

A Charming Story

It is important to understand the political situation at that date, or so my Chancellor tells me. Which leaves us with a tiny problem, because I have never really understood any of it – just explain to me why an apparently random set of families throughout Europe called themselves Guelphs, and the rest Ghibellines? For no reason that I could ever see?

And why choose names with the same first letter? I mean, what hope did I have of keeping track?

We're Ghibellines, by the way; at least I know that much. And since we're Ghibelline, and we're the royals, our kingdom's Ghibelline. And this has led to a few problems.

The Guelph faction, backed by Ruritania of course, has been trying to infiltrate the upper levels of our nobility, for several years – decades, even. After all, they had money. Obviously, being Ghibelline, we'd been opposing this for years, decades even, but with only limited success; royalty only gets you so far. We needed a big propaganda event – something to swing popular opinion our way. Something to make Guelph sympathies seem unpatriotic.

My wedding would be a perfect opportunity.

The Chancellor and the Noblemen Of The Bedchamber set up a committee to identify a suitable match for me, and came up with a short-list of five names. My father considered the list, quite carefully by his standards, and finally plumped for Lord Puttel's daughter, Elizabetha Maria Gertrud Anna Katerina von und zu Aschen-Feuerstelle-Puttel.

Just call her Asch. I do. It saves a lot of ink.

Who, me? No of course not. Why should I have any choice? I was only there to marry her. King's sons marry as instructed, obviously. I mean, I'm not saying she was ugly – she wasn't, and indeed isn't – but she's not a patch on Willa. But princes can not marry opera singers, and princes must marry their father's choice.

Anyway, the point about Puttel was that he's married to this Guelph woman, but she's only a landgraf's daughter; in fact the Feuerstelles have only had any sort of title for four generations, so it was quite a step up in rank for her. After all, everyone knows the Puttels have been herzogs ever since Noah learned to doggy-paddle – and Ghibelline herzogs at that. The magic power of gold. Pulls it off every time. What? Asch? Ah, well, you see, Asch was born just von und zu Aschen-Puttel; she was Puttel's daughter by his first wife, another Elizabeth, who was also Ghibelline – until she accidentally died of a dagger wound. No no, let's just leave it at that. But it made a perfect background for the press.

But background is not enough; the press needed a Good Story. We needed to give them something really strong, not just a boring meeting by boring chance at a boring party, followed by a boring chat at a boring hunt. We needed Romance, we needed Dream – in other words, we needed the press to go overboard. So we got the Court Poet onto it, and I must say I think he did pretty well, as it turned out.

The first stage was letting it be known that I was on the market. The press had been dropping hints about Willa, and also about Gislet and Jo-Jo, and about some of my habits while I was in Paris – not that I'd tried to hide anything; I mean, they were well looked after, and I'd acknowledged all the kids and given them pretty generous settlements. They were the point, after all; my father wanted to be sure I was capable of fathering a good number of heirs. Especially after Uncle Freidrich's – interesting – reign it really mattered that I could show some sexual interest at least in humans, and preferably female humans of childbearing age. So it was easy to steer the press into dropping hints that I was looking for a more serious relationship – and therefore into lots of stuff about my 'growing maturity of outlook'. Made me feel decrepit – but then, I didn't have a say.

Then we got started on the second stage – the Romance proper. We held a couple of small parties, just to set the scene, but the one that mattered was going to be a Grand Ball ostensibly to celebrate the anniversary of my father's accession to the throne. In reality, of course, it was a stage set for my being swept off my feet by love for Asch – and for the press to watch the story unfold, as they say.

I just hoped she was reasonably presentable.

Being a leftover daughter with two other proper daughters around, Asch wasn't that popular around the Puttel household, obviously, so we had a bit of work to do to get her to the Ball at all behind the backs of the Guelph war cabinet – I mean, the Guelph-nobility-whose-loyalty-to-the-Throne-is-unquestionable. We got a message to Asch warning her what was likely to happen, bribed a footman to let one of our agents in that night just after the family proper had left, and between them they managed the thing really very well. Asch turned up 'in disguise' as the 'Furstin von Ungekennte', a name which I assume was meant to sound like the German for 'unknown'; I danced with her; we fell in lurve where the press could take notes; and then as midnight struck she did a very effective 'Oh horror horror is it that late I must leave at once!' down the palace steps. Unfortunately I was caught by surprise and had managed to lose my way in one of the side corridors – it's amazing how many people think princes and kings actually live in palaces – I've set foot in that one perhaps twice in my whole life. Anyway, I was only just in time to grab the slipper 'carelessly' left behind by the Von Ungekennte before it was brushed up by the cleaners, so that I could give a touching interview for the News And Journal.

Then the following day we had the Search For Who Fitted The Slipper – I mean, isn't that just typical of a poet? As if an unknown princess is even possible – which it isn't – and is then going to hang around in Town while we all look for her? But the thing was, it spread the story out past the Ball itself – kept it in the public eye. And would you believe – the press loved it! Lapped it up like a cat lapping the cream.

And finally a really good wedding, and one in the eye for the Guelphs. They never really recovered from it, you know, that and the War of the Bucket. Still hasn't stopped Ruritania from sticking a finger in our pies from time to time, but nowadays we give as good as we get. And me, I'm next in line when my father finally eats his way to his grave, and meanwhile I live happily ever after with Asch. And sleep with Willa.