

The Hidden Princess

by [Patrick Welch](#)

Mr. Welch has previously or is currently appearing in Riverside Quarterly, Analog, Eternity, Millennium, Phic-Shun, Jackhammer, and 69 Forms of Paranoia, all while pursuing an MA degree at Bowling Green State University. He quit writing short fiction to concentrate on writing advertising and articles for local publications until about a year ago. He has also had fiction accepted by Knightmares Magazine, Dazzler's Digital Domain and Virtual Press, in addition to the mandatory novel or two bouncing around publishers.

Editor's Note: Mr. Welch has previously appeared in Pegasus Online in our [August/September 1997](#) issue.

"Come closer, ladies and gentlemen, friends and neighbors, and enjoy the challenge of the Hidden Princess!" Smiling faces gathered around my wagon as I spread three shells on my overhanging platform. Above it, the banner reading "Dr. Forturo's Traveling Emporium of Miscellaneous Marvels" flapped in the small breeze.

"As you can see, our princess is indeed shy." I held up a small round stone and placed it under one of the shells. "So shy is she that she is determined to remain hidden from all but the most discerning eye." Smoothly and rapidly -- but not too rapidly -- I rearranged the shells left, right, above, below, all the while maintaining my spiel. "Now," I stopped and stepped back, "our heroine believes she is safe and secure under one of her protective canopies. Would anyone care to guess where she has gone?"

The herd chattered among themselves, first pointing to one, then another of the possibilities. Finally a farm boy with markedly bovine features stepped forward. "I think she's here," he said timorously, touching the one on the left.

"The lad says the left. Let us discover how discerning he really is." I lifted up the shell and was rewarded by a round of applause as indeed the princess was nestled snugly below. "Excellent, my young friend," I patted him on the head and handed him a trinket. "For your troubles. Now, is anyone else up to the challenge, one that can be enjoyed for a single lead coin?"

Indeed they were. One after another they offered their wealth to prove their eyesight was more adept than the flashing hands of Dr. Forturo. One by one they were proven wrong. One by one my coffers grew in size, much welcome since the villagers had been particularly immune to my presentations of elixirs, potions and mysterious machines that my Traveling Emporium was famous for.

I didn't win every time of course; that would be foolish. It is easier to shear the flock a few skeins at a time than all at once. And ultimately more rewarding. But all good things must come to an end; mine ended when a tall man dressed not at all like the villagers stood before me. "You wish to try your skill, young man?" I smiled.

Wordlessly he set a gold coin in front of me and nodded. I finished my routine and he pondered his predicament. "I will say," he paused another moment, "in the center." Before I could react he overturned the shells on the left and right. Both were empty. He then looked at me and smiled. "It would appear I guessed correctly."

"It would appear so," I agreed.

"Let's gaze upon her lovely countenance, shall we?" he continued, reaching for the center shell.

I reacted first this time. I turned it over...the princess nestled comfortably under her hiding place. "You have definitely earned your prize this day," I maintained my pleasant demeanor as I paid him. "Would anyone else care to try his mettle?" I called out.

"I would," a former player stepped forward. He also put down a gold coin. "We will play the game like this gentleman did. I will lift the two shells that I do not choose."

"Sir, that is not the way the Hidden Princess is played," I protested.

"If you cannot accept those rules, then perhaps you have not been playing honestly with us," the tall stranger threatened. "It should matter not which shells are turned over if indeed the princess is under one of them."

The crowd agreed ominously, I reluctantly. The carnage began. I was able to win a few when my patrons became overconfident, but within the hour I had repaid all that I had gained and quite a few coins more. The villagers walked away laughing with greedy delight when I finally put down my canvas and closed for the evening. They were still laughing when I steered my reluctant team out of the hamlet of Gadmire to find a refuge for the evening.

A small clearing by a crystal stream proved adequate. I built a campfire, fed my animals and stared into the flames. My appetite had disappeared along with my coins. I had been most fortunate to slip the pebble back under the one shell; otherwise the evening would have proven to be even more embarrassing. One thing was certain; Gadmire was no longer fertile ground. Tomorrow I would have to ply my trade elsewhere.

"Elsewhere" proved to be Fremound, a fishing village a good three day's travel from my previous target. My top hat, gold trousers and merrily painted wagon proved immediately to be the most exciting event to strike the village since their last flood. It was difficult to determine which was worse; the smell of the crowd or the stench of rotting fish. Yet they proved eager enough; I was able to sell several love potions and charming mechanisms before nightfall. That did not cover my losses from Gadmire, however, so I encouraged them to return after their dinner hour to amuse themselves further at my carriage.

That evening I introduced the villagers to the game of the Secret Assassins. "As you can see," I smiled, gazing down at their unwashed faces, "you have three caves in which you can find refuge." I pointed to each of the shells in turn. "In one of these," I lifted the empty shell, "you shall find safety and treasure. The other two, however, are guarded by demons who will slay you instantly." Indeed the other two shells covered small pebbles. I smoothly rearranged the shells. "Would anyone care to seek their fortune?"

Indeed they did. I can only imagine it was a result of their fishing activities because they quickly proved to be formidable at the game. But not as formidable as I. The first several times they were able to find their sanctuary without difficulty. Which only meant I had to make it slightly more difficult. Within half an hour the tide had turned strongly in my favor and their coins were flowing rapidly into my coffers. I was feeling quite pleased with my success when an unwelcome but familiar figure stepped forward.

"I would like to try my fortune," he said coldly and placed a gold coin on the platform.

With difficulty I managed to maintain my smile. "A new player! We are indeed fortunate this evening." I quickly rearranged the three shells. "You may begin."

He ignored me; instead he addressed the crowd. "Good citizens of Fremound, there are two ways the game of Secret Assassins may be played. One is an honest test of eyesight versus dexterity. One is dishonest thievery. The quickest way to discover if Dr. Forturo has

been using magician's tricks is simply to do this."

Before I could react he darted forward and upturned all three shells. There was a gasp from the crowd followed by angry curses as not one, not two, but three small pebbles were revealed. I won't go into the ensuing details except to say that all my customers received full refunds...and some more...and I was forced from Fremound in disgrace.

The scent of rotting fish trailed me as I made my forlorn voyage out of the village to the sanctuary of the surrounding woods. I spent a good hour cleaning fish parts from my wagon and myself, then made a small campfire and planned. The stranger, whoever he was, was doubtless following me. Why I had no idea. His continual interference in my commerce was unacceptable, however. I needed to learn more.

When I reentered Fremound later that evening I was dressed not in the gold and sequined regalia that was Dr. Forturo but in a simple brown jerkin and phony beard. I was confident the townspeople would be feting their savior somewhere, and it did not take me long to find them. The third seaside inn I entered was particularly full; in one corner a large crowd was gathered at a table by the hearth. A voice I now recognized, feared and hated rose above the rest. "Quite simple, really. As you can see, I merely palm the pebble like so as I set down the cup. And now it is as empty as the rest!" A burst of applause followed immediately.

I ordered a cup of local wine and approached to get a better view of the proceedings. My enemy sat smugly at the table, three gold cups in front of him. As I suspected, he had been demonstrating the secrets of the Hidden Princess to his fawning entourage. "It's a very easy game for deceit," he continued. "I feel most fortunate I was passing by your village lest Dr. Forturo steal all your hard-earned fortune."

The crowd cheered lustily and tankards were raised. Seething, I joined in and took a hefty swig of wine...which I immediately regretted. Apparently the villagers used fish in their wine-making as well.

"Are there any legitimate games of chance?" one foolish villager asked.

"Indeed there are," their benefactor smiled. "The only truly fair competition involving sight and skill is the game of the Three Kings."

Someone had to ask it so I did. "And what is that?" I called from the back, making sure to adopt a deeper voice as disguise.

"One of startling simplicity and infinite challenge," he said smoothly. "We begin with a simple deck of cards, which, it so happens, I have on me." He withdrew them and spread them on the table. "We only require three; the King of Spades," he separated it with a flourish, "the King of Clubs and the King of Hearts." He held them up so the sheep could see. "Three kings, good folk of Fremound." He turned them face down on the table and rearranged them slowly. "Two of these kings are impostors, pretenders to the throne if you will," he intoned as he continued rearranging them. "Your challenge is to select the King of Hearts, the only true ruler, from the three. Would anyone care to try?"

A chorus of eager voices rang out, pointing and calling out the various cards. "The one on the left you say?" he asked, then turned it over as several agreed. The King of Hearts did indeed appear. "Most excellent. As you all can see, a fair challenge of skill and luck. Shall we try again?"

The flock agreed. I watched as he rapidly mixed the cards, rapidly turned over the losing kings and just as rapidly took in their money. I noticed how he repeatedly ignored correct

answers while choosing players who were wrong. I noticed how several times he palmed the King of Hearts only to replace it after a suitable interval. I noticed how he let small bettors occasionally win while the larger wagers continually lost.

But that I kept to myself. Instead I returned to the bar and ordered another glass of wine. So that was his game. He was following me, using me as the wolf so he could come in and shear my flock!

And following me was not difficult, burdened as I was with my wagon of wares while he doubtless rode alone. This financial assassination was going to have to stop, and soon. I nursed my wine, wincing at every cheer and more frequent groan arising from the crowd nearby. By the end of the evening I knew what I had to do.

One week later I pulled my tired team into the Hamlet of Glenfallow. It was far from the more popular trade routes, which would make my offerings even more appealing. My wagon was quite a spectacle as I entered the village; gold and red and yellow ornamentation, my huge banner wafting in the breeze, I sitting tall in front in my silk hat, gold trousers and checkered vest, tooting my trumpet to signal my arrival.

The curious villagers looked out as I slowly guided my team to the village center. "Come on, come all," I called out cheerfully. "Sample for yourselves the bountiful treasures that Dr. Forturo's Traveling Emporium of Miscellaneous Marvels has brought to you!" I disembarked, opened the side of my wagon and I was ready for business.

The good folk of Glenfallow were not, not initially anyway. Several children approached first; I appeased them with some tricks and a few trinkets. An older resident followed. I sold him an elixir for the soreness in his joints and he limped away satisfied. A few curious housewives, the innkeeper, and soon I had all the people in the village crowded around me.

All but one. I noticed him tethering his horse and relaxing in the shade of a nearby tree. He wore a beard this time and his clothes were those of a poor farmer. But he could not disguise his height; my nemesis had arrived, just as I knew he would.

I immediately turned my attention to the crowd before me. "Ladies and gentlemen," I raised my voice, "the Emporium of Dr. Forturo will now be closing for a brief period. Please return this evening as we will again be available to dazzle you with our array of miscellaneous marvels available no where else in our fair land. We also promise you an evening of entertainment you shall not soon forget!" There were a few good natured grumblings but the crowd dispersed as I put away my sign and closed up my establishment. Then I went inside my wagon, locked my door and sat down. To practice.

As promised I reopened promptly after the dinner hour. A small but enthusiastic crowd soon was herded before me. Among them, in the rear and ducking behind others to shield himself, my enemy waited.

"Good fellows of Glenfallow," I started my spiel immediately. "As promised, I shall endeavor to entertain you tonight with a game that challenges the eye and the mind. A trifling enigma I like to call the Hidden Princess." I reached down and set three gold cups and a small leather ball before me. "Your task is a most simple yet rewarding one..."

The villagers got into the spirit of the game very quickly. Just as quickly I got into their purses. I was enjoying a small yet steady profit when he finally walked forward. "I believe I am up to the challenge," he said, placing a gold coin firmly on my platform.

"A gold coin? That is a hefty wager dear squire. Perhaps a smaller bet would be more

appropriate until you become accomplished in the game." He laughed and shook his head as I hid the ball under one of the cups and rearranged them. "Choose."

"Good citizens of Glenfallow," he called to the crowd, ignoring me. "the Hidden Princess is a game that is often performed by charlatans. There is one simple method for determining the honesty of the player." He turned back to me. "I choose the center," he said as he grabbed the two cups on either side and turned them over.

The Hidden Princess rolled out from under the one on the left. "I am indeed sorry," I said as I dropped his wager into my till. I replaced the ball and began rearranging the cups. "Would anyone else care to try their skill?"

"Hold," my nemesis ordered. He looked at the cups, then at me. "So that's it," he said smugly. He placed another gold coin on the table. "Again."

"As you wish." I rotated the cups a few more times and stopped. "Please select."

"On the left," he said smugly, then tipped all three cups over. The ball rolled out from the center.

"Perhaps a smaller wager next time," I suggested as I took his coin.

"No," he shook his head fiercely. "Again." Another gold coin. This time he focused alternately on my hands, on the cups, on the platform. I performed my maneuvering longer this time so he could get a better view. "Are you ready?"

He scratched his head, then turned to the crowd. "Often a charlatan will use sleight of hand to remove or insert the ball under the cup. However, we can prevent that. Madam, would you assist us?"

A spreading farmwife blushed but stepped forward. I smiled, my hands at my side, and stepped back from the cups. "I claim the ball is under the left cup. Would you please turn all three over?"

Giggling, she complied. The ball was under the right.

"This is impossible!" he roared. "This man is a charlatan. I have seen him before. He is cheating all you good townspeople of Glenfallow!"

I retained my equanimity. "Would you please explain how?"

"It's the cups," he swore. "It has to be the cups!"

I picked up two, clanged them together. "Simple brass cups. I have them available for sale here if you wish."

"No!" he swore. "I will prove it!" He forced his way through the crowd, which parted with a combination of curses at his rudeness and chuckles at his lack of skill.

"Some people take defeat poorly," I observed. "Now, would anyone else care to test themselves?" I had won four more games and lost two when he once again stood before me. He was laden with three simple pewter tankards. "Now I will prove that you are indeed a charlatan!" He set them firmly on my platform. I studied the containers; identical in every way. I shrugged and removed my cups.

"One more thing," he stopped me. "The apparatus is often the secret of the fraud." He

glanced through the crowd. "Sir, you are wearing a ring. Would you be so kind as to let us use it for this demonstration?"

The farmer shrugged and passed it to him. He in turn set it on the platform. "We will use this, not the leather ball you are so fond of."

I nodded and placed it under one of the tankards. It slid smoothly over the platform; the small click it occasionally made I could cover by maintaining my spiel. "Your rules are acceptable."

"Then," he reached in his pocket, "let us begin. 75 gold coins is my wager."

I paled slightly. "That is a very large sum. I am not sure I have those resources available."

He smirked. "Further proof, citizens, that the man is a fraud, a cheat! An honest man would not hesitate!"

I noticed the crowd begin to grumble. 75 crowns; if I lost I would be near ruin. "Fine," I said. "I will accept your wager." I looked out at the crowd. "As I promised, dear friends from Glenfallow, I have indeed presented you with a most singular evening of entertainment!" I maintained some mindless patter as I smoothly and rapidly arranged and rearranged the three mugs. I shuddered as I heard a slight click when I finished. Had he heard it as well? No turning back now. "If you will."

He waited only a second. "On the left."

The crowd held their breath as he tipped over the three tankards. Then let out a cheer as the ring was revealed...under the right.

"Thank you one and all," I called out cheerfully as I raked my hard-earned wages into my coffers.

"Night is fast approaching; I am afraid Dr. Forturo must close his emporium for the evening. Please visit us tomorrow and sample our collection of elixirs, mechanisms and other treasures from around the world!" I watched with a smirk as my enemy staggered through the crowd. I found the jeers and laughter that followed him nearly as rewarding as his wealth.

I was enjoying a glass of wine in Glenfallow's one inn when someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was him, this time without his beard and homely attire. "You must tell me how you did it," he demanded.

"I could," I said after due consideration. "But there must be reciprocity."

"I cannot pay you. You have all my funds," he said bitterly.

"Not that. I just want you to stop following me. It will be more profitable for both of us if our paths never cross again."

He sat next to me. "That is acceptable. Now, how did you cheat me?"

I smiled. "I did not."

"What are you talking about?"

"The game of the Hidden Princess? I conducted it honestly. No sleight of hand; no hidden ball drop, no doctored apparatus. It was a legitimate challenge of hand versus eye."

He stared at me, trying to comprehend. "Impossible! You've never done that in your life; you are not that good!"

Truth be told, until that evening he was correct. "I knew you would be expecting some sort of fraud," I explained patiently. "You were concentrating more on how I might be perpetuating one than on the movement of the cups. You're right; I'm not that good. But I am better than you."

My arguments convinced him not. "You're lying, Forturo. You had an accomplice. Perhaps magical assistance. I am going to learn the truth. And when I do I will find you!" Others watched and snickered as he stalked from the inn. I shrugged and returned my attention to the wine and my thoughts. I understood his skepticism; I would not have believed my explanation if our situations were reversed. Odd, I decided; for the first time in my life honesty had won out over deceit. I shrugged; it would probably never happen again.

The End
