

Chapter 4 : “1956/58 – Roman Holiday”

Princess Margaretha's affair with the noble Sir Robin Douglas-Home was widely published. It is obvious that Gustaf VI and the daily press tried to blame Sibylla for the relationship not ending in a marriage. The weekly press, who knew their princesses better blamed Margaretha herself, Margaretha's friends blamed Robin for not being considerate enough, Robin blamed Sibylla, and the nanny Ingrid Björnberg, to whom I give the last word, saw it as a maturation process for her ward. Even princesses must learn to handle their relationships.¹ The lesson for the future was that the royal press organization should be strengthened and centralized in order not to disseminate conflicting information. This is what happened...

On 22 September 1956, Margaretha was in London to improve her English, living in Hampstead with friends of Sibylla, Mr. and Mrs. Desmond Boyle, an English businessman and his Swedish-born wife. During the day, she took the subway back and forth to Middlesex Hospital where she practised as a play leader in the children's section with the Boyle's daughter Carina. The family had promised to keep an eye on her, but left this to her daughter. A mistake. She, Margaretha and some friends visited “The Casanova Club”, a fashionable place that also kept itself with a jazz pianist, a tall, blonde, slim young man named Robin Douglas-Home (1932-1968). He was of good family, noble since 1473, but not himself wealthy. He had attended Eaton where he studied Greek and Latin but did not receive a scholarship to Cambridge or Oxford. Instead, he trained as an officer at Sandhurst and then a five-year contract 1951-1955 as an intelligence officer at the Seaforth Highlanders in various foreign commissions. When he and Margaretha met, he worked part time as a “copywriter” at the advertising agency J Walter Thompson for \$40 a week and played the piano in the evenings for \$84 a week. He was known for his hit “Spring is in the air” and also for being an experienced seducer, as it seems with the method of devoting the object of his desire an intense attention and playing on them like on a piano. Margaretha, lacking experience in such things, was defenceless.

Spring is in the air.
Flowers grow,
peeking through
the snow.

Spring is in the air.
I can feel the sun,
warming up my skin.

Ain't got no diamonds.
Ain't got no gold.
And I'm not living,
the way I have been told.²

Robins' seduction technique was afterwards described in detail. Margaretha introduced herself as a princess. Robin laughed at her. Princesses he had met before. He treated her alternately as being of no importance, sometimes as a goddess. He sent gifts: a huge catch of lily of the valley, fnesia, carnations or just a single long-stalked rose. Margaretha was soon off balance. There was a lot of romantic small talk on the phone and every time she entered

¹ Ingrid Björnberg. Dagbok från Haga och Stockholms slott. Stockholm:Bonniers, 1975, s 163.

² J D Roth. Spring is in the air. (Alternativ version.)

the restaurant where he played the piano it was a refrain just for her. They only existed for each other. Wherever she was, he could show up. Sometimes with a lady friend to make her jealous. And then suddenly he reversed himself and took it all from the jokular side: "During her stay in London, Princess Margaretha is also said to have had a lot of fun with Robin's telephone calls where she was constantly unsure whether it was really a representative of the friends of the small birds who asked her to participate in the opening of a new bird bath in Hyde Park or just Robin who was kidding again."³ Not to forget the love moments in Robin's souterrain apartment.

Margaretha celebrated Christmas at home and returned to England on 18 January. The official schedule was for her to end of the English tour in March. Act 2 of the drama began when Robin proposed to her in mid-March and was given a conditional "yes". They would wait two years to see if their love was strong enough. Apparently an attempt by Margaretha to wriggle away. If Margaretha had been a sophisticated young lady with at least a rudimentary knowledge of the world, she could have ended it then and there. Now she was an overprotected princess who never had handled a conflict about anything. She told her mother Sibylla about her promise, apparently hoping to avoid making a decision herself, and told Robin that she had told her, prompting him to send Sibylla a proposal in a hurry. Several telephone calls were made. Sibylla discussed the letter with King Gustaf VI, who opposed the marriage but left it to Sibylla to formulate the rejection. Margaretha then left London for Denmark where she spent a month working in a nursery. She is said to have confided in Queen Ingrid, but there is no evidence of her helping. On 3 May she returned to Stockholm. Everything had been very secret, and the newspapers did not get into the news until someone in Robin's surroundings informed them. Robin said he regretted it coming out. The relationship, affair, flirt or whatever it was became public on May 5.

Robin commented to friends: 'The whole idea was to keep her incommunicado from me. They couldn't stomach the thought of their royal blood mixing with a drop of vintage club pianist brew. But I am afraid they were a bit late for that. I rattled off a formal letter asking for Margaretha's hand in marriage though I recognized, right from the outset, that my chances of being accepted by the family were somewhat less probable than the survival of the proverbial cat in hell. Margaretha's mother, Sibylla, wanted no time in answering my proposal of marriage. The letter came back within a fortnight. The answer was brief and gave not the slightest possibility of but one interpretation. It was "No!"

I was given no opportunity to push my proposal in person for almost a year and, even then, under almost total watchdog conditions. We had privately swapped troth in London and I knew her love for me was utterly genuine. As was mine for her. But her whole family was lined up against me. She was left in no doubt by old King Gustav that she would forfeit all her royal rights if she married a commoner. She had that problem as well as love affair with me, in common with Princess Margaret [a later relationship]. They both plumped up for the rights and privileges when it mattered – and who, say I, could blame them. My uncle may have been the Earl of Home, Leader of the Conservatives in the House of Lords, Secretary for Commonwealth Relations and Lord President of the Council but I was still considered to be of pretty low stock by the Swedish Royal Family.⁴

³ Jan Webster. Varför just Robin. Året runt 1958:12.

⁴ "Darling Robin!" The Enigmatic Life of Robert Douglas-Home & the Three Margarets. The Esoteric Curiosa : Knowledge Is Power, 2011-01-17.

At the moment of this outburst, Sibylla was in Germany and Gustaf VI at Sofiero. He who had to deal with this hot potato was therefore Sibylla's court marshal baron Carl-Reinhold von Essen (1891-1980), a military man with a brutally realistic attitude to royal marriages. He issued a press release on May 5: "Reports that Mr. Robin Douglas-Home asked for Princess Margaretha's hand are true, but the whole matter was settled one-and-a-half months ago. It was a little innocent affair in London, as so often happens between young people, and the whole matter was declared ended with Princess Sibylla's reply to the Englishman's letter of proposal. - The King did not write a letter of his own to Princess Margaretha as a result of the letter of proposal, but the King's will was expressed in Princess Sibylla's letter of reply. The reply was very polite but definitive. The proposal was from the Swedish viewpoint to be considered as impossible. I cannot possibly understand why the matter has been taken up in the Press so long afterwards."⁵

von Essen explained the rejection in detail in an interview the same day: "We cannot imagine her living in a tiny flat in London and waiting at home every night while her husband goes out to play a piano for a living. Think of your own Princess Margaret. You would not like that; nor would we. It might be different if Mr. Douglas-Home were a Schubert or a Beethoven." Princess Margaretha herself, he explained, has no major income of her own [at the moment an interest of 400 thousand kronor after Edmund]. He concluded: "If and when these practical obstacles are removed, the Swedish royal house has no objection to a union – provided the Princess still is interested."⁶

Gustaf VI realized the imprudence of von Essen's statements and let his Marshal Birger Ekeberg (1880-1968) issue an alternative press communiqué to give himself a little room for maneuver: "Following certain rumours in the London press concerning Princess Margaretha, the King's Marshal of the Court informed her that the Swedish King has not issued a ban on the marriage. On the other hand, the king advised the princess to think very carefully about such an important decision."

The rejection did indeed cause bad blood. Young delicate love versus a money-obsessed, bigoted and status-crazy parent generation. Swedish newspaper: "The enlightened ultra-democratic Swedish royal house reacted just old Queen Victoria in England would have done."⁷ Robin's father: "A Bernadotte from 1810 shall not believe herself more than a Home from 1473."⁸ It was calculated how much money it took to entertain Margaretha at the level she was accustomed to. 33,500 a year it turned out. The biggest items were the clothing account, a Cadillac, an eight-bedroom apartment in a fashionable neighbourhood and at least one cook and a servant or maid. Representation and entertainment were minor costs. Her present fortune was 400 thousand that yielded a dividend of 20 thousand but half went to Sibylla. Robin's pay in 1957 was unexpectedly high at 11 thousand a year, probably due to his name, and his piano playing earned at its best the equivalent of 44 thousand a year.⁹ It could just work.

On 6 May, King Gustaf VI returned from his summerhouse Sofiero and had a long conversation with Margaretha about what really happened between her and Robin and how she imagined her future. The correct answer is that Margaretha did not want to think about

⁵ The Times, 1957-05-06.

⁶ Sunday Express, 1957-05-05.

⁷ Svenska Dagbladet, 1957-05-06.

⁸ Daily Express, 1957-05-06.

⁹ Holger Fastmörup. Vad kostar det att vara gift med Margaretha. Husmodern, 1957:24.

her future. Robin called her three times and one of his letters arrived stamped with the family seal "Faithful unto death". A Swedish newspaper: The court is not "not completely dismissive but waiting" for the proposal. It is easy to believe [that] he [Robin] is more interested than she.¹⁰ The next day, the 2:nd person in charge arrived, i.e. Sibylla, who was not quite aware about what was going on except that she understood from the newspapers that she was a flint-hearted mother without any understanding of young love. Sibylla also had a long conversation with her daughter who seemed unruffled by all the commotion. Sibylla then summoned her counsellors responsible for the girls' education. She is said to have been quite distraught, depressed and at the same time concerned for her daughter's future happiness. "If Robin managed to improve his financial prospects, she would consider a yes."

Act 3 was also full of drama. Robin completely changed his style, founded a publishing house to publish "industrial literature" and ceased playing the piano. Robin's housekeeper testified that the two corresponded intensively and that Robin had Margaretha's photograph on the night stand.¹¹ There is unconfirmed information that the Swedish Prime Minister Erlander discussed their possible engagement, betrothal, vows or whatever with Queen Elisabeth. Anyway. Late on the night of Tuesday, March 4, 1958, Robin arrived by plane to Bromma to make a study visit at the publish house Esselte and also, at Sibylla's invitation, to meet Margaretha. Robin had met her uncle Prince Bertil before his departure, who claimed that everyone was in favour of an engagement. This was later denied by Sibylla's court marshal von Essen, who said that Robin visited on the condition that there would be no engagement. According to his sister, he brought a wedding ring however. The visit seems to have been a "court intrigue". Sibylla's lady-in-waiting Stina Rålamb was married to a board member of Esselte.

At Bromma, Robin was met by one of his old military friends, the English military attaché, Lieutenant Colonel David de Crespigny Smiley, with whom he was to stay overnight. He was also met by a rarely seen press gathering of 250 journalists and photographers. A number of police officers formed a chain so that Robin could reach the car. A heavily built man tried to keep it put by lifting it in the rear bumper but Smiley had time to get away before he had help. Outside the villa in Djursholm there were already 20 photographers and more were coming. Robin jumped out of the car, stumbled on the stairs and entered the house on all fours. "He was running away like a fox scared by car lights on a road" was the description. Robin caught his breath, looked himself in the mirror and exited to confront the journalists. After all, he was a "Home" and an officer and the rabble were commoners.

The following morning Robin slept late. Come morning he spoke for a long time with his future fiancée on the phone and the next morning he had yet another conversation. Meanwhile a lot of journalists and photographers had gathered and at 10.10 Robin exited and sat down in the front seat beside his friend Smiley. Then the convoy at high speed started for the city ignoring traffic regulations. It was more than legally dangerous, it was actually dangerous. It can only be compared to when Elisabeth II visited Sweden in 1956. Smiley tried to shake the convoy - whatever that would serve. The photographers in the caravan didn't want Robin any harm...

Smiley tried his best, but was unable to shake the leash until the police helped him with a roadblock next to the British Embassy. There Robin exited by the back door

¹⁰ Expressen, 1957-05-07.

¹¹ Expressen, 1958-03-06.

and was escorted by a court official to the castle, where he entered through a back door without being observed by the large number of photographers and journalists. He was to have lunch with Sibylla and be received by the king for a private conversation.¹²

At the castle Robin met Margaretha and Sibylla and had lunch with the family. “The correspondent of the Daily Herald newspaper in London spoke to Princess Sibylla's court marshal Baron von Essen about the couples feelings. Essen answered that that he couldn't say because he closed his eyes when the two met. “But the young princesses looked on with interest, as the couple kissed”¹³ Gustaf VI wanted to delay their conversation so that Robin and Margaretha could meet first. After a study visit to Esselte, Robin returned to the castle for dinner. On Thursday, Robin and Margaretha spent time together without Sibylla, first at the castle, and then at one of Margaretha's friends, Wivekst Wesström, who invited her to dinner. Wesström lived at Beckholmen just south of Djurgården. Margaretha had a room there. Going there they were monitored by a long caravan of press cars, but these were stopped by the police as Beckholmen was a military protection area. They went there in separate cars so as not to be photographed together. Friday morning Robin got to meet Gustaf VI. After a conversation with Prince Bertil, he was escorted to the meeting which lasted about a quarter of an hour. He then had lunch with Sibylla. The kings decision would be communicated in two days Sunday. Saturday it was again lunch and then Gustaf VI took the two on a car tour. The exit was so fast that no one in the press had time to react until they were far away. A spectator said that the king had laughed heartily at the successful manoeuvre.

Finally Sunday. It was lunch as usual. Nobody wanted to say anything. Sibylla wanted more time for reflection. Robin tried to pressure Margaretha, who very timely took to bed with an acute case of kidney stone. It ended with a joint communiqué by Gustaf VI, Margaretha and Robin that he would return in the spring. On Monday, Robin returned in a terrible mood. All the English journalists were on the return flight. These were dismissed with “mind your own business”.

Act 4 was very short. Robin was invited to Solliden by Sibylla sometime in May but did not come. The invitation was postponed until July. Margaretha meanwhile had a holiday with a friend in Spain, incognito. “She needed time to think, and she wanted to leave home to decide by herself.”¹⁴ Not so easy because Robin wrote and telephoned her almost every day. The photographers and journalists were also extraordinarily invasive. It was like a semi-official state visit. A photographer climbed a tree outside her bedroom and photographed her through the window. Another photographer paid a maid to be admitted to Margaretha's hotel room. He found a portrait of Robin on the bedside table and photographed it as proof of their love. Sibylla publicly protested with no effect.

Act 5 finally, the highlight of the drama took place on Friday 11 July. A lot of curious people had gathered outside Solliden. The police guard had been reinforced to four men. Margaretha was coming in from a stay at Fanö in southwestern Jutland. Robins' luggage had arrived. Only Robin himself was missing. He was with his uncle in Hampshire and was expected to arrive at 8:25 on Saturday morning July 12 at Bulltofta air port where he would get a ride to Kalmar and take the local flight at 15:15 to Borgholm. The night before, he called Margaretha and wanted to know how she had responded to the engagement. It was a long conversation.

¹² Gösta Ollén. En skrämnd grabb bland blixtar. Expressen, 1958-03-05.

¹³ Expressen, 1958-03-06.

¹⁴ Maria Ek. Inte längre rädd. Svensk Damtidning, 1960:16.

Margaretha wanted to postpone the decision for yet a few months but was given an ultimatum that if she did not decide before tomorrow it would be over. "For Princess Margaretha, the friend's ultimatum came more or less as a shock. To decide for life. By telephone. In a few hours. Who does such a thing?"¹⁵ The conversation was over sometime between 20-21 hours. Robin would call the next morning for her decision. He did not want to appear ridiculous again. However, if anything out of the ordinary happened, nobody noticed it. Even at 21:15, Sibylla's lady-in-waiting Brita Cederström believed that Robin would come as agreed.

Meanwhile, Margaretha complained to Sibylla, who tried to instil some spine into her daughter. This was met with such success that Margaretha sent a telegram to Robin that she did not want to break up the engagement, but that it was to be postponed until *after* him arriving to Öland. Robin responded with a telegram requesting his luggage in return.¹⁶ He also published a short press release via the Press Associations news agency which forwarded it to Reuters: "For reasons that must remain my own business, I have decided not to visit Sweden in the foreseeable future." This was so cryptic that "the journalist on duty" called the Stockholm castle for more information. There he was referred to Solliden where the news of Robin's press communiqué at about 22 o'clock struck like a bomb. At 22:30, the lunch that Robin was supposed to take on route Bulltofta to Kalmar was cancelled and Margaretha took to bed in a new attack of acute kidney stones. At about 23 o'clock a doctor from Borgholm's hospital was called in. He found no fault with her kidneys however. She attended dinner the next day. A little subdued perhaps. The journalist also called the doctor, which said that he did not get back into bed until 3 a.m. At 00:30 a.m., Sibylla's lady-in-waiting published a press communiqué that Robin because of Margaretha's indisposition had postponed his visit. She then asked for a leave, which was granted.

The next day, Robin called for a final decision. Margaretha was unable to speak to him and handed the receiver to Ingrid Björnberg. Sibylla then took over the conversation. She seems to have convinced Robin that Margaretha had in fact made her decision and that this was irreversible.^{17,18} Ingrid Björnberg was very compassionate:

I felt great sorrow for Margaretha those days. In her heart, she probably felt that Robin was not the right person for her, but at the same time she did not want to hurt him by a final no.

It was a terribly difficult situation.

"I know that Sessan has been unsure of herself," I said in the end. But no one else can decide for Sessan than herself. No one can measure another's love. You have to decide for yourself.

- If Sessan is prepared to get engaged, so let him come. But if Sessan cancels the visit, Sessan must understand that it is over.¹⁹

Incidentally, Sibylla's chamberlain, Count Gösta Lewenhaupt, had a holiday with family in nearby Torekov. He himself was in Borgholm on some private matter when he was summoned to Solliden. Sibylla asked him to step in and clarify the situation for the press. Lewenhaupt collected four journalists (an Englishman, a Frenchman, two Swedes) and a photographer and drove them out to Solliden for an improvised press conference. Though Lewenhaupt had no

¹⁵ Marilou von Stedingk. Våra gifta prinsessor. Del 3. Svensk Damtidning, 1964:35.

¹⁶ Anita Nyman. Allt om kärleken i Margarethas liv. Svensk Damtidning, 1973:25.

¹⁷ Ingrid Björnberg. Dagbok från Haga och Stockholms slott. Stockholm:Bonniers, 1975, s 163.

¹⁸ Sagan slut på slottet. Vecko Journalen, 1958:29.

¹⁹ Ingrid Björnberg. Dagbok från Haga och Stockholms slott. Stockholm:Bonniers, 1975, s 163.

idea what was going on, it went well: Gustaf VI and Sibylla, two loving family people, wanted to let the young find out about their feelings for each other. That had now happened. Amen.

However, it is not so easy to escape a public relations fiasco:

Vecko Journalen

The royal houses of Europe have not really kept up with the times the last few years, when royalty has outgrown their narrow taboo ridden world and increasingly become the property of the people. When married adult princesses are regarded as some kind of over-glamorized film stars, which have both beauty and ancestry. When the news has become so fast, hard and competitive. When distance does not mean anything. And above all, when the photograph has become news.

And this huge technical apparatus is still handled by the courts using methods that were modern in the 19th century. Yet even today's press is easy to deal with, if you handle it properly. This was proved brilliantly during the press conference of chamberlain Gösta Lewenhaupt at Solliden, when he won over the most anti-royalist writers on the side of Princess Sibylla. It was a skilful snake oil act that this sympathetic Count, landlord, industrialist and drafted substitute court marshal performed at short order.²⁰

Expressen

Circus Bernadotte.

The Bernadotte court has now twice devolved into a circus. The big spectacle from last year, however incredible it must seem in advance, has even managed to be outperformed by the second show at Solliden this week. The complex acrobatics are magnificent: first an official communiqué about the new arrival of the suitor, then plenty of official details about the imminent engagement, then massive ordering of the police to “protect” the event, then suddenly a message from the future fiancé himself that there will be no trip at all for “secret reasons” and finally, a few hours later cresting with an amateur notice of the princess being indisposed ...

Nothing is missing from this tried-and-tested clownarium, least of all the seven-wonder concluding prat fall. On the international market, the Swedish court may expect a lasting reputation for such performances.

End of romance.²¹

The publicity made “Spring is in the air” a hit all over Europe. Robin resumed his piano playing with a better pay check this time around and went on to seduce Princess Margaret of England. That didn't go well either. Princess Margaretha of Sweden also had difficulties in finding love. It was eight years until the next suitor John Ambler. He wasn't noble, but at least he was rich. Even royalty have to compromise. Robin was not a little bitter about the outcome. As a columnist for the Daily Express, he continued until his death in 1968 to reveal

²⁰ Prinsessan Margaretha gör slut med Robin Douglas-Home. Vecko Journalen, 1958:29.

²¹ Cirkus Bernadotte. Expressen, 1958-07-12.

unfavourable details about Margaretha and her marriage. In 1967, he tried to publish a novel about the affair, “The Pride of the Peacock”, but it was rejected. Reportedly due to “a subjective” portrait of Sibylla.^{22,23} Rumour has it that he presented Sibylla as “pro-German, anti-Jewish and a danger to the Swedish monarchy”. When the book came out the following year - possibly in a rewritten form - it had changed title to “When the Sweet Talking's done” but was not more flattering because of that:

The novel tells of a passionate love affair between Philip, an aristocratic young Englishman and Sabine, a beautiful half Siamese Countess who bewitches him with her animal sensuality. Sabine was born to privilege and riches but she has the soul of a whore, and the raging flames of her sexual hunger are fanned by a cloistered upbringing. Her father is a French aristocrat and diplomat whose second wife resents her stepdaughter's attractiveness and steps in to prevent Sabine marrying Philip. A powerful erotic novel set against a London background.

In their turn, Swedish magazines published disparaging articles, portraying him as an untalented and misguided fortune hunter.

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The book's title was taken from the 1941 “Blues in the Night” by Harold Arlen & Johnny Mercer. Robin probably had Frank Sinatra's 1958 interpretation in mind. The complete stanza reads:

“But when the sweet talking's done
A woman's a two-face,
A worrisome thing who'll leave ya t' sing
The blues in the night.”

It is not a successful book. All the women are unreliable sex objects. It get's to be a little tiresome. In the middle of the book comes a couple of completely different pages with Princess Sibylla's alter ego “the duchess Beatrix, a great niece of the Kaiser, the daughter of the Margrave von Wolfenbuttel-Schleswig”. She and the book's protagonist, Philip, struggle over who knows best what the stepdaughter wants with her life. Perhaps the real Princess Margaretha did not need another expert on this subject.

²² Derek Hunt. Försmådd friare skriver skandalbok om prinsessan Margaretha. Året Runt, 1967:16.

²³ Robin Douglas-Home. When the Sweet Talking's Done. 1968.