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Die verkaufte Braut
The Bartered Bride
Directed by Max Ophüls

Everybody is going to town for the fair. We see shots of the young man Wenzel and his parents, and also a traveling circus on the way. The circus monkey jumps into Wenzel's lap, and so Wenzel first meets Esmeralda, a circus performer and the foster daughter of the circus owners. A stagecoach full of passengers comes along, but it catches a wheel on a milestone and gets stuck. The young postillion, Hans, heads off into town to get the wheel fixed. In town the fair is already in progress, and Marie, the mayor's daughter, is playing one of the games in a booth. She wins a prize, a piglet, which promptly escapes, precipitating a chase on the part of all the local yokels who hope to win Marie's hand. Hans sees her and is smitten. He gives chase and catches the pig and returns it to Marie. He muscles the chief suitor out of the way and walks off with Marie, obviously to her satisfaction. Kezal, the matchmaker, sees this, and thinks that it is high time to get her married off on his terms. Marie invites Hans to stay for the fair, but he says he can't. Disappointed, she at least gives him some flowers. The wheelwright yells at Hans that the wheel is finished, but Hans ignores him and goes off to the fair with Marie after all.

Kezal, full of enthusiasm, is telling the mayor that he has found the right match for his daughter. He must think of her happiness and must lose no time now. Wenzel is the right man; he is a good man, and he is also rich, with many assets like horses, cows, fields, and woods. They must go right over to the Golden Goose Inn, where everything is ready. There they encounter Wenzel and his parents. The parents and the mayor go into a room to negotiate. Wenzel and Marie stay in the antechamber together, but it is quite obvious that there is no spark between the two. Kezal sings about the advantages of a good marriage, and the parents agree. But Marie suddenly says no and stalks out.

At the fair Hans shows his strength by ringing the bell with the hammer. One of the stagecoach passengers, a self-important financier, also tries, without success. Embarrassed, he decides he wants to leave. Hans objects that now it is too late to travel on, that they might be overtaken by nightfall. The financier agrees that this is too dangerous, and says that they will depart first thing in the morning. He will stay at the Golden Goose for the night. Marie is distraught because of her pending arranged marriage. She decides to run away and writes a note to her father to tell him not to look for her, he won't find her anyway, but not to worry, she will be with her Aunt Lenchen in Prague. At the town hall, Wenzel's parents are eating cake to celebrate the marriage contract. Wenzel himself has left, and while walking finds the circus monkey, which means that Esmeralda is near. Marie finds Hans and tries to persuade him to take her along in the stagecoach to Pilsen. He agrees, but not until the morning. Marie sees Wenzel's parents coming, so the two of them duck into a tent, where the performer is singing of true love and telling cautionary tales that demonstrate it. Marie and Hans are a little embarrassed, but the subject is perfect for their situation, and they sing a love duet.

Esmeralda is decorating the spot where the circus is setting up. She sees Wenzel and they flirt. Meanwhile Marie and Hans are having their photograph taken, but are surprised by Wenzel's parents, so they flee. The photographer doesn't notice, but prattles on, telling them about the wonders of modern photography and how it is all the rage of the truly noble society in Paris, Vienna, and Berlin. This isn't witchcraft, this is progress, this is science! He tells them to hold still and starts counting. He is surprised to find a different couple, but thanks them and hopes this will be a wonderful memory for them. Esmeralda is now playing the accordion for Wenzel, and remarks that art is great, but hard work.

A police sergeant appears, looking for the circus director Brummer. There is a lot of wordplay and deliberate but comic misunderstanding (and bad jokes). Theoretically the circus already has permission to appear, but the sergeant reminds him of one more important thing: he still owes the town treasury 300 guilders from the last time they appeared here. Brummer insists that he hadn't forgotten the 300 guilders – he had just forgotten to PAY them. He promises to pay them, unless he forgets, and his wife promises to remind him to pay. Brummer and his wife come upon Wenzel and Esmeralda, and upon finding out that he loves art, immediately manage to get him to buy two tickets for that evening's performance. While talking about him and agreeing that he is a nice guy, they go into a routine about having money and not being an artist, in which case a person would be no better than anyone else. They agree that being an artist AND having plenty of money would be the best situation. Kezal appears and asks if the policeman has seen the mayor's daughter. He hasn't. Kezal sniffs around the circus looking for her, and chances upon Wenzel and Esmeralda. Hans and Marie are still going through various portions of the fair, very much in love. They are now in a model of one of Napoleon's battles, with a professor giving a history lecture on it. As he concludes, the lecturer asks the public to leave a token of their appreciation at the door – and hopes he hasn't disturbed Hans and Marie too much with his lecture.

Back at the Golden Goose and supposed marriage ceremony, the mayor laments that his child has left him. He vows that the marriage cannot take place, she must have her free will. Wenzel's mother replies that free will is a postillion, and he has been taking Marie to booths at the fair. HER child is too precious to leave in the hands of his libertine daughter. Kezal then asks if they know where THEIR son is, telling them that he is at the circus with a dancer, a dancer with bare legs. He pleads with both parties that for the welfare of their families -- i.e., if the mayor does not want a postillion for a son-in-law, and Wenzel's parents do not want a circus dancer for a daughter-in-law -- they must leave everything to him. The most important thing is a good, decent marriage.

At the mayor's office, the police sergeant announces circus director Brummer, who is appealing for a further extension in the payment of the 300 guilders of back taxes for public performances. The mayor denies the extension and thereby also permission for the current performances. Hans and Marie are shown drifting romantically on the river, singing a love song. This is rudely interrupted by her father, who takes her away. At the circus, Brummer comes in and sadly tells the performers that the circus will have to leave because the mayor will not grant them permission to perform. Esmeralda tells

Wenzel, who tells her not to worry and promises to get her the 300 guilders by that evening. He tells a circus assistant to wait for him in the pub. At the Golden Goose, the financier invites Hans to have a drink, which he declines. Wenzel goes to his parents and asks them for 300 guilders for a very worthy cause. They indignantly send him to his room and tell him to behave. At the circus, Esmeralda and her parents fondly bid each other good night. The circus director and his wife discuss their daughter's new love, remarking that it wouldn't be so bad if he could at least do a handstand. At the Golden Goose, the circus assistant is steadily getting drunk waiting for his new friend Wenzel and drinking on his tab.

On the square, the whole town is dancing. Hans wants to see the goldsmith urgently and gets his son to fetch his father, who is playing second trumpet in the band. The goldsmith opens up his shop so that Hans can buy a ring. Everyone goes home, and we see various main characters in their rooms, thinking and singing of each other. Hans serenades Marie, and climbs up a ladder to give her his ring, which she joyfully accepts. One of the local suitors sabotages him and causes him to fall off the ladder, and a general brawl ensues, in which Hans beats up everyone and emerges triumphant. Marie sings about the ring.

The next morning everyone has gone to church. The mayor tries to convince Marie to marry Wenzel. He reasons that tomorrow she may no longer love Hans, but Wenzel will still have the largest estate in the region. Wenzel, however, has run off. His parents think that maybe if they wait just a little while longer, things will still work out. Hans is about to take off with the stagecoach when Kezal appears. He tells Hans that he is worth nothing, that he will only bring Marie misery. The financier grows impatient and wants to leave; he needs to be in Vienna in three days. Kezal makes Hans an offer he thinks he can't refuse: if he leaves and doesn't interfere with Marie's engagement any more, he will give him 100 guilders on the spot. He ultimately ups it to 200, but Hans ignores him. He takes off with the stagecoach without promising to stay out of town. Kezal follows on a horse, and they sing a duet about all the things money can buy, that is, the things Hans doesn't have, Hans countering every argument. Kezal is finally left behind, but Wenzel is sitting at the crossroads outside town. He asks Hans to take him along. Hans says he can't because it's against regulations and could cost him his job. Wenzel pleads with him, saying that his whole future depends on it. Hans finally agrees. While they are driving, Wenzel explains that he must get to Pilsen to talk to the people in the town hall there so that the circus can perform, otherwise he will never be able to see Esmeralda again. To his surprise, Hans learns that Wenzel loves Esmeralda and does not want to marry Marie. They conceive a plan. Hans promises Wenzel that he will get him the 300 guilders if Hans will drive the coach for him. Hans takes a horse and rides back, finding Kezal on a milestone outside of town. He tells the matchmaker that he will accept his offer of 300 guilders (!) after all. Very reluctantly Kezal gives him 300, but makes him promise never again to try to prevent Wenzel and Marie's marriage. Hans rides back to the stagecoach, and Wenzel then takes off for town with the 300 guilders. Kezal also returns to town, where he tells Wenzel's parents how he has paid off Hans to stay away, and how now everything will work out. The servants are listening at the keyhole, and soon the story of how Hans has sold his bride has spread throughout the

town. The mayor is outraged, and Marie runs home, overcome with shame and heartbreak. Hans simply leaves the coach and heads back to town on a horse.

Brummer and his wife pay a call on the mayor. After some wordplay and slapstick routines, they tell the mayor that they are here about the back taxes. The mayor says he can't help them with that any more. They protest that they would never have left without paying, that there are still some patrons of the arts who are generous and will not let art die. They give him the money and invite the mayor and his whole entourage to seats of honor at the opening ceremony that evening. They ask for the honor of his presence on the occasion of the engagement of their daughter. But he says it's quite impossible. They commiserate with him. But true art will overcome all, they feel, and they press him to attend the opening ceremony and see how art will put all matters right. He gives official permission for the performance to take place.

At the opening that night the director introduces the show. The strongman will grind huge rocks into sand. Esmeralda will perform with the dancing bear, and put her head into its mouth at the end. Leopold Wohoo, the man-eating cannibal from the Aka Aka tribe, will appear. The mayor and his guests are in the seats of honor. The director and his wife engage in another slapstick routine having to do with her laying an egg. They sing a song. Esmeralda begins her act, but the bear falls over. Wenzel runs backstage to see what is wrong. The circus assistant, who is in the bear suit, is now completely drunk and cannot do the act. The other performers are very angry with him. Although it is not her fault, Esmeralda is very upset. Wenzel says he will help her out and convinces her to stop crying. He puts on the bear suit and does the act, which goes very well. Wenzel explains that it is because he loves Esmeralda very much. He sings about the bear. Marie in the audience is very sad, although unbeknownst to her, Hans is on the way. In the ring Esmeralda and Wenzel, in the bear suit, are kissing. Hans shows up and spirits Marie out of her seat. He tries to convince Marie to be reasonable and to let him explain. She, however, is still angry with him and runs away. Kezal, still trying to convince Wenzel to be reasonable and marry Marie, has mistaken the real bear for him, and inadvertently opens the cage. The audience scatters when it hears that the bear is loose. Hans grabs Marie and heads up a tree. The mayor yells at him to hold on to her tightly. Hans saves her from the bear. Kezal says he knew Hans was always a splendid fellow. Wenzel, as the fake bear, lures the real bear back to its cage. Esmeralda thanks and kisses him again. Everyone dances on the town square, and the movie ends as the photographer takes a picture of the main characters as a happy remembrance of the year 1850.

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