A PLOT FOR EMPIRE.

A THRILLING STORY OF CONTINENTAL CONSPIRACY AGAINST BRITAIN.

"No, I could never live in this country," she said, "even if my liking for it grew. It would be impossible!"

He was puzzled for a moment.

"You think that you could never care for it enough," he suggested; "yet you have scarcely had time to judge it fairly. London in the spring is gay enough, and the life at some of our country houses is very different to what it was a few years ago. Society is so much more tolerant and broader."

"It is scarcely a question," she said, "of my likes or dislikes. Next to Paris, I prefer London in the spring to any city in Europe, and a week I spent at Radnett was very delightful. But, nevertheless, I could never live here. It is not my destiny!"

The old curiosity was strong upon him. Radnett was the home of the Duchess of Radnett and Ilchester, who had the reputation of being the most exclusive hostess in Europe! He was bewildered.

"I would give a great deal," he said earnestly, "to know what you believe that destiny to be."

"We are bordering upon the forbidden subject," she reminded him, with a look which was almost reproachful. "You must please believe me when I tell you, that for me things have already been arranged otherwise. Come, I want you to tell me all about this country into which we are going. You must remember that to me it is all new!"

He suffered her to lead the conversation into other channels, with a vague feeling of disquiet. The mystery which hung around the girl and her uncle seemed only to grow denser as his desire to penetrate it grew. At present, at any rate, he was baffled. He dared ask no more questions.

The train glided into Peterborough station before either of them were well aware that they had entered in earnest upon the journey. Wolfenden looked out of the window with amazement.

"Why, we are nearly half way there!" he exclaimed. "How wretched!"

She smiled, and took up a magazine. Wolfenden's servant came respectfully to the window.

"Can I get you anything, my lord?" he inquired.

Wolfenden shook his head, and opening the door, stepped out on to the platform.

"Nothing, thanks, Selby," he said. "You had better get yourself some lunch. We don't get to Deringham until four o'clock."

The man raised his hat and turned away. In a moment, however, he was back again.

"You will pardon my mentioning it, my lord," he said, "but the young lady's maid has been travelling in my carriage, and a nice fidget she's been in all the way. She's been muttering to herself in French, and she seems terribly frightened about something or other. The moment the train stopped here, she rushed off to the telegraph office."

"She seems a little excitable," Wolfenden remarked. "All right, Selby, you'd better hurry up and get what you want to eat."

"Certainly, my lord; and perhaps your lordship knows that there is a flower-stall in the corner there."

Wolfenden nodded and hurried off. He returned to the carriage just as the train was moving off, with a handful of fresh, wet violets, whose perfume seemed instantly to fill the compartment. The girl held out her hands with a little exclamation of pleasure.

"What a delightful travelling companion you are," she declared. "I think these English violets are the sweetest flowers in the world."

She held them up to her lips. Wolfenden was looking at a paper bag in her lap.

"May I inquire what that is?" he asked.

"Buns!" she answered. "You must not think that because I am a girl I am never hungry. It is two o'clock, and I am positively famished. I sent my maid for them."

He smiled, and sweeping away the bundles of rugs and coats, produced the luncheon basket which he had secured at King's Cross, and opening it, spread out the contents.

"For two!" she exclaimed, "and what a delightful looking salad! Where on earth did that come from?"

"Oh, I am no magician," he exclaimed. "I ordered the basket at King's Cross, after I had seen you. Let me spread the cloth here. My dressing-case will make a capital table."

They picknicked together gaily. It seemed to Wolfenden that chicken and tongue had never tested so well before, or claret, at three shillings a bottle, so full and delicious. They cleared everything up, and then sat and talked over the cigarette which she had insisted upon. But, although he tried more than once, he could not lead the conversation into any serious channel—she would not talk of her past, she distinctly avoided the future. Once, when he had made a deliberate effort to gain some knowledge as to her earlier surroundings, she reproved him with a silence so marked that he hastened to talk of something else.

"Your maid," he said, "is greatly distressed about something. She sent a telegram off at Peterborough. I hope that your uncle will not make himself unpleasant because of my travelling with you."

She smiled at him quite undisturbed.

"Poor Celeste," she said. "Your presence here has upset her terribly. Mr. Sabin has some rather strange notions about me, and I am quite sure that he would rather have sent me down in a special train than have had this happen. You need not look so serious about it."

"It is only on your account," he assured her.

"Then you need not look serious at all," she continued. "I am not under my uncle's jurisdiction. In fact, I am quite an independent person."

"I am delighted to hear it," he said heartily. "I should imagine that Mr. Sabin would not be at all a pleasant person to be on bad terms with."

She smiled thoughtfully.

"There are a good many people," she said, "who would agree with you. There are a great many people in the world who have come to regret having offended him. Let us talk of something else. I believe that I can see the sea!"

They were indeed at Cromer. He found a carriage for her, and collected her belongings. He was almost amused at her absolute indolence in the midst of the bustle of arrival. She was evidently unused to doing the slightest thing for herself. He took the address which she gave to him, and repeated it to the driver. Then he asked the question which had been trembling many times upon his lips.

"May I come and see you?"

She had evidently been considering the matter, for she answered him at once and deliberately.

"I should like you to," she said; "but if for any reason it did not suit my uncle to have you come, it would not be pleasant for either of us. He is going to play golf on the Deringham links. You will be certain to see him there, and you must be guided by his manner towards you."

"And if he is still—as he was in London—must this be good-bye, then?" he asked, earnestly.

She looked at him with a faint color in her cheeks, and a softer light in her proud, clear eyes.

"Well," she said, "good-bye would be the last word which could be spoken between us. But, n'importe, we shall see."

She flashed a suddenly brilliant smile upon him, and leaned back amongst the cushions. The carriage drove off, and Wolfenden, humming pleasantly to himself, stepped into the dog-cart which was waiting for him.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Great Work.

The Countess of Deringham might be excused for considering herself the most unfortunate woman in England. In a single week she had passed from the position of one of the most brilliant leaders of English society to be the keeper of a recluse, whose sanity was at least doubtful. Her husband, Admiral the Earl of Deringham, had been a man of iron nerve and constitution, with a splendid reputation, and undoubtedly a fine seaman. The horror of a single day had broken up his life. He had been the awe-stricken witness of a great naval catastrophe, in which many of his oldest friends and companions had gone to the bottom of the sea before his eyes, together with nearly a thousand British seamen. The responsibility for the disaster lay chiefly with those who had perished in it, yet some small share of the blame was fastened upon the onlookers, and he himself, as admiral in command, had not altogether escaped. From the moment when they led him down from the bridge of his flagship, grey and fainting, he had been a changed man. He had never recovered from the shock. He retired from active service at once, under a singular and marvelously persistent delusion. Briefly, he believed, or professed to believe, that half the British fleet had perished, and that the country was at the mercy of the first great Power who cared to send her warships up the Thames. It was a question whether he was really insane; on any ordinary topic his views were the views of a rational man, but the task which he proceeded to set himself was so absorbing that any other subject seemed scarcely to come within the horizon of his comprehension. He imagined himself selected by no less a person than the Secretary for War, to devote the rest of his life to the accomplishment of a certain undertaking! Practically his mission was to prove by figures, plans and naval details (unknown to the general public), the complete helplessness of the Empire. He bought a yacht and commenced a series of short cruises, lasting over two years, during the whole of which time his wife was his faithful and constant companion. They visited in turn each one of the fortified ports of the country, winding up with a general inspection of every battleship and cruiser within British waters. Then, with huge piles of amassed information before him, he settled down in Norfolk to the framing of his report, still under the impression that the whole country was anxiously awaiting it. His wife remained with him then, listening daily to the news of his progress, and careful never to utter a single word of discouragement or disbelief in the startling facts which he sometimes put before her. The best room in the house, the great library, was stripped perfectly bare and fitted up for his study, and a typist was engaged to copy out the result of his labors in fair form. Lately, the fatal results to England which would follow the public disclosure of her awful helplessness had weighed heavily upon him, and he was beginning to live in the fear of betrayal. The room in which he worked was fitted with iron shutters, and was guarded night and day. He saw no visitors, and was annoyed if any were permitted to enter the house. He met his wife only at dinner time, for which meal he dressed in great state, and at which no one else was ever allowed to be present. He suffered, when they were alone, no word to pass his lips, save with reference to the subject of his labors; it is certain he looked upon himself as the discoverer of terrible secrets. Any remark addressed to him upon other matters utterly failed to make any impression. If he heard it he did not reply. He would simply look puzzled, and, as speedily as possible, withdraw. He was sixty years of age, of dignified and kindly appearance; a handsome man still, save that the fire of his blue eyes was quenched, and the firm lines of his commanding mouth had become tremulous. Wolfenden, on his arrival, was met in the hall by his mother, who carried him off at once to have tea in her own room. As he took a low chair opposite to her he was conscious at once of a distinct sense of self-reproach. Although still a handsome woman, the Countess of Deringham was only the wreck of her former brilliant self. Wolfenden, knowing what her life must be, under its altered circumstances, could scarcely wonder at it. The black hair was still only faintly streaked with grey, and her figure was as slim and upright as ever. But there were lines on her forehead and about her eyes, her cheeks were thinner, and even her hands were wasted. He looked at her in silent pity, and although a man of singularly undemonstrative habits, he took her hand in his and pressed it gently. Then he set himself to talk as cheerfully as possible.

"There is nothing much wrong physically with the Admiral, I hope?" he said, calling him by the name they still always gave him. "I saw him at the window as I came round. By the by, what is that extraordinary looking affair like a sentry-box doing there?"

The countess sighed.

"That is part of what I have to tell you," she said. "A sentry-box is exactly what it is, and if you had looked inside you would have seen Dunn or Heggs there keeping guard. In health your father seems as well as ever; mentally, I am afraid that he is worse. I fear that he is getting very bad indeed. That is why I have sent for you, Wolf!"

Wolfenden was seriously and genuinely concerned. Surely his mother had had enough to bear.

"I am very sorry," he said. "Your letter prepared me a little for this; you must tell me all about it."

"He has suddenly become the victim," the countess said, "of a new and most extraordinary delusion. How it came to pass I cannot exactly tell, but this is what happened. He has a bed, you know, made up in an anteroom, leading from the library, and he sleeps there generally. Early this morning the whole house was awakened by the sound of two revolver shots. I hurried down in my dressing gown, and found some of the servants already outside the library door, which was locked and barred on the inside. When he heard my voice he let me in. The room was in partial darkness and some disorder. He had a smoking revolver in his hand, and was muttering to himself so fast that I could not understand a word he said. The chest that holds all his maps and papers had been dragged into the middle of the room, and the iron staple had been twisted, as though with a heavy blow. I saw that the lamp was flickering and a current of air was in the room, and when I looked towards the window I found that the shutters were open and one of the sashes had been lifted. All at once he became coherent.

"'Send for Morton and Philip Dunn!' he cried. 'Let the shrubbery and all the Home Park be searched. Let no one pass out of either of the gates. There have been thieves here!'

"I gave his orders to Morton. 'Where is Richardson?' I asked. Richardson was supposed to have been watching outside. Before he could answer Richardson came in through the window. His forehead was bleeding, as though from a blow.

"'What has happened, Richardson?' I asked. The man hesitated, and looked at your father. Your father answered instead.

"'I woke up five minutes ago,' he cried, 'and found two men here. How they got past Richardson I don't know, but they were in the room, and they had dragged my chest out there, and had forced a crowbar through the lock! I was just in time; I hit one man in the arm, and he fired back. Then they bolted right past Richardson. They must have nearly knocked you down. You must have been asleep, you idiot,' he cried, 'or you could have stopped them!'

"I turned to Richardson; he did not say a word, but he looked at me meaningly. The Admiral was examining his chest, so I drew Richardson on one side.

"'Is this true, Richardson?' I asked. The man shook his head.

"'No, your ladyship,' he said bluntly; 'it ain't; there's no two men been here at all! The master dragged the chest out himself; I heard him doing it, and I saw the light, so I left my box, and stepped into the room to see what was wrong. Directly he saw me he yelled out and let fly at me with his revolver! It's a wonder I'm alive, for one of the bullets grazed my temple!'

"Then he went on to say that he would like to leave, that no wages were good enough to be shot at, and plainly hinted that he thought your father ought to be locked up. I talked him over, and then got the Admiral to go back to bed. We had the place searched as a matter of form, but of course there was no sign of anybody. He had imagined the whole thing. It is a mercy that he did not kill Richardson!"

"This is very serious," Wolfenden said gravely. "What about his revolver?"

"I managed to secure that," the Countess said. "It is locked up in my drawer, but I am afraid that he may ask for it at any moment."

"We can make that all right," Wolfenden said; "I know where there are some blank cartridges in the gun-room, and I will reload the revolver with them. By the by, what does Blatherwick say about all this?"

"He is almost as worried as I am, poor little man," Lady Deringham said. "I am afraid every day that he will give it up and leave. We are paying him five hundred a year, but it must be miserable work for him. It is really most amusing, though, to see how terrified he is at your father. He positively shakes when he speaks to him."

"What does he have to do?" Wolfenden asked.

"Oh, draw maps and make calculations and copy all sorts of things. You see it is wasted and purposeless work, that is what makes it so hard for the poor man."

"You are quite sure, I suppose," Wolfenden asked, after a moment's hesitation, "that it is all wasted work."

"Absolutely," the Countess declared. "Mr. Blatherwick brings me, sometimes in despair, sheets upon which he has been engaged for days. They are all just a hopeless tangle of figures and wild calculations! Nobody could possibly make anything coherent out of them."

"I wonder," Wolfenden suggested, thoughtfully, "whether it would be a good idea to get Denvers, the Secretary, to write and ask him not to go on with the work for the present. He could easily make some excuse—say that it was attracting attention which they desired to avoid, or something of that sort! Denvers is a good fellow, and he and the admiral were great friends once, weren't they?"

The Countess shook her head.

"I am afraid that would not do at all," she said. "Besides, out of pure good nature, of course, Denvers has already encouraged him. Only last week he wrote him a friendly letter, hoping that he was getting on, and telling him how interested every one in the War Office was to hear about his work. He has known about it all the time, you see. They would break down altogether."

"Of course, there is that to be feared," Wolfenden admitted. "I too, if the occupation were taken from your father, I am afraid he wonder what put this new delusion into his head? Does he suspect anyone in particular?"

The Countess shook her head.

"I do not think so; of course it was Miss Merton who started it. He quite believes that she took copies of all the work she did here, but he was so pleased with himself at the idea of having found her out that he has troubled very little about itt. He seems to think that she had not reached the most important part of his work, and he is copying that himself now by hand."

"But outside the house, has he no suspicions at all?"

"Not that I know of; not any definite suspicion. He was talking last night of Duchesne, the great spy and adventurer, in a rambling sort of way. 'Duchesne would be the man to get hold of my work if he knew of it,' he kept on saying. 'But none must know of it! The newspapers must be quiet It is a terrible danger!' He talked like that for some time. No, I do not think that he suspects anybody. It is more a general uneasiness."

"Poor old chap!" Wolfenden said softly. "What does Dr. Whitlett think of him? Has he seen him lately? I wonder if there is any chance of his getting over it?"

"None at all," she answered. "Dr. Whitlett is quite frank. He will never recover what he has lost—he will probably lose more. But come, there is the dressing bell. You will see him for yourself at dinner. Whatever you do, don't be late—he hates anyone to be a minute behind time."

CHAPTER XIV.

The Tempting of Mr. Blatherwick.

Wolfenden was careful to reach the hall before the dinner gong was sounded. His father greeted him warmly, and Wolfenden was surpirsed to see so little outward change in him. He was carefully dressed, well groomed in every respect, and he wore a delicate orchid in his button-hole.

During dinner he discussed the little round of London life and its various social events with perfect sanity, and permitted himself his usual good-natured grumble at Wolfenden for his dilatoriness in the choice of a profession.

He did not once refer to the subject of his own weakness until dessert had been served, when he passed the claret to Wolfenden without filling his own glass.

"You will excuse my not joining you," he said to his son, "but I have still three or four hours' writing to do, and such work as mine requires a very clear head—you can understand that, I dare say."

(To be continued.)