A PLOT FOR EMPIRE.

A THRILLING STORY OF CONTINENTAL CONSPIRACY AGAINST BRITAIN.

"Give that to McPherson," he said. "You can clean my clubs and put them in my locker. I shall not be playing again this morning."

The boy disappeared down the hill. They stood for a moment side by side.

"I have spoilt your game," she said. "I am sorry."

He laughed.

"I think you know," he said, boldly, "that I would rather spend five minutes with you than a day at golf."

She moved on with a smile at the corners of her lips.

"What a downright person you are!" she said. "But honestly, to-day I am not in the mood to be alone. I am possessed with an uneasy spirit of sadness. I am afraid of my thoughts."

"I am sorry," he said, "that you should have any that are not happy ones. Don't you think perhaps that you are a little lonely? You seem to have so few friends?"

"It is not that," she answered. "I have many and very dear friends, and it is only for a little time that I am separated from them. It is simply that I am not used to solitude, and I am becoming a creature of moods and presentiments. It is very foolish that I give way to them; but to-day I am miserable. You must stretch out that strong hand of yours, my friend, and pull me up."

"I will do my best," he said. "I am afraid I cannot claim that there is anything in the shape of affinity between us, for to-day I am particularly happy."

She met his eyes briefly, and looked away seawards with the ghost of a sorrowful smile upon her lips. Her words sounded like a warning.

"Do not be sure," she said. "It may not last."

"It will last," he said, "so long as you choose. For to-day you are the mistress of my moods!"

"Then I am very sorry for you," she said, earnestly.

He laughed it off, but her words brought a certain depression with them. He went on to speak of something else.

"I have been thinking about you this morning," he said. "If your uncle is going to play golf here, it will be very dull for you. Would you care for my mother to come and see you? She would be delighted, I am sure, for it is dull for her, too, and she is fond of young people. If you"——

He stopped short. She was shaking her head slowly. The old despondency was back in her face. Her eyes were full of trouble. She laid her delicately gloved fingers upon his arm.

"My friend," she said, "it is very kind of you to think of it—but it is impossible. I cannot tell you why as I would wish. But at present I do not desire any acquaintances. I must not, in fact, think of it. It would give me great pleasure to know your mother. Only I must not. Believe me that it is impossible."

Wolfenden was a little hurt — a good deal mystified. It was a very odd thing. He was not in the least a snob, but he knew that the visit of the Countess of Deringham, whose name was still great in the social world, was not a thing to be refused without grave reasons by a girl in the position of Mr. Sabin's niece. The old question came back to him with an irresistible emphasis: Who were these people? He looked at her furtively. He was an observant man in the small details of a woman's toilette, and he knew that he had never met a girl better turned out than his present companion. The cut of her tailor-made gown was perfection, her gloves and boots could scarcely have come from anywhere but Paris. She carried herself, too, with a perfect ease and indefinable distinction which could only have come to her by descent. She was a perfect type of the woman of breeding—unrestrained, yet aristocratic to the tips of her finger-nails.

He sighed as he looked away from her.

"You are a very mysterious young woman," he said, with a forced air of gaiety.

"I am afraid that I am," she admitted, regretfully. "I can assure you that I am very tired of it. But—it will not last for very much longer."

"You are really going away, then?" he asked, quickly.

"Yes. We shall not be in England much longer."

"You are going for good?" he asked. "I mean, to remain away?"

"When we go," she said, "it is very doubtful if ever I shall set my foot on English soil again."

He drew a quick breath. It was his one chance, then. Her last words must be his excuse for such precipitation. They had scrambled down through an opening in the cliffs, and there was no one else in sight. Some instinct seemed to tell her what was coming. She tried to talk, but she could not. His hand had closed upon hers, and she had not the strength to draw it away. It was so very English, this sudden wooing. No one had ever dared to touch her fingers before without first begging permission.

"Don't you know—Helene—that I love you? I want you to live in England—to be my wife. Don't say that I haven't a chance. I know that I ought not to have spoken yet, but you are going away so soon, and I am so afraid that I might not see you again alone. Don't stop me, please. I am not asking you now for your love. I know that it is too soon—to hope for that—altogether. I only want you to know, and to be allowed to hope."

"You must not. It is impossible."

The words were very low, and they came from her quivering with intense pain. He released her fingers. She leaned upon a huge boulder near, and, resting her face upon her hand, gazed dreamily out to sea.

"I am very sorry," she said. "My uncle was right after all. It was not wise for us to meet. I ought to have no friends. It was not wise—it was very, very foolish."

Being a man, his first thoughts had been for himself. But at her words he forgot everything except that she too was unhappy.

"Do you mean," he said slowly, "that you cannot care for me, or that there are difficulties which seem to make it impossible?"

She looked up at him, and he scarcely knew her transfigured face, with the tears glistening upon her eyelashes.

"Do not tempt me to say what might make both of us more unhappy," she begged. "Be content to know that I cannot marry you."

"You have promised somebody else?"

"I shall probably marry," she said deliberately, "somebody else."

He ground his heel in the soft sands, and his eyes flashed.

"You are being coerced!" he cried.

She lifted her head proudly.

"There is no person breathing," she said quietly, "who would dare to attempt such a thing!"

Then he looked out with her towards the sea, and they watched the long, rippling waves break upon the brown sands, the faint and unexpected gleam of wintry sunshine lying upon the bosom of the sea, and the screaming seagulls, whose white wings shone like alabaster against the darker clouds. For him these things were no longer beautiful, nor did he see the sunlight, which with a sudden fitfulness had warmed the air. It was all very cold and grey. It was not possible for him to read the riddle yet—she had not said that she could not care for him. There was that hope!

"There is no one," he said slowly, "who could coerce you? You will not marry me, but you will probably marry somebody else. Is it, then, that you care for this other man, and not for me?"

She shook her head.

"Of the two," she said, with a faint attempt at her old manner, "I prefer you. Yet I shall marry him."

Wolfenden became aware of an unexpected sensation. He was getting angry.

"I have a right," he said, resting his hand upon her shoulder, and gaining courage from her evident weakness, "to know more. I have given you my love. At least you owe me in return your confidence. Let me have it. You shall see that if even I may not be your lover, I can at least be your faithful friend."

She touched his hand tenderly. It was scarcely kind of her—certainly not wise. She had taken off her glove, and the touch of her soft, delicate fingers thrilled him. The blood rushed through his veins like mad music. The longing to take her into his arms was almost uncomfortable. Her dark eyes looked upon him very kindly.

"My friend," she said, "I know that you would be faithful. You must not be angry with me. Nay, it is your pity I want. Some day you will know all. Then you will understand. Perhaps even you will be sorry for me, if I am not forgotten. I only wish that I could tell you more; only I may not. It makes me sad to deny you, but I must."

"I mean to know," he said doggedly—"I mean to know everything. You are sacrificing yourself. To talk of marrying a man whom you do not love is absurd. Who are you? If you do not tell me, I shall go to your guardian. I shall go to Mr. Sabin."

"Mr. Sabin is always at your service," said a suave voice almost at his elbow. "Never more so than at the present."

Wolfenden turned round with a start. It was indeed Mr. Sabin, in unaccustomed guise, clad in a tweed suit and leaning upon an ordinary walking-stick."

"Come," he said, good-humoredly, "don't look at me as though I were something uncanny. If you had not been so very absorbed you would have heard me call to you from the cliffs. I wanted to save myself the climb, but you were deaf, both of you. Am I the first man whose footsteps upon the sands have fallen lightly. Now, what is it you want to ask me, Lord Wolfenden?"

Wolfenden was in no way disturbed at the man's coming. On the contrary, he was glad of it. He answered boldly and without hesitation.

"I want to marry your niece, Mr. Sabin," he said.

"Very natural indeed," Mr. Sabin remarked easily. "If I were a young man of your age and evident taste I have not the least doubt but that I should want to marry her myself. I offer you my sincere sympathy. Unfortunately it is impossible."

"I want to know," Wolfenden said, "why it is impossible? I want a reason of some sort."

"You shall have one with pleasure," Mr. Sabin said. "My niece is already betrothed."

"To a man," Wolfenden exclaimed indignantly, "whom she admits that she does not care for!"

"Whom she has nevertheless," Mr. Sabin said suddenly, and with a sudden flash of anger in his eyes, "agreed and promised of her own free will to marry. Look here, Lord Wolfenden, I do not desire to quarrel with you. You saved me from a very awkward accident a few nights ago, and I remain your debtor. Be reasonable! My niece has refused your offer. I confirm her refusal. Your proposal does us both much honor, but it is utterly out of the question. That is putting it plainly, is it not? Now, you must choose for yourself—whether you will drop the subject and remain our valued friend, or whether you compel me to ask you to leave us at once, and consider us henceforth as strangers."

The girl laid her hand upon his shoulder and looked at him pleadingly.

"For my sake," she said, "choose to remain our friend, and let this be forgotten."

"For your sake, I consent," he said, "But I give no promise that I will not at some future time reopen the subject."

"You will do so," Mr. Sabin said, "exactly when you desire to close your acquaintance with us. For the rest, you have chosen wisely. Now I am going to take you home, Helene. Afterwards, if Lord Wolfenden will give me a match, I shall be delighted to have a round of golf with him."

"I shall be very pleased," Wolfenden answered.

"I will see you at the pavilion in half an hour," Mr. Sabin said. "In the meantime, you will please excuse us. I have a few words to say to my niece."

She held out both her hands, looking at him half kindly, half wistfully.

"Good-bye," she said. "I am so sorry!"

But he looked straight into her eyes, and he answered her bravely. He would not admit defeat.

"I hope that you are not," he said. "I shall never regret it."

CHAPTER XX.

From a Dim World.

Wolfenden was in no particularly cheerful frame of mind when, a few moments after the half hour was up, Mr. Sabin appeared upon the pavilion tee, followed by a tall, dark young man carrying a bag of golf clubs. Mr. Sabin, on the other hand, was inclined to be sardonically cheerful.

"Your handicap," he remarked, "is two. Mine is one. Suppose we play level. We ought to make a good match."

Wolfenden looked at him in surprise.

"Did you say one?"

Mr. Sabin smiled.

"Yes; they give me one at Pau and Cannes. My foot interferes very little with my walking upon turf. All the same, I expect you will find me an easy victim here. Shall I drive? Just here, Dumayne," he added, pointing to a convenient spot upon the tee with the head of his driver. "Not too much sand."

"Where did you get your caddie?" Wolfenden asked. "He is not one of ours, is he?"

Mr. Sabin shook his head.

"I found him on some links in the south of France," he answered. "He is the only caddie I ever knew who could make a decent tee, so I take him about with me. He valets me as well. That will do nicely, Dumayne."

Mr. Sabin's expression suddenly changed. His body, as though by instinct, fell into position. He scarcely altered his stand an inch from the position he had first taken up. Wolfenden, who had expected a half-swing, was amazed at the wonderfully lithe, graceful movement with which he stooped down and the club flew round his shoulder. Clean and true the ball flew off the tee in a perfectly direct line—a capital drive only a little short of the two hundred yards. Master and servant watched it critically.

"A fairly well hit ball, I think, Dumayne," Mr. Sabin remarked.

"You got it quite clean away, sir," the man answered. "It hasn't run very well, though; you will find it a litte near the far bunker for a comfortable second."

"I shall carry it all right," Mr. Sabin said, quietly.

Wolfenden also drove a long ball, but with a little slice. He had to play the odd, and caught the top of the bunker. The hole fell to Mr. Sabin in four.

They strolled off towards the second teeing ground.

"Are you staying down here for long?" Mr. Sabin asked.

Wolfenden hesitated.

"I am not sure," he said. "I am rather oddly situated at home. At any rate I shall probably be here as long as you."

"I am not sure about that," Mr. Sabin said. "I think that I am going to like these links, and if so I shall not hurry away. Forgive me if I am inquisitive, but your reference to home affairs is, I presume, in connection with your father's health. I was very sorry to hear that he is looked upon now as a confirmed invalid."

Wolfenden assented gravely. He did not wish to talk about his father to Mr. Sabin. On the other hand, Mr. Sabin was politely persistent.

"He does not, I presume, receive visitors," he said, as they left the tee after the third drive.

"Never," Wolfenden answered decisively. "He suffers a good deal in various ways, and apart from that he is very much absorbed in the collection of some statistics connected with a hobby of his. He does not see even his oldest friends."

Mr. Sabin was obviously interested.

"Many years ago," he said, "I met your father at Alexandria. He was then in command of the Victoria. He would perhaps scarcely recollect me now, but at the time he made me promise to visit him if ever I was in England. It must be—yes, it surely must be nearly fifteen years ago,"

"I am afraid," Wolfenden remarked, watching the flight of his ball after a successful brassey shot, "that he would have forgotten all about it by now. His memory has suffered a good deal."

Mr. Sabin addressed his own ball, and from a bad lie sent it flying a hundred and fifty yards with a peculiar, jerking shot which Wolfenden watched with envy.

"You must have a wonderful eye," he remarked, "to hit a ball with a full swing lying like that. Nine men out of ten would have taken an iron."

Mr. Sabin shrugged his shoulders. He did not wish to talk golf.

"I was about to remark," he said, "that your father had then the reputation of, and impressed me as being, the best informed man with regard to English naval affairs with whom I ever conversed."

"He was considered an authority, I believe," Wolfenden admitted.

"What I particularly admired about him," Mr. Sabin continued, "was the absence of that cocksureness which sometimes, I am afraid, almost blinds the judgment of your great naval officers. I have heard him even discuss the possibility of an invasion of England with the utmost gravity. He admitted that it was far from improbable."

"My father's views," Wolfenden said, "have always been pessimistic as regards the actual strength of our navy and coast defences. I believe he used to make himself a great nuisance at the Admiralty."

"He has ceased now, I suppose," Mr. Sabin remarked, "to take much interest in the matter?"

"I can scarcely say that," Wolfenden answered. "His interest, however, has ceased to be official. I dare say you have heard that he was in command of the Channel Fleet at the time of the terrible disaster in the Solent. He retired almost immediately afterwards, and we fear that his health will never altogether recover from the shock."

There was a short intermission in the conversation. Wolfenden had sliced his ball badly from the sixth tee, and Mr. Sabin, having driven as usual with almost mathematical precision, their ways for a few minutes lay apart. They came together, however, on the putting green, and had a short walk to the next tee.

"That was a very creditable half to you," Mr. Sabin remarked.

"My approach," Wolfenden admitted, "was a lucky one."

"It was a very fine shot," Mr. Sabin insisted. "The spin helped you, of course, but you were justified in allowing for that, especially as you seem to play most of your mashie shots with a cut. What were we talking about? Oh, I remember, of course. It was about your father and the Solent catastrophe. Admiral Deringham was not concerned with the actual disaster in any way, was he?"

Wolfenden shook his head.

"Thank God, no!" he said emphatically. "But Admiral Marston was his dearest friend, and he saw him go down with six hundred of his men. He was so close that they even shouted farewells to one another."

"It must have been a terrible shock," Mr. Sabin admitted. "No wonder he has suffered from it. Now you have spoken of it, I think I remember reading about his retirement. A sad thing for a man of action, as he always was. Does he remain in Norfolk all the year round?"

"He never leaves Deringham Hall," Wolfenden answered. "He used to make short yachting cruises until last year, but that is all over now. It is twelve months since he stepped outside his own gates."

Mr. Sabin remained deeply interested.

"Has he any occupation beyond this hobby of which you spoke?" he asked. "He rides and shoots a little, I suppose, like the rest of your country gentlemen?"

Then for the first time Wolfenden began to wonder dimly whether Mr. Sabin had some purpose of his own in so closely pursuing the thread of this conversation. He looked at him keenly. At the moment his attention seemed altogether directed to the dangerous proximity of his ball and a tall sand bunker. Throughout his interest had seemed to be fairly divided between the game and the conversation which he had initiated. None the less Wolfenden was puzzled. He could scarcely believe that Mr. Sabin had any real, personal interest in his father, but, on the other hand, it was not easy to understand this persistent questioning as to his occupation and doings. The last inquiry, carelessly though it was asked, was a direct one. It seemed scarcely worth while to evade it.

"No; my father has special interests," he answered slowly. "He is engaged now upon some work connected with his profession."

"Indeed!"

Mr. Sabin's exclamation suggested a curiosity which it was not Wolfenden's purpose to gratify. He remained silent. The game proceeded without remark for a quarter of an hour. Wolfenden was now three down, and with all the stimulus of a strong opponent he set himself to recover his ground. The ninth hole he won with a fine, long putt, which Mr. Sabin applauded heartily.

They drove from the next tee, and walked together after their balls, which lay within a few yards of one another.

"I am very much interested," Mr. Sabin remarked, "in what you have been telling me about your father. It confirms rather a curious story about Lord Deringham which I heard in London a few weeks ago. I was told, I forget by whom, that your father had devoted years of his life to a wonderfully minute study of English coast defences and her naval strength. My informant went on to say that—forgive me, but this was said quite openly, you know—that whilst on general matters your father's mental health was scarcely all that could be desired, his work in connection with these two subjects was of great value. It struck me as being a very singular and a very interesting case."

Wolfenden shook his head dubiously.

"Your informant was misled, I am afraid," he said. "My father takes his hobby very seriously, and, of course, we humor him. But as regards the value of his work, I am afraid it is worthless."

"Have you tested it yourself?" Mr. Sabin asked.

"I have only seen a few pages," Wolfenden admitted, "but they were wholly unintelligible. My chief authority is his own secretary, who is giving up an excellent place simply because he is ashamed to take money for assisting in work which he declares to be utterly hopeless."

"He is a man," Mr. Sabin remarked, "whom you can trust, I suppose? His judgment is not likely to be at fault."

"There is not the faintest chance of it," Wolfenden declared. "He is a very simple, good-hearted little chap, and tremendously conscientious. What your friend told you, by the bye, reminds me of rather a curious thing which happened yesterday."

Wolfenden paused. There did not seem, however, to be any reason for concealment, and his companion was evidently deeply interested.

"A man called upon us," Wolfenden continued, "with a letter purporting to be from our local doctor here. He gave his name as Franklin Wilmot, the celebrated physician, you know, and explained that he was interested in a new method of treating mental complaints. He was very plausible, and he explained everything unusual about his visit most satisfactorily. He wanted a sight of the work on which my father was engaged, and after talking it over we introduced him into the study during my father's absence. From it he promised to give us a general opinion upon the case and its treatment. Whilst he was there our doctor drove up in hot haste. The letter was a forgery, the man an impostor."

Wolfenden, glancing towards Mr. Sabin as he finished his story, was surprised at the latter's imperfectly concealed interest. His lips were indrawn, his face seemed instinct with a certain passionate but finely controlled emotion. Only the slight hiss of his breath and the gleam of his black eyes betrayed him.

"What happened?" he asked. "Did you secure the fellow?"

Wolfenden played a long shot and waited whilst he watched the run of his ball. Then he turned towards his companion and shook his head.

"No! He was a great deal too clever for that. He sent me out to meet Whitlett, and when we got back he had shown us a clean pair of heels. He got away through the window."

"Did he take away any papers with him?" Mr. Sabin asked.

"He may have taken a loose sheet or two," Wolfenden said. "Nothing of any consequence, I think. He had no time. I don't think that that could have been his object altogether, or he would scarcely have suggested my remaining with him in the study."

Mr. Sabin drew a quick little breath. He played an iron shot and played it very badly.

"It was a very extraordinary occurrence," he remarked. "What was the man like? Did he seem like an ordinary thief?"

Wolfenden shook his head decidedly.

"Not in the least," he declared. "He was well dressed, and his manners were excellent. He had all the appearance of a man of position. He completely imposed upon both my mother and myself."

"How long were you in the study before Dr. Whitlett arrived?" Mr. Sabin asked.

"Barely five minutes."

It was odd, but Mr. Sabin seemed positively relieved.

"And Mr. Blatherwick," he asked, "where was he all the time?"

"Who?" Wolfenden asked in surprise.

"Mr. Blatherwick—your father's secretary," Mr. Sabin repeated coolly; "I understood you to say that his name was Blatherwick."

"I don't remember mentioning his name at all," Wolfenden said, vaguely disturbed.

(To be Continued.)

Justice Lount was presented with a pair of white gloves at Goderich.