A PLOT FOR EMPIRE.

A THRILLING STORY OF CONTINENTAL CONSPIRACY AGAINST BRITAIN.

"You will owe Germany nothing, for she will be paid and overpaid for all she does. Russia has made terms with the Republic of France. Politically, she has nothing to gain by a rupture; but with Germany it is different. She and France are ready at this moment to fly at one another's throats. The military popularity of such a war would be immense. The cry to arms would ring from the Mediterranean to the Rhine."

"Oh, I hope that it may not be war," she said. "I had hoped always that diplomacy, backed by a waiting army, would be sufficient. France at heart is true, I know, But, after all, it sounds like a fairy tale. You are a wonderful man, but how can you hope to move nations? What can you offer Germany to exact so tremendous a price?"

"I can offer," Mr. Sabin said calmly, "what Germany desires more than anything else in the world—the key to England. It has taken me six years to perfect my schemes. As you know, I was in America part of the time I was supposed to be in China. It was there, in the laboratory of Allison, that I commenced the work. Step by step I moved on—link by link I have forged the chain. I may say, without falsehood or exaggeration, that my work would be the work of another man's lifetime. With me it has been a labor of love. Your part, my dear Helene, will be a glorious one; think of it, and shake off your depression. This hole and corner life is not for long—the time for which we have worked is at hand."

She did not look up, there was no answering fire of enthusiasm in her dark eyes. The color came into her cheeks and faded away. Mr. Sabin was vaguely disturbed.

"In what way," she said, without directly looking at him, "is Lord Wolfenden likely to be useful to you?"

Mr. Sabin did not reply for some time, in fact, he did not reply at all. This new phase in the situation was suddenly revealed to him. When he spoke his tone was grave enough—grave with an undertone of contempt.

"Is it possible, Helene," he said, "that you have allowed yourself to think seriously of the love-making of this young man? I must confess that such a thing in connection with you would never have occurred to me in my wildest dreams!"

"I am the mistress of my own affections," she said coldly. "I am not pledged to you in any way. If I were to say that I intended to listen seriously to Lord Wolfenden—even if I were to say that I intended to marry him—well, there is no one who would dare to interfere! But, on the other hand, I have refused him. That should be enough for you. I am not going to discuss the matter at all; you would not understand it."

"I must admit," Mr. Sabin said, "that I probably should not. Of love, as you young people conceive it, I know nothing But of that greater affection — the passionate love of a man for his race and his kind and his country—well, that has always seemed to me a thing worth living and working and dying for! I had fancied, Helene, that some spark of that same fire had warmed your blood, or you would not be here to-day."

"I think," she answered more gently, "that it has. I, too, believe me, love my country and my people, and my order. If I do not find these all-engrossing, you must remember that I am a woman, and I am young; I do not pretend to be capable only of impersonal and patriotic love."

"Ay, you are a woman, and the blood of some of your ancestors will make itself felt," he added, looking at her thoughtfully. "I ought to have considered the influence of sex and heredity. By the bye, have you heard from Henri lately?"

She shook her hear.

"Not since he has been in France. We thought that whilst he was there it would be better for him not to write."

Mr. Sabin nodded.

"Most discreet," he remarked satirically. "I wonder what Henri would say if he knew?"

The girl's lip curled a little.

"If even," she said, "there was really something serious for him to know, Henri would survive it. His is not the temperature of sorrow. For twenty minutes he would be in a paroxysm. He would probably send out for poison, which he would be careful not to take; and play with a pistol if he were sure that it was not loaded. By dinner time he would be calm, the opera would soothe him still more, and by the time it was over he would be quite ready to take Mademoiselle Somebody out to supper. With the first glass of champagne his sorrow would be drowned for ever. If any wound remained at all, it would be the wound of his vanity."

"You have considered, then, the possibility of upsetting my schemes and withdrawing your part?" Mr. Sabin said quietly. "You understand that your marriage with Henri would be an absolute necessity—that without it all would be chaos."

"I do not say that I have considered any such possibility," she answered. "If I make up my mind to withdraw, I shall give you notice. But I will admit that I like Lord Wolfenden, and I detest Henri. Ah! I know of what you would remind me; you need not fear, I shall not forget! It will not be to-day, nor to-morrow, that I shall decide."

A servant entered the room and announced Lord Wolfenden. Mr. Sabin looked up.

"Where have you shown him?" he asked.

"Into the library, sir," the girl answered.

Mr. Sabin swore softly between his teeth, and sprang to his feet.

"Excuse me, Helene," he exclaimed, "I will bring Lord Wolfenden into the drawing-room. That girl is an idiot! She has shown him into the one room in the house which I would not have had him enter for anything in the world!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Way of the Woman.

Wolfenden had been shown, as he supposed, into an empty room by the servant of whom he had inquired for Mr. Sabin. But the door was scarcely closed before a familiar sound from a distant corner warned him that he was not alone. He stopped short and looked fixedly at the slight, feminine figure whose white fingers were flashing over the keyboard of a typewriter. There was something very familiar about the curve of her neck and the waving of her brown hair; her back was to him, and she did not turn round.

"Do leave me some cigarettes," she said, without lifting her head. "This is frightfully monotonous work. How much more of it is there for me to do?"

"I really don't know," Wolfenden answered, hesitatingly. "Why, Blanche!"

"Lord Wolfenden!" she exclaimed; "why, what are you doing here?"

"I might ask you," he said gravely, "the same question."

She stood up.

"You have not come to see me?"

He shook his head.

"I had not the least idea that you were here," he assured her.

Her face hardened.

"Of course not. I was an idiot to imagine that you would care enough to come, even if you had known."

"I do not know," he remarked, "why you should say that. On the contrary —"

She interrupted him.

"Oh! I know what you are going to say. I ran away from Mrs. Selby's nice rooms, and never thanked you for your kindness. I didn't even leave a message for you, did I? Well, never mind; you know why, I dare say."

Wolfenden thought that he did, but he evaded a direct answer.

"What I cannot understand," he said, "is why you are here."

"It is my new situation," she answered. "I was bound to look for one, you know. There is nothing strange about it. I advertised for a situation, and I got this one."

He was silent. There were things in connection with this which he scarcely understood. She watched him with a mocking smile parting her lips.

"It is a good deal harder to understand," she said, "why you are here. This is the very last house in the world in which I should have thought of seeing you."

"Why?" he asked quickly.

She shrugged her shoulders; her speech had been scarcely a discreet one.

"I should not have imagined," she said, "that Mr. Sabin would have come within the circle of your friends."

"I do not know why he should not," Wolfenden said. "I consider him a very interesting man."

She smiled upon him.

"Yes, he is interesting," she said; "only I should not have thought that your tastes were at all identical."

"You seem to know a good deal about him," Wolfenden remarked, quietly.

For a moment an odd light gleamed in her eyes; she was very pale. Wolfenden moved towards her.

"Blanche," he said, "has anything gone wrong with you? You don't look well."

She withdrew her hands from her face.

"There is nothing wrong with me," she ssaid. "Hush! he is coming."

She swung round in her seat, and the quick clicking of the instrument was resumed as her fingers flew over it. The door opened, and Mr. Sabin entered. He leaned on his stick, standing on the threshold, and glanced keenly at both of them.

"My dear Lord Wolfenden," he said apologetically, "this is the worst of having country servants. Fancy showing you in here. Come and join us in the other room; we are just going to have our coffee."

Wolfenden followed him with alacrity; they crossed the little hall and entered the dining-room. Helene was still sitting there sipping her coffee in an easy chair. She welcomed him with outstretched hand and a brilliantly soft smile. Mr. Sabin, who was watching her closely, appreciated, perhaps for the first time, her rare womanly beauty, apart from its distinctly patrician qualities There was a change, and he was not the man to be blind to it or to under-rate its significance. He felt that on the eve of victory he had another and an unexpected battle to fight; yet he held himself like a brave man and one used to reverses, for he showed no signs of dismay.

"I want you to try a glass of this claret, Lord Wolfenden," he said, "before you begin your coffee. I know that you are a judge, and I am rather proud of it. You are not going away, Helene?"

"I had no idea of going," she laughed. "This is really the only habitable room in the house, and I am not going to let Lord Wolfenden send me to shiver in what we call the drawing-room."

"I should be very sorry if you thought of such a thing," Wolfenden answered.

"If you will excuse me for a moment," Mr. Sabin said, "I will unpack some cigarettes. Helene, will you see that Lord Wolfenden has which liqueur he prefers?"

He limped away, and Helene watched him leave the room with some surprise. These were tactics which she did not understand. Was he already making up his mind that the game could be played without her? She was puzzled—a little uneasy.

She turned to find Wolfenden's admiring eyes fixed upon her; she looked at him with a smile, half sad, half humorous.

"Let me remember," she said, "I am to see that you have—what was it? Oh, liqueurs. We haven't much choice; you will find Kummel and Chartreuse on the sideboard, and Benedictine, which my uncle hates, by the bye, at your elbow."

"No liqueurs, thanks," he said. "I wonder, did you expect me to-night? I don't think that I ought to have come, ought I?"

"Well, you certainly show," she answered, with a smile, "a remarkable disregard for all precedents and conventions. You ought to be already on your way to foreign parts with your guns and servants. It is Englishmen, is it not, who go always to the Rocky Mountains to shoot bears when their love affairs go wrong?"

He was watching her closely, and he saw that she was less at her ease than she would have had him believe. He saw, too, or fancied that he saw, a softening in her face, a kindliness gleaming out of her lustrous eyes which suggested new things to him.

"The Rocky Mountains," he said, slowly, "mean despair. A man does not go so far whilst he has hope."

She did not answer him; he gathered courage from her silence.

"Perhaps," he said, "I might now have been on my way there but for a somewhat sanguine disposition — a very strong determination, and," he added more softly, "a very intense love."

"It takes," she remarked, "a very great deal to discourage an Englishman,"

"Speaking for myself," he answered, "I defy discouragement; I am proof against it. I love you so dearly, Helene, that I simply decline to give you up; I warn you that I am not a lover to be shaken off."

His voice was very tender; his words sounded to her simple but strong. He was so sure of himself and his love. Truly, she thought, for an Englishman this was no indifferent wooer; his confidence thrilled her; she felt her heart beat quickly under its sheath of drooping black lace and roses.

"I am giving you," she said, quietly, "no hope. Remember that; but I do not want you to go away."

The hope which her tongue so steadfastly refused to speak, he gathered from her eyes, her face, from that indefinable softening which seems to pervade at the moment of yielding a woman's very personality. He was wonderfully happy, although he had the wit to keep it to himself.

"You need not fear," he whispered, "I shall not go away."

Outside they heard the sound of Mr. Sabin's stick. She leaned over towards him.

"I want you," she said, "to—kiss me."

His heart gave a great leap, but he controlled himself. Intuitively, he knew how much was permitted to him; he seemed to have even some faint perception of the cause for her strange request. He bent over and took her face for a moment between his hands; her lips touched his—she had kissed him!

He stood away from her, breathless with the excitement of the moment. The perfume of her hair, the soft touch of her lips, the gentle movement with which she had thrust him away, these things were like the drinking of strong wine to him. Her own cheeks were scarlet; outside the sound of Mr. Sabin's stick grew more and more distinct; she smoothed her hair, and laughed softly up at him.

"At least," she murmured, "there is that to remember always."

CHAPTER XXV.

A Handful of Ashes.

The Countess of Deringham was sitting alone in her smaller drawing-room, gazing steadfastly at a certain spot in the blazing fire before her. A little pile of gray ashes was all that remained of the sealed packet which she had placed within the bars only a few seconds ago. She watched it slowly grow shapeless—piece after piece went fluttering up the broad chimney. A gentle, yet melancholy smile was parting her lips. A chapter of her life was floating away there with the little trembling strips lighter than the air, already hopelessly destroyed. Their disintegration brought with it a sense of freedom which she had lacked for many years. Yet it was only the folly of a girl, the story of a little foolish love-making, which those grey, ashen fragments, clinging so tenaciously to the iron bars, could have unfolded. Lady Deringham was not a woman who had ever for a single moment had cause to reproach herself with any real lack of duty to the brave young Englishman whom she had married so many years ago. It was of those days she was thinking as she sat there waiting for the caller, whose generosity had set her free.

At precisely four o'clock there was the sound of wheels in the drive, the slow movement of feet in the hall, and a servant announced a visitor.

"Mr. Sabin."

Lady Deringham smiled and greeted him graciously. Mr. Sabin leaned upon his wonderful stick for a moment, and then bent low over Lady Deringham's hand. She pointed to an easy chair close to her own, and he sank into it with some appearance of weariness. He was looking a little old and tired, and he carried himself without any of his usual buoyancy.

"Only a few minutes ago," she said, "I burnt my letters. I was thinking of those days in Paris when the man announced you! How old it makes one feel!"

He looked at her critically.

"I am beginning to arrive at the conclusion," he said, "that the poets and the novelists are wrong. It is the man who suffers! Look at my grey hairs!"

"It is only the art of my maid," she said, smiling, "which conceals mine. Do not let me talk of the past at all; to think that we lived so long ago is positively appalling!"

He shook his head gently.

"Not so appalling," he answered, "as the thought of how long we still have to live! One regrets one's youth as a matter of course, but the prospect of old age is more terrible still! Lucky those men and those women who live and then die. It is that interregnum—the level, monotonous plain of advancing old age, when one takes the waters at Carlsbad and looks askance at the entrees—that is what one has to dread. To watch our own degeneration, the dropping away of our energies, the decline of our taste—why, the tortures of the Inquisition were trifles to it!"

She shuddered a little.

"You paint old age in dreary colors," she said.

"I paint it as it must seem to men who have kept the kernel of life between their teeth," he answered carelessly. "To the others—well, one cares little about them. Most men are like cows, they are contented so long as they are fed. To that class I dare say old age may seem something of a rest. But neither you nor I are akin to them."

"You talk as you always talked," she said. "Mr. Sabin is very like——"

He stopped her.

"Mr. Sabin, if you please," he exclaimed. "I am particularly anxious to preserve my incognito just now. Ever since we met yesterday I have been regretting that I did not mention it to you—I do not wish it to be known that I am in England."

"Mr. Sabin it shall be, then," she answered; "only if I were you I would have chosen a more musical name."

"I wonder—have you by chance spoken of me to your son?" he asked.

"It is only by chance that I have not," she admitted. "I have scarcely seen him alone to-day, and he was out last evening. "Do you wish to remain Mr. Sabin to him also?"

"To him particularly," Mr. Sabin declared; "young men are seldom discreet."

Lady Deringham smiled.

"Wolfenden is not a gossip," she remarked; "in fact, I believe he is generally considered too reserved."

"For the present, nevertheless," he said, "let me remain Mr. Sabin to him also. I do not ask you this without a purpose."

Lady Deringham bowed her head. This man had a right to ask her more than such slight favors.

"You are still," she said, "a man of mystery and incognitos. You are still, I suppose, a plotter of great schemes. In the old days you used to terrify me almost; are you still as daring?"

"Alas! no," he answered. "Time is rapidly drawing me towards the great borderland, and when my foot is once planted there I shall carry out my theories and make my bow to the world with the best grace a man may whose life has been one long chorus of disappointments. No! I have retired from the great stage; mine is now only a passive occupation. One returns always, you know, and in a mild way I have returned to the literary ambitions of my youth. It is in connection, by the bye, with this that I arrive at the favor which you so kindly promised to grant me."

"If you knew, Victor," she said, "how grateful I feel towards you, you would not hesitate to ask me anything within my power to grant."

Mr. Sabin toyed with his stick and gazed steadfastly into the fire. He was pensive for several minutes; then, with the air of a man who suddenly detaches himself from a not unpleasant train of thought, he looked up with a smile.

"I am not going to tax you very severely," he said. "I am writing a critical paper on the armaments of the world for a European review. I had letters of introduction to Mr. C., and he gave me a great deal of valuable information. There were one or two points, however, on which he was scarcely clear, and in the course of conversation he mentioned your husband's name as being the greatest living authority upon those points. He offered to give me a letter to him, but I thought it would perhaps scarcely be wise. I fancied, too, you might be inclined, for reasons which we need not enlarge upon, to help me."

For a simple request Lady Deringham's manner of receiving it was certainly strange; she was suddenly white almost to the lips. A look of positive fear was in her eyes. The frank cordiality, the absolute kindliness with which she had welcomed her visitor was gone. She looked at him with new eyes; the old mistrust was born again. Once more he was the man to be feared and dreaded above all other men; yet she would not give way altogether. He was watching her narrowly, and she made a brave effort to regain her composure.

"But do you not know," she said, hesitatingly, "that my husband is a great invalid? It is a very painful subject for all of us, but we fear that his mind is not what it used to be. He has never been the same man since that awful night in the Solent. His work is more of a hobby with him; it would not be at all reliable for reference."

"Not all of it, certainly," he assented. "Mr. C. explained that to me. What I want is an opportunity to discriminate. Some would be very useful to me—the majority, of course, worse than useless. The particular information which I want concerns the structural defects in some of the new battleships. It would save an immense amount of time to get this succinctly."

She looked away from him, still agitated.

"There are difficulties," she murmured; "serious ones. My husband has an extraordinary idea as to the value of his own researches, and he is always haunted by a fear lest someone should break in and steal his papers. He would not suffer me to glance at them, and the room is too closely guarded for me to take you there without his knowledge. He is never away himself, and one of the keepers is stationed outside."

"The wit of a woman," Mr. Sabin said, softly, "is all-conquering."

"Providing always," Lady Deringham said, "that the woman is willing. I do not understand what it all means. Do you know this? Perhaps you do. There have been efforts made by strangers to break into my husband's room. Only a few days ago a stranger came here with a forged letter of introduction, and obtained access to the Admiral's library. He did not come to steal. He came to study my husband's work; he came, in fact, for the very purpose which you avow. Only yesterday my son began to take the same interest in the same thing. The whole of this morning he spent with his father, under the pretence of helping him; really he was studying and examining for himself. He has not told me what it is, but he has a reason for this; he, too, has some suspicion. Now you come, and your mission is the same. What does it all mean? I will write to Mr. C. myself; he will come down and advise me."

"I would not do that if I were you," Mr. Sabin said, quietly. "Mr. C. would not thank you to be dragged down here on such an idle errand."

"Ah, but would it be an idle errand?" she said, slowly. "Victor, be frank with me. I should hate to refuse anything you asked me. Tell me what it means. Is my husband's work of any real value, and, if so, to whom, and for what purpose?"

Mr. Sabin was gently distressed.

"My dear Lady Deringham," he said, "I have told you the exact truth. I want to get some statistics for my paper. Mr. C. himself recommended me to try and get them from your husband; that is absolutely all. As for this attempted robbery of which you were telling me, believe me when I assure you that I know nothing whatever about it. Your son's interest is, after all, only natural. The study of the papers on which your husband has been engaged is the only reasonable test of his sanity. Frankly, I cannot believe that anyone in Lord Deringham's mental state could produce any work likely to be of the slightest permanent value."

The Countess sighed.

"I suppose that I must believe you, Victor," she said; "yet, notwithstanding all that you say, I do not know how to help you — my husband scarcely ever leaves the room. He works there with a revolver by his side. If he were to find a stranger near his work, I believe that he would shoot him without hesitation."

"At night time"——

"At night time he usually sleeps there in an anteroom, and outside there is a man always watching."

Mr. Sabin looked thoughtful.

"It is only necessary," he said, "for me to be in the room for about ten minutes, and I do not need to carry anything away; my memory will serve me for all that I require. By some means or other I must have that ten minutes."

"You must risk your life," Lady Deringham said, "for I cannot suggest any plan; I would help you if I could, but I am powerless."

"I must have that ten minutes," Mr. Sabin said slowly.

"Must!" Lady Deringham raised her eyebrows. There was a subtle change in the tone of the man, a note of authority, perhaps even the shadow of a threat; he noted the effect and followed it up.

"I mean what I say, Constance," he declared. "I am not asking you a great thing; you have your full share of woman's wit, and you can arrange this if you like."

"But, Victor, be reasonable," she protested; "suggest a way yourself if you think it so easy. I tell you that he never leaves the room!"

(To be Continued.)