

Ambrose Pratt

The Counterstroke

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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CHAPTER I.—THE ACADEMY OF EX-AMBASSADORS

CHAPTER II.—PORTRAITS

CHAPTER III.—A SPY UPON A SPY

CHAPTER IV.—TWO WOMEN'S HEARTS

CHAPTER V.—FRANCINE DISAPPEARS

CHAPTER VI.—A DIFFICULT SITUATION

CHAPTER VII.—LOVE AND LIES

CHAPTER VIII.—THE TORTURE OF THE THUMBSCREWS

CHAPTER IX.—THE VOYAGE OF THE "SEA HAWK"

CHAPTER X.—THE COUNCIL OF KINGS

CHAPTER XI.—THE VENGEANCE OF A PRINCE

CHAPTER XII.—THE LORD OF ATTALA

CHAPTER XIII.—CONDEMNED TO DEATH

CHAPTER XIV.—A DREAM OF HOPE

CHAPTER XV.—THE DOOM OF A MONARCH

CHAPTER XVI.—THE TREASURE-CHAMBER OF THE NIHILISTS

CHAPTER XVII.—ESCAPE

CHAPTER XVIII.—THE CAUTION OF A KING

CHAPTER XIX.—EXPLANATION: ASSASSINATION

CHAPTER XX.—SIDE-LIGHTS AND SERMONS

CHAPTER XXI.—A SUPPER PARTY

CHAPTER XXII.—A GAME OF DICE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

CHAPTER XXIII.—THE INVASION OF ATTALA

CHAPTER XXIV.—THE CAPTURE OF ATTALA

CHAPTER XXV.—THE LOVE OF OELTJEN

CHAPTER XXVI.—THE END OF BOSA GRACCI

CHAPTER XXVII.—FRANCINE

THE END

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Table of Contents

Contents:

CHAPTER I.—THE ACADEMY OF EX-AMBASSADORS
CHAPTER II.—PORTRAITS
CHAPTER III.—A SPY UPON A SPY
CHAPTER IV.—TWO WOMEN'S HEARTS
CHAPTER V.—FRANCINE DISAPPEARS
CHAPTER VI.—A DIFFICULT SITUATION
CHAPTER VII.—LOVE AND LIES
CHAPTER VIII.—THE TORTURE OF THE THUMBSCREWS
CHAPTER IX.—THE VOYAGE OF THE "SEA HAWK"
CHAPTER X.—THE COUNCIL OF KINGS
CHAPTER XI.—THE VENGEANCE OF A PRINCE
CHAPTER XII.—THE LORD OF ATTALA
CHAPTER XIII.—CONDEMNED TO DEATH
CHAPTER XIV.—A DREAM OF HOPE
CHAPTER XV.—THE DOOM OF A MONARCH
CHAPTER XVI.—THE TREASURE-CHAMBER OF THE NIHILISTS
CHAPTER XVII.—ESCAPE
CHAPTER XVIII.—THE CAUTION OF A KING
CHAPTER XIX.—EXPLANATION: ASSASSINATION
CHAPTER XX.—SIDE-LIGHTS AND SERMONS

CHAPTER XXI.—A SUPPER PARTY

CHAPTER XXII.—A GAME OF DICE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

CHAPTER XXIII.—THE INVASION OF ATTALA

CHAPTER XXIV.—THE CAPTURE OF ATTALA

CHAPTER XXV.—THE LOVE OF OELTJEN

CHAPTER XXVI.—THE END OF BOSA GRACCI

CHAPTER XXVII.—FRANCINE



CHAPTER I.—THE ACADEMY OF EX-AMBASSADORS

Table of Contents

The gentleman nearest the gate, and the tallest of the three, was wrapped in a heavy fur greatcoat. His cleanshaven face—strong, impassive, and good to look upon—was of a type unmistakably English, and he wore an eye-glass that appeared to have become cemented into its position.

The second gentleman was of a short but sturdy build, and his bristling moustache, whose yellow and stiff-waxed points turned fiercely upwards, proclaimed him of Teutonic origin. He wore an imposing military cloak of foreign cut and manufacture, and his attitude was that of a soldier mounting guard.

The third gentleman, whose tightly-fitting black frock coat was shiny and threadbare to the verge of seediness, seemed to be of excessively nervous disposition; he stamped about incessantly, swished often at the darkness with his cane, and sent a fire of impatient glances in all directions from a pair of large and piercing black eyes. He was slightly formed and lithe, active as a panther, never still. His face was tiny-featured, pallid, and almost fleshless, its plainness intensified by the few straggling black hairs that apologized for the lack of a proper moustache and imperial, but relieved from absolute ugliness by the beauty of his eyes. No man might confidently predicate his place of origin, but he resembled most an Austrian, and perhaps a Jew, for his nose was long and slightly hooked.

A wearisome half-hour passed by in absolute silence; the relative positions of the three gentlemen remained unchanged, but the impatience of the Austrian appeared to have communicated itself to his companions, for the German often consulted his watch and the Englishman was swearing softly under his breath.

"An hour past the appointed time," he muttered at last, half-aloud.

The German turned to him. "Less five minutes, my Lord; it is five minutes to twelve," he observed in excellent English.

"What, you know me?" cried the Englishman.

"I saw you once not long ago, at the Court of the Czar: you are Lord Francis Cressingham."

"You have me at a disadvantage then."

The German bowed. "My name is Oeltjen, Ludwig Oeltjen."

"What! Count Ludwig Oeltjen, chief *attache* to the German Ambassador in London?"

"Not now, my Lord; I have retired——"

"Ah, that fatal—whew, my tongue! I beg your pardon, Count."

"No need, my Lord. But it surprises me that you had not already heard; unhappily the affair was kept but half a secret——"

The third gentleman here broke in, speaking in English quaintly accentuated rather than broken. "May I offer you of my cigarettes, messieurs?"

Lord Francis curtly shook his head; Count Oeltjen shrugged his shoulders. "No, I thank you, sir."

The eyes of the Austrian swept a burning glance over the pair who had disdained his advance, but he proceeded with tranquil voice: "it was that I might beg from you a match, I wish very much to smoke."

Lord Cressingham handed him a box from his waistcoat pocket without speaking. The Austrian struck a light and returned the box with a low bow.

During a deep silence, some clock near by tolled midnight, and a second after the last stroke the iron gate before which they had waited so long opened with a sharp clinking crunch.

"Enter!" commanded a voice from the dark beyond. The three men glanced at each other and each made a courteous inclination of invitation and stood motionless.

"You, my Lord."

"After you, Count."

"But perhaps this gentleman!"

The Austrian bowed to the ground. "I am neither my lord nor count," he responded, his tone suggestive of subdued satire.

"Ah, well," muttered the Englishman, and he strode forward squaring his shoulders as he walked. He was closely followed by the other two. The gate clanged behind them and an elderly gentleman in evening dress emerged from the shadow of the wall. "This way," he said laconically, and without turning his head stalked up the path towards the dark porch of a gloomy stone house removed some twenty paces from the pavement.

The figure of a man was vaguely perceptible standing in the open doorway silhouetted against an artificial twilight

within.

"Have all arrived?" he demanded, his voice grave and richly sonorous.

"Three," replied the man in evening dress.

"Their names?"

"Lord Francis Cressingham, Count Karl von Oeltjen, and the Archduke of——"

"Silence!" cried the Austrian, interrupting suddenly.

Lord Francis and the Count, thrilled with surprise, searched for each other's eyes in the darkness.

The man in the doorway stepped aside, disclosing the entrance to a wide and spacious, but dimly lighted hall. "Welcome to my house, gentlemen; may it please you, enter!" he said politely.

The Austrian was the first to obey. The Englishman and the German followed, exchanging questioning glances immediately they had crossed the threshold. The master of the house entered last, after muttering something in an undertone to the gentleman in evening dress who thereupon disappeared. He carefully fastened the door behind him, then strode down the hall to an archway defended with heavy velvet curtains. These he threw aside, and the visitors were dazzled by a sudden shaft of brilliant gaslight. Behind the arch stretched a stately and magnificent apartment full thirty feet square, which was, however, poorly furnished, indeed tenanted solely by five armed divans arranged to face each other in a small circle in the very centre of the thickly matted floor. The room had evidently been originally designed as the auditorium of a small private theatre, for at one end was a platform

intended for a stage. It was illumined by a single chandelier, which contained, however, twenty gas jets and which hovered immediately above the circle of chairs.

The master of the house observed the surprise with which his guests surveyed his arrangements. "Here we shall be free to converse unreservedly," he explained, pointing to the chairs; "the world may see us, for aught I care, but I do not wish the world to overhear us."

The three visitors regarded him with curiosity. They beheld a man neither old nor young, a man of heavy mask-like countenance, with big fleshy nose and sullen jowl over which a pasty skin was so loosely drawn that puffy bags fell away at intervals from eyes and cheeks and jaws. The face, although superlatively ugly, was nevertheless ennobled by a broad and splendid brow, and enlivened by a pair of twinkling black eyes that shone with humour and keen intelligence.

He suffered the glances of his guests with a certain calm and dignified composure, staring straight before him and allowing them to look their full upon him. The examination lasted a few seconds only, for no conclusion could be drawn by the most penetrating from that stolid visage, and this fact was quickly recognized by all.

The Austrian was the first to turn away. "You—I don't know your name, sir," he said affectedly, "have kept us standing in the cold an hour."

"By Jove! yes," said Lord Francis.

"An hour exactly," said Count von Oeltjen.

The master of the house slightly smiled. "My name is for the present Perigord. It is true that by an accident I have

kept you waiting sixty minutes; well—the more reason that we get to business at once: seat yourselves, gentlemen, if you please!"

Mr. Perigord, who was over six feet in height and of great bulk, forthwith crossed the apartment in a few ponderous strides and seated himself with perfect *sang froid* in the largest divan.

"Insolent!" muttered the Austrian.

Lord Francis readjusted his monocle, which had become displaced through sheer surprise. Count von Oeltjen coughed. No one appeared the least inclined to follow the direction or example of his host.

Mr. Perigord, observing their disposition, made a peculiar gesture with his hands, holding them aloft in an attitude of admiration; thereafter he placed three fingers of his right hand upon his lips. His guests each immediately fell upon one knee, the left, their arms uplifted to heaven, their hands inclined to the right shoulder.

"Shibboleth! Shibboleth! Shibboleth!" said Mr. Perigord.

"Tob!" murmured Lord Francis.

"Banai!" whispered Count von Oeltjen.

"Amalabec!" said the Austrian, his voice growing strangely husky.

Mr. Perigord slowly stood erect. "Heleniham!" he said impressively.

On a common impulse the others rose to their feet, then fell on both knees, their heads bent in an attitude of adoration.

"Gibulum!" said Lord Francis.

"Jubulun!" muttered the Count.

"Zebulan!" said the Austrian.

Mr. Perigord raised his arms above his head, holding his left elbow with the finger and thumb of his right hand. "Mahak-Makar-a-bak," he said, intoning the words slowly in the manner of a priest making sacrifice. The three men humbly bent themselves before him, touching their foreheads with their open palms.

"Arise, gentlemen, and seat yourselves," said Mr. Perigord. This time he was obeyed without question and in deepest silence, the silence of speechless astonishment. It was as though the huge, flabby-faced man had suddenly accomplished his own apotheosis, for all traces of combativeness had disappeared from the faces of the three, leaving them stricken dumb and strangely reverent, like Brahmins before a sacred idol's shrine.

Mr. Perigord surveyed his guests with a keenly scrutinizing gaze, for a period so extended that the stillness became almost insupportable. He appeared to be endeavouring to read their thoughts and with such a measure of success that all three were plainly suffering much mental disquietude. Lord Francis clutched the arms of his chair with a grasp of iron. Count von Oeltjen tugged violently at his moustache, while the Austrian simply writhed in his seat unable to meet, much less return, his host's searching and compelling stare.

Finally Mr. Perigord appeared to have satisfied himself. He smiled slightly, and addressed them in low even tones, his voice nevertheless occasionally expressive of satire and tinged with subtle malice.

"Most worshipful Knights of the Ninth Arch, in this encampment whether you be counts, belted earls, archdukes, or even princes of the blood royal, you meet as brothers and subjects of our Order. Is it not so?"

"Aye," returned the three, shooting questionful and hesitating glances at each other.

"It is well. You were summoned hither this evening for a solemn purpose which I shall presently disclose to you. It is better first, however, that as brothers you be made acquainted with each other."

Here the Austrian rose abruptly from his chair, his lips parted as if for speech, but Mr. Perigord frowned him down.

"Fear not, sir, names are as nothing save as symbols; yours shall be respected. Well then, you first. Uncle of a monarch, heir perhaps to a crown, you shall be called Prince Carlos; are you content?" (A cynical smile flashed for a second across his lips.) "You have an enemy, fearless, remorseless, implacable, who has already twice narrowly failed in accomplishing your destruction. Once death essayed to clutch you lurking in the green depths of a pond. A trespasser whose providential presence in the Royal Park was unsuspected by your enemy, hearing your drowning scream, plunged in and rescued you at the risk of his own life, since he could not swim. Once again death flaunted his ensign in your face, this time hid in the honeyed poison of a woman's scarlet lips. You received a warning, and for the moment escaped. But you are foolish, Prince, to nurse your danger still. Had you disobeyed the summons which explains your presence here to-night, to-morrow would have seen Europe in mourning, Madame Viyella a murderess!"

On mention of that name Lord Francis and Count von Oeltjen uttered cries of dismay, but the effect on the prince was more startling—he fell back on his chair limp and nerveless, his cheeks livid, his eyes glowing like coals. "False, false!" he muttered, or rather groaned.

Mr. Perigord went on unheeding. "You, Lord Francis Cressingham, three months ago secretary to the Ambassador at the Court of the Czar, were obliged to resign your position and abandon a career which your energy and brilliant talents must have rendered glorious because on the solicitation of a woman, for whose smile you had already forgotten ties which bound you in all honour to a woman of greater beauty and queenly worth, you carried a letter to one high in office but a traitor to his salt, a letter which but for the vigilance of my agents might have accomplished its nefarious object. Shall I state that object?"

Lord Francis Cressingham, who was nervously biting at lips turned absolutely bloodless, stammered hoarsely, "No!"

Mr. Perigord smiled satirically. "The Czar still rules," he said, adding with marked coldness, "but unhappily Madame Viyella has succeeded in persuading you that she was an innocent agent and unaware of the contents of that letter!"

A pause succeeded, during which the falling of a pin to the floor would have appeared a loud and startling noise.

"You, Count Ludwig von Oeltjen," said Mr. Perigord suddenly breaking the silence, "were chief *attache* to the Kaiser's embassy in London until three weeks ago. You were then compelled to resign, and the reason officially assigned for your retirement was the misplacing of an important dispatch entrusted to your charge, which through some

mishap was said to have reached its destination too late to be of service. The real cause of your dismissal was somewhat different. A certain reigning monarch was at that time paying a visit to Her Majesty the Queen of England. You were induced to undertake the presentation to that king of a petition from his majesty's subjects resident in England, which purported to be an address of welcome, I believe, praying for some favours speciously put forward as a means for your delusion. It was writ on parchment, subtly perfumed by a scent which to inhale meant death. Your mission happily failed of its intention. Your honesty was not questioned, but you were required to name the person who had so befooled you. You persistently refused, and, in consequence of your obstinacy, Germany lost a faithful servant, and Madame Viyella, Countess of Hobenstein, still reigns a sovereign beauty and petted favourite at half the Courts of Europe."

The Count von Oeltjen drew his breath sharply through tightly clenched teeth. Bending forward he demanded hoarsely: "Who the devil, sir, are you, who know so much?"

Mr. Perigord for answer threw back the left lapel of his coat, his action displaying the presence of a large brooch fastened to his breast, whereupon was traced a strange device, wrought with diamonds of great size and brilliancy. "Prince, peer or peasant," he said with grave solemnity, his manner of malice entirely gone, "what matters, it? I am he to whom all true Masons owe allegiance. And yet your question is not impertinent and deserves a different answer. Be satisfied to know that social rank I have none. I am of royal birth, but I have no right to name my parents;

therefore am I a veritable nobody, a mountebank if you will, but a mountebank who holds the reins of a mighty power, not the less puissant because its methods are concealed. For sixteen years I have concentrated and devoted all my energies of brain and body and the resources of a large fortune to the accomplishment of an object, a mission which I have persuaded myself to believe is incontestably virtuous and just. To that end I have used all my talents, sacrificed my desires, pleasures and ambitions, and forced myself to become an idea rather than a person, a purpose rather than a human being. Throughout those years I have lived an anchorite, without once tasting the kiss of woman or permitting a drop of wine to cross my lips, always working, working, working, often despairing, but never relinquishing my task. My labours have not gone entirely unrewarded, my cause has produced many proselytes, it has been sanctified and consecrated by the greatest priest on earth. Emperors have become my helpmates in its service, kings my servants, princes and peers my ardent followers. The obscurity of my origin was at first a deadly bar to progress, but that obstacle was conquered the instant that I became a Mason, and now, in spite of it, no potentate on earth denies me right of place. At last I see the end in view. The knowledge which for sixteen long years I have sought so patiently has at last been partially revealed to me and I am now within measurable distance of accomplishing the mission which I believe that the Most High God has confided into my hands."

He paused, and raised his right hand reverently upward, while his three guests stared at him spellbound.

After a moment he resumed: "You wonder, gentlemen, what the nature of that mission is, still more perhaps why I have called you here. Listen then, and learn. When still a young man, a hotblood like yourselves, while travelling in Russia I fell madly in love with an evil woman, the beautiful but infamous Sophie Peroffskaja. For her sake I became a Nihilist, and the friend of bloody scoundrels such as Russakoff, Jelaboff, Kibaichick and a score of others. These men laid specious arguments before me. They told me blood-curdling tales of the horrors of Russian serfdom, the cruelty of the nobles, their selfishness and viciousness, their wanton disregard of human misery and suffering. Unhappily, they proved their stories true. Having entered their circle to gratify a woman's caprice, I remained among them a Nihilist from sympathy, and, a young impassioned man, for a term I thought their objects noble, their ineffable methods more than justified. You have all heard of the assassination of Czar Alexander II. Well, I stood beside Russakoff when Russakoff threw the bomb. Bah! calm yourselves, gentlemen, I had no hand in the massacre, and was as ignorant of those fiends' dreadful purpose as yourselves. But that fact did not save me. I served six months in the mines of Siberia, and was only released after the exercise of powerful intervention. But it was a changed man who received his passport and was deported from the realms of the Czar. During my imprisonment I had learned many things before unknown to me and had much opportunity for serious reflection. I recognized then how senseless and unreasonable was the assassination of Alexander, the one Czar who had truly loved his people, who had freed the serfs

of his own will, and who had done more than all his imperial progenitors combined to establish personal liberty in Russia. With deep and constant consideration came further enlightenment, and I began to see how criminally near-sighted were men who sought to punish individuals for the sins of centuries, and who blindly hoped to destroy an institution so hydra-headed as monarchy by the murder of a king, or a score of kings. It then occurred to me that the leaders of Nihilism must be men of incredible ignorance to persist in such designs. Memory forbade, however, the entertaining long of such a proposition. I had read pamphlets, the handiwork of the mysterious leaders of the society, whose specious and brilliant contents could only have emanated from powerful and enlightened minds. Irresistibly, therefore, was the conviction forced upon me that the society of which I had been a member was controlled by men whom either madness, revenge or personal ambition excited to the planning and perpetration of such monstrous crimes, and who for their own wicked ends played upon the ignorance and noble but misdirected enthusiasm of their following. This terrible conviction grew stronger through the weary, slaving days, but I was tortured with the vanity of knowledge come too late. Having lost hope of ever walking the earth a free man again, I dared to make one night a solemn pact with God. Kneeling on the stone floor of my cell I vowed to the Most High that if He saw fit to accomplish my release, I would devote my life, my fortune, my very soul, to abolish Nihilism and disband by any means and at any cost or hazard that small but dangerous coterie of men whose objects are, avowedly,

ideally grand, but whose methods are so accursedly inhuman. Gentlemen, God heard, and took me at my word. His answer was swift and sure. After I had sworn my vow I fell into a deep dreamless sleep; I was awakened at dawn by a soldier who struck off my chains and informed me that I was free. Overcome, I fell upon my knees and gratefully renewed my covenant, but the soldier thought I returned thanks for my good fortune, and, an unbeliever, he kicked me brutally upon the side. At another time I should have strangled him, for I was strong and quick-tempered in those days, but I felt that I had become God's servant, and rising humbly followed the ruffian without attempting to revenge his coward act. Since that day, my life has all been moulded on that plan."

In the pause that followed, silence reigned supreme; the faces of all had grown profoundly grave, passionately attentive.

Mr. Perigord gazed musingly at his guests, and presently continued: "My work was of necessity infinitely tedious. From my short acquaintance with Nihilism, I knew something of its laws and secrets but nothing of the organization of its chiefs. With gold I purchased much knowledge, with patience more, but it cost me five years of ceaseless effort to acquire the groundwork that I needed. Those five years taught me that the society is composed of three circles. The outermost comprises no less than half a million neophytes scattered among the poor and proscribed not only of Russia but of all the other nations of Europe. These neophytes, who are generally unintelligent and illiterate creatures drawn from the lowest classes of

humanity, are captained by members of the second circle, men of a slightly better type, indeed sometimes aristocrats, who act as mediums between the inmost and outermost circles. So much it was not difficult to discover, but so closely and faithfully are the secrets of the order kept that it cost me a further eight years of unremitting inquiry and nigh thirty thousand pounds before I could ascertain one simple little thing—namely, the number of the chiefs who constitute the inmost circle. At last I succeeded, and the day of my success was never more despairing. I had journeyed to Cairo to hear the news. The traitor whom I had bought having muttered in my ear a number—*three*—was about to whisper names, when a bullet fired at him point blank from across the street in which we stood, took his life, and a second bullet cut off the lobe of my left ear. That day, gentlemen, President Sadi Carnot was stabbed to death in France. I did not relax my diligence; Divine Providence assisted me; a month since I discovered much of that which I have sought for so long and often so hopelessly. The manner of my discovery need not be discussed, only the fact that at last, gentlemen, I have acquired power to name in a breath the three creatures who now direct the terrible machinery of Anarchism and Nihilism."

The listeners neither murmured nor moved; they appeared to be frozen and tongue-tied, so pale and still were they.

Mr. Perigord waited a moment, looking at them expectantly; then with a shrug of his huge shoulders once more resumed.

"You make no remark, you ask no questions, most worshipful Knights of the Ninth Arch. You do well. Come hither, gather closer round me, brothers—so. I have sent for you because I need your help, therefore my secrets are your secrets So! Listen, and you shall hear how vilely can the devil deface God's handiwork. Madame the Countess of Hobenstein is a beautiful woman, is it not so, and kind? Ha, ha, ha! My brothers, the inmost circle of which I have spoken, is composed of three men. Of one of these Madame Viyella is the daughter, of the second the wife, of the third the mistress!"

Prince Carlos sank back in his chair uttering a loud hysterical laugh. "Her husband is dead!" he cried.

Lord Francis and Von Oeltjen gazed at their host with dazed and stupid faces, "Yes, he is dead," they repeated.

Mr. Perigord frowned. "The Count von Hobenstein is dead," he answered grimly, and drew from his pocket a folded paper. "Read!"

The Prince snatched the paper and tore it open; the others stooped over him to see. Quickly they fell back.

Lord Francis put his hand to his head. Von Oeltjen threw out his arms dramatically. Only Prince Carlos did not seem to understand. "What does it mean?" he gasped; "a copy certificate of a marriage celebrated in New York between Katherin Viyella and——"

"Mr. Frederick Smith," interrupted Perigord, with a queer little smile; "a common enough name, is it not?"

"But perhaps assumed," suggested Lord Francis Cressingham.

"Undoubtedly assumed," replied Perigord.

"Diable! who is Katherin's father?" muttered the Count von Oeltjen,

"And who, in God's name, is her lover?" almost shouted the Prince, who seemed overcome with a sudden frenzy of rage.

"Gentlemen," said Perigord, "you behold assigned to you your tasks. You, Lord Francis, will devote yourself heart and soul to the discovery of the name of Madame Viyella's father. The task should be easy, for the woman believes herself at present in love with you. I can give you no assistance except to inform you that the late Count von Hobenstein some twelve years back married in Bavaria an American actress who called herself Kate Staines; the name, however, was assumed."

"Are those my orders, sir?"

"Yes." Mr. Perigord turned to the Prince. "Your Highness is so foolish as to remain, in spite of repeated warnings, still infatuated. We must therefore seek to turn your madness to our own account. A jealous man should make a good detective; you must ascertain the name of Madame's lover —"

The Prince, who had retreated several steps during this speech, here interrupted fiercely: "Never—an action so base —|—"

Mr. Perigord looked him in the eyes, and spoke gravely, kindly, as to an angry child. "Patience, Prince; the object is good, if the method be unseemly. Believe me, I assign you a task whose first aim is the preservation of your own life. For two months has your death been decreed; twice have you miraculously escaped assassination; take care that the third

attempt be not better planned. I have called upon you to assist me where I might have commanded a score of others, in order that you might help in the work of your own salvation, and at the same time lessen your indebtedness to me. You force me into explanations. It was I who fished you from the pond at Hohenlinden. You saw me not, for I left you while still unconscious in order to track your assassin, but into your tight-clenched hand I thrust a symbol to remind you——"

"Great heaven!" gasped the Prince.

"A pencil case engraved with the word 'Jehovah.' Nay, words are useless. Prince. Speak not of gratitude, but rather act the part of grateful man. You will do my bidding?"

"I—I—I, yes, ah——"

"It is well. You, Count von Oeltjen——"

"Sir."

"Will set out at once for Paris. You will seek out the Chief of Police, and say to him these words: 'Tunnel, Bordighera, Perigord,' whereupon that officer will know how to prevent the Nihilists from undermining the railway over which the President must presently pass on his visit to Mentone. But be careful, Count, let drop no mention of my whereabouts."

The Count saluted. "And after, sir?"

"Return to London with all speed, for I shall soon have further need of you. You will hear from me!"

Mr. Perigord rose to his feet and moved slowly to the door. There arrived he turned and pointed gravely to some curtains opposite. "Beyond those hangings, gentlemen, you will find supper, and a servant who when you are ready will

guide you to the street. Pray excuse me from personally attending you. I have much to do. Good night."

He bowed, and would have gone but for Lord Francis Cressingham, who had impulsively started forward, his right hand outstretched.

"Well, my lord?"

Lord Francis hesitated a second, then plucking up courage asked: "And for me—is it forbidden that I leave England?"

"Absolutely—is that all?"

"But Madame Viyella—she may at any moment——"

"She will remain where you remain."

"Ah, er—I—excuse me, sir, but I should like to know the end of all this."

"You mean?"

"I mean that if I, if the Prince, succeed in our tasks, are we pledged—I put it badly, sir," he stammered, then blurted out: "Your object, sir, is the destruction of Nihilism; does that involve the destruction of Nihilists?"

Mr. Perigord eyed him thoughtfully a moment, then answered with cold deliberation: "You have been a soldier, sir, and should have learned the lesson of unquestioning obedience. My commands have much to do with you, my designs need concern you nothing. But reassure yourself; you will be required to do nought that is not entirely lawful."

Next instant he had disappeared, and the three gentlemen presently obeyed his latest admonition. They found in the indicated room a rich repast awaiting them, composed of choicest foods and wines spread temptingly upon an unclothed marble table. But appetites they had

none. Each swallowed hastily a glass of spirit, and forthwith departed in the wake of the gentleman who had first admitted them to Mr. Perigord's mysterious house.



CHAPTER II.—PORTRAITS

Table of Contents

MISS FRANCINE ELLIOTT, only daughter of Colonel Vernon Elliott, V.C., C.B., sat one afternoon in the library of her father's house in Berkeley Square, giving tea to her cousin and intimate friend, Captain Lethby, of the 1st Dragoon Guards.

Miss Elliott was twenty-four years of age, and a girl of much parts and character. She managed unaided her father's household, her mother having died in her infancy; she was president of a woman's franchise society, secretary to an important private charitable institution, and treasurer to one of the largest working girls' clubs in London. She had already painted two pictures which had been hung in the Royal Academy; she possessed an exceedingly sweet contralto voice, and for four years past had sung at almost every charitable concert organized in the city. She was a clever conversationalist, and much in demand for four o'clocks and dinner parties; she loved dancing above all other pleasures, and during the five seasons since she had been "out" had contrived to be present and enjoy herself at almost every fashionable ball given by society's best set.

Naturally she was a very busy young woman indeed, who had very little spare time ever on her hands, but in spite of her manifold duties, and in spite of her popularity and the adulation she received in consequence, she remained an unspoiled and unassuming girl, remarkable chiefly for a sweet and approachable demeanour, and a manner whose

charm was universally admitted, and which converted her most distant acquaintances into admiring friends.

She was rather tall; slight, but not thin; she had a firm but gliding gait, an unimaginably graceful carriage. Her eyes were large and blue as the sea; they looked at one directly, straight and true. Her chin was prominent but softly rounded; her faintly aquiline nose was beautifully shaped, and its curved and quivering nostrils strangely matched the sensitive mouth beneath. She seemed to exhale kindness and distinction. To see her was to wish to know her.

Captain Lethby had been in love with his cousin for quite six years, but after two refusals of his suit he had gradually settled into the assured position of her chum and closest friend. He had not abandoned all hope of winning her, but his addresses were never in evidence, and in consequence he had enjoyed for two years the privilege of her fullest confidence, and was usually also her appointed escort. He found in such constant companionship a solace for his long-repressed desires, and was therefore satisfied to wait. He was a frank and generous-hearted gentleman, not good-looking, but he looked good, and in spite of rather blunt and off-hand manners was the best-liked officer in his regiment. It is true that he spent his money freely, and that he had plenty to spend, being an only son and heir to a baronetcy and uninvolved estates, two advantages alone sufficient to win for almost any man a certain popularity.

His open face at present wore an expression of embarrassment, for Miss Elliott was attentively regarding him, awaiting his reply to a question he appeared to find a difficulty in answering.

"Lord Francis Cressingham is a friend of yours, surely?" she repeated. "He used to be, I know," added the girl.

Captain Lethby fenced with her. "Oh, ah, well, of course, he used to be one of us, you know."

"But you do not like him? Out with it, Jack; you have no secrets from me, have you?" with an arch smile.

Captain Lethby fidgeted in his chair. "Well, er, the fact is, Francine, I like him well enough. It's a question of respect. You see, he got badly mixed up in that Russian affair, and although he resigned at once, he hasn't attempted to give out anything like a proper explanation. Our fellows say there was more in it than mere carelessness; and then, he's been acting so queerly ever since. Never goes anywhere except to the house of that foreign Countess-what's-her-name. And even when one meets him there he keeps out of one's road. Funny business altogether. May I smoke?"

"Why, yes, of course. But what do you think of it yourself?"

Captain Lethby puffed out three long smoke wreaths. "Hum, er—well. Blessed if I know what to think. No more tea, thanks. What makes you so keen about him, Francine?"

The girl gave a queer little smile. "You might offer me a cigarette, Jack. Thanks." As she lit the cigarette she gave a contented sigh and remarked: "I was there myself last night."

"Where?"

"At the Countess of Hobenstein's."

"The deuce! Beg pardon, Francine, but what under heaven took you there?"

"A hansom."

"But, er, you know—er, they say the Queen refused to receive her."

"Do they? I don't believe it. There was a big crowd there, and all good people. I like her, Jack."

"Well, wonders will never cease; I didn't think she'd be your sort."

"Why not?" imperiously. "She is the sweetest woman I have met for years, and pardon me, Jack, but although all London is discussing her, you are the first person who has said a word to me of her disparagingly."

"I beg your pardon," retorted the Captain; "I only said I didn't think she was your sort."

Francine laughed merrily. "You did not mean that to be uncomplimentary, did you, Jack?"

The Captain did not catch the point. "Did you meet Cressingham there?" he asked.

"I saw him at a distance. He was looking far from well."

Lethby regarded the girl with jealous eyes. "You seem to take a lot of interest in him," he remarked.

"He was once a friend of mine. Do you know, Jack, he is the only man who ever——" she hesitated, blushing faintly and casting down her eyes.

"Who ever what?"

"Nothing."

"Francine!"

"Yes, Jack."

"You are blushing; you have a secret."

"Not from you, Jack; I meant to tell you some day."

"Then tell me now."