

A PLOT FOR EMPIRE.

A THRILLING STORY OF CONTINENTAL CONSPIRACY AGAINST BRITAIN.

Wolffenden assented in silence. For the first time, perhaps, he fully realized the eternal pity of seeing a man so distinguished the victim of a hopeless and incurable mania. He watched him sitting at the head of his table, courteous, gentle, dignified; noted the air of intellectual abstraction which followed upon his last speech, and in which he seemed to dwell for the rest of the time during which they sat together. Instinctively he knew what disillusionment must mean for him. Sooner anything than that. It must never be. Never he repeated firmly to himself, as he smoked a solitary cigar late on in the empty smoking-room. Whatever happens here must be saved from that. There was a knock at the door, and in response to his invitation to enter, Mr. Blatherwick came in. Wolffenden, who was in the humor to prefer anyone's society to his own, greeted him pleasantly, and wheeled up an easy chair opposite to his own.

"Come to have a smoke, Blatherwick?" he said. "That's right. Try one of these cigars; the governor's are all right, but they are in such shocking condition."
Mr. Blatherwick accepted one with some hesitation, and puffed slowly at it with an air of great deliberation. He was a young man of mild demeanor and deportment, and clerical aspirations. He wore thick spectacles, and suffered from chronic biliousness.
"An much obliged to you, Lord Wolffenden," he said. "I seldom smoke cigars—it is not good for my sight. An occasional cigarette is all I permit myself."
Wolffenden frowned inwardly, for his regalitas were priceless, and not to be replaced; but he said nothing.
"I have taken the liberty, Lord Wolffenden," Mr. Blatherwick continued, "of bringing for your inspection a letter I received this morning. It is, I presume, intended for a practical joke, and I need not say that I intend to treat it as such. At the same time as you were in the house, I imagined that no harm would ensue if I ventured to ask for your opinion. He handed the letter to Wolffenden, who took it and read it through. It was dated "London," and bore the postmark of the previous day.

"Dear Sir,—The writer of this letter is prepared to offer you one thousand pounds in return for a certain service which you are in a position to perform. The details of that service can only be explained to you in a personal interview, but broadly speaking it is as follows:
"You are engaged as private secretary to the Earl of Deringham, lately an admiral in the British navy. Your duties, it is presumed, are to copy and revise papers and calculations having reference to the coast defences; and navy of Great Britain. The writer is himself engaged upon a somewhat similar task, but not being able to find suitable accommodation in London, he is without one or two important particulars. The service required of you is the supplying of these, and for this you are offered one thousand pounds.
"As a man of honor you may possibly hesitate to at once embrace this offer. You need not; Lord Deringham's work is practically unimportant, and the work of a lunatic you yourself, from your intimate association with him, must know that this statement is true. Here is a card, and a note of coherent form to the man of statistics and information which he has collected. Therefore you do him no harm in supplying these few particulars, and one who will be able to make use of them. The sum you are offered is a few months' delay and they could easily be acquitted by the means of the expenditure of a single billiennary. That, however, is not the point.
"I am rich and I have no time to spare. Hence I can only be satisfied if you are a man of common sense, and I take it for granted, therefore, that you will not hesitate to accept this offer. Your non-resistance will be assumed if you decline the offer."
The letter ended thus somewhat abruptly. Wolffenden, who had only glanced it through at first, now read it carefully. Then he handed it back to Blatherwick.
"It's a very curious communication," he said, thoughtfully. "In every respect a most peculiar one. I do not know what to think of it."
Mr. Blatherwick laid down his cigar with an air of great relief. He would have liked to have thrown it away, but did not.
"It must surely be intended for a practical joke, Lord Wolffenden," he said. "Either that, or my correspondent has been ludicrously misinformed."
"You do not consider, then, that my father's work is of any value at all?" Wolffenden asked.
Mr. Blatherwick coughed apologetically, and watched the extinction of the cigar by his side with obvious satisfaction.
"You would, I am sure, prefer," he said, "that I give you a perfectly straightforward answer to that question. I cannot conceive that the work upon which his lordship and I are engaged can be of the slightest interest or use to anybody. I can assure you, Lord Wolffenden, that my brain at times reels—positively reels—from the extraordinary nature of the manuscripts which your father has passed on to me to copy. It is not that they are merely technical, they are absolutely and entirely meaningless. You ask me for my opinion, Lord Wolffenden, and I cannot but be my duty to answer you honestly. I am quite sure that his lordship is not in a fit state of mind to undertake any serious work."
"The person who wrote that letter," Wolffenden remarked, "thought otherwise."
"The person who wrote that letter," Mr. Blatherwick retorted quickly, "if indeed it was written in good faith, is scarcely likely to know so much about his lordship's condition of mind as I, who have spent the greater por-

tion of every day for three months with him."
"Do you consider that my father is getting worse, Mr. Blatherwick?" Wolffenden asked.
"I should have replied that his lordship's state of mind was exactly the same as when I first came here. But there has been a change for the worse during the last week. It commenced with his sudden, and I am bound to say, unfounded suspicion of Miss Merton, whom I believe to be a most estimable and worthy young lady."
Mr. Blatherwick paused, and appeared to be troubled with a slight cough. The smile which Wolffenden was not altogether able to conceal seemed somewhat to increase his embarrassment.
"The extraordinary occurrence of last night, which has probably got hold of you," Mr. Blatherwick continued, "is the next development of what, I fear, we can only regard as downright insanity. I regret having to speak so plainly, but I am afraid that any milder phrase would be inapplicable."
"I am very sorry to hear this," Wolffenden remarked gravely.
"Under the circumstances," Mr. Blatherwick said, picking up his cigar which was now extinct, and immediately laying it down again, "I trust that you and Lady Deringham will excuse my not giving the customary notice of my desire to leave. It is, of course, impossible for me to continue to keep a secretary to a man who is in such a state of mind as your father's. I am in receipt of four services so ludicrously inadequate, that I do not see how I can do so. I am sure that you will understand my position, and I shall be glad to leave by the early train to-morrow."
"Oh! you can't go so soon?" Wolffenden said. "How about this letter?"
"You can take any steps you think proper with regard to it," Mr. Blatherwick answered nervously. "Personally I have nothing to do with it. I thought of going to spend a week with an aunt of mine in Cornwall, and I should like to spend by the early train to-morrow."
Wolffenden could scarcely keep from laughing, although he was a little annoyed.
"Look here, Blatherwick," he said, "you must help me a little before you go. There's a good fellow. I don't doubt that you will be able to give me some idea of the poor old governor's condition of mind; but at the same time it's rather an odd thing, isn't it, that his own subjects should be having his work stolen from him? I should like you to write me a letter to that effect. There is some one, at any rate, who places a very high value upon my manuscripts. I must say that I should like to know whom that letter came from."
"I can assure you," Mr. Blatherwick said, "that I have not the faintest idea."
"Of course you haven't," Wolffenden assented, a little impatiently. "But don't you see how easy it will be for me to find out? You must go to the Grand Hotel on Thursday for lunch, and meet this mysterious person."
"I would very much rather not," Mr. Blatherwick declared promptly. "I should feel exceedingly uncomfortable; I should not like it at all."
"Look here," Wolffenden said persuasively. "I must find out who wrote that letter, and can only do so with your help. You need only be there when the man who comes to your table. Your presence is all that is required; and I shall take it as a favor if you will allow me to make you a present of a fifty-pound note."
Mr. Blatherwick flushed a little and hesitated. He had brothers and sisters, whose bringing up was a terrible strain upon the slim purse of his father, a country clergyman, and a great deal could be done with fifty pounds. It was against his conscience as well as his inclination to remain in a post where his duties were a farce, but this was different. He signed.
"You are very generous, Lord Wolffenden," he said. "I will stay until Thursday."
"There's a good fellow," Wolffenden said, much relieved. "Have another cigar."
Mr. Blatherwick rose hastily, and shook his head. "You must excuse me, if you please," he said. "I will not smoke any more. I think if you will not mind—"
Wolffenden turned to the window and held up his hand.
"Listen!" he said. "Is that a carriage at this time of night?"
A carriage it certainly was, passing by the window in a moment they heard it draw up at the front door, and someone's light footsteps were heard.
"Odd time for callers," Wolffenden remarked.
Mr. Blatherwick did not reply. He, too, was listening. In a moment they heard the rustling of a woman's skirts outside, and the smoking-room door opened.

his fingers and read it out.
"Mr. Franklin Wilnot."
He was thoughtful for a moment. The name was familiar enough, but he could not immediately remember in what connection. Suddenly it flashed into his mind.
"Of course!" he exclaimed. He is a famous physician—a very great swell, goes to court and all that sort."
Lady Deringham nodded.
"He has introduced himself as a physician."
He has brought this letter from Dr. Wilnot."
Wolffenden took the note from her hand. It was written on half a sheet of paper, and apparently in great haste.
"Dear Lady Deringham—My old friend, Franklin Wilnot, who has been staying at Cromer, has just called upon me. We have been having a chat, and he has been extremely interested in Lord Deringham's case, so much so that I had arranged to come over with him this evening to see if you would care to have his opinion. Unfortunately, however, I have been summoned to attend a patient nearly ten miles away—a bad accident. I fear—and Wilnot is leaving for town to-morrow morning. I suggest, however, that he might call on his way back to Cromer, and if you would kindly let him see Lord Deringham I should be glad as his opinion would be of material assistance to me. Wilnot's reputation as one of the greatest living authorities on cases of partial mania is doubtless known to you, and as he never, under any circumstances, visits the Grosvenor London, it would be a great pity to lose this opportunity.
"In great haste, and begging you to excuse this scrawl, I am, dear Lady Deringham, yours sincerely,
"John Whitlock."
"P. S.—You will please not offer him any fee."
Wolffenden folded up the letter and returned it.
"Well, I suppose it's all right," he said. "It's an odd time, though, to call on an errand of this sort."
"So I thought," Lady Deringham agreed. "But Dr. Wilnot's explanation seems perfectly feasible, does it not, I said that I would consult you. You will come in and see him?"
Wolffenden followed into the drawing-room. A tall, dark man was sitting in a corner, under a palm tree. In one hand he held a magazine, the pictures of which he appeared to be studying with interest. When the visitor entered, he raised his head, and the other was raised to his mouth. He was in the act of indulging in a yawn when Wolffenden and his mother entered the room.
"This is my son-in-law, Dr. Wilnot," she said. "Dr. Franklin Wilnot."
"The two men bowed.
"Lady Deringham has explained to you the reasons why I am here, I presume?" the latter remarked at once.
Wolffenden assented.
"You'll find an article in it that it will be a little difficult to get my father to see you on such short notice."
"I was about to explain to Lady Deringham, before I understood that you were in the house. I have said, that although that would be an advantage, it is not absolutely necessary at present. I should of course have to examine your father before giving a definite opinion in his case, but I can give you a very fair idea as to his condition without seeing him at all."
Wolffenden and his mother exchanged glances.
"You must forgive us," Wolffenden commenced hesitatingly. "But really I can scarcely understand."
"Of course not," Dr. Wilnot interrupted brusquely. "My method is one which is doubtless altogether strange to you, but when a man has a hobby, such as mine, he will do what he likes. I am generally able, from a study of the case, to tell you the brain is weakened, if at all, and in what manner it can be strengthened. This is only the crudest outline of my theory, but to be brief, I can give you my opinion as to Lord Deringham's mental condition, and my advice as to its maintenance, if you will place an opinion as to your father's state of health, which he has been engaged, I hope I have made myself clear."
"Perfectly," Wolffenden answered. "It sounds very reasonable and very interesting, but I am afraid that there are a few practical difficulties in the way. In the first place, my father does not show his work or any portion of it to anyone. On the other hand, he is a man of extraordinary precautions to maintain absolute secrecy with regard to it."
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