THE COUNTERSTROKE

BY

AMBROSE PRATT,

AUTHOR OF "VIGOROUS DAUNT, BILLIONAIRE."

CHAPTER I.

The Academy of ex-Ambassadors.

At a late hour on a certain cold night in February, in the year 1900, three gentlemen stood near an old padlocked iron gateway at the northern end of Finchley road, London. They had arrived at that common point by separate conveyances, and it was easy to discover that they were strangers to each other, for although all stood within a circle whose diameter did not exceed three yards, and although the night was dark and the road otherwise utterly deserted, the face of each, dimly discernible by the light of a neighboring street lamp, wore an air of blank unconsciousness of all companionship.

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

The second gentleman was of a short but sturdy build, and his bristling mustache, whose yellow and stiff-waxed points turned fiercely upward, 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 mustache 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.

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 toward 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 center of the thickly matted floor. The room had evidently been originally designed as the auditorium of a small private theater, 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 humor 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.

"Banal!" whispered Count von Oeltjen.

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

Mr. Perigord slowly stood erect. "Helenham!" 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 a 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 endeavoring to read their thoughts and mustache, 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, bolted 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 questioning 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 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.

"Ah, well," muttered the Englishman, better first, however, that as brethren 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 depth 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 honor 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 intrusted 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 favors 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 Hohenstein, still reigns a sovereign beauty and petted favorite 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?"

TO BE CONTINUED TO-MORROW.

TO BEGIN MASONIC TEMPLE.

May 1, 1907, Is Set As Date for Laying Cornerstone of Building.

Plans have been adopted by the Masonic Temple Association of the District of Columbia for laying the cornerstone of the new Masonic Temple on or before May 1, 1907. This was decided at the quarterly meeting of the association held Saturday night. At the same time it was decided to hold a big fair in Washington next spring, and the executive committee was directed to make the necessary arrangements for the affair.

The executive committee was also authorized to attend to the preliminary matters with regard to the cornerstone laying, and by the time the next quarterly meeting comes around it is expected the plans will be well under way.

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The report of the auditing committee, which has been going over the stock books of the company, shows that out of the 20,000 shares of stock authorized under the charter, 19,947 shares have been subscribed for, and 15,341 have been paid up. The auditing committee was composed of Geo. E. Fleming, chairman; John Evans, jr.; Edward L. Hillyer, and W. L. Crane.

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