

THE COUNTERSTROKE

BY AMBROSE PRATT,

AUTHOR OF "VIGOROUS DAUNT, BILLIONAIRE"

SYNOPSIS PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

In the installments of "The Counterstroke" already published, it is related how three persons of high rank are given orders by one Mr. Perigot, the mysterious head of the secret society...

CHAPTER IV.

Two Women's Hearts.

"Yes, my lord, though you at first mistook me," said Miss Elliott, with a pointed smile; her cheeks were scarlet; she looked straight at him, her eyes luminous as stars.

"I beg your pardon," stammered Cressingham, entirely discomfited. "I have come to return a compliment. This afternoon you warned me of some danger which you believed is threatening me. It is now my turn to put you on your guard against a peril so real and imminent that I have disregarded her place."

"How good you are!" he muttered, still half-dazed with surprise. "It was after the concert. I went with some of my girls to call upon one who is ill and in want. It was at a tenement house in Soho, a very poor place indeed, where the rooms are small and have only thin partitions between them. When waiting for the sick bed for a surgeon for whom I had sent, I overheard a conversation between two foreigners in an adjoining room. They spoke in Swedish, and quite unreservedly, thinking I supposed that they incurred no risk of being understood. Luckily for you, my lord, I spent two years in Stockholm. I think that they are military or something like that, and are acting under the orders given them by the head of some mysterious society whose enemy apparently you are. They spoke of a Madame Virella and a man called Elliott—or something like that—and then mentioned your name. It seems that you were seen issuing late one night quite recently from a certain house in London, a house occupied by enemies of their society. This fact, taken in conjunction with your intimacy with Madame Virella, as aroused the fears of their master, and your removal has been planned in consequence. This very night an attempt will be made to murder you. A forged letter will be brought entreating your immediate presence at the house I have mentioned, which house I gathered has now changed ownership and is under their control. If you go, you will be established and your body buried in the cellar."

A low tapping at that moment sounded on the outer door. Miss Elliott stopped speaking and looked at Cressingham inquiringly. His face was white and miserable; he stood wringing his hands a moment, then, turning to the girl, muttered in a low, passionate whisper: "Miss Elliott, I am accused to-night; it would have been almost better that you had left me to my fate. There is one without there who if she sees you here would—My God! who can tell what she would do? Your name to-morrow—ah, what am I saying, what shall I do?"

"Who is it?" imperiously. "Madame Virella. 'Ah, the woman she spoke of!'" "You do not understand; it is the Countess of Hohenstein."

The girl turned scarlet, and hot tears glistened in her eyes. "I am properly punished," she muttered; then, "You must not let her see me—at least, not that. I should die of shame! Oh, I might have guessed!"

The tapping recommenced. Lord Cressingham swiftly crossed the room and drew aside some curtains. "It breaks my heart," he almost groaned, "but I must ask you to wait here; it is my dressing room."

"But is there no other exit?" "None." "Through that door there?" "My bedroom; there is a man in it already."

"A man?" "Ah, trust me a little, Miss Elliott. I am less black than I appear."

She gave him a burning glance. "Madame writes," she said, her voice full of bitter satire. He fell back, and she closed the door in his face. The tapping was louder now and more imperious. Drawing the curtains into place again he swiftly and noiselessly returned to his chair before the fire.

"Come in," he called in drowsy tones. The handle was turned. "I can't," replied a voice without. Cressingham got noisily to his feet, and stumbling to the door pushed the latch aside.

"A thousand pardons," he cried; "I fancy I must have been dozing." "Dozing? you slept like the dead, my boy. I have been hammering there for quite a time."

Cressingham rubbed his eyes and pretended to yawn. "I'm awfully sorry," he said sheepily. "The countess swept into the room and round it with long, undulating strides, shedding coat, cloak, and wraps to the floor as she proceeded. The man leisurely followed her, picking up each article in turn. Madame was now appeared like a queen. A splendid dress of shimmering jet work on a ground of black brocade enveloped her luscious figure tightly, and above it her alabaster shoulders and milk white bosom shone forth in bold relief. A single band of diamonds embraced the rounded column of her neck, and from her corsage swung a chain of brilliant stones to her knees. Proudly conscious of her beauty, she faced the man as a queen might her subject; a moveless, faintly scornful smile upon her lips. "Well, my boy, I've taken the measure of your English baby face."

With a swift movement she threw open the door, passed, and was gone. Cressingham stood dumbly in the silence to the patter of her footsteps on the passage. He heard her fall on the stairway, fumble with the latch below, and presently the street door crashing close. Then he staggered, rather than walked, to his bedroom.

Oeljen was standing just within the threshold. "I should like you to your room now, if you please."

"Very well, my lord," said Oeljen. "I should, however, tell you that I have been listening to your conversation."

"Indeed, and you approve?" Cressingham spoke very loudly, hoping that Miss Elliott would hear. He had conceived the sudden wild hope of attempting to excite himself in her eyes thus.

"I think that you want a little too far. Your acting, however, was on the whole superb."

"Thanks," drily. "My fear is, however, for the morrow."

"That in a colder moment she will know better how to guard her secrets. Even to-night she was careful to disclose no name. She said, 'my father,' only 'my father.'"

Cressingham thought for a while. "It is a terrible part for me to play," he said at last. "Do you know, Oeljen, although I know the woman is bad, I feel an awful ruffian at 'killing her like this.'"

"Ach Himmel! she loves you, that is plain! But (in a whisper) where is the other woman, the first, my lord, the one that warned you?"

Cressingham frowned pale. "That is my business," he said curtly. "I beg your pardon."

Cressingham bowed. "Let us go," he said. A loud knock sounded on the door as they approached it. Cressingham pushed aside the latch, and his servant, in slippers and pajamas, entered, a letter in his outstretched hand; he seemed half asleep.

"For you, my lord." "Who brought it?" "An cabman."

"Wait a moment, John, and you can show the countess to his room. He opened the letter, and presently passed it in silence to Oeljen. It was a card inscribed with certain hieroglyphics.

The countess glanced at it, and whispered meaningly: "Already the path grows dangerous, my lord. It is perhaps my turn next."

Cressingham shrugged his shoulders and pocketed the card. "Perhaps. Good night."

"Sleep well!" said the German, and smiling satirically he departed in the servant's wake.

Cressingham shut the door, and turned to face his greatest task. Miss Elliott stood between the parted curtains of the dressing-room, her face pale, but self-possessed and calm.

"It was, oh, so cold in there, and dark!" she muttered, shivering a little. He pointed to the card, and said: "Wait a moment and warm yourself. Presently the passage will be clear."

She crossed the room and spread out her hands to the blaze, her back turned to the man. He stood irresolutely a moment, nervously gnawing at his under lip, then, growing desperate at her silence, spoke.

"Miss Elliott?" She slowly turned her head, and looked at him across her shoulder.

"What do you mean?" "I am not the fool you think me, that is all."

She caught her breath, and cried: "Explain to me one hand pressed tightly to her heart."

He answered her with brutal plainness, speaking the first words that occurred to him.

"It is you who should explain; you visit me and pretend to love me, but you have another lover who visits you."

Madame sighed deeply and breathed again, her countenance, but that was because you had an audience, perhaps?"

"Miss Elliott, I assure you on my honor—"

"Spare me, my lord," she interrupted lightly. "I have already seen you act tonight. What time is that?"

A clock was chiming somewhere in the city, its tones reaching them in muted and melancholy. Cressingham glanced at his watch. "Half-past two."

"Lucky I have a latekey," said the girl. "Don't you think the coast is clear by now?"

"One moment!" He hurried into the dressing-room and a second after came out with hat and coat. The girl regarded him with much contempt.

"Do you think I should accept your escort farther than the street?" she queried bitterly. His lips tightened, but without reply he opened the door for her to pass, and in unbroken silence they trod the passage and descended the stairs.

They were on the street, and she passed on and stood by the door, attempting herself to open it. With a hopeless little laugh he assisted her, and she elided through into the street. Two men, standing not a yard from the door, peered rudely into her veiled face. She drew back with a little gasp, an involuntary cry for help. Cressingham sprang out at once, but the men slunk off quickly down the street.

"Thank you," said Miss Elliott. "It was nothing, but seeing them so close and suddenly, they frightened me for a second."

"At least, let me put you in a cab," he said, impudently. "Really, the streets are not always safe at this hour. It may be the last favor I shall ever ask of you."

"Very well, then."

He walked with her a few steps down the street and whistled. Instantly a four-wheeler standing in the shadows of some houses not far distant moved out into the light and came quickly toward them. To Cressingham it seemed that the cab must have been waiting by appointment, so swift was its response, but another matter now engrossed his mind. A few, a very few seconds remained to him during which he might fight for his happiness. Silence might be more dignified, but at any rate he could not possibly hurt himself more by speech than he was harmed already.

"Francine," he muttered suddenly, "you wrong me in your thoughts. I'm not so black as you think me. I'm in an awful mess, and the curse of it is I can't explain. But on my honor, Francine, I'm not the loose fellow you think me. I couldn't be, for I love you, you, you, with all my soul, and that alone would keep me straight."

Miss Elliott, watching him from behind the thick meshes of her veil, thought how handsome he looked standing in the lamplight there, his eyes so bright, his face so passionately eager; a faint thought entered her mind, and a faint impulse.

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