

First draft outline - NOT a proposal

THE RUSSIAN PRINCE

An Edwardian thriller

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Background: Origins of the First World War

Serbia was a small country in what is now Yugoslavia. It was dominated by its neighbour Austria, which was then large and powerful and known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria wanted to absorb Serbia, so Serbia sought the protection of Russia. Nevertheless in 1908 Austria annexed a big piece of Serbia, a province called Bosnia. In 1914 a group of Serbian nationalist students assassinated a visiting Austrian Archduke in the town of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. Then:-

1. The Austrians, who already had designs on Serbia, used the assassination as a pretext and declared war on Serbia.

(However they did not actually attack.)

2. Russia, which was supposed to be Serbia's patron, reluctantly mobilised her army. (Mobilisation meant calling-up the conscripts, arming them, and sending them to the border in railway trains.) At first Russia mobilised only partially, against Austria; but then the Russian generals realised that partial mobilisation left them vulnerable to an attack by Austria's ally, Germany; so the Russians ordered full mobilisation.

3. Once Russia had mobilised against Austria and Germany, of course Germany had to mobilise. However, Germany's problem was that Russia was allied with France, and the German generals were afraid that while they mobilised against Russia in the east France would attack them in the west. They decided to solve this problem by trying to put France out of the war with a lightning knockout blow. So Germany invaded France.

4. The German plan for invading France involved going through Belgium. Nobody cared much about Belgium, although there was an ancient treaty (1839) which permitted (but did not oblige) Britain

to defend the neutrality of Belgium. However Britain did care about Germany, which was growing fast and threatened British domination of the seas, world trade and the colonies. So when Germany invaded Belgium, Britain used the 1839 treaty as an excuse to declare war on Germany.

This is how a quarrel between Austria and Serbia led to a war between England and Germany.

Part One

1. The slums of Edwardian London are no better than they were in Dickens' time. They are characterised by dirt, disease, awful poverty, drunkenness and fierce exploitation. One in three babies dies before its first birthday. When school medical examinations are introduced one child in six is found to be too starved, verminous or sick to benefit from education. In some homes people eat standing up because there are no chairs. In Whitechapel, where the official overcrowding level is 214 inhabitants per acre, there are in fact six thousand people per acre.

In the East End the poorest of Englishmen mingle with even poorer immigrants from Eastern Europe. Refugee Russians, Poles, Germans, Latvians and Letts import far-left political ideas which take root in the richly rotting soil of London poverty. The most powerful political organisation is the Federation of Jewish Anarchist Groups, which publishes its own newspaper, Der Arbeter Fraint - in Yiddish - and organises a successful strike of sweatshop workers.

Early in 1914 a German spy appears in this milieu. He is calling himself Felix Murontziv and posing as a Russian anarchist. His brief is to report on the many refugee revolutionists in London, paying particular attention to expatriate Germans who might be planning a comeback.

Felix is a complex and driven man. At the age of eleven he discovered that the solid German bourgeois couple who brought him up were not his natural parents. In fact he is the son of a now-dead peasant girl and an unidentified young aristocrat. Felix is obsessed with deception in general and betrayal in particular. He both adores and hates the aristocracy, and posing as an anarchist

while working for the ruling class symbolises this inner conflict. On a more rational level he would like to become a big-shot and sees secret intelligence work as his road to advancement. He yearns for war. He is 25.

In playing his anarchist role he lets some of his passions show through, and he appears as a Rasputin-like character, intense, magnetic, fiery, and domineering.

He has a wife and child in Germany, but the first thing he does in England is to marry a London girl and make her pregnant. For Felix there will never be love without betrayal.

2. MI5 was started in 1906, when it was called MO5 and had a staff of one, its founder, Captain Vernon Kell. Kell's superiors were horrified the first time he asked for an assistant, but it is a basic law of nature that Intelligence departments always get bigger, and by now - 1914 - Kell has four officers, a lawyer, two investigators and seven clerks. His office is in the basement of the Little Theatre in John Street, off the Strand.

Kell is a curious man. The son of an English officer and a Polish countess, as a boy he travelled all over Europe and learned French, German, Italian and Polish. He served in China during the Boxer Rebellion and passed Army interpreter's exams in Chinese and Russian. The East broke his health and - it seemed - ended a promising military career. He has asthma, recurrent dysentery, and back pains so bad he can hardly sit upright and uses his car for even the shortest ~~his~~ journeys.

This is a man with an iron will, very tough and deeply pious. With tongue in cheek he tells the editors of Who's Who that his interests are fishing and croquet. One of his colleagues is fond of saying that Kell can smell a spy the way a terrier smells a rat: it may not be true but it is a sign of the attitude he inspires in

his subordinates. Superficially he is an officer of the old school from his moustache to his mirror-bright toecaps, but in fact he is devious, flexible, unorthodox and at times most ungentlemanly in his methods. He claims to be a brilliant forger, but this is both a joke and a cover story, for in fact he uses the services of jailed counterfeiters. He is referred to as 'K', beginning the tradition that Intelligence chiefs in England will be known by an initial. Kell has a good relationship with the aggressive, mercurial young Winston Churchill, who has been Home Secretary and is now First Lord of the Admiralty: Churchill is keen on cloak-and-dagger stuff and helps Kell cut through redtape.

Kell's big break comes when a Prussian naval officer goes from the German Embassy to a barbershop in the Caledonian Road, which is a bit like going from Central Park South to Brooklyn for a haircut. The barber's name is Karl Gustav Ernst. Kell has Ernst's mail intercepted. The barbershop turns out to be the post office for the German spy network in England.

Kell begins to track down the individual spies, but - setting another MI5 tradition - when he identifies them he does not arrest them unless they discover something really important or try to leave the country.

3. The British Establishment is at its peak. They rule half the world. They don't know it, but they will never have it this good again. The old playboy King Edward VII died in 1910, but this is still the Edwardian era: the wealth, power and prestige amassed during the sixty-three solemn years of Victoria's reign are being spent with gusto. People eat and drink hugely. Houses are enormous, clothes are gorgeous, entertainment is lavish. The rules of etiquette have attained unparalleled complexity - for

example, brown boots may not be worn closer to London than Ascot. Small fortunes are made by the Bond Street and Savile Row outfitters who supply the many clothes essential for different times of day and different social occasions. More than a million people, out of a working population of eighteen million, are employed as domestic servants. It is a time of hypocrisy: everyone pays lip-service to Victorian morality, and the homosexual intelligentsia have been driven abroad by the Oscar Wilde trial; but royalty patronise the Paris brothels and syphilis is rampant.

The Earl of Walden is a rich man. Most of his wealth is in London property, so he has survived the collapse of agricultural prices which has reduced the fortunes of some of his friends. To look after himself, his wife and his two teenage daughters he employs more than 100 servants at his homes in London, Surrey, Monte Carlo and Scotland. This year his elder daughter Charlotte is 18 and is 'coming out' - that is, she will put her hair up, be presented at court, and go to the endless parties and balls of the London 'season' in order to meet a suitable husband.

Charlotte is pretty, protected, innocent, cultured, wilful and idealistic. Her education has been narrow and impractical. A year ago she was wearing pigtails and knee socks. She asked her governess: 'What will I do when I come out?'

'Oh, go to parties and balls and picnics and just have a wonderful time until you get married.'

'And what will I do after I get married?'

'Why, my child, you will do nothing.'

This conversation continues to be on Charlotte's mind.

The London season is a marriage market for the ruling class, and this year's top prize is Prince Aleksei Andreivitch Oblomov, a handsome, enormously wealthy Russian of 30. He is related to half

the crowned heads of Europe, including George V of England; he is a favourite of the Czar, his uncle; and he is the man every debutante's mother wants for her son-in-law.

Charlotte meets him at her own coming-out ball and quickly discovers why he has escaped marriage so long: he is chronically shy with women. She succeeds in bringing him out of his shell a little, and he talks earnestly about the need for reform in Russia: for mechanised agriculture, free speech, land reform, industry and democracy.

Of course he is only a young hothead and his elders are confident that, once he finds a wife and settles down, he will realise that in Russia all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

4. While Charlotte has been growing up cocooned in Walden Hall, European statesmen have been forging the alliances which will ensure that when one of them goes to war the rest will follow. The Central Powers - Germany and Austria-Hungary - are encircled by hostile nations: France, Belgium, England, Russia and the Balkans. As always, the problem facing German military planners is the danger of war on two fronts, against Russia in the east and France in the west. The aim of German diplomacy, therefore, is to neutralise Russia. One attempt to do this has already failed: in 1905 the Kaiser and the Czar signed the Treaty of Bjorko, but their officials tore it up immediately afterwards.

The head of German espionage at this time is Gustav Steinhauer, an overblown, ambitious, scheming former Pinkerton detective (really). He was the 'Prussian naval officer' who had his hair cut in the Caledonian Road. He has 20 spies in England. As war looms in 1914, Steinhauer reads in an English newspaper that Prince Oblomov is in London, and he has a bright idea.

If England and Russia could be made to quarrel, and if the timing of the quarrel were just right, then Russia might be kept out of the coming war. Now, there is already a cause of friction between Russia and England, in that England shelters refugee Russian revolutionists. (England does this because public opinion and the Liberal government disapprove of the brutal Czarist regime.) Steinhauer thinks that if the Czar's favourite nephew were to be assassinated in England by refugee Russian revolutionists, the consequent cooling of relations between the two countries might be crucial.

Steinhauer goes to England to brief Felix.

5. Coming home from a party at dawn, Charlotte is thunderstruck to see a woman asleep on the pavement. Her chamberone explains that thousands of men, women and children have nowhere to sleep but the streets of London. Charlotte just did not know that there were really poor people in the world. She goes home and screams at her mother: 'Why didn't anyone tell me?' Her hysteria has another, secret source: she has just found out how babies are made. It seems that her education so far has been little better than a conspiracy to deceive her. Charlotte has her father's strong will as well as her mother's soft heart, and she won't stand still for this kind of treatment.

Now that she has begun to find out how things are in the real world, what can she do about it? She learns that as a woman she cannot even vote! She forgets Prince Oblomov and seeks out a different, more arty kind of society. She cultivates avant-garde acquaintances and meets some of the intellectual subversives of the day: Thomas Hardy, Emmeline Pankhurst, Bertrand Russell, Bernard Shaw, DH Lawrence. She scandalises her society friends by declaring an (entirely theoretical) belief in free love, and

terrifies her parents by planning to go on a suffragette demonstration.

6. Kell, the head of MI5, is still reading the mail of Ernst, the barber; so he learns in advance of Steinhauer's visit and has Steinhauer shadowed.

Steinhauer meets with Feliks and explains the idea. Feliks is very keen: for him to kill an aristocrat with his superior's approval is a way of getting as it were double stamps. Felix wonders how to get next to Oblomov. Steinhauer shows him the English newspaper, in which Oblomov is reported to have attended the coming-out ball of Charlotte, Viscountess Walden, at nineteen Belgrave Square. Find Charlotte, says Steinhauer, and perhaps she will lead you to Oblomov.

7. Kell knows of this meeting but does not know what was said. He decided to take a closer look at Felix. He manages to stand next to him in a pub one evening and even pass a few words of conversation. Kell feels instinctively that Feliks is interesting and dangerous. However Kell does not have the manpower to put a 24-hour watch on every suspected spy. But he does have informants within the revolutionary underworld. One of these is Andre Barre, a Bolshevik. Kell asks Barre to learn what he can about Felix.

This is Kell's big mistake.

8. Charlotte goes on her suffragette demonstration. The King has refused to give an audience to Mrs Pankhurst, so the suffragettes march on Buckingham Palace. The police are ordered to repel them with a minimum of arrests (because the suffragettes are more trouble in jail than out) and the consequence of this policy is that the women get beaten up. Idle male bystanders join

in the attacks. The most militant of the women wield Indian clubs and throw pepper.

Charlotte is rescued from a beating by a tall, bright-eyed, roughly-dressed Russian who tells her his name is Felix.

The Archduke Ferdinand is assassinated in Sarajevo.

Part Two

9. Felix had originally planned simply to follow Charlotte around until he found Oblomov, but seeing her at the demonstration gives him a better idea.

He cultivates her, takes over her political education, and seduces her. They are not in love. Charlotte is continuing her teenage rebellion, and although Felix has an almost hypnotic power to dominate her she does not become very fond of him. Felix is using her, and he gets a big kick out of screwing the aristocracy, but he is not under her spell, not yet.

He tells her about life in Russia and the unbelievable brutality of the Czarist regime. He makes her read Marx and Kropotkin. He explains about revolution and about propaganda by deed. He talks about maybe kidnapping Oblomov and holding him to ransom against the release of political prisoners. She thinks it's a grand idea.

10. Andre Barre, the Bolshevik, knows where to get bombs, and now Felix asks for his help. Barre takes Felix to meet a mad little Latvian in Islington who agrees to make them a bomb.

Barre has a meeting with Kell. Barre tells Kell that Felix is having an affair with Charlotte, but does not say anything about the Oblomov plot.

Why? Everyone in the revolutionary movement trusts Barre

because he is known to have suffered unimaginable torture at the hands of the Czar's police, who pulled out his fingernails and cut off his penis. It is assumed that the Czar could not have a more implacable enemy. Wrong. Barre is in fact a shell of a man who completely lacks a will of his own. Not only is he reporting to Kell, he is basically working for the Ochrana, the Russian secret police, his torturers. He has reported the assassination plot to the Ochrana and they they have instructed him to do all he can to help.

Why? (i) It is Ochrana policy to encourage anarchist outrages in order to justify their ever-harsher crackdowns. (ii) This is particularly so in London, where they use agents provocateurs in the hope of scaring the English into sending the revolutionists home to be jailed, tortured and executed. ~~(iii)~~ (iii) Although the Czar thinks Oblomov is a harmless young hothead who will soon settle down, the Ochrana are afraid that if he doesn't settle down he will be a dangerous social-democrat and a pernicious influence and may well reduce their powers, so they will be delighted to see him dead.

11. Charlotte begins to cultivate Oblomov again and persuades her mother to give a weekend party for him at Walden Hall in Surrey. Charlotte achieves this partly by hints that Oblomov may be in love with her. Oblomov, who is certainly in love with her, also draws the conclusion that any advances might be favourably received.

Charlotte arranges for Feliks to be hired as a gardener at Walden Hall.

Then she goes for the first time to Felix's house, and meets his wife - who is now very pregnant. At this point Charlotte's trust in Felix begins to fade.

12. Kell gets suspicious about the long silence from Barre, and sends an investigator to see him. Felix sees the investigator leaving Barre's house, and follows the man to headquarters. Realising that Barre is a police informer, Felix kills him. Then he picks up the bomb and goes to Walden Hall for the weekend.

Austria declares war on Serbia.

Part Three

13. On Saturday morning Oblomov asks Charlotte to marry him. The 'kidnapping' is scheduled for that afternoon, and the plan is that Charlotte should lure Oblomov to a disused hut in the woods. Charlotte is afraid that if she refuses Oblomov he may leave Walden Hall immediately; so she says Maybe, and promises to give him his answer that afternoon in the hut.

Among the guests is a distinguished surgeon. Hesitantly, embarrassed, Charlotte asks him: 'When a woman stops ... bleeding ... is it serious?' The doctor says: 'It usually means she's pregnant.' Charlotte turns white.

14. Kell learns of Andre's death. He has lost contact with Felix. He remembers another link to Felix - Viscountess Walden. He goes to Belgrave Square and is told that the Waldens are in the country, giving a weekend party for Prince Oblomov. Kell suspects the truth and heads for Walden Hall. (Maybe he sends a cable which is intercepted by Felix or Charlotte?)

14. Charlotte goes early to the hut to tell Felix she is having his baby. She interrupts him setting the fuse to the bomb.

Kell arrives at Walden Hall and goes out searching for Oblomov.

Charlotte realises this is not a kidnapping but a murder,

and that she was to have died with Oblomov. She tells Felix that he would have been killing his own child, too. Suddenly they both realise that, because Felix was interrupted in the middle of setting the fuse, the bomb is about to go off. Felix throws himself on the bomb. As he lies dying, with half his body blown away, he tells Charlotte not to have the baby adopted. She promises.

Oblomov arrives. He assumes - as will everyone else - that quite by accident Charlotte has saved his life.

Charlotte agrees to marry Oblomov.

Russia mobilises.

The end.