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Dear Ken:

Your latest version of THE RUSSIAN PRINCE had me chortling with delight time and time again, and I not only enjoyed reading it, but as I did so, I could imagine all the wonderful things that you are sure to do when you actually write the book.

Still, you know me. There's always something I have to worry about, and I guess I'd better tell you straight out what these are.

From the synopsis, I come away liking Feliks better than I do Walden. Feliks, after all, has had his true love taken away from him, has been tortured and deprived, in other words, he in all respects appears to be the underdog. Even his child has been stolen away from him. He is alone, desperate, trying to save millions of Russian lives from a pointless war. So, I find myself wanting him to succeed easily as much (or probably more) than I seem to want Walden to frustrate him.

Mixed in with this problem, I think, is perhaps the fact that you're counting on a certain amount of sympathy for Britain as against Germany. And that might work, I think in England. But in this country, we're talking about history that's rather remote. The average American these days probably doesn't even know that Russia was allied with England in WWI, and those who do know, would not get terribly involved one way or the other -- simply because of these facts of history.

This brings us back, I think, to how we are going to get the reader to want desperately what Walden wants, and how we are also going to get the reader to dislike Feliks enough, so that Walden and his family will have a definite edge.

Early in the novel Walden needs to do, I think, something wonderful. True, we have him saving the day when Feliks makes his first attempt at killing them both; but Walden's quick-wittedness and strength are not in themselves endearing. Of course, if some of these scenes are written from his point of view, and you lead us into a /...

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rich and humane sensibility, it's possible that we may come to feel with him in the very texture of the writing; but I frankly would feel more confident if you were to devise some action, so that we could not help but like him. Perhaps when Charlotte is having troubles, he could stand up for her in a way that no one else would dare to and in a way that might indeed be risky for him. This could show his courage and his love.

Ken, you make it a little hard for yourself making a man like this your protagonist. He's rich. You tell us he feels "deep contentment." In the scene with Churchill, which tickled me no end, you caricature him a bit, or so I thought. Interesting problem. Can we want what he wants, if at the same time he's something of a snob?

Again, this could all fade into the wind if we have some strong interior monologues, where we come to know him as a brilliant and caring man, one who loves England, loves his family, fears Germany, and desires this Russian alliance with a passion.

My other points are of much less importance, I think.

Lydia's goal in life seems to be to keep her secret. But at the beginning of the book, I wonder too if she ought to have some "positive" goal. Perhaps an exquisite marriage for her daughter?

I wonder too if at some point she shouldn't succumb physically to Feliks. I like the idea of her firmly rejecting him on the outside, and still loving him on the inside; but I would like it even more, I think, if at some point they both become swept away by passion. I realize that you must have considered this very carefully and then rejected the idea, and you may well be right, but as a potential reader, I did feel somewhat deprived in their failing to get together even briefly.

Feliks as a character was more clear to me in your previous versions. I think that you may need to include a scene which "motivates" him into action. This could either be in the present or in a flashback. After all, he has been in exile for many years, an anarchist for many years, etc. Why now? What is the compulsion at this specific point in time for him now to become an assassin, especially when he never before has been one?

Corollary to that, I think we need to know whether he has been chosen by others or has chosen himself for this particular task? Does he have any special training or skills to accomplish it, or is he merely a dreamer who sets out to undertake the impossible or the near impossible?

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Things worked very nicely for you with Faber being alone, or largely alone; but in general, I think it's easier to open out a major character like this to your readers if he has at least one confederate or confidante, and I wonder what sort of a time you're going to have with Feliks if he is totally alone as you now have him.

I love, by the way, his relationship with Charlotte.

Coming back to Walden, I think that he ought to have some strong personal feelings about Oblomov, either like or dislike. Also, when Oblomov makes his political demands, you don't tell us how Walden feels. It's clear that Walden must consult with others, but what is Walden's position -- both political and personal?

Coming back to my first point, Ken, I think that if the reader is going to want Walden and Oblomov not to be killed, I think that the reader must like both these guys. Certainly Walden. And the reader also must desperately want that treaty to be signed.

I guess that's it.

I think now that we have lots of tension, excitement, color, potentially wonderful characters and all sorts of delicious historical stuff, so that if you can orient our sympathies in a clear and powerful way, I think the book should work like a dream.

I'll be eager to hear what you think of all this.

Love,



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