

Follett, Ken

FELIKS

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Draft of Ken Follett's new novel, centering on the attempt of a Russian Revolutionist to assassinate the two men negotiating an agreement between England and Russia to ensure Russia's entry into the imminent war on the side of the Allies.

The Earl of Walden has been picked by the government to negotiate a treaty with the Russians, as the Czar's negotiator is Oblomov, who is distantly related to his wife Lydia, and it can be indicated that he is simply staying with Walden for social reasons; their daughter Charlotte is making her debut this season.

The reader slowly learns more about Walden, his wife and daughter. Lydia had a mad affair when a girl with a revolutionary, Feliks, in her native Russia. When her parents found out they had him arrested and her married off to Walden, who was stationed in St. Petersburg at the time and searching for a wife. Charlotte, it eventually is learned, is really Feliks' daughter. Lydia has come to love her husband but still remembers her lust for Feliks.

Meanwhile Feliks has come to England to kill Walden and Oblomov; he has learned of the plan for the treaty and wants to stop it--poor Russian peasants shouldn't be dragged into a war not of their making. He attempts to kill Walden and Oblomov at Charlotte's presentation at court but is so startled to see Lydia with them that he bungles it. He then attempts to kill the men at the hotel where Oblomov is moved, but fails once more. Oblomov is moved again and he has not a clue to his whereabouts.

At this point he makes the acquaintance of Charlotte, who is trying to find out about life, since her parents have concealed a great deal from her with a thoroughly Victorian upbringing. She steals away to a Suffragette rally and is almost trampled before being rescued by Feliks. She is intrigued with him, feels he is the first adult "to speak sense to her" and he in turn realizes she is his daughter. He confides his plan to kill Oblomov to her and she agrees to help him. Oblomov has gone to the Walden country house and Charlotte writes Feliks from there to say that is where he can be found.

The police have been trailing Feliks and learn his intention to go to the Walden country house; they tail him but he discovers this and escapes, makes contact with Charlotte and hides in the nursery. Before he can do anything Lydia discovers he is there, makes love to him. Feliks then decides to set a fire to drive Oblomov out of the house where he can get at him to kill him; he kills Oblomov but is killed himself in trying to rescue Charlotte who is trapped by the fire.

This novel has some interesting premises and the characters are basically interesting ones, but the thriller aspect of the plot gets defused by Follett's interest in portraying them, especially Lydia and Charlotte. Charlotte is perhaps overportrayed with the amount of time spent on her and feminism and others underportrayed. The reader has no real sense of Oblomov, who is a shadowy figure at best (and that name is not right given the classic novel).

Walden is sympathetic as he should be, but a bit too bland. Feliks is, I think, supposedly balanced between the good and evil aspects of his personality, yet comes off a bit weak and recognizably more good than bad, so there is not enough tension about which way he will go.

The tension is also weak throughout the book, as there is simply not enough suspense about the assassination. The first attempt is a murky, not very well realized one and could be better done by far. (It is inconceivable, for example, that Feliks would not know the difference between a footman and a coachman, part of everyday life in that era.) The second is better, but when Feliks heads for the country there is a great opportunity for a "dragnet" type chase after he eludes his tail that is totally bypassed by Feliks easily finding Charlotte and gaining entry to the house, where he encounters no difficulties but stays locked in the nursery until he decides to light the fire.

I also found Felix relationship with Charlotte a bit incredible; she might be fascinated with him and feel that he talked sense to her (I found him a bit too rational when he spoke to her on p. 95--his espousal of feminism and his statement that revolutions bring changes that are not necessarily the ones the revolutionists sought--are not the likely feelings of a dedicated fanatical assassin and believer in revolution at that time especially) but would she so easily consent to murder? It seems against everything she would believe morally. It seems more likely that Feliks would lie to her and use her, or if he confided in her she would intend to go along with him and then betray him, or something of that sort. That she would be intrigued by his "speaking sense" and then disappointed with his morality, perhaps.

There are also some other minor flaws, one or two anachronisms and the epilogue, which is not entirely effective and resurrects Oblossov from the dead to be killed in 1919 by the communists. The title is, of course, terrible.

All in all, however, I think the novel is interesting and if the suspense were substantially beefed up and some of the characterization better worked out, it could be a very good.