

The Russian Prince

Prologue

Two young tourists from the U.S., Peter and Hizzie, are visiting Walden Wildlife Park in Surrey, England. The Park is in the grounds of Walden Hall, a stately home which is open to the public. But what Peter and Hizzie like best is the fantastic landscaped garden, with its vistas, waterfalls, lakes, artificial hills, and - best of all - the follies or ~~gambolas~~ ^{gambolas}, which are whimsical little buildings in a variety of crazy styles dotted about the garden for decoration. One of these is a Greek style gazebo about half a mile from the main house and partly hidden by shrubbery. Peter and Hizzie find a way in. The place is clean, with marble seats and a fountain, and even pictures on the walls. They smoke a joint, enjoying the ambience and imagining the lives of the incredibly rich people who used to live here. They make love, pretending to be Lord and Lady Walden. A little later they hear a voice: "I heard heavy breathing so I waited outside." In comes a woman who must be at least eighty years old. Peter realises they are a little out of line, and begins to apologise. The old lady has a wrinkle in her eye. "Don't worry, there was a time when I used to get laid in here." Peter and Hizzie look at one another - she's an original! It turns out she owns the place - not just the gazebo but the house, the grounds and the business.* She is called Lady Walden, and this is the story she tells.

* Not only did I get laid in here, I almost got killed here, too.

Part 1: Brickings

1. In 1914 the gazebo is a den for two teenage sisters who live at Walden Hall. The girls are Charlotte and Belinda, aged 18 and 16 (although from their conversation they seem younger). Normally they are very closely supervised by their governess, but on her day off an accompanying maid takes over. The maid, Sarah, meets her boyfriend while the girls go to the gazebo.

This year Charlotte will "come 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 be matched with a suitable husband. She is pretty, protected, innocent, cultured, wilful and idealistic. She speaks Russian and French, but otherwise her education has been narrow and impractical: heavy on music and art, light on history and geography, no mathematics, physics or science. She recently asked her governess: "What will I do after I get married?" The governess said: "Why, my child, you will do nothing." Charlotte is not happy at the prospect of spending her life doing nothing.

Today Charlotte and Belinda are talking about sex, a subject upon which they are by modern

standards breathtakingly ignorant. They agree that babies grow inside women but cannot decide how they come out. Charlotte knows where eggs emerge from chickens, and once by accident Belinda saw a cow drop a calf, but they agree that their own bodies have no apertures big enough for a baby. They wonder whether they suffer from a congenital deformity. There is no one they can ask about this. They do not consider the question of how a baby gets started: they assume it happens spontaneously around the age of 21, and for them this explains why a girl is pressured to marry at 19 or 20.

2. The British Establishment is at its peak. They rule half the world, and of course they do not know that they will never have it this good again. The playboy king, Edward VII, died in 1910, but this is still the Edwardian era: the wealth, power and prestige amassed during the 63 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 Ayr. Small fortunes are made by the Bond Street and Savile Row outfitters who supply the many clothes essential for different social occasions and even different times of day. More than a million people, out of a working population of eighteen million, are employed as domestic servants. It is a time of hypocrisy. Charlotte and Belinda are victims of the notorious conspiracy of silence about sex. 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 has reached epidemic proportions.

The Earl of Walden, the father of Charlotte and Belinda, is a typical but likeable product of this elite. 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 Russian wife Lydia, and his two daughters he employs more than one hundred servants at his homes in Surrey, London, Monte Carlo and Scotland. He is fifty, and one of those men who are in their prime at that age. His big, beefy body has yet to collapse into fat. His hearty manner conceals a sharp intelligence. But his full-blooded enjoyment of life is genuine. He likes hunting parties and ^{the company of} society balls, ^{young} men and mature women, ^{going to} opera and music-hall (vaudeville), ^{drinking} ale and port, ^{playing} poker and chess. He has no real job, apart from a ceremonial part in the royal household, but he is a friend of several senior politicians* and often does confidential diplomatic work. **he is active in the House of Lords.**

In the spring of 1914 the danger of war looms over Europe. The Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, are encircled by hostile nations: France, England, Belgium, Russia and the Balkans. England and France, enemies for the last thousand years, have been thrown together by their ~~shared~~ fear of the growing wealth and power of Germany. On her side Germany is

increasingly confident of defending her interests by force of arms. The problem facing German military planners is, as always, the danger of war on two fronts: against France in the west and Russia in the east. The aim of German diplomacy therefore is to neutralise Russia. *Ipso facto*, the French and the British are keen to extract from Russia a firm commitment to attack Germany if Germany attacks France.

It is with this in mind that the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, a weasel-faced birdwatcher, visits Walden. Grey explains that a young Russian prince will be in London for the season (May, June & July). He is Alexei Andreevich Oblomov, ^{30,} a nephew and favourite of the Czar and a distant relation of Walden's wife Lydia. ostensibly Prince Oblomov will be here to find a bride, but he will also conduct secret talks about Anglo-Russian military co-operation. Walden, who speaks Russian, will negotiate on behalf of England. Frankly, says Grey, if you can make them commit themselves we will win the war. If you can't, we'll probably lose.

3. 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 stunted, verminous or sick to benefit from education. In many homes people eat standing up because there are no chairs. The official overcrowding level is 214 inhabitants per acre, but Whitechapel has six thousand per acre.

In the East End the poorest of Englishmen mingle with even poorer immigrants from Eastern Europe, especially Russia. England is the only European country with no restrictions on immigration. Consequently London is a haven for refugee revolutionists. The anarchists are particularly strong, with their own clubs and their own newspaper (in Yiddish). England's open-door policy infuriates the Russian secret police - the notorious "Ochrana" - but the liberal government and British public opinion are out of sympathy with the cruel domestic policies of the Czar.

The Ochrana, using "attache's" at the Russian Embassy in London, tries to keep an eye on these expatriate troublemakers, and does so more successfully than the cheerfully incompetent English secret police, Scotland Yard's "Special Branch", who don't know a Menshevik from a mensch. But the Ochrana does more than watch. For years now it has been using agents provocateurs to incite outrages for the purpose of discrediting the revolutionaries. In these countries, including Russia, the outrages justify severe to justify ever-harder security crackdowns on dissidents. In England the hope is that public opinion will turn against the revolutionists and they will all be sent home to be

imprisoned, tortured and executed. This has not happened yet despite the Siege of Sydney Street, the Tottenham Outrage, and the Hamstead Heath Shootings.

The Ochrana's senior plotter in London is Serge Fespichkin, a cool but not perfectly sane manipulator with an obsession for files. The Ochrana is in charge of encoding and decoding all cable traffic at the Russian Embassy, so Fespichkin hears of Otklov's forthcoming visit to London, and he begins to think.

Otklov is a respected young anarchist who is continually pressing for reforms in Russia. The Czarist ruling class see him as an idealist whose heart is in the right place. The revolutionaries scorn him and secretly admit that the kind of democracy he believes in is the greatest threat to the prospect of a real revolution. But the Ochrana, political naive like all intelligence institutions, see him as a highly dangerous man - especially since one of his reforms would be to curtail the power of the Ochrana. In short, Fespichkin believes the world would be well rid of Otklov.

And suppose - Fespichkin reasons - Otklov were to be assassinated, while in England, by an expatriate Russian revolutionary. Would this not force the British to reverse their open-door policy? Indeed, given that the British are desperate to squeeze a military commitment out of Russia, such an assassination might even prompt the Czar to demand extradition of the revolutionaries as the price of the commitment.

The assassination of Otklov would therefore doubly serve the Ochrana. (Is it not incredible that they should kill one of their own leaders? No. According to the history books, they have already killed the Grand Duke Sergei and the Minister of the Interior, both times using agents provocateurs.)

Fespichkin also knows from the cables that Otklov will have talks with the Earl of Walden. The name Walden rings a bell, and Fespichkin delves into his files. Walden is married to a Russian, the Countess Lydia. Lydia has a file: before she married Walden she associated with a young St Petersburg anarchist called Feliks Murnikov. Feliks has a file ... and, yes, he is in London.

Fespichkin calls in one of his agents.

4. At the age of 11 Felix discovered that the St Petersburg shopkeeper 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 anarchist. When he was a student he had a brief, passionate affair with Lydia, the daughter of a Count; but she broke it off (under parental pressure) and married an English earl. Later Felix was tortured by the Ochrana, escaped from prison, and fled to England. His hatred of the ruling class is therefore deeply personal as well as

political.

He is a complex and driven man. Now 40, he is a Rasputin-like character, intense, fiery, magnetic and domineering. He is tall, thin, hairy, and none too clean, but there is in him a kind of animal energy which some women find irresistible. Most evenings he may be found at the Jubilee Street Anarchist Club in Hoxney, drinking and arguing politics.

Tonight the group around Feliks is joined by Andre Barre, a shy, nervous Bolshevik with contacts at the Russian Embassy. Barre announces that he has heard through his contacts that Prince Orlanov will come to London for secret talks with the Earl of Walden.

Here is an opportunity for propaganda-by-deed, and around the table there is much hot-headed talk of demonstrations, petitions, guns and bombs. Feliks however is quiet. If he is going to do something he will not plan it in public.

Barre, who is of course an agent provocateur, reports back to Feliks. Feliks says: "Do you think he knows who Lady Walden is?" He showed no sign, Barre replies. "Well," says Feliks, "he'll soon find out."

Part 2: The ball

5. The London season is a marriage market for the ruling class, and Prince Orlanov is widely regarded - by the debutante's mothers - as this year's top prize. He makes his first appearance at Charlotte's coming-out ball, held in the Surrey Hotel. He turns out to be very handsome as well as high-born and incredibly rich. The ball is a glittering occasion, with the debut in fabulous gowns and the young men in white ties and tails. Charlotte talks to Orlanov and quickly discovers how he has managed to remain a bachelor for so long: he is chronically shy with women. But her naivety and straightforwardness make a chord in him, and he comes out of his shell a little with her. He talks earnestly about the need for change in Russia: for land reform, mechanized agriculture, free speech, industry, and parliamentary democracy. Charlotte is fascinated and has to be dragged away to dance with her other guests.

A little later, in the ladies' parlor room, she has a girl-to-girl chat with a cousin who tells her the sexual facts of life and leaves her a little dazed.

6. Feliks is also at the ball. He has got a job as a temporary waiter with the object of ~~getting~~^{taking} a close look at Orlanov. He does not plan to kill the prince tonight.

if only because he has not figured out where to get the money to buy a weapon. In a corner he sees Lydia and hears somebody call her lady Walden. He is thunderstruck. He catches her eye. She turns white and walks away. Feliks pursues her. He asks her to meet him. She refuses. But he gets the impression that he still has some power over her; and now he knows where to get the money for the weapon which will kill Ottomar.

7. On the way home from the ball at dawn Charlotte is horrified to see a woman sleeping on the pavement. Her chaperone explains that thousands of men, women and children have nowhere to sleep but the streets of London. Charlotte simply did not know that people could be that poor. She insists on stopping the carriage and speaking to the woman. It turns out to be Sarah, the maid who used to domesticate for the governess at Walden Hall. She explains that she lost her job when she got pregnant by her boyfriend. Charlotte ^{is grossed out by} ~~becomes almost hysterical~~ with the revelations of the last 12 hours. When she gets home she screams at her mother: "Why did nobody tell me?" It seems that her education so far has been little better than a conspiracy to deceive her. She has her father's strong will as well as her mother's soft heart: from now on, she decides, she will find things out for herself.

39 and still beautiful,

8. Lydia ^{has} her own problems. Back in 1894 she married Walden after a whirlwind courtship in St Petersburg. She has always liked her husband, but she has nourished the memory of her adolescent passion for Feliks, and she has never ceased to feel guilty because she was not a virgin when she married Walden. This guilt has clouded the marriage. Lydia is now 39 and still beautiful. Now Feliks has reappeared in her life, and she is distraught. She does not feel the urge to have an affair with Feliks — that at least has gone — but ~~acute~~ guilt and remembered love make her weak toward him. And in this mood she cannot face her husband, so she withdraws from him.

Part 3: Subversion

(10) 9. Walden and Ottomar exchange information on mobilization and military planning. They begin to draft an agreement whereby both will attack Germany if Germany and France go to war. Ottomar may be shy with women but he is a tough negotiator.

After their first meeting Walden walks around for a while. He has noticed the change in Lydia's mood and he vaguely recalls it. He finds himself walking past a small house in Chelsea. It is the home of Bonita Carter, real name Myrtle Jenkins. Bonita was the greatest courtesan in London in the 1890s. The young Walden was crazy about her and in fact gave her this little house. What is she like now? he wonders. She must be fifty. He walks on.

(9) 10. Gorkichkin knows all the details of the Walden-Oblomov talks because Oblomov reports back to Moscow via his coded cable sent from the Embassy. Gorkichkin also knows all of Oblomov's movements. Consequently he is able to give Bame bits of information which make Bame indispensable to Feliks; and in return Feliks is obliged to make Bame party to his plans.

Now, instructed by Gorkichkin, Bame takes Feliks to see a crazy old lode in the Uckermark who makes bombs. Feliks says he will need quite a big bomb with a timing device. The chemist names a price. I'll find the money, says Feliks. *

11. Now that Charlotte has begun to find out how things are in the real world, what can she do about it? She discovers that as a woman she cannot even vote! She forgets Oblomov and seeks out the London avant-garde (through her cousin Lucinda). She meets some of the intellectual subversives of the day: Thomas Hardy, Emmeline Pankhurst, Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, J.M. W. Turner. She scandalises her society friends by declaring an (entirely theoretical) belief in free love, and horrifies her parents by announcing her intention of going on a suffragette demonstration.

12. * Feliks calls on Lydia while Walden is out. He gains admittance by giving a false name. He tells Lydia how much money he needs and arranges to meet her in a week's time. She, desperate to get him out of the house and terrified he might spill the beans to Walden, agrees.

Lydia's problem is that she has no money. The household shopping is done by servants, and they do not use cash - the shopkeepers send bills to Walden who pays by cheque. Lydia's dressmakers, habers etc all send the bill. Even if Lydia takes morning coffee at the Cafe Royal she signs for it. Her personal fortune consists of property and stocks which she cannot sell without the knowledge of the family solicitor, a personal friend of

Walden's. She has no bank account of her own. So, highly embarrassed, she takes some jewellery to Hutton Gardens and sells it. All this deception increases her sense of estrangement from her husband.

Part 4: Seduction

13. The King has refused to give an audience to Mrs Pankhurst, so the suffragettes march on Buckingham Palace (on Thursday 21 May 1914) and Charlotte goes along. The police are ordered to repel the suffragettes with a minimum of arrests (because they are more trouble in jail than out) and the consequence of this policy in practice is that the women get beaten up by the policemen - and by male bystanders. The more militant women wield Indian clubs and throw pepper. Charlotte, innocent as always, is unamed, and is rescued from a beating by a tall, roughly-dressed Russian who introduces himself as Feliks.

14. Feliks takes Charlotte back to his dingy lodgings in Finsbury and ^{seduces} takes her on the richly bed. He plans to use her, but that doesn't spoil his pleasure: all his life he's wanted to know the aristocracy.

Charlotte is mesmerized by him. She has never met anyone like him. ~~She does not fall in love with him,~~ but ^{he} she discovers that ^{sex} seduction is what she has been waiting for all her life.

15. Walden asks Lydia to wear one of the pieces of jewellery she has sold. She tells him she has sent it for repair. Next day he sees it for sale in a shop window. He storms in and accuses them of theft. The manager takes him into the office and explains that this does happen from time to time, a lady needs cash for a clandestine purpose and sells some jewellery unbeknown to her husband... Humiliated, Walden buys back the jewellery. Then he hires a private detective to follow Lydia.

16. Following Feliks' instruction, Lydia books a private room in a restaurant and meets him there for lunch. She gives him the money. Now he asks her for something else: a job. She agrees to get him taken on as a gardener at Walden Hall.

Part 5 : Finishing Touches

17. Walden's private detective reports that Lydia had lunch in a private room in a restaurant with a man of about 40, and they spoke Russian together. The detective followed Feliks home and so has his address.

Walden instructs the detective to find out all about Feliks. Then he goes to Chelsea.

Bonika is now a comfortable, heavy, plump woman of fifty, no longer a courtesan, living on her investments. She is thrilled to see Walden. They spend a wonderful afternoon in bed. Walden begins to consider ways in which he could spend less time with Lydia and more time with Bonika.

18. Charlotte gets laid regularly in Moscow. Feliks tells her how the Ottomans tortured him. There are many Russians languishing in these infernal cells, he says. But we must do something! cries Charlotte. All right, says Feliks: let's kidnap Ottomans and hold him to ransom against the release of the prisoners. Wonderful! says Charlotte.

19. Charlotte sees Ottomans again and enchants him. She persuades her mother to give a weekend party for Ottomans at Walden Hall, thinking that Ottomans may take the opportunity to propose. Lydia agrees and the invitations are sent out.

20. On 28 here the Archduke Ferdinand is assassinated at Sarajevo. Sir Edmund Grey tells Walden that he must sign an agreement with Ottomans within the next few days. (Of course the agreement will still have to be ratified.) Walden says he thinks Ottomans will sign next weekend at Walden Hall.

Part 6 : A Death

21. On the Thursday before the weekend party Feliks goes to Ukenwell to collect the bombs. The chemist explains the mechanism. Setting the timer is a delicate job: the bombs must first be armed, then the timer - an alarm clock - must be set. The alarm bell will ring two seconds before the explosion. The bombs would destroy everyone in ~~the~~ room, provided it were not muffled by something heavy like a bag of

said.

Feliks takes the books and leaves for home.

22. On Friday morning the private detective reports to Walden. Feliks is an anarchist, and has a bomb he says. Yesterday he visited a man who has a police record for making bombs. Then he, Feliks, caught a train for home.

Of course Walden suspects that Feliks may intend to assassinate Orlanov. He gets the Russian Embassy to supply two bodyguards for Orlanov. He wonders what Lydia's role is in all this, and is afraid to ask her.

It occurs to him that if Orlanov is assassinated it could ruin the secret treaty and keep Russia out of the war.

23. Feliks, now gardening at Walden Hall, hears about the bodyguards and contrives to stay well away from the main house. (Nobody knows he is Russian: he gives his name as Felix Morrow.)

On Friday evening he and Charlotte make love in the gazebo. Then he tells her to lure Orlanov to the gazebo at 5 pm on Saturday.

24. On Saturday morning Lydia finds her "old" jewellery in Walden's wardrobe. She decides to cash it.

Also that morning Orlanov proposes to Charlotte. She promises to give him his answer at 5 pm in the gazebo.

Later she speaks to another house-guest, a distinguished surgeon. Embarrassed, she asks him: "Is it at all serious if a woman stops, you know, bleeding?" Gruffly the surgeon answers: "It means she's pregnant." Charlotte turns white.

25. After lunch Ferkichkin, who knows Orlanov's plan through home, calls off Orlanov's bodyguards, saying Orlanov has refused to have them hanging around. (Orlanov will be dead before he can deny it, Ferkichkin thinks.)

Lydia gets Walden alone and confides all. He has no time to be glad that he is not, after all, untruthful, because of the course she reveals that the assassin is right here at Walden Hall! He starts a search - but neither Feliks, Orlanov or Charlotte ~~can~~ be found.

26. Olman is walking in the woods alone, wondering whether Charlotte will say yes. Meanwhile Charlotte goes to the gazebo to tell Feliks she is pregnant. She finds him arming the bomb. She realizes that this is to be a murder, not a kidnapping, and that Feliks was prepared to kill her as well as Olman. Bitterly, she tells Feliks he would have been killing his own child, too. In his distraction at this news Feliks reaches up the bomb, and suddenly the alarm goes off. Two seconds, and everyone will be blown up — unless the bomb is muffled by a heavy object, like a bag of sand — or a body? Feliks throws himself on the bomb and it goes off. Charlotte is uninjured. Dying, Feliks makes her promise not to have the baby adopted (as he was). She agrees.

27. After the explosion everyone comes running. But nobody knows of Charlotte's involvement with Feliks and they all assume she accidentally surprised the assassin and unwittingly saved Olman's life.

Charlotte agrees to marry Olman, who will never know that the baby is not his.

Walden and Lydia are reconciled and have a second honeymoon.

Walden and Olman sign the treaty.

The world goes to war.

Epilogue.

The 85-year-old Charlotte has been talking to Peter and Hissie all day. They shared sandwiches at midday in the gazebo, then had dinner together in the Great Hall of the house after all the guests had gone home. Now, at almost midnight, Charlotte tells the rest of the story. Olman, now Peter was broke and Olman was made military liaison officer with the British and stayed in London. Charlotte married him in August. He lost all his fortune. It came, in the Russian Revolution, but Walden got him appointed director a directorship in a bank and to everyone's surprise he became an energetic and successful ^{international} banker. Walden lived to a ripe old age but lost his fortune in the depression. Lydia's grandchildren have revived the family finances by turning Walden Hall into a Wildlife Park.

"It's a fabulous story," says Peter. "You should write a book."

Charlotte laughs. "Nobody wants to believe it."

"Maybe not." Peter thinks for a while. "Well," he says after a while, "you could make it a novel."