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KEN FOLLETT

AUTHOR OF

EYE OF THE NEEDLE

The Man From St. Petersburg

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The Man From St. Petersburg

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One can't love humanity.
One can only love people.

—GRAHAM GREENE

About the Author

Ken Follett is the author of the bestselling EYE OF THE NEEDLE, which won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award, TRIPLE, and THE KEY TO REBECCA, all available in Signet editions. Welsh-born, he is a former journalist for the London *Evening News* and editorial director of Everest Books in England. He now lives in England with his wife and children.

ONE

It was a slow Sunday afternoon, the kind Walden loved. He stood at an open window and looked across the park. The broad, level lawn was dotted with mature trees: a Scotch pine, a pair of mighty oaks, several chestnuts and a willow like a head of girlish curls. The sun was high and the trees cast dark, cool shadows. The birds were silent, but a hum of contented bees came from the flowering creeper beside the window. The house was still, too. Most of the servants had the afternoon off. The only weekend guests were Walden's brother George, George's wife, Clarissa, and their children. George had gone for a walk, Clarissa was lying down and the children were out of sight. Walden was comfortable: he had worn a frock coat to church, of course, and in an hour or two he would put on his white tie and tails for dinner, but in the meantime he was at ease in a tweed suit and a soft-collared shirt. Now, he thought, if only Lydia will play the piano tonight, it will have been a perfect day.

He turned to his wife. "Will you play, after dinner?"

Lydia smiled. "If you like."

Walden heard a noise and turned back to the window. At the far end of the drive, a quarter of a mile away, a motor car appeared. Walden felt a twinge of irritation, like the sly stab of pain in his right leg before

a rainstorm. Why should a car annoy me? he thought. He was not against motor cars—he owned a Lanchester and used it regularly to travel to and from London—although in the summer they were a terrible nuisance to the village, sending up clouds of dust from the unpaved road as they roared through. He was thinking of putting down a couple of hundred yards of tarmacadam along the street. Ordinarily he would not have hesitated, but the roads had not been his responsibility since 1909 when Lloyd George had set up the Roads Boards—and that, he realized, was the source of his irritation. It had been a characteristic piece of Liberal legislation: they took money from Walden in order to do themselves what he would have done anyway; then they failed to do it. I suppose I'll pave the road myself in the end, he thought; it's just annoying to pay for it twice.

The motor car turned into the gravel forecourt and came to a noisy, shuddering halt opposite the south door. Exhaust fumes drifted in at the window, and Walden held his breath. The driver got out, wearing helmet, goggles and a heavy motoring coat, and opened the door for the passenger. A short man in a black coat and a black felt hat stepped down from the car. Walden recognized the man and his heart sank: the peaceful summer afternoon was over.

"It's Winston Churchill," he said.

Lydia said: "How embarrassing."

The man just refused to be snubbed. On Thursday he had sent a note which Walden had ignored. On Friday he had called on Walden at his London house and had been told that the Earl was not at home. Now he had driven all the way to Norfolk on a Sunday. He would be turned away again. Does he think his stubbornness is impressive? Walden wondered.

He hated to be rude to people, but Churchill deserved it. The Liberal government in which Churchill was a minister was engaged in a vicious attack on the very foundations of English society—taxing landed property, undermining the House of Lords, trying to give Ireland away to the Catholics, emasculating the

Royal Navy and yielding to the blackmail of trade unions and damned socialists. Walden and his friends would not shake hands with such people.

The door opened and Pritchard came into the room. He was a tall Cockney with brilliantined black hair and an air of gravity which was transparently fake. He had run away to sea as a boy and had jumped ship in East Africa. Walden, there on safari, had hired him to supervise the native porters, and they had been together ever since. Now Pritchard was Walden's major-domo, traveling with him from one house to another, and as much of a friend as a servant could be.

"The First Lord of the Admiralty is here, my lord," Pritchard said.

"I'm not at home," Walden said.

Pritchard looked uncomfortable. He was not used to throwing out Cabinet ministers. My father's butler would have done it without turning a hair, Walden thought, but old Thomson is graciously retired, growing roses in the garden of that little cottage in the village, and somehow Pritchard has never acquired that unassailable dignity.

Pritchard began to drop his aitches, a sign that he was either very relaxed or very tense. "Mr. Churchill said you'd say not at 'ome, my lord, and 'e said to give you this letter." He proffered an envelope on a tray.

Walden did *not* like to be pushed. He said crossly: "Give it back to him—" Then he stopped and looked again at the handwriting on the envelope. There was something familiar about the large, clear, sloping letters.

"Oh, dear," said Walden.

He took the envelope, opened it and drew out a single sheet of heavy white paper, folded once. At the top was the royal crest, printed in red. Walden read:

Buckingham Palace
May 1st, 1914

My dear Walden
You will see young Winston.
George R.I.

"It's from the King," Walden said to Lydia.

He was so embarrassed that he flushed. It was *frightfully* bad form to drag the King into something like this. Walden felt like a schoolboy who is told to stop quarreling and get on with his prep. For a moment he was tempted to defy the King. But the consequences . . . Lydia would no longer be received by the Queen, people would be unable to invite the Waldens to parties at which a member of the Royal Family would be present and—worst of all—Walden's daughter, Charlotte, could not be presented at court as a debutante. The family's social life would be wrecked. They might as well go and live in another country. No, there was no question of disobeying the King.

Walden sighed. Churchill had defeated him. In a way it was a relief, for now he could break ranks and no one could blame him. *Letter from the King, old boy,* he would say in explanation; *nothing to be done, you know.*

"Ask Mr. Churchill to come in," he said to Pritchard.

He handed the letter to Lydia. The Liberals really did not understand how the monarchy was supposed to work, he reflected. He murmured: "The King is just not firm enough with these people."

Lydia said: "This is becoming awfully boring."

She was not bored at all, Walden thought; in fact, she probably found it all quite exciting; but she said that because it was the kind of thing an English countess would say, and since she was not English but Russian, she liked to say typically English things, the way a man speaking French would say *alors* and *hein?* a lot.

Walden went to the window. Churchill's motor car was still rattling and smoking in the forecourt. The driver stood beside it, with one hand on the door, as if he had to hold it like a horse to stop it from wandering away. A few servants were gazing at it from a safe distance.

Pritchard came in and said: "Mr. Winston Churchill."

Churchill was forty, exactly ten years younger than

Walden. He was a short, slender man who dressed in a way Walden thought was a shade too elegant to be quite gentlemanly. His hair was receding rapidly, leaving a peak at the forehead and two curls at the temples which, together with his short nose and the permanent sardonic twinkle in his eye, gave him a mischievous look. It was easy to see why the cartoonists regularly portrayed him as a malign cherub.

Churchill shook hands and said cheerfully: "Good afternoon, Lord Walden." He bowed to Lydia. "Lady Walden, how do you do." Walden thought: What is it about him that grates so on my nerves?

Lydia offered him tea and Walden told him to sit down. Walden would not make small talk: he was impatient to know what all the fuss was about.

Churchill began: "First of all my apologies, together with the King's, for imposing myself on you."

Walden nodded. He was not going to say it was perfectly all right.

Churchill said: "I might add that I should not have done so, other than for the most compelling reasons."

"You'd better tell me what they are."

"Do you know what has been happening in the money market?"

"Yes. The discount rate has gone up."

"From one and three quarters to just under three percent. It's an enormous rise, and it has come about in a few weeks."

"I presume you know why."

Churchill nodded. "German companies have been factoring debts on a vast scale, collecting cash and buying gold. A few more weeks of this and Germany will have got in everything owing to her from other countries, while leaving her debts to them outstanding—and her gold reserves will be higher than they have ever been before."

"They are preparing for war."

"In this and other ways. They have raised a levy of one billion marks, over and above normal taxation, to improve an army that is already the strongest in Europe. You will remember that in 1909, when Lloyd George increased British taxation by fifteen million

pounds sterling, there was almost a revolution. Well, a billion marks is equivalent to *fifty* million pounds. It's the biggest levy in European history—"

"Yes, indeed," Walden interrupted. Churchill was threatening to become histrionic: Walden did not want him making speeches. "We Conservatives have been worried about German militarism for some time. Now, at the eleventh hour, you're telling me that we were right."

Churchill was unperturbed. "Germany will attack France, almost certainly. The question is, will we come to the aid of France?"

"No," Walden said in surprise. "The Foreign Secretary has assured us that we have no obligations to France—"

"Sir Edward is sincere, of course," Churchill said. "But he is mistaken. Our understanding with France is such that we could not possibly stand aside and watch her be defeated by Germany."

Walden was shocked. The Liberals had convinced everyone, him included, that they would not lead England into war; and now one of their leading ministers was saying the opposite. The duplicity of the politicians was infuriating, but Walden forgot that as he began to contemplate the consequences of war. He thought of the young men he knew who would have to fight: the patient gardeners in his park, the cheeky footmen, the brown-faced farm boys, the hell-raising undergraduates, the languid idlers in the clubs of St. James's . . . then that thought was overtaken by another, much more chilling, and he said: "But can we win?"

Churchill looked grave. "I think not."

Walden stared at him. "Dear God, what have you people done?"

Churchill became defensive. "Our policy has been to avoid war, and you can't do that and arm yourself to the teeth at the same time."

"But you have failed to avoid war."

"We're still trying."

"But you think you will fail."

Churchill looked belligerent for a moment, then swallowed his pride. "Yes."

"So what will happen?"

"If England and France together cannot defeat Germany, then we must have another ally, a third country on our side: Russia. If Germany is divided, fighting on two fronts, we can win. The Russian army is incompetent and corrupt, of course—like everything else in that country—but it doesn't matter so long as they draw off part of Germany's strength."

Churchill knew perfectly well that Lydia was Russian, and it was characteristically tactless of him to disparage her country in her presence, but Walden let it pass, for he was highly intrigued by what Churchill was saying. "Russia already has an alliance with France," he said.

"It's not enough," Churchill said. "Russia is obliged to fight if France is the victim of aggression. It is left to Russia to decide whether France is the victim or the aggressor in a particular case. When war breaks out, both sides always claim to be the victim. Therefore the alliance obliges Russia to do no more than fight if she wants to. We need Russia to be freshly and firmly committed to our side."

"I can't imagine you chaps joining hands with the Czar."

"Then you misjudge us. To save England, we'll deal with the devil."

"Your supporters won't like it."

"They won't know."

Walden could see where all this was leading, and the prospect was exciting. "What have you in mind? A secret treaty? Or an unwritten understanding?"

"Both."

Walden looked at Churchill through narrowed eyes. This young demagogue might have a brain, he thought, and that brain might not be working in my interest. So the Liberals want to do a secret deal with the Czar, despite the hatred which the English people have for the brutal Russian regime—but why tell me? They want to rope me in somehow, that much is clear. For what purpose? So that if it all goes wrong they will have a Conservative on whom to put the blame? It will

take a plotter more subtle than Churchill to lead me into such a trap.

Walden said: "Go on."

"I have initiated naval talks with the Russians, along the lines of our military talks with the French. They've been going on for a while at a rather low level, and now they are about to get serious. A young Russian admiral is coming to London. His name is Prince Aleksey Andreyevich Orlov."

Lydia said: "Aleks!"

Churchill looked at her. "I believe he is related to you, Lady Walden."

"Yes," Lydia said, and, for some reason Walden could not even guess at, she looked uneasy. "He is the son of my elder sister, which makes him my . . . cousin?"

"Nephew," Walden said.

"I didn't know he had become an admiral," Lydia added. "It must be a recent promotion." She was her usual, perfectly composed self, and Walden decided he had imagined that moment of unease. He was pleased that Aleks would be coming to London: he was very fond of the lad. Lydia said: "He is young to have so much authority."

"He's thirty," Churchill said to Lydia, and Walden recalled that Churchill, at forty, was very young to be in charge of the entire Royal Navy. Churchill's expression seemed to say: The world belongs to brilliant young men like me and Orlov.

But you need me for something, Walden thought.

"In addition," Churchill went on, "Orlov is nephew to the Czar, through his father, the late Prince, and—more importantly—he is one of the few people other than Rasputin whom the Czar likes and trusts. If anyone in the Russian naval establishment can swing the Czar on to our side, Orlov can."

Walden asked the question that was on his mind. "And my part in all this?"

"I want you to represent England in these talks—and I want you to bring me Russia on a plate."

The fellow could never resist the temptation to be

melodramatic, Walden thought. "You want Aleks and me to negotiate an Anglo-Russian military alliance?"

"Yes."

Walden saw immediately how difficult, challenging and rewarding the task would be. He concealed his excitement and resisted the temptation to get up and pace about.

Churchill was saying: "You know the Czar personally. You know Russia and speak Russian fluently. You're Orlov's uncle by marriage. Once before you have persuaded the Czar to side with England rather than with Germany—in 1906, when you intervened to prevent the ratification of the Treaty of Bjorko." Churchill paused. "Nevertheless, you were not our first choice to represent Britain at these negotiations. The way things are at Westminster . . ."

"Yes, yes." Walden did not want to start discussing *that*. "However, something changed your mind."

"In a nutshell, you were the Czar's choice. It seems you are the only Englishman in whom he has any faith. Anyway, he sent a telegram to his cousin, His Majesty King George the Fifth, insisting that Orlov deal with you."

Walden could imagine the consternation among the Radicals when they learned they would have to involve a reactionary old Tory peer in such a clandestine scheme. "I should think you were horrified," he said.

"Not at all. In foreign affairs our policies are not so much at odds with yours. And I have always felt that domestic political disagreements were no reason why your talents should be lost to His Majesty's Government."

Flattery now, Walden thought. They want me badly. Aloud he said: "How would all this be kept secret?"

"It will seem like a social visit. If you agree, Orlov will stay with you for the London season. You will introduce him to society. Am I right in thinking that your daughter is due to come out this year?" He looked at Lydia.

"That's right," she said.

"So you'll be going about a good deal anyway. Orlov is a bachelor, as you know, and obviously very eligible,