

Excerpt from **Kingdoms Fall – The Laxenburg Message** by Edward Parr

[The following excerpt involves the two protagonists of the novel, David Gresham, recently recruited to serve in the British Secret Intelligence Service, and James Wilkins, a young Captain in the British army, during a mission to Athens during the First World War.]

Gresham ducked out the back door quickly and walked to the district where the two most likely and most knowledgeable German agents were believed to reside. There was no lack of German-speaking customers at the public houses in that district, and Gresham entered one uncertain of the reception he would receive. In his British uniform, he immediately drew the attention of every eye. The Germans and Austrians, some of whom were in uniform themselves, looked at him with amusement and disdain. Gresham sat at a table and called for whisky.

“No, no, my friend,” said a friendly and somewhat inebriated Austrian officer, in English. “You are in Greece now, so you must order the wine. If you cannot order correctly, we shall have to throw you out.”

“The only wine I’ll drink comes from France, and I don’t expect you’ve got any,” replied Gresham coldly.

“Not yet, perhaps, but it’s just a matter of time. Then try the *uozo* – a local aperitif; it’s quite delicious.”

“No, thanks; I’ll stick to whisky.”

“Perhaps you should return to your dark dirty pubs, then, Englishman. You have no appreciation for the treasures of Greece.”

“I’m looking for an old schoolmate who I’m told lives in this district.”

“There is no other Englishman here.”

“He’s a German, from Berlin; his name is Ernst Muller. We spent a year at Oxford together, but he moved to Athens to work for the Ambassador or something. Do you know him?”

“No, but I might be convinced to ask my friends for you.”

“You are very kind, and I shall repay your kindness by buying you and your friends a bottle of the Greek wine, if you will allow me,” said Gresham, sipping his whisky.

“Most thoughtful, but the wine is cheap.”

“Then gold, as I am most anxious to see my old friend and find out whether he intends to return to my sister and the child he left behind in England.”

“Ah, now I see your intent most clearly. Money will do. Allow me to ask for you.” The Austrian stepped to his friends and conferred with them a moment. There was some dispute as to whether to assist a British officer, but as Gresham placed five gold sovereigns on the table, the dissenters were quickly voted down.

At last the Austrian returned to Gresham’s table and carefully lifted and pocketed the sovereigns. “There is a café three blocks from here, the *Piraiikon*. You will find your friend there most evenings. Now you should leave, as some of my friends would like to take your money and cut your English throat.”

Gresham rose and walked calmly to the street without another word.

The *Piraikon* was an almost identical pub nearby, bustling with Germans and Austrians who were drinking wine and steins of beer. Ducking into an alley, Gresham lowered his tie, dirtied his face and tousled his hair. He staggered out of the alley and approached the *Piraikon* drunkenly. At the door, he stopped.

“Where is Ernst Muller?!” he shouted.

A deathly silence fell, as Gresham scanned the room to see if his intended target could be identified. He staggered into the crowd, pushing through past the customers to the middle of the room.

“Ernst Muller!” he shouted again. A young man sitting by himself at the rear looked about nervously.

“Go back to Gallipoli, Englishmen, and die with the rest of your army,” said a bald pot-bellied German businessman standing nearby.

“I’ll be damned before you get away with it, Ernst,” Gresham cried out drunkenly to the businessman. “Where are you, Ernst!?”

Suddenly two German officers tackled Gresham to the ground. He flailed helplessly as the Germans punched his face and side; Gresham was careful not to punch back. He scrambled to the street as the Germans’ friends pulled them away, and he wandered off, staggering and muttering about his poor sister – at least, until he reached the alley.

There, Gresham stopped and watched the pub. The nervous young German man in fine civilian clothes soon left alone, and Gresham carefully followed him, staying in the shadows. One block, then two, to a fine townhouse. The young man looked both ways, and used his key to enter the house, quickly closing the door behind him.

The marble columns of the entrance to the new National Archeological Museum were impressive, but they lacked the aura of antiquity that permeated the rest of the city. At midnight, the museum was dark and quiet, and Wilkins waited in the park in front of the museum, still uncertain what Gresham planned to do. Wilkins was definitely more at ease standing alone in the dark in the eerily quiet city now that he was in uniform. Earlier in the evening, Wilkins had visited the nearest Gendarmerie and, after a bit of bribery, gotten the address of the Athens Chief, Vasilakos. The gendarmes were all vehemently anti-royalist, and Wilkins began to believe that Gresham’s earlier reference to the unfortunate end of French King Louis XVI might not be far from the truth.

At last, Wilkins could see a British officer approaching, and indeed it was Gresham, more or less. Although in uniform, Gresham looked like he had been out drinking and brawling: His hair was wild and wet with perspiration, his uniform was disheveled and stained, his boots were covered with muck, and there were a few bruises on his face and some evidence of a bloodied nose.

“Where on earth have you been, David?” Wilkins asked with concern.

“Just playing my part in our little drama. I’ve been exploring the local pubs, especially those catering to the Huns. Afraid to say there’s been a minor fisticuffs. That sort of thing is bound to happen when a British officer mistakenly walks into a nest of bloody Germans. I’ve found our prey, however. Let’s go.”

Gresham led Wilkins down a back alley, already having learned the back streets of the complex city. It was a short distance in the moonlight to the now-quiet public house where Gresham had made his public display. Two more blocks brought them to the presumed house of Ernst Muller.

At the door, Gresham pulled a neat set of iron picks from his pocket and easily unlocked the clumsy, ancient brass lock. He and Wilkins entered quietly and shut the door gently. In the dim light from the street, Gresham took out his handgun, and Wilkins did the same. They quickly searched the first floor of the house, which was empty, and started cautiously up the stairs.

The bedroom door was closed. Gresham cracked the door open enough for the two men to see Muller asleep in his bed. Gresham entered first, his handgun raised, and Wilkins followed. They surrounded the bed. “Muller, wake up,” said Gresham. Muller wasn’t asleep. He quickly twisted and raised his Mauser pistol. Gresham smashed his handgun down on Muller’s hand, breaking the German’s fingers and forcing the pistol from his hand. Gresham leapt onto Muller’s chest and forced his M1911’s muzzle against the young clean-cut German’s throat. “Make a sound and I will blast your throat open.”

“*Ich spreche kein Englisch*,” Muller growled.

“Well, we’ll find out in a minute, because I’m going to cut off each of your fingers and toes until you learn how to speak English.”

“*Ja*, alright, there is no need for such violence,” said Muller. “I am no one; I am just a businessman.”

“You work with diplomats and pass information for Germany. Those diplomats know the treaties with their country. And you know what they say,” said Wilkins.

“When did Germany sign the treaty with Bulgaria?” asked Gresham.

“I have no idea if there is such a treaty.”

“*Beginnen wir mit seinen schwanz*,” said Wilkins, drawing a short field knife from the back of his belt.

“*Ja, ja, ja*, the treaty, it was signed September 23,” said Muller, now truly panicking.

“And how will your Kaiser reward his new ally?”

Muller shrieked, “of course I cannot tell you that!”

Gresham carefully positioned the muzzle of his handgun against Muller’s left elbow.

“Listen to me, you English pig –”

Gresham fired. Muller’s elbow shattered and his blood and bone splashed across the bedspread. Muller howled in agony and the smell of burnt flesh filled the room.

Gresham turned his head to see how Wilkins had reacted to the shooting of their prisoner. He was gratified to see only cold determination in his colleague’s eyes,

and turned back to Muller. “I would like to kill you, Muller. But since I cannot do so yet, I will have to enjoy hurting you some more.”

“I cannot say!”

Gresham pressed the muzzle against Muller’s left shoulder.

“Listen, Muller,” said Wilkins. “Your secrets will not remain secrets long; it is just a matter of time before the terms are made known. Better to just tell us now than to suffer needlessly.”

“What was Bulgaria promised if they join Germany in the war!?” Gresham yelled.

“I cannot –”

Gresham fired again. This time his bullet entered the flesh of Muller’s left shoulder and scored across the bone. There was a strong smell of flesh and droplets of blood sprayed across the bed and wall.

Muller groaned. “Lower Serbia,” he gasped.

“What else?” Gresham asked, pressing the hot muzzle against Muller’s right elbow.

“Macedonia – part in Serbia and part in Greece; it will all be split between Austria and Bulgaria. That is everything – I swear it,” groaned the German.

“And when does the invasion of Serbia begin?” asked Gresham.

Muller spit at Gresham and laughed: “Next week.”

Wilkins bound up Muller’s shattered elbow and shoulder in strips of bloody bed sheets and the German was dragged through the dark city streets to the home of the Chief of the Athens Gendarmerie Vasilakos. Wilkins pounded on the door. A portly, older Greek man answered the door in an old, soiled robe and bare feet. His wild grey hair suggested he had been fast asleep.

“Αυτό είναι κατάσκοπος για τη Γερμανία. Έχει ζωτική σημασία πληροφορίες για τον πρωθυπουργό,” Wilkins told him.

Vasilakos eyed the two British officers and the bleeding German man between them, and nervously ushered them into his kitchen. Wilkins told how he and Gresham had captured the German spy, and, more importantly, what the spy knew about the treaty and imminent invasion of Serbia. Vasilakos was clearly worried and upset, but he was finally convinced to run upstairs to dress and to fetch Prime Minister Venizelos to his home to hear from the German directly.

Gresham found a bottle of cheap Greek wine in the small dirty kitchen and poured a glass for himself and one for Muller. Then he went to the sink to wash the blood from his hands. He and Wilkins fed Muller wine through the night to keep him sedated and talkative. Near dawn, the back door opened, and Vasilakos at last returned, followed by an older man in a neat brown wool suit, the tails of his crisp white shirt hanging out and no necktie. His face was lined, but his pointed grey beard and mustache were elegant and neatly trimmed. He took his wire rim spectacles from

his eyes and wiped them on the tail of his shirt. He looked at Gresham and Wilkins, and then looked grimly at Muller lying on the floor.

“Who are you men?” he demanded to know.

“Our names are not important,” said Gresham. “We are British officers, as you can see. We discovered that this man is an undeclared agent of the German government, a spy in your country. We have questioned him, and have learned terrible news which we knew must be brought to your attention immediately. We have brought him to the Gendarmes so that your government can deal with him as you see fit.”

The Prime Minister sat down on a stool by the door and scowled.

He spoke to Vasilakos in whispers for a few moments as Gresham and Wilkins looked on. The Prime Minister became angry and told Vasilakos to wait outside.

“This man is well known to us,” he said at last to Gresham and Wilkins. “But we did not know he would have such information. Please tell me exactly what he told you.”

Gresham knelt by Muller’s side and propped him into a seating position, lightly grasping (and squeezing) the man’s shattered elbow. “Muller, when did Germany and Bulgaria sign their treaty?”

“September 23rd,” he said.

“When does the invasion of Serbia begin?”

“October 7th.”

“What will Bulgaria gain for its allegiance to Germany?”

“Half of Serbia and Macedonia.”

The Prime Minister gasped and stood. “Germany has promised parts of Macedonia to Bulgaria? What parts?!” he demanded.

“Eastern Macedonia and most of the Central Macedonia.”

“Kavala?”

“Yes.”

“Vodena?”

“Yes.”

“This is outrageous! How can this have been done without the King’s knowledge?” said the Prime Minister with disgust.

“King Constantine knows the terms, *mein Herr*. Germany has promised Greece that the rest of your country will remain unmolested.”

“Who is Germany to make such promises?! I see the King’s perfidy all too clearly. He has sold off the most fertile parts of Greece to guarantee its security. There would be revolution if this news was made public.”

“Your Excellency,” said Wilkins, “As you know, British and French troops have already embarked for Salonika to come to the aid of Serbia. Will they be allowed to disembark in your homeland?”

Venizelos looked up at Wilkins, and his eyes narrowed. “I see. If you wish to know my response, return here this evening.” He turned and stepped out the back door where the Gendarmes were waiting to escort the Prime Minister back to his home.

Wilkins turned to Chief of the Gendarmerie and pointed at Muller. “*Θέλετε τον?*” he asked.

The police chief shook his head and brushed his hand away.

“We’ll take him with us,” Wilkins said to Gresham.

They picked up Muller, who by now was deeply asleep, and carried him out the back door and down the alleyway.

“What do we do with him,” Wilkins asked.

“I’ve made arrangements,” said Gresham. “I will need to take ship to Salonika today. You must meet with Vasilakos tonight and follow me to Salonika tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

“I’ll take Muller; you go back to the hotel and have a big breakfast where everyone can see you.”

Gresham slapped the German to wake him and got him onto his feet.

“I’ll take you home now, Ernst; you’ve been very helpful.”

Muller grunted, half asleep, half drunk.

Gresham looked at Wilkins. “Go now,” he told him with a grim smile.

Wilkins walked briskly back to the street as Gresham dragged Muller down the alleyway.