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## **A CLUBFOOT OMNIBUS**

# THE GOLD COMFIT BOX

BY

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

H&S  
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The Publishers wish to express their thanks to Messrs. Herbert Jenkins, Ltd., who have very kindly given their permission for *The Man with the Clubfoot* and *The Return of Clubfoot* to be reprinted in this Omnibus.

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## PREFACE

Mr. Dooley remarks in the course of one of his conversations with his friend Hinnessy that news is sin and sin news and that you can write all the news in a convent on the back of a postage stamp. The sage was merely expressing in his own way the discouraging but inescapable truth that evil makes livelier reading than good for the simple reason that the blameless life is static while ill-doing implies action. If as the Good Book tells us, the way of the transgressor is hard, for the purposes of fiction especially sensational fiction, it is incomparably better value than the way of the just. The descent to Avernus, from the reader's point of view, is considerably easier going than the primrose path.

Where authors congregate in the Elysian Fields it is no doubt a source of gratification to the late Dean Farrar to know that generations of schoolboys continue to devour *Eric or Little by Little*. I am afraid however, that the continued

popularity of the good Dean's masterpiece reposes more upon the tribulations of the well-intentioned but unfortunate hero, and in particular, the fiendish machinations of Barker the bully, than the elevating sentiments of worthy Mr. Rose. The fact is that in fiction stained-glass heroes have a habit of staying put in their windows: it is the bad boys, the men of flesh and blood, that come to life—d'Artagnan and Tom Jones, Gil Blas, Figaro and Hajji Baba.

Particularly the villains—those, at least, of the more plausible variety—linger in the memory. We may not recall the intricate plot of *The Woman in White* but who can forget Count Fosco, with his light tenor voice and his canaries? Still the mere names of Fagin, Long John Silver, Dr. Nikola and Count Dracula send long shivers chasing down our spines, however the exploits in which they figure be blurred in the mind.

I wrote a book about a villain once—his name was The Man with the Clubfoot—and it changed my whole career. I think it was fated. Desperate characters were ever my meat. At a tender age, my mother used to tell me, she discovered her sweet little boy directing his sisters in a childish game of his imagining representing the police (with handkerchiefs realistically tied over their noses) exhuming the surplus wives whom the bigamous Mr. Deeming had interred under the kitchen floor.

When my father took me as a schoolboy to the Adelphi melodramas my delight was not the breezy and super-heroic Mr. Terriss but the villainous Mr. Abingdon, with his black moustache, nonchalant air and "faultless" evening dress. I remember thinking, when we studied "Hamlet" at school, that Shakespeare would have heightened the dramatic effect of the play by giving us more of the King, so gorgeously profligate, so resourcefully murder-minded. I always felt that Conan Doyle's Moriarty is no more than a rat in the arras—Sherlock Holmes could only have gained in stature had the author bestowed on the shadowy figure of the impresario of crime some of the tender care he lavished upon the delineation of the harmless but necessary Watson.

When, in the midst of the World War, the spirit moved me to try my hand at writing a "thriller," one of the first conclusions I arrived at was that the surest and subtlest way to build up the hero's character was by creating a reasonably plausible villain. My hero was to be a quiet Englishman of the regular officer type—it seemed obvious to me that, the more ruthless his opponent could be made to appear, the more effective the hero's nonchalance and resolute abstention from heroics. The merit of the secret service setting with the Great War as a background was that in this field, as I knew from a fairly intimate acquaintance with the subject, there was absolutely no limit to the perilous situations to be contrived. Unconsciously, perhaps, *The Man With the Clubfoot* expressed the sense of bewilderment with which we all discovered that in war anything can happen—and frequently does.

A novel resembles a dream in being a thing of shreds and patches, a welter of impressions consciously or subconsciously absorbed. Actually my tale became for me an outlet of escape from the pent-up emotions of the battlefield, for I wrote it when convalescing from wounds received on the Somme. One might say that the shell which blew me sky-high and temporarily put an end to my military activities blew me into fiction, for, before joining up with the Irish Guards, I had spent all my working life in Fleet Street. I was propelled aloft, that sunny September afternoon, an experienced newspaper man and came down a budding novelist.

*The Man With the Clubfoot* embodies, as I discern in retrospect, some of the "battle dreams," that familiar symptom of shell concussion, which haunted my convalescence. The Somme was probably the greatest battle the world has ever seen: the carnage had no parallel in the annals of war: we ate and slept and fought among piles of corpses. The Guards Division attacked twice in ten days and I took part in both attacks. In the first I was knocked flat three times by shell-bursts but escaped injury: I had one orderly wounded and another killed at my side: I received a bullet through the heel of my boot and a second through the strap of my field glasses, but emerged unscathed as one of the two or three surviving officers of my battalion, to go over the top again in ten days' time.

Battle dreams are horrible. I had visions of Hindenburg, as gigantic as his wooden image reared in Berlin for patriots to knock nails into on behalf of war charities, striding at me over mountains of dead: I would fancy myself alone in a trench with walls a hundred feet high and raked with monster shells. But my most frequent nightmare, continually recurring, was to find myself in war-time Germany without papers of any kind and the whole of the secret police on my track.

When the time came for me to leave hospital and undergo three months' convalescence, I faced the world in a

miserable and terrified frame of mind. It was then that a gracious Royal lady came to my aid. Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll, who was a patroness of the Empire Hospital, Vincent Square, where I was a patient, offered me the use of Rhu Lodge, on her Rosneath estate in Dumbartonshire. In this charming retreat, lapped by the waters of the Gare Loch, I found peace. Violent exercise or any form of excitement was forbidden me. But after a crowded life as newspaper man and war correspondent I could not remain inactive. So, to occupy my mind, I resolved to write a "thriller."

Before the war I spent five years in Berlin as a newspaper correspondent. They were years when Anglo-German rivalry reached its most acute phase and a certain type of German was at little pains to conceal his true sentiments for Britain and the British. Once, in the press canteen of the Reichstag, an obscure German journalist, representative of a pan-German and, consequently, violently anti-British newspaper, tried to pick a quarrel with me. The incident was without importance, but I never forgot the berserk rage into which this cantankerous fellow worked himself. His blazing eyes, his screaming voice, his large paunch shaking with ire, came back to me when the character of Grundt, the master spy, was taking shape in my mind.

The clubfoot was an added touch. It seemed to me sound psychology to ally physical deformity with a warped mind, as Hugo did with Quasimodo and Dickens with Quilp: moreover, ever since I can remember, the particular form of disability associated with a monstrous boot has instinctively repelled me. For the rest, Dr. Grundt's personality is drawn from no one person but is an amalgam of the many different types of Prussian functionary with which I came in contact during my years in Germany under the Empire.

Although the reader may not appreciate it, actually a good deal of first-hand observation of German Court life has gone into the delineation of Dr. Adolf Grundt. That rather pathetic figure, William II, was absolute monarch and Supreme War Lord but largely for window-dressing purposes—in fact he was the tool of the Camarilla, the inner circle at Court. Wherever you have an autocracy, you find irresponsible advisers who, by a judicious admixture of flattery and wire-pulling, exert even greater influence over the march of events than the despot. At the height of the ex-Kaiser's reign, for instance, the most influential personage of the State, more powerful, even, than the Imperial Chancellor, was the head of the Emperor's Civil Cabinet, because he had the immediate ear of the sovereign. If William II did not have a personal secret service apart from the political police, he might well have had one. As things were in the entourage of the monarch, if Grundt did not exist, he should have been invented, as Voltaire said of God.

For myself, I set out to create a villain but must admit to having acquired a sneaking regard for the Herr Doktor in the process. He is ruthless, but he has plenty of courage: he can be diplomatic on occasion, but is full of character; and he has (or I like to consider that he has) a sense of humour. I am glad to know that many of my readers do not consider him a hundred per cent. rascal, but speak of him indulgently, nay, even affectionately, as "old Clubfoot."

Let me hope that, renewing acquaintance with him in this Omnibus Edition, they will find that their feelings for him have stood the test of time.

VALENTINE WILLIAMS  
Estoril, Portugal,  
*March*, 1936.

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# THE GOLD COMFIT BOX

*It must be getting on for five years since I last had tidings of the redoubtable Dr. Grundt, once known and feared in the world of international espionage (by reason of a physical deformity) as "The Man With the Clubfoot." He was then said to be living on a small property he owned in Southern Germany, devoting himself, as I have heard, to the breeding of cats, an animal for which he displayed a peculiar predilection.*

*"How inexhaustible and alluring a study the cat!" I recollect his saying to me on the occasion of one of our most thrilling encounters—the scene was the Villa Waldesruh' at Kiel and the circumstances of our meeting will be found fully set forth in these pages. "How friendless, how aloof, how sublimely egoistic and unfathomable! What an example to all who follow our thankless yet fascinating profession!"*

*And he broke into one of those peals of strident laughter which still, all these years after, will sometimes go ringing through my dreams.*

*He was always a man of mystery, was "der Stelze" (The Lamé One), as he was often catted in the inner circles of government in Imperial Germany. In the days before the war he was known by name and repute only to the chosen few of us in the British Secret Service, and, of these, I was the only one who, up to the outbreak of hostilities, had come into direct contact with that ruthless and terrifying cripple. For Grundt was not of Germany's official espionage services, neither of Nicolai's branch of the Great General Staff, nor yet of von Boy-Ed's Admiralty Intelligence.*

*He was supposedly attached to Section Seven of the Berlin Police Presidency (the Political Police). In reality, however, he was head of the personal secret service of the Emperor and derived his power and authority from none other than the Supreme War Lord himself. So far as I have been able to discover, he possessed no official credentials and there is no mention of his name in the innumerable publications dealing with the Kaiser and his Court, even in the notorious Bülow Memoirs. Grundt worked in the dark, and German officialdom trembled before him—the bureaucrat knows, none better, that the servant of the autocrat is often more powerful than the autocrat himself. It fell to my lot to discover that, if the shadow of old Clubfoot (as we were wont to call him among ourselves) fell across our path, it was a fight to a finish.*

*I shall be taking you back into the years before the war with these memories of mine. Time has healed the old wounds now and the foes of yesterday are the friends of to-day. But do not run away with the idea that even at the worst periods of Anglo-German tension prior to the fateful 4th of August, there was any particular animus between the British and the German secret service. Not at any rate where the regular personnel was concerned. As far as our outfit went, our job was to find out as much as possible about Germany's warlike preparedness and prevent the Germans from discovering what we were up to; and our future enemies were at the same game.*

*This task we both performed in a business-like, almost comradely fashion, something after the fashion of rival newspaper men or commercial travellers who, after doing their best to cut each other's throats all day, settle down for a friendly drink together in the evening. The trouble sprang from the subordinate agents both sides were obliged to employ—the cosmopolitan rabble of cashiered officers, unfrocked clergy and other black sheep, of ex-criminals, sharpers and touts of both sexes who, seeking only their own ends, deserved no quarter and frequently received none. I do not include Dr. Grundt in this category, but the fact remains that, in contrast with the regular Intelligence officers in his country and mine, he was an independent agent, that is to say, he was responsible to no established authority. I mention this because it explains the singular ruthlessness of the constant war of brains between him and us.*

*Well, I am out of the game now. Twenty years in the British Army and ten of them in the Secret Service—it was a good innings while it lasted. But the old Europe is dead and even the Europe reborn in the smoke and flame of war seems fantastically far removed from the New World where I have made my home. From the mountain shack where I*

*write I look back over the dead years and wonder whether the young blade Clavering who led the hunt for poor Charles Forrest's gold comfit box is the same person as the staid, grizzled old fellow broken in the wars who has sat down to write this story.*

*The evening stillness rests like a benediction upon the lake. The air is scented with sylvan odours of balsam and spruce. A chipmunk has stolen from his hole under the veranda and is surveying me with his devil's face and beady eyes. At the water's edge the friendly little mink which lives in the bank sits on a flat rock, arching its long and graceful neck to sniff the evening air. A bass leaps in the lake, leaving an ever widening circle, reminding me that the hour is propitious for casting a line before supper.*

*But I linger at my typewriter, gazing down the vistas of my memory, as dim and crowded with figures as are the woods with their hemlock and spruce, maple and white oak, that girdle my mountain retreat about. As the blue shadows deepen on the Adirondack crests, I forget the old stiffness in my shoulder where the barrage caught me at Bourlon Wood and stretch forth my hands towards the graceful figure, that, when evening descends, often steps out of the past to bear me company—Madeleine with smile slow and wistful and eyes that have the same liquid untamed regard as the woodland creatures about me.*

*She fades and in her wake comes hobbling a vast and forbidding shape, phantom returned from that dead Europe that plunged the world into war. So real and tangible is the visitant that, with but a little imagination, I can hear the thump of a monstrous boot upon the veranda and turning, see the ape-like form of the terrible Dr. Grundt glowering at me from behind my chair.*

*I can neither forgive nor forget. But ... Schwamm daruber! The arms are laid down to-day, Herr Doktor. We have let the dead bury the dead, your country and mine. If you should chance to read this story you will learn for the first time the secret of Charles Forrest's gold box and how close you were to dealing the British Secret Service a paralysing and wellnigh irreparable blow. Now that time has dulled the edge of the old bitterness I will grant that you were a stout fighter and I suppose you strove to do your duty as you saw it, even as I strove to do mine.*

*And so, old Clubfoot, from the other end of the world I lower my sword to you, if not in salute, at least in token of peace. Cheerio, or, as they say in your beloved Berlin, Mahlzeit!*

*Philip Clavering.*

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### London calling

The strangest chapter of adventures in my career in the British Secret Service opened on a vile, black night of storm and rain, the year before the war.

Spring was late and March went roaring out of Brussels, according to the old saw, with all the fury of the noble beast that is Brabant's national emblem. A deluge of icy needles, driven by a wind that blew in gusts of tempest violence, stung my face as I emerged from the lighted warmth of the Café des Trois Etoiles to struggle the short distance back to my hotel. It was what the world was to learn to think of as typical Flanders weather.

The street was a funnel of wind and water and reverberant with the noises of the gale. Head down, the collar of my raincoat turned up, I battled my way along, the rain drumming upon glass, windows rattling, awnings flapping, and ever and again a loud crash as a bill-board or ash-bin was blown over. It was half past one by the clock as I crossed the Place. I had been spending the evening with Stockvis, who was at that time looking after things for us at Antwerp, and I thought the fellow would never have let me go to bed. I had been busy ever since my arrival from London on the previous afternoon and I had a long report to draw up before turning in. The prospect of a pipe and a nightcap from my

flask in the snug quiet of my bedroom as I went over my notes was very inviting as, leaving the gale behind me, I pushed through the rotating door of the hotel.

In the lobby Albert, the night porter, said as he produced my key, "They telephoned for Monsieur from London to-night...."

I glanced at him, puzzled. "From London, Albert?" I could not think of anyone in London who would telephone me except the office. But Sunday, as a rule, was a quiet day at headquarters: besides, what with the Treasury perpetually slashing at the Secret Funds, the Chief was rarely lavish in the matter of long distance calls. It was something important, evidently.

The man nodded. "Twice already. They will ring up again...."

Curiouser and curiouser. I felt a little stirring of excitement. "At what time did they call up?" I asked.

Albert referred to his book. "At one eight, the first time, and again not five minutes ago...."

"I'm not going to bed yet," I said. "Don't let there be any mistake about it when they telephone again...."

"Very good, Monsieur Dunlop...."

"A terrible night," I remarked, picking up my key.

"Monsieur may well say that. Especially for all those unfortunate people...."

"What people?"

"Monsieur hasn't heard then?"

"About what?"

"About the railway accident...."

"What railway accident?"

"The Berlin-Paris express was wrecked to-night...."

I whistled. "When did this happen?"

"Around midnight. It was derailed near Charleroi...."

"And many people were killed, you say?"

The porter spread out his hands. "*Dame*, it would seem so. The first I heard of it was from your friend in London. It had just come over the news tape...."

I nodded. It was the office that had called me, then—we had a news ticker installed there.

"I told your friend I had no particulars. But I rang up the *Petit Bleu*. They said that nearly all the land lines to Charleroi are down owing to the gale and that only a single wire to the Ministry is working. But from what the lady told me, I fear the death-roll must be considerable. She said that two coaches turned over and she heard people screaming...."

"What lady are you talking about?"

Albert lowered his voice impressively. "A survivor, Monsieur Dunlop. She arrived about ten minutes ago and engaged a room. Her manner was so agitated that I asked her if she was ill and she told me what had happened. The coach she was in was thrown over, but she managed to scramble out unhurt. Running into the village she found a car and



made the man drive her straight into Brussels...." He tapped his forehead. "Unhinged, savez-vous? She made me promise not to mention her arrival to anyone, said she didn't want to be bothered with reporters. So, if Monsieur would keep this to himself...."

"Of course," I said. "Poor creature! What a shocking experience! There's nothing one can do, I suppose?"

"I offered to call a doctor to Madame, but she refused. She said she was going to bed. By the way, Monsieur's friend from London asked me if we had any news of the accident. I told him just what I've told you...."

"Thanks, Albert," I said. "Well, put him through promptly when he comes on again...."

I had scarcely got to my room, draped my dripping raincoat across the bath-tub and kicked off my wet shoes, than the telephone whirred. "*Je vous dites,*" a very English voice spoke in execrable French into my ear, "*je veux parler avec Mossoo Dunlop....*"

I felt a sudden thrill. It was the Chief himself. This meant business. For six months now, I had been running the show in Brussels and I was fair sick of it. Brussels may be the "little Paris," but its delights soon pall. Every blessed Saturday morning, for six mortal months in succession, I had caught the Ostend boat train from Charing Cross, spent the rest of Saturday and the whole of Sunday in Brussels, closeted with the prime collection of cosmopolitan riff-raff constituting our intelligence rank-and-file in Belgium and Holland, and returned to London on the Monday, consigning to the devil the secret service and all its works that came between a fellow and his week-end parties. Little piffling reports—for the most part, a choice blend of blatherskyte, exaggeration and sheer mendacity—to be sifted, rewards parsimoniously doled out—a louis here, a hundred franc note there—and less excitement than a curate shall find on a seven-day round trip to Lovely Lucerne. I was absolutely fed up. And to think, I would tell myself indignantly, that I had temporarily shed my horse-gunner's shell-jacket for this dreary chore!

But here was the Chief telephoning me from London for the third time, and at twelve bob a call. On a Sunday night, too, when, as a general thing, he was enjoying his Sabbath repose on the shores of his beloved Solent. That authoritative, deep-chested voice of his, so well-remembered, brought him vividly before my eyes—I could almost see before me that big, grizzled head, those bright, blue eyes that could twinkle so humorously yet, on occasion, become as merciless as the asp's, that clean-cut, uncompromising mouth and crag-like jaw. "Here I am, sir," I said.

"Is that you, Clavering?" The stern voice was edged with anxiety.

"Yes, sir..."

\* \* \* \* \*

I had better explain, before I go any further that "Dunlop" was what you might call an "accommodation" name at head quarters. All of us, even the old man himself, were "Dunlop" at odd times. It was convenient to have an alias in dealing with the funnies of international espionage who had to be interviewed as part of the day's work. Thus, though my real name is Philip Clavering, at the week-end I regularly became James Dunlop, a London business man with interests in Belgium, and business cards, identification papers, and a most important-looking leather portfolio to support my claim, all Bristol and shipshape fashion, to quote a favourite expression of the Chief's.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Clavering," said the skipper, "you've heard about the train smash?"

"Yes, sir. Just now...."

"Heard of any English casualties?"

"No, sir. Why?"

"Charles Forrest was aboard that train...."

"I say!" Forrest was one of our star turns.

"We've only had the bare announcement here. What I want to do is to ascertain as soon as possible whether Forrest is all right. If you can't find out in Brussels, get a car and drive over to the wreck—if it's near Charleroi you ought to do it in an hour or so. I hope to God that Forrest has escaped, but what I'm concerned with at present is that box of his. You know it?"

I laughed. "That snuff-box or whatever it is he carries?"

"That's it. If he's injured and has had to go to hospital, get that box at all costs. If he's among the killed, don't leave the scene of the wreck until you've found the body and recovered the box or definitely established that it has been destroyed. Understand?"

"Yes, sir....."

"Then get on with it. And, hark'ee, Clavering, this matter is absolutely vital. 'Phone or wire me the moment you have any news!"

"Very good, sir!"

I hung up, but only long enough for the line to be disconnected. Then, as in my experience newspapers are usually two or three jumps ahead of official sources with the news, I followed Albert's example and rang the *Petit Bleu*. At the newspaper they were polite but not helpful. About a dozen dead and injured had been extracted from the wreck, but they had no names as yet. I called the railway station and the ministry of Railways with no better result.

There was nothing for it—it would have to be a car. As I grabbed my wet hat and raincoat and slipped my whisky flask into my pocket, I heard the wind go howling round the house—a nice trip I had let myself in for. And supposing, when I reached the wreck, I found that old Charles was all right, I would have had a cold and miserable journey for nothing.

Suddenly I remembered the woman of whom the night porter had spoken. She had been on the train; there must have been other survivors like herself who had scrambled clear. It was just possible that she might have noticed Forrest, if he had been one of these. The question was worth putting to her. I picked up the telephone again and asked for the night porter.

"What was the name of the lady who escaped from the train wreck and took a room here to-night?"

It was, Albert said, a certain Madame Staffer—at least, that is what it sounded like.

"What's the number of her room?"

Madame had suite 123/124, the same floor as monsieur. "She said she was going to bed," Albert reminded me.

"That's all right," I told him. "And listen, Albert, I shall probably have to drive out to the scene of the wreck. Can you get me a car, a fast car, and have it standing by, in case I need it?"

Nothing ever defeats a Continental hotel porter. If I had asked for an elephant, I have no doubt Albert's affirmative would have been equally swift and imperturbable. I hung up and collected my hat and coat again. I was reluctant to disturb the lady, after the terrible experience she had undergone. But it seemed to me I had no choice—the matter was urgent. I went out into the corridor and walked along until I came to 123/124. A light shone from under the door.

That settles it. I knocked softly. There was no reply. I knocked again. Silence. I tried the handle and found, unexpectedly, that the door was not locked. I was looking into a small entry hall with a door at the end revealing a glimpse of the sitting-room where a light burned dimly. I advanced to the sitting-room, rapped on the open door. I could see that the room was empty but that the light was on in the bedroom leading off it.

A woman's voice, pleasant and cultured, cried, "*Entrez!*" and as I crossed the sitting-room, called softly in German, "*Sind Sie es, Herr Doktor?*"

I took off my hat and looked in at the bedroom door.

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### The survivor

The woman was in bed, propped up among the pillows. She wore a brilliant Chinese coat embroidered in red and blue and green, and a long lock of hair, jet-black and lustrous in a band of light that fell from the bedside lamp, hung down over one shoulder. In the brief instant during which she stared at me in stupefaction I had time to observe that she was young and remarkably handsome—her eyes, in particular, large and black-fringed, were magnificent.

At the sight of me she sat up abruptly, drawing the front of her gay coat together. "*Qu'est-ce que vous voulez, monsieur?*" she demanded coldly.

I bowed and in my best French said, "Madame, I regret profoundly the necessity which compels me to present myself to you unannounced, but I understand that you were a passenger in the Berlin-Paris train which was wrecked to-night...."

"Well?" She continued to eye me askance.

"Permit me to introduce myself," I went on, with another bow. "My name is Dunlop and I come from London. A friend of mine was on that train and I wished to ask you if, by any chance..."

"I'm afraid I can be of no assistance to you," she replied quickly. "You see, I didn't wait. When the crash came, I seemed to lose consciousness and the next thing I knew I was lying on the ground in the dark with people crying out all around me. The glass of the window was broken and I crawled out, and then—and then—I seemed to find myself in a car. The driver says I stopped him in the village and told him to drive me to Brussels but I myself have no recollection of it..." She looked at me nervously. "In the circumstances, therefore, I'm afraid I cannot relieve your anxiety about your friend...."

"I thought you might have noticed other passengers who escaped like yourself," I put in. "My friend's an Englishman, a small, dark man, clean-shaven and very square-shouldered..."

"I tell you I remember nothing," she protested plaintively. "I've had a grave shock. My nerves are on edge. I want to rest. Please go away...."

"But, Madame," I urged suavely, "you were surely not the only person to leave the wreck alive? Won't you try and think whether you saw anyone answering to my friend's description? After the appalling ordeal you've been through, I wouldn't insist, only the matter is of the gravest importance...."

Her agitation was growing. Her splendid eyes were shadowed with some unnameable fear. She seemed on the verge of an outbreak of hysteria. "For the last time I tell you I remember nothing," she cried. Then her voice broke. "By what right do you come here to torture me? I want to be quiet, do you understand? to be quiet. Go away! Go away!" Her tone rose shrilly.

It was obvious to me that I should get nothing out of this hysterical woman. But I lingered on. "I was hoping you'd be able to save me a long, cold journey in the rain," said I, fiddling with my hat. "You see, it's essential that I should find out immediately whether my friend escaped. You didn't notice him on the train, I suppose?"

"No, I tell you, no," she vociferated. "I never saw your friend...."

"He joined the train at Berlin," I explained. "His name's Forrest, Charles Forrest...."

And then a very terrible and embarrassing thing happened. Without the slightest warning, she gave a little, moaning cry, her head drooped to one side and she fainted clean away.

I was appalled. This was what had come of my ill-timed persistence. I sprang to the bed and took one of her hands that lay outside the coverlet—it was small and finely-wrought and cold as ice. "Madame, Madame," I cried, raising up her head. But she lay there like the dead.

In desperation I gazed about me. There was no water within sight and she rested a dead weight in my arms, her dark head pillowed against my tweed shoulder. As I looked at her I could not forbear remarking the exquisite shape of her face, the fineness of the skin, the sensitiveness of the charming rather pouting mouth.

Then I remembered the flask in my pocket. I drew it out, unscrewed it and tried to force a little of the whisky between her lips. But her teeth were tightly clenched and the spirit trickled down on her coat. She never stirred out of her death-like swoon.

I should have to summon a doctor. As gently as I could I laid her head down on the pillow and made for the door. I did not wait for the lift but raced down the three flights to the hotel lobby. The porter was at his desk talking to a man dressed for the street who, by the suitcase at his feet, seemed to be a new arrival.

"Excuse me," I said to the stranger and drew the porter aside. "The woman in 123 and 4, she's fainted," I told him hurriedly. "You've got to get a doctor to her quick!"

The porter's glance was suspicious. "How does Monsieur know this?"

"It doesn't matter how I know it," I retorted sharply. "Is there a doctor in this hotel?"

"For that," said Albert, turning in the direction of the new arrival, "this gentleman is a doctor and he's a friend of Madame!"

On this the stranger hobbled forward. As he moved I perceived that he was lame. One of his feet was encased in a clumsy surgical boot and he leaned heavily on a crutch-handled stick. He was wearing a hard felt hat and an ample black overcoat.

At the sight of me he doffed his hat, disclosing a bony, square head shaved to the scalp at the sides and, as to the top, a mass of iron-grey bristles. "Dr. Grundt!" he introduced himself in a thick guttural voice, bowing stiffly.

"This gentleman says the lady the Herr Doctor was asking for has fainted," the porter explained, dropping into German.

"So?" said the other, fixing me with a hard, glittering eye.

"A friend of mine is on that train that was wrecked to-night," I put in hastily, "and, seeing that this lady is a survivor, I thought she might have news of him. Unfortunately, she's in a highly hysterical condition and I fear my questions upset her...." Then the woman's question, as I had entered the suite, flashed into my mind. "Is the lady expecting you?" I asked the lame man.

I had gone instinctively into German which, I should perhaps explain, I speak as fluently as English—one of the main reasons for the loan of my services from the Regular Army to the Secret Service in the difficult period of Anglo-German relations before the war.

The German bowed. "The gracious lady is an old friend of mine." He turned to the porter. "Since there is no further objection to my seeing her," he said in his hard, metallic voice, "I propose to go upstairs."

Albert insisted on accompanying us, with a certain prim air as though he thought a chaperon was required, and the three of us moved in a body to the lift. As we went up I found my eyes unconsciously drawn to my German companion. In the months that stood before I was to have many opportunities of studying the Man with the Clubfoot, as we used to call him, but I have never forgotten my first sight of him on that night in Brussels.

He was a type to arrest attention in any assembly, less by reason of his appearance, which was striking enough, than the extraordinary air of authority, of command he radiated. There was a vitality, a suggestion of reserve power, about him that had something of the lion or the tiger or, better still, of one of the greater apes about it. His bulk was enormous, the span of his shoulders so terrific that it quite dwarfed his height, with arms so long that, when he stood erect, they hung down on either side like any orang-outang's.

This simian suggestion was strengthened by his really disgusting hirsuteness. His eyebrows, protuberances as bony and projecting as a gorilla's, were overhung with shaggy tufts; there were pads of hair upon his cheek-bones, bristles at the nostrils and growing out of the large, pointed ears; a ridge of hard, iron-grey stubble under the squat, broad nose, and a thatch of dark down on the backs of the enormous, spade-like hands.

But the most singular thing about the stranger was the unbridled ferocity of his manner. He was obviously a man of unusual intellect, with a big head which he carried thrust forward at an angle, so alert, so suspicious and challenging that I could think only of some giant ape crashing its way through the jungle. Moreover, a light smouldered in his eyes, which were small and glittering and, let me admit at once, indubitably courageous, that hinted at bursts of uncontrollable fury. His lips were bulbous, and when smiling disclosed a row of yellow, fang-like teeth; but for the most part they were set in a hard, grim line bespeaking an arrogant and unconcealed contempt for his fellow-men.

By common consent Albert and I remained in the sitting-room while Dr. Grundt went to the bedroom door, which I had left ajar, and rapped. There was no answer and he went inside. In a moment he was back. "Hot-water bags," he ordered addressing the porter.

"Sofort, Herr Doktor," Albert replied obediently, and hurried away. Grundt was eyeing me in his furtive way. "We need not detain you," he remarked.

"How is she?" I asked.

"She's come out of her faint, but her circulation is very low," he replied. "Gott, a woman's nerves..."

"Since the lady is in such good hands," I said, "I think I'll leave you..."

I was interrupted by a faint cry from the bedroom. "*Qui est la?*" I heard.

Without another word Grundt turned and swiftly went back to the bedroom, while I made my way to the lift.

## 88

### The Gold Box

The accident had taken place near a station called Ablesse, Albert had informed me—a village in the Charleroi coal-mining area. There was no one in the lobby when I descended, so I sent the elevator boy to find the porter, and in the meantime sought to locate Ablesse on the large railway map hanging behind the reception desk. Measured on the map, as the crow flies, it was about sixty kilometres from Brussels, in the valley of the Sambre. Then Albert bustled up. The car was at the door.

I found a large open Minerva awaiting me. It was one of the line of automobiles that habitually stood before the

hotel for the benefit of hotel guests who wanted something more luxurious and faster than a mere taxi for excursions to the field of Waterloo, Laeken and similar places of interest. Gérard, its chauffeur-proprietor, had driven me before; his cheerful, red face grinned me a welcome from under the streaming sou'wester. I told him our destination and promised him a hundred-franc tip if we made it in the hour—no mean achievement, as cars were in those days, and making allowances for the execrable *pavé* of most Belgian roads of the period.

"One will see," Gérard remarked succinctly—he was a man of few words—and I slipped into the driving-seat at his side. It was ten minutes to three and raining and blowing harder than ever. Brussels was a vista of shining asphalt, blurred lights and a hundred thousand knives dancing on the deserted pavements. The trams had stopped running and there was little traffic about, so that we slid through the sleeping city at a good clip. But long before we were clear of the octroi, I had given myself up to my thoughts and lost all count of my surroundings.

I was thinking about Charles Forrest and his box. Old Charles's box was known to all of us in that small group of Intelligence officers whom the Chief liked to call his "star turns." I had spoken of it as a snuff-box, but, properly speaking, it was a comfit box; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, persons of quality used to carry sweetmeats—*dragées*, I think they called them—in boxes like these. This one was a delightful specimen of seventeenth century goldsmith's work, elaborately engraved with Amoretti and what not, about the size of a tinder box, that is to say, it measured roughly about four inches by three.

Charles's story was that the box had belonged to a French ancestor of his mother's, a dancer at the Court of Louis XIV, to whom it had been presented by a Venetian nobleman. The dancer's name—Marie Bertesson—was inscribed upon the lid and figured ingeniously in the locking device. The box had no key but between the two names stamped, the one along the upper, the other upon the lower part of the lid, there was the figure of Cupid with bent bow and arrow. The arrow was practical—that is to-day, it was superimposed on the figure and swung on a pivot. To open the box, one turned the barb of the arrow in turn to each letter of the word "M-A-R-I-E," pressing each time upon the little boss upon which it rotated, on which the lid flew up.

Old Charles was immensely proud of his heirloom which, to tell the truth, was a very charming and probably quite valuable piece. He carried it with him everywhere, and I could well believe that he might have taken advantage of its secret locking device to use it as the receptacle of some document of importance; at any rate, it was obvious that some such idea was present in the Chief's mind in giving me orders to recover the box at all costs. Of course, the box was very limited in capacity. At most, it would accommodate two or three sheets of thin paper, folded small. But that was neither here nor there—in this bizarre job of ours fellows have lost their lives over a half-sheet of note-paper.

I had not set eyes on Charles Forrest for months. That's the way things happened in our work; one would see a fellow every day for weeks, and then, hey presto, he would vanish and no questions asked. Sometimes he would never reappear, and by and by the Chief would take from his desk a certain slim volume which was always kept under lock and key, and run a red pencil through one of the names listed there.

A queer fellow, Forrest, not very likeable and hard to understand. I thought about him as the big Minerva went rushing through the night, slithering about on the cobbles and sending the water spraying up from the puddles. He had brought it as far as lieutenant-commander in the Navy, and then at forty-five had gone on half-pay and joined us. I always thought that his rather crabbed temperament had more to do with his retirement from service with the Fleet than his efficiency as a naval officer, for he was energetic and highly talented, and could always be relied on to finish, and usually finish successfully any job he undertook. He had made a special study of the North Sea and the Baltic—he had spent many leaves cruising those waters alone in a small yawl he owned—and I did not doubt that he was now returning from some such mission. You will remember that with the breakdown of all attempts to secure a "naval holiday" between Great Britain and Germany in the years immediately preceding the War, the Anglo-German naval situation became permanently and perilously acute.

It was a glare in the sky ahead that first told me we were nearing our destination. My first impression was that the wreck was in flames, but we soon discovered that the reflection came from naphthalene flares rigged up at intervals along the permanent way. We drew up at a level crossing where already at least a dozen automobiles were parked. Gérard's stubby finger prodded the luminous dial of the dashboard clock. The hands pointed to twenty minutes to four. His grin was triumphant. "Good work, *mon vieux*," I told him. "Wait for me here. I may be some time." And I hauled my

stiff, cold limbs out of the driving-seat.

Two hundred yards along the metals the guttering light of the flares lit up a towering mass of wreckage. Figures came and went against the lurid background of flames and smoke. It was not hard to see what had happened. A goods train, switched from a parallel track, had run into the express from the side. With the force of the impact the engine of the goods train had clambered on the roof of the rear—the baggage—wagon of the express, flinging the next two coaches clear off the line. These two coaches had plunged down the low embankment and reposed in a tangled, splintered mass of wreckage at the foot. Viewing them, I marvelled at the miraculous escape from death of the little lady at the hotel.

Lights and a long low roof gleaming darkly in the rain were visible beyond the capsized coaches. The murmur of voices, the ring of tools, the hissing of steam reached my ears as I hurried forward. An occasional flash of light followed by a mounting cauliflower of snowy smoke told me that the press photographers had reached the scene before me.

I skirted the wreck looking for someone in authority. Behind the prone coaches the hedge fencing off the railway had been cut away. Twenty paces from the gap was the long low roof I had descried before, sides open to the weather, earthen floor, shed at the end—one doesn't see many of such places any more; it was a rope-walk. Here, where the ropemakers were wont to trudge to and fro spinning their hemp, a line of forms shapeless as sacks were laid out. It was dim in the rope-walk, but light streamed from another building farther away, and through the open door I caught a glimpse of a doctor's white coat.

I was about to pass through the hedge when a gendarme stopped me. I asked to speak to his officer. The man bade me wait, and sent another gendarme in search of the lieutenant. I inquired from the first gendarme whether there were any English among the dead. He gave me a curious look and said I had better ask the officer. There were nine dead and twenty-one injured, he told me in answer to a further question of mine. It was believed that most of the casualties had been removed from the wreck.

A bearded officer, the hood of his mackintosh cape drawn over his uniform cap, now appeared. "*Mon lieutenant*," I said, "an English friend of mine was a passenger on the express and I'm anxious to discover whether he's all right. The name is Forrest—Charles Forrest——"

On that the lieutenant, even as his subordinate before him, seemed to stiffen into attention. "You're a friend of this Monsieur Forrest?" he inquired rather tensely.

A sense of foreboding was growing upon me. "Yes," I replied. "I hope you're not going to tell me that——"

The officer shook his head. "He had no luck, that one," he said. "Please come with me..."

And he led the way through the hedge and across the rope-walk to the adjacent building.

It was the village school converted into a temporary hospital. Acetylene flares; mattresses on desks and floor; bandaged heads and arms; a white-coated group about a table; the strong reek of ether and iodine. With ringing spurs my escort clanked across the schoolhouse to a door in the far wall. This he thrust open and ushered me into a small office, where a man, stripped to the waist, lay on his back on a table.

One glance told me that the man was Charles Forrest; a second that he was dead.

He was not disfigured or mutilated, and I saw no blood. His eyes were wide open and with the unrevealing glance of the dead those sightless orbs stared up at the green-shaded oil lamp hanging from the ceiling. Two men in dark clothes, one on either side of the table, were bending over him; a third man, in surgeon's overalls abundantly splashed with blood, stood apart, nonchalantly filing his nails.

I recognised one of the pair at the table. It was Vandervliet, the Chief of the Belgian Secret Police. I knew those bristling whiskers, that large paunch, of old; but I was very sure that he did not know me.

The gendarmerie officer had drawn him aside and was whispering to him. Now Vandervliet addressed me. He was a fat and frog-like man, with a revolting habit of clearing his throat raucously at frequent intervals. "You are a friend of

Monsieur Forrest? You can identify him?" he demanded with a vaguely suspicious air, and hawked resonantly.

"Certainly," I said.

"What is his profession?"

"He is a retired naval officer——"

"No occupation?"

"He's managing director of a shipping line," I replied, giving old Charles's official cover. He had actually acquired an interest in an unimportant shipping concern—a line of tramp steamers—to account for his frequent visits to the German and Dutch seaports.

"And who are you, monsieur?" The question was peremptory.

"I'm an engineer," I said. "I'm over here from London on business..."

"Your papers, if you please, m'sieu..." The fat man's eye—it was round and protruding, like a gooseberry—held mine. I gave him my business card—James Dunlop, Electrical Engineer, Victoria Street—and passport; passports were rather rarities in those days.

Vandervliet unfolded my passport, glanced over it, then his face changed. Closing the passport, he handed it back to me; then, addressing his aide, the gendarmerie lieutenant and the surgeon, requested in his gruff, asthmatic voice: "Gentlemen, be good enough to leave Monsieur and myself alone!"

The three men clattered out. Vandervliet followed them to the door, and closed it. Then, turning to me, he croaked: "Monsieur Dunlop, permit me to introduce myself. I am Vandervliet, Chief of the Secret Police!"

I bowed and murmured "Monsieur!" wondering what was coming next.

"Your name has been mentioned in certain very secret conversations that have recently taken place between the British military attaché in Brussels and the Chief of our General Staff. I feel justified, therefore, in asking you a certain delicate question. This one here"—his thumb indicated the dead man—"was he, like yourself, of the British Secret Service?"

I hesitated, looking from him to my dead comrade. "Why do you ask me that?"

"Because," the Belgian answered ponderously, "the wreck to-night was no accident. Or rather it was an accident resulting from a criminal interference with the railway signals. Someone tampered with the signal outside Ablesse station and brought the express to a standstill, with the result that a goods train, scheduled to follow it, crashed into it while passing from one set of metals to the other——"

"But I don't understand," I interrupted him. "Why was it necessary to stop the express?"

"In order that the miscreant who had robbed your friend might leave the train..."

I went cold with apprehension. "Robbed?" I faltered.

"If not robbed, *mon cher*, then murdered. That, at least, is certain..." He fumbled in a drawer and, taking something enveloped in cotton wool, held it up to the light. I saw the gleam of the blade—it was a long, slender stiletto. "This unfortunate Forrest," Vandervliet went on, "did not lose his life in the accident, although such was the impression at first. He was stabbed to death with this..." He shook the dagger at me. "When the surgeon examined him, this knife was buried up to the hilt in Forrest's chest. Look here!"

He stepped up to the table with finger pointing. On the dead man's breast, just above the left nipple, I perceived a narrow slit, plugged with a tampon of cotton wool.



**"Mon baiser reste"**

I have always been highly sensitive to atmosphere, especially in the more dramatic moments of my career. Even after all these years, when I think back upon that interview with old Vandervliet in that bare little pitch-pine room, with the corpse of my poor comrade stretched out between us, it is to hear again the loud tattoo of the rain upon the tin roof of the schoolhouse, the gurgle of water in gutter and kennel, the mad buffeting of the wind, and the deep panting of the breakdown locomotive in the cutting outside.

I stared at the portly Belgian aghast, for the moment quite unable to speak.

"He was of your service, *n'est-ce pas?*" he wheezed.

I nodded.

"Was he carrying documents of value?"

I hoisted my shoulders. "I can't say for sure, but it's probable..."

"I thought as much," said the Belgian rather pompously. He cleared his throat and spat into his handkerchief. "He spoke of some box..."

I caught his arm. "You mean, he was alive when they found him? What did he say?"

"He was one of the first to be taken from the wreck. It was the level-crossing keeper who got him out—this man and his son heard the crash and were on the scene within a minute or two. They found Forrest in the rear sleeper fully dressed—he must have lain down to sleep in his clothes..."

"Yes, yes, but what did he say?" The stolid Belgian was not to be hurried.

"A beam had pinned him to the floor," he replied imperturbably. "They thought he was dead but when they lifted him clear and laid him on the grass, he moved and spoke to them in French. He was restless and kept muttering about a box. It was only a minute or two before he died, however—internal hæmorrhage, the doctor says. Old Pierre and his boy left him there to go on with the rescue work—they never noticed the dagger and it was the doctor who discovered it. But by that time, as I say, your poor friend was dead..."

I frowned. "He had a gold box—a sort of *bonbonnière*. Was anything of the sort found on him?"

Vandervliet's head shake was emphatic. "No." He pulled open a drawer. "Here's everything he had in his pockets...."

I went and looked over his shoulder. I saw in a heap a watch and chain, bunch of keys, leather cigar-case, gold cigar-cutter, wallet, some small change—English and German. Vandervliet took out the wallet, opened it. "It was not money or valuables the murderer was after. *Regardez!*" And he showed me three £5 notes tucked away under a flap.

I examined the contents of the wallet myself. Visiting cards, an hotel bill—the Bristol, Berlin—some private letters, a photo or two—nothing of the slightest moment. "What about his luggage?" I questioned. Vandervliet's pudgy finger indicated a shabby suitcase ranged against the wall. "I went through it myself. Only clothes and a few books...." He pitched me over the keys. "And, as far as is known he had no registered luggage—at any rate, he had no receipt on him."

As a matter of form I hunted through the valise, shaking out coats and shorts and underwear. Just as I expected, there was no sign of the box—I knew that old Charles never let it out of his sight. Vandervliet flung me across a grey tweed overcoat and I went through the pockets with the same negative result.

I tossed the coat aside and, putting my hands in my pockets, confronted my companion. "Monsieur Vandervliet," I said, "with your permission I'm going to lay my cards on the table..."

"*Faites, m'sieu,*" he wheezed amiably.

"I was sent here to-night on orders telephoned by my Chief in London to recover that box at all costs. I discern very clearly in this affair the hand of the German counter-espionage..."

"Ah!" the Belgian croaked.

"Obviously, Forrest was shadowed from Berlin. At what time did the accident occur?"

"The train was halted at 12.33. The collision took place three or four minutes later..."

I nodded. "Quite. The plan was to halt the express at an hour when everyone had retired for the night. The murderer, knowing the precise moment at which the train would be stopped, was free to wait until the last second before entering Forrest's compartment to secure the box. I don't suppose Forrest's death was intended: probably, he woke up and the thief killed him to prevent his raising the alarm. Now there's this. This device of stopping a train to enable a criminal to escape isn't new. It has often been employed by train bandits in the States. Only it implies that the man on the train had accomplices in the village to tamper with the signals and afterwards facilitate his escape, probably with a car..."

The fat man leered at me cunningly. "Exactly. And there was a car..."

"Ah!"

"A big grey car, splashed with mud as though it had travelled a long distance. On learning that the signals had been wrongfully set against the express, I immediately despatched the *brigade mobile* to make inquiries in the village. They found a woman who has a cottage just at the back of the school-house here. She was sitting up with a sick child. Glancing out of her window, a few minutes before the express passed, she saw this car on the road alongside the railway hedge, close to where the accident occurred. A man stood beside it as though waiting for someone—she wondered what he was doing there at that time of night. On hearing the crash she stopped to see to the child and slip on her clothes before rushing out. When she reached the road beside the cutting, the car had disappeared..."

"In which case," I said sombrely, "we may whistle for the——" I broke off; the little lady at the hotel had suddenly flashed across my mind. "Monsieur," I cried excitedly, "did anyone notice a woman running away from the wreck after the accident?"

He shook his head blankly. "Not that I know of. But all the passengers have not yet been accounted for. Two of the dead have not been identified. They're checking the lists now..."

I broke in upon him with my story of the interview I had had that night at my hotel. "Of course," I said, "the shock of the accident would explain her hysterical behaviour. But if she had really killed this man... Can you telephone Brussels and have her detained?"

"*Bien sûr,*" my companion remarked and waddled to the door. "Laporte," he called, and his aide appeared. He gave him a whispered instruction. "The coup is classic," he cackled placidly, returning to me. "The beautiful lady and the stiletto—you said she was beautiful, I think?"

"I don't think I mentioned it, but as a matter of fact, she is..."

The Belgian rolled up his eyes with a seraphic expression. "They always are. Not one of the regulars, I suppose?"

"I never saw her before. I'd call her a rank amateur. If she were an old hand she'd never have let the porter get out of her the fact that she'd been on that train..."

"The name is new to me," Vandervliet observed. "Staffer—the name is English, is it not?"

It was Stafford, of course—the idea had not occurred to me. "Yes," I replied. "But it's an alias, as like as not. She's not English, however. She's Hungarian, or Rumanian, or, perhaps, Polish..."

The pendulous cheeks trembled to an asthmatic chuckle. "We'll know more when we've printed those pretty fingers of hers..."

I started. "By jove! I was forgetting that dagger. Did you look for any prints on it?"

Vandervliet seemed to swell. "You don't imagine that the great Vandervliet would overlook a detail like that?"

"And there *are* prints?"

"*Bien sûr*, there are prints. Your comrade will be avenged yet, *mon cher*...."

"It has just struck me," I put in, "that, since he was alive when they found him, he must have seen his assailant. I'd like to have a word with old Pierre who, you say, was with Forrest when he died..."

"That is not hard. I'll have him fetched...." Vandervliet plodded to the door. As he opened it I caught sight of the brown uniform of a Wagons-Lits conductor. "The *contrôleur* of the rear sleeper," Vandervliet told me. "I sent for him..." He gave me a significant glance which I interpreted as meaning that we should not take the man into our confidence about the murder.

The conductor's face was ashen and a blood-stained bandage swathed his head. His uniform was stained with mud and oil. My companion patted him on the shoulder, called him "*mon brave*," and asked how he was. A little tap of nothing at all on the nut, the man explained modestly in fluent Paris argot—he seemed to be a stout fellow.

We questioned him together. When the crash came he was in the conductor's compartment in the next coach, having a slight argument about some missing towels. He noticed that the train had stopped and was about to comment on it to his colleague when he was flung violently against the side of the compartment—and that was all he knew about it. It was obvious, therefore, that he could have heard no cry or any sound of a scuffle coming from Forrest's compartment.

The train was running very light, he said. Only three compartments were occupied in the rear coach. There were four passengers—a Frenchman and his wife who joined the train at Cologne and shared a compartment; an Englishman, booked through from Berlin to Paris; and a lady, likewise travelling from Berlin to Paris. The Frenchman and his wife were killed on the spot; the Englishman was also dead. The lady was missing. They were still searching the wreck for her body.

Vandervliet and I exchanged a glance. We asked about the lady. Richard—that was the conductor's name—had seen her last during the first service of dinner. She was then sitting with the English gentleman in his compartment, smoking a cigarette. She and the Englishman were obviously friends—they had lunched together; at least, Richard had seen them going along to the restaurant car when lunch was announced.

And that was the sum of information we extracted from the *contrôleur*.

As we dismissed him, Laporte, Vandervliet's subordinate, appeared. With a crestfallen countenance he announced that all telephone communication with Brussels was interrupted. Raspingly, Vandervliet bade him take a car, go to the hotel, seek the lady out and remain on guard over her until we should arrive. "And if there's a lame gentleman with her, he's to be detained as well," was the Chief's parting instruction. "We'll be on the safe side," he observed to me humorously. Little did we divine at the time the unconscious irony of that remark.

Rather sombrely, I glanced at my companion. Here was a thread clearly discernible running back from the dead man

to the woman at the hotel. As old Vandervliet had said, the coup was classic—she had scraped acquaintance with Forrest in the train, or perhaps she had picked him up somewhere in Berlin, and, sitting with him in his compartment, had marked down that gold box of his as the most likely receptacle for the document or whatever it was her employers were in search of. Or, more probably, they knew what was in the box and had given her the direct order to steal the box and leave the train at the arranged stopping-place.

I wondered about old Charles. I had never heard that he was particularly susceptible to women, but then none of us knew very much about his private life—he was always a secretive devil. And I had seen enough of life to realise how few of us are really proof against a pretty face and such alluring black eyes as those of the little lady of the hotel. It made me positively hot under the collar to reflect that I must have actually been within a few yards of the box when I was in her bedroom.

I had made a special study of the personnel of the German secret service in all its branches, but I could not place the clubfooted man. He was a German, but that did not necessarily mean that he was in the plot. He might be a medical man settled in Brussels, a friend whom she had called in to attend on her. I was not favourably impressed by his looks; but then my revered Chief would scarcely have taken a prize in a beauty contest, either.

I looked at my watch—4.25. I had little hope that she would still be at the hotel: my inquiry about Forrest was enough to have frightened her away. I would have to hasten back to Brussels and take up the pursuit from there. But first I must speak with old Pierre.

I reminded Vandervliet about it. "We'll go out and look for him," he pronounced and picked up his large umbrella.

The schoolhouse had been evacuated. In the rope-walk men with flash-lamps and stretchers were preparing to remove the dead to a line of ambulances parked along the hedge. We paused an instant to contemplate the grim and terrible array.

"They've all been identified except him there, *patron*...." A plain-clothes man, who was standing by, spoke up. His foot pointed to a blanket that left only a head and shoulders showing.

It was a man of middle age, undersized and narrow chested and shabbily clad, with a long, sharp nose and snarling, rat-like mouth. His eyes were closed, the face stern and peaceful; but for its waxen pallor you would have said he was asleep.

"He has no papers and no luggage and his clothing bears no marks," the plain-clothes man explained. "And none of the conductors remembers having seen him on the train..."

I was staring fixedly at that livid mask; it seemed to me I should know that vulpine face. "Turn down the blanket," I bade the detective.

He hesitated. "He's terribly crushed; he's not a pleasant sight..."

"No matter. I want to see his arm..."

I turned to Vandervliet. "There should be two crossed lances tattooed on the forearm," I said.

The dead man's arm lay outside the coverlet. Two lances were tattooed there, just as I had predicted.

"It's H.79, otherwise Amschel Lipschütz," I told my companion in an undertone. "He did his military service with the Russian cavalry but he's an old hand in the secret service of our friends across the Rhine."

"*Tiens*," old Vandervliet exclaimed, "you know him?"

"I know the rascal," I retorted. "He's a stool-pigeon of the German counter-espionage, a nasty bit of work. He has a criminal record as long as your arm: white slave traffic, dope, and the Lord knows what else. He's a Bessarabian by origin and started life as an informer for the Okhrana—you know, the Russian secret police. I've run across him once or

twice and always there was blood in his tracks. I wonder how he was involved in the smash since he doesn't seem to have been on the train..."

"I think I can explain that," said Vandervliet and turned to the plain-clothes man. "Where did they find him?"

"Under the wreckage of the rear sleeper, *patron*. There were tons of stuff on top of him..."

Vandervliet nodded and drew me aside. "Obviously he was of the party that fixed the signal. In all probability, he came to the sleeper to guide the lady to the car and when the collision occurred the coach toppled over on him..."

"You may be right," I told him. "But I'm thinking of that dagger. It smells of H.79—he was always handy with the knife. Will you take his prints? And I should like someone to question the survivors in case one of them saw or heard anything suspicious before the crash occurred. I've been here too long as it is. I must get back to Brussels..."

"Leave it to me," said the Belgian. "Apropos," he went on, "you wanted to see old Pierre. Here he is!"

A lanky old man in the peaked cap of the Flemish peasant shambled in under the roof of the rope-walk. A caped gendarme escorted him and a lad of about twenty whom I took to be the son. Vandervliet explained to them that I wanted to ask some questions about the first victim they had taken from the wreck, the English gentleman.

Old Pierre was voluble enough. They had seen a hand sticking out and had then perceived the "*pauvre monsieur*" wedged between the bed and the side of the compartment. They had extracted him with no great difficulty. He was so limp that they had believed him dead. But as they laid him on the grass he had opened his eyes and his hands fluttered towards his jacket—old Pierre acted it for us. The gentleman kept muttering to himself, Pierre said—something about a box.

"What exactly did he say?" I asked.

The old man spread his hands and blinked his eyes at me—he had a gnarled face and pouched eyes, like a lizard's. "*Eh bien*," he answered in his thick patois French, "he said like this, 'my box, my box,' over and over again, and he kept trying to move his hands to his chest. I said to him, thinking he was in a delirium, 'It's all right, *mon bon monsieur*, a little moment and you shall have your box'—you know, to pacify him as one would a child. But people were screaming all round us and we had to help the others—we were afraid the wreck might catch fire as happens so often but not in this case, thanks be to God—so I told young Georges here to leave him and come on. I could see the poor gentleman was going—he was talking a lot of nonsense..."

"Do you remember anything else he said?"

The old man hoisted his narrow shoulders. "*Ma foi*, I didn't pay attention..."

On that the son struck in. "He seemed to think he was speaking to a woman..."

Vandervliet and I looked at one another.

"A woman?" I echoed. "Did he mention her name?"

"No," young Georges replied. "It was just from something he said..."

"Well, what did he say?" I demanded impatiently.

"It was in his delirium, you understand," the lad explained with an embarrassed air. "He spoke of kisses..."

"Of *kisses*?" I exclaimed. My tone was incredulous. This did not sound in the least like old Charles. I had a sudden vision of that weatherbeaten face of his, tough as a figure-head, of his stern blue eye and hard, cynical mouth. "Are you sure of this?" I asked the youth.

"*Mais si, m'sieu...*"

"Can you remember his exact words?"

"He said, like one who talks in his sleep, 'My kiss remains!'" he said.

"Look here," I broke in, "are you quite certain you aren't making this up?"

"But, m'sieu, the poor gentleman said it three times: 'My kiss remains!' Like that!"

"He said three times"—I give the phrase in French, as young Georges repeated it, and as, doubtless, Forrest, who knew French pretty well, said it—" *Mon baiser reste!*? Is that correct?"

The boy nodded emphatically. "*Oui, m'sieu. 'Mon baiser reste!'*"

I repeated the phrase over to myself. "Mon baiser reste!" This beat Banagher. What was this woman to Forrest that his last thoughts should be of her? Well, one never knew about fellows and that was a fact. "And he said nothing else, nothing more than this?" I asked old Pierre's son.

"*Non, m'sieu.* After the third time, his head fell back and Papa said to me, 'Hurry thyself, little imbecile,' he said to me. 'Dost thou not see he's gone? Come on and let's give the living ones a chance,' he said. And then I perceived that the poor gentleman was dead..."

"And neither of you saw anything of a gold box when you lifted him clear?" I asked. Both the old man and his son shook their heads vigorously. I turned to the plain-clothes man. "Have you been through his pockets?" I asked, pointing to the corpse on the ground.

They brought me a bloodstained sack with the dead spy's few poor belongings. As I expected, Forrest's box was not among them. Though virtually certain that the woman had carried it off with her to Brussels, I asked old Vandervliet to have a special search made of the wreckage. I told him I would pay a reward of 1,000 francs to the finder of the box. A thousand francs was £40 in our currency of those days and I saw the Belgian's eyebrows go up. "If the box is still there, you'll get it back," he told me with considerable assurance. "But for me," he added with a sage air, "it went with the little lady back to Brussels!"

I waited only to impress upon my Belgian friend the need for absolute secrecy—discretion is the very essence of our work—and he agreed with me that nothing should be disclosed to the newspapers regarding the true circumstances of Forrest's death. Promising to see me very shortly in Brussels, he wheezed a cordial farewell at me. Five minutes later, at Gérard's side, I was racing back towards Brussels and the unfriendly dawn.

## 90

### Concerning a clubfooted man

The sky was flushed an angry red as we rolled into Brussels. Brussels gets to work in the morning earlier than any other European capital, and I know them all. Trams crowded with the first relays of wage-earners thumped along the avenues, the dog-carts rattled on their rounds with the milk—the cheerful stir was in singular contrast with the gloom of my thoughts. On stepping round a charlady as I entered the lobby of my hotel, the first person I saw was Laporte, Vandervliet's aide.

He was telephoning at the desk. On catching sight of me, he hung up the receiver and came bustling across the deserted vestibule. "*Ca y est!*" he announced with an air of profound dejection.

"Gone, are they?"

"Not ten minutes after you left the hotel. Around three..."

"Both of them?"

He nodded. "The doctor told the porter that the lady was sufficiently rested and preferred to go on home at once...."

That settled that—the clubfooted man was in it, too.

"Where were they making for?"

Laporte made a contemptuous gesture. "Where would they make for? I warned the frontier posts but, *que voulez-vous?* I was too late. Verviers reports that they crossed into Germany at four-thirty—a big, grey car with a diplomatic *laissez-passer*...."

"The car that brought the lady from Ablesse, I suppose?"

"Undoubtedly...."

"What have you found out about them?"

"Precious little. The man was registered at the Hotel van Gelder—that's a small German house in the Lower Town...."

"I know it," I said briefly. "It's always creeping with their agents...."

"He arrived last night. Registered as from Berlin. The woman who keeps the hotel swears she never saw him before...."

I laughed my disbelief. "*Et avec ça?*" Which is good Parisian for "Tell me another." "What about the lady?"

Laporte drew me across the lobby to the reception desk and opened the register. There she was, the latest entry, in a bold, attractive hand: *Madeleine Stafford, Cologne*.

"And what do we do now?" the secret service man demanded blankly.

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Nothing, *mon vieux!*"

If you are looking for a feverish chase half across Europe, I am afraid I cannot oblige you—at least, not yet. Laporte's tidings did not surprise me. They had secured a good start. After a coup of this kind, the first thing an agent does is to seek with all speed the shelter of his own frontiers—and Aachen is only about seventy-five miles as the crow flies from Brussels. The secret service has no use for extradition: it has its own methods for obtaining justice. The box had gone, but, more than this, we had lost a man. If I knew the Chief, he would see that the score was evened. But it would be evened in his own time.

The Chief was in town. I went to my room and put through a call to London, grateful to learn from the operator that the gale had spared communications westward. I had changed into pyjamas and turned on the bath when the bell rang. In a minute I heard the well-remembered voice. "Is that you, P.C.?"

"Yes, sir...."

"Well, what's the news?"

Telephones have ears: I had to be discreet. "The consignment went astray owing to a premature death in the family," I told him.

He was always sharp as a needle, was the skipper. No indignation, no inquest—right away he tumbled to it that I was giving him a message in conventional language. He asked no unnecessary questions, but only said: "You mean our friend?"

"Yes," I told him.

"In the accident?"

His voice was even—the old man could always take it on the chin.

"The same sort of accident as Banquo had," said I.

His "Ah!" was perfectly steady. "And the—er—consignment?" he inquired gently.

"Gone where the sausages come from, sir," I reported. "I'm writing you a full report in cipher——"

A pause. Then: "Better come over yourself, P.C. Take the morning train. Are you in touch with anyone over this?"

"With Vandervliet, sir!"

"I'll send someone over to take your place. Let Vandervliet know. Good-bye!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The Chief was waiting for me when I reached the office that afternoon. He greeted me cordially enough but his air was rather forbidding—indeed, I did not know when I had seen him looking more concerned.

"Clavering," said he, "this is a lad business—bad about poor Forrest and bad about that box of his...."

He lifted an evening paper that lay upon the desk. "I see the name of an old friend among the list of dead, Amschel Lipschütz. Does that explain what you meant by saying that Forrest had met with the same sort of accident as Banquo?"

"Not exactly, sir. Lipschütz was found dead in the wreckage. But the person who stabbed Forrest was a woman...."

The Chief frowned. "A woman?"

"A certain Madeleine Stafford...."

The Chief shook his head blankly. "And the box has gone to Germany, you say?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. I offered a reward of 1,000 francs for its recovery. But Vandervliet telephoned me just before I left to say it had not been found...."

The Chief's scowl deepened—with the large paper-knife he wielded, he was punching holes in the blotter. "Shall I tell you what was in that box?" he went on. "A complete list of our agents on the German coast. Forrest was on the job for months, nosing out really efficient, reliable people...." He broke off and with a resigned sigh, pushed the cigarettes across. "Well, let's hear your story...."

He stopped me only once and that was right at the start when I told of my meeting with the woman in the hotel. "Just a minute," he said and turned to his confidential secretary who sat at her desk in the corner. "We don't know this Madeleine Stafford or anyone like her, do we, Garnet?"

Garnet looked up from the file she was arranging. (Her name was really Miss Wolseley but, as she had the same surname as the celebrated Field Marshal, from an easy association of ideas, everybody called her "Garnet" *tout court*.)

"I don't think so, sir," she replied in her quiet, competent way. "Not under that name, at any rate. Of course, Greta Gelbhammer, who works for Abteilung Sieben, is dark and some people"—here Garnet glanced at me rather pointedly



through her spectacles—"might call her handsome...."

Garnet was quite a bright girl but, like so many bright young women; she was apt to be much too positive. The Chief, who thought a lot of her brains, did nothing to discourage her—that was left to some of us in the office.

"Greta Gelbhammer is a Jewess," I retorted severely. "Besides, she's forty if she's a day and about as crude as they make 'em. This girl isn't more than twenty-five or twenty-six, a Christian and quite obviously a lady...."

"Sounds like one of these damned amateurs," the old man grumbled. "This trade of ours is being ruined by them, like another ancient and even less honourable profession. Go on!"

"And to think it was a fellow like Forrest who let us down," he exclaimed when I had finished. "'My kiss remains!'" he quoted with a disgusted air, and snorted. "Well, poor devil, he paid for it. And that's that. But all his work in Germany will have to be done again...." He fell into a brooding silence.

"What about the people on that list of his?" I ventured to put in.

"The German counter-espionage will bag the lot," the old man rejoined absently. "Or worse, if my opposite number knows his job, he'll simply hold his hand, feed 'em false information to send us and then, at the most awkward moment for us, of course, swoop down and pinch the whole boiling...."

"It's not as if we weren't warned—I mean, you have a copy of the list, I suppose, sir...."

Morosely the Chief shook his head. "That's the devil of it, I haven't, not a complete one anyway. The list I have doesn't include Forrest's last appointments. All we can do is to keep tabs on the fellows whose names we have and see if the counter-espionage gets after them...."

"You don't think that secret lock on Forrest's box may defeat them?"

The Chief laughed sourly. "A locksmith will make quick work of that..." He grunted. "It's a mess, Clavering, and that's a fact...." He paused. "This clubfooted man is new to me. Grundt, you say his name is?"

"Yes, sir. Dr. Grundt...."

"It's odd," said the Chief, "but there's something hovering far in the back of my mind about a club-footed man.... What is it, Garnet?"

Silently the secretary had laid an open file before him. With a nicely manicured finger-nail she now pointed to a sheet of paper bound up in it. On the sheet a German newspaper clipping was pasted with the translation typed out beneath. The Chief glanced through the typewriting, then, with a grateful regard at his secretary, exclaimed, "Garnet's a wonder! She never forgets anything...."

He tapped the file. "This is the case I was trying to remember. Last year a Guards officer, attached to the Great General Staff in Berlin, was found dead in his rooms. Officially his death was attributed to heart failure. But here's *Die Rote Zeit*, a Berlin Socialist newspaper, spilling the beans. It says that this officer was under suspicion of selling military information to the Russians and that his death took place immediately following the visit of a lame gentleman, a certain Dr. G...."

He adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and read out: "'If our information, emanating from a sure source, is correct, not heart failure, but a bullet fired by his own hand, was the cause of Major von L.'s sudden demise. This is not the first time, in military and naval circles, that such fatal results have ensued upon the visit of the clubfooted Doctor who, unless we are mistaken, receives his orders from a most exalted quarter....'"

"Which," observed the Chief, surveying me maliciously over the top of his spectacles, "can mean only the Emperor. Here's a note appended to the clipping which bears out this conclusion...." Settling his glasses on his nose again, he read out: "'The entire issue of *Die Rote Zeit* containing the above was confiscated by the Berlin police, the Editor arrested

and indicted on a charge of *lèse-majesté*."

"Your little lady's visitor was no amateur, at any rate," the Chief remarked with a short laugh. Then the telephone on the secretary's desk whirred. Garnet answered it. Her hand across the transmitter, "Vandervliet," she said.

The Chief signed to me to take the call. The Belgian's asthmatic wheezing came distinctly over the wire. "*Mon cher Dunlop*," he said when I had announced myself, "we have verified those prints on the knife."

My first thought was of the Stafford woman. "But how?" I asked, puzzled. "Lipschütz," was the answer. "Lipschütz?" I echoed. "*Mais oui, mon cher*. We took his prints as you suggested. *Eh bien*, they're identical!"

My original surmise was correct then—H.79 had run true to form. I must admit I was relieved to find the lady of the hotel cleared to this extent. There is a certain etiquette in secret service work as there is in all professions and, save in certain definitely prescribed cases, murder has no place in it. Somehow, I had never been able to credit my friend of the attractive eyes with a wanton crime such as this; and I could now look forward with less bitterness to the ultimate reckoning which I had promised myself would take place between us. I remember I said something of the kind in reporting old Vandervliet's announcement to the Chief. "Bah," said the skipper, "the woman doesn't matter. It's this clubfooted man I'm after...."

Then I spoke out loud the thought that had been in my mind from the very start of the interview. "I'm hoping very much, sir," I said, "that you're going to let me go into Germany and square up accounts with him...."

The Chief shook his head. "Francis Okewood left for Germany this morning. You're going back to Brussels...."

As you may imagine, I felt pretty sick at that. Francis Okewood was a top-hole man, as you who have read his secret service adventures during and after the war\* are aware; particularly, his knowledge of German and the Germans was second to none. But, after all, I was the only one who had actually seen Dr. Grundt, and it seemed to me that I had the prior claim.

\* *The Man with the Clubfoot* and *Clubfoot the Avenger*.

I said something of the kind to the Chief. He was pretty short with me. "It isn't a question of squaring up accounts," he replied. "We've got to warn our people as far as we can. Grundt will keep." He smiled grimly. "I like my meat well hung...."

"And the box, sir?"

He frowned. "If I'm not mistaken, we may whistle for it...."

The telephone rang again. This time it was the War Office—the Director of Military Intelligence. "Give me two minutes, you two!" said the Chief. Garnet and I went into the anteroom.

"I'm puzzled about old Charles, you know," I told her. "Somehow, I can't quite see him doing a thing like this...."

"You said the woman was attractive, didn't you?" said Garnet, glancing at her nails. She had a very well-shaped hand.

"Most alluring. I can understand any fellow falling for her. I could fall for her myself..."

"They lunched together on the train, you say? And she was seen later smoking a cigarette with him in his compartment?"

"Yes. But that doesn't necessarily prove that he was in love with her..."

"She was able to get that box off him, at any rate. And what about those last words of his?"

"Listen, Garnet," I told her, "I didn't know Charles Forrest very well—none of us did. But I knew him well enough

to see that he was wrapped up in his work. It's absolutely unthinkable to me that he should have put any woman before his job. After all, the man's dead and can't defend himself. Why jump to the obvious conclusion at once?"

"I'm not jumping to any conclusion that I know of," she said severely. "I'm simply going on the facts. After all, those last words of his can only mean one thing..."

"I don't care what they mean. I can only tell you that that line about kissing simply wasn't in his repertoire..."

"Nevertheless, it's what he said," she pointed out.

"All the same," I told her, "I shall want evidence a great deal stronger than any we've got at present to believe that old Charles, with all his experience, should have let himself be hoodwinked by a common adventuress..."

I spoke with an air of conviction but my mind was torn with doubt. From what little I had known about Forrest, he had never been what is called a philanderer. And he had always gone about his work with a certain grim seriousness which seemed to rule out the possibility of amorous adventure. But I had lived long enough to agree with what Holy Writ says about the way of a man with a maid and I realised that I might well be mistaken. I was not going to admit it to Garnet however.

"You men are all the same," she remarked crisply. "You always stick up for one another, don't you?"

I looked at her in some surprise. Seeing the Garnet week in, week out, always calm and unruffled and efficient we scarcely thought of her as a woman but rather as one of ourselves. I don't suppose she was a day more than twenty-five or twenty-six, but she was so self-assured that I imagine it made her seem older than she really was. And when she took off the hideous horn-rimmed spectacles she invariably wore in the office, she was really not bad-looking.

"Never mind," she continued, "I like loyalty. And I like you for thinking the best about poor Forrest..."

A hail from the inner room put an end to our conversation. "Clavering," said the Chief as we went in to him, "are you pretty familiar with the present type of German service rifle?"

I had made a special study of fire-arms, as, of course, he knew. "Yes, sir," I replied rather puzzled.

"Expert enough to tell by handling a model whether the mechanism displays any departure from standard?"

"I think so, sir..."

"Then I shall want you to take over a job I was nursing for Okewood..."

My spirits sank. Not only had Okewood been entrusted with the mission that by rights belonged to me, but I was also expected to accept his leavings.

"Very good, sir," I answered dejectedly.

"I'll send you further instructions in due course," said the Chief. "In the meantime, you'll follow up the Brussels end of this affair. Keep in touch with Vandervliet..."

"Very good, sir," I replied submissively and turned to leave. Not another word about Grundt. Was the skipper really going to take Forrest's murder lying down?

I should have known him better. He had fallen silent and was staring down at the letter opener in his hand. "Grundt, you said his name was, didn't you?" he suddenly remarked.

That was the old man all over. As Winston Churchill once said of Lord Reading, he seemed to think by double entry. "Yes, sir," I agreed, brightening up.

Leaning across the desk, the Chief prodded me in the chest with the paper knife. "Don't forget that name, Clavering!"

Because you and Dr. Grundt are apt to have a show-down one of these days!"

It was to come sooner than either of us reckoned.

## 91

### At the Weisser Hirsch

It was about a week after the events I have just described that, in the dusk of a weeping April afternoon, I found myself entering the little hostelry of the Weisser Hirsch at Schwarzentel, a tiny hamlet just over the German side of the Belgo-German frontier. In obedience to orders, after making my report to the Chief, I had returned to Brussels and remained there, kicking my heels in a thoroughly disgruntled frame of mind.

For Vandervliet could tell me no more than what I knew already, namely, that Madeleine Stafford and her limping doctor had crossed the border into safety. Though he assured me that all frontier guards had been specially warned to arrest them instantly should they attempt to return to Belgium, I was convinced in my own mind that, as far as Belgium was concerned, we had seen the last of them. It chafed me to know that. Francis Okewood was in Germany busy on a job that properly should have been mine, and even when I received my instructions for this Schwarzentel mission, for which the Chief had already prepared me, I could work up little enthusiasm for an undertaking which appeared to me to be neither interesting nor exciting; but merely dangerous in a hole-and-corner sort of way.

My orders were to investigate a specific report that the German infantry were experimenting with a new type of rifle. One of our agents on the Belgo-German frontier, a Luxemburger named Balck, had forwarded the story. He lived at Eupen, a small German frontier town, and his information was that the Jäger battalion stationed there had been issued with the new weapon. Under instructions from London he had arranged for one of the non-commissioned officers, a certain Oberjäger Brandweis—in the Jäger sergeants are called "Oberjäger"—to bring a rifle to the inn at Schwarzentel after dark for our inspection. Balck called himself an auctioneer, but I always suspected that he did a bit of money-lending on the side. Probably Brandweis was in financial difficulties—that is the way most traitors are made.

Balck, of course, did not know one end of a rifle from the other and it was not the Chief's habit, anyhow, to entrust a matter of this potential importance to the judgment of a subaltern agent. Under the rigorous Prussian military laws it was horribly dangerous for anyone—German or foreigner—to attempt to obtain secret military information and Balck, accordingly, had done his best to induce the wretched Brandweis to bring the rifle across the border into Belgium. But Brandweis could not be persuaded to run this additional risk. The rendezvous was therefore fixed at the inn at Schwarzentel which stood on the German side of the line, no more than two hundred paces distant from the black and white striped Prussian frontier posts.

Though I say it as shouldn't, I was not a bad-looking fellow in those days, 150 lbs. stripped and five foot ten in my socks. But as I contemplated my appearance in the very wavy mirror of my tiny whitewashed bedroom at the Weisser Hirsch, I flatter myself my own mother would scarce have known me. Even the Chief, no mean hand at disguise himself when it came to it, would have had difficulty in recognising not the least dapper of his young men in the stolid, plump-faced individual, with straggling moustache, hair cut *en brosse* and gold pince-nez anchored by a chain to the ear, whose reflection confronted me in the glass. I never went in much for false beards and wigs, but in preparation for this particular stunt I had left my small moustache untrimmed and sacrificed my parting to a ruthless cropping with the shears. Two small guttapercha pads on either side of my upper jaw, between gums and teeth, rounded the naturally rather narrow shape of my face in remarkable fashion. A knickerbocker suit of green shoddy which I bought at a reach-me-down establishment at Brussels gave me, as I believed, the authentic appearance of a Belgian Tartarin.

For this was the essential part of my cover, as we used to call it. The Chief, who was canny about such things, had not lost sight of the fact that Brandweis might be merely a stool-pigeon. If I were walking into a trap, at least my identity

must be carefully wrapped up to give me a sporting chance of extricating myself. Balck, it seemed, was a sportsman of sorts in such leisure as he had left over from the pursuits of espionage and usury. His plan was that I should appear as a Belgian guest of his at a shoot to be held by a syndicate of which he was a member in the country round Schwarzenthal and that after lunch, on the pretext of having sprained my foot, I should make my way, ostensibly to rest, to the inn and there await the visit of Brandweis.

In accordance with this plan, I spent the night before the shoot as one Gerrit Hasselt, of Bruges, at the hotel at Eupen. Balck called for me next morning. I was not really surprised when he explained that he was too busy to go out with us—subordinate agents, as a rule stand from under on such occasions and I saw at a glance that he was half scared out of his life. It appeared to me that he had done all that was reasonably to have been expected of him when he took me to a café in the environs of the town and presented me to a genial group of his fellow-townsmen weirdly and wonderfully garbed for "*die Jagd*."

At a quarter past three that afternoon, three-quarters of an hour before Brandweis was due to present himself, by which time, as previously arranged, we found ourselves close to the belt of woods through which the frontier line runs and about a mile from the inn, I staged my "sprain." I succeeded in eluding all efforts of assistance and half an hour later a slatternly wench ushered me into the bedroom I had asked for at the Weisser Hirsch. For all that my mission bored me, I was feeling rather pleased with myself. I was decidedly flattered to find how unsuspectingly Balck's German friends had accepted me in my Belgian rôle. We had an entertaining, if somewhat perilous, morning after hare—perilous because the guns stood in the centre of an advancing circle of beaters driving the game before them and everybody blazed away at once. Still, nobody was hurt and we bagged a lot of hares. I found myself smiling at my recollection of the scene.

I had told them below that a man would call to see me about a car. This, of course, was Brandweis; he had been warned—quite needlessly, I should have said—not to appear in uniform. Four o'clock passed and he did not come. As time wore on I grew apprehensive.

I was in Germany and the German counter-espionage, especially on the frontier, I knew was extremely alert. Bribing a man serving in the German Army to betray military secrets was high treason under German law and punishable by a long term of penal servitude. If I were caught, my number would be surely up. My own people would disown me; for such is the rule of the service.

I went to the window. It was on the back, looking out upon a small gravelled yard some ten feet below, set about with arbours used in the summer-time. The forest came right up to the beer-garden—there was a gate in the fence that gave access to it.

It was growing dark and patches of mist clung clammy to the tree-tops. Out of the depths of the woods the rustle of feet in the undergrowth, an occasional voice calling in the distance, floated up to me. Villagers gathering firewood, I told myself; but I left the window. These vague sounds made me strangely nervous.

Then the door was tapped lightly. I ran and drew the bolt. A man slipped in hastily. He was in plain clothes, wearing a long raincoat. His face was a sickly greenish yellow. He bolted the door and faced me, withdrawing from under his mackintosh a long package wrapped in newspaper. Silently, he extended a hand, grasping his package with the other. The package danced, he trembled so; and his eyes were lit with terror, like the eyes of a wounded hare I had seen that morning.

I stepped to the casement and drew the curtains across, then touched a match to the candle that stood upon the table—there was no electricity in the little inn. A sudden feeling of nausea overcame me—I hated the mob, hated myself for what I had come there to do. I knew the Jäger battalions for splendid troops, unsurpassed by any in the Prussian Army for smartness and loyalty, and the thought of this unsavoury scoundrel selling the honour of the regiment to a foreign power was almost more than I could stomach. Instead of giving this Judas his shekels into his hand, I flung the envelope with the money on the table. He snatched it up and began to count the notes while I, picking up the rifle, freed it from its swathings and started my examination.

I perceived immediately that my mission was futile. The weapon was the ordinary Mäuser, the German service rifle; a closer scrutiny showed me that the only new departure was an unimportant alteration in the sights. Rifle in hand, I

questioned the Oberjager. But he, in a whining voice, protested that the rifle was the new issue.

"Give me back my rifle, Herr," he begged huskily, rolling hunted eyes, "and let me go!" I pressed him further, for fraud of this kind is the commonplace of espionage work, but received the same answer—it was the new issue.

The sound of Balck's car in the street determined me—he was to drive me back to Eupen. I went to the door and unbolting it, handed Brandweis his rifle. "Get out of here!" I flung him in German.

My back was to the door as I faced him. It was the almost demented expression upon his face—such a frozen look of horror as I had rarely seen on human countenance before—that caused me to swing about. The door-handle was turning slowly. My first idea was that it was Balck. Then some instinct of danger warned me. Perceiving that Brandweis had laid the rifle down upon the table, I snatched it up and thrust it under the bed. While I was thus engaged, the sergeant in two noiseless strides had gained the window. I turned in time to see him throw the casement wide, fling a leg over the sill and vault out.

At the same moment the curtains blew wildly out into the room, the candle flared and guttered and I saw that the door was open. A huge form bulked darkly in the entrance.

The candle burned up again. The door had closed softly. An enormous man, hat on head, stood within the room, leaning on his stick and regarding me balefully.

With a chill sense of foreboding I recognised the clubfooted man of the hotel.

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### Face to face with Clubfoot

Once seen, the Man with the Clubfoot could never be forgotten. With his barrel chest and mighty torso, his flail-like arms and, before all, his prodigious and repellent hirsuteness, he had left an ineffaceable impression of sheer animal strength upon my mind. But in the week that had elapsed since I first clapped eyes on him, on that night of storm in the lobby of that Brussels hotel, I seemed to have lost sight of the extraordinary atmosphere of menace he spread about him.

No doubt my perceptive faculties were quickened by the peculiar circumstances of his untoward appearance—that twilight room, the dark and silent woods without, and at the open casement the curtains yet swaying to the terror-stricken haste of my visitor's departure—and by the instant realisation of the acute peril of my position. Whatever the reason, I found something unutterably sinister about this gigantic cripple as he lurked there, his massive head tilted forward and to one side as, with a sly, suspicious air, he sent his glance darting into every nook and cranny of the modest bed-chamber—something sinister and something inexorable, and I quailed.

My scalp was prickling. I longed to get my hand on my pistol which was in my inside pocket. But this was no time for gun play: if he had followed Brandweis to the inn, he was not alone. My only chance was to bluff myself out of my desperate predicament.

From under his beetling eyebrows Grundt was considering me with a savage glare. I perceived at once that he did not recognize me, and the discovery gave me courage.

"It's customary to knock when you enter a private room," I said severely in my best Belgian French. "May I inquire what you want here?"

That fierce, dark eye was roving round the room again. "Am I right in supposing that the gentleman has had a visitor?" he questioned with elaborate politeness. He answered in French which he spoke fluently enough but with a

hard, guttural German inflection—his voice was harsher than the creak of dry axles. I had to think swiftly. I could not be sure whether he had seen Brandweis disappear through the window, but it was fairly obvious that he knew the sergeant had been with me. Denial was useless: boldly I took the plunge.

I giggled feebly, as I imagined a man who would buy a suit as dreadful as those grass-green duds of mine would giggle, and rejoined brightly, "If you'd call him a visitor. I'd just come in from shooting and was about to change my wet things when this man burst in and begged me to hide him. Then you came and he sprang through the window there. What was he? A poacher. They were telling me at the shoot to-day that the poaching along the frontier is something terrible..."

Supporting himself on his stick the cripple limped a few steps towards me—the thud of his heavy boot on the bare boards sounded like the approach of leaden-footed destiny. He halted in front of me. "So? The gentleman has been shooting, *hein?*" he growled out. "A good day's sport, my friend?"

"Capital," I said as nonchalantly as I could contrive with a throat that was dry with apprehension. "We bagged forty-one hares...."

"So, so? You were after hare. The gentleman must be a notable marksman..."

I might have known that his saccharine civility boded no good. He was pointing towards the bed. As my eyes followed the direction of his rubber-shod stick, my heart seemed to miss a beat. The dark butt of the rifle projected from under the bed flounce which the draught from the window must have displaced.

I did not hesitate. I stooped down and pulled the rifle out. "It's not mine," said I with such boldness as I could muster. "This fellow put it there. I'm afraid I'm not a good enough shot to go after hare with a rifle...."

The big man chuckled—his mirth had an unpleasant sound. "The gentleman is too modest..." He paused and moistened his thick lips with his tongue. "I, too, have a day's sport on hand. But I'm no such noble sportsman as yourself. Vermin is *my* quarry—the fox, the weasel, the rat..." His voice gathered volume on a rising note, then sank to its normal level again. "I, too, drive my game, my friend," he went on softly. "Into the centre of a circle, in our good old German way..." His hot eyes glittered. "Is this the first time the gentleman has taken part in a German hare drive?"

I don't know what I answered. The underlying menace in his manner indescribable. Though the room was damp and chilly, the perspiration broke out on my face and my hands were dank. With a cold shiver of fear running down my spine I asked myself *how much this man knew...*

"A thrilling sport, is it not?"—he was speaking again in that strident voice of his. "Especially if one puts oneself in the place of the hare. Master Long Ears hears footsteps, shouts, and flees before them, doubles in his tracks and encounters them again; and all the time the circle of beaters, closing in, inexorably, from all sides, grows smaller. Tighter and tighter the encircling ring becomes, more frantic and despairing are the victim's efforts to escape. But there is no escape. Fate is waiting in the centre. Or nemesis, shall I call it? the nemesis that waits on vermin—rats, and the other foul creeping things I hunt..."

His voice had descended to a rasping undertone. He ground his teeth on the closing word and there was a dangerous gleam in his eyes fastened with intent upon my face. Suddenly whistles shrilled faintly in the forest and then a single shot went reverberating through the darkness outside. On the instant my companion lifted his bull head and cocked his ear towards the window, his whole expression alert and watchful like a wild beast measuring the distance for its pounce. My mind was working rapidly and I profited by his absorption to steal a pace nearer the solitary candle.

A second shot. The cripple seemed to relax. His smile was savagely exultant. "*Pan,*" he cried triumphantly, imitating the report of a gun, "to bring the rascal to earth. And *pan!* The *coup de grâce!* So may all traitors be exterminated, stamped out, annihilated!" He cleared his throat contemptuously.

No need to ask myself the meaning of those shots. They had got Brandweis—this was the climax my formidable visitor's parable had been working up to. The inn was surrounded; they had held, as it were, the nose of a bag open to the traitor as he sped for his life through the woods, and he had bolted straight into it. The clubfooted man had been playing with me while waiting for the shot which would tell him that the trap he had laid had closed. My turn, I doubted not,

would be next.

The critical moment had arrived. I stole a glance at Grundt. His appearance appalled me. His heavy cheeks were shaking to a gust of rage that shook him as a storm shakes an oak, leaving him speechless. His regard was bloody: every hair of him seemed to bristle; and his fleshy lips, twisted into a cruel leer, were flecked with beads of foam. And I was alone with him in this lonely inn, at the mercy of the incalculable military strength of the vast German Empire.

"Vermin we shoot," he snarled, "and traitors like Brandweis we shoot. But what death is not too good for those who make traitors? Shall I tell you why I, the unique and incomparable Grundt, sully my hands with carrion like this dog I've just sent to his Maker? It is because Oberjäger Brandweis belonged to a corps which is as the apple of his eye to him whom I have the honour to serve, and my master must never know that one of his trusted Jäger could ever fall so low. As for you..."—his voice rose to a passionate shout—"who are you, you sneaking cur, and who sent you spying here?"

I was cold as ice now—a crisis, when I am face to face with it, always has that effect upon me. I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know what you're talking about and I don't like your tone. This is my room. Have the goodness to get out!"

On that he seemed to pounce. "Ei, ei," he cackled shrilly. "A good disguise, my dear colleague, and excellently carried off. But the arrogant tone is not in your rôle...." He dropped into English. "Tell me please, how long this excellent Balck who now sits in Eupen jail, has been in the employ of the English Secret Service?"

I knew then that Balck, the slimy hound, must have given the rendezvous away—the danger with civilian agents, the Chief used to declare, was that they are always the first to rat. Inch by inch, my right hand was moving towards the gun in my inside pocket. But Grundt must have detected the movement for he rapped out, "Reach for the ceiling, you dog!" I saw that one of his great, hairy hands was wrapped about an automatic.

And now, in a fraction of the time it takes to set it all down on paper, I found myself obliged to take a momentous decision. Before me was the man who, beyond a doubt, had planned and carried out the theft of Charles Forrest's box. He was a cripple and I was young and active and, notwithstanding his gun, if I had had any certainty that the box was still in his possession, I would have chanced my arm and gone for him. But I did not have this certainty and the price of failure was either a bullet through the head or, at best, a long stretch in a German convict prison. With death in my heart, I had to tell myself that in this case discretion was certainly the better part of valour. By biding my time I should at least keep my real identity a secret against a more promising chance to recover the box—though I feared that it had already, long since, yielded up its secret.

My mind made up, slowly I raised my hands. But when they were level with the candle I suddenly shot out my right palm and flattened the flame, dropping to my knees as the room went dark. The roar of the gun nearly burst my ear-drum but before Grundt could fire again I had dived through the curtains and clear over the window-sill. It was a crazy thing to do, but I landed, crouching, on my feet.

In the obscurity of the yard a shape rose up beside me with hands that grappled for my throat. I had a fleeting glimpse of a red face and bristling moustaches under a bowler hat and drove blindly at it with my left as I scrambled to my feet. It was a daisy of an upper cut with all my weight behind it and the figure folded up with a soft grunt.

There came a second and a third thudding report in rear and I heard the bullets go crashing through the leaves. But by this time I was in one of the arbours, bursting my way through the hedge. Whistles were blowing and a clamour of voices, dominated by one that trumpeted like a wounded elephant, rang out behind me as the darkness of the sopping woods swallowed me up.

In our game the old hand always marks down a line of retreat. In returning from the shoot that afternoon I had not failed to remark the deep and tangled gully that wound its way across the frontier. I floundered considerably in the dark before I picked it up while sound of pursuit echoed through all the trees about. But my luck was in and some twenty minutes later, my hands scratched, my hair full of burrs and an ugly tear in the knickers of my lovely green suit, I stumbled almost into the arms of an astonished Belgian customs man and knew I was in safety.



*I confer with Garnet*

My instructions were, whatever my findings on the rifle might be, to return to London without delay—the War Office, it seemed, were apprehensive on the subject of the rumoured new weapon. I managed to hire a car at Verviers to take me to Liège where I got a train for Antwerp and caught the night boat to Harwich. On reaching my chambers in the Albany next morning I shed my verdant reach-me-downs without regret and after a bath and a shave, summoned a barber to restore my moustache to its normal proportions. Only then did I telephone the office, to be told that the Chief wished me to lunch with him—would I pick him up at one o'clock?

But when, a few minutes before that hour, I was ushered into his room, only Garnet was there. "Oh, my gracious," was her greeting, as she stared hard at my cropped hair, "when did they let *you* out?"

"Were you never taught as a child that it's rude to make personal remarks?" I said. "Where's the Big Noise?"

"He's been detained at Downing Street," she replied. "He'll see you at three..." Her clear grey eyes contemplated me. "Well," she demanded, "how did you get on? Is it an automatic rifle or what?"

"It's a wash-out," I told her with some feeling, "and I shouldn't be surprised to know it was a plant from the beginning. The only consolation is that that lily-livered skunk, Balck, is in the clink. The next time the Treasury starts chopping you down you can tell 'em what comes of taking military information from a tinpot auctioneer. But I didn't waste my time exactly. I ran across our clubfooted friend again..."

One of the most irritating things about our Garnet was that she never allowed anything to surprise her. If you were to tell her, for instance, that Westminster Abbey had been burned to the ground, her first question would probably be, "Was it insured?"—she had that kind of a mind. Accordingly, she displayed no astonishment now, but merely enquired, "Did he have the box?"

After what I had been through, her question nettled me. "Unfortunately," I rejoined very sarcastically, "I did not have the opportunity of going through his pockets..."

"Why?"

"Because he happened to be holding a gun in his hand at the time. A loaded automatic, my dear, and by an odd coincidence it was pointed at me..."

Her eyes were suddenly grave. "Not joking?"

"I'm not joking," I told her. "And the worthy Dr. Grundt wasn't joking, either. Unless, of course, he fired at me in fun..."

"You mean he actually fired at you?"

"I do. He seems to believe in the old cowboy saying, 'First fire, then inquire!' So, in the circumstances..." I shrugged my shoulders. "Besides, how was I to know he had the box on him?"

She patted my sleeve. "The great thing is to have you back safe. And, anyway, if you had searched him, I don't believe you'd have found the box..."

"Why do you say that?"

She ignored the question. "I suppose there's no doubt but that they got away with it..."

"If you're implying they did not, let me tell you that every inch of ground at the scene of the accident was gone over with a fine tooth comb..."

"Would the finder necessarily hand it over?"

"Well," I said, "that box wouldn't fetch more than a couple of hundred francs at a pawnshop. And I offered a thousand francs reward. Why should you think that the woman didn't get away with it? She was obviously put on to shadow Forrest..."

Garnet nodded. "Okewood thinks that Forrest was shadowed all the way from Hamburg..."

"You've heard from old Francis, then?"

"Yes. He has found out that a German secret service man was at Strait's Hotel at Hamburg the night Forrest stopped there. Forrest spent two nights in Berlin, at the Bristol..." She paused, regarding me. "The woman was there with him..."

"Who says so?"

"Okewood. They were continually together, he says..." She stopped. "I know what you feel about Forrest," she went on gently, "and I don't want to say a word against him. But you must see now that he was infatuated with this girl, so much so, indeed, that, at the very moment of death, he fancied she was still with him..."

"What has Francis done about her?" I asked, without pursuing the question.

"He has found no trace of her. Of the clubfooted man, either. But your encounter with Grundt would explain that. She's probably on the frontier with him..."

"The Chief should have sent me instead of Francis," I grumbled. "After all, I know the pair of them. I'd have run them to earth on the frontier and joined hands with Francis..."

"And become infatuated with the lady like poor Charles?"

She could say the most annoying things. "I don't see why you should assume that..." I rejoined.

"Didn't you tell me you could fall in love with her yourself?"

The Chief was right: the Garnet forgot nothing. "If I did make such a remark," I retorted cuttingly, "I was probably relying, quite unjustifiably, on your sense of humour..."

Her eyes smiled at me. "Poor old Clavering..." Then, growing serious once more, she said, "After all, I can't help thinking that, for some reason or other, that list has not yet been found..."

"They've got the box, haven't they? You're not suggesting that the list wasn't in it?"

"It was in it all right. You know Brade?"

"That English coal importer who works for us at Hamburg, do you mean?"

"Yes. He saw Forrest just before Forrest started for Berlin. Forrest showed Brade the box and told him that the list was in it, Okewood says..."

"Then what?"

"Okewood has made the rounds of a number of the agents whose names we have and no attempt has been made to molest them as yet..."

"That proves nothing..."

"Wait a minute! Do you remember Andresen?"

"The big Dane who was always taking you out to lunch when he was here?"

She coloured slightly. "He's not a Dane. He's a naturalised German. And I only lunched with him twice. Andresen runs a beer-garden on the harbour at Kiel. He only gets away with it because he served in the German Navy—you know how jumpy they always are at Kiel. If any suspicion attached to Andresen, he'd be under lock and key, especially as a lot of men from the Fleet frequent his establishment. Well, he hasn't been interfered with—not up to the day before yesterday, at any rate, Okewood says..."

It was certainly surprising, and I said so. "But they've got that box," I added.

"I'm afraid you're right," Garnet agreed thoughtfully. "But aren't you going to tell me about your meeting with Grundt?"

"It's a long story," I remarked, gazing at her. Garnet looked rather nice that day. Black always suited her and she had a bunch of violets tucked into the belt of her frock. "Do you ever eat lunch, Garnet?" I asked. "I mean when there are no Danes about..."

"Oh, yes," she answered brightly, "nearly every day—oftener if I'm invited. And that reminds me..."

"Do you want to go along to the Savoy Grill with me?" I broke in.

"If you'd allowed me to finish what I was saying," she returned severely, "I was about to convey to you an order from our esteemed Number One. He said you were to take me out to lunch. And now you've gone and spoilt everything by asking me..."

"Spoilt nothing. All this means is that he'll foot the bill. Or will he?"

She gave her demure laugh. "I doubt it..."

"We'll go to the Savoy just the same," I declared.

"Not the Savoy," she pleaded. "It's so crowded. Somewhere quieter..."

"Garnet," said I, fixing her with my eyes, "I believe you're paying me a compliment..."

"If you believe that, my dear," she answered with calm, "you'll believe anything. Since it's to be a good lunch, let's go to the Maison Basque where we can talk..."

"The Maison Basque be it," said I. "Run for your bonnet and shawl while I count up my money..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Garnet, of course, had something up her sleeve. It was perfectly clear to me that the Chief had told her to take me to the Maison Basque for some ulterior purpose of his own—I knew these two of old. Still, nothing appeared at first and I was able to tell the story of my experiences at Schwarzentel without interruption.

My tale was finished and we had reached the coffee when Garnet remarked casually, "Who would you say was the most interesting woman here?"

My first reaction to this quite unexpected question was that she had brought me there to show me the Stafford wench lurching, say, with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. We had a corner table and the small, narrow room was quite crowded. I surveyed the throng without seeing any sign of the lady in question.

I turned to my companion. "The price of the lunch," I remarked facetiously, "does not include compliments..."

"No, but seriously," she said laughing, "look around and tell me which, of the eight or nine women in the room, intrigues you sufficiently to make you feel you'd like to meet her..."

I glanced down the restaurant again. "Well," I remarked at length, "if I were in search of adventure I believe I'd find it with the young woman on the sofa over there with the man in grey..."

Garnet began to laugh softly, but I stopped her. "Please remark," I went on, "that my judgment is in no way influenced by the circumstance that the lady is possessed of considerably physical charm and that her—ah—retroussé nose and full lips denote what I will delicately call considerable sensibility. No, my dear Garnet, what intrigues me about her is something so trivial that I am sure it would escape your attention..."

"Oh," she said puzzled, "and what may that be?"

"It's a detail so small that it would elude the vigilance of anyone but a—ahem—a trained sleuth like myself. If you will cast an eye at the dish before her, you'll observe that the lady is regaling herself with a fillet steak. Am I right?"

"As far as I can see—yes, she seems to be eating steak. What of it?"

"Observe the red pepper in her hand. And the bottle of Worcester sauce on the table. Now she's helping herself to it. Surely you must see that a woman who indulges in red meat lavishly besprinkled with condiments must be a female of quite unusual force of character. And determined females, as you must have noticed, my dear Garnet, have a fatal fascination for me..."

Garnet smiled. "I hadn't remarked it. As for the red pepper and the rest of it, they're easily explained. She's a Hungarian, and the Magyars, as you should certainly be aware, like their food highly seasoned..."

"You know her, then?"

"By sight only. That's Mitzi Funda!"

Everybody has forgotten Mitzi Funda to-day, I imagine, except, perhaps, a few old playgoers who will find in my narrative the true explanation of her mysterious disappearance from London in the middle of the run of a play. George Edwardes or one of those fellows brought her over from Budapest to do a dance number in some musical show and her youth and grace so charmed the public that she stayed to appear in another production.

"Why, of course," I said. "I thought her face was vaguely familiar. Who's the man?"

"British naval officer. Submarines. He wants to marry her..."

I glanced at my companion sharply. "What's at the back of your mind, Garnet?"

She laughed. "Nothing. Only if I were you I'd take a good look at the lady..."

"I've done that, already..."

"And very usefully," she commented. "Never mind, I'm always telling the Chief that in our job it's not the most brilliant minds that pull off the biggest coups..."

With which characteristically double-edged compliment she relapsed into silence and began to draw on her gloves.

### A step on the stair

"The man Grundt," observed the Chief when he had heard my story, "begins to incommode me. I don't like people who have my fellows stabbed or take pot-shots at them, Clavering, and that's a fact. But we shall have to proceed warily..."

His tone was light, but the line of his mouth was forbidding. "It's evident that that Socialist rag was right. Our limping friend obviously takes his orders from an exalted quarter and, indeed, he said as much to you. We may, therefore, infer that investigations in which he appears concern matters of particular interest to a certain erratic gentleman who lives on the Spree. It seems clear that, in the case of Oberjäger Brandweis, Grundt acted, in a preventive sense, off his own bat, and I draw your attention to the fact that he enjoys sufficient independent authority to have a man like this sergeant shot down and, apparently, no questions asked—not to mention that he tried, fortunately without success, to mete out the same fate to you. We may take it that the whole weight of his power was behind his resolve to get that list of agents off Forrest. And for the same reason..."

"I don't see that a list of British spies should be a matter of especial concern to the Emperor," I objected. "I mean, isn't it primarily a routine job for the counter-espionage..."

"The Fleet, man, the Fleet," the Chief rapped out. "William II considers himself, and rightly, to be the creator of the modern German navy, and thinks that its welfare and security are in his personal charge. Forrest was confident that he could build up an information service on the German coasts that would prevent the Imperial Fleet from making a single move unknown to us. I don't know whether you ever realized it, but Forrest was a marvellous judge of men. Better of men than of women..." he added rather sombrely.

I said nothing. I knew it was of no use to try and alter the old man's opinion on any subject on which his mind was made up. "Forrest," he went on, "was a damned judgmental briber. I don't know whether it was because he was a cynic and embittered, and thought the worst of most people, but he had a flair for smelling out potential traitors that amounted to genius. Before he went away, here, in this very room, he mentioned the names of certain people, employed in the German dockyards and so forth, whom he was confident of getting to work for us—well, it would knock you silly. If those names ever got out, if they're on that list, knowing how the Emperor cherishes his pet toy, I tell you an earthquake would be nothing to it..."

"But is that list in German hands?" I asked.

"All I can tell you," said the Chief irritably, "is that, as far as we have been able to ascertain, no arrests have been made, and none of the agents whose names are known to us have been interfered with. Also there is no evidence that our friends across the North Sea knew of the existence of this list or were looking for more than the box. But that proves nothing. Old Clubfoot works in the dark, behind a façade of terrorism and mystery. I may tell you that Okewood has got absolutely nowhere with his inquiries about the man himself. Most of the people with whom Okewood has been in touch have never heard of Grundt, and those who have absolutely refuse to talk about him. As far as Okewood can ascertain, the fellow has no headquarters but is continually moving about..."

"What about the woman, sir?"

"Vanished into thin air for all we have been able to find out. I have had Brewster making inquiries in Cologne, but without success. I take it that was a fake address she gave. I assume, however, that she's on the Belgian frontier with Grundt. Or was," he added rather ruefully, "since he never seems to stay long in the one place..."

"I wish you'd let me go into Germany after them, Chief," I suggested.

He hoisted his broad shoulders. "To what end? If Grundt has the box, he has the list. And if the box has gone astray, you might as well go looking for a needle in a haystack..."

"I was thinking the woman might lead me to it," I ventured to put in.

"Sheer waste of time. If she had it, and everything suggests she did, she passed it on to Grundt. If Grundt is in Germany and has that box in his possession, Okewood will get it, if any man can. For the present, I can't spare you. What with this infernal Liberal Government cutting down our funds, we're shorthanded and I have a job for you right here in London. Remember this about Grundt. He's powerful and well-protected. If he were to walk into this office now I should have no means of holding him, without bringing a first-class diplomatic rumpus about our ears. You realise that...?"

I nodded rather sombrely. His words were to recur to me later. "No use crying over spilt milk," the Chief, noticing my mood, rallied me. "If that list's gone, it's gone, and that's all there is to it. As for Grundt, don't worry. We'll get him if it means waiting until we have him sewn up, all shipshape and Bristol fashion, in a straight espionage charge. But caution, Clavering, caution! The fellow is dangerous—dangerous because he's thorough and because he never makes the mistake of under-estimating his adversary..."

With that, for the moment, I had to be content, never guessing how Fate was playing into my hands.

"And now," said the Chief, "for a word with you about the little lady you saw at lunch..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The worst kind of fear is fear of the unknown. When I was younger than I am to-day, and before four years of War had racked the old engine to bits, I used to flatter myself that my nerve was pretty steady. It had to be. The level set in those days by the Chief himself, not to mention the little band of high-flyers he had gathered about him, was 'way out of sight. Fellows like Francis Okewood or Herbert Brewster, who were happy only when carrying their lives in their hands, made the running devilish hot for ordinary blokes like me. But that evening, a few hours after my lunch with Garnet at the Maison Basque and the talk with the Chief that followed it, as I lurked in the darkness of Mitzi Funda's sitting-room, I do not mind admitting that I was badly rattled.

It was that light, stealthy footfall on the staircase that did it. You see, I believed—indeed, I *knew*—I was alone in the great, gloomy old house in Long Acre, on the top floor of which Mitzi Funda had her apartment. Save for this one flat, which the dancer rented furnished, the whole place was given over to offices. On letting myself in from the street with my key, ten minutes before, I had closed the front door behind me and mounted, past landing after landing of locked doors and dark fanlights, to the apartment at the top. And now, with my job scarce begun, my ear caught the faint sound of footsteps breaking in upon the grave-like hush of the ancient mansion as they ascended the stairs.

The mission to the house in Long Acre had seemed so simple as the Chief had unfolded it to me that afternoon. The Funda, it appeared, had been seen in the company of a certain Markus, a notorious Russian Secret Service agent—you must not forget that then, as now, the activity of the Russian Secret Service was an incessant thorn in our sides. On the grounds of the old adage about evil communications corrupting good manners, the Chief was anxious to discover what connection existed between an unsavoury ruffian like Markus—he was a most ignoble rogue—and the little dancer, especially in the light of her friendship with this lieutenant-commander of hers with whom it seemed, she was in the habit of lunching almost daily at the Maison Basque.

"Garnet thought you might as well look the lady over, as you'll be calling on her to-night," the Chief explained.

"Oh, so I'm calling on her, am I?" I put in.

"She won't be at home. She goes to the theatre at seven, and you won't be dropping round until eight or so. But Garnet thought you'd better know the lady by sight in case, by any accident, she should walk in on you..."

"Most considerate," I commented. "And is it Miss Wolseley's idea that I should burgle the lady's apartment?"

That was his idea, the skipper confessed. I should have a key; there was no risk, really. From seven o'clock, when the Funda left for the theatre, until round midnight or later when she returned, the house in Long Acre was empty—the daily woman who looked after the flat came only in the mornings, and the offices closed at six.

"And so, Clavering, you can run the rule over her rooms without fear of being disturbed. I have a report on this naval pal of hers—he's doing duty at the Admiralty just now. He has an excellent reputation, no money difficulties or anything like that, and there's nothing to suggest that his interest in the lady is not entirely high-minded and so forth. But"—and here the Chief made a heavy pause—"a girl who finds it necessary to have supper twice in one week at an obscure restaurant at King's Cross with a gentleman of Markus's peculiar reputation is, on the face of it, hardly a recommendable acquaintance for a British submarine officer, particularly in view of our Russian friends' interest in our last type of submarine. Markus has, or used to have, some kind of back-stairs connection with the stage—he once ran a theatrical agency at Cracow or one of those places—and I'm quite prepared to give the Funda a clean bill of health. But not before we've had a quiet look-see among her papers. Especially as friend Markus has been missing for the past twenty-four hours—I'm afraid our people were a little too hot on his trail..."

With that the old man pitched a brace of brand-new Yale keys on the blotter, explaining that one opened the street door and the other the front door of the flat—the Lord knows how he got them, but he had a marvellous faculty for simplifying things in that way. "If there's a locked desk," he said significantly, "I believe you'll be able to handle it..."

You know Long Acre?—that rather dingy street of automobile shops where modern office buildings rub elbows with dilapidated survivals of the days when Covent Garden, close by, was the fashionable quarter of the town. The house in which the Funda lived was one of these old mansions with a fine Queen Anne doorway.

Fortified by a chop and a pint of claret at my club, towards eight o'clock, having ascertained that no policeman was in sight, I let myself into the house with my key. In the radiance of a street lamp that fell through the ornate fanlight I saw a bare and shabby hall with a staircase, blackened with age, winding its way into the silent recesses of the upper floors. Ghosts of the rococo age seemed to rustle by me as I creaked up the stairs, until I found my further progress barred by a door built across the topmost flight.

I listened as I fished out my key. The house was deathly still. The front door opened straight into the sitting-room, oak-panelled and quite large, with a bow window built out on one side. There was the glow of a fire at the end of the room, and by its light I switched on a hand-lamp that stood on the baby Bechstein. The furniture shouted hire purchase, but the dancer had done her best to cover up the imitation old oak with barbaresque draperies. There were masses of flowers everywhere, photographs on the mantelpiece and piano and a shelf of books. A very liveable room and, with that nice fire burning in the old-fashioned hearth, cosy to come into out of the chilly night.

I began by taking rapid stock of the geography of the place. A door on the far side of the sitting-room gave on a passage where I looked in upon a tiled bathroom and a bedroom adjoining and, at the end, a kitchen out of which led a small room with a couple of wardrobe trunks and some hat-boxes. I dealt with the bedroom first—it did not take me long to discover that its cupboards and drawers contained nothing but wearing apparel. Then I returned to the sitting-room.

I had already marked down the cheap oak desk that stood against a wall. It was not locked. The drawers yielded up nothing more incriminating than some passbooks and bundles of cancelled cheques, some correspondence in English and German about the dancer's London engagement, her contract, a sheaf of bills and a mass of press cuttings. An oaken press and a chest of drawers revealed only an overflow of clothes and shoes and hats; cutlery and table-linen were in the drawer of the gate-leg table, obviously used for meals; other drawers in the room were empty. It looked very much as though I had drawn a blank.

I glanced about me. Invitation cards, and some of those fans given away at restaurants, decorated the mantel, also some pictures of the dancer in various rôles, and a photo inscribed "Bill," in naval uniform, of the man with whom I had seen her lurching at the Maison Basque. The only other man's photo in the room was on the piano—a large head in a massive silver frame. It was the face of a man, soft and self-indulgent, the throat bared by an open tennis shirt. A German dedication, in facsimile handwriting, was engraved upon the frame—"In Herzenstreue, Dein Bubi"—or, as one would say in English, "Always your own Boy."

I was contemplating the picture and reflecting in a drowsy, idle sort of fashion how quiet and remote the flat was, with the sound of the theatre traffic in Leicester Square mounting to it like a faint vibration, when my ear suddenly detected a creaking sound on the stairs outside. Then I heard a light footstep. There was no possibility of any mistake. The house was as quiet as the tomb, and out of its brooding silence I distinctly heard this soft and, as it seemed to me,

deliberately stealthy sound.

It could not be the dancer, for she was at the theatre. My first thought was of Markus. The Chief said they had lost track of him. He might well have the keys of the flat and be coming there for refuge. Whoever it was, I was properly trapped, for there was no exit except by the front door.

There was sufficient light from the fire to distinguish anybody who should come in. So I switched off the lamp on the piano, and then, as the footsteps approached the door, slipping back the safety catch of the automatic in my side-pocket, I stole behind the curtains screening the bow window, and waited.

That surreptitious footfall came on. Grasping the curtains with one hand, I kept a chink open through which I might command a view of the door. Now the intruder was on the landing—in the stagnant hush it seemed to me I could distinguish the sound of rapid breathing on the other side of the door. A key scraped softly, then the door was gently opened and immediately closed again.

Peering through the curtains, I was immediately dazzled by the white beam of an electric torch that travelled slowly all round the room, up and down the walls. At first I could make out nothing save that a tall, dark figure stood there just inside the door. But presently the light went out and, as the figure advanced into the room, I saw that it was a woman.

Her face was still in shadow, but the silhouette was unmistakable—the silhouette of a woman in evening dress. I could discern ear-rings, the outline of a high fur collar, the graceful line of a long evening wrap. Her stealthy movements disposed of any idea that it was the Funda herself—besides, the figure was taller than the dancer's.

The suddenly a pool of warm light illuminated the centre of the room, and I saw, standing beside the piano where she had turned on the lamp, not two yards from my hiding-place, the lady of the Brussels hotel.

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### What the flames revealed

A subtle perfume was in my nostrils, faint and strangely alluring. It brought back to me so vividly that first glimpse I had had of her reclining in her bed in her gaudy Chinese jacket, that I was sure my sense of smell must have unconsciously retained the memory of that intimate, personal fragrance and instantly identified it. She was all in black and exquisitely *soignée*. Her raven hair, drawn back from her forehead and gathered in a loose knot on the back of her head, gleamed like a black satin cap, and the long diamond ear-rings she wore, setting off the exquisite oval of her face, flashed in the lamplight. She looked superb.

With entire self-possession she glanced about her, then, her bag and long white evening gloves in her hand, stepped quickly to the door into the passage and passed put of my line of sight; but I guessed she was spying out the ground. Behind the curtains I was taut with suspense. My mission, which had appeared so easy, had suddenly become fraught with all sorts of possibilities. What was this woman, who worked for the German Secret Service, doing here? Or, more directly, what had Dr. Grundt, her employer, to do with Mitzi Funda? Here was a development which the Chief and even the omniscient Garnet had certainly not foreseen.

She was coming back. Now she faced me, in the full light—she certainly was an exquisite creature. Her lovely face was expressionless, sulky almost. I felt for my pistol—she was making straight for me.

But her objective was the piano which stood beside the bow window, so that the breadth of the instrument was between her and me, where I lurked behind the curtains. Very composedly she laid her bag and gloves upon the piano top, and picked up the photo in the silver frame—the young man's photo I had already remarked. She turned the frame over, fingering the back. Then, to my astonishment, I saw her draw forth, as though from some slot or other hidden



receptacle, a number of thin blue paper sheets.

They were letters. I could see the writing. Putting the frame aside, she spread out the sheets, which were folded lengthwise, and, propping her elbows on the piano, bent forward to study them under the lamp. She was so close to me now that, by putting forth my hand, I might have touched her face; so close that, from where I stood, immobile and scarce venturing to draw breath, I could read a word or two of the sheets which she was conning with such rapt concentration.

They were, as I surmised, letters written in German script. I exulted; my "look-see," as the Chief had called it, was not to be so fruitless after all. Seeing her thus absorbed, I decided that the time had come to act. Measuring with my eye the distance between the curtain and the letters, I raised my left hand to the opening, ready to part it, at the same time placing my right hand, which grasped my pistol, above my left. Then, like a flash, with my two hands simultaneously, I flung the curtains apart and, stretching across the piano, planted my left hand, palm down, with a bang on the letters while, with my right, I covered her with my gun.

She screamed softly and sprang back. The sheaf of papers remained under my hand. I let her be for the moment and gathered up the sheets. My first sensation was one of disappointment. They were love-letters—half a dozen of them—dated but without address, beginning with such phrases as "*Süßes Mädel*," "*Meine kleine, süsse Mitzi*," "*Teures Herz*" or similar German forms of endearment, and signed, after protestations of considerable fervour, "Bubi," like the photograph. I ran through the lot hastily, while watching the woman out of the corner of my eye for any attempt at flight—I could find nothing of any consequence whatever about these pages covered with lines of spidery German handwriting.

The woman had not moved. She stood like a statue, her delicate face almost as pale, regarding me out of dismayed and fearful eyes. I scanned her furtively, wondering whether she knew me again. It was scarcely probable, I reflected—she had seen me only for a few moments and that in an indifferent light. At any rate, I discerned no sign of recognition in her face. "What are you doing here?" I demanded, looking up from my reading. I spoke in English.

She shrugged her shoulders, a sullen look on her regular features. "If it comes to that," she replied—her English had a faint, slurring accent to it—"I might ask you the same question..."

"You may take it from me, madam," I rejoined sternly, "that if there are any questions to be asked I shall ask them. Now will you answer my question or"—I pointed to the telephone on the desk—"do I hand you over to the police?"

She made a little movement of the hands. "I think I have no need to tell you what I am doing here." Her English was very fluent—her accent only noticeable in the way she rolled her "r's."

"You came to get these letters?"

She made me a little bow. Two arm-chairs were drawn up in front of the fire. I pointed to one of them. "Sit down," I bade her.

She hesitated and then, with a slight movement of the shoulders, let slip her wrap which I took from her. She appeared in a long black velvet evening gown, armless and deeply *décolletée*, and exquisitely draped about her faultless figure. The only jewel she wore was a diamond arrow pinned to her corsage. Gathering up her bag and gloves from the piano, she slowly moved to the chair and sat down. With complete self-composure she helped herself to a cigarette from an enamel case which she took from her bag.

"Now then," said I, planting myself opposite her, "will you have the goodness to tell me whose letters these are and what you want with them?"

She paused an instant to light her cigarette. "That," she remarked glibly, throwing the match in the fire, "is neither here nor there. The point is, are you authorised to treat?"

"And if I am?"

"Then you shall tell me what those letters are worth to you..."

"The letters are not for sale," I declared bluntly.

She gave a nonchalant shrug. "You say stupid things. Of what possible use to you are letters written by a debauched fool to a designing woman?"

"Of what use are they to you?"

She blew out a cloud of smoke and removed a speck of tobacco from her scarlet lips. "After all," she murmured, "there is no good reason why you should not know the truth." She raised her eyes to my face. "But do you have to stand over me like that?"

I took the other chair. The letters I placed, convenient to my hand and well out of my companion's reach, on the cushioned rail surrounding the fireplace. "*Voilà*," she said. "An officer of good family has mixed himself up with this dancer..."

"A German officer?" I queried. She shot me a quick glance from under her long lashes. "A German officer, if you will. He has written this woman letters—foolish letters: well, you can judge for yourself since you've read them. Now the affair is at an end, the gentleman would marry and he wants his letters back. But the lady is difficult. And so, to avoid a scandal, I come to recover the letters.... You see, I am frank..."

"Admirably so," I commented dryly.

"To avoid a scandal, the family would pay, I think"—she flashed me another sidelong glance—"a hundred pounds..."

"A hundred pounds is a lot of money for a German family to shell out," I observed. "Who is this man? That's his photo on the piano, isn't it? But I'd like to hear his name..."

She sighed impatiently. "You may not believe me, but I don't know it. All I can tell you is that he's related by marriage to one of the most important families..."

She broke off abruptly. Her hand was pointing at the letters as they lay on the fender seat, their edges curling, up in the heat of the fire. I then perceived that, between the lines of sloping writing, fresh rows of characters in brownish ink had mysteriously appeared.

I snatched up the topmost sheet. I saw at a glance what the invisible ink had concealed. These were numbered answers in German to a series of questions—the questionnaire is a favourite method of utilising the services of agents—and they dealt with military matters, German military matters at that—there was a reference to the defences of Thorn, one of Prussia's chief fortresses on the Russian frontier, and mention of experiments with an automatic recoil field gun at some artillery ranges in Schleswig. Momentarily forgetting my companion, I held each letter in turn to the bars of the grate and in each instance the warmth brought the same evidence to light. I had in my hands a series of detailed reports on Germany's defences against Russia.

I turned to the woman at my side. She had not budged from her chair. She was watching me with fascinated eyes. "Love letters, eh?" I said, looking at her. "And now, madam, we'll have the truth..."

"I've told you all I know," she protested weakly.

"Not all, surely," said I. "You haven't yet told me who sent you here..."

"It was a gentleman acting on behalf of this officer's family..."

"Who is this officer?"

"I've told you already, I don't know his name. But he's someone very important..."

"How, important? A general, do you mean?"

"His rank is only captain. But he's a Serene Highness, a Prince. He was infatuated with this dancer: he wanted to marry her. And so, acting on behalf of very highly placed interests in Germany, this gentleman I speak of asked me to get these letters back..."

"Fiddlesticks," I broke in crisply. "Your officer may be a Prince. But he's also a common or garden spy supplying information to the Russian General Staff through their agent, Mitzi Funda. And you're an agent of the German secret service!"

She sat there like one annihilated. She was so pale that I thought she was going to faint as she had fainted that night in Brussels. I collected the letters and thrust them in my pocket. Then I went across to her with her wrap. "And now," said I, holding it out for her to slip on, "since neither of us wishes to be surprised here by the owner of this apartment, we're going somewhere where we can have a quiet talk."

At that she sprang up. "You can't detain me," she cried.

"Perhaps not," said I, laughing, "but I'm going to. And if you're sensible you'll make the best of what I'll not conceal from you is a very bad business."

She gave me a scared look and, without another word, let me help her into her cloak. Then I put out the light and we went downstairs together.

I told the taxi to drive us to the Albany.

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### News of the Box

Her silence lasted while we were whirled through the lights and traffic of Leicester Square and Piccadilly. As for myself, my brain was busy with my own thoughts. We might conceivably hold the lady, I reflected, on a charge of being found upon enclosed premises, a charge which would lie, with equal force, against me; but the chance of any London magistrate granting her extradition to Belgium on the available evidence was of the slightest, and in any case I knew the Chief would set his face against the publicity. It did not escape me that in this matter of Russo-German espionage we were to all intents and purposes neutral, and a plan was forming in my mind by which we might make the most of our situation as *tertius gaudens*.

I had directed the driver to set us down at the back, or Vigo Street entrance of the Albany (which is locked after nightfall) in order that our arrival might attract less attention. I opened the wicket gate in the iron shutter with my key and motioned to my companion to enter. She obeyed submissively. The covered way (styled by initiates "the ropewalk") which traverses this peaceful Piccadilly retreat was deserted in the dim light of its old-fashioned lamps. My "set" (as suites in the Albany are called) was on the ground floor with two windows, of the sitting-room and bedroom respectively, looking out, across a patch of anæmic grass, upon the ropewalk. There was no one about and my companion and I gained my chambers unobserved.

I led the way through the hall into the sitting-room and switched on the light. The little Madame was gazing curiously about her. I did not expect a lady of her exciting profession to betray any excessive bashfulness at being ushered into a man's rooms after nightfall, but all the same her self-composure struck me as remarkable. She appeared to have recovered from her fright: her bearing was relaxed and debonair; evidently, she was a woman who was at her ease in any surroundings. The only emotion she displayed was the sort of furtive curiosity which most women evince in similar circumstances.

"What is this place?" she asked, glancing round the sitting-room.

"It's called Albany," I told her.

"It is an hotel?"

"No. It's more like an apartment house..."

"It is so quiet, like a convent..."

"Not much of the convent about it. Only bachelors have apartments here..."

"A monastery then?" She was examining my prints.

I laughed. "I wouldn't say that, either, although it's a strictly masculine establishment..."

"A refuge for men?"

"If you like. But for bachelors..."

"I understand. A sort of"—her fingers groped—"a sort of home for fallen men, is that it?" And she laughed merrily.

I laughed, too—she had a pretty wit. With her queenly air, she let her wrap slide from her gleaming arms. She seemed to take charge of the proceedings. I relieved her of her cloak, not sorry that the ice was broken between us. "Will you have a drink?" I said. She shook her head. "But you may give me a cigarette..." She sat down on the couch before the fire. I fetched her the cigarette box and gave her a light, then placed myself at the other end of the couch.

"This is a clever woman," I said to myself, surveying her. "She knows when she's beaten. And she has got all her wits about her..." Aloud I remarked "I'm wondering what nationality you are, Madame..."

"Does it matter?" she replied simply.

"You're obviously foreign and yet your name is English," I told her.

She turned her head quickly and gazed at me. "You know my name?"

I laughed. "I know more about you than you think, Miss—or should it be—Mrs. Stafford?"

The expression of her face was unrevealing. "They call me Mrs. Stafford," she answered with a secretive air.

"You have an English husband?"

She shook her head. "I was married. But not to an Englishman. It is my mother's name. She came from Scotland. I use it because, everywhere I go, I find the English respected. Life is not easy for a woman alone..."

She spoke with a gentle melancholy which was attractive. I liked her air of candour. But I had to think of my job. So I said, "I'm wondering what you, who are not a German, are doing, working for the German secret service?"

She sighed. "In the circumstances I can't expect you to believe me, but..." She broke off, "I am not of the secret service," she affirmed simply. "What I told you was the truth, or what was represented to me as the truth. I was asked to recover those letters by someone who was interested in extricating this officer from—how do you say?—a scrape. I had no idea there was any question of espionage involved and, what is more, I don't think the person who sent me knew it, either..."

"And who might this person be, Madame?" I questioned. I knew, of course, but I was anxious to see what she would reply. With eyes half-closed she shook her head. "I mustn't answer that," she whispered.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I hope you realise that you're not in a position to refuse an answer to any of my questions..."

She nodded briefly. "You don't know what you ask," she declared. Suddenly she turned and with an engaging air, laid her hand on my sleeve. "Let us be frank," she pleaded. "These letters, they are of no importance to the English. How does it affect the safety of this country if a German officer who has forgotten his oath furnishes military information to a Russian agent? But these letters are of the greatest importance to the man who sent me to fetch them..."

"Why?"

"Because the honour of a German princely house is at stake..."

I laughed. "I'm afraid the argument leaves me comparatively cold. In any case, until I know who this man is..."

"I've told you I don't know his name. Besides, what does he matter? He is nothing."

"I agree. But I wasn't thinking of the Prince. I meant the man who sent you. Who is he and what is his name?"

She moved her slim body restlessly. "If I tell you, will you let me take those letters back?"

"I might—on conditions..."

"He is of the household of the Emperor. His name is ... Dr. Grundt!"

"And why do you have to accept orders from him, may I ask?"

She was staring into the fire, one slim leg crossed over the other. There was grace—the grace of some wild creature—in every line of her. For a moment she was silent. Then in a low voice she said, "Sometimes a woman has no choice..."

"Meaning that you're in his power?"

She shook herself and sprang up. "I have said too much already. Give me those letters and let me go!"

Eyes alight, one hand eagerly stretched out, she faced me. "Not so fast," I said. "If I do this for you, I want a service in return..."

Her expression was suddenly cautious. With a disappointed air she turned from me. "What is it?" she asked dully.

"I want you to tell me what you did with a certain gold box," I answered. I was watching her face.

This woman was incalculable. This time she did not blench. She simply said, in the same leaden tones, "So? You know about that?"

I fully expected now that she would recognise me as the intruder who had burst in upon her that night in Brussels. But she did not even look at me, but remained, with head averted, staring absently down at her fingers plucking at the arm of the couch.

"I know that you killed an Englishman named Forrest and robbed him of this box," I declared. The first statement I was pretty sure was false, but I made it with the deliberate intent to provoke her. In this I succeeded for, on the instant, she whipped about and, eyes blazing, cried out, "No, no, you mustn't say that. I didn't kill Forrest. His death was an accident or, if not an accident, a fatality, a horrible, ghastly fatality like any other cruel and needless murder. If I were free, rather than associate with those who, even though involuntarily, were responsible, I'd flee to the other end of the world..." She wrung her hands. "Oh, how can I make you believe that?"

"By telling me the truth," I said sternly.

She shook her head. "I can't—I daren't..."

"You know the alternative," I reminded her. "And there's this. The Belgian secret police know all about you. They'll be only too pleased to claim you for extradition"—I made a deliberate pause—"on the charge of murder..."

"But I tell you I didn't kill Forrest..." she cried desperately.

"You can explain that to the magistrate at Bow Street," I gave her back brutally.

I could see she was wavering. "You won't believe me if I do tell you the truth," she said tensely.

"You must let me be the best judge of that..."

Her hands clasped tightly before her, she raised her splendid eyes to the ceiling and let them range about the room as though she sought, vainly, for some way of escape. "You don't know what you ask of me," she whispered. "If *he* knew I'd spoken to you..." She broke off and fastened her splendid eyes entreatingly on my face. "Oh, believe me," she said, "I'm not thinking only of myself now..."

"You needn't fear that I shall give you away," I assured her.

"If only I could rely on that promise..."

"I give you my word of honour..."

"You understand," she put in tremulously, "if ever he should discover that I had spoken, it would mean ruin for me. And—and not for me alone..."

"All I want is the truth," I answered. "Your relations with anybody else don't concern me..."

She sighed. Then, helping herself to a cigarette, she walked to the mantelpiece and peered forward to gaze absently at her reflection in the mirror hanging above it. Presently she veered round to me. "Sit down," she said, indicating the couch with the point of her satin slipper. And as I obeyed, "You probably won't believe my story, but you must let me tell it in my own way, without interruption..."

The whirr of the telephone bell cut across her words. I was in no mood to be disturbed just then. I leaned forward to the instrument at my elbow, lifted the receiver and dumped it down on the table.

Her glance thanked me. "I met Forrest at the Bristol in Berlin," she said. "It was on the Friday, two days before we left for Paris. Yes," she went on, anticipating my question, "my orders were to contrive that he should speak to me. It wasn't very easy. He was—how do you call it—shy. And such a lonely, strange man. But, *enfin*, these things can be arranged. After that, it wasn't difficult..."

"Were you his mistress?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"You expect me to believe that?"

With a thoughtful air she flaked the ash from her cigarette into the fire-place. "I told you my story was improbable. He was not that sort of man. The sea was his mistress. His talk was all of the sea and boats..."

"Yet he used to kiss you?"

Her head, hands and shoulders moved together in a gesture of indifference, while her eyes reproved me haughtily. "You said you would not interrupt..."

"I'm sorry..."

"Then shall I go on?"

"Please..."

"My orders were to get a certain gold box..."

"Why? What did it contain?"

Her eyes narrowed suddenly. "Why do you ask me that?"

I scented a trap. "As far as I know the box contained nothing except cigarettes, perhaps," I hastened to explain unconcernedly. "You see, it's an heirloom, and Forrest's family are anxious to get it back..." This was an improvisation and fictitious at that. For Forrest, as I well knew, had been absolutely alone in the world. "Didn't Grundt tell you why he wanted it?" I persisted.

The name seemed to scare her and she lowered her voice. "He told me only that Forrest was under suspicion," she answered with a frightened air. "They had been through his luggage at the Bristol without finding anything incriminating. He was known to have this box, however, and I was to get it for them. My first orders were to find out where he kept it. That was not easy until one day when I borrowed a pencil from him and when he opened his coat, I saw the bulge under his waistcoat and guessed that he carried the box in a secret pocket in the lining. I reported this to Grundt and he told me I was to accompany Forrest to Paris and steal the box on the train..."

"Why not at the hotel?"

"I think Grundt did not want Forrest to have any idea who had robbed him. Well, I told Forrest I had to go to Paris and we arranged to travel together. He booked us neighbouring compartments in the sleeper. I was warned that the train would stop for three minutes at this village of Ablesse where a man would be waiting beside the railway. I was given a powder to put in Forrest's drink and a key to open the communicating door between our two compartments. I was warned not to enter his compartment until the last possible moment in case there should be any—how do you say?—hitch in the plan. When I had the box all I had to do was to go to the door at the front end of the sleeper and hand the box to the man who would be waiting there..."

She paused and turned wearily away, crushing her cigarette out, with a quick, stabbing movement of the hand, in the ash-tray that stood on the mantelpiece. "We dined together in the restaurant car that night," she resumed, "but I could not find the opportunity to empty the powder in his glass. For that I had to wait until later when we were back in the sleeping car. I said I would like a drink before I went to bed—I had some Perrier in my compartment and he had a flask. *Allez*, it wasn't difficult. But it seems I had left it too late..."

"You mean the powder didn't take effect?"

"Not fully, although about eleven o'clock or so he began to get sleepy and we said good night. The train was to be halted at 12.33 in the morning. From midnight on I was ready waiting in my compartment, trying to make up my mind to act before-the-train stopped—three minutes seemed such a little time. At last, when it was half-past twelve, I felt I could wait no longer..."

She broke off to light another cigarette. "When I entered his compartment," she continued presently, "I was horrorstruck to see, by the blue bright light that burned in the roof, that he had lain down fully dressed. He was asleep but I was terribly afraid that the moment he felt my hand under his waistcoat he would wake. While I was still hesitating the train suddenly began to rock and I heard the hiss of the brakes—I knew we were stopping. In a panic I thrust my hand inside his waistcoat. The box was there—I could feel the hard edge. But the pocket was buttoned up and I had to undo his waistcoat before I could get the box out. I managed it without arousing him and slipped the box into my bag. As I crept to the door, I was suddenly seized from behind. He had woken up and caught me by the arms. He did not cry out but I knew that he was trying to pinion me with one hand and with the other turn the light full on to see who I was. I was struggling desperately when suddenly I saw a man in the doorway, a strange pallid man who had a knife in his hand—I saw it glitter in the dimness. He seemed to strike Forrest with his fist and immediately I felt the grip on my arms relax and Forrest reeled backwards. Then there was a terrific crash and the light went out..."

She laid her cigarette aside and covered her eyes with her hand. She remained silent for an instant thus. Then she said, "I don't think I lost consciousness. I felt myself swept off my feet and glass was falling all about me. Instinctively I shut my eyes and clutched a strap or something. When I opened my eyes again I saw a gaping hole beside me and crawled out. There were clouds of escaping steam, shouts and people screaming. Before me was a hedge and, on the other side, a man who ran up and down like a madman. On catching sight of me, he rushed over. He seemed to know me—I discovered later it was a chauffeur who had driven me in Berlin—and asked if I were hurt. When I said I was all right he began to question me about someone who he kept saying had got into the train to find me. But then I must have fainted, for the next thing I knew I was in a motor-car going to Brussels..."

"And the box?"

"Still in my bag..."

"What did you do with it?"

She did not speak at once: she had her back to me and was gazing down into the fire. "What did you do with the box?" I repeated.

She swung about and her earnest gaze considered me. "Do you believe my story?" she demanded rather tensely.

"Yes," said I, for it had the ring of truth, fitting in, as it did, with the discovery of Lipschütz's dead body under the wreck and of his finger-prints on the stiletto plunged in Forrest's chest. Moreover, she had spoken throughout with an air of simple frankness which had made the strongest impression upon me.

"Do you now believe that it was not I who killed this man?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered. "But you can't escape the moral responsibility for his death..."

She bowed her head. "I felt that, too. It gives me no peace. That is why I did not hand over the box..."

Her answer electrified me. Then Garnet's theory was right and Forrest's list had not fallen into Grundt's hands. Why, this simplified matters beyond words! "You mean, you have it still?" I demanded incredulously.

She inclined her dark head again. "It was the first time I'd ever done a thing like this. This Englishman had trusted me—he was different from other men I have met, kind and chivalrous and, well, when it came to the point, the thought of it almost disarmed me. To have robbed him was bad enough: to have sent him to his death..." She broke off rather breathlessly. "After what had happened, to have handed over his box would have made me a direct accomplice in his murder, or so it seemed to me. I felt it would bring me bad luck. And so I kept the box..."

"But how did you explain to Grundt? Didn't he ask you where it was?"

"I said it was lost in the accident, that I had it in my hand when the crash came and that when I crawled out of the wreckage it had disappeared. If he had shown any regret, any anger against the assassin..."

"What did he say?"

"Merely that it complicated matters and that someone whose name I have forgotten would answer to him for exceeding instructions. But he cared nothing for the fact that a man had been murdered: his only thought was of the box..."

"Did you gather why he was so keen to obtain possession of it?"

"He said several times that Forrest must have been carrying papers of importance and that if they were anywhere they were in the box..."

"And when you said you hadn't got it, what did he do?"

She shuddered. "He raged like a wild beast. It was terrible. I went back to Germany with him and all the way he



stormed at me. It was to appease him that I undertook this mission. Now you understand why I must take back those letters..." She raised her liquid eyes to mine. "You've been so understanding. You're going to help me, aren't you?"

I stood up and went to her at the fire-place. "Where is the box now?" I asked.

"In Germany," she replied in a low voice.

"Where in Germany?"

"What does it matter?" she said rather petulantly. "If I give you my word to return the box, you will have it..."

"When?"

"It could not be before next week..."

"There's a boat train for Germany that leaves first thing in the morning," I suggested. "Why don't we catch it together? You can then hand me the box and in return I'll give you the letters..."

She shrunk away from me, aghast. "You must be mad. This man has spies everywhere. If I were seen with you..." She fingered my coat lapel. "Aren't you willing to trust me, *dites*?"

"That's not the point," I evaded. "You say yourself you're under observation and I'm not taking any risks.... By the way," I went on and tried to make my tone as casual as possible, "since you've got the box, you can probably tell me what's in it..."

She gave me a rapid, searching glance. "Don't you *know*?" she asked with a tinge of suspicion in her voice.

"What?" I asked as innocently as possible.

"Haven't you seen this box?"

"Not me," I affirmed solemnly. "I told you the family had inquired about it.... Why?"

"Because ... well, it can't be opened, that's all. There's no lock or fastening, only a sort of arrow that twirls in the lid. A trick box, it seems to be. I tried to open it, and I couldn't see how it works..."

I could hardly control my excitement. Not only was that list of spies still out of Grundt's hands, but he had also no certain knowledge of its existence. Moreover, the secret lock was a safeguard against this woman realising the importance of the box in the event of her wishing to play false with me and supposing she had detained the box for some undisclosed motive of her own—I had to admit to myself that her story, to say the least, was romantic. "Now, listen to me Mrs. Stafford," I said to her, "this is the best I can do. I propose to allow you to go free from here and return to Germany unmolested..."

Her eyes danced. "It's true?" she cried. "Oh, I felt sure I did right to trust you..."

"Let me finish," I put in. "For the moment, the letters stay with me..."

On the instant the glow died out of her face. "Then what?" she said in a hard voice.

"On a word from you," I went on, "I or some other properly accredited emissary will bring the letters to any place you care to designate and there exchange them against the box..."

She bit her lip, shaking her head sadly; she looked as if she were going to cry. "You're sending me to my death," she exclaimed brokenly. "Without those letters I dare not return to him..." She took my two hands in hers: there was magnetism in the touch of her soft, warm palms. "For the love of God, my friend," she entreated, "do this for me and I promise you you won't regret it..."

She looked entrancingly lovely as she appealed to me, her charming, vital features transfigured with eagerness. Once more that faint exotic perfume she used enveloped me. I felt my resolution slipping. To hearten myself I said harshly, "It's the best I can do for you, my dear, and it's no use discussing it further..." She drew her hands away and with a tiny handkerchief began dabbing forlornly at her nose. "You say you're in the hands of this man, Grundt," I went on. "If you'd tell me more about it, we might see if we can't find a way to get you out of his clutches..."

Before she had time to answer the door bell rang.

## 97

### Dr. Grundt goes visiting

Albany—the definite article is frowned upon by initiates—is very quiet at night. The bell seemed to peal through the place like a fire alarm. The woman's glance consulted me fearfully. "Must you open?" "They can see the light from outside," I told her. "Is there a back door?" she asked. I shook my head. The bell trilled again.

Going to the bedroom door, I opened it and switched on the light. "Step in here for a moment while I see who it is," I bade her. Gathering up her wrap, her bag and her gloves, she disappeared hastily, closing the door behind her. I glanced round the room, replaced the telephone receiver on its hook, shook up the cushions on the couch and went out to the hall.

One glance at the massive shape bulking darkly in the trembling gaslight of the landing told me who my visitor was. I was dumbfounded, less by seeing him there, I believe, than by the colossal effrontery of the fellow in showing himself in London at all. Big as a house, head down in characteristic pose, leaning on his stick, he regarded me. Then, lifting his bowler hat, he grated stiffly, "Pardon, if I disturb you thus late. You are Herr Dunlop, I think?"

"That is my name," I replied.

"I am Dr. Grundt," he grunted gutturally, "and I desire the favour of a few minutes' conversation with you..."

"It's late," I observed without enthusiasm. "It would suit me better if you would call again in the morning..."

"In the morning I shall be on my way back to the Continent," he rejoined heartily. "Come, come, Herr, as between colleagues, I ask you, is it friendly to keep me waiting in this draughty passage?" And he brushed unceremoniously past me into the hall where, with all due deliberation, he slung his overcoat from his shoulders and hung it, together with his hat, on the hat-rack.

I could have stopped him, but I held my hand. The fact is that everything about this man interested me. I was fascinated by the strong suggestion of the anthropoid ape in his demeanour: I could not keep my eyes off him—it seemed to me I had never beheld a more extraordinary-looking individual. And I was enormously intrigued by his visit. There was something eminently worth while studying about a fellow who thus blandly, imperiously, even, would walk straight into the enemy stronghold—I mentally doffed my hat to his sublime and invincible cheek. One should lose no chance of becoming better acquainted, I reflected, with a foe of this exceptional calibre. As for the lady concealed in my bedroom I scarcely gave her a thought. In the circumstances she would know better than to disclose herself, and as far as I was concerned, I could guarantee that Grundt would not discover her. As I thought of the bargain Mrs. Stafford and I had struck, I could not refrain from indulging, at my visitor's expense, in a brief moment of what he would have called "*Schadenfreude*," that untranslatable German portmanteau word for pleasure in another's discomfiture.

We went into the sitting-room. He declined a drink but accepted a cigar. You who read these old souvenirs of mine may wonder that, having the man responsible for the death of my unfortunate colleague there in my power, I did not instantly call up Vine Street and hand him over to the police. But that was not the way of the Secret Service. The score was chalked up against this man and one day it would be paid off. But it would be paid off in our own time and our own

way, if so be with the aid of the police, then with the support of evidence a great deal more specifically incriminating than any we possessed against him at that time. For the moment all we had against him was that he had been seen in the company of a woman indirectly implicated in a murder charge on foreign soil.

He had planted his big body down on the couch and was nonchalantly rolling his cigar in his hairy fingers.

"So, my dear colleague?" he now said in his thick English. "You doubtless know what brings me here..."

"If I do," I told him bluntly, "then I'm better informed than I thought I was..."

"You have not perhaps forgotten our meeting in Brussels?"

The man's nerve was colossal. "I'm not likely to!" I blurted out angrily. But at the same time I made a mental note, not without a certain glow of satisfaction, that my disguise at Schwarzenthal had stood proof against that searching glance.

He clicked gently with his tongue. "A most unfortunate mistake..." He scowled heavily. "It is not, however, a mistake that the gentleman in question will repeat. A valued member of your staff, this Forrest?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I intervened loftily. "As far as I know Forrest was a shipping man..." I was diverted by my visitor's careful avoidance of any reference to Forrest's box.

He simmered gently. "Quite, quite. Discretion before everything..." He paused. "But we waste time. Now, if you'll permit me, I shall speak in German because, if I remember rightly, on that night in Brussels you demonstrated your mastery of our language ... *also*,"—he went into German—"to the point. You visited a certain apartment to-night. You entered alone, but you left with a lady. You drove here with her and vanished through a locked door at which I, in my ignorance of London, have been vainly hammering for the past twenty minutes. And when a compassionate constable referred me to the Piccadilly entrance, it took me almost as long to discover from a singularly thick-skulled night watchman the number of your apartment. Of course he went on," with a sidelong glance at me, "had I known that, like Mahomet, you possess a variety of names..."

He did not finish the sentence but, with a brusque gesture, thrust the cigar he was fingering into his mouth. Until I had seen Dr. Grundt light a cigar I did not know that this comparatively straightforward operation could serve as such a complete demonstration of character. There was ferocity in the way in which, with a snap of his fang-like teeth, he bit off the end, and contemptuous arrogance in the way in which, disgustingly, he spat the severed tip far out upon the rug. He was concentration and deliberation personified as he carefully warmed the cigar at the match flame and nursed the smouldering end to a glow: the picture of luxuriant self-indulgence and animal enjoyment, too, as, with his blubber lips pursed up, his great head thrown backward and his bristling nostrils expanded to savour the aroma, he blew a long cloud of smoke and emitted a resonant grunt of satisfaction. Ferocity, arrogance, concentration, self-gratification—there was the whole portrait of Dr. Grundt.

He addressed me once more, cigar in hand. "There were letters found to-night, my friend," he said briskly. "I want them..."

"Herr Doktor," I retorted, "it'll save us both a lot of trouble if you'll understand, once and for all, that I'm answering no questions..."

"Remark," said he loftily, "that I ask none. I do not inquire, 'Where is the lady?'—I am, I hope, too gallant for that—or 'Where are the letters?' I merely state that I must have them!"

"My answer is, in any case, the same..."

"Ta, ta, ta, not so fast! Let me explain. What at first sight appeared to be merely a piece of folly now appears, in the light of information that has come to my knowledge since my arrival in London this morning, to be a grave case of espionage..." His voice took on an authoritative tone. "You've driven that ruffian Markus out of London, they tell me?"

There was no reason why I should not admit it. Markus was a notorious double-cross. "He didn't want much

driving," I replied. "He saw the red light and skipped..."

"And now the little Funda has followed him?"

Grundt was as sharp as a needle. I said nothing, but he detected the surprise in my face. "Is it possible I am telling you something you didn't know, *lieber Kollege*?" he snarled. "She did not appear at the theatre to-night. She sent a letter to say she had received bad news, that she might go back to Hungary. Markus fled from you, but she fled from Markus. Shall I tell you why? Because she wanted to marry an Englishman, an officer, as I hear, of your navy. But you would know about that better than I..."

I said nothing. "Women, bah!" the big man rumbled. "They are all the same. They love and suddenly"—he sawed the air with his great paw—"they want to cut loose from their past. So I fancy it was with the little Funda. But Markus thought otherwise. From across the Channel he would have sent you a denunciation of Fräulein Mitzi. But the lady was too quick—she forestalled him. Our Russian friends must find a new agent and the English officer a new fiancée. And so the affair is classified, finished, ruled off. That being so, you will let me take those letters, *nicht wahr*?"

"I know of no letters," I told him stiffly.

His face darkened and he had to make an effort to control himself. "I'll be frank," he declared in his heavy bass. "Without them I cannot bring home the guilt of one who is a traitor to the most loyal and devoted corps of officers in the world. Give me those letters, Herr, and let me finish my job!"

"As far as I'm concerned," I rejoined brusquely, "It's finished here and now. I didn't ask you here and the sooner you take yourself off the better!"

On that he scrambled awkwardly to his feet. "Give me those letters!" he cried hoarsely. His eyes were enraged.

"There are no letters," I affirmed. "And if there were, you shouldn't have them..."

"Don't lie to me," he trumpeted. "You went into that house in Long Acre before the woman—I saw you. If you haven't got the letters, then she has. In that case, what is she doing here?"

All through our interview my ears had been strained for any sound from the bedroom, but I had heard nothing. I wondered at what point in our conversation the woman had discovered the identity of my visitor. The door was solid mahogany; but it seemed to me that Grundt's last strident shout must have penetrated it. I could picture to myself the frightened, graceful creature cowering behind it.

"There's no one here except ourselves," I lied stoutly, and at the same time edged towards the bedroom door. But he was facing me, his back to it, and I could not pass him without attracting his attention.

"You brought her here with you," he thundered. Then, raising his head, he sniffed. "Don't you think I know the perfume she uses?" Like a flash he whipped about and with bewildering agility for one crippled as he was, made, hobbling, for the bedroom. I tried to intercept him, but I was too late. He flung the door wide, then, lurching with his heavy boot, stepped quickly back.

Garnet stood in the doorway.

Grundt glared at her, then, slowly turning, directed a glance, charged with suspicion and bewilderment, at me. He seemed utterly disconcerted, as, indeed, was I. "What's all the noise about?" Garnet demanded serenely. She came slowly into the sitting-room.

She was in evening dress with a dark wrap and looked very presentable, as, indeed, she always did when she laid aside those darned gig-lamps of hers. The German's face was a study. He put me in mind of a wild beast of the jungle disturbed by some unfamiliar sound or smell. He kept screwing his short neck round to glance from Garnet to me and from us back to the bedroom.

"This gentleman," I observed suavely to Garnet, "is under the impression that I have a lady friend of his concealed in my bedroom..."

Garnet shook her head at me. "You're a desperate villain. Where is she?" She advanced calmly into the sitting-room.

"How long ... how long have you been in there?" Grundt asked her huskily. His cigar had gone out and he was easing his collar with his fingers.

Garnet laughed. "Ever since you saw fit to disturb our *tête-à-tête*..." She looked at me. "What time was it when you brought me back from Long Acre?"

The cripple glowered. "You were at Long Acre with him to-night?" he asked her, breaking in before I could answer.

"Certainly. I went to call on a friend of mine, but she was out. I found Mr. Clavering there and we came away together..."

I was in transports of delight at her quickness. The German grunted—he obviously did not know what to believe—and favoured us again with his baleful stare. Then muttering, "Permit me!" he limped through to the bedroom.

I followed after. The room was undisturbed, the curtains drawn across the French window, the bed turned down for the night. To my dismay I was conscious of that subtle fragrance again. Grundt caught it too for I saw him cant over that bullet head of his and sniff. Then irresolutely he hauled himself across to the curtains, parted them. The window was shut and bolted. He opened a wall press, glanced in at the adjoining bathroom, let his gaze rove around the room perfunctorily and limped out. Garnet, watching him from the doorway, stood back to let him pass.

"You've forgotten something," she said. He veered about. He was bristling with anger. "You didn't look under the bed," she observed demurely. He scowled savagely. "The young lady is pleased to be facetious," he growled in his throaty English. "But I have made no mistake. The woman I am looking for was here..." He broke into a sudden bellow. "*Verdammt*, I know her perfume. The whole place reeks of it!"

With a little laugh Garnet waved the handkerchief she carried under his nose. "Your friend is not the only one to use scent, you know," she remarked easily. The hairy fingers shot out and seized the handkerchief, pawing it over until they found the initials—I could see them plainly from where I stood, "M.W."—for "Margaret Wolseley." With a snort Grundt thrust the handkerchief back into her hand. Her laugh followed him as, flinging away from her, he stumped out into the hall. A moment later we heard the front door bang and a heavy, halting footstep ring on the flagstones until the night peace of Albany swallowed the sound.

I was already at the house telephone connected with the night porter's lodge. "A lame gentleman has just left me," I told the porter. "He will in all probability ask you to get him a cab. You'll keep him waiting for five minutes before you find one. Is that understood?" Then I rang up Vine Street police station which, for the benefit of those whose geography of Central London is defective, I might explain is practically next door to the Albany.

I found the calm Irish voice of the station sergeant very heartening. "Considine," said I, "this is Major Clavering speaking. There's a big lame man waiting in the entrance of the Albany or just leaving. How long will it take you to put two of your plain clothes men on his trail? I don't want him interfered with: I merely want to know where he goes..."

"Hould the line a minewt now, Meejor..." There was a pause during which I looked for Garnet and saw her calmly

powdering her face in the glass. The station sergeant's voice spoke softly in my ear. "They're afther leavin'. Will they report to you, sorr?"

"Please, Sergeant Considine..." I hung up, then, lifting the receiver again, asked for the Chief's home number. Garnet turned round from the mirror. "You won't get him," she said. "He's out of town for the night. But you can take it from me, you've done the right thing. The old man wouldn't want him interfered with..." She shook her head at the door through which Clubfoot had vanished. "Ouf, what a brute!"

"Garnet," I exclaimed, replacing the receiver, "you're a wonder! Talk about Houdini—the cabinet trick is nothing to it. But tell me first—how did you get hold of her perfume?"

Garnet chuckled. "That was easy. All perfume smells alike to a man at close quarters. I happened to have some Ful-Nana on my hanky so I pushed it under his nose. That's all!"

I roared with laughter. "You're a scream. But the vanishing trick, how on earth did you manage that?"

She was tapping a cigarette to rights on the back of her hand. "I was dining with friends at the Berkeley when someone who came to our table mentioned that Mitzi Funda didn't appear at the theatre to-night. So I rang you at her flat to warn you, in case she showed up there, I mean. When there was no reply I telephoned you here, but the exchange could get no answer. That was about three-quarters of an hour ago. I rang you again here about a quarter of an hour later and, after a lot of bother, the exchange told me your receiver was off the hook. So I came round. The night-porter said a big, lame man had called on you—a foreigner who asked a lot of questions. The porter seemed a bit suspicious of him. Then, as I was coming along the ropewalk, or whatever you call it, I saw a woman in evening dress run across the grass in front of one of the ground floor flats. A window behind her was open and I discovered that it was one of your windows. I stepped back into an entrance out of sight and saw her go by—she seemed to be scared out of her wits. So I took the liberty of nipping in at the open window. The first thing I heard, when I was in the bedroom, was someone telling you in German in the next room that he'd followed you and some woman here. By the way," she added, "it is Grundt, isn't it?"

"Old Clubfoot in person," said I. "Did you ever hear of such nerve? And the woman you saw is Madeleine Stafford, poor Charles's Delilah..."

"Ah!" she said thoughtfully. "She's very beautiful. But she's dangerous, too..."

"That remains to be seen," I rejoined. With a meditative air Garnet had seated herself upon the fender. "Tell me!" she ordered composedly, settling her frock.

"Not until I've mixed myself a drink," I told her, moving to the sideboard. "And you'd better have one, too. That is, if your Puritan principles permit..."

"I'm afraid my principles are blown sky-high," she returned quietly. "Don't you realise I'm irretrievably compromised? Our hop-and-go-kick friend will carry back to Germany with him the most deplorable impression of my morals. In the circumstances I think I might venture, don't you, if you make it a weak one?"

I could scarcely believe my ears. This was a side of our Garnet I had never seen in office hours. Swinging her legs on the fender, while she sipped her Scotch and soda, she listened to my narrative of the evening's events. "Let's take a look at those letters," she suggested when I had finished.

To read them she had to put on those horrible glasses of hers and immediately became the old official Garnet again. She was an excellent German scholar and made quick work of that spidery hand. "This is the real stuff," was her comment as she passed the letters back to me. "No wonder old Clubfoot wanted them..." She leaned her brown head back against the mantel-piece. "And so you really think that this Stafford woman will get the box back in exchange for those letters?" she demanded.

Her tone ruffled me slightly. "Yes, I do. After all, the box is in her possession and Grundt knows nothing about it..."

"At present, yes..."

"What do you mean by that?"

She swung a slim foot. "Don't you realise you've let her see that we're anxious to recover the box?"

"I made it perfectly clear that it was only for sentimental reasons..."

Her laugh was short. "You don't imagine she believes that fairy tale, do you?"

"I believe her to be absolutely genuine," I said. "The trouble is that she's not a free agent. This man has got some hold on her..."

"Is this the story she told Forrest?" she asked sarcastically.

"I haven't the least idea," I said.

"I inquire," she rejoined delicately, "merely because it seems to me I've heard it before..."

Women are odd creatures. So many of them seem able to forgive another woman almost anything except charm and good looks. Garnet knew absolutely nothing about Mrs. Stafford except that she was remarkably attractive and that I was interested in her; but it was enough.

"You're quite wrong about her," I cried. "I've met enough liars in this job of ours to know when a person is speaking the truth. Mrs. Stafford is all right. We'll get that box back: you see if we don't..."

Garnet sighed. "Do you still think I was mistaken about Forrest...?"

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Well," she said slowly, "if she was able to tell you this tale so successfully..."

"For an intelligent woman," I told her, "you make at times astonishingly inept remarks. Are you suggesting that I'm in love with her, may I ask?"

Her eyes rested mildly on mine. "Well, are you?"

"It's preposterous," I declared. "A woman I've hardly exchanged two words with ... Come on, I'm going to take you home. And," I added severely, "I must ask you not to go prejudicing the Chief against this idea of mine...."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she answered calmly. "I only said anything now because I don't want you to get hurt..."

She said it very sweetly, but I was still sore and I answered crossly, "I believe I can look after myself..."

"That, my dear," she retorted, "is the most absurd statement you have made to-night!"

But Clubfoot was too many for us. At three o'clock in the morning, by which time I had had a warning circulated to all railway stations and ports in the country to be on the look-out for my lame visitor and, possibly, a woman companion, I was knocked up by two crestfallen detectives. Their tale was of a taxicab chase that had ended in front of a quiet house at Kew and of an indignant landlady in night attire who would hear nothing against her German lodger until they had

shown her the open gate in the garden at the back and tyre marks in the mud of the lane beyond. By what underground route Dr. Grundt fled from England, we never ascertained. There are creeks in Essex where a motor cruiser can lie up unobserved, and Norfolk and Suffolk coves remote from the vigilant eye of the coast-guards—in fine, there are ways out of England of which Bradshaw knows nothing. Mrs. Stafford disappeared without trace at the same time and there appeared to be no doubt that Grundt took her with him—they must have had some prearranged meeting-place.

A week slipped by. I was busy winding up the Mitzi Funda case and remained on in London. Every day I looked for the summons that would put me in possession of the box. The Chief had fully approved my action in the matter—indeed, he was good enough to say that he would not have acted otherwise himself. But I could see that he was mildly sceptical as to the woman living up to her part of the bargain, and I wondered whether Garnet had not been filling him up with her ideas. As for Garnet, I avoided her as much as possible. It seemed to me, when we met, that she wore an increasingly triumphant expression as the days passed and no word came from the other side. And then, without any warning, which is the way things used to happen in our job, the Brander case at Portsmouth claimed my entire attention.

Our people stumbled across Brander's trail by a pure fluke. It was Chief Petty Officer Gybe of H.M.S. *Fearless*, our latest super-dreadnought, who gave the show away by flinging the money about at Brighton races when on leave from his ship. Now if, years before, Gybe had not made a dead set against an A.B. called Griffiths, and Griffiths on leaving the Navy, had not gone into the police, Gybe might never have been caught, I should never have gone to Ostend, and Grundt.... But there, once one starts on a string of hypotheses such as these, there is no end. Besides, I am anticipating....

Gybe's misfortune was that, although he was in mufti, he was recognised by a plain clothes man on the course. This was none other than his old shipmate, Griffiths, who had never forgotten the treatment he had received at Gybe's hands and who now lost no time in communicating to the Special Branch at Scotland Yard (the executive end, so to speak, of the secret service) his doubts as to the source of the petty officer's new-found affluence.

In those years immediately preceding the outbreak of the world war, when the counter-espionage on both sides of the north Sea was right on its toes, the spectacle of a petty officer laying fivers and tenners on the horses was one that merited the attention of sundry retiring individuals in plain clothes who kept unostentatious watch on comings and goings at our chief naval ports and dockyards. A confidential call was paid upon the captain of the *Fearless* which led to a strictly private search of C.P.O. Gybe's ditty-box on board the battleship. It revealed, sewn into the lining of a pea-jacket, a questionnaire concerning the super-dreadnought's forthcoming gunnery trials.

Gybe went to sea again with the questionnaire still reposing in its hiding-place, never suspecting that, night and day, during the week he had spent ashore, he had been under supervision. It was found that his habit, when on shore leave, was to drop in at a tavern behind the Hard at Portsmouth called "The Boatswain's Pipe." It was a modest little beer-house frequented by naval ratings and dockyard hands and was kept by a man named Frederic Brander.

Nothing was known to Brander's discredit. He had been in no trouble with the police, he had no dubious acquaintances. The Portsmouth police had no reason for suspecting him to be anything but what he professed to be, a purser retired after twenty years' service with one of the smaller British steamship lines, as English as his wife, who came from Ryde, across the water, undoubtedly was.

Then *Fearless* returned from her trials. This is where I appeared on the scene. I was one of the party of detectives who grabbed Gybe as he landed from the leave pinnace, wearing his pea-jacket. I have never forgotten the expression on his face as we surrounded him. He went a horrible leaden colour and I guessed that, like most bullies, he was yellow. We hustled him into an office and on searching him found, still sewn up in his jacket, the questionnaire. But this time it was filled in.

Well, he coughed up the whole story, blubbing and lamenting about his wife and children—like all traitors, he was a poor sort of fellow. He was in the hands of the bookies and had misappropriated certain mess funds to pay his debts. A timely loan from his friend, Brander, had saved him from exposure and court martial. Then one day Brander, who had been pressing him for repayment, suggested a method of liquidating the debt and earning a little easy money besides. He represented that a friend of his, employed by a North of England armament firm, was interested in H.M.S. *Fearless's* gunnery trials. If Gybe would answer a few simple questions on the subject, his debt would be washed out and there would be fifty pounds for him in addition. The money would be paid when the questionnaire, duly filled in,



was handed over.

To obtain the necessary evidence against Brander, Gybe had to go through the formality of delivering up the questionnaire. So we escorted him in a body through a network of little cobbled lanes to "The Boatswain's Pipe." The idea was that we should wait in the passage while Gybe, now thoroughly cowed, went as usual to Brander's parlour behind the tap.

But it was early in the morning—not ten o'clock—and the place was not yet open for custom. Brander must have been on the qui vive and seen the little group approach—the sound of the shot rang out through the locked front door before the tinkle of the old-fashioned bell had died away. On that we put our shoulders to the door, but we were too late. We found Brander in the back room, sprawled across the breakfast-table with his brains running out of his ear, and his wife raving over the body.

Not a shred of evidence connecting the dead man with Gybe was found. But what we did discover were Brander's discharge papers from the German Navy, dated a dozen years or so before, and a photograph of the dead man in petty officer's uniform taken in a group on board the German battleship *Preussen*. It struck me as being foolhardy to the point of madness for a man working for the German secret service on British soil to have kept such incriminating documents by him, especially when, like Brander, he was posing as a British subject, and I told the Chief so.

"Shows he wasn't a regular agent," the old man grunted. "The fellow was clearly a novice to have done a damfool thing like that. We'll know more about it when we discover to whom he was reporting...."

Not a line about the case appeared in the newspapers—that was the Chief's doing, I assumed. The inquest on Brander was dispensed with, the body smuggled out and buried secretly, and Brander's wife, who was hopelessly insane, quietly certified and removed to a lunatic asylum. It was given out in the neighbourhood that Brander had gone away on a holiday to recover from the shock of his wife's seizure, and a detective, posing as a relative of the wife's, was installed to conduct the business of the pub.

Then, three days after the tragedy, the Chief sent for me.

I found him highly elated. A letter addressed to Brander at the beer-shop had been sent up by the postal authorities, acting on a confidential order from the Postmaster-General. This communication had arrived on the previous day, two days after Brander's suicide. The envelope, which bore the Brussels post mark, contained only a few lines of typewriting in English without heading or signature and read:

*Await you on the 10th, 4 p.m., Café Apeldoorn, rue de la Digue, Ostend. The silver star will identify.*

The 10th was the following day.

"That our friends have to identify their emissary," the Chief declared, "suggests to me that Brander is not known to them by sight. I propose to kill two birds with one stone. They shall have their questionnaire, or something so like it they won't know the difference, and we'll cash in on it, too. It amuses me to think of old Tirpitz contributing to the office expenses. And with the Treasury so sticky about funds a hundred quid or so—it must be worth that—won't come amiss...." He cocked his shrewd old eye at me. "How would you like to take a chance and impersonate Brander at the rendezvous? Do you think you could carry it off?"

"Why not?" I answered light-heartedly. "As you say, sir, it's fairly evident that they don't know Brander by sight. My German will pass the test and I can play Brander's type on my head. For the rest, I'm perfectly willing to risk it..."

"What is it, Garnet?" the Chief broke in testily. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

I had not noticed Garnet before—the old man had few confidences from her and she was almost like a part of the

furniture posted at her desk in the corner. She had come forward with a sheet of foolscap in her hand. "It's Okewood's latest report, sir," she explained. "It's arrived only this morning. You haven't seen it yet..."

"Well, it'll wait, won't it?"

The Garnet shook her head. "No, Chief, you've got to read it now..."

With a resigned air the old man took the paper from her, frowning as he adjusted his glasses. I could see that two or three lines of the typescript he held were underscored in red. The stern face before me cleared. With a bang the Chief brought his hand down on the desk. "By God," he exclaimed, "I believe we've got him!"

He looked across the desk at me. "Listen to this from Okewood," he said, and proceeded to read out: "Though nominally attached to Section Seven, in reality Grundt appears to control a small force of picked secret service men whose duty it is, under his direction, to carry out investigations in confidential matters in which the Emperor is personally interested. This organisation is said to act entirely independently of all existing Intelligence services, although, such is the degree of authority invested in its head, it has the right to call to its aid at all times the forces of the State. I have been unable to obtain any information as to the numbers or names of those acting under Grundt's orders, but I have ascertained that the badge of their authority is a silver star, eight-pointed and surmounted with a 'G,' signifying 'Garde'..."

He peered at me from over the tops of his horn-rimmed glasses and repeated softly, "A silver star!"

My throat was suddenly dry. "You mean that Grundt is behind this Brander business?"

He nodded curtly, then, slowly, gleefully, began to rub his hands. "Clavering," he said, "I have a notion that we have him where we want him. A word to Vandervliet and he'll have that café surrounded, waiting for our friend to hop blithely into the trap. And this time we'll catch old Clubfoot with the goods on him. Openly conducting espionage on Belgian soil against a nation with which Belgium is at peace—it'll be ten year's penal servitude for him, at least. And when he realises that, he may be willing to talk business..."

"About the gold box?"

"About the gold box, no less..."

"And if he hasn't got it?"

The Chief laughed. "That, my dear Clavering, is the only hypothesis that interests me. If he has the box, it's good-bye to that list of agents; if he hasn't, then it's up to him to help us get it back—otherwise..." He broke off. "I don't believe he'd like a Belgian prison..." he added with a malicious smile.

"We've no certainty that Grundt himself will be waiting for Brander," I pointed out.

"That's true," the Chief agreed. "But remark that once more we are dealing with one of those naval questions in which his august employer is so passionately interested. Nothing delights His Majesty more than to be able to flourish first-hand information about the British Fleet under the noses of his admirals. An authentic report about Fearless's gunnery trials would be a fine feather in the Imperial bonnet. And what a triumph for Grundt!"

A smooth voice struck in. "You don't seriously intend to send Clavering on this mission, do you, Chief?" said Garnet.

It was I who spoke first. "And why not?" I demanded.

"He's seen you repeatedly," she answered, her forehead ruffled above her glasses. "He'll be able to penetrate through any disguise..."

The Chief pushed out his underlip. "She's right Clavering," he told me. "I'd overlooked that..."

"I'm greatly obliged to Miss Wolseley for her solicitude," I rejoined, "but in the first place I'm confident of being able to disguise myself so that my own mother wouldn't recognise me, and that goes for speech and gait as well as my personal appearance. In the second place, if Vandervliet makes a job of it and the trap is properly laid, there's virtually no risk...."

"This man's a savage," Garnet interjected with a quite unusual amount of heat. "He'd think nothing of shooting you down—he tried to shoot you once before. Especially when he finds that he's trapped." ... She turned to the old man who sat, with a face like a graven image, behind his desk. "I know it's no business of mine, sir, but—send somebody else!"

The old man did not reply at once. "I've never ordered a subordinate of mine to undertake a job which might cost him his life," he observed at last. "Clavering here knows that, on a mission of this kind or any other, a dead man's of no use to anybody. If he thinks that it would be foolhardy for him to undertake this trip to Ostend, I shall applaud his common sense and appoint someone else in his place...." He glanced at me inquiringly. "The decision is up to you, Clavering...."

"I go, of course, sir," I told him.

"Then I'll get on to Vandervliet at once. Put in a call to Brussels, urgent priority, will you, please, Garnet, my dear?"

Garnet did not look at me, but went to the telephone.

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### The plan goes awry

One of the things we were taught in the service was that the first essential for the successful impersonation of another individual is to *think* oneself, so to speak, into the skin of the rôle. The Chief was never strong on blue glasses and what he called "yellow ochre and crepe hair."

"If you've sufficiently studied the type you are to represent," he would tell us, "you'll have no difficulty in drawing his mentality like a glove over yours. And if you *think* right, you will unconsciously assume those mannerisms of conduct and gait which are better than any grease paint and wig business."

"Remember, Clavering," he said, in giving me my final orders for my Ostend mission, "that this Brander has followed the sea for many years, not as a seaman, however, for the best part of his service, but as purser, a characteristic type. For the greater portion of his career he was in British ships, acquiring a veneer that led everybody at Portsmouth to take him for an Englishman. Yet behind that veneer were those twelve years he had spent in the German Navy. This man had the blind, unflinching obedience of the German noncommissioned officer in his heart, as, no doubt, those who lured him into this espionage business reckoned. You mustn't forget that; it would have dominated his attitude towards the emissary who was to meet him at Ostend...."

In the rush to get away from London and to work up the rôle I had elected to play I had had scarcely time to weigh seriously my chances of success. I knew that I could depend absolutely on the Chief, in collaboration with my frog-like friend, old Vandervliet, to see that there was no hitch in the arrangements at Ostend. And in fact almost the first person I saw, on landing from the afternoon boat, was Vandervliet's gimlet-eyed assistant, Laporte. In the garb of an hotel tout he was loafing on the quay and, although he looked me square in the face as I came off the second-class gangway with the crowd, I was gratified to perceive that he failed to recognise me. And when at length, after threading a maze of mean streets at the back of the port, I reached the squalid estammet that was the Café Apeldoorn and saw the party of men working rather aimlessly on the road before it, I knew that the trap was set and read to close.

My instructions were simple enough. I had a whistle. On handing over the questionnaire—the original document

faked over, with immense gusto, by the Chief himself—I was to blow my whistle, on which Vandervliet's myrmidons were to rush in and detain everyone present. But I confess I was not feeling too happy in my mind as I sat sipping a glass of beer and waiting for the man with the silver star to show up. Save for two navvies playing cards and a nondescript individual, in a yellow overcoat, who, I fancied, might be a Belgian plain clothes man, reading a newspaper in a corner, I had the place to myself. I was early at the rendezvous and in the interval of waiting I had abundant leisure to reflect upon the hazards of my enterprise.

We were banking on the probability that the man with the silver star—Clubfoot or another—did not know Frederic Brander by sight. If we were wrong, I realised I might have spared myself the trip, for I conjectured that the emissary would take the opportunity of looking me over as a guard against a trap before showing himself. I had little expectation of deceiving anyone already familiar with Brander's appearance; the most I could hope to do was to present a type approximating as nearly as possible to his. With that, supposing the man I was to meet had only a passing acquaintance with Brander, I might still get by; but before all I had Grundt in mind. Here was the greatest risk; if, as the Chief had so confidently anticipated, Grundt were the man with the silver star, I knew it would take the most complete and baffling disguise to hide my real identity from that savage, searching eye.

As far as was practicable, then, I had moulded my appearance on that of the suicide. Physically, we were much of a type—which probably accounted for the Chief's initial proposal that I should impersonate Brander. We were, each of us, big-built, lean of face and aquiline of profile, and wiry. Brander, on the other hand, was fair, with light hair as yet untouched by grey, and light eyebrows and lashes, while I was dark. Treatment with peroxide corrected that, however, with results that still astonished me as I surveyed myself in the mirrored wall behind my sofa seat in the café.

A little stain had given my face and hands a brown and weatherbeaten hue; my hair, now vividly golden, was clipped to the scalp even as Brander's had been; and my low collar and worn blue serge suggested to the life, or so it seemed to me, the mariner ashore. My hat was a cheap, stained felt, and in the lining, neatly folded, was the document—or what purported to be the document—that had cost Brander his life, Brander's wife her reason, and Chief Petty Officer Gybe his career. I felt that I could pass muster with anyone, even Grundt, if, as we assumed, he were not already familiar with the appearance of the man I was impersonating.

That "if" was a big one, however, and it rested like a leaden weight on my spirits as I waited there. In vain I told myself that, even if the ruse were exposed, the danger was not great: one blast on my whistle and the café would be full of police—I had a sense of foreboding which I could not throw off. Gloomy thoughts drifted through my mind, of Gybe's ghastly pallor as Waterhouse, of the Special Branch, tapped him on the shoulder, of Brander stretched out across the table, of his wife's piercing screams. A stout fellow, Brander—death rather than ruin for him. I must remember that—it would help me to slip into the skin of my trap.

I let my mind slide into German harness. I tried thinking strong-willed, self-opinionated thoughts such as the Prussian military training hammers into a man. With sentimental ecstasy I repeated to myself such improving maxims as "*Gott mit uns*," "*Wir Deutschen fürchten Gott und sonst Nichts auf der Welt*" and recited, with some excusable lapses the first verse of "*Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles*" under my breath. Suddenly I became aware that the waiter was hovering in the vicinity of my table.

The card-players had left the café and only the man with the newspaper and I remained. It was half-past four. My glass was empty and I called the waiter over and ordered another bock. Stooping to mop the table with the soiled napkin he carried, as he picked up my glass, he ground out between his teeth in German, "*Man wartet auf Sie*," that is to say, "You are awaited." Then aloud, in French, he said, "The telephone? This way, sir. I'll show you!" And he led the way to a door behind the bar.

The moment had arrived. My last glimpse of the little café showed me my *vis-à-vis* furtively observing us from behind his newspaper. My left hand feeling for my whistle, my right groping inside my coat to make sure that my automatic was in the inside pocket, I followed the waiter into a dark passage where, at the end, a man stood looking out from a doorway.

He was as solid as an ox; but it was not Dr. Grundt. The bowler hat crammed firmly on the shaven head, the black broadcloth, the large umbrella crooked over his arm, the bristling Kaiser moustache—all these things proclaimed as

loudly as possible the Herr Kriminal-Kommissar, as members of the plain clothes branch of the German police are called. As I approached the door he shot out a beefy hand at me and opening it, displayed, cupped in the palm, a silver star, eight-pointed and stamped with a "G," even as Okewood had described.

"So?" I said in my stiffest German and doffed my hat. "I have something for you my friend..." I began to feel in the lining; but the man with the star stopped me. "Not here!" he muttered in gruff German. "Follow me!"

So saying he stepped backwards into the room, making way for me to pass. I went in and found myself immediately confronted by a trapdoor in the floor raised up to disclose a flight of wooden steps descending into a pool of darkness.

I hesitated and, as the door into the passage closed behind me, swung about. A frowsty-looking fellow in a yellow overcoat was just shutting the door. It was the man who had read the newspaper in the café. "All right, Vogel?" the man in black demanded. "All right," the other agreed. The first man gave me a little push. "Down with you," he said to me, jerking his thumb towards the stairs. "Excuse me," I remarked frigidly, centring my mind on the fact that the Germans are the most pedantic race under the sun, "my instructions were to hand over a certain paper to someone who should be identified by a silver star. You have identified yourself, *also*..." I fumbled in my hat.

"Don't be in such a hurry, *mein Junger*," growled the man in the yellow overcoat. Then to his companion he added, "Have you got your light, Bauer?" And, as the other switched on a torch, "So? Now lead on!"

I was in a dire quandary, sandwiched there between those two burly detectives. Here was a complication we had not foreseen. In my left-hand pocket my fingers gripped the whistle. I had only to blow it to bring assistance, yet to give the signal was to risk closing the net prematurely and ruining everything. On the other hand, since I had no idea whither the stairs before me led, to go on was to risk passing altogether out of Vandervliet's safety cordon and facing the ultimate encounter singlehanded. It seemed to me I had no choice and I followed Bauer down the stairs.

It brought us to a dank cellar with an iron gate ajar at the far end. We passed through the gate into a low passage, the white beam of the torch lighting up walls that glistened with damp. A deep laugh behind me went echoing along the gallery. "Smugglers!" said Vogel curtly but expressively.

Instinctively I had begun to count our paces. I had counted up to a hundred or more when I felt the fresh air on my face and perceived a glimmer of daylight in the distance. At length we emerged into a cellar, the floor of which was deep in sand, mounted a wooden ladder to a sort of hatch cemented in the rock and surrounded by a circle of stunted bushes, and found ourselves upon the dunes.

I had a brief moment of panic. It was unpleasant while it lasted, but it passed. All our precautions had gone for nothing. I had burnt my boats. It looked to me as if this adventure of mine was destined to prove, as the Duke said of Waterloo, "a damned close-run thing." The surroundings were not calculated to cheer my flagging spirits. Save for a man in chauffeur's uniform who loitered there, his overcoat collar turned up against the searching breeze, not a soul was in sight. We were alone in a vista of sand and sea and sky. Dusk was falling and the wind sent the sand dancing in eddies before it to rattle among the straining gorse clumps. Half a mile away the ocean was a ragged, discoloured smear.

Stark as a landmark a motor-car stood up among the dunes. It was halted on a road a good three hundred yards' walk across the loose sand. My companions made me enter first, then Vogel produced a large scarf and, without comment, proceeded to bandage my eyes. I did not trouble to protest. He had his orders and I had no wish to fray my nerves and dissipate my energies in bickering with these underlings.

We had not been ten minutes under way when the car stopped and one of the men descended—to unlatch a gate, as I imagined. I heard the crunch of gravel under our tyres and the smell of trees was in my nostrils. The car halted again, I was helped out and guided up some steps and across carpet.

Then my bandage was whisked off and I saw the Man with the Clubfoot standing before me.

### In which a key revives hope

I have no recollection of that room for the simple reason that I had no eyes for my surroundings. My gaze was irresistibly drawn to the awe-inspiring figure regarding me, this simian creature with the hot, wrathful eyes and the merciless mouth. Grundt seemed to have been working, for the only light in the room was a lamp that shed its rays on a desk strewn with papers. Subconsciously I registered the fact that the lighting was poor. Both his face and mine were in shadow, and the circumstance gave me a glimmering of hope. For by this time I had made up my mind that our ruse had failed and that I should be lucky if I contrived to get home alive.

Grundt made a brief gesture to the two detectives who had entered with me and they clattered out. Instinctively I had fallen into my rôle. Bolt upright, chest out, hands to my sides, heels together, I confronted the giant cripple. "You're Friedrich Brander, from Portsmouth, *nicht wahr?*" he rasped commandingly.

"*Jawohl, Exzellenz,*" I roared in approved service fashion—I thought the title would not displease him.

He snapped his fingers impatiently. "The questionnaire!" he ordered.

I drew it from its hiding-place. His hairy hand snatched it from me. Limping to the desk, he spread out the sheet of flimsy paper under the light. As he read, his heavy face unknit and a gratified smile turned up the corners of his gross lips. His perusal at an end, he laid the report on the desk and hauled a wallet from his pocket. "You were well spoken of to me, my friend," he growled. "I'm glad to find that my confidence in your loyalty to our good German Fatherland was not displaced. You and I may work together again. Fifty pounds in English money was the sum agreed, I think?" He drew forth a wad of Bank of England notes.

Everything had gone well so far and my spirits were rising. The Chief's remark about Tirpitz came into my mind. I stole a glance at that ogre face, noted the cupidity that revealed itself in the eyes, and drew a bow at a venture.

"A hundred was the stipulated price, Your Excellency," I retorted.

The big man frowned. "Grundt has no use for fancy titles," he declared in his metallic voice. "You can call me Herr Doktor, or even old Clubfoot, if you're so minded. And the price was seventy-five!" Licking his enormous thumb, he proceeded to count off fifteen notes from the packet in his hand.

He was engaged in this task when the door was softly rapped. Vogel thrust his face into the room. "Herr Doktor..." he began. "Well, what is it?" Clubfoot demanded irascibly. Instead of replying, the man pranced a-tiptoe across the room and whispered in Grundt's ear. "What does the fellow want? I'll not see him," the cripple roared angrily. But he spoke too late. A small, trim man, hook-nosed, grey-haired, authoritative, came bustling in.

My heart sank into my boots. I prided myself on spotting types—I had devoted a great deal of time to this fascinating study. And although the newcomer was in plain clothes, I knew him immediately for a German naval officer, and an officer of high rank at that.

Grundt's first words confirmed my suspicion. "The Herr Admiral might have waited at the hotel," he remarked with grudging civility.

After a brief glance at me—he had a bright blue eye that seemed to drill right through me—the Admiral swung round to Grundt. "Have you got it?" he demanded crisply.

With a self-complacent air the other pointed to the desk. "His Majesty should be pleased," he observed ingratiatingly. But the Admiral had seized the report and with rapt interest was scanning it under the lamp.

"Our illustrious ruler knows," Grundt pursued purringly, "that he has but to voice a wish and his devoted and loyal servant, so long and so highly honoured by the confidence of his Imperial master..."

"But you can't show him this," the Admiral roared suddenly, his grizzled head thrust forward under the lamp. "If *he* knows the English can shoot like this, he'll upset the whole building programme, *zum Donnerwetter....*" He wheeled about, frowning. "I suppose this report is all right? Where did it come from? *Ach*, so..."

His steely eye had once more fallen on me. With an effort I gathered my wits about me, standing stiffly at attention, staring straight in front of me.

"This is Herr Brander, a former petty officer of the Fleet," Grundt explained suavely.

"Brander, Brander? I seem to know that name," the Admiral barked. "When were you discharged, my man?"

"At your orders, Excellency, in 1901"—that much, at least, I could vouch for.

"What ship?"

"The *Preussen*, Excellency"—I was still on safe ground.

The Admiral rugged face lit up—he had a pleasant smile. "The *Preussen*, *zum diebel!* Then you knew me, Admiral von Trompeter? I commanded her..."

There was, as I recalled later a glitter in his eye that should have warned me. But his bluff air had thrown me off the scent. Though I was sweating with sheer funk, I replied glibly, "But of course, Excellency! I recognised the Herr Admiral the moment His Excellency came into the room..."

I broke off in a panic. With an icy air the Admiral had turned to Grundt. "The fellow's an impostor," he announced. "Ask them in the Fleet about me, Herr Doktor, and they'll tell you that Trompeter has the reputation of never forgetting a name or a face. I remember Petty Officer Brander quite well. He was with me in the *Panther* and later in the *Stettin*. This is not the man. And I never commanded the *Preussen*. You may believe if you will that a man forgets the name of his last captain in the service..." He laughed, and his laugh was like the tinkle of ice in a glass. "So much for your famous report, Herr Doktor! I thought it was too good to be true. The other aides-de-camp of His Majesty will get a good laugh out of this..."

Inwardly I was cursing the Chief's sense of humour. This is what came of being too clever. Gingerly I began to slide my hand to my side pocket where my gun was. But Grundt was too quick for me. His draw was the swiftest, as the automatic he levelled at me was the largest, I had ever seen. The blood suffused his face. "You dog," he bellowed, "you'd play tricks with me, would you? Who are you?" Seizing the lamp with his left hand, while he held me covered with the pistol in his right, he tilted it back until the light shone full in my face.

"No scandal, Herr Doktor," said the Admiral sharply, and picked up his hat and overcoat. His shoulders shook with a spasm of malicious laughter. "The rogue, whoever he is, played his part capitally. A pity for him that he did not have only you to deal with. The next time you entertain a naval guest you'd better send for old Trompeter, who never forgets a face. Always at your service, Herr Doktor..." He bowed ironically and tripped lightly out, still chuckling.

The Man with the Clubfoot paid no heed to him. He was glaring at me, his features convulsed with fury. With that pitiless light beating on my face, I felt that those tiger eyes of his were boring me through and through. As on that night in Brussels when we had first met, I was acutely conscious of the animal force this primitive creature gave forth. It was as though he projected some deadly ray that held me powerless in its ban.

My arms raised painfully above my head, I stood there, waiting for him to speak. I do not know how long we remained like that—it seemed an eternity—but I remember how, in that paralysing silence, I strained my ears for any sound and heard only the plangent voice of the wind. In the course of my career I found myself in some tight spots at times, but usually there was some straw of hope to snatch at. That evening, however, face to face with Grundt in a house the very location of which was unknown to me, was one of the rare occasions when I felt certain that my last hour had struck.

There must have been a bell under the carpet by the desk, for suddenly I heard the door behind me open, and Vogel's

voice: "The Herr Doktor rang?"—Grundt had made no move that I could detect.

"Search him," Grundt commanded harshly. Vogel approached me from one side, Bauer from the other. They took away my gun, some Belgian and English money and a packet of Gold Flake, and laid these finds upon the desk—I had taken good care before leaving London to see that, apart from these necessities, my pockets were empty. Morosely, the cripple's eye ferreted among these trophies. Then, "Is there any place where we can hold him in safe custody?" he asked.

The two detectives exchanged a glance. "There's the wood-cellar," Bauer suggested. "It has a stout door and the windows are barred....."

"Put him there," the cripple ordered, "lock the door and bring me the key."

"Does the Herr Doktor wish him to be handcuffed?" Vogel inquired submissively. Grundt had put up his gun and turned away with a sombre, reflective air.

"If the place is secure, that will suffice," he answered. He dragged himself cumbrously to the desk, adjusted the lamp and sat down.

The reaction was almost too much for me. What did this unlooked-for respite portend? In a sort of daze I let them lead me away, through a hall decorated with deer antlers, hunting-horns and the like, and down a stairway to a basement, where they opened a heavy whitewashed door and thrust me into a gloomy cellar. There I heard a key grate in the lock, and the footsteps of my escort recede into the distance.

My prison was dry, but its brick floor struck cold. It was almost in darkness, its only light being derived from two barred and unglazed openings on a level with the ground outside. My first action was to inspect the door. It was an old door and solid, and the lock did not yield an inch as I softly tried it. And the bars across the window were inch-thick, firmly planted and set too close together for even a child's body to pass. In vain I scrutinised floor and walls, even dragging down a pile of logs, for any other means of egress. There was none. I was fairly caught, and I sat myself down on the chopping-block to think things over.

The initiative—with rage in my heart I had to admit it to myself—had passed out of my hands. And as far as I could figure it out I had no chance of regaining it. No doubt, as time wore on and they received no signal from me, Vandervliet's people would enter the café. Normally, I imagined, the entry to that subterranean passage was carefully concealed; but even supposing that Vandervliet's men searched the place and found the trap-door, the passage would only bring them out upon the dunes and they would be no nearer, effectively, towards rescuing me than if they had stayed at the café. And I had absolutely no method of communicating with them.

If there had been any servants in that infernal house I might conceivably have revolved in my mind a plan for smuggling out a message to Vandervliet or Laporte. But the whole place was as silent as the grave. I was in the basement where presumably the kitchen was situated, yet not a sound of any human activity reached me in my cellar. I could have shouted for help, of course, and banged on the door, but this, I judged, would have brought me no other result than handcuffs and a gag. I did not doubt that Grundt and his two acolytes were the only persons in the house beside myself, or that the house was situated in some lonely spot—on the dunes, for instance, between Ostend and Knocke; and Grundt had detained me because the isolated location of the place favoured whatever design he harboured concerning me. I shivered—not alone with the cold in the cellar—and, springing up, began to pace up and down.

I had been locked up there for a good hour by my watch, and the cellar was quite dark, when I heard outside the sound of a motor-car starting up, followed a minute or two later by the sound of its departure. A crazy idea took possession of me—I dare say I was a bit light-headed; I had eaten nothing since breakfast, and I craved for a cigarette—were my captors leaving me in the lurch in that empty house to die of starvation? For a moment my nerve cracked and I hurled myself at the door, beating upon it with my fists and shouting, "Grundt, Grundt let me out!"

The fit passed almost as soon as it came, and I stepped back from the door, ashamed of my weakness. As I stood there panting I fancied I heard a movement in the passage. I listened. Yes, there it was again! A rat, I thought.

Then something fell tinkling on the brickwork under my feet. The door was raised perhaps a foot above the level of



the cellar, and I knew that something had been pushed under it. I stooped and groped in the darkness.

It was a key.

## 102

### Escape

Without a moment's hesitation I thrust it in the lock—after all, that is what keys are for. The key fitted and the ponderous door swung out. I was free. Outside all was dark, but enough light percolated from the staircase to show me that the passage was deserted. I paused an instant to withdraw the key and lock the door on the outside, dropping the key in my pocket—it occurred to me that it might delay pursuit if they believed I were still a prisoner. For I already had a theory as to the identity of my deliverer.

I crept to the staircase, listened and, when no sound reached me from above, tiptoed my way up to the hall. A slight figure stood impassive under the hanging lamp. It was Madeleine Stafford.

We exchanged a long glance. I had forgotten all about my disguise, my stained skin, my chemical blondness, and for the moment was puzzled by the look of bewilderment on that flowerlike face. "You—you are Mr. Clavering, aren't you?" she said at last uncertainly. Smiling, I nodded. Then I suppose she read the apprehension in the quick look I cast about me—at the door of the room where I had seen Grundt, standing ajar; at the other doors—closed, these—leading off the hall; at the broad staircase that mounted to a landing, to branch off at right-angles to the upper stories—for she added quickly: "We shan't be disturbed for the moment. There's no one in the house...." She gazed at me wonderingly. "What an amazing disguise! But for your walk, the way you carry your head..." She broke off. "Well," she asked archly, "are you surprised to see me?"

"Not altogether," I answered her, "although somehow it had never occurred to me that you would be here with him—not until that key was pushed under the door, at any rate...."

"You hadn't lost faith in me altogether, then?" she demanded with a quick intake of the breath.

I shrugged. "You promised to send word. When no word came..."

"This is the first time he has let me out of his sight since we left England, and this is only a fortunate accident. If he was not with me himself, one or other of his people was my constant companion..."

"And to-night then?"

"He was unexpectedly summoned to the Emperor at Aachen. He took one of his men with him to drive the car. The other—a man named Bauer—he left behind on guard. But Bauer has gone out, probably to the village to drink beer..."

"You're sure of this, I suppose?" I questioned anxiously.

"I was watching from the landing up there and saw him leave by the front door. He locked it after him—the doors are always locked when Grundt is away. But come in here—we can talk more safely. There are French windows to this room. We shall hear Bauer when he returns and you can slip out into the grounds unobserved. If he has gone to the village he cannot be back for half an hour at least..."

So saying she led me into Grundt's study. It gave me an odd feeling of fear to find myself back in that room—the sinister presence of the man seemed yet to linger there. The reading-lamp was still alight. We left the door ajar. My companion moved noiselessly to the curtains, parted them and softly unlatched one side of the window. This done, she

came slowly to the desk and faced me, a graceful, appealing figure in her flowing black dress. In the reflected glow of the lamp I perceived that the lovely face was pale and distressed with dark shadows about the eyes.

"Did they forget that the house has windows?" I could not refrain from inquiring.

She made a helpless movement of the shoulders. "He knows only too well he has no need of bolts and bars to prevent me from leaving him," she rejoined sombrely. "The doors are locked, but not against me. It is to keep out intruders..."

"How did you know I was here?" I asked.

"I saw them bringing you in blindfolded as I was coming downstairs..."

"And you recognised me in spite of my disguise?" My tone was crestfallen.

"There was something familiar about you—the set of your head ... I don't know. Ever since that night in London Grundt has been raving against you. I was expecting to see you sooner or later in his power..."

"You are sharper than Grundt if you recognised me," I put in.

"He didn't know you again? Are you sure?" she questioned apprehensively.

"He has discovered that I'm not the man I represent myself to be, but that's all. If he'd guessed my real identity, I don't think I'd have left that room alive..."

She nodded with troubled eyes. "He is enraged against you. He would like to tear you—how do you say it?—limb by limb..."

"But I interrupted you," I excused myself.

"I shrank out of sight on the landing," she resumed, "and watched them bring you in here. I returned to my room and waited for about half an hour. Then Bauer came and said that Grundt wanted to see me. Grundt told me he was going to Aachen and that he would let me know to-morrow where I was to join him. He said nothing about you..."

"And nothing of a man called Brander?"

"No. He did not mention that he had had any visitor. But I saw a large key lying on the blotter, and presently he put it away in a drawer of the desk. After that I went back to my room until I heard the car drive off. I was on my way downstairs to see if I could discover from Bauer what had become of you when I caught sight of him slipping out. A moment later I heard you banging on the door and calling from the basement. That was the first indication I had that you were still in the house. It was then I remembered the key I had seen. I ran into Grundt's room and found it in the drawer where he had put it. I didn't wait to unlock the door in case Bauer should come back. I just pushed the key under the door and ran back to the hall to keep watch..."

I put out my hand; she took it listlessly. "You were a brick," I said. "I can never thank you enough. And now what? In the first place, just what is this house and where are we?"

"All I can tell you is that it is called the Villa Belgica, and that it lies in the dunes three miles from Ostend. We arrived here two days ago and an old woman comes in daily to look after us. Who the place belongs to, or how Grundt happens to be here, I can't say. I'm afraid you'll have to walk into Ostend—there's no conveyance nearer than the village and that's in the opposite direction. There's a road across the sand-hills—it passes the front gates. You can't miss the way..."

"And what about you?"

She moved her shoulders nonchalantly. "I stay here..."

"And when Grundt returns to-morrow and finds me gone?"

"I thought we might put that key back in the drawer. Then he would not be able to tell how you got out. What did you do with it?"

I gave her the key and she replaced it in the drawer. "That's no good," I told her, "but it suggests an idea..." I paused, considering her. "Unless I can persuade you to come with me..."

She gazed at me wide-eyed. "Where?"

"To England—anywhere out of this man's clutches..."

She shook her head, aghast. "No..."

"Ostend, you say, is only three miles away. At Ostend I can guarantee you absolute safety from any interference by Grundt..."

With even greater determination she shook her head again. "It's impossible. I can never leave him..."

"Is there nothing I can do?" I said. "Can't you see I want to help you?"

She pressed my hand gently—that magnetic touch of hers sent the blood coursing to my head. "I know," she answered softly, "but there's nothing you can do. Except to swear on your word of honour as an English gentleman that you will never disclose to him, if you are recaptured, how you escaped from this place. If he should find out..."

"He won't by the time I'm finished here," I told her, "since you're resolved to stay. Where do you suppose I can find such a thing as an iron bar?"

"An iron bar? What for?"

"Never mind. Is there such a thing about?"

"There's a coal-cellar in the basement. There might be one there..."

"Good. Now listen. Can you stay in this room?"

"Yes, I often sit here when I am alone..."

"Good. Read or do some needlework—anything you like. If Bauer returns you've heard nothing and seen nothing—do you understand?"

"Where are you going?"

"Down to the basement to hunt up that bar. I'll be back in a minute. If you hear Bauer in the meantime, cough loudly..."

Without giving her time to reply, I crept away.

A search of the coal-cellar which flanked my late prison failed to produce the crowbar I had hoped to find. But among some parts of a derelict stove I came upon a cast-iron stanchion about three feet long which I thought might serve my purpose. Thrusting it under my coat I hurried upstairs again and, without disclosing my intentions to Madeleine, passed rapidly through the study and out by the window. Happily the night was not particularly dark and, making my way quietly round the house, I came to the two windows of the wood-cellar. Crouching down, I set to work with my stanchion upon the bars of one of the openings, striving to force them apart.

It was hard work and I made a good deal of noise, besides badly skinning my hands. But at length, by dint of much battering and bending, I had widened the grill sufficiently to admit, as far as I could judge, the passage of a human body.

Then with my feet I made some realistic scratches in the moss-grown stone in which the bars were set, trampled down a plant or two in the flower-bed outside, and deliberately left some foot-marks in the mould. Feeling that I had contrived a reasonably plausible setting for a dramatic escape, I dropped my bar through the opening into the wood-cellar, and returned to Madeleine in the study.

She was reading the *Kölnische Zeitung*, but started up when I stepped through the window. Bauer had not returned, she said. I told her what I had done. "Your next move," I declared, "is to go straight to bed and be fast asleep by the time Bauer gets back. In that way you will have a sound alibi in the improbable case that Grundt should still suspect you of conniving at my escape, the more so that Bauer, having played truant, will naturally be anxious to prevent any inquiries from being made as to how you passed the evening..."

On that her face cleared. "That is clever," she said, smiling at me. "I was wondering how I should face Grundt. But now..." She broke off and gave a little gurgling laugh. "You are intelligent. I like intelligence. And you have great resourcefulness. Are they all as resourceful as you in the British Secret Service?"

"You're not so slow yourself," I answered with a grin. "Tell me something. When we met in London the other day, did you recognize me as the man who came to your bedroom that night in Brussels?"

She nodded rather mischievously.

"And you never let on?"

"I was afraid. I didn't know you then..."

"You know me better now?"

She dropped her eyes and nodded.

"Well enough to trust me?"

She nodded again.

"You remember our bargain about the box?"

She flung her hands apart. "How could I get it for you when he watches me day and night? When I give my word I keep it. But in this case it has not been possible..."

"How did you explain to him your failure to recover those letters?"

She shrugged. "I told him the truth—that you were there before me..."

"Didn't he want to know why I didn't have you arrested?"

She coloured up. "I told him I persuaded you to let me go..."

"And he believed that?"

"The way I described it, yes..."

"I see..."

"But if he'd known that I was in your bedroom when he came round to the Albany..." She paused, "It was good of you not to betray me..."

"Would it help you if you had those letters?"

She nodded. "Yes. This Prince, or whatever he is, stands high in the Emperor's favour. Without the letters Grundt

cannot proceed against him..."

"Needless to say, I haven't got those letters on me. But you shall have them the moment I reach London if you'll hand over that gold box..."

"Have I not told you I have had no chance to fetch it?"

"Where is it, then?"

Her eyes grew apprehensive again. "In Cologne..."

"Where in Cologne?"

"In my apartment there. On the way back from Brussels with Grundt after the railway accident I stopped there to get some clothes and put it in a safe place..."

"Will you tell me where it is so that I can collect it?"

She was silent, considering.

"Your heart's not in the work you do for Grundt, is it?" I demanded. "The German Secret Service doesn't mean anything to you, I know that..."

"I daren't risk it," she said piteously. "If Grundt ever discovered that I had played him false..."

"Yet you were not afraid to play him false to-night?"

"That was different," she said softly. "Your life depended on it ... as another life depends on this," she added in a breathless undertone. "What is this box to you? Is it true what you told me about Forrest's family wanting it back?"

"No," I said.

"That, at least, is a truthful answer..."

"You say that one life depends on Grundt not discovering the whereabouts of the box. If I tell you that at least a dozen lives are in jeopardy if it should fall into his hands. I'll undertake to collect that box and Grundt will never know a thing about it. Won't you trust me ... Madeleine?"

Abruptly she averted her eyes. Then, standing up from her chair, she took a turn or two up and down the room. "Very well," she said at length, stopping in front of me, "but it is on one condition, and one condition only, that you fetch the box yourself..."

"There was never any other intention," I rejoined promptly.

"No," she countered at once, "but I want your word of honour that you will take no other human being into your confidence so that if, by any accident, you are prevented from going yourself, my secret remains inviolate. Is that agreed?"

"Absolutely," I told her.

"I have your solemn promise?"

"My word of honour..."

"It is enough," she said. "Listen to me, then! Write nothing down, do you hear? But remember this address. Engel-Gasse 14—it is a small street behind the Archbishop's Palace and my apartment is at the top. It is in the name of Hagen, Marie Hagen. At present it is shut up, but here"—she thrust her hand down the front of her dress—"is the key!" And she

dropped a small shining key into my palm.

I was about to thank her, but she checked me. "Wait," she bade me, "you have yet to learn where the gold box is hidden. You must go into the kitchen—it is an old-fashioned kitchen with a great bricked-in copper for boiling clothes. At the back of the copper, under the grate, there is a loose brick. Behind it you will find the box..."

"I don't know how to thank you," I told her. "You have no idea what this means to us. I shall be in Cologne tomorrow and you shall have those letters next day..."

"Letters or no letters," she answered gravely, "if I didn't trust you, for your intelligence as well as your sense of honour..."

"Then let me thank you for your trust," I said. And raising her two hands to my lips, I kissed each in turn—she had such pretty hands.

She gave me a whimsical, amused look. "That colouring is dreadful. Please be dark again by the next time we meet. I don't like fair men..."

"All the same," I gave her back, "if I hadn't been a fair man to-night, old Clubfoot would have a different story to tell..."

The half-hour grace was long since past. "I'll have to be moving," I said. "Where do you want the letters sent?" Care of Thomas Cook & Son, Berlin, would find her, she told me. She gave me her hand. "Good luck," she said, "and come safe home!"

"I'll never forget what you've done for me to-night," I declared. "Shall I tell you something? I adore courage. And you're the most courageous woman I've ever met..."

She smiled wanly. "Better to die with courage than to live on in fear..." She sighed. "It's easier to die than to live..." She put me from her. "Now go!"

I went to the window. The last glimpse I had of her was standing by the desk, with her secretive air, gazing wistfully at me. If I had known then what dark events impended for her, I would have carried her off by force rather than have left her there in the power of that sinister cripple.

## 103

### Disaster

Bright and early next morning I was at Cologne. I can abridge the remainder of my Ostend adventure by saying that I made my way across the dunes without incident and, on reaching the town, lost no time in catching the first train out. Clubfoot was off again—evidently he had, like most of us, his own clandestine routes for crossing frontiers—and for me to have gone to the police would only have led to unpleasantness for my deliverer, besides being a sheer waste of time. I did not even wire the Chief; time enough for that next day when the box was in my possession, I reflected, browsing deliciously upon the idea of walking into his sanctum and laying the box silently upon the desk under his Garnet's incredulous gaze. I waited only to cash a cheque—since all my available funds had been taken from me at the villa—at the Grand Hotel, where I was known, and then, with hopes high, headed for Germany.

Eight a.m. appeared to me to be inconveniently early for running the gauntlet of Madeleine's concierge. So I whiled away a pleasant hour over coffee and rolls and the *Kölnische Zeitung* at a café off the Dom-Platz, and towards nine o'clock, having ascertained from the waiter that the Engel-Gasse was one of the streets abutting upon the little square

before the Cardinal-Archbishop's Palace, I strolled off in the sunshine towards my destination.

It was a lovely spring morning. The lacy spires of the Cathedral tapered towards a canopy of azure as divinely blue as the sky above Sorrento, and on the steps and under porches quite dwarfed by those staring twin towers a cluster of Mass-goers was constantly ascending and descending. I was always fond of the Rhineland, with its spotless, thriving cities and verdant, vine-clad hills, its friendly, easy-going natives, whose temperaments seem to have absorbed most of the generous qualities of the grape. In the course of a somewhat adventurous life I had discovered that even fear itself knows no thrill quite so poignant as the sensation of acute danger safely surmounted. The knowledge that I was out of Clubfoot's clutches and about to add the crowning touch to his discomfiture redoubled my enjoyment of my surroundings as, lighting a cigarette, I turned my back on the great church and directed my steps towards the hoary pile which is the Archbishop's residence.

The Engel-Gasse was a clean, old-fashioned street, narrow and lined with lofty and rather gloomy houses. At No. 14 the front door was open and I was hoping to dodge unseen past the concierge's little window when I bumped into that worthy herself. She was a small, dried-up woman in a blue apron and wooden shoes, who, with mop and bucket, was swilling out the entrance.

"*Zu wem, bitte?*" she said, brushing the hair out of her eyes.

"Frau Hagen..."

She bestowed on me rather a sharp look. "You were told yesterday that the *gnädige* Frau is away..."

At the moment I did not really pay any particular attention to her answer, although it was to come back to me later—my only thought was to get up to the flat without delay. I did not wish to divulge the fact that I had the key to the apartment in case the woman might insist on accompanying me upstairs. I was turning over in my mind how I should surmount this difficulty when the telephone rang in the lodge behind her.

"And we don't know," she added, putting down her mop, "when she'll be back..."

"In that case," said I, tipping my hat, "please excuse me..." And I turned away.

But out of the corner of my eye I saw her enter her lodge and presently heard her speaking on the telephone. From where I lingered I had a clear view of her stooping to the instrument with her back to the door. I slipped forward and up the stairs.

There was one apartment on each landing, each with the tenant's name chastely inscribed in Gothic characters on a small porcelain plate under the bell. I had mounted to the top floor before I came upon the name I wanted. Without wasting another minute, I fished out the key and let myself into the flat.

Drawn curtains and closed shutters darkened the living-room. The sparse sunshine, filtered through the slats, barred greenly furniture swathed in holland and pictures enveloped in newspaper where they hung on the walls. I flung a window wide and hooked the shutter back, admitting, together with light and air, the voice of the city. The cheerful symphony of carpet-beating, motor horns and tram bells was quick to dissipate the atmosphere of desolation which seems to hang about all dwelling-places abandoned by their owners.

I did not linger in the sitting-room but, leaving the window open to light me on my way, threaded a corridor that led from the hall in search of the kitchen. A snug dining-room: a large bedroom furnished in silver grey which I took to be Madeleine's: a somewhat antiquated bathroom: a spare room—and, spellbound, I was at the goal of my long chase.

The kitchen was large as kitchens go and bright with sunshine, for the single window, looking out upon a shut-in court with the tall, grave Cathedral towers rising above the housetops beyond it, was unshuttered. There was an old-fashioned range, evidently abandoned, as was shown by the small gas-stove that stood before it, and in the corner—my breath came faster as I recognized it—the copper.

I was down on the tiled floor in a second, my arm thrust out under the rusty grate where normally the fire to heat the

boiler was laid. At first my fingers slid over the whitewashed brickwork, then my nails encountered a slight excrescence. I felt the loosened brick, prised it from its seating, drew it out and put it on the ground beside me. Once more my hand was plunged into the aperture.

Triumph! The box was there—I could feel its scalloped edges, the chasing on the sides. Now I had plucked it forth and it reposed on my palm, this harmless-looking bonbonnière, fit plaything for a pretty woman, that had cost my colleague his life.

Crouched on my knees I contemplated the charming toy, with its amoretti and its swooning Cupid brandishing his barbed dart. Mechanically, my heart like to burst with my swelling sense of exultation, I found myself repeating the name engraved along top and bottom of the lid—Marie Bertesson! The arrow lay in the vertical position between the two names, pointing straight out towards the right-hand side of the box. I gloated—coups such as this made the game worth while. Another minute and the precious list would be in my hands—I tarried deliberately, to prolong the joy of anticipation.

Now to see how old Charles was wont to open it. I touched the arrow gingerly with my finger. It spun easily. I swung the barb towards the letter "M"...

At the same moment a harsh command in German shattered the silence: "Drop that box and stand up!"

On the instant my house of cards collapsed about me. I scrambled to my feet in a panic and turned about. In that fraction of a second I verily believe I ran the whole gamut of the human emotions. Surprise, disappointment, mortification, rage—I was smitten to the ground, annihilated. But worst of all was the suspicion of treachery that flashed across my mind, the staggering, crushing suspicion that I had been lured into an ambush.

This feeling, however, promptly gave way to one of bewilderment as I recognised the man who confronted me behind the levelled automatic. It was Markus—once seen, one was not likely to forget that snarling mask that guinea-yellow hue, those black boot-button eyes, as restless as a bird's—Markus, of the Russian secret police, pimp, procurer and, as I always suspected, drug addict. As he faced me now he had an air of hysterical eagerness about him that suggested the influence of some narcotic.

He should have recognised me, for we had known one another, on and off, for years. But I suppose my altered colouring baffled him. At any rate he gave no sign of recognition but, pointing to the kitchen table that separated us, piped shrilly in German, "That box! Put it on the table! Quick, or I shoot!"

I was greatly puzzled. That Grundt should have taken Markus, with his unspeakable record, into his service, I was unable to believe. But if not, what was Markus doing here in Madeleine Stafford's flat? Something the concierge below had said came into my mind—she had spoken of a man who had called on the previous day. Markus, of course—obviously he had been watching the apartment. Why? A sudden light came to me. Mitzi Funda's letters! He had discovered in some way that Madeleine had been sent to fetch them and on fleeing from England had made straight for Cologne to await her arrival.

The box was still in my hands. I was unarmed—my Scott Webley had been taken from me at Grundt's—and the pistol that covered me was sagging dangerously: I could see his fingers trembling on the trigger. "Gladly," I said in English as nonchalantly as I could contrive. "But I don't see of what use that box will be to you. You won't find Mitzi Funda's letters there!" I laid the box on the table. Quick as a flash he pounced on it, whirled about and stormed out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind him.

I was dumbfounded. My intention had been to parley with him and if that failed, to try and get possession of his pistol. But this precipitate flight had ruined everything. I was over that table and out of the kitchen before he had reached the hall. I saw him fumbling with the door latch and noted mechanically that the door was closed, as I had left it.

The door was banged to in my face, just as I reached it. I plucked it open and heard his feet thunder on the stairs. Three steps at a time I went plunging down in pursuit. I had passed the first landing when a shout and a shot, followed instantly by a second shot, a hubbub of voices and a vast trampling of feet, brought me up short in a panic.



I peered over the banisters. The reek of cordite was sour in my nostrils and, below me, a haze of bluish smoke hung in the air. Markus was slumped face downward on the stairs—I could see his bald head and, beyond it, his grey hat that had fallen from it—and two men in dark clothes were bending over him. Others were swarming behind—the staircase was full of people: I caught a glimpse of the concierge's terrified face in the throng. Even as I gazed I perceived a burly individual in a bowler hat detach himself from the group and with two others come running up.

It was Grundt's bull-dog, Vogel! At the sight of him I turned and sped swiftly up the flight. The front door of the apartment was open and, darting inside, I closed it softly behind me. I was sorely tempted to bolt it and put up the chain: but I refrained, realising that to do so would clearly indicate that somebody was still inside.

There was no backstairs to the flats, as my preliminary inspection of the premises had shown me—if there had been, I reflected, they would surely have been guarded. My only chance of escape now was by the roof.

I was at the sitting-room window when already I heard the entrance bell, its harsh alarm accompanied by thunderous knocking. A flat, narrow sill, lead-sheathed, ran below the window which was of the dormer variety, jutting out from the steep-pitched roof, as were all the other windows of the top story of the block...

I clambered out on the sill and, clinging to the shutter, closed, as best I might, the two sides of the casement, and then, perilously, swung the shutters to. I could not, of course, fasten either window or shutters as the latches were on the inside. I found myself on a ledge, a bare foot wide, on one side the large, old-fashioned ridged tiles of the roof, on the other a precipitous, hair-raising drop of, perhaps, a hundred feet to the cobbled mosaic of the roadway. To the right of me, three or four windows away, the block ended on an intersecting street. One of these windows was open. Dizzily I began to worm my way towards it. Within the house the pealing of the bell and the hammering went on and I heard distant shouts for the "*Portierfrau*."

It was fortunate for me that, out of sheer, dithering terror of high places, I moved with extreme caution for, just as I reached the window, a man poked his head out. The voices of the party at the apartment door were loud in my ears now and I realised that the window must give on the staircase—I wondered fleetingly whether perhaps Markus, following me up the stairs, had not gained access to the flat that way, via the window I had left open in the sitting-room. With racing heart I flattened myself back against the roof and almost at once, to my enormous relief, the head was withdrawn. With such haste as my swimming head would allow I made off in the opposite direction.

It was urgent for me to find cover for, whether they broke the door down or whether the concierge let them in, at any minute now they would be in the apartment, and German thoroughness, I realised, would not overlook an exhaustive search of the roof. Besides, up there, with the whole sunlit panorama of the city spread at my feet, I felt as mercilessly exposed as a fly on the ceiling. The first window I came to was closed with the blinds drawn inside: before the second the shutters were fastened; and it was not until I arrived at the third that I found what I wanted—an open window and an empty room.

At least, I judged it from the pervading stillness to be empty. As I huddled there, stemming myself against the huge red tiles and listening, I noticed that the window panes were spattered with whitewash. I concluded that the apartment in question was under repair. Hearing no movement within, I ventured to crane my neck for a peep inside.

A confusion of ladders, paint-stained sheets, buckets and brushes met my eyes. Obviously the flat was being done up. There appeared to be nobody about, for the door into the hall stood wide and there was no sound of any activity. I hesitated no longer and, scrambling over the window-ledge, dropped quietly to the floor inside.

Two or three painter's smocks hanging on the wall explained the absence of the workmen. They must have gone to breakfast. The sight of those smocks gave me my great idea. Shade of Badinguet! Did not Prince Louis Napoleon escape from the Fortress of Ham in the working clothes of a mason to found and destroy an Empire? Why should not I adopt the same ruse? Heavy footsteps and stentorian shouts reverberated from outside—God, they were on the leads already! In a fever I grabbed one of the smocks and at the same time, dipping my hand in a bucket, smeared some whitewash on my hair and face and hat. The smock was an ample, coat-like affair, originally white but now abundantly flecked with paint. I did not stop to fasten it but, buttoning as I went, fled into the hall. The front door was open and I raced down the staircase, only checking my headlong pace on coming in sight of the porter's lodge.

But I need not have worried. The porter's lodge was deserted. I surmised that the concierge was one of the excited group of housewives who were collected at the house door, all clacking together and peering down the street. The Engel-Gasse was in a turmoil. People were running from all sides and not a doorway or window but had its dressing of awe-struck, curious faces. "It's a police raid at No. 14. They've killed a man!" I heard a youth on a bicycle call to a friend as he pedalled madly by. Looking neither to right nor left of me, I turned my back on all the excitement and walked unconcernedly away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Markus was dead and the box was in Grundt's hands. I was raging. Not against Markus, for he was an accident—one of those unforeseen twists of Fortune's wheel against which the best-laid plans are not proof; but against myself, for the child-like simplicity with which I had walked into Clubfoot's trap.

Oh, but he was the deep one. I could see it all now. He had disbelieved from the first Madeleine's story that the box was lost in the train wreck and no doubt had taken the first opportunity of searching her apartment to look for it. When the box was still not forthcoming, being too securely hidden, he had simply bided his time until our fortuitous encounter in London: following upon our meeting at Brussels, had suggested to his mind some connection between Madeleine and me. He had, of course, penetrated my disguise at the villa and on the spot had conceived this plan of facilitating my escape not only to test Madeleine but also on the chance—it was a long shot but how shrewdly calculated!—that I would lead him to the hiding-place of the box.

Well, thanks to Markus's disastrous intervention, Grundt had the box. But I could not see that he had any good grounds for suspecting Mrs. Stafford. My escape from the villa, I reminded myself, was plausibly contrived and Bauer would support her in any story she cared to tell. Moreover, Markus, the only person who had seen me at the apartment, was dead—it was obvious that he must have been hanging about the place for some days and that the concierge had mistaken me for him. The police search of the apartment was only *pro forma*—they could have had no certain expectation of finding me there. Seeing that there was no evidence that I had been at the flat, if Madeleine stuck to the story I had told her to tell, that she had been in bed and asleep at the time of my escape, Grundt could not reasonably suspect any collusion between us. She would not even have to explain the presence of the box in her apartment; all that Grundt would know would be that it was found on the dead body of Markus, who, for aught they knew to the contrary, might have had it in his possession ever since the wreck. The Russian spy's anxiety to recover the Mitzi Funda letters, which she had been sent to London to get, would sufficiently account for his appearance at the Engel-Gasse. I had been gravely concerned about Madeleine, and the gradual realisation that, as far as I could see, she was adequately shielded from Clubfoot's vengeance was the only ray of light I could discern in one of the blackest moments in my career.

The box was gone and I had to get out of Cologne, get out of Germany, as fast as possible. The railway station, I guessed, would be watched, but I decided to take the risk. I knew from experience that no disguise is so effective as one which misleads as to the professional occupation of its wearer. For example, if you are on the look-out for a soldier and a man in sailor's dress appears, the chances are that he will get through, especially in a crowded place where the powers of observation are necessarily circumscribed. Grundt's men were watching for a tall, blonde, sunburnt man in blue serge with a nautical air: their rather limited perceptive faculties, I judged, would scarcely extend to a painter, his face smeared with whitewash, mingling in with a crowd of humble folk, market gardeners and the like, swarming at the fourth class booking office window.

And so it proved. The big hall of the Haupt-Bahnhof was full of plain clothes men, grasping their large umbrellas and staring into people's faces. But I passed through the barrier right under their noses in a file of workpeople going across the Rhine to the industrial suburb of Deutz for which prudently I had bought a ticket. At Deutz I got rid of my smock and washed my face in the wash-room, then boarded a train for Wesel and late in the afternoon found myself at Cleves. A few miles from Cleves the great forest known as the Reichswald straddles the German-Dutch frontier. In my day there were paths known to the smugglers by which a man might travel to and fro across the border without ever catching sight of a customs officer's green uniform. That night I lodged at Nymwegen and next day, in a thoroughly dejected frame of mind, took the first train for London.

### Garnet steps in

Many people are under the impression that the alluring vamp of spy fiction is a recognised figure of secret service work. I hate to disillusion you, but such is really not the case. Women have their uses in espionage, but the general experience has been that their tendency to survey a situation through the glasses of their emotions rather than their reason and, more particularly, to sentimentalise their business relations with the opposite sex, make their value as regular agents questionable. In my years in the secret service I had dealings with more than one woman agent of the siren order (more or less) and those who were not out-and-out adventuresses, and eminently untrustworthy, usually fiddled around with a little occasional spy work as a side-line to an even older profession.

Of course, women were employed and, for aught I know, still are. The efficient ones, however, were much more likely to approximate to the type, say, of our Garnet than a Madeleine Stafford. Usually they were selected for the very reason that they were lacking in those qualities which would single out a striking creature like Mrs. Stafford from the common herd. Garnet herself, I might explain, had been known to carry out missions with her habitual precision and competence.

When diplomatic relations were strained and it was found politic to withdraw provisionally regulars like Francis Okewood, Herbert Brewster or the writer from the scene of their activities, Garnet would occasionally replace us. Once or twice I saw her on her return from such excursions and I marvelled at the skill wherewith she had contrived to make herself appear even plainer and more insignificant-looking than she really was. With her hair scraped off her forehead and screwed into a tight bun, in the steel-rimmed pince-nez, tweeds and flat-heeled shoes of incorruptible virtue, she was the very pattern of austere British virginity. I could well understand that on her travels abroad nobody would pay the slightest attention to the harmless little Englishwoman, for all that she concealed behind the placid self-assurance of a deaconess the memory of a Datas and a really brilliant fluency in foreign languages.

With her richly exotic beauty and languid charm, Mrs. Stafford was a woman to attract notice everywhere she went. She was so obviously alluring to men that the first glimpse of her would be apt to put the old secret service hand on his guard; poor Forrest seemed to have been the exception that proved the rule. Grundt was the kind of man who would use for his own ends anybody he found to his hand and I saw no reason to discredit her story that she was a novice, forced into this business against her will, in the fact that she was working for him. What his hold over her was, I still had to ascertain; but I wondered whether her nationality, whatever it was, did not contain the key of the mystery. The three great Empires of those days, Germany, Austria and Russia, had many discontented subjects. Poland, Finland, Bohemia, Croatia were hotbeds of conspirators, the cockpits of incessant underground warfare between the oppressed nationalities of their oppressors.

On my return to London, however, I found that headquarters was far from sharing my attitude towards Madeleine Stafford. The Chief affirmed unhesitatingly that she was playing a part at Grundt's instigation.

"All Grundt was after," he declared tersely, "was to get you off Belgian soil, where he couldn't detain you indefinitely without considerable risk to himself. Once you were in Germany he had you where he wanted you. The box was the piece of cheese to bait the trap. Of course, it has been in his possession. It may well be that he's still not clear as to the exact significance of that list and was curious to discover whether it's of sufficient importance to us for you to go into Germany after it. In that event, you've told him precisely what he wanted to know..."

He dismissed me ungraciously. He seemed overworked and worried that day. Garnet followed me into the ante-room. "You mustn't mind him," she said. "The Admiralty have been making themselves unpleasant—there's a spot of trouble on about our naval news from Germany. And the worst of it is that Okewood has had to clear out..."

"What has old Francis been up to now? Not got himself expelled, has he?"

"No. But they made it too hot for him. He says the counter-espionage at Kiel is jumpier than ever. So he hopped

across into Denmark to let things simmer down. It has left us rather in a hole. So you can imagine that the old man wasn't too pleased to learn from you that practically the whole of our secret organisation on the German coast is in Grundt's hands..."

"I don't see why he should vent his feelings on me," I remarked. "After all, I didn't lose the darned box..." And then I remembered something I had not dared to bring up to the Chief in the mood in which I found him. "Look here, Garnet," I went on, "you know those Mitzi Funda letters? I want you to get hold of them for me..."

She gave me one of her swift looks through her glasses. "You don't really propose to send them to that woman, do you?"

"Yes, I do. After all, they're of no further interest to us. Mitzi Funda has disappeared and Markus is dead..."

"That may be..." She moved her head petulantly. "Gracious, I do hate to see a man make a fool of himself..."

"That," I said stiffly, "is wholly a matter of opinion. I made a bargain with Mrs. Stafford. She kept her part. I intend to keep mine..."

"Notwithstanding that the whole thing was a plant?"

"I don't agree with you. I've told you from the outset that I believe Madeleine Stafford to be genuine..."

She sighed resignedly. "I daresay I can get those letters for you: as you say, they're of no value to us. But, Clavering, do be sensible about this girl of yours. Don't lose your head over her!"

Her calm assumption that she was right and that I was wrong angered me. "Look here," I returned hotly, "when I want your advice, I'll ask for it!"

Then, perceiving that I had been rude, I added less bluntly, "You don't seem to realise that there may be two sides to this question. Has it ever struck you that you may have been just as wrong, about Forrest and all the rest, as you think I've been?"

She nodded composedly. "Oh, yes..."

"Take Forrest, for instance..."

"It was about him I was thinking..."

"I know this woman better than any of you and I tell you again she was friends with Forrest and nothing more..."

"There I fancy you may be right," she rejoined with infuriating calm.

"Oh, I'm right, am I?" I cried. "That's something, at any rate. Perhaps you'd care to tell me why you've changed your mind about Forrest?"

"I've been thinking, that's all..."

And, believe it or not, I could get no more out of her than that. But she gave me the letters that same afternoon, and, within the hour, they were on their way, by registered post, to Mrs. Stafford in Berlin. With them I enclosed the key of the apartment in the Engel-Gasse.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the Chief seemed to have a grouch against me—in fairness to him let me say that these moods of his soon passed—and I had some leave owing, I decided to fade from the picture. Accordingly, I stuck a bag and some clubs in my car and ran down to Sandwich for a little golf. I had been there a week when, on coming off the course late one afternoon—it was, I remember, a Monday—I was met by a telegraph boy who had been sent across from the hotel. He had a wire for

me from the Chief, ordering me to report for duty urgently. I was in London soon after dinner and on entering the office was greeted with the startling news that Garnet had disappeared.

It was a curious story the Chief unfolded. On the previous Wednesday Garnet, who had been working for several weeks without a break, asked if she might take Friday and Saturday off as she wished to spend a long week-end with her married sister at Hythe, saying she would be back at work as usual on Monday. The Chief, who was always urging her to take things more easily, was delighted to give her leave. Accordingly, on Thursday evening, at her usual time, she went off. That was the last they had seen of her. That morning she had neither appeared at the office nor sent any word, with the result that her sister was communicated with. It was then discovered that Garnet had not been to Hythe and that her sister knew nothing of her whereabouts. Inquiry at her London flat showed that she had left with a suitcase on Thursday evening, informing the night porter that she would not be home until Sunday night or Monday morning.

When by Monday lunch-time she was still missing, the Chief, now thoroughly alarmed, requested the Special Branch at Scotland Yard to make a discreet investigation at the railway stations. The result was surprising. A plain clothes man on duty at Liverpool Street, who had worked with us and knew Garnet by sight, had recognised her at the terminus on the Friday night. Suitcase in hand she was in the press of passengers passing the barrier for the Hook of Holland boat train. The detective, whose name was McKenna, saved the office the trouble of further inquiry by admitting, rather naïvely, that, knowing Miss Wolseley to be connected with the secret service, out of sheer curiosity he had asked about her at the booking-office and found that she had taken a ticket through to Kiel.

I stared at the Chief in amazement. "But why Kiel, sir?"

"Well," he said slowly, "I believe I can answer that. You know Andresen at Kiel?"

"By name, yes..."

"Did you know that his name was on that list of Forrest's?"

The box again! I pricked up my ears. "I believe Miss Wolseley did say something about it..."

"Andresen has always been absolutely reliable. But of late his reports have fallen off and well, they don't ring genuine. I know that the German counter-espionage has tightened up considerably at Kiel and it may be that Andresen is afraid of giving himself away. On the other hand, there is the danger that he is being deliberately supplied with false information or even that someone, using his code, is sending back reports in his place. I've been very concerned about it because, if they're on to Andresen, it means that they're on to the whole of our list, in which case..." He shook his head dubiously. "Garnet knew I've been worrying about this situation. She knew, too, that I'd never agree to her going out to investigate—I told her as much last week when she suggested it. It's my belief that she slipped over to Kiel over the week-end, without saying a word to me, to find out the truth about Andresen. You see, she knows Andresen—she met him when he was over here..."

I chuckled. "Don't I know it? Why, they went out to lunch together twice in one week. He was one of our Garnet's most notable conquests. She talked of him for weeks afterwards..."

The old man did not follow me into my bantering tone. His eyes considered me gravely.

"Well, sir," I said, "it's too late to make any connection with the Continent to-night. But I'll catch the Flushing train in the morning..."

"You realise that Grundt may be at the back of this?" he queried incisively.

I indicated that this reflection was not unconnected with my offer.

"No, Clavering," the skipper declared with emphasis. "I'll have you walking into no more traps. Up to Friday, at any rate, Andresen was at liberty. That's to say, we had a telegram from him yesterday—it came in the ordinary manner in conventional code via Copenhagen—which only he, I imagine, could have drafted—it was in answer to a query about an item in his last expense account. I'm not going to run you into more risk than is essential. All you have to do is to drop in

upon Andresen at this beer-garden of his at Kiel—it's on the east bank of the harbour on the road to Kitzberg—and find out from him whether he has seen anything of Miss Wolseley. Andresen is a very knowledgeable chap and he can make inquiries much more effectively than you can. Let's see, you've never been to Kiel, have you?"

"No, sir..."

"Then you can safely appear as an ordinary English tourist. No disguise, no faked identity; use your own name so that, if there is any hitch, they'll have nothing against you and if you discover that Garnet has really met with an accident, you can at need appear openly as a friend of hers with a clear conscience. But, understand this, Andresen is to do the donkey work. You stop in the background..."

"And if I come across Clubfoot's trail in this business, what then?"

"You'll report to me for further instructions..."

"But if she's been arrested?"

"Your orders stand!" His tone was authoritative.

"You're not forgetting that Grundt has met her?"

"In evening dress, I think?"

"Yes..."

The stern features relaxed momentarily into a smile. "If old Hop-and-go-kick spots her for anything but the more objectionable type of female British tourist, he's sharper than I give him credit for. You know Garnet well enough to be sure that her cover's sound and that in no conceivable circumstances will she ever disclose her connection with this office. What's happened, I fancy, is that she found things at Kiel a trifle hectic and Andresen has advised her to lie low for a bit..."

"Then why hasn't one of them advised you?"

"For the same reason that I haven't attempted to communicate with Andresen—with the situation as unclear as it is, it's too risky. As long as Garnet hasn't fallen off the boat or come to grief in a railway accident, I'm not worrying unduly about her. That young woman can take care of herself in any circumstances. Now, remember, Clavering," he concluded, "I don't want you figuring on the butcher's bill. Your job is to locate Miss Wolseley and advise me. No knight errant business! You can leave that to Andresen and me!"

With which strictly practical homily, he wished me good luck on my errand and bade me good night.

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### **A glass of beer at Andresen's and what it led to**

Ah, vanished days of a Europe that has crumbled into dust as utterly as the walls of Tyre and Sidon! I can still snatch a thrill from the memory of starting out on those missions of mine, my well-worn hunting flask on my hip, an automatic in my inside pocket and a belt of a hundred good gold sovereigns round my waist. At my back was London, stolid old London, which always palled on me after a few months; before me the Continent seemed, like a map in relief, to unfold itself, parcelled out into its mass of States, great and small, nearly all with its Emperor, King or Princeling hedged in with bayonets. They knew me on the Channel boats and on all the famous trains—the Nord Express that would

be my travelling home between the lights of Paris and the winter snows of St. Petersburg of the Tsars; the Orient Express that carried me so often across the great Balkan range to Constantinople with its soaring minarets or the shores of the Black Sea; the Sud Express with the leafy Castellana and the carriages of the excellent Madrileños at the end of its run or Lisbon, dreaming of fallen grandeur by the broad waters of the Tagus. More often than not the destiny towards which those drumming wheels bore me was commonplace and banal; but I never quitted the shores of England without a sense of exhilaration born of excited speculation as to what the future held in store.

I left London for Hamburg next morning, breakfasted beside the Alster next day, and caught a train for Kiel which set me down at my destination about noon. I had previously reconnoitred my route on the map with considerable thoroughness and duly made my way to the Holstenbrücke where I boarded a little steamer to take me across the harbour—the "Förde," as they call it. It was a glorious day, sunny and mild, and on landing at Kitzberg, with its array of summer villas gleaming whitely through the trees, I set off on foot through the woods for Andresen's.

Five minutes' tramp brought me in sight of a rustic signboard inscribed "*Zum Goldnen Adler*," which was the device of Andresen's establishment, and beyond it, of a ramshackle kind of pavilion with a dozen or so roughly carpentered tables, covered with red and white cloths, set out in a clearing among the pines. A deep silence reigned and between the branches were glimpses of snowy sails on sparkling blue water. The place seemed deserted, but that did not surprise me. Andresen's was clearly one of those establishments commonly found in the environs of German cities where on Sundays workmen bring their families for a glass of beer and a game of cards or skittles under the trees.

As I entered the garden a woman appeared from the house with a pan of water which she emptied on the grass. She was a big-boned, rather bovine female in a pinafore fastened over her clean cotton frock—I wondered whether this was Frau Andresen. On perceiving me, she put down her dish and, wiping her hands on her pinafore, came across to where I stood among the tables.

"It's warm walking," I remarked, doffing my hat. "Do you think I could have a glass of nice cold Pilsener?"

"Certainly," she answered, setting a chair for me. "The Herr has come far?"

"Only from Kitzberg," I told her. "And what about something to eat? I haven't had any lunch..."

I could have an omelette or a Wiener-Schnitzel, she told me, and the Gruyère was fresh. She had rather a dour, reserved way with her, accentuated by her strongly-marked dark eyebrows and abundant black hair. I said I would take the Schnitzel. "And if Herr Andresen is anywhere about," I added, "I'd like a word with him." Herr Andresen was out, she stated curtly, and went away.

She brought me my beer at once and, lighting a cigarette, I gave myself over to the peace of the place. The air was heavenly, soft and deeply impregnated with the scent of the pines. I drank my beer and wondered about Garnet. Andresen was evidently still about; but what could have happened to her?

When the woman at length brought me my food I asked her when Andresen was likely to be in. She shrugged her shoulders. "Is Frau Andresen there?" I asked. "I am Frau Andresen," she answered.

"A friend of Herr Andresen's from London has lately been at Kiel," I explained, "and I'm anxious to find out where's she's stopping. Her name is Miss Wolseley. She hasn't been here, I suppose?"

"An English lady with pince-nez?" she asked, looking at me out of her bold black eyes.

"That's her," I said eagerly.

"She was here this morning to see my husband. But he was out. She said she'd come back..."

This was distinctly encouraging. "At what time?" I questioned.

She hoisted her shoulders. "She didn't say..."

"Has she been here before to-day?"

"Oh, yes. Several times..."

"And seen Herr Andresen?"

"Oh, yes. She met him in London, it appears. The Herr is English also?"

Yes, I told her.

"For an Englishman the Herr speaks German brilliantly..."

I made some subtle rejoinder and asked if she knew at what time Andresen would return. She was more expansive now, standing there, hand on hip, as I ate my lunch. Her husband had gone to Kiel, she confided. She had expected him home for the midday meal but he must have been delayed. He would arrive at any minute. "If the Herr wished to see the English Miss, he'd better wait on a little."

"Thanks," said I, "I believe I will." And I asked her if she knew where Miss Wolseley was staying. But she only shrugged her shoulders and remarked that doubtless her husband could tell me. Then she retired into the house and left me to finish my meal.

She reappeared presently with my coffee, but this time she did not linger. The information I had gleaned made me much easier in my mind. Whatever was the explanation of the falling-off in Andresen's reports, it was clear that he was as yet under no surveillance. From where I sat I commanded the whole extent of the garden, with the fringe of the woods on one side and on the other the carriage road to Kitzberg shining white through the palings. Having drunk my coffee, I made a leisurely tour of the enclosure, and even poked my nose out on the road to make sure that no watcher lurked behind tree or bush. Then I saw Frau Andresen emerging from the house as though in search of me.

Her husband had telephoned, she told me; he was on his way home. As she spoke it seemed to me that she eyed me with an air of suspense, of suppressed excitement; but I put the notion from me as fanciful. That was always a failing of mine. I used to think that almost the only real qualification I possessed for intelligence work was a certain intuition which enabled me to read people and their moods with a fair amount of accuracy. The trouble was my reluctance to trust my first impressions, so that I seldom profited by what was quite a useful gift. Thus does Nature take away with one hand what she has bestowed with the other.

"You'll wait for him, won't you?" the woman said. "He won't be long now, and I'm sure he'll be glad to see any friend of the English Miss. I brought you the newspaper to read. And if the Herr fancied a little glass of cognac, or a sup of Danzig Goldwasser..."

I declined a liqueur, but I picked up the *Kieler Nachrichten*. It was a dullish little provincial sheet with a good deal of news of naval promotions, movements of warships and the like. I noticed that the Emperor was at sea with the Fleet on naval exercises, and was expected back at Kiel the following week.

As I sat there a few people began to arrive at the beer-garden for their afternoon coffee which, in the German provinces at that date, took the place of our English afternoon tea. A middle-aged couple with a flock of noisy children streamed in from the woods, and were presently followed by two rather mincing females in black with walking-sticks and a yapping Peke. A little later an old-fashioned fly disgorged at the road entrance a noisy party of two men and two women, who had thriftily brought their eatables with them in a basket and ordered two portions of coffee between them. The beer-garden seemed to be waking up.

It was getting on for four o'clock. Still there was no sign of Garnet or Andresen. There was nothing for it but to wait. Now that my anxiety about Garnet was to a great extent relieved, I began to feel considerably aggrieved against her. It was an intolerable thing, I reflected irascibly, that my leave should be broken off, my time wasted and the office routine upset over this irresponsible jaunt of hers. I turned over in my mind a few pithy remarks in which to voice my opinion when she should appear.



I laid aside the newspaper and, standing up, strolled across to the decrepit-looking skittle alley which projected from a corner of the garden. The children I had seen arrive were playing there, and the air rang with their shouts and the clatter of the ball among the pins. I was watching them at their game when I heard the throb of a motor engine and, looking round, perceived that a motor-car had halted at the gate. A woman was getting out. I saw at a glance that she was too tall to be Garnet and I turned my attention to the children again.

Then a voice said behind me: "This is the Herr who has asked for Miss Wolseley..."

I swung about. Frau Andresen was there. With her was the woman I had noticed descending from the car.

I suppose Madeleine Stafford was the last person in the world I had expected to see in that place. My face must have betrayed my astonishment, but she was quite unmoved. "But this gentleman and I are already acquainted," she said tranquilly in German.

Frau Andresen addressed me volubly. "Since this lady, who comes here to drink coffee sometimes, is also English, I asked her when she arrived just now whether she happened to know your English friend. And now it appears that the gnä' Frau knows the Herr. *Gott*, it's a small world, as the saying goes!" She tittered shrilly.

"I think I should like some coffee," Mrs. Stafford observed in her pleasant voice, "and I dare say the gentleman will join me..."

"I shall be delighted," I said.

"Two coffees? At once," Frau Andresen exclaimed. "And you'll tell the gentleman where the English Miss is staying, *nicht wahr?*" she added to Mrs. Stafford. With that she bustled away.

With her nonchalant air Madeleine had seated herself at a table aloof from the crowd, and was drawing off her gloves. I took a chair opposite her. She seemed to be a long time peeling off her gloves. She was outwardly composed, her lovely features unruffled, but this instinct of mine, of which I have already spoken, told me that this calm of hers was artificial. I had the impression that she was making an effort to appear self-controlled.

"Well," she remarked, smiling at me, "this is a surprise. You've let your hair go dark again. It suits you!"

"That's dye," I told her. "I couldn't stand looking like a blond sheikh..." I paused. "I certainly never expected to meet you at Kiel..."

I was thinking to myself that I should have anticipated it. This was no coincidence—the world was not so small as that. The garden was mellow in the afternoon sunlight, and about us the laughter and cries of the children fended the pleasant quiet of the surrounding woods. But it was as though a cold, black shadow had suddenly darkened the sun, the silhouette of a monstrous human shape, crouching, with one distorted foot drawn back. And it seemed to me that danger stalked close at hand.

"I'm staying at the hotel at Kitzberg," she explained.

"With Grundt?"

She touched my hand. "Be careful how you mention that name. No, I'm alone..."

"Where is he?"

"At sea with the Emperor..."

"When does he get back?"

"Not until next week..."

I nodded. This confirmed the paragraph I had read in the newspaper.

"I often walk or drive over here in the afternoons," she went on. "It's pleasant among the pines. They all think I'm English—on account of my name, you know. So when Frau Andresen saw me arrive, she naturally asked me about this friend of yours..." She made a pause. "There are not so many English stopping at Kiel, especially at this time of year..."

"Do you happen to know where Miss Wolseley is staying?"

"She's at Kitzeberg..."

"At the hotel, do you mean?"

"No. She's at a villa..."

"What villa?"

"The Villa Waldesruh'..."

"What's she doing there?"

She laughed and put up her slim hand as though to ward me off. "Really, you cross-examine me as though you were a policeman. I can't tell you what she's doing there—I don't know the lady. I've only seen her in the village..."

"In the *village*?" I was bewildered.

"Yes. She looked so extremely English that I asked who she was. She's stopping with the Wahlstedters..."

"Do you know them?"

"Slightly. A man and wife. I can take you calling there if you want to go..." Perceiving that I was silent, she added: "You seem strangely suspicious. She's not in your service, is she?"

I laughed. "Good Lord, no. She's just a girl I know in London. I heard she was at Kitzeberg or one of these places along the harbour, so, as I was at Hamburg, I thought I'd run over and look her up..." I paused. "Please get rid of any idea that I'm here on business. I'm on holiday..."

"Then why so gloomy?"

"I'm not gloomy. I was only thinking, isn't it rather an amazing coincidence our running into one another like this?"

She gave a little shrug. "Coincidences are the commonplaces of life. But here's Frau Andresen with our coffee and some of that delicious *Baumkuchen* they serve here. Would you like her to ring up the Villa Waldesruh' and ask if we can come along?"

"I think I'd like a word with Miss Wolseley first," I said. "Perhaps I could talk to her..."

"As you like," she said indifferently.

Frau Andresen escorted me to the telephone and got the number. "It's Herr Wahlstedter himself," she informed me, handing me the receiver. A light German voice replied. I introduced myself as a friend of Miss Wolseley and asked to speak to her. Herr Wahlstedter regretted that the Miss was out. Who should he say had telephoned?

I was debating whether to leave my name or not when I was aware, from a faint fragrance that stole along the passage, that Madeleine was behind me. "Let me speak," she said, and took the receiver from me. "This is Mrs. Stafford," she announced. "I have a friend of Miss Wolseley's from London with me. I wanted to bring him out to call on her this afternoon ... she's only gone to the post office ... good ... we'll be along in about a quarter of an hour..."

Well, that settled it. I had burned my boats. But I was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery about Garnet.

For a moment the Chief's orders to me obtruded themselves awkwardly into my mind. But I thrust them resolutely into the background. Grundt was absent; Andresen was at liberty—the circumstances were radically different from any we had envisaged.

We returned to the garden and drank our coffee. Andresen had not appeared, and I purposely refrained from mentioning his name in front of Madeleine; nor as I settled the bill, did Frau Andresen say anything about him. Andresen, I decided, would keep. Then Madeleine and I entered her car—she told me she hired it from the hotel—and were whirled away along the coast road to Kitzberg.

On the way I asked her if she had received the Mitzi Funda letters. She nodded rather secretively and a little colour warmed her pale cheeks. I asked her what explanation she had given Grundt. On which she told me that she had not yet handed the letters over, as Grundt was away, and rather brusquely changed the subject. But now the box was on my mind, and I inquired what Grundt had done with it.

She seemed surprised. "Grundt?" she repeated. "Didn't you get it? You sent me back the key of the apartment..."

"I got it all right," I told her, "but our friend Markus took it off me again..."

She gave me a rapid glance. "Then you were at my apartment the day that Markus was shot?"

"Yes. But nobody knows it..."

"And Markus had the box, you say?" Her manner had grown agitated.

"Yes. Didn't Grundt tell you?"

She shook her head. "I haven't seen him since that night at Ostend..." She paused and was about to add something when the car stopped, and immediately the door was opened. A man in a white serving jacket stood there, a scraggy little man with a livid scar down one cheek. Behind him was a gate in a grey wire fence, and beyond, up some shallow steps, the front door stood open.

The Villa Waldesruh' was built on a steep hill that wound up from the main street of Kitzberg, one of a number of isolated villas standing practically flush with the road with gardens at the back. Deferentially, the man with the scar assisted my companion to alight, and we entered the house.

Officiously, the servant bustled ahead. "This way, Herr," he announced, and opened a door that gave off the hall. I stepped back for my companion to lead the way, but, on looking round, found she had vanished. I hesitated. "If the Herr will take the trouble to go in," the servant encouraged me, "the English Miss is at home and is expecting him. Frau Stafford went to her room. She will join you in a minute..."

My head full of Garnet and of the surprise she would get on seeing me, I crossed the threshold unsuspectingly...

### **A gallows draught with Dr. Grundt**

My first thought—irrelevant enough—on recovering from my surprise was that I had never seen the Man with the Clubfoot taking his ease before. He was ensconced in a high-backed arm-chair facing the door. His satyr's face, broad and bony, was deeply tanned as though with the sea breezes, and his healthy complexion seemed to stress the animal energy that streamed from him. He wore a relaxed and almost jovial air as he sat there, his crutch-handled stick within easy reach, his deformed foot propped up on a low stool, and on his knee the largest white cat I have ever seen. His thick

fingers ran up and down the arched spine of this monster tom, the velvety down on the great hands, inky black against the snowy fur.

His chair, angular and uncomfortable-looking and upholstered in faded red rep, was in keeping with the old-German character of the room. There was a vast mahogany desk, a stove (in green tiling) as big as a family tomb, and heavy hangings of dingy brown damped down the light from a bow window, diamond-paned in the best bogus mediæval style, that overlooked a delightful garden. Bookshelves, shoulder-high, ran round the walls, and on one of these, flanked by a collection of Bavarian beer-mugs, a terra-cotta bust of the Emperor was prominently placed. I saw in a glazed case on the wall a large collection of decorations mounted on a bar, and there were many framed photographs about, mostly of men in uniform, with lengthy dedications and signatures all twirls and flourishes. From these details, and from the fact that Grundt seemed so completely at home, I inferred that I found myself in Clubfoot's own house.

He did not raise his eyes on my entrance, but, gazing down at the great cat in his lap while his fingers toyed with its coat, remarked smoothly, as though carrying on a conversation already begun between us: "How inexhaustible and alluring a study the cat, my dear Clavering! How friendless, how aloof"—his hot eyes glittered and he bared the gold in his teeth in a mocking smile—"how sublimely egoistic and unfathomable! What an example to all who follow our thankless yet fascinating profession!"

He fell to chuckling and, progressing from chuckle to chuckle, broke into a strident laugh. At the sight of me the cat stood up, stretched delicately and dropped lightly to the floor.

"See," Grundt chortled, "Adolphus is at peace on my lap. Then you appear, and at once he transfers his affections to the new-comer..." And in truth the obese brute, a regular Daniel Lambert among cats, had started to rub itself against my leg, purring like a dynamo the while. "What perfect fickleness," Clubfoot pursued, "what resolute opportunism! So it is right, my dear colleague! We may learn much from Adolphus, you and I. In our calling a man"—his voice dropped a half-tone—"or even a woman, may befriend no one, trust no one. Let us be false—and strong!" And, rubbing his hands together in a sort of ecstasy of enjoyment, he exploded again into a great shout of laughter.

I listened to him tight-lipped and torn with conflicting emotions. I knew what he meant. Madeleine Stafford was no more than a vulgar decoy. At his behest she had trapped me, as she had trapped Charles Forrest. No wonder she had not had the effrontery to face me, but had fled away. And Frau Andresen was her accomplice—if it was Frau Andresen. In any case, they had played their parts with consummate skill. Not that this reflection brought me any solace. I was in a tight spot, and it would take a great deal more than the gun in my pocket to get me out of it. For myself I was not afraid, but when I thought of Garnet my blood seemed to stagnate with fear.

"But won't you be seated, my dear Clavering," the man in the chair invited flutily. "You will excuse me if I do not rise to welcome you to this modest retreat of mine, but I have been of late in constant attendance upon one of the most exhausting personalities on the world's stage to-day—*na*, you know of whom I speak—and at my age a man has a right to his little comforts. You'll join me, I trust, in a glass of wine. My illustrious employer graciously sent me, as a Christmas gift, a parcel of old Steinberger, on which I should like your opinion..."

So saying he pressed a bell on the desk beside him, I had taken a chair at random. I was bewildered, embarrassed—I found no words to come to my aid. In this cryptic, allusive mood Grundt seemed to me to be even more sinister than in one of his blustering rages.

The door was opened softly. The manservant stood there. "A bottle of the Steinberger, Alfred, and two glasses," Clubfoot commanded softly. And as the man was about to withdraw: "By the way," he added, "have you the Herr's pistol?"

I clapped my hand to my inside pocket. It was empty. Silently the servant placed my gun on the desk and disappeared. "An excellent domestic who is nobly exerting himself to live down a criminal record," Grundt commented ingratiatingly as he locked the weapon away in a drawer. "Alfred might have gone far as a sleight-of-hand manipulator. Unfortunately, his tastes lay in the direction of picking pockets. Lack of ambition, my dear colleague—lack of ambition!"

The subject of this homily returning at this moment with a dust-encrusted bottle and two long-stemmed glasses on a

tray, Grundt poured the wine and sent Alfred to me with my glass. "When I ring," Clubfoot observed enigmatically to the man, and dismissed him.

Grundt raised his glass, passing it to and fro under avid nostrils, then held it against the light, contemplating the amber wine clinging like oil to the sides of the greenish-yellow beaker. His look quizzed me. "To the protean Herr Clavering!" he said.

I lifted my glass in turn. After all, I asked myself, why not? The wine had an exquisite bouquet redolent of honey and wild thyme. Anything I could do to humour this man-ape in his present expansive mood... "*Auf Ihr Wohl*, Herr Doktor!" I answered his toast, and we drank.

Smacking his bulbous lips loudly, the huge German set his glass down upon the desk at his side. "*Na*," he said jovially, "what do you think of the Imperial cellars, young man?"

"A noble wine," I answered sincerely. "One doesn't get a Steinberger Kabinet to drink every day..."

"Truly spoken," Clubfoot rumbled. "And so I reserve it for special occasions to do honour to distinguished visitors like yourself..."

I bowed formally. "The Herr Doktor is too kind..."

"Not at all," he countered. "The laws of hospitality are always respected under Grundt's roof. The wine must be of the best, whether it be a loving cup ... or a gallows draught!" And he fell once more to stroking Adolphus who had leaped upon his knee.

He spoke with a silken suavity which merely stressed the unambiguous menace of his words. I was conscious of a little stab of fear and my throat was dry. To cover up my discomposure I drank again.

"The fact that you've not taken the trouble to disguise yourself on this occasion," said Clubfoot, tickling Adolphus's ear, "is, I infer, a compliment to my humble self. May I take it that you reckoned on my absence from Kiel?"

"The Herr Doktor knows that I've always had the highest respect for his intelligence..." I was resolved to give nothing away.

He perceived the evasion and scowled. But his tones were dulcet as before. "In point of fact," he remarked, "I was not due back until next week. It was only the fortunate circumstance that I happened to be ashore this afternoon, attending a luncheon at the Imperial Yacht Club, which enabled me to come home in time to make the requisite arrangements to—er—welcome you..."

"There was really no need to put yourself out on my account," I replied.

"Ta, ta, ta! It was a pleasure. Besides, I wished to talk with you..." He paused, while his great hand softly stropped itself against the arched back in his lap. The drowsy purring of Adolphus was the only sound in the room. "I have a feeling," Grundt went on with a thoughtful air, "that a certain measure of luck which has favoured you in our encounters up to the present may have misled you as to the efficiency of my organisation. It may interest you to learn, therefore, that your arrival at the al fresco establishment of the good Andresen was reported to me at the lunch table of Prince Heinrich within ten minutes of your arrival there..."

"By Frau Andresen, I presume?"

"By the lady who is momentarily replacing her," he corrected gently. "Frau Andresen is in jail with her husband..."

I quailed. This meant that Garnet had walked straight into the net they had spread for her. They had grabbed Andresen and his wife, put in this woman as a decoy and waited to see what fortune would send them. To date, the bag was Garnet and I—not bad!

Clubfoot had shifted his gaze to me and was watching me, sidelong, from underneath his shaggy eyebrows. The dismay in my face appeared to gratify him for he laughed contentedly. "Ja, ja," he observed, "Frau Andresen's substitute did her part well. Five minutes later our dainty Mrs. Stafford had her instructions. A clever woman, that, Clavering, a—clever—woman! But your glass is empty. Permit me!" He refilled our glasses.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I fail to see where her cleverness comes in. I was perfectly open with her. I told her I wanted to find out where a friend of mine, a Miss Wolseley, was staying, and she volunteered to take me to her villa..."

"And why did you go looking for the lady at Andresen's, may I inquire?" asked Clubfoot, holding his wine to his eye.

"Because she was a friend of his. I had met them lunching together in London. Instead of taking me to Miss Wolseley's villa Mrs. Stafford brought me here..."

The cripple simmered. "Naturally. Because your friend is stopping in this house..." He drank and replaced his glass.

I was unable to repress a start. "Here?" Then recovering myself, I added drily, "And you're Herr Wahlstedter, I suppose?"

Grundt cleared his throat resonantly. "One of the first maxims of our engaging profession, as you should know is to eschew all unnecessary lies. In the bewildering series of aliases under which he was wont to operate, I have never succeeded in discovering our good Alfred's real name. But Wahlstedter is the name he has selected for his service with me. And Frau Wahlstedter—if she is entitled to that appellation, which is a matter of some doubt—is my cook..." He paused. "Would you like to see Miss Wolseley?"

I scented a trap. "Very much," I replied warily.

"Then I would ask you to do me the honour of presenting me..."

"You haven't met Miss Wolseley?"

"But I reached here only an hour before yourself, zum Donnerwetter. I've been at sea for the past ten days—my exalted employer has never been able to understand that some of us have work to do. And since my arrival,"—he pointed at the desk, littered with unopened mail and dossiers—"I've had my hands full, as you see..." He touched the bell. "Which must be my excuse for not presenting my respects sooner to your, ahem, charming compatriot!"

A moment later Garnet was ushered in. If I had not been expecting her, I do not believe I would ever have recognised her. Without the use of wig or greasepaint or disguise of any sort, she had managed to turn herself into a perfectly terrible caricature of the Englishwoman abroad. Her clothes were dire—an indescribable yellowish tweed suit of mannish cut with a man's stiff white collar and a bilious green tie—and she wore some sort of open-work brogues or sandals that gave her a grotesque, splay-footed appearance. Her hair was dragged so tightly back from her forehead that her eyebrows were permanently elevated and her eyes bulged from her head, giving her the facial expression of a startled animal. Her face was devoid of powder or other aids to beauty and, positively, she had a shining red nose. By some manipulation of the lips when she spoke she contrived to give the impression that her upper teeth projected. She looked like the wrath of God.

With gold spectacles gleaming, she bounced into the room, quivering with indignation. "Mr. Clavering!" she exclaimed with a sort of kittenish glee which was inimitable, as she saw me. "How on earth do you come to be here! Are you aware that I was kidnapped and carried to this house where I've been detained against my will ever since Saturday?" She glanced from me to Grundt. "Who is this man?" she demanded. Then rounding on him, "Are you responsible for this abominable outrage?" she cried irately.

Grundt had risen from his chair. Leaning heavily on his stick he scrutinised her with a suspicious, challenging air. "Take off your spectacles!" he suddenly roared at her. She faced him, bridling—her impersonation of an English spinster standing up for her rights was masterly, a gem of acutely observed characterisation. With a determined mien she settled her spectacles firmly on her nose. "I'll do nothing of the sort," she declared acidly.

"Take 'em off," the German thundered, "or I'll do it myself!" And dragging his monstrous boot over the carpet he lurched towards her. I thrust myself between them. "Out of the way, damn you," he trumpeted. He was bristling with rage.

I turned to Garnet who had retreated behind me.

"I think you'd better do as he says," I advised her. My back screened her from the cripple's furious gaze and for a fleeting instant I saw the real Garnet peep out of her eyes.

"Oh, very well," she observed snippily. "Only it seems such an exceedingly curious thing to ask. Is the man drunk or mad or what?"

She doffed her glasses. With a movement of his enormous arm, Grundt swept me from his path. Hobbling forward he pushed his hairy face into hers. "So!" he cackled triumphantly. "It is as I suspected. The good Clavering's lady friend! But this time, my dear, your *tête-à-tête* is with me!"

"If you've quite finished staring at me like a gargoyle," Garnet frigidly interposed, "perhaps you'll allow me to put my glasses on again. I'm as blind as a bat without them!"

"Do what you like with them, liebes Fräulein, do what you like with them..." Chortling consumedly, the cripple stumped back to his desk and began hunting through the papers there. "But let's have no more play-acting, I beg!"

"Play-acting?" she echoed with a fine simulation of indignation. Popping on her spectacles, she appealed to me. "Mr. Clavering, how long do you intend to allow me to be insulted? Will you please take me away!"

"Sit down, Miss Wolseley," Grundt bade her composedly. "It was a clever bluff, but your eyes betrayed you. They were not in the rôle—if you'll permit me to say it without offence, they're too, na, what shall I say? too charmingly feminine for this *tour de force* of yours. They told me what I suspected from the moment that our excellent Clavering entered the room here, that you and he are in this together..."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she broke in crisply.

"Surely you haven't forgotten our meeting in London?"

"I'm not aware that I've ever seen you before..."

"At friend Clavering's apartment," Clubfoot pursued evenly, "in circumstances over which I—and you, too I feel sure—would prefer to draw the veil..."

"This is outrageous!" she cried shrilly. "Now you listen to me. I intend to lodge a strong protest with the British Embassy about this business. I give you fair warning—you'll detain me at your peril..."

"*Quatsch!*" said Grundt—he was looking through a drawer.

"Will you kindly have my suitcase put on a taxi..."

His glance flamed at her. "Sit down," he barked, his eyes blazing. "And shut up!"

To my surprise she made no further protest but, glancing about her for a chair, found one at my side and seated herself composedly. In a somewhat bewildered frame of mind, I followed her example and sat down. Her surrender daunted me considerably. If Garnet chucked in the sponge, then, indeed, things were looking black for us.

Her regard was fixed, rather earnestly, on the man at the desk. Following the direction of her eyes I perceived that she was gazing, not at Grundt's face but at his hands.

There was the sheen of gold between his hairy paws. I saw that he was holding Charles Forrest's box.

**What the box contained**

"You know this box?" he said to me.

I shook my head.

"Yet it belonged to your late colleague, Herr Forrest?"

"Did it?"

"Come, come," he rasped, "denials will serve you nothing. I know that you attached sufficient importance to it to offer a thousand francs' reward for its recovery. Do you deny that, too?"

"Forrest's family were anxious to recover it," I said huskily. "It seems it's an heirloom..."

"So?" A sarcastic smile twisted the gross lips. "You leave Brussels at 3 o'clock in the morning for the scene of the railway accident in quest of news of Forrest and you wish me to believe that, before you knew whether he was alive or dead, or whether the box was still in his possession or not, you were already provided with the instructions of his family to offer a reward for its return. Is that right?"

"I acted on my own responsibility. I knew what value his people set on the box..."

"Then you knew he had it with him?"

"Certainly. He always carried it..."

Garnet's bag slipped to the ground with a gentle plop. As I stooped to restore it to her, I caught the warning frown on her face, without, however, immediately comprehending its purport.

"Pay attention to me," Clubfoot bellowed irascibly. "How did you know he always carried it?"

"Because..." I broke off, suddenly conscious of the pit that yawned at my feet. Too late I divined the meaning of Garnet's danger signal. "... I was told so," I added lamely.

"Don't lie," Grundt shouted. "You were sent in search of this box because it was well known that Forrest never let it out of his sight and he was carrying valuable papers in it. What were these papers?"

"I haven't the least idea," I said indifferently.

The great cripple laid the box upon the blotter in front of him and dropped into the desk chair, breathing rather hard. Absently, his hand clawed into the open cigar-box that stood on the writing-table and fetched out a cigar.

"Now, you two, listen to me," he snarled. "We've caught Andresen red-handed with the goods on him. Your tricky Mr. Okewood got away but he left a trail behind that led back to the Goldner Adler with the result that friend Andresen has been thoroughly investigated. There are telegrams to and from Copenhagen to be explained; bank deposits to be accounted for—if he gets off with less than twenty years' penal servitude..." He broke off. "And he's not the only one who'll see the inside of a German Zuchthaus. There are those who fetched and carried for him, who brought him his instructions from London..."

"You can't frighten me, Grundt," I told him with an assurance I was far from feeling. "It's no offence under the law, criminal or military, to call on a man and ask for a friend's address or, in Miss Wolseley's case, to look up an old



acquaintance. You allege that Andresen is a spy. If he is, it's the first I've heard of it. It pleases you to insinuate that Miss Wolseley and I are implicated in some conspiracy with Andresen against the safety of the State. May I ask what evidence of this you can produce?"

He struck a match savagely and applied it to his cigar. "The evidence will be forthcoming all right..." he growled.

I laughed easily. "Not from Andresen..."

His eyes flickered restlessly to my face. They were lit with a yellowish fire. "Don't be too sure," he rasped. "There's a lot of evidence at the end of a rubber club..."

He used the grim German word "*Totschlager*," literally, beater-to-death. His sombre mien, the cynical curl to his lips, gave me a sudden, horrific vision of some bare, underground cell, a knot of merciless, pertinacious questioners, bludgeons rising and falling noiselessly, agonised screams. For the moment I was unable to speak.

The clumsy fingers drummed. "You'll be sensible, Clavering. What does this box contain?"

I licked my dry lips. "Why ask me that, since it's in your possession?"

"It was handed to me but an hour ago. I've not yet had the leisure to examine it: I perceive, however, that it has a secret locking device. I shall ask you to be good enough to open the box for me..."

"I'm afraid I can't oblige," I retorted. "I've told you already I've never set eyes on it before..."

Contentedly he puffed at his cigar. "I feel sure you're going to be reasonable. I'm not unaware that a cold chisel would make short work of the lock. But my soul shrinks from such an act of vandalism. A masterpiece such as this—Italian, is it not—merits a better fate at my hands. Besides, I should like to preserve this delightful *bonbonnière* intact as a souvenir of a bizarre and not altogether unsuccessful episode of my official career. It will do to carry my throat lozenges when my asthma troubles me in winter..." He paused to discharge a leisurely stream of smoke. "The advantage of your opening the box in my presence," he enunciated delicately, "is that, in the event of the papers being in cipher, or any little difficulty like that, you will be on hand to help us out..." With extreme deliberation his knotted forefinger pressed the bell-push.

Garnet, who had remained silent up till now, leaned forward in her chair. "Is it understood," she asked rather tensely, "that if Mr. Clavering opens the box for you, you will let us go free?"

I was horror-struck. Why, this was tantamount to an admission that I was acquainted with the secret! "It's no use discussing it," I put in quickly. "I'm not going to open the box, for the simple reason that I don't know how to open it..."

Clubfoot was smiling complacently. "Women are always so direct," he observed. "A practical question, my dear! But based, I fear, on a misapprehension. You, of course, are not in any position to dictate terms. If your friend, however, decides to be reasonable, both you and he may reckon on my indulgence..."

"Not good enough," said Garnet briskly. "It's release or nothing. That's a condition!"

The great eyebrows came down portentously. "Condition? You'd dare to propose conditions to me?" His voice dropped to a menacing whisper. "Why, you poor fool, don't you realise that I hold you and your accomplice in the hollow of my hand"—he thrust his huge palm at her in illustration—"and that I can crush the pair of you"—he crooked his hairy talons—"as I'd crush an egg..." He swung about in his chair for the door had opened. "What the devil do you want?" he roared.

Alfred was there. "The Herr Doktor rang?"

Grundt passed his hand across his face. "*Ach*, so. Yes! Send Vogel and Bauer to me here..." The servant withdrew and Clubfoot turned to me. "Well," he cried in a loud, hectoring voice, "which is it to be, yes or no?"

"If you're still talking about the box," I rejoined firmly, "I've told you already that I can't oblige you. Sorry, but there it is! I'm not aware that I ever saw Forrest open it. You're surely not suggesting that I'm cleverer than you, Herr Doktor?"

"I'm suggesting that you do as I tell you without any more play-acting and lies," he croaked harshly. "The woman spoke the truth just now when she tried to bargain for your safety." He pounded the desk. "Are you going to obey of your own free will or am I going to make you?" His voice grew suddenly fluty. "Or perhaps you think I haven't the means?" And his restless eyes shot a sidelong glance at Garnet.

"Look here, Grundt," I said rather desperately, "Miss Wolesley has nothing to do with this. Let her go and we'll talk things over..."

"That your fascinating lady friend," he returned with exaggerated politeness, "should have been detained even an hour against her will in my poor abode cuts me to the soul. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to accede to your wishes. Unfortunately, I may require Miss Wolseley..."—he paused and his eyes rolled spitefully—"when I've done with you. *Verdammt*," raising his voice to a shout in one of his lightning changes of mood, "do you realise that when I give an order, it's to be obeyed? *Himmelkreuzdonnerwetter*, you rat, do you know you're wasting my time? One of you two is going to do as I say before you leave this house or I'll find a way to make you, *bei Gott!*" And he brought his leg-of-mutton fist down upon the solid oak desk-top with a crash that sent the box slithering across the blotter.

I could read this shouting monster like a book. Inflated with power as he was, the mere idea of opposition infuriated him. As he had himself admitted, a chisel would have settled that lock in a trice; but it was evident from the sort of sadistic light glowering under those fantastic eyebrows that he was set upon bending one or other of us to his will. My courage slipped a notch as I looked at Garnet.

A single loud knock interrupted him. Vogel's janissary whiskers were visible in the doorway, Bauer's livid countenance in rear. The pair marched in with faces of doom and took position beside the desk in an expectant attitude.

Grundt picked up the box, balancing it in his fingers. "This gentleman," he said, addressing his two henchmen, "is about to open this box for me. You'll stand on either side of him and keep hold of his arms to prevent any attempt on his part to destroy the contents. Get on with it!"

The two men advanced stolidly, burly and forbidding, Vogel with his heavy jowl and rampant moustache, Bauer, fat of face and sallow of hue, with a dull and fish-like eye. In silence they placed me between them.

Clubfoot held out the box to me. "So..."

I put my hands in my pockets.

The blood rushed into his face, he snorted and his eyes glared murder. All the primeval savagery of the brute seemed to flare up in the lodent flame that leaped out from under the beetling brows. He ground his teeth and beads of foam bubbled at the purplish, twitching lips. His access of fury was so violent that the whole gross mass of him trembled and quaked. Incoherent sounds broke from him and his features writhed with the exaggerated ferocity and hate you see concentrated in a devil dancer's mask. I thought he was going to have a stroke.

It was a terrifying exhibition. The detectives on either side of me were paralysed with fear. Vogel was rocking on his heels and Bauer's cod-fish orbs were popping out of their sockets. I stole a glance at Garnet and I was proud of her. She sat relaxed and unafraid, in that grotesque get-up of hers, nonchalantly nursing her knee.

Almost as quickly as it had seized him, Grundt's paroxysm passed. One enormous hand eased his collar, he grunted and murmured softly, hissing the sibilant, "So..."

I faced him as boldly as I might but my spirits sank within me at the unspeakable menace of his regard. His eyes never left my face. "So..." he repeated. Then, head down and with a furtive air, he glanced swiftly about the room. "Vogel," he ordered softly, "have the goodness to bring that radiator here!"

He pointed to where an electric stove, a round portable affair of the common type that has an asbestos cone in the

centre, stood in a corner. Vogel placed the contraption on the desk. "So!" Clubfoot handed him the length of flex. "Just attach that to the plug in the wall behind me, will you?"

I had no idea what these preparations portended, but I watched them with much the same fascinated and fearsome interest as, I imagine, the condemned felon may display in the mechanism of the gallows on being introduced into the execution shed. Vogel stooped to the foot of the wall behind him and the heater warmed to a red glow—mechanically I noted that the cord was very long to enable the radiator to be used at will in different parts of the room.

"So!" Grundt muttered, on perceiving that the heater was duly functioning. Then, pointing at me, he cackled suddenly, exultantly. "Now off with his shoes and socks and we'll warm his feet for him!"

I was appalled. Even thus did marauding bands in the Middle Ages compel their victims to reveal their hidden stores of money. This was torture—and I could not forget that the fate—the very lives, perhaps—of the men and women on Forrest's list was in my keeping. I sprang back, but stumbled against a piece of furniture behind me. Before I could regain my balance they were upon me. The portly Bauer hurled himself through the air like a flying elephant, while Vogel, in a sort of rugby tackle, imprisoned my legs. I staggered over backwards upon a low couch with Bauer's enormous mass on my chest.

I heard Garnet's breathless scream, "No, no, you wouldn't dare?" and Grundt's blustering rejoinder, "Dare? I'll roast his soles clear through to the instep if I have to..." Then, despite my struggles, my shoes and socks were torn off—I could not struggle much: Bauer must have tipped the beam at fifteen or sixteen stone. The tail of his jacket flapping in my face momentarily blinded me: but Grundt's snarling tones grated on my ear. "Well, my friend," he inquired mockingly, "are we going to be reasonable?"

"Go to hell!" I shouted. Seeing nothing of what was going forward around me, I suddenly found the suspense intolerable and made a supreme effort to free myself. But my resistance was in vain—Bauer had my arms pinned to the couch and Vogel was planted solidly on my legs. Then there came the sound of a scuffle, a woman's shrill cry and a panting growl from Grundt, "Stand away from that window. And if you make another sound, I'll have you gagged..." Thereafter, the creak of the door and Grundt's voice, "Hold her, Alfred!"—and I knew that Garnet, dear, plucky Garnet, had done her poor best to help me and had failed.

Bauer's coat at that instant falling clear of my face, I saw Clubfoot, the red-hot heater grasped in one enormous hand, hobbling eagerly towards the couch where I tossed in the grip of his men. "Hold him, boys," he wheezed jovially as he stooped to set the radiator down upon the floor. Already I felt the heat on the sole of my right foot when a clear voice cried out, "Stop!"

"A moment, Vogel!" Grundt commanded.

"I can't stand it," I heard a piteous wail. "I'll open the box for you myself..."

A thunderous shout of laughter rumbled through the study. "*Ei ei*," a mocking voice resounded. "See, we're going to be reasonable at last!"

They let me up. Grundt was just handing Garnet the box. I was aware of Alfred, the manservant, hovering in the background. "Garnet," I yelled, "don't be a damned fool! Garnet!" In my bare feet I hurtled forward. But Clubfoot thrust his great belly in my path. "You keep out of this, d'you hear?" he barked.

Dumbfounded, my heart swelling with rage and misery, I watched the slight figure at the desk, flanked by Bauer and Alfred. Garnet had put the box down on the blotter and I saw her fingers twirl the arrow. Grundt was facing her across the desk. He suffered me to steal up beside him, rightly divining that there was no fight left in me—I noticed, however, that Vogel was behind me with a drawn pistol. Clubfoot's simian traits were radiant with eagerness, his immense frame rigid with suspense. Garnet did not look at me. Rather tremulously and with flushed cheeks, she gave her whole attention to the spinning dart.

It had never occurred to me that she was familiar with the secret. Like a few of us in the inner circle she knew, of course, that Forrest had this box; but, as far as I was aware, only Francis Okewood and I were acquainted with the

locking mechanism—in a rare moment of expansion, one night when he and Francis were dining with me, Forrest had shown it to us under the pledge of secrecy.

I should have known our Garnet better. It was obvious now that, some time or other, she must have persuaded old Charles to let her into the secret. Without an instant's hesitation, as I saw to my dismay, she set the arrow on the M and pressed and so, through the A and the R and the I of Marie Bertesson's first name, to the E. On coming to the final letter she paused for the fraction of a second and I had the impression that she wanted to glance up at me, but was afraid. Then she pressed the dart for the last time and the lid flew up.

The box was empty.

## 108

### Which takes Garnet off

Grundt swooped down upon the box, tearing it out of her hands, as in Cairo I have had a kite filch a biscuit from between my very fingers at the tea-table. It was growing dusk and, switching on the desk lamp, the cripple held the golden trinket beneath the light. Cigar in mouth, lips pursed up appraisingly, eyes sombre and unrevealing, he stared at the box open in his hands. But his examination availed him nothing. The box was indubitably empty—I could see its gleaming gold interior bare of so much as a speck of dust.

Beneath the cover of the desk a small, warm hand sought mine, clung to it desperately. For a fleeting moment Garnet was out of her rôle. The brief, surreptitious look she gave me was brimming over with tenderness and sympathy, and I fancied a tear glistened behind her disfiguring glasses. My heart went out to her. She had taken a fantastic risk; but in the immense relief of the discovery that Forrest's list was still immune from the terrible eye of Clubfoot I had forgotten my erstwhile horror at her apparent indiscretion. So I returned her grip with a will and smiled encouragingly at her.

But it was a poor effort. I was in no mood for smiling just then. Up to that moment I had been unconsciously making excuses for Madeleine's betrayal of me; but it was now crystal-clear that she had double-crossed me from the start. In some way she must have mastered the secret of the box and extracted the list—though for what purpose I could not conceive, since, evidently, she had not passed it on to Grundt. The realisation of her treachery left me humiliated, mortified and very sore against myself. I turned on my heel and, crossing the room, silently sat down on the couch and began to pull on my socks.

The staccato peal of the telephone on the desk roused Grundt from his reverie. He lifted the receiver. A sudden wariness in the determined face, a certain tenseness that became noticeable in his attitude as he bent down to the instrument, told me that the call was an important one. "The *Hohenzollern*?" he repeated—that, if some of you have forgotten, was the Emperor's yacht. "Yes, I'll take the call!" He laid a tufted paw across the transmitter. "Put them in the room across the hall," he said to Vogel, jerking his head in our direction.

The plain clothes man marched us out into a small office summarily furnished with a desk, a horsehair sofa, a plaster bust of His Majesty and a shelf of official publications. The window was barred. Our escort left us to ourselves, but we heard his heavy tread on the flags of the hall outside. The moment we were alone, Garnet caught me by the hands. "Oh, my dear," she cried, "did they hurt you much?"

I shook my head rather morosely. "He was bluffing, I think..."

It was her turn to shake her head. Emphatically. "That was no bluff. The man's a savage, a throw-back to the German Urwald. He's as primitive as the aurochs and as dangerous..."

"Well," I remarked dryly, "You didn't give me the chance to test it, did you?"

"You couldn't expect me to sit by and let him torture you," she declared with feeling.

I glanced at the door. "How did you know that the box was empty?" I whispered.

"I didn't know—not for sure, at least..." She laid her hands on my shoulder. "Oh, it was crazy of you to come after me..."

"If you don't mind my saying so," I interjected severely, "you were the crazy one for haring off here alone in the first place. What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?"

She coloured up. "Well," she said slowly, "you know there was this trouble about Andresen and his reports. It seemed to me terribly important to find out the truth about Andresen because if he had been arrested, since his name is on that list of Forrest's, it would mean that the list was in Clubfoot's hands..."

"It obviously isn't," I put in. "They got on to Andresen through Francis Okewood—Grundt admitted as much to me himself..."

"Of course, I didn't know that," Garnet replied. "What really determined me to run over to Kiel over the week-end was a Kiel message I read in the *Berliner Tageblatt*—in the Court news, it was. It said that the Emperor had received on board the *Hohenzollern* Dr Grundt, inspector of secondary schools..."

I laughed. "'Inspector of secondary schools' is good..."

"That suggested to me at once that old Clubfoot, as you call him, was behind the Andresen puzzle. I could see that the Chief believed that Andresen had ratted; but I knew better. I felt that I could appear at Kiel quite safely, as I'd never been there before; and a word with Andresen would clear everything up. If, on the other hand, anything had happened to Andresen, I could get at the facts with much less risk than any of you fellows. The Chief was standing clear of Kiel for the moment and I knew that he'd never consent to my going; so it seemed simpler to tell him nothing about it..."

"And a nice hash you made of things," I grumbled. "Did you call on Grundt? Or did you think this villa was a boarding house or what?"

She shook her head soberly. "It was much less complicated than that. I left London on Thursday night, was at Hamburg next evening, slept the night there and came on to Kiel next day—the Saturday, that is. My intention was to catch the night train back to London. I got to Andresen's about noon. A woman there told me he was out..."

"She was one of Clubfoot's people," I explained.

"She said she was Frau Andresen..."

"Frau Andresen's in jail..."

"And Andresen?"

"The same..."

She nodded sagely. "I guessed as much from what happened subsequently. The woman at the beer-garden said Andresen would be back for lunch, if I cared to wait. So I sat down and ordered some coffee. Then a man appeared—it was Bauer, one of Grundt's two watchdogs, I discovered later—and said his orders were to take me before the Chief of Police. After a bit of an argument he brought me here and here I've been ever since. They treated me all right except that I was never allowed to go out and that they refused to answer any questions. Until this afternoon I'd no idea I was in Grundt's house..."

"Well, you know now," I told her rather ill-humouredly. "And if you'd inform me as to how we're going to get out again, I'd be obliged. Did you see anything of Mrs. Stafford?"

"Is *she* here?"

"Certainly. It was she who brought me to the villa to see you. Said you were stopping with friends. You realise, of course, that it was she who took the list out of the box?"

"Yes, I suppose it was. Unless..." She broke off.

"Unless what?"

"Nothing..." She paused. "Grundt hasn't got the list, at any rate. I mean, he seemed to be genuinely astonished to find the box empty..."

"I agree..."

"Then what could Mrs. Stafford want with that list?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I can't tell you. But we can't get over the facts..."

She nodded. "Do you suppose we could persuade Grundt to give up the box—now that he knows it's empty, I mean?"

"Nothing easier. You've seen how amenable he is to suggestion. I daresay he'd fill it with cigarettes or chocolates for you, if you asked him nicely..."

"No, but seriously, Clavering..."

"You don't seem to realise the hole we're in. I don't want to scare you, but as things are at present, we've an excellent chance of standing our trial, as accomplices of Andresen, on a charge of espionage. And that means ... a German jail, my dear!"

She did not flinch: she was full of courage. "I know. But we've got to get hold of that box..."

"To put in a glass case in the drawing-room, I suppose, as a souvenir of our experiences—when we come out of prison?"

She gave me a penitent look. "Don't rub it in..."

"I don't want to rub it in. But I can't forget that you ran us into this mess. If you can't be helpful, try, at least, to be practical..."

"All the same," she repeated stubbornly, "we've got to get hold of that box..."

I cautioned her to silence. The door was opening. Vogel stood there beckoning. He took us back to the study. Immersed in thought, Clubfoot squatted at the desk as we had left him, the gold box open before him.

"I shall not require your presence further," he said to Garnet as we were ushered in. "One of my men will accompany you to Hamburg and see you on board the Harwich boat. My advice to you, Miss Wolseley," he added, pulling down his matted brows at her and scowling, "is once you're out of Germany, never to return..." He glanced at Vogel. "Who's on duty besides you and Bauer?"

"Matthäi and Honig, Herr Doktor..."

"Let Honig escort the lady. He worked in a lunatic asylum once, didn't he? He ought to know how to handle an obstreperous woman..." He burst into a loud guffaw.

"There's not the least necessity to disturb your keeper friend," Garnet chipped in in her tartest manner. "Believe me, I require no persuading to leave this country..." Her look consulted me. "Mr. Clavering is going to take me back to

London..."

"I regret, but Mr. Clavering is not leaving at present," was Grundt's impassive rejoinder.

"Then I stay too," she declared stoutly.

"Get out," Clubfoot bawled suddenly. "And think yourself lucky that I set you free. Take her away, Vogel!"

She hesitated. Her eyes appealed to me. But I made no move. I was only too glad to see her out of this bull-ape's clutches. Vogel tapped her on the shoulder. "Tell Honig he's to see her on board, and not let her out of his sight until the moment of sailing," Grundt bade his aide.

"Very good, Herr Doktor."

Garnet and I exchanged a silent glance. Then, slowly, she followed Vogel out. With a chilly feeling round the heart I watched her go, then turned back to the man at the desk asking myself what fate he had in store for me.

Blowing like a grampus, he was lighting a fresh cigar. Alfred's scarred countenance looked in at the door. "I'll see Frau Stafford now," said Grundt briskly. He picked up the box, still open as Garnet had left it, weighed it in his fingers and, with a brooding air, replaced it on the desk. Then head down, hands folded behind his back, he began to limp up and down the carpet, a plume of cigar smoke trailing in his wake. My presence he ignored entirely.

Then the door opened and Madeleine came in.

## 109

### Alfred does his stuff

This woman had as many moods as she had frocks. She had changed her tailored suit for a close-fitting indoor robe. It was a barbaresque affair, derived from the Boyar fashions which the Imperial Russian Ballet had then but lately introduced into Western Europe, of heavy figured brocade, in which red and gold predominated, fur-edged, with tight sleeves that drooped below the elbow into extravagantly wide panels and came to a point on the back of her tapering hands. Her eyes, darkened with mascara, were languorous behind the upturned lashes and she seemed, in doffing her outdoor clothes for this gorgeous creation, to have taken on the exotic and subtly provocative air that went with it. There was something faintly wanton in her manner that made me think of a high-class cocotte.

*Soignée* and *svelte* and undulating in her long dress moulded to her exquisite figure and exuding that subtle fragrance of hers that always made my heart beat faster, she entered, a cigarette smoking between her slender fingers. "You asked for me?" she said to Grundt with her little disdainful inflection. By way of reply the cripple's stubby index finger pointed at the desk. Following the direction of his hand with her eyes, she uttered a faint, croony cry. "You've found it then?"

Grundt nodded, his eyes resting upon her without disfavour. "Empty..."

She had moved to the desk. The box was in her hands. There was a sharp click. "Oh," she exclaimed in dismay and tugged at the arrow, "now it's shut again and I can't get it open!"

Chortling good-humouredly, Clubfoot lumbered across to her. Clumsy and fearsome as a great orang-outang by contrast with her delicate loveliness, he took the box from her hands and, steadying it on the blotter, twisted the dart as he had seen Garnet do. The lid flew up.

Madeleine gave a delighted cry. "*Ça c'est mignon!*" she said softly in her throat. Nestling up to the ogre, she made him show her the working of the lock, and presently, as absorbed as a child with a new toy, she was twirling the arrow herself. "Where did you find it after all?" she asked.

Grundt was standing away from her now, drawing on his cigar. He did not answer her question, but asked one himself. "Was Markus on the train that night?" he demanded abruptly.

"Markus?" she repeated, and now for the first time she looked at me. "Do you mean the Russian who was after the Mitzi Funda letters?"

"That's the man," said Clubfoot.

"If he were on the train, I shouldn't be any the wiser," she rejoined. "I don't even know him by sight. Why do you ask?"

"Because that box was found in his pocket..."

"At the scene of the accident, do you mean?" Her air of innocent curiosity was extremely plausible.

"No, *meine liebe*, on the stairs of your apartment at Cologne..."

In well-feigned amazement she stared at him. "At the Engel-Gasse? What on earth was he doing there? As you know, the place has been shut up for months. Besides, I tell you, I don't know the man..."

"Nevertheless, the fact is that he was met by some of my people descending the stairs from your apartment. He opened fire and was shot down. When the body was searched, the box was found on him. How do you explain that?"

"I can't explain it," she answered haughtily. "When did this happen?"

"About ten days ago..."

"Why was I not told about it?"

"My subordinates are not in the habit of babbling about my business. And I, as you know, was at sea with His Majesty..." He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes. "What if friend Markus were working for the British?"

She lifted her shoulders indifferently. "You said he was a Russian agent..."

He pawed the air in a gesture of indifference. "To a weasel like Markus—England, Russia, Germany—it's all one. Supposing, by any chance, this box had been hidden in your flat, my dear, and Markus, instructed perhaps by our excellent Clavering here, had been sent to recover it..."

"The only person who could have hidden the box at the Engel-Gasse is myself," she countered bluntly. "Is that what you're hinting at?"

Grundt spread his hands and bowed. "The inference," he mouthed, "is irresistible..."

With an angry toss of her head she turned away. "You weary me with your constant suspicions. Here I have wasted a fine afternoon talking to one of the dullest Englishmen I've ever met solely in your interests, and my only reward is to be greeted with the most outrageous accusations of treachery..."

Clubfoot's dark eyes flashed. "I haven't forgotten that we called at the Engel-Gasse on the day after the train wreck, and that you left me while you went to the bedroom to pack your clothes..."

She stamped her foot. "And what conceivable reason should I have for lying to you? You know as well as I do that I never even heard of the wretched Forrest and his box until you ordered me to scrape acquaintance with him and rob him. Not only do I almost lose my life in a railway accident, but, for all I know, I'm also suspected of the murder of this



man..." Then, catching sight of me, she cried: "What is this person doing here? Do we really have to discuss all this in front of him?"

"Don't worry," Grundt rasped, "we're telling him no secrets..."

She stamped her foot again, her face alight with anger—she was a consummate actress. "I'm sick of your constant innuendoes," she cried. "You're so eaten up with suspicion of everyone and everything that you're incapable of seeing the truth spread out under your eyes..."

He gave her a puzzled look. "The truth?" he growled.

"Your precious Lipschütz who killed Forrest, wasn't he at one time in the Russian secret police? You told me so yourself. Don't you see that he double-crossed you, that he'd told Markus about this mission and that Markus was on the train, waiting to snatch the box when he had the chance. For all I know, he was outside Forrest's compartment when the crash came, and picked up the box when I dropped it..."

She was quick-witted. No doubt of that. I watched Grundt's face to see how he would take this ingenious explanation. He did not answer at once, frowning and grinding his teeth on his cigar. It was a favourable sign, I decided.

"If that were so," he said unwillingly, "what brought Markus to your apartment?"

"But my poor Grundt, the Mitzi Funda letters, of course. Obviously, the Russians knew that I'd gone to London to fetch them, and sent him into Germany to trail me..."

Clubfoot grunted. "So? But that doesn't explain what he was doing with this box. Why didn't he turn it in to the Russians or the British, or whoever his employers were?"

"Clearly because it was empty," she flashed back. "Why hand over a pretty thing like that? Besides, it's gold, isn't it? and valuable..." She laughed cooingly. "Now that we know it is empty, I'm hoping very much you're going to offer it to me as a souvenir..."

"That locking device is intricate," Grundt growled unwillingly. "How do you suppose Markus was able to open it when it defeated me?"

"But you opened it..." she began. "Oh, I see..." And she looked at me. She shrugged her shoulders. "Bah, the mechanism is not too difficult. You didn't have leisure to study it, that's all..." She laughed softly. "Somehow, I don't see you being beaten by a simple trick like this..."

The man was inordinately vain. He swelled to her praise. "You're right. If I'd had the time to investigate it. *Na!*..." His mind drifted away and I became aware that his menacing gaze was directed at me.

Madeleine remarked it. Leaning against the desk in a careless attitude, she said, waving her cigarette in my direction: "Is our English friend going to spend the summer with us?"

Grundt laughed dourly. "Not at the Villa Waldesruh', I fear..."

"I merely ask," Madeleine rejoined, "because I happened to see his friend, Miss Wolseley, driving off with her suitcase in one of the cars..."

"The good Clavering is not leaving at present..."

"Why? What do you want with him?" Her question was nonchalant, but her eyes were alert. I realised now that she was trying in her subtle way to help me. After all, our interests were identical—in mere self-preservation she could scarcely do otherwise. My courage began to revive.

"For one thing I intend that he shall answer to the courts of justice in the Andresen affair," Grundt replied. "It's high

time the gentlemen across the North Sea were taught to keep their prying noses out of Germany..."

"The courts? That means witnesses, doesn't it?"

"He'll have to be identified, of course..."

"By me?"

"Only behind closed doors. Espionage cases are always heard *in camera*..."

"*In camera* or not, of what value shall I be to you henceforth if I give evidence in this case? No, no, *mon cher*, the thing's impossible. Besides, the Andresen affair is closed..."

"Who says it's closed?"

"Isn't it a fact that Andresen committed suicide in prison the night after he was arrested?"

I started. This was horrible. "Who told you that?" Clubfoot demanded, lowering at her.

"Do you deny it?" she countered.

He made no answer, drawing on his cigar, his brows knit in thought, and I knew that it was true. Andresen was dead, poor devil; but his disappearance made things easier for me.

"Make no mistake about it," Grundt snarled at last, "I can put our clever friend from London away for five years at least. And I'll do it"—he paused to glare at me—"unless he's prepared to be reasonable..."

"If you want anything of him," Madeleine interposed quickly, "you'd better let me ask it. It's not the Mitzi Funda letters by any chance, is it?"

As she spoke her hand had dipped down the front of her dress. Now she drew forth the letters, still in the envelope in which I had forwarded them to her from London, and silently extended the packet to Grundt. He snatched it from her and shook out the sheaf of azure-tinted sheets upon the blotter. With an inarticulate ejaculation he spread one beneath the lamp. "At last," he cried triumphantly. "How did you manage it?" he questioned as he pored over the letters.

With a careless air she was manicuring her nails on the back of her hand, breathing on them and frictioning them vigorously. "It may be that my method of approach is more successful than yours..."

He was examining the envelope now. "But these letters came through the post from London!"

With eyebrows politely arched she gave smiling confirmation. "Certainly. Mr. Clavering sent them to me..."

Grundt's features were clouded with suspicion at once. "So? And why should he do that, pray?"

"A gentleman always pays his debts of honour. And Mr. Clavering is a gentleman. That's probably why he'll never make much success of secret service work..."

"Stop talking riddles, *zum Donnerwetter*," the big German snapped irritably. "What's all this to do with the letters?"

It seemed to me that it was time I came to her aid. "Perhaps you'll let me explain," I said. "When I surprised Mrs. Stafford that night at Mitzi Funda's apartment in London I gave her my word to return those letters, and I kept my promise. We needn't go into the details of the transaction..."

The great cripple stared at me, puzzled for a moment, then, slapping his enormous thigh, burst into a hearty guffaw. "*Ach* so?" he roared. "Kolossal! I remember now, our little Mada told me something of this. *Prachtvoll!* Good work, my dear, good work..." He was gathering the letters back into their envelope. "With those letters I shall demolish certain clever gentlemen who cannot sleep at night for thinking of the favours I enjoy at the hands of my Imperial master. So," he

murmured, tapping his packet, "I'm an intriguer, am I? A meddling fool who'd try and sap His Majesty's confidence in a devoted and excellent Prince. Ha!" He cackled resonantly. "The head of the Military Cabinet has no intention of troubling the ears of the Emperor with idle gossip; the Chief of the General Staff has investigated the matter confidentially and finds no basis for Herr Doktor Grundt's grave insinuations. *Pfui!* Fools, dolts, sheeps-heads, I'll show them whether old Clubfoot is past his work. And as for this puffed-up popinjay"—his hand struck the packet a smart blow—"this rotten, debauched princeling who has forgotten his oath to the Throne and betrayed his country, I'll hound him out of the army into the grave!" His voice dropped to a rumbling bass that was vibrant with menace, and he remained staring moodily into space.

Then, rousing himself from his sombre spell, he shouted for Alfred. He bade the man fetch him his hat and overcoat. Alfred was back in a moment with the things and stood there stiffly, with the overcoat held out, while Grundt stowed the envelope with the letters away in a leather satchel. Grundt was about to put an arm into the sleeve of his overcoat when he perceived the little gold box glittering on the desk. He grabbed it up and thrust it away in an inner pocket. Then Alfred helped him into his overcoat, handed him his hat and crutch-handled stick.

"Go and ring up the *Hohenzollern* in the roads." Clubfoot dismissed the servant who was fussing about him, pulling down his jacket behind and brushing the broad shoulders. "Say I am on my way to see the aide-de-camp on duty with a communication of the utmost importance. And tell Hermann I want the car immediately. Be quick!"

The man fled. Grundt's gaze, as he made a final survey of the room, fell upon me. "*Ach*, friend Clavering," he murmured, "I was forgetting you..." He paused, plucking at his chin and staring at me abstractedly. Ultimately, after a long silence, he swung round towards the door and called "Vogel!"

His bull-dog appeared with an alacrity clearly born of long experience of his master. "Is there still time to catch the boat that leaves Hamburg for Harwich to-night?" Clubfoot asked his aide.

Vogel dredged up a large silver watch from the tightly-stretched depths of his waistcoat, conned it under the light and announced that it could be done. "Put him on the boat," said Grundt, pointing at me, "and stay with him until she sails. You'll do the job yourself. Understand?"

"Very good, Herr Doktor!"

"And you," he snarled at me, "keep out of my path in future!"

So saying, with a swaggering gesture, he clapped his hat upon his head and turned towards the door. I saw Madeleine step up to him. "Herr Doktor..."

He patted her shoulder paternally. "Don't delay me now. I'll talk to you later..."

"The gold box," she said in a soft, ingratiating voice, "aren't you going to let me keep it? It's of no use to you. Besides, don't I deserve a reward?"

I was electrified. What a good sport she was! Breathlessly I waited for his rejoinder. He was smiling at her indulgently.

His hand went to his pocket. "So, the box..." He frowned suddenly, then, putting his stick and satchel down on the desk, began to pat himself furiously. "But I put it in my pocket an instant ago," he muttered.

"I know. I saw you," said Madeleine. "You must have it!"

"It's gone!" he growled. He turned to Vogel, pointing at me. "Search him..."

"It's absurd," I protested. "How could I get it? I haven't been near you..." The detective's beefy hands were pawing me diligently. "I'm not a pick-pocket!"

At those words Grundt whipped about like a shot rabbit. "Alfred!" he yelled.

"Excuse me, Herr Doktor," Vogel interposed, "but Alfred is out..."

"Out?" Grundt thundered.

"Not two minutes ago. He went off in the Herr Doktor's car..."

"In my car? *Herr Gott!*"

And then, unexpectedly, Clubfoot began to laugh. He threw his great head back so violently that his hat fell on the floor, while he rocked with gargantuan mirth. "No, but this Alfred!" he repeated over and over again, while his shouts of laughter went pealing through the room. It was an astonishing exhibition, unbridled and violent like everything about this bewildering personality. "Pinched it off me under my very eyes," he gasped weakly, "while he helped me into my overcoat. *Aber nein, dieser Alfred!*" And he was off again, guffawing and threshing about with his great arms.

When his transports had subsided, he wiped his eyes and, looking at me, observed with a sort of gallow's humour expression: "The triumph of automatism over morals, Clavering! He felt that box in my pocket, and pouf! all his good resolutions were wrecked!" He turned to Vogel. "We'll have to put the police on him. Let Bauer see to it. You'd better get off now or you'll miss that boat!"

Vogel touched my arm and we went out together. I caught Madeleine's eye on the way to the door. Her glance was charged with humour, and she moved her shoulders helplessly as though to say she had done her best for me and failed. I smiled at her, but I asked myself what she had done with Forrest's list.

Grundt was laughing again. His stormy gusts of merriment pursued us into the hall.

## 110

### Madeleine shows her hand

I found Garnet on the Harwich boat. She was overwhelmed with surprise at seeing me there, and made me tell her everything that had happened after her departure from the Villa Waldesruh'. She was not as much impressed as I thought she should have been by my account of how Madeleine's ready wit had saved me. "Obviously," she remarked with her most non-committal air, "she had to lie for you to protect herself." She was much more exercised at hearing of the disappearance of the box. "That's bad," she said several times. "We couldn't have foreseen it, of course, but it's bad!"

"My dear Garnet," I replied somewhat curtly, for her unshakable prejudice against Madeleine never failed to irritate me, "you must see that the whereabouts of the box has no further interest for us..."

"I wonder," was the enigmatic reply. "The trouble is," she went on, wrinkling her forehead, "that, if I know anything of Clubfoot, this man of his won't get very far with it..."

I laughed. "A fellow who's smart enough to pull off a trick like that oughtn't to have much difficulty in keeping out of the clutches of the police. Besides, what does it matter? The box is empty and Mrs. Stafford has got Forrest's list. I've no doubt she'll take the first opportunity to return it to me..."

But deep down in my heart I was not so positive. Was this strange, alluring creature an ally? or were her motives, as Garnet suggested solely interested? I wished I knew, if only to fortify myself against my forthcoming interview with the Chief when I was aware I should have to justify my disobedience of his explicit orders.

What passed between him and Garnet when, in due course, she reported back at work, I never exactly heard. But Garnet told me afterwards that, all things considered, he did not take too harsh a view of her exploit. I was not so

fortunate, however. The old man had a bitter tongue, and for the best part of five thoroughly uncomfortable minutes he let me have the raw edge of it.

He did not seem to reflect that, if I had not accompanied Madeleine Stafford to the Villa Waldesruh', we should never have known that the box was empty when it fell into Grundt's hands, and consequently that it was Madeleine who had abstracted Forrest's list. The Chief could only see, apparently, that the list was still missing, and that, although Grundt might yet be in ignorance of its existence, the security of our entire intelligence service on the German seaboard remained in jeopardy. My timid suggestion that Mrs. Stafford was well disposed towards us and might yet turn the list in, if only as part of the bargain over the Mitzi Funda letters, aroused his most savage irony.

"She'll turn it in all right," he declared in scornful tones. "But perhaps you'd allow me to draw your attention to the fact that with that list in her pocket your lady friend can hold us up for any sum she cares to name. And what simplified matters so delightfully is that by surrendering those letters you've handed over the only article of barter we possessed. You've made a fine mess of things, Major Clavering. What I can't pass over is that by flagrantly disobeying orders you've effectively deprived me of any chance I might have had of dealing with the situation in my own way. You'd better go on leave!"

Which was the skipper's pet method of signifying his displeasure. So, with a flea in my ear and the wry reflection that Charles Forrest's box, which had already cost four men their lives, was in all probability fated to end its travels in a Continental pawnshop, I went back to Sandwich and my golf.

I was still there when, about a week later, on coming down to breakfast, I found beside my place a letter in a hand unfamiliar to me and bearing the Amsterdam postmark. It had been forwarded on from the Albany. Even before my eye fell upon the initials boldly scrawled at the foot of the few lines it contained, I knew instinctively that it was from Madeleine Stafford. It was dated two days previously and started off without address or superscription:

*I must see you urgently. Please wire immediately to M. S., Poste Restante, Amsterdam, what afternoon soon it will be convenient to meet me between three and four at the Café Tarnowski.*

I was elated. All the doubts I had nurtured concerning her—so greatly against my personal sentiments—were swept away at a blow. This could only mean that she was going to deliver up Forrest's list.

Forthwith I telegraphed that I would be at the rendezvous next afternoon, and caught the night mail for Amsterdam.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everybody who has ever been to Amsterdam knows the Café Tarnowski, which used to boast of being the largest establishment of the kind in the world—I was told once that it took in, I think, some 800 newspapers and periodicals in different languages. It is many years since I last drank a glass of cool Amstel beer there, but in my day it was a great, roaring place whose high roof echoed, all round the clock, to the murmur of voices, the clatter of dominoes and the click of billiard balls.

Shortly before three o'clock next afternoon, after spending a lazy morning mooning about the city and lunching at my leisure, I entered the café. I had told no one of my plans. Especially not the Chief or Garnet. After all, I believed in this woman: they did not. I was on leave and quite free to spend a couple of days on the Continent if I so desired.

She was there before me. I saw her almost as soon as I came in—a quiet, self-possessed figure in black with a fox fur and a natty Paris hat, spooning a *café liégeois* at a table not far from the door: evidently she had posted herself near the entrance so that I should have no difficulty in finding her in that enormous place. She had dwelt so much in my thoughts during the last weeks that a sort of intimacy had established itself between us in my mind; but it was only on seeing her there before me that I recognised how greatly I had looked forward to this meeting—we had so much to talk over. I approached her in all friendliness and confidence, for I recognised now that, in the trick she had played on me at

the Goldner Adler, she had only been obeying an order which it was impossible to evade. Once the bogus Frau Andresen had reported my arrival at the beer-garden, Madeleine, I realised, could not have put me on my guard without instantly arousing Grundt's suspicions.

But now, when I stood before her, her greeting chilled me. She was in one of her hard moods, restive, aloof, secretive. My welcoming smile evoked no response in the white, set face. Pointing to a chair she said hurriedly, "Sit down, please, and listen to me—I have very little time."

Somewhat chagrined I obeyed, waiting for her to speak. Leaning towards me, her chin propped in her hands, she went on tensely, "If I were to tell you where you can arrest a German spy operating in England, how much would that be worth to you?"

I stared at her, stunned. Somehow I had never discerned a mercenary streak in her character before. "In money, do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"Yes." Her manner was eager.

I shrugged my shoulders. "It would depend on circumstances. Who is it?"

"A first-class man, one of the most trusted and experienced of German agents..."

"And he's operating in England, you say?"

"Yes..."

"One of Grundt's people?"

"He's working for Grundt at present..."

"And you're willing to denounce him?"

"Yes..." Her face hardened. "But you'll have to pay me..."

Of course, transactions of this kind were no novelty to me, but I could never stomach them very well. If to-day middle-age finds me cynical, it is because, during my years in the secret service, I saw so much of loyalties thus bought and sold over the counter. But in those days I still retained some ideals and the discovery that Madeleine was no better than the common run of professional spies gave me a considerable shock. I realised that I had been living in a fool's paradise as far as my little lady was concerned.

I glanced at her rather coldly. "Is this why you sent for me?"

She met my scrutiny rather uneasily. "Yes..."

"I thought, maybe, you had some news for me about the box..."

"The box?" She looked puzzled. "Oh, the gold box. I'm afraid it has never been recovered. Alfred seems to have got safely away with it. Anyway, it's empty, as you know. If it ever contained anything of value, Markus got it. Now about this man in England..."

She was lying, of course. Markus had had no time to open the box. He had snatched it from me and dashed downstairs to his death. But I did not tell her this. Instead I persisted, "Then you didn't open the box when it was in your possession?"

"I've told you already I didn't know how to open it. Please don't waste time with idle questions. As I was saying, I can give you information that will enable you to arrest this German agent..." Her eyes flickered to my face. "But it will cost you ... two hundred pounds."

I had swallowed my chagrin. This was familiar ground to me. The haggling was about to begin. I shook my head. "You've come to the wrong shop, my dear. We don't pay prices like that. If we're going to do business, you'd better come down to earth..."

"Please understand that I'm not going to haggle," she cut in haughtily. "The price is two hundred pounds. And when you've arrested this man and seen for yourselves the information he has collected, you will agree with me that the price is not too high..."

"That remains to be seen," I rejoined bluntly. "In any case, we don't buy a pig in a poke..."

"I'm willing to trust you," she answered with dignity. "That's why I wrote to you in person. Your word of honour will satisfy me. If I give you the information you require to arrest this man and you find that the claims I have made are substantiated, do you promise to see that I am paid this money in full?"

"I think I can say 'yes' to that..."

"And the price is two hundred pounds?"

"Agreed..."

"I make one condition, that my name is kept out of it..."

"That, too, can be arranged..."

"Especially"—her voice trembled a little—"he must never know who denounced him..."

"I'll see to it," said I and drew out my pencil. "Now who is this guy and where do we pick him up?"

She hesitated. "Before I tell you this, when shall I be paid?"

"As soon as he's safely behind the bars and the charges against him are established..."

"Will that take long?"

I hoisted my shoulders. "Inquiries of this kind are sometimes a matter of weeks..."

With a desperate air she shook her head. "I can't wait. I must have the money in a week. If you return to London to-night he can be arrested at once, to-morrow..."

"Perhaps. But the evidence..."

"I can tell you where to find it..."

"He may suspect something and destroy it..."

"He suspects nothing..." She caught my hand. "I'm desperate for this money, I tell you. You don't know what depends on it. Say that you'll help me..."

"I'll do what I can," I promised grudgingly. "Where do you want it sent?"

"Can you bring it to me here in cash?—English notes will do. Telegraph me as before and I'll meet you. But make it soon, I beg of you. And in any event not later than a week from to-day..."

"All right. Now let's have the details..."

She paused for an instant, twisting and untwisting her slender fingers. "The name is Hans Roth," she said at last. "But he calls himself Henry Rothsay. He's posing as a retired Australian business man visiting England..."

Roth? The name was new to me. "What's he after?" I inquired.

She glanced cautiously about her. "Grundt has received orders to investigate some story of an expeditionary force, which the English are rumoured to be preparing, to act in co-operation with the French in the event of a European war. It is supposed to be a force of a hundred thousand men to be held in readiness to land on the coast of Schleswig. It seems that the Emperor is very excited about it..."

I pricked up my ears. This rang authentic enough. I had heard rumours myself, of preparations at Aldershot, of combined manoeuvres of the Army and Fleet.

"Grundt has been given carte blanche. He took the best man he could find. Hans Roth looks like an Englishman and speaks English perfectly—you would never know that he was not English."

"How long has he been over there?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you exactly. I don't think he has made any report as yet. But I know where he keeps his notes and sketches..."

"Ah..."

Again that stealthy glance around her. "There's a false bottom to the field-glasses he carries. Everything is there..."

I nodded, then, with pencil poised, demanded, "And where is he to be found?"

She opened her bag and, taking from it a letter, read out the name of an hotel at Haslemere. "He writes from Scotland..."

"From Scotland?" I repeated sharply—the great naval base at Rosyth, constant objective of spies, came immediately into my mind.

"Yes. From Edinburgh. But he was going south next day. To Haslemere, in Surrey. He expects to spend several weeks there..."

Haslemere! Quiet and eminently respectable, where wealthy City men had their homes, and hotels, boarding-houses and nursing-homes were tucked away among the bracken and pines. What better base of operations could a spy, interested in doings at First Army Corps Head-quarters, select than this tranquil beauty spot, not inconveniently distant from Aldershot, yet sufficiently remote for a casual Australian tourist's presence, amid the handful of American and Dominion visitors, always registered at the hotels and boarding-houses, there, to excite no comment?

As she folded the letter to put it back in her bag, my eye caught a superscription, "*Meine geliebte Mada!*" The spidery German characters danced before my sight. "My beloved Mada!" When a German thus addresses a woman, the deduction is irrefutable.

And she was selling her lover for two hundred pounds!

Did my manner reveal my thoughts? The interview was at an end. She was touching up her lips in the mirror of her vanity case and I was gazing about for a waiter to pay the bill. Rather timorously she touched my sleeve. "What do you think of me?" she said humbly.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Our job is to conceal our thoughts, not reveal them..." I paused and went on deliberately, "Since we are talking business, are you sure there's nothing else you'd care to sell?"

She winced. "What do you mean?" Her voice was not very steady.

"No stolen documents or anything of that kind?"

With tragic eyes she stared at me. "I don't understand..."



"I'm in the market to buy that paper you took from Forrest's box," I told her curtly.

A spasm of pain crossed her face. "Then you think I lied to you about that?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm not good at drawing fine distinctions, I'm afraid..."

"Nevertheless, I told you the truth. I never opened the box. But I can't expect you to believe that..."

"Is there any reason why you should? Let's get down to brass tacks, my dear. A woman who'd sell her lover..."

Her face flamed. "You read that letter?"

"I couldn't help seeing the beginning. He is your lover, isn't he?"

She shook her head. "Not any more. But I'm no hypocrite. If he were, I'd sell him just the same. Because I must have that money..."

"At least, you're frank about it..."

"You think I'm a Judas, don't you?"

"Judas was cheaper. But the cost of living—or should it be loving?—has gone up since those days..."

My heart went back on me when I saw the fleeting misery of her expression. It was as though I had stabbed her to the heart. But I would not retract. Her brazen effrontery outraged me: I was sick with pain and disappointment.

"I have delayed too long," she said quietly and stood up. "Grundt takes his siesta at this time and it's the only chance I have to get away..."

"You're still with Grundt, then?" It seemed to me she was running a frightful risk.

She nodded and picked up her bag. "Send a messenger with the money," she repeated. "I don't want to see you again..."

Then, without looking at me, she turned and went quickly out.

## 111

### Hans Roth, Spy

To the British public at large Hans Roth, alias Henry Rothsay was just another of those damned German spies. Aged about forty, sunburnt and taciturn, dressed in ready-made tweeds and speaking fluent English with even a slight colonial twang, he looked to the life the rôle he had adopted. But with the information we already possessed, supplemented by the abundant material the case of his field-glasses supplied, we speedily demolished his attempts to stand by his Australian alias. This background shattered, nothing remained, for he immediately relapsed into a stubborn silence about himself and his mission, admitting nothing denying nothing.

His notes and sketches, however, the itinerary of his sojournings on the Scottish coast and the record of his visits to Aldershot, Pirbright and other military centres, gave us sufficient evidence as to have secured his conviction ten times over. It was, therefore, as Hans Roth, an enigmatic nondescript believed to be of German nationality and vaguely described on the charge-sheet—it was his own designation—as "clerk," that he was charged at Bow Street and after

very brief proceedings *in camera*, as is the general practice in espionage cases, remanded for further inquiries.

But neither his bourgeois-sounding name, nor his cheap clothes, nor the obscure background he had so painstakingly built up for himself during the four weeks he was operating in the British Isles, deceived me. I had formed my own conclusions about him, based upon his well-set-up appearance, his careful courtesy and, above all, the uncomplaining stoicism with which he resigned himself to the inevitable. Although it was I who brought the police to the hotel at Haslemere where he was arrested, he seemed to bear me no ill will, and in the course of a number of interviews I had with him during the days that ensued, while he obstinately refused to give any information about himself, we became quite good friends. Not that I was ever completely at my ease with him, for the secret of his betrayal (which the Chief alone shared with me) weighed heavy on my conscience.

Frequently at our interviews I would find myself speculating as to what episode in Madeleine's past this strange, lonely man represented. More than once I tried to draw him out about his earlier life, but always without success. It was as though an iron curtain had descended between him and his background; and he opposed a mute, though smiling, resistance even to attempts to induce him to reveal the names of any relatives or friends he possessed. A sum of a few hundred pounds standing in his name in a London bank were used for his defence.

The evidence against him was overwhelming and when, at the end of the stipulated week, I consulted with the Chief, he ruled that Mrs. Stafford had earned her fee and that I should cross to Holland with her blood-money the same night. My part in the affair was at an end, for our counter-espionage had taken the investigation out of my hands. I thought I would apply for a final interview with the prisoner. I saw him in the cells at Bow Street, after one of his appearances before the police magistrate, while waiting to be conveyed back to the remand prison.

I told him I should not be seeing him again, and he thanked me for certain small attentions I had shown him while he was in jail. I asked whether I could not do anything about notifying his family. He shook his head. "I have no one who matters now," he said rather wistfully. "But if you would tell me one thing..." He broke off to eye me with an embarrassed, speculative air.

"If I can, I will," I promised.

His mien was very earnest. "Who gave me away?"

He would not wait for me to put my negative head-shake into words. "It's asking you to break a rule, perhaps? Well, if I give you my word of honour that nothing you say goes beyond these four walls? Let me finish! Before you refuse, I'm going to tell you who I am so that you may know that my word is not quite valueless. But you must promise to keep my true identity secret, even from your Chief. You are an officer: we shall speak, not as jailer and prisoner, but as comrades. Is it agreed, Major?"

I knew then that my surmise was correct. He was a German officer. Once more he forestalled my refusal. "This amiable gentleman who will defend me will claim mistaken identity," he said quickly. "But I have no illusions. Nothing you can tell me will save me from a long term of penal servitude—I know that. But I also know I was denounced—otherwise, you would never have arrested me. You won't deny that, I suppose?"

"You must know that the regulations forbid me to answer any such questions," I answered stiffly.

A nervous gesture of his hand cut me off. "If I tell you my real name, will you swear never to divulge it?"

"You've yet to stand your trial," I rejoined. "How can you expect me to let you bind our hands in this way? We'll discover your real identity, don't worry!"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's all one. You'll see, there will be no reason for my true name to come out. In any case, I'm going to leave it to your discretion..."

Even after all these years I do not feel justified in giving the name, especially as it was not disclosed at the trial; but it was one famous in Prussia's military history. His family had furnished a regular dynasty of officers to the Prussian Guards regiment to which he had belonged. "I may be a damned German spy," he said wryly. "But my hands are clean.

You can trust my honour..."

I had passed my word to Madeleine, however, and anyway, what he asked was impossible. The Service never reveals its sources—that was one of the first things we used to learn. "Man," he cried, in the first burst of feeling I had seen in him, "you don't know what this means to me. I'm not afraid of jail: what I can't face is the prospect of being locked away for years without ever knowing, without ever being sure..."

He lifted haggard eyes to mine. "For God's sake, comrade, answer me this one question. You don't have to speak; just move your head for 'yes' or 'no' and I shall understand..." He paused, then demanded hoarsely, "Was it—was it a woman?"

"Now see here, Roth," I said briskly. "I'm devilish sorry for you as I should be sorry for any other good chap in a mess. But you're a soldier the same as I am and you know damned well that what you want me to do is out of the question..."

"But I'll go mad in prison unless I know," he exclaimed wildly. "Forget you're a British officer, Clavering, and have a little pity..."

"Would you in my place?" I asked him sternly.

"You expect me to be logical when I'm almost out of my mind," he flared back. "Do this one favour for me, comrade. No one shall ever find out that you have spoken. When I tell you that I ruined my career for this woman, that my family cast me off, that if it was she who betrayed me it means the end of my belief in human nature, in God Himself..."

"It was eight years ago," he said, "when I first met her. She was the loveliest creature you can imagine. A brother officer of mine had picked her up while on manoeuvres in Silesia—she was a dancer in an Austrian theatre troupe that was stranded at Liegnitz. He brought her to Berlin, set her up in a flat. I fell in love with her at sight. Her lover was a brute—she was glad to leave him for me. There was a scene between us: he insulted me and I called him out. I killed him and they took my commission away. Four generations of my family had served in the Guards: such a thing had never happened to one of us before. My father stopped my allowance and said he never wanted to see me again. I had no money but I landed a job in Poland and took the girl with me..."

I pricked up my ears. The Secret Service is the refuge of all broken careers, and the Germans in those days ran a very active espionage and counter-espionage service on their Russian frontier.

"She was never happy at Königsberg," he went on. "I was much away from home and my pay was very small. One day, without a word, she left me and I lost all trace of her until I ran into her in Berlin the other day. It was at a railway station and we had only a few minutes together, but it was as though we had never parted. I promised to write to her, and, like a fool—his mouth was bitter—"I kept my word." Facing me he pounded his palm with the edge of his hand. "That letter was the only letter I wrote from this country. She was the only person to know the address at Haslemere where you arrested me. Yet still, fool that I am, I want to give her the benefit of the doubt. Comrade, you know, you must know, the truth. For the love of heaven, set my mind at rest."

But I stood firm. I knew nothing of the circumstances that had led to his arrest, I assured him, and if I did, I should not feel at liberty to disclose them. I told this lie with the packet of notes that was the price of his freedom in the inside pocket of my jacket. Our job had many such bitter, debasing moments. I left him huddled up at the table, his head between his hands, and I never saw him again. A month later he was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude at the Old Bailey.

\* \* \* \* \*

Madeleine was at her old table when I reached the Café Tarnowski next afternoon. Not knowing who might be observing us, I said: "The envelope with the money is in my pocket. What do you want me to do with it?"

"Put it down on the table presently and I will take it before I go..." Her manner was highly nervous and I noticed the pile of cigarette stubs in the ash-tray. "Did you ... did you see him?" she asked in a faltering voice.

"Roth, do you mean? Yes..."

"Does he know?" she asked in an undertone, her eyes cast down.

"I told him nothing. But I think he guesses..."

She sighed. "Will they send him to prison?"

I nodded and she sighed again. "I suppose," she began and seemed to swallow, "I suppose you think that what I did was unspeakable?"

"As I told you before," I retorted, "I'm not paid to think. My job is to achieve results. And in this case, as far as we are concerned, the results are eminently satisfactory..."

"You don't answer my question..."

I laughed. "Well, it seems you're consistent, at least. You left him for money before..."

"That's a lie," she exclaimed hotly. "I left him because I discovered he was working for the German counter-espionage in Poland..."

"You're Polish, are you?"

She shook her head. "I'm Serbian. My father was a Serbian general, and my husband was a Serb as well—a captain in the Serbian army..."

"And they're both dead?"

"My father was assassinated; my husband committed suicide. I have known nothing but tragedy in my life. At twenty-four I was virtually alone in the world. It seems to be my fate that anyone I love or who loves me meets with misfortune..."

"But how did Poland concern you, since you're a Serb? Or were you already working for the Secret Service when you were with Roth?"

A shadow darkened her face. "During the three months I was with Hans at Königsberg I had no idea how he earned his living, until one day I discovered he was pursuing someone"—she paused—"someone who was very dear to me..."

"And why have you denounced him now?"

She shook her head. "I mustn't tell you..." She was drawing the envelope stealthily towards her. "But you've brought me the price of my freedom!" And she slipped the envelope inside her bag. She held out her small hand to me. "Good-bye, my friend, and don't think too hardly of me. When next we meet, if all goes well, there'll be no more lies, no more subterfuges, no more strife between us..." Sweetly, appealingly, she smiled into my eyes.

I took her hand and held it. "When will that be?"

A strange light crept into the charming face. She was transfigured; she was like a woman waiting for her lover. "Very soon, I hope..."

"And you'll let me see you again?"

She smiled mischievously; but she did not withdraw her hand. "Who knows? Perhaps some day..."

"And Grundt?"

A shadow fell across the delicate features. She shuddered and took her hand away. "There's the 'if,'" she said in a

low voice.

Then, as at our last meeting, she turned from me and hurried out.

## 112

### **The Black Hand casts a shadow**

The day I returned from Amsterdam I took Garnet out to dinner. It was the first chance we had had for a talk since our Kiel adventure. My mind was a mass of confused impressions about Madeleine. Here was a woman who had tricked Charles Forrest, trapped me and betrayed for money the man who, after all, had wrecked his career to befriend her. Was she, as she had represented herself to me, the plaything of Fate, the helpless instrument of Grundt by reason of some association he had discovered between her and the violent background of Serbian politics? Or was she Clubfoot's accomplice—his mistress, even—and Roth merely an inconvenient encumbrance whom Grundt had deliberately resolved to sacrifice? Such instances were not uncommon in our business.

For myself, I was conscious only of an overwhelming compassion for this vital, charming creature. I seemed to discern in all her changing moods an unspoiled quality, a craving for happiness, which deserved a brighter fate than the miserable life which had been hers. I was in love with her, I suppose—at any rate, I thought of her far too often for my peace of mind. But I did not know it then—I was only to realise it when the final tragedy of her storm-tossed career was about to snatch her from my arms. Restless and depressed, I turned to Garnet in the hope that her calm, unhurried judgment would appease the troubled waters of my thoughts.

She did not scoff at Madeleine's story, as I had expected. "The history of the Balkans," she said, "is written in blood. Assassination, bomb outrages, palace intrigues, conspiracies. If I know anything of modern Serbian politics, you'll find the Black Hand lurking somewhere in the background of your little lady's history. You've heard of the Black Hand, haven't you?"

"Vaguely," I said—the Balkans was not my subject. "It's a secret society, isn't it?"

She nodded. "One of the most powerful and unscrupulous in the world to-day. It aims at the restoration of Greater Serbia. For the Black Hand Austria-Hungary that holds millions of Serb blood-brothers in subjection is the arch-enemy. There's a king in Serbia but the Black Hand is the real ruler, as King Milan, who saved his life by abdicating to it, and King Alexander, who opposed it and was butchered together with his Queen, discovered to their cost. The army supports it, the Government, while officially repudiating its violent agitation, works hand-in-glove with it behind the scenes. And Germany, for whom the preservation of the Habsburg monarchy intact is a matter of life and death, is at the back of Austria-Hungary's Balkan policy. If I'm right and your Mrs. Stafford has got herself mixed up in one these Pan-Slav intrigues, there's the explanation of Grundt's hold over her..."

"I believe you've hit it," I put in. "She spoke of some friend of hers being involved in espionage on Germany's Russian frontier..."

"Russia, as you know, uses the Balkan States, especially the Serbs and Bulgars, as pawns against the Triple Alliance. The Serbs and Bulgars are at one another's throats already, now that they've beaten the Turk"—this was the early summer of 1913—"but in reality it's Austria-Hungary and Russia at grips by proxy. I shouldn't wonder," she added thoughtfully, "if they don't end by plunging Europe into war..."

The first warm spell of the year was on us. We were dining that night, as I remember, out of doors, on the terrace of the Royal Automobile Club in the pleasant coolness of the overhanging plane trees. Shaded lights, quiet voices, the strains of the orchestra playing "Musetta's Song" in the inner room—war seemed far removed from that setting of luxury and elegance.

But I did not make light of Garnet's prophecy, although I was probably the only man present that evening who would not have laughed her to scorn, and neither of us could divine at that time how rapidly the fulfilment of that prediction was drawing near. In the service war was the supreme eventuality that overshadowed and coloured all our waking days: our job was to be ready for it when it should come.

Garnet roused me from my meditation. "Do you remember once I told you I didn't want you to get hurt?" she said in her tranquil way.

"Perfectly," I replied, not without a touch of stiffness in my tone.

"You weren't angry with me?"

"Not in the least..."

"Philip," she said earnestly—it was the first time she had called me by my Christian name—"don't get your fingers burnt! Madeleine Stafford may be all you say she is, but she's not for you. If she's involved in these Balkan plots and counterplots, she'll drag you in after her, ruin your life as she has ruined other men's and still you'll never possess her wholly. When a woman takes up a cause, it's good-bye to love..."

I put my hand on hers. "Dear Garnet," I answered, "you're right, as you always are. But it doesn't make any difference. If Madeleine came in the door there and called me I should follow her. And the trouble is, there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it..."

She sighed. "The last time we spoke of this, you denied it," she reminded me. "You were even quite cross with me for suggesting it. Now you don't even take the trouble to deny it. It's a bad sign!"

Her tranquil glance considered me. Her eyes were her best feature when not masked by those blessed gig-lamps of hers. Brown and wide-open and thoughtful, they suggested unfathomed depths like the unruffled surface of a lake. I remarked once more how finely-made she was and how beautifully groomed. Her skin was lovely and I noticed in particular—because she wore her dark brown hair in some new way that disclosed them—what pretty ears she had. I found myself thinking again that, behind the careful competence of her in her working hours, there was a Garnet that none of us knew really anything about. "If I had any sense," I told her, "I should fall in love with you, Garnet. You'd make some fellow a wonderful wife."

She laughed and shook her brown head. "Thank you, my dear. I have enough experience of men to realise that that's meant for a compliment. But I'm afraid matrimony's not in my line. A man wants too much looking after. Keeping people like you out of mischief gives me all the worry I can conveniently manage without going out of my mind. When I think of Charles Forrest ... By the way, did you get anything out of your fascinators about Wahlstedter?"

"Only that he's still at large..."

"With the box, that is?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "He's long since sold or popped it..."

"Scotland Yard has circularised every police headquarters on the Continent, offering a hundred pounds reward for its recovery. If Wahlstedter sold or pawned it, we should have heard by this. A hundred pounds is a lot of francs, and marks, and lire..."

"Garnet," said I, cocking my eye at her, "I believe you have some theory of your own about the box..."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, I can't help feeling you *expected* to find it empty that day at Kiel..."

She laughed. "Won't you give me credit for opening it to save you?"

"Yes, but..."

"But what?" Her eyes laughed mischief at me.

"You'd have found some other way of bluffing Grundt. You know something about the box. I wish you'd tell me what it is..."

"My theory, such as it is, is no good without the box, Philip. Get the box back and we'll see..."

"It beats me what happened to that list of Forrest's," I said. "Against the obvious explanation that the box was empty from the start, we have the positive assertion of what's-his-name at Hamburg..."

"Brade?"

"Yes. As far as we know, Brade was the last of our people Forrest spoke to before starting back on that fatal journey to England. Brade says that Forrest showed him the box and told him that the list was in it. Of course, Forrest may have taken out the list and concealed it somewhere about him. But in that case it would have been found on his body. And I'm convinced that Madeleine Stafford never had the list. Or perhaps you don't agree with me?"

"Certainly I agree with you," was Garnet's impassive rejoinder.

"Do you believe that the list was in the box at the time of the railway accident?"

"Yes, I think I do," she replied with irritating serenity.

"And you agree with me that Madeleine Stafford never had it?"

"Yes. In fact," she added, "the more I think about it, the more I incline to the view that Mrs. Stafford's account of her relations with Forrest is true..."

"Then what?" I demanded, bewildered.

"Find the box," she laughed, "and we'll see..."

"But dash it all, Garnet, either the list is in the box or it isn't..."

"Exactly," she conceded sweetly.

"But, my dear girl..."

"Get the box back," she repeated, "and I'll explain what I mean. And now, if you're feeling as frivolous as I am, you may take me to a revue..."

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later came the enigmatic summons that whisked me off, hot-foot, to Vienna.

note-paper which at most Continental cafés the waiter will supply on demand, together with a penny bottle of semi-coagulated ink and a pen as full of hairs as a badger's tail. The writing, sprawling, smudgy and illiterate, was in keeping with the literary style. Which is not saying much, as the communication itself, reproduced here *in extenso* from the original among my papers, will attest:

Without address or date, it began straight off: *Shall the mister klavvering always yet hav interrest in his frends gold box he shall komm most quik to hotel brischtoll at Wien he shall put inserat in neues wiener tagblatt he shall say lik this angekommen K and wate vissit of*

*a frend.*

Which, being interpreted, signified that if I was still interested in the gold box, I was to proceed at once to the Hotel Bristol at Vienna, announcing my arrival by inserting an advertisement in the personal column of the well-known Viennese newspaper, the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, in the form "*Angekommen* (that is to say, arrived) *K.*"

In the service we were accustomed to correspondents whose epistolary efforts manifested even less Chesterfieldian elegance than this. What surprised me about the letter was that it was addressed to me (insufficiently stamped, I might add) at my chambers at the Albany. The writer was obviously Dr. Grundt's ex major-domo, Alfred Wahlstedter, or some obliging proxy; what bothered me was how that gentleman had contrived to procure my private address.

I was for ignoring the communication. I still inclined to the view that the recovery of poor Charles's heirloom no longer had anything but a sentimental interest; besides, I was weary of travel and anxious to avoid associations that would constantly bring Madeleine into my thoughts. It was Garnet who strongly urged that I should go out to Vienna. She still resolutely refused to explain the singular importance she attached to the recovery of the box. "Get it back and we'll see if I'm right," was all she would say. Garnet never proffered her advice to the Chief unasked, or she said she didn't; but on this occasion she managed to get him round to her point of view by implanting in his mind the idea that it would be good for our prestige to regain possession of an object which had been snatched away from under the very nose of the terrible Dr. Grundt. The result of her interference was that the Chief, after agreeing with me when I first brought the matter to his attention, now changed his mind. I was ordered to leave for Vienna forthwith, and authorised, since the motive of the letter was undoubtedly pecuniary, to expend up to one hundred pounds on buying back the box.

Garnet came to Charing Cross to see me off. I was sulky and short with her. The season was at its height and I was finding in an occasional game of polo and a round of week-end parties a certain anodyne for my heart-sickness. I was strangely loath to leave London—I have often wondered whether I had a presentiment of what lay before. "Vienna with the lilac out and all the cafés in the Prater in full swing," Garnet rallied me. "I envy you. I wish I was going myself..."

"You can have the lilac, and the Prater, too," I retorted glumly. "The more I think about this wild-goose chase, the less I like it. How do we know that this letter isn't just another trap to get me back into old Clubfoot's clutches?"

She shook her head in the solemn way she had. "Too obvious. Let's give Grundt his due. At least, he's got brains..."

"Meaning that I've none, is that it?"

She sighed. "If I stay here, you'll pick a quarrel with me. I'd better be getting back to the office. So long, my dear. Come back safe and sound with the box."

"I'll come back with the box all right," I told her darkly. "But it'll probably be an elm box and I'll be safe and sound inside, neatly packed in ice. However, what matter, since you've had your way?"

She bit her lip. "I think that's rather a rotten thing to say. After that, if anything should happen to you..." She turned abruptly and left me standing there beside the Pullman. I called after her, but she had vanished in the crowd.



I started on my journey in a worse temper than ever.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day after arriving at my destination, over my breakfast coffee and rolls in my room at the Bristol, I unfolded the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*. There was my advertisement, neatly sandwiched between a notice of a lost bangle and the fervent entreaty that the lady in the white hat should communicate with the gentleman she had smiled at in the Karntner-Strasse. Not half an hour later the telephone rang.

"Herr Clavering?" said a voice.

"Well?"

"Have you read the *Tagblatt* this morning?"

"Yes."

"Will you repeat a certain advertisement?"

"*Angekommen. K.*'—is that the one you mean?"

"Right! Be on the left-hand pavement of the Graben at eleven o'clock and walk up and down until the friend you have come to see accosts you..."

The foregoing dialogue took place in German. I should not have recognised the engaging Alfred's voice again if I had heard it; and, but for the livid scar on his face, I should have had some difficulty in identifying Grundt's trim domestic with the seedy individual who, shortly after eleven, suddenly barred my passage along Vienna's most fashionable shopping street. It was evident that our Alfred had fallen upon evil days. He was unshaven and his boots were broken, and from the circumstances that, despite the warm morning, he kept the collar of his threadbare jacket turned up I inferred that he was temporarily dispensing with a shirt.

But it was Alfred right enough. The shifty eye, the whining, ingratiating tone of the old lag, were unmistakable. His manner was distinctly nervous. "The gentleman recognises me, *nicht wahr?*" he said, glancing apprehensively about him. "From the Villa Waldesruh—the gentleman will remember?"

I was about to assure him that I remembered him very well indeed, when, with an exceedingly dirty finger laid on his lips, he enjoined me to silence. "The gentleman will drink a glass of Pilsener with me, perhaps?" he suggested leering. "There's a place not a dozen steps from here where we shall not be disturbed..." So saying, he slipped his arm in mine and led me, out of the press on the pavement, down a flagged alley to a little tavern.

"The essence of trade," said he sententiously when the waiter had brought our beer, "is supply and demand. I happen to possess an object which the gentleman would like to have. We can therefore do business. Is it not so?"

"Now look here, Wahlstedter..." I began briskly. But he stopped me. "Would it be agreeable to the gentleman if I ordered a little sandwich?" he questioned carelessly. "The fact is I overslept myself and was obliged to leave home without my breakfast..."

I felt inclined to point out that he had likewise omitted to shave or put on a shirt; but I told him to go ahead. "Before we proceed any farther," I said when he had given his order, "I want to know where the box is. Is it in your possession?"

"Herr Clavering," he replied with a heavy sigh, "I have had reverses. My life at the Villa Waldesruh' was a psychological monstrosity. Dr. Grundt has no respect for the dignity of human labour. He is in no sense what the English call a 'chentleman.' He treated me like a slave, a serf, a peon, and when in anger did not scruple to throw up in my face my unfortunate past which, as I shall presently make clear to you, Herr Clavering, was due to no shortcomings of mine but to the dastardly machinations of those whom I considered friends..."

"Quite. But what about the box?" I cut him off.

"My present impoverished condition, I admit," he pursued unswervingly, "is due to my own action. In fleeing from the Villa Waldesruh', I abandoned a singularly complete wardrobe, six of everything, Herr Clavering, shirts, collars, socks, vests and drawers for summer and winter wear..."

"Yes, yes. But I want to know about the..."

"To say nothing of a devoted consort," he declaimed, his small eyes flashing, "whose skill in preparing spare-ribs and sauerkraut alone would have ensured her a position in the finest kitchen in the land and enabled her to support me in my old age. But I am a man"—he thumped his chest—"a citizen of the world, and the measure of indignity heaped upon me by the tyrant, Grundt, was brimful and running over. I saw my chance of freedom and I snatched it. A Rumanian steamer leaving Hamburg for Black Sea ports offered me the opportunity to get clear away. Unfortunately, the master was a brute of the stamp of Grundt and did not scruple to put me to work in the stokehold, shovelling coal. With the result that, on reaching Constantza..."

"You deserted and smuggled your way on a goods train as far as Vienna, I know," I interposed impatiently.

"The gentleman shows remarkable perspicacity," Alfred affirmed solemnly. "That is exactly what I did. Though how you should have guessed..."

"My good Wahlstedter," I interrupted incisively, "my time is limited. Will you please answer me, Where is the box?"

He looked up from the sandwich the waiter had placed before him. By the way he wolfed his food I should have said he had eaten nothing for the past twenty-four hours. "It is temporarily deposited with an acquaintance of mine," he remarked with his mouth full.

"Pawned, do you mean?"

"My friend is not a pawnbroker," he replied with dignity. "For a hundred kronen I can regain possession of the box..." He looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. "If the gentleman would advance me that sum"—he paused—"on account..."

"And how much are you asking for the box?" I demanded. He took a quick swig of his beer. "A thousand pounds in English money," he said rapidly. I laughed. "Divide it by a hundred and we'll talk..."

He shook his head, narrowing his eyes. "A thousand pounds is the price," he reiterated.

"You're wasting my time," I said and rapped on the table with a coin. "My bill!" I told the waiter. "Don't be in such a hurry!" cried my companion, affrighted. And, as the waiter approached, he added, "Perhaps he could bring me another sandwich? And some more beer?"

I gave the order. "I'm aware that the gentleman attaches the greatest importance to the recovery of this box," he hazarded, playing with his fork.

"Really? And who told you that?"

"Frau Stafford..." His tone was nonchalant, but I felt his small eyes ferreting in my face.

"What has Frau Stafford to do with it?"

He pushed his plate aside and leaned forward confidentially. "I had been in Vienna for three days—I was starving..."

"I thought you told me you'd raised a hundred kronen on the box..."

He coughed. "I was persuaded to take part in a game of cards..."

I laughed. "What about your old profession, then?"

He drew himself up. "There's such a thing as professional dignity, Herr. I work only the first-class places: I have always had a tiptop clientele. In my line I require smart clothes, a good address. With permission,"—he bowed formally—"I am not a common pickpocket..."

"You must pardon my ignorance," I said.

"Your apology is accepted," he retorted loftily. "As I was saying, in my distress, while walking on the Ring-Strasse, I encountered Frau Stafford..."

"Here? In Vienna?" I cried in glad surprise.

"No longer than four days ago. Knowing her association with Grundt, I offered her the box..."

"Well?" I broke in breathlessly.

"She refused it, Herr. She said she was free of Grundt at last and was on her way to Serbia to start a new existence. Or words to that effect. 'But why,' she told, 'don't you offer the box to Herr Clavering, the Englishman you saw one day at the Villa Waldesruh? He'll pay you handsomely for it,' she said. 'At least two thousand pounds in good English money, she said...' He spread his hands deprecatingly. 'And I ask only half the sum,' he added, his little eyes darting furtive glances at my face.

I knew now where he had obtained my address at the Albany—the rest, of course, was pure invention to screw the price up.

"If you took that box to a jeweller," I declared crisply, "the utmost you'd get for it would be ten pounds. And you wouldn't get that. What would actually happen is that he'd turn you over to the police, for you may as well realise that that box has been notified as stolen at every Police Head-quarters in Europe and the United States..."

Herr Wahlstedter's unhealthy face had gone a greenish tinge. "It's a lie," he faltered.

"If it were a lie, you'd have pledged the box at a regular pawnbroker's long ago," I told him. "As I happen to want the box I'll give you twenty pounds for it. But not a penny more..."

By this he had finished his second sandwich. Glancing cautiously about him he said, "And is twenty pounds the price the gentleman puts on the lives of a dozen men?"

I glanced at him keenly before replying. The miserable wretch had discovered something. It was going to cost us money. "Reflect well," he went on with a crafty look. "Is not the safety of Herr Forrest's friends worth..." He paused. "Come, to show I'm not grasping—let's say, five hundred pounds?"

I breathed again. We had reached the haggling stage; therefore, the box was as good as mine. "I don't know what you mean," I said indifferently. "As far as I'm aware, the box is empty..."

He shrugged his shoulders. "In that case, why does the gentleman attach such importance to it?"

He had me cornered there. Greatly intrigued, I sought, by dint of seemingly innocuous questions, to discover what connection had existed between him and Forrest. But he refused to be drawn: he would talk only figures and soon we were engaged, hammer and tongs, in a haggling match that must have lasted for the best part of three hours. The upshot of it all was that I was to pay him immediately the sum of one hundred kronen in order that he might redeem the box, and eighty-five pounds in English money when the box was handed over. The friend who had accommodated him did business, apparently, only after dark so that, as my companion resolutely refused to come to me at the Bristol, our rendezvous was fixed for 11 o'clock that night at his room in the Grünberg-Gasse. I was to ask for Herr Alois Binzl, in

which name he was registered, and I was to come alone.

He was very insistent about this. The Austrian secret police, he declared, were utterly subservient to Grundt. Let them once get a suspicion that Herr Alois Binzl, the humble lodger of the Grünberg-Gasse, was identical with the Alfred Wahlstedter, whose description (he told me) Grundt had circulated far and wide in the German-speaking countries, and all would be lost. As he said this, he shivered in his threadbare suit and raw fear shadowed his eyes.

Before we separated, I asked him if he knew where Madeleine Stafford was staying. He said she had informed him, the day he had met her, that she was leaving Vienna the same evening for Belgrade. I was conscious of a pang of disappointment. She was free of Grundt; and she had never let me know. She must have contemplated some such step at our last interview—I remembered her parting words so clearly. "When next we meet, if all goes well, there'll be no more lies, no more subterfuges, no more strife between us..."

She had regained her liberty, then; yet we were farther apart than ever.

## 114

### The long arm of Dr. Grundt

The night porter at the Bristol showed me the location of the Grünberg-Gasse on the map. He twisted his face into rather a knowing look as his pencil pointed to one of a ganglion of little streets clustered about a small square called the Grüner Markt. His attitude intrigued me until, having paid off my taxi on the square and followed the directions he had given me, I found myself in what was unquestionably Vienna's red light district.

Women lolled unashamed at the open casements of the small, mean houses; figures slunk up quiet and sordid alleys to disappear through doors that gave the impression of standing permanently ajar; and the jangle of automatic pianos and cheap gramophones added a note of false gaiety to the sombre and secretive atmosphere of the whole quarter.

The Grünberg-Gasse lay to one side of this labyrinth of vice and squalor, a typical Old Vienna street of high, tumbledown houses with small shops, cobblers and the like installed on ground floor and in cellars, and apartments above. Where, at a cellar entrance, a battered light-sign advertised a café with "*Damen-Bedienung*," a painted wench called softly as I went by and I detected in the Grünberg-Gasse, for all its tranquil, old-world appearance, the same sinister, brooding air that hung over the adjoining streets.

House doors in Vienna are closed, by police order, at 10 p.m. After that hour, everybody, tenants and visitors alike, pay the concierge an admission fee of twenty-five hellers—Sperrgeld, as it is called—or, at least, such was the practice before the war. "Herr Binzl?" said the bearded hag who unlatched the street door in answer to my ring. "Is the gentleman expected?" "*Jawohl!*" I told her.

"The apartment on the left, at the top," she mumbled, her grimy hand clutching my Sperrgold through the little trap, and I started to toil up seven flights.

Herr Binzl's door was shut and there was no bell. The landing was dark. Striking a match, I rapped and waited. No one came, so I rapped again. I rapped several times without result, then tried the apartment across the landing. But here, too, my knocking elicited no response.

I looked at my watch. The luminous dial said five minutes past eleven—I was not too early at the rendezvous. I listened again at the door. No sound—clearly, the good Alfred had not yet returned from his nocturnal call upon his friend, the amateur pawn-broker. On an idle instinct, I tried the door knob. To my surprise, it yielded—the door was not fastened. At least, I told myself, here's somewhere to wait; and I walked in.

The place was in darkness. Lighting a match, I perceived that the apartment consisted of but a single room, sparsely and shabbily furnished and tucked away under the roof, with a ceiling, cracked and crumbling like the walls, that descended precipitously on one side. The trembling match flame revealed some dirty dishes and a candle, stuck in a bottle, on a table. I lit the candle and gazed about me.

I saw it at once, that dark and sack-like object dangling from a hook in the ceiling and oscillating gently before the uncurtained window in the slight draught from the open door. Before ever I discerned the purple features, the protruding tongue, I recognised by the threadbare suit the man I had come to see, realised that he had hanged himself from a staple in the ceiling, survival of some lamp that once had swung there.

I had arrived too late.

Instantly, the box leaped to my mind. Why had he done this thing? And had he taken his life before or after redeeming the box? As I sprang forward to investigate, something splintered under my foot. A broken plate rolled away over the bare boards; beside it lay the fragments of a cup; beyond a chair was overturned. Moreover, plaster from the dilapidated wall was spattered all over the floor. A desperate struggle had taken place in that room. And now I knew the truth. This was not suicide; it was murder. There were livid rings on the dead man's wrists to prove it, although the rope that had bound him had been carried off, and the shoulders of his ragged jacket were white with plaster where his murderer, or murderers, had flung him to the floor. His murderers? His executioners, rather. They had overpowered him, trussed him and strung him up. Pitilessly. Brutally. A hirsute countenance, savage and relentless, seemed to glare triumphantly at me from the recesses of my mind. Grundt! This was his handiwork!

One glance at the distorted, livid face, the feel of those clammy, pendulous hands, disposed of any idea that I should cut the body down and seek to revive it. The man had been dead for several hours. I was concerned with my own position; it was perilous enough, I had no intention of notifying the police; yet without that, I had no chance of establishing an alibi. My only course was to leave no traces and depart as swiftly as possible. But first I had a duty to perform.

I shut the door and approached the ghastly figure. It was not the first time I had searched a corpse. I had little hope of finding the box; I did not even know whether he had been able to redeem it, although the fate that had overtaken him suggested that he had. Standing on a chair, the corpse swaying to my slightest touch, I went through the pockets. The box was not there; but I came across a paper that confirmed my worst suspicions. It was a receipt, dated that day, for one hundred kronen "against pledge." The signature was illegible.

So, once more, Grundt had snatched the prize from my hands. That this foul deed was of his contriving, if not actually of his doing, I had not the slightest doubt. Indeed, as I paused there an instant beside that poor, dead, swaying thing, I wondered whether he himself had not been the instrument of his own vengeance. For I remembered what Madeleine had told Alfred Wahlstedter, that she was free of Grundt, and her own mistress again. This could only signify that she was in flight, perhaps with the aid of the two hundred pounds she had earned from us. But the man she had betrayed was an agent of Grundt's—she had confided this to me herself; if Grundt had discovered her treachery, as her flight seemed to suggest, the chances were that he was already on her trail. That she was technically out of his zone of influence would not matter a whit. If I knew anything of Clubfoot and the crude processes of his mind, Vienna, Belgrade, Timbuctoo—they were all one to him; he would pursue her to the ends of the earth.

Because of this growing conviction of mine that Grundt was in Vienna, hot on her tracks, taking a fool-hardy risk, I stopped at the porter's box as I was leaving the house. "Can you tell me," I questioned casually, "at what time Herr Binzl's lame friend went away?"

"The big lame gentleman who came with the other man?" the concierge demanded without suspicion.

"That's the one," said I.

She made a deprecatory gesture of the hand. "They're gone this long time," she croaked. "It was before I put the lentils on for our supper, at any rate, and that was at eight o'clock!"

I thanked her and stumbled blindly out of that house of death.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was conscious of a sense of panic. The patient deliberation of the man appalled me. I recalled him as I had seen him at the Villa Waldesruh', doubled up with laughter at the idea that this ex-pickpocket he had befriended should have robbed him; yet at that very moment he must have been planning inexorable vengeance upon the thief. The fact that his victim was a vain, cringing, worthless creature made the crime even more horrible, revealing as it did the monstrous arrogance of his executioner.

A clock on the Ring-Strasse showed me that it was half-past midnight—I had been walking at hazard for more than an hour. My mind was clearer now. Grundt was in Vienna. He had regained possession of the box and had, roughly, four hours' start of me. It might well be that, by this, he was on his way back to Germany. No matter: wherever he had gone, I intended to set off forthwith in pursuit. But how, in a strange city, after midnight, was I to pick up his trail?

It was while revolving this point in my mind that I thought of my old friend, Dr. Siegfried Binder. He was a leader writer on one of the chief Viennese newspapers, a gentle, grizzled, cynical little man. I had met him originally at a literary café in Vienna and, finding him friendly and amusing and, above all, exceptionally well-informed, had got into the habit of dropping in on him at the *Neue Wiener Zeitung* whenever I happened to be in the Austrian capital. A man in our job has to have a lot of friends—as many friends, as many news sources.

Binder went to the newspaper every night and the reason I remembered him was that he was the only person I could think of who was available at that nocturnal hour. The *Neue Wiener Zeitung* offices were quite close, in a side street off the Ring, and five minutes later I was shown into the big editorial room where, in a litter of torn proofs, brimming ash-trays and beer mugs, the Herr Doktor composed his nightly editorial on foreign affairs.

Wizened and myopic, he glanced up at me from under his green eye-shade from a desk strewn with sheets of paper covered with his almost illegible handwriting. "*Grüss' Gott*, Herr Clavering!" he cried. "You arrive in time to give me your opinion of a masterly castigation of the rascally Serbs I have just written!" And before I could avert it, he was reading out to me, in his lilting Viennese German, a long and excessively complicated diatribe on Balkan politics.

It required considerable patience and diplomacy on my part to edge him towards the subject that had brought me. "Dr. Grundt?" he repeated the name. "No, I can't say I've ever heard of him. But if he's a German of any standing von Raup, who covers the German Embassy for us"—he pointed to a figure writing at a desk across the room—"will know him. I'll bring him over!"

Von Raup was a down-at-heels Austrian Baron in a frock coat, rather shiny as to the seams, and a sweeping cavalry moustache. At the mention of Grundt's name he frowned heavily. "Certainly, I know him," he said. "A boorish Berliner, if there ever was one. He was at the Café zur Post this afternoon with another German newspaper correspondent..."

"Newspaper correspondent?" I echoed faintly.

"It's Dr. Grundt, of the Berlin *Tagespost*, you mean, isn't it?"

"I didn't know he was a journalist," I put in. "A big man with a club-foot..."

"That's the fellow. He had the impudence to tell me that, but for the Prussian Army at our backs, the Serbs would have long since crossed the Danube and invaded Southern Hungary. He's going down to Belgrade and Macedonia to write a series of articles..."

I was suddenly taut with suspense. My guess was not so wide of the mark, after all. Madeleine had gone to Belgrade; and here was Clubfoot headed in the same direction. "You don't happen to know where the Herr Doktor is staying?" I asked.

"He was at the Habsburger Hof," said von Raup. "But he left for Belgrade to-night..."

To-night! My spirits fell. This meant that his start might easily be extended to twelve or even twenty-four hours. Besides, once in Macedonia, where Serbians and Bulgarians even now were at one another's throats, how was I ever to catch up with him?

"I suppose you're sure he went?" I inquired tremulously.

"I was at the train," the Herr Baron replied, "seeing off a friend of mine, the Feldjäger who travels with despatches for the German Embassy. I saw your friend, Grundt, in the sleeper..."

I had learnt in a hard school that, despite all appearances, no situation was ever hopeless. My prospects of success were far from encouraging, but my course was clear. I must follow in pursuit. Before going to my bed, I telegraphed the Chief, briefly and without explanation, that I was leaving for Belgrade. Then, with an eye to my "cover," I took a leaf from Grundt's book and wired a London newspaper editor, who was a friend of mine, to telegraph me credentials as a special correspondent to Poste Restante, Belgrade.

Next day I caught the morning train for the Serbian capital.

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### The chase is on

And so the chase was on.

Looking back across the years upon that hot and tedious journey, I find my memory a blank. It is as though time mercifully stood still as the day express bore me down to Budapest and beyond, through the endless, sunlit plain of Southern Hungary, towards my goal. It seems to me that I began to live again only when the train steamed into Semlin and I descried, on the farther bank of the yellow, swirling Danube, the frowning walls of the white citadel that gave Belgrade its name.

I was frantic to catch up with Grundt. I was only twelve hours behind him. He had to delay but a single day in Belgrade and I should draw level. To be honest, I was more concerned about Madeleine's safety than the recovery of the box. Did she know that Clubfoot was in pursuit? I had a vision of her, with the light of freedom in those ever-changing eyes of hers, travelling in all serenity and confidence towards her Serbian home, never suspecting that the implacable and untiring avenger was on her trail. I had no means of warning her: all I could hope to do was to head Grundt off before he could reach her.

I did not expect to find Clubfoot in Belgrade, and I was right. I knew that he would not trouble to plan a trip into Macedonia unless he had a very shrewd idea that Madeleine was bound in the same direction. He was four days behind her on leaving Vienna; but I anticipated that her start would avail her little in Macedonia where such railways as existed were in the hands of the military and roads were practically non-existent.

My credentials as a special correspondent were awaiting me at Belgrade. To go to Macedonia, I discovered, would require a permit which had to be presented at Serbian General Headquarters at Uskub. I wasted a precious twenty-four hours on getting this permit. My colleague of the *Tagespost*, I learned, had written for his permit in advance. It had been brought to him at the train and he had travelled on to Uskub. Thirty-six hours in arrears I followed him there, only to find he had left, twelve hours before, for First Army Headquarters.

He had hired the only motor-car available for civilians and I had to relinquish the lead I had gained in order to arrange for horses and a groom. Clubfoot was forty-eight hours ahead by the time I clattered out of Uskub on the flea-bitten half-Arab I had bought from a wounded officer of the Royal Guard, followed by my servant mounted on one of the two sturdy Macedonian ponies I had acquired and leading the other which was loaded with hastily procured camp

equipment and stores.

The roads, which were nothing more than rutted tracks, were a pandemonium of marching columns, supply trains, ambulances and walking wounded, that sent the red dust swirling up. It was sunset before we reached the mountain-top on which the cluster of tents housing First Army Headquarters was precariously perched. Some newspaper correspondents were quartered here and one of them, an Englishman, told me that a lame German journalist in a car had reached the camp two days previously. He had stopped only long enough to pay his respects to the Chief of Staff and departed again. The lame man had not mentioned any definite destination, but had informed one of the Austrian correspondents that he intended visiting some of the field dressing-stations between Uskub and the front line.

It was here, at First Army Headquarters, that I first got tidings of Madeleine. Up to my meeting with Major Dravitch, of the Army Medical Service, all my inquiries after her had proved fruitless. I had asked for her everywhere, starting with the principal hotels, the newspaper offices and the bank at Belgrade, but without success. I was much handicapped in speaking no Serbian and only a little Russian and, still more, in not knowing her real, her Serbian name, which she would undoubtedly be using. It seemed to me, however, that there could not be so many Serbian girls of good family, as she unquestionably was, with Scottish mothers, and so I persevered.

Dravitch met me, travel-stained and weary, as I emerged from the General Staff marquee. Addressing me in excellent German—he told me afterwards he had studied medicine at the Berlin Charité—he invited me to his tent for a glass of Drina red wine. His fat face and jovial personality—he was an enormously stout man—invited confidence and soon I found myself unfolding to him my difficulty.

The name of Stafford conveyed nothing to him at first. It was only after I had described Madeleine's appearance and mentioned that she was the daughter of one Serbian officer and widow of another that a light seemed to dawn on him. "With a Scottish mother?" he repeated. "That can only be the sister of Peter Milanovitch. Beautiful, you say she is?"

"Very beautiful," I assured him.

"With dark and soulful eyes?"

"Yes, yes..."

He slapped his thigh. "*Donnerwetter*," he cried, "there can't be another woman like her in the whole of Serbia..."

"You know her?" I questioned eagerly.

"I talked with her no later than two days ago. It was at the field ambulance at Egri Palanka. She had come up with Red Cross supplies from Uskub..."

It was as though a chill hand clutched at my heart. I thought of Grundt and his tour of the dressing-stations and I quailed.

"She's a Red Cross nurse, you mean?" I faltered.

"*Jawohl!*"

"You don't happen to know her married name?"

He shook his head. "They call her Sister Madeleine..."

"And where is she now?"

"At Egri Palanka, as far as I know. By the way, you're not the first person who has asked for her..."

I could not speak. I thought of Grundt and his forty-eight hours' start and waited, quaking for the Major to continue. "There was a German journalist here a day or two back," Dravitch went on, "who questioned me about her.



Unfortunately, I wasn't able to help him, as I hadn't met her then..."

I breathed again. My companion was rattling on. "Of course, she may have returned to Uskub by this. But wait, now I think of it, she told me that her brother is due here next week. He's coming to receive the Cross of Saint Sava from our Crown Prince who, as you know, commands this army..."

"And who is her brother?"

The Major's expansive smile was tinged with irony. "A great national hero, it would appear..." He paused. "I'm one of those Serbians who believe that the realisation of Serbia's national ambitions will come about naturally through the inevitable break-up of the Habsburg system. But young Peter Milanovitch belongs to the forward movement..."

"The Black Hand, do you mean?"

"*Um Gottes Willen!*" A shadow of apprehension crossed the plump face. "Please, we don't talk about that here. Milanovitch is unquestionably a gallant fellow. He was formerly of our Intelligence Service in Austria-Hungary, but got into trouble with the German secret police and was sent to the fortress of Schlatz from which he made a sensational escape a few weeks ago. He lost no time in returning home to offer his services to the army and is now at the front..."

I listened breathless. At last I began to see light. I knew Schlatz by reputation as a grim old Silesian stronghold where political prisoners were incarcerated. Did not this explain Grundt's hold over Madeleine? With her brother safely interned, probably without trial, Grundt could force her to his bidding as he willed by the mere threat of visiting any disobedience on her part upon the prisoner. Milanovitch had escaped a few weeks ago, Dravitch had said, thereby, if my theory were right, enabling Madeleine to regain her liberty. Most escapes of this kind, I knew from experience, were contrived by bribing warders or guards. That two hundred pounds of ours might well have served to open to young Milanovitch the doors of his prison. And the dates approximately coincided as well. Every bit of the puzzle dropped smoothly into place. Now I understood her distress on the occasion of our two meetings at the Café Tarnowski. She had had to decide between her German lover, the foe of the Slavs, and her patriot brother. And who should blame her for the choice she made? Not I.

Her brother, Grundt's prisoner, was at the front and therefore out of Grundt's clutches. Not so Madeleine. She might suppose that, as a Red Cross nurse in the Serbian military service, she was safe from pursuit. But I knew better. In that lawless land, historical scene of kidnappings and every other sort of crime of violence, home of the Komitaji, with Clubfoot on her trail, she was constantly in danger.

Though night was at hand, I was on fire to take the road at once for Egri Palanka. Dravitch demurred. He explained to me that the country after dark was far from safe, what with troops of marauding deserters and bands of komitajis whose vendettas, both public and private, have diversified Macedonian history since the days of Alexander; besides, as Egri Palanka lay towards the front line, I should require a pass in order to traverse the line of sentries. This only the Chief of Staff could give, and he had left that morning with His Royal Highness on a three-day tour of the front. Egri Palanka was distant only three hours by horseback from the camp across the mountains; as soon as I had my pass, Dravitch said, he would be delighted to ride over there with me and renew acquaintance with his charming compatriot.

The prospect of being cooped up there for three days on that sun-baked hill-top appalled me. All night long, in my tent under the stars, I tossed, picturing to myself Grundt, grim and tenacious, nosing his way through gorge and defile from ambulance to ambulance in search of his quarry. Towards dawn I fell asleep and dreamed that someone stood over my sleeping-bag and shook me awake. Opening my eyes—this was still in my dream—I found myself gazing into the dead face of Charles Forrest. I sat up with a loud cry and saw the bright sunshine outside and heard the cheerful notes of réveillé go clanging through the hills. As I shaved and dressed my mind was made up, although it was not until some hours later that I had the chance of putting my resolution into execution.

That morning the officer in charge of the Press was to conduct the war correspondents attached to the First Army on a visit to some look-out point whence a view of the whole front was obtainable. I gladly accepted his invitation to accompany the party. Towards nine o'clock we set out in a long cavalcade. I purposely kept in rear of the cortège. For a long time we followed the dry bed of a river where the whole party was in view of the officer who led the way. But after

an hour's riding we entered a narrow defile, following a bridle path that wound in and out among the crags. As soon as the last man ahead of me had disappeared, I dismounted, affecting to remove a stone from my horse's hoof. When no one came back for me, I sprang into the saddle again and, putting my horse about, galloped off in the opposite direction. I was free.

I had taken the precaution of packing some bread and cold meat and, since cholera was raging and all water suspect, a bottle of Giesshübler in my saddle-bags. I was, therefore, good for at least twenty-four hours. I had plotted out the exact position of my destination on the Austrian General Staff map I had bought at Belgrade and knew that, once I should strike the bed of the River Vardar on which Egri Palanka was situated, I should be on the right road. It was a blazing hot day and I lost a lot of time leading my horse up and down precipitous trails in the hills. Towards noon, however, as I topped a steep ascent, a faint rumbling sound, like the mutter of distant thunder, was borne to my ears on the parching breeze. It was gunfire; and I knew I was approaching the front. Far below, a silver trickle bubbled noisily over a broad, boulder-strewn bed. It was the Vardar. An hour later a string of wretched hovels straggling over the mountain-side on either curving bank told me that Egri Palanka lay before me.

I had met no one on my ride and, in the siesta hour, the squalid village street was deserted save for a few scavenger dogs dozing in the grilling sun. There was a tiny mosque under a clump of trees faced by a café with a low building of wattle beside it, crowned by a dumpy dome. Then with a thrill, I perceived, farther along the street, a Red Cross flag drooping over the door of a dilapidated, whitewashed structure.

An orderly came out as I approached. In my inadequate Russian I asked for Sister Madeleine. His face lit up and he broke into a flood of explanation. Then, seeing that I did not understand him, he pointed in the direction whence the steady grumble of the guns proceeded and I gathered that she had gone up to the front line.

I inquired when she was likely to be back. He made some answer which was beyond me and, seeing this, described with his hand a wide arc extending from the sun above our heads to the westward. I deduced from this sign language that she would not be back until sundown. I wanted to ask him where she lodged, but this was too much for my rickety Russian. As I floundered there, he slipped into the building and presently reappeared with a stout woman in Red Cross uniform whom I took to be the matron.

She spoke a little German. Sister Madeleine had left at dawn with an ambulance column and would not return until late in the afternoon. She would scarcely be back at the ambulance that day; as she would have finished her tour of duty when the column got in, she would probably leave it at the entrance to the village and go straight home. Sister Madeleine found the hospital hot and overcrowded, she explained, and had induced the authorities to place an empty house at her disposal outside the village.

I made the matron tell me exactly how to find this place of Madeleine's. It was on the far side of the village, the matron said, on the only road that existed in those parts, the road that traversed the village and followed the river bed. You rode out past the mosque for about two miles—it was the Turkish house with a flat roof and blue shutters that stood up alone on the river bank with a screen of cypress behind it.

With Grundt ever present in my thoughts I asked the chatty matron whether there were any other foreigners at Egri Palanka. My question seemed to amuse her. No strangers ever came to Egri Palanka, she declared. "No newspaper correspondents, even?" I questioned. "I met a German journalist at Army Head-quarters who is interested in the Red Cross Services..." She shook her head. "I've been here a month, and in all that time the only foreigner we've had was an Austrian surgeon who came with Major Dravitch, from Army Headquarters..."

My spirits mounted. At last I was ahead of Clubfoot. Since it looked to me as though I should be at Egri Palanka for the night, I asked the matron whether the village boasted an inn. She shrugged her ample shoulders. One could eat after a fashion at the café beside the hammam; as for a bed—she spread her fat hands deprecatingly.

The hammam was, of course, the Turkish bath. This, then, was the odd-looking structure I had remarked over against the café. I was not surprised to find a hammam at Egri Palanka, for many Macedonian villages included a good sprinkling of Moslem inhabitants. I was dusty and stiff from my ride and I had not had a bath since leaving Belgrade. Cholera or no cholera, if the place were only reasonably clean, I decided to risk it. A good sweat and a brisk rub,

followed by a short nap to make up for my broken slumbers of the previous night, would, I reasoned, agreeably fill in an hour or two until it should be time for me to ride out in quest of Madeleine. For a couple of dinars a vague individual in a tattered fez and baggy trousers, whom I routed up out of the café, conducted my horse to a stall in rear and, under my vigilant eye, watered him and left him a feed of corn. This duty attended to, I entered the bath next door.

The hammam was picturesquely situated on the river bank in the shade of some acacias with the stream rustling past. Inside it was pure Arabian Nights. A small dark corridor led into a central chamber where the sunlight, filtered through coloured glass let into the squat dome I had observed outside, touched with rainbow hues the leaping jet of a tiny fountain. In the far wall was a door which, from the sound of running water beyond it, appeared to lead to the various hot rooms. At the four corners of the chamber openings spanned by dwarf arches, so low that I had to bend my head to pass beneath, gave access, as I discovered on poking about, to a series of narrow, labyrinthine passages broken at intervals by curtained recesses, each containing a couch.

The attendant who presently emerged from the bath proper was quite in the picture—a picaresque figure not above five feet in height, with a single inflamed eye peering out of a saddle-brown countenance from under the folds of an immense striped turban and no other clothing save a pair of linen drawers. Although the floor of the place was only pounded mud, I had already noticed that it was well swept and that the linen on the couches was scrupulously clean. So I let Sindbad, as I called him to myself, give me a white robe and a pair of babooshes and conduct me, through a maze-like corridor, to a cubby-hole where I undressed. The place was as silent as the grave and I saw no sign of any other visitor as I passed through the central chamber to the hot room.

About an hour and a half later, thoroughly cleansed and agreeably fatigued by the vigorous kneading I had received from Sindbad's coppery, sinewy hands, I returned to my cubby-hole. I looked at my watch. It was half-past three. I was feeling pleasantly drowsy. I could rest for half an hour before setting out, I told myself, as I flung myself upon the couch. I let my mind dwell luxuriously upon my meeting with Madeleine. How astonished she would be to see me! Would she be as glad as I? I wondered. At least, all strife was banished between us, now that I knew the truth. I let my thoughts glide happily away...

In those last moments of consciousness, I believe I had quite lost sight of the menace that, even as I slept, was hobbling in our tracks.

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### The man in the hammam

What was that strange parti-coloured beam of light that streamed upon my hand as it rested on my chest? What this narrow chamber in which I found myself? Bemused, I gazed around, saw above my head the window, set with stars of purple and yellow glass, through which a wan and sickly ray penetrated. Beyond it the tiny room in which I lay was thick with shadows. It was the distant sound of running water, a series of reverberating slaps faintly heard, that brought me to my senses. I realised that it was evening and that I was still in the hammam. I sprang up in a panic and flew to my watch. A quarter to eight!

In mad haste I tore into my riding things. Pulling on my jacket as I ran, I dashed out into the central chamber. A savage-looking figure waited stolidly there, a peasant in a frieze coat and sandals, a rifle slung from his shoulder. Seeing no sign of the attendant, I hurried into the bath.

Sindbad stooped over the rubbing-table. The low-roofed chamber echoed to resounding slaps, asthmatic blowings, stifled grunts and groans. I had a glimpse of a shaven head, of a vast chest thatched like any bear's with black hair, of a mighty, swelling paunch, on the slab under the rubber's swiftly-moving hands. On the instant, scarcely daring to breathe, I had withdrawn swiftly out of sight behind the door.

The pounding ceased. Sindbad poked his turbaned head out. I beckoned him into the central chamber. The peasant was still there. On seeing the attendant he sprang forward fiercely. But Sindbad waved him aside—he had seen the money in my hand. I paid him what he asked, on which the peasant claimed him with a flood of excited talk and the two men disappeared together through the door that led to the bath.

Grundt! At Egri Palanka already! Bitter self-reproaches assailed me. While I, self-confident fool that I was, had slept, he had caught up with me, effacing the lead I had so precariously won. The sight of him taking his ease in the hammam boded ill for Madeleine. It meant either that he had already had the reckoning with her that he had come so far to seek—my throat went dry at the thought—or else that, having discovered as I had, that she was temporarily absent, he was planning to confront her in his own time, secure in the knowledge that he had run her to earth. It must be one thing or the other—in no other circumstances would Grundt be willing to relax.

But he had left me out of his reckoning. It was obvious that he could have no idea of my presence at Egri Palanka or, for that matter, within a thousand miles of him. Otherwise, he would have combed the village through, a simple matter, until he had found me. I thanked my lucky star for that maze of little passages wherein, safely hidden, I had escaped his notice when he had arrived at the bath. And now my courage began to revive. My horse was there next door. If only Madeleine were still from home, I might yet have time to reach her house and carry her into safety before Grundt could follow us. After all, he was there without his clothes: he had yet to dress...

Great Scott, the box! It must be there with his things. He had left Vienna immediately after the murder of Wahlstedter—he must have the box with him. But where were his clothes? How on earth was I to find the recess where he had undressed in that labyrinth of twisting corridors? The rub was the final stage of the bath; at any moment now he might emerge. If he came upon me there, my chances of rescuing Madeleine were almost *nil*. Dare I risk it?

I should have to. At all costs I must retrieve the box. Without further delay I darted down the nearest passage. Right and left little runways branched off—heavens, the place was a veritable rabbit-warren. Nothing there—every cubicle was empty.

I was back under the dome. An angry, strident voice resounded from the bath—I should know those tones. I plunged into the nearer of the two corridors on the far side of the chamber. Here again my search was fruitless. As I was coming back I heard hasty footsteps crossing the court and pausing, saw the armed peasant I had remarked before dash for the exit.

One passage remained to be explored. Triumph! At the extreme end of one of its two branches, where a curtain gaped half-open, I descried garments hanging on the wall—a panama hat, a suit of khaki drill, a shirt. And on the floor a pair of boots, one huge and misshapen, with a monstrous sole.

It seemed to me that I heard voices again. But throwing caution to the winds, I fell upon the coat and trousers, hunting feverishly through the pockets. It was easy to see that the box was not there—its weight would have revealed it.

Crushed with disappointment, I stepped back. At that moment I heard a ponderous, limping step ringing hollow under the low, vaulted roof of the passage. And I realised that I was trapped in that mole-run of a place.

My hand felt for my gun. I should have to shoot my way out at need, although I had no desire for a fight—I had Madeleine to think of. My eye, glancing round, fell upon Clubfoot's surgical boot. At least, I might delay pursuit, that is, provided I could get away. I snatched it up—it was immensely heavy with a good three inches of sole—and thrust it under my coat. Then I darted out.

The leaden, halting tread came nearer. The cripple was still out of sight. Another dressing-room faced me across the corridor. I slipped inside. Through the chinks of the curtain I watched Grundt approach, naked save for a towel about his loins, wheezing and blowing as he dragged himself painfully forward with the aid of two sticks. His fabulous hirsuteness, as he hobbled along, gave him the appearance of some decrepit ape. His broad face was glistening with perspiration; he was grinding his teeth and muttering to himself. His feet were bare—one of them, I noticed, was a mere twisted lump.

He lunged past me into his cubby-hole. My fingers gripped the butt of my automatic. God knows, I was sorely tempted, then and there, to put him beyond the power of doing Madeleine further harm. But I had my orders to consider—until the gold box was in my hands, Clubfoot must live. And so my pistol stayed in my pocket. But the instant he was out of sight I emerged from my hiding-place and ran, tiptoe, along the passage.

Where it joined the main artery I bumped, full tilt, into Sindbad, shambling towards me with towels slung over his shining, brown shoulder. With an angry shout he sprang back. But I was already on him, driving at his chin. The blow was not clean, for my fist slipped on the moisture on his face and landed, glancing, on his mouth so that his teeth cut my knuckles. But he fell over backwards just as a roar resounded from my rear. There was an ear-splitting report and a bullet smacked the clay roof just above my head.

But Grundt did not have time to go properly into action. I was already half-way up the corridor. I heard a second bullet shiver the glass of one of the windows in the dome as I crossed the little court and dashed out into the street. The café yard was deserted and my good Osman let me saddle him without demur while a growing hubbub of voices sounded from the street.

I was cold as ice now. Danger always had that effect on me when I was face to face with it. The bulky weight under my jacket gave me confidence. I was out of sight of the hammam and Grundt was immobilised for the time being. I laughed to myself as I tightened up old Osman's girths.

There was another exit to the yard—a gate giving on the river-bed. I was in the saddle before I noticed the gate, but at the same moment I heard an infuriated yell and saw Sindbad and a rabble of peasants come pouring into the yard. In rear Clubfoot limped, stark as he was born, brandishing a pistol. Even as I glanced back, a bullet whined past my face.

I had no experience of Osman's ability as a jumper. But I set him at that gate and he flew it like a bird. We landed in the shallow river-bed, in the centre of which a swift current of green water murmured over the stones. Over to the left (which was the direction I wanted) I could see where the road through the village ran out and merged itself in a rough track that followed the line of the water-course. I put Osman's head about and hell-for-leather we were off.

The western sky flamed with the vestiges of a vivid sunset. The solemn crags that flanked our passage were a mellow brown in the crystalline evening light. A kingfisher darted over the stream and high in the air above the mountains an eagle slowly wheeled. Save for a solitary horseman, whose tiny figure was visible on the road ahead, I had the whole majestic panorama to myself.

My horse was swift, with the ethereal swiftness that Arab blood gives. Quickly we overhauled that lonely rider. Astride a little Macedonian pony he was galloping furiously. As I approached him I perceived it was the peasant who had been at the bath. I had a pang of dismay. A messenger from Grundt?

He shifted his head to look at me as we thundered by, but that was all. Soon we had left him far in our wake and now, from afar, I descried the house with the blue shutters. I first identified it by the row of tall, grave cypresses that sheltered it from the wind blowing from the mountain behind. No other dwelling was in sight and the place had a desolate and abandoned air. No smoke mounted from the chimneys and the ground floor windows, closely shuttered, were splashes of faded blue against the discoloured white façade. Above, overhanging the river-bed, ran a long loggia or balcony, jealously screened with woodwork, the so-called mashrabiyyeh that distinguishes the windows of the women's quarters in every Turkish house. There was an untidy yard, enclosed by a thorn hedge, on the side from which I approached, with outhouses tucked away under the mountain.

I was so engrossed in studying the place that I did not observe the barrier across the road until we were close upon it. It was a massive affair of saplings with brambles laid on top. I was reining in my horse when a man who suddenly sprang up from the roadside snatched at my bridle. He was a peasant like the one I had seen before, in a frieze coat, legs swathed in linen leg-cloths, and a rifle across his back.

It was the horse that shook the fellow clear. Osman shied violently, all but unseating me, and reared. I gave him his head and put him at the barrier. He checked, then cleared it like an angel. Glancing back I perceived that my assailant had rolled in the road. But he was unslinging his rifle and here was the horseman I had passed thundering up the road.

Laying my face against Osman's neck I galloped furiously for the shelter of the house, now not two hundred yards away.

There was no gate, but only an opening in the hedge. I was through it and in the yard when the rifle behind me cracked. Osman shivered violently, made a half-hearted spring to one side as the rifle cracked again, and gently collapsed under me. That involuntary movement on the horse's part saved my life for I saw the plaster spurt up on the house in a line with where my head would have been.

Poor Osman pitched over dead with the blood flowing from his ear as I freed my feet from the irons. Then I perceived that the house door which faced me was slowly opening. I dashed for it and slipped inside. A dark figure stood within. "Quick!" said a low, caressing voice in my ear. I heard the door slam and the crash of a heavy bar.

The next moment Madeleine was in my arms.

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### The house with the blue shutters

I don't know how it happened. We were in one another's arms and I was kissing her eyes, her cheeks, her lustrous black hair where it lay, thickly clustering, about the nape of her firm, white neck. The joy of seeing her there before me, alive and unscathed, was almost unbearable.

She did not put me from her but let me have my way, her face radiant with a sort of breathless wonder. And when I sought her lips she yielded them in sweetly eager surrender. No word was spoken between us at that time, for no word was necessary. Our understanding was complete. It was as though she had been expecting me; and I had the feeling that ever since that tragic night in Brussels, which marked the beginning of our strange acquaintance, it had been written in the stars that we should love one another. So we clung to one another in passionate abandon; for myself, in the unclouded bliss of that brief moment, I lost all sense of time and place.

At length she stirred, smiled up at me. "Then you know...?"

"Everything. About your brother and Grundt. It was Grundt who sent him to Schlitz, wasn't it? And that two hundred pounds was to finance your brother's escape..."

She nodded. "There was no one else to get the money. They wanted two thousand marks apiece, two thousand for the jailer and two thousand for the sergeant of the guard..." She sighed and fondled my hair. "Nothing matters, now that you understand. I was so terribly afraid of you just now. I was in the upper room. For ages I watched you galloping up the valley, never dreaming it could be you. I recognised you only when you pulled up at the barricade..." She smiled dreamily into my eyes. "And then, somehow, I knew that all the time I had been expecting you. When I saw that man raise his rifle, I thought that my life would end, too..." She broke off and added breathlessly, "Tell me, what are you doing here? And how did you know that I was in danger?"

Rather shyly, she had released herself from my embrace and stepped back. Swiftly, I swung about to the door behind me, listening for any movement outside. There were panels of yellow glass on either side of the framework and through one of these I saw the yard, still and deserted and eerily drenched in amber light, and poor Osman's corpse, with legs stiffly extended, lying at the foot of the steps in a lake of blood. The silence, both within the house and without, was oppressive, foreboding. Against it I heard only the incessant tremor of the guns.

I turned round and for the first time surveyed my companion. She was dressed for riding—in her khaki shirt, open at the throat, and her cord breeches she looked like a young boy. She was still wearing her hat, a funny little brown slouch hat, and her riding boots were thickly powdered with the red dust of the valley, as though she had only recently come in. The entrance hall in which we found ourselves was a ghostly, twilight place now that night was approaching, with a ceiling

of beams carved and gaudily painted, such as Orientals delight in, striped hangings grey with dust draped about the two doors that led off it, and, above our heads, a great brass lamp studded with lumps of coloured glass, very cheap and garish. An uncarpeted stair narrow and rickety, mounted straight up to a little landing on the floor above.

With a backward jerk of my head I asked, "Who are these men?"

"Bulgarian komitajis," she replied, "and the arch-enemies of all us Serbians. There are many of them in the district. I came home an hour ago and soon afterwards, from a window, saw them skulking in the yard. One was the man that fired at you; the other I saw a few minutes later riding off at full speed in the direction of Egri Palanka..."

I had heard tales of the Bulgarian, komitajis, their ferocity, their fiendish cruelty. Fit allies for Grundt, I reflected.

"I know," I said. "He was at the hammam there. Evidently he rode in to let Grundt know that you were back..."

"Grundt?" She started from me, her hands pressed to her face.

For greater ease in riding I had stuffed the cripple's monstrous boot in my jacket pocket. Now I drew it forth. "You'll have to be told sooner or later, my dear. Grundt's at Egri Palanka. And here's his trade mark to prove it!" And I put the boot down on a chest that stood there.

She shrank away. "Grundt!" she said again. Then, abruptly, she sat down on the chest. "So?" she murmured. "Now I understand about those men..."

"Grundt arrived at the bath while I was there," I explained. "I stole his boot to delay him. Without it he can scarcely walk. But if I know anything of the ruffian, that won't stop him. He's half-way here by this. My dear, we haven't a minute to lose..."

She shook her head. "For what?"

"Why, to put you in safety, of course. I'm going to take you to First Army Headquarters. What about horses? Have you more than one?"

"There are no horses here," she rejoined quietly. "When I have to ride out to the front, an orderly brings me a mount from the village. But all that has no importance now. We can't leave this house..."

"We can go on foot. I'll undertake to rustle up some kind of conveyance once we reach the village. And if it's that bird at the barricade that's on your mind, I've got a gun..."

"You don't understand," she said resignedly. "The house is surrounded..."

I gazed at her in concern. "Surrounded? Are you sure of this?"

She stood up. "Come with me!" She moved across the hall and ushered me into the front room. With the shutters closed, semi-darkness reigned. But Madeleine touched a match to a candle and, picking up some small object that lay there, handed it to me. "Do you know what that is?"

I know a spent bullet when I see one, and so I told her. She pointed to a deep graze high up in the wall. "Now open the shutter," she bade me, "but be careful not to show yourself. You understand?"

I nodded and went to the window.

"Ph-tt!" A bullet kicked a splinter out of the woodwork beside my ear, and "Ping!", a second rang a bell-like note on the heavy iron window bars. The two reports, almost simultaneous, echoed back clamourously from the mountain. I stepped back hastily and pulled the shutter to.

"I thought at first that they were planning to kidnap me," Madeleine said. "As I was all alone in the house and it was still light, I thought I would go down and sleep at the ambulance. But when I opened the front door I saw this man who

attacked you building a barrier across the road. So I went to the back, intending to take a path I know of across the mountain. But the moment I appeared I was fired at from two directions—I saw one man peering out from behind a boulder. These *komitajis* are dead shots. If their bullets flew wide, as these did, I knew it was intentional—it was to warn me. I opened a shutter here and another bullet came ... well, you have seen for yourself.."

"Wait there," I bade her, and darted from the room. "My dear, be careful!" her cry of alarm rang after me. She followed me out and remained standing in the doorway while I went into the back room, shuttered like the other. I tried a window at the side, and a shot rang out; again at the kitchen window I made the test and a bullet spurted plaster over my sleeve. There was no doubt about it. We were trapped.

Slowly I returned to the hall. "Well?" she questioned.

"You were right," I told her, "But we've got to do something. We can't sit here quietly and wait for Grundt to arrive..."

"My dear," she said gently, "there's no alternative: At daylight a car will come as usual to take me to the hospital. Until then..."

"You mean, if we can hold out until morning we shall be safe?"

She bowed her head.

"Then we must hold out," I told her.

"I have a pistol," she said, "and so have you. If needs be, we shall know how to defend ourselves..."

"Yes," said I, "but not here..." I was examining the front door. "That door is stout enough. But an axe will make short work of it. Didn't you say that the balcony upstairs commands a view of the road along the valley? At least from there we shall see him coming. How are you off for ammunition?"

"I've none except what's in my pistol—seven cartridges, I think..."

"I've a box of fifty cartridges," I said. "But they're in my saddle-bags..." My look consulted her. "I'll not feel happy in my mind unless I have them..."

"You're not going out there?" she whispered, affrighted, for I had laid my hand on the door.

"I can reach those saddle-bags from the porch," I replied in a low voice. "As long as I don't leave the porch I ought to be under cover. Besides, the horse should help to screen me. Keep back now!" And noiselessly lifting the cross-piece, I let the door swing inward under its own weight.

A segment of the yard, all rosy in the afterglow, came into view. The dead horse's head rested on the bottom steps, the saddle-bags just beyond it. I was about to move forward when my eye caught a movement behind the hedge. God, they were in the yard! I had just time to thrust the door shut with my foot and, grasping Madeleine by the waist, to pull her down beside me on the floor. A shower of glass descended upon us, its tinkle merging with the crash of the shot. The bullet had gone through the door and shattered the lamp.

"That settles it," said I, and flattening myself against the wall, I replaced the cross-bar. "It's a siege, then. This leaves us with fourteen cartridges between us. Is there any food in the house? I ask because I've had nothing to eat since breakfast. My lunch is out there in the saddle-bags..."

"Wait," she told me. "There is food in the kitchen. And a Primus stove upstairs in my room. I'll make you some coffee..." She disappeared through the door at the end of the hall.

What was keeping Grundt? I wondered when she had gone. Presumably he still had his car. Even deprived of his boot, he should have been here before this. As the boot came into my mind I saw it standing there on the chest where I



had put it down. I thrust it back in my jacket pocket. It would be a curious souvenir of a curious adventure—if I lived to tell the tale. The brooding silence was getting on my nerves. Was Clubfoot waiting until darkness should promise him and his band of cut-throats complete immunity from interference? It looked like it. It was a quarter past eight. In another three-quarters of an hour, I judged, the last of the light would be gone. And then...

There was the chink of crockery, and I saw Madeleine approaching with a loaded tray—a flat Serbian loaf, butter, goat's milk cheese, a tin of bully beef. She refused to let me relieve her of her burden, but led the way upstairs.

She had turned the former harem into her sleeping quarters, and with Serbian rugs and draperies done her best to make the bare and draughty room habitable. At one end was the broad dais running from wall to wall that is found in every Turkish house, now with the aid of army blankets and a few bright cushions converted into a divan. Her narrow camp-bed stood against the wall. There was a Primus on a box, a couple of portable camp chairs and various empty packing-cases to serve as seats or tables at discretion. The cool air of evening entered through the two unglazed windows, and the arched opening between that gave on the screened loggia.

I stepped out. There were little traps in the mashrabiyyeh; but it was not necessary to open them—through the wooden grill I could see the river-bed winding away in the dusk towards the clustered roofs of Egri Palanka where, here and there, a light was beginning to twinkle. The road was empty; not a human being was in sight. Even the barrier seemed to be unguarded, though I felt certain that its sentinel was lurking somewhere not far away. With some disquietude I noticed that the entrance yard, being on the other side of the house, could not be seen from the balcony.

Side by side on the divan we supped together, while slowly the darkness deepened outside. As we ate, Madeleine made me narrate the circumstances which had brought me to Egri Palanka. I told her of Alfred Wahlstedter's letter and of the fate that had befallen him. "Grundt must have got rid of the box in Vienna," I concluded. "I take it we've seen the last of it. And that reminds me," I went on; "there's a question I want to ask you. Only I don't know how to put it without seeming to doubt you. It's about Forrest..."

"Whether he was my lover—isn't that it?" She smiled rather wistfully. "With a woman like me, one man or another, what difference does it make? But I told you the truth. Forrest never even tried to kiss me. He wasn't that sort of man..."

"He didn't kiss you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why so surprised? There is such a thing as platonic friendship, you know..."

"But, Madeleine, his last words before he died were 'My kiss remains.' What language did you speak together?"

"English..."

"Well, he said this in French—'*Mon baiser reste.*' I naturally assumed he was thinking of you..."

"I shouldn't lie to you," she declared earnestly. "If Forest spoke these words, he must have been delirious. In any case, they couldn't possibly have had any reference to me. Why, we were just good friends together, nothing more..." She stopped, staring fixedly before her. "It was that brave man's death which determined me to break with Grundt," she added tersely.

I slipped my arm about her. "Tell me," I said,

"When I look back over my life I seem to have had two separate existences," she answered. "For the first twenty-four years of my life nothing exciting happened to me. I was born in Belgrade, but my mother died when I was only eight, and my father sent me to the Ursuline sisters in Vienna to be educated. Then, one holiday, I met Dmitri Gregorovitch. He was a captain in the army and a protégé and political associate of my father's. I was only sixteen and he was twenty years older than I, but my father wished me to marry him, and I obeyed. I wasn't in love with him, of course, but he was a charming man and always kind to me, and for the next eight years I lived quite happily as an officer's wife in a small Serbian provincial town—my husband was on the Staff at Nish. And then the evil destiny struck that has pursued me ever since..."

I drew her more closely to me. But she remained impassive.

"My father and Dmitri belonged to a secret society—they call it the Black Hand. There was a plot to overthrow the Karageorgevitch dynasty. My father was to raise the troops in Belgrade while Dmitri organised the revolt at Nish. But the plan became known. Loyalist officers went to my father's house at night and killed him with their swords and, on hearing the news, my husband shot himself. I was warned to flee without delay, and some friends put me on the train for Vienna where Peter, who was only twenty, was a student at the University..."

She broke off to listen, for there was a sound outside. But it was only a flock of rooks cawing lustily, as high above the river they winged their way home.

"I had very little money, for they had confiscated all our property," she resumed. "For months Peter and I starved in Vienna. Then I got work on the stage. I had learnt the dances of our gipsies, and I secured an engagement as a specialty number with a travelling troupe. We toured all over Austria-Hungary and Germany. Peter was the only relation I had, and I used to send him money so that he could go on with his studies—he was reading for the Bar. Then one day in Silesia, at a little town called Liegnitz, our manager bolted and left us high and dry. It was there I met von Altmann. He was a Prussian officer, a Guardsman—the Guards Corps was on manoeuvres in Silesia. He made a dead set at me; he was well-bred, dashing, and he seemed to have plenty of money, while I was absolutely destitute. I was in debt all over the town, and Peter kept writing to me for money. And so I gave up the struggle and let Guido von Altmann take an apartment for me in Berlin..."

"You needn't go into all that again," I interrupted. "Roth told me everything—about his duel with Altmann and his disgrace..."

"Guido von Altmann was a drunkard," she said tensely. "And when he had been drinking he was like a wild beast. I lived with him for three months, but after that I could stand it no longer. Anybody could have taken me away from him. I never cared anything about Hans, although I knew he ruined himself for me. And when afterwards at Konigsberg I discovered that he was hunting down my own brother..." Her voice broke.

"Oh, my dear," I soothed her.

"I never knew until then," she went on, "that Peter was in the Serbian Secret Service. The Black Hand had got in touch with him. He has a marvellous talent for languages, and some time last summer he got himself engaged as a gardener at Konopisht, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand's estate in Bohemia, where the rose gardens are famous. He was there when, in October, the Kaiser arrived on a secret visit to the Archduke. Grundt was with the Emperor, and discovered Peter, who fled into Saxony and thence into Poland, where Hans, instructed by Grundt, I suppose, picked up his trail. Hans never knew that Peter was my brother, for I had kept my Serbian connection a secret—on the stage I called myself Madeleine Stafford. But Grundt discovered it—they found letters of mine when they searched Peter's lodgings in Vienna. I went to Berlin on leaving Hans, and I was living in a single room there when Grundt called on me. I was distracted with anxiety about Peter, who seemed to have completely disappeared. Grundt told me that Peter was interned at Schlatz, but that nothing would happen to him as long as I was sensible and did as I was told. Then Grundt unfolded his plan. I was to undertake secret missions for him from time to time. At first I refused, for my father had brought me up to regard the Germans as Serbia's mortal foe. But then Grundt explained that under military law Peter was liable to be shot without trial..."

I shook my head. "Bluff, my dear..."

"Nevertheless," she answered, "he had been before no tribunal. No one outside the fortress, except Grundt, knew that he was at Schlatz. You know as well as I do that, in these circumstances, political prisoners have a habit of committing suicide in prison, as it is called..."

I nodded. I could not gainsay her. "I was helpless," she said, "and so I agreed to work for Grundt. It was the Forrest case that opened my eyes. I was horrified, I felt debased, humiliated. And when I discovered that I was forced to act as a decoy for you..." She broke off, her face aflame.

"For some weeks," she said, "Peter had been smuggling out letters to me through a man, a Jewish jeweller called Bernstein, at Breslau. All his letters were full of plans of escape. Then, while I was at Amsterdam, he wrote and said that for four thousand marks—that's two hundred pounds in your money—it could be fixed. Grundt gave me board and lodging and paid my dress bills, but very rarely any money, and I had no idea how I could raise this sum for Peter until a letter came from Hans. I had run into him by chance some weeks before at the Friedrichstrasse station in Berlin, and as it happened, a day or two later, from something I overheard Grundt say on the telephone, I discovered that Hans was working for him in England. It was Hans or my little brother and—well, you know the decision I made..."

The rest of the story was soon told. The same afternoon on which I had brought the two hundred pounds to the café at Amsterdam, she had telegraphed the money to Bernstein at Breslau. Next day the wire had arrived announcing that Peter was free, and that she was to join him at Bale. Within the hour she was on her way.

"And now that's told," said I when she had done, "let's forget it. We'll see this thing through together, sweetheart, and then you're coming back with me to England..."

On that abruptly she freed herself from my arms and, standing up, went to the loggia door. I joined her there and during a full moment's silence, side by side, we looked forth along the silent valley. The darkness was almost complete. Only in the western sky the light yet lingered. Here and there a star trembled. "Madeleine," I said, "when we've put all this behind us, I want you to marry me..."

She glanced up at me with her bright, affectionate smile. But she shook her head. "No, my dear," she answered rather sadly. "I wouldn't do you this wrong. I've been tossed like a ball from hand to hand; I'm no fit wife for an honourable Englishman like you..."

"Honourable Englishman be damned!" I told her heartily. "I'm only a man like the rest, dearest, and you're the only woman I've ever met that I wanted to marry..." And I took her in my arms.

This time she did not resist. "All the same," she said with a secretive smile, "I shall not marry you..."

"You couldn't love me—is that what you mean?" I asked miserably.

The coolness of her hand on my face thrilled me as she gently stroked my forehead. "On the contrary," she said in a low voice, "I love you very tenderly. I loved you before I suspected it myself. Only to-night, when I saw that man raise his rifle to take aim at you did I know how much. But, *chéri*, it is impossible. I am ill-fated. I should bring you no luck..."

"Even if that's true, which it isn't," I gave her back, "I'm willing to risk it..."

She shook her head sadly. "I know what I know..." Taking me by the arm, she drew me out upon the balcony. "I want you to remember this view. When in the future you see water shining under the stars, I'd like you to think of me..." Suddenly she was clinging to me, her face buried in my coat. "Hold me tightly, oh *mon bien aimé*," she whispered, "and then I shall not be so afraid!"

I caught her to me and lifted her face to mine. Her eyes were wet. "I'll take care of you," I said. "There's nothing to be frightened of..." But even as I spoke I heard a faint humming sound mounting from the end of the valley.

She rested in my arms, gazing up in my face. She was smiling now. "We are to spend the night together," she murmured caressingly, "and I don't even know your little name..."

"Philip," I told her.

"Philip!" Daintily she seemed to savour the name. Then drawing my face down to hers, she kissed me on the lips.

Of a sudden that throbbing hum from the road below was loud in the room. Gently Madeleine slipped out of my arms and crept to the wooden screen. I followed after.

Two long beams of light cleft, trembling, the obscurity of the river-bed. It was a car.

### The assault

A dark mass was visible above the line of the barricade—an open car with two blurred figures in the front seat. Black shapes moved to and fro in the reflected glow of the headlights, and there was the hollow clatter of timber as the tree-trunks were hauled off the road. Then the car slid slowly forward, bouncing on the rough track, its lights picking out the stones with which its path was strewn. It swung out of sight round the corner of the house, and the next moment the throb of the engine ceased.

We had not moved from the loggia, Madeleine and I, when the front door below was loudly rapped. Her small hand clutched mine. "Don't go..." she whispered.

"What does it matter?" I told her in the same tone. "He knows we're here..." I was looking about me. "That stair leading down to the hall, only one man can mount at a time. We can hold it if we barricade the landing..."

The knocking was repeated. A raucous, guttural voice called: "Clavering! Hey, Clavering!"

"Help me cart all these boxes out," I bade Madeleine. "Your bed, too, and those cushions. Have you got your gun?" She ran swiftly to the bed and drew it from under the pillow. "That's the idea. Now lend me a hand with the bed. It'll do as a foundation..."

We bore the bed out on the landing. Grundt was shouting again, above a fusillade of knocks. "Clavering, I know you're inside," he roared in German. "Open the door! I want to talk to you..."

I stooped to Madeleine's ear. "Go on building! I'm going to parley with him..."

"Don't go down!" she implored. "They might shoot through the door..."

I nodded and, squeezing past the barrier, descended a few steps. As I went I drew my pistol, slipping back the safety catch.

A volley of savage blows rained upon the door. By the sound I judged that they were beating upon it with the butt end of a rifle. The clamour ceased for an instant and Clubfoot's raven croak, half suffocated with fury, rang out: "Open or I'll break down the door, *zum Teufel!* Open, do you hear me?"

A reckless mood took possession of me. The thought of what Madeleine had suffered at the hands of this brute enraged me, while the mental picture of the giant cripple hobbling painfully about in borrowed boots filled me with malicious, if unsportsmanlike, glee. Keeping myself well out of range, on the upper steps of the flight, I cried blandly: "Who's there?"

Instantly came the answer back: "It's I, Dr. Grundt! Open the door, *verflucht!*" By the closeness of his voice, I guessed that he was on the porch.

"Who?" I repeated innocently.

"It's Dr. Grundt. You heard me..."

"Not Herr Doktor Grundt, of the Berlin *Tagespost*?" I queried facetiously.

"Open the door! I have to speak with you!" His mighty fist hammered at the panel.

"Then say what you have to say through the door," I told him.

"I'm going to speak to you in person, Clavering," he ground out through his teeth. "Do you mean to open or do I break down the door? Answer me, yes or no..."

"The answer is, no. It's after office hours," I rejoined ribaldry. "Call round in the morning. Any time after ten..."

"Tell that man to bring the axe," I heard Clubfoot say. I glanced over my shoulder. In the grey light that fell through the fanlight over the door I caught Madeleine's eye as she stacked the boxes up. Already the barricade had risen to a good four feet—I noticed she had left a gap for my return. I grinned at her, just to keep her courage up, at the same time motioning to her to take cover. She gave me a wistful, brave smile. But she remained erect and went on stuffing the boxes with her gay cushions.

"Listen to me, Grundt," I called out, "I've got a gun. Stand away from that door or I fire..." Another voice, rasping out an order in Serbian, cut across my words. With a splintering crash the axe fell. Aiming at the centre of the door I pressed the trigger of the automatic. The report in that confined space was terrific. I heard a shout of alarm outside, scurrying footsteps...

I was prepared for an answering shot, but not for the rain of bullets that followed. Crouched there on the top step, plaster, splinters of wood and broken glass descended upon me. With loud fracas the lamp, its chain severed, landed in fragments on the floor. As I cowered there, my hands protecting my head, the assault on the door recommenced. Steadying my hand on my knee, I fired again—it was against my better judgment, for it left us with but twelve cartridges and I had no visible target—and another volley rattled about me.

"Philip!" Madeleine's agonised whisper rustled in my ear. I turned my head: she was leaning through the gap in the barricade. "I'm all right." I smiled at her through the drifting plaster dust that made my eyes smart. "For God's sake, get down!" I glanced down at the door again. It trembled to fresh blows. Now there was the glint of steel as the axe was withdrawn through a jagged rent in a panel.

I held my fire until I saw a sinewy, sunburnt forearm slither through the opening. My automatic spat once, there was a gasping shriek, and the hand disappeared. I waited for the inevitable retaliation, and when the volley had spent itself, scrambled back, in a deluge of falling debris, behind the barricade. Madeleine was there unhurt, her face rather pale, her dark eyes shining. Between us we pulled the last of the packing-cases into the gap.

"You're not wounded?" her lips formed. I shook my head. I was craning my ear toward a confused medley of muttering voices, of rustling footsteps, which was audible outside. "What are the chances of relief to-night from the village?" I said to Madeleine.

"There are only some territorial guards there, old men, mostly. We can't count on them..."

"But they must have heard the firing," I expostulated. "Won't somebody come out to investigate, at least?"

She shook her head. "The whole countryside is in a turmoil. Every night, almost, there is shooting in the mountains. People know better than to leave their villages after dark..."

It seemed to me I heard a step upon the porch. I snapped my fingers at my companion. "Your gun..." Obediently, she laid it in my hand and I put it on the ground beside me. "Thanks. Now go into the bedroom and stay there," I told her. "And whatever you do, keep out of the range of the windows..."

I durst not take my eye off the door to look at her. But I was aware that she had not budged. "Do as I tell you," I ordered tersely. "I shall be much easier in my mind if I know you're out of danger..."

"No, no," I heard her whisper back, "I stay here with you..."

Without warning a bullet came whistling, the first of a fusillade, under cover of which the axe once more was swung against the door. I fired two shots at random, but still the blows rained down. Then with a tearing, splintering sound the

door burst inward. I had three shots left in my gun and I wanted to husband them. So I waited for my chance. It came when, as the door gave, I had a clear view of a peasant, rifle in hand, silhouetted in the opening.

I fired and he went down. A bullet spat viciously by my ear and I ducked, then fired at a second man who, taking a flying leap through the doorway, landed in the middle of the staircase. He cried "Ah!" shrilly, but kept on. At that moment there was an ear-splitting detonation at my side and the man on the stairs, hands clawing the air, bent over backwards and toppled to the bottom of the flight. I flashed a glance at Madeleine and saw her kneeling beside me, her pistol smoking in her hand. "Good work," I told her. "But take it easy! I'm down to my last cartridge!" By way of answer she thrust the gun into my hand. "You can make better use of it than I," she said. "Give me yours!" And we exchanged weapons.

The man I had hit had disappeared, but Madeleine's *komitaji* lay huddled up where he had dropped. Of a sudden the firing had stopped, our assailants withdrawn out of range—through the wrecked door we could see the yard stretching quiet and undisturbed under the stars. Somewhere out of sight the jabber of excited voices mounted to our ears.

Madeleine's hand found mine, wrung it hard. "We're not out of the wood yet," I said. "But we've given them something to go on with. I wonder where old Clubfoot is skulking..." I suppose, what with one thing and another, I was a bit light-headed, for I remember singing out: "Grundt, you rat, where are you hiding? Come out and show yourself, you old devil!" But there was no reply. And now the voices ceased.

It was so dark outside that I could no longer distinguish Madeleine's features as she knelt beside me. This obscurity was, of course, to our advantage, for we must have been practically invisible from the yard. But the yard itself was now no more than a pool of blackness in which I found it difficult to discern any movement. And so it happened that a *komitaji* was able to slink up to the side of the porch unobserved and, sliding his rifle round the door jamb, to fire at us almost point-blank.

It was a close call for both Madeleine and me; for the bullet flew between us. I thrust her down with my hand, at the same time raising my head to peer over the barricade. I spotted the rifle thrust through the doorway and was waiting for the marksman to show his head when, with a shock that jarred me from wrist to elbow, my pistol was struck from my hand and sent clattering down the steps. I then perceived that a rifle had opened fire from the other corner of the doorway.

"My gun's gone," I cried to Madeleine. "Give me yours, quick!" But at that very moment a wild-looking figure appeared on the porch and in one vigorous bound dropped sprawling on hands and knees half-way up the flight. Madeleine fired almost simultaneously. With a scream like a wounded hare's the intruder tumbled down the stairway, some heavy object bumping after him. At the bottom he gathered himself up on all fours and, crawling, disappeared into the darkness beyond the porch. I turned to Madeleine—all I could see of her was the whitish blur her face made in the gloom. "There goes our last shot!" I said.

She made no comment but clutched my hand. "Look!" she whispered tensely. "Smoke!" The thin spiral of smoke to which she pointed and the wooden box, lying athwart the stairs, from which it appeared to emanate, the faint hissing sound accompanying it, told me on the instant the whole story. Quick as lightning I flung my arms about Madeleine and dragged her away from the barricade and behind the angle of the wall separating the head of the stair from the landing of the upper floor. I was only just in time. The next second the whole house dipped and rocked to the roar of the explosion. The air hummed to the whizz of flying chips of wood and glass and metal, and the mountain echoed and re-echoed with noise.

I had handled high explosives myself: I knew a box of gun-cotton when I saw one. I remembered reading in the newspapers of bomb outrages committed by *komitajis*. We had had a miraculous escape: if the box of gun-cotton had remained there on the upper part of the stairs, if it had not rolled to the bottom of the flight with the man in his fall, we should have been blown to pieces.

Filled with a sort of beserker rage, I gathered myself up and rushed back to the barricade. It had suffered but little from the explosion, for the full force of the blast, deflected by the steps, had struck mainly upwards. A hole gaped in the stairway, and above my head a great chasm was torn in the roof from which a tangle of beams and plaster dangled

precariously. The air was thick with the sour fumes of explosive and a dense curtain of dust that got into my lungs and made me cough. Through it I was conscious of a yellow, flickering light that illuminated the yard.

As the dust began to settle I was aware that a figure was standing in the shattered doorway. It was Grundt. The smoky glare of torches at his back threw into hard, black relief the rugged mass of the gigantic cripple. In front of the half-circle of wild-looking mountaineers he was planted there, the weight of his body propped on the crutch-handled stick grasped in his left hand, a pistol in his right. Bareheaded, the tops of his khaki trousers stuffed into a pair of knee boots of untanned hide such as the Serbian cavalry wore, a leather belt with holster dangling about his ample waist, he looked like a Boer commandant or a Vigilante of the Western plains.

He was stooped over his stick, his legs bent at the knee as though his feet gave him intolerable pain. In that eerie light, the perspiration glistened on his hairy face and lines of exhaustion, drawn from the tufted nostrils to the corners of the fleshy, cruel mouth, spoke of the physical agony he must have been suffering. Infuriated as I was against him, I could not help feeling a certain grudging admiration for the adamant spirit animating this extraordinary individual.

The torchlight played about me as I appeared at the barricade. Coated with dust and plaster though my face was, Grundt recognised me—I saw how at once he drew his bristling eyebrows down in a threatening scowl. Lurching heavily, he took a pace forward, eager, determined, notwithstanding the obvious effort it cost him to walk. I jerked up my empty pistol and covered him. "Stay where you are, Grundt!" I bade him. I was listening sharply for any sound of Madeleine behind me, praying to God that she would keep out of sight.

"Where's Mrs. Stafford?" said Clubfoot. His voice had an icy, sepulchral ring. There was something finite, doomful about it. It put me in mind of the tone of a judge passing the death sentence or the hollow sound of clods falling in a grave.

"Mrs. Stafford is not here," I told him boldly. "She's gone back to Uskub!"

A tremor passed over him and he shook like an oak caught by a sudden gust of wind. "Don't lie to me," he trumpeted, his voice rising to a hoarse, snarling shriek. "She's in this house. Dead or alive, I mean to see her..."

"You're misinformed," I retorted bluntly. "And now—get out!"

With a wrathful snort he whipped his right hand up. "Don't wave that gun about," I warned him. "I've got you covered..." On which he flung a swift glance over his shoulder at the knot of stolid, silent figures mustered, with rifles at the ready, at his back. A man in breeches and leggings with a square, German head, who stood on the wing of the group, cried out excitedly in German—I took him to be the interpreter. I did not catch what he said but Clubfoot rasped at him, "Wait!" and turned back to me.

For the moment my attention was distracted. It seemed to me that some unwonted sound had suddenly broken in upon the soft stillness of the summer night, a faint rhythmic hammering.

Grundt was addressing me again. "My quarrel's not with you, Clavering," he said in a voice which he tried to make conciliatory. "Be sensible. The house is surrounded, and I've shown you, I think, that I mean business. Let's have no more bloodshed. Send Mrs. Stafford out to me here and I don't care what becomes of you. You can go back to Egri Palanka. I give you my word of honour that you won't be interfered with..."

The noise I had heard was coming nearer. There was no mistake about it now. It was the sound of horses galloping up the valley. My eye caught a movement in the ring of peasants behind Grundt. I saw one slip away round the side of the house.

"Your word of honour, eh?" I rejoined sarcastically. "That, of course, is something I can rely on?"

"Oh, absolutely," Grundt assured me, blinking his eyes rapidly.

The man who had left the group came running back, shouting. Instantly the yard was in a turmoil. The interpreter sprang forward and caught Grundt by the arm. But with an angry snarl Grundt threw him off. To my listening ear now the

clatter of horses' hoofs was unmistakably plain.

"Well," Clubfoot cried and advanced a pace—it brought him across the threshold of the house. "Where is she?"

"Nowhere where you can harm her, Grundt," I shouted exultantly, confident in the belief that help was close at hand. The group in the yard had dispersed in all directions and from beyond the porch resounded the drone of the motor-car starting up. "And now, take yourself out of this! I shall count three and if at the end of that time you're not out of sight I'll blow your ugly head off! Unless, of course, you prefer to answer to the Serbian military authorities for this gross outrage upon a British subject. I'm beginning to count. One..."

He did not wait for me to finish but, with a stifled roar and an upward throw of the wrist, with elbow bent pumped a shot at me. The hideous distortion of his features, the rolling eyes, the foam-flecked lips, must have warned me—at any rate, a fraction of a second before he fired, I ducked. The wind of his bullet ruffled my hair, but in an instant I was up again and with an angry shout flung my empty pistol at him.

It caught him on the side of the head and sent him reeling back against the wreck of the door. His pistol went off again, but this time the shot flew wide. Now figures bulked blackly out of the gloom at his back, grappling with him. Plunging and struggling, they dragged him away. There were shots—the pop-pop-pop of an automatic—and shouts near at hand. We were saved. If I could hold him how ... Unarmed as I was I looked about me for some missile, found that monstrous boot of his in my jacket pocket, hurled it at the cripple as he was hustled across the threshold. It missed him, crashed against the door jamb and hurtled to the ground. As it fell something tinkled on the broken glass that strewed the floor, something that gleamed golden in the vagrant beam of an electric torch that suddenly shone in from the yard.

In an instant I was over the barricade and, leaping that hole in the stairs, was at the bottom. There lay Clubfoot's boot, the deep sole split along one edge. Beside it, spilled from its hiding-place, was Forrest's gold box.

"Madeleine!" I clamoured excitedly as I picked it up. "Madeleine!"

"I'm here," she called back, "behind the barricade!"

Her voice was almost inaudible. With a sudden sense of fear I dashed madly back up the stairs.

## 119

### "It was not to be..."

The end of this rambling yarn of mine approaches. I find it the hardest part to write. Nineteen years have strewn my path with memories both brave and terrible since that night at Egri Palanka. Such abundant solace as a man may derive from unselfish love, tenderness and heavenly understanding has been mine, and to the sweetly gracious giver I am humbly and eternally grateful. But sometimes, when the night is warm and moonless like this and the stars mirror themselves in the glassy surface of the lake, I find my thoughts again with Madeleine and her whispered prayer, as we stood together in the loggia: "When you see water shining under the stars, think of me!" and I know, by the numbness in my heart, that the old wound has never healed.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was behind the barricade, half-sitting, half lying on the ground, her head resting against the wall. It was pitch-dark behind the barrier and I would have passed her by, for I thought she would be on the landing or in the bedroom, but that she called my name. "Madeleine, sweetheart," I cried aghast as I perceived her there, and broke off, choking.

"Grundt..." she panted. "I was just coming through the door ... that last shot of his..." A fit of coughing seized her. I



could feel her eyes on mine in the dark. "I heard horses outside," she said faintly when the paroxysm had passed. "They came out from the village, after all..."

I slipped my arms about her, kneeling by her side. "All danger's past now, dearest. Grundt and the rest of them have gone. And I've got the gold box..." I tried to speak gaily. "Where do you think it was hidden? In old Clubfoot's boot..."

She sighed softly. "Dear Philip, I'm so glad..."

"Relax now," I told her. "I'm going to carry you into the bedroom..." And I lifted her up. She was like a dead weight in my arms. I was afraid, afraid.

I was dimly conscious of a growing hubbub outside—more shots, shouted commands, the neighing of a horse. I paid no heed, but bore Madeleine swiftly into the bedroom and laid her down on the divan. I put a pillow under her head and lighted the candle, set it down on the floor at her side.

One glance at her in the light and I knew that she was going to die. Her eyes had lost their sparkle and she breathed fitfully and in spasms. There was a dark stain on the front of her khaki shirt and when I opened it there was blood between her breasts. I would have left her to fetch water to wash the wound, but her fingers entwined about mine detained me. "Don't leave me," she murmured in a whisper as light as a sigh. "Hold me close, Philip. It's so ... dark!"

I put my arms about her and laid my face, begrimed as it was, against hers. The tears were running down my cheeks. She noticed it and said: "It was not to be, *chéri*. I told you..." Then her eyes closed wearily and she seemed to fall into a doze. Thus, an instant later, Major Dravitch found us as, with two other officers, he burst into the room.

He took in the situation at a glance. Bidding me bring water and a basin he went to the bedside. I stood back while he made his examination. His companions fastened on me. One was the Press officer from whose party I had escaped. He was very irate. It was Major Dravitch who had put them on the right track on their return to camp that evening: they had set out for Egri Palanka at once and found the place in a turmoil over the shooting. The *komitajis* had resisted them at the barricade on the road. A groom had received a bullet through the ankle: two of the *komitajis* were killed. A motor-car was seen to disappear during the shooting. The Deputy Chief of Staff had been highly incensed over my escapade: when he heard about its sequel he would certainly withdraw my Press credentials...

I left him talking. Dravitch had quitted the divan and was lighting a cigarette. On seeing me, he shrugged his shoulders. Looking past him, I saw that the laboured breathing had ceased and that the slight form on the divan was lying still.

## 120

### The box gives up its secret

Time has all but effaced from my mind the record of the succeeding days. With Madeleine's death I seemed to have lost the power of registering emotion. It was as though some part of my consciousness had died with her and what survived dwelt with her only as I had known and loved her in life, radiant with vitality and beauty, proud and unconquerable.

Dry-eyed and unmoved, I listened to the thump of muffled drums as they bore her on a farm-cart to the tiny village church, stood for hours while the thuribles smoked and the deep bassos of the bearded priests chanted their interminable "*Permileui Gospodin*" against the throb of distant gun-fire, let the crash of volley and the wail of bugles over the open grave beat with impunity upon my frozen heart. And I have a vague recollection of a stalwart, sunburnt young Serbian officer who grasped me by the hand and who, they told me, was her brother.

The same with the investigation that followed. Looking back, I have the sensation that the Major Clavering of the British Secret Service who sat closeted for long hours with the Serbian Chief of Intelligence at Uskub was an individual altogether separate from myself. I had become a machine. I was not even conscious at that time of any particular rancour against Grundt. When they informed me that his car had disappeared without trace in the mountains, that it was believed Bulgarian spies had facilitated his flight through the Serbian lines into Bulgaria, I accepted it as the inevitable and unalterable fact. Automatically, and from sheer force of habit, I wired the Chief that I had recovered the box and was returning to London as soon as possible.

It was only when, from the deck of the Channel boat, I saw the white cliffs of Kent loom up through the heat haze that I seemed to stir from my lethargy. I found myself seized with an uncontrollable revulsion against meeting the Chief. I knew I should be expected to tell him the full story; but the thought of reliving the anguish of that night was suddenly intolerable to me. In an agony of indecision, instead of going on to London, I went to an hotel on the Leas. From there, on a sudden instinct, I rang up Garnet.

She was sane and kind and soothing, I reflected. I would tell her the story and give her the box, then go away somewhere where there were no associations with Madeleine to pluck at my heart-strings, try and forget. I had made up my mind to resign from the service; my battery was in India; they would be glad to have me back. The Chief would disapprove—he hated a quitter; but I cared nothing about that.

Garnet arrived soon after nine that evening. I was at the train to meet her. She got out of her carriage some distance from where I was standing, came up to me and took my two hands in hers. Her eyes were deeply troubled. "Philip," she said tremulously, "I scarcely recognised you, you've grown so thin and worn. Oh, my dear, did you have to take it so hard?"

"You've heard about ... about Madeleine, then?"

She nodded. "There was a despatch from the military attaché at Belgrade..." She slipped her arm confidently into mine. "Let's go somewhere where we can talk..." My hand found hers and gripped it. Dear Garnet, she was always such a stand-by...

The Channel was like a mill-pond that night, with a sickle moon that spilled a swathe of gold upon the still waters. For a long time we walked on the cliff in silence. Garnet asked no questions: she did not speak at all. She let the peace of our surroundings, the reassuring touch of her hand upon my arm, do their work. Ever since she was twenty she had been with the Chief and if she had made a success of the job it was not merely because her brain was always abreast of his extraordinary rapid processes of thought but also because her equable temperament was never ruffled by his not infrequent outbursts of irascibility. She had the gift of silent sympathy, and that night on the Leas at Folkestone it dripped like balm upon my wounded heart.

And so it befell that, of a sudden, I was blurting out the whole story, Madeleine's and mine. She let me tell it in my own way, walking at my side, her brown eyes, veiled and wistful, looking straight in front of her. When I had done she still said nothing, but only stretched out her long, cool fingers so that they lay along the back of my hand.

"Garnet," I said desperately, "you're so wise. Tell me what am I going to do?"

"If I knew anything I could do to help you, I'd do it, Philip," she answered in her warm, gentle voice. "But this is one of those things you have to go through alone..."

"I'm done with the service," I told her savagely. "I shall resign to-morrow..."

She nodded quietly. "There I think you're wise..."

I laughed rather bitterly. "I must say I never imagined that you would approve..."

It doesn't matter what she replied. It was, I think, the first compliment she had ever paid me. She said, in effect, that secret service work exacted a certain tough fibre that placed the ultimate objective above any consideration of morality and that this quality was lacking in my composition. "Do you remember I told you I was afraid you'd get hurt?" she

reminded me.

"It's not going to be easy for you in the months to come," she said. "But there's this to bear in mind, Philip. Madeleine was right—marriage between you two would have been an impossibility. When the first bitterness of this tragedy has begun to wear away, think of her settled in a London flat, after the life of excitement to which she was accustomed, with you continually absent on missions, or, if not that, then in an Indian cantonment, a Major's lady, and you'll realise how shrewd her judgment was. As things have fallen out, she has given you a memory of sweetness and light that will last you throughout your life. For remember, Philip, that perfect love comes to very few of us and that to love and be loved in return is a spiritual ecstasy which death can modify but never take away..." Her voice shook a little and she stopped. "It's easy to talk," she went on tremulously, "but, oh, my dear, I've no words to tell you how dreadfully sorry I am for you..." I pressed her hand: I had no need to say anything; and she knew it.

And then I drew out Charles Forrest's gold box and showed it to her. "You told me to get it and there it is!" I said. "Wasn't there some theory of yours..."

Her nod was eloquent of suppressed excitement. "Let's go to the hotel, shall we?"

The hotel was close at hand. It was past eleven o'clock and we had the lounge to ourselves. We sat down at one of the small tables and I produced the box. Garnet took it in her hands, scrutinised it for a moment in silence, then said, as she deposited it on the table before us, "You know the Wallace Collection in London?"

"Yes..."

"You may have forgotten it, but they have a marvellous array of snuff-boxes and bonbonnières. One of them, a gold comfit box not unlike this, I remember quite well—as a matter of fact, I went back to see it the other day. It has a hidden catch and when you press the sides of the box, a little spike shoots out and runs into your hand. The theory is that the spike was poisoned—you sent the box to anybody whom you wanted to put out of the way..." She paused. "You know the history of this box of Forrest's, don't you?"

"Charles did tell us some rigmarole. This Marie Bertesson was a dancer, wasn't she? and the box was presented to her by some Italian..."

"A Venetian nobleman. He had been her lover. What does seventeenth century Venice say to you, Philip?"

I jumped to her meaning at once. "Poison, of course. But I don't see..."

"Wait a minute. Did you ever get a satisfactory explanation of poor Charles Forrest's last words? You know, '*Mon baisier reste!*'..."

"No. I don't think I told you that I questioned Madeleine and she said the phrase could have no reference to her. Because Forrest never kissed her. And that's the truth, Garnet..."

She patted my hand. "I know, I know. Give me a pencil!"

I handed her my pencil and she took a refreshment menu that stood in a stand on the table and wrote on the back in block capitals the name "Marie Bertesson."

Thus:

MARIE BERTESSON

Then at random, as it seemed to me, she started striking individual letters through, placing a number in succession beneath each letter as she did so. When she had finished the printed name looked like this:

MARIE BERTESSON  
1 5 9 6 8 4 11 10 13 14 7 12 2 3

Taking her pencil, she aligned the letters in the order of her arbitrary numeration:

1. M
2. O
3. N
4. B
5. A
6. I
7. S
8. E
9. R
10. R
11. E
12. S
13. T
14. E

and wrote below, "*Mon baiser reste.*"

"An anagram?" I cried. "And Forrest was trying to let us know the secret with his last breath?"

She nodded, colouring up. "I've told you the story backwards. I came across the anagram by accident: I had written down poor Charles's last words and was puzzling my head as to what they could mean. It was the anagram that sent me back to the Wallace Collection to look at that trick box..."

"Then you mean that this box of Forrest's has some secret poisoning device like the other?"

"That's what I was wondering. Look at the menace in that phrase, 'My kiss remains!!' Supposing this Venetian was a rejected lover, abandoned by his French mistress..."

"Gad, Garnet," I exclaimed excitedly, "I believe you've got it. And all this time, unbeknownst to any of us except old Charles, there's been a hidden compartment in the box. Why on earth didn't you tell me before?"

"It seemed so, well, so romantic. And we didn't have the box..."

"Well, aren't you going to try it?" I urged. "Obviously, it works like the other..." And to encourage her, spinning the dart round, I set it on the M and pressed the boss.

I let her slender fingers replace mine. In breathless silence we watched the pointer swing from letter to letter through the anagram. As the arrow rested on the final E and Garnet's hand touched the boss for the last time, a narrow band of gold, not more than a quarter of an inch in depth, noiselessly sprang out from the side of the box along its lower edge.

"Oh, look, a secret compartment!" Garnet cried. I snatched up the box and peered into it. "It's a false bottom all right, but it's empty..." I gave the box a vigorous shake; but nothing dropped out. "I see no spike. If poison was the idea, this compartment must have held a poisoned letter or a poisoned handkerchief. Something flat at any rate, there's so little..."

I broke off. Garnet was pointing silently to a little wad of flimsy paper, folded small, that lay upon the table.

I snatched it up, spread it out. A list of names and addresses in Forrest's neat hand. The force of the spring must have jerked the paper from its hiding-place, unobserved by either of us.

The first entry on the list was Alfred Wahlstedter, Villa Waldesruh', Kiel.

\* \* \* \* \*

I never saw Grundt again. Two months later I sailed for Bombay to rejoin my battery and was with it a year later when, with the Lahore Division, we landed at Marseilles *en route* for First Ypres. I stayed in France until the Cambrai show sent me home for good to find a peace and contentment which I did not believe life could yet hold for me.

Garnet is calling me. She likes me to say good night to our two youngsters before they settle down to sleep.

THE END

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