CHAPTER I

THE MUTTER OF THE STORM

Was the hush that rested over the garden of the old Kommandanten-Haus, that breathless July evening of 1914 which launched me on my strange adventure, symbolical of the lull before the storm which was about to break over Europe? Now that I look back upon that summer I spent at Schlatz I think it was. Personally, I was far too busy absorbing first impressions of life in a pleasant German garrison town to have ears to hear the ominous beat of the war drums, faint at first but growing steadily louder, like the tomtoms of "Emperor Jones." But later, when I was a V.A.D. at Dover and at night the wind from the Channel would awaken us with the throbbing of the guns in France, thinking of those glorious summer days, I would picture myself sleeping peacefully, like almost everybody else, through the growling thunder of the approaching catastrophe.

On this evening, as I remember, dusk had fallen early. The sun had died in a riot of wrathful colour, and beyond the end of the garden the lemon-tinted sky set off in sharp silhouette the high wall of Schlatz Castle and the square tower, still higher, that rose to heaven above it like a stern prayer in stone.

Not a leaf stirred in the rambling and neglected garden which, between two blank grey walls, spread its train of green right up to the piled-up mass of the Castle. The air was warm, and through the open French windows of Dr. von Hentsch's study the heavy fragrance of the roses
mounted to me as I sat at the typewriter. I had the feeling that the garden was holding its breath, waiting, as it were, for something to happen, while the darkness slowly deepened and high up in the air yellow lights began to glimmer in the Castle windows.

I had just switched on the reading-lamp when I heard the postman coming up the gravel path at the side of the house. Nothing much ever happened at Schlatz; and we had so few visitors that it was not hard to identify our different callers by their step. Particularly Franz, our postman. Though Lucy von Hentsch and her husband were kindness itself, I was at times homesick for England. Letters made a great difference to me at Schlatz, even poor Bill's, and I used to catch myself listening for Franz's stolid, military tramp.

At his sonorous sing-song greeting, "Schön gut'n Abend, Fräulein!" I looked up from Lucy's manuscript to see him standing in the open window, his loose blue uniform all flecked with the July dust.

"There was nobody at the front, Fräulein," he said, "so I thought I'd look round at the back, on the chance."

"I didn't hear the bell," I explained. "The Herr Landgerichtsrat and Frau von Hentsch are dining out and the maids have gone to the Fair."

"And the Miss"—"die Miss" was the way I was often addressed—"remains like that all alone in the house?"

Franz was sorting through his bag.

I laughed. "The Miss has plenty to occupy her, Franz," I told him, and pointed to the pile of manuscript beside my machine.

He wagged his head doubtfully.

"The newspapers are full of nothing but robberies and murders," he observed with an air of gloom. "The Kommandanten-Haus is lonely, perched up here on the hill above the town. Frau von Speicher, the late Kom-
mandant's lady, she would never stay in the house by herself—nee, nee! The Fräulein should, at least, keep the windows closed.'

"Nothing's going to happen to me right under the noses of the Castle guards," I answered, and took the letters he handed over—there was one for me, I saw with delight, from my married sister, Dulcie. "You must remember that English girls are used to taking care of themselves, Franz."

"Na und ob!" the postman put in, as who should say, "Now you're talking!" "It's the men in England who need protecting, Fräulein, if the newspapers tell the truth about the goings-on of your friends, die Suffragetten. . . ."

We both laughed. This was a stock joke between Franz and me. Like all Germans I met, he displayed a sort of incredulous interest in the fight for female suffrage in England which loomed so large in the newspapers that summer.

"Anyway the Miss has nothing to fear from the prisoners," the postman resumed, moving his head in the direction of the glowing windows of the Castle. "The Herren Offiziere amuse themselves far too well under arrest to think of escaping. . . ."

I smiled my assent, for the same thought was in my mind. I should explain that Schlatz Castle, once the seat of the Dukedom of Schlätz—Herzog von Schlatz is one of the titles of the Kings of Prussia—was used to lodge officers sentenced to fortress imprisonment for offences against the military code, such as duelling, gambling and the like. These officers were frequently let out on parole, to get their hair cut and so forth, and I used to see them about the town in undress uniform, without their swords. As far as I could gather, their punishment consisted solely in the loss of promotion and the temporary deprivation of their personal liberty. Even Dr. von Hentsch used to
say that the drinking and gambling up at the Schloss were a disgrace.

The garden of the Kommandanten-Haus ran right up to the Castle wall, and sometimes in the evening sounds of revelry would be wafted down to us from the detention quarters. Our house, as its name indicated, was really the official residence of the Castle Commandant. But when Major von Ungemach, who was a bachelor, was given the post, he preferred to occupy a suite in the Schloss and let the picturesque 18th-century house to Dr. von Hentsch, who was transferred about the same time to Schlatz as judge at the local courts.

"The Herren Offiziere won't trouble the gracious Fräulein," Franz added. "I meant tramps and such rabble. With the harvest a lot of bad characters drift into the town." He wagged his head. "One can't blame them. Hunger makes men desperate. As long as you have wage-slaves, you'll have crime, Fräulein. Even in old England, which isn't a police State like this..."

I stared at him in amazement. "Why, Franz," I exclaimed, "you're talking like a Socialist. You'd better not let the Herr Landgerichtsrat hear you...!

His sun-browned face, bony and, in repose, rather severe, broke into a slow smile at the horror in my voice. I really was taken aback. Socialists at home I knew of mainly as shabby men in cloth caps who walked in procession to the Park on Sundays under huge banners. But in Dr. von Hentsch's well-ordered household, where only thoroughly constitutional newspapers like the Kreuz-Zeitung were read, Socialists, or Social Democrats, as he called them, were mentioned only to be denounced as incendiary scoundrels dangerously favoured by parliamentary institutions. It sounded to me odd to hear this civil-spoken rather staid Prussian postman in his trim uniform voicing Socialist doctrines.
"One can say things to an English Miss one wouldn't say to a Prussian official," he observed drily.

I hastened to change the subject, which I felt to be dangerous.

"I'm sure you'd like a glass of beer after your walk," I put in.

"Since the Fräulein is so kind. It's sultry out. I think there's a storm coming up..."

As I ran through the adjoining dining-room, hung with Dr. von Hentsch's collection of antlers, to fetch a bottle of beer from the cooler in the pantry, I heard a tremor of distant thunder go rolling across the garden. With a muttered "Prost, Fräulein!" Franz drained the glass at a draught. As he set it down and wiped his moustache, the lamp on the desk blinked.

"Oh, dear," I exclaimed, "I do hope the light's not going to fail again to-night. I want to finish all this typing before I go to bed...."

"The power-station's overloaded," remarked the postman, adjusting the sling of his bag over his shoulder. "After the entertainment of His Majesty when he visited Schlatz last winter there were no funds available for carrying out the necessary improvements. The town will have to wait for a decent electric light supply until a few more Social Democrats are elected to the council. That time isn't far off now, Fräulein. The struggle is coming to a head..."

"I'm afraid I don't know very much about your German politics, Franz," I interposed evasively.

"This is something bigger than mere politics, Fräulein," he answered in his earnest way. "The struggle is not simply a clash between parties. It's a fight between the army and the people. It can end in only one way. There'll be either a revolution... or a war."

Once more the thunder growled in the darkness without.
At that I laughed outright. "Revolution? War? Now you're talking nonsense, Franz. If you said there was going to be a revolution in England, you'd still be wrong; but you'd be less far from the truth. Of course, if civil war does break out in Ulster, there's no knowing what might happen. But in Germany! People who say things like that don't know when they're well off. You've got a Kaiser to be proud of, a prosperous country, good wages, beautiful cities with splendid theatres and music and open-air beer gardens where you can take your wife and children, all kinds of inexpensive pleasures that working-men in England don't enjoy, I can tell you. As for war, you mustn't believe all this scare rubbish you read in the newspapers. In spite of the Daily Mail, relations between Germany and England were never better than they are to-day."

With a brooding air the postman settled his red-striped cap on his head and hitched up his bag.

"All that may be true," he said. "But if the military want a war, it won't be hard to find a pretext. For the rest, you Engländer have a parliament that is a parliament, that can make and unmake Ministries; not a wretched talking-shop with no real power like our German Reichstag. This is a military State, Fräulein. The civilian doesn't count. He's only fit to be sabred, like the cobbler of Zabern, to teach him his place. There is no liberty for the individual in Prussia. If you were to report to the Post-Direktor what I have said to you this evening I should be flung into the street, into gaol, maybe, my pension would be taken away and my wife and children would starve. But the masses are getting restless under the rule of the sabre. As soon as the military believe that the people are getting out of hand, they'll start a war. And that may be sooner than you think."

I laughed incredulously. "A war? A war with whom?"
For a moment Franz was silent, and in the pause I heard a sudden wind brush shudderingly through the trees outside the window. Behind the jetty mass of the Castle the lightning flickered white across the sky; and louder now, but still reluctant and stertorous, the thunder muttered again.

Then the postman, having glanced cautiously over his shoulder, drew nearer and, dropping his voice, said:

"Strange things are happening up at the barracks. At the mobilisation store they are working day and night. There is talk of a new uniform to be handed out, a grey uniform which has never been seen before. Do you know what that means, Fräulein?"

His serious brown eyes, intelligent and trusting as any dog's, were fixed on my face. His manner was so portentous that I fell back a step. He did not wait for my answer.

"This new uniform is clearly for service in the field," he declared. "In other words, the German Army is preparing to mobilise. And that means..."—he paused, to wrench his mouth into a wry and bitter grimace, then added with measured deliberation—"...that means war!"

I was not greatly impressed. Why, only that afternoon I had been to a Kaffee-Klatsch at Frau Oberleutnant Meyer's! All the young officers of the infantry battalion stationed at Schlatz had been there, including Rudi von Linz, a charming lieutenant who was a particular friend of mine, and we had danced until seven o'clock. And had not Major von Ungemach, the Castle Commandant, telephoned that very evening to ask whether he might call upon me? I had no intention of being alone in the house with the somewhat ardent Major and I had told him I was busy and couldn't see him.

But when an army mobilises surely the officers haven't time to go dancing or calling on their women friends? So I said, rather sarcastically, to Franz: "With whom, pray?"

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He shook his head sagely. "That remains to be seen, Fräulein. I’m no politician. Perhaps over this trouble in the Balkans. The newspapers say that the Austrians intend to demand satisfaction from Servia for the murder of the Archduke."

“And quite right, too!” I cried. “Dr. von Hentsch says the whole thing was planned by the Servian Government. To think of that poor man, and his wife too, being shot down like that in cold blood!”

“Na,” said the postman, heaving up his satchel, “what will be, will be! I wish you good-night, Fräulein!” He glanced into the garden stretched out black and listless in the close air. “I must hurry if I’m to finish my round before the storm breaks.”

“Gute Nacht, Franz,” I replied, and turned back to the desk to read my letter.

At the window he hesitated. “The Fräulein will have the goodness not to repeat what I said to-night? It would get me into serious trouble if it were known.

“Schwanim darüber!”, I told him, or “Wash it out!” as you might say. “I’ve already forgotten it. And I advise you to do the same.”

He smiled whimsically and wagged his head in a gesture expressive of doubt. Then, “Gute Nacht, Miss,” he said. “Angenehme Ruhe!”

“Ebenfalls!” I answered, giving him back the stock reply to his wish that I might sleep well,—German, like Chinese, bristles with ceremonial greetings and no less formal rejoinders—his feet rasped on the path and he was gone. A vivid lightning flash revealed to me a momentary glimpse of the garden with every leaf, as it seemed to me, hanging motionless in the sultry atmosphere. As I picked up Dulcie’s letter, once more the thunder rumbled sullenly out of the night...