CHAPTER XIII

I CALL ON MR. BALE AND RECOGNISE A FAMILIAR OBJECT

I was thunderstruck.

They had followed me after all, then, and, having seen me safely inside the flat, had waited while Grundt was fetched. By this time, doubtless, the house was surrounded. And I, who had deemed myself so clever in eluding the tracker, I should be taken red-handed, with the blue envelope on me: under my frock I could feel the stiff paper against my skin.

The alarm my face must have revealed was nothing to the effect of the announcement on the Prince. I turned to find him staring in terror at the maid, his mouth open, and his flabby cheeks quivering like jelly.

I looked at Floria. At Hedwig’s cry she had whirled about to face the door. Her rage had left her on the instant, and she stood there, with the tears yet glistening on her lashes, tense and watchful. Wariness was in every line of her beautiful body, and her eyes were as sparks’ of green fire. There was something in her pose that made me think of a panther.

She acted promptly. Plucking the girl by the arm across the threshold—I had already stepped back within the room—she shut the door. “Where is he?” she demanded in an imperative whisper.

Hedwig made a frightened movement of her head towards the hall. “In the dining-room!”

“You fool! Did you let him know I was at home?”

“He didn’t give me the chance to speak. When I answered the bell, he stepped inside the hall and said he must see you at once. . . .”
Floria frowned, and looked inquiringly at the Prince. "I'll have to receive him," she said.

In a voice squeaky with fright, the other burst out frantically: "You can't! I forbid it, do you understand? It'll be my ruin, my ruin, do you hear me? You know that I'm absent without leave..."

"And whose fault is that?" was the almost savage retort. "Did I press you to stay? Didn't I implore you to go back to Spandau last night?"

"If he finds me here, I'm finished," the plump youth wailed. He was gibbering. "His Majesty won't overlook it again. You know what he is. I shall be banished to the colonies, to... to Tsingtau, or Swakopmund, or some such ghastly hole. Grundt mustn't find me here. I tell you. Send him away: tell him anything you like; but don't let him in!"

She knit her smooth white brow and shrugged her shoulders. "What's the use? He won't be put off like that. This man knows everything that's going on. If he's here, it means that he's come after you. You'll have to face it, Karlchen. You'd better let me handle him, though..."

Abruptly she ceased, for at that moment we all heard a dull, clumping step outside. Some one with a heavy limp was coming through the hall.

Seeing that they had apparently forgotten all about my existence, I had been edging, as unostentatiously as possible, towards the bedroom door. A little flicker of hope was burning up within me. It seemed impossible that the man with the clubfoot should have come to the flat except in pursuit of me. Yet what if, after all, he was merely in search of the delinquent Prince? In that case my fears were groundless. I had not been shadowed, the house would not be guarded, and if only I could avoid being seen by Grundt, I might yet get away. My idea was to slip
through the bedroom into the hall and make a dart for the front door while Grundt was in the salon. It was a fighting chance; but it was the only chance I had and I meant to take it.

The inexorable footsteps halted. An imploring whisper cut across the pregnant silence. "Floria, you'll have to hide me. . . ."

With a look she silenced the ignoble, gaudy figure: she had taken full command of the situation now. A single, imperative knock fell upon the door. She signed to Hedwig to open.

As the maid went forward, the three of them had their backs to me. The bedroom door was ajar. Noiselessly I stepped within. I had to leave the door as it was: I dared not shut it.

In the bedroom it was cool and dim; for shutters and curtains were yet closed. As I tiptoed over the velvety carpet I was conscious of a four-poster bed looming up, pompous and golden, and a three-part mirror above a dressing-table threw back a glitter of silver and crystal. The door into the hall was half open. I posted myself there and waited; for to reach the front door I must pass the salon, and I would not venture forth until I knew that Grundt was safely in the room with the door shut.

There was the creak of hinges and immediately thereon the patter of a light step in the passage. Hedwig must have retired to her kitchen. Then, so close that it seemed to speak in my ear, I heard the grating voice which, I sometimes fancy, will haunt my memory, like the vestige of an evil dream, until my dying day.

Grundt was speaking from the threshold and his tone was raging. "Herr Gott," he thundered, "am I to be kept kicking my heels in the ante-chamber like a dunning tradesman? The maid has told you, I observe, that I wished to see you immediately. May I ask, then . . . ."
The end of the sentence was smothered by a sort of gruff growl. I guessed that he had recognised Floria's visitor. "Your Highness, my respects!" The compliment was ruthlessly peremptory: the voice snarling and mocking. "Your Highness, has doubtless an adequate explanation for your absence from duty?"

Floria's clear contralto broke in. "Herr Doktor, the Prince is indisposed..."

Grundt did not let her finish. "My remarks were addressed to His Highness," he reproved her icily.

In a whining voice the Prince took up the cue. "Unfortunately, I am far from well. Otherwise, I should have returned to barracks yesterday. But I shall explain everything fully to my Commanding Officer. Count Westfried knows my wretched state of health. Rest assured, Herr Doktor, I shall make it all right with the Colonel..."

Grundt cleared his throat. "I am aware," he rasped out, "that Colonel Westfried's social ambitions, or perhaps I should say, those of the Countess, his wife, lead him to place the most liberal interpretation upon Your Highness's conception of your military duties. I would point out, however, that on this occasion any excuse Your Highness has to offer will have to be made in the first instance to the Minister of the Royal Household."

The Prince's gasp was clearly audible. I could picture the wretched youth collapsing like a pricked balloon. "The Minister of the Royal Household!" he repeated in a dying voice.

"Since you omitted the formality of applying for leave," the relentless indictment proceeded, "your Adjutant, in the absence of the good Count Westfried, who had been summoned to a conference at the War Office, became alarmed and telephoned up to the Colonel. Count Westfried requested the Berlin authorities to investigate discreetly. The matter was referred to the Minister of the
Royal Household, who communicated with me. Doubtless the Supreme War Lord, my Imperial Master, who, as Your Highness knows, is now on his Norwegian cruise, will be suitably edified to receive a telegram informing His Majesty that Prince Karl-Albrecht of Traubheim-Zwickau, absent without leave, has been discovered in his..."—the mocking inflection of the voice was emphasised—"na, let us say, en déshabillé in the boudoir of...""Um Gottes Willen, Grundt," Floria exclaimed earnestly, "you're not going to bring this silly escapade to the Emperor's ears?"

"What I hear," was the sombre retort, "His Majesty also hears! But we waste time. I have other things to think about. Your Highness will have the goodness..."

"I... I throw myself upon your mercy, Herr Doktor," cried the Prince shrill with agitation. "I know the immense influence you wield. In the absence of His Majesty you can hush this thing up, nicht wahr? I am sure you can. Oblige me in this and... and you'll not find me ungrateful, I promise you. We've... we've a very chic decoration at the Court of Traubheim-Zwickau, the Order of the Portcullis. Very distinguished, really..."

"The same, I think, as Count Westfried wears?" Grundt remarked drily.

"Yes, yes. Precisely. A green... a green ribbon. It looks quite delightful across a white shirt-front. I was about to say, lieber Herr Doktor, that if I were to say a word to Papa, I'm sure the Duke would..."

The harsh voice stemmed his excitable gush.

"Old Club-foot, as they call me, is not to be bribed. His Highness, your father, would tell you that. I accept no ribands, Prince. I bestow them."

But it struck me that Grundt's manner had become perceptibly less hostile.

There was a movement in the room. I heard the jingle
of spurs, and Florentia’s voice in a caressing undertone: “No scandal, Grundt, I beg! Leave him to me, and I’ll see that he goes back to his regiment without delay. If you report this business, there’ll be a black mark against me at police headquarters, and we don’t want that, do we? Nicht wahr, you’ll leave this to me?”

There was a pause. Then Grundt, gruffly: “Have it your own way!”

An awful panic seized on me, for she promptly called out: “Karlchen, go and get dressed at once!” Softly I edged round the door and peered into the hall. It was deserted, but the salon door stood wide. If Grundt now took his leave, and the Prince came into the bedroom, I should be trapped. I waited, trembling, on the threshold. I heard the Prince’s ponderous tread as he crossed the drawing-room, and a rasping whisper from Grundt:

“Hurry up and get rid of the fool, Florentia! I want to speak to you about the English spy, Abbott!”

And then, abruptly, the salon door was shut.

I don’t know how I got out of the house.

Desperately curious though I was to hear what Grundt had to tell Florentia about my little Major, I dared not neglect my one chance of escape. I remember reminding myself to close the front door softly after me, but thereafter my recollections are a confused impression of flights of carpeted stairs that never seemed to end, of the enormous relief with which, as I cowered, breathless, in the pink and gold entrance hall, I discovered the Hohenzollern-Allee to be as placid and deserted as when I left it; of a line of taxis on a tiny Platz, where a fountain played in the sunlight. I took the first cab on the rank and bade the driver put me down at the corner of Unter den Linden and the Friedrich-Strasse. From there, as I had ascertained before setting out, from the map in the lobby at Kemper’s, it was a step
to the Tauben-Strasse. I meant to lose no time in passing on the blue envelope to Mr. Joseph Bale.

As we rolled smoothly along over the shining asphalt of new streets, past natty apartment houses, where every balcony blazed with flowers, I took stock of the situation. It was not easy to sort out the facts.

In the first place, why had Grundt come to the flat? In quest of the Prince or of me? By the tone of his voice he had appeared surprised at finding the Prince there: on the other hand, if I were his quarry, why had he not immediately asked for me, ransacked the apartment until he had run me to earth?

The answer, I felt sure, was that Grundt, not knowing where the blue envelope was hidden, did not connect the flat with the missing document. Then what had brought him to the Hohenzollern-Allee? The Schlattz business, I was certain. His remark to Floria showed that. Then what was the woman's rôle in the affair? She and Grundt were obviously old-standing acquaintances: but Abbott was a friend of hers too. A lover, perhaps?

And then, in a revealing flash, something that Abbott had said that night in the study of the Kommandanten-Haus came back to me. He had spoken of having been "let down" by a woman, and of his "ghastly folly." Might not this "ghastly folly" be that, while on a secret mission to Germany, he had become Floria's lover, and that she had betrayed him to Grundt? Was not this the explanation of the Major's strange remark that he had left his honour behind him in Berlin? The hypothesis would account for the hiding-place of the blue envelope, at the same time supplying the link between Grundt and Floria. If Grundt had travelled from Schlattz by car, he could not have arrived in Berlin much before I had. Clearly he had gone straight to the Hohenzollern-Allee to inform his accomplice of what had occurred at Schlattz.
But if Floria had denounced the Englishman, how was it that the blue envelope had not been found? The most superficial search of the apartment would have revealed it. The question defeated me. I only knew that, though Grundt was apparently aware of the existence of this missive, he was, for some reason or other, not looking for it in Floria's flat.

What did the envelope lying in my bosom contain? Grundt knew. Always my thoughts came back to him. Who was this man to whom all paid such deference, the pugnacious little Judge alike with Floria's fatuous prince-ling? What post did he fill, and what was this immense influence of his, of which the Prince had spoken, which Dr. von Hentsch had found himself "unable to withstand"? I remembered Grundt's outburst in the garden when, with rolling eyes and arms dramatically uplifted, he had raved about the powerful enemies he made in following his goal.

To make powerful enemies argues the possession of power. And power was draped like a cloak about this ungainly cripple. He had called the Emperor his master, and I had not spent six months in Germany without perceiving that I was in an absolute monarchy in which the ruler's word was law. What if the contents of the blue envelope concerned the Emperor . . . ?

The thought appalled me. As we plunged into the seething traffic of the Potsdamer Platz, the docile throngs of people, shepherded by the bristling police at the crossings, or pressing along the pavements, gave me a terrified feeling of isolation. These rushing, determined hordes seemed to dwarf me, to scale me down to that dream-like state of negation of which Gerontius speaks. I pictured to myself the man with the clubfoot as the latent force behind the swarming hordes, a resolute, grim figure hovering halfway between heights my puny experience could not soar
to, and depths my imagination could not plumb. I longed for England and my home.

It was a quarter past ten by my watch. I made up my mind that, the envelope handed over, I would abandon my dinner with Rudi and take that noonday train.

Like many of the cross streets of the Friedrich-Strasse, the Tauben-Strasse looked dingy and vaguely disreputable. One or two new office buildings and some plate-glass shop fronts did nothing to obliterate the palpable fact that here the far-famed night-life of Berlin's main artery overflowed. There was an "Art Cabaret," whatever that might be, with a huge electric sign as nakedly hideous as such things are by daylight, a dreadful restaurant made to represent Hänsel and Gretel's Zuckerhäuschen, with a papier mâché witch peeping perpetually out of the window, and a whole flight of mean little cafés, whose dirty lace curtains, discreetly drawn, lent them a faintly scabrous air.

No. 97 was a tall and shabby house half-way along the street, and, as a brass plate on the doorpost below set forth, Mr. Joseph Bale's "Agentur" was situated on the fourth floor. There was no lift, and the staircase, permeated with a faint cooking odour, as of cabbage fried in grease, wound aloft into a black silence broken only by a melancholy hurdy-gurdy which, in the inner courtyard, was grinding out "Donna è mobile."

The door of Mr. Bale's office, marked by an enamel plate bearing his name, stood ajar. I found myself in a long and sunless ante-room, hung with theatre posters, where a handful of people, men and women of all ages, with the rather obvious appearance of stage folk of the humbler sort, stood aimlessly about, or sat on a bench running round the walls, gossiping in undertones. At the far end of the room, besides a rack of hats and coats, a long counter barred the access to a glass door
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bearing the painted inscription: *Herr Direktor Bale. Kein Zutritt.*

I looked around for some one to take in my name. On the other side of the counter lounged a Jewish-looking youth in a shiny blue suit, who was picking his teeth abstractedly, while a fat and florid woman in a picture hat poured what seemed to be a very long and earnest story into his ear. I pushed my way through to the counter, where I came upon a thin and rather dirty-looking young man, with an enormous shock of hair, who clapsed a letter, and a much-painted female with a visiting-card, prancing about, impatiently waiting for the florid woman to end her tale.

I had no time to spare, I realised, if I wanted to catch that train. My experience with Hedwig had taught me something. Propping my parcel and parasol against the counter, I opened my purse and took out a five-mark piece. But I had yet to catch young Israel’s eye: the florid female was still in the full flow of her narrative.

I glanced casually round. There was a poster of little Tich under the clock, I remember, and one of Saharet, the dancer, close by. On the bench next to the door a man in a straw hat was gazing intently at me over the top of a newspaper he was affecting to read. His stare embarrassed me, and I turned my eyes away.

It was then that I remarked, hanging from the rack on the wall, a mustard-coloured overcoat.

CHAPTER XIV
THE CAFÉ ZUR NELKE

There was no mistaking that garment and, in further identification, on the hook above it I recognised the sage-green hat, with its jaunty feather, which my neighbour on the journey to Berlin had sported.