
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 clasped 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.
The owner of the overcoat was nowhere visible in the ante-chamber, and I concluded that he was closeted with Bale. I did not linger to ask myself what he wanted with the Herr Direktor: I just made straight for the door. It seemed to me, as I went out, that the man with the newspaper, who had stared so hard at me before, made some remark in an undertone. But I did not wait to find out whether he was addressing me.

Once outside the office door, however, I ran swiftly downstairs. As I went I thought I heard a step, hurried yet oddly cautious, coming after me. That quiet footfall made me desperate; for I had no plan, only the urgent instinct to shake myself free from this stealthy, relentless pursuit. Now to my horror I realised that the trackers were still at my heels.

The step gained on me, and I had not reached the bottom flight before, looking over my shoulder, I saw a man hurrying down in my wake. Realising at a glance that I could not shake him off, I slowed down, so as not to arouse his suspicions if my fears were groundless, and leaned back against the grimy wall to let him pass. The sad notes of the barrel-organ floated futilely out of the depths of that sombre house. Now it was playing the Old Hundred, and the wheezing melody brought to my mind a sudden, irrelevant memory of Calverley, nimblest of hymsters, and a tranquil Cambridge quad.

My unknown pursuer swung sharply round the bend of the stairs. Below me, at the foot of the last flight, the entrance hall was a funnel of gloom opening at the end into a panel of dazzling sunlight enclosed within the two tall wings of the street door, the one shut, the other folded back against the wall. My heart seemed to miss a beat as I saw how, at the sight of me, that vague figure on the stairs above slackened pace. I recognised the man in the straw hat who had stared at me in Bale's office.
I shrank back against the wall as he stopped before me and, speaking in a sort of breathless undertone, said, "Bale's double-crossed us. I tried to warn you when you came in, but you wouldn't heed me. You seemed to scent it out for yourself, though, didn't you? Gad, you've got a fine flair!" He smiled at me.

I gazed at him in wonder. He spoke in English.

He spoke our language like an Englishman, and an Englishman of breeding at that. But he was pallid and hungry-looking; shabbily dressed, too, like all the others I had seen kicking their heels in Bale's agency: and any Latin race might have claimed his crisp, black hair, dark, rather fiery blue eyes, long-lashed, and straight, proud nose.

His smile was bright and kind, and I liked it. My heart was banging against my ribs, but something about this quiet stranger comforted me immeasurably. It was not merely the thrill of meeting a fellow-countryman in such a dilemma as mine. It was some indefinite, reassuring quality about him, perhaps the self-confident, faintly arrogant timbre of his speaking voice, perhaps a sort of lurking twinkle in the cobalt of his eye.

He took instant charge of the situation. "Come on," he said quickly. "This house ain't healthy for either of us..." He caught my arm, and began to hurry me down the last remaining flight. "I don't believe that any one spotted you upstairs except me," he said, "and I was looking out for you. Lucky for you that you arrived when you did. There's a plain-clothes man with Bale now. Trailing you, of course. Another minute, and he'd have had them all on the qui vive..."

By this we were at the street door, past which streamed the traffic of the Tauben-Strasse. I paused an instant to take breath; my heart was beating so fast. My companion glanced at his watch. "We must have a talk," he observed thoughtfully, "but first I want to take a look
round here. There’s a café next door to this, the first
door on the left on leaving the house, the Café zur Nelke
it’s called. Suppose you pop in there for a moment?
Ask for Fräulein Ottile, and say you’re waiting for Max.
Never mind what it looks like. It’s the only place about
here where we can be sure of not being interrupted. Why,
what’s the matter?"

I had drawn back in horror behind the wing of the door.
At the kerb outside a taxi had drawn up. With infinite
labour a burly figure was getting out backwards. I knew
that vast back, that monstrous boot.

“Der Stelze!” I murmured aghast.

At the words my companion’s eyes snapped, and on the
instant he was all watchfulness. But he never lost his
jaunty air, and even in my terror I remember thinking that
this man must have an iron nerve. “So that’s old Club-
foot, eh?” he remarked, as though to himself. Then I
felt my arm grasped firmly, and I was thrust behind the
wing of the door set back against the wall. I was numb
with fright, and from an immense distance as it seemed to
me, I heard my unknown friend’s sharp whisper: “The
moment the coast is clear nip into the café!” The rapid
patter of his feet along the hall died away.

The upper panel of the door that sheltered me was
fitted with a grille of heavy iron lattice-work covered by
a grimy glass shutter that might be opened, when the
doors were shut, to air the house. The triangular recess
in which, between wall and door, I was squeezed, was
pitch-dark, and for this reason I surmised that while,
through the glass shutter and the lattice beyond it, I com-
manded a view of the entrance hall towards the staircase,
I ran little risk of being seen myself.

Presently, on the other side of my hiding-place, my
straining ears caught the pant of laboured breathing, the
tap of a stick, and the thud of a heavy boot on the flags.
THE CAFÉ ZUR NELKE

Then Grundt emerged into my field of view. The sunshine gleamed on that immense back moulded in the black alpaca jacket, as he lurched painfully forward towards the stairs. Two vague men in bowlers were with him: one passed within a few inches of where I lurked behind the door, and I had an impression of a grim, bloodless face, an enormous red moustache.

I waited until, from my niche behind the door, I had seen the trio disappear round the bend of the stairs. Then I darted out into the street. The next moment I was entering one of the sordid little cafés I had noticed as I walked along from the Friedrich-Strasse.

Lace curtains yellowing on the glass door and the single window, broad and long like a shop front, and, half-way up, hangings of faded red baize to keep out winter draughts, effectually screened the Café zur Nelke from the curiosity of the street. The traffic drummed faintly upon the quiet within. On the walls, above a red plush bench that ran on either side, nymphs, obese and pinkly nude, looking as though they had escaped from the hoardings of a country fair, pelted one another with handfuls of the carnations which gave the café its name.

Small tables spread with white cloths stood in front of the bench. A red stuff curtain, embroidered with yellow arabesques, divided the café into two, and from the other side of the hanging the sound of some one picking out a tune with one finger on a cracked piano was audible. Low of ceiling and airless, the room reeked of dust and stale perfume, cigar-smoke and beer.

There was no one in the place as I entered but a fat woman with a prodigious bust crammed into a high-collared silk blouse, and a mass of very bright yellow hair piled up on her head. On the stroke of the bell that rang as the door opened she rose up to meet me.
Her face was bloated and cruel, and she had the eyes of a cod. With every manifestation of extreme distrust she mustered me. "Sie wünschen?" she said in a beery voice. I asked for Fräulein Ottilie.

"Ottilie!" the woman called, and, still eyeing me suspiciously, returned to her table. Abruptly the piano ceased, and a girl came in from the back room.

She was much younger than the other, but her skin had the same puffy, dead-white texture. Under a mask of paint her face was emaciated and wan. She appeared astonished to see me there.

"I've come to meet Max," I said. "He told me to wait here for him. . . ."

"Max?" She glanced at me quickly. "Max is in the pen."

"In the pen?"

"Na, in Moabit, then. . . ."

"Moabit?"

"D'you mean to say you've never heard of Moabit gaol?"

"I think there's some mistake," I told her. "I've only just left the Max I mean. He was going to meet me here. . . ."

Her eyes, deep-sunk, and oh, so haggard, were drinking in every detail of my appearance.

"There are so many Maxes," she observed reflectively. "What does this one do?"

"I think he's an actor. . . ."

Her face lit up at once. Her smile made me realise how young she really was. "Ach, der!" She giggled. "I thought you meant Blonde Lotte's man. They've put him away for six months." She rubbed her first finger and thumb together and raised them to her nose as though she were taking snuff. "You know . . . ?"

I didn't. I suppose my face showed it, for she added: "Snow-peddling. . . ."
"Snow-peddling?"

"I thought everybody knew what snow was," she remarked contemptuously. "Cocaine, if you like. Smart ladies like you have been here inquiring for him, so naturally I thought ..." She broke off and gave me a challenging look. "So you 're a friend of 'The Count,' was? That 's what the girls call him here, you know. Well, I suppose you 'd better sit down!"

So saying, she dragged the curtain back. A frowsy room, heavy with the reek of cheap perfume and powder, was disclosed. Like the other it was set with small tables, and the electric lights were on, for the window was heavily curtained.

Two girls, painted like my companion, and dressed in the same vaguely provocative style, as we deemed it in those days, very low-cut blouses and black skirts to the knee, were there. One, a little brunette with lively, dark eyes, was playing patience at a table: the other, a big-boned, animal-looking creature, had one massive leg cocked over the other and was darning a hole in her stocking. It was a disarmingly domestic scene; but somehow the place had an unspeakably obscene atmosphere that made my gorge rise.

"A friend of 'The Count's,'" Fräulein Ottile introduced me as she drew up a chair. The other two girls stared at me as though I were a wild beast. The formal bow, however, wherewith they acknowledged the presentation would not have disgraced a vicar's wife. The fat woman bustled in from the front.

"The Fräulein will take a little something while she 's waiting, nicht ?" she said, her dull eyes alight with cupidity. I told her I wanted nothing. Her mouth set like a rat-trap. "It 's the custom of the house," she announced. I said I would have some coffee. "And will not the Fräulein offer something to these ladies as well?" she persisted. I told her to take their orders. Ottile
chose stout: the patience player, whom they addressed as Lenchen, promptly demanded beer: while the girl who was darning her stocking—her name was Kerminedeclared in the most refined manner imaginable that she would “fancy” a little glass of “Porto.” Scratching herself thoughtfully, she explained her preference by expatiating with disingenuous candour on the disadvantages of stout as it affected her digestive processes.

The fat woman brought the drinks and retired to the front room with the bottle of stout she had opened for herself. The three girls plied me with questions about “The Count.” I concealed my ignorance as best I could. I told them he was well, that, as far as I knew, he had not yet found an engagement.

He seemed to be extremely popular with them all. Ottile said he was a “famoser Kerl”; Lenchen, engrossed with her patience, murmured that she adored his “romantic Italian appearance”; while Hermine, sipping her port, declared that he was a “flotten Kavalier,” and free with his money when he had any.

Those three poor creatures displayed the most inordinate interest in my clothes. They fingered the material of my frock, demanding to know what it cost: they cooed their admiration for my silk stockings—from Fifth Avenue, they were, a present from my dear Lucy Varley: they made me take off my hat and show them my hair. Their curiosity left no portion of my attire to the imagination: in short, I felt like a traveller who arrives unexpectedly at a kral in the heart of the African bush.

This sort of thing having lasted for the best part of an hour, I began to wonder what had become of my young man from next door. It was half-past eleven by my watch. Twice already the glasses had been replenished; but now they were empty again, and the fat woman was hovering meaningly about my table.
THE CAFÉ ZUR NELKE

I was feeling seriously alarmed. What could be keeping my unknown friend? I could not remain indefinitely in the café; yet what was I to do? I still had the blue envelope. Abbott had given me the name of the branch of the War Office for which he worked: M.I.5, wasn’t it? There was yet time to collect my suit-case and catch that noonday train, that was, if I dared go back to Kemper’s. But what if the café were watched?

My mind tormented by these questions, I asked for my bill. The fat woman brought it. It was preposterously high, something over sixty marks, more than £3. But I knew it would be useless to dispute the reckoning in a place like that.

And then I discovered that my purse was gone. . . .

It must have been stolen from me in that nondescript throng in Bale’s ante-room, for I remembered putting it back in the pocket of my overcoat after getting out the tip for Bale’s clerk. It was a stunning blow. The purse contained not only all my money, but also my ticket to London. No chance of catching that train now: I had not the price of a ‘bus fare on me; and there was my bill at the hotel to settle.

The realisation made me sick with fear. The fat woman was surveying me in a grim and forbidding silence. I told her I had lost my purse. I seemed to detect a hint of sympathy in Fräulein Otilie’s weary eyes; but the other girls exchanged a malicious glance and sniggered. “So?” remarked the fat woman incredulously, in her beery voice. Imperiously her bloated hand tapped the bill as it lay on the table. “And my money?”

I thought of the Transomes. I should have to ring up Molly. What should I say to explain my presence in this disreputable place?

“Have you the telephone?” I asked.

“Bitte schön. . . .” The woman pushed open a door
at the back of the café, disclosing a passage where there was a wall instrument. While I looked up Molly's number, she stood in the doorway, a silent and implacable sentinel.

A man's voice answered my call in German: a butler, the cold, suave intonation suggested. "The gnädige Frau is away," he said.

This was a facer. I gasped, and asked unsteadily: "Is Herr Transome there?"

"Herr Transome has gone away with the gnädige Frau," came back the smooth answer. "The mother of the gnädige Frau has died suddenly in Switzerland. Who is this speaking, please?"

But I hung up the receiver and turned away. Of what use was it to give my name? If Molly, not expecting me before Friday, had written to Schlatz to put me off, her letter must have arrived after I had left. What on earth was I to do?

I found myself face to face with the fat woman. Her leaden-hued features were clouded with anger. She gripped my arm and shook me. "Na, and what about my bill, my little one?"

"I have no money," I faltered. "My friends are away. If you would let me wait a little until Herr Max comes...?"

She burst into a sort of shrill snort. "That beggarly rumpum! I'll have my money from you, my fine lady, and I'll have it now..." She flung me back against the door, and called stridently down the passage: "Hans!"

A man in his shirt-sleeves, with great ears bulging out from under a cloth cap, appeared instantly, from the end of the corridor. I fell back before him into the café. Some one had dragged the curtain across again, shutting out the heartening bourdon of the adjacent Friedrich-Strasse. I was trapped in that evil, airless room, alone with these painted women and this man who, with narrow
crafty eyes smouldering menace out of a livid and lecherous face, was advancing on me.

"Also," screeched the harridan, arms akimbo, "the young lady runs up a bill for 63 marks, 50 pfennigs, and hasn't the money to pay for it!"

With a lithe and noiseless gait the man came at me. The three girls scattered at his approach. He moved so swiftly that his hand was on my shoulder before I could avoid him.

"No money, was?" He pawed my arm. "But these pretty clothes will fetch something, my dear. . . ."

Hermine cackled shrilly. "You should see her underthings. Fine silk! And she says she can't pay for our drinks! Why don't you strip the haughty slut, Häschen?"

He chuckled. "A good idea! Come and hold her, girls!"

Ottile did not move; but the fat woman and the other two swept down on me in a body.

Then the door-bell clanged, and the young man I was so anxiously expecting came swiftly through the curtain.

CHAPTER XV

NIGEL DRUCE

My new-found friend was not the one to let the grass grow under his feet, as my old Nana used to say. With the same swift presence of mind which had saved me once already that morning, he now grabbed the bully by the collar, swung him round and sent him reeling backwards. Despite my upbringing among men, the sight of violence has always sickened me; but this was done so tranquilly, with a flick of the wrist, as it were, that the hard thud which sounded the contact of the German's head with the wall gave me only a thrill of elation.