CHAPTER II
A FOOTFALL IN THE GARDEN

The postman's gloomy forebodings had left me vaguely restless. Not his talk of war. The activity at the barracks I set down to preparation for manœuvres or the like; for, from the way the young officers grumbled, to me, at any rate, the battalion at Schlitz appeared to be constantly making ready for something, whether it were inspection by an incredibly terrifying military personage, a field day, or night operations. I was thinking of what Franz had said about tramps. The Kommandantenhaus was certainly isolated from the town, and I had read in the German newspapers of ghastly crimes committed in lonely mansions.

But the night was airless, and with the windows closed I felt I should stifte in the stuffy study with its thick red curtains, heavy mahogany furniture, and great green-tiled stove gleaming dully in the corner. I contented myself, therefore, with opening the drawer of the desk in the centre of the room on which my typewriter stood and assuring myself, that the big revolver which Dr. von Hentsch kept, there was in its accustomed place. Leaving the drawer half open, I settled down in my chair beside the lamp to read my sister's letter.

I came across that letter the other day, poor bit of flotsam to survive the deluge which was to sweep so much away. It is mostly about a plan we had made, Dulcie, Jim, her husband, and I, to pass the summer holidays together in the Black Forest. I had been invited to spend the last week of July with some American friends in Berlin where Dulcie and Jim, her husband, were to meet me on the 1st of August. As the von Hentsches were
leaving for their summer holiday at Karlsbad on 24th July, the arrangement just suited.

August, 1914!

As I re-read my sister's letter the other day I felt glad that fate had mercifully veiled the future from our eyes. Neither she who dashed off that cheery scrawl on the pretty, azure-tinted note-paper, nor I who read it in the quiet of Dr. von Hentsch's study on that thundery July evening, with the summer lightning streaking the sky behind Castle Schlatz, could know that almost every date she mentioned was inscrutably marked down to be a milestone of history.

This 31st of July, for instance, when she and Jim, who now sleeps under Kemmel Hill, were to start off from London, was to see a brief cipher flash like a train of fire across two vast Empires and call millions of men to arms: this 1st of August, appointed date for our happy reunion in Berlin, was destined to live through the ages as the day on which, by mobilising against Russia, Germany took the irrevocable step: this 2nd of August, when we were to leave Berlin, was doomed to witness the first blood spilled on French soil by the invader. "Jim has booked our rooms in the Forester's house at Kalkstein for the 4th," Dulcie wrote: the fateful 4th of August, which was to bring the British Empire to its feet to face the challenge.

Dulcie wrote to me every week, adorable letters, a bit of herself. I have always been pals with Dulcie, for we had no brothers and Mother died when we were kids. And, during the greater part of our childhood, Daddy was soldiering in India while we were being brought up at home.

Dulcie is domesticated, not like me, "an adventurous romantic," as Daddy used to call me. Before I went to Schlatz I lived with her and Jim at Purley. When Marie von Hentsch, who was at school with me—by the time I
A FOOTFALL IN THE GARDEN

got to Schlatz she was married and living in America—
proposed me to her mother as private secretary—perhaps
I ought to explain that Frau von Hentsch was Lucy
Varley, the popular American novelist—I was vegetating
in a highly respectable, and abominably dreary, typing
job in the city. Dulcie was all against my going out to
Germany. But then she was all against my doing any-
thing except marry Bill Bradley. She wanted me to
marry Bill and "settle down."

That is precisely what marriage with a thoroughly good-
hearted, dull, dear fellow like Bill would have done for me.
I should have "settled down" like porridge in a plate.
But at twenty-two I didn't want to settle down. On the
contrary, I was mad to be up and doing. I wanted to see
more of life and the world than I could observe from the
windows of the 9.12 from Purley to London Bridge or
from my desk in St. Mary Axe. So, having refused poor
Bill for the umpteenth time, I went to Schlatz.

Darling old Dulcie! She always wrote reams, every-
thing, just as it drifted into her pen, about Jim, and her
babies, and the new car . . . and Bill. Her letter carried
me right out of the tranquil old house with its faint, clean
odour of much scouring blended with the summer scents
of the garden. As I read on, sheet after sheet in her big,
sprawling hand, I forgot all about Franz and his dark fore-
bodings and the lightning flaming behind the Castle and
the thunder growling ever louder overhead.

"Bill came in on Sunday after golf," Dulcie wrote. "His
first question is always: 'How's Olivia?' You really
ought to write to the poor fellow. He looked perfectly miser-
able although he's won the monthly medal with a round of 78.
He says you never answer his letters. He's convinced you've
fallen in love with some incredibly dashing Prussian officer.
Have you? Jim says if you marry a German he'll call him
out and shoot him. Tell me about your conquests when you
write. "Don’t the German men rave about your blue eyes and black hair? They must be sick of blondes. I saw Mabel Fordwych at Murray’s the other night. She’s got a studio in Chelsea and has cut her hair short. She looked most eccentric and mannish. Everybody was staring at her. Great excitement here about the suffragettes. Did you see they tried to blow up the Abbey? Jim took me up to town for our wedding anniversary on Thursday. We dined at the Troc and went on afterwards to see the new play at the Criterion. At least, it’s not a new play but an old one revived. Do you know it? It is called ‘A Scrap of Paper.’ Stupid title but quite a thrilling story. Some of the crinolines were rather sweet. I suppose you can’t get any decent frocks out there. They say we’re all going to show our ankles next winter. The creature next door won’t like that, will she? You and I will be all right, anyway."

The sudden loud swish of water plucked me away from Dulcie’s gossip. Outside the rain was coming down in a solid sheet. The garden rang with splashings and gurglings, and the clean savour of wet leaves and damp earth was wafted into the room.

Frau von Hentsch had lived long enough in Germany to be as fussy as any German Hausfrau about her belongings. I sprang to the window to close it; for the rain was spurt- ing on the carpet. As I rose from the desk my eye fell on the clock. The hands marked a quarter to ten.

As I reached the window I thought I heard a soft foot- fall scrape the gravel outside. It was too early for the Hentsches or the maids to be back; and anyway the former would come in by the front door where the car put them down, while the servants would use the kitchen entrance.

Rather startled, I paused and called out: "Wer ist’s?" But the footsteps had abruptly ceased and only the hissing crash of the downpour answered me. The garden was
inky black and I could see nothing beyond the silvery shafts of the rain, a couple of yards from the window, where the light from the room shone out into the night.

Suddenly the lightning flamed in a flash so broad and dazzling as to light up and hold, for the fraction of a second, in brilliant illumination the whole scene before me, from the little bushes, writhing and bending under the lashing rain outside the window, to the gilded fan on the summit of the Castle tower. On the edge of the turf, not a dozen yards from the window, I saw a man cowering in the shelter of a bush.

I was terribly frightened but I did not lose my presence of mind. As all went black once more, I seized the two doors of the window to shut them. But at that moment came a clap of thunder, so unheralded, so ear-splitting, that I staggered back into the room.

And then, without warning, the lamp at the desk went out and the study was plunged in darkness. Once more I heard that stealthy footfall on the path. There was a hollow sound as the wings of the window fell back again. Against the patch of semi-obscenity they framed, I saw a dark form slip into the room.

CHAPTER III

THE GUN

Before I could move or cry out, a quiet voice spoke in English out of the blackness:

"It's all right," it said. "Don't be scared!"

It was a man's voice, well-bred, a little breathless and, as it seemed to me, a trifle high-pitched from excitement. Still, it was an English voice—and I had not heard an English voice in the six months I had been at Schlatz. Somehow, the familiar timbre seemed to steady my nerves.