CHAPTER XXII

HEDWIG

OUTSIDE a woman’s voice was suddenly upraised in terror. “Nein, nein, ich geh’ nicht. . . .” I heard her scream, there was the sound of a scuffle, and a slight, girlish figure was almost flung into the room.

It was Hedwig. She was still wearing the neat cap and apron, the coquettish black skirt, in which I had seen her that morning: obviously, Clubfoot’s emissary had not even given her time to put on a hat. Inside the study, she brought up short, her small hands clasped tightly in front of her, the pupils of her china-blue eyes distended with fear and brimming over with tears. She did not seem to notice me at first: she was staring fixedly at Clubfoot who, with one hand laid across his great gash of a mouth, surveyed her silently over the top of the desk.

“Herr Doktor,” she began to wail forthwith, “I’ve done nothing. I’ve nothing to tell you. . . .” She wrung her hands in anguish. “They frightened me so, dragging me out like that in the middle of the night. Please, Herr Doktor . . .” she held out her hands to him—“ach, please let me go home now!”

As she spoke she took a pace forward and caught sight of me where I sat in the chair beside the desk. On the instant her features became rigid in a dreadful expression of horror, her eyes and her mouth opened wide, and her hands went up to her face, the fingers clawing her cheeks. She rocked on her feet.

“Look out,” spoke Grundt casually. “She’s going to faint!” But Hansemann had forestalled the warning. He had sprung forward and caught the girl in his arms as she toppled backwards.

I jumped up to go to her, but, with a brusque gesture
of the hand, Clubfoot stopped me. "Stay where you are!" he snarled. Hansemann had deposited the maid in a chair, and now crossed to the desk to fetch the carafe of water that stood there. "Dowse her well!" Grundt bade the man. "Nothing like cold water for the vapours. And here,"—he pulled open a drawer and handed the man a flask—"give her a dram of this!"

"You must let me go to her!" I cried indignantly. But Grundt's vast arm barred the way. "Sit still, you! Our good Hansemann is as tender as a young mother. He knows how to handle frightened folk. He used to be one of the State headsman's aides..." He laughed noisely. "See, the little lady's coming round famously. . . . Bring her over here, mein Junger! Chair, and all, that's the style!"

Dripping with water, gasping and pallid, Hedwig lay back in the chair which Hansemann gathered up in his muscular arms and set down beside the desk. Presently she opened her eyes. The man held out to her a glass with brandy. But she waved it aside. "I feel so bad," she whimpered wearily. "I want to go home."

But Grundt leaned forward in his chair and thrust his beetle jowl in her face.

"Not until you've answered my questions." He moved his head in my direction. "You know this lady, I think?"

The maid shrank back in her chair. "Nein, nein..."

"You've seen her before! Where was it?"

But Hedwig covered up her face with her hands. "Nein, nein! I don't know her. Please let me go home..."

"Not before you've told the truth..."

The girl's hands fell away. Her face was ghastly. 

"To-morrow! I will tell you anything I can to-morrow. But now, please..." Her head drooped suddenly.

"This is inhuman!" I burst out. "Can't you see the girl's half dead with fright?" But as again I tried to
rise that enormous arm shot out and pinned me, like a bar of iron, in my chair.

"Answer me, you!" Clubfoot's free hand went out and his broad fingers wrapped themselves about the slim young throat. He shook the swooning girl brutally. "The truth, you lying slut!" He flesched his teeth and ground them together, while little beads of foam bubbled at the corners of his mouth. "I'll knock sense into you, if I have to bang your head against the wall," he roared, his features distorted with rage. "You know this smooth-tongued English jade: I saw it in your face, the moment you clapped eyes on her. Where did you meet her? Himmelfreuzsakrament, will you answer me?"

He moved his arm to reach for the carafe, and I, seizing my opportunity, slipped out of my chair and placed myself between him and his victim. "This sort of thing has gone on long enough," I cried, my fear for the moment forgotten in the blazing anger that carried me away. "Let the girl alone! I can tell you what you want to know...."

"I'll hear no more lies from you," he raged, and hauled himself out of his seat. "You've found your tongue too late. Stand aside!" His enormous arm cleaved the air and swept me from his path. With his other hand he dashed the water remaining in the carafe into Hedwig's face.

The girl moaned, stirred, and finally sat up. Grundt's hands clamped themselves upon her shoulders. "Answer me!" he commanded. "Where have you seen this Englishwoman before?"

"Don't make me say!" wailed the maid. "The gnädige Frau made me swear I wouldn't tell... I shall lose my place...."

"Answer...!"

Hedwig closed her eyes. "At the apartment," she said huskily.
"When?"
"This morning. . . ."
"What was she doing there?"

* * * * *

Bit by bit he dragged the truth from her. She must have been listening at the door all through my interview with the Prince. Apparently she had not overheard the brief allusion to the gramophone; at least, if she had, she did not mention the incident to Clubfoot: the only ray of light I could discern on my black and hopeless horizon.

I stood aloof while Grundt, barking out question upon question, gradually pieced the story together. The Prince, it appeared, had dressed and left the flat while the Pellegrini was closeted with Clubfoot in the salon. They had discovered my disappearance, Hedwig said, only after Grundt had gone.

"And your mistress forbade you to say anything to any one about the Englishwoman's visit?" asked Clubfoot.
"Ja, Herr Doktor!"
"To me also, nicht wahr?"
A pause. Then a scarcely audible, "Ja, Herr!"
"Why?"

The maid hesitated.
"She told you," he prompted, "that it would get her into trouble with me, wasn't that it?"

Hedwig cast an uneasy glance about her. Her whispered "Yes!" was like a smothered sob.

"Then why didn't she send this Englishwoman about her business when she first saw her?"
"I. . . . I don't know, Herr Doktor!"
"Don't you dare tell me any more lies!" he screeched.
"Wasn't it because your mistress was not aware, until I told her, that this girl was a friend of the Englishman Abbott?"

The maid was twining and untwining her fingers in an agony of apprehension. "I. . . . I can't . . . ."
“Herr Gott,” vociferated the cripple, “you’d better mind yourself! I’m going to have the truth if it means plucking your false tongue out by the roots. Answer my question!”

“It may be so,” was the sullen rejoinder.

“So?” He cleared his throat raucously. “And did this man, Abbott, ever visit your mistress at the apartment?”

Hedwig clasped her hands together. “Herr,” she imploded in a trembling voice, “let the gnädige Frau reply to that question herself! I . . . I told a falsehood to your man just now. I said I didn’t know where she was. But I will tell you. She has gone to His Highness’s suite at the Atlantic. If you go there you’ll find her, and you can ask her yourself. . . .”

Clubfoot leaned forward. “Did this man, Abbott, ever visit your mistress at her flat?” he repeated, with deadly emphasis.

“Um Gottes Willen, Herr Doktor . . .” She wrung her hands in a frenzy.

“Answer the question!”

She bowed her head in affirmation.

I heard Grundt draw in his breath with a hissing sound, saw how his tufted nostrils opened and shut. Behind their thick glasses his eyes seemed to distend. The nails of his left hand, which rested on the blotting-paper, blindly clawed at the topmost sheet till it became detached and was crumpled up in that huge palm. His whole body shook: I could see how the livid cheeks, shadowed by a black stubble, and heavy as a mastiff’s, trembled.

“The last time,” he said in a rapid, croaking voice, “when was it?”

“It was a Sunday. About a fortnight ago. . . .”

“The night he was arrested, nicht wahr?”

The maid gave a frightened nod.

“Tell me. . . .”
"He came in the evening to fetch the gnädige Frau out to dinner. He was to spend the night. . . ."
"How long was he there?"
"Not long, a little quarter of an hour. The gnädige Frau was practically ready. She had only to put on her cloak...."
"Where did he wait?"
"In the salon. . . ."
"Alone . . .?"

"Jawohl, Herr Doktor!" Grundt's enormous fist, tight balled, was pounding his knee. "But," the girl went on, "the English Herr didn't spend the night at the flat, after all. The gnädige Frau came back alone. And when I asked her what had become of Herr Abbott, she told me he had had to leave Berlin suddenly. . . ."

The man at the desk remained silent. "Did another Englishman ever visit your mistress? Either before or after Abbott went away?" he asked presently.
"Nein, Herr. . . ."

He gazed at her abstractedly. "Is this true?"
"As God is my judge, Herr Doktor. Herr Abbott was Madame's only English friend."

There was another pause. Then Clubfoot stood up suddenly. "Hansemann," he called, "my hat and coat. And tell Heinrich I want my car. Send this woman"—he indicated Hedwig—"home in a taxi. She"—he jerked his head in my direction—"is coming with us. You, too, and Freytag. Let Mayer remain here on duty. If there should be any urgent message for me, I shall be at the Hôtel Atlantic, Prince Karl-Albrecht's suite." He clapped his hands. "Be quick!"

Hansemann padded away and returned with a bowler hat and a light overcoat. "The car is at the door, Herr Doktor!" he announced. There was a whispered conversation between him and Grundt, as he helped the latter into his overcoat.
“True,” said Clubfoot aloud, “I’d forgotten him. Well, you can send him in . . .”

By this he seemed to have regained his equanimity. In fact, he began to hum a little tune as he opened a drawer of the desk and took from it a large black automatic. He scrutinised the pistol carefully, nor did he look up when Hansemann, reappearing, ushered in Rudi von Linz.

“Ach, Herr Leutnant,” Clubfoot remarked, as he broke the pistol and applied his eye to the barrel, “there was a question I wanted to ask you. Do you know why your friend, Miss Dunbar, left Schlatz so suddenly?”

Rudi, who had been staring in blank astonishment at the spectacle of Hedwig with her dank hair and the front of her dress all running with water, started and looked at me. “N . . . hö,” he faltered reluctantly. “That is to say . . .”

“You are aware that she was asked to leave the town?” Grundt broke in.

“Yes . . .” he answered, after a pause.

“Do you know on what grounds?”

“I do!”

“In that case,” said Clubfoot, snapping the breach of his pistol, “you will be interested to hear that she is under arrest on a charge of espionage . . .”

The boy gasped. “Espio . . . it isn’t possible?”

“Just as possible,” Grundt retorted, as he clipped the magazine of the automatic into place, “just as possible as that an officer of His Majesty’s Foot Guards should have so far forgotten himself as to have associated with and shielded a foreign spy . . . .”

The boy was white to the lips. “Herr Doktor,” he declared tensely, “I give you my word of honour as an officer . . . .”

But, with a click of vexation, Clubfoot cut him short. “I’ve no time for idle excuses,” he snarled. “You will return to your quarters and there await the Provost-
THE RECKONING

Marshal of the Garrison. And," he added, as he delicately laid the pistol on the high top of the desk in front of him, "I would suggest you employ the time in seriously considering your position in the matter." He bowed formally. "Herr Leutnant,"—he paused—"it is doubtless the last time I shall have the advantage of addressing you by your military rank—ich empfehle mich!"

Rudi drew himself up and, with a set face, marched up to the desk. To my intense surprise, he picked up the pistol and thrust it into the pocket in the skirts of his military frock. He bowed stiffly to Grundt, and without even a glance at me, strode quickly out of the room.

"Take her down to the car," said Grundt, pointing at me. Propping himself on his stick, he led the way.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RECKONING

I have no proper recollection of that journey through the night save that we drove at a breakneck speed, and that Grundt's scarlet racing car had a peculiarly melodious horn on two notes. We went so fast, indeed, that within a minute or two of our leaving the villa, or so it seemed to me, we were out of the car and passing through a turnabout door into a very ornate marble and gilt hotel lobby.

A clock above the reception desk, where the night porter was writing in a book, showed the hour to be a quarter to two. Most of the lights were extinguished, and a stunted old man in overalls was clanking about with broom and pail. The lobby was sunk in that exhausted hush which reigns in busy places after the day's work is done.

Grundt hobbled up to the desk and, opening his overcoat, appeared to show the porter some badge or emblem. At any rate, the man presently left his counter with