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 turn-about 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
considerable alacrity and crossed the vestibule to the lift. Clubfoot lingered to give an order to his two acolytes. Then his fingers gripped my arm, guiding my hand to the outside pocket of his overcoat. I felt the outline of a pistol. "When I shoot, I shoot straight," he hissed in a rasping undertone. "You might bear that in mind, my fine lady. Vorwärts!" He gave me a push. His two men remained behind. He and I moved to the lift alone.

We shot up into the warm quiet of the slumbering hotel and stepped off in the dimness of a floor high above the street. The night porter wanted to escort us, but Clubfoot declared he would find the way alone. As the gate rattled to and the brightly-lit cage dropped down into the stagnant darkness, such a sensation of terror-stricken loneliness as I have never known assailed me. But Grundt's steely fingers fastened about my arm and hustled me forward along the softly-carpeted corridor.

A weary-looking waiter in a white coat, carrying a tray of empty champagne bottles, padded by. The jingle of a piano, the murmur of voices, raised in discordant song, drifted round the turn of the passage. A drunken voice, uplifted above the rest, was bawling:

"Bis früh um fünf, kleine Maus,
Da geh'n wir sicher nicht nach Haus,
Bis dass der Hahn..."

Clubfoot had stopped in front of one of the long line of white-enamelled doors and, without knocking, flung it violently open.

Within the room a sea of faces swam in a blue qualm of tobacco smoke. It was a small salon, vulgarly pretentious with very bright gilt furniture and mauve upholstery and curtains, and ablaze with light from a huge crystal chandelier in the centre, and electric candles set in golden sconces round the panelled walls. The air was almost unbreathable with the aroma of tobacco, the fumes of
spilled wine, and the cloying, sickly emanations of warm liquid white, grease-paint and perfume.

For there were women in the company of the round half-dozen officers who were taking their ease in His Highness's suite—three or four of them at least. One, a young thing, with pert, childish features, was perched on top of the piano, a uniform cap cocked at an impudent angle on her golden curls: another, much older, with a harlot's hard face, giggled drunkenly as she sat on an officer's knee. And the Pellegrini was there too, installed on the Louis Seize settee beside the Prince, who had an arm about her milky neck and his face buried in her resplendent hair. There were bottles everywhere; on the centre table, on chairs, on the ground; bottles and glasses and brimming ash-trays.

The piano ceased abruptly on our intrusion. But the drunken voice we had heard went dithering on, raucous as a raven's:

"Bis früh um fünfe, kleine Maus,
Da geh'n wir sicher nicht . . ."

"Ruhe!" roared Clubfoot, and thrust me into the midst of them.

The pianist, a gorgeous figure in a tunic of scarlet and gold, swung round on his stool. I recognised the Hussar with the saturnine face I had seen with the Prince at Schippke's. When his eye fell on us, "Shut up, Helmut!" he called out to the singer, who was the man with the girl on his knee, and no other, I perceived, than my friend, the Baron, who had presented me to the Prince. He seemed to be stupefied with drink; but he broke off with his song. Gradually, as the consciousness of the presence of that brawny figure, looming portentous in the doorway, penetrated through the befuddled wits, silence fell upon the company.

The Hussar, who was 'the only one to appear compara-
tively sober, was the first to speak. "Du mein lieber Gott!" he ejaculated blankly, staring at Grundt.

"Mind yourself, Ulrich, he's got a writ!" a voice cried facetiously.

The girl on the piano, who had been mustering me with owlish solemnity, screeched suddenly: "Ach je, and I owe three weeks' rent!"

"A bailiff, pfui deibel!" ejaculated a plump blonde, who sat on the floor with her head in an officer's lap. "Chuck him in the bath, Hoheit, chuck him in the bath!"

A delighted roar greeted this sally. It was the Prince who quelled it. The Pellegrini had sprung up and, thus violently parted from his lady-love, the portly youth had struggled to his feet, and was now eyeing Grundt with every sign of the liveliest concern. He pawed the air with his hand. "Quiet, Kinder!" he bade. With unsteady gait he moved a pace towards Grundt who, hat on head, and leaning on his stick, morosely contemplated the scene from the door. "Herr Doktor," he articulated, rather thickly, "I am delighted." Then he saw me and repressed a start. I noticed how his glance swiftly travelled to the Pellegrini's face. "Lieber Herr Doktor," he went on cajolingly, "you will join us, I trust. Permit me to make you acquainted with my guests..." He swallowed a hiccough and smiled foolishly round the circle.

"Your Highness will have the goodness to send your guests away," said Clubfoot, brisk and firm. "I wish to speak to you alone...."

"I wo," the Prince tittered, "they don't matter. All good friends of mine, Herr Doktor. Sit down, man, and have some champagne."

With an exclamation of impatience, Clubfoot flashed a rapid glance round the room. His eye fell upon the gaudy Hussar who, sprawling back against the piano, with his elbows on the keyboard, was watching him out of a grave,
impassive face. Grundt made a sign, and at once the officer rose up obediently and came forward.

"You remember me, Herr Graf?" said Clubfoot in an undertone.

"Gewiss, Herr Doktor!" The Hussar was all deference.

"We met over the Hohenau affair, I think?"

"Stimmt, Herr Doktor!"

"Oblige me by getting rid of this rabble!"

"Willingly, Herr Doktor!"

He bowed stiffly and turned to face the room. "Come on, Kinder!" he cried. "The party's over!"

A chorus of protest arose but, albeit with some difficulty, he shepherded them all into the adjoining bedroom, where evening wraps and service caps and swords were piled in a heap on the bed. As the Pellegrini rose to follow them, Clubfoot called out sharply: "Not you...."

I saw her lip go out in pouting rebellion. But he pointed imperiously to the sofa, and she sat down, cowed and stillen, her green eyes watchful and uneasy.

When the last of the party had trooped out, Grundt shut the door and the clamour of their voices in the corridor died away. The Prince had drawn up a chair to the table, and was wetting a napkin with Giesshubler water and dabbing his forehead. Dragging his misshapen foot over the carpet, Grundt limped up to the table.

"Prince," he said, "before leaving on his Norwegian cruise, His Majesty, my Imperial master, entrusted to me the investigation of a grave affair of espionage. It will be my unpleasant duty to report to His Majesty that Your Highness is one of the persons implicated...."

The Prince giggled and looked up from his toilette.

"Some of those fellows put you up to this, I'll be bound," he remarked, with a knowing air. "I saw you confabbing with old Ulrich. But I'm not so drunk as all that"—he wagged his head clownishly—"nee, nee, mein Junger...."
"This is no joking matter, Prince," Clubfoot retorted sternly. "Were you aware that this lady here"—he pointed with his stick at the woman on the sofa—"was the mistress of a notorious English Secret Service agent, a man called Abbott?"

With her green eyes flaming, the Pellegrini thrust herself between them. "It's an infamous lie," she cried, bringing her hand down with a crash on the table. "Don't listen to him, Karlchen! He's only trying to make mischief between us. . . ."

Peevishly the Prince drew down the corners of his mouth. With a nervous gesture he began to brush away some fragments of cigar ash from the front of his tunic. "Erlauben Sie, Herr Doktor," he observed, with pompous irritation, "Your accusation is . . . na, a direct reflection upon my honour. . . ."

"Oh," exclaimed the woman, with an expression of extreme disgust, "is that all you find to say . . . ?"

The Prince scowled at Grundt and tried to look fierce. "You . . . you forget yourself!" he said in a very loud voice. Clubfoot bowed. "Possibly, Prince. But I do not forget my duty to Your Highness. And my duty is to prevent this wanton creature . . ."

The woman stamped her foot. "Oh," she gasped in a furious voice, "this is too much!"

The Prince rose up, oversetting his chair. "Enough!" he squealed indignantly, "I will not sit here and allow you to . . ."

But Grundt's harsh voice spoke on inexorably: "... to prevent this wanton creature from making a public laughing-stock of Your Highness."

Tortured as I was with anxiety, I could not help admiring the supreme adroitness of this approach. The princely vanity was flicked on the raw. I saw the flabby youth colour up and shoot an uneasy glance at his mistress
who, pale and pleading, faced him across the table. She, leaning forward, cried out in accents strangled by tears; "Send this man about his business, Karlchen! Can't you see through his game? I've never told you before, but he's been pestering me for months. He swore he'd ruin me because I turned him down. . . ."

This bold counter-attack won her a temporary advantage. The duel of wits was beginning to fascinate me. On its outcome, I realised, my safety depended. The Pellegrini was quick and full of pluck, that was clear. But was she a match for her terrible adversary? And how would she parry the deadly blow he had in store, Hedwig's evidence, a veritable coup de Jarnac?

The Prince clenched his fists and advanced menacingly on Clubfoot, his small eyes alight with spite. "You'd dare . . .?" he muttered thickly.

Grundt's big teeth flashed golden as he bared them in a noiseless laugh. "Clever," he crooned, "but not clever enough. As you will discover, Prince, if you will let me finish what I have to say." He swung round, and, pointing an accusing finger at me, "Will Your Highness take a look at this young person," he said, "and tell me if you have seen her before?"

How like the man! I might have known that Clubfoot would always regard attack as the best means of defence. Of a sudden the Pellegrini became oddly still. The Prince, pinned down by Grundt's merciless regard, gave me a reluctant glance, and then his eyes signalled a mute question to the Pellegrini. But she left him to flounder alone, affecting to be busy with the fastening of one of her emerald ear-rings.

Karl-Albrecht shrugged his shoulders. "I . . . I can't really say offhand," he rejoined, with elaborate indifference. "Where should I have seen her?"

"This morning, at Frau von Pellegrini's flat," was the
prompt answer. "And again to-night at Schippke's." His voice was a sing-song, as though he read from a list. "And each time en tête à tête," he added.

His Highness wilted. He became defiant, like a child caught fibbing. "Well, and what of it?" he demanded sulkily.

"Only that this Englishwoman is a spy in the British service. . . ."

The Prince's fat face went a vivid scarlet. He cast an indignant glance at the Pellegrini. The instinctive movement did not escape Clubfoot. "Na, ja," he remarked softly, "I, too, am wondering why she didn't tell you!"

"Because I didn't know it," the Pellegrini exclaimed angrily.

"Then why, meine Gnädige," was the swift riposte, "did you especially warn His Highness not to mention to me his meeting with the Englishwoman at your flat?"

If this was a blind thrust, and I think it was, it pressed her hard. I could see how she gathered up all her wits to parry it.

"It was to protect you, Karlchen," she made answer in a low voice, gazing sentimentally at the Prince. "Whatever Dr. Grundt may think, you cannot afford to have your name dragged into an affair of this kind." Boldly she faced the cripple. "That's why, if you want to know,"—she flung the words defiantly at him—"I said nothing to you about this girl's visit. And because I had kept it from you, I requested His Highness not to mention it. . . ."

Upright, beside the table, his knee slightly bent to ease the weight of that monstrous boot, Grundt lowered her. "So," he murmured through his set teeth, "you thought you'd hoodwink me, did you?"

"She was perfectly right," primly announced the Prince. "Of course I can't be mixed up in an espionage scandal, as you ought to know. . . ."
There was jubilation in the Pellegrini's lovely face. But I divined that it was premature. Unshaken, Clubfoot returned to the charge. "Did the gnädige Frau confide to you, Prince, that she was in the habit of supplementing Your Highness's generosity in pecuniary matters by rendering certain small services to me?"

The question rang bitterly ironical. It acted on the Prince like a goad, for he sat up suddenly and said: "Is this true, Floria?"

She began to whimper. "I couldn't help myself. He threatened me. . . ."

With an imprecation Karl-Albrecht flung himself violently back in his chair. "It's incredible. Do you mean to say that all this time you've been spying for him?"

She uttered a frightened wail. "Not against you, Karlchen. On my word of honour. . . ."

"Ach, Quatsch!" he said roughly. "You know that everything he hears goes straight back to His Majesty. It's . . . it's an outrage," he stammered. "You must be mad. . . ." He relapsed into a gloomy silence.

"The gnädige Frau has proved herself one of my most valued aides," Grundt observed, quick to seize the advantage. "Why, only the other day she was instrumental in securing the arrest of a dangerous British spy. . . ." He made a deliberate pause. "One, Abbott. Did Frau Floria never speak of him?"

"No," answered the Prince curtly.

"So, so. . . ." The exclamation was as soft as a sigh. "And yet he was a great friend of Madame's. They were at supper together at the Mascotte the night we arrested him. A Sunday night, Prince, the 5th of July. If I remember rightly,"—he affected to be absorbed in the scrutiny of his nails—"Your Highness spent that week-end at home at Traubheim."
The Prince stirred himself from his lethargy. "That's true, certainly. . . ." He looked sharply across the table at the Pellegrini. "Well, haven't you anything to say?"

Her resistance was ebbing away. "Grundt forced me to act as decoy," she faltered. "This man was nothing to me, Karlchen, I swear it. A mere acquaintance. . . ."

Clubfoot cackled noisily. "So slight an acquaintance," he jeered, "that he used to spend the night with her during Your Highness's absence. . . ."

"It's not true," she cried, her voice rising to a shriek. "Karlchen, you don't believe that. . . ."

"Don't you dare give me the lie!" stormed Grundt. "I've got the evidence of your own maid against you." He swung round to the Prince. "Why, the very night he was arrested this man had arranged to stay at her apartment! And because we'd put him out of harm's way, because he couldn't perform the errand himself, he sent this accomplice of his"—the crutch-stick described a circle in my direction—"to retrieve what he had left behind." His great paws landed with a crash on the table as he lurched forward to thrust his jowl almost into the Prince's face. "You surprised this Englishwoman in the salon this morning. Did she seem to be looking for something?"

The young man jumped up in a pet. "I'll answer no questions, do you hear? You've got to leave me out of this. I . . . I won't be dragged in. . . ."

"You won't be dragged in, won't you?" shouted Grundt, casting all deference to the winds. "Don't you realise you're in it up to the neck? I've only to go to that telephone there to send you up for court-martial. And I'll do it, too, if I have any more nonsense. Now, will you answer me?"

With a livid face the wretched youth dropped back into his chair. "All right, all right," he muttered feebly.
"What was the Englishwoman doing when you found her?" Grundt demanded.

"Nothing in particular..."

"Was she sitting, or standing, or walking about, or what?"

"She was sitting on the sofa... Wait, there was something..." He put his hands to his head. "Ach, ja, she said she had been looking through the gramophone records..."

Clubfoot's face changed. His eyes rolled, his nostrils twitched, and he ground his teeth together. A bellow of rage burst from his lips and, raising his heavy stick, he brought it crashing down upon the table, upsetting the bottles and shivering a glass. Bottles and glasses clattered to the floor as he snatched the stick away and, swinging it over his head, plunged round the table, dragging his twisted foot after him, straight at the Pellegrini. "I'll have your life for this!" he gibbered. With a scream she covered her face with her hands and cowered on the sofa.

At that moment there came a knocking at the door.

I don't think Grundt heard it. Even as he towered above the sofa, with his arm raised to strike, his paroxysm of fury seemed to pass. He lowered the stick, breathing hard. "You shall answer to me later," he muttered, and slowly swung his glance to me. His eyes, staring and bloodshot, had lost all human semblance: they were the eyes of an infuriated man-ape. He made a vague gesture of the hand. "First, I'll deal with you..."

He was coming at me when, for the second time, the door was discreetly rapped.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCERNING A WAITER AND HIS TRAY

"Herein!" he trumpeted ragingly. The door gapèd, and I caught a glimpse of a white coat in the corridor.