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 fane 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-obscurity 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.
Still rather tremulous, I answered: "Who are you? What do you want?"

I had stepped back and my hands were on the edge of the writing-table. That blessed light again! The switch of the reading-lamp turned ineffectually at my touch. Now my fingers groped in vain for the box of matches I had left beside the typewriter with my packet of cigarettes. I knew that a candle used for sealing stood on the desk.

A low laugh sounded out of the obscurity.

"It's devilish awkward introducing oneself in the dark," was the reply. "Don't you think we could have some light? It is Miss Dunbar, isn't it? Miss Olivia Dunbar?"

The utter conventionality of his remark went far to allay my fears. The humour of the situation struck me and I, in my turn, laughed.

"Yes," I said, "I'm Olivia Dunbar. But the electric light has failed. Who are you? And what on earth do you mean by frightening me like that?"

"I say, I'm most frightfully sorry, really," the voice broke in contritely. "I had no intention of scaring you. Of course, I thought you'd understand.

The fright I had received had frayed my nerves. I felt distinctly irritable. This invisible visitor's bland assumption that it was an intelligible proceeding for a complete stranger to burst into a private house at night at the height of a thunderstorm nettled me.

"I don't know what you mean," I retorted hotly. "How am I to know you aren't a burglar, creeping in like that?"

I heard a sharp sigh.

"My gracious goodness, I can't explain things like this in the dark. Can't you light a candle or something? It's simply preposterous, the two of us gassing away here like a couple of blind men. Hang it, I want to see you!"
His outburst had an almost pathetic ring which tickled my sense of humour.

"Not half so much as I want to see you," I gave him back. "Am I supposed to know you?"

"Yes... and no," was his extraordinary answer.

"Well, give me a match!" I said.

He groaned audibly. "I haven't got one. Have you?"

"There's a box somewhere," I replied, "but I can't lay my hands on it in the dark..."

"Look here, if there's a box about, the two of us should be able to find it..."

My eyes, growing used to the obscurity, could now discern a form vaguely silhouetted against the dim window. There was a brusque movement towards me.

"Stop where you are!" I ordered sharply. "Wait till I find the matches! Do you think I'm going to have you grooping about after me in the dark?"

I heard a suppressed chuckle and the movement stopped dead. Then the lightning gleamed and revealed a youngish figure of a man standing bare-headed just within the room. The sight of him, brief as it was, linking up the vague, immaterial voice with a definite individual, steadied me.

"Can't you borrow a light from somewhere?" came out of the dark. "I..."

A long, loud thunder peal drowned the rest of the words. The sudden noise jarred me horribly.

"No, I can't," I answered crossly. "Everybody's out, and I don't know where there are any more matches."

Scarcely were the words out of my mouth than I knew I had said a foolish thing. Until I had ascertained what this man wanted, I should never have let him know that I was alone in the house. I realised my mistake when I heard a sort of gasp come out of the obscurity and the voice remark:

"There's nobody at home but you, then?"
I made no answer. I was round at the front of the writing-table now, hunting feverishly for those infernal matches. My hand touched the half-open drawer and I drew out the revolver and laid it on the desk beneath a sheaf of typing paper. Then to my intense relief I trod on the box of matches which had fallen on the carpet.

I struck a match and lit the candle in its silver holder. The wick, smeared with the wax of ancient sealings, burned low at first, spluttering, and by its feeble radiance I examined the stranger. I am bound to say that my apprehensions diminished with my first look at him. He was a little, gingery man, rather below medium height, whose outward appearance certainly confirmed the impression I had derived from his voice, namely, that he was a gentleman.

His grey tweed suit, though worn and rather crumpled, suggested a West End cut; and as the candle burning brighter, the detail of his features became apparent. I saw that he was well-groomed, with thinnish, sandy hair brushed neatly back off his forehead and a small, carefully trimmed moustache. He seemed to be very wet and had his jacket collar turned up against the rain. When I first saw him in the light he was wiping the moisture from his face with what I remember struck me as being an exceedingly unclean pocket-handkerchief.

If I scrutinised the stranger, he appeared to study me with no less interest. As we stared at one another in silence, it struck me that he had an oddly watchful air, like a rabbit at the mouth of its warren. I noticed, too, that his eyes kept travelling from me to the half-open door of the dining-room and thence over his shoulder to the window and the garden, all rustling under the downpour, beyond. They were curious eyes, reddish in hue and set rather close together, with a reckless, almost an unbalanced expression in their depths.
He was the first to break the silence between us.

"You were not expecting me, then?"

Greatly mystified, I shook my head. "If you would tell me your name..." I ventured. But he ignored my lead.

"This is Sunday, isn't it?" he demanded suddenly, very earnestly.

"Certainly," I replied. I was beginning to feel uneasy again. He appeared to be perfectly sober; but didn't those shifting, tawny eyes of his look a little mad?

"Sunday, the 19th of July, eh?" he persisted.

"Yes. . . ."

On that, he fell into a brooding silence, puckering up his forehead and casting sidelong glances at me from under his reddish lashes.

"You don't happen to know a party whose initials are N. D., I suppose?" he said at last.

"N. D.?" I repeated. "No, I don't think so. Who is he?"

Again he evaded my question.

"And an Englishman hasn't called to see you here during the past few days? Or written?"

"No," I told him. "You're the first Englishman I've seen for six months. You are English, aren't you?"

"Me?" he said absently. "Oh, rather!" Then, harking back to his theme, he demanded again: "And you don't happen to have seen this fellow about the town, I suppose?"

"I don't know what he looks like," I replied.

"No," he rejoined absently, "of course, you wouldn't. Party about thirty, very fit-looking, sort of quiet, with dark hair and very bright blue eyes. . . .

He rattled this off quickly, then paused, his furtive eyes eagerly fixed on mine.

"No," I said, "I've seen nobody like that about the town. As a matter of fact, I believe I'm the only English
person in Schlatz. And now," I went on, rather impatently, for his extraordinary air of mystery was getting on my nerves, "perhaps you would tell me what I can do for you. In the first place, how do you come to know my name?"

At that, on a sudden, he seemed to slough off his vague and despondent air.

"To tell you the truth," he remarked brightly, "I was asked to look you up. . . ."

"Oh," I said, "by whom?"

"By your people in town. . . ."

I looked at him sharply. Daddy's only brother has a fruit farm in California, and Aunt Sybil, Mother's sister, our only other near relative, is an invalid who lives at Bath. And Purley cannot be claimed as "town" by even the most optimistic of suburbanites.

"You've met my people then?" I replied. "Who was it told you to call?"

He paused for a second, and then answered rather hastily: "Why, your father! You're Colônel Dunbar's daughter, aren't you?"

At that I stiffened. But, noticing how sharply, how eagerly almost, the stranger was eyeing me, I rejoined as nonchalantly as I could:

"Fancy you knowing Daddy! When did you see him last?"

"Oh, just the other day, in London. . . ."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Someone introduced us at a club. The Senior, I think it was. Or was it the Rag? When he heard that I was going to Germany he said to me: 'If you're in the neighborhood of Schlatz, mind you look up my daughter, Olivia. She's secretary to Frau von Hentsch—Lucy Varley, the novelist, you know—at the Kommandanten-Haus!' A splendid fellow your father, Miss Dunbar!"
“Yes, isn’t he a darling?” I replied. My heart was beating rather fast, and I was straining my ears for any sound within the house that should tell me of the von Hentschels’ return. But the clock warned me that it was not yet ten; and I could not hope that either they or the maids would be back before eleven. “You . . . you haven’t told me your name,” I continued, as he did not speak and I felt I must say something.

He laughed rather nervously.

“Why, no more I have! It’s Abbott, Major Abbott. And now that I’ve introduced myself, Miss Dunbar,” he went on rapidly, “you must let me apologize once again for the way I frightened you. But I was sheltering from the storm under a tree, out there, and when that terrific flash of lightning came I suddenly thought of the danger of trees in a thunderstorm, and . . . and all that, don’t you know, and seeing you at the window I knew at once that you were English, so I just dashed in out of the rain, meaning to explain. And then the light went out. I expect you’re wondering what I was doing in the garden. Perhaps I ought to tell you that I wanted to see you on private and very urgent business. Before I rang the front door bell I thought I’d try and find out if you were anywhere about . . . .”

He dashed off this fantastic explanation with the utmost glibness and paused, as though waiting to see what I should reply.

The house was very still. The rain was lessening now, and the thunder had ceased. The storm seemed to have passed over, but there was still some lightning about—I could see the flashes glint from time to time on the gleaming leaves outside the window.

“Well, now that you are here,” I said, and tried to banish the nervousness from my voice, “won’t you tell me what it is I can do for you?”
THE CROUCHING BEAST

He laughed easily. "I'm in the most absurd predicament, really. It's this way. I was going to meet this pal of mine here at Schlatz and travel with him to London. He was due here yesterday; but he doesn't seem to have turned up. As you were the only person I knew here I gave him your name so that he could call—as I'd promised your father to look you up—in my place, in case I didn't have time between trains. That was why I thought you might be expecting me. Do you see?"

"I see," I answered without enthusiasm.

"Coming here in the train this evening," he resumed, quite unabashed, "I was robbed. I fell asleep and when I woke up I found I'd lost my pocket-book with all my money, my bag, my overcoat, my hat, even. If my friend were here I'd be all right, see? And if I could stop over till the morning, I could wire Cox's for funds, of course. But I must get on by the last train to-night. And so I'm in the embarrassing position of having to ask you, as the only person I know at Schlatz, for a loan, a hundred marks or so; would do, just enough to buy my ticket. And perhaps if you could borrow a hat for me . . . ."

All this time we had been standing up, he, furtive and so very glib, between me and the window, I behind the desk with my hand clutching the revolver under the sheets of paper that covered it.

"Is that all?" I said when he had finished.

At my tone, the easy smile fled from his face.

"I . . . I think so," he rejoined. "You . . . you believe my story, don't you, Miss Dunbar?"

"Not a word of it," I answered firmly.

"But why?", he broke in.

"Because," I told him, "my father died three months before I came to Schlatz?"

He was not in the least disconcerted. He ran a wiry freckled hand over his sandy hair.
"My God," he ejaculated, "that's turn it!"

"And now," I said, "perhaps you'll leave this room by the way you entered it?" And with my free hand I pointed at the window behind him.

He stood there, gazing at me forlornly, his pointed features twisted into an utterly woebegone expression, his forehead a mass of furrows.

"But I can't do that," he protested with a sort of desperate air. "Not without some money, and a hat, at any rate!"

"You'll get no money from me, Major Abbott," I retorted very scathingly. "And I strongly advise you to take my offer and disappear before Dr. von Hentsch comes back. He's a German judge and you won't find him as lenient as I am!"

"You don't understand," he exclaimed gloomily. "I can't go. Look here, Miss Dunbar"—his voice grew warm—"be a sport! Think what you like of me; but lend me a hundred marks. You'll get it back and you'll render me a tremendous service."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," I replied. "You're nothing but a common cheat. Why should I give you money?"

"Because I must have it, I tell you!"

"I'm sorry," I gave him back coldly, "but I can't regard that as a sufficient reason."

He shot a slow glance over his shoulder and remained like that for a moment, as though listening for any sound from the garden. The gesture frightened me, I don't know why, and I disengaged the revolver, but held it down on the desk so that my typewriter hid it from his view. When he turned back to face me, his face was dark with determination.

"You make things very difficult," he said. "But I've got to have that money." And he stepped resolutely forward.
THE CROUCHING, BEAST

On that I raised the revolver and covered him.
"It's loaded," I warned him in a trembling voice. "If you come any nearer, I'll shoot!"
He halted abruptly and held up his hands in front of him as though to ward me off. It irritated me to find that he was indignant rather than impressed.
"Haven't you been taught never to point a loaded gun?" he cried sharply. "Put that damned pistol down!"
I stamped my foot angrily for, like a fool, I felt I might begin to cry. "Then go away!" I cried. "I tell you again you'll get nothing here!"
But he did not budge. He stood there, facing the revolver which I could not keep from shaking in my grasp, his tawny eyes warm and friendly, a smile playing at his lips.
"By George," he exclaimed, as though to himself, "I like your spirit. I wonder if I dare...!"
At that instant, with a roar that crashed and reverberated through the dripping night, the Castle gun was fired.

CHAPTER IV
IN WHICH I FIRST HEAR OF THE LAME ONE

EVERYBODY at Schlatz knew the noonday gun.
It was a pudgy, little brass affair, mounted on a squat, wooden carriage, its bright muzzle peering down from the age-mottled Schloss wall upon the red roofs of the town. Each day, a few minutes before noon, old Hejnrich, the gunner, who had left a leg at St. Privat, might be descried stumping along the battlements to take up his position beside the cannon, clanyard in hand, eye on the Castle clock, whose dials were set in the four faces of the tower. As the first stroke of high noon clanged out above his