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 Heijnrich, 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, day yard 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
head, the loud bang of the gun would cut across the confused chiming of the mid-day bells down in the town. The other clocks did not always wait for the gun; for the Castle clock was not particularly accurate. It was a stock joke of Dr. von Hentsch's that old Heinrich took his time from the Schloss clock and that the Schloss time was regulated by the noon gun. In all the months I had been at Schlatz, I had never known the cannon fired except at mid-day.

Even as the gun spoke now and the Kommandantenhau, according to its wont, jarred and shook to the concussion, I saw my visitor spring back from the window. At the same time, from sheer surprise, I forgot all about the revolver and, still clutching it, my hand sank down upon the desk.

"The Castle gun!" I whispered blankly. "Why are they firing it at this time of night?"

Without replying, the little man sprang to the window, closed it and drew the heavy curtains across. Even as he did so, within the lofty enclosure of the Schloss a wild hubbub broke loose. There came a sudden burst of shouting, a whistle shrilled thrice, a drum rolled. Then the cannon roared again, overtoning the din, and, as the noise of the explosion rolled away, an electric gong, brazen-throated, nerve-racking, like a fire alarm, began to stutter its harsh summons through the night.

As I stood there, one hand pressed to my heart, and listened to that awesome racket, too insistent for either closed window or drawn curtain to drown, all the dank and clinging darkness outside seemed to be vibrant with dynamic energy. I had the feeling that, at the foot of the hill, the sleeping town was stirring into life, with voices upraised in affright and footsteps that raced madly through its narrow streets.

For the third time the gun boomed forth above the
swelling tumult and the windows of the old house started and sang.

"Oh, what has happened?" I asked in a panic. "What does it all mean?"

My companion was cool and brisk.

"It means," said he, and held me with his bright, bird-like eye, "it means that a prisoner has escaped from the Schloss."

"A prisoner?" I repeated incredulously. And then the truth dawned upon me. "You mean...?"

He nodded cheerfully.

"But you're English...?" I faltered.

"I'm English all right," he retorted. "Nevertheless, I've been stuffed away in that damned stone jug up there for thirteen days without a trial..."

People at Schlatz were always talking about the imprisoned officers; but I had never heard of an Englishman being of their number. Many of the prisoners were known to me by name, too; for some of them were quite lionised in conversation, such as the young Hussar-lieutenant who, to avenge his wife's honour, had killed in a duel the brother officer, his senior in rank: the offences of others were passed over in silence, like that of Rittmeister von Krachwitz, a horrible, drink-sodden creature—I had seen him about the town—who had "accidentally" slain his soldier servant.

Yet this time it did not occur to me to doubt the statement of my odd visitor. For once his uncanny composure had forsaken him and his words, spoken heatedly, savagely almost, rang true.

Suddenly a lump came into my throat and I felt myself soften to this quiet, tawny little man. I had been many times to the Castle and knew its grim, high walls, its solid, frowning gates, iron-studded, guarding its cloistered intricacy of keep and covered way and courtyard, its ringed system of solemn, pacing sentinels.
I FIRST HEAR OF THE LAME ONE

My thoughts flashed back to that moment when, the candle flaring up, I had had my first clear glimpse of my mysterious visitant, a little breathless, wiping the rain out of his eyes with his grubby handkerchief, but no more flustered than one who has run for shelter from a sudden shower, he who, with what infinite resource, cool judgment and reckless daring, had but lately burst his way to freedom through massive doors, over lofty escarpments, past lines of guards!

I thought of him, with his gloomy prison at his back and the minutes of the precious start he had gained slipping, one by one, away, almost jauntily spinning to me the foolish yarn, by means of which, without disclosing the truth, he had hoped to enlist my aid. His motive for concealment was not hard to understand. With a rush I realised that this must be an almost incredibly cool and fearless man.

But now, in his clipped and jerky way, he was speaking to me.

"I'm a British officer on duty," he exclaimed. "I can't say more. That should be enough for you, a soldier's daughter, to know. And I've got to get clear away. Never mind about those lies I told you: the service don't encourage confidences. They smuggled a letter in to me up there"—he jerked his head backwards—"giving me your name and saying that Nigel Druce—you don't know him, apparently, but he's another one of us—would warn you to expect me. You've seen nothing of him, you say?"

"No," I answered wonderingly.

"Then he's dead," snapped back my little man, very decisively. "Nigel never missed a date in his life. Listen, you'll help me?"

"Yes," I said.

"How much money have you got?"
I had already picked up my bag from where it lay beside the typewriter and was counting through my notes. "A little over 300 marks."

This, in those days, was fifteen pounds odd, a lot of money to me.

"Can you spare all of this?"

"Of course," I lied.

He took the notes I gave him and stuffed them in his pocket.

"You'll get it back," he remarked. "Either from me or from my people. If you don't, write in for it. Just drop a line to M.I. 5, War Office, and explain the circumstances. They'll pay you."

With a bland air he rubbed his hands together.

"I must have a hat," he announced. "And some sort of overcoat would be useful, too!"

"Dr. von Hentsch's son, who's studying law in Bonn, is away," I replied. "There's an old hat and, I think, a raincoat of his, in the hall. They're not likely to be missed until he returns for the vacation. You could have those. I'll fetch them. . . ."

"Wait!" he bade me. He was looking at the clock.

"Half-past ten now: at what time do you expect your people home?"

"Not before eleven at the earliest. The servants are supposed to be in by eleven. But they've gone down to the Kermesse and they're sure to be late. And the von Hentsches are out playing bridge. They mayn't be back until half-past eleven or a quarter to twelve. I don't want to hurry you," I added hesitatingly, "but don't you think you ought to be getting on?"

"There's no great urgency now that they know I've legged it," he answered nonchalantly. "It's always a sound plan to let the first heat of the chase spend itself before one takes to the road. I've got half an hour, anyway. . . ."
"Not if they search the garden," I suggested. "They're bound to think of that, aren't they?"

He wagged his head knowingly.

"Perhaps. Not at once, though. Our German pals haven't got much imagination. I purposely laid a good strong scent on the ramparts on the other side from this, where that market garden comes up to the Schloss wall on the slope nearest the town. I'm trusting that they'll start by following up that clue."

"Then you escaped on this side?" I broke in eagerly.

"Do tell me how! Not by our garden?"

His amused smile seemed to me to confirm my idea.

"But," I exclaimed aghast, "the wall between this and the Castle is frightfully high and all studded with spikes and broken glass. And the door's locked...!"

The door I spoke of was at the end of the garden, a little postern gate set deep in the immensely thick and lofty outer wall of the Schloss, and giving direct access to the courtyard. It enabled the Commandant of Schlatz to enter the Castle from his house without going round by the main gate. When Dr. von Hentsch went into residence at the Kommandanten-Haus, the door, being no longer in use, was locked and the key deposited in the Castle orderly-room.

"Locks can be picked," bluntly retorted my little man.

"But," he went on, looking at me with a friendly air, "I'm not going to tell you anything. Bear this in mind, my dear: the less you know about me, the better for you. You've got to forget that you've ever seen me. You're green to this game; but I want you to understand that there's the worst kind of trouble in store for any one suspected of aiding me to escape.

"Bah," said I, little knowing how bitterly I was to think back upon the foolish boast, "they daren't do anything to me. I'm English. I'm not afraid of them."
THE CROUCKING BEAST

The tawny eyes were, of a sudden, thoughtful.
"Don't be too sure. 'Der Stelze' don't stop at anything."
"'Der Stelze'?" I repeated. "That means 'the lame one,' doesn't it? Who is 'der Stelze'?"

I was watching my companion and at my question I saw a curious change come over his face. The features seemed to grow rigid and, for an instant, an odd light, like a tongue of fire, flamed up in his wary eyes.

"God forbid that you should ever run foul of him, my dear," he said, so earnest of a sudden, by contrast with his former easy, almost bantering, manner, that I stared.
"But, remember what I say to you now, especially after what has happened to-night! If a lame German, a whopping great fellow with a clubfoot, comes inquiring after me, be on your guard! Don't let him suspect you or... beware!"

A little silence fell between us. All was still outside now. The tumult up at the Castle seemed to have died away. With a brisk gesture the little man buttoned up his jacket.

"And now," he said smartly, "action front! By reason of what I've just told you, you mustn't get mixed up in this. We're going to put out the candle, you'll fetch me that hat and coat and show me where the front door is. Then you'll cut upstairs to your room as fast as your legs can carry you, nip into bed and stay there until morning."

"And you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I'm going to finish my job." He extended his hand. "Good-bye, my dear, thank you a thousand times. I wish to Heaven, I'd trusted you from the start. But a woman let me down once, and since then I'm being extra cautious."

His lean hand clasped mine. My hands were cold as ice; but his grasp was warm and firm.
"Good luck," I said. "I'm sorry I was so... so
unsympathetic at first, but I didn't understand. Before you go I want to tell you this: I think you're the bravest man I've ever met."

He shook his head and laughed.

"Not brave. Only reckless. As a gambler’s brave who's down to his last penny. I left my honour behind when they nabbed me and clapped me in gaol up there. But now, by God"—he pursed his lips into a grim line—"I'm going to fetch it back!"

"Your honour?" I echoed. I wondered what he meant. But his unflinching pluck touched me, and I said: "Listen, Major Abbott, I've done so little for you. Can't I help in any other way?"

He shook his head. "You've been a perfect brick. But there's nothing more you can do... here."

"Where are you making for?" I asked.

He hesitated and looked at me steadily.

"Berlin..." he said at last.

"Berlin?" I repeated. "Why, I'm going there myself next week."

He paused, and his eyes narrowed. "The devil you are!" he muttered softly. Then he laughed. "No. You keep out of this. It's no work for a charming girl like you."

"I'm not such a helpless female as that sounds," I told him. "I'm used to taking care of myself. And I really do know German well. If there was anything..."

He checked me with his hand. "I know. But I've got to plough a lonely furrow." He turned to the desk.

"Ready? I'm going to blow out the light."

At that very moment an electric bell resounded through the house.

The little man was stooping to the candle on the desk. Now he straightened up and looked at me inquiringly. And for the first time his face was really anxious.
"There's some one at the front door," I explained in a rapid undertone.

"Who is it, do you know?" he whispered.

Mystified, I shook my head. "The von Hentsches wouldn't ring. They have their key. And so have the servants."

"Bad!" he commented briefly. "It must be the window for me, then. That path I saw outside the house, does it lead to the road?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good. Shut the window after me, then bolt upstairs and get into a wrapper. Come down, then, and see who's at the front door. I'll watch my opportunity and nip out on to the road..." The bell trilled again. "You can let 'em ring for a bit. They'll think you're asleep."

He tiptoed to the window. "Ready?" he said softly. Then I saw his body stiffen. He held up a warning hand. I listened; and out of the stillness I heard the gentle rustle of feet in the garden.

Quick as thought, my companion bent to the candle and the study sank into darkness. At the same instant another patient, enigmatic ring whirred through the silence. There were vague, muffled sounds in the garden; but not very close to the house, as it seemed to me.

A hot, staccato whisper rasped on my ear.

"You're going to Berlin for sure?"

"Yes, on Friday. Why?"

"If anything should happen to me, can I rely on you to redeem a ghastly folly of mine?"

"I'll help you in any way I can."

Our hands met in the dark.

"Listen, then! In the drawing-room of a woman called Florida von Pellegrini, an opera singer, who has an apartment at 305 Hohenzollern-Allee, a sealed envelope is hidden in the gramophone cabinet. It is in the lower
part, thrust away behind a lot of old gramophone records, a blue envelope, you can’t mistake it. Do you think you could retrieve that envelope without this woman or any one else knowing, and take it to an address I’ll give you?"

Feeling rather scared, I answered as bravely as I could: "I’ll do my best. But how can you be sure it’s still there?"

"Because the gramophone is never used. Flora hates gramophones. . . ."

His use of the woman’s Christian name was to recur to me later.

"If the envelope has gone," he went on, "you’ll know that I’ve been there before you. She gets up late. If you call early, it oun’t be difficult. Pretend you’ve got something to sell, frocks or furs, and the maid—her name is Hedwig—will show you into the salon to wait."

Again that awful bell, patient but persistent.

And what am I to do with this envelope?" I asked.

"Take it to one Joseph Bale. He’s got a theatrical agency in the Tauben-Strasse, one of the turnings off the Friedrich-Strasse, at No. 97. Give him the envelope, in person, only in person, remember. He’ll know what to do with it. He’s an elusive beggar, but if you say you’re a friend of mine, he’ll see you at once."

"You can count on me," I said.

He squeezed my hand. "I know you won’t fail me. If you only understood what this means to me! I let my people down. And I have to make good. Sure you’ve got those two addresses?"

I repeated them as he had given them to me.

"Good. The name’s Bale, remember. A friend of Major Abbott, you’ll say. Got that?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then stand by to shut the window after me!"
THE CROUCHING BEAST

I caught his hand as he turned away. "You're never going out there?"

Two long and steady peals in succession resounded from the front hall.

"It's my only chance. There's no knowing what they wouldn't do to you if they caught me here. Besides, for the present it seems all quiet again. Hush, now!"

His hand was on the window-latch. Noiselessly the window swung back. The smell of damp leaves was in my nostrils. And then the little man was gone. The night, moonless, starless, and black under a pall of low-hanging clouds, seemed to swallow him up. Only then did I remember that he had left without the coat and hat I had promised him.

I closed the window as gently as I could, groped my way to the door, and darted up to my bedroom. By candlelight I whipped the pins out of my hair, tore off my blouse and skirt, and dragged on my kimono. Cinder in hand, I hastened downstairs again to the front door.

"What is it? Who's there?" I asked, my hand on the latch.

A thick voice answered in guttural English:

"Is that you, gnädiges Fräulein? Please to open quickly. It is I, Major von Ungemach...."

His voice, usually a sort of jolly, jovial bellow, was husky and apprehensive. I scarcely recognised it.

"But what do you want?" I persisted. "I'm not dressed. I was in bed and asleep...."

His heavy hand beat impatiently upon the glass panel of the door.

"Open only! I must see you at once. It is most urgent!"

I swung back the door. Von Ungemach stepped swiftly into the hall. His puffy face was deeply troubled and his pale eyes smouldered angrily. His grey military
overcoat was cast about his shoulders, and he carried an electric torch in his hand.

The change in his appearance gave me a sudden feeling of fear. I had never seen the Herr Kommandant like this before. I knew him only as a plump, self-indulgent, amusing creature, prodigiously vain, an indefatigable talker, and untiringly assiduous in his attention to me. I found it hard to identify him with this grey-faced man, haggard-eyed and curt of speech.

He turned from me to rap out an order to some one invisible in the gloom.

"Stay there with your men at the garden gate," he barked. "You'll let nobody pass, verstanden?"

"Zu Befehl, Herr Major," a gruff voice spoke back out of the night. Von Ungemach took the door from me and closed it. I was tortured with anxiety for my poor little man. Penned in, as he was, in the garden, with its high, unscalable walls, and the gate on the road guarded; what chance did he have?

"One of our people has escaped," said the Major bluntly: he spoke in German; usually he aired his English on me. "It is thought he may have come by way of your garden. You say you were in bed. Did you hear any suspicious sound downstairs?"

"Only the gun," I replied, and wondered whether I looked as terrified as I felt, "and the excitement afterwards."

The beam of his torch swept the bare hall. It fell upon the electric switch beside the door. His hand turned the button; but the hall remained dark.

"Verdammt," he rasped. "the light to fail on this of all nights!" He swung round to me. "You said the Herr Landgerichtsrat was out when I telephoned. Has he come back yet?"

"No," I replied.
"Then, with the gracious Fräulein's permission, I will take a look round. We'll start with the study, as that gives on the garden.

Familiar as he was with the house, he led the way without hesitation along the passage and through the dining-room, his lamp flinging a shaft of white light before him as he went. I followed, my mind a medley of conjectures and fears. Had my visitor left any trace behind? And what story was I going to tell if the Major took it into his head to cross-examine me as to my movements during the evening?

We had reached the study threshold when a single shot rang out from the garden. With a muttered exclamation von Ungemach dashed into the room and plucked open the window. There fell another deafening explosion without; guttural voices shouted incoherently, heavy footfalls grated on the gravel.

The Major darted out, taking his torch with him, and I was left alone in the dark.

Sick with fear, I leaned back against the door-post, afraid to ask myself what those shots portended.

CHAPTER V

DR. VON HENTSCH CHANGES HIS MIND

Doubtless you who have lived through the amazing Iliad of the Great War will count it as nothing that a rifle should crack out across the peace of a German garden, and a man disappear thereafter as completely as though he had never existed. But at the time of which I write the world at large still knew not what manner of thing was this Prussian military system which the spirit that sets liberty before death was to undertake to smash.

I least of all. I was of that generation of the English