Valentine Williams

The Crouching Beast

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THE CROUCHING BEAST

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Peace at last....

I can scarcely believe we have beaten them. Yet to-night bonfires were flaming the wonderful news across the Downs and Bill Bradley says London has gone wild.

Dear Bill! He knew I would be sorrowing while all England rejoiced, and he turned his back on the junketings in town to motor down to Sussex and comfort me. He has been so patient, so understanding, through all these agonising months of uncertainty that to-night, before he left, I promised to give him his answer at Christmas, if by then there is still no news.

How should there be any news? The British mission which has gone into Germany has been ordered to make the closest inquiries; but what more can they do than the Red Cross, the Crown Princess of Sweden (bless her golden English heart!), the King of Spain, the Vatican, all the high neutral sources which have already tried and failed?

It is so bitter hard to abandon hope. And yet I haven't much faith left. It is eight months since I last heard: and they are quite definite when I see them in Whitehall. Well may they call it the Secret Service! Shall I ever forget the furtive little office, high above the stir of the Embankment, the tidy desk, with just a telephone and some letter trays, and behind it my Nigel's Chief, that frightening old man, whose eyes were yet so gentle as he told me I must make up my mind for the worst?

To ease my mind of its grief, to clear it for this decision I feel I owe to poor Bill, I have resolved to write my story. Perhaps I shall find solace in the very anguish of living in memory once more through the phases of that extraordinary adventure which Nigel Druce and I confronted together.

The last bonfire has flickered out. Not a dog barks: the countryside is deathly still, blanketed in the November sea-mist that clings pearling to the diamond panes of my cottage window. But shadowy figures come thronging about my lamp: dear Lucy Varley, my little Major, the Pellegrini with her flaming hair, Rudi von Linz, dapper and debonair, Pater Vedastus, as I first saw him, leaning on his spade in the garden of the Capuchins, and that man of terror they called The Crouching Beast, Clubfoot, the grim and sinister cripple who stood in the forefront of those who brought down untold misery upon the world and on me.

And my Nigel. God help me! Of him it will be hardest to write....

Olivia Dunbar.

11*th November*, 1918.

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The mutter of the storm

Was the hush that rested over the garden of the old Kommandanten-Haus, that breathless July evening of 1914

which launched me on my strange adventure, symbolical of the lull before the storm which was about to break over Europe? Now that I look back upon that summer I spent at Schlatz I think it was. Personally, I was far too busy absorbing first impressions of life in a pleasant German garrison town to have ears to hear the ominous beat of the war drums, faint at first but growing steadily louder, like the tomtoms of "Emperor Jones." But later, when I was a V.A.D. at Dover and at night the wind from the Channel would awaken us with the throbbing of the guns in France, thinking of those glorious summer days, I would picture myself sleeping peacefully, like almost everybody else, through the growling thunder of the approaching catastrophe.

On this evening, as I remember, dusk had fallen early. The sun had died in a riot of wrathful colour, and beyond the end of the garden the lemon-tinted sky set off in sharp silhouette the high wall of Schlatz Castle and the square tower, still higher, that rose to heaven above it like a stern prayer in stone.

Not a leaf stirred in the rambling and neglected garden which, between two blank grey walls, spread its train of green right up to the piled-up mass of the Castle. The air was warm, and through the open French windows of Dr. von Hentsch's study the heavy fragrance of the roses mounted to me as I sat at the typewriter. I had the feeling that the garden was holding its breath, waiting, as it were, for something to happen, while the darkness slowly deepened and high up in the air yellow lights began to glimmer in the Castle windows.

I had just switched on the reading-lamp when I heard the postman coming up the gravel path at the side of the house. Nothing much ever happened at Schlatz; and we had so few visitors that it was not hard to identify our different callers by their step. Particularly Franz, our postman. Though Lucy von Hentsch and her husband were kindness itself, I was at times homesick for England. Letters made a great difference to me at Schlatz, even poor Bill's, and I used to catch myself listening for Franz's stolid, military tramp.

At his sonorous sing-song greeting, "Schon'gut'n Abend, Fräulein!" I looked up from Lucy's manuscript to see him standing in the open window, his loose blue uniform all flecked with the July dust.

"There was nobody at the front, Fräulein," he said, "so I thought I'd look round at the back, on the chance."

"I didn't hear the bell," I explained. "The Herr Landgerichtsrat and Frau von Hentsch are dining out and the maids have gone to the Fair."

"And the Miss"—"die Miss" was the way I was often addressed—"remains like that all alone in the house?" Franz was sorting through his bag.

I laughed. "The Miss has plenty to occupy her, Franz," I told him, and pointed to the pile of manuscript beside my machine.

He wagged his head doubtfully.

"The newspapers are full of nothing but robberies and murders," he observed with an air of gloom. "The Kommandanten-Haus is lonely, perched up here on the hill above the town. Frau von Speicher, the late Kommandant's lady, she would never stay in the house by herself—nee,

nee! The Fräulein should, at least, keep the windows closed."

"Nothing's going to happen to me right under the noses of the Castle guards," I answered, and took the letters he handed over—there was one for me, I saw with delight, from my married sister, Dulcie. "You must remember that English girls are used to taking care of themselves, Franz...."

"Na und ob!" the postman put in, as who should say, "Now you're talking!" "It's the men in England who need protecting, Fräulein, if the newspapers tell the truth about the goings-on of your friends, die Suffragetten...."

We both laughed. This was a stock joke between Franz and me. Like all Germans I met, he displayed a sort of incredulous interest in the fight for female suffrage in England which loomed so large in the newspapers that summer.

"Anyway, the Miss has nothing to fear from the prisoners," the postman resumed, moving his head in the direction of the glowing windows of the Castle. "The Herren Offiziere amuse themselves far too well under arrest to think of escaping...."

I smiled my assent, for the same thought was in my mind. I should explain that Schlatz Castle, once the seat of the Dukedom of Schlatz—Herzog von Schlatz is one of the titles of the Kings of Prussia—was used to lodge officers sentenced to fortress imprisonment for offences against the military code such as duelling, gambling and the like. These officers were frequently let out on parole, to get their hair cut and so forth, and I used to see them about the town in undress uniform without their swords. As far as I could

gather, their punishment consisted solely in the loss of promotion and the temporary deprivation of their personal liberty. Even Dr. von Hentsch used to say that the drinking and gambling up at the Schloss were a disgrace.

The garden of the Kommandanten-Haus ran right up to the Castle wall, and sometimes in the evening sounds of revelry would be wafted down to us from the detention quarters. Our house, as its name indicated, was really the official residence of the Castle Commandant. But when Major von Ungemach, who was a bachelor, was given the post, he preferred to occupy a suite in the Schloss and let the picturesque 18th-century house to Dr. von Hentsch, who was transferred about the same time to Schlatz as judge at the local courts.

"The Herren Offiziere won't trouble the gracious Fräulein," Franz added. "I meant tramps and such rabble. With the harvest a lot of bad characters drift into the town." He wagged his head. "One can't blame them. Hunger makes men desperate. As long as you have wage-slaves, you'll have crime, Fräulein. Even in old England, which isn't a police State like this...."

I stared at him in amazement. "Why, Franz," I exclaimed, "you're talking like a Socialist. You'd better not let the Herr Landgerichtsrat hear you...!"

His sun-browned face, bony and, in repose, rather severe, broke into a slow smile at the horror in my voice. I really was taken aback. Socialists at home I knew of mainly as shabby men in cloth caps who walked in procession to the Park on Sundays under huge banners. But in Dr. von Hentsch's well-ordered household, where only thoroughly

constitutional newspapers like the *Kreuz-Zeitung* were read, Socialists, or Social Democrats, as he called them, were mentioned only to be denounced as incendiary scoundrels dangerously favoured by parliamentary institutions. It sounded to me odd to hear this civil-spoken, rather staid Prussian postman in his trim uniform voicing Socialist doctrines.

"One can say things to an English Miss one wouldn't say to a Prussian official," he observed drily.

I hastened to change the subject, which I felt to be dangerous.

"I'm sure you'd like a glass of beer after your walk," I put in.

"Since the Fräulein is so kind. It's sultry out. I think there's a storm coming up...."

As I ran through the adjoining dining-room, hung with Dr. von Hentsch's collection of antlers, to fetch a bottle of beer from the cooler in the pantry, I heard a tremor of distant thunder go rolling across the garden. With a muttered "Pros't, Fräulein!" Franz drained the glass at a draught. As he set it down and wiped his moustache, the lamp on the desk blinked.

"Oh, dear," I exclaimed, "I do hope the light's not going to fail again to-night. I want to finish all this typing before I go to bed....!"

"The power station's overloaded," remarked the postman, adjusting the sling of his bag over his shoulder. "After the entertainment of His Majesty when he visited Schlatz last winter there were no funds available for carrying out the necessary improvements. The town will

have to wait for a decent electric light supply until a few more Social Democrats are elected to the council. That time isn't far off now, Fräulein. The struggle is coming to a head...."

"I'm afraid I don't know very much about your German politics, Franz," I interposed evasively.

"This is something bigger than mere politics, Fräulein," he answered in his earnest way. "The struggle is not simply a clash between parties. It's a fight between the army and the people. It can end in only one way. There'll be either a revolution or a war."

Once more the thunder growled in the darkness without.

At that I laughed outright. "Revolution? War? Now you're talking nonsense, Franz. If you said there was going to be a revolution in England, you'd still be wrong; but you'd be less far from the truth. Of course, if civil war does break out in Ulster, there's no knowing what might happen. But in Germany! People who say things like that don't know when they're well off. You've got a Kaiser to be proud of, a prosperous country, good wages, beautiful cities with splendid theatres and music and open-air beer gardens where you can take your wife and children, all kinds of inexpensive pleasures that working-men in England don't enjoy, I can tell you. As for war, you mustn't believe all this scare rubbish you read in the newspapers. In spite of the *Daily Mail* relations between Germany and England were never better than they are to-day."

With a brooding air the postman settled his red-striped cap on his head and hitched up his bag.

"All that may be true," he said. "But if the military want a war, it won't be hard to find a pretext. For the rest, you Engländer have a parliament that is a parliament, that can make and unmake Ministries; not a wretched talking-shop with no real power like our German Reichstag. This is a military State, Fräulein. The civilian doesn't count. He's only fit to be sabred, like the cobbler of Zabern, to teach him his place. There is no liberty for the individual in Prussia. If you were to report to the Post-Direktor what I have said to you this evening I should be flung into the street, into gaol, maybe, my pension would be taken away and my wife and children would starve. But the masses are getting restless under the rule of the sabre. As soon as the military believe that the people are getting out of hand, they'll start a war. And that may be sooner than you think...."

I laughed incredulously. "A war? A war with whom?"

For a moment Franz was silent, and in the pause I heard a sudden wind brush shudderingly through the trees outside the window. Behind the jetty mass of the Castle the lightning flickered white across the sky; and louder now, but still reluctant and stertorous, the thunder muttered again.

Then the postman, having glanced cautiously over his shoulder, drew nearer and, dropping his voice, said:

"Strange things are happening up at the barracks. At the mobilisation store they are working day and night. There is talk of a new uniform to be handed out, a grey uniform which has never been seen before. Do you know what that means, Fräulein?"

His serious brown eyes, intelligent and trusting as any dog's, were fixed on my face. His manner was so portentous

that I fell back a step. He did not wait for my answer.

"This new uniform is clearly for service in the field," he declared. "In other words, the German Army is preparing to mobilise. And that means..."—he paused, to wrench his mouth into a wry and bitter grimace, then added with measured deliberation—"... that means war!"

I was not greatly impressed. Why, only that afternoon I had been to a Kaffee-Klatsch at Frau Oberleutnant Meyer's! All the young officers of the infantry battalion stationed at Schlatz had been there, including Rudi von Linz, a charming lieutenant who was a particular friend of mine, and we had danced until seven o'clock. And had not Major von Ungemach, the Castle Commandant, telephoned that very evening to ask whether he might call upon me? I had no intention of being alone in the house with the somewhat ardent Major and I had told him I was busy and couldn't see him.

But when an army mobilises surely the officers haven't time to go dancing or calling on their women friends? So I said, rather sarcastically, to Franz: "With whom, pray?"

He shook his head sagely. "That remains to be seen, Fräulein. I'm no politician. Perhaps over this trouble in the Balkans. The newspapers say that the Austrians intend to demand satisfaction from Servia for the murder of the Archduke...!"

"And quite right, too!" I cried. "Dr. von Hentsch says the whole thing was planned by the Servian Government. To think of that poor man, and his wife too, being shot down like that in cold blood!"

"Na," said the postman, heaving up his satchel, "what will be, will be! I wish you good-night, Fräulein!" He glanced into the garden stretched out black and listless in the close air. "I must hurry if I'm to finish my round before the storm breaks."

"Gute Nacht, Franz," I replied, and turned back to the desk to read my letter.

At the window he hesitated. "The Fräulein will have the goodness not to repeat what I said to-night? It would get me into serious trouble if it were known...."

"Schwamm darüber!" I told him, or "Wash it out!" as you might say. "I've already forgotten it. And I advise you to do the same."

He smiled whimsically and wagged his head in a gesture expressive of doubt. Then, "Gute Nacht, Miss," he said. "Angenehme Rune!"

"Ebenfalls!" I answered, giving him back the stock reply to his wish that I might sleep well—German, like Chinese, bristles with ceremonial greetings and no less formal rejoinders—his feet rasped on the path and he was gone. A vivid lightning flash revealed to me a momentary glimpse of the garden with every leaf, as it seemed to me, hanging motionless in the sultry atmosphere. As I picked up Dulcie's letter, once more the thunder rumbled sullenly out of the night....

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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 manoeuvres or the like; for, from the way the young officers grumbled, to me, at any rate, the battalion at Schlatz 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 Kommandanten-Haus 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 stifle 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* 4*th*," 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 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 anything 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, everything, 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 forebodings 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 miserable*

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's 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 plashings 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 spurting

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 footfall 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 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.

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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 groping 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 impatiently, 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 Colonel 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 your 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 neighbourhood 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 Hentsches' 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 apologise 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