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THE MAN WITH THE CLUBFOOT

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THE MAN WITH THE CLUBFOOT

BY

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

AUTHOR OF
THE YELLOW STREAK, Etc.

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THE MAN WITH THE CLUBFOOT

CHAPTER I

I SEEK A BED IN ROTTERDAM

THE reception clerk looked up from the hotel register and shook his head firmly. "Very sorry, saire," he said, "not a bed in ze house." And he closed the book with a snap.

Outside the rain came down heavens hard. Every one who came into the brightly lit hotel vestibule entered with a gush of water. I felt I would rather die than face the wind-swept streets of Rotterdam again.

I turned once more to the clerk who was now busy at the key-rack.

"Haven't you really a corner? I wouldn't mind where it was, as it is only for the night. Come now. . . ."

"Very sorry, saire. We have two gentlemen sleeping in ze bathrooms already. If you had reserved . . ." And he shrugged his shoulders

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and bent towards a visitor who was demanding his key.

I turned away with rage in my heart. What a cursed fool I had been not to wire from Groningen! I had fully intended to, but the extraordinary conversation I had had with Dicky Allerton had put everything else out of my head. At every hotel I had tried it had been the same story—Cooman's, the Maas, the Grand, all were full even to the bathrooms. If I had only wired. . . .

As I passed out into the porch I bethought myself of the porter. A hotel porter had helped me out of a similar plight in Breslau once years ago. This porter, with his red drink-sodden face and tarnished gold braid, did not promise well, so far as a recommendation for a lodging for the night was concerned. Still . . .

I suppose it was my mind dwelling on my experience at Breslau that made me address the man in German. When one has been familiar with a foreign tongue from one's boyhood, it requires but a very slight mental impulse to drop into it. From such slight beginnings do great enterprises spring. If I had known the immense ramification of adventure that was to spread its roots from that simple question, I verily believe my heart would have failed me and I would have run forth into the night and

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the rain and roamed the streets till morning.

Well, I found myself asking the man in German if he knew where I could get a room for the night.

He shot a quick glance at me from under his reddened eyelids.

"The gentleman would doubtless like a German house?" he queried.

You may hardly credit it, but my interview with Dicky Allerton that afternoon had simply driven the war out of my mind. When one has lived much among foreign peoples, one's mentality slips automatically into their skin. I was now thinking in German—at least so it seems to me when I look back upon that night—and I answered without reflecting:

"I don't care where it is as long as I can get somewhere to sleep out of this infernal rain!"

"The gentleman can have a good, clean bed at the Hotel Sixt in the little street they call the Vos in't Tuintje, on the canal behind the Bourse. The proprietress is a good German, jawohl. . . . Frau Anna Schratt her name is. The gentleman need only say he comes from Franz at the Bopparder Hof."

I gave the man a gulden and bade him get me a cab.

It was still pouring. As we rattled away over the glistening cobble-stones, my mind

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traveled back over the startling events of the day. My talk with old Dicky had given me such a mental jar that I found it at first well-nigh impossible to concentrate my thoughts. That's the worst of shell-shock. You think you are cured, you feel fit and well, and then suddenly the machinery of your mind checks and halts and creaks. Ever since I had left hospital convalescent after being wounded on the Somme ("gunshot wound in head and cerebral concussion" the doctors called it) I had trained myself, whenever my brain was *en panne*, to go back to the beginning of things and work slowly up to the present by methodical stages.

Let's see then. . . . I was "boarded" at Millbank and got three months' leave: then I did a month in the Littlejohns' bungalow in Cornwall: there I got the letter from Dicky Allerton, who, before the war, had been in partnership with my brother Francis in the motor business at Coventry. Dicky had been with the Naval Division at Antwerp and was interned with the rest of the crowd when they crossed the Dutch frontier in those disastrous days of October, 1914.

Dicky wrote from Groningen, just a line. Now that I was on leave, if I were fit to travel, would I come to Groningen and see him? "I have had a curious communication which seems

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to have to do with poor Francis," he added. That was all.

My brain was still halting, so I turned to Francis. Here again I had to go back. Francis, rejected on all sides for active service owing to what he scornfully used to call "the shirkers' ailment, varicose veins," had flatly declined to carry on with his motor business after Dicky had joined up, although their firm was doing government work. Finally, he had vanished into the maw of the War Office and all I knew was that he was "something on the Intelligence." More than this not even *he* would tell me, and when he finally disappeared from London, just about the time that I was popping the parapet with my battalion at Neuve Chapelle, he left me his London chambers as his only address for letters.

Ah! now it was all coming back . . . Francis' infrequent letters to me about nothing at all, then his will, forwarded to me for safe keeping when I was home on leave last Christmas, and after that, silence. Not another letter, not a word about him, not a shred of information. He had utterly vanished.

I remembered my frantic inquiries, my vain visits to the War Office, my perplexity at the imperturbable silence of the various officials I importuned for news of my poor brother. Then

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there was that lunch at the Bath Club with Sonny Martin of the Heavies and a friend of his, some kind of staff captain in red tabs. I don't think I heard his name, but I know he was at the War Office, and presently over our cigars and coffee I laid before him the mysterious facts about my brother's case.

"Perhaps you knew Francis?" I said in conclusion. "Yes," he replied, "I know him well." "*Know* him," I repeated, "*know* him . . . then . . . then you think . . . you have reason to believe he is still alive . . .?"

Red Tabs cocked his eye at the gilded cornice of the ceiling and blew a ring from his cigar. But he said nothing.

I persisted with my questions but it was of no avail. Red Tabs only laughed and said: "I know nothing at all except that your brother is a most delightful fellow with all your own love of getting his own way."

Then Sonny Martin, who is the perfection of tact and diplomacy—probably on that account he failed for the Diplomatic—chipped in with an anecdote about a man who was rating the waiter at an adjoining table, and I held my peace. But as Red Tabs rose to go, a little later, he held my hand for a minute in his and with that curious look of his, said slowly and with meaning:

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"When a nation is at war, officers on *active service* must occasionally disappear, sometimes in their country's interest, sometimes in their own."

He emphasized the words "on active service."

In a flash my eyes were opened. How blind I had been! Francis was in Germany.

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CHAPTER II

RED TABS' sphinx-like declaration was no riddle to me. I knew at once that Francis must be on secret service in the enemy's country and that country Germany. My brother's extraordinary knowledge of the Germans, their customs, life and dialects, rendered him ideally suitable for any such perilous mission. Francis always had an extraordinary talent for languages: he seemed to acquire them all without any mental effort, but in German he was supreme. During the year that he and I spent at Consistorial-Rat von Mayburg's house at Bonn, he rapidly outdistanced me, and though, at the end of our time, I could speak German like a German, Francis was able, in addition, to speak Bonn and Cologne *patois* like a native of those ancient cities —ay and he could drill a squad of recruits in

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their own language like the smartest *Leutnant* ever fledged from Gross-Lichterfelde.

He never had any difficulty in passing himself off as a German. Well I remember his delight when he was claimed as a fellow Rheinlander by a German officer we met, one summer before the war, combining golf with a little useful espionage at Cromer.

I don't think Francis had any ulterior motive in his study of German. He simply found he had this imitative faculty: philology had always interested him: so, even after he had gone into the motor trade, he used to amuse himself on business trips to Germany by acquiring new dialects.

His German imitations were extraordinarily funny. One of his "star turns" was a noisy sitting of the Reichstag with speeches by Prince Bülow and August Bebel and "interruptions"; another, a patriotic oration by an old Prussian General at a Kaiser's Birthday dinner. Francis had a marvellous faculty not only of *seeming* German, but even of almost looking like a German, so absolutely was he able to slip into the skin of the part.

Yet never in my wildest moments had I dreamt that he would try and get into Germany in war-time, into that land where every citizen is catalogued and pigeon-holed from the cradle,

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But Red Tabs' oracular utterance had made everything clear to me. Why, a mission to Germany would be the very thing that Francis would give his eyes to be allowed to attempt! Francis with his utter disregard of danger, his love of taking risks, his impish delight in taking a rise out of the stodgy Hun . . . why, if there were Englishmen brave enough to take chances of that kind, Francis would be the first to volunteer.

Yes, if Francis were on a mission anywhere it would be to Germany. But what prospect had he of ever returning—with the frontiers closed and ingress and egress practically barred even to pro-German neutrals? Many a night in the trenches I had a mental vision of Francis, so debonair and so fearless, facing a firing-squad of Prussian privates.

From the day of the luncheon at the Bath Club to this very afternoon I had had no further inkling of my brother's whereabouts or fate. The authorities at home professed ignorance, as I knew, in duty bound, they would, and I had nothing to hang any theory on to until Dicky Allerton's letter came. Ashcroft at the F.O. fixed up my passports for me and I lost no time in exchanging the white gulls and red cliffs of Cornwall for the windmills and trim canals of Holland.

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And now in my breast pocket lay, written on a small piece of cheap foreign note-paper, the tidings I had come to Groningen to seek. Yet so trivial, so nonsensical, so baffling was the message that I already felt my trip to Holland to have been a fruitless errand.

I found Dicky fat and bursting with health in his quarters at the internment camp. He only knew that Francis had disappeared. When I told him of my meeting with Red Tabs at the Bath Club, of the latter's words to me at parting and of my own conviction in the matter he whistled, then looked grave.

He went straight to the point in his bluff, direct way.

"I am going to tell you a story first, Desmond," he said to me, "then I'll show you a piece of paper. Whether the two together fit in with your theory as to poor Francis' disappearance will be for you to judge. Until now—I must confess—I had felt inclined to dismiss the only reference this document appears to make to your brother as a mere coincidence in names, but what you have told me makes things interesting—by Jove, it does, though. Well, here's the yarn first of all!

"Your brother and I have had dealings in the past with a Dutchman in the motor business

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at Nymwegen, name of van Urutius. He has often been over to see us at Coventry in the old days and Francis has stayed with him at Nymwegen once or twice on his way back from Germany—Nymwegen, you know, is close to the German frontier. Old Urutius has been very decent to me since I have been in gaol here and has been over several times, generally with a box or two of those nice Dutch cigars.'"

"Dicky," I broke in on him, "get on with the story. What the devil's all this got to do with Francis? The document. . . ."

"Steady, my boy!" was the imperturbable reply, "let me spin my yarn my own way. I'm coming to the piece of paper. . . .

"Well, then, old Urutius came to see me ten days ago. All I knew about Francis I had told him, namely, that Francis had entered the army and was missing. It was no busines of the old Mynheer if Francis was in the Intelligence, so I didn't tell him that. Van U. is a staunch friend of the English, but you know the saying that if a man doesn't know he can't split.

"My old Dutch pal, then, turned up here ten days ago. He was bubbling over with excitement. 'Mr. Allerton,' he says, 'I haf had a writing, a most mysterious writing—a writing, I t'ink, from Francis Okewood.'

"I sat tight. If there were any revelations

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coming they were going to be Dutch, not British. On that I was resolved.

"'I haf received,' the old Dutchman went on, 'from Gairemany a parcel of metal shields, plates—what you call 'em—of tin, *hein?* What I haf to advertise my business. They arrife las' week—I open the parcel myself and on the top is the envelope with the invoice.'

"Mynheer paused: he has a good sense of the dramatic.

"'Well,' I said, 'did it bite you or say "Gott strafe England," or what?'

"Van Urutius ignored my flippancy and resumed. 'I open the envelope and there in the invoice I find this writing—here!'

"And here," said Dicky, diving into his pocket, "is 'the writing'!"

And he thrust into my eagerly outstretched hand a very thin half-sheet of foreign note-paper, of that kind of cheap glazed note-paper you get in cafés on the Continent when you ask for writing materials.

Three lines of German, written in fluent German characters in purple ink beneath the name and address of Mynheer van Urutius . . . that was all.

My heart sank with disappointment and wretchedness as I read the inscription.

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Here is the document:

Heern Willem van Urutius,
Automobilgeschäft,
Nymwegen.
***Alexander-Straat* 81 bis.**

Berlin, 1ten Juli, 16.

O Eichenholz! O Eichenholz,
Wie leer sind deine Blätter.

Wie Achiles in dem Zelte.

Wo zweie sich zanken
Erfreut sich der Dritte.

(Translation.)

Mr. Willem van Urutius,
Automobile Agent,
Nymwegen.
81 bis *Alexander-Straat*.

Berlin, 1st July, 16.

O Oak-tree! O Oak-tree,
How empty are thy leaves.

Like Achiles in the tent.

When two people fall out
The third party rejoices.

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I stared at this nonsensical document in silence. My thoughts were almost too bitter for words.

At last I spoke.

"What's all this rigmarole got to do with Francis, Dicky?" I asked, vainly trying to suppress the bitterness in my voice. "This looks like a list of copybook maxims for your Dutch friend's advertisement cards. . . ."

But I returned to the study of the piece of paper.

"Not so fast, old bird," Dicky replied coolly, "let me finish my story. Old Stick-in-the-mud is a lot shrewder than we think.

" 'When I read the writing,' he told me, 'I think he is all robbish, but then I ask myself, who shall put robbish in my invoices? And then I read the writing again and once again and then I see he is a message.'

"Stop, Dicky!" I cried, "of course, what an ass I am! Why *Eichenholz* . . ."

"Exactly," returned Dicky, "as the old Mynheer was the first to see, *Eichenholz* translated into English is 'Oak-tree' or 'Oak-wood' —in other words, Francis."

"Then, Dicky . . ." I interrupted.

"Just a minute," said Dicky, putting up his hand. "I confess I thought, on first seeing this message or whatever it is, that there must be

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simply a coincidence of name and that somebody's idle scribbling had found its way into old van U.'s invoice. But now that you have told me that Francis may have actually got into Germany, then, I must say, it looks as if this might be an attempt of his to communicate with home."

"Where did the Dutchman's packet of stuff come from?" I asked.

"From the Berlin Metal Works in Steglitz, a suburb of Berlin: he has dealt with them for years."

"But then what does all the rest of it mean . . . all this about Achilles and the rest?"

"Ah, Desmond!" was Dicky's reply, "that's where you've got not only me, but also Mynheer van Urutius."

"'O oakwood! O oakwood, how empty are thy leaves!' . . . That sounds like a taunt, don't you think, Dicky?" said I.

"*Or* a confession of failure from Francis . . . to let us know that he has done nothing, adding that he is accordingly sulking 'like Achilles in his tent.'"

"But, see here, Richard Allerton," I said, "Francis would never spell 'Achilles' with one 'l' . . . now, would he?"

"By Jove!" said Dicky, looking at the paper again, "nobody would but a very uneducated

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person. I know nothing about German, but tell me, is that the hand of an educated German? Is it Francis' handwriting?"

"Certainly, it is an educated hand," I replied, "but I'm dashed if I can say whether it is Francis' German handwriting: it can scarcely be because, as I have already remarked, he spells 'Achilles' with one 'l.'"

Then the fog came down over us again. We sat helplessly and gazed at the fateful paper.

"There's only one thing for it, Dicky," I said finally, "I'll take the blooming thing back to London with me and hand it over to the Intelligence. After all, Francis may have a code with them. Possibly they will see light where we grope in darkness."

"Desmond," said Dicky, giving me his hand, "that's the most sensible suggestion you've made yet. Go home and good luck to you. But promise me you'll come back here and tell me if that piece of paper brings the news that dear old Francis is alive."

So I left Dicky but I did not go home. I was not destined to see my home for many a weary week.

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CHAPTER III

A VISITOR IN THE NIGHT

A VOLLEY of invective from the box of the cab—bad language in Dutch is fearfully effective—aroused me from my musings. The cab, a small, uncomfortable box with a musty smell, stopped with a jerk that flung me forward. From the outer darkness furious altercation resounded above the plashing of the rain. I peered through the streaming glass of the windows but could distinguish nothing save the yellow blur of a lamp. Then a vehicle of some kind seemed to move away in front of us, for I heard the grating of wheels against the curb, and my cab drew up to the pavement.

On alighting, I found myself in a narrow, dark street with high houses on either side. A grimy lamp with the word "Hôtel" in half-obliterated characters painted on it hung above my head, announcing that I had arrived at my

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destination. As I paid off the cabman another cab passed. It was apparently the one with which my Jehu had had words, for he turned round and shouted abuse into the night.

My cabman departed, leaving me with my bag on the pavement at my feet, gazing at a narrow dirty door, the upper half of which was filled in with frosted glass. I was at last awake to the fact that I, an Englishman, was going to spend the night in a German hotel to which I had been specially recommended by a German porter on the understanding that I was a German. I knew that, according to the Dutch neutrality regulations, my passport would have to be handed in for inspection by the police and that therefore I could not pass myself off as a German.

"Bah!" I said to give myself courage, "this is a free country, a neutral country. They may be offensive, they may overcharge you, in a Hun hotel, but they can't eat you. Besides, any bed on a night like this!" and I pushed open the door.

Within, the hotel proved to be rather better than its uninviting exterior promised. There was a small vestibule with a little glass cage of an office on one side and beyond it an old-fashioned flight of stairs, with a glass knob on the post at the foot, winding to the upper stories.

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At the sound of my footsteps on the mosaic flooring, a waiter emerged from a little cubby-hole under the stairs. He had a blue apron girt about his waist, but otherwise he wore the short coat and the dicky and white tie of the Continental hotel waiter. His hands were grimy with black marks and so was his apron. He had apparently been cleaning boots.

He was a big, fat, blonde man with narrow, cruel little eyes. His hair was cut so short that his head appeared to be shaven. He advanced quickly towards me and asked me in German in a truculent voice what I wanted.

I replied in the same language, I wanted a room.

He shot a glance at me through his little slits of eyes on hearing my good Bonn accent, but his manner did not change.

"The hotel is full. The gentleman cannot have a bed here. The proprietress is out at present. I regret. . . ." He spat this all out in the offhand insolent manner of the Prussian official.

"It was Franz, of the Bopparder Hof, who recommended me to come here," I said. I was not going out again into the rain for a whole army of Prussian waiters.

"He told me that Frau Schratt would make me very comfortable," I added.

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The waiter's manner changed at once.

"So, so," he said—quite genially this time—"it was Franz who sent the gentleman to us. He is a good friend of the house, is Franz. Ja, Frau Schratt is unfortunately out just now, but as soon as the lady returns I will inform her you are here. In the meantime, I will give the gentleman a room."

He handed me a candlestick and a key.

"So," he grunted, "No. 31, the third floor."

A clock rang out the hour somewhere in the distance.

"Ten o'clock already," he said. "The gentleman's papers can wait till to-morrow, it is so late. Or perhaps the gentleman will give them to the proprietress. She must come any moment."

As I mounted the winding staircase I heard him murmur again:

"So, so, Franz sent him here! Ach, der Franz!"

As soon as I had passed out of sight of the lighted hall I found myself in complete darkness. On each landing a jet of gas, turned down low, flung a dim and flickering light a few yards around. On the third floor I was able to distinguish by the gas rays a small plaque fastened to the wall inscribed with an arrow pointing to the right above the figures: 46-30.

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I stopped to strike a match to light my candle. The whole hotel seemed wrapped in silence, the only sound the rushing of water in the gutters without. Then from the darkness of the narrow corridor that stretched out in front of me, I heard the rattle of a key in a lock.

I advanced down the corridor, the pale glimmer of my candle showing me as I passed a succession of yellow doors, each bearing a white porcelain plate inscribed with a number in black. No. 46 was the first room on the right counting from the landing: the even numbers were on the right, the odd on the left: therefore I reckoned on finding my room the last on the left at the end of the corridor.

The corridor presently took a sharp turn. As I came round the bend I heard again the sound of a key and then the rattling of a door knob, but the corridor bending again, I could not see the author of the noise until I had turned the corner.

I ran right into a man fumbling at a door on the left-hand side of the passage, the last door but one. A mirror at the end of the corridor caught and threw back the reflection of my candle.

The man looked up as I approached. He was wearing a soft black felt hat and a black overcoat and on his arm hung an umbrella stream-

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ing with rain. His candlestick stood on the floor at his feet. It had apparently just been extinguished, for my nostrils sniffed the .odor of burning tallow.

"You have a light?" the stranger said in German in a curiously breathless voice. "I have just come upstairs and the wind blew out my candle and I could not get the door open. Perhaps you could . . ." He broke off gasping and put his hand to his heart.

"Allow me," I said. The lock of the door was inverted and to open the door you had to insert the key upside-down. I did so and the door opened easily. As it swung back I noticed the number of the room was 33, next door to mine.

"Can I be of any assistance to you? Are you unwell?" I said, at the same time lifting my candle and scanning the stranger's features.

He was a young man with close-cropped black hair, fine dark eyes and an aquiline nose with a deep furrow between the eyebrows. The crispness of his hair and the high cheekbones gave a suggestion of Jewish blood. His face was very pale and his lips were blueish. I saw the perspiration glistening on his forehead.

"Thank you, it is nothing," the man replied in the same breathless voice. "I am only a little out of breath with carrying my bag up."

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"You must have arrived just before I did," I said, remembering the cab that had driven away from the hotel as I drove up.

"That is so," he answered, pushing open his door as he spoke. He disappeared into the darkness of the room and suddenly the door shut with a slam that re-echoed through the house.

As I had calculated, my room was next door to his, the end room of the corridor. It smelt horribly close and musty and the first thing I did was to stride across to the windows and fling them back wide.

I found myself looking across a dark and narrow canal, on whose stagnant water loomed large the black shapes of great barges, into the windows of gaunt and weather-stained houses over the way. Not a light shone in any window. Away in the distance the same clock as I had heard before struck the quarter—a single, clear-chime.

It was the regular bedroom of the *maison meublée*—worn carpet, discolored and dingy wall-paper, faded red curtains and mahogany bedstead with a vast *édredon*, like a giant pin-cushion. My candle, guttering wildly in the unaccustomed breeze blowing dankly through the chamber, was the sole illuminant. There was neither gas nor electric light laid on.

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The house had relapsed into quiet. The bedroom had an evil look and this, combined with the dank air from the canal, gave my thoughts a sombre tinge.

"Well," I said to myself, "you're a nice kind of ass! Here you are, a British officer, posing as a brother Hun in a cut-throat Hun hotel, with a waiter who looks like the official Prussian executioner. What's going to happen to you, young feller my lad, when Madame comes along and finds you have a British passport? A very pretty kettle of fish, I must say!

"And suppose Madame takes it into her head to toddle along up here to-night and calls your bluff and summons the gentle Hans or Fritz or whatever that ruffianly waiter's name is to come upstairs and settle your hash! What sort of a fight are you going to put up in that narrow corridor out there with a Hun next door and probably on every side of you, and no exit this end? You don't know a living soul in Rotterdam and no one will be a penny the wiser if you vanish off the face of the earth . . . at any rate no one on this side of the water."

Starting to undress, I noticed a little door on the left-hand side of the bed. I found it opened into a small *cabinet de toilette*, a narrow slip of a room with a wash-hand stand and a very dirty window covered with yellow paper. I

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pulled open this window with great difficulty—it cannot have been opened for years—and found it gave on to a very small and deep interior court, just an air shaft round which the house was built. At the bottom was a tiny paved court not more than five foot square, entirely isolated save on one side where there was a basement window with a flight of steps leading down from the court through an iron grating. From this window a faint yellow streak of light was visible. The air was damp and chill and horrid odors of a dirty kitchen were wafted up the shaft. So I closed the window and set about turning in.

I took off my coat and waistcoat, then bethought me of the mysterious document I had received from Dicky. Once more I looked at those enigmatical words:

O Oak-wood! O Oak-wood (for that much was clear),

How empty are thy leaves.
Like Achiles (with one "l") *in the tent.*
When two people fall out
The third party rejoices.

What did it all mean? Had Francis fallen out with some confederate who, having had his revenge by denouncing my brother, now took this extraordinary step to announce his victim's fate to the latter's friends? "Like Achilles in

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the tent!" Why not "in *his* tent"? Surely . . .

A curious choking noise, the sound of a strangled cough, suddenly broke the profound silence of the house. My heart seemed to stop for a moment. I hardly dared raise my eyes from the paper which I was conning, leaning over the table in my shirt and trousers.

The noise continued, a hideous, deep-throated gurgling. Then I heard a faint foot-fall in the corridor without.

I raised my eyes to the door.

Someone or something was scratching the panels, furiously, frantically.

The door-knob was rattled loudly. The noise broke in raucously upon that horrid gurgling sound without. It snapped the spell that bound me.

I moved resolutely towards the door. Even as I stepped forward the gurgling resolved itself into a strangled cry.

"Ach! ich sterbe" were the words I heard.

Then the door burst open with a crash, there was a swooping rush of wind and rain through the room, the curtains flapped madly from the windows.

The candle flared up wildly.

Then it went out.

Something fell heavily into the room.

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CHAPTER IV

DESTINY KNOCKS AT THE DOOR

THERE are two things at least that modern warfare teaches you, one is to keep cool in an emergency, the other is not to be afraid of a corpse. Therefore I was scarcely surprised to find myself standing there in the dark calmly reviewing the extraordinary situation in which I now found myself. That's the curious thing about shell-shock: after it a motor back-firing or a tire bursting will reduce a man to tears, but in face of danger he will probably find himself in full possession of his wits as long as there is no sudden and violent noise connected with it.

Brief as the sounds without had been, I was able on reflection to identify that gasping gurgle, that rapid patter of the hands. Anyone who has seen a man die quickly knows them. Accordingly I surmised that somebody had come to my door at the point of death.

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Then I thought of the man next door, his painful breathlessness, his blueish lips, when I found him wrestling with his key, and I guessed who was my nocturnal visitor lying prone in the dark at my feet.

Shielding the candle with my hand I re-kindled it. Then I grappled with the flapping curtains and got the windows shut. Then only did I raise my candle until its beams shone down upon the silent figure lying across the threshold of the room.

It was the man from No. 33. He was quite dead. His face was livid and distorted, his eyes glassy between the half-closed lids, while his fingers, still stiffly clutching, showed paint and varnish and dust beneath the nails where he had pawed door and carpet in his death agony.

One did not need to be a doctor to see that a heart attack had swiftly and suddenly struck him down.

Now that I knew the worst I acted with decision. I dragged the body by the shoulders into the room until it lay in the center of the carpet. Then I locked the door.

The foreboding of evil that had cast its black shadow over my thoughts from the moment I crossed the threshold of this sinister hotel came over me strongly again. Indeed, my position

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was, to say the least, scarcely enviable. Here was I, a British officer with British papers of identity, about to be discovered in a German hotel, into which I had introduced myself under false pretences, at dead of night alone with the corpse of a German or Austrian (for such the dead man apparently was)!

It was undoubtedly a most awkward fix.

I listened.

Everything in the hotel was silent as the grave.

I turned from my gloomy forebodings to look again at the stranger. In his crisp black hair and slightly protuberant cheek-bones I traced again the hint of Jewish ancestry I had remarked before. Now that the man's eyes—his big, thoughtful eyes that had stared at me out of the darkness of the corridor—were closed, he looked far less foreign than before: in fact he might almost have passed as an Englishman.

He was a young man—about my own age, I judged—(I shall be twenty-eight next birthday) and about my own height, which is five feet ten. There was something about his appearance and build that struck a chord very faintly in my memory.

Had I seen the fellow before?

I remembered now that I had noticed something oddly familiar about him when I first saw

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him for that brief moment in the corridor.

I looked down at him again as he lay on his back on the faded carpet. I brought the candle down closer and scanned his features.

He certainly looked less foreign than he did before. He might not be a German after all: more likely a Hungarian or a Pole, perhaps even a Dutchman. His German had been too flawless for a Frenchman—for a Hungarian, either, for that matter.

I leant back on my knees to ease my cramped position. As I did so I caught a glimpse of the stranger's three-quarters face.

Why! He reminded me of Francis a little!

There certainly was a suggestion of my brother in the man's appearance. Was it the thick black hair, the small dark moustache? Was it the well-chiselled mouth? It was rather a hint of Francis than a resemblance to him.

The stranger was fully dressed. The jacket of his blue serge suit had fallen open and I saw a portfolio in the inner breast pocket. Here, I thought, might be a clue to the dead man's identity. I fished out the portfolio, then rapidly ran my fingers over the stranger's other pockets.

I left the portfolio to the last.

The jacket pockets contained nothing else except a white silk handkerchief unmarked. In

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the right hand top pocket of the waistcoat was a neat silver cigarette case, perfectly plain, containing half a dozen cigarettes. I took one out and looked at it. It was a Melania, a cigarette I happen to know for they stock them at one of my clubs, the Dionysus, and it chances to be the only place in London where you can get the brand.

It looked as if my unknown friend had come from London.

There was also a plain silver watch of Swiss make.

In the trousers pocket was some change, a little English silver and coppers, some Dutch silver and paper money. In the right-hand trouser pocket was a bunch of keys.

That was all.

I put the different articles on the floor beside me. Then I got up, put the candle on the table, drew the chair up to it and opened the portfolio.

In a little pocket of the inner flap were visiting cards. Some were simply engraved with the name in small letters:

Dr. Semlin

Others were more detailed:

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Dr. Semlin,
Brooklyn, N. Y.
The Halewright Mfg. Co., Ltd

There were also half a dozen private cards:

Dr. Semlin,
333 E. 73rd St.,
New York.
Rivington Park House.

In the packet of cards was a solitary one, larger than the rest, an expensive affair on thick, highly glazed millboard, bearing in gothic characters the name:

OTTO VON STEINHARDT

On this card was written in pencil, above the name:

"Hotel Sixt, Vos in't Tuintje," and in brackets, thus: "[Mme. Anna Schratt.]"

In another pocket of the portfolio was an American passport surmounted by a flaming eagle and sealed with a vast red seal, sending

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greetings to all and sundry on behalf of Henry Semlin, a United States citizen, travelling to Europe. Details in the body of the document set forth that Henry Semlin was born at Brooklyn on 31st March, 1886, that his hair was Black, nose Aquiline, chin Firm, and that of special marks he had None. The description was good enough to show me that it was undoubtedly the body of Henry Semlin that lay at my feet.

The passport had been issued at Washington three months earlier. The only *visé* it bore was that of the American Embassy in London, dated two days previously. With it was a British permit, issued to Henry Semlin, Manufacturer, granting him authority to leave the United Kingdom for the purpose of travelling to Rotterdam, further a bill for luncheon served on board the Dutch Royal mail steamer *Koningin Regentes* on yesterday's date.

In the long and anguishing weeks that followed on that anxious night in the Hotel of the Vos in't Tuintje, I have often wondered to what malicious promptings, to what insane impulse, I owed the idea that suddenly germinated in my brain as I sat fingering the dead man's letter-case in that squalid room. The impulse sprang into my brain like a flash and like a flash I acted on it, though I can hardly believe

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I meant to pursue it to its logical conclusion until I stood once more outside the door of my room.

The examination of the dead man's papers had shown me that he was an American business man, who had just come from London, having but recently proceeded to England from the United States.

What puzzled me was why an American manufacturer, seemingly of some substance and decently dressed, should go to a German hotel on the recommendation of a German, from his name, and the style of his visiting card, a man of good family.

Semlin might, of course, have been, like myself, a traveller benighted in Rotterdam, owing his recommendation to the hotel to a German acquaintance in the city. Still, Americans are cautious folk and I found it rather improbable that this American business man should adventure himself into this evil-looking house with a large sum of money on his person—he had several hundred pounds of money in Dutch currency notes in a thick wad in his portfolio.

I knew that the British authorities discouraged, as far as they could, neutrals travelling to and fro between England and Germany in war-time. Possibly Semlin wanted to do business in Germany on his European trip as well

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as in England. Knowing the attitude of the British authorities, he may well have made his arrangements in Holland for getting into Germany lest the British police should get wind of his purpose and stop him crossing to Rotterdam.

But his German was so flawless, with no trace of Americanism in voice or accent. And I knew what good use the German Intelligence had made of neutral passports in the past. Therefore I determined to go next door and have a look at Dr. Semlin's luggage. In the back of my mind was ever that harebrain resolve, half-formed as yet but none the less firmly rooted in my head.

Taking up my candle again, I stole out of the room. As I stood in the corridor and turned to lock the bedroom door behind me, the mirror at the end of the passage caught the reflection of my candle.

I looked and saw myself in the glass, a white, staring face.

I looked again. Then I fathomed the riddle that had puzzled me in the dead face of the stranger in my room.

It was not the face of Francis that his features suggested.

It was mine!

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The next moment I found myself in No. 33. I could see no sign of the key of the room: Semlin must have dropped it in his fall, so it behoved me to make haste for fear of any untoward interruption. I had not yet heard eleven strike on the clock.

The stranger's hat and overcoat lay on a chair. The hat was from Scott's: there was nothing except a pair of leather gloves in the overcoat pockets.

A bag, in size something between a small kit-bag and a large hand-bag, stood open on the table. It contained a few toilet necessaries, a pair of pyjamas, a clean shirt, a pair of slippers, . . . nothing of importance and not a scrap of paper of any kind.

I went through everything again, looked in the sponge bag, opened the safety razor case, shook out the shirt, and finally took everything out of the bag and stacked the things on the table.

At the bottom of the bag I made a strange discovery. The interior of the bag was fitted with that thin yellow canvas-like material with which nearly all cheap bags, like this one was, are lined. At the bottom of the bag an oblong piece of the lining had apparently been torn clean out. The leather of the bag showed through the slit. Yet the lining round the edges

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of the gap showed no fraying, no trace of rough usage. On the contrary, the edges were pasted neatly down on the leather.

I lifted the bag and examined it. As I did so I saw lying on the table beside it an oblong of yellow canvas. I picked it up and found the under side stained with paste and the brown of the leather.

It was the missing piece of lining and it was stiff with something that crackled inside it.

I slit the piece of canvas up one side with my penknife. It contained three long fragments of paper, a thick, expensive, highly glazed paper. Top, bottom and left-hand side of each was trim and glossy: the fourth side showed a broken edge as though it had been roughly cut with a knife. The three slips of paper were the halves of three quarto sheets of writing, torn in two, lengthways, from top to bottom.

At the top of each slip was part of some kind of crest in gold, what, it was not possible to determine, for the crest had been in the center of the sheet and the cut had gone right through it.

The letter was written in English but the name of the recipient as also the date was on the missing half.

Somewhere in the silence of the night I heard a door bang. I thrust the slips of paper in their canvas covering into my trousers pocket.

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I must not be found in that room. With trembling hands I started to put the things back in the bag. Those slips of paper, I reflected as I worked, at least rent the veil of mystery enveloping the corpse that lay stiffening in the next room. This, at any rate, was certain: German or American or hyphenate, Henry Semlin, manufacturer and spy, had voyaged from America to England not for the purposes of trade but to get hold of that mutilated document now reposing in my pocket. Why he had only got half the letter and what had happened to the other half was more than I could say . . . it sufficed for me to know that its importance to somebody was sufficient to warrant a journey on its behalf from one side to the other of the Atlantic.

As I opened the bag my fingers encountered a hard substance, as of metal, embedded in the slack of the lining in the joints of the mouth. At first I thought it was a coin, then I felt some kind of clasp or fastening behind it and it seemed to be a brooch. Out came my pocket knife again and there lay a small silver star, about as big as a regimental cap badge, embedded in the thin canvas. It bore an inscription. In stencilled letters I read:

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02 G
Abt. VII.

Here was Dr. Semlin's real visiting-card.

I held in my hand a badge of the German secret police.

You cannot penetrate far behind the scenes in Germany without coming across the traces of Section Seven of the Berlin Police Presidency, the section that is known euphemistically as that of the Political Police. Ostensibly it attends to the safety of the monarch, and of distinguished personages generally, and the numerous suite that used to accompany the Kaiser on his visits to England invariably included two or three top-hatted representatives of the section.

The ramifications of *Abteilung Sieben* are, in reality, much wider. It does such work in connection with the newspapers as is even too dirty for the German Foreign Office to touch, comprising everything from the launching of personal attacks in obscure blackmailing sheets against inconvenient politicians to the escorting

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of unpleasantly truthful foreign correspondents to the frontier. It is the obedient handmaiden of the Intelligence Department of both War Office and Admiralty in Germany, and renders faithful service to the espionage which is constantly maintained on officials, politicians, the clergy and the general public in that land of careful organization.

Section Seven is a vast subterranean department. Always working in the dark, its political complexion is a handy cloak for blacker and more sinister activities. It is frequently entrusted with commissions of which it would be inexpedient for official Germany to have cognizance and which, accordingly, official Germany can always safely repudiate when occasion demands.

I thrust the pin of the badge into my braces and fastened it there, crammed the rest of the dead man's effects into his bag, stuck his hat upon my head and threw his overcoat on my arm, picked up his bag and crept away. In another minute I was back in my room, my brain aflame with the fire of a great enterprise.

Here, to my hand, lay the key of that locked land which held the secret of my lost brother. The question I had been asking myself, ever since I had first discovered the dead man's American papers of identity, was this. Had I

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the nerve to avail myself of Semlin's American passport to get into Germany? The answer to that question lay in the little silver badge. I knew that no German official, whatever his standing, whatever his orders, would refuse passage to the silver star of Section Seven. It need only be used, too, as a last resource, for I had my papers as a neutral. Could I but once set foot in Germany, I was quite ready to depend on my wits to see me through. One advantage, I knew, I must forgo. That was the half-letter in its canvas case.

If that document was of importance to Section Seven of the German Police, then it was of equal, nay, of greater importance to my country. If I went, that should remain behind in safe keeping.

"Never before, since the war began," I told myself, "can any Englishman have had such an opportunity vouchsafed to him for getting easily and safely into that jealously guarded land as you have now! You have plenty of money, what with your own and this . . ." and I fingered Semlin's wad of notes, "and provided you can keep your head sufficiently to remember always that you are a German, once over the frontier you should be able to give the Huns the slip and try and follow up the trail of poor Francis.

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"And maybe," I argued further (so easily is one's better judgment defeated when one is young and set on a thing), "maybe in German surroundings, you may get some sense into that mysterious jingle you got from Dicky Allerton as the sole existing clue to the disappearance of Francis."

Nevertheless, I wavered. The risks were awful. I had to get out of that evil hotel in the guise of Dr. Semlin, with, as the sole safeguard against exposure, should I fall in with the dead man's employers or friends, that slight and possibly imaginative resemblance between him and me: I had to take such measures as would prevent the fraud from being detected when the body was discovered in the hotel: above all, I had to ascertain, before I could definitely resolve to push or into Germany, whether Semlin was already known to the people at the hotel or whether—as I surmisd to be the case—this was also his first visit to the house in the Vos in't Tuintje.

In any case, I was quite determined in my own mind that the only way to get out of the place with Semlin's document without considerable unpleasantness, if not grave danger, would be to transfer his identity and effects to myself and vice versâ. When I saw the way a little clearer I could decide whether to take the

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supreme risk and adventure myself into the enemy's country.

Whatever I was going to do, there were not many hours of the night left in which to act, and I was determined to be out of that house of ill omen before day dawned. If I could get clear of the hotel and at the same time ascertain that Semlin was as much a stranger there as myself, I could decide on my further course of action in the greater freedom of the streets of Rotterdam. One thing was certain: the waiter had let the question of Semlin's papers stand over until the morning, as he had done in my case, for Semlin still had his passport in his possession.

'After all, if Semlin was unknown at the hotel, the waiter had only seen him for the same brief moment as he had seen me.

Thus I reasoned and argued with myself, but in the meantime I acted. I had nothing compromising in my suit-case, so that caused no difficulty. My British passport and permit and anything bearing any relation to my personality, such as my watch and cigarette case, both of which were engraved with my initials, I transferred to the dead man's pockets. As I bent over the stiff, cold figure with its livid face and clutching fingers, I felt a difficulty which I had hitherto resolutely shirked forcing itself

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squarely into the forefront of my mind.

What was I going to do about the body?

At that moment came a low knocking.

With a sudden sinking at the heart I remembered I had forgotten to lock the door.

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CHAPTER V

HERE was Destiny knocking at the door. In that instant my mind was made up. For the moment, at any rate, I had every card in my hands. I would bluff these stodgy Huns: I would brazen it out: I would be Semlin and go through with it to the bitter end, aye, and if it took me to the very gates of Hell.

The knocking was repeated.

"May one come in?" said a woman's voice in German.

I stepped across the corpse and opened the door a foot or so.

There stood a woman with a lamp. She was a middle-aged woman with an egg-shaped face, fat and white and puffy, and pale, crafty eyes. She was in her outdoor clothes, with an enormous vulgar-looking hat and an old-fashioned sealskin cape with a high collar. The cape which was glistening with rain was half open,

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and displayed a vast bosom tightly compressed into a white silk blouse. In one hand she carried an oil lamp.

"Frau Schratt," she said by way of introduction, and raised the lamp to look more closely at me.

Then I saw her face change. She was looking past me into the room, and I knew that the lamplight was falling full upon the ghastly thing that lay upon the floor.

I realized the woman was about to scream, so I seized her by the wrist. She had disgusting hands, fat and podgy and covered with rings.

"Quiet!" I whispered fiercely in her ear, never relaxing my grip on her wrist. "You will be quiet and come in here, do you understand?"

She sought to shrink from me, but I held her fast and drew her into the room.

She stood motionless with her lamp, at the head of the corpse. She seemed to have regained her self-possession. The woman was no longer frightened. I felt instinctivly that her fears had been all for herself, not for that livid horror sprawling on the floor. When she spoke her manner was almost business-like.

"I was told nothing of this," she said. "Who is it? What do you want me to do?"

Of all the sensations of that night, none has

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left a more unpleasant odor in my memory than the manner of that woman in the chamber of death. Her voice was incredibly hard. Her dull, basilisk eyes, seeking in mine the answers to her questions, gave me an eerie sensation that makes my blood run cold whenever I think of her.

Then suddenly her manner, arrogant, insolent, cruel, changed. She became polite. She was obsequious. Of the two, the first manner became her vastly better. She looked at me with a curious air, almost with reverence, as it seemed to me. She said, in a purring voice:

"Ach, so! I did not understand. The gentleman must excuse me."

And she purred again: "So!"

It was then I noticed that her eyes were fastened upon my chest. I followed their direction.

They rested on the silver badge I had stuck in my braces.

I understood and held my peace. Silence was my only trump until I knew how the land lay. If I left this woman alone, she would tell me all I wanted to know.

In fact, she began to speak again.

"I expected *you*," she said, "but not . . . *this*. Who is it this time? A Frenchman, eh?"

I shook my head.

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"An Englishman," I said curtly.

Her eyes opened in wonder.

"Ach, nein!" she cried—and you would have said her voice vibrated with pleasure—"An Englishman! Ei, ei!"

If ever a human being licked its chops, that woman did.

She wagged her head and repeated to herself: "Ei, ei!" adding, as if to explain her surprise, "he is the first we have had.

"You brought him here, eh! But why up here? Or did der Stelze send him?"

She fired this string of questions at me without pausing for a reply. She continued:

"I was out, but Karl told me. There was another came, too: Franz sent him."

"This is he," I said. "I caught him prying in my room and he died."

"Ach!" she ejaculated . . . and in her voice was all the world of admiration that a German woman feels for brute man. . . . "The Herr Engländer came into your room and he died. So, so! But one must speak to Franz. The man drinks too much. He is always drunk. He makes mistakes. It will not do. I will. . . ."

"I wish you to do nothing against Franz," I said. "This Englishman spoke German well: Karl will tell you."

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"As the gentleman wishes," was the woman's reply in a voice so silky and so servile that I felt my gorge rise.

"She looks like a slug!" I said to myself, as she stood there, fat and sleek and horrible.

"Here are his passport and other papers," I said, bending down and taking them from the dead man's pocket. "He was an English officer, you see?" And I unfolded the little black book stamped with the Royal Arms.

She leant forward and I was all but stifled with the stale odor of the patchouli with which her faded body was drenched.

Then, making a sheaf of passport and permit, I held them in the flame of the candle.

"But we always keep them!" expostulated the hotel-keeper.

"This passport must die with the man," I replied firmly. "He must not be traced. I want no awkward enquiries made, you understand. Therefore . . ." and I flung the burning mass of papers into the grate.

"Good, good!" said the German and put her lamp down on the table. "There was a telephone message for you," she added, "to say that der Stelze will come at eight in the morning to receive what you have brought."

The deuce! This was getting awkward. Who the devil was Stelze?

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"Coming at eight is he?" I said, simply for the sake of saying something.

"Jawohl!" replied Frau Schratt. "He was here already this morning. He was nervous, oh! very, and expected you to be here. Already two days he is waiting here to go on."

"So," I said, "he is going to take . . . *it* on with him, is he?" (I knew where he was "going on" to, well enough: he was going to see that document safe into Germany.)

There was a malicious ring in the woman's voice when she spoke of Stelze. I thought I might profit by this. So I drew her out.

"So Stelze called to-day and gave you his orders, did he?" I said, "and . . . and took charge of things generally, eh?"

Her little eyes snapped viciously.

"Ach!" she said, "der Stelze is der Stelze. He has power; he has authority; he can make and unmake men. But I . . . I in my time have broken a dozen better men than he and yet he dares to tell Anna Schratt that . . . that . . ."

She raised her voice hysterically, but broke off before she could finish the sentence. I saw she thought she had said too much.

"He won't play that game with me," I said. Strength is the quality that every German, man, woman and child, respects, and strength alone.

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My safety depended on my showing this ignoble creature that I received orders from no one. "You know what he is. One runs the risk, one takes trouble, one is successful. Then he steps in and gathers the laurels. No, I am not going to wait for him."

The hotel-keeper sprang to her feet, her faded face all ravaged by the shadow of a great fear.

"You wouldn't dare!" she said.

"I would," I retorted. "I've done my work and I'll report to headquarters and to no one else!"

My eyes fell upon the body.

"Now, what are we going to do with this?" I said. "You must help me, Frau Schratt. This is serious. This must not be found here."

She looked up at me in surprise.

"That?" she said, and she kicked the body with her foot. "Oh, that will be all right with die Schratt! 'It must not be found here'" (she mimicked my grave tone). "It will *not* be found here, young man!"

And she chuckled with all the full-bodied good humor of a fat person.

"You mean?"

"I mean what I mean, young man, and what you mean," she replied. "When they are in a difficulty, when there are complications, when

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there is any unpleasantness . . . like *this* . . . they remember die Schratt, 'die fesche Anna,' as they called me once, and it is 'gnädige Frau' here and 'gnädige Frau' there and a diamond bracelet or a pearl ring, if only I will do the little conjuring trick that will smooth everything over. But when all goes well, then I am 'old Schratt,' 'old hag,' 'old woman,' and I must take my orders and beg nicely and . . . bah!"

Her words ended in a gulp, which in any other woman would have been a sob.

Then she added in her hard harlot's voice:

"You needn't worry your head about *him*, there! Leave him to me! It's my trade!"

At those words, which covered God only knows what horrors of midnight disappearances, of ghoulish rites with packing-case and sack, in the dark cellars of that evil house, I felt that, could I but draw back from the enterprise to which I had so rashly committed myself, I would do so gladly. Only then did I begin to realize something of the utter ruthlessness, the cold, calculating ferocity, of the most bitter and most powerful enemy which the British Empire has ever had.

But it was too late to withdraw now. The die was cast. Destiny, knocking at my door, had found me ready to follow, and I was com-

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mitted to whatever might befall me in my new personality.

The German woman turned to go.

"Der Stelze will be here at eight, then," she said. "I suppose the gentleman will take his early morning coffee before."

"I shan't be here," I said. "You can tell your friend I've gone."

She turned on me like a flash.

She was hard as flint again.

"Nein!" she cried. "You stay here!"

"No," I answered with equal force, "not I . . ."

". . . Orders are orders and you and I must obey!"

"But who is Stelze that he should give orders to me?" I cried.

"Who is . . .?" She spoke aghast.

". . . And you yourself," I continued, "were saying . . ."

"When an order has been given, what you or I think or say is of no account," the woman said. "It is an order: you and I know *whose* order. Let that suffice. You stay here! Good night!"

With that she was gone. She closed the door behind her; the key rattled in the lock and I realized that I was a prisoner. I heard the woman's footfalls die away down the corridor.

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That distant clock cleaved the silence of the night with twelve ponderous strokes. Then the chimes played a pretty jingling little tune that rang out clearly in the still, rain-washed air.

I stood petrified and reflected on my next move.

Twelve o'clock! I had eight hours' grace before Stelze, the man of mystery and might, arrived to unmask me and hand me over to the tender mercies of Madame and of Karl. Before eight o'clock arrived I must—so I summed up my position—be clear of the hotel and in the train for the German frontier—if I could get a train—else I must be out of Rotterdam, by that hour.

But I must *act* and act without delay. There was no knowing when that dead man lying on the floor might procure me another visit from Madame and her myrmidons. The sooner I was out of that house of death the better.

The door was solid; the lock was strong. That I discovered without any trouble. In any case, I reflected, the front-door of the hotel would be barred and bolted at this hour of the night, and I could scarcely dare hope to escape by the front without detection, even if Karl were not actually in the entrance hall. There must be a back entrance to the hotel, I thought,

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for I had seen that the windows of my room opened on to the narrow street lining the canal which ran at the back of the house.

Escape by the windows was impossible. The front of the house dropped sheer down and there was nothing to give one a foothold. But I remembered the window in the *cabinet de toilette* giving on to the little air-shaft. That seemed to offer a slender chance of escape.

For the second time that night I opened the casement and inhaled the fetid odors arising from the narrow court. All the windows looking, like mine, upon the air-shaft were shrouded in darkness: only a light still burned in the window beneath the grating with the iron stair to the little yard. What was at the foot of the stair I could not descry, but I thought I could recognize the outline of a door.

From the window of the *cabinet de toilette* to the yard the sides of the house, cased in stained and dirty stucco, fell sheer away. Measured with the eye the drop from the window to the pavement was about fifty feet. With a rope and something to break one's fall it might, I fancied, be managed. . . .

From that on, things moved swiftly. First with my penknife I ripped the tailor's tab with my name from the inside pocket of my coat and burnt it in the candle: nothing else I had

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on was marked, for I had had to buy a lot of new garments when I came out of hospital. I took Semlin's overcoat, hat and bag into the *cabinet de toilette* and stood them in readiness by the window. As a precaution against surprise I pushed the massive mahogany bedstead right across the doorway and thus barricaded the entrance to the room.

From either side of the fireplace hung two bell-ropes, twisted silk cords of faded crimson with dusty tassels. Mounting on the mantlepiece I cut the bell-ropes off short where they joined the wire. Testing them I found them apparently solid—at any rate they must serve. I knotted them together.

Back to the *cabinet de toilette* I went to find a suitable object to which to fasten my rope. There was nothing in the little room save the washstand, and that was fragile and quite unsuited for the purpose. I noticed that the window was fitted with shutters on the outside fastened back against the wall. They had not been touched for years, I should say, for the iron peg holding them back was heavy with rust and the shutters were covered with dust. I closed the left-hand shutter and found that it fastened solidly to the window-frame by means of massive iron bolts, top and bottom.

Here was the required support for my rope.

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The poker thrust through the wooden slips of the shutter held the rope quite solidly. I attached my rope to the poker with an expert knot that I had picked up at a course in tying knots during a preposterously dull week I had spent at the base in France. Then I dragged from the bed the gigantic eiderdown pincushion and the two massive pillows, stripping off the pillow-slips lest their whiteness might attract attention whilst they were fulfilling the unusual mission for which I destined them.

At the window of the *cabinet de toilette* I listened a moment. All was silent as the grave. Resolutely I pitched out the eiderdown into the dark and dirty air shaft. It sailed gracefully earthwards and settled with a gentle plop on the stones of the tiny yard. The pillows followed. The heavier thud they would have made was deadened by the billowy mass of the *édredon*. Semlin's bag went next, and made no sound to speak of; then his overcoat and hat followed suit.

I noticed, with a grateful heart, that the eiderdown and pillows covered practically the whole of the flags of the yard.

I went back once more to the room and blew out the candle. Then, taking a short hold on my silken rope, I clambered out over the window ledge and started to let myself down.

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My two bell-ropes, knotted together, were about twenty feet long, so I had to reckon on a clear drop of something over thirty feet. The poker and shutter held splendidly firm, and I found little difficulty in lowering myself, though I barked my knuckles most unpleasantly on the rough stucco of the wall. As I reached the extremity of my rope I glanced downward. The red splash of the eiderdown, just visible in the light from the adjoining window, seemed to be a horrible distance below me. My spirit failed me. My determination began to ebb. I could never risk it.

The rope settled the question for me. It snapped without warning—how it had supported my weight up to then I don't know—and I fell in a heap (and, as it seemed to me at the time, with a most reverberating crash) on to the soft divan I had prepared for my reception.

I came down hard, very hard, but old Madame's plump eiderdown and pillows certainly helped to break my fall. I dropped square on top of the eiderdown with one knee on a pillow and, though shaken and jarred, I found I had broken no bones.

Nor did my senses leave me. In a minute I was up on my feet again. I listened. All was still silent. I cast a glance upwards. The window from which I had descended was still dark.

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I could see the broken bell-ropes dangling from the shutter, and I noted, with a glow of professional pride, that my expert join between the two ropes had not given. The lower rope had parted in the middle. . . .

I crammed Semlin's hat on my head, retrieved his bag and overcoat from the corner of the court where they had fallen and the next moment was tiptoeing down the ladder.

The iron stair ran down beside the window in which I had seen the light burning. The lower part of the window was screened off by a dirty muslin curtain. Through the upper part I caught a glimpse of a sort of scullery with a paraffin lamp standing on a wooden table. The room was empty. From top to bottom the window was protected by heavy iron bars.

At the foot of the iron stair stood, as I had anticipated, a door. It was my last chance of escape. It stood a dozen yards from the bottom of the ladder across a dank, little paved area where tins of refuse were standing—a small door with a brass handle.

I ducked low as I clambered down the iron ladder so as not to be seen from the window should anyone enter the scullery as I passed. Treading very softly I crept across the little area and, as quietly as I could, turned the handle of the door.

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It turned round easily in my hand, but nothing happened.

The door was locked.

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CHAPTER VI

I BOARD THE BERLIN TRAIN AND LEAVE A LAME GENTLEMAN ON THE PLATFORM

I WAS caught like a rat in a trap. I could not return by the way I had come and the only egress was closed to me. The area door and window were the only means of escape from the little court. The one was locked, the other barred. I was fairly trapped. All I had to do now was to wait until my absence was discovered and the broken rope found to show them where I was. Then they would come down to the area, I should be confronted with the man, Stelze, and my goose would be fairly cooked.

As quietly as I could I made a complete, thorough, rapid examination of the area. It was a dank, dark place, only lit where the yellow light streamed forth from the scullery. It had a couple of low bays hollowed out of the masonry under the little court-yard, the one

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filled with wood blocks, the other with broken packing-cases, old bottles and like rubbish. I explored these until my hands came in contact with the damp bricks at the back, but in vain. Door and window remained the only means of escape.

Four tall tin refuse bins stood in line in front of these two bays, a fifth was stowed away under the iron stair. They were all nearly full of refuse, so were useless as hiding-places. In any case it accorded neither with the part I was playing nor with my sense of the ludicrous to be discovered by the hotel domestics hiding in a refuse bin.

I was at my wits' end to know what to do. I had dared so much, all had gone so surprisingly well, that it was heartbreaking to be foiled with liberty almost within my grasp. A great wave of disappointment swept over me until I felt my very heart sicken. Then I heard footsteps and hope revived within me.

I shrunk back into the darkness of the area behind the refuse bins standing in front of the bay nearest the door.

Within the house footsteps were approaching the scullery. I heard a door open, then a man's voice singing. He was warbling in a fine mellow baritone that popular German ballad:

"Das haben die Mädchen so gerne
Die im Stübchen und die im *Salong*."

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The voice hung lovingly and wavered and trilled on that word "*Salong*": the effect was so much to the singer's liking that he sang the stave over again. A bumping and a rattle as of loose objects in an empty box formed the accompaniment to his song.

"A cheery fellow!" I said to myself. If only I could see who it was! But I dare not move into that patch of yellow light from which the only view into the scullery was afforded.

The singing stopped. Again I heard a door open. Was he going away? Then I saw a thin shaft of light under the area door.

The next moment it was flung back and the waiter, Karl, appeared, still in his blue apron, a bucket in either hand.

He was coming to the refuse bins.

Pudd'n Head Wilson's advice came into my mind: "When angry count up to four: when very angry, swear." I was not angry but scared, terribly scared, scared so that I could hear my heart pulsating in great thuds in my ears. Nevertheless, I followed the advice of the sage of Dawson's Landing and counted to myself: one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four; while my heart hammered out: keep-cool, keep-cool, keep-cool! And all the time I remained crouching behind the first two refuse bins nearest the door.

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The waiter hummed to himself the melody of his little ditty in a deep bourdon as he paused a moment at the door. Then he advanced slowly across the area.

Would he stop at the refuse bins behind which I cowered?

No, he passed them.

The third? The fourth?

No!

He walked straight across the area and went to the bin beneath the stairs.

I muttered a blessing inwardly on the careful habits of the German who organizes even his refuse into separate tubs.

The man had his back to the door.

Now or never was my chance.

I crawled round my friendly garbage bins, reached the area door on tip-toe and stepped softly into the house. As I did so I heard the clank of tin as Karl replaced the lid of the tub.

A dark passage stretched out in front of me. Immediately to my right was the scullery door wide open. I must avoid the scullery at all costs. The man might remain there and I could not risk him driving me before him back to the entrance hall of the hotel.

I crept down the dark passage with hands outstretched. Presently they fell upon the latch of a door. I pressed it, the door opened

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inwards into the darkness and I passed through. As I softly closed the door behind me I heard Karl's heavy step and the grinding of the key as he locked the area door.

I stood in a kind of cupboard in pitch darkness, hardly daring to breathe.

Once more I heard the man singing his idiotic song. I did not dare look out from my hiding-place, for his voice sounded so near that I feared he might be still in the passage.

So I stood and waited.

. . . . . .

I must have stayed there for an hour in the dark. I heard the waiter coming and going in the scullery, listened to his heavy tramp, to his everlasting snatch of song, to the rattle of utensils, as he went about his work. Every minute of the time I was tortured by the apprehension that he would come to the cupboard in the passage.

It was cold in that damp subterranean place. The cupboard was roomy enough, so I thought I would put on the overcoat I was carrying. As I stretched out my arm, my hand struck hard against some kind of projecting hook in the wall behind me.

"Damn!" I swore savagely under my breath, but I put out my hand again to find out what

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had hurt me. My fingers encountered the cold iron of a latch. I pressed it and it gave.

A door swung open and I found myself in another little area with a flight of stone steps leading to the street.

. . . . . .

I was in a narrow lane driven between the tall sides of the houses. It was a cul-de-sac. At the open end I could see the glimmer of street lamps. It had stopped raining and the air was fresh and pleasant. Carrying my bag I walked briskly down the lane and presently emerged in a quiet thoroughfare traversed by a canal—probably the street, I thought, that I had seen from the windows of my bedroom. The Hotel Sixt lay to the right of the lane: I struck out to the left and in a few minutes found myself in an open square behind the Bourse.

There I found a cab-rank with three or four cabs drawn up in line, the horses somnolent, the drivers snoring inside their vehicles. I stirred up the first and bade the driver take me to the Café Tarnowski.

Everyone who has been to Holland knows the Café Tarnowski at Rotterdam. It is an immense place with hundreds of marble-topped tables tucked away among palms under a vast

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glazed roof. Day or night it never closes: the waiters succeed each other in shifts: day and night the great hall resounds to the cry of orders, the patter of the waiters' feet, the click of dominoes on the marble tables.

Delicious Dutch *café au lait*, a beefsteak and fried potatoes, most succulent of all Dutch dishes, crisp white bread, hot from the midnight baking, and appetizing Dutch butter, largely compensated for the thrills of the night. Then I sent for some more coffee, black this time, and a railway guide, and lighting a cigarette began to frame my plan of campaign.

The train for Berlin left Rotterdam at seven in the morning. It was now ten minutes past two, so I had plenty of time. From that night onward, I told myself, I was a German, and from that moment I set myself assiduously to *feel* myself a German as well as enact the part.

"It's no use dressing a part," Francis used to say to me; "you must *feel* it as well. If I were going to disguise myself as a Berliner, I should not be content to shave my head and wear a bowler hat with a morning coat and get my nails manicured pink. I should begin by persuading myself that I was the Lord of creation, that bad manners is a sign of manly strength and that dishonesty is the highest form of diplomacy."

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Poor old Francis! How shrewd he was and how well he knew his Berliners!

There is nothing like newspapers for giving one an idea of national sentiment. I had not spoken to a German, save to a few terrified German rats, prisoners of war in France, since the beginning of the war and I knew that my knowledge of German thought must be rusty. So I sent the willing waiter for all the German papers and periodicals he could lay his hands on. He returned with stacks of them, *Berliner Tageblatt, Kölnische Zeitung, Vorwärts;* the alleged comic papers, *Kladderadatsch, Lustige Blätter* and *Simplicissimus;* the illustrated press, *Leipziger Illustrirte Zeitung, Der Welt-krieg im Bild,* and the rest: that remarkable café even took in such less popular publications as Harden's *Zukunft* and semi-blackmailing rags like *Der Roland von Berlin.*

For two hours I saturated myself with German contemporary thought as expressed in the German press. I deliberately laid my mind open to conviction; I repeated to myself over and over again: "We Germans are fighting a defensive war: the scoundrelly Grey made the world-war: Gott strafe England!" Absurd as this proceeding seems to me when I look back upon it, I would not laugh at myself at the time. I must be German, I must feel German, I must

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think German: on that would my safety in the immediate future depend.

I laid aside my reading in the end with a feeling of utter amazement. In every one of these publications, in peace-time so widely dissimilar in conviction and trend, I found the same mentality, the same outlook, the same parrot-like cries. What the *Cologne Gazette* shrieked from its editorial columns, the comic (God save the mark) press echoed in foul and hideous caricature. Here was organization with a vengeance, the mobilization of national thought, a series of gramophone records fed into a thousand different machines so that each might play the selfsame tune.

"You needn't worry about your German mentality," I told myself, "you've got it all here! You've only got to be a parrot like the rest and you'll be as good a Hun as Hindenburg!"

A Continental waiter, they say, can get one anything one chooses to ask for at any hour of the day or night. I was about to put this theory to the test.

"Waiter," I said (of course, in German), "I want a bag, a handbag. Do you think you could get me one?"

"Does the gentleman want it now?" the man replied.

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"This very minute," I answered.

"About that size?"—indicating Semlin's.

"Yes, or smaller if you like: I am not particular."

"I will see what can be done."

In ten minutes the man was back with a brown leather bag about a size smaller than Semlin's. It was not new and he charged me thirty gulden (which is about fifty shillings) for it. I paid with a willing heart and tipped him generously to boot, for I wanted a bag and could not wait till the shops opened without missing the train for Germany.

I paid my bill and drove off to the Central Station through the dark streets with my two bags. The clocks were striking six as I entered under the great glass dome of the station hall.

I went straight to the booking-office, and bought a first-class ticket, single, to Berlin. One never knows what may happen and I had several things to do before the train went.

The bookstall was just opening. I purchased a sovereign's worth of books and magazines, English, French and German, and crammed them into the bag I had procured at the café. Thus laden I adjourned to the station buffet.

There I set about executing a scheme I had evolved for leaving the document which Semlin

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had brought from England in a place of safety, whence it could be recovered without difficulty, should anything happen to me. I knew no one in Holland save Dicky, and I could not send him the document, for I did not trust the post. For the same reason I would not post the document home to my bank in England: besides, I knew one could not register letters until eight o'clock, by which hour I hoped to be well on my way into Germany.

No, my bag, conveniently weighted with books and deposited at the station cloak-room, should be my safe. The comparative security of station cloak-rooms as safe deposits has long been recognized by jewel thieves and the like and this means of leaving my document behind in safety seemed to me to be better than any other I could think of.

So I dived into my bag and from the piles of literature it contained picked up a book at random. It was a German brochure: *Gott strafe England!* by Prof. Dr. Hugo Bischoff, of the University of Göttingen. The irony of the thing appealed to my sense of humor. "So be it!" I said. "The worthy Professor's fulminations against my country shall have the honor of harboring the document which is, apparently, of such value to *his* country!" And I tucked the little canvas case away inside the pages of

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the pamphlet, stuck the pamphlet deep down among the books and shut the bag.

Seeing its harmless appearance the cloak-room receipt—I calculated—would, unlike Semlin's document, attract no attention if, by any mischance, it fell into wrong hands *en route*. I therefore did not scruple to commit it to the post. Before taking my bag of books to the cloak-room I wrote two letters. Both were to Ashcroft—Ashcroft of the Foreign Office, who got me my passport and permit to come to Rotterdam. Herbert Ashcroft and I were old friends. I addressed the envelopes to his private house in London. The Postal Censor, I knew, keen though he always is after letters from neutral countries, would leave old Herbert's correspondence alone.

The first letter was brief. "Dear Herbert," I wrote, "would you mind looking after the enclosed until you hear from me again? Filthy weather here. Yours, D. O." This letter was destined to contain the cloak-room receipt. To conceal the importance of an enclosure, it is always a good dodge to send the covering letter under separate cover.

"Dear Herbert," I said in my second letter, "If you don't hear from me within two months of this date regarding the enclosure you will have already received, please send someone, or,

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preferably, go yourself and collect my luggage at the cloak-room of the Rotterdam Central Station. I know how busy you always are. Therefore you will understand my reasons for making this inordinate claim upon your time. Yours, D. O." And, by way of a clue, I added, inconsequently enough: "Gott strafe England!"

I chuckled inwardly at the thought of Herbert's face on receiving this preposterous demand that he should abandon his dusty desk in Downing Street and betake himself across the North Sea to fetch my luggage. But he'd go all right. I knew my Herbert, dull and dry and conventional, but a most faithful friend.

I called a porter at the entrance of the buffet and handing him Semlin's bag and overcoat, bade him find me a first-class carriage in the Berlin train when it arrived. I would meet him on the platform. Then, at the cloak-room opposite, I gave in my bag of books, put the receipt in the first letter and posted it in the letter-box within the station. I went out into the streets with the second letter and posted it in a letter-box let into the wall of a tobacconist's shop in a quiet street a few turnings away. By this arrangement I reckoned Herbert would get the letter with the receipt before the covering letter arrived.

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Returning to the railway station I noticed a kind of slop shop which despite the early hour was already open. A fat Jew in his shirt-sleeves, his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, stood at the entrance framed in hanging overcoats and hats and boots. I had no umbrella and it struck me that a waterproof of some kind might not be a bad addition to my extremely scanty wardrobe. Moreover, I reflected that with the rubber shortage rain-coats must be at a premium in Germany.

So I followed the bowing son of Shem into his dark and dirty shop and emerged presently wearing an appallingly ugly green mackintosh reeking hideously of rubber. It was a shocking garment but I reflected that I was a German and must choose my garb accordingly.

Outside the shop I nearly ran into a little man who was loafing in the doorway. He was a wizened, scrubby old fellow wearing a dirty peaked cap with a band of tarnished gold. I knew him at once for one of those guides, half tout, half bully, that infest the railway termini of all great Continental cities.

"Want a guide, sir?" the man said in German.

I shook my head and hurried on. The man trotted beside me. "Want a good, cheap hotel, sir? Good, respectable house. . . Want a . . ."

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"Ach! gehen Sie zum Teufel!" I cried angrily. But the man persisted, running along beside me and reeling off his tout's patter in a wheezing, asthmatic voice. I struck off blindly down the first turning we came to, hoping to be rid of the fellow, but in vain. Finally, I stopped and held out a gulden.

"Take this and go away!" I said.

The old fellow waved the coin aside.

"Danke, danke," he said nonchalantly, looking at the same time to right and left.

Then he said in a calm English voice, utterly different from his whining accents of a moment before: "You must be a dam' cool hand!"

But he didn't bluff me, staggered though I was. I said quickly in German:

"What do you want with me? I don't understand you. If you annoy me any more I shall call the police!"

Again he spoke in English and it was the voice of a well-bred Englishman that spoke:

"You're either a past master at the game or raving mad. Why! the whole station is humming after you! Yet you walked out of the buffet and through the whole lot of them without turning a hair. No wonder they never spotted you!"

Again I answered in German:

"Ich verstehe nicht!"

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But he went on in English, without seeming to notice my observation:

"Hang it all, man, you can't go into Germany wearing a regimental tie!"

My hand flew to my collar and the blood to my head. What a cursed amateur I was, after all! I had entirely forgotten that I was wearing my regimental colors. I was crimson with vexation but also with a sense of relief. I felt I might trust this man. It would be a sharp German agent who would notice a small detail like that.

Still I resolved to stick to German: I would trust nobody.

But the guide had started his patter again. I saw two workmen approaching. When they had passed, he said, this time in English:

"You're quite right to be cautious with a stranger like me, but I want to warn you. Why, I've been following you round all the morning. Lucky for you it was me and not one of the others. . . ."

Still I was silent. The little man went on:

"For the past half-hour they have been combing that station for you. How you managed to escape them I don't know except that none of them seems to have a very clear idea of your appearance. You don't look very British, I grant you; but I spotted your tie and

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then I recognized the British officer all right.

"No, don't worry to tell me anything about yourself—it is none of my business to know, any more than you will find out anything about me. *I* know where you are going, for I heard you take your ticket; but you may as well understand that you have as much chance of getting into your train if you walk into the railway hall and up the stairs in the ordinary way as you have of flying across the frontier."

"But they can't stop me!" I said. "This isn't Germany. . . ."

"Bah!" said the guide. "You will be jostled, there will be an altercation, a false charge, and you will miss your train! *They* will attend to the rest!

"Damn it, man," he went on, "I know what I'm talking about. Here, come with me and I'll show you. You have twenty minutes before the train goes. Now start the German again!"

We went down the street together for all the world like a "mug" in tow of one of those blackguard guides. As we approached the station the guide said in his whining German:

"Pay attention to me now. I shall leave you here. Go to the suburban booking-office—the entrance is in the street to the left of the station hall. Go into the first-class waiting- room and look out of the window that gives on to the

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station hall. There you will see some of the forces mobilized against you. There is a regular cordon of guides—like me—drawn across the entrances to the main-line platforms—unostentatiously, of course. If you look you will see plenty of plain-clothes Huns, too. . . .”

“Guides?” I said.

He nodded cheerfully.

“Looks bad for me, doesn’t it? But one gets better results by being one of them. Oh! it’s all right. In any case you’ve got to trust me now.

“See here! When you have satisfied yourself that I’m correct in what I say, take a platform ticket and walk upstairs to platform No. 5. On that platform you will find a train. Go to the end where the metals run out of the station, where the engine would be coupled on, and get into the last first-class carriage. On no account move from there until you see me. Now then, I’ll have that gulden!”

I gave him the coin. The old fellow looked at it and wagged his head, so I gave him another, whereupon he took off his cap, bowed low and hurried off.

In the suburban side waiting-room I peered out of the window on to the station hall. True enough, I saw one, two, four, six guides loafing about the barriers leading to the main-line pla

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forms. There seemed to be a lot of people in the hall and certainly a number of the men possessed that singular taste in dress, those rotundities of contour, by which one may distinguish the German in a crowd.

I now had no hesitation in following the guide's instructions to the letter. Platform No. 5 was completely deserted as I emerged breathless from the long staircase and I had no difficulty in getting into the last first-class carriage unobserved. I sat down by the window on the far side of the carriage.

Alongside it ran the brown panels and gold lettering of a German restaurant car.

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes to seven. There was no sign of my mysterious friend. I wondered vaguely, too, what had become of my porter. True, there was nothing of importance in Semlin's bag, but a traveller with luggage always commands more confidence than one without.

Five minutes to seven! Still no word from the guide. The minutes ticked away. By Jove! I was going to miss the train. But I sat resolutely in my corner. I had put my trust in this man. I would trust him to the last.

Suddenly his face appeared in the window at my elbow. The door was flung open.

"Quick!" he whispered in my ear, "follow me."

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