

THE HOUR *by the* CLOCK

(Continued from page 10.)

these papers ready when you return."

Frau Bobel heard nothing of this. From her perch at the transom of her own room she saw Pleigman go; in half an hour Pleigman coming back—awkwardly. She crept out to the balcony, along to the Captain's door. All she could hear was a low murmur of voices. But through the keyhole she could see Pleigman go to the door. She sped back to her own room and up to the transom. The fake Pleigman departed. From her covert in the elm-top she saw him lurch away up street.

But was it—Pleigman? If not—who?

Frau Bobel believed that she knew. But because she had come to detest Hanslick, because she had come to have an over-powering interest in these two adventurers, one of the air, the other of the earth, she swore to herself that she would not report her suspicions to the machine. Not yet.

Controlling her emotions she went to her telephone, got a connection with Aerodrome X, and gave the Secret Service code-sign for that day.

"May I speak to Commander Hopkirch?"

"The Commander is busy with his machine. He is leaving on scout duty in half an hour."

"Oh. When will he be back?"

"Not until morning. Can't say the hour. Better ring at daybreak—or later."

Frau Bobel put the receiver slowly on the hook. She wanted to scream. She kept silence. Things were happening of which she, supposed sleepless watcher of Captain Clock, was but vaguely aware. She knew now that the second Pleigman in the Captain's room was the Commander. Clock had sent for him on the eve of a long important flight. A word from her to Hanslick would have held back the Commander. Because she detested Hanslick and his machine she kept it to herself. What was the mission? What could it have to do with the Captain? The Commander's cool answers to her questions in the beer-room recurred to her furiously. She had then been on the very edge of a discovery. Here it was. Hopkirch and Clock were in some collusion. Was the Commander luring the Captain to his doom? And what had Pleigman to do with it? Was he in the confidence of the Captain?

The heat was stifling. She crept out to the elm-top. In the blur of the restless searchlights she could see vast masses of people moving below. The hotel was just a rock in a sea of people, who regardless of the hour or the heat would not go home. The streets were dark. Only in the flare of the searchlights could she see this almost terrifying mass of humanity, which in spite of the efforts of soldiers and police, trying to disperse them, ran together like mercury.

It was Berlin on the defensive; expectant, wondering; afraid; yet feeling secure under the play of the lights, knowing that the city which might be attacked from the air was protected by such an aggregate of aircraft, and anti-aircraft guns as never had been known in any city.

Even this was far less absorbing to Frau Bobel than the Captain, whose light shone across the balcony, and whose windows in spite of the heat were close shut. Pleigman was in there; the real one this time. He had been there for an hour or more.

Then she gazed down at the crowd again. So Pleigman was a traitor? Well, there was time enough for him. The Captain first. She had threatened the Captain that he was in her power; that she would shadow him everywhere; that she would appear only in the moment of supreme opportunity. He knew she was in the hotel. She knew that he had made no effort to locate her. He had ignored her. She was angry. She did not pause to ask herself why one moment she vowed to spring the trap and put an end to the Captain's double career; the next found herself unable to do it, because of—was it the man himself, or was it the strange, inevitable swing of some vast unbelievable event shadowed by those bulletins from the clouds?

Well, it was a long while—almost a dream—since she had so furtively begun to spy upon the Captain back at her little house in Cologne. How Germany had changed! Here she was in the heart and brain of it; with

that swirling sea of people below, and above her and the elm-top the imperturbable stars.

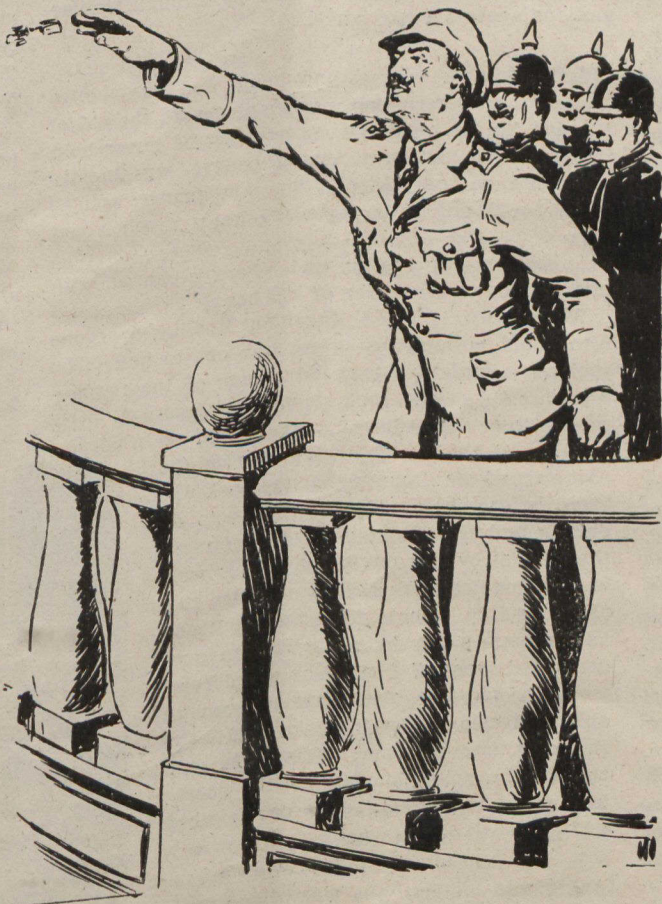
Frau Bobel felt uncontrollably sleepy.

Yet it was a strange time to be dreaming when the realisms of all things were hourly becoming so incredibly big and strange.

And it was not strange that Berlin, which for years had been the power which upheaved the world and ostensibly by the strength of the *Allemachte Gott*, should on that strange night, foreshadowed by Captain Clock, become the objective of tremendous voltages. The drama was proceeding even as Clock in his room wrote it down, up to the point where he could no longer trace it. Pleigman sleepless as an owl, sat at the door keeping his ears on the crowd below and his eyes on the Captain. The door was open by the Captain's order. The Captain was a strange man. The gates of hell might open at a word from him. Pleigman had ceased to figure him out. He merely complied with him, believing that almost any moment of miracle the man might be snatched from his sight to heaven knew what.

Pleigman was not aware that an astute female spy was well asleep in the tangled shadow of the elm-top. He could not have believed that anybody could sleep on such a night. Himself a child of Berlin, knowing every cranny of it as on a map, he nevertheless had always felt it as a city of cave-men and kobolds and supermen and terrible, uplifting inventions. Pleigman had never seen any other city. He had never wanted to. The yesterdays and to-morrows all came to a focus here. He believed Berlin was a city of power, not a mere community in commerce. It was the ante-room of God; the gathering place of the people by whom His will was made known.

Now were its wires and wireless spaces, its telegraphs, telephones and Marconis carrying the voltage of some turn in the great struggle, some unlooked-for change in events such as Captain Kluck had sketched out in his secret narrative. Pleigman said it was incredible; impossible. Yet—why was Berlin packed into the heart of itself down there as a hurricane drives the waves on shore? Why was the Captain so marvellously, compressedly calm as he finished his papers, sealed them up, wrote one letter to his friend, the editor, in Paris, entrusted all to Pleigman and stepped out to the balcony?



"Take back your Iron Cross!"

Some bell boomed out—three. The stars were a million. Every cluster known to the naked eye seemed to be a spangle of jewels. Yet if one of these terrible messages from the north or the west should jump the wires or the wire-

less lanes and short-circuit into that stupendous mass of flesh and nerves and brains down there, the stars might for a while be forgotten.

Clock was oddly silent. He did not know that Frau Bobel was in the shadow of the elm, though he might have guessed it. She was nothing to him. Far less than Pleigman—or another. The crowd failed to excite him. There was something else. He believed that the Wilhelmstrasse knew; that the War Office was full of people; that the Kaiser and his lords were in council somewhere—but that as long as they could they would keep the news from the people under the flare of the searchlights, until something should crack in Berlin itself and the war-lords would crumple up like wet cardboard.

But there was something else. Pleigman saw him scan the star-dromes. Frau Bobel, awake now, crouched in the shadow of the tree. It seemed an age since she had gone to sleep. The sound of the crowd below to her had changed. How, she scarcely knew. Like the rising of a storm. The people were like clouds or a sea. The army at home, old and young and women—too lacking in fire and directive energy to become a mob, she thought; yet—heaven knew.

She tried to forget them; remembering the Captain and his abject satellite, Pleigman, who did everything the Captain did—peering up at the stars now, listening,—what did they expect? An aero-invasion?

The drone of the people below tapered off into a sound from the star lanes. She heard it. Clock sooner. She saw the Captain grab Pleigman by the arm, pointing to—an atom of sound somewhere? An airship. Whose? Obviously—Hopkirch's; back sooner than expected. No other machine could have so agitated the Captain.

Swiftly the atom became a small speck of noise almost vertically above—beyond the search flares. Clock had his glasses up.

"Raus!" he whispered to Pleigman, clutching at his tunic. "Ah! Three short greens—a red—and a green. His lights. Good! Pleigman—you had better crawl out to the crowd. Quick!"

It was all over in a minute. Frau Bobel heard every word. She saw the Captain stalk into his room followed by Pleigman.

Then somehow the flares faded. Dawn crept over the city; from a sky sweeping clean of stars, and not an airship anywhere. Its lacklustre light fell weirdly upon the pied and chequered masses of bedraggled, sleepless humanity, much of it sunken in heaps on the walks, under the trees, in doorways, a mass of inertia.

XIX.

FRAU BOBEL left the balcony. She knew the Captain would not leave his room. She went to the telephone. The toss of a copper would have sent her to the Captain. In times of impending crisis one leans to the strong man, to the self-contained. Crisis was coming. Wings of it. The air was alive with it. Frau Bobel knew not what. But Commander Hopkirch closeted with the Captain before he took to the air, had signalled him by agreement on his return. The code meant—definitely something. What? Something of which the people were ignorant and the war lords were not. She could fancy the Major-domo glowering at his end of the line; hating to be called by a woman—who had done nothing to stop one man from his purpose.

So she told him calmly, collectedly, tersely—all she knew.

Then the sun was up. The hotel began to palpitate with traffic. Doors banged, windows whistled, feet pounding along the corridors, hushed and excited voices. The Captain was out again. She hated him; pitied him; loved him: it mattered not which most. Anyhow she had trapped him. He never could escape.

The crowd was waking like a vast menagerie.

(Continued on page 24.)