

The HOUR by the CLOCK

Previous Chapters

CAPTAIN CLOCK, C.E.F., wounded prisoner in Germany, conceives the idea of getting better treatment by sending to his accomplice, the editor of the *Rondeau Gazette* in Albera, coded letters complimentary to the Germans. Each letter is decoded by the editor into the writer's opinions of how the war will be won by the Allies from the air. He sets the originals all up in type and arranges them as a series of newspaper clips purporting to be a syndicate of pro-German letters from Capt. Clock, published across Canada. These bogus clippings are forwarded to Capt. Clock in Cologne, for his own use and credit with the German authorities. Completely guarded, and followed closely by Frau Bobel, who is acting under orders, Clock travels from city to city through Germany. Infuriated by shadow-men, he beats up a gang in the hotel.

OPINIONS as to how the War Will End may be as Various as Opinions About the Date. This Concluding Instalment of Captain Clock's Experiences as a Prisoner of War is One Hazard as to the Possible How.

By ROLAND JENNER

"The skunk! I wanted him shot."

Hanslick peered into her shrewd, sparkling eyes.

"What, Frau Bobel, is the uppermost idea in the Captain's nut?"

"Airships. He almost wept when a cloud of Gothas sang across the city. He believes the war will be ended from the air. How—he does not say."

"Nor anybody else," grunted Hanslick. "The All-Lies are trying to match our supremacy in the air. But they have no alignment of programme as yet. They have thousands of aircraft scattered in scores of dromes well behind the lines. It is impossible to discover many in one place. They do not understand that every German city has a circo-suburb of aerodromes, all alert, powerful, searching with tremendous eyes into the night, beating the air with aerodynamics undreamed of in their crass calculations."

That ended the interview.

X.

CLOCK got a curt note from Hanslick: "Hereafter you will investigate on your own initiative, but keeping up the itinerary provided by me from the War Office. You will report daily. Your next objective is Berlin. Govern yourself accordingly."

Hanslick scrutinized Clock's next letter with a magnifying glass. It was unusually brief, but more cryptic and runic than any of the others.

"The swine!" he scowled. "Never improves by experience. He might as well have written with his left foot."

What it said was this:—"Amazing air defences are visible here. Struck with the war enthusiasm of the people. Food is abundant. Labor is not scarce. Found three barbers in one shop and four boot-blacks in another. Have been given the closest attention imaginable. All my wants anticipated. Unexpected visit yesterday from my former landlady in Cologne. Interesting woman—intensely patriotic. Glad to know of your promotion. Berlin my next objective. More anon."

The decodation of Clock's letter worked about this way:—"Lose no time in air propaganda. Germany must be shot through the Berlin brain. But every city in Germany must be expecting it. Advertise the show but don't say what it is. The effectiveness of the final knockout will depend upon the nervous expectancy produced. Germany is in a state of suppressed hysteria. Once get Berlin going and—"

Without deleting a word Hanslick sent the original letter along to Lt.-Col. Thom, Bureau de Publicité, Paris—where he hoped it would prove a good seed sown in promising soil.

He despatched Frau Bobel at once to Geneva. Her mission was to see that the Deutsche Bank there had to the credit of Lt.-Col. Thom a large sum of money to be drawn upon at his discretion, and that Thom was aware of the fact.

With a woman's capacity for news-gathering on the side, she was able to discover that events were moving with almost incredible speed on the war front, the latest phase of which was that perhaps before she could reach Berlin, airships of the enemy would be deep into Germany at a height unreachable by "Archies," for the purpose of delivering news bombs. Hanslick was incredulous.

"Air postmen will never reach Berlin," he assured

her. "On your advice I have already recommended the authorities to confer upon Captain Kluck the Iron Cross for his services to the Fatherland. That should give him rope enough to hang him if he is a traitor. Any day I may decide to pull up the rope. When I do, Captain Kluck will not have the luxury of being shot in a courtyard. He will be hanged in British style in a public square. And you shall see him dangle."

"Berlin will bring him to book," she said warmly. "Traitors may work in Leipsic and Hamburg—never in Berlin. The brain of Germany is surcharged with all that kills treason to the Fatherland. It is the power-house of the German people. Its voltage is colossal. Once let the good Captain slip his insulation—and he is a dead man with the death of a thousand devils."

Hanslick had never seen Frau Bobel so like a scorpion.

"The female of the species," he muttered. "Well, we shall see."

XI.

CLOCK arrived at Berlin in the late summer. He had already credited Frau Bobel with his unexpected freedom from the spy-men. What was her game? Not mere benevolent regard.

At the Hotel Vaterland, overlooking the great Thiergarten, Clock was automatically registered and given a room on the top floor, with a long balcony opened on to by a tier of rooms. From here he got his first glimpse of the strangest city in the world. Up the Unter den Linden, that favorite parade-way of the Kaiser, and the Sieges Allee, crammed row on row with its gawky monuments of Prussianism, he could see the famous quadriga surmounting the Brandenburg Gate, the four-horse trophy which Napoleon once took to Paris, and which was now the plunging symbol of German Imperial might concentrated in the history Wilhelmstrasse beyond, leading up to the huge and gloomy War Offices, the building of the Great General Staff.

Clock took particular notice of the Vaterland balcony, which was in full view of a hundred thousand people any evening. At one end the top of a huge elm bosked over in a screen. That Frau Bobel was somewhere in the hotel he was quite sure. She wouldn't appear until—the opportunity. She herself would be judge of that. Now that he was no longer a marionette pulled by the wires he was in hourly danger of precipitating the fatal moment. He knew that. To give a liberated prisoner carte blanche under invisible control in a power-house like Berlin was like setting a man-of-war adrift in a mine field. A false remark might be a spark in a powder magazine. He was already known on the streets. Kluck in khaki. He had seen the headlines and the photograph of himself in the Zeitungs. He could make no move outside his room when he was not watched with the united gaze of hundreds upon hundreds of eyes. Tattered and patched as was his uniform, he was as well dressed as all but a select minority of official nabobs. The people dragged and scuffed along the pavements. They moved, not with the alacrity and bonhomie of even tired Paris or war-jaded London, but with the intermittent stimulus of a great mob galvanized into casual bursts of life, amused by nothing in the windows, no longer stimulated by even the statues on the Sieges Allee.

Berlin was a human island in an archipelago of misery. A city of women, children and old folk, officers and nabobs, editors, preachers and professors—a motley crew of propagandists driven to the verge of mass insanity by the recurrence of one set of fixed ideas. A marvellous machine overworked.



"Pleigman—how far up is that boat?"

IX.

HANSLICK sent a surgeon to examine the arm of Captain Clock, which had unexpectedly become limber in the scrimmage.

"It is again rigid," reported the master of anatomy. "I have had two men trying to bend it. Impossible! There must have been a flow of nervous energy to the arm caused by the excitement. I can do nothing more."

"I think he is a strong-arm artist," punctuated Hanslick. "Some Houdini. No man could have so flailed six Germans as he did unless he had biceps and shoulders like a Jap wrestler. How are the men progressing whom he beat up?"

"All recovering, sir."

Dismissing the automaton, Hanslick sent for Frau Bobel, whose story was very little more encouraging.

"Better have him shot at once," he said. "He is—"

"Not so headlong, good Major," cooed the Frau. "Consider the goose that laid the golden egg. Captain Kluck's syndicate of letters with his photograph has already appeared in our newspapers. The renegade is known everywhere. Why kill him—inopportunistly?"

Hanslick had a high scorn of woman's babble.

"Then you got from him no confession?"

"None. Poh! That man does not fear death more than any of his Canadian compatriots in battle."

"What do you recommend?"

"A measure of freedom. Let him hang in his own rope. He is not amenable to German treatment. I will guarantee to be his shadow. But he is to see me very seldom. All those democratic westerners are highly sentimental. They respond to the feminine."