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MOONLIGHT OVER MADEIRA

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

About 51,000 words

Chapter I — The Cruise Liner

There are mornings in Madeira that seem to have been arranged by someone with a weakness for the picturesque and an unlimited budget. The one on which this story properly begins was such a morning. The sea below Reid's lay flat and burnished as hammered tin, the sky had the high, rinsed blue of the first hour after a night's rain, and along the lower terraces the gardeners had been at the hibiscus since six, so that the whole hillside smelt of cut stems and warm earth and the particular sweetness that the island keeps in reserve for visitors it intends to keep. I had been on Madeira eleven days. I had told myself, on each of them, that I would leave on the next.

"I would *love* a long glass of iced lager," said Nanette. "Besides, I refuse to be deserted for a whole morning."

Her parasol lay along the rail of the veranda, her round bare elbows rested upon it and she cuddled her obstinate chin in upturned palms. I turned to her with a glance in which I had meant to convey rebuke. But the blue eyes danced with mischief and pouting lips smiled impudently, a smile half childish and half elfin, and the rebuke died somewhere on its way to my face, as such rebukes always did. It is one of the minor tragedies of middle age that one cannot be severe with the young while envying them so frankly.

"Young ladies of eighteen do not drink beer," I answered. "It isn't done."

"It is done constantly," said Nanette, "by young ladies of eighteen who have been to a school in Normandy where the food was a crime against the living. You have no idea, Mr. Devlin, what I have suffered."

Jack Larkin came out as I spoke, saw Nanette, and blushed. I never saw Nanette blush during all the time I knew her. I saw her grow deathly pale; but this was later, and on a night I would give a good deal to forget.

Jack was good to see in the Madeira sunlight; one of those lean-limbed Cambridge men who carry themselves well and who always look amazingly clean, as if laundered fresh each morning along with the table linen. He had come out with a tennis racquet under his arm and the expression of a man who had not the smallest hope of being asked to use it. Nanette turned a slim shoulder in his direction, and stared out pensively across the bay. I thought that she had the most perfect arms imaginable. So did Nanette. It was, I had come to understand, the one subject on which she and I were in complete and untroubled agreement.

"I want to go out with you two and Mr. Renshaw to that ship," she said, peering aside at the enraptured Jack. "Please ask Mum. She likes you — and I love beer."

Jack and I exchanged glances. We both looked at Nanette; and then beyond her, beyond the flower-hung edge of the terrace and the toy harbour and the small craft tacking like water-beetles, to where the subject of controversy lay anchored — a big Norwegian cruise ship out of Hamburg, in from the River Plate. She rode at her moorings with the heavy serenity of a thing that

has crossed an ocean and is in no hurry to do anything else, and her white flanks threw back the morning so brilliantly that one could not look at her long.

"I *have* asked her," Jack declared, with the gloom of a man reporting a defeat already suffered. "She's adamant."

"So have I," came a cheery voice — and Renshaw joined the party, immaculate, smelling faintly of bay rum, carrying the air of a man for whom the day held no terrors. "She says that Mr. Calvert is coming to lunch."

"But I *loathe* Mr. Calvert!" cried Nanette, turning upon the speaker scornfully. "He's one of the reasons why I want to go!"

"Is that so, Nan?"

From a long, awning-covered chair near the corner of the veranda Nanette's mother arose — a gracefully pretty woman who solved the mystery of Nanette's beauty for those who had met only her father. She had been so still, and the awning had thrown so deep a shade, that I had genuinely believed the corner empty; and from the swift collapse of Nanette's expression it was plain that she had believed it too.

"Mum! Have you been sitting there all the time?"

"All the time, dear — and I have heard every word! So don't attempt to take one back!"

Renshaw, the well-groomed, became all attention. He became attentive from the crown of his perfectly brushed hair to the soles of his spruce white trainers. He placed a chair for Nanette's mother with the grave deliberation of a man laying a wreath. He adjusted his compact binoculars to enable her to view

the liner. She thanked him with a smile unmistakably like Nanette's, and I reflected, not for the first time, that Renshaw devoted to the comfort of agreeable women an energy that other men reserve for their careers.

"So you loathe poor Mr. Calvert?" she murmured, raising the glasses.

"Hate him poisonously!"

"And you love beer?"

"Simply worship it, Mum! Lager is my vice!"

Her mother lowered the glasses and fought with rising laughter, for Nanette was looking straight at her with the unblinking, injured candour of the very young who have been found out. Then:

"You little devil!" she said. "I don't believe a word of it! But your father simply won't hear of you going on board a foreign ship. Don't ask me why. You know him as well as anybody."

"I'll ask him myself!" Nanette said, flashing blue eyes rebelliously. "Where is the funny old thing?"

"Nan, dear!"

"Oh, he's a darling! But he treats me as if I were made of spun sugar and likely to dissolve in the first shower."

"You are still a baby, Nan — a mere infant."

Nanette threw back her shapely head and laughed scornfully. Wild canaries were singing in the palm grove below the balcony, invisible among the fronds, and, being poetically inclined, I suppose, I thought that Nanette's soft rippling laughter was music sweet as theirs, and rather more dangerous.

She turned swiftly. She had all her mother's grace as well as the divine abandon of youth, and she moved as if gravity were a convention that applied chiefly to other people. With never another glance at any of us, she walked in through the open French window. Jack Larkin's glance followed the slim, straight figure until the shadow of the lounge swallowed it. Her mother looked up at Renshaw with an amusement that had something rueful in it.

"Have you a daughter?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "I regret — "

"Don't regret," she interrupted, though her smile softened the irony to come: "Pray that you may never have a daughter!"

"Really," Jack began, in his youthful, diffident way, turning the racquet over and over in his hands, "I don't think there's any harm in — "

He was interrupted. Nanette returned, dragging by the hand a bored, silver-haired gentleman who was absorbed in the news on a tablet he had stopped reading some minutes before, and who came out into the sunshine blinking like a man brought up suddenly from a deep dive. He was a long, mild, beautifully dressed person, and he wore the expression of one who has discovered, late in a comfortable life, that the chief duty of a wealthy man is to be managed by his women, and who has decided to bear it.

"Now, Pop," said Nanette firmly, planting him before us as one plants a witness, "is there really any reason why I shouldn't go with Mr. Renshaw, Mr. Devlin, and Mr. Larkin to see that liner?"

“Well, dear,” her father replied, in his measured manner, “I am afraid you would be late for lunch, and — “

His glance sought his wife’s across the terrace. I distinctly detected a negative shake of the head from Nanette’s mother; small, decided, and final, the sort of signal that passes between people who have been married a long time and have reduced an entire grammar of disagreement to the movement of an eyebrow.

“And,” he went on, taking his cue without a flicker, “your mother thinks that this would be rude, as Mr. Calvert is expected.”

He smiled almost apologetically, patted Nanette on the head as one might gentle a high-strung filly, and, tablet in hand, returned to his shady corner in the lounge with the unhurried tread of a man retiring from a field he had never seriously intended to hold. Nanette stared reproachfully at her mother.

“Don’t be huffy about it, darling,” said the latter. “Really, you will only have time for a swim and a bit of sun, if you are to make yourself presentable by one o’clock.”

Nanette looked swiftly from face to face. A number of people had now begun to come out from late breakfast — a retired admiral and his wife, two pale honeymooners who never spoke, a loud party of Lisbon businessmen — and the terrace was filling with the murmur and clink of a hotel settling into its morning. Nanette checked speech, withered poor Jack with a final, comprehensive look of scorn that took in his racquet, his flannels, and his entire existence, and walked quickly into the hotel. The last few

steps that were visible, as she crossed the threshold, almost consisted of stamping her feet.

Following a moment of silence:

"Look here, you lot," said Jack, "it looks rather mean for us all to desert Nanette. I know we've arranged the tender and all that, but it's dull swimming alone — "

"Don't worry, Mr. Larkin," Nanette's mother broke in. She was smiling, and there was a world of comfortable prophecy in the smile. "Nanette will not be swimming alone!"

Poor Jack smiled in return, flushed, and then frowned darkly as the implication arrived. His glance constantly sought the entrance to the hotel. But Renshaw tactfully made the conversation general, and we were discussing the latest fashions of Paris as opposed to those of Buenos Aires — a subject on which Renshaw held views of surprising authority — when a slight figure arrayed in a pink bathrobe and shaded by a parasol passed slowly down the path below the terrace; whereupon:

"There goes Nanette!" said Jack, jumping up so quickly that he upset a small table. "Excuse me. I'll just run and ask her if she would rather I stayed."

He hurled himself in the direction of the steps and disappeared. A moment later he reappeared on the path below, running after the girl with the doomed gallantry of a man chasing a bus he has already missed. We watched.

"Nanette!" he called.

Nanette paused, turned, waved her hand with the airy finality of royalty dismissing a petition, and went on. She

walked under a veritable awning of hibiscus, sweeping some of the blossoms off with her parasol so that they fell about her in a small private weather of pink and scarlet. Rounding the corner, she came into view again on a lower path. Her mother leaned over the balcony rail.

“Go after her, Jack!” she called. “Don’t be afraid of her!”

The words reached Nanette. She looked up through flower-laden branches, and her voice came faintly, edged with the particular cruelty of which the young are capable without ever quite meaning it.

“I don’t want him to come after me. I want to be alone.”

Jack Larkin turned and began to walk back up the sloping path. He kept his curly head lowered, taking his phone from his pocket and staring at it without seeing it, as a man does when pretending, for the benefit of the world and himself, that he has somewhere else to be. Nanette’s mother glanced at Renshaw.

“Poor Jack,” she said. “He is very young!”

She said it kindly; but there was that in her voice which suggested she had already glimpsed, far down the morning’s bright water, the shape of something that youth and kindness between them would not be able to prevent.

Chapter II — Rescue

We did not take the lift down to the landing stage. It was busy with bathers, the cage of it rising and falling and disgorging dripping children and stout men in alarming shorts; therefore we descended by the rambling stairway cut out of the rock, a green and dripping tunnel of a thing, fern-lined, that smelt of cold stone and the sea. At the bend, where a gap in the cliff opens the whole bay to view, I paused.

Half across the bay, far beyond the waddling group who hugged the bathing pool, where the transparent water deepened from jade at the rocks to a turquoise blue that hurt the eye, I saw a flashing of white limbs and glimpsed a pink-covered head lowered to the swell. She was a long way out. She was a great deal farther out than any sane person had any business to be. Came a rapturous murmur behind me.

"Nanette! Good lord — that girl swims like a fish!"

"They should follow with the boat," Renshaw's voice broke in on Jack's, and the lightness had gone out of it. "There's a nasty current cuts round the headland. I've watched it carry a dinghy."

"She is safe enough," said I, with a confidence I was already ceasing to feel. "Her fairy godmother was a mermaid — or a siren."

Nevertheless, when we reached the waiting tender, Nanette's daring had attracted attention of a kind that no swimmer wants. I could not see her mother anywhere along the rail; but there was a buzz of excited conversation all around, the high, carrying note

that a crowd takes on when it has begun to be frightened and is not yet ashamed of the appetite, and the duty lifeguard on the jetty was standing up on the bollard, making urgent signals to the boatmen.

“She’s right on our course!” cried Jack. “Come on! Hurry up!”

“Don’t worry,” I implored him — quite uselessly, since I was no longer obeying the instruction myself — tumbling into the launch.

“But she’ll never be able to swim it!” said Renshaw, jumping in behind me. “Hello! What’s this!”

He had stumbled over a bulky parcel wrapped up in newspaper that had been stowed under the after thwart, and went down on one knee with a most undignified oath.

“Please leave alone, sir!” cried the Portuguese boatman in charge, with a sharpness that surprised me. “I ask you, do not touch!”

“Oh!”

Renshaw stared at him suspiciously, rubbing his knee, and then we were off in a smother of blue water and exhaust, the bow lifting, the shore swinging away behind us.

“Pick her up, Devlin!” came a shout from someone on shore, thinned by distance. “She’s overdone it this morning. She can never get back!”

The purr of the motor — it was a good motor, and the man knew his work — made it difficult to hear the other shouts that followed us, but they did follow us, a ragged chorus of advice

and alarm, and excitement was growing intense. I looked out ahead uneasily, shading my eyes. The sea that had looked from the terrace like hammered tin was, down here at its own level, a moving, muscular thing, and the little wind had begun to put a chop on it. I could not see Nanette.

“Can you see her, Devlin?” said Jack hoarsely.

“No.”

“There she is!”

The cry came from Renshaw, who had the binoculars up, and:

“Where?” Jack and I yelled together.

Ignoring us, with a composure I admired even then:

“Port, easy!” he directed the man at the wheel, pointing. “Now — as she is! Hold it!”

We raced, all out, in the direction of the rash swimmer, the boat slamming now from crest to crest so that we had to hang on. Anger claimed me — the helpless, sweating anger of a man watching a piece of foolishness ripen into a catastrophe he had been too indulgent to prevent. This crazy performance was a display of girlish pique, nothing more; and it was going to end with us dragging a child’s body out of the Atlantic. I felt particularly sorry for Jack Larkin. He was hanging over the bow in a perfect anguish of terrified expectation, the spray going clean over him, and he did not so much as turn his head to wipe it away. Presently:

“She’s still swimming strongly!” he gasped; then, almost immediately, in a voice that cracked clean across: “My God!”

“What?”

Renshaw and I were peering ahead over Jack's shoulder.

"She's gone down!"

Over the noise of the motor, over the slap and hiss of the sea, it reached us dimly — a prolonged, horrified cry from the watchers on shore, the sound a crowd makes once and never forgets making.

What happened during the next few minutes I am unable to record with any accuracy, and I have given up trying. I think Jack was fighting with the boatman because he couldn't get another knot out of his engine; I have a confused memory of his shouting and the man shouting back. Renshaw, I remember, looked dishevelled for the first and only time in my experience of him, his hair across his forehead, his linen jacket soaked black. I was drenched with perspiration — and it was not wholly due to the heat of the sun.

Then, dead ahead, not six lengths away, a white arm was thrown up out of the sea, and went down.

"Stop her!" I yelled.

Hot on the words came a splash — and Jack was in. He had not waited for the boat to lose way; he had simply gone, fully dressed, except that he had shed his linen jacket at the last instant, kicking off into the swell like a man who has decided that his own life is the least valuable thing aboard. He reached Nanette as she came up for the second time, got an arm across her, and turned her on her back with a competence that did him credit.

"Reverse! Starboard!"

We described an untidy crescent, the screw threshing; and then — Nanette was being hauled aboard over the low gunwale, streaming, and Jack came clambering over behind her looking like a half-drowned Labrador, grinning, gasping, triumphant, the happiest wretched object I ever saw.

She sank down on the cushions. Jack dropped on his knees before her.

“Nanette!” he panted.

She opened starry eyes, and looked at him, and the look held a perfectly genuine astonishment.

“Yes?” she said.

“Back to the landing stage,” I heard Renshaw direct the boatman, with the flatness of a man steadying his own pulse.

“What’s that!” cried Nanette, surprisingly sitting bolt upright. “Not on your life, Pedro!”

We were riding the swell now, the motor silent, rocking gently in our own subsiding wake, and from the now-distant bathing pool I heard a sound of great, prolonged cheering come rolling out over the water.

Nanette sprang up on the thwart, balancing there, poised on tiptoe against the blue, a slender young goddess with the whole bay for a pedestal. Jack’s coat was in her hand; and she waved it furiously, looking back to where moving figures showed upon the flower-draped terraces.

The cheering was renewed, redoubled.

“That will relieve Mum’s anxiety,” said Nanette, sitting down again with the air of one who has discharged a tiresome

duty. “Please go ahead, Pedro — and would somebody pass me my robe?”

“What!” cried Jack.

Renshaw, moving like a man in a dream, tore away the newspaper from the mysterious bundle the boatman had been so anxious about — and there, neatly folded, was Nanette’s pink robe.

“Be careful, please!” she said. “My shoes are wrapped up in it.”

She turned to Jack, at the same time pulling off her pink bathing cap and shaking out her hair. “I’m so sorry you jumped in,” she added, and for an instant something almost like contrition crossed the small bright face. “You were a darling to do it, though.”

He had been positively glowering at her — the slow, scalded glower of a man understanding by degrees that he has been made a fool of in front of an entire hotel; but, at this, he blushed with delight and became a proud and happy man again, a feat of recovery I found remarkable and a sad omen for his peace of mind. Nanette shook her tousled head distractingly. Stooping, she pulled out from the folded robe a pair of high-heeled sandals and proceeded to squeeze five tiny wet toes into each of them, frowning over the operation as over a problem of statecraft.

“Nanette!” I said slowly, and I heard my own voice come out colder than I intended. “Weren’t you drowning?”

She looked up at me, all wide, injured innocence.

“Of course I wasn’t drowning!” she returned. “I was swimming under water. I was good for another mile!”

“Nanette!” said Renshaw, who had recovered his parting and most of his composure. “You will come to a bad end, my child.”

“Please pass me my parasol,” Nanette retorted, declining to discuss her end. “It’s in the locker. And be careful. My bag is inside it.”

The parasol was discovered, and the bag within it, and a small mirror within that. Surveying herself disdainfully — Nanette regarded her own reflection rather as a stern governess regards a promising but careless pupil — she combed her hair, delicately applied lip balm, and powdered her impudent nose, restoring herself plank by plank to the condition in which she chose to be seen.

“You are all wet!” said Jack, feasting his eyes upon her as if wetness in Nanette were a phenomenon of unexampled beauty.

His own case was a great deal worse than hers, the water running off him in steady runnels to pool in the bottom boards, and I marvelled, not for the last time, at the splendid altruism of love.

“The sun will dry me. But, oh! how good that lager will taste! Won’t someone please give me a cigarette?”

I held out my pack — I had given up perhaps eleven times by then — and:

“Nanette,” I said, “one day a Someone will come who will teach you how to behave yourself!”

“Tosh!” said Nanette, taking a cigarette and turning her face to the sun. “I’ve long outlived the notion that someone needs to rescue me.”

She believed it, too; and as the boat came round and pointed her bows at the great white liner waiting across the bay, I looked at the smooth, sure, eighteen-year-old certainty of her and felt, without in the least knowing why, a small cold finger laid across my pleasure in the morning.

Chapter III — The Man from the River Plate

As we drew alongside the liner, it became evident that we were objects of much interest to her people. I had a good view of the open deck amidships; she carried a full complement of passengers under her awnings, a lively, idle, sun-browned crowd who watched our approach with frank curiosity and the gratitude of the becalmed for any event whatever.

We started up the gangway ladder; and it seemed probable that some of the spectators would either fall overboard or break their necks, so urgently did they crane across the rails above us.

“They are anxious to see the gallant rescuer,” said Renshaw drily.

I suspected otherwise. They were anxious to see Nanette’s shapely legs, and Nanette, going up the ladder ahead of us with the unhurried grace of a cat, was perfectly aware of it.

On the deck, I turned and looked back across to where Funchal climbed the hill. The sunlight was dazzling, struck off a thousand white walls and red roofs heaped one above another up the green flank of the island. I could trace the steep cobbled street, from point to point, down which one may slide in a wicker toboggan steered by two men in straw hats; see the square, too, with its powder-blue jacaranda trees, and imagine the morning gathering at the tables outside the Golden Gate, the small cups of bitter coffee, the talk of freight and weather and the price of bananas. Away over the bows I looked, and saw the flower-

draped cliffs below Reid's, where, on the lower terrace, over cocktails, Nanette would, I surmised, be the sole topic of conversation until dinner and possibly after it.

The lady in question, supremely indifferent to the somewhat marked curiosity of the passengers, was walking aft with Jack, doubtless in quest of the much-desired lager. Jack, his legs encased in sodden chinos that had begun to dry in pale, salt-rimed patches, was ridiculously happy because Nanette hung on his arm, and would, I think, have walked into the sea again at a word from her.

"Leave them alone," said Renshaw. "God knows he's earned it."

We found our way to the ship's bar, a long cool room panelled in pale wood, smelling of coffee and cigar smoke and the cold-metal smell of a well-run ship, and ordered drinks. They were good and reasonably priced, which on a ship is a kind of miracle. It was an eclectic company — northern Europeans predominated, fair and deliberate, with a generous sprinkling of South Americans, dark, quick, and beautifully dressed; the sort of sun-weathered, well-travelled people, neither young nor old, who seem to spend their lives in motion around the warm circuits of the world and to belong to no part of it in particular.

One man, who sat alone at the far end of the room, puzzled me. He was handsome, in a way that the word does not quite cover. He wore his dark wavy hair rather long, longer than the fashion, and was dressed in a perfectly cut and immaculately white linen suit that no shipboard heat seemed able to crease. With the aid

of a distinctive pair of black-rimmed glasses, he studied what looked like an official document on a slim tablet, moving through it now and then with one finger, entirely sealed off from the chatter around him. There was a stillness about him that the rest of the room did not have; the stillness of a man who is working while everyone else is on holiday.

"Good lord!" Renshaw exclaimed, and set down his glass.

Glancing aside, I saw that he, too, was staring at this singular individual.

"Looks like someone out of a film," said I.

"I know," Renshaw replied slowly. "But he didn't wear his hair like that the last time I saw him — coming out of Helmand with what was left of his unit, and not very much daylight left either. Good lord!"

He jumped up and crossed the room with the directness of a man who has remembered something important. I followed, more from curiosity than anything.

"O'Mara!" he cried.

The man addressed set down his tablet and stood up unhurriedly; then a change went over the still face, and:

"Renshaw!" he exclaimed, and held out his hand. "Can it be Renshaw!"

"Renshaw it is!" was the reply; "and I want you to meet" — drawing me forward by the elbow — "Mr. Devlin. Devlin, this is Major Edmond O'Mara."

The major adjusted his glasses and looked me over briefly, with a single grave, complete glance, as if to determine whether

he wanted to know me or not, and to settle the question once and for all. I found myself looking into a pair of the coldest grey eyes that had ever examined my hidden motives, and I had the uncomfortable sensation, common enough with such men, of having been read at a sitting and filed.

But, to tell the truth, I was more than a little flurried. For, as Renshaw spoke the name, the fact had dawned upon me that I stood in the presence not only of an Irishman of ancient family, nor merely in that of a distinguished officer, but in the presence of a regimental legend; a thing infinitely more wonderful and rarer. This was “The O’Mara” — a synonym, in certain quiet circles, for all that is fine in uniform, from Whitehall to Kabul; a name spoken by men who do not, as a rule, speak names at all.

He removed his glasses and grasped my hand warmly, and the legend became, disconcertingly, a man.

“I am glad to meet you, Mr. Devlin,” he said. We formed a trio, and there were some inevitable reminiscences — campaigns, a wager, a colonel long since dead — and more drinks; then:

“What, in the name of wonder, are you doing on this ship?” Renshaw asked.

O’Mara shrugged his shoulders. He had some queerly Gallic mannerisms, picked up no doubt in places he would not name. In fact, if one had not known better, one must have written him off as an incurable poseur, the kind of man who arranges his own picturesqueness.

“Peacetime soldiering is a dull business,” he replied. “I take on odd jobs to keep me out of mischief.”

He said *odd jobs* with the smallest possible inflection, and I noted it, and did not then know what to make of it. He ordered another round and spoke to the steward in what I believe was entirely acceptable German, and the steward answered him as one answers a man one is slightly afraid of. Following some aimless chatter:

“Are you for Hamburg?” asked Renshaw.

“I don’t know,” said O’Mara surprisingly. He set down his glass and looked round the bar, once, slowly, taking in every face in it without appearing to move his head. “I may come ashore here.”

“You *may*!” I exclaimed and glanced at my watch. “You have twenty minutes to decide!”

“Two would be sufficient,” he assured me. “I travel light.”

He smiled — and, in the smile, I met for the first time the real O’Mara. The cold grey eyes were cold no longer; they smiled, too — whimsically, warmly, with an extraordinary kindness, as if he had decided, on some private evidence, that I was worth being kind to. The cloak of inscrutability was dropped, just for a moment, and the clean, brave soul of the man looked out. A vague dislike I had been nursing vanished like morning mist off the bay, and I knew that men would follow Edmond O’Mara into the thickest and the hottest, if he needed them; women, too, perhaps, and rather more dangerously. A man like that is a man born to suffer, because he carries something the rest of us have learned

to do without. But suddenly I understood why his regiment had worshipped him, and why they spoke his name the way they did.

"There goes the first shore signal," said Renshaw, as a note sounded somewhere forward. "We had better rescue Nanette from the lager."

We found her on deck with Jack and another man who had attached himself to the party in our absence, as a barnacle attaches itself to a clean hull. He was a poisonously handsome fellow, sleek, olive, faintly scented, and his heavy-lidded dark eyes were literally devouring the girl's bright beauty without the least pretence of concealment. He had met Jack in London, it appeared — the meeting had cost Jack dear — and now Jack was the most unhappy man in Madeira. Every time roguish blue eyes met those intense dark ones, he visibly shuddered, and his jaw set.

The dark gentleman was presented.

"Renshaw, Devlin — meet Senhor Gabriel da Rocha."

We met him — reluctantly. His handshake was soft and lingered a fraction too long, and his smile showed a great many excellent teeth.

"This," said Renshaw, with a coolness that was almost rudeness, "is Mr. Jack Larkin — Major Edmond O'Mara. Doubtless, Senhor da Rocha, you have met already?"

"No," murmured O'Mara, bowing coolly, his eyes resting on the other man for a beat longer than courtesy required. "One does not meet everybody on board."

Something passed between the two of them in that instant — I could not have said what; a recognition, perhaps, of the kind

that two professionals of opposed trades exchange across a crowded room. Then it was gone.

"Nanette!" I called.

She had stepped to the rail with Da Rocha. She turned, with a small reluctant motion of the shoulders.

"Yes?"

"I want you to know Major Edmond O'Mara."

She came forward, and I introduced them formally. Nanette gave one quick, startled look at O'Mara — and O'Mara, noting her unusual attire, the damp hair, the high-heeled sandals incongruous beneath the salt-stiff robe, smiled, not unkindly. Nanette dropped her lashes, said something meaningless about the weather, and ran back to Da Rocha as a child runs back to the familiar from the doorway of a strange room.

I heard Jack grind his teeth. When he joined the pair at the rail I stood at his elbow, partly to be ready to prevent an international incident.

"We must be saying goodbye, Mr. da Rocha," he began, with the stiff politeness of a man longing to be rude, but:

"Not goodbye at all!" Da Rocha exclaimed, turning and resting one well-kept hand on Nanette's shoulder, where it lay like a declaration. "I am undecided until this morning, but now — it is settled! Here, in Madeira" — he indicated the distant hills with a sweep of the arm — "I have a villa, so charming, so high. Do you know" — he included us all in the conversation with the largeness of a man buying drinks for the house — "that up in Funchal the telephone reception fails completely? Yes,

completely; the mountain eats it. But in my villa, high above the town, I have the most perfect private sound-and-communications system on the island; a fibre line, my own satellite dish, everything; and one night — tonight, maybe —" he glanced aside at Nanette — "we shall dance to whatever you like."

I confess the boast struck me as a curious thing for a holidaying gentleman to be proud of; but the moment passed, and I forgot it, and had cause to remember it later.

"You are going ashore, then?"

"But certainly! It is settled. Is it not?"

The question was addressed to Nanette, over the heads of the rest of us, and:

"I should just *hate* to lose you so soon," she replied, looking up at him from under her lashes in a way that made Jack go white. "Let's go and see if your things are in the boat."

Side by side with the radiantly smiling Da Rocha, she hurried forward. She glanced back, once, at Jack, at me, at Renshaw — a swift, defiant, oddly pleading glance, the glance of someone who has stepped onto a slope and discovered it is steeper than it looked. O'Mara was watching her, quite without expression. She avoided his gaze. He turned and went in at the saloon entrance without a word.

The last gong sounded, mournful over the water. Jack had disappeared. I stared at Renshaw. He whistled softly, a descending note.

"Nanette has been bitten at last," he remarked.

“Yes,” I said, watching the slim figure and the sleek one go forward together into the glare. “I think she has.”

Da Rocha’s baggage — a great deal of it, most of it excellent — was loaded into Reid’s launch, and we all got aboard for the run back to shore. We were surrounded at once by a noisy flotilla of small boats whose vendors held up Madeira embroidery, wickerwork, and hand-painted tiles, shouting their prices and dropping them, desperately inviting bids from the departing passengers leaning over the liner’s rail far above. It was distracting, a whole bobbing bazaar clamouring on the swell, so that I scarcely noticed a steward coming down the gangway after us, carrying a suitcase and a holdall. Jack sat right astern, his hands plunged in the pockets of his sodden chinos, looking at nothing. Then, suddenly, I realised that someone had stepped down into the launch and was standing beside me.

I turned — and met the cold grey eyes of O’Mara.

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed. “Your decision was a sudden one!”

“Yes,” he replied, settling himself with the small case at his feet, “it was — very.”

He was looking, I noticed, not at the shore, nor at the magnificent ship above us, but at the back of Gabriel da Rocha’s well-barbered head.

“Hello, O’Mara!” cried Renshaw, delighted. “This is fine!”

“Isn’t it,” said O’Mara.

Nanette bent toward Da Rocha in the bows, talking animatedly, one hand on his arm, and did not look round; and the

launch swung away from the liner’s side and pointed her nose at Funchal climbing its green hill in the noon glare, carrying, though only one of us suspected it, a cargo a great deal heavier than her baggage.

Chapter IV — At the Casino

A party of us went down to the Casino that night, consisting of Nanette, Nanette's mother, Renshaw, and myself. Jack excused himself on the plea that he had promised to play someone at snooker — a transparent fiction, since the someone was never named and the snooker never, so far as I know, occurred; the truth being that Jack could not yet trust himself to watch Nanette dance with another man and behave like a guest in a civilised establishment. Nanette had been put through the hoop well and truly for her morning's escapade, an interview behind closed doors from which her mother had emerged looking tired and Nanette looking exactly as before; but she looked none the worse for this parental correction, and rather, if anything, the better, as the young so unjustly do.

Newly arrived from the seclusion of a private school in Normandy, where the chief excitements had been the arrival of the laundry and the departure of an unpopular mistress, she was learning, with the rapidity of the naturally gifted, the dangerous truism that beauty governs mankind; and she was practising the lesson on every man within range, as a young fencer practises on whatever comes to hand.

The Casino, when we reached it, was doing its modest, glittering best — a low white building above the harbour, its terrace strung with lights, the sea sounding invisibly below the balustrade, and inside the warm rooms the small dry rattle of the ball in the wheel and the murmur of the crowd. And Da Rocha was

waiting there — and Nanette pretended to be surprised, prettily, though she had been watching the door since we came in. Her mother really did not believe the performance for a moment, and caught my eye over Nanette's head with a resignation that asked nothing and expected the worst.

The said Da Rocha wanted to dance. Nanette loved dancing and danced divinely. Therefore she decided, with the contrariness that was her chief weapon, to play roulette.

"Please, Mum," she pleaded — "until I have lost twenty euros!"

Her mother consented, silently signalling me to sit beside Nanette at the table — a commission I accepted, as I accepted all such commissions, with the dim foreknowledge of failure. Whilst Nanette's mother danced with Renshaw, who danced as he did everything, faultlessly and without warmth, I chaperoned Nanette.

The game was dull, as roulette always is to the watcher and frequently to the player. Da Rocha leaned at her shoulder and constantly urged the superior charms of the dance floor, his voice a low continuous current at her ear. But Nanette played on, staking her chips with the lordly carelessness of one spending someone else's money, which indeed she was. Presently:

"Do you think Jack will come along?" she asked me, not looking up from the table.

"I hope so," I said, and meant it; Jack sober and present seemed to me a great deal safer than Jack absent and brooding.

An interval, in which Nanette lost a handful of chips without appearing to notice, then:

"Had you met Major O'— what's his name — before?"

"No. I had heard of him."

"Really?" The blue eyes came up, suddenly attentive. "Is he famous?"

"I suppose he is — in a way."

"What way?"

"The kind of way," I said, "that doesn't get into the papers."

She considered this, and seemed about to ask more, when:

"But listen!" Da Rocha exclaimed, with the petulance of a man losing an audience, "this is *so* boring! Let us dance."

"Not until I've lost my twenty euros," said Nanette firmly, and pushed out another stack.

More aimless play, the wheel spinning, the croupier's rake going out and coming back, then:

"I saw your major man when we first went on board, you know," said Nanette, casually, staking her all on a single number with the recklessness she brought to everything. "Jack and I peeped into the bar, and — he was in there."

"Really. Is that so?"

"Yes. Wasn't it odd I should meet him, after — seeing him like that?" There was something in the question that was not quite idle, a small persistent worrying at a thing that had caught in her mind.

"Very odd," I agreed, and watched the number lose.

Nanette's fortune was swept away by the croupier with a courteous murmur. She remained unperturbed — she had a gambler's

temperament, which is to say none at all where money was concerned. But she kept throwing quick glances all about the room, over my shoulder, toward the doors, into the farther salon; and now:

"Please take me out on the terrace and get me a long, cool drink," she asked, rising.

We stood up and crossed to the open doors, Da Rocha at her other side. He grabbed Nanette's arm and led her out ahead of me into the dark, and I followed at the leisurely pace of the professional chaperone who knows that his value lies chiefly in being seen to exist. As I came to the doorway I glanced aside, and saw Jack coming in from the entrance hall. He had come after all. He looked flushed, and not, I thought, entirely from the night air; and he was literally glaring after the pair in front of me with an expression that boded ill for the evening. I waved to him, meaning to draw him over and anchor him to the safe society of Nanette's mother, but he swung round on his heel and went out again into the night.

It was dark on the terrace, the lights strung overhead making more shadow than illumination, and at first I couldn't see Nanette at all. Then I glimpsed a raised white arm over in a distant corner, against the faint shine of the sea. She was standing with her back to the railing and Da Rocha stood close in front of her, bending forward, one hand resting on the balustrade beside her and his dark head close to her fair one.

"What about that long, cool drink?" said I, advancing with the heavy tread of a man giving fair warning.

Nanette immediately ran to me, with a rush of relief that she covered at once with gaiety.

“Oh, please!” she cried. “I’m simply gasping! Where shall we sit? Somewhere by the windows — where we can watch.”

She was excited, breathing rather quickly, and it was clear enough that Da Rocha had been making love to her in the practised, headlong, Continental manner, and that she had found it at once delightful and a little more than she had bargained for. He turned, and I heard him snap his fingers softly in the dark — a small, ill-tempered, oddly menacing sound.

“Why not here?” he suggested, recovering his smoothness. “How beautiful is the view in the moonlight, with the dark groves and the twinkling lamps and the sea.”

“No,” said Nanette, already steering for a table near an open window, full in the light. “I feel chilly and I want to watch the dancing.”

“If you are cold, let us dance.”

Nanette shook her head and opened a tiny jewelled cigarette case — an affectation she had adopted three days before and was still enjoying. She bent toward me.

“A light, please,” she begged.

She was quite determined to be neither warmed nor danced into a corner, and so we sat there, the three of us, sipping iced drinks under the window, Da Rocha sulking handsomely, until Nanette’s mother and Renshaw came off the floor and joined us. There were inquiries for Jack. I said nothing useful — for the boy, when I last saw him, had been palpably and miserably drunk,

and that was not a thing to lay before his rival and the girl's mother at a small table.

Nanette was unable to mask her preoccupation, constantly looking past us into the lighted rooms, her eyes going again and again to the door of the inner salon; then, suddenly, halfway through a sentence of her mother's, she jumped up.

"Come on," she said to Da Rocha, and threw her wrap to me — "let's dance!"

He was on his feet in an instant, all sulks forgotten, and the two went in. Nanette's mother was watching her daughter with the particular stillness of a woman doing sums she does not like the look of, and as I stood up, idly, to follow them with my eyes, I glanced toward the inner room.

O'Mara was standing there, just within the salon, watching the play at the roulette table, a glass untouched in his hand. He had come, then; and he had not come to find us.

Nanette and Da Rocha began to dance. Da Rocha danced perfectly, with all the sensuous, deliberate grace of the born charmer; but the look in his dark eyes as he held her raised my gorge considerably, and I was glad Jack was not there to see it. Nanette floated in his arms like a bit of thistledown; her tiny feet seemed scarcely to brush the floor. He talked to her constantly, his lips close to her hair, and sometimes she smiled up at him; but, always, as they turned, she glanced through the wide doorway into the roulette room — and I understood, then, what she was watching, and it was not the wheel. Renshaw drifted over and joined me at the edge of the floor.

"Yes," said he, following my glance, "Nanette is in the throes of her first infatuation." He paused. "I'm only wondering with which of them."

As he spoke, she went past in Da Rocha's arms, and frowned at Renshaw — quite openly, like a cross child — because his shoulder had momentarily blocked her view of the roulette table and the still white figure standing beside it.

"She is," I agreed, and did not add what I was thinking.

She danced every dance after that with Da Rocha, becoming more and more animated, more brilliant and more brittle, as the night wore on; and through it all O'Mara stood at the edge of the inner room and watched the wheel, and never once, that I saw, looked at the dancing at all — which was, I came to feel, a far more particular kind of attention than looking would have been. Then Nanette's mother, with the firmness she kept for the necessary moment, moved an adjournment. Of course, Nanette objected.

"Mum," she said, breathless, glowing, dangerous, "Mr. da Rocha has invited us all to drive up to his villa. We can dance to whatever we like. Think of it!"

But her mother declined to think of it, with a smile and a finality against which even Nanette knew better than to argue twice. Da Rocha was not defeated yet, however; men of his stamp rarely are at the first repulse. His car was waiting; he would drive the party back to Reid's; and in the end this lesser invitation was accepted, there being no graceful way to refuse it. Nanette, her mother, Renshaw, and I elected to go.

“How many can you take?” Nanette asked.

“Oh, six easily,” said Da Rocha, with a glance that counted only one of us.

“I wonder if anyone else is going back?” said Nanette, and her eyes went, with little subtlety, toward the inner room.

Following her glance:

“I might ask Major O’Mara if he is ready,” said I, taking pity, and not entirely sure on whom. “Do you mind, Senhor da Rocha?”

“But of course not!” he replied, with the smile of a man calmly weighing his options and finding them, on the whole, satisfactory.

I crossed to the inner room. O’Mara heard me coming, somehow, before I spoke, and turned.

He thanked me. He preferred to walk.

“And I dislike Senhor da Rocha,” he added, quite pleasantly, as a man states a fact about the weather.

I went back and reported that the major preferred the night air. Therefore the five of us packed into Da Rocha’s sleek red hire car that stood waiting before the Casino, low and gleaming under the lights. Da Rocha, of course, had Nanette beside him in front. I could hear his constant murmur over the roar of the engine all the way, though I could not catch a word of it, and was glad. He took us up to Reid’s at an average of about eighty kilometres an hour along roads built for a third of it, the headlights swinging across white walls and black banana leaves and once across the astonished face of a man leading a bullock,

and Nanette laughed aloud at every corner, and I held on and reflected upon the folly of indulging the young.

Nanette's mother steered Nanette firmly up to bed the moment we arrived, and Da Rocha, finding his audience dispersed, did not stay long; he kissed the mother's hand, bowed to the rest of us, promised everyone everything, and slid away down the hill in a red blur. I rang Jack's room from the lobby, but there was no answer, which I had expected and did not like.

At about midnight, O'Mara joined us, having walked the whole way up from the town without apparent effort and arrived cooler than any of us. We went out on to the terrace, he and Renshaw and I, and sat watching the fairyland of the gardens below, the dark masses of the great trees and the winking lights of Funchal climbing the slopes beyond, and the riding-lights of the few ships in the bay. We did not talk a great deal. There was a quality in O'Mara's silences that made talk seem unnecessary and rather vulgar. Presently I heard a faint movement behind us in the dark, the brush of a soft sole on tile, and:

"Oh!" said a voice in the darkness, with an innocence that deceived nobody.

We all turned — and there was Nanette, distracting in a wrap of some pale stuff, her hair loose, having plainly not made the smallest attempt to go to sleep.

"I can't sleep, and I left my book out here!" she explained, looking from face to face to see how the explanation was received.

“Let me look,” said Renshaw gravely, and rose and searched the dim terrace with great thoroughness.

But he looked in vain; there was, I feel sure, no book.

“May I stay awhile and smoke a cigarette with you?” Nanette pleaded; “or were you telling funny stories?”

She stayed — seated, after a moment’s deliberation, on the arm of my chair, which I understood to be a strategic position commanding the whole terrace. There was not much conversation, but after a while O’Mara got up and disappeared into the hotel. Nanette began to talk, then, with a feverish, brilliant animation, telling us about Normandy and the unpopular mistress and a horse she had once ridden, scarcely pausing for breath, until presently O’Mara came back, carrying a loose coat over his arm.

Gracefully, without a word of fuss, he placed it around Nanette’s bare shoulders.

“You must be cold,” he said.

Nanette glanced up at him, then down again — and shivered. But it was not because she was cold; and I saw her mother’s prophecy, made that morning on the bright terrace, begin quietly to come true in the dark.

We sat on a while longer. The moon came clear of the headland and laid a long road of light across the bay, and somewhere far below a guitar was being played, badly and with feeling. At last Nanette, reluctantly, gathering O’Mara’s coat about her as if she meant to keep it, was persuaded to her room.

Long after she had gone, when the terrace was empty and the lights of the town had thinned, Jack was driven up from Funchal by a patient taxi driver and decanted at the door. We got him to bed between us without arousing anyone — no easy feat, for he was in that stage of intoxication which combines the boneless and the eloquent.

“I’ll kill that slimy Da Rocha,” he declared thickly, to the ceiling, with the solemn conviction of the very drunk. “S’a matter of honour.” And went to sleep.

O’Mara looked him over with those cool grey eyes, and there was no contempt in the look, only something that might almost have been pity.

“I wonder,” he murmured, “if cats and pretty girls know how cruel they are?”

He did not seem to expect an answer, and I had none to give him. Below us the guitar had stopped. The moon rode high and serene over the sleeping island, that beautiful, idle, treacherous island, and shed its light impartially upon the just and the unjust, upon Jack snoring in his innocence, upon Da Rocha no doubt awake in his villa among his machines, and upon whatever it was that O’Mara had carried down into that launch and not yet seen fit to mention to any of us.

Chapter V — “In Five Minutes”

The days wore on in that lotus-eaters’ paradise and I became an audience of one at a comedy already leaning toward drama. There was a mystery that intrigued me vastly, and Renshaw shared my curiosity, though he and I read it by different lights.

I could not imagine what O'Mara was doing in Madeira.

Da Rocha, palpably, had broken his journey to pursue Nanette. He positively haunted the hotel, materialising at the bathing pool, at the cocktail terrace, at the foot of the garden steps, with the soft persistence of a man who has decided that patience is merely another form of attack. I found it hard to believe that any such motive had inspired the major. Renshaw, with singular density, believed that Nanette was desperately infatuated with Da Rocha, and said so, repeatedly, with the satisfaction of a man who has solved a puzzle by ignoring most of its pieces. I let him think so, and studied O'Mara.

This strange man spent a large part of every day seated on his balcony, reading and working at his small computer. What he read or what he wrote, nobody knew. On occasions he disappeared for hours, and no one knew where he went; he would be gone before breakfast and back before cocktails, dustless, unhurried, offering no account of himself and inviting none.

It was on one of those idle, brilliant mornings that the whole party went down into Funchal, and I had my first clear sight of how the threads of the thing were beginning to cross.

The expedition was Nanette's idea, which is to say it was Da Rocha's, presented through Nanette so that her mother could not easily refuse it. We went down by the cable-car over the rust-red roofs, the bay opening wider and bluer beneath us at every pylon, and from the gardens at Monte we came down again the old way, in the *carros de cesto* — the wicker sledges that two men in straw boaters and rubber-soled shoes steer and brake with their own

feet down the steep polished streets, leaning and hauling on the cords, trotting and skidding behind you while the walls flash past a hand's breadth from your elbow. Nanette shrieked with delight the whole way down and demanded to go up and do it again. Jack, wedged beside her, wore the fixed smile of a man enjoying himself on principle; Da Rocha, in the sledge behind, called compliments forward that the wind mercifully shredded before they arrived.

In the town the heat lay thick and sweet between the buildings. We drifted through the market — the great hall of it loud with the slap of fish on marble and the cries of the women, the stalls heaped with custard apples and tree-tomatoes and flowers so violently coloured they looked enamelled, bird-of-paradise and ginger-lily and great armfuls of agapanthus. Nanette bought a single absurd orchid and wore it behind her ear and was photographed by three separate strangers before we reached the door. Da Rocha bought her, over her laughing protests, a length of the island embroidery, and the soft proprietary way he laid it across her arm made Jack turn aside and study a pyramid of bananas with passionate attention.

"He buys her things," Renshaw observed to me, "as if he were furnishing a house."

"Yes," I said. "I had noticed."

We took coffee at last at a café on the square, under the powder-blue jacaranda, the small bitter cups and a plate of the honey-cake they make there, and for a while the comedy ran smoothly: Nanette holding court, Jack and Da Rocha each

pretending the other was not present, Renshaw discoursing on the embroidery trade, Nanette's mother watching all of it from behind dark glasses with the tranquil vigilance of a lighthouse.

It was then that I saw O'Mara.

He was on the far side of the square, where the bank stands, and he was not idling. He came out of a doorway with another man — a heavy, sunburnt, capable-looking person in a creased linen jacket whom I took, rightly as it proved, for someone official — and the two of them stood a moment in talk that was brief and entirely without gesture, the talk of men who have said the important thing already and are confirming it. Then the heavy man went one way and O'Mara the other, and O'Mara's way took him, without the smallest appearance of haste, along the harbour front, where he stopped at the rail and looked for perhaps half a minute at the shipping in the roads — at one grey vessel in particular, standing well out, that flew no flag I could read at that distance — before he walked on and was lost among the awnings.

I do not think anyone else of our party saw him. Nanette had her back to the harbour; she was, I noticed, glancing now and then over her shoulder toward the hotel cars, as if she expected the major to appear from the direction in which he was least likely to be. I said nothing. But I sat with my cold coffee and turned the small scene over, the doorway and the official-looking man and the grey ship in the roads, and felt the first definite conviction that the holiday I was on and the business O'Mara was on were not, after all, two separate things, and that Nanette,

drifting through her gardens in her pretty pique, was closer to the centre of it than any of us yet knew.

It was queer, too, how many times Nanette strolled through the unfrequented part of the gardens below O'Mara's balcony. Sometimes, but rarely, she would be alone; sometimes with Jack, more often with Da Rocha. But, always, she paused to glance in her mirror and powder her nose before she turned the corner. O'Mara, apparently, never noticed her.

She would loiter around the bathing pool for hours in the morning and then suddenly throw off her robe and plunge into the sea with an easy, gliding dive like a young dryad. By this token I would know that O'Mara was sauntering down the steps.

As she went in, Da Rocha and Jack would take the water like twin ducks. It was a miracle that they never tried to drown each other.

O'Mara was a hard man to know; a lonely man, with the particular loneliness of those who carry something they may not set down. I was honestly proud of the fact that, little by little, he began to unbend to me, to grant me something like friendship. Occasionally he would join me on the cocktail terrace before lunch; and Nanette would ask him for a light and then run back to her mother, Renshaw, Jack, Da Rocha, and the rest of the party who, amongst them, had enough lighters to set fire to the building.

Da Rocha was ceaselessly persevering in his endeavours to take her for drives, to take her sailing, and to dance with her to whatever music he had to offer. Her mother negatived these

plans with an unfailing, smiling, infinitely patient obstruction that I came to admire as a thing of real artistry.

One day an apparently indignant Nanette came across to where I was sitting with O'Mara. Jack followed, as Jack always followed.

"Mr. Devlin!" she burst out, "Gabriel wants to drive me out to a perfectly wonderful cliff. You lie on the edge and look down I don't know how many hundred feet. Now, do *you* see any earthly reason why I shouldn't go?"

"I don't suppose Devlin sees any earthly reason why *I* shouldn't," said Jack. "But I haven't been invited."

"You are always quarrelling with Gabriel," Nanette retorted, fixing a cigarette in her holder. "Please, Major, would you give me a light?"

As she stooped over the flame that he offered her, I could see her eyes — looking at every wave in his hair, seeking out the faint lines at his temples, studying his long, sensitive fingers. He shook out the match, and:

"You are restless, Nanette," he said. "Why not spend a few peaceful hours in the garden, reading? Let me lend you a book."

Coming from any other source, this suggestion would have provoked a scathing rejoinder, but:

"Thank you," said Nanette simply, "I will."

She sat for that entire afternoon in a secluded corner of the garden, a comfortable, empty chair drawn up beside her own, reading a Russian novel — and waiting for O'Mara to join her.

But he didn't.

That evening the comedy became drama. I was to learn in a few short hours how Nanette's alluring beauty had averted tragedy from a royal house. And this was how it developed:

A rather special dance had been arranged — I forget why; and O'Mara, quite the best-dressed man in the hotel, was last to go to his room and first down. He could get into black quicker than anyone I have ever met. You may know Reid's cocktail bar? Well, as I looked in, having changed, there was O'Mara on a tall stool studying a dry Martini. The way his bow was tied excited my envy; it was a poem in white piqué.

We had the bar to ourselves, and presently: "How long do you expect to stay in Madeira?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled — that rare and revealing smile.

"In the strictest confidence, Devlin," he replied — and suddenly his grey eyes grew steely; he was smiling no longer — "until I have in my possession a certain small black dispatch box."

"What!" I exclaimed.

"It contains," he went on, turning the stem of his glass between two fingers, "some deeply compromising correspondence involving a member of a royal house; and if it ever reaches the intelligence network that is waiting for it in London, I hesitate to imagine the consequences."

"Good heavens!" said I, and formed my lips to convey an unspoken name.

O'Mara nodded.

"Exactly," he replied. "That was what took me to the Argentine; but their man — a dangerous and clever agent — gave me the slip in Buenos Aires, and so you met me on my way back to Europe."

"Then you have it!" I cried.

"No, damn it! I haven't!" said he; "or would I be sitting on this stool? It's getting desperate, Devlin! There's a Royal Navy vessel standing off Funchal waiting for my signal that I'm coming aboard!"

The grey ship in the roads, I thought; and I held my tongue and was glad I had held it all afternoon. I said nothing for a few moments. Then I thanked him for his confidence.

"I confide in you with a definite purpose," he replied. "I claim to be a judge of men, and I judge you to be one who would stand by in a rough house. I may need help, after all. If I do, the facts being as we know them, can I call on you?"

We solemnly shook hands — as Nanette came racing in.

She was flushed with excitement, and wearing a new frock. Her blue eyes shone like stars when she saw O'Mara. She looked adorable, and was well aware of the fact. Her happiness was that of the girl who knows herself to be perfectly gowned. It was completed now that Fate had ordained O'Mara to be the first man to see her so.

Jumping on to a tall stool:

"Do you like me?" she demanded naïvely.

"You look as if you had come straight from fairyland," I said. "Let me order you something, to prove you are mortal."

“Oh, no, please!” cried Nanette. “Mum would *go spare* if she caught me drinking cocktails! Give me just a sip of yours!”

She drank from my glass, watching me with roguish eyes; then, turning to O’Mara:

“Am I smart enough to be honoured with a dance this evening, Major?” she asked — but the note of raillery faded as she met his glance, and she dropped her head, looking down at tiny blue and silver shoes.

“The honour would be mine, Nanette,” he said, in the gentle way he had of addressing all women.

Nanette bit her lip and jumped to the floor, as her mother came to look for her.

“Good gracious, Nanette!” she exclaimed. “In the *bar*! And your frock, dear! I see, now, why you wouldn’t have me with you to try on!”

“Please *don’t*, Mum!” cried Nanette. “Will you *never* allow me to grow up!”

The blue-and-silver frock was certainly daring for a young woman of eighteen. It was pure Paris; but Nanette’s sweet shoulders were worth displaying.

“You are altogether too exposed, dear!” her mother declared.

“I wear less when I’m swimming!” argued the reasonable Nanette.

“Never mind. Please wear your wrap, dear, or a scarf — at least during dinner.”

And so the famous evening began.

Da Rocha had managed to get himself invited to the dinner party that included Nanette, and Jack sat facing him, the width of the table between them and the whole length of an old grievance. Renshaw, O'Mara, and I shared a bachelor table, from which I had an excellent view of the developing weather.

When the dancing began, I missed O'Mara. Nanette danced with me, but abstractedly, alternately watching the door and the open French windows. There are few things more provoking than to dance with a young woman who wants to dance with someone else, and I have seldom been so thoroughly, so courteously, so completely not there.

Da Rocha claimed her quite often and she suffered his public love-making in a way that nearly led to an outburst from Jack. The storm broke when O'Mara appeared. Nanette had begun dancing with Jack, but she did not finish. She dragged him across the floor to O'Mara, and:

"Please say you will dance," she pleaded. She turned to her flushed partner. "Then we will finish our dance, Jack," she added.

"I hate to refuse," O'Mara replied, and his voice was gentle; "but I came down to beg you to excuse me. I find that I must go out — on most urgent business. Don't be angry. I mean it, Nanette."

Nanette was not angry — but she was deeply humiliated. Every woman in the room had marked her descent upon the aloof O'Mara, confident in her radiant young beauty, and every woman in the room now marked the result.

“I don’t want to dance any more,” she said petulantly, when the major had gone, “at least, not to this silly band.”

“It’s an excellent band, dear,” her mother replied, watching Nanette with a sudden maternal anxiety.

“They play such dated stuff,” Nanette declared. “If I hear one more bossa nova I shall scream. They are liable to break into hymns almost any minute!”

“Then what do you want to do?”

“I want to drive up to Gabriel’s and dance to whatever he chooses to play.”

“Nanette!” — her mother spoke sharply — “I have already told you that I absolutely refuse. You heard what your father said?”

“No, Mum, I didn’t,” Nanette replied. “You told me. I would like to ask Pop.”

But Pop had retreated to his room with his tablet and three old newspapers he’d been meaning to read all week.

“Then I’m going to bed,” Nanette announced. “I have a headache.”

She turned and walked from the ballroom. Da Rocha detained her in the doorway, but only for a moment, his dark head bent close to her fair one. Then he crossed the floor and went out on to the terrace, and there was a satisfaction in the set of his shoulders that I did not like. A few minutes later I strolled up to my room to get a pipe. The window was open, and I lingered in the dark for a moment, held by the moon-magic of the night. As I stood there, I heard a soft call:

“Nanette!”

Nanette's room was below and to the left of mine. I looked out. I could see a slender silvery figure leaning over the balcony.

"Is that you, Gabriel?"

"Yes, dear."

"In five minutes!"

Chapter VI — The Bungalow in the Hills

Personality is a queer thing. Nobody has quite defined it yet. In my wild quest of a plan to save Nanette from herself, without letting her mother know and without compromising her, I came straight to what looked to me like an inevitable decision — I decided to tell O'Mara.

What I thought he could do that I couldn't do alone, God knows; but that was the effect the man had on people around him. One went to O'Mara with one's troubles as naturally as water finds the low ground.

One fear I had: that he should have started out on whatever mysterious business called him. I raced across to his room. It was in darkness. I went racing down to the lounge. Dancing was in full swing; no sign of O'Mara. I grabbed the front desk.

"Has Major O'Mara gone out?"

"No, sir. Not this way."

I turned, hope reborn — and there stood O'Mara reading a note that a member of staff had just handed to him!

"O'Mara!" I cried.

He glanced up. His face was stern. His eyes glinted icily.

"Go and get Larkin," he said. "Bring him here — alone."

"But Nanette — "

"I know all about Nanette. Bring Larkin to me."

I ran. I was under orders. But it was a service of love.

Jack was in the bar — quite alone, and well on the way to being alone with a vengeance. He looked at me in a lowering way.

"Nanette's in danger," I said briefly. He jumped up. "Come quickly."

When we got to the lobby and he saw who was waiting, he pulled up with a jerk.

"What the hell has *he* got to do with it?" he demanded.

"Mr. Larkin!"

O'Mara was watching him.

"Well, what is it?"

"This!" O'Mara handed him the note. "You read it, too, Devlin."

Jack and I read together:

> Have gone to Gabriel's villa to dance. If you get this in time, will you join us? — Nanette.

Jack crushed the paper into a ball.

"My God! The child!" he said. "Why did she send this to you?"

O'Mara stared the angry lover down, then:

"Because she is very young," he answered, without one note of anger. "Don't blame her, Larkin — and don't blame me. Blame the age we live in. Leave me out. *You* are going to save her from Da Rocha."

"Has she started?"

"I fear so."

"Then where's the chance? That swine drives like a maniac!"

"True, but he can't race at night on those roads. It will take him half an hour."

"We have no car!"

"We don't need one. I happen to know a route — a mere goat track — by which we can climb to the villa almost as quickly as he can drive there."

"You mean it?" asked Jack hoarsely.

"As it happens, I was about to take a stroll in that direction when this note reached me." He said it without the flicker of an eyelid, and I understood, even in the middle of my fright, that O'Mara had been about to climb to Da Rocha's villa tonight for reasons that had nothing whatever to do with Nanette, and that Fate had merely arranged for him to acquire two assistants on the way.

"Come on!" said Jack.

I have the haziest recollection of that appalling climb. O'Mara knew the way like the palm of his hand. Under a sickle moon that looked so near in its white purity one almost felt one could reach up and grasp it, we climbed, panting and sweating. From the gardens of the valley we broke up through banana plantations where the great bursting pods banged our heads as we stooped to follow that tireless guide. We scaled a sheer hillside steep as a roof. We crawled along a path less than a yard wide, with a gorge yawning hundreds of feet below in which the vineyards shrank to a close green carpet.

We came to the red earth of the uplands. Our feet sank in it as in moss. Pines barred our way, rank on rank. Away to the left, below, beyond, the still sea shone like lapis lazuli.

"Ssh! Quiet!" O'Mara ordered.

We pulled up. I looked at Jack. He might recently have come out of a steam room. His collar was a mere farce; a loop of exhausted linen. I believe I was no more spruce. I looked at O'Mara. That remarkable man appeared to be as well-dressed as usual, and was not even breathing hard.

"Single file," he commanded. "Not a sound."

We crept on, breathing heavily; and presently, through those sentinel pines on the crest, it reached us — music from a high-end sound system, clear and rich on the night air.

"Thank God! We are in time!" said O'Mara.

We sighted Da Rocha's villa through the thinning trees. Lights shone out from three tall windows fronting on an L-shaped veranda. The windows were open, and O'Mara made his dispositions.

"Larkin," he directed, "take the window on your right front. Keep out of sight. Wait your moment. Time it. We shall not interfere." He held out his hand. "This is your chance. Make the most of it."

Jack grasped the extended hand, and:

"Thank you, sir!" he said.

He went off through the pines, stooping warily.

We gave him time to reach his post; then O'Mara and I made a detour and crept up on to the veranda so that we looked into Da Rocha's villa from a window opposite to that which concealed Jack.

The room was sparsely furnished. It had a polished floor from which the few rugs had been removed. There was champagne in an ice bucket on a sideboard. There was the most elaborate and

costly sound system I had ever beheld. A Moorish lamp hanging from the beamed ceiling gave light. I could see two good pictures — both nudes — and a long, deep, cushioned divan. The speakers were playing something slow and lush, and Nanette and Da Rocha were dancing to it.

I have said that Da Rocha danced perfectly. His dancing on this night was inspired — inspired by passion. He did not merely hold Nanette, he enveloped her; with his arms, with his ardent, lascivious eyes.

She swam into view and out of view like a dream-nymph hypnotized by a satyr. Her expression was indefinable as I saw it. A sort of exaltation was there, born of adventure and sensuous music. I could not know whether she had tasted the wine; but there was a dawning doubt, too, a doubt of herself that was not yet fear.

Then the music ceased, and we heard remote applause from the speakers.

Da Rocha muted the system and led Nanette to the divan. He seated himself beside her, smiled, and put his arm around her bare shoulders. She made a whimsical grimace, but did not protest. Then she glanced at him quickly — and he stooped and kissed her. It was a lingering kiss, which she ended by pushing him away.

Their conversation reached us as a mere murmur; but Nanette imperatively negatived further advances and pointed in the direction of the sideboard. Da Rocha shrugged, smiled, and crossed to the ice bucket.

I had both fists so tightly clenched that they hurt; but O'Mara's hand held my wrist like a human manacle. Jack's inaction astounded me. Then, under the urge of O'Mara's iron restraint, I began to think. After all, poor Jack held no rights over Nanette, and he was too unworldly to grasp the inwardness of this scene. She had suffered Da Rocha's kiss. Jack was still waiting for his cue.

It came shortly after Da Rocha returned with two beaded glasses. I had watched Nanette whilst the man had poured out the wine; and I knew that, at last, pique and rebellion, having died their natural deaths, she realised her position.

He set the glasses on a little coffee table and drew it beside the divan. Nanette asked him to put the music back on. He shook his head and smilingly handed her one of the glasses. She put it down, untouched. Da Rocha drained the other, replaced it on the table, and, suddenly throwing himself on his knees, clasped the girl in eager arms and burst into a torrent of passionate speech.

Nanette shrank back on the divan. Da Rocha followed her. He kissed her hands, her arms, her shoulders. He devoured her with his lips.

She writhed in his clasp, uttered a half-stifled cry, and wrenching one arm free, tried to thrust him away.

Then Jack came in.

He covered the course in four running strides, stooped, seized Da Rocha around the neck, and jerked him on to his feet. Whereon followed — catastrophe.

Jack slipped on the polished floor, stumbled, tried to recover — and fell.

Da Rocha twisted about and kicked him above the left temple.

He lay prone.

“Jack!” cried Nanette. “Jack!”

O’Mara’s grip on my wrist was like a vise.

“Wait,” he said. “The boy’s down but he’s not out!”

O’Mara was right. Nanette’s voice recalled him. Da Rocha wore only light dancing shoes.

Jack rolled over, avoided a second swinging kick, and came to his feet, shaking his tawny head like a terrier with a flea in its ear.

“Jack!” cried Nanette again.

She crouched on the divan, wide-eyed. Her shoulder strap had slipped; and Nanette will never know how beautiful I know she is. Even as I saw, guiltily, she readjusted it — and the fight started.

Blood was trickling into Jack’s eyes. He kept dodging and trying to clear his sight. It upset his judgment, beyond a doubt; added to which his skull must have been humming like a beehive. Remember, too, the climb he had put in.

To my intense annoyance, Da Rocha proved able to box as well as he danced and kicked. He took all a trained fighter’s advantage of Jack’s double handicap. Some punishment came his way, but it was not heavy — and he kept registering killing body blows on his opponent.

Jack might have planted a lucky one before it was too late. But Nanette defeated him.

"Jack!" she cried, a sob in her voice. "Don't let him *beat* you!"

Half-dazed, the boy paused, dropped his hands — and Da Rocha delivered a tremendous right well below the belt. Jack went down — to stay.

"The dirty swine!" I exclaimed.

O'Mara slipped a revolver into my hand.

"I don't think there are any staff about tonight," he said. "But see that I'm not interrupted."

He stepped in through the open window, straightening his cuffs. It was not pose; it was nerves. The man was human. He was fighting for composure.

Da Rocha faced him, and:

"*You!*" came, as a sort of rapturous sigh, from the divan.

The two men confronted each other for an electric moment; then:

"You are a very dirty fighter, Da Rocha," said O'Mara smoothly. "But, as you are probably tired, I suggest that you give me the black dispatch box that you have locked in your bedroom — and we will say no more about it."

Da Rocha's expression became complicated. My own brain was revolving like a merry-go-round. This sudden revelation was too much for me — that Da Rocha was a foreign agent! The pursuit of Nanette, the private communications system he had boasted of, the

villa high above the town where ordinary reception failed: I saw it all turn over in an instant and show me its other face.

"Go to hell!" was the reply. "Who are you?"

"You are very forgetful," said O'Mara.

As he spoke, he reached out a long, lazy left. It looked effortless, but it was perfectly timed, perfectly measured. It started in the ball of his suddenly rigid right foot and from there carried every ounce of energy in his body to the point of Da Rocha's jaw.

There was a pleasant snapping sound. Da Rocha went down like a poleaxed ox.

Nanette sat silent, a second Niobe.

"Devlin!" cried O'Mara. "The revolver! We have no time to waste!"

I ran in, passing the weapon to him.

"Attend to Larkin," he directed. "We must get him away."

He crossed to a door right of the divan and went into a room beyond, which was dimly lighted.

"Mr. Devlin — " Nanette began.

Came the sound of a pistol shot — a second! There followed a splintering crash. Nanette leapt to her feet, and turned — as O'Mara came out again, carrying a small black dispatch box. He put it on the coffee table.

Jack stirred and groaned. Nanette's gaze never left O'Mara. And now, timidly approaching him:

“I was mad,” she whispered. “Oh, thank you!” She swayed and sank into his arms, her perfect lips raised to his in offering. “Can you forgive me?”

He held her for a moment, very tenderly, looking into her eyes, then:

“I have nothing to forgive, little girl,” he said. “You have been foolish, but I don’t think you will ever be so foolish again.”

Gently, he set her aside, and:

“Devlin,” said he, “lend a hand with Larkin. We will borrow Da Rocha’s car.”

Chapter VII — A Short Note

Wonderful to relate, we managed to keep secret the story of Nanette’s indiscretion. Her mother never knew that she had left her room. And it was toward dusk of the following day that the first act of the tragi-comedy came to a close.

To Renshaw’s inquiries touching my disappearance from the dance, I had returned evasive replies — a man does not improvise well at three in the morning, helping a half-conscious boy up a hotel staircase, but I had done my best, and Renshaw was too well bred to press a friend who plainly did not wish to be pressed. Jack kept his room, for good and sufficient reasons; the left side of his face had come up in colours not provided for in nature, and he was disinclined to display them. O’Mara had gone into the town early and had not come back. Nanette remained invisible.

For all the glory of the Madeiran sunshine and the wonder of the flowers, black depression sat heavily upon us, the particular flatness of the morning after, when the music has stopped and the cost is being added up in a dozen separate rooms.

I was lounging on the terrace at about six o'clock wondering what Nanette was doing and whether her mother suspected anything, when O'Mara suddenly walked out to me.

"Hello!" I cried. "I thought you had gone for good!"

"No," he answered musingly, "not yet."

He sank into a chair, as if dog weary, and for a moment said nothing at all, looking out at the bay where the light was beginning to go amber.

"Had a hard day?" I asked.

"Fairly," he replied; "but I've done my job. I suspect there are harder to come." He paused, then: "Have you seen Nanette?" he asked.

"No." I stared at him. "O'Mara, tell me if you resent my frankness — but that girl's madly in love with you."

"I don't resent it, Devlin," he answered. "I know she thinks she is. But Nanette is very young. There is something you don't know — that nobody else will ever know."

I looked into the grey eyes. But they were not cold: they were on fire! I drew a sharp breath.

"O'Mara — " I began.

He nodded, and gripped my hand hard.

"Yes!" he said simply. "From the first moment I saw her. I daren't trust myself to see her again. You understand? It's quite impossible."

"But why?"

"For many reasons. Thank God, *she's* young enough to forget."

There was a short silence, which is more memorable to me than many long conversations. I did not ask him what the reasons were. One did not, with O'Mara; and I had begun dimly to perceive that a man in his trade does not marry where he pleases, and that the something nobody would ever know was not a thing of the heart at all, but of the work that had brought him, and the grey ship, to Madeira.

"What shall you do?" I asked.

He pointed across the bay.

Trailing a pennant of smoke in her wake, the greyhound shape of a Royal Navy vessel raced for the harbour.

"I sail in an hour," he answered. "I can take care of myself, Devlin, but Nanette is of an age when a — silly attachment might spoil years of her life. So" — he took a letter from his pocket — "I have done a cruel thing. I have said what isn't true — God knows it isn't true! Her pride will do the rest. Will you give it to her — after I have gone?"

The promise was made. I thought of Nanette's fresh young loveliness, which this man, who wanted her madly, might have taken as an unconditional gift. I thought of certain others I had met who would not have hesitated for the tenth part of a second.

I reflected on the age we live in, for all its freedoms. And I wondered.

I have known some good Irishmen and some bad. But Edmond O'Mara would be a mighty fine advertisement for any race on earth.

Nanette came down to dinner, and I can never forget her expression when she saw O'Mara's deserted table — the small, swift collapse of a hope she had not admitted even to herself, mastered almost before it showed.

My task was going to be a hard one.

I took her out to the terrace afterward. Away on the distant horizon I could trace a faint wisp of smoke.

"Do you mean," she said, and her voice had changed strangely, "that Major O'Mara — has gone?"

I looked at her in the moonlight. And Nanette had grown up, between the soup and the coffee, as the young sometimes do, all at once and for good. She watched me with a woman's eyes.

I handed the note to her. She ran to the library window, tearing open the envelope as she went. I turned away and tried to trace the slender smoke trail fading, fading on a distant horizon.

A cry brought me sharply about.

Nanette stood before me, her eyes blazing, her face deathly white.

"Do you know what is in this?" she demanded.

"I do not, Nanette."

And indeed I shall never know; but I know what it cost him to write it.

A moment she stood so, glaring at me. Then, frenziedly she began to tear the letter into tiny fragments, and:

"How dare he!" she cried. "Oh, God! how *dare* he!"

Whereupon she burst into such passionate sobs that it was agony to hear them. Dropping into a chair on the deserted terrace, she cried until my heart ached, and I stood by like a fool with my hands at my sides, because there was nothing on earth I could say that would not have been either a lie or a betrayal.

It was her first love, and a very big one. An O'Mara inspires nothing petty. But she had courage, and pride.

She conquered her weakness, and stood up.

"You are very kind, Mr. Devlin," she said. "I am sorry I made a fool of myself."

Then she went in, walking very upright.

I spent a wretched evening, and when I retired to my room, sleep simply would not come. I got up, with an idea of smoking a pipe, but, first, I crossed to the open window. On a moon-dappled path below the terrace I espied a moving figure; and Burns's words flashed through my mind: "The best-laid schemes o' mice and men…"

Nanette was stealing among the flowers, collecting tiny fragments of the torn letter that a light evening breeze had blown from the terrace above. She gathered them one by one, stooping in the moonlight, with the patience of a child saving

the pieces of a broken toy. It was a hurt, an affront; but it was the only thing of his she had, and she meant to keep it.

Chapter VIII — The Call

"Message, sir!"

I sat up with a start. Morning sunlight flooded the large bare room. Wild canaries were singing outside my window. Slowly, facts began to assert themselves. I had been dreaming that I was taking coffee at the Wolseley with a minor royal and a cabinet minister, when a figure from the intelligence briefings I had been reading had appeared through a window, clutching a hard drive with a red warning sticker. Now, I realised that I had absorbed too much news on my phone before sleeping; but that actually I was in bed at Reid's Hotel, Funchal.

The text message that the porter had passed under my door was crisp enough, but it effectually banished my drowsiness.

> Please call on British consul at once. Vitally urgent. Am holding you to our bargain. — O'Mara.

A bargain based upon the security of interests rather older than oneself is not lightly denied: I thought that perhaps my dreams had been prophetic. Nor was Edmond O'Mara the man to send such a message except under stress extraordinary.

As I hurriedly bathed, shaved, and dressed, I reviewed the position, and a queer position it was for a man who had come to Madeira for nothing more strenuous than sunshine and the society of agreeable people. There was O'Mara, homeward bound with a packet of letters whose publication would serve a hostile foreign network rather well. There was myself, George Devlin, who in a neutral way had helped to secure these. There was Gabriel da

Rocha, agent of that hostile network, nursing a broken jaw as a result of the foregoing transactions. And there was Nanette.

Even as her name brought the vivid image to my mind, from under the open window came a soft call:

"Coo — oo!"

I crossed, struggling with an intractable tie; and there on the balcony below was Nanette.

To know that the most provokingly beautiful girl one has ever met is madly in love with a better man and to behave sanely in her company is an acid test of what I have heard termed British poise.

She shaded her eyes with her hands, looking up at me. Her arms were a delicate brown colour on their outer curves where the sun had tanned them, and by comparison ivory white beneath. With a background of flowers against distant sea blue, Nanette made a picture exquisite to remember in old age but disturbing to a comparatively young bachelor. Temptation is sweet only when there is a chance of falling.

"What a horrid tie," she said. "Please wear the grey one with silver stripes, as it's our last day in Madeira."

There was a wistful note in her appeal, and, looking down at Nanette, slowly a memory came: I had worn that grey tie on the day we had met O'Mara. She had remembered. Of course she had remembered; she would be remembering small things like that for a long while yet.

I suppressed a sigh, admiring how the world was made. At eighteen, there are many things that even the most confident

young woman doesn't know. There was one that Nanette did not even suspect — that the man who had wounded her had done it deliberately, and at a cost to himself she would have wept to learn of. There was another that I knew of; but this was not my own secret. I was unselfish enough to wish I could tell her.

"Very well, Nanette," I replied, and lingered, looking down.

"Are you going to swim this morning — for the last time?"

"No. I have to go into the town."

"I don't think I shall swim, then," said Nanette. "May I come with you? Or is it a stag party?"

Before I could reply:

"Please remember your packing!" came a voice from below.

Nanette's mother stepped out onto the balcony and looked up at me in mock severity. Seeing her, beside her daughter, I reflected that the lucky man who won Nanette would acquire a bride who would always be beautiful. "Consider well the mother of thy beloved," says an Arab poet. "In her behold thy beloved-to-be."

"Pop is doing his tonight," Nanette protested.

I visualized Pop, sole occupant of the family table in the dining room, dealing with a solid English breakfast, regardless of flies, temperature, and the indifferent quality of the bacon.

"He has none to do, dear," was the reply. "I do it for him."

"But, darling," Nanette wheedled, head pressed against her mother's shoulder, "there are hours and hours. Please let me off."

In the end she had her way, as she had her way in most things, and we set out together along the dusty road. There would be disappointment this morning down at the bathing pool, I mused, peering aside at the piquant face shaded by a parasol. Nanette wore no hat, and the sun had given her hair a warmth it had not possessed when we first arrived.

"Did you tell Jack you were going?" I asked.

"No." Nanette aroused herself from a reverie. "I forgot."

Poor Jack! And he would have sold his Cambridge Blue for a smile from Nanette.

The road to the town is picturesque; and I might have counted George Devlin a happy man had I not known that my charming companion loved to be with me only because I formed a link with her memories of someone else. Down the steep slope we walked, talking but little. An old road worker doffed his hat, smiled, and bade us good morning. I sensed his kindly, appreciative glance following us. Funchal is famous for honeymoons, and the old man had drawn the obvious and flattering conclusion, and I had not the heart, nor the Portuguese, to correct him.

Past the gardens of the Casino and the flower-cloaked balconies of villas we went. I forced myself to think of my real mission. Common sense whispered that I should have driven down in a fast car. Sense of duty demanded that I should conceal the nature of my business from Nanette — which was the harder of the two, for she had a disconcerting trick of asking exactly the question one least wished to answer.

“Shall you be long with the consul?” she asked.

“I don’t expect to be,” I replied.

“Then I will go along and have a simply perfect shawl I saw sent up to Mum,” said Nanette. “She won’t like it. But *I* love it.”

We were just about to turn into that steep and narrow street that leads to the square, when:

“Hi! hi! Hello there!” we were hailed.

We turned. Bumping along in a sledge behind two sweating patient oxen, was Jack.

“Hello, Jack,” said Nanette. “Mr. Devlin has to see the consul and I’m going shopping. Want to come along?”

“Rather!” cried Jack. “Jump in.”

We proceeded to the consulate in the bullock cart, escorted by a battalion of flies with fixed bayonets. Jack’s bruises had gone down a little, or he had ceased to care about them; the mere sight of Nanette unattended by Da Rocha had restored him to something like his ordinary radiance.

“Meet you at the Golden Gate,” called Jack.

He was absurdly happy when I left him with Nanette and climbed the narrow stairs to the consul’s office.

The British consul was a quiet little official automaton who had buried his heart in somebody’s grave and had nothing left to hope for. He did his country’s small business in Funchal with a faded thoroughness, and I think the arrival of something genuinely secret and urgent was the first event in years that had given him any pleasure.

“Good morning, Mr. Devlin,” he said, and smiled rather sadly as I plumped an ornamental object down on the table.

“Good Lord!” said I.

It was Nanette’s handbag, a frivolous trifle from Paris, which she had asked me to take care of as we got into the bullock cart. I had been carrying it unconsciously, and the spectacle of it sitting there among the consul’s sober blotters struck us both, for a moment, as exquisitely absurd.

“You are early,” the consul went on, recovering himself, “and I have not quite finished decoding a dispatch which I am instructed to deliver to you. The main point, however, is this: Major O’Mara arrives in Madeira tomorrow night, and — “

“Oh!” A faint cry interrupted him. “I’m so sorry — “

We both turned and looked up.

Nanette stood in the doorway, her blue eyes so widely opened as to convey an impression of fear.

“I came for my bag,” she said. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

But she had intruded, and she knew it, and I knew it; and as she took the frivolous Paris bag from the table her eyes went once, swiftly, to the half-decoded sheet beneath the consul’s hand, and I understood with a sinking heart that the one secret I had been charged to keep from her was the one she had just overheard.

Chapter IX — Moon of Madness

Fifteen minutes later I was in possession of the facts — and faced with a problem.

"This chap Da Rocha," said the consul, "isn't Portuguese, in spite of his name. He's some kind of what-not. He has the biggest communications setup in the island up at his villa."

"He's a foreign agent."

"I know," the other returned quietly, "but it wasn't my business to mention it first. He crashed his car the other day and he's laid up for repairs in a house he owns down here in the town. I know the doctor who's attending."

I did not contradict him, for I was reading once again the body of the decoded message:

> Arrive Funchal Harbour 2 A.M. Friday morning.
> Please meet me. Arrange for accommodation
> privately. No one must know. Letters have all been
> photographed. See Da Rocha does not slip away.
> Watch Arundel Castle. Try to learn if any
> associate of Da C. sails. Prevent if possible. I
> count on you. — O'Mara.

"Not a vessel has cleared for European ports since Major O'Mara left," said the consul. "So there's a good chance."

"He's returning in the naval vessel?"

"I don't think so." He glanced at a list of shipping. "Although this dispatch came from her. My idea is that they

intercepted the Yeoward boat and put him on board. She's due here at the time stated."

"Devilish awkward," I murmured. "It's late to cancel my sailing. I'm booked in the *Arundel* myself."

"I'll step across to Blandy's with you," said the consul, standing up and reaching for his hat. "We can get you transferred to a later sailing. Leave the finding of private accommodation to me, too."

"Do you know of anyone associated with Da Rocha?"

"No. Da Rocha has property in Madeira, but he's rarely here. Nearly all I know about him I have learned officially."

We settled our business at the shipping agent's, thanks to consular aid, and, the morning growing insufferably hot, my friend agreed that something icy through a straw was indicated. When we arrived at the Golden Gate this theory proved to be popular. A party from Reid's that included Nanette's mother had arrived, and Jack was sharing Nanette with a stranger — a broad, self-possessed man with an international air that sat upon him like a well-cut suit.

He reminded me of my London stockbroker until he was introduced as Maddox. He had a real-estate smile that was not unattractive, and my first, natural impression was that he had recently purchased the island from the Portuguese and was running his eye over the property. Presently, however:

"And how is our friend, Gabriel?" Nanette asked. Then, turning to me: "I met Mr. Maddox with Gabriel da Rocha," she explained — and the small artless sentence told me a great deal,

for it meant that the broken-jawed agent in his shuttered house in the town was already reaching out, through this smiling proxy, toward the one of our party who could be most easily reached.

I forget how Maddox replied, for I was exchanging significant glances with the consul. A few moments later that competent official took the floor.

"So you are leaving Madeira, Mr. Maddox?" he asked.

"No," the other replied, sharing an appreciative look between the cigar that he had just lighted and Nanette. "I had hoped to sail in the *Arundel Castle*, but I have been delayed."

The consul put several more leading questions to Maddox, in a chatty way, but I rather lost track of the conversation. Nanette was in a mood of feverish animation, which I knew, from experience, meant mischief. The party had been over to Blandy's apparently, and had learned that accommodation in the next mail boat was not to be had for love or money.

Nanette and Jack talked happy nonsense about camping out in lifeboats and what not. Then I made an announcement.

"Somebody is lucky," I said. "My berth will be vacant."

This statement was received with gratifying consternation.

"You surely can't mean that you are not coming with us?" Nanette's mother exclaimed.

Two pairs of eyes I particularly noted at this moment — the heavy-lidded brown eyes of Mr. Maddox and the wide-open blue eyes of Nanette.

"Unhappily, yes," I replied. "Unfortunate, very; but I must wait for a later sailing."

There was a sort of farewell dance at Reid's that night. Quite a number of people were leaving in the *Arundel*. Nanette persistently avoided me; and I doubled up with Jack in a scowling competition having for target Mr. Julian Maddox, who had dropped in after dinner and monopolized Nanette.

Once, pausing near me:

"Do you know what they call the crescent moon here?" she asked.

"No."

"Moon of Madness."

She laughed and danced on. Jack scowled. I wondered.

At the cocktail bar, during an interval, things bordered on the hectic. I have met more charming men of Mr. Maddox's general stamp. Mr. Maddox was not among the best of them.

"Don't look so gloomy, my lad," he said to Jack. "It takes a man of experience to please a young girl."

Jack had boxed for his college and was no mean craftsman. I rapidly took in the powerful but fleshy form of Maddox and prepared to mourn his passing. He smiled confidently; but one could have got roughly about the same odds on a peanut in a monkey-house, when:

"Mr. Devlin!" said someone at my elbow.

Jack was just descending in a leisurely way from his tall stool. He paused as I turned. The British consul stood behind us.

"A word in private," said he.

I grabbed Jack's arm.

"Come along, too," I urged.

He hesitated, then:

“Perhaps you’re right,” came with manifest reluctance.

We walked out into the lounge; and the consul handed me a scribbled note.

“Received in code tonight,” he explained.

Detain Julian Maddox at any cost.

Jack had left us, going to look for Nanette, and:

“From O’Mara?” I asked.

“No. From Scotland Yard!”

“But he’s not sailing!”

The consul met my gaze of inquiry.

“Da Rocha’s communications equipment is remarkably well informed,” he said. “Maddox knew of this move before we did.”

Chapter X — The *Arundel Castle* Sails

I cannot pretend that I was a happy man as I climbed the gangway of the *Arundel Castle* on the following morning. All my friends were leaving, and the affection and admiration that I had for Edmond O'Mara could not recompense me for their loss. My only consolation lay in the knowledge that, unhonoured and unsung though I should be, yet, in a modest way, I was doing my job of work toward keeping a dangerous secret from falling into the wrong hands.

An inward-bound liner, by the time she makes Madeira, offers a ripe crop of studies to the psychologist. The spirited romantics who have taken to heart the old dictum that a man is young as often as he falls in love. The anxious-eyed women who have lost what their men have found. A score of flirtations and two or three intrigues, followed with interest by the midnight watch and reported in routine to the purser. The odd men out, too, are always rather pathetic. It was wonderful how many lonely eyes lighted up when Nanette stepped on to the deck. Even some of the romantics prepared to change their minds.

Baggage was missing, of course. Nanette's mother had lost a wardrobe trunk, nothing less.

"Don't worry," said Nanette's father, in his imperturbable way. "It will turn up."

"It will be Nan's turn to worry," was the reply. "All her things are in it!"

Nanette, the irresponsible, had disappeared with Jack in quest of her new quarters. She professed to be the victim of a dreadful theory that her cabin companion was an elderly Flemish lady with a tendency to complain.

Young local divers were showing off from the boat deck; vendors of lace shouted themselves hoarse from a flotilla of small craft that clung to the steamer like wasps to a honey-pot; Portuguese lightermen called cheerful insults at one another; nobody could find the missing trunk, nobody could find Nanette; Nanette's father said both would turn up — and the Bay of Funchal embraced it all with peaceful beauty.

When the last shore signal was sounded, I found Jack beside me. He was plainly in a panic.

"Here, I say," he exclaimed. "I thought Nanette was with you!"

"And I thought she was with you!"

"When did you see her last?"

"When she went to look for her cabin."

"But she came back to fetch *you*!"

"She didn't arrive."

"Hurry up, please," urged the officer on the gangway. "You're last for the shore, sir."

Jack turned and ran in at the saloon entrance. I could see no one else I knew; so there was nothing for it but to tumble down the gangway. Reid's launch had gone, and I took the boat in which some customs people, office men, and others were going ashore.

They had turned steam on to the anchor and the gangway was swinging up as we drew away. I stood in the boat, searching the decks far above me, their rails lined with unfamiliar faces. From the white-capped, gold-laced officers on the bridge, I worked down, deck by deck. I caught a momentary glimpse of some folks I knew and waved automatically; but of Nanette's party I could see nothing.

Then sounded faintly a bell. Straggling boats seemed to be drawn astern of the liner by some powerful current. There was movement in the placid water; a swell rocked us. One could see the churning of the screw in clear blue sea. Renewed waving — and the *Arundel Castle* was homeward bound for Southampton, with passengers, mixed cargo, several potential weddings, and a broken heart or so.

As I stepped from the boat on to the stone stairs and went up to the jetty, I paused, looking back. I was shortly to meet Edmond O'Mara, and the thought was pleasurable, but I would have given much to have been aboard the liner now headed for the open sea, where the worst that could befall a man was a poor table and a tedious neighbour, and not the thing I felt gathering, formless and patient, over Funchal.

I walked up the tree-lined street, sighing when I passed the shop where Nanette had found that wonderful shawl. The square, you may recall, is planted with jacaranda trees that bear a light blue blossom. In the sunshine of early morning it seemed to me that all the streets were dim with an azure born of the flowers…

Only two tables had been placed outside the Golden Gate. At one of them a girl was seated, her elbows on the table, her chin propped upon clenched hands. She stirred slightly, and I saw the sunlight gleaming in her hair.

I stood stock still. Then I began to run.

Nanette looked up.

She was pale. Her widely opened eyes were the colour of those flowers — misty blue. And they said, “I am afraid. I am ashamed. Don’t be angry with me.”

“Nanette!” I whispered.

She bit her lip and turned her head aside quickly; then:

“I was mad to do it,” she confessed. “I am sorry — now. Please send a message to the ship. They will be frantic.”

“But — your things? You will have to wait for a whole week.”

“They are in the small wardrobe trunk. I bribed Pedro to leave it behind. Oh, please, Mr. Devlin!” She clutched my arm and I felt how she trembled. “Look after me. I am so frightened.”

And there it was. The wilful child who had needed no rescuing had, in the space of a single reckless morning, made herself wholly dependent upon me, and tied herself, without in the least understanding it, into the very knot of the business I had stayed behind to unpick. I thought of O’Mara coming in on the tide at two in the morning, and of what he would say when he learned that the one person in the world he had crossed an ocean to protect was now sitting under the jacarandas in the thick of it. I sat down beside her and ordered her something cold, and began, as gently as I could, to think.

Chapter XI — The Photographs

The M.V. *Aguila* dropped her anchor on to the rocky bottom of Funchal Harbour at fifteen minutes after two in the morning, under a perfect crescent moon — a true Moon of Madness.

They had the ladder down in a trice, and my boat drew alongside. I ran up to the deck — and there was Edmond O'Mara in a white drill suit, the moonlight gleaming on his wavy hair.

We shook hands in silence, whilst his searching grey eyes looked into mine and mine told him all that I was helpless to conceal. Then:

"It was good of you, Devlin," he said. "My message has put you out?"

"I had booked in the *Arundel*; but it didn't matter. My time is my own."

Indeed, already the spell of O'Mara was on me. There are many names honoured in the annals of quiet service, but ask one of the men who was with him when it mattered most; a troop commander then, and only a major now by a series of injustices that his admirers preferred not to dwell upon. The regiment would convince you that Edmond O'Mara had more than earned his place in their story.

"What has happened?" I asked him.

He gave me the facts, whilst we enjoyed the hospitality of the captain who was delighted to have been instrumental in helping so distinguished a passenger.

“The original documents are safe in Whitehall, Devlin. But I found marks showing clearly where they had been laid flat to be photographed. We got word to the captain here and I doubled back. The mails will be watched at Southampton; but I don’t fear the mails. Some trusted agent will carry the photographs personally. I wired headquarters for likely names.”

“Scotland Yard replied,” said I. “One, Julian Maddox, is under surveillance.”

O’Mara’s cold eyes fixed me.

“Who’s watching him?” he asked.

This brought me to it, and I gulped a quick drink before replying:

“Nanette.”

His expression changed; then:

“So they are still here?” he said.

“*She* is still here.”

The captain excused himself gracefully, on a plea of duty; and I told O’Mara — the whole wretched comedy of the missed boat, the bribed boatman, the trunk left behind, the girl trembling under the jacarandas. He heard me out without a word, his face growing harder at every sentence.

“You think she overheard you in the consul’s office?”

“I know she did. She admitted it.”

“And so you told her — the rest?”

“Was I wrong?”

O’Mara stood up and paced the room a couple of times; then:

“I don’t know,” said he. “Let’s go ashore.”

Fate has playfully set me in some queer situations, but I can recall none stranger than that in which I found myself now. O'Mara, occupying a room in the consul's house, and engaged in private consultations with the military governor and others; Nanette, studiously declining to meet him — although his return to Funchal was the reason of her being there; Da Rocha, incapacitated, and only able to act through Maddox; the latter gentleman dancing attendance on Nanette.

"He doesn't know that I know anything," she said to me. "And he doesn't know that Major O'Mara is here."

We were taking tea on the terrace of Reid's; the adored young woman who had missed the boat and my innocent self subjects of much inaccurate speculation. Two frantic messages had come through to Nanette: one from her mother and one from Jack.

"Please answer them for me," was all she had said.

"Nanette!" I looked into the childish blue eyes, in which, when O'Mara was mentioned, I had seen the woman-light shine. "I feel responsible for you. In playing with a dangerous man like Maddox you take risks which you don't understand."

"I'm going to find out where the photographs are!"

"Because of — O'Mara?"

She looked at me bravely.

"No," she lied — yet did not know she lied. "Because Major O'Mara insulted my intelligence. I am going to find out for my own sake."

I dined with O'Mara in the town that night. He was frantically worried. That Maddox was the man to whom the task had

been assigned of getting the photographs to the network's handlers he could not doubt. But where were they? And how did Maddox propose to smuggle them through?

"Where is Nanette?" he asked suddenly.

"Dining with Maddox at Reid's."

"Damn!" said O'Mara; then: "Go back and look after her," he begged. "I can't stand it, Devlin. You shouldn't leave her."

"She dismissed me!"

"Report yourself for duty. Call me when you know something."

I arrived at the hotel fifteen minutes later. The front desk handed me a note as I ran in. I tore the envelope open in a frenzy. This was the message:

> Photographs are on board a motor cruiser belonging to Gabriel da Rocha. I can't find out where it is. But Maddox goes in it tomorrow morning to Las Palmas and from there by steamer to England. Have gone with him to the Casino. Will keep him as long as possible. Can't do any more. — Nanette.

When I called O'Mara, I heard him groan.

"Send someone from the hotel to stand by her," he said; or, rather, it was an order. "I can find out where Da Rocha's boat lies through secure channels. It's hell, Devlin, but I daren't take chances. Join me here. But make sure she is safe."

Chapter XII — The Motor Cruiser

I found O'Mara at the consul's house a little before midnight, in a back room that smelt of old paper and sealing-wax, with the shutters closed and a single lamp burning. He had taken

off his dinner jacket and hung it with absurd care over the back of a chair, and he was bent over the consul's desk, on which were spread a large-scale chart of the island's south coast, a tide table, and a portable computer whose screen he had angled away from the window. The quiet little official sat in the corner with the patient, faintly luminous air of a man who has waited years for one interesting night and means to enjoy it.

"Sit down, Devlin," said O'Mara, without looking up. "And don't talk for a moment."

So I sat, and watched him work, and learned more in that half hour about the trade he followed than in all the cinema of my life. There was nothing of the cinema in it. There were no disguises and no chases; there was a man reading, comparing, discarding, with the absolute economy of attention of a surgeon, and there was the soft tick of the consul's old clock.

"Da Rocha," he said at last, as if continuing a conversation, "is a careful man, but careful men leave the neatest tracks. He keeps a boat. A man who keeps a boat must keep it somewhere, must fuel it somewhere, must pay someone to watch it. The consul, here, knows everyone who sells diesel between Funchal and the Desertas." He glanced at the little man, who inclined his head with melancholy pride. "And a thirty-eight-foot cruiser took on fuel the day before yesterday at a place that is not Funchal, and has not been seen since."

"Then you know where she is."

"I know where she was. It is not the same thing." He turned the chart toward me and laid one finger on a cleft in the coast

east of the town, a place where the contours crowded together like the lines on an old man's brow. "There is a fishing village here, in a chasm. Steep. Private. The kind of place where a stranger's car is remembered for a week and a stranger's questions for a year. If I wanted to lie quiet with something I had no business to be carrying, I should lie there."

"How can you be sure?"

"I can't. That is the whole art of it, Devlin — to act with certainty on a thing you cannot be sure of." He closed the computer. "Da Rocha's transmitter has been busy all evening. The governor's people can't read it — it isn't that sort of war any more, where you read a man's letters — but they can hear the shape of it. Long bursts, then silence, then a short burst at ten minutes past every hour. He is talking to someone at sea, or to someone who relays to the sea. And the grey ship you saw in the roads," he added, with the ghost of a smile, "is ours, and has been listening too, and agrees with me about the direction."

I thought of that idle morning under the jacarandas, the doorway by the bank, the heavy sunburnt man in the creased jacket, the grey ship standing off; and the whole of it slid into place with a small, cold click, like a key in a well-made lock.

"You saw all that coming," I said, "weeks ago. In the square."

"I saw a man who needed watching, and I watched him. That is most of the trade." He stood and reached for his coat. "The rest is luck, and other people's courage, and I have been shamefully lavish with both. Come. The governor has lent us a car and a man

who can drive it down a cliff, which is more than I can do. We will go and look at da Rocha's pretty boat, and decide whether we are clever enough to rob it."

The consul saw us to the door and pressed O'Mara's hand in both of his, and said something low in Portuguese that I did not catch, and O'Mara answered him gently. Then we went out into the warm dark, where the car waited, and I understood that the long, patient, invisible part of the night was over, and the other part beginning.

The governor's car — a large black SUV that announced the reach of official hospitality — was driven by the chauffeur over what I took to be the edge of a sheer precipice. I inhaled noisily. Then we were gliding down a cobbled road that, serpentine, embraced a fairy port.

Nestling in a cleft, a volcanic chasm, its terraced roofs silvered by the crescent moon, lay a town asleep. Patches of colour, as if a Titan artist had thrown uncleaned palettes into the hollow, crowded upon and overlay the white walls. Green fronds peeped above pools of shadow. A beautiful auditorium, this town looked down upon the eternal drama of the sea.

O'Mara spoke to the chauffeur in Portuguese. His command of unpronounceable languages was not the least of his acquirements. The powerful brakes were applied and our switchback descent ceased.

We proceeded on foot.

Where a low stone wall prevented the traveller from falling through the roof of a villa some twenty feet below, O'Mara pulled up, grasped my arm, and pointed.

Displaying her graceful, creamy shape like a courtesan stretched upon blue velvet, a fine-lined motor boat rode in the tiny harbour. Lights shone out from her cabin ports. O'Mara unbuttoned the light coat he wore over his dinner jacket and stood for a moment quite still, looking out over the water. He had been right, to the yard and to the hour, and he took no more pleasure in it than a man confirming the time by a clock he trusts.

"There is Da Rocha's boat," said he; "and there, no doubt, is what we are after. But it looks — "

"As if Nanette had failed to keep Maddox?"

O'Mara turned to me, and his eyes gleamed coldly in the moonlight.

"Devlin," he said, "you remind me of an unpleasant truth: that if I succeed in this matter I shall be indebted to a girl."

"She will have done a big thing for England."

"I don't begrudge her that. It would hurt me to think she had done it for me."

For a moment I hesitated; then:

"I think she knows it," I ventured, "and wants to hurt you."

"Why?"

"Because you hurt *her*."

He stared fixedly out over the harbour for some moments, but he did not seem to have taken offence. At last:

“If I had married very young, Devlin,” he said, “and God had been good to me, I might have had a daughter like Nanette. Even if there were no other reason, shouldn’t I be a blackguard to think of her except as a wilful child?”

But I could find no answer. This man’s codes were beyond me. Young though he was in the years when it had mattered most, he had won a name that had outlasted those of a score of senior officers and more than one general. The fact came home to me and brought with it a great humility, that I was not of the stuff that histories are made of.

“Suppose we go and look for a boat,” I said.

O’Mara aroused himself — for he had his dreams even as you and I.

“A boat it is,” said he. “As I have no official status whatever, there’s nothing for it but frank piracy. Are you game?”

“Every time.”

We went on down the sloping cobbled street. Presently it led us through the heart of the little town, where shuttered windows told of citizens asleep and only a zealous dog broke the silence. This until, as we were about to come out on the water front, from a high balcony stole the strains of a guitar.

O’Mara paused, looking up. A dim light might be discerned. He glanced at me, smiled, and we passed on. Love is an art with the Southerners.

I have wondered since, reviewing that journey, during which both our minds, I think, were busied with plans for boarding the motor boat and securing the incriminating photographs, that no

premonition touched me. “Nanette had failed to keep Maddox,” I had said, noting the lighted cabin. Yet Nanette had dared to slip away from the *Arundel Castle* and to remain alone in Funchal. I should have known my Nanette.

Drawn up beside a quay, a dark blotch in the moonlight, was Da Rocha’s car.

“Da Rocha’s car,” I exclaimed. “Maddox *is* on board.”

But O’Mara did not reply. He was staring out in the direction of the lighted craft, a thirty-eight-foot motor cruiser, very handy in smooth water but a dirty brute, I thought, in a choppy sea. Then:

“I am wondering,” he murmured.

“What?”

“Why he is lying out there and not alongside? There is no boat at the stair.”

At first, the full significance of his remark missed me. My concern was with the problem of how we were to find transport. Then, something in the quality of that fixed stare with which my companion watched the lighted ports, his poise, as if listening, prepared me for what was to come.

The tones of a coarse voice, raised hilariously, reached my ears, coming from the cruiser’s cabin. A trill of laughter followed, youthful, musical. My heart missed a beat. I clutched O’Mara’s arm.

“My God!” I said. “He has Nanette with him!”

Involuntarily, my gaze went upward, to where in cold serenity the Moon of Madness raised her crescent lamp.

O'Mara from the pocket of his light coat took a revolver. He placed it in his soft hat and crammed the hat tightly on his head. He began to peel his dinner jacket.

"I'm going for a swim," said he. "Coming?"

But he was not alone in the idea. Before I could frame any reply came sounds of loud laughter, a scuffling of feet — and I saw Nanette run out on to the after-deck. She wore a blue-and-silver dance frock. I heard Maddox call to her and I heard her laughing answer; but I could not distinguish a word.

I saw her raise her arms as if to unfasten the string of beads about her neck. She stooped swiftly, stood upright again — and Maddox was beside her.

There was a shrill cry — half laughter, half hysteria. Nanette disappeared in the shadow of the awning. I heard the man's voice, his heavy tread…

Nanette reappeared at the bow of the boat.

Heroism is always beautiful, whether it spring from love of country or love of man. The dance frock had vanished, shed like the sheath of a chrysalis when the moth is born. A silver moon-goddess stood at the prow. She stooped, once, twice — I thought to discard her shoes. Then, as Maddox came stumbling forward, Nanette dived almost soundlessly into the still blue sea.

And Nanette could swim like a seal.

Maddox craned over the side. For one moment I think he contemplated following. Then her head came up two lengths away. Behind the swimmer, on a tow-line of beads, floated a flat, square portfolio.

I glanced once at O'Mara — and that man of action was stricken to stone. Fists clenched, he stood, watching a girl of eighteen doing the work he had come to do — and doing it for *him*.

Maddox was hauling in his anchor. The motor started with a roar. Then Nanette saw us. She was halfway to the shore.

"Please throw one of the rugs on the steps," came gaspingly. "And go away! Start the car up!"

When, a few minutes later, a very wet Nanette, wrapped in a light top coat, confronted O'Mara, I don't know quite what happened.

"There are your photographs," I heard her say. "If I never see you again, at least think I was not such a fool as you supposed."

With all her dear bravado, she could not still the trembling of her voice. I saw O'Mara's pale face, and turned aside. That meeting was one I can never forget. Yet the details will always be hazy.

Maddox was in the picture somewhere. I think I knocked him down. I don't remember why. But I fancy it was not because of any attempt to recover the portfolio but because he grossly misunderstood the situation.

Then, I recall, O'Mara stooped, lifted Nanette, and walked up the sloping cobbled street under a smiling moon. He had suffered as only the few can suffer, to make her forget him. His sacrifice had been rejected by the Great Goddess.

Once, Nanette peeped up at him swiftly. I saw her eyes. Then she hid her face against his shoulder. I think Nanette was crying. But I know Nanette was happy.

Chapter XIII — The Grass Orphan

"Public men should never indulge in private correspondence," said O'Mara. "Such indiscretions sometimes lead to war. I understand that all Napoleon's social engagements were made by proxy."

He turned toward me, his arm resting on the rail of the balcony. There were times when O'Mara looked extraordinarily handsome. Today, I thought he appeared almost haggard. In his spruce white suit with Madeiran sunlight making play in the waves of his hair, he had all that curious atmosphere of romance that made him attractive to women and unpopular with men who knew no better. But his eyes were tragically tired, with the particular fatigue of a man who has won and found the winning bitter.

I saw him glance at a square portfolio that lay upon the table in the shadows of my room.

"Six photographic negatives," he went on musingly, "and twelve prints — as all the letters photographed ran to more than one page. It's odd to reflect, Devlin, that these scraps of film and paper might light a bonfire big enough to burn up a whole empire."

Odd indeed; yet I knew it to be true. For that relentless loom which the Arabs call Kismet had drawn me into the pattern of this human carpet woven of anarchy, love, sacrifice, and God knows what other threads. I knew; therefore:

"Why not destroy them?" said I.

O'Mara shook his head.

“My instructions are to deliver them intact to headquarters,” he replied.

“Are you returning in a later sailing?”

“No. They are sending for me.”

“Lodge them in the bank, then.”

“Contrary to instructions, Devlin. They must remain in my charge.”

I met the fixed stare of his cold grey eyes.

“In which respect,” said I, “your instructions resemble mine.”

“And do honour to both of us,” he added.

I lighted a cigarette, smiling perhaps a trifle wryly. When a wayward beauty of eighteen deliberately misses the boat home and her parents send word to an eligible bachelor that they hold him responsible for her safety, one sits up and takes notice. Traditional English phlegm is called upon to do its best.

On the terrace above the bathing pool, a band was playing. Below my windows a multi-coloured cascade of flowers poured down, wave upon wave, to meet the deep blue ocean. Sounds of laughter came floating up. Little yellow birds darting gaily from palm to palm appeared to find life a thing of song. I wondered. Was it Abraham Lincoln who confessed that he could mould men but not circumstance?

“It seems absurd,” said O’Mara, breaking a long silence. “But do you know what I was thinking?”

“No.”

“That, after all, Madeira is a very lonely island.”

He stared at me fixedly, until:

“What do you mean exactly?” I asked.

“Devlin,” he said, “the hostile network has had a nasty set-back in England. But there’s material there” — he pointed to the portfolio — “for which their backers would pay a substantial fortune. They have forty-eight hours to act.”

“But only two agents in the island — one out of the ring.”

“Da Rocha has a powerful communications setup in his villa. He will be in touch with his chief — and his chief is a dangerously clever man.”

His service record afforded sufficient credentials for the courage of Major Edmond O’Mara. He was watching me with that close regard which seemed to concern itself with one’s subconscious self, so pointedly did it penetrate; and, rather fatuously:

“You are surely not nervous about your charge?” I queried.

He continued to watch me for a moment, then:

“No,” he replied, and his expression grew abstracted. “Oddly enough, I was thinking of yours.”

He turned aside and was very quiet for a moment, tapping two fingers slowly on the balcony rail. It was the stillness I had come to recognise. At his base it used to be said that when O’Mara went still like that, those around him tended to sit up straighter.

Precisely what he had in mind I found myself at a loss to imagine, and before I had time to ask:

“Please, are you at home?” cried a voice from below.

I crossed to my balcony and looked down.

Nanette stood on the terrace. The sunshine made a glory of her tousled head as she laughed up at me. A stout tourist seated nearby in a cane lounge-chair found his attention engrossed by the unashamed beauty of a pair of slim legs that had suddenly interfered with his view of the bay. They were delicately sunburned to the knees, which — the brevity of modern frocks and a habit of going stockingless had forced me to learn — were dimpled. One suspects that Cleopatra had dimpled knees.

“Yes, Nanette,” said I. “Where have you been?”

“Bathing. You should know that, Mr. Devlin. You are sadly neglecting your grass orphan!”

She looked very lovely. The tourist raised envious eyes to my balcony, their envy magnified by thick sunglasses.

“Please come down and join the party.”

“Very well, Nanette,” I answered.

But when I turned back and re-entered my room, O’Mara and the portfolio were gone. And I knew that Nanette would be disappointed.

Presently, side by side, we walked down a shady path strewn with fallen hibiscus blossom. Nanette was very silent. An American training ship manned by naval cadets lay in the bay, and, at a bend in the path, Nanette paused. She stared out at the little vessel — “a painted ship upon a painted sea.”

“One of the boys from the cadet ship is with our party,” she said. “He’s nice. I have promised to dance with him tonight. He’s from Boston,” she added.

“Has he got late shore leave then?” I asked.

“No,” Nanette answered in a dreamy voice, moving on. “I don’t think so. He just wants to stay. They are going to the Azores from here. Where is — or are — the Azores?”

“Quite a long way,” I answered vaguely; for Nanette really didn’t want to know.

There was small envy in my heart regarding the cadet from Boston. He was being used as a diversion by a distracting young woman whose heart was not in the game. However, it is the mission of youth to learn, and the poor fellow would learn about women from her.

I met him in due course. He was being lionized by a group seated around a table beneath a bright umbrella that cast pleasing shadows. Nanette unblushingly monopolized him, and his joy was ghastly to behold. He would cheerfully have deserted his ship for her.

The sister of the British consul, who was acting as a sort of official chaperone to our grass orphan, kept throwing appealing looks in my direction. But I was helpless, and I knew it. A hundred times Nanette’s glance sought the steps. And if only O’Mara had joined us, the eyes of the infatuated young man from Boston might have been opened before he doomed himself to cells for a siren’s smile.

But O’Mara did not join us.

When I drifted down to dinner that evening, I missed him. I waited in the cocktail bar in vain. Nanette peeped in, too. At last, there was nothing for it but to dine alone. And constantly

the blue eyes of Nanette, who had been adopted by a charming couple from the North Country, were turned in my direction. Always she smiled — but only to hide her disappointment.

The cadet blew along in due course, flushed with excitement, and was greeted by a very composed Nanette. Accompanied by her temporary "parents," she bore the young man away to the Casino.

I made up my mind to walk down later. But I was largely concerned with the absence of O'Mara. I hung about until after nine o'clock and was prepared to go out, when I saw him crossing the lounge. He beckoned to me, and:

"They are not idle, Devlin," he said. "Their communications have been active."

"Have you picked anything up?"

"No. Conditions in the town are bad. But there's something afoot."

"Short of burglary, what can they do?"

He stared at me vacantly; then:

"I don't know," he confessed.

But we were to learn — and very soon.

A disturbance in the lobby proclaimed itself.

"What's the trouble?" said I.

Even as I spoke, the worthy man from Lancashire, whose wife had taken Nanette under her wing, came hurrying in. He was pale.

"My God! Devlin," he exclaimed. "Did you send a car to the Casino for Nanette?"

"No!" I replied blankly.

"Damn it! I suspected there was something wrong!"

"Quick!" said O'Mara. "What has happened?"

The other spoke very breathlessly.

"Someone brought her a message — from *you*, Mr. Devlin. She ran out without a word. Young Dunn, the cadet, ran after her."

"Well?" O'Mara urged.

"When I got to the door, they told me that both had driven off in a car that was waiting by the gate."

"Did anyone actually see this car?" O'Mara demanded.

"No. It stood out in the roadway."

"Then who brought the message?"

"A boy idling at the gate."

"You questioned him?"

"Closely," replied the man from Lancashire. "He did not know the driver and only had a glimpse of the car."

"But I don't understand," said I dazedly.

"I followed," the hoarse voice went on, "but just this side of the bridge, where it's so lonely and dark at night, I nearly ran over Dunn! He was insensible. He's out in the hallway now! Nanette — has disappeared!"

Very deliberately, O'Mara straightened his jacket and turned to face me.

"Devlin," he said coldly, "why, in God's name, didn't you stick to your post?"

Chapter XIV — The Portfolio

Born leaders of men do not achieve leadership; men force it upon them. Here was a panic-stricken group, soon augmented by the manager and a doctor who chanced to be in the hotel. One was for communicating with the police; another urged the military; all were anxious to enlarge the news.

We were in a room on the right of the entrance, the medical man bending over an insensible cadet. O'Mara quietly closed the door. And I have since remembered how instinctively we all turned and faced him.

"Doctor," he said, "how soon will he recover?"

The Portuguese physician shook his head.

"Do not count upon him," he answered gravely. "A tremendous blow on the back of his skull. I cannot examine him properly here. He must be taken at once to the hospital."

"An accident?"

"But certainly, no! Foul play. Some blunt weapon. I suspect a sandbag."

"Shall I call the police?" the manager asked.

"No," said O'Mara. "Get young Dunn away as quickly as possible. Gentlemen" — he included us all in a comprehensive glance — "let us keep this affair to ourselves."

"What!" I cried.

But indeed, beyond that one word I could not go. Inertia at such a time astounded me.

"There is a well-known policy of war," O'Mara went on: "Masterly inactivity. We have no Service de Sûreté and no Scotland Yard in Madeira. A clumsy hue and cry could serve no better purpose than to drive the enemy into some more remote hiding place."

"But, Nanette!" I burst out.

Then I met O'Mara's glance. I noted the grim set of his jaw. I saw how pale he was.

"Your remark was rather unnecessary, Devlin," he said. "I recently pointed out to you that Madeira is a very lonely island. If you can suggest any plan for locating the whereabouts of Nanette, do so."

Then I understood. And I think I groaned.

"There are so many roads they might have taken," the manager explained. "And what means have we of tracing the car? Such a thing has never happened here before. Certainly not in my time."

"What villain has done it?" came in agonized North Country dialect. "Oh, the poor little lass!"

"Madeiran blood runs very hot," said the physician.

"No doubt," O'Mara agreed. "And Nanette is a lovely child. But do you believe there is anyone amongst her acquaintances mad enough to commit such an outrage?"

"Why do you say 'amongst her acquaintances'?" I asked stupidly.

"Because *your* name was used to induce her to go," O'Mara answered. "Ultimately, she must be found. Her abductor knows this. Therefore he is prepared to make terms."

Came a rap on the door.

“Yes?” said the manager.

A porter appeared. Major O’Mara was wanted on the phone. As he went out:

“Come to my room in five minutes, Devlin,” he directed.

The five minutes that followed form a blur in my memory. There were hushed voices. There was movement; a still figure being carried through the hall to where a car waited out in the scented darkness. Someone kept saying, “We must do something. We must do something,” in a helpless, mechanical way, as if the repetition were itself a kind of action.

Then I stood in O’Mara’s room. He was seated on the side of the bed.

“I was right,” he said. “It’s a move in the enemy’s game!”

“What!”

My wild, distorted ideas were tumbled over one another by that statement. They fought in my brain, seeking fresh formation.

“I knew that if my theory were sound they would waste no time. That was Julian Maddox on the phone. It’s the photographs they’re after, Devlin!”

Whereupon: “Thank God!” I exclaimed.

O’Mara raised his eyes to me.

“I forgive you,” he said softly, “for preferring my ruin to Nanette’s.”

Certainly the swift tragedy of the last half hour must have numbed my brain. O’Mara had watched me, not angrily, for several moments before the full meaning of his words gripped my mind.

I dropped into an armchair.

Gabriel da Rocha and Julian Maddox, foreign agents both, had triumphed at the eleventh hour!

“My special duties as a secret service officer end tonight.” It was O’Mara who spoke, but his voice seemed to come hollowly from a great distance. “My resignation from the regiment must follow.”

I spoke never a word.

“There is just one thing, Devlin, you can do.”

Then I roused myself. I looked eagerly at O’Mara. I think, in that dark hour, I would have crawled through the hottest alleyways of hell to save him. “Why, in God’s name, didn’t you stick to your post?” Those words of his would sound in my ears for many a long day to come.

“You can enable me to resign,” he went on. “It would be preferable to being removed from the Army List with the notation that the Crown has no further requirement for this officer’s services.”

“Anything,” I said. “I will do anything.”

A party of serenaders, playing gently on guitars and singing a languorous love-song, passed along the road below. Their voices mingled in perfect harmony. A sea breeze bore perfume into the room. And I thought that this soft island, set like a jewel above the brow of Africa, might once have been the home of Calypso, stealing men’s senses.

“It may seem mere splitting of hairs,” O’Mara went on. “But it serves my purpose, and so I ask you to do it.”

He took up the precious portfolio, which lay upon the bed beside him.

"I forced the lock last night," he said, "but had it repaired and fitted with a key in the town this morning. I removed the seals intact and replaced them. Here is the key." He held it out upon his open palm. "Take it."

I took it, wondering and waiting.

"Now take the portfolio," said he. "You will find it is locked. Hide it where you please. But its security means everything to me, to Nanette, and to England."

"You mean," I began, "that I — "

"I mean," O'Mara took me up, "that *you* may pay this price to ransom her. *I* cannot. You have sworn no oath of allegiance to the Crown. I have."

"Good God!" I cried. "The decision is to rest with *me*!"

"As a private citizen you can choose between the claims of your country, in this very difficult matter, and the claims of a helpless girl who has been given into your charge. As an officer, I have no choice."

He spoke in a low, monotonous voice. But I shall remember every word of his instructions whilst memory lasts.

"You must not tell me where it is concealed. It should be in some place, though, that is quickly accessible."

"But, O'Mara! Are they sending someone to make terms?"

"They are. At eleven o'clock tonight."

"Why not have him arrested?"

O'Mara stared at me, and smiled. But it was a cold smile.

“Julian Maddox is coming in person,” he replied. “News of this unfortunate occurrence having reached him and our mutual friend, Gabriel da Rocha, both are anxious to place their extensive knowledge of the island at our disposal. On what charge should you propose to arrest Maddox?”

“Directly he declares his real object, upon a triple charge of blackmail, abduction, and attempted murder!”

“And then?”

“Well, surely — “

“My dear fellow!” O’Mara stood up and sighed wearily. “Racks and boiling oil would never be sanctioned by the civil governor. Personally, I should prescribe them.”

I was silenced. O’Mara was right.

“Under Portuguese law the case would take weeks,” he added. “It would be adjourned to Lisbon. No. We cannot leave her in unknown hands — “

He turned, the sentence unfinished, and walked across to the balcony. I knew that if she had never met Edmond O’Mara little Nanette would have been safe in England that night. And I knew that he knew.

Taking up the portfolio, I went out, closing the door very quietly.

Chapter XV — Terms with the Enemy

I had noted a loose floor board in my room. With the aid of a knife blade, I succeeded in lifting it, revealing a dusty cavity. Here I hid the portfolio. I replaced the board and slipped the key on to my ring with others that I habitually carried.

That I was destined to be present at the interview with Maddox, I foresaw clearly enough. How best to prepare myself it was not easy to determine. Primarily I had to focus upon keeping my temper. O'Mara plainly wanted to be alone.

I looked into the cocktail bar. Two men whom I knew were drinking highballs, and:

"Hello, Devlin," said one, "what's this crazy rumour about your young friend?"

The words offended me. I suppose I was in a mood for it. Since the fateful morning that Nanette had missed the boat, many questionable glances had been cast upon me.

"It's what you say," I answered shortly: "a crazy rumour."

Then I went out.

I crossed the lobby and stood in the porch for a while, breathing the warm perfume of the gardens. A man and a girl were walking down the slope toward the terraces. He had his arm about her waist.

The open road called to me. Lighting my pipe, I set out. Drivers of bullock carts solicited my patronage, but I ignored them and walked on. I had no idea where I was going. I think I

was merely running away from myself. I could not banish the illusion that Nanette was hiding behind some tree; that she would suddenly leap out at me with mock reproaches for my neglect of the grass orphan.

Twice I thought I saw her slender figure in the distance.

O'Mara was ruined. This was the idea that ultimately came to the top and stayed there. O'Mara was ruined. The blind love of a child-woman had wrecked the best man it had ever been my lot to know. She had stayed for O'Mara. No one suspected it. But I knew.

This was the sequel.

Lonely in my knowledge of all it might mean — when, willy-nilly, I should have surrendered the portfolio — I tramped on. A great, cold jewel, the moon lighted my way. By a stagnant cistern, green with slime, I pulled up. I had walked half the distance to the Casino.

This cistern was infested by poisonous insects with nasty habits in their tails and a social custom of leaving red-hot visiting cards. I turned back, scratching viciously.

A party homeward bound to Reid's in a car offered me a lift.

I thanked them but preferred to walk.

"Having no further requirement for this officer's services." Yes, I could save him from that.

The hall porter said that Major O'Mara was in his room. Therefore, having a curiosity respecting Maddox, I took up a strategic position on a shadowed bench in that miniature palm grove which commands the porch. I told the porter where he could find me.

I had waited but a short time when Maddox arrived, in the pomp and circumstance of a large car. A chauffeur drove it in at the gate with much skill and even more noise. I stood up to see Maddox alight.

He entered Reid's proprietorially. He was in evening kit, wore a straw hat boasting a band of well-known colours to which he was not entitled, and smoked a successful cigar decorated with what looked like the Order of the Garter. If he was nervous he showed no sign of the fact.

Whatever one might think of Julian Maddox, and I thought poorly of him on most counts, he was as fearless as any man I have ever had the misfortune to deal with. I wish that were not true; it would make him easier to dismiss.

The driver pulled the car out into the road again, and I settled down with my pipe to await O'Mara's summons.

It came sooner than I had expected. Mr. Maddox was all of a man of business.

"Major O'Mara asks you to step up to his room, sir," said the hall porter.

Knocking out my pipe, I made my way upstairs. On the side of the angels though I might be, I found myself not wholly at ease. I rapped at O'Mara's door and walked in.

Maddox was seated in an armchair, a stump of fat cigar between his teeth. The decorative band was absent. I presumed that he had smoked it.

O'Mara stood, facing me, by the open window, very still in the way that I had come to know. "I hope I have not dragged you

from pleasant company. But Mr. Maddox here has presumed to question a statement of mine."

"Cut it out," said Maddox. "This is business."

"Mr. Maddox," O'Mara resumed blandly, "is not personally responsible for his defects of education. Forgive him, Devlin. The facts, briefly, are these: You may recall that I recently placed in your care a certain portfolio, the contents of which you know?"

"You did," said I.

"My reason," O'Mara continued, "was that I feared an attempt by Mr. Maddox or his friends to recover this portfolio. I mentioned my fears to you at the time."

"You did," I repeated.

"Mr. Maddox," O'Mara turned to him, "Mr. Devlin, here, has the portfolio and a new key which I have had made. The portfolio is locked. I don't know what he has done with it. Therefore your proposals are useless."

Maddox rolled the cigar stump. With a thumb and forefinger he removed fragments from his mouth — of what, I cannot say; possibly the band. Then:

"I believe you," he granted. "I never doubted your word. You're damned up-stage but you don't lie."

"Thank you," said O'Mara.

The tone in which he spoke puzzled me at the time. It was so oddly sincere.

"But, you see," Maddox went on, "I know why you've done it!"

O’Mara did not exactly start. But his glance, as Maddox spoke, was dagger-like in its intensity.

“You’re an officer and a gentleman. The two aren’t always twins, but you happen to be both. I’ve got to deal with Mr. Devlin? If he lets you down, the disgrace is his. You’re just branded a fool, but you save your British honour. Am I right?”

By heavens! I knew he was right! And, studying the composed, watchful face of the man — unruffled, alert, reading every flicker in the room — I wondered at him despite myself. A mind like Maddox’s, turned to honest purpose, would have been worth something.

“Very well, Mr. Devlin.” He diverted the cigar stump in my direction. “As it’s turned out, I’m not sorry. You’re sweet on the young lady who’s disappeared. I don’t blame you. I fancy her, myself. But business is business.”

Only O’Mara’s frigid stare held me in my place. I plunged my hands in my trouser pockets and clenched them tightly.

“Do not permit Mr. Maddox’s vulgarity to upset your judgment,” said O’Mara. “Also, make due allowances for him.”

“I don’t say I know where she is,” Maddox resumed unmoved, “but I’m prepared to promise that she’ll be home by midnight if you, Mr. Devlin, will double on the major and hand over to me that portfolio!”

“One moment!”

O’Mara broke in so violently that he startled me.

“Well?” said Maddox.

“You fully appreciate the value of what the portfolio contains?” O’Mara challenged.

“Fully,” I answered.

“You know what is at stake — on both sides?”

“I do.”

“So do I. Therefore I am going to leave you alone with Mr. Maddox. Make your terms, Devlin. I shall never reproach you. Tonight it conquers.”

He walked quickly to the door and went out.

“Very pretty,” said Maddox. “When he’s fired from the Guards he should do well on the stage.”

Chapter XVI — The House on the Cliff

I have come to the conclusion that British honour is pretty good stock-in-trade. Maddox accepted my word that no rescue by force would be attempted. And, if Maddox accepted it, I think my promise must be a gilt-edged security.

At twenty minutes before midnight — the time I had arranged to set out — Reid's was moderately excited. The absence of Nanette could no longer be concealed in view of the fact that her worthy foster-parents had created something of a hubbub following her departure from the Casino. Hotel servants had been talking, too.

The arrangement had the charm of simplicity.

In a car containing only a chauffeur and myself, I was to follow Maddox's car. Any support must be not less than five hundred yards in the rear.

"But," I had objected, "although you trust *me*, I don't trust *you*. I might be held up."

"You can arm yourself if you like," Maddox had conceded. "And you will have the driver. Your friends, too, will be close behind you."

I had hesitated, until:

"Damn it!" he cried. "I want the goods! This deal is square!"

I agreed when he spoke thus. Slowly, I was learning my man.

O'Mara elected to follow alone.

"They will stick to their bargain, Devlin," he said sadly. "We dare not take the risk, I admit; but Nanette is safe enough. They know how far they can go."

Past a curious group clustering around the hotel entrance, we walked out — Maddox, O'Mara, and myself. I watched a magnificent cigar being lighted in Maddox's car, wondering how and where he found room to carry more than one at a time.

Then we set forth upon our queer journey.

The leading car threaded through the outskirts of Funchal, around the flank of the little town and out to that sea road which scales the frowning cliffs.

I am never at my best on roads of this kind. A squat red lozenge in the glare of our headlights, the leading car, from time to time, would disappear over a precipice. Nothing would obstruct my view of starry sky and the still mirror of the ocean far below.

Then, a hairpin turn in the dizzy path being negotiated, there ahead again the car would appear.

So it went, up and up, around bend after bend, until the bumping and jolting told me that we had left the road, such as it was, and were digging a road of our own.

We crept over a desolate dome of territory that must have been left behind when Atlantis sank. Upon our topping the crown of this blasted heath, I looked out ahead. I prayed that the brakes had been recently overhauled.

A long, curving, rock-strewn slope swept gracefully down to a sheer edge. And perched close to the precipice like a lonely

seafowl was a little, dirty white dwelling — hundreds of eerie feet above the sea, approached by no perceptible path. I exhausted my imagination in endeavouring to invent a reason why any human being should live there.

By means of zigzag manoeuvring, the leading car was brought to within fifty yards or so of the place. My chauffeur gingerly imitated the design. Then came the prearranged signal.

Maddox's arm was protruded. He waved his cigar like a field marshal's baton.

"Stop!" I said — and the word sounded like a gasp of relief.

I got out, turned, and looked back.

O'Mara's car had been pulled up on the crest. I could see him standing beside it, a distant silhouette against the sky.

I walked down to where Maddox waited by the house.

There was a low stone wall round the seaward end of the property, enclosing a tiny garden in which bricks were apparently cultivated. And now I could see over the edge. I gasped. A wooden ladder, connecting with a platform that jutted out just below the house, described a zigzag pattern down the cliff-side. In a miniature cove below, a smart motor cruiser lay, her lighted ports like watching eyes.

"Send your car up to the top," Maddox directed.

I shouted to the man. And, as I watched him painfully tacking back against the gradient, I reflected that if O'Mara's psychology should prove to be at fault, mine was a sorry case. I fingered a revolver that nestled in my pocket.

The climb accomplished:

"Now," said Maddox, "you remember the conditions?"

"Perfectly."

"Halfway between the house and my car."

I turned and mounted the slope. Maddox whistled shrilly.

Spinning about, I watched. I saw two things happen.

Maddox's chauffeur leapt from his seat, stripping off his jacket and discarding his cap. From somewhere on the hither side of the building, which appeared to possess no door, three figures came into view. Two were thick-set men; the third was a girl.

And the girl was Nanette!

They held her wrists, but the moment she caught sight of me standing there in the moonlight:

"Mr. Devlin!" she cried. "Don't do it! don't do it! I'll never forgive you! They *dare* not harm me, and you are not to do it!"

I made no answer. I had none to make. And so the men led her on until she stood before me.

She was pale, and so slender, between her burly captors, as to look ethereal. Her widely open eyes were fixed in a stare of reproach. My heart thumped.

"You don't understand, Nanette," I said. "There is Major O'Mara — and he wishes it."

One long, lingering glance she cast up to where O'Mara stood watching. I saw a flood of colour sweep over her face. Then her obstinate little mouth quivered. She lowered her head, and:

"I hate myself," she whispered.

"Now," said Maddox, coming forward, "give me the key."

I did so. He placed it carefully in his waistcoat pocket. Nanette never looked up.

“Hand the portfolio to Miguel.”

The chauffeur was indicated. I obeyed, and the man handed the portfolio on to Maddox, who narrowly examined the seals.

“Senhor da Rocha,” he said sharply.

Whereupon Miguel ran off, carrying the portfolio, and disappeared over the edge where the ladder was. So Gabriel da Rocha was on board the cruiser!

Again Maddox spoke rapid Portuguese.

Nanette was released, and the two men turned and went back to the house. She stood before me, with lowered head.

Maddox raised his straw hat. The colours of the band looked highly effective in the moonlight.

“Miss Nanette and Mr. Devlin,” he said, “I bid you good night.”

He was not without a certain vulgar dignity. He followed his pair of ruffians to the dwelling.

“Come, Nanette!” I urged. “It isn’t safe to delay.”

But, as we climbed to the waiting cars, she spoke only twice.

“They told me you had sent for me,” she said, “because Major O’Mara — was ill.”

“What happened?”

“Poor Tommy Dunn sat in front, and the man with me, who said he was a doctor, reached over and hit him with something. I screamed.”

“Did he put his hand over your mouth to stop you?”

She nodded.

“Have they been unkind to you?”

She shook her head.

O’Mara waited until we gained the crest, then he got into his car and drove off. I followed, with an unusually dumb Nanette.

She sneaked into Reid’s by the side entrance and went straight to her room. O’Mara was waiting for me in the cocktail bar. I entered very gloomily and he ordered me a double whisky and soda.

“They will have some little difficulty in opening the portfolio, Devlin,” he said, watching the bartender preparing our drinks.

I stared at him. He was smiling!

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

“I mean that I took the precaution of filing one of the wards before I gave the key to you.”

But, even then, I didn’t understand, and:

“What for?” I asked.

“Unnecessarily, as it fell out,” he replied. “But my idea was to gain time.”

“To gain time!”

“Yes. To enable us to get a good start before they forced the lock.”

He slid a full glass along the counter in my direction, and:

“Do you play poker?” he asked.

“What the devil are you talking about?”

“I was merely wondering if you did. That portfolio which you have been treasuring, Devlin, contains several pages torn from an old copy of the *Sporting Times*. Yet neither you nor I have told a lie about it from start to finish! Chin-chin!”

Chapter XVII — Nanette Is Confidential

"Did you ever hear of Axel Varga?" said O'Mara.

I shook my head blankly.

"That's the devil of it," he murmured. "He works in the dark."

"Who is he?"

He hesitated for a moment, then:

"He is the immediate chief of those foreign agents," he replied, "whose activities have detained me so long in Madeira. One good thing I owe to him. I shall be returning to England with you in the morning."

"What!" I exclaimed gladly. "By the *Union Castle*?"

"Yes." He turned, staring at me in that coldly penetrating way which was so disconcerting and so misleading. "By a sheer coincidence, Mr. Varga is on board and I am instructed to look out for him."

"But the ship is full, O'Mara."

"There is always room for three more passengers in any British liner," he replied: "a diplomatic agent, a King's Messenger, and a pretty woman."

"What are you expected to do?" I asked.

"I am expected to prevent him landing!"

"But" — doubtless my expression became more blank than ever — "surely the authorities at Southampton — "

"The authorities at Southampton don't know in what name he is travelling. Neither does Cape Town, apparently. They merely

know that he's on board — with a false passport. He made South Africa too hot to hold him. Their backers have a long-standing interest in sowing disorder wherever British influence holds. It's an old game."

He stirred languidly in the cane lounge chair, watching a number of ants performing mysterious evolutions on his white drill suit. It was very still and peaceful in the little palm grove. A faint breeze carried perfume from the gardens, a sound of distant voices and soft laughter. Outside the cool oasis in which we sat, shaded, Madeira sunlight blazed on a million bright flowers, and the low mossy walls were alive with lizards.

"Have you ever seen this man?" I asked.

"No," O'Mara turned his head lazily. "I haven't the slightest idea what he looks like. Unless I get some further intelligence, my chance of identifying this fellow is a bad hundred to one."

"But you say he has a false passport?"

"So I understand. Probably issued in Paris or Milan or even New York, and in perfect order. Thousands of undesirables travel about the world annually with other people's passports, Devlin. The appended photograph is the only snag, and you might be surprised to learn how easy it is to replace it and duplicate the official stamp."

Presently I went hunting for Nanette. My guardianship of this wayward ward was soon to cease; and whilst I lacked the courage to think about saying goodbye at Southampton, I had

learned that for a man of my age and temperament the rôle of official uncle to a young woman in love was no sort of job.

Tea was in full swing on the terrace, but Nanette was not there. I thought she might be on the tennis courts, and I strolled down the steps and along the sloping, flower-gay path sacred to basking lizards.

Halfway down there is a sort of abutment, overhanging the lower gardens and possessing a stone seat. Here, in a lounge chair, her parasol propped against the low wall, I saw Nanette.

Her feet tucked up on the chair, to protect her bare legs from the ants, she sat manicuring her fingernails.

She neither saw nor heard my approach. And I stood still watching her. Quite mechanically she was polishing away with a chamois burnisher, but her blue eyes were staring, unseeingly, out over the bay.

As I studied the charming, pensive profile, I wondered, as I had wondered too often, what fate had in store for Nanette. My more immediate wonder was concerned with the problem of how she had contrived to be alone.

Suddenly she turned and saw me.

“Coo-ooh!” she called. “Have you come to take me to tea?”

“Yes,” I replied, walking down to her. “What has become of everybody?”

“I don’t know,” said Nanette. “I wanted to be alone.”

“To think?”

“I suppose so.”

I dropped on to the stone seat beside her.

“Whom did you want to think about, Nanette?”

She lowered her lashes, and polished busily.

“Oh — Pop and Mum — and folks.”

I lighted a cigarette, and presently she looked up. Her clear eyes regarded me wistfully for a moment, and:

“You know,” she said. “Don’t you?”

“I am afraid I do, Nanette,” I confessed.

“Isn’t it strange,” she went on, staring away over the sea, “that I should be so crazy about someone who avoids me?”

“Very strange,” I answered dully.

When a girl thus makes a confidant of a man she has never kissed, if he knows the rules of the game he retires hurt. Then:

“I suppose I shall get over it,” she said, and smilingly packed up the manicure implements. “We have to be on board at a fiendishly early hour tomorrow. I don’t know whether to go to bed at nine o’clock or sit up all night. Let’s have tea.”

As I helped her out of the cushioned chair:

“I have some news for you, Nanette,” I said. “Major O’Mara is coming with us.”

Her eyes opened very widely; and she stared at me in a frightened way that I always associated with any sudden reference to O’Mara. Then she turned swiftly, taking up her parasol.

“Really,” she said. “How often he changes his mind.”

But as we walked up the long path to the terrace she talked animatedly. And glancing aside at her flushed face, I realised with almost a shock of surprise how very young she was — and how

sweetly incapable of hiding the excitement that my news had created.

Chapter XVIII — Suspects

That run home to Southampton did not begin auspiciously for Nanette. Her happiness at being on the same ship with O'Mara was distinctly blunted by the presence of an official chaperone.

Her father had some sort of pull with the line, and by dint of industrious messaging, he had contrived to get in touch with a lady he knew who was returning from South Africa: one Mrs. Porter, a really formidable matron, deep-chested, heavy-jowled, and contemplating a sinful world through spectacles of an unnecessarily unpleasant pattern.

"Pop is mad!" said Nanette. "This woman must die."

Excluding O'Mara and myself, Nanette had come on board with a male escort of three devoted dancing partners. Lacking the society of Nanette, these were three very lonely young men, divided by a mutual distrust but united in their dislike of O'Mara.

Unreciprocated passion renders its victims clairvoyant; and each one of these three knew what the rest of the crowd at Reid's Hotel had never suspected: that Nanette only emerged from a land of dreams when O'Mara was with her. Now, to crown a troublous situation, Mrs. Porter presented a protégé — Captain Tarrant. She made it pointedly clear that no other follower would be tolerated.

I resigned my staff of office with a sigh, and settled down to be sorry for Nanette — and Tarrant.

O'Mara and I stood at the door of the smoke-room watching the coast of Madeira melt into a blue distance. There is no melancholy quite like that of watching an island sink astern, taking with it a parcel of one's life that will not come again; and I felt it then, though I could not have said for what exactly I grieved. Nanette, in a short, sleeveless frock, came along the deck, linked between two men, one of whom was Tarrant. She pretended not to see us. But right in front of the door she pulled up insistently, leaning on the rail and pointing out something to her companions. Nanette knew she had very beautiful arms. But she wanted O'Mara to know.

He smiled at me, sadly, and turning, went into the smoke-room. The girl's naïveté was hopelessly disarming. We sat down facing one another across a table, and:

"There is something I want you to do for me," said O'Mara.

"About — Nanette?"

"No." He shook his head, and that tragically hungry look came into his eyes that I had seen there before. "Don't let us talk about her, Devlin. I have a valuable portfolio in my stateroom."

"Surely you will hand it over to the purser?"

"Impossible. Contrary to the rules of the game. The ship might sink. But a certain Axel Varga is on board. Therefore — "

He paused, staring at me significantly.

"You want *me* to take charge of it?"

"Yes. Lock it in your trunk. I don't expect any move on this gentleman's part. He is stalking bigger game and therefore

anxious to avoid publicity. But he is not a man to underrate, and a careful enemy is most dangerous in the hour when he seems to be doing nothing at all."

"Very well," said I. "Of course, this man, Varga, will know you are on board?"

"Naturally," O'Mara returned. "His associates in Madeira will have advised him — although absolutely nothing to afford a clue to his assumed identity happened at Funchal. He is a dangerously clever man."

"Have you taken a look around?"

"Yes. Have you?"

"I have. But no likely candidate for the honour of being Axel Varga has presented himself."

"I agree," said O'Mara quietly. "But I have an appointment with the purser in an hour's time. I am going carefully through the passenger manifest."

When O'Mara left me, I was joined by the journalist, my stable-companion; a substantial Scot whom I had met in London two years before. He proposed a promenade. And just as we started the faithful three came into the smoke-room, together, and ordered drinks. Their aspects were mournful.

Then, in a shady corner outside, we discovered the explanation.

Nanette was coiled up in a deck chair, her charming head turned in the direction of her neighbour on the right — Tarrant. In a chair on her left, enveloped in an unnecessary rug, Mrs. Porter slumbered soundly — and almost noiselessly.

Nanette beckoned to me. As I paused, she threw a venom-laden glance at the unconscious chaperone, and:

"I do not like you, Mrs. P.," she murmured. "The reason why is plain to see — and hear."

Tarrant, his gaze fixed upon her, smiled admiringly. He had very even white teeth. Then he looked up at me.

"I hear that your friend is the famous O'Mara," he said. "I thought he was a film actor."

The words told me plainly that this was another victim of the distracting Nanette. Therefore I forgave him.

"His appearance is certainly deceptive," I admitted.

"We were on their left flank at the time he was put forward for the V.C.," Tarrant went on. "I was only a young lieutenant, but we saw some of the same work. The prestige regiments always get the headlines, though."

There was a small, sour note in the last words, the note of a man who feels himself overlooked; and I should have marked it, and did not. Nanette glanced at him under suddenly lowered lashes, and:

"Please, Mr. Devlin, lead me to a cool drink with lemon in it," she said.

She was on her feet in one graceful movement. Her ability to disentangle herself from complicated poses resembled that of an antelope. Grasping my right arm and the left of my startled Scottish companion, she moved away.

"Captain Tarrant is so good-looking that he bores me," she whispered in my ear.

O’Mara found me some little time later.

“I have ventured to have you put at a table among strangers,” he said. “Your immediate neighbour is a certain Dr. Falk.”

He stared at me.

“I’ll do my best, O’Mara,” said I. “Where are *you*?”

“At the purser’s table,” he replied, “facing one John Edward Cardew, of Halifax, Nova Scotia. These two birds may prove to be black swans, but there isn’t another query in the passenger list.”

I experienced Dr. Falk at lunch and later at dinner. Apart from his audible enjoyment of the soup, I found his table manners genial. He had been studying the neolithic fauna of South Africa on behalf of some learned Munich institution blessed with a name that only Dr. Falk could pronounce and that I shall never attempt to spell.

My report to O’Mara was unsatisfactory.

“He seems fairly true to type,” I said. “If he is not what he professes to be, he carries it well. How about your man?”

O’Mara shrugged in his curious way.

“He obviously knows Halifax,” was the reply. “His line appears to be steam trawlers. Having unaccountably neglected the subject of steam trawlers, I am rather at a disadvantage here.”

“I am equally rusty,” I confessed, “upon the neolithic fauna of South Africa.”

There was dancing on deck that night. Nanette danced with the faithful three in turn and with Tarrant. Tarrant secured more than his fair share because of the powerful backing of “Mrs. P.”

Nanette was dancing with me, in a curiously abstracted way, when suddenly she grew animated. Her eyes sparkled. She floated in my arms lightly as a feather.

Following her glance, I saw O’Mara watching us.

When I had deposited Nanette with the guardian Mrs. Porter, I returned to find O’Mara; for he had signalled to me. He was standing just inside the smoke-room door.

“Axel Varga is active,” he said in a cautious voice.

“What do you mean?”

He glanced around the smoke-room warningly. I took the cue and looked about me. Dr. Falk sat in a corner, fast asleep. Cardew, the other suspect, formed one of a bridge party.

“Two dispatch cases have been forced open,” O’Mara went on, “by someone who entered my cabin tonight!”

Chapter XIX — Dr. Falk Calls

"You have my authority to take any steps you may think fit, Major O'Mara," said the captain. "I have received the usual instructions and of course I shall do nothing without consulting you."

We came down to the nearly deserted promenade deck. Three young men were doing a midnight route march there — and Nanette, coiled up, squirrel-like, in a furry cloak, occupied one of two chairs. The other accommodated Tarrant. "Mrs. P.," leaving her charge in selected company, had presumably retired.

Tarrant was obviously elated. The chairs were set very near to the foot of the ladder communicating with the bridge and the commander's quarters. Tarrant didn't know that Nanette had seen O'Mara go up and that she was patiently waiting to see him come down. There is a particular cruelty in being chosen as the audience for a happiness that has nothing to do with oneself, and Tarrant was suffering it without the smallest suspicion.

We crossed to the rail, and leaned there, watching the clear water and the strange phosphorescent shapes glittering in its depths. And presently a slim bare arm was slipped under mine. I turned, startled — to find Nanette beside me.

"Please may I stay for five minutes?" she said. "Or do you want to go to the smoke-room?"

She stayed, and for longer than five minutes. Tarrant had disappeared; and the threesome had terminated around a table

decorated with tall glasses. We began to pace up and down, Nanette clinging to my arm.

Presently, as we turned, very timidly she slipped her other arm under O'Mara's.

"Is it true," she asked, "that there was serious trouble at a forward base where you were posted on your last deployment? And that a sergeant-major called Meakin faced a tribunal?"

O'Mara looked down at her in his gravely gentle way.

"It is not true, Nanette," he answered. "Where did you hear the story?"

"I didn't believe it," she answered indignantly, "but someone told me."

O'Mara caught my side glance and smiled — the happy, revealing smile that had grown so rare. But after Nanette had retired, over a final pipe in O'Mara's room:

"Queer thing," he murmured. "That that story should have leaked out."

"What story?" said I.

"The trouble with a group of N.C.O.s at that base, which rumour would seem to have expanded to a mutiny." He stared at me coldly. "It was the hidden hand at work," he added. "We had their agents in our ranks. Did you ever hear of it?"

"Vaguely, now that you remind me."

"The ringleaders managed to slip away. But it's odd Nanette should have got hold of the thing." He turned the matter over once, silently, and then seemed to lay it aside. "Well!" He lay

back on the sofa berth and regarded me with raised brows. “There is nothing more to be done tonight.”

“Are you satisfied about Falk and Cardew?”

“About Cardew, yes. He had been playing since dinner time. Falk nobody seems to have noticed. How long he had been in the smoke-room I can’t discover. We may safely count steam trawlers out, Devlin. Focus on the neolithic fauna of South Africa.”

“Shall you turn in now?”

“No,” said O’Mara, reaching up to the rack above his head for a pipe and tobacco pouch that lay there. “I am going to spend an hour with the ship’s communications officer. Radio operators are sometimes inspiring.”

To reach my cabin I had to pass the smoke-room door, and, just as I came to it:

“Either of them is old enough to be her father!” I heard.

I stepped in. The faithful three alone kept a resentful steward from his bed.

“Whose father?” said I.

“Hello, Devlin!” the speaker hailed me. “Sit down and let’s have a doch-an’-dorris. We were talking about Nanette.”

“Oh!” I remarked, dropping into a chair. “What seems to be the difficulty?”

“Well,” another explained, “she has fallen flat for that chap Tarrant; and we were saying that he’s old enough to be her father.”

“He is about thirty-five,” I hazarded — “a dangerous age for a girl of eighteen.”

"Piffle! Why, when she was only thirty he would be nearly fifty!"

"Have you pointed this out to her?"

"Rather not! Suppose *you* have a shot. You are well in with her ladyship."

"I should prefer to be excused," said I.

The profound slumbers of my Scottish friend proclaimed themselves to the ear as I walked along the alleyway leading to our stateroom. A sleeping partner who snores is difficult. When he snores in Gaelic he is nearly insupportable.

I undressed to a ceaseless accompaniment that I found the reverse of soothing. Slipping on a dressing gown, I lighted my pipe, determined to go out on the deserted deck; for the night was hot as the Sahara; the sea a burnished mirror.

Off I went, and met not a soul. For half an hour or so I wandered aimlessly. When, at last, my pipe burned out, feeling sleepy enough to face the snore barrage, I retraced my steps.

Rounding the corner of the alleyway, I pulled up short.

Dr. Falk had just come out of my room and was quietly closing the door behind him!

I stepped back swiftly. But I was too late. He turned and saw me.

He wore an appalling red dressing gown and a really incredible nightcap. Through the thick pebbles of his spectacles he beamed apologetically, and:

"Mr. Devlin — my *dear* sir!" he said, coming forward. "I can never forgive myselves — never!" He held up a huge pipe. "I did

not know that you had a companion. I knock. I think I hear you sleeping. And I venture to come in. I am restless. The smoke-room steward is retired. I know you are a pipe lover, and" — he indicated the yawning bowl — "I have not tobacco, so, I venture."

It was beautifully done, and that, I thought afterward, was precisely what was wrong with it; for an innocent man fumbles his excuses, and Dr. Falk's came out smooth as a billiard ball. I stared him fully in the eyes for a moment, then:

"Don't apologize," I said. "You are welcome to a pipe."

Opening the door, I stood aside for him to enter. My pouch lay, conspicuous, on the bed cover, but:

"I see it there," Falk whispered, stuffing about an ounce of expensive mixture into his incinerator. "But you are not here."

Thanking me profusely in a thick undertone, he presently took his departure. I listened to his receding footsteps, then I stooped, pulled out my trunk, and examined the lock.

It was fast. Nor could I find a scrap of evidence to show that anything else in the cabin had been tampered with.

What was I to believe? Could Dr. Falk really be the formidable agent, Axel Varga? If it were so, he had cool courage enough to justify the faith of his employers. In any event, I determined that O'Mara must be informed without delay of this suspicious occurrence.

Sleep was not for me.

Chapter XX — Fog in the Channel

Toward dusk on the following day — our last evening afloat — things began to move to that strange revelation which solved the Varga mystery.

O'Mara had been missing quite often. Several times I saw him coming out of the radio cabin, and he had had two long interviews with the commander, at the second of which the purser had attended. Then, having got into dinner kit, I was making for the smoke-room when I met him.

"Hello!" I called. "Any news?"

He took me aside, and:

"No reply yet," he answered.

"Perhaps the authorities in Munich don't realise the urgency of your message."

"Perhaps not," he said absently. "Let's explore a cocktail."

In the smoke-room we found Tarrant and my Scottish piper; so we formed a quartette.

Tarrant's attitude toward O'Mara was not friendly. I excused much of it, feeling the real cause to be, not professional jealousy, but Nanette. However, O'Mara was senior and Tarrant never allowed himself to be openly rude.

I was seated with my back to the door, when suddenly I saw a change of expression on three faces. I turned.

Nanette was peeping in at us. She looked adorable in a lace frock and I saw Tarrant glance aside at O'Mara in a way that was twin brother to murderous.

For it was to O'Mara that Nanette was appealing.

"Would it be perfectly horrible of me to come in?" she asked.

"It would be perfectly delightful, Nanette," said I.

She came in, to the marked perturbation of the smoke-room. She sat between O'Mara and myself. The three musketeers, who had been talking loudly in a neighbouring corner, grew suddenly silent.

"If you see Mrs. P.," said Nanette, taking a sip from my glass, "please hide me until I get under the table."

Dinner that night was something of an ordeal for me. Dr. Falk talked continuously about fossils, took two servings of every course, and generally seemed to be in high good humour. I think my own share in the conversation was not marked by any unusual brilliancy.

O'Mara's mood rather defeated me. He was by habit a lonely man, with a way of sinking into himself. Tonight, this phase of his temperament, which had expressed itself in his evasive talk, for some reason I found irritating.

On the morrow we should dock. The identity of Varga remained a mystery. The result of O'Mara's message was unknown to me. And O'Mara had become a sphinx.

A group having for its nucleus the faithful trio had got up an extempore dance on deck. A portable speaker belonging to Tarrant provided the music. Mrs. Porter presided over the playlist, and Tarrant and Nanette did most of the dancing. A few

others joined for a time and then retired, presumably to cope with the important job of packing.

I discovered myself to be the victim of a rising excitement. Something was afoot. I determined to find O'Mara.

It was a longish quest, but I found him at last. He was pacing up and down the deserted boat-deck. As I came up the ladder he stopped and stared at me, then:

"Hello, Devlin," he said. "Forgive my odd behaviour. But it's a race against time, and time looks like winning."

"What do you mean?" I asked blankly. "Have you had no reply?"

"That's it," said he, "and I can't afford to make a mistake. They expect fog, though. It may save the situation."

I was not at all clear on this point, but O'Mara immediately resumed his promenade and I perforce fell into step beside him.

"Falk is in his cabin," I said.

"Good," O'Mara murmured. "Where is Nanette?"

The question surprised me. Very rarely indeed did O'Mara speak of Nanette.

"I left her with Mrs. Porter and Tarrant," I replied.

He nodded, but made no comment. Presently:

"If this dangerously clever devil slips through my fingers," he declared, "Whitehall will disown me!"

And suddenly, as he spoke, an explanation of his recent behaviour presented itself. To the world he remained the aloof O'Mara; something of a poseur; a man unmoved by the trivial accidents of life. With me he felt that he could be real. He had

treated the matter lightly enough, hitherto. But now, England all but in sight, and the enigma of Varga unsolved, he showed himself a desperately worried man.

"If I get him," he began abruptly, after long and taciturn promenading, "do you know to whom the credit will belong?"

"No," I returned, puzzled.

"To Nanette," said O'Mara.

This silenced me effectually. For what Nanette had to do with the matter was about as clear as pea soup.

I left him, toward one o'clock, promising to return. I had abandoned the idea of sleeping; and I wanted to change. No message for O'Mara had come up to the time of my departure from the boat-deck. The operator on duty was unable to conceal his intense excitement. Just before I came down, leaning over the half-door of his room:

"Fog in the Channel, sir!" he announced gleefully.

"Good!" said O'Mara. "Go and change, Devlin."

I managed to effect a change of costume without arousing my Scottish friend. He snored harmoniously and uninterruptedly. When I returned to the deck, no trace of mist was visible. The sea looked like oil and the heat was oppressive. I lingered at the rail for a moment, staring forward to where the Cornish coast lay veiled in distance.

Right ahead, I discerned a faintly moving white speck. Then I became aware of someone beside me.

I turned. The captain stood at my elbow.

"No rest for me tonight, Mr. Devlin," he said. "The Channel is a mass of soup."

"So I have heard," I replied. "What's that ahead?"

"I have been wondering," he murmured. "It looks like a motor boat — and right on our course. Excuse me. I might as well go up."

A few minutes later, as I rejoined O'Mara, the ship bellowed her warning to the small craft ahead.

O'Mara was in the operator's room.

"What's that?" he asked. "Not fog already?"

"No," said I. "There's some kind of boat in our way."

"Oh," said he. "Fisherman?"

"No. It looks like a pleasure cruiser."

He stared for a moment. I had never seen him look so ill groomed. His wavy hair, since he had gone hatless all night, was wildly disordered.

Then the instrument began its mysterious coughing.

O'Mara straightened up and lighted a cigarette with the careful deliberation of a man controlling his nerves. The operator adjusted the headpiece.

"Here it is, sir!" he said. "At last!"

"Excellent," said O'Mara calmly.

And, whilst this long-awaited message came through, the horn began its disturbing solo — and mist crept, damply, into the cabin. We had struck the outer fringe of the Channel fog.

At this moment I saw Nanette. She stood at the door, wide-eyed, wrapped in a furry coat. I ran out to her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and clutched me — "where is — Major O'Mara?"

She was trembling.

"Nanette!" I said. "What is it? He is there — in the operator's room."

"Thank God!" I heard her whisper. Then: "I have been so frightened!" she went on, clinging to me. "Mrs. Porter sleeps like a log — and Captain Tarrant came to our room a few minutes ago and knocked. I opened the door, not realising who it was."

"Yes?" I said, clenching my hands tightly.

"He was — insane. He said — he was going to kill Major O'Mara — "

"What's that?" came in a cool voice.

O'Mara stepped out on the deck. He held a slip of paper in his hand. The mist had closed down, now, like a blanket. Even the deep note of the fog-horn was muted.

"I've got him, Devlin!" said O'Mara.

"What!"

"He sent off two code messages before my eyes were opened; and he received one reply. I don't know the code."

Dimly, through the fog, a queer, high siren note reached us.

"Major O'Mara!" Nanette released her grip and grasped O'Mara's arm. "Are you talking about Captain Tarrant?"

The communications operator joined our party as:

"Yes," O'Mara replied, "thanks to you, Nanette! Only those behind this knew so much about the trouble at that base as Tarrant confided to you!" He turned to me. "I acted on that

slender clue, Devlin. The name of a sergeant-major — and I was right! The *real* Captain Tarrant is in hospital at Ladysmith!"

"Good God!" said I. "Then this man — "

"Is Axel Varga! I told you he was dangerously clever!"

Then, muffled, ghostly, it reached our ears on the boat-deck — that most thrilling of all sea cries:

"Man overboard!"

Already the ship's engines were running dead slow. Now they were rung off.

Helter-skelter we went hounding after O'Mara — to Tarrant's stateroom. It was empty. One of the lifebelts was missing. Out in the fog, that queer high siren note persisted. I thought of the white motor boat — and of Tarrant's radio message.

O'Mara clasped his hands behind his back. The sleeping ship was awakening to a growing pandemonium.

"Have you a cigarette, Devlin?" he said. "I have smoked all mine. It needs a brave man to do what Axel Varga has done tonight. If ever I have the pleasure of meeting Captain Tarrant again, I shall tell him so."

Chapter XXI — A Missing Picture

"Oh, I say!" cried Jack. "This is topping!"

His admiring gaze was set upon a photograph in my portfolio of Madeira snapshots. It represented a slender girl, arms raised, poised in the act of diving from a rock into the clear water below. In justice to the beauty of the model and not out of any desire to fan my artistic vanity, I agreed with Jack.

The original of the study, seated on the edge of a table, slim legs swinging restlessly, surveyed the work with less enthusiasm.

"I look painfully bare," said Nanette severely.

"Can I have a copy, Devlin?" Jack asked.

"Please say no," came promptly from Nanette. "If you want a photograph, Jack, I had several good ones taken in Switzerland."

We examined other items of my collection.

"Hello!" said Jack. "Who is the sportsman with the toothy smile?"

He was frowning at a snapshot of Nanette coiled up in a deck chair. Seated very near to her, in smiling tête-à-tête, was a man whose white sun helmet cast a dark shadow upon his features.

"Captain Tarrant," Nanette replied. "You don't know him, Jack."

She turned over the print, giving me a swift glance. Its full significance rather missed me at the time. I merely supposed that this picture of the man we had known as "Captain Tarrant"

conjured up memories of O'Mara. And memories of O'Mara almost invariably brought about sudden changes of mood in Nanette.

Later, however, having induced Jack to telephone somebody about something or another, she drew me aside.

"Captain Tarrant is in London!" she said, speaking with suppressed excitement. "This was what I really came to tell you."

"What!" I exclaimed.

In the days that had lapsed since the disappearance of the notorious Axel Varga, alias Captain Tarrant, I had begun to share O'Mara's view that this greatly daring man had perished at sea.

"I received this note from him last night," Nanette went on. "And I don't know what to do."

Opening the envelope which she handed to me, I drew out a single sheet of unheaded, undated paper having a cutting pinned to it. The note read as follows:

> I learn from the appended picture that you are in London. If you can forgive me for my behaviour and will consent to see me for a moment before I leave England, put a message in the Personal Column of the Daily Planet and I will arrange the rest. I can never forget you — so try to be kind. J. Tarrant.

The picture referred to was cut from the *Daily Planet*, and showed Nanette as one of a group at a dance party — I forget where.

"How did he learn your address?" I asked.

"He didn't," said Nanette. "Look at the envelope. It was forwarded from the office of the *Planet*."

She watched me almost pathetically, and I divined the nature of the problem that was disturbing Nanette's mind.

"I simply couldn't do it!" she burst out. "It isn't as if he were really a criminal. He behaved abominably, and he frightened me; but there is a difference, isn't there, between a wicked man and a man who has done a wicked thing."

"Do you mean, Nanette," I asked, "that you don't want me to tell Major O'Mara?"

Nanette shook her head.

"Of course I don't," she replied. "I shouldn't have mentioned it if I had meant that. What I mean is — that I am not going to do what he asks."

"Yet he begs you to be kind," said I, feasting my eyes on Nanette's charming face which, now, wore an adorably wistful expression.

"I *am* being kind," she retorted; then: "Oh!" she exclaimed, and, suddenly silent, watched the open door.

Jack's voice might be heard. He was returning from downstairs and had evidently admitted visitors. A moment later they came in — O'Mara and an inspector of the Special Branch whom I had met before. He was a burly man with a rat-trap jaw, and I thought it probable that he could trace an unbroken descent from the first Bow Street runner in criminal history.

Nanette greeted O'Mara with disarming nonchalance. But the only person in the room who believed that she had not expected to

meet him there was Jack. The detective, a peculiarly efficient man-hunter, as events were to show, smiled grimly and stared out of the window.

O'Mara held Nanette's hand for a moment, and then turned aside, very still, turning his watch over slowly in his palm.

"Come along, Jack!" cried Nanette gaily. "Mum will be tearing the Berkeley down!"

Jack was only too ready to depart. His admiration of O'Mara was something he could not hide, and, whilst he was no psychologist, this very hero worship inspired distrust — where Nanette was concerned. In other words, he was not clever enough to know that Nanette loved O'Mara, but he was modest enough to wonder how any girl could spare him an odd glance whilst O'Mara was present.

Nanette's vivacity became feverish. She literally danced down the stairs, calling farewells to everybody. But, finally, from a long way down:

"Goodbye, Major O'Mara!" she cried.

"Goodbye, Nanette," he said, and shook Jack's cordially extended hand. "Look after her, Larkin. She is well worth it."

"You're right, sir!" Jack replied with enthusiasm — and was gone.

"Now," said O'Mara, and fixed one of his coldest stares upon me — "are the snapshots developed?"

"Yes," I replied, almost startled by his abrupt change of manner. "The prints came in this morning."

"And are there any of Axel Varga, sir?" asked the inspector.

"There is one. Unfortunately, his features are in shadow."

"Let me see," said O'Mara.

Once more my portfolio of snapshots was produced.

"This could be enlarged," said the inspector eagerly. "It is quite sharp."

"Does the face seem familiar?" O'Mara asked.

"Vaguely. I think I have seen him somewhere. But it's very much a case of a needle in a haystack. Of course, he's far too clever to go to any of the known centres — always supposing he's alive, and, being alive, that he's in London."

"He is alive, and he is in London," said I.

"What!" O'Mara rapped out the word in a parade-ground voice. "How the devil do you know that, Devlin?"

In a very few sentences I told him.

"That settles it," said the inspector. "The rest is routine. Find the woman and your case is won."

O'Mara's expression went very still. It was a danger signal, but the Scotland Yard man was ignorant of this fact.

"Explain yourself, inspector," he directed, with ominous calm.

"Well — it's clear enough," was the reply. "I shall insert a paragraph in the *Planet*, and when Mr. Varga turns up, he will be met by someone he's not expecting."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said O'Mara coldly. "The assistance of the Special Branch has been asked for because of the facilities that you possess in cases of this kind. But on no

account must the name of any friend of mine be dragged into the matter."

The atmosphere grew oppressively electrical for a moment; then:

"As you wish, sir," returned the inspector. "But you are going to lose him."

"I trust not. But even so, I decline to use this lady's name as a bait to trap Varga."

No doubt the man from Scotland Yard thought the speaker mad. No doubt he wondered why cases of this sort were placed in charge of distinguished soldiers handicapped by such preposterous scruples. But he did not know how Fate had intertwined Nanette in this affair so that at every turn success or failure seemed to lie cupped in her hands. He took it like a good sportsman, however.

"Might I look over the other photographs?" he asked.

"Certainly," said I, and spread them before him. "The negatives are in the wallet. You will want the one of Varga."

But when, later, I found myself alone, and began to arrange my photographic gallery, I missed not one negative, but *two*. Search availed me nothing. The negative of Varga was gone, but so also was that of Nanette in the act of diving from a rock.

"Jack!" I exclaimed. "Jack must have taken it!"

But I was wrong.

Chapter XXII — Portrait of a Girl Diving

On the following morning Nanette's mother called. One great disadvantage of this era of freedom is that it has taken all the kick out of life. Without prohibitions there can be no thrills. If a pretty married woman had called upon my father in his bachelor days he would have immediately consulted his solicitor.

She looked more like Nanette than ever. Her shapely arms were sunburned, and (I thought) were very beautiful so. But, as Nanette had done, she declared that she was ashamed of her tanned look. She had come with some more definite purpose than merely to chat, and presently the truth popped out.

"Really, you know, Mr. Devlin," she said, "I don't think it was quite playing the game."

I suppose I stared like an idiot.

"You know quite well what I mean," she added, and smiled in that way which was so like Nanette's.

"On the contrary," I assured her earnestly. "I really haven't the faintest idea to what you refer."

She stared at me unblinkingly, then nodded.

"I can see you haven't," she confessed. "Perhaps you didn't think there was any harm in it — and, of course, I admit the excellence of the charity. But I'm afraid it will get her talked about. At least, you might have consulted me."

"Please — please!" I entreated. "Take pity upon me. You are clearly referring to something of which I have no knowledge whatever — "

"Mr. Devlin," she interrupted — and held out a newspaper which she carried — "I am referring to the picture in the *Daily Planet*."

"But what have I to do with the pictures in the *Daily Planet*?" I asked blankly.

"Since you took the picture in question, the connection in this case is obvious."

Dazedly, I opened the copy of the *Planet* which she handed to me — and there, prominently featured, was a large reproduction of my photograph of Nanette diving! The caption read:

> A charming study of a charming diver. No wonder Madeira grows more popular every season. The original print is on view in the Modern Gallery, Bond Street, amongst a collection offered for sale in aid of Blind Veterans UK.

To say that I was staggered is to convey but a feeble idea of my frame of mind. I stared at the picture until I seemed to see it dimly through a haze. When, at last, I looked up and met the reproachful gaze of Nanette's mother, I was temporarily past comment.

My innocence must have proclaimed itself, for:

"Mr. Devlin," she said, and I saw her expression change, "I must apologize. You evidently are as surprised as I was. But this only deepens the mystery. Did you transfer these photos yourself?"

"Yes," I answered. "I had them on my computer — the whole Madeira collection. But — "

I stopped short. The truth had presented itself to me. One of four people had taken this unaccountable liberty with the photograph. Jack, the inspector, O'Mara, or Nanette herself. For I had no evidence to show which of these four had accessed the files while visiting my rooms.

"Yes?" Nanette's mother prompted.

"The photo was submitted by someone who had access to my computer yesterday," I went on. "You see, I noticed this particular file had been forwarded — and the photograph of the man in the sun helmet had vanished from the folder entirely."

"You mean that someone took it?"

"Took it or forwarded it elsewhere."

"But with what object?"

"Presumably a philanthropic one," said I, very blankly. "Nobody profits — except the charity."

"It resembles the work of an enemy — if one can imagine Nan having an enemy. Unfortunately, it is a perfect likeness. In fact, it was brought to my notice by someone. Personally, I don't read the *Planet*."

"What does Nanette think about it?"

"She doesn't know. That is, she had already gone out when the paper was shown to me. She may know by now. I am afraid it will earn her a rather unenviable notoriety."

I promised that I would thresh the matter out, but as I had a luncheon appointment all I could hope to do immediately was to call the *Planet* and speak to the department responsible.

This led to nowhere.

The picture editor was out, and apparently no other member of the staff knew anything whatever about the photograph — or about anything else.

I lunched that day at the Savoy Grill. So did nearly everybody who had been in Funchal whilst Nanette was there. The room appeared to be decorated with copies of the *Planet*, and the attention I received would have overwhelmed anyone with a more robust sense of their own celebrity. I grew stickily embarrassed.

Finally, I made my escape — and in the lobby ran into Jack.

"I say, Devlin," he exclaimed, "it's hardly good enough. Nanette kicked at the picture from the first. Now you go and publish it!"

"Stop!" I said sharply. "This is the last time I shall explain the fact to anyone. But I did not send Nanette's photograph to the Planet. Except that someone accessed the file from the computer in my rooms yesterday, I know nothing whatever about the matter."

"*Accessed* it!"

"Exactly."

"But when?"

"I noticed it just after you had gone. In fact, Jack, I thought at the time you had copied it to have a print made."

"Good heavens, no! She didn't want me to have it."

"Then the mystery remains a mystery."

"It's so objectless!" cried Jack. "A photograph like that is just good fun amongst friends, but one doesn't want the million

readers of the *Planet* to see it. This defeats me! Have you called the office?"

"Yes. I could get no satisfaction. I am going along to the Modern Gallery now."

"I'll come with you!" said Jack.

Chapter XXIII — Fiasco

A curious episode marked our arrival at the gallery. On the opposite side of Bond Street, you may recall that there is a block of offices and showrooms, occupied by beauty specialists, boutiques, and others. Well, at the entrance to the gallery, where an announcement stated that an exhibition of modern drawings and art photographs was being held in aid of, etc., we bumped into one of Nanette's Madeira conquests.

"Hello, Marsden!" said I.

The young man, who had been leaning against the doorway and staring abstractedly across the street, became galvanized into sudden action. He gave a swift look at me, a second look at Jack, and then:

"Hello, Devlin," he returned in an oddly guilty way.

Immediately he stared across the street again. At which moment came a cry from Jack.

"Good lord! There's Nanette!"

"Where?" I asked.

"In that window, on the first floor there. She has seen us, I think."

I followed the direction of his gaze. The window indicated belonged to an expert organizer of female hair. An attractive wax bust was visible but no Nanette. I turned to Marsden.

"*Is* Nanette there?" I asked.

"I couldn't say," he replied evasively.

Jack gave him a venomous glance and started across the street.

“We can see for ourselves,” he snapped.

I looked inquiringly at the young man in the doorway, but he returned my regard with so high a challenge that I wondered, checked the words on my tongue, and followed Jack.

We mounted the stairway to the first landing, and Jack threw open a door bearing the simple legend “Pierre” with quite unnecessary violence. We found ourselves in a discreet waiting room delicately perfumed. A stout French gentleman, whose wavy gleaming locks were a credit to his professional acquirements, greeted us. He bowed.

“I have called for a lady who is here,” said Jack. “Please tell her Mr. Devlin and Mr. Larkin.”

“But there is some mistake,” Pierre replied — assuming that this was none other than the maestro in person. “No one is here at the moment — unless you mean Mlle. Justine, my assistant.” He raised his voice. “Justine!”

A trim figure in white appeared at the door of an inner sanctuary sacred to hair.

“M’sieur?” said Justine, and bestowed upon us a swift glance of roguish dark eyes.

“You are alone?”

“Yes, m’sieur. I am waiting for Lady Rickaby whose appointment is at three.”

She bit her lip, suppressing a smile, and disappeared.

"You see?" M. Pierre extended apologetic palms. "There is no one."

"What's afoot?" Jack asked as we regained Bond Street. "That fellow was lying. The girl gave it away. Nanette is hiding from us."

We stared at each other, badly puzzled. Then we looked across to where Marsden lounged in the entrance to the Modern Gallery, seemingly oblivious of our existence.

"Come on!" said Jack savagely.

We joined the waiting Marsden.

"Have you seen the famous picture?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "I haven't."

Jack made a snorting noise, then, paying the entrance fee, we went into the exhibition. We found it to be far from crowded, and, indeed, the artistic donations were not of outstanding merit. Quite the most interesting exhibit was the lady in charge of the sales department. And, at the end of a ten minutes' quest, we sought her aid.

"Perhaps you could tell me," said I, "where the picture is that was reproduced in today's *Planet* — a portrait of a girl diving."

Whereupon the lady addressed began to laugh!

Jack's expression was worthy of study. In the eyes of poor Jack, anything touching Nanette was sacred, and this was the second time in one afternoon that inquiries concerning her had provoked merriment.

"I wish I could!" was the reply. "Really, it's most absurd. But all the same the publicity has done the exhibition a lot of good. Forgive my laughter, but, you see, we know nothing whatever about this picture!"

"What!"

Jack's exclamation was not merely rude; it was explosive.

"It has never been here," she went on. "Dozens of people have asked about it. But *we* have never seen it. The secretary called the *Planet* this morning and was told that they had used the photograph in good faith."

"But who sent it to them?" I asked.

"I am afraid I can't tell you," was the answer. "All we could learn was that it had been sent in by a responsible agency. Personally, of course, we are rather grateful."

In silence Jack and I departed. Marsden was standing in Bond Street just outside the doorway.

"Goodbye, Marsden," I said. "Let's hope it keeps fine."

"Goodbye, Devlin," said he, jauntily imperturbable.

Jack glanced sharply up at M. Pierre's windows; but only the wax bust rewarded his scrutiny.

"I am beginning to hate your friend Marsden," he confided.

"He is not so popular with me, either," I admitted, "though I begin to think the poor devil is more sinned against than sinning."

"Come round to the club," Jack suggested. "This thing calls for cool reflection."

I left him at four o'clock. We had called Nanette's mother, only to learn that Nanette had not returned. The whole thing was provokingly mysterious. It had entirely diverted my thoughts from the more serious problem of the capture of Axel Varga. In fact, I could not shake my mind free of it.

That Nanette had been hiding in the establishment of M. Pierre, I no longer doubted. And that Marsden had some part in the comedy was clear enough. Poor fellow, I regarded him in a more charitable spirit than Jack had at command. Nanette had been using him — for what purpose I could not imagine — and his reward would be small.

Some association between Nanette, at M. Pierre's, and Marsden, in the entrance of the Modern Gallery, seemed to be established. But since Nanette's photograph was not in the gallery, why this association — and conveying what?

Nothing — in so far as my bewildered brain served me.

So I mused, as I drifted along Pall Mall. I determined to hunt up O'Mara, when, suddenly, I saw something which called me to prompt action.

A taxi turned a corner at the very moment I was about to cross. In it sat Nanette — and Axel Varga!

It is in such moments of stress as this that vacant cabs magically disappear from the streets. No fewer than five taxi drivers had solicited my patronage during the few minutes that had elapsed since I had left Jack.

Now, with a dangerous agitator wanted by the British Government disappearing in the distance, from end to end of Pall Mall not a taxi was in sight!

When at last one crept into view, pursuit was out of the question.

If I had been perplexed before, perplexity now gave place to consternation. The comedy of Bond Street had been no more than a gay curtain draped before a stage set for drama. I tried in vain to allot the actors their proper rôles. What part did the missing photograph play? How came Varga in the cast? What of Marsden? And what of Nanette?

It was not far to my chambers, and I hurried back, with the intention of calling O'Mara.

I met him at the door.

Those who served with Edmond O'Mara say that when things were going hopelessly wrong a curious calm would settle over him, as if the worse the situation became the more completely he inhabited it. He had that look now.

"Hello, O'Mara!" I called. "This is lucky! I want to see you badly."

"I came to see *you*, Devlin," said he. "There is something I wish you to know."

Having opened the door and hurried him upstairs:

"Don't jump to conclusions," I began. "But Nanette met Varga this afternoon."

O'Mara stared at me incredulously.

"Where?" he demanded.

“I don’t know where. But I saw them together not ten minutes ago.”

He hesitated for a moment; then:

“Tell me all about it,” he said calmly.

In as few words as possible I outlined the events of the day, terminating with my glimpse of Nanette and Axel Varga together in Pall Mall.

“It is a blank mystery to me, O’Mara,” I said. “I simply cannot understand what it’s all about.”

“To me,” he replied, “it is equally, but painfully, clear.”

“What do you mean?”

“In the first place,” said he, “our friend the inspector accessed your file of Nanette.”

“The inspector! In heaven’s name, what for?”

“Because he happens to be a clever man at his trade. I declined to allow him to insert a paragraph in Nanette’s name. But he was by no means defeated. He employed certain official channels and secured the publication of her photograph.”

“With what object?”

“You recall the words that appeared under the picture?”

“Clearly. But the original was never at the gallery at all!”

“Quite unnecessary that it should be, Devlin. Our friend the inspector was in Bond Street, however.”

I think I was gaping like an imbecile.

“You are simply confusing me, O’Mara,” I managed to say.

“Yes,” he admitted. “No doubt the scheme is difficult to grasp. You see — the inspector banked on Varga’s infatuation for

Nanette. He judged it, no doubt, by the risk that Varga ran in communicating with her."

"Good heavens!" I cried. "I see it all! He hoped in this way to lure Varga to the gallery?"

"Certainly. He thought that Varga would probably come, first, to secure a print of the picture, and, second, possibly to obtain a glimpse of Nanette in person."

"And you say the inspector was there? I didn't see him."

"I did!" said O'Mara grimly. "He was in an office at the end of the gallery — with the door ajar. The girl in charge knew he was there on some police business, but she did not know that it had any connection with the missing photo. I gave him a crisp five minutes. But, officially, he was within his rights — and he knew it, dash him!"

"O'Mara," I said, "I can't fit Nanette and young Marsden into the picture."

O'Mara's expression changed, softened.

"I wonder?" he murmured. "She has a high spirit, and, I am beginning to think, a keen brain. Devlin!" — he suddenly grasped my shoulder — "how happy some man is going to be, some day!"

He turned aside abruptly, and walked into the inner room where my modest library formed a haven of refuge. Vaguely, as we had talked, I had grown aware of voices below. Someone answered the door; the other voice had been inaudible throughout.

Then I heard the door open behind me. I looked. And there was Nanette!

But, even as I was about to greet her, I checked the words. I had seen Nanette merry; I had seen her sad. I knew her moods of coquetry and of contrition. But, always, save once, I had thought of her as a child. I did not know her as I saw her now.

"I thought you were my friend," she said. "I thought I could trust you. If I had had one little doubt I would never have told you — "

"Nanette," I began —

But she checked me with a sad, angry gesture.

"You are no better than *he* is," she went on bitterly; "for you helped him. Heavens, what a fool I have been! And he only thinks of me as a *bait* for his traps!"

"Stop!" I cried. "For heaven's sake, stop, Nanette!"

"He was right," she pursued, stonily ignoring me, and looking unseeingly, miserably, before her as she spoke. "Captain Tarrant came. But I had arranged to warn him."

I remembered Marsden and his watch upon the window of M. Pierre. Then, abruptly, her mood changed. The blue eyes, which were so sweetly childish, blazed at me.

"No man, however bad he is, shall ever be lured to ruin by me — and made to think a woman did it for love!"

"He is entitled to laugh, Nanette," said a grave voice.

O'Mara came out from the recess and stood watching her.

A moment she confronted him, then:

"Goodbye!" she said.

Turning, Nanette ran from the room. I heard the street door slam.

"O'Mara!" I cried. "Why didn't you tell her?"

"It is better she should think as she does," he replied. "Fate has done what I failed to do. Now she will forget."

I have often wondered, since, if he believed it would be so. I have tried, knowing the man's honesty of soul, to conceive that he hoped it would be so. What he felt, standing there with his back to the light, I could not see and dared not ask.

Dejectedly, I sat smoking a lonely pipe, when the phone rang. I took up the receiver. I think I knew who had called me, even before I heard her voice.

"Is that you, Mr. Devlin?"

"Yes, Nanette."

"I am so miserable, because — "

She hesitated.

"Because of what?" I prompted gently.

"Because I never gave you a chance to explain. Oh, Mr. Devlin! Tell me — *is* there something I don't know?"

"Why, yes — there is," I replied. "You don't know that Major O'Mara and I were totally ignorant of the plot to trap the man you call Captain Tarrant."

"Oh!" came, as a sort of sigh, broken by a sob. "And I told him — Mr. Devlin, do you think you can ever forgive me?"

"*I do* forgive you, Nanette."

"And do you think — Good night!"

"Nanette!" I called. "Nanette!" But there was no answer.

Chapter XXIV — Peter Pan

A delicious haze hung over the Serpentine, by which token I knew that a warm day might be expected. Votaries of Peter Pan were few, for the morning was young as yet, but I sat watching him in his green temple and I thought how puzzled some archaeologist of the future was going to be.

Strange to reflect that a Scotsman should add to the ranks of the gods; stranger still that his immortal child should find himself so completely at home upon Olympus. More and more strange the reflection that none of the older gods were jealous.

Children of course came to pay tribute, and I think it was this morning I learned for the first time that there are many juvenile citizens whose day is incomplete unless they have made offering — a laugh, a pointed finger, a fleeting glance — to the god of that dear world which is hidden from most of us behind the gates of innocence.

To many an exile under palm and pine, the coming of spring means dreams of crocuses and Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens.

I was suffering from a fit of physical and mental restlessness. I could not clear my mind of the idea that some imminent peril threatened O'Mara. That Nanette was involved, I feared, but tried hard not to believe. Experience of that hostile organization known as the S Group had shown its members to be frankly unscrupulous; and Nanette had blindly involved herself with one of them. I knew why she had done it, but the man, Axel

Varga, could not know. For Nanette, Varga had ceased to exist. I doubted that the reverse was true.

The peace of the morning and the beauty of the lake mocked me. In the long encounter between O'Mara and the S Group, honours had gone to the enemy. But the battle was not yet over. Instinct and common sense alike told me that the worst was yet to come.

My ceaseless meditations along these lines had earned me a sleepless night, and I think I had sought out this spot beside the Serpentine with some vague idea of finding peace.

Now, coming out of a brown study and looking up, I observed a figure approaching along the path. It was that of a girl very simply dressed in a grey walking suit, and wearing a tight-fitting hat of a rich wine colour. Her fingers listlessly interlocked, she came slowly along, looking down at the path and sometimes kicking a pebble aside. Never once did she look up, not even when she arrived before Peter Pan, until:

"Good morning, Nanette!" said I.

Then she stopped as suddenly as if a physical obstacle had checked her.

"Good heavens!" she replied, tore herself from a land of dreams and stared at me, smiling. But her smile was not exactly a happy one. "It's like a musical comedy, isn't it?"

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, everybody turning up at the same place for no reason!"

"Not everybody," said I.

"Well — no." Nanette hesitated, and then sat down beside me on the bench. "Not everybody."

"Curiously enough," I went on, "I was thinking about you."

Nanette stared at the point of her shoe.

"Must be telepathy," she murmured.

"Why? Were you thinking about me?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I shall never forgive myself for what I have done."

"You mean — about Axel Varga?"

"About Captain Tarrant, yes." She turned to me. "You see, I always think of him as 'Tarrant.'"

"Does that make you like him any better, Nanette?"

"No," she admitted; "I have never liked him. But, well — you know how I felt about him? Does Major O'Mara know that I know?"

"You mean," I suggested, "does he know that you no longer suspect him of using you as a lure?"

Nanette nodded without looking up.

"I have had no opportunity of telling him," said I. "But I expect to see him today." I rested my hand upon hers, which lay listlessly on the seat beside her. "May I talk to you quite honestly?"

"Of course," said Nanette, but still did not look up.

"I want to tell you," I went on, "that the man you call Captain Tarrant, but whose real name is Axel Varga, is not as civilised as he appears to be. He is a member of a very dangerous organisation. I hope you will make a point of avoiding him."

"I am never going to see him again," Nanette declared.

She spoke abstractedly, and it dawned upon me that her interest was centred less upon this matter of her perilous acquaintance with a member of the S Group than upon the passers-by. I attached little significance to the fact at the time, and:

"I am only anxious about your personal safety," I said. "Anything you care to tell me, I shall keep to myself. Are you sure that Captain Tarrant does not mean to see you again, whatever you may intend?"

Nanette looked aside at me.

I thought that, since Axel Varga was human, my question had been rather superfluous. O'Mara, who was no alarmist, had admitted that the secret organisation of these people was extensive and efficient. Wild ideas assailed my mind, but:

"Of course, we are no longer in the lonely island of Madeira," I went on, "but in the capital of a civilised country. All the same, Nanette, I should be glad to know that Varga was no longer in England."

"So should I," she admitted, and looked away again.

The words were simple enough, but, from what I knew of Nanette, I detected an unfamiliar note in her voice. I was not sorry to hear it, although it was a note of fear. It told me that my warning had been unnecessary. Nanette knew that Varga was a dangerous man.

"I have been wondering what I should do," she began suddenly. "But now I have made up my mind."

She opened her handbag and took out a twisted scrap of paper. Smoothing it carefully, she passed it to me, and:

“Captain Tarrant dropped this yesterday,” she said, “while he was with me in a taxi. I think, perhaps — “

She hesitated.

“Yes?” said I, glancing at what was written on the paper.

“It’s so odd that I think, perhaps, you should show it to — your friend.”

Watching her as she spoke, I wondered at the scheme of things; wondered whether she would outlive a romance born in a jewelled island, or whether, despite her youth, it was real, for good or ill, this love of hers for O’Mara.

I suppressed a sigh, and bent over the writing. This was what I read:

> Book from Charing Cross to the British Museum. From the Mansion House also it is no distance to the British Museum. Hyde Park there is a station. Change at Charing Cross for Piccadilly. Bond Street is merely Bond Street, and two London Bridges are better than one Bond Street. But the Mansion House and the British Museum are national institutions, and Berkeley Square pulled down or Berkeley Square blown up would only lead to the Old Bailey. Residents at the Crystal Palace rarely moved to Berkeley Square, and the Tower Bridge is new whilst London Bridge is old. Meet you in Bond Street.

I raised my eyes. Nanette was stifling laughter. Now she stifled it no longer. And Nanette's laughter was very sweet music.

"Of course," she confessed, "I know it *seems* perfectly idiotic! But one never knows. It may mean a general strike or something. But whatever it means, I shall have to be pushing along. I am meeting Mum at Selfridges."

She stood up, looking sharply to right and left, and I wondered what this might portend. However, we took the path to the Gate, walking very slowly, and from there proceeded in a taxi.

I dropped Nanette at her destination and was standing outside the shop wondering whether to walk over to the Club or to hunt up O'Mara, when an explanation of this chance meeting presented itself.

O'Mara, I recalled, had once said, in Nanette's presence, that when he had a difficult problem upon his mind, he varied the ordinary routine of a London morning. Other duties permitting, he walked as far as Peter Pan, and in the presence of the little god not infrequently discovered a solution of his difficulties.

Nanette had been unfortunate. This morning O'Mara had not come.

I re-entered the taxi which I had kept waiting, and:

"Lancaster Gate," I directed.

Why I did so I have no idea; but experience has taught me that the motives which prompt many far-reaching actions are so obscure as to defy subsequent research.

Discharging the man, I set out along that path beside the Serpentine. The hour was now approaching noon, and nannies promenaded with the younger generation. I found myself surrounded by future society beauties; statesmen who would be making laws when I was an old man; great soldiers destined to save their country from enemies yet unborn; actresses whose reputations might overshadow the memory of Sarah Bernhardt; princesses, dukes, vagabonds, thieves; some in pushchairs, others in miniature electric cars, some toddling; a fascinating crowd.

Then I awakened from my day dream. Standing squarely in front of Peter Pan, and watching that youthful deity with a fixed stare, was O'Mara!

He remained unaware of my presence until I touched him on the shoulder.

He turned swiftly. And I saw a far-away look in his grey eyes instantly change to one of close scrutiny; then:

"Devlin," he said, "I am glad to see you. I learned something last night."

"What?" I said.

"I learned why Axel Varga has come to England! The president of the S Group — a person with the mentality of a Machiavelli and the morals of a baboon — is one Brandt."

"Well?" said I.

"Brandt is in London!"

Chapter XXV — The Second Message

"Of course," I said, "it may mean nothing."

O'Mara raised his eyes from the extraordinary communication that I had handed to him, and:

"Or it may mean everything!" he added.

We sat on that bench by the water's edge where I had met Nanette. O'Mara continued his scrutiny of the message, and, looking over his shoulder, I read it again for perhaps the twentieth time. Its absurdity fogged me. Passers-by ceased to exist, and I forgot Peter Pan.

"Perhaps," said I, "it is some kind of code."

"Since it is otherwise meaningless," O'Mara murmured, without raising his eyes, "your suggestion is excellent. You will have noticed that there are three references to the British Museum and that the expression 'Two London Bridges' occurs?"

"I had not particularly noticed this," I admitted.

"Two London Bridges," O'Mara went on musingly. "Very interesting — very interesting. You see where I mean?"

He indicated the passage with a careful finger.

"Quite," said I eagerly. "But Charing Cross, Berkeley Square, and Bond Street also occur several times."

"But only Bond Street and Berkeley Square crop up in pairs," he replied, "if we exclude the brace of London Bridges."

And now, as we sat there pondering over this nonsensical piece of writing, came a strange interruption.

"Have you seen Comrade Varga?" said a guttural voice.

I looked up sharply. A stout German obstructed my view of Kensington Gardens. His ample face was draped in a pleasant smile, and he surveyed O'Mara and myself through a pair of spectacles that resembled portholes. No doubt I was gaping like an imbecile but O'Mara rose to the situation lightly.

"He is here," he replied calmly. "Are you from Comrade Brandt?"

"I am," said the German. His smile disappeared. Relieved of it, his face was frankly sinister. "Have you seen Comrade Hale?"

Perhaps it is unnecessary to state that emerging from a perusal of the letter about Hyde Park, Bond Street, and Berkeley Square, and finding myself plunged into this apparently inane conversation, I began to doubt my own sanity; but:

"*This* is Comrade Hale," said O'Mara gravely, and waved his hand in my direction!

The German nodded in a very brusque way.

"Show me the order," he demanded.

O'Mara held up the demented document we had been reading; whereupon:

"Good," said our new acquaintance. "Quick! The order for tonight!" He passed an envelope to O'Mara. "I am followed. Good morning."

He moved off hurriedly, and I was still staring in speechless astonishment when a thick-set man wearing a blue suit and a soft hat, and who, without resembling a straggler from the Row, might have been a visitor from abroad, came along the path.

One keen side-glance he gave us, and then disappeared in the wake of the German.

"O'Mara — " I began; but:

"After all," he interrupted me, "one must admit that the Scotland Yard people are efficient. That was a detective-inspector of the Special Branch."

"Do you mean he is following the German?"

"Undoubtedly."

"But why should he follow him? Who was the German?"

"I haven't the faintest idea!" O'Mara replied.

"But he mentioned Varga! And you seemed to know him."

O'Mara looked me over with those cold grey eyes in a way that I didn't like.

"Really, Devlin," he replied, "considering the admirable assistance which you have given me in this matter — for which I shall always be grateful — there are times when you defeat me. Why our German friend reposed his confidence in us I have no more idea than the Man in the Moon, nor why he confided this letter to my keeping. But his reference to Varga brands him a member of the S Group, without the significant fact that he is being followed by an officer of the Special Branch, whom I chance to know but who does not know me. The weary arm of coincidence is not long enough to embrace all these happenings, Devlin. There is some other explanation. Let us see if it is here."

He tore open the envelope and withdrew a single sheet of paper. I bent forward eagerly, and over his shoulder read the following:

Charing Cross, London Bridge, Hyde Park, and the Strand are all worthy of a visit. Kingsway is modern, but the British Museum, Tower Bridge, the Mansion House, especially the British Museum, must not be neglected. Hyde Park merits several visits. The Mansion House, or the British Museum, can be done in one day, but Hyde Park is the only Hyde Park, whilst Piccadilly and the Strand are merely thoroughfares. The British Museum exhibit 365A is not in the National Gallery. The Crystal Palace does not resemble Buckingham Palace and Bond Street is not the Station for the Crystal Palace. Shepherd's Market is a survival. But book at Kingsway. Meet you at the Mansion House.

"And now," said O'Mara, "you know as much as I do!"

I stared at him blankly, and, as I stared, heard clocks, near and remote, strike the hour of noon. O'Mara suddenly thrust the second letter into his pocket and began to study that which Nanette had given to me.

He looked up, staring intently at the figure of Peter Pan, then:

"Twelve o'clock," he muttered. "Does the fact that it is twelve o'clock convey anything to you, Devlin?"

"Nothing," I confessed, "except that I feel thirsty."

But it had conveyed something more to O'Mara. A distinguished officer is not relieved of his ordinary duties and dispatched to the Argentine upon the toss of a coin. He is

selected for his special qualifications. That O'Mara's qualifications were extensive I had already learned; that they were also peculiar was beginning to dawn upon me.

Chapter XXVI — The Cryptogram

Nanette was with a party at the Hippodrome that night, and I had promised to look in during the interval. The curtain had just fallen and the orchestra was playing as I entered with O'Mara. The manager met us at the top of the steps.

No doubt you remember him. He is unforgettable, being the best-dressed manager in Europe. He was delighted to meet O'Mara and much happier in greeting an officer of the Household troops who had come in for a drink than in endorsing a plebeian cheque for the use of the Royal box. He had the air of a man who has spent thirty years learning precisely how much warmth to extend to precisely whom, and who extends it now as effortlessly as he breathes.

Nanette came running out ahead of her party and stopped dead on seeing O'Mara. He bowed in his grave, courtly fashion. She glanced at me swiftly, and then:

"Oh, Major O'Mara," she said, "I want to ask you to forgive me!"

"And I want to thank you," said he.

"To thank me?"

Nanette looked up at him and then down again very swiftly. She began tapping her foot upon the floor.

"To thank you," he repeated, "once more. It seems to be my happy fate, Nanette, to be always thanking you."

“But what have you to thank me for?” she asked, industriously studying the point of her shoe.

“For giving me an opportunity of redeeming my many failures.”

Nanette looked up — she was quite calm again — and met his eyes bravely.

“Some of them,” she said, “have been my fault.”

“You are wrong,” O’Mara assured her. “The fault has been mine from the very beginning.”

“What do you mean?” she asked; and I turned aside, joining some friends who had just come out from the stalls.

In spite of my determination about Nanette, it still hurt somewhat to see that light in her eyes. There is no loneliness quite so complete as that of the man who stands a yard from a great happiness and knows that it is addressed to somebody else; and I had grown, I confess, rather expert in it.

“I mean,” I heard O’Mara reply, “that I have tried to do something that is impossible.”

I heard no more, nor did I want to.

That bell which indicates the rise of the curtain releases from the bars of a London theatre certain characteristic types. The wet man returning guiltily with guarded breath to his dry wife in the stalls, having stepped out to “smoke a cigarette.” The bored man, who is present under protest, and who goes to his seat like a martyr to the stake. The victim of an irresistible beat, who dances with his date in the lobby, and post-mortem examination of whose skull reveals the presence of several

perfectly formed saxophones but nothing else. I have watched that little migration a hundred times, and never without the comfortable sense of being, myself, a mere spectator of the human comedy. Tonight, though I did not yet know it, I had been written into the cast.

The curtain was about to rise and practically everybody was seated when I learned that Nanette had straggled. She stood with O'Mara in the opening at the back of the stalls. And I thought that I had never before seen her so animated in his company.

Envied model of her girl friends, Nanette was a paragon of self-possession in the company of all men, or had been until she had met O'Mara. Never, hitherto, had I seen her at her ease with him. But tonight she was — realised that she was — and her happy excitement will be good to remember when I am ten years older.

One hand resting upon his arm, she looked up, talking gaily. He, too, had relaxed, as any man must have done finding himself in the company of an adorably pretty and spirited girl who loved him so much that she didn't care who knew. He was laughing like a schoolboy. I had never once heard O'Mara laugh in that wholly unguarded way, and the sound of it told me, more plainly than any confession, how the case stood with him.

The curtain was up before Nanette tore herself away. She was very flushed, and I know her heart was beating wildly. I pitied her escort, foreseeing that she would be abstracted throughout the remainder of the evening.

O'Mara turned to me, and his eyes were still glistening happily.

"Well, Devlin," said he, "what are you thinking?"

"I am thinking," I replied honestly, "that we are about of an age. That if Nanette had looked at me as I saw her looking at you, I should have asked her to marry me before I let her go back to her seat."

He stared very hard, his expression changing from second to second; then:

"Being Celtic," he said, "I suppose I am superstitious. At every turn since I have met her Nanette has intruded in my life. I am beginning to wonder."

"About what are you thinking in particular?" I asked.

"About the letter that Varga dropped in the cab and that Nanette gave to you."

"Have you fathomed it?" I asked excitedly — "and the other?"

"Both are in the same code. But without the first I doubt that I should have been able to read the second."

"*Then you have* read them?"

"I have," O'Mara replied; "and this time Nanette has dealt me a full hand."

His suppressed excitement communicated itself to me. There was a particular note he struck, very rarely, when the long patience of his trade was about to be repaid; and he struck it now, low and even, under the brassy gaiety of the orchestra.

"What have you learned?" I said eagerly. "Can I be of any assistance?"

"Your assistance is indispensable!" he returned. "Are you game?"

“Every time!”

“Good enough. Let us go along to your rooms, and I will explain what tonight has in store for us.”

As the taxi that we presently hailed threaded its way through the traffic of Cranbourne Street, and on through that of Piccadilly, I glanced aside several times at my silent companion. The lights of the theatres slid over his still profile, flaring and fading, and he watched them without seeing them, his mind already gone away ahead of us into whatever the night was to be. I wondered if his abstraction might be ascribed to the problem of the S Group, or to that of Nanette. Not being an O’Mara, I hesitated to judge. But my vote was for Nanette.

Arrived at my rooms and having sampled the whisky and soda:

“Now,” O’Mara began, “the mantle of Edgar Allan Poe not having fallen upon my shoulders, I doubt that I should have solved this cipher but for the happy coincidence of meeting our German friend in the very shadow of Peter Pan. You will recall, too, that at the moment of his departure, the clocks were chiming the hour of noon.”

“I remember,” said I.

“I turned it over in my mind, considering the thing from every conceivable angle. Before I tackled the cipher — for of course the messages were palpably written in some kind of cipher — one fact was plain enough to me.”

“What was that?”

“The fact that Varga, an important member of the S Group, was not known by sight to the member who spoke to us! He mistook

us, sitting where the Order had appointed, for the very Comrades he had been sent to find — Varga, whom he had never seen, and the American, Hale, whom he had never seen either. It was the one weakness in an organisation built upon secrecy: that its own servants were strangers to one another."

"So far I agree," said I, "but what I simply cannot make out is why this deranged German should walk up to two perfect strangers seated in Kensington Gardens and take it for granted that they were the people he was looking for."

"His opening remark was non-committal," O'Mara reminded me, reflectively sipping his whisky and soda.

"Certainly it was; but am I to assume that the man was walking about London addressing the inquiry, 'Have you seen Comrade Varga?' to every male citizen he met on his travels?"

"The very point that led me to a solution of the problem," O'Mara returned. "I realised, of course, that the routine which you indicate would have been insane, and I do not look for insanity of this kind from members of the S Group. I recalled that we had been sitting by the statue of Peter Pan, and that I had drawn your attention to the presence of 'Two London Bridges' in the message. I noted that the double bridges were preceded by a reference to Bond Street — or, rather, by two references to Bond Street — and followed by another. I remembered that the hour was noon.

"Treating the message as a cipher, I assumed, as a basis of investigation, that the various well-known spots mentioned

represented letters and that all intervening words might be neglected. Now, I had two almost certain clues to work upon.

"First, that our German friend clearly expected to meet Varga and someone called Hale by the statue of Peter Pan. Second, that he expected to meet them there at noon. Think for a moment, and you will realise that this must have been the case."

"It is clear enough," said I, "now that you point it out to me."

"His handing me a second message in the same cipher," O'Mara went on, "suggested that the first related to the appointment which we, by bounty of the gods, had accidentally kept. I therefore assumed that the first message conveyed something of this sort: 'Be at the statue of Peter Pan at midday.'

"I began to examine it with this idea in mind. Particularly, I was looking for a sequence to fit the name, Peter Pan. As you can see —" he spread the original messages on my table before me — "it appears unmistakably at the very beginning. Charing Cross is the first point mentioned; four other London landmarks occur, and then Charing Cross again. I assumed as a working theory that Charing Cross stood for the letter P."

He had the patience of a man laying out the pieces of a watch upon a velvet cloth, and I, who could no more have spun that web backward than flown, sat watching him with the humility one feels in the presence of a faculty wholly outside one's own.

"This suggested that British Museum was E as it occurs next, is followed by Mansion House, and then occurs again.

“Assuming Mansion House to be T, we get P-e-t-e. Calling Hyde Park R, we get Peter. Charing Cross then crops up in its correct place. Reading Piccadilly as A and Bond Street as N gives Peter Pan.”

He laid his cigarette in an ash-tray and bent over the writing enthusiastically.

“This enabled me to cross-check, for Bond Street occurs again immediately, with the two London Bridges which first attracted my attention, followed by another Bond Street.

“Bond Street being N, it was reasonable to assume that London Bridge was O, making — Peter Pan, Noon.”

“By gad!” I exclaimed. “It’s wonderful!”

“On the contrary,” O’Mara assured me, “it is elementary. To continue: we now have Mansion House again, or T, followed by British Museum — E, and two Berkeley Squares, hitherto unmentioned. Old Bailey and Crystal Palace crop up next — very defeating — followed by a third Berkeley Square. Then Tower Bridge. This is followed by London Bridge, O, and Bond Street, N. Remembering the name of the Comrade for whom you were mistaken, Devlin, I very quickly determined that Berkeley Square stood for L and the word following ’Noon’ was ’Tell.’ This gave me a pair of blanks, then L, another blank, and o-n. Hale was clearly indicated, and I had my complete message. ’Peter Pan noon, tell Hale.’”

O’Mara replaced his cigarette between his lips and turned to me, smiling.

“You mean,” said I, “that you have read the second message?”

“Naturally,” he replied. “It is childishly easy, once having got the idea of the nature of the cipher. Without bothering you with details, such as the letters implied by Buckingham Palace, Shepherd’s Market, and Kingsway — places that don’t occur in the first message — I may say that it reads as follows: ’Porchester Terrace 365A — which I assume to be the number of a house — midnight.’”

“Good heavens!” I glanced at the clock. “And he said the order was for tonight!”

“Tonight,” O’Mara returned, glancing up. “We have two hours.”

“We have two hours?”

“Precisely,” said he, and his grey eyes surveyed me unblinkingly. “There are certain chances, but there is no game without chances, and we shall be covered by a raid squad from Scotland Yard. Whether Comrade Brandt is more familiar with the appearance of Comrades Varga and Hale than his emissary seems to be, I cannot say. But tonight at twelve o’clock I suggest that you and I present ourselves at number 365A Porchester Terrace, as Comrades Varga and Hale! It is asking a lot, Devlin, but are you game?”

I looked at the clock, and then at the quiet, waiting face of the man across the table, and I thought of all the comfortable evenings I had spent in that room over a book and a pipe, never dreaming that one of them would end in my walking, of my own free will, into a house full of people who would cut my throat if they guessed what I was.

“Good God!” I said, hesitated for one electric moment, and then held out my hand.

O’Mara grasped it.

Chapter XXVII — The Comrades Gather

"Nanette has gone on somewhere to dance," said O'Mara.

"I know." I stared out of the window of the taxi. "I take it that she doesn't know where *we* have gone on to?"

"No."

O'Mara's reply was little more than a whisper, but it told me that which made me at once glad and sorry. For good or for ill, Nanette was winning. He had ceased to fight her; one heard it in the single syllable, the way a man's voice changes when he has put down a weight he has carried too long.

"Two things are rather worrying me," O'Mara confessed. "It is obvious enough that Varga is afraid to visit any of the known centres of the S Group, hence the appointment at Peter Pan. He probably received the letter — or 'Order' — at some post office, under an assumed name. But if he had read it and decoded it before he dropped it in the taxi, where was he at noon today?"

"Unable to approach Peter Pan," I replied promptly, "because we were there, not to mention the man from Scotland Yard who was following the German."

"Yes," O'Mara mused. "Varga's reaction to this check is one of the points I am wondering about. It may prove to be a snag. The second snag — "

But as our taxi had turned into Porchester Terrace and was now pulling up, I did not learn what the second snag might be.

We alighted, and I looked up and down the street. Save for O'Mara's assurance, there was nothing to show that our movements

were covered by the squad from Scotland Yard. Porchester Terrace proclaimed itself empty from end to end, or for as far as I could see. The lamps stood in their pools of light at decent intervals; a cat crossed the road on its private business; somewhere a long way off a late bus changed gear and laboured away into silence. It was the most ordinary street in the world, and I have never in my life felt anything so unsafe.

Number 365A was a prosperous-looking mansion set back beyond a patch of shrubbery and approached through a sort of arcade guarded by handsome double doors. What appeared to be a large room on the first floor was brilliantly lighted, but otherwise the house was in darkness.

"Pull over to the other side of the street," O'Mara directed the taxi driver, "and wait. We shall not be long."

"Very good, sir."

As the man turned his cab:

"Now," said O'Mara, "we are going over the top! Are you fit?"

There was that in the phrase, and in the level way he used it, which steadied me; for he had gone over the top in earnest, more than once, in places where the cost was counted afterward in long lists in the newspapers, and if it meant so little to his voice it might, I told myself, mean less to my legs than they at present feared.

"All ready," said I.

O'Mara pressed the bell button.

In the interval that elapsed between the ringing of the bell and the opening of the door, I conjured up a picture of Nanette dancing with somebody or another somewhere, perpetually glancing abstractedly about the room, as I had seen her do so often, in hope of catching a glimpse of O'Mara. It was a strange thing to stand on, that picture, while one waited on a dark step for a stranger to open the door of a trap; but a man takes what comfort offers, and the thought of her was the warmest thing within reach.

It was hard to believe that this doorway before which we waited represented a frontier which, once crossed, shut us off from the life of empty gaiety which the name of London conveys to so many; difficult to regard it as the porch of a grim and real underworld, controlled by enemies of established society, remorseless, almost inhuman in their bloodthirsty fanaticism.

A saturnine foreign butler admitted us. We had shed our dinner kit and were wearing tweeds.

"Comrade Varga and Comrade Hale," said O'Mara with composure.

The man nodded and stood aside. We entered the arcade, which was bordered by plants in pots, and saw ahead of us some carpeted steps, lighted by a hanging lantern.

As the double doors closed behind us, I experienced one of those indescribable moments compounded of panic and exhilaration. Then somewhere, very dimly, I heard a clock striking midnight. We were going upstairs. I counted the strokes without meaning to, and thought, with a lightheadedness that frightened me more than

the fear had, that it was exactly the hour at which, in the better-regulated sort of story, the hero is rescued, and that this was not that sort of story.

"Comrade Varga and Comrade Hale."

I found myself in a large room, very simply furnished in library fashion, and in the presence of six or seven rather unsavoury human specimens, some of whom bowed curtly, and some of whom did not bow at all. The faces, in the soft light, had each its own particular wrongness — one too smooth, one too still, one with eyes that moved when the head did not — and I understood that I was looking at people who had put a line through the ordinary rules a long time ago, and felt the better for it.

Our Peter Pan acquaintance was present; and a short thick-set man, who had incredibly long arms and a formidable, barely contained energy about him, came forward to greet us. He had incomplete teeth, and those that survived badly needed attention. His accent opened up wide possibilities.

"Greeting, Comrades," said he. "You are welcome. My name is Brandt."

And as he spoke, fixing his piercing glance first upon O'Mara and then upon myself, I recognised beneath that uncouth exterior the primitive, formidable force of the man. He was the genuine article where the others were merely its instruments; one felt it as one feels heat from a closed stove.

He presented the other comrades, by names which are not to be found in Debrett's, and I reflected that impudence is indispensable to success in this sort of game.

It became evident that, from Comrade Brandt downward, nobody in the room was familiar with the appearance of either Varga or Hale! It was the whole of our safety, that ignorance, and it was the thinnest thing imaginable; one word, one wrong answer, one Comrade who had after all once seen a photograph, and the soft lamplit room would have shown us its other face in a heartbeat.

An appalling-looking bearded comrade attached itself to O'Mara.

"We are anxious, Comrade," it said, "to hear your personal account of the state of the work in South Africa."

"I am not too hopeful," O'Mara replied gloomily, and glanced aside at me. It was beautifully judged; gloom commits a man to nothing, and a discouraged report is the one kind no enthusiast troubles to check.

"But," said Brandt, turning his dreadful little eyes in my direction, "Comrade Hale brings us news from the United States which will be like new blood in our veins."

I had not, until that instant, been called upon to be Comrade Hale aloud. I am no actor, and I felt the eyes of the room settle upon me with the weight of a hand; but I had served a sufficient apprenticeship at O'Mara's side to know that the safest answer is the one that promises everything and says nothing, and I gave it.

Somehow or another, O'Mara managed to shake off the bearded comrade, and to secure a word aside with me.

"Very full bag," he murmured. "If we make no mistakes, we shall purge England and America of some unsavoury elements. But

the second snag which I had foreseen rests on the fact that another liner from Madeira has reached Southampton since we returned. There is one member of the S Group whom we left behind. He knows us both. He might quite conceivably have been on that liner! His appearance here would raise the temperature considerably. And — “

He was interrupted. The door of the room was thrown open and the foreign butler entered.

“Comrade Maddox,” he announced.

“The snag to which I referred!” said O’Mara.

Chapter XXVIII — The Raid

I suppose that at some time during his life every man who has anything of the boy left in him has ift that he would like to take a fling at the great adventure of Secret Service. I feel called upon to assure these aspirants that a comfortable armchair is the better choice. The boy in me had its fling that night, and the man in me has never since envied anyone his.

Accident, or that Higher Power which the Arabs call Kismet, had cast me into the path of Edmond O'Mara. He had honoured me with his friendship, but had quite failed to recognise that I was a man of lesser stature than his own. Whilst granting every honour to marshal and statesman, personally I am disposed to believe that it was men such as O'Mara who got the job done quietly when others were taking the credit; and perhaps, hitherto, I had been inclined to look upon the Secret Service as a job for highbrows rather than for soldiers.

This error was to be corrected.

Conceive a large room filled with enemies of established order; fanatics, whose collected scruples would have left a thimble empty. Conceive that I and O'Mara, posing as members of their bloodthirsty organisation, were amongst them as spies, pledged to bring about their ruin.

Now, conceive that a "Comrade," who knows us and has fared ill at our hands, is suddenly announced.

Perhaps I shall be forgiven when I say that I remembered with gratitude how Edmond O'Mara had rallied his troop under fire

in circumstances that made headlines for a week and were then forgotten by everyone but those who had been there; how his presence of mind and consummate self-possession had turned what might have been catastrophe into something his commanding officer had quietly commended. I was no soldier; but I had read his record in his own bearing, day after day, and I clung to it now as a man clings to a rail in a heavy sea.

He edged up beside me. I saw him reach instinctively for something that was no longer there — a habit broken — and saw his expression shift to something harder and more direct; then:

"Get near the door," he murmured. "My fault, Devlin, to have let you in for this. But I had hoped to learn things that police examination can never bring out."

Maddox came in.

He was in dinner kit and he smoked a cigar which, to my disordered vision, appeared to be decorated with two bands. His superb self-possession was worthy of a seasoned professional. He did not merely own the room; he possessed the property. I have disliked few men more heartily and admired few more honestly, and in the half second before everything happened I caught myself, absurdly, hoping he would do nothing that obliged us to shoot him.

"Take the left," said O'Mara.

Unerringly, instinctively, Maddox's glance settled upon us at the moment of his entrance. He had advanced no more than one pace beyond the butler, and his mouth was agape for excited utterance, when O'Mara's revolver had him covered.

Overwhelmed with a sense of utter unreality, I covered the group of four on my left which included the formidable Brandt. The pistol, which I had carried all evening as a kind of cold and shameful secret, was suddenly the most natural thing in the world to be holding; and I heard my own voice come out steadier than I had any right to expect.

Glibly, as if born of long familiarity, the words leapt to my tongue:

"Hands up!"

The command was obeyed. And I have since thought, paradoxical though it may appear, that violent men, in these matters, are more tractable than men of peace. Assessing human life lightly, they credit the brain behind the gun with compunction no greater than their own.

"By God!" I heard Maddox say — and I hope I shall always find time to take off my hat to a good loser — "I had you wrong all along, Major!"

Brandt looked dangerously ugly for a moment; the long arms tensed, the incomplete teeth showed, and I saw in his little eyes the swift arithmetic of a man weighing the distance to the nearest gun against the steadiness of the two pointed at him. Then the arithmetic came out against him, and the danger went out of him as a tide goes out, leaving only the ugliness behind.

"Line up," said O'Mara sharply. "Jump to it. Fall in on the left of Brandt."

Came inarticulate mutterings, but without other audible protest the group obeyed, forming a line having Brandt at one end and the saturnine butler at the other.

"Now," O'Mara continued, "if any man lowers his hands, I shall not argue with him. Devlin, will you go down to the street door and whistle? Pass behind me. Keep a sharp look-out. I don't know who is in the house."

I obeyed, the sense of unreality prevailing. But I know I shall always remember that row of sullen-faced men with raised hands, who watched as I crossed behind O'Mara — watched me with the patient, calculating hatred of caged animals who have not yet abandoned hope of the keeper making one careless move.

There was no one on the stairs, and no one in the long, glazed passage that led to the street. This gained, I ran the length of it, and throwing open the double doors beheld a seemingly deserted Porchester Terrace.

I whistled shrilly. The result was magical.

Springing from what hiding places I know not, men appeared running from right and left! This was the raid squad from Scotland Yard, and I realised that I was helping to mould history. There is no describing the relief of it; the dark, empty, indifferent street had, between one breath and the next, filled with men who were on my side, and I could have wept, or laughed, or sat down where I stood.

Our taximan, who was waiting on the other side of the street, and who had been peacefully smoking a cigarette, jumped

down from his seat and watched the proceedings with an expression of stupefaction that was comic in its intensity.

Everything was carried out in a most orderly manner. The members of the Group were arrested without unnecessary fuss. The whole thing could not have been staged more efficiently by a film director. A six-seater car appeared from somewhere or another, in which the gang was packed as neatly as tinned sardines.

The police handled the job with such discretion that chance passers-by never dreamed that anything unusual was going forward. They do these raids much better on the screen. There were no shots, no shouting, no leaping from windows; only a number of quiet men persuading a number of sullen men into a motor-car, under lamplight, in a sleeping street, while the great machinery of an ordered society closed without fuss upon those who had set themselves to wreck it.

Maddox was the last to come down from above, his cigar still held firmly between his teeth. He was unperturbed. Deportation was the worst he had to fear, and he knew it quite well. He was smiling slyly.

He paused, looking hard at O'Mara and at myself.

"Listen," he said, "you two boys have doubled on me pretty badly, but I don't bear no malice." His grammar at times revealed the influence of the Cubist school. "Varga is different, and he's still loose. Take my tip and watch out for Varga. If he's seeing red, don't try to pet him. Good night!"

He entered the car, urged by two detectives.

“Good night,” murmured O’Mara thoughtfully, and turned to me.

“You know, Devlin,” he went on, “if that man had had our advantages, he would have made a damned good sportsman.”

There were certain formalities to be attended to, and I suppose it was close upon two o’clock when O’Mara and I found ourselves outside my rooms. I suggested a doch-an’-dorris.

“If I were superstitious,” O’Mara declared, “I should refuse.”

He smiled, glancing up at the tall ladder beneath which we must walk to reach my door.

“Oh!” said I, “they are mending the roof, or something.”

“I suppose we might risk it,” he replied; and we went in.

The incident stuck in my mind, not so much because of any superstitious significance that I attached to it as because of what actually happened later. We had walked under a ladder, the pair of us, laughing, with the worst of the night, as we thought, safely behind us; and that, I have since reflected, is precisely the hour at which the gods are most attentive.

O’Mara dropped on to the settee in my big room and sighed rather wearily as he watched me preparing drinks.

“You know, Devlin,” said he, “I am both glad and sorry that this job is over. I have blundered through by sheer good luck. Without your aid, and the aid of someone else, I should have crashed badly.”

“Perhaps not,” I returned. “If you had not succeeded in one way, you might quite easily have found another.”

"Or I might not," said he. "No. I am a poor policeman, and peacetime soldiering is no sort of game."

"What do you mean, O'Mara?"

"I mean," he replied, holding up to the light a glass that I had handed to him, "that I am infernally restless."

I sighed as loudly as he had done and stooped over the soda syphon. Then:

"Devlin," said O'Mara, "we live in a generation that grows up very early."

"We do," I agreed.

"I should like to talk to you seriously. There are many men I have known longer, but none I could sooner trust. Yet in this matter somehow I don't feel…"

"Yes?" I prompted.

"Well, I don't feel quite at liberty to discuss it with you."

There was a silence that might have been awkward. O'Mara was watching me almost pathetically; and:

"I know what you want to talk about," I said. "Nanette is a witch. But there is only one man in the world for her now. It might be fair, though, to give her a year to think it over."

"You don't doubt *my* attitude in the matter," O'Mara murmured.

"No," I replied, "I know it."

He looked at me fixedly, when:

"Coo-ooh!" I heard.

O’Mara’s expression changed; and, turning, I crossed to an open window, looking down into the street.

Standing just in front of the ladder which disfigured the front of the premises, was Nanette, staring upward. A two-seater with several people in it stood at the kerb.

“Hello, Nanette,” I called.

“Saw your light,” she shouted, “as we were passing. May we come up, or are you going to bed?”

“No,” I replied, and hesitated to tell her what I knew she hoped. “Come right up and bring your friends. I have only just got in.”

“Right-oh!” she cried.

Chapter XXIX — Axel Varga

The party that presently invaded us proved to consist of Nanette and a brunette girl friend whom I had not seen before. They were escorted by a young medical officer recently back from a tour overseas — a very charming type of Scotsman — and Marsden, one of Nanette's Madeira conquests, whom, you may recall, I had met again recently under rather odd circumstances. I thought that this evening was probably his reward for the weary job of scouting that he had performed on that occasion.

He was not a happy man. The fact was beginning to dawn upon him that at the Savoy, the Hippodrome, and wherever else they had gone, he had been wasting his fragrance on the desert air. I pictured him driving to my apartment as one consciously heading for his doom.

The poor fellow was rather pathetically young, and, regarding every acquaintance of Nanette's as a serious rival, he had awakened to the fact that he had three score or so of deadly enemies in London. I was, I am ashamed to say, in no mood to be kind to him; for I had spent my evening in a den of murderers in his lady's service, and he had spent his being jealous of me, and there is no arguing oneself out of so human and so petty an injustice.

Presently:

"Whisky and soda?" said I; "or have you reached the Bass stage?"

“Neither, thanks,” he returned, and glared around my modest bachelor apartment as one who finds himself in the chamber of Bluebeard.

Nanette had sped to O’Mara like an arrow to its target. As I turned aside from the peevish Marsden, “I hadn’t dared to hope I should see you again tonight,” I heard her say, and the whole heart of her was in it, naked and unashamed, for anyone who cared to hear.

The other man and the pretty brunette were jointly occupying my most comfortable armchair, therefore, conquering a perfectly stupid pique which Marsden had inspired:

“Well,” said I, holding out my cigarette case, “we seem to have no alternative but to — look on, Marsden.”

He rejected the olive-branch, and, rudely ignoring my proffered case, crossed to the settee where Nanette and O’Mara sat side by side.

“I say, Nanette,” he exclaimed, “what about going on to Chelsea?”

Nanette barely glanced up as she replied:

“No, I don’t want to dance any more tonight, Jim.”

“Why not dance here?” cried her friend, pointing in the direction of the piano. “Do you play, Mr. Devlin?”

“Not dance music,” I confessed gladly.

“But Jim does,” she went on. “Go on, Jim! Just one.”

“Jim” crossed to the piano, offering an excellent imitation of an ox approaching the abattoir. He crashed into a piece of syncopation that put years on the instrument. I had never heard

the item before and trust that I shall never hear it again. I saw O'Mara smilingly shake his head; then Nanette ran across to me, and off we went around the furniture, I wondering which would burst first, a wire in my reeling piano or a blood-vessel in the empurpled skull of the player.

Nanette danced because she was too happy to keep still, even with O'Mara beside her. I danced because I had no choice in the matter. It was an odd business, pointedly illustrating the part that Terpsichore plays in this modern civilisation of ours.

Nanette was dancing with me, but she wanted to dance with O'Mara. The other pair didn't want to dance at all. They just wanted to be alone together. And Marsden didn't want to be the band. In fact, the whole thing was a sort of neutral territory, or sanctuary, in which the various protagonists found temporary refuge.

I don't know what momentous decision Nanette's girl friend was shirking, but when Marsden threatened to weaken:

"Go on, Jim! Please go on!" she cried, avoiding the ardent gaze of her partner.

Marsden, the most ferociously reluctant musician I have ever seen at work, made a renewed assault upon the keyboard. He was watching Nanette, who rarely took her eyes off O'Mara; and a vein rose unpleasantly upon his forehead. He perpetrated some discords that set my teeth on edge.

How long this might have continued I hesitate to guess. Marsden's gorge was rising tropically. I doubt that his

destruction of my piano would have ceased while life remained in the instrument, but an interruption came.

Nanette and I had navigated an awkward channel behind the armchair and were beating up toward the settee and O'Mara. The young doctor had ingeniously steered his partner into a little book-lined recess at the farther end of the room. I had my back to the open window and Nanette was facing it. Suddenly she grew rigid.

Her face became transfigured with an expression of horror that I can never forget. She pulled up dead — staring, staring past me, into the darkness of the street beyond. For the tenth part of a second I saw, in her widened eyes, the reflection of something coming, and my body knew it before my mind did, and would not turn.

"What is it, Nanette?" I began, when the music ceased with a crash and I saw Marsden bound to his feet.

Unconsciously, I had gripped Nanette hard. But, in the next instant, she wrenched herself free from my grasp, turned, and with a queer sort of smothered cry threw herself upon O'Mara!

I twisted about.

Not two feet behind me an arm protruded into the room! The hand grasped a strange-looking pistol fitted with a suppressor. I heard a muffled thud. Something came whizzing through the air in my direction. (I learned later, when clarity came, that it was a valuable Ming vase that had stood upon the piano.)

"Hold him, Devlin!" yelled Marsden.

It was Marsden who had hurled this costly projectile at the dimly seen arm in the window. The vase went crashing out into the street. I heard a second thud. Marsden fell forward across the instrument — and then slid down on to the carpet. The hand clutching the pistol had vanished.

It had all happened in less time than it takes to read of it; and that, I think, is the cruelty of such moments — that a thing one will carry to one's grave is over before the mind has consented to believe it has begun.

A sort of vague red mist was dancing before my eyes. Came a rush of footsteps. Nanette was slipping from O'Mara's arms. His face as he looked down into hers was a mask of tragedy. I heard her utter a little moan and I saw a streak of blood upon one white shoulder.

Then followed chaos.

A very weak voice, which vaguely I recognised as that of Marsden, said:

"Don't worry about me, Doc. Look after Nanette."

And I, who had grudged the poor boy a cigarette half an hour before, learned in those few words how badly I had misjudged him; for there is a test that strips every man to what he truly is, and young Marsden had passed it while better-mannered men, myself among them, merely stood and stared.

I saw O'Mara stoop and lift Nanette. I saw her pale face. When, cutting through the tumult like a ray from a beacon:

"The window, Devlin! Watch which way he goes!"

Automatically, I obeyed O'Mara. I strained out, looking to right and to left of the ladder. It was boarded over, but I realised that a desperate man, given sufficient agility, could have climbed the rungs from underneath, as evidently the assassin had done. The superstition we had laughed at on the doorstep had paid itself, with interest, within the hour.

At first, the street seemed to be empty from end to end; then I saw the figure of a man emerge from shadow into a patch of light cast by a street lamp — one who walked swiftly in the direction of Berkeley Square. I withdrew my head and stared, only half believing, about the room.

Marsden, looking deathly, lay propped up against the piano. He met my glance, and:

"Seen him?" he demanded.

I turned, as the doctor who had been bending over Nanette looked up at her friend, who stood beside him.

"Know anything about nursing?" he jerked.

The girl was very pale, but:

"Yes," she answered bravely, meeting his eyes, "a little. Tell me what to do, and I will do it."

He nodded, smiling, whereat I was reassured, and then:

"Is the building manager about, Mr. Devlin?" he asked.

"I'll find him."

"Good. You fellows are in the way now. Get after the swine who did this."

But O'Mara had already started for the door. His expression was one I had rather not have seen. The aloof and courtly manner,

the gentleness he kept for women and for beaten men, were gone from him as if they had never been; there is a savage hidden in every Celt, if one digs deep enough through, and tonight Axel Varga had dug too deep.

The other members of the group by this time were safely housed in cells. I thought that if we were destined to overtake Axel Varga, he was likely to enjoy the distinction of spending the night in a morgue.

Chapter XXX — Memories Can Save

As Marsden's car, driven by O'Mara, raced around the corner into the square, all question of the fugitive's identity was settled.

Just vaulting into a two-seater that had been parked over by the railings was the man whose retreating figure I had seen as I leaned from the window! I prayed that he might be unable to start. But my prayer was not answered. Off he went, heading for Piccadilly.

One swift glance back he gave over his shoulder. And in the light of the street lamp by which the car had stood, I saw the face of Varga!

I glanced at O'Mara beside me. His pale features were set like a mask. I had seen that face under the soft lamps of Porchester Terrace, courteous and watchful; I had seen it gentle, bent over Nanette; but I had not seen it so, and I was glad I sat beside the man and not before him.

I looked to right and to left; but not a soul was in sight. Berkeley Square was apparently deserted. Often enough I had

wondered how certain notorious burglaries had been accomplished with all the resources of civilisation at beck and call of justice. This was the answer. A great city asleep is the loneliest place on earth, and a man may do murder in its empty squares with more privacy than in a desert.

We had no means of arranging for Varga's interception — although a constable was on duty at the corner of Bruton Street! We could only hope to keep him in sight or else overtake him. The merest hitch, or slightest traffic delay, would deliver him into our hands. But the betting was equal. Such an accident might as well befall us as him; and, the quarry once out of sight, our chances fell below zero.

O'Mara spoke never a word. His mind held but one single purpose. That purpose, I firmly believe, was to wreak justice upon Varga with his own hands. I have known calm men, and I have known angry men; but I had never until that night sat beside a man whose anger had passed altogether out of heat into a cold, exact, and terrible attention, in which there seemed no longer to be any room for himself at all.

Momentarily, I wondered about Marsden. Of Nanette I dared not think. But a cold fury was growing within me, and I fingered the pistol that had been in my pocket since the raid upon the house in Porchester Terrace.

Varga whirled round into St. James's Street. The traffic in Piccadilly was not great but there were a number of pedestrians about. I even saw policemen in the distance. It all seemed utterly grotesque — that we should be hunting a murderer down the

most respectable streets in the world, past the lighted windows of clubs where elderly gentlemen dozed over their last brandy, and that not one of those quiet citizens should ever know. Then, hot upon the fugitive, we, too, were dropping down the slope. Far ahead I could see the clock above St. James's Palace. The hour was a quarter past two.

Our speed was outrageous. We crossed Pall Mall at about thirty-five, and came out into the Mall, heading for Buckingham Palace at something approaching racing pace. We were gaining slightly. We crept from forty-five to fifty. Broad thoroughfares, brightly lighted, offered no obstruction; and we flew around the sharp bend by the Victoria Memorial and headed east. The wind of our going sang in my ears, and the great pale front of the Palace swept by us, shuttered and serene, with its sentries and its flagstaff, indifferent as the moon to the two cars tearing past below.

"Westminster Bridge!" I muttered.

O'Mara did not speak. Past the barracks we sped, and, undeterred by a certain amount of traffic in Parliament Square, shot on to the approach to the Bridge. We were now three lengths behind Varga, and on the gradient began to improve upon it. Varga drove on the inside lane, hugging the pavement. And at about the centre of the Bridge we passed outside him. I heard someone shouting.

"Cover him, Devlin!" said O'Mara grimly. "Shoot if he doesn't pull up!"

I turned and gave a loud cry. Varga had slowed down and was already twenty yards behind us!

"Stop, O'Mara!" I cried — "stop!"

He obeyed so suddenly that I nearly dived through the windscreen. Then we jumped, one on either side, and started to run back.

Varga had already dismounted, and I saw him peeling his coat. A picture arose out of the recent past: a foggy night off Ushant, and I seemed to hear again that eerie cry, "Man overboard!"

So it was that Varga had eluded us once before. Undoubtedly he was going to do so again; and for all the cold hatred in my heart, I could not entirely withhold admiration as I saw him bound upon the parapet, raise his arms, and take that appalling dive into the Thames far below. There is a courage that serves good ends and a courage that serves vile ones, and they look, in the doing, exactly alike; and that, perhaps, is the most disturbing thing a man learns in this kind of work.

I knew now, however, what I had not known formerly: that Axel Varga's courage was the courage of madness. His was that disease of fanaticism which, when it does not create a demagogue, floods the criminal lunatic asylums.

As we both craned over the parapet, peering down at the uneasy water, I heard the sound of a runner and then the flat note of a police whistle.

"There he is!" said O'Mara.

I stared but could see nothing, when:

“Hello, there! What’s the game! Who was it that went over?” cried a loud voice.

We turned, as a breathless constable came doubling up.

“A very dangerous criminal,” O’Mara replied, “and we were chasing him. Quick, officer! On which side of the Bridge shall we find a boat?”

The manner of one accustomed to give orders is unmistakable, and:

“West, sir,” the constable answered promptly. “There’s a boat at the pier.”

“Good,” said O’Mara, and started to run to the car. I followed.

As we jumped in, turned, and headed back to where Big Ben recorded the fact that only seven minutes had elapsed since we had passed St. James’s Palace, I saw the constable coming after us. But, leaving the car by the foot of the clock tower, O’Mara raced across to the gate at the head of those steps that lead down to the pier. It was locked; and here I thought that the chase ended. But I had counted without O’Mara.

London, unlike New York, normally is a very empty city at two o’clock in the morning; but now, as if conjured up by a magic talisman, a group began to assemble. There is no accounting for it. A man may walk those streets at that hour and meet no living soul; let something happen, and from doorways and side-turnings and the very paving-stones, it seems, the watchers of the small hours materialise to see how it will end.

I looked to my right — from which the constable was bearing down upon us. Even as he ran, his bearing was ominous. It occurred to me that he regarded O'Mara and myself with justifiable suspicion, and I foresaw complications.

It was odd, I reflected, that we stood almost in the shadow of Scotland Yard — representing the forces of order, civil society against those of disruption — but that the very powers that should have backed us were likely now to aid and abet a dangerous conspirator and assassin in escaping the meshes of justice. There is a kind of irony of which Fate is particularly fond, and this was a finished specimen of it.

The constable rather windily began to blow his whistle again.

A resolute-looking man, clean-shaven, and of a very hard-bitten countenance, suddenly appeared at my elbow.

"What's the trouble?" he inquired — and challenged me with keen eyes.

An official note in his voice was recognizable. O'Mara turned quickly. The ever-increasing group drew more closely around us. A second constable was making his way across from Parliament Square.

"The trouble is," said O'Mara, "that this gate is locked, and I want to get on to the pier."

The man, whose face seemed to have been chiselled out of seasoned teak, stared in a curious way. Then the breathless constable burst upon us.

“Just a minute!” he began. “I want to know some more about this business!”

He became uneasily aware of the presence of our weatherbeaten acquaintance. He stopped in the act of laying his hand upon O’Mara’s arm. O’Mara, watching the man who had accosted us, spoke, and:

“Sergeant Cassidy!” he said.

The expression on the grim face changed. The man so addressed drew himself smartly to attention. It was automatic — second nature; but his smile was good to see. I have noticed that the men who served under O’Mara never seemed quite to leave his command, however many years and miles came between; and here, on a London bridge at half-past two in the morning, was the proof of it.

“Thank you, sir,” said he, “for remembering me.”

O’Mara held out his hand.

“Stand easy, Sergeant,” he replied. “I gather that you have left the Army and rejoined the Police.”

Cassidy’s eyes were glistening as he grasped the proffered hand.

“I have that, sir,” he said, “and without loss of rank. I am a detective-sergeant now.”

He glanced at the two constables — for the Parliament Square reinforcement had come up.

“Carry on,” he directed, “there’s a man drowning. Leave this to me.”

“Cassidy,” said O’Mara, “are you with us on this — against the kind of men we’ve been hunting tonight?”

“I am, sir!”

“Well, one of them has just jumped off the Bridge. He is a powerful swimmer. I want to get on to the pier and into a boat.”

“You are in luck, sir,” Cassidy returned enthusiastically, “for tonight I happen to have the key.”

When, a minute later, we pushed out into the stream, watched by an ever-increasing group of idlers, I thought how proud a man must feel to see a light like that which had crossed Cassidy’s face as he had recognised the officer he had served under. One such silent tribute is worth more than a thousand cheers; and it came to me, as I bent to an oar, that this was the true secret of O’Mara — not his cleverness, which was great, nor his courage, which was greater, but the thing he left behind him in the men he had led, so that years afterward and a world away a key turned in a lock for him that would have turned for no one else.

“Do you remember the night in the valley, sir?” Cassidy asked.

And O’Mara in reply merely laid his hand upon his shoulder and gripped hard for a moment. But this apparently simple question had a far-reaching result, as I was presently to learn.

A fairly strong current was running, which, together with O’Mara’s recollection of the swimmer’s position as seen from the Bridge, sufficiently indicated where we should lay our course.

Certain official steps had automatically been taken, and we were not alone in our quest. Apparently, even at two o’clock in

the morning, it is contrary to regulations for anyone to bathe from Westminster Bridge.

Looking up from that unfamiliar viewpoint at certain London landmarks outlined against the clear sky, I wondered why Fate always seems to put a brake upon our joy-rides. The Houses of Parliament hung above us, golden and floodlit and unreal, like a painted backcloth let down behind a stage; and the black water slid by under our keel carrying God knew what toward the sea.

Untrammelled by an intense anxiety on account of Nanette that obsessed me tonight, this queer adventure must have been definitely enjoyable. But, like so many human experiences, it was less exciting in the doing than it is in the telling. For exploration of unfamiliar by-paths, as I have already mentioned, there is no vehicle like a cosy armchair.

That Varga would head for the nearest landing place, it was fairly reasonable to suppose. Therefore we pulled hard across in the direction of the County Hall, eagerly watching the surface of the water. Suddenly:

"There he goes!" cried Cassidy.

But, even as he spoke, I had seen the swimmer — close in, under the right bank, heading powerfully for the stairs. We raced for him and made land almost simultaneously.

In the act of landing Varga stumbled and slipped back into the river. He came up by the stern of the boat. O'Mara's hand shot out, grasped him by a sodden collar-band, and hauled him in against the side.

Dimly, I could see O'Mara's face as he looked down at the upcast eyes of Varga. I think I knew what was in his mind, and in those upturned eyes was recognition of it — and acceptance. Two strong hands, a yard of black water, and a man who had earned death a dozen times over and would expect no mercy: it would have been the work of a moment, and no court on earth could have proved it murder. The river ran on. Nobody spoke. I did not move, for it was not my hand on the collar-band, and it was not my night in the valley to remember.

Still grasping the helpless man, O'Mara glanced quickly at Cassidy.

"Yes, Cassidy," he said coldly, "I remember the night in the valley. You have reminded me that I once had decent instincts. Sergeant, here's your prisoner."

Chapter XXXI — Hiatus

I find that my memory holds no proper record of the hour that elapsed between this time and our return to Nanette. There were certain unavoidable formalities to be gone through; but within ten minutes of the arrest of Varga, I was on the telephone to my rooms. My man answered; and his replies, whilst reticent, were reassuring — reticent in the particular way of a good servant who has been told more than he means to repeat, and reassuring chiefly because he had elected to be reassuring, which is not always the same thing as good news.

"Mr. Marsden has been removed to hospital, sir. A very narrow escape, I understand. It will be a long job, but he is in no danger. Yes, sir, the lady is" — pause — "still here."

"Why?" I asked uneasily, and glanced at O'Mara, who was standing at my elbow throughout this conversation.

"They — didn't like to move her, sir. I called Sir Frank Lyle, in Harley Street, sir, by request. He is here."

"But where is — the lady?"

"Sorry, sir, but she is — in your room. Her mother is with her, sir."

"Is she dangerously ill?"

"I don't really know, sir. Both the medical men are with her now."

As I replaced the receiver, I stared at O'Mara. He had moved away from me and was pacing restlessly up and down the bleakly furnished room in New Scotland Yard from which we had been

speaking. There is no place on earth quite so comfortless as an official waiting-room in the small hours, with its hard chairs and its dead grate and its single hard light; and a man waiting in it upon news of life or death seems to take its bleakness into himself.

"You understand?" I said. "She is — rather badly hurt."

"I understand." He nodded grimly. "She saved my life, Devlin, perhaps at the price of her own. I can't bear to think of it."

He turned abruptly and stared out of the window at a vista of empty Embankment below, lighted by many twinkling lamps.

"I have been a self-reliant man all my life, Devlin; it may be aggressively so. Perhaps this is poetic justice. Since the moment that I set foot in Madeira, up to this very hour, she has done my work for me, step by step. You admit it, Devlin? You admit it?"

"I do," said I. "It's true, but no discredit to you."

He shook his head and resumed the restless pacing. I saw him reach instinctively for a habit long associated with moments of strain, and saw him snap his fingers when he realised that he had broken himself of it. Some things, it seemed, were not so easily left behind; and I understood, watching him, that the iron self-command which had carried him through the den at Porchester Terrace and the cold madness on the Bridge was nearer to breaking now, in this empty room, over the fate of one girl, than it had been all night in the face of his enemies.

"I have placed independence above every other virtue in man," he went on. "I have fought for it and suffered for it. I suppose she has been sent to teach me that independence and loneliness are inseparable. Do you know," he turned and looked fully into my eyes, with an expression almost of humility, "I don't think I could bear that lonely path any longer, Devlin. And if —" he paused and squared his jaw for a moment — "and if I have to follow it, there won't be very much left."

"Shut up!" I said. "You are talking nonsense. If you elect to be lonely in future, the choice is yours."

"Unless…" he smiled wryly.

"Don't think of that!" I replied. "She is young and full of stamina. Besides, she wants to live."

"And I want her to live," he added softly. "Yet, even now, I can't believe it — and I can't quite condone it."

"Condone what?" I demanded.

"The acceptance, by a man of my age, world-worn, a little disappointed, more than a little cynical, of such a sacrifice, from a girl with all the world to choose from. I can find no justification."

"I see," I murmured. "And can you find any for leaving her, now that you know? Because you can't shut your eyes to the fact that this is not a schoolgirl's infatuation, but the real thing. Can you condone that?"

My voice was not quite steady; for I was pleading, I knew, against my own poor unspoken hopes, and there is a particular

loneliness in doing a thing well for a friend that costs one something to do at all.

"She was ready to die for you, O'Mara," I said. "It would break her heart to lose you. Damn it!" I pulled out my cigarette case, "I am talking like your sentimental aunt."

O'Mara smiled, this time more happily, and grasped my shoulder in characteristic fashion.

"I believe we are both behaving rather idiotically," he admitted. "Let's hope for the best."

"I don't believe you would recognise it if it came to you," I returned.

He shrugged his shoulders and we went up to a room on the floor above, where some sort of superior official was waiting. Throughout the interview that followed O'Mara became again the steely-eyed, square-jawed soldier whom I knew so well; the traditional O'Mara, whose name had been a tonic to many a man during those dark days when it had mattered most. Only I, who had heard him a quarter of an hour before, knew what the composure cost, and how thin a wall now stood between the soldier and the man.

Chapter XXXII — The Heart of Nanette

I seemed to detect an ominous air of hush as I opened the door for O'Mara and myself to go up to my apartments. Nanette's mother met us. I could scarcely bear to look at her. Almost immediately, she fixed her eyes upon O'Mara.

"Major O'Mara," she began bravely, "I have known for a long time how Nanette felt about you…"

"And I suppose you have reproached me," said he.

"I have not," she returned. "I have had many opportunities of watching, and I know that your behaviour has been admirable, if…" she hesitated.

"Yes?" O'Mara urged gently.

"If she has really meant anything to you. Be frank with me, Major O'Mara. Has she?"

There was the whole anxiety of motherhood in the question — the willingness to forgive everything except the one thing a mother cannot forgive, which is that her child should have given her heart for nothing.

"She has," he replied gravely. "I didn't know, but I know now."

"It is frightfully hard to say," she went on, "but…" she turned to me impulsively. "Can you help me, Mr. Devlin?"

"I think I can," said I. "There is no reason why my friend, Major O'Mara, should not marry Nanette, unless there is any on your side. Personally, he thinks he is too old for her!" This last remark I added in what was meant to be a facetious manner,

for the situation was difficult to cope with, and a man will reach for a feeble joke as he will reach for a handrail. “But please tell us — how is she?”

“She will recover,” was the reply, “thanks to the speedy attention that she received. Failing this, it might have been — otherwise. I am afraid she cannot be moved for some time, Mr. Devlin. It will be a dreadful inconvenience for you…”

“And a great honour,” I added. “Is it possible to see her?”

“I don’t know if it is advisable. But she is asking to see” — glancing at O’Mara — “someone.”

O’Mara bit his lip — the nearest approach to a display of emotion that I had ever observed in him — and turned quickly aside.

Then followed a period of waiting. Nanette’s girl friend came down, having been relieved by a professional nurse. She smiled at O’Mara, and blushed furiously; an unusual accomplishment in a girl of her type and age. But the smile and the blush told me more of the state of Nanette’s heart than a long dissertation could have revealed; for the young keep no secrets from one another, and what Nanette had whispered upstairs to her friend was written now, plainly, in her friend’s confusion.

The young medical officer appeared at last, and his expression was reassuring.

“Can we go up?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied; “I have Sir Frank’s permission to admit you for three minutes, but no more than three minutes.”

He stared significantly at O'Mara.

In a queerly furtive fashion I began to mount the stairs of my own house, treading softly as upon holy ground and going with bated breath. O'Mara moved equally silently. I cannot say what his feelings were at this moment, for I did not even look at him. But when we came to the door of the sick room that had been my bedroom, it was opened by a white-capped nurse, and we entered, catlike as burglars.

Nanette lay propped up in my bed, with closed eyes. She was pale, but, in that hour, more adorable than ever. Her mother sat over by an open window, watching, and Sir Frank Lyle stood beside the bed. We crept forward, abashed as detected criminals. But Nanette did not stir, until:

"Someone has come to say good night to you, dear," said her mother.

Then the drooping lids quivered, and she raised her blue eyes. I cannot say if she saw O'Mara, or merely pretended that she did not see him; but admittedly he was standing behind me. She laid her hand in mine, and:

"Thank you, Mr. Devlin," she murmured, in a pathetically weak voice. "I am going to be a frightful nuisance to you. In future, I shall try to arrange to be shot in my own bedroom."

Even then, with her shoulder bound and her life but newly out of danger, she must have her joke; and I understood, hearing it, that whatever else the bullet had taken from her it had not touched the gallant, absurd, indestructible spirit that I had first seen flash out over a hotel rail in Madeira.

She closed her eyes again, wearily, and dropped her hand upon the coverlet. Sir Frank beckoned to me to step aside. I did so.

O'Mara drew nearer.

"I have come to thank you, Nanette," he said.

He sat on the chair beside her, bending forward. Slowly, she turned her head, raised weary lids again, and looked at him. She stayed so for what seemed a long time; just looking — looking — and questioning. And he, who had crossed an ocean to keep himself from her, who had written the cruel letter and climbed the goat-track and filed the ward of the key and done a hundred careful, lonely, honourable things to set her free of him, gave it all up at last in the only way a brave man ever surrenders, which is wholly and without conditions. He stooped nearer and nearer, until suddenly, but weakly, a white arm crept around his neck and trembling fingers were plunged into his hair.

Nanette drew his head down upon the pillow beside her, sighed, and closed her eyes again happily.

I turned away, staring at her mother. Then I caught Sir Frank's glance. He began to tiptoe toward the door, nodded significantly to the nurse — and shepherded us out of the sick room!

The last to leave, I looked back, guiltily, for one moment. Nanette was fast asleep, for they had given her an opiate. And she lay with her head nestling upon O'Mara's shoulder.

I shall always remember her smile.