

## CHAPTER XVII

## THE BOAT

HERDJIMAN went to a cupboard and produced a loaf of rye bread, he stood for a moment with it in his hand and then going from the room came back with a mat basket. He stowed the bread in this and a sausage which he had brought back evidently from some larder outside, also a knife which he took from a drawer in the parlour table.

He went out, and Jean standing and looking at the basket could hear a gurgling noise and Herdjiman talking to something or some one. He was, in fact, talking to the little water-breaker that he was filling from the great stone cooling jar. The breaker had a rope sling, and he came in carrying it with one hand and holding a tin cup in the other.

"Here's your water," said Herdjiman, "and you pour it out, so." He showed how to empty the breaker so that none might be spilled in filling the cup, and Jean watched this nightmare operation, one of the things he would have to do in this ghostly world into which he was departing.

"The wind's from Trieste," said Herdjiman, as he put the bung back in the breaker, "and it will blow like that for days; you have only to go full before it. Bread, water, there is nothing else. Come, take the basket."

He carried the breaker, and going first led the way to the front door.

The wind was blowing down the narrow, moonlit street. Herdjiman shut the door behind them and

turned to the right where a glint of the harbour showed. There was not a soul in the street nor on the mole, nor a sound under the silent moon but the smacking of the water against the steps and the moored boats, the straining of a rope, the creak of a mast.

The *Karan* was tied up by the steps with another boat, cork fenders protected them from chafing one another or being chafed by the steps. Herdjiman, pulling on the mooring rope, brought her up close to the steps, and Jean got in. She rocked under him as he steadied himself and placed the basket on the bottom boards then he took the breaker of water and the tin cup from the other, and stowed them aft.

Herdjiman, bending down, began to unloose the painter, the last tie between Jean and the world he knew.

It came to him now that in a moment all would be over, it was just as though the boatman were raising a knife to kill him, and doing so without compunction or remorse.

And now in that supreme moment the world he was being cut adrift from crystallised into the figure of a girl standing by Herdjiman—Karan.

Karan in this world of the utterly impossible that had suddenly surrounded him had been like a figure obscured by rolling mists, now glimpsed, now gone. At this moment the mists definitely parted to show her clear.

He could think clearly at last.

If he chose he could, after putting out from the harbour, make under the moonlight for Beljazi, see her and touch her again—and, as Herdjiman had said, "Mix her up in this business," bring on her who knows what and for nothing. He could not take her with him, could not remain with her. In this

last moment the consuming dread for himself vanished, he was thinking only of Karan.

"The girl!" he said as Herdjiman stood up, the loosed rope in his hand. "Beljazi—you will go to her?"

"I'll see to her," said the man with the rope. "If you make out, write. Dirk Herdjiman will find me, I'm the only one here."

The rope fell in the boat.

Jean pushed away with one of the oars, and the *Karan* drifted out a bit. Herdjiman raised his hand.

Rowing now, Jean could see Herdjiman's figure against the walls of the fortification, and now the great mass of Ragusa lay across the moonlit water, and Herdjiman was gone.

There was nothing to show little Beljazi out there four miles away beyond the sparkle, nor the islands to the north. The world under the mystery of night had resolved itself into its major elements—the mountains, the fortified city with the yellow point that marked the light on the mole, and the sea.

Jean set the sail and it took the wind, blowing from the islands. As he took the tiller, keeping the boat before the wind, it was as if Fate had touched his mind just as night had touched the world, blotting out everything but the mountains across which there was no escape; the fortified city where he could not hide, the sea that might yet lead him to escape and some sort of freedom.