

CHAPTER XVIII

NIGHT ON THE ADRIATIC

DID he think of Karan ? Yes, but she had withdrawn and become for the moment only part of the world, from which he was escaping or trying to escape, like the yellow point of light that marked the harbour to which he might not return.

At the moment of departure she had appeared before him as the crystallisation of everything he was condemned to leave. But now, out here, away and adrift, with no one to depend on but himself in this monstrous effort to escape, this preposterous adventure into the absolutely unknown, she was not with him.

The thought of her could bring no comfort, at best it was eased by Herdjiman's promise to see to her, and the thought of her could bring no self-reproach, and his love for her though deep-seated in his heart was like a jewel sunk in turbid water. Why, even his love for himself, where was it in this act of escape that was first cousin to suicide and in which he was sacrificing everything to escape, not death, but the ignominy of a felon's death ?

He was absolutely alone to deal in this matter with his own hands without help from man or, as far as he could see, from God.

Stein, guessing his ready reaction to environment, had never dreamed of such an environment as this, nor had he ever dreamed of such an environment as that created by himself a few hours ago in the studio,

with such disastrous results to himself as well as to Jean.

Alone, now, surrounded with negation and no hint of guidance, the mind of Jean shrank, became dead to all that would have normally affected it, yet at the same time expanded and became alive as the mind of a hunted animal expands, and becomes alive to the exigencies dominating its flight.

Herdjiman had said, "Keep down the Adriatic, try and pick up a ship, pretend you have been blown off shore."

As they had been coming down the mole he had said: "Get as far as you can."

Sailing directions easy to remember and easy to carry out with this wind.

He was crossing the little bay just south of Ragusa, and he could see the light on the point of land just ahead.

He altered the course more to seaward.

He was adding to Herdjiman's hasty instructions, thinking things out, saying to himself, "Yes, I must keep down the Adriatic, but I have no compass and my only direction will be the land, I must keep the land in sight but at the greatest distance possible when daylight comes; till then I must keep fairly close lest I should lose touch of it altogether.

The land past Point Patkio indents slightly at Grudo and then runs fairly stright to the Gulf of Cattaro, it is thirty miles or so from Ragusa to the entrance of the Gulf.

It was along this coast he was making, keeping too close for safety had the *Karan* been a larger boat, but she was little draught and the reef off Grudo did not harm her, nor the shoals south-west of the reef. He had in his pocket the small folding map which he had carried all the way from Serajevo, it

included the Adriatic coast and the Adriatic itself down to the heel of Italy and Corfu. It was just a chance that he had it in his pocket owing to the fact that the portrait being finished, he had projected a trip to the upper islands for a few days, leaving Karan and the old man at Beljazi. He had wished to consult Herdjiman, and had put the map in his pocket for reference.

He took it out now.

Even by the light of the moon he could see the line indicating the coast and the great recession of the line below Point Platamone, but the light was not strong enough to read names, so he put the map by in his pocket and kept his mind to the steering.

Now, away to starboard, a light showed golden, and near it a point of green; it was a mail boat making up to Trieste far off, yet still sending the thud of her propellers across the night. To port, a light showed far off, evasive, now there, now gone. It was one of the sea lights of the Dalmatian coast and when he picked it up it began talking to him and winking at him.

The revolving light is more than a mechanism of lamps and lenses, it is a person, a companion that talks and tells things. It may only say "Ushant—Ushant" or "Grisnez Cape—Grisnez Cape"—it has a voice. And you can embroider a lot on the one word "Ushant" or "Finisterre."

The light to port, though speaking in an unknown tongue, could make itself understood. "I am a sea light," it said. "Can't tell you my name and it doesn't matter, but I know you—come from Ragusa. I know!"

The light winked as well as spoke.

The whole coast dim in the distance and stretching north and south of the light seemed alive and

watching, anxious to reach out to him, yet restrained like a wild animal behind bars.

The light began to sink more astern. He had to turn his head now to receive its messages and its winks, and now, far ahead in the extreme distance as though the coast away there had awakened at his coming, saying, "Ah, there he is!" Another light showed, this time steadfast.

No! This was not a coast light, but the light of some vessel inshore of him. His eyes had been watching the coast, but now he saw nothing but this gleam increasing in brightness as it drew closer. It was a small steamer belonging to one of the coast lines and making, possibly, for Spalato or Fiume. Now he could see the hull and the white canvas of the bridge, and now, as she drew level, the red port light staring at him full. She was quarter of a mile or so away and she showed no sign of having sighted him, just stared at him with that red eye which faded out as she passed, the thud of her engines now coming to him on the wind.

Then came the heave of sea she had made in her passage.