"And now, sir," said Nigel, as we rose up, "please go to your cell. We can find our way out alone."

"So be it," he replied. "May Almighty God have you two in His keeping! And ask Him in your prayers that I may be guided aright in the difficult times that stand before." Rather shyly he put out his hand, and Nigel grasped it. Then, with an abrupt motion, the Pater turned about, his sandals clacked softly on the flags of the nave, and the gloom of the sanctuary swallowed up the gaunt and lonely figure.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE BAFFLING OF THE BEAST

It was getting on for half-past nine when at length we stole forth from the chapel. The solemn hush of dusk rested over the monastery garden. The bats were twinkling to and fro, and in front of the little burial-ground the cypresses with their looped-up branches stood out like the furled umbrellas of some Eastern pageant against the greenly glowing sky. To any one who had observed the two hooded figures flit noiselessly along the twilit path to that inconspicuous door in the garden wall, we must have seemed like the wraiths of departed friars escaped from the tomb.

In the forest it was already quite dark, but we could distinguish the path opposite the gate snaking its way whitely under the trees. Nigel was moody and absorbed. I could see that something had upset him, although I found myself at a loss to fathom the cause of his depression. The news we had read in the paper surely proved that the copy of our precious report had reached London: whatever happened to us now, Nigel had, at any rate, fulfilled his mission, and I should have looked to find him exulting in our success.
I made no attempt to break in upon his thoughts, but
trudged after him in silence along the narrow path. The
evening was close, and for greater ease, as my heavy serge
cloak was oppressively heavy, I threw it back, letting it
dangle from my shoulders. All was profoundly still in
the woods about us, but the distant throbbing of a car,
which reached our ears from time to time, announced
the proximity of a road, probably the road on the other
side of the monastery of which Pater Vedastus had
spoken.

We had not been walking long when Nigel slackened
his pace to wait for me. As I came up I saw that beyond
him the path went dipping down between high banks to a
deep cutting. Here the trees were sparser, and when at
the bottom Nigel stopped again I perceived in the grey
half-light a forest track, running left and right, with
patches of brown water in its ruts wanly reflecting the
evening sky.

"This is where we cross the road," said Nigel in a
low voice. "Don't linger, in case there's any one about.
Dart straight over and up the path on the other side. I'll
lead the way...."

He paused an instant to peer out from behind the pro-
tecting bank, then sprang out. Two bounds saw him
across. I followed: and forthwith sank up to my ankles in
slime. At the same instant I heard the stutter of a motor-
engine, and a car hove in sight round a curve in the road
not fifty yards away.

Frantically, I dragged my feet clear of the clinging
mud, and with the next step was bogged again. My cloak
fell off, and though I snatched it up and flung it about me
at once, it was too late: I had been seen. There was
a loud hail from the car, the scream of brakes, and then
a burst of vivid flame as a pistol clanged through the
cutting. I heard the bullet whistle past my head and spit
viciously into the bank. Darting forward, Nigel grabbed my hand and hauled me, by sheer muscular force, on to the road’s firm centre.

In a second we were across and between the steep banks of the path on the other side. As we went I had a glimpse of the car, all blazing lamps and gleaming bonnet, in the act of stopping, and Clubfoot, erect in the tonneau, brandishing a pistol and shouting orders. While the car was yet under way two men in plain clothes tumbled out and started after us. As we reached the path, the pistol roared again.

We had, perhaps, thirty yards advantage of our pursuers. The path mounted sheerly up, but we were at the top before we heard them panting behind us. Now we were in the dark woods again. Immediately, Nigel quitted the path and struck a course parallel with it among the trees. An excited voice yelled: “This way, Herr Doktor, this way!” to which, in accents hoarse with rage, came back the answer: “Don’t wait for me, zum Teufel, go on, go on!”

Their voices faded into the distance as we raced madly through the forest. “It’s... more than... two kilomètres!” I gasped out, as we blundered noisily along in the blackness, knowing that I, at least, could not sustain that crazy pace. But Nigel never slackened speed. With my heart pounding, with an agonising pain in my side, with the perspiration rolling down my face, I struggled forward in his wake.

It was not until a dense belt of undergrowth, with brambles shoulder-high, stretched an impenetrable barrier before us that my companion halted. With a gesture he motioned me down. Crouching behind a bush, we lay, looking towards a faint lightening in the surrounding obscurity which, not more than fifty paces away, marked the trace of the path we had left. Very soon we heard the
rustling of feet, and two dim figures went by at a shamb-ling run.

Nigel raised a warning finger at me, and for perhaps two minutes we waited in absolute silence. Then his voice, softer than a sigh, breathed in my ear: "We've just one ghost of a chance. If these are Clubfoot's men from Berlin, they won't know the forest. We're going to gamble on their missing that left-hand fork which leads to van Rossum's farm. Ready?" He helped me to my feet, and at a stealthy jog-trot we regained the path.

Spent as I was with fatigue and lack of food, that brief breathing spell did little to rest my weary limbs. I was past speech, past hope, past sensibility almost, and Nigel with his arm linked in mine was literally supporting me, when at length, as we burst out upon a small clearing, the smooth face of some oak palings loomed up. They met in a V, and on either side of them the path branched.

There was no sign of the pursuit, and the gentle tremor of the slim and silvery birches within the copse was the only sound as we took the left-hand fork. Both of us, I think, realised that we had reached the last lap, and we hurried forward with a sort of desperate eagerness. Then suddenly, as we turned the angle of the copse, we saw before us a gate, set in a stone wall, spanning the path ahead.

At the same moment a twig snapped noisily under my foot. Instantly, from the darkness under the trees, a sharp challenge: "Halt! Wer geht?" rang out, and a soldier stepped smartly into the centre of the track, his rifle, with bayonet fixed, threateningly advanced.

That burly figure, barring the path, was the death of all our hopes. Behind it, not thirty paces distant, the gate seemed to beckon us to safety. We both stopped irresolute. I felt the quick, warning pressure of Nigel's hand upon my arm: then he went boldly forward. "Gelobt
sei Jesus Christus, Freund," he said gravely—and I remember marvelling to find he had contrived to pick up the Capuchin greeting.

The sentry lowered his rifle. He was, as I recall it, a loutish peasant type, with fat cheeks bulging out beneath the brass strap of his Pickelhaube. "So," he remarked in some kind of thick, drawling patois, "die Patres, was?"

I knew that, to have eluded detection for so long as he had, Nigel Druise must possess unusual gifts for sinking his identity in a given rôle. But until that night in the Reichswald I had never realised what a superb character actor the stage lost in him. Without a second's hesitation he sprang into the part he had assumed and played it with a maestria which filled me with admiration. In the twinkling of any eye, he had it pat, every detail—voice, demeanour, gait, even, as it seemed to me, mentality, too—adjusted to the livery he wore. He was the young German friar to the life, excitable like all Germans, unpractical and world-shy as young clerics mostly are: the interpretation impressed me as being flawless and convincing.

His eyes were round with fright, and he was chattering with well-simulated fear as he laid his hands upon the sentry's tunic. "Thanks be to our holy Sankt Franziskus that we've found you," he gibbered. "We've been attacked in the forest, good Brother Anselmus here and I, by a gang of desperadoes armed with revolvers . . . ."

The soldier started. "Na ja," he said uneasily, "there were shots a while back . . . ."

"Murderous ruffians in a car, they were, no doubt belonging to the gang that killed the gendarme at Cleves last night. You must have heard about it?"

"Na und ob," was the phlegmatic rejoinder. "The greencoats have been buzzing like bees round and about the forest since dawn . . . ." With an adroit movement
he disengaged himself from the other’s frantic clutch. His rifle now rested butt-end on the ground; but he was still between us and the gate. "When I heard the shooting just now, I made sure they ’d bagged a prisoner. But you were attacked, you say? Which way did the revolver-Fritzies go?"

With every semblance of abject panic, my shameless young man wrung his hands. "But, du lieber Himmel," he lamented, "they’re at our heels. . . ."

The sentry recoiled and brought his rifle to the ready. "So?" he growled apprehensively.

"They chased us through the woods. At any moment now they may burst in upon us. . . ."

"How many of them are there?"

"Half a dozen at least. Their leader is a big brute, a lame man. . . ."

"I will summon reinforcements," said the soldier importantly. He put a whistle to his lips and blew three piercing blasts.

"O’weh, O’weh," gibbered Nigel, "we shall be murdered before your comrades arrive!" He turned quickly to me. "Run to the farm, Brother Anselmus, and alarm the good van Rossum. . . ." His eyelid fluttered, and he made an almost imperceptible backward movement of the head.

I perceived his drift and took a resolute step forward. "Halt!" boomed the guard. "No crossing of the frontier, by special order of the Herr Hauptmann. . . ."

"Mensch," came in a hysterical wail from Nigel, "d’you want us all to be butchered like the gendarme? This lame man, who is the leader, shoots to kill, I warn you. The good Brother will but arouse the farmer and his men and come straight back. Go, Brother Anselmus, hurry. . . ."

So saying, he sought to hustle me past the soldier. The man, however, hoarsely muttering "Back!" elbowed
me aside and at the same time raised his rifle. He was
staring past me into the woods, where, as I now be-
came aware, some one was crashing through the brush.
The next moment, Clubfoot, hobbling grotesquely, came
lurching at a smart pace from among the trees. "Halt
da!" he roared, his voice, for very breathlessness, rattling
in his throat, and advanced plunging over the grass
bordering the path. And then he was brought up short
by the sentry who, with a shout of "Hände hoch!"
covered the intruder with his rifle.

Panting and blowing, Clubfoot halted, plainly discern-
ible in such light as yet lingered in the clearing. He had
lost his hat, and a-wad of gauze, made fast to his shaven
poll by means of strips of adhesive plaster, recalled our
last meeting. His face, abundantly scratched and bleeding,
was drenched with perspiration. About his neck an
automatic dangled from a lanyard.

"Ass, idiot, sheepshod!" he bellowed, waving his
stick at the guard. "Put down that rifle, verdammt!"
He came on again.

"It's the lame man, their ringleader," said Nigel in
purposely thrilled accents. "D'you see his revolver? Be
careful, my friend. He's dangerous!" As he spoke,
behind his back he signed to me vigorously to make for
the gate.

The light in the clearing was going fast, and the two
men on the path hid me from view. Under cover of them
I began to edge away. As I went I heard Grundt's hoarse
snarl echo across the open. "Wait till I get my hands
on you, you thieving English spy!" His voice rose to
an exasperated squeal: "I'm on His Majesty's service,
you dolt. You stop me at your peril. I can have you
shot for this, you hound. That man's a spy, and I hold
a warrant for his arrest!"

"You tell that to the Herr Unteroffizier," came the
sentry's reply in his thick German. “In the meantime, my boy, stick up your hands, or I blow your ugly head off. . . .”

Favoured by the dimness, I had reached the gate unseen. Beyond loomed up the mass of a great barn with the roof of the farmstead, sunk in darkness and silence, not a stone's-throw away. Once through the gate, I turned to see whether Nigel was following. As I did so, Clubfoot's voice, part roar, part scream, like the cry of an angry elephant, reverberated through the clearing.

I saw him snatch at the pistol that rested on his chest. As his hand was raised, his arm was struck up and, with a report that went rolling endlessly along the quiet forest aisles, the shot departed in the air. A figure had sprung out from the bushes at his back and had him by the throat. Shouts now resounded from among the trees. Clubfoot was plunging madly in the grip of his assailant.

“Well done, comrade,” I heard the sentry cry. Then, “You there, stand still, will you? or I fire!”

“Himmelskreuzsakrament . . . !”

Grundt's bellow of rage, trumpeted furiously into the night, cut across the guard's warning. But he had ceased to struggle. He remained, panting audibly, his wrists firmly grasped behind him by the soldier who stood there.

All the woods were now astir with footsteps. The measured, slightly unctuous voice, which Nigel had adopted for his rôle, rang hollow through the glade: “Guard him well, friends,” he said, “while I fetch the good van Rossum and his men with ropes to bind your prisoner.” He took a pace backwards. “And you, wretched man,” he added, addressing Grundt in solemn tones, “blaspheme not, but repent of your sins. And Brother Anselmus and I will remember you in our prayers!” With that he turned and, hands tucked modestly in his
capacious sleeves, walked with slow deliberation towards the gate.

A strangled shriek of rage rang out. Despite our peril, I was smiling. For once I regretted the gathering darkness that prevented me from seeing Clubfoot's face. A gabble of incoherent words broke from the cripple's lips. "Stop him... don't let him escape... I'll show you my papers... let go my hands, verdammit..."

I knew that Nigel Druce was brave; but not until that moment did I realise what nerves of steel were his. He never hurried his pace, but with head bowed down as though in meditation, marched composedly to where I cowered, in a tremor of anxiety, under the shadow of the high barn. With a steady hand he unlatched the gate and passed through. "Now quick!" he whispered. His face wore a delighted grin.

I gave one last look back. The figures, indistinct now in the shades of night, were as we had left them: the sentry, firm as a rock, straddling the path, with rifle levelled; opposite him, Grundt, still shouting incoherently, the outline of a Pickelhaube behind.

It was the last glimpse I was to have of Clubfoot, and I have never forgotten it. The failing light obscured his features; but the rugged silhouette was unmistakable, and every line of it spelt menace and defiance. With his head raised challenging in the air, and all that massive body in an attitude of enraged revolt, he was like a wild beast held back in its spring; and, on the very threshold of safety, I trembled, wondering whether he might not yet leap forth and rend me.

As I turned to follow Nigel, a party of soldiers burst from the woods and surrounded the prisoner and his captors. But we did not wait on further developments. We darted through the yard. A ray of light now fell through the half-open door of the farmhouse, and by its
radiance I saw that above the lintel a shield, divided into two parts, was painted. The near side showed the German colours, black, white, red; the farther—how my heart bounded at the sight!—the Dutch, red, white, blue. One pace, and we were in Holland!

There was no one about. "No time for van Rossum," Nigel whispered, and whisked his habit over his head. He tossed it, together with my cloak, under the farmhouse porch. Then we ran across the yard and out through a gate on to a road running through a rickyard. Suddenly a light showed between the haystacks, and an oldish man, bearded and forbidding, confronted us. He was wearing nothing but his coat and trousers, and his bare feet were thrust into clogs, as though he had been aroused from his bed.

"Van Rossum?" Nigel asked.

The bearded man eyed him suspiciously. "Ja!" he replied impassively.

"We are friends of Pater Vedastus...."

The farmer nodded ponderously. "I know the Pater: he is a good man," he answered in his thick German.

"Then you'll help us? He said you would...."

"Ja," was the toneless reply.

"We're in Holland here, nicht wahr?"

"Ja!"

"Is there any chance of the German frontier guards coming over in pursuit of us?"

At that moment there was the clatter of accoutrements among the ricks. The farmer pointed and, twenty yards away, we saw a file of soldiers in vaguely unfamiliar silhouette doubling towards the yard gate.

"Dutch," explained the farmer. "I roused them when I heard the shot." He raised his hand to enjoin silence.

"They're only just in time...."

A terrible hubbub had broken out in the quadrangle
of low buildings surrounding the farmhouse. Voices were raised in angry discussion.

"The friends of the Pater are my friends," van Rossum declared gravely. "Don't linger. The Dutch officer has a German wife." He indicated the path running through the rickyard. "Follow that: it leads to Beek, the first frontier village."

Nigel held out his hand. "Pater Vedastus has good friends," he said, with his bright smile.

"We who live on the frontier don't like our neighbours," the farmer replied impassively. He nodded casually and plodded off in the direction of the house, swinging his lantern. The din of the dispute continued in the distance.

A minute later we emerged upon a quiet country road. Facing us was a barn, its door plastered with notices. They were all in Dutch.

"Oh, Nigel," I sighed blissfully, "safe at last!"

"Yes," he answered absently, and with that we set off at a swinging pace along the road.

His voice had a sombre ring; and I noticed that he had ceased to smile.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"COME! SAYS THE DRUM"

By the time we arrived at the inn to which Nigel brought me, in a rambling, red village, two or three miles on the Dutch side of the frontier, I had reached that pitch of exhaustion where falling asleep is like dropping through a hole in the world.

I have a vague remembrance of ham and eggs and coffee, and of a compassionate, chubby woman who kept on appearing, quite unaccountably in a gold crown and ermine robes—(I was too tired to reason it out then, but next day I