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
saw the large oleograph of Queen Wilhelmina upon the parlour wall; of a clean, white-washed bedroom, which Nigel told me was next to his; of casting coat and waistcoat and shoes aside to collapse, half-dressed, upon the bed, and of sliding forthwith into deep and delicious sleep.

But not into oblivion. Strange phantoms pursued me through the dreams that haunted my slumber. I fancied myself back in the study at Schlatz, correcting proofs in my corner, with my dear Lucy Varley placidly knitting under the lamp, and the little Doctor reading the Kreuz-Zeitung in the armchair. Suddenly the window burst open, and a pallid figure rushed in, crying "Save me, save me!" It was Vivian Abbott, with his tawny hair and wary, fearless eyes. But when, in my dream, I looked at him more closely, I perceived that one of his feet was encased in a monstrous, misshapen boot: and there was Grundt confronting me, his huge form shaken with silent laughter.

Then I dreamed that I was at Schippke's once more, surrounded by the Prince and other officers in their sky-blue tunics. Rudi was not there, but presently the Pelligrini, resplendent with her gorgeous hair and shining white frock like a bride, came threading her way through the crowd. "I've got a lovely surprise for you," she said, but my heart sank, for her face was livid, evil. As she spoke the ranks parted, and I saw Rudi dead on a stretcher with blood on his golden curls, and a revolver clasped in his limp hand. I shrieked, and instantly a gigantic, hairy paw stretched up out of the press and descended upon me. I fled away.

Now I was running through a forest inky-black, amid trees so tall that their branches vanished in the sky. As I hastened along there came to my ears the note of the bird I had heard at daybreak in the woods: toc-toc, toc-toc! And then I was seized with the terrifying certainty
that this was no bird-call, but the rhythmic tapping of a
stick. Fearfully, I glanced round, and saw Clubfoot
hobbling after me. We were in the narrow stone passage
now, dim and endless, and without a door, of which I had
dreamed before, the night after our first encounter in the
garden at Schlatz.

His face was distorted with rage, his nostrils twitching,
his eyes hotly blazing. "Olivia, Olivia!" he kept calling,
and all the time his stick rapped the flags. He was gain-
ing on me: he had grasped me by the shoulder. I tried
in vain to scream...

Shuddering from head to foot, I sat up. The white
walls of my room had a bluish tinge in the russet shades
of dawn filtering in through the window. Below in the
smoky greyness a cock crowed stridently.

Some one was tapping insistently at the door. I heard
Nigel's voice, hurried, uneasy. "Olivia, Olivia..." it
cried softly. I got up and unlocked the door, then,
conscious of my déshabillé, jumped into bed and pulled
the clothes over me.

Nigel entered quickly. "You screamed," he explained,
"so I came to see what had happened..." Catching
sight of my face—I suppose I still looked terrified—he sat
down on the bed and took my hands in his. "Why," he
declared, "your hands are as cold as ice..."

I flung my arms about him and hugged him to me.
"Oh, Nigel," I exclaimed, "I've been so frightened.
I've had such an awful nightmare. But now you're
here I know that it was only a dream..."

He gathered me up in his arms. "You poor child! You're trembling all over..."

I drew back to survey him, wondering to find him fully
dressed. "Nigel, don't tell me you haven't been to bed?"

He tried to smile at me. His face was deathly pale.
"I had some writing to do..."
"It could have waited. You should have got some sleep. To whom had you to write so urgently to-night?"

He paused, looking away. There was something very odd about his manner. "To you among other people," he replied.

"To me?"

He was silent, his face averted.

"To me?" I repeated.

He nodded, his eyes steadfastly averted from mine. "But, Nigel dear," I persisted gently, "why to me?"

He hesitated, clearing his throat. His expression was desperately miserable. "To say good-bye..." he answered huskily.

"To say good-bye?" I echoed in a dazed voice. Now that we were in safety, could it be that he had changed his mind? A woman can always tell when a man tires of her, they say. But I knew so little about it: this was the first man I had ever cared a rap about. "And you were going to write to me?" I said. "Couldn't you... wouldn't it have been more honest to come to me yourself?"

He caught his breath. "I hadn't the courage. If I'd gone to you and told you, I was afraid I shouldn't be able to go through with it..." He put his hands on my shoulders and faced me squarely. "Olivia, dearest heart, I've got to go back!"

The caress in his voice told me everything which in that particular instant I wanted to know. He was the first, the only lover of my life, and for that one fleeting second of time the most important thing in the world to me was the rapturous discovery that he still cared. I twined my arms about his neck and drew him to me. "Oh, Nigel," I whispered, "and I thought you were trying to break it off..."

"God forbid, my darling," he murmured brokenly, "if you're willing to wait..."
And then the full purport of his words became clear to me. Our strange betrothal in the Capuchin chapel, his sombre fit thereafter, persisting even after we were in safety: now I perceived the meaning of it all. "Nigel," I burst out in an agony of fear, "you're never going back there?" I made a vague gesture in the direction of the woods.

"Don't make it harder for me than it is already," he pleaded sadly.

"But... but he's waiting, hunting for you, there, across the frontier, Clubfoot, this ruthless savage! You'll be arrested immediately. Why, why, why?" I was distraught.

"I shall make my way back through Charlemagne's Ride," he said gravely. "There'll be no great danger about that. The getting into Germany is simple enough: it's the getting out that's the difficulty."

"Why should you want to go back?" I clamoured frantically. "What for? If this news in the paper is true, the copy of the report has reached London, hasn't it? And even if it hasn't, we shall be there ourselves within the next twenty-four hours. Your work in Germany is over. What earthly reason can you have for wishing to return?"

He gazed fixedly into my eyes. "If it weren't for you, Olivia," he answered earnestly, "I, too, should count my mission at an end. But you've promised to be my wife, and that makes a tremendous difference..."

"Why, for Heaven's sake?"

Very gently, as was his way, he drew me down and pillowed my head against his breast. "Listen, dearest," he said quietly. "It's war this time. These people mean to fight. If that report were not enough, to-day's news—I have seen the Rotterdam papers here—ample confirms it. The Emperor is back in Berlin: Austria is massing troops on the Danube: there has been a panic on the Berlin Exchange: the Vienna Bourse is shut. By this
time to-morrow Austria will have started hostilities against Servia, and the peace of Europe will have been definitely broken. And Germany is preparing to mobilise. Some German Customs officers from Goch were drinking downstairs here to-night, and from what they were saying amongst themselves, it's quite clear to me that the unofficial warnings for 'War Danger,' as they call it, the first stage of mobilisation, have already gone out. . . ." He paused, a far-away look in his eyes. Outside, in the grey mists of morning, the village was stirring to life. From end to end barnyard challenged barnyard with triumphant crowings, and beneath the window a farm cart went rumbling by.

"This is our moment," he said, "the high noon of the Secret Service. In normal times they ignore us, snub us, repudiate us, stint us of funds; but when diplomacy breaks down and war comes, they rely on us to keep them posted. Wars are decided during the mobilisation period. The fate of nations depends on the success with which their leaders are able to cover up their concentration and prevent their strategic plan from being prematurely disclosed through the forward march of the troops. Once war is declared, the Secret Service can sit back for a breathing spell and let events take their course. But mobilisation is its opportunity to justify years of patient preparation, of expenditure without apparent results. I'm on the spot. I can get across into Germany into the very thick of mobilisation. It's my chance, Olivia. I've got to go back!"

I was growing desperate. 'I had to put a stop to this mad enterprise,' I told myself. The tears were very near the surface as I answered him. "Why should you?" I cried hotly. "You've done your part, and more than your part. There are other men in the Service besides you. Why should you risk your life again?"
"To win back my good name," he said tensely. His voice was unsteady. He paused an instant to control it, then added: "I've thought it all out, Olivia. I could never let you marry me with that stain on my record. Active service is my one chance of rehabilitating myself, of regaining the commission they took away from me. If war breaks out within a day or two, as I think it will, no agent will have such opportunities as will then be mine. To-day I can still go back: to-morrow it may be too late. Have I the right to hesitate?"

I was sobbing now, for I knew that I had failed. "Oh, my dear," I cried, "what do I care about your commission? If you fall into Grundt's hands he will have no mercy. If they should kill you, what will become of me?" And I broke down utterly.

He took me in his arms again and kissed my eyes, trying to console me with loving words. If the war crisis passed he would soon be back in England, within ten days or a fortnight: meanwhile, he would communicate with me through a special channel he had proposed in a letter he had written to his Chief, which he gave me. If war broke out... The blue eyes shone with their old light as he assured me of his ability to "keep clear of old Clubfoot."

"The mouse that only creeps to one poor hole
Can never be a mouse of any soul,"

he quoted gaily, with that debonair air which became him so well. I divined that he was only trying to cheer me up, and that, under his laughing mask, he was almost as moved as I: the inexpressible tenderness of his eyes told me as much.

But he was still keeping something back, and presently, when I was calmer, it came out.

We were to part at once, within half an hour.

Numb with grief, I listened to him: by that time, I think, all my tears were shed. Now that this thing had
been decided, it mattered little to me when we parted, or how. It was clear, he said, that, almost hourly, the political situation was growing more critical, and he could not afford to risk the frontier control being suddenly tightened up. Once mobilisation was proclaimed, and perhaps twenty-four hours before the formal notices went out, the barriers would come down. He dared not delay. His plan was to make a wide détour of the frontier on foot, reaching his objective on the far side of the forest towards the close of day. Then at nightfall he would slip across the line through the ravine which emerged into Charlemagne’s Ride.

In half an hour’s time, at five o’clock, the first tram left the village for Nymwegen, about eight miles distant, the nearest big town, where I could get the train for the Hook. He gave me German money and written instructions for my journey. He had settled our score at the inn on the previous night. The sooner I was clear of the frontier the better, he declared, for Clubfoot was quite capable of crossing into Holland in search of us. As it would be difficult to procure an outfit and change my clothes en route without attracting attention, Nigel suggested that I should travel in my disguise straight through to London, to my sister’s house. He advised me to sew the report and his letter to his Chief in the lining of my jacket, and produced needle and thread which he had borrowed for this purpose from the woman of the inn.

In fact, he had thought of everything, and seeing him so brave and practical, I determined to try to put my grief away and show him a courageous face at our parting. Even at that date date—it was the morning of the 28th of July—I did not clearly realise that Europe was sliding over the precipice, inevitably, irresistibly; and I don’t think I anticipated, such was my confidence in Nigel’s pluck and resourcefulness, that our separation would be
more than temporary, at the worst a matter of a few weeks. As we paced up and down the chaussée at the end of the village, waiting for the big steam tram to start, with the early morning mists rising from the fields and every blade of grass sparkling with dew, it was a mercy that neither he nor I could guess what the future had in store for us.

"And did you really intend to go away and leave me without saying good-bye?" I asked him.

He pressed my hand. "If it had come to the point, I don't think I could have done it," he said. "But I was afraid of myself. Since I met you life has been worth living again, dearest, and I didn't think I should have the strength to let you go. . . ."

I looked into his face. "Tell me, Nigel, did you always mean to go back, once you had brought me into safety?"

He shook his head. "It came to me suddenly last night in the chapel. Up to then, I suppose, I was only thinking of getting that document out of Germany. But when the Father showed me that newspaper, and I knew we had won through, I suddenly seemed to see my duty like a bright light piercing through the darkness in which I have walked for all these years. 'Look, like the sun there. . . .'" And he pointed to the red ball gleaming dully over the steaming plain.

"Then that was why you asked Pater Vedastus to bless us?"

He grew rather embarrassed. "You must have thought me devilish sentimental. But I wanted to feel, when I am back there again"—he made a gesture of the arm towards the bluish blur on the horizon where the great forest lay—"that you are waiting for me. . . ."

"Didn't you know it without that?"

He nodded wistfully. "Yes, but . . ." His voice grew warm: "Oh, sweetheart, I wanted so desperately to go with you to England, this England of ours that,
THE CROUCHING BEAST

when I came out of prison, I never wanted to see again. I thought that if I could hear you repeat your promise there before the altar in the presence of that good old priest, it would give me strength to do what was right....” He broke off abashed.

“I felt as though we were being married,” I said. “I’m glad you had the idea, Nigel. Now I know that we belong to one another for always. . . .”

Two large Dutch vrouwen, with shawls and market-baskets, were hoisting themselves into the empty tram. The driver and conductor appeared on the road. We had halted, Nigel and I, under a lime tree a little distance away.

Nigel caught up my two hands in his. “God bless you for saying that,” he murmured brokenly. “Then you’ll wait for me?”

“My eyes were moist. “You know I will. . . .”

“Even if it’s months?”

“Even if it’s years. To the end of my life, Nigel!”

Only Fate knew, God help me, what a true prophet I was. Now we became aware that the driver was clanging his bell impatiently. The conductor shouted from the platform. “I suppose I’ll have to go,” I said despairingly. We exchanged a wistful smile, realising that a hand-clasp was all my disguise would allow, and walked slowly to the tram.

“Oh, my dearest dear,” I whispered, as I stood on the step, “take care of yourself. I shall die if you don’t come back to me. . . .”

I have often wondered since whether he had a premonition of what Fate had in store for us. For one instant those eyes, with their turquoise sheen, rested on my face as though he wished to stamp my features on his memory. His expression in that moment was stern, grim almost, and the touch of his hand in mine was like the touch of ice. “Good-bye, beloved,” he murmured in a choking voice, and, dropping my hand, turned away.
AFTERMATH

Then, with a jerk, the tram started and the tears blinded my sight. When I had dried my eyes, they showed me that spare, lonely figure still standing as I had left it, face to the frontier and the creaming line of the woods, head bowed, motionless, upon the dusty chaussée.

I never saw Nigel Druce again.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

AFTERMATH

That is my story.

The last chapter is soon told.

I had an uneventful journey home until I reached the Hook. There the first person I saw on going on board the Harwich boat was Jim. My brother-in-law was returning from Berlin, of all places. Dulcie, distracted, as I knew she would be, at my disappearance, had sent him out in search of me. I shall never forget Jim's face when I went up to him in my shabby boy's clothes and touched him on the shoulder.

He was very stiff with me at first, and no wonder. In Berlin the Embassy could tell him nothing about me, and referred him to the police. At Police Headquarters he was received by a very polite gentleman who explained that, in police experience, most disappearances of this kind were voluntary, and advised him to return to England and await a letter from me. Pressed for further enlightenment, the official eventually produced the English police record of Nigel Marston-Gore, and with a great show of consideration, informed my horrified relative that, on the night of 21st July, the day I had arrived in Berlin from Schlacht, Nigel had fetched me away from Kemper's Hotel, where I had registered in a false name, and the pair of us