

Darkness Over the Ocean

Sherlock Holmes - The Secret Letters

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A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

The Darkness Over the Ocean is the third volume in *The Secret Letters* series.

Although each volume follows the traditions of a Sherlock Holmes adventure, together they form a larger story — one that gradually draws Holmes into a dangerous international pursuit involving hidden documents, political secrets, and one of the most formidable adversaries he has ever faced.

In the first volume, *The Shadow Over the Seine*, Holmes travels to Paris to investigate a case involving forged paintings. What begins as an apparently straightforward inquiry soon reveals connections to a much larger mystery.

In the second volume, *Saint Peter's Confession*, the investigation continues in Rome. There Holmes uncovers evidence pointing toward an extraordinary historical document known as *Saint Peter's Confession*. Before he can secure it, however, the document is stolen by Colonel Sebastian Moran, the former associate of Professor Moriarty and one of the most dangerous men in Europe.

When Holmes learns that Moran is bound for New York, he immediately follows. Their pursuit leads them aboard the great ocean liner *SS Majestic*, where the events of this volume unfold. During the crossing, Holmes finds himself confronting deception, murder, hidden identities,

and a relentless opponent whose intelligence proves every bit as dangerous as his reputation.

Whether this is your first journey into *The Secret Letters* or you have followed the story from the beginning, I hope you will enjoy the voyage.

Thank you for reading.

Alistair Croft

Chapter One

WATSON FINDS THE PACKAGE

The winter darkness had already begun to gather over London when I took up the next of Holmes's letters. The fire in the grate burned low and quietly, its uneven glow moving gently across the walls of my study. The lamp upon my desk illuminated only the nearest circle of papers before me, while the remainder of the room already lay half concealed in shadow. Outside came the muted sound of carriages upon the damp street, and through the windowpanes I could discern only the dull reflection of the fog from the street lamps farther down Baker Street.

For several minutes I remained seated with the letter in my hand without opening it. I must confess that Holmes's last communication had left me in a most unusual state of unease. His hurried departure from Rome, the almost improvised journey southward, and finally his arrival in Naples during the Christmas season of 1891 had all borne the mark of events moving steadily towards something larger and far more dangerous than I yet fully understood.

It was precisely this sense of incompleteness that caused me to hesitate now. There are moments when a man instinctively delays lifting a curtain because he already suspects that something lies behind it which will alter his understanding of all that has gone before. My curiosity regarding Holmes's movements had by no means diminished; yet it was now accompanied by a reluctance which I found difficult to explain even to myself. The matter seemed already to have drifted away from that clear and rational world to which so many of Holmes's previous investigations, however extraordinary, had ultimately returned.

The letter in my hand bore unmistakable signs of having travelled a considerable distance. I held it up to the lamplight once more and observed that it had not been posted from Italy, as I had expected, but from New York, dated the fifteenth of February 1892.

The discovery caused me to sit up slowly in my chair. So, Holmes had crossed the Atlantic.

For a brief moment my thoughts returned to the harbour at Naples, as he had last described it to me—the winter cold over the quay, the many emigrants gathered in the darkness, and the great steamship waiting out by the pier. There had been something peculiarly final in his last lines from Italy, as though he himself had already understood that the moment the vessel left Europe, something would begin which no man could thereafter recall.

At last, I broke the seal and slowly unfolded the letter.

I opened it carefully and spread the closely written pages before me. Holmes's handwriting appeared as it always did precise and confident, almost entirely free from corrections, as though even his thoughts moved with a discipline that rarely permitted hesitation. I read the opening lines slowly.

15 February 1892

New York

My dear Watson,

As you will observe from both the date and place of posting, I have arrived safely in New York, though not without a considerable number of hardships and challenges during the crossing aboard the ocean liner SS Majestic.

I leaned back slightly in my chair and continued reading.

My daily notes from the voyage I have collected into a separate log-book—or travel journal, if you prefer—which should already have reached you in a separate package likewise dispatched from New York.

I must emphasise that these notes should not be regarded as letters in the ordinary sense, but rather as comparatively unedited daily observations, gathered and arranged following my arrival here.

The notes themselves were made continuously throughout the voyage, often late in the evening or during the early hours of the morning; however, their final compilation has necessarily taken place here in New York, where for the first time since Naples I have enjoyed a measure of tranquillity.

I have endeavoured to preserve the days and events as accurately and authentically as possible, although I cannot, of course, entirely free myself from the influence which memory inevitably exerts upon any later account.

*Yours sincerely,
S.H.*

The letter ended almost abruptly. There followed no further explanation, no concluding remarks regarding the case, nor concerning the strange crossing which he evidently considered significant enough to require a journal of its own.

I remained seated for some moments with the paper in my hands.

A separate package.

At once I attempted to recall such a delivery, but without success. For a moment I felt a growing irritation with myself. Holmes's records had always been of the greatest importance, and the thought that I might have misplaced something sent directly from New York seemed almost unforgivable. Slowly I rose and crossed to the cabinet beside my desk.

For some time, I searched through old folders, document boxes, and piles of papers which over the years had accumulated under the firm conviction that they would later be arranged more systematically. Several times I paused, convinced that I must be mistaken and that no such package had ever reached me. I became acutely aware of that particular uncertainty which advancing age sometimes brings with it—the unpleasant doubt cast upon one's own memory.

At length, at the very bottom of the cabinet behind some older notes from my years in medical practice, I discovered a small cardboard box

which I did not immediately recognise. I drew it out and carefully brushed the dust from the lid. Inside lay, indeed, a package meticulously tied with string. The wrapping bore the marks of a long journey, and upon its front I could clearly see the stamp of New York City.

In the lower left-hand corner Holmes had written, in his own hand:

Journal of the Crossing.

For several seconds I simply sat regarding the package before me. There was about the moment an almost ceremonial stillness. The fire crackled softly behind me while the lamplight fell across the string and the slightly yellowed paper. Slowly I took the scissors from my desk, cut the cord, and carefully loosened the wrapping.

The stack of handwritten pages proved considerably heavier than I had expected. As I lifted the uppermost sheet and recognised Holmes's characteristic handwriting, I once again experienced that familiar sensation of being drawn into his world—a world in which even the smallest observation often concealed the beginning of far greater events.

I turned carefully through the pages. After only the first few sheets it became immediately clear to me that this was no ordinary collection of letters. Some passages were written as continuous narrative, possessing the cool and precise clarity that had always characterised Holmes's more analytical accounts. Elsewhere the text was suddenly interrupted by brief notes, hurried observations, or isolated sentences written almost as though they had been set down in passing while the events themselves were still unfolding around him. In several places the record resembled a diary more than correspondence.

I allowed my gaze to move over the pages without yet seriously beginning the reading and immediately recognised my old friend's distinctive manner of expression—the sharp precision, the almost mathematical rhythm of the observations, and that remarkable ability to preserve even the smallest detail without ever entirely losing sight of the larger whole.

And yet there was something different about these pages. It was difficult to define at once, but I quickly gained the impression that Holmes had never before written in quite this manner. There rested upon the journal a more unified and enduring atmosphere, as though the voyage

itself had left a deeper mark upon him than he perhaps fully wished to admit. Even in the brief and apparently matter-of-fact entries I occasionally sensed an unusual weight in the descriptions—as though the events at sea had not merely been observed by Holmes but had in some measure affected him.

I turned another page or two and saw, at the top of the first true section, a single word written in Holmes's firm hand: *Naples*

Chapter Two

JOURNAL OF THE CROSSING

The following pages are taken from the logbook which Holmes later compiled in New York concerning the voyage through the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic aboard the *SS Majestic*.

December 1891
Naples

I succeeded in reaching Naples considerably sooner than I had originally considered likely, and my first action upon arrival was to secure passage aboard the ocean liner *SS Majestic*, which was scheduled to depart for New York.

It was of considerable importance to me that the ticket, which I obtained without any particular difficulty under my present identity, placed me upon the same deck as Colonel Sebastian Moran. At this point I had not yet laid eyes upon him since the events in Rome, but all available information suggested that he had indeed reserved passage aboard the vessel.

The ticket further revealed that departure was not scheduled until the twenty-ninth of December, leaving me with four days in Naples. This delay quickly proved far more valuable than I had at first imagined, for it afforded me an opportunity not only to make the necessary preparations but also to conduct a number of observations concerning the ship, her

crew, and the people who were already beginning to gather about the harbour.

Naples struck me as a city defined by peculiar contrasts. Everywhere one sensed the southern warmth and restless noise that seem to hang over Italian port cities even during the winter months; yet at the same time poverty lay visibly across large portions of the city. And still, side by side with this, there existed a curious atmosphere of expectation, as though the entire harbour lived in constant awareness of the many people who, in these days, stood on the threshold of leaving Europe behind and beginning new lives upon the far side of the Atlantic.

The Christmas season only made this feeling more pronounced. Small lights burned in front of certain windows, and even among the poorest groups around the harbour I occasionally observed families attempting to preserve some degree of dignity and celebration through modest meals or improvised decorations.

I chose to take lodgings in a small boarding house of modest, yet respectable quality situated close to the harbour itself. The room was sparsely furnished, and the constant smell of coal smoke and salt water drifted almost continuously through the window; but the establishment possessed the advantage that from my room I could overlook portions of the harbour district, while less than five minutes' walk brought me to the quay where the *SS Majestic* lay moored.

Monsieur Étienne Valmont

I had decided to assume a new identity for the crossing. After considerable reflection, I concluded that it would be most advantageous to present myself as a French author—a role which appeared particularly useful under the circumstances. I speak the language with sufficient fluency to conduct extended conversations without difficulty, and my familiarity with both French and English literature would undoubtedly enable me to move naturally amongst the first-class passengers without attracting unnecessary attention.

A writer is also granted a particular advantage. People expect a certain degree of eccentricity from him, while seldom asking overly practical questions about his actual occupation.

I therefore devoted my first day in Naples to acquiring the necessary accessories for this new role. A dark and reasonably substantial moustache proved easy enough to obtain from a theatrical supplier near the harbour, and together with a black beret, an appropriately dark coat, gloves, and several smaller details, I gradually assembled an appearance that seemed sufficiently cultivated and discreetly elegant to belong quite naturally in the first-class accommodations aboard the *SS Majestic*. It was precisely this quality of discretion that I wished to achieve. A disguise which tries too hard to conceal itself almost invariably attracts more attention than it avoids. My objective, therefore, was not to appear unusual but rather so entirely natural that no person would find reason to remember me after a passing encounter upon the promenade deck or in the ship's saloons.

When, later that evening, I passed the mirror in my room and examined the result in the lamplight, I was obliged to admit that even I would have found it difficult to recognise the French author who now gazed calmly back at me from the glass. The choice of name, in truth, required greater consideration than one might immediately suppose. A man's name carries with it more information than most people realise. It reveals not merely nationality, but also social background, upbringing, education, and occasionally even temperament. A poor disguise is seldom exposed by appearance alone; far more often it collapses beneath the weight of small details which its owner has failed to consider sufficiently.

I therefore spent much of my first evening in Naples examining a number of possibilities. I desired something sufficiently cultivated to belong naturally amongst first-class passengers, yet not so aristocratic as to attract unnecessary notice. Several alternatives were tried and discarded in my notes that evening before I finally settled upon the name:

Monsieur Étienne Valmont

The longer I looked at it written upon the paper before me, the more suitable it appeared.

The name possessed precisely the discreet elegance I wished to achieve—sufficiently refined to be accepted without question, yet common enough to be quickly forgotten again amongst the many passengers aboard.

Loading the Ship

During the days that followed, I made it a regular habit to visit the harbour from the early hours of the morning until darkness fell.

The SS *Majestic* lay motionless alongside the quay, a great dark body of steel and steam, whilst an almost uninterrupted tide of labour unfolded around her. From my accustomed observation point I was able to study at leisure the many different rhythms that gradually formed themselves about the vessel and which often reveal far more of a ship's true nature than any technical description ever could.

On the first day, the work was concentrated chiefly upon the cargo itself. Vast quantities of freight were brought aboard from early morning onward—heavy crates, commercial goods, barrels, and various forms of machinery, all lowered with considerable precision into the holds through openings in the deck. At the same time, a large number of men laboured almost without pause upon the coaling of the ship. Coal dust hung over the entire harbour like a dark veil, and more than once I observed how the workers, after only a few hours of labour, appeared almost blackened from head to foot.

By the second day, the character of the harbour had begun gradually to change.

Now personal possessions began to arrive. Suitcases, trunks, and private furnishings were brought towards the ship in ever-increasing numbers, and it became apparent that many of the people waiting upon the quay were not merely undertaking a temporary journey but were, in truth, leaving their former lives behind entirely.

I saw heavy oak chests with initials painted upon their sides, arm-chairs wrapped in blankets, small cabinets, sewing machines, and in a few instances even agricultural implements which had evidently been deemed valuable enough to carry all the way across the Atlantic. One

family arrived with two bicycles fastened atop a wagon, whilst another carefully carried a rolled mattress between them through the crowd.

It struck me as remarkable how strongly mankind remains attached even to the most modest possessions when faced with the prospect of beginning anew in a foreign land.

Yet it was not the luggage alone that interested me. I devoted a considerable portion of my time to studying the work itself around the ship—the various routines, points of access, and patterns of movement amongst the crew. I noted which groups had access to particular areas, when cargo was transferred, which stairways were most frequently used by stewards and dockworkers, and how the activity upon the decks seemed to change between day and night.

Such observations may at first appear trivial, Watson, but over the years I have learned that anyone wishing to move unnoticed through a closed system must first understand its rhythm.

The Emigrants in the Harbour

As the days passed, the harbour also changed in character through the people who gradually gathered around the ocean liner. It soon became clear to me that the majority of the emigrants came from the southern regions of Europe. Judging by the languages that surrounded me from morning until evening, most were Italians, though I also observed a considerable number of French families, a circumstance which further confirmed the wisdom of my present disguise. It was not uncommon to hear Italian and French mingled together within the small groups scattered about the quay, whilst occasional English or American harbour officials attempted, with limited success, to make themselves understood.

Many of the families already seemed to have left their former lives long before the ship actually sailed. They now lived almost permanently beside the harbour with all their possessions gathered around them—trunks, blankets, furniture, and assorted tools arranged in small, disorderly circles about each family. Several had lit modest fires directly upon the quay to ward off the cold during the night, and I saw children

sleeping beneath heavy blankets amongst trunks and baskets while their parents remained awake beside the flames, speaking quietly together.

There already rested upon them that peculiar condition of waiting which great journeys so often impose upon human beings.

At times it seemed remarkable to me how willingly they exposed themselves to cold, discomfort, and uncertainty merely to remain close to the vessel that was to carry them towards their imagined future. Many could undoubtedly have found cheaper and warmer lodging elsewhere in the city, yet none appeared willing to venture farther from the harbour than necessity required.

And yet it was not desperation that first impressed me about these people.

Despite the unmistakable poverty that marked the greater number of them, many made a remarkable effort to preserve a measure of dignity during the Christmas season. In the evenings I saw small lights burning amongst the baggage, and in several places quiet singing drifted across the quay as families shared modest meals together. Some had evidently brought cakes or pastries from home for the holiday, and I noticed several women carefully distributing small pieces of bread or confectionery to their children, as though determined to preserve at least a shadow of domestic normality amidst the cold and disorder of the harbour.

It occurred to me during those hours, Watson, how far hope can sometimes carry a human being in the effort to preserve his dignity.

Whenever America was mentioned in the conversations around me, the voices often changed perceptibly. I did not observe the wild desperation one might perhaps have expected from people in their circumstances, but rather a cautious anticipation—as though the very name still belonged to the realm of dreams and therefore had to be spoken with a certain care lest its power be diminished.

Observations from the Quay

Since I had not yet obtained any opportunity to move freely aboard the *SS Majestic*, I was obliged to content myself with those observations that could be made from the quay and the surrounding harbour district.

The limitation was, naturally, considerable; nevertheless, experience has taught me, Watson, that even a restricted viewpoint may provide a decisive advantage if studied with sufficient patience. I therefore began, as systematically as possible, to regard the ship not merely as a vessel but as a terrain.

From various points along the waterfront, I observed the arrangement of the decks, the lines of the railings, the position of the stairways, and those areas where the crew appeared able to move most freely between the different sections of the ship. By means of small sketches made in my notebook, I gradually succeeded in forming a preliminary picture of the connections between the decks and of the manner in which the human traffic seemed to flow through the vessel.

I was particularly interested in those transitions which did not immediately attract attention. Upon any large ship there necessarily exist two separate structures side by side. One is the official world—the world visible to the passengers, with its salons, promenade decks, and clearly marked passageways. The other belongs to the crew and to labour: narrow staircases, service corridors, cargo areas, and connections between decks which are rarely noticed by anyone except those who use them daily. It was this second structure that I wished to understand.

By following the movements of the crew around the cargo and observing which stairways were favoured by stewards, coal-heavers, and dockworkers, I was able, even before boarding, to form a preliminary impression of which areas could most easily be connected and where a person might move more or less unnoticed through the ship.

More than once I stood for long periods merely watching the work continue around me whilst in reality attempting to imagine the vessel from within—not as the passengers would experience her, but as a closed system of connections, rhythms, and hidden routes.

These observations would later prove to be far from insignificant.

The Sailor in the Tavern

It was upon my third day in Naples that I finally realised that the observa-

tions I had thus far conducted from the quay and surrounding harbour district were no longer sufficient for my purposes.

I had already acquired a reasonably precise impression of the liner's external structure, of the rhythms of labour surrounding her, and of the various groups amongst the crew. Yet the more I studied the vessel, the clearer it became that any genuine understanding would necessarily have to begin from within.

It was particularly the corridors, the arrangement of the decks, and the transitions between the various sections that interested me. To this must naturally be added the location of the cabins, and not least the probable quarters of Colonel Sebastian Moran aboard the ship. Even at this early stage it was clear to me that if I were later to move safely and effectively about the vessel, I must obtain practical knowledge of her internal structure as soon as possible.

A large passenger ship resembles, in truth, a small and highly organised society far more than it resembles a vessel in the old-fashioned sense. There are layers, hierarchies, hidden connections, and districts through which only certain people pass. And as in any other society, the real power often lies not where the passengers imagine it to reside.

Such thoughts occupied me that afternoon as I sat at a modest harbour tavern overlooking the quay.

Before me stretched the harbour with its constant clamour of voices, steam, and movement, whilst the *SS Majestic* rose dark and almost immovable in the background. Around me I could feel both the damp winter chill from the sea and the heavy smell of tobacco, ale, and salt water that seemed to permeate the very timber of the little establishment. From the open doorway came muted voices and the clink of glasses, while the distant noise of the harbour rolled continuously through the district like a permanent undertone.

After some time, a sailor seated himself at a nearby table. He was a heavily built fellow with a weather-beaten face and hands so rough and worn that they appeared shaped more by rope, coal, and salt water than by ordinary labour. Whether his experience had chiefly been acquired upon the open sea or as a dockhand was difficult to determine at first

glance; yet after only a few minutes of observation it became clear to me that the man possessed considerably more knowledge of the world than his appearance initially suggested.

He exchanged remarks with the tavern keeper and with various passing dockworkers, and to my surprise a considerable portion of these conversations took place in excellent English. It was chiefly this fact that first awakened my genuine interest.

Good English amongst sailors was, of course, not uncommon in itself; yet in this man's case the language possessed a confidence and naturalness which suggested long service amongst English or Scottish crews. I further observed that many passers-by greeted him with that peculiar mixture of respect and familiarity which often surrounds men who have spent many years moving between ports and ships. I therefore resolved to begin a conversation.

Shortly thereafter he lit his pipe, and I immediately recognised the heavy, distinctive aroma of Scottish tobacco—a dark and powerful blend I had encountered many times before amongst sailors and shipyard workers in Glasgow. I therefore took the opportunity, with suitable caution, to steer the conversation towards Scotland and the great shipyards along the Clyde.

My remark appeared at once to make the man more communicative. It transpired, as I had suspected, that he had spent several years in Glasgow, first in the shipyards and later at sea.

"I helped build ships like her," he said, nodding towards the *Majestic*, lying dark against the quay in the fading afternoon light. "Not her exactly, perhaps, but her kind. Sister ships. Steamers built for long crossings."

His voice changed as he spoke of ships. A note of unexpected respect entered the rough sailor's tone, and during the next several minutes he described with considerable enthusiasm the advances in modern steam engines and the improvements which, in his opinion, had transformed ocean travel since his younger days.

"The newer engines keep her steadier in the water," he explained. "And the hull is stronger now. One notices it at once when the sea begins to move."

He spat thoughtfully to one side before continuing.

"In the old days the sea struck harder through the whole ship. Now the great ladies like her ride far more steadily."

He nodded once more towards the Majestic.

"A vessel like her can probably carry between a thousand and twelve hundred souls when she is properly filled. And she is not even among the largest any longer. There are some now that take twice that number. Twenty-five hundred, perhaps."

I allowed myself to appear suitably impressed, which was not difficult.

"And how long does such a crossing ordinarily require?" I asked.

"That depends upon many things," he replied. "How long one remains in the ports along the way. What sort of weather one encounters. But between fourteen days and three weeks would be considered quite normal."

He drew slowly upon his pipe.

"Especially now in winter, with the storms."

I allowed myself a slight hesitation at the mention of winter storms.

"That is perhaps something I have not fully taken into account," I remarked. "I must confess that I have never been a particularly good sailor."

The seaman smiled crookedly.

"Yes," he said. "Either a man suffers from that affliction, or he does not."

He shook his head slightly.

"I have never had it myself. But I have known many who never managed to rid themselves of it again."

"Then perhaps I may nevertheless expect a reasonably comfortable voyage aboard a vessel such as this?" I observed after a moment. "If I understand you correctly, these newer ocean steamers seem almost to have developed into floating hotels."

The seaman laughed quietly to himself and shook his head.

"That may be how the passengers experience it," he said. "But not those of us who work aboard."

He drew heavily upon his pipe while his gaze briefly drifted towards the Majestic.

"Coal is still coal, monsieur. The firemen still labour like demons down below, and in the engine room the heat can rise to forty or fifty degrees when things are at their worst. Many of the bunks lie close against the bulkheads beside the machinery, so that men scarcely get a proper night's sleep."

I nodded and allowed him to continue without interruption.

"And then there is the smell," he said with a crooked smile. "The fine folk in first class may not notice much of it, but farther down..."

He shrugged.

"At times it is like an entire zoological garden."

He was now clearly amusing himself with his own descriptions.

"There are chickens and goats and cages full of small animals. On occasion even cattle. Not as bad as in the days of the old wooden sailing ships, perhaps, but animals still accompany many crossings. They must be fed, moved about, and cared for, and there is cleaning to be done constantly."

He made a face.

"And it smells, monsieur. It smells dreadful when the sea grows rough and everything begins sliding about down there."

His expression became slightly more serious.

"And where there are animals, dampness, and large numbers of people crowded together, illness is never far behind."

The Arrangement

I took advantage of a suitable pause in the conversation to steer the subject towards the crew and life aboard among the various groups of employees.

"Does one see much of the captain and officers during such a crossing?" I asked.

The sailor gave a low snort and shook his head.

"No," he said. "Not the rest of us, at any rate."

He leaned back slightly upon the bench.

"They keep to their own quarters up near the bridge and the officers' section. And I daresay I would do the same if I were in their place."

There was neither bitterness nor genuine criticism in his voice. Rather, it was the simple acknowledgement of a state of affairs which had long since been accepted by everyone aboard.

"No," he continued, "I had mostly to do with the cleaning staff, the cooks, and the people connected with third class. And naturally the engine men and those who worked with the cargo."

He shrugged.

"We are the ones who keep her running."

He spat his chewing tobacco over the edge of the quay and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. For a moment I allowed silence to settle between us, as though the conversation were naturally drawing to a close, before I let the next question fall with an appearance of hesitant curiosity.

"Would it even be possible," I said, "to come aboard before departure? Merely to have a look at the arrangements?"

The sailor cast a quick glance in my direction without replying at once. For a moment he appeared to consider the question more seriously than I had expected.

"First class I know little about," he said at length. "That is not where I made my voyages."

He slipped a hand into his pocket and slowly produced a coin, which he held between his fingers for a moment.

"But a great many things may be obtained with something like this."

He smiled crookedly.

"There is not such a great difference between life ashore and life at sea, monsieur."

I allowed myself to appear more amused by the remark than I truly was, while at the same time noting the growing confidence in the man's tone.

He lowered his voice slightly.

"One gets to know people around the harbour."

I nodded without replying.

“Come back here at about nine o’clock,” he said after another brief pause. “When darkness has properly fallen.”

He nodded towards the harbour.

“I daresay we shall find a solution then.”

The Luggage and the Possibilities

I must confess, Watson, that I left the conversation in considerably better spirits than I had expected only half an hour earlier. Every investigation ultimately depends upon access—access to places, people, or information—and the sailor’s willingness to cooperate provided me, for the first time, with a genuine opportunity to become acquainted with the *SS Majestic* from the inside before the vessel departed Europe.

I therefore made my way slowly back through the harbour district with a much lighter mind, while darkness gradually gathered over the quays.

It was also the first time that I passed sufficiently close among the groups of emigrants to study their possessions in any real detail.

Everywhere around me baggage stood piled in formations between the families—enormous travelling trunks with worn metal fittings, blankets, cooking pots, kitchen utensils, and heaps of clothing which plainly represented the greater part of their former lives. Some had even brought smaller pieces of furniture, and I saw armchairs, bundles of bed frames, and in several instances bicycles secured atop suitcases and wooden crates.

Most surprising of all, however, was the presence of genuine agricultural implements among the luggage. Several families had brought ploughs and other tools intended for field work, as though they had already begun, in their minds, the new lives they hoped to create upon the far side of the Atlantic.

More than once I paused simply to observe the people around me. It struck me that, despite the obvious uncertainty, the cold, and the primitive conditions, I observed remarkably little genuine desperation amongst them. Fear was naturally visible upon many faces, and some appeared clearly exhausted by poverty and waiting; yet beneath this lay,

in the majority of cases, a remarkable determination which seemed to overcome both uncertainty and fear.

The impression corresponded entirely with the view I had gradually formed during my days in the harbour: that America appeared to many of these people less as a concrete country than as an idea of opportunity.

And that, at times, is a far stronger force.

The Visit Aboard

When I returned to the harbour tavern at the appointed hour, the area had changed considerably since the afternoon. Darkness now lay heavily over the harbour, and most of the busiest activities had ceased. Only occasional shouts and the distant sounds of work about the quays could still be heard between the buildings and the dark hulls of the ships.

In contrast, the many small encampments established by the emigrants along the waterfront now shone brightly in the winter evening. Small fires and lanterns cast warm, flickering light across the crowds, and from several places I could hear subdued voices or quiet singing among the groups. Despite everything, the sight called Christmas faintly to mind.

I seated myself at the same table as before, lit my pipe, and pretended that my attention was directed chiefly towards the harbour. In reality, I naturally spent the time studying the few individuals still moving about the area.

It was not long before the sailor appeared once again. This time he was accompanied by a young steward who, at first glance, seemed considerably less composed than his companion. He was neatly dressed according to the standards of the ship and comparatively young, but his movements betrayed unmistakable nervousness. More than once he cast quick glances around him, as though anxious to ensure that no acquaintance observed him. I had, however, little difficulty in understanding the true reason for his presence. Payment had quite clearly proved stronger than caution.

“He can show you the way,” said the sailor briefly as he settled heavily into a chair beside the table.

I nodded calmly, produced a silver coin, and allowed it to remain upon the tabletop before him. The sailor smiled with evident satisfaction and said no more. Shortly thereafter I rose and followed the steward through the dark harbour district towards the quay.

We did not approach the vessel via the official gangways but by means of a narrower bridge evidently used chiefly by crewmen and dock workers. Even here I began systematically noting the various access routes which might later prove useful. Aboard the vessel there prevailed an almost unexpected silence.

The ship was still far from fully staffed or occupied, and the few sounds moving through the corridors acquired a curious echoing quality within the great vessel's interior. I immediately noticed the well-maintained woodwork surrounding the passageways and staircases. Everything appeared carefully treated with oil and varnish, and even in the subdued light of the wall lamps the *SS Majestic* presented herself as a vessel maintained with considerable discipline.

At the same time, I felt, through the deck beneath my feet, a faint vibration and a heavy warmth in the air. Something aboard was already operating. Whether it was the main engines or merely parts of the steam and ventilation systems I could not yet determine, but it was clear that the ship already functioned as a living mechanism long before her actual departure.

As we moved through the corridors, I concentrated chiefly upon the stairways connecting the various decks and the different routes between sections of the vessel. In several places I observed narrower staircases and more discreet corridors clearly not intended for passengers. I therefore allowed a question to emerge with appropriate casualness.

"These stairways are not used by the passengers, I presume?"

The steward quickly shook his head.

"Only by the crew, monsieur," he replied. "It is quicker that way. We can move between the decks without being delayed by the passengers."

The information interested me considerably more than the young man probably imagined.

As we continued upward through the ship, the differences between the various sections became increasingly apparent.

Second class appeared respectable, orderly, and well maintained—much like a superior boarding house in a larger European city. First class, however, stood noticeably above even that standard. Here the atmosphere changed almost immediately. Thick carpets muffled the sound of our footsteps, brass lamps cast a warm glow upon the walls, and in several places, there stood carved wooden figures and decorative ornaments which reminded one less of an ordinary vessel at sea than of the finest hotels in London or Paris.

It was evident that the steamer had not been built merely for transportation. She had also been built to impress.

Cabin Number Forty-Eight

When we reached the section of first class where the cabins were arranged along the broad carpeted corridors, I allowed my gaze to pass briefly over the numbers upon the doors before coming to a halt.

“Yes,” I said, with sufficient confidence in my voice. “This must be number forty-eight.”

The steward raised no objection. He merely produced a key and unlocked the door for me with the professional ease that already seemed ingrained in him.

I stepped inside and immediately took stock of the room. The cabin far exceeded anything I had anticipated, even from first-class accommodation at sea. It resembled a small hotel suite rather than an ordinary passenger cabin. Along one wall stood a substantial writing desk with its accompanying chair, while several built-in wardrobes offered considerable space for a traveller’s necessities during a lengthy crossing. Upon a smaller table I noticed a Russian tea samovar of respectable quality, and upon the walls hung a number of pictures and prints which, though they could hardly be described as works of art, nevertheless testified to a genuine effort toward elegance.

The porthole was closed and concealed by the darkness beyond, yet its size suggested that the cabin must receive a comparatively generous

amount of daylight when compared with the far more primitive conditions upon the lower decks.

The sleeping area occupied almost an entire section of its own. Here stood a broad canopy bed flanked by smaller bedside tables fitted with lamps and storage compartments, all executed with a degree of comfort that would scarcely have seemed out of place in a respectable London hotel.

"Would it be possible for me to borrow the key for a moment?" I asked, turning to the steward. "I merely wish to satisfy myself regarding the lock."

The young man looked distinctly surprised by the request.

"The lock, monsieur?"

"Only for a moment," I replied calmly. "I always prefer to inspect such matters personally."

His expression revealed that he considered the request, at the very least, peculiar; yet after a brief hesitation he withdrew the key from the lock and handed it to me. He then stepped outside the cabin, and I locked the door from within.

With the efficiency that only long practice can provide, I produced the small piece of wax which I had prepared in advance for precisely such a purpose and quickly made an exact impression of the key. The task required less than a minute. While engaged in it, I could not help reflecting that the copy would almost certainly prove useful later, when the time came to pay Colonel Moran's cabin a more discreet visit.

I returned the wax impression to my belongings, unlocked the door, and stepped once more into the corridor.

"I must have mistaken the number," I said with a slight smile. "My papers have been left behind at the hotel. Still, it was pleasant to see the accommodation."

The steward nodded politely, though his face still bore unmistakable signs of bewilderment regarding the entire affair.

Shortly thereafter I followed him back through the quiet corridors and down toward the crew access route. At parting, I allowed another silver

coin to pass discreetly into his hand, which immediately seemed to dispel whatever doubts remained in the young man's mind.

A few minutes later I found myself once more standing upon the quay.

Behind me, the *SS Majestic* rose dark and almost silent against the night sky, while steam and faint vibrations still seemed to pulse through the immense body of the vessel. I began slowly making my way back through Naples in the cold evening air, with an ever-strengthening sense that the *Majestic* was not merely a ship.

She was an entire society in miniature—woven together by hidden connections in every direction.

Chapter Three

MEDICAL INSPECTION

On the day before the scheduled departure, the atmosphere along the quay changed noticeably. Whereas the preceding days had been characterised chiefly by waiting and the slow, almost rhythmic activity that accompanies work in a large harbour, a far greater restlessness had now settled over the area. Shouts rang constantly between the docks, carts moved back and forth without pause, and everywhere people seemed to be hurrying with that particular urgency which arises when a great vessel draws near the hour of its departure.

It was evident that the voyage had now moved a decisive step closer.

Throughout the morning, more and more wagons laden with baggage arrived beside the ship. This time it was not chiefly the emigrants' simpler possessions that were brought toward the quay, but goods of far greater value and refinement. Well-made traveling trunks, leather suitcases, pieces of furniture, and sealed crates were carried aboard by stewards and dockworkers with considerably more care than I had previously observed in connection with the cargo destined for third class.

It quickly became apparent that the second-class passengers were now arriving in significant numbers. The change could be felt throughout the area surrounding the vessel. Even the voices seemed to take on a different character. Whereas one had previously heard chiefly Italian dialects and the more animated conversations of the emigrants, French, English, and German now sounded around the gangways as well, often spoken in tones that were noticeably more restrained and controlled.

Access to the lower third-class sections had meanwhile been closed off. When I directed my gaze toward the deck, I could already see from a distance that conditions there had become considerably more crowded. People sat closely packed among their belongings, and it appeared obvious to me that the ship was approaching the limits of her capacity.

Near the barriers stood several emigrant families surrounded by portions of their possessions. A number of them had evidently not yet succeeded in getting all their baggage aboard, and irritated discussions were taking place between them and the ship's personnel. I observed in particular one elderly man who, with considerable agitation, attempted to explain the value of a small wooden chest, while a steward repeatedly shook his head and pointed toward the already overcrowded cargo section.

It struck me once again how little of a man's life can ultimately be gathered into a handful of possessions. And yet these people seemed to guard their belongings with an intensity suggesting that their entire former existence still lay concealed within the trunks and chests surrounding them.

As I continued my observations along the quay, I noticed a small tent that had been erected near the aft gangway.

I approached the area with as much casualness as circumstances permitted and quickly determined that it served as a form of medical inspection station. A short line of emigrants stood before the tent, where a nurse and a physician appeared to be examining passengers individually before allowing them to proceed toward the ship.

"Must everyone pass through here?" I asked in French.

The nurse cast a quick glance in my direction.

"All third-class passengers," she replied shortly.

"And the passengers in first and second class?"

She shook her head.

"Not here, monsieur. If they are examined, it is done elsewhere."

The atmosphere surrounding the tent was noticeably more tense than anywhere else in the harbour.

The Irregularity

I observed several individuals who had evidently already undergone examination without being approved, and among certain families there was visible desperation of a sort I had seen only to a limited extent during the previous days.

Names were continuously called from a list. Whenever a name was announced, people rose from beside their baggage and stepped forward toward the tent with that peculiar mixture of obedience and nervousness that bureaucratic examinations often inspire in those who find themselves dependent upon the outcome.

After some time, I noticed that one particular name was repeated several times without receiving any response. The man calling the names raised his voice, yet no one answered. Irritation now began to show plainly in his manner. He moved farther along the quay toward the last small group of emigrants who had not yet boarded and began questioning the families more directly.

It was then that I noticed the disturbance. Within one particular family a subdued discussion suddenly arose. Several members avoided looking at one another, and the body language of the entire group changed in a manner that immediately attracted my attention. They spoke together rapidly and in hushed tones while the official continued repeating the name with increasing insistence.

At last, a man slowly rose.

"That's me," he said uncertainly.

It was not the words themselves that interested me. It was the hesitation. The reaction simply did not appear natural. There was an uncertainty in both his voice and his movements that did not correspond with the spontaneous recognition one normally expects when a man hears his own name called aloud. Something about the situation felt wrong.

The official immediately approached him and held out a hand for his papers. The man at once began searching through his pockets with a nervousness that struck me as nearly as remarkable as his earlier hesitation at the mention of the name itself. Shortly thereafter several members

of his family also began rummaging through bags and bundles with a somewhat theatrical eagerness, as though anxious to demonstrate that the documents certainly existed somewhere among their possessions. Yet no papers were produced.

The man quickly explained that they must have been left behind at the boarding house where the family had previously stayed, but that he could easily retrieve them later that same day. A distinctly strained atmosphere settled over the group. I noticed several of the other emigrants following the conversation with growing unease. The fear of being denied passage at the very last moment seemed during those days to hang like a constant shadow over the entire harbour district.

The official hesitated. He exchanged a few rapid remarks with the nurse at the tent and then cast another searching glance at the man before him. A brief discussion followed, much of which I could not hear because of the noise surrounding us. Yet after several more moments of uncertainty, the official finally granted reluctant permission for the man to join the queue for the medical examination.

Naturally, I observed the entire episode with considerable interest. Not because I was yet able to draw any firm conclusion from it, but because several small details seemed to point toward some hidden irregularity.

Experience has taught me, however, Watson, that it is often dangerous to reach conclusions too early upon the basis of instinctive suspicion alone. And yet the incident remained in my thoughts.

Chapter Four

BEFORE DEPARTURE

Early in the afternoon of December twenty-ninth, I left the boarding house with my modest luggage. At that point only a few hours remained before the scheduled departure, and long before I reached the quay I could already sense how completely the atmosphere surrounding the ocean liner had changed once again since morning. The earlier waiting had now given way to that peculiar form of concentrated agitation that arises immediately before the departure of a great vessel.

Most of the cargo had by then been loaded aboard. Only a few smaller bags, pieces of hand luggage, and parcels still remained scattered about the quay, while the great traveling trunks and furniture that had dominated the area during previous days had almost entirely disappeared.

As I made my way through the crowd toward the forward section of the vessel, where the first-class passengers were to embark, I caught fragments of conversation among the emigrants and dockworkers. It quickly became apparent that the rumours concerning illness had now spread much farther around the ship.

"He is already aboard," I heard one man say in Italian.

"No, they took him off again," insisted another.

A third declared with certainty that the entire family would be refused passage.

It soon became evident, however, that none of them truly knew the facts. The rumours moved through the harbour with the peculiar speed that fear so often lends to such stories. It has always seemed to me,

Watson, that rumours at sea sometimes spread far more rapidly than the disease itself.

When I reached the area surrounding the second- and first-class gangways, the atmosphere changed yet again, and quite noticeably. Here there prevailed a much greater degree of calm and order. The passengers stood more widely dispersed, voices were subdued, and baggage was handled with almost ceremonial care by stewards and servants alike.

The first to make use of the first-class gangway, however, were not the passengers themselves, but the ship's officers.

I observed them with considerable interest. In their dark uniforms and with their precise, almost rehearsed movements, they lent the entire embarkation an air of disciplined dignity. Several moved back and forth between ship and shore carrying documents and lists, while others briefly inspected the various areas surrounding the gangway.

It struck me how extensive a hierarchy such a vessel truly required. There appeared to exist an almost military structure among the captain's people, and I found myself surprised by how many officers of differing rank were evidently involved in even a single crossing.

I quietly took my place among the other first-class passengers while allowing my gaze to move discreetly across the area surrounding the gangway. My true purpose, of course, was to catch sight of Colonel Sebastian Moran. As yet, however, I saw no sign of him.

The Colonel Arrives

With only an hour remaining before the scheduled departure, I began to wonder whether Moran might already have boarded earlier and by more discreet means. It was at that very moment that a cab suddenly turned into the square before the first-class gangway and drew up as close to the queue as seemed physically possible.

The passengers around me turned briefly toward the vehicle. The door opened, and the man who stepped out I recognised without the slightest difficulty as Colonel Sebastian Moran.

He made no attempt whatsoever to conceal his identity. On the contrary, there was something almost demonstrative in the confidence of his

appearance. Even at a distance he bore the unmistakable stamp of both officer and big-game hunter—the erect posture, the precise movements, and that particular aristocratic discipline which rarely leaves men of his kind entirely. He still wore his colonel's uniform, and at his side hung his sable with such natural ease that one might have imagined him still in active service.

There was nothing hurried or nervous in his movements. What struck me immediately was how secure he so obviously felt.

A steward hastened forward to offer assistance with his luggage, but Moran dismissed him at once with a firm gesture and kept his own hand upon the dark suitcase he had brought with him. This small detail interested me considerably more than it would probably have interested anyone else nearby. Men such as Moran rarely entrust anything of importance to other hands.

The fact that he insisted upon carrying that particular suitcase himself I therefore noted immediately as a circumstance of possible significance. A few moments later he boarded without the slightest difficulty and disappeared into the ship's carpeted corridors.

I followed shortly afterward in my role as Monsieur Étienne Valmont, French author, and passed through the first-class inspection without incident.

Departure

Once aboard, I made my way to the rail and remained there for some time.

The harbour still lay illuminated behind us in the winter darkness. Steam rose heavily around the vessel while the last orders were shouted between quay and deck. Beneath me the damp wooden planks creaked softly, and around the railings passengers stood gathered in small groups. Several waved down toward relatives on the quay, while a few emigrants still hurried anxiously among the last carts and piles of baggage farther away.

I also noticed several individuals who had quite clearly failed to make the voyage. Some merely stood motionless, gazing at the enormous vessel

with that peculiar emptiness of expression which sometimes follows the sudden collapse of hope.

Slowly the *SS Majestic* began to draw away from the quay. A deep vibration passed through the entire ship, followed by the heavy sigh of escaping steam as the harbour gradually began to slip away behind us.

It was only at that moment, Watson—when the lights of Naples slowly began to disappear into the darkness beyond the sea—that I fully understood how completely isolated a man truly becomes at sea.

The First-Class Dining Saloon

As the clock approached seven, the majority of the first-class passengers gradually began making their way toward the dining saloon. I followed the flow of people at a suitable distance and shortly thereafter entered a room which genuinely surprised me more than I would previously have considered likely aboard a vessel in the middle of the Mediterranean. It was not merely a question of comfort.

The entire arrangement of the dining saloon seemed characterised by an almost demonstrative elegance, organisation, and luxury far exceeding what one normally associates with sea travel. The long tables were covered with white linens of remarkable quality, and the polished silverware caught the subdued glow of brass lamps hanging at regular intervals throughout the room.

Uniformed waiters moved silently between the tables with a discipline and precision more suggestive of a grand hotel in London or Paris than of a ship bound for the Atlantic. Even the sounds seemed muted. Voices were kept low, porcelain clinked discreetly, and beneath it all one sensed only the faint, constant vibration of the engines far below the decks.

The meal was served with a care clearly intended to make the passengers forget that they were at sea. There was first a buffet consisting of various fish dishes, cold selections, and smaller seafood offerings, after which the main courses were brought in several stages. Roast veal and roast pork were served with vegetables, sauces, and a variety of wines. For dessert, passengers could choose among several small tarts, pastries, and French specialties accompanied by coffee and liqueurs.

It struck me once again, Watson, how determined mankind remains—even in the middle of the ocean—to recreate the illusion of civilisations permanence. Perhaps precisely because the sea itself reminds us so clearly of the opposite.

I had selected my position beforehand with some care. Through a discreet inquiry to one of the waiters, I succeeded in obtaining a seat at a table for four situated directly beside the one already occupied by Colonel Sebastian Moran. He therefore sat with his back partially turned toward me—an almost ideal position from which to observe him. Throughout much of the dinner I was thus able to study him without difficulty.

The first thing that struck me was precisely the absence of everything one might otherwise have expected from a man in his situation. There was nothing nervous or dramatic about Moran. He appeared entirely calm, reserved, and disciplined—exactly as I had imagined from the information, I already possessed concerning his character.

When he addressed the waiters, he did so briefly and politely. When other guests spoke to him, he responded precisely and without unnecessary words. Indeed, he spoke very little. The interesting point, however, was that the others at his table nevertheless seemed unconsciously to adjust themselves to him. Not because he attempted to dominate the conversation, but because his mere presence naturally created a certain authority around him.

It seemed evident to me that Moran greatly preferred listening to speaking. And that fact was of considerable interest. For the more comfortable and unsuspecting he felt aboard the *SS Majestic*, the easier it would later become for me to observe him—and, if necessary, to intervene without awakening his suspicions prematurely.

The French Lady

Among the passengers seated at my own table was a French lady who distinguished herself from the very beginning by an exceptionally outgoing and sociable disposition. She appeared to be in her middle fifties and carried herself with the kind of confident elegance often found in people

who have spent many years moving comfortably within good society. At the same time there was something almost restless about her nature. She seemed incapable of remaining silent or merely observant for any great length of time.

At first, she spoke animatedly with the others at the table. Shortly thereafter she began commenting upon the food with considerable enthusiasm, and whenever new dishes were brought in, she appeared to possess an opinion concerning nearly everything that was served. She spoke rapidly, passionately, and with an energy that stood in interesting contrast to the more subdued atmosphere around her. After some time, she turned directly toward me.

"You are French, monsieur?" she asked with obvious interest, having overheard a few of my remarks to one of the waiters.

"That is correct," I replied calmly.

She appeared genuinely pleased by the answer.

A short while later she informed me that she herself was traveling to New York City to visit her husband, who worked in trade. From the manner in which she described this however, I quickly noted that commerce was unlikely to be her principal interest.

It naturally became necessary for me to introduce myself as well.

"Étienne Valmont," I said with a slight inclination of the head. "An author."

Her reaction was almost immediate. She lightly clasped her hands together before her.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "To encounter a person with an interest in literature on such a voyage!"

Several others at the table briefly turned toward us.

She continued without pause.

"I must confess, Monsieur Valmont, that this crossing already seems terribly long to me. I was not looking forward to it in the least."

She leaned slightly closer.

"But fortunately, I have brought several books with me. And perhaps..." She smiled expectantly. "Perhaps I might be allowed to hear your

opinion of them? And perhaps even discuss a few French authors during the voyage?"

I nodded politely.

"That would naturally be my pleasure, madame."

At the same time, however, I took considerable care not to appear overly enthusiastic.

Experience has taught me over the years, Watson, that the safest way to protect a disguise is often to avoid precisely those relationships which may later develop into genuine familiarity. Even on that first evening, therefore, I instinctively maintained a certain cautious distance from the French lady. Not because she appeared dangerous. Quite the contrary. But people who talk a great deal often notice far more than they themselves realise.

During our conversation, the French lady suddenly introduced a subject that immediately sharpened my attention. The interesting point was not so much the question itself as the fact that the rumors had now clearly reached the social circles of first class.

"You have heard about the sick passenger, I assume?" she asked quietly, setting down her silverware for a moment.

I merely raised my eyes toward her in mild inquiry.

"Oh, there is already a great deal of talk about it," she continued quickly. "Even during embarkation there was a strange confusion concerning some of the passenger lists."

She lowered her voice slightly.

"And I saw with my own eyes that there was trouble involving several of the third-class passengers. There were medical examinations, people being stopped, and several members of the crew seemed quite uncertain about who was actually supposed to board."

She shook her head.

"One hardly knows what goes on down there."

The final remark was delivered with a faintly condescending tone, though not with genuine malice. It seemed rather the natural consequence of her social background and her limited understanding of life upon the lower decks.

“So many people crowded together in so little space,” she continued. “And who knows what diseases they may be bringing aboard?”

I responded in a largely neutral manner and allowed her to continue without expressing any strong opinion of my own.

“Large crossings always give rise to a certain amount of uneasiness,” I remarked simply.

In truth, her words interested me less than the reactions they produced around us.

At the neighbouring table, the rumours had evidently become the subject of discussion as well, and I therefore seized the opportunity to observe Colonel Moran discreetly. What interested me was precisely the absence of any visible reaction.

He continued his meal with the same calm precision as before, answered occasional questions briefly, and appeared in no way affected by the growing concern surrounding the rumours of illness. I found that noteworthy. The meal, however, continued amid the same peculiar mixture of luxury and discipline that already seemed characteristic of life aboard.

The ship vibrated faintly beneath us, and through the dark windows one could now glimpse only the black expanse of the sea outside.

It was perhaps during that first dinner, Watson, that I truly began to understand the ship as a small floating society unto itself, where rumours, status, fear, and observation moved between the decks almost as swiftly as the people themselves.

The Smoking Saloon

After dinner, the majority of the first-class passengers seemed almost instinctively to move on toward the smoking saloon, which very soon proved to be one of the true social centers of the ship.

My first impression was that the room had clearly been intended to possess a more cultivated atmosphere than that of ordinary amusement. In several respects it resembled a private library or an English gentlemen’s club more than a traditional lounge at sea. Along the walls stood small bookcases, and between them were dark wooden panels and brass lamps

whose warm light cast a subdued glow over the room. Small tables stood here and there, surrounded by deep armchairs, and upon several of them there had already been placed dishes of cigars, cheroots, cigarettes, and smaller boxes containing various types of fine tobacco. The air already bore the mark of smoke.

Colonel Sebastian Moran had placed himself somewhere near the center of the room. He sat alone in a low armchair with a cigar between his fingers and seemed at once entirely relaxed and entirely aware of his surroundings. It struck me yet again how disciplined his whole appearance was. Even the manner in which he held the cigar seemed controlled and precise, as though nothing about him were ever left to chance or unconscious movement.

Several passengers greeted him as they passed through the room. Each time Moran returned the greeting politely, but without encouraging any longer conversation. It seemed clear to me that he enjoyed both the cigar and the relative silence around him.

I found a seat for myself in a more withdrawn corner, from which I could survey the greater part of the room without attracting much attention to myself. That peace, however, did not last long. The French lady from dinner had apparently found her way to my modest refuge without any great difficulty.

"You permit?" she asked with a smile, before she had already seated herself.

A moment later she produced a long cigarette holder, placed a cigarette in it, and lit it with a practiced ease that suggested considerable experience. By this time, I was beginning to realize that it might already prove difficult to avoid her company entirely during the crossing. I therefore continued to answer politely, but as superficially as the situation allowed.

While she spoke on about books, Paris, and the inconveniences of sea travel, I noticed that Moran had risen from his seat. He was now moving into the adjoining room. After a few minutes I excused myself to the lady and followed shortly thereafter at a suitable distance.

The Gaming Saloon

The atmosphere changed noticeably as soon as one entered the next room. Where the smoking saloon had possessed the character of quiet comfort and conversation, here there prevailed a far more concentrated and charged atmosphere. It was plain that this room belonged first and foremost to games of chance.

Most of those seated at the tables were men, though a few women sat beside their husbands or companions and watched the games with varying degrees of interest. At the far end of the room roulette was being played at a smaller table, and elsewhere I observed a game that resembled blackjack. There were also several poker tables, but at the majority of the table's places had been set for four players, and from the handling of the cards and the rhythm of the players it was evident that whist was the principal game being played.

I began to move slowly through the room under the pretense of general interest.

It was then that Moran stepped toward one of the unoccupied tables and sat down. As I passed him, he raised a hand briefly toward an empty chair beside him.

"A game of whist, monsieur?" he asked politely.

It was our first direct contact. I paused for a moment and inclined my head slightly.

"You are very kind," I replied in English touched with a French accent. "But I must unfortunately confess that I do not play myself. I do, however, find the game most interesting to observe."

Moran nodded calmly, as though the answer neither surprised nor particularly interested him.

I continued through the room and soon afterward took up a position at the bar, from which I had an unobstructed view of the tables. From there I could observe how Moran, with quiet self-assurance, invited several passing gentlemen to join the game. He did so without any visible eagerness, but with that particular form of confident authority which causes other men almost automatically to accept the invitation. Before long the table was full.

From the bar I had a relatively complete view of the room. I ordered a beer and once again filled my pipe with tobacco, after which I settled into that outward calm which is often necessary if one wishes to observe others without drawing unnecessary attention to oneself. Around me the games had now properly begun at the various tables, and the earlier subdued conversation in the room was gradually replaced by that particular concentrated silence which so often gathers around gambling.

Naturally, I kept my attention chiefly upon one particular table. At that distance it was not possible for me to observe the individual cards or the details of the play, but it soon became clear that Colonel Moran was intensely engaged in the game of whist. Not in the excited or noisy manner one sometimes sees in more primitive gamblers, but with a calm and almost professional concentration. He spoke relatively little, and when he did, it was briefly and precisely, while his attention rarely left the table or the hands of the other players. I noticed in particular the way in which he held his own cards—close together, slightly angled, and with a natural protection against curious glances. Such small movements occur only in men who have learned through long experience that at every card table there are always eyes attempting to read more than they ought.

Over the course of approximately an hour, the pile of chips before him grew quite considerably. It was therefore impossible not to note that Moran was either a remarkably skilled or a remarkably passionate card-player—possibly both at once.

This observation interested me far more than it would immediately have interested most of those around me. For, without wishing to appear overly modest, I may as well admit, Watson, that card play too has held my interest during certain periods of my life—particularly in my younger years—and it could only please me if that interest might later prove useful in connection with my wider undertaking aboard the ship. There are, after all, few places where a man's temperament reveals itself more clearly than at a card table.

After roughly an hour, however, the fatigue from the day's many observations began to make itself felt, and since I had already obtained the most important information the evening could at present offer me,

I finally chose to leave the gaming room. Shortly thereafter I withdrew to my cabin with the intention of being fully alert and rested for the continuation of the crossing on the following day.

Chapter Five

THE SECOND DAY ABOARD

Already at the breakfast table on the following morning, it became clear to me that something had changed during the night.

Rumours of Illness

The atmosphere in the dining saloon was noticeably different from that of the previous evening. The conversations still proceeded in relatively subdued tones at most tables, as was proper among people of the social class occupying the first-class deck; yet it was now almost impossible not to hear that the subject of the passenger lists and the possible illness had spread throughout a large part of the ship.

At certain tables the matter was discussed in discreet whispers. At others it was spoken of far more openly. At my own table it was suggested that the ship's physician must necessarily be concealing something from the passengers. Another guest declared with certainty that the family in third class had evidently lied during the inspection in Naples. What interested me particularly was that one of those present described an incident at the medical tent which corresponded in its essential details almost exactly with my own observations in the harbour. The rumours had therefore already moved between the decks with considerable speed.

At a neighbouring table sat a gentleman who distinguished himself chiefly by speaking considerably louder than most of the others around him. From his accent and general appearance, I judged him to be German, most likely a businessman of the type who travels to America with plans to establish or expand commercial connections in New York.

He appeared greatly agitated.

"I want an explanation," he declared several times with increasing irritation. "If the doctor knows something, he ought to say so now. And if he will not speak, then the captain must."

He tapped lightly upon the table with his fingertips.

"It is better to settle such matters at once."

Naturally, I also observed Colonel Moran throughout the entire scene. What was interesting was precisely that he made no attempt whatsoever to dominate the conversation. He remained calm and participated only minimally in the discussions around him. There was nothing loud or excitable in his conduct. On the contrary, he seemed almost deliberately to keep himself apart from the growing uneasiness. Only once did I think I heard him remark that one ought not to draw hasty conclusions before either the captain or the physician had actually spoken on the matter.

It struck me as characteristic. Men such as Sebastian Moran are rarely swept along by mass anxiety. They prefer to observe it.

A Useful Acquaintance

The next matter of genuine interest that day—and one which would later assume greater significance than I could possibly have imagined at the time—occurred when, after breakfast, I went out onto the promenade deck for some fresh air.

The sea was comparatively calm that morning, and many of the passengers had already settled themselves along the railings with blankets draped over their shoulders while the ship continued her northerly course through the Mediterranean.

It was there, quite by chance, that I once again caught sight of the young steward who, several evenings earlier, had helped me gain access to the *SS Majestic* before the official embarkation. He passed me quickly with a number of papers in his hand but immediately recognised me and offered a polite greeting. I chose to stop him.

Partly because it is always useful to maintain connections aboard a closed vessel, and partly because there had already been something about the young man that had aroused my interest.

From his appearance, his hairstyle, and the manner in which he carried himself, I could quickly perceive that he did not come from the middle classes, but rather from a modest or even impoverished background. Yet there was nothing coarse or heavy about him. On the contrary, he appeared unusually alert and intelligent, perhaps even possessing that slightly dreamy expression one sometimes finds in young people who have not yet entirely accepted the place in society that life has, for the time being, assigned them.

We soon fell into a more relaxed conversation, and to my surprise he told me that he himself was fond of reading books whenever his duties allowed it. Somewhat shyly, he hinted that he might very much like to read something I had written. I nodded kindly.

"That naturally pleases me to hear," I said. "But I am afraid I must disappoint you. I have not brought any of my own books with me."

He appeared genuinely disappointed, which I found almost touching.

I then asked him which authors he read himself, and he mentioned several names from the more popular branches of literature—adventure stories, travel novels, and a few historical works which had clearly made a deep impression upon him. What surprised me was not so much what he read as the sincere enthusiasm with which he spoke about it.

I quickly found myself feeling a natural sympathy for the young man, while at the same time beginning to suspect that our acquaintance might later develop in a manner advantageous to my broader undertaking aboard the ship.

"And your name?" I asked at last.

"William, monsieur," he replied.

I noted it immediately.

When our conversation appeared naturally to be drawing to a close, William made ready to continue his work. He had already turned half away when I allowed the question to fall with as much casualness as the situation permitted.

"Tell me," I remarked calmly, "all this talk about passenger lists and illness—is it, in your opinion, something that ought to be taken seriously?"

William stopped at once.

He turned back toward me and shook his head lightly. It seemed to me, however, less an expression of genuine knowledge than an instinctive desire to reassure a first-class passenger.

"No, monsieur," he replied after a brief hesitation. "To the best of my belief, nothing has happened beyond what one might expect with so many people gathered aboard a ship."

He spoke quite softly now.

"My duties are mostly on the first and second decks."

He hesitated briefly before adding, with noticeable emphasis:

"Fortunately, not on the third."

The last remark was delivered with a mixture of relief and a not entirely concealed contempt which I had already observed several times among members of the crew with regard to the lower passenger decks.

He cast a quick glance around the promenade deck before continuing.

"But if you wish it, monsieur... I could try to find out a little more."

I nodded slowly, as though the suggestion had only then occurred to me.

"That might prove useful," I replied. "Though naturally with complete discretion."

"Of course, monsieur."

He nodded at once with a seriousness that amused me slightly. A moment later he turned away again and disappeared down one of the narrower service stairways leading away from the deck and into the inner regions of the ship.

I remained where I was for a moment, looking toward the entrance after he had vanished. Once again, it struck me how significant these hidden connections throughout the vessel might ultimately prove to be. As it happened, however, it would not be long before William showed himself to be considerably useful.

Perhaps More Than Rumours

Later that afternoon I had withdrawn to my cabin in order to think quietly about the situation aboard ship and gather together my impres-

sions from the first days at sea. The vessel moved steadily through the Mediterranean, and the constant, faint vibration of the engines seemed almost to sharpen one's thoughts within the confines of the cabin.

I had just begun arranging a few notes at the writing desk when there came a cautious knock upon the door.

"Come in," I said.

The door opened discreetly, and William stepped inside. He appeared more serious than he had earlier in the day.

"Forgive the interruption, monsieur," he said quietly.

"On the contrary," I replied. "Take a seat."

He sat carefully in one of the chairs beside the small writing table in the cabin, as though he still did not feel entirely at home in first-class surroundings.

"You have news?" I asked calmly.

"Yes, monsieur."

He leaned slightly forward.

"I have spoken with a friend who works on the third deck."

He hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"And what he told me... does not entirely agree with what I said to you earlier."

I laid my pipe aside and looked up at him.

"Then," I said quietly, "perhaps there is more to these rumors than one would ordinarily expect?"

William nodded gravely.

"It is quite common," he explained, "for people on the third deck to bring minor illnesses aboard at this time of year. Colds, fevers, and the like. And many still manage to pass the medical inspection."

He lowered his voice even further.

"But this man... apparently suffered from something more serious."

I allowed him to continue without interruption.

"My friend was surprised that he managed to get through the inspection in Naples at all," William said. "The doctor was called earlier today, and afterward he spoke for a long time with one of the officers."

I nodded slowly.

“And what do they intend to do?”

“So far as anyone knows,” William replied, “the man is to be put ashore in Genoa.”

He hesitated once more.

“I believe he has already been isolated. But...” He drew a slightly deeper breath. “If it truly is a contagious disease... then the question is how many people may already have been infected.”

I noticed that his hands had unconsciously tightened upon the arms of the chair.

“I must ask you to treat this information with the utmost discretion, Monsieur Valmont,” he said seriously. “There must not be too many rumours. Certainly not on the first deck.”

“I understand,” I replied calmly. “And you have my thanks for your helpfulness.”

I took a silver coin from my pocket and allowed it to slide across the table toward him.

William hesitated briefly before accepting it with a quiet nod. A few moments later he rose, offered a short farewell, and left my cabin as discreetly as he had entered it. Left alone in the silence, I remained seated for some time without moving. For the first time, I now began seriously to consider whether the situation aboard the ship might be more complicated than even the rumours yet suggested.

Reflections

Naturally, Watson, William’s visit and the information he had brought me gave rise to a number of considerations.

I now began more systematically to place the various observations within the peculiar context in which we found ourselves aboard ship. Once the harbour has disappeared behind one, many of the normal possibilities for control, distance, and escape simply cease to exist. Several hundred people suddenly live crowded together within a confined space, where the air, corridors, stairways, and even meals are shared day after day. Under such conditions, the spread of illness would, of course, have opportunities quite different from those on land.

In my subsequent reflections I also began to consider the situation from another angle.

Any major emergency aboard a ship—whether it concerned illness, fire, or merely serious unrest among the passengers—would necessarily affect the entire internal structure of the vessel and the usual patterns of movement between the decks. Under normal circumstances, such a ship functions with almost military precision. People move according to established routines, through defined access routes, and within clearly marked social layers. But emergencies always alter systems. They force people to act more quickly, less disciplinedly, and sometimes far more revealingly than they otherwise would.

I could therefore not avoid turning my thoughts to what possibilities a possible crisis aboard might add to my own observations and to my wider undertaking concerning Colonel Moran. Not because I in any way desired such a development, but experience has taught me over the years, Watson, that a man's most valuable observations sometimes arise precisely in those moments when order begins to falter. It therefore seemed to me well worth keeping this circumstance in mind—and, if necessary, taking advantage of the situation should the circumstances later permit it.

The Officer's Announcement

Whether it was due to the loud dissatisfaction of the German businessman earlier in the day, or whether it was simply ordinary practice on the part of the ship's management under such circumstances, I cannot say with certainty. But during dinner that same evening something occurred which immediately captured the attention of the entire saloon.

Between the main course and dessert, one of the ship's senior officers suddenly appeared in the dining saloon and politely requested the passengers' attention. The conversations quickly died away around the tables. The officer stood erect and composed amid the white tablecloths and subdued lamps, and his whole bearing bore the mark of that professional calm which great passenger ships must necessarily attempt to convey to their guests during any form of disturbance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "it has come to our attention that during the course of the day certain rumours have arisen aboard."

He spoke with that particular calm authority which was clearly the result of long experience with people.

"Such rumours are, fortunately, not common aboard the *SS Majestic*, but as we understand that some passengers in first class have felt concern over the matter, the management naturally wishes to take it seriously."

He allowed his gaze to pass calmly through the room.

"I can state in the strongest possible terms that there is no cause for alarm."

A palpable silence immediately settled around the tables.

"It is true," the officer continued, "that there were earlier some minor irregularities in connection with the passenger lists on the third deck. These matters have now been fully clarified."

He hesitated briefly.

"The ship's physician has furthermore personally inspected conditions in third class and has observed nothing that gives rise to suspicion of serious illness."

His voice became slightly lighter.

"We naturally regret any uneasiness the rumours may have caused, but from the management's side we now consider the matter closed."

A moment later, several passengers broke spontaneously into polite applause. It seemed to me, however, at least equally interesting to observe those who did not applaud. Several people around the saloon did indeed appear relieved by the explanation, but others remained more reserved. In particular, the German businessman at the neighbouring table retained a distinctly skeptical expression throughout the officer's speech.

Naturally, I formed my own reflections as well. For unlike the majority of the other passengers, I now possessed a certain amount of information which made it difficult to accept the official explanation entirely without reservation.

Moran's Card Play

Later that evening I once again chose to spend time in the gaming room.

This time, however, I had decided to remain there considerably longer than on the previous evening, in the hope of making further observations concerning Colonel Moran and his habits aboard ship.

I therefore again took my place at the bar, preferably alone and at sufficient distance not to attract undue attention to myself. Because of that distance it was still impossible for me to follow the individual details of the games at the tables, but several of the impressions I had already formed the previous evening were now further confirmed.

Moran played with remarkable calm. There was nothing impulsive or emotional in his behaviour at the card table. On the contrary, everything about him appeared tactically controlled—from the manner in which he held his cards to the way his gaze moved among the other players without ever fully revealing his own thoughts. He was, beyond question, an exceedingly skilled card player. And once again the pile of chips before him grew steadily throughout the evening.

This time I chose to remain until the game itself had come to an end, and when the last players began to rise from the tables and the room gradually emptied, Moran also left his seat. I waited a few moments and then followed him discreetly through the corridors.

I had expected beforehand that he would go directly back toward his cabin, perhaps with a brief detour onto the deck to smoke or take the air before retiring for the night. To my surprise, however, he continued past the section where several of the first-class cabins were located. Instead, he turned without hesitation through a smaller door on the right-hand side of the corridor.

I approached the area carefully a few seconds later. Upon the door stood, in clear lettering:

To the Lower Decks of the Ship. Crew Only.

I hesitated for a brief moment before deciding to open the door very carefully. Behind it there appeared a narrow steel staircase, far simpler and more functional than the elegant passenger stairs of first class. It seemed to continue steeply downward through the ship's interior and, as far as I could immediately judge, led directly toward the lower sections

of the vessel. It was plainly one of the hidden connections between decks used chiefly by the crew.

I chose not to continue farther that evening. Partly because I did not yet know the staircase's full structure or its possible exits, and partly because it seemed unwise at this stage to risk an unnecessary confrontation in an area where I could not possibly explain my presence.

And yet the observation remained strongly in my thoughts. For if Colonel Moran regularly used the crew's access routes down through the ship, it could scarcely be accidental. I therefore resolved already that night that on the following day I must examine the staircase and its various connections more closely.

Chapter Six

THIRD DAY AT SEA

On the third day, the same officer who had addressed us on the previous evening once again made an appearance during breakfast.

His presence seemed, on this occasion, to create a far greater sense of calm among the passengers from the outset. Several conversations around the tables died away almost immediately upon his entering the dining saloon, and it became apparent to me that his earlier assurances had, after all, produced a reassuring effect upon a considerable portion of the first-class passengers.

Naturally, I had formed my own reflections upon the matter. For a moment I imagined that he might now provide further information concerning the rumours of illness—perhaps even information that lay somewhat closer to the truth, or that suggested a genuine development in the affair.

Yet he did not touch upon that subject at all.

Changes to the Schedule

Instead, the officer explained that, according to the original schedule, the *SS Majestic* had been expected to arrive at Genoa later that same afternoon. Unfortunately, however, certain minor technical difficulties had been discovered within part of the ship's pumping system, with the result that arrival could now only be expected during the course of the night. He emphasised several times that there was no cause for serious concern.

"It does not affect the safety of the vessel," he explained calmly. "This is merely a technical notice for our passengers."

He then went on to state that the stay in Genoa had originally been planned to last one day, but that, owing to the necessary repair work, it would now be extended to two days.

Somewhat surprisingly, this announcement appeared to please several of the passengers. The officer was quick to add that the prolonged stay would also provide guests with an opportunity to explore the city more thoroughly, and that guided tours and smaller excursions would be arranged for those who might be interested.

Once again, he stressed that the matter concerned nothing more than a minor technical fault.

"Should it prove," he continued, "that a complete repair cannot be carried out in Genoa due to the lack of certain replacement parts, a temporary solution will be implemented, allowing us to continue the voyage at normal speed."

He paused briefly.

"In that event, the final replacement of the pump in question will take place upon our arrival at Gibraltar Harbour, which may extend our stay there by a further two or three days."

This immediately produced renewed uneasiness at several of the tables.

The German businessman from the previous day rose almost at once.

"Then I must ask for clarification," he said with evident irritation. "Are we to regard this as the definitive plan? Or does uncertainty still remain regarding our stay at Gibraltar?"

He straightened himself.

"It is of considerable importance to my own arrangements that I know this at once."

The officer considered the matter for a moment before replying.

"Given the circumstances surrounding the pump in question," he said at last, "I do not consider it realistic that the full repair can be completed in Genoa."

He continued calmly:

"The necessary replacement parts are, however, expected to be available in Gibraltar. You should therefore proceed on the assumption that the itinerary will be adjusted in accordance with what I have just described."

He clasped his hands behind his back.

"That would mean approximately three days in Genoa before the *SS Majestic* resumes her direct passage across the Atlantic."

An idea

This new announcement concerning the ship's technical difficulties and the extended stay in Genoa suddenly opened several possibilities which would otherwise have been unavailable during a more rapid crossing.

I had already observed that the evenings spent around the card tables presented an excellent opportunity for more detailed observations of Colonel Sebastian Moran. No man can entirely conceal his true temperament at a gaming table for any great length of time, particularly when the stakes gradually increase and concentration becomes more intense.

Yet I was simultaneously beginning to recognise the limitations of my present position.

My disguise as the French author Étienne Valmont undoubtedly afforded me a highly advantageous entrée into first-class society; yet that very role made it difficult for me to move freely and unnoticed between the various levels and social strata of the vessel without attracting unnecessary attention. I therefore found it necessary to begin thinking more flexibly.

My thoughts then turned to Camille Ardent. You will recall Miss Ardent from Paris, Watson, where she not only acquitted herself admirably but also proved exceptionally helpful under the difficult circumstances in which we were then operating. On several occasions she had demonstrated precisely that combination of qualities which the present situation seemed to require.

She possessed intelligence, elegance, and a social confidence that enabled her to move effortlessly among people of every rank. Most im-

portantly, she possessed the rare ability to appear entirely natural in surroundings where most individuals became either too intrusive or too reserved. The more I considered the matter, the more obvious her potential role appeared to me.

Aboard a vessel such as the *Majestic*, first-class passengers would quickly become acquainted with one another. Conversations would arise at the dining tables, in the lounges, and around the gaming tables. Camille would be able to move within such circles without arousing the slightest suspicion, while her presence would simultaneously allow me to expand my observations without being constantly obliged to remain among the same company myself. Her assistance might prove particularly valuable around the card tables.

I had already formed the impression that Colonel Moran regarded card-playing as something more than a mere diversion. There was something in the manner in which he approached these gatherings that convinced me they would assume greater significance later in the voyage. If I were to keep him under observation without attracting attention, a trusted ally among the passengers would be of considerable value.

Now that our departure appeared likely to be delayed by several days, it no longer seemed impossible to secure her assistance. The factor of time, which had previously argued against the plan, had suddenly become far less restrictive. I therefore resolved that the very first action I should take upon our arrival in Genoa would be to send her a telegram.

A New Identity

Yet this was not the only matter that occupied my thoughts. As I continued my preparations, my reflections returned again and again to another question which had likewise not escaped my attention. The question of my own disguise.

Until now, the identity of the French author had served me admirably. Aboard a ship, people could not simply disappear into the crowd. The same faces were encountered morning and evening. Small details were noticed. Habits became familiar. And any role that was to be maintained

for several weeks had to withstand a far more persistent scrutiny than would ordinarily be the case.

I therefore began to ask myself whether Étienne Valmont was still equal to the task. Or whether the time had come to expand the gallery. I accordingly began, even then, to prepare a future supplement both to my identity and to my outward appearance. At the same time, I decided that our stay in Genoa would provide the necessary opportunity to carry out this transformation.

Chapter Seven

FOURTH DAY – GENOA

I awoke early the following morning, though I was not fully awake from the very first moment. It was more a sensation than an actual sound that gradually drew me out of sleep. Something was missing. Not silence in the ordinary sense, but the absence of that constant rhythm which had been almost continuously present around us throughout the preceding days. The deep vibrations of the engines, the faint pulse running through the hull, and the almost imperceptible movement beneath the floor all seemed suddenly to have vanished. The ship felt unnaturally still.

I remained lying for a few moments, gazing at the ceiling above my berth while allowing my thoughts to gather themselves around the situation. Shortly afterward, I rose and crossed to the porthole. Outside, the sea lay almost motionless. Through the light morning mist, I could make out several vessels both near at hand and farther away, and when I opened the small porthole slightly, the sounds of the harbour reached me faintly metallic blows, shouted commands, and the distant bustle of a large city already at work.

We had arrived at Genoa.

When, some time later, I made my way toward breakfast, I observed that the *SS Majestic* was not yet alongside the quay but remained at anchor in the roads together with several other vessels.

Even in the corridors there was a distinct atmosphere of expectation. People appeared less relaxed than usual, as though the very state of immobility had created a new form of uneasiness aboard. It struck

me once again, Watson, how curious it is that a ship may at times feel more restless in stillness than in motion. When she moves through the sea at full power, she seems almost to exist within her proper element. Yet the moment that movement ceases, one becomes suddenly far more conscious of the vessel's isolation and of the immense expanse of water surrounding her.

At the Breakfast Table

That morning, I made a deliberate effort to find a table at which three persons were already seated, so that I might naturally occupy the final place without becoming involved in any greater social engagement. No suitable opportunity presented itself, however. I was therefore obliged to select a smaller table at which a middle-aged married couple had already taken their seats.

I had only just sat down, hoping for a comparatively quiet morning, when I almost immediately heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Ah! Monsieur Valmont!"

The French lady from the previous evening—Madame Cécile Beaumont—had apparently found me once again without any great difficulty. She at once expressed the most sincere pleasure at seeing me and sat down with an energy that seemed almost surprising at so early an hour. She appeared relieved, enthusiastic, almost exhilarated.

"I am already delighted that we have arrived," she declared with a small sigh. "You cannot imagine, monsieur, how little affection I have for long sea voyages."

She cast a quick glance toward the harbour through the great windows.

"The very thought of solid ground already puts me in a better humour."

With growing enthusiasm, she began to outline the plans she had already formed for her stay in Genoa. First, she would naturally see the city itself. She had heard much of the harbour, the ancient streets, and the colourful markets, which were said to be among the liveliest in all of Italy. This was followed by a lengthy account of the shops she hoped to

visit and of the purchases which she regarded as absolutely essential now that she had unexpectedly been granted an entire day at her disposal.

The cafés came next. She mentioned several by name, having received recommendations from acquaintances in Marseille, and described in vivid detail the terraces where she imagined spending the afternoon with coffee, newspapers, and people to observe. As the crowning feature of her plans, she even mentioned the possibility of attending the opera later that evening, should the ship's departure continue to be delayed.

"One must, after all, make the best of a delay," she declared with a conviction that left no doubt whatsoever that she fully intended to follow that principle to the letter.

As she spoke, I once again observed that particular vitality which seemed to animate her entire being. Whereas other passengers had reacted to the alterations in the itinerary with irritation or concern, every deviation from the expected appeared almost to provide her with renewed energy. Only when her plans for the day seemed exhausted did she suddenly turn directly toward me. Her gaze rested upon my face with an air of inquiry for a moment.

"And what of you, Monsieur Valmont?" she asked. "Surely you do not intend to spend the entire day aboard ship?"

There was a challenging merriment in her voice, as though she had already decided in advance that a negative reply would be the only acceptable one.

"But Monsieur Valmont..." she said with an expectant smile, without waiting for my answer. "Might you perhaps care to accompany me? It would be far more interesting to experience the city in the company of someone who understands both literature and Italy."

Naturally, I was obliged to find a suitable means of escape without appearing openly discourteous.

"You are most kind, madame," I replied calmly. "But I must unfortunately confess that the sea has not yet treated me entirely kindly."

I allowed my hand to rest lightly against my stomach.

"It remains somewhat unsettled after the crossing."

Then I added with a slight smile:

"Though hopefully not to such an extent as to cause you to believe that I am the much-discussed invalid passenger."

This immediately caused her to laugh.

"Oh no, monsieur. You appear far too cultivated for such a role."

And yet, Watson, I noticed that she very subtly moved her chair a few inches farther away from me. I must confess that I felt a certain quiet relief at escaping the prospect of spending an entire day in her exceedingly energetic company.

The breakfast was interrupted shortly thereafter by the familiar officer from the preceding days. His presence was already beginning to assume the character of a fixed routine aboard ship, and several conversations throughout the dining saloon immediately fell silent as he stepped forward between the tables. He calmly explained that the *SS Majestic* remained at anchor while various harbour formalities were being completed before her actual movement into the dock.

"We expect passengers to go ashore around midday," he announced.

Hardly had he spoken the words before the German businessman once again rose to his feet. This time his action was accompanied by several faint smiles around the room, as though the passengers had almost expected his intervention in advance.

"Are these delays connected with the rumours of illness?" the German asked directly.

The question caused several passengers to look up. It was evident that he had voiced what many others had been thinking but had not yet wished to express aloud.

The officer hesitated only briefly before replying. His voice remained courteous and professional, yet I noticed that he now chose his words with considerably greater care than before. He explained that passenger documentation naturally had to be reviewed and that certain individuals would be examined by the ship's physician. Such precautions, he stated, were entirely normal during large crossings involving many hundreds of passengers. Cases of colds, influenza, and other minor ailments occurred every year and required medical evaluation, and the shipping company

merely wished to ensure that all necessary procedures were being followed.

As he spoke, however, I observed something that interested me more than his actual words. He said nothing untrue. Yet neither did he say more than was absolutely necessary. Each phrase appeared carefully weighed. Every sentence remained within boundaries that allowed him to reassure without genuinely informing. It was the sort of diplomatic precision frequently employed when one wishes to calm concerns without simultaneously revealing how serious they may in fact be.

The German gentleman asked no further questions. Perhaps he had noticed the same thing that I had.

At length, the officer repeated that disembarkation was still expected around midday, thanked the passengers for their patience and understanding, and then departed from the dining saloon.

Almost immediately after his departure, the atmosphere began to relax. Madame Beaumont gave an audible sigh of relief. Several of the other passengers reacted in much the same manner. Conversations resumed, cutlery once more rattled softly against porcelain, and the subdued tension that had characterised the room during the previous minutes gradually seemed to dissipate.

I, however, was far from reassured. Quite the contrary. The more I reflected upon the officer's answers, the stronger became my conviction that there remained information aboard the *Majestic* which had not been shared with the passengers. I therefore seized the opportunity to rise.

"I wish you a speedy recovery, Monsieur Valmont," said Madame Beaumont kindly. "And a pleasant stay in Genoa. Perhaps we shall meet again later."

"I hope so, madame," I replied with a courteous inclination of the head.

She smiled before once more turning her attention to the others at the table.

I left the dining saloon and proceeded back through the long corridors. Around me, life aboard the ship continued almost undisturbed.

Cabin doors opened and closed. Stewards passed by engaged in their customary duties. Somewhere farther ahead I could hear muted voices and laughter. Yet the feeling continued to accompany me. The suspicion that something was still being concealed aboard the *SS Majestic*.

And that the delay at Genoa might prove to be only the first visible consequence of a problem which had not yet fully emerged into the light.

Going Ashore

Naturally, I took care not to be among the first passengers to leave the ship once disembarkation had been permitted. I moved without haste, but with the necessary discretion—not least in order to avoid another and more prolonged encounter with Madame Cécile Beaumont, who would undoubtedly have found it remarkable that my supposedly weakened stomach should suddenly prove quite well suited to extended excursions through Genoa.

The harbour appeared that January morning as a place marked by both movement and cold. The damp air from the sea seemed almost sharper here than it had upon the open water, and among the quays horse-drawn carriages were already moving back and forth in considerable numbers with passengers, luggage, and goods. Customs officers passed between the newly arrived vessels, sailors called to one another from the decks, and over it all lay the smell of coal smoke, salt water, and wet timber.

To my surprise, I also observed a considerable group of emigrants near the harbour district. It immediately struck me as noteworthy that so many new passengers were already waiting to come aboard, and I made a mental note that the third-class section would probably soon appear even more crowded than it had during the first part of the crossing.

I did not, however, waste time upon further observations. Instead, I immediately took a carriage to a central telegraph office. There I wrote swiftly and precisely, without unnecessary information:

Mademoiselle Camille Ardent Paris

Assistance requested immediately stop Board SS Majestic Gibraltar January eighth or ninth stop Travel under discretion stop Further explanation later stop

— Valmont/Sigurdson

The name Valmont was, of course, still the identity I had chosen to employ among the ship's passengers.

After sending the telegram, I at once left the office again. I wished for as little exposure in the city as possible and therefore took another carriage without delay back toward the harbour and the ship, where I already felt that events had begun to move in a direction requiring far greater caution than before.

William's Assistance

I must here add, Watson, that upon my return to the *SS Majestic* I had another undertaking which I very much desired to accomplish that same day—and which, in my own estimation, was possibly considerably more complicated than the dispatch of the telegram to Camille Ardent. I wished both to re-establish contact with the young steward William and, if possible, to investigate more closely the particular stairway which I had seen Colonel Moran use the previous evening.

First class already seemed noticeably emptier at this hour. Many of the passengers had gone ashore to make use of the stay in Genoa, and the ship's ordinarily lively corridors had taken on a more subdued and almost abandoned atmosphere. This made it considerably easier for me to move relatively unhindered through the passageways without attracting any particular attention.

I passed several servants who were in the process of clearing away after the afternoon service and took the opportunity discreetly to inquire after a steward by the name of William. No one seemed immediately to know the name. One of the servants, however, kindly offered to make inquiries farther below in the kitchen areas. He returned a few minutes later.

"There may be someone down there who knows whom you mean, monsieur."

"That would be of great assistance to me," I replied calmly. "Would you be so kind as to inform him that he may find me in my cabin?"

The servant nodded and disappeared again. Nor was it long before there came a cautious knock at my door.

"Come in."

William entered with the same discreet caution as before, and I thanked him for his promptness and expressed the hope that he might once again be willing to assist me. He nodded at once with a small smile. I could not quite determine whether this was due to loyalty, curiosity—or merely to the memory of the earlier silver coin.

This time I chose to speak more openly with him, though naturally without revealing more than was necessary.

"What I am now going to ask of you," I said calmly, "is considerably more difficult than last time."

William at once straightened a little in his chair.

I then explained to him that I had reasons for needing to move more freely between the ship's various decks and service areas. I hinted that my undertaking was in the nature of a discreet investigation concerning certain matters aboard, and that I therefore had to be able to move about without attracting notice among the passengers.

"For this reason," I continued, "I require access to a steward's uniform. At the same time, I must know something of the working hours and routines among the staff, so that I may move naturally through the ship without being recognised or stopped."

William now listened with considerably greater seriousness.

"It would also be exceedingly useful," I added, "if you could provide me with a name I might possibly use. Perhaps a steward who has signed off here in Genoa—or a man assigned to night duty who is not known to everyone aboard."

William remained seated in silence for a moment. His expression showed plainly that he now understood that the task required far more of him than before. At last he nodded slowly.

"I shall try, monsieur."

He rose.

“Wait here. I will return within the hour.”

With that, he left the cabin.

Emilio

Just as he had promised, he returned a little under an hour later. This time he carried a small parcel beneath his arm. He closed the door behind him, stepped forward to the table, and held the parcel out to me.

“Here is the uniform,” he said in a low voice. “It ought to fit you tolerably well.”

He hesitated briefly before continuing:

“And if you choose to use the name Emilio... I do not think it will attract any particular attention.”

I accepted the parcel and for a moment regarded the dark steward’s uniform which now lay folded before me upon the table.

“You have been exceedingly helpful, William,” I said calmly.

I took out another silver coin and let it slide across to him.

This time William smiled more openly.

“Thank you, monsieur.”

Shortly thereafter, he left the cabin once more, and I remained alone with the uniform before me and the growing sense that the game aboard the *SS Majestic* was now beginning to move into a new phase.

Upon the bed before me lay the dark steward’s uniform, the cap, and the small list of information which William had obtained. I immediately began to examine the disguise in a systematic manner. First, I tried on the jacket and then considered how it altered my posture and movements. I walked back and forth through the cabin several times, attempting to find that particular pace and rhythm which naturally belong to a man in service.

Disguises, you see, are rarely a matter of the face alone, Watson. They concern themselves far more with people’s expectations: with the manner in which different classes move, look, and respond. A gentleman pauses differently from a servant. A servant holds a door in another fashion. He does not look directly at persons of higher rank unless he is addressed. Even the pace of his steps is determined by his function.

I therefore took a little dark grease and applied it carefully along the hairline, together with a faint shadow at the jaw, in order to break the customary lines of my face. The object was not to make myself invisible—that would in any case have been impossible—but rather to make myself uninteresting. A man is seldom noticed when he fits naturally into his surroundings. I placed myself before the mirror and tried various expressions and accents.

“Emilio,” I said softly, with a slight Italian inflection.

Then once more:

“Emilio.”

I tried several variations until the voice, and the appearance seemed to agree tolerably well. At last, I studied my own reflection for several seconds in silence. The disguise was not perfect. But it seemed to me serviceable. And aboard a vessel, it is often far more important to appear natural than to be truly convincing.

The Stairway

I put on the cap, extinguished the light in the cabin, and then left the room with cautious steps, though without appearing hesitant. For I had already realised that an employee aboard a large ship must never appear uncertain. The crew moved quickly, purposefully, and without unnecessary pauses. Hesitation attracts far more attention than speed.

I therefore made my way through the elegant first-class corridors with the quicker and more practical gait of a servant—no longer as the well-groomed French author Étienne Valmont, but as yet another anonymous member of the ship’s staff.

Shortly afterward, I reached the door, opened it without hesitation, and began the descent into the vessel’s interior.

The stairway surprised me immediately. It was both narrower and considerably steeper than I had imagined beforehand, and it seemed to continue almost endlessly downward through the ship. The surrounding walls were far more bare and functional than the elegant passenger areas above, and after only a few minutes of descending, I felt that I had left the world of first class entirely behind.

I first passed through the second deck. A certain degree of order and quiet still prevailed there, though in a far more modest form than above. Shortly thereafter, I reached the third deck, where the atmosphere changed noticeably. The air was heavier here.

I could smell the presence of many people gathered within a confined space—damp clothing, food, seasickness, and that particular dense warmth which quickly arises when large families live closely together over an extended period. Somewhere farther within, I heard a child crying, and from an open doorway there came the rapid sound of voices speaking Italian. I continued downward.

Only when I reached the lowest sections did it truly dawn upon me how enormous a vessel, I was aboard. Until then, I had spent most of my time among the passengers and in those areas designed for their comfort. Down here, however, the ship revealed herself in an entirely different guise. This was no longer the world of drawing rooms and promenade decks. It was the working world of the ship.

Everywhere around me stood stacks of cargo piled to impressive heights. Crates and trunks filled the passageways. Furniture had been securely lashed along the walls. Here and there I saw tools, agricultural equipment, and even several bicycles awaiting transportation to the far side of the Atlantic.

The quantity of possessions was so immense that it almost seemed to me as though an entire small town had packed up its life and attempted to move it across the ocean.

In a larger enclosed area farther ahead, I noticed various animals which had likewise been brought aboard. Chickens clucked their dissatisfaction within their cages. Geese moved about with that peculiar air of authority possessed only by geese, while ducks remained gathered in smaller groups.

Most remarkable of all, however, was a solitary goat, which surveyed its surroundings with great dignity, as though the entire vessel had been constructed solely for its benefit.

The smell in that part of the ship was precisely what one would expect from a modest farm in the countryside. I could not help smiling at the

thought. Only a few decks above, coffee was being served in silver pots and conversations conducted concerning art, politics, and opera. Down here there were chickens, straw, and livestock. The contrast between the two worlds seemed almost absurd.

Once again, I was reminded, Watson, that third-class passengers transported far more than mere possessions. They transported their entire existence. Their tools, their livestock, their modest savings, and their hopes for a new life were all gathered here within the ship's interior.

As I continued through the darker passageways, other sounds gradually began to dominate. First came the distant hiss of steam. Then the rhythmic strokes of pumps. The metal around me vibrated faintly, and somewhere farther ahead there sounded the monotonous ring of tools striking steel. It sounded like a vessel at work. Like a living creature whose enormous organs were concealed behind walls and bulkheads.

I immediately associated these sounds with the problems in the pumping system which the officers had previously mentioned. If repairs were indeed underway, it would be only natural for activity to be concentrated in precisely these areas. I therefore continued forward calmly but purposefully.

Along the way, I passed several members of the crew. None of them appeared particularly interested in me. They were occupied with their own duties and offered no more than a brief nod when our paths crossed. I returned their greetings in the same manner and continued onward.

To my own satisfaction, I noticed that I had already begun to acquire the particular manner in which the ship's personnel moved.

People seldom notice the man who appears naturally to belong where he is. Not because he hides himself, but because he presents precisely the impression his surroundings expect to see. On a ship filled with passengers, sailors, stewards, and engineers, it was an advantage I intended to exploit to the fullest.

The noise increased steadily as I moved deeper toward the engineering sections of the vessel. Soon the sound became almost deafening. Metallic blows, escaping steam, and the constant rhythm of machinery merged

into a heavy and continuous roar that penetrated both the floors and walls around me.

At the same time, the temperature rose noticeably with every step I took farther into the ship's interior. The vibrations increased as well. I scarcely dared imagine, Watson, what conditions must be like down here when the engines were operating at full power in the middle of the Atlantic.

I paused for a moment before a large open compartment and looked inside. It was almost entirely filled with coal.

Gigantic piles stretched along the walls while labourers with shovels and wheelbarrows continued tirelessly to fill the space even further. Several of the men worked half-clothed because of the heat, and their faces and hands were covered with black coal dust. The sight seemed almost surreal after the hours spent among first-class carpets, silver cutlery, and shaded lamps.

It struck me as though I had stepped directly out of a fashionable hotel and into one of the dark working-class streets of London's East End. The contrast was so pronounced that it seemed almost unreal.

Only minutes earlier, I had been among well-dressed passengers, silver cutlery, and subdued conversations concerning art, politics, and travel. Down here, the surroundings were defined by labor, necessity, and endurance. The smell of machinery, damp timber, and cargo filled the air, and the people around me were occupied by concerns entirely different from those that engaged the passengers of the first class.

On my return journey, I therefore deliberately took my time. I no longer had any particular destination. Now I observed. I noted side passages disappearing between the storage compartments. Narrow corridors through which two persons could scarcely pass one another. Small storage areas that appeared almost hidden behind random doors. Dead ends terminating at bulkheads or locked rooms.

Places where a man might remain for considerable periods without being noticed by anyone save the few whose daily work brought them there. The more I saw, the clearer one fact became. A man possessing the

proper experience and cover could move almost invisibly through these lower sections of the ship. Not merely for minutes. Perhaps for days.

Moran's Freedom of Movement

The thought inevitably brought me back to Colonel Moran. I now began truly to understand why he had chosen the crew stairways, connecting passages, and less-frequented sections as his preferred routes of movement.

Where passengers saw a maze of corridors, he probably saw a network of opportunities. Where others saw confusion, he saw shortcuts. It was an environment suited to him. A place where he could be present without being seen. No one continued to pay me any particular attention. For the first time, I felt that the disguise was doing more than merely concealing me. It had begun to alter the very manner in which other people perceived me.

When I eventually returned to my cabin, I closed the door behind me and drew a deep breath. Slowly, I removed the uniform and began washing the dark stain from my hairline and jaw. And while the dark water later gathered in the washbasin and slowly drained away, the many impressions of the day gradually found their places within my thoughts.

I then settled down with a book, though I must confess, Watson, that I read for a long time without truly reading. My eyes followed the lines while my thoughts continued their journey through the corridors, cargo holds, and hidden passages deep within the ship's interior.

It was not until much later, when darkness had settled over the harbour, that I laid the book aside and realised that most of the evening had passed without my being able to recount a single page of what I had supposedly been reading.

Chapter Eight

FIFTH DAY - GENOA

In the study, the winter darkness has now fallen completely, and only the lamp upon the desk casts its subdued glow across Holmes's closely written pages. The fire in the grate has sunk to a gentler glow, and the silence around me is broken only by the wind outside and the distant sound of a single cab passing along the street below.

After some time, I lay the papers aside and rub my tired eyes. I realise that I have already become absorbed in Holmes's account to a degree I had not entirely anticipated.

Watson's Reflections

I find myself thinking of the second day in Genoa, which brought with it remarkable observations and new developments. I now begin truly to sense that events are gathering momentum. Holmes is no longer merely a passenger awaiting a voyage. He is becoming part of the ship itself.

I remain seated quietly, the papers half-raised before me.

I have seen Holmes under the most varied circumstances over the years. I have followed him through the fog-bound streets of London, where the glow of the gas lamps scarcely managed to penetrate the mist. I have seen him in remote country houses where old family secrets lay concealed behind heavy curtains and generations of silence. I have traveled with him in railway carriages, along dusty country roads, through mountain passes, and across desolate stretches of moorland where civilisation seemed very far away. But never before had I accompanied him

to sea. It is precisely this circumstance that now fascinates me. A ship is different.

On land, Holmes had always possessed freedom of movement. He could leave a place if necessary. He could seek assistance, suspend an investigation, return to Baker Street, or place distance between himself and his enemies before returning later with renewed strength. Even when he found himself in danger, there was almost always a path of escape. Aboard an ocean-going vessel, conditions are entirely different. Here, there is no escape.

The further I read, the clearer it becomes that he seemed almost absorbed by the vessel itself. He no longer merely describes his observations. He describes the ship as a system. As a living organism with its own circulations, its own layers, and its own hidden connections. It seems to me that he has gradually become part of its rhythm and machinery.

My thoughts also return to his descriptions of the emigrants. I can almost see them before me: the furniture stacked among crates and trunks, the small lights in the evening, the families gathered closely around their modest possessions, the children playing among the baggage without fully understanding that their world was already beginning to change.

I think of the immense upheavals that lay before these people—or perhaps in which they already found themselves. Perhaps it is my background as a physician that causes my thoughts to linger upon the descriptions of the medical inspections on the quay. I imagine the men entrusted with the responsibility of making those decisions.

Where was the line to be drawn? When was a cough merely a cough, and when was it a sign of something far more serious? How many families had been separated at the last moment by a decision made within a few minutes by a stranger with a long queue waiting behind him? I cannot help pursuing the thought further. How many of these people ever found the life of which they dreamed? How many achieved the future that had persuaded them to leave behind everything they knew? And how many merely exchanged one form of uncertainty for another?

Holmes's descriptions cause me to reflect upon the entire human tide that moved across Europe in those years. Upon the poverty. Upon the

small villages emptied of their young people. Upon America as an idea rather than a reality. A promise. A vision. A hope so powerful that it could persuade men and women to abandon their homes, their language, and their past.

I sit with these thoughts for a long while before once again turning my attention to the letters. I sense that Holmes's voice has changed. Not dramatically, nor in a manner that immediately attracts notice. But gradually and unmistakably.

The weary, hunted, and defensive man who had written from Paris and later from Rome seemed slowly to have withdrawn into the background. The uncertainty has not disappeared, but it no longer dominates his account.

Instead, I increasingly recognise the Holmes I knew best.

The investigator, the strategist and the hunter. He is once more upon his true ground. Not because the danger has diminished, but because patterns have begun to emerge. He has something to analyse, something to follow, and something to understand. Where he had previously been driven by necessity, he is now once more driven by curiosity. And when Sherlock Holmes begins to perceive patterns, he is often at his most formidable.

I adjust the lamp slightly and slowly fill my pipe. The flames from the fireplace cast their warm glow across the walls of the study while the rain drums softly against the windowpane outside. I know now that the events aboard the *SS Majestic* have only just begun. But I also sense that the voyage has reached a point at which the decisive pieces will soon begin to move.

With that thought, I once more take up Holmes's journal and return to the strange, enclosed world aboard the *SS Majestic*, where the sea surrounds all sides and where no one yet suspects where the journey will truly end.

In Moran's Cabin

The ship already seemed half-empty, though this was true only of the two upper decks. Apparently, only a limited number of the third-class

passengers had been permitted to leave the vessel during the stay in Genoa. The lower sections still appeared densely populated, while first class had now acquired an almost deserted character.

After breakfast, I made certain that Colonel Sebastian Moran was among those passengers who had gone ashore. Only then did I return to my own cabin, where I retrieved the homemade key, I had previously fashioned with the aid of the wax impression taken from the steward's key ring.

Shortly thereafter, I gained access to Moran's cabin. I already knew the arrangement of the room. I knew where a passenger would naturally store his belongings, and, perhaps more importantly, where a man would be inclined to conceal objects that he did not wish discovered during a superficial search. I therefore began systematically with the trunk, continued to the writing desk, and from there moved on to the cupboards and drawers. The work did not take long.

The further I progressed through his belongings, the clearer one fact became. If the document *Saint Peter's Confession* was aboard the ship in Moran's possession, it was unlikely to be concealed within this cabin.

Everywhere I found the usual articles that accompany a man upon a lengthy journey: clothing, toiletries, shaving equipment, a few personal effects, and the many small necessities that gradually accumulate around any traveler. But the document was nowhere to be found. Instead, I made a discovery which, in its own way, proved almost equally interesting.

Among several rolled papers lay a larger sheet which at first glance resembled a technical drawing. I carefully unfolded it upon the desk and immediately realised that I was looking at a detailed map of the *SS Majestic*. It was far more comprehensive than the diagrams occasionally provided to ordinary passengers. Not only were the decks and cabins marked, but also connecting corridors, staff routes, service stairways, emergency exits, and various technical areas, all indicated with a precision that clearly suggested the document had been intended for internal use.

I studied the map for some time. Gradually, several of my earlier observations began to fall into place. The staff door leading to the stairway toward the cargo holds. The passages where he seemed to disappear from sight only to reappear elsewhere aboard the vessel. None of it had been improvised. He had clearly familiarised himself with the structure of the ship long before our departure from Naples. It struck me that I had perhaps underestimated the extent of his preparations. Naturally, I had always regarded him as an intelligent adversary, but this pointed to something more. He had not merely planned his journey.

After carefully rolling the map up once more and returning it to precisely where I had found it, I turned my attention to the wardrobe. Here, too, my observations became interesting. A pair of trousers caught my attention because I believed I recognised them from the first days of the voyage. Upon closer inspection, I discovered small traces of coal dust along the hems. The amount was modest, but sufficient to arouse my interest.

So far as I could judge, the dust could only have originated from the lower working areas surrounding the machinery and technical installations. The discovery corresponded remarkably well with the map.

As I continued my examination of the wardrobe, I found additional items that seemed out of place among Moran's other belongings. There were rough shoes, worn gloves, a dark jacket, and various articles of clothing that would have suited a labourer far better than a well-dressed first-class passenger. What was most remarkable, however, was not the clothing itself but its condition. Almost everything appeared only lightly used, as though it had been acquired for a specific purpose and then set aside in anticipation of the proper moment.

A dark cap attracted my attention. At first glance, it resembled the caps worn by dockworkers and men employed in the cargo holds, but upon closer inspection it seemed almost too carefully considered. It was ordinary enough to pass unnoticed yet selected with a degree of care that told me its owner had considered precisely how he wished to appear.

I must confess, Watson, that the realisation made a certain impression upon me. There are few more troublesome adversaries than those who think according to the same principles as oneself.

When I finally concluded my examination, I spent several minutes ensuring that everything stood exactly as before. The map was returned. The clothing was rehung. No drawer stood differently than it had when I arrived.

Only when I was entirely satisfied with the result did I leave the cabin in silence. Moran would discover not the slightest sign that I had been there. Yet I left his cabin with a far clearer understanding of the man himself. And that understanding made me more uneasy than I cared to admit.

The Telegram

I spent most of the afternoon in the smaller streets around the harbour of Genoa. I had various minor errands to attend to, but my true purpose was naturally to pay another visit to the telegraph office in the hope of finding a message from Paris.

To my considerable satisfaction, a reply was already awaiting me.

The telegram consisted of only a few lines, but they were entirely sufficient:

Arriving Gibraltar as requested stop Several performances sacrificed in process stop, I trust your mystery justifies expense stop

— C.A.

After reading it, I allowed myself a rare smile.

It was precisely the sort of reply I had expected from Mademoiselle Camille Ardent: concise, intelligent, and marked by exactly that hint of ironic elegance which made her particularly useful in situations of this character.

I immediately left the telegraph office and continued by cab back toward the harbour.

Upon my arrival, I was able to determine from a distance that the repair work apparently had been completed, at least temporarily. Activity around the ship had once again increased, and several members of the

crew were now moving quickly between the gangways and the upper decks. At the gangway, passengers were informed that departure was expected within approximately one hour, as soon as all persons aboard had been accounted for.

On my way up to the deck, I paused for a moment and observed the new emigrants who were now boarding the vessel. This time, the procedure was being conducted under considerably stricter supervision than before. Two physicians personally carried out the examinations, and every passenger was carefully inspected before permission to board was granted.

Several were asked to open their mouths, cough, or present their documents once again, and the atmosphere among the families seemed noticeably more strained than it had been during the departure from Naples.

It was clear to me that the management of the *SS Majestic* wished to demonstrate to the other passengers that the situation was entirely under control. Whether it truly had remained however, an open question.

Aboard Once More

Owing to the increasing activity surrounding our departure and the many small events aboard, I had almost succeeded in forgetting Madame Cécile Beaumont altogether. I was, however, quickly reminded of her existence at the evening buffet, where she once again managed, with considerable elegance, to accompany me at the table, almost as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

That evening she seemed more purposeful than before. After the initial courtesies, Madame Beaumont began to show far greater interest in my supposed literary occupation. What did I write about? Which French authors did I myself admire? And which literary genre did I regard as the most significant of the present age?

I must confess, Watson, that at precisely this moment I became painfully aware of the limitations of even the most carefully prepared disguise. For it is one thing to appear to be an author. It is quite another

to conduct a prolonged conversation with someone who is genuinely interested in literature.

Fortunately, Madame Beaumont proved to be just as fond of presenting her own opinions as she was of hearing mine. I therefore managed, tolerably well, to navigate the conversation by means of cautious improvisations, sufficiently vague formulations, and a series of polite questions which soon caused her to speak once more of her own literary preferences.

As so often before, it became apparent that people much prefer to speak of their own interests than to examine those of others too closely.

Later that evening, I withdrew once again to the salon with the card tables, where I immediately observed that Colonel Sebastian Moran had resumed his customary place. He sat with the same calm assurance as before and appeared entirely untouched by the events which, during the past few days, had occupied so many of the ship's other passengers. Neither the rumours of illness, the delays in Genoa, nor the growing uneasiness among the emigrants seemed to have left the slightest trace upon him. I observed him for some time. If he had in any way discovered my presence in his cabin, he showed no sign of it. On the contrary, he appeared almost remarkably at ease.

I therefore chose to regard this as a good sign and drew the provisional conclusion that my investigation had been carried out without arousing suspicion.

Chapter Nine

SIXTH DAY - THE MEDITERRANEAN

The following morning, I awoke with the immediate sensation that something had changed. At first I could not say precisely what it was. But after only a few moments, I recognised the familiar rhythm passing through the ship's structure. The deep vibrations beneath the floor, the regular pulse of the machinery, and that particular movement which belongs only to a great vessel upon the open sea told me all I needed to know. We were back at sea.

I was just about to leave the cabin and make my way toward the breakfast buffet when there came a cautious knock at the door. When I opened it, William stood outside. Something in his appearance caused me at once to pause. He seemed more tense than usual. Almost nervous. Yet at the same time there was something satisfied about him, as one sees in a man who believes he has made a discovery of importance. I allowed him to enter and closed the door behind him.

"You asked me to observe, Monsieur Valmont," he said quietly. "And I have done so."

He hesitated for a moment, as though still considering how much he ought to say.

"Perhaps I have found something that may interest you. Perhaps it is only a trifle. But it seems to me to be an irregularity, and I thought it might arouse your curiosity."

I immediately felt my interest sharpen. William had already proved himself both observant and reliable. He was not the sort to seek me out without reason.

“Interesting,” I said calmly. “But I presume this is not a conversation that should be conducted here and now.”

He nodded at once.

We therefore agreed to meet again at eleven o’clock that same morning, after which he quickly left the cabin and disappeared down the corridor with that peculiar, hurried gait which seems common to all stewards aboard ship.

On my way toward the breakfast buffet, my thoughts naturally began at once to circle around the discovery he had hinted at. The possibilities were numerous. Perhaps it concerned the new emigrants who had come aboard in Genoa. Perhaps it had to do with the rumours of illness, which still seemed to possess a life of their own among the passengers.

When I reached the dining saloon, however, I could immediately perceive that the atmosphere aboard had changed noticeably since the days before our call at Genoa.

The uneasiness which had previously marked many of the passengers now seemed to have diminished. Conversations sounded carefree once more. Laughter could be heard at several of the tables. Even the most anxious faces appeared more relaxed. The stay ashore had clearly had a calming effect upon many of them, and the extensive medical inspections during boarding had probably created the impression that the situation was now under control. Other impressions had simply found room in people’s minds.

It struck me once again, Watson, how quickly even serious concerns may disappear among human beings, provided only that ordinary life returns with sufficient conviction.

Going Down Again

In a brief remark, William had indicated that the irregularity he wished to show me was located in the lower part of the ship. I therefore decided at once that the situation required an appearance other than that of Monsieur Étienne Valmont.

Back in my cabin, I once more took out the steward’s uniform and put it on with what had already become a familiar routine. Again, I applied

the dark stain along the hairline and added a faint shadow at the jaw in order to break the customary lines of my face. Then I regarded myself for a moment in the mirror.

I had to admit, Watson, that the transformation already seemed far more natural to me than it had the first time. I was Emilio again.

Precisely at eleven o'clock, there came a cautious knock at the door.

"Come in," I said quietly.

William put his head inside—and stopped at once with an expression of visible surprise. For a brief moment it actually seemed to me that he did not recognise me at all. Then he smiled faintly.

"It is astonishing," he said in a low voice.

"That is also the intention," I replied calmly.

We wasted no further time.

Together we moved quickly and discreetly through the first-class corridors. At that hour the ship was marked by that particular midday stillness during which many passengers were still in the salons or upon the deck, while the greater part of the staff was already occupied with the day's routines.

We met no one on the way. Shortly afterward, we reached the staff door, which William opened without hesitation. He went first down the narrow stairway. I followed close behind him into the darker and more hidden world of the *SS Majestic*.

The first part of the journey down through the ship's interior was already familiar to me from the previous day. I was nevertheless surprised by how violently conditions had changed now that the vessel was once more in full motion upon the open sea. The sounds were far stronger. The whole ship seemed alive around us.

Steam hung heavy in the air, and everywhere I sensed that particular mixture of oil, coal dust, and damp heat produced by the machinery. Even the walls around the stairway vibrated constantly, and the farther we descended, the more penetrating the noise became. It was soon impossible to conduct an ordinary conversation.

William walked ahead of me without speaking, and when we reached the lowest deck among the stacks of cargo, he merely turned briefly and signalled with his hand which way we were to continue. I followed him.

Behind some crates and a hanging of sackcloth sat a man upon a stool. I was not especially surprised to see him. My first thought was naturally the most obvious one: that he was down here because he was not permitted to be anywhere else. Everything about his situation immediately pointed in that direction. He had concealed himself among the cargo, he was plainly not a member of the crew, and the improvised hiding place bore the clear marks of a man who had for some time been attempting to avoid attention. In other words, we were probably dealing with a stowaway. And yet there was something about the situation that caused me to hesitate.

Over the years, I had seen many people attempt to hide from the authorities, from creditors, or from other forms of pursuit, and I had also encountered men who, in desperation, had taken their chance and slipped aboard vessels without a ticket.

But such people generally possessed a certain alertness. They listened for footsteps and watched their surroundings, and they were accustomed to the fear of discovery. This man seemed different. He did not sit like a man in hiding. Rather, he seemed like one who had been left behind.

His shoulders hung heavily, and the laboured breathing which had already caught my attention now sounded even more clearly in the stillness between the crates. When he slowly raised his head and caught sight of us, I saw no real alarm in his eyes. Rather, he appeared relieved to see other human beings. It was precisely this circumstance that impressed me most strongly.

If William had merely wished to show me a stowaway, his agitation would have been difficult to understand. There had to be more to the matter than that. Something had caused the young steward to seek me out first thing that morning, and as I studied the man before me, my sense grew that we were facing something quite different from a simple breach of the ship's regulations.

I therefore began, even then, to suspect that the true story had not yet revealed itself. And as so often before, Watson, it later proved that this suspicion was well founded.

Santos

My reflections were interrupted, however, by William, who leaned slightly toward me and said in an almost inaudible whisper:

“The sick passenger.”

I immediately looked upon the man with different eyes. In the dim glow of the lamp, his weakness became far more apparent to me. It was not merely fatigue, but that particular exhaustion one observes in a man who has recently suffered severely from illness. I stepped closer and calmly introduced myself as Emilio, while making it clear that he had nothing to fear from me. At the sight of me, the man instinctively drew back a little and coughed into his sleeve.

“Santos,” he said hoarsely.

He then began, slowly and somewhat incoherently, to explain his situation. He belonged to a family that was bound for America, and several times he repeated, almost despairingly:

“It is a terrible mess... why did I have to fall ill?”

It soon became clear to me that he was not suffering from any serious or particularly contagious disease. He described it rather as a severe influenza, or possibly an allergic condition that had affected his airways.

“It certainly does not improve down here,” he said, casting a faint glance around the cargo hold. “But it is not dangerous.”

From time to time his explanation was interrupted by coughing. The real difficulty, however, no longer lay in the illness itself, but in the fact that another man had been put ashore under his name during the stop in Genoa. A member of his own family. This circumstance clearly troubled him far more than his physical condition.

William quietly explained that Santos had already recovered considerably during the few days he had spent hidden below deck.

“I suppose I shall have to remain here for the entire crossing,” Santos said softly. “And then... with the help of good friends, I hope...”

He nodded cautiously toward William.

"...it may be possible for me to go ashore in New York."

He fell silent for a moment before adding, almost apologetically:

"But I have no money left. My means were modest from the beginning... and now they are exhausted."

Naturally, Watson, I formed my own conclusions regarding this matter. Services aboard a vessel of this size are seldom performed for long without payment. As I reflected upon Santos's unfortunate circumstances, an idea gradually began to take shape.

"When you are well enough to move about down here, Santos," I said calmly, "I may have a small occupation for you, one which, in return, should ensure that you can set foot upon American soil without any great difficulty when we reach New York City."

Santos slowly raised his eyes toward me. His face still bore the marks of illness, yet I could now detect a cautious attentiveness in his gaze—and perhaps even a glimmer of hope.

"An occupation?" he asked quietly.

"I could make use of a pair of good eyes down here in the cargo hold," I continued.

His expression became more questioning still.

"A pair of eyes," I explained, "that keeps watch on who comes and goes."

Now he was clearly beginning to understand.

The Assignment

I then described the man who particularly interested me. I explained that he was someone who wished to appear as an ordinary labourer among the ship's crew and the men working on the lower decks, yet who would nevertheless stand out slightly from the crowd if one paid attention to the right details.

I mentioned the heavy boots I had previously observed. I described the dark working clothes and the distinctive cap with the broad brim which had impressed itself upon my memory during my investigations. Finally,

I drew attention to the well-groomed moustache which, in my opinion, scarcely belonged naturally among the ship's ordinary workers.

As I spoke, Santos listened attentively.

"If you keep your eyes and ears open," I continued, "I shall see to it that you need no longer concern yourself with how you are to leave the ship in New York."

Santos looked first at me and then at William.

"And how am I to pass my observations on?" he asked after a brief pause.

"Through William," I replied, nodding toward the young steward.

William immediately nodded in confirmation.

Santos remained silent for several seconds. He sat with his gaze fixed upon the floor, as though weighing his situation and the opportunities still available to him. At length he slowly inclined his head in silent acceptance. Nothing more was said.

Shortly afterward, William and I left the concealed refuge among the crates. The glow of the oil lamp gradually disappeared behind us as we once again made our way through the labyrinthine passages of the cargo hold and began the ascent through the ship's interior.

On the way back, I naturally occupied myself with my own reflections. I now knew with considerable certainty that Colonel Sebastian Moran was operating in the lower regions of the ship. The coal dust upon his clothing, the map of the vessel's interior, and not least his disguise all pointed in the same direction. There was something down there that held a particular interest for him.

At the same time, I had perhaps acquired an observer. The hidden man in the cargo hold might prove to be my eyes in a place where I could not easily remain myself. Whether he was sufficiently reliable, I did not yet know, but in the game now unfolding aboard ship one must sometimes work with the pieces available.

An Offensive Plan

For the first time since we left Europe, I therefore felt that the balance between us was beginning to shift, if only slightly. Moran still possessed

the document, certainly, but I was gradually beginning to understand his methods. It was for precisely that reason that I arrived at the conclusion that my next move should not be defensive. I must force him to react.

After considerable reflection, it seemed almost paradoxical that the document had now become less important than the man who concealed it. If I continued searching directly for the document, I would most likely expend my efforts examining a ship far larger and more complicated than any passenger could readily imagine. If, on the other hand, I could induce Moran to reveal something about the hiding place himself, the situation would be entirely different.

My plan was therefore unusually simple. I would visit his cabin once again. Not in order to search for anything, but deliberately to leave behind a small trace. Something so discreet that no casual visitor would ever notice it. Something so modest that it could not be interpreted as burglary or sabotage. Yet at the same time sufficient for a man such as Moran to detect.

By now I knew his type. He was disciplined. Methodical. Suspicious. He was the sort of man who remembered the position of an object down to the smallest detail. If even one thing stood ever so slightly differently from before, he would notice it. And, more importantly, he would begin to think. Has someone been here? And is the document still safe?

If my assessment of him was correct, he would not be able to leave the matter alone. Sooner or later he would feel compelled either to inspect the hiding place or perhaps move the document to a new location. And it was precisely at that moment that I hoped to observe him.

Naturally, the plan was not without risk. The timing would have to be chosen with great care. I could not simply disappear from the social gatherings aboard ship whenever it suited me. Madame Beaumont had already ensured that Monsieur Étienne Valmont had become a far more visible figure in first class than I had ever wished. A prolonged absence would inevitably provoke questions, and questions were the last thing I needed.

After some consideration, the evenings around the card tables therefore seemed best suited to my purpose. Once Moran was seated at the

table, the game absorbed him completely, while at the same time the attention of the passengers was directed toward their own amusements. In such an atmosphere, even an absence of several minutes could easily pass unnoticed.

I would first make myself plainly visible at the card tables, so that both Moran and the other passengers registered my presence. Then, under some natural pretext, I would leave the room, make my way swiftly to his cabin, do what was necessary, and return again as though nothing at all had occurred. I had no intention of remaining there a moment longer than absolutely necessary.

Chapter Ten

SEVENTH DAY

The following day, Watson, I found myself in a state which I can best describe as one of restrained restlessness. Naturally, I made every effort not to allow it to influence my outward conduct, yet my thoughts returned incessantly to the question of whether Colonel Sebastian Moran had observed the small alterations in his cabin—and, more importantly, whether they had produced the effect I had intended.

I therefore found myself instinctively awaiting every knock upon my cabin door from William, hoping it might bring news from the cargo hold or from Santos's observations. But nothing occurred. Apart from the customary meals and the formal social gatherings, I spent the greater part of the day in my cabin under various pretexts, listening for signs of any development. The day passed without any real movement. The only noteworthy event that occurred proved instead to be an experience of a very different—and, to my mind, considerably more painful—nature.

Unwanted Attention

Madame Cécile Beaumont had once again joined me at the coffee table earlier that afternoon and had inquired further about my literary works. In order to satisfy her curiosity, I had improvised several titles which seemed sufficiently ordinary to slip quickly from her memory. This proved to be a serious miscalculation.

The catastrophe occurred during the evening meal. Madame Beaumont was once again seated at my table and, on this particular evening, was engaged in an especially animated discussion of literature. She ques-

tioned me about English and French authors, about various literary movements, and about my own opinions regarding them, to which I improvised answers as best I could, answers which appeared only to increase her enthusiasm.

I must confess, Watson, that during the course of the conversation I allowed myself to be somewhat flattered by her attention and perhaps forgot for a moment that, in this matter, I was wearing borrowed feathers.

Then, suddenly—and without the slightest warning—she rose to her feet. Before I could comprehend her intention, she tapped lightly upon her glass with a spoon. An astonishing silence immediately descended over the entire dining saloon. Until that moment, no one had addressed the room during dinner apart from the officers who occasionally conveyed announcements from the ship's management. Yet there, stood Madame Beaumont, clearly enjoying the attention of every person present.

She waited until complete silence had been achieved and then declared, with considerable solemnity, that she merely wished to offer a warm recommendation to her fellow passengers. She had, she explained, enjoyed on several occasions the great pleasure of the company of the celebrated French author Monsieur Étienne Valmont, whose presence had, according to her account, practically saved her voyage.

At this point, I felt a very distinct desire to disappear immediately through the nearest emergency exit. But the ordeal was far from over.

Madame Beaumont continued with increasing enthusiasm.

"In addition to being an exceedingly charming and cultivated gentleman," she declared, "Monsieur Valmont is, of course, one of the great literary voices of our age—not merely in France, but far beyond her borders."

She then proceeded, with great emphasis, to mention one of the fictitious book titles I had previously invented for the occasion.

I scarcely believe, Watson, that I have ever before felt so profoundly uncomfortable during a dinner.

I fervently hoped that no one present possessed any significant knowledge of contemporary French literature.

Madame Beaumont concluded her speech by warmly recommending that her fellow passengers take advantage of the opportunity to enjoy the company of “such a literary luminary” during the remainder of the crossing, after which she performed a theatrical nod in my direction. To my horror, this was met with spontaneous applause from several tables around us. I had no alternative but to nod politely to those present and attempt to follow the mood of the room as naturally as possible. At the subsequent coffee gathering, matters became even worse.

Over the following days, the consequences of my unfortunate literary fame began to make themselves fully felt. Numerous passengers now sought me out personally at every conceivable opportunity. Some wished to compliment me upon the masterpiece I had supposedly written, although none of them appeared entirely certain of either its title or its contents. Others asked me to recommend books which they almost certainly had no intention of reading, while a few, with the utmost seriousness, requested my views on French culture, modern literature, and the most significant authors of the age.

Naturally, I endeavoured to answer these inquiries with appropriate courtesy, yet as time passed a suspicion began to take shape in my mind. It seemed to me that the interest in literature was often considerably less than the interest in the author. Several of my conversational partners appeared far more concerned with being seen in the company of Monsieur Étienne Valmont than with anything he might actually have written.

Looking back upon these events today, Watson, I must admit that few of my disguises have ever inflicted greater personal suffering upon me.

I had previously impersonated clergymen, sailors, merchants, and laborers without significant difficulty. Yet to pose as a successful author among people who sincerely wished to discuss literature proved a far more exhausting undertaking. At the time, however, I regarded it merely as a minor irritation.

On the one hand, I was now obliged to maintain a considerably lower profile and, if possible, avoid the larger social gatherings aboard ship. On

the other hand, under the present circumstances, it would provoke far greater curiosity if Monsieur Étienne Valmont were suddenly to disappear entirely from the vessel's public life. I therefore needed to find a balance between visibility and reserve.

That evening, I resolved to leave dinner comparatively early. For the first time since our departure, I had no intention of observing the card game any longer than absolutely necessary. I would confine myself to a brief stay in the smoking room and thereafter retire to my cabin. At the time, this seemed to me the most prudent course of action.

And it was precisely then, Watson, that there occurred what I had perhaps expected least of all—though, upon reflection, it was something I probably ought to have foreseen.

Moran's Passion

I was sitting alone in the smoking room with my pipe and a small glass of cognac before me. Several passengers greeted me politely as they passed through the room, but none sat down beside me. Perhaps I did not appear particularly inviting that evening.

Then a figure suddenly halted before me. It was Colonel Sebastian Moran. He greeted me courteously and asked, in a calm voice, whether he might join me. Naturally, I endeavoured to appear as unconcerned as possible and indicated the chair opposite. Moran did not immediately say anything further.

Instead, he calmly extended a hand toward the tobacco tray and selected, with considerable care, a large cigar. He slowly turned it between his fingers, examined the band, held it up to the light, and finally raised it to his nose with almost ceremonial deliberation.

I could not help thinking, Watson, that in that moment he appeared entirely the sort of officer who must have felt exceedingly at home in the clubs and officers' messes of British India. He took his time lighting the cigar. Only when the smoke had begun to gather heavily between us did he look at me through the bluish haze. Perhaps that very smoke was my good fortune. At any rate, I made certain not to be sparing with the smoke from my own pipe.

"Interesting," he said suddenly. "Most interesting."

I immediately understood that I must appear politely interested without seeming in any way tense.

"And what are you thinking of?" I asked calmly.

"Oh," he said with a slight nod, "I shall not presume to call myself a writer, although in my younger days I did make a few attempts at works of a literary nature."

I allowed him to continue.

"Drawn from my travels in the East," he added after a pause.

"Ah," said I, "travel writing?"

"Yes... among other things."

For a moment he stared into the air before him and allowed another slow cloud of cigar smoke to drift through the room.

"May I ask," I then said, "what your principal interests are?"

"Certainly," he replied without hesitation. "Hunting."

He leaned back slightly.

"It is, I believe, my greatest fascination."

Now I listened with considerably greater attention.

"To hunt prey," he continued calmly, "particularly in difficult terrain—that is a very special art."

He smiled faintly.

"Perhaps the prey has seen you. Perhaps it has not. You possess your advantages, and the prey possesses its own. In the end, it is always a struggle of life and death."

He looked directly at me.

I found it difficult to determine whether there was any genuine undertone behind the words, or whether I merely attributed greater significance to them because of my own circumstances. But one thing was clear. He spoke as a man who enjoyed the hunt.

"Yes, Monsieur Valmont," he said after another moment. "I shall not disturb you any further."

He nodded lightly toward the card room.

"I had better return to another of my passions—the game of whist."

I noticed that his gaze briefly passed over me as he spoke.

"I have observed your steadfastness at the bar on several occasions," he continued. "And you have no doubt observed that fortune appears to favour me."

"I certainly have," I replied.

He smiled faintly.

"Now I merely hope," he said, "that it will continue to favour me throughout the voyage... and conclude with complete victory."

With that, he rose, nodded politely, and made his way toward the card tables.

I remained seated with a curious sensation. Perhaps I had just been a minor figure in a story that Moran himself was telling. And perhaps not. But if I had indeed been such a figure, one thing was perfectly clear to me: Colonel Moran possessed considerable talent as an actor.

I allowed some time to pass, slowly finished my pipe, and then returned to my cabin.

Chapter Eleven

EIGHTH DAY

The following morning, I was awakened by movements that bordered upon actual tremors—something I had not previously experienced during the voyage. At intervals the floor beneath me shuddered, followed by a dull, almost hollow impact somewhere within the hull. I remained lying still for a moment and listened. If one waited long enough, there was a certain regularity to it: first the vibrations, then the impact, and then silence once more.

I rose and crossed to the porthole. There I immediately found the explanation. The weather had changed. The Mediterranean no longer lay calm around us, but moved in dark-grey, heavy swells that struck against the ship's sides. The SS *Majestic* still maintained herself impressively in the sea, yet the larger waves nevertheless sent noticeable tremors through the steel structure, and whenever a particularly heavy swell struck the hull, it sounded like a brief, muffled blow somewhere deep within the vessel. I had expected such weather later, out on the Atlantic, but I was reminded that the Mediterranean, too, had enjoyed its reputation among sailors for centuries.

William Has News

I had not progressed far in these reflections before a knock sounded at my cabin door. I opened it cautiously at first but immediately pulled it wider when I saw that it was William.

"There is news, monsieur," he said quietly.

"Come in," I replied at once. "Tell me."

William stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Santos observed something during the night," he said. "The person you described appeared shortly after midnight. Santos heard the stairs creak and was able to follow him without being seen."

I felt my attention sharpen at once.

"He actually believes," William continued, "that he knows which direction the man went... and perhaps also what his purpose was."

"Interesting," I said calmly. "When can we speak with him?"

"After breakfast would be best. I am busy at the moment. But if you can be ready around eleven o'clock..."

He hesitated briefly and then added with a faint smile:

"...and make certain that you resemble a functioning steward."

I nodded and smiled.

At breakfast I did my utmost to remain as anonymous as possible—with little success.

Naturally, Madame Cécile Beaumont arrived at my table almost immediately. This morning she was able to report that she had enjoyed a most vivid dream in which a French poet had played a prominent role.

"Hopefully in a favourable capacity?" I remarked dryly.

She smiled over her coffee cup.

"I shall not say."

Several of those around the table laughed quietly.

Later, additional passengers joined us and greeted the "French author" with almost exaggerated politeness. I was beginning to feel like an impostor in a minor theatrical comedy.

Immediately after breakfast I hurried back to my cabin.

I must confess, Watson, that William's message occupied my thoughts far more than I cared to admit. The young steward had thus far proved both attentive and reliable, and the excitement I had observed in him earlier that morning suggested that he genuinely believed he had discovered something of significance. I therefore carried out my transformation with greater haste than usual.

The work had by now become almost routine. I knew precisely where the darkening should be applied along the hairline, how much should

be added around the jaw, and which small alterations best transformed the overall impression of the face. What had once required concentration and caution I now performed almost mechanically. I was finished long before the appointed time.

William distinguished himself once again through his punctuality. I recognised the four short knocks upon the door before I had even reached it. When he entered, we exchanged only a few words before making our way through the corridors and down toward the crew stairways.

We spoke very little during the journey.

Something Has Changed

The ship sounded different now than it had during our stay in Genoa. The deep rhythm of the engines had returned, and through the steel structure one could once again feel the constant pulse of the machinery. At the same time, the blows of the sea against the hull mingled with the metallic labor of the pumping systems, so that the entire vessel seemed to live its own mechanical life around us.

The air grew steadily heavier as we descended. There was a damp warmth in the lower sections which led me to think that a ship, too, possessed its own seasons and its own climate, determined by the sea outside and the machinery within.

At last, we reached the labyrinth of crates, furniture, and cargo in the hold. Here the light once again became sparse, and the narrow passages between the stacks resembled alleys more than parts of a passenger vessel. William stopped suddenly.

"Wait here for a moment," he whispered.

I nodded, and he disappeared alone among the crates.

Only a few minutes passed, yet when he returned, I immediately saw that something was wrong. His expression had changed. The anticipatory satisfaction I had noticed earlier that morning had vanished.

"He is not here," he said quietly.

"Not here?"

William shook his head.

"I do not understand it. He never leaves the place for this long."

I looked toward the concealed corner among the crates where Santos had maintained his primitive refuge the previous day.

"Let us wait a little," I said.

We found a place nearby and waited. A quarter of an hour passed. Then several more minutes. But Santos did not appear.

Gradually our waiting began to seem pointless, and we instead decided to examine the surrounding area with caution. We moved through the passages between the cargo, looked behind stacks of freight, and searched the places where a man in his circumstances might naturally be expected to seek shelter.

Several workers passed us in the process. William spoke discreetly with a few of them who knew of Santos's presence aboard, but the answers were the same everywhere. No one had seen him. At length we were forced to admit that our search had produced no result.

Lunchtime was approaching, and I had no desire to make my absence from first class unnecessarily conspicuous. Furthermore, yet another change of identity awaited me. We therefore agreed that William should continue his inquiries on his own and seek me out immediately should he discover the slightest clue.

As we parted, I was left with a growing sense of unease. Santos had not struck me as a man who would voluntarily abandon his hiding place. He had been ill, weakened, and obviously dependent upon the assistance William provided. That he should suddenly disappear without explanation therefore seemed highly remarkable.

As I made my way back toward the upper decks, my thoughts inevitably returned to the events of the previous evening. Was there a connection? Could Santos's disappearance somehow be related to my conversation with Moran? Or perhaps to the small traces I had left behind in his cabin? I attempted to dismiss the idea as premature, yet it returned again and again.

I began seriously to consider whether I had once more underestimated Colonel Sebastian Moran. And if that were indeed the case, I feared that Santos might already have paid the price for my misjudgment.

Oliver Hanson

I was not, however, Watson, required to wait very long before at least some of my questions were answered.

Later that same day, while I was sitting in my cabin after luncheon and listening to the ship's heavy motions working their way through the steel structure around me, the familiar four knocks once again sounded upon the door.

I opened it immediately, and William stepped inside.

This time he was visibly affected by the situation.

"I have found Santos," he said quickly.

"Alive?" I asked almost instinctively.

I must confess, Watson, that I had already imagined several less pleasant possibilities.

"More than that," William replied.

I must have looked puzzled, for he continued at once.

"He is on the second deck."

"On the second deck?"

"Yes," said William. "And his name is now Oliver Hanson."

I looked at him silently for a moment.

"I do not understand you, William."

"Neither do I entirely," he admitted. "But it is him. I have not the slightest doubt. I tried approaching him, but he behaved as though he had never seen me before in his life."

"Oliver Hanson..." I repeated slowly.

"I then checked the passenger lists," William continued. "The name is there, certainly. But it looks strange. It appears at the bottom of the second-class passenger list, and it almost seems as though it was added later."

"Aha," I exclaimed.

Now several things suddenly began to fall into place.

"Of course, the name was added," I said quietly. "The question is why... and, more importantly, how."

William looked at me expectantly.

"You will wish to see it for yourself, I assume?"

"Well thought, William," I said, nodding approvingly. "Very well thought indeed."

I immediately began considering the possibilities.

"When would be the most suitable time?"

"Meals are handled differently in second class," he explained. "There is no formal dining room like the one in first class. People collect food from the large serving tables or receive it in one of the lounges. There is much more movement and confusion. It would be easy enough to remain there without attracting attention."

I quickly considered the timing.

"But how do I avoid being absent from dinner in first class at the same time?"

William smiled faintly.

"The second-class passengers dine early. Around five o'clock. If we go down a little beforehand, you should have no difficulty returning to first class by half past five."

I nodded.

"Excellent."

Thus, the arrangement was made.

I did very little else that afternoon. The weather had meanwhile grown rougher, and the SS *Majestic* was now moving far more heavily in the sea than she had earlier in the voyage, so that it suited me well enough to remain comparatively quiet in my cabin. By a quarter to five I was once again dressed in the steward's uniform, and the darkening along the hairline, together with the shadow about the jaw, had by now become almost a matter of routine. I found myself observing once more how quickly a man accustoms himself even to the strangest of double lives. Shortly afterward William knocked upon the door, and together we made our way down toward the second deck.

The Second Deck

The meal service unfolded very much as William had described it. At some of the tables passengers stood in line with plates and cutlery in their

hands, while at others there was free access to platters and large serving pots. There appeared to be plenty of food, yet the whole atmosphere differed markedly from the elegant order of first class. Here there were no attendants discreetly drawing out chairs or refilling glasses; people moved freely among one another, spoke more loudly, laughed more openly, and taken altogether it actually seemed as though many of the passengers were quite at ease with the more informal tone.

William and I placed ourselves in a corner of the room from which we could overlook the greater part of the area without attracting any particular attention. Some time passed before he gave a discreet nod in a certain direction and said quietly, "The man with the tall hat."

I followed his gaze. At that distance I could not yet determine anything with certainty, but we began slowly and without haste to move closer through the crowd, and the nearer I came, the clearer it became that William had been entirely right. There could be no doubt. The man was identical with Santos — or rather with the man who had previously called himself Santos down in the cargo hold.

He now had more colour in his face and was dressed in a neat, almost respectable suit of clothes which suited him far better than the conditions among the crates had done. Indeed, he appeared almost distinguished. Only the slightly exhausted expression and the weariness about his eyes still betrayed his recent stay in the darker regions of the ship. While we observed him, he coughed briefly into his sleeve, and that small movement removed the last possible doubt. The question now was simply how he had come to be here.

After a few moments' consideration, I decided upon a direct confrontation and therefore walked calmly toward him.

"Mr. Oliver Hanson?" I said.

He raised his head and nodded at once, and I could clearly see that he recognised me.

"It seems to me," I continued quietly, "not entirely easy to understand how you now come to be on this deck. I was also under the impression that we had an arrangement."

For a moment he merely looked at me without quite meeting my eyes. Then he said quietly:

“One generally gets what one pays for.”

I studied him for several seconds and then understood the situation at once. There was nothing further to discuss. I had simply been outbid. It was yet another misjudgment on my part, and without another word I turned away and left the area together with William. He followed me back toward my cabin, and only when the door had closed behind us did, he exclaim:

“I still do not understand it.”

“No,” I replied calmly, as I took a seat at the table. “But apparently the rules are the same here as in the darker streets of London. The highest bidder obtains his due. And when a man possesses something to which several others desire access, he suddenly finds himself in a remarkably advantageous position.”

William nodded slowly, still plainly bewildered by the situation.

“Our friend Santos,” I continued, “has quite clearly received a better offer than the one I gave him — or merely hinted at. And perhaps,” I added after a short pause, “the offer was accompanied by a discreet threat as well.”

William again looked somewhat uncertain, but nodded nevertheless. I took out another silver coin and pressed it discreetly into his hand. This time we both smiled, for by now we both understood the meaning of that small gesture.

The Game Turns

My dear Watson, the day had already been long and filled with several surprises, yet this was not to be the last of them. The evening still held an observation of considerable value — perhaps not something from which I could immediately derive any direct advantage, but something I understood at once might become highly significant later, when Mademoiselle Camille Ardent would make her entrance aboard.

The evening meal passed surprisingly quietly despite the ship’s more violent movements. The steamer was now labouring more heavily in the

sea, and at regular intervals one could feel the vibrations through the floors and the deep blows of the waves against the hull. Yet during the course of the day the passengers seemed already to have grown accustomed to the conditions. Conversations continued, glasses clinked, and the stewards moved about with that remarkable assurance which only people accustomed to life at sea appear to possess.

To my quiet satisfaction I saw nothing of Madame Cécile Beaumont that evening, and I was therefore able to complete dinner comparatively undisturbed. Later I again made my way toward the smoking room, where I took my customary place at the bar, lit my pipe, and ordered a mug of English ale. The smoke already hung thickly in the room, heavier than on the preceding evenings, as though the weather outside had somehow found its way into the saloon itself. Several of the regular players had already gathered around the card tables, and I noticed a brief nod from Colonel Sebastian Moran — no more than a small, polite acknowledgment, which I returned. We had now, in a sense, come to be on speaking terms, though I attached no great significance to the fact.

Shortly afterward the play began, and before the first half hour had passed I clearly perceived that the atmosphere around Moran's table had altered in character. Fortune seemed that evening to have changed direction. On the previous nights Moran had almost at once built up a considerable stack of chips before him. This time the opposite was true. I therefore directed my attention more closely toward the table to make certain that my senses were not deceiving me. They were not. Moran was losing — not dramatically, not loudly, but steadily and persistently. He seemed quieter than usual, more concentrated, almost tense, and several times I saw him lose hands which under other circumstances he would probably either have won or abandoned earlier.

After roughly an hour something occurred which, I had not yet observed in him. He reached beneath his jacket, drew out his wallet, and asked for additional chips. On the previous evenings the movement had always been the reverse: chips had been exchanged for cash. Now the money flowed in the other direction, and this did not happen only once.

Over the next couple of hours, he was obliged to repeat the action three separate times.

By then I found the matter too remarkable to continue merely standing at the bar. In order not to attract unnecessary attention, I therefore took a seat at a smaller poker table in the immediate vicinity of Moran's. I played with the utmost caution and for very modest stakes, for it was of no importance to me whether I won or lost a few pounds. My only purpose was to have a legitimate reason for remaining near his table.

It was after the third exchange of money for chips that events took a far more dramatic turn. Moran suddenly rose to his feet.

"There has been cheating!" he said loudly.

The conversations around the tables died away almost at once. Moran stared directly at one of the other players.

"Where did those cards come from?" he asked sharply. "Where did the three kings come from?"

The other man looked utterly bewildered, but Moran continued with growing irritation:

"I have been watching the cards closely. Especially the kings. They cannot have appeared by legitimate play."

None of the other players said anything. The atmosphere around the table grew noticeably heavier, and Moran now summoned one of the saloon attendants and explained the situation with increasing agitation. He insisted that cheating had taken place. Several more animated discussions now unfolded around the table, and for the first time since I had come to know him aboard, I saw Colonel Moran lose control of his temper.

At one point he struck the table so hard with his hand that the sound echoed through the whole saloon, and every eye turned toward him. No one appeared ever to have witnessed such a reaction from him before.

The steward who had now arrived attempted diplomatically to calm the situation. He offered to summon the person responsible for the gaming area and assured Moran that a satisfactory solution could naturally be found so that the game might continue.

Naturally, Watson, I formed my own thoughts as I listened. It seemed to me that several bargains had been made aboard the SS *Majestic* that day; but this time the outcome did not appear to have fallen in Moran's favour.

After further discussion he at last lowered his voice. He seized his jacket, did not even finish his drink, but set the glass back upon the table with almost demonstrative force, so that the ale slopped over the rim. Then he turned abruptly and left the saloon.

The two stewards remained behind, looking at one another with expressions that plainly revealed they did not entirely understand what had just occurred. The other players quickly began to make subdued remarks.

"He appears to be in good humour only when the cards fall in his favor," one of them observed dryly.

Several laughed quietly.

I did nothing further that evening but noted my observations with considerable interest. For the first time I had seen Colonel Moran under pressure, and, more importantly, I had seen how he reacted when control began to slip from his grasp. I understood even then, Watson, that this knowledge might later prove exceedingly valuable when Camille Ardent at last entered the game around the card tables.

Chapter Twelve

NINTH DAY

The following morning the wind had abated. The SS *Majestic* still moved heavily through the sea, but the violent blows against the hull had ceased, and what remained was only the deep, regular vibration of the engines and the long rolling motion through the waves.

I thought I could sense the change later at breakfast as well. The atmosphere in the dining saloon was no longer marked by the same tense curiosity that had characterised the first days at sea. Conversations had become quieter and more weary. Several passengers appeared irritable, as though the ship's confined world were beginning to wear upon them. I caught a few subdued remarks concerning the rumours of illness, which apparently had begun to circulate once more, though only at a single table.

It struck me, Watson, that the ship had perhaps already passed beyond its honeymoon phase. The voyage was becoming routine. The people aboard were beginning to feel the monotony, the isolation of the sea, and one another's constant presence.

It was only some way into breakfast that I noticed something else.

Moran was not present. This immediately surprised me.

At the neighbouring table sat several of his regular card companions from the preceding evenings. One of them made a dry remark to the effect that "the Colonel apparently does not tolerate losing." The others laughed softly, but the laughter sounded uncertain. I observed that none of them appeared especially at ease with the situation. Quite the contrary. There was a strange caution hanging over their table.

It was precisely at that moment that William passed me very discreetly and allowed a small, folded note to slide down in front of my plate.

Come immediately!

I read the words and looked up toward him, but he had already turned and vanished from the saloon. I then waited a brief moment so that my departure should not appear too conspicuous, politely excused myself from my table companions, and left the dining saloon in the direction of my cabin.

William was waiting for me in the corridor.

"There is no time to waste," he said quickly. "The man you described—with the large cap and the dark jacket—is on his way down toward the lowest deck with one of the officers."

For a moment I considered changing into the steward's uniform but immediately dismissed the thought. The situation seemed too urgent.

"There is no time," I said shortly, pointing toward the corridor.

We moved quickly through the passageways toward the crew door.

Pursued in the Dark

When we reached it, William stopped.

"I am afraid I cannot follow you any farther," he said in a low voice. "I am on duty at the service."

I nodded to him in acknowledgment, though at the same time the fleeting thought crossed my mind that perhaps fear had seized him as well. Then I continued alone down into the depths of the ship. The noise was now almost deafening.

By this time, I knew the route: first past the second deck, then the third, and from there farther down toward the cargo holds. I moved as quickly as circumstances allowed, though without attracting attention—which, under the conditions, would scarcely have been easy in any case. Steam lay heavily in the air, dust drifted through the narrow passages, and the noise of the machinery swallowed almost every other sound.

When I had reached the very bottom, I suddenly thought I heard voices. They came from the direction of Santos's former hiding place.

I at once decided to draw nearer. I knew the surroundings fairly well by then and understood where the darkness and the shadows between the crates offered concealment. I therefore succeeded in approaching, comparatively unnoticed, close enough to hear the conversation.

There were plainly two men. One voice I recognised immediately as Moran's. The other must have belonged to an officer.

"Are you certain of your information?" the officer asked several times, with clear anxiety in his voice.

"Completely," came Moran's calm reply.

There followed a few further subdued remarks which I did not fully catch, but the tone made it clear that the officer was allowing himself to be persuaded.

Suddenly I heard footsteps. I drew farther back into the shadows at once. A moment later the officer passed within less than two yards of me without discovering my presence. He moved quickly toward the stairs. His errand was evidently concluded. But Moran was still inside.

Had he hidden the document near Santos's old refuge? I doubted it. I remembered the coal dust on his trousers. Something told me that his true hiding place must be closer to the coal stores or the engine room. I dared not move for fear of discovery and therefore remained standing perfectly still in the darkness.

Approximately five minutes passed. Then Moran emerged.

I must confess, Watson, that I was genuinely surprised by the quality of his disguise. He had succeeded almost completely in concealing his customary appearance as colonel and aristocrat behind the shabby working clothes. He still appeared, of course, to be a large man, but by no means a dominant or remarkable figure. The cap was drawn low over his forehead, and even the moustache seemed far less striking in the poor light.

I was forced, however reluctantly, to admire his talent for disguise. He passed me with rapid steps and without the slightest sign of suspicion. Only when the sound of his footsteps had entirely disappeared did I step out from the shadows.

I followed him at such a distance that I could at all times just make out his silhouette among the dark passages of the cargo hold. It was no easy task. The ship laboured heavily in the sea, and everywhere steam, dust, and the noise of machinery mingled into an almost impenetrable chaos of sound and motion.

Suddenly his figure disappeared. I stopped at once. A moment later I saw a narrow strip of light farther ahead. There must be a door or opening somewhere near the place where Moran had vanished. I naturally concluded that he had likely gone inside, and I therefore decided to approach with caution.

I had scarcely taken a few steps forward when his voice suddenly rang out through the darkness—loud, sharp, and commanding.

“Stop! Come out!”

I froze instantly. A second later a lamp was lit. The yellowish light cut through the darkness, and I saw Moran moving directly toward me.

Fortunately, just where I stood there was a narrow gap between two enormous crates, partly concealed behind a heavy piece of canvas that had been drawn over the cargo. Instinctively I pressed myself between the crates and pulled the canvas in front of me. I was now almost completely hidden. Only through a small opening at the bottom could I see out. The light from the lamp approached. The shadows shifted across the floor.

So close did he come to me, Watson, that I could clearly see one of his heavy boots stop only a few inches from my hiding place. I scarcely dared breathe. And for the first time on this voyage, I truly felt the danger of being the hunted one.

All thoughts of Moran as the elegant card player and controlled man of the salons vanished in that moment. I now understood with perfect clarity that this was also the cold-blooded hunter from India—the man who had pursued prey through jungle and mountain passes—and I had no doubt that he would deal with me without hesitation if he discovered me down there.

Several times he spoke aloud into the darkness.

“I know you are here.”

A moment of silence.

“Step forward.”

There were no other sounds but his voice, the deep pulse of the machinery, and the heavy blows of the sea against the hull.

He moved slowly back and forth with the lamp, examining the places where a man might hide. The light slid several times across the canvas in front of me, but my hiding place was evidently too natural among the great crates and tarpaulins. He passed me once again. This time more quickly.

I sensed that he was gradually abandoning the actual search, though not the suspicion.

Shortly afterward I heard his steps receding in the direction of the engine room. Only when the sound had almost entirely ebbed away did I dare carefully loosen the canvas and step out from my hiding place. I just managed to see his silhouette disappear through an opening immediately before the engine room.

I must confess, Watson, that at that moment I drew a considerable sigh of relief. It had been far closer than I cared to admit. At the same time, I made the decision not to follow him any farther on this occasion. The risk now seemed unnecessarily great. On the other hand, I was almost certain that I had located the area of his hiding place—at least the hiding place he was using at that particular time. I therefore stepped fully out from the darkness and took the opposite direction toward the stairs. Approximately ten minutes later I was back in my cabin.

The Cards Are Laid Before Us

The beginning of luncheon was almost reassuring in its ordinariness. Madame Cécile Beaumont appeared once more at my table and as had gradually become her habit, filled the silence with a stream of comments, questions, and compliments. That day she seemed particularly occupied with my supposed literary talents and once again managed to deliver several kind remarks concerning my “great body of work,” to which the two other passengers at the table nodded politely and affirmingly.

I remember distinctly that fish was served that day. It was not a species with which I was especially familiar, but undoubtedly a local Mediter-

ranian fish—something resembling cod—served with a mild mustard sauce and small vegetables. It was exceedingly delicate. It seemed almost ironic to me, Watson, that on a ship filled with secrets, fear, and hidden alliances, such culinary pleasures could still be produced.

In the middle of the meal, I noticed that there were no drinks upon the table. The attendants were elsewhere in the saloon, and I therefore rose myself and went toward the serving table arranged for that purpose. I took water first, and then, of course, white wine.

Just as I turned back with the glasses, Colonel Sebastian Moran was suddenly standing immediately before me. Perhaps he had come with the same errand in mind; I did not know. He now stood at his full height directly opposite me with a smile that I found difficult to judge. It was polite, almost friendly, and yet behind it there seemed to lie something entirely different.

He greeted me calmly and firmly. Then he leaned a little toward me, adjusted his spectacles slightly, and allowed his gaze to travel down over my jacket.

“Remarkable, Monsieur Valmont,” he said calmly. “Though perhaps it belongs to the author’s profession to move about somewhat discreetly.”

Then he raised his hand and brushed something very lightly from my sleeve.

“Coal dust,” he said.

His gaze rested upon me for a moment.

“Yes,” he continued calmly, “it is the strangest things one may get upon oneself when one frequents the wrong places.”

I did not answer him at once.

It was not the words alone that impressed themselves upon me, Watson, but the manner in which they were spoken. There was no actual threat in his voice, no agitation, and no visible triumph. Quite the contrary. He spoke with the same calm courtesy as if he had been commenting upon the weather or the quality of the wine, and for that very reason the effect was all the stronger. He knew. Or at least he knew enough that any mutual uncertainty between us had now vanished.

I stood still for a brief moment with the bottle and glasses in my hands while he calmly walked back through the dining saloon toward his table. No one around us appeared to have noticed anything particular. Conversations continued. Cutlery clinked against porcelain. Somewhere behind me, Madame Beaumont laughed loudly, and beneath it all I could still feel the ship's deep, regular vibrations through the floor.

For me, however, the situation had changed completely. The discreet observations of the first days, the concealed movements, the cautious soundings, and the small strategic manoeuvres had now been replaced by something else and something far more direct. Moran had allowed me to understand that he had seen my move. At the same time, with almost elegant precision, he had made it clear that he wished me to know it. It was, in its way, an invitation, or perhaps a warning.

When I returned to the table, the conversation around me continued almost unchanged, but my own thoughts were in an entirely different place. I now understood that the game from this point onward would no longer be conducted solely behind curtains and in hidden shadows. We had both acknowledged one another's presence upon the board, and from that moment, Watson, the match would be played with far more open cards.

Evening Thoughts on Deck

I spent the late evening almost alone upon the deck. Few passengers had any desire to remain outside after the day's rough seas, and even the most steadfast among them generally contented themselves with brief visits to the rail before seeking once more the warmth and light of the salons. There was little left now of the wind, but the sea was still dark and alive around us. The waves struck heavily against the hull and left white sprays of foam which gleamed briefly in the darkness of the night before being swallowed once again by the sea. The *SS Majestic*, however, glided steadily and securely onward with the calm confidence that only a great ocean-going vessel seems to possess.

I stood for a long time with my hands resting upon the rail and gazed out into the darkness. Far off on the horizon, I thought I could make out

the lights of Gibraltar, mere tiny points in the dark, yet sufficient to mark that another phase of the voyage was approaching its beginning.

I thought of Camille Ardent and of how she would soon come aboard. With her arrival, the game would inevitably change its character once again.

For several days now I had observed Colonel Sebastian Moran more closely than he probably suspected. I had seen his discipline, his cunning, and his considerable abilities as both actor and tactician. Yet I had also seen something else, something far more important: signs of uneasiness and of temper, signs of a man who no longer felt himself merely the hunter, but who was beginning to experience the unpleasant sensation that he, too, might be hunted. And that, Watson, is often the moment at which even the strongest men begin to make mistakes.

I remained standing for a long while, looking out over the sea. The Mediterranean, despite the storm, had seemed to me almost protective. It had been a kind of transitional space between the old world of Europe and the open ocean. The Atlantic, however, was something entirely different. I knew its reputation, particularly at this season of the year. The storms there were not like the sudden fury of the Mediterranean, but vast and enduring forces that could hold a ship captive for days at a time. I could not help thinking what that might mean for a vessel such as the *SS Majestic*, where so many secrets were already moving unseen between the decks.

A ship changes strangely, Watson, when it is no longer merely sailing between countries but finds itself in the midst of the open sea, with no possibility of turning back. There comes a moment upon the Atlantic when every person aboard knows that there is no longer any road back to Europe, and yet no secure road forward to America either. One is, quite simply, between worlds. And precisely there, I thought, as I looked out over the darkness and the distant lights of Gibraltar, our true game would most likely begin.

Chapter Thirteen

TENTH DAY - GIBRALTAR

Watson slowly lets the papers sink into his lap and remains seated in silence in his study while the warm yellow light of the lamp casts gentle shadows across the dark walls and the bookshelves surrounding him. Outside, the winter evening has settled heavily over London. Through the windowpanes, he can hear the wind moving down the darkness of Baker Street, and from time to time there comes the muted rumble of a late cab passing through the city on its way toward other districts and other stories. He remains seated for a long while without reading further.

There is something about Holmes's last lines that has left a particular impression upon him. Not merely the events themselves, but the atmosphere of the letters. The sense that Holmes has now truly entered into something that is no longer simply an investigation, but a genuine strategic contest between two men who each know precisely what the other is capable of.

Watson must admit to himself that he feels both relief and uneasiness at the same time. Relief, because he already knows that Holmes will continue onward. The letters continue, after all. They lie before him upon the desk in neat little piles bearing later dates from New York, and that fact alone is a comfort. Holmes had therefore not been exposed, thrown overboard, or killed during this portion of the voyage, as Watson had more than once nearly feared while reading.

At the same time, however, another feeling grows within him: an uneasiness concerning the opponent Holmes faces.

For many years, Sebastian Moran had existed in Watson's imagination chiefly as Professor Moriarty's brutal henchman—a superb marksman, certainly a dangerous man, but nevertheless one who had functioned primarily as another man's weapon. The letters now painted a far more troubling picture. Here Moran emerged as something quite different: a disciplined tactician possessing considerable talents for disguise, manipulation, and psychological pressure. A man with the instincts of a hunter and with that particular form of intelligence which does not necessarily arise from books, but from experience, survival, and danger.

And perhaps it is precisely this that troubles Watson most: that Moran had understood the game very quickly and had begun to play it himself.

Watson rises slowly from his chair and walks toward the window. He stands there for a moment with his hands behind his back, gazing out into the winter darkness while his thoughts circle around the ship.

The SS Majestic.

Gradually it has assumed an almost curious place in his imagination. No longer merely as a vessel, but as an entire floating society with its own social classes, its own rumours, rules, and hidden worlds. He can almost see the ship before him now: the elegant salons of first class with their cigars, wine, and subdued conversations; the more crowded and noisier corridors of second class; and deep below it all, beneath everything orderly and civilised, the cargo holds filled with steam, coal dust, animals, hidden passageways, and desperate people.

Suddenly it strikes Watson as an image of the modern world itself. A floating society of classes moving toward something unknown.

He returns to the desk and lets his hand rest upon the next letters, which still lie unopened before him. His gaze lingers upon the dates from New York, although it is not the city on the far side of the ocean that occupies his thoughts at that moment.

It is the crossing. The Atlantic.

He knew enough sailors' tales to understand what winter voyages across the Atlantic could entail. Storms, fog, illness, and that peculiar isolation which exists only in the middle of the open ocean, where there is no longer any road back and not yet any certain road forward.

And now he knew as well that Holmes and Moran had already begun to play a far more dangerous game beneath the decks of the ship. A game that had only just begun.

Watson slowly draws a breath, adjusts the lamp shade slightly, and mechanically fills his pipe without truly thinking about it. Only then does he pick up the next letter, place it carefully before him, and begin reading once again.

Gibraltar

This morning was marked by considerably more noise than usual. I awoke to a muted gray light falling through the porthole while sounds from the harbor seemed to penetrate deep into the very interior of the ship. At first, I thought that I might perhaps have slept later than normal, but when I consulted my watch, it was only eight o'clock.

It was neither early nor late aboard the *SS Majestic*. Most of the first-class passengers did not ordinarily appear at breakfast until around nine o'clock, and thus I had ample time. I dressed at leisure and went up on deck, where I spent approximately half an hour observing the scene unfolding around us.

Gibraltar presented itself in its most military aspect.

I immediately noticed the British flags snapping sharply in the wind blowing in from the Atlantic, as well as the guns positioned among the fortifications upon the Rock. Smaller vessels moved constantly to and fro around the ship with the precision that only major harbours seem to possess. Coal barges moved heavily through the water. Dockworkers shouted to one another amid steam and the clamour of iron. Farther along the quay I could see soldiers standing in formation while officers moved among them.

Yet all of this was, in reality, merely the backdrop. What chiefly characterised the morning were the long lines of emigrants being led ashore. There seemed almost no end to them. Children, elderly people, women wrapped in blankets, men carrying suitcases, bags, and bundles tied together with cord. Everywhere there were cries, questions, and anxious voices speaking in different languages. Some families appeared desperate

not to become separated from their belongings. Others quite plainly feared something far worse.

One must remember, Watson, that it was winter. The temperature was perhaps around forty degrees Fahrenheit, and the wind coming in from the Atlantic was sharp and damp. Many of the third-class passengers were inadequately clothed for prolonged periods upon the deck or in the harbour. I noticed coughing in several places, weary faces, and that particular form of exhaustion which develops among people who have lived in close quarters under poor conditions for too long. The first part of the journey had clearly already taken a heavy toll upon many of them. One could see the fear in their movements. Several cast nervous glances toward the doctors and inspectors stationed near the gangway. No doubt many feared not being allowed to return to the ship after their medical examinations.

As I stood observing this, I suddenly sensed a presence behind me and turned. It was William. He took up a position beside me and silently watched the crowd for a moment before explaining that the entire third deck was to be emptied.

"It is the normal procedure here in Gibraltar, Monsieur," he said. "Third class is cleaned and disinfected. Ventilation, inspection, and medical examination. The sick—and possibly the dead—are brought ashore."

I looked at him questioningly.

"Yes," he continued in a lower voice. "Especially during the winter. There are around twelve hundred people on that deck. Very little indoor space. Many are forced to remain outside in the cold during parts of the crossing."

He shrugged slightly.

"It would not be unusual if five or ten had already lost their lives."

I turned my gaze once more toward the long lines of people making their way down the gangway, and I must confess, Watson, that at that moment I was struck by the curious contrast between the ship's different worlds.

Above us, first class still enjoyed its cigars, wines, and warm salons, while hundreds of people farther below were already engaged in a quiet struggle against cold, illness, and the fear of being left behind in a foreign harbour.

Informations and Doubts

At breakfast it was striking how few of the first-class passengers actually appeared that day. Several tables stood almost empty, and the atmosphere in the dining saloon seemed quieter and more scattered than usual.

One of the attendants informed me that many had taken advantage of the opportunity to go ashore early in the morning with plans to enjoy breakfast at one of the more luxurious establishments near the harbour.

I had just taken my seat at my customary table when my now almost permanent table companion, Madame Cécile Beaumont, appeared and sat beside me with her usual energy and sociability. She seemed considerably more animated than she had during the last days at sea and appeared almost to delight in the sensation of once again being close to civilisation and solid ground. She was immediately able to inform me that the colonel had also already left the ship.

"I spoke very briefly with him early this morning," she told me as she poured her coffee. "He seemed quite occupied. He said that there were urgent matters that had to be attended to at this last stop before the Atlantic."

Perhaps I allowed a little more interest to show in my expression than I had intended, for it seemed only to encourage her further speculation.

"But that is not really surprising," she continued eagerly. "After all, he was part of the British Army. Surely Gibraltar still means something quite special to men like him? News, connections, military contacts... Why, who knows what things might interest a colonel at so important a gateway to the Atlantic for the British Empire?"

She spoke the last words with almost theatrical gravity, as though the Rock itself concealed strategic secrets of the highest order.

She herself, incidentally, had plans to spend most of the day ashore. There was apparently shopping to be done, cafés to be visited, and possibly an inspection of the more exclusive quarters of the town.

Once again, she very kindly offered me the pleasure of her company during the excursion.

I politely declined.

"Perhaps later," I added, so as not to appear discourteous.

She immediately smiled in understanding.

"Of course. Perhaps you are occupied with your writing, Monsieur Valmont?"

I nodded elegantly without giving a direct answer, which she apparently accepted as confirmation. In reality, my thoughts were naturally elsewhere. Madame Beaumont's information regarding Moran seemed to me far more interesting than I wished to reveal. I found it difficult to understand how he dared leave the ship so unprotected. If the document truly remained aboard, and if he had at the same time sensed my growing interest in the lower regions of the vessel, then his behaviour struck me as almost careless.

On my way back toward my cabin, my thoughts continued to circle around Colonel Moran's decision to go ashore. The more I considered it, the less it seemed to accord with the logic and caution he had otherwise displayed throughout the crossing. How had he dared? Not merely to leave the ship, but to do so openly, calmly, and apparently without any concern whatsoever. If the document truly was aboard—which I now regarded as almost certain—then it seemed to me highly peculiar that he would voluntarily leave its hiding place unguarded, especially after he had plainly begun to suspect that someone had taken an interest in the lower regions of the vessel. It was a mystery to me.

There might, of course, be circumstances that compelled him to go ashore, matters so important that he had no real choice. But what could they be? I considered various possibilities as I moved slowly through the passageways. Gibraltar was the last true stopping place before the Atlantic, the last opportunity to send telegrams, establish connections, or alter plans before the ship would find itself alone upon the open sea

for days at a time. Perhaps he had contacts ashore. Perhaps something had to be prepared in connection with our arrival in New York. I still knew far too little of his true intentions to exclude anything. Nor was it unlikely that there were connections in America which had to be warned or activated while he still had the means to do so. Yet even these explanations did not satisfy me entirely.

I entertained many different reflections without arriving at any truly logical explanation. On the contrary, my sense grew that something in the situation eluded the ordinary chain of reasoning. It seemed almost, Watson, as though my opponent had voluntarily opened the board for my next moves, and precisely for that reason I began to grow still more cautious.

A Death

I changed into my steward's disguise with what had by now become almost routine swiftness. It briefly struck me how strangely quickly a man accustoms himself to even the most improbable roles. The jacket, the cap, the dark stain at the hairline—all now found their places almost without conscious thought. When, a moment later, I looked at myself in the mirror, I greeted Emilio almost mechanically before extinguishing the lamp and leaving the cabin.

This time I deliberately chose not to contact William or allow him to accompany me. I wished to move alone and took the now familiar stairway down through the ship's interior. Already after the first few levels, I sensed how the atmosphere had changed. The great rhythmic pulse of the engines was silent now, and for that very reason all other sounds could be heard far more clearly than before. Voices, metallic blows, echoes of iron against iron, and the constant movement of people all seemed to travel through the interior of the vessel.

As I approached the lower part of the stairway opposite the third deck, the sounds grew louder still. I stopped for a brief moment and listened. My first thought was naturally that cargo was being shifted. Freight would necessarily have to be moved. Passengers were going ashore, others would come aboard, and various parts of the cargo would probably have

to be rearranged. Yet it still seemed strange to me that the activity should be so extensive.

When I descended farther, I saw lights ahead and clear movement among the crates. And these were not the people I had expected. They were not the coalmen, the engine workers, or the employees who normally laboured in the lowest parts of the ship. Instead, I saw stewards, officers, and several men who, from their uniforms and appearance, might very well belong to the local harbour police. This surprised me.

When I stepped fully down onto the floor among the great stacks of cargo, I immediately noticed that a larger area farther ahead had been cordoned off with ropes and temporary markers. People were moving purposefully back and forth with a seriousness that made it clear this was something more than ordinary work. I found the situation highly remarkable.

Fortunately, I recognised one of the doctors with whom I had briefly exchanged a few words earlier in the harbour at Naples. I therefore approached him discreetly and asked in a low voice what was happening. He answered quickly and without attaching any particular importance to my question.

"A man has been found dead," he said. "There is concern about possible contagion. The police are establishing the necessary cordons, and we have been summoned to carry out the examinations."

Almost immediately afterward, he continued speaking with another man, as though the situation already occupied him far more than his conversation with me.

I took a few steps back and once again allowed my gaze to travel over the area. Among the other stewards, I could already hear the first rumours taking shape. Some spoke of an epidemic. Others mentioned the sick passenger who had earlier been the cause of uneasiness aboard the ship. And in that moment, I began to understand why Moran had been able to leave the vessel without any visible concern. The situation down here made any closer investigation almost impossible. Yet what precisely connected this death with Moran himself remained unclear to me.

The Dead Man

Among the group of stewards standing somewhat apart near the stairway, I caught sight of William. I signalled discreetly to him, and he at once left the group and came toward me. We deliberately placed ourselves a little distance from the others. I had no wish to attract unnecessary attention. After all, I was not a known member of the ship's regular crew, and although I would probably have been able to explain myself out of the situation by claiming that I was newly taken on or worked on another deck, I saw no reason to invite additional glances.

William was quickly able to confirm that a man had been found dead. I made it quite clear to him that I wished, by every possible means, to gain access to the dead man. I had to examine the body with my own eyes and form an impression of the likely cause of death. William explained that the doctor had already been summoned, but I allowed him to understand that, for me, this was a matter of the highest priority. He thought for a moment, then nodded and asked me to follow him.

We moved behind a larger section of cargo and continued between stacks of crates and furniture until we approached the central area near the rear of the hold. Here there was as yet no cordon. William quickly moved a couple of smaller crates aside, and suddenly we had access to the same small, concealed area where Santos had previously stayed. The table and chair were still there. The oil lamp still burned faintly.

And propped against one of the great crates sat a man apparently collapsed lifelessly against the woodwork. To my surprise, there was no one nearby.

"The area has been cleared," William whispered nervously. "They are waiting for the doctor."

I replied quickly that there was no time to lose. I immediately crouched before the dead man and carefully lifted his head. Both William and I stiffened almost at the same time. It was Santos. No longer Oliver Hanson from the second deck, but once again dressed in his old worn clothing from third class. No explanation was needed between us. We

both understood instantly that someone had deliberately returned him to his original identity.

I at once began a rapid and highly practiced examination of the body. What I was looking for was not merely signs of illness, but traces that might reveal something about the actual cause of death. I therefore concentrated especially upon the head, the throat, and the chest. It took me only a few moments to notice something unusual.

I asked William to bring the lamp closer. He was plainly uneasy with the situation, not least with the thought of possible contagion, yet he obeyed all the same and held the lamp nearer while instinctively turning his head away from the dead man. And there I saw it clearly: small pressure marks at the neck, toward the angle of the jaw. They were not marks left by a rope or by any ordinary strangulation, but the discreet traces produced by an exceedingly professionally executed suffocation. The sort of grip that kills quickly and efficiently without leaving obvious signs of violence. I understood at once that this matter had nothing whatever to do with illness alone. Other hands had been involved in Santos's death.

I had scarcely time to rise before we both heard voices approaching between the crates. William reacted instantly and signalled that we had to leave at once. We could now clearly hear the doctor's voice and that of another man, probably an officer. Without another word, we hurried back the same way we had come.

Realisations About Moran

Back in my cabin, I had ample time for reflection upon the events that had taken place in the depths of the ship. The first conclusion that presented itself was also the most dramatic. Sebastian Moran was not merely a hunter or an observer. He was a man who killed.

At the same time, I was forced to acknowledge that my pressure had produced results. He had apparently been compelled to go ashore in order to undertake certain security measures, whether in connection with the remainder of the voyage or perhaps already with our eventual

arrival in New York. Yet my pressure had also provoked something else: the death of a man.

I was obliged, albeit reluctantly, to admire Moran's ability to coordinate his actions and their consequences. With a single death he had secured several advantages at once. He had caused the area to be sealed off. He had created fear. There was now restricted access, uneasiness, and a measure of chaos in the lower parts of the ship, a condition that would likely spread to the rest of the vessel before long. And that, above all, was important to understand. Chaos and the absence of structure always serve best the man who understands how to control the uncontrollable.

I realised then, Watson, that I was continuing to play against an opponent who had no need of prolonged moral deliberations. He acted quickly, practically, and without hesitation. That made him considerably more dangerous than I had previously wished to admit.

I spent the evening in my usual manner, taking my meal in the saloon and afterward enjoying my pipe in the smoking room. It was once again striking how few passengers still remained aboard. Many had clearly chosen to make full use of the stop in Gibraltar, and the entire atmosphere of the first-class section seemed noticeably more subdued than it had earlier in the voyage.

Only a few card games were in progress, and none of them attracted my attention to any significant degree. I therefore chose to return to my cabin comparatively early.

Chapter Fourteen

ELEVENTH DAY - GIBRALTAR

The following day I spent almost entirely aboard the ship. On several occasions I attempted to obtain further news concerning Santos's death, but it was not until late in the afternoon that I succeeded in making contact with William. He appeared tired and was plainly affected by the situation. He informed me that the doctor's examinations had not led to the same conclusions as my own. Quite the contrary. The physician was convinced that the man had died as a consequence of his illness, and the necessary isolation measures had already been implemented. The body had been taken ashore, and medical inspections of third-class passengers prior to boarding would now be carried out with considerably greater rigour.

"They are not prepared to take any risks," William said quietly. "Not now."

He already foresaw that the consequence would be that a significant number of third-class travellers would likely be refused permission to reboard the ship. I looked at him questioningly and asked how such a situation was expected to be handled. William slowly shook his head. He did not know. Several ocean liners belonging to the same company sailed the route, he explained, and perhaps some of the passengers would later be allowed to continue their journey aboard another vessel once they had again been approved by the medical authorities.

I remained standing for a moment after our conversation, occupied with my own reflections. It was now clear to me that the rumours concerning the contagious disease had gained an entirely different level

of influence than before. Fear was no longer merely a subject discussed among a handful of nervous first-class passengers. It had become part of the very structure of the ship itself—something that affected routines, access, security measures, and the general mood aboard. I could only imagine how that fear would continue to spread during the long crossing of the Atlantic.

Nothing further occurred that day. Not until the evening.

A Fuller Explanation

As on the previous day, I again chose to spend some time in the smoking room with my pipe. To my considerable surprise, Moran appeared that evening. He had not been present during dinner but had evidently returned to the ship later in the day. His appearance was perfectly composed. He seemed well groomed, elegant, and entirely untouched by the events of the preceding days. Not the slightest sign of uneasiness was visible in him.

He made almost directly for my table, as though it had been his intended destination all along. Without asking permission, he seated himself opposite me and began the same calm ritual that had accompanied our previous conversation. He reached for the cigar box, selected a cigar with care, and took his time lighting it. The bluish smoke drifted slowly upward between us. He seemed completely at ease. Like a man acting from a position of confidence.

I politely inquired about his excursion ashore and his stay in the city. He answered my questions elegantly and effortlessly without revealing anything meaningful about his activities. Yet after only a few minutes of conversation, he slowly raised the cigar and looked directly at me through the smoke.

“It seems to me, Monsieur Valmont,” he said calmly, “that you have developed a considerable interest in the less elegant parts of the ship.”

He paused briefly.

“I shall merely permit myself to observe that such interests can be dangerous.”

He released another cloud of smoke between us and then continued in the same controlled tone.

“By the way, regarding that passion for hunting which I mentioned previously, I have since reflected that my answer perhaps deserved a fuller explanation.”

He leaned back slightly in his chair.

“A hunter’s true talent does not consist merely in tracking and approaching his prey with the greatest possible discretion. No—the decisive moment is something else entirely.”

His gaze now rested unwaveringly upon me.

“It is the ability to pull the trigger at precisely the right moment. Without hesitation. Without concern for morality, principles, or any other consideration. In that instant, only one thing exists.”

He raised his hand slightly, as though holding an invisible rifle.

“To fire the shot.”

Then he smiled again. Calmly. Almost pleasantly.

“I merely felt that such a consideration belongs in any honest description of the passion of the hunt.”

Thereupon he rose with the same effortless elegance with which he had seated himself and made his way toward the card tables, where his place had clearly stood empty awaiting his return. At his entrance there was no trace of the explosive temper he had displayed the previous day. He appeared once more entirely composed. Back in his proper place. And perfectly prepared to win.

Naturally, the development of that conversation demanded a clear response from me. In the game now unfolding between us, Moran had made an exceedingly aggressive move. If I may employ an image you will understand, Watson, he had effectively castled his king while simultaneously advancing his queen into a threatening position deep within the board. He had openly demonstrated that he knew of my movements upon the lower decks of the ship, while at the same time implying—without stating it directly—that he was entirely willing to act with a brutality far beyond what most men would imagine.

The question now was how I ought to answer. A defensive move might provide me with peace in the short term. I could withdraw, await developments, and attempt to regain the initiative at a later stage. Yet such a course would also signal to Moran that his threats had achieved their purpose. That, I did not desire. On the other hand, an offensive response carried its own considerable dangers. After all, I found myself aboard a vessel between continents, without any genuine prospect of assistance, facing a man who had now demonstrated beyond doubt that he was willing to kill in order to protect his plans.

For a long time after Moran had departed the smoking room, I remained seated with my pipe between my hands. The smoke hung heavily about me while my thoughts moved back and forth among the available possibilities. It struck me that our contest had now changed in character. Earlier it had been defined by hidden observations, tentative advances, and mutual examinations. Now we were both fully aware of each other's presence. The masks had not yet fallen entirely, but they had begun to crack. And for that very reason, Watson, it seemed to me that the most dangerous move at this particular moment might well be to do nothing at all.

Chapter Fifteen

TWELFTH DAY - GIBRALTAR

The day was marked by the emigrants' return to the ship.

In the meantime, the third deck had been scrubbed and cleaned with an almost military thoroughness. The smell of disinfectant still lingered faintly in the air in several parts of the vessel, and as much clearing and cleaning as possible had been carried out. Now the boarding process had begun once more. At times it seemed orderly. At others, deeply dramatic.

From the deck I could observe the long lines of people moving slowly toward the gangways with their belongings, children, and suitcases. Many appeared weary after their days ashore. Others were plainly nervous. Around the medical inspections in particular, disturbances arose again and again. Some passengers were stopped, detained, and examined more closely, and immediately loud discussions broke out among families, doctors, and guards.

Most were permitted to pass. But not all. Some were quietly taken aside and led away from the queues. I observed how fear spread among them like an invisible current. A single cough could cause several people instinctively to draw away. Mothers held their children more closely. A few made obvious attempts to conceal symptoms or signs of weakness.

For my own part, I kept a particularly close watch upon the first-class gangway. I was awaiting the arrival of Madame Camille Ardent. She was my hidden card. My offensive move in the game against Moran. A joker, if you will. And I sincerely hoped that her presence might alter the course of the contest in my favour.

For only now, Watson, was the true journey beginning. The preparations had been made. The opposing forces had measured themselves against one another. But only now did the real trial of strength lie before us. Once SS *Majestic* departed Gibraltar, we would find ourselves isolated in the middle of the Atlantic for at least two weeks, without any possibility of assistance or meaningful escape. Anything might occur. An outbreak of disease, technical failures, or violent winter storms. At that moment the future appeared to me hazy and difficult to discern, almost like a dark sea upon which one glimpsed the next wave only for a fleeting instant.

Camille Ardent's Arrival

Despite my constant surveillance of the gangway, I failed throughout the day to catch sight of Camille Ardent. I noted every cab that arrived and studied every solitary woman, every elegant traveler, every person who might conceivably be concealed behind a disguise. She could easily appear as someone entirely different from herself, and for that very reason I took great care not to overlook anything. Yet nothing among that day's passengers truly attracted my attention.

As evening approached, I began for the first time to feel genuine concern. Any number of things might have occurred during her journey. Departure was expected either during the night or in the early hours of the morning, but the final boarding would most likely be closed before midnight. If she did not arrive before then, the entire character of my plan would have to change.

Nor was she to be seen at dinner in the saloon. Later, therefore, I withdrew to the smoking room, where I seated myself with my pipe as I had done on so many previous evenings. At first glance everything appeared entirely as usual. The subdued conversations, the smoke beneath the ceiling, the sound of glasses and muted footsteps upon the carpets. And for that very reason it struck the room almost like an electric shock when my eyes suddenly fell upon an exceedingly beautiful and elegant lady who had just entered the saloon.

She was dressed in a dark hat and gloves and carried a small traveling case in one hand. Her movements were calm and controlled, almost discreet, yet she immediately drew the attention of those present. Not through anything overt, but rather through a particular quality of self-possession.

She did not look in my direction. Not once. Instead, she walked directly to the bar and seated herself there with perfect composure, as though she had been aboard the ship for days and already knew the place intimately.

In Baker Street

I sit for some time with the letters before me without immediately continuing my reading. My thoughts dwell upon the new figure who has now entered the stage: Madame Camille Ardent.

I cannot help smiling faintly at the memory of Holmes's manner of describing Camille Ardent. In his letters he referred to her with his customary strategic detachment, as a potential resource, a card in hand, or perhaps a joker to be played at the proper moment. Yet I know my friend well enough to read between the lines. Behind the cool phrasing lies something else. Holmes respected her. Not merely her courage or her loyalty, but her intelligence. By this point he had encountered very few people capable of moving so naturally between different social worlds while still preserving their independence of mind.

Camille Ardent was not merely an assistant. She was a person with plans of her own, judgments of her own, and objectives of her own. It is for precisely that reason that another thought begins gradually to form in my mind.

How much control will Holmes truly exercise over this new player?

He speaks of her as a piece upon the board, but experience has taught me that people rarely remained pieces for very long around Sherlock Holmes. The most interesting among them sooner or later developed purposes of their own and began moving according to their own rules. Perhaps Camille would do the same. The thought lingers with me.

Everything now appears to be approaching a point at which the various threads must converge. Holmes, Moran, Camille, the document, and the many individuals whose fates have in one way or another become tied to this strange pursuit all seem gradually to be assuming their final positions. And before them all still lies the Atlantic Ocean—the vast, cold sea that continues to conceal the outcome of the game now approaching its decisive phase.

Thereafter Watson returns to his reading of Camille Ardent's remarkable entrance.

Positioning

Holmes folded his newspaper, rose slowly, and moved toward the bar with an almost demonstrative lack of haste. He stopped some distance from her and at first pretended that his business concerned only the bartender.

"Do you happen to have any Norwegian beer?" he asked.

The steward looked at him in complete confusion.

Holmes sighed very slightly.

"Well then," he said dryly, "British will do."

A moment later a dark pint was slid across the counter toward him. He took the glass, turned half toward Camille, and raised it slightly.

"Étienne Valmont," he said calmly.

He had scarcely spoken the name before a tall figure rose from a chair farther along the saloon and, with a light, almost fluid smile, stepped between them.

"Miss..." said the man with a slight bow and a questioning gesture of the hand.

"Camille Ardent," she replied.

"Miss Ardent," repeated Colonel Sebastian Moran. "You have already attracted considerable attention aboard ship."

His gaze moved briefly between them both.

"And not least, I understand, from my good friend here."

He made an elegant gesture toward Holmes.

"Monsieur Valmont. Our literary contribution to first class."

Moran smiled faintly.

"He appears already to have aroused great interest among the more conversational ladies aboard. The fact that he addresses you first may therefore be regarded as quite a significant compliment."

Holmes rested one hand calmly upon the bar.

"And in return, allow me to present my friend here," he said, turning his attention toward the colonel. "Colonel Moran. Formerly in service in India."

Moran smiled in a controlled fashion and bowed lightly.

"I fear," he continued, "that Monsieur Valmont is not occupied solely with his writing during this voyage. At times he strikes me as unusually observant. Particularly in the most peculiar places."

Holmes smiled faintly.

"I may be engaged upon a study," he said calmly. "A study which from time to time demands nearly all of my attention."

He took an unhurried sip of his beer.

"I may reveal this much: my friend the colonel here performs the role of the cynical hunter of big game admirably. A man with a keen eye for his target... though perhaps with a certain weakness where details are concerned."

An almost imperceptible smile crossed Camille's face.

"Then I must hope," she said lightly, "that the colonel does not regard me as prey."

"One never knows," Moran replied with a calm smile.

A brief silence settled between them while the sounds of muted voices and glasses from the saloon seemed to draw closer around them.

Camille now turned toward Holmes.

"So, observation is your specialty?"

"Observation," Holmes replied. "Synthesis. Conclusions. Perhaps even interpretations."

She smiled faintly.

"But it must be limiting to possess only a single pair of eyes."

Holmes nodded almost thoughtfully.

"It is my greatest handicap," he said. "I can only be present in one place at a time."

He allowed his gaze to rest upon her for a moment.

"My study would probably be far more complete if that were not the case."

Camille Ardent held his gaze a moment longer than ordinary courtesy strictly required, and then nodded very slightly, as though she had understood more in the sentence than the words themselves immediately contained.

It was precisely such moments that Holmes later described as the most decisive. Not great revelations or dramatic confrontations, but the small, almost invisible shifts in which two people suddenly recognise that they are speaking on several levels at once.

Moran broke the silence.

"So, what do you prefer, Miss Ardent?" he asked with a slight smile. "An observant author, or a hunter of big game?"

She laughed softly and looked from one to the other.

"You both seem excellent company," she said. "But at present I think I may prefer a little drama."

"In that case," Moran said at once, "I can offer you a place at our card table. I guarantee that it will be entertaining."

"Whist?" she asked.

"Naturally."

"I have played a little," she said calmly. "Enough for domestic purposes."

"At a card table," Holmes observed quietly, "one may often learn more about people than at many social gatherings."

"Indeed?" she said, turning toward him again. "And what would you recommend I look for?"

Holmes slowly raised his glass.

"Follow those who play highest," he said. "That is usually where one learns most, and where the secrets lie."

She laughed again, though this time there was something more searching in her gaze.

Moran lightly tapped his gloves against his palm.

"You must excuse me," he said. "My friends at the card table are waiting. But should you feel inclined, Miss Ardent, I shall always see that a place is made for you."

"That is kind of you," she replied. "But I think I must first find my cabin and recover a little from the journey."

Moran bowed lightly once more and then moved back toward the saloon and the green light surrounding the card tables.

Holmes remained standing at the bar for a moment longer. With calm movements he took out his pipe, filled it carefully, and lit it, while apparently regarding the darkness beyond the windows. Camille Ardent gave him one final glance, which he did not directly return, and then left the saloon.

Chapter Sixteen

THIRTEENTH DAY - THE ATLANTIC

The first day after our departure from Gibraltar was clearly marked by a restored freshness and sociability. The stay in harbour had had a noticeable effect upon the first-class passengers. After many days at sea, it had been a relief to feel solid ground beneath one's feet, to move among ordinary people, and for a time to renew one's connection with the wider world which we had otherwise left behind us.

At breakfast, experiences ashore were exchanged with great liveliness. Several of the ladies compared shops, restaurants, and views. The gentlemen discussed trade, shipping, and politics. Even the most reserved passengers seemed more talkative than before.

On the surface there reigned an optimism which almost seemed infectious. Yet that was not the whole truth. When one observes people for long enough, one sometimes discovers that the most interesting things do not lie in what is said, but in what remains unsaid. Behind the newly recovered cheerfulness, I sensed something else. Conversations were broken off a little too quickly. Certain groups spoke together in lowered voices. Several passengers cast long glances toward the sea through the saloon windows. The Mediterranean lay behind us. Europe lay behind us. Now the great ocean awaited.

Colonel Moran seemed in unusually good spirits. I observed that the stay in Gibraltar had done him good. He appeared well dressed as always, elegant without seeming vain, and he possessed that particular ability to make other people feel interesting. Several of the female passengers sought his company, and he entertained them with small anecdotes from

India, hunting, and travel, while at the same time enjoying very considerable respect among the male passengers.

I particularly noticed the German merchant who had previously distinguished himself by his many questions. Several times I saw him engaged in longer conversations with Moran. These were not the usual social exchanges. They spoke quietly and seriously. I could not hear the subject, but it seemed to me that the good colonel was gradually strengthening his position aboard.

In the evening, the salons filled once more. The light was subdued, and the cigars glowed. At the card tables, the usual conversations were carried on while the cards were shuffled and dealt. Glasses clinked, and laughter sounded from the farther corners of the saloon.

I had taken my usual position near the bar. Before me lay a selection of newspapers that had come aboard in Gibraltar. From time to time, I turned their pages, but the truth is that my attention was only slightly directed toward the news of the world. My real interest lay only a few yards away.

Camille Ardent had taken a seat at the card table at Moran's invitation. He seemed genuinely pleased with her company. There was something almost possessive in the attention he showed her, not in a manner that appeared improper, but plainly enough that no one could doubt he valued her presence. Miss Ardent repaid him with an attentiveness that seemed almost exaggerated. She listened with interest to his explanations. She asked questions. Several times she requested that he explain rules and tactics more fully. When she made small mistakes, which occurred at suitable intervals, she received his guidance with a mixture of gratitude and modesty. To the others at the table, she appeared to be an intelligent but comparatively inexperienced player. It was an excellent performance.

Earlier that day I had had occasion to observe her handling of the cards. She held them correctly. She looked at them with the proper economy of movement. She concealed her reactions far better than any beginner would have been able to do. In short, she played the role of a beginner considerably better than a true beginner would have done.

Moran did not appear to notice it. He enjoyed the role of teacher far too much. Several times he leaned forward across the table to explain a situation to her or comment upon a move. Each time she listened attentively, and each time his satisfaction seemed to increase a little.

I must admit, Watson, that at this point I began to suspect that Miss Ardent might possess even greater theatrical abilities than I had originally credited to her. She was not merely playing cards. She was playing an audience. And that evening her principal actor was undoubtedly Sebastian Moran.

The most interesting thing was unquestionably that Moran appeared to notice none of this. I found it difficult to determine the cause. Perhaps he was simply too occupied with Miss Ardent. Perhaps he was flattered by the attention she showed him. Or perhaps he was committing the error that even intelligent men sometimes make when they encounter an attractive woman: he underestimated her. Whatever the cause, he appeared blind to what was gradually becoming clear to me.

The Language Develops

During the course of the evening, Miss Ardent and I began cautiously to develop the first elements of a language between us. Not through words, nor through anything that might arouse suspicion, but through glances, small movements, and discreet signs. I gradually shifted to a position from which I could sit behind Moran without attracting attention to myself. From there I had an excellent view of Miss Ardent, and at the same time I could observe both her and the colonel without risk of being noticed.

At first everything proceeded with great caution. I had no intention of exposing her to unnecessary danger, and she did not yet know my plans. I therefore limited myself to a few discreet attempts to establish contact: a raised eyebrow at a suitable moment, a hand left resting a little longer upon the edge of the table than chance required, small movements which, to an outsider, would have seemed entirely meaningless, but which might be perceived by an attentive person. Whether she

noticed them, I could not at first determine; gradually, however, I began to feel that she did.

Later in the evening, while Moran was entertaining the table with one of his many stories from India and the other players listened with varying degrees of interest, the moment occurred that removed my doubt. Miss Ardent suddenly raised her eyes. It lasted scarcely more than a second. She looked directly at me and then turned her attention once more to the company around her.

To anyone else the episode would have been without significance. But there are moments, Watson, when people understand one another without words. I have experienced them over the years in many different circumstances, and I learned long ago to trust them. This was such a moment. She had caught the signal, and more importantly still, she had chosen not to ignore it.

The rest of the evening passed without incidents that seemed immediately remarkable. The card games continued for some time yet, but gradually fatigue began to make itself felt among the passengers. Conversations became slower. A few people yawned openly. Chairs were pushed back, glasses emptied, and cigars extinguished. One by one, the guests left the saloon and made their way toward their cabins.

Moran was among the last to rise. He appeared in especially good humour. There was something almost satisfied about him that evening, as though events were developing in a direction, he found agreeable. He bowed politely to Miss Ardent and accompanied her some distance toward the exit before they parted.

I noticed that she returned his attention with the same elegant lightness that she seemed to carry everywhere with her. Yet if Moran hoped for more than her social courtesy, I found no sign of it. She appeared neither impressed nor particularly captivated. Rather, she seemed to regard the whole situation with the professional distance that an experienced actress adopts toward a role she has completely mastered.

I remained seated for a while after their departure. The stewards had already begun to clear away after the evening. Cards were collected. Ashtrays emptied. Bottles and glasses removed. The saloon gradually lost

its social character and returned to the more sober form it would possess at the beginning of the next day.

Chapter Seventeen

FOURTEENTH DAY

The second morning was perfectly calm. The sun shone from an almost cloudless sky, and through the great windows of the saloons the light fell across the white tablecloths and the brightly polished silver. When one remained indoors, it was almost possible to forget that it was still winter and that we were upon the Atlantic Ocean.

Several of the passengers had already taken a turn upon the deck before breakfast. One could see it in their freshened faces and hear it in their conversations. The atmosphere remained marked by the optimism to which the stay in Gibraltar had given rise. Laughter came easily. Conversations flowed without effort between the tables. People spoke of markets, restaurants, views, and small purchases. Several appeared relieved that the voyage was now truly directed toward America. Perhaps it was precisely for that reason that the incident which was soon to follow made so powerful an impression upon those present.

I was seated at my usual breakfast table and took part only sporadically in the conversations around me. As so often before, I preferred to listen rather than speak. From my place I had a good view of the dining saloon, and I noticed, among other things, that Miss Ardent had once again taken a seat at the table near Colonel Moran. It seemed to me that this had by now become an established routine.

At our own table, Madame Beaumont was in especially radiant spirits that morning. She talked almost without pause. First she described several restaurants in Gibraltar which, in her opinion, had been far better than she had expected. Then she spoke of the markets, the narrow streets, and

the many merchants she had encountered during her stay in the town. At last, she arrived at the subject which plainly occupied her most: a purchase. A very particular purchase.

The Necklace

She leaned forward toward the table with a confidential air.

"I believe," she said, "that I actually made the bargain of my life in Gibraltar."

Naturally, this immediately aroused the interest of the other guests at the table.

"What sort of bargain was it?" asked one of the ladies.

"A necklace," Madame Beaumont replied triumphantly. "A necklace of natural Mediterranean pearls."

Several approving remarks were heard.

Madame Beaumont answered all questions willingly, and the longer the conversation continued, the clearer it became how much satisfaction her new acquisition gave her. She described not only the appearance and history of the piece, but also the circumstances under which she had secured it. There was no doubt that the purchase represented far more to her than a financial transaction. It was a triumph, and like all persons who have just achieved such a thing, she wished to share her pleasure with those around her.

At last, a brief pause arose in the conversation. Madame Beaumont let her gaze move around the table as though a new thought had just occurred to her. Then her face brightened.

"But of course," she exclaimed. "You must see it."

She clapped her hands lightly, rose so quickly that her chair scraped back against the floor, and looked at us with an expectant enthusiasm of which none present could be in any doubt.

"One moment," she said. "I shall return at once."

With that, she left the dining saloon at a brisk pace and disappeared through the door. When it closed behind her, a brief silence settled over the table. It was not an awkward silence, but rather the sort that sometimes arises when a particularly energetic person has temporarily

ly departed from a gathering. One of the gentlemen smiled discreetly down into his coffee cup. Another took the opportunity to resume his breakfast. Around us, the other guests gradually returned to their own conversations, and soon the familiar mixture of subdued voices, clinking cutlery, and attendants moving between the tables could once again be heard.

For my own part, I could not help noticing that several of those present appeared to appreciate the sudden calm. Madame Beaumont undoubtedly possessed many excellent qualities, but silence was not among them.

Breakfast therefore continued at a more subdued pace. None of us paid any further attention to her absence. We all assumed that she had merely gone up to her cabin to fetch the necklace which she so plainly valued. Had anyone at that moment told us that, within a few minutes, she would return with news of an entirely different character from that which she had expected to share with us, no one at the table would have believed it. Yet that is precisely what was to happen.

In the brief interval of quiet that followed Madame Beaumont's departure, I once again allowed my gaze to travel through the saloon. My attention was drawn anew toward the table where Miss Ardent sat in Colonel Moran's company. She seemed to be listening to him with an attentiveness that appeared both natural and effortless, and I was forced to admit, however reluctantly, that she seemed genuinely entertained by his company. There was something in her smile and in the manner in which she leaned slightly toward him that for a moment awakened an old doubt in me. Could she be playing several games at once? If anyone possessed that ability, it was certainly Camille Ardent. She had already proved herself a far more nuanced and intelligent actor than most around her suspected. The thought troubled me for a moment, but I forced myself to set it aside. I had no concrete reason for mistrust, and the observations I had already made continued to point in the direction I had hoped.

My reflections, however, were abruptly interrupted.

The Theft

The door to the dining saloon was opened with such force that several guests instinctively turned around. Madame Beaumont came quickly back through the room. She moved with far greater speed than her usual dignity would ordinarily allow, and even from a distance I could see that something was wrong. The lively expression which only a few minutes earlier had animated her face had vanished completely. Now she was pale and agitated, and she came directly toward our table without so much as glancing to either side.

"It is gone!"

The words rang out loudly enough that not only those of us at the table, but also several of the nearest guests, could hear them. The conversations around us died almost immediately.

"The pearl necklace," she continued. "It is gone."

She remained standing at the table while, with increasing agitation, she explained how she had laid the necklace out upon the table in her cabin. She had tried it on before breakfast, considered wearing it, but had finally decided to leave it there.

"And I should never have done so," she cried, throwing up her hands in despair.

One of the gentlemen at the table attempted cautiously to calm the situation by asking whether it might not simply have been misplaced. Madame Beaumont immediately rejected the idea.

"I am absolutely certain," she said. "It was lying on the table when I left. Now it is gone."

She fell silent for a moment, as though she herself felt a reluctance toward the conclusion she was about to utter.

"I am sorry to say it," she continued, "but I can imagine nothing else than that it has been stolen."

The word seemed to move through the room like an invisible wave. At the neighbouring tables, people at once began exchanging glances and subdued comments. Some leaned forward in order to follow the matter more closely, while others plainly attempted to appear indifferent, though they listened just as intently as everyone else.

When a steward passed our table shortly afterward, he was immediately stopped by Madame Beaumont, who now repeated the whole story with such force that the young man quickly came to look both uncomfortable and pressured. He made several diplomatic attempts to suggest that the necklace might have been placed elsewhere, or that there might be some misunderstanding, but each time he was interrupted.

"I know perfectly well where I put it," she said sharply. "I keep track of my belongings."

The steward nodded cautiously and explained that several of the first-class stewards naturally had access to the cabins, but that he could not imagine any of them—

"No," she interrupted him again. "One never can in such a situation."

Then she asked the question which several around the table had plainly already been thinking.

"Who had access to my cabin?"

For a moment, the young man looked as though he wished himself in some other place entirely. He repeated that several stewards had access, but that he naturally did not wish to draw any hasty conclusions. Madame Beaumont, however, was not to be reassured.

"I wish to speak with the captain."

The steward explained politely that he would first have to inform his superiors.

"The captain," she repeated.

"I shall see that the matter is investigated."

"At once."

"Yes, madame."

When he finally withdrew, the atmosphere in the dining saloon was no longer the same. A few minutes earlier people had been speaking of restaurants in Gibraltar, of markets and views and the small pleasures which the voyage still afforded. Now they sat more quietly. Glances were exchanged with greater caution. A few passengers even looked over their shoulders, as though they had suddenly become aware of their surroundings in a new way. For a theft does not merely deprive a person

of property. It also deprives everyone else of trust. And that process had already begun.

The Reactions

Holmes also observed Colonel Moran's reaction to the news, or perhaps rather the lack of one. The rumour had naturally reached his table as quickly as every other part of the saloon. Several of the players had turned toward one another and exchanged comments, and I saw a couple of them direct questions toward the colonel. The distance was too great for me to hear the words, but I could study his face without difficulty.

It did not seem to me that he was surprised. On the contrary, he appeared almost amused. There was a fleeting smile about his mouth, as though the entire episode represented a welcome diversion in the otherwise monotonous rhythm that inevitably arises during a longer sea voyage. He leaned back in his chair, listened to the others' comments, and contributed a few remarks of his own, which several around the table rewarded with laughter. Miss Ardent also appeared to listen, but her attention seemed far less occupied with the theft itself than with the people reacting to it. As so often before, I reflected that any major event aboard ship reveals more about the passengers than about the event itself.

As breakfast drew toward its close, and several guests had already pushed back their chairs to rise, a steward arrived accompanied by the deck steward. Their presence immediately aroused fresh interest around the tables, and several conversations died away while people listened discreetly.

Madame Beaumont rose almost at once. With great energy, she repeated that she had been robbed and that she expected action without delay. She again put forward the same questions, this time with even greater sharpness. Who had access to her cabin? Who had keys? And how could such a thing possibly occur in first class? She emphasised that she had chosen to travel first class precisely because of the safety and security one might reasonably expect there. If passengers' belongings could not be protected even under such circumstances, then what was the value of the considerable sums one paid for a ticket?

The deck steward listened politely to her entire account. He was an experienced man with that calm expression often found among those who spend their lives at sea. When she had finished, he assured her that the matter would be investigated at once, and that all relevant information would be gathered. His words were correct, and his tone respectful. Nevertheless, they did not seem especially convincing to me. There was something routine in his response, as though he had already spoken the same phrases many times before. He seemed more concerned with calming the situation than with the theft itself. Nor was Madame Beaumont particularly reassured by his assurances, but when he repeated his promise of an imminent investigation, she reluctantly agreed to let the matter rest for the moment.

Gradually, the guests began once more to leave the dining saloon, and the conversations returned by degrees to their previous subjects. Yet the atmosphere was no longer the same. A caution had entered the room which had not been there before.

For my own part, I had to admit that I formed certain reflections concerning the theft. Perhaps the matter was not, in the first instance, about pearls. Perhaps it was about something else entirely. Over the years I had learned that the value of a stolen object does not always lie in the object itself. Sometimes the true value is the uneasiness the theft creates: the suspicion, the breakdown of control, the questions that are subsequently asked, the doors that are opened, and the people who are forced to identify themselves or explain their movements.

As I watched the last guests leave the saloon, it therefore occurred to me that someone among those present might have desired precisely that reaction. If the purpose was to create greater control aboard, one could hardly have chosen a more effective instrument than a theft in first class. At that point the thought was no more than a possibility, yet it remained with me longer than I had expected.

I spent most of the afternoon in my cabin. Not because I slept—quite the contrary. Sleep had, by that time, become difficult aboard the *Majestic*. There were simply too many things to think about. I needed distance from the conversations of the salons and from the endless stream of

people that surrounded us from morning until evening. Experience had taught me that observations often benefit from being allowed to settle before one attempts to gather them into actual conclusions.

There was Madame Beaumont's performance at the breakfast table. There was her missing pearl necklace. There was Moran's remarkable lack of interest in the matter. And I must also admit, Watson, that Camille Ardent's behaviour did not entirely leave my thoughts. I had been the one to bring her into this game, and yet several times during the afternoon I found myself recalling her smile at the card table and the ease with which she seemed to move in Moran's company. Was it all merely acting? I still believed so. Yet when a person possesses a particular talent for playing roles, the question sometimes becomes not whether that person is playing a role, but which role is being played at any given moment. I reached, however, no real conclusion.

In the Gaming Saloon

When evening came and I again made my way toward the saloon, the ship had recovered its usual rhythm. The lamps cast their warm golden light across the walls and ceilings. Music played softly somewhere farther inside the room, and the stewards moved calmly among the tables with the professional discretion most of them had mastered to perfection.

The passengers did their best to return to normality, though they succeeded only in part. The theft was no longer discussed with the same agitation as in the morning, but it lay as an underlying theme in almost every conversation. One could hear it in the cautious questions, in the small remarks, and in the way, people involuntarily looked about them.

That evening, I did not choose my usual place at the bar. Instead, I seated myself at a smaller table close to the card-playing area. Whist was being played there, and I joined the company politely. The cards were dealt, tricks were won and lost, and occasional comments were exchanged among the players. My participation, however, was more mechanical than engaged. My real attention was fixed upon the neighbouring table.

Camille Ardent sat almost opposite Moran. She had placed herself at an angle which appeared accidental, but which at the same time allowed her occasionally to glance in my direction without attracting attention. Moran sat with his back partly turned toward me, which meant that he would seldom be able to register the brief glances that passed between us. This gave us the opportunity gradually to develop the language that had begun to take shape on the previous evenings.

The first thing that struck me was how quickly she had become part of the table's established circle. She was no longer treated as a guest or as the new woman at the table. She had been accepted as a player. Her comments were listened to. Her judgments were taken seriously. The other players waited naturally for her turn and included her in their conversations. This seemed to me to have happened more quickly than I had expected.

She played calmly and precisely. The small uncertainties she had previously displayed were still present, but they now seemed more like deliberate choices than genuine mistakes. She continued to ask questions, but the questions had changed in character. They were no longer naive or searching. They were tactical. She no longer asked how the game was played, but why it was played in a particular way.

Several times during the evening, I noticed that Miss Ardent very skillfully guided the direction of the conversations. She never did so openly enough that anyone could accuse her of conducting an interrogation, but rather in that manner by which certain people manage to let a conversation move precisely where they wish it to go without the other participants noticing.

The Conversation About the Theft

It was during one of these conversations that she apparently brought up the theft quite by chance. There was nothing dramatic in the manner in which it occurred. On the contrary, she introduced the question with a lightness that made it sound like a natural continuation of the discussion already under way. As she placed a card upon the table, she let

her gaze move over her fellow players and asked with an almost curious innocence:

“Is that sort of thing actually common on long crossings?”

The question was received with the mixture of interest and amusement that often follows any incident which has befallen someone other than oneself. One of the gentlemen shrugged and declared that he had never experienced anything of the kind before. Another said that ships attracted every sort of person, and that one must therefore expect a little of everything. There was some laughter around the table, and for a moment the conversation threatened to drift toward other subjects.

Moran, however, did not allow himself to be carried entirely along by the mood. He gathered up his cards calmly, studied them for a moment, and only then let his gaze move around the table.

“If one announces one’s valuables to the entire saloon,” he said with a faint smile, “one must presumably accept some portion of the consequences.”

The remark produced another round of laughter, and several of those present nodded approvingly at what they took to be simple common sense. Moran continued in the same tone.

“Discretion is often the best security, Miss Ardent. That holds true on ships, in great cities, and in life generally.”

He accompanied the words with a brief laugh. It was not the open and hearty laughter that springs from genuine amusement, but rather the subdued satisfaction of a man who believes he has formulated a truth from which others would do well to learn.

I sat silently with my own cards in hand and listened. It was precisely then that a strange feeling began to take shape within me. I could point to no single detail. There was no direct contradiction in his words, no obvious error, and no revealing remark. Yet something about his reaction seemed wrong to me. Perhaps it was the manner in which he had immediately been ready with his explanation, or perhaps it was the almost complete absence of surprise. The longer I observed him, the stronger my suspicion became. The theft did not appear to have surprised him in the least.

I do not say, Watson, that at that moment I suspected him of having arranged it himself. For that I still possessed far too little information. But I became increasingly convinced that the event had not come unexpectedly to him. On the contrary, I sat with the distinct impression that he already knew far more about the matter than he had any interest in revealing. Whether he knew the culprit, I did not know. Nor could I determine whether he knew all the circumstances. Yet one thing seemed likely to me: the theft had not taken Colonel Sebastian Moran by surprise.

Colonel Moran's Stories

Moran played that evening with an aggressiveness that could not pass unnoticed. Where others were content to follow the natural rhythms of the game, he seemed constantly to press it forward. The stakes rose steadily, and before him there gradually gathered piles of chips and banknotes. He appeared entirely relaxed, almost carefree, and yet I had the impression that nothing he did was accidental. It gradually struck me that Moran was not merely playing cards; he was also playing his game with people and atmospheres.

And that evening his most important audience appeared to be seated directly opposite him: Miss Ardent. He often sought her gaze when he had won a significant trick. Several of his remarks were directed toward her, even when they seemed addressed to the whole table. He had the habit of telling stories at precisely those moments when the game allowed for a brief pause, as though he instinctively understood when attention was at its highest. Whether he was trying to impress her or merely wished to maintain her interest, I could not yet determine. Perhaps it was both.

Miss Ardent, for her part, seemed to understand precisely how to keep the conversation moving. She never asked many questions, but always just enough to make Moran continue.

At one point she asked, quite cautiously, about India. It was no more than a single remark, but it was sufficient. Moran laid his cards aside for a moment, leaned back in his chair, and began to speak. He described a military situation from his younger years in which, according to his

account, a small group of soldiers had been cut off and pressed by a far larger force. The story was told with assurance and a wealth of detail, and he presented himself as the man who had understood the situation more quickly than the others and had therefore taken the necessary decisions. He spoke at length and with remarkable confidence about the necessity of acting quickly in situations where other men hesitated. Several times he returned to the idea that brutality and mercy were not always opposites, but sometimes merely different names for the same decision viewed from opposite sides. This was said without agitation and without the theatrical self-assertion one often encounters in men who wish to impress those around them. On the contrary, he expressed his views with such calmness that several at the table seemed to find them both reasonable and convincing.

I noticed how differently the company reacted to him. Some listened with that fascination people often feel toward those who have experienced things they themselves know only from books. Others seemed less comfortable. An elderly American businessman in particular appeared increasingly uneasy as the evening progressed. Several times he shifted in his chair and attempted to smile in the proper places, but the smile rarely reached beyond the corners of his mouth.

When the first story had ended, I actually expected the conversation to move on. Moran, however, had clearly discovered that he held the attention of his audience, and, like any experienced storyteller, he knew how to exploit it. Almost without transition, he began another account, this time of a tiger hunt in India.

He described the surroundings with a richness of detail that made a considerable impression. One could almost feel the damp heat, hear the distant sounds of the jungle, and sense the long hours of waiting in which nothing apparently happens, while every experienced hunter knows that it is precisely the silence which is often the most dangerous moment. Even I was forced, however reluctantly, to admit that he told the story well—not merely because he had lived what he described, but because he instinctively knew which details to emphasise and which to omit.

The longer the story continued, the more the listeners leaned forward toward the table. For that very reason, the ending had all the greater effect. In the midst of the hunt, a local helper had been killed. Moran described the incident soberly, neither callously nor boastfully, but with a strange absence of the grief or regret one would ordinarily expect. He, spoke of the death as though it were a natural part of the landscape, like the weather or the terrain. Risk was part of the hunt, he explained. It had always been so. Some people simply found themselves closer to danger than others.

When he said this, I sensed an almost imperceptible change around the table. No one protested, and no one contradicted him. Yet the eager atmosphere of a few minutes earlier had vanished. It seemed to me that several of those present suddenly saw the storyteller in a somewhat different light. The story was no longer about tigers, jungles, or adventure; it was about the man who told it. Perhaps Moran himself was aware of that. Perhaps it was precisely what he intended. For when he reached the end, he fell silent for a moment and let his gaze move around the company. It was not a dominating gaze, but rather an examining one, like that of a man who wished to register the effect of his own words.

At last, his eyes rested upon Miss Ardent. Only for a moment, but long enough for me to notice it. She answered the look with nothing beyond the calm attentiveness she had shown throughout the evening, yet it still gave me cause for thought.

As I sat there watching them both, something gradually began to fall into place in my mind. I had long regarded Moran as a soldier, adventurer, gambler, and hunter. All these descriptions were correct, but they did not fully explain the fascination he seemed to exert upon those around him. Gradually, I realised that his true interest might not be the quarry of the hunt at all. It was the people around him. He seemed to study them with the same attention with which others study cards at a gaming table. He told stories, expressed opinions, and gently pressed against their boundaries, not necessarily in order to convince them, but to see how they reacted: what they feared, what they admired, and what they tried to conceal.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that his interest in power sprang from the same source. Not power in the traditional sense, but the subtler satisfaction that lies in understanding other people better than they understand oneself. And it was there, Watson, that I began truly to grasp why Sebastian Moran had proved so difficult an opponent through all these years. He was not merely a man who hunted animals, money, or documents. He hunted insight. And that form of hunter is often far more dangerous than all the others.

In many respects, Sebastian Moran's method was far removed from my own, and yet I was reluctantly obliged to acknowledge that there were similarities I could not ignore. He worked, as I did, through observation. He studied people. He assessed their strengths, their weaknesses, and their probable reactions. The difference lay rather in the purpose and in the instruments, he chose to employ.

Where I sought understanding, he sought control. Where I preferred to let people reveal themselves, Moran seemed actively to press them into doing so. He used dominance, uncertainty, and at times fear as tools in the same way others used logic or persuasion. It was not a method I could respect, but I had to admit that it was often effective.

I have met many intelligent men over the years, Watson, and one of the most common errors among them is to underestimate other intelligent men merely because their abilities express themselves in a different manner. Moran was, in my judgment, precisely such a case. Most people would see him as a soldier, a hunter, or a gambler. Some might even regard him as a brutal man with fortune on his side. That was a grave miscalculation. Behind the outward appearance there worked a mind that was constantly analysing its surroundings. He could be impulsive, but he was never thoughtless. He could be violent, but seldom without calculation. The more I observed him, the better I understood why he had been Professor Moriarty's preferred hand.

The Communication System

Even so, it was not Moran who occupied my thoughts most that evening. My greatest fascination lay instead in the language that was gradually

arising between Miss Ardent and myself. Perhaps I ought not to call it a language. A communication system would be more precise. It was neither planned nor agreed upon. We had had no opportunity to meet privately. We had not exchanged instructions or devised any sort of code.

It simply came into being. First through occasional glances, then through small movements of the hand: a thumb resting against the edge of the table at a certain angle, an index finger briefly raised, an eyebrow lifted, a glass moved a few inches. Each movement was so slight that no outsider would have attached significance to it, and even if someone had noticed it, it would scarcely have aroused suspicion.

Gradually, these small signals began to acquire meaning. I noticed how Miss Ardent caught them almost immediately. Her play changed in character at the moments when she received a message. She wagered differently. She became more cautious or more aggressive. She allowed certain tricks to go and, on other occasions, pressed Moran at precisely the moments when I had expected it.

As the evening progressed, I therefore found myself less occupied with the current card game than with the possibilities this unexpected collaboration opened. I began to imagine situations later in the voyage: how, through joint effort, we might influence the development of the game; how certain incidents might be provoked; how men such as Moran might be guided in particular directions without ever realising it themselves. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that this cooperation might prove decisive.

As the evening drew toward its close and the final rounds were played, I found myself in a more philosophical mood than I ordinarily permit myself. Over the years I had seen alliances arise under the strangest circumstances. Some had been built through long conversations and shared experiences, while others had rested upon mutual respect or common interests. Yet when I looked back, some of the strongest alliances I had known had emerged almost without words.

Human understanding does not always follow the paths prescribed by logic. Sometimes it develops more swiftly in silence than in conversation. And as I watched Miss Ardent lay down her cards at the evening's end, it

struck me that precisely this might be occurring between us: not through agreements or promises, but through that rare trust which may arise between two people who see the same reality and understand it in the same way.

Chapter Eighteen

FIFTEENTH DAY

I noted that the following day passed without any events of a truly dramatic character. No new thefts were reported. No passengers came to quarrel. No curious discoveries were made. And yet it was a day upon which the atmosphere aboard changed noticeably.

The theft of Madame Beaumont's pearl necklace continued to shape life upon the ship, not because it was discussed at any great length, but because it had set something in motion. Suspicion had found its way aboard, and suspicion possesses the quality of seldom remaining confined to the original incident.

Altered Behaviour

Suddenly, one noticed the stewards in a different manner than before. Whereas their presence had previously formed part of the ship's polite and almost invisible service, it now acquired a more administrative character. They still moved through the salons and passageways with the same professional calm, but one noticed the lists, the notebooks, and the many questions.

Several times during the day I saw passengers stopped and asked their names, cabin numbers, or various details concerning their stay aboard. Everything was conducted politely and correctly, but there was no doubt that control had been tightened.

What was interesting was that the passengers' behaviour changed as well. Social life naturally continued. Coffee was drunk, cards were played, and the usual conversations were conducted. Yet beneath the surface

something had altered. People locked their cabins. Bags and hand luggage were kept closer to the body. Several passengers who had previously left their belongings to chance now began to keep watch over them. I also noticed that some regarded the staff with a mistrust that had not been present before. Such reactions are entirely natural. Once trust has been challenged, people are quick to protect themselves.

I particularly observed that the scrutiny seemed to be directed toward the newly arrived and those passengers who had come aboard late in the voyage. More questions were asked of them. More notes were taken. More cross-checking was carried out. Control of this kind rarely feels neutral. It is almost always directed toward the person who does not yet quite belong to the community, or toward one who, for one reason or another, is perceived as standing outside it.

The deck steward also made himself far more visible than before. Several times I saw him move through the salons, stop beside various groups of stewards, and exchange brief conversations with them. He compared information, checked lists, and took notes himself. It all took place without drama, yet it still created the impression of a minor state of alert.

Gradually, I began to consider whether this might perhaps be the true effect of the theft—or perhaps even its true purpose. For a theft does not merely remove an object. It creates a situation. It creates fear and suspicion, and with them comes legitimacy for control. Suddenly people accept questions they would previously have considered intrusive. They accept registration, supervision, and investigation because they feel threatened.

The longer I observed the development, the more I began to wonder whether someone among us might have desired precisely this reaction. At the same time, I was forced to acknowledge that the situation made my own movements as the steward Emilio considerably more difficult. Previously I had been able to move relatively freely among the ship's various areas. Now the risk of being stopped and questioned would be far greater. More people were observing. More people were noting faces and names. More people wanted explanations.

I therefore began to consider whether this might not merely be a consequence of the theft. Perhaps it had been the intention. If someone wished to restrict my freedom of movement without knowing my identity, it would be difficult to imagine a more effective means. That thought remained with me for the rest of the day, and although I could not yet prove anything, my suspicion grew that the pearl necklace might be only the visible part of a much larger manoeuvre.

The Staff's Altered Practices

William paid me a discreet visit in my cabin early in the afternoon. As usual, he chose a time when the risk of being noticed was as small as possible, and he closed the door behind him with the caution that had by now become a natural part of our cooperation. He needed few words to confirm what I had already observed. Control had been noticeably tightened.

The theft of Madame Beaumont's pearl necklace was now being discussed throughout the ship. Even on the third deck, where rumours normally arrived in distorted form and often developed more rapidly than truth itself, the story had reached them. According to William, the incident was being recounted in many different versions. Some believed it to be a matter of professional crime. Others were convinced that the culprit must belong among the crew. A few had already developed more imaginative theories, which William repeated with a certain amusement.

More interesting, however, was how the staff reacted. It seemed, he told me, as though the theft had given rise to a general campaign for greater caution. Passengers were encouraged to lock their cabins. They were reminded to keep watch over their belongings. And above all, they were urged to pay attention to unfamiliar persons moving about without an obvious purpose.

"They are speaking of it everywhere," he said. "On every deck. Even people who had no idea who Madame Beaumont was now know the story of the pearl necklace."

He shook his head slightly.

"I almost think more people know about the theft than know the ship's destination."

I could not help smiling at the remark.

William went on to tell me that he himself had been stopped several times during the day and asked to identify himself. No one had treated him discourteously, but it was plain that the management wished to know who was moving where.

"They are checking names far more than before," he said. "Especially if one goes outside one's usual area."

It was precisely the development I had feared.

I thanked him for the information and settled matters in our particular little way. Without grand words and without unnecessary formalities, I placed the agreed payment before him. He accepted it with a brief nod, and, as so often before, this simple act underlined the curious nature of our alliance. We were not friends in the ordinary sense. Nor were we merely employer and informant. We occupied a place somewhere between, bound together by necessity, trust, and a mutual understanding of the risks we both ran.

When William had left the cabin shortly afterward, I remained seated alone for some time. At last I rose and went to the porthole. Outside, the Atlantic stretched in every direction. It was the same view that had met me the day before and the day before that. Dark water. A heavy horizon. No landfall. No lighthouses. No sign of the world that human beings otherwise attempt so eagerly to organise and control. I remained standing there for a moment and gazed at it.

It struck me once more how little our small intrigues and conflicts truly mattered to the sea around us. While passengers suspected one another, while the crew kept lists and conducted inquiries, and while I myself attempted to outmanoeuvre Sebastian Moran, the ocean continued undisturbed in its ancient motion. It remained dark and still black, and there was not the slightest trace of human order in its vast expanse.

At the Card Tables

In the card room, Miss Ardent's and my silent collaboration continued

to develop. It increasingly struck me as almost peculiar how quickly a common language can arise between two people when circumstances demand it. We had still not exchanged a single word concerning the matter, and yet our understanding of one another had become so precise that even the smallest movements now carried meaning.

The first part of the evening unfolded much as the preceding ones had done. Colonel Moran occupied the natural center of the table and played with the same aggressive self-assurance to which I had by now become accustomed. Chips accumulated before him in steadily growing piles, and he seemed entirely in his element. The cards fell in his favour, the other players were gradually pressed back, and at the same time he continued the social performance which he appeared to enjoy almost as much as the game itself. His stories came and went in a steady stream, and on several occasions, I noticed how his gaze sought Miss Ardent, almost as though her attention were as important to him as his winnings.

For her part, she played her role with exquisite skill. She listened with interest, asked questions at the proper moments, and allowed him the satisfaction that many men find in explaining themselves to an attentive listener. Yet I had the distinct impression that both of us were waiting for something. There existed a silent understanding between us that this evening would not end as the previous ones had.

Fortune Changes

I therefore began gradually to alter my signals. Not enough to attract attention, but sufficiently that she would understand my intention. It was fascinating to observe the effect.

At first, the changes were almost imperceptible. A trick here. A modest gain there. Nothing that could concern a man of Moran's experience and confidence. But the development continued, and slowly the balance at the table began to shift.

Moran retained his smile, yet I noticed that he now studied his cards for longer periods before playing them. When a hand went against him, he still laughed and offered his customary remarks, but the laughter had lost a little of its ease.

"This is one of those evenings," he remarked at one point with a shrug, "when the cards have apparently decided to lead lives of their own."

There was laughter around the table, and he laughed as well, but I noticed that his fingers drummed briefly upon the tabletop.

Shortly afterward, he was obliged to request additional chips. A steward approached and exchanged money for him, and a new stack was built up before his place. The matter was handled with the discretion customary among wealthy people. No one commented upon it directly, but everyone had noticed. For a brief period, fortune seemed to return to him. Then the losses began again. This time more rapidly.

Several times I observed him studying the remaining chips before him. His gaze drifted briefly toward Miss Ardent, who continued to play with the same calm precision as before. At last, he laid down his cards and rose.

"Gentlemen. Miss Ardent. You must excuse me for a moment."

No explanation was offered. None was required. Everyone at the table understood perfectly well what had occurred.

I waited a moment before rising myself. The situation was unusual enough that I did not wish to allow it to pass unnoticed. With suitable caution, I followed him out of the salon and down the corridor. I had expected him to make his way toward his cabin. To my surprise, he did nothing of the kind. Instead, he continued at a brisk pace through the interior of the ship and made directly for the stairway leading to the lower decks.

That observation alone was sufficient. I had no desire to press my luck further than necessary. I therefore turned back and returned to the salon, where I resumed my seat. Only after I had settled myself did I take out my watch and note the time.

Moran Resumes the Game

When Moran finally returned to the table, he did so with a fresh stack of chips before him and an expression suggesting that his brief absence had never occurred.

None of those present asked any questions. Such behaviour would have violated the unwritten rules that govern such tables. One does not

comment upon another man's finances, nor does one inquire where his money comes from. Nevertheless, I had no doubt that everyone had noticed his absence, just as everyone had noticed that his supply of chips had suddenly been restored.

Another change had occurred, however, and it interested me far more. Whereas earlier in the evening he had played with an almost provocative aggressiveness, there was now something more disciplined in his behaviour. He appeared more focused and less concerned with dominating the table. On several occasions I saw him allow opportunities for gain to pass which he would previously have pursued, and he now placed his wagers with a care that stood in marked contrast to the superior confidence he had otherwise displayed.

It was as though his brief excursion into the deeper parts of the ship had reminded him of something important. Or perhaps, rather, reassured him.

Whatever the reason, he gradually succeeded in halting the decline. He did not win greatly, but neither did he continue to lose at the same pace, and as the balance at the table became more even, his good humour appeared to return.

The conversation once again grew lively. Moran told stories, and the other players listened with that mixture of fascination and skepticism which his accounts so often inspired. At one point he, spoke of a stay in India during which he and several companions had been invited to a feast by local hosts. Only after several hours had it dawned upon them that the dish they had praised so warmly was not composed of the meat, they had imagined it to be. The story produced the expected laughter around the table.

Yet while the others amused themselves with the exotic anecdote, I found my thoughts occupied elsewhere. By then I had heard enough of Moran's stories to know that they rarely concerned what they pretended to concern. His tales almost always contained an underlying point that revealed more about the storyteller than about the events themselves. This time, it seemed to me that the story was not about food at all. It was about people who believe they know what lies before them, and about

the difference between appearance and reality. Perhaps it was merely my own suspicion that coloured the interpretation. Perhaps not.

When the laughter had subsided and the cards were once again gathered from the table, Moran leaned back in his chair and regarded the other players for a moment.

There was a particular expression upon his face which I had noticed on several previous occasions. It appeared whenever he was not merely playing a game but contemplating the mechanisms behind it.

"Fortune changes quickly for many men," he said thoughtfully.

His voice was calm, almost philosophical.

"But the man who controls the course of events is seldom surprised by its movements."

The remark was received with a few nods and a shrug or two. To most at the table, it was probably merely another of his many observations upon card-playing.

To me, however, the words carried a different resonance, and I reflected upon them as the game continued. For if there was one thing I had gradually learned about Sebastian Moran, it was that he rarely said anything by accident. Behind his stories, his jokes, and his seemingly carefree sociability there was almost always a calculation.

Chapter Nineteen

SIXTEENTH DAY - THE STORM

On the fifth day after our departure from Gibraltar, the warning of the storm arrived.

The atmosphere at the breakfast tables that morning was unusually subdued. Several of the passengers appeared tired after the long evenings in the salons, and conversations were conducted in a quieter tone than was customary. At the same time, I had already noticed from the early hours that the ship was moving differently than before. There was as yet no true heavy sea, but the steady rhythm that had characterised the preceding days had given way to heavier and more irregular motions.

While we sat at our tables, the officer who had previously addressed the passengers regarding various matters connected with the voyage entered the dining saloon. He halted near the entrance and politely requested our attention. Conversations gradually died away. Cutlery was laid aside. Cups were set down. Within a few moments, the attention of the entire room rested upon him.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “there is no cause for concern, but we consider it advisable to inform you of the weather conditions we expect to encounter during the coming twenty-four hours.”

A few remarks were exchanged here and there, but most listened attentively. The officer explained that the ship was entering an area of poor weather, something entirely normal in the North Atlantic at this season of the year. The crew anticipated no danger to the vessel but wished the passengers to be prepared for the conditions that might lie ahead.

"There is no reason for panic," he said with a reassuring smile. "But we wish everyone to have the opportunity to make their plans accordingly."

Several nodded in understanding. Others exchanged glances. A few already appeared less pleased.

"It may become necessary to restrict movement about the ship," he continued. "And should the storm develop into a full winter gale, we may be obliged to ask passengers to remain in their cabins."

It was at this point that the German businessman rose. He had already shown himself several times during the voyage to be a man with a taste for humour.

"Then have you run out of food?" he called loudly. "Or have you decided to starve us to death?"

Laughter broke out at several tables. Even the officer was compelled to smile.

"No, sir. I can assure you that we have not."

"So, there will still be breakfast?"

"Certainly."

"And luncheon?"

"Certainly."

"And dinner?"

"So far as I am aware, dinner as well."

Laughter spread through the room once more. When it had subsided, the officer continued.

"Should we be forced to keep passengers in their cabins, all meals will naturally be delivered to them. Provisioning is not the problem. Safety is the problem."

His voice became more serious.

"When a ship is working heavily in the sea, even ordinary objects can become dangerous. Chairs and tables may shift. Glassware may shatter. Boiling liquids may spill. And even aboard a modern vessel such as the *Majestic*, it may become difficult to move safely through the common areas."

He then explained that passengers would be informed by means of the ship's bell and that three clear rings would serve as the signal to retire to their cabins.

The German businessman was not yet finished.

"And does that apply to all three decks?"

The question produced a brief murmur throughout the room. Several now listened with greater interest. The officer hesitated for a moment before replying.

"The conditions are not entirely the same on all decks."

His answer was diplomatic, yet honest.

"On the third deck there are not the same opportunities for private accommodation and comfort. The passengers there will be obliged to rely more heavily upon the common areas. Conditions will simply be harsher."

For a moment there was silence.

Many of the first-class passengers preferred not to think too closely about the manner in which the majority of the ship's other passengers traveled.

The officer then thanked us for our attention and withdrew, whereupon the conversations immediately resumed. This time, however, they concerned almost nothing but the weather.

The Storm Strengthens

Already during the morning, the warning began to justify itself. The wind could be heard around the superstructure, and the cold grew noticeably sharper. It quickly became unpleasant to remain outdoors for any length of time, and most people retreated to the warmth of the salons.

By afternoon the ship's movements changed further. First came the long, slow rolls that caused glasses and cutlery to rattle softly. Later the vessel began to strike more directly into the sea, and even the least experienced passengers could feel the difference. I also noted the direction from which the storm approached. It came from the south.

That may seem an insignificant detail to the modern reader, Watson, but among seamen winter storms from the south have long possessed a particular reputation. I found myself thinking of the old sailing ships, where ice could accumulate upon rails and rigging until the crew were forced to hack it away to avoid disaster. Modern technology had solved many of those problems, but the sea itself had not changed on that account.

When darkness fell, the storm truly took hold. It was not necessary to see the waves. One could hear the development and feel it through the hull. The vibrations altered in character. The wind struck the ship with increasing force, and somewhere in the distance I heard a door slam.

Shortly before evening, the three bell signals sounded.

Almost immediately afterward I heard activity in the corridors. Passengers made their way toward their cabins. Voices called to one another. Doors opened and closed. Somewhere there came a loud crash followed by startled exclamations.

The storm now had its grip upon the *Majestic*. And I already knew at that moment that it would alter more than merely the weather. It would alter the very rules of the game aboard ship. Routines would break down. Surveillance would weaken. People would seek shelter. And in such situation's opportunities arise that do not exist under normal conditions.

Seasickness and an Opportunity

It was with precisely these thoughts in mind that I later that evening heard the four discreet knocks upon my cabin door. William stood outside, pale as a sheet and in a condition that left no doubt that the storm had claimed its first victim.

"Come in," I said.

He did not even protest.

It was evident that all his energy was being spent merely on remaining upright. I helped him over to the bed, where he sank down with a groan and closed his eyes for a moment.

Seasickness is one of the most merciless afflictions I know. It attacks without regard for age, strength, or experience, and over the years I have seen both sailors and soldiers reduced to helpless shadows of themselves by it. William was no exception. Yet his condition simultaneously presented me with an opportunity.

While the storm raged outside and the ship laboured heavily in the sea, a plan began to take shape. I myself was unaffected by the motion. And if William remained in the cabin, Emilio could once again return to life.

It would be far easier to move about the ship under such conditions, and the usual systems of control would inevitably be weakened.

When I presented the idea, William opened his eyes and gave a faint nod.

“Will anyone keep knocking at the door?” I asked.

“No,” he muttered. “Just say that I have everything I need. Nobody wants to visit a seasick man.”

“And if Emilio is stopped?”

He managed a faint smile despite his miserable condition.

“Then say you are a steward attached to the bridge. Nobody knows them. Nobody expects to know them.”

Outside, another wave struck the hull.

And while William pulled the blanket around himself, I began making preparations for the night’s first excursion as Emilio.

The storm might be a problem for most people aboard. For me, it was beginning to develop into an opportunity.

Emilio

On the previous evening, I had already conducted a few cautious reconnaissance excursions under my new identity. In particular, I had kept watch on the corridors surrounding both Colonel Moran’s and Miss Ardent’s cabins, though without result. Neither of them appeared. There were no movements, no visitors, and no signs of activity. A few days earlier, Moran had remarked during a conversation with Miss Ardent that storms at sea had never been his strong suit. Whether that was true or merely another of his many masks, I could not, of course, know. A

man such as Moran could employ illness with equal ease as both shield and camouflage. Nevertheless, I began to suspect that there might be a kernel of truth in his statement.

I had resolved to undertake a more determined search for his hiding place. I doubted that I would ever enjoy more favourable conditions. The storm had transformed life aboard ship entirely. Most of the passengers had disappeared into their cabins, and even among the crew one encountered only those individuals whose presence was absolutely necessary for the operation of the vessel.

Dressed in Emilio Stuart's steward's uniform, I began my descent toward the lower regions of the ship. Even for a man who did not suffer from seasickness, it was a demanding journey. The Majestic laboured heavily in the sea. The hull rolled and twisted beneath my feet, and on several occasions, I was forced to stop and grip the railing tightly to avoid being thrown against the wall. Stairways that under ordinary circumstances appeared broad and secure had now become narrow passages between sudden movements and invisible forces.

When I reached the lower decks, I was struck by how quiet everything had become. Under normal conditions one would hear voices, footsteps, and the endless activity that accompanies the operation of a great ship. Now it had almost vanished. Only the deepest sounds of the machinery remained. Here and there a coal-heaver or an engineer passed by with his gaze fixed firmly upon his work. No one appeared interested in anything except surviving the storm.

I made directly for the door which Moran had previously revealed to me without realizing it himself. To my surprise, it stood unlocked. There were no guards. The storm had simply consumed the ship's attention.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

To my surprise, I found myself not in another coal store but in something resembling a combination workshop, spare-parts depot, and craftsmen's storeroom. The darkness was almost complete, and for the first few seconds I could discern only the nearest outlines. After some difficulty I succeeded in lighting a lamp, and slowly the room emerged from the shadows.

Workbenches, tool chests, and machinery stood everywhere. Along the walls were stacked planks, metal rods, and sheets of various sizes. Here and there stood barrels of oil and other liquids presumably used for repairs. Vises, saws, hammers, and instruments whose purpose I could not immediately determine were arranged in a system that no doubt made perfect sense to the ship's craftsmen.

The storm's movements rendered any investigation difficult. Several times I was obliged to steady myself against the workbenches while the ship hurled itself from side to side, and on more than one occasion I considered whether wisdom might not dictate abandoning the enterprise altogether and returning to my cabin.

Yet I continued.

I attempted to think as Moran would think. If he had chosen a hiding place, it would have to be somewhere that offered maximum control with minimum risk. It would need to be easily accessible and yet invisible to casual visitors. Above all, it would have to be a place from which he could quickly retrieve or deposit something. I still remembered how little time it had taken him to leave the card table and return with fresh funds.

In several places I examined cupboards, tool chests, and storage compartments, but nothing seemed likely. At last, I returned to the doorway and stood there, allowing my gaze to travel through the entire room, precisely as I had done so many times at crime scenes in the past.

And then I saw it. High upon the wall near the door ran a series of shelves with boxes stacked behind one another. I had not noticed them at first glance.

The Hiding Place

A ladder stood beneath them. I must confess, Watson, that I did not feel particularly comfortable at the prospect of climbing it under such conditions. More than once it seemed likely to slide away beneath me, and only after considerable effort did, I succeed in positioning it so that it stood reasonably secure. Carefully I began my ascent toward the upper shelves.

As I climbed higher, it became easier to maintain my balance by bracing myself against the shelving, although the ship's movements continued to make the work difficult. At first glance, the rows of boxes appeared almost identical. Yet the more closely I studied them, the more small differences began to emerge.

It was not their size or position that first attracted my attention, but rather the fact that one of the boxes appeared slightly less dusty than the others. At the same time, I could discern traces of fresh coal dust along the lid, as though someone had recently sprinkled it there to help it blend naturally into its surroundings. At that moment I felt my heart begin to beat more rapidly. I remained perfectly still for several seconds, studying the box.

Then I found a small metal tool lying among some nearby implements and, exercising the utmost caution, succeeded in lifting the lid no more than a few inches. It was more than enough. Inside the box lay the parchment roll. Beside it were several bundles of banknotes.

I remember that for a moment I merely stood staring at the discovery without taking any action at all. My satisfaction arose not solely from the fact that the document had finally been found. Even stronger was the feeling of having confirmed a series of conclusions that had for some time rested upon observations, assumptions, and logical connections.

I had found the hiding place Moran had selected. The document had been aboard the ship all along, precisely as I had suspected. Naturally, the question immediately presented itself whether I ought to take it with me. The temptation was considerable.

Yet the longer I considered the matter, the clearer it became that such an action would most likely be a mistake. If the document vanished now, Moran would instantly understand that someone had discovered his secret. He would alter his plans, become far more cautious, and possibly react in ways that neither of us could predict.

Paradoxically, therefore, the document seemed safer to me here, in Moran's own hiding place, than anywhere else aboard the ship.

I carefully closed the lid again, ensured that everything appeared exactly as I had found it, and then began the slow and somewhat difficult

descent toward the floor. When I reached the bottom, I cast one final glance toward the shelf. Despite the seriousness of the situation, a faint smile appeared. Had I myself been obliged to conceal something of similar importance, I would very likely have chosen a place very much like this one.

Shortly afterward I left the workshop area. I had scarcely closed the door behind me, however, before a faint light appeared farther down the corridor. Instinctively I withdrew and pressed myself between several crates.

For a brief moment the unpleasant thought flashed through my mind that it might be Moran himself. If he found me here, my entire advantage would be lost in an instant.

The light approached slowly. At first, I could distinguish only the lamp. Then the figure gradually took shape.

To my relief, it proved to be nothing more than a steward moving through the corridor with the same caution that I myself had been obliged to exercise. The ship's movements clearly did not make his work any easier, and when we passed one another a few moments later, we did not exchange so much as a single word.

The journey back to my cabin consumed most of a quarter of an hour.

Only when I finally closed the door behind me and sat down did I allow myself truly to think the situation through. It struck me then that I had not experienced this feeling since the days in Rome.

For the first time in a very long while, it seemed to me that the initiative once more rested in my hands. Not because the case had been solved. Not because the danger had passed. But because I finally knew something that my opponent did not know that I knew. And in any duel, Watson, that advantage is often worth more than the weapon itself.

The Board Has Changed

I sat down on the edge of the bunk and listened for a moment to the storm's relentless assault upon the hull. The wind whistled around the superstructure, and at regular intervals there came the heavy impacts as the ship plunged into yet another wave. It was a curious moment,

Watson, for amidst all this chaos I began to feel a growing sense of certainty. When one is engaged upon a difficult case, there sometimes comes a point at which all emotion must be set aside and one's position reviewed with cold objectivity, precisely as a general assesses his strengths and weaknesses before a battle. That was exactly what I did that night.

The first advantage was obvious. Moran was temporarily out of the game. Whether this was due to seasickness or merely caution, I could not say with certainty, but the result was the same. The storm had isolated him. Whereas he had previously been able to move freely between the lounges, the cabins, and the various decks, his world had now been reduced to a few square yards. Even if he wished to act, he would be forced to do so under conditions far more difficult than before.

The second advantage was no less significant. I myself remained unaffected. The Atlantic appeared to hold no power over me. While other passengers lay helpless in their cabins, and even members of the crew struggled with nausea and exhaustion, my thoughts remained clear. The storm naturally made every movement more difficult, but it did not make it impossible. I was still among the few people aboard who were functioning more or less normally.

The third advantage followed almost naturally from the first two. Control of the ship was beginning to dissolve. Not because anyone had lost authority, but because every available effort was now directed toward the most important objective of all: bringing the vessel safely through the storm. The many restrictions that had previously made the Emilio identity difficult to employ had, in practice, disappeared. No one was interested any longer in passenger manifests, name checks, or minor irregularities. Even the most diligent officials had more pressing matters to occupy their attention.

Yet the most important realisation of all was also the simplest. I now knew Moran's hiding place. No longer as a theory or a probability, but as a verified fact. I had seen the document with my own eyes. I had stood close enough to it that I could have taken it without any great difficulty. I knew its precise location. I knew the route by which it could be reached. And most importantly of all, I knew that the document remained there.

That changed the entire nature of the situation.

Until this point I had, in reality, been pursuing rumours, assumptions, and clues. I had attempted to reconstruct movements and intentions from fragments of information. Now matters stood differently. The document was no longer an idea or a possibility. It had become a tangible object in a tangible location. The difference is far greater than most people imagine.

Yet as I sat in my cabin reviewing the events of recent days, it occurred to me that there was another circumstance which might be even more important. Moran knew nothing. He still believed himself secure. He believed his hiding place remained undiscovered. He probably assumed that the storm and its delays were working to his advantage, and that his opponent was still groping through the darkness in search of clues that had yet to lead anywhere decisive. He had no idea that I had already found the document.

I must confess, Watson, that this realisation afforded me a certain satisfaction. Not because I considered the struggle won. Quite the contrary. Experience had taught me that such thoughts often precede the gravest mistakes. Nothing is more dangerous to an investigator than a sense of infallibility, and over the years I have seen more than one carefully constructed plan collapse at the very moment its creator felt most certain of success.

Nevertheless, I could not escape the conclusion which at that moment appeared almost unavoidable. The balance had changed. For the first time in many weeks, I was no longer merely reacting to my opponent's moves. I was no longer forced to guess at his intentions or to follow trails which he himself had left behind. Quite the reverse.

While the storm continued to hammer against the ship's sides, and the Atlantic rolled dark and restless around us, Moran sat somewhere aboard convinced that he still controlled the game. And therein lay his weakness. For he had not yet understood that the board had changed. Without realising it, he was now playing upon a board on which I knew more of the pieces than he did himself.

Once the storm had taken hold of the *Majestic*, it showed no inclination to release its grip. For another day and a half, the ship was hurled about by sea and wind, and I was largely reduced to following its progress through the sounds that surrounded me. I could hear the wind labouring through the superstructure, hear the long groans of the hull as it twisted between the waves, and feel the heavy shocks when the bow crashed into the sea with a force that sent vibrations through the entire vessel.

After a time, I lost almost all sense of the rhythm of day and night. Behind the walls of the cabin there was no distinction between morning and evening. Only the light of the lamp, the voice of the storm, and the ship's ceaseless movements informed me that time continued to pass.

My only real task became caring for William. The young steward was exhausted in every respect. More than once I sat studying his face, which under ordinary circumstances radiated both health and youthful energy. Now it appeared drawn and pale. Even when he slept, it seemed less like rest than a brief truce between the body and its suffering.

Seasickness is a brutal affliction, Watson. Those who have never experienced it themselves often underestimate it. They imagine a little nausea and discomfort. The reality is far worse. Seasickness is one of nature's most merciless reminders of human frailty. It robs a man of his appetite, his strength, and eventually almost of his will. Even the simplest actions become overwhelming exertions. To drink a glass of water, rise from a bed, or merely turn over upon a mattress can feel like tasks of almost impossible difficulty.

I was obliged to assist William with practically everything. When he awoke, I saw that he had water. When he attempted to eat, I helped him manage the few spoonfuls that his stomach was willing to accept. More than once I feared that he would become dehydrated, and I therefore kept a careful watch over him, even while he slept. He complained very little, however. His suffering was so obvious that any complaint would have been superfluous. Life at sea exacts its price, my dear Watson.

During those hours I found myself thinking of the sailors, officers, and seamen who spend the greater part of their lives upon the ocean. We often see only the result of their experience and hardiness, but less

frequently the price that has been paid along the way. The sea shapes men in its own merciless fashion. Had I been afflicted by seasickness to the same degree as William, I can assure you that I would, without the slightest hesitation, have left the world's oceans to others and sought a considerably more peaceful occupation upon dry land.

Chapter Twenty

THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH DAYS

On the seventh or perhaps the eighth day since our departure from Gibraltar—I must confess, Watson, that the storm had by then rendered the dates somewhat uncertain in my mind—the weather at last began to loosen its grip upon the ship.

It would be inaccurate to say that the sea had become calm. The *Majestic* continued to roll and labor heavily in the swell, and one could still feel the power of the long waves through the hull. Yet the difference was unmistakable. The wind had lost some of its sharpness, and the violent impacts which for several days had shaken the entire vessel now came less frequently and with diminished force.

There was something in the ship's manner of movement that reminded me of a great animal after a prolonged struggle. It remained upon its feet and continued forward, yet not without signs of exhaustion.

The Storm's Aftermath

This change pleased me chiefly on William's account.

During the preceding days I had more than once feared that his strength would fail him entirely, but now he was once again sitting upright in bed, and although his face remained pale and his hands had not yet regained their customary steadiness, he was able to eat a little soup and carry on a reasonably coherent conversation. He was still far from well, but he was no longer the storm's helpless victim. There was life in him again, and that was more than I had dared hope for only a day earlier.

Seeing this improvement, I decided that Emilio could, for the present, retreat into the shadows. The storm was loosening its hold, and I wished once more to view the ship through the eyes of Étienne Valmont. After so many hours confined to my cabin, I felt the need to form an impression of conditions aboard and to gauge the mood among both passengers and crew.

It quickly became apparent that the storm had left its mark.

Ordinarily, the lounges and corridors would at that hour have been filled with people, yet a strange silence still lingered over much of the ship. The passengers whom I encountered moved slowly and cautiously, as though they did not entirely trust that the floor beneath them would remain stable. The crew, by contrast, were fully occupied with the work of restoration.

In several places I saw stewards gathering fragments of broken china, and in one of the lounges a few chairs still lay overturned while others had been pushed against the walls, where they had evidently sought refuge during the worst of the storm. In the bar area, bottles were being sorted and damage assessed, and although everyone worked efficiently, there was a subdued seriousness about the activity that suggested the weather had been harsher than anyone had wished to admit.

At one point I stopped a steward and asked when normal routines would resume.

He smiled wearily.

“Three bells, monsieur,” he said. “The same signal that sent everyone to their cabins. Not until it sounds again can we begin calling people back out.”

I thanked him and continued my walk, reflecting on how characteristic life at sea is that an entire society may be halted and restarted by means of three simple bells.

It was not until late in the afternoon that the signal came.

The sound spread throughout the ship and was met by activity that seemed almost tentative. Doors opened, heads appeared in corridors, and little by little the passengers began to emerge once more.

When I later presented myself in the dining saloon, the majority had indeed returned, yet they were not the same people who had sat down to dinner several days earlier.

I found myself thinking involuntarily of prizefighters after a difficult bout. No one appeared seriously injured, but many looked as though they had expended every reserve of strength. There was a weariness in their faces and a restraint in their conversations that had not previously existed. People ate slowly, and the stories they told about the storm were recounted without enthusiasm. It was evident that no one wished to relive the past several days more than absolutely necessary.

As I allowed my gaze to travel around the room, I noticed that both Camille Ardent and Sebastian Moran were absent. Naturally, several others were missing as well, but it was those two who immediately attracted my attention. For a moment the familiar doubt returned. That small voice which from time to time questioned matters I would much rather regard as settled. This time, however, I succeeded in dismissing the thought almost immediately.

Indeed, I chose instead to regard Moran's absence as an encouraging sign. If he remained in his cabin, then the storm must have struck him hard. Perhaps he had not yet recovered his strength. Perhaps the sea had taken more from him than I had imagined. And I must confess, Watson, that the thought was not displeasing to me.

Alone with My Thoughts

Later that evening I wandered through the lounges and discovered that the card tables stood empty.

Ordinarily at least one group would have gathered around them, but on this evening, no one appeared inclined toward games or risk. After several days of struggle against the sea, people did not long for excitement. They longed for peace.

I therefore ended up in the smoking room, where I settled into one of the deep leather chairs and filled my pipe. As the smoke slowly rose toward the ceiling, I listened to the muted sounds of the ship and, for the first time in many days, experienced a sense of peace.

Not merely because the storm was subsiding, but because the situation appeared to be developing in my favour. I knew the location of the document. I also knew that Moran suspected nothing of my knowledge. And I still had reason to believe that the storm had weakened him.

All these things ought to have satisfied me. Perhaps they did. For as I sat there in the silence, another thought gradually began to intrude. I had experienced it before. Those moments when the future suddenly appears comprehensible, when the pieces seem to fall into place of their own accord, and when the outcome begins to appear almost inevitable. It is often at precisely such moments that catastrophe chooses to reveal itself.

And as I sat with the pipe in my hand, watching the smoke drift through the lamplight, I found myself unable to shake the uncomfortable feeling that my satisfaction might have become just a little too great.

Almost Normal

The following morning presented an altogether different picture from that of the preceding days. The storm had indeed moved westward, yet its effects remained evident everywhere aboard.

When I entered the dining saloon, I immediately noticed that far fewer passengers than usual had found their way to breakfast. Many places remained empty, and among those who had appeared there were numerous faces still bearing unmistakable traces of the previous days' ordeal at sea. Several sat with nothing more than a cup of tea or coffee before them, displaying none of their customary interest in breakfast, while others appeared pale and fatigued, as though only now recovering from an illness.

Even the conversations had changed in character. Where the saloon had once been filled with lively voices, laughter, and discussions of the voyage, everything now proceeded in a far more subdued tone. People spoke quietly among themselves, and many seemed more concerned with regaining their strength than with social pleasures.

Madame Cécile Beaumont arrived at our table shortly thereafter. Her customary energy had not entirely vanished, but it was noticeably di-

minished. She immediately declared that she never again wished to set foot aboard a ship and that, in her opinion, the Mediterranean ought to be closed to public traffic during the winter months.

The remark elicited a few smiles from the others at the table, though I also noticed that no one seriously contradicted her.

For my own part, I listened politely, while my attention was in reality directed elsewhere. A few tables farther down sat Colonel Sebastian Moran.

I had expected to find him affected by the storm—if not ill, then at least somewhat fatigued or worn by the experience. Such would have been the natural consequence of several days of severe weather. Yet, to my surprise, he appeared to be in exceptionally good condition.

He ate with a healthy appetite and without haste. His movements were calm, his posture erect, and his face bore no sign of sleeplessness or discomfort. Indeed, he resembled a man who had just concluded a pleasant stay in the countryside rather than several days aboard a ship in a winter storm.

What I found even more remarkable was that he listened attentively to the accounts of the weather offered by the other passengers without contributing much himself. Several at his table described the worst hours of the storm, but Moran confined himself to a few brief remarks and otherwise allowed the others to speak.

He observed more than he participated.

It occurred to me at that moment, Watson, that men of his type are often at their best under difficult conditions.

Storms, accidents, and uncertainty throw ordinary people off balance. Yet for the professional hunter, every disruption of the normal order presents a potential advantage. While the majority of the passengers were still attempting to regain their footing after the gale, it seemed to me that Moran had already left the storm behind and turned his attention toward whatever opportunities it might have created.

At the Card Table

That evening the card room had almost returned to its customary form.

The storm had become a topic of conversation among many others, and the relief the passengers felt at being able to gather once more was evident. People spoke more loudly than on the previous evening. Laughter was heard more often. The cards were dealt with their familiar rhythm, and the smoke of cigars once again drifted in thin layers beneath the ceiling. I had chosen a new seat, not because the old one had become useless, but because I wished to preserve that small advantage which unpredictability always provides. From there I could still see both Moran and Camille, while our silent communication could continue without attracting attention.

At first, the game proceeded without surprises. Moran seemed relaxed, almost invigorated after the passing of the storm. He told small stories, laughed at his own remarks, and played with the usual mixture of confidence and aggression. Yet as the evening progressed, the picture slowly began to change. At first, it was only a few hands that went against him. Then more. Small losses, insignificant in themselves, yet together they began to form a pattern.

I noticed the first signs long before the others at the table. There came a tension around his eyes that was visible only for brief moments. His jaw worked a little more sharply. He began stacking his chips with an exaggerated precision, a habit I had seen in him before when he was attempting to keep irritation and impatience under control.

It was not the sort of thing that would have attracted ordinary attention. To most of those around the table, he still appeared the same superior player. To me, however, the signs were familiar.

When he had to purchase more chips for the first time, he did so with his usual elegance. He drew out several banknotes, smiled at the others, and made the whole matter appear a natural part of the game's progress. No one at the table seemed to attach importance to it. Nor did they do so when it happened again later in the evening. But I noticed it. And more importantly still, I believed I understood its significance.

At this point Camille sent me a signal. It was no more than a brief glance, a change in the position of her hand, and an almost imperceptible movement of the fingers. Yet it was enough. Our little language had by

now become so developed that the message was clear to me. The cards were working against Moran. The situation at the table was developing precisely in the direction we had hoped.

Moran lost again. His piles of chips dwindled, and although he continued to preserve his outward calm, I believed I could see the familiar signs of irritation. Everything pointed toward the same conclusion I had already drawn once before: sooner or later he would be forced to leave the table in order to obtain further funds from his hiding place.

Precisely because everything seemed to fit together so well, I ceased asking the questions that had otherwise served me so faithfully through the years. I simply took my conclusion for granted. Therefore, I acted.

In the Depths of the Ship

I rose from my seat, left the saloon, and went directly to my cabin, where the change into Emilio now seemed to me almost routine. Within a few minutes I had changed identities, and while I worked, my thoughts had already moved far ahead of the actual events. I imagined the outcome almost in advance. When shortly afterward I made my way down through the ship's interior, I felt not merely prepared; I felt almost certain of success.

The route toward the workshop area had become familiar to me. I knew the smell of coal dust, oil, and hot metal. I knew the deep vibrations of the machinery through the hull and the long, shadowed corridors where the light seldom reached fully. When I arrived, I found a suitable hiding place behind several crates near the door and arranged myself so that I could observe without being seen.

I had expected a long wait. It was not to be so.

After only a short time I heard footsteps approaching through the corridor. They sounded quick and purposeful, and a moment later Sebastian Moran appeared.

It was then that I first felt the faint uneasiness. Nothing concrete. Nothing I could put into words. Rather an instinctive sense that something did not accord with expectation. He did not appear like a man who had just suffered a considerable defeat at the card table. On the contrary,

he moved with a calmness and certainty that seemed peculiar to me. Several times he stopped and allowed his gaze to pass over his surroundings, not fleetingly or casually, but thoroughly and methodically, as though he were searching for something quite specific.

When I look back upon it now, I should perhaps have understood the connection even then. But satisfaction had made me less sharp.

I convinced myself that he was merely taking his customary precautions. A man like Moran would naturally not approach his hiding place without first making certain that no one had followed him. It seemed entirely logical. For that very reason, I made yet another wrong decision.

I wished to come closer. I wished to see him at the box. I wished not merely to know, but to be entirely certain. I therefore left my hiding place and moved cautiously toward the workshop door. There I placed myself beside the opening in the belief that I would be able to observe everything without being noticed. It was at that moment that the situation changed.

Moran did not turn slowly. He did not hesitate. He turned directly around and began to move with firm steps toward the door. Toward me.

Even now I recall the surprise with some reluctance. In all my life I have experienced few moments in which I was entirely unprepared, but this was one of them.

There was no time for analysis, no time for reflection, only instinct. At that same instant, I noticed another door beside me. The key was still in the lock. I seized it, turned it, opened the door, and stepped into the darkness beyond. Almost at the same time, I closed the door behind me. The entire action can scarcely have taken more than a few seconds. I had barely regained my breath when I heard the outer door open. A sharp light fell through the opening and cut like a luminous wedge through the darkness. In that strip of light stood Sebastian Moran.

I could not see his face clearly, but I saw enough to understand the situation. He was not surprised. There was no searching in his gaze, no uncertainty. On the contrary, he appeared almost pleased, like a man whose calculation had just been confirmed.

"I know you are here," he said calmly.

Not Followed, but Led

The words struck me harder than any threat could have done, for in that same moment I understood the truth. I had not followed Moran. Moran had led me.

His voice sounded again, still calm and controlled, almost friendly.

“You were quick,” he said. “But not quite quick enough. I saw your legs vanish through the door.”

There was no anger in his tone, no agitation, no triumphant laughter, only the quiet satisfaction one hears in a hunter who has at last brought his quarry within reach.

After a brief pause, he continued:

“You should know that I shall soon return to finish my hunt.”

Then the door was closed. I heard the key turn in the lock. I heard it being withdrawn. Shortly afterward, his footsteps slowly died away through the ship’s interior, and I was left alone.

After some time, I found a crate and sat down. Only then did I begin truly to understand the extent of my mistake. I had underestimated my opponent. Worse still, I had overestimated myself. It was not my observations that had failed me; they had been correct enough. The error lay in my belief that they had given me the whole picture. I had seen a pattern and then assumed that the pattern must necessarily continue.

While the *Majestic* continued her heavy passage through the darkness of the Atlantic, I therefore sat alone in that black room and was forced to acknowledge that the initiative had once again slipped into Sebastian Moran’s hands. So swiftly can fortune turn.

And perhaps, I thought there in the darkness, while the ship’s deep vibrations sounded through the steel around me, this is precisely the danger that threatens every hunter: that he becomes so absorbed in his quarry that he no longer sees the trap before his own feet.

In the Cargo Hold

I quickly realised that my situation was grave. I was trapped without any real means of summoning help, without certain knowledge of when

the door would be opened again, and without the faintest idea of what Moran intended to do in the meantime. In that moment, darkness was my greatest enemy. Darkness makes clear thought difficult, my dear Watson. It deprives a man of his bearings and causes even the simplest problems to appear larger than they are.

I therefore took out my matches.

When the flame flared up, the brief golden light cast long shadows across the walls. I gained a fleeting impression of the room's size, of the many crates, and of the rough plank walls around me. At the same time, to my relief, I discovered an oil lamp hanging from a beam beneath the ceiling. The match had almost burned down to my fingers by the time I succeeded in lighting it.

A moment later, the room was illuminated. I felt no urge to conserve the light or conceal myself. Moran already knew that I was here. The light would reveal nothing that had not already been revealed. My task now was not to hide, but to understand the situation as fully as possible.

The room proved smaller than I had first imagined. It was not large, but it was densely packed with crates of various sizes. They were stacked far more neatly and carefully than the other cargo I had previously seen aboard the ship. The wood was of good quality, the fittings solid, and several of the crates were marked with symbols and stamps suggesting goods of considerable value. There was something exclusive about the whole arrangement. This was not ordinary freight. I imagined that it might be wine or spirits of particular quality, perhaps luxury goods intended for the wealthier passengers or for merchants in New York. Whatever it was, the cargo seemed valuable enough to have been stored separately from the rest.

I began to examine the room systematically, first the walls, then the door, and finally the floor and the various corners. My hope, naturally, was to find another exit or some weakness in the construction that might be exploited. After a short investigation, however, I was forced to acknowledge that my possibilities were extremely limited. The walls were solid. The door was heavy. There was no other way out.

Stowaways

I was on the point of abandoning that part of the examination when something farther in among the crates caught my attention. In the lamp-light I made out the outlines of several human bodies, and I moved cautiously closer.

Behind a large crate lay three men curled close together upon the floor. They slept heavily, almost unnaturally so. Around them lay empty bottles, corks, and the remains of spilled wine. One man even still held a bottle in his hand, as though he had fallen asleep in the middle of a movement. My first instinct was that I was dealing with stowaways.

I bent down and cautiously attempted to wake them. There was no reaction. I shook one of them a little harder. Still nothing. It was only when I took a half-filled bottle from the floor and poured its contents over the head of the nearest man that life returned to him.

The man sprang up with a startled roar. He cursed loudly, coughed, spat, and shook his head like a dog just emerged from water. His eyes had difficulty focusing, and when at last he fixed his gaze upon me, it was immediately clear that he was heavily intoxicated.

He began to speak—or rather, to attempt to speak. The words came slowly and incoherently. Several times he had to begin again because he himself had forgotten what he was trying to tell me. Nevertheless, I gradually succeeded in forming a picture of the situation.

My first assumption had been correct. They were stowaways, smuggled aboard concealed in one of the crates, from which they had only dared emerge once the ship was already far from land. The plan had apparently been simple enough. They would remain hidden during the crossing and later attempt to disappear among the many immigrants upon our arrival in New York.

Reality had proved less simple. Once they had come out of their hiding place, they had access neither to food nor to water. They dared not show themselves. They did not know the ship. They had no helpers aboard. Thus, their first days had become a struggle for survival. The man told it

with a strange mixture of pride and despair. At last, they had succeeded in breaking open one of the other crates.

To their great fortune, it proved to be filled with wine and spirits.

"At least we were not thirsty any longer," he said with a crooked grin.

I must confess, Watson, that I did not share his humour. But I understood the situation. A man without water will seize upon any possibility. What to a well-fed first-class passenger might appear foolish excess may, to a desperate man, become a question of survival.

The result now lay before me: three men who had been drinking their way through several days, three men who scarcely any longer knew what day it was, and a storeroom that served at once as prison, hiding place, and wine cellar. I regarded them for a moment without speaking.

It was only when the most intoxicated of them suddenly pointed behind the crates and muttered, "There were four of us..." that my attention was caught by something I had not yet noticed.

"Four?" I repeated.

The man nodded heavily.

"Yes... there were four. But he did not make it."

He slowly raised his arm and pointed toward the darkest corner of the room.

I took the lamp and went there. And there I found the fourth man. He lay still among the crates, half-hidden in the shadows, and even at first glance it was clear to me that he had been dead for some time. His face was sunken, the skin greyish, and the body possessed that peculiar rigidity which leaves no doubt in one who has seen death before. The other three seemed almost indifferent, perhaps because alcohol had dulled them, perhaps because through their own misery they no longer possessed the strength to grieve.

I stood in silence for a moment and regarded the dead man. I folded my hands before me and remained standing there quietly.

Trapped

As time passed, the ship's own sounds began once more to emerge. The deep vibrations from the machinery traveled through the floor and up

through the walls, while from time to time there came isolated metallic notes from somewhere in the vessel's interior. Otherwise, it was remarkably quiet. The three stowaways had gradually sunk back into their alcohol-heavy sleep, and the dead man lay motionless among the crates like a silent reminder of how closely life and death often exist side by side.

I still remember the strange sense of separation that gradually took shape in my thoughts. Only a few yards of wood, iron, and steel separated me from the rest of the ship, and yet it seemed to me as though I were in an entirely different world. Somewhere beyond this locked room, life aboard continued quite undisturbed. The passengers were probably gathering for dinner. The cards were being dealt at the gaming tables. Conversations were taking place in the salons, and laughter perhaps sounded at the very moment when I sat alone among crates, dust, and darkness.

I could not help thinking of the people who had, in various ways, become part of this affair. Perhaps Sebastian Moran was even then seated at a table surrounded by admirers, telling yet another of his stories from India. Perhaps Miss Ardent was moving through the salons with the same effortless elegance that always seemed to accompany her. And perhaps William was still going about with the comfortable conviction that I was safely in my cabin. I myself sat here, fully aware that time was working against me.

If my calculations were correct, Moran would first complete his game at the card table and then return to carry out the work he had already announced. I therefore did not have many hours at my disposal, perhaps not even that long.

I let my gaze travel over the three stowaways. They had already sunk back into their drunken stupor. One lay with his head against the wall, snoring heavily. Another from time to time muttered a few incomprehensible words before again vanishing into the darkness of sleep. None of them represented any real danger. They were in their own world, far removed from the storm, the ship, and the danger that now threatened us all.

Holmes Changes Clothes

My gaze then fell upon the dead man. Only a few minutes earlier, I had regarded him as yet another tragic victim of the Atlantic crossing. Now I saw something different. Perhaps an opportunity.

There was no reason for hesitation. With movements as calm and methodical as the circumstances allowed, I began to change clothes. Emilio's uniform was removed and placed beside the corpse. A short time later, the dead man was dressed in the steward's dark jacket and trousers, while I myself pulled on his worn and weathered garments. The fabric smelled of dampness, sweat, and many days spent in the confined room, but that was of secondary importance.

Emilio disappeared. In his place remained yet another anonymous figure among the many people who crossed the ocean each year in the hope of a new life.

I carefully moved the dead man closer to the others. Not so much that his position appeared unnatural, but enough that he sat huddled among his companions, as though sleep had simply overcome him. I then placed a bottle in his hand and studied the result. It was convincing. If Moran returned, he would see precisely what he expected to see.

For a moment I considered extinguishing the lamp but immediately rejected the idea. On the contrary, a lit lamp would appear far more natural. If these men had spent several days here with unrestricted access to wine and spirits, it would have been far more suspicious had they been sitting in darkness. I therefore left it burning.

Afterward, I examined the room once more and farther among the crates discovered an empty shipping crate large enough for me to crawl inside. To my satisfaction, I found an old knot-hole in the wood. The view was limited, but sufficient. I climbed in, carefully pulled the lid into place, and settled myself as comfortably as the circumstances permitted.

The waiting began.

The Hunter Returns

After a couple of hours, I heard the sound of keys in the lock, and a

moment later Moran stood in the open doorway. He took several steps into the room, and his eyes immediately settled upon the sleeping men. Only one of them held his interest—the man wearing Emilio's uniform.

He stopped beside the dead man without any visible surprise and remained standing there for a moment with his gaze fixed upon the body, as though merely confirming an expectation that had been formed long beforehand. He then bent down, picked up the bottle, and smelled its contents, after which his eyes slowly moved toward the three sleeping men who still lay sprawled among the crates without the faintest awareness of his presence.

It is difficult to describe precisely the impression he made upon me at that moment. There was no visible pleasure in him, nor any real satisfaction. Rather, he struck me as a man who had once again received confirmation that the world behaved more or less as he expected it to. Nothing in his manner suggested doubt or uncertainty. He seemed convinced in advance of what he would find, and it therefore struck me as remarkable that he did not even devote more than a passing glance to the dead man's face. Had he entertained the slightest suspicion that something was amiss, he would undoubtedly have examined the body much more thoroughly. Instead, he behaved like a man who already regarded the matter as settled.

As I watched him through the narrow crack in the woodwork, I became increasingly convinced that my plan had succeeded. He simply believed that the man on the floor was Emilio.

The realisation brought me a brief moment of relief, but it did not last long. Moran had not made the troublesome journey down through the depths of the ship merely to confirm a death. Something had brought him here, and as I observed his calm and methodical movements, my conviction grew that his true purpose had not yet begun.

He crouched beside the body and let his hand move toward the man's throat. Even this gesture was performed with a composure that I found almost more disturbing than open brutality would have been. There was nothing hurried or violent about it. On the contrary, it reminded me of the manner in which an experienced surgeon examines a patient, or a

hunter inspects an animal he already knows to be dead. Everything was carried out with a precision that comes only from long habit, and as I sat concealed a few yards away, it struck me once more just how dangerous an adversary Sebastian Moran truly was. Not because of his strength or courage, but because he possessed the rare ability to carry out even the darkest actions without allowing emotion to interfere with his work.

After the execution, Moran rose, cast a final glance around the room, and then disappeared. The keys turning in the lock were the last sound he left behind.

Still Trapped

How long I remained seated inside the crate before I dared move, I cannot say with certainty. Five minutes seemed likely. Perhaps ten. Perhaps a quarter of an hour. I had no desire to risk the possibility that Moran had merely withdrawn in order to listen or verify the result of his work. The possibility was simply too serious to ignore.

Only when the silence had lasted so long that even my caution began to consider it excessive did I carefully push the lid aside and crawl out.

My joints protested after the awkward position, and I slowly straightened my back. The lamp was still burning and cast its yellow glow across the room. The bottles lay scattered across the floor exactly as before. The three stowaways continued sleeping in their drunken stupor, unaware of what had just taken place only a few steps away from them.

My gaze immediately fell upon the dead man. Now he sat there in the steward's uniform with the bottle in his hand, as though he had merely fallen asleep after a lengthy drinking bout. I found no reason to examine him more closely. I already knew what I would find. Moran had employed the same method as before. If the man had, against all expectation, still been alive when Moran arrived, death must have come almost immediately.

I left him where he was and instead went to the door.

I pounded hard against the metal, first with my fist and later with a piece of wood I found nearby. The sound echoed through the small room but died away almost at once. Even as I made the attempt, I was

aware of its futility. On the other side of the door lay machinery, coal dust, steam, and the ship's constant noise. No one would hear me.

After a few minutes I gave up. It was one of those moments when reality could no longer be negotiated with. I was trapped.

The realisation did not come as a shock. Rather, it arrived as a slow and unpleasant clarification.

It struck me that my situation resembled that of the stowaways in many respects. They had been trapped here in the hope of food and rescue. Now I was waiting for something not entirely different. The only distinction was that they had arrived here out of necessity, whereas I had come as the result of my own misjudgment.

I sat down upon a crate and allowed my thoughts to wander. How long would it be? Hours? A day? Or several? Perhaps no one would open the door before our arrival in New York. Perhaps I would not be discovered until the cargo was unloaded at the dock.

I was still wearing the dead man's clothes, and the thought gave me a peculiar sensation of having slipped out of my own existence. Étienne Valmont was gone. Emilio was gone. Remaining behind was merely another anonymous figure in the dark interior of the ship.

Self-Realisation

My thoughts inevitably returned to the events taking place above. Again and again, I saw before me the smoking room, the card tables, and the many conversations that had occupied me so completely during the preceding days. I thought of Moran, of his seemingly carefree self-confidence, of the stories he told, and of the manner in which he studied people while they believed it was they who were observing him. And I thought of Camille Ardent, whose presence had introduced yet another unpredictable factor into a game that was already complicated enough.

As the hours passed and nothing changed around me, a less pleasant realization gradually forced its way to the surface. Until that point, I had naturally regarded Moran as the cause of my predicament. After all, it was he who had led me here. He who had laid the trap. He who had undoubtedly foreseen that my curiosity would sooner or later lead me

astray. Yet the longer I sat alone with my thoughts, the more difficult it became to place the entire blame upon him.

The truth was less comfortable. I had helped him.

Had I been content merely to observe, I would never have ended up here. Had I been satisfied with the knowledge I already possessed I would still have been moving freely about the ship. I already knew of the document. I already knew of his plans. In reality, I had achieved more than most investigators could have hoped for under similar circumstances. Yet I wanted more. I wished not merely to understand his game. I wished to defeat him.

Looking back upon the matter now, Watson, I must admit that there was an element of vanity in that desire. I wanted to see cracks appear in his confidence. I wanted to witness the moment when his calculations failed him. Perhaps I had even looked forward, to some small degree, to seeing him suffer a financial defeat at the card table. Not because the money itself interested me, but because it represented something larger—his belief in his own superiority. I had desired not merely the truth. I had desired confirmation that I was right. And it is precisely that distinction which, throughout history, has brought many otherwise sensible men into difficulty.

In order to distract myself, I rose and began to move among the crates. Beside the sleeping men still stood several of the bottles that had been both their salvation and the cause of their present condition. I picked one of them up and carefully drew out the cork. The sharp smell of spirits immediately rose to meet me.

For a brief moment, I considered whether it might make the waiting easier. Not because I felt any real desire for alcohol, but because the hours seemed to stretch longer and longer without any prospect of change. Yet at the very first scent I lost interest. If I escaped from this place, it would require every measure of clarity and concentration I could summon. There are circumstances in which a man may permit himself to dull his senses. This was not one of them.

I therefore replaced the bottle and returned to the crate upon which I had spent most of my time seated.

The Waiting

I leaned my back against the wood, folded my arms, and allowed the silence to settle around me. The deep vibrations of the ship continued their monotonous rhythm through the floor. Far away came the distant rumble of the machinery, while at intervals the heavy breathing of the sleeping men blended with the sounds from the vessel's interior.

And so I sat in the darkness and listened while time slowly passed with the relentless calm that exists only in situations where a man has lost every possibility of influencing its course.

Had I not possessed my watch, I should entirely have lost all sense of the passage of time. Within the storeroom there was no distinction between day and night. The oil lamp burned with the same yellowish glow hour after hour, and whether the sun stood high above the Atlantic or darkness lay upon the sea, none of it reached us below.

My three companions continued their peculiar existence. At regular intervals they awoke, took a few swallows from the bottles, muttered a little among themselves, and then sank back into sleep. The longer time passed, the more I began to understand them. Perhaps it was, in fact, the most merciful way to endure such a situation. When a man possesses no means of changing his circumstances, consciousness itself can sometimes become a burden.

One of the men gradually became more talkative than the others. He was not necessarily less intoxicated, but solitude had apparently awakened in him a need for company. He told me how they had come aboard. None of them had been able to afford a ticket, and so they had staked everything upon a single chance. They had been concealed inside a crate, transported aboard as part of the cargo, and had only later managed to free themselves.

The story was told without self-pity.

That was simply life.

He also told me that he had previously been in New York. For several years he had worked as a labourer on farms farther inland, particularly during the harvest season, when there was always a need for strong hands.

He spoke neither of wealth nor of grand dreams. On the contrary, it seemed to me that his ambitions were modest.

He merely wanted another chance.

As I listened to him, it occurred to me that this may be the strongest force within human beings. Not the certainty of success, but the possibility of it. A man can endure almost any hardship if he believes that an opportunity awaits him on the other side.

At one point he glanced toward the dead man in the steward's uniform and suddenly asked why his companion had been given different clothes.

I hesitated for a moment before replying.

"I thought it might provide him with a more dignified burial."

The man regarded the body for several seconds and then slowly nodded. He asked no further questions. Perhaps he understood that the explanation was not the whole truth. Perhaps it simply did not interest him.

The hours continued to pass.

From time to time a few remarks were exchanged, but for the greater part of the time silence prevailed. It was not a peaceful silence, but rather the particular kind that arises between people who have waited too long.

Gradually, I began truly to feel the reality of captivity. Not merely as a practical limitation, but as a condition of existence. While the storm had raged outside, I had felt myself to be an active participant in events. Now I sat idle and could do nothing.

I sensed the darkness over the ocean in an entirely new way. Not as the black waves outside the ship, but as something deep and heavy within its very interior.

Again and again, I reviewed the situation and again and again I arrived at the same conclusions. My odds were not encouraging.

Even if I escaped, Moran would most likely already have moved the document. He would have secured himself. He would have taken advantage of the time I had lost. The trail would be broken, and the initiative would have passed definitively into his hands.

I must confess, my dear Watson, that more than once I arrived at the conclusion that the contest might already have been lost.

Chapter Twenty-One

TWENTY-SECOND DAY

There are situations in which a man may still act, plan, and influence the events around him. Mine was no longer one of them. Time passed without any real change. The three stowaways woke, drank, slept, and woke again. The dead man continued to lie among the crates as a silent reminder of how fragile existence truly was aboard the ship's hidden worlds. Even I gradually began to lose any secure sense of the passage of time.

For that reason, the sound came as a shock when it finally arrived after more than a day and a half. In reality, it was nothing more than the quite ordinary rattle of a key against a lock, yet after such prolonged isolation the sound seemed almost explosive.

I sprang up from my place. A moment later the key turned, the door slid open, and a sharp light streamed into the dark room. In the opening stood William. He had taken only a few steps inside before he stopped abruptly. His gaze fell first upon the sleeping men and then moved on to the lifeless figure in the steward's uniform. I immediately saw what was passing through his mind. The dead man wore my clothes, and in the brief instant during which William stood motionless in the doorway, he was undoubtedly convinced that it was I who lay there. I do not think I have ever seen him so pale. His hand flew instinctively to his forehead, and his whole posture revealed the terror that must have seized him.

"William."

My voice caused him to turn so quickly that he almost lost his balance. When he caught sight of me, the shock was gradually replaced by relief,

and I stepped out of the shadows to explain the situation as briefly as possible.

Only then did I truly notice how much he himself had changed. The helpless and seasick man I had left in the cabin several days earlier seemed almost gone. He was still pale, and the illness had clearly cost him strength, but his gaze was clear, and his movements had acquired a purposefulness I had not previously seen in him.

"Come," he said simply. "We must get away from here."

The Escape

There was no reason to argue. The escape was swift, though not without difficulty. The two least intoxicated men were still able to walk under their own power, while the third had to be supported between us. Slowly we worked our way upward through the interior of the ship until William opened a door on the first landing and led us into an area that at once surprised and shook me.

The smell reached me first.

Even after the days in the storeroom, it struck like a blow. The air was heavy with dampness, illness, and human crowding. It was that particular atmosphere which arises when hundreds of people are forced for a long period to live close together under conditions that are only just sufficient. As my eyes adjusted to the surroundings, I began to understand the scale of it.

Before me lay the great emigrant quarters. Bunks stretched in long rows through the space. Between them, families sat close together around their belongings. Children slept beneath blankets. Elderly people stared silently into the air. Suitcases, bundles, and personal possessions were stacked everywhere, as though entire small communities had been pressed together inside the ship.

What surprised me most, however, was how little attention our arrival attracted. No one asked questions or looked closely at us. Nor did anyone show interest in the three men we were bringing with us. At first this seemed strange to me, but gradually the explanation became clear. These people were already occupied by their own anxieties. They thought of

their families, their future, and the unknown life awaiting them on the other side of the Atlantic. Compared with all that, we were of no consequence. We became invisible, not because we were especially skilled at hiding, but because no one had the strength to concern himself with us. It was precisely for that reason that we succeeded in disappearing into the crowd.

William at last found an empty bunk in one of the more distant corners of the room and helped the three men into place. I remained standing for a moment and looked at them. Only a few days earlier they had been my fellow prisoners in a dark storeroom. Now they were merely three faces among hundreds of others, swallowed up by the great human current around them.

When William had finished, we parted without many words, and I continued alone through the tightly packed rows of bunks and luggage.

For the first time in several days, I was free again. Yet freedom felt strange.

Perhaps because I knew that the world outside had not stood still while I was trapped. On the contrary, events had continued their course, and as I moved through the crowded quarters of the emigrants, one thought increasingly forced itself upon me: how much had Sebastian Moran managed to accomplish while I sat imprisoned in the darkness?

Fresh Air

After leaving the great emigrant dormitory, I made my way almost instinctively toward the outer deck. It was not a choice born of any particular plan or tactical consideration. On the contrary, it was a purely human need. After the long days in the stagnant air of the storeroom, among the fumes of spirits, the sleeping men, and the constant reminder of death's presence, I felt an almost physical desire to sense the sky above me once more and the open space of the sea around me.

When I stepped outside, the cold met me at once. The wind was still sharp, and the air had that particular wintry bite which only the northern Atlantic can produce. Nevertheless, it felt like a blessing. I drew a deep breath, allowed the fresh air to fill my lungs, and felt it clear my head far

more effectively than any rest could have done. It seemed to me almost like a medicine prescribed by nature herself.

At the same time, the sun broke through the clouds. Not strongly and not for long at a time, but in brief golden strokes that fell across the deck and over the many people who had sought the open air after the storm's long confinement. It struck me once more how much a few rays of light can mean to the human mind. After days in darkness, even the weakest sun seemed to possess an almost miraculous effect.

I let my gaze pass over the crowd. Families sat close together. Women held children against them. Elderly people sat silent with blankets around their shoulders. A few attempted to smile or carry on conversations, but the overall impression was not one of joy. It was exhaustion.

For the first time, I had the opportunity truly to study the passengers of the third deck. I must confess, my dear Watson, that the sight affected me deeply. Many of them did not resemble people on their way toward a new future, but rather people fleeing from a catastrophe. Their faces were thin. Their cheeks sunken. Their clothing worn and often insufficient against the cold. Even the children appeared serious in a way children should never be.

As I watched them, my own thoughts gradually returned to the situation in which I myself now stood. I raised my eyes toward the sea. The storm had long since moved eastward, and the dark waves now rolled along the ship's sides with a far more regular rhythm. I was forced to acknowledge that in several decisive respects I lacked firm points of reference. The day and a half spent in the storeroom had cut me off from everything that had occurred aboard, and while I had sat among crates, sleeping drunkards, and a dead stowaway, life had continued without me. Conversations had been conducted. Decisions had been made. New connections had perhaps arisen, and old plans altered. I had no means of knowing.

Yet the situation did not feel quite as hopeless as it immediately ought to have done. On the contrary, my thoughts returned again and again to the one advantage that the storm, the captivity, and all the other misfortunes had not succeeded in taking from me. Whatever else might

have occurred, the document remained aboard the *Majestic*. More than that: I knew its hiding place. I had seen it with my own eyes. I knew where Moran had placed it, and that knowledge gave me a fixed point which none of the other uncertainties could shake.

The more I considered this, the more the matter seemed in truth to have become simpler. Many questions remained unanswered, but the decisive objective was the same as before. So long as the document remained aboard the ship, the game was not lost. On the contrary, it could still be won. And unlike Moran, I knew exactly where to look.

The more I reflected upon this fact, the clearer its importance became. In all the preceding months I had pursued rumours, assumptions, and clues. Now I knew the object itself. Whatever else had occurred during my confinement did not alter the fact that the document still lay hidden in the workshop area, exactly where I had left it. At the same time, it seemed likely to me that Moran now regarded the matter of Emilio as concluded. If he had previously entertained even the slightest suspicion of a connection between the steward Emilio and the French man of letters Étienne Valmont, he must now believe it confirmed once and for all. The man he believed to be Emilio lay dead in the storeroom. For Moran, Emilio had disappeared. And once a man believes that a problem has been solved, he often ceases to investigate it. That thought gradually began to affect my spirits.

A little later I asked one of the other passengers how much of the voyage he believed remained. He shrugged and cast a glance toward the horizon.

"If we are lucky," he said, "we shall see New York tomorrow."

His answer surprised me more than it ought to have done. My sense of time had been completely dissolved in the darkness below decks. While I had been trapped, the voyage had continued. The storm had delayed us, but it had not stopped us. Suddenly everything became concrete. Tomorrow. Perhaps as early as tomorrow, the *Majestic* would arrive.

I found a place among the other emigrants and sat down. Around me, life continued in its peculiar mixture of hope, fear, and endurance. Children played among suitcases and heaps of luggage, mothers spoke

quietly together, and men stared silently toward the sea as though trying to glimpse the future somewhere out near the horizon.

In the midst of this crowd, I began to review the situation anew.

Only one thing of real importance remained.

The document.

As the sun slowly sank toward the western horizon and twilight once again began to spread across the sea, I sat among the emigrants and felt a sensation that had been absent through most of my captivity. It was neither certainty nor victory that I felt. Both remained uncertain. But I once more had a direction. Events no longer seemed random or beyond my grasp. For the first time in several days, I could again see the next move.

And as darkness gradually settled over the Atlantic, I began mentally to prepare myself for the advance which, to the best of my judgment, would decide the entire matter. This time, I thought, I must not allow myself to be distracted. This time the document must become mine.

The Crowd

Just as I believed I had regained control over events, it became clear that I had once again miscalculated. This time, however, it was not Sebastian Moran who had deceived me. It was the ship itself—or rather, the twelve hundred people it carried. One may read figures in newspapers and reports without truly understanding their meaning, but when one first finds oneself in the midst of so many human beings, enclosed within a limited space in the middle of the sea, numbers suddenly acquire an altogether different reality. I had imagined that I would be able, without great difficulty, to make my way back through the third deck and reach the door that led into the ship's interior. Yet after only a few minutes of effort, it was clear to me that the task was far more difficult than I had assumed.

In first class there prevailed an invisible order. People kept their distance. One waited one's turn. One apologised if one happened to touch another person. The whole of social intercourse was surrounded by a series of unwritten rules that made movement through the ship com-

paratively easy. On the third deck, conditions were entirely different. Not because the people were different, I thought. People are people, regardless of the ticket upon which they travel. But their circumstances were different. Here space was limited, resources scarce, and the future uncertain. When such conditions prevail, courtesy often becomes a luxury.

Everywhere I saw lines at the latrines. People stood crowded together around the distribution of food. Families struggled to preserve some small measure of privacy among strangers. Children cried. Mothers tried to comfort them. Men argued heatedly over space, luggage, or rights which no one could truly enforce. Several times I attempted to press forward through the crowd, but after long exertion I had covered only a few yards. Whenever an opening seemed to appear, it closed again. Whenever I thought I had found a way ahead, it was blocked by new groups of people.

Then darkness began to fall.

The strangest thing was almost how quickly movement ceased. No order was given. No bell rang. No officer came with instructions. Yet it seemed as though the whole of the third deck obeyed some invisible command. People gradually began to sit down. Some spread out blankets. Others drew closer together around their families. A few crawled directly down among their luggage. In a very short time, the restless current of humanity had transformed itself into an almost motionless landscape of bodies. I realised that many of them must have been accustomed to precisely this routine.

And with that, I was forced to give up. Not forever, but for that evening. There was simply no way forward.

I found a place among the others and sat down. Several times during the night I was jostled. On a couple of occasions someone shouted at me in languages I did not understand. One man even threatened me outright when he felt I had seated myself too close to his family. Yet I perceived no real malice in it. It was desperation, fatigue, cold, fear—all that arises when too many people are pressed together into too little space.

The night was long. I wore only the dead stowaway's worn clothing, and the cold found its way through the fabric with ease. Sleep came only in brief flashes. Each time I was on the point of drifting off, I was awakened by an elbow, a crying child, a coughing man, or merely the ship's own movements.

Chapter Twenty-Two

TWENTY-THIRD DAY - NEW YORK

When the morning light finally began to seep in through hatches and openings, it felt like a liberation. Almost at once the crowd began to move again. This time most people streamed toward the deck in search of air and light after the night. For that very reason, I was able to move in the opposite direction.

Slowly but surely, I worked my way through the human current until at last I reached the door I had been seeking. When I stood before it, I felt a relief that stood in sharp contrast to its modest appearance. It was only a door. Yet at that moment it seemed to me almost like a gate between two worlds.

I stepped through and found myself once more in that part of the ship which I had come to know all too well. Now concern truly began to return. With every passing minute, the likelihood increased that Moran had made precisely the move I feared. If he had removed the document while I was trapped in the storeroom, all my efforts would prove to have been in vain. With that thought gnawing at the back of my mind, I began the cautious descent toward the workshop area.

Toward the Document

I moved slowly through the ship's interior, partly from caution and partly because every corridor, every doorway, and every shadow now seemed to contain the possibility of an unpleasant encounter. In theory I might

run into Moran anywhere, and although I doubted that he expected ever to see me again, I had no wish to leave anything to chance.

It was not Moran, however, who awaited me.

As I approached the workshop area, it became clear that something had changed. There were far more people than before. Workers, stewards, officers, and men carrying lamps moved back and forth in small groups, while subdued conversations passed in waves through the corridors. Only when I drew nearer did I understand what the cause must be.

Of course. The body. The dead steward had been found.

Notes were being taken, questions asked, and information exchanged. Although the death was scarcely treated with the same gravity as the murder of Santos, it nevertheless demanded attention, and that attention made my own passage exceedingly difficult. I was forced to move through the area with a degree of caution I have only rarely had to employ. Again and again, I had to stop in the shadows, wait until men turned their backs, and only then take a few more steps forward. Several times groups of men passed so close to me that I could hear their conversations without difficulty. Time crept forward, yet little by little I nevertheless managed to approach my goal.

When at last I stood before the door to the workshop, I felt an almost physical relief. I slipped inside, carefully closed the door behind me, and once again stood alone in the darkness.

This time I did not hesitate. The risk of lighting the lamp was real, but without light I would be helpless. A moment later the familiar yellow glow spread through the room and cast long shadows across the workbenches, tools, and machinery.

My gaze immediately sought the ladder. It stood precisely where I had left it. There was no sign of disturbance. No trace of hurried movement. Nothing to suggest that anyone had been there since my last visit. Slowly hope began to grow in me again. Perhaps everything had happened after all as I had imagined. Perhaps the storm, the captivity, and the many delays had altered nothing decisive. Perhaps the document still waited where I had left it.

I went to the ladder, took hold of it, and began to climb.

This time the movement seemed easier. I knew the room now. I knew the shelves. I knew the position. And when I reached the upper level and directed my gaze toward the shelf, I immediately saw what I had hoped to see.

The Box Is Still There, But...

The box was still there. An almost childish relief washed over me. After all the detours, all the setbacks, and all the hours that had been lost, the goal finally seemed within reach. I no longer needed the tool. After the first successful examination, I already knew the mechanism, and with a movement that now seemed almost routine, I placed my hands upon the lid and carefully lifted it.

It can scarcely have taken more than a second.

Yet even today, Watson, it seems to me that that single second lasted far longer. For the box was empty.

I remained standing without moving. My hands still rested upon the edge while my gaze instinctively searched the interior of the box. It was a reaction without any true meaning, as though my eyes refused to accept what they had already seen. I looked for the parchment roll. For the money. For some sign that I had opened the wrong box. For some explanation that could return the world to the order of which I had been so certain only moments before. But there was nothing. Only the empty space where the document had previously lain.

I do not know how long I remained in that position. Perhaps only a few seconds. Perhaps longer. But as I stared down into the empty box, the truth slowly forced its way through the last remnants of hope and expectation. Moran had been here. Not recently, necessarily. Not within the last hour or the last night. But at some point, during my imprisonment he had come here, opened precisely this box, and removed its contents.

I remained standing with one hand upon the edge of the box and looked into the darkness between the shelves. It struck me how great a significance this place had acquired in my thoughts. Without my entirely realising it, the workshop had become the fixed point of the affair. When

everything else seemed unclear, I could return to the one certainty that the document lay here, that the game had not yet been decided, and that I still knew something Moran did not know I knew.

Now that advantage too had vanished.

Slowly I lowered the lid again. The sound of wood against wood seemed unusually loud in the silence. I was forced to acknowledge something I had hoped never again to admit. I had no idea where the document was. And worse still, I no longer knew what Sebastian Moran intended to do.

The End of the Logbook

Watson turns the pages, hoping to find another sheet in the logbook, a final page with a better ending. There is none.

"I must confess," he remarks, "that I do not find this ending satisfactory. After all that has gone before, it seems almost unreasonable. Holmes survived the storm. On several occasions he escaped the traps laid by Sebastian Moran. He discovered the hiding place of the document. He came closer to his objective than Moran had probably ever realised. And yet the crossing ends with the document once again slipping from his grasp.

"It almost seems to me as though the entire voyage has been brought back to its point of departure. Perhaps even worse than that. When the *Majestic* left Naples, Holmes at least knew that the document was in Moran's possession. Now that the ship approaches New York, he no longer knows anything with certainty."

I notice something else.

There are moments in Holmes's accounts when he writes with that particular cool precision which has always signalled progress. Yet there are also rare moments when one senses something different between the lines. An acknowledgment that he has encountered an adversary who possesses not only strength and courage, but intelligence as well.

During this crossing, Sebastian Moran has revealed himself to be far more than a brutal henchman. He has thought and acted. And on more

than one occasion he has succeeded in placing Holmes in difficulties such as very few men have ever managed to do.

Watson gazes ahead and shakes off some of the pessimism that has settled over him. He reminds himself that when Holmes seemed furthest from his goal, it was often then that his real work began.

I wonder how much still awaited him on the far side of the Atlantic. I do not know the people he is soon to meet. I do not know the clues that already await him in the streets of New York. And I know even less of the role the document will continue to play.

One thing I know beyond any doubt: when Sebastian Moran steps ashore in New York carrying his secret, Sherlock Holmes follows him.

Epilogue

Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining Sherlock Holmes on this voyage across the Atlantic.

What began as a simple pursuit aboard the *Majestic* soon became something far more dangerous. During the crossing, Holmes faced storms, deception, murder, hidden identities, and, perhaps most significantly, an adversary who proved far more formidable than he had first appeared.

As Dr. Watson observes in the final pages, the journey has not ended with certainty, but with questions. The mysterious document remains at the center of the affair, and Sebastian Moran has once again demonstrated why he was considered one of the most dangerous men ever associated with Professor Moriarty.

Yet Holmes has never been a man discouraged by setbacks. Indeed, some of his greatest investigations have begun at precisely the moment when all seemed lost.

The story continues in the final volume, *The Final Truth*, where Holmes follows Moran into New York. There, among the crowded streets, towering buildings, and hidden networks of a rapidly growing city, the chase enters its final and most dangerous stage. Old secrets will be uncovered, new allies and enemies will emerge, and the true significance of the document will at last be revealed.

I hope you have enjoyed this adventure aboard the *Majestic*, and I look forward to welcoming you to the concluding chapter of the story. Until then, thank you for reading.

Warm regards,
Alistair Croft