

***MARGARET  
PEDLER***



***THE MOON OUT  
OF REACH***

**Margaret Pedler**

# **The Moon out of Reach**

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# CHAPTER I

## THE SHINING SHIP

She was kneeling on the hearthrug, grasping the poker firmly in one hand. Now and again she gave the fire a truculent prod with it as though to emphasise her remarks.

"'Ask and ye shall receive'! . . . '*Tout vient à point à celui qui sait attendre*'! Where on earth is there any foundation for such optimism, I'd like to know?"

A sleek brown head bent determinedly above some sewing lifted itself, and a pair of amused eyes rested on the speaker.

"Really, Nan, you mustn't confound French proverbs with quotations from the Scriptures. They're not at all the same thing."

"Those two run on parallel lines, anyway. When I was a kiddie I used to pray—I've prayed for hours, and it wasn't through any lack of faith that my prayers weren't answered. On the contrary, I was enormously astonished to find how entirely the Almighty had overlooked my request for a white pony like the one at the circus."

"Well, then, my dear, try to solace yourself with the fact that 'everything comes at last to him who knows how to wait.'"

"But it doesn't!"

Penelope Craig reflected a moment.

"Do you—know—how to wait?" she demanded, with a significant little accent on the word "know."

"I've waited in vain. No white pony has ever come, and if it trotted in now—why, I don't want one any longer. I tell you, Penny"—tapping an emphatic forefinger on the other's knee—"you never get your wishes until you've out-grown them."

"You've reached the mature age of three-and-twenty"—drily. "It's a trifle early to be so definite."

"Not a bit! I want my wishes *now*, while I'm young and can enjoy them—lots of money, and amusement, and happiness! They'll be no good to me when I'm seventy or so!"

"Even at seventy," remarked Penelope sagely, "wealth is better than poverty—much. And I can imagine amusement and happiness being quite desirable even at three score years and ten."

Nan Davenant grimaced.

"Philosophers," she observed, "are a highly irritating species."

"But what do you want, my dear? You're always kicking against the pricks.

What do you really *want*?"

The coals slipped with a grumble in the grate and a blue flame shot up the chimney. Nan stretched out her hand for the matches and lit a cigarette. Then she blew a cloud of speculative smoke into the air.

"I don't know," she said slowly. Adding whimsically: "I believe that's the root of the trouble."

Penelope regarded her critically.

"I'll tell you what's the matter," she returned. "During the war you lived on excitement—"

"I worked jolly hard," interpolated Nan indignantly.  
The other's eyes softened.

"I know you worked," she said quickly. "Like a brick. But all the same you did live on excitement—narrow shaves of death during air-raids, dances galore, and beautiful boys in khaki, home on leave in convenient rotation, to take you anywhere and everywhere. You felt you were working for them and they knew they were fighting for you, and the whole four years was just one pulsing, throbbing rush. Oh, I know! You were caught up into it just the same as the rest of the world, and now that it's over and normal existence is feebly struggling up to the surface again, you're all to pieces, hugely dissatisfied, like everyone else."

"At least I'm in the fashion, then!"

Penelope smiled briefly.

"Small credit to you if you are," she retorted. "People are simply shirking work nowadays. And you're as bad as anyone. You've not tried to pick up the threads again—you're just idling round."

"It's catching, I expect," temporised Nan beguilingly.

But the lines on Penelope's face refused to relax.

"It's because it's easier to play than to work," she replied with grim candour.

"Don't scold, Penny." Nan brought the influence of a pair of appealing blue eyes to bear on the matter. "I really mean to begin work—soon."

"When?" demanded the other searchingly.

Nan's charming mouth, with its short, curved upper lip, widened into a smile of friendly mockery.

"You don't expect me to supply you with the exact day and hour, do you? Don't be so fearfully precise, Penny! I can't run myself on railway time-table lines. You need never hope for it."

"I don't"—shortly. Adding, with a twinkle: "Even I'm not quite such an optimist as that!"

As she spoke, Penelope laid down her sewing and stretched cramped arms above her head.

"At this point," she observed, "the House adjourned for tea. Nan, it's your week for domesticity. Go and make tea."

Nan scrambled up from the hearthrug obediently and disappeared into the kitchen regions, while Penelope, curling herself up on a cushion in front of the fire, sat musing.

For nearly six years now she and Nan had shared the flat they were living in. When they had first joined forces, Nan had been at the beginning of her career as a pianist and was still studying, while Penelope, her senior by five years, had already been before the public as a singer for some considerable time. With the outbreak of the war, they had both thrown themselves heartily into war work of various kinds, reserving only a certain portion of their time for professional purposes. The double work had proved a considerable strain on each of them, and now that the war was past it seemed as though Nan, at least, were incapable of getting a fresh grip on things.

Luckily—or, from some points of view, unluckily—she was the recipient of an allowance of three hundred a year from a wealthy and benevolent uncle. Without this, the two girls might have found it difficult to weather the profitless



intervals which punctuated their professional engagements. But with this addition to their income they rubbed along pretty well, and contrived to find a fair amount of amusement in life through the medium of their many friends in London.

Penelope, the elder of the two by five years, was the daughter of a country rector, long since dead. She had known the significance of the words "small means" all her life, and managed the financial affairs of the little ménage in Edenhall Mansions with creditable success. Whereas Nan Davenant, flung at her parents' death from the shelter of a home where wealth and reckless expenditure had prevailed, knew less than nothing of the elaborate art of cutting one's coat according to the cloth. Nor could she ever be brought to understand that there are only twenty shillings in a pound—and that at the present moment even twenty shillings were worth considerably less than they appeared to be.

There are certain people in the world who seem cast for the part of onlooker. Of these Penelope was one. Evenly her life had slipped along with its measure of work and play, its quiet family loves and losses, entirely devoid of the alarms and excursions of which Fate shapes the lives of some. Hence she had developed the talent of the looker-on.

Naturally of an observant turn of mind, she had learned to penetrate the veil that hangs behind the actions of humanity, into the secret, temperamental places whence those actions emanate, and had achieved a somewhat rare comprehension and tolerance of her fellows.

From her father, who had been for thirty years the arbiter of affairs both great and small in a country parish and had

yet succeeded in retaining the undivided affection of his flock, she had inherited a spice of humorous philosophy, and this, combined with a very practical sense of justice, enabled her to accept human nature as she found it—without contempt, without censoriousness, and sometimes with a breathless admiration for its unexpectedly heroic qualities.

She it was who alone had some slight understanding of Nan Davenant's complexities—complexities of temperament which both baffled the unfortunate possessor of them and hopelessly misled the world at large.

The Davenant history showed a line of men and women gifted beyond the average, the artistic bias paramount, and the interpolation of a Frenchwoman four generations ago, in the person of Nan's great-grandmother, had only added to the temperamental burden of the race. She had been a strange, brilliant creature, with about her that mysterious touch of genius which by its destined suffering buys forgiveness for its destined sins.

And in Nan the soul of her French ancestress lived anew. The charm of the frail and fair Angèle de Varincourt—baffling, elusive, but irresistible—was hers, and the soul of the artist, with its restless imagination, its craving for the beautiful, its sensitive response to all emotion—this, too, was her inheritance.

To Penelope, Nan's ultimate unfolding was a matter of absorbing interest. Her own small triumphs as a singer paled into insignificance beside the riot of her visions for Nan's future. Nevertheless, she was sometimes conscious of an undercurrent of foreboding. Something was lacking. Had

the gods, giving so much, withheld the two best gifts of all—Success and Happiness?

While Penelope mused in the firelight, the clatter of china issuing from the kitchen premises indicated unusual domestic activity on Nan's part, and finally culminated in her entry into the sitting-room, bearing a laden tea-tray.

"Hot scones!" she announced joyfully. "I've made a burnt offering of myself, toasting them."

Penelope smiled.

"What an infant you are, Nan," she returned. "I sometimes wonder if you'll ever grow up?"

"I hope not"—with great promptitude. "I detest extremely grown-up people. But what are you brooding over so darkly? Cease those philosophical reflections in which you've been indulging—it's a positive vice with you, Penny—and give me some tea."

Penelope laughed and began to pour out tea.

"I half thought Maryon Rooke might be here by now," remarked Nan, selecting a scone from the golden-brown pyramid on the plate and carefully avoiding Penelope's eyes. "He said he might look in some time this afternoon."

Penelope held the teapot arrested in mid-air.

"How condescending of him!" she commented drily. "If he comes—then exit

Penelope."

"You're an ideal chaperon, Penny," murmured Nan with approval.

"Chaperons are superfluous women nowadays. And you and Maryon are so nearly engaged that you wouldn't require one even if they weren't out of date."

"Are we?" A queer look of uncertainty showed in Nan's eyes. One might almost have said she was afraid.

"Aren't you?" Penelope's counter-question flashed back swiftly. "I thought there was a perfectly definite understanding between you?"

"So you trot tactfully away when he comes? Nice of you, Penny."

"It's not in the least 'nice' of me," retorted the other. "I happen to be giving a singing-lesson at half-past five, that's all." After a pause she added tentatively: "Nan, why don't you take some pupils? It means—hard cash."

"And endless patience!" commented Nan, "No, don't ask me that, Penny, as you love me! I couldn't watch their silly fingers lumbering over the piano."

"Well, why don't you take more concert work? You could get it if you chose! You're simply throwing away your chances! How long is it since you composed anything, I'd like to know?"

"Precisely five minutes—just now when I was in the kitchen. Listen, and

I'll play it to you. It's a setting to those words of old Omar:

'Ah, Love! could you and I with Fate conspire  
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!'

I was burning my fingers in the performance of duty and the appropriateness of the words struck me," she added with a malicious little grin.

She seated, herself at the piano and her slim, nervous hands wandered soundlessly a moment above the keys.

Then a wailing minor melody grew beneath them—unsatisfied, asking, with now and then an ecstasy of joyous chords that only died again into the querying despair of the original theme. She broke off abruptly, humming the words beneath her breath.

Penelope crossed the room and, laying her hands on the girl's shoulders, twisted her round so that she faced her.

"Nan, it's sheer madness! You've got this wonderful talent—a real gift of the gods—and you do nothing with it!"

Nan laughed uncertainly and bent her head so that all Penelope could see was a cloud of dusky hair.

"I can't," she said.

"Why not?" Penelope's voice was urgent. "Why don't you work up that last composition, for instance, and get it published? Surely"—giving her a little wrathful shake—"surely you've some ambition?"

"Do you remember what that funny old Scotch clairvoyant said to me? . . . 'You have ambition—great ambition—but not the stability or perseverance to achieve.'"

Penelope's level brows contracted into a frown and she shook her head dissentingly.

"It's true—every word of it," asserted Nan.

The other dropped her hands from Nan's shoulders and turned away.

"You'll break everyone's heart before you've finished," she said. Adding in a lighter tone: "I'm going out now. If Maryon Rooke comes, don't begin by breaking his for him."

The door closed behind her and Nan, left alone, strolled restlessly over to the window and stood looking out.

"Break his!" she whispered under her breath. "Dear old Penny! She doesn't know the probabilities in this particular game of chance."

The slanting afternoon sunlight revealed once more that sudden touch of gravity—almost of fear—in her face. It was rather a charming face, delicately angled, with cheeks that hollowed slightly beneath the cheek-bones and a chin which would have been pointed had not old Dame Nature changed her mind at the last moment and elected to put a provoking little cleft there. Nor could even the merciless light of a wintry sun find a flaw in her skin. It was one of those rare, creamy skins, with a golden undertone and the feature of a flower petal, sometimes found in conjunction with dark hair. The faint colour in her cheeks was of that same warm rose which the sun kisses into glowing life on the velvet skin of an apricot.

The colour deepened suddenly in her face as the sound of an electric bell trilled through the flat. Dropping her arms to her sides, she stood motionless, like a bird poised for flight. Then, with a little impatient shrug of her shoulders, she made her way slowly, almost unwillingly, across the hall and threw open the door.

"You, Maryon?" she said a trifle breathlessly. Then, as he entered:

"I—I hardly expected you."

He took both her hands in his and kissed them.

"It's several years since I expected anything," he answered. "Now—I only hope."

Nan smiled.

"Come in, pessimist, and don't begin by being epigrammatic on the very doorstep. Tea? Or coffee? I'm afraid the flat doesn't run to whisky-and-soda."

"Coffee, please—and your conversation—will suffice. 'A Loaf of Bread . . . and Thou beside me singing in the Wilderness' . . ."

"You'd much prefer a whisky-and-soda and a grilled steak to the loaf and—the et ceteras," observed Nan cynically. "There's a very wide gulf between what a man says and what he thinks."

"There's a much wider one between what a man wants and what he gets," he returned grimly.

"You'll soon have all you want," she answered. "You're well on the way to fame already."

"Do you know," he remarked irrelevantly, "your eyes are exactly like blue violets. I'd like to paint you, Nan."

"Perhaps I'll sit for you some day," she replied, handing him his coffee.

"That is, if you're very good."

Maryon Rooke was a man the merit of whose work was just beginning to be noticed in the art world. For years he had laboured unacknowledged and with increasing bitterness—for he knew his own worth. But now, though, still only in his early thirties, his reputation, particularly as a painter of women's portraits, had begun to be noised abroad. His feet were on the lower rungs of the ladder, and it was generally prophesied that he would ultimately reach the top. His gifts were undeniable, and there was a certain ruthlessness in the line of the lips above the small Van Dyck

beard he wore which suggested that he would permit little to stand in the way of his attaining his goal—be it what it might.

"You'd make a delightful picture, Sun-kissed," he said, narrowing his eyes and using one of his most frequent names for her. "With your blue violet eyes and that rose-petal skin of yours."

Nan smiled involuntarily.

"Don't be so flowery, Maryon. Really, you and Penelope are very good antidotes to each other! She's just been giving me a lecture on the error of my ways. She doesn't waste any breath over my appearance, bless her!"

"What's the crime?"

"Lack of application, waste of opportunities, and general idleness."

"It's all true." Rooke leaned forward, his eyes lit by momentary enthusiasm. They were curious eyes—hazel brown, with a misleading softness in them that appealed to every woman he met. "It's all true," he repeated. "You could do big things, Nan. And you do nothing."

Nan laughed, half-pleased, half-vexed.

"I think you overrate my capabilities."

"I don't. There are very few pianists who have your technique, and fewer still, your soul and power of interpretation."

"Oh, yes, there are. Heaps. And they've got what I lack."

"And that is?"

"The power to hold their audience."

"You lack that? You who can hold a man—"

She broke in excitedly.



"Yes, I can hold one man—or woman. I can play to a few people and hold them. I know that. But—I can't hold a crowd."

Rooke regarded her thoughtfully. Perhaps it was true that in spite of her charm, of the compelling fascination which made her so unforgettable—did he not know how unforgettable!—she yet lacked the tremendous force of magnetic personality which penetrates through a whole concourse of people, temperamentally differing as the poles, and carries them away on one great tidal wave of enthusiasm and applause.

"It may be true," he said, at last, reluctantly. "I don't think you possess great animal magnetism! Yours is a more elusive, more—how shall I put it?—an attraction more spirituelle. . . . To those it touches, worse luck, a more enduring one."

"More enduring?"

"Far more. Animal magnetism is a thing of bodily presence. Once one is away from it—apart—one is free. Until the next meeting! But *your* victims aren't even free from you when you're not there."

"It sounds a trifle boring. Like a visitor who never knows when it's time to go."

Rooke smiled.

"You're trying to switch me off the main theme, which is your work."

She sprang up.

"Don't bully me any more," she said quickly, "and I'll play you one of my recent compositions."

She sauntered across to the piano and began to play a little ripping melody, full of sunshine and laughter, and though a sob ran through it, it was smothered by the overlying gaiety. Rooke crossed to her side and quietly lifted her hands from the keys.

"Charming," he said. "But it doesn't ring true. That was meant for a sad song. As it stands, it's merely flippant—insincere. And insincerity is the knell of art."

Nan skimmed the surface defiantly.

"What a disagreeable criticism! You might have given me some encouragement instead of crushing my poor little attempt at composition like that!"

Rooke looked at her gravely. With him, sincerity in art was a fetish; in life, a superfluity. But for the moment he was genuinely moved. The poseur's mask which he habitually wore slipped aside and the real man peeped out.

"Yours ought to be more than attempts," he said quietly. "It's in you to do something really big. And you must do it. If not, you'll go to pieces. You don't understand yourself."

"And do you profess to?"

"A little." He smiled down at her. "The gods have given you the golden gift—the creative faculty. And there's a price to pay if you don't use the gift."

Nan's "blue violet" eyes held a startled look.

"You've got something which isn't given to everyone. To precious few, in fact! And if you don't use it, it will poison everything. We artists *may not* rust. If we do, the soul corrodes."

The sincerity of his tone was unmistakable. Art was the only altar at which Rooke worshipped, it was probably the

only altar at which he ever would worship consistently. Nan suddenly yielded to the driving force at the back of his speech.

"Listen to this, then," she said. "It's a setting to some words I came across the other day."

She handed him a slip of paper on which the words were written and his eyes ran swiftly down the verses of the brief lyric:

### **EMPTY HANDS**

Away in the sky, high over our heads,  
With the width of a world between,  
The far Moon sails like a shining ship  
Which the Dreamer's eyes have seen.

And empty hands are out-stretched in vain,  
While aching eyes beseech,  
And hearts may break that cry for the Moon,  
The silver Moon out of reach!

But sometimes God on His great white Throne  
Looks down from the Heaven above,  
And lays in the hands that are empty  
The tremulous Star of Love.

Nan played softly, humming the melody in the wistful little pipe of a voice which was all that Nature had endowed her with. But it had an appealing quality—the heart-touching quality of the mezzo-soprano—while through the music ran the same unsatisfied cry as in her setting of the

old Tentmaker's passionate words—a terrible demand for those things that life sometimes withholds.

As she ceased playing Maryon Rooke spoke musingly.

"It's a queer world," he said. "What a man wants he can't have. He sees the good gifts and may not take them. Or, if he takes the one he wants the most—he loses all the rest. Fame and love and life—the great god Circumstance arranges all these little matters for us. . . . And mighty badly sometimes! And that's why I can't—why I mustn't—"

He broke off abruptly, checking what he had intended to say. Nan felt as though a door had been shut in her face. This man had a rare faculty for implying everything and saying nothing.

"I don't understand," she said rather low.

"An artist isn't a free agent—not free to take the things life offers," he answered steadily. "He's seen 'the far Moon' with the Dreamer's eyes, and that's probably all he'll ever see of it. His 'empty hands' may not even grasp at the star."

He had adapted the verses very cleverly to suit his purpose. With a sudden flash of intuition Nan understood him, and the fear which had knocked at her heart, when Penelope had assumed that there was a definite understanding between herself and Rooke, knocked again. Poetically wrapped up, he was in reality handing her out her congé—frankly admitting that art came first and love a poor second.

He twisted his shoulders irritably.

"Last talks are always odious!" he flung out abruptly.

"Last?" she queried. Her fingers were trifling nervously with the pages of an album of songs that rested against the

music-desk.

He did not look at her.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I'm going away. I leave for Paris tomorrow."

There was a crash of jangled notes as the album suddenly pitched forward on to the keys of the piano.

With an impetuous movement he leaned towards her and caught her hand in his.

"Nan!" he said hoarsely, "Nan! Do you care?"

But the next moment he had released her.

"I'm a fool!" he said. "What's the use of drawing a boundary line and then overstepping it?"

"And where"—Nan's voice was very low—"where do you draw the line?"

He stood motionless a moment. Then he gestured a line with his hand—a line between, himself and her.

"There," he said briefly.

She caught her breath. But before she could make any answer he was speaking again.

"You've been very good to me, Nan—pushed the gate of Paradise at least ajar. And if it closes now, I've no earthly right to grumble. . . . After all, I'm only one amongst your many friends." He reclaimed her hands and drew them against his breast. "Good-bye, beloved," he said. His voice sounded rough and uneven.

Instinctively Nan clung to him. He released himself very gently—very gently but inexorably.

"So it's farewell, Sun-kissed."

Mechanically she shook hands and her lips murmured some vague response. She heard the door of the flat close

behind him, followed almost immediately by the clang of the iron grille as the lift-boy dragged it across. It seemed to her as though a curious note of finality sounded in the metallic clamour of the grille—a grim resemblance to the clank of keys and shooting of bolts which cuts the outer world from the prisoner in his cell.

With a little strangled cry she sank into a chair, clasping her hands tightly together. She sat there, very still and quiet, staring blankly into space. . . .

And so, an hour later, Penelope found her. She was startled by the curious, dazed look in her eyes.

"Nan!" she cried sharply. "Nan! What's the matter?"

Nan turned her head fretfully from one side to the other.

"Nothing," she answered dully. "Nothing whatever."

But Penelope saw the look of strain in her face. Very deliberately she divested herself of her hat and coat and sat down.

"Tell me about it," she said practically. "Is it—is it that man?"

A gleam of humour shot across Nan's face, and the painfully set expression went out of it.

"Yes," she said, smiling a little. "It is 'that man.'"

"Well, what's happened? Surely"—with an accent of reproof—"surely you've not refused him?"

Nan still regarded her with a faintly humorous smile.

"Do you think I ought not—to have refused him?" she queried.

Penelope answered with decision.

"Certainly I do. You could see—anyone could see—that he cared badly, and you ought to have choked him off months ago if you only meant to turn him down at the finish. It wasn't playing the game."

Nan began to laugh helplessly.

"Penny, you're too funny for words—if you only knew it. But still, you're beginning to restore my self-respect. If you were mistaken in him, then perhaps I've not been quite such an incredible fool as I thought."

"Mistaken?" There was a look of consternation in Penelope's honest brown eyes. "Mistaken? . . . Nan, what do you mean?"

"It's quite simple." Nan's laughter ceased suddenly. "Maryon Rooke has *not* asked me to marry him. I've not refused him. He—he didn't give me the opportunity." Her voice shook a little. "He's just been in to say good-bye," she went on, after a pause. "He's going abroad."

"Listen to me, Nan." Penelope spoke very quietly. "There's a mistake somewhere. I'm absolutely sure Maryon cares for you—and cares pretty badly, too."

"Oh, yes, he cares. But"—in a studiously light voice that hid the quivering pain at her heart—"a rising artist has to consider his art. He can't hamper himself by marriage with an impecunious musician who isn't able to pull wires and help him on. 'He travels the fastest who travels alone.' You know it. And Maryon Rooke knows it. I suppose it's true."

She got up from her chair and came and stood beside Penelope.

"We won't talk of this again, Penny. What one wants is a 'far Moon' and

I'd forgotten the width of the world which always seems to lie between.

My 'shining ship' has foundered. That's all."



## CHAPTER II

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## THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Penelope tapped sharply at Nan's bedroom door.

"Nan, are you ready? Your taxi's waiting outside."

"Ticking tuppences away like the very dickens, too!" returned Nan, emerging from her room dressed for a journey.

It was a week or two later and in response to a wire—and as the result of a good deal of persuasion on the part of Penelope—Nan had accepted an engagement to play at a big charity concert in Exeter. Lady Chatterton, the organiser of the concert, had offered to put her up for the couple of nights involved, and Nan was now hurrying to catch the Paddington West-country train.

"I've induced the taxi-driver to come up and carry down your baggage," pursued Penelope. "You'll have to look fairly sharp if you're to catch the one-fifty."

"I *must* catch it," declared Nan. "Why, the Chattertons are fourteen miles from Abbencombe Station and it would be simply ghastly if they sent all that way to meet me—and there *was* no me! Besides, there's a rehearsal fixed for ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

While she spoke, the two girls were making their way down the circular flight of stone steps—since the lift was

temporarily out of order—preceded by the driver grumblingly carrying Nan's suit-case and hat-box. A minute or two later the taxi emitted a grunt from somewhere within the depths of its being and Nan was off, with Penelope's cheery "Good luck!" ringing in her ears.

She sat back against the cushions and gasped a sigh of relief. She had run it rather close, but now, glancing down at her wrist-watch, she realised that, failing a block in the traffic, she would catch her train fairly easily.

It was after they had entered the Park that the first contre-temps occurred. The taxi jibbed and came abruptly to a standstill. Nan let down the window and leaned out.

"What's the matter?" she asked with some anxiety.

The driver, descending leisurely from his seat, regarded her with a complete lack of interest.

"That's just w'ot I'm goin' to find out," he replied in a detached way.

Nan watched him while he poked indifferently about the engine, then sank back into her seat with a murmur of relief as he at last climbed once more into his place behind the wheel and the taxi got going again.

But almost before two minutes had elapsed there came another halt, followed by another lengthy examination of the engine's internals. Engine trouble spelt disaster, and Nan hopped out and joined the driver in the road.

"What's wrong?" she asked. She looked down anxiously at her wrist-watch.

"I shall miss my train at this rate."

"I cawn't 'elp it if you do," returned the man surlily. He was one of the many drivers who had taken advantage of a

long-suffering public during the war-time scarcity of taxi-cabs and he hoped to continue the process during the peace. Incivility had become a confirmed habit with him.

"But I can't miss it!" declared Nan.

"And this 'ere taxi cawn't catch it."

"Do you mean you really can't get her to go?" asked Nan.

"'Aven't I just bin sayin' so?"—aggressively. "That's just 'ow it stands. She won't go."

He ignored Nan's exclamation of dismay and renewed his investigation of the engine.

"No," he said at last, straightening himself. "I cawn't get you to Paddington—or anyw'ere else for the matter o' that!"

He spoke with a stubborn unconcern that was simply maddening.

"Then get me another taxi—quick!" said Nan.

"W'ere from?"—contemptuously. "There ain't no taxi-rank 'ere in 'Yde Park."

Nan looked hopelessly round. Cars and taxis, some with luggage and some without, went speeding past her, but never a single one that was empty.

"Oh"—she turned desperately to her driver—"can't you do *anything*?"

Run down and see if you can hail one for me. I'll stay by the taxi."

He shook his head.

"Callin' taxis for people ain't my job," he remarked negligently. "I'm a driver, I am."

Nan, driven by the extreme urgency of her need, stepped out into the middle of the road and excitedly hailed the next taxicab that passed her carrying luggage. The occupant, a woman, her attention attracted by Nan's waving arm, leaned out from the window and called to her driver to stop. Nan ran forward.

"Oh, *are* you by any chance going to Paddington?" she asked eagerly.

"My taxi's broken down and I'm afraid I'll miss my train."

The woman smiled her sympathy. She had a delightful smile.

"How awful for you! But I'm not going anywhere near there. I'm so sorry I can't help."

The taxicab slid away and Nan stood once more forlornly watching the stream go by. The precious moments were slipping past, and no one in the world looked in the least as if they were going to Paddington. The driver, superbly unconcerned, lit up a cigarette, while Nan stood in the middle of the road, which seemed suddenly to have almost emptied of traffic.

All at once a taxi sped up the wide road with only a single suit-case up-ended in front beside the chauffeur. She planted herself directly in its path, and waved so frantically that the driver slowed up, although with obvious reluctance. Someone looked out of the window, and with a vague, troubled surprise Nan realised that the cab's solitary passenger was of the masculine persuasion. But she was far beyond being deterred by a mere detail of that description.

"Are you going to Paddington?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, I am," came the answer. The speaker's voice had a slight, well-bred drawl in it, reminiscent of the public school. "Can I do anything for you?"

"You can drive me there, if you will," she replied, with the bluntness of despair. "My taxi's broken down."

"But with pleasure."

The man was out of his own cab in an instant, and held the door open while she paid her fare and ordered her luggage to be transferred. The driver showed no very energetic appreciation of the idea; in fact, he seemed inclined to dispute it, and, at the end of her patience, Nan herself made a grab at her hat-box with the intention of carrying it across to the other taxicab. In the same moment she felt it quietly taken from her and heard the same drawling voice addressing her recalcitrant driver.

"Bring that suit-case across and look sharp about it."

There was a curious quality of authority in the lazy voice to which the taxi-man responded in spite of himself, and he proceeded to obey the order with celerity. A minute later the transference was accomplished and Nan found herself sitting side by side in a taxi with an absolute stranger.

"He was a perfect *beast* of a driver!" was her first heart-felt ejaculation.

The man beside her smiled.

"I'm sure he was—a regular 'down-with-everything' type," he replied.

She stole a veiled glance at him. His face was lean, with a squarish jaw, and the very definitely dark brows and lashes contrasted oddly with his English-fair hair and blue-

grey eyes. In one eye he wore a horn-rimmed monocle from which depended a narrow black ribbon.

"I can't thank you enough for coming to my rescue," said Nan, after her quick scrutiny. "It was so frightfully important that I should catch this train."

"Was it?"

Somehow the brief question compelled an explanation, although it held no suggestion of curiosity—nothing more than a friendly interest.

"Yes. I have a concert engagement to-morrow, and if I missed this train I couldn't possibly make my connection at Exeter. I change on to the South-Western line there."

"Then I'm very glad I sailed in at the crucial moment. Although you'd have been able to reach your destination in time for the concert even had the worst occurred to-day. You could have travelled down by an earlier train to-morrow; if everything else had failed."

"But they've fixed a rehearsal for ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"That certainly does complicate matters. And I suppose, in any case, you'd rather not have to play in public immediately after a long railway journey."

"How do you know I play?" demanded Nan. "It's just conceivable I might be a singer!"

A distinct twinkle showed behind the monocle.

"There are quite a number of 'conceivable' things about you. But I heard Miss Nan Davenant play several times during the war—at concerts where special seats were