

II

"*Va pas*, indeed! What perfectly rotten nonsense!" Dick Stewart glowers at the words. "*Va pas*! Sheer down simple elementary rot! Now I wonder what silly Johnny of an ass did that?"

But all the same he felt it as a warning. It had pulled him up with a jerk, with what sailors call "a round turn." Mystery again. For the last six weeks he had been continually plagued with mystery. Even Bodinton had been mysterious about his quest. And now—

"Can't be meant for me, anyhow," he muttered. "Nobody knew I was coming this way—didn't know I was myself, two days ago. Some farceur's joke, *coram populo*. Besides"—he was examining the letters closely—"the thing has been done for weeks—days, anyhow. The idiot scratched his *va pas* in the paint and rubbed mud into the scratches. And the mud is quite dry—it's dusting off!"

"The stupidest kind of joke, perfectly asinine!" he thought it, "but enough to make some fellows funk going on." And just such a warning is written on every signpost, at every turn in life, he reflected. *Va pas* is a bogey at every corner; "Beware, avoid, retreat; at any rate, stand still—keep where you are, risk nothing! That is the counsel, which the timid take and the plucky contemn. Bah!" he said to the signpost. "Bah!" to the old bachelor magpie, too. He struck the post with his stick, to knock away the rest of the dried mud and make the words less legible. Somebody else would be coming along, whom the ridiculous warning might scare.

Then he hitched the pack higher up between his shoulders.

"Which way?" he said to himself, with decision and