PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

As we know, Heyst had gone to stay in Schomberg's hotel in complete ignorance that his person was odious to that worthy. When he arrived, Zangiacomo's Ladies' Orchestra had been established there for some time.

The business which had called him out from his seclusion in his lost corner of the Eastern seas was with the Tesmans, and it had something to do with money. He transacted it quickly, and then found himself with nothing to do while he awaited Davidson, who was to take him back to his solitude; for back to his solitude Heyst meant to go. He whom we used to refer to as the Enchanted Heyst was suffering from thorough disenchantment. Not with the islands, however. The Archipelago has a lasting fascination. It is not easy to shake off the spell of island life. Heyst was disenchanted with life as a whole. His scornful temperament, beguiled into action, suffered from failure in a subtle way unknown to men accustomed to grapple with the realities of common human enterprise. It was like the gnawing pain of useless apostasy, a sort of shame before his own betrayed nature; and in addition, he also suffered from plain, downright remorse. He deemed himself guilty of Morrison's death. A rather absurd feeling, since no one could possibly have foreseen the horrors of the cold, wet summer lying in wait for poor Morrison at home.

It was not in Heyst's character to turn morose; but his mental state was not compatible with a sociable mood. He spent his evenings sitting apart on the veranda of Schomberg's hotel. The lamentations of string instruments issued from the building in the hotel compound, the approaches to which were decorated with Japanese paper lanterns strung up between the trunks of several big trees. Scraps of tunes more or less plaintive reached his ears. They pursued him even into his bedroom, which opened into an upstairs veranda. The fragmentary and rasping character of these sounds made their intrusion inexpressibly tedious in the long run. Like most dreamers, to whom it is given sometimes to hear the music of the spheres, Heyst, the wanderer of the Archipelago, had a taste for silence which he had been able to gratify for years. The islands are very quiet. One sees them lying about, clothed in their dark garments of leaves, in a great hush of silver and azure,

where the sea without murmurs meets the sky in a ring of magic stillness. A sort of smiling somnolence broods over them; the very voices of their people are soft and subdued, as if afraid to break some protecting spell.

Perhaps this was the very spell which had enchanted Heyst in the early days. For him, however, that was broken. He was no longer enchanted, though he was still a captive of the islands. He had no intention to leave them ever. Where could he have gone to, after all these years? Not a single soul belonging to him lived anywhere on earth. Of this fact--not such a remote one, after all--he had only lately become aware; for it is failure that makes a man enter into himself and reckon up his resources. And though he had made up his mind to retire from the world in hermit fashion, yet he was irrationally moved by this sense of loneliness which had come to him in the hour of renunciation. It hurt him. Nothing is more painful than the shock of sharp contradictions that lacerate our intelligence and our feelings.

Meantime Schomberg watched Heyst out of the corner of his eye. Towards the unconscious object of his enmity he preserved a distant lieutenant-of-the-Reserve demeanour. Nudging certain of his customers with his elbow, he begged them to observe what airs "that Swede" was giving himself.

"I really don't know why he has come to stay in my house. This place isn't good enough for him. I wish to goodness he had gone somewhere else to show off his superiority. Here I have got up this series of concerts for you gentlemen, just to make things a little brighter generally; and do you think he'll condescend to step in and listen to a piece or two of an evening? Not he. I know him of old. There he sits at the dark end of the piazza, all the evening long--planning some new swindle, no doubt. For two-pence I would ask him to go and look for quarters somewhere else; only one doesn't like to treat a white man like that out in the tropics. I don't know how long he means to stay, but I'm willing to bet a trifle that he'll never work himself up to the point of spending the fifty cents of entrance money for the sake of a little good music."

Nobody cared to bet, or the hotel-keeper would have lost. One evening Heyst was driven to desperation by the rasped, squeaked, scraped snatches of tunes pursuing him even to his hard couch, with a mattress as thin as a pancake and a diaphanous mosquito net. He descended among the trees, where the soft glow of Japanese lanterns picked out parts of their great rugged trunks, here and there, in the great mass of darkness under the lofty foliage. More lanterns, of the shape of cylindrical concertinas, hanging in a row from a slack string, decorated the doorway of what Schomberg called grandiloquently "my concert-hall." In his desperate mood Heyst ascended

three steps, lifted a calico curtain, and went in.

The uproar in that small, barn-like structure, built of imported pine boards, and raised clear of the ground, was simply stunning. An instrumental uproar, screaming, grunting, whining, sobbing, scraping, squeaking some kind of lively air; while a grand piano, operated upon by a bony, red-faced woman with bad-tempered nostrils, rained hard notes like hail through the tempest of fiddles. The small platform was filled with white muslin dresses and crimson sashes slanting from shoulders provided with bare arms, which sawed away without respite. Zangiacomo conducted. He wore a white mess-jacket, a black dress waistcoat, and white trousers. His longish, tousled hair and his great beard were purple-black. He was horrible. The heat was terrific. There were perhaps thirty people having drinks at several little tables. Heyst, quite overcome by the volume of noise, dropped into a chair. In the quick time of that music, in the varied, piercing clamour of the strings, in the movements of the bare arms, in the low dresses, the coarse faces, the stony eyes of the executants, there was a suggestion of brutality--something cruel, sensual and repulsive.

"This is awful!" Heyst murmured to himself.

But there is an unholy fascination in systematic noise. He did not flee from it incontinently, as one might have expected him to do. He remained, astonished at himself for remaining, since nothing could have been more repulsive to his tastes, more painful to his senses, and, so to speak, more contrary to his genius, than this rude exhibition of vigour. The Zangiacomo band was not making music; it was simply murdering silence with a vulgar, ferocious energy. One felt as if witnessing a deed of violence; and that impression was so strong that it seemed marvellous to see the people sitting so quietly on their chairs, drinking so calmly out of their glasses, and giving no signs of distress, anger, or fear. Heyst averted his gaze from the unnatural spectacle of their indifference.

When the piece of music came to an end the relief was so great that he felt slightly dizzy, as if a chasm of silence had yawned at his feet. When he raised his eyes, the audience, most perversely, was exhibiting signs of animation and interest in their faces, and the women in white muslin dresses were coming down in pairs from the platform into the body of Schomberg's "concert-hall." They dispersed themselves all over the place. The male creature with the hooked nose and purple-black beard disappeared somewhere. This was the interval during which, as the astute Schomberg had stipulated, the members of the orchestra were encouraged to favour the members of the audience with their company--that is, such

members as seemed inclined to fraternize with the arts in a familiar and generous manner; the symbol of familiarity and generosity consisting in offers of refreshment.

The procedure struck Heyst as highly incorrect. However, the impropriety of Schomberg's ingenious scheme was defeated by the circumstance that most of the women were no longer young, and that none of them had ever been beautiful. Their more or less worn cheeks were slightly rouged, but apart from that fact, which might have been simply a matter of routine, they did not seem to take the success of the scheme unduly to heart. The impulse to fraternize with the arts being obviously weak in the audience, some of the musicians sat down listlessly at unoccupied tables, while others went on perambulating the central passage: arm in arm, glad enough, no doubt, to stretch their legs while resting their arms. Their crimson sashes gave a factitious touch of gaiety to the smoky atmosphere of the concert-hall; and Heyst felt a sudden pity for these beings, exploited, hopeless, devoid of charm and grace, whose fate of cheerless dependence invested their coarse and joyless features with a touch of pathos.

Heyst was temperamentally sympathetic. To have them passing and repassing close to his little table was painful to him. He was preparing to rise and go out when he noticed that two white muslin dresses and crimson sashes had not yet left the platform. One of these dresses concealed the raw-boned frame of the woman with the bad-tempered curve to her nostrils. She was no less a personage than Mrs. Zangiacomo. She had left the piano, and, with her back to the hall, was preparing the parts for the second half of the concert, with a brusque, impatient action of her ugly elbow. This task done, she turned, and, perceiving the other white muslin dress motionless on a chair in the second row, she strode towards it between the music-stands with an aggressive and masterful gait. On the lap of that dress there lay, unclasped and idle, a pair of small hands, not very white, attached to well-formed arms. The next detail Heyst was led to observe was the arrangement of the hair--two thick, brown tresses rolled round an attractively shaped head.

"A girl, by Jove!" he exclaimed mentally.

It was evident that she was a girl. It was evident in the outline of the shoulders, in the slender white bust springing up, barred slantwise by the crimson sash, from the bell-shaped spread of muslin skirt hiding the chair on which she sat averted a little from the body of the hall. Her feet, in low white shoes, were crossed prettily.

She had captured Heyst's awakened faculty of observation; he had the sensation of a new experience. That was because his faculty of observation had never before been captured by any feminine creature in that marked and exclusive fashion. He looked at her anxiously, as no man ever looks at another man; and he positively forgot where he was. He had lost touch with his surroundings. The big woman, advancing, concealed the girl from his sight for a moment. She bent over the seated youthful figure, in passing it very close, as if to drop a word into its ear. Her lips did certainly move. But what sort of word could it have been to make the girl jump up so swiftly? Heyst, at his table, was surprised into a sympathetic start. He glanced quickly round. Nobody was looking towards the platform; and when his eyes swept back there again, the girl, with the big woman treading at her heels, was coming down the three steps from the platform to the floor of the hall. There she paused, stumbled one pace forward, and stood still again, while the other--the escort, the dragoon, the coarse big woman of the piano--passed her roughly, and, marching truculently down the centre aisle between the chairs and tables, went out to rejoin the hook-nosed Zangiacomo somewhere outside. During her extraordinary transit, as if everything in the hall were dirt under her feet, her scornful eyes met the upward glance of Heyst, who looked away at once towards the girl. She had not moved. Her arms hung down; her eyelids were lowered.

Heyst laid down his half-smoked cigar and compressed his lips. Then he got up. It was the same sort of impulse which years ago had made him cross the sandy street of the abominable town of Delli in the island of Timor and accost Morrison, practically a stranger to him then, a man in trouble, expressively harassed, dejected, lonely.

It was the same impulse. But he did not recognize it. He was not thinking of Morrison then. It may be said that, for the first time since the final abandonment of the Samburan coal mine, he had completely forgotten the late Morrison. It is true that to a certain extent he had forgotten also where he was. Thus, unchecked by any sort of self consciousness, Heyst walked up the central passage.

Several of the women, by this time, had found anchorage here and there among the occupied tables. They talked to the men, leaning on their elbows, and suggesting funnily--if it hadn't been for the crimson sashes--in their white dresses an assembly of middle-aged brides with free and easy manners and hoarse voices. The murmuring noise of conversations carried on with some spirit filled Schomberg's concert-room. Nobody remarked Heyst's movements; for indeed he was not the only man on his legs there. He had been confronting the girl for some time before she became aware of

his presence. She was looking down, very still, without colour, without glances, without voice, without movement. It was only when Heyst addressed her in his courteous tone that she raised her eyes.

"Excuse me," he said in English, "but that horrible female has done something to you. She has pinched you, hasn't she? I am sure she pinched you just now, when she stood by your chair."

The girl received this overture with the wide, motionless stare of profound astonishment. Heyst, vexed with himself, suspected that she did not understand what he said. One could not tell what nationality these women were, except that they were of all sorts. But she was astonished almost more by the near presence of the man himself, by his largely bald head, by the white brow, the sunburnt cheeks, the long, horizontal moustaches of crinkly bronze hair, by the kindly expression of the man's blue eyes looking into her own. He saw the stony amazement in hers give way to a momentary alarm, which was succeeded by an expression of resignation.

"I am sure she pinched your arm most cruelly," he murmured, rather disconcerted now at what he had done.

It was a great comfort to hear her say:

"It wouldn't have been the first time. And suppose she did--what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," he said with a faint, remote playfulness in his tone which had not been heard in it lately, and which seemed to catch her ear pleasantly. "I am grieved to say that I don't know. But can I do anything? What would you wish me to do? Pray command me."

Again, the greatest astonishment became visible in her face; for she now perceived how different he was from the other men in the room. He was as different from them as she was different from the other members of the ladies' orchestra.

"Command you?" she breathed, after a time, in a bewildered tone. "Who are you?" she asked a little louder.

"I am staying in this hotel for a few days. I just dropped in casually here. This outrage--"

"Don't you try to interfere," she said so earnestly that Heyst asked, in his

faintly playful tone:

"Is it your wish that I should leave you?"

"I haven't said that," the girl answered. "She pinched me because I didn't get down here quick enough--"

"I can't tell you how indignant I am--" said Heyst. "But since you are down here now," he went on, with the ease of a man of the world speaking to a young lady in a drawing-room, "hadn't we better sit down?"

She obeyed his inviting gesture, and they sat down on the nearest chairs. They looked at each other across a little round table with a surprised, open gaze, self-consciousness growing on them so slowly that it was a long time before they averted their eyes; and very soon they met again, temporarily, only to rebound, as it were. At last they steadied in contact, but by that time, say some fifteen minutes from the moment when they sat down, the "interval" came to an end.

So much for their eyes. As to the conversation, it had been perfectly insignificant because naturally they had nothing to say to each other. Heyst had been interested by the girl's physiognomy. Its expression was neither simple nor yet very clear. It was not distinguished--that could not be expected--but the features had more fineness than those of any other feminine countenance he had ever had the opportunity to observe so closely. There was in it something indefinably audacious and infinitely miserable--because the temperament and the existence of that girl were reflected in it. But her voice! It seduced Heyst by its amazing quality. It was a voice fit to utter the most exquisite things, a voice which would have made silly chatter supportable and the roughest talk fascinating. Heyst drank in its charm as one listens to the tone of some instrument without heeding the tune.

"Do you sing as well as play?" he asked her abruptly.

"Never sang a note in my life," she said, obviously surprised by the irrelevant question; for they had not been discoursing of sweet sounds. She was clearly unaware of her voice. "I don't remember that I ever had much reason to sing since I was little," she added.

That inelegant phrase, by the mere vibrating, warm nobility of the sound, found its way into Heyst's heart. His mind, cool, alert, watched it sink there with a sort of vague concern at the absurdity of the occupation, till it rested at the bottom, deep down, where our unexpressed longings lie.

"You are English, of course?" he said.

"What do you think?" she answered in the most charming accents. Then, as if thinking that it was her turn to place a question: "Why do you always smile when you speak?"

It was enough to make anyone look grave, but her good faith was so evident that Heyst recovered himself at once.

"It's my unfortunate manner--" he said with his delicate, polished playfulness. "Is is very objectionable to you?"

She was very serious.

"No. I only noticed it. I haven't come across so many pleasant people as all that, in my life."

"It's certain that this woman who plays the piano is infinitely more disagreeable than any cannibal I have ever had to do with."

"I believe you!" She shuddered. "How did you come to have anything to do with cannibals?"

"It would be too long a tale," said Heyst with a faint smile. Heyst's smiles were rather melancholy, and accorded badly with his great moustaches, under which his mere playfulness lurked as comfortable as a shy bird in its native thicket. "Much too long. How did you get amongst this lot here?"

"Bad luck," she answered briefly.

"No doubt, no doubt," Heyst assented with slight nods. Then, still indignant at the pinch which he had divined rather than actually seen inflicted: "I say, couldn't you defend yourself somehow?"

She had risen already. The ladies of the orchestra were slowly regaining their places. Some were already seated, idle stony-eyed, before the music-stands. Heyst was standing up, too.

"They are too many for me," she said.

These few words came out of the common experience of mankind; yet by virtue of her voice, they thrilled Heyst like a revelation. His feelings were in a

state of confusion, but his mind was clear.

"That's bad. But it isn't actual ill-usage that this girl is complaining of," he thought lucidly after she left him.

CHAPTER TWO

That was how it began. How it was that it ended, as we know it did end, is not so easy to state precisely. It is very clear that Heyst was not indifferent, I won't say to the girl, but to the girl's fate. He was the same man who had plunged after the submerged Morrison whom he hardly knew otherwise than by sight and through the usual gossip of the islands. But this was another sort of plunge altogether, and likely to lead to a very different kind of partnership.

Did he reflect at all? Probably. He was sufficiently reflective. But if he did, it was with insufficient knowledge. For there is no evidence that he paused at any time between the date of that evening and the morning of the flight. Truth to say, Heyst was not one of those men who pause much. Those dreamy spectators of the world's agitation are terrible once the desire to act gets hold of them. They lower their heads and charge a wall with an amazing serenity which nothing but an indisciplined imagination can give.

He was not a fool. I suppose he knew--or at least he felt--where this was leading him. But his complete inexperience gave him the necessary audacity. The girl's voice was charming when she spoke to him of her miserable past, in simple terms, with a sort of unconscious cynicism inherent in the truth of the ugly conditions of poverty. And whether because he was humane or because her voice included all the modulations of pathos, cheerfulness, and courage in its compass, it was not disgust that the tale awakened in him, but the sense of an immense sadness.

On a later evening, during the interval between the two parts of the concert, the girl told Heyst about herself. She was almost a child of the streets. Her father was a musician in the orchestras of small theatres. Her mother ran away from him while she was little, and the landladies of various poor lodging-houses had attended casually to her abandoned childhood. It was never positive starvation and absolute rags, but it was the hopeless grip of poverty all the time. It was her father who taught her to play the violin. It seemed that he used to get drunk sometimes, but without pleasure, and only because he was unable to forget his fugitive wife. After he had a paralytic stroke, falling over with a crash in the well of a music-hall orchestra during the performance, she had joined the Zangiacomo company. He was now in a home for incurables.

"And I am here," she finished, "with no one to care if I make a hole in the

water the next chance I get or not."

Heyst told her that he thought she could do a little better than that, if it was only a question of getting out of the world. She looked at him with special attention, and with a puzzled expression which gave to her face an air of innocence.

This was during one of the "intervals" between the two parts of the concert. She had come down that time without being incited thereto by a pinch from the awful Zangiacomo woman. It is difficult to suppose that she was seduced by the uncovered intellectual forehead and the long reddish moustaches of her new friend. New is not the right word. She had never had a friend before; and the sensation of this friendliness going out to her was exciting by its novelty alone. Besides, any man who did not resemble Schomberg appeared for that very reason attractive. She was afraid of the hotel-keeper, who, in the daytime, taking advantage of the fact that she lived in the hotel itself, and not in the Pavilion with the other "artists" prowled round her, mute, hungry, portentous behind his great beard, or else assailed her in quiet corners and empty passages with deep, mysterious murmurs from behind, which, not withstanding their clear import, sounded horribly insane somehow.

The contrast of Heyst's quiet, polished manner gave her special delight and filled her with admiration. She had never seen anything like that before. If she had, perhaps, known kindness in her life, she had never met the forms of simple courtesy. She was interested by it as a very novel experience, not very intelligible, but distinctly pleasurable.

"I tell you they are too many for me," she repeated, sometimes recklessly, but more often shaking her head with ominous dejection.

She had, of course, no money at all. The quantities of "black men" all about frightened her. She really had no definite idea where she was on the surface of the globe. The orchestra was generally taken from the steamer to some hotel, and kept shut up there till it was time to go on board another steamer. She could not remember the names she heard.

"How do you call this place again?" she used to ask Heyst.

"Sourabaya," he would say distinctly, and would watch the discouragement at the outlandish sound coming into her eyes, which were fastened on his face.

He could not defend himself from compassion. He suggested that she might go to the consul, but it was his conscience that dictated this advice, not his conviction. She had never heard of the animal or of its uses. A consul! What was it? Who was he? What could he do? And when she learned that perhaps he could be induced to send her home, her head dropped on her breast.

"What am I to do when I get there?" she murmured with an intonation so just, with an accent so penetrating--the charm of her voice did not fail her even in whispering--that Heyst seemed to see the illusion of human fellowship on earth vanish before the naked truth of her existence, and leave them both face to face in a moral desert as arid as the sands of Sahara, without restful shade, without refreshing water.

She leaned slightly over the little table, the same little table at which they had sat when they first met each other; and with no other memories but of the stones in the streets her childhood had known, in the distress of the incoherent, confused, rudimentary impressions of her travels inspiring her with a vague terror of the world she said rapidly, as one speaks in desperation:

"You do something! You are a gentleman. It wasn't I who spoke to you first, was it? I didn't begin, did I? It was you who came along and spoke to me when I was standing over there. What did you want to speak to me for? I don't care what it is, but you must do something."

Her attitude was fierce and entreating at the same time--clamorous, in fact though her voice had hardly risen above a breath. It was clamorous enough to be noticed. Heyst, on purpose, laughed aloud. She nearly choked with indignation at this brutal heartlessness.

"What did you mean, then, by saying 'command me!'?" she almost hissed.

Something hard in his mirthless stare, and a quiet final "All right," steadied her.

"I am not rich enough to buy you out," he went on, speaking with an extraordinary detached grin, "even if it were to be done; but I can always steal you."

She looked at him profoundly, as though these words had a hidden and very complicated meaning.

"Get away now," he said rapidly, "and try to smile as you go."

She obeyed with unexpected readiness; and as she had a set of very good white teeth, the effect of the mechanical, ordered smile was joyous, radiant. It astonished Heyst. No wonder, it flashed through his mind, women can deceive men so completely. The faculty was inherent in them; they seemed to be created with a special aptitude. Here was a smile the origin of which was well known to him; and yet it had conveyed a sensation of warmth, had given him a sort of ardour to live which was very new to his experience.

By this time she was gone from the table, and had joined the other "ladies of the orchestra." They trooped towards the platform, driven in truculently by the haughty mate of Zangiacomo, who looked as though she were restraining herself with difficulty from punching their backs. Zangiacomo followed, with his great, pendulous dyed beard and short mess-jacket, with an aspect of hang-dog concentration imparted by his drooping head and the uneasiness of his eyes, which were set very close together. He climbed the steps last of all, turned about, displaying his purple beard to the hall, and tapped with his bow. Heyst winced in anticipation of the horrible racket. It burst out immediately unabashed and awful. At the end of the platform the woman at the piano, presenting her cruel profile, her head tilted back, banged the keys without looking at the music.

Heyst could not stand the uproar for more than a minute. He went out, his brain racked by the rhythm of some more or less Hungarian dance music. The forests inhabited by the New Guinea cannibals where he had encountered the most exciting of his earlier futile adventures were silent. And this adventure, not in its execution, perhaps, but in its nature, required even more nerve than anything he had faced before. Walking among the paper lanterns suspended to trees he remembered with regret the gloom and the dead stillness of the forests at the back of Geelvink Bay, perhaps the wildest, the unsafest, the most deadly spot on earth from which the sea can be seen. Oppressed by his thoughts, he sought the obscurity and peace of his bedroom; but they were not complete. The distant sounds of the concert reached his ear, faint indeed, but still disturbing. Neither did he feel very safe in there; for that sentiment depends not on extraneous circumstances but on our inward conviction. He did not attempt to go to sleep; he did not even unbutton the top button of his tunic. He sat in a chair and mused. Formerly, in solitude and in silence, he had been used to think clearly and sometimes even profoundly, seeing life outside the flattering optical delusion of everlasting hope, of conventional self-deceptions, of an ever-expected happiness. But now he was troubled; a light veil seemed to hang before his mental vision; the awakening of a tenderness, indistinct and confused as yet, towards an unknown woman.

Gradually silence, a real silence, had established itself round him. The concert was over; the audience had gone; the concert-hall was dark; and even the Pavilion, where the ladies' orchestra slept after its noisy labours, showed not a gleam of light. Heyst suddenly felt restless in all his limbs, as this reaction from the long immobility would not be denied, he humoured it by passing quietly along the back veranda and out into the grounds at the side of the house, into the black shadows under the trees, where the extinguished paper lanterns were gently swinging their globes like withered fruit.

He paced there to and fro for a long time, a calm, meditative ghost in his white drill-suit, revolving in his head thoughts absolutely novel, disquieting, and seductive; accustoming his mind to the contemplation of his purpose, in order that by being faced steadily it should appear praiseworthy and wise. For the use of reason is to justify the obscure desires that move our conduct, impulses, passions, prejudices, and follies, and also our fears.

He felt that he had engaged himself by a rash promise to an action big with incalculable consequences. And then he asked himself if the girl had understood what he meant. Who could tell? He was assailed by all sorts of doubts. Raising his head, he perceived something white flitting between the trees. It vanished almost at once; but there could be no mistake. He was vexed at being detected roaming like this in the middle of the night. Who could that be? It never occurred to him that perhaps the girl, too, would not be able to sleep. He advanced prudently. Then he saw the white, phantom-like apparition again; and the next moment all his doubts as to the state of her mind were laid at rest, because he felt her clinging to him after the manner of supplicants all the world over. Her whispers were so incoherent that he could not understand anything; but this did not prevent him from being profoundly moved. He had no illusions about her; but his sceptical mind was dominated by the fulness of his heart.

"Calm yourself, calm yourself," he murmured in her ear, returning her clasp at first mechanically, and afterwards with a growing appreciation of her distressed humanity. The heaving of her breast and the trembling of all her limbs, in the closeness of his embrace, seemed to enter his body, to infect his very heart. While she was growing quieter in his arms, he was becoming more agitated, as if there were only a fixed quantity of violent emotion on this earth. The very night seemed more dumb, more still, and the immobility of the vague, black shapes, surrounding him more perfect.

"It will be all right," he tried to reassure her, with a tone of conviction,

speaking into her ear, and of necessity clasping her more closely than before.

Either the words or the action had a very good effect. He heard a light sigh of relief. She spoke with a calmed ardour.

"Oh, I knew it would be all right from the first time you spoke to me! Yes, indeed, I knew directly you came up to me that evening. I knew it would be all right, if you only cared to make it so; but of course I could not tell if you meant it. 'Command me,' you said. Funny thing for a man like you to say. Did you really mean it? You weren't making fun of me?"

He protested that he had been a serious person all his life.

"I believe you," she said ardently. He was touched by this declaration. "It's the way you have of speaking as if you were amused with people," she went on. "But I wasn't deceived. I could see you were angry with that beast of a woman. And you are clever. You spotted something at once. You saw it in my face, eh? It isn't a bad face--say? You'll never be sorry. Listen--I'm not twenty yet. It's the truth, and I can't be so bad looking, or else--I will tell you straight that I have been worried and pestered by fellows like this before. I don't know what comes to them--"

She was speaking hurriedly. She choked, and then exclaimed, with an accent of despair:

"What is it? What's the matter?"

Heyst had removed his arms from her suddenly, and had recoiled a little. "Is it my fault? I didn't even look at them, I tell you straight. Never! Have I looked at you? Tell me. It was you that began it."

In truth, Heyst had shrunk from the idea of competition with fellows unknown, with Schomberg the hotel-keeper. The vaporous white figure before him swayed pitifully in the darkness. He felt ashamed of his fastidiousness.

"I am afraid we have been detected," he murmured. "I think I saw somebody on the path between the house and the bushes behind you."

He had seen no one. It was a compassionate lie, if there ever was one. His compassion was as genuine as his shrinking had been, and in his judgement more honourable.

She didn't turn her head. She was obviously relieved.

"Would it be that brute?" she breathed out, meaning Schomberg, of course. "He's getting too forward with me now. What can you expect? Only this evening, after supper, he--but I slipped away. You don't mind him, do you? Why, I could face him myself now that I know you care for me. A girl can always put up a fight. You believe me? Only it isn't easy to stand up for yourself when you feel there's nothing and nobody at your back. There's nothing so lonely in the world as a girl who has got to look after herself. When I left poor dad in that home--it was in the country, near a village--I came out of the gates with seven shillings and threepence in my old purse, and my railway ticket. I tramped a mile, and got into a train--"

She broke off, and was silent for a moment.

"Don't you throw me over now," she went on. "If you did, what should I do? I should have to live, to be sure, because I'd be afraid to kill myself, but you would have done a thousand times worse than killing a body. You told me you had been always alone, you had never had a dog even. Well, then, I won't be in anybody's way if I live with you--not even a dog's. And what else did you mean when you came up and looked at me so close?"

"Close? Did I?" he murmured unstirring before her in the profound darkness. "So close as that?"

She had an outbreak of anger and despair in subdued tones.

"Have you forgotten, then? What did you expect to find? I know what sort of girl I am; but all the same I am not the sort that men turn their backs on--and you ought to know it, unless you aren't made like the others. Oh, forgive me! You aren't like the others; you are like no one in the world I ever spoke to. Don't you care for me? Don't you see--?"

What he saw was that, white and spectral, she was putting out her arms to him out of the black shadows like an appealing ghost. He took her hands, and was affected, almost surprised, to find them so warm, so real, so firm, so living in his grasp. He drew her to him, and she dropped her head on his shoulder with a deep-sigh.

"I am dead tired," she whispered plaintively.

He put his arms around her, and only by the convulsive movements of her

body became aware that she was sobbing without a sound. Sustaining her, he lost himself in the profound silence of the night. After a while she became still, and cried quietly. Then, suddenly, as if waking up, she asked:

"You haven't seen any more of that somebody you thought was spying about?"

He started at her quick, sharp whisper, and answered that very likely he had been mistaken.

"If it was anybody at all," she reflected aloud, "it wouldn't have been anyone but that hotel woman--the landlord's wife."

"Mrs. Schomberg," Heyst said, surprised.

"Yes. Another one that can't sleep o' nights. Why? Don't you see why? Because, of course, she sees what's going on. That beast doesn't even try to keep it from her. If she had only the least bit of spirit! She knows how I feel, too, only she's too frightened even to look him in the face, let alone open her mouth. He would tell her to go hang herself."

For some time Heyst said nothing. A public, active contest with the hotel-keeper was not to be thought of. The idea was horrible. Whispering gently to the girl, he tried to explain to her that as things stood, an open withdrawal from the company would be probably opposed. She listened to his explanation anxiously, from time to time pressing the hand she had sought and got hold of in the dark.

"As I told you, I am not rich enough to buy you out so I shall steal you as soon as I can arrange some means of getting away from here. Meantime it would be fatal to be seen together at night. We mustn't give ourselves away. We had better part at once. I think I was mistaken just now; but if, as you say, that poor Mrs. Schomberg can't sleep of nights, we must be more careful. She would tell the fellow."

The girl had disengaged herself from his loose hold while he talked, and now stood free of him, but still clasping his hand firmly.

"Oh, no," she said with perfect assurance. "I tell you she daren't open her mouth to him. And she isn't as silly as she looks. She wouldn't give us away. She knows a trick worth two of that. She'll help--that's what she'll do, if she dares do anything at all."

"You seem to have a very clear view of the situation," said Heyst, and received a warm, lingering kiss for this commendation.

He discovered that to part from her was not such an easy matter as he had supposed it would be.

"Upon my word," he said before they separated, "I don't even know your name."

"Don't you? They call me Alma. I don't know why. Silly name! Magdalen too. It doesn't matter; you can call me by whatever name you choose. Yes, you give me a name. Think of one you would like the sound of--something quite new. How I should like to forget everything that has gone before, as one forgets a dream that's done with, fright and all! I would try."

"Would you really?" he asked in a murmur. "But that's not forbidden. I understand that women easily forget whatever in their past diminishes them in their eyes."

"It's your eyes that I was thinking of, for I'm sure I've never wished to forget anything till you came up to me that night and looked me through and through. I know I'm not much account; but I know how to stand by a man. I stood by father ever since I could understand. He wasn't a bad chap. Now that I can't be of any use to him, I would just as soon forget all that and make a fresh start. But these aren't things that I could talk to you about. What could I ever talk to you about?"

"Don't let it trouble you," Heyst said. "Your voice is enough. I am in love with it, whatever it says."

She remained silent for a while, as if rendered breathless by this quiet statement.

"Oh! I wanted to ask you--"

He remembered that she probably did not know his name, and expected the question to be put to him now; but after a moment of hesitation she went on:

"Why was it that you told me to smile this evening in the concert-room there--you remember?"

"I thought we were being observed. A smile is the best of masks. Schomberg

was at a table next but one to us, drinking with some Dutch clerks from the town. No doubt he was watching us--watching you, at least. That's why I asked you to smile."

"Ah, that's why. It never came into my head!"

"And you did it very well, too--very readily, as if you had understood my intention."

"Readily!" she repeated. "Oh, I was ready enough to smile then. That's the truth. It was the first time for years I may say that I felt disposed to smile. I've not had many chances to smile in my life, I can tell you; especially of late."

"But you do it most charmingly--in a perfectly fascinating way."

He paused. She stood still, waiting for more with the stillness of extreme delight, wishing to prolong the sensation.

"It astonished me," he added. "It went as straight to my heart as though you had smiled for the purpose of dazzling me. I felt as if I had never seen a smile before in my life. I thought of it after I left you. It made me restless."

"It did all that?" came her voice, unsteady, gentle, and incredulous.

"If you had not smiled as you did, perhaps I should not have come out here tonight," he said, with his playful earnestness of tone. "It was your triumph."

He felt her lips touch his lightly, and the next moment she was gone. Her white dress gleamed in the distance, and then the opaque darkness of the house seemed to swallow it. Heyst waited a little before he went the same way, round the corner, up the steps of the veranda, and into his room, where he lay down at last--not to sleep, but to go over in his mind all that had been said at their meeting.

"It's exactly true about that smile," he thought. There he had spoken the truth to her; and about her voice, too. For the rest--what must be must be.

A great wave of heat passed over him. He turned on his back, flung his arms crosswise on the broad, hard bed, and lay still, open-eyed under the mosquito net, till daylight entered his room, brightened swiftly, and turned to unfailing sunlight. He got up then, went to a small looking-glass hanging on the wall, and stared at himself steadily. It was not a new-born vanity

which induced this long survey. He felt so strange that he could not resist the suspicion of his personal appearance having changed during the night. What he saw in the glass, however, was the man he knew before. It was almost a disappointment--a belittling of his recent experience. And then he smiled at his naiveness; for, being over five and thirty years of age, he ought to have known that in most cases the body is the unalterable mask of the soul, which even death itself changes but little, till it is put out of sight where no changes matter any more, either to our friends or to our enemies.

Heyst was not conscious of either friends or of enemies. It was the very essence of his life to be a solitary achievement, accomplished not by hermit-like withdrawal with its silence and immobility, but by a system of restless wandering, by the detachment of an impermanent dweller amongst changing scenes. In this scheme he had perceived the means of passing through life without suffering and almost without a single care in the world--invulnerable because elusive.

CHAPTER THREE

For fifteen years Heyst had wandered, invariably courteous and unapproachable, and in return was generally considered a "queer chap." He had started off on these travels of his after the death of his father, an expatriated Swede who died in London, dissatisfied with his country and angry with all the world, which had instinctively rejected his wisdom.

Thinker, stylist, and man of the world in his time, the elder Heyst had begun by coveting all the joys, those of the great and those of the humble, those of the fools and those of the sages. For more than sixty years he had dragged on this painful earth of ours the most weary, the most uneasy soul that civilization had ever fashioned to its ends of disillusion and regret. One could not refuse him a measure of greatness, for he was unhappy in a way unknown to mediocre souls. His mother Heyst had never known, but he kept his father's pale, distinguished face in affectionate memory. He remembered him mainly in an ample blue dressing-gown in a large house of a quiet London suburb. For three years, after leaving school at the age of eighteen, he had lived with the elder Heyst, who was then writing his last book. In this work, at the end of his life, he claimed for mankind that right to absolute moral and intellectual liberty of which he no longer believed them worthy.

Three years of such companionship at that plastic and impressionable age were bound to leave in the boy a profound mistrust of life. The young man learned to reflect, which is a destructive process, a reckoning of the cost. It is not the clear-sighted who lead the world. Great achievements are accomplished in a blessed, warm mental fog, which the pitiless cold blasts of the father's analysis had blown away from the son.

"I'll drift," Heyst had said to himself deliberately.

He did not mean intellectually or sentimentally or morally. He meant to drift altogether and literally, body and soul, like a detached leaf drifting in the wind-currents under the immovable trees of a forest glade; to drift without ever catching on to anything.

"This shall be my defence against life," he had said to himself with a sort of inward consciousness that for the son of his father there was no other worthy alternative.

He became a waif and stray, austerely, from conviction, as others do through drink, from vice, from some weakness of character--with deliberation, as others do in despair. This, stripped of its facts, had been Heyst's life up to that disturbing night. Next day, when he saw the girl called Alma, she managed to give him a glance of frank tenderness, quick as lightning and leaving a profound impression, a secret touch on the heart. It was in the grounds of the hotel, about tiffin time, while the Ladies of the orchestra were strolling back to their pavilion after rehearsal, or practice, or whatever they called their morning musical exercises in the hall. Heyst, returning from the town, where he had discovered that there would be difficulties in the way of getting away at once, was crossing the compound, disappointed and worried. He had walked almost unwittingly into the straggling group of Zangiacomo's performers. It was a shock to him, on coming out of his brown study, to find the girl so near to him, as if one waking suddenly should see the figure of his dream turned into flesh and blood. She did not raise her shapely head, but her glance was no dream thing. It was real, the most real impression of his detached existence--so far.

Heyst had not acknowledged it in any way, though it seemed to him impossible that its effect on him should not be visible to anyone who happened to be looking on. And there were several men on the veranda, steady customers of Schomberg's table d'hote, gazing in his direction--at the ladies of the orchestra, in fact. Heyst's dread arose, not out of shame or timidity, but from his fastidiousness. On getting amongst them, however, he noticed no signs of interest or astonishment in their faces, any more than if they had been blind men. Even Schomberg himself, who had to make way for him at the top of the stairs, was completely unperturbed, and continued the conversation he was carrying on with a client.

Schomberg, indeed, had observed "that Swede" talking with the girl in the intervals. A crony of his had nudged him; and he had thought that it was so much the better; the silly fellow would keep everybody else off. He was rather pleased than otherwise and watched them out of the corner of his eye with a malicious enjoyment of the situation--a sort of Satanic glee. For he had little doubt of his personal fascination, and still less of his power to get hold of the girl, who seemed too ignorant to know how to help herself, and who was worse than friendless, since she had for some reason incurred the animosity of Mrs. Zangiacomo, a woman with no conscience. The aversion she showed him as far as she dared (for it is not always safe for the helpless to display the delicacy of their sentiments), Schomberg pardoned on the score of feminine conventional silliness. He had told Alma, as an argument, that she was a clever enough girl to see that she could do no better than to put her trust in a man of substance, in the prime of life, who knew his way

about. But for the excited trembling of his voice, and the extraordinary way in which his eyes seemed to be starting out of his crimson, hirsute countenance, such speeches had every character of calm, unselfish advice--which, after the manner of lovers, passed easily into sanguine plans for the future.

"We'll soon get rid of the old woman," he whispered to her hurriedly, with panting ferocity. "Hang her! I've never cared for her. The climate don't suit her; I shall tell her to go to her people in Europe. She will have to go, too! I will see to it. Eins, zwei, march! And then we shall sell this hotel and start another somewhere else."

He assured her that he didn't care what he did for her sake; and it was true. Forty-five is the age of recklessness for many men, as if in defiance of the decay and death waiting with open arms in the sinister valley at the bottom of the inevitable hill. Her shrinking form, her downcast eyes, when she had to listen to him, cornered at the end of an empty corridor, he regarded as signs of submission to the overpowering force of his will, the recognition of his personal fascinations. For every age is fed on illusions, lest men should renounce life early and the human race come to an end.

It's easy to imagine Schomberg's humiliation, his shocked fury, when he discovered that the girl who had for weeks resisted his attacks, his prayers, and his fiercest protestations, had been snatched from under his nose by "that Swede," apparently without any trouble worth speaking of. He refused to believe the fact. He would have it, at first, that the Zangiacomos, for some unfathomable reason, had played him a scurvy trick, but when no further doubt was possible, he changed his view of Heyst. The despised Swede became for Schomberg the deepest, the most dangerous, the most hateful of scoundrels. He could not believe that the creature he had coveted with so much force and with so little effect, was in reality tender, docile to her impulse, and had almost offered herself to Heyst without a sense of guilt, in a desire of safety, and from a profound need of placing her trust where her woman's instinct guided her ignorance. Nothing would serve Schomberg but that she must have been circumvented by some occult exercise of force or craft, by the laying of some subtle trap. His wounded vanity wondered ceaselessly at the means "that Swede" had employed to seduce her away from a man like him--Schomberg--as though those means were bound to have been extraordinary, unheard of, inconceivable. He slapped his forehead openly before his customers; he would sit brooding in silence or else would burst out unexpectedly declaiming against Heyst without measure, discretion, or prudence, with swollen features and an affectation of outraged virtue which could not have deceived the most childlike of moralists for a

moment--and greatly amused his audience.

It became a recognized entertainment to go and hear his abuse of Heyst, while sipping iced drinks on the veranda of the hotel. It was, in a manner, a more successful draw than the Zangiacomo concerts had ever been--intervals and all. There was never any difficulty in starting the performer off. Anybody could do it, by almost any distant allusion. As likely as not he would start his endless denunciations in the very billiard-room where Mrs. Schomberg sat enthroned as usual, swallowing her sobs, concealing her tortures of abject humiliation and terror under her stupid, set, everlasting grin, which, having been provided for her by nature, was an excellent mask, in as much as nothing--not even death itself, perhaps--could tear it away.

But nothing lasts in this world, at least without changing its physiognomy. So, after a few weeks, Schomberg regained his outward calm, as if his indignation had dried up within him. And it was time. He was becoming a bore with his inability to talk of anything else but Heyst's unfitness to be at large, Heyst's wickedness, his wiles, his astuteness, and his criminality. Schomberg no longer pretended to despise him. He could not have done it. After what had happened he could not pretend, even to himself. But his bottled-up indignation was fermenting venomously. At the time of his immoderate loquacity one of his customers, an elderly man, had remarked one evening:

"If that ass keeps on like this, he will end by going crazy."

And this belief was less than half wrong. Schomberg had Heyst on the brain. Even the unsatisfactory state of his affairs, which had never been so unpromising since he came out East directly after the Franco-Prussian War, he referred to some subtly noxious influence of Heyst. It seemed to him that he could never be himself again till he had got even with that artful Swede. He was ready to swear that Heyst had ruined his life. The girl so unfairly, craftily, basely decoyed away would have inspired him to success in a new start. Obviously Mrs. Schomberg, whom he terrified by savagely silent moods combined with underhand, poisoned glances, could give him no inspiration. He had grown generally neglectful, but with a partiality for reckless expedients, as if he did not care when and how his career as a hotel-keeper was to be brought to an end. This demoralized state accounted for what Davidson had observed on his last visit to the Schomberg establishment, some two months after Heyst's secret departure with the girl to the solitude of Samburan.

The Schomberg of a few years ago--the Schomberg of the Bangkok days, for

instance, when he started the first of his famed table d'hote dinners--would never have risked anything of the sort. His genius ran to catering, "white man for white men" and to the inventing, elaborating, and retailing of scandalous gossip with asinine unction and impudent delight. But now his mind was perverted by the pangs of wounded vanity and of thwarted passion. In this state of moral weakness Schomberg allowed himself to be corrupted.

CHAPTER FOUR

The business was done by a guest who arrived one fine morning by mail-boat--immediately from Celebes, having boarded her in Macassar, but generally, Schomberg understood, from up China Sea way; a wanderer clearly, even as Heyst was, but not alone and of quite another kind.

Schomberg, looking up from the stern-sheets of his steam-launch, which he used for boarding passenger ships on arrival, discovered a dark sunken stare plunging down on him over the rail of the first-class part of the deck. He was no great judge of physiognomy. Human beings, for him, were either the objects of scandalous gossip or else recipients of narrow strips of paper, with proper bill-heads stating the name of his hotel--"W. Schomberg, proprietor, accounts settled weekly."

So in the clean-shaven, extremely thin face hanging over the mail-boat's rail Schomberg saw only the face of a possible "account." The steam-launches of other hotels were also alongside, but he obtained the preference.

"You are Mr. Schomberg, aren't you?" the face asked quite unexpectedly.

"I am at your service," he answered from below; for business is business, and its forms and formulas must be observed, even if one's manly bosom is tortured by that dull rage which succeeds the fury of baffled passion, like the glow of embers after a fierce blaze.

Presently the possessor of the handsome but emaciated face was seated beside Schomberg in the stern-sheets of the launch. His body was long and loose-jointed, his slender fingers, intertwined, clasped the leg resting on the knee, as he lolled back in a careless yet tense attitude. On the other side of Schomberg sat another passenger, who was introduced by the clean-shaven man as--

"My secretary. He must have the room next to mine."

"We can manage that easily for you."

Schomberg steered with dignity, staring straight ahead, but very much interested by these two promising "accounts." Their belongings, a couple of large leather trunks browned by age and a few smaller packages, were piled up in the bows. A third individual--a nondescript, hairy creature--had

modestly made his way forward and had perched himself on the luggage. The lower part of his physiognomy was over-developed; his narrow and low forehead, unintelligently furrowed by horizontal wrinkles, surmounted wildly hirsute cheeks and a flat nose with wide, baboon-like nostrils. There was something equivocal in the appearance of his shaggy, hair-smothered humanity. He, too, seemed to be a follower of the clean-shaven man, and apparently had travelled on deck with native passengers, sleeping under the awnings. His broad, squat frame denoted great strength. Grasping the gunwales of the launch, he displayed a pair of remarkably long arms, terminating in thick, brown hairy paws of simian aspect.

"What shall we do with the fellow of mine?" the chief of the party asked Schomberg. "There must be a boarding-house somewhere near the port--some grog-shop where they could let him have a mat to sleep on?"

Schomberg said there was a place kept by a Portuguese half-caste.

"A servant of yours?" he asked.

"Well, he hangs on to me. He is an alligator-hunter. I picked him up in Colombia, you know. Ever been in Colombia?"

"No," said Schomberg, very much surprised. "An alligator-hunter? Funny trade! Are you coming from Colombia, then?"

"Yes, but I have been coming for a long time. I come from a good many places. I am travelling west, you see."

"For sport, perhaps?" suggested Schomberg.

"Yes. Sort of sport. What do you say to chasing the sun?"

"I see--a gentleman at large," said Schomberg, watching a sailing canoe about to cross his bow, and ready to clear it by a touch of the helm.

The other passenger made himself heard suddenly.

"Hang these native craft! They always get in the way."

He was a muscular, short man with eyes that gleamed and blinked, a harsh voice, and a round, toneless, pock-marked face ornamented by a thin, dishevelled moustache, sticking out quaintly under the tip of a rigid nose. Schomberg made the reflection that there was nothing secretarial about

him. Both he and his long, lank principal wore the usual white suit of the tropics, cork helmets, pipe-clayed white shoes--all correct. The hairy nondescript creature perched on their luggage in the bow had a check shirt and blue dungaree trousers. He gazed in their direction from forward in an expectant, trained-animal manner.

"You spoke to me first," said Schomberg in his manly tones. "You were acquainted with my name. Where did you hear of me, gentlemen, may I ask?"

"In Manila," answered the gentleman at large, readily. "From a man with whom I had a game of cards one evening in the Hotel Castille."

"What man? I've no friends in Manila that I know of," wondered Schomberg with a severe frown.

"I can't tell you his name. I've clean forgotten it; but don't you worry. He was anything but a friend of yours. He called you all the names he could think of. He said you set a lot of scandal going about him once, somewhere--in Bangkok, I think. Yes, that's it. You were running a table d'hote in Bangkok at one time, weren't you?"

Schomberg, astounded by the turn of the information, could only throw out his chest more and exaggerate his austere Lieutenant-of-the-Reserve manner. A table d'hote? Yes, certainly. He always--for the sake of white men. And here in this place, too? Yes, in this place, too.

"That's all right, then." The stranger turned his black, cavernous, mesmerizing glance away from the bearded Schomberg, who sat gripping the brass tiller in a sweating palm. "Many people in the evening at your place?"

Schomberg had recovered somewhat.

"Twenty covers or so, take one day with another," he answered feelingly, as befitted a subject on which he was sensitive. "Ought to be more, if only people would see that it's for their own good. Precious little profit I get out of it. You are partial to tables d'hote, gentlemen?"

The new guest made answer that he liked a hotel where one could find some local people in the evening. It was infernally dull otherwise. The secretary, in sign of approval, emitted a grunt of astonishing ferocity, as if proposing to himself to eat the local people. All this sounded like a longish stay, thought Schomberg, satisfied under his grave air; till, remembering the girl snatched

away from him by the last guest who had made a prolonged stay in his hotel, he ground his teeth so audibly that the other two looked at him in wonder. The momentary convulsion of his florid physiognomy seemed to strike them dumb. They exchanged a quick glance. Presently the clean-shaven man fired out another question in his curt, unceremonious manner:

"You have no women in your hotel, eh?"

"Women!" Schomberg exclaimed indignantly, but also as if a little frightened. "What on earth do you mean by women? What women? There's Mrs. Schomberg, of course," he added, suddenly appeased, with lofty indifference.

"If she knows how to keep her place, then it will do. I can't stand women near me. They give me the horrors," declared the other. "They are a perfect curse!"

During this outburst the secretary wore a savage grin. The chief guest closed his sunken eyes, as if exhausted, and leaned the back of his head against the stanchion of the awning. In this pose, his long, feminine eyelashes were very noticeable, and his regular features, sharp line of the jaw, and well-cut chin were brought into prominence, giving him a used-up, weary, depraved distinction. He did not open his eyes till the steam-launch touched the quay. Then he and the other man got ashore quickly, entered a carriage, and drove away to the hotel, leaving Schomberg to look after their luggage and take care of their strange companion. The latter, looking more like a performing bear abandoned by his show men than a human being, followed all Schomberg's movements step by step, close behind his back, muttering to himself in a language that sounded like some sort of uncouth Spanish. The hotel-keeper felt uncomfortable till at last he got rid of him at an obscure den where a very clean, portly Portuguese half-caste, standing serenely in the doorway, seemed to understand exactly how to deal with clients of every kind. He took from the creature the strapped bundle it had been hugging closely through all its peregrinations in that strange town, and cut short Schomberg's attempts at explanation by a most confident--

"I comprehend very well, sir."

"It's more than I do," thought Schomberg, going away thankful at being relieved of the alligator-hunter's company. He wondered what these fellows were, without being able to form a guess of sufficient probability. Their names he learned that very day by direct inquiry "to enter in my books," he explained in his formal military manner, chest thrown out, beard very much in evidence.

The shaven man, sprawling in a long chair, with his air of withered youth, raised his eyes languidly.

"My name? Oh, plain Mr. Jones--put that down--a gentleman at large. And this is Ricardo." The pock-marked man, lying prostrate in another long chair, made a grimace, as if something had tickled the end of his nose, but did not come out of his supineness. "Martin Ricardo, secretary. You don't want any more of our history, do you? Eh, what? Occupation? Put down, well--tourists. We've been called harder names before now; it won't hurt our feelings. And that fellow of mine--where did you tuck him away? Oh, he will be all right. When he wants anything he'll take it. He's Peter. Citizen of Colombia. Peter, Pedro--I don't know that he ever had any other name. Pedro, alligator hunter. Oh, yes--I'll pay his board with the half-caste. Can't help myself. He's so confoundedly devoted to me that if I were to give him the sack he would fly at my throat. Shall I tell you how I killed his brother in the wilds of Colombia? Well, perhaps some other time--it's a rather long story. What I shall always regret is that I didn't kill him, too. I could have done it without any extra trouble then; now it's too late. Great nuisance; but he's useful sometimes. I hope you are not going to put all this in your book?"

The offhand, hard manner and the contemptuous tone of "plain Mr. Jones" disconcerted Schomberg utterly. He had never been spoken to like this in his life. He shook his head in silence and withdrew, not exactly scared--though he was in reality of a timid disposition under his manly exterior--but distinctly mystified and impressed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Three weeks later, after putting his cash-box away in the safe which filled with its iron bulk a corner of their room, Schomberg turned towards his wife, but without looking at her exactly, and said:

"I must get rid of these two. It won't do!"

Mrs. Schomberg had entertained that very opinion from the first; but she had been broken years ago into keeping her opinions to herself. Sitting in her night attire in the light of a single candle, she was careful not to make a sound, knowing from experience that her very assent would be resented. With her eyes she followed the figure of Schomberg, clad in his sleeping suit, and moving restlessly about the room.

He never glanced her way, for the reason that Mrs. Schomberg, in her night attire, looked the most unattractive object in existence--miserable, insignificant, faded, crushed, old. And the contrast with the feminine form he had ever in his mind's eye made his wife's appearance painful to his aesthetic sense.

Schomberg walked about swearing and fuming for the purpose of screwing his courage up to the sticking point.

"Hang me if I ought not to go now, at once, this minute, into his bedroom, and tell him to be off--him and that secretary of his--early in the morning. I don't mind a round game of cards, but to make a decoy of my table d'hote--my blood boils! He came here because some lying rascal in Manila told him I kept a table d'hote."

He said these things, not for Mrs. Schomberg's information, but simply thinking aloud, and trying to work his fury up to a point where it would give him courage enough to face "plain Mr. Jones."

"Impudent overbearing, swindling sharper," he went on. "I have a good mind to--"

He was beside himself in his lurid, heavy, Teutonic manner, so unlike the picturesque, lively rage of the Latin races; and though his eyes strayed about irresolutely, yet his swollen, angry features awakened in the miserable woman over whom he had been tyrannizing for years a fear for his precious

carcass, since the poor creature had nothing else but that to hold on to in the world. She knew him well; but she did not know him altogether. The last thing a woman will consent to discover in a man whom she loves, or on whom she simply depends, is want of courage. And, timid in her corner, she ventured to say pressingly:

"Be careful, Wilhelm! Remember the knives and revolvers in their trunks."

In guise of thanks for that anxious reminder, he swore horribly in the direction of her shrinking person. In her scanty nightdress, and barefooted, she recalled a mediaeval penitent being reproved for her sins in blasphemous terms. Those lethal weapons were always present to Schomberg's mind. Personally, he had never seen them. His part, ten days after his guests' arrival, had been to lounge in manly, careless attitudes on the veranda--keeping watch--while Mrs. Schomberg, provided with a bunch of assorted keys, her discoloured teeth chattering and her globular eyes absolutely idiotic with fright, was "going through" the luggage of these strange clients. Her terrible Wilhelm had insisted on it.

"I'll be on the look-out, I tell you," he said. "I shall give you a whistle when I see them coming back. You couldn't whistle. And if he were to catch you at it, and chuck you out by the scruff of the neck, it wouldn't hurt you much; but he won't touch a woman. Not he! He has told me so. Affected beast. I must find out something about their little game, and so there's an end of it. Go in! Go now! Quick march!"

It had been an awful job; but she did go in, because she was much more afraid of Schomberg than of any possible consequences of the act. Her greatest concern was lest no key of the bunch he had provided her with should fit the locks. It would have been such a disappointment for Wilhelm. However, the trunks, she found, had been left open; but her investigation did not last long. She was frightened of firearms, and generally of all weapons, not from personal cowardice, but as some women are, almost superstitiously, from an abstract horror of violence and murder. She was out again on the veranda long before Wilhelm had any occasion for a warning whistle. The instinctive, motiveless fear being the most difficult to overcome, nothing could induce her to return to her investigations, neither threatening growls nor ferocious hisses, nor yet a poke or two in the ribs.

"Stupid female!" muttered the hotel-keeper, perturbed by the notion of that armoury in one of his bedrooms. This was from no abstract sentiment, with him it was constitutional. "Get out of my sight," he snarled. "Go and dress yourself for the table d'hote."

Left to himself, Schomberg had meditated. What the devil did this mean? His thinking processes were sluggish and spasmodic; but suddenly the truth came to him.

"By heavens, they are desperadoes!" he thought.

Just then he beheld "plain Mr. Jones" and his secretary with the ambiguous name of Ricardo entering the grounds of the hotel. They had been down to the port on some business, and now were returning; Mr. Jones lank, spare, opening his long legs with angular regularity like a pair of compasses, the other stepping out briskly by his side. Conviction entered Schomberg's heart. They were two desperadoes--no doubt about it. But as the funk which he experienced was merely a general sensation, he managed to put on his most severe Officer-of-the-Reserve manner, long before they had closed with him.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

Being answered with derisive civility, he became confirmed in his sudden conviction of their desperate character. The way Mr. Jones turned his hollow eyes on one, like an incurious spectre, and the way the other, when addressed, suddenly retracted his lips and exhibited his teeth without looking round--here was evidence enough to settle that point. Desperadoes! They passed through the billiard-room, inscrutably mysterious, to the back of the house, to join their violated trunks.

"Tiffin bell will ring in five minutes, gentlemen." Schomberg called after them, exaggerating the deep manliness of his tone.

He had managed to upset himself very much. He expected to see them come back infuriated and begin to bully him with an odious lack of restraint. Desperadoes! However they didn't; they had not noticed anything unusual about their trunks and Schomberg recovered his composure and said to himself that he must get rid of this deadly incubus as soon as practicable. They couldn't possibly want to stay very long; this was not the town--the colony--for desperate characters. He shrank from action. He dreaded any kind of disturbance--"fracas" he called it--in his hotel. Such things were not good for business. Of course, sometimes one had to have a "fracas;" but it had been a comparatively trifling task to seize the frail Zangiacomo--whose bones were no larger than a chicken's--round the ribs, lift him up bodily, dash him to the ground, and fall on him. It had been easy. The wretched, hook-nosed creature lay without movement, buried under its purple beard.

Suddenly, remembering the occasion of that "fracas," Schomberg groaned with the pain as of a hot coal under his breastbone, and gave himself up to desolation. Ah, if he only had that girl with him he would have been masterful and resolute and fearless--fight twenty desperadoes--care for nobody on earth! Whereas the possession of Mrs. Schomberg was no incitement to a display of manly virtues. Instead of caring for no one, he felt that he cared for nothing. Life was a hollow sham; he wasn't going to risk a shot through his lungs or his liver in order to preserve its integrity. It had no savour--damn it!

In his state of moral decomposition, Schomberg, master as he was of the art of hotel-keeping, and careful of giving no occasion for criticism to the powers regulating that branch of human activity, let things take their course; though he saw very well where that course was tending. It began first with a game or two after dinner--for the drinks, apparently--with some lingering customer, at one of the little tables ranged against the walls of the billiard-room. Schomberg detected the meaning of it at once. "That's what it was! This was what they were!" And, moving about restlessly (at that time his morose silent period had set in), he cast sidelong looks at the game; but he said nothing. It was not worth while having a row with men who were so overbearing. Even when money appeared in connection with these postprandial games, into which more and more people were being drawn, he still refrained from raising the question; he was reluctant to draw unduly the attention of "plain Mr. Jones" and of the equivocal Ricardo, to his person. One evening, however, after the public rooms of the hotel had become empty, Schomberg made an attempt to grapple with the problem in an indirect way.

In a distant corner the tired China boy dozed on his heels, his back against the wall. Mrs. Schomberg had disappeared, as usual, between ten and eleven. Schomberg walked about slowly in and out of the room and the veranda, thoughtful, waiting for his two guests to go to bed. Then suddenly he approached them, militarily, his chest thrown out, his voice curt and soldierly.

"Hot night, gentlemen."

Mr Jones, lolling back idly in a chair, looked up. Ricardo, as idle, but more upright, made no sign.

"Won't you have a drink with me before retiring?" went on Schomberg, sitting down by the little table.

"By all means," said Mr. Jones lazily.

Ricardo showed his teeth in a strange, quick grin. Schomberg felt painfully how difficult it was to get in touch with these men, both so quiet, so deliberate, so menacingly unceremonious. He ordered the Chinaman to bring in the drinks. His purpose was to discover how long these guests intended to stay. Ricardo displayed no conversational vein, but Mr. Jones appeared communicative enough. His voice somehow matched his sunken eyes. It was hollow without being in the least mournful; it sounded distant, uninterested, as though he were speaking from the bottom of a well. Schomberg learned that he would have the privilege of lodging and boarding these gentlemen for at least a month more. He could not conceal his discomfiture at this piece of news.

"What's the matter? Don't you like to have people in your house?" asked plain Mr. Jones languidly. "I should have thought the owner of a hotel would be pleased."

He lifted his delicate and beautifully pencilled eyebrows. Schomberg muttered something about the locality being dull and uninteresting to travellers--nothing going on--too quiet altogether, but he only provoked the declaration that quiet had its charm sometimes, and even dullness was welcome as a change.

"We haven't had time to be dull for the last three years," added plain Mr. Jones, his eyes fixed darkly on Schomberg whom he further more invited to have another drink, this time with him, and not to worry himself about things he did not understand; and especially not to be inhospitable--which in a hotel-keeper is highly unprofessional.

"I don't understand," grumbled Schomberg. "Oh, yes, I understand perfectly well. I--"

"You are frightened," interrupted Mr. Jones. "What is the matter?"

"I don't want any scandal in my place. That's what's the matter."

Schomberg tried to face the situation bravely, but that steady, black stare affected him. And when he glanced aside uncomfortably, he met Ricardo's grin uncovering a lot of teeth, though the man seemed absorbed in his thoughts all the time.

"And, moreover," went on Mr. Jones in that distant tone of his, "you can't help yourself. Here we are and here we stay. Would you try to put us out? I dare say you could do it; but you couldn't do it without getting hurt--very badly hurt. We can promise him that, can't we, Martin?"

The secretary retracted his lips and looked up sharply at Schomberg, as if only too anxious to leap upon him with teeth and claws.

Schomberg managed to produce a deep laugh.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Mr Jones closed his eyes wearily, as if the light hurt them, and looked remarkably like a corpse for a moment. This was bad enough; but when he opened them again, it was almost a worse trial for Schomberg's nerves. The spectral intensity of that glance, fixed on the hotel-keeper (and this was most frightful) without any definite expression, seemed to dissolve the last grain of resolution in his character.

"You don't think, by any chance, that you have to do with ordinary people, do you?" inquired Mr. Jones, in his lifeless manner, which seemed to imply some sort of menace from beyond the grave.

"He's a gentleman," testified Martin Ricardo with a sudden snap of the lips, after which his moustaches stirred by themselves in an odd, feline manner.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that," said plain Mr. Jones, while Schomberg, dumb and planted heavily in his chair looked from one to the other, leaning forward a little. "Of course I am that; but Ricardo attaches too much importance to a social advantage. What I mean, for instance, is that he, quiet and inoffensive as you see him sitting here, would think nothing of setting fire to this house of entertainment of yours. It would blaze like a box of matches. Think of that! It wouldn't advance your affairs much, would it?--whatever happened to us."

"Come, come gentlemen," remonstrated Schomberg, in a murmur. "This is very wild talk!"

"And you have been used to deal with tame people, haven't you? But we aren't tame. We once kept a whole angry town at bay for two days, and then we got away with our plunder. It was in Venezuela. Ask Martin here--he can tell you."

Instinctively Schomberg looked at Ricardo, who only passed the tip of his tongue over his lips with an uncanny sort of gusto, but did not offer to begin.

"Well, perhaps it would be a rather long story," Mr. Jones conceded after a short silence.

"I have no desire to hear it, I am sure," said Schomberg. "This isn't Venezuela. You wouldn't get away from here like that. But all this is silly talk of the worst sort. Do you mean to say you would make deadly trouble for the sake of a few guilders that you and that other"--eyeing Ricardo suspiciously, as one would look at a strange animal--"gentleman can win of an evening? Isn't as if my customers were a lot of rich men with pockets full of cash. I wonder you take so much trouble and risk for so little money."

Schomberg's argument was met by Mr. Jones's statement that one must do something to kill time. Killing time was not forbidden. For the rest, being in a communicative mood, Mr. Jones said languidly and in a voice indifferent, as if issuing from a tomb, that he depended on himself, as if the world were still one great, wild jungle without law. Martin was something like that, too--for reasons of his own.

All these statements Ricardo confirmed by short, inhuman grins. Schomberg lowered his eyes, for the sight of these two men intimidated him; but he was losing patience.

"Of course, I could see at once that you were two desperate characters--something like what you say. But what would you think if I told you that I am pretty near as desperate as you two gentlemen? 'Here's that Schomberg has an easy time running his hotel,' people think; and yet it seems to me I would just as soon let you rip me open and burn the whole show as not. There!"

A low whistle was heard. It came from Ricardo, and was derisive. Schomberg, breathing heavily, looked on the floor. He was really desperate. Mr. Jones remained languidly sceptical.

"Tut, tut! You have a tolerable business. You are perfectly tame; you--" He paused, then added in a tone of disgust: "You have a wife."

Schomberg tapped the floor angrily with his foot and uttered an indistinct, laughing curse.

"What do you mean by flinging that damned trouble at my head?" he cried. "I wish you would carry her off with you some where to the devil! I wouldn't run after you."

The unexpected outburst affected Mr. Jones strangely. He had a horrified recoil, chair and all, as if Schomberg had thrust a wriggling viper in his face.

"What's this infernal nonsense?" he muttered thickly. "What do you mean? How dare you?"

Ricardo chuckled audibly.

"I tell you I am desperate," Schomberg repeated. "I am as desperate as any man ever was. I don't care a hang what happens to me!"

"Well, then"--Mr. Jones began to speak with a quietly threatening effect, as if the common words of daily use had some other deadly meaning to his mind--"well, then, why should you make yourself ridiculously disagreeable to us? If you don't care, as you say, you might just as well let us have the key of that music-shed of yours for a quiet game; a modest bank--a dozen candles or so. It would be greatly appreciated by your clients, as far as I can judge from the way they betted on a game of ecarte I had with that fair, baby-faced man--what's his name? They just yearn for a modest bank. And I am afraid Martin here would take it badly if you objected; but of course you won't. Think of the calls for drinks!"

Schomberg, raising his eyes, at last met the gleams in two dark caverns under Mr. Jones's devilish eyebrows, directed upon him impenetrably. He shuddered as if horrors worse than murder had been lurking there, and said, nodding towards Ricardo:

"I dare say he wouldn't think twice about sticking me, if he had you at his back! I wish I had sunk my launch, and gone to the bottom myself in her, before I boarded the steamer you came by. Ah, well, I've been already living in hell for weeks, so you don't make much difference. I'll let you have the concert-room--and hang the consequences. But what about the boy on late duty? If he sees the cards and actual money passing, he will be sure to blab, and it will be all over the town in no time."

A ghastly smile stirred the lips of Mr. Jones.

"Ah, I see you want to make a success of it. Very good. That's the way to get on. Don't let it disturb you. You chase all the Chinamen to bed early, and

we'll get Pedro here every evening. He isn't the conventional waiter's cut, but he will do to run to and fro with the tray, while you sit here from nine to eleven serving out drinks and gathering the money."

"There will be three of them now," thought the unlucky Schomberg.

But Pedro, at any rate, was just a simple, straightforward brute, if a murderous one. There was no mystery about him, nothing uncanny, no suggestion of a stealthy, deliberate wildcat turned into a man, or of an insolent spectre on leave from Hades, endowed with skin and bones and a subtle power of terror. Pedro with his fangs, his tangled beard, and queer stare of his little bear's eyes was, by comparison, delightfully natural. Besides, Schomberg could no longer help himself.

"That will do very well," he asserted mournfully. "But if you gentlemen, if you had turned up here only three months ago--ay, less than three months ago--you would have found somebody very different from what I am now to talk to you. It's true. What do you think of that?"

"I scarcely know what to think. I should think it was a lie. You were probably as tame three months ago as you are now. You were born tame, like most people in the world."

Mr Jones got up spectrally, and Ricardo imitated him with a snarl and a stretch. Schomberg, in a brown study, went on, as if to himself:

"There has been an orchestra here--eighteen women."

Mr Jones let out an exclamation of dismay, and looked about as if the walls around him and the whole house had been infected with plague. Then he became very angry, and swore violently at Schomberg for daring to bring up such subjects. The hotel-keeper was too much surprised to get up. He gazed from his chair at Mr. Jones's anger, which had nothing spectral in it but was not the more comprehensible for that.

"What's the matter?" he stammered out. "What subject? Didn't you hear me say it was an orchestra? There's nothing wrong in that. Well, there was a girl amongst them--" Schomberg's eyes went stony; he clasped his hands in front of his breast with such force that his knuckles came out white. "Such a girl! Tame, am I? I would have kicked everything to pieces about me for her. And she, of course . . . I am in the prime of life . . . then a fellow bewitched her--a vagabond, a false, lying, swindling, underhand, stick-at-nothing brute. Ah!"

His entwined fingers cracked as he tore his hands apart, flung out his arms, and leaned his forehead on them in a passion of fury. The other two looked at his shaking back--the attenuated Mr. Jones with mingled scorn and a sort of fear, Ricardo with the expression of a cat which sees a piece of fish in the pantry out of reach. Schomberg flung himself backwards. He was dry-eyed, but he gulped as if swallowing sobs.

"No wonder you can do with me what you like. You have no idea--just let me tell you of my trouble--"

"I don't want to know anything of your beastly trouble," said Mr. Jones, in his most lifelessly positive voice.

He stretched forth an arresting hand, and, as Schomberg remained open-mouthed, he walked out of the billiard-room in all the uncanniness of his thin shanks. Ricardo followed at his leader's heels; but he showed his teeth to Schomberg over his shoulder.

CHAPTER SIX

From that evening dated those mysterious but significant phenomena in Schomberg's establishment which attracted Captain Davidson's casual notice when he dropped in, placid yet astute, in order to return Mrs. Schomberg's Indian shawl. And strangely enough, they lasted some considerable time. It argued either honesty and bad luck or extraordinary restraint on the part of "plain Mr. Jones and Co." in their discreet operations with cards.

It was a curious and impressive sight, the inside of Schomberg's concert-hall, encumbered at one end by a great stack of chairs piled up on and about the musicians' platform, and lighted at the other by two dozen candles disposed about a long trestle table covered with green cloth. In the middle, Mr. Jones, a starved spectre turned into a banker, faced Ricardo, a rather nasty, slow-moving cat turned into a croupier. By contrast, the other faces round that table, anything between twenty and thirty, must have looked like collected samples of intensely artless, helpless humanity--pathetic in their innocent watch for the small turns of luck which indeed might have been serious enough for them. They had no notice to spare for the hairy Pedro, carrying a tray with the clumsiness of a creature caught in the woods and taught to walk on its hind legs.

As to Schomberg, he kept out of the way. He remained in the billiard-room, serving out drinks to the unspeakable Pedro with an air of not seeing the growling monster, of not knowing where the drinks went, of ignoring that there was such a thing as a music-room over there under the trees within fifty yards of the hotel. He submitted himself to the situation with a low-spirited stoicism compounded of fear and resignation. Directly the party had broken up, (he could see dark shapes of the men drifting singly and in knots through the gate of the compound), he would withdraw out of sight behind a door not quite closed, in order to avoid meeting his two extraordinary guests; but he would watch through the crack their contrasted forms pass through the billiard-room and disappear on their way to bed. Then he would hear doors being slammed upstairs; and a profound silence would fall upon the whole house, upon his hotel appropriated, haunted by those insolently outspoken men provided with a whole armoury of weapons in their trunks. A profound silence. Schomberg sometimes could not resist the notion that he must be dreaming. Shuddering, he would pull himself together, and creep out, with movements strangely inappropriate to the Lieutenant-of-the-Reserve bearing by which he tried to keep up his self-respect before the

world.

A great loneliness oppressed him. One after another he would extinguish the lamps, and move softly towards his bedroom, where Mrs. Schomberg waited for him--no fit companion for a man of his ability and "in the prime of life." But that life, alas, was blighted. He felt it; and never with such force as when on opening the door he perceived that woman sitting patiently in a chair, her toes peeping out under the edge of her night-dress, an amazingly small amount of hair on her head drooping on the long stalk of scraggy neck, with that everlasting scared grin showing a blue tooth and meaning nothing--not even real fear. For she was used to him.

Sometimes he was tempted to screw the head off the stalk. He imagined himself doing it--with one hand, a twisting movement. Not seriously, of course. Just a simple indulgence for his exasperated feelings. He wasn't capable of murder. He was certain of that. And, remembering suddenly the plain speeches of Mr. Jones, he would think: "I suppose I am too tame for that"--quite unaware that he had murdered the poor woman morally years ago. He was too unintelligent to have the notion of such a crime. Her bodily presence was bitterly offensive, because of its contrast with a very different feminine image. And it was no use getting rid of her. She was a habit of years, and there would be nothing to put in her place. At any rate, he could talk to that idiot half the night if he chose.

That night he had been vapouring before her as to his intention to face his two guests and, instead of that inspiration he needed, had merely received the usual warning: "Be careful, Wilhelm." He did not want to be told to be careful by an imbecile female. What he needed was a pair of woman's arms which, flung round his neck, would brace him up for the encounter. Inspire him, he called it to himself.

He lay awake a long time; and his slumbers, when they came, were unsatisfactory and short. The morning light had no joy for his eyes. He listened dismally to the movements in the house. The Chinamen were unlocking and flinging wide the doors of the public rooms which opened on the veranda. Horrors! Another poisoned day to get through somehow! The recollection of his resolve made him feel actually sick for a moment. First of all the lordly, abandoned attitudes of Mr. Jones disconcerted him. Then there was his contemptuous silence. Mr. Jones never addressed himself to Schomberg with any general remarks, never opened his lips to him unless to say "Good morning"--two simple words which, uttered by that man, seemed a mockery of a threatening character. And, lastly, it was not a frank physical fear he inspired--for as to that, even a cornered rat will fight--but a

superstitious shrinking awe, something like an invincible repugnance to seek speech with a wicked ghost. That it was a daylight ghost surprisingly angular in his attitudes, and for the most part spread out on three chairs, did not make it any easier. Daylight only made him a more weird, a more disturbing and unlawful apparition. Strangely enough in the evening when he came out of his mute supineness, this unearthly side of him was less obtrusive. At the gaming-table, when actually handling the cards, it was probably sunk quite out of sight; but Schomberg, having made up his mind in ostrich-like fashion to ignore what was going on, never entered the desecrated music-room. He had never seen Mr. Jones in the exercise of his vocation--or perhaps it was only his trade.

"I will speak to him tonight," Schomberg said to himself, while he drank his morning tea, in pyjamas, on the veranda, before the rising sun had topped the trees of the compound, and while the undried dew still lay silvery on the grass, sparkled on the blossoms of the central flower-bed, and darkened the yellow gravel of the drive. "That's what I'll do. I won't keep out of sight tonight. I shall come out and catch him as he goes to bed carrying the cash-box."

After all, what was the fellow but a common desperado? Murderous? Oh, yes; murderous enough, perhaps--and the muscles of Schomberg's stomach had a quivering contraction under his airy attire. But even a common desperado would think twice or, more likely, a hundred times, before openly murdering an inoffensive citizen in a civilized, European-ruled town. He jerked his shoulders. Of course! He shuddered again, and paddled back to his room to dress himself. His mind was made up, and he would think no more about it; but still he had his doubts. They grew and unfolded themselves with the progress of the day, as some plants do. At times they made him perspire more than usual, and they did away with the possibility of his afternoon siesta. After turning over on his couch more than a dozen times, he gave up this mockery of repose, got up, and went downstairs.

It was between three and four o'clock, the hour of profound peace. The very flowers seemed to doze on their stalks set with sleepy leaves. Not even the air stirred, for the sea-breeze was not due till later. The servants were out of sight, catching naps in the shade somewhere behind the house. Mrs. Schomberg in a dim up-stair room with closed jalousies, was elaborating those two long pendant ringlets which were such a feature of her hairdressing for her afternoon duties. At that time no customers ever troubled the repose of the establishment. Wandering about his premises in profound solitude, Schomberg recoiled at the door of the billiard-room, as if he had seen a snake in his path. All alone with the billiards, the bare little

tables, and a lot of untenanted chairs, Mr. Secretary Ricardo sat near the wall, performing with lightning rapidity something that looked like tricks with his own personal pack of cards, which he always carried about in his pocket. Schomberg would have backed out quietly if Ricardo had not turned his head. Having been seen, the hotel-keeper elected to walk in as the lesser risk of the two. The consciousness of his inwardly abject attitude towards these men caused him always to throw his chest out and assume a severe expression. Ricardo watched his approach, clasping the pack of cards in both hands.

"You want something, perhaps?" suggested Schomberg in his lieutenant-of-the-Reserve voice.

Ricardo shook his head in silence and looked expectant. With him Schomberg exchanged at least twenty words every day. He was infinitely more communicative than his patron. At times he looked very much like an ordinary human being of his class; and he seemed to be in an amiable mood at that moment. Suddenly spreading some ten cards face downward in the form of a fan, he thrust them towards Schomberg.

"Come, man, take one quick!"

Schomberg was so surprised that he took one hurriedly, after a very perceptible start. The eyes of Martin Ricardo gleamed phosphorescent in the half-light of the room screened from the heat and glare of the tropics.

"That's the king of hearts you've got," he chuckled, showing his teeth in a quick flash.

Schomberg, after looking at the card, admitted that it was, and laid it down on the table.

"I can make you take any card I like nine times out of ten," exulted the secretary, with a strange curl of his lips and a green flicker in his raised eyes.

Schomberg looked down at him dumbly. For a few seconds neither of them stirred; then Ricardo lowered his glance, and, opening his fingers, let the whole pack fall on the table. Schomberg sat down. He sat down because of the faintness in his legs, and for no other reason. His mouth was dry. Having sat down, he felt that he must speak. He squared his shoulders in parade style.

"You are pretty good at that sort of thing," he said.

"Practice makes perfect," replied the secretary.

His precarious amiability made it impossible for Schomberg to get away. Thus, from his very timidity, the hotel-keeper found himself engaged in a conversation the thought of which filled him with apprehension. It must be said, in justice to Schomberg, that he concealed his funk very creditably. The habit of throwing out his chest and speaking in a severe voice stood him in good stead. With him, too, practice made perfect; and he would probably have kept it up to the end, to the very last moment, to the ultimate instant of breaking strain which would leave him grovelling on the floor. To add to his secret trouble, he was at a loss what to say. He found nothing else but the remark:

"I suppose you are fond of cards."

"What would you expect?" asked Ricardo in a simple, philosophical tone. "It is likely I should not be?" Then, with sudden fire: "Fond of cards? Ay, passionately!"

The effect of this outburst was augmented by the quiet lowering of the eyelids, by a reserved pause as though this had been a confession of another kind of love. Schomberg cudgelled his brains for a new topic, but he could not find one. His usual scandalous gossip would not serve this turn. That desperado did not know anyone anywhere within a thousand miles. Schomberg was almost compelled to keep to the subject.

"I suppose you've always been so--from your early youth."

Ricardo's eyes remained cast down. His fingers toyed absently with the pack on the table.

"I don't know that it was so early. I first got in the way of it playing for tobacco--in forecastles of ships, you know--common sailor games. We used to spend whole watches below at it, round a chest, under a slush lamp. We would hardly spare the time to get a bite of salt horse--neither eat nor sleep. We could hardly stand when the watches were mustered on deck. Talk of gambling!" He dropped the reminiscent tone to add the information, "I was bred to the sea from a boy, you know."

Schomberg had fallen into a reverie, but without losing the sense of impending calamity. The next words he heard were:

"I got on all right at sea, too. Worked up to be mate. I was mate of a schooner--a yacht, you might call her--a special good berth too, in the Gulf of Mexico, a soft job that you don't run across more than once in a lifetime. Yes, I was mate of her when I left the sea to follow him."

Ricardo tossed up his chin to indicate the room above; from which Schomberg, his wits painfully aroused by this reminder of Mr. Jones's existence, concluded that the latter had withdrawn into his bedroom. Ricardo, observing him from under lowered eyelids, went on:

"It so happened that we were shipmates."

"Mr Jones, you mean? Is he a sailor too?"

Ricardo raised his eyelids at that.

"He's no more Mr. Jones than you are," he said with obvious pride. "He a sailor! That just shows your ignorance. But there! A foreigner can't be expected to know any better. I am an Englishman, and I know a gentleman at sight. I should know one drunk, in the gutter, in jail, under the gallows. There's a something--it isn't exactly the appearance, it's a--no use me trying to tell you. You ain't an Englishman, and if you were, you wouldn't need to be told."

An unsuspected stream of loquacity had broken its dam somewhere deep within the man, had diluted his fiery blood and softened his pitiless fibre. Schomberg experienced mingled relief and apprehension, as if suddenly an enormous savage cat had begun to wind itself about his legs in inexplicable friendliness. No prudent man under such circumstances would dare to stir. Schomberg didn't stir. Ricardo assumed an easy attitude, with an elbow on the table. Schomberg squared his shoulders afresh.

"I was employed, in that there yacht--schooner, whatever you call it--by ten gentlemen at once. That surprises you, eh? Yes, yes, ten. Leastwise there were nine of them gents good enough in their way, and one downright gentleman, and that was . . ."

Ricardo gave another upward jerk of his chin as much as to say: He! The only one.

"And no mistake," he went on. "I spotted him from the first day. How? Why? Ay, you may ask. Hadn't seen that many gentlemen in my life. Well,

somehow I did. If you were an Englishman, you would--"

"What was your yacht?" Schomberg interrupted as impatiently as he dared; for this harping on nationality jarred on his already tried nerves. "What was the game?"

"You have a headpiece on you! Game! 'Xactly. That's what it was--the sort of silliness gentlemen will get up among themselves to play at adventure. A treasure-hunting expedition. Each of them put down so much money, you understand, to buy the schooner. Their agent in the city engaged me and the skipper. The greatest secrecy and all that. I reckon he had a twinkle in his eye all the time--and no mistake. But that wasn't our business. Let them bust their money as they like. The pity of it was that so little of it came our way. Just fair pay and no more. And damn any pay, much or little, anyhow--that's what I say!"

He blinked his eyes greenishly in the dim light. The heat seemed to have stilled everything in the world but his voice. He swore at large, abundantly, in snarling undertones, it was impossible to say why, then calmed down as inexplicably, and went on, as a sailor yarns.

"At first there were only nine of them adventurous sparks, then, just a day or two before the sailing date, he turned up. Heard of it somehow, somewhere--I would say from some woman, if I didn't know him as I do. He would give any woman a ten-mile berth. He can't stand them. Or maybe in a flash bar. Or maybe in one of them grand clubs in Pall Mall. Anyway, the agent netted him in all right--cash down, and only about four and twenty hours for him to get ready; but he didn't miss his ship. Not he! You might have called it a pier-head jump--for a gentleman. I saw him come along. Know the West India Docks, eh?"

Schomberg did not know the West India Docks. Ricardo looked at him pensively for a while, and then continued, as if such ignorance had to be disregarded.

"Our tug was already alongside. Two loafers were carrying his dunnage behind him. I told the dockman at our moorings to keep all fast for a minute. The gangway was down already; but he made nothing of it. Up he jumps, one leap, swings his long legs over the rail, and there he is on board. They pass up his swell dunnage, and he puts his hand in his trousers pocket and throws all his small change on the wharf for them chaps to pick up. They were still promenading that wharf on all fours when we cast off. It was only then that he looked at me--quietly, you know; in a slow way. He

wasn't so thin then as he is now; but I noticed he wasn't so young as he looked--not by a long chalk. He seemed to touch me inside somewhere. I went away pretty quick from there; I was wanted forward anyhow. I wasn't frightened. What should I be frightened for? I only felt touched--on the very spot. But Jee-miny, if anybody had told me we should be partners before the year was out--well, I would have--"

He swore a variety of strange oaths, some common, others quaintly horrible to Schomberg's ears, and all mere innocent exclamations of wonder at the shifts and changes of human fortune. Schomberg moved slightly in his chair. But the admirer and partner of "plain Mr. Jones" seemed to have forgotten Schomberg's existence for the moment. The stream of ingenuous blasphemy--some of it in bad Spanish--had run dry, and Martin Ricardo, connoisseur in gentlemen, sat dumb with a stony gaze as if still marvelling inwardly at the amazing elections, conjunctions, and associations of events which influence man's pilgrimage on this earth.

At last Schomberg spoke tentatively:

"And so the--the gentleman, up there, talked you over into leaving a good berth?"

Ricardo started.

"Talked me over! Didn't need to talk me over. Just beckoned to me, and that was enough. By that time we were in the Gulf of Mexico. One night we were lying at anchor, close to a dry sandbank--to this day I am not sure where it was--off the Colombian coast or thereabouts. We were to start digging the next morning, and all hands had turned in early, expecting a hard day with the shovels. Up he comes, and in his quiet, tired way of speaking--you can tell a gentleman by that as much as by anything else almost--up he comes behind me and says, just like that into my ear, in a manner: 'Well, what do you think of our treasure hunt now?'

"I didn't even turn my head; 'xactly as I stood, I remained, and I spoke no louder than himself:

"'If you want to know, sir, it's nothing but just damned tom-foolery.'

"We had, of course, been having short talks together at one time or another during the passage. I dare say he had read me like a book. There ain't much to me, except that I have never been tame, even when walking the pavement and cracking jokes and standing drinks to chums--ay, and to strangers, too.

I would watch them lifting their elbows at my expense, or splitting their side at my fun--I can be funny when I like, you bet!"

A pause for self-complacent contemplation of his own fun and generosity checked the flow of Ricardo's speech. Schomberg was concerned to keep within bounds the enlargement of his eyes, which he seemed to feel growing bigger in his head.

"Yes, yes," he whispered hastily.

"I would watch them and think: 'You boys don't know who I am. If you did--!' With girls, too. Once I was courting a girl. I used to kiss her behind the ear and say to myself: 'If you only knew who's kissing you, my dear, you would scream and bolt!' Ha! ha! Not that I wanted to do them any harm; but I felt the power in myself. Now, here we sit, friendly like, and that's all right. You aren't in my way. But I am not friendly to you. I just don't care. Some men do say that; but I really don't. You are no more to me one way or another than that fly there. Just so. I'd squash you or leave you alone. I don't care what I do."

If real force of character consists in overcoming our sudden weaknesses, Schomberg displayed plenty of that quality. At the mention of the fly, he re-enforced the severe dignity of his attitude as one inflates a collapsing toy balloon with a great effort of breath. The easy-going, relaxed attitude of Ricardo was really appalling.

"That's so," he went on. "I am that sort of fellow. You wouldn't think it, would you? No. You have to be told. So I am telling you, and I dare say you only half believe it. But you can't say to yourself that I am drunk, stare at me as you may. I haven't had anything stronger than a glass of iced water all day. Takes a real gentleman to see through a fellow. Oh, yes--he spotted me. I told you we had a few talks at sea about one thing or another. And I used to watch him down the skylight, playing cards in the cuddy with the others. They had to pass the time away somehow. By the same token he caught me at it once, and it was then that I told him I was fond of cards--and generally lucky in gambling, too. Yes, he had sized me up. Why not? A gentleman's just like any other man--and something more."

It flashed through Schomberg's mind: that these two were indeed well matched in their enormous dissimilarity, identical souls in different disguises.

"Says he to me"--Ricardo started again in a gossiping manner--'I'm packed

up. It's about time to go, Martin.'

"It was the first time he called me Martin. Says I:

"'Is that it, sir?'

"'You didn't think I was after that sort of treasure, did you? I wanted to clear out from home quietly. It's a pretty expensive way of getting a passage across, but it has served my turn.'

"I let him know very soon that I was game for anything, from pitch and toss to wilful murder, in his company.

"'Wilful murder?' says he in his quiet way. 'What the deuce is that? What are you talking about? People do get killed sometimes when they get in one's way, but that's self-defence--you understand?'

"I told him I did. And then I said I would run below for a minute, to ram a few of my things into a sailor's bag I had. I've never cared for a lot of dunnage; I believed in going about flying light when I was at sea. I came back and found him strolling up and down the deck, as if he were taking a breath of fresh air before turning in, like any other evening.

"'Ready?'

"'Yes, sir.'

"He didn't even look at me. We had had a boat in the water astern ever since we came to anchor in the afternoon. He throws the stump of his cigar overboard.

"'Can you get the captain out on deck?' he asks.

"That was the last thing in the world I should have thought of doing. I lost my tongue for a moment.

"'I can try,' says I.

"'Well, then, I am going below. You get him up and keep him with you till I come back on deck. Mind! Don't let him go below till I return.'

"I could not help asking why he told me to rouse a sleeping man, when we wanted everybody on board to sleep sweetly till we got clear of the schooner.

He laughs a little and says that I didn't see all the bearings of this business.

"'Mind,' he says, 'don't let him leave you till you see me come up again.' He puts his eyes close to mine. 'Keep him with you at all costs.'

"'And that means?' says I.

"'All costs to him--by every possible or impossible means. I don't want to be interrupted in my business down below. He would give me lots of trouble. I take you with me to save myself trouble in various circumstances; and you've got to enter on your work right away.'

"'Just so, sir,' says I; and he slips down the companion.

"With a gentleman you know at once where you are; but it was a ticklish job. The skipper was nothing to me one way or another, any more than you are at this moment, Mr. Schomberg. You may light your cigar or blow your brains out this minute, and I don't care a hang which you do, both or neither. To bring the skipper up was easy enough. I had only to stamp on the deck a few times over his head. I stamped hard. But how to keep him up when he got there?

"'Anything the matter; Mr. Ricardo?' I heard his voice behind me.

"There he was, and I hadn't thought of anything to say to him; so I didn't turn round. The moonlight was brighter than many a day I could remember in the North Sea.

"'Why did you call me? What are you staring at out there, Mr. Ricardo?'

"He was deceived by my keeping my back to him. I wasn't staring at anything, but his mistake gave me a notion.

"'I am staring at something that looks like a canoe over there,' I said very slowly.

"The skipper got concerned at once. It wasn't any danger from the inhabitants, whoever they were.

"'Oh, hang it!' says he. 'That's very unfortunate.' He had hoped that the schooner being on the coast would not get known so very soon. 'Dashed awkward, with the business we've got in hand, to have a lot of niggers watching operations. But are you certain this is a canoe?'

"'It may be a drift-log,' I said; 'but I thought you had better have a look with your own eyes. You may make it out better than I can.'

"His eyes weren't anything as good as mine. But he says:

"'Certainly. Certainly. You did quite right.'

"And it's a fact I had seen some drift-logs at sunset. I saw what they were then and didn't trouble my head about them, forgot all about it till that very moment. Nothing strange in seeing drift-logs off a coast like that; and I'm hanged if the skipper didn't make one out in the wake of the moon. Strange what a little thing a man's life hangs on sometimes--a single word! Here you are, sitting unsuspicious before me, and you may let out something unbeknown to you that would settle your hash. Not that I have any ill-feeling. I have no feelings. If the skipper had said, 'O, bosh!' and had turned his back on me, he would not have gone three steps towards his bed; but he stood there and stared. And now the job was to get him off the deck when he was no longer wanted there.

"'We are just trying to make out if that object there is a canoe or a log,' says he to Mr. Jones.

"Mr Jones had come up, lounging as carelessly as when he went below. While the skipper was jawing about boats and drifting logs. I asked by signs, from behind, if I hadn't better knock him on the head and drop him quietly overboard. The night was slipping by, and we had to go. It couldn't be put off till next night no more. No. No more. And do you know why?"

Schomberg made a slight negative sign with his head. This direct appeal annoyed him, jarred on the induced quietude of a great talker forced into the part of a listener and sunk in it as a man sinks into slumber. Mr. Ricardo struck a note of scorn.

"Don't know why? Can't you guess? No? Because the boss had got hold of the skipper's cash-box by then. See?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"A common thief!"

Schomberg bit his tongue just too late, and woke up completely as he saw Ricardo retract his lips in a cat-like grin; but the companion of "plain Mr. Jones" didn't alter his comfortable, gossiping attitude.

"Garn! What if he did want to see his money back, like any tame shopkeeper, hash-seller, gin-slinger, or ink-spewer does? Fancy a mud turtle like you trying to pass an opinion on a gentleman! A gentleman isn't to be sized up so easily. Even I ain't up to it sometimes. For instance, that night, all he did was to waggle his finger at me. The skipper stops his silly chatter, surprised.

"'Eh? What's the matter?' asks he.

"The matter! It was his reprieve--that's what was the matter.

"'O, nothing, nothing,' says my gentleman. 'You are perfectly right. A log--nothing but a log.'

"Ha, ha! Reprieve, I call it, because if the skipper had gone on with his silly argument much longer he would have had to be knocked out of the way. I could hardly hold myself in on account of the precious minutes. However, his guardian angel put it into his head to shut up and go back to his bed. I was ramping mad about the lost time."

"'Why didn't you let me give him one on his silly coconut sir?' I asks.

"'No ferocity, no ferocity,' he says, raising his finger at me as calm as you please.

"You can't tell how a gentleman takes that sort of thing. They don't lose their temper. It's bad form. You'll never see him lose his temper--not for anybody to see anyhow. Ferocity ain't good form, either--that much I've learned by this time, and more, too. I've had that schooling that you couldn't tell by my face if I meant to rip you up the next minute--as of course I could do in less than a jiffy. I have a knife up the leg of my trousers."

"You haven't!" exclaimed Schomberg incredulously.

Mr Ricardo was as quick as lightning in changing his lounging, idle attitude for a stooping position, and exhibiting the weapon with one jerk at the left leg of his trousers. Schomberg had just a view of it, strapped to a very hairy limb, when Mr. Ricardo, jumping up, stamped his foot to get the trouser-leg down, and resumed his careless pose with one elbow on the table.

"It's a more handy way to carry a tool than you would think," he went on, gazing abstractedly into Schomberg's wide-open eyes. "Suppose some little difference comes up during a game. Well, you stoop to pick up a dropped card, and when you come up--there you are ready to strike, or with the thing up you sleeve ready to throw. Or you just dodge under the table when there's some shooting coming. You wouldn't believe the damage a fellow with a knife under the table can do to ill-conditioned skunks that want to raise trouble, before they begin to understand what the screaming's about, and make a bolt--those that can, that is."

The roses of Schomberg's cheek at the root of his chestnut beard faded perceptibly. Ricardo chuckled faintly.

"But no ferocity--no ferocity! A gentleman knows. What's the good of getting yourself into a state? And no shirking necessity, either. No gentleman ever shirks. What I learn I don't forget. Why! We gambled on the plains, with a damn lot of cattlemen in ranches; played fair, mind--and then had to fight for our winnings afterwards as often as not. We've gambled on the hills and in the valleys and on the sea-shore, and out of sight of land--mostly fair. Generally it's good enough. We began in Nicaragua first, after we left that schooner and her fool errand. There were one hundred and twenty-seven sovereigns and some Mexican dollars in that skipper's cash-box. Hardly enough to knock a man on the head for from behind, I must confess; but that the skipper had a narrow escape the governor himself could not deny afterwards.

"'Do you want me to understand, sir, that you mind there being one life more or less on this earth?' I asked him, a few hours after we got away.

"'Certainly not,' says he.

"'Well, then, why did you stop me?'

"'There's a proper way of doing things. You'll have to learn to be correct. There's also unnecessary exertion. That must be avoided, too--if only for the look of the thing.' A gentleman's way of putting things to you--and no

mistake!

"At sunrise we got into a creek, to lie hidden in case the treasure hunt party had a mind to take a spell hunting for us. And dash me if they didn't! We saw the schooner away out, running to leeward, with ten pairs of binoculars sweeping the sea, no doubt on all sides. I advised the governor to give her time to beat back again before we made a start. So we stayed up that creek something like ten days, as snug as can be. On the seventh day we had to kill a man, though--the brother of this Pedro here. They were alligator-hunters, right enough. We got our lodgings in their hut. Neither the boss nor I could habla Espanol--speak Spanish, you know--much then. Dry bank, nice shade, jolly hammocks, fresh fish, good game, everything lovely. The governor chucked them a few dollars to begin with; but it was like boarding with a pair of savage apes, anyhow. By and by we noticed them talking a lot together. They had twigged the cash-box, and the leather portmanteaus, and my bag--a jolly lot of plunder to look at. They must have been saying to each other:

"'No one's ever likely to come looking for these two fellows, who seem to have fallen from the moon. Let's cut their throats.'

"Why, of course! Clear as daylight. I didn't need to spy one of them sharpening a devilish long knife behind some bushes, while glancing right and left with his wild eyes, to know what was in the wind. Pedro was standing by, trying the edge of another long knife. They thought we were away on our lookout at the mouth of the river, as was usual with us during the day. Not that we expected to see much of the schooner, but it was just as well to make certain, if possible; and then it was cooler out of the woods, in the breeze. Well, the governor was there right enough, lying comfortable on a rug, where he could watch the offing, but I had gone back to the hut to get a chew of tobacco out of my bag. I had not broken myself of the habit then, and I couldn't be happy unless I had a lump as big as a baby's fist in my cheek."

At the cannibalistic comparison, Schomberg muttered a faint, sickly "don't." Ricardo hitched himself up in his seat and glanced down his outstretched legs complacently.

"I am tolerably light on my feet, as a general thing," he went on. "Dash me if I don't think I could drop a pinch of salt on a sparrow's tail, if I tried. Anyhow, they didn't hear me. I watched them two brown, hairy brutes not ten yards off. All they had on was white linen drawers rolled up on their thighs. Not a word they said to each other. Antonio was down on his thick

hams, busy rubbing a knife on a flat stone; Pedro was leaning against a small tree and passing his thumb along the edge of his blade. I got away quieter than a mouse, you bet."

"I didn't say anything to the boss then. He was leaning on his elbow on his rug, and didn't seem to want to be spoken to. He's like that--sometimes that familiar you might think he would eat out of your hand, and at others he would snub you sharper than a devil--but always quiet. Perfect gentleman, I tell you. I didn't bother him, then; but I wasn't likely to forget them two fellows, so businesslike with their knives. At that time we had only one revolver between us two--the governor's six-shooter, but loaded only in five chambers; and we had no more cartridges. He had left the box behind in a drawer in his cabin. Awkward! I had nothing but an old clasp-knife--no good at all for anything serious.

"In the evening we four sat round a bit of fire outside the sleeping-shed, eating broiled fish off plantain leaves, with roast yams for bread--the usual thing. The governor and I were on one side, and these two beauties cross-legged on the other, grunting a word or two to each other, now and then, hardly human speech at all, and their eyes down, fast on the ground. For the last three days we couldn't get them to look us in the face. Presently I began to talk to the boss quietly, just as I am talking to you now, careless like, and I told him all I had observed. He goes on picking up pieces of fish and putting them into his mouth as calm as anything. It's a pleasure to have anything to do with a gentleman. Never looked across at them once.

"'And now,' says I, yawning on purpose, 'we've got to stand watch at night, turn about, and keep our eyes skinned all day, too, and mind we don't get jumped upon suddenly.'

"'It's perfectly intolerable,' says the governor. 'And you with no weapon of any sort!'

"'I mean to stick pretty close to you, sir, from this on, if you don't mind,' says I.

"He just nods the least bit, wipes his fingers on the plantain leaf, puts his hand behind his back, as if to help himself to rise from the ground, snatches his revolver from under his jacket and plugs a bullet plumb centre into Mr. Antonio's chest. See what it is to have to do with a gentleman. No confounded fuss, and things done out of hand. But he might have tipped me a wink or something. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Scared ain't in it! I didn't even know who had fired. Everything had been so still just before that

the bang of the shot seemed the loudest noise I had ever heard. The honourable Antonio pitches forward--they always do, towards the shot; you must have noticed that yourself--yes, he pitches forward on to the embers, and all that lot of hair on his face and head flashes up like a pinch of gunpowder. Greasy, I expect; always scraping the fat off them alligators' hides--"

"Look here," exclaimed Schomberg violently, as if trying to burst some invisible bonds, "do you mean to say that all this happened?"

"No," said Ricardo coolly. "I am making it all up as I go along, just to help you through the hottest part of the afternoon. So down he pitches his nose on the red embers, and up jumps our handsome Pedro and I at the same time, like two Jacks-in-the-box. He starts to bolt away, with his head over his shoulder, and I, hardly knowing what I was doing, spring on his back. I had the sense to get my hands round his neck at once, and it's about all I could do to lock my fingers tight under his jaw. You saw the beauty's neck, didn't you? Hard as iron, too. Down we both went. Seeing this the governor puts his revolver in his pocket.

"'Tie his legs together, sir,' I yell. 'I'm trying to strangle him.'

"There was a lot of their fibre-lines lying about. I gave him a last squeeze and then got up.

"'I might have shot you,' says the governor, quite concerned.

"'But you are glad to have saved a cartridge, sir,' I tell him.

"My jump did save it. It wouldn't have done to let him get away in the dark like that, and have the beauty dodging around in the bushes, perhaps, with the rusty flint-lock gun they had. The governor owned up that the jump was the correct thing.

"'But he isn't dead,' says he, bending over him.

"Might as well hope to strangle an ox. We made haste to tie his elbows back, and then, before he came to himself, we dragged him to a small tree, sat him up, and bound him to it, not by the waist but by the neck--some twenty turns of small line round his throat and the trunk, finished off with a reef-knot under his ear. Next thing we did was to attend to the honourable Antonio, who was making a great smell frizzling his face on the red coals. We pushed and rolled him into the creek, and left the rest to the alligators.

"I was tired. That little scrap took it out of me something awful. The governor hadn't turned a hair. That's where a gentleman has the pull of you. He don't get excited. No gentleman does--or hardly ever. I fell asleep all of a sudden and left him smoking by the fire I had made up, his railway rug round his legs, as calm as if he were sitting in a first-class carriage. We hardly spoke ten words to each other after it was over, and from that day to this we have never talked of the business. I wouldn't have known he remembered it if he hadn't alluded to it when talking with you the other day--you know, with regard to Pedro."

"It surprised you, didn't it? That's why I am giving you this yarn of how he came to be with us, like a sort of dog--dashed sight more useful, though. You know how he can trot around with trays? Well, he could bring down an ox with his fist, at a word from the boss, just as cleverly. And fond of the governor! Oh, my word! More than any dog is of any man."

Schomberg squared his chest.

"Oh, and that's one of the things I wanted to mention to Mr. Jones," he said. "It's unpleasant to have that fellow round the house so early. He sits on the stairs at the back for hours before he is needed here, and frightens people so that the service suffers. The Chinamen--"

Ricardo nodded and raised his hand.

"When I first saw him he was fit to frighten a grizzly bear, let alone a Chinaman. He's become civilized now to what he once was. Well, that morning, first thing on opening my eyes, I saw him sitting there, tied up by the neck to the tree. He was blinking. We spent the day watching the sea, and we actually made out the schooner working to windward, which showed that she had given us up. Good! When the sun rose again, I took a squint at our Pedro. He wasn't blinking. He was rolling his eyes, all white one minute and black the next, and his tongue was hanging out a yard. Being tied up short by the neck like this would daunt the arch devil himself--in time--in time, mind! I don't know but that even a real gentleman would find it difficult to keep a stiff lip to the end. Presently we went to work getting our boat ready. I was busying myself setting up the mast, when the governor passes the remark:

"'I think he wants to say something.'

"I had heard a sort of croaking going on for some time, only I wouldn't take

any notice; but then I got out of the boat and went up to him, with some water. His eyes were red--red and black and half out of his head. He drank all the water I gave him, but he hadn't much to say for himself. I walked back to the governor.

"'He asks for a bullet in his head before we go,' I said. I wasn't at all pleased.

"'Oh, that's out of the question altogether,' says the governor.

"He was right there. Only four shots left, and ninety miles of wild coast to put behind us before coming to the first place where you could expect to buy revolver cartridges.

"'Anyhow,' I tells him, 'he wants to be killed some way or other, as a favour.'

"And then I go on setting up the boat's mast. I didn't care much for the notion of butchering a man bound hand and foot and fastened by the neck besides. I had a knife then--the honourable Antonio's knife; and that knife is this knife.

"Ricardo gave his leg a resounding slap.

"First spoil in my new life," he went on with harsh joviality. "The dodge of carrying it down there I learned later. I carried it stuck in my belt that day. No, I hadn't much stomach for the job; but when you work with a gentleman of the real right sort you may depend on your feelings being seen through your skin. Says the governor suddenly:

"'It may even be looked upon as his right'--you hear a gentleman speaking there?--'but what do you think of taking him with us in the boat?'

"And the governor starts arguing that the beggar would be useful in working our way along the coast. We could get rid of him before coming to the first place that was a little civilized. I didn't want much talking over. Out I scrambled from the boat.

"'Ay, but will he be manageable, sir?'

"'Oh, yes. He's daunted. Go on, cut him loose--I take the responsibility.'

"'Right you are, sir.'

"He sees me come along smartly with his brother's knife in my hand--I

wasn't thinking how it looked from his side of the fence, you know--and jiminy, it nearly killed him! He stared like a crazed bullock and began to sweat and twitch all over, something amazing. I was so surprised, that I stopped to look at him. The drops were pouring over his eyebrows, down his beard, off his nose--and he gurgled. Then it struck me that he couldn't see what was in my mind. By favour or by right he didn't like to die when it came to it; not in that way, anyhow. When I stepped round to get at the lashing, he let out a sort of soft bellow. Thought I was going to stick him from behind, I guess. I cut all the turns with one slash, and he went over on his side, flop, and started kicking with his tied legs. Laugh! I don't know what there was so funny about it, but I fairly shouted. What between my laughing and his wriggling, I had a job in cutting him free. As soon as he could feel his limbs he makes for the bank, where the governor was standing, crawls up to him on his hands and knees, and embraces his legs. Gratitude, eh? You could see that being allowed to live suited that chap down to the ground. The governor gets his legs away from him gently and just mutters to me:

"'Let's be off. Get him into the boat.'

"It was not difficult," continued Ricardo, after eyeing Schomberg fixedly for a moment. "He was ready enough to get into the boat, and--here he is. He would let himself be chopped into small pieces--with a smile, mind; with a smile!--for the governor. I don't know about him doing that much for me; but pretty near, pretty near. I did the tying up and the untying, but he could see who was the boss. And then he knows a gentleman. A dog knows a gentleman--any dog. It's only some foreigners that don't know; and nothing can teach them, either."

"And you mean to say," asked Schomberg, disregarding what might have been annoying for himself in the emphasis of the final remark, "you mean to say that you left steady employment at good wages for a life like this?"

"There!" began Ricardo quietly. "That's just what a man like you would say. You are that tame! I follow a gentleman. That ain't the same thing as to serve an employer. They give you wages as they'd fling a bone to a dog, and they expect you to be grateful. It's worse than slavery. You don't expect a slave that's bought for money to be grateful. And if you sell your work--what is it but selling your own self? You've got so many days to live and you sell them one after another. Hey? Who can pay me enough for my life? Ay! But they throw at you your week's money and expect you to say 'thank you' before you pick it up."

He mumbled some curses, directed at employers generally, as it seemed, then blazed out:

"Work be damned! I ain't a dog walking on its hind legs for a bone; I am a man who's following a gentleman. There's a difference which you will never understand, Mr. Tame Schomberg."

He yawned slightly. Schomberg, preserving a military stiffness reinforced by a slight frown, had allowed his thoughts to stray away. They were busy detailing the image of a young girl--absent--gone--stolen from him. He became enraged. There was that rascal looking at him insolently. If the girl had not been shamefully decoyed away from him, he would not have allowed anyone to look at him insolently. He would have made nothing of hitting that rogue between the eyes. Afterwards he would have kicked the other without hesitation. He saw himself doing it; and in sympathy with this glorious vision Schomberg's right foot, and arm moved convulsively.

At this moment he came out of his sudden reverie to note with alarm the wide-awake curiosity of Mr. Ricardo's stare.

"And so you go like this about the world, gambling," he remarked inanely, to cover his confusion. But Ricardo's stare did not change its character, and he continued vaguely:

"Here and there and everywhere." He pulled himself together, squared his shoulders. "Isn't it very precarious?" he said firmly.

The word precarious--seemed to be effective, because Ricardo's eyes lost their dangerously interested expression.

"No, not so bad," Ricardo said, with indifference. "It's my opinion that men will gamble as long as they have anything to put on a card. Gamble? That's nature. What's life itself? You never know what may turn up. The worst of it is that you never can tell exactly what sort of cards you are holding yourself. What's trumps?--that is the question. See? Any man will gamble if only he's given a chance, for anything or everything. You too--"

"I haven't touched a card now for twenty years," said Schomberg in an austere tone.

"Well, if you got your living that way you would be no worse than you are now, selling drinks to people--beastly beer and spirits, rotten stuff fit to make an old he-goat yell if you poured it down its throat. Pooh! I can't stand

the confounded liquor. Never could. A whiff of neat brandy in a glass makes me feel sick. Always did. If everybody was like me, liquor would be going a-begging. You think it's funny in a man, don't you?"

Schomberg made a vague gesture of toleration. Ricardo hitched up his chair and settled his elbow afresh on the table.

"French siros I must say I do like. Saigon's the place for them. I see you have siros in the bar. Hang me if I ain't getting dry, conversing like this with you. Come, Mr. Schomberg, be hospitable, as the governor says."

Schomberg rose and walked with dignity to the counter. His footsteps echoed loudly on the floor of polished boards. He took down a bottle, labelled "Sirop de Groseille." The little sounds he made, the clink of glass, the gurgling of the liquid, the pop of the soda-water cork had a preternatural sharpness. He came back carrying a pink and glistening tumbler. Mr. Ricardo had followed his movements with oblique, coyly expectant yellow eyes, like a cat watching the preparation of a saucer of milk, and the satisfied sound after he had drunk might have been a slightly modified form of purring, very soft and deep in his throat. It affected Schomberg unpleasantly as another example of something inhuman in those men wherein lay the difficulty of dealing with them. A spectre, a cat, an ape--there was a pretty association for a mere man to remonstrate with, he reflected with an inward shudder; for Schomberg had been overpowered, as it were, by his imagination, and his reason could not react against that fanciful view of his guests. And it was not only their appearance. The morals of Mr. Ricardo seemed to him to be pretty much the morals of a cat. Too much. What sort of argument could a mere man offer to a . . . or to a spectre, either! What the morals of a spectre could be, Schomberg had no idea. Something dreadful, no doubt. Compassion certainly had no place in them. As to the ape--well, everybody knew what an ape was. It had no morals. Nothing could be more hopeless.

Outwardly, however, having picked up the cigar which he had laid aside to get the drink, with his thick fingers, one of them ornamented by a gold ring, Schomberg smoked with moody composure. Facing him, Ricardo blinked slowly for a time, then closed his eyes altogether, with the placidity of the domestic cat dozing on the hearth-rug. In another moment he opened them very wide, and seemed surprised to see Schomberg there.

"You're having a very slack time today, aren't you?" he observed. "But then this whole town is confoundedly slack, anyhow; and I've never faced such a slack party at a table before. Come eleven o'clock, they begin to talk of

breaking up. What's the matter with them? Want to go to bed so early, or what?"

"I reckon you don't lose a fortune by their wanting to go to bed," said Schomberg, with sombre sarcasm.

"No," admitted Ricardo, with a grin that stretched his thin mouth from ear to ear, giving a sudden glimpse of his white teeth. "Only, you see, when I once start, I would play for nuts, for parched peas, for any rubbish. I would play them for their souls. But these Dutchmen aren't any good. They never seem to get warmed up properly, win or lose. I've tried them both ways, too. Hang them for a beggarly, bloodless lot of animated cucumbers!"

"And if anything out of the way was to happen, they would be just as cool in locking you and your gentleman up," Schomberg snarled unpleasantly.

"Indeed!" said Ricardo slowly, taking Schomberg's measure with his eyes. "And what about you?"

"You talk mighty big," burst out the hotel-keeper. "You talk of ranging all over the world, and doing great things, and taking fortune by the scruff of the neck, but here you stick at this miserable business!"

"It isn't much of a lay--that's a fact," admitted Ricardo unexpectedly.

Schomberg was red in the face with audacity.

"I call it paltry," he spluttered.

"That's how it looks. Can't call it anything else." Ricardo seemed to be in an accommodating mood. "I should be ashamed of it myself, only you see the governor is subject to fits--"

"Fits!" Schomberg cried out, but in a low tone. "You don't say so!" He exulted inwardly, as if this disclosure had in some way diminished the difficulty of the situation. "Fits! That's a serious thing, isn't it? You ought to take him to the civil hospital--a lovely place."

Ricardo nodded slightly, with a faint grin.

"Serious enough. Regular fits of laziness, I call them. Now and then he lays down on me like this, and there's no moving him. If you think I like it, you're a long way out. Generally speaking, I can talk him over. I know how to deal

with a gentleman. I am no daily-bread slave. But when he has said, 'Martin, I am bored,' then look out! There's nothing to do but to shut up, confound it!"

Schomberg, very much cast down, had listened open-mouthed.

"What's the cause of it?" he asked. "Why is he like this? I don't understand."

"I think I do," said Ricardo. "A gentleman, you know, is not such a simple person as you or I; and not so easy to manage, either. If only I had something to lever him out with!"

"What do you mean, to lever him out with?" muttered Schomberg hopelessly.

Ricardo was impatient with this denseness.

"Don't you understand English? Look here! I couldn't make this billiard table move an inch if I talked to it from now till the end of days--could I? Well, the governor is like that, too, when the fits are on him. He's bored. Nothing's worthwhile, nothing's good enough, that's mere sense. But if I saw a capstan bar lying about here, I would soon manage to shift that billiard table of yours a good many inches. And that's all there is to it."

He rose noiselessly, stretched himself, supple and stealthy, with curious sideways movements of his head and unexpected elongations of his thick body, glanced out of the corners of his eyes in the direction of the door, and finally leaned back against the table, folding his arms on his breast comfortably, in a completely human attitude.

"That's another thing you can tell a gentleman by--his freakishness. A gentleman ain't accountable to nobody, any more than a tramp on the roads. He ain't got to keep time. The governor got like this once in a one-horse Mexican pueblo on the uplands, away from everywhere. He lay all day long in a dark room--"

"Drunk?" This word escaped Schomberg by inadvertence at which he became frightened. But the devoted secretary seemed to find it natural.

"No, that never comes on together with this kind of fit. He just lay there full length on a mat, while a ragged, bare-legged boy that he had picked up in the street sat in the patio, between two oleanders near the open door of his room, strumming on a guitar and singing tristes to him from morning to night. You know tristes--twang, twang, twang, aouh, hoo! Chroo, yah!"

Schomberg uplifted his hands in distress. This tribute seemed to flatter Ricardo. His mouth twitched grimly.

"Like that--enough to give colic to an ostrich, eh? Awful. Well, there was a cook there who loved me--an old fat, Negro woman with spectacles. I used to hide in the kitchen and turn her to, to make me dulces--sweet things, you know, mostly eggs and sugar--to pass the time away. I am like a kid for sweet things. And, by the way, why don't you ever have a pudding at your tablydott, Mr. Schomberg? Nothing but fruit, morning, noon, and night. Sickening! What do you think a fellow is--a wasp?"

Schomberg disregarded the injured tone.

"And how long did that fit, as you call it, last?" he asked anxiously.

"Weeks, months, years, centuries, it seemed to me," returned Mr. Ricardo with feeling. "Of an evening the governor would stroll out into the sala and fritter his life away playing cards with the juez of the place--a little Dago with a pair of black whiskers--ekarty, you know, a quick French game, for small change. And the comandante, a one-eyed, half-Indian, flat-nosed ruffian, and I, we had to stand around and bet on their hands. It was awful!"

"Awful," echoed Schomberg, in a Teutonic throaty tone of despair. "Look here, I need your rooms."

"To be sure. I have been thinking that for some time past," said Ricardo indifferently.

"I was mad when I listened to you. This must end!"

"I think you are mad yet," said Ricardo, not even unfolding his arms or shifting his attitude an inch. He lowered his voice to add: "And if I thought you had been to the police, I would tell Pedro to catch you round the waist and break your fat neck by jerking your head backward--snap! I saw him do it to a big buck nigger who was flourishing a razor in front of the governor. It can be done. You hear a low crack, that's all--and the man drops down like a limp rag."

Not even Ricardo's head, slightly inclined on the left shoulder, had moved; but when he ceased the greenish irises which had been staring out of doors glided into the corners of his eyes nearest to Schomberg and stayed there with a coyly voluptuous expression.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Schomberg felt desperation, that lamentable substitute for courage, ooze out of him. It was not so much the threat of death as the weirdly circumstantial manner of its declaration which affected him. A mere "I'll murder you," however ferocious in tone, and earnest, in purpose, he could have faced; but before this novel mode of speech and procedure, his imagination being very sensitive to the unusual, he collapsed as if indeed his moral neck had been broken--snap!

"Go to the police? Of course not. Never dreamed of it. Too late now. I've let myself be mixed up in this. You got my consent while I wasn't myself. I explained it to you at the time."

Ricardo's eye glided gently off Schomberg to stare far away.

"Ay! Some trouble with a girl. But that's nothing to us."

"Naturally. What I say is, what's the good of all that savage talk to me?" A bright argument occurred to him. "It's out of proportion; for even if I were fool enough to go to the police now, there's nothing serious to complain about. It would only mean deportation for you. They would put you on board the first west-bound steamer to Singapore." He had become animated. "Out of this to the devil," he added between his teeth for his own private satisfaction.

Ricardo made no comment, and gave no sign of having heard a single word. This discouraged Schomberg, who had looked up hopefully.

"Why do you want to stick here?" he cried. "It can't pay you people to fool around like this. Didn't you worry just now about moving your governor? Well, the police would move him for you; and from Singapore you can go on to the east coast of Africa."

"I'll be hanged if the fellow isn't up to that silly trick!" was Ricardo's comment, spoken in an ominous tone which recalled Schomberg to the realities of his position.

"No! No!" he protested. "It's a manner of speaking. Of course I wouldn't."

"I think that trouble about the girl has really muddled your brains, Mr.

Schomberg. Believe me, you had better part friends with us; for, deportation or no deportation, you'll be seeing one of us turning up before long to pay you off for any nasty dodge you may be hatching in that fat head of yours."

"Gott im Himmel!" groaned Schomberg. "Will nothing move him out? Will he stop here immer--I mean always? Suppose I were to make it worth your while, couldn't you--"

"No," Ricardo interrupted. "I couldn't, unless I had something to lever him out with. I've told you that before."

"An inducement?" muttered Schomberg.

"Ay. The east coast of Africa isn't good enough. He told me the other day that it will have to wait till he is ready for it; and he may not be ready for a long time, because the east coast can't run away, and no one is likely to run off with it."

These remarks, whether considered as truisms or as depicting Mr. Jones's mental state, were distinctly discouraging to the long-suffering Schomberg; but there is truth in the well-known saying that places the darkest hour before the dawn. The sound of words, apart from the context, has its power; and these two words, 'run off,' had a special affinity to the hotel-keeper's, haunting idea. It was always present in his brain, and now it came forward evoked by a purely fortuitous expression. No, nobody could run off with a continent; but Heyst had run off with the girl!

Ricardo could have had no conception of the cause of Schomberg's changed expression. Yet it was noticeable enough to interest him so much that he stopped the careless swinging of his leg and said, looking at the hotel-keeper:

"There's not much use arguing against that sort of talk--is there?"

Schomberg was not listening.

"I could put you on another track," he said slowly, and stopped, as if suddenly choked by an unholy emotion of intense eagerness combined with fear of failure. Ricardo waited, attentive, yet not without a certain contempt.

"On the track of a man!" Schomberg uttered convulsively, and paused again, consulting his rage and his conscience.

"The man in the moon, eh?" suggested Ricardo, in a jeering murmur.

Schomberg shook his head.

"It would be nearly as safe to rook him as if he were the Man in the moon. You go and try. It isn't so very far."

He reflected. These men were thieves and murderers as well as gamblers. Their fitness for purposes of vengeance was appallingly complete. But he preferred not to think of it in detail. He put it to himself summarily that he would be paying Heyst out and would, at the same time, relieve himself of these men's oppression. He had only to let loose his natural gift for talking scandalously about his fellow creatures. And in this case his great practice in it was assisted by hate, which, like love, has an eloquence of its own. With the utmost ease he portrayed for Ricardo, now seriously attentive, a Heyst fattened by years of private and public rapines, the murderer of Morrison, the swindler of many shareholders, a wonderful mixture of craft and impudence, of deep purposes and simple wiles, of mystery and futility. In this exercise of his natural function Schomberg revived, the colour coming back to his face, loquacious, florid, eager, his manliness set off by the military bearing.

"That's the exact story. He was seen hanging about this part of the world for years, spying into everybody's business: but I am the only one who has seen through him from the first--contemptible, double-faced, stick-at-nothing, dangerous fellow."

"Dangerous, is he?"

Schomberg came to himself at the sound of Ricardo's voice.

"Well, you know what I mean," he said uneasily. "A lying, circumventing, soft-spoken, polite, stuck-up rascal. Nothing open about him."

Mr Ricardo had slipped off the table, and was prowling about the room in an oblique, noiseless manner. He flashed a grin at Schomberg in passing, and a snarling:

"Ah! H'm!"

"Well, what more dangerous do you want?" argued Schomberg. "He's in no way a fighting man, I believe," he added negligently.

"And you say he has been living alone there?"

"Like the man in the moon," answered Schomberg readily. "There's no one that cares a rap what becomes of him. He has been lying low, you understand, after bagging all that plunder."

"Plunder, eh? Why didn't he go home with it?" inquired Ricardo.

The henchman of plain Mr. Jones was beginning to think that this was something worth looking into. And he was pursuing truth in the manner of men of sounder morality and purer intentions than his own; that is he pursued it in the light of his own experience and prejudices. For facts, whatever their origin (and God only knows where they come from), can be only tested by our own particular suspicions. Ricardo was suspicious all round. Schomberg, such is the tonic of recovered self-esteem, Schomberg retorted fearlessly:

"Go home? Why don't you go home? To hear your talk, you must have made a pretty considerable pile going round winning people's money. You ought to be ready by this time."

Ricardo stopped to look at Schomberg with surprise.

"You think yourself very clever, don't you?" he said.

Schomberg just then was so conscious of being clever that the snarling irony left him unmoved. There was positively a smile in his noble Teutonic beard, the first smile for weeks. He was in a felicitous vein.

"How do you know that he wasn't thinking of going home? As a matter of fact, he was on his way home."

"And how do I know that you are not amusing yourself by spinning out a blamed fairy tale?" interrupted Ricardo roughly. "I wonder at myself listening to the silly rot!"

Schomberg received this turn of temper unmoved. He did not require to be very subtly observant to notice that he had managed to arouse some sort of feeling, perhaps of greed, in Ricardo's breast.

"You won't believe me? Well! You can ask anybody that comes here if that--that Swede hadn't got as far as this house on his way home. Why should he turn up here if not for that? You ask anybody."

"Ask, indeed!" returned the other. "Catch me asking at large about a man I mean to drop on! Such jobs must be done on the quiet--or not at all."

The peculiar intonation of the last phrase touched the nape of Schomberg's neck with a chill. He cleared his throat slightly and looked away as though he had heard something indelicate. Then, with a jump as it were:

"Of course he didn't tell me. Is it likely? But haven't I got eyes? Haven't I got my common sense to tell me? I can see through people. By the same token, he called on the Tesmans. Why did he call on the Tesmans two days running, eh? You don't know? You can't tell?"

He waited complacently till Ricardo had finished swearing quite openly at him for a confounded chatterer, and then went on:

"A fellow doesn't go to a counting-house in business hours for a chat about the weather, two days running. Then why? To close his account with them one day, and to get his money out the next! Clear, what?"

Ricardo, with his trick of looking one way and moving another approached Schomberg slowly.

"To get his money?" he purred.

"Gewiss," snapped Schomberg with impatient superiority. "What else? That is, only the money he had with the Tesmans. What he has buried or put away on the island, devil only knows. When you think of the lot of hard cash that passed through that man's hands, for wages and stores and all that--and he's just a cunning thief, I tell you." Ricardo's hard stare discomposed the hotel-keeper, and he added in an embarrassed tone: "I mean a common, sneaking thief--no account at all. And he calls himself a Swedish baron, too! Tfui!"

"He's a baron, is he? That foreign nobility ain't much," commented Mr. Ricardo seriously. "And then what? He hung about here!"

"Yes, he hung about," said Schomberg, making a wry mouth. "He--hung about. That's it. Hung--"

His voice died out. Curiosity was depicted in Ricardo's countenance.

"Just like that; for nothing? And then turned about and went back to that

island again?"

"And went back to that island again," Schomberg echoed lifelessly, fixing his gaze on the floor.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Ricardo with genuine surprise. "What is it?"

Schomberg, without looking up, made an impatient gesture. His face was crimson, and he kept it lowered. Ricardo went back to the point.

"Well, but how do you account for it? What was his reason? What did he go back to the island for?"

"Honeymoon!" spat out Schomberg viciously.

Perfectly still, his eyes downcast, he suddenly, with no preliminary stir, hit the table with his fist a blow which caused the utterly unprepared Ricardo to leap aside. And only then did Schomberg look up with a dull, resentful expression.

Ricardo stared hard for a moment, spun on his heel, walked to the end of the room, came back smartly, and muttered a profound "Ay! Ay!" above Schomberg's rigid head. That the hotel-keeper was capable of a great moral effort was proved by a gradual return of his severe, Lieutenant-of-the-Reserve manner.

"Ay, ay!" repeated Ricardo more deliberately than before, and as if after a further survey of the circumstances, "I wish I hadn't asked you, or that you had told me a lie. It don't suit me to know that there's a woman mixed up in this affair. What's she like? It's the girl you--"

"Leave off!" muttered Schomberg, utterly pitiful behind his stiff military front.

"Ay, ay!" Ricardo ejaculated for the third time, more and more enlightened and perplexed. "Can't bear to talk about it--so bad as that? And yet I would bet she isn't a miracle to look at."

Schomberg made a gesture as if he didn't know, as if he didn't care. Then he squared his shoulders and frowned at vacancy.

"Swedish baron--h'm!" Ricardo continued meditatively. "I believe the

governor would think that business worth looking up, quite, if I put it to him properly. The governor likes a duel, if you will call it so; but I don't know a man that can stand up to him on the square. Have you ever seen a cat play with a mouse? It's a pretty sight!"

Ricardo, with his voluptuously gleaming eyes and the coy expression, looked so much like a cat that Schomberg would have felt all the alarm of a mouse if other feelings had not had complete possession of his breast.

"There are no lies between you and me," he said, more steadily than he thought he could speak.

"What's the good now? He funks women. In that Mexican pueblo where we lay grounded on our beef-bones, so to speak, I used to go to dances of an evening. The girls there would ask me if the English caballero in the posada was a monk in disguise, or if he had taken a vow to the sancissima madre not to speak to a woman, or whether--You can imagine what fairly free-spoken girls will ask when they come to the point of not caring what they say; and it used to vex me. Yes, the governor funks facing women."

"One woman?" interjected Schomberg in guttural tones.

"One may be more awkward to deal with than two, or two hundred, for that matter. In a place that's full of women you needn't look at them unless you like; but if you go into a room where there is only one woman, young or old, pretty or ugly, you have got to face her. And, unless you are after her, then--the governor is right enough--she's in the way."

"Why notice them?" muttered Schomberg. "What can they do?"

"Make a noise, if nothing else," opined Mr. Ricardo curtly, with the distaste of a man whose path is a path of silence; for indeed, nothing is more odious than a noise when one is engaged in a weighty and absorbing card game. "Noise, noise, my friend," he went on forcibly; "confounded screeching about something or other, and I like it no more than the governor does. But with the governor there's something else besides. He can't stand them at all."

He paused to reflect on this psychological phenomenon, and as no philosopher was at hand to tell him that there is no strong sentiment without some terror, as there is no real religion without a little fetishism, he emitted his own conclusion, which surely could not go to the root of the matter.

"I'm hanged if I don't think they are to him what liquor is to me. Brandy--pah!"

He made a disgusted face, and produced a genuine shudder. Schomberg listened to him in wonder. It looked as if the very scoundrelism, of that--that Swede would protect him; the spoil of his iniquity standing between the thief and the retribution.

"That's so, old buck." Ricardo broke the silence after contemplating Schomberg's mute dejection with a sort of sympathy. "I don't think this trick will work."

"But that's silly," whispered the man deprived of the vengeance which he had seemed already to hold in his hand, by a mysterious and exasperating idiosyncrasy.

"Don't you set yourself to judge a gentleman." Ricardo without anger administered a moody rebuke. "Even I can't understand the governor thoroughly. And I am an Englishman and his follower. No, I don't think I care to put it before him, sick as I am of staying here."

Ricardo could not be more sick of staying than Schomberg was of seeing him stay. Schomberg believed so firmly in the reality of Heyst as created by his own power of false inferences, of his hate, of his love of scandal, that he could not contain a stifled cry of conviction as sincere as most of our convictions, the disguised servants of our passions, can appear at a supreme moment.

"It would have been like going to pick up a nugget of a thousand pounds, or two or three times as much, for all I know. No trouble, no--"

"The petticoat's the trouble," Ricardo struck in.

He had resumed his noiseless, feline, oblique prowling, in which an observer would have detected a new character of excitement, such as a wild animal of the cat species, anxious to make a spring, might betray. Schomberg saw nothing. It would probably have cheered his drooping spirits; but in a general way he preferred not to look at Ricardo. Ricardo, however, with one of his slanting, gliding, restless glances, observed the bitter smile on Schomberg's bearded lips--the unmistakable smile of ruined hopes.

"You are a pretty unforgiving sort of chap," he said, stopping for a moment with an air of interest. "Hang me if I ever saw anybody look so disappointed!

I bet you would send black plague to that island if you only knew how--eh, what? Plague too good for them? Ha, ha, ha!"

He bent down to stare at Schomberg who sat unstirring with stony eyes and set features, and apparently deaf to the rasping derision of that laughter so close to his red fleshy ear.

"Black plague too good for them, ha, ha!" Ricardo pressed the point on the tormented hotel-keeper. Schomberg kept his eyes down obstinately.

"I don't wish any harm to the girl--" he muttered.

"But did she bolt from you? A fair bilk? Come!"

"Devil only knows what that villainous Swede had done to her--what he promised her, how he frightened her. She couldn't have cared for him, I know." Schomberg's vanity clung to the belief in some atrocious, extraordinary means of seduction employed by Heyst. "Look how he bewitched that poor Morrison," he murmured.

"Ah, Morrison--got all his money, what?"

"Yes--and his life."

"Terrible fellow, that Swedish baron! How is one to get at him?"

Schomberg exploded.

"Three against one! Are you shy? Do you want me to give you a letter of introduction?"

"You ought to look at yourself in a glass," Ricardo said quietly. "Dash me if you don't get a stroke of some kind presently. And this is the fellow who says women can do nothing! That one will do for you, unless you manage to forget her."

"I wish I could," Schomberg admitted earnestly. "And it's all the doing of that Swede. I don't get enough sleep, Mr. Ricardo. And then, to finish me off, you gentlemen turn up . . . as if I hadn't enough worry."

"That's done you good," suggested the secretary with ironic seriousness. "Takes your mind off that silly trouble. At your age too."

He checked himself, as if in pity, and changing his tone:

"I would really like to oblige you while doing a stroke of business at the same time."

"A good stroke," insisted Schomberg, as if it were mechanically. In his simplicity he was not able to give up the idea which had entered his head. An idea must be driven out by another idea, and with Schomberg ideas were rare and therefore tenacious. "Minted gold," he murmured with a sort of anguish.

Such an expressive combination of words was not without effect upon Ricardo. Both these men were amenable to the influence of verbal suggestions. The secretary of "plain Mr. Jones" sighed and murmured.

"Yes. But how is one to get at it?"

"Being three to one," said Schomberg, "I suppose you could get it for the asking."

"One would think the fellow lived next door," Ricardo growled impatiently. "Hang it all, can't you understand a plain question? I have asked you the way."

Schomberg seemed to revive.

"The way?"

The torpor of deceived hopes underlying his superficial changes of mood had been pricked by these words which seemed pointed with purpose.

"The way is over the water, of course," said the hotel-keeper. "For people like you, three days in a good, big boat is nothing. It's no more than a little outing, a bit of a change. At this season the Java Sea is a pond. I have an excellent, safe boat--a ship's life-boat--carry thirty, let alone three, and a child could handle her. You wouldn't get a wet face at this time of the year. You might call it a pleasure-trip."

"And yet, having this boat, you didn't go after her yourself--or after him? Well, you are a fine fellow for a disappointed lover."

Schomberg gave a start at the suggestion.

"I am not three men," he said sulkily, as the shortest answer of the several he could have given.

"Oh, I know your sort," Ricardo let fall negligently. "You are like most people--or perhaps just a little more peaceable than the rest of the buying and selling gang that bosses this rotten show. Well, well, you respectable citizen," he went on, "let us go thoroughly into the matter."

When Schomberg had been made to understand that Mr. Jones's henchman was ready to discuss, in his own words, "this boat of yours, with courses and distances," and such concrete matters of no good augury to that villainous Swede, he recovered his soldierly bearing, squared his shoulders, and asked in his military manner:

"You wish, then, to proceed with the business?"

Ricardo nodded. He had a great mind to, he said. A gentleman had to be humoured as much as possible; but he must be managed, too, on occasions, for his own good. And it was the business of the right sort of "follower" to know the proper time and the proper methods of that delicate part of his duty. Having exposed this theory Ricardo proceeded to the application.

"I've never actually lied to him," he said, "and I ain't going to now. I shall just say nothing about the girl. He will have to get over the shock the best he can. Hang it all! Too much humouring won't do here."

"Funny thing," Schomberg observed crisply.

"Is it? Ay, you wouldn't mind taking a woman by the throat in some dark corner and nobody by, I bet!"

Ricardo's dreadful, vicious, cat-like readiness to get his claws out at any moment startled Schomberg as usual. But it was provoking too.

"And you?" he defended himself. "Don't you want me to believe you are up to anything?"

"I, my boy? Oh, yes. I am not that gentleman; neither are you. Take 'em by the throat or chuck 'em under the chin is all one to me--almost," affirmed Ricardo, with something obscurely ironical in his complacency. "Now, as to this business. A three days' jaunt in a good boat isn't a thing to frighten people like us. You are right, so far; but there are other details."

Schomberg was ready enough to enter into details. He explained that he had a small plantation, with a fairly habitable hut on it, on Madura. He proposed that his guest should start from town in his boat, as if going for an excursion to that rural spot. The custom-house people on the quay were used to see his boat go off on such trips.

From Madura, after some repose and on a convenient day, Mr. Jones and party would make the real start. It would all be plain sailing. Schomberg undertook to provision the boat. The greatest hardship the voyagers need apprehend would be a mild shower of rain. At that season of the year there were no serious thunderstorms.

Schomberg's heart began to thump as he saw himself nearing his vengeance. His speech was thick but persuasive.

"No risk at all--none whatever."

Ricardo dismissed these assurances of safety with an impatient gesture. He was thinking of other risks.

"The getting away from here is all right; but we may be sighted at sea, and that may bring awkwardness later on. A ship's boat with three white men in her, knocking about out of sight of land, is bound to make talk. Are we likely to be seen on our way?"

"No, unless by native craft," said Schomberg.

Ricardo nodded, satisfied. Both these white men looked on native life as a mere play of shadows. A play of shadows the dominant race could walk through unaffected and disregarded in the pursuit of its incomprehensible aims and needs. No. Native craft did not count, of course. It was an empty, solitary part of the sea, Schomberg expounded further. Only the Ternate mail-boat crossed that region about the eighth of every month, regularly--nowhere near the island though. Rigid, his voice hoarse, his heart thumping, his mind concentrated on the success of his plan, the hotel-keeper multiplied words, as if to keep as many of them as possible between himself and the murderous aspect of his purpose.

"So, if you gentlemen depart from my plantation quietly at sunset on the eighth--always best to make a start at night, with a land breeze--it's a hundred to one--What am I saying?--it's a thousand to one that no human eye will see you on the passage. All you've got to do is keep her heading north-east for, say, fifty hours; perhaps not quite so long. There will always

be draft enough to keep a boat moving; you may reckon on that; and then--"

The muscles about his waist quivered under his clothes with eagerness, with impatience, and with something like apprehension, the true nature of which was not clear to him. And he did not want to investigate it. Ricardo regarded him steadily, with those dry eyes of his shining more like polished stones than living tissue.

"And then what?" he asked.

"And then--why, you will astonish der herr baron--ha, ha!"

Schomberg seemed to force the words and the laugh out of himself in a hoarse bass.

"And you believe he has all that plunder by him?" asked Ricardo, rather perfunctorily, because the fact seemed to him extremely probable when looked at all round by his acute mind.

Schomberg raised his hands and lowered them slowly.

"How can it be otherwise? He was going home, he was on his way, in this hotel. Ask people. Was it likely he would leave it behind him?"

Ricardo was thoughtful. Then, suddenly raising his head, he remarked:

"Steer north-east for fifty hours, eh? That's not much of a sailing direction. I've heard of a port being missed before on better information. Can't you say what sort of landfall a fellow may expect? But I suppose you have never seen that island yourself?"

Schomberg admitted that he had not seen it, in a tone in which a man congratulates himself on having escaped the contamination of an unsavoury experience. No, certainly not. He had never had any business to call there. But what of that? He could give Mr. Ricardo as good a sea-mark as anybody need wish for. He laughed nervously. Miss it! He defied anyone that came within forty miles of it to miss the retreat of that villainous Swede.

"What do you think of a pillar of smoke by day and a loom of fire at night? There's a volcano in full blast near that island--enough to guide almost a blind man. What more do you want? An active volcano to steer by?"

These last words he roared out exultingly, then jumped up and glared. The

door to the left of the bar had swung open, and Mrs. Schomberg, dressed for duty, stood facing him down the whole length of the room. She clung to the handle for a moment, then came in and glided to her place, where she sat down to stare straight before her, as usual.