PART THREE

CHAPTER ONE

Tropical nature had been kind to the failure of the commercial enterprise. The desolation of the headquarters of the Tropical Belt Coal Company had been screened from the side of the sea; from the side where prying eyes--if any were sufficiently interested, either in malice or in sorrow--could have noted the decaying bones of that once sanguine enterprise.

Heyst had been sitting among the bones buried so kindly in the grass of two wet seasons' growth. The silence of his surroundings, broken only by such sounds as a distant roll of thunder, the lash of rain through the foliage of some big trees, the noise of the wind tossing the leaves of the forest, and of the short seas breaking against the shore, favoured rather than hindered his solitary meditation.

A meditation is always--in a white man, at least--more or less an interrogative exercise. Heyst meditated in simple terms on the mystery of his actions; and he answered himself with the honest reflection:

"There must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all."

He reflected, too, with the sense of making a discovery, that this primeval ancestor is not easily suppressed. The oldest voice in the world is just the one that never ceases to speak. If anybody could have silenced its imperative echoes, it should have been Heyst's father, with his contemptuous, inflexible negation of all effort; but apparently he could not. There was in the son a lot of that first ancestor who, as soon as he could uplift his muddy frame from the celestial mould, started inspecting and naming the animals of that paradise which he was so soon to lose.

Action--the first thought, or perhaps the first impulse, on earth! The barbed hook, baited with the illusions of progress, to bring out of the lightless void the shoals of unnumbered generations!

"And I, the son of my father, have been caught too, like the silliest fish of them all." Heyst said to himself.

He suffered. He was hurt by the sight of his own life, which ought to have been a masterpiece of aloofness. He remembered always his last evening with his father. He remembered the thin features, the great mass of white hair, and the ivory complexion. A five-branched candlestick stood on a little table by the side of the easy chair. They had been talking a long time. The noises of the street had died out one by one, till at last, in the moonlight, the London houses began to look like the tombs of an unvisited, unhonoured, cemetery of hopes.

He had listened. Then, after a silence, he had asked--for he was really young then:

"Is there no guidance?"

His father was in an unexpectedly soft mood on that night, when the moon swam in a cloudless sky over the begrimed shadows of the town.

"You still believe in something, then?" he said in a clear voice, which had been growing feeble of late. "You believe in flesh and blood, perhaps? A full and equable contempt would soon do away with that, too. But since you have not attained to it, I advise you to cultivate that form of contempt which is called pity. It is perhaps the least difficult--always remembering that you, too, if you are anything, are as pitiful as the rest, yet never expecting any pity for yourself."

"What is one to do, then?" sighed the young man, regarding his father, rigid in the high-backed chair.

"Look on--make no sound," were the last words of the man who had spent his life in blowing blasts upon a terrible trumpet which filled heaven and earth with ruins, while mankind went on its way unheeding.

That very night he died in his bed, so quietly that they found him in his usual attitude of sleep, lying on his side, one hand under his cheek, and his knees slightly bent. He had not even straightened his legs.

His son buried the silenced destroyer of systems, of hopes, of beliefs. He observed that the death of that bitter contemner of life did not trouble the flow of life's stream, where men and women go by thick as dust, revolving and jostling one another like figures cut out of cork and weighted with lead just sufficiently to keep them in their proudly upright posture.

After the funeral, Heyst sat alone, in the dusk, and his meditation took the form of a definite vision of the stream, of the fatuously jostling, nodding, spinning figures hurried irresistibly along, and giving no sign of being aware that the voice on the bank had been suddenly silenced . . . Yes. A few obituary notices generally insignificant and some grossly abusive. The son had read them all with mournful detachment.

"This is the hate and rage of their fear," he thought to himself, "and also of wounded vanity. They shriek their little shriek as they fly past. I suppose I ought to hate him too . . ."

He became aware of his eyes being wet. It was not that the man was his father. For him it was purely a matter of hearsay which could not in itself cause this emotion. No! It was because he had looked at him so long that he missed him so much. The dead man had kept him on the bank by his side. And now Heyst felt acutely that he was alone on the bank of the stream. In his pride he determined not to enter it.

A few slow tears rolled down his face. The rooms, filling with shadows, seemed haunted by a melancholy, uneasy presence which could not express itself. The young man got up with a strange sense of making way for something impalpable that claimed possession, went out of the house, and locked the door. A fortnight later he started on his travels--to "look on and never make a sound."

The elder Heyst had left behind him a little money and a certain quantity of movable objects, such as books, tables, chairs, and pictures, which might have complained of heartless desertion after many years of faithful service; for there is a soul in things. Heyst, our Heyst, had often thought of them, reproachful and mute, shrouded and locked up in those rooms, far away in London with the sounds of the street reaching them faintly, and sometimes a little sunshine, when the blinds were pulled up and the windows opened from time to time in pursuance of his original instructions and later reminders. It seemed as if in his conception of a world not worth touching, and perhaps not substantial enough to grasp, these objects familiar to his childhood and his youth, and associated with the memory of an old man, were the only realities, something having an absolute existence. He would never have them sold, or even moved from the places they occupied when he looked upon them last. When he was advised from London that his lease had expired, and that the house, with some others as like it as two peas, was to be demolished, he was surprisingly distressed.

He had entered by then the broad, human path of inconsistencies. Already

the Tropical Belt Coal Company was in existence. He sent instructions to have some of the things sent out to him at Samburan, just as any ordinary, credulous person would have done. They came, torn out from their long repose--a lot of books, some chairs and tables, his father's portrait in oils, which surprised Heyst by its air of youth, because he remembered his father as a much older man; a lot of small objects, such as candlesticks, inkstands, and statuettes from his father's study, which surprised him because they looked so old and so much worn.

The manager of the Tropical Belt Coal Company, unpacking them on the veranda in the shade besieged by a fierce sunshine, must have felt like a remorseful apostate before these relics. He handled them tenderly; and it was perhaps their presence there which attached him to the island when he woke up to the failure of his apostasy. Whatever the decisive reason, Heyst had remained where another would have been glad to be off. The excellent Davidson had discovered the fact without discovering the reason, and took a humane interest in Heyst's strange existence, while at the same time his native delicacy kept him from intruding on the other's whim of solitude. He could not possibly guess that Heyst, alone on the island, felt neither more nor less lonely than in any other place, desert or populous. Davidson's concern was, if one may express it so, the danger of spiritual starvation; but this was a spirit which had renounced all outside nourishment, and was sustaining itself proudly on its own contempt of the usual coarse ailments which life offers to the common appetites of men.

Neither was Heyst's body in danger of starvation, as Schomberg had so confidently asserted. At the beginning of the company's operations the island had been provisioned in a manner which had outlasted the need. Heyst did not need to fear hunger; and his very loneliness had not been without some alleviation. Of the crowd of imported Chinese labourers, one at least had remained in Samburan, solitary and strange, like a swallow left behind at the migrating season of his tribe.

Wang was not a common coolie. He had been a servant to white men before. The agreement between him and Heyst consisted in the exchange of a few words on the day when the last batch of the mine coolies was leaving Samburan. Heyst, leaning over the balustrade of the veranda, was looking on, as calm in appearance as though he had never departed from the doctrine that this world, for the wise, is nothing but an amusing spectacle. Wang came round the house, and standing below, raised up his yellow, thin face.

"All finished?" he asked. Heyst nodded slightly from above, glancing towards

the jetty. A crowd of blue-clad figures with yellow faces and calves was being hustled down into the boats of the chartered steamer lying well out, like a painted ship on a painted sea; painted in crude colours, without shadows, without feeling, with brutal precision.

"You had better hurry up if you don't want to be left behind."

But the Chinaman did not move.

"We stop," he declared. Heyst looked down at him for the first time.

"You want to stop here?"

"Yes."

"What were you? What was your work here?"

"Mess-loom boy."

"Do you want to stay with me here as my boy?" inquired Heyst, surprised.

The Chinaman unexpectedly put on a deprecatory expression, and said, after a marked pause:

"Can do."

"You needn't," said Heyst, "unless you like. I propose to stay on here--it may be for a very long time. I have no power to make you go if you wish to remain, but I don't see why you should."

"Catchee one piecee wife," remarked Wang unemotionally, and marched off, turning his back on the wharf and the great world beyond, represented by the steamer waiting for her boats.

Heyst learned presently that Wang had persuaded one of the women of Alfuro village, on the west shore of the island, beyond the central ridge, to come over to live with him in a remote part of the company's clearing. It was a curious case, inasmuch as the Alfuros, having been frightened by the sudden invasion of Chinamen, had blocked the path over the ridge by felling a few trees, and had kept strictly on their own side. The coolies, as a body, mistrusting the manifest mildness of these harmless fisher-folk, had kept to their lines, without attempting to cross the island. Wang was the brilliant exception. He must have been uncommonly fascinating, in a way that was

not apparent to Heyst, or else uncommonly persuasive. The woman's services to Heyst were limited to the fact that she had anchored Wang to the spot by her charms, which remained unknown to the white man, because she never came near the houses. The couple lived at the edge of the forest, and she could sometimes be seen gazing towards the bungalow shading her eyes with her hand. Even from a distance she appeared to be a shy, wild creature, and Heyst, anxious not to try her primitive nerves unduly, scrupulously avoided that side of the clearing in his strolls.

The day--or rather the first night--after his hermit life began, he was aware of vague sounds of revelry in that direction. Emboldened by the departure of the invading strangers, some Alfuros, the woman's friends and relations, had ventured over the ridge to attend something in the nature of a wedding feast. Wang had invited them. But this was the only occasion when any sound louder than the buzzing of insects had troubled the profound silence of the clearing. The natives were never invited again. Wang not only knew how to live according to conventional proprieties, but had strong personal views as to the manner of arranging his domestic existence. After a time Heyst perceived that Wang had annexed all the keys. Any keys left lying about vanished after Wang had passed that way. Subsequently some of them--those that did not belong to the store-rooms and the empty bungalows, and could not be regarded as the common property of this community of two--were returned to Heyst, tied in a bunch with a piece of string. He found them one morning lying by the side of his plate. He had not been inconvenienced by their absence, because he never locked up anything in the way of drawers and boxes. Heyst said nothing. Wang also said nothing. Perhaps he had always been a taciturn man; perhaps he was influenced by the genius of the locality, which was certainly that of silence. Till Heyst and Morrison had landed in Black Diamond Bay, and named it, that side of Samburan had hardly ever heard the sound of human speech. It was easy to be taciturn with Heyst, who had plunged himself into an abyss of meditation over books, and remained in it till the shadow of Wang falling across the page, and the sound of a rough, low voice uttering the Malay word "makan," would force him to climb out to a meal.

Wang in his native province in China might have been an aggressively, sensitively genial person; but in Samburan he had clothed himself in a mysterious stolidity and did not seem to resent not being spoken to except in single words, at a rate which did not average half a dozen per day. And he gave no more than he got. It is to be presumed that if he suffered he made up for it with the Alfuro woman. He always went back to her at the first fall of dusk, vanishing from the bungalow suddenly at this hour, like a sort of topsy-turvy, day-hunting, Chinese ghost with a white jacket and a pigtail.

Presently, giving way to a Chinaman's ruling passion, he could be observed breaking the ground near his hut, between the mighty stumps of felled trees, with a miner's pickaxe. After a time, he discovered a rusty but serviceable spade in one of the empty store-rooms, and it is to be supposed that he got on famously; but nothing of it could be seen, because he went to the trouble of pulling to pieces one of the company's sheds in order to get materials for making a high and very close fence round his patch, as if the growing of vegetables were a patented process, or an awful and holy mystery entrusted to the keeping of his race.

Heyst, following from a distance the progress of Wang's gardening and of these precautions--there was nothing else to look at--was amused at the thought that he, in his own person, represented the market for its produce. The Chinaman had found several packets of seeds in the store-rooms, and had surrendered to an irresistible impulse to put them into the ground. He would make his master pay for the vegetables which he was raising to satisfy his instinct. And, looking silently at the silent Wang going about his work in the bungalow in his unhasty, steady way; Heyst envied the Chinaman's obedience to his instincts, the powerful simplicity of purpose which made his existence appear almost automatic in the mysterious precision of its facts.

CHAPTER TWO

During his master's absence at Sourabaya, Wang had busied himself with the ground immediately in front of the principal bungalow. Emerging from the fringe of grass growing across the shore end of the coal-jetty, Heyst beheld a broad, clear space, black and level, with only one or two clumps of charred twigs, where the flame had swept from the front of his house to the nearest trees of the forest.

"You took the risk of firing the grass?" Heyst asked.

Wang nodded. Hanging on the arm of the white man before whom he stood was the girl called Alma; but neither from the Chinaman's eyes nor from his expression could anyone have guessed that he was in the slightest degree aware of the fact.

"He has been tidying the place in his labour-saving way," explained Heyst, without looking at the girl, whose hand rested on his forearm. "He's the whole establishment, you see. I told you I hadn't even a dog to keep me company here."

Wang had marched off towards the wharf.

"He's like those waiters in that place," she said. That place was Schomberg's hotel.

"One Chinaman looks very much like another," Heyst remarked. "We shall find it useful to have him here. This is the house."

They faced, at some distance, the six shallow steps leading up to the veranda. The girl had abandoned Heyst's arm.

"This is the house," he repeated.

She did not offer to budge away from his side, but stood staring fixedly at the steps, as if they had been something unique and impracticable. He waited a little, but she did not move.

"Don't you want to go in?" he asked, without turning his head to look at her. "The sun's too heavy to stand about here." He tried to overcome a sort of fear, a sort of impatient faintness, and his voice sounded rough. "You had

better go in," he concluded.

They both moved then, but at the foot of the stairs Heyst stopped, while the girl went on rapidly, as if nothing could stop her now. She crossed the veranda swiftly, and entered the twilight of the big central room opening upon it, and then the deeper twilight of the room beyond. She stood still in the dusk, in which her dazzled eyes could scarcely make out the forms of objects, and sighed a sigh of relief. The impression of the sunlight, of sea and sky, remained with her like a memory of a painful trial gone through--done with at last!

Meanwhile Heyst had walked back slowly towards the jetty; but he did not get so far as that. The practical and automatic Wang had got hold of one of the little trucks that had been used for running baskets of coal alongside ships. He appeared pushing it before him, loaded lightly with Heyst's bag and the bundle of the girl's belongings, wrapped in Mrs. Schomberg's shawl. Heyst turned about and walked by the side of the rusty rails on which the truck ran. Opposite the house Wang stopped, lifted the bag to his shoulder, balanced it carefully, and then took the bundle in his hand.

"Leave those things on the table in the big room--understand?"

"Me savee," grunted Wang, moving off.

Heyst watched the Chinaman disappear from the veranda. It was not till he had seen Wang come out that he himself entered the twilight of the big room. By that time Wang was out of sight at the back of the house, but by no means out of hearing. The Chinaman could hear the voice of him who, when there were many people there, was generally referred to as "Number One." Wang was not able to understand the words, but the tone interested him.

"Where are you?" cried Number One.

Then Wang heard, much more faint, a voice he had never heard before--a novel impression which he acknowledged by cocking his head slightly to one side.

"I am here--out of the sun."

The new voice sounded remote and uncertain. Wang heard nothing more, though he waited for some time, very still, the top of his shaven poll exactly level with the floor of the back veranda. His face meanwhile preserved an

inscrutable immobility. Suddenly he stooped to pick up the lid of a deal candle-box which was lying on the ground by his foot. Breaking it up with his fingers, he directed his steps towards the cook-shed, where, squatting on his heels, he proceeded to kindle a small fire under a very sooty kettle, possibly to make tea. Wang had some knowledge of the more superficial rites and ceremonies of white men's existence, otherwise so enigmatically remote to his mind, and containing unexpected possibilities of good and evil, which had to be watched for with prudence and care.

CHAPTER THREE

That morning, as on all the others of the full tale of mornings since his return with the girl to Samburan, Heyst came out on the veranda and spread his elbows on the railing, in an easy attitude of proprietorship. The bulk of the central ridge of the island cut off the bungalow from sunrises, whether glorious or cloudy, angry or serene. The dwellers therein were debarred from reading early the fortune of the new-born day. It sprang upon them in its fulness with a swift retreat of the great shadow when the sun, clearing the ridge, looked down, hot and dry, with a devouring glare like the eye of an enemy. But Heyst, once the Number One of this locality, while it was comparatively teeming with mankind, appreciated the prolongation of early coolness, the subdued, lingering half-light, the faint ghost of the departed night, the fragrance of its dewy, dark soul captured for a moment longer between the great glow of the sky and the intense blaze of the uncovered sea.

It was naturally difficult for Heyst to keep his mind from dwelling on the nature and consequences of this, his latest departure from the part of an unconcerned spectator. Yet he had retained enough of his wrecked philosophy to prevent him from asking himself consciously how it would end. But at the same time he could not help being temperamentally, from long habit and from set purpose, a spectator still, perhaps a little less naive but (as he discovered with some surprise) not much more far sighted than the common run of men. Like the rest of us who act, all he could say to himself, with a somewhat affected grimness, was:

"We shall see!"

This mood of grim doubt intruded on him only when he was alone. There were not many such moments in his day now; and he did not like them when they came. On this morning he had no time to grow uneasy. Alma came out to join him long before the sun, rising above the Samburan ridge, swept the cool shadow of the early morning and the remnant of the night's coolness clear off the roof under which they had dwelt for more than three months already. She came out as on other mornings. He had heard her light footsteps in the big room--the room where he had unpacked the cases from London; the room now lined with the backs of books halfway up on its three sides. Above the cases the fine matting met the ceiling of tightly stretched white calico. In the dusk and coolness nothing gleamed except the gilt frame of the portrait of Heyst's father, signed by a famous painter, lonely in the

middle of a wall.

Heyst did not turn round.

"Do you know what I was thinking of?" he asked.

"No," she said. Her tone betrayed always a shade of anxiety, as though she were never certain how a conversation with him would end. She leaned on the guard-rail by his side.

"No," she repeated. "What was it?" She waited. Then, rather with reluctance than shyness, she asked:

"Were you thinking of me?"

"I was wondering when you would come out," said Heyst, still without looking at the girl--to whom, after several experimental essays in combining detached letters and loose syllables, he had given the name of Lena.

She remarked after a pause:

"I was not very far from you."

"Apparently you were not near enough for me."

"You could have called if you wanted me," she said. "And I wasn't so long doing my hair."

"Apparently it was too long for me."

"Well, you were thinking of me, anyhow. I am glad of it. Do you know, it seems to me, somehow, that if you were to stop thinking of me I shouldn't be in the world at all!"

He turned round and looked at her. She often said things which surprised him. A vague smile faded away on her lips before his scrutiny.

"What is it?" he asked. "Is it a reproach?"

"A reproach! Why, how could it be?" she defended herself.

"Well, what did it mean?" he insisted.

"What I said--just what I said. Why aren't you fair?"

"Ah, this is at least a reproach!"

She coloured to the roots of her hair.

"It looks as if you were trying to make out that I am disagreeable," she murmured. "Am I? You will make me afraid to open my mouth presently. I shall end by believing I am no good."

Her head drooped a little. He looked at her smooth, low brow, the faintly coloured cheeks, and the red lips parted slightly, with the gleam of her teeth within.

"And then I won't be any good," she added with conviction. "That I won't! I can only be what you think I am."

He made a slight movement. She put her hand on his arm, without raising her head, and went on, her voice animated in the stillness of her body:

"It is so. It couldn't be any other way with a girl like me and a man like you. Here we are, we two alone, and I can't even tell where we are."

"A very well-known spot of the globe," Heyst uttered gently. "There must have been at least fifty thousand circulars issued at the time--a hundred and fifty thousand, more likely. My friend was looking after that, and his ideas were large and his belief very strong. Of us two it was he who had the faith. A hundred and fifty thousand, certainly."

"What is it you mean?" she asked in a low tone.

"What should I find fault with you for?" Heyst went on. "For being amiable, good, gracious--and pretty?"

A silence fell. Then she said:

"It's all right that you should think that of me. There's no one here to think anything of us, good or bad."

The rare timbre of her voice gave a special value to what she uttered. The indefinable emotion which certain intonations gave him, he was aware, was more physical than moral. Every time she spoke to him she seemed to abandon to him something of herself--something excessively subtle and

inexpressible, to which he was infinitely sensible, which he would have missed horribly if she were to go away. While he was looking into her eyes she raised her bare forearm, out of the short sleeve, and held it in the air till he noticed it and hastened to pose his great bronze moustaches on the whiteness of the skin. Then they went in.

Wang immediately appeared in front, and, squatting on his heels, began to potter mysteriously about some plants at the foot of the veranda. When Heyst and the girl came out again, the Chinaman had gone in his peculiar manner, which suggested vanishing out of existence rather than out of sight, a process of evaporation rather than of movement. They descended the steps, looking at each other, and started off smartly across the cleared ground; but they were not ten yards away when, without perceptible stir or sound, Wang materialized inside the empty room. The Chinaman stood still with roaming eyes, examining the walls as if for signs, for inscriptions; exploring the floor as if for pitfalls, for dropped coins. Then he cocked his head slightly at the profile of Heyst's father, pen in hand above a white sheet of paper on a crimson tablecloth; and, moving forward noiselessly, began to clear away the breakfast things.

Though he proceeded without haste, the unerring precision of his movements, the absolute soundlessness of the operation, gave it something of the quality of a conjuring trick. And, the trick having been performed, Wang vanished from the scene, to materialize presently in front of the house. He materialized walking away from it, with no visible or guessable intention; but at the end of some ten paces he stopped, made a half turn, and put his hand up to shade his eyes. The sun had topped the grey ridge of Samburan. The great morning shadow was gone; and far away in the devouring sunshine Wang was in time to see Number One and the woman, two remote white specks against the sombre line of the forest. In a moment they vanished. With the smallest display of action, Wang also vanished from the sunlight of the clearing.

Heyst and Lena entered the shade of the forest path which crossed the island, and which, near its highest point had been blocked by felled trees. But their intention was not to go so far. After keeping to the path for some distance, they left it at a point where the forest was bare of undergrowth, and the trees, festooned with creepers, stood clear of one another in the gloom of their own making. Here and there great splashes of light lay on the ground. They moved, silent in the great stillness, breathing the calmness, the infinite isolation, the repose of a slumber without dreams. They emerged at the upper limit of vegetation, among some rocks; and in a depression of the sharp slope, like a small platform, they turned about and looked from on

high over the sea, lonely, its colour effaced by sunshine, its horizon a heat mist, a mere unsubstantial shimmer in the pale and blinding infinity overhung by the darker blaze of the sky.

"It makes my head swim," the girl murmured, shutting her eyes and putting her hand on his shoulder.

Heyst, gazing fixedly to the southward, exclaimed:

"Sail ho!"

A moment of silence ensued.

"It must be very far away," he went on. "I don't think you could see it. Some native craft making for the Moluccas, probably. Come, we mustn't stay here."

With his arm round her waist, he led her down a little distance, and they settled themselves in the shade; she, seated on the ground, he a little lower, reclining at her feet.

"You don't like to look at the sea from up there?" he said after a time.

She shook her head. That empty space was to her the abomination of desolation. But she only said again:

"It makes my head swim."

"Too big?" he inquired.

"Too lonely. It makes my heart sink, too," she added in a low voice, as if confessing a secret.

"I'm afraid," said Heyst, "that you would be justified in reproaching me for these sensations. But what would you have?"

His tone was playful, but his eyes, directed at her face, were serious. She protested.

"I am not feeling lonely with you--not a bit. It is only when we come up to that place, and I look at all that water and all that light--"

"We will never come here again, then," he interrupted her.

She remained silent for a while, returning his gaze till he removed it.

"It seems as if everything that there is had gone under," she said.

"Reminds you of the story of the deluge," muttered the man, stretched at her feet and looking at them. "Are you frightened at it?"

"I should be rather frightened to be left behind alone. When I say, I, of course I mean we."

"Do you?" . . . Heyst remained silent for a while. "The vision of a world destroyed," he mused aloud. "Would you be sorry for it?"

"I should be sorry for the happy people in it," she said simply.

His gaze travelled up her figure and reached her face, where he seemed to detect the veiled glow of intelligence, as one gets a glimpse of the sun through the clouds.

"I should have thought it's they specially who ought to have been congratulated. Don't you?"

"Oh, yes--I understand what you mean; but there were forty days before it was all over."

"You seem to be in possession of all the details."

Heyst spoke just to say something rather than to gaze at her in silence. She was not looking at him.

"Sunday school," she murmured. "I went regularly from the time I was eight till I was thirteen. We lodged in the north of London, off Kingsland Road. It wasn't a bad time. Father was earning good money then. The woman of the house used to pack me off in the afternoon with her own girls. She was a good woman. Her husband was in the post office. Sorter or something. Such a quiet man. He used to go off after supper for night-duty, sometimes. Then one day they had a row, and broke up the home. I remember I cried when we had to pack up all of a sudden and go into other lodgings. I never knew what it was, though--"

"The deluge," muttered Heyst absently.

He felt intensely aware of her personality, as if this were the first moment of leisure he had found to look at her since they had come together. The peculiar timbre of her voice, with its modulations of audacity and sadness, would have given interest to the most inane chatter. But she was no chatterer. She was rather silent, with a capacity for immobility, an upright stillness, as when resting on the concert platform between the musical numbers, her feet crossed, her hands reposing on her lap. But in the intimacy of their life her grey, unabashed gaze forced upon him the sensation of something inexplicable reposing within her; stupidity or inspiration, weakness or force--or simply an abysmal emptiness, reserving itself even in the moments of complete surrender.

During a long pause she did not look at him. Then suddenly, as if the word "deluge" had stuck in her mind, she asked, looking up at the cloudless sky:

"Does it ever rain here?"

"There is a season when it rains almost every day," said Heyst, surprised. "There are also thunderstorms. We once had a 'mud-shower.'"

"Mud-shower?"

"Our neighbour there was shooting up ashes. He sometimes clears his red-hot gullet like that; and a thunderstorm came along at the same time. It was very messy; but our neighbour is generally well behaved--just smokes quietly, as he did that day when I first showed you the smudge in the sky from the schooner's deck. He's a good-natured, lazy fellow of a volcano."

"I saw a mountain smoking like that before," she said, staring at the slender stem of a tree-fern some dozen feet in front of her. "It wasn't very long after we left England--some few days, though. I was so ill at first that I lost count of days. A smoking mountain--I can't think how they called it."

"Vesuvius, perhaps," suggested Heyst.

"That's the name."

"I saw it, too, years, ages ago," said Heyst.

"On your way here?"

"No, long before I ever thought of coming into this part of the world. I was yet a boy."

She turned and looked at him attentively, as if seeking to discover some trace of that boyhood in the mature face of the man with the hair thin at the top and the long, thick moustaches. Heyst stood the frank examination with a playful smile, hiding the profound effect these veiled grey eyes produced--whether on his heart or on his nerves, whether sensuous or spiritual, tender or irritating, he was unable to say.

"Well, princess of Samburan," he said at last, "have I found favour in your sight?"

She seemed to wake up, and shook her head.

"I was thinking," she murmured very low.

"Thought, action--so many snares! If you begin to think you will be unhappy."

"I wasn't thinking of myself!" she declared with a simplicity which took Heyst aback somewhat.

"On the lips of a moralist this would sound like a rebuke," he said, half seriously; "but I won't suspect you of being one. Moralists and I haven't been friends for many years."

She had listened with an air of attention.

"I understood you had no friends," she said. "I am pleased that there's nobody to find fault with you for what you have done. I like to think that I am in no one's way."

Heyst would have said something, but she did not give him time. Unconscious of the movement he made she went on:

"What I was thinking to myself was, why are you here?"

Heyst let himself sink on his elbow again.

"If by 'you' you mean 'we'--well, you know why we are here."

She bent her gaze down at him.

"No, it isn't that. I meant before--all that time before you came across me

and guessed at once that I was in trouble, with no one to turn to. And you know it was desperate trouble too."

Her voice fell on the last words, as if she would end there; but there was something so expectant in Heyst's attitude as he sat at her feet, looking up at her steadily, that she continued, after drawing a short, quick breath:

"It was, really. I told you I had been worried before by bad fellows. It made me unhappy, disturbed--angry, too. But oh, how I hated, hated, hated that man!"

"That man" was the florid Schomberg with the military bearing, benefactor of white men ('decent food to eat in decent company')--mature victim of belated passion. The girl shuddered. The characteristic harmoniousness of her face became, as it were, decomposed for an instant. Heyst was startled.

"Why think of it now?" he cried.

"It's because I was cornered that time. It wasn't as before. It was worse, ever so much. I wished I could die of my fright--and yet it's only now that I begin to understand what a horror it might have been. Yes, only now, since we--"

Heyst stirred a little.

"Came here," he finished.

Her tenseness relaxed, her flushed face went gradually back to its normal tint.

"Yes," she said indifferently, but at the same time she gave him a stealthy glance of passionate appreciation; and then her face took on a melancholy cast, her whole figure drooped imperceptibly.

"But you were coming back here anyhow?" she asked.

"Yes. I was only waiting for Davidson. Yes, I was coming back here, to these ruins--to Wang, who perhaps did not expect to see me again. It's impossible to guess at the way that Chinaman draws his conclusions, and how he looks upon one."

"Don't talk about him. He makes me feel uncomfortable. Talk about yourself!"

"About myself? I see you are still busy with the mystery of my existence here; but it isn't at all mysterious. Primarily the man with the quill pen in his hand in that picture you so often look at is responsible for my existence. He is also responsible for what my existence is, or rather has been. He was a great man in his way. I don't know much of his history. I suppose he began like other people; took fine words for good, ringing coin and noble ideals for valuable banknotes. He was a great master of both, himself, by the way. Later he discovered--how am I to explain it to you? Suppose the world were a factory and all mankind workmen in it. Well, he discovered that the wages were not good enough. That they were paid in counterfeit money."

"I see!" the girl said slowly.

"Do you?"

Heyst, who had been speaking as if to himself, looked up curiously.

"It wasn't a new discovery, but he brought his capacity for scorn to bear on it. It was immense. It ought to have withered this globe. I don't know how many minds he convinced. But my mind was very young then, and youth I suppose can be easily seduced--even by a negation. He was very ruthless, and yet he was not without pity. He dominated me without difficulty. A heartless man could not have done so. Even to fools he was not utterly merciless. He could be indignant, but he was too great for flouts and jeers. What he said was not meant for the crowd; it could not be; and I was flattered to find myself among the elect. They read his books, but I have heard his living word. It was irresistible. It was as if that mind were taking me into its confidence, giving me a special insight into its mastery of despair. Mistake, no doubt. There is something of my father in every man who lives long enough. But they don't say anything. They can't. They wouldn't know how, or perhaps, they wouldn't speak if they could. Man on this earth is an unforeseen accident which does not stand close investigation. However, that particular man died as quietly as a child goes to sleep. But, after listening to him, I could not take my soul down into the street to fight there. I started off to wander about, an independent spectator--if that is possible."

For a long time the girl's grey eyes had been watching his face. She discovered that, addressing her, he was really talking to himself. Heyst looked up, caught sight of her as it were, and caught himself up, with a low laugh and a change of tone.

"All this does not tell you why I ever came here. Why, indeed? It's like prying

into inscrutable mysteries which are not worth scrutinizing. A man drifts. The most successful men have drifted into their successes. I don't want to tell you that this is a success. You wouldn't believe me if I did. It isn't; neither is it the ruinous failure it looks. It proves nothing, unless perhaps some hidden weakness in my character--and even that is not certain."

He looked fixedly at her, and with such grave eyes that she felt obliged to smile faintly at him, since she did not understand what he meant. Her smile was reflected, still fainter, on his lips.

"This does not advance you much in your inquiry," he went on. "And in truth your question is unanswerable; but facts have a certain positive value, and I will tell you a fact. One day I met a cornered man. I use the word because it expresses the man's situation exactly, and because you just used it yourself. You know what that means?"

"What do you say?" she whispered, astounded. "A man!"

Heyst laughed at her wondering eyes.

"No! No! I mean in his own way."

"I knew very well it couldn't be anything like that," she observed under her breath.

"I won't bother you with the story. It was a custom-house affair, strange as it may sound to you. He would have preferred to be killed outright--that is, to have his soul dispatched to another world, rather than to be robbed of his substance, his very insignificant substance, in this. I saw that he believed in another world because, being cornered, as I have told you, he went down on his knees and prayed. What do you think of that?"

Heyst paused. She looked at him earnestly.

"You didn't make fun of him for that?" she said.

Heyst made a brusque movement of protest

"My dear girl, I am not a ruffian," he cried. Then, returning to his usual tone: "I didn't even have to conceal a smile. Somehow it didn't look a smiling matter. No, it was not funny; it was rather pathetic; he was so representative of all the past victims of the Great Joke. But it is by folly alone that the world moves, and so it is a respectable thing upon the whole. And besides,

he was what one would call a good man. I don't mean especially because he had offered up a prayer. No! He was really a decent fellow, he was quite unfitted for this world, he was a failure, a good man cornered--a sight for the gods; for no decent mortal cares to look at that sort." A thought seemed to occur to him. He turned his face to the girl. "And you, who have been cornered too--did you think of offering a prayer?"

Neither her eyes nor a single one of her features moved the least bit. She only let fall the words:

"I am not what they call a good girl."

"That sounds evasive," said Heyst after a short silence. "Well, the good fellow did pray and after he had confessed to it I was struck by the comicality of the situation. No, don't misunderstand me--I am not alluding to his act, of course. And even the idea of Eternity, Infinity, Omnipotence, being called upon to defeat the conspiracy of two miserable Portuguese half-castes did not move my mirth. From the point of view of the supplicant, the danger to be conjured was something like the end of the world, or worse. No! What captivated my fancy was that I, Axel Heyst, the most detached of creatures in this earthly captivity, the veriest tramp on this earth, an indifferent stroller going through the world's bustle--that I should have been there to step into the situation of an agent of Providence. I, a man of universal scorn and unbelief. . . ."

"You are putting it on," she interrupted in her seductive voice, with a coaxing intonation.

"No. I am not like that, born or fashioned, or both. I am not for nothing the son of my father, of that man in the painting. I am he, all but the genius. And there is even less in me than I make out, because the very scorn is falling away from me year after year. I have never been so amused as by that episode in which I was suddenly called to act such an incredible part. For a moment I enjoyed it greatly. It got him out of his corner, you know."

"You saved a man for fun--is that what you mean? Just for fun?"

"Why this tone of suspicion?" remonstrated Heyst. "I suppose the sight of this particular distress was disagreeable to me. What you call fun came afterwards, when it dawned on me that I was for him a walking, breathing, incarnate proof of the efficacy of prayer. I was a little fascinated by it--and then, could I have argued with him? You don't argue against such evidence, and besides it would have looked as if I had wanted to claim all the merit.

Already his gratitude was simply frightful. Funny position, wasn't it? The boredom came later, when we lived together on board his ship. I had, in a moment of inadvertence, created for myself a tie. How to define it precisely I don't know. One gets attached in a way to people one has done something for. But is that friendship? I am not sure what it was. I only know that he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption has entered into his soul."

Heyst's tone was light, with the flavour of playfulness which seasoned all his speeches and seemed to be of the very essence of his thoughts. The girl he had come across, of whom he had possessed himself, to whose presence he was not yet accustomed, with whom he did not yet know how to live; that human being so near and still so strange, gave him a greater sense of his own reality than he had ever known in all his life.

CHAPTER FOUR

With her knees drawn up, Lena rested her elbows on them and held her head in both her hands.

"Are you tired of sitting here?" Heyst asked.

An almost imperceptible negative movement of the head was all the answer she made.

"Why are you looking so serious?" he pursued, and immediately thought that habitual seriousness, in the long run, was much more bearable than constant gaiety. "However, this expression suits you exceedingly," he added, not diplomatically, but because, by the tendency of his taste, it was a true statement. "And as long as I can be certain that it is not boredom which gives you this severe air, I am willing to sit here and look at you till you are ready to go."

And this was true. He was still under the fresh sortilege of their common life, the surprise of novelty, the flattered vanity of his possession of this woman; for a man must feel that, unless he has ceased to be masculine. Her eyes moved in his direction, rested on him, then returned to their stare into the deeper gloom at the foot of the straight tree-trunks, whose spreading crowns were slowly withdrawing their shade. The warm air stirred slightly about her motionless head. She would not look at him, from some obscure fear of betraying herself. She felt in her innermost depths an irresistible desire to give herself up to him more completely, by some act of absolute sacrifice. This was something of which he did not seem to have an idea. He was a strange being without needs. She felt his eyes fixed upon her; and as he kept silent, she said uneasily--for she didn't know what his silences might mean:

"And so you lived with that friend--that good man?"

"Excellent fellow," Heyst responded, with a readiness that she did not expect. "But it was a weakness on my part. I really didn't want to, only he wouldn't let me off, and I couldn't explain. He was the sort of man to whom you can't explain anything. He was extremely sensitive, and it would have been a tigerish thing to do to mangle his delicate feelings by the sort of plain speaking that would have been necessary. His mind was like a white-walled, pure chamber, furnished with, say, six straw-bottomed chairs, and he was

always placing and displacing them in various combinations. But they were always the same chairs. He was extremely easy to live with; but then he got hold of this coal idea--or, rather, the idea got hold of him, it entered into that scantily furnished chamber of which I have just spoken, and sat on all the chairs. There was no dislodging it, you know! It was going to make his fortune, my fortune, everybody's fortune. In past years, in moments of doubt that will come to a man determined to remain free from absurdities of existence, I often asked myself, with a momentary dread, in what way would life try to get hold of me? And this was the way. He got it into his head that he could do nothing without me. And was I now, he asked me, to spurn and ruin him? Well, one morning--I wonder if he had gone down on his knees to pray that night!--one morning I gave in."

Heyst tugged violently at a tuft of dried grass, and cast it away from him with a nervous gesture.

"I gave in," he repeated.

Looking towards him with a movement of her eyes only, the girl noticed the strong feeling on his face with that intense interest which his person awakened in her mind and in her heart. But it soon passed away, leaving only a moody expression.

"It's difficult to resist where nothing matters," he observed. "And perhaps there is a grain of freakishness in my nature. It amused me to go about uttering silly, commonplace phrases. I was never so well thought of in the islands till I began to jabber commercial gibberish like the veriest idiot. Upon my word, I believe that I was actually respected for a time. I was as grave as an owl over it; I had to be loyal to the man. I have been, from first to last, completely, utterly loyal to the best of my ability. I thought he understood something about coal. And if I had been aware that he knew nothing of it, as in fact he didn't, well--I don't know what I could have done to stop him. In one way or another I should have had to be loyal. Truth, work, ambition, love itself, may be only counters in the lamentable or despicable game of life, but when one takes a hand one must play the game. No, the shade of Morrison needn't haunt me. What's the matter? I say, Lena, why are you staring like that? Do you feel ill?"

Heyst made as if to get on his feet. The girl extended her arm to arrest him, and he remained staring in a sitting posture, propped on one arm, observing her indefinable expression of anxiety, as if she were unable to draw breath.

"What has come to you?" he insisted, feeling strangely unwilling to move, to

touch her.

"Nothing!" She swallowed painfully. "Of course it can't be. What name did you say? I didn't hear it properly."

"Name?" repeated Heyst dazedly. "I only mentioned Morrison. It's the name of that man of whom I've been speaking. What of it?"

"And you mean to say that he was your friend?"

"You have heard enough to judge for yourself. You know as much of our connection as I know myself. The people in this part of the world went by appearances, and called us friends, as far as I can remember. Appearances--what more, what better can you ask for? In fact you can't have better. You can't have anything else."

"You are trying to confuse me with your talk," she cried. "You can't make fun of this."

"Can't? Well, no I can't. It's a pity. Perhaps it would have been the best way," said Heyst, in a tone which for him could be called gloomy. "Unless one could forget the silly business altogether." His faint playfulness of manner and speech returned, like a habit one has schooled oneself into, even before his forehead had cleared completely. "But why are you looking so hard at me? Oh, I don't object, and I shall try not to flinch. Your eyes--"

He was looking straight into them, and as a matter of fact had forgotten all about the late Morrison at that moment.

"No," he exclaimed suddenly. "What an impenetrable girl you are Lena, with those grey eyes of yours! Windows of the soul, as some poet has said. The fellow must have been a glazier by vocation. Well, nature has provided excellently for the shyness of your soul."

When he ceased speaking, the girl came to herself with a catch of her breath. He heard her voice, the varied charm of which he thought he knew so well, saying with an unfamiliar intonation:

"And that partner of yours is dead?"

"Morrison? Oh, yes, as I've told you, he--"

"You never told me."

"Didn't I? I thought I did; or, rather, I thought you must know. It seems impossible that anybody with whom I speak should not know that Morrison is dead."

She lowered her eyelids, and Heyst was startled by something like an expression of horror on her face.

"Morrison!" she whispered in an appalled tone. "Morrison!" Her head drooped. Unable to see her features, Heyst could tell from her voice that for some reason or other she was profoundly moved by the syllables of that unromantic name. A thought flashed through his head--could she have known Morrison? But the mere difference of their origins made it wildly improbable.

"This is very extraordinary!" he said. "Have you ever heard the name before?"

Her head moved quickly several times in tiny affirmative nods, as if she could not trust herself to speak, or even to look at him. She was biting her lower lip.

"Did you ever know anybody of that name?" he asked.

The girl answered by a negative sign; and then at last she spoke, jerkily, as if forcing herself against some doubt or fear. She had heard of that very man, she told Heyst.

"Impossible!" he said positively. "You are mistaken. You couldn't have heard of him, it's--"

He stopped short, with the thought that to talk like this was perfectly useless; that one doesn't argue against thin air.

"But I did hear of him; only I didn't know then, I couldn't guess, that it was your partner they were talking about."

"Talking about my partner?" repeated Heyst slowly.

"No." Her mind seemed almost as bewildered, as full of incredulity, as his. "No. They were talking of you really; only I didn't know it."

"Who were they?" Heyst raised his voice. "Who was talking of me? Talking where?"

With the first question he had lifted himself from his reclining position; at the last he was on his knees before her, their heads on a level.

"Why, in that town, in that hotel. Where else could it have been?" she said.

The idea of being talked about was always novel to Heyst's simplified conception of himself. For a moment he was as much surprised as if he had believed himself to be a mere gliding shadow among men. Besides, he had in him a half-unconscious notion that he was above the level of island gossip.

"But you said first that it was of Morrison they talked," he remarked to the girl, sinking on his heels, and no longer much interested. "Strange that you should have the opportunity to hear any talk at all! I was rather under the impression that you never saw anybody belonging to the town except from the platform."

"You forget that I was not living with the other girls," she said. "After meals they used to go back to the Pavilion, but I had to stay in the hotel and do my sewing, or what not, in the room where they talked."

"I didn't think of that. By the by, you never told me who they were."

"Why, that horrible red-faced beast," she said, with all the energy of disgust which the mere thought of the hotel-keeper provoked in her.

"Oh, Schomberg!" Heyst murmured carelessly.

"He talked to the boss--to Zangiacomo, I mean. I had to sit there. That devil-woman sometimes wouldn't let me go away. I mean Mrs. Zangiacomo."

"I guessed," murmured Heyst. "She liked to torment you in a variety of ways. But it is really strange that the hotel-keeper should talk of Morrison to Zangiacomo. As far as I can remember he saw very little of Morrison professionally. He knew many others much better."

The girl shuddered slightly.

"That was the only name I ever overheard. I would get as far away from them as I could, to the other end of the room, but when that beast started shouting I could not help hearing. I wish I had never heard anything. If I had got up and gone out of the room I don't suppose the woman would have killed me for it; but she would have rowed me in a nasty way. She would

have threatened me and called me names. That sort, when they know you are helpless, there's nothing to stop them. I don't know how it is, but bad people, real bad people that you can see are bad, they get over me somehow. It's the way they set about downing one. I am afraid of wickedness."

Heyst watched the changing expressions of her face. He encouraged her, profoundly sympathetic, a little amused.

"I quite understand. You needn't apologize for your great delicacy in the perception of inhuman evil. I am a little like you."

"I am not very plucky," she said.

"Well! I don't know myself what I would do, what countenance I would have before a creature which would strike me as being evil incarnate. Don't you be ashamed!"

She sighed, looked up with her pale, candid gaze and a timid expression on her face, and murmured:

"You don't seem to want to know what he was saying."

"About poor Morrison? It couldn't have been anything bad, for the poor fellow was innocence itself. And then, you know, he is dead, and nothing can possibly matter to him now."

"But I tell you that it was of you he was talking!" she cried.

"He was saying that Morrison's partner first got all there was to get out of him, and then, and then--well, as good as murdered him--sent him out to die somewhere!"

"You believe that of me?" said Heyst, after a moment of perfect silence.

"I didn't know it had anything to do with you. Schomberg was talking of some Swede. How was I to know? It was only when you began telling me about how you came here--"

"And now you have my version." Heyst forced himself to speak quietly. "So that's how the business looked from outside!" he muttered.

"I remember him saying that everybody in these parts knew the story," the girl added breathlessly.

"Strange that it should hurt me!" mused Heyst to himself; "yet it does. I seem to be as much of a fool as those everybodies who know the story and no doubt believe it. Can you remember any more?" he addressed the girl in a grimly polite tone. "I've often heard of the moral advantages of seeing oneself as others see one. Let us investigate further. Can't you recall something else that everybody knows?"

"Oh! Don't laugh!" she cried.

"Did I laugh? I assure you I was not aware of it. I won't ask you whether you believe the hotel-keeper's version. Surely you must know the value of human judgement!"

She unclasped her hands, moved them slightly, and twined her fingers as before. Protest? Assent? Was there to be nothing more? He was relieved when she spoke in that warm and wonderful voice which in itself comforted and fascinated one's heart, which made her lovable.

"I heard this before you and I ever spoke to each other. It went out of my memory afterwards. Everything went out of my memory then; and I was glad of it. It was a fresh start for me, with you--and you know it. I wish I had forgotten who I was--that would have been best; and I very nearly did forget."

He was moved by the vibrating quality of the last words. She seemed to be talking low of some wonderful enchantment, in mysterious terms of special significance. He thought that if she only could talk to him in some unknown tongue, she would enslave him altogether by the sheer beauty of the sound, suggesting infinite depths of wisdom and feeling.

"But," she went on, "the name stuck in my head, it seems; and when you mentioned it--"

"It broke the spell," muttered Heyst in angry disappointment as if he had been deceived in some hope.

The girl, from her position a little above him, surveyed with still eyes the abstracted silence of the man on whom she now depended with a completeness of which she had not been vividly conscious before, because, till then, she had never felt herself swinging between the abysses of earth and heaven in the hollow of his arm. What if he should grow weary of the burden?

"And, moreover, nobody had ever believed that tale!"

Heyst came out with an abrupt burst of sound which made her open her steady eyes wider, with an effect of immense surprise. It was a purely mechanical effect, because she was neither surprised nor puzzled. In fact, she could understand him better then than at any moment since she first set eyes on him.

He laughed scornfully.

"What am I thinking of?" he cried. "As if it could matter to me what anybody had ever said or believed, from the beginning of the world till the crack of doom!"

"I never heard you laugh till today," she observed. "This is the second time!"

He scrambled to his feet and towered above her.

"That's because, when one's heart has been broken into in the way you have broken into mine, all sorts of weaknesses are free to enter--shame, anger, stupid indignation, stupid fears--stupid laughter, too. I wonder what interpretation you are putting on it?"

"It wasn't gay, certainly," she said. "But why are you angry with me? Are you sorry you took me away from those beasts? I told you who I was. You could see it."

"Heavens!" he muttered. He had regained his command of himself. "I assure you I could see much more than you could tell me. I could see quite a lot that you don't even suspect yet, but you can't be seen quite through."

He sank to the ground by her side and took her hand. She asked gently:

"What more do you want from me?"

He made no sound for a time.

"The impossible, I suppose," he said very low, as one makes a confidence, and pressing the hand he grasped.

It did not return the pressure. He shook his head as if to drive away the thought of this, and added in a louder, light tone:

"Nothing less. And it isn't because I think little of what I've got already. Oh, no! It is because I think so much of this possession of mine that I can't have it complete enough. I know it's unreasonable. You can't hold back anything--now."

"Indeed I couldn't," she whispered, letting her hand lie passive in his tight grasp. "I only wish I could give you something more, or better, or whatever it is you want."

He was touched by the sincere accent of these simple words.

"I tell you what you can do--you can tell me whether you would have gone with me like this if you had known of whom that abominable idiot of a hotel-keeper was speaking. A murderer--no less!"

"But I didn't know you at all then," she cried. "And I had the sense to understand what he was saying. It wasn't murder, really. I never thought it was."

"What made him invent such an atrocity?" Heyst exclaimed. "He seems a stupid animal. He is stupid. How did he manage to hatch that pretty tale? Have I a particularly vile countenance? Is black selfishness written all over my face? Or is that sort of thing so universally human that it might be said of anybody?"

"It wasn't murder," she insisted earnestly.

"I know. I understand. It was worse. As to killing a man, which would be a comparatively decent thing to do, well--I have never done that."

"Why should you do it?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"My dear girl, you don't know the sort of life I have been leading in unexplored countries, in the wilds; it's difficult to give you an idea. There are men who haven't been in such tight places as I have found myself in who have had to--to shed blood, as the saying is. Even the wilds hold prizes which tempt some people; but I had no schemes, no plans--and not even great firmness of mind to make me unduly obstinate. I was simply moving on, while the others, perhaps, were going somewhere. An indifference as to roads and purposes makes one meeker, as it were. And I may say truly, too, that I never did care, I won't say for life--I had scorned what people call by that name from the first--but for being alive. I don't know if that is what

men call courage, but I doubt it very much."

"You! You have no courage?" she protested.

"I really don't know. Not the sort that always itches for a weapon, for I have never been anxious to use one in the quarrels that a man gets into in the most innocent way sometimes. The differences for which men murder each other are, like everything else they do, the most contemptible, the most pitiful things to look back upon. No, I've never killed a man or loved a woman--not even in my thoughts, not even in my dreams."

He raised her hand to his lips, and let them rest on it for a space, during which she moved a little closer to him. After the lingering kiss he did not relinquish his hold.

"To slay, to love--the greatest enterprises of life upon a man! And I have no experience of either. You must forgive me anything that may have appeared to you awkward in my behaviour, inexpressive in my speeches, untimely in my silences."

He moved uneasily, a little disappointed by her attitude, but indulgent to it, and feeling, in this moment of perfect quietness, that in holding her surrendered hand he had found a closer communion than they had ever achieved before. But even then there still lingered in him a sense of incompleteness not altogether overcome--which, it seemed, nothing ever would overcome--the fatal imperfection of all the gifts of life, which makes of them a delusion and a snare.

All of a sudden he squeezed her hand angrily. His delicately playful equanimity, the product of kindness and scorn, had perished with the loss of his bitter liberty.

"Not murder, you say! I should think not. But when you led me to talk just now, when the name turned up, when you understood that it was of me that these things had been said, you showed a strange emotion. I could see it."

"I was a bit startled," she said.

"At the baseness of my conduct?" he asked.

"I wouldn't judge you, not for anything."

"Really?"

"It would be as if I dared to judge everything that there is." With her other hand she made a gesture that seemed to embrace in one movement the earth and the heaven. "I wouldn't do such a thing."

Then came a silence, broken at last by Heyst:

"I! I! do a deadly wrong to my poor Morrison!" he cried. "I, who could not bear to hurt his feelings. I, who respected his very madness! Yes, this madness, the wreck of which you can see lying about the jetty of Diamond Bay. What else could I do? He insisted on regarding me as his saviour; he was always restraining the eternal obligation on the tip of his tongue, till I was burning with shame at his gratitude. What could I do? He was going to repay me with this infernal coal, and I had to join him as one joins a child's game in a nursery. One would no more have thought of humiliating him than one would think of humiliating a child. What's the use of talking of all this! Of course, the people here could not understand the truth of our relation to each other. But what business of theirs was it? Kill old Morrison! Well, it is less criminal, less base--I am not saying it is less difficult--to kill a man than to cheat him in that way. You understand that?"

She nodded slightly, but more than once and with evident conviction. His eyes rested on her, inquisitive, ready for tenderness.

"But it was neither one nor the other," he went on. "Then, why your emotion? All you confess is that you wouldn't judge me."

She turned upon him her veiled, unseeing grey eyes in which nothing of her wonder could be read.

"I said I couldn't," she whispered.

"But you thought that there was no smoke without fire!" the playfulness of tone hardly concealed his irritation. "What power there must be in words, only imperfectly heard--for you did not listen with particular care, did you? What were they? What evil effort of invention drove them into that idiot's mouth out of his lying throat? If you were to try to remember, they would perhaps convince me, too."

"I didn't listen," she protested. "What was it to me what they said of anybody? He was saying that there never were such loving friends to look at as you two; then, when you got all you wanted out of him and got thoroughly tired of him, too, you kicked him out to go home and die."

Indignation, with an undercurrent of some other feeling, rang in these quoted words, uttered in her pure and enchanting voice. She ceased abruptly and lowered her long, dark lashes, as if mortally weary, sick at heart.

"Of course, why shouldn't you get tired of that or any other--company? You aren't like anyone else, and--and the thought of it made me unhappy suddenly; but indeed, I did not believe anything bad of you. I--"

A brusque movement of his arm, flinging her hand away, stopped her short. Heyst had again lost control of himself. He would have shouted, if shouting had been in his character.

"No, this earth must be the appointed hatching planet of calumny enough to furnish the whole universe. I feel a disgust at my own person, as if I had tumbled into some filthy hole. Pah! And you--all you can say is that you won't judge me; that you--"

She raised her head at this attack, though indeed he had not turned to her.

"I don't believe anything bad of you," she repeated. "I couldn't."

He made a gesture as if to say:

"That's sufficient."

In his soul and in his body he experienced a nervous reaction from tenderness. All at once, without transition, he detested her. But only for a moment. He remembered that she was pretty, and, more, that she had a special grace in the intimacy of life. She had the secret of individuality which excites--and escapes.

He jumped up and began to walk to and fro. Presently his hidden fury fell into dust within him, like a crazy structure, leaving behind emptiness, desolation, regret. His resentment was not against the girl, but against life itself--that commonest of snares, in which he felt himself caught, seeing clearly the plot of plots and unconsoled by the lucidity of his mind.

He swerved and, stepping up to her, sank to the ground by her side. Before she could make a movement or even turn her head his way, he took her in his arms and kissed her lips. He tasted on them the bitterness of a tear fallen there. He had never seen her cry. It was like another appeal to his

tenderness--a new seduction. The girl glanced round, moved suddenly away, and averted her face. With her hand she signed imperiously to him to leave her alone--a command which Heyst did not obey.

CHAPTER FIVE

When she opened her eyes at last and sat up, Heyst scrambled quickly to his feet and went to pick up her cork helmet, which had rolled a little way off. Meanwhile she busied herself in doing up her hair, plaited on the top of her head in two heavy, dark tresses, which had come loose. He tendered her the helmet in silence, and waited as if unwilling to hear the sound of his own voice.

"We had better go down now," he suggested in a low tone.

He extended his hand to help her up. He had the intention to smile, but abandoned it at the nearer sight of her still face, in which was depicted the infinite lassitude of her soul. On their way to regain the forest path they had to pass through the spot from which the view of the sea could be obtained. The flaming abyss of emptiness, the liquid, undulating glare, the tragic brutality of the light, made her long for the friendly night, with its stars stilled by an austere spell; for the velvety dark sky and the mysterious great shadow of the sea, conveying peace to the day-weary heart. She put her hand to her eyes. Behind her back Heyst spoke gently.

"Let us get on, Lena."

She walked ahead in silence. Heyst remarked that they had never been out before during the hottest hours. It would do her no good, he feared. This solicitude pleased and soothed her. She felt more and more like herself--a poor London girl playing in an orchestra, and snatched out from the humiliations, the squalid dangers of a miserable existence, by a man like whom there was not, there could not be, another in this world. She felt this with elation, with uneasiness, with an intimate pride--and with a peculiar sinking of the heart.

"I am not easily knocked out by any such thing as heat," she said decisively.

"Yes, but I don't forget that you're not a tropical bird."

"You weren't born in these parts, either," she returned.

"No, and perhaps I haven't even your physique. I am a transplanted being. Transplanted! I ought to call myself uprooted--an unnatural state of existence; but a man is supposed to stand anything."

She looked back at him and received a smile. He told her to keep in the shelter of the forest path, which was very still and close, full of heat if free from glare. Now and then they had glimpses of the company's old clearing blazing with light, in which the black stumps of trees stood charred, without shadows, miserable and sinister. They crossed the open in a direct line for the bungalow. On the veranda they fancied they had a glimpse of the vanishing Wang, though the girl was not at all sure that she had seen anything move. Heyst had no doubts.

"Wang has been looking out for us. We are late."

"Was he? I thought I saw something white for a moment, and then I did not see it any more."

"That's it--he vanishes. It's a very remarkable gift in that Chinaman."

"Are they all like that?" she asked with naive curiosity and uneasiness.

"Not in such perfection," said Heyst, amused.

He noticed with approval that she was not heated by the walk. The drops of perspiration on her forehead were like dew on the cool, white petal of a flower. He looked at her figure of grace and strength, solid and supple, with an ever-growing appreciation.

"Go in and rest yourself for a quarter of an hour; and then Mr. Wang will give us something to eat," he said.

They had found the table laid. When they came together again and sat down to it, Wang materialized without a sound, unheard, uncalled, and did his office. Which being accomplished, at a given moment he was not.

A great silence brooded over Samburan--the silence of the great heat that seems pregnant with fatal issues, like the silence of ardent thought. Heyst remained alone in the big room. The girl seeing him take up a book, had retreated to her chamber. Heyst sat down under his father's portrait; and the abominable calumny crept back into his recollection. The taste of it came on his lips, nauseating and corrosive like some kinds of poison. He was tempted to spit on the floor, naively, in sheer unsophisticated disgust of the physical sensation. He shook his head, surprised at himself. He was not used to receive his intellectual impressions in that way--reflected in movements of carnal emotion. He stirred impatiently in his chair, and raised

the book to his eyes with both hands. It was one of his father's. He opened it haphazard, and his eyes fell on the middle of the page. The elder Heyst had written of everything in many books--of space and of time, of animals and of stars; analysing ideas and actions, the laughter and the frowns of men, and the grimaces of their agony. The son read, shrinking into himself, composing his face as if under the author's eye, with a vivid consciousness of the portrait on his right hand, a little above his head; a wonderful presence in its heavy frame on the flimsy wall of mats, looking exiled and at home, out of place and masterful, in the painted immobility of profile.

And Heyst, the son, read:

Of the stratagems of life the most cruel is the consolation of love--the most subtle, too; for the desire is the bed of dreams.

He turned the pages of the little volume, "Storm and Dust," glancing here and there at the broken text of reflections, maxims, short phrases, enigmatical sometimes and sometimes eloquent. It seemed to him that he was hearing his father's voice, speaking and ceasing to speak again. Startled at first, he ended by finding a charm in the illusion. He abandoned himself to the half-belief that something of his father dwelt yet on earth--a ghostly voice, audible to the ear of his own flesh and blood. With what strange serenity, mingled with terrors, had that man considered the universal nothingness! He had plunged into it headlong, perhaps to render death, the answer that faced one at every inquiry, more supportable.

Heyst stirred, and the ghostly voice ceased; but his eyes followed the words on the last page of the book:

Men of tormented conscience, or of a criminal imagination, are aware of much that minds of a peaceful, resigned cast do not even suspect. It is not poets alone who dare descend into the abyss of infernal regions, or even who dream of such a descent. The most inexpressive of human beings must have said to himself, at one time or another: "Anything but this!" . . .

We all have our instants of clairvoyance. They are not very helpful. The character of the scheme does not permit that or anything else to be helpful. Properly speaking its character, judged by the standards established by its victims, is infamous. It excuses every violence of protest and at the same time never fails to crush it, just as it crushes the blindest assent. The so-called wickedness must be, like the so-called virtue, its own reward--to be anything at all . . .

Clairvoyance or no clairvoyance, men love their captivity. To the unknown force of negation they prefer the miserably tumbled bed of their servitude. Man alone can give one the disgust of pity; yet I find it easier to believe in the misfortune of mankind than in its wickedness.

These were the last words. Heyst lowered the book to his knees. Lena's voice spoke above his drooping head:

"You sit there as if you were unhappy."

"I thought you were asleep," he said.

"I was lying down right enough, but I never closed my eyes."

"The rest would have done you good after our walk. Didn't you try?"

"I was lying down, I tell you, but sleep I couldn't."

"And you made no sound! What want of sincerity. Or did you want to be alone for a time?"

"I--alone?" she murmured.

He noticed her eyeing the book, and got up to put it back in the bookcase. When he turned round, he saw that she had dropped into the chair--it was the one she always used--and looked as if her strength had suddenly gone from her, leaving her only her youth, which seemed very pathetic, very much at his mercy. He moved quickly towards the chair.

"Tired, are you? It's my fault, taking you up so high and keeping you out so long. Such a windless day, too!"

She watched his concern, her pose languid, her eyes raised to him, but as unreadable as ever. He avoided looking into them for that very reason. He forgot himself in the contemplation of those passive arms, of these defenceless lips, and--yes, one had to go back to them--of these wide-open eyes. Something wild in their grey stare made him think of sea-birds in the cold murkiness of high latitudes. He started when she spoke, all the charm of physical intimacy revealed suddenly in that voice.

"You should try to love me!" she said.

He made a movement of astonishment.

"Try," he muttered. "But it seems to me--" He broke off, saying to himself that if he loved her, he had never told her so in so many words. Simple words! They died on his lips. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

She lowered her eyelids and turned her head a little.

"I have done nothing," she said in a low voice. "It's you who have been good, helpful, and tender to me. Perhaps you love me for that--just for that; or perhaps you love me for company, and because--well! But sometimes it seems to me that you can never love me for myself, only for myself, as people do love each other when it is to be for ever." Her head drooped. "Forever," she breathed out again; then, still more faintly, she added an entreating: "Do try!"

These last words went straight to his heart--the sound of them more than the sense. He did not know what to say, either from want of practice in dealing with women or simply from his innate honesty of thought. All his defences were broken now. Life had him fairly by the throat. But he managed a smile, though she was not looking at him; yes, he did manage it--the well-known Heyst smile of playful courtesy, so familiar to all sorts and conditions of men in the islands.

"My dear Lena," he said, "it looks as if you were trying to pick a very unnecessary quarrel with me--of all people!"

She made no movement. With his elbows spread out he was twisting the ends of his long moustaches, very masculine and perplexed, enveloped in the atmosphere of femininity as in a cloud, suspecting pitfalls, and as if afraid to move.

"I must admit, though," he added, "that there is no one else; and I suppose a certain amount of quarrelling is necessary for existence in this world."

That girl, seated in her chair in graceful quietude, was to him like a script in an unknown language, or even more simply mysterious, like any writing to the illiterate. As far as women went he was altogether uninstructed and he had not the gift of intuition which is fostered in the days of youth by dreams and visions, exercises of the heart fitting it for the encounters of a world, in which love itself rests as much on antagonism as on attraction. His mental attitude was that of a man looking this way and that on a piece of writing which he is unable to decipher, but which may be big with some revelation. He didn't know what to say. All he found to add was:

"I don't even understand what I have done or left undone to distress you like this."

He stopped, struck afresh by the physical and moral sense of the imperfections of their relations--a sense which made him desire her constant nearness, before his eyes, under his hand, and which, when she was out of his sight, made her so vague, so elusive and illusory, a promise that could not be embraced and held.

"No! I don't see clearly what you mean. Is your mind turned towards the future?" he interpellated her with marked playfulness, because he was ashamed to let such a word pass his lips. But all his cherished negations were falling off him one by one.

"Because if it is so there is nothing easier than to dismiss it. In our future, as in what people call the other life, there is nothing to be frightened of."

She raised her eyes to him; and if nature had formed them to express anything else but blank candour he would have learned how terrified she was by his talk and the fact that her sinking heart loved him more desperately than ever. He smiled at her.

"Dismiss all thought of it," he insisted. "Surely you don't suspect after what I have heard from you, that I am anxious to return to mankind. I! I! murder my poor Morrison! It's possible that I may be really capable of that which they say I have done. The point is that I haven't done it. But it is an unpleasant subject to me. I ought to be ashamed to confess it--but it is! Let us forget it. There's that in you, Lena, which can console me for worse things, for uglier passages. And if we forget, there are no voices here to remind us."

She had raised her head before he paused.

"Nothing can break in on us here," he went on and, as if there had been an appeal or a provocation in her upward glance, he bent down and took her under the arms, raising her straight out of the chair into a sudden and close embrace. Her alacrity to respond, which made her seem as light as a feather, warmed his heart at that moment more than closer caresses had done before. He had not expected that ready impulse towards himself which had been dormant in her passive attitude. He had just felt the clasp of her arms round his neck, when, with a slight exclamation--"He's here!"--she disengaged herself and bolted, away into her room.

CHAPTER SIX

Heyst was astounded. Looking all round, as if to take the whole room to witness of this outrage, he became aware of Wang materialized in the doorway. The intrusion was as surprising as anything could be, in view of the strict regularity with which Wang made himself visible. Heyst was tempted to laugh at first. This practical comment on his affirmation that nothing could break in on them relieved the strain of his feelings. He was a little vexed, too. The Chinaman preserved a profound silence.

"What do you want?" asked Heyst sternly.

"Boat out there," said the Chinaman.

"Where? What do you mean? Boat adrift in the straits?"

Some subtle change in Wang's bearing suggested his being out of breath; but he did not pant, and his voice was steady.

"No--row."

It was Heyst now who was startled and raised his voice.

"Malay man, eh?"

Wang made a slight negative movement with his head.

"Do you hear, Lena?" Heyst called out. "Wang says there is a boat in sight--somewhere near apparently. Where's that boat Wang?"

"Round the point," said Wang, leaping into Malay unexpectedly, and in a loud voice. "White men three."

"So close as that?" exclaimed Heyst, moving out on the veranda followed by Wang. "White men? Impossible!"

Over the clearing the shadows were already lengthening. The sun hung low; a ruddy glare lay on the burnt black patch in front of the bungalow, and slanted on the ground between the straight, tall, mast-like trees soaring a hundred feet or more without a branch. The growth of bushes cut off all view of the jetty from the veranda. Far away to the right Wang's hut, or

rather its dark roof of mats, could be seen above the bamboo fence which insured the privacy of the Alfuro woman. The Chinaman looked that way swiftly. Heyst paused, and then stepped back a pace into the room.

"White men, Lena, apparently. What are you doing?"

"I am just bathing my eyes a little," the girl's voice said from the inner room.

"Oh, yes; all right!"

"Do you want me?"

"No. You had better--I am going down to the jetty. Yes, you had better stay in. What an extraordinary thing!"

It was so extraordinary that nobody could possibly appreciate how extraordinary it was but himself. His mind was full of mere exclamations, while his feet were carrying him in the direction of the jetty. He followed the line of the rails, escorted by Wang.

"Where were you when you first saw the boat?" he asked over his shoulder.

Wang explained in Malay that he had gone to the shore end of the wharf, to get a few lumps of coal from the big heap, when, happening to raise his eyes from the ground, he saw the boat--a white man boat, not a canoe. He had good eyes. He had seen the boat, with the men at the oars; and here Wang made a particular gesture over his eyes, as if his vision had received a blow. He had turned at once and run to the house to report.

"No mistake, eh?" said Heyst, moving on. At the very outer edge of the belt he stopped short. Wang halted behind him on the path, till the voice of Number One called him sharply forward into the open. He obeyed.

"Where's that boat?" asked Heyst forcibly. "I say--where is it?"

Nothing whatever was to be seen between the point and the jetty. The stretch of Diamond Bay was like a piece of purple shadow, lustrous and empty, while beyond the land, the open sea lay blue and opaque under the sun. Heyst's eyes swept all over the offing till they met, far off, the dark cone of the volcano, with its faint plume of smoke broadening and vanishing everlastingly at the top, without altering its shape in the glowing transparency of the evening.

"The fellow has been dreaming," he muttered to himself.

He looked hard at the Chinaman. Wang seemed turned into stone. Suddenly, as if he had received a shock, he started, flung his arm out with a pointing forefinger, and made guttural noises to the effect that there, there, there, he had seen a boat.

It was very uncanny. Heyst thought of some strange hallucination. Unlikely enough; but that a boat with three men in it should have sunk between the point and the jetty, suddenly, like a stone, without leaving as much on the surface as a floating oar, was still more unlikely. The theory of a phantom boat would have been more credible than that.

"Confound it!" he muttered to himself.

He was unpleasantly affected by this mystery; but now a simple explanation occurred to him. He stepped hastily out on the wharf. The boat, if it had existed and had retreated, could perhaps be seen from the far end of the long jetty.

Nothing was to be seen. Heyst let his eyes roam idly over the sea. He was so absorbed in his perplexity that a hollow sound, as of somebody tumbling about in a boat, with a clatter of oars and spars, failed to make him move for a moment. When his mind seized its meaning, he had no difficulty in locating the sound. It had come from below--under the jetty!

He ran back for a dozen yards or so, and then looked over. His sight plunged straight into the stern-sheets of a big boat, the greater part of which was hidden from him by the planking of the jetty. His eyes fell on the thin back of a man doubled up over the tiller in a queer, uncomfortable attitude of drooping sorrow. Another man, more directly below Heyst, sprawled on his back from gunwale to gunwale, half off the after thwart, his head lower than his feet. This second man glared wildly upward, and struggled to raise himself, but to all appearance was much too drunk to succeed. The visible part of the boat contained also a flat, leather trunk, on which the first man's long legs were tucked up nervelessly. A large earthenware jug, with its wide mouth uncorked, rolled out on the bottom-boards from under the sprawling man.

Heyst had never been so much astonished in his life. He stared dumbly at the strange boat's crew. From the first he was positive that these men were not sailors. They wore the white drill-suit of tropical civilization; but their apparition in a boat Heyst could not connect with anything plausible. The

civilization of the tropics could have had nothing to do with it. It was more like those myths, current in Polynesia, of amazing strangers, who arrive at an island, gods or demons, bringing good or evil to the innocence of the inhabitants--gifts of unknown things, words never heard before.

Heyst noticed a cork helmet floating alongside the boat, evidently fallen from the head of the man doubled over the tiller, who displayed a dark, bony poll. An oar, too, had been knocked overboard, probably by the sprawling man, who was still struggling, between the thwarts. By this time Heyst regarded the visitation no longer with surprise, but with the sustained attention demanded by a difficult problem. With one foot poised on the string-piece, and leaning on his raised knee, he was taking in everything. The sprawling man rolled off the thwart, collapsed, and, most unexpectedly, got on his feet. He swayed dizzily, spreading his arms out and uttered faintly a hoarse, dreamy "Hallo!" His upturned face was swollen, red, peeling all over the nose and cheeks. His stare was irrational. Heyst perceived stains of dried blood all over the front of his dirty white coat, and also on one sleeve.

"What's the matter? Are you wounded?"

The other glanced down, reeled--one of his feet was inside a large pith hat--and, recovering himself, let out a dismal, grating sound in the manner of a grim laugh.

"Blood--not mine. Thirst's the matter. Exhausted's the matter. Done up. Drink, man! Give us water!"

Thirst was in the very tone of his words, alternating a broken croak and a faint, throaty rustle which just reached Heyst's ears. The man in the boat raised his hands to be helped up on the jetty, whispering:

"I tried. I am too weak. I tumbled down."

Wang was coming along the jetty slowly, with intent, straining eyes.

"Run back and bring a crowbar here. There's one lying by the coal-heap," Heyst shouted to him.

The man standing in the boat sat down on the thwart behind him. A horrible coughing laugh came through his swollen lips.

"Crowbar? What's that for?" he mumbled, and his head dropped on his chest mournfully.

Meantime, Heyst, as if he had forgotten the boat, started kicking hard at a large brass tap projecting above the planks. To accommodate ships that came for coal and happened to need water as well, a stream had been tapped in the interior and an iron pipe led along the jetty. It terminated with a curved end almost exactly where the strangers' boat had been driven between the piles; but the tap was set fast.

"Hurry up!" Heyst yelled to the Chinaman, who was running with the crowbar in his hand.

Heyst snatched it from him and, obtaining a leverage against the string-piece, wrung the stiff tap round with a mighty jerk. "I hope that pipe hasn't got choked!" he muttered to himself anxiously.

It hadn't; but it did not yield a strong gush. The sound of a thin stream, partly breaking on the gunwale of the boat and partly splashing alongside, became at once audible. It was greeted by a cry of inarticulate and savage joy. Heyst knelt on the string-piece and peered down. The man who had spoken was already holding his open mouth under the bright trickle. Water ran over his eyelids and over his nose, gurgled down his throat, flowed over his chin. Then some obstruction in the pipe gave way, and a sudden thick jet broke on his face. In a moment his shoulders were soaked, the front of his coat inundated; he streamed and dripped; water ran into his pockets, down his legs, into his shoes; but he had clutched the end of the pipe, and, hanging on with both hands, swallowed, spluttered, choked, snorted with the noises of a swimmer. Suddenly a curious dull roar reached Heyst's ears. Something hairy and black flew from under the jetty. A dishevelled head, coming on like a cannonball, took the man at the pipe in flank, with enough force to tear his grip loose and fling him headlong into the stern-sheets. He fell upon the folded legs of the man at the tiller, who, roused by the commotion in the boat, was sitting up, silent, rigid, and very much like a corpse. His eyes were but two black patches, and his teeth glistened with a death's head grin between his retracted lips, no thicker than blackish parchment glued over the gums.

From him Heyst's eyes wandered to the creature who had replaced the first man at the end of the water-pipe. Enormous brown paws clutched it savagely; the wild, big head hung back, and in a face covered with a wet mass of hair there gaped crookedly a wide mouth full of fangs. The water filled it, welled up in hoarse coughs, ran down on each side of the jaws and down the hairy throat, soaked the black pelt of the enormous chest, naked under a torn check shirt, heaving convulsively with a play of massive

muscles carved in red mahogany.

As soon as the first man had recovered the breath knocked out of him by the irresistible charge, a scream of mad cursing issued from the stern-sheets. With a rigid, angular crooking of the elbow, the man at the tiller put his hand back to his hip.

"Don't shoot him, sir!" yelled the first man. "Wait! Let me have that tiller. I will teach him to shove himself in front of a caballero!"

Martin Ricardo flourished the heavy piece of wood, leaped forward with astonishing vigour, and brought it down on Pedro's head with a crash that resounded all over the quiet sweep of Black Diamond Bay. A crimson patch appeared on the matted hair, red veins appeared in the water flowing all over his face, and it dripped in rosy drops off his head. But the man hung on. Not till a second furious blow descended did the hairy paws let go their grip and the squirming body sink limply. Before it could touch the bottom-boards, a tremendous kick in the ribs from Ricardo's foot shifted it forward out of sight, whence came the noise of a heavy thud, a clatter of spars, and a pitiful grunt. Ricardo stooped to look under the jetty.

"Aha, dog! This will teach you to keep back where you belong, you murdering brute, you slaughtering savage, you! You infidel, you robber of churches! Next time I will rip you open from neck to heel, you carrion-eater! Esclavo!"

He backed a little and straightened himself up.

"I don't mean it really," he remarked to Heyst, whose steady eyes met his from above. He ran aft briskly.

"Come along, sir. It's your turn. I oughtn't to have drunk first. 'S truth, I forgot myself! A gentleman like you will overlook that, I know." As he made these apologies, Ricardo extended his hand. "Let me steady you, sir."

Slowly Mr. Jones unfolded himself in all his slenderness, rocked, staggered, and caught Ricardo's shoulder. His henchman assisted him to the pipe, which went on gushing a clear stream of water, sparkling exceedingly against the black piles and the gloom under the jetty.

"Catch hold, sir," Ricardo advised solicitously. "All right?"

He stepped back, and, while Mr. Jones revelled in the abundance of water,

he addressed himself to Heyst with a sort of justificatory speech, the tone of which, reflecting his feelings, partook of purring and spitting. They had been thirty hours tugging at the oars, he explained, and they had been more than forty hours without water, except that the night before they had licked the dew off the gunwales.

Ricardo did not explain to Heyst how it happened. At that precise moment he had no explanation ready for the man on the wharf, who, he guessed, must be wondering much more at the presence of his visitors than at their plight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The explanation lay in the two simple facts that the light winds and strong currents of the Java Sea had drifted the boat about until they partly lost their bearings; and that by some extra-ordinary mistake one of the two jars put into the boat by Schomberg's man contained salt water. Ricardo tried to put some pathos into his tones. Pulling for thirty hours with eighteen-foot oars! And the sun! Ricardo relieved his feelings by cursing the sun. They had felt their hearts and lungs shrivel within them. And then, as if all that hadn't been trouble enough, he complained bitterly, he had had to waste his fainting strength in beating their servant about the head with a stretcher. The fool had wanted to drink sea water, and wouldn't listen to reason. There was no stopping him otherwise. It was better to beat him into insensibility than to have him go crazy in the boat, and to be obliged to shoot him. The preventive, administered with enough force to brain an elephant, boasted Ricardo, had to be applied on two occasions--the second time all but in sight of the jetty.

"You have seen the beauty," Ricardo went on expansively, hiding his lack of some sort of probable story under this loquacity. "I had to hammer him away from the spout. Opened afresh all the old broken spots on his head. You saw how hard I had to hit. He has no restraint, no restraint at all. If it wasn't that he can be made useful in one way or another, I would just as soon have let the governor shoot him."

He smiled up at Heyst in his peculiar lip-retracting manner, and added by way of afterthought:

"That's what will happen to him in the end, if he doesn't learn to restrain himself. But I've taught him to mind his manners for a while, anyhow!"

And again he addressed his quick grin up to the man on the wharf. His round eyes had never left Heyst's face ever since he began to deliver his account of the voyage.

"So that's how he looks!" Ricardo was saying to himself.

He had not expected Heyst to be like this. He had formed for himself a conception containing the helpful suggestion of a vulnerable point. These solitary men were often tipplers. But no!--this was not a drinking man's face; nor could he detect the weakness of alarm, or even the weakness of

surprise, on these features, in those steady eyes.

"We were too far gone to climb out," Ricardo went on. "I heard you walking along though. I thought I shouted; I tried to. You didn't hear me shout?"

Heyst made an almost imperceptible negative sign, which the greedy eyes of Ricardo--greedy for all signs--did not miss.

"Throat too parched. We didn't even care to whisper to each other lately. Thirst chokes one. We might have died there under this wharf before you found us."

"I couldn't think where you had gone to." Heyst was heard at last, addressing directly the newcomers from the sea. "You were seen as soon as you cleared that point."

"We were seen, eh?" grunted Mr. Ricardo. "We pulled like machines--daren't stop. The governor sat at the tiller, but he couldn't speak to us. She drove in between the piles till she hit something, and we all tumbled off the thwarts as if we had been drunk. Drunk--ha, ha! Too dry, by George! We fetched in here with the very last of our strength, and no mistake. Another mile would have done for us. When I heard your footsteps, above, I tried to get up, and I fell down."

"That was the first sound I heard," said Heyst.

Mr Jones, the front of his soiled white tunic soaked and plastered against his breast-bone, staggered away from the water-pipe. Steadying himself on Ricardo's shoulder, he drew a long breath, raised his dripping head, and produced a smile of ghastly amiability, which was lost upon the thoughtful Heyst. Behind his back the sun, touching the water, was like a disc of iron cooled to a dull red glow, ready to start rolling round the circular steel plate of the sea, which, under the darkening sky, looked more solid than the high ridge of Samburan; more solid than the point, whose long outlined slope melted into its own unfathomable shadow blurring the dim sheen on the bay. The forceful stream from the pipe broke like shattered glass on the boat's gunwale. Its loud, fitful, and persistent splashing revealed the depths of the world's silence.

"Great notion, to lead the water out here," pronounced Ricardo appreciatively.

Water was life. He felt now as if he could run a mile, scale a ten-foot wall,

sing a song. Only a few minutes ago he was next door to a corpse, done up, unable to stand, to lift a hand; unable to groan. A drop of water had done that miracle.

"Didn't you feel life itself running and soaking into you, sir?" he asked his principal, with deferential but forced vivacity.

Without a word, Mr. Jones stepped off the thwart and sat down in the stern-sheets.

"Isn't that man of yours bleeding to death in the bows under there?" inquired Heyst.

Ricardo ceased his ecstasies over the life-giving water and answered in a tone of innocence:

"He? You may call him a man, but his hide is a jolly sight tougher than the toughest alligator he ever skinned in the good old days. You don't know how much he can stand: I do. We have tried him a long time ago. Ola, there! Pedro! Pedro!" he yelled, with a force of lung testifying to the regenerative virtues of water.

A weak "Senor?" came from under the wharf.

"What did I tell you?" said Ricardo triumphantly. "Nothing can hurt him. He's all right. But, I say, the boat's getting swamped. Can't you turn this water off before you sink her under us? She's half full already."

At a sign from Heyst, Wang hammered at the brass tap on the wharf, then stood behind Number One, crowbar in hand, motionless as before. Ricardo was perhaps not so certain of Pedro's toughness as he affirmed; for he stooped, peering under the wharf, then moved forward out of sight. The gush of water ceasing suddenly, made a silence which became complete when the after-trickle stopped. Afar, the sun was reduced to a red spark, glowing very low in the breathless immensity of twilight. Purple gleams lingered on the water all round the boat. The spectral figure in the stern-sheets spoke in a languid tone:

"That--er--companion--er--secretary of mine is a queer chap. I am afraid we aren't presenting ourselves in a very favourable light."

Heyst listened. It was the conventional voice of an educated man, only strangely lifeless. But more strange yet was this concern for appearances,

expressed, he did not know, whether in jest or in earnest. Earnestness was hardly to be supposed under the circumstances, and no one had ever jested in such dead tones. It was something which could not be answered, and Heyst said nothing. The other went on:

"Travelling as I do, I find a man of his sort extremely useful. He has his little weaknesses, no doubt."

"Indeed!" Heyst was provoked into speaking. "Weakness of the arm is not one of them; neither is an exaggerated humanity, as far as I can judge."

"Defects of temper," explained Mr. Jones from the stern-sheets.

The subject of this dialogue, coming out just then from under the wharf into the visible part of the boat, made himself heard in his own defence, in a voice full of life, and with nothing languid in his manner on the contrary, it was brisk, almost jocose. He begged pardon for contradicting. He was never out of temper with "our Pedro." The fellow was a Dago of immense strength and of no sense whatever. This combination made him dangerous, and he had to be treated accordingly, in a manner which he could understand. Reasoning was beyond him.

"And so"--Ricardo addressed Heyst with animation--"you mustn't be surprised if--"

"I assure you," Heyst interrupted, "that my wonder at your arrival in your boat here is so great that it leaves no room for minor astonishments. But hadn't you better land?"

"That's the talk, sir!" Ricardo began to bustle about the boat, talking all the time. Finding himself unable to "size up" this man, he was inclined to credit him with extraordinary powers of penetration, which, it seemed to him, would be favoured by silence. Also, he feared some pointblank question. He had no ready-made story to tell. He and his patron had put off considering that rather important detail too long. For the last two days, the horrors of thirst, coming on them unexpectedly, had prevented consultation. They had had to pull for dear life. But the man on the wharf, were he in league with the devil himself, would pay for all their sufferings, thought Ricardo with an unholy joy.

Meantime, splashing in the water which covered the bottom-boards, Ricardo congratulated himself aloud on the luggage being out of the way of the wet. He had piled it up forward. He had roughly tied up Pedro's head. Pedro had

nothing to grumble about. On the contrary, he ought to be mighty thankful to him, Ricardo, for being alive at all.

"Well, now, let me give you a leg up, sir," he said cheerily to his motionless principal in the stern-sheets. "All our troubles are over--for a time, anyhow. Ain't it luck to find a white man on this island? I would have just as soon expected to meet an angel from heaven--eh, Mr. Jones? Now then--ready, sir? one, two, three, up you go!"

Helped from below by Ricardo, and from above by the man more unexpected than an angel, Mr. Jones scrambled up and stood on the wharf by the side of Heyst. He swayed like a reed. The night descending on Samburan turned into dense shadow the point of land and the wharf itself, and gave a dark solidity to the unshimmering water extending to the last faint trace of light away to the west. Heyst stared at the guests whom the renounced world had sent him thus at the end of the day. The only other vestige of light left on earth lurked in the hollows of the thin man's eyes. They gleamed, mobile and languidly evasive. The eyelids fluttered.

"You are feeling weak," said Heyst.

"For the moment, a little," confessed the other.

With loud panting, Ricardo scrambled on his hands and knees upon the wharf, energetic and unaided. He rose up at Heyst's elbow and stamped his foot on the planks, with a sharp, provocative, double beat, such as is heard sometimes in fencing-schools before the adversaries engage their foils. Not that the renegade seaman Ricardo knew anything of fencing. What he called "shooting-irons," were his weapons, or the still less aristocratic knife, such as was even then ingeniously strapped to his leg. He thought of it, at that moment. A swift stooping motion, then, on the recovery, a ripping blow, a shove off the wharf, and no noise except a splash in the water that would scarcely disturb the silence. Heyst would have no time for a cry. It would be quick and neat, and immensely in accord with Ricardo's humour. But he repressed this gust of savagery. The job was not such a simple one. This piece had to be played to another tune, and in much slower time. He returned to his note of talkative simplicity.

"Ay; and I too don't feel as strong as I thought I was when the first drink set me up. Great wonder-worker water is! And to get it right here on the spot! It was heaven--hey, sir?"

Mr Jones, being directly addressed, took up his part in the concerted piece:

"Really, when I saw a wharf on what might have been an uninhabited island, I couldn't believe my eyes. I doubted its existence. I thought it was a delusion till the boat actually drove between the piles, as you see her lying now."

While he was speaking faintly, in a voice which did not seem to belong to the earth, his henchman, in extremely loud and terrestrial accents, was fussing about their belongings in the boat, addressing himself to Pedro:

"Come, now--pass up the dunnage there! Move, yourself, hombre, or I'll have to get down again and give you a tap on those bandages of yours, you growling bear, you!"

"Ah! You didn't believe in the reality of the wharf?" Heyst was saying to Mr. Jones.

"You ought to kiss my hands!"

Ricardo caught hold of an ancient Gladstone bag and swung it on the wharf with a thump.

"Yes! You ought to burn a candle before me as they do before the saints in your country. No saint has ever done so much for you as I have, you ungrateful vagabond. Now then! Up you get!"

Helped by the talkative Ricardo, Pedro scrambled up on the wharf, where he remained for some time on all fours, swinging to and fro his shaggy head tied up in white rags. Then he got up clumsily, like a bulky animal in the dusk, balancing itself on its hind legs.

Mr Jones began to explain languidly to Heyst that they were in a pretty bad state that morning, when they caught sight of the smoke of the volcano. It nerved them to make an effort for their lives. Soon afterwards they made out the island.

"I had just wits enough left in my baked brain to alter the direction of the boat," the ghostly voice went on. "As to finding assistance, a wharf, a white man--nobody would have dreamed of it. Simply preposterous!"

"That's what I thought when my Chinaman came and told me he had seen a boat with white men pulling up," said Heyst.

"Most extraordinary luck," interjected Ricardo, standing by anxiously attentive to every word. "Seems a dream," he added. "A lovely dream!"

A silence fell on that group of three, as if everyone had become afraid to speak, in an obscure sense of an impending crisis. Pedro on one side of them and Wang on the other had the air of watchful spectators. A few stars had come out pursuing the ebbing twilight. A light draught of air tepid enough in the thickening twilight after the scorching day, struck a chill into Mr. Jones in his soaked clothes.

"I may infer, then, that there is a settlement of white people here?" he murmured, shivering visibly.

Heyst roused himself.

"Oh, abandoned, abandoned. I am alone here--practically alone; but several empty houses are still standing. No lack of accommodation. We may just as well--here, Wang, go back to the shore and run the trolley out here."

The last words having been spoken in Malay, he explained courteously that he had given directions for the transport of the luggage. Wang had melted into the night--in his soundless manner.

"My word! Rails laid down and all," exclaimed Ricardo softly, in a tone of admiration. "Well, I never!"

"We were working a coal-mine here," said the late manager of the Tropical Belt Coal Company. "These are only the ghosts of things that have been."

Mr Jones's teeth were suddenly started chattering by another faint puff of wind, a mere sigh from the west, where Venus cast her rays on the dark edge of the horizon, like a bright lamp hung above the grave of the sun.

"We might be moving on," proposed Heyst. "My Chinaman and that--ah--ungrateful servant of yours, with the broken head, can load the things and come along after us."

The suggestion was accepted without words. Moving towards the shore, the three men met the trolley, a mere metallic rustle which whisked past them, the shadowy Wang running noiselessly behind. Only the sound of their footsteps accompanied them. It was a long time since so many footsteps had rung together on that jetty. Before they stepped on to the path trodden through the grass, Heyst said:

"I am prevented from offering you a share of my own quarters." The distant courtliness of this beginning arrested the other two suddenly, as if amazed by some manifest incongruity. "I should regret it more," he went on, "if I were not in a position to give you the choice of those empty bungalows for a temporary home."

He turned round and plunged into the narrow track, the two others following in single file.

"Queer start!" Ricardo took the opportunity for whispering, as he fell behind Mr. Jones, who swayed in the gloom, enclosed by the stalks of tropical grass, almost as slender as a stalk of grass himself.

In this order they emerged into the open space kept clear of vegetation by Wang's judicious system of periodic firing. The shapes of buildings, unlighted, high-roofed, looked mysteriously extensive and featureless against the increasing glitter of the stars. Heyst was pleased at the absence of light in his bungalow. It looked as uninhabited as the others. He continued to lead the way, inclining to the right. His equable voice was heard:

"This one would be the best. It was our counting-house. There is some furniture in it yet. I am pretty certain that you'll find a couple of camp bedsteads in one of the rooms."

The high-pitched roof of the bungalow towered up very close, eclipsing the sky.

"Here we are. Three steps. As you see, there's a wide veranda. Sorry to keep you waiting for a moment; the door is locked, I think."

He was heard trying it. Then he leaned against the rail, saying:

"Wang will get the keys."

The others waited, two vague shapes nearly mingled together in the darkness of the veranda, from which issued a sudden chattering of Mr. Jones's teeth, directly suppressed, and a slight shuffle of Ricardo's feet. Their guide and host, his back against the rail, seemed to have forgotten their existence. Suddenly he moved, and murmured:

"Ah, here's the trolley."

Then he raised his voice in Malay, and was answered, "Ya tuan," from an indistinct group that could be made out in the direction of the track.

"I have sent Wang for the key and a light," he said, in a voice that came out without any particular direction--a peculiarity which disconcerted Ricardo.

Wang did not tarry long on his mission. Very soon from the distant recesses of obscurity appeared the swinging lantern he carried. It cast a fugitive ray on the arrested trolley with the uncouth figure of the wild Pedro drooping over the load; then it moved towards the bungalow and ascended the stairs. After working at the stiff lock, Wang applied his shoulder to the door. It came open with explosive suddenness, as if in a passion at being thus disturbed after two years' repose. From the dark slope of a tall stand-up writing-desk a forgotten, solitary sheet of paper flew up and settled gracefully on the floor.

Wang and Pedro came and went through the offended door, bringing the things off the trolley, one flitting swiftly in and out, the other staggering heavily. Later, directed by a few quiet words from Number One, Wang made several journeys with the lantern to the store-rooms, bringing in blankets, provisions in tins, coffee, sugar, and a packet of candles. He lighted one, and stuck it on the ledge of the stand-up desk. Meantime Pedro, being introduced to some kindling-wood and a bundle of dry sticks, had busied himself outside in lighting a fire, on which he placed a ready-filled kettle handed to him by Wang impassively, at arm's length, as if across a chasm. Having received the thanks of his guests, Heyst wished them goodnight and withdrew, leaving them to their repose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Heyst walked away slowly. There was still no light in his bungalow, and he thought that perhaps it was just as well. By this time he was much less perturbed. Wang had preceded him with the lantern, as if in a hurry to get away from the two white men and their hairy attendant. The light was not dancing along any more; it was standing perfectly still by the steps of the veranda.

Heyst, glancing back casually, saw behind him still another light--the light of the strangers' open fire. A black, uncouth form, stooping over it monstrously, staggered away into the outlying shadows. The kettle had boiled, probably.

With that weird vision of something questionably human impressed upon his senses, Heyst moved on a pace or two. What could the people be who had such a creature for their familiar attendant? He stopped. The vague apprehension, of a distant future, in which he saw Lena unavoidably separated from him by profound and subtle differences; the sceptical carelessness which had accompanied every one of his attempts at action, like a secret reserve of his soul, fell away from him. He no longer belonged to himself. There was a call far more imperious and august. He came up to the bungalow, and at the very limit of the lantern's light, on the top step, he saw her feet and the bottom part of her dress. The rest of her person was suggested dimly as high as her waist. She sat on a chair, and the gloom of the low eaves descended upon her head and shoulders. She didn't stir.

"You haven't gone to sleep here?" he asked.

"Oh, no! I was waiting for you--in the dark."

Heyst, on the top step, leaned against a wooden pillar, after moving the lantern to one side.

"I have been thinking that it is just as well you had no light. But wasn't it dull for you to sit in the dark?"

"I don't need a light to think of you." Her charming voice gave a value to this banal answer, which had also the merit of truth. Heyst laughed a little, and said that he had had a curious experience. She made no remark. He tried to figure to himself the outlines of her easy pose. A spot of dim light here and

there hinted at the unfailing grace of attitude which was one of her natural possessions.

She had thought of him, but not in connection with the strangers. She had admired him from the first; she had been attracted by his warm voice, his gentle eye, but she had felt him too wonderfully difficult to know. He had given to life a savour, a movement, a promise mingled with menaces, which she had not suspected were to be found in it--or, at any rate, not by a girl wedded to misery as she was. She said to herself that she must not be irritated because he seemed too self-contained, and as if shut up in a world of his own. When he took her in his arms, she felt that his embrace had a great and compelling force, that he was moved deeply, and that perhaps he would not get tired of her so very soon. She thought that he had opened to her the feelings of delicate joy, that the very uneasiness he caused her was delicious in its sadness, and that she would try to hold him as long as she could--till her fainting arms, her sinking soul, could cling to him no more.

"Wang's not here, of course?" Heyst said suddenly. She answered as if in her sleep.

"He put this light down here without stopping, and ran."

"Ran, did he? H'm! Well, it's considerably later than his usual time to go home to his Alfuro wife; but to be seen running is a sort of degradation for Wang, who has mastered the art of vanishing. Do you think he was startled out of his perfection by something?"

"Why should he be startled?"

Her voice remained dreamy, a little uncertain.

"I have been startled," Heyst said.

She was not listening to him. The lantern at their feet threw the shadows of her face upward. Her eyes glistened, as if frightened and attentive, above a lighted chin and a very white throat.

"Upon my word," mused Heyst, "now that I don't see them, I can hardly believe that those fellows exist!"

"And what about me?" she asked, so swiftly that he made a movement like somebody pounced upon from an ambush. "When you don't see me, do you believe that I exist?"

"Exist? Most charmingly! My dear Lena, you don't know your own advantages. Why, your voice alone would be enough to make you unforgettable!"

"Oh, I didn't mean forgetting in that way. I dare say if I were to die you would remember me right enough. And what good would that be to anybody? It's while I am alive that I want--"

Heyst stood by her chair, a stalwart figure imperfectly lighted. The broad shoulders, the martial face that was like a disguise of his disarmed soul, were lost in the gloom above the plane of light in which his feet were planted. He suffered from a trouble with which she had nothing to do. She had no general conception of the conditions of the existence he had offered to her. Drawn into its peculiar stagnation she remained unrelated to it because of her ignorance.

For instance, she could never perceive the prodigious improbability of the arrival of that boat. She did not seem to be thinking of it. Perhaps she had already forgotten the fact herself. And Heyst resolved suddenly to say nothing more of it. It was not that he shrank from alarming her. Not feeling anything definite himself he could not imagine a precise effect being produced on her by any amount of explanation. There is a quality in events which is apprehended differently by different minds or even by the same mind at different times. Any man living at all consciously knows that embarrassing truth. Heyst was aware that this visit could bode nothing pleasant. In his present soured temper towards all mankind he looked upon it as a visitation of a particularly offensive kind.

He glanced along the veranda in the direction of the other bungalow. The fire of sticks in front of it had gone out. No faint glow of embers, not the slightest thread of light in that direction, hinted at the presence of strangers. The darker shapes in the obscurity, the dead silence, betrayed nothing of that strange intrusion. The peace of Samburan asserted itself as on any other night. Everything was as before, except--Heyst became aware of it suddenly--that for a whole minute, perhaps, with his hand on the back of the girl's chair and within a foot of her person, he had lost the sense of her existence, for the first time since he had brought her over to share this invincible, this undefiled peace. He picked up the lantern, and the act made a silent stir all along the veranda. A spoke of shadow swung swiftly across her face, and the strong light rested on the immobility of her features, as of a woman looking at a vision. Her eyes were still, her lips serious. Her dress, open at the neck, stirred slightly to her even breathing.

"We had better go in, Lena," suggested Heyst, very low, as if breaking a spell cautiously.

She rose without a word. Heyst followed her indoors. As they passed through the living-room, he left the lantern burning on the centre table.

CHAPTER NINE

That night the girl woke up, for the first time in her new experience, with the sensation of having been abandoned to her own devices. She woke up from a painful dream of separation brought about in a way which she could not understand, and missed the relief of the waking instant. The desolate feeling of being alone persisted. She was really alone. A night-light made it plain enough, in the dim, mysterious manner of a dream; but this was reality. It startled her exceedingly.

In a moment she was at the curtain that hung in the doorway, and raised it with a steady hand. The conditions of their life in Samburan would have made peeping absurd; nor was such a thing in her character. This was not a movement of curiosity, but of downright alarm--the continued distress and fear of the dream. The night could not have been very far advanced. The light of the lantern was burning strongly, striping the floor and walls of the room with thick black bands. She hardly knew whether she expected to see Heyst or not; but she saw him at once, standing by the table in his sleeping-suit, his back to the doorway. She stepped in noiselessly with her bare feet, and let the curtain fall behind her. Something characteristic in Heyst's attitude made her say, almost in a whisper:

"You are looking for something."

He could not have heard her before; but he didn't start at the unexpected whisper. He only pushed the drawer of the table in and, without even looking over his shoulder, asked quietly, accepting her presence as if he had been aware of all her movements:

"I say, are you certain that Wang didn't go through this room this evening?"

"Wang? When?"

"After leaving the lantern, I mean."

"Oh, no. He ran on. I watched him."

"Or before, perhaps--while I was with these boat people? Do you know? Can you tell?"

"I hardly think so. I came out as the sun went down, and sat outside till you

came back to me."

"He could have popped in for an instant through the back veranda."

"I heard nothing in here," she said. "What is the matter?"

"Naturally you wouldn't hear. He can be as quiet as a shadow, when he likes. I believe he could steal the pillows from under our heads. He might have been here ten minutes ago."

"What woke you up? Was it a noise?"

"Can't say that. Generally one can't tell, but is it likely, Lena? You are, I believe, the lighter sleeper of us two. A noise loud enough to wake me up would have awakened you, too. I tried to be as quiet as I could. What roused you?"

"I don't know--a dream, perhaps. I woke up crying."

"What was the dream?"

Heyst, with one hand resting on the table, had turned in her direction, his round, uncovered head set on a fighter's muscular neck. She left his question unanswered, as if she had not heard it.

"What is it you have missed?" she asked in her turn, very grave.

Her dark hair, drawn smoothly back, was done in two thick tresses for the night. Heyst noticed the good form of her brow, the dignity of its width, its unshining whiteness. It was a sculptural forehead. He had a moment of acute appreciation intruding upon another order of thoughts. It was as if there could be no end of his discoveries about that girl, at the most incongruous moments.

She had on nothing but a hand-woven cotton sarong--one of Heyst's few purchases, years ago, in Celebes, where they are made. He had forgotten all about it till she came, and then had found it at the bottom of an old sandalwood trunk dating back to pre-Morrison days. She had quickly learned to wind it up under her armpits with a safe twist, as Malay village girls do when going down to bathe in a river. Her shoulders and arms were bare; one of her tresses, hanging forward, looked almost black against the white skin. As she was taller than the average Malay woman, the sarong ended a good way above her ankles. She stood poised firmly, half-way

between the table and the curtained doorway, the insteps of her bare feet gleaming like marble on the overshadowed matting of the floor. The fall of her lighted shoulders, the strong and fine modelling of her arms hanging down her sides, her immobility, too, had something statuesque, the charm of art tense with life. She was not very big--Heyst used to think of her, at first, as "that poor little girl,"--but revealed free from the shabby banality of a white platform dress, in the simple drapery of the sarong, there was that in her form and in the proportions of her body which suggested a reduction from a heroic size.

She moved forward a step.

"What is it you have missed?" she asked again.

Heyst turned his back altogether on the table. The black spokes of darkness over the floor and the walls, joining up on the ceiling in a path of shadow, were like the bars of a cage about them. It was his turn to ignore a question.

"You woke up in a fright, you say?" he said.

She walked up to him, exotic yet familiar, with her white woman's face and shoulders above the Malay sarong, as if it were an airy disguise, but her expression was serious.

"No," she replied. "It was distress, rather. You see, you weren't there, and I couldn't tell why you had gone away from me. A nasty dream--the first I've had, too, since--"

"You don't believe in dreams, do you?" asked Heyst.

"I once knew a woman who did. Leastwise, she used to tell people what dreams mean, for a shilling."

"Would you go now and ask her what this dream means?" inquired Heyst jocularly.

"She lived in Camberwell. She was a nasty old thing!"

Heyst laughed a little uneasily.

"Dreams are madness, my dear. It's things that happen in the waking world, while one is asleep, that one would be glad to know the meaning of."

"You have missed something out of this drawer," she said positively.

"This or some other. I have looked into every single one of them and come back to this again, as people do. It's difficult to believe the evidence of my own senses; but it isn't there. Now, Lena, are you sure that you didn't--"

"I have touched nothing in the house but what you have given me."

"Lena!" he cried.

He was painfully affected by this disclaimer of a charge which he had not made. It was what a servant might have said--an inferior open to suspicion--or, at any rate, a stranger. He was angry at being so wretchedly misunderstood; disenchanted at her not being instinctively aware of the place he had secretly given her in his thoughts.

"After all," he said to himself, "we are strangers to each other."

And then he felt sorry for her. He spoke calmly:

"I was about to say, are you sure you have no reason to think that the Chinaman has been in this room tonight?"

"You suspect him?" she asked, knitting her eyebrows.

"There is no one else to suspect. You may call it a certitude."

"You don't want to tell me what it is?" she inquired, in the equable tone in which one takes a fact into account.

Heyst only smiled faintly.

"Nothing very precious, as far as value goes," he replied.

"I thought it might have been money," she said.

"Money!" exclaimed Heyst, as if the suggestion had been altogether preposterous. She was so visibly surprised that he hastened to add: "Of course, there is some money in the house--there, in that writing-desk, the drawer on the left. It's not locked. You can pull it right out. There is a recess, and the board at the back pivots: a very simple hiding-place, when you know the way to it. I discovered it by accident, and I keep our store of sovereigns in there. The treasure, my dear, is not big enough to require a

cavern."

He paused, laughed very low, and returned her steady stare.

"The loose silver, some guilders and dollars, I have always kept in that unlocked left drawer. I have no doubt Wang knows what there is in it, but he isn't a thief, and that's why I--no, Lena, what I've missed is not gold or jewels; and that's what makes the fact interesting--which the theft of money cannot be."

She took a long breath, relieved to hear that it was not money. A great curiosity was depicted on her face, but she refrained from pressing him with questions. She only gave him one of her deep-gleaming smiles.

"It isn't me so it must be Wang. You ought to make him give it back to you."

Heyst said nothing to that naive and practical suggestion, for the object that he missed from the drawer was his revolver.

It was a heavy weapon which he had owned for many years and had never used in his life. Ever since the London furniture had arrived in Samburan, it had been reposing in the drawer of the table. The real dangers of life, for him, were not those which could be repelled by swords or bullets. On the other hand neither his manner nor his appearance looked sufficiently inoffensive to expose him to light-minded aggression.

He could not have explained what had induced him to go to the drawer in the middle of the night. He had started up suddenly--which was very unusual with him. He had found himself sitting up and extremely wide awake all at once, with the girl reposing by his side, lying with her face away from him, a vague, characteristically feminine form in the dim light. She was perfectly still.

At that season of the year there were no mosquitoes in Samburan, and the sides of the mosquito net were looped up. Heyst swung his feet to the floor, and found himself standing there, almost before he had become aware of his intention to get up.

Why he did this he did not know. He didn't wish to wake her up, and the slight creak of the broad bedstead had sounded very loud to him. He turned round apprehensively and waited for her to move, but she did not stir. While he looked at her, he had a vision of himself lying there too, also fast asleep, and--it occurred to him for the first time in his life--very defenceless. This

quite novel impression of the dangers of slumber made him think suddenly of his revolver. He left the bedroom with noiseless footsteps. The lightness of the curtain he had to lift as he passed out, and the outer door, wide open on the blackness of the veranda--for the roof eaves came down low, shutting out the starlight--gave him a sense of having been dangerously exposed, he could not have said to what. He pulled the drawer open. Its emptiness cut his train of self-communion short. He murmured to the assertive fact:

"Impossible! Somewhere else!"

He tried to remember where he had put the thing; but those provoked whispers of memory were not encouraging. Foraging in every receptacle and nook big enough to contain a revolver, he came slowly to the conclusion that it was not in that room. Neither was it in the other. The whole bungalow consisted of the two rooms and a profuse allowance of veranda all round. Heyst stepped out on the veranda.

"It's Wang, beyond a doubt," he thought, staring into the night. "He has got hold of it for some reason."

There was nothing to prevent that ghostly Chinaman from materializing suddenly at the foot of the stairs, or anywhere, at any moment, and toppling him over with a dead sure shot. The danger was so irremediable that it was not worth worrying about, any more than the general precariousness of human life. Heyst speculated on this added risk. How long had he been at the mercy of a slender yellow finger on the trigger? That is, if that was the fellow's reason for purloining the revolver.

"Shoot and inherit," thought Heyst. "Very simple." Yet there was in his mind a marked reluctance to regard the domesticated grower of vegetables in the light of a murderer.

"No, it wasn't that. For Wang could have done it any time this last twelve months or more--"

Heyst's mind had worked on the assumption that Wang had possessed himself of the revolver during his own absence from Samburan; but at that period of his speculation his point of view changed. It struck him with the force of manifest certitude that the revolver had been taken only late in the day, or on that very night. Wang, of course. But why? So there had been no danger in the past. It was all ahead.

"He has me at his mercy now," thought Heyst, without particular

excitement.

The sentiment he experienced was curiosity. He forgot himself in it: it was as if he were considering somebody else's strange predicament. But even that sort of interest was dying out when, looking to his left, he saw the accustomed shapes of the other bungalows looming in the night, and remembered the arrival of the thirsty company in the boat. Wang would hardly risk such a crime in the presence of other white men. It was a peculiar instance of the "safety in numbers," principle, which somehow was not much to Heyst's taste.

He went in gloomily, and stood over the empty drawer in deep and unsatisfactory thought. He had just made up his mind that he must breathe nothing of this to the girl, when he heard her voice behind him. She had taken him by surprise, but he resisted the impulse to turn round at once under the impression that she might read his trouble in his face. Yes, she had taken him by surprise, and for that reason the conversation which began was not exactly as he would have conducted it if he had been prepared for her pointblank question. He ought to have said at once: "I've missed nothing." It was a deplorable thing that he should have let it come so far as to have her ask what it was he missed. He closed the conversation by saying lightly:

"It's an object of very small value. Don't worry about it--it isn't worth while. The best you can do is to go and lie down again, Lena."

Reluctant she turned away, and only in the doorway asked: "And you?"

"I think I shall smoke a cheroot on the veranda. I don't feel sleepy for the moment."

"Well, don't be long."

He made no answer. She saw him standing there, very still, with a frown on his brow, and slowly dropped the curtain.

Heyst did really light a cheroot before going out again on the veranda. He glanced up from under the low eaves, to see by the stars how the night went on. It was going very slowly. Why it should have irked him he did not know, for he had nothing to expect from the dawn; but everything round him had become unreasonable, unsettled, and vaguely urgent, laying him under an obligation, but giving him no line of action. He felt contemptuously irritated with the situation. The outer world had broken upon him; and he did not

know what wrong he had done to bring this on himself, any more than he knew what he had done to provoke the horrible calumny about his treatment of poor Morrison. For he could not forget this. It had reached the ears of one who needed to have the most perfect confidence in the rectitude of his conduct.

"And she only half disbelieves it," he thought, with hopeless humiliation.

This moral stab in the back seemed to have taken some of his strength from him, as a physical wound would have done. He had no desire to do anything--neither to bring Wang to terms in the matter of the revolver nor to find out from the strangers who they were, and how their predicament had come about. He flung his glowing cigar away into the night. But Samburan was no longer a solitude wherein he could indulge in all his moods. The fiery parabolic path the cast-out stump traced in the air was seen from another veranda at a distance of some twenty yards. It was noted as a symptom of importance by an observer with his faculties greedy for signs, and in a state of alertness tense enough almost to hear the grass grow.

CHAPTER TEN

The observer was Martin Ricardo. To him life was not a matter of passive renunciation, but of a particularly active warfare. He was not mistrustful of it, he was not disgusted with it, still less was he inclined to be suspicious of its disenchantments; but he was vividly aware that it held many possibilities of failure. Though very far from being a pessimist, he was not a man of foolish illusions. He did not like failure, not only because of its unpleasant and dangerous consequences, but also because of its damaging effect upon his own appreciation of Martin Ricardo. And this was a special job, of his own contriving, and of considerable novelty. It was not, so to speak, in his usual line of business--except, perhaps, from a moral standpoint, about which he was not likely to trouble his head. For these reasons Martin Ricardo was unable to sleep.

Mr Jones, after repeated shivering fits, and after drinking much hot tea, had apparently fallen into deep slumber. He had very peremptorily discouraged attempts at conversation on the part of his faithful follower. Ricardo listened to his regular breathing. It was all very well for the governor. He looked upon it as a sort of sport. A gentleman naturally would. But this ticklish and important job had to be pulled off at all costs, both for honour and for safety. Ricardo rose quietly, and made his way on the veranda. He could not lie still. He wanted to go out for air, and he had a feeling that by the force of his eagerness even the darkness and the silence could be made to yield something to his eyes and ears.

He noted the stars, and stepped back again into the dense darkness. He resisted the growing impulse to go out and steal towards the other bungalow. It would have been madness to start prowling in the dark on unknown ground. And for what end? Unless to relieve the oppression. Immobility lay on his limbs like a leaden garment. And yet he was unwilling to give up. He persisted in his objectless vigil. The man of the island was keeping quiet.

It was at that moment that Ricardo's eyes caught the vanishing red trail of light made by the cigar--a startling revelation of the man's wakefulness. He could not suppress a low "Hallo!" and began to sidle along towards the door, with his shoulders rubbing the wall. For all he knew, the man might have been out in front by this time, observing the veranda. As a matter of fact, after flinging away the cheroot, Heyst had gone indoors with the feeling of a man who gives up an unprofitable occupation. But Ricardo fancied he could

hear faint footfalls on the open ground, and dodged quickly into the room. There he drew breath, and meditated for a while. His next step was to feel for the matches on the tall desk, and to light the candle. He had to communicate to his governor views and reflections of such importance that it was absolutely necessary for him to watch their effect on the very countenance of the hearer. At first he had thought that these matters could have waited till daylight; but Heyst's wakefulness, disclosed in that startling way, made him feel suddenly certain that there could be no sleep for him that night.

He said as much to his governor. When the little dagger-like flame had done its best to dispel the darkness, Mr. Jones was to be seen reposing on a camp bedstead, in a distant part of the room. A railway rug concealed his spare form up to his very head, which rested on the other railway rug rolled up for a pillow. Ricardo plumped himself down cross-legged on the floor, very close to the low bedstead; so that Mr. Jones--who perhaps had not been so very profoundly asleep--on opening his eyes found them conveniently levelled at the face of his secretary.

"Eh? What is it you say? No sleep for you tonight? But why can't you let me sleep? Confound your fussiness!"

"Because that there fellow can't sleep--that's why. Dash me if he hasn't been doing a think just now! What business has he to think in the middle of the night?"

"How do you know?"

"He was out, sir--up in the middle of the night. My own eyes saw it."

"But how do you know that he was up to think?" inquired Mr. Jones. "It might have been anything--toothache, for instance. And you may have dreamed it for all I know. Didn't you try to sleep?"

"No, sir. I didn't even try to go to sleep."

Ricardo informed his patron of his vigil on the veranda, and of the revelation which put an end to it. He concluded that a man up with a cigar in the middle of the night must be doing a think.

Mr Jones raised himself on his elbow. This sign of interest comforted his faithful henchman.

"Seems to me it's time we did a little think ourselves," added Ricardo, with more assurance. Long as they had been together the moods of his governor were still a source of anxiety to his simple soul.

"You are always making a fuss," remarked Mr. Jones, in a tolerant tone.

"Ay, but not for nothing, am I? You can't say that, sir. Mine may not be a gentleman's way of looking round a thing, but it isn't a fool's way, either. You've admitted that much yourself at odd times."

Ricardo was growing warmly argumentative. Mr. Jones interrupted him without heat.

"You haven't roused me to talk about yourself, I presume?"

"No, sir." Ricardo remained silent for a minute, with the tip of his tongue caught between his teeth. "I don't think I could tell you anything about myself that you don't know," he continued. There was a sort of amused satisfaction in his tone which changed completely as he went on. "It's that man, over there, that's got to be talked over. I don't like him."

He, failed to observe the flicker of a ghastly smile on his governor's lips.

"Don't you?" murmured Mr. Jones, whose face, as he reclined on his elbow, was on a level with the top of his follower's head.

"No, sir," said Ricardo emphatically. The candle from the other side of the room threw his monstrous black shadow on the wall. "He--I don't know how to say it--he isn't hearty-like."

Mr Jones agreed languidly in his own manner:

"He seems to be a very self-possessed man."

"Ay, that's it. Self--" Ricardo choked with indignation. "I would soon let out some of his self-possession through a hole between his ribs, if this weren't a special job!"

Mr Jones had been making his own reflections, for he asked:

"Do you think he is suspicious?"

"I don't see very well what he can be suspicious of," pondered Ricardo. "Yet

there he was doing a think. And what could be the object of it? What made him get out of his bed in the middle of the night. 'Tain't fleas, surely."

"Bad conscience, perhaps," suggested Mr. Jones jocularly.

His faithful secretary suffered from irritation, and did not see the joke. In a fretful tone he declared that there was no such thing as conscience. There was such a thing as funk; but there was nothing to make that fellow funky in any special way. He admitted, however, that the man might have been uneasy at the arrival of strangers, because of all that plunder of his put away somewhere.

Ricardo glanced here and there, as if he were afraid of being overheard by the heavy shadows cast by the dim light all over the room. His patron, very quiet, spoke in a calm whisper:

"And perhaps that hotel-keeper has been lying to you about him. He may be a very poor devil indeed."

Ricardo shook his head slightly. The Schombergian theory of Heyst had become in him a profound conviction, which he had absorbed as naturally as a sponge takes up water. His patron's doubts were a wanton denying of what was self-evident; but Ricardo's voice remained as before, a soft purring with a snarling undertone.

"I am sup-prised at you, sir! It's the very way them tame ones--the common 'yporcrits of the world--get on. When it comes to plunder drifting under one's very nose, there's not one of them that would keep his hands off. And I don't blame them. It's the way they do it that sets my back up. Just look at the story of how he got rid of that pal of his! Send a man home to croak of a cold on the chest--that's one of your tame tricks. And d'you mean to say, sir, that a man that's up to it wouldn't bag whatever he could lay his hands in his 'yporcritical way? What was all that coal business? Tame citizen dodge; 'yporcrisy--nothing else. No, no, sir! The thing is to extract it from him as neatly as possible. That's the job; and it isn't so simple as it looks. I reckon you have looked at it all round, sir, before you took up the notion of this trip."

"No." Mr. Jones was hardly audible, staring far away from his couch. "I didn't think about it much. I was bored."

"Ay, that you were--bad. I was feeling pretty desperate that afternoon, when that bearded softy of a landlord got talking to me about this fellow here.

Quite accidentally, it was. Well, sir, here we are after a mighty narrow squeak. I feel all limp yet; but never mind--his swag will pay for the lot!"

"He's all alone here," remarked Mr. Jones in a hollow murmur.

"Ye-es, in a way. Yes, alone enough. Yes, you may say he is."

"There's that Chinaman, though."

"Ay, there's the Chink," assented Ricardo rather absentmindedly.

He was debating in his mind the advisability of making a clean breast of his knowledge of the girl's existence. Finally he concluded he wouldn't. The enterprise was difficult enough without complicating it with an upset to the sensibilities of the gentleman with whom he had the honour of being associated. Let the discovery come of itself, he thought, and then he could swear that he had known nothing of that offensive presence.

He did not need to lie. He had only to hold his tongue.

"Yes," he muttered reflectively, "there's that Chink, certainly."

At bottom, he felt a certain ambiguous respect for his governor's exaggerated dislike of women, as if that horror of feminine presence were a sort of depraved morality; but still morality, since he counted it as an advantage. It prevented many undesirable complications. He did not pretend to understand it. He did not even try to investigate this idiosyncrasy of his chief. All he knew was that he himself was differently inclined, and that it did not make him any happier or safer. He did not know how he would have acted if he had been knocking about the world on his own. Luckily he was a subordinate, not a wage-slave but a follower--which was a restraint. Yes! The other sort of disposition simplified matters in general; it wasn't to be gainsaid. But it was clear that it could also complicate them--as in this most important and, in Ricardo's view, already sufficiently delicate case. And the worst of it was that one could not tell exactly in what precise manner it would act.

It was unnatural, he thought somewhat peevishly. How was one to reckon up the unnatural? There were no rules for that. The faithful henchman of plain Mr. Jones, foreseeing many difficulties of a material order, decided to keep the girl out of the governor's knowledge, out of his sight, too, for as long a time as it could be managed. That, alas, seemed to be at most a matter of a few hours; whereas Ricardo feared that to get the affair properly

going would take some days. Once well started, he was not afraid of his gentleman failing him. As is often the case with lawless natures, Ricardo's faith in any given individual was of a simple, unquestioning character. For man must have some support in life.

Cross-legged, his head drooping a little and perfectly still, he might have been meditating in a bonze-like attitude upon the sacred syllable "Om." It was a striking illustration of the untruth of appearances, for his contempt for the world was of a severely practical kind. There was nothing oriental about Ricardo but the amazing quietness of his pose.

Mr. Jones was also very quiet. He had let his head sink on the rolled-up rug, and lay stretched out on his side with his back to the light. In that position the shadows gathered in the cavities of his eyes made them look perfectly empty. When he spoke, his ghostly voice had only to travel a few inches straight into Ricardo's left ear.

"Why don't you say something, now that you've got me awake?"

"I wonder if you were sleeping as sound as you are trying to make out, sir," said the unmoved Ricardo.

"I wonder," repeated Mr. Jones. "At any rate, I was resting quietly!"

"Come, sir!" Ricardo's whisper was alarmed. "You don't mean to say you're going to be bored?"

"No."

"Quite right!" The secretary was very much relieved. "There's no occasion to be, I can tell you, sir," he whispered earnestly. "Anything but that! If I didn't say anything for a bit, it ain't because there isn't plenty to talk about. Ay, more than enough."

"What's the matter with you?" breathed out his patron. "Are you going to turn pessimist?"

"Me turn? No, sir! I ain't of those that turn. You may call me hard names, if you like, but you know very well that I ain't a croaker." Ricardo changed his tone. "If I said nothing for a while, it was because I was meditating over the Chink, sir."

"You were? Waste of time, my Martin. A Chinaman is unfathomable."

Ricardo admitted that this might be so. Anyhow, a Chink was neither here nor there, as a general thing, unfathomable as he might be; but a Swedish baron wasn't--couldn't be! The woods were full of such barons.

"I don't know that he is so tame," was Mr. Jones's remark, in a sepulchral undertone.

"How do you mean, sir? He ain't a rabbit, of course. You couldn't hypnotize him, as I saw you do to more than one Dago, and other kinds of tame citizens, when it came to the point of holding them down to a game."

"Don't you reckon on that," murmured plain Mr. Jones seriously.

"No, sir, I don't, though you have a wonderful power of the eye. It's a fact."

"I have a wonderful patience," remarked Mr. Jones dryly.

A dim smile flitted over the lips of the faithful Ricardo who never raised his head.

"I don't want to try you too much, sir, but this is like no other job we ever turned our minds to."

"Perhaps not. At any rate let us think so."

A weariness with the monotony of life was reflected in the tone of this qualified assent. It jarred on the nerves of the sanguine Ricardo.

"Let us think of the way to go to work," he retorted a little impatiently. "He's a deep one. Just look at the way he treated that chum of his. Did you ever hear of anything so low? And the artfulness of the beast--the dirty, tame artfulness!"

"Don't you start moralizing, Martin," said Mr. Jones warningly. "As far as I can make out the story that German hotel-keeper told you, it seems to show a certain amount of character;--and independence from common feelings which is not usual. It's very remarkable, if true."

"Ay, ay! Very remarkable. It's mighty low down, all the same," muttered, Ricardo obstinately. "I must say I am glad to think he will be paid off for it in a way that'll surprise him!"

The tip of his tongue appeared lively for an instant, as if trying for the taste of that ferocious retribution on his compressed lips. For Ricardo was sincere in his indignation before the elementary principle of loyalty to a chum violated in cold blood, slowly, in a patient duplicity of years. There are standards in villainy as in virtue, and the act as he pictured it to himself acquired an additional horror from the slow pace of that treachery so atrocious and so tame. But he understood too the educated judgement of his governor, a gentleman looking on all this with the privileged detachment of a cultivated mind, of an elevated personality.

"Ay, he's deep--he's artful," he mumbled between his sharp teeth.

"Confound you!" Mr. Jones's calm whisper crept into his ear. "Come to the point."

Obedient, the secretary shook off his thoughtfulness. There was a similarity of mind between these two--one the outcast of his vices, the other inspired by a spirit of scornful defiance, the aggressiveness of a beast of prey looking upon all the tame creatures of the earth as its natural victim. Both were astute enough, however, and both were aware that they had plunged into this adventure without a sufficient scrutiny of detail. The figure of a lonely man far from all assistance had loomed up largely, fascinating and defenceless in the middle of the sea, filling the whole field of their vision. There had not seemed to be any need for thinking. As Schomberg had been saying: "Three to one."

But it did not look so simple now in the face of that solitude which was like an armour for this man. The feeling voiced by the henchman in his own way--"We don't seem much forwarder now we are here" was acknowledged by the silence of the patron. It was easy enough to rip a fellow up or drill a hole in him, whether he was alone or not, Ricardo reflected in low, confidential tones, but--

"He isn't alone," Mr. Jones said faintly, in his attitude of a man composed for sleep. "Don't forget that Chinaman." Ricardo started slightly.

"Oh, ay--the Chink!"

Ricardo had been on the point of confessing about the girl; but no! He wanted his governor to be unperturbed and steady. Vague thoughts, which he hardly dared to look in the face, were stirring his brain in connection with that girl. She couldn't be much account, he thought. She could be frightened. And there were also other possibilities. The Chink, however,

could be considered openly.

"What I was thinking about it, sir," he went on earnestly, "is this--here we've got a man. He's nothing. If he won't be good, he can be made quiet. That's easy. But then there's his plunder. He doesn't carry it in his pocket."

"I hope not," breathed Mr. Jones.

"Same here. It's too big, we know, but if he were alone, he would not feel worried about it overmuch--I mean the safety of the pieces. He would just put the lot into any box or drawer that was handy."

"Would he?"

"Yes, sir. He would keep it under his eye, as it were. Why not? It is natural. A fellow doesn't put his swag underground, unless there's a very good reason for it."

"A very good reason, eh?"

"Yes, sir. What do you think a fellow is--a mole?"

From his experience, Ricardo declared that man was not a burrowing beast. Even the misers very seldom buried their hoard, unless for exceptional reasons. In the given situation of a man alone on an island, the company of a Chink was a very good reason. Drawers would not be safe, nor boxes, either, from a prying, slant-eyed Chink. No, sir, unless a safe--a proper office safe. But the safe was there in the room.

"Is there a safe in this room? I didn't notice it," whispered Mr. Jones.

That was because the thing was painted white, like the walls of the room; and besides, it was tucked away in the shadows of a corner. Mr. Jones had been too tired to observe anything on his first coming ashore; but Ricardo had very soon spotted the characteristic form. He only wished he could believe that the plunder of treachery, duplicity, and all the moral abominations of Heyst had been there. But no; the blamed thing was open.

"It might have been there at one time or another," he commented gloomily, "but it isn't there now."

"The man did not elect to live in this house," remarked Mr. Jones. "And by the by, what could he have meant by speaking of circumstances which

prevented him lodging us in the other bungalow? You remember what he said, Martin? Sounded cryptic."

Martin, who remembered and understood the phrase as directly motived by the existence of the girl, waited a little before saying:

"Some of his artfulness, sir; and not the worst of it either. That manner of his to us, this asking no questions, is some more of his artfulness. A man's bound to be curious, and he is; yet he goes on as if he didn't care. He does care--or else what was he doing up with a cigar in the middle of the night, doing a think? I don't like it."

"He may be outside, observing the light here, and saying the very same thing to himself of our own wakefulness," gravely suggested Ricardo's governor.

"He may be, sir; but this is too important to be talked over in the dark. And the light is all right, it can be accounted for. There's a light in this bungalow in the middle of the night because--why, because you are not well. Not well, sir--that's what's the matter, and you will have to act up to it."

The consideration had suddenly occurred to the faithful henchman, in the light of a felicitous expedient to keep his governor and the girl apart as long as possible. Mr. Jones received the suggestion without the slightest stir, even in the deep sockets of his eyes, where a steady, faint gleam was the only thing telling of life and attention in his attenuated body. But Ricardo, as soon as he had enunciated his happy thought, perceived in it other possibilities more to the point and of greater practical advantage.

"With your looks, sir, it will be easy enough," he went on evenly, as if no silence had intervened, always respectful, but frank, with perfect simplicity of purpose. "All you've got to do is just to lie down quietly. I noticed him looking sort of surprised at you on the wharf, sir."

At these words, a naive tribute to the aspect of his physique, even more suggestive of the grave than of the sick-bed, a fold appeared on that side of the governor's face which was exposed to the dim light--a deep, shadowy, semicircular fold from the side of the nose to bottom of the chin--a silent smile. By a side-glance Ricardo had noted this play of features. He smiled, too, appreciative, encouraged.

"And you as hard as nails all the time," he went on. "Hang me if anybody would believe you aren't sick, if I were to swear myself black in the face! Give us a day or two to look into matters and size up that 'yporcrit."

Ricardo's eyes remained fixed on his crossed shins. The chief, in his lifeless accents, approved.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea."

"The Chink, he's nothing. He can be made quiet any time."

One of Ricardo's hands, reposing palm upwards on his folded legs, made a swift thrusting gesture, repeated by the enormous darting shadow of an arm very low on the wall. It broke the spell of perfect stillness in the room. The secretary eyed moodily the wall from which the shadow had gone. Anybody could be made quiet, he pointed out. It was not anything that the Chink could do; no, it was the effect that his company must have produced on the conduct of the doomed man. A man! What was a man? A Swedish baron could be ripped up, or else holed by a shot, as easily as any other creature; but that was exactly what was to be avoided, till one knew where he had hidden his plunder.

"I shouldn't think it would be some sort of hole in his bungalow," argued Ricardo with real anxiety.

No. A house can be burnt--set on fire accidentally, or on purpose, while a man's asleep. Under the house--or in some crack, cranny, or crevice? Something told him it wasn't that. The anguish of mental effort contracted Ricardo's brow. The skin of his head seemed to move in this travail of vain and tormenting suppositions.

"What did you think a fellow is, sir--a baby?" he said, in answer to Mr. Jones's objections. "I am trying to find out what I would do myself. He wouldn't be likely to be cleverer than I am."

"And what do you know about yourself?"

Mr Jones seemed to watch his follower's perplexities with amusement concealed in a death-like composure.

Ricardo disregarded the question. The material vision of the spoil absorbed all his faculties. A great vision! He seemed to see it. A few small canvas bags tied up with thin cord, their distended rotundity showing the inside pressure of the disk-like forms of coins--gold, solid, heavy, eminently portable. Perhaps steel cash-boxes with a chased design, on the covers; or perhaps a black and brass box with a handle on the top, and full of goodness knows

what. Bank notes? Why not? The fellow had been going home; so it was surely something worth going home with.

"And he may have put it anywhere outside--anywhere!" cried Ricardo in a deadened voice, "in the forest--"

That was it! A temporary darkness replaced the dim light of the room. The darkness of the forest at night and in it the gleam of a lantern, by which a figure is digging at the foot of a tree-trunk. As likely as not, another figure holding that lantern--ha, feminine! The girl!

The prudent Ricardo stifled a picturesque and profane exclamation, partly joy, partly dismay. Had the girl been trusted or mistrusted by that man? Whatever it was, it was bound to be wholly! With women there could be no half-measures. He could not imagine a fellow half-trusting a woman in that intimate relation to himself, and in those particular circumstances of conquest and loneliness where no confidences could appear dangerous since, apparently, there could be no one she could give him away to. Moreover, in nine cases out of ten the woman would be trusted. But, trusted or mistrusted, was her presence a favourable or unfavourable condition of the problem? That was the question!

The temptation to consult his chief, to talk over the weighty fact, and get his opinion on it, was great indeed. Ricardo resisted it; but the agony of his solitary mental conflict was extremely sharp. A woman in a problem is an incalculable quantity, even if you have something to go upon in forming your guess. How much more so when you haven't even once caught sight of her.

Swift as were his mental processes, he felt that a longer silence was inadvisable. He hastened to speak:

"And do you see us, sir, you and I, with a couple of spades having to tackle this whole confounded island?"

He allowed himself a slight movement of the arm. The shadow enlarged it into a sweeping gesture.

"This seems rather discouraging, Martin," murmured the unmoved governor.

"We mustn't be discouraged--that's all!" retorted his henchman. "And after what we had to go through in that boat too! Why it would be--"

He couldn't find the qualifying words. Very calm, faithful, and yet astute, he expressed his new-born hopes darkly.

"Something's sure to turn up to give us a hint; only this job can't be rushed. You may depend on me to pick up the least little bit of a hint; but you, sir--you've got to play him very gently. For the rest you can trust me."

"Yes; but I ask myself what YOU are trusting to."

"Our luck," said the faithful Ricardo. "Don't say a word against that. It might spoil the run of it."

"You are a superstitious beggar. No, I won't say anything against it."

"That's right, sir. Don't you even think lightly of it. Luck's not to be played with."

"Yes, luck's a delicate thing," assented Mr. Jones in a dreamy whisper.

A short silence ensued, which Ricardo ended in a discreet and tentative voice.

"Talking of luck, I suppose he could be made to take a hand with you, sir--two-handed picket or ekkarty, you being seedy and keeping indoors--just to pass the time. For all we know, he may be one of them hot ones once they start--"

"Is it likely?" came coldly from the principal. "Considering what we know of his history--say with his partner."

"True, sir. He's a cold-blooded beast; a cold-blooded, inhuman--"

"And I'll tell you another thing that isn't likely. He would not be likely to let himself be stripped bare. We haven't to do with a young fool that can be led on by chaff or flattery, and in the end simply overawed. This is a calculating man."

Ricardo recognized that clearly. What he had in his mind was something on a small scale, just to keep the enemy busy while he, Ricardo, had time to nose around a bit.

"You could even lose a little money to him, sir," he suggested.

"I could."

Ricardo was thoughtful for a moment.

"He strikes me, too, as the sort of man to start prancing when one didn't expect it. What do you think, sir? Is he a man that would prance? That is, if something startled him. More likely to prance than to run--what?"

The answer came at once, because Mr. Jones understood the peculiar idiom of his faithful follower.

"Oh, without doubt! Without doubt!"

"It does me good to hear that you think so. He's a prancing beast, and so we mustn't startle him--not till I have located the stuff. Afterwards--"

Ricardo paused, sinister in the stillness of his pose. Suddenly he got up with a swift movement and gazed down at his chief in moody abstraction. Mr. Jones did not stir.

"There's one thing that's worrying me," began Ricardo in a subdued voice.

"Only one?" was the faint comment from the motionless body on the bedstead.

"I mean more than all the others put together."

"That's grave news."

"Ay, grave enough. It's this--how do you feel in yourself, sir? Are you likely to get bored? I know them fits come on you suddenly; but surely you can tell--"

"Martin, you are an ass."

The moody face of the secretary brightened up.

"Really, sir? Well, I am quite content to be on these terms--I mean as long as you don't get bored. It wouldn't do, sir."

For coolness, Ricardo had thrown open his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. He moved stealthily across the room, bare-footed, towards the candle, the shadow of his head and shoulders growing bigger behind him on the opposite wall, to which the face of plain Mr. Jones was turned. With a feline

movement, Ricardo glanced over his shoulder at the thin back of the spectre reposing on the bed, and then blew out the candle.

"In fact, I am rather amused, Martin," Mr. Jones said in the dark.

He heard the sound of a slapped thigh and the jubilant exclamation of his henchman:

"Good! That's the way to talk, sir!"