

### CHAPTER III

In the afternoon he lounged into the editorial office, carrying with affected nonchalance that weight of the irremediable he had felt laid on him suddenly in the small hours of the night—that consciousness of something that could no longer be helped. His patronising friend informed him at once that he had made the acquaintance of the Moorsom party last night. At the Dunsters, of course. Dinner.

“Very quiet. Nobody there. It was much better for the business. I say . . .”

Renouard, his hand grasping the back of a chair, stared down at him dumbly.

“Phew! That’s a stunning girl. . . Why do you want to sit on that chair? It’s uncomfortable!”

“I wasn’t going to sit on it.” Renouard walked slowly to the window, glad to find in himself enough self-control to let go the chair instead of raising it on high and bringing it down on the Editor’s head.

“Willie kept on gazing at her with tears in his boiled eyes. You should have seen him bending sentimentally over her at dinner.”

“Don’t,” said Renouard in such an anguished tone that the Editor turned right round to look at his back.

“You push your dislike of young Dunster too far. It’s positively morbid,” he disapproved mildly. “We can’t be all beautiful after thirty. . . . I talked a little, about you mostly, to the professor. He appeared to be interested in the silk plant—if only as a change from the great subject. Miss Moorsom didn’t seem to mind when I confessed to her that I had taken you into the confidence of the thing. Our Willie approved too. Old Dunster with his white beard seemed to give me his blessing. All those people have a great opinion of you, simply because I told them that you’ve led every sort of life one can think of before you got struck on exploration. They want you to make suggestions. What do you think ‘Master Arthur’ is likely to have taken to?”

“Something easy,” muttered Renouard without unclenching his teeth.

“Hunting man. Athlete. Don’t be hard on the chap. He may be riding boundaries, or droving cattle, or humping his swag about the back-blocks away

to the devil—somewhere. He may be even prospecting at the back of beyond—this very moment.”

“Or lying dead drunk in a roadside pub. It’s late enough in the day for that.”

The Editor looked up instinctively. The clock was pointing at a quarter to five. “Yes, it is,” he admitted. “But it needn’t be. And he may have lit out into the Western Pacific all of a sudden—say in a trading schooner. Though I really don’t see in what capacity. Still . . .”

“Or he may be passing at this very moment under this very window.”

“Not he . . . and I wish you would get away from it to where one can see your face. I hate talking to a man’s back. You stand there like a hermit on a sea-shore growling to yourself. I tell you what it is, Geoffrey, you don’t like mankind.”

“I don’t make my living by talking about mankind’s affairs,” Renouard defended himself. But he came away obediently and sat down in the arm-chair. “How can you be so certain that your man isn’t down there in the street?” he asked. “It’s neither more nor less probable than every single one of your other suppositions.”

Placated by Renouard’s docility the Editor gazed at him for a while. “Aha! I’ll tell you how. Learn then that we have begun the campaign. We have telegraphed his description to the police of every township up and down the land. And what’s more we’ve ascertained definitely that he hasn’t been in this town for the last three months at least. How much longer he’s been away we can’t tell.”

“That’s very curious.”

“It’s very simple. Miss Moorsom wrote to him, to the post office here directly she returned to London after her excursion into the country to see the old butler. Well—her letter is still lying there. It has not been called for. Ergo, this town is not his usual abode. Personally, I never thought it was. But he cannot fail to turn up some time or other. Our main hope lies just in the certitude that he must come to town sooner or later. Remember he doesn’t know that the butler is dead, and he will want to inquire for a letter. Well, he’ll find a note from Miss Moorsom.”

Renouard, silent, thought that it was likely enough. His profound distaste for this conversation was betrayed by an air of weariness darkening his energetic sun-tanned features, and by the augmented dreaminess of his eyes. The Editor noted it as a further proof of that immoral detachment from mankind, of that callousness of sentiment fostered by the unhealthy conditions of solitude—

according to his own favourite theory. Aloud he observed that as long as a man had not given up correspondence he could not be looked upon as lost. Fugitive criminals had been tracked in that way by justice, he reminded his friend; then suddenly changed the bearing of the subject somewhat by asking if Renouard had heard from his people lately, and if every member of his large tribe was well and happy.

“Yes, thanks.”

The tone was curt, as if repelling a liberty. Renouard did not like being asked about his people, for whom he had a profound and remorseful affection. He had not seen a single human being to whom he was related, for many years, and he was extremely different from them all.

On the very morning of his arrival from his island he had gone to a set of pigeon-holes in Willie Dunster’s outer office and had taken out from a compartment labelled “Malata” a very small accumulation of envelopes, a few addressed to himself, and one addressed to his assistant, all to the care of the firm, W. Dunster and Co. As opportunity offered, the firm used to send them on to Malata either by a man-of-war schooner going on a cruise, or by some trading craft proceeding that way. But for the last four months there had been no opportunity.

“You going to stay here some time?” asked the Editor, after a longish silence.

Renouard, perfunctorily, did see no reason why he should make a long stay.

“For health, for your mental health, my boy,” rejoined the newspaper man. “To get used to human faces so that they don’t hit you in the eye so hard when you walk about the streets. To get friendly with your kind. I suppose that assistant of yours can be trusted to look after things?”

“There’s the half-caste too. The Portuguese. He knows what’s to be done.”

“Aha!” The Editor looked sharply at his friend. “What’s his name?”

“Who’s name?”

“The assistant’s you picked up on the sly behind my back.”

Renouard made a slight movement of impatience.

“I met him unexpectedly one evening. I thought he would do as well as another. He had come from up country and didn’t seem happy in a town. He told me his

name was Walter. I did not ask him for proofs, you know.”

“I don’t think you get on very well with him.”

“Why? What makes you think so.”

“I don’t know. Something reluctant in your manner when he’s in question.”

“Really. My manner! I don’t think he’s a great subject for conversation, perhaps. Why not drop him?”

“Of course! You wouldn’t confess to a mistake. Not you. Nevertheless I have my suspicions about it.”

Renouard got up to go, but hesitated, looking down at the seated Editor.

“How funny,” he said at last with the utmost seriousness, and was making for the door, when the voice of his friend stopped him.

“You know what has been said of you? That you couldn’t get on with anybody you couldn’t kick. Now, confess—is there any truth in the soft impeachment?”

“No,” said Renouard. “Did you print that in your paper.”

“No. I didn’t quite believe it. But I will tell you what I believe. I believe that when your heart is set on some object you are a man that doesn’t count the cost to yourself or others. And this shall get printed some day.”

“Obituary notice?” Renouard dropped negligently.

“Certain—some day.”

“Do you then regard yourself as immortal?”

“No, my boy. I am not immortal. But the voice of the press goes on for ever. . . . And it will say that this was the secret of your great success in a task where better men than you—meaning no offence—did fail repeatedly.”

“Success,” muttered Renouard, pulling-to the office door after him with considerable energy. And the letters of the word PRIVATE like a row of white eyes seemed to stare after his back sinking down the staircase of that temple of publicity.

Renouard had no doubt that all the means of publicity would be put at the service of love and used for the discovery of the loved man. He did not wish him dead. He did not wish him any harm. We are all equipped with a fund of humanity which is not exhausted without many and repeated provocations—and this man had done him no evil. But before Renouard had left old Dunster's house, at the conclusion of the call he made there that very afternoon, he had discovered in himself the desire that the search might last long. He never really flattered himself that it might fail. It seemed to him that there was no other course in this world for himself, for all mankind, but resignation. And he could not help thinking that Professor Moorsom had arrived at the same conclusion too.

Professor Moorsom, slight frame of middle height, a thoughtful keen head under the thick wavy hair, veiled dark eyes under straight eyebrows, and with an inward gaze which when disengaged and arriving at one seemed to issue from an obscure dream of books, from the limbo of meditation, showed himself extremely gracious to him. Renouard guessed in him a man whom an incurable habit of investigation and analysis had made gentle and indulgent; inapt for action, and more sensitive to the thoughts than to the events of existence. Withal not crushed, sub-ironic without a trace of acidity, and with a simple manner which put people at ease quickly. They had a long conversation on the terrace commanding an extended view of the town and the harbour.

The splendid immobility of the bay resting under his gaze, with its grey spurs and shining indentations, helped Renouard to regain his self-possession, which he had felt shaken, in coming out on the terrace, into the setting of the most powerful emotion of his life, when he had sat within a foot of Miss Moorsom with fire in his breast, a humming in his ears, and in a complete disorder of his mind. There was the very garden seat on which he had been enveloped in the radiant spell. And presently he was sitting on it again with the professor talking of her. Near by the patriarchal Dunster leaned forward in a wicker arm-chair, benign and a little deaf, his big hand to his ear with the innocent eagerness of his advanced age remembering the fires of life.

It was with a sort of apprehension that Renouard looked forward to seeing Miss Moorsom. And strangely enough it resembled the state of mind of a man who fears disenchantment more than sortilege. But he need not have been afraid. Directly he saw her in a distance at the other end of the terrace he shuddered to the roots of his hair. With her approach the power of speech left him for a time. Mrs. Dunster and her aunt were accompanying her. All these people sat down; it was an intimate circle into which Renouard felt himself cordially admitted; and the talk was of the great search which occupied all their minds. Discretion was expected by these people, but of reticence as to the object of the journey there could be no question. Nothing but ways and means and arrangements could be

talked about.

By fixing his eyes obstinately on the ground, which gave him an air of reflective sadness, Renouard managed to recover his self-possession. He used it to keep his voice in a low key and to measure his words on the great subject. And he took care with a great inward effort to make them reasonable without giving them a discouraging complexion. For he did not want the quest to be given up, since it would mean her going away with her two attendant grey-heads to the other side of the world.

He was asked to come again, to come often and take part in the counsels of all these people captivated by the sentimental enterprise of a declared love. On taking Miss Moorsom's hand he looked up, would have liked to say something, but found himself voiceless, with his lips suddenly sealed. She returned the pressure of his fingers, and he left her with her eyes vaguely staring beyond him, an air of listening for an expected sound, and the faintest possible smile on her lips. A smile not for him, evidently, but the reflection of some deep and inscrutable thought.