

CHAPTER IX

Sheltered by the squat headland from the first morning sparkle of the sea the little bay breathed a delicious freshness. The party from the schooner landed at the bottom of the garden. They exchanged insignificant words in studiously casual tones. The professor's sister put up a long-handled eye-glass as if to scan the novel surroundings, but in reality searching for poor Arthur anxiously. Having never seen him otherwise than in his town clothes she had no idea what he would look like. It had been left to the professor to help his ladies out of the boat because Renouard, as if intent on giving directions, had stepped forward at once to meet the half-caste Luiz hurrying down the path. In the distance, in front of the dazzlingly sunlit bungalow, a row of dark-faced house-boys unequal in stature and varied in complexion preserved the immobility of a guard of honour.

Luiz had taken off his soft felt hat before coming within earshot. Renouard bent his head to his rapid talk of domestic arrangements he meant to make for the visitors; another bed in the master's room for the ladies and a cot for the gentleman to be hung in the room opposite where—where Mr. Walter—here he gave a scared look all round—Mr. Walter—had died.

“Very good,” assented Renouard in an even undertone. “And remember what you have to say of him.”

“Yes, master. Only”—he wriggled slightly and put one bare foot on the other for a moment in apologetic embarrassment—“only I—I—don't like to say it.”

Renouard looked at him without anger, without any sort of expression. “Frightened of the dead? Eh? Well—all right. I will say it myself—I suppose once for all. . . .” Immediately he raised his voice very much.

“Send the boys down to bring up the luggage.”

“Yes, master.”

Renouard turned to his distinguished guests who, like a personally conducted party of tourists, had stopped and were looking about them.

“I am sorry,” he began with an impassive face. “My man has just told me that Mr. Walter . . .” he managed to smile, but didn't correct himself . . . “has gone in a trading schooner on a short tour of the islands, to the westward.”

This communication was received in profound silence.

Renouard forgot himself in the thought: "It's done!" But the sight of the string of boys marching up to the house with suit-cases and dressing-bags rescued him from that appalling abstraction.

"All I can do is to beg you to make yourselves at home . . . with what patience you may."

This was so obviously the only thing to do that everybody moved on at once. The professor walked alongside Renouard, behind the two ladies.

"Rather unexpected—this absence."

"Not exactly," muttered Renouard. "A trip has to be made every year to engage labour."

"I see . . . And he . . . How vexingly elusive the poor fellow has become! I'll begin to think that some wicked fairy is favouring this love tale with unpleasant attentions."

Renouard noticed that the party did not seem weighed down by this new disappointment. On the contrary they moved with a freer step. The professor's sister dropped her eye-glass to the end of its chain. Miss Moorsom took the lead. The professor, his lips unsealed, lingered in the open: but Renouard did not listen to that man's talk. He looked after that man's daughter—if indeed that creature of irresistible seductions were a daughter of mortals. The very intensity of his desire, as if his soul were streaming after her through his eyes, defeated his object of keeping hold of her as long as possible with, at least, one of his senses. Her moving outlines dissolved into a misty coloured shimmer of a woman made of flame and shadows, crossing the threshold of his house.

The days which followed were not exactly such as Renouard had feared—yet they were not better than his fears. They were accursed in all the moods they brought him. But the general aspect of things was quiet. The professor smoked innumerable pipes with the air of a worker on his holiday, always in movement and looking at things with that mysteriously sagacious aspect of men who are admittedly wiser than the rest of the world. His white head of hair—whiter than anything within the horizon except the broken water on the reefs—was glimpsed in every part of the plantation always on the move under the white parasol. And once he climbed the headland and appeared suddenly to those below, a white speck elevated in the blue, with a diminutive but statuesque effect.

Felicia Moorsom remained near the house. Sometimes she could be seen with a despairing expression scribbling rapidly in her lock-up dairy. But only for a moment. At the sound of Renouard's footsteps she would turn towards him her beautiful face, adorable in that calm which was like a wilful, like a cruel ignoring of her tremendous power. Whenever she sat on the verandah, on a chair more specially reserved for her use, Renouard would stroll up and sit on the steps near her, mostly silent, and often not trusting himself to turn his glance on her. She, very still with her eyes half-closed, looked down on his head—so that to a beholder (such as Professor Moorsom, for instance) she would appear to be turning over in her mind profound thoughts about that man sitting at her feet, his shoulders bowed a little, his hands listless—as if vanquished. And, indeed, the moral poison of falsehood has such a decomposing power that Renouard felt his old personality turn to dead dust. Often, in the evening, when they sat outside conversing languidly in the dark, he felt that he must rest his forehead on her feet and burst into tears.

The professor's sister suffered from some little strain caused by the unstability of her own feelings toward Renouard. She could not tell whether she really did dislike him or not. At times he appeared to her most fascinating; and, though he generally ended by saying something shockingly crude, she could not resist her inclination to talk with him—at least not always. One day when her niece had left them alone on the verandah she leaned forward in her chair—speckless, resplendent, and, in her way, almost as striking a personality as her niece, who did not resemble her in the least. "Dear Felicia has inherited her hair and the greatest part of her appearance from her mother," the maiden lady used to tell people.

She leaned forward then, confidentially.

"Oh! Mr. Renouard! Haven't you something comforting to say?"

He looked up, as surprised as if a voice from heaven had spoken with this perfect society intonation, and by the puzzled profundity of his blue eyes fluttered the wax-flower of refined womanhood. She continued. "For—I can speak to you openly on this tiresome subject—only think what a terrible strain this hope deferred must be for Felicia's heart—for her nerves."

"Why speak to me about it," he muttered feeling half choked suddenly.

"Why! As a friend—a well-wisher—the kindest of hosts. I am afraid we are really eating you out of house and home." She laughed a little. "Ah! When, when will this suspense be relieved! That poor lost Arthur! I confess that I am almost afraid of the great moment. It will be like seeing a ghost."

“Have you ever seen a ghost?” asked Renouard, in a dull voice.

She shifted her hands a little. Her pose was perfect in its ease and middle-aged grace.

“Not actually. Only in a photograph. But we have many friends who had the experience of apparitions.”

“Ah! They see ghosts in London,” mumbled Renouard, not looking at her.

“Frequently—in a certain very interesting set. But all sorts of people do. We have a friend, a very famous author—his ghost is a girl. One of my brother’s intimates is a very great man of science. He is friendly with a ghost . . . Of a girl too,” she added in a voice as if struck for the first time by the coincidence. “It is the photograph of that apparition which I have seen. Very sweet. Most interesting. A little cloudy naturally. . . . Mr. Renouard! I hope you are not a sceptic. It’s so consoling to think. . . .”

“Those plantation boys of mine see ghosts too,” said Renouard grimly.

The sister of the philosopher sat up stiffly. What crudeness! It was always so with this strange young man.

“Mr. Renouard! How can you compare the superstitious fancies of your horrible savages with the manifestations”

Words failed her. She broke off with a very faint primly angry smile. She was perhaps the more offended with him because of that flutter at the beginning of the conversation. And in a moment with perfect tact and dignity she got up from her chair and left him alone.

Renouard didn’t even look up. It was not the displeasure of the lady which deprived him of his sleep that night. He was beginning to forget what simple, honest sleep was like. His hammock from the ship had been hung for him on a side verandah, and he spent his nights in it on his back, his hands folded on his chest, in a sort of half conscious, oppressed stupor. In the morning he watched with unseeing eyes the headland come out a shapeless inkblot against the thin light of the false dawn, pass through all the stages of daybreak to the deep purple of its outlined mass nimbed gloriously with the gold of the rising sun. He listened to the vague sounds of waking within the house: and suddenly he became aware of Luiz standing by the hammock—obviously troubled.

“What’s the matter?”

“Tse! Tse! Tse!”

“Well, what now? Trouble with the boys?”

“No, master. The gentleman when I take him his bath water he speak to me. He ask me—he ask—when, when, I think Mr. Walter, he come back.”

The half-caste’s teeth chattered slightly. Renouard got out of the hammock.

“And he is here all the time—eh?”

Luiz nodded a scared affirmative, but at once protested, “I no see him. I never. Not I! The ignorant wild boys say they see . . . Something! Ough!”

He clapped his teeth on another short rattle, and stood there, shrunk, blighted, like a man in a freezing blast.

“And what did you say to the gentleman?”

“I say I don’t know—and I clear out. I—I don’t like to speak of him.”

“All right. We shall try to lay that poor ghost,” said Renouard gloomily, going off to a small hut near by to dress. He was saying to himself: “This fellow will end by giving me away. The last thing that I . . . No! That mustn’t be.” And feeling his hand being forced he discovered the whole extent of his cowardice.