

## CHAPTER X

That morning wandering about his plantation, more like a frightened soul than its creator and master, he dodged the white parasol bobbing up here and there like a buoy adrift on a sea of dark-green plants. The crop promised to be magnificent, and the fashionable philosopher of the age took other than a merely scientific interest in the experiment. His investments were judicious, but he had always some little money lying by, for experiments.

After lunch, being left alone with Renouard, he talked a little of cultivation and such matters. Then suddenly:

“By the way, is it true what my sister tells me, that your plantation boys have been disturbed by a ghost?”

Renouard, who since the ladies had left the table was not keeping such a strict watch on himself, came out of his abstraction with a start and a stiff smile.

“My foreman had some trouble with them during my absence. They funk working in a certain field on the slope of the hill.”

“A ghost here!” exclaimed the amused professor. “Then our whole conception of the psychology of ghosts must be revised. This island has been uninhabited probably since the dawn of ages. How did a ghost come here. By air or water? And why did it leave its native haunts. Was it from misanthropy? Was he expelled from some community of spirits?”

Renouard essayed to respond in the same tone. The words died on his lips. Was it a man or a woman ghost, the professor inquired.

“I don’t know.” Renouard made an effort to appear at ease. He had, he said, a couple of Tahitian amongst his boys—a ghost-ridden race. They had started the scare. They had probably brought their ghost with them.

“Let us investigate the matter, Renouard,” proposed the professor half in earnest. “We may make some interesting discoveries as to the state of primitive minds, at any rate.”

This was too much. Renouard jumped up and leaving the room went out and walked about in front of the house. He would allow no one to force his hand. Presently the professor joined him outside. He carried his parasol, but had

neither his book nor his pipe with him. Amiably serious he laid his hand on his “dear young friend’s” arm.

“We are all of us a little strung up,” he said. “For my part I have been like sister Anne in the story. But I cannot see anything coming. Anything that would be the least good for anybody—I mean.”

Renouard had recovered sufficiently to murmur coldly his regret of this waste of time. For that was what, he supposed, the professor had in his mind.

“Time,” mused Professor Moorsom. “I don’t know that time can be wasted. But I will tell you, my dear friend, what this is: it is an awful waste of life. I mean for all of us. Even for my sister, who has got a headache and is gone to lie down.”

He shook gently Renouard’s arm. “Yes, for all of us! One may meditate on life endlessly, one may even have a poor opinion of it—but the fact remains that we have only one life to live. And it is short. Think of that, my young friend.”

He released Renouard’s arm and stepped out of the shade opening his parasol. It was clear that there was something more in his mind than mere anxiety about the date of his lectures for fashionable audiences. What did the man mean by his confounded platitudes? To Renouard, scared by Luiz in the morning (for he felt that nothing could be more fatal than to have his deception unveiled otherwise than by personal confession), this talk sounded like encouragement or a warning from that man who seemed to him to be very brazen and very subtle. It was like being bullied by the dead and cajoled by the living into a throw of dice for a supreme stake.

Renouard went away to some distance from the house and threw himself down in the shade of a tree. He lay there perfectly still with his forehead resting on his folded arms, light-headed and thinking. It seemed to him that he must be on fire, then that he had fallen into a cool whirlpool, a smooth funnel of water swirling about with nauseating rapidity. And then (it must have been a reminiscence of his boyhood) he was walking on the dangerous thin ice of a river, unable to turn back. . . . Suddenly it parted from shore to shore with a loud crack like the report of a gun.

With one leap he found himself on his feet. All was peace, stillness, sunshine. He walked away from there slowly. Had he been a gambler he would have perhaps been supported in a measure by the mere excitement. But he was not a gambler. He had always disdained that artificial manner of challenging the fates. The bungalow came into view, bright and pretty, and all about everything was peace, stillness, sunshine. . . .

While he was plodding towards it he had a disagreeable sense of the dead man's company at his elbow. The ghost! He seemed to be everywhere but in his grave. Could one ever shake him off? he wondered. At that moment Miss Moorsom came out on the verandah; and at once, as if by a mystery of radiating waves, she roused a great tumult in his heart, shook earth and sky together—but he plodded on. Then like a grave song-note in the storm her voice came to him ominously.

“Ah! Mr. Renouard. . .” He came up and smiled, but she was very serious. “I can't keep still any longer. Is there time to walk up this headland and back before dark?”

The shadows were lying lengthened on the ground; all was stillness and peace. “No,” said Renouard, feeling suddenly as steady as a rock. “But I can show you a view from the central hill which your father has not seen. A view of reefs and of broken water without end, and of great wheeling clouds of sea-birds.”

She came down the verandah steps at once and they moved off. “You go first,” he proposed, “and I'll direct you. To the left.”

She was wearing a short nankin skirt, a muslin blouse; he could see through the thin stuff the skin of her shoulders, of her arms. The noble delicacy of her neck caused him a sort of transport. “The path begins where these three palms are. The only palms on the island.”

“I see.”

She never turned her head. After a while she observed: “This path looks as if it had been made recently.”

“Quite recently,” he assented very low.

They went on climbing steadily without exchanging another word; and when they stood on the top she gazed a long time before her. The low evening mist veiled the further limit of the reefs. Above the enormous and melancholy confusion, as of a fleet of wrecked islands, the restless myriads of sea-birds rolled and unrolled dark ribbons on the sky, gathered in clouds, soared and stooped like a play of shadows, for they were too far for them to hear their cries.

Renouard broke the silence in low tones.

“They'll be settling for the night presently.” She made no sound. Round them all was peace and declining sunshine. Near by, the topmost pinnacle of Malata,

resembling the top of a buried tower, rose a rock, weather-worn, grey, weary of watching the monotonous centuries of the Pacific. Renouard leaned his shoulders against it. Felicia Moorsom faced him suddenly, her splendid black eyes full on his face as though she had made up her mind at last to destroy his wits once and for all. Dazzled, he lowered his eyelids slowly.

“Mr. Renouard! There is something strange in all this. Tell me where he is?”

He answered deliberately.

“On the other side of this rock. I buried him there myself.”

She pressed her hands to her breast, struggled for her breath for a moment, then: “Ohhh! . . . You buried him! . . . What sort of man are you? . . . You dared not tell! . . . He is another of your victims? . . . You dared not confess that evening. . . . You must have killed him. What could he have done to you? . . . You fastened on him some atrocious quarrel and . . .”

Her vengeful aspect, her poignant cries left him as unmoved as the weary rock against which he leaned. He only raised his eyelids to look at her and lowered them slowly. Nothing more. It silenced her. And as if ashamed she made a gesture with her hand, putting away from her that thought. He spoke, quietly ironic at first.

“Ha! the legendary Renouard of sensitive idiots—the ruthless adventurer—the ogre with a future. That was a parrot cry, Miss Moorsom. I don’t think that the greatest fool of them all ever dared hint such a stupid thing of me that I killed men for nothing. No, I had noticed this man in a hotel. He had come from up country I was told, and was doing nothing. I saw him sitting there lonely in a corner like a sick crow, and I went over one evening to talk to him. Just on impulse. He wasn’t impressive. He was pitiful. My worst enemy could have told you he wasn’t good enough to be one of Renouard’s victims. It didn’t take me long to judge that he was drugging himself. Not drinking. Drugs.”

“Ah! It’s now that you are trying to murder him,” she cried.

“Really. Always the Renouard of shopkeepers’ legend. Listen! I would never have been jealous of him. And yet I am jealous of the air you breathe, of the soil you tread on, of the world that sees you—moving free—not mine. But never mind. I rather liked him. For a certain reason I proposed he should come to be my assistant here. He said he believed this would save him. It did not save him from death. It came to him as it were from nothing—just a fall. A mere slip and tumble of ten feet into a ravine. But it seems he had been hurt before up-

country—by a horse. He ailed and ailed. No, he was not a steel-tipped man. And his poor soul seemed to have been damaged too. It gave way very soon.”

“This is tragic!” Felicia Moorsom whispered with feeling. Renouard’s lips twitched, but his level voice continued mercilessly.

“That’s the story. He rallied a little one night and said he wanted to tell me something. I, being a gentleman, he said, he could confide in me. I told him that he was mistaken. That there was a good deal of a plebeian in me, that he couldn’t know. He seemed disappointed. He muttered something about his innocence and something that sounded like a curse on some woman, then turned to the wall and—just grew cold.”

“On a woman,” cried Miss Moorsom indignantly. “What woman?”

“I wonder!” said Renouard, raising his eyes and noting the crimson of her earlobes against the live whiteness of her complexion, the sombre, as if secret, night-splendour of her eyes under the writhing flames of her hair. “Some woman who wouldn’t believe in that poor innocence of his. . . Yes. You probably. And now you will not believe in me—not even in me who must in truth be what I am—even to death. No! You won’t. And yet, Felicia, a woman like you and a man like me do not often come together on this earth.”

The flame of her glorious head scorched his face. He flung his hat far away, and his suddenly lowered eyelids brought out startlingly his resemblance to antique bronze, the profile of Pallas, still, austere, bowed a little in the shadow of the rock. “Oh! If you could only understand the truth that is in me!” he added.

She waited, as if too astounded to speak, till he looked up again, and then with unnatural force as if defending herself from some unspoken aspersion, “It’s I who stand for truth here! Believe in you! In you, who by a heartless falsehood—and nothing else, nothing else, do you hear?—have brought me here, deceived, cheated, as in some abominable farce!” She sat down on a boulder, rested her chin in her hands, in the pose of simple grief—mourning for herself.

“It only wanted this. Why! Oh! Why is it that ugliness, ridicule, and baseness must fall across my path.”

On that height, alone with the sky, they spoke to each other as if the earth had fallen away from under their feet.

“Are you grieving for your dignity? He was a mediocre soul and could have given you but an unworthy existence.”

She did not even smile at those words, but, superb, as if lifting a corner of the veil, she turned on him slowly.

“And do you imagine I would have devoted myself to him for such a purpose! Don’t you know that reparation was due to him from me? A sacred debt—a fine duty. To redeem him would not have been in my power—I know it. But he was blameless, and it was for me to come forward. Don’t you see that in the eyes of the world nothing could have rehabilitated him so completely as his marriage with me? No word of evil could be whispered of him after I had given him my hand. As to giving myself up to anything less than the shaping of a man’s destiny—if I thought I could do it I would abhor myself. . . .” She spoke with authority in her deep fascinating, unemotional voice. Renouard meditated, gloomy, as if over some sinister riddle of a beautiful sphinx met on the wild road of his life.

“Yes. Your father was right. You are one of these aristocrats . . .”

She drew herself up haughtily.

“What do you say? My father! . . . I an aristocrat.”

“Oh! I don’t mean that you are like the men and women of the time of armours, castles, and great deeds. Oh, no! They stood on the naked soil, had traditions to be faithful to, had their feet on this earth of passions and death which is not a hothouse. They would have been too plebeian for you since they had to lead, to suffer with, to understand the commonest humanity. No, you are merely of the topmost layer, disdainful and superior, the mere pure froth and bubble on the inscrutable depths which some day will toss you out of existence. But you are you! You are you! You are the eternal love itself—only, O Divinity, it isn’t your body, it is your soul that is made of foam.”

She listened as if in a dream. He had succeeded so well in his effort to drive back the flood of his passion that his life itself seemed to run with it out of his body. At that moment he felt as one dead speaking. But the headlong wave returning with tenfold force flung him on her suddenly, with open arms and blazing eyes. She found herself like a feather in his grasp, helpless, unable to struggle, with her feet off the ground. But this contact with her, maddening like too much felicity, destroyed its own end. Fire ran through his veins, turned his passion to ashes, burnt him out and left him empty, without force—almost without desire. He let her go before she could cry out. And she was so used to the forms of repression enveloping, softening the crude impulses of old humanity that she no longer believed in their existence as if it were an exploded legend. She did not

recognise what had happened to her. She came safe out of his arms, without a struggle, not even having felt afraid.

“What’s the meaning of this?” she said, outraged but calm in a scornful way.

He got down on his knees in silence, bent low to her very feet, while she looked down at him, a little surprised, without animosity, as if merely curious to see what he would do. Then, while he remained bowed to the ground pressing the hem of her skirt to his lips, she made a slight movement. He got up.

“No,” he said. “Were you ever so much mine what could I do with you without your consent? No. You don’t conquer a wraith, cold mist, stuff of dreams, illusion. It must come to you and cling to your breast. And then! Oh! And then!”

All ecstasy, all expression went out of his face.

“Mr. Renouard,” she said, “though you can have no claim on my consideration after having decoyed me here for the vile purpose, apparently, of gloating over me as your possible prey, I will tell you that I am not perhaps the extraordinary being you think I am. You may believe me. Here I stand for truth itself.”

“What’s that to me what you are?” he answered. “At a sign from you I would climb up to the seventh heaven to bring you down to earth for my own—and if I saw you steeped to the lips in vice, in crime, in mud, I would go after you, take you to my arms—wear you for an incomparable jewel on my breast. And that’s love—true love—the gift and the curse of the gods. There is no other.”

The truth vibrating in his voice made her recoil slightly, for she was not fit to hear it—not even a little—not even one single time in her life. It was revolting to her; and in her trouble, perhaps prompted by the suggestion of his name or to soften the harshness of expression, for she was obscurely moved, she spoke to him in French.

“Assez! J’ai horreur de tout cela,” she said.

He was white to his very lips, but he was trembling no more. The dice had been cast, and not even violence could alter the throw. She passed by him unbendingly, and he followed her down the path. After a time she heard him saying:

“And your dream is to influence a human destiny?”

“Yes!” she answered curtly, unabashed, with a woman’s complete assurance.

“Then you may rest content. You have done it.”

She shrugged her shoulders slightly. But just before reaching the end of the path she relented, stopped, and went back to him.

“I don’t suppose you are very anxious for people to know how near you came to absolute turpitude. You may rest easy on that point. I shall speak to my father, of course, and we will agree to say that he has died—nothing more.”

“Yes,” said Renouard in a lifeless voice. “He is dead. His very ghost shall be done with presently.”

She went on, but he remained standing stock still in the dusk. She had already reached the three palms when she heard behind her a loud peal of laughter, cynical and joyless, such as is heard in smoking-rooms at the end of a scandalous story. It made her feel positively faint for a moment.