CHAPTER FIVE

Davidson happened to be two days late on his return trip; no great matter, certainly, but he made a point of going ashore at once, during the hottest hour of the afternoon, to look for Heyst. Schomberg's hotel stood back in an extensive enclosure containing a garden, some large trees, and, under their spreading boughs, a detached "hall available for concerts and other performances," as Schomberg worded it in his advertisements. Torn, and fluttering bills, intimating in heavy red capitals CONCERTS EVERY NIGHT, were stuck on the brick pillars on each side of the gateway.

The walk had been long and confoundedly sunny. Davidson stood wiping his wet neck and face on what Schomberg called "the piazza." Several doors opened on to it, but all the screens were down. Not a soul was in sight, not even a China boy—nothing but a lot of painted iron chairs and tables. Solitude, shade, and gloomy silence—and a faint, treacherous breeze which came from under the trees and quite unexpectedly caused the melting Davidson to shiver slightly—the little shiver of the tropics which in Sourabaya, especially, often means fever and the hospital to the incautious white man.

The prudent Davidson sought shelter in the nearest darkened room. In the artificial dusk, beyond the levels of shrouded billiard-tables, a white form heaved up from two chairs on which it had been extended. The middle of the day, table d'hote tiffin once over, was Schomberg's easy time. He lounged out, portly, deliberate, on the defensive, the great fair beard like a cuirass over his manly chest. He did not like Davidson, never a very faithful client of his. He hit a bell on one of the tables as he went by, and asked in a distant, Officer-in-Reserve manner:

"You desire?"

The good Davidson, still sponging his wet neck, declared with simplicity that he had come to fetch away Heyst, as agreed.

"Not here!"

A Chinaman appeared in response to the bell. Schomberg turned to him very severely:

"Take the gentleman's order."

Davidson had to be going. Couldn't wait—only begged that Heyst should be informed that the Sissie would leave at midnight.

"Not—here, I am telling you!"

Davidson slapped his thigh in concern.

"Dear me! Hospital, I suppose." A natural enough surmise in a very feverish locality.

The Lieutenant of the Reserve only pursed up his mouth and raised his eyebrows without looking at him. It might have meant anything, but Davidson dismissed the hospital idea with confidence. However, he had to get hold of Heyst between this and midnight:

“He has been staying here?” he asked.

“Yes, he was staying here.”

“Can you tell me where he is now?” Davidson went on placidly. Within himself he was beginning to grow anxious, having developed the affection of a self-appointed protector towards Heyst. The answer he got was:

“Can't tell. It's none of my business,” accompanied by majestic oscillations of the hotel-keeper's head, hinting at some awful mystery.

Davidson was placidity itself. It was his nature. He did not betray his sentiments, which were not favourable to Schomberg.

“I am sure to find out at the Tesmans' office,” he thought. But it was a very hot hour, and if Heyst was down at the port he would have learned already that the Sissie was in. It was even possible that Heyst had already gone on board, where he could enjoy a coolness denied to the town. Davidson, being stout, was much preoccupied with coolness and inclined to immobility. He lingered awhile, as if irresolute. Schomberg, at the door, looking out, affected perfect indifference. He could not keep it up, though. Suddenly he turned inward and asked with brusque rage:

“You wanted to see him?”

“Why, yes,” said Davidson. “We agreed to meet—”

“Don't you bother. He doesn't care about that now.”

“Doesn't he?”

“Well, you can judge for yourself. He isn't here, is he? You take my word for it. Don't you bother about him. I am advising you as a friend.”

“Thank you,” said, Davidson, inwardly startled at the savage tone. “I think I will sit down for a moment and have a drink, after all.”

This was not what Schomberg had expected to hear. He called brutally:

“Boy!”

The Chinaman approached, and after referring him to the white man by a nod the hotel-keeper departed, muttering to himself. Davidson heard him gnash his teeth as he went.

Davidson sat alone with the billiard-tables as if there had been not a soul staying in the hotel. His placidity was so genuine that he was not unduly, fretting himself over the absence of Heyst, or the mysterious manners Schomberg had treated him to. He was considering these things in his own fairly shrewd way.

Something had happened; and he was loath to go away to investigate, being restrained by a presentiment that somehow enlightenment would come to him there. A poster of CONCERTS EVERY EVENING, like those on the gate, but in a good state of preservation, hung on the wall fronting him. He looked at it idly and was struck by the fact—then not so very common—that it was a ladies' orchestra; “Zangiacomo's eastern tour—eighteen performers.” The poster stated that they had had the honour of playing their select repertoire before various colonial excellencies, also before pashas, sheiks, chiefs, H. H. the Sultan of Mascate, etc., etc.

Davidson felt sorry for the eighteen lady-performers. He knew what that sort of life was like, the sordid conditions and brutal incidents of such tours led by such Zangiacomos who often were anything but musicians by profession. While he was staring at the poster, a door somewhere at his back opened, and a woman came in who was looked upon as Schomberg's wife, no doubt with truth. As somebody remarked cynically once, she was too unattractive to be anything else. The opinion that he treated her abominably was based on her frightened expression. Davidson lifted his hat to her. Mrs. Schomberg gave him an inclination of her sallow head and incontinently sat down behind a sort of raised counter, facing the door, with a mirror and rows of bottles at her back. Her hair was very elaborately done with two ringlets on the left side of her scraggy neck; her dress was of silk, and she had come on duty for the afternoon. For some reason or other Schomberg exacted this from her, though she added nothing to the fascinations of the place. She sat there in the smoke and noise, like an enthroned idol, smiling stupidly over the billiards from time to time, speaking to no one, and no one speaking to her. Schomberg himself took no more interest in her than may be implied in a sudden and totally unmotived scowl. Otherwise the very Chinamen ignored her existence.

She had interrupted Davidson in his reflections. Being alone with her, her silence and open-eyed immobility made him uncomfortable. He was easily sorry for people. It seemed rude not to take any notice of her. He said, in allusion to the poster:

“Are you having these people in the house?”

She was so unused to being addressed by customers that at the sound of his voice she jumped in her seat. Davidson was telling us afterwards that she jumped exactly like a figure made of wood, without losing her rigid immobility. She did not even move her eyes; but she answered him freely, though her very lips seemed made of wood.

“They stayed here over a month. They are gone now. They played every evening.”

“Pretty good, were they?”

To this she said nothing; and as she kept on staring fixedly in front of her, her silence disconcerted Davidson. It looked as if she had not heard him—which was impossible. Perhaps she drew the line of speech at the expression of opinions. Schomberg might have trained her, for domestic reasons, to keep them to herself. But Davidson felt in honour obliged to converse; so he said, putting his own interpretation on this surprising silence:

"I see—not much account. Such bands hardly ever are. An Italian lot, Mrs. Schomberg, to judge by the name of the boss?"

She shook her head negatively.

"No. He is a German really; only he dyes his hair and beard black for business. Zangiacomo is his business name."

"That's a curious fact," said Davidson. His head being full of Heyst, it occurred to him that she might be aware of other facts. This was a very amazing discovery to anyone who looked at Mrs. Schomberg. Nobody had ever suspected her of having a mind. I mean even a little of it, I mean any at all. One was inclined to think of her as an It—an automaton, a very plain dummy, with an arrangement for bowing the head at times and smiling stupidly now and then. Davidson viewed her profile with a flattened nose, a hollow cheek, and one staring, unwinking, goggle eye. He asked himself: Did that speak just now? Will it speak again? It was as exciting, for the mere wonder of it, as trying to converse with a mechanism. A smile played about the fat features of Davidson; the smile of a man making an amusing experiment. He spoke again to her:

"But the other members of that orchestra were real Italians, were they not?"

Of course, he didn't care. He wanted to see whether the mechanism would work again. It did. It said they were not. They were of all sorts, apparently. It paused, with the one goggle eye immovably gazing down the whole length of the room and through the door opening on to the "piazza." It paused, then went on in the same low pitch:

"There was even one English girl."

"Poor devil!"—said Davidson, "I suppose these women are not much better than slaves really. Was that fellow with the dyed beard decent in his way?"

The mechanism remained silent. The sympathetic soul of Davidson drew its own conclusions.

"Beastly life for these women!" he said. "When you say an English girl, Mrs. Schomberg, do you really mean a young girl? Some of these orchestra girls are no chicks."

"Young enough," came the low voice out of Mrs. Schomberg's unmoved physiognomy.

Davidson, encouraged, remarked that he was sorry for her. He was easily sorry for people.

“Where did they go to from here?” he asked.

“She did not go with them. She ran away.”

This was the pronouncement Davidson obtained next. It introduced a new sort of interest.

“Well! Well!” he exclaimed placidly; and then, with the air of a man who knows life: “Who with?” he inquired with assurance.

Mrs. Schomberg's immobility gave her an appearance of listening intently. Perhaps she was really listening; but Schomberg must have been finishing his sleep in some distant part of the house. The silence was profound, and lasted long enough to become startling. Then, enthroned above Davidson, she whispered at last:

“That friend of yours.”

“Oh, you know I am here looking for a friend,” said Davidson hopefully. “Won't you tell me—”

“I've told you”

“Eh?”

A mist seemed to roll away from before Davidson's eyes, disclosing something he could not believe.

“You can't mean it!” he cried. “He's not the man for it.” But the last words came out in a faint voice. Mrs. Schomberg never moved her head the least bit. Davidson, after the shock which made him sit up, went slack all over.

“Heyst! Such a perfect gentleman!” he exclaimed weakly.

Mrs. Schomberg did not seem to have heard him. This startling fact did not tally somehow with the idea Davidson had of Heyst. He never talked of women, he never seemed to think of them, or to remember that they existed; and then all at once—like this! Running off with a casual orchestra girl!

“You might have knocked me down with a feather,” Davidson told us some time afterwards.

By then he was taking an indulgent view of both the parties to that amazing transaction. First of all, on reflection, he was by no means certain that it prevented Heyst from being a perfect gentleman, as before. He confronted our open grins or quiet smiles with a serious round face. Heyst had taken the girl away to Samburan; and that was no joking matter. The loneliness, the ruins of the spot, had impressed Davidson's simple soul. They were incompatible with the frivolous comments of people who had not seen it. That black jetty, sticking out of the jungle into the empty sea; these roof-ridges of deserted houses peeping

dismally above the long grass! Ough! The gigantic and funereal blackboard sign of the Tropical Belt Coal Company, still emerging from a wild growth of bushes like an inscription stuck above a grave figured by the tall heap of unsold coal at the shore end of the wharf, added to the general desolation.

Thus was the sensitive Davidson. The girl must have been miserable indeed to follow such a strange man to such a spot. Heyst had, no doubt, told her the truth. He was a gentleman. But no words could do justice to the conditions of life on Samburan. A desert island was nothing to it. Moreover, when you were cast away on a desert island—why, you could not help yourself; but to expect a fiddle-playing girl out of an ambulant ladies' orchestra to remain content there for a day, for one single day, was inconceivable. She would be frightened at the first sight of it. She would scream.

The capacity for sympathy in these stout, placid men! Davidson was stirred to the depths; and it was easy to see that it was about Heyst that he was concerned. We asked him if he had passed that way lately.

"Oh, yes. I always do—about half a mile off."

"Seen anybody about?"

"No, not a soul. Not a shadow."

"Did you blow your whistle?"

"Blow the whistle? You think I would do such a thing?"

He rejected the mere possibility of such an unwarrantable intrusion. Wonderfully delicate fellow, Davidson!

"Well, but how do you know that they are there?" he was naturally asked.

Heyst had entrusted Mrs. Schomberg with a message for Davidson—a few lines in pencil on a scrap of crumpled paper. It was to the effect: that an unforeseen necessity was driving him away before the appointed time. He begged Davidson's indulgence for the apparent discourtesy. The woman of the house—meaning Mrs. Schomberg—would give him the facts, though unable to explain them, of course.

"What was there to explain?" wondered Davidson dubiously.

"He took a fancy to that fiddle-playing girl, and—"

"And she to him, apparently," I suggested.

"Wonderfully quick work," reflected Davidson. "What do you think will come of it?"

"Repentance, I should say. But how is it that Mrs. Schomberg has been selected for a confidante?"

For indeed a waxwork figure would have seemed more useful than that woman whom we all were accustomed to see sitting elevated above the two billiard-tables—without expression, without movement, without voice, without sight.

"Why, she helped the girl to bolt," said Davidson turning at me his innocent eyes, rounded by the state of constant amazement in which this affair had left him, like those shocks of terror or sorrow which sometimes leave their victim afflicted by nervous trembling. It looked as though he would never get over it.

"Mrs. Schomberg jerked Heyst's note, twisted like a pipe-light, into my lap while I sat there unsuspecting," Davidson went on. "Directly I had recovered my senses, I asked her what on earth she had to do with it that Heyst should leave it with her. And then, behaving like a painted image rather than a live woman, she whispered, just loud enough for me to hear:

"I helped them. I got her things together, tied them up in my own shawl, and threw them into the compound out of a back window. I did it."

"That woman that you would say hadn't the pluck to lift her little finger!" marvelled Davidson in his quiet, slightly panting voice. "What do you think of that?"

I thought she must have had some interest of her own to serve. She was too lifeless to be suspected of impulsive compassion. It was impossible to think that Heyst had bribed her. Whatever means he had, he had not the means to do that. Or could it be that she was moved by that disinterested passion for delivering a woman to a man which in respectable spheres is called matchmaking?—a highly irregular example of it!

"It must have been a very small bundle," remarked Davidson further.

"I imagine the girl must have been specially attractive," I said.

"I don't know. She was miserable. I don't suppose it was more than a little linen and a couple of those white frocks they wear on the platform."

Davidson pursued his own train of thought. He supposed that such a thing had never been heard of in the history of the tropics. For where could you find anyone to steal a girl out of an orchestra? No doubt fellows here and there took a fancy to some pretty one—but it was not for running away with her. Oh dear no! It needed a lunatic like Heyst.

"Only think what it means," wheezed Davidson, imaginative under his invincible placidity. "Just only try to think! Brooding alone on Samburan has upset his brain. He never stopped to consider, or he couldn't have done it. No sane man . . . How is a thing like that to go on? What's he going to do with her in the end? It's madness."

"You say that he's mad. Schomberg tells us that he must be starving on his island; so he may end yet by eating her," I suggested.

Mrs. Schomberg had had no time to enter into details, Davidson told us. Indeed, the wonder was that they had been left alone so long. The drowsy afternoon was slipping by. Footsteps and voices resounded on the veranda—I beg pardon, the piazza; the scraping of chairs, the ping of a smitten bell. Customers were turning up. Mrs. Schomberg was begging Davidson hurriedly, but without looking at him, to say nothing to anyone, when on a half-uttered word her nervous whisper was cut short. Through a small inner door Schomberg came in, his hair brushed, his beard combed neatly, but his eyelids still heavy from his nap. He looked with suspicion at Davidson, and even glanced at his wife; but he was baffled by the natural placidity of the one and the acquired habit of immobility in the other.

"Have you sent out the drinks?" he asked surlily.

She did not open her lips, because just then the head boy appeared with a loaded tray, on his way out. Schomberg went to the door and greeted the customers outside, but did not join them. He remained blocking half the doorway, with his back to the room, and was still there when Davidson, after sitting still for a while, rose to go. At the noise he made Schomberg turned his head, watched him lift his hat to Mrs. Schomberg and receive her wooden bow accompanied by a stupid grin, and then looked away. He was loftily dignified. Davidson stopped at the door, deep in his simplicity.

"I am sorry you won't tell me anything about my friend's absence," he said. "My friend Heyst, you know. I suppose the only course for me now is to make inquiries down at the port. I shall hear something there, I don't doubt."

"Make inquiries of the devil!" replied Schomberg in a hoarse mutter.

Davidson's purpose in addressing the hotel-keeper had been mainly to make Mrs. Schomberg safe from suspicion; but he would fain have heard something more of Heyst's exploit from another point of view. It was a shrewd try. It was successful in a rather startling way, because the hotel-keeper's point of view was horribly abusive. All of a sudden, in the same hoarse sinister tone, he proceeded to call Heyst many names, of which "pig-dog" was not the worst, with such vehemence that he actually choked himself. Profiting from the pause, Davidson, whose temperament could withstand worse shocks, remonstrated in an undertone:

"It's unreasonable to get so angry as that. Even if he had run off with your cash-box—"

The big hotel-keeper bent down and put his infuriated face close to Davidson's.

"My cash-box! My—he—look here, Captain Davidson! He ran off with a girl. What do I care for the girl? The girl is nothing to me."

He shot out an infamous word which made Davidson start. That's what the girl was; and he reiterated the assertion that she was nothing to him. What he was concerned for was the good name of his house. Wherever he had been

established, he had always had “artist parties” staying in his house. One recommended him to the others; but what would happen now, when it got about that leaders ran the risk in his house—his house—of losing members of their troupe? And just now, when he had spent seven hundred and thirty-four guilders in building a concert-hall in his compound. Was that a thing to do in a respectable hotel? The cheek, the indecency, the impudence, the atrocity! Vagabond, impostor, swindler, ruffian, schwein-hund!

He had seized Davidson by a button of his coat, detaining him in the doorway, and exactly in the line of Mrs. Schomberg's stony gaze. Davidson stole a glance in that direction and thought of making some sort of reassuring sign to her, but she looked so bereft of senses, and almost of life, perched up there, that it seemed not worth while. He disengaged his button with firm placidity. Thereupon, with a last stifled curse, Schomberg vanished somewhere within, to try and compose his spirits in solitude. Davidson stepped out on the veranda. The party of customers there had become aware of the explosive interlude in the doorway. Davidson knew one of these men, and nodded to him in passing; but his acquaintance called out:

“Isn't he in a filthy temper? He's been like that ever since.”

The speaker laughed aloud, while all the others sat smiling. Davidson stopped.

“Yes, rather.” His feelings were, he told us, those of bewildered resignation; but of course that was no more visible to the others than the emotions of a turtle when it withdraws into its shell.

“It seems unreasonable,” he murmured thoughtfully.

“Oh, but they had a scrap!” the other said.

“What do you mean? Was there a fight!—a fight with Heyst?” asked Davidson, much perturbed, if somewhat incredulous.

“Heyst? No, these two—the bandmaster, the fellow who's taking these women about and our Schomberg. Signor Zangiacomo ran amuck in the morning, and went for our worthy friend. I tell you, they were rolling on the floor together on this very veranda, after chasing each other all over the house, doors slamming, women screaming, seventeen of them, in the dining-room; Chinamen up the trees. Hey, John? You climb tree to see the fight, eh?”

The boy, almond-eyed and impassive, emitted a scornful grunt, finished wiping the table, and withdrew.

“That's what it was—a real, go-as-you-please scrap. And Zangiacomo began it. Oh, here's Schomberg. Say, Schomberg, didn't he fly at you, when the girl was missed, because it was you who insisted that the artists should go about the audience during the interval?”

Schomberg had reappeared in the doorway. He advanced. His bearing was stately, but his nostrils were extraordinarily expanded, and he controlled his voice with apparent effort.

“Certainly. That was only business. I quoted him special terms and all for your sake, gentlemen. I was thinking of my regular customers. There's nothing to do in the evenings in this town. I think, gentlemen, you were all pleased at the opportunity of hearing a little good music; and where's the harm of offering a grenadine, or what not, to a lady artist? But that fellow—that Swede—he got round the girl. He got round all the people out here. I've been watching him for years. You remember how he got round Morrison.”

He changed front abruptly, as if on parade, and marched off. The customers at the table exchanged glances silently. Davidson's attitude was that of a spectator. Schomberg's moody pacing of the billiard-room could be heard on the veranda.

“And the funniest part is,” resumed the man who had been speaking before—an English clerk in a Dutch house—“the funniest part is that before nine o'clock that same morning those two were driving together in a gharry down to the port, to look for Heyst and the girl. I saw them rushing around making inquiries. I don't know what they would have done to the girl, but they seemed quite ready to fall upon your Heyst, Davidson, and kill him on the quay.”

He had never, he said, seen anything so queer. Those two investigators working feverishly to the same end were glaring at each other with surprising ferocity. In hatred and mistrust they entered a steam-launch, and went flying from ship to ship all over the harbour, causing no end of sensation. The captains of vessels, coming on shore later in the day, brought tales of a strange invasion, and wanted to know who were the two offensive lunatics in a steam-launch, apparently after a man and a girl, and telling a story of which one could make neither head nor tail. Their reception by the roadstead was generally unsympathetic, even to the point of the mate of an American ship bundling them out over the rail with unseemly precipitation.

Meantime Heyst and the girl were a good few miles away, having gone in the night on board one of the Tesman schooners bound to the eastward. This was known afterwards from the Javanese boatmen whom Heyst hired for the purpose at three o'clock in the morning. The Tesman schooner had sailed at daylight with the usual land breeze, and was probably still in sight in the offing at the time. However, the two pursuers after their experience with the American mate, made for the shore. On landing, they had another violent row in the German language. But there was no second fight; and finally, with looks of fierce animosity, they got together into a gharry—obviously with the frugal view of sharing expenses—and drove away, leaving an astonished little crowd of Europeans and natives on the quay.

After hearing this wondrous tale, Davidson went away from the hotel veranda, which was filling with Schomberg's regular customers. Heyst's escapade was the general topic of conversation. Never before had that unaccountable individual been the cause of so much gossip, he judged. No! Not even in the beginnings of the Tropical Belt Coal Company when becoming for a moment a public character was he the object of a silly criticism and unintelligent envy for every vagabond and adventurer in the islands. Davidson concluded that people liked to discuss that sort of scandal better than any other.

I asked him if he believed that this was such a great scandal after all.

“Heavens, no!” said that excellent man who, himself, was incapable of any impropriety of conduct. “But it isn't a thing I would have done myself; I mean even if I had not been married.”

There was no implied condemnation in the statement; rather something like regret. Davidson shared my suspicion that this was in its essence the rescue of a distressed human being. Not that we were two romantics, tingeing the world to the hue of our temperament, but that both of us had been acute enough to discover a long time ago that Heyst was.

“I shouldn't have had the pluck,” he continued. “I see a thing all round, as it were; but Heyst doesn't, or else he would have been scared. You don't take a woman into a desert jungle without being made sorry for it sooner or later, in one way or another; and Heyst being a gentleman only makes it worse.”