CHAPTER SEVEN

Some considerable time afterwards—we did not meet very often—I asked Davidson how he had managed about the shawl and heard that he had tackled his mission in a direct way, and had found it easy enough. At the very first call he made in Samarang he rolled the shawl as tightly as he could into the smallest possible brown-paper parcel, which he carried ashore with him. His business in the town being transacted, he got into a gharry with the parcel and drove to the hotel. With his precious experience, he timed his arrival accurately for the hour of Schomberg's siesta. Finding the place empty as on the former occasion, he marched into the billiard-room, took a seat at the back, near the sort of dais which Mrs. Schomberg would in due course come to occupy, and broke the slumbering silence of the house by thumping a bell vigorously. Of course a Chinaman appeared promptly. Davidson ordered a drink and sat tight.

"I would have ordered twenty drinks one after another, if necessary," he said—Davidson's a very abstemious man—"rather than take that parcel out of the house again. Couldn't leave it in a corner without letting the woman know it was there. It might have turned out worse for her than not bringing the thing back at all."

And so he waited, ringing the bell again and again, and swallowing two or three iced drinks which he did not want. Presently, as he hoped it would happen, Mrs. Schomberg came in, silk dress, long neck, ringlets, scared eyes, and silly grin—all complete. Probably that lazy beast had sent her out to see who was the thirsty customer waking up the echoes of the house at this quiet hour. Bow, nod—and she clambered up to her post behind the raised counter, looking so helpless, so inane, as she sat there, that if it hadn't been for the parcel, Davidson declared, he would have thought he had merely dreamed all that had passed between them. He ordered another drink, to get the Chinaman out of the room, and then seized the parcel, which was reposing on a chair near him, and with no more than a mutter—"this is something of yours"—he rammed it swiftly into a recess in the counter, at her feet. There! The rest was her affair. And just in time, too. Schomberg turned up, yawning affectedly, almost before Davidson had regained his seat. He cast about suspicious and irate glances. An invincible placidity of expression helped Davidson wonderfully at the moment, and the other, of course, could have no grounds for the slightest suspicion of any sort of understanding between his wife and this customer.

As to Mrs. Schomberg, she sat there like a joss. Davidson was lost in admiration. He believed, now, that the woman had been putting it on for years. She never even winked. It was immense! The insight he had obtained almost frightened him; he couldn't get over his wonder at knowing more of the real Mrs. Schomberg than anybody in the Islands, including Schomberg himself. She was a

miracle of dissimulation. No wonder Heyst got the girl away from under two men's noses, if he had her to help with the job!

The greatest wonder, after all, was Heyst getting mixed up with petticoats. The fellow's life had been open to us for years and nothing could have been more detached from feminine associations. Except that he stood drinks to people on suitable occasions, like any other man, this observer of facts seemed to have no connection with earthly affairs and passions. The very courtesy of his manner, the flavour of playfulness in the voice set him apart. He was like a feather floating lightly in the workaday atmosphere which was the breath of our nostrils. For this reason whenever this looker-on took contact with things he attracted attention. First, it was the Morrison partnership of mystery, then came the great sensation of the Tropical Belt Coal where indeed varied interests were involved: a real business matter. And then came this elopement, this incongruous phenomenon of self-assertion, the greatest wonder of all, astonishing and amusing.

Davidson admitted to me that, the hubbub was subsiding; and the affair would have been already forgotten, perhaps, if that ass Schomberg had not kept on gnashing his teeth publicly about it. It was really provoking that Davidson should not be able to give one some idea of the girl. Was she pretty? He didn't know. He had stayed the whole afternoon in Schomberg's hotel, mainly for the purpose of finding out something about her. But the story was growing stale. The parties at the tables on the veranda had other, fresher, events to talk about and Davidson shrank from making direct inquiries. He sat placidly there, content to be disregarded and hoping for some chance word to turn up. I shouldn't wonder if the good fellow hadn't been dozing. It's difficult to give you an adequate idea of Davidson's placidity.

Presently Schomberg, wandering about, joined a party that had taken the table next to Davidson's.

“A man like that Swede, gentlemen, is a public danger,” he began. “I remember him for years. I won't say anything of his spying—well, he used to say himself he was looking for out-of-the-way facts and what is that if not spying? He was spying into everybody's business. He got hold of Captain Morrison, squeezed him dry, like you would an orange, and scared him off to Europe to die there. Everybody knows that Captain Morrison had a weak chest. Robbed first and murdered afterwards! I don't mince words—not I. Next he gets up that swindle of the Belt Coal. You know all about it. And now, after lining his pockets with other people's money, he kidnaps a white girl belonging to an orchestra which is performing in my public room for the benefit of my patrons, and goes off to live like a prince on that island, where nobody can get at him. A damn silly girl . . . It's disgusting—tfui!”

He spat. He choked with rage—for he saw visions, no doubt. He jumped up from his chair, and went away to flee from them—perhaps. He went into the room where Mrs. Schomberg sat. Her aspect could not have been very soothing to the sort of torment from which he was suffering.

Davidson did not feel called upon to defend Heyst. His proceeding was to enter into conversation with one and another, casually, and showing no particular knowledge of the affair, in order to discover something about the girl. Was she anything out of the way? Was she pretty? She couldn't have been markedly so. She had not attracted special notice. She was young—on that everybody agreed. The English clerk of Tesmans remembered that she had a sallow face. He was respectable and highly proper. He was not the sort to associate with such people. Most of these women were fairly battered specimens. Schomberg had them housed in what he called the Pavilion, in the grounds, where they were hard at it mending and washing their white dresses, and could be seen hanging them out to dry between the trees, like a lot of washerwomen. They looked very much like middle-aged washerwomen on the platform, too. But the girl had been living in the main building along with the boss, the director, the fellow with the black beard, and a hard-bitten, oldish woman who took the piano and was understood to be the fellow's wife.

This was not a very satisfactory result. Davidson stayed on, and even joined the table d'hote dinner, without gleaning any more information. He was resigned.

“I suppose,” he wheezed placidly, “I am bound to see her some day.”

He meant to take the Samburan channel every trip, as before of course.

“Yes,” I said. “No doubt you will. Some day Heyst will be signalling to you again; and I wonder what it will be for.”

Davidson made no reply. He had his own ideas about that, and his silence concealed a good deal of thought. We spoke no more of Heyst's girl. Before we separated, he gave me a piece of unrelated observation.

“It's funny,” he said, “but I fancy there's some gambling going on in the evening at Schomberg's place, on the quiet. I've noticed men strolling away in twos and threes towards that hall where the orchestra used to play. The windows must be specially well shuttered, because I could not spy the smallest gleam of light from that direction; but I can't believe that those beggars would go in there only to sit and think of their sins in the dark.”

“That's strange. It's incredible that Schomberg should risk that sort of thing,” I said.