

## CHAPTER SIX

We said no more about Heyst on that occasion, and it so happened that I did not meet Davidson again for some three months. When we did come together, almost the first thing he said to me was:

“I've seen him.”

Before I could exclaim, he assured me that he had taken no liberty, that he had not intruded. He was called in. Otherwise he would not have dreamed of breaking in upon Heyst's privacy.

“I am certain you wouldn't,” I assured him, concealing my amusement at his wonderful delicacy. He was the most delicate man that ever took a small steamer to and fro among the islands. But his humanity, which was not less strong and praiseworthy, had induced him to take his steamer past Samburan wharf (at an average distance of a mile) every twenty-three days—exactly. Davidson was delicate, humane, and regular.

“Heyst called you in?” I asked, interested.

Yes, Heyst had called him in as he was going by on his usual date. Davidson was examining the shore through his glasses with his unwearied and punctual humanity as he steamed past Samburan.

I saw a man in white. It could only have been Heyst. He had fastened some sort of enormous flag to a bamboo pole, and was waving it at the end of the old wharf.

Davidson didn't like to take his steamer alongside—for fear of being indiscreet, I suppose; but he steered close inshore, stopped his engines, and lowered a boat. He went himself in that boat, which was manned, of course, by his Malay seamen.

Heyst, when he saw the boat pulling towards him, dropped his signalling-pole; and when Davidson arrived, he was kneeling down engaged busily in unfastening the flag from it.

“Was there anything wrong?” I inquired, Davidson having paused in his narrative and my curiosity being naturally aroused. You must remember that Heyst as the Archipelago knew him was not—what shall I say—was not a signalling sort of man.

“The very words that came out of my mouth,” said Davidson, “before I laid the boat against the piles. I could not help it!”

Heyst got up from his knees and began carefully folding up the flag thing, which struck Davidson as having the dimensions of a blanket.

“No, nothing wrong,” he cried. His white teeth flashed agreeably below the coppery horizontal bar of his long moustaches.

I don't know whether it was his delicacy or his obesity which prevented Davidson from clambering upon the wharf. He stood up in the boat, and, above him, Heyst stooped low with urbane smiles, thanking him and apologizing for the liberty, exactly in his usual manner. Davidson had expected some change in the man, but there was none. Nothing in him betrayed the momentous fact that within that jungle there was a girl, a performer in a ladies' orchestra, whom he had carried straight off the concert platform into the wilderness. He was not ashamed or defiant or abashed about it. He might have been a shade confidential when addressing Davidson. And his words were enigmatical.

“I took this course of signalling to you,” he said to Davidson, “because to preserve appearances might be of the utmost importance. Not to me, of course. I don't care what people may say, and of course no one can hurt me. I suppose I have done a certain amount of harm, since I allowed myself to be tempted into action. It seemed innocent enough, but all action is bound to be harmful. It is devilish. That is why this world is evil upon the whole. But I have done with it! I shall never lift a little finger again. At one time I thought that intelligent observation of facts was the best way of cheating the time which is allotted to us whether we want it or not; but now I, have done with observation, too.”

Imagine poor, simple Davidson being addressed in such terms alongside an abandoned, decaying wharf jutting out of tropical bush. He had never heard anybody speak like this before; certainly not Heyst, whose conversation was concise, polite, with a faint ring of playfulness in the cultivated tones of his voice.

“He's gone mad,” Davidson thought to himself.

But, looking at the physiognomy above him on the wharf, he was obliged to dismiss the notion of common, crude lunacy. It was truly most unusual talk. Then he remembered—in his surprise he had lost sight of it—that Heyst now had a girl there. This bizarre discourse was probably the effect of the girl. Davidson shook off the absurd feeling, and asked, wishing to make clear his friendliness, and not knowing what else to say:

“You haven't run short of stores or anything like that?”

Heyst smiled and shook his head:

“No, no. Nothing of the kind. We are fairly well off here. Thanks, all the same. If I have taken the liberty to detain you, it is not from any uneasiness for myself and my—companion. The person I was thinking of when I made up my mind to invoke your assistance is Mrs. Schomberg.”

“I have talked with her,” interjected Davidson.

“Oh! You? Yes, I hoped she would find means to—”

“But she didn't tell me much,” interrupted Davidson, who was not averse from hearing something—he hardly knew what.

“H'm—Yes. But that note of mine? Yes? She found an opportunity to give it to you? That's good, very good. She's more resourceful than one would give her credit for.”

“Women often are—” remarked Davidson. The strangeness from which he had suffered, merely because his interlocutor had carried off a girl, wore off as the minutes went by. “There's a lot of unexpectedness about women,” he generalized with a didactic aim which seemed to miss its mark; for the next thing Heyst said was:

“This is Mrs. Schomberg's shawl.” He touched the stuff hanging over his arm. “An Indian thing, I believe,” he added, glancing at his arm sideways.

“It isn't of particular value,” said Davidson truthfully.

“Very likely. The point is that it belongs to Schomberg's wife. That Schomberg seems to be an unconscionable ruffian—don't you think so?”

Davidson smiled faintly.

“We out here have got used to him,” he said, as if excusing a universal and guilty toleration of a manifest nuisance. “I'd hardly call him that. I only know him as a hotel-keeper.”

“I never knew him even as that—not till this time, when you were so obliging as to take me to Sourabaya, I went to stay there from economy. The Netherlands House is very expensive, and they expect you to bring your own servant with you. It's a nuisance.”

“Of course, of course,” protested Davidson hastily.

After a short silence Heyst returned to the matter of the shawl. He wanted to send it back to Mrs. Schomberg. He said that it might be very awkward for her if she were unable, if asked, to produce it. This had given him, Heyst, much uneasiness. She was terrified of Schomberg. Apparently she had reason to be.

Davidson had remarked that, too. Which did not prevent her, he pointed out, from making a fool of him, in a way, for the sake of a stranger.

“Oh! You know!” said Heyst. “Yes, she helped me—us.”

“She told me so. I had quite a talk with her,” Davidson informed him. “Fancy anyone having a talk with Mrs. Schomberg! If I were to tell the fellows they wouldn't believe me. How did you get round her, Heyst? How did you think of it? Why, she looks too stupid to understand human speech and too scared to shoo a chicken away. Oh, the women, the women! You don't know what there may be in the quietest of them.”

“She was engaged in the task of defending her position in life,” said Heyst. “It’s a very respectable task.”

“Is that it? I had some idea it was that,” confessed Davidson.

He then imparted to Heyst the story of the violent proceedings following on the discovery of his flight. Heyst’s polite attention to the tale took on a sombre cast; but he manifested no surprise, and offered no comment. When Davidson had finished he handed down the shawl into the boat, and Davidson promised to do his best to return it to Mrs. Schomberg in some secret fashion. Heyst expressed his thanks in a few simple words, set off by his manner of finished courtesy. Davidson prepared to depart. They were not looking at each other. Suddenly Heyst spoke:

“You understand that this was a case of odious persecution, don’t you? I became aware of it and—”

It was a view which the sympathetic Davidson was capable of appreciating.

“I am not surprised to hear it,” he said placidly. “Odious enough, I dare say. And you, of course—not being a married man—were free to step in. Ah, well!”

He sat down in the stern-sheets, and already had the steering lines in his hands when Heyst observed abruptly:

“The world is a bad dog. It will bite you if you give it a chance; but I think that here we can safely defy the fates.”

When relating all this to me, Davidson’s only comment was:

“Funny notion of defying the fates—to take a woman in tow!”