

CHAPTER FIVE

Three weeks later, after putting his cash-box away in the safe which filled with its iron bulk a corner of their room, Schomberg turned towards his wife, but without looking at her exactly, and said:

“I must get rid of these two. It won't do!”

Mrs. Schomberg had entertained that very opinion from the first; but she had been broken years ago into keeping her opinions to herself. Sitting in her night attire in the light of a single candle, she was careful not to make a sound, knowing from experience that her very assent would be resented. With her eyes she followed the figure of Schomberg, clad in his sleeping suit, and moving restlessly about the room.

He never glanced her way, for the reason that Mrs. Schomberg, in her night attire, looked the most unattractive object in existence—miserable, insignificant, faded, crushed, old. And the contrast with the feminine form he had ever in his mind's eye made his wife's appearance painful to his aesthetic sense.

Schomberg walked about swearing and fuming for the purpose of screwing his courage up to the sticking point.

“Hang me if I ought not to go now, at once, this minute, into his bedroom, and tell him to be off—him and that secretary of his—early in the morning. I don't mind a round game of cards, but to make a decoy of my table d'hote—my blood boils! He came here because some lying rascal in Manila told him I kept a table d'hote.”

He said these things, not for Mrs. Schomberg's information, but simply thinking aloud, and trying to work his fury up to a point where it would give him courage enough to face “plain Mr. Jones.”

“Impudent overbearing, swindling sharper,” he went on. “I have a good mind to—”

He was beside himself in his lurid, heavy, Teutonic manner, so unlike the picturesque, lively rage of the Latin races; and though his eyes strayed about irresolutely, yet his swollen, angry features awakened in the miserable woman over whom he had been tyrannizing for years a fear for his precious carcass, since the poor creature had nothing else but that to hold on to in the world. She knew him well; but she did not know him altogether. The last thing a woman will consent to discover in a man whom she loves, or on whom she simply depends, is want of courage. And, timid in her corner, she ventured to say pressingly:

“Be careful, Wilhelm! Remember the knives and revolvers in their trunks.”

In guise of thanks for that anxious reminder, he swore horribly in the direction of her shrinking person. In her scanty nightdress, and barefooted, she recalled a

mediaeval penitent being reproved for her sins in blasphemous terms. Those lethal weapons were always present to Schomberg's mind. Personally, he had never seen them. His part, ten days after his guests' arrival, had been to lounge in manly, careless attitudes on the veranda—keeping watch—while Mrs. Schomberg, provided with a bunch of assorted keys, her discoloured teeth chattering and her globular eyes absolutely idiotic with fright, was “going through” the luggage of these strange clients. Her terrible Wilhelm had insisted on it.

“I'll be on the look-out, I tell you,” he said. “I shall give you a whistle when I see them coming back. You couldn't whistle. And if he were to catch you at it, and chuck you out by the scruff of the neck, it wouldn't hurt you much; but he won't touch a woman. Not he! He has told me so. Affected beast. I must find out something about their little game, and so there's an end of it. Go in! Go now! Quick march!”

It had been an awful job; but she did go in, because she was much more afraid of Schomberg than of any possible consequences of the act. Her greatest concern was lest no key of the bunch he had provided her with should fit the locks. It would have been such a disappointment for Wilhelm. However, the trunks, she found, had been left open; but her investigation did not last long. She was frightened of firearms, and generally of all weapons, not from personal cowardice, but as some women are, almost superstitiously, from an abstract horror of violence and murder. She was out again on the veranda long before Wilhelm had any occasion for a warning whistle. The instinctive, motiveless fear being the most difficult to overcome, nothing could induce her to return to her investigations, neither threatening growls nor ferocious hisses, nor yet a poke or two in the ribs.

“Stupid female!” muttered the hotel-keeper, perturbed by the notion of that armoury in one of his bedrooms. This was from no abstract sentiment, with him it was constitutional. “Get out of my sight,” he snarled. “Go and dress yourself for the table d'hote.”

Left to himself, Schomberg had meditated. What the devil did this mean? His thinking processes were sluggish and spasmodic; but suddenly the truth came to him.

“By heavens, they are desperadoes!” he thought.

Just then he beheld “plain Mr. Jones” and his secretary with the ambiguous name of Ricardo entering the grounds of the hotel. They had been down to the port on some business, and now were returning; Mr. Jones lank, spare, opening his long legs with angular regularity like a pair of compasses, the other stepping out briskly by his side. Conviction entered Schomberg's heart. They *were* two desperadoes—no doubt about it. But as the funk which he experienced was

merely a general sensation, he managed to put on his most severe Officer-of-the-Reserve manner, long before they had closed with him.

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

Being answered with derisive civility, he became confirmed in his sudden conviction of their desperate character. The way Mr. Jones turned his hollow eyes on one, like an incurious spectre, and the way the other, when addressed, suddenly retracted his lips and exhibited his teeth without looking round—here was evidence enough to settle that point. Desperadoes! They passed through the billiard-room, inscrutably mysterious, to the back of the house, to join their violated trunks.

“Tiffin bell will ring in five minutes, gentlemen.” Schomberg called after them, exaggerating the deep manliness of his tone.

He had managed to upset himself very much. He expected to see them come back infuriated and begin to bully him with an odious lack of restraint. Desperadoes! However they didn't; they had not noticed anything unusual about their trunks and Schomberg recovered his composure and said to himself that he must get rid of this deadly incubus as soon as practicable. They couldn't possibly want to stay very long; this was not the town—the colony—for desperate characters. He shrank from action. He dreaded any kind of disturbance—“fracas” he called it—in his hotel. Such things were not good for business. Of course, sometimes one had to have a “fracas;” but it had been a comparatively trifling task to seize the frail Zangiaco—whose bones were no larger than a chicken's—round the ribs, lift him up bodily, dash him to the ground, and fall on him. It had been easy. The wretched, hook-nosed creature lay without movement, buried under its purple beard.

Suddenly, remembering the occasion of that “fracas,” Schomberg groaned with the pain as of a hot coal under his breastbone, and gave himself up to desolation. Ah, if he only had that girl with him he would have been masterful and resolute and fearless—fight twenty desperadoes—care for nobody on earth! Whereas the possession of Mrs. Schomberg was no incitement to a display of manly virtues. Instead of caring for no one, he felt that he cared for nothing. Life was a hollow sham; he wasn't going to risk a shot through his lungs or his liver in order to preserve its integrity. It had no savour—damn it!

In his state of moral decomposition, Schomberg, master as he was of the art of hotel-keeping, and careful of giving no occasion for criticism to the powers regulating that branch of human activity, let things take their course; though he saw very well where that course was tending. It began first with a game or two after dinner—for the drinks, apparently—with some lingering customer, at one of the little tables ranged against the walls of the billiard-room. Schomberg detected the meaning of it at once. “That's what it was! This was what they were!” And,

moving about restlessly (at that time his morose silent period had set in), he cast sidelong looks at the game; but he said nothing. It was not worth while having a row with men who were so overbearing. Even when money appeared in connection with these postprandial games, into which more and more people were being drawn, he still refrained from raising the question; he was reluctant to draw unduly the attention of "plain Mr. Jones" and of the equivocal Ricardo, to his person. One evening, however, after the public rooms of the hotel had become empty, Schomberg made an attempt to grapple with the problem in an indirect way.

In a distant corner the tired China boy dozed on his heels, his back against the wall. Mrs. Schomberg had disappeared, as usual, between ten and eleven. Schomberg walked about slowly in and out of the room and the veranda, thoughtful, waiting for his two guests to go to bed. Then suddenly he approached them, militarily, his chest thrown out, his voice curt and soldierly.

"Hot night, gentlemen."

Mr. Jones, lolling back idly in a chair, looked up. Ricardo, as idle, but more upright, made no sign.

"Won't you have a drink with me before retiring?" went on Schomberg, sitting down by the little table.

"By all means," said Mr. Jones lazily.

Ricardo showed his teeth in a strange, quick grin. Schomberg felt painfully how difficult it was to get in touch with these men, both so quiet, so deliberate, so menacingly unceremonious. He ordered the Chinaman to bring in the drinks. His purpose was to discover how long these guests intended to stay. Ricardo displayed no conversational vein, but Mr. Jones appeared communicative enough. His voice somehow matched his sunken eyes. It was hollow without being in the least mournful; it sounded distant, uninterested, as though he were speaking from the bottom of a well. Schomberg learned that he would have the privilege of lodging and boarding these gentlemen for at least a month more. He could not conceal his discomfiture at this piece of news.

"What's the matter? Don't you like to have people in your house?" asked plain Mr. Jones languidly. "I should have thought the owner of a hotel would be pleased."

He lifted his delicate and beautifully pencilled eyebrows. Schomberg muttered something about the locality being dull and uninteresting to travellers—nothing going on—too quiet altogether, but he only provoked the declaration that quiet had its charm sometimes, and even dullness was welcome as a change.

"We haven't had time to be dull for the last three years," added plain Mr. Jones, his eyes fixed darkly on Schomberg whom he further more invited to have another drink, this time with him, and not to worry himself about things he did

not understand; and especially not to be inhospitable—which in a hotel-keeper is highly unprofessional.

“I don't understand,” grumbled Schomberg. “Oh, yes, I understand perfectly well. I—”

“You are frightened,” interrupted Mr. Jones. “What is the matter?”

“I don't want any scandal in my place. That's what's the matter.”

Schomberg tried to face the situation bravely, but that steady, black stare affected him. And when he glanced aside uncomfortably, he met Ricardo's grin uncovering a lot of teeth, though the man seemed absorbed in his thoughts all the time.

“And, moreover,” went on Mr. Jones in that distant tone of his, “you can't help yourself. Here we are and here we stay. Would you try to put us out? I dare say you could do it; but you couldn't do it without getting hurt—very badly hurt. We can promise him that, can't we, Martin?”

The secretary retracted his lips and looked up sharply at Schomberg, as if only too anxious to leap upon him with teeth and claws.

Schomberg managed to produce a deep laugh.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Mr. Jones closed his eyes wearily, as if the light hurt them, and looked remarkably like a corpse for a moment. This was bad enough; but when he opened them again, it was almost a worse trial for Schomberg's nerves. The spectral intensity of that glance, fixed on the hotel-keeper (and this was most frightful) without any definite expression, seemed to dissolve the last grain of resolution in his character.

“You don't think, by any chance, that you have to do with ordinary people, do you?” inquired Mr. Jones, in his lifeless manner, which seemed to imply some sort of menace from beyond the grave.

“He's a gentleman,” testified Martin Ricardo with a sudden snap of the lips, after which his moustaches stirred by themselves in an odd, feline manner.

“Oh, I wasn't thinking of that,” said plain Mr. Jones, while Schomberg, dumb and planted heavily in his chair looked from one to the other, leaning forward a little. “Of course I am that; but Ricardo attaches too much importance to a social advantage. What I mean, for instance, is that he, quiet and inoffensive as you see him sitting here, would think nothing of setting fire to this house of entertainment of yours. It would blaze like a box of matches. Think of that! It wouldn't advance your affairs much, would it?—whatever happened to us.”

“Come, come gentlemen,” remonstrated Schomberg, in a murmur. “This is very wild talk!”

“And you have been used to deal with tame people, haven't you? But we aren't tame. We once kept a whole angry town at bay for two days, and then we got away with our plunder. It was in Venezuela. Ask Martin here—he can tell you.”

Instinctively Schomberg looked at Ricardo, who only passed the tip of his tongue over his lips with an uncanny sort of gusto, but did not offer to begin.

“Well, perhaps it would be a rather long story,” Mr. Jones conceded after a short silence.

“I have no desire to hear it, I am sure,” said Schomberg. “This isn't Venezuela. You wouldn't get away from here like that. But all this is silly talk of the worst sort. Do you mean to say you would make deadly trouble for the sake of a few guilders that you and that other”—eyeing Ricardo suspiciously, as one would look at a strange animal—“gentleman can win of an evening? Isn't as if my customers were a lot of rich men with pockets full of cash. I wonder you take so much trouble and risk for so little money.”

Schomberg's argument was met by Mr. Jones's statement that one must do something to kill time. Killing time was not forbidden. For the rest, being in a communicative mood, Mr. Jones said languidly and in a voice indifferent, as if issuing from a tomb, that he depended on himself, as if the world were still one great, wild jungle without law. Martin was something like that, too—for reasons of his own.

All these statements Ricardo confirmed by short, inhuman grins. Schomberg lowered his eyes, for the sight of these two men intimidated him; but he was losing patience.

“Of course, I could see at once that you were two desperate characters—something like what you say. But what would you think if I told you that I am pretty near as desperate as you two gentlemen? 'Here's that Schomberg has an easy time running his hotel,' people think; and yet it seems to me I would just as soon let you rip me open and burn the whole show as not. There!”

A low whistle was heard. It came from Ricardo, and was derisive. Schomberg, breathing heavily, looked on the floor. He was really desperate. Mr. Jones remained languidly sceptical.

“Tut, tut! You have a tolerable business. You are perfectly tame; you—” He paused, then added in a tone of disgust: “You have a wife.”

Schomberg tapped the floor angrily with his foot and uttered an indistinct, laughing curse.

“What do you mean by flinging that damned trouble at my head?” he cried. “I wish you would carry her off with you some where to the devil! I wouldn't run after you.”

The unexpected outburst affected Mr. Jones strangely. He had a horrified recoil, chair and all, as if Schomberg had thrust a wriggling viper in his face.

“What's this infernal nonsense?” he muttered thickly. “What do you mean? How dare you?”

Ricardo chuckled audibly.

“I tell you I am desperate,” Schomberg repeated. “I am as desperate as any man ever was. I don't care a hang what happens to me!”

“Well, then”—Mr. Jones began to speak with a quietly threatening effect, as if the common words of daily use had some other deadly meaning to his mind—“well, then, why should you make yourself ridiculously disagreeable to us? If you don't care, as you say, you might just as well let us have the key of that music-shed of yours for a quiet game; a modest bank—a dozen candles or so. It would be greatly appreciated by your clients, as far as I can judge from the way they betted on a game of ecarte I had with that fair, baby-faced man—what's his name? They just yearn for a modest bank. And I am afraid Martin here would take it badly if you objected; but of course you won't. Think of the calls for drinks!”

Schomberg, raising his eyes, at last met the gleams in two dark caverns under Mr. Jones's devilish eyebrows, directed upon him impenetrably. He shuddered as if horrors worse than murder had been lurking there, and said, nodding towards Ricardo:

“I dare say he wouldn't think twice about sticking me, if he had you at his back! I wish I had sunk my launch, and gone to the bottom myself in her, before I boarded the steamer you came by. Ah, well, I've been already living in hell for weeks, so you don't make much difference. I'll let you have the concert-room—and hang the consequences. But what about the boy on late duty? If he sees the cards and actual money passing, he will be sure to blab, and it will be all over the town in no time.”

A ghastly smile stirred the lips of Mr. Jones.

“Ah, I see you want to make a success of it. Very good. That's the way to get on. Don't let it disturb you. You chase all the Chinamen to bed early, and we'll get Pedro here every evening. He isn't the conventional waiter's cut, but he will do to run to and fro with the tray, while you sit here from nine to eleven serving out drinks and gathering the money.”

“There will be three of them now,” thought the unlucky Schomberg.

But Pedro, at any rate, was just a simple, straightforward brute, if a murderous one. There was no mystery about him, nothing uncanny, no suggestion of a stealthy, deliberate wildcat turned into a man, or of an insolent spectre on leave from Hades, endowed with skin and bones and a subtle power of terror. Pedro

with his fangs, his tangled beard, and queer stare of his little bear's eyes was, by comparison, delightfully natural. Besides, Schomberg could no longer help himself.

“That will do very well,” he asserted mournfully. “But if you gentlemen, if you had turned up here only three months ago—ay, less than three months ago—you would have found somebody very different from what I am now to talk to you. It's true. What do you think of that?”

“I scarcely know what to think. I should think it was a lie. You were probably as tame three months ago as you are now. You were born tame, like most people in the world.”

Mr. Jones got up spectrally, and Ricardo imitated him with a snarl and a stretch. Schomberg, in a brown study, went on, as if to himself:

“There has been an orchestra here—eighteen women.”

Mr. Jones let out an exclamation of dismay, and looked about as if the walls around him and the whole house had been infected with plague. Then he became very angry, and swore violently at Schomberg for daring to bring up such subjects. The hotel-keeper was too much surprised to get up. He gazed from his chair at Mr. Jones's anger, which had nothing spectral in it but was not the more comprehensible for that.

“What's the matter?” he stammered out. “What subject? Didn't you hear me say it was an orchestra? There's nothing wrong in that. Well, there was a girl amongst them—” Schomberg's eyes went stony; he clasped his hands in front of his breast with such force that his knuckles came out white. “Such a girl! Tame, am I? I would have kicked everything to pieces about me for her. And she, of course . . . I am in the prime of life . . . then a fellow bewitched her—a vagabond, a false, lying, swindling, underhand, stick-at-nothing brute. Ah!”

His entwined fingers cracked as he tore his hands apart, flung out his arms, and leaned his forehead on them in a passion of fury. The other two looked at his shaking back—the attenuated Mr. Jones with mingled scorn and a sort of fear, Ricardo with the expression of a cat which sees a piece of fish in the pantry out of reach. Schomberg flung himself backwards. He was dry-eyed, but he gulped as if swallowing sobs.

“No wonder you can do with me what you like. You have no idea—just let me tell you of my trouble—”

“I don't want to know anything of your beastly trouble,” said Mr. Jones, in his most lifelessly positive voice.

He stretched forth an arresting hand, and, as Schomberg remained open-mouthed, he walked out of the billiard-room in all the uncanniness of his thin

shanks. Ricardo followed at his leader's heels; but he showed his teeth to Schomberg over his shoulder.