

## CHAPTER FOUR

The business was done by a guest who arrived one fine morning by mail-boat—immediately from Celebes, having boarded her in Macassar, but generally, Schomberg understood, from up China Sea way; a wanderer clearly, even as Heyst was, but not alone and of quite another kind.

Schomberg, looking up from the stern-sheets of his steam-launch, which he used for boarding passenger ships on arrival, discovered a dark sunken stare plunging down on him over the rail of the first-class part of the deck. He was no great judge of physiognomy. Human beings, for him, were either the objects of scandalous gossip or else recipients of narrow strips of paper, with proper bill-heads stating the name of his hotel—"W. Schomberg, proprietor, accounts settled weekly."

So in the clean-shaven, extremely thin face hanging over the mail-boat's rail Schomberg saw only the face of a possible "account." The steam-launches of other hotels were also alongside, but he obtained the preference.

"You are Mr. Schomberg, aren't you?" the face asked quite unexpectedly.

"I am at your service," he answered from below; for business is business, and its forms and formulas must be observed, even if one's manly bosom is tortured by that dull rage which succeeds the fury of baffled passion, like the glow of embers after a fierce blaze.

Presently the possessor of the handsome but emaciated face was seated beside Schomberg in the stern-sheets of the launch. His body was long and loose-jointed, his slender fingers, intertwined, clasped the leg resting on the knee, as he lolled back in a careless yet tense attitude. On the other side of Schomberg sat another passenger, who was introduced by the clean-shaven man as—

"My secretary. He must have the room next to mine."

"We can manage that easily for you."

Schomberg steered with dignity, staring straight ahead, but very much interested by these two promising "accounts." Their belongings, a couple of large leather trunks browned by age and a few smaller packages, were piled up in the bows. A third individual—a nondescript, hairy creature—had modestly made his way forward and had perched himself on the luggage. The lower part of his physiognomy was over-developed; his narrow and low forehead, unintelligently furrowed by horizontal wrinkles, surmounted wildly hirsute cheeks and a flat nose with wide, baboon-like nostrils. There was something equivocal in the appearance of his shaggy, hair-smothered humanity. He, too, seemed to be a follower of the clean-shaven man, and apparently had travelled on deck with native passengers, sleeping under the awnings. His broad, squat frame denoted

great strength. Grasping the gunwales of the launch, he displayed a pair of remarkably long arms, terminating in thick, brown hairy paws of simian aspect.

“What shall we do with the fellow of mine?” the chief of the party asked Schomberg. “There must be a boarding-house somewhere near the port—some grog-shop where they could let him have a mat to sleep on?”

Schomberg said there was a place kept by a Portuguese half-caste.

“A servant of yours?” he asked.

“Well, he hangs on to me. He is an alligator-hunter. I picked him up in Colombia, you know. Ever been in Colombia?”

“No,” said Schomberg, very much surprised. “An alligator-hunter? Funny trade! Are you coming from Colombia, then?”

“Yes, but I have been coming for a long time. I come from a good many places. I am travelling west, you see.”

“For sport, perhaps?” suggested Schomberg.

“Yes. Sort of sport. What do you say to chasing the sun?”

“I see—a gentleman at large,” said Schomberg, watching a sailing canoe about to cross his bow, and ready to clear it by a touch of the helm.

The other passenger made himself heard suddenly.

“Hang these native craft! They always get in the way.”

He was a muscular, short man with eyes that gleamed and blinked, a harsh voice, and a round, toneless, pock-marked face ornamented by a thin, dishevelled moustache, sticking out quaintly under the tip of a rigid nose. Schomberg made the reflection that there was nothing secretarial about him. Both he and his long, lank principal wore the usual white suit of the tropics, cork helmets, pipe-clayed white shoes—all correct. The hairy nondescript creature perched on their luggage in the bow had a check shirt and blue dungaree trousers. He gazed in their direction from forward in an expectant, trained-animal manner.

“You spoke to me first,” said Schomberg in his manly tones. “You were acquainted with my name. Where did you hear of me, gentlemen, may I ask?”

“In Manila,” answered the gentleman at large, readily. “From a man with whom I had a game of cards one evening in the Hotel Castille.”

“What man? I've no friends in Manila that I know of,” wondered Schomberg with a severe frown.

“I can't tell you his name. I've clean forgotten it; but don't you worry. He was anything but a friend of yours. He called you all the names he could think of. He said you set a lot of scandal going about him once, somewhere—in Bangkok, I think. Yes, that's it. You were running a table d'hote in Bangkok at one time, weren't you?”

Schomberg, astounded by the turn of the information, could only throw out his chest more and exaggerate his austere Lieutenant-of-the-Reserve manner. A table d'hote? Yes, certainly. He always—for the sake of white men. And here in this place, too? Yes, in this place, too.

“That's all right, then.” The stranger turned his black, cavernous, mesmerizing glance away from the bearded Schomberg, who sat gripping the brass tiller in a sweating palm. “Many people in the evening at your place?”

Schomberg had recovered somewhat.

“Twenty covers or so, take one day with another,” he answered feelingly, as befitted a subject on which he was sensitive. “Ought to be more, if only people would see that it's for their own good. Precious little profit I get out of it. You are partial to tables d'hote, gentlemen?”

The new guest made answer that he liked a hotel where one could find some local people in the evening. It was infernally dull otherwise. The secretary, in sign of approval, emitted a grunt of astonishing ferocity, as if proposing to himself to eat the local people. All this sounded like a longish stay, thought Schomberg, satisfied under his grave air; till, remembering the girl snatched away from him by the last guest who had made a prolonged stay in his hotel, he ground his teeth so audibly that the other two looked at him in wonder. The momentary convulsion of his florid physiognomy seemed to strike them dumb. They exchanged a quick glance. Presently the clean-shaven man fired out another question in his curt, unceremonious manner:

“You have no women in your hotel, eh?”

“Women!” Schomberg exclaimed indignantly, but also as if a little frightened. “What on earth do you mean by women? What women? There's Mrs. Schomberg, of course,” he added, suddenly appeased, with lofty indifference.

“If she knows how to keep her place, then it will do. I can't stand women near me. They give me the horrors,” declared the other. “They are a perfect curse!”

During this outburst the secretary wore a savage grin. The chief guest closed his sunken eyes, as if exhausted, and leaned the back of his head against the stanchion of the awning. In this pose, his long, feminine eyelashes were very noticeable, and his regular features, sharp line of the jaw, and well-cut chin were brought into prominence, giving him a used-up, weary, depraved distinction. He did not open his eyes till the steam-launch touched the quay. Then he and the other man got ashore quickly, entered a carriage, and drove away to the hotel, leaving Schomberg to look after their luggage and take care of their strange companion. The latter, looking more like a performing bear abandoned by his show men than a human being, followed all Schomberg's movements step by step, close behind his back, muttering to himself in a language that sounded like some sort of uncouth Spanish. The hotel-keeper felt uncomfortable till at last he

got rid of him at an obscure den where a very clean, portly Portuguese half-caste, standing serenely in the doorway, seemed to understand exactly how to deal with clients of every kind. He took from the creature the strapped bundle it had been hugging closely through all its peregrinations in that strange town, and cut short Schomberg's attempts at explanation by a most confident—

“I comprehend very well, sir.”

“It's more than I do,” thought Schomberg, going away thankful at being relieved of the alligator-hunter's company. He wondered what these fellows were, without being able to form a guess of sufficient probability. Their names he learned that very day by direct inquiry “to enter in my books,” he explained in his formal military manner, chest thrown out, beard very much in evidence.

The shaven man, sprawling in a long chair, with his air of withered youth, raised his eyes languidly.

“My name? Oh, plain Mr. Jones—put that down—a gentleman at large. And this is Ricardo.” The pock-marked man, lying prostrate in another long chair, made a grimace, as if something had tickled the end of his nose, but did not come out of his supineness. “Martin Ricardo, secretary. You don't want any more of our history, do you? Eh, what? Occupation? Put down, well—tourists. We've been called harder names before now; it won't hurt our feelings. And that fellow of mine—where did you tuck him away? Oh, he will be all right. When he wants anything he'll take it. He's Peter. Citizen of Colombia. Peter, Pedro—I don't know that he ever had any other name. Pedro, alligator hunter. Oh, yes—I'll pay his board with the half-caste. Can't help myself. He's so confoundedly devoted to me that if I were to give him the sack he would fly at my throat. Shall I tell you how I killed his brother in the wilds of Colombia? Well, perhaps some other time—it's a rather long story. What I shall always regret is that I didn't kill him, too. I could have done it without any extra trouble then; now it's too late. Great nuisance; but he's useful sometimes. I hope you are not going to put all this in your book?”

The offhand, hard manner and the contemptuous tone of “plain Mr. Jones” disconcerted Schomberg utterly. He had never been spoken to like this in his life. He shook his head in silence and withdrew, not exactly scared—though he was in reality of a timid disposition under his manly exterior—but distinctly mystified and impressed.