

## CHAPTER SIX

From that evening dated those mysterious but significant phenomena in Schomberg's establishment which attracted Captain Davidson's casual notice when he dropped in, placid yet astute, in order to return Mrs. Schomberg's Indian shawl. And strangely enough, they lasted some considerable time. It argued either honesty and bad luck or extraordinary restraint on the part of "plain Mr. Jones and Co." in their discreet operations with cards.

It was a curious and impressive sight, the inside of Schomberg's concert-hall, encumbered at one end by a great stack of chairs piled up on and about the musicians' platform, and lighted at the other by two dozen candles disposed about a long trestle table covered with green cloth. In the middle, Mr. Jones, a starved spectre turned into a banker, faced Ricardo, a rather nasty, slow-moving cat turned into a croupier. By contrast, the other faces round that table, anything between twenty and thirty, must have looked like collected samples of intensely artless, helpless humanity—pathetic in their innocent watch for the small turns of luck which indeed might have been serious enough for them. They had no notice to spare for the hairy Pedro, carrying a tray with the clumsiness of a creature caught in the woods and taught to walk on its hind legs.

As to Schomberg, he kept out of the way. He remained in the billiard-room, serving out drinks to the unspeakable Pedro with an air of not seeing the growling monster, of not knowing where the drinks went, of ignoring that there was such a thing as a music-room over there under the trees within fifty yards of the hotel. He submitted himself to the situation with a low-spirited stoicism compounded of fear and resignation. Directly the party had broken up, (he could see dark shapes of the men drifting singly and in knots through the gate of the compound), he would withdraw out of sight behind a door not quite closed, in order to avoid meeting his two extraordinary guests; but he would watch through the crack their contrasted forms pass through the billiard-room and disappear on their way to bed. Then he would hear doors being slammed upstairs; and a profound silence would fall upon the whole house, upon his hotel appropriated, haunted by those insolently outspoken men provided with a whole armoury of weapons in their trunks. A profound silence. Schomberg sometimes could not resist the notion that he must be dreaming. Shuddering, he would pull himself together, and creep out, with movements strangely inappropriate to the Lieutenant-of-the-Reserve bearing by which he tried to keep up his self-respect before the world.

A great loneliness oppressed him. One after another he would extinguish the lamps, and move softly towards his bedroom, where Mrs. Schomberg waited for

him—no fit companion for a man of his ability and “in the prime of life.” But that life, alas, was blighted. He felt it; and never with such force as when on opening the door he perceived that woman sitting patiently in a chair, her toes peeping out under the edge of her night-dress, an amazingly small amount of hair on her head drooping on the long stalk of scraggy neck, with that everlasting scared grin showing a blue tooth and meaning nothing—not even real fear. For she was used to him.

Sometimes he was tempted to screw the head off the stalk. He imagined himself doing it—with one hand, a twisting movement. Not seriously, of course. Just a simple indulgence for his exasperated feelings. He wasn't capable of murder. He was certain of that. And, remembering suddenly the plain speeches of Mr. Jones, he would think: “I suppose I am too tame for that”—quite unaware that he had murdered the poor woman morally years ago. He was too unintelligent to have the notion of such a crime. Her bodily presence was bitterly offensive, because of its contrast with a very different feminine image. And it was no use getting rid of her. She was a habit of years, and there would be nothing to put in her place. At any rate, he could talk to that idiot half the night if he chose.

That night he had been vapouring before her as to his intention to face his two guests and, instead of that inspiration he needed, had merely received the usual warning: “Be careful, Wilhelm.” He did not want to be told to be careful by an imbecile female. What he needed was a pair of woman's arms which, flung round his neck, would brace him up for the encounter. Inspire him, he called it to himself.

He lay awake a long time; and his slumbers, when they came, were unsatisfactory and short. The morning light had no joy for his eyes. He listened dismally to the movements in the house. The Chinamen were unlocking and flinging wide the doors of the public rooms which opened on the veranda. Horrors! Another poisoned day to get through somehow! The recollection of his resolve made him feel actually sick for a moment. First of all the lordly, abandoned attitudes of Mr. Jones disconcerted him. Then there was his contemptuous silence. Mr. Jones never addressed himself to Schomberg with any general remarks, never opened his lips to him unless to say “Good morning”—two simple words which, uttered by that man, seemed a mockery of a threatening character. And, lastly, it was not a frank physical fear he inspired—for as to that, even a cornered rat will fight—but a superstitious shrinking awe, something like an invincible repugnance to seek speech with a wicked ghost. That it was a daylight ghost surprisingly angular in his attitudes, and for the most part spread out on three chairs, did not make it any easier. Daylight only made him a more weird, a more disturbing and unlawful apparition. Strangely enough in the evening when he came out of his mute supineness, this unearthly side of him was

less obtrusive. At the gaming-table, when actually handling the cards, it was probably sunk quite out of sight; but Schomberg, having made up his mind in ostrich-like fashion to ignore what was going on, never entered the desecrated music-room. He had never seen Mr. Jones in the exercise of his vocation—or perhaps it was only his trade.

“I will speak to him tonight,” Schomberg said to himself, while he drank his morning tea, in pyjamas, on the veranda, before the rising sun had topped the trees of the compound, and while the undried dew still lay silvery on the grass, sparkled on the blossoms of the central flower-bed, and darkened the yellow gravel of the drive. “That’s what I’ll do. I won’t keep out of sight tonight. I shall come out and catch him as he goes to bed carrying the cash-box.”

After all, what was the fellow but a common desperado? Murderous? Oh, yes; murderous enough, perhaps—and the muscles of Schomberg’s stomach had a quivering contraction under his airy attire. But even a common desperado would think twice or, more likely, a hundred times, before openly murdering an inoffensive citizen in a civilized, European-ruled town. He jerked his shoulders. Of course! He shuddered again, and paddled back to his room to dress himself. His mind was made up, and he would think no more about it; but still he had his doubts. They grew and unfolded themselves with the progress of the day, as some plants do. At times they made him perspire more than usual, and they did away with the possibility of his afternoon siesta. After turning over on his couch more than a dozen times, he gave up this mockery of repose, got up, and went downstairs.

It was between three and four o’clock, the hour of profound peace. The very flowers seemed to doze on their stalks set with sleepy leaves. Not even the air stirred, for the sea-breeze was not due till later. The servants were out of sight, catching naps in the shade somewhere behind the house. Mrs. Schomberg in a dim up-stair room with closed jalousies, was elaborating those two long pendant ringlets which were such a feature of her hairdressing for her afternoon duties. At that time no customers ever troubled the repose of the establishment. Wandering about his premises in profound solitude, Schomberg recoiled at the door of the billiard-room, as if he had seen a snake in his path. All alone with the billiards, the bare little tables, and a lot of untenanted chairs, Mr. Secretary Ricardo sat near the wall, performing with lightning rapidity something that looked like tricks with his own personal pack of cards, which he always carried about in his pocket. Schomberg would have backed out quietly if Ricardo had not turned his head. Having been seen, the hotel-keeper elected to walk in as the lesser risk of the two. The consciousness of his inwardly abject attitude towards these men caused him always to throw his chest out and assume a severe expression. Ricardo watched his approach, clasping the pack of cards in both hands.

“You want something, perhaps?” suggested Schomberg in his lieutenant-of-the-Reserve voice.

Ricardo shook his head in silence and looked expectant. With him Schomberg exchanged at least twenty words every day. He was infinitely more communicative than his patron. At times he looked very much like an ordinary human being of his class; and he seemed to be in an amiable mood at that moment. Suddenly spreading some ten cards face downward in the form of a fan, he thrust them towards Schomberg.

“Come, man, take one quick!”

Schomberg was so surprised that he took one hurriedly, after a very perceptible start. The eyes of Martin Ricardo gleamed phosphorescent in the half-light of the room screened from the heat and glare of the tropics.

“That's the king of hearts you've got,” he chuckled, showing his teeth in a quick flash.

Schomberg, after looking at the card, admitted that it was, and laid it down on the table.

“I can make you take any card I like nine times out of ten,” exulted the secretary, with a strange curl of his lips and a green flicker in his raised eyes.

Schomberg looked down at him dumbly. For a few seconds neither of them stirred; then Ricardo lowered his glance, and, opening his fingers, let the whole pack fall on the table. Schomberg sat down. He sat down because of the faintness in his legs, and for no other reason. His mouth was dry. Having sat down, he felt that he must speak. He squared his shoulders in parade style.

“You are pretty good at that sort of thing,” he said.

“Practice makes perfect,” replied the secretary.

His precarious amiability made it impossible for Schomberg to get away. Thus, from his very timidity, the hotel-keeper found himself engaged in a conversation the thought of which filled him with apprehension. It must be said, in justice to Schomberg, that he concealed his funk very creditably. The habit of throwing out his chest and speaking in a severe voice stood him in good stead. With him, too, practice made perfect; and he would probably have kept it up to the end, to the very last moment, to the ultimate instant of breaking strain which would leave him grovelling on the floor. To add to his secret trouble, he was at a loss what to say. He found nothing else but the remark:

“I suppose you are fond of cards.”

“What would you expect?” asked Ricardo in a simple, philosophical tone. “It is likely I should not be?” Then, with sudden fire: “Fond of cards? Ay, passionately!”

The effect of this outburst was augmented by the quiet lowering of the eyelids, by a reserved pause as though this had been a confession of another kind of love. Schomberg cudgelled his brains for a new topic, but he could not find one. His usual scandalous gossip would not serve this turn. That desperado did not know anyone anywhere within a thousand miles. Schomberg was almost compelled to keep to the subject.

“I suppose you've always been so—from your early youth.”

Ricardo's eyes remained cast down. His fingers toyed absently with the pack on the table.

“I don't know that it was so early. I first got in the way of it playing for tobacco—in forecastles of ships, you know—common sailor games. We used to spend whole watches below at it, round a chest, under a slush lamp. We would hardly spare the time to get a bite of salt horse—neither eat nor sleep. We could hardly stand when the watches were mustered on deck. Talk of gambling!” He dropped the reminiscent tone to add the information, “I was bred to the sea from a boy, you know.”

Schomberg had fallen into a reverie, but without losing the sense of impending calamity. The next words he heard were:

“I got on all right at sea, too. Worked up to be mate. I was mate of a schooner—a yacht, you might call her—a special good berth too, in the Gulf of Mexico, a soft job that you don't run across more than once in a lifetime. Yes, I was mate of her when I left the sea to follow him.”

Ricardo tossed up his chin to indicate the room above; from which Schomberg, his wits painfully aroused by this reminder of Mr. Jones's existence, concluded that the latter had withdrawn into his bedroom. Ricardo, observing him from under lowered eyelids, went on:

“It so happened that we were shipmates.”

“Mr. Jones, you mean? Is he a sailor too?”

Ricardo raised his eyelids at that.

“He's no more Mr. Jones than you are,” he said with obvious pride. “He a sailor! That just shows your ignorance. But there! A foreigner can't be expected to know any better. I am an Englishman, and I know a gentleman at sight. I should know one drunk, in the gutter, in jail, under the gallows. There's a something—it isn't exactly the appearance, it's a—no use me trying to tell you. You ain't an Englishman, and if you were, you wouldn't need to be told.”

An unsuspected stream of loquacity had broken its dam somewhere deep within the man, had diluted his fiery blood and softened his pitiless fibre. Schomberg experienced mingled relief and apprehension, as if suddenly an enormous savage cat had begun to wind itself about his legs in inexplicable

friendliness. No prudent man under such circumstances would dare to stir. Schomberg didn't stir. Ricardo assumed an easy attitude, with an elbow on the table. Schomberg squared his shoulders afresh.

“I was employed, in that there yacht—schooner, whatever you call it—by ten gentlemen at once. That surprises you, eh? Yes, yes, ten. Leastwise there were nine of them gents good enough in their way, and one downright gentleman, and that was . . .”

Ricardo gave another upward jerk of his chin as much as to say: He! The only one.

“And no mistake,” he went on. “I spotted him from the first day. How? Why? Ay, you may ask. Hadn't seen that many gentlemen in my life. Well, somehow I did. If you were an Englishman, you would—”

“What was your yacht?” Schomberg interrupted as impatiently as he dared; for this harping on nationality jarred on his already tried nerves. “What was the game?”

“You have a headpiece on you! Game! 'Xactly. That's what it was—the sort of silliness gentlemen will get up among themselves to play at adventure. A treasure-hunting expedition. Each of them put down so much money, you understand, to buy the schooner. Their agent in the city engaged me and the skipper. The greatest secrecy and all that. I reckon he had a twinkle in his eye all the time—and no mistake. But that wasn't our business. Let them bust their money as they like. The pity of it was that so little of it came our way. Just fair pay and no more. And damn any pay, much or little, anyhow—that's what I say!”

He blinked his eyes greenishly in the dim light. The heat seemed to have stilled everything in the world but his voice. He swore at large, abundantly, in snarling undertones, it was impossible to say why, then calmed down as inexplicably, and went on, as a sailor yarns.

“At first there were only nine of them adventurous sparks, then, just a day or two before the sailing date, he turned up. Heard of it somehow, somewhere—I would say from some woman, if I didn't know him as I do. He would give any woman a ten-mile berth. He can't stand them. Or maybe in a flash bar. Or maybe in one of them grand clubs in Pall Mall. Anyway, the agent netted him in all right—cash down, and only about four and twenty hours for him to get ready; but he didn't miss his ship. Not he! You might have called it a pier-head jump—for a gentleman. I saw him come along. Know the West India Docks, eh?”

Schomberg did not know the West India Docks. Ricardo looked at him pensively for a while, and then continued, as if such ignorance had to be disregarded.

“Our tug was already alongside. Two loafers were carrying his dunnage behind him. I told the dockman at our moorings to keep all fast for a minute. The

gangway was down already; but he made nothing of it. Up he jumps, one leap, swings his long legs over the rail, and there he is on board. They pass up his swell dunnage, and he puts his hand in his trousers pocket and throws all his small change on the wharf for them chaps to pick up. They were still promenading that wharf on all fours when we cast off. It was only then that he looked at me—quietly, you know; in a slow way. He wasn't so thin then as he is now; but I noticed he wasn't so young as he looked—not by a long chalk. He seemed to touch me inside somewhere. I went away pretty quick from there; I was wanted forward anyhow. I wasn't frightened. What should I be frightened for? I only felt touched—on the very spot. But Jee-miny, if anybody had told me we should be partners before the year was out—well, I would have—”

He swore a variety of strange oaths, some common, others quaintly horrible to Schomberg's ears, and all mere innocent exclamations of wonder at the shifts and changes of human fortune. Schomberg moved slightly in his chair. But the admirer and partner of “plain Mr. Jones” seemed to have forgotten Schomberg's existence for the moment. The stream of ingenuous blasphemy—some of it in bad Spanish—had run dry, and Martin Ricardo, connoisseur in gentlemen, sat dumb with a stony gaze as if still marvelling inwardly at the amazing elections, conjunctions, and associations of events which influence man's pilgrimage on this earth.

At last Schomberg spoke tentatively:

“And so the—the gentleman, up there, talked you over into leaving a good berth?”

Ricardo started.

“Talked me over! Didn't need to talk me over. Just beckoned to me, and that was enough. By that time we were in the Gulf of Mexico. One night we were lying at anchor, close to a dry sandbank—to this day I am not sure where it was—off the Colombian coast or thereabouts. We were to start digging the next morning, and all hands had turned in early, expecting a hard day with the shovels. Up he comes, and in his quiet, tired way of speaking—you can tell a gentleman by that as much as by anything else almost—up he comes behind me and says, just like that into my ear, in a manner: 'Well, what do you think of our treasure hunt now?'

“I didn't even turn my head; 'xactly as I stood, I remained, and I spoke no louder than himself:

“If you want to know, sir, it's nothing but just damned tom-foolery.'

“We had, of course, been having short talks together at one time or another during the passage. I dare say he had read me like a book. There ain't much to me, except that I have never been tame, even when walking the pavement and cracking jokes and standing drinks to chums—ay, and to strangers, too. I would

watch them lifting their elbows at my expense, or splitting their side at my fun—I *can* be funny when I like, you bet!”

A pause for self-complacent contemplation of his own fun and generosity checked the flow of Ricardo's speech. Schomberg was concerned to keep within bounds the enlargement of his eyes, which he seemed to feel growing bigger in his head.

“Yes, yes,” he whispered hastily.

“I would watch them and think: 'You boys don't know who I am. If you did—!' With girls, too. Once I was courting a girl. I used to kiss her behind the ear and say to myself: 'If you only knew who's kissing you, my dear, you would scream and bolt!' Ha! ha! Not that I wanted to do them any harm; but I felt the power in myself. Now, here we sit, friendly like, and that's all right. You aren't in my way. But I am not friendly to you. I just don't care. Some men do say that; but I really don't. You are no more to me one way or another than that fly there. Just so. I'd squash you or leave you alone. I don't care what I do.”

If real force of character consists in overcoming our sudden weaknesses, Schomberg displayed plenty of that quality. At the mention of the fly, he re-enforced the severe dignity of his attitude as one inflates a collapsing toy balloon with a great effort of breath. The easy-going, relaxed attitude of Ricardo was really appalling.

“That's so,” he went on. “I am that sort of fellow. You wouldn't think it, would you? No. You have to be told. So I am telling you, and I dare say you only half believe it. But you can't say to yourself that I am drunk, stare at me as you may. I haven't had anything stronger than a glass of iced water all day. Takes a real gentleman to see through a fellow. Oh, yes—he spotted me. I told you we had a few talks at sea about one thing or another. And I used to watch him down the skylight, playing cards in the cuddy with the others. They had to pass the time away somehow. By the same token he caught me at it once, and it was then that I told him I was fond of cards—and generally lucky in gambling, too. Yes, he had sized me up. Why not? A gentleman's just like any other man—and something more.”

It flashed through Schomberg's mind: that these two were indeed well matched in their enormous dissimilarity, identical souls in different disguises.

“Says he to me”—Ricardo started again in a gossiping manner—'I'm packed up. It's about time to go, Martin.'

“It was the first time he called me Martin. Says I:

“'Is that it, sir?'

“You didn't think I was after that sort of treasure, did you? I wanted to clear out from home quietly. It's a pretty expensive way of getting a passage across, but it has served my turn.’

“I let him know very soon that I was game for anything, from pitch and toss to wilful murder, in his company.

“‘Wilful murder?’ says he in his quiet way. ‘What the deuce is that? What are you talking about? People do get killed sometimes when they get in one's way, but that's self-defence—you understand?’

“I told him I did. And then I said I would run below for a minute, to ram a few of my things into a sailor's bag I had. I've never cared for a lot of dunnage; I believed in going about flying light when I was at sea. I came back and found him strolling up and down the deck, as if he were taking a breath of fresh air before turning in, like any other evening.

“‘Ready?’

“‘Yes, sir.’

“He didn't even look at me. We had had a boat in the water astern ever since we came to anchor in the afternoon. He throws the stump of his cigar overboard.

“‘Can you get the captain out on deck?’ he asks.

“That was the last thing in the world I should have thought of doing. I lost my tongue for a moment.

“‘I can try,’ says I.

“‘Well, then, I am going below. You get him up and keep him with you till I come back on deck. Mind! Don't let him go below till I return.’

“I could not help asking why he told me to rouse a sleeping man, when we wanted everybody on board to sleep sweetly till we got clear of the schooner. He laughs a little and says that I didn't see all the bearings of this business.

“‘Mind,’ he says, ‘don't let him leave you till you see me come up again.’ He puts his eyes close to mine. ‘Keep him with you at all costs.’

“‘And that means?’ says I.

“‘All costs to him—by every possible or impossible means. I don't want to be interrupted in my business down below. He would give me lots of trouble. I take you with me to save myself trouble in various circumstances; and you've got to enter on your work right away.’

“‘Just so, sir,’ says I; and he slips down the companion.

“‘With a gentleman you know at once where you are; but it was a ticklish job. The skipper was nothing to me one way or another, any more than you are at this moment, Mr. Schomberg. You may light your cigar or blow your brains out this minute, and I don't care a hang which you do, both or neither. To bring the

skipper up was easy enough. I had only to stamp on the deck a few times over his head. I stamped hard. But how to keep him up when he got there?

“Anything the matter; Mr. Ricardo?” I heard his voice behind me.

“There he was, and I hadn't thought of anything to say to him; so I didn't turn round. The moonlight was brighter than many a day I could remember in the North Sea.

“Why did you call me? What are you staring at out there, Mr. Ricardo?”

“He was deceived by my keeping my back to him. I wasn't staring at anything, but his mistake gave me a notion.

“I am staring at something that looks like a canoe over there,” I said very slowly.

“The skipper got concerned at once. It wasn't any danger from the inhabitants, whoever they were.

“Oh, hang it!” says he. ‘That's very unfortunate.’ He had hoped that the schooner being on the coast would not get known so very soon. ‘Dashed awkward, with the business we've got in hand, to have a lot of niggers watching operations. But are you certain this is a canoe?’

“It may be a drift-log,” I said; ‘but I thought you had better have a look with your own eyes. You may make it out better than I can.’

“His eyes weren't anything as good as mine. But he says:

“Certainly. Certainly. You did quite right.’

“And it's a fact I had seen some drift-logs at sunset. I saw what they were then and didn't trouble my head about them, forgot all about it till that very moment. Nothing strange in seeing drift-logs off a coast like that; and I'm hanged if the skipper didn't make one out in the wake of the moon. Strange what a little thing a man's life hangs on sometimes—a single word! Here you are, sitting unsuspecting before me, and you may let out something unbeknown to you that would settle your hash. Not that I have any ill-feeling. I have no feelings. If the skipper had said, ‘O, bosh!’ and had turned his back on me, he would not have gone three steps towards his bed; but he stood there and stared. And now the job was to get him off the deck when he was no longer wanted there.

“We are just trying to make out if that object there is a canoe or a log,” says he to Mr. Jones.

“Mr. Jones had come up, lounging as carelessly as when he went below. While the skipper was jawing about boats and drifting logs. I asked by signs, from behind, if I hadn't better knock him on the head and drop him quietly overboard. The night was slipping by, and we had to go. It couldn't be put off till next night no more. No. No more. And do you know why?”

Schomberg made a slight negative sign with his head. This direct appeal annoyed him, jarred on the induced quietude of a great talker forced into the part of a listener and sunk in it as a man sinks into slumber. Mr. Ricardo struck a note of scorn.

“Don't know why? Can't you guess? No? Because the boss had got hold of the skipper's cash-box by then. See?”