

## CHAPTER TWO

That was how it began. How it was that it ended, as we know it did end, is not so easy to state precisely. It is very clear that Heyst was not indifferent, I won't say to the girl, but to the girl's fate. He was the same man who had plunged after the submerged Morrison whom he hardly knew otherwise than by sight and through the usual gossip of the islands. But this was another sort of plunge altogether, and likely to lead to a very different kind of partnership.

Did he reflect at all? Probably. He was sufficiently reflective. But if he did, it was with insufficient knowledge. For there is no evidence that he paused at any time between the date of that evening and the morning of the flight. Truth to say, Heyst was not one of those men who pause much. Those dreamy spectators of the world's agitation are terrible once the desire to act gets hold of them. They lower their heads and charge a wall with an amazing serenity which nothing but an indisciplined imagination can give.

He was not a fool. I suppose he knew—or at least he felt—where this was leading him. But his complete inexperience gave him the necessary audacity. The girl's voice was charming when she spoke to him of her miserable past, in simple terms, with a sort of unconscious cynicism inherent in the truth of the ugly conditions of poverty. And whether because he was humane or because her voice included all the modulations of pathos, cheerfulness, and courage in its compass, it was not disgust that the tale awakened in him, but the sense of an immense sadness.

On a later evening, during the interval between the two parts of the concert, the girl told Heyst about herself. She was almost a child of the streets. Her father was a musician in the orchestras of small theatres. Her mother ran away from him while she was little, and the landladies of various poor lodging-houses had attended casually to her abandoned childhood. It was never positive starvation and absolute rags, but it was the hopeless grip of poverty all the time. It was her father who taught her to play the violin. It seemed that he used to get drunk sometimes, but without pleasure, and only because he was unable to forget his fugitive wife. After he had a paralytic stroke, falling over with a crash in the well of a music-hall orchestra during the performance, she had joined the Zangiaco company. He was now in a home for incurables.

“And I am here,” she finished, “with no one to care if I make a hole in the water the next chance I get or not.”

Heyst told her that he thought she could do a little better than that, if it was only a question of getting out of the world. She looked at him with special attention, and with a puzzled expression which gave to her face an air of innocence.

This was during one of the “intervals” between the two parts of the concert. She had come down that time without being incited thereto by a pinch from the awful Zangiaco woman. It is difficult to suppose that she was seduced by the uncovered intellectual forehead and the long reddish moustaches of her new friend. New is not the right word. She had never had a friend before; and the sensation of this friendliness going out to her was exciting by its novelty alone. Besides, any man who did not resemble Schomberg appeared for that very reason attractive. She was afraid of the hotel-keeper, who, in the daytime, taking advantage of the fact that she lived in the hotel itself, and not in the Pavilion with the other “artists” prowled round her, mute, hungry, portentous behind his great beard, or else assailed her in quiet corners and empty passages with deep, mysterious murmurs from behind, which, notwithstanding their clear import, sounded horribly insane somehow.

The contrast of Heyst's quiet, polished manner gave her special delight and filled her with admiration. She had never seen anything like that before. If she had, perhaps, known kindness in her life, she had never met the forms of simple courtesy. She was interested by it as a very novel experience, not very intelligible, but distinctly pleasurable.

“I tell you they are too many for me,” she repeated, sometimes recklessly, but more often shaking her head with ominous dejection.

She had, of course, no money at all. The quantities of “black men” all about frightened her. She really had no definite idea where she was on the surface of the globe. The orchestra was generally taken from the steamer to some hotel, and kept shut up there till it was time to go on board another steamer. She could not remember the names she heard.

“How do you call this place again?” she used to ask Heyst.

“Sourabaya,” he would say distinctly, and would watch the discouragement at the outlandish sound coming into her eyes, which were fastened on his face.

He could not defend himself from compassion. He suggested that she might go to the consul, but it was his conscience that dictated this advice, not his conviction. She had never heard of the animal or of its uses. A consul! What was it? Who was he? What could he do? And when she learned that perhaps he could be induced to send her home, her head dropped on her breast.

“What am I to do when I get there?” she murmured with an intonation so just, with an accent so penetrating—the charm of her voice did not fail her even in whispering—that Heyst seemed to see the illusion of human fellowship on earth vanish before the naked truth of her existence, and leave them both face to face in a moral desert as arid as the sands of Sahara, without restful shade, without refreshing water.

She leaned slightly over the little table, the same little table at which they had sat when they first met each other; and with no other memories but of the stones in the streets her childhood had known, in the distress of the incoherent, confused, rudimentary impressions of her travels inspiring her with a vague terror of the world she said rapidly, as one speaks in desperation:

“*You* do something! You are a gentleman. It wasn't I who spoke to you first, was it? I didn't begin, did I? It was you who came along and spoke to me when I was standing over there. What did you want to speak to me for? I don't care what it is, but you must do something.”

Her attitude was fierce and entreating at the same time—clamorous, in fact though her voice had hardly risen above a breath. It was clamorous enough to be noticed. Heyst, on purpose, laughed aloud. She nearly choked with indignation at this brutal heartlessness.

“What did you mean, then, by saying 'command me!'?” she almost hissed.

Something hard in his mirthless stare, and a quiet final “All right,” steadied her.

“I am not rich enough to buy you out,” he went on, speaking with an extraordinary detached grin, “even if it were to be done; but I can always steal you.”

She looked at him profoundly, as though these words had a hidden and very complicated meaning.

“Get away now,” he said rapidly, “and try to smile as you go.”

She obeyed with unexpected readiness; and as she had a set of very good white teeth, the effect of the mechanical, ordered smile was joyous, radiant. It astonished Heyst. No wonder, it flashed through his mind, women can deceive men so completely. The faculty was inherent in them; they seemed to be created with a special aptitude. Here was a smile the origin of which was well known to him; and yet it had conveyed a sensation of warmth, had given him a sort of ardour to live which was very new to his experience.

By this time she was gone from the table, and had joined the other “ladies of the orchestra.” They trooped towards the platform, driven in truculently by the haughty mate of Zangiaco, who looked as though she were restraining herself with difficulty from punching their backs. Zangiaco followed, with his great, pendulous dyed beard and short mess-jacket, with an aspect of hang-dog concentration imparted by his drooping head and the uneasiness of his eyes, which were set very close together. He climbed the steps last of all, turned about, displaying his purple beard to the hall, and tapped with his bow. Heyst winced in anticipation of the horrible racket. It burst out immediately unabashed and awful. At the end of the platform the woman at the piano, presenting her cruel profile, her head tilted back, banged the keys without looking at the music.

Heyst could not stand the uproar for more than a minute. He went out, his brain racked by the rhythm of some more or less Hungarian dance music. The forests inhabited by the New Guinea cannibals where he had encountered the most exciting of his earlier futile adventures were silent. And this adventure, not in its execution, perhaps, but in its nature, required even more nerve than anything he had faced before. Walking among the paper lanterns suspended to trees he remembered with regret the gloom and the dead stillness of the forests at the back of Geelvink Bay, perhaps the wildest, the unsafest, the most deadly spot on earth from which the sea can be seen. Oppressed by his thoughts, he sought the obscurity and peace of his bedroom; but they were not complete. The distant sounds of the concert reached his ear, faint indeed, but still disturbing. Neither did he feel very safe in there; for that sentiment depends not on extraneous circumstances but on our inward conviction. He did not attempt to go to sleep; he did not even unbutton the top button of his tunic. He sat in a chair and mused. Formerly, in solitude and in silence, he had been used to think clearly and sometimes even profoundly, seeing life outside the flattering optical delusion of everlasting hope, of conventional self-deceptions, of an ever-expected happiness. But now he was troubled; a light veil seemed to hang before his mental vision; the awakening of a tenderness, indistinct and confused as yet, towards an unknown woman.

Gradually silence, a real silence, had established itself round him. The concert was over; the audience had gone; the concert-hall was dark; and even the Pavilion, where the ladies' orchestra slept after its noisy labours, showed not a gleam of light. Heyst suddenly felt restless in all his limbs, as this reaction from the long immobility would not be denied, he humoured it by passing quietly along the back veranda and out into the grounds at the side of the house, into the black shadows under the trees, where the extinguished paper lanterns were gently swinging their globes like withered fruit.

He paced there to and fro for a long time, a calm, meditative ghost in his white drill-suit, revolving in his head thoughts absolutely novel, disquieting, and seductive; accustoming his mind to the contemplation of his purpose, in order that by being faced steadily it should appear praiseworthy and wise. For the use of reason is to justify the obscure desires that move our conduct, impulses, passions, prejudices, and follies, and also our fears.

He felt that he had engaged himself by a rash promise to an action big with incalculable consequences. And then he asked himself if the girl had understood what he meant. Who could tell? He was assailed by all sorts of doubts. Raising his head, he perceived something white flitting between the trees. It vanished almost at once; but there could be no mistake. He was vexed at being detected roaming like this in the middle of the night. Who could that be? It never occurred to him that perhaps the girl, too, would not be able to sleep. He advanced

prudently. Then he saw the white, phantom-like apparition again; and the next moment all his doubts as to the state of her mind were laid at rest, because he felt her clinging to him after the manner of supplicants all the world over. Her whispers were so incoherent that he could not understand anything; but this did not prevent him from being profoundly moved. He had no illusions about her; but his sceptical mind was dominated by the fulness of his heart.

“Calm yourself, calm yourself,” he murmured in her ear, returning her clasp at first mechanically, and afterwards with a growing appreciation of her distressed humanity. The heaving of her breast and the trembling of all her limbs, in the closeness of his embrace, seemed to enter his body, to infect his very heart. While she was growing quieter in his arms, he was becoming more agitated, as if there were only a fixed quantity of violent emotion on this earth. The very night seemed more dumb, more still, and the immobility of the vague, black shapes, surrounding him more perfect.

“It will be all right,” he tried to reassure her, with a tone of conviction, speaking into her ear, and of necessity clasping her more closely than before.

Either the words or the action had a very good effect. He heard a light sigh of relief. She spoke with a calmed ardour.

“Oh, I knew it would be all right from the first time you spoke to me! Yes, indeed, I knew directly you came up to me that evening. I knew it would be all right, if you only cared to make it so; but of course I could not tell if you meant it. 'Command me,' you said. Funny thing for a man like you to say. Did you really mean it? You weren't making fun of me?”

He protested that he had been a serious person all his life.

“I believe you,” she said ardently. He was touched by this declaration. “It's the way you have of speaking as if you were amused with people,” she went on. “But I wasn't deceived. I could see you were angry with that beast of a woman. And you are clever. You spotted something at once. You saw it in my face, eh? It isn't a bad face—say? You'll never be sorry. Listen—I'm not twenty yet. It's the truth, and I can't be so bad looking, or else—I will tell you straight that I have been worried and pestered by fellows like this before. I don't know what comes to them—”

She was speaking hurriedly. She choked, and then exclaimed, with an accent of despair:

“What is it? What's the matter?”

Heyst had removed his arms from her suddenly, and had recoiled a little. “Is it my fault? I didn't even look at them, I tell you straight. Never! Have I looked at you? Tell me. It was you that began it.”

In truth, Heyst had shrunk from the idea of competition with fellows unknown, with Schomberg the hotel-keeper. The vaporous white figure before him swayed pitifully in the darkness. He felt ashamed of his fastidiousness.

“I am afraid we have been detected,” he murmured. “I think I saw somebody on the path between the house and the bushes behind you.”

He had seen no one. It was a compassionate lie, if there ever was one. His compassion was as genuine as his shrinking had been, and in his judgement more honourable.

She didn't turn her head. She was obviously relieved.

“Would it be that brute?” she breathed out, meaning Schomberg, of course. “He's getting too forward with me now. What can you expect? Only this evening, after supper, he—but I slipped away. You don't mind him, do you? Why, I could face him myself now that I know you care for me. A girl can always put up a fight. You believe me? Only it isn't easy to stand up for yourself when you feel there's nothing and nobody at your back. There's nothing so lonely in the world as a girl who has got to look after herself. When I left poor dad in that home—it was in the country, near a village—I came out of the gates with seven shillings and threepence in my old purse, and my railway ticket. I tramped a mile, and got into a train—”

She broke off, and was silent for a moment.

“Don't you throw me over now,” she went on. “If you did, what should I do? I should have to live, to be sure, because I'd be afraid to kill myself, but you would have done a thousand times worse than killing a body. You told me you had been always alone, you had never had a dog even. Well, then, I won't be in anybody's way if I live with you—not even a dog's. And what else did you mean when you came up and looked at me so close?”

“Close? Did I?” he murmured un stirring before her in the profound darkness. “So close as that?”

She had an outbreak of anger and despair in subdued tones.

“Have you forgotten, then? What did you expect to find? I know what sort of girl I am; but all the same I am not the sort that men turn their backs on—and you ought to know it, unless you aren't made like the others. Oh, forgive me! You aren't like the others; you are like no one in the world I ever spoke to. Don't you care for me? Don't you see—?”

What he saw was that, white and spectral, she was putting out her arms to him out of the black shadows like an appealing ghost. He took her hands, and was affected, almost surprised, to find them so warm, so real, so firm, so living in his grasp. He drew her to him, and she dropped her head on his shoulder with a deep-sigh.

"I am dead tired," she whispered plaintively.

He put his arms around her, and only by the convulsive movements of her body became aware that she was sobbing without a sound. Sustaining her, he lost himself in the profound silence of the night. After a while she became still, and cried quietly. Then, suddenly, as if waking up, she asked:

"You haven't seen any more of that somebody you thought was spying about?"

He started at her quick, sharp whisper, and answered that very likely he had been mistaken.

"If it was anybody at all," she reflected aloud, "it wouldn't have been anyone but that hotel woman—the landlord's wife."

"Mrs. Schomberg," Heyst said, surprised.

"Yes. Another one that can't sleep o' nights. Why? Don't you see why? Because, of course, she sees what's going on. That beast doesn't even try to keep it from her. If she had only the least bit of spirit! She knows how I feel, too, only she's too frightened even to look him in the face, let alone open her mouth. He would tell her to go hang herself."

For some time Heyst said nothing. A public, active contest with the hotel-keeper was not to be thought of. The idea was horrible. Whispering gently to the girl, he tried to explain to her that as things stood, an open withdrawal from the company would be probably opposed. She listened to his explanation anxiously, from time to time pressing the hand she had sought and got hold of in the dark.

"As I told you, I am not rich enough to buy you out so I shall steal you as soon as I can arrange some means of getting away from here. Meantime it would be fatal to be seen together at night. We mustn't give ourselves away. We had better part at once. I think I was mistaken just now; but if, as you say, that poor Mrs. Schomberg can't sleep of nights, we must be more careful. She would tell the fellow."

The girl had disengaged herself from his loose hold while he talked, and now stood free of him, but still clasping his hand firmly.

"Oh, no," she said with perfect assurance. "I tell you she daren't open her mouth to him. And she isn't as silly as she looks. She wouldn't give us away. She knows a trick worth two of that. She'll help—that's what she'll do, if she dares do anything at all."

"You seem to have a very clear view of the situation," said Heyst, and received a warm, lingering kiss for this commendation.

He discovered that to part from her was not such an easy matter as he had supposed it would be.

"Upon my word," he said before they separated, "I don't even know your name."

“Don't you? They call me Alma. I don't know why. Silly name! Magdalen too. It doesn't matter; you can call me by whatever name you choose. Yes, you give me a name. Think of one you would like the sound of—something quite new. How I should like to forget everything that has gone before, as one forgets a dream that's done with, fright and all! I would try.”

“Would you really?” he asked in a murmur. “But that's not forbidden. I understand that women easily forget whatever in their past diminishes them in their eyes.”

“It's your eyes that I was thinking of, for I'm sure I've never wished to forget anything till you came up to me that night and looked me through and through. I know I'm not much account; but I know how to stand by a man. I stood by father ever since I could understand. He wasn't a bad chap. Now that I can't be of any use to him, I would just as soon forget all that and make a fresh start. But these aren't things that I could talk to you about. What could I ever talk to you about?”

“Don't let it trouble you,” Heyst said. “Your voice is enough. I am in love with it, whatever it says.”

She remained silent for a while, as if rendered breathless by this quiet statement.

“Oh! I wanted to ask you—”

He remembered that she probably did not know his name, and expected the question to be put to him now; but after a moment of hesitation she went on:

“Why was it that you told me to smile this evening in the concert-room there—you remember?”

“I thought we were being observed. A smile is the best of masks. Schomberg was at a table next but one to us, drinking with some Dutch clerks from the town. No doubt he was watching us—watching you, at least. That's why I asked you to smile.”

“Ah, that's why. It never came into my head!”

“And you did it very well, too—very readily, as if you had understood my intention.”

“Readily!” she repeated. “Oh, I was ready enough to smile then. That's the truth. It was the first time for years I may say that I felt disposed to smile. I've not had many chances to smile in my life, I can tell you; especially of late.”

“But you do it most charmingly—in a perfectly fascinating way.”

He paused. She stood still, waiting for more with the stillness of extreme delight, wishing to prolong the sensation.

“It astonished me,” he added. “It went as straight to my heart as though you had smiled for the purpose of dazzling me. I felt as if I had never seen a smile before in my life. I thought of it after I left you. It made me restless.”

“It did all that?” came her voice, unsteady, gentle, and incredulous.

“If you had not smiled as you did, perhaps I should not have come out here tonight,” he said, with his playful earnestness of tone. “It was your triumph.”

He felt her lips touch his lightly, and the next moment she was gone. Her white dress gleamed in the distance, and then the opaque darkness of the house seemed to swallow it. Heyst waited a little before he went the same way, round the corner, up the steps of the veranda, and into his room, where he lay down at last—not to sleep, but to go over in his mind all that had been said at their meeting.

“It's exactly true about that smile,” he thought. There he had spoken the truth to her; and about her voice, too. For the rest—what must be must be.

A great wave of heat passed over him. He turned on his back, flung his arms crosswise on the broad, hard bed, and lay still, open-eyed under the mosquito net, till daylight entered his room, brightened swiftly, and turned to unfailing sunlight. He got up then, went to a small looking-glass hanging on the wall, and stared at himself steadily. It was not a new-born vanity which induced this long survey. He felt so strange that he could not resist the suspicion of his personal appearance having changed during the night. What he saw in the glass, however, was the man he knew before. It was almost a disappointment—a belittling of his recent experience. And then he smiled at his naiveness; for, being over five and thirty years of age, he ought to have known that in most cases the body is the unalterable mask of the soul, which even death itself changes but little, till it is put out of sight where no changes matter any more, either to our friends or to our enemies.

Heyst was not conscious of either friends or of enemies. It was the very essence of his life to be a solitary achievement, accomplished not by hermit-like withdrawal with its silence and immobility, but by a system of restless wandering, by the detachment of an impermanent dweller amongst changing scenes. In this scheme he had perceived the means of passing through life without suffering and almost without a single care in the world—invulnerable because elusive.