CHAPTER FOUR

With her knees drawn up, Lena rested her elbows on them and held her head in both her hands.

“Are you tired of sitting here?” Heyst asked.

An almost imperceptible negative movement of the head was all the answer she made.

“Why are you looking so serious?” he pursued, and immediately thought that habitual seriousness, in the long run, was much more bearable than constant gaiety. “However, this expression suits you exceedingly,” he added, not diplomatically, but because, by the tendency of his taste, it was a true statement. “And as long as I can be certain that it is not boredom which gives you this severe air, I am willing to sit here and look at you till you are ready to go.”

And this was true. He was still under the fresh sortilege of their common life, the surprise of novelty, the flattered vanity of his possession of this woman; for a man must feel that, unless he has ceased to be masculine. Her eyes moved in his direction, rested on him, then returned to their stare into the deeper gloom at the foot of the straight tree-trunks, whose spreading crowns were slowly withdrawing their shade. The warm air stirred slightly about her motionless head. She would not look at him, from some obscure fear of betraying herself. She felt in her innermost depths an irresistible desire to give herself up to him more completely, by some act of absolute sacrifice. This was something of which he did not seem to have an idea. He was a strange being without needs. She felt his eyes fixed upon her; and as he kept silent, she said uneasily—for she didn't know what his silences might mean:

“And so you lived with that friend—that good man?”

“Excellent fellow,” Heyst responded, with a readiness that she did not expect. “But it was a weakness on my part. I really didn't want to, only he wouldn't let me off, and I couldn't explain. He was the sort of man to whom you can't explain anything. He was extremely sensitive, and it would have been a tigerish thing to do to mangle his delicate feelings by the sort of plain speaking that would have been necessary. His mind was like a white-walled, pure chamber, furnished with, say, six straw-bottomed chairs, and he was always placing and displacing them in various combinations. But they were always the same chairs. He was extremely easy to live with; but then he got hold of this coal idea—or, rather, the idea got hold of him, it entered into that scantily furnished chamber of which I have just spoken, and sat on all the chairs. There was no dislodging it, you know! It was going to make his fortune, my fortune, everybody's fortune. In past years, in moments of doubt that will come to a man determined to remain free from absurdities of existence, I often asked myself, with a momentary dread, in what

way would life try to get hold of me? And this was the way. He got it into his head that he could do nothing without me. And was I now, he asked me, to spurn and ruin him? Well, one morning—I wonder if he had gone down on his knees to pray that night!—one morning I gave in."

Heyst tugged violently at a tuft of dried grass, and cast it away from him with a nervous gesture.

"I gave in," he repeated.

Looking towards him with a movement of her eyes only, the girl noticed the strong feeling on his face with that intense interest which his person awakened in her mind and in her heart. But it soon passed away, leaving only a moody expression.

"It's difficult to resist where nothing matters," he observed. "And perhaps there is a grain of freakishness in my nature. It amused me to go about uttering silly, commonplace phrases. I was never so well thought of in the islands till I began to jabber commercial gibberish like the veriest idiot. Upon my word, I believe that I was actually respected for a time. I was as grave as an owl over it; I had to be loyal to the man. I have been, from first to last, completely, utterly loyal to the best of my ability. I thought he understood something about coal. And if I had been aware that he knew nothing of it, as in fact he didn't, well—I don't know what I could have done to stop him. In one way or another I should have had to be loyal. Truth, work, ambition, love itself, may be only counters in the lamentable or despicable game of life, but when one takes a hand one must play the game. No, the shade of Morrison needn't haunt me. What's the matter? I say, Lena, why are you staring like that? Do you feel ill?"

Heyst made as if to get on his feet. The girl extended her arm to arrest him, and he remained staring in a sitting posture, propped on one arm, observing her indefinable expression of anxiety, as if she were unable to draw breath.

"What has come to you?" he insisted, feeling strangely unwilling to move, to touch her.

"Nothing!" She swallowed painfully. "Of course it can't be. What name did you say? I didn't hear it properly."

"Name?" repeated Heyst dazedly. "I only mentioned Morrison. It's the name of that man of whom I've been speaking. What of it?"

"And you mean to say that he was your friend?"

"You have heard enough to judge for yourself. You know as much of our connection as I know myself. The people in this part of the world went by appearances, and called us friends, as far as I can remember. Appearances—what more, what better can you ask for? In fact you can't have better. You can't have anything else."

“You are trying to confuse me with your talk,” she cried. “You can't make fun of this.”

“Can't? Well, no I can't. It's a pity. Perhaps it would have been the best way,” said Heyst, in a tone which for him could be called gloomy. “Unless one could forget the silly business altogether.” His faint playfulness of manner and speech returned, like a habit one has schooled oneself into, even before his forehead had cleared completely. “But why are you looking so hard at me? Oh, I don't object, and I shall try not to flinch. Your eyes—”

He was looking straight into them, and as a matter of fact had forgotten all about the late Morrison at that moment.

“No,” he exclaimed suddenly. “What an impenetrable girl you are Lena, with those grey eyes of yours! Windows of the soul, as some poet has said. The fellow must have been a glazier by vocation. Well, nature has provided excellently for the shyness of your soul.”

When he ceased speaking, the girl came to herself with a catch of her breath. He heard her voice, the varied charm of which he thought he knew so well, saying with an unfamiliar intonation:

“And that partner of yours is dead?”

“Morrison? Oh, yes, as I've told you, he—”

“You never told me.”

“Didn't I? I thought I did; or, rather, I thought you must know. It seems impossible that anybody with whom I speak should not know that Morrison is dead.”

She lowered her eyelids, and Heyst was startled by something like an expression of horror on her face.

“Morrison!” she whispered in an appalled tone. “Morrison!” Her head drooped. Unable to see her features, Heyst could tell from her voice that for some reason or other she was profoundly moved by the syllables of that unromantic name. A thought flashed through his head—could she have known Morrison? But the mere difference of their origins made it wildly improbable.

“This is very extraordinary!” he said. “Have you ever heard the name before?”

Her head moved quickly several times in tiny affirmative nods, as if she could not trust herself to speak, or even to look at him. She was biting her lower lip.

“Did you ever know anybody of that name?” he asked.

The girl answered by a negative sign; and then at last she spoke, jerkily, as if forcing herself against some doubt or fear. She had heard of that very man, she told Heyst.

“Impossible!” he said positively. “You are mistaken. You couldn't have heard of him, it's—”

He stopped short, with the thought that to talk like this was perfectly useless; that one doesn't argue against thin air.

“But I did hear of him; only I didn't know then, I couldn't guess, that it was your partner they were talking about.”

“Talking about my partner?” repeated Heyst slowly.

“No.” Her mind seemed almost as bewildered, as full of incredulity, as his. “No. They were talking of you really; only I didn't know it.”

“Who were they?” Heyst raised his voice. “Who was talking of me? Talking where?”

With the first question he had lifted himself from his reclining position; at the last he was on his knees before her, their heads on a level.

“Why, in that town, in that hotel. Where else could it have been?” she said.

The idea of being talked about was always novel to Heyst's simplified conception of himself. For a moment he was as much surprised as if he had believed himself to be a mere gliding shadow among men. Besides, he had in him a half-unconscious notion that he was above the level of island gossip.

“But you said first that it was of Morrison they talked,” he remarked to the girl, sinking on his heels, and no longer much interested. “Strange that you should have the opportunity to hear any talk at all! I was rather under the impression that you never saw anybody belonging to the town except from the platform.”

“You forget that I was not living with the other girls,” she said. “After meals they used to go back to the Pavilion, but I had to stay in the hotel and do my sewing, or what not, in the room where they talked.”

“I didn't think of that. By the by, you never told me who they were.”

“Why, that horrible red-faced beast,” she said, with all the energy of disgust which the mere thought of the hotel-keeper provoked in her.

“Oh, Schomberg!” Heyst murmured carelessly.

“He talked to the boss—to Zangiacomo, I mean. I had to sit there. That devil-woman sometimes wouldn't let me go away. I mean Mrs. Zangiacomo.”

“I guessed,” murmured Heyst. “She liked to torment you in a variety of ways. But it is really strange that the hotel-keeper should talk of Morrison to Zangiacomo. As far as I can remember he saw very little of Morrison professionally. He knew many others much better.”

The girl shuddered slightly.

“That was the only name I ever overheard. I would get as far away from them as I could, to the other end of the room, but when that beast started shouting I

could not help hearing. I wish I had never heard anything. If I had got up and gone out of the room I don't suppose the woman would have killed me for it; but she would have rowed me in a nasty way. She would have threatened me and called me names. That sort, when they know you are helpless, there's nothing to stop them. I don't know how it is, but bad people, real bad people that you can see are bad, they get over me somehow. It's the way they set about downing one. I am afraid of wickedness."

Heyst watched the changing expressions of her face. He encouraged her, profoundly sympathetic, a little amused.

"I quite understand. You needn't apologize for your great delicacy in the perception of inhuman evil. I am a little like you."

"I am not very plucky," she said.

"Well! I don't know myself what I would do, what countenance I would have before a creature which would strike me as being evil incarnate. Don't you be ashamed!"

She sighed, looked up with her pale, candid gaze and a timid expression on her face, and murmured:

"You don't seem to want to know what he was saying."

"About poor Morrison? It couldn't have been anything bad, for the poor fellow was innocence itself. And then, you know, he is dead, and nothing can possibly matter to him now."

"But I tell you that it was of you he was talking!" she cried.

"He was saying that Morrison's partner first got all there was to get out of him, and then, and then—well, as good as murdered him—sent him out to die somewhere!"

"You believe that of me?" said Heyst, after a moment of perfect silence.

"I didn't know it had anything to do with you. Schomberg was talking of some Swede. How was I to know? It was only when you began telling me about how you came here—"

"And now you have my version." Heyst forced himself to speak quietly. "So that's how the business looked from outside!" he muttered.

"I remember him saying that everybody in these parts knew the story," the girl added breathlessly.

"Strange that it should hurt me!" mused Heyst to himself; "yet it does. I seem to be as much of a fool as those everybodies who know the story and no doubt believe it. Can you remember any more?" he addressed the girl in a grimly polite tone. "I've often heard of the moral advantages of seeing oneself as others see one. Let us investigate further. Can't you recall something else that everybody knows?"

“Oh! Don't laugh!” she cried.

“Did I laugh? I assure you I was not aware of it. I won't ask you whether you believe the hotel-keeper's version. Surely you must know the value of human judgement!”

She unclasped her hands, moved them slightly, and twined her fingers as before. Protest? Assent? Was there to be nothing more? He was relieved when she spoke in that warm and wonderful voice which in itself comforted and fascinated one's heart, which made her lovable.

“I heard this before you and I ever spoke to each other. It went out of my memory afterwards. Everything went out of my memory then; and I was glad of it. It was a fresh start for me, with you—and you know it. I wish I had forgotten who I was—that would have been best; and I very nearly did forget.”

He was moved by the vibrating quality of the last words. She seemed to be talking low of some wonderful enchantment, in mysterious terms of special significance. He thought that if she only could talk to him in some unknown tongue, she would enslave him altogether by the sheer beauty of the sound, suggesting infinite depths of wisdom and feeling.

“But,” she went on, “the name stuck in my head, it seems; and when you mentioned it—”

“It broke the spell,” muttered Heyst in angry disappointment as if he had been deceived in some hope.

The girl, from her position a little above him, surveyed with still eyes the abstracted silence of the man on whom she now depended with a completeness of which she had not been vividly conscious before, because, till then, she had never felt herself swinging between the abysses of earth and heaven in the hollow of his arm. What if he should grow weary of the burden?

“And, moreover, nobody had ever believed that tale!”

Heyst came out with an abrupt burst of sound which made her open her steady eyes wider, with an effect of immense surprise. It was a purely mechanical effect, because she was neither surprised nor puzzled. In fact, she could understand him better then than at any moment since she first set eyes on him.

He laughed scornfully.

“What am I thinking of?” he cried. “As if it could matter to me what anybody had ever said or believed, from the beginning of the world till the crack of doom!”

“I never heard you laugh till today,” she observed. “This is the second time!”

He scrambled to his feet and towered above her.

“That's because, when one's heart has been broken into in the way you have broken into mine, all sorts of weaknesses are free to enter—shame, anger, stupid

indignation, stupid fears—stupid laughter, too. I wonder what interpretation you are putting on it?"

"It wasn't gay, certainly," she said. "But why are you angry with me? Are you sorry you took me away from those beasts? I told you who I was. You could see it."

"Heavens!" he muttered. He had regained his command of himself. "I assure you I could see much more than you could tell me. I could see quite a lot that you don't even suspect yet, but you can't be seen quite through."

He sank to the ground by her side and took her hand. She asked gently:

"What more do you want from me?"

He made no sound for a time.

"The impossible, I suppose," he said very low, as one makes a confidence, and pressing the hand he grasped.

It did not return the pressure. He shook his head as if to drive away the thought of this, and added in a louder, light tone:

"Nothing less. And it isn't because I think little of what I've got already. Oh, no! It is because I think so much of this possession of mine that I can't have it complete enough. I know it's unreasonable. You can't hold back anything—now."

"Indeed I couldn't," she whispered, letting her hand lie passive in his tight grasp. "I only wish I could give you something more, or better, or whatever it is you want."

He was touched by the sincere accent of these simple words.

"I tell you what you can do—you can tell me whether you would have gone with me like this if you had known of whom that abominable idiot of a hotel-keeper was speaking. A murderer—no less!"

"But I didn't know you at all then," she cried. "And I had the sense to understand what he was saying. It wasn't murder, really. I never thought it was."

"What made him invent such an atrocity?" Heyst exclaimed. "He seems a stupid animal. He *is* stupid. How did he manage to hatch that pretty tale? Have I a particularly vile countenance? Is black selfishness written all over my face? Or is that sort of thing so universally human that it might be said of anybody?"

"It wasn't murder," she insisted earnestly.

"I know. I understand. It was worse. As to killing a man, which would be a comparatively decent thing to do, well—I have never done that."

"Why should you do it?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"My dear girl, you don't know the sort of life I have been leading in unexplored countries, in the wilds; it's difficult to give you an idea. There are men who haven't been in such tight places as I have found myself in who have had to—to

shed blood, as the saying is. Even the wilds hold prizes which tempt some people; but I had no schemes, no plans—and not even great firmness of mind to make me unduly obstinate. I was simply moving on, while the others, perhaps, were going somewhere. An indifference as to roads and purposes makes one meeker, as it were. And I may say truly, too, that I never did care, I won't say for life—I had scorned what people call by that name from the first—but for being alive. I don't know if that is what men call courage, but I doubt it very much."

"You! You have no courage?" she protested.

"I really don't know. Not the sort that always itches for a weapon, for I have never been anxious to use one in the quarrels that a man gets into in the most innocent way sometimes. The differences for which men murder each other are, like everything else they do, the most contemptible, the most pitiful things to look back upon. No, I've never killed a man or loved a woman—not even in my thoughts, not even in my dreams."

He raised her hand to his lips, and let them rest on it for a space, during which she moved a little closer to him. After the lingering kiss he did not relinquish his hold.

"To slay, to love—the greatest enterprises of life upon a man! And I have no experience of either. You must forgive me anything that may have appeared to you awkward in my behaviour, inexpressive in my speeches, untimely in my silences."

He moved uneasily, a little disappointed by her attitude, but indulgent to it, and feeling, in this moment of perfect quietness, that in holding her surrendered hand he had found a closer communion than they had ever achieved before. But even then there still lingered in him a sense of incompleteness not altogether overcome—which, it seemed, nothing ever would overcome—the fatal imperfection of all the gifts of life, which makes of them a delusion and a snare.

All of a sudden he squeezed her hand angrily. His delicately playful equanimity, the product of kindness and scorn, had perished with the loss of his bitter liberty.

"Not murder, you say! I should think not. But when you led me to talk just now, when the name turned up, when you understood that it was of me that these things had been said, you showed a strange emotion. I could see it."

"I was a bit startled," she said.

"At the baseness of my conduct?" he asked.

"I wouldn't judge you, not for anything."

"Really?"

“It would be as if I dared to judge everything that there is.” With her other hand she made a gesture that seemed to embrace in one movement the earth and the heaven. “I wouldn't do such a thing.”

Then came a silence, broken at last by Heyst:

“I! I! do a deadly wrong to my poor Morrison!” he cried. “I, who could not bear to hurt his feelings. I, who respected his very madness! Yes, this madness, the wreck of which you can see lying about the jetty of Diamond Bay. What else could I do? He insisted on regarding me as his saviour; he was always restraining the eternal obligation on the tip of his tongue, till I was burning with shame at his gratitude. What could I do? He was going to repay me with this infernal coal, and I had to join him as one joins a child's game in a nursery. One would no more have thought of humiliating him than one would think of humiliating a child. What's the use of talking of all this! Of course, the people here could not understand the truth of our relation to each other. But what business of theirs was it? Kill old Morrison! Well, it is less criminal, less base—I am not saying it is less difficult—to kill a man than to cheat him in that way. You understand that?”

She nodded slightly, but more than once and with evident conviction. His eyes rested on her, inquisitive, ready for tenderness.

“But it was neither one nor the other,” he went on. “Then, why your emotion? All you confess is that you wouldn't judge me.”

She turned upon him her veiled, unseeing grey eyes in which nothing of her wonder could be read.

“I said I couldn't,” she whispered.

“But you thought that there was no smoke without fire!” the playfulness of tone hardly concealed his irritation. “What power there must be in words, only imperfectly heard—for you did not listen with particular care, did you? What were they? What evil effort of invention drove them into that idiot's mouth out of his lying throat? If you were to try to remember, they would perhaps convince me, too.”

“I didn't listen,” she protested. “What was it to me what they said of anybody? He was saying that there never were such loving friends to look at as you two; then, when you got all you wanted out of him and got thoroughly tired of him, too, you kicked him out to go home and die.”

Indignation, with an undercurrent of some other feeling, rang in these quoted words, uttered in her pure and enchanting voice. She ceased abruptly and lowered her long, dark lashes, as if mortally weary, sick at heart.

“Of course, why shouldn't you get tired of that or any other—company? You aren't like anyone else, and—and the thought of it made me unhappy suddenly; but indeed, I did not believe anything bad of you. I—”

A brusque movement of his arm, flinging her hand away, stopped her short. Heyst had again lost control of himself. He would have shouted, if shouting had been in his character.

“No, this earth must be the appointed hatching planet of calumny enough to furnish the whole universe. I feel a disgust at my own person, as if I had tumbled into some filthy hole. Pah! And you—all you can say is that you won't judge me; that you—”

She raised her head at this attack, though indeed he had not turned to her.

“I don't believe anything bad of you,” she repeated. “I couldn't.”

He made a gesture as if to say:

“That's sufficient.”

In his soul and in his body he experienced a nervous reaction from tenderness. All at once, without transition, he detested her. But only for a moment. He remembered that she was pretty, and, more, that she had a special grace in the intimacy of life. She had the secret of individuality which excites—and escapes.

He jumped up and began to walk to and fro. Presently his hidden fury fell into dust within him, like a crazy structure, leaving behind emptiness, desolation, regret. His resentment was not against the girl, but against life itself—that commonest of snares, in which he felt himself caught, seeing clearly the plot of plots and unconsoled by the lucidity of his mind.

He swerved and, stepping up to her, sank to the ground by her side. Before she could make a movement or even turn her head his way, he took her in his arms and kissed her lips. He tasted on them the bitterness of a tear fallen there. He had never seen her cry. It was like another appeal to his tenderness—a new seduction. The girl glanced round, moved suddenly away, and averted her face. With her hand she signed imperiously to him to leave her alone—a command which Heyst did not obey.