

## CHAPTER NINE

That night the girl woke up, for the first time in her new experience, with the sensation of having been abandoned to her own devices. She woke up from a painful dream of separation brought about in a way which she could not understand, and missed the relief of the waking instant. The desolate feeling of being alone persisted. She was really alone. A night-light made it plain enough, in the dim, mysterious manner of a dream; but this was reality. It startled her exceedingly.

In a moment she was at the curtain that hung in the doorway, and raised it with a steady hand. The conditions of their life in Samburan would have made peeping absurd; nor was such a thing in her character. This was not a movement of curiosity, but of downright alarm—the continued distress and fear of the dream. The night could not have been very far advanced. The light of the lantern was burning strongly, striping the floor and walls of the room with thick black bands. She hardly knew whether she expected to see Heyst or not; but she saw him at once, standing by the table in his sleeping-suit, his back to the doorway. She stepped in noiselessly with her bare feet, and let the curtain fall behind her. Something characteristic in Heyst's attitude made her say, almost in a whisper:

“You are looking for something.”

He could not have heard her before; but he didn't start at the unexpected whisper. He only pushed the drawer of the table in and, without even looking over his shoulder, asked quietly, accepting her presence as if he had been aware of all her movements:

“I say, are you certain that Wang didn't go through this room this evening?”

“Wang? When?”

“After leaving the lantern, I mean.”

“Oh, no. He ran on. I watched him.”

“Or before, perhaps—while I was with these boat people? Do you know? Can you tell?”

“I hardly think so. I came out as the sun went down, and sat outside till you came back to me.”

“He could have popped in for an instant through the back veranda.”

“I heard nothing in here,” she said. “What is the matter?”

“Naturally you wouldn't hear. He can be as quiet as a shadow, when he likes. I believe he could steal the pillows from under our heads. He might have been here ten minutes ago.”

“What woke you up? Was it a noise?”

“Can't say that. Generally one can't tell, but is it likely, Lena? You are, I believe, the lighter sleeper of us two. A noise loud enough to wake me up would have awakened you, too. I tried to be as quiet as I could. What roused you?”

“I don't know—a dream, perhaps. I woke up crying.”

“What was the dream?”

Heyst, with one hand resting on the table, had turned in her direction, his round, uncovered head set on a fighter's muscular neck. She left his question unanswered, as if she had not heard it.

“What is it you have missed?” she asked in her turn, very grave.

Her dark hair, drawn smoothly back, was done in two thick tresses for the night. Heyst noticed the good form of her brow, the dignity of its width, its unshining whiteness. It was a sculptural forehead. He had a moment of acute appreciation intruding upon another order of thoughts. It was as if there could be no end of his discoveries about that girl, at the most incongruous moments.

She had on nothing but a hand-woven cotton sarong—one of Heyst's few purchases, years ago, in Celebes, where they are made. He had forgotten all about it till she came, and then had found it at the bottom of an old sandalwood trunk dating back to pre-Morrison days. She had quickly learned to wind it up under her armpits with a safe twist, as Malay village girls do when going down to bathe in a river. Her shoulders and arms were bare; one of her tresses, hanging forward, looked almost black against the white skin. As she was taller than the average Malay woman, the sarong ended a good way above her ankles. She stood poised firmly, half-way between the table and the curtained doorway, the insteps of her bare feet gleaming like marble on the overshadowed matting of the floor. The fall of her lighted shoulders, the strong and fine modelling of her arms hanging down her sides, her immobility, too, had something statuesque, the charm of art tense with life. She was not very big—Heyst used to think of her, at first, as “that poor little girl,”—but revealed free from the shabby banality of a white platform dress, in the simple drapery of the sarong, there was that in her form and in the proportions of her body which suggested a reduction from a heroic size.

She moved forward a step.

“What is it you have missed?” she asked again.

Heyst turned his back altogether on the table. The black spokes of darkness over the floor and the walls, joining up on the ceiling in a path of shadow, were like the bars of a cage about them. It was his turn to ignore a question.

“You woke up in a fright, you say?” he said.

She walked up to him, exotic yet familiar, with her white woman's face and shoulders above the Malay sarong, as if it were an airy disguise, but her expression was serious.

"No," she replied. "It was distress, rather. You see, you weren't there, and I couldn't tell why you had gone away from me. A nasty dream—the first I've had, too, since—"

"You don't believe in dreams, do you?" asked Heyst.

"I once knew a woman who did. Leastwise, she used to tell people what dreams mean, for a shilling."

"Would you go now and ask her what this dream means?" inquired Heyst jocularly.

"She lived in Camberwell. She was a nasty old thing!"

Heyst laughed a little uneasily.

"Dreams are madness, my dear. It's things that happen in the waking world, while one is asleep, that one would be glad to know the meaning of."

"You have missed something out of this drawer," she said positively.

"This or some other. I have looked into every single one of them and come back to this again, as people do. It's difficult to believe the evidence of my own senses; but it isn't there. Now, Lena, are you sure that you didn't—"

"I have touched nothing in the house but what you have given me."

"Lena!" he cried.

He was painfully affected by this disclaimer of a charge which he had not made. It was what a servant might have said—an inferior open to suspicion—or, at any rate, a stranger. He was angry at being so wretchedly misunderstood; disenchanted at her not being instinctively aware of the place he had secretly given her in his thoughts.

"After all," he said to himself, "we are strangers to each other."

And then he felt sorry for her. He spoke calmly:

"I was about to say, are you sure you have no reason to think that the Chinaman has been in this room tonight?"

"You suspect him?" she asked, knitting her eyebrows.

"There is no one else to suspect. You may call it a certitude."

"You don't want to tell me what it is?" she inquired, in the equable tone in which one takes a fact into account.

Heyst only smiled faintly.

"Nothing very precious, as far as value goes," he replied.

"I thought it might have been money," she said.

“Money!” exclaimed Heyst, as if the suggestion had been altogether preposterous. She was so visibly surprised that he hastened to add: “Of course, there is some money in the house—there, in that writing-desk, the drawer on the left. It's not locked. You can pull it right out. There is a recess, and the board at the back pivots: a very simple hiding-place, when you know the way to it. I discovered it by accident, and I keep our store of sovereigns in there. The treasure, my dear, is not big enough to require a cavern.”

He paused, laughed very low, and returned her steady stare.

“The loose silver, some guilders and dollars, I have always kept in that unlocked left drawer. I have no doubt Wang knows what there is in it, but he isn't a thief, and that's why I—no, Lena, what I've missed is not gold or jewels; and that's what makes the fact interesting—which the theft of money cannot be.”

She took a long breath, relieved to hear that it was not money. A great curiosity was depicted on her face, but she refrained from pressing him with questions. She only gave him one of her deep-gleaming smiles.

“It isn't me so it must be Wang. You ought to make him give it back to you.”

Heyst said nothing to that naive and practical suggestion, for the object that he missed from the drawer was his revolver.

It was a heavy weapon which he had owned for many years and had never used in his life. Ever since the London furniture had arrived in Samburan, it had been reposing in the drawer of the table. The real dangers of life, for him, were not those which could be repelled by swords or bullets. On the other hand neither his manner nor his appearance looked sufficiently inoffensive to expose him to light-minded aggression.

He could not have explained what had induced him to go to the drawer in the middle of the night. He had started up suddenly—which was very unusual with him. He had found himself sitting up and extremely wide awake all at once, with the girl reposing by his side, lying with her face away from him, a vague, characteristically feminine form in the dim light. She was perfectly still.

At that season of the year there were no mosquitoes in Samburan, and the sides of the mosquito net were looped up. Heyst swung his feet to the floor, and found himself standing there, almost before he had become aware of his intention to get up.

Why he did this he did not know. He didn't wish to wake her up, and the slight creak of the broad bedstead had sounded very loud to him. He turned round apprehensively and waited for her to move, but she did not stir. While he looked at her, he had a vision of himself lying there too, also fast asleep, and—it occurred to him for the first time in his life—very defenceless. This quite novel impression of the dangers of slumber made him think suddenly of his revolver. He left the bedroom with noiseless footsteps. The lightness of the curtain he had

to lift as he passed out, and the outer door, wide open on the blackness of the veranda—for the roof eaves came down low, shutting out the starlight—gave him a sense of having been dangerously exposed, he could not have said to what. He pulled the drawer open. Its emptiness cut his train of self-communion short. He murmured to the assertive fact:

“Impossible! Somewhere else!”

He tried to remember where he had put the thing; but those provoked whispers of memory were not encouraging. Foraging in every receptacle and nook big enough to contain a revolver, he came slowly to the conclusion that it was not in that room. Neither was it in the other. The whole bungalow consisted of the two rooms and a profuse allowance of veranda all round. Heyst stepped out on the veranda.

“It's Wang, beyond a doubt,” he thought, staring into the night. “He has got hold of it for some reason.”

There was nothing to prevent that ghostly Chinaman from materializing suddenly at the foot of the stairs, or anywhere, at any moment, and toppling him over with a dead sure shot. The danger was so irremediable that it was not worth worrying about, any more than the general precariousness of human life. Heyst speculated on this added risk. How long had he been at the mercy of a slender yellow finger on the trigger? That is, if that was the fellow's reason for purloining the revolver.

“Shoot and inherit,” thought Heyst. “Very simple.” Yet there was in his mind a marked reluctance to regard the domesticated grower of vegetables in the light of a murderer.

“No, it wasn't that. For Wang could have done it any time this last twelve months or more—”

Heyst's mind had worked on the assumption that Wang had possessed himself of the revolver during his own absence from Samburan; but at that period of his speculation his point of view changed. It struck him with the force of manifest certitude that the revolver had been taken only late in the day, or on that very night. Wang, of course. But why? So there had been no danger in the past. It was all ahead.

“He has me at his mercy now,” thought Heyst, without particular excitement.

The sentiment he experienced was curiosity. He forgot himself in it: it was as if he were considering somebody else's strange predicament. But even that sort of interest was dying out when, looking to his left, he saw the accustomed shapes of the other bungalows looming in the night, and remembered the arrival of the thirsty company in the boat. Wang would hardly risk such a crime in the presence of other white men. It was a peculiar instance of the “safety in numbers,” principle, which somehow was not much to Heyst's taste.

He went in gloomily, and stood over the empty drawer in deep and unsatisfactory thought. He had just made up his mind that he must breathe nothing of this to the girl, when he heard her voice behind him. She had taken him by surprise, but he resisted the impulse to turn round at once under the impression that she might read his trouble in his face. Yes, she had taken him by surprise, and for that reason the conversation which began was not exactly as he would have conducted it if he had been prepared for her pointblank question. He ought to have said at once: "I've missed nothing." It was a deplorable thing that he should have let it come so far as to have her ask what it was he missed. He closed the conversation by saying lightly:

"It's an object of very small value. Don't worry about it—it isn't worth while. The best you can do is to go and lie down again, Lena."

Reluctant she turned away, and only in the doorway asked: "And you?"

"I think I shall smoke a cheroot on the veranda. I don't feel sleepy for the moment."

"Well, don't be long."

He made no answer. She saw him standing there, very still, with a frown on his brow, and slowly dropped the curtain.

Heyst did really light a cheroot before going out again on the veranda. He glanced up from under the low eaves, to see by the stars how the night went on. It was going very slowly. Why it should have irked him he did not know, for he had nothing to expect from the dawn; but everything round him had become unreasonable, unsettled, and vaguely urgent, laying him under an obligation, but giving him no line of action. He felt contemptuously irritated with the situation. The outer world had broken upon him; and he did not know what wrong he had done to bring this on himself, any more than he knew what he had done to provoke the horrible calumny about his treatment of poor Morrison. For he could not forget this. It had reached the ears of one who needed to have the most perfect confidence in the rectitude of his conduct.

"And she only half disbelieves it," he thought, with hopeless humiliation.

This moral stab in the back seemed to have taken some of his strength from him, as a physical wound would have done. He had no desire to do anything—neither to bring Wang to terms in the matter of the revolver nor to find out from the strangers who they were, and how their predicament had come about. He flung his glowing cigar away into the night. But Samburan was no longer a solitude wherein he could indulge in all his moods. The fiery parabolic path the cast-out stump traced in the air was seen from another veranda at a distance of some twenty yards. It was noted as a symptom of importance by an observer with his faculties greedy for signs, and in a state of alertness tense enough almost to hear the grass grow.

