

CHAPTER SEVEN

The explanation lay in the two simple facts that the light winds and strong currents of the Java Sea had drifted the boat about until they partly lost their bearings; and that by some extra-ordinary mistake one of the two jars put into the boat by Schomberg's man contained salt water. Ricardo tried to put some pathos into his tones. Pulling for thirty hours with eighteen-foot oars! And the sun! Ricardo relieved his feelings by cursing the sun. They had felt their hearts and lungs shrivel within them. And then, as if all that hadn't been trouble enough, he complained bitterly, he had had to waste his fainting strength in beating their servant about the head with a stretcher. The fool had wanted to drink sea water, and wouldn't listen to reason. There was no stopping him otherwise. It was better to beat him into insensibility than to have him go crazy in the boat, and to be obliged to shoot him. The preventive, administered with enough force to brain an elephant, boasted Ricardo, had to be applied on two occasions—the second time all but in sight of the jetty.

“You have seen the beauty,” Ricardo went on expansively, hiding his lack of some sort of probable story under this loquacity. “I had to hammer him away from the spout. Opened afresh all the old broken spots on his head. You saw how hard I had to hit. He has no restraint, no restraint at all. If it wasn't that he can be made useful in one way or another, I would just as soon have let the governor shoot him.”

He smiled up at Heyst in his peculiar lip-retracting manner, and added by way of afterthought:

“That's what will happen to him in the end, if he doesn't learn to restrain himself. But I've taught him to mind his manners for a while, anyhow!”

And again he addressed his quick grin up to the man on the wharf. His round eyes had never left Heyst's face ever since he began to deliver his account of the voyage.

“So that's how he looks!” Ricardo was saying to himself.

He had not expected Heyst to be like this. He had formed for himself a conception containing the helpful suggestion of a vulnerable point. These solitary men were often tipplers. But no!—this was not a drinking man's face; nor could he detect the weakness of alarm, or even the weakness of surprise, on these features, in those steady eyes.

“We were too far gone to climb out,” Ricardo went on. “I heard you walking along though. I thought I shouted; I tried to. You didn't hear me shout?”

Heyst made an almost imperceptible negative sign, which the greedy eyes of Ricardo—greedy for all signs—did not miss.

“Throat too parched. We didn't even care to whisper to each other lately. Thirst chokes one. We might have died there under this wharf before you found us.”

“I couldn't think where you had gone to.” Heyst was heard at last, addressing directly the newcomers from the sea. “You were seen as soon as you cleared that point.”

“We were seen, eh?” grunted Mr. Ricardo. “We pulled like machines—daren't stop. The governor sat at the tiller, but he couldn't speak to us. She drove in between the piles till she hit something, and we all tumbled off the thwarts as if we had been drunk. Drunk—ha, ha! Too dry, by George! We fetched in here with the very last of our strength, and no mistake. Another mile would have done for us. When I heard your footsteps, above, I tried to get up, and I fell down.”

“That was the first sound I heard,” said Heyst.

Mr. Jones, the front of his soiled white tunic soaked and plastered against his breast-bone, staggered away from the water-pipe. Steadying himself on Ricardo's shoulder, he drew a long breath, raised his dripping head, and produced a smile of ghastly amiability, which was lost upon the thoughtful Heyst. Behind his back the sun, touching the water, was like a disc of iron cooled to a dull red glow, ready to start rolling round the circular steel plate of the sea, which, under the darkening sky, looked more solid than the high ridge of Samburan; more solid than the point, whose long outlined slope melted into its own unfathomable shadow blurring the dim sheen on the bay. The forceful stream from the pipe broke like shattered glass on the boat's gunwale. Its loud, fitful, and persistent splashing revealed the depths of the world's silence.

“Great notion, to lead the water out here,” pronounced Ricardo appreciatively.

Water was life. He felt now as if he could run a mile, scale a ten-foot wall, sing a song. Only a few minutes ago he was next door to a corpse, done up, unable to stand, to lift a hand; unable to groan. A drop of water had done that miracle.

“Didn't you feel life itself running and soaking into you, sir?” he asked his principal, with deferential but forced vivacity.

Without a word, Mr. Jones stepped off the thwart and sat down in the stern-sheets.

“Isn't that man of yours bleeding to death in the bows under there?” inquired Heyst.

Ricardo ceased his ecstasies over the life-giving water and answered in a tone of innocence:

“He? You may call him a man, but his hide is a jolly sight tougher than the toughest alligator he ever skinned in the good old days. You don't know how much he can stand: I do. We have tried him a long time ago. Ola, there! Pedro!

Pedro!" he yelled, with a force of lung testifying to the regenerative virtues of water.

A weak "Senor?" came from under the wharf.

"What did I tell you?" said Ricardo triumphantly. "Nothing can hurt him. He's all right. But, I say, the boat's getting swamped. Can't you turn this water off before you sink her under us? She's half full already."

At a sign from Heyst, Wang hammered at the brass tap on the wharf, then stood behind Number One, crowbar in hand, motionless as before. Ricardo was perhaps not so certain of Pedro's toughness as he affirmed; for he stooped, peering under the wharf, then moved forward out of sight. The gush of water ceasing suddenly, made a silence which became complete when the after-trickle stopped. Afar, the sun was reduced to a red spark, glowing very low in the breathless immensity of twilight. Purple gleams lingered on the water all round the boat. The spectral figure in the stern-sheets spoke in a languid tone:

"That—er—companion—er—secretary of mine is a queer chap. I am afraid we aren't presenting ourselves in a very favourable light."

Heyst listened. It was the conventional voice of an educated man, only strangely lifeless. But more strange yet was this concern for appearances, expressed, he did not know, whether in jest or in earnest. Earnestness was hardly to be supposed under the circumstances, and no one had ever jested in such dead tones. It was something which could not be answered, and Heyst said nothing. The other went on:

"Travelling as I do, I find a man of his sort extremely useful. He has his little weaknesses, no doubt."

"Indeed!" Heyst was provoked into speaking. "Weakness of the arm is not one of them; neither is an exaggerated humanity, as far as I can judge."

"Defects of temper," explained Mr. Jones from the stern-sheets.

The subject of this dialogue, coming out just then from under the wharf into the visible part of the boat, made himself heard in his own defence, in a voice full of life, and with nothing languid in his manner on the contrary, it was brisk, almost jocose. He begged pardon for contradicting. He was never out of temper with "our Pedro." The fellow was a Dago of immense strength and of no sense whatever. This combination made him dangerous, and he had to be treated accordingly, in a manner which he could understand. Reasoning was beyond him.

"And so"—Ricardo addressed Heyst with animation—"you mustn't be surprised if—"

"I assure you," Heyst interrupted, "that my wonder at your arrival in your boat here is so great that it leaves no room for minor astonishments. But hadn't you better land?"

“That's the talk, sir!” Ricardo began to bustle about the boat, talking all the time. Finding himself unable to “size up” this man, he was inclined to credit him with extraordinary powers of penetration, which, it seemed to him, would be favoured by silence. Also, he feared some pointblank question. He had no ready-made story to tell. He and his patron had put off considering that rather important detail too long. For the last two days, the horrors of thirst, coming on them unexpectedly, had prevented consultation. They had had to pull for dear life. But the man on the wharf, were he in league with the devil himself, would pay for all their sufferings, thought Ricardo with an unholy joy.

Meantime, splashing in the water which covered the bottom-boards, Ricardo congratulated himself aloud on the luggage being out of the way of the wet. He had piled it up forward. He had roughly tied up Pedro's head. Pedro had nothing to grumble about. On the contrary, he ought to be mighty thankful to him, Ricardo, for being alive at all.

“Well, now, let me give you a leg up, sir,” he said cheerily to his motionless principal in the stern-sheets. “All our troubles are over—for a time, anyhow. Ain't it luck to find a white man on this island? I would have just as soon expected to meet an angel from heaven—eh, Mr. Jones? Now then—ready, sir? one, two, three, up you go!”

Helped from below by Ricardo, and from above by the man more unexpected than an angel, Mr. Jones scrambled up and stood on the wharf by the side of Heyst. He swayed like a reed. The night descending on Samburan turned into dense shadow the point of land and the wharf itself, and gave a dark solidity to the unshimmering water extending to the last faint trace of light away to the west. Heyst stared at the guests whom the renounced world had sent him thus at the end of the day. The only other vestige of light left on earth lurked in the hollows of the thin man's eyes. They gleamed, mobile and languidly evasive. The eyelids fluttered.

“You are feeling weak,” said Heyst.

“For the moment, a little,” confessed the other.

With loud panting, Ricardo scrambled on his hands and knees upon the wharf, energetic and unaided. He rose up at Heyst's elbow and stamped his foot on the planks, with a sharp, provocative, double beat, such as is heard sometimes in fencing-schools before the adversaries engage their foils. Not that the renegade seaman Ricardo knew anything of fencing. What he called “shooting-irons,” were his weapons, or the still less aristocratic knife, such as was even then ingeniously strapped to his leg. He thought of it, at that moment. A swift stooping motion, then, on the recovery, a ripping blow, a shove off the wharf, and no noise except a splash in the water that would scarcely disturb the silence. Heyst would have no time for a cry. It would be quick and neat, and immensely

in accord with Ricardo's humour. But he repressed this gust of savagery. The job was not such a simple one. This piece had to be played to another tune, and in much slower time. He returned to his note of talkative simplicity.

“Ay; and I too don't feel as strong as I thought I was when the first drink set me up. Great wonder-worker water is! And to get it right here on the spot! It was heaven—hey, sir?”

Mr. Jones, being directly addressed, took up his part in the concerted piece:

“Really, when I saw a wharf on what might have been an uninhabited island, I couldn't believe my eyes. I doubted its existence. I thought it was a delusion till the boat actually drove between the piles, as you see her lying now.”

While he was speaking faintly, in a voice which did not seem to belong to the earth, his henchman, in extremely loud and terrestrial accents, was fussing about their belongings in the boat, addressing himself to Pedro:

“Come, now—pass up the dunnage there! Move, yourself, hombre, or I'll have to get down again and give you a tap on those bandages of yours, you growling bear, you!”

“Ah! You didn't believe in the reality of the wharf?” Heyst was saying to Mr. Jones.

“You ought to kiss my hands!”

Ricardo caught hold of an ancient Gladstone bag and swung it on the wharf with a thump.

“Yes! You ought to burn a candle before me as they do before the saints in your country. No saint has ever done so much for you as I have, you ungrateful vagabond. Now then! Up you get!”

Helped by the talkative Ricardo, Pedro scrambled up on the wharf, where he remained for some time on all fours, swinging to and fro his shaggy head tied up in white rags. Then he got up clumsily, like a bulky animal in the dusk, balancing itself on its hind legs.

Mr. Jones began to explain languidly to Heyst that they were in a pretty bad state that morning, when they caught sight of the smoke of the volcano. It nerved them to make an effort for their lives. Soon afterwards they made out the island.

“I had just wits enough left in my baked brain to alter the direction of the boat,” the ghostly voice went on. “As to finding assistance, a wharf, a white man—nobody would have dreamed of it. Simply preposterous!”

“That's what I thought when my Chinaman came and told me he had seen a boat with white men pulling up,” said Heyst.

“Most extraordinary luck,” interjected Ricardo, standing by anxiously attentive to every word. “Seems a dream,” he added. “A lovely dream!”

A silence fell on that group of three, as if everyone had become afraid to speak, in an obscure sense of an impending crisis. Pedro on one side of them and Wang on the other had the air of watchful spectators. A few stars had come out pursuing the ebbing twilight. A light draught of air tepid enough in the thickening twilight after the scorching day, struck a chill into Mr. Jones in his soaked clothes.

“I may infer, then, that there is a settlement of white people here?” he murmured, shivering visibly.

Heyst roused himself.

“Oh, abandoned, abandoned. I am alone here—practically alone; but several empty houses are still standing. No lack of accommodation. We may just as well—here, Wang, go back to the shore and run the trolley out here.”

The last words having been spoken in Malay, he explained courteously that he had given directions for the transport of the luggage. Wang had melted into the night—in his soundless manner.

“My word! Rails laid down and all,” exclaimed Ricardo softly, in a tone of admiration. “Well, I never!”

“We were working a coal-mine here,” said the late manager of the Tropical Belt Coal Company. “These are only the ghosts of things that have been.”

Mr. Jones's teeth were suddenly started chattering by another faint puff of wind, a mere sigh from the west, where Venus cast her rays on the dark edge of the horizon, like a bright lamp hung above the grave of the sun.

“We might be moving on,” proposed Heyst. “My Chinaman and that—ah—ungrateful servant of yours, with the broken head, can load the things and come along after us.”

The suggestion was accepted without words. Moving towards the shore, the three men met the trolley, a mere metallic rustle which whisked past them, the shadowy Wang running noiselessly behind. Only the sound of their footsteps accompanied them. It was a long time since so many footsteps had rung together on that jetty. Before they stepped on to the path trodden through the grass, Heyst said:

“I am prevented from offering you a share of my own quarters.” The distant courtliness of this beginning arrested the other two suddenly, as if amazed by some manifest incongruity. “I should regret it more,” he went on, “if I were not in a position to give you the choice of those empty bungalows for a temporary home.”

He turned round and plunged into the narrow track, the two others following in single file.

“Queer start!” Ricardo took the opportunity for whispering, as he fell behind Mr. Jones, who swayed in the gloom, enclosed by the stalks of tropical grass, almost as slender as a stalk of grass himself.

In this order they emerged into the open space kept clear of vegetation by Wang's judicious system of periodic firing. The shapes of buildings, unlighted, high-roofed, looked mysteriously extensive and featureless against the increasing glitter of the stars. Heyst was pleased at the absence of light in his bungalow. It looked as uninhabited as the others. He continued to lead the way, inclining to the right. His equable voice was heard:

“This one would be the best. It was our counting-house. There is some furniture in it yet. I am pretty certain that you'll find a couple of camp bedsteads in one of the rooms.”

The high-pitched roof of the bungalow towered up very close, eclipsing the sky.

“Here we are. Three steps. As you see, there's a wide veranda. Sorry to keep you waiting for a moment; the door is locked, I think.”

He was heard trying it. Then he leaned against the rail, saying:

“Wang will get the keys.”

The others waited, two vague shapes nearly mingled together in the darkness of the veranda, from which issued a sudden chattering of Mr. Jones's teeth, directly suppressed, and a slight shuffle of Ricardo's feet. Their guide and host, his back against the rail, seemed to have forgotten their existence. Suddenly he moved, and murmured:

“Ah, here's the trolley.”

Then he raised his voice in Malay, and was answered, “Ya tuan,” from an indistinct group that could be made out in the direction of the track.

“I have sent Wang for the key and a light,” he said, in a voice that came out without any particular direction—a peculiarity which disconcerted Ricardo.

Wang did not tarry long on his mission. Very soon from the distant recesses of obscurity appeared the swinging lantern he carried. It cast a fugitive ray on the arrested trolley with the uncouth figure of the wild Pedro drooping over the load; then it moved towards the bungalow and ascended the stairs. After working at the stiff lock, Wang applied his shoulder to the door. It came open with explosive suddenness, as if in a passion at being thus disturbed after two years' repose. From the dark slope of a tall stand-up writing-desk a forgotten, solitary sheet of paper flew up and settled gracefully on the floor.

Wang and Pedro came and went through the offended door, bringing the things off the trolley, one flitting swiftly in and out, the other staggering heavily. Later, directed by a few quiet words from Number One, Wang made several journeys

with the lantern to the store-rooms, bringing in blankets, provisions in tins, coffee, sugar, and a packet of candles. He lighted one, and stuck it on the ledge of the stand-up desk. Meantime Pedro, being introduced to some kindling-wood and a bundle of dry sticks, had busied himself outside in lighting a fire, on which he placed a ready-filled kettle handed to him by Wang impassively, at arm's length, as if across a chasm. Having received the thanks of his guests, Heyst wished them goodnight and withdrew, leaving them to their repose.