

CHAPTER TEN

The observer was Martin Ricardo. To him life was not a matter of passive renunciation, but of a particularly active warfare. He was not mistrustful of it, he was not disgusted with it, still less was he inclined to be suspicious of its disenchantments; but he was vividly aware that it held many possibilities of failure. Though very far from being a pessimist, he was not a man of foolish illusions. He did not like failure, not only because of its unpleasant and dangerous consequences, but also because of its damaging effect upon his own appreciation of Martin Ricardo. And this was a special job, of his own contriving, and of considerable novelty. It was not, so to speak, in his usual line of business—except, perhaps, from a moral standpoint, about which he was not likely to trouble his head. For these reasons Martin Ricardo was unable to sleep.

Mr. Jones, after repeated shivering fits, and after drinking much hot tea, had apparently fallen into deep slumber. He had very peremptorily discouraged attempts at conversation on the part of his faithful follower. Ricardo listened to his regular breathing. It was all very well for the governor. He looked upon it as a sort of sport. A gentleman naturally would. But this ticklish and important job had to be pulled off at all costs, both for honour and for safety. Ricardo rose quietly, and made his way on the veranda. He could not lie still. He wanted to go out for air, and he had a feeling that by the force of his eagerness even the darkness and the silence could be made to yield something to his eyes and ears.

He noted the stars, and stepped back again into the dense darkness. He resisted the growing impulse to go out and steal towards the other bungalow. It would have been madness to start prowling in the dark on unknown ground. And for what end? Unless to relieve the oppression. Immobility lay on his limbs like a leaden garment. And yet he was unwilling to give up. He persisted in his objectless vigil. The man of the island was keeping quiet.

It was at that moment that Ricardo's eyes caught the vanishing red trail of light made by the cigar—a startling revelation of the man's wakefulness. He could not suppress a low "Hallo!" and began to sidle along towards the door, with his shoulders rubbing the wall. For all he knew, the man might have been out in front by this time, observing the veranda. As a matter of fact, after flinging away the cheroot, Heyst had gone indoors with the feeling of a man who gives up an unprofitable occupation. But Ricardo fancied he could hear faint footfalls on the open ground, and dodged quickly into the room. There he drew breath, and meditated for a while. His next step was to feel for the matches on the tall desk, and to light the candle. He had to communicate to his governor views and reflections of such importance that it was absolutely necessary for him to watch

their effect on the very countenance of the hearer. At first he had thought that these matters could have waited till daylight; but Heyst's wakefulness, disclosed in that startling way, made him feel suddenly certain that there could be no sleep for him that night.

He said as much to his governor. When the little dagger-like flame had done its best to dispel the darkness, Mr. Jones was to be seen reposing on a camp bedstead, in a distant part of the room. A railway rug concealed his spare form up to his very head, which rested on the other railway rug rolled up for a pillow. Ricardo plumped himself down cross-legged on the floor, very close to the low bedstead; so that Mr. Jones—who perhaps had not been so very profoundly asleep—on opening his eyes found them conveniently levelled at the face of his secretary.

“Eh? What is it you say? No sleep for you tonight? But why can't you let *me* sleep? Confound your fussiness!”

“Because that there fellow can't sleep—that's why. Dash me if he hasn't been doing a think just now! What business has he to think in the middle of the night?”

“How do you know?”

“He was out, sir—up in the middle of the night. My own eyes saw it.”

“But how do you know that he was up to think?” inquired Mr. Jones. “It might have been anything—toothache, for instance. And you may have dreamed it for all I know. Didn't you try to sleep?”

“No, sir. I didn't even try to go to sleep.”

Ricardo informed his patron of his vigil on the veranda, and of the revelation which put an end to it. He concluded that a man up with a cigar in the middle of the night must be doing a think.

Mr. Jones raised himself on his elbow. This sign of interest comforted his faithful henchman.

“Seems to me it's time we did a little think ourselves,” added Ricardo, with more assurance. Long as they had been together the moods of his governor were still a source of anxiety to his simple soul.

“You are always making a fuss,” remarked Mr. Jones, in a tolerant tone.

“Ay, but not for nothing, am I? You can't say that, sir. Mine may not be a gentleman's way of looking round a thing, but it isn't a fool's way, either. You've admitted that much yourself at odd times.”

Ricardo was growing warmly argumentative. Mr. Jones interrupted him without heat.

“You haven't roused me to talk about yourself, I presume?”

“No, sir.” Ricardo remained silent for a minute, with the tip of his tongue caught between his teeth. “I don't think I could tell you anything about myself that you don't know,” he continued. There was a sort of amused satisfaction in his tone which changed completely as he went on. “It's that man, over there, that's got to be talked over. I don't like him.”

He, failed to observe the flicker of a ghastly smile on his governor's lips.

“Don't you?” murmured Mr. Jones, whose face, as he reclined on his elbow, was on a level with the top of his follower's head.

“No, sir,” said Ricardo emphatically. The candle from the other side of the room threw his monstrous black shadow on the wall. “He—I don't know how to say it—he isn't hearty-like.”

Mr. Jones agreed languidly in his own manner:

“He seems to be a very self-possessed man.”

“Ay, that's it. Self—” Ricardo choked with indignation. “I would soon let out some of his self-possession through a hole between his ribs, if this weren't a special job!”

Mr. Jones had been making his own reflections, for he asked:

“Do you think he is suspicious?”

“I don't see very well what he can be suspicious of,” pondered Ricardo. “Yet there he was doing a think. And what could be the object of it? What made him get out of his bed in the middle of the night. 'Tain't fleas, surely.”

“Bad conscience, perhaps,” suggested Mr. Jones jocularly.

His faithful secretary suffered from irritation, and did not see the joke. In a fretful tone he declared that there was no such thing as conscience. There was such a thing as funk; but there was nothing to make that fellow funky in any special way. He admitted, however, that the man might have been uneasy at the arrival of strangers, because of all that plunder of his put away somewhere.

Ricardo glanced here and there, as if he were afraid of being overheard by the heavy shadows cast by the dim light all over the room. His patron, very quiet, spoke in a calm whisper:

“And perhaps that hotel-keeper has been lying to you about him. He may be a very poor devil indeed.”

Ricardo shook his head slightly. The Schombergian theory of Heyst had become in him a profound conviction, which he had absorbed as naturally as a sponge takes up water. His patron's doubts were a wanton denying of what was self-evident; but Ricardo's voice remained as before, a soft purring with a snarling undertone.

“I am sup-prise-d at you, sir! It's the very way them tame ones—the common 'yporcrits of the world—get on. When it comes to plunder drifting under one's very nose, there's not one of them that would keep his hands off. And I don't blame them. It's the way they do it that sets my back up. Just look at the story of how he got rid of that pal of his! Send a man home to croak of a cold on the chest—that's one of your tame tricks. And d'you mean to say, sir, that a man that's up to it wouldn't bag whatever he could lay his hands in his 'yporcritical way? What was all that coal business? Tame citizen dodge; 'yporcricisy—nothing else. No, no, sir! The thing is to extract it from him as neatly as possible. That's the job; and it isn't so simple as it looks. I reckon you have looked at it all round, sir, before you took up the notion of this trip.”

“No.” Mr. Jones was hardly audible, staring far away from his couch. “I didn't think about it much. I was bored.”

“Ay, that you were—bad. I was feeling pretty desperate that afternoon, when that bearded softy of a landlord got talking to me about this fellow here. Quite accidentally, it was. Well, sir, here we are after a mighty narrow squeak. I feel all limp yet; but never mind—his swag will pay for the lot!”

“He's all alone here,” remarked Mr. Jones in a hollow murmur.

“Ye-es, in a way. Yes, alone enough. Yes, you may say he is.”

“There's that Chinaman, though.”

“Ay, there's the Chink,” assented Ricardo rather absentmindedly.

He was debating in his mind the advisability of making a clean breast of his knowledge of the girl's existence. Finally he concluded he wouldn't. The enterprise was difficult enough without complicating it with an upset to the sensibilities of the gentleman with whom he had the honour of being associated. Let the discovery come of itself, he thought, and then he could swear that he had known nothing of that offensive presence.

He did not need to lie. He had only to hold his tongue.

“Yes,” he muttered reflectively, “there's that Chink, certainly.”

At bottom, he felt a certain ambiguous respect for his governor's exaggerated dislike of women, as if that horror of feminine presence were a sort of depraved morality; but still morality, since he counted it as an advantage. It prevented many undesirable complications. He did not pretend to understand it. He did not even try to investigate this idiosyncrasy of his chief. All he knew was that he himself was differently inclined, and that it did not make him any happier or safer. He did not know how he would have acted if he had been knocking about the world on his own. Luckily he was a subordinate, not a wage-slave but a follower—which was a restraint. Yes! The other sort of disposition simplified matters in general; it wasn't to be gainsaid. But it was clear that it could also

complicate them—as in this most important and, in Ricardo's view, already sufficiently delicate case. And the worst of it was that one could not tell exactly in what precise manner it would act.

It was unnatural, he thought somewhat peevishly. How was one to reckon up the unnatural? There were no rules for that. The faithful henchman of plain Mr. Jones, foreseeing many difficulties of a material order, decided to keep the girl out of the governor's knowledge, out of his sight, too, for as long a time as it could be managed. That, alas, seemed to be at most a matter of a few hours; whereas Ricardo feared that to get the affair properly going would take some days. Once well started, he was not afraid of his gentleman failing him. As is often the case with lawless natures, Ricardo's faith in any given individual was of a simple, unquestioning character. For man must have some support in life.

Cross-legged, his head drooping a little and perfectly still, he might have been meditating in a bonze-like attitude upon the sacred syllable “Om.” It was a striking illustration of the untruth of appearances, for his contempt for the world was of a severely practical kind. There was nothing oriental about Ricardo but the amazing quietness of his pose. Mr. Jones was also very quiet. He had let his head sink on the rolled-up rug, and lay stretched out on his side with his back to the light. In that position the shadows gathered in the cavities of his eyes made them look perfectly empty. When he spoke, his ghostly voice had only to travel a few inches straight into Ricardo's left ear.

“Why don't you say something, now that you've got me awake?”

“I wonder if you were sleeping as sound as you are trying to make out, sir,” said the unmoved Ricardo.

“I wonder,” repeated Mr. Jones. “At any rate, I was resting quietly!”

“Come, sir!” Ricardo's whisper was alarmed. “You don't mean to say you're going to be bored?”

“No.”

“Quite right!” The secretary was very much relieved. “There's no occasion to be, I can tell you, sir,” he whispered earnestly. “Anything but that! If I didn't say anything for a bit, it ain't because there isn't plenty to talk about. Ay, more than enough.”

“What's the matter with you?” breathed out his patron. “Are you going to turn pessimist?”

“Me turn? No, sir! I ain't of those that turn. You may call me hard names, if you like, but you know very well that I ain't a croaker.” Ricardo changed his tone. “If I said nothing for a while, it was because I was meditating over the Chink, sir.”

“You were? Waste of time, my Martin. A Chinaman is unfathomable.”

Ricardo admitted that this might be so. Anyhow, a Chink was neither here nor there, as a general thing, unfathomable as he might be; but a Swedish baron wasn't—couldn't be! The woods were full of such barons.

"I don't know that he is so tame," was Mr. Jones's remark, in a sepulchral undertone.

"How do you mean, sir? He ain't a rabbit, of course. You couldn't hypnotize him, as I saw you do to more than one Dago, and other kinds of tame citizens, when it came to the point of holding them down to a game."

"Don't you reckon on that," murmured plain Mr. Jones seriously.

"No, sir, I don't, though you have a wonderful power of the eye. It's a fact."

"I have a wonderful patience," remarked Mr. Jones dryly.

A dim smile flitted over the lips of the faithful Ricardo who never raised his head.

"I don't want to try you too much, sir, but this is like no other job we ever turned our minds to."

"Perhaps not. At any rate let us think so."

A weariness with the monotony of life was reflected in the tone of this qualified assent. It jarred on the nerves of the sanguine Ricardo.

"Let us think of the way to go to work," he retorted a little impatiently. "He's a deep one. Just look at the way he treated that chum of his. Did you ever hear of anything so low? And the artfulness of the beast—the dirty, tame artfulness!"

"Don't you start moralizing, Martin," said Mr. Jones warningly. "As far as I can make out the story that German hotel-keeper told you, it seems to show a certain amount of character;—and independence from common feelings which is not usual. It's very remarkable, if true."

"Ay, ay! Very remarkable. It's mighty low down, all the same," muttered, Ricardo obstinately. "I must say I am glad to think he will be paid off for it in a way that'll surprise him!"

The tip of his tongue appeared lively for an instant, as if trying for the taste of that ferocious retribution on his compressed lips. For Ricardo was sincere in his indignation before the elementary principle of loyalty to a chum violated in cold blood, slowly, in a patient duplicity of years. There are standards in villainy as in virtue, and the act as he pictured it to himself acquired an additional horror from the slow pace of that treachery so atrocious and so tame. But he understood too the educated judgement of his governor, a gentleman looking on all this with the privileged detachment of a cultivated mind, of an elevated personality.

"Ay, he's deep—he's artful," he mumbled between his sharp teeth.

“Confound you!” Mr. Jones's calm whisper crept into his ear. “Come to the point.”

Obedient, the secretary shook off his thoughtfulness. There was a similarity of mind between these two—one the outcast of his vices, the other inspired by a spirit of scornful defiance, the aggressiveness of a beast of prey looking upon all the tame creatures of the earth as its natural victim. Both were astute enough, however, and both were aware that they had plunged into this adventure without a sufficient scrutiny of detail. The figure of a lonely man far from all assistance had loomed up largely, fascinating and defenceless in the middle of the sea, filling the whole field of their vision. There had not seemed to be any need for thinking. As Schomberg had been saying: “Three to one.”

But it did not look so simple now in the face of that solitude which was like an armour for this man. The feeling voiced by the henchman in his own way—“We don't seem much forwarder now we are here” was acknowledged by the silence of the patron. It was easy enough to rip a fellow up or drill a hole in him, whether he was alone or not, Ricardo reflected in low, confidential tones, but—

“He isn't alone,” Mr. Jones said faintly, in his attitude of a man composed for sleep. “Don't forget that Chinaman.” Ricardo started slightly.

“Oh, ay—the Chink!”

Ricardo had been on the point of confessing about the girl; but no! He wanted his governor to be unperturbed and steady. Vague thoughts, which he hardly dared to look in the face, were stirring his brain in connection with that girl. She couldn't be much account, he thought. She could be frightened. And there were also other possibilities. The Chink, however, could be considered openly.

“What I was thinking about it, sir,” he went on earnestly, “is this—here we've got a man. He's nothing. If he won't be good, he can be made quiet. That's easy. But then there's his plunder. He doesn't carry it in his pocket.”

“I hope not,” breathed Mr. Jones.

“Same here. It's too big, we know, but if he were alone, he would not feel worried about it overmuch—I mean the safety of the pieces. He would just put the lot into any box or drawer that was handy.”

“Would he?”

“Yes, sir. He would keep it under his eye, as it were. Why not? It is natural. A fellow doesn't put his swag underground, unless there's a very good reason for it.”

“A very good reason, eh?”

“Yes, sir. What do you think a fellow is—a mole?”

From his experience, Ricardo declared that man was not a burrowing beast. Even the misers very seldom buried their hoard, unless for exceptional reasons.

In the given situation of a man alone on an island, the company of a Chink was a very good reason. Drawers would not be safe, nor boxes, either, from a prying, slant-eyed Chink. No, sir, unless a safe—a proper office safe. But the safe was there in the room.

“Is there a safe in this room? I didn't notice it,” whispered Mr. Jones.

That was because the thing was painted white, like the walls of the room; and besides, it was tucked away in the shadows of a corner. Mr. Jones had been too tired to observe anything on his first coming ashore; but Ricardo had very soon spotted the characteristic form. He only wished he could believe that the plunder of treachery, duplicity, and all the moral abominations of Heyst had been there. But no; the blamed thing was open.

“It might have been there at one time or another,” he commented gloomily, “but it isn't there now.”

“The man did not elect to live in this house,” remarked Mr. Jones. “And by the by, what could he have meant by speaking of circumstances which prevented him lodging us in the other bungalow? You remember what he said, Martin? Sounded cryptic.”

Martin, who remembered and understood the phrase as directly motivated by the existence of the girl, waited a little before saying:

“Some of his artfulness, sir; and not the worst of it either. That manner of his to us, this asking no questions, is some more of his artfulness. A man's bound to be curious, and he is; yet he goes on as if he didn't care. He does care—or else what was he doing up with a cigar in the middle of the night, doing a think? I don't like it.”

“He may be outside, observing the light here, and saying the very same thing to himself of our own wakefulness,” gravely suggested Ricardo's governor.

“He may be, sir; but this is too important to be talked over in the dark. And the light is all right, it can be accounted for. There's a light in this bungalow in the middle of the night because—why, because you are not well. Not well, sir—that's what's the matter, and you will have to act up to it.”

The consideration had suddenly occurred to the faithful henchman, in the light of a felicitous expedient to keep his governor and the girl apart as long as possible. Mr. Jones received the suggestion without the slightest stir, even in the deep sockets of his eyes, where a steady, faint gleam was the only thing telling of life and attention in his attenuated body. But Ricardo, as soon as he had enunciated his happy thought, perceived in it other possibilities more to the point and of greater practical advantage.

“With your looks, sir, it will be easy enough,” he went on evenly, as if no silence had intervened, always respectful, but frank, with perfect simplicity of

purpose. "All you've got to do is just to lie down quietly. I noticed him looking sort of surprised at you on the wharf, sir."

At these words, a naive tribute to the aspect of his physique, even more suggestive of the grave than of the sick-bed, a fold appeared on that side of the governor's face which was exposed to the dim light—a deep, shadowy, semicircular fold from the side of the nose to bottom of the chin—a silent smile. By a side-glance Ricardo had noted this play of features. He smiled, too, appreciative, encouraged.

"And you as hard as nails all the time," he went on. "Hang me if anybody would believe you aren't sick, if I were to swear myself black in the face! Give us a day or two to look into matters and size up that 'yporcrit.'"

Ricardo's eyes remained fixed on his crossed shins. The chief, in his lifeless accents, approved.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea."

"The Chink, he's nothing. He can be made quiet any time."

One of Ricardo's hands, reposing palm upwards on his folded legs, made a swift thrusting gesture, repeated by the enormous darting shadow of an arm very low on the wall. It broke the spell of perfect stillness in the room. The secretary eyed moodily the wall from which the shadow had gone. Anybody could be made quiet, he pointed out. It was not anything that the Chink could do; no, it was the effect that his company must have produced on the conduct of the doomed man. A man! What was a man? A Swedish baron could be ripped up, or else holed by a shot, as easily as any other creature; but that was exactly what was to be avoided, till one knew where he had hidden his plunder.

"I shouldn't think it would be some sort of hole in his bungalow," argued Ricardo with real anxiety.

No. A house can be burnt—set on fire accidentally, or on purpose, while a man's asleep. Under the house—or in some crack, cranny, or crevice? Something told him it wasn't that. The anguish of mental effort contracted Ricardo's brow. The skin of his head seemed to move in this travail of vain and tormenting suppositions.

"What did you think a fellow is, sir—a baby?" he said, in answer to Mr. Jones's objections. "I am trying to find out what I would do myself. He wouldn't be likely to be cleverer than I am."

"And what do you know about yourself?"

Mr. Jones seemed to watch his follower's perplexities with amusement concealed in a death-like composure.

Ricardo disregarded the question. The material vision of the spoil absorbed all his faculties. A great vision! He seemed to see it. A few small canvas bags tied

up with thin cord, their distended rotundity showing the inside pressure of the disk-like forms of coins—gold, solid, heavy, eminently portable. Perhaps steel cash-boxes with a chased design, on the covers; or perhaps a black and brass box with a handle on the top, and full of goodness knows what. Bank notes? Why not? The fellow had been going home; so it was surely something worth going home with.

“And he may have put it anywhere outside—anywhere!” cried Ricardo in a deadened voice, “in the forest—”

That was it! A temporary darkness replaced the dim light of the room. The darkness of the forest at night and in it the gleam of a lantern, by which a figure is digging at the foot of a tree-trunk. As likely as not, another figure holding that lantern—ha, feminine! The girl!

The prudent Ricardo stifled a picturesque and profane exclamation, partly joy, partly dismay. Had the girl been trusted or mistrusted by that man? Whatever it was, it was bound to be wholly! With women there could be no half-measures. He could not imagine a fellow half-trusting a woman in that intimate relation to himself, and in those particular circumstances of conquest and loneliness where no confidences could appear dangerous since, apparently, there could be no one she could give him away to. Moreover, in nine cases out of ten the woman would be trusted. But, trusted or mistrusted, was her presence a favourable or unfavourable condition of the problem? That was the question!

The temptation to consult his chief, to talk over the weighty fact, and get his opinion on it, was great indeed. Ricardo resisted it; but the agony of his solitary mental conflict was extremely sharp. A woman in a problem is an incalculable quantity, even if you have something to go upon in forming your guess. How much more so when you haven't even once caught sight of her.

Swift as were his mental processes, he felt that a longer silence was inadvisable. He hastened to speak:

“And do you see us, sir, you and I, with a couple of spades having to tackle this whole confounded island?”

He allowed himself a slight movement of the arm. The shadow enlarged it into a sweeping gesture.

“This seems rather discouraging, Martin,” murmured the unmoved governor.

“We mustn't be discouraged—that's all!” retorted his henchman. “And after what we had to go through in that boat too! Why it would be—”

He couldn't find the qualifying words. Very calm, faithful, and yet astute, he expressed his new-born hopes darkly.

“Something's sure to turn up to give us a hint; only this job can't be rushed. You may depend on me to pick up the least little bit of a hint; but you, sir—you've got to play him very gently. For the rest you can trust me.”

“Yes; but I ask myself what YOU are trusting to.”

“Our luck,” said the faithful Ricardo. “Don't say a word against that. It might spoil the run of it.”

“You are a superstitious beggar. No, I won't say anything against it.”

“That's right, sir. Don't you even think lightly of it. Luck's not to be played with.”

“Yes, luck's a delicate thing,” assented Mr. Jones in a dreamy whisper.

A short silence ensued, which Ricardo ended in a discreet and tentative voice.

“Talking of luck, I suppose he could be made to take a hand with you, sir—two-handed picket or ekkarty, you being seedy and keeping indoors—just to pass the time. For all we know, he may be one of them hot ones once they start—”

“Is it likely?” came coldly from the principal. “Considering what we know of his history—say with his partner.”

“True, sir. He's a cold-blooded beast; a cold-blooded, inhuman—”

“And I'll tell you another thing that isn't likely. He would not be likely to let himself be stripped bare. We haven't to do with a young fool that can be led on by chaff or flattery, and in the end simply overawed. This is a calculating man.”

Ricardo recognized that clearly. What he had in his mind was something on a small scale, just to keep the enemy busy while he, Ricardo, had time to nose around a bit.

“You could even lose a little money to him, sir,” he suggested.

“I could.”

Ricardo was thoughtful for a moment.

“He strikes me, too, as the sort of man to start prancing when one didn't expect it. What do you think, sir? Is he a man that would prance? That is, if something startled him. More likely to prance than to run—what?”

The answer came at once, because Mr. Jones understood the peculiar idiom of his faithful follower.

“Oh, without doubt! Without doubt!”

“It does me good to hear that you think so. He's a prancing beast, and so we mustn't startle him—not till I have located the stuff. Afterwards—”

Ricardo paused, sinister in the stillness of his pose. Suddenly he got up with a swift movement and gazed down at his chief in moody abstraction. Mr. Jones did not stir.

“There's one thing that's worrying me,” began Ricardo in a subdued voice.

“Only one?” was the faint comment from the motionless body on the bedstead.

“I mean more than all the others put together.”

“That's grave news.”

“Ay, grave enough. It's this—how do you feel in yourself, sir? Are you likely to get bored? I know them fits come on you suddenly; but surely you can tell—”

“Martin, you are an ass.”

The moody face of the secretary brightened up.

“Really, sir? Well, I am quite content to be on these terms—I mean as long as you don't get bored. It wouldn't do, sir.”

For coolness, Ricardo had thrown open his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. He moved stealthily across the room, bare-footed, towards the candle, the shadow of his head and shoulders growing bigger behind him on the opposite wall, to which the face of plain Mr. Jones was turned. With a feline movement, Ricardo glanced over his shoulder at the thin back of the spectre reposing on the bed, and then blew out the candle.

“In fact, I am rather amused, Martin,” Mr. Jones said in the dark.

He heard the sound of a slapped thigh and the jubilant exclamation of his henchman:

“Good! That's the way to talk, sir!”