CHAPTER THREE

That morning, as on all the others of the full tale of mornings since his return with the girl to Samburan, Heyst came out on the veranda and spread his elbows on the railing, in an easy attitude of proprietorship. The bulk of the central ridge of the island cut off the bungalow from sunrises, whether glorious or cloudy, angry or serene. The dwellers therein were debarred from reading early the fortune of the new-born day. It sprang upon them in its fulness with a swift retreat of the great shadow when the sun, clearing the ridge, looked down, hot and dry, with a devouring glare like the eye of an enemy. But Heyst, once the Number One of this locality, while it was comparatively teeming with mankind, appreciated the prolongation of early coolness, the subdued, lingering half-light, the faint ghost of the departed night, the fragrance of its dewy, dark soul captured for a moment longer between the great glow of the sky and the intense blaze of the uncovered sea.

It was naturally difficult for Heyst to keep his mind from dwelling on the nature and consequences of this, his latest departure from the part of an unconcerned spectator. Yet he had retained enough of his wrecked philosophy to prevent him from asking himself consciously how it would end. But at the same time he could not help being temperamentally, from long habit and from set purpose, a spectator still, perhaps a little less naive but (as he discovered with some surprise) not much more far sighted than the common run of men. Like the rest of us who act, all he could say to himself, with a somewhat affected grimness, was:

“We shall see!”

This mood of grim doubt intruded on him only when he was alone. There were not many such moments in his day now; and he did not like them when they came. On this morning he had no time to grow uneasy. Alma came out to join him long before the sun, rising above the Samburan ridge, swept the cool shadow of the early morning and the remnant of the night's coolness clear off the roof under which they had dwelt for more than three months already. She came out as on other mornings. He had heard her light footsteps in the big room—the room where he had unpacked the cases from London; the room now lined with the backs of books halfway up on its three sides. Above the cases the fine matting met the ceiling of tightly stretched white calico. In the dusk and coolness nothing gleamed except the gilt frame of the portrait of Heyst's father, signed by a famous painter, lonely in the middle of a wall.

Heyst did not turn round.

“Do you know what I was thinking of?” he asked.

“No,” she said. Her tone betrayed always a shade of anxiety, as though she were never certain how a conversation with him would end. She leaned on the guard-rail by his side.

“No,” she repeated. “What was it?” She waited. Then, rather with reluctance than shyness, she asked:

“Were you thinking of me?”

“I was wondering when you would come out,” said Heyst, still without looking at the girl—to whom, after several experimental essays in combining detached letters and loose syllables, he had given the name of Lena.

She remarked after a pause:

“I was not very far from you.”

“Apparently you were not near enough for me.”

“You could have called if you wanted me,” she said. “And I wasn't so long doing my hair.”

“Apparently it was too long for me.”

“Well, you were thinking of me, anyhow. I am glad of it. Do you know, it seems to me, somehow, that if you were to stop thinking of me I shouldn't be in the world at all!”

He turned round and looked at her. She often said things which surprised him. A vague smile faded away on her lips before his scrutiny.

“What is it?” he asked. “Is it a reproach?”

“A reproach! Why, how could it be?” she defended herself.

“Well, what did it mean?” he insisted.

“What I said—just what I said. Why aren't you fair?”

“Ah, this is at least a reproach!”

She coloured to the roots of her hair.

“It looks as if you were trying to make out that I am disagreeable,” she murmured. “Am I? You will make me afraid to open my mouth presently. I shall end by believing I am no good.”

Her head drooped a little. He looked at her smooth, low brow, the faintly coloured cheeks, and the red lips parted slightly, with the gleam of her teeth within.

“And then I won't be any good,” she added with conviction. “That I won't! I can only be what you think I am.”

He made a slight movement. She put her hand on his arm, without raising her head, and went on, her voice animated in the stillness of her body:

“It is so. It couldn't be any other way with a girl like me and a man like you. Here we are, we two alone, and I can't even tell where we are.”

“A very well-known spot of the globe,” Heyst uttered gently. “There must have been at least fifty thousand circulars issued at the time—a hundred and fifty thousand, more likely. My friend was looking after that, and his ideas were large and his belief very strong. Of us two it was he who had the faith. A hundred and fifty thousand, certainly.”

“What is it you mean?” she asked in a low tone.

“What should I find fault with you for?” Heyst went on. “For being amiable, good, gracious—and pretty?”

A silence fell. Then she said:

“It's all right that you should think that of me. There's no one here to think anything of us, good or bad.”

The rare timbre of her voice gave a special value to what she uttered. The indefinable emotion which certain intonations gave him, he was aware, was more physical than moral. Every time she spoke to him she seemed to abandon to him something of herself—something excessively subtle and inexpressible, to which he was infinitely sensible, which he would have missed horribly if she were to go away. While he was looking into her eyes she raised her bare forearm, out of the short sleeve, and held it in the air till he noticed it and hastened to pose his great bronze moustaches on the whiteness of the skin. Then they went in.

Wang immediately appeared in front, and, squatting on his heels, began to potter mysteriously about some plants at the foot of the veranda. When Heyst and the girl came out again, the Chinaman had gone in his peculiar manner, which suggested vanishing out of existence rather than out of sight, a process of evaporation rather than of movement. They descended the steps, looking at each other, and started off smartly across the cleared ground; but they were not ten yards away when, without perceptible stir or sound, Wang materialized inside the empty room. The Chinaman stood still with roaming eyes, examining the walls as if for signs, for inscriptions; exploring the floor as if for pitfalls, for dropped coins. Then he cocked his head slightly at the profile of Heyst's father, pen in hand above a white sheet of paper on a crimson tablecloth; and, moving forward noiselessly, began to clear away the breakfast things.

Though he proceeded without haste, the unerring precision of his movements, the absolute soundlessness of the operation, gave it something of the quality of a conjuring trick. And, the trick having been performed, Wang vanished from the scene, to materialize presently in front of the house. He materialized walking away from it, with no visible or guessable intention; but at the end of some ten paces he stopped, made a half turn, and put his hand up to shade his eyes. The sun had topped the grey ridge of Samburan. The great morning shadow was

gone; and far away in the devouring sunshine Wang was in time to see Number One and the woman, two remote white specks against the sombre line of the forest. In a moment they vanished. With the smallest display of action, Wang also vanished from the sunlight of the clearing.

Heyst and Lena entered the shade of the forest path which crossed the island, and which, near its highest point had been blocked by felled trees. But their intention was not to go so far. After keeping to the path for some distance, they left it at a point where the forest was bare of undergrowth, and the trees, festooned with creepers, stood clear of one another in the gloom of their own making. Here and there great splashes of light lay on the ground. They moved, silent in the great stillness, breathing the calmness, the infinite isolation, the repose of a slumber without dreams. They emerged at the upper limit of vegetation, among some rocks; and in a depression of the sharp slope, like a small platform, they turned about and looked from on high over the sea, lonely, its colour effaced by sunshine, its horizon a heat mist, a mere unsubstantial shimmer in the pale and blinding infinity overhung by the darker blaze of the sky.

“It makes my head swim,” the girl murmured, shutting her eyes and putting her hand on his shoulder.

Heyst, gazing fixedly to the southward, exclaimed:

“Sail ho!”

A moment of silence ensued.

“It must be very far away,” he went on. “I don't think you could see it. Some native craft making for the Moluccas, probably. Come, we mustn't stay here.”

With his arm round her waist, he led her down a little distance, and they settled themselves in the shade; she, seated on the ground, he a little lower, reclining at her feet.

“You don't like to look at the sea from up there?” he said after a time.

She shook her head. That empty space was to her the abomination of desolation. But she only said again:

“It makes my head swim.”

“Too big?” he inquired.

“Too lonely. It makes my heart sink, too,” she added in a low voice, as if confessing a secret.

“I'm afraid,” said Heyst, “that you would be justified in reproaching me for these sensations. But what would you have?”

His tone was playful, but his eyes, directed at her face, were serious. She protested.

“I am not feeling lonely with you—not a bit. It is only when we come up to that place, and I look at all that water and all that light—”

“We will never come here again, then,” he interrupted her.

She remained silent for a while, returning his gaze till he removed it.

“It seems as if everything that there is had gone under,” she said.

“Reminds you of the story of the deluge,” muttered the man, stretched at her feet and looking at them. “Are you frightened at it?”

“I should be rather frightened to be left behind alone. When I say, I, of course I mean we.”

“Do you?” . . . Heyst remained silent for a while. “The vision of a world destroyed,” he mused aloud. “Would you be sorry for it?”

“I should be sorry for the happy people in it,” she said simply.

His gaze travelled up her figure and reached her face, where he seemed to detect the veiled glow of intelligence, as one gets a glimpse of the sun through the clouds.

“I should have thought it's they specially who ought to have been congratulated. Don't you?”

“Oh, yes—I understand what you mean; but there were forty days before it was all over.”

“You seem to be in possession of all the details.”

Heyst spoke just to say something rather than to gaze at her in silence. She was not looking at him.

“Sunday school,” she murmured. “I went regularly from the time I was eight till I was thirteen. We lodged in the north of London, off Kingsland Road. It wasn't a bad time. Father was earning good money then. The woman of the house used to pack me off in the afternoon with her own girls. She was a good woman. Her husband was in the post office. Sorter or something. Such a quiet man. He used to go off after supper for night-duty, sometimes. Then one day they had a row, and broke up the home. I remember I cried when we had to pack up all of a sudden and go into other lodgings. I never knew what it was, though—”

“The deluge,” muttered Heyst absently.

He felt intensely aware of her personality, as if this were the first moment of leisure he had found to look at her since they had come together. The peculiar timbre of her voice, with its modulations of audacity and sadness, would have given interest to the most inane chatter. But she was no chatterer. She was rather silent, with a capacity for immobility, an upright stillness, as when resting on the concert platform between the musical numbers, her feet crossed, her hands reposing on her lap. But in the intimacy of their life her grey, unabashed gaze

forced upon him the sensation of something inexplicable reposing within her; stupidity or inspiration, weakness or force—or simply an abysmal emptiness, reserving itself even in the moments of complete surrender.

During a long pause she did not look at him. Then suddenly, as if the word “deluge” had stuck in her mind, she asked, looking up at the cloudless sky:

“Does it ever rain here?”

“There is a season when it rains almost every day,” said Heyst, surprised. “There are also thunderstorms. We once had a 'mud-shower.'”

“Mud-shower?”

“Our neighbour there was shooting up ashes. He sometimes clears his red-hot gullet like that; and a thunderstorm came along at the same time. It was very messy; but our neighbour is generally well behaved—just smokes quietly, as he did that day when I first showed you the smudge in the sky from the schooner's deck. He's a good-natured, lazy fellow of a volcano.”

“I saw a mountain smoking like that before,” she said, staring at the slender stem of a tree-fern some dozen feet in front of her. “It wasn't very long after we left England—some few days, though. I was so ill at first that I lost count of days. A smoking mountain—I can't think how they called it.”

“Vesuvius, perhaps,” suggested Heyst.

“That's the name.”

“I saw it, too, years, ages ago,” said Heyst.

“On your way here?”

“No, long before I ever thought of coming into this part of the world. I was yet a boy.”

She turned and looked at him attentively, as if seeking to discover some trace of that boyhood in the mature face of the man with the hair thin at the top and the long, thick moustaches. Heyst stood the frank examination with a playful smile, hiding the profound effect these veiled grey eyes produced—whether on his heart or on his nerves, whether sensuous or spiritual, tender or irritating, he was unable to say.

“Well, princess of Samburan,” he said at last, “have I found favour in your sight?”

She seemed to wake up, and shook her head.

“I was thinking,” she murmured very low.

“Thought, action—so many snares! If you begin to think you will be unhappy.”

“I wasn't thinking of myself!” she declared with a simplicity which took Heyst aback somewhat.

“On the lips of a moralist this would sound like a rebuke,” he said, half seriously; “but I won't suspect you of being one. Moralists and I haven't been friends for many years.”

She had listened with an air of attention.

“I understood you had no friends,” she said. “I am pleased that there's nobody to find fault with you for what you have done. I like to think that I am in no one's way.”

Heyst would have said something, but she did not give him time. Unconscious of the movement he made she went on:

“What I was thinking to myself was, why are you here?”

Heyst let himself sink on his elbow again.

“If by 'you' you mean 'we'—well, you know why we are here.”

She bent her gaze down at him.

“No, it isn't that. I meant before—all that time before you came across me and guessed at once that I was in trouble, with no one to turn to. And you know it was desperate trouble too.”

Her voice fell on the last words, as if she would end there; but there was something so expectant in Heyst's attitude as he sat at her feet, looking up at her steadily, that she continued, after drawing a short, quick breath:

“It was, really. I told you I had been worried before by bad fellows. It made me unhappy, disturbed—angry, too. But oh, how I hated, hated, *hated* that man!”

“That man” was the florid Schomberg with the military bearing, benefactor of white men ('decent food to eat in decent company')—mature victim of belated passion. The girl shuddered. The characteristic harmoniousness of her face became, as it were, decomposed for an instant. Heyst was startled.

“Why think of it now?” he cried.

“It's because I was cornered that time. It wasn't as before. It was worse, ever so much. I wished I could die of my fright—and yet it's only now that I begin to understand what a horror it might have been. Yes, only now, since we—”

Heyst stirred a little.

“Came here,” he finished.

Her tenseness relaxed, her flushed face went gradually back to its normal tint.

“Yes,” she said indifferently, but at the same time she gave him a stealthy glance of passionate appreciation; and then her face took on a melancholy cast, her whole figure drooped imperceptibly.

“But you were coming back here anyhow?” she asked.

“Yes. I was only waiting for Davidson. Yes, I was coming back here, to these ruins—to Wang, who perhaps did not expect to see me again. It's impossible to

guess at the way that Chinaman draws his conclusions, and how he looks upon one."

"Don't talk about him. He makes me feel uncomfortable. Talk about yourself!"

"About myself? I see you are still busy with the mystery of my existence here; but it isn't at all mysterious. Primarily the man with the quill pen in his hand in that picture you so often look at is responsible for my existence. He is also responsible for what my existence is, or rather has been. He was a great man in his way. I don't know much of his history. I suppose he began like other people; took fine words for good, ringing coin and noble ideals for valuable banknotes. He was a great master of both, himself, by the way. Later he discovered—how am I to explain it to you? Suppose the world were a factory and all mankind workmen in it. Well, he discovered that the wages were not good enough. That they were paid in counterfeit money."

"I see!" the girl said slowly.

"Do you?"

Heyst, who had been speaking as if to himself, looked up curiously.

"It wasn't a new discovery, but he brought his capacity for scorn to bear on it. It was immense. It ought to have withered this globe. I don't know how many minds he convinced. But my mind was very young then, and youth I suppose can be easily seduced—even by a negation. He was very ruthless, and yet he was not without pity. He dominated me without difficulty. A heartless man could not have done so. Even to fools he was not utterly merciless. He could be indignant, but he was too great for flouts and jeers. What he said was not meant for the crowd; it could not be; and I was flattered to find myself among the elect. They read his books, but I have heard his living word. It was irresistible. It was as if that mind were taking me into its confidence, giving me a special insight into its mastery of despair. Mistake, no doubt. There is something of my father in every man who lives long enough. But they don't say anything. They can't. They wouldn't know how, or perhaps, they wouldn't speak if they could. Man on this earth is an unforeseen accident which does not stand close investigation. However, that particular man died as quietly as a child goes to sleep. But, after listening to him, I could not take my soul down into the street to fight there. I started off to wander about, an independent spectator—if that is possible."

For a long time the girl's grey eyes had been watching his face. She discovered that, addressing her, he was really talking to himself. Heyst looked up, caught sight of her as it were, and caught himself up, with a low laugh and a change of tone.

"All this does not tell you why I ever came here. Why, indeed? It's like prying into inscrutable mysteries which are not worth scrutinizing. A man drifts. The most successful men have drifted into their successes. I don't want to tell you that

this is a success. You wouldn't believe me if I did. It isn't; neither is it the ruinous failure it looks. It proves nothing, unless perhaps some hidden weakness in my character—and even that is not certain."

He looked fixedly at her, and with such grave eyes that she felt obliged to smile faintly at him, since she did not understand what he meant. Her smile was reflected, still fainter, on his lips.

"This does not advance you much in your inquiry," he went on. "And in truth your question is unanswerable; but facts have a certain positive value, and I will tell you a fact. One day I met a cornered man. I use the word because it expresses the man's situation exactly, and because you just used it yourself. You know what that means?"

"What do you say?" she whispered, astounded. "A man!"

Heyst laughed at her wondering eyes.

"No! No! I mean in his own way."

"I knew very well it couldn't be anything like that," she observed under her breath.

"I won't bother you with the story. It was a custom-house affair, strange as it may sound to you. He would have preferred to be killed outright—that is, to have his soul dispatched to another world, rather than to be robbed of his substance, his very insignificant substance, in this. I saw that he believed in another world because, being cornered, as I have told you, he went down on his knees and prayed. What do you think of that?"

Heyst paused. She looked at him earnestly.

"You didn't make fun of him for that?" she said.

Heyst made a brusque movement of protest

"My dear girl, I am not a ruffian," he cried. Then, returning to his usual tone: "I didn't even have to conceal a smile. Somehow it didn't look a smiling matter. No, it was not funny; it was rather pathetic; he was so representative of all the past victims of the Great Joke. But it is by folly alone that the world moves, and so it is a respectable thing upon the whole. And besides, he was what one would call a good man. I don't mean especially because he had offered up a prayer. No! He was really a decent fellow, he was quite unfitted for this world, he was a failure, a good man cornered—a sight for the gods; for no decent mortal cares to look at that sort." A thought seemed to occur to him. He turned his face to the girl. "And you, who have been cornered too—did you think of offering a prayer?"

Neither her eyes nor a single one of her features moved the least bit. She only let fall the words:

"I am not what they call a good girl."

“That sounds evasive,” said Heyst after a short silence. “Well, the good fellow did pray and after he had confessed to it I was struck by the comicality of the situation. No, don't misunderstand me—I am not alluding to his act, of course. And even the idea of Eternity, Infinity, Omnipotence, being called upon to defeat the conspiracy of two miserable Portuguese half-castes did not move my mirth. From the point of view of the supplicant, the danger to be conjured was something like the end of the world, or worse. No! What captivated my fancy was that I, Axel Heyst, the most detached of creatures in this earthly captivity, the veriest tramp on this earth, an indifferent stroller going through the world's bustle—that I should have been there to step into the situation of an agent of Providence. *I*, a man of universal scorn and unbelief. . . .”

“You are putting it on,” she interrupted in her seductive voice, with a coaxing intonation.

“No. I am not like that, born or fashioned, or both. I am not for nothing the son of my father, of that man in the painting. I am he, all but the genius. And there is even less in me than I make out, because the very scorn is falling away from me year after year. I have never been so amused as by that episode in which I was suddenly called to act such an incredible part. For a moment I enjoyed it greatly. It got him out of his corner, you know.”

“You saved a man for fun—is that what you mean? Just for fun?”

“Why this tone of suspicion?” remonstrated Heyst. “I suppose the sight of this particular distress was disagreeable to me. What you call fun came afterwards, when it dawned on me that I was for him a walking, breathing, incarnate proof of the efficacy of prayer. I was a little fascinated by it—and then, could I have argued with him? You don't argue against such evidence, and besides it would have looked as if I had wanted to claim all the merit. Already his gratitude was simply frightful. Funny position, wasn't it? The boredom came later, when we lived together on board his ship. I had, in a moment of inadvertence, created for myself a tie. How to define it precisely I don't know. One gets attached in a way to people one has done something for. But is that friendship? I am not sure what it was. I only know that he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption has entered into his soul.”

Heyst's tone was light, with the flavour of playfulness which seasoned all his speeches and seemed to be of the very essence of his thoughts. The girl he had come across, of whom he had possessed himself, to whose presence he was not yet accustomed, with whom he did not yet know how to live; that human being so near and still so strange, gave him a greater sense of his own reality than he had ever known in all his life.