

CHAPTER FIVE

Waking up suddenly, Lena looked, without raising her head from the pillow, at the room in which she was alone. She got up quickly, as if to counteract the awful sinking of her heart by the vigorous use of her limbs. But this sinking was only momentary. Mistress of herself from pride, from love, from necessity, and also because of a woman's vanity in self-sacrifice, she met Heyst, returning from the strangers' bungalow, with a clear glance and a smile.

The smile he managed to answer, but, noticing that he avoided her eyes, she composed her lips and lowered her gaze. For the same reason she hastened to speak to him in a tone of indifference, which she put on without effort, as if she had grown adept in duplicity since sunrise.

“You have been over there again?”

“I have. I thought—but you had better know first that we have lost Wang for good.”

She repeated “For good?” as if she had not understood.

“For good or evil—I shouldn't know which if you were to ask me. He has dismissed himself. He's gone.”

“You expected him to go, though, didn't you?”

Heyst sat down on the other side of the table.

“Yes. I expected it as soon as I discovered that he had annexed my revolver. He says he hasn't taken it. That's untrue of course. A Chinaman would not see the sense of confessing under any circumstances. To deny any charge is a principle of right conduct; but he hardly expected to be believed. He was a little enigmatic at the last, Lena. He startled me.”

Heyst paused. The girl seemed absorbed in her own thoughts.

“He startled me,” repeated Heyst. She noted the anxiety in his tone, and turned her head slightly to look at him across the table.

“It must have been something—to startle you,” she said. In the depth of her parted lips, like a ripe pomegranate, there was a gleam of white teeth.

“It was only a single word—and some of his gestures. He had been making a good deal of noise. I wonder we didn't wake you up. How soundly you can sleep! I say, do you feel all right now?”

“As fresh as can be,” she said, treating him to another deep gleam of a smile. “I heard no noise, and I'm glad of it. The way he talks in his harsh voice frightens me. I don't like all these foreign people.”

“It was just before he went away—bolted out, I should say. He nodded and pointed at the curtain to our room. He knew you were there, of course. He

seemed to think—he seemed to try to give me to understand that you were in special—well, danger. You know how he talks.”

She said nothing; she made no sound, only the faint tinge of colour ebbed out of her cheek.

“Yes,” Heyst went on. “He seemed to try to warn me. That must have been it. Did he imagine I had forgotten your existence? The only word he said was 'two'. It sounded so, at least. Yes, 'two'—and that he didn't like it.”

“What does that mean?” she whispered.

“We know what the word two means, don't we, Lena? We are two. Never were such a lonely two out of the world, my dear! He might have tried to remind me that he himself has a woman to look after. Why are you so pale, Lena?”

“Am I pale?” she asked negligently.

“You are.” Heyst was really anxious.

“Well, it isn't from fright,” she protested truthfully.

Indeed, what she felt was a sort of horror which left her absolutely in the full possession of all her faculties; more difficult to bear, perhaps, for that reason, but not paralysing to her fortitude.

Heyst in his turn smiled at her.

“I really don't know that there is any reason to be frightened.”

“I mean I am not frightened for myself.”

“I believe you are very plucky,” he said. The colour had returned to her face. “I” continued Heyst, “am so rebellious to outward impressions that I can't say that much about myself. I don't react with sufficient distinctness.” He changed his tone. “You know I went to see those men first thing this morning.”

“I know. Be careful!” she murmured.

“I wonder how one can be careful! I had a long talk with—but I don't believe you have seen them. One of them is a fantastically thin, long person, apparently ailing; I shouldn't wonder if he were really so. He makes rather a point of it in a mysterious manner. I imagine he must have suffered from tropical fevers, but not so much as he tries to make out. He's what people would call a gentleman. He seemed on the point of volunteering a tale of his adventures—for which I didn't ask him—but remarked that it was a long story; some other time, perhaps.

“I suppose you would like to know who I am?” he asked me.

“I told him I would leave it to him, in a tone which, between gentlemen, could have left no doubt in his mind. He raised himself on his elbow—he was lying down on the camp-bed—and said:

“I am he who is—”

Lena seemed not to be listening; but when Heyst paused, she turned her head quickly to him. He took it for a movement of inquiry, but in this he was wrong. A great vagueness enveloped her impressions, but all her energy was concentrated on the struggle that she wanted to take upon herself, in a great exaltation of love and self-sacrifice, which is woman's sublime faculty; altogether on herself, every bit of it, leaving him nothing, not even the knowledge of what she did, if that were possible. She would have liked to lock him up by some stratagem. Had she known of some means to put him to sleep for days she would have used incantations or philtres without misgivings. He seemed to her too good for such contacts, and not sufficiently equipped. This last feeling had nothing to do with the material fact of the revolver being stolen. She could hardly appreciate that fact at its full value.

Observing her eyes fixed and as if sightless—for the concentration on her purpose took all expression out of them—Heyst imagined it to be the effect of a great mental effort.

“No use asking me what he meant, Lena; I don't know, and I did not ask him. The gentleman, as I have told you before, seems devoted to mystification. I said nothing, and he laid down his head again on the bundle of rugs he uses for a pillow. He affects a state of great weakness, but I suspect that he's perfectly capable of leaping to his feet if he likes. Having been ejected, he said, from his proper social sphere because he had refused to conform to certain usual conventions, he was a rebel now, and was coming and going up and down the earth. As I really did not want to listen to all this nonsense, I told him that I had heard that sort of story about somebody else before. His grin is really ghastly. He confessed that I was very far from the sort of man he expected to meet. Then he said:

“As to me, I am no blacker than the gentleman you are thinking of, and I have neither more nor less determination.”

Heyst looked across the table at Lena. Propped on her elbows, and holding her head in both hands, she moved it a little with an air of understanding.

“Nothing could be plainer, eh?” said Heyst grimly. “Unless, indeed, this is his idea of a pleasant joke; for, when he finished speaking, he burst into a loud long laugh. I didn't join him!”

“I wish you had,” she breathed out.

“I didn't join him. It did not occur to me. I am not much of a diplomatist. It would probably have been wise, for, indeed, I believe he had said more than he meant to say, and was trying to take it back by this affected jocularly. Yet when one thinks of it, diplomacy without force in the background is but a rotten reed to lean upon. And I don't know whether I could have done it if I had thought of it. I don't know. It would have been against the grain. Could I have done it? I have

lived too long within myself, watching the mere shadows and shades of life. To deceive a man on some issue which could be decided quicker, by his destruction while one is disarmed, helpless, without even the power to run away—no! That seems to me too degrading. And yet I have you here. I have your very existence in my keeping. What do you say, Lena? Would I be capable of throwing you to the lions to save my dignity?”

She got up, walked quickly round the table, posed herself on his knees lightly, throwing one arm round his neck, and whispered in his ear:

“You may if you like. And may be that's the only way I would consent to leave you. For something like that. If it were something no bigger than your little finger.”

She gave him a light kiss on the lips and was gone before he could detain her. She regained her seat and propped her elbows again on the table. It was hard to believe that she had moved from the spot at all. The fleeting weight of her body on his knees, the hug round his neck, the whisper in his ear, the kiss on his lips, might have been the unsubstantial sensations of a dream invading the reality of waking life; a sort of charming mirage in the barren aridity of his thoughts. He hesitated to speak till she said, businesslike:

“Well. And what then?”

Heyst gave a start.

“Oh, yes. I didn't join him. I let him have his laugh out by himself. He was shaking all over, like a merry skeleton, under a cotton sheet he was covered with—I believe in order to conceal the revolver that he had in his right hand. I didn't see it, but I have a distinct impression it was there in his fist. As he had not been looking at me for some time, but staring into a certain part of the room, I turned my head and saw a hairy, wild sort of creature which they take about with them, squatting on its heels in the angle of the walls behind me. He wasn't there when I came in. I didn't like the notion of that watchful monster behind my back. If I had been less at their mercy, I should certainly have changed my position. As things are now, to move would have been a mere weakness. So I remained where I was. The gentleman on the bed said he could assure me of one thing; and that was that his presence here was no more morally reprehensible than mine.

“‘We pursue the same ends,’ he said, ‘only perhaps I pursue them with more openness than you—with more simplicity.’

“That's what he said,” Heyst went on, after looking at Lena in a sort of inquiring silence. “I asked him if he knew beforehand that I was living here; but he only gave me a ghastly grin. I didn't press him for an answer, Lena. I thought I had better not.”

On her smooth forehead a ray of light always seemed to rest. Her loose hair, parted in the middle, covered the hands sustaining her head. She seemed

spellbound by the interest of the narrative. Heyst did not pause long. He managed to continue his relation smoothly enough, beginning afresh with a piece of comment.

“He would have lied impudently—and I detest being told a lie. It makes me uncomfortable. It's pretty clear that I am not fitted for the affairs of the wide world. But I did not want him to think that I accepted his presence too meekly, so I said that his comings or goings on the earth were none of my business, of course, except that I had a natural curiosity to know when he would find it convenient to resume them.

“He asked me to look at the state he was in. Had I been all alone here, as they think I am, I should have laughed at him. But not being alone—I say, Lena, you are sure you haven't shown yourself where you could be seen?”

“Certain,” she said promptly.

He looked relieved.

“You understand, Lena, that when I ask you to keep so strictly out of sight, it is because you are not for them to look at—to talk about. My poor Lena! I can't help that feeling. Do you understand it?”

She moved her head slightly in a manner that was neither affirmative nor negative.

“People will have to see me some day,” she said.

“I wonder how long it will be possible for you to keep out of sight?” murmured Heyst thoughtfully. He bent over the table. “Let me finish telling you. I asked him point blank what it was he wanted with me; he appeared extremely unwilling to come to the point. It was not really so pressing as all that, he said. His secretary, who was in fact his partner, was not present, having gone down to the wharf to look at their boat. Finally the fellow proposed that he should put off a certain communication he had to make till the day after tomorrow. I agreed; but I also told him that I was not at all anxious to hear it. I had no conception in what way his affairs could concern me.

“Ah, Mr. Heyst,” he said, ‘you and I have much more in common than you think.’”

Heyst struck the table with his fist unexpectedly.

“It was a jeer; I am sure it was!”

He seemed ashamed of this outburst and smiled faintly into the motionless eyes of the girl.

“What could I have done—even if I had had my pockets full of revolvers?”

She made an appreciative sign.

“Killing's a sin, sure enough,” she murmured.

“I went away,” Heyst continued. “I left him there, lying on his side with his eyes shut. When I got back here, I found you looking ill. What was it, Lena? You did give me a scare! Then I had the interview with Wang while you rested. You were sleeping quietly. I sat here to consider all these things calmly, to try to penetrate their inner meaning and their outward bearing. It struck me that the two days we have before us have the character of a sort of truce. The more I thought of it, the more I felt that this was tacitly understood between Jones and myself. It was to our advantage, if anything can be of advantage to people caught so completely unawares as we are. Wang was gone. He, at any rate, had declared himself, but as I did not know what he might take it into his head to do, I thought I had better warn these people that I was no longer responsible for the Chinaman. I did not want Mr. Wang making some move which would precipitate the action against us. Do you see my point of view?”

She made a sign that she did. All her soul was wrapped in her passionate determination, in an exalted belief in herself—in the contemplation of her amazing opportunity to win the certitude, the eternity, of that man's love.

“I never saw two men,” Heyst was saying, “more affected by a piece of information than Jones and his secretary, who was back in the bungalow by then. They had not heard me come up. I told them I was sorry to intrude.

“Not at all! Not at all,” said Jones.

“The secretary backed away into a corner and watched me like a wary cat. In fact, they both were visibly on their guard.

“I am come,” I told them, “to let you know that my servant has deserted—gone off.”

“At first they looked at each other as if they had not understood what I was saying; but very soon they seemed quite concerned.

“You mean to say your Chink's cleared out?” said Ricardo, coming forward from his corner. “Like this—all at once? What did he do it for?”

“I said that a Chinaman had always a simple and precise reason for what he did, but that to get such a reason out of him was not so easy. All he told me, I said, was that he 'didn't like'.

“They were extremely disturbed at this. Didn't like what, they wanted to know.

“The looks of you and your party,” I told Jones.

“Nonsense!” he cried out, and immediately Ricardo, the short man, struck in.

“Told you that? What did he take you for, sir—an infant? Or do you take us for kids?—meaning no offence. Come, I bet you will tell us next that you've missed something.”

“I didn't mean to tell you anything of the sort,” I said, “but as a matter of fact it is so.”

“He slapped his thigh.

“Thought so. What do you think of this trick, governor?”

“Jones made some sort of sign to him, and then that extraordinary cat-faced associate proposed that he and their servant should come out and help me catch or kill the Chink.

“My object, I said, was not to get assistance. I did not intend to chase the Chinaman. I had come only to warn them that he was armed, and that he really objected to their presence on the island. I wanted them to understand that I was not responsible for anything that might happen.

“Do you mean to tell us,’ asked Ricardo, ‘that there is a crazy Chink with a six-shooter broke loose on this island, and that you don't care?’

“Strangely enough they did not seem to believe my story. They were exchanging significant looks all the time. Ricardo stole up close to his principal; they had a confabulation together, and then something happened which I did not expect. It's rather awkward, too.

“Since I would not have their assistance to get hold of the Chink and recover my property, the least they could do was to send me their servant. It was Jones who said that, and Ricardo backed up the idea.

“Yes, yes—let our Pedro cook for all hands in your compound! He isn't so bad as he looks. That's what we will do!”

“He hustled out of the room to the veranda, and let out an ear-splitting whistle for their Pedro. Having heard the brute's answering howl, Ricardo ran back into the room.

“Yes, Mr. Heyst. This will do capitally, Mr. Heyst. You just direct him to do whatever you are accustomed to have done for you in the way of attendance. See?”

“Lena, I confess to you that I was taken completely by surprise. I had not expected anything of the sort. I don't know what I expected. I am so anxious about you that I can't keep away from these infernal scoundrels. And only two months ago I would not have cared. I would have defied their scoundrelism as much as I have scorned all the other intrusions of life. But now I have you! You stole into my life, and—”

Heyst drew a deep breath. The girl gave him a quick, wide-eyed glance.

“Ah! That's what you are thinking of—that you have me!”

It was impossible to read the thoughts veiled by her steady grey eyes, to penetrate the meaning of her silences, her words, and even her embraces. He used to come out of her very arms with the feeling of a baffled man.

“If I haven't you, if you are not here, then where are you?” cried Heyst. “You understand me very well.”

She shook her head a little. Her red lips, at which he looked now, her lips as fascinating as the voice that came out of them, uttered the words:

“I hear what you say; but what does it mean?”

“It means that I could lie and perhaps cringe for your sake.”

“No! No! Don't you ever do that,” she said in haste, while her eyes glistened suddenly. “You would hate me for it afterwards!”

“Hate you?” repeated Heyst, who had recalled his polite manner. “No! You needn't consider the extremity of the improbable—as yet. But I will confess to you that I—how shall I call it?—that I dissembled. First I dissembled my dismay at the unforeseen result of my idiotic diplomacy. Do you understand, my dear girl?”

It was evident that she did not understand the word. Heyst produced his playful smile, which contrasted oddly with the worried character of his whole expression. His temples seemed to have sunk in, his face looked a little leaner.

“A diplomatic statement, Lena, is a statement of which everything is true, but the sentiment which seems to prompt it. I have never been diplomatic in my relation with mankind—not from regard for its feelings, but from a certain regard for my own. Diplomacy doesn't go well with consistent contempt. I cared little for life and still less for death.”

“Don't talk like that!”

“I dissembled my extreme longing to take these wandering scoundrels by their throats,” he went on. “I have only two hands—I wish I had a hundred to defend you—and there were three throats. By that time their Pedro was in the room too. Had he seen me engaged with their two throats, he would have been at mine like a fierce dog, or any other savage and faithful brute. I had no difficulty in dissembling my longing for the vulgar, stupid, and hopeless argument of fight. I remarked that I really did not want a servant. I couldn't think of depriving them of their man's services; but they would not hear me. They had made up their minds.

“We shall send him over at once,’ Ricardo said, ‘to start cooking dinner for everybody. I hope you won't mind me coming to eat it with you in your bungalow; and we will send the governor's dinner over to him here.’

“I could do nothing but hold my tongue or bring on a quarrel—some manifestation of their dark purpose, which we have no means to resist. Of course, you may remain invisible this evening; but with that atrocious-brute prowling all the time at the back of the house, how long can your presence be concealed from these men?”

Heyst's distress could be felt in his silence. The girl's head, sustained by her hands buried in the thick masses of her hair, had a perfect immobility.

“You are certain you have not been seen so far?” he asked suddenly.

The motionless head spoke.

“How can I be certain? You told me you wanted me to keep out of the way. I kept out of the way. I didn't ask your reason. I thought you didn't want people to know that you had a girl like me about you.”

“What? Ashamed?” cried Heyst.

“It isn't what's right, perhaps—I mean for you—is it?”

Heyst lifted his hands, reproachfully courteous.

“I look upon it as so very much right that I couldn't bear the idea of any other than sympathetic, respectful eyes resting on you. I disliked and mistrusted these fellows from the first. Didn't you understand?”

“Yes; I did keep out of sight,” she said.

A silence fell. At last Heyst stirred slightly.

“All this is of very little importance now,” he said with a sigh. “This is a question of something infinitely worse than mere looks and thoughts, however base and contemptible. As I have told you, I met Ricardo's suggestions by silence. As I was turning away he said:

“If you happen to have the key of that store-room of yours on you, Mr. Heyst, you may just as well let me have it; I will give it to our Pedro.’

“I had it on me, and I tendered it to him without speaking. The hairy creature was at the door by then, and caught the key, which Ricardo threw to him, better than any trained ape could have done. I came away. All the time I had been thinking anxiously of you, whom I had left asleep, alone here, and apparently ill.”

Heyst interrupted himself, with a listening turn of his head. He had heard the faint sound of sticks being snapped in the compound. He rose and crossed the room to look out of the back door.

“And here the creature is,” he said, returning to the table. “Here he is, already attending to the fire. Oh, my dear Lena!”

She had followed him with her eyes. She watched him go out on the front veranda cautiously. He lowered stealthily a couple of screens that hung between the column, and remained outside very still, as if interested by something on the open ground. Meantime she had risen in her turn, to take a peep into the compound. Heyst, glancing over his shoulder, saw her returning to her seat. He beckoned to her, and she continued to move, crossing the shady room, pure and bright in her white dress, her hair loose, with something of a sleep-walker in her unhurried motion, in her extended hand, in the sightless effect of her grey eyes luminous in the half-light. He had never seen such an expression in her face before. It had dreaminess in it, intense attention, and something like sternness.

Arrested in the doorway by Heyst's extended arm, she seemed to wake up, flushed faintly—and this flush, passing off, carried away with it the strange transfiguring mood. With a courageous gesture she pushed back the heavy masses of her hair. The light clung to her forehead. Her delicate nostrils quivered. Heyst seized her arm and whispered excitedly:

“Slip out here, quickly! The screens will conceal you. Only you must mind the stair-space. They are actually out—I mean the other two. You had better see them before you—”

She made a barely perceptible movement of recoil, checked at once, and stood still. Heyst released her arm.

“Yes, perhaps I had better,” she said with unnatural deliberation, and stepped out on the veranda to stand close by his side.

Together, one on each side of the screen, they peeped between the edge of the canvas and the veranda-post entwined with creepers. A great heat ascended from the sun-smitten ground, in an ever-rising wave, as if from some secret store of earth's fiery heart; for the sky was growing cooler already, and the sun had declined sufficiently for the shadows of Mr. Jones and his henchman to be projected towards the bungalow side by side—one infinitely slender, the other short and broad.

The two visitors stood still and gazed. To keep up the fiction of his invalidism, Mr. Jones, the gentleman, leaned on the arm of Ricardo, the secretary, the top of whose hat just came up to his governor's shoulder.

“Do you see them?” Heyst whispered into the girl's ear. “Here they are, the envoys of the outer world. Here they are before you—evil intelligence, instinctive savagery, arm in arm. The brute force is at the back. A trio of fitting envoys perhaps—but what about the welcome? Suppose I were armed, could I shoot these two down where they stand? Could I?”

Without moving her head, the girl felt for Heyst's hand, pressed it and thereafter did not let it go. He continued, bitterly playful:

“I don't know. I don't think so. There is a strain in me which lays me under an insensate obligation to avoid even the appearance of murder. I have never pulled a trigger or lifted my hand on a man, even in self-defence.”

The suddenly tightened grip of her hand checked him.

“They are making a move,” she murmured.

“Can they be thinking of coming here?” Heyst wondered anxiously.

“No, they aren't coming this way,” she said; and there was another pause. “They are going back to their house,” she reported finally.

After watching them a little longer, she let go Heyst's hand and moved away from the screen. He followed her into the room.

“You have seen them now,” he began. “Think what it was to me to see them land in the dusk, fantasms from the sea—apparitions, chimeras! And they persist. That's the worst of it—they persist. They have no right to be—but they are. They ought to have aroused my fury. But I have refined everything away by this time—anger, indignation, scorn itself. Nothing's left but disgust. Since you have told me of that abominable calumny, it has become immense—it extends even to myself.” He looked up at her.

“But luckily I have you. And if only Wang had not carried off that miserable revolver—yes, Lena, here we are, we two!”

She put both her hands on his shoulders and looked straight into his eyes. He returned her penetrating gaze. It baffled him. He could not pierce the grey veil of her eyes; but the sadness of her voice thrilled him profoundly.

“You are not reproaching me?” she asked slowly.

“Reproach? What a word between us! It could only be myself—but the mention of Wang has given me an idea. I have been, not exactly cringing, not exactly lying, but still dissembling. You have been hiding yourself, to please me, but still you have been hiding. All this is very dignified. Why shouldn't we try begging now? A noble art? Yes. Lena, we must go out together. I couldn't think of leaving you alone, and I must—yes, I must speak to Wang. We shall go and seek that man, who knows what he wants and how to secure what he wants. We will go at once!”

“Wait till I put my hair up,” she agreed instantly, and vanished behind the curtain.

When the curtain had fallen behind her, she turned her head back with an expression of infinite and tender concern for him—for him whom she could never hope to understand, and whom she was afraid she could never satisfy, as if her passion were of a hopelessly lower quality, unable to appease some exalted and delicate desire of his superior soul. In a couple of minutes she reappeared. They left the house by the door of the compound, and passed within three feet of the thunderstruck Pedro, without even looking in his direction. He rose from stooping over a fire of sticks, and, balancing himself clumsily, uncovered his enormous fangs in gaping astonishment. Then suddenly he set off rolling on his bandy legs to impart to his masters the astonishing discovery of a woman.