

## CHAPTER FOUR

Heyst, seated at the table with his chin on his breast, raised his head at the faint rustle of Lena's dress. He was startled by the dead pallor of her cheeks, by something lifeless in her eyes, which looked at him strangely, without recognition. But to his anxious inquiries she answered reassuringly that there was nothing the matter with her, really. She had felt giddy on rising. She had even had a moment of faintness, after her bath. She had to sit down to wait for it to pass. This had made her late dressing.

"I didn't try to do my hair. I didn't want to keep you waiting any longer," she said.

He was unwilling to press her with questions about her health, since she seemed to make light of this indisposition. She had not done her hair, but she had brushed it, and had tied it with a ribbon behind. With her forehead uncovered, she looked very young, almost a child, a careworn child; a child with something on its mind.

What surprised Heyst was the non-appearance of Wang. The Chinaman had always materialized at the precise moment of his service, neither too soon nor too late. This time the usual miracle failed. What was the meaning of this?

Heyst raised his voice—a thing he disliked doing. It was promptly answered from the compound:

"Ada tuan!"

Lena, leaning on her elbow, with her eyes on her plate, did not seem to hear anything. When Wang entered with a tray, his narrow eyes, tilted inward by the prominence of salient cheek-bones, kept her under stealthy observation all the time. Neither the one nor the other of that white couple paid the slightest attention to him and he withdrew without having heard them exchange a single word. He squatted on his heels on the back veranda. His Chinaman's mind, very clear but not far-reaching, was made up according to the plain reason of things, such as it appeared to him in the light of his simple feeling for self-preservation, untrammelled by any notions of romantic honour or tender conscience. His yellow hands, lightly clasped, hung idly between his knees. The graves of Wang's ancestors were far away, his parents were dead, his elder brother was a soldier in the yamen of some Mandarin away in Formosa. No one near by had a claim on his veneration or his obedience. He had been for years a labouring restless vagabond. His only tie in the world was the Alfuro woman, in exchange for whom he had given away some considerable part of his hard-earned substance; and his duty, in reason, could be to no one but himself.

The scuffle behind the curtain was a thing of bad augury for that Number One for whom the Chinaman had neither love nor dislike. He had been awed enough

by that development to hang back with the coffee-pot till at last the white man was induced to call him in. Wang went in with curiosity. Certainly, the white woman looked as if she had been wrestling with a spirit which had managed to tear half her blood out of her before letting her go. As to the man, Wang had long looked upon him as being in some sort bewitched; and now he was doomed. He heard their voices in the room. Heyst was urging the girl to go and lie down again. He was extremely concerned. She had eaten nothing.

“The best thing for you. You really must!”

She sat listless, shaking her head from time to time negatively, as if nothing could be any good. But he insisted; she saw the beginning of wonder in his eyes, and suddenly gave way.

“Perhaps I had better.”

She did not want to arouse his wonder, which would lead him straight to suspicion. He must not suspect!

Already, with the consciousness of her love for this man, of that something rapturous and profound going beyond the mere embrace, there was born in her a woman's innate mistrust of masculinity, of that seductive strength allied to an absurd, delicate shrinking from the recognition of the naked necessity of facts, which never yet frightened a woman worthy of the name. She had no plan; but her mind, quieted down somewhat by the very effort to preserve outward composure for his sake, perceived that her behaviour had secured, at any rate, a short period of safety. Perhaps because of the similarity of their miserable origin in the dregs of mankind, she had understood Ricardo perfectly. He would keep quiet for a time now. In this momentarily soothing certitude her bodily fatigue asserted itself, the more overpoweringly since its cause was not so much the demand on her strength as the awful suddenness of the stress she had had to meet. She would have tried to overcome it from the mere instinct of resistance, if it had not been for Heyst's alternate pleadings and commands. Before this eminently masculine fussing she felt the woman's need to give way, the sweetness of surrender.

“I will do anything you like,” she said.

Getting up, she was surprised by a wave of languid weakness that came over her, embracing and enveloping her like warm water, with a noise in her ears as of a breaking sea.

“You must help me along,” she added quickly.

While he put his arm round her waist—not by any means an uncommon thing for him to do—she found a special satisfaction in the feeling of being thus sustained. She abandoned all her weight to that encircling and protecting pressure, while a thrill went through her at the sudden thought that it was she who would have to protect him, to be the defender of a man who was strong

enough to lift her bodily, as he was doing even then in his two arms. For Heyst had done this as soon as they had crept through the doorway of the room. He thought it was quicker and simpler to carry her the last step or two. He had grown really too anxious to be aware of the effort. He lifted her high and deposited her on the bed, as one lays a child on its side in a cot. Then he sat down on the edge, masking his concern with a smile which obtained no response from the dreamy immobility of her eyes. But she sought his hand, seized it eagerly; and while she was pressing it with all the force of which she was capable, the sleep she needed overtook her suddenly, overwhelmingly, as it overtakes a child in a cot, with her lips parted for a safe, endearing word which she had thought of but had no time to utter.

The usual flaming silence brooded over Samburan.

“What in the world is this new mystery?” murmured Heyst to himself, contemplating her deep slumber.

It was so deep, this enchanted sleep, that when some time afterwards he gently tried to open her fingers and free his hand, he succeeded without provoking the slightest stir.

“There is some very simple explanation, no doubt,” he thought, as he stole out into the living-room.

Absent-mindedly he pulled a book out of the top shelf, and sat down with it; but even after he had opened it on his knee, and had been staring at the pages for a time, he had not the slightest idea of what it was about. He stared and stared at the crowded, parallel lines. It was only when, raising his eyes for no particular reason, he saw Wang standing motionless on the other side of the table, that he regained complete control of his faculties.

“Oh, yes,” he said, as if suddenly reminded of a forgotten appointment of a not particularly welcome sort.

He waited a little, and then, with reluctant curiosity, forced himself to ask the silent Wang what he had to say. He had some idea that the matter of the vanished revolver would come up at last; but the guttural sounds which proceeded from the Chinaman did not refer to that delicate subject. His speech was concerned with cups, saucers, plates, forks, and knives. All these things had been put away in the cupboards on the back veranda, where they belonged, perfectly clean, “all plopel.” Heyst wondered at the scrupulosity of a man who was about to abandon him; for he was not surprised to hear Wang conclude the account of his stewardship with the words:

“I go now.”

“Oh! You go now?” said Heyst, leaning back, his book on his knees.

“Yes. Me no likee. One man, two man, three man—no can do! Me go now.”

“What's frightening you away like this?” asked Heyst, while through his mind flashed the hope that something enlightening might come from that being so unlike himself, taking contact with the world with a simplicity and directness of which his own mind was not capable. “Why?” he went on. “You are used to white men. You know them well.”

“Yes. Me savee them,” assented Wang inscrutably. “Me savee plenty.”

All that he really knew was his own mind. He had made it up to withdraw himself and the Alfuro woman from the uncertainties of the relations which were going to establish themselves between those white men. It was Pedro who had been the first cause of Wang's suspicion and fear. The Chinaman had seen wild men. He had penetrated, in the train of a Chinese pedlar, up one or two of the Bornean rivers into the country of the Dyaks. He had also been in the interior of Mindanao, where there are people who live in trees—savages, no better than animals; but a hairy brute like Pedro, with his great fangs and ferocious growls, was altogether beyond his conception of anything that could be looked upon as human. The strong impression made on him by Pedro was the prime inducement which had led Wang to purloin the revolver. Reflection on the general situation, and on the insecurity of Number One, came later, after he had obtained possession of the revolver and of the box of cartridges out of the table drawer in the living-room.

“Oh, you savee plenty about white men,” Heyst went on in a slightly bantering tone, after a moment of silent reflection in which he had confessed to himself that the recovery of the revolver was not to be thought of, either by persuasion or by some more forcible means. “You speak in that fashion, but you are frightened of those white men over there.”

“Me no flightened,” protested Wang raucously, throwing up his head—which gave to his throat a more strained, anxious appearance than ever. “Me no likee,” he added in a quieter tone. “Me velly sick.”

He put his hand over the region under the breast-bone.

“That,” said Heyst, serenely positive, “belong one piecee lie. That isn't proper man-talk at all. And after stealing my revolver, too!”

He had suddenly decided to speak about it, because this frankness could not make the situation much worse than it was. He did not suppose for a moment that Wang had the revolver anywhere about his person; and after having thought the matter over, he had arrived at the conclusion that the Chinaman never meant to use the weapon against him. After a slight start, because the direct charge had taken him unawares, Wang tore open the front of his jacket with a convulsive show of indignation.

“No hab got. Look see!” he mouthed in pretended anger.

He slapped his bare chest violently; he uncovered his very ribs, all astir with the panting of outraged virtue; his smooth stomach heaved with indignation. He started his wide blue breeches flapping about his yellow calves. Heyst watched him quietly.

“I never said you had it on you,” he observed, without raising his voice; “but the revolver is gone from where I kept it.”

“Me no savee levelvel,” Wang said obstinately.

The book lying open on Heyst's knee slipped suddenly and he made a sharp movement to catch it up. Wang was unable to see the reason of this because of the table, and leaped away from what seemed to him a threatening symptom. When Heyst looked up, the Chinaman was already at the door facing the room, not frightened, but alert.

“What's the matter?” asked Heyst.

Wang nodded his shaven head significantly at the curtain closing the doorway of the bedroom.

“Me no likee,” he repeated.

“What the devil do you mean?” Heyst was genuinely amazed. “Don't like what?”

Wang pointed a long lemon-coloured finger at the motionless folds.

“Two,” he said.

“Two what? I don't understand.”

“Suppose you savee, you no like that fashion. Me savee plenty. Me go now.”

Heyst had risen from his chair, but Wang kept his ground in the doorway for a little longer. His almond-shaped eyes imparted to his face an expression of soft and sentimental melancholy. The muscles of his throat moved visibly while he uttered a distinct and guttural “Goodbye” and vanished from Number One's sight.

The Chinaman's departure altered the situation. Heyst reflected on what would be best to do in view of that fact. For a long time he hesitated; then, shrugging his shoulders wearily, he walked out on the veranda, down the steps, and continued at a steady gait, with a thoughtful mien, in the direction of his guests' bungalow. He wanted to make an important communication to them, and he had no other object—least of all to give them the shock of a surprise call. Nevertheless, their brutish henchman not being on watch, it was Heyst's fate to startle Mr. Jones and his secretary by his sudden appearance in the doorway. Their conversation must have been very interesting to prevent them from hearing the visitor's approach. In the dim room—the shutters were kept constantly closed against the heat—Heyst saw them start apart. It was Mr. Jones who spoke:

“Ah, here you are again! Come in, come in!”

Heyst, taking his hat off in the doorway, entered the room.