

CHAPTER NINE

Stumbling up the steps, as if suddenly exhausted, Lena entered the room and let herself fall on the nearest chair. Before following her, Heyst took a survey of the surroundings from the veranda. It was a complete solitude. There was nothing in the aspect of this familiar scene to tell him that he and the girl were not as completely alone as they had been in the early days of their common life on this abandoned spot, with only Wang discreetly materializing from time to time and the uncomplaining memory of Morrison to keep them company.

After the cold gust of wind there was an absolute stillness of the air. The thunder-charged mass hung unbroken beyond the low, ink-black headland, darkening the twilight. By contrast, the sky at the zenith displayed pellucid clearness, the sheen of a delicate glass bubble which the merest movement of air might shatter. A little to the left, between the black masses of the headland and of the forest, the volcano, a feather of smoke by day and a cigar-glow at night, took its first fiery expanding breath of the evening. Above it a reddish star came out like an expelled spark from the fiery bosom of the earth, enchanted into permanency by the mysterious spell of frozen spaces.

In front of Heyst the forest, already full of the deepest shades, stood like a wall. But he lingered, watching its edge, especially where it ended at the line of bushes, masking the land end of the jetty. Since the girl had spoken of catching a glimpse of something white among the trees, he believed pretty firmly that they had been followed in their excursion up the mountain by Mr. Jones's secretary. No doubt the fellow had watched them out of the forest, and now, unless he took the trouble to go back some distance and fetch a considerable circuit inland over the clearing, he was bound to walk out into the open space before the bungalows. Heyst did, indeed, imagine at one time some movement between the trees, lost as soon as perceived. He stared patiently, but nothing more happened. After all, why should he trouble about these people's actions? Why this stupid concern for the preliminaries, since, when the issue was joined, it would find him disarmed and shrinking from the ugliness and degradation of it?

He turned and entered the room. Deep dusk reigned in there already. Lena, near the door, did not move or speak. The sheen of the white tablecloth was very obtrusive. The brute these two vagabonds had tamed had entered on its service while Heyst and Lena were away. The table was laid. Heyst walked up and down the room several times. The girl remained without sound or movement on the chair. But when Heyst, placing the two silver candelabra on the table, struck a match to light the candles, she got up suddenly and went into the bedroom. She came out again almost immediately, having taken off her hat. Heyst looked at her over his shoulder.

“What's the good of shirking the evil hour? I've lighted these candles for a sign of our return. After all, we might not have been watched—while returning, I mean. Of course we were seen leaving the house.”

The girl sat down again. The great wealth of her hair looked very dark above her colourless face. She raised her eyes, glistening softly in the light with a sort of unreadable appeal, with a strange effect of unseeing innocence.

“Yes,” said Heyst across the table, the fingertips of one hand resting on the immaculate cloth. “A creature with an antediluvian lower jaw, hairy like a mastodon, and formed like a pre-historic ape, has laid this table. Are you awake, Lena? Am I? I would pinch myself, only I know that nothing would do away with this dream. Three covers. You know it is the shorter of the two who's coming—the gentleman who, in the play of his shoulders as he walks, and in his facial structure, recalls a Jaguar. Ah, you don't know what a jaguar is? But you have had a good look at these two. It's the short one, you know, who's to be our guest.”

She made a sign with her head that she knew; Heyst's insistence brought Ricardo vividly before her mental vision. A sudden languor, like the physical echo of her struggle with the man, paralysed all her limbs. She lay still in the chair, feeling very frightened at this phenomenon—ready to pray aloud for strength.

Heyst had started to pace the room.

“Our guest! There is a proverb—in Russia, I believe—that when a guest enters the house, God enters the house. The sacred virtue of hospitality! But it leads one into trouble as well as any other.”

The girl unexpectedly got up from the chair, swaying her supple figure and stretching her arms above her head. He stopped to look at her curiously, paused, and then went on:

“I venture to think that God has nothing to do with such a hospitality and with such a guest!”

She had jumped to her feet to react against the numbness, to discover whether her body would obey her will. It did. She could stand up, and she could move her arms freely. Though no physiologist, she concluded that all that sudden numbness was in her head, not in her limbs. Her fears assuaged, she thanked God for it mentally, and to Heyst murmured a protest:

“Oh, yes! He's got to do with everything—every little thing. Nothing can happen—”

“Yes,” he said hastily, “one of the two sparrows can't be struck to the ground—you are thinking of that.” The habitual playful smile faded on the kindly lips

under the martial moustache. “Ah, you remember what you have been told—as a child—on Sundays.”

“Yes, I do remember.” She sank into the chair again. “It was the only decent bit of time I ever had when I was a kid, with our landlady's two girls, you know.”

“I wonder, Lena,” Heyst said, with a return to his urbane playfulness, “whether you are just a little child, or whether you represent something as old as the world.”

She surprised Heyst by saying dreamily:

“Well—and what about you?”

“I? I date later—much later. I can't call myself a child, but I am so recent that I may call myself a man of the last hour—or is it the hour before last? I have been out of it so long that I am not certain how far the hands of the clock have moved since—since—”

He glanced at the portrait of his father, exactly above the head of the girl, as if it were ignoring her in its painted austerity of feeling. He did not finish the sentence; but he did not remain silent for long.

“Only what must be avoided are fallacious inferences, my dear Lena—especially at this hour.”

“Now you are making fun of me again,” she said without looking up.

“Am I?” he cried. “Making fun? No, giving warning. Hang it all, whatever truth people told you in the old days, there is also this one—that sparrows do fall to the ground, that they are brought to the ground. This is no vain assertion, but a fact. That's why”—again his tone changed, while he picked up the table knife and let it fall disdainfully—“that's why I wish these wretched round knives had some edge on them. Absolute rubbish—neither edge, point, nor substance. I believe one of these forks would make a better weapon at a pinch. But can I go about with a fork in my pocket?” He gnashed his teeth with a rage very real, and yet comic.

“There used to be a carver here, but it was broken and thrown away a long time ago. Nothing much to carve here. It would have made a noble weapon, no doubt; but—”

He stopped. The girl sat very quiet, with downcast eyes. As he kept silence for some time, she looked up and said thoughtfully:

“Yes, a knife—it's a knife that you would want, wouldn't you, in case, in case—”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“There must be a crowbar or two in the sheds; but I have given up all the keys together. And then, do you see me walking about with a crowbar in my hand?”

Ha, ha! And besides, that edifying sight alone might start the trouble for all I know. In truth, why has it not started yet?"

"Perhaps they are afraid of you," she whispered, looking down again.

"By Jove, it looks like it," he assented meditatively. "They do seem to hang back for some reason. Is that reason prudence, or downright fear, or perhaps the leisurely method of certitude?"

Out in the black night, not very far from the bungalow, resounded a loud and prolonged whistle. Lena's hands grasped the sides of the chair, but she made no movement. Heyst started, and turned his face away from the door.

The startling sound had died away.

"Whistles, yells, omens, signals, portents—what do they matter?" he said. "But what about the crowbar? Suppose I had it! Could I stand in ambush at the side of the door—this door—and smash the first protruding head, scatter blood and brains over the floor, over these walls, and then run stealthily to the other door to do the same thing—and repeat the performance for a third time, perhaps? Could I? On suspicion, without compunction, with a calm and determined purpose? No, it is not in me. I date too late. Would you like to see me attempt this thing while that mysterious prestige of mine lasts—or their not less mysterious hesitation?"

"No, no!" she whispered ardently, as if compelled to speak by his eyes fixed on her face. "No, it's a knife you want to defend yourself with—to defend—there will be time—"

"And who knows if it isn't really my duty?" he began again, as if he had not heard her disjointed words at all. "It may be—my duty to you, to myself. For why should I put up with the humiliation of their secret menaces? Do you know what the world would say?"

He emitted a low laugh, which struck her with terror. She would have got up, but he stooped so low over her that she could not move without first pushing him away.

"It would say, Lena, that I—the Swede—after luring my friend and partner to his death from mere greed of money, have murdered these unoffending shipwrecked strangers from sheer funk. That would be the story whispered—perhaps shouted—certainly spread out, and believed—and believed, my dear Lena!"

"Who would believe such awful things?"

"Perhaps you wouldn't—not at first, at any rate; but the power of calumny grows with time. It's insidious and penetrating. It can even destroy one's faith in oneself—dry-rot the soul."

All at once her eyes leaped to the door and remained fixed, stony, a little enlarged. Turning his head, Heyst beheld the figure of Ricardo framed in the

doorway. For a moment none of the three moved, then, looking from the newcomer to the girl in the chair, Heyst formulated a sardonic introduction.

“Mr. Ricardo, my dear.”

Her head drooped a little. Ricardo's hand went up to his moustache. His voice exploded in the room.

“At your service, ma'am!”

He stepped in, taking his hat off with a flourish, and dropping it carelessly on a chair near the door.

“At your service,” he repeated, in quite another tone. “I was made aware there was a lady about, by that Pedro of ours; only I didn't know I should have the privilege of seeing you tonight, ma'am.”

Lena and Heyst looked at him covertly, but he, with a vague gaze avoiding them both, looked at nothing, seeming to pursue some point in space.

“Had a pleasant walk?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes. And you?” returned Heyst, who had managed to catch his glance.

“I haven't been a yard away from the governor this afternoon till I started for here.” The genuineness of the accent surprised Heyst, without convincing him of the truth of the words.

“Why do you ask?” pursued Ricardo with every inflection of perfect candour.

“You might have wished to explore the island a little,” said Heyst, studying the man, who, to render him justice, did not try to free his captured gaze. “I may remind you that it wouldn't be a perfectly safe proceeding.”

Ricardo presented a picture of innocence.

“Oh, yes—meaning that Chink that has ran away from you. He ain't much!”

“He has a revolver,” observed Heyst meaningly.

“Well, and you have a revolver, too,” Mr. Ricardo argued unexpectedly. “I don't worry myself about that.”

“That's different. I am not afraid of you,” Heyst made answer after a short pause.

“Of me?”

“Of all of you.”

“You have a queer way of putting things,” began Ricardo.

At that moment the door on the compound side of the house came open with some noise, and Pedro entered, pressing the edge of a loaded tray to his breast. His big, hairy head rolled a little, his feet fell in front of each other with a short, hard thump on the floor. The arrival changed the current of Ricardo's thought, perhaps, but certainly of his speech.

“You heard me whistling a little while ago outside? That was to give him a hint, as I came along, that it was time to bring in the dinner; and here it is.”

Lena rose and passed to the right of Ricardo, who lowered his glance for a moment. They sat down at the table. The enormous gorilla back of Pedro swayed out through the door.

“Extraordinary strong brute, ma'am,” said Ricardo. He had a propensity to talk about “his Pedro,” as some men will talk of their dog. “He ain't pretty, though. No, he ain't pretty. And he has got to be kept under. I am his keeper, as it might be. The governor don't trouble his head much about dee-tails. All that's left to Martin. Martin, that's me, ma'am.”

Heyst saw the girl's eyes turn towards Mr. Jones's secretary and rest blankly on his face. Ricardo, however, looked vaguely into space, and, with faint flickers of a smile about his lips, made conversation indefatigably against the silence of his entertainers. He boasted largely of his long association with Mr. Jones—over four years now, he said. Then, glancing rapidly at Heyst:

“You can see at once he's a gentleman, can't you?”

“You people,” Heyst said, his habitual playful intonation tinged with gloom, “are divorced from all reality in my eyes.”

Ricardo received this speech as if he had been expecting to hear those very words, or else did not mind at all what Heyst might say. He muttered an absent-minded “Ay, ay,” played with a bit of biscuit, sighed, and said, with a peculiar stare which did not seem to carry any distance, but to stop short at a point in the air very near his face:

“Anybody can see at once *you* are one. You and the governor ought to understand each other. He expects to see you tonight. The governor isn't well, and we've got to think of getting away from here.”

While saying these words he turned himself full towards Lena, but without any marked expression. Leaning back with folded arms, the girl stared before her as if she had been alone in the room. But under that aspect of almost vacant unconcern the perils and emotion that had entered into her life warmed her heart, exalted her mind with a sense of an inconceivable intensity of existence.

“Really? Thinking of going away from here?” Heyst murmured.

“The best of friends must part,” Ricardo pronounced slowly. “And, as long as they part friends, there's no harm done. We two are used to be on the move. You, I understand, prefer to stick in one place.”

It was obvious that all this was being said merely for the sake of talking, and that Ricardo's mind was concentrated on some purpose unconnected with the words that were coming out of his mouth.

“I should like to know,” Heyst asked with incisive politeness, “how you have come to understand this or anything else about me? As far as I can remember, I’ve made you no confidences.”

Ricardo, gazing comfortably into space out of the back of his chair—for some time all three had given up any pretence of eating—answered abstractedly:

“Any fellow might have guessed it!” He sat up suddenly, and uncovered all his teeth in a grin of extraordinary ferocity, which was belied by the persistent amiability of his tone. “The governor will be the man to tell you something about that. I wish you would say you would see my governor. He’s the one who does all our talking. Let me take you to him this evening. He ain’t at all well; and he can’t make up his mind to go away without having a talk with you.”

Heyst, looking up, met Lena’s eyes. Their expression of candour seemed to hide some struggling intention. Her head, he fancied, had made an imperceptible affirmative movement. Why? What reason could she have? Was it the prompting of some obscure instinct? Or was it simply a delusion of his own senses? But in this strange complication invading the quietude of his life, in his state of doubt and disdain and almost of despair with which he looked at himself, he would let even a delusive appearance guide him through a darkness so dense that it made for indifference.

“Well, suppose I *do* say so.”

Ricardo did not conceal his satisfaction, which for a moment interested Heyst.

“It can’t be my life they are after,” he said to himself. “What good could it be to them?”

He looked across the table at the girl. What did it matter whether she had nodded or not? As always when looking into her unconscious eyes, he tasted something like the dregs of tender pity. He had decided to go. Her nod, imaginary or not imaginary, advice or illusion, had tipped the scale. He reflected that Ricardo’s invitation could scarcely be anything in the nature of a trap. It would have been too absurd. Why carry subtly into a trap someone already bound hand and foot, as it were?

All this time he had been looking fixedly at the girl he called Lena. In the submissive quietness of her being, which had been her attitude ever since they had begun their life on the island, she remained as secret as ever. Heyst got up abruptly, with a smile of such enigmatic and despairing character that Mr. Secretary Ricardo, whose abstract gaze had an all-round efficiency, made a slight crouching start, as if to dive under the table for his leg-knife—a start that was repressed, as soon as begun. He had expected Heyst to spring on him or draw a revolver, because he created for himself a vision of him in his own image. Instead of doing either of these obvious things, Heyst walked across the room, opened the door and put his head through it to look out into the compound.

As soon as his back was turned, Ricardo's hand sought the girl's arm under the table. He was not looking at her, but she felt the groping, nervous touch of his search, felt suddenly the grip of his fingers above her wrist. He leaned forward a little; still he dared not look at her. His hard stare remained fastened on Heyst's back. In an extremely low hiss, his fixed idea of argument found expression scathingly:

“See! He's no good. He's not the man for you!”

He glanced at her at last. Her lips moved a little, and he was awed by that movement without a sound. Next instant the hard grasp of his fingers vanished from her arm. Heyst had shut the door. On his way back to the table, he crossed the path of the girl they had called Alma—she didn't know why—also Magdalen, whose mind had remained so long in doubt as to the reason of her own existence. She no longer wondered at that bitter riddle, since her heart found its solution in a blinding, hot glow of passionate purpose.