

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was at this precise moment of their conversation that Heyst had intruded on Mr. Jones and his secretary with his warning about Wang, as he had related to Lena. When he left them, the two looked at each other in wondering silence. My Jones was the first to break it.

“I say, Martin!”

“Yes, sir.”

“What does this mean?”

“It's some move. Blame me if I can understand.”

“Too deep for you?” Mr. Jones inquired dryly.

“It's nothing but some of his infernal impudence,” growled the secretary. “You don't believe all that about the Chink, do you, sir? 'Tain't true.”

“It isn't necessary for it to be true to have a meaning for us. It's the why of his coming to tell us this tale that's important.”

“Do you think he made it up to frighten us?” asked Ricardo.

Mr. Jones scowled at him thoughtfully.

“The man looked worried,” he muttered, as if to himself. “Suppose that Chinaman has really stolen his money! The man looked very worried.”

“Nothing but his artfulness, sir,” protested Ricardo earnestly, for the idea was too disconcerting to entertain. “Is it likely that he would have trusted a Chink with enough knowledge to make it possible?” he argued warmly. “Why, it's the very thing that he would keep close about. There's something else there. Ay, but what?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” Mr. Jones let out a ghostly, squeaky laugh. “I've never been placed in such a ridiculous position before,” he went on, with a sepulchral equanimity of tone. “It's you, Martin, who dragged me into it. However, it's my own fault too. I ought to—but I was really too bored to use my brain, and yours is not to be trusted. You are a hothead!”

A blasphemous exclamation of grief escaped from Ricardo. Not to be trusted! Hothead! He was almost tearful.

“Haven't I heard you, sir, saying more than twenty times since we got fired out from Manila that we should want a lot of capital to work the East Coast with? You were always telling me that to prime properly all them officials and Portuguese scallywags we should have to lose heavily at first. Weren't you always worrying about some means of getting hold of a good lot of cash? It wasn't to be got hold of by allowing yourself to become bored in that rotten Dutch town and playing a two-penny game with confounded beggarly bank

clerks and such like. Well, I've brought you here, where there is cash to be got—and a big lot, to a moral,” he added through his set teeth.

Silence fell. Each of them was staring into a different corner of the room. Suddenly, with a slight stamp of his foot, Mr. Jones made for the door. Ricardo caught him up outside.

“Put an arm through mine, sir,” he begged him gently but firmly. “No use giving the game away. An invalid may well come out for a breath of fresh air after the sun's gone down a bit. That's it, sir. But where do you want to go? Why did you come out, sir?”

Mr. Jones stopped short.

“I hardly know myself,” he confessed in a hollow mutter, staring intently at the Number One bungalow. “It's quite irrational,” he declared in a still lower tone.

“Better go in, sir,” suggested Ricardo. “What's that? Those screens weren't down before. He's spying from behind them now, I bet—the dodging, artful, plotting beast!”

“Why not go over there and see if we can't get to the bottom of this game?” was the unexpected proposal uttered by Mr. Jones. “He will have to talk to us.”

Ricardo repressed a start of dismay, but for a moment could not speak. He only pressed the governor's hand to his side instinctively.

“No, sir. What could you say? Do you expect to get to the bottom of his lies? How could you make him talk? It isn't time yet to come to grips with that gent. You don't think I would hang back, do you? His Chink, of course, I'll shoot like a dog the moment I catch sight of him; but as to that Mr. Blasted Heyst, the time isn't yet. My head's cooler just now than yours. Let's go in again. Why, we are exposed here. Suppose he took it into his head to let off a gun on us! He's an unaccountable, 'yporcritical skunk.”

Allowing himself to be persuaded, Mr. Jones returned to his seclusion. The secretary, however, remained on the veranda—for the purpose, he said, of seeing whether that Chink wasn't sneaking around; in which case he proposed to take a long shot at the galoot and chance the consequences. His real reason was that he wanted to be alone, away from the governor's deep-sunk eyes. He felt a sentimental desire to indulge his fancies in solitude. A great change had come over Mr. Ricardo since that morning. A whole side of him which from prudence, from necessity, from loyalty, had been kept dormant, was aroused now, colouring his thoughts and disturbing his mental poise by the vision of such staggering consequences as, for instance, the possibility of an active conflict with the governor. The appearance of the monstrous Pedro with his news drew Ricardo out of a feeling of dreaminess wrapped up in a sense of impending trouble. A woman? Yes, there was one; and it made all the difference. After driving away

Pedro, and watching the white helmets of Heyst and Lena vanishing among the bushes he stood lost in meditation.

“Where could they be off to like this?” he mentally asked himself.

The answer found by his speculative faculties on their utmost stretch was—to meet that Chink. For in the desertion of Wang Ricardo did not believe. It was a lying yarn, the organic part of a dangerous plot. Heyst had gone to combine some fresh move. But then Ricardo felt sure that the girl was with him—the girl full of pluck, full of sense, full of understanding; an ally of his own kind!

He went indoors briskly. Mr. Jones had resumed his cross-legged pose at the head of the bed, with his back against the wall.

“Anything new?”

“No, sir.”

Ricardo walked about the room as if he had no care in the world. He hummed snatches of song. Mr. Jones raised his waspish eyebrows, at the sound. The secretary got down on his knees before an old leather trunk, and, rummaging in there, brought out a small looking-glass. He fell to examining his physiognomy in it with silent absorption.

“I think I'll shave,” he decided, getting up.

He gave a sidelong glance to the governor, and repeated it several times during the operation, which did not take long, and even afterwards, when after putting away the implements, he resumed his walking, humming more snatches of unknown songs. Mr. Jones preserved a complete immobility, his thin lips compressed, his eyes veiled. His face was like a carving.

“So you would like to try your hand at cards with that skunk, sir?” said Ricardo, stopping suddenly and rubbing his hands.

Mr. Jones gave no sign of having heard anything.

“Well, why not? Why shouldn't he have the experience? You remember in that Mexican town—what's its name?—the robber fellow they caught in the mountains and condemned to be shot? He played cards half the night with the jailer and the sheriff. Well, this fellow is condemned, too. He must give you your game. Hang it all, a gentleman ought to have some little relaxation! And you have been uncommonly patient, sir.”

“You are uncommonly volatile all of a sudden,” Mr. Jones remarked in a bored voice. “What's come to you?”

The secretary hummed for a while, and then said:

“I'll try to get him over here for you tonight, after dinner. If I ain't here myself, don't you worry, sir. I shall be doing a bit of nosing around—see?”

“I see,” sneered Mr. Jones languidly. “But what do you expect to see in the dark?”

Ricardo made no answer, and after another turn or two slipped out of the room. He no longer felt comfortable alone with the governor.