

CHAPTER TEN

She passed by Heyst as if she had indeed been blinded by some secret, lurid, and consuming glare into which she was about to enter. The curtain of the bedroom door fell behind her into rigid folds. Ricardo's vacant gaze seemed to be watching the dancing flight of a fly in mid air.

"Extra dark outside, ain't it?" he muttered.

"Not so dark but that I could see that man of yours prowling about there," said Heyst in measured tones.

"What—Pedro? He's scarcely a man you know; or else I wouldn't be so fond of him as I am."

"Very well. Let's call him your worthy associate."

"Ay! Worthy enough for what we want of him. A great standby is Peter in a scrimmage. A growl and a bite—oh, my! And you don't want him about?"

"I don't."

"You want him out of the way?" insisted Ricardo with an affectation of incredulity which Heyst accepted calmly, though the air in the room seemed to grow more oppressive with every word spoken.

"That's it. I do want him out of the way." He forced himself to speak equably.

"Lor! That's no great matter. Pedro's not much use here. The business my governor's after can be settled by ten minutes' rational talk with—with another gentleman. Quiet talk!"

He looked up suddenly with hard, phosphorescent eyes. Heyst didn't move a muscle. Ricardo congratulated himself on having left his revolver behind. He was so exasperated that he didn't know what he might have done. He said at last:

"You want poor, harmless Peter out of the way before you let me take you to see the governor—is that it?"

"Yes, that is it."

"H'm! One can see," Ricardo said with hidden venom, "that you are a gentleman; but all that gentlemanly fancifulness is apt to turn sour on a plain man's stomach. However—you'll have to pardon me."

He put his fingers into his mouth and let out a whistle which seemed to drive a thin, sharp shaft of air solidly against one's nearest ear-drum. Though he greatly enjoyed Heyst's involuntary grimace, he sat perfectly stolid waiting for the effect of the call.

It brought Pedro in with an extraordinary, uncouth, primeval impetuosity. The door flew open with a clatter, and the wild figure it disclosed seemed anxious to devastate the room in leaps and bounds; but Ricardo raised his open palm, and

the creature came in quietly. His enormous half-closed paws swung to and fro a little in front of his bowed trunk as he walked. Ricardo looked on truculently.

“You go to the boat—understand? Go now!”

The little red eyes of the tame monster blinked with painful attention in the mass of hair.

“Well? Why don't you get? Forgot human speech, eh? Don't you know any longer what a boat is?”

“Si—boat,” the creature stammered out doubtfully.

“Well, go there—the boat at the jetty. March off to it and sit there, lie down there, do anything but go to sleep there—till you hear my call, and then fly here. Them's your orders. March! Get, vamos! No, not that way—out through the front door. No sulks!”

Pedro obeyed with uncouth alacrity. When he had gone, the gleam of pitiless savagery went out of Ricardo's yellow eyes, and his physiognomy took on, for the first time that evening, the expression of a domestic cat which is being noticed.

“You can watch him right into the bushes, if you like. Too dark, eh? Why not go with him to the very spot, then?”

Heyst made a gesture of vague protest.

“There's nothing to assure me that he will stay there. I have no doubt of his going, but it's an act without guarantee.”

“There you are!” Ricardo shrugged his shoulders philosophically. “Can't be helped. Short of shooting our Pedro, nobody can make absolutely sure of his staying in the same place longer than he has a mind to; but I tell you, he lives in holy terror of my temper. That's why I put on my sudden-death air when I talk to him. And yet I wouldn't shoot him—not I, unless in such a fit of rage as would make a man shoot his favourite dog. Look here, sir! This deal is on the square. I didn't tip him a wink to do anything else. He won't budge from the jetty. Are you coming along now, sir?”

A short silence ensued. Ricardo's jaws were working ominously under his skin. His eyes glided voluptuously here and there, cruel and dreamy. Heyst checked a sudden movement, reflected for a while, then said:

“You must wait a little.”

“Wait a little! Wait a little! What does he think a fellow is—a graven image?” grumbled Ricardo half audibly.

Heyst went into the bedroom, and shut the door after him with a bang. Coming from the light, he could not see a thing in there at first; yet he received the impression of the girl getting up from the floor. On the less opaque darkness of

the shutter-hole, her head detached itself suddenly, very faint, a mere hint of a round, dark shape without a face.

“I am going, Lena. I am going to confront these scoundrels.” He was surprised to feel two arms falling on his shoulders. “I thought that you—” he began.

“Yes, yes!” the girl whispered hastily.

She neither clung to him, nor yet did she try to draw him to her. Her hands grasped his shoulders, and she seemed to him to be staring into his face in the dark. And now he could see something of her face, too—an oval without features—and faintly distinguish her person, in the blackness, a form without definite lines.

“You have a black dress here, haven't you, Lena?” he asked, speaking rapidly, and so low that she could just hear him.

“Yes—an old thing.”

“Very good. Put it on at once.”

“But why?”

“Not for mourning!” There was something peremptory in the slightly ironic murmur. “Can you find it and get into it in the dark?”

She could. She would try. He waited, very still. He could imagine her movements over there at the far end of the room; but his eyes, accustomed now to the darkness, had lost her completely. When she spoke, her voice surprised him by its nearness. She had done what he had told her to do, and had approached him, invisible.

“Good! Where's that piece of purple veil I've seen lying about?” he asked.

There was no answer, only a slight rustle.

“Where is it?” he repeated impatiently.

Her unexpected breath was on his cheek.

“In my hands.”

“Capital! Listen, Lena. As soon as I leave the bungalow with that horrible scoundrel, you slip out at the back—instantly, lose no time!—and run round into the forest. That will be your time, while we are walking away, and I am sure he won't give me the slip. Run into the forest behind the fringe of bushes between the big trees. You will know, surely, how to find a place in full view of the front door. I fear for you; but in this black dress, with most of your face muffled up in that dark veil, I defy anybody to find you there before daylight. Wait in the forest till the table is pushed into full view of the doorway, and you see three candles out of four blown out and one relighted—or, should the lights be put out here while you watch them, wait till three candles are lighted and then two put out. At

either of these signals run back as hard as you can, for it will mean that I am waiting for you here.”

While he was speaking, the girl had sought and seized one of his hands. She did not press it; she held it loosely, as it were timidly, caressingly. It was no grasp; it was a mere contact, as if only to make sure that he was there, that he was real and no mere darker shadow in the obscurity. The warmth of her hand gave Heyst a strange, intimate sensation of all her person. He had to fight down a new sort of emotion, which almost unmanned him. He went on, whispering sternly:

“But if you see no such signals, don't let anything—fear, curiosity, despair, or hope—entice you back to this house; and with the first sign of dawn steal away along the edge of the clearing till you strike the path. Wait no longer, because I shall probably be dead.”

The murmur of the word “Never!” floated into his ear as if it formed itself in the air.

“You know the path,” he continued. “Make your way to the barricade. Go to Wang—yes, to Wang. Let nothing stop you!” It seemed to him that the girl's hand trembled a little. “The worst he can do to you is to shoot you, but he won't. I really think he won't, if I am not there. Stay with the villagers, with the wild people, and fear nothing. They will be more awed by you than you can be frightened of them. Davidson's bound to turn up before very long. Keep a lookout for a passing steamer. Think of some sort of signal to call him.”

She made no answer. The sense of the heavy, brooding silence in the outside world seemed to enter and fill the room—the oppressive infinity of it, without breath, without light. It was as if the heart of hearts had ceased to beat and the end of all things had come.

“Have you understood? You are to run out of the house at once,” Heyst whispered urgently.

She lifted his hand to her lips and let it go. He was startled.

“Lena!” he cried out under his breath.

She was gone from his side. He dared not trust himself—no, not even to the extent of a tender word.

Turning to go out he heard a thud somewhere in the house. To open the door, he had first to lift the curtain; he did so with his face over his shoulder. The merest trickle of light, coming through the keyhole and one or two cracks, was enough for his eyes to see her plainly, all black, down on her knees, with her head and arms flung on the foot of the bed—all black in the desolation of a mourning sinner. What was this? A suspicion that there were everywhere more things than he could understand crossed Heyst's mind. Her arm, detached from the bed, motioned him away. He obeyed, and went out, full of disquiet.

The curtain behind him had not ceased to tremble when she was up on her feet, close against it, listening for sounds, for words, in a stooping, tragic attitude of stealthy attention, one hand clutching at her breast as if to compress, to make less loud the beating of her heart. Heyst had caught Mr. Jones's secretary in the contemplation of his closed writing-desk. Ricardo might have been meditating how to break into it; but when he turned about suddenly, he showed so distorted a face that it made Heyst pause in wonder at the upturned whites of the eyes, which were blinking horribly, as if the man were inwardly convulsed.

"I thought you were never coming," Ricardo mumbled.

"I didn't know you were pressed for time. Even if your going away depends on this conversation, as you say, I doubt if you are the men to put to sea on such a night as this," said Heyst, motioning Ricardo to precede him out of the house.

With feline undulations of hip and shoulder, the secretary left the room at once. There was something cruel in the absolute dumbness of the night. The great cloud covering half the sky hung right against one, like an enormous curtain hiding menacing preparations of violence. As the feet of the two men touched the ground, a rumble came from behind it, preceded by a swift, mysterious gleam of light on the waters of the bay.

"Ha!" said Ricardo. "It begins."

"It may be nothing in the end," observed Heyst, stepping along steadily.

"No! Let it come!" Ricardo said viciously. "I am in the humour for it!"

By the time the two men had reached the other bungalow, the far-off modulated rumble growled incessantly, while pale lightning in waves of cold fire flooded and ran off the island in rapid succession. Ricardo, unexpectedly, dashed ahead up the steps and put his head through the doorway.

"Here he is, governor! Keep him with you as long as you can—till you hear me whistle. I am on the track."

He flung these words into the room with inconceivable speed, and stood aside to let the visitor pass through the doorway; but he had to wait an appreciable moment, because Heyst, seeing his purpose, had scornfully slowed his pace. When Heyst entered the room it was with a smile, the Heyst smile, lurking under his martial moustache.