

## CHAPTER THREE

To Ricardo the girl had been so unforeseen that he was unable to bring upon her the light of his critical faculties. Her smile appeared to him full of promise. He had not expected her to be what she was. Who, from the talk he had heard, could expect to meet a girl like this? She was a blooming miracle, he said to himself, familiarly, yet with a tinge of respect. She was no meat for the likes of that tame, respectable gin-slinger. Ricardo grew hot with indignation. Her courage, her physical strength, demonstrated at the cost of his discomfiture, commanded his sympathy. He felt himself drawn to her by the proofs of her amazing spirit. Such a girl! She had a strong soul; and her reflective disposition to throw over her connection proved that she was no hypocrite.

“Is your gentleman a good shot?” he said, looking down on the floor again, as if indifferent.

She hardly understood the phrase; but in its form it suggested some accomplishment. It was safe to whisper an affirmative.

“Yes.”

“Mine, too—and better than good,” Ricardo murmured, and then, in a confidential burst: “I am not so good at it, but I carry a pretty deadly thing about me, all the same!”

He tapped his leg. She was past the stage of shudders now. Stiff all over, unable even to move her eyes, she felt an awful mental tension which was like blank forgetfulness. Ricardo tried to influence her in his own way.

“And my gentleman is not the sort that would drop me. He ain't no foreigner; whereas you, with your baron, you don't know what's before you—or, rather, being a woman, you know only too well. Much better not to wait for the chuck. Pile in with us and get your share—of the plunder, I mean. You have some notion about it already.”

She felt that if she as much as hinted by word or sign that there was no such thing on the island, Heyst's life wouldn't be worth half an hour's purchase; but all power of combining words had vanished in the tension of her mind. Words themselves were too difficult to think of—all except the word “yes,” the saving word! She whispered it with not a feature of her face moving. To Ricardo the faint and concise sound proved a cool, reserved assent, more worth having from that amazing mistress of herself than a thousand words from any other woman. He thought with exultation that he had come upon one in a million—in ten millions! His whisper became frankly entreating.

“That's good! Now all you've got to do is to make sure where he keeps his swag. Only do be quick about it! I can't stand much longer this crawling-on-the-

stomach business so as not to scare your gentleman. What do you think a fellow is—a reptile?”

She stared without seeing anyone, as a person in the night sits staring and listening to deadly sounds, to evil incantations. And always in her head there was that tension of the mind trying to get hold of something, of a saving idea which seemed to be so near and could not be captured. Suddenly she seized it. Yes—she had to get that man out of the house. At that very moment, raised outside, not very near, but heard distinctly, Heyst's voice uttered the words:

“Have you been looking out for me, Wang?”

It was for her like a flash of lightning framed in the darkness which had beset her on all sides, showing a deadly precipice right under her feet. With a convulsive movement she sat up straight, but had no power to rise. Ricardo, on the contrary, was on his feet on the instant, as noiseless as a cat. His yellow eyes gleamed, gliding here and there; but he too seemed unable to make another movement. Only his moustaches stirred visibly, like the feelers of some animal.

Wang's answer, “Ya tuan,” was heard by the two in the room, but more faintly. Then Heyst again:

“All right! You may bring the coffee in. Mem Putih out in the room yet?”

To this question Wang made no answer.

Ricardo's and the girl's eyes met, utterly without expression, all their faculties being absorbed in listening for the first sound of Heyst's footsteps, for any sound outside which would mean that Ricardo's retreat was cut off. Both understood perfectly well that Wang must have gone round the house, and that he was now at the back, making it impossible for Ricardo to slip out unseen that way before Heyst came in at the front.

A darkling shade settled on the face of the devoted secretary. Here was the business utterly spoiled! It was the gloom of anger, and even of apprehension. He would perhaps have made a dash for it through the back door, if Heyst had not been heard ascending the front steps. He climbed them slowly, very slowly, like a man who is discouraged or weary—or simply thoughtful; and Ricardo had a mental vision of his face, with its martial moustache, the lofty forehead, the impassive features, and the quiet, meditative eyes. Trapped! Confound it! After all, perhaps the governor was right. Women had to be shunned. Fooling with this one had apparently ruined the whole business. For, trapped as he was he might just as well kill, since, anyhow, to be seen was to be unmasked. But he was too fair-minded to be angry with the girl.

Heyst had paused on the veranda, or in the very doorway.

“I shall be shot down like a dog if I ain't quick,” Ricardo muttered excitedly to the girl.

He stooped to get hold of his knife; and the next moment would have hurled himself out through the curtain, nearly, as prompt and fully as deadly to Heyst as an unexpected thunderbolt. The feel more than the strength of the girl's hand, clutching at his shoulder, checked him. He swung round, crouching with a yellow upward glare. Ah! Was she turning against him?

He would have stuck his knife into the hollow of her bare throat if he had not seen her other hand pointing to the window. It was a long opening, high up, close under the ceiling almost, with a single pivoting shutter.

While he was still looking at it she moved noiselessly away, picking up the overturned chair, and placed it under the wall. Then she looked round; but he didn't need to be beckoned to. In two long, tiptoeing strides he was at her side.

“Be quick!” she gasped.

He seized her hand and wrung it with all the force of his dumb gratitude, as a man does to a chum when there is no time for words. Then he mounted the chair. Ricardo was short—too short to get over without a noisy scramble. He hesitated an instant; she, watchful, bore rigidly on the seat with her beautiful bare arms, while, light and sure, he used the back of the chair as a ladder. The masses of her brown hair fell all about her face.

Footsteps resounded in the next room, and Heyst's voice, not very loud, called her by name.

“Lena!”

“Yes! In a minute,” she answered with a particular intonation which she knew would prevent Heyst from coming in at once.

When she looked up, Ricardo had vanished, letting himself down outside so lightly that she had not heard the slightest noise. She stood up then, bewildered, frightened, as if awakened from a drugged sleep, with heavy, downcast, unseeing eyes, her fortitude tired out, her imagination as if dead within her and unable to keep her fear alive.

Heyst moved about aimlessly in the other room. This sound roused her exhausted wits. At once she began to think, hear, see; and what she saw—or rather recognized, for her eyes had been resting on it all the time—was Ricardo's straw slipper, lost in the scuffle, lying near the bath. She had just time to step forward and plant her foot on it when the curtains shook, and, pushed aside, disclosed Heyst in the doorway.

Out of the appeased enchantment of the senses she had found with him, like a sort of bewitched state, his danger brought a sensation of warmth to her breast. She felt something stir in there, something profound, like a new sort of life.

The room was in partial darkness, Ricardo having accidentally swung the pivoted shutter as he went out of the window. Heyst peered from the doorway.

“Why, you haven't done your hair yet,” he said.

“I won't stop to do it now. I shan't be long,” she replied steadily, and remained still, feeling Ricardo's slipper under the sole of her foot.

Heyst, with a movement of retreat, let the curtain drop slowly. On the instant she stooped for the slipper, and, with it in her hand, spun round wildly, looking for some hiding-place; but there was no such spot in the bare room. The chest, the leather bunk, a dress or two of hers hanging on pegs—there was no place where the merest hazard might not guide Heyst's hand at any moment. Her wildly roaming eyes were caught by the half-closed window. She ran to it, and by raising herself on her toes was able to reach the shutter with her fingertips. She pushed it square, stole back to the middle of the room, and, turning about, swung her arm, regulating the force of the throw so as not to let the slipper fly too far out and hit the edge of the overhanging eaves. It was a task of the nicest judgement for the muscles of those round arms, still quivering from the deadly wrestle with a man, for that brain, tense with the excitement of the situation and for the unstrung nerves flickering darkness before her eyes. At last the slipper left her hand. As soon as it passed the opening, it was out of her sight. She listened. She did not hear it strike anything; it just vanished, as if it had wings to fly on through the air. Not a sound! It had gone clear.

Her valiant arms hanging close against her side, she stood as if turned into stone. A faint whistle reached her ears. The forgetful Ricardo, becoming very much aware of his loss, had been hanging about in great anxiety, which was relieved by the appearance of the slipper flying from under the eaves; and now, thoughtfully, he had ventured a whistle to put her mind at ease.

Suddenly the girl reeled forward. She saved herself from a fall only by embracing with both arms one of the tall, roughly carved posts holding the mosquito net above the bed. For a long time she clung to it, with her forehead leaning against the wood. One side of her loosened sarong had slipped down as low as her hip. The long brown tresses of her hair fell in lank wisps, as if wet, almost black against her white body. Her uncovered flank, damp with the sweat of anguish and fatigue, gleamed coldly with the immobility of polished marble in the hot, diffused light falling through the window above her head—a dim reflection of the consuming, passionate blaze of sunshine outside, all aquiver with the effort to set the earth on fire, to burn it to ashes.