

CHAPTER TWELVE

On returning to the Heyst bungalow, rapid as if on wings, Ricardo found Lena waiting for him. She was dressed in black; and at once his uplifting exultation was replaced by an awed and quivering patience before her white face, before the immobility of her reposeful pose, the more amazing to him who had encountered the strength of her limbs and the indomitable spirit in her body. She had come out after Heyst's departure, and had sat down under the portrait to wait for the return of the man of violence and death. While lifting the curtain, she felt the anguish of her disobedience to her lover, which was soothed by a feeling she had known before—a gentle flood of penetrating sweetness. She was not automatically obeying a momentary suggestion, she was under influences more deliberate, more vague, and of greater potency. She had been prompted, not by her will, but by a force that was outside of her and more worthy. She reckoned upon nothing definite; she had calculated nothing. She saw only her purpose of capturing death—savage, sudden, irresponsible death, prowling round the man who possessed her, death embodied in the knife ready to strike into his heart. No doubt it had been a sin to throw herself into his arms. With that inspiration that descends at times from above for the good or evil of our common mediocrity, she had a sense of having been for him only a violent and sincere choice of curiosity and pity—a thing that passes. She did not know him. If he were to go away from her and disappear, she would utter no reproach, she would not resent it; for she would hold in herself the impress of something most rare and precious—his embraces made her own by her courage in saving his life.

All she thought of—the essence of her tremors, her flushes of heat, and her shudders of cold—was the question how to get hold of that knife, the mark and sign of stalking death. A tremor of impatience to clutch the frightful thing, glimpsed once and unforgettable, agitated her hands.

The instinctive flinging forward of these hands stopped Ricardo dead short between the door and her chair, with the ready obedience of a conquered man who can bide his time. Her success disconcerted her. She listened to the man's impassioned transports of terrible eulogy and even more awful declarations of love. She was even able to meet his eyes, oblique, apt to glide away, throwing feral gleams of desire.

“No!” he was saying, after a fiery outpouring of words in which the most ferocious phrases of love were mingled with wooing accents of entreaty. “I will have no more of it! Don't you mistrust me. I am sober in my talk. Feel how quietly my heart beats. Ten times today when you, you, you, swam in my eye, I thought it would burst one of my ribs or leap out of my throat. It has knocked

itself dead and tired, waiting for this evening, for this very minute. And now it can do no more. Feel how quiet it is!”

He made a step forward, but she raised her clear voice commandingly:

“No nearer!”

He stopped with a smile of imbecile worship on his lips, and with the delighted obedience of a man who could at any moment seize her in his hands and dash her to the ground.

“Ah! If I had taken you by the throat this morning and had my way with you, I should never have known what you are. And now I do. You are a wonder! And so am I, in my way. I have nerve, and I have brains, too. We should have been lost many times but for me. I plan—I plot for my gentleman. Gentleman—pah! I am sick of him. And you are sick of yours, eh? You, you!”

He shook all over; he cooed at her a string of endearing names, obscene and tender, and then asked abruptly:

“Why don't you speak to me?”

“It's my part to listen,” she said, giving him an inscrutable smile, with a flush on her cheek and her lips cold as ice.

“But you will answer me?”

“Yes,” she said, her eyes dilated as if with sudden interest.

“Where's that plunder? Do you know?”

“No! Not yet.”

“But there is plunder stowed somewhere that's worth having?”

“Yes, I think so. But who knows?” she added after a pause.

“And who cares?” he retorted recklessly. “I've had enough of this crawling on my belly. It's you who are my treasure. It's I who found you out where a gentleman had buried you to rot for his accursed pleasure!”

He looked behind him and all around for a seat, then turned to her his troubled eyes and dim smile.

“I am dog-tired,” he said, and sat down on the floor. “I went tired this morning, since I came in here and started talking to you—as tired as if I had been pouring my life-blood here on these planks for you to dabble your white feet in.”

Unmoved, she nodded at him thoughtfully. Woman-like, all her faculties remained concentrated on her heart's desire—on the knife—while the man went on babbling insanely at her feet, ingratiating and savage, almost crazy with elation. But he, too, was holding on to his purpose.

“For you! For you I will throw away money, lives—all the lives but mine! What you want is a man, a master that will let you put the heel of your shoe on his neck; not that skulker, who will get tired of you in a year—and you of him.

And then what? You are not the one to sit still; neither am I. I live for myself, and you shall live for yourself, too—not for a Swedish baron. They make a convenience of people like you and me. A gentleman is better than an employer, but an equal partnership against all the 'yporcrits is the thing for you and me. We'll go on wandering the world over, you and I both free and both true. You are no cage bird. We'll rove together, for we are of them that have no homes. We are born rovers!”

She listened to him with the utmost attention, as if any unexpected word might give her some sort of opening to get that dagger, that awful knife—to disarm murder itself, pleading for her love at her feet. Again she nodded at him thoughtfully, rousing a gleam in his yellow eyes, yearning devotedly upon her face. When he hitched himself a little closer, her soul had no movement of recoil. This had to be. Anything had to be which would bring the knife within her reach. He talked more confidentially now.

“We have met, and their time has come,” he began, looking up into her eyes. “The partnership between me and my gentleman has to be ripped up. There's no room for him where we two are. Why, he would shoot me like a dog! Don't you worry. This will settle it not later than tonight!”

He tapped his folded leg below the knee, and was surprised, flattered, by the lighting up of her face, which stooped towards him eagerly and remained expectant, the lips girlishly parted, red in the pale face, and quivering in the quickened drawing of her breath.

“You marvel, you miracle, you man's luck and joy—one in a million! No, the only one. You have found your man in me,” he whispered tremulously. “Listen! They are having their last talk together; for I'll do for your gentleman, too, by midnight.”

Without the slightest tremor she murmured, as soon as the tightening of her breast had eased off and the words would come:

“I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry—with him.”

The pause, the tone, had all the value of meditated advice.

“Good, thrifty girl!” he laughed low, with a strange feline gaiety, expressed by the undulating movement of his shoulders and the sparkling snap of his oblique eyes. “You are still thinking about the chance of that swag. You'll make a good partner, that you will! And, I say, what a decoy you will make! Jee-miny!”

He was carried away for a moment, but his face darkened swiftly.

“No! No reprieve. What do you think a fellow is—a scarecrow? All hat and clothes and no feeling, no inside, no brain to make fancies for himself? No!” he went on violently. “Never in his life will he go again into that room of yours—never any more!”

A silence fell. He was gloomy with the torment of his jealousy, and did not even look at her. She sat up and slowly, gradually, bent lower and lower over him, as if ready to fall into his arms. He looked up at last, and checked this droop unwittingly.

“Say! You, who are up to fighting a man with your bare hands, could you—eh?—could you manage to stick one with a thing like that knife of mine?”

She opened her eyes very wide and gave him a wild smile.

“How can I tell?” she whispered enchantingly. “Will you let me have a look at it?”

Without taking his eyes from her face, he pulled the knife out of its sheath—a short, broad, cruel double-edged blade with a bone handle—and only then looked down at it.

“A good friend,” he said simply. “Take it in your hand and feel the balance,” he suggested.

At the moment when she bent forward to receive it from him, there was a flash of fire in her mysterious eyes—a red gleam in the white mist which wrapped the promptings and longings of her soul. She had done it! The very sting of death was in her hands, the venom of the viper in her paradise, extracted, safe in her possession—and the viper's head all but lying under her heel. Ricardo, stretched on the mats of the floor, crept closer and closer to the chair in which she sat.

All her thoughts were busy planning how to keep possession of that weapon which had seemed to have drawn into itself every danger and menace on the death-ridden earth. She said with a low laugh, the exultation in which he failed to recognize:

“I didn't think that you would ever trust me with that thing!”

“Why not?”

“For fear I should suddenly strike you with it.”

“What for? For this morning's work? Oh, no! There's no spite in you for that. You forgave me. You saved me. You got the better of me, too. And anyhow, what good would it be?”

“No, no good,” she admitted.

In her heart she felt that she would not know how to do it; that if it came to a struggle, she would have to drop the dagger and fight with her hands.

“Listen. When we are going about the world together, you shall always call me husband. Do you hear?”

“Yes,” she said bracing herself for the contest, in whatever shape it was coming.

The knife was lying in her lap. She let it slip into the fold of her dress, and laid her forearms with clasped fingers over her knees, which she pressed desperately together. The dreaded thing was out of sight at last. She felt a dampness break out all over her.

“I am not going to hide you, like that good-for-nothing, finicky, sneery gentleman. You shall be my pride and my chum. Isn't that better than rotting on an island for the pleasure of a gentleman, till he gives you the chuck?”

“I'll be anything you like,” she said.

In his intoxication he crept closer with every word she uttered, with every movement she made.

“Give your foot,” he begged in a timid murmur, and in the full consciousness of his power.

Anything! Anything to keep murder quiet and disarmed till strength had returned to her limbs and she could make up her mind what to do. Her fortitude had been shaken by the very facility of success that had come to her. She advanced her foot forward a little from under the hem of her skirt; and he threw himself on it greedily. She was not even aware of him. She had thought of the forest, to which she had been told to run. Yes, the forest—that was the place for her to carry off the terrible spoil, the sting of vanquished death. Ricardo, clasp ing her ankle, pressed his lips time after time to the instep, muttering gasping words that were like sobs, making little noises that resembled the sounds of grief and distress. Unheard by them both, the thunder growled distantly with angry modulations of its tremendous voice, while the world outside shuddered incessantly around the dead stillness of the room where the framed profile of Heyst's father looked severely into space.

Suddenly Ricardo felt himself spurned by the foot he had been cherishing—spurned with a push of such violence into the very hollow of his throat that it swung him back instantly into an upright position on his knees. He read his danger in the stony eyes of the girl; and in the very act of leaping to his feet he heard sharply, detached on the comminatory voice of the storm the brief report of a shot which half stunned him, in the manner of a blow. He turned his burning head, and saw Heyst towering in the doorway. The thought that the beggar had started to prance darted through his mind. For a fraction of a second his distracted eyes sought for his weapon all over the floor. He couldn't see it.

“Stick him, you!” he called hoarsely to the girl, and dashed headlong for the door of the compound.

While he thus obeyed the instinct of self-preservation, his reason was telling him that he could not possibly reach it alive. It flew open, however, with a crash, before his launched weight, and instantly he swung it to behind him. There, his shoulder leaning against it, his hands clinging to the handle, dazed and alone in

the night full of shudders and muttered menaces, he tried to pull himself together. He asked himself if he had been shot at more than once. His shoulder was wet with the blood trickling from his head. Feeling above his ear, he ascertained that it was only a graze, but the shock of the surprise had unmanned him for the moment.

What the deuce was the governor about to let the beggar break loose like this? Or—was the governor dead, perhaps?

The silence within the room awed him. Of going back there could be no question.

“But she knows how to take care of her self,” he muttered.

She had his knife. It was she now who was deadly, while he was disarmed, no good for the moment. He stole away from the door, staggering, the warm trickle running down his neck, to find out what had become of the governor and to provide himself with a firearm from the armoury in the trunks.