

CHAPTER TWO

The clock—which once upon a time had measured the hours of philosophic meditation—could not have ticked away more than five seconds when Wang materialized within the living-room. His concern primarily was with the delayed breakfast, but at once his slanting eyes became immovably fixed upon the unstirring curtain. For it was behind it that he had located the strange, deadened scuffling sounds which filled the empty room. The slanting eyes of his race could not achieve a round, amazed stare, but they remained still, dead still, and his impassive yellow face grew all at once careworn and lean with the sudden strain of intense, doubtful, frightened watchfulness. Contrary impulses swayed his body, rooted to the floor-mats. He even went so far as to extend his hand towards the curtain. He could not reach it, and he didn't make the necessary step forward.

The mysterious struggle was going on with confused thuds of bare feet, in a mute wrestling match, no human sound, hiss, groan, murmur, or exclamation coming through the curtain. A chair fell over, not with a crash but lightly, as if just grazed, and a faint metallic ring of the tin bath succeeded. Finally the tense silence, as of two adversaries locked in a deadly grip, was ended by the heavy, dull thump of a soft body flung against the inner partition of planks. It seemed to shake the whole bungalow. By that time, walking backward, his eyes, his very throat, strained with fearful excitement, his extended arm still pointing at the curtain, Wang had disappeared through the back door. Once out in the compound, he bolted round the end of the house. Emerging innocently between the two bungalows he lingered and lounged in the open, where anybody issuing from any of the dwellings was bound to see him—a self-possessed Chinaman idling there, with nothing but perhaps an unserved breakfast on his mind.

It was at this time that Wang made up his mind to give up all connection with Number One, a man not only disarmed but already half vanquished. Till that morning he had had doubts as to his course of action, but this overheard scuffle decided the question. Number One was a doomed man—one of those beings whom it is unlucky to help. Even as he walked in the open with a fine air of unconcern, Wang wondered that no sound of any sort was to be heard inside the house. For all he knew, the white woman might have been scuffling in there with an evil spirit, which had of course killed her. For nothing visible came out of the house he watched out of the slanting corner of his eye. The sunshine and the silence outside the bungalow reigned undisturbed.

But in the house the silence of the big room would not have struck an acute ear as perfect. It was troubled by a stir so faint that it could hardly be called a ghost of whispering from behind the curtain.

Ricardo, feeling his throat with tender care, breathed out admiringly:

“You have fingers like steel. Jimminy! You have muscles like a giant!”

Luckily for Lena, Ricardo's onset had been so sudden—she was winding her two heavy tresses round her head—that she had no time to lower her arms. This, which saved them from being pinned to her sides, gave her a better chance to resist. His spring had nearly thrown her down. Luckily, again, she was standing so near the wall that, though she was driven against it headlong, yet the shock was not heavy enough to knock all the breath out of her body. On the contrary, it helped her first instinctive attempt to drive her assailant backward.

After the first gasp of a surprise that was really too over-powering for a cry, she was never in doubt of the nature of her danger. She defended herself in the full, clear knowledge of it, from the force of instinct which is the true source of every great display of energy, and with a determination which could hardly have been expected from a girl who, cornered in a dim corridor by the red-faced, stammering Schomberg, had trembled with shame, disgust, and fear; had drooped, terrified, before mere words spluttered out odiously by a man who had never in his life laid his big paw on her.

This new enemy's attack was simple, straightforward violence. It was not the slimy, underhand plotting to deliver her up like a slave, which had sickened her heart and had made her feel in her loneliness that her oppressors were too many for her. She was no longer alone in the world now. She resisted without a moment of faltering, because she was no longer deprived of moral support; because she was a human being who counted; because she was no longer defending herself for herself alone; because of the faith that had been born in her—the faith in the man of her destiny, and perhaps in the Heaven which had sent him so wonderfully to cross her path.

She had defended herself principally by maintaining a desperate, murderous clutch on Ricardo's windpipe, till she felt a sudden relaxation of the terrific hug in which he stupidly and ineffectually persisted to hold her. Then with a supreme effort of her arms and of her suddenly raised knee, she sent him flying against the partition. The cedar-wood chest stood in the way, and Ricardo, with a thump which boomed hollow through the whole bungalow, fell on it in a sitting posture, half strangled, and exhausted not so much by the efforts as by the emotions of the struggle.

With the recoil of her exerted strength, she too reeled, staggered back, and sat on the edge of the bed. Out of breath, but calm and unabashed, she busied herself in readjusting under her arms the brown and yellow figured Celebes sarong, the tuck of which had come undone during the fight. Then, folding her bare arms tightly on her breast, she leaned forward on her crossed legs, determined and without fear.

Ricardo, leaning forward too, his nervous force gone, crestfallen like a beast of prey that has missed its spring, met her big grey eyes looking at him—wide open, observing, mysterious—from under the dark arches of her courageous eyebrows. Their faces were not a foot apart. He ceased feeling about his aching throat and dropped the palms of his hands heavily on his knees. He was not looking at her bare shoulders, at her strong arms; he was looking down at the floor. He had lost one of his straw slippers. A chair with a white dress on it had been overturned. These, with splashes of water on the floor out of a brusquely misplaced sponge-bath, were the only traces of the struggle.

Ricardo swallowed twice consciously, as if to make sure of his throat before he spoke again:

“All right. I never meant to hurt you—though I am no joker when it comes to it.”

He pulled up the leg of his pyjamas to exhibit the strapped knife. She glanced at it without moving her head, and murmured with scornful bitterness:

“Ah, yes—with that thing stuck in my side. In no other way.”

He shook his head with a shamefaced smile.

“Listen! I am quiet now. Straight—I am. I don't need to explain why—you know how it is. And I can see, now, this wasn't the way with you.”

She made no sound. Her still, upward gaze had a patient, mournfulness which troubled him like a suggestion of an inconceivable depth. He added thoughtfully:

“You are not going to make a noise about this silly try of mine?”

She moved her head the least bit.

“Jee-miny! You are a wonder—” he murmured earnestly, relieved more than she could have guessed.

Of course, if she had attempted to run out, he would have stuck the knife between her shoulders, to stop her screaming; but all the fat would have been in the fire, the business utterly spoiled, and the rage of the governor—especially when he learned the cause—boundless. A woman that does not make a noise after an attempt of that kind has tacitly condoned the offence. Ricardo had no small vanities. But clearly, if she would pass it over like this, then he could not be so utterly repugnant to her. He felt flattered. And she didn't seem afraid of him either. He already felt almost tender towards the girl—that plucky, fine girl who had not tried to run screaming from him.

“We shall be friends yet. I don't give you up. Don't think it. Friends as friends can be!” he whispered confidently. “Jee-miny! You aren't a tame one. Neither am I. You will find that out before long.”

He could not know that if she had not run out, it was because that morning, under the stress of growing uneasiness at the presence of the incomprehensible

visitors, Heyst had confessed to her that it was his revolver he had been looking for in the night; that it was gone, that he was a disarmed, defenceless man. She had hardly comprehended the meaning of his confession. Now she understood better what it meant. The effort of her self-control, her stillness, impressed Ricardo. Suddenly she spoke:

“What are you after?”

He did not raise his eyes. His hands reposing on his knees, his drooping head, something reflective in his pose, suggested the weariness of a simple soul, the fatigue of a mental rather than physical contest. He answered the direct question by a direct statement, as if he were too tired to dissemble:

“After the swag.”

The word was strange to her. The veiled ardour of her grey gaze from under the dark eyebrows never left Ricardo's.

“A swag?” she murmured quietly. “What's that?”

“Why, swag, plunder—what your gentleman has been pinching right and left for years—the pieces. Don't you know? This!”

Without looking up, he made the motion of counting money into the palm of his hand. She lowered her eyes slightly to observe this bit of pantomime, but returned them to his face at once. Then, in a mere breath:

“How do you know anything about him?” she asked, concealing her puzzled alarm. “What has it got to do with you?”

“Everything,” was Ricardo's concise answer, in a low, emphatic whisper. He reflected that this girl was really his best hope. Out of the unfaded impression of past violence there was growing the sort of sentiment which prevents a man from being indifferent to a woman he has once held in his arms—if even against her will—and still more so if she has pardoned the outrage. It becomes then a sort of bond. He felt positively the need to confide in her—a subtle trait of masculinity, this almost physical need of trust which can exist side by side with the most brutal readiness of suspicion.

“It's a game of grab—see?” he went on, with a new inflection of intimacy in his murmur. He was looking straight at her now.

“That fat, tame slug of a gin-slinger, Schomberg, put us up to it.”

So strong is the impression of helpless and persecuted misery, that the girl who had fought down a savage assault without faltering could not completely repress a shudder at the mere sound of the abhorred name.

Ricardo became more rapid and confidential:

“He wants to pay him off—pay both of you, at that; so he told me. He was hot after you. He would have given all he had into those hands of yours that have

nearly strangled me. But you couldn't, eh? Nohow—what?" He paused. "So, rather than—you followed a gentleman?"

He noticed a slight movement of her head and spoke quickly.

"Same here—rather than be a wage-slave. Only these foreigners aren't to be trusted. You're too good for him. A man that will rob his best chum?" She raised her head. He went on, well pleased with his progress, whispering hurriedly: "Yes. I know all about him. So you may guess how he's likely to treat a woman after a bit!"

He did not know that he was striking terror into her breast now. Still the grey eyes remained fixed on him unmovably watchful, as if sleepy under the white forehead. She was beginning to understand. His words conveyed a definite, dreadful meaning to her mind, which he proceeded to enlighten further in a convinced murmur.

"You and I are made to understand each other. Born alike, bred alike, I guess. You are not tame. Same here! You have been chucked out into this rotten world of 'yporcrits. Same here!"

Her stillness, her appalled stillness, wore to him an air of fascinated attention. He asked abruptly:

"Where is it?"

She made an effort to breathe out:

"Where's what?"

His tone expressed excited secrecy.

"The swag—plunder—pieces. It's a game of grab. We must have it; but it isn't easy, and so you will have to lend a hand. Come! is it kept in the house?"

As often with women, her wits were sharpened by the very terror of the glimpsed menace. She shook her head negatively.

"No."

"Sure?"

"Sure," she said.

"Ay! Thought so. Does your gentleman trust you?"

Again she shook her head.

"Blamed 'yporcrit," he said feelingly, and then reflected: "He's one of the tame ones, ain't he?"

"You had better find out for yourself," she said.

"You trust me. I don't want to die before you and I have made friends." This was said with a strange air of feline gallantry. Then, tentatively: "But he could be brought to trust you, couldn't he?"

“Trust me?” she said, in a tone which bordered on despair, but which he mistook for derision.

“Stand in with us,” he urged. “Give the chuck to all this blamed 'yporcrisy. Perhaps, without being trusted, you have managed to find out something already, eh?”

“Perhaps I have,” she uttered with lips that seemed to her to be freezing fast.

Ricardo now looked at her calm face with something like respect. He was even a little awed by her stillness, by her economy of words. Womanlike, she felt the effect she had produced, the effect of knowing much and of keeping all her knowledge in reserve. So far, somehow, this had come, about of itself. Thus encouraged, directed in the way of duplicity, the refuge of the weak, she made a heroically conscious effort and forced her stiff, cold lips into a smile.

Duplicity—the refuge of the weak and the cowardly, but of the disarmed, too! Nothing stood between the enchanted dream of her existence and a cruel catastrophe but her duplicity. It seemed to her that the man sitting there before her was an unavoidable presence, which had attended all her life. He was the embodied evil of the world. She was not ashamed of her duplicity. With a woman's frank courage, as soon as she saw that opening she threw herself into it without reserve, with only one doubt—that of her own strength. She was appalled by the situation; but already all her aroused femininity, understanding that whether Heyst loved her or not she loved him, and feeling that she had brought this on his head, faced the danger with a passionate desire to defend her own.