

PART FOUR

CHAPTER ONE

Ricardo advanced prudently by short darts from one tree-trunk to another, more in the manner of a squirrel than a cat. The sun had risen some time before. Already the sparkle of open sea was encroaching rapidly on the dark, cool, early-morning blue of Diamond Bay; but the deep dusk lingered yet under the mighty pillars of the forest, between which the secretary dodged.

He was watching Number One's bungalow with an animal-like patience, if with a very human complexity of purpose. This was the second morning of such watching. The first one had not been rewarded by success. Well, strictly speaking, there was no hurry.

The sun, swinging above the ridge all at once, inundated with light the space of burnt grass in front of Ricardo and the face of the bungalow, on which his eyes were fixed, leaving only the one dark spot of the doorway. To his right, to his left, and behind him, splashes of gold appeared in the deep shade of the forest, thinning the gloom under the ragged roof of leaves.

This was not a very favourable circumstance for Ricardo's purpose. He did not wish to be detected in his patient occupation. For what he was watching for was a sight of the girl—that girl! just a glimpse across the burnt patch to see what she was like. He had excellent eyes, and the distance was not so great. He would be able to distinguish her face quite easily if she only came out on the veranda; and she was bound to do that sooner or later. He was confident that he could form some opinion about her—which, he felt, was very necessary, before venturing on some steps to get in touch with her behind that Swedish baron's back. His theoretical view of the girl was such that he was quite prepared, on the strength of that distant examination, to show himself discreetly—perhaps even make a sign. It all depended on his reading of the face. She couldn't be much. He knew that sort!

By protruding his head a little he commanded, through the foliage of a festooning creeper, a view of the three bungalows. Irregularly disposed along a flat curve, over the veranda rail of the farthest one hung a dark rug of a tartan pattern, amazingly conspicuous. Ricardo could see the very checks. A brisk fire of sticks was burning on the ground in front of the steps, and in the sunlight the thin, fluttering flame had paled almost to invisibility—a mere rosy stir under a

faint wreath of smoke. He could see the white bandage on the head of Pedro bending over it, and the wisps of black hair standing up weirdly. He had wound that bandage himself, after breaking that shaggy and enormous head. The creature balanced it like a load, staggering towards the steps. Ricardo could see a small, long-handled saucepan at the end of a great hairy paw.

Yes, he could see all that there was to be seen, far and near. Excellent eyes! The only thing they could not penetrate was the dark oblong of the doorway on the veranda under the low eaves of the bungalow's roof. And that was vexing. It was an outrage. Ricardo was easily outraged. Surely she would come out presently! Why didn't she? Surely the fellow did not tie her up to the bedpost before leaving the house!

Nothing appeared. Ricardo was as still as the leafy cables of creepers depending in a convenient curtain from the mighty limb sixty feet above his head. His very eyelids were still, and this unblinking watchfulness gave him the dreamy air of a cat posed on a hearth-rug contemplating the fire. Was he dreaming? There, in plain sight, he had before him a white, blouse-like jacket, short blue trousers, a pair of bare yellow calves, a pigtail, long and slender—

“The confounded Chink!” he muttered, astounded.

He was not conscious of having looked away; and yet right there, in the middle of the picture, without having come round the right-hand corner or the left-hand corner of the house, without falling from the sky or surging up from the ground, Wang had become visible, large as life, and engaged in the young-ladyish occupation of picking flowers. Step by step, stooping repeatedly over the flower-beds at the foot of the veranda, the startlingly materialized Chinaman passed off the scene in a very commonplace manner, by going up the steps and disappearing in the darkness of the doorway.

Only then the yellow eyes of Martin Ricardo lost their intent fixity. He understood that it was time for him to be moving. That bunch of flowers going into the house in the hand of a Chinaman was for the breakfast-table. What else could it be for?

“I'll give you flowers!” he muttered threateningly. “You wait!”

Another moment, just for a glance towards the Jones bungalow, whence he expected Heyst to issue on his way to that breakfast so offensively decorated, and Ricardo began his retreat. His impulse, his desire, was for a rush into the open, face to face with the appointed victim, for what he called a “ripping up,” visualized greedily, and always with the swift preliminary stooping movement on his part—the forerunner of certain death to his adversary. This was his impulse; and as it was, so to speak, constitutional, it was extremely difficult to resist when his blood was up. What could be more trying than to have to skulk and dodge and restrain oneself, mentally and physically, when one's blood was up? Mr.

Secretary Ricardo began his retreat from his post of observation behind a tree opposite Heyst's bungalow, using great care to remain unseen. His proceedings were made easier by the declivity of the ground, which sloped sharply down to the water's edge. There, his feet feeling the warmth of the island's rocky foundation already heated by the sun, through the thin soles of his straw slippers he was, as it were, sunk out of sight of the houses. A short scramble of some twenty feet brought him up again to the upper level, at the place where the jetty had its root in the shore. He leaned his back against one of the lofty uprights which still held up the company's signboard above the mound of derelict coal. Nobody could have guessed how much his blood was up. To contain himself he folded his arms tightly on his breast.

Ricardo was not used to a prolonged effort of self-control. His craft, his artfulness, felt themselves always at the mercy of his nature, which was truly feral and only held in subjection by the influence of the "governor," the prestige of a gentleman. It had its cunning too, but it was being almost too severely tried since the feral solution of a growl and a spring was forbidden by the problem. Ricardo dared not venture out on the cleared ground. He dared not.

"If I meet the beggar," he thought, "I don't know what I mayn't do. I daren't trust myself."

What exasperated him just now was his inability to understand Heyst. Ricardo was human enough to suffer from the discovery of his limitations. No, he couldn't size Heyst up. He could kill him with extreme ease—a growl and a spring—but that was forbidden! However, he could not remain indefinitely under the funereal blackboard.

"I must make a move," he thought.

He moved on, his head swimming a little with the repressed desire of violence, and came out openly in front of the bungalows, as if he had just been down to the jetty to look at the boat. The sunshine enveloped him, very brilliant, very still, very hot. The three buildings faced him. The one with the rug on the balustrade was the most distant; next to it was the empty bungalow; the nearest, with the flower-beds at the foot of its veranda, contained that bothersome girl, who had managed so provokingly to keep herself invisible. That was why Ricardo's eyes lingered on that building. The girl would surely be easier to "size up" than Heyst. A sight of her, a mere glimpse, would have been something to go by, a step nearer to the goal—the first real move, in fact. Ricardo saw no other move. And any time she might appear on that veranda!

She did not appear; but, like a concealed magnet, she exercised her attraction. As he went on, he deviated towards the bungalow. Though his movements were deliberate, his feral instincts had such sway that if he had met Heyst walking towards him, he would have had to satisfy his need of violence. But he saw

nobody. Wang was at the back of the house, keeping the coffee hot against Number One's return for breakfast. Even the simian Pedro was out of sight, no doubt crouching on the door-step, his red little eyes fastened with animal-like devotion on Mr. Jones, who was in discourse with Heyst in the other bungalow—the conversation of an evil spectre with a disarmed man, watched by an ape.

His will having very little to do with it, Ricardo, darting swift glances in all directions, found himself at the steps of the Heyst bungalow. Once there, falling under an uncontrollable force of attraction, he mounted them with a savage and stealthy action of his limbs, and paused for a moment under the eaves to listen to the silence. Presently he advanced over the threshold one leg—it seemed to stretch itself, like a limb of india-rubber—planted his foot within, brought up the other swiftly, and stood inside the room, turning his head from side to side. To his eyes, brought in there from the dazzling sunshine, all was gloom for a moment. His pupils, like a cat's, dilating swiftly, he distinguished an enormous quantity of books. He was amazed; and he was put off too. He was vexed in his astonishment. He had meant to note the aspect and nature of things, and hoped to draw some useful inference, some hint as to the man. But what guess could one make out of a multitude of books? He didn't know what to think; and he formulated his bewilderment in the mental exclamation:

“What the devil has this fellow been trying to set up here—a school?”

He gave a prolonged stare to the portrait of Heyst's father, that severe profile ignoring the vanities of this earth. His eyes gleamed sideways at the heavy silver candlesticks—signs of opulence. He prowled as a stray cat entering a strange place might have done, for if Ricardo had not Wang's miraculous gift of materializing and vanishing, rather than coming and going, he could be nearly as noiseless in his less elusive movements. He noted the back door standing just ajar; and all the time his slightly pointed ears, at the utmost stretch of watchfulness, kept in touch with the profound silence outside enveloping the absolute stillness of the house.

He had not been in the room two minutes when it occurred to him that he must be alone in the bungalow. The woman, most likely, had sneaked out and was walking about somewhere in the grounds at the back. She had been probably ordered to keep out of sight. Why? Because the fellow mistrusted his guests; or was it because he mistrusted *her*?

Ricardo reflected that from a certain point of view it amounted nearly to the same thing. He remembered Schomberg's story. He felt that running away with somebody only to get clear of that beastly, tame, hotel-keeper's attention was no proof of hopeless infatuation. She could be got in touch with.

His moustaches stirred. For some time he had been looking at a closed door. He would peep into that other room, and perhaps see something more informing than a confounded lot of books. As he crossed over, he thought recklessly:

“If the beggar comes in suddenly, and starts to prance, I'll rip him up and be done with it!”

He laid his hand on the handle, and felt the door come unlatched. Before he pulled it open, he listened again to the silence. He felt it all about him, complete, without a flaw.

The necessity of prudence had exasperated his self-restraint. A mood of ferocity woke up in him, and, as always at such times, he became physically aware of the sheeted knife strapped to his leg. He pulled at the door with fierce curiosity. It came open without a squeak of hinge, without a rustle, with no sound at all; and he found himself glaring at the opaque surface of some rough blue stuff, like serge. A curtain was fitted inside, heavy enough and long enough not to stir.

A curtain! This unforeseen veil, baffling his curiosity checked his brusqueness. He did not fling it aside with an impatient movement; he only looked at it closely, as if its texture had to be examined before his hand could touch such stuff. In this interval of hesitation, he seemed to detect a flaw in the perfection of the silence, the faintest possible rustle, which his ears caught and instantly, in the effort of conscious listening, lost again. No! Everything was still inside and outside the house, only he had no longer the sense of being alone there.

When he put out his hand towards the motionless folds it was with extreme caution, and merely to push the stuff aside a little, advancing his head at the same time to peep within. A moment of complete immobility ensued. Then, without anything else of him stirring, Ricardo's head shrank back on his shoulders, his arm descended slowly to his side. There was a woman in there. The very woman! Lighted dimly by the reflection of the outer glare, she loomed up strangely big and shadowy at the other end of the long, narrow room. With her back to the door, she was doing her hair with bare arms uplifted. One of them gleamed pearly white; the other detached its perfect form in black against the unshuttered, uncurtained square window-hole. She was there, her fingers busy with her dark hair, utterly unconscious, exposed and defenceless—and tempting.

Ricardo drew back one foot and pressed his elbows close to his sides; his chest started heaving convulsively as if he were wrestling or running a race; his body began to sway gently back and forth. The self-restraint was at an end: his psychology must have its way. The instinct for the feral spring could no longer be denied. Ravish or kill—it was all one to him, as long as by the act he liberated the suffering soul of savagery repressed for so long. After a quick glance over his shoulder, which hunters of big game tell us no lion or tiger omits to give before

charging home, Ricardo charged, head down, straight at the curtain. The stuff, tossed up violently by his rush, settled itself with a slow, floating descent into vertical folds, motionless, without a shudder even, in the still, warm air.