

PART I. THE MAN AND THE BRIG

The shallow sea that foams and murmurs on the shores of the thousand islands, big and little, which make up the Malay Archipelago has been for centuries the scene of adventurous undertakings. The vices and the virtues of four nations have been displayed in the conquest of that region that even to this day has not been robbed of all the mystery and romance of its past--and the race of men who had fought against the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch and the English, has not been changed by the unavoidable defeat. They have kept to this day their love of liberty, their fanatical devotion to their chiefs, their blind fidelity in friendship and hate--all their lawful and unlawful instincts. Their country of land and water--for the sea was as much their country as the earth of their islands--has fallen a prey to the western race--the reward of superior strength if not of superior virtue. To-morrow the advancing civilization will obliterate the marks of a long struggle in the accomplishment of its inevitable victory.

The adventurers who began that struggle have left no descendants. The ideas of the world changed too quickly for that. But even far into the present century they have had successors. Almost in our own day we have seen one of them--a true adventurer in his devotion to his impulse--a man of high mind and of pure heart, lay the foundation of a flourishing state on the ideas of pity and justice. He recognized chivalrously the claims of the conquered; he was a disinterested adventurer, and the reward of his noble instincts is in the veneration with which a strange and faithful race cherish his memory.

Misunderstood and traduced in life, the glory of his achievement has vindicated the purity of his motives. He belongs to history. But there were others--obscure adventurers who had not his advantages of birth, position, and intelligence; who had only his sympathy with the people of forests and sea he understood and loved so well. They can not be said to be forgotten since they have not been known at all. They were lost in the common crowd of seamen-traders of the Archipelago, and if they emerged from their obscurity it was only to be condemned as law-breakers. Their lives were thrown away for a cause that had no right to exist in the face of an irresistible and orderly progress--their thoughtless lives guided by a simple feeling.

But the wasted lives, for the few who know, have tinged with romance the region of shallow waters and forest-clad islands, that lies far east, and still mysterious between the deep waters of two oceans.

I

Out of the level blue of a shallow sea Carimata raises a lofty barrenness of grey and yellow tints, the drab eminence of its arid heights. Separated by a narrow strip of water, Suroeton, to the west, shows a curved and ridged outline resembling the backbone of a stooping giant. And to the eastward a troop of insignificant islets stand effaced, indistinct, with vague features that seem to melt into the gathering shadows. The night following from the eastward the retreat of the setting sun advanced slowly, swallowing the land and the sea; the land broken, tormented and abrupt; the sea smooth and inviting with its easy polish of continuous surface to wanderings facile and endless.

There was no wind, and a small brig that had lain all the afternoon a few miles to the northward and westward of Carimata had hardly altered its position half a mile during all these hours. The calm was absolute, a dead, flat calm, the stillness of a dead sea and of a dead atmosphere. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing but an impressive immobility. Nothing moved on earth, on the waters, and above them in the unbroken lustre of the sky. On the unruffled surface of the straits the brig floated tranquil and upright as if bolted solidly, keel to keel, with its own image reflected in the unframed and immense mirror of the sea. To the south and east the double islands watched silently the double ship that seemed fixed amongst them forever, a hopeless captive of the calm, a helpless prisoner of the shallow sea.

Since midday, when the light and capricious airs of these seas had abandoned the little brig to its lingering fate, her head had swung slowly to the westward and the end of her slender and polished jib-boom, projecting boldly beyond the graceful curve of the bow, pointed at the setting sun, like a spear poised high in the hand of an enemy. Right aft by the wheel the Malay quartermaster stood with his bare, brown feet firmly planted on the wheel-grating, and holding the spokes at right angles, in a solid grasp, as though the ship had been running before a gale. He stood there perfectly motionless, as if petrified but ready to tend the helm as soon as fate would permit the brig to gather way through the oily sea.

The only other human being then visible on the brig's deck was the person in charge: a white man of low stature, thick-set, with shaven cheeks, a grizzled moustache, and a face tinted a scarlet hue by the burning suns and by the sharp salt breezes of the seas. He had thrown off his light jacket, and clad only in white trousers and a thin cotton singlet, with his stout arms crossed on his breast--upon which they showed like two thick lumps of raw flesh--he prowled about from side to side of the half-poop. On his bare feet he wore a pair of straw

sandals, and his head was protected by an enormous pith hat--once white but now very dirty--which gave to the whole man the aspect of a phenomenal and animated mushroom. At times he would interrupt his uneasy shuffle athwart the break of the poop, and stand motionless with a vague gaze fixed on the image of the brig in the calm water. He could also see down there his own head and shoulders leaning out over the rail and he would stand long, as if interested by his own features, and mutter vague curses on the calm which lay upon the ship like an immovable burden, immense and burning.

At last, he sighed profoundly, nerved himself for a great effort, and making a start away from the rail managed to drag his slippers as far as the binnacle. There he stopped again, exhausted and bored. From under the lifted glass panes of the cabin skylight near by came the feeble chirp of a canary, which appeared to give him some satisfaction. He listened, smiled faintly muttered "Dicky, poor Dick--" and fell back into the immense silence of the world. His eyes closed, his head hung low over the hot brass of the binnacle top. Suddenly he stood up with a jerk and said sharply in a hoarse voice:

"You've been sleeping--you. Shift the helm. She has got stern way on her."

The Malay, without the least flinch of feature or pose, as if he had been an inanimate object called suddenly into life by some hidden magic of the words, spun the wheel rapidly, letting the spokes pass through his hands; and when the motion had stopped with a grinding noise, caught hold again and held on grimly. After a while, however, he turned his head slowly over his shoulder, glanced at the sea, and said in an obstinate tone:

"No catch wind--no get way."

"No catch--no catch--that's all you know about it," growled the red-faced seaman. "By and by catch Ali--" he went on with sudden condescension. "By and by catch, and then the helm will be the right way. See?"

The stolid seacannie appeared to see, and for that matter to hear, nothing. The white man looked at the impassive Malay with disgust, then glanced around the horizon--then again at the helmsman and ordered curtly:

"Shift the helm back again. Don't you feel the air from aft? You are like a dummy standing there."

The Malay revolved the spokes again with disdainful obedience, and the red-faced man was moving forward grunting to himself, when through the open skylight the hail "On deck there!" arrested him short, attentive, and with a sudden change to

amiability in the expression of his face.

"Yes, sir," he said, bending his ear toward the opening. "What's the matter up there?" asked a deep voice from below.

The red-faced man in a tone of surprise said:

"Sir?"

"I hear that rudder grinding hard up and hard down. What are you up to, Shaw? Any wind?"

"Ye-es," drawled Shaw, putting his head down the skylight and speaking into the gloom of the cabin. "I thought there was a light air, and--but it's gone now. Not a breath anywhere under the heavens."

He withdrew his head and waited a while by the skylight, but heard only the chirping of the indefatigable canary, a feeble twittering that seemed to ooze through the drooping red blossoms of geraniums growing in flower-pots under the glass panes. He strolled away a step or two before the voice from down below called hurriedly:

"Hey, Shaw? Are you there?"

"Yes, Captain Lingard," he answered, stepping back. "Have we drifted anything this afternoon?"

"Not an inch, sir, not an inch. We might as well have been at anchor."

"It's always so," said the invisible Lingard. His voice changed its tone as he moved in the cabin, and directly afterward burst out with a clear intonation while his head appeared above the slide of the cabin entrance:

"Always so! The currents don't begin till it's dark, when a man can't see against what confounded thing he is being drifted, and then the breeze will come. Dead on end, too, I don't doubt."

Shaw moved his shoulders slightly. The Malay at the wheel, after making a dive to see the time by the cabin clock through the skylight, rang a double stroke on the small bell aft. Directly forward, on the main deck, a shrill whistle arose long drawn, modulated, dying away softly. The master of the brig stepped out of the companion upon the deck of his vessel, glanced aloft at the yards laid dead square; then, from the door-step, took a long, lingering look round the horizon.

He was about thirty-five, erect and supple. He moved freely, more like a man accustomed to stride over plains and hills, than like one who from his earliest youth had been used to counteract by sudden swayings of his body the rise and roll of cramped decks of small craft, tossed by the caprice of angry or playful seas.

He wore a grey flannel shirt, and his white trousers were held by a blue silk scarf wound tightly round his narrow waist. He had come up only for a moment, but finding the poop shaded by the main-topsail he remained on deck bareheaded. The light chestnut hair curled close about his well-shaped head, and the clipped beard glinted vividly when he passed across a narrow strip of sunlight, as if every hair in it had been a wavy and attenuated gold wire. His mouth was lost in the heavy moustache; his nose was straight, short, slightly blunted at the end; a broad band of deeper red stretched under the eyes, clung to the cheek bones. The eyes gave the face its remarkable expression. The eyebrows, darker than the hair, pencilled a straight line below the wide and unwrinkled brow much whiter than the sunburnt face. The eyes, as if glowing with the light of a hidden fire, had a red glint in their greyness that gave a scrutinizing ardour to the steadiness of their gaze.

That man, once so well known, and now so completely forgotten amongst the charming and heartless shores of the shallow sea, had amongst his fellows the nickname of "Red-Eyed Tom." He was proud of his luck but not of his good sense. He was proud of his brig, of the speed of his craft, which was reckoned the swiftest country vessel in those seas, and proud of what she represented.

She represented a run of luck on the Victorian goldfields; his sagacious moderation; long days of planning, of loving care in building; the great joy of his youth, the incomparable freedom of the seas; a perfect because a wandering home; his independence, his love--and his anxiety. He had often heard men say that Tom Lingard cared for nothing on earth but for his brig--and in his thoughts he would smilingly correct the statement by adding that he cared for nothing living but the brig.

To him she was as full of life as the great world. He felt her live in every motion, in every roll, in every sway of her tapering masts, of those masts whose painted trucks move forever, to a seaman's eye, against the clouds or against the stars. To him she was always precious--like old love; always desirable--like a strange woman; always tender--like a mother; always faithful--like the favourite daughter of a man's heart.

For hours he would stand elbow on rail, his head in his hand and listen--and

listen in dreamy stillness to the cajoling and promising whisper of the sea, that slipped past in vanishing bubbles along the smooth black-painted sides of his craft. What passed in such moments of thoughtful solitude through the mind of that child of generations of fishermen from the coast of Devon, who like most of his class was dead to the subtle voices, and blind to the mysterious aspects of the world--the man ready for the obvious, no matter how startling, how terrible or menacing, yet defenceless as a child before the shadowy impulses of his own heart; what could have been the thoughts of such a man, when once surrendered to a dreamy mood, it is difficult to say.

No doubt he, like most of us, would be uplifted at times by the awakened lyricism of his heart into regions charming, empty, and dangerous. But also, like most of us, he was unaware of his barren journeys above the interesting cares of this earth. Yet from these, no doubt absurd and wasted moments, there remained on the man's daily life a tinge as that of a glowing and serene half-light. It softened the outlines of his rugged nature; and these moments kept close the bond between him and his brig.

He was aware that his little vessel could give him something not to be had from anybody or anything in the world; something specially his own. The dependence of that solid man of bone and muscle on that obedient thing of wood and iron, acquired from that feeling the mysterious dignity of love. She--the craft--had all the qualities of a living thing: speed, obedience, trustworthiness, endurance, beauty, capacity to do and to suffer--all but life. He--the man--was the inspirer of that thing that to him seemed the most perfect of its kind. His will was its will, his thought was its impulse, his breath was the breath of its existence. He felt all this confusedly, without ever shaping this feeling into the soundless formulas of thought. To him she was unique and dear, this brig of three hundred and fourteen tons register--a kingdom!

And now, bareheaded and burly, he walked the deck of his kingdom with a regular stride. He stepped out from the hip, swinging his arms with the free motion of a man starting out for a fifteen-mile walk into open country; yet at every twelfth stride he had to turn about sharply and pace back the distance to the taffrail.

Shaw, with his hands stuck in his waistband, had hooked himself with both elbows to the rail, and gazed apparently at the deck between his feet. In reality he was contemplating a little house with a tiny front garden, lost in a maze of riverside streets in the east end of London. The circumstance that he had not, as yet, been able to make the acquaintance of his son--now aged eighteen months--worried him slightly, and was the cause of that flight of his fancy into the murky atmosphere of his home. But it was a placid flight followed by a quick return. In

less than two minutes he was back in the brig. "All there," as his saying was. He was proud of being always "all there."

He was abrupt in manner and grumpy in speech with the seamen. To his successive captains, he was outwardly as deferential as he knew how, and as a rule inwardly hostile--so very few seemed to him of the "all there" kind. Of Lingard, with whom he had only been a short time--having been picked up in Madras Roads out of a home ship, which he had to leave after a thumping row with the master--he generally approved, although he recognized with regret that this man, like most others, had some absurd fads; he defined them as "bottom-upwards notions."

He was a man--as there were many--of no particular value to anybody but himself, and of no account but as the chief mate of the brig, and the only white man on board of her besides the captain. He felt himself immeasurably superior to the Malay seamen whom he had to handle, and treated them with lofty toleration, notwithstanding his opinion that at a pinch those chaps would be found emphatically "not there."

As soon as his mind came back from his home leave, he detached himself from the rail and, walking forward, stood by the break of the poop, looking along the port side of the main deck. Lingard on his own side stopped in his walk and also gazed absentmindedly before him. In the waist of the brig, in the narrow spars that were lashed on each side of the hatchway, he could see a group of men squatting in a circle around a wooden tray piled up with rice, which stood on the just swept deck. The dark-faced, soft-eyed silent men, squatting on their hams, fed decorously with an earnestness that did not exclude reserve.

Of the lot, only one or two wore sarongs, the others having submitted--at least at sea--to the indignity of European trousers. Only two sat on the spars. One, a man with a childlike, light yellow face, smiling with fatuous imbecility under the wisps of straight coarse hair dyed a mahogany tint, was the tindal of the crew--a kind of boatswain's or serang's mate. The other, sitting beside him on the booms, was a man nearly black, not much bigger than a large ape, and wearing on his wrinkled face that look of comical truculence which is often characteristic of men from the southwestern coast of Sumatra.

This was the kassab or store-keeper, the holder of a position of dignity and ease. The kassab was the only one of the crew taking their evening meal who noticed the presence on deck of their commander. He muttered something to the tindal who directly cocked his old hat on one side, which senseless action invested him with an altogether foolish appearance. The others heard, but went on somnolently feeding with spidery movements of their lean arms.

The sun was no more than a degree or so above the horizon, and from the heated surface of the waters a slight low mist began to rise; a mist thin, invisible to the human eye; yet strong enough to change the sun into a mere glowing red disc, a disc vertical and hot, rolling down to the edge of the horizontal and cold-looking disc of the shining sea. Then the edges touched and the circular expanse of water took on suddenly a tint, sombre, like a frown; deep, like the brooding meditation of evil.

The falling sun seemed to be arrested for a moment in his descent by the sleeping waters, while from it, to the motionless brig, shot out on the polished and dark surface of the sea a track of light, straight and shining, resplendent and direct; a path of gold and crimson and purple, a path that seemed to lead dazzling and terrible from the earth straight into heaven through the portals of a glorious death. It faded slowly. The sea vanquished the light. At last only a vestige of the sun remained, far off, like a red spark floating on the water. It lingered, and all at once--without warning--went out as if extinguished by a treacherous hand.

"Gone," cried Lingard, who had watched intently yet missed the last moment. "Gone! Look at the cabin clock, Shaw!"

"Nearly right, I think, sir. Three minutes past six."

The helmsman struck four bells sharply. Another barefooted seacannie glided on the far side of the poop to relieve the wheel, and the serang of the brig came up the ladder to take charge of the deck from Shaw. He came up to the compass, and stood waiting silently.

"The course is south by east when you get the wind, serang," said Shaw, distinctly.

"Sou' by eas'," repeated the elderly Malay with grave earnestness.

"Let me know when she begins to steer," added Lingard.

"Ya, Tuan," answered the man, glancing rapidly at the sky. "Wind coming," he muttered.

"I think so, too," whispered Lingard as if to himself.

The shadows were gathering rapidly round the brig. A mulatto put his head out of the companion and called out:

"Ready, sir."

"Let's get a mouthful of something to eat, Shaw," said Lingard. "I say, just take a look around before coming below. It will be dark when we come up again."

"Certainly, sir," said Shaw, taking up a long glass and putting it to his eyes. "Blessed thing," he went on in snatches while he worked the tubes in and out, "I can't--never somehow--Ah! I've got it right at last!"

He revolved slowly on his heels, keeping the end of the tube on the sky-line. Then he shut the instrument with a click, and said decisively:

"Nothing in sight, sir."

He followed his captain down below rubbing his hands cheerfully.

For a good while there was no sound on the poop of the brig. Then the seacannie at the wheel spoke dreamily:

"Did the malim say there was no one on the sea?"

"Yes," grunted the serang without looking at the man behind him.

"Between the islands there was a boat," pronounced the man very softly.

The serang, his hands behind his back, his feet slightly apart, stood very straight and stiff by the side of the compass stand. His face, now hardly visible, was as inexpressive as the door of a safe.

"Now, listen to me," insisted the helmsman in a gentle tone.

The man in authority did not budge a hair's breadth. The seacannie bent down a little from the height of the wheel grating.

"I saw a boat," he murmured with something of the tender obstinacy of a lover begging for a favour. "I saw a boat, O Haji Wasub! Ya! Haji Wasub!"

The serang had been twice a pilgrim, and was not insensible to the sound of his rightful title. There was a grim smile on his face.

"You saw a floating tree, O Sali," he said, ironically.

"I am Sali, and my eyes are better than the bewitched brass thing that pulls out

to a great length," said the pertinacious helmsman. "There was a boat, just clear of the easternmost island. There was a boat, and they in her could see the ship on the light of the west--unless they are blind men lost on the sea. I have seen her. Have you seen her, too, O Haji Wasub?"

"Am I a fat white man?" snapped the serang. "I was a man of the sea before you were born, O Sali! The order is to keep silence and mind the rudder, lest evil befall the ship."

After these words he resumed his rigid aloofness. He stood, his legs slightly apart, very stiff and straight, a little on one side of the compass stand. His eyes travelled incessantly from the illuminated card to the shadowy sails of the brig and back again, while his body was motionless as if made of wood and built into the ship's frame. Thus, with a forced and tense watchfulness, Haji Wasub, serang of the brig Lightning, kept the captain's watch unwearied and wakeful, a slave to duty.

In half an hour after sunset the darkness had taken complete possession of earth and heavens. The islands had melted into the night. And on the smooth water of the Straits, the little brig lying so still, seemed to sleep profoundly, wrapped up in a scented mantle of star light and silence.