II

It was half-past eight o'clock before Lingard came on deck again. Shaw--now with a coat on--trotted up and down the poop leaving behind him a smell of tobacco smoke. An irregularly glowing spark seemed to run by itself in the darkness before the rounded form of his head. Above the masts of the brig the dome of the clear heaven was full of lights that flickered, as if some mighty breathings high up there had been swaying about the flame of the stars. There was no sound along the brig's decks, and the heavy shadows that lay on it had the aspect, in that silence, of secret places concealing crouching forms that waited in perfect stillness for some decisive event. Lingard struck a match to light his cheroot, and his powerful face with narrowed eyes stood out for a moment in the night and vanished suddenly. Then two shadowy forms and two red sparks moved backward and forward on the poop. A larger, but a paler and oval patch of light from the compass lamps lay on the brasses of the wheel and on the breast of the Malay standing by the helm. Lingard's voice, as if unable altogether to master the enormous silence of the sea, sounded muffled, very calm--without the usual deep ring in it.

"Not much change, Shaw," he said.

"No, sir, not much. I can just see the island--the big one--still in the same place. It strikes me, sir, that, for calms, this here sea is a devil of locality."

He cut "locality" in two with an emphatic pause. It was a good word. He was pleased with himself for thinking of it. He went on again:

"Now--since noon, this big island--"

"Carimata, Shaw," interrupted Lingard.

"Aye, sir; Carimata--I mean. I must say--being a stranger hereabouts--I haven't got the run of those--"

He was going to say "names" but checked himself and said, "appellations," instead, sounding every syllable lovingly.

"Having for these last fifteen years," he continued, "sailed regularly from London in East-Indiamen, I am more at home over there--in the Bay."

He pointed into the night toward the northwest and stared as if he could see from

where he stood that Bay of Bengal where--as he affirmed--he would be so much more at home.

"You'll soon get used--" muttered Lingard, swinging in his rapid walk past his mate. Then he turned round, came back, and asked sharply.

"You said there was nothing afloat in sight before dark? Hey?"

"Not that I could see, sir. When I took the deck again at eight, I asked that serang whether there was anything about; and I understood him to say there was no more as when I went below at six. This is a lonely sea at times--ain't it, sir? Now, one would think at this time of the year the homeward-bounders from China would be pretty thick here."

"Yes," said Lingard, "we have met very few ships since we left Pedra Branca over the stern. Yes; it has been a lonely sea. But for all that, Shaw, this sea, if lonely, is not blind. Every island in it is an eye. And now, since our squadron has left for the China waters--"

He did not finish his sentence. Shaw put his hands in his pockets, and propped his back against the sky-light, comfortably.

"They say there is going to be a war with China," he said in a gossiping tone, "and the French are going along with us as they did in the Crimea five years ago. It seems to me we're getting mighty good friends with the French. I've not much of an opinion about that. What do you think, Captain Lingard?"

"I have met their men-of-war in the Pacific," said Lingard, slowly. "The ships were fine and the fellows in them were civil enough to me--and very curious about my business," he added with a laugh. "However, I wasn't there to make war on them. I had a rotten old cutter then, for trade, Shaw," he went on with animation.

"Had you, sir?" said Shaw without any enthusiasm. "Now give me a big ship--a ship, I say, that one may--"

"And later on, some years ago," interrupted Lingard, "I chummed with a French skipper in Ampanam--being the only two white men in the whole place. He was a good fellow, and free with his red wine. His English was difficult to understand, but he could sing songs in his own language about ah-moor--Ah-moor means love, in French--Shaw."

"So it does, sir--so it does. When I was second mate of a Sunderland barque, in forty-one, in the Mediterranean, I could pay out their lingo as easy as you would

a five-inch warp over a ship's side--"

"Yes, he was a proper man," pursued Lingard, meditatively, as if for himself only. "You could not find a better fellow for company ashore. He had an affair with a Bali girl, who one evening threw a red blossom at him from within a doorway, as we were going together to pay our respects to the Rajah's nephew. He was a good-looking Frenchman, he was--but the girl belonged to the Rajah's nephew, and it was a serious matter. The old Rajah got angry and said the girl must die. I don't think the nephew cared particularly to have her krissed; but the old fellow made a great fuss and sent one of his own chief men to see the thing done--and the girl had enemies--her own relations approved! We could do nothing. Mind, Shaw, there was absolutely nothing else between them but that unlucky flower which the Frenchman pinned to his coat--and afterward, when the girl was dead, wore under his shirt, hung round his neck in a small box. I suppose he had nothing else to put it into."

"Would those savages kill a woman for that?" asked Shaw, incredulously.

"Aye! They are pretty moral there. That was the first time in my life I nearly went to war on my own account, Shaw. We couldn't talk those fellows over. We couldn't bribe them, though the Frenchman offered the best he had, and I was ready to back him to the last dollar, to the last rag of cotton, Shaw! No use--they were that blamed respectable. So, says the Frenchman to me: 'My friend, if they won't take our gunpowder for a gift let us burn it to give them lead.' I was armed as you see now; six eight-pounders on the main deck and a long eighteen on the forecastle--and I wanted to try 'em. You may believe me! However, the Frenchman had nothing but a few old muskets; and the beggars got to windward of us by fair words, till one morning a boat's crew from the Frenchman's ship found the girl lying dead on the beach. That put an end to our plans. She was out of her trouble anyhow, and no reasonable man will fight for a dead woman. I was never vengeful, Shaw, and--after all--she didn't throw that flower at me. But it broke the Frenchman up altogether. He began to mope, did no business, and shortly afterward sailed away. I cleared a good many pence out of that trip, I remember."

With these words he seemed to come to the end of his memories of that trip. Shaw stifled a yawn.

"Women are the cause of a lot of trouble," he said, dispassionately. "In the Morayshire, I remember, we had once a passenger--an old gentleman--who was telling us a yarn about them old-time Greeks fighting for ten years about some woman. The Turks kidnapped her, or something. Anyway, they fought in Turkey; which I may well believe. Them Greeks and Turks were always fighting. My father was master's mate on board one of the three-deckers at the battle of Navarino--

and that was when we went to help those Greeks. But this affair about a woman was long before that time."

"I should think so," muttered Lingard, hanging over the rail, and watching the fleeting gleams that passed deep down in the water, along the ship's bottom.

"Yes. Times are changed. They were unenlightened in those old days. My grandfather was a preacher and, though my father served in the navy, I don't hold with war. Sinful the old gentleman called it--and I think so, too. Unless with Chinamen, or niggers, or such people as must be kept in order and won't listen to reason; having not sense enough to know what's good for them, when it's explained to them by their betters--missionaries, and such like au-tho-ri-ties. But to fight ten years. And for a woman!"

"I have read the tale in a book," said Lingard, speaking down over the side as if setting his words gently afloat upon the sea. "I have read the tale. She was very beautiful."

"That only makes it worse, sir--if anything. You may depend on it she was no good. Those pagan times will never come back, thank God. Ten years of murder and unrighteousness! And for a woman! Would anybody do it now? Would you do it, sir? Would you--"

The sound of a bell struck sharply interrupted Shaw's discourse. High aloft, some dry block sent out a screech, short and lamentable, like a cry of pain. It pierced the quietness of the night to the very core, and seemed to destroy the reserve which it had imposed upon the tones of the two men, who spoke now loudly.

"Throw the cover over the binnacle," said Lingard in his duty voice. "The thing shines like a full moon. We mustn't show more lights than we can help, when becalmed at night so near the land. No use in being seen if you can't see yourself--is there? Bear that in mind, Mr. Shaw. There may be some vagabonds prying about--"

"I thought all this was over and done for," said Shaw, busying himself with the cover, "since Sir Thomas Cochrane swept along the Borneo coast with his squadron some years ago. He did a rare lot of fighting--didn't he? We heard about it from the chaps of the sloop Diana that was refitting in Calcutta when I was there in the Warwick Castle. They took some king's town up a river hereabouts. The chaps were full of it."

"Sir Thomas did good work," answered Lingard, "but it will be a long time before these seas are as safe as the English Channel is in peace time. I spoke about that

light more to get you in the way of things to be attended to in these seas than for anything else. Did you notice how few native craft we've sighted for all these days we have been drifting about--one may say--in this sea?"

"I can't say I have attached any significance to the fact, sir."

"It's a sign that something is up. Once set a rumour afloat in these waters, and it will make its way from island to island, without any breeze to drive it along."

"Being myself a deep-water man sailing steadily out of home ports nearly all my life," said Shaw with great deliberation, "I cannot pretend to see through the peculiarities of them out-of-the-way parts. But I can keep a lookout in an ordinary way, and I have noticed that craft of any kind seemed scarce, for the last few days: considering that we had land aboard of us--one side or another--nearly every day."

"You will get to know the peculiarities, as you call them, if you remain any time with me," remarked Lingard, negligently.

"I hope I shall give satisfaction, whether the time be long or short!" said Shaw, accentuating the meaning of his words by the distinctness of his utterance. "A man who has spent thirty-two years of his life on saltwater can say no more. If being an officer of home ships for the last fifteen years I don't understand the heathen ways of them there savages, in matters of seamanship and duty, you will find me all there, Captain Lingard."

"Except, judging from what you said a little while ago--except in the matter of fighting," said Lingard, with a short laugh.

"Fighting! I am not aware that anybody wants to fight me. I am a peaceable man, Captain Lingard, but when put to it, I could fight as well as any of them flat-nosed chaps we have to make shift with, instead of a proper crew of decent Christians. Fighting!" he went on with unexpected pugnacity of tone, "Fighting! If anybody comes to fight me, he will find me all there, I swear!"

"That's all right. That's all right," said Lingard, stretching his arms above his head and wriggling his shoulders. "My word! I do wish a breeze would come to let us get away from here. I am rather in a hurry, Shaw."

"Indeed, sir! Well, I never yet met a thorough seafaring man who was not in a hurry when a con-demned spell of calm had him by the heels. When a breeze comes . . . just listen to this, sir!"

"I hear it," said Lingard. "Tide-rip, Shaw."

"So I presume, sir. But what a fuss it makes. Seldom heard such a--"

On the sea, upon the furthest limits of vision, appeared an advancing streak of seething foam, resembling a narrow white ribbon, drawn rapidly along the level surface of the water by its two ends, which were lost in the darkness. It reached the brig, passed under, stretching out on each side; and on each side the water became noisy, breaking into numerous and tiny wavelets, a mimicry of an immense agitation. Yet the vessel in the midst of this sudden and loud disturbance remained as motionless and steady as if she had been securely moored between the stone walls of a safe dock. In a few moments the line of foam and ripple running swiftly north passed at once beyond sight and earshot, leaving no trace on the unconquerable calm.

"Now this is very curious--" began Shaw.

Lingard made a gesture to command silence. He seemed to listen yet, as if the wash of the ripple could have had an echo which he expected to hear. And a man's voice that was heard forward had something of the impersonal ring of voices thrown back from hard and lofty cliffs upon the empty distances of the sea. It spoke in Malay--faintly.

"What?" hailed Shaw. "What is it?"

Lingard put a restraining hand for a moment on his chief officer's shoulder, and moved forward smartly. Shaw followed, puzzled. The rapid exchange of incomprehensible words thrown backward and forward through the shadows of the brig's main deck from his captain to the lookout man and back again, made him feel sadly out of it, somehow.

Lingard had called out sharply--"What do you see?" The answer direct and quick was--"I hear, Tuan. I hear oars."

"Whereabouts?"

"The night is all around us. I hear them near."

"Port or starboard?"

There was a short delay in answer this time. On the quarter-deck, under the poop, bare feet shuffled. Somebody coughed. At last the voice forward said doubtfully:

"Kanan."

"Call the serang, Mr. Shaw," said Lingard, calmly, "and have the hands turned up. They are all lying about the decks. Look sharp now. There's something near us. It's annoying to be caught like this," he added in a vexed tone.

He crossed over to the starboard side, and stood listening, one hand grasping the royal back-stay, his ear turned to the sea, but he could hear nothing from there. The quarter-deck was filled with subdued sounds. Suddenly, a long, shrill whistle soared, reverberated loudly amongst the flat surfaces of motionless sails, and gradually grew faint as if the sound had escaped and gone away, running upon the water. Haji Wasub was on deck and ready to carry out the white man's commands. Then silence fell again on the brig, until Shaw spoke quietly.

"I am going forward now, sir, with the tindal. We're all at stations."

"Aye, Mr. Shaw. Very good. Mind they don't board you--but I can hear nothing. Not a sound. It can't be much."

"The fellow has been dreaming, no doubt. I have good ears, too, and--"

He went forward and the end of his sentence was lost in an indistinct growl. Lingard stood attentive. One by one the three seacannies off duty appeared on the poop and busied themselves around a big chest that stood by the side of the cabin companion. A rattle and clink of steel weapons turned out on the deck was heard, but the men did not even whisper. Lingard peered steadily into the night, then shook his head.

"Serang!" he called, half aloud.

The spare old man ran up the ladder so smartly that his bony feet did not seem to touch the steps. He stood by his commander, his hands behind his back; a figure indistinct but straight as an arrow.

"Who was looking out?" asked Lingard.

"Badroon, the Bugis," said Wasub, in his crisp, jerky manner.

"I can hear nothing. Badroon heard the noise in his mind."

"The night hides the boat."

"Have you seen it?"

"Yes, Tuan. Small boat. Before sunset. By the land. Now coming here--near. Badroon heard him."

"Why didn't you report it, then?" asked Lingard, sharply.

"Malim spoke. He said: 'Nothing there,' while I could see. How could I know what was in his mind or yours, Tuan?"

"Do you hear anything now?"

"No. They stopped now. Perhaps lost the ship--who knows? Perhaps afraid--"

"Well!" muttered Lingard, moving his feet uneasily. "I believe you lie. What kind of boat?"

"White men's boat. A four-men boat, I think. Small. Tuan, I hear him now! There!"

He stretched his arm straight out, pointing abeam for a time, then his arm fell slowly.

"Coming this way," he added with decision.

From forward Shaw called out in a startled tone:

"Something on the water, sir! Broad on this bow!"

"All right!" called back Lingard.

A lump of blacker darkness floated into his view. From it came over the water English words--deliberate, reaching him one by one; as if each had made its own difficult way through the profound stillness of the night.

"What--ship--is--that--pray?"

"English brig," answered Lingard, after a short moment of hesitation.

"A brig! I thought you were something bigger," went on the voice from the sea with a tinge of disappointment in its deliberate tone. "I am coming alongside--if--you--please."

"No! you don't!" called Lingard back, sharply. The leisurely drawl of the invisible

speaker seemed to him offensive, and woke up a hostile feeling. "No! you don't if you care for your boat. Where do you spring from? Who are you--anyhow? How many of you are there in that boat?"

After these emphatic questions there was an interval of silence. During that time the shape of the boat became a little more distinct. She must have carried some way on her yet, for she loomed up bigger and nearly abreast of where Lingard stood, before the self-possessed voice was heard again:

"I will show you."

Then, after another short pause, the voice said, less loud but very plain:

"Strike on the gunwale. Strike hard, John!" and suddenly a blue light blazed out, illuminating with a livid flame a round patch in the night. In the smoke and splutter of that ghastly halo appeared a white, four-oared gig with five men sitting in her in a row. Their heads were turned toward the brig with a strong expression of curiosity on their faces, which, in this glare, brilliant and sinister, took on a deathlike aspect and resembled the faces of interested corpses. Then the bowman dropped into the water the light he held above his head and the darkness, rushing back at the boat, swallowed it with a loud and angry hiss.

"Five of us," said the composed voice out of the night that seemed now darker than before. "Four hands and myself. We belong to a yacht--a British yacht--"

"Come on board!" shouted Lingard. "Why didn't you speak at once? I thought you might have been some masquerading Dutchmen from a dodging gunboat."

"Do I speak like a blamed Dutchman? Pull a stroke, boys--oars! Tend bow, John."

The boat came alongside with a gentle knock, and a man's shape began to climb at once up the brig's side with a kind of ponderous agility. It poised itself for a moment on the rail to say down into the boat--"Sheer off a little, boys," then jumped on deck with a thud, and said to Shaw who was coming aft: "Good evening . . . Captain, sir?"

"No. On the poop!" growled Shaw.

"Come up here. Come up," called Lingard, impatiently.

The Malays had left their stations and stood clustered by the mainmast in a silent group. Not a word was spoken on the brig's decks, while the stranger made his way to the waiting captain. Lingard saw approaching him a short, dapper man,

who touched his cap and repeated his greeting in a cool drawl:

"Good evening. . . Captain, sir?"

"Yes, I am the master--what's the matter? Adrift from your ship? Or what?"

"Adrift? No! We left her four days ago, and have been pulling that gig in a calm, nearly ever since. My men are done. So is the water. Lucky thing I sighted you."

"You sighted me!" exclaimed Lingard. "When? What time?"

"Not in the dark, you may be sure. We've been knocking about amongst some islands to the southward, breaking our hearts tugging at the oars in one channel, then in another--trying to get clear. We got round an islet--a barren thing, in shape like a loaf of sugar--and I caught sight of a vessel a long way off. I took her bearing in a hurry and we buckled to; but another of them currents must have had hold of us, for it was a long time before we managed to clear that islet. I steered by the stars, and, by the Lord Harry, I began to think I had missed you somehow--because it must have been you I saw."

"Yes, it must have been. We had nothing in sight all day," assented Lingard. "Where's your vessel?" he asked, eagerly.

"Hard and fast on middling soft mud--I should think about sixty miles from here. We are the second boat sent off for assistance. We parted company with the other on Tuesday. She must have passed to the northward of you to-day. The chief officer is in her with orders to make for Singapore. I am second, and was sent off toward the Straits here on the chance of falling in with some ship. I have a letter from the owner. Our gentry are tired of being stuck in the mud and wish for assistance."

"What assistance did you expect to find down here?"

"The letter will tell you that. May I ask, Captain, for a little water for the chaps in my boat? And I myself would thank you for a drink. We haven't had a mouthful since this afternoon. Our breaker leaked out somehow."

"See to it, Mr. Shaw," said Lingard. "Come down the cabin, Mr.--"

"Carter is my name."

"Ah! Mr. Carter. Come down, come down," went on Lingard, leading the way down the cabin stairs.

The steward had lighted the swinging lamp, and had put a decanter and bottles on the table. The cuddy looked cheerful, painted white, with gold mouldings round the panels. Opposite the curtained recess of the stern windows there was a sideboard with a marble top, and, above it, a looking-glass in a gilt frame. The semicircular couch round the stern had cushions of crimson plush. The table was covered with a black Indian tablecloth embroidered in vivid colours. Between the beams of the poop-deck were fitted racks for muskets, the barrels of which glinted in the light. There were twenty-four of them between the four beams. As many sword-bayonets of an old pattern encircled the polished teakwood of the rudder-casing with a double belt of brass and steel. All the doors of the state-rooms had been taken off the hinges and only curtains closed the doorways. They seemed to be made of yellow Chinese silk, and fluttered all together, the four of them, as the two men entered the cuddy.

Carter took in all at a glance, but his eyes were arrested by a circular shield hung slanting above the brass hilts of the bayonets. On its red field, in relief and brightly gilt, was represented a sheaf of conventional thunderbolts darting down the middle between the two capitals T. L. Lingard examined his guest curiously. He saw a young man, but looking still more youthful, with a boyish smooth face much sunburnt, twinkling blue eyes, fair hair and a slight moustache. He noticed his arrested gaze.

"Ah, you're looking at that thing. It's a present from the builder of this brig. The best man that ever launched a craft. It's supposed to be the ship's name between my initials--flash of lightning--d'you see? The brig's name is Lightning and mine is Lingard."

"Very pretty thing that: shows the cabin off well," murmured Carter, politely.

They drank, nodding at each other, and sat down.

"Now for the letter," said Lingard.

Carter passed it over the table and looked about, while Lingard took the letter out of an open envelope, addressed to the commander of any British ship in the Java Sea. The paper was thick, had an embossed heading: "Schooner-yacht Hermit" and was dated four days before. The message said that on a hazy night the yacht had gone ashore upon some outlying shoals off the coast of Borneo. The land was low. The opinion of the sailing-master was that the vessel had gone ashore at the top of high water, spring tides. The coast was completely deserted to all appearance. During the four days they had been stranded there they had sighted in the distance two small native vessels, which did not approach. The owner

concluded by asking any commander of a homeward-bound ship to report the yacht's position in Anjer on his way through Sunda Straits--or to any British or Dutch man-of-war he might meet. The letter ended by anticipatory thanks, the offer to pay any expenses in connection with the sending of messages from Anjer, and the usual polite expressions.

Folding the paper slowly in the old creases, Lingard said--"I am not going to Anjer--nor anywhere near."

"Any place will do, I fancy," said Carter.

"Not the place where I am bound to," answered Lingard, opening the letter again and glancing at it uneasily. "He does not describe very well the coast, and his latitude is very uncertain," he went on. "I am not clear in my mind where exactly you are stranded. And yet I know every inch of that land--over there."

Carter cleared his throat and began to talk in his slow drawl. He seemed to dole out facts, to disclose with sparing words the features of the coast, but every word showed the minuteness of his observation, the clear vision of a seaman able to master quickly the aspect of a strange land and of a strange sea. He presented, with concise lucidity, the picture of the tangle of reefs and sandbanks, through which the yacht had miraculously blundered in the dark before she took the ground.

"The weather seems clear enough at sea," he observed, finally, and stopped to drink a long draught. Lingard, bending over the table, had been listening with eager attention. Carter went on in his curt and deliberate manner:

"I noticed some high trees on what I take to be the mainland to the south--and whoever has business in that bight was smart enough to whitewash two of them: one on the point, and another farther in. Landmarks, I guess. . . . What's the matter, Captain?"

Lingard had jumped to his feet, but Carter's exclamation caused him to sit down again.

"Nothing, nothing . . . Tell me, how many men have you in that yacht?"

"Twenty-three, besides the gentry, the owner, his wife and a Spanish gentleman--a friend they picked up in Manila."

"So you were coming from Manila?"

"Aye. Bound for Batavia. The owner wishes to study the Dutch colonial system. Wants to expose it, he says. One can't help hearing a lot when keeping watch aft--you know how it is. Then we are going to Ceylon to meet the mail-boat there. The owner is going home as he came out, overland through Egypt. The yacht would return round the Cape, of course."

"A lady?" said Lingard. "You say there is a lady on board. Are you armed?"

"Not much," replied Carter, negligently. "There are a few muskets and two sporting guns aft; that's about all--I fancy it's too much, or not enough," he added with a faint smile.

Lingard looked at him narrowly.

"Did you come out from home in that craft?" he asked.

"Not I! I am not one of them regular yacht hands. I came out of the hospital in Hongkong. I've been two years on the China coast."

He stopped, then added in an explanatory murmur:

"Opium clippers--you know. Nothing of brass buttons about me. My ship left me behind, and I was in want of work. I took this job but I didn't want to go home particularly. It's slow work after sailing with old Robinson in the Ly-e-moon. That was my ship. Heard of her, Captain?"

"Yes, yes," said Lingard, hastily. "Look here, Mr. Carter, which way was your chief officer trying for Singapore? Through the Straits of Rhio?"

"I suppose so," answered Carter in a slightly surprised tone; "why do you ask?"

"Just to know . . . What is it, Mr. Shaw?"

"There's a black cloud rising to the northward, sir, and we shall get a breeze directly," said Shaw from the doorway.

He lingered there with his eyes fixed on the decanters.

"Will you have a glass?" said Lingard, leaving his seat. "I will go up and have a look."

He went on deck. Shaw approached the table and began to help himself, handling the bottles in profound silence and with exaggerated caution, as if he had been

measuring out of fragile vessels a dose of some deadly poison. Carter, his hands in his pockets, and leaning back, examined him from head to foot with a cool stare. The mate of the brig raised the glass to his lips, and glaring above the rim at the stranger, drained the contents slowly.

"You have a fine nose for finding ships in the dark, Mister," he said, distinctly, putting the glass on the table with extreme gentleness.

"Eh? What's that? I sighted you just after sunset."

"And you knew where to look, too," said Shaw, staring hard.

"I looked to the westward where there was still some light, as any sensible man would do," retorted the other a little impatiently. "What are you trying to get at?"

"And you have a ready tongue to blow about yourself--haven't you?"

"Never saw such a man in my life," declared Carter, with a return of his nonchalant manner. "You seem to be troubled about something."

"I don't like boats to come sneaking up from nowhere in particular, alongside a ship when I am in charge of the deck. I can keep a lookout as well as any man out of home ports, but I hate to be circumvented by muffled oars and such ungentlemanlike tricks. Yacht officer--indeed. These seas must be full of such yachtsmen. I consider you played a mean trick on me. I told my old man there was nothing in sight at sunset--and no more there was. I believe you blundered upon us by chance--for all your boasting about sunsets and bearings. Gammon! I know you came on blindly on top of us, and with muffled oars, too. D'ye call that decent?"

"If I did muffle the oars it was for a good reason. I wanted to slip past a cove where some native craft were moored. That was common prudence in such a small boat, and not armed--as I am. I saw you right enough, but I had no intention to startle anybody. Take my word for it."

"I wish you had gone somewhere else," growled Shaw. "I hate to be put in the wrong through accident and untruthfulness--there! Here's my old man calling me--"

He left the cabin hurriedly and soon afterward Lingard came down, and sat again facing Carter across the table. His face was grave but resolute.

"We shall get the breeze directly," he said.

"Then, sir," said Carter, getting up, "if you will give me back that letter I shall go on cruising about here to speak some other ship. I trust you will report us wherever you are going."

"I am going to the yacht and I shall keep the letter," answered Lingard with decision. "I know exactly where she is, and I must go to the rescue of those people. It's most fortunate you've fallen in with me, Mr. Carter. Fortunate for them and fortunate for me," he added in a lower tone.

"Yes," drawled Carter, reflectively. "There may be a tidy bit of salvage money if you should get the vessel off, but I don't think you can do much. I had better stay out here and try to speak some gunboat--"

"You must come back to your ship with me," said Lingard, authoritatively. "Never mind the gunboats."

"That wouldn't be carrying out my orders," argued Carter. "I've got to speak a homeward-bound ship or a man-of-war--that's plain enough. I am not anxious to knock about for days in an open boat, but--let me fill my fresh-water breaker, Captain, and I will be off."

"Nonsense," said Lingard, sharply. "You've got to come with me to show the place and--and help. I'll take your boat in tow."

Carter did not seem convinced. Lingard laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Look here, young fellow. I am Tom Lingard and there's not a white man among these islands, and very few natives, that have not heard of me. My luck brought you into my ship--and now I've got you, you must stay. You must!"

The last "must" burst out loud and sharp like a pistol-shot. Carter stepped back.

"Do you mean you would keep me by force?" he asked, startled.

"Force," repeated Lingard. "It rests with you. I cannot let you speak any vessel. Your yacht has gone ashore in a most inconvenient place--for me; and with your boats sent off here and there, you would bring every infernal gunboat buzzing to a spot that was as quiet and retired as the heart of man could wish. You stranding just on that spot of the whole coast was my bad luck. And that I could not help. You coming upon me like this is my good luck. And that I hold!"

He dropped his clenched fist, big and muscular, in the light of the lamp on the

black cloth, amongst the glitter of glasses, with the strong fingers closed tight upon the firm flesh of the palm. He left it there for a moment as if showing Carter that luck he was going to hold. And he went on:

"Do you know into what hornet's nest your stupid people have blundered? How much d'ye think their lives are worth, just now? Not a brass farthing if the breeze fails me for another twenty-four hours. You may well open your eyes. It is so! And it may be too late now, while I am arguing with you here."

He tapped the table with his knuckles, and the glasses, waking up, jingled a thin, plaintive finale to his speech. Carter stood leaning against the sideboard. He was amazed by the unexpected turn of the conversation; his jaw dropped slightly and his eyes never swerved for a moment from Lingard's face. The silence in the cabin lasted only a few seconds, but to Carter, who waited breathlessly, it seemed very long. And all at once he heard in it, for the first time, the cabin clock tick distinctly, in pulsating beats, as though a little heart of metal behind the dial had been started into sudden palpitation.

"A gunboat!" shouted Lingard, suddenly, as if he had seen only in that moment, by the light of some vivid flash of thought, all the difficulties of the situation. "If you don't go back with me there will be nothing left for you to go back to--very soon. Your gunboat won't find a single ship's rib or a single corpse left for a landmark. That she won't. It isn't a gunboat skipper you want. I am the man you want. You don't know your luck when you see it, but I know mine, I do--and--look here--"

He touched Carter's chest with his forefinger, and said with a sudden gentleness of tone:

"I am a white man inside and out; I won't let inoffensive people--and a woman, too--come to harm if I can help it. And if I can't help, nobody can. You understand--nobody! There's no time for it. But I am like any other man that is worth his salt: I won't let the end of an undertaking go by the board while there is a chance to hold on--and it's like this--"

His voice was persuasive--almost caressing; he had hold now of a coat button and tugged at it slightly as he went on in a confidential manner:

"As it turns out, Mr. Carter, I would--in a manner of speaking--I would as soon shoot you where you stand as let you go to raise an alarm all over this sea about your confounded yacht. I have other lives to consider--and friends--and promises--and--and myself, too. I shall keep you," he concluded, sharply.

Carter drew a long breath. On the deck above, the two men could hear soft footfalls, short murmurs, indistinct words spoken near the skylight. Shaw's voice rang out loudly in growling tones:

"Furl the royals, you tindal!"

"It's the queerest old go," muttered Carter, looking down on to the floor. "You are a strange man. I suppose I must believe what you say--unless you and that fat mate of yours are a couple of escaped lunatics that got hold of a brig by some means. Why, that chap up there wanted to pick a quarrel with me for coming aboard, and now you threaten to shoot me rather than let me go. Not that I care much about that; for some time or other you would get hanged for it; and you don't look like a man that will end that way. If what you say is only half true, I ought to get back to the yacht as quick as ever I can. It strikes me that your coming to them will be only a small mercy, anyhow--and I may be of some use--But this is the queerest. . . . May I go in my boat?"

"As you like," said Lingard. "There's a rain squall coming."

"I am in charge and will get wet along of my chaps. Give us a good long line, Captain."

"It's done already," said Lingard. "You seem a sensible sailorman and can see that it would be useless to try and give me the slip."

"For a man so ready to shoot, you seem very trustful," drawled Carter. "If I cut adrift in a squall, I stand a pretty fair chance not to see you again."

"You just try," said Lingard, drily. "I have eyes in this brig, young man, that will see your boat when you couldn't see the ship. You are of the kind I like, but if you monkey with me I will find you--and when I find you I will run you down as surely as I stand here."

Carter slapped his thigh and his eyes twinkled.

"By the Lord Harry!" he cried. "If it wasn't for the men with me, I would try for sport. You are so cocksure about the lot you can do, Captain. You would aggravate a saint into open mutiny."

His easy good humour had returned; but after a short burst of laughter, he became serious.

"Never fear," he said, "I won't slip away. If there is to be any throat-cutting--as

you seem to hint--mine will be there, too, I promise you, and. . . ."

He stretched his arms out, glanced at them, shook them a little.

"And this pair of arms to take care of it," he added, in his old, careless drawl.

But the master of the brig sitting with both his elbows on the table, his face in his hands, had fallen unexpectedly into a meditation so concentrated and so profound that he seemed neither to hear, see, nor breathe. The sight of that man's complete absorption in thought was to Carter almost more surprising than any other occurrence of that night. Had his strange host vanished suddenly from before his eyes, it could not have made him feel more uncomfortably alone in that cabin where the pertinacious clock kept ticking off the useless minutes of the calm before it would, with the same steady beat, begin to measure the aimless disturbance of the storm.