

#### IV

It was noon before the brig, piloted by Lingard through the deep channels between the outer coral reefs, rounded within pistol-shot a low hummock of sand which marked the end of a long stretch of stony ledges that, being mostly awash, showed a black head only, here and there amongst the hissing brown froth of the yellow sea. As the brig drew clear of the sandy patch there appeared, dead to windward and beyond a maze of broken water, sandspits, and clusters of rocks, the black hull of the yacht heeling over, high and motionless upon the great expanse of glittering shallows. Her long, naked spars were inclined slightly as if she had been sailing with a good breeze. There was to the lookers-on aboard the brig something sad and disappointing in the yacht's aspect as she lay perfectly still in an attitude that in a seaman's mind is associated with the idea of rapid motion.

"Here she is!" said Shaw, who, clad in a spotless white suit, came just then from forward where he had been busy with the anchors. "She is well on, sir--isn't she? Looks like a mudflat to me from here."

"Yes. It is a mudflat," said Lingard, slowly, raising the long glass to his eye. "Haul the mainsail up, Mr. Shaw," he went on while he took a steady look at the yacht. "We will have to work in short tacks here."

He put the glass down and moved away from the rail. For the next hour he handled his little vessel in the intricate and narrow channel with careless certitude, as if every stone, every grain of sand upon the treacherous bottom had been plainly disclosed to his sight. He handled her in the fitful and unsteady breeze with a matter-of-fact audacity that made Shaw, forward at his station, gasp in sheer alarm. When heading toward the inshore shoals the brig was never put round till the quick, loud cries of the leadsmen announced that there were no more than three feet of water under her keel; and when standing toward the steep inner edge of the long reef, where the lead was of no use, the helm would be put down only when the cutwater touched the faint line of the bordering foam. Lingard's love for his brig was a man's love, and was so great that it could never be appeased unless he called on her to put forth all her qualities and her power, to repay his exacting affection by a faithfulness tried to the very utmost limit of endurance. Every flutter of the sails flew down from aloft along the taut leeches, to enter his heart in a sense of acute delight; and the gentle murmur of water alongside, which, continuous and soft, showed that in all her windings his incomparable craft had never, even for an instant, ceased to carry her way, was to him more precious and inspiring than the soft whisper of tender words would

have been to another man. It was in such moments that he lived intensely, in a flush of strong feeling that made him long to press his little vessel to his breast. She was his perfect world full of trustful joy.

The people on board the yacht, who watched eagerly the first sail they had seen since they had been ashore on that deserted part of the coast, soon made her out, with some disappointment, to be a small merchant brig beating up tack for tack along the inner edge of the reef--probably with the intention to communicate and offer assistance. The general opinion among the seafaring portion of her crew was that little effective assistance could be expected from a vessel of that description. Only the sailing-master of the yacht remarked to the boatswain (who had the advantage of being his first cousin): "This man is well acquainted here; you can see that by the way he handles his brig. I shan't be sorry to have somebody to stand by us. Can't tell when we will get off this mud, George."

A long board, sailed very close, enabled the brig to fetch the southern limit of discoloured water over the bank on which the yacht had stranded. On the very edge of the muddy patch she was put in stays for the last time. As soon as she had paid off on the other tack, sail was shortened smartly, and the brig commenced the stretch that was to bring her to her anchorage, under her topsails, lower staysails and jib. There was then less than a quarter of a mile of shallow water between her and the yacht; but while that vessel had gone ashore with her head to the eastward the brig was moving slowly in a west-northwest direction, and consequently, sailed--so to speak--past the whole length of the yacht. Lingard saw every soul in the schooner on deck, watching his advent in a silence which was as unbroken and perfect as that on board his own vessel.

A little man with a red face framed in white whiskers waved a gold-laced cap above the rail in the waist of the yacht. Lingard raised his arm in return. Further aft, under the white awnings, he could see two men and a woman. One of the men and the lady were in blue. The other man, who seemed very tall and stood with his arm entwined round an awning stanchion above his head, was clad in white. Lingard saw them plainly. They looked at the brig through binoculars, turned their faces to one another, moved their lips, seemed surprised. A large dog put his forepaws on the rail, and, lifting up his big, black head, sent out three loud and plaintive barks, then dropped down out of sight. A sudden stir and an appearance of excitement amongst all hands on board the yacht was caused by their perceiving that the boat towing astern of the stranger was their own second gig.

Arms were outstretched with pointing fingers. Someone shouted out a long sentence of which not a word could be made out; and then the brig, having reached the western limit of the bank, began to move diagonally away, increasing

her distance from the yacht but bringing her stern gradually into view. The people aft, Lingard noticed, left their places and walked over to the taffrail so as to keep him longer in sight.

When about a mile off the bank and nearly in line with the stern of the yacht the brig's topsails fluttered and the yards came down slowly on the caps; the fore and aft canvas ran down; and for some time she floated quietly with folded wings upon the transparent sheet of water, under the radiant silence of the sky. Then her anchor went to the bottom with a rumbling noise resembling the roll of distant thunder. In a moment her head tended to the last puffs of the northerly airs and the ensign at the peak stirred, unfurled itself slowly, collapsed, flew out again, and finally hung down straight and still, as if weighted with lead.

"Dead calm, sir," said Shaw to Lingard. "Dead calm again. We got into this funny place in the nick of time, sir."

They stood for a while side by side, looking round upon the coast and the sea. The brig had been brought up in the middle of a broad belt of clear water. To the north rocky ledges showed in black and white lines upon the slight swell setting in from there. A small island stood out from the broken water like the square tower of some submerged building. It was about two miles distant from the brig. To the eastward the coast was low; a coast of green forests fringed with dark mangroves. There was in its sombre dullness a clearly defined opening, as if a small piece had been cut out with a sharp knife. The water in it shone like a patch of polished silver. Lingard pointed it out to Shaw.

"This is the entrance to the place where we are going," he said.

Shaw stared, round-eyed.

"I thought you came here on account of this here yacht," he stammered, surprised.

"Ah. The yacht," said Lingard, musingly, keeping his eyes on the break in the coast. "The yacht--" He stamped his foot suddenly. "I would give all I am worth and throw in a few days of life into the bargain if I could get her off and away before to-night."

He calmed down, and again stood gazing at the land. A little within the entrance from behind the wall of forests an invisible fire belched out steadily the black and heavy convolutions of thick smoke, which stood out high, like a twisted and shivering pillar against the clear blue of the sky.

"We must stop that game, Mr. Shaw," said Lingard, abruptly.

"Yes, sir. What game?" asked Shaw, looking round in wonder.

"This smoke," said Lingard, impatiently. "It's a signal."

"Certainly, sir--though I don't see how we can do it. It seems far inland. A signal for what, sir?"

"It was not meant for us," said Lingard in an unexpectedly savage tone. "Here, Shaw, make them put a blank charge into that fore-castle gun. Tell 'em to ram hard the wadding and grease the mouth. We want to make a good noise. If old Jorgenson hears it, that fire will be out before you have time to turn round twice. . . . In a minute, Mr. Carter."

The yacht's boat had come alongside as soon as the brig had been brought up, and Carter had been waiting to take Lingard on board the yacht. They both walked now to the gangway. Shaw, following his commander, stood by to take his last orders.

"Put all the boats in the water, Mr. Shaw," Lingard was saying, with one foot on the rail, ready to leave his ship, "and mount the four-pounder swivel in the longboat's bow. Cast off the sea lashings of the guns, but don't run 'em out yet. Keep the topsails loose and the jib ready for setting, I may want the sails in a hurry. Now, Mr. Carter, I am ready for you."

"Shove off, boys," said Carter as soon as they were seated in the boat. "Shove off, and give way for a last pull before you get a long rest."

The men lay back on their oars, grunting. Their faces were drawn, grey and streaked with the dried salt sprays. They had the worried expression of men who had a long call made upon their endurance. Carter, heavy-eyed and dull, steered for the yacht's gangway. Lingard asked as they were crossing the brig's bows:

"Water enough alongside your craft, I suppose?"

"Yes. Eight to twelve feet," answered Carter, hoarsely. "Say, Captain! Where's your show of cutthroats? Why! This sea is as empty as a church on a week-day."

The booming report, nearly over his head, of the brig's eighteen-pounder interrupted him. A round puff of white vapour, spreading itself lazily, clung in fading shreds about the foreyard. Lingard, turning half round in the stern sheets, looked at the smoke on the shore. Carter remained silent, staring sleepily at the

yacht they were approaching. Lingard kept watching the smoke so intensely that he almost forgot where he was, till Carter's voice pronouncing sharply at his ear the words "way enough," recalled him to himself.

They were in the shadow of the yacht and coming alongside her ladder. The master of the brig looked upward into the face of a gentleman, with long whiskers and a shaved chin, staring down at him over the side through a single eyeglass. As he put his foot on the bottom step he could see the shore smoke still ascending, unceasing and thick; but even as he looked the very base of the black pillar rose above the ragged line of tree-tops. The whole thing floated clear away from the earth, and rolling itself into an irregularly shaped mass, drifted out to seaward, travelling slowly over the blue heavens, like a threatening and lonely cloud.