

PART II. THE SHORE OF REFUGE

I

The coast off which the little brig, floating upright above her anchor, seemed to guard the high hull of the yacht has no distinctive features. It is land without form. It stretches away without cape or bluff, long and low--indefinitely; and when the heavy gusts of the northeast monsoon drive the thick rain slanting over the sea, it is seen faintly under the grey sky, black and with a blurred outline like the straight edge of a dissolving shore. In the long season of unclouded days, it presents to view only a narrow band of earth that appears crushed flat upon the vast level of waters by the weight of the sky, whose immense dome rests on it in a line as fine and true as that of the sea horizon itself.

Notwithstanding its nearness to the centres of European power, this coast has been known for ages to the armed wanderers of these seas as "The Shore of Refuge." It has no specific name on the charts, and geography manuals don't mention it at all; but the wreckage of many defeats unerringly drifts into its creeks. Its approaches are extremely difficult for a stranger. Looked at from seaward, the innumerable islets fringing what, on account of its vast size, may be called the mainland, merge into a background that presents not a single landmark to point the way through the intricate channels. It may be said that in a belt of sea twenty miles broad along that low shore there is much more coral, mud, sand, and stones than actual sea water. It was amongst the outlying shoals of this stretch that the yacht had gone ashore and the events consequent upon her stranding took place.

The diffused light of the short daybreak showed the open water to the westward, sleeping, smooth and grey, under a faded heaven. The straight coast threw a heavy belt of gloom along the shoals, which, in the calm of expiring night, were unmarked by the slightest ripple. In the faint dawn the low clumps of bushes on the sandbanks appeared immense.

Two figures, noiseless like two shadows, moved slowly over the beach of a rocky islet, and stopped side by side on the very edge of the water. Behind them, between the mats from which they had arisen, a small heap of black embers smouldered quietly. They stood upright and perfectly still, but for the slight movement of their heads from right to left and back again as they swept their gaze through the grey emptiness of the waters where, about two miles distant, the hull of the yacht loomed up to seaward, black and shapeless, against the wan

sky.

The two figures looked beyond without exchanging as much as a murmur. The taller of the two grounded, at arm's length, the stock of a gun with a long barrel; the hair of the other fell down to its waist; and, near by, the leaves of creepers drooping from the summit of the steep rock stirred no more than the festooned stone. The faint light, disclosing here and there a gleam of white sandbanks and the blurred hummocks of islets scattered within the gloom of the coast, the profound silence, the vast stillness all round, accentuated the loneliness of the two human beings who, urged by a sleepless hope, had risen thus, at break of day, to look afar upon the veiled face of the sea.

"Nothing!" said the man with a sigh, and as if awakening from a long period of musing.

He was clad in a jacket of coarse blue cotton, of the kind a poor fisherman might own, and he wore it wide open on a muscular chest the colour and smoothness of bronze. From the twist of threadbare sarong wound tightly on the hips protruded outward to the left the ivory hilt, ringed with six bands of gold, of a weapon that would not have disgraced a ruler. Silver glittered about the flintlock and the hardwood stock of his gun. The red and gold handkerchief folded round his head was of costly stuff, such as is woven by high-born women in the households of chiefs, only the gold threads were tarnished and the silk frayed in the folds. His head was thrown back, the dropped eyelids narrowed the gleam of his eyes. His face was hairless, the nose short with mobile nostrils, and the smile of careless good-humour seemed to have been permanently wrought, as if with a delicate tool, into the slight hollows about the corners of rather full lips. His upright figure had a negligent elegance. But in the careless face, in the easy gestures of the whole man there was something attentive and restrained.

After giving the offering a last searching glance, he turned and, facing the rising sun, walked bare-footed on the elastic sand. The trailed butt of his gun made a deep furrow. The embers had ceased to smoulder. He looked down at them pensively for a while, then called over his shoulder to the girl who had remained behind, still scanning the sea:

"The fire is out, Immada."

At the sound of his voice the girl moved toward the mats. Her black hair hung like a mantle. Her sarong, the kilt-like garment which both sexes wear, had the national check of grey and red, but she had not completed her attire by the belt, scarves, the loose upper wrappings, and the head-covering of a woman. A black silk jacket, like that of a man of rank, was buttoned over her bust and fitted

closely to her slender waist. The edge of a stand-up collar, stiff with gold embroidery, rubbed her cheek. She had no bracelets, no anklets, and although dressed practically in man's clothes, had about her person no weapon of any sort. Her arms hung down in exceedingly tight sleeves slit a little way up from the wrist, gold-braided and with a row of small gold buttons. She walked, brown and alert, all of a piece, with short steps, the eyes lively in an impassive little face, the arched mouth closed firmly; and her whole person breathed in its rigid grace the fiery gravity of youth at the beginning of the task of life--at the beginning of beliefs and hopes.

This was the day of Lingard's arrival upon the coast, but, as is known, the brig, delayed by the calm, did not appear in sight of the shallows till the morning was far advanced. Disappointed in their hope to see the expected sail shining in the first rays of the rising sun, the man and the woman, without attempting to relight the fire, lounged on their sleeping mats. At their feet a common canoe, hauled out of the water, was, for more security, moored by a grass rope to the shaft of a long spear planted firmly on the white beach, and the incoming tide lapped monotonously against its stern.

The girl, twisting up her black hair, fastened it with slender wooden pins. The man, reclining at full length, had made room on his mat for the gun--as one would do for a friend--and, supported on his elbow, looked toward the yacht with eyes whose fixed dreaminess like a transparent veil would show the slow passage of every gloomy thought by deepening gradually into a sombre stare.

"We have seen three sunrises on this islet, and no friend came from the sea," he said without changing his attitude, with his back toward the girl who sat on the other side of the cold embers.

"Yes; and the moon is waning," she answered in a low voice. "The moon is waning. Yet he promised to be here when the nights are light and the water covers the sandbanks as far as the bushes."

"The traveller knows the time of his setting out, but not the time of his return," observed the man, calmly.

The girl sighed.

"The nights of waiting are long," she murmured.

"And sometimes they are vain," said the man with the same composure. "Perhaps he will never return."

"Why?" exclaimed the girl.

"The road is long and the heart may grow cold," was the answer in a quiet voice.

"If he does not return it is because he has forgotten."

"Oh, Hassim, it is because he is dead," cried the girl, indignantly.

The man, looking fixedly to seaward, smiled at the ardour of her tone.

They were brother and sister, and though very much alike, the family resemblance was lost in the more general traits common to the whole race.

They were natives of Wajo and it is a common saying amongst the Malay race that to be a successful traveller and trader a man must have some Wajo blood in his veins. And with those people trading, which means also travelling afar, is a romantic and an honourable occupation. The trader must possess an adventurous spirit and a keen understanding; he should have the fearlessness of youth and the sagacity of age; he should be diplomatic and courageous, so as to secure the favour of the great and inspire fear in evil-doers.

These qualities naturally are not expected in a shopkeeper or a Chinaman pedlar; they are considered indispensable only for a man who, of noble birth and perhaps related to the ruler of his own country, wanders over the seas in a craft of his own and with many followers; carries from island to island important news as well as merchandise; who may be trusted with secret messages and valuable goods; a man who, in short, is as ready to intrigue and fight as to buy and sell. Such is the ideal trader of Wajo.

Trading, thus understood, was the occupation of ambitious men who played an occult but important part in all those national risings, religious disturbances, and also in the organized piratical movements on a large scale which, during the first half of the last century, affected the fate of more than one native dynasty and, for a few years at least, seriously endangered the Dutch rule in the East. When, at the cost of much blood and gold, a comparative peace had been imposed on the islands the same occupation, though shorn of its glorious possibilities, remained attractive for the most adventurous of a restless race. The younger sons and relations of many a native ruler traversed the seas of the Archipelago, visited the innumerable and little-known islands, and the then practically unknown shores of New Guinea; every spot where European trade had not penetrated--from Aru to Atjeh, from Sumbawa to Palawan.