

III

"My word! I couldn't help liking the chap," would shout Lingard when telling the story; and looking around at the eyes that glittered at him through the smoke of cheroots, this Brixham trawler-boy, afterward a youth in colliers, deep-water man, gold-digger, owner and commander of "the finest brig afloat," knew that by his listeners--seamen, traders, adventurers like himself--this was accepted not as the expression of a feeling, but as the highest commendation he could give his Malay friend.

"By heavens! I shall go to Wajo!" he cried, and a semicircle of heads nodded grave approbation while a slightly ironical voice said deliberately--"You are a made man, Tom, if you get on the right side of that Rajah of yours."

"Go in--and look out for yourself," cried another with a laugh.

A little professional jealousy was unavoidable, Wajo, on account of its chronic state of disturbance, being closed to the white traders; but there was no real ill-will in the banter of these men, who, rising with handshakes, dropped off one by one. Lingard went straight aboard his vessel and, till morning, walked the poop of the brig with measured steps. The riding lights of ships twinkled all round him; the lights ashore twinkled in rows, the stars twinkled above his head in a black sky; and reflected in the black water of the roadstead twinkled far below his feet. And all these innumerable and shining points were utterly lost in the immense darkness. Once he heard faintly the rumbling chain of some vessel coming to an anchor far away somewhere outside the official limits of the harbour. A stranger to the port--thought Lingard--one of us would have stood right in. Perhaps a ship from home? And he felt strangely touched at the thought of that ship, weary with months of wandering, and daring not to approach the place of rest. At sunrise, while the big ship from the West, her sides streaked with rust and grey with the salt of the sea, was moving slowly in to take up a berth near the shore, Lingard left the roadstead on his way to the eastward.

A heavy gulf thunderstorm was raging, when after a long passage and at the end of a sultry calm day, wasted in drifting helplessly in sight of his destination, Lingard, taking advantage of fitful gusts of wind, approached the shores of Wajo. With characteristic audacity, he held on his way, closing in with a coast to which he was a stranger, and on a night that would have appalled any other man; while at every dazzling flash, Hassim's native land seemed to leap nearer at the brig--and disappear instantly as though it had crouched low for the next spring out of an impenetrable darkness. During the long day of the calm, he had obtained from

the deck and from aloft, such good views of the coast, and had noted the lay of the land and the position of the dangers so carefully that, though at the precise moment when he gave the order to let go the anchor, he had been for some time able to see no further than if his head had been wrapped in a woollen blanket, yet the next flickering bluish flash showed him the brig, anchored almost exactly where he had judged her to be, off a narrow white beach near the mouth of a river.

He could see on the shore a high cluster of bamboo huts perched upon piles, a small grove of tall palms all bowed together before the blast like stalks of grass, something that might have been a palisade of pointed stakes near the water, and far off, a sombre background resembling an immense wall--the forest-clad hills. Next moment, all this vanished utterly from his sight, as if annihilated and, before he had time to turn away, came back to view with a sudden crash, appearing unscathed and motionless under hooked darts of flame, like some legendary country of immortals, withstanding the wrath and fire of Heaven.

Made uneasy by the nature of his holding ground, and fearing that in one of the terrific off-shore gusts the brig would start her anchor, Lingard remained on deck to watch over the safety of his vessel. With one hand upon the lead-line which would give him instant warning of the brig beginning to drag, he stood by the rail, most of the time deafened and blinded, but also fascinated, by the repeated swift visions of an unknown shore, a sight always so inspiring, as much perhaps by its vague suggestion of danger as by the hopes of success it never fails to awaken in the heart of a true adventurer. And its immutable aspect of profound and still repose, seen thus under streams of fire and in the midst of a violent uproar, made it appear inconceivably mysterious and amazing.

Between the squalls there were short moments of calm, while now and then even the thunder would cease as if to draw breath. During one of those intervals. Lingard, tired and sleepy, was beginning to doze where he stood, when suddenly it occurred to him that, somewhere below, the sea had spoken in a human voice. It had said, "Praise be to God--" and the voice sounded small, clear, and confident, like the voice of a child speaking in a cathedral. Lingard gave a start and thought--I've dreamed this--and directly the sea said very close to him, "Give a rope."

The thunder growled wickedly, and Lingard, after shouting to the men on deck, peered down at the water, until at last he made out floating close alongside the upturned face of a man with staring eyes that gleamed at him and then blinked quickly to a flash of lightning. By that time all hands in the brig were wildly active and many ropes-ends had been thrown over. Then together with a gust of wind, and, as if blown on board, a man tumbled over the rail and fell all in a heap upon

the deck. Before any one had the time to pick him up, he leaped to his feet, causing the people around him to step back hurriedly. A sinister blue glare showed the bewildered faces and the petrified attitudes of men completely deafened by the accompanying peal of thunder. After a time, as if to beings plunged in the abyss of eternal silence, there came to their ears an unfamiliar thin, far-away voice saying:

"I seek the white man."

"Here," cried Lingard. Then, when he had the stranger, dripping and naked but for a soaked waistcloth, under the lamp of the cabin, he said, "I don't know you."

"My name is Jaffir, and I come from Pata Hassim, who is my chief and your friend. Do you know this?"

He held up a thick gold ring, set with a fairly good emerald.

"I have seen it before on the Rajah's finger," said Lingard, looking very grave.

"It is the witness of the truth I speak--the message from Hassim is--'Depart and forget!'"

"I don't forget," said Lingard, slowly. "I am not that kind of man. What folly is this?"

It is unnecessary to give at full length the story told by Jaffir. It appears that on his return home, after the meeting with Lingard, Hassim found his relative dying and a strong party formed to oppose his rightful successor. The old Rajah Tulla died late at night and--as Jaffir put it--before the sun rose there were already blows exchanged in the courtyard of the ruler's dalam. This was the preliminary fight of a civil war, fostered by foreign intrigues; a war of jungle and river, of assaulted stockades and forest ambushes. In this contest, both parties--according to Jaffir--displayed great courage, and one of them an unswerving devotion to what, almost from the first, was a lost cause. Before a month elapsed Hassim, though still chief of an armed band, was already a fugitive. He kept up the struggle, however, with some vague notion that Lingard's arrival would turn the tide.

"For weeks we lived on wild rice; for days we fought with nothing but water in our bellies," declaimed Jaffir in the tone of a true fire-eater.

And then he went on to relate, how, driven steadily down to the sea, Hassim, with a small band of followers, had been for days holding the stockade by the

waterside.

"But every night some men disappeared," confessed Jaffir. "They were weary and hungry and they went to eat with their enemies. We are only ten now--ten men and a woman with the heart of a man, who are tonight starving, and to-morrow shall die swiftly. We saw your ship afar all day; but you have come too late. And for fear of treachery and lest harm should befall you--his friend--the Rajah gave me the ring and I crept on my stomach over the sand, and I swam in the night--and I, Jaffir, the best swimmer in Wajo, and the slave of Hassim, tell you--his message to you is 'Depart and forget'--and this is his gift--take!"

He caught hold suddenly of Lingard's hand, thrust roughly into it the ring, and then for the first time looked round the cabin with wondering but fearless eyes. They lingered over the semicircle of bayonets and rested fondly on musket-racks. He grunted in admiration.

"Ya-wa, this is strength!" he murmured as if to himself. "But it has come too late."

"Perhaps not," cried Lingard.

"Too late," said Jaffir, "we are ten only, and at sunrise we go out to die." He went to the cabin door and hesitated there with a puzzled air, being unused to locks and door handles.

"What are you going to do?" asked Lingard.

"I shall swim back," replied Jaffir. "The message is spoken and the night can not last forever."

"You can stop with me," said Lingard, looking at the man searchingly.

"Hassim waits," was the curt answer.

"Did he tell you to return?" asked Lingard.

"No! What need?" said the other in a surprised tone.

Lingard seized his hand impulsively.

"If I had ten men like you!" he cried.

"We are ten, but they are twenty to one," said Jaffir, simply.

Lingard opened the door.

"Do you want anything that a man can give?" he asked.

The Malay had a moment of hesitation, and Lingard noticed the sunken eyes, the prominent ribs, and the worn-out look of the man.

"Speak out," he urged with a smile; "the bearer of a gift must have a reward."

"A drink of water and a handful of rice for strength to reach the shore," said Jaffir sturdily. "For over there"--he tossed his head--"we had nothing to eat to-day."

"You shall have it--give it to you with my own hands," muttered Lingard.

He did so, and thus lowered himself in Jaffir's estimation for a time. While the messenger, squatting on the floor, ate without haste but with considerable earnestness, Lingard thought out a plan of action. In his ignorance as to the true state of affairs in the country, to save Hassim from the immediate danger of his position was all that he could reasonably attempt. To that end Lingard proposed to swing out his long-boat and send her close inshore to take off Hassim and his men. He knew enough of Malays to feel sure that on such a night the besiegers, now certain of success, and being, Jaffir said, in possession of everything that could float, would not be very vigilant, especially on the sea front of the stockade. The very fact of Jaffir having managed to swim off undetected proved that much. The brig's boat could--when the frequency of lightning abated--approach unseen close to the beach, and the defeated party, either stealing out one by one or making a rush in a body, would embark and be received in the brig.

This plan was explained to Jaffir, who heard it without the slightest mark of interest, being apparently too busy eating. When the last grain of rice was gone, he stood up, took a long pull at the water bottle, muttered: "I hear. Good. I will tell Hassim," and tightening the rag round his loins, prepared to go. "Give me time to swim ashore," he said, "and when the boat starts, put another light beside the one that burns now like a star above your vessel. We shall see and understand. And don't send the boat till there is less lightning: a boat is bigger than a man in the water. Tell the rowers to pull for the palm-grove and cease when an oar, thrust down with a strong arm, touches the bottom. Very soon they will hear our hail; but if no one comes they must go away before daylight. A chief may prefer death to life, and we who are left are all of true heart. Do you understand, O big man?"

"The chap has plenty of sense," muttered Lingard to himself, and when they stood side by side on the deck, he said: "But there may be enemies on the beach, O

Jaffir, and they also may shout to deceive my men. So let your hail be Lightning! Will you remember?"

For a time Jaffir seemed to be choking.

"Lit-ing! Is that right? I say--is that right, O strong man?" Next moment he appeared upright and shadowy on the rail.

"Yes. That's right. Go now," said Lingard, and Jaffir leaped off, becoming invisible long before he struck the water. Then there was a splash; after a while a spluttering voice cried faintly, "Lit-ing! Ah, ha!" and suddenly the next thunder-squall burst upon the coast. In the crashing flares of light Lingard had again and again the quick vision of a white beach, the inclined palm-trees of the grove, the stockade by the sea, the forest far away: a vast landscape mysterious and still--Hassim's native country sleeping unmoved under the wrath and fire of Heaven.