

IV

A Traveller visiting Wajo to-day may, if he deserves the confidence of the common people, hear the traditional account of the last civil war, together with the legend of a chief and his sister, whose mother had been a great princess suspected of sorcery and on her death-bed had communicated to these two the secrets of the art of magic. The chief's sister especially, "with the aspect of a child and the fearlessness of a great fighter," became skilled in casting spells. They were defeated by the son of their uncle, because--will explain the narrator simply--"The courage of us Wajo people is so great that magic can do nothing against it. I fought in that war. We had them with their backs to the sea." And then he will go on to relate in an awed tone how on a certain night "when there was such a thunderstorm as has been never heard of before or since" a ship, resembling the ships of white men, appeared off the coast, "as though she had sailed down from the clouds. She moved," he will affirm, "with her sails bellying against the wind; in size she was like an island; the lightning played between her masts which were as high as the summits of mountains; a star burned low through the clouds above her. We knew it for a star at once because no flame of man's kindling could have endured the wind and rain of that night. It was such a night that we on the watch hardly dared look upon the sea. The heavy rain was beating down our eyelids. And when day came, the ship was nowhere to be seen, and in the stockade where the day before there were a hundred or more at our mercy, there was no one. The chief, Hassim, was gone, and the lady who was a princess in the country--and nobody knows what became of them from that day to this. Sometimes traders from our parts talk of having heard of them here, and heard of them there, but these are the lies of men who go afar for gain. We who live in the country believe that the ship sailed back into the clouds whence the Lady's magic made her come. Did we not see the ship with our own eyes? And as to Rajah Hassim and his sister, Mas Immada, some men say one thing and some another, but God alone knows the truth."

Such is the traditional account of Lingard's visit to the shores of Boni. And the truth is he came and went the same night; for, when the dawn broke on a cloudy sky the brig, under reefed canvas and smothered in sprays, was storming along to the southward on her way out of the Gulf. Lingard, watching over the rapid course of his vessel, looked ahead with anxious eyes and more than once asked himself with wonder, why, after all, was he thus pressing her under all the sail she could carry. His hair was blown about by the wind, his mind was full of care and the indistinct shapes of many new thoughts, and under his feet, the obedient brig dashed headlong from wave to wave.

Her owner and commander did not know where he was going. That adventurer had only a confused notion of being on the threshold of a big adventure. There was something to be done, and he felt he would have to do it. It was expected of him. The seas expected it; the land expected it. Men also. The story of war and of suffering; Jaffir's display of fidelity, the sight of Hassim and his sister, the night, the tempest, the coast under streams of fire--all this made one inspiring manifestation of a life calling to him distinctly for interference. But what appealed to him most was the silent, the complete, unquestioning, and apparently uncurious, trust of these people. They came away from death straight into his arms as it were, and remained in them passive as though there had been no such thing as doubt or hope or desire. This amazing unconcern seemed to put him under a heavy load of obligation.

He argued to himself that had not these defeated men expected everything from him they could not have been so indifferent to his action. Their dumb quietude stirred him more than the most ardent pleading. Not a word, not a whisper, not a questioning look even! They did not ask! It flattered him. He was also rather glad of it, because if the unconscious part of him was perfectly certain of its action, he, himself, did not know what to do with those bruised and battered beings a playful fate had delivered suddenly into his hands.

He had received the fugitives personally, had helped some over the rail; in the darkness, slashed about by lightning, he had guessed that not one of them was unwounded, and in the midst of tottering shapes he wondered how on earth they had managed to reach the long-boat that had brought them off. He caught unceremoniously in his arms the smallest of these shapes and carried it into the cabin, then without looking at his light burden ran up again on deck to get the brig under way. While shouting out orders he was dimly aware of someone hovering near his elbow. It was Hassim.

"I am not ready for war," he explained, rapidly, over his shoulder, "and to-morrow there may be no wind." Afterward for a time he forgot everybody and everything while he coned the brig through the few outlying dangers. But in half an hour, and running off with the wind on the quarter, he was quite clear of the coast and breathed freely. It was only then that he approached two others on that poop where he was accustomed in moments of difficulty to commune alone with his craft. Hassim had called his sister out of the cabin; now and then Lingard could see them with fierce distinctness, side by side, and with twined arms, looking toward the mysterious country that seemed at every flash to leap away farther from the brig--unscathed and fading.

The thought uppermost in Lingard's mind was: "What on earth am I going to do with them?" And no one seemed to care what he would do. Jaffir with eight others

quartered on the main hatch, looked to each other's wounds and conversed interminably in low tones, cheerful and quiet, like well-behaved children. Each of them had saved his kris, but Lingard had to make a distribution of cotton cloth out of his trade-goods. Whenever he passed by them, they all looked after him gravely. Hassim and Immada lived in the cuddy. The chief's sister took the air only in the evening and those two could be heard every night, invisible and murmuring in the shadows of the quarter-deck. Every Malay on board kept respectfully away from them.

Lingard, on the poop, listened to the soft voices, rising and falling, in a melancholy cadence; sometimes the woman cried out as if in anger or in pain. He would stop short. The sound of a deep sigh would float up to him on the stillness of the night. Attentive stars surrounded the wandering brig and on all sides their light fell through a vast silence upon a noiseless sea. Lingard would begin again to pace the deck, muttering to himself.

"Belarab's the man for this job. His is the only place where I can look for help, but I don't think I know enough to find it. I wish I had old Jorgenson here--just for ten minutes."

This Jorgenson knew things that had happened a long time ago, and lived amongst men efficient in meeting the accidents of the day, but who did not care what would happen to-morrow and who had no time to remember yesterday. Strictly speaking, he did not live amongst them. He only appeared there from time to time. He lived in the native quarter, with a native woman, in a native house standing in the middle of a plot of fenced ground where grew plantains, and furnished only with mats, cooking pots, a queer fishing net on two sticks, and a small mahogany case with a lock and a silver plate engraved with the words "Captain H. C. Jorgenson. Barque Wild Rose."

It was like an inscription on a tomb. The Wild Rose was dead, and so was Captain H. C. Jorgenson, and the sextant case was all that was left of them. Old Jorgenson, gaunt and mute, would turn up at meal times on board any trading vessel in the Roads, and the stewards--Chinamen or mulattos--would sulkily put on an extra plate without waiting for orders. When the seamen traders foregathered noisily round a glittering cluster of bottles and glasses on a lighted verandah, old Jorgenson would emerge up the stairs as if from a dark sea, and, stepping up with a kind of tottering jauntiness, would help himself in the first tumbler to hand.

"I drink to you all. No--no chair."

He would stand silent over the talking group. His taciturnity was as eloquent as

the repeated warning of the slave of the feast. His flesh had gone the way of all flesh, his spirit had sunk in the turmoil of his past, but his immense and bony frame survived as if made of iron. His hands trembled but his eyes were steady. He was supposed to know details about the end of mysterious men and of mysterious enterprises. He was an evident failure himself, but he was believed to know secrets that would make the fortune of any man; yet there was also a general impression that his knowledge was not of that nature which would make it profitable for a moderately prudent person.

This powerful skeleton, dressed in faded blue serge and without any kind of linen, existed anyhow. Sometimes, if offered the job, he piloted a home ship through the Straits of Rhio, after, however, assuring the captain:

"You don't want a pilot; a man could go through with his eyes shut. But if you want me, I'll come. Ten dollars."

Then, after seeing his charge clear of the last island of the group he would go back thirty miles in a canoe, with two old Malays who seemed to be in some way his followers. To travel thirty miles at sea under the equatorial sun and in a cranky dug-out where once down you must not move, is an achievement that requires the endurance of a fakir and the virtue of a salamander. Ten dollars was cheap and generally he was in demand. When times were hard he would borrow five dollars from any of the adventurers with the remark:

"I can't pay you back, very soon, but the girl must eat, and if you want to know anything, I can tell you."

It was remarkable that nobody ever smiled at that "anything." The usual thing was to say:

"Thank you, old man; when I am pushed for a bit of information I'll come to you."

Jorgenson nodded then and would say: "Remember that unless you young chaps are like we men who ranged about here years ago, what I could tell you would be worse than poison."

It was from Jorgenson, who had his favourites with whom he was less silent, that Lingard had heard of Darat-es-Salam, the "Shore of Refuge." Jorgenson had, as he expressed it, "known the inside of that country just after the high old times when the white-clad Padris preached and fought all over Sumatra till the Dutch shook in their shoes." Only he did not say "shook" and "shoes" but the above paraphrase conveys well enough his contemptuous meaning. Lingard tried now to remember and piece together the practical bits of old Jorgenson's amazing tales;

but all that had remained with him was an approximate idea of the locality and a very strong but confused notion of the dangerous nature of its approaches. He hesitated, and the brig, answering in her movements to the state of the man's mind, lingered on the road, seemed to hesitate also, swinging this way and that on the days of calm.

It was just because of that hesitation that a big New York ship, loaded with oil in cases for Japan, and passing through the Billiton passage, sighted one morning a very smart brig being hove-to right in the fair-way and a little to the east of Carimata. The lank skipper, in a frock-coat, and the big mate with heavy moustaches, judged her almost too pretty for a Britisher, and wondered at the man on board laying his topsail to the mast for no reason that they could see. The big ship's sails fanned her along, flapping in the light air, and when the brig was last seen far astern she had still her mainyard aback as if waiting for someone. But when, next day, a London tea-clipper passed on the same track, she saw no pretty brig hesitating, all white and still at the parting of the ways. All that night Lingard had talked with Hassim while the stars streamed from east to west like an immense river of sparks above their heads. Immada listened, sometimes exclaiming low, sometimes holding her breath. She clapped her hands once. A faint dawn appeared.

"You shall be treated like my father in the country," Hassim was saying. A heavy dew dripped off the rigging and the darkened sails were black on the pale azure of the sky. "You shall be the father who advises for good--"

"I shall be a steady friend, and as a friend I want to be treated--no more," said Lingard. "Take back your ring."

"Why do you scorn my gift?" asked Hassim, with a sad and ironic smile.

"Take it," said Lingard. "It is still mine. How can I forget that, when facing death, you thought of my safety? There are many dangers before us. We shall be often separated--to work better for the same end. If ever you and Immada need help at once and I am within reach, send me a message with this ring and if I am alive I will not fail you." He looked around at the pale daybreak. "I shall talk to Belarab straight--like we whites do. I have never seen him, but I am a strong man. Belarab must help us to reconquer your country and when our end is attained I won't let him eat you up."

Hassim took the ring and inclined his head.

"It's time for us to be moving," said Lingard. He felt a slight tug at his sleeve. He looked back and caught Immada in the act of pressing her forehead to the grey

flannel. "Don't, child!" he said, softly.

The sun rose above the faint blue line of the Shore of Refuge.

The hesitation was over. The man and the vessel, working in accord, had found their way to the faint blue shore. Before the sun had descended half-way to its rest the brig was anchored within a gunshot of the slimy mangroves, in a place where for a hundred years or more no white man's vessel had been entrusted to the hold of the bottom. The adventurers of two centuries ago had no doubt known of that anchorage for they were very ignorant and incomparably audacious. If it is true, as some say, that the spirits of the dead haunt the places where the living have sinned and toiled, then they might have seen a white long-boat, pulled by eight oars and steered by a man sunburnt and bearded, a cabbage-leaf hat on head, and pistols in his belt, skirting the black mud, full of twisted roots, in search of a likely opening.

Creek after creek was passed and the boat crept on slowly like a monstrous water-spider with a big body and eight slender legs. . . . Did you follow with your ghostly eyes the quest of this obscure adventurer of yesterday, you shades of forgotten adventurers who, in leather jerkins and sweating under steel helmets, attacked with long rapiers the palisades of the strange heathen, or, musket on shoulder and match in cock, guarded timber blockhouses built upon the banks of rivers that command good trade? You, who, wearied with the toil of fighting, slept wrapped in frieze mantles on the sand of quiet beaches, dreaming of fabulous diamonds and of a far-off home.

"Here's an opening," said Lingard to Hassim, who sat at his side, just as the sun was setting away to his left. "Here's an opening big enough for a ship. It's the entrance we are looking for, I believe. We shall pull all night up this creek if necessary and it's the very devil if we don't come upon Belarab's lair before daylight."

He shoved the tiller hard over and the boat, swerving sharply, vanished from the coast.

And perhaps the ghosts of old adventurers nodded wisely their ghostly heads and exchanged the ghost of a wistful smile.