

VII

The faint murmur of the words spoken on that night lingered for a long time in Lingard's ears, more persistent than the memory of an uproar; he looked with a fixed gaze at the stars burning peacefully in the square of the doorway, while after listening in silence to all he had to say, Belarab, as if seduced by the strength and audacity of the white man, opened his heart without reserve. He talked of his youth surrounded by the fury of fanaticism and war, of battles on the hills, of advances through the forests, of men's unswerving piety, of their unextinguishable hate. Not a single wandering cloud obscured the gentle splendour of the rectangular patch of starlight framed in the opaque blackness of the hut. Belarab murmured on of a succession of reverses, of the ring of disasters narrowing round men's fading hopes and undiminished courage. He whispered of defeat and flight, of the days of despair, of the nights without sleep, of unending pursuit, of the bewildered horror and sombre fury, of their women and children killed in the stockade before the besieged sallied forth to die.

"I have seen all this before I was in years a man," he cried, low.

His voice vibrated. In the pause that succeeded they heard a light sigh of the sleeping follower who, clasping his legs above his ankles, rested his forehead on his knees.

"And there was amongst us," began Belarab again, "one white man who remained to the end, who was faithful with his strength, with his courage, with his wisdom. A great man. He had great riches but a greater heart."

The memory of Jorgenson, emaciated and grey-haired, and trying to borrow five dollars to get something to eat for the girl, passed before Lingard suddenly upon the pacific glitter of the stars.

"He resembled you," pursued Belarab, abruptly. "We escaped with him, and in his ship came here. It was a solitude. The forest came near to the sheet of water, the rank grass waved upon the heads of tall men. Telal, my father, died of weariness; we were only a few, and we all nearly died of trouble and sadness--here. On this spot! And no enemies could tell where we had gone. It was the Shore of Refuge--and starvation."

He droned on in the night, with rising and falling inflections. He told how his desperate companions wanted to go out and die fighting on the sea against the ships from the west, the ships with high sides and white sails; and how,

unflinching and alone, he kept them battling with the thorny bush, with the rank grass, with the soaring and enormous trees. Lingard, leaning on his elbow and staring through the door, recalled the image of the wide fields outside, sleeping now, in an immensity of serenity and starlight. This quiet and almost invisible talker had done it all; in him was the origin, the creation, the fate; and in the wonder of that thought the shadowy murmuring figure acquired a gigantic greatness of significance, as if it had been the embodiment of some natural force, of a force forever masterful and undying.

"And even now my life is unsafe as if I were their enemy," said Belarab, mournfully. "Eyes do not kill, nor angry words; and curses have no power, else the Dutch would not grow fat living on our land, and I would not be alive to-night. Do you understand? Have you seen the men who fought in the old days? They have not forgotten the times of war. I have given them homes and quiet hearts and full bellies. I alone. And they curse my name in the dark, in each other's ears--because they can never forget."

This man, whose talk had been of war and violence, discovered unexpectedly a passionate craving for security and peace. No one would understand him. Some of those who would not understand had died. His white teeth gleamed cruelly in the dark. But there were others he could not kill. The fools. He wanted the land and the people in it to be forgotten as if they had been swallowed by the sea. But they had neither wisdom nor patience. Could they not wait? They chanted prayers five times every day, but they had not the faith.

"Death comes to all--and to the believers the end of trouble. But you white men who are too strong for us, you also die. You die. And there is a Paradise as great as all earth and all Heaven together, but not for you--not for you!"

Lingard, amazed, listened without a sound. The sleeper snored faintly. Belarab continued very calm after this almost involuntary outburst of a consoling belief. He explained that he wanted somebody at his back, somebody strong and whom he could trust, some outside force that would awe the unruly, that would inspire their ignorance with fear, and make his rule secure. He groped in the dark and seizing Lingard's arm above the elbow pressed it with force--then let go. And Lingard understood why his temerity had been so successful.

Then and there, in return for Lingard's open support, a few guns and a little money, Belarab promised his help for the conquest of Wajo. There was no doubt he could find men who would fight. He could send messages to friends at a distance and there were also many unquiet spirits in his own district ready for any adventure. He spoke of these men with fierce contempt and an angry tenderness, in mingled accents of envy and disdain. He was wearied by their folly,

by their recklessness, by their impatience--and he seemed to resent these as if they had been gifts of which he himself had been deprived by the fatality of his wisdom. They would fight. When the time came Lingard had only to speak, and a sign from him would send them to a vain death--those men who could not wait for an opportunity on this earth or for the eternal revenge of Heaven.

He ceased, and towered upright in the gloom.

"Awake!" he exclaimed, low, bending over the sleeping man.

Their black shapes, passing in turn, eclipsed for two successive moments the glitter of the stars, and Lingard, who had not stirred, remained alone. He lay back full length with an arm thrown across his eyes.

When three days afterward he left Belarab's settlement, it was on a calm morning of unclouded peace. All the boats of the brig came up into the lagoon armed and manned to make more impressive the solemn fact of a concluded alliance. A staring crowd watched his imposing departure in profound silence and with an increased sense of wonder at the mystery of his apparition. The progress of the boats was smooth and slow while they crossed the wide lagoon. Lingard looked back once. A great stillness had laid its hand over the earth, the sky, and the men; upon the immobility of landscape and people. Hassim and Immada, standing out clearly by the side of the chief, raised their arms in a last salutation; and the distant gesture appeared sad, futile, lost in space, like a sign of distress made by castaways in the vain hope of an impossible help.

He departed, he returned, he went away again, and each time those two figures, lonely on some sandbank of the Shallows, made at him the same futile sign of greeting or good-bye. Their arms at each movement seemed to draw closer around his heart the bonds of a protecting affection. He worked prosaically, earning money to pay the cost of the romantic necessity that had invaded his life. And the money ran like water out of his hands. The owner of the New England voice remitted not a little of it to his people in Baltimore. But import houses in the ports of the Far East had their share. It paid for a fast prau which, commanded by Jaffir, sailed into unfrequented bays and up unexplored rivers, carrying secret messages, important news, generous bribes. A good part of it went to the purchase of the Emma.

The Emma was a battered and decrepit old schooner that, in the decline of her existence, had been much ill-used by a paunchy white trader of cunning and gluttonous aspect. This man boasted outrageously afterward of the good price he had got "for that rotten old hooker of mine--you know." The Emma left port mysteriously in company with the brig and henceforth vanished from the seas

forever. Lingard had her towed up the creek and ran her aground upon that shore of the lagoon farthest from Belarab's settlement. There had been at that time a great rise of waters, which retiring soon after left the old craft cradled in the mud, with her bows grounded high between the trunks of two big trees, and leaning over a little as though after a hard life she had settled wearily to an everlasting rest. There, a few months later, Jorgenson found her when, called back into the life of men, he reappeared, together with Lingard, in the Land of Refuge.

"She is better than a fort on shore," said Lingard, as side by side they leant over the taffrail, looking across the lagoon on the houses and palm groves of the settlement. "All the guns and powder I have got together so far are stored in her. Good idea, wasn't it? There will be, perhaps, no other such flood for years, and now they can't come alongside unless right under the counter, and only one boat at a time. I think you are perfectly safe here; you could keep off a whole fleet of boats; she isn't easy to set fire to; the forest in front is better than a wall. Well?"

Jorgenson assented in grunts. He looked at the desolate emptiness of the decks, at the stripped spars, at the dead body of the dismantled little vessel that would know the life of the seas no more. The gloom of the forest fell on her, mournful like a winding sheet. The bushes of the bank tapped their twigs on the bluff of her bows, and a pendent spike of tiny brown blossoms swung to and fro over the ruins of her windlass.

Hassim's companions garrisoned the old hulk, and Jorgenson, left in charge, prowled about from stem to stern, taciturn and anxiously faithful to his trust. He had been received with astonishment, respect--and awe. Belarab visited him often. Sometimes those whom he had known in their prime years ago, during a struggle for faith and life, would come to talk with the white man. Their voices were like the echoes of stirring events, in the pale glamour of a youth gone by. They nodded their old heads. Do you remember?--they said. He remembered only too well! He was like a man raised from the dead, for whom the fascinating trust in the power of life is tainted by the black scepticism of the grave.

Only at times the invincible belief in the reality of existence would come back, insidious and inspiring. He squared his shoulders, held himself straight, and walked with a firmer step. He felt a glow within him and the quickened beat of his heart. Then he calculated in silent excitement Lingard's chances of success, and he lived for a time with the life of that other man who knew nothing of the black scepticism of the grave. The chances were good, very good.

"I should like to see it through," Jorgenson muttered to himself ardently; and his lustreless eyes would flash for a moment.