

PART III. THE CAPTURE

I

"Some people," said Lingard, "go about the world with their eyes shut. You are right. The sea is free to all of us. Some work on it, and some play the fool on it--and I don't care. Only you may take it from me that I will let no man's play interfere with my work. You want me to understand you are a very great man--"

Mr. Travers smiled, coldly.

"Oh, yes," continued Lingard, "I understand that well enough. But remember you are very far from home, while I, here, I am where I belong. And I belong where I am. I am just Tom Lingard, no more, no less, wherever I happen to be, and--you may ask--" A sweep of his hand along the western horizon entrusted with perfect confidence the remainder of his speech to the dumb testimony of the sea.

He had been on board the yacht for more than an hour, and nothing, for him, had come of it but the birth of an unreasoning hate. To the unconscious demand of these people's presence, of their ignorance, of their faces, of their voices, of their eyes, he had nothing to give but a resentment that had in it a germ of reckless violence. He could tell them nothing because he had not the means. Their coming at this moment, when he had wandered beyond that circle which race, memories, early associations, all the essential conditions of one's origin, trace round every man's life, deprived him in a manner of the power of speech. He was confounded. It was like meeting exacting spectres in a desert.

He stared at the open sea, his arms crossed, with a reflective fierceness. His very appearance made him utterly different from everyone on board that vessel. The grey shirt, the blue sash, one rolled-up sleeve baring a sculptural forearm, the negligent masterfulness of his tone and pose were very distasteful to Mr. Travers, who, having made up his mind to wait for some kind of official assistance, regarded the intrusion of that inexplicable man with suspicion. From the moment Lingard came on board the yacht, every eye in that vessel had been fixed upon him. Only Carter, within earshot and leaning with his elbow upon the rail, stared down at the deck as if overcome with drowsiness or lost in thought.

Of the three other persons aft, Mr. Travers kept his hands in the side pockets of his jacket and did not conceal his growing disgust.

On the other side of the deck, a lady, in a long chair, had a passive attitude that to Mr. d'Alcacer, standing near her, seemed characteristic of the manner in which she accepted the necessities of existence. Years before, as an attache of his Embassy in London, he had found her an interesting hostess. She was even more interesting now, since a chance meeting and Mr. Travers' offer of a passage to Batavia had given him an opportunity of studying the various shades of scorn which he suspected to be the secret of her acquiescence in the shallowness of events and the monotony of a worldly existence.

There were things that from the first he had not been able to understand; for instance, why she should have married Mr. Travers. It must have been from ambition. He could not help feeling that such a successful mistake would explain completely her scorn and also her acquiescence. The meeting in Manila had been utterly unexpected to him, and he accounted for it to his uncle, the Governor-General of the colony, by pointing out that Englishmen, when worsted in the struggle of love or politics, travel extensively, as if by encompassing a large portion of earth's surface they hoped to gather fresh strength for a renewed contest. As to himself, he judged--but did not say--that his contest with fate was ended, though he also travelled, leaving behind him in the capitals of Europe a story in which there was nothing scandalous but the publicity of an excessive feeling, and nothing more tragic than the early death of a woman whose brilliant perfections were no better known to the great world than the discreet and passionate devotion she had innocently inspired.

The invitation to join the yacht was the culminating point of many exchanged civilities, and was mainly prompted by Mr. Travers' desire to have somebody to talk to. D'Alcacer had accepted with the reckless indifference of a man to whom one method of flight from a relentless enemy is as good as another. Certainly the prospect of listening to long monologues on commerce, administration, and politics did not promise much alleviation to his sorrow; and he could not expect much else from Mr. Travers, whose life and thought, ignorant of human passion, were devoted to extracting the greatest possible amount of personal advantage from human institutions. D'Alcacer found, however, that he could attain a measure of forgetfulness--the most precious thing for him now--in the society of Edith Travers.

She had awakened his curiosity, which he thought nothing and nobody on earth could do any more.

These two talked of things indifferent and interesting, certainly not connected with human institutions, and only very slightly with human passions; but d'Alcacer could not help being made aware of her latent capacity for sympathy developed in those who are disenchanted with life or death. How far she was

disenchanted he did not know, and did not attempt to find out. This restraint was imposed upon him by the chivalrous respect he had for the secrets of women and by a conviction that deep feeling is often impenetrably obscure, even to those it masters for their inspiration or their ruin. He believed that even she herself would never know; but his grave curiosity was satisfied by the observation of her mental state, and he was not sorry that the stranding of the yacht prolonged his opportunity.

Time passed on that mudbank as well as anywhere else, and it was not from a multiplicity of events, but from the lapse of time alone, that he expected relief. Yet in the sameness of days upon the Shallows, time flowing ceaselessly, flowed imperceptibly; and, since every man clings to his own, be it joy, be it grief, he was pleased after the unrest of his wanderings to be able to fancy the whole universe and even time itself apparently come to a standstill; as if unwilling to take him away further from his sorrow, which was fading indeed but undiminished, as things fade, not in the distance but in the mist.