

II

D'Alcacer was a man of nearly forty, lean and sallow, with hollow eyes and a drooping brown moustache. His gaze was penetrating and direct, his smile frequent and fleeting. He observed Lingard with great interest. He was attracted by that elusive something--a line, a fold, perhaps the form of the eye, the droop of an eyelid, the curve of a cheek, that trifling trait which on no two faces on earth is alike, that in each face is the very foundation of expression, as if, all the rest being heredity, mystery, or accident, it alone had been shaped consciously by the soul within.

Now and then he bent slightly over the slow beat of a red fan in the curve of the deck chair to say a few words to Mrs. Travers, who answered him without looking up, without a modulation of tone or a play of feature, as if she had spoken from behind the veil of an immense indifference stretched between her and all men, between her heart and the meaning of events, between her eyes and the shallow sea which, like her gaze, appeared profound, forever stilled, and seemed, far off in the distance of a faint horizon, beyond the reach of eye, beyond the power of hand or voice, to lose itself in the sky.

Mr. Travers stepped aside, and speaking to Carter, overwhelmed him with reproaches.

"You misunderstood your instructions," murmured Mr. Travers rapidly. "Why did you bring this man here? I am surprised--"

"Not half so much as I was last night," growled the young seaman, without any reverence in his tone, very provoking to Mr. Travers.

"I perceive now you were totally unfit for the mission I entrusted you with," went on the owner of the yacht.

"It's he who got hold of me," said Carter. "Haven't you heard him yourself, sir?"

"Nonsense," whispered Mr. Travers, angrily. "Have you any idea what his intentions may be?"

"I half believe," answered Carter, "that his intention was to shoot me in his cabin last night if I--"

"That's not the point," interrupted Mr. Travers. "Have you any opinion as to his

motives in coming here?"

Carter raised his weary, bloodshot eyes in a face scarlet and peeling as though it had been licked by a flame. "I know no more than you do, sir. Last night when he had me in that cabin of his, he said he would just as soon shoot me as let me go to look for any other help. It looks as if he were desperately bent upon getting a lot of salvage money out of a stranded yacht."

Mr. Travers turned away, and, for a moment, appeared immersed in deep thought. This accident of stranding upon a deserted coast was annoying as a loss of time. He tried to minimize it by putting in order the notes collected during the year's travel in the East. He had sent off for assistance; his sailing-master, very crestfallen, made bold to say that the yacht would most likely float at the next spring tides; d'Alcacer, a person of undoubted nobility though of inferior principles, was better than no company, in so far at least that he could play picquet.

Mr. Travers had made up his mind to wait. Then suddenly this rough man, looking as if he had stepped out from an engraving in a book about buccaneers, broke in upon his resignation with mysterious allusions to danger, which sounded absurd yet were disturbing; with dark and warning sentences that sounded like disguised menaces.

Mr. Travers had a heavy and rather long chin which he shaved. His eyes were blue, a chill, naive blue. He faced Lingard untouched by travel, without a mark of weariness or exposure, with the air of having been born invulnerable. He had a full, pale face; and his complexion was perfectly colourless, yet amazingly fresh, as if he had been reared in the shade.

He thought:

"I must put an end to this preposterous hectoring. I won't be intimidated into paying for services I don't need."

Mr. Travers felt a strong disgust for the impudence of the attempt; and all at once, incredibly, strangely, as though the thing, like a contest with a rival or a friend, had been of profound importance to his career, he felt inexplicably elated at the thought of defeating the secret purposes of that man.

Lingard, unconscious of everything and everybody, contemplated the sea. He had grown on it, he had lived with it; it had enticed him away from home; on it his thoughts had expanded and his hand had found work to do. It had suggested endeavour, it had made him owner and commander of the finest brig afloat; it

had lulled him into a belief in himself, in his strength, in his luck--and suddenly, by its complicity in a fatal accident, it had brought him face to face with a difficulty that looked like the beginning of disaster.

He had said all he dared to say--and he perceived that he was not believed. This had not happened to him for years. It had never happened. It bewildered him as if he had suddenly discovered that he was no longer himself. He had come to them and had said: "I mean well by you. I am Tom Lingard--" and they did not believe! Before such scepticism he was helpless, because he had never imagined it possible. He had said: "You are in the way of my work. You are in the way of what I can not give up for any one; but I will see you through all safe if you will only trust me--me, Tom Lingard." And they would not believe him! It was intolerable. He imagined himself sweeping their disbelief out of his way. And why not? He did not know them, he did not care for them, he did not even need to lift his hand against them! All he had to do was to shut his eyes now for a day or two, and afterward he could forget that he had ever seen them. It would be easy. Let their disbelief vanish, their folly disappear, their bodies perish. . . . It was that--or ruin!