

IV

D'Alcacer, standing back, surveyed them all with a profound and alert attention. Lingard seemed unable to tear himself away from the yacht, and remained, checked, as it were in the act of going, like a man who has stopped to think out the last thing to say; and that stillness of a body, forgotten by the labouring mind, reminded Carter of that moment in the cabin, when alone he had seen this man thus wrestling with his thought, motionless and locked in the grip of his conscience.

Mr. Travers muttered audibly through his teeth:

"How long is this performance going to last? I have desired you to go."

"Think of these poor devils," whispered Lingard, with a quick glance at the crew huddled up near by.

"You are the kind of man I would be least disposed to trust--in any case," said Mr. Travers, incisively, very low, and with an inexplicable but very apparent satisfaction. "You are only wasting your time here."

"You--You--" He stammered and stared. He chewed with growls some insulting word and at last swallowed it with an effort. "My time pays for your life," he said.

He became aware of a sudden stir, and saw that Mrs. Travers had risen from her chair.

She walked impulsively toward the group on the quarter-deck, making straight for Immada. Hassim had stepped aside and his detached gaze of a Malay gentleman passed by her as if she had been invisible.

She was tall, supple, moving freely. Her complexion was so dazzling in the shade that it seemed to throw out a halo round her head. Upon a smooth and wide brow an abundance of pale fair hair, fine as silk, undulating like the sea, heavy like a helmet, descended low without a trace of gloss, without a gleam in its coils, as though it had never been touched by a ray of light; and a throat white, smooth, palpitating with life, a round neck modelled with strength and delicacy, supported gloriously that radiant face and that pale mass of hair unvisited by sunshine.

She said with animation:

"Why, it's a girl!"

Mrs. Travers extorted from d'Alcacer a fresh tribute of curiosity. A strong puff of wind fluttered the awnings and one of the screens blowing out wide let in upon the quarter-deck the rippling glitter of the Shallows, showing to d'Alcacer the luminous vastness of the sea, with the line of the distant horizon, dark like the edge of the encompassing night, drawn at the height of Mrs. Travers' shoulder. . . . Where was it he had seen her last--a long time before, on the other side of the world? There was also the glitter of splendour around her then, and an impression of luminous vastness. The encompassing night, too, was there, the night that waits for its time to move forward upon the glitter, the splendour, the men, the women.

He could not remember for the moment, but he became convinced that of all the women he knew, she alone seemed to be made for action. Every one of her movements had firmness, ease, the meaning of a vital fact, the moral beauty of a fearless expression. Her supple figure was not dishonoured by any faltering of outlines under the plain dress of dark blue stuff moulding her form with bold simplicity.

She had only very few steps to make, but before she had stopped, confronting Immada, d'Alcacer remembered her suddenly as he had seen her last, out West, far away, impossibly different, as if in another universe, as if presented by the fantasy of a fevered memory. He saw her in a luminous perspective of palatial drawing rooms, in the restless eddy and flow of a human sea, at the foot of walls high as cliffs, under lofty ceilings that like a tropical sky flung light and heat upon the shallow glitter of uniforms, of stars, of diamonds, of eyes sparkling in the weary or impassive faces of the throng at an official reception. Outside he had found the unavoidable darkness with its aspect of patient waiting, a cloudy sky holding back the dawn of a London morning. It was difficult to believe.

Lingard, who had been looking dangerously fierce, slapped his thigh and showed signs of agitation.

"By heavens, I had forgotten all about you!" he pronounced in dismay.

Mrs. Travers fixed her eyes on Immada. Fairhaired and white she asserted herself before the girl of olive face and raven locks with the maturity of perfection, with the superiority of the flower over the leaf, of the phrase that contains a thought over the cry that can only express an emotion. Immense spaces and countless centuries stretched between them: and she looked at her as when one looks into one's own heart with absorbed curiosity, with still wonder, with an immense compassion. Lingard murmured, warningly:

"Don't touch her."

Mrs. Travers looked at him.

"Do you think I could hurt her?" she asked, softly, and was so startled to hear him mutter a gloomy "Perhaps," that she hesitated before she smiled.

"Almost a child! And so pretty! What a delicate face," she said, while another deep sigh of the sea breeze lifted and let fall the screens, so that the sound, the wind, and the glitter seemed to rush in together and bear her words away into space. "I had no idea of anything so charmingly gentle," she went on in a voice that without effort glowed, caressed, and had a magic power of delight to the soul. "So young! And she lives here--does she? On the sea--or where? Lives--" Then faintly, as if she had been in the act of speaking, removed instantly to a great distance, she was heard again: "How does she live?"

Lingard had hardly seen Edith Travers till then. He had seen no one really but Mr. Travers. He looked and listened with something of the stupor of a new sensation.

Then he made a distinct effort to collect his thoughts and said with a remnant of anger:

"What have you got to do with her? She knows war. Do you know anything about it? And hunger, too, and thirst, and unhappiness; things you have only heard about. She has been as near death as I am to you--and what is all that to any of you here?"

"That child!" she said in slow wonder.

Immada turned upon Mrs. Travers her eyes black as coal, sparkling and soft like a tropical night; and the glances of the two women, their dissimilar and inquiring glances met, seemed to touch, clasp, hold each other with the grip of an intimate contact. They separated.

"What are they come for? Why did you show them the way to this place?" asked Immada, faintly.

Lingard shook his head in denial.

"Poor girl," said Mrs. Travers. "Are they all so pretty?"

"Who-all?" mumbled Lingard. "There isn't an other one like her if you were to ransack the islands all round the compass."

"Edith!" ejaculated Mr. Travers in a remonstrating, acrimonious voice, and everyone gave him a look of vague surprise.

Then Mrs. Travers asked:

"Who is she?"

Lingard very red and grave declared curtly:

"A princess."

Immediately he looked round with suspicion. No one smiled. D'Alcacer, courteous and nonchalant, lounged up close to Mrs. Travers' elbow.

"If she is a princess, then this man is a knight," he murmured with conviction. "A knight as I live! A descendant of the immortal hidalgo errant upon the sea. It would be good for us to have him for a friend. Seriously I think that you ought--"

The two stepped aside and spoke low and hurriedly.

"Yes, you ought--"

"How can I?" she interrupted, catching the meaning like a ball.

"By saying something."

"Is it really necessary?" she asked, doubtfully.

"It would do no harm," said d'Alcacer with sudden carelessness; "a friend is always better than an enemy."

"Always?" she repeated, meaningly. "But what could I say?"

"Some words," he answered; "I should think any words in your voice--"

"Mr. d'Alcacer!"

"Or you could perhaps look at him once or twice as though he were not exactly a robber," he continued.

"Mr. d'Alcacer, are you afraid?"

"Extremely," he said, stooping to pick up the fan at her feet. "That is the reason I am so anxious to conciliate. And you must not forget that one of your queens once stepped on the cloak of perhaps such a man."

Her eyes sparkled and she dropped them suddenly.

"I am not a queen," she said, coldly.

"Unfortunately not," he admitted; "but then the other was a woman with no charm but her crown."

At that moment Lingard, to whom Hassim had been talking earnestly, protested aloud:

"I never saw these people before."

Immada caught hold of her brother's arm. Mr. Travers said harshly:

"Oblige me by taking these natives away."

"Never before," murmured Immada as if lost in ecstasy. D'Alcacer glanced at Mrs. Travers and made a step forward.

"Could not the difficulty, whatever it is, be arranged, Captain?" he said with careful politeness. "Observe that we are not only men here--"

"Let them die!" cried Immada, triumphantly.

Though Lingard alone understood the meaning of these words, all on board felt oppressed by the uneasy silence which followed her cry.

"Ah! He is going. Now, Mrs. Travers," whispered d'Alcacer.

"I hope!" said Mrs. Travers, impulsively, and stopped as if alarmed at the sound.

Lingard stood still.

"I hope," she began again, "that this poor girl will know happier days--" She hesitated.

Lingard waited, attentive and serious.

"Under your care," she finished. "And I believe you meant to be friendly to us."

"Thank you," said Lingard with dignity.

"You and d'Alcacer," observed Mr. Travers, austerely, "are unnecessarily detaining this--ah--person, and--ah--friends--ah!"

"I had forgotten you--and now--what? One must--it is hard--hard--" went on Lingard, disconnectedly, while he looked into Mrs. Travers' violet eyes, and felt his mind overpowered and troubled as if by the contemplation of vast distances. "I--you don't know--I--you--cannot . . . Ha! It's all that man's doing," he burst out.

For a time, as if beside himself, he glared at Mrs. Travers, then flung up one arm and strode off toward the gangway, where Hassim and Immada waited for him, interested and patient. With a single word "Come," he preceded them down into the boat. Not a sound was heard on the yacht's deck, while these three disappeared one after another below the rail as if they had descended into the sea.