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After a time this absolute silence which she almost could feel pressing upon her on all sides induced in Mrs. Travers a state of hallucination. She saw herself standing alone, at the end of time, on the brink of days. All was unmoving as if the dawn would never come, the stars would never fade, the sun would never rise any more; all was mute, still, dead--as if the shadow of the outer darkness, the shadow of the uninterrupted, of the everlasting night that fills the universe, the shadow of the night so profound and so vast that the blazing suns lost in it are only like sparks, like pin-points of fire, the restless shadow that like a suspicion of an evil truth darkens everything upon the earth on its passage, had enveloped her, had stood arrested as if to remain with her forever.

And there was such a finality in that illusion, such an accord with the trend of her thought that when she murmured into the darkness a faint "so be it" she seemed to have spoken one of those sentences that resume and close a life.

As a young girl, often reprov'd for her romantic ideas, she had dreams where the sincerity of a great passion appeared like the ideal fulfilment and the only truth of life. Entering the world she discovered that ideal to be unattainable because the world is too prudent to be sincere. Then she hoped that she could find the truth of life an ambition which she understood as a lifelong devotion to some unselfish ideal. Mr. Travers' name was on men's lips; he seemed capable of enthusiasm and of devotion; he impressed her imagination by his impenetrability. She married him, found him enthusiastically devoted to the nursing of his own career, and had nothing to hope for now.

That her husband should be bewildered by the curious misunderstanding which had taken place and also permanently grieved by her disloyalty to his respectable ideals was only natural. He was, however, perfectly satisfied with her beauty, her brilliance, and her useful connections. She was admired, she was envied; she was surrounded by splendour and adulation; the days went on rapid, brilliant, uniform, without a glimpse of sincerity or true passion, without a single true emotion--not even that of a great sorrow. And swiftly and stealthily they had led her on and on, to this evening, to this coast, to this sea, to this moment of time and to this spot on the earth's surface where she felt unerringly that the moving shadow of the unbroken night had stood still to remain with her forever.

"So be it!" she murmured, resigned and defiant, at the mute and smooth obscurity that hung before her eyes in a black curtain without a fold; and as if in answer to that whisper a lantern was run up to the foreyard-arm of the brig. She

saw it ascend swinging for a short space, and suddenly remain motionless in the air, piercing the dense night between the two vessels by its glance of flame that strong and steady seemed, from afar, to fall upon her alone.

Her thoughts, like a fascinated moth, went fluttering toward that light--that man--that girl, who had known war, danger, seen death near, had obtained evidently the devotion of that man. The occurrences of the afternoon had been strange in themselves, but what struck her artistic sense was the vigour of their presentation. They outlined themselves before her memory with the clear simplicity of some immortal legend. They were mysterious, but she felt certain they were absolutely true. They embodied artless and masterful feelings; such, no doubt, as had swayed mankind in the simplicity of its youth. She envied, for a moment, the lot of that humble and obscure sister. Nothing stood between that girl and the truth of her sensations. She could be sincerely courageous, and tender and passionate and--well--ferocious. Why not ferocious? She could know the truth of terror--and of affection, absolutely, without artificial trammels, without the pain of restraint.

Thinking of what such life could be Mrs. Travers felt invaded by that inexplicable exaltation which the consciousness of their physical capacities so often gives to intellectual beings. She glowed with a sudden persuasion that she also could be equal to such an existence; and her heart was dilated with a momentary longing to know the naked truth of things; the naked truth of life and passion buried under the growth of centuries.

She glowed and, suddenly, she quivered with the shock of coming to herself as if she had fallen down from a star. There was a sound of rippling water and a shapeless mass glided out of the dark void she confronted. A voice below her feet said:

"I made out your shape--on the sky." A cry of surprise expired on her lips and she could only peer downward. Lingard, alone in the brig's dinghy, with another stroke sent the light boat nearly under the yacht's counter, laid his sculls in, and rose from the thwart. His head and shoulders loomed up alongside and he had the appearance of standing upon the sea. Involuntarily Mrs. Travers made a movement of retreat.

"Stop," he said, anxiously, "don't speak loud. No one must know. Where do your people think themselves, I wonder? In a dock at home? And you--"

"My husband is not on board," she interrupted, hurriedly.

"I know."

She bent a little more over the rail.

"Then you are having us watched. Why?"

"Somebody must watch. Your people keep such a good look-out--don't they? Yes. Ever since dark one of my boats has been dodging astern here, in the deep water. I swore to myself I would never see one of you, never speak to one of you here, that I would be dumb, blind, deaf. And--here I am!"

Mrs. Travers' alarm and mistrust were replaced by an immense curiosity, burning, yet quiet, too, as if before the inevitable work of destiny. She looked downward at Lingard. His head was bared, and, with one hand upon the ship's side, he seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Because you had something more to tell us," Mrs. Travers suggested, gently.

"Yes," he said in a low tone and without moving in the least.

"Will you come on board and wait?" she asked.

"Who? I!" He lifted his head so quickly as to startle her. "I have nothing to say to him; and I'll never put my foot on board this craft. I've been told to go. That's enough."

"He is accustomed to be addressed deferentially," she said after a pause, "and you--"

"Who is he?" asked Lingard, simply.

These three words seemed to her to scatter her past in the air--like smoke. They robbed all the multitude of mankind of every vestige of importance. She was amazed to find that on this night, in this place, there could be no adequate answer to the searching naiveness of that question.

"I didn't ask for much," Lingard began again. "Did I? Only that you all should come on board my brig for five days. That's all. . . . Do I look like a liar? There are things I could not tell him. I couldn't explain--I couldn't--not to him--to no man--to no man in the world--"

His voice dropped.

"Not to myself," he ended as if in a dream.

"We have remained unmolested so long here," began Mrs. Travers a little unsteadily, "that it makes it very difficult to believe in danger, now. We saw no one all these days except those two people who came for you. If you may not explain--"

"Of course, you can't be expected to see through a wall," broke in Lingard. "This coast's like a wall, but I know what's on the other side. . . . A yacht here, of all things that float! When I set eyes on her I could fancy she hadn't been more than an hour from home. Nothing but the look of her spars made me think of old times. And then the faces of the chaps on board. I seemed to know them all. It was like home coming to me when I wasn't thinking of it. And I hated the sight of you all."

"If we are exposed to any peril," she said after a pause during which she tried to penetrate the secret of passion hidden behind that man's words, "it need not affect you. Our other boat is gone to the Straits and effective help is sure to come very soon."

"Affect me! Is that precious watchman of yours coming aft? I don't want anybody to know I came here again begging, even of you. Is he coming aft? . . . Listen! I've stopped your other boat."

His head and shoulders disappeared as though he had dived into a denser layer of obscurity floating on the water. The watchman, who had the intention to stretch himself in one of the deck chairs, catching sight of the owner's wife, walked straight to the lamp that hung under the ridge pole of the awning, and after fumbling with it for a time went away forward with an indolent gait.

"You dared!" Mrs. Travers whispered down in an intense tone; and directly, Lingard's head emerged again below her with an upturned face.

"It was dare--or give up. The help from the Straits would have been too late anyhow if I hadn't the power to keep you safe; and if I had the power I could see you through it--alone. I expected to find a reasonable man to talk to. I ought to have known better. You come from too far to understand these things. Well, I dared; I've sent after your other boat a fellow who, with me at his back, would try to stop the governor of the Straits himself. He will do it. Perhaps it's done already. You have nothing to hope for. But I am here. You said you believed I meant well--"

"Yes," she murmured.

"That's why I thought I would tell you everything. I had to begin with this business about the boat. And what do you think of me now? I've cut you off from the rest of the earth. You people would disappear like a stone in the water. You left one foreign port for another. Who's there to trouble about what became of you? Who would know? Who could guess? It would be months before they began to stir."

"I understand," she said, steadily, "we are helpless."

"And alone," he added.

After a pause she said in a deliberate, restrained voice:

"What does this mean? Plunder, captivity?"

"It would have meant death if I hadn't been here," he answered.

"But you have the power to--"

"Why, do you think, you are alive yet?" he cried. "Jorgenson has been arguing with them on shore," he went on, more calmly, with a swing of his arm toward where the night seemed darkest. "Do you think he would have kept them back if they hadn't expected me every day? His words would have been nothing without my fist."

She heard a dull blow struck on the side of the yacht and concealed in the same darkness that wrapped the unconcern of the earth and sea, the fury and the pain of hearts; she smiled above his head, fascinated by the simplicity of images and expressions.

Lingard made a brusque movement, the lively little boat being unsteady under his feet, and she spoke slowly, absently, as if her thought had been lost in the vagueness of her sensations.

"And this--this--Jorgenson, you said? Who is he?"

"A man," he answered, "a man like myself."

"Like yourself?"

"Just like myself," he said with strange reluctance, as if admitting a painful truth. "More sense, perhaps, but less luck. Though, since your yacht has turned up here, I begin to think that my luck is nothing much to boast of either."

"Is our presence here so fatal?"

"It may be death to some. It may be worse than death to me. And it rests with you in a way. Think of that! I can never find such another chance again. But that's nothing! A man who has saved my life once and that I passed my word to would think I had thrown him over. But that's nothing! Listen! As true as I stand here in my boat talking to you, I believe the girl would die of grief."

"You love her," she said, softly.

"Like my own daughter," he cried, low.

Mrs. Travers said, "Oh!" faintly, and for a moment there was a silence, then he began again:

"Look here. When I was a boy in a trawler, and looked at you yacht people, in the Channel ports, you were as strange to me as the Malays here are strange to you. I left home sixteen years ago and fought my way all round the earth. I had the time to forget where I began. What are you to me against these two? If I was to die here on the spot would you care? No one would care at home. No one in the whole world--but these two."

"What can I do?" she asked, and waited, leaning over.

He seemed to reflect, then lifting his head, spoke gently:

"Do you understand the danger you are in? Are you afraid?"

"I understand the expression you used, of course. Understand the danger?" she went on. "No--decidedly no. And--honestly--I am not afraid."

"Aren't you?" he said in a disappointed voice. "Perhaps you don't believe me? I believed you, though, when you said you were sure I meant well. I trusted you enough to come here asking for your help--telling you what no one knows."

"You mistake me," she said with impulsive earnestness. "This is so extraordinarily unusual--sudden--outside my experience."

"Aye!" he murmured, "what would you know of danger and trouble? You! But perhaps by thinking it over--"

"You want me to think myself into a fright!" Mrs. Travers laughed lightly, and in

the gloom of his thought this flash of joyous sound was incongruous and almost terrible. Next moment the night appeared brilliant as day, warm as sunshine; but when she ceased the returning darkness gave him pain as if it had struck heavily against his breast. "I don't think I could do that," she finished in a serious tone.

"Couldn't you?" He hesitated, perplexed. "Things are bad enough to make it no shame. I tell you," he said, rapidly, "and I am not a timid man, I may not be able to do much if you people don't help me."

"You want me to pretend I am alarmed?" she asked, quickly.

"Aye, to pretend--as well you may. It's a lot to ask of you--who perhaps never had to make-believe a thing in your life--isn't it?"

"It is," she said after a time.

The unexpected bitterness of her tone struck Lingard with dismay.

"Don't be offended," he entreated. "I've got to plan a way out of this mess. It's no play either. Could you pretend?"

"Perhaps, if I tried very hard. But to what end?"

"You must all shift aboard the brig," he began, speaking quickly, "and then we may get over this trouble without coming to blows. Now, if you were to say that you wish it; that you feel unsafe in the yacht--don't you see?"

"I see," she pronounced, thoughtfully.

"The brig is small but the cuddy is fit for a lady," went on Lingard with animation.

"Has it not already sheltered a princess?" she commented, coolly.

"And I shall not intrude."

"This is an inducement."

"Nobody will dare to intrude. You needn't even see me."

"This is almost decisive, only--"

"I know my place."

"Only, I might not have the influence," she finished.

"That I can not believe," he said, roughly. "The long and the short of it is you don't trust me because you think that only people of your own condition speak the truth always."

"Evidently," she murmured.

"You say to yourself--here's a fellow deep in with pirates, thieves, niggers--"

"To be sure--"

"A man I never saw the like before," went on Lingard, headlong, "a--ruffian."

He checked himself, full of confusion. After a time he heard her saying, calmly:

"You are like other men in this, that you get angry when you can not have your way at once."

"I angry!" he exclaimed in deadened voice. "You do not understand. I am thinking of you also--it is hard on me--"

"I mistrust not you, but my own power. You have produced an unfortunate impression on Mr. Travers."

"Unfortunate impression! He treated me as if I had been a long-shore loafer. Never mind that. He is your husband. Fear in those you care for is hard to bear for any man. And so, he--"

"What Machiavellism!"

"Eh, what did you say?"

"I only wondered where you had observed that. On the sea?"

"Observed what?" he said, absently. Then pursuing his idea--"One word from you ought to be enough."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. Why, even I, myself--"

"Of course," she interrupted. "But don't you think that after parting with you on

such--such--inimical terms, there would be a difficulty in resuming relations?"

"A man like me would do anything for money--don't you see?"

After a pause she asked:

"And would you care for that argument to be used?"

"As long as you know better!"

His voice vibrated--she drew back disturbed, as if unexpectedly he had touched her.

"What can there be at stake?" she began, wonderingly.

"A kingdom," said Lingard.

Mrs. Travers leaned far over the rail, staring, and their faces, one above the other, came very close together.

"Not for yourself?" she whispered.

He felt the touch of her breath on his forehead and remained still for a moment, perfectly still as if he did not intend to move or speak any more.

"Those things," he began, suddenly, "come in your way, when you don't think, and they get all round you before you know what you mean to do. When I went into that bay in New Guinea I never guessed where that course would take me to. I could tell you a story. You would understand! You! You!"

He stammered, hesitated, and suddenly spoke, liberating the visions of two years into the night where Mrs. Travers could follow them as if outlined in words of fire.