

VII

His tale was as startling as the discovery of a new world. She was being taken along the boundary of an exciting existence, and she looked into it through the guileless enthusiasm of the narrator. The heroic quality of the feelings concealed what was disproportionate and absurd in that gratitude, in that friendship, in that inexplicable devotion. The headlong fierceness of purpose invested his obscure design of conquest with the proportions of a great enterprise. It was clear that no vision of a subjugated world could have been more inspiring to the most famous adventurer of history.

From time to time he interrupted himself to ask, confidently, as if he had been speaking to an old friend, "What would you have done?" and hurried on without pausing for approval.

It struck her that there was a great passion in all this, the beauty of an implanted faculty of affection that had found itself, its immediate need of an object and the way of expansion; a tenderness expressed violently; a tenderness that could only be satisfied by backing human beings against their own destiny. Perhaps her hatred of convention, trammelling the frankness of her own impulses, had rendered her more alert to perceive what is intrinsically great and profound within the forms of human folly, so simple and so infinitely varied according to the region of the earth and to the moment of time.

What of it that the narrator was only a roving seaman; the kingdom of the jungle, the men of the forest, the lives obscure! That simple soul was possessed by the greatness of the idea; there was nothing sordid in its flaming impulses. When she once understood that, the story appealed to the audacity of her thoughts, and she became so charmed with what she heard that she forgot where she was. She forgot that she was personally close to that tale which she saw detached, far away from her, truth or fiction, presented in picturesque speech, real only by the response of her emotion.

Lingard paused. In the cessation of the impassioned murmur she began to reflect. And at first it was only an oppressive notion of there being some significance that really mattered in this man's story. That mattered to her. For the first time the shadow of danger and death crossed her mind. Was that the significance? Suddenly, in a flash of acute discernment, she saw herself involved helplessly in that story, as one is involved in a natural cataclysm.

He was speaking again. He had not been silent more than a minute. It seemed to

Mrs. Travers that years had elapsed, so different now was the effect of his words. Her mind was agitated as if his coming to speak and confide in her had been a tremendous occurrence. It was a fact of her own existence; it was part of the story also. This was the disturbing thought. She heard him pronounce several names: Belarab, Daman, Tenggara, Ningrat. These belonged now to her life and she was appalled to find she was unable to connect these names with any human appearance. They stood out alone, as if written on the night; they took on a symbolic shape; they imposed themselves upon her senses. She whispered as if pondering: "Belarab, Daman, Ningrat," and these barbarous sounds seemed to possess an exceptional energy, a fatal aspect, the savour of madness.

"Not one of them but has a heavy score to settle with the whites. What's that to me! I had somehow to get men who would fight. I risked my life to get that lot. I made them promises which I shall keep--or--! Can you see now why I dared to stop your boat? I am in so deep that I care for no Sir John in the world. When I look at the work ahead I care for nothing. I gave you one chance--one good chance. That I had to do. No! I suppose I didn't look enough of a gentleman. Yes! Yes! That's it. Yet I know what a gentleman is. I lived with them for years. I chummed with them--yes--on gold-fields and in other places where a man has got to show the stuff that's in him. Some of them write from home to me here--such as you see me, because I--never mind! And I know what a gentleman would do. Come! Wouldn't he treat a stranger fairly? Wouldn't he remember that no man is a liar till you prove him so? Wouldn't he keep his word wherever given? Well, I am going to do that. Not a hair of your head shall be touched as long as I live!"

She had regained much of her composure but at these words she felt that staggering sense of utter insecurity which is given one by the first tremor of an earthquake. It was followed by an expectant stillness of sensations. She remained silent. He thought she did not believe him.

"Come! What on earth do you think brought me here--to--to--talk like this to you? There was Hassim--Rajah Tulla, I should say--who was asking me this afternoon: 'What will you do now with these, your people?' I believe he thinks yet I fetched you here for some reason. You can't tell what crooked notion they will get into their thick heads. It's enough to make one swear." He swore. "My people! Are you? How much? Say--how much? You're no more mine than I am yours. Would any of you fine folks at home face black ruin to save a fishing smack's crew from getting drowned?"

Notwithstanding that sense of insecurity which lingered faintly in her mind she had no image of death before her. She felt intensely alive. She felt alive in a flush of strength, with an impression of novelty as though life had been the gift of this very moment. The danger hidden in the night gave no sign to awaken her terror,

but the workings of a human soul, simple and violent, were laid bare before her and had the disturbing charm of an unheard-of experience. She was listening to a man who concealed nothing. She said, interrogatively:

"And yet you have come?"

"Yes," he answered, "to you--and for you only."

The flood tide running strong over the banks made a placid trickling sound about the yacht's rudder.

"I would not be saved alone."

"Then you must bring them over yourself," he said in a sombre tone. "There's the brig. You have me--my men--my guns. You know what to do.

"I will try," she said.

"Very well. I am sorry for the poor devils forward there if you fail. But of course you won't. Watch that light on the brig. I had it hoisted on purpose. The trouble may be nearer than we think. Two of my boats are gone scouting and if the news they bring me is bad the light will be lowered. Think what that means. And I've told you what I have told nobody. Think of my feelings also. I told you because I--because I had to."

He gave a shove against the yacht's side and glided away from under her eyes. A rippling sound died out.

She walked away from the rail. The lamp and the skylights shone faintly along the dark stretch of the decks. This evening was like the last--like all the evenings before.

"Is all this I have heard possible?" she asked herself. "No--but it is true."

She sat down in a deck chair to think and found she could only remember. She jumped up. She was sure somebody was hailing the yacht faintly. Was that man hailing? She listened, and hearing nothing was annoyed with herself for being haunted by a voice.

"He said he could trust me. Now, what is this danger? What is danger?" she meditated.

Footsteps were coming from forward. The figure of the watchman flitted vaguely

over the gangway. He was whistling softly and vanished. Hollow sounds in the boat were succeeded by a splash of oars. The night swallowed these slight noises. Mrs. Travers sat down again and found herself much calmer.

She had the faculty of being able to think her own thoughts--and the courage. She could take no action of any kind till her husband's return. Lingard's warnings were not what had impressed her most. This man had presented his innermost self unclothed by any subterfuge. There were in plain sight his desires, his perplexities, affections, doubts, his violence, his folly; and the existence they made up was lawless but not vile. She had too much elevation of mind to look upon him from any other but a strictly human standpoint. If he trusted her (how strange; why should he? Was he wrong?) she accepted the trust with scrupulous fairness. And when it dawned upon her that of all the men in the world this unquestionably was the one she knew best, she had a moment of wonder followed by an impression of profound sadness. It seemed an unfortunate matter that concerned her alone.

Her thought was suspended while she listened attentively for the return of the yacht's boat. She was dismayed at the task before her. Not a sound broke the stillness and she felt as if she were lost in empty space. Then suddenly someone amidships yawned immensely and said: "Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" A voice asked: "Ain't they back yet?" A negative grunt answered.

Mrs. Travers found that Lingard was touching, because he could be understood. How simple was life, she reflected. She was frank with herself. She considered him apart from social organization. She discovered he had no place in it. How delightful! Here was a human being and the naked truth of things was not so very far from her notwithstanding the growth of centuries. Then it occurred to her that this man by his action stripped her at once of her position, of her wealth, of her rank, of her past. "I am helpless. What remains?" she asked herself. Nothing! Anybody there might have suggested: "Your presence." She was too artificial yet to think of her beauty; and yet the power of personality is part of the naked truth of things.

She looked over her shoulder, and saw the light at the brig's foreyard-arm burning with a strong, calm flame in the dust of starlight suspended above the coast. She heard the heavy bump as of a boat run headlong against the ladder. They were back! She rose in sudden and extreme agitation. What should she say? How much? How to begin? Why say anything? It would be absurd, like talking seriously about a dream. She would not dare! In a moment she was driven into a state of mind bordering on distraction. She heard somebody run up the gangway steps. With the idea of gaining time she walked rapidly aft to the taffrail. The light of the brig faced her without a flicker, enormous amongst the suns scattered in

the immensity of the night.

She fixed her eyes on it. She thought: "I shan't tell him anything. Impossible. No! I shall tell everything." She expected every moment to hear her husband's voice and the suspense was intolerable because she felt that then she must decide. Somebody on deck was babbling excitedly. She devoutly hoped d'Alcacer would speak first and thus put off the fatal moment. A voice said roughly: "What's that?" And in the midst of her distress she recognized Carter's voice, having noticed that young man who was of a different stamp from the rest of the crew. She came to the conclusion that the matter could be related jocularly, or--why not pretend fear? At that moment the brig's yard-arm light she was looking at trembled distinctly, and she was dumfounded as if she had seen a commotion in the firmament. With her lips open for a cry she saw it fall straight down several feet, flicker, and go out. All perplexity passed from her mind. This first fact of the danger gave her a thrill of quite a new emotion. Something had to be done at once. For some remote reason she felt ashamed of her hesitations.

She moved swiftly forward and under the lamp came face to face with Carter who was coming aft. Both stopped, staring, the light fell on their faces, and both were struck by each other's expression. The four eyes shone wide.

"You have seen?" she asked, beginning to tremble.

"How do you know?" he said, at the same time, evidently surprised.

Suddenly she saw that everybody was on deck.

"The light is down," she stammered.

"The gentlemen are lost," said Carter. Then he perceived she did not seem to understand. "Kidnapped off the sandbank," he continued, looking at her fixedly to see how she would take it. She seemed calm. "Kidnapped like a pair of lambs! Not a squeak," he burst out with indignation. "But the sandbank is long and they might have been at the other end. You were on deck, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes," she murmured. "In the chair here."

"We were all down below. I had to rest a little. When I came up the watchman was asleep. He swears he wasn't, but I know better. Nobody heard any noise, unless you did. But perhaps you were asleep?" he asked, deferentially.

"Yes--no--I must have been," she said, faintly.