

IX

The letter went on to enlarge on the intrigues of Tengga, the wavering conduct of Belarab, and the state of the public mind. It noted every gust of opinion and every event, with an earnestness of belief in their importance befitting the chronicle of a crisis in the history of an empire. The shade of Jorgenson had, indeed, stepped back into the life of men. The old adventurer looked on with a perfect understanding of the value of trifles, using his eyes for that other man whose conscience would have the task to unravel the tangle. Lingard lived through those days in the Settlement and was thankful to Jorgenson; only as he lived not from day to day but from sentence to sentence of the writing, there was an effect of bewildering rapidity in the succession of events that made him grunt with surprise sometimes or growl--"What?" to himself angrily and turn back several lines or a whole page more than once. Toward the end he had a heavy frown of perplexity and fidgeted as he read:

--and I began to think I could keep things quiet till you came or those wretched white people got their schooner off, when Sherif Daman arrived from the north on the very day he was expected, with two Illanun praus. He looks like an Arab. It was very evident to me he can wind the two Illanun pangerans round his little finger. The two praus are large and armed. They came up the creek, flags and streamers flying, beating drums and gongs, and entered the lagoon with their decks full of armed men brandishing two-handed swords and sounding the war cry. It is a fine force for you, only Belarab who is a perverse devil would not receive Sherif Daman at once. So Daman went to see Tengga who detained him a very long time. Leaving Tengga he came on board the Emma, and I could see directly there was something up.

He began by asking me for the ammunition and weapons they are to get from you, saying he was anxious to sail at once toward Wajo, since it was agreed he was to precede you by a few days. I replied that that was true enough but that I could not think of giving him the powder and muskets till you came. He began to talk about you and hinted that perhaps you will never come. "And no matter," says he, "here is Rajah Hassim and the Lady Immada and we would fight for them if no white man was left in the world. Only we must have something to fight with." He pretended then to forget me altogether and talked with Hassim while I sat listening. He began to boast how well he got along the Bruni coast. No Illanun prau had passed down that coast for years.

Immada wanted me to give the arms he was asking for. The girl is beside herself with fear of something happening that would put a stopper on the Wajo

expedition. She has set her mind on getting her country back. Hassim is very reserved but he is very anxious, too. Daman got nothing from me, and that very evening the praus were ordered by Belarab to leave the lagoon. He does not trust the Illanuns--and small blame to him. Sherif Daman went like a lamb. He has no powder for his guns. As the praus passed by the Emma he shouted to me he was going to wait for you outside the creek. Tengga has given him a man who would show him the place. All this looks very queer to me.

Look out outside then. The praus are dodging amongst the islets. Daman visits Tengga. Tengga called on me as a good friend to try and persuade me to give Daman the arms and gunpowder he is so anxious to get. Somehow or other they tried to get around Belarab, who came to see me last night and hinted I had better do so. He is anxious for these Illanuns to leave the neighbourhood. He thinks that if they loot the schooner they will be off at once. That's all he wants now. Immada has been to see Belarab's women and stopped two nights in the stockade. Belarab's youngest wife--he got married six weeks ago--is on the side of Tengga's party because she thinks Belarab would get a share of the loot and she got into her silly head there are jewels and silks in that schooner. What between Tengga worrying him outside and the women worrying him at home, Belarab had such a lively time of it that he concluded he would go to pray at his father's tomb. So for the last two days he has been away camping in that unhealthy place. When he comes back he will be down with fever as sure as fate and then he will be no good for anything. Tengga lights up smoky fires often. Some signal to Daman. I go ashore with Hassim's men and put them out. This is risking a fight every time--for Tengga's men look very black at us. I don't know what the next move may be. Hassim's as true as steel. Immada is very unhappy. They will tell you many details I have no time to write.

The last page fluttered on the table out of Lingard's fingers. He sat very still for a moment looking straight before him, then went on deck.

"Our boats back yet?" he asked Shaw, whom he saw prowling on the quarter-deck.

"No, sir, I wish they were. I am waiting for them to go and turn in," answered the mate in an aggrieved manner.

"Lower that lantern forward there," cried Lingard, suddenly, in Malay.

"This trade isn't fit for a decent man," muttered Shaw to himself, and he moved away to lean on the rail, looking moodily to seaward. After a while: "There seems to be commotion on board that yacht," he said. "I see a lot of lights moving about her decks. Anything wrong, do you think, sir?"

"No, I know what it is," said Lingard in a tone of elation. She has done it! he thought.

He returned to the cabin, put away Jorgenson's letter and pulled out the drawer of the table. It was full of cartridges. He took a musket down, loaded it, then took another and another. He hammered at the waddings with fierce joyousness. The ramrods rang and jumped. It seemed to him he was doing his share of some work in which that woman was playing her part faithfully. "She has done it," he repeated, mentally. "She will sit in the cuddy. She will sleep in my berth. Well, I'm not ashamed of the brig. By heavens--no! I shall keep away: never come near them as I've promised. Now there's nothing more to say. I've told her everything at once. There's nothing more."

He felt a heaviness in his burning breast, in all his limbs as if the blood in his veins had become molten lead.

"I shall get the yacht off. Three, four days--no, a week."

He found he couldn't do it under a week. It occurred to him he would see her every day till the yacht was afloat. No, he wouldn't intrude, but he was master and owner of the brig after all. He didn't mean to skulk like a whipped cur about his own decks.

"It'll be ten days before the schooner is ready. I'll take every scrap of ballast out of her. I'll strip her--I'll take her lower masts out of her, by heavens! I'll make sure. Then another week to fit out--and--goodbye. Wish I had never seen them. Good-bye--forever. Home's the place for them. Not for me. On another coast she would not have listened. Ah, but she is a woman--every inch of her. I shall shake hands. Yes. I shall take her hand--just before she goes. Why the devil not? I am master here after all--in this brig--as good as any one--by heavens, better than any one--better than any one on earth."

He heard Shaw walk smartly forward above his head hailing:

"What's that--a boat?"

A voice answered indistinctly.

"One of my boats is back," thought Lingard. "News about Daman perhaps. I don't care if he kicks. I wish he would. I would soon show her I can fight as well as I can handle the brig. Two praus. Only two praus. I wouldn't mind if there were twenty. I would sweep 'em off the sea--I would blow 'em out of the water--I would

make the brig walk over them. 'Now,' I'd say to her, 'you who are not afraid, look how it's done!'"

He felt light. He had the sensation of being whirled high in the midst of an uproar and as powerless as a feather in a hurricane. He shuddered profoundly. His arms hung down, and he stood before the table staring like a man overcome by some fatal intelligence.

Shaw, going into the waist to receive what he thought was one of the brig's boats, came against Carter making his way aft hurriedly.

"Hullo! Is it you again?" he said, swiftly, barring the way.

"I come from the yacht," began Carter with some impatience.

"Where else could you come from?" said Shaw. "And what might you want now?"

"I want to see your skipper."

"Well, you can't," declared Shaw, viciously. "He's turned in for the night."

"He expects me," said Carter, stamping his foot. "I've got to tell him what happened."

"Don't you fret yourself, young man," said Shaw in a superior manner; "he knows all about it."

They stood suddenly silent in the dark. Carter seemed at a loss what to do. Shaw, though surprised by it, enjoyed the effect he had produced.

"Damn me, if I did not think so," murmured Carter to himself; then drawing coolly asked--"And perhaps you know, too?"

"What do you think? Think I am a dummy here? I ain't mate of this brig for nothing."

"No, you are not," said Carter with a certain bitterness of tone. "People do all kinds of queer things for a living, and I am not particular myself, but I would think twice before taking your billet."

"What? What do you in-si-nu-ate. My billet? You ain't fit for it, you yacht-swabbing brass-buttoned imposter."

"What's this? Any of our boats back?" asked Lingard from the poop. "Let the seacannie in charge come to me at once."

"There's only a message from the yacht," began Shaw, deliberately.

"Yacht! Get the deck lamps along here in the waist! See the ladder lowered. Bear a hand, serang! Mr. Shaw! Burn the flare up aft. Two of them! Give light to the yacht's boats that will be coming alongside. Steward! Where's that steward? Turn him out then."

Bare feet began to patter all round Carter. Shadows glided swiftly.

"Are these flares coming? Where's the quartermaster on duty?" shouted Lingard in English and Malay. "This way, come here! Put it on a rocket stick--can't you? Hold over the side--thus! Stand by with the lines for the boats forward there. Mr. Shaw--we want more light!"

"Aye, aye, sir," called out Shaw, but he did not move, as if dazed by the vehemence of his commander.

"That's what we want," muttered Carter under his breath. "Imposter! What do you call yourself?" he said half aloud to Shaw.

The ruddy glare of the flares disclosed Lingard from head to foot, standing at the break of the poop. His head was bare, his face, crudely lighted, had a fierce and changing expression in the sway of flames.

"What can be his game?" thought Carter, impressed by the powerful and wild aspect of that figure. "He's changed somehow since I saw him first," he reflected. It struck him the change was serious, not exactly for the worse, perhaps--and yet. . . . Lingard smiled at him from the poop.

Carter went up the steps and without pausing informed him of what had happened.

"Mrs. Travers told me to go to you at once. She's very upset as you may guess," he drawled, looking Lingard hard in the face. Lingard knitted his eyebrows. "The hands, too, are scared," Carter went on. "They fancy the savages, or whatever they may be who stole the owner, are going to board the yacht every minute. I don't think so myself but--"

"Quite right--most unlikely," muttered Lingard.

"Aye, I daresay you know all about it," continued Carter, coolly, "the men are startled and no mistake, but I can't blame them very much. There isn't enough even of carving knives aboard to go round. One old signal gun! A poor show for better men than they."

"There's no mistake I suppose about this affair?" asked Lingard.

"Well, unless the gentlemen are having a lark with us at hide and seek. The man says he waited ten minutes at the point, then pulled slowly along the bank looking out, expecting to see them walking back. He made the trunk of a tree apparently stranded on the sand and as he was sculling past he says a man jumped up from behind that log, flung a stick at him and went off running. He backed water at once and began to shout, 'Are you there, sir?' No one answered. He could hear the bushes rustle and some strange noises like whisperings. It was very dark. After calling out several times, and waiting on his oars, he got frightened and pulled back to the yacht. That is clear enough. The only doubt in my mind is if they are alive or not. I didn't let on to Mrs. Travers. That's a kind of thing you keep to yourself, of course."

"I don't think they are dead," said Lingard, slowly, and as if thinking of something else.

"Oh! If you say so it's all right," said Carter with deliberation.

"What?" asked Lingard, absently; "fling a stick, did they? Fling a spear!"

"That's it!" assented Carter, "but I didn't say anything. I only wondered if the same kind of stick hadn't been flung at the owner, that's all. But I suppose you know your business best, Captain."

Lingard, grasping his whole beard, reflected profoundly, erect and with bowed head in the glare of the flares.

"I suppose you think it's my doing?" he asked, sharply, without looking up.

Carter surveyed him with a candidly curious gaze. "Well, Captain, Mrs. Travers did let on a bit to me about our chief-officer's boat. You've stopped it, haven't you? How she got to know God only knows. She was sorry she spoke, too, but it wasn't so much of news to me as she thought. I can put two and two together, sometimes. Those rockets, last night, eh? I wished I had bitten my tongue out before I told you about our first gig. But I was taken unawares. Wasn't I? I put it to you: wasn't I? And so I told her when she asked me what passed between you and me on board this brig, not twenty-four hours ago. Things look different now,

all of a sudden. Enough to scare a woman, but she is the best man of them all on board. The others are fairly off the chump because it's a bit dark and something has happened they ain't used to. But she has something on her mind. I can't make her out!" He paused, wriggled his shoulders slightly--"No more than I can make you out," he added.

"That's your trouble, is it?" said Lingard, slowly.

"Aye, Captain. Is it all clear to you? Stopping boats, kidnapping gentlemen. That's fun in a way, only--I am a youngster to you--but is it all clear to you? Old Robinson wasn't particular, you know, and he--"

"Clearer than daylight," cried Lingard, hotly. "I can't give up--"

He checked himself. Carter waited. The flare bearers stood rigid, turning their faces away from the flame, and in the play of gleams at its foot the mast near by, like a lofty column, ascended in the great darkness. A lot of ropes ran up slanting into a dark void and were lost to sight, but high aloft a brace block gleamed white, the end of a yard-arm could be seen suspended in the air and as if glowing with its own light. The sky had clouded over the brig without a breath of wind.

"Give up," repeated Carter with an uneasy shuffle of feet.

"Nobody," finished Lingard. "I can't. It's as clear as daylight. I can't! No! Nothing!"

He stared straight out afar, and after looking at him Carter felt moved by a bit of youthful intuition to murmur, "That's bad," in a tone that almost in spite of himself hinted at the dawning of a befogged compassion.

He had a sense of confusion within him, the sense of mystery without. He had never experienced anything like it all the time when serving with old Robinson in the Ly-e-moon. And yet he had seen and taken part in some queer doings that were not clear to him at the time. They were secret but they suggested something comprehensible. This affair did not. It had somehow a subtlety that affected him. He was uneasy as if there had been a breath of magic on events and men giving to this complication of a yachting voyage a significance impossible to perceive, but felt in the words, in the gestures, in the events, which made them all strangely, obscurely startling.

He was not one who could keep track of his sensations, and besides he had not the leisure. He had to answer Lingard's questions about the people of the yacht. No, he couldn't say Mrs. Travers was what you may call frightened. She seemed to have something in her mind. Oh, yes! The chaps were in a funk. Would they

fight? Anybody would fight when driven to it, funk or no funk. That was his experience. Naturally one liked to have something better than a handspike to do it with. Still--In the pause Carter seemed to weigh with composure the chances of men with handspikes.

"What do you want to fight us for?" he asked, suddenly.

Lingard started.

"I don't," he said; "I wouldn't be asking you."

"There's no saying what you would do, Captain," replied Carter; "it isn't twenty-four hours since you wanted to shoot me."

"I only said I would, rather than let you go raising trouble for me," explained Lingard.

"One night isn't like another," mumbled Carter, "but how am I to know? It seems to me you are making trouble for yourself as fast as you can."

"Well, supposing I am," said Lingard with sudden gloominess. "Would your men fight if I armed them properly?"

"What--for you or for themselves?" asked Carter.

"For the woman," burst out Lingard. "You forget there's a woman on board. I don't care that for their carcasses."

Carter pondered conscientiously.

"Not to-night," he said at last. "There's one or two good men amongst them, but the rest are struck all of a heap. Not to-night. Give them time to get steady a bit if you want them to fight."

He gave facts and opinions with a mixture of loyalty and mistrust. His own state puzzled him exceedingly. He couldn't make out anything, he did not know what to believe and yet he had an impulsive desire, an inspired desire to help the man. At times it appeared a necessity--at others policy; between whiles a great folly, which perhaps did not matter because he suspected himself of being helpless anyway. Then he had moments of anger. In those moments he would feel in his pocket the butt of a loaded pistol. He had provided himself with the weapon, when directed by Mrs. Travers to go on board the brig.

"If he wants to interfere with me, I'll let drive at him and take my chance of getting away," he had explained hurriedly.

He remembered how startled Mrs. Travers looked. Of course, a woman like that--not used to hear such talk. Therefore it was no use listening to her, except for good manners' sake. Once bit twice shy. He had no mind to be kidnapped, not he, nor bullied either.

"I can't let him nab me, too. You will want me now, Mrs. Travers," he had said; "and I promise you not to fire off the old thing unless he jolly well forces me to."

He was youthfully wise in his resolution not to give way to her entreaties, though her extraordinary agitation did stagger him for a moment. When the boat was already on its way to the brig, he remembered her calling out after him:

"You must not! You don't understand."

Her voice coming faintly in the darkness moved him, it resembled so much a cry of distress.

"Give way, boys, give way," he urged his men.

He was wise, resolute, and he was also youthful enough to almost wish it should "come to it." And with foresight he even instructed the boat's crew to keep the gig just abaft the main rigging of the brig.

"When you see me drop into her all of a sudden, shove off and pull for dear life."

Somehow just then he was not so anxious for a shot, but he held on with a determined mental grasp to his fine resolution, lest it should slip away from him and perish in a sea of doubts.

"Hadn't I better get back to the yacht?" he asked, gently.

Getting no answer he went on with deliberation:

"Mrs. Travers ordered me to say that no matter how this came about she is ready to trust you. She is waiting for some kind of answer, I suppose."

"Ready to trust me," repeated Lingard. His eyes lit up fiercely.

Every sway of flares tossed slightly to and fro the massy shadows of the main deck, where here and there the figure of a man could be seen standing very still

with a dusky face and glittering eyeballs.

Carter stole his hand warily into his breast pocket:

"Well, Captain," he said. He was not going to be bullied, let the owner's wife trust whom she liked.

"Have you got anything in writing for me there?" asked Lingard, advancing a pace, exultingly.

Carter, alert, stepped back to keep his distance. Shaw stared from the side; his rubicund cheeks quivered, his round eyes seemed starting out of his head, and his mouth was open as though he had been ready to choke with pent-up curiosity, amazement, and indignation.

"No! Not in writing," said Carter, steadily and low.

Lingard had the air of being awakened by a shout. A heavy and darkening frown seemed to fall out of the night upon his forehead and swiftly passed into the night again, and when it departed it left him so calm, his glance so lucid, his mien so composed that it was difficult to believe the man's heart had undergone within the last second the trial of humiliation and of danger. He smiled sadly:

"Well, young man," he asked with a kind of good-humoured resignation, "what is it you have there? A knife or a pistol?"

"A pistol," said Carter. "Are you surprised, Captain?" He spoke with heat because a sense of regret was stealing slowly within him, as stealthily, as irresistibly as the flowing tide. "Who began these tricks?" He withdrew his hand, empty, and raised his voice. "You are up to something I can't make out. You--you are not straight."

The flares held on high streamed right up without swaying, and in that instant of profound calm the shadows on the brig's deck became as still as the men.

"You think not?" said Lingard, thoughtfully.

Carter nodded. He resented the turn of the incident and the growing impulse to surrender to that man.

"Mrs. Travers trusts me though," went on Lingard with gentle triumph as if advancing an unanswerable argument.

"So she says," grunted Carter; "I warned her. She's a baby. They're all as innocent as babies there. And you know it. And I know it. I've heard of your kind. You would dump the lot of us overboard if it served your turn. That's what I think."

"And that's all."

Carter nodded slightly and looked away. There was a silence. Lingard's eyes travelled over the brig. The lighted part of the vessel appeared in bright and wavering detail walled and canopied by the night. He felt a light breath on his face. The air was stirring, but the Shallows, silent and lost in the darkness, gave no sound of life.

This stillness oppressed Lingard. The world of his endeavours and his hopes seemed dead, seemed gone. His desire existed homeless in the obscurity that had devoured his corner of the sea, this stretch of the coast, his certitude of success. And here in the midst of what was the domain of his adventurous soul there was a lost youngster ready to shoot him on suspicion of some extravagant treachery. Came ready to shoot! That's good, too! He was too weary to laugh--and perhaps too sad. Also the danger of the pistol-shot, which he believed real--the young are rash--irritated him. The night and the spot were full of contradictions. It was impossible to say who in this shadowy warfare was to be an enemy, and who were the allies. So close were the contacts issuing from this complication of a yachting voyage, that he seemed to have them all within his breast.

"Shoot me! He is quite up to that trick--damn him. Yet I would trust him sooner than any man in that yacht."

Such were his thoughts while he looked at Carter, who was biting his lips, in the vexation of the long silence. When they spoke again to each other they talked soberly, with a sense of relief, as if they had come into cool air from an overheated room and when Carter, dismissed, went into his boat, he had practically agreed to the line of action traced by Lingard for the crew of the yacht. He had agreed as if in implicit confidence. It was one of the absurdities of the situation which had to be accepted and could never be understood.

"Do I talk straight now?" had asked Lingard.

"It seems straight enough," assented Carter with an air of reserve; "I will work with you so far anyhow."

"Mrs. Travers trusts me," remarked Lingard again.

"By the Lord Harry!" cried Carter, giving way suddenly to some latent conviction.

"I was warning her against you. Say, Captain, you are a devil of a man. How did you manage it?"

"I trusted her," said Lingard.

"Did you?" cried the amazed Carter. "When? How? Where--"

"You know too much already," retorted Lingard, quietly. "Waste no time. I will be after you."

Carter whistled low.

"There's a pair of you I can't make out," he called back, hurrying over the side.

Shaw took this opportunity to approach. Beginning with hesitation: "A word with you, sir," the mate went on to say he was a respectable man. He delivered himself in a ringing, unsteady voice. He was married, he had children, he abhorred illegality. The light played about his obese figure, he had flung his mushroom hat on the deck, he was not afraid to speak the truth. The grey moustache stood out aggressively, his glances were uneasy; he pressed his hands to his stomach convulsively, opened his thick, short arms wide, wished it to be understood he had been

chief-officer of home ships, with a spotless character and he hoped "quite up to his work." He was a peaceable man, none more; disposed to stretch a point when it "came to a difference with niggers of some kind--they had to be taught manners and reason" and he was not averse at a pinch to--but here were white people--gentlemen, ladies, not to speak of the crew. He had never spoken to a superior like this before, and this was prudence, his conviction, a point of view, a point of principle, a conscious superiority and a burst of resentment hoarded through years against all the successive and unsatisfactory captains of his existence. There never had been such an opportunity to show he could not be put upon. He had one of them on a string and he was going to lead him a dance. There was courage, too, in it, since he believed himself fallen unawares into the clutches of a particularly desperate man and beyond the reach of law.

A certain small amount of calculation entered the audacity of his remonstrance. Perhaps--it flashed upon him--the yacht's gentry will hear I stood up for them. This could conceivably be of advantage to a man who wanted a lift in the world. "Owner of a yacht--badly scared--a gentleman--money nothing to him." Thereupon Shaw declared with heat that he couldn't be an accessory either after or before the fact. Those that never went home--who had nothing to go to perhaps--he interjected, hurriedly, could do as they liked. He couldn't. He had a

wife, a family, a little house--paid for--with difficulty. He followed the sea respectably out and home, all regular, not vagabonding here and there, chumming with the first nigger that came along and laying traps for his betters.

One of the two flare bearers sighed at his elbow, and shifted his weight to the other foot.

These two had been keeping so perfectly still that the movement was as startling as if a statue had changed its pose. After looking at the offender with cold malevolence, Shaw went on to speak of law-courts, of trials, and of the liberty of the subject; then he pointed out the certitude and the inconvenience of being found out, affecting for the moment the dispassionateness of wisdom.

"There will be fifteen years in gaol at the end of this job for everybody," said Shaw, "and I have a boy that don't know his father yet. Fine things for him to learn when he grows up. The innocent are dead certain here to catch it along with you. The missus will break her heart unless she starves first. Home sold up."

He saw a mysterious iniquity in a dangerous relation to himself and began to lose his head. What he really wanted was to have his existence left intact, for his own cherishing and pride. It was a moral aspiration, but in his alarm the native grossness of his nature came clattering out like a devil out of a trap. He would blow the gaff, split, give away the whole show, he would back up honest people, kiss the book, say what he thought, let all the world know . . . and when he paused to draw breath, all around him was silent and still. Before the impetus of that respectable passion his words were scattered like chaff driven by a gale and rushed headlong into the night of the Shallows. And in the great obscurity, imperturbable, it heard him say he "washed his hands of everything."

"And the brig?" asked Lingard, suddenly.

Shaw was checked. For a second the seaman in him instinctively admitted the claim of the ship.

"The brig. The brig. She's right enough," he mumbled. He had nothing to say against the brig--not he. She wasn't like the big ships he was used to, but of her kind the best craft he ever. . . . And with a brusque return upon himself, he protested that he had been decoyed on board under false pretences. It was as bad as being shanghaied when in liquor. It was--upon his soul. And into a craft next thing to a pirate! That was the name for it or his own name was not Shaw. He said this glaring owlshly. Lingard, perfectly still and mute, bore the blows without a sign.

The silly fuss of that man seared his very soul. There was no end to this plague of fools coming to him from the forgotten ends of the earth. A fellow like that could not be told. No one could be told. Blind they came and blind they would go out. He admitted reluctantly, but without doubt, that as if pushed by a force from outside he would have to try and save two of them. To this end he foresaw the probable need of leaving his brig for a time. He would have to leave her with that man. The mate. He had engaged him himself--to make his insurance valid--to be able sometimes to speak--to have near him. Who would have believed such a fool-man could exist on the face of the sea! Who? Leave the brig with him. The brig!

Ever since sunset, the breeze kept off by the heat of the day had been trying to re-establish in the darkness its sway over the Shoals. Its approaches had been heard in the night, its patient murmurs, its foiled sighs; but now a surprisingly heavy puff came in a free rush as if, far away there to the northward, the last defence of the calm had been victoriously carried. The flames borne down streamed bluishly, horizontal and noisy at the end of tall sticks, like fluttering pennants; and behold, the shadows on the deck went mad and jostled each other as if trying to escape from a doomed craft, the darkness, held up dome-like by the brilliant glare, seemed to tumble headlong upon the brig in an overwhelming downfall, the men stood swaying as if ready to fall under the ruins of a black and noiseless disaster. The blurred outlines of the brig, the masts, the rigging, seemed to shudder in the terror of coming extinction--and then the darkness leaped upward again, the shadows returned to their places, the men were seen distinct, swarthy, with calm faces, with glittering eyeballs. The destruction in the breath had passed, was gone.

A discord of three voices raised together in a drawling wail trailed on the sudden immobility of the air.

"Brig ahoy! Give us a rope!"

The first boat-load from the yacht emerged floating slowly into the pool of purple light wavering round the brig on the black water. Two men squeezed in the bows pulled uncomfortably; in the middle, on a heap of seamen's canvas bags, another sat, insecure, propped with both arms, stiff-legged, angularly helpless. The light from the poop brought everything out in lurid detail, and the boat floating slowly toward the brig had a suspicious and pitiful aspect. The shabby load lumbering her looked somehow as if it had been stolen by those men who resembled castaways. In the sternsheets Carter, standing up, steered with his leg. He had a smile of youthful sarcasm.

"Here they are!" he cried to Lingard. "You've got your own way, Captain. I thought I had better come myself with the first precious lot--"

"Pull around the stern. The brig's on the swing," interrupted Lingard.

"Aye, aye! We'll try not to smash the brig. We would be lost indeed if--fend off there, John; fend off, old reliable, if you care a pin for your salty hide. I like the old chap," he said, when he stood by Lingard's side looking down at the boat which was being rapidly cleared by whites and Malays working shoulder to shoulder in silence. "I like him. He don't belong to that yachting lot either. They picked him up on the road somewhere. Look at the old dog--carved out of a ship's timber--as talkative as a fish--grim as a gutted wreck. That's the man for me. All the others there are married, or going to be, or ought to be, or sorry they ain't. Every man jack of them has a petticoat in tow--dash me! Never heard in all my travels such a jabber about wives and kids. Hurry up with your dunnage--below there! Aye! I had no difficulty in getting them to clear out from the yacht. They never saw a pair of gents stolen before--you understand. It upset all their little notions of what a stranding means, hereabouts. Not that mine aren't mixed a bit, too--and yet I've seen a thing or two."

His excitement was revealed in this boyish impulse to talk.

"Look," he said, pointing at the growing pile of bags and bedding on the brig's quarter-deck. "Look. Don't they mean to sleep soft--and dream of home--maybe. Home. Think of that, Captain. These chaps can't get clear away from it. It isn't like you and me--"

Lingard made a movement.

"I ran away myself when so high. My old man's a Trinity pilot. That's a job worth staying at home for. Mother writes sometimes, but they can't miss me much. There's fourteen of us altogether--eight at home yet. No fear of the old country ever getting undermanned--let die who must. Only let it be a fair game, Captain. Let's have a fair show."

Lingard assured him briefly he should have it. That was the very reason he wanted the yacht's crew in the brig, he added. Then quiet and grave he inquired whether that pistol was still in Carter's pocket.

"Never mind that," said the young man, hurriedly. "Remember who began. To be shot at wouldn't rile me so much--it's being threatened, don't you see, that was heavy on my chest. Last night is very far off though--and I will be hanged if I know what I meant exactly when I took the old thing from its nail. There. More I can't say till all's settled one way or another. Will that do?"

Flushing brick red, he suspended his judgment and stayed his hand with the generosity of youth.

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Apparently it suited Lingard to be reprieved in that form. He bowed his head slowly. It would do. To leave his life to that youngster's ignorance seemed to redress the balance of his mind against a lot of secret intentions. It was distasteful and bitter as an expiation should be. He also held a life in his hand; a life, and many deaths besides, but these were like one single feather in the scales of his conscience. That he should feel so was unavoidable because his strength would at no price permit itself to be wasted. It would not be--and there was an end of it. All he could do was to throw in another risk into the sea of risks. Thus was he enabled to recognize that a drop of water in the ocean makes a great difference. His very desire, unconquered, but exiled, had left the place where he could constantly hear its voice. He saw it, he saw himself, the past, the future, he saw it all, shifting and indistinct like those shapes the strained eye of a wanderer outlines in darker strokes upon the face of the night.