X

When Lingard went to his boat to follow Carter, who had gone back to the yacht, Wasub, mast and sail on shoulder, preceded him down the ladder. The old man leaped in smartly and busied himself in getting the dinghy ready for his commander.

In that little boat Lingard was accustomed to traverse the Shallows alone. She had a short mast and a lug-sail, carried two easily, floated in a few inches of water. In her he was independent of a crew, and, if the wind failed, could make his way with a pair of sculls taking short cuts over shoal places. There were so many islets and sandbanks that in case of sudden bad weather there was always a lee to be found, and when he wished to land he could pull her up a beach, striding ahead, painter in hand, like a giant child dragging a toy boat. When the brig was anchored within the Shallows it was in her that he visited the lagoon. Once, when caught by a sudden freshening of the sea-breeze, he had waded up a shelving bank carrying her on his head and for two days they had rested together on the sand, while around them the shallow waters raged lividly, and across three miles of foam the brig would time after time dissolve in the mist and re-appear distinct, nodding her tall spars that seemed to touch a weeping sky of lamentable greyness.

Whenever he came into the lagoon tugging with bare arms, Jorgenson, who would be watching the entrance of the creek ever since a muffled detonation of a gun to seaward had warned him of the brig's arrival on the Shore of Refuge, would mutter to himself--"Here's Tom coming in his nutshell." And indeed she was in shape somewhat like half a nutshell and also in the colour of her dark varnished planks. The man's shoulders and head rose high above her gunwales; loaded with Lingard's heavy frame she would climb sturdily the steep ridges, slide squatting into the hollows of the sea, or, now and then, take a sedate leap over a short wave. Her behaviour had a stout trustworthiness about it, and she reminded one of a surefooted mountain-pony carrying over difficult ground a rider much bigger than himself.

Wasub wiped the thwarts, ranged the mast and sail along the side, shipped the rowlocks. Lingard looked down at his old servant's spare shoulders upon which the light from above fell unsteady but vivid. Wasub worked for the comfort of his commander and his singleminded absorption in that task flashed upon Lingard the consolation of an act of friendliness. The elderly Malay at last lifted his head with a deferential murmur; his wrinkled old face with half a dozen wiry hairs pendulous at each corner of the dark lips expressed a kind of weary satisfaction,

and the slightly oblique worn eyes stole a discreet upward glance containing a hint of some remote meaning. Lingard found himself compelled by the justice of that obscure claim to murmur as he stepped into the boat:

"These are times of danger."

He sat down and took up the sculls. Wasub held on to the gunwale as to a last hope of a further confidence. He had served in the brig five years. Lingard remembered that very well. This aged figure had been intimately associated with the brig's life and with his own, appearing silently ready for every incident and emergency in an unquestioning expectation of orders; symbolic of blind trust in his strength, of an unlimited obedience to his will. Was it unlimited?

"We shall require courage and fidelity," added Lingard, in a tentative tone.

"There are those who know me," snapped the old man, readily, as if the words had been waiting for a long time. "Observe, Tuan. I have filled with fresh water the little breaker in the bows."

"I know you, too," said Lingard.

"And the wind--and the sea," ejaculated the serang, jerkily. "These also are faithful to the strong. By Allah! I who am a pilgrim and have listened to words of wisdom in many places, I tell you, Tuan, there is strength in the knowledge of what is hidden in things without life, as well as in the living men. Will Tuan be gone long?"

"I come back in a short time--together with the rest of the whites from over there. This is the beginning of many stratagems. Wasub! Daman, the son of a dog, has suddenly made prisoners two of my own people. My face is made black."

"Tse! Tse! What ferocity is that! One should not offer shame to a friend or to a friend's brother lest revenge come sweeping like a flood. Yet can an Illanun chief be other than tyrannical? My old eyes have seen much but they never saw a tiger change its stripes. Ya-wa! The tiger can not. This is the wisdom of us ignorant Malay men. The wisdom of white Tuans is great. They think that by the power of many speeches the tiger may--" He broke off and in a crisp, busy tone said: "The rudder dwells safely under the aftermost seat should Tuan be pleased to sail the boat. This breeze will not die away before sunrise." Again his voice changed as if two different souls had been flitting in and out of his body. "No, no, kill the tiger and then the stripes may be counted without fear--one by one, thus."

He pointed a frail brown finger and, abruptly, made a mirthless dry sound as if a

rattle had been sprung in his throat.

"The wretches are many," said Lingard.

"Nay, Tuan. They follow their great men even as we in the brig follow you. That is right."

Lingard reflected for a moment.

"My men will follow me then," he said.

"They are poor calashes without sense," commented Wasub with pitying superiority. "Some with no more comprehension than men of the bush freshly caught. There is Sali, the foolish son of my sister and by your great favour appointed to mind the tiller of this ship. His stupidity is extreme, but his eyes are good--nearly as good as mine that by praying and much exercise can see far into the night."

Lingard laughed low and then looked earnestly at the serang. Above their heads a man shook a flare over the side and a thin shower of sparks floated downward and expired before touching the water.

"So you can see in the night, O serang! Well, then, look and speak. Speak! Fight--or no fight? Weapons or words? Which folly? Well, what do you see?"

"A darkness, a darkness," whispered Wasub at last in a frightened tone. "There are nights--" He shook his head and muttered. "Look. The tide has turned. Ya, Tuan. The tide has turned."

Lingard looked downward where the water could be seen, gliding past the ship's side, moving smoothly, streaked with lines of froth, across the illumined circle thrown round the brig by the lights on her poop. Air bubbles sparkled, lines of darkness, ripples of glitter appeared, glided, went astern without a splash, without a trickle, without a plaint, without a break. The unchecked gentleness of the flow captured the eye by a subtle spell, fastened insidiously upon the mind a disturbing sense of the irretrievable. The ebbing of the sea athwart the lonely sheen of flames resembled the eternal ebb-tide of time; and when at last Lingard looked up, the knowledge of that noiseless passage of the waters produced on his mind a bewildering effect. For a moment the speck of light lost in vast obscurity the brig, the boat, the hidden coast, the Shallows, the very walls and roof of darkness--the seen and the unseen alike seemed to be gliding smoothly onward through the enormous gloom of space. Then, with a great mental effort, he brought everything to a sudden standstill; and only the froth and bubbles went

on streaming past ceaselessly, unchecked by the power of his will.

"The tide has turned--you say, serang? Has it--? Well, perhaps it has, perhaps it has," he finished, muttering to himself.

"Truly it has. Can not Tuan see it run under his own eyes?" said Wasub with an alarmed earnestness. "Look. Now it is in my mind that a prau coming from amongst the southern islands, if steered cunningly in the free set of the current, would approach the bows of this, our brig, drifting silently as a shape without a substance."

"And board suddenly--is that it?" said Lingard.

"Daman is crafty and the Illanuns are very bloodthirsty. Night is nothing to them. They are certainly valorous. Are they not born in the midst of fighting and are they not inspired by the evil of their hearts even before they can speak? And their chiefs would be leading them while you, Tuan, are going from us even now--"

"You don't want me to go?" asked Lingard.

For a time Wasub listened attentively to the profound silence.

"Can we fight without a leader?" he began again. "It is the belief in victory that gives courage. And what would poor calashes do, sons of peasants and fishermen, freshly caught--without knowledge? They believe in your strength--and in your power--or else--Will those whites that came so suddenly avenge you? They are here like fish within the stakes. Ya-wa! Who will bring the news and who will come to find the truth and perchance to carry off your body? You go alone, Tuan!"

"There must be no fighting. It would be a calamity," insisted Lingard. "There is blood that must not be spilt."

"Hear, Tuan!" exclaimed Wasub with heat. "The waters are running out now." He punctuated his speech by slight jerks at the dinghy. "The waters go and at the appointed time they shall return. And if between their going and coming the blood of all the men in the world were poured into it, the sea would not rise higher at the full by the breadth of my finger nail."

"But the world would not be the same. You do not see that, serang. Give the boat a good shove."

"Directly," said the old Malay and his face became impassive. "Tuan knows when it is best to go, and death sometimes retreats before a firm tread like a startled

snake. Tuan should take a follower with him, not a silly youth, but one who has lived--who has a steady heart--who would walk close behind watchfully--and quietly. Yes. Quietly and with quick eyes--like mine--perhaps with a weapon--I know how to strike."

Lingard looked at the wrinkled visage very near his own and into the peering old eyes. They shone strangely. A tense eagerness was expressed in the squatting figure leaning out toward him. On the other side, within reach of his arm, the night stood like a wall -discouraging--opaque--impenetrable. No help would avail. The darkness he had to combat was too impalpable to be cleft by a blow--too dense to be pierced by the eye; yet as if by some enchantment in the words that made this vain offer of fidelity, it became less overpowering to his sight, less crushing to his thought. He had a moment of pride which soothed his heart for the space of two beats. His unreasonable and misjudged heart, shrinking before the menace of failure, expanded freely with a sense of generous gratitude. In the threatening dimness of his emotions this man's offer made a point of clearness, the glimmer of a torch held aloft in the night. It was priceless, no doubt, but ineffectual; too small, too far, too solitary. It did not dispel the mysterious obscurity that had descended upon his fortunes so that his eyes could no longer see the work of his hands. The sadness of defeat pervaded the world.

"And what could you do, O Wasub?" he said.

"I could always call out--'Take care, Tuan.'"

"And then for these charm-words of mine. Hey? Turn danger aside? What? But perchance you would die all the same. Treachery is a strong magic, too--as you said."

"Yes, indeed! The order might come to your servant. But I--Wasub--the son of a free man, a follower of Rajahs, a fugitive, a slave, a pilgrim--diver for pearls, serang of white men's ships, I have had too many masters. Too many. You are the last." After a silence he said in an almost indifferent voice: "If you go, Tuan, let us go together."

For a time Lingard made no sound.

"No use," he said at last. "No use, serang. One life is enough to pay for a man's folly--and you have a household."

"I have two--Tuan; but it is a long time since I sat on the ladder of a house to talk at ease with neighbours. Yes. Two households; one in--" Lingard smiled faintly. "Tuan, let me follow you."

"No. You have said it, serang--I am alone. That is true, and alone I shall go on this very night. But first I must bring all the white people here. Push."

"Ready, Tuan? Look out!"

Wasub's body swung over the sea with extended arms. Lingard caught up the sculls, and as the dinghy darted away from the brig's side he had a complete view of the lighted poop--Shaw leaning massively over the taffrail in sulky dejection, the flare bearers erect and rigid, the heads along the rail, the eyes staring after him above the bulwarks. The fore-end of the brig was wrapped in a lurid and sombre mistiness; the sullen mingling of darkness and of light; her masts pointing straight up could be tracked by torn gleams and vanished above as if the trucks had been tall enough to pierce the heavy mass of vapours motionless overhead. She was beautifully precious. His loving eyes saw her floating at rest in a wavering halo, between an invisible sky and an invisible sea, like a miraculous craft suspended in the air. He turned his head away as if the sight had been too much for him at the moment of separation, and, as soon as his little boat had passed beyond the limit of the light thrown upon the water, he perceived very low in the black void of the west the stern lantern of the yacht shining feebly like a star about to set, unattainable, infinitely remote--belonging to another universe.