

PART IV. THE GIFT OF THE SHALLOWS

I

Lingard brought Mrs. Travers away from the yacht, going alone with her in the little boat. During the bustle of the embarkment, and till the last of the crew had left the schooner, he had remained towering and silent by her side. It was only when the murmuring and uneasy voices of the sailors going away in the boats had been completely lost in the distance that his voice was heard, grave in the silence, pronouncing the words--"Follow me." She followed him; their footsteps rang hollow and loud on the empty deck. At the bottom of the steps he turned round and said very low:

"Take care."

He got into the boat and held on. It seemed to him that she was intimidated by the darkness. She felt her arm gripped firmly--"I've got you," he said. She stepped in, headlong, trusting herself blindly to his grip, and sank on the stern seat catching her breath a little. She heard a slight splash, and the indistinct side of the deserted yacht melted suddenly into the body of the night.

Rowing, he faced her, a hooded and cloaked shape, and above her head he had before his eyes the gleam of the stern lantern expiring slowly on the abandoned vessel. When it went out without a warning flicker he could see nothing of the stranded yacht's outline. She had vanished utterly like a dream; and the occurrences of the last twenty-four hours seemed also to be a part of a vanished dream. The hooded and cloaked figure was part of it, too. It spoke not; it moved not; it would vanish presently. Lingard tried to remember Mrs. Travers' features, even as she sat within two feet of him in the boat. He seemed to have taken from that vanished schooner not a woman but a memory--the tormenting recollection of a human being he would see no more.

At every stroke of the short sculls Mrs. Travers felt the boat leap forward with her. Lingard, to keep his direction, had to look over his shoulder frequently--"You will be safe in the brig," he said. She was silent. A dream! A dream! He lay back vigorously; the water slapped loudly against the blunt bows. The ruddy glow thrown afar by the flares was reflected deep within the hood. The dream had a pale visage, the memory had living eyes.

"I had to come for you myself," he said.

"I expected it of you." These were the first words he had heard her say since they had met for the third time.

"And I swore--before you, too--that I would never put my foot on board your craft."

"It was good of you to--" she began.

"I forgot somehow," he said, simply.

"I expected it of you," she repeated. He gave three quick strokes before he asked very gently:

"What more do you expect?"

"Everything," she said. He was rounding then the stern of the brig and had to look away. Then he turned to her.

"And you trust me to--" he exclaimed.

"I would like to trust you," she interrupted, "because--"

Above them a startled voice cried in Malay, "Captain coming." The strange sound silenced her. Lingard laid in his sculls and she saw herself gliding under the high side of the brig. A dark, staring face appeared very near her eyes, black fingers caught the gunwale of the boat. She stood up swaying. "Take care," said Lingard again, but this time, in the light, did not offer to help her. She went up alone and he followed her over the rail.

The quarter-deck was thronged by men of two races. Lingard and Mrs. Travers crossed it rapidly between the groups that moved out of the way on their passage. Lingard threw open the cabin door for her, but remained on deck to inquire about his boats. They had returned while he was on board the yacht, and the two men in charge of them came aft to make their reports. The boat sent north had seen nothing. The boat which had been directed to explore the banks and islets to the south had actually been in sight of Daman's praus. The man in charge reported that several fires were burning on the shore, the crews of the two praus being encamped on a sandbank. Cooking was going on. They had been near enough to hear the voices. There was a man keeping watch on the ridge; they knew this because they heard him shouting to the people below, by the fires. Lingard wanted to know how they had managed to remain unseen. "The night was our hiding place," answered the man in his deep growling voice. He knew nothing of

any white men being in Daman's camp. Why should there be? Rajah Hassim and the Lady, his sister, appeared unexpectedly near his boat in their canoe. Rajah Hassim had ordered him then in whispers to go back to the brig at once, and tell Tuan what he had observed. Rajah Hassim said also that he would return to the brig with more news very soon. He obeyed because the Rajah was to him a person of authority, "having the perfect knowledge of Tuan's mind as we all know."-- "Enough," cried Lingard, suddenly.

The man looked up heavily for a moment, and retreated forward without another word. Lingard followed him with irritated eyes. A new power had come into the world, had possessed itself of human speech, had imparted to it a sinister irony of allusion. To be told that someone had "a perfect knowledge of his mind" startled him and made him wince. It made him aware that now he did not know his mind himself--that it seemed impossible for him ever to regain that knowledge. And the new power not only had cast its spell upon the words he had to hear, but also upon the facts that assailed him, upon the people he saw, upon the thoughts he had to guide, upon the feelings he had to bear. They remained what they had ever been--the visible surface of life open in the sun to the conquering tread of an unfettered will. Yesterday they could have been discerned clearly, mastered and despised; but now another power had come into the world, and had cast over them all the wavering gloom of a dark and inscrutable purpose.