

II

Recovering himself with a slight start Lingard gave the order to extinguish all the lights in the brig. Now the transfer of the crew from the yacht had been effected there was every advantage in the darkness. He gave the order from instinct, it being the right thing to do in the circumstances. His thoughts were in the cabin of his brig, where there was a woman waiting. He put his hand over his eyes, collecting himself as if before a great mental effort. He could hear about him the excited murmurs of the white men whom in the morning he had so ardently desired to have safe in his keeping. He had them there now; but accident, ill-luck, a cursed folly, had tricked him out of the success of his plan. He would have to go in and talk to Mrs. Travers. The idea dismayed him. Of necessity he was not one of those men who have the mastery of expression. To liberate his soul was for him a gigantic undertaking, a matter of desperate effort, of doubtful success. "I must have it out with her," he murmured to himself as though at the prospect of a struggle. He was uncertain of himself, of her; he was uncertain of everything and everybody; but he was very certain he wanted to look at her.

At the moment he turned to the door of the cabin both flares went out together and the black vault of the night upheld above the brig by the fierce flames fell behind him and buried the deck in sudden darkness. The buzz of strange voices instantly hummed louder with a startled note. "Hallo!"--"Can't see a mortal thing"--"Well, what next?"--insisted a voice--"I want to know what next?"

Lingard checked himself ready to open the door and waited absurdly for the answer as though in the hope of some suggestion. "What's up with you? Think yourself lucky," said somebody.--"It's all very well--for to-night," began the voice.--"What are you fashing yourself for?" remonstrated the other, reasonably, "we'll get home right enough."--"I am not so sure; the second mate he says"--"Never mind what he says; that 'ere man who has got this brig will see us through. The owner's wife will talk to him--she will. Money can do a lot." The two voices came nearer, and spoke more distinctly, close behind Lingard. "Suppose them blooming savages set fire to the yacht. What's to prevent them?"--"And suppose they do. This 'ere brig's good enough to get away in. Ain't she? Guns and all. We'll get home yet all right. What do you say, John?"

"I say nothing and care less," said a third voice, peaceful and faint.

"D'you mean to say, John, you would go to the bottom as soon as you would go home? Come now!"--"To the bottom," repeated the wan voice, composedly. "Aye! That's where we all are going to, in one way or another. The way don't matter."

"Ough! You would give the blues to the funny man of a blooming circus. What would my missus say if I wasn't to turn up never at all?"--"She would get another man; there's always plenty of fools about." A quiet and mirthless chuckle was heard in the pause of shocked silence. Lingard, with his hand on the door, remained still. Further off a growl burst out: "I do hate to be chucked in the dark aboard a strange ship. I wonder where they keep their fresh water. Can't get any sense out of them silly niggers. We don't seem to be more account here than a lot of cattle. Likely as not we'll have to berth on this blooming quarter-deck for God knows how long." Then again very near Lingard the first voice said, deadened discreetly--"There's something curious about this here brig turning up sudden-like, ain't there? And that skipper of her--now? What kind of a man is he--anyhow?"

"Oh, he's one of them skippers going about loose. The brig's his own, I am thinking. He just goes about in her looking for what he may pick up honest or dishonest. My brother-in-law has served two commissions in these seas, and was telling me awful yarns about what's going on in them God-forsaken parts. Likely he lied, though. Them man-of-war's men are a holy terror for yarns. Bless you, what do I care who this skipper is? Let him do his best and don't trouble your head. You won't see him again in your life once we get clear."

"And can he do anything for the owner?" asked the first voice again.--"Can he! We can do nothing--that's one thing certain. The owner may be lying clubbed to death this very minute for all we know. By all accounts these savages here are a crool murdering lot. Mind you, I am sorry for him as much as anybody."--"Aye, aye," muttered the other, approvingly.--"He may not have been ready, poor man," began again the reasonable voice. Lingard heard a deep sigh.--"If there's anything as can be done for him, the owner's wife she's got to fix it up with this 'ere skipper. Under Providence he may serve her turn."

Lingard flung open the cabin door, entered, and, with a slam, shut the darkness out.

"I am, under Providence, to serve your turn," he said after standing very still for a while, with his eyes upon Mrs. Travers. The brig's swing-lamp lighted the cabin with an extraordinary brilliance. Mrs. Travers had thrown back her hood. The radiant brightness of the little place enfolded her so close, clung to her with such force that it might have been part of her very essence. There were no shadows on her face; it was fiercely lighted, hermetically closed, of impenetrable fairness.

Lingard looked in unconscious ecstasy at this vision, so amazing that it seemed to have strayed into his existence from beyond the limits of the conceivable. It

was impossible to guess her thoughts, to know her feelings, to understand her grief or her joy. But she knew all that was at the bottom of his heart. He had told her himself, impelled by a sudden thought, going to her in darkness, in desperation, in absurd hope, in incredible trust. He had told her what he had told no one on earth, except perhaps, at times, himself, but without words--less clearly. He had told her and she had listened in silence. She had listened leaning over the rail till at last her breath was on his forehead. He remembered this and had a moment of soaring pride and of unutterable dismay. He spoke, with an effort.

"You've heard what I said just now? Here I am."

"Do you expect me to say something?" she asked. "Is it necessary? Is it possible?"

"No," he answered. "It is said already. I know what you expect from me. Everything."

"Everything," she repeated, paused, and added much lower, "It is the very least." He seemed to lose himself in thought.

"It is extraordinary," he reflected half aloud, "how I dislike that man." She leaned forward a little.

"Remember those two men are innocent," she began.

"So am I--innocent. So is everybody in the world. Have you ever met a man or a woman that was not? They've got to take their chances all the same."

"I expect you to be generous," she said.

"To you?"

"Well--to me. Yes--if you like to me alone."

"To you alone! And you know everything!" His voice dropped. "You want your happiness."

She made an impatient movement and he saw her clench the hand that was lying on the table.

"I want my husband back," she said, sharply.

"Yes. Yes. It's what I was saying. Same thing," he muttered with strange placidity.

She looked at him searchingly. He had a large simplicity that filled one's vision. She found herself slowly invaded by this masterful figure. He was not mediocre. Whatever he might have been he was not mediocre. The glamour of a lawless life stretched over him like the sky over the sea down on all sides to an unbroken horizon. Within, he moved very lonely, dangerous and romantic. There was in him crime, sacrifice, tenderness, devotion, and the madness of a fixed idea. She thought with wonder that of all the men in the world he was indeed the one she knew the best and yet she could not foresee the speech or the act of the next minute. She said distinctly:

"You've given me your confidence. Now I want you to give me the life of these two men. The life of two men whom you do not know, whom to-morrow you will forget. It can be done. It must be done. You cannot refuse them to me." She waited.

"Why can't I refuse?" he whispered, gloomily, without looking up.

"You ask!" she exclaimed. He made no sign. He seemed at a loss for words.

"You ask . . . Ah!" she cried. "Don't you see that I have no kingdoms to conquer?"