

## **PART V. THE POINT OF HONOUR AND THE POINT OF PASSION**

### **I**

"May I come in?"

"Yes," said a voice within. "The door is open." It had a wooden latch. Mr. Travers lifted it while the voice of his wife continued as he entered. "Did you imagine I had locked myself in? Did you ever know me lock myself in?"

Mr. Travers closed the door behind him. "No, it has never come to that," he said in a tone that was not conciliatory. In that place which was a room in a wooden hut and had a square opening without glass but with a half-closed shutter he could not distinguish his wife very well at once. She was sitting in an armchair and what he could see best was her fair hair all loose over the back of the chair. There was a moment of silence. The measured footsteps of two men pacing athwart the quarter-deck of the dead ship Emma commanded by the derelict shade of Jorgenson could be heard outside.

Jorgenson, on taking up his dead command, had a house of thin boards built on the after deck for his own accommodation and that of Lingard during his flying visits to the Shore of Refuge. A narrow passage divided it in two and Lingard's side was furnished with a camp bedstead, a rough desk, and a rattan armchair. On one of his visits Lingard had brought with him a black seaman's chest and left it there. Apart from these objects and a small looking-glass worth about half a crown and nailed to the wall there was nothing else in there whatever. What was on Jorgenson's side of the deckhouse no one had seen, but from external evidence one could infer the existence of a set of razors.

The erection of that primitive deckhouse was a matter of propriety rather than of necessity. It was proper that the white men should have a place to themselves on board, but Lingard was perfectly accurate when he told Mrs. Travers that he had never slept there once. His practice was to sleep on deck. As to Jorgenson, if he did sleep at all he slept very little. It might have been said that he haunted rather than commanded the Emma. His white form flitted here and there in the night or stood for hours, silent, contemplating the sombre glimmer of the lagoon. Mr. Travers' eyes accustomed gradually to the dusk of the place could now distinguish more of his wife's person than the great mass of honey-coloured hair. He saw her face, the dark eyebrows and her eyes that seemed profoundly black in the half light. He said:

"You couldn't have done so here. There is neither lock nor bolt."

"Isn't there? I didn't notice. I would know how to protect myself without locks and bolts."

"I am glad to hear it," said Mr. Travers in a sullen tone and fell silent again surveying the woman in the chair. "Indulging your taste for fancy dress," he went on with faint irony.

Mrs. Travers clasped her hands behind her head. The wide sleeves slipping back bared her arms to her shoulders. She was wearing a Malay thin cotton jacket, cut low in the neck without a collar and fastened with wrought silver clasps from the throat downward. She had replaced her yachting skirt by a blue check sarong embroidered with threads of gold. Mr. Travers' eyes travelling slowly down attached themselves to the gleaming instep of an agitated foot from which hung a light leather sandal.

"I had no clothes with me but what I stood in," said Mrs. Travers. "I found my yachting costume too heavy. It was intolerable. I was soaked in dew when I arrived. So when these things were produced for my inspection. . . ."

"By enchantment," muttered Mr. Travers in a tone too heavy for sarcasm.

"No. Out of that chest. There are very fine stuffs there."

"No doubt," said Mr. Travers. "The man wouldn't be above plundering the natives. . . ." He sat down heavily on the chest. "A most appropriate costume for this farce," he continued. "But do you mean to wear it in open daylight about the decks?"

"Indeed I do," said Mrs. Travers. "D'Alcacer has seen me already and he didn't seem shocked."

"You should," said Mr. Travers, "try to get yourself presented with some bangles for your ankles so that you may jingle as you walk."

"Bangles are not necessities," said Mrs. Travers in a weary tone and with the fixed upward look of a person unwilling to relinquish her dream. Mr. Travers dropped the subject to ask:

"And how long is this farce going to last?"

Mrs. Travers unclasped her hands, lowered her glance, and changed her whole pose in a moment.

"What do you mean by farce? What farce?"

"The one which is being played at my expense."

"You believe that?"

"Not only believe. I feel deeply that it is so. At my expense. It's a most sinister thing," Mr. Travers pursued, still with downcast eyes and in an unforgiving tone. "I must tell you that when I saw you in that courtyard in a crowd of natives and leaning on that man's arm, it gave me quite a shock."

"Did I, too, look sinister?" said Mrs. Travers, turning her head slightly toward her husband. "And yet I assure you that I was glad, profoundly glad, to see you safe from danger for a time at least. To gain time is everything. . . ."

"I ask myself," Mr. Travers meditated aloud, "was I ever in danger? Am I safe now? I don't know. I can't tell. No! All this seems an abominable farce."

There was that in his tone which made his wife continue to look at him with awakened interest. It was obvious that he suffered from a distress which was not the effect of fear; and Mrs. Travers' face expressed real concern till he added in a freezing manner: "The question, however, is as to your discretion."

She leaned back again in the chair and let her hands rest quietly in her lap.

"Would you have preferred me to remain outside, in the yacht, in the near neighbourhood of these wild men who captured you? Or do you think that they, too, were got up to carry on a farce?"

"Most decidedly." Mr. Travers raised his head, though of course not his voice.

"You ought to have remained in the yacht amongst white men, your servants, the sailing-master, the crew whose duty it was to. . . . Who would have been ready to die for you."

"I wonder why they should have--and why I should have asked them for that sacrifice. However, I have no doubt they would have died. Or would you have preferred me to take up my quarters on board that man's brig? We were all fairly safe there. The real reason why I insisted on coming in here was to be nearer to you--to see for myself what could be or was being done. . . . But really if you want me to explain my motives then I may just as well say nothing. I couldn't remain outside for days without news, in a state of horrible doubt. We couldn't even tell

whether you and d'Alcacer were still alive till we arrived here. You might have been actually murdered on the sandbank, after Rajah Hassim and that girl had gone away; or killed while going up the river. And I wanted to know at once, as soon as possible. It was a matter of impulse. I went off in what I stood in without delaying a moment."

"Yes," said Mr. Travers. "And without even thinking of having a few things put up for me in a bag. No doubt you were in a state of excitement. Unless you took such a tragic view that it seemed to you hardly worth while to bother about my clothes."

"It was absolutely the impulse of the moment. I could have done nothing else. Won't you give me credit for it?"

Mr. Travers raised his eyes again to his wife's face. He saw it calm, her attitude reposeful. Till then his tone had been resentful, dull, without sarcasm. But now he became slightly pompous.

"No. As a matter of fact, as a matter of experience, I can't credit you with the possession of feelings appropriate to your origin, social position, and the ideas of the class to which you belong. It was the heaviest disappointment of my life. I had made up my mind not to mention it as long as I lived. This, however, seems an occasion which you have provoked yourself. It isn't at all a solemn occasion. I don't look upon it as solemn at all. It's very disagreeable and humiliating. But it has presented itself. You have never taken a serious interest in the activities of my life which of course are its distinction and its value. And why you should be carried away suddenly by a feeling toward the mere man I don't understand."

"Therefore you don't approve," Mrs. Travers commented in an even tone. "But I assure you, you may safely. My feeling was of the most conventional nature, exactly as if the whole world were looking on. After all, we are husband and wife. It's eminently fitting that I should be concerned about your fate. Even the man you distrust and dislike so much (the warmest feeling, let me tell you, that I ever saw you display) even that man found my conduct perfectly proper. His own word. Proper. So eminently proper that it altogether silenced his objections."

Mr. Travers shifted uneasily on his seat.

"It's my belief, Edith, that if you had been a man you would have led a most irregular life. You would have been a frank adventurer. I mean morally. It has been a great grief to me. You have a scorn in you for the serious side of life, for the ideas and the ambitions of the social sphere to which you belong."

He stopped because his wife had clasped again her hands behind her head and was no longer looking at him.

"It's perfectly obvious," he began again. "We have been living amongst most distinguished men and women and your attitude to them has been always so--so negative! You would never recognize the importance of achievements, of acquired positions. I don't remember you ever admiring frankly any political or social success. I ask myself what after all you could possibly have expected from life."

"I could never have expected to hear such a speech from you. As to what I did expect! . . . I must have been very stupid."

"No, you are anything but that," declared Mr. Travers, conscientiously. "It isn't stupidity." He hesitated for a moment. "It's a kind of wilfulness, I think. I preferred not to think about this grievous difference in our points of view, which, you will admit, I could not have possibly foreseen before we. . . ."

A sort of solemn embarrassment had come over Mr. Travers. Mrs. Travers, leaning her chin on the palm of her hand, stared at the bare matchboard side of the hut.

"Do you charge me with profound girlish duplicity?" she asked, very softly.

The inside of the deckhouse was full of stagnant heat perfumed by a slight scent which seemed to emanate from the loose mass of Mrs. Travers' hair. Mr. Travers evaded the direct question which struck him as lacking fineness even to the point of impropriety.

"I must suppose that I was not in the calm possession of my insight and judgment in those days," he said. "I--I was not in a critical state of mind at the time," he admitted further; but even after going so far he did not look up at his wife and therefore missed something like the ghost of a smile on Mrs. Travers' lips. That smile was tinged with scepticism which was too deep-seated for anything but the faintest expression. Therefore she said nothing, and Mr. Travers went on as if thinking aloud:

"Your conduct was, of course, above reproach; but you made for yourself a detestable reputation of mental superiority, expressed ironically. You inspired mistrust in the best people. You were never popular."

"I was bored," murmured Mrs. Travers in a reminiscent tone and with her chin resting in the hollow of her hand.

Mr. Travers got up from the seaman's chest as unexpectedly as if he had been stung by a wasp, but, of course, with a much slower and more solemn motion.

"The matter with you, Edith, is that at heart you are perfectly primitive." Mrs. Travers stood up, too, with a supple, leisurely movement, and raising her hands to her hair turned half away with a pensive remark:

"Imperfectly civilized."

"Imperfectly disciplined," corrected Mr. Travers after a moment of dreary meditation.

She let her arms fall and turned her head.

"No, don't say that," she protested with strange earnestness. "I am the most severely disciplined person in the world. I am tempted to say that my discipline has stopped at nothing short of killing myself. I suppose you can hardly understand what I mean."

Mr. Travers made a slight grimace at the floor.

"I shall not try," he said. "It sounds like something that a barbarian, hating the delicate complexities and the restraints of a nobler life, might have said. From you it strikes me as wilful bad taste. . . . I have often wondered at your tastes. You have always liked extreme opinions, exotic costumes, lawless characters, romantic personalities--like d'Alcacer . . ."

"Poor Mr. d'Alcacer," murmured Mrs. Travers.

"A man without any ideas of duty or usefulness," said Mr. Travers, acidly. "What are you pitying him for?"

"Why! For finding himself in this position out of mere good-nature. He had nothing to expect from joining our voyage, no advantage for his political ambitions or anything of the kind. I suppose you asked him on board to break our tete-a-tete which must have grown wearisome to you."

"I am never bored," declared Mr. Travers. "D'Alcacer seemed glad to come. And, being a Spaniard, the horrible waste of time cannot matter to him in the least."

"Waste of time!" repeated Mrs. Travers, indignantly.

"He may yet have to pay for his good nature with his life."

Mr. Travers could not conceal a movement of anger.

"Ah! I forgot those assumptions," he said between his clenched teeth. "He is a mere Spaniard. He takes this farcical conspiracy with perfect nonchalance. Decayed races have their own philosophy."

"He takes it with a dignity of his own."

"I don't know what you call his dignity. I should call it lack of self-respect."

"Why? Because he is quiet and courteous, and reserves his judgment. And allow me to tell you, Martin, that you are not taking our troubles very well."

"You can't expect from me all those foreign affectations. I am not in the habit of compromising with my feelings."

Mrs. Travers turned completely round and faced her husband. "You sulk," she said. . . . Mr. Travers jerked his head back a little as if to let the word go past.--"I am outraged," he declared. Mrs. Travers recognized there something like real suffering.--"I assure you," she said, seriously (for she was accessible to pity), "I assure you that this strange Lingard has no idea of your importance. He doesn't know anything of your social and political position and still less of your great ambitions." Mr. Travers listened with some attention.--"Couldn't you have enlightened him?" he asked.--"It would have been no use; his mind is fixed upon his own position and upon his own sense of power. He is a man of the lower classes. . . ."--"He is a brute," said Mr. Travers, obstinately, and for a moment those two looked straight into each other's eyes.--"Oh," said Mrs. Travers, slowly, "you are determined not to compromise with your feelings!" An undertone of scorn crept into her voice. "But shall I tell you what I think? I think," and she advanced her head slightly toward the pale, unshaven face that confronted her dark eyes, "I think that for all your blind scorn you judge the man well enough to feel that you can indulge your indignation with perfect safety. Do you hear? With perfect safety!" Directly she had spoken she regretted these words. Really it was unreasonable to take Mr. Travers' tricks of character more passionately on this spot of the Eastern Archipelago full of obscure plots and warring motives than in the more artificial atmosphere of the town. After all what she wanted was simply to save his life, not to make him understand anything. Mr. Travers opened his mouth and without uttering a word shut it again. His wife turned toward the looking-glass nailed to the wall. She heard his voice behind her.

"Edith, where's the truth in all this?"

She detected the anguish of a slow mind with an instinctive dread of obscure places wherein new discoveries can be made. She looked over her shoulder to say:

"It's on the surface, I assure you. Altogether on the surface."

She turned again to the looking-glass where her own face met her with dark eyes and a fair mist of hair above the smooth forehead; but her words had produced no soothing effect.

"But what does it mean?" cried Mr. Travers. "Why doesn't the fellow apologize? Why are we kept here? Are we being kept here? Why don't we get away? Why doesn't he take me back on board my yacht? What does he want from me? How did he procure our release from these people on shore who he says intended to cut our throats? Why did they give us up to him instead?"

Mrs. Travers began to twist her hair on her head.

"Matters of high policy and of local politics. Conflict of personal interests, mistrust between the parties, intrigues of individuals--you ought to know how that sort of thing works. His diplomacy made use of all that. The first thing to do was not to liberate you but to get you into his keeping. He is a very great man here and let me tell you that your safety depends on his dexterity in the use of his prestige rather than on his power which he cannot use. If you would let him talk to you I am sure he would tell you as much as it is possible for him to disclose."

"I don't want to be told about any of his rascalities. But haven't you been taken into his confidence?"

"Completely," admitted Mrs. Travers, peering into the small looking-glass.

"What is the influence you brought to bear upon this man? It looks to me as if our fate were in your hands."

"Your fate is not in my hands. It is not even in his hands. There is a moral situation here which must be solved."

"Ethics of blackmail," commented Mr. Travers with unexpected sarcasm. It flashed through his wife's mind that perhaps she didn't know him so well as she had supposed. It was as if the polished and solemn crust of hard proprieties had cracked slightly, here and there, under the strain, disclosing the mere wrongheadedness of a common mortal. But it was only manner that had cracked a little; the marvellous stupidity of his conceit remained the same. She thought that this discussion was perfectly useless, and as she finished putting up her



hair she said: "I think we had better go on deck now."

"You propose to go out on deck like this?" muttered Mr. Travers with downcast eyes.

"Like this? Certainly. It's no longer a novelty. Who is going to be shocked?"

Mr. Travers made no reply. What she had said of his attitude was very true. He sulked at the enormous offensiveness of men, things, and events; of words and even of glances which he seemed to feel physically resting on his skin like a pain, like a degrading contact. He managed not to wince. But he sulked. His wife continued, "And let me tell you that those clothes are fit for a princess--I mean they are of the quality, material and style custom prescribes for the highest in the land, a far-distant land where I am informed women rule as much as the men. In fact they were meant to be presented to an actual princess in due course. They were selected with the greatest care for that child Immada. Captain Lingard. . . ."

Mr. Travers made an inarticulate noise partaking of a groan and a grunt.

"Well, I must call him by some name and this I thought would be the least offensive for you to hear. After all, the man exists. But he is known also on a certain portion of the earth's surface as King Tom. D'Alcacer is greatly taken by that name. It seems to him wonderfully well adapted to the man, in its familiarity and deference. And if you prefer. . . ."

"I would prefer to hear nothing," said Mr. Travers, distinctly. "Not a single word. Not even from you, till I am a free agent again. But words don't touch me. Nothing can touch me; neither your sinister warnings nor the moods of levity which you think proper to display before a man whose life, according to you, hangs on a thread."

"I never forget it for a moment," said Mrs. Travers. "And I not only know that it does but I also know the strength of the thread. It is a wonderful thread. You may say if you like it has been spun by the same fate which made you what you are."

Mr. Travers felt awfully offended. He had never heard anybody, let alone his own self, addressed in such terms. The tone seemed to question his very quality. He reflected with shocked amazement that he had lived with that woman for eight years! And he said to her gloomily:

"You talk like a pagan."

It was a very strong condemnation which apparently Mrs. Travers had failed to

hear for she pursued with animation:

"But really, you can't expect me to meditate on it all the time or shut myself up here and mourn the circumstances from morning to night. It would be morbid. Let us go on deck."

"And you look simply heathenish in this costume," Mr. Travers went on as though he had not been interrupted, and with an accent of deliberate disgust.

Her heart was heavy but everything he said seemed to force the tone of levity on to her lips. "As long as I don't look like a guy," she remarked, negligently, and then caught the direction of his lurid stare which as a matter of fact was fastened on her bare feet. She checked herself, "Oh, yes, if you prefer it I will put on my stockings. But you know I must be very careful of them. It's the only pair I have here. I have washed them this morning in that bathroom which is built over the stern. They are now drying over the rail just outside. Perhaps you will be good enough to pass them to me when you go on deck."

Mr. Travers spun round and went on deck without a word. As soon as she was alone Mrs. Travers pressed her hands to her temples, a gesture of distress which relieved her by its sincerity. The measured footsteps of two men came to her plainly from the deck, rhythmic and double with a suggestion of tranquil and friendly intercourse. She distinguished particularly the footfalls of the man whose life's orbit was most remote from her own. And yet the orbits had cut! A few days ago she could not have even conceived of his existence, and now he was the man whose footsteps, it seemed to her, her ears could single unerringly in the tramp of a crowd. It was, indeed, a fabulous thing. In the half light of her over-heated shelter she let an irresolute, frightened smile pass off her lips before she, too, went on deck.