

III

Mrs. Travers, acutely aware of Lingard behind her, remained gazing over the lagoon. After a time he stepped forward and placed himself beside her close to the rail. She went on staring at the sheet of water turned to deep purple under the sunset sky.

"Why have you been avoiding me since we came back from the stockade?" she asked in a deadened voice.

"There is nothing to tell you till Rajah Hassim and his sister Immada return with some news," Lingard answered in the same tone. "Has my friend succeeded? Will Belarab listen to any arguments? Will he consent to come out of his shell? Is he on his way back? I wish I knew! . . . Not a whisper comes from there! He may have started two days ago and he may be now near the outskirts of the Settlement. Or he may have gone into camp half way down, from some whim or other; or he may be already arrived for all I know. We should not have seen him. The road from the hills does not lead along the beach."

He snatched nervously at the long glass and directed it at the dark stockade. The sun had sunk behind the forests leaving the contour of the tree-tops outlined by a thread of gold under a band of delicate green lying across the lower sky. Higher up a faint crimson glow faded into the darkened blue overhead. The shades of the evening deepened over the lagoon, clung to the sides of the Emma and to the forms of the further shore. Lingard laid the glass down.

"Mr. d'Alcacer, too, seems to have been avoiding me," said Mrs. Travers. "You are on very good terms with him, Captain Lingard."

"He is a very pleasant man," murmured Lingard, absently. "But he says funny things sometimes. He inquired the other day if there were any playing cards on board, and when I asked him if he liked card-playing, just for something to say, he told me with that queer smile of his that he had read a story of some people condemned to death who passed the time before execution playing card games with their guards."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him that there were probably cards on board somewhere--Jorgenson would know. Then I asked him whether he looked on me as a gaoler. He was quite startled and sorry for what he said."

"It wasn't very kind of you, Captain Lingard."

"It slipped out awkwardly and we made it up with a laugh."

Mrs. Travers leaned her elbows on the rail and put her head into her hands. Every attitude of that woman surprised Lingard by its enchanting effect upon himself. He sighed, and the silence lasted for a long while.

"I wish I had understood every word that was said that morning."

"That morning," repeated Lingard. "What morning do you mean?"

"I mean the morning when I walked out of Belarab's stockade on your arm, Captain Lingard, at the head of the procession. It seemed to me that I was walking on a splendid stage in a scene from an opera, in a gorgeous show fit to make an audience hold its breath. You can't possibly guess how unreal all this seemed, and how artificial I felt myself. An opera, you know. . . ."

"I know. I was a gold digger at one time. Some of us used to come down to Melbourne with our pockets full of money. I daresay it was poor enough to what you must have seen, but once I went to a show like that. It was a story acted to music. All the people went singing through it right to the very end."

"How it must have jarred on your sense of reality," said Mrs. Travers, still not looking at him. "You don't remember the name of the opera?"

"No. I never troubled my head about it. We--our lot never did."

"I won't ask you what the story was like. It must have appeared to you like the very defiance of all truth. Would real people go singing through their life anywhere except in a fairy tale?"

"These people didn't always sing for joy," said Lingard, simply. "I don't know much about fairy tales."

"They are mostly about princesses," murmured Mrs. Travers.

Lingard didn't quite hear. He bent his ear for a moment but she wasn't looking at him and he didn't ask her to repeat her remark. "Fairy tales are for children, I believe," he said. "But that story with music I am telling you of, Mrs. Travers, was not a tale for children. I assure you that of the few shows I have seen that one was the most real to me. More real than anything in life."

Mrs. Travers, remembering the fatal inanity of most opera librettos, was touched by these words as if there had been something pathetic in this readiness of response; as if she had heard a starved man talking of the delight of a crust of dry bread. "I suppose you forgot yourself in that story, whatever it was," she remarked in a detached tone.

"Yes, it carried me away. But I suppose you know the feeling."

"No. I never knew anything of the kind, not even when I was a chit of a girl." Lingard seemed to accept this statement as an assertion of superiority. He inclined his head slightly. Moreover, she might have said what she liked. What pleased him most was her not looking at him; for it enabled him to contemplate with perfect freedom the curve of her cheek, her small ear half hidden by the clear mesh of fine hair, the fascination of her uncovered neck. And her whole person was an impossible, an amazing and solid marvel which somehow was not so much convincing to the eye as to something within him that was apparently independent of his senses. Not even for a moment did he think of her as remote. Untouchable--possibly! But remote--no. Whether consciously or unconsciously he took her spiritually for granted. It was materially that she was a wonder of the sort that is at the same time familiar and sacred.

"No," Mrs. Travers began again, abruptly. "I never forgot myself in a story. It was not in me. I have not even been able to forget myself on that morning on shore which was part of my own story."

"You carried yourself first rate," said Lingard, smiling at the nape of her neck, her ear, the film of escaped hair, the modelling of the corner of her eye. He could see the flutter of the dark eyelashes: and the delicate flush on her cheek had rather the effect of scent than of colour.

"You approved of my behaviour."

"Just right, I tell you. My word, weren't they all struck of a heap when they made out what you were."

"I ought to feel flattered. I will confess to you that I felt only half disguised and was half angry and wholly uncomfortable. What helped me, I suppose, was that I wanted to please. . . ."

"I don't mean to say that they were exactly pleased," broke in Lingard, conscientiously. "They were startled more."

"I wanted to please you," dropped Mrs. Travers, negligently. A faint, hoarse, and impatient call of a bird was heard from the woods as if calling to the oncoming night. Lingard's face grew hot in the deepening dusk. The delicate lemon yellow and ethereal green tints had vanished from the sky and the red glow darkened menacingly. The sun had set behind the black pall of the forest, no longer edged with a line of gold. "Yes, I was absurdly self-conscious," continued Mrs. Travers in a conversational tone. "And it was the effect of these clothes that you made me put on over some of my European--I almost said disguise; because you know in the present more perfect costume I feel curiously at home; and yet I can't say that these things really fit me. The sleeves of this silk under-jacket are rather tight. My shoulders feel bound, too, and as to the sarong it is scandalously short. According to rule it should have been long enough to fall over my feet. But I like freedom of movement. I have had very little of what I liked in life."

"I can hardly believe that," said Lingard. "If it wasn't for your saying so. . . ."

"I wouldn't say so to everybody," she said, turning her head for a moment to Lingard and turning it away again to the dusk which seemed to come floating over the black lagoon. Far away in its depth a couple of feeble lights twinkled; it was impossible to say whether on the shore or on the edge of the more distant forest. Overhead the stars were beginning to come out, but faint yet, as if too remote to be reflected in the lagoon. Only to the west a setting planet shone through the red fog of the sunset glow. "It was supposed not to be good for me to have much freedom of action. So at least I was told. But I have a suspicion that it was only unpleasing to other people."

"I should have thought," began Lingard, then hesitated and stopped. It seemed to him inconceivable that everybody should not have loved to make that woman happy. And he was impressed by the bitterness of her tone. Mrs. Travers did not seem curious to know what he wanted to say and after a time she added, "I don't mean only when I was a child. I don't remember that very well. I daresay I was very objectionable as a child."

Lingard tried to imagine her as a child. The idea was novel to him. Her perfection seemed to have come into the world complete, mature, and without any hesitation or weakness. He had nothing in his experience that could help him to imagine a child of that class. The children he knew played about the village street and ran on the beach. He had been one of them. He had seen other children, of course, since, but he had not been in touch with them except visually and they had not been English children. Her childhood, like his own, had been passed in England, and that very fact made it almost impossible for him to imagine it. He could not even tell whether it was in town or in the country, or whether as a child she had even seen the sea. And how could a child of that kind be objectionable?

But he remembered that a child disapproved of could be very unhappy, and he said:

"I am sorry."

Mrs. Travers laughed a little. Within the muslin cage forms had turned to blurred shadows. Amongst them the form of d'Alcacer arose and moved. The systematic or else the morbid dumbness of Mr. Travers bored and exasperated him, though, as a matter of fact, that gentleman's speeches had never had the power either to entertain or to soothe his mind.

"It's very nice of you. You have a great capacity for sympathy, but after all I am not certain on which side your sympathies lie. With me, or those much-trying people," said Mrs. Travers.

"With the child," said Lingard, disregarding the bantering tone. "A child can have a very bad time of it all to itself."

"What can you know of it?" she asked.

"I have my own feelings," he answered in some surprise.

Mrs. Travers, with her back to him, was covered with confusion. Neither could she depict to herself his childhood as if he, too, had come into the world in the fullness of his strength and his purpose. She discovered a certain naiveness in herself and laughed a little. He made no sound.

"Don't be angry," she said. "I wouldn't dream of laughing at your feelings. Indeed your feelings are the most serious thing that ever came in my way. I couldn't help laughing at myself--at a funny discovery I made."

"In the days of your childhood?" she heard Lingard's deep voice asking after a pause.

"Oh, no. Ages afterward. No child could have made that discovery. Do you know the greatest difference there is between us? It is this: That I have been living since my childhood in front of a show and that I never have been taken in for a moment by its tinsel and its noise or by anything that went on on the stage. Do you understand what I mean, Captain Lingard?"

There was a moment of silence. "What does it matter? We are no children now." There was an infinite gentleness in Lingard's deep tones. "But if you have been unhappy then don't tell me that it has not been made up to you since. Surely you

have only to make a sign. A woman like you."

"You think I could frighten the whole world on to its knees?"

"No, not frighten." The suggestion of a laugh in the deadened voice passed off in a catch of the breath. Then he was heard beginning soberly: "Your husband. . . ." He hesitated a little and she took the opportunity to say coldly:

"His name is Mr. Travers."

Lingard didn't know how to take it. He imagined himself to have been guilty of some sort of presumption. But how on earth was he to call the man? After all he was her husband. That idea was disagreeable to him because the man was also inimical in a particularly unreasonable and galling manner. At the same time he was aware that he didn't care a bit for his enmity and had an idea that he would not have cared for his friendship either. And suddenly he felt very much annoyed.

"Yes. That's the man I mean," he said in a contemptuous tone. "I don't particularly like the name and I am sure I don't want to talk about him more than I can help. If he hadn't been your husband I wouldn't have put up with his manners for an hour. Do you know what would have happened to him if he hadn't been your husband?"

"No," said Mrs. Travers. "Do you, Captain Lingard?"

"Not exactly," he admitted. "Something he wouldn't have liked, you may be sure."

"While of course he likes this very much," she observed. Lingard gave an abrupt laugh.

"I don't think it's in my power to do anything that he would like," he said in a serious tone. "Forgive me my frankness, Mrs. Travers, but he makes it very difficult sometimes for me to keep civil. Whatever I have had to put up with in life I have never had to put up with contempt."

"I quite believe that," said Mrs. Travers. "Don't your friends call you King Tom?"

"Nobody that I care for. I have no friends. Oh, yes, they call me that . . ."

"You have no friends?"

"Not I," he said with decision. "A man like me has no chums."

"It's quite possible," murmured Mrs. Travers to herself.

"No, not even Jorgenson. Old crazy Jorgenson. He calls me King Tom, too. You see what that's worth."

"Yes, I see. Or rather I have heard. That poor man has no tone, and so much depends on that. Now suppose I were to call you King Tom now and then between ourselves," Mrs. Travers' voice proposed, distantly tentative in the night that invested her person with a colourless vagueness of form.

She waited in the stillness, her elbows on the rail and her face in her hands as if she had already forgotten what she had said. She heard at her elbow the deep murmur of:

"Let's hear you say it."

She never moved the least bit. The sombre lagoon sparkled faintly with the reflection of the stars.

"Oh, yes, I will let you hear it," she said into the starlit space in a voice of unaccented gentleness which changed subtly as she went on. "I hope you will never regret that you came out of your friendless mystery to speak to me, King Tom. How many days ago it was! And here is another day gone. Tell me how many more of them there must be? Of these blinding days and nights without a sound."

"Be patient," he murmured. "Don't ask me for the impossible."

"How do you or I know what is possible?" she whispered with a strange scorn. "You wouldn't dare guess. But I tell you that every day that passes is more impossible to me than the day before."

The passion of that whisper went like a stab into his breast. "What am I to tell you?" he murmured, as if with despair. "Remember that every sunset makes it a day less. Do you think I want you here?"

A bitter little laugh floated out into the starlight. Mrs. Travers heard Lingard move suddenly away from her side. She didn't change her pose by a hair's breadth. Presently she heard d'Alcacer coming out of the Cage. His cultivated voice asked half playfully:

"Have you had a satisfactory conversation? May I be told something of it?"

"Mr. d'Alcacer, you are curious."

"Well, in our position, I confess. . . . You are our only refuge, remember."

"You want to know what we were talking about," said Mrs. Travers, altering slowly her position so as to confront d'Alcacer whose face was almost undistinguishable. "Oh, well, then, we talked about opera, the realities and illusions of the stage, of dresses, of people's names, and things of that sort."

"Nothing of importance," he said courteously. Mrs. Travers moved forward and he stepped to one side. Inside the Cage two Malay hands were hanging round lanterns, the light of which fell on Mr. Travers' bowed head as he sat in his chair.

When they were all assembled for the evening meal Jorgenson strolled up from nowhere in particular as his habit was, and speaking through the muslin announced that Captain Lingard begged to be excused from joining the company that evening. Then he strolled away. From that moment till they got up from the table and the camp bedsteads were brought in not twenty words passed between the members of the party within the net. The strangeness of their situation made all attempts to exchange ideas very arduous; and apart from that each had thoughts which it was distinctly useless to communicate to the others. Mr. Travers had abandoned himself to his sense of injury. He did not so much brood as rage inwardly in a dull, dispirited way. The impossibility of asserting himself in any manner galled his very soul. D'Alcacer was extremely puzzled. Detached in a sense from the life of men perhaps as much even as Jorgenson himself, he took yet a reasonable interest in the course of events and had not lost all his sense of self-preservation. Without being able to appreciate the exact values of the situation he was not one of those men who are ever completely in the dark in any given set of circumstances. Without being humorous he was a good-humoured man. His habitual, gentle smile was a true expression. More of a European than of a Spaniard he had that truly aristocratic nature which is inclined to credit every honest man with something of its own nobility and in its judgment is altogether independent of class feeling. He believed Lingard to be an honest man and he never troubled his head to classify him, except in the sense that he found him an interesting character. He had a sort of esteem for the outward personality and the bearing of that seaman. He found in him also the distinction of being nothing of a type. He was a specimen to be judged only by its own worth. With his natural gift of insight d'Alcacer told himself that many overseas adventurers of history were probably less worthy because obviously they must have been less simple. He didn't, however, impart those thoughts formally to Mrs. Travers. In fact he avoided discussing Lingard with Mrs. Travers who, he thought, was quite intelligent enough to appreciate the exact shade of his attitude. If that shade was fine, Mrs. Travers was fine, too; and there was no need to discuss the colours of

this adventure. Moreover, she herself seemed to avoid all direct discussion of the Lingard element in their fate. D'Alcacer was fine enough to be aware that those two seemed to understand each other in a way that was not obvious even to themselves. Whenever he saw them together he was always much tempted to observe them. And he yielded to the temptation. The fact of one's life depending on the phases of an obscure action authorizes a certain latitude of behaviour. He had seen them together repeatedly, communing openly or apart, and there was in their way of joining each other, in their poses and their ways of separating, something special and characteristic and pertaining to themselves only, as if they had been made for each other.

What he couldn't understand was why Mrs. Travers should have put off his natural curiosity as to her latest conference with the Man of Fate by an incredible statement as to the nature of the conversation. Talk about dresses, opera, people's names. He couldn't take this seriously. She might have invented, he thought, something more plausible; or simply have told him that this was not for him to know. She ought to have known that he would not have been offended. Couldn't she have seen already that he accepted the complexion of mystery in her relation to that man completely, unquestionably; as though it had been something preordained from the very beginning of things? But he was not annoyed with Mrs. Travers. After all it might have been true. She would talk exactly as she liked, and even incredibly, if it so pleased her, and make the man hang on her lips. And likewise she was capable of making the man talk about anything by a power of inspiration for reasons simple or perverse. Opera! Dresses! Yes--about Shakespeare and the musical glasses! For a mere whim or for the deepest purpose. Women worthy of the name were like that. They were very wonderful. They rose to the occasion and sometimes above the occasion when things were bound to occur that would be comic or tragic (as it happened) but generally charged with trouble even to innocent beholders. D'Alcacer thought these thoughts without bitterness and even without irony. With his half-secret social reputation as a man of one great passion in a world of mere intrigues he liked all women. He liked them in their sentiment and in their hardness, in the tragic character of their foolish or clever impulses, at which he looked with a sort of tender seriousness.

He didn't take a favourable view of the position but he considered Mrs. Travers' statement about operas and dresses as a warning to keep off the subject. For this reason he remained silent through the meal.

When the bustle of clearing away the table was over he strolled toward Mrs. Travers and remarked very quietly:

"I think that in keeping away from us this evening the Man of Fate was well

inspired. We dined like a lot of Carthusian monks."

"You allude to our silence?"

"It was most scrupulous. If we had taken an eternal vow we couldn't have kept it better."

"Did you feel bored?"

"Pas du tout," d'Alcacer assured her with whimsical gravity. "I felt nothing. I sat in a state of blessed vacuity. I believe I was the happiest of us three. Unless you, too, Mrs. Travers. . . ."

"It's absolutely no use your fishing for my thoughts, Mr. d'Alcacer. If I were to let you see them you would be appalled."

"Thoughts really are but a shape of feelings. Let me congratulate you on the impassive mask you can put on those horrors you say you nurse in your breast. It was impossible to tell anything by your face."

"You will always say flattering things."

"Madame, my flatteries come from the very bottom of my heart. I have given up long ago all desire to please. And I was not trying to get at your thoughts. Whatever else you may expect from me you may count on my absolute respect for your privacy. But I suppose with a mask such as you can make for yourself you really don't care. The Man of Fate, I noticed, is not nearly as good at it as you are."

"What a pretentious name. Do you call him by it to his face, Mr. d'Alcacer?"

"No, I haven't the cheek," confessed d'Alcacer, equably. "And, besides, it's too momentous for daily use. And he is so simple that he might mistake it for a joke and nothing could be further from my thoughts. Mrs. Travers, I will confess to you that I don't feel jocular in the least. But what can he know about people of our sort? And when I reflect how little people of our sort can know of such a man I am quite content to address him as Captain Lingard. It's common and soothing and most respectable and satisfactory; for Captain is the most empty of all titles. What is a Captain? Anybody can be a Captain; and for Lingard it's a name like any other. Whereas what he deserves is something special, significant, and expressive, that would match his person, his simple and romantic person."

He perceived that Mrs. Travers was looking at him intently. They hastened to turn

their eyes away from each other.

"He would like your appreciation," Mrs. Travers let drop negligently.

"I am afraid he would despise it."

"Despise it! Why, that sort of thing is the very breath of his nostrils."

"You seem to understand him, Mrs. Travers. Women have a singular capacity for understanding. I mean subjects that interest them; because when their imagination is stimulated they are not afraid of letting it go. A man is more mistrustful of himself, but women are born much more reckless. They push on and on under the protection of secrecy and silence, and the greater the obscurity of what they wish to explore the greater their courage."

"Do you mean seriously to tell me that you consider me a creature of darkness?"

"I spoke in general," remonstrated d'Alcacer. "Anything else would have been an impertinence. Yes, obscurity is women's best friend. Their daring loves it; but a sudden flash of light disconcerts them. Generally speaking, if they don't get exactly at the truth they always manage to come pretty near to it."

Mrs. Travers had listened with silent attention and she allowed the silence to continue for some time after d'Alcacer had ceased. When she spoke it was to say in an unconcerned tone that as to this subject she had had special opportunities. Her self-possessed interlocutor managed to repress a movement of real curiosity under an assumption of conventional interest. "Indeed," he exclaimed, politely. "A special opportunity. How did you manage to create it?"

This was too much for Mrs. Travers. "I! Create it!" she exclaimed, indignantly, but under her breath. "How on earth do you think I could have done it?"

Mr. d'Alcacer, as if communing with himself, was heard to murmur unrepentantly that indeed women seldom knew how they had "done it," to which Mrs. Travers in a weary tone returned the remark that no two men were dense in the same way. To this Mr. d'Alcacer assented without difficulty. "Yes, our brand presents more varieties. This, from a certain point of view, is obviously to our advantage. We interest. . . . Not that I imagine myself interesting to you, Mrs. Travers. But what about the Man of Fate?"

"Oh, yes," breathed out Mrs. Travers.

"I see! Immensely!" said d'Alcacer in a tone of mysterious understanding. "Was his

stupidity so colossal?"

"It was indistinguishable from great visions that were in no sense mean and made up for him a world of his own."

"I guessed that much," muttered d'Alcacer to himself. "But that, you know, Mrs. Travers, that isn't good news at all to me. World of dreams, eh? That's very bad, very dangerous. It's almost fatal, Mrs. Travers."

"Why all this dismay? Why do you object to a world of dreams?"

"Because I dislike the prospect of being made a sacrifice of by those Moors. I am not an optimist like our friend there," he continued in a low tone nodding toward the dismal figure of Mr. Travers huddled up in the chair. "I don't regard all this as a farce and I have discovered in myself a strong objection to having my throat cut by those gorgeous barbarians after a lot of fatuous talk. Don't ask me why, Mrs. Travers. Put it down to an absurd weakness."

Mrs. Travers made a slight movement in her chair, raising her hands to her head, and in the dim light of the lanterns d'Alcacer saw the mass of her clear gleaming hair fall down and spread itself over her shoulders. She seized half of it in her hands which looked very white, and with her head inclined a little on one side she began to make a plait.

"You are terrifying," he said after watching the movement of her fingers for a while.

"Yes . . . ?" she accentuated interrogatively.

"You have the awfulness of the predestined. You, too, are the prey of dreams."

"Not of the Moors, then," she uttered, calmly, beginning the other plait. D'Alcacer followed the operation to the end. Close against her, her diaphanous shadow on the muslin reproduced her slightest movements. D'Alcacer turned his eyes away.

"No! No barbarian shall touch you. Because if it comes to that I believe he would be capable of killing you himself."

A minute elapsed before he stole a glance in her direction. She was leaning back again, her hands had fallen on her lap and her head with a plait of hair on each side of her face, her head incredibly changed in character and suggesting something medieval, ascetic, drooped dreamily on her breast.

D'Alcacer waited, holding his breath. She didn't move. In the dim gleam of jewelled clasps, the faint sheen of gold embroideries and the shimmer of silks, she was like a figure in a faded painting. Only her neck appeared dazzlingly white in the smoky redness of the light. D'Alcacer's wonder approached a feeling of awe. He was on the point of moving away quietly when Mrs. Travers, without stirring in the least, let him hear the words:

"I have told him that every day seemed more difficult to live. Don't you see how impossible this is?"

D'Alcacer glanced rapidly across the Cage where Mr. Travers seemed to be asleep all in a heap and presenting a ruffled appearance like a sick bird. Nothing was distinct of him but the bald patch on the top of his head.

"Yes," he murmured, "it is most unfortunate. . . . I understand your anxiety, Mrs. Travers, but . . ."

"I am frightened," she said.

He reflected a moment. "What answer did you get?" he asked, softly.

"The answer was: 'Patience.'"

D'Alcacer laughed a little.--"You may well laugh," murmured Mrs. Travers in a tone of anguish.--"That's why I did," he whispered. "Patience! Didn't he see the horror of it?"--"I don't know. He walked away," said Mrs. Travers. She looked immovably at her hands clasped in her lap, and then with a burst of distress, "Mr. d'Alcacer, what is going to happen?"--"Ah, you are asking yourself the question at last. That will happen which cannot be avoided; and perhaps you know best what it is."--"No. I am still asking myself what he will do."--"Ah, that is not for me to know," declared d'Alcacer. "I can't tell you what he will do, but I know what will happen to him."--"To him, you say! To him!" she cried.--"He will break his heart," said d'Alcacer, distinctly, bending a little over the chair with a slight gasp at his own audacity--and waited.

"Croyez-vous?" came at last from Mrs. Travers in an accent so coldly languid that d'Alcacer felt a shudder run down his spine.

Was it possible that she was that kind of woman, he asked himself. Did she see nothing in the world outside herself? Was she above the commonest kind of compassion? He couldn't suspect Mrs. Travers of stupidity; but she might have been heartless and, like some women of her class, quite unable to recognize any emotion in the world except her own. D'Alcacer was shocked and at the same

time he was relieved because he confessed to himself that he had ventured very far. However, in her humanity she was not vulgar enough to be offended. She was not the slave of small meannesses. This thought pleased d'Alcacer who had schooled himself not to expect too much from people. But he didn't know what to do next. After what he had ventured to say and after the manner in which she had met his audacity the only thing to do was to change the conversation. Mrs. Travers remained perfectly still. "I will pretend that I think she is asleep," he thought to himself, meditating a retreat on tip-toe.

He didn't know that Mrs. Travers was simply trying to recover the full command of her faculties. His words had given her a terrible shock. After managing to utter this defensive "croyez-vous" which came out of her lips cold and faint as if in a last effort of dying strength, she felt herself turn rigid and speechless. She was thinking, stiff all over with emotion: "D'Alcacer has seen it! How much more has he been able to see?" She didn't ask herself that question in fear or shame but with a reckless resignation. Out of that shock came a sensation of peace. A glowing warmth passed through all her limbs. If d'Alcacer had peered by that smoky light into her face he might have seen on her lips a fatalistic smile come and go. But d'Alcacer would not have dreamed of doing such a thing, and, besides, his attention just then was drawn in another direction. He had heard subdued exclamations, had noticed a stir on the decks of the Emma, and even some sort of noise outside the ship.

"These are strange sounds," he said.

"Yes, I hear," Mrs. Travers murmured, uneasily.

Vague shapes glided outside the Cage, barefooted, almost noiseless, whispering Malay words secretly.

"It seems as though a boat had come alongside," observed d'Alcacer, lending an attentive ear. "I wonder what it means. In our position. . . ."

"It may mean anything," interrupted Mrs. Travers.

"Jaffir is here," said a voice in the darkness of the after end of the ship. Then there were some more words in which d'Alcacer's attentive ear caught the word "surat."

"A message of some sort has come," he said. "They will be calling Captain Lingard. I wonder what thoughts or what dreams this call will interrupt." He spoke lightly, looking now at Mrs. Travers who had altered her position in the chair; and by their tones and attitudes these two might have been on board the

yacht sailing the sea in perfect safety. "You, of course, are the one who will be told. Don't you feel a sort of excitement, Mrs. Travers?"

"I have been lately exhorted to patience," she said in the same easy tone. "I can wait and I imagine I shall have to wait till the morning."

"It can't be very late yet," he said. "Time with us has been standing still for ever so long. And yet this may be the hour of fate."

"Is this the feeling you have at this particular moment?"

"I have had that feeling for a considerable number of moments already. At first it was exciting. Now I am only moderately anxious. I have employed my time in going over all my past life."

"Can one really do that?"

"Yes. I can't say I have been bored to extinction. I am still alive, as you see; but I have done with that and I feel extremely idle. There is only one thing I would like to do. I want to find a few words that could convey to you my gratitude for all your friendliness in the past, at the time when you let me see so much of you in London. I felt always that you took me on my own terms and that so kindly that often I felt inclined to think better of myself. But I am afraid I am wearying you, Mrs. Travers."

"I assure you you have never done that--in the past. And as to the present moment I beg you not to go away. Stay by me please. We are not going to pretend that we are sleepy at this early hour."

D'Alcacer brought a stool close to the long chair and sat down on it. "Oh, yes, the possible hour of fate," he said. "I have a request to make, Mrs. Travers. I don't ask you to betray anything. What would be the good? The issue when it comes will be plain enough. But I should like to get a warning, just something that would give me time to pull myself together, to compose myself as it were. I want you to promise me that if the balance tips against us you will give me a sign. You could, for instance, seize the opportunity when I am looking at you to put your left hand to your forehead like this. It is a gesture that I have never seen you make, and so . . ."

"Jorgenson!" Lingard's voice was heard forward where the light of a lantern appeared suddenly. Then, after a pause, Lingard was heard again: "Here!"

Then the silent minutes began to go by. Mrs. Travers reclining in her chair and

d'Alcacer sitting on the stool waited motionless without a word. Presently through the subdued murmurs and agitation pervading the dark deck of the Emma Mrs. Travers heard a firm footstep, and, lantern in hand, Lingard appeared outside the muslin cage.

"Will you come out and speak to me?" he said, loudly. "Not you. The lady," he added in an authoritative tone as d'Alcacer rose hastily from the stool. "I want Mrs. Travers."

"Of course," muttered d'Alcacer to himself and as he opened the door of the Cage to let Mrs. Travers slip through he whispered to her, "This is the hour of fate."

She brushed past him swiftly without the slightest sign that she had heard the words. On the after deck between the Cage and the deckhouse Lingard waited, lantern in hand. Nobody else was visible about; but d'Alcacer felt in the air the presence of silent and excited beings hovering outside the circle of light. Lingard raised the lantern as Mrs. Travers approached and d'Alcacer heard him say:

"I have had news which you ought to know. Let us go into the deckhouse."

D'Alcacer saw their heads lighted up by the raised lantern surrounded by the depths of shadow with an effect of a marvellous and symbolic vision. He heard Mrs. Travers say "I would rather not hear your news," in a tone that made that sensitive observer purse up his lips in wonder. He thought that she was overwrought, that the situation had grown too much for her nerves. But this was not the tone of a frightened person. It flashed through his mind that she had become self-conscious, and there he stopped in his speculation. That friend of women remained discreet even in his thoughts. He stepped backward further into the Cage and without surprise saw Mrs. Travers follow Lingard into the deckhouse.