

#### IV

Lingard stood the lantern on the table. Its light was very poor. He dropped on to the sea-chest heavily. He, too, was over-wrought. His flannel shirt was open at the neck. He had a broad belt round his waist and was without his jacket. Before him, Mrs. Travers, straight and tall in the gay silks, cottons, and muslins of her outlandish dress, with the ends of the scarf thrown over her head, hanging down in front of her, looked dimly splendid and with a black glance out of her white face. He said:

"Do you, too, want to throw me over? I tell you you can't do that now."

"I wasn't thinking of throwing you over, but I don't even know what you mean. There seem to be no end of things I can't do. Hadn't you better tell me of something that I could do? Have you any idea yourself what you want from me?"

"You can let me look at you. You can listen to me. You can speak to me."

"Frankly, I have never shirked doing all those things, whenever you wanted me to. You have led me . . ."

"I led you!" cried Lingard.

"Oh! It was my fault," she said, without anger. "I must have dreamed then that it was you who came to me in the dark with the tale of your impossible life. Could I have sent you away?"

"I wish you had. Why didn't you?"

"Do you want me to tell you that you were irresistible? How could I have sent you away? But you! What made you come back to me with your very heart on your lips?"

When Lingard spoke after a time it was in jerky sentences.

"I didn't stop to think. I had been hurt. I didn't think of you people as ladies and gentlemen. I thought of you as people whose lives I held in my hand. How was it possible to forget you in my trouble? It is your face that I brought back with me on board my brig. I don't know why. I didn't look at you more than at anybody else. It took me all my time to keep my temper down lest it should burn you all up. I didn't want to be rude to you people, but I found it wasn't very easy because

threats were the only argument I had. Was I very offensive, Mrs. Travers?"

She had listened tense and very attentive, almost stern. And it was without the slightest change of expression that she said:

"I think that you bore yourself appropriately to the state of life to which it has pleased God to call you."

"What state?" muttered Lingard to himself. "I am what I am. They call me Rajah Laut, King Tom, and such like. I think it amused you to hear it, but I can tell you it is no joke to have such names fastened on one, even in fun. And those very names have in them something which makes all this affair here no small matter to anybody."

She stood before him with a set, severe face.--"Did you call me out in this alarming manner only to quarrel with me?"--"No, but why do you choose this time to tell me that my coming for help to you was nothing but impudence in your sight? Well, I beg your pardon for intruding on your dignity."--"You misunderstood me," said Mrs. Travers, without relaxing for a moment her contemplative severity. "Such a flattering thing had never happened to me before and it will never happen to me again. But believe me, King Tom, you did me too much honour. Jorgenson is perfectly right in being angry with you for having taken a woman in tow."--"He didn't mean to be rude," protested Lingard, earnestly. Mrs. Travers didn't even smile at this intrusion of a point of manners into the atmosphere of anguish and suspense that seemed always to arise between her and this man who, sitting on the sea-chest, had raised his eyes to her with an air of extreme candour and seemed unable to take them off again. She continued to look at him sternly by a tremendous effort of will.

"How changed you are," he murmured.

He was lost in the depths of the simplest wonder. She appeared to him vengeful and as if turned forever into stone before his bewildered remorse. Forever. Suddenly Mrs. Travers looked round and sat down in the chair. Her strength failed her but she remained austere with her hands resting on the arms of her seat. Lingard sighed deeply and dropped his eyes. She did not dare relax her muscles for fear of breaking down altogether and betraying a reckless impulse which lurked at the bottom of her dismay, to seize the head of d'Alcacer's Man of Fate, press it to her breast once, fling it far away, and vanish herself, vanish out of life like a wraith. The Man of Fate sat silent and bowed, yet with a suggestion of strength in his dejection. "If I don't speak," Mrs. Travers said to herself, with great inward calmness, "I shall burst into tears." She said aloud, "What could have happened? What have you dragged me in here for? Why don't you tell me

your news?"

"I thought you didn't want to hear. I believe you really don't want to. What is all this to you? I believe that you don't care anything about what I feel, about what I do and how I end. I verily believe that you don't care how you end yourself. I believe you never cared for your own or anybody's feelings. I don't think it is because you are hard, I think it is because you don't know, and don't want to know, and are angry with life."

He flourished an arm recklessly, and Mrs. Travers noticed for the first time that he held a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Is that your news there?" she asked, significantly. "It's difficult to imagine that in this wilderness writing can have any significance. And who on earth here could send you news on paper? Will you let me see it? Could I understand it? Is it in English? Come, King Tom, don't look at me in this awful way."

She got up suddenly, not in indignation, but as if at the end of her endurance. The jewelled clasps, the gold embroideries, gleamed elusively amongst the folds of her draperies which emitted a mysterious rustle.

"I can't stand this," she cried. "I can't stand being looked at like this. No woman could stand it. No woman has ever been looked at like this. What can you see? Hatred I could understand. What is it you think me capable of?"

"You are very extraordinary," murmured Lingard, who had regained his self-possession before that outburst.

"Very well, and you are extraordinary, too. That's understood--here we are both under that curse and having to face together whatever may turn up. But who on earth could have sent you this writing?"

"Who?" repeated Lingard. "Why, that young fellow that blundered on my brig in the dark, bringing a boatload of trouble alongside on that quiet night in Carimata Straits. The darkest night I have ever known. An accursed night."

Mrs. Travers bit her lip, waited a little, then asked quietly:

"What difficulty has he got into now?"

"Difficulty!" cried Lingard. "He is immensely pleased with himself, the young fool. You know, when you sent him to talk to me that evening you left the yacht, he came with a loaded pistol in his pocket. And now he has gone and done it."

"Done it?" repeated Mrs. Travers blankly. "Done what?"

She snatched from Lingard's unresisting palm the sheet of paper. While she was smoothing it Lingard moved round and stood close at her elbow. She ran quickly over the first lines, then her eyes steadied. At the end she drew a quick breath and looked up at Lingard. Their faces had never been so close together before and Mrs. Travers had a surprising second of a perfectly new sensation. She looked away.--"Do you understand what this news means?" he murmured. Mrs. Travers let her hand fall by her side. "Yes," she said in a low tone. "The compact is broken."

Carter had begun his letter without any preliminaries:

You cleared out in the middle of the night and took the lady away with you. You left me no proper orders. But as a sailorman I looked upon myself as left in charge of two ships while within half a mile on that sandbank there were more than a hundred piratical cut-throats watching me as closely as so many tigers about to leap. Days went by without a word of you or the lady. To leave the ships outside and go inland to look for you was not to be thought of with all those pirates within springing distance. Put yourself in my place. Can't you imagine my anxiety, my sleepless nights? Each night worse than the night before. And still no word from you. I couldn't sit still and worry my head off about things I couldn't understand. I am a sailorman. My first duty was to the ships. I had to put an end to this impossible situation and I hope you will agree that I have done it in a seamanlike way. One misty morning I moved the brig nearer the sandbank and directly the mist cleared I opened fire on the praus of those savages which were anchored in the channel. We aimed wide at first to give those vagabonds that were on board a chance to clear out and join their friends camped on the sands. I didn't want to kill people. Then we got the long gun to bear and in about an hour we had the bottom knocked out of the two praus. The savages on the bank howled and screamed at every shot. They are mighty angry but I don't care for their anger now, for by sinking their praus I have made them as harmless as a flock of lambs. They needn't starve on their sandbank because they have two or three dugouts hauled up on the sand and they may ferry themselves and their women to the mainland whenever they like.

I fancy I have acted as a seaman and as a seaman I intend to go on acting. Now I have made the ships safe I shall set about without loss of time trying to get the yacht off the mud. When that's done I shall arm the boats and proceed inshore to look for you and the yacht's gentry, and shan't rest till I know whether any or all of you are above the earth yet.

I hope these words will reach you. Just as we had done the business of those praus the man you sent off that night in Carimata to stop our chief officer came sailing in from the west with our first gig in tow and the boat's crew all well. Your serang tells me he is a most trustworthy messenger and that his name is Jaffir. He seems only too anxious to try to get to you as soon as possible. I repeat, ships and men have been made safe and I don't mean to give you up dead or alive.

"You are quick in taking the point," said Lingard in a dull voice, while Mrs. Travers, with the sheet of paper gripped in her hand, looked into his face with anxious eyes. "He has been smart and no mistake."

"He didn't know," murmured Mrs. Travers.

"No, he didn't know. But could I take everybody into my confidence?" protested Lingard in the same low tone. "And yet who else could I trust? It seemed to me that he must have understood without being told. But he is too young. He may well be proud according to his lights. He has done that job outside very smartly--damn his smartness! And here we are with all our lives depending on my word--which is broken now, Mrs. Travers. It is broken."

Mrs. Travers nodded at him slightly.

"They would sooner have expected to see the sun and the moon fall out of the sky," Lingard continued with repressed fire. Next moment it seemed to have gone out of him and Mrs. Travers heard him mutter a disconnected phrase. . . . "The world down about my ears."

"What will you do?" she whispered.

"What will I do?" repeated Lingard, gently. "Oh, yes--do. Mrs. Travers, do you see that I am nothing now? Just nothing."

He had lost himself in the contemplation of her face turned to him with an expression of awed curiosity. The shock of the world coming down about his ears in consequence of Carter's smartness was so terrific that it had dulled his sensibilities in the manner of a great pain or of a great catastrophe. What was there to look at but that woman's face, in a world which had lost its consistency, its shape, and its promises in a moment?

Mrs. Travers looked away. She understood that she had put to Lingard an impossible question. What was presenting itself to her as a problem was to that man a crisis of feeling. Obviously Carter's action had broken the compact entered into with Daman, and she was intelligent enough to understand that it was the

sort of thing that could not be explained away. It wasn't horror that she felt, but a sort of consternation, something like the discomfiture of people who have just missed their train. It was only more intense. The real dismay had yet to make its way into her comprehension. To Lingard it was a blow struck straight at his heart.

He was not angry with Carter. The fellow had acted like a seaman. Carter's concern was for the ships. In this fatality Carter was a mere incident. The real cause of the disaster was somewhere else, was other, and more remote. And at the same time Lingard could not defend himself from a feeling that it was in himself, too, somewhere in the unexplored depths of his nature, something fatal and unavoidable. He muttered to himself:

"No. I am not a lucky man."

This was but a feeble expression of the discovery of the truth that suddenly had come home to him as if driven into his breast by a revealing power which had decided that this was to be the end of his fling. But he was not the man to give himself up to the examination of his own sensations. His natural impulse was to grapple with the circumstances and that was what he was trying to do; but he missed now that sense of mastery which is half the battle. Conflict of some sort was the very essence of his life. But this was something he had never known before. This was a conflict within himself. He had to face unsuspected powers, foes that he could not go out to meet at the gate. They were within, as though he had been betrayed by somebody, by some secret enemy. He was ready to look round for that subtle traitor. A sort of blankness fell on his mind and he suddenly thought: "Why! It's myself."

Immediately afterward he had a clear, merciless recollection of Hassim and Immada. He saw them far off beyond the forests. Oh, yes, they existed--within his breast!

"That was a night!" he muttered, looking straight at Mrs. Travers. He had been looking at her all the time. His glance had held her under a spell, but for a whole interminable minute he had not been aware of her at all. At the murmur of his words she made a slight movement and he saw her again.--"What night?" she whispered, timidly, like an intruder. She was astonished to see him smile.--"Not like this one," he said. "You made me notice how quiet and still it was. Yes. Listen how still it is."

Both moved their heads slightly and seemed to lend an ear. There was not a murmur, sigh, rustle, splash, or footfall. No whispers, no tremors, not a sound of any kind. They might have been alone on board the Emma, abandoned even by

the ghost of Captain Jorgenson departed to rejoin the Barque Wild Rose on the shore of the Cimmerian sea.--"It's like the stillness of the end," said Mrs. Travers in a low, equable voice.--"Yes, but that, too, is false," said Lingard in the same tone.--"I don't understand," Mrs. Travers began, hurriedly, after a short silence. "But don't use that word. Don't use it, King Tom! It frightens me by its mere sound."

Lingard made no sign. His thoughts were back with Hassim and Immada. The young chief and his sister had gone up country on a voluntary mission to persuade Belarab to return to his stockade and to take up again the direction of affairs. They carried urgent messages from Lingard, who for Belarab was the very embodiment of truth and force, that unquestioned force which had permitted Belarab to indulge in all his melancholy hesitations. But those two young people had also some personal prestige. They were Lingard's heart's friends. They were like his children. But beside that, their high birth, their warlike story, their wanderings, adventures, and prospects had given them a glamour of their own.