

PART VI. THE CLAIM OF LIFE AND THE TOLL OF DEATH

I

"Have you got King Tom's watch in there?" said a voice that seemed not to attach the slightest importance to the question. Jorgenson, outside the door of Mrs. Travers' part of the deckhouse, waited for the answer. He heard a low cry very much like a moan, the startled sound of pain that may be sometimes heard in sick rooms. But it moved him not at all. He would never have dreamt of opening the door unless told to do so, in which case he would have beheld, with complete indifference, Mrs. Travers extended on the floor with her head resting on the edge of the camp bedstead (on which Lingard had never slept), as though she had subsided there from a kneeling posture which is the attitude of prayer, supplication, or defeat. The hours of the night had passed Mrs. Travers by. After flinging herself on her knees, she didn't know why, since she could think of nothing to pray for, had nothing to invoke, and was too far gone for such a futile thing as despair, she had remained there till the sense of exhaustion had grown on her to the point in which she lost her belief in her power to rise. In a half-sitting attitude, her head resting against the edge of the couch and her arms flung above her head, she sank into an indifference, the mere resignation of a worn-out body and a worn-out mind which often is the only sort of rest that comes to people who are desperately ill and is welcome enough in a way. The voice of Jorgenson roused her out of that state. She sat up, aching in every limb and cold all over.

Jorgenson, behind the door, repeated with lifeless obstinacy:

"Do you see King Tom's watch in there?"

Mrs. Travers got up from the floor. She tottered, snatching at the air, and found the back of the armchair under her hand.

"Who's there?"

She was also ready to ask: "Where am I?" but she remembered and at once became the prey of that active dread which had been lying dormant for a few hours in her uneasy and prostrate body. "What time is it?" she faltered out.

"Dawn," pronounced the imperturbable voice at the door. It seemed to her that it was a word that could make any heart sink with apprehension. Dawn! She stood

appalled. And the toneless voice outside the door insisted:

"You must have Tom's watch there!"

"I haven't seen it," she cried as if tormented by a dream.

"Look in that desk thing. If you push open the shutter you will be able to see."

Mrs. Travers became aware of the profound darkness of the cabin. Jorgenson heard her staggering in there. After a moment a woman's voice, which struck even him as strange, said in faint tones:

"I have it. It's stopped."

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to know the time. There should be a key about. See it anywhere?"

"Yes, it's fastened to the watch," the dazed voice answered from within. Jorgenson waited before making his request. "Will you pass it out to me? There's precious little time left now!"

The door flew open, which was certainly something Jorgenson had not expected. He had expected but a hand with the watch protruded through a narrow crack, but he didn't start back or give any other sign of surprise at seeing Mrs. Travers fully dressed. Against the faint clearness in the frame of the open shutter she presented to him the dark silhouette of her shoulders surmounted by a sleek head, because her hair was still in the two plaits. To Jorgenson Mrs. Travers in her un-European dress had always been displeasing, almost monstrous. Her stature, her gestures, her general carriage struck his eye as absurdly incongruous with a Malay costume, too ample, too free, too bold--offensive. To Mrs. Travers, Jorgenson, in the dusk of the passage, had the aspect of a dim white ghost, and he chilled her by his ghost's aloofness.

He picked up the watch from her outspread palm without a word of thanks, only mumbling in his moustache, "H'm, yes, that's it. I haven't yet forgotten how to count seconds correctly, but it's better to have a watch."

She had not the slightest notion what he meant. And she did not care. Her mind remained confused and the sense of bodily discomfort oppressed her. She whispered, shamefacedly, "I believe I've slept."

"I haven't," mumbled Jorgenson, growing more and more distinct to her eyes. The brightness of the short dawn increased rapidly as if the sun were impatient to

look upon the Settlement. "No fear of that," he added, boastfully.

It occurred to Mrs. Travers that perhaps she had not slept either. Her state had been more like an imperfect, half-conscious, quivering death. She shuddered at the recollection.

"What an awful night," she murmured, drearily.

There was nothing to hope for from Jorgenson. She expected him to vanish, indifferent, like a phantom of the dead carrying off the appropriately dead watch in his hand for some unearthly purpose. Jorgenson didn't move. His was an insensible, almost a senseless presence! Nothing could be extorted from it. But a wave of anguish as confused as all her other sensations swept Mrs. Travers off her feet.

"Can't you tell me something?" she cried.

For half a minute perhaps Jorgenson made no sound; then: "For years I have been telling anybody who cared to ask," he mumbled in his moustache. "Telling Tom, too. And Tom knew what he wanted to do. How's one to know what you are after?"

She had never expected to hear so many words from that rigid shadow. Its monotonous mumble was fascinating, its sudden loquacity was shocking. And in the profound stillness that reigned outside it was as if there had been no one left in the world with her but the phantom of that old adventurer. He was heard again: "What I could tell you would be worse than poison."

Mrs. Travers was not familiar with Jorgenson's consecrated phrases. The mechanical voice, the words themselves, his air of abstraction appalled her. And he hadn't done yet; she caught some more of his unconcerned mumbling: "There is nothing I don't know," and the absurdity of the statement was also appalling. Mrs. Travers gasped and with a wild little laugh:

"Then you know why I called after King Tom last night."

He glanced away along his shoulder through the door of the deckhouse at the growing brightness of the day. She did so, too. It was coming. It had come! Another day! And it seemed to Mrs. Travers a worse calamity than any discovery she had made in her life, than anything she could have imagined to come to her. The very magnitude of horror steadied her, seemed to calm her agitation as some kinds of fatal drugs do before they kill. She laid a steady hand on Jorgenson's sleeve and spoke quietly, distinctly, urgently.

"You were on deck. What I want to know is whether I was heard?"

"Yes," said Jorgenson, absently, "I heard you." Then, as if roused a little, he added less mechanically: "The whole ship heard you."

Mrs. Travers asked herself whether perchance she had not simply screamed. It had never occurred to her before that perhaps she had. At the time it seemed to her she had no strength for more than a whisper. Had she been really so loud? And the deadly chill, the night that had gone by her had left in her body, vanished from her limbs, passed out of her in a flush. Her face was turned away from the light, and that fact gave her courage to continue. Moreover, the man before her was so detached from the shames and prides and schemes of life that he seemed not to count at all, except that somehow or other he managed at times to catch the mere literal sense of the words addressed to him--and answer them. And answer them! Answer unfailingly, impersonally, without any feeling.

"You saw Tom--King Tom? Was he there? I mean just then, at the moment. There was a light at the gangway. Was he on deck?"

"No. In the boat."

"Already? Could I have been heard in the boat down there? You say the whole ship heard me--and I don't care. But could he hear me?"

"Was it Tom you were after?" said Jorgenson in the tone of a negligent remark.

"Can't you answer me?" she cried, angrily.

"Tom was busy. No child's play. The boat shoved off," said Jorgenson, as if he were merely thinking aloud.

"You won't tell me, then?" Mrs. Travers apostrophized him, fearlessly. She was not afraid of Jorgenson. Just then she was afraid of nothing and nobody. And Jorgenson went on thinking aloud.

"I guess he will be kept busy from now on and so shall I."

Mrs. Travers seemed ready to take by the shoulders and shake that dead-voiced spectre till it begged for mercy. But suddenly her strong white arms fell down by her side, the arms of an exhausted woman.

"I shall never, never find out," she whispered to herself.

She cast down her eyes in intolerable humiliation, in intolerable desire, as though she had veiled her face. Not a sound reached the loneliness of her thought. But when she raised her eyes again Jorgenson was no longer standing before her.

For an instant she saw him all black in the brilliant and narrow doorway, and the next moment he had vanished outside, as if devoured by the hot blaze of light. The sun had risen on the Shore of Refuge.

When Mrs. Travers came out on deck herself it was as it were with a boldly unveiled face, with wide-open and dry, sleepless eyes. Their gaze, undismayed by the sunshine, sought the innermost heart of things each day offered to the passion of her dread and of her impatience. The lagoon, the beach, the colours and the shapes struck her more than ever as a luminous painting on an immense cloth hiding the movements of an inexplicable life. She shaded her eyes with her hand. There were figures on the beach, moving dark dots on the white semicircle bounded by the stockades, backed by roof ridges above the palm groves. Further back the mass of carved white coral on the roof of the mosque shone like a white day-star. Religion and politics--always politics! To the left, before Tengga's enclosure, the loom of fire had changed into a pillar of smoke. But there were some big trees over there and she couldn't tell whether the night council had prolonged its sitting. Some vague forms were still moving there and she could picture them to herself: Daman, the supreme chief of sea-robbers, with a vengeful heart and the eyes of a gazelle; Sentot, the sour fanatic with the big turban, that other saint with a scanty loin cloth and ashes in his hair, and Tengga whom she could imagine from hearsay, fat, good-tempered, crafty, but ready to spill blood on his ambitious way and already bold enough to flaunt a yellow state umbrella at the very gate of Belarab's stockade--so they said.

She saw, she imagined, she even admitted now the reality of those things no longer a mere pageant marshalled for her vision with barbarous splendour and savage emphasis. She questioned it no longer--but she did not feel it in her soul any more than one feels the depth of the sea under its peaceful glitter or the turmoil of its grey fury. Her eyes ranged afar, unbelieving and fearful--and then all at once she became aware of the empty Cage with its interior in disorder, the camp bedsteads not taken away, a pillow lying on the deck, the dying flame like a shred of dull yellow stuff inside the lamp left hanging over the table. The whole struck her as squalid and as if already decayed, a flimsy and idle phantasy. But Jorgenson, seated on the deck with his back to it, was not idle. His occupation, too, seemed fantastic and so truly childish that her heart sank at the man's utter absorption in it. Jorgenson had before him, stretched on the deck, several bits of rather thin and dirty-looking rope of different lengths from a couple of inches to about a foot. He had (an idiot might have amused himself in that way) set fire to

the ends of them. They smouldered with amazing energy, emitting now and then a splutter, and in the calm air within the bulwarks sent up very slender, exactly parallel threads of smoke, each with a vanishing curl at the end; and the absorption with which Jorgenson gave himself up to that pastime was enough to shake all confidence in his sanity.

In one half-opened hand he was holding the watch. He was also provided with a scrap of paper and the stump of a pencil. Mrs. Travers was confident that he did not either hear or see her.

"Captain Jorgenson, you no doubt think. . . ."

He tried to wave her away with the stump of the pencil. He did not want to be interrupted in his strange occupation. He was playing very gravely indeed with those bits of string. "I lighted them all together," he murmured, keeping one eye on the dial of the watch. Just then the shortest piece of string went out, utterly consumed. Jorgenson made a hasty note and remained still while Mrs. Travers looked at him with stony eyes thinking that nothing in the world was any use. The other threads of smoke went on vanishing in spirals before the attentive Jorgenson.

"What are you doing?" asked Mrs. Travers, drearily.

"Timing match . . . precaution. . . ."

He had never in Mrs. Travers' experience been less spectral than then. He displayed a weakness of the flesh. He was impatient at her intrusion. He divided his attention between the threads of smoke and the face of the watch with such interest that the sudden reports of several guns breaking for the first time for days the stillness of the lagoon and the illusion of the painted scene failed to make him raise his head. He only jerked it sideways a little. Mrs. Travers stared at the wisps of white vapour floating above Belarab's stockade. The series of sharp detonations ceased and their combined echoes came back over the lagoon like a long-drawn and rushing sigh.

"What's this?" cried Mrs. Travers.

"Belarab's come home," said Jorgenson.

The last thread of smoke disappeared and Jorgenson got up. He had lost all interest in the watch and thrust it carelessly into his pocket, together with the bit of paper and the stump of pencil. He had resumed his aloofness from the life of men, but approaching the bulwark he condescended to look toward Belarab's

stockade.

"Yes, he is home," he said very low.

"What's going to happen?" cried Mrs. Travers. "What's to be done?" Jorgenson kept up his appearance of communing with himself.

"I know what to do," he mumbled.

"You are lucky," said Mrs. Travers, with intense bitterness.

It seemed to her that she was abandoned by all the world. The opposite shore of the lagoon had resumed its aspect of a painted scene that would never roll up to disclose the truth behind its blinding and soulless splendour. It seemed to her that she had said her last words to all of them: to d'Alcacer, to her husband, to Lingard himself--and that they had all gone behind the curtain forever out of her sight. Of all the white men Jorgenson alone was left, that man who had done with life so completely that his mere presence robbed it of all heat and mystery, leaving nothing but its terrible, its revolting insignificance. And Mrs. Travers was ready for revolt. She cried with suppressed passion:

"Are you aware, Captain Jorgenson, that I am alive?"

He turned his eyes on her, and for a moment she was daunted by their cold glassiness. But before they could drive her away, something like the gleam of a spark gave them an instant's animation.

"I want to go and join them. I want to go ashore," she said, firmly. "There!"

Her bare and extended arm pointed across the lagoon, and Jorgenson's resurrected eyes glided along the white limb and wandered off into space.

"No boat," he muttered.

"There must be a canoe. I know there is a canoe. I want it."

She stepped forward compelling, commanding, trying to concentrate in her glance all her will power, the sense of her own right to dispose of herself and her claim to be served to the last moment of her life. It was as if she had done nothing. Jorgenson didn't flinch.

"Which of them are you after?" asked his blank, unringing voice.

She continued to look at him; her face had stiffened into a severe mask; she managed to say distinctly:

"I suppose you have been asking yourself that question for some time, Captain Jorgenson?"

"No. I am asking you now."

His face disclosed nothing to Mrs. Travers' bold and weary eyes. "What could you do over there?" Jorgenson added as merciless, as irrepressible, and sincere as though he were the embodiment of that inner voice that speaks in all of us at times and, like Jorgenson, is offensive and difficult to answer.

"Remember that I am not a shadow but a living woman still, Captain Jorgenson. I can live and I can die. Send me over to share their fate."

"Sure you would like?" asked the roused Jorgenson in a voice that had an unexpected living quality, a faint vibration which no man had known in it for years. "There may be death in it," he mumbled, relapsing into indifference.

"Who cares?" she said, recklessly. "All I want is to ask Tom a question and hear his answer. That's what I would like. That's what I must have."