II

Along the hot and gloomy forest path, neglected, overgrown and strangled in the fierce life of the jungle, there came a faint rustle of leaves. Jaffir, the servant of princes, the messenger of great men, walked, stooping, with a broad chopper in his hand. He was naked from the waist upward, his shoulders and arms were scratched and bleeding. A multitude of biting insects made a cloud about his head. He had lost his costly and ancient head-kerchief, and when in a slightly wider space he stopped in a listening attitude anybody would have taken him for a fugitive.

He waved his arms about, slapping his shoulders, the sides of his head, his heaving flanks; then, motionless, listened again for a while. A sound of firing, not so much made faint by distance as muffled by the masses of foliage, reached his ears, dropping shots which he could have counted if he had cared to. "There is fighting in the forest already," he thought. Then putting his head low in the tunnel of vegetation he dashed forward out of the horrible cloud of flies, which he actually managed for an instant to leave behind him. But it was not from the cruelty of insects that he was flying, for no man could hope to drop that escort, and Jaffir in his life of a faithful messenger had been accustomed, if such an extravagant phrase may be used, to be eaten alive. Bent nearly double he glided and dodged between the trees, through the undergrowth, his brown body streaming with sweat, his firm limbs gleaming like limbs of imperishable bronze through the mass of green leaves that are forever born and forever dying. For all his desperate haste he was no longer a fugitive; he was simply a man in a tremendous hurry. His flight, which had begun with a bound and a rush and a general display of great presence of mind, was a simple issue from a critical situation. Issues from critical situations are generally simple if one is quick enough to think of them in time. He became aware very soon that the attempt to pursue him had been given up, but he had taken the forest path and had kept up his pace because he had left his Rajah and the lady Immada beset by enemies on the edge of the forest, as good as captives to a party of Tengga's men.

Belarab's hesitation had proved too much even for Hassim's hereditary patience in such matters. It is but becoming that weighty negotiations should be spread over many days, that the same requests and arguments should be repeated in the same words, at many successive interviews, and receive the same evasive answers. Matters of state demand the dignity of such a procedure as if time itself had to wait on the power and wisdom of rulers. Such are the proceedings of embassies and the dignified patience of envoys. But at this time of crisis Hassim's impatience obtained the upper hand; and though he never departed from the

tradition of soft speech and restrained bearing while following with his sister in the train of the pious Belarab, he had his moments of anger, of anxiety, of despondency. His friendships, his future, his country's destinies were at stake, while Belarab's camp wandered deviously over the back country as if influenced by the vacillation of the ruler's thought, the very image of uncertain fate.

Often no more than the single word "Good" was all the answer vouchsafed to Hassim's daily speeches. The lesser men, companions of the Chief, treated him with deference; but Hassim could feel the opposition from the women's side of the camp working against his cause in subservience to the mere caprice of the new wife, a girl quite gentle and kind to her dependents, but whose imagination had run away with her completely and had made her greedy for the loot of the yacht from mere simplicity and innocence. What could Hassim, that stranger, wandering and poor, offer for her acceptance? Nothing. The wealth of his far-off country was but an idle tale, the talk of an exile looking for help.

At night Hassim had to listen to the anguished doubts of Immada, the only companion of his life, child of the same mother, brave as a man, but in her fears a very woman. She whispered them to him far into the night while the camp of the great Belarab was hushed in sleep and the fires had sunk down to mere glowing embers. Hassim soothed her gravely. But he, too, was a native of Wajo where men are more daring and quicker of mind than other Malays. More energetic, too, and energy does not go without an inner fire. Hassim lost patience and one evening he declared to his sister Immada: "To-morrow we leave this ruler without a mind and go back to our white friend."

Therefore next morning, letting the camp move on the direct road to the settlement, Hassim and Immada took a course of their own. It was a lonely path between the jungle and the clearings. They had two attendants with them, Hassim's own men, men of Wajo; and so the lady Immada, when she had a mind to, could be carried, after the manner of the great ladies of Wajo who need not put foot to the ground unless they like. The lady Immada, accustomed to the hardships that are the lot of exiles, preferred to walk, but from time to time she let herself be carried for a short distance out of regard for the feelings of her attendants. The party made good time during the early hours, and Hassim expected confidently to reach before evening the shore of the lagoon at a spot very near the stranded Emma. At noon they rested in the shade near a dark pool within the edge of the forest; and it was there that Jaffir met them, much to his and their surprise. It was the occasion of a long talk. Jaffir, squatting on his heels, discoursed in measured tones. He had entranced listeners. The story of Carter's exploit amongst the Shoals had not reached Belarab's camp. It was a great shock to Hassim, but the sort of half smile with which he had been listening to Jaffir never altered its character. It was the Princess Immada who cried out in

distress and wrung her hands. A deep silence fell.

Indeed, before the fatal magnitude of the fact it seemed even to those Malays that there was nothing to say and Jaffir, lowering his head, respected his Prince's consternation. Then, before that feeling could pass away from that small group of people seated round a few smouldering sticks, the noisy approach of a large party of men made them all leap to their feet. Before they could make another movement they perceived themselves discovered. The men were armed as if bound on some warlike expedition. Amongst them Sentot, in his loin cloth and with unbound wild locks, capered and swung his arms about like the lunatic he was. The others' astonishment made them halt, but their attitude was obviously hostile. In the rear a portly figure flanked by two attendants carrying swords was approaching prudently. Rajah Hassim resumed quietly his seat on the trunk of a fallen tree, Immada rested her hand lightly on her brother's shoulder, and Jaffir, squatting down again, looked at the ground with all his faculties and every muscle of his body tensely on the alert.

"Tengga's fighters," he murmured, scornfully.

In the group somebody shouted, and was answered by shouts from afar. There could be no thought of resistance. Hassim slipped the emerald ring from his finger stealthily and Jaffir got hold of it by an almost imperceptible movement. The Rajah did not even look at the trusty messenger.

"Fail not to give it to the white man," he murmured. "Thy servant hears, O Rajah. It's a charm of great power."

The shadows were growing to the westward. Everybody was silent, and the shifting group of armed men seemed to have drifted closer. Immada, drawing the end of a scarf across her face, confronted the advance with only one eye exposed. On the flank of the armed men Sentot was performing a slow dance but he, too, seemed to have gone dumb.

"Now go," breathed out Rajah Hassim, his gaze levelled into space immovably.

For a second or more Jaffir did not stir, then with a sudden leap from his squatting posture he flew through the air and struck the jungle in a great commotion of leaves, vanishing instantly like a swimmer diving from on high. A deep murmur of surprise arose in the armed party, a spear was thrown, a shot was fired, three or four men dashed into the forest, but they soon returned crestfallen with apologetic smiles; while Jaffir, striking an old path that seemed to lead in the right direction, ran on in solitude, raising a rustle of leaves, with a naked parang in his hand and a cloud of flies about his head. The sun declining

to the westward threw shafts of light across his dark path. He ran at a springy half-trot, his eyes watchful, his broad chest heaving, and carrying the emerald ring on the forefinger of a clenched hand as though he were afraid it should slip off, fly off, be torn from him by an invisible force, or spirited away by some enchantment. Who could tell what might happen? There were evil forces at work in the world, powerful incantations, horrible apparitions. The messenger of princes and of great men, charged with the supreme appeal of his master, was afraid in the deepening shade of the forest. Evil presences might have been lurking in that gloom. Still the sun had not set yet. He could see its face through the leaves as he skirted the shore of the lagoon. But what if Allah's call should come to him suddenly and he die as he ran!

He drew a long breath on the shore of the lagoon within about a hundred yards from the stranded bows of the Emma. The tide was out and he walked to the end of a submerged log and sent out a hail for a boat. Jorgenson's voice answered. The sun had sunk behind the forest belt of the coast. All was still as far as the eye could reach over the black water. A slight breeze came along it and Jaffir on the brink, waiting for a canoe, shivered a little.

At the same moment Carter, exhausted by thirty hours of uninterrupted toil at the head of whites and Malays in getting the yacht afloat, dropped into Mrs. Travers' deck chair, on board the Hermit, said to the devoted Wasub: "Let a good watch be kept to-night, old man," glanced contentedly at the setting sun and fell asleep.