

III

There was in the bows of the Emma an elevated grating over the heel of her bowsprit whence the eye could take in the whole range of her deck and see every movement of her crew. It was a spot safe from eaves-droppers, though, of course, exposed to view. The sun had just set on the supreme content of Carter when Jorgenson and Jaffir sat down side by side between the knightheads of the Emma and, public but unapproachable, impressive and secret, began to converse in low tones.

Every Wajo fugitive who manned the hulk felt the approach of a decisive moment. Their minds were made up and their hearts beat steadily. They were all desperate men determined to fight and to die and troubling not about the manner of living or dying. This was not the case with Mrs. Travers who, having shut herself up in the deckhouse, was profoundly troubled about those very things, though she, too, felt desperate enough to welcome almost any solution.

Of all the people on board she alone did not know anything of that conference. In her deep and aimless thinking she had only become aware of the absence of the slightest sound on board the Emma. Not a rustle, not a footfall. The public view of Jorgenson and Jaffir in deep consultation had the effect of taking all wish to move from every man.

Twilight enveloped the two figures forward while they talked, looking in the stillness of their pose like carved figures of European and Asiatic contrasted in intimate contact. The deepening dusk had nearly effaced them when at last they rose without warning, as it were, and thrilling the heart of the beholders by the sudden movement. But they did not separate at once. They lingered in their high place as if awaiting the fall of complete darkness, a fit ending to their mysterious communion. Jaffir had given Jorgenson the whole story of the ring, the symbol of a friendship matured and confirmed on the night of defeat, on the night of flight from a far-distant land sleeping unmoved under the wrath and fire of heaven.

"Yes, Tuan," continued Jaffir, "it was first sent out to the white man, on a night of mortal danger, a present to remember a friend by. I was the bearer of it then even as I am now. Then, as now, it was given to me and I was told to save myself and hand the ring over in confirmation of my message. I did so and that white man seemed to still the very storm to save my Rajah. He was not one to depart and forget him whom he had once called his friend. My message was but a message of good-bye, but the charm of the ring was strong enough to draw all the power of that white man to the help of my master. Now I have no words to say. Rajah

Hassim asks for nothing. But what of that? By the mercy of Allah all things are the same, the compassion of the Most High, the power of the ring, the heart of the white man. Nothing is changed, only the friendship is a little older and love has grown because of the shared dangers and long companionship. Therefore, Tuan, I have no fear. But how am I to get the ring to the Rajah Laut? Just hand it to him. The last breath would be time enough if they were to spear me at his feet. But alas! the bush is full of Tengga's men, the beach is open and I could never even hope to reach the gate."

Jorgenson, with his hands deep in the pockets of his tunic, listened, looking down. Jaffir showed as much consternation as his nature was capable of.

"Our refuge is with God," he murmured. "But what is to be done? Has your wisdom no stratagem, O Tuan?"

Jorgenson did not answer. It appeared as though he had no stratagem. But God is great and Jaffir waited on the other's immobility, anxious but patient, perplexed yet hopeful in his grim way, while the night flowing on from the dark forest near by hid their two figures from the sight of observing men. Before the silence of Jorgenson Jaffir began to talk practically. Now that Tengga had thrown off the mask Jaffir did not think that he could land on the beach without being attacked, captured, nay killed, since a man like he, though he could save himself by taking flight at the order of his master, could not be expected to surrender without a fight. He mentioned that in the exercise of his important functions he knew how to glide like a shadow, creep like a snake, and almost burrow his way underground. He was Jaffir who had never been foiled. No bog, morass, great river or jungle could stop him. He would have welcomed them. In many respects they were the friends of a crafty messenger. But that was an open beach, and there was no other way, and as things stood now every bush around, every tree trunk, every deep shadow of house or fence would conceal Tengga's men or such of Daman's infuriated partisans as had already made their way to the Settlement. How could he hope to traverse the distance between the water's edge and Belarab's gate which now would remain shut night and day? Not only himself but anybody from the Emma would be sure to be rushed upon and speared in twenty places.

He reflected for a moment in silence.

"Even you, Tuan, could not accomplish the feat."

"True," muttered Jorgenson.

When, after a period of meditation, he looked round, Jaffir was no longer by his

side. He had descended from the high place and was probably squatting on his heels in some dark nook on the fore deck. Jorgenson knew Jaffir too well to suppose that he would go to sleep. He would sit there thinking himself into a state of fury, then get away from the Emma in some way or other, go ashore and perish fighting. He would, in fact, run amok; for it looked as if there could be no way out of the situation. Then, of course, Lingard would know nothing of Hassim and Immada's captivity for the ring would never reach him--the ring that could tell its own tale. No, Lingard would know nothing. He would know nothing about anybody outside Belarab's stockade till the end came, whatever the end might be, for all those people that lived the life of men. Whether to know or not to know would be good for Lingard Jorgenson could not tell. He admitted to himself that here there was something that he, Jorgenson, could not tell. All the possibilities were wrapped up in doubt, uncertain, like all things pertaining to the life of men. It was only when giving a short thought to himself that Jorgenson had no doubt. He, of course, would know what to do.

On the thin face of that old adventurer hidden in the night not a feature moved, not a muscle twitched, as he descended in his turn and walked aft along the decks of the Emma. His faded eyes, which had seen so much, did not attempt to explore the night, they never gave a glance to the silent watchers against whom he brushed. Had a light been flashed on him suddenly he would have appeared like a man walking in his sleep: the somnambulist of an eternal dream. Mrs. Travers heard his footsteps pass along the side of the deckhouse. She heard them--and let her head fall again on her bare arms thrown over the little desk before which she sat.

Jorgenson, standing by the taffrail, noted the faint reddish glow in the massive blackness of the further shore. Jorgenson noted things quickly, cursorily, perfunctorily, as phenomena unrelated to his own apparitional existence of a visiting ghost. They were but passages in the game of men who were still playing at life. He knew too well how much that game was worth to be concerned about its course. He had given up the habit of thinking for so long that the sudden resumption of it irked him exceedingly, especially as he had to think on toward a conclusion. In that world of eternal oblivion, of which he had tasted before Lingard made him step back into the life of men, all things were settled once for all. He was irritated by his own perplexity which was like a reminder of that mortality made up of questions and passions from which he had fancied he had freed himself forever. By a natural association his contemptuous annoyance embraced the existence of Mrs. Travers, too, for how could he think of Tom Lingard, of what was good or bad for King Tom, without thinking also of that woman who had managed to put the ghost of a spark even into his own extinguished eyes? She was of no account; but Tom's integrity was. It was of Tom that he had to think, of what was good or bad for Tom in that absurd and deadly

game of his life. Finally he reached the conclusion that to be given the ring would be good for Tom Lingard. Just to be given the ring and no more. The ring and no more.

"It will help him to make up his mind," muttered Jorgenson in his moustache, as if compelled by an obscure conviction. It was only then that he stirred slightly and turned away from the loom of the fires on the distant shore. Mrs. Travers heard his footsteps passing again along the side of the deckhouse--and this time never raised her head. That man was sleepless, mad, childish, and inflexible. He was impossible. He haunted the decks of that hulk aimlessly. . . .

It was, however, in pursuance of a very distinct aim that Jorgenson had gone forward again to seek Jaffir.

The first remark he had to offer to Jaffir's consideration was that the only person in the world who had the remotest chance of reaching Belarab's gate on that night was that tall white woman the Rajah Laut had brought on board, the wife of one of the captive white chiefs. Surprise made Jaffir exclaim, but he wasn't prepared to deny that. It was possible that for many reasons, some quite simple and others very subtle, those sons of the Evil One belonging to Tengga and Daman would refrain from killing a white woman walking alone from the water's edge to Belarab's gate. Yes, it was just possible that she might walk unharmed.

"Especially if she carried a blazing torch," muttered Jorgenson in his moustache. He told Jaffir that she was sitting now in the dark, mourning silently in the manner of white women. She had made a great outcry in the morning to be allowed to join the white men on shore. He, Jorgenson, had refused her the canoe. Ever since she had secluded herself in the deckhouse in great distress.

Jaffir listened to it all without particular sympathy. And when Jorgenson added, "It is in my mind, O Jaffir, to let her have her will now," he answered by a "Yes, by Allah! let her go. What does it matter?" of the greatest unconcern, till Jorgenson added:

"Yes. And she may carry the ring to the Rajah Laut."

Jorgenson saw Jaffir, the grim and impassive Jaffir, give a perceptible start. It seemed at first an impossible task to persuade Jaffir to part with the ring. The notion was too monstrous to enter his mind, to move his heart. But at last he surrendered in an awed whisper, "God is great. Perhaps it is her destiny."

Being a Wajo man he did not regard women as untrustworthy or unequal to a task requiring courage and judgment. Once he got over the personal feeling he

handed the ring to Jorgenson with only one reservation, "You know, Tuan, that she must on no account put it on her finger."

"Let her hang it round her neck," suggested Jorgenson, readily.

As Jorgenson moved toward the deckhouse it occurred to him that perhaps now that woman Tom Lingard had taken in tow might take it into her head to refuse to leave the Emma. This did not disturb him very much. All those people moved in the dark. He himself at that particular moment was moving in the dark. Beyond the simple wish to guide Lingard's thought in the direction of Hassim and Immada, to help him to make up his mind at last to a ruthless fidelity to his purpose Jorgenson had no other aim. The existence of those whites had no meaning on earth. They were the sort of people that pass without leaving footprints. That woman would have to act in ignorance. And if she refused to go then in ignorance she would have to stay on board. He would tell her nothing.

As a matter of fact, he discovered that Mrs. Travers would simply have nothing to do with him. She would not listen to what he had to say. She desired him, a mere weary voice confined in the darkness of the deck cabin, to go away and trouble her no more. But the ghost of Jorgenson was not easily exorcised. He, too, was a mere voice in the outer darkness, inexorable, insisting that she should come out on deck and listen. At last he found the right words to say.

"It is something about Tom that I want to tell you. You wish him well, don't you?"

After this she could not refuse to come out on deck, and once there she listened patiently to that white ghost muttering and mumbling above her drooping head.

"It seems to me, Captain Jorgenson," she said after he had ceased, "that you are simply trifling with me. After your behaviour to me this morning, I can have nothing to say to you."

"I have a canoe for you now," mumbled Jorgenson.

"You have some new purpose in view now," retorted Mrs. Travers with spirit. "But you won't make it clear to me. What is it that you have in your mind?"

"Tom's interest."

"Are you really his friend?"

"He brought me here. You know it. He has talked a lot to you."

"He did. But I ask myself whether you are capable of being anybody's friend."

"You ask yourself!" repeated Jorgenson, very quiet and morose. "If I am not his friend I should like to know who is."

Mrs. Travers asked, quickly: "What's all this about a ring? What ring?"

"Tom's property. He has had it for years."

"And he gave it to you? Doesn't he care for it?"

"Don't know. It's just a thing."

"But it has a meaning as between you and him. Is that so?"

"Yes. It has. He will know what it means."

"What does it mean?"

"I am too much his friend not to hold my tongue."

"What! To me!"

"And who are you?" was Jorgenson's unexpected remark. "He has told you too much already."

"Perhaps he has," whispered Mrs. Travers, as if to herself. "And you want that ring to be taken to him?" she asked, in a louder tone.

"Yes. At once. For his good."

"Are you certain it is for his good? Why can't you. . . ."

She checked herself. That man was hopeless. He would never tell anything and there was no means of compelling him. He was invulnerable, unapproachable. . . . He was dead.

"Just give it to him," mumbled Jorgenson as though pursuing a mere fixed idea. "Just slip it quietly into his hand. He will understand."

"What is it? Advice, warning, signal for action?"

"It may be anything," uttered Jorgenson, morosely, but as it were in a mollified

tone. "It's meant for his good."

"Oh, if I only could trust that man!" mused Mrs. Travers, half aloud.

Jorgenson's slight noise in the throat might have been taken for an expression of sympathy. But he remained silent.

"Really, this is most extraordinary!" cried Mrs. Travers, suddenly aroused. "Why did you come to me? Why should it be my task? Why should you want me specially to take it to him?"

"I will tell you why," said Jorgenson's blank voice. "It's because there is no one on board this hulk that can hope to get alive inside that stockade. This morning you told me yourself that you were ready to die--for Tom--or with Tom. Well, risk it then. You are the only one that has half a chance to get through--and Tom, maybe, is waiting."

"The only one," repeated Mrs. Travers with an abrupt movement forward and an extended hand before which Jorgenson stepped back a pace. "Risk it! Certainly! Where's that mysterious ring?"

"I have got it in my pocket," said Jorgenson, readily; yet nearly half a minute elapsed before Mrs. Travers felt the characteristic shape being pressed into her half-open palm. "Don't let anybody see it," Jorgenson admonished her in a murmur. "Hide it somewhere about you. Why not hang it round your neck?"

Mrs. Travers' hand remained firmly closed on the ring. "Yes, that will do," she murmured, hastily. "I'll be back in a moment. Get everything ready." With those words she disappeared inside the deckhouse and presently threads of light appeared in the interstices of the boards. Mrs. Travers had lighted a candle in there. She was busy hanging that ring round her neck. She was going. Yes--taking the risk for Tom's sake.

"Nobody can resist that man," Jorgenson muttered to himself with increasing moroseness. "I couldn't."