

VII

With the sublime indifference of a man who has had a glimpse through the open doors of Paradise and is no longer careful of mere life, Lingard had followed Belarab's anxious messengers. The stockade was waking up in a subdued resonance of voices. Men were getting up from the ground, fires were being rekindled. Draped figures flitted in the mist amongst the buildings; and through the mat wall of a bamboo house Lingard heard the feeble wailing of a child. A day of mere life was beginning; but in the Chief's great Council room several wax candles and a couple of cheap European lamps kept the dawn at bay, while the morning mist which could not be kept out made a faint reddish halo round every flame.

Belarab was not only awake, but he even looked like a man who had not slept for a long time. The creator of the Shore of Refuge, the weary Ruler of the Settlement, with his scorn of the unrest and folly of men, was angry with his white friend who was always bringing his desires and his troubles to his very door. Belarab did not want any one to die but neither did he want any one in particular to live. What he was concerned about was to preserve the mystery and the power of his melancholy hesitations. These delicate things were menaced by Lingard's brusque movements, by that passionate white man who believed in more than one God and always seemed to doubt the power of Destiny. Belarab was profoundly annoyed. He was also genuinely concerned, for he liked Lingard. He liked him not only for his strength, which protected his clear-minded scepticism from those dangers that beset all rulers, but he liked him also for himself. That man of infinite hesitations, born from a sort of mystic contempt for Allah's creation, yet believed absolutely both in Lingard's power and in his boldness. Absolutely. And yet, in the marvellous consistency of his temperament, now that the moment had come, he dreaded to put both power and fortitude to the test.

Lingard could not know that some little time before the first break of dawn one of Belarab's spies in the Settlement had found his way inside the stockade at a spot remote from the lagoon, and that a very few moments after Lingard had left the Chief in consequence of Jorgenson's rockets, Belarab was listening to an amazing tale of Hassim and Immada's capture and of Tengga's determination, very much strengthened by that fact, to obtain possession of the Emma, either by force or by negotiation, or by some crafty subterfuge in which the Rajah and his sister could be made to play their part. In his mistrust of the universe, which seemed almost to extend to the will of God himself, Belarab was very much alarmed, for the material power of Daman's piratical crowd was at Tengga's command; and who could tell whether this Wajo Rajah would remain loyal in the circumstances? It

was also very characteristic of him whom the original settlers of the Shore of Refuge called the Father of Safety, that he did not say anything of this to Lingard, for he was afraid of rousing Lingard's fierce energy which would even carry away himself and all his people and put the peace of so many years to the sudden hazard of a battle.

Therefore Belarab set himself to persuade Lingard on general considerations to deliver the white men, who really belonged to Daman, to that supreme Chief of the Illanuns and by this simple proceeding detach him completely from Tengga. Why should he, Belarab, go to war against half the Settlement on their account? It was not necessary, it was not reasonable. It would be even in a manner a sin to begin a strife in a community of True Believers. Whereas with an offer like that in his hand he could send an embassy to Tengga who would see there at once the downfall of his purposes and the end of his hopes. At once! That moment! . . . Afterward the question of a ransom could be arranged with Daman in which he, Belarab, would mediate in the fullness of his recovered power, without a rival and in the sincerity of his heart. And then, if need be, he could put forth all his power against the chief of the sea-vagabonds who would, as a matter of fact, be negotiating under the shadow of the sword.

Belarab talked, low-voiced and dignified, with now and then a subtle intonation, a persuasive inflexion or a half-melancholy smile in the course of the argument. What encouraged him most was the changed aspect of his white friend. The fierce power of his personality seemed to have turned into a dream. Lingard listened, growing gradually inscrutable in his continued silence, but remaining gentle in a sort of rapt patience as if lapped in the wings of the Angel of Peace himself. Emboldened by that transformation, Belarab's counsellors seated on the mats murmured loudly their assent to the views of the Chief. Through the thickening white mist of tropical lands, the light of the tropical day filtered into the hall. One of the wise men got up from the floor and with prudent fingers began extinguishing the waxlights one by one. He hesitated to touch the lamps, the flames of which looked yellow and cold. A puff of the morning breeze entered the great room, faint and chill. Lingard, facing Belarab in a wooden armchair, with slack limbs and in the divine emptiness of a mind enchanted by a glimpse of Paradise, shuddered profoundly.

A strong voice shouted in the doorway without any ceremony and with a sort of jeering accent:

"Tengga's boats are out in the mist."

Lingard half rose from his seat, Belarab himself could not repress a start. Lingard's attitude was a listening one, but after a moment of hesitation he ran

out of the hall. The inside of the stockade was beginning to buzz like a disturbed hive.

Outside Belarab's house Lingard slowed his pace. The mist still hung. A great sustained murmur pervaded it and the blurred forms of men were all moving outward from the centre toward the palisades. Somewhere amongst the buildings a gong clanged. D'Alcacer's raised voice was heard:

"What is happening?"

Lingard was passing then close to the prisoners' house. There was a group of armed men below the verandah and above their heads he saw Mrs. Travers by the side of d'Alcacer. The fire by which Lingard had spent the night was extinguished, its embers scattered, and the bench itself lay overturned. Mrs. Travers must have run up on the verandah at the first alarm. She and d'Alcacer up there seemed to dominate the tumult which was now subsiding. Lingard noticed the scarf across Mrs. Travers' face. D'Alcacer was bareheaded. He shouted again:

"What's the matter?"

"I am going to see," shouted Lingard back.

He resisted the impulse to join those two, dominate the tumult, let it roll away from under his feet--the mere life of men, vain like a dream and interfering with the tremendous sense of his own existence. He resisted it, he could hardly have told why. Even the sense of self-preservation had abandoned him. There was a throng of people pressing close about him yet careful not to get in his way. Surprise, concern, doubt were depicted on all those faces; but there were some who observed that the great white man making his way to the lagoon side of the stockade wore a fixed smile. He asked at large:

"Can one see any distance over the water?"

One of Belarab's headmen who was nearest to him answered:

"The mist has thickened. If you see anything, Tuan, it will be but a shadow of things."

The four sides of the stockade had been manned by that time. Lingard, ascending the banquette, looked out and saw the lagoon shrouded in white, without as much as a shadow on it, and so still that not even the sound of water lapping the shore reached his ears. He found himself in profound accord with this blind and soundless peace.

"Has anything at all been seen?" he asked incredulously.

Four men were produced at once who had seen a dark mass of boats moving in the light of the dawn. Others were sent for. He hardly listened to them. His thought escaped him and he stood motionless, looking out into the unstimulating mist pervaded by the perfect silence. Presently Belarab joined him, escorted by three grave, swarthy men, himself dark-faced, stroking his short grey beard with impenetrable composure. He said to Lingard, "Your white man doesn't fight," to which Lingard answered, "There is nothing to fight against. What your people have seen, Belarab, were indeed but shadows on the water." Belarab murmured, "You ought to have allowed me to make friends with Daman last night."

A faint uneasiness was stealing into Lingard's breast.

A moment later d'Alcacer came up, inconspicuously watched over by two men with lances, and to his anxious inquiry Lingard said: "I don't think there is anything going on. Listen how still everything is. The only way of bringing the matter to a test would be to persuade Belarab to let his men march out and make an attack on Tengga's stronghold this moment. Then we would learn something. But I couldn't persuade Belarab to march out into this fog. Indeed, an expedition like this might end badly. I myself don't believe that all Tengga's people are on the lagoon. . . . Where is Mrs. Travers?"

The question made d'Alcacer start by its abruptness which revealed the woman's possession of that man's mind. "She is with Don Martin, who is better but feels very weak. If we are to be given up, he will have to be carried out to his fate. I can depict to myself the scene. Don Martin carried shoulder high surrounded by those barbarians with spears, and Mrs. Travers with myself walking on each side of the stretcher. Mrs. Travers has declared to me her intention to go out with us."

"Oh, she has declared her intention," murmured Lingard, absent-mindedly.

D'Alcacer felt himself completely abandoned by that man. And within two paces of him he noticed the group of Belarab and his three swarthy attendants in their white robes, preserving an air of serene detachment. For the first time since the stranding on the coast d'Alcacer's heart sank within him. "But perhaps," he went on, "this Moor may not in the end insist on giving us up to a cruel death, Captain Lingard."

"He wanted to give you up in the middle of the night, a few hours ago," said Lingard, without even looking at d'Alcacer who raised his hands a little and let them fall. Lingard sat down on the breech of a heavy piece mounted on a naval

carriage so as to command the lagoon. He folded his arms on his breast. D'Alcacer asked, gently:

"We have been reprieved then?"

"No," said Lingard. "It's I who was reprieved."

A long silence followed. Along the whole line of the manned stockade the whisperings had ceased. The vibrations of the gong had died out, too. Only the watchers perched in the highest boughs of the big tree made a slight rustle amongst the leaves.

"What are you thinking of, Captain Lingard?" d'Alcacer asked in a low voice. Lingard did not change his position.

"I am trying to keep it off," he said in the same tone.

"What? Trying to keep thought off?"

"Yes."

"Is this the time for such experiments?" asked d'Alcacer.

"Why not? It's my reprieve. Don't grudge it to me, Mr. d'Alcacer."

"Upon my word I don't. But isn't it dangerous?"

"You will have to take your chance."

D'Alcacer had a moment of internal struggle. He asked himself whether he should tell Lingard that Mrs. Travers had come to the stockade with some sort of message from Jorgenson. He had it on the tip of his tongue to advise Lingard to go and see Mrs. Travers and ask her point blank whether she had anything to tell him; but before he could make up his mind the voices of invisible men high up in the tree were heard reporting the thinning of the fog. This caused a stir to run along the four sides of the stockade.

Lingard felt the draught of air in his face, the motionless mist began to drive over the palisades and, suddenly, the lagoon came into view with a great blinding glitter of its wrinkled surface and the faint sound of its wash rising all along the shore. A multitude of hands went up to shade the eager eyes, and exclamations of wonder burst out from many men at the sight of a crowd of canoes of various sizes and kinds lying close together with the effect as of an enormous raft, a little

way off the side of the Emma. The excited voices rose higher and higher. There was no doubt about Tengga's being on the lagoon. But what was Jorgenson about? The Emma lay as if abandoned by her keeper and her crew, while the mob of mixed boats seemed to be meditating an attack.

For all his determination to keep thought off to the very last possible moment, Lingard could not defend himself from a sense of wonder and fear. What was Jorgenson about? For a moment Lingard expected the side of the Emma to wreath itself in puffs of smoke, but an age seemed to elapse without the sound of a shot reaching his ears.

The boats were afraid to close. They were hanging off, irresolute; but why did Jorgenson not put an end to their hesitation by a volley or two of musketry if only over their heads? Through the anguish of his perplexity Lingard found himself returning to life, to mere life with its sense of pain and mortality, like a man awakened from a dream by a stab in the breast. What did this silence of the Emma mean? Could she have been already carried in the fog? But that was unthinkable. Some sounds of resistance must have been heard. No, the boats hung off because they knew with what desperate defence they would meet; and perhaps Jorgenson knew very well what he was doing by holding his fire to the very last moment and letting the craven hearts grow cold with the fear of a murderous discharge that would have to be faced. What was certain was that this was the time for Belarab to open the great gate and let his men go out, display his power, sweep through the further end of the Settlement, destroy Tengga's defences, do away once for all with the absurd rivalry of that intriguing amateur boat-builder. Lingard turned eagerly toward Belarab but saw the Chief busy looking across the lagoon through a long glass resting on the shoulder of a stooping slave. He was motionless like a carving. Suddenly he let go the long glass which some ready hands caught as it fell and said to Lingard:

"No fight."

"How do you know?" muttered Lingard, astounded.

"There are three empty sampans alongside the ladder," said Belarab in a just audible voice. "There is bad talk there."

"Talk? I don't understand," said Lingard, slowly.

But Belarab had turned toward his three attendants in white robes, with shaven polls under skull-caps of plaited grass, with prayer beads hanging from their wrists, and an air of superior calm on their dark faces: companions of his desperate days, men of blood once and now imperturbable in their piety and

wisdom of trusted counsellors.

"This white man is being betrayed," he murmured to them with the greatest composure.

D'Alcacer, uncomprehending, watched the scene: the Man of Fate puzzled and fierce like a disturbed lion, the white-robed Moors, the multitude of half-naked barbarians, squatting by the guns, standing by the loopholes in the immobility of an arranged display. He saw Mrs. Travers on the verandah of the prisoners' house, an anxious figure with a white scarf over her head. Mr. Travers was no doubt too weak after his fit of fever to come outside. If it hadn't been for that, all the whites would have been in sight of each other at the very moment of the catastrophe which was to give them back to the claims of their life, at the cost of other lives sent violently out of the world. D'Alcacer heard Lingard asking loudly for the long glass and saw Belarab make a sign with his hand, when he felt the earth receive a violent blow from underneath. While he staggered to it the heavens split over his head with a crash in the lick of a red tongue of flame; and a sudden dreadful gloom fell all round the stunned d'Alcacer, who beheld with terror the morning sun, robbed of its rays, glow dull and brown through the sombre murk which had taken possession of the universe. The Emma had blown up; and when the rain of shattered timbers and mangled corpses falling into the lagoon had ceased, the cloud of smoke hanging motionless under the livid sun cast its shadow afar on the Shore of Refuge where all strife had come to an end.

A great wail of terror ascended from the Settlement and was succeeded by a profound silence. People could be seen bolting in unreasoning panic away from the houses and into the fields. On the lagoon the raft of boats had broken up. Some of them were sinking, others paddling away in all directions. What was left above water of the Emma had burst into a clear flame under the shadow of the cloud, the great smoky cloud that hung solid and unstirring above the tops of the forest, visible for miles up and down the coast and over the Shallows.

The first person to recover inside the stockade was Belarab himself. Mechanically he murmured the exclamation of wonder, "God is great," and looked at Lingard. But Lingard was not looking at him. The shock of the explosion had robbed him of speech and movement. He stared at the Emma blazing in a distant and insignificant flame under the sinister shadow of the cloud created by Jorgenson's mistrust and contempt for the life of men. Belarab turned away. His opinion had changed. He regarded Lingard no longer as a betrayed man but the effect was the same. He was no longer a man of any importance. What Belarab really wanted now was to see all the white people clear out of the lagoon as soon as possible. Presently he ordered the gate to be thrown open and his armed men poured out to take possession of the Settlement. Later Tengga's houses were set on fire and

Belarab, mounting a fiery pony, issued forth to make a triumphal progress surrounded by a great crowd of headmen and guards.

That night the white people left the stockade in a cortege of torch bearers. Mr. Travers had to be carried down to the beach, where two of Belarab's war-boats awaited their distinguished passengers. Mrs. Travers passed through the gate on d'Alcacer's arm. Her face was half veiled. She moved through the throng of spectators displayed in the torchlight looking straight before her. Belarab, standing in front of a group of headmen, pretended not to see the white people as they went by. With Lingard he shook hands, murmuring the usual formulas of friendship; and when he heard the great white man say, "You shall never see me again," he felt immensely relieved. Belarab did not want to see that white man again, but as he responded to the pressure of Lingard's hand he had a grave smile.

"God alone knows the future," he said.

Lingard walked to the beach by himself, feeling a stranger to all men and abandoned by the All-Knowing God. By that time the first boat with Mr. and Mrs. Travers had already got away out of the blood-red light thrown by the torches upon the water. D'Alcacer and Lingard followed in the second. Presently the dark shade of the creek, walled in by the impenetrable forest, closed round them and the splash of the paddles echoed in the still, damp air.

"How do you think this awful accident happened?" asked d'Alcacer, who had been sitting silent by Lingard's side.

"What is an accident?" said Lingard with a great effort. "Where did you hear of such a thing? Accident! Don't disturb me, Mr. d'Alcacer. I have just come back to life and it has closed on me colder and darker than the grave itself. Let me get used . . . I can't bear the sound of a human voice yet."