PART II

CHAPTER ONE

The light and heat fell upon the settlement, the clearings, and the river as if flung down by an angry hand. The land lay silent, still, and brilliant under the avalanche of burning rays that had destroyed all sound and all motion, had buried all shadows, had choked every breath. No living thing dared to affront the serenity of this cloudless sky, dared to revolt against the oppression of this glorious and cruel sunshine. Strength and resolution, body and mind alike were helpless, and tried to hide before the rush of the fire from heaven. Only the frail butterflies, the fearless children of the sun, the capricious tyrants of the flowers, fluttered audaciously in the open, and their minute shadows hovered in swarms over the drooping blossoms, ran lightly on the withering grass, or glided on the dry and cracked earth. No voice was heard in this hot noontide but the faint murmur of the river that hurried on in swirls and eddies, its sparkling wavelets chasing each other in their joyous course to the sheltering depths, to the cool refuge of the sea.

Almayer had dismissed his workmen for the midday rest, and, his little daughter on his shoulder, ran quickly across the courtyard, making for the shade of the verandah of his house. He laid the sleepy child on the seat of the big rocking-chair, on a pillow which he took out of his own hammock, and stood for a while looking down at her with tender and pensive eyes. The child, tired and hot, moved uneasily, sighed, and looked up at him with the veiled look of sleepy fatigue. He picked up from the floor a broken palm-leaf fan, and began fanning gently the flushed little face. Her eyelids fluttered and Almayer smiled. A responsive smile brightened for a second her heavy eyes, broke with a dimple the soft outline of her cheek; then the eyelids dropped suddenly, she drew a long breath through the parted lips--and was in a deep sleep before the fleeting smile could vanish from her face.

Almayer moved lightly off, took one of the wooden armchairs, and placing it close to the balustrade of the verandah sat down with a sigh of relief. He spread his elbows on the top rail and resting his chin on his clasped hands looked absently at the river, at the dance of sunlight on the flowing water. Gradually the forest of the further bank became smaller, as if sinking below the level of the river. The outlines wavered, grew thin, dissolved in the air. Before his eyes there was now only a space of undulating blue--one big, empty sky growing dark at times. . . .

Where was the sunshine? . . . He felt soothed and happy, as if some gentle and invisible hand had removed from his soul the burden of his body. In another second he seemed to float out into a cool brightness where there was no such thing as memory or pain. Delicious. His eyes closed--opened--closed again.

"Almayer!"

With a sudden jerk of his whole body he sat up, grasping the front rail with both his hands, and blinked stupidly.

"What? What's that?" he muttered, looking round vaguely.

"Here! Down here, Almayer."

Half rising in his chair, Almayer looked over the rail at the foot of the verandah, and fell back with a low whistle of astonishment.

"A ghost, by heavens!" he exclaimed softly to himself.

"Will you listen to me?" went on the husky voice from the courtyard. "May I come up, Almayer?"

Almayer stood up and leaned over the rail. "Don't you dare," he said, in a voice subdued but distinct. "Don't you dare! The child sleeps here. And I don't want to hear you--or speak to you either."

"You must listen to me! It's something important."

"Not to me, surely."

"Yes! To you. Very important."

"You were always a humbug," said Almayer, after a short silence, in an indulgent tone. "Always! I remember the old days. Some fellows used to say there was no one like you for smartness--but you never took me in. Not quite. I never quite believed in you, Mr. Willems."

"I admit your superior intelligence," retorted Willems, with scornful impatience, from below. "Listening to me would be a further proof of it. You will be sorry if you don't."

"Oh, you funny fellow!" said Almayer, banteringly. "Well, come up. Don't make a noise, but come up. You'll catch a sunstroke down there and die on my doorstep

perhaps. I don't want any tragedy here. Come on!"

Before he finished speaking Willems' head appeared above the level of the floor, then his shoulders rose gradually and he stood at last before Almayer--a masquerading spectre of the once so very confidential clerk of the richest merchant in the islands. His jacket was soiled and torn; below the waist he was clothed in a worn-out and faded sarong. He flung off his hat, uncovering his long, tangled hair that stuck in wisps on his perspiring forehead and straggled over his eyes, which glittered deep down in the sockets like the last sparks amongst the black embers of a burnt-out fire. An unclean beard grew out of the caverns of his sunburnt cheeks. The hand he put out towards Almayer was very unsteady. The once firm mouth had the tell-tale droop of mental suffering and physical exhaustion. He was barefooted. Almayer surveyed him with leisurely composure.

"Well!" he said at last, without taking the extended hand which dropped slowly along Willems' body.

"I am come," began Willems.

"So I see," interrupted Almayer. "You might have spared me this treat without making me unhappy. You have been away five weeks, if I am not mistaken. I got on very well without you--and now you are here you are not pretty to look at."

"Let me speak, will you!" exclaimed Willems.

"Don't shout like this. Do you think yourself in the forest with your . . . your friends? This is a civilized man's house. A white man's. Understand?"

"I am come," began Willems again; "I am come for your good and mine."

"You look as if you had come for a good feed," chimed in the irrepressible Almayer, while Willems waved his hand in a discouraged gesture. "Don't they give you enough to eat," went on Almayer, in a tone of easy banter, "those--what am I to call them--those new relations of yours? That old blind scoundrel must be delighted with your company. You know, he was the greatest thief and murderer of those seas. Say! do you exchange confidences? Tell me, Willems, did you kill somebody in Macassar or did you only steal something?"

"It is not true!" exclaimed Willems, hotly. "I only borrowed. . . . They all lied! I . . ."

"Sh-sh!" hissed Almayer, warningly, with a look at the sleeping child. "So you did steal," he went on, with repressed exultation. "I thought there was something of the kind. And now, here, you steal again."

For the first time Willems raised his eyes to Almayer's face.

"Oh, I don't mean from me. I haven't missed anything," said Almayer, with mocking haste. "But that girl. Hey! You stole her. You did not pay the old fellow. She is no good to him now, is she?"

"Stop that. Almayer!"

Something in Willems' tone caused Almayer to pause. He looked narrowly at the man before him, and could not help being shocked at his appearance.

"Almayer," went on Willems, "listen to me. If you are a human being you will. I suffer horribly--and for your sake."

Almayer lifted his eyebrows. "Indeed! How? But you are raving," he added, negligently.

"Ah! You don't know," whispered Willems. "She is gone. Gone," he repeated, with tears in his voice, "gone two days ago."

"No!" exclaimed the surprised Almayer. "Gone! I haven't heard that news yet." He burst into a subdued laugh. "How funny! Had enough of you already? You know it's not flattering for you, my superior countryman."

Willems--as if not hearing him--leaned against one of the columns of the roof and looked over the river. "At first," he whispered, dreamily, "my life was like a vision of heaven--or hell; I didn't know which. Since she went I know what perdition means; what darkness is. I know what it is to be torn to pieces alive. That's how I feel."

"You may come and live with me again," said Almayer, coldly. "After all, Lingard--whom I call my father and respect as such--left you under my care. You pleased yourself by going away. Very good. Now you want to come back. Be it so. I am no friend of yours. I act for Captain Lingard."

"Come back?" repeated Willems, passionately. "Come back to you and abandon her? Do you think I am mad? Without her! Man! what are you made of? To think that she moves, lives, breathes out of my sight. I am jealous of the wind that fans her, of the air she breathes, of the earth that receives the caress of her foot, of the sun that looks at her now while I . . . I haven't seen her for two days--two days."

The intensity of Willems' feeling moved Almayer somewhat, but he affected to

yawn elaborately, "You do bore me," he muttered. "Why don't you go after her instead of coming here?"

"Why indeed?"

"Don't you know where she is? She can't be very far. No native craft has left this river for the last fortnight."

"No! not very far--and I will tell you where she is. She is in Lakamba's campong." And Willems fixed his eyes steadily on Almayer's face.

"Phew! Patalolo never sent to let me know. Strange," said Almayer, thoughtfully. "Are you afraid of that lot?" he added, after a short pause.

"I--afraid!"

"Then is it the care of your dignity which prevents you from following her there, my high-minded friend?" asked Almayer, with mock solicitude. "How noble of you!"

There was a short silence; then Willems said, quietly, "You are a fool. I should like to kick you."

"No fear," answered Almayer, carelessly; "you are too weak for that. You look starved."

"I don't think I have eaten anything for the last two days; perhaps more--I don't remember. It does not matter. I am full of live embers," said Willems, gloomily. "Look!" and he bared an arm covered with fresh scars. "I have been biting myself to forget in that pain the fire that hurts me there!" He struck his breast violently with his fist, reeled under his own blow, fell into a chair that stood near and closed his eyes slowly.

"Disgusting exhibition," said Almayer, loftily. "What could father ever see in you? You are as estimable as a heap of garbage."

"You talk like that! You, who sold your soul for a few guilders," muttered Willems, wearily, without opening his eyes.

"Not so few," said Almayer, with instinctive readiness, and stopped confused for a moment. He recovered himself quickly, however, and went on: "But you--you have thrown yours away for nothing; flung it under the feet of a damned savage woman who has made you already the thing you are, and will kill you very soon, one way

or another, with her love or with her hate. You spoke just now about guilders. You meant Lingard's money, I suppose. Well, whatever I have sold, and for whatever price, I never meant you--you of all people--to spoil my bargain. I feel pretty safe though. Even father, even Captain Lingard, would not touch you now with a pair of tongs; not with a ten-foot pole. . . ."

He spoke excitedly, all in one breath, and, ceasing suddenly, glared at Willems and breathed hard through his nose in sulky resentment. Willems looked at him steadily for a moment, then got up.

"Almayer," he said resolutely, "I want to become a trader in this place."

Almayer shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes. And you shall set me up. I want a house and trade goods--perhaps a little money. I ask you for it."

"Anything else you want? Perhaps this coat?" and here Almayer unbuttoned his jacket--"or my house--or my boots?"

"After all it's natural," went on Willems, without paying any attention to Almayer--"it's natural that she should expect the advantages which . . . and then I could shut up that old wretch and then . . ."

He paused, his face brightened with the soft light of dreamy enthusiasm, and he turned his eyes upwards. With his gaunt figure and dilapidated appearance he looked like some ascetic dweller in a wilderness, finding the reward of a self-denying life in a vision of dazzling glory. He went on in an impassioned murmur--

"And then I would have her all to myself away from her people--all to myself--under my own influence--to fashion--to mould--to adore--to soften--to . . . Oh! Delight! And then--then go away to some distant place where, far from all she knew, I would be all the world to her! All the world to her!"

His face changed suddenly. His eyes wandered for awhile and then became steady all at once.

"I would repay every cent, of course," he said, in a business-like tone, with something of his old assurance, of his old belief in himself, in it. "Every cent. I need not interfere with your business. I shall cut out the small native traders. I have ideas--but never mind that now. And Captain Lingard would approve, I feel sure. After all it's a loan, and I shall be at hand. Safe thing for you."

"Ah! Captain Lingard would approve! He would app . . ." Almayer choked. The notion of Lingard doing something for Willems enraged him. His face was purple. He spluttered insulting words. Willems looked at him coolly.

"I assure you, Almayer," he said, gently, "that I have good grounds for my demand."

"Your cursed impudence!"

"Believe me, Almayer, your position here is not so safe as you may think. An unscrupulous rival here would destroy your trade in a year. It would be ruin. Now Lingard's long absence gives courage to certain individuals. You know?--I have heard much lately. They made proposals to me . . . You are very much alone here. Even Patalolo . . ."

"Damn Patalolo! I am master in this place."

"But, Almayer, don't you see . . ."

"Yes, I see. I see a mysterious ass," interrupted Almayer, violently. "What is the meaning of your veiled threats? Don't you think I know something also? They have been intriguing for years--and nothing has happened. The Arabs have been hanging about outside this river for years--and I am still the only trader here; the master here. Do you bring me a declaration of war? Then it's from yourself only. I know all my other enemies. I ought to knock you on the head. You are not worth powder and shot though. You ought to be destroyed with a stick--like a snake."

Almayer's voice woke up the little girl, who sat up on the pillow with a sharp cry. He rushed over to the chair, caught up the child in his arms, walked back blindly, stumbled against Willems' hat which lay on the floor, and kicked it furiously down the steps.

"Clear out of this! Clear out!" he shouted.

Willems made an attempt to speak, but Almayer howled him down.

"Take yourself off! Don't you see you frighten the child--you scarecrow! No, no! dear," he went on to his little daughter, soothingly, while Willems walked down the steps slowly. "No. Don't cry. See! Bad man going away. Look! He is afraid of your papa. Nasty, bad man. Never come back again. He shall live in the woods and never come near my little girl. If he comes papa will kill him--so!" He struck his fist on the rail of the balustrade to show how he would kill Willems, and, perching the consoled child on his shoulder held her with one hand, while he

pointed toward the retreating figure of his visitor.

"Look how he runs away, dearest," he said, coaxingly. "Isn't he funny. Call 'pig' after him, dearest. Call after him."

The seriousness of her face vanished into dimples. Under the long eyelashes, glistening with recent tears, her big eyes sparkled and danced with fun. She took firm hold of Almayer's hair with one hand, while she waved the other joyously and called out with all her might, in a clear note, soft and distinct like the pipe of a bird:--

"Pig! Pig! Pig!"

CHAPTER TWO

A sigh under the flaming blue, a shiver of the sleeping sea, a cool breath as if a door had been swung upon the frozen spaces of the universe, and with a stir of leaves, with the nod of boughs, with the tremble of slender branches the sea breeze struck the coast, rushed up the river, swept round the broad reaches, and travelled on in a soft ripple of darkening water, in the whisper of branches, in the rustle of leaves of the awakened forests. It fanned in Lakamba's campong the dull red of expiring embers into a pale brilliance; and, under its touch, the slender, upright spirals of smoke that rose from every glowing heap swayed, wavered, and eddying down filled the twilight of clustered shade trees with the aromatic scent of the burning wood. The men who had been dozing in the shade during the hot hours of the afternoon woke up, and the silence of the big courtyard was broken by the hesitating murmur of yet sleepy voices, by coughs and yawns, with now and then a burst of laughter, a loud hail, a name or a joke sent out in a soft drawl. Small groups squatted round the little fires, and the monotonous undertone of talk filled the enclosure; the talk of barbarians, persistent, steady, repeating itself in the soft syllables, in musical tones of the never-ending discourses of those men of the forests and the sea, who can talk most of the day and all the night; who never exhaust a subject, never seem able to thresh a matter out; to whom that talk is poetry and painting and music, all art, all history; their only accomplishment, their only superiority, their only amusement. The talk of camp fires, which speaks of bravery and cunning, of strange events and of far countries, of the news of yesterday and the news of to-morrow. The talk about the dead and the living--about those who fought and those who loved.

Lakamba came out on the platform before his own house and sat down--perspiring, half asleep, and sulky--in a wooden armchair under the shade of the overhanging eaves. Through the darkness of the doorway he could hear the soft warbling of his womenkind, busy round the looms where they were weaving the checkered pattern of his gala sarongs. Right and left of him on the flexible bamboo floor those of his followers to whom their distinguished birth, long devotion, or faithful service had given the privilege of using the chief's house, were sleeping on mats or just sat up rubbing their eyes: while the more wakeful had mustered enough energy to draw a chessboard with red clay on a fine mat and were now meditating silently over their moves. Above the prostrate forms of the players, who lay face downward supported on elbow, the soles of their feet waving irresolutely about, in the absorbed meditation of the game, there towered here and there the straight figure of an attentive spectator looking down with dispassionate but profound interest. On the edge of the platform a row of high-heeled leather sandals stood ranged carefully in a level line, and against the

rough wooden rail leaned the slender shafts of the spears belonging to these gentlemen, the broad blades of dulled steel looking very black in the reddening light of approaching sunset.

A boy of about twelve--the personal attendant of Lakamba--squatted at his master's feet and held up towards him a silver siri box. Slowly Lakamba took the box, opened it, and tearing off a piece of green leaf deposited in it a pinch of lime, a morsel of gambier, a small bit of areca nut, and wrapped up the whole with a dexterous twist. He paused, morsel in hand, seemed to miss something, turned his head from side to side, slowly, like a man with a stiff neck, and ejaculated in an ill-humoured bass--

"Babalatchi!"

The players glanced up quickly, and looked down again directly. Those men who were standing stirred uneasily as if prodded by the sound of the chief's voice. The one nearest to Lakamba repeated the call, after a while, over the rail into the courtyard. There was a movement of upturned faces below by the fires, and the cry trailed over the enclosure in sing-song tones. The thumping of wooden pestles husking the evening rice stopped for a moment and Babalatchi's name rang afresh shrilly on women's lips in various keys. A voice far off shouted something--another, nearer, repeated it; there was a short hubbub which died out with extreme suddenness. The first crier turned to Lakamba, saying indolently--

"He is with the blind Omar."

Lakamba's lips moved inaudibly. The man who had just spoken was again deeply absorbed in the game going on at his feet; and the chief--as if he had forgotten all about it already--sat with a stolid face amongst his silent followers, leaning back squarely in his chair, his hands on the arms of his seat, his knees apart, his big blood-shot eyes blinking solemnly, as if dazzled by the noble vacuity of his thoughts.

Babalatchi had gone to see old Omar late in the afternoon. The delicate manipulation of the ancient pirate's susceptibilities, the skilful management of Aissa's violent impulses engrossed him to the exclusion of every other business--interfered with his regular attendance upon his chief and protector--even disturbed his sleep for the last three nights. That day when he left his own bamboo hut--which stood amongst others in Lakamba's campong--his heart was heavy with anxiety and with doubt as to the success of his intrigue. He walked slowly, with his usual air of detachment from his surroundings, as if unaware that many sleepy eyes watched from all parts of the courtyard his progress towards a small gate at its upper end. That gate gave access to a separate

enclosure in which a rather large house, built of planks, had been prepared by Lakamba's orders for the reception of Omar and Aissa. It was a superior kind of habitation which Lakamba intended for the dwelling of his chief adviser--whose abilities were worth that honour, he thought. But after the consultation in the deserted clearing--when Babalatchi had disclosed his plan--they both had agreed that the new house should be used at first to shelter Omar and Aissa after they had been persuaded to leave the Rajah's place, or had been kidnapped from there--as the case might be. Babalatchi did not mind in the least the putting off of his own occupation of the house of honour, because it had many advantages for the quiet working out of his plans. It had a certain seclusion, having an enclosure of its own, and that enclosure communicated also with Lakamba's private courtyard at the back of his residence--a place set apart for the female household of the chief. The only communication with the river was through the great front courtyard always full of armed men and watchful eyes. Behind the whole group of buildings there stretched the level ground of rice-clearings, which in their turn were closed in by the wall of untouched forests with undergrowth so thick and tangled that nothing but a bullet--and that fired at pretty close range--could penetrate any distance there.

Babalatchi slipped quietly through the little gate and, closing it, tied up carefully the rattan fastenings. Before the house there was a square space of ground, beaten hard into the level smoothness of asphalte. A big buttressed tree, a giant left there on purpose during the process of clearing the land, roofed in the clear space with a high canopy of gnarled boughs and thick, sombre leaves. To the right--and some small distance away from the large house--a little hut of reeds, covered with mats, had been put up for the special convenience of Omar, who, being blind and infirm, had some difficulty in ascending the steep plankway that led to the more substantial dwelling, which was built on low posts and had an uncovered verandah. Close by the trunk of the tree, and facing the doorway of the hut, the household fire glowed in a small handful of embers in the midst of a large circle of white ashes. An old woman--some humble relation of one of Lakamba's wives, who had been ordered to attend on Aissa--was squatting over the fire and lifted up her bleared eyes to gaze at Babalatchi in an uninterested manner, as he advanced rapidly across the courtyard.

Babalatchi took in the courtyard with a keen glance of his solitary eye, and without looking down at the old woman muttered a question. Silently, the woman stretched a tremulous and emaciated arm towards the hut. Babalatchi made a few steps towards the doorway, but stopped outside in the sunlight.

"O! Tuan Omar, Omar besar! It is I--Babalatchi!"

Within the hut there was a feeble groan, a fit of coughing and an indistinct

murmur in the broken tones of a vague plaint. Encouraged evidently by those signs of dismal life within, Babalatchi entered the hut, and after some time came out leading with rigid carefulness the blind Omar, who followed with both his hands on his guide's shoulders. There was a rude seat under the tree, and there Babalatchi led his old chief, who sat down with a sigh of relief and leaned wearily against the rugged trunk. The rays of the setting sun, darting under the spreading branches, rested on the white-robed figure sitting with head thrown back in stiff dignity, on the thin hands moving uneasily, and on the stolid face with its eyelids dropped over the destroyed eyeballs; a face set into the immobility of a plaster cast yellowed by age.

"Is the sun near its setting?" asked Omar, in a dull voice.

"Very near," answered Babalatchi.

"Where am I? Why have I been taken away from the place which I knew--where I, blind, could move without fear? It is like black night to those who see. And the sun is near its setting--and I have not heard the sound of her footsteps since the morning! Twice a strange hand has given me my food to-day. Why? Why? Where is she?"

"She is near," said Babalatchi.

"And he?" went on Omar, with sudden eagerness, and a drop in his voice. "Where is he? Not here. Not here!" he repeated, turning his head from side to side as if in deliberate attempt to see.

"No! He is not here now," said Babalatchi, soothingly. Then, after a pause, he added very low, "But he shall soon return."

"Return! O crafty one! Will he return? I have cursed him three times," exclaimed Omar, with weak violence.

"He is--no doubt--accursed," assented Babalatchi, in a conciliating manner--"and yet he will be here before very long--I know!"

"You are crafty and faithless. I have made you great. You were dirt under my feet--less than dirt," said Omar, with tremulous energy.

"I have fought by your side many times," said Babalatchi, calmly.

"Why did he come?" went on Omar. "Did you send him? Why did he come to defile the air I breathe--to mock at my fate--to poison her mind and steal her body? She

has grown hard of heart to me. Hard and merciless and stealthy like rocks that tear a ship's life out under the smooth sea." He drew a long breath, struggled with his anger, then broke down suddenly. "I have been hungry," he continued, in a whimpering tone--"often I have been very hungry--and cold--and neglected--and nobody near me. She has often forgotten me--and my sons are dead, and that man is an infidel and a dog. Why did he come? Did you show him the way?"

"He found the way himself, O Leader of the brave," said Babalatchi, sadly. "I only saw a way for their destruction and our own greatness. And if I saw aright, then you shall never suffer from hunger any more. There shall be peace for us, and glory and riches."

"And I shall die to-morrow," murmured Omar, bitterly.

"Who knows? Those things have been written since the beginning of the world," whispered Babalatchi, thoughtfully.

"Do not let him come back," exclaimed Omar.

"Neither can he escape his fate," went on Babalatchi. "He shall come back, and the power of men we always hated, you and I, shall crumble into dust in our hand." Then he added with enthusiasm, "They shall fight amongst themselves and perish both."

"And you shall see all this, while, I . . ."

"True!" murmured Babalatchi, regretfully. "To you life is darkness."

"No! Flame!" exclaimed the old Arab, half rising, then falling back in his seat. "The flame of that last day! I see it yet--the last thing I saw! And I hear the noise of the rent earth--when they all died. And I live to be the plaything of a crafty one," he added, with inconsequential peevishness.

"You are my master still," said Babalatchi, humbly. "You are very wise--and in your wisdom you shall speak to Syed Abdulla when he comes here--you shall speak to him as I advised, I, your servant, the man who fought at your right hand for many years. I have heard by a messenger that the Syed Abdulla is coming to-night, perhaps late; for those things must be done secretly, lest the white man, the trader up the river, should know of them. But he will be here. There has been a surat delivered to Lakamba. In it, Syed Abdulla says he will leave his ship, which is anchored outside the river, at the hour of noon to-day. He will be here before daylight if Allah wills."

He spoke with his eye fixed on the ground, and did not become aware of Aissa's presence till he lifted his head when he ceased speaking. She had approached so quietly that even Omar did not hear her footsteps, and she stood now looking at them with troubled eyes and parted lips, as if she was going to speak; but at Babalatchi's entreating gesture she remained silent. Omar sat absorbed in thought.

"Ay wa! Even so!" he said at last, in a weak voice. "I am to speak your wisdom, O Babalatchi! Tell him to trust the white man! I do not understand. I am old and blind and weak. I do not understand. I am very cold," he continued, in a lower tone, moving his shoulders uneasily. He ceased, then went on rambling in a faint whisper. "They are the sons of witches, and their father is Satan the stoned. Sons of witches. Sons of witches." After a short silence he asked suddenly, in a firmer voice--"How many white men are there here, O crafty one?"

"There are two here. Two white men to fight one another," answered Babalatchi, with alacrity.

"And how many will be left then? How many? Tell me, you who are wise."

"The downfall of an enemy is the consolation of the unfortunate," said Babalatchi, sententiously. "They are on every sea; only the wisdom of the Most High knows their number--but you shall know that some of them suffer."

"Tell me, Babalatchi, will they die? Will they both die?" asked Omar, in sudden agitation.

Aissa made a movement. Babalatchi held up a warning hand.

"They shall, surely, die," he said steadily, looking at the girl with unflinching eye.

"Ay wa! But die soon! So that I can pass my hand over their faces when Allah has made them stiff."

"If such is their fate and yours," answered Babalatchi, without hesitation. "God is great!"

A violent fit of coughing doubled Omar up, and he rocked himself to and fro, wheezing and moaning in turns, while Babalatchi and the girl looked at him in silence. Then he leaned back against the tree, exhausted.

"I am alone, I am alone," he wailed feebly, groping vaguely about with his trembling hands. "Is there anybody near me? Is there anybody? I am afraid of this

strange place."

"I am by your side, O Leader of the brave," said Babalatchi, touching his shoulder lightly. "Always by your side as in the days when we both were young: as in the time when we both went with arms in our hands."

"Has there been such a time, Babalatchi?" said Omar, wildly; "I have forgotten. And now when I die there will be no man, no fearless man to speak of his father's bravery. There was a woman! A woman! And she has forsaken me for an infidel dog. The hand of the Compassionate is heavy on my head! Oh, my calamity! Oh, my shame!"

He calmed down after a while, and asked quietly--

"Is the sun set, Babalatchi?"

"It is now as low as the highest tree I can see from here," answered Babalatchi.

"It is the time of prayer," said Omar, attempting to get up.

Dutifully Babalatchi helped his old chief to rise, and they walked slowly towards the hut. Omar waited outside, while Babalatchi went in and came out directly, dragging after him the old Arab's praying carpet. Out of a brass vessel he poured the water of ablution on Omar's outstretched hands, and eased him carefully down into a kneeling posture, for the venerable robber was far too infirm to be able to stand. Then as Omar droned out the first words and made his first bow towards the Holy City, Babalatchi stepped noiselessly towards Aissa, who did not move all the time.

Aissa looked steadily at the one-eyed sage, who was approaching her slowly and with a great show of deference. For a moment they stood facing each other in silence. Babalatchi appeared embarrassed. With a sudden and quick gesture she caught hold of his arm, and with the other hand pointed towards the sinking red disc that glowed, rayless, through the floating mists of the evening.

"The third sunset! The last! And he is not here," she whispered; "what have you done, man without faith? What have you done?"

"Indeed I have kept my word," murmured Babalatchi, earnestly. "This morning Bulangi went with a canoe to look for him. He is a strange man, but our friend, and shall keep close to him and watch him without ostentation. And at the third hour of the day I have sent another canoe with four rowers. Indeed, the man you long for, O daughter of Omar! may come when he likes."

"But he is not here! I waited for him yesterday. To-day! To-morrow I shall go."

"Not alive!" muttered Babalatchi to himself. "And do you doubt your power," he went on in a louder tone--"you that to him are more beautiful than an houri of the seventh Heaven? He is your slave."

"A slave does run away sometimes," she said, gloomily, "and then the master must go and seek him out."

"And do you want to live and die a beggar?" asked Babalatchi, impatiently.

"I care not," she exclaimed, wringing her hands; and the black pupils of her wide-open eyes darted wildly here and there like petrels before the storm.

"Sh! Sh!" hissed Babalatchi, with a glance towards Omar. "Do you think, O girl! that he himself would live like a beggar, even with you?"

"He is great," she said, ardently. "He despises you all! He despises you all! He is indeed a man!"

"You know that best," muttered Babalatchi, with a fugitive smile--"but remember, woman with the strong heart, that to hold him now you must be to him like the great sea to thirsty men--a never-ceasing torment, and a madness."

He ceased and they stood in silence, both looking on the ground, and for a time nothing was heard above the crackling of the fire but the intoning of Omar glorifying the God--his God, and the Faith--his faith. Then Babalatchi cocked his head on one side and appeared to listen intently to the hum of voices in the big courtyard. The dull noise swelled into distinct shouts, then into a great tumult of voices, dying away, recommencing, growing louder, to cease again abruptly; and in those short pauses the shrill vociferations of women rushed up, as if released, towards the quiet heaven. Aissa and Babalatchi started, but the latter gripped in his turn the girl's arm and restrained her with a strong grasp.

"Wait," he whispered.

The little door in the heavy stockade which separated Lakamba's private ground from Omar's enclosure swung back quickly, and the noble exile appeared with disturbed mien and a naked short sword in his hand. His turban was half unrolled, and the end trailed on the ground behind him. His jacket was open. He breathed thickly for a moment before he spoke.

"He came in Bulangi's boat," he said, "and walked quietly till he was in my presence, when the senseless fury of white men caused him to rush upon me. I have been in great danger," went on the ambitious nobleman in an aggrieved tone. "Do you hear that, Babalatchi? That eater of swine aimed a blow at my face with his unclean fist. He tried to rush amongst my household. Six men are holding him now."

A fresh outburst of yells stopped Lakamba's discourse. Angry voices shouted: "Hold him. Beat him down. Strike at his head."

Then the clamour ceased with sudden completeness, as if strangled by a mighty hand, and after a second of surprising silence the voice of Willems was heard alone, howling maledictions in Malay, in Dutch, and in English.

"Listen," said Lakamba, speaking with unsteady lips, "he blasphemes his God. His speech is like the raving of a mad dog. Can we hold him for ever? He must be killed!"

"Fool!" muttered Babalatchi, looking up at Aissa, who stood with set teeth, with gleaming eyes and distended nostrils, yet obedient to the touch of his restraining hand. "It is the third day, and I have kept my promise," he said to her, speaking very low. "Remember," he added warningly--"like the sea to the thirsty! And now," he said aloud, releasing her and stepping back, "go, fearless daughter, go!"

Like an arrow, rapid and silent she flew down the enclosure, and disappeared through the gate of the courtyard. Lakamba and Babalatchi looked after her. They heard the renewed tumult, the girl's clear voice calling out, "Let him go!" Then after a pause in the din no longer than half the human breath the name of Aissa rang in a shout loud, discordant, and piercing, which sent through them an involuntary shudder. Old Omar collapsed on his carpet and moaned feebly; Lakamba stared with gloomy contempt in the direction of the inhuman sound; but Babalatchi, forcing a smile, pushed his distinguished protector through the narrow gate in the stockade, followed him, and closed it quickly.

The old woman, who had been most of the time kneeling by the fire, now rose, glanced round fearfully and crouched hiding behind the tree. The gate of the great courtyard flew open with a great clatter before a frantic kick, and Willems darted in carrying Aissa in his arms. He rushed up the enclosure like a tornado, pressing the girl to his breast, her arms round his neck, her head hanging back over his arm, her eyes closed and her long hair nearly touching the ground. They appeared for a second in the glare of the fire, then, with immense strides, he dashed up the planks and disappeared with his burden in the doorway of the big house.

Inside and outside the enclosure there was silence. Omar lay supporting himself on his elbow, his terrified face with its closed eyes giving him the appearance of a man tormented by a nightmare.

"What is it? Help! Help me to rise!" he called out faintly.

The old hag, still crouching in the shadow, stared with bleared eyes at the doorway of the big house, and took no notice of his call. He listened for a while, then his arm gave way, and, with a deep sigh of discouragement, he let himself fall on the carpet.

The boughs of the tree nodded and trembled in the unsteady currents of the light wind. A leaf fluttered down slowly from some high branch and rested on the ground, immobile, as if resting for ever, in the glow of the fire; but soon it stirred, then soared suddenly, and flew, spinning and turning before the breath of the perfumed breeze, driven helplessly into the dark night that had closed over the land.

CHAPTER THREE

For upwards of forty years Abdulla had walked in the way of his Lord. Son of the rich Syed Selim bin Sali, the great Mohammedan trader of the Straits, he went forth at the age of seventeen on his first commercial expedition, as his father's representative on board a pilgrim ship chartered by the wealthy Arab to convey a crowd of pious Malays to the Holy Shrine. That was in the days when steam was not in those seas--or, at least, not so much as now. The voyage was long, and the young man's eyes were opened to the wonders of many lands. Allah had made it his fate to become a pilgrim very early in life. This was a great favour of Heaven, and it could not have been bestowed upon a man who prized it more, or who made himself more worthy of it by the unswerving piety of his heart and by the religious solemnity of his demeanour. Later on it became clear that the book of his destiny contained the programme of a wandering life. He visited Bombay and Calcutta, looked in at the Persian Gulf, beheld in due course the high and barren coasts of the Gulf of Suez, and this was the limit of his wanderings westward. He was then twenty-seven, and the writing on his forehead decreed that the time had come for him to return to the Straits and take from his dying father's hands the many threads of a business that was spread over all the Archipelago: from Sumatra to New Guinea, from Batavia to Palawan.

Very soon his ability, his will--strong to obstinacy--his wisdom beyond his years, caused him to be recognized as the head of a family whose members and connections were found in every part of those seas. An uncle here--a brother there; a father-in-law in Batavia, another in Palembang; husbands of numerous sisters; cousins innumerable scattered north, south, east, and west--in every place where there was trade: the great family lay like a network over the islands. They lent money to princes, influenced the council-rooms, faced--if need be--with peaceful intrepidity the white rulers who held the land and the sea under the edge of sharp swords; and they all paid great deference to Abdulla, listened to his advice, entered into his plans--because he was wise, pious, and fortunate.

He bore himself with the humility becoming a Believer, who never forgets, even for one moment of his waking life, that he is the servant of the Most High. He was largely charitable because the charitable man is the friend of Allah, and when he walked out of his house--built of stone, just outside the town of Penang--on his way to his godowns in the port, he had often to snatch his hand away sharply from under the lips of men of his race and creed; and often he had to murmur deprecating words, or even to rebuke with severity those who attempted to touch his knees with their finger-tips in gratitude or supplication. He was very handsome, and carried his small head high with meek gravity. His lofty brow,

straight nose, narrow, dark face with its chiselled delicacy of feature, gave him an aristocratic appearance which proclaimed his pure descent. His beard was trimmed close and to a rounded point. His large brown eyes looked out steadily with a sweetness that was belied by the expression of his thin-lipped mouth. His aspect was serene. He had a belief in his own prosperity which nothing could shake.

Restless, like all his people, he very seldom dwelt for many days together in his splendid house in Penang. Owner of ships, he was often on board one or another of them, traversing in all directions the field of his operations. In every port he had a household--his own or that of a relation--to hail his advent with demonstrative joy. In every port there were rich and influential men eager to see him, there was business to talk over, there were important letters to read: an immense correspondence, enclosed in silk envelopes--a correspondence which had nothing to do with the infidels of colonial post-offices, but came into his hands by devious, yet safe, ways. It was left for him by taciturn nakhodas of native trading craft, or was delivered with profound salaams by travel-stained and weary men who would withdraw from his presence calling upon Allah to bless the generous giver of splendid rewards. And the news was always good, and all his attempts always succeeded, and in his ears there rang always a chorus of admiration, of gratitude, of humble entreaties.

A fortunate man. And his felicity was so complete that the good genii, who ordered the stars at his birth, had not neglected--by a refinement of benevolence strange in such primitive beings--to provide him with a desire difficult to attain, and with an enemy hard to overcome. The envy of Lingard's political and commercial successes, and the wish to get the best of him in every way, became Abdulla's mania, the paramount interest of his life, the salt of his existence.

For the last few months he had been receiving mysterious messages from Sambir urging him to decisive action. He had found the river a couple of years ago, and had been anchored more than once off that estuary where the, till then, rapid Pantai, spreading slowly over the lowlands, seems to hesitate, before it flows gently through twenty outlets; over a maze of mudflats, sandbanks and reefs, into the expectant sea. He had never attempted the entrance, however, because men of his race, although brave and adventurous travellers, lack the true seamanlike instincts, and he was afraid of getting wrecked. He could not bear the idea of the Rajah Laut being able to boast that Abdulla bin Selim, like other and lesser men, had also come to grief when trying to wrest his secret from him. Meantime he returned encouraging answers to his unknown friends in Sambir, and waited for his opportunity in the calm certitude of ultimate triumph.

Such was the man whom Lakamba and Babalatchi expected to see for the first

time on the night of Willems' return to Aissa. Babalatchi, who had been tormented for three days by the fear of having over-reached himself in his little plot, now, feeling sure of his white man, felt lighthearted and happy as he superintended the preparations in the courtyard for Abdulla's reception. Half-way between Lakamba's house and the river a pile of dry wood was made ready for the torch that would set fire to it at the moment of Abdulla's landing. Between this and the house again there was, ranged in a semicircle, a set of low bamboo frames, and on those were piled all the carpets and cushions of Lakamba's household. It had been decided that the reception was to take place in the open air, and that it should be made impressive by the great number of Lakamba's retainers, who, clad in clean white, with their red sarongs gathered round their waists, chopper at side and lance in hand, were moving about the compound or, gathering into small knots, discussed eagerly the coming ceremony.

Two little fires burned brightly on the water's edge on each side of the landing place. A small heap of damar-gum torches lay by each, and between them Babalatchi strolled backwards and forwards, stopping often with his face to the river and his head on one side, listening to the sounds that came from the darkness over the water. There was no moon and the night was very clear overhead, but, after the afternoon breeze had expired in fitful puffs, the vapours hung thickening over the glancing surface of the Pantai and clung to the shore, hiding from view the middle of the stream.

A cry in the mist--then another--and, before Babalatchi could answer, two little canoes dashed up to the landing-place, and two of the principal citizens of Sambir, Daoud Sahamin and Hamet Bahassoen, who had been confidentially invited to meet Abdulla, landed quickly and after greeting Babalatchi walked up the dark courtyard towards the house. The little stir caused by their arrival soon subsided, and another silent hour dragged its slow length while Babalatchi tramped up and down between the fires, his face growing more anxious with every passing moment.

At last there was heard a loud hail from down the river. At a call from Babalatchi men ran down to the riverside and, snatching the torches, thrust them into the fires, then waved them above their heads till they burst into a flame. The smoke ascended in thick, wispy streams, and hung in a ruddy cloud above the glare that lit up the courtyard and flashed over the water, showing three long canoes manned by many paddlers lying a little off; the men in them lifting their paddles on high and dipping them down together, in an easy stroke that kept the small flotilla motionless in the strong current, exactly abreast of the landing-place. A man stood up in the largest craft and called out--

"Syed Abdulla bin Selim is here!"

Babalatchi answered aloud in a formal tone--

"Allah gladdens our hearts! Come to the land!"

Abdulla landed first, steadying himself by the help of Babalatchi's extended hand. In the short moment of his passing from the boat to the shore they exchanged sharp glances and a few rapid words.

"Who are you?"

"Babalatchi. The friend of Omar. The protected of Lakamba."

"You wrote?"

"My words were written, O Giver of alms!"

And then Abdulla walked with composed face between the two lines of men holding torches, and met Lakamba in front of the big fire that was crackling itself up into a great blaze. For a moment they stood with clasped hands invoking peace upon each other's head, then Lakamba, still holding his honoured guest by the hand, led him round the fire to the prepared seats. Babalatchi followed close behind his protector. Abdulla was accompanied by two Arabs. He, like his companions, was dressed in a white robe of starched muslin, which fell in stiff folds straight from the neck. It was buttoned from the throat halfway down with a close row of very small gold buttons; round the tight sleeves there was a narrow braid of gold lace. On his shaven head he wore a small skull-cap of plaited grass. He was shod in patent leather slippers over his naked feet. A rosary of heavy wooden beads hung by a round turn from his right wrist. He sat down slowly in the place of honour, and, dropping his slippers, tucked up his legs under him decorously.

The improvised divan was arranged in a wide semi-circle, of which the point most distant from the fire--some ten yards--was also the nearest to Lakamba's dwelling. As soon as the principal personages were seated, the verandah of the house was filled silently by the muffled-up forms of Lakamba's female belongings. They crowded close to the rail and looked down, whispering faintly. Below, the formal exchange of compliments went on for some time between Lakamba and Abdulla, who sat side by side. Babalatchi squatted humbly at his protector's feet, with nothing but a thin mat between himself and the hard ground.

Then there was a pause. Abdulla glanced round in an expectant manner, and after a while Babalatchi, who had been sitting very still in a pensive attitude,

seemed to rouse himself with an effort, and began to speak in gentle and persuasive tones. He described in flowing sentences the first beginnings of Sambir, the dispute of the present ruler, Patalolo, with the Sultan of Koti, the consequent troubles ending with the rising of Bugis settlers under the leadership of Lakamba. At different points of the narrative he would turn for confirmation to Sahamin and Bahassoen, who sat listening eagerly and assented together with a "Betul! Betul! Right! Right!" ejaculated in a fervent undertone.

Warming up with his subject as the narrative proceeded, Babalatchi went on to relate the facts connected with Lingard's action at the critical period of those internal dissensions. He spoke in a restrained voice still, but with a growing energy of indignation. What was he, that man of fierce aspect, to keep all the world away from them? Was he a government? Who made him ruler? He took possession of Patalolo's mind and made his heart hard; he put severe words into his mouth and caused his hand to strike right and left. That unbeliever kept the Faithful panting under the weight of his senseless oppression. They had to trade with him--accept such goods as he would give--such credit as he would accord. And he exacted payment every year . . .

"Very true!" exclaimed Sahamin and Bahassoen together.

Babalatchi glanced at them approvingly and turned to Abdulla.

"Listen to those men, O Protector of the oppressed!" he exclaimed. "What could we do? A man must trade. There was nobody else."

Sahamin got up, staff in hand, and spoke to Abdulla with ponderous courtesy, emphasizing his words by the solemn flourishes of his right arm.

"It is so. We are weary of paying our debts to that white man here, who is the son of the Rajah Laut. That white man--may the grave of his mother be defiled!--is not content to hold us all in his hand with a cruel grasp. He seeks to cause our very death. He trades with the Dyaks of the forest, who are no better than monkeys. He buys from them guttah and rattans--while we starve. Only two days ago I went to him and said, 'Tuan Almayer'--even so; we must speak politely to that friend of Satan--'Tuan Almayer, I have such and such goods to sell. Will you buy?' And he spoke thus--because those white men have no understanding of any courtesy--he spoke to me as if I was a slave: 'Daoud, you are a lucky man'--remark, O First amongst the Believers! that by those words he could have brought misfortune on my head--'you are a lucky man to have anything in these hard times. Bring your goods quickly, and I shall receive them in payment of what you owe me from last year.' And he laughed, and struck me on the shoulder with his open hand. May Jehannum be his lot!"

"We will fight him," said young Bahassoen, crisply. "We shall fight if there is help and a leader. Tuan Abdulla, will you come among us?"

Abdulla did not answer at once. His lips moved in an inaudible whisper and the beads passed through his fingers with a dry click. All waited in respectful silence. "I shall come if my ship can enter this river," said Abdulla at last, in a solemn tone.

"It can, Tuan," exclaimed Babalatchi. "There is a white man here who . . ."

"I want to see Omar el Badavi and that white man you wrote about," interrupted Abdulla.

Babalatchi got on his feet quickly, and there was a general move.

The women on the verandah hurried indoors, and from the crowd that had kept discreetly in distant parts of the courtyard a couple of men ran with armfuls of dry fuel, which they cast upon the fire. One of them, at a sign from Babalatchi, approached and, after getting his orders, went towards the little gate and entered Omar's enclosure. While waiting for his return, Lakamba, Abdulla, and Babalatchi talked together in low tones. Sahamin sat by himself chewing betel-nut sleepily with a slight and indolent motion of his heavy jaw. Bahassoen, his hand on the hilt of his short sword, strutted backwards and forwards in the full light of the fire, looking very warlike and reckless; the envy and admiration of Lakamba's retainers, who stood in groups or flitted about noiselessly in the shadows of the courtyard.

The messenger who had been sent to Omar came back and stood at a distance, waiting till somebody noticed him. Babalatchi beckoned him close.

"What are his words?" asked Babalatchi.

"He says that Syed Abdulla is welcome now," answered the man.

Lakamba was speaking low to Abdulla, who listened to him with deep interest.

". . . We could have eighty men if there was need," he was saying--"eighty men in fourteen canoes. The only thing we want is gunpowder . . ."

"Hai! there will be no fighting," broke in Babalatchi. "The fear of your name will be enough and the terror of your coming."

"There may be powder too," muttered Abdulla with great nonchalance, "if only the ship enters the river safely."

"If the heart is stout the ship will be safe," said Babalatchi. "We will go now and see Omar el Badavi and the white man I have here."

Lakamba's dull eyes became animated suddenly.

"Take care, Tuan Abdulla," he said, "take care. The behaviour of that unclean white madman is furious in the extreme. He offered to strike . . ."

"On my head, you are safe, O Giver of alms!" interrupted Babalatchi.

Abdulla looked from one to the other, and the faintest flicker of a passing smile disturbed for a moment his grave composure. He turned to Babalatchi, and said with decision--

"Let us go."

"This way, O Uplifter of our hearts!" rattled on Babalatchi, with fussy deference. "Only a very few paces and you shall behold Omar the brave, and a white man of great strength and cunning. This way."

He made a sign for Lakamba to remain behind, and with respectful touches on the elbow steered Abdulla towards the gate at the upper end of the court-yard. As they walked on slowly, followed by the two Arabs, he kept on talking in a rapid undertone to the great man, who never looked at him once, although appearing to listen with flattering attention. When near the gate Babalatchi moved forward and stopped, facing Abdulla, with his hand on the fastenings.

"You shall see them both," he said. "All my words about them are true. When I saw him enslaved by the one of whom I spoke, I knew he would be soft in my hand like the mud of the river. At first he answered my talk with bad words of his own language, after the manner of white men. Afterwards, when listening to the voice he loved, he hesitated. He hesitated for many days--too many. I, knowing him well, made Omar withdraw here with his . . . household. Then this red-faced man raged for three days like a black panther that is hungry. And this evening, this very evening, he came. I have him here. He is in the grasp of one with a merciless heart. I have him here," ended Babalatchi, exultingly tapping the upright of the gate with his hand.

"That is good," murmured Abdulla.

"And he shall guide your ship and lead in the fight--if fight there be," went on Babalatchi. "If there is any killing--let him be the slayer. You should give him arms--a short gun that fires many times."

"Yes, by Allah!" assented Abdulla, with slow thoughtfulness.

"And you will have to open your hand, O First amongst the generous!" continued Babalatchi. "You will have to satisfy the rapacity of a white man, and also of one who is not a man, and therefore greedy of ornaments."

"They shall be satisfied," said Abdulla; "but . . ." He hesitated, looking down on the ground and stroking his beard, while Babalatchi waited, anxious, with parted lips. After a short time he spoke again jerkily in an indistinct whisper, so that Babalatchi had to turn his head to catch the words. "Yes. But Omar is the son of my father's uncle . . . and all belonging to him are of the Faith . . . while that man is an unbeliever. It is most unseemly . . . very unseemly. He cannot live under my shadow. Not that dog. Penitence! I take refuge with my God," he mumbled rapidly. "How can he live under my eyes with that woman, who is of the Faith? Scandal! O abomination!"

He finished with a rush and drew a long breath, then added dubiously--

"And when that man has done all we want, what is to be done with him?"

They stood close together, meditative and silent, their eyes roaming idly over the courtyard. The big bonfire burned brightly, and a wavering splash of light lay on the dark earth at their feet, while the lazy smoke wreathed itself slowly in gleaming coils amongst the black boughs of the trees. They could see Lakamba, who had returned to his place, sitting hunched up spiritlessly on the cushions, and Sahamin, who had got on his feet again and appeared to be talking to him with dignified animation. Men in twos or threes came out of the shadows into the light, strolling slowly, and passed again into the shadows, their faces turned to each other, their arms moving in restrained gestures. Bahassoen, his head proudly thrown back, his ornaments, embroideries, and sword-hilt flashing in the light, circled steadily round the fire like a planet round the sun. A cool whiff of damp air came from the darkness of the riverside; it made Abdulla and Babalatchi shiver, and woke them up from their abstraction.

"Open the gate and go first," said Abdulla; "there is no danger?"

"On my life, no!" answered Babalatchi, lifting the rattan ring. "He is all peace and content, like a thirsty man who has drunk water after many days."

He swung the gate wide, made a few paces into the gloom of the enclosure, and retraced his steps suddenly.

"He may be made useful in many ways," he whispered to Abdulla, who had stopped short, seeing him come back.

"O Sin! O Temptation!" sighed out Abdulla, faintly. "Our refuge is with the Most High. Can I feed this infidel for ever and for ever?" he added, impatiently.

"No," breathed out Babalatchi. "No! Not for ever. Only while he serves your designs, O Dispenser of Allah's gifts! When the time comes--and your order . . ."

He sidled close to Abdulla, and brushed with a delicate touch the hand that hung down listlessly, holding the prayer-beads.

"I am your slave and your offering," he murmured, in a distinct and polite tone, into Abdulla's ear. "When your wisdom speaks, there may be found a little poison that will not lie. Who knows?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Babalatchi saw Abdulla pass through the low and narrow entrance into the darkness of Omar's hut; heard them exchange the usual greetings and the distinguished visitor's grave voice asking: "There is no misfortune--please God--but the sight?" and then, becoming aware of the disapproving looks of the two Arabs who had accompanied Abdulla, he followed their example and fell back out of earshot. He did it unwillingly, although he did not ignore that what was going to happen in there was now absolutely beyond his control. He roamed irresolutely about for awhile, and at last wandered with careless steps towards the fire, which had been moved, from under the tree, close to the hut and a little to windward of its entrance. He squatted on his heels and began playing pensively with live embers, as was his habit when engrossed in thought, withdrawing his hand sharply and shaking it above his head when he burnt his fingers in a fit of deeper abstraction. Sitting there he could hear the murmur of the talk inside the hut, and he could distinguish the voices but not the words. Abdulla spoke in deep tones, and now and then this flowing monotone was interrupted by a querulous exclamation, a weak moan or a plaintive quaver of the old man. Yes. It was annoying not to be able to make out what they were saying, thought Babalatchi, as he sat gazing fixedly at the unsteady glow of the fire. But it will be right. All will be right. Abdulla inspired him with confidence. He came up fully to his expectation. From the very first moment when he set his eye on him he felt sure that this man--whom he had known by reputation only--was very resolute. Perhaps too resolute. Perhaps he would want to grasp too much later on. A shadow flitted over Babalatchi's face. On the eve of the accomplishment of his desires he felt the bitter taste of that drop of doubt which is mixed with the sweetness of every success.

When, hearing footsteps on the verandah of the big house, he lifted his head, the shadow had passed away and on his face there was an expression of watchful alertness. Willems was coming down the plankway, into the courtyard. The light within trickled through the cracks of the badly joined walls of the house, and in the illuminated doorway appeared the moving form of Aissa. She also passed into the night outside and disappeared from view. Babalatchi wondered where she had got to, and for the moment forgot the approach of Willems. The voice of the white man speaking roughly above his head made him jump to his feet as if impelled upwards by a powerful spring.

"Where's Abdulla?"

Babalatchi waved his hand towards the hut and stood listening intently. The

voices within had ceased, then recommenced again. He shot an oblique glance at Willems, whose indistinct form towered above the glow of dying embers.

"Make up this fire," said Willems, abruptly. "I want to see your face."

With obliging alacrity Babalatchi put some dry brushwood on the coals from a handy pile, keeping all the time a watchful eye on Willems. When he straightened himself up his hand wandered almost involuntarily towards his left side to feel the handle of a kriss amongst the folds of his sarong, but he tried to look unconcerned under the angry stare.

"You are in good health, please God?" he murmured.

"Yes!" answered Willems, with an unexpected loudness that caused Babalatchi to start nervously. "Yes! . . . Health! . . . You . . ."

He made a long stride and dropped both his hands on the Malay's shoulders. In the powerful grip Babalatchi swayed to and fro limply, but his face was as peaceful as when he sat--a little while ago--dreaming by the fire. With a final vicious jerk Willems let go suddenly, and turning away on his heel stretched his hands over the fire. Babalatchi stumbled backwards, recovered himself, and wriggled his shoulders laboriously.

"Tse! Tse! Tse!" he clicked, deprecatingly. After a short silence he went on with accentuated admiration: "What a man it is! What a strong man! A man like that"--he concluded, in a tone of meditative wonder--"a man like that could upset mountains--mountains!"

He gazed hopefully for a while at Willems' broad shoulders, and continued, addressing the inimical back, in a low and persuasive voice--

"But why be angry with me? With me who think only of your good? Did I not give her refuge, in my own house? Yes, Tuan! This is my own house. I will let you have it without any recompense because she must have a shelter. Therefore you and she shall live here. Who can know a woman's mind? And such a woman! If she wanted to go away from that other place, who am I--to say no! I am Omar's servant. I said: 'Gladden my heart by taking my house.' Did I say right?"

"I'll tell you something," said Willems, without changing his position; "if she takes a fancy to go away from this place it is you who shall suffer. I will wring your neck."

"When the heart is full of love there is no room in it for justice," recommenced

Babalatchi, with unmoved and persistent softness. "Why slay me? You know, Tuan, what she wants. A splendid destiny is her desire--as of all women. You have been wronged and cast out by your people. She knows that. But you are brave, you are strong--you are a man; and, Tuan--I am older than you--you are in her hand. Such is the fate of strong men. And she is of noble birth and cannot live like a slave. You know her--and you are in her hand. You are like a snared bird, because of your strength. And--remember I am a man that has seen much--submit, Tuan! Submit! . . . Or else . . ."

He drawled out the last words in a hesitating manner and broke off his sentence. Still stretching his hands in turns towards the blaze and without moving his head, Willems gave a short, lugubrious laugh, and asked--

"Or else what?"

"She may go away again. Who knows?" finished Babalatchi, in a gentle and insinuating tone.

This time Willems spun round sharply. Babalatchi stepped back.

"If she does it will be the worse for you," said Willems, in a menacing voice. "It will be your doing, and I . . ."

Babalatchi spoke, from beyond the circle of light, with calm disdain.

"Hai--ya! I have heard before. If she goes--then I die. Good! Will that bring her back do you think--Tuan? If it is my doing it shall be well done, O white man! and--who knows--you will have to live without her."

Willems gasped and started back like a confident wayfarer who, pursuing a path he thinks safe, should see just in time a bottomless chasm under his feet. Babalatchi came into the light and approached Willems sideways, with his head thrown back and a little on one side so as to bring his only eye to bear full on the countenance of the tall white man.

"You threaten me," said Willems, indistinctly.

"I, Tuan!" exclaimed Babalatchi, with a slight suspicion of irony in the affected surprise of his tone. "I, Tuan? Who spoke of death? Was it I? No! I spoke of life only. Only of life. Of a long life for a lonely man!"

They stood with the fire between them, both silent, both aware, each in his own way, of the importance of the passing minutes. Babalatchi's fatalism gave him

only an insignificant relief in his suspense, because no fatalism can kill the thought of the future, the desire of success, the pain of waiting for the disclosure of the immutable decrees of Heaven. Fatalism is born of the fear of failure, for we all believe that we carry success in our own hands, and we suspect that our hands are weak. Babalatchi looked at Willems and congratulated himself upon his ability to manage that white man. There was a pilot for Abdulla--a victim to appease Lingard's anger in case of any mishap. He would take good care to put him forward in everything. In any case let the white men fight it out amongst themselves. They were fools. He hated them--the strong fools--and knew that for his righteous wisdom was reserved the safe triumph.

Willems measured dismally the depth of his degradation. He--a white man, the admired of white men, was held by those miserable savages whose tool he was about to become. He felt for them all the hate of his race, of his morality, of his intelligence. He looked upon himself with dismay and pity. She had him. He had heard of such things. He had heard of women who . . . He would never believe such stories. . . . Yet they were true. But his own captivity seemed more complete, terrible, and final--without the hope of any redemption. He wondered at the wickedness of Providence that had made him what he was; that, worse still, permitted such a creature as Almayer to live. He had done his duty by going to him. Why did he not understand? All men were fools. He gave him his chance. The fellow did not see it. It was hard, very hard on himself--Willems. He wanted to take her from amongst her own people. That's why he had condescended to go to Almayer. He examined himself. With a sinking heart he thought that really he could not--somehow--live without her. It was terrible and sweet. He remembered the first days. Her appearance, her face, her smile, her eyes, her words. A savage woman! Yet he perceived that he could think of nothing else but of the three days of their separation, of the few hours since their reunion. Very well. If he could not take her away, then he would go to her. . . . He had, for a moment, a wicked pleasure in the thought that what he had done could not be undone. He had given himself up. He felt proud of it. He was ready to face anything, do anything. He cared for nothing, for nobody. He thought himself very fearless, but as a matter of fact he was only drunk; drunk with the poison of passionate memories.

He stretched his hands over the fire, looked round and called out--

"Aissa!"

She must have been near, for she appeared at once within the light of the fire. The upper part of her body was wrapped up in the thick folds of a head covering which was pulled down over her brow, and one end of it thrown across from shoulder to shoulder hid the lower part of her face. Only her eyes were visible--sombre and gleaming like a starry night.

Willems, looking at this strange, muffled figure, felt exasperated, amazed and helpless. The ex-confidential clerk of the rich Hudig would hug to his breast settled conceptions of respectable conduct. He sought refuge within his ideas of propriety from the dismal mangroves, from the darkness of the forests and of the heathen souls of the savages that were his masters. She looked like an animated package of cheap cotton goods! It made him furious. She had disguised herself so because a man of her race was near! He told her not to do it, and she did not obey. Would his ideas ever change so as to agree with her own notions of what was becoming, proper and respectable? He was really afraid they would, in time. It seemed to him awful. She would never change! This manifestation of her sense of proprieties was another sign of their hopeless diversity; something like another step downwards for him. She was too different from him. He was so civilized! It struck him suddenly that they had nothing in common--not a thought, not a feeling; he could not make clear to her the simplest motive of any act of his . . . and he could not live without her.

The courageous man who stood facing Babalatchi gasped unexpectedly with a gasp that was half a groan. This little matter of her veiling herself against his wish acted upon him like a disclosure of some great disaster. It increased his contempt for himself as the slave of a passion he had always derided, as the man unable to assert his will. This will, all his sensations, his personality--all this seemed to be lost in the abominable desire, in the priceless promise of that woman. He was not, of course, able to discern clearly the causes of his misery; but there are none so ignorant as not to know suffering, none so simple as not to feel and suffer from the shock of warring impulses. The ignorant must feel and suffer from their complexity as well as the wisest; but to them the pain of struggle and defeat appears strange, mysterious, remediable and unjust. He stood watching her, watching himself. He tingled with rage from head to foot, as if he had been struck in the face. Suddenly he laughed; but his laugh was like a distorted echo of some insincere mirth very far away.

From the other side of the fire Babalatchi spoke hurriedly--

"Here is Tuan Abdulla."

CHAPTER FIVE

Directly on stepping outside Omar's hut Abdulla caught sight of Willems. He expected, of course, to see a white man, but not that white man, whom he knew so well. Everybody who traded in the islands, and who had any dealings with Hudig, knew Willems. For the last two years of his stay in Macassar the confidential clerk had been managing all the local trade of the house under a very slight supervision only on the part of the master. So everybody knew Willems, Abdulla amongst others--but he was ignorant of Willems' disgrace. As a matter of fact the thing had been kept very quiet--so quiet that a good many people in Macassar were expecting Willems' return there, supposing him to be absent on some confidential mission. Abdulla, in his surprise, hesitated on the threshold. He had prepared himself to see some seaman--some old officer of Lingard's; a common man--perhaps difficult to deal with, but still no match for him. Instead, he saw himself confronted by an individual whose reputation for sagacity in business was well known to him. How did he get here, and why? Abdulla, recovering from his surprise, advanced in a dignified manner towards the fire, keeping his eyes fixed steadily on Willems. When within two paces from Willems he stopped and lifted his right hand in grave salutation. Willems nodded slightly and spoke after a while.

"We know each other, Tuan Abdulla," he said, with an assumption of easy indifference.

"We have traded together," answered Abdulla, solemnly, "but it was far from here."

"And we may trade here also," said Willems.

"The place does not matter. It is the open mind and the true heart that are required in business."

"Very true. My heart is as open as my mind. I will tell you why I am here."

"What need is there? In leaving home one learns life. You travel. Travelling is victory! You shall return with much wisdom."

"I shall never return," interrupted Willems. "I have done with my people. I am a man without brothers. Injustice destroys fidelity."

Abdulla expressed his surprise by elevating his eyebrows. At the same time he

made a vague gesture with his arm that could be taken as an equivalent of an approving and conciliating "just so!"

Till then the Arab had not taken any notice of Aissa, who stood by the fire, but now she spoke in the interval of silence following Willems' declaration. In a voice that was much deadened by her wrappings she addressed Abdulla in a few words of greeting, calling him a kinsman. Abdulla glanced at her swiftly for a second, and then, with perfect good breeding, fixed his eyes on the ground. She put out towards him her hand, covered with a corner of her face-veil, and he took it, pressed it twice, and dropping it turned towards Willems. She looked at the two men searchingly, then backed away and seemed to melt suddenly into the night.

"I know what you came for, Tuan Abdulla," said Willems; "I have been told by that man there." He nodded towards Babalatchi, then went on slowly, "It will be a difficult thing."

"Allah makes everything easy," interjected Babalatchi, piously, from a distance.

The two men turned quickly and stood looking at him thoughtfully, as if in deep consideration of the truth of that proposition. Under their sustained gaze Babalatchi experienced an unwonted feeling of shyness, and dared not approach nearer. At last Willems moved slightly, Abdulla followed readily, and they both walked down the courtyard, their voices dying away in the darkness. Soon they were heard returning, and the voices grew distinct as their forms came out of the gloom. By the fire they wheeled again, and Babalatchi caught a few words. Willems was saying--

"I have been at sea with him many years when young. I have used my knowledge to observe the way into the river when coming in, this time."

Abdulla assented in general terms.

"In the variety of knowledge there is safety," he said; and then they passed out of earshot.

Babalatchi ran to the tree and took up his position in the solid blackness under its branches, leaning against the trunk. There he was about midway between the fire and the other limit of the two men's walk. They passed him close. Abdulla slim, very straight, his head high, and his hands hanging before him and twisting mechanically the string of beads; Willems tall, broad, looking bigger and stronger in contrast to the slight white figure by the side of which he strolled carelessly, taking one step to the other's two; his big arms in constant motion as he gesticulated vehemently, bending forward to look Abdulla in the face.

They passed and repassed close to Babalatchi some half a dozen times, and, whenever they were between him and the fire, he could see them plain enough. Sometimes they would stop short, Willems speaking emphatically, Abdulla listening with rigid attention, then, when the other had ceased, bending his head slightly as if consenting to some demand, or admitting some statement. Now and then Babalatchi caught a word here and there, a fragment of a sentence, a loud exclamation. Impelled by curiosity he crept to the very edge of the black shadow under the tree. They were nearing him, and he heard Willems say--

"You will pay that money as soon as I come on board. That I must have."

He could not catch Abdulla's reply. When they went past again, Willems was saying--

"My life is in your hand anyway. The boat that brings me on board your ship shall take the money to Omar. You must have it ready in a sealed bag."

Again they were out of hearing, but instead of coming back they stopped by the fire facing each other. Willems moved his arm, shook his hand on high talking all the time, then brought it down jerkily--stamped his foot. A short period of immobility ensued. Babalatchi, gazing intently, saw Abdulla's lips move almost imperceptibly. Suddenly Willems seized the Arab's passive hand and shook it. Babalatchi drew the long breath of relieved suspense. The conference was over. All well, apparently.

He ventured now to approach the two men, who saw him and waited in silence. Willems had retired within himself already, and wore a look of grim indifference. Abdulla moved away a step or two. Babalatchi looked at him inquisitively.

"I go now," said Abdulla, "and shall wait for you outside the river, Tuan Willems, till the second sunset. You have only one word, I know."

"Only one word," repeated Willems.

Abdulla and Babalatchi walked together down the enclosure, leaving the white man alone by the fire. The two Arabs who had come with Abdulla preceded them and passed at once through the little gate into the light and the murmur of voices of the principal courtyard, but Babalatchi and Abdulla stopped on this side of it. Abdulla said--

"It is well. We have spoken of many things. He consents."

"When?" asked Babalatchi, eagerly.

"On the second day from this. I have promised every thing. I mean to keep much."

"Your hand is always open, O Most Generous amongst Believers! You will not forget your servant who called you here. Have I not spoken the truth? She has made roast meat of his heart."

With a horizontal sweep of his arm Abdulla seemed to push away that last statement, and said slowly, with much meaning--

"He must be perfectly safe; do you understand? Perfectly safe--as if he was amongst his own people--till . . ."

"Till when?" whispered Babalatchi.

"Till I speak," said Abdulla. "As to Omar." He hesitated for a moment, then went on very low: "He is very old."

"Hai-ya! Old and sick," murmured Babalatchi, with sudden melancholy.

"He wanted me to kill that white man. He begged me to have him killed at once," said Abdulla, contemptuously, moving again towards the gate.

"He is impatient, like those who feel death near them," exclaimed Babalatchi, apologetically.

"Omar shall dwell with me," went on Abdulla, "when . . . But no matter. Remember! The white man must be safe."

"He lives in your shadow," answered Babalatchi, solemnly. "It is enough!" He touched his forehead and fell back to let Abdulla go first.

And now they are back in the courtyard wherefrom, at their appearance, listlessness vanishes, and all the faces become alert and interested once more. Lakamba approaches his guest, but looks at Babalatchi, who reassures him by a confident nod. Lakamba clumsily attempts a smile, and looking, with natural and ineradicable sulkiness, from under his eyebrows at the man whom he wants to honour, asks whether he would condescend to visit the place of sitting down and take food. Or perhaps he would prefer to give himself up to repose? The house is his, and what is in it, and those many men that stand afar watching the interview are his. Syed Abdulla presses his host's hand to his breast, and informs him in a confidential murmur that his habits are ascetic and his temperament inclines to

melancholy. No rest; no food; no use whatever for those many men who are his. Syed Abdulla is impatient to be gone. Lakamba is sorrowful but polite, in his hesitating, gloomy way. Tuan Abdulla must have fresh boatmen, and many, to shorten the dark and fatiguing road. Hai-ya! There! Boats!

By the riverside indistinct forms leap into a noisy and disorderly activity. There are cries, orders, banter, abuse. Torches blaze sending out much more smoke than light, and in their red glare Babalatchi comes up to say that the boats are ready.

Through that lurid glare Syed Abdulla, in his long white gown, seems to glide fantastically, like a dignified apparition attended by two inferior shades, and stands for a moment at the landing-place to take leave of his host and ally--whom he loves. Syed Abdulla says so distinctly before embarking, and takes his seat in the middle of the canoe under a small canopy of blue calico stretched on four sticks. Before and behind Syed Abdulla, the men squatting by the gunwales hold high the blades of their paddles in readiness for a dip, all together. Ready? Not yet. Hold on all! Syed Abdulla speaks again, while Lakamba and Babalatchi stand close on the bank to hear his words. His words are encouraging. Before the sun rises for the second time they shall meet, and Syed Abdulla's ship shall float on the waters of this river--at last! Lakamba and Babalatchi have no doubt--if Allah wills. They are in the hands of the Compassionate. No doubt. And so is Syed Abdulla, the great trader who does not know what the word failure means; and so is the white man--the smartest business man in the islands--who is lying now by Omar's fire with his head on Aissa's lap, while Syed Abdulla

flies down the muddy river with current and paddles between the sombre walls of the sleeping forest; on his way to the clear and open sea where the Lord of the Isles (formerly of Greenock, but condemned, sold, and registered now as of Penang) waits for its owner, and swings erratically at anchor in the currents of the capricious tide, under the crumbling red cliffs of Tanjong Mirrah.

For some time Lakamba, Sahamin, and Bahassoen looked silently into the humid darkness which had swallowed the big canoe that carried Abdulla and his unvarying good fortune. Then the two guests broke into a talk expressive of their joyful anticipations. The venerable Sahamin, as became his advanced age, found his delight in speculation as to the activities of a rather remote future. He would buy praus, he would send expeditions up the river, he would enlarge his trade, and, backed by Abdulla's capital, he would grow rich in a very few years. Very few. Meantime it would be a good thing to interview Almayer to-morrow and, profiting by the last day of the hated man's prosperity, obtain some goods from him on credit. Sahamin thought it could be done by skilful wheedling. After all, that son of Satan was a fool, and the thing was worth doing, because the coming

revolution would wipe all debts out. Sahamin did not mind imparting that idea to his companions, with much senile chuckling, while they strolled together from the riverside towards the residence. The bull-necked Lakamba, listening with pouted lips without the sign of a smile, without a gleam in his dull, bloodshot eyes, shuffled slowly across the courtyard between his two guests. But suddenly Bahassoen broke in upon the old man's prattle with the generous enthusiasm of his youth. . . . Trading was very good. But was the change that would make them happy effected yet? The white man should be despoiled with a strong hand! . . . He grew excited, spoke very loud, and his further discourse, delivered with his hand on the hilt of his sword, dealt incoherently with the honourable topics of throat-cutting, fire-raising, and with the far-famed valour of his ancestors.

Babalatchi remained behind, alone with the greatness of his conceptions. The sagacious statesman of Sambir sent a scornful glance after his noble protector and his noble protector's friends, and then stood meditating about that future which to the others seemed so assured. Not so to Babalatchi, who paid the penalty of his wisdom by a vague sense of insecurity that kept sleep at arm's length from his tired body. When he thought at last of leaving the waterside, it was only to strike a path for himself and to creep along the fences, avoiding the middle of the courtyard where small fires glimmered and winked as though the sinister darkness there had reflected the stars of the serene heaven. He slunk past the wicket-gate of Omar's enclosure, and crept on patiently along the light bamboo palisade till he was stopped by the angle where it joined the heavy stockade of Lakamba's private ground. Standing there, he could look over the fence and see Omar's hut and the fire before its door. He could also see the shadow of two human beings sitting between him and the red glow. A man and a woman. The sight seemed to inspire the careworn sage with a frivolous desire to sing. It could hardly be called a song; it was more in the nature of a recitative without any rhythm, delivered rapidly but distinctly in a croaking and unsteady voice; and if Babalatchi considered it a song, then it was a song with a purpose and, perhaps for that reason, artistically defective. It had all the imperfections of unskilful improvisation and its subject was gruesome. It told a tale of shipwreck and of thirst, and of one brother killing another for the sake of a gourd of water. A repulsive story which might have had a purpose but possessed no moral whatever. Yet it must have pleased Babalatchi for he repeated it twice, the second time even in louder tones than at first, causing a disturbance amongst the white rice-birds and the wild fruit-pigeons which roosted on the boughs of the big tree growing in Omar's compound. There was in the thick foliage above the singer's head a confused beating of wings, sleepy remarks in bird-language, a sharp stir of leaves. The forms by the fire moved; the shadow of the woman altered its shape, and Babalatchi's song was cut short abruptly by a fit of soft and persistent coughing. He did not try to resume his efforts after that interruption, but went away stealthily to seek--if not sleep--then, at least, repose.

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as Abdulla and his companions had left the enclosure, Aissa approached Willems and stood by his side. He took no notice of her expectant attitude till she touched him gently, when he turned furiously upon her and, tearing off her face-veil, trampled upon it as though it had been a mortal enemy. She looked at him with the faint smile of patient curiosity, with the puzzled interest of ignorance watching the running of a complicated piece of machinery. After he had exhausted his rage, he stood again severe and unbending looking down at the fire, but the touch of her fingers at the nape of his neck effaced instantly the hard lines round his mouth; his eyes wavered uneasily; his lips trembled slightly. Starting with the unresisting rapidity of a particle of iron--which, quiescent one moment, leaps in the next to a powerful magnet--he moved forward, caught her in his arms and pressed her violently to his breast. He released her as suddenly, and she stumbled a little, stepped back, breathed quickly through her parted lips, and said in a tone of pleased reproof--

"O Fool-man! And if you had killed me in your strong arms what would you have done?"

"You want to live . . . and to run away from me again," he said gently. "Tell me--do you?"

She moved towards him with very short steps, her head a little on one side, hands on hips, with a slight balancing of her body: an approach more tantalizing than an escape. He looked on, eager--charmed. She spoke jestingly.

"What am I to say to a man who has been away three days from me? Three!" she repeated, holding up playfully three fingers before Willems' eyes. He snatched at the hand, but she was on her guard and whisked it behind her back.

"No!" she said. "I cannot be caught. But I will come. I am coming myself because I like. Do not move. Do not touch me with your mighty hands, O child!"

As she spoke she made a step nearer, then another. Willems did not stir. Pressing against him she stood on tiptoe to look into his eyes, and her own seemed to grow bigger, glistening and tender, appealing and promising. With that look she drew the man's soul away from him through his immobile pupils, and from Willems' features the spark of reason vanished under her gaze and was replaced by an appearance of physical well-being, an ecstasy of the senses which had taken possession of his rigid body; an ecstasy that drove out regrets, hesitation and

doubt, and proclaimed its terrible work by an appalling aspect of idiotic beatitude. He never stirred a limb, hardly breathed, but stood in stiff immobility, absorbing the delight of her close contact by every pore.

"Closer! Closer!" he murmured.

Slowly she raised her arms, put them over his shoulders, and clasping her hands at the back of his neck, swung off the full length of her arms. Her head fell back, the eyelids dropped slightly, and her thick hair hung straight down: a mass of ebony touched by the red gleams of the fire. He stood unyielding under the strain, as solid and motionless as one of the big trees of the surrounding forests; and his eyes looked at the modelling of her chin, at the outline of her neck, at the swelling lines of her bosom, with the famished and concentrated expression of a starving man looking at food. She drew herself up to him and rubbed her head against his cheek slowly and gently. He sighed. She, with her hands still on his shoulders, glanced up at the placid stars and said--

"The night is half gone. We shall finish it by this fire. By this fire you shall tell me all: your words and Syed Abdulla's words; and listening to you I shall forget the three days--because I am good. Tell me--am I good?"

He said "Yes" dreamily, and she ran off towards the big house.

When she came back, balancing a roll of fine mats on her head, he had replenished the fire and was ready to help her in arranging a couch on the side of it nearest to the hut. She sank down with a quick but gracefully controlled movement, and he threw himself full length with impatient haste, as if he wished to forestall somebody. She took his head on her knees, and when he felt her hands touching his face, her fingers playing with his hair, he had an expression of being taken possession of; he experienced a sense of peace, of rest, of happiness, and of soothing delight. His hands strayed upwards about her neck, and he drew her down so as to have her face above his. Then he whispered--"I wish I could die like this--now!" She looked at him with her big sombre eyes, in which there was no responsive light. His thought was so remote from her understanding that she let the words pass by unnoticed, like the breath of the wind, like the flight of a cloud. Woman though she was, she could not comprehend, in her simplicity, the tremendous compliment of that speech, that whisper of deadly happiness, so sincere, so spontaneous, coming so straight from the heart--like every corruption. It was the voice of madness, of a delirious peace, of happiness that is infamous, cowardly, and so exquisite that the debased mind refuses to contemplate its termination: for to the victims of such happiness the moment of its ceasing is the beginning afresh of that torture which is its price.

With her brows slightly knitted in the determined preoccupation of her own desires, she said--

"Now tell me all. All the words spoken between you and Syed Abdulla."

Tell what? What words? Her voice recalled back the consciousness that had departed under her touch, and he became aware of the passing minutes every one of which was like a reproach; of those minutes that falling, slow, reluctant, irresistible into the past, marked his footsteps on the way to perdition. Not that he had any conviction about it, any notion of the possible ending on that painful road. It was an indistinct feeling, a threat of suffering like the confused warning of coming disease, an inarticulate monition of evil made up of fear and pleasure, of resignation and of revolt. He was ashamed of his state of mind. After all, what was he afraid of? Were those scruples? Why that hesitation to think, to speak of what he intended doing? Scruples were for imbeciles. His clear duty was to make himself happy. Did he ever take an oath of fidelity to Lingard? No. Well then--he would not let any interest of that old fool stand between Willems and Willems' happiness. Happiness? Was he not, perchance, on a false track? Happiness meant money. Much money. At least he had always thought so till he had experienced those new sensations which . . .

Aissa's question, repeated impatiently, interrupted his musings, and looking up at her face shining above him in the dim light of the fire he stretched his limbs luxuriously and obedient to her desire, he spoke slowly and hardly above his breath. She, with her head close to his lips, listened absorbed, interested, in attentive immobility. The many noises of the great courtyard were hushed up gradually by the sleep that stilled all voices and closed all eyes. Then somebody droned out a song with a nasal drawl at the end of every verse. He stirred. She put her hand suddenly on his lips and sat upright. There was a feeble coughing, a rustle of leaves, and then a complete silence took possession of the land; a silence cold, mournful, profound; more like death than peace; more hard to bear than the fiercest tumult. As soon as she removed her hand he hastened to speak, so insupportable to him was that stillness perfect and absolute in which his thoughts seemed to ring with the loudness of shouts.

"Who was there making that noise?" he asked.

"I do not know. He is gone now," she answered, hastily. "Tell me, you will not return to your people; not without me. Not with me. Do you promise?"

"I have promised already. I have no people of my own. Have I not told you, that you are everybody to me?"

"Ah, yes," she said, slowly, "but I like to hear you say that again--every day, and every night, whenever I ask; and never to be angry because I ask. I am afraid of white women who are shameless and have fierce eyes." She scanned his features close for a moment and added:

"Are they very beautiful? They must be."

"I do not know," he whispered, thoughtfully. "And if I ever did know, looking at you I have forgotten."

"Forgotten! And for three days and two nights you have forgotten me also! Why? Why were you angry with me when I spoke at first of Tuan Abdulla, in the days when we lived beside the brook? You remembered somebody then. Somebody in the land whence you come. Your tongue is false. You are white indeed, and your heart is full of deception. I know it. And yet I cannot help believing you when you talk of your love for me. But I am afraid!"

He felt flattered and annoyed by her vehemence, and said--

"Well, I am with you now. I did come back. And it was you that went away."

"When you have helped Abdulla against the Rajah Laut, who is the first of white men, I shall not be afraid any more," she whispered.

"You must believe what I say when I tell you that there never was another woman; that there is nothing for me to regret, and nothing but my enemies to remember."

"Where do you come from?" she said, impulsive and inconsequent, in a passionate whisper. "What is that land beyond the great sea from which you come? A land of lies and of evil from which nothing but misfortune ever comes to us--who are not white. Did you not at first ask me to go there with you? That is why I went away."

"I shall never ask you again."

"And there is no woman waiting for you there?"

"No!" said Willems, firmly.

She bent over him. Her lips hovered above his face and her long hair brushed his cheeks.

"You taught me the love of your people which is of the Devil," she murmured, and bending still lower, she said faintly, "Like this?"

"Yes, like this!" he answered very low, in a voice that trembled slightly with eagerness; and she pressed suddenly her lips to his while he closed his eyes in an ecstasy of delight.

There was a long interval of silence. She stroked his head with gentle touches, and he lay dreamily, perfectly happy but for the annoyance of an indistinct vision of a well-known figure; a man going away from him and diminishing in a long perspective of fantastic trees, whose every leaf was an eye looking after that man, who walked away growing smaller, but never getting out of sight for all his steady progress. He felt a desire to see him vanish, a hurried impatience of his disappearance, and he watched for it with a careful and irksome effort. There was something familiar about that figure. Why! Himself! He gave a sudden start and opened his eyes, quivering with the emotion of that quick return from so far, of finding himself back by the fire with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. It had been half a dream; he had slumbered in her arms for a few seconds. Only the beginning of a dream--nothing more. But it was some time before he recovered from the shock of seeing himself go away so deliberately, so definitely, so unguardedly; and going away--where? Now, if he had not woke up in time he would never have come back again from there; from whatever place he was going to. He felt indignant. It was like an evasion, like a prisoner breaking his parole--that thing slinking off stealthily while he slept. He was very indignant, and was also astonished at the absurdity of his own emotions.

She felt him tremble, and murmuring tender words, pressed his head to her breast. Again he felt very peaceful with a peace that was as complete as the silence round them. He muttered--

"You are tired, Aissa."

She answered so low that it was like a sigh shaped into faint words.

"I shall watch your sleep, O child!"

He lay very quiet, and listened to the beating of her heart. That sound, light, rapid, persistent, and steady; her very life beating against his cheek, gave him a clear perception of secure ownership, strengthened his belief in his possession of that human being, was like an assurance of the vague felicity of the future. There were no regrets, no doubts, no hesitation now. Had there ever been? All that seemed far away, ages ago--as unreal and pale as the fading memory of some delirium. All the anguish, suffering, strife of the past days; the humiliation and

anger of his downfall; all that was an infamous nightmare, a thing born in sleep to be forgotten and leave no trace--and true life was this: this dreamy immobility with his head against her heart that beat so steadily.

He was broad awake now, with that tingling wakefulness of the tired body which succeeds to the few refreshing seconds of irresistible sleep, and his wide-open eyes looked absently at the doorway of Omar's hut. The reed walls glistened in the light of the fire, the smoke of which, thin and blue, drifted slanting in a succession of rings and spirals across the doorway, whose empty blackness seemed to him impenetrable and enigmatical like a curtain hiding vast spaces full of unexpected surprises. This was only his fancy, but it was absorbing enough to make him accept the sudden appearance of a head, coming out of the gloom, as part of his idle fantasy or as the beginning of another short dream, of another vagary of his overtired brain. A face with drooping eyelids, old, thin, and yellow, above the scattered white of a long beard that touched the earth. A head without a body, only a foot above the ground, turning slightly from side to side on the edge of the circle of light as if to catch the radiating heat of the fire on either cheek in succession. He watched it in passive amazement, growing distinct, as if coming nearer to him, and the confused outlines of a body crawling on all fours came out, creeping inch by inch towards the fire, with a silent and all but imperceptible movement. He was astounded at the appearance of that blind head dragging that crippled body behind, without a sound, without a change in the composure of the sightless face, which was plain one second, blurred the next in the play of the light that drew it to itself steadily. A mute face with a kriss between its lips. This was no dream. Omar's face. But why? What was he after?

He was too indolent in the happy languor of the moment to answer the question. It darted through his brain and passed out, leaving him free to listen again to the beating of her heart; to that precious and delicate sound which filled the quiet immensity of the night. Glancing upwards he saw the motionless head of the woman looking down at him in a tender gleam of liquid white between the long eyelashes, whose shadow rested on the soft curve of her cheek; and under the caress of that look, the uneasy wonder and the obscure fear of that apparition, crouching and creeping in turns towards the fire that was its guide, were lost--were drowned in the quietude of all his senses, as pain is drowned in the flood of drowsy serenity that follows upon a dose of opium.

He altered the position of his head by ever so little, and now could see easily that apparition which he had seen a minute before and had nearly forgotten already. It had moved closer, gliding and noiseless like the shadow of some nightmare, and now it was there, very near, motionless and still as if listening; one hand and one knee advanced; the neck stretched out and the head turned full towards the fire. He could see the emaciated face, the skin shiny over the prominent bones, the

black shadows of the hollow temples and sunken cheeks, and the two patches of blackness over the eyes, over those eyes that were dead and could not see. What was the impulse which drove out this blind cripple into the night to creep and crawl towards that fire? He looked at him, fascinated, but the face, with its shifting lights and shadows, let out nothing, closed and impenetrable like a walled door.

Omar raised himself to a kneeling posture and sank on his heels, with his hands hanging down before him. Willems, looking out of his dreamy numbness, could see plainly the kriss between the thin lips, a bar across the face; the handle on one side where the polished wood caught a red gleam from the fire and the thin line of the blade running to a dull black point on the other. He felt an inward shock, which left his body passive in Aissa's embrace, but filled his breast with a tumult of powerless fear; and he perceived suddenly that it was his own death that was groping towards him; that it was the hate of himself and the hate of her love for him which drove this helpless wreck of a once brilliant and resolute pirate, to attempt a desperate deed that would be the glorious and supreme consolation of an unhappy old age. And while he looked, paralyzed with dread, at the father who had resumed his cautious advance--blind like fate, persistent like destiny--he listened with greedy eagerness to the heart of the daughter beating light, rapid, and steady against his head.

He was in the grip of horrible fear; of a fear whose cold hand robs its victim of all will and of all power; of all wish to escape, to resist, or to move; which destroys hope and despair alike, and holds the empty and useless carcass as if in a vise under the coming stroke. It was not the fear of death--he had faced danger before--it was not even the fear of that particular form of death. It was not the fear of the end, for he knew that the end would not come then. A movement, a leap, a shout would save him from the feeble hand of the blind old man, from that hand that even now was, with cautious sweeps along the ground, feeling for his body in the darkness. It was the unreasoning fear of this glimpse into the unknown things, into those motives, impulses, desires he had ignored, but that had lived in the breasts of despised men, close by his side, and were revealed to him for a second, to be hidden again behind the black mists of doubt and deception. It was not death that frightened him: it was the horror of bewildered life where he could understand nothing and nobody round him; where he could guide, control, comprehend nothing and no one--not even himself.

He felt a touch on his side. That contact, lighter than the caress of a mother's hand on the cheek of a sleeping child, had for him the force of a crushing blow. Omar had crept close, and now, kneeling above him, held the kriss in one hand while the other skimmed over his jacket up towards his breast in gentle touches; but the blind face, still turned to the heat of the fire, was set and immovable in its

aspect of stony indifference to things it could not hope to see. With an effort Willems took his eyes off the deathlike mask and turned them up to Aissa's head. She sat motionless as if she had been part of the sleeping earth, then suddenly he saw her big sombre eyes open out wide in a piercing stare and felt the convulsive pressure of her hands pinning his arms along his body. A second dragged itself out, slow and bitter, like a day of mourning; a second full of regret and grief for that faith in her which took its flight from the shattered ruins of his trust. She was holding him! She too! He felt her heart give a great leap, his head slipped down on her knees, he closed his eyes and there was nothing. Nothing! It was as if she had died; as though her heart had leaped out into the night, abandoning him, defenceless and alone, in an empty world.

His head struck the ground heavily as she flung him aside in her sudden rush. He lay as if stunned, face up and, daring not move, did not see the struggle, but heard the piercing shriek of mad fear, her low angry words; another shriek dying out in a moan. When he got up at last he looked at Aissa kneeling over her father, he saw her bent back in the effort of holding him down, Omar's contorted limbs, a hand thrown up above her head and her quick movement grasping the wrist. He made an impulsive step forward, but she turned a wild face to him and called out over her shoulder--

"Keep back! Do not come near! Do not. . . ."

And he stopped short, his arms hanging lifelessly by his side, as if those words had changed him into stone. She was afraid of his possible violence, but in the unsettling of all his convictions he was struck with the frightful thought that she preferred to kill her father all by herself; and the last stage of their struggle, at which he looked as though a red fog had filled his eyes, loomed up with an unnatural ferocity, with a sinister meaning; like something monstrous and depraved, forcing its complicity upon him under the cover of that awful night. He was horrified and grateful; drawn irresistibly to her--and ready to run away. He could not move at first--then he did not want to stir. He wanted to see what would happen. He saw her lift, with a tremendous effort, the apparently lifeless body into the hut, and remained standing, after they disappeared, with the vivid image in his eyes of that head swaying on her shoulder, the lower jaw hanging down, collapsed, passive, meaningless, like the head of a corpse.

Then after a while he heard her voice speaking inside, harshly, with an agitated abruptness of tone; and in answer there were groans and broken murmurs of exhaustion. She spoke louder. He heard her saying violently--"No! No! Never!"

And again a plaintive murmur of entreaty as of some one begging for a supreme favour, with a last breath. Then she said--

"Never! I would sooner strike it into my own heart."

She came out, stood panting for a short moment in the doorway, and then stepped into the firelight. Behind her, through the darkness came the sound of words calling the vengeance of heaven on her head, rising higher, shrill, strained, repeating the curse over and over again--till the voice cracked in a passionate shriek that died out into hoarse muttering ending with a deep and prolonged sigh. She stood facing Willems, one hand behind her back, the other raised in a gesture compelling attention, and she listened in that attitude till all was still inside the hut. Then she made another step forward and her hand dropped slowly.

"Nothing but misfortune," she whispered, absently, to herself. "Nothing but misfortune to us who are not white." The anger and excitement died out of her face, and she looked straight at Willems with an intense and mournful gaze.

He recovered his senses and his power of speech with a sudden start.

"Aissa," he exclaimed, and the words broke out through his lips with hurried nervousness. "Aissa! How can I live here? Trust me. Believe in me. Let us go away from here. Go very far away! Very far; you and I!"

He did not stop to ask himself whether he could escape, and how, and where. He was carried away by the flood of hate, disgust, and contempt of a white man for that blood which is not his blood, for that race which is not his race; for the brown skins; for the hearts false like the sea, blacker than night. This feeling of repulsion overmastered his reason in a clear conviction of the impossibility for him to live with her people. He urged her passionately to fly with him because out of all that abhorred crowd he wanted this one woman, but wanted her away from them, away from that race of slaves and cut-throats from which she sprang. He wanted her for himself--far from everybody, in some safe and dumb solitude. And as he spoke his anger and contempt rose, his hate became almost fear; and his desire of her grew immense, burning, illogical and merciless; crying to him through all his senses; louder than his hate, stronger than his fear, deeper than his contempt--irresistible and certain like death itself.

Standing at a little distance, just within the light--but on the threshold of that darkness from which she had come--she listened, one hand still behind her back, the other arm stretched out with the hand half open as if to catch the fleeting words that rang around her, passionate, menacing, imploring, but all tinged with the anguish of his suffering, all hurried by the impatience that gnawed his breast. And while she listened she felt a slowing down of her heart-beats as the meaning

of his appeal grew clearer before her indignant eyes, as she saw with rage and pain the edifice of her love, her own work, crumble slowly to pieces, destroyed by that man's fears, by that man's falseness. Her memory recalled the days by the brook when she had listened to other words--to other thoughts--to promises and to pleadings for other things, which came from that man's lips at the bidding of her look or her smile, at the nod of her head, at the whisper of her lips. Was there then in his heart something else than her image, other desires than the desires of her love, other fears than the fear of losing her? How could that be? Had she grown ugly or old in a moment? She was appalled, surprised and angry with the anger of unexpected humiliation; and her eyes looked fixedly, sombre and steady, at that man born in the land of violence and of evil wherefrom nothing but misfortune comes to those who are not white. Instead of thinking of her caresses, instead of forgetting all the world in her embrace, he was thinking yet of his people; of that people that steals every land, masters every sea, that knows no mercy and no truth--knows nothing but its own strength. O man of strong arm and of false heart! Go with him to a far country, be lost in the throng of cold eyes and false hearts--lose him there! Never! He was mad--mad with fear; but he should not escape her! She would keep him here a slave and a master; here where he was alone with her; where he must live for her--or die. She had a right to his love which was of her making, to the love that was in him now, while he spoke those words without sense. She must put between him and other white men a barrier of hate. He must not only stay, but he must also keep his promise to Abdulla, the fulfilment of which would make her safe.

"Aissa, let us go! With you by my side I would attack them with my naked hands. Or no! Tomorrow we shall be outside, on board Abdulla's ship. You shall come with me and then I could . . . If the ship went ashore by some chance, then we could steal a canoe and escape in the confusion. . . . You are not afraid of the sea . . . of the sea that would give me freedom . . ."

He was approaching her gradually with extended arms, while he pleaded ardently in incoherent words that ran over and tripped each other in the extreme eagerness of his speech. She stepped back, keeping her distance, her eyes on his face, watching on it the play of his doubts and of his hopes with a piercing gaze, that seemed to search out the innermost recesses of his thought; and it was as if she had drawn slowly the darkness round her, wrapping herself in its undulating folds that made her indistinct and vague. He followed her step by step till at last they both stopped, facing each other under the big tree of the enclosure. The solitary exile of the forests, great, motionless and solemn in his abandonment, left alone by the life of ages that had been pushed away from him by those pigmies that crept at his foot, towered high and straight above their heads. He seemed to look on, dispassionate and imposing, in his lonely greatness, spreading his branches wide in a gesture of lofty protection, as if to hide them in the sombre

shelter of innumerable leaves; as if moved by the disdainful compassion of the strong, by the scornful pity of an aged giant, to screen this struggle of two human hearts from the cold scrutiny of glittering stars.

The last cry of his appeal to her mercy rose loud, vibrated under the sombre canopy, darted among the boughs startling the white birds that slept wing to wing--and died without an echo, strangled in the dense mass of unstirring leaves. He could not see her face, but he heard her sighs and the distracted murmur of indistinct words. Then, as he listened holding his breath, she exclaimed suddenly--

"Have you heard him? He has cursed me because I love you. You brought me suffering and strife--and his curse. And now you want to take me far away where I would lose you, lose my life; because your love is my life now. What else is there? Do not move," she cried violently, as he stirred a little--"do not speak! Take this! Sleep in peace!"

He saw a shadowy movement of her arm. Something whizzed past and struck the ground behind him, close to the fire. Instinctively he turned round to look at it. A kriss without its sheath lay by the embers; a sinuous dark object, looking like something that had been alive and was now crushed, dead and very inoffensive; a black wavy outline very distinct and still in the dull red glow. Without thinking he moved to pick it up, stooping with the sad and humble movement of a beggar gathering the alms flung into the dust of the roadside. Was this the answer to his pleading, to the hot and living words that came from his heart? Was this the answer thrown at him like an insult, that thing made of wood and iron, insignificant and venomous, fragile and deadly? He held it by the blade and looked at the handle stupidly for a moment before he let it fall again at his feet; and when he turned round he faced only the night:--the night immense, profound and quiet; a sea of darkness in which she had disappeared without leaving a trace.

He moved forward with uncertain steps, putting out both his hands before him with the anguish of a man blinded suddenly.

"Aissa!" he cried--"come to me at once."

He peered and listened, but saw nothing, heard nothing. After a while the solid blackness seemed to wave before his eyes like a curtain disclosing movements but hiding forms, and he heard light and hurried footsteps, then the short clatter of the gate leading to Lakamba's private enclosure. He sprang forward and brought up against the rough timber in time to hear the words, "Quick! Quick!" and the sound of the wooden bar dropped on the other side, securing the gate.

With his arms thrown up, the palms against the paling, he slid down in a heap on the ground.

"Aissa," he said, pleadingly, pressing his lips to a chink between the stakes. "Aissa, do you hear me? Come back! I will do what you want, give you all you desire--if I have to set the whole Sambir on fire and put that fire out with blood. Only come back. Now! At once! Are you there? Do you hear me? Aissa!"

On the other side there were startled whispers of feminine voices; a frightened little laugh suddenly interrupted; some woman's admiring murmur--"This is brave talk!" Then after a short silence Aissa cried--

"Sleep in peace--for the time of your going is near. Now I am afraid of you. Afraid of your fear. When you return with Tuan Abdulla you shall be great. You will find me here. And there will be nothing but love. Nothing else!--Always!--Till we die!"

He listened to the shuffle of footsteps going away, and staggered to his feet, mute with the excess of his passionate anger against that being so savage and so charming; loathing her, himself, everybody he had ever known; the earth, the sky, the very air he drew into his oppressed chest; loathing it because it made him live, loathing her because she made him suffer. But he could not leave that gate through which she had passed. He wandered a little way off, then swerved round, came back and fell down again by the stockade only to rise suddenly in another attempt to break away from the spell that held him, that brought him back there, dumb, obedient and furious. And under the immobilized gesture of lofty protection in the branches outspread wide above his head, under the high branches where white birds slept wing to wing in the shelter of countless leaves, he tossed like a grain of dust in a whirlwind--sinking and rising--round and round--always near that gate. All through the languid stillness of that night he fought with the impalpable; he fought with the shadows, with the darkness, with the silence. He fought without a sound, striking futile blows, dashing from side to side; obstinate, hopeless, and always beaten back; like a man bewitched within the invisible sweep of a magic circle.