

PART IV

CHAPTER ONE

The night was very dark. For the first time in many months the East Coast slept unseen by the stars under a veil of motionless cloud that, driven before the first breath of the rainy monsoon, had drifted slowly from the eastward all the afternoon; pursuing the declining sun with its masses of black and grey that seemed to chase the light with wicked intent, and with an ominous and gloomy steadiness, as though conscious of the message of violence and turmoil they carried. At the sun's disappearance below the western horizon, the immense cloud, in quickened motion, grappled with the glow of retreating light, and rolling down to the clear and jagged outline of the distant mountains, hung arrested above the steaming forests; hanging low, silent and menacing over the unstimulating tree-tops; withholding the blessing of rain, nursing the wrath of its thunder; undecided--as if brooding over its own power for good or for evil.

Babalatchi, coming out of the red and smoky light of his little bamboo house, glanced upwards, drew in a long breath of the warm and stagnant air, and stood for a moment with his good eye closed tightly, as if intimidated by the unwonted and deep silence of Lakamba's courtyard. When he opened his eye he had recovered his sight so far, that he could distinguish the various degrees of formless blackness which marked the places of trees, of abandoned houses, of riverside bushes, on the dark background of the night.

The careworn sage walked cautiously down the deserted courtyard to the waterside, and stood on the bank listening to the voice of the invisible river that flowed at his feet; listening to the soft whispers, to the deep murmurs, to the sudden gurgles and the short hisses of the swift current racing along the bank through the hot darkness.

He stood with his face turned to the river, and it seemed to him that he could breathe easier with the knowledge of the clear vast space before him; then, after a while he leaned heavily forward on his staff, his chin fell on his breast, and a deep sigh was his answer to the selfish discourse of the river that hurried on unceasing and fast, regardless of joy or sorrow, of suffering and of strife, of failures and triumphs that lived on its banks. The brown water was there, ready to carry friends or enemies, to nurse love or hate on its submissive and heartless bosom, to help or to hinder, to save life or give death; the great and rapid river: a deliverance, a prison, a refuge or a grave.

Perchance such thoughts as these caused Babalatchi to send another mournful sigh into the trailing mists of the unconcerned Pantai. The barbarous politician had forgotten the recent success of his plottings in the melancholy contemplation of a sorrow that made the night blacker, the clammy heat more oppressive, the still air more heavy, the dumb solitude more significant of torment than of peace. He had spent the night before by the side of the dying Omar, and now, after twenty-four hours, his memory persisted in returning to that low and sombre reed hut from which the fierce spirit of the incomparably accomplished pirate took its flight, to learn too late, in a worse world, the error of its earthly ways. The mind of the savage statesman, chastened by bereavement, felt for a moment the weight of his loneliness with keen perception worthy even of a sensibility exasperated by all the refinements of tender sentiment that a glorious civilization brings in its train, among other blessings and virtues, into this excellent world. For the space of about thirty seconds, a half-naked, betel-chewing pessimist stood upon the bank of the tropical river, on the edge of the still and immense forests; a man angry, powerless, empty-handed, with a cry of bitter discontent ready on his lips; a cry that, had it come out, would have rung through the virgin solitudes of the woods, as true, as great, as profound, as any philosophical shriek that ever came from the depths of an easy-chair to disturb the impure wilderness of chimneys and roofs.

For half a minute and no more did Babalatchi face the gods in the sublime privilege of his revolt, and then the one-eyed puller of wires became himself again, full of care and wisdom and far-reaching plans, and a victim to the tormenting superstitions of his race. The night, no matter how quiet, is never perfectly silent to attentive ears, and now Babalatchi fancied he could detect in it other noises than those caused by the ripples and eddies of the river. He turned his head sharply to the right and to the left in succession, and then spun round quickly in a startled and watchful manner, as if he had expected to see the blind ghost of his departed leader wandering in the obscurity of the empty courtyard behind his back. Nothing there. Yet he had heard a noise; a strange noise! No doubt a ghostly voice of a complaining and angry spirit. He listened. Not a sound. Reassured, Babalatchi made a few paces towards his house, when a very human noise, that of hoarse coughing, reached him from the river. He stopped, listened attentively, but now without any sign of emotion, and moving briskly back to the waterside stood expectant with parted lips, trying to pierce with his eye the wavering curtain of mist that hung low over the water. He could see nothing, yet some people in a canoe must have been very near, for he heard words spoken in an ordinary tone.

"Do you think this is the place, Ali? I can see nothing."

"It must be near here, Tuan," answered another voice. "Shall we try the bank?"

"No! . . . Let drift a little. If you go poking into the bank in the dark you might stove the canoe on some log. We must be careful. . . . Let drift! Let drift! . . . This does seem to be a clearing of some sort. We may see a light by and by from some house or other. In Lakamba's campong there are many houses? Hey?"

"A great number, Tuan . . . I do not see any light."

"Nor I," grumbled the first voice again, this time nearly abreast of the silent Babalatchi who looked uneasily towards his own house, the doorway of which glowed with the dim light of a torch burning within. The house stood end on to the river, and its doorway faced down-stream, so Babalatchi reasoned rapidly that the strangers on the river could not see the light from the position their boat was in at the moment. He could not make up his mind to call out to them, and while he hesitated he heard the voices again, but now some way below the landing-place where he stood.

"Nothing. This cannot be it. Let them give way, Ali! Dayong there!"

That order was followed by the splash of paddles, then a sudden cry--

"I see a light. I see it! Now I know where to land, Tuan."

There was more splashing as the canoe was paddled sharply round and came back up-stream close to the bank.

"Call out," said very near a deep voice, which Babalatchi felt sure must belong to a white man. "Call out--and somebody may come with a torch. I can't see anything."

The loud hail that succeeded these words was emitted nearly under the silent listener's nose. Babalatchi, to preserve appearances, ran with long but noiseless strides halfway up the courtyard, and only then shouted in answer and kept on shouting as he walked slowly back again towards the river bank. He saw there an indistinct shape of a boat, not quite alongside the landing-place.

"Who speaks on the river?" asked Babalatchi, throwing a tone of surprise into his question.

"A white man," answered Lingard from the canoe. "Is there not one torch in rich Lakamba's campong to light a guest on his landing?"

"There are no torches and no men. I am alone here," said Babalatchi, with some hesitation.

"Alone!" exclaimed Lingard. "Who are you?"

"Only a servant of Lakamba. But land, Tuan Putih, and see my face. Here is my hand. No! Here! . . . By your mercy. . . . Ada! . . . Now you are safe."

"And you are alone here?" said Lingard, moving with precaution a few steps into the courtyard. "How dark it is," he muttered to himself--"one would think the world had been painted black."

"Yes. Alone. What more did you say, Tuan? I did not understand your talk."

"It is nothing. I expected to find here . . . But where are they all?"

"What matters where they are?" said Babalatchi, gloomily. "Have you come to see my people? The last departed on a long journey--and I am alone. Tomorrow I go too."

"I came to see a white man," said Lingard, walking on slowly. "He is not gone, is he?"

"No!" answered Babalatchi, at his elbow. "A man with a red skin and hard eyes," he went on, musingly, "whose hand is strong, and whose heart is foolish and weak. A white man indeed . . . But still a man."

They were now at the foot of the short ladder which led to the split-bamboo platform surrounding Babalatchi's habitation. The faint light from the doorway fell down upon the two men's faces as they stood looking at each other curiously.

"Is he there?" asked Lingard, in a low voice, with a wave of his hand upwards.

Babalatchi, staring hard at his long-expected visitor, did not answer at once. "No, not there," he said at last, placing his foot on the lowest rung and looking back. "Not there, Tuan--yet not very far. Will you sit down in my dwelling? There may be rice and fish and clear water--not from the river, but from a spring . . ."

"I am not hungry," interrupted Lingard, curtly, "and I did not come here to sit in your dwelling. Lead me to the white man who expects me. I have no time to lose."

"The night is long, Tuan," went on Babalatchi, softly, "and there are other nights and other days. Long. Very long . . . How much time it takes for a man to die! O

Rajah Laut!"

Lingard started.

"You know me!" he exclaimed.

"Ay--wa! I have seen your face and felt your hand before--many years ago," said Babalatchi, holding on halfway up the ladder, and bending down from above to peer into Lingard's upturned face. "You do not remember--but I have not forgotten. There are many men like me: there is only one Rajah Laut."

He climbed with sudden agility the last few steps, and stood on the platform waving his hand invitingly to Lingard, who followed after a short moment of indecision.

The elastic bamboo floor of the hut bent under the heavy weight of the old seaman, who, standing within the threshold, tried to look into the smoky gloom of the low dwelling. Under the torch, thrust into the cleft of a stick, fastened at a right angle to the middle stay of the ridge pole, lay a red patch of light, showing a few shabby mats and a corner of a big wooden chest the rest of which was lost in shadow. In the obscurity of the more remote parts of the house a lance-head, a brass tray hung on the wall, the long barrel of a gun leaning against the chest, caught the stray rays of the smoky illumination in trembling gleams that wavered, disappeared, reappeared, went out, came back--as if engaged in a doubtful struggle with the darkness that, lying in wait in distant corners, seemed to dart out viciously towards its feeble enemy. The vast space under the high pitch of the roof was filled with a thick cloud of smoke, whose under-side--level like a ceiling--reflected the light of the swaying dull flame, while at the top it oozed out through the imperfect thatch of dried palm leaves. An indescribable and complicated smell, made up of the exhalation of damp earth below, of the taint of dried fish and of the effluvia of rotting vegetable matter, pervaded the place and caused Lingard to sniff strongly as he strode over, sat on the chest, and, leaning his elbows on his knees, took his head between his hands and stared at the doorway thoughtfully.

Babalatchi moved about in the shadows, whispering to an indistinct form or two that flitted about at the far end of the hut. Without stirring Lingard glanced sideways, and caught sight of muffled-up human shapes that hovered for a moment near the edge of light and retreated suddenly back into the darkness. Babalatchi approached, and sat at Lingard's feet on a rolled-up bundle of mats.

"Will you eat rice and drink sagueir?" he said. "I have waked up my household."

"My friend," said Lingard, without looking at him, "when I come to see Lakamba, or any of Lakamba's servants, I am never hungry and never thirsty. Tau! Savee! Never! Do you think I am devoid of reason? That there is nothing there?"

He sat up, and, fixing abruptly his eyes on Babalatchi, tapped his own forehead significantly.

"Tse! Tse! Tse! How can you talk like that, Tuan!" exclaimed Babalatchi, in a horrified tone.

"I talk as I think. I have lived many years," said Lingard, stretching his arm negligently to take up the gun, which he began to examine knowingly, cocking it, and easing down the hammer several times. "This is good. Mataram make. Old, too," he went on.

"Hai!" broke in Babalatchi, eagerly. "I got it when I was young. He was an Aru trader, a man with a big stomach and a loud voice, and brave--very brave. When we came up with his prau in the grey morning, he stood aft shouting to his men and fired this gun at us once. Only once!" . . . He paused, laughed softly, and went on in a low, dreamy voice. "In the grey morning we came up: forty silent men in a swift Sulu prau; and when the sun was so high"--here he held up his hands about three feet apart--"when the sun was only so high, Tuan, our work was done--and there was a feast ready for the fishes of the sea."

"Aye! aye!" muttered Lingard, nodding his head slowly. "I see. You should not let it get rusty like this," he added.

He let the gun fall between his knees, and moving back on his seat, leaned his head against the wall of the hut, crossing his arms on his breast.

"A good gun," went on Babalatchi. "Carry far and true. Better than this--there."

With the tips of his fingers he touched gently the butt of a revolver peeping out of the right pocket of Lingard's white jacket.

"Take your hand off that," said Lingard sharply, but in a good-humoured tone and without making the slightest movement.

Babalatchi smiled and hitched his seat a little further off.

For some time they sat in silence. Lingard, with his head tilted back, looked downwards with lowered eyelids at Babalatchi, who was tracing invisible lines with his finger on the mat between his feet. Outside, they could hear Ali and the

other boatmen chattering and laughing round the fire they had lighted in the big and deserted courtyard.

"Well, what about that white man?" said Lingard, quietly.

It seemed as if Babalatchi had not heard the question. He went on tracing elaborate patterns on the floor for a good while. Lingard waited motionless. At last the Malay lifted his head.

"Hai! The white man. I know!" he murmured absently. "This white man or another. . . . Tuan," he said aloud with unexpected animation, "you are a man of the sea?"

"You know me. Why ask?" said Lingard, in a low tone.

"Yes. A man of the sea--even as we are. A true Orang Laut," went on Babalatchi, thoughtfully, "not like the rest of the white men."

"I am like other whites, and do not wish to speak many words when the truth is short. I came here to see the white man that helped Lakamba against Patalolo, who is my friend. Show me where that white man lives; I want him to hear my talk."

"Talk only? Tuan! Why hurry? The night is long and death is swift--as you ought to know; you who have dealt it to so many of my people. Many years ago I have faced you, arms in hand. Do you not remember? It was in Carimata--far from here."

"I cannot remember every vagabond that came in my way," protested Lingard, seriously.

"Hai! Hai!" continued Babalatchi, unmoved and dreamy. "Many years ago. Then all this"--and looking up suddenly at Lingard's beard, he flourished his fingers below his own beardless chin--"then all this was like gold in sunlight, now it is like the foam of an angry sea."

"Maybe, maybe," said Lingard, patiently, paying the involuntary tribute of a faint sigh to the memories of the past evoked by Babalatchi's words.

He had been living with Malays so long and so close that the extreme deliberation and deviousness of their mental proceedings had ceased to irritate him much. Tonight, perhaps, he was less prone to impatience than ever. He was disposed, if not to listen to Babalatchi, then to let him talk. It was evident to him that the

man had something to say, and he hoped that from the talk a ray of light would shoot through the thick blackness of inexplicable treachery, to show him clearly--if only for a second--the man upon whom he would have to execute the verdict of justice. Justice only! Nothing was further from his thoughts than such an useless thing as revenge. Justice only. It was his duty that justice should be done--and by his own hand. He did not like to think how. To him, as to Babalatchi, it seemed that the night would be long enough for the work he had to do. But he did not define to himself the nature of the work, and he sat very still, and willingly dilatory, under the fearsome oppression of his call. What was the good to think about it? It was inevitable, and its time was near. Yet he could not command his memories that came crowding round him in that evil-smelling hut, while Babalatchi talked on in a flowing monotone, nothing of him moving but the lips, in the artificially inanimated face. Lingard, like an anchored ship that had broken her sheer, darted about here and there on the rapid tide of his recollections. The subdued sound of soft words rang around him, but his thoughts were lost, now in the contemplation of the past sweetness and strife of Carimata days, now in the uneasy wonder at the failure of his judgment; at the fatal blindness of accident that had caused him, many years ago, to rescue a half-starved runaway from a Dutch ship in Samarang roads. How he had liked the man: his assurance, his push, his desire to get on, his conceited good-humour and his selfish eloquence. He had liked his very faults--those faults that had so many, to him, sympathetic sides.

And he had always dealt fairly by him from the very beginning; and he would deal fairly by him now--to the very end. This last thought darkened Lingard's features with a responsive and menacing frown. The doer of justice sat with compressed lips and a heavy heart, while in the calm darkness outside the silent world seemed to be waiting breathlessly for that justice he held in his hand--in his strong hand:--ready to strike--reluctant to move.

CHAPTER TWO

Babalatchi ceased speaking. Lingard shifted his feet a little, uncrossed his arms, and shook his head slowly. The narrative of the events in Sambir, related from the point of view of the astute statesman, the sense of which had been caught here and there by his inattentive ears, had been yet like a thread to guide him out of the sombre labyrinth of his thoughts; and now he had come to the end of it, out of the tangled past into the pressing necessities of the present. With the palms of his hands on his knees, his elbows squared out, he looked down on Babalatchi who sat in a stiff attitude, inexpressive and mute as a talking doll the mechanism of which had at length run down.

"You people did all this," said Lingard at last, "and you will be sorry for it before the dry wind begins to blow again. Abdulla's voice will bring the Dutch rule here."

Babalatchi waved his hand towards the dark doorway.

"There are forests there. Lakamba rules the land now. Tell me, Tuan, do you think the big trees know the name of the ruler? No. They are born, they grow, they live and they die--yet know not, feel not. It is their land."

"Even a big tree may be killed by a small axe," said Lingard, drily. "And, remember, my one-eyed friend, that axes are made by white hands. You will soon find that out, since you have hoisted the flag of the Dutch."

"Ay--wa!" said Babalatchi, slowly. "It is written that the earth belongs to those who have fair skins and hard but foolish hearts. The farther away is the master, the easier it is for the slave, Tuan! You were too near. Your voice rang in our ears always. Now it is not going to be so. The great Rajah in Batavia is strong, but he may be deceived. He must speak very loud to be heard here. But if we have need to shout, then he must hear the many voices that call for protection. He is but a white man."

"If I ever spoke to Patalolo, like an elder brother, it was for your good--for the good of all," said Lingard with great earnestness.

"This is a white man's talk," exclaimed Babalatchi, with bitter exultation. "I know you. That is how you all talk while you load your guns and sharpen your swords; and when you are ready, then to those who are weak you say: 'Obey me and be happy, or die! You are strange, you white men. You think it is only your wisdom and your virtue and your happiness that are true. You are stronger than the wild

beasts, but not so wise. A black tiger knows when he is not hungry--you do not. He knows the difference between himself and those that can speak; you do not understand the difference between yourselves and us--who are men. You are wise and great--and you shall always be fools."

He threw up both his hands, stirring the sleeping cloud of smoke that hung above his head, and brought the open palms on the flimsy floor on each side of his outstretched legs. The whole hut shook. Lingard looked at the excited statesman curiously.

"Apa! Apa! What's the matter?" he murmured, soothingly. "Whom did I kill here? Where are my guns? What have I done? What have I eaten up?"

Babalatchi calmed down, and spoke with studied courtesy.

"You, Tuan, are of the sea, and more like what we are. Therefore I speak to you all the words that are in my heart. . . . Only once has the sea been stronger than the Rajah of the sea."

"You know it; do you?" said Lingard, with pained sharpness.

"Hai! We have heard about your ship--and some rejoiced. Not I. Amongst the whites, who are devils, you are a man."

"Trima kassi! I give you thanks," said Lingard, gravely.

Babalatchi looked down with a bashful smile, but his face became saddened directly, and when he spoke again it was in a mournful tone.

"Had you come a day sooner, Tuan, you would have seen an enemy die. You would have seen him die poor, blind, unhappy--with no son to dig his grave and speak of his wisdom and courage. Yes; you would have seen the man that fought you in Carimata many years ago, die alone--but for one friend. A great sight to you."

"Not to me," answered Lingard. "I did not even remember him till you spoke his name just now. You do not understand us. We fight, we vanquish--and we forget."

"True, true," said Babalatchi, with polite irony; "you whites are so great that you disdain to remember your enemies. No! No!" he went on, in the same tone, "you have so much mercy for us, that there is no room for any remembrance. Oh, you are great and good! But it is in my mind that amongst yourselves you know how to remember. Is it not so, Tuan?"

Lingard said nothing. His shoulders moved imperceptibly. He laid his gun across his knees and stared at the flint lock absently.

"Yes," went on Babalatchi, falling again into a mournful mood, "yes, he died in darkness. I sat by his side and held his hand, but he could not see the face of him who watched the faint breath on his lips. She, whom he had cursed because of the white man, was there too, and wept with covered face. The white man walked about the courtyard making many noises. Now and then he would come to the doorway and glare at us who mourned. He stared with wicked eyes, and then I was glad that he who was dying was blind. This is true talk. I was glad; for a white man's eyes are not good to see when the devil that lives within is looking out through them."

"Devil! Hey?" said Lingard, half aloud to himself, as if struck with the obviousness of some novel idea. Babalatchi went on:

"At the first hour of the morning he sat up--he so weak--and said plainly some words that were not meant for human ears. I held his hand tightly, but it was time for the leader of brave men to go amongst the Faithful who are happy. They of my household brought a white sheet, and I began to dig a grave in the hut in which he died. She mourned aloud. The white man came to the doorway and shouted. He was angry. Angry with her because she beat her breast, and tore her hair, and mourned with shrill cries as a woman should. Do you understand what I say, Tuan? That white man came inside the hut with great fury, and took her by the shoulder, and dragged her out. Yes, Tuan. I saw Omar dead, and I saw her at the feet of that white dog who has deceived me. I saw his face grey, like the cold mist of the morning; I saw his pale eyes looking down at Omar's daughter beating her head on the ground at his feet. At the feet of him who is Abdulla's slave. Yes, he lives by Abdulla's will. That is why I held my hand while I saw all this. I held my hand because we are now under the flag of the Orang Blanda, and Abdulla can speak into the ears of the great. We must not have any trouble with white men. Abdulla has spoken--and I must obey."

"That's it, is it?" growled Lingard in his moustache. Then in Malay, "It seems that you are angry, O Babalatchi!"

"No; I am not angry, Tuan," answered Babalatchi, descending from the insecure heights of his indignation into the insincere depths of safe humility. "I am not angry. What am I to be angry? I am only an Orang Laut, and I have fled before your people many times. Servant of this one--protected of another; I have given my counsel here and there for a handful of rice. What am I, to be angry with a white man? What is anger without the power to strike? But you whites have

taken all: the land, the sea, and the power to strike! And there is nothing left for us in the islands but your white men's justice; your great justice that knows not anger."

He got up and stood for a moment in the doorway, sniffing the hot air of the courtyard, then turned back and leaned against the stay of the ridge pole, facing Lingard who kept his seat on the chest. The torch, consumed nearly to the end, burned noisily. Small explosions took place in the heart of the flame, driving through its smoky blaze strings of hard, round puffs of white smoke, no bigger than peas, which rolled out of doors in the faint draught that came from invisible cracks of the bamboo walls. The pungent taint of unclean things below and about the hut grew heavier, weighing down Lingard's resolution and his thoughts in an irresistible numbness of the brain. He thought drowsily of himself and of that man who wanted to see him--who waited to see him. Who waited! Night and day. Waited. . . . A spiteful but vaporous idea floated through his brain that such waiting could not be very pleasant to the fellow. Well, let him wait. He would see him soon enough. And for how long? Five seconds--five minutes--say nothing--say something. What? No! Just give him time to take one good look, and then . . .

Suddenly Babalatchi began to speak in a soft voice. Lingard blinked, cleared his throat--sat up straight.

"You know all now, Tuan. Lakamba dwells in the stockaded house of Patalolo; Abdulla has begun to build godowns of plank and stone; and now that Omar is dead, I myself shall depart from this place and live with Lakamba and speak in his ear. I have served many. The best of them all sleeps in the ground in a white sheet, with nothing to mark his grave but the ashes of the hut in which he died. Yes, Tuan! the white man destroyed it himself. With a blazing brand in his hand he strode around, shouting to me to come out--shouting to me, who was throwing earth on the body of a great leader. Yes; swearing to me by the name of your God and ours that he would burn me and her in there if we did not make haste. . . . Hai! The white men are very masterful and wise. I dragged her out quickly!"

"Oh, damn it!" exclaimed Lingard--then went on in Malay, speaking earnestly. "Listen. That man is not like other white men. You know he is not. He is not a man at all. He is . . . I don't know."

Babalatchi lifted his hand deprecatingly. His eye twinkled, and his red-stained big lips, parted by an expressionless grin, uncovered a stumpy row of black teeth filed evenly to the gums.

"Hai! Hai! Not like you. Not like you," he said, increasing the softness of his tones as he neared the object uppermost in his mind during that much-desired

interview. "Not like you, Tuan, who are like ourselves, only wiser and stronger. Yet he, also, is full of great cunning, and speaks of you without any respect, after the manner of white men when they talk of one another."

Lingard leaped in his seat as if he had been prodded.

"He speaks! What does he say?" he shouted.

"Nay, Tuan," protested the composed Babalatchi; "what matters his talk if he is not a man? I am nothing before you--why should I repeat words of one white man about another? He did boast to Abdulla of having learned much from your wisdom in years past. Other words I have forgotten. Indeed, Tuan, I have . . ."

Lingard cut short Babalatchi's protestations by a contemptuous wave of the hand and reseated himself with dignity.

"I shall go," said Babalatchi, "and the white man will remain here, alone with the spirit of the dead and with her who has been the delight of his heart. He, being white, cannot hear the voice of those that died. . . . Tell me, Tuan," he went on, looking at Lingard with curiosity--"tell me, Tuan, do you white people ever hear the voices of the invisible ones?"

"We do not," answered Lingard, "because those that we cannot see do not speak."

"Never speak! And never complain with sounds that are not words?" exclaimed Babalatchi, doubtingly. "It may be so--or your ears are dull. We Malays hear many sounds near the places where men are buried. To-night I heard . . . Yes, even I have heard. . . . I do not want to hear any more," he added, nervously. "Perhaps I was wrong when I . . . There are things I regret. The trouble was heavy in his heart when he died. Sometimes I think I was wrong . . . but I do not want to hear the complaint of invisible lips. Therefore I go, Tuan. Let the unquiet spirit speak to his enemy the white man who knows not fear, or love, or mercy--knows nothing but contempt and violence. I have been wrong! I have! Hai! Hai!"

He stood for awhile with his elbow in the palm of his left hand, the fingers of the other over his lips as if to stifle the expression of inconvenient remorse; then, after glancing at the torch, burnt out nearly to its end, he moved towards the wall by the chest, fumbled about there and suddenly flung open a large shutter of attaps woven in a light framework of sticks. Lingard swung his legs quickly round the corner of his seat.

"Hallo!" he said, surprised.

The cloud of smoke stirred, and a slow wisp curled out through the new opening. The torch flickered, hissed, and went out, the glowing end falling on the mat, whence Babalatchi snatched it up and tossed it outside through the open square. It described a vanishing curve of red light, and lay below, shining feebly in the vast darkness. Babalatchi remained with his arm stretched out into the empty night.

"There," he said, "you can see the white man's courtyard, Tuan, and his house."

"I can see nothing," answered Lingard, putting his head through the shutter-hole. "It's too dark."

"Wait, Tuan," urged Babalatchi. "You have been looking long at the burning torch. You will soon see. Mind the gun, Tuan. It is loaded."

"There is no flint in it. You could not find a fire-stone for a hundred miles round this spot," said Lingard, testily. "Foolish thing to load that gun."

"I have a stone. I had it from a man wise and pious that lives in Menang Kabau. A very pious man--very good fire. He spoke words over that stone that make its sparks good. And the gun is good--carries straight and far. Would carry from here to the door of the white man's house, I believe, Tuan."

"Tida apa. Never mind your gun," muttered Lingard, peering into the formless darkness. "Is that the house--that black thing over there?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Babalatchi; "that is his house. He lives there by the will of Abdulla, and shall live there till . . . From where you stand, Tuan, you can look over the fence and across the courtyard straight at the door--at the door from which he comes out every morning, looking like a man that had seen Jehannum in his sleep."

Lingard drew his head in. Babalatchi touched his shoulder with a groping hand.

"Wait a little, Tuan. Sit still. The morning is not far off now--a morning without sun after a night without stars. But there will be light enough to see the man who said not many days ago that he alone has made you less than a child in Sambir."

He felt a slight tremor under his hand, but took it off directly and began feeling all over the lid of the chest, behind Lingard's back, for the gun.

"What are you at?" said Lingard, impatiently. "You do worry about that rotten gun. You had better get a light."

"A light! I tell you, Tuan, that the light of heaven is very near," said Babalatchi, who had now obtained possession of the object of his solicitude, and grasping it strongly by its long barrel, grounded the stock at his feet.

"Perhaps it is near," said Lingard, leaning both his elbows on the lower cross-piece of the primitive window and looking out. "It is very black outside yet," he remarked carelessly.

Babalatchi fidgeted about.

"It is not good for you to sit where you may be seen," he muttered.

"Why not?" asked Lingard.

"The white man sleeps, it is true," explained Babalatchi, softly; "yet he may come out early, and he has arms."

"Ah! he has arms?" said Lingard.

"Yes; a short gun that fires many times--like yours here. Abdulla had to give it to him."

Lingard heard Babalatchi's words, but made no movement. To the old adventurer the idea that fire arms could be dangerous in other hands than his own did not occur readily, and certainly not in connection with Willems. He was so busy with the thoughts about what he considered his own sacred duty, that he could not give any consideration to the probable actions of the man of whom he thought--as one may think of an executed criminal--with wondering indignation tempered by scornful pity. While he sat staring into the darkness, that every minute grew thinner before his pensive eyes, like a dispersing mist, Willems appeared to him as a figure belonging already wholly to the past--a figure that could come in no way into his life again. He had made up his mind, and the thing was as well as done. In his weary thoughts he had closed this fatal, inexplicable, and horrible episode in his life. The worst had happened. The coming days would see the retribution.

He had removed an enemy once or twice before, out of his path; he had paid off some very heavy scores a good many times. Captain Tom had been a good friend to many: but it was generally understood, from Honolulu round about to Diego Suarez, that Captain Tom's enmity was rather more than any man single-handed could easily manage. He would not, as he said often, hurt a fly as long as the fly left him alone; yet a man does not live for years beyond the pale of civilized laws

without evolving for himself some queer notions of justice. Nobody of those he knew had ever cared to point out to him the errors of his conceptions.

It was not worth anybody's while to run counter to Lingard's ideas of the fitness of things--that fact was acquired to the floating wisdom of the South Seas, of the Eastern Archipelago, and was nowhere better understood than in out-of-the-way nooks of the world; in those nooks which he filled, unresisted and masterful, with the echoes of his noisy presence. There is not much use in arguing with a man who boasts of never having regretted a single action of his life, whose answer to a mild criticism is a good-natured shout--"You know nothing about it. I would do it again. Yes, sir!" His associates and his acquaintances accepted him, his opinions, his actions like things preordained and unchangeable; looked upon his many-sided manifestations with passive wonder not unmixed with that admiration which is only the rightful due of a successful man. But nobody had ever seen him in the mood he was in now. Nobody had seen Lingard doubtful and giving way to doubt, unable to make up his mind and unwilling to act; Lingard timid and hesitating one minute, angry yet inactive the next; Lingard puzzled in a word, because confronted with a situation that discomposed him by its unprovoked malevolence, by its ghastly injustice, that to his rough but unsophisticated palate tasted distinctly of sulphurous fumes from the deepest hell.

The smooth darkness filling the shutter-hole grew paler and became blotchy with ill-defined shapes, as if a new universe was being evolved out of sombre chaos. Then outlines came out, defining forms without any details, indicating here a tree, there a bush; a black belt of forest far off; the straight lines of a house, the ridge of a high roof near by. Inside the hut, Babalatchi, who lately had been only a persuasive voice, became a human shape leaning its chin imprudently on the muzzle of a gun and rolling an uneasy eye over the reappearing world. The day came rapidly, dismal and oppressed by the fog of the river and by the heavy vapours of the sky--a day without colour and without sunshine: incomplete, disappointing, and sad.

Babalatchi twitched gently Lingard's sleeve, and when the old seaman had lifted up his head interrogatively, he stretched out an arm and a pointing forefinger towards Willems' house, now plainly visible to the right and beyond the big tree of the courtyard.

"Look, Tuan!" he said. "He lives there. That is the door--his door. Through it he will appear soon, with his hair in disorder and his mouth full of curses. That is so. He is a white man, and never satisfied. It is in my mind he is angry even in his sleep. A dangerous man. As Tuan may observe," he went on, obsequiously, "his door faces this opening, where you condescend to sit, which is concealed from all eyes. Faces it--straight--and not far. Observe, Tuan, not at all far."

"Yes, yes; I can see. I shall see him when he wakes."

"No doubt, Tuan. When he wakes. . . . If you remain here he can not see you. I shall withdraw quickly and prepare my canoe myself. I am only a poor man, and must go to Sambir to greet Lakamba when he opens his eyes. I must bow before Abdulla who has strength--even more strength than you. Now if you remain here, you shall easily behold the man who boasted to Abdulla that he had been your friend, even while he prepared to fight those who called you protector. Yes, he plotted with Abdulla for that cursed flag. Lakamba was blind then, and I was deceived. But you, Tuan! Remember, he deceived you more. Of that he boasted before all men."

He leaned the gun quietly against the wall close to the window, and said softly: "Shall I go now, Tuan? Be careful of the gun. I have put the fire-stone in. The fire-stone of the wise man, which never fails."

Lingard's eyes were fastened on the distant doorway. Across his line of sight, in the grey emptiness of the courtyard, a big fruit-pigeon flapped languidly towards the forests with a loud booming cry, like the note of a deep gong: a brilliant bird looking in the gloom of threatening day as black as a crow. A serried flock of white rice birds rose above the trees with a faint scream, and hovered, swaying in a disordered mass that suddenly scattered in all directions, as if burst asunder by a silent explosion. Behind his back Lingard heard a shuffle of feet--women leaving the hut. In the other courtyard a voice was heard complaining of cold, and coming very feeble, but exceedingly distinct, out of the vast silence of the abandoned houses and clearings. Babalatchi coughed discreetly. From under the house the thumping of wooden pestles husking the rice started with unexpected abruptness. The weak but clear voice in the yard again urged, "Blow up the embers, O brother!" Another voice answered, drawling in modulated, thin sing-song, "Do it yourself, O shivering pig!" and the drawl of the last words stopped short, as if the man had fallen into a deep hole. Babalatchi coughed again a little impatiently, and said in a confidential tone--

"Do you think it is time for me to go, Tuan? Will you take care of my gun, Tuan? I am a man that knows how to obey; even obey Abdulla, who has deceived me. Nevertheless this gun carries far and true--if you would want to know, Tuan. And I have put in a double measure of powder, and three slugs. Yes, Tuan. Now--perhaps--I go."

When Babalatchi commenced speaking, Lingard turned slowly round and gazed upon him with the dull and unwilling look of a sick man waking to another day of suffering. As the astute statesman proceeded, Lingard's eyebrows came close, his

eyes became animated, and a big vein stood out on his forehead, accentuating a lowering frown. When speaking his last words Babalatchi faltered, then stopped, confused, before the steady gaze of the old seaman.

Lingard rose. His face cleared, and he looked down at the anxious Babalatchi with sudden benevolence.

"So! That's what you were after," he said, laying a heavy hand on Babalatchi's yielding shoulder. "You thought I came here to murder him. Hey? Speak! You faithful dog of an Arab trader!"

"And what else, Tuan?" shrieked Babalatchi, exasperated into sincerity. "What else, Tuan! Remember what he has done; he poisoned our ears with his talk about you. You are a man. If you did not come to kill, Tuan, then either I am a fool or . . ."

He paused, struck his naked breast with his open palm, and finished in a discouraged whisper--"or, Tuan, you are."

Lingard looked down at him with scornful serenity. After his long and painful gropings amongst the obscure abominations of Willems' conduct, the logical if tortuous evolutions of Babalatchi's diplomatic mind were to him welcome as daylight. There was something at last he could understand--the clear effect of a simple cause. He felt indulgent towards the disappointed sage.

"So you are angry with your friend, O one-eyed one!" he said slowly, nodding his fierce countenance close to Babalatchi's discomfited face. "It seems to me that you must have had much to do with what happened in Sambir lately. Hey? You son of a burnt father."

"May I perish under your hand, O Rajah of the sea, if my words are not true!" said Babalatchi, with reckless excitement. "You are here in the midst of your enemies. He the greatest. Abdulla would do nothing without him, and I could do nothing without Abdulla. Strike me--so that you strike all!"

"Who are you," exclaimed Lingard contemptuously--"who are you to dare call yourself my enemy! Dirt! Nothing! Go out first," he went on severely. "Lakas! quick. March out!"

He pushed Babalatchi through the doorway and followed him down the short ladder into the courtyard. The boatmen squatting over the fire turned their slow eyes with apparent difficulty towards the two men; then, unconcerned, huddled close together again, stretching forlornly their hands over the embers. The women

stopped in their work and with uplifted pestles flashed quick and curious glances from the gloom under the house.

"Is that the way?" asked Lingard with a nod towards the little wicket-gate of Willems' enclosure.

"If you seek death, that is surely the way," answered Babalatchi in a dispassionate voice, as if he had exhausted all the emotions. "He lives there: he who destroyed your friends; who hastened Omar's death; who plotted with Abdulla first against you, then against me. I have been like a child. O shame! . . . But go, Tuan. Go there."

"I go where I like," said Lingard, emphatically, "and you may go to the devil; I do not want you any more. The islands of these seas shall sink before I, Rajah Laut, serve the will of any of your people. Tau? But I tell you this: I do not care what you do with him after to-day. And I say that because I am merciful."

"Tida! I do nothing," said Babalatchi, shaking his head with bitter apathy. "I am in Abdulla's hand and care not, even as you do. No! no!" he added, turning away, "I have learned much wisdom this morning. There are no men anywhere. You whites are cruel to your friends and merciful to your enemies--which is the work of fools."

He went away towards the riverside, and, without once looking back, disappeared in the low bank of mist that lay over the water and the shore. Lingard followed him with his eyes thoughtfully. After awhile he roused himself and called out to his boatmen--

"Hai--ya there! After you have eaten rice, wait for me with your paddles in your hands. You hear?"

"Ada, Tuan!" answered Ali through the smoke of the morning fire that was spreading itself, low and gentle, over the courtyard--"we hear!"

Lingard opened slowly the little wicket-gate, made a few steps into the empty enclosure, and stopped. He had felt about his head the short breath of a puff of wind that passed him, made every leaf of the big tree shiver--and died out in a hardly perceptible tremor of branches and twigs. Instinctively he glanced upwards with a seaman's impulse. Above him, under the grey motionless waste of a stormy sky, drifted low black vapours, in stretching bars, in shapeless patches, in sinuous wisps and tormented spirals. Over the courtyard and the house floated a round, sombre, and lingering cloud, dragging behind a tail of tangled and filmy streamers--like the dishevelled hair of a mourning woman.

CHAPTER THREE

"Beware!"

The tremulous effort and the broken, inadequate tone of the faint cry, surprised Lingard more than the unexpected suddenness of the warning conveyed, he did not know by whom and to whom. Besides himself there was no one in the courtyard as far as he could see.

The cry was not renewed, and his watchful eyes, scanning warily the misty solitude of Willems' enclosure, were met everywhere only by the stolid impassiveness of inanimate things: the big sombre-looking tree, the shut-up, sightless house, the glistening bamboo fences, the damp and drooping bushes further off--all these things, that condemned to look for ever at the incomprehensible afflictions or joys of mankind, assert in their aspect of cold unconcern the high dignity of lifeless matter that surrounds, incurious and unmoved, the restless mysteries of the ever-changing, of the never-ending life.

Lingard, stepping aside, put the trunk of the tree between himself and the house, then, moving cautiously round one of the projecting buttresses, had to tread short in order to avoid scattering a small heap of black embers upon which he came unexpectedly on the other side. A thin, wizened, little old woman, who, standing behind the tree, had been looking at the house, turned towards him with a start, gazed with faded, expressionless eyes at the intruder, then made a limping attempt to get away. She seemed, however, to realize directly the hopelessness or the difficulty of the undertaking, stopped, hesitated, tottered back slowly; then, after blinking dully, fell suddenly on her knees amongst the white ashes, and, bending over the heap of smouldering coals, distended her sunken cheeks in a steady effort to blow up the hidden sparks into a useful blaze. Lingard looked down on her, but she seemed to have made up her mind that there was not enough life left in her lean body for anything else than the discharge of the simple domestic duty, and, apparently, she begrudged him the least moment of attention.

After waiting for awhile, Lingard asked--

"Why did you call, O daughter?"

"I saw you enter," she croaked feebly, still grovelling with her face near the ashes and without looking up, "and I called--the cry of warning. It was her order. Her order," she repeated, with a moaning sigh.

"And did she hear?" pursued Lingard, with gentle composure.

Her projecting shoulder-blades moved uneasily under the thin stuff of the tight body jacket. She scrambled up with difficulty to her feet, and hobbled away, muttering peevishly to herself, towards a pile of dry brushwood heaped up against the fence.

Lingard, looking idly after her, heard the rattle of loose planks that led from the ground to the door of the house. He moved his head beyond the shelter of the tree and saw Aissa coming down the inclined way into the courtyard. After making a few hurried paces towards the tree, she stopped with one foot advanced in an appearance of sudden terror, and her eyes glanced wildly right and left. Her head was uncovered. A blue cloth wrapped her from her head to foot in close slanting folds, with one end thrown over her shoulder. A tress of her black hair strayed across her bosom. Her bare arms pressed down close to her body, with hands open and outstretched fingers; her slightly elevated shoulders and the backward inclination of her torso gave her the aspect of one defiant yet shrinking from a coming blow. She had closed the door of the house behind her; and as she stood solitary in the unnatural and threatening twilight of the murky day, with everything unchanged around her, she appeared to Lingard as if she had been made there, on the spot, out of the black vapours of the sky and of the sinister gleams of feeble sunshine that struggled, through the thickening clouds, into the colourless desolation of the world.

After a short but attentive glance towards the shut-up house, Lingard stepped out from behind the tree and advanced slowly towards her. The sudden fixity of her--till then--restless eyes and a slight twitch of her hands were the only signs she gave at first of having seen him. She made a long stride forward, and putting herself right in his path, stretched her arms across; her black eyes opened wide, her lips parted as if in an uncertain attempt to speak--but no sound came out to break the significant silence of their meeting. Lingard stopped and looked at her with stern curiosity. After a while he said composedly--

"Let me pass. I came here to talk to a man. Does he hide? Has he sent you?"

She made a step nearer, her arms fell by her side, then she put them straight out nearly touching Lingard's breast.

"He knows not fear," she said, speaking low, with a forward throw of her head, in a voice trembling but distinct. "It is my own fear that has sent me here. He sleeps."

"He has slept long enough," said Lingard, in measured tones. "I am come--and now is the time of his waking. Go and tell him this--or else my own voice will call him up. A voice he knows well."

He put her hands down firmly and again made as if to pass by her.

"Do not!" she exclaimed, and fell at his feet as if she had been cut down by a scythe. The unexpected suddenness of her movement startled Lingard, who stepped back.

"What's this?" he exclaimed in a wondering whisper--then added in a tone of sharp command: "Stand up!"

She rose at once and stood looking at him, timorous and fearless; yet with a fire of recklessness burning in her eyes that made clear her resolve to pursue her purpose even to the death. Lingard went on in a severe voice--

"Go out of my path. You are Omar's daughter, and you ought to know that when men meet in daylight women must be silent and abide their fate."

"Women!" she retorted, with subdued vehemence. "Yes, I am a woman! Your eyes see that, O Rajah Laut, but can you see my life? I also have heard--O man of many fights--I also have heard the voice of fire-arms; I also have felt the rain of young twigs and of leaves cut up by bullets fall down about my head; I also know how to look in silence at angry faces and at strong hands raised high grasping sharp steel. I also saw men fall dead around me without a cry of fear and of mourning; and I have watched the sleep of weary fugitives, and looked at night shadows full of menace and death with eyes that knew nothing but watchfulness. And," she went on, with a mournful drop in her voice, "I have faced the heartless sea, held on my lap the heads of those who died raving from thirst, and from their cold hands took the paddle and worked so that those with me did not know that one man more was dead. I did all this. What more have you done? That was my life. What has been yours?"

The matter and the manner of her speech held Lingard motionless, attentive and approving against his will. She ceased speaking, and from her staring black eyes with a narrow border of white above and below, a double ray of her very soul streamed out in a fierce desire to light up the most obscure designs of his heart. After a long silence, which served to emphasize the meaning of her words, she added in the whisper of bitter regret--

"And I have knelt at your feet! And I am afraid!"

"You," said Lingard deliberately, and returning her look with an interested gaze, "you are a woman whose heart, I believe, is great enough to fill a man's breast: but still you are a woman, and to you, I, Rajah Laut, have nothing to say."

She listened bending her head in a movement of forced attention; and his voice sounded to her unexpected, far off, with the distant and unearthly ring of voices that we hear in dreams, saying faintly things startling, cruel or absurd, to which there is no possible reply. To her he had nothing to say! She wrung her hands, glanced over the courtyard with that eager and distracted look that sees nothing, then looked up at the hopeless sky of livid grey and drifting black; at the unquiet mourning of the hot and brilliant heaven that had seen the beginning of her love, that had heard his entreaties and her answers, that had seen his desire and her fear; that had seen her joy, her surrender--and his defeat. Lingard moved a little, and this slight stir near her precipitated her disordered and shapeless thoughts into hurried words.

"Wait!" she exclaimed in a stifled voice, and went on disconnectedly and rapidly-- "Stay. I have heard. Men often spoke by the fires . . . men of my people. And they said of you--the first on the sea--they said that to men's cries you were deaf in battle, but after . . . No! even while you fought, your ears were open to the voice of children and women. They said . . . that. Now I, a woman, I . . ."

She broke off suddenly and stood before him with dropped eyelids and parted lips, so still now that she seemed to have been changed into a breathless, an unhearing, an unseeing figure, without knowledge of fear or hope, of anger or despair. In the astounding repose that came on her face, nothing moved but the delicate nostrils that expanded and collapsed quickly, flutteringly, in interrupted beats, like the wings of a snared bird.

"I am white," said Lingard, proudly, looking at her with a steady gaze where simple curiosity was giving way to a pitying annoyance, "and men you have heard, spoke only what is true over the evening fires. My ears are open to your prayer. But listen to me before you speak. For yourself you need not be afraid. You can come even now with me and you shall find refuge in the household of Syed Abdulla--who is of your own faith. And this also you must know: nothing that you may say will change my purpose towards the man who is sleeping--or hiding--in that house."

Again she gave him the look that was like a stab, not of anger but of desire; of the intense, over-powering desire to see in, to see through, to understand everything: every thought, emotion, purpose; every impulse, every hesitation inside that man; inside that white-clad foreign being who looked at her, who spoke to her, who breathed before her like any other man, but bigger, red-faced, white-haired and

mysterious. It was the future clothed in flesh; the to-morrow; the day after; all the days, all the years of her life standing there before her alive and secret, with all their good or evil shut up within the breast of that man; of that man who could be persuaded, cajoled, entreated, perhaps touched, worried; frightened--who knows?--if only first he could be understood! She had seen a long time ago whither events were tending. She had noted the contemptuous yet menacing coldness of Abdulla; she had heard--alarmed yet unbelieving--Babalatchi's gloomy hints, covert allusions and veiled suggestions to abandon the useless white man whose fate would be the price of the peace secured by the wise and good who had no need of him any more. And he--himself! She clung to him. There was nobody else. Nothing else. She would try to cling to him always--all the life! And yet he was far from her. Further every day. Every day he seemed more distant, and she followed him patiently, hopefully, blindly, but steadily, through all the devious wanderings of his mind. She followed as well as she could. Yet at times--very often lately--she had felt lost like one strayed in the thickets of tangled undergrowth of a great forest. To her the ex-clerk of old Hudig appeared as remote, as brilliant, as terrible, as necessary, as the sun that gives life to these lands: the sun of unclouded skies that dazzles and withers; the sun beneficent and wicked--the giver of light, perfume, and pestilence. She had watched him--watched him close; fascinated by love, fascinated by danger. He was alone now--but for her; and she saw--she thought she saw--that he was like a man afraid of something. Was it possible? He afraid? Of what? Was it of that old white man who was coming--who had come? Possibly. She had heard of that man ever since she could remember. The bravest were afraid of him! And now what was in the mind of this old, old man who looked so strong? What was he going to do with the light of her life? Put it out? Take it away? Take it away for ever!--for ever!--and leave her in darkness:--not in the stirring, whispering, expectant night in which the hushed world awaits the return of sunshine; but in the night without end, the night of the grave, where nothing breathes, nothing moves, nothing thinks--the last darkness of cold and silence without hope of another sunrise.

She cried--"Your purpose! You know nothing. I must . . ."

He interrupted--unreasonably excited, as if she had, by her look, inoculated him with some of her own distress.

"I know enough."

She approached, and stood facing him at arm's length, with both her hands on his shoulders; and he, surprised by that audacity, closed and opened his eyes two or three times, aware of some emotion arising within him, from her words, her tone, her contact; an emotion unknown, singular, penetrating and sad--at the close sight of that strange woman, of that being savage and tender, strong and

delicate, fearful and resolute, that had got entangled so fatally between their two lives--his own and that other white man's, the abominable scoundrel.

"How can you know?" she went on, in a persuasive tone that seemed to flow out of her very heart--"how can you know? I live with him all the days. All the nights. I look at him; I see his every breath, every glance of his eye, every movement of his lips. I see nothing else! What else is there? And even I do not understand. I do not understand him!--Him!--My life! Him who to me is so great that his presence hides the earth and the water from my sight!"

Lingard stood straight, with his hands deep in the pockets of his jacket. His eyes winked quickly, because she spoke very close to his face. She disturbed him and he had a sense of the efforts he was making to get hold of her meaning, while all the time he could not help telling himself that all this was of no use.

She added after a pause--"There has been a time when I could understand him. When I knew what was in his mind better than he knew it himself. When I felt him. When I held him. . . . And now he has escaped."

"Escaped? What? Gone away!" shouted Lingard.

"Escaped from me," she said; "left me alone. Alone. And I am ever near him. Yet alone."

Her hands slipped slowly off Lingard's shoulders and her arms fell by her side, listless, discouraged, as if to her--to her, the savage, violent, and ignorant creature--had been revealed clearly in that moment the tremendous fact of our isolation, of the loneliness impenetrable and transparent, elusive and everlasting; of the indestructible loneliness that surrounds, envelopes, clothes every human soul from the cradle to the grave, and, perhaps, beyond.

"Aye! Very well! I understand. His face is turned away from you," said Lingard. "Now, what do you want?"

"I want . . . I have looked--for help . . . everywhere . . . against men. . . . All men . . . I do not know. First they came, the invisible whites, and dealt death from afar . . . then he came. He came to me who was alone and sad. He came; angry with his brothers; great amongst his own people; angry with those I have not seen: with the people where men have no mercy and women have no shame. He was of them, and great amongst them. For he was great?"

Lingard shook his head slightly. She frowned at him, and went on in disordered haste--

"Listen. I saw him. I have lived by the side of brave men . . . of chiefs. When he came I was the daughter of a beggar--of a blind man without strength and hope. He spoke to me as if I had been brighter than the sunshine--more delightful than the cool water of the brook by which we met--more . . ." Her anxious eyes saw some shade of expression pass on her listener's face that made her hold her breath for a second, and then explode into pained fury so violent that it drove Lingard back a pace, like an unexpected blast of wind. He lifted both his hands, incongruously paternal in his venerable aspect, bewildered and soothing, while she stretched her neck forward and shouted at him.

"I tell you I was all that to him. I know it! I saw it! . . . There are times when even you white men speak the truth. I saw his eyes. I felt his eyes, I tell you! I saw him tremble when I came near--when I spoke--when I touched him. Look at me! You have been young. Look at me. Look, Rajah Laut!"

She stared at Lingard with provoking fixity, then, turning her head quickly, she sent over her shoulder a glance, full of humble fear, at the house that stood high behind her back--dark, closed, rickety and silent on its crooked posts.

Lingard's eyes followed her look, and remained gazing expectantly at the house. After a minute or so he muttered, glancing at her suspiciously--

"If he has not heard your voice now, then he must be far away--or dead."

"He is there," she whispered, a little calmed but still anxious--"he is there. For three days he waited. Waited for you night and day. And I waited with him. I waited, watching his face, his eyes, his lips; listening to his words.--To the words I could not understand.--To the words he spoke in daylight; to the words he spoke at night in his short sleep. I listened. He spoke to himself walking up and down here--by the river; by the bushes. And I followed. I wanted to know--and I could not! He was tormented by things that made him speak in the words of his own people. Speak to himself--not to me. Not to me! What was he saying? What was he going to do? Was he afraid of you?--Of death? What was in his heart? . . . Fear? . . . Or anger? . . . what desire? . . . what sadness? He spoke; spoke; many words. All the time! And I could not know! I wanted to speak to him. He was deaf to me. I followed him everywhere, watching for some word I could understand; but his mind was in the land of his people--away from me. When I touched him he was angry--so!"

She imitated the movement of some one shaking off roughly an importunate hand, and looked at Lingard with tearful and unsteady eyes.

After a short interval of laboured panting, as if she had been out of breath with running or fighting, she looked down and went on--

"Day after day, night after night, I lived watching him--seeing nothing. And my heart was heavy--heavy with the presence of death that dwelt amongst us. I could not believe. I thought he was afraid. Afraid of you! Then I, myself, knew fear. . . . Tell me, Rajah Laut, do you know the fear without voice--the fear of silence--the fear that comes when there is no one near--when there is no battle, no cries, no angry faces or armed hands anywhere? . . . The fear from which there is no escape!"

She paused, fastened her eyes again on the puzzled Lingard, and hurried on in a tone of despair--

"And I knew then he would not fight you! Before--many days ago--I went away twice to make him obey my desire; to make him strike at his own people so that he could be mine--mine! O calamity! His hand was false as your white hearts. It struck forward, pushed by my desire--by his desire of me. . . . It struck that strong hand, and--O shame!--it killed nobody! Its fierce and lying blow woke up hate without any fear. Round me all was lies. His strength was a lie. My own people lied to me and to him. And to meet you--you, the great!--he had no one but me? But me with my rage, my pain, my weakness. Only me! And to me he would not even speak. The fool!"

She came up close to Lingard, with the wild and stealthy aspect of a lunatic longing to whisper out an insane secret--one of those misshapen, heart-rending, and ludicrous secrets; one of those thoughts that, like monsters--cruel, fantastic, and mournful, wander about terrible and unceasing in the night of madness. Lingard looked at her, astounded but unflinching. She spoke in his face, very low.

"He is all! Everything. He is my breath, my light, my heart. . . . Go away. . . . Forget him. . . . He has no courage and no wisdom any more . . . and I have lost my power. . . . Go away and forget. There are other enemies. . . . Leave him to me. He had been a man once. . . . You are too great. Nobody can withstand you. . . . I tried. . . . I know now I cry for mercy. Leave him to me and go away."

The fragments of her supplicating sentences were as if tossed on the crest of her sobs. Lingard, outwardly impassive, with his eyes fixed on the house, experienced that feeling of condemnation, deep-seated, persuasive, and masterful; that illogical impulse of disapproval which is half disgust, half vague fear, and that wakes up in our hearts in the presence of anything new or unusual, of anything that is not run into the mould of our own conscience; the accursed feeling made up of disdain, of anger, and of the sense of superior virtue that leaves us deaf,

blind, contemptuous and stupid before anything which is not like ourselves.

He answered, not looking at her at first, but speaking towards the house that fascinated him--

"I go away! He wanted me to come--he himself did! . . . You must go away. You do not know what you are asking for. Listen. Go to your own people. Leave him. He is . . ."

He paused, looked down at her with his steady eyes; hesitated, as if seeking an adequate expression; then snapped his fingers, and said--

"Finish."

She stepped back, her eyes on the ground, and pressed her temples with both her hands, which she raised to her head in a slow and ample movement full of unconscious tragedy. The tone of her words was gentle and vibrating, like a loud meditation. She said--

"Tell the brook not to run to the river; tell the river not to run to the sea. Speak loud. Speak angrily. Maybe they will obey you. But it is in my mind that the brook will not care. The brook that springs out of the hillside and runs to the great river. He would not care for your words: he that cares not for the very mountain that gave him life; he that tears the earth from which he springs. Tears it, eats it, destroys it--to hurry faster to the river--to the river in which he is lost for ever. . . . O Rajah Laut! I do not care."

She drew close again to Lingard, approaching slowly, reluctantly, as if pushed by an invisible hand, and added in words that seemed to be torn out of her--

"I cared not for my own father. For him that died. I would have rather . . . You do not know what I have done . . . I . . ."

"You shall have his life," said Lingard, hastily.

They stood together, crossing their glances; she suddenly appeased, and Lingard thoughtful and uneasy under a vague sense of defeat. And yet there was no defeat. He never intended to kill the fellow--not after the first moment of anger, a long time ago. The days of bitter wonder had killed anger; had left only a bitter indignation and a bitter wish for complete justice. He felt discontented and surprised. Unexpectedly he had come upon a human being--a woman at that--who had made him disclose his will before its time. She should have his life. But she must be told, she must know, that for such men as Willems there was no

favour and no grace.

"Understand," he said slowly, "that I leave him his life not in mercy but in punishment."

She started, watched every word on his lips, and after he finished speaking she remained still and mute in astonished immobility. A single big drop of rain, a drop enormous, pellucid and heavy--like a super-human tear coming straight and rapid from above, tearing its way through the sombre sky--struck loudly the dry ground between them in a starred splash. She wrung her hands in the bewilderment of the new and incomprehensible fear. The anguish of her whisper was more piercing than the shrillest cry.

"What punishment! Will you take him away then? Away from me? Listen to what I have done. . . . It is I who . . ."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lingard, who had been looking at the house.

"Don't you believe her, Captain Lingard," shouted Willems from the doorway, where he appeared with swollen eyelids and bared breast. He stood for a while, his hands grasping the lintels on each side of the door, and writhed about, glaring wildly, as if he had been crucified there. Then he made a sudden rush head foremost down the plankway that responded with hollow, short noises to every footstep.

She heard him. A slight thrill passed on her face and the words that were on her lips fell back unspoken into her benighted heart; fell back amongst the mud, the stones--and the flowers, that are at the bottom of every heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

When he felt the solid ground of the courtyard under his feet, Willems pulled himself up in his headlong rush and moved forward with a moderate gait. He paced stiffly, looking with extreme exactitude at Lingard's face; looking neither to the right nor to the left but at the face only, as if there was nothing in the world but those features familiar and dreaded; that white-haired, rough and severe head upon which he gazed in a fixed effort of his eyes, like a man trying to read small print at the full range of human vision. As soon as Willems' feet had left the planks, the silence which had been lifted up by the jerky rattle of his footsteps fell down again upon the courtyard; the silence of the cloudy sky and of the windless air, the sullen silence of the earth oppressed by the aspect of coming turmoil, the silence of the world collecting its faculties to withstand the storm. Through this silence Willems pushed his way, and stopped about six feet from Lingard. He stopped simply because he could go no further. He had started from the door with the reckless purpose of clapping the old fellow on the shoulder. He had no idea that the man would turn out to be so tall, so big and so unapproachable. It seemed to him that he had never, never in his life, seen Lingard.

He tried to say--

"Do not believe . . ."

A fit of coughing checked his sentence in a faint splutter. Directly afterwards he swallowed--as it were--a couple of pebbles, throwing his chin up in the act; and Lingard, who looked at him narrowly, saw a bone, sharp and triangular like the head of a snake, dart up and down twice under the skin of his throat. Then that, too, did not move. Nothing moved.

"Well," said Lingard, and with that word he came unexpectedly to the end of his speech. His hand in his pocket closed firmly round the butt of his revolver bulging his jacket on the hip, and he thought how soon and how quickly he could terminate his quarrel with that man who had been so anxious to deliver himself into his hands--and how inadequate would be that ending! He could not bear the idea of that man escaping from him by going out of life; escaping from fear, from doubt, from remorse into the peaceful certitude of death. He held him now. And he was not going to let him go--to let him disappear for ever in the faint blue smoke of a pistol shot. His anger grew within him. He felt a touch as of a burning hand on his heart. Not on the flesh of his breast, but a touch on his heart itself, on the palpitating and untiring particle of matter that responds to every emotion of the soul; that leaps with joy, with terror, or with anger.

He drew a long breath. He could see before him the bare chest of the man expanding and collapsing under the wide-open jacket. He glanced aside, and saw the bosom of the woman near him rise and fall in quick respirations that moved slightly up and down her hand, which was pressed to her breast with all the fingers spread out and a little curved, as if grasping something too big for its span. And nearly a minute passed. One of those minutes when the voice is silenced, while the thoughts flutter in the head, like captive birds inside a cage, in rushes desperate, exhausting and vain.

During that minute of silence Lingard's anger kept rising, immense and towering, such as a crested wave running over the troubled shallows of the sands. Its roar filled his ears; a roar so powerful and distracting that, it seemed to him, his head must burst directly with the expanding volume of that sound. He looked at that man. That infamous figure upright on its feet, still, rigid, with stony eyes, as if its rotten soul had departed that moment and the carcass hadn't had the time yet to topple over. For the fraction of a second he had the illusion and the fear of the scoundrel having died there before the enraged glance of his eyes. Willems' eyelids fluttered, and the unconscious and passing tremor in that stiffly erect body exasperated Lingard like a fresh outrage. The fellow dared to stir! Dared to wink, to breathe, to exist; here, right before his eyes! His grip on the revolver relaxed gradually. As the transport of his rage increased, so also his contempt for the instruments that pierce or stab, that interpose themselves between the hand and the object of hate. He wanted another kind of satisfaction. Naked hands, by heaven! No firearms. Hands that could take him by the throat, beat down his defence, batter his face into shapeless flesh; hands that could feel all the desperation of his resistance and overpower it in the violent delight of a contact lingering and furious, intimate and brutal.

He let go the revolver altogether, stood hesitating, then throwing his hands out, strode forward--and everything passed from his sight. He could not see the man, the woman, the earth, the sky--saw nothing, as if in that one stride he had left the visible world behind to step into a black and deserted space. He heard screams round him in that obscurity, screams like the melancholy and pitiful cries of sea-birds that dwell on the lonely reefs of great oceans. Then suddenly a face appeared within a few inches of his own. His face. He felt something in his left hand. His throat . . . Ah! the thing like a snake's head that darts up and down . . . He squeezed hard. He was back in the world. He could see the quick beating of eyelids over a pair of eyes that were all whites, the grin of a drawn-up lip, a row of teeth gleaming through the drooping hair of a moustache . . . Strong white teeth. Knock them down his lying throat . . . He drew back his right hand, the fist up to the shoulder, knuckles out. From under his feet rose the screams of sea-birds. Thousands of them. Something held his legs . . . What the devil . . . He

delivered his blow straight from the shoulder, felt the jar right up his arm, and realized suddenly that he was striking something passive and unresisting. His heart sank within him with disappointment, with rage, with mortification. He pushed with his left arm, opening the hand with haste, as if he had just perceived that he got hold by accident of something repulsive--and he watched with stupefied eyes Willems tottering backwards in groping strides, the white sleeve of his jacket across his face. He watched his distance from that man increase, while he remained motionless, without being able to account to himself for the fact that so much empty space had come in between them. It should have been the other way. They ought to have been very close, and . . . Ah! He wouldn't fight, he wouldn't resist, he wouldn't defend himself! A cur! Evidently a cur! . . . He was amazed and aggrieved--profoundly, bitterly--with the immense and blank desolation of a small child robbed of a toy. He shouted--unbelieving:

"Will you be a cheat to the end?"

He waited for some answer. He waited anxiously with an impatience that seemed to lift him off his feet. He waited for some word, some sign; for some threatening stir. Nothing! Only two unwinking eyes glittered intently at him above the white sleeve. He saw the raised arm detach itself from the face and sink along the body. A white clad arm, with a big stain on the white sleeve. A red stain. There was a cut on the cheek. It bled. The nose bled too. The blood ran down, made one moustache look like a dark rag stuck over the lip, and went on in a wet streak down the clipped beard on one side of the chin. A drop of blood hung on the end of some hairs that were glued together; it hung for a while and took a leap down on the ground. Many more followed, leaping one after another in close file. One alighted on the breast and glided down instantly with devious vivacity, like a small insect running away; it left a narrow dark track on the white skin. He looked at it, looked at the tiny and active drops, looked at what he had done, with obscure satisfaction, with anger, with regret. This wasn't much like an act of justice. He had a desire to go up nearer to the man, to hear him speak, to hear him say something atrocious and wicked that would justify the violence of the blow. He made an attempt to move, and became aware of a close embrace round both his legs, just above the ankles. Instinctively, he kicked out with his foot, broke through the close bond and felt at once the clasp transferred to his other leg; the clasp warm, desperate and soft, of human arms. He looked down bewildered. He saw the body of the woman stretched at length, flattened on the ground like a dark blue rag. She trailed face downwards, clinging to his leg with both arms in a tenacious hug. He saw the top of her head, the long black hair streaming over his foot, all over the beaten earth, around his boot. He couldn't see his foot for it. He heard the short and repeated moaning of her breath. He imagined the invisible face close to his heel. With one kick into that face he could free himself. He dared not stir, and shouted down--

"Let go! Let go! Let go!"

The only result of his shouting was a tightening of the pressure of her arms. With a tremendous effort he tried to bring his right foot up to his left, and succeeded partly. He heard distinctly the rub of her body on the ground as he jerked her along. He tried to disengage himself by drawing up his foot. He stamped. He heard a voice saying sharply--

"Steady, Captain Lingard, steady!"

His eyes flew back to Willems at the sound of that voice, and, in the quick awakening of sleeping memories, Lingard stood suddenly still, appeased by the clear ring of familiar words. Appeased as in days of old, when they were trading together, when Willems was his trusted and helpful companion in out-of-the-way and dangerous places; when that fellow, who could keep his temper so much better than he could himself, had spared him many a difficulty, had saved him from many an act of hasty violence by the timely and good-humoured warning, whispered or shouted, "Steady, Captain Lingard, steady." A smart fellow. He had brought him up. The smartest fellow in the islands. If he had only stayed with him, then all this . . . He called out to Willems--

"Tell her to let me go or . . ."

He heard Willems shouting something, waited for awhile, then glanced vaguely down and saw the woman still stretched out perfectly mute and unresponsive, with her head at his feet. He felt a nervous impatience that, somehow, resembled fear.

"Tell her to let go, to go away, Willems, I tell you. I've had enough of this," he cried.

"All right, Captain Lingard," answered the calm voice of Willems, "she has let go. Take your foot off her hair; she can't get up."

Lingard leaped aside, clean away, and spun round quickly. He saw her sit up and cover her face with both hands, then he turned slowly on his heel and looked at the man. Willems held himself very straight, but was unsteady on his feet, and moved about nearly on the same spot, like a tipsy man attempting to preserve his balance. After gazing at him for a while, Lingard called, rancorous and irritable--

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

Willems began to walk towards him. He walked slowly, reeling a little before he

took each step, and Lingard saw him put his hand to his face, then look at it holding it up to his eyes, as if he had there, concealed in the hollow of the palm, some small object which he wanted to examine secretly. Suddenly he drew it, with a brusque movement, down the front of his jacket and left a long smudge.

"That's a fine thing to do," said Willems.

He stood in front of Lingard, one of his eyes sunk deep in the increasing swelling of his cheek, still repeating mechanically the movement of feeling his damaged face; and every time he did this he pressed the palm to some clean spot on his jacket, covering the white cotton with bloody imprints as of some deformed and monstrous hand. Lingard said nothing, looking on. At last Willems left off staunching the blood and stood, his arms hanging by his side, with his face stiff and distorted under the patches of coagulated blood; and he seemed as though he had been set up there for a warning: an incomprehensible figure marked all over with some awful and symbolic signs of deadly import. Speaking with difficulty, he repeated in a reproachful tone--

"That was a fine thing to do."

"After all," answered Lingard, bitterly, "I had too good an opinion of you."

"And I of you. Don't you see that I could have had that fool over there killed and the whole thing burnt to the ground, swept off the face of the earth. You wouldn't have found as much as a heap of ashes had I liked. I could have done all that. And I wouldn't."

"You--could--not. You dared not. You scoundrel!" cried Lingard.

"What's the use of calling me names?"

"True," retorted Lingard--"there's no name bad enough for you."

There was a short interval of silence. At the sound of their rapidly exchanged words, Aissa had got up from the ground where she had been sitting, in a sorrowful and dejected pose, and approached the two men. She stood on one side and looked on eagerly, in a desperate effort of her brain, with the quick and distracted eyes of a person trying for her life to penetrate the meaning of sentences uttered in a foreign tongue: the meaning portentous and fateful that lurks in the sounds of mysterious words; in the sounds surprising, unknown and strange.

Willems let the last speech of Lingard pass by; seemed by a slight movement of

his hand to help it on its way to join the other shadows of the past. Then he said-

"You have struck me; you have insulted me . . ."

"Insulted you!" interrupted Lingard, passionately. "Who--what can insult you . . . you . . ."

He choked, advanced a step.

"Steady! steady!" said Willems calmly. "I tell you I sha'n't fight. Is it clear enough to you that I sha'n't? I--shall--not--lift--a--finger."

As he spoke, slowly punctuating each word with a slight jerk of his head, he stared at Lingard, his right eye open and big, the left small and nearly closed by the swelling of one half of his face, that appeared all drawn out on one side like faces seen in a concave glass. And they stood exactly opposite each other: one tall, slight and disfigured; the other tall, heavy and severe.

Willems went on--

"If I had wanted to hurt you--if I had wanted to destroy you, it was easy. I stood in the doorway long enough to pull a trigger--and you know I shoot straight."

"You would have missed," said Lingard, with assurance. "There is, under heaven, such a thing as justice."

The sound of that word on his own lips made him pause, confused, like an unexpected and unanswerable rebuke. The anger of his outraged pride, the anger of his outraged heart, had gone out in the blow; and there remained nothing but the sense of some immense infamy--of something vague, disgusting and terrible, which seemed to surround him on all sides, hover about him with shadowy and stealthy movements, like a band of assassins in the darkness of vast and unsafe places. Was there, under heaven, such a thing as justice? He looked at the man before him with such an intensity of prolonged glance that he seemed to see right through him, that at last he saw but a floating and unsteady mist in human shape. Would it blow away before the first breath of the breeze and leave nothing behind?

The sound of Willems' voice made him start violently. Willems was saying--

"I have always led a virtuous life; you know I have. You always praised me for my steadiness; you know you have. You know also I never stole--if that's what you're

thinking of. I borrowed. You know how much I repaid. It was an error of judgment. But then consider my position there. I had been a little unlucky in my private affairs, and had debts. Could I let myself go under before the eyes of all those men who envied me? But that's all over. It was an error of judgment. I've paid for it. An error of judgment."

Lingard, astounded into perfect stillness, looked down. He looked down at Willems' bare feet. Then, as the other had paused, he repeated in a blank tone--

"An error of judgment . . ."

"Yes," drawled out Willems, thoughtfully, and went on with increasing animation: "As I said, I have always led a virtuous life. More so than Hudig--than you. Yes, than you. I drank a little, I played cards a little. Who doesn't? But I had principles from a boy. Yes, principles. Business is business, and I never was an ass. I never respected fools. They had to suffer for their folly when they dealt with me. The evil was in them, not in me. But as to principles, it's another matter. I kept clear of women. It's forbidden--I had no time--and I despised them. Now I hate them!"

He put his tongue out a little; a tongue whose pink and moist end ran here and there, like something independently alive, under his swollen and blackened lip; he touched with the tips of his fingers the cut on his cheek, felt all round it with precaution: and the unharmed side of his face appeared for a moment to be preoccupied and uneasy about the state of that other side which was so very sore and stiff.

He recommenced speaking, and his voice vibrated as though with repressed emotion of some kind.

"You ask my wife, when you see her in Macassar, whether I have no reason to hate her. She was nobody, and I made her Mrs. Willems. A half-caste girl! You ask her how she showed her gratitude to me. You ask . . . Never mind that. Well, you came and dumped me here like a load of rubbish; dumped me here and left me with nothing to do--nothing good to remember--and damn little to hope for. You left me here at the mercy of that fool, Almayer, who suspected me of something. Of what? Devil only knows. But he suspected and hated me from the first; I suppose because you befriended me. Oh! I could read him like a book. He isn't very deep, your Sambir partner, Captain Lingard, but he knows how to be disagreeable. Months passed. I thought I would die of sheer weariness, of my thoughts, of my regrets And then . . ."

He made a quick step nearer to Lingard, and as if moved by the same thought, by the same instinct, by the impulse of his will, Aissa also stepped nearer to them.

They stood in a close group, and the two men could feel the calm air between their faces stirred by the light breath of the anxious woman who enveloped them both in the uncomprehending, in the despairing and wondering glances of her wild and mournful eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Willems turned a little from her and spoke lower.

"Look at that," he said, with an almost imperceptible movement of his head towards the woman to whom he was presenting his shoulder. "Look at that! Don't believe her! What has she been saying to you? What? I have been asleep. Had to sleep at last. I've been waiting for you three days and nights. I had to sleep some time. Hadn't I? I told her to remain awake and watch for you, and call me at once. She did watch. You can't believe her. You can't believe any woman. Who can tell what's inside their heads? No one. You can know nothing. The only thing you can know is that it isn't anything like what comes through their lips. They live by the side of you. They seem to hate you, or they seem to love you; they caress or torment you; they throw you over or stick to you closer than your skin for some inscrutable and awful reason of their own--which you can never know! Look at her--and look at me. At me!--her infernal work. What has she been saying?"

His voice had sunk to a whisper. Lingard listened with great attention, holding his chin in his hand, which grasped a great handful of his white beard. His elbow was in the palm of his other hand, and his eyes were still fixed on the ground. He murmured, without looking up--

"She begged me for your life--if you want to know--as if the thing were worth giving or taking!"

"And for three days she begged me to take yours," said Willems quickly. "For three days she wouldn't give me any peace. She was never still. She planned ambushes. She has been looking for places all over here where I could hide and drop you with a safe shot as you walked up. It's true. I give you my word."

"Your word," muttered Lingard, contemptuously.

Willems took no notice.

"Ah! She is a ferocious creature," he went on. "You don't know . . . I wanted to pass the time--to do something--to have something to think about--to forget my troubles till you came back. And . . . look at her . . . she took me as if I did not belong to myself. She did. I did not know there was something in me she could get hold of. She, a savage. I, a civilized European, and clever! She that knew no more than a wild animal! Well, she found out something in me. She found it out, and I was lost. I knew it. She tormented me. I was ready to do anything. I

resisted--but I was ready. I knew that too. That frightened me more than anything; more than my own sufferings; and that was frightful enough, I assure you."

Lingard listened, fascinated and amazed like a child listening to a fairy tale, and, when Willems stopped for breath, he shuffled his feet a little.

"What does he say?" cried out Aissa, suddenly.

The two men looked at her quickly, and then looked at one another.

Willems began again, speaking hurriedly--

"I tried to do something. Take her away from those people. I went to Almayer; the biggest blind fool that you ever . . . Then Abdulla came--and she went away. She took away with her something of me which I had to get back. I had to do it. As far as you are concerned, the change here had to happen sooner or later; you couldn't be master here for ever. It isn't what I have done that torments me. It is the why. It's the madness that drove me to it. It's that thing that came over me. That may come again, some day."

"It will do no harm to anybody then, I promise you," said Lingard, significantly.

Willems looked at him for a second with a blank stare, then went on--

"I fought against her. She goaded me to violence and to murder. Nobody knows why. She pushed me to it persistently, desperately, all the time. Fortunately Abdulla had sense. I don't know what I wouldn't have done. She held me then. Held me like a nightmare that is terrible and sweet. By and by it was another life. I woke up. I found myself beside an animal as full of harm as a wild cat. You don't know through what I have passed. Her father tried to kill me--and she very nearly killed him. I believe she would have stuck at nothing. I don't know which was more terrible! She would have stuck at nothing to defend her own. And when I think that it was me--me--Willems . . . I hate her. To-morrow she may want my life. How can I know what's in her? She may want to kill me next!"

He paused in great trepidation, then added in a scared tone--

"I don't want to die here."

"Don't you?" said Lingard, thoughtfully.

Willems turned towards Aissa and pointed at her with a bony forefinger.

"Look at her! Always there. Always near. Always watching, watching . . . for something. Look at her eyes. Ain't they big? Don't they stare? You wouldn't think she can shut them like human beings do. I don't believe she ever does. I go to sleep, if I can, under their stare, and when I wake up I see them fixed on me and moving no more than the eyes of a corpse. While I am still they are still. By God--she can't move them till I stir, and then they follow me like a pair of jailers. They watch me; when I stop they seem to wait patient and glistening till I am off my guard--for to do something. To do something horrible. Look at them! You can see nothing in them. They are big, menacing--and empty. The eyes of a savage; of a damned mongrel, half-Arab, half-Malay. They hurt me! I am white! I swear to you I can't stand this! Take me away. I am white! All white!"

He shouted towards the sombre heaven, proclaiming desperately under the frown of thickening clouds the fact of his pure and superior descent. He shouted, his head thrown up, his arms swinging about wildly; lean, ragged, disfigured; a tall madman making a great disturbance about something invisible; a being absurd, repulsive, pathetic, and droll. Lingard, who was looking down as if absorbed in deep thought, gave him a quick glance from under his eyebrows: Aissa stood with clasped hands. At the other end of the courtyard the old woman, like a vague and decrepit apparition, rose noiselessly to look, then sank down again with a stealthy movement and crouched low over the small glow of the fire. Willems' voice filled the enclosure, rising louder with every word, and then, suddenly, at its very loudest, stopped short--like water stops running from an over-turned vessel. As soon as it had ceased the thunder seemed to take up the burden in a low growl coming from the inland hills. The noise approached in confused mutterings which kept on increasing, swelling into a roar that came nearer, rushed down the river, passed close in a tearing crash--and instantly sounded faint, dying away in monotonous and dull repetitions amongst the endless sinuosities of the lower reaches. Over the great forests, over all the innumerable people of unstirring trees--over all that living people immense, motionless, and mute--the silence, that had rushed in on the track of the passing tumult, remained suspended as deep and complete as if it had never been disturbed from the beginning of remote ages. Then, through it, after a time, came to Lingard's ears the voice of the running river: a voice low, discreet, and sad, like the persistent and gentle voices that speak of the past in the silence of dreams.

He felt a great emptiness in his heart. It seemed to him that there was within his breast a great space without any light, where his thoughts wandered forlornly, unable to escape, unable to rest, unable to die, to vanish--and to relieve him from the fearful oppression of their existence. Speech, action, anger, forgiveness, all appeared to him alike useless and vain, appeared to him unsatisfactory, not worth the effort of hand or brain that was needed to give them effect. He could

not see why he should not remain standing there, without ever doing anything, to the end of time. He felt something, something like a heavy chain, that held him there. This wouldn't do. He backed away a little from Willems and Aissa, leaving them close together, then stopped and looked at both. The man and the woman appeared to him much further than they really were. He had made only about three steps backward, but he believed for a moment that another step would take him out of earshot for ever. They appeared to him slightly under life size, and with a great cleanness of outlines, like figures carved with great precision of detail and highly finished by a skilful hand. He pulled himself together. The strong consciousness of his own personality came back to him. He had a notion of surveying them from a great and inaccessible height.

He said slowly: "You have been possessed of a devil."

"Yes," answered Willems gloomily, and looking at Aissa. "Isn't it pretty?"

"I've heard this kind of talk before," said Lingard, in a scornful tone; then paused, and went on steadily after a while: "I regret nothing. I picked you up by the waterside, like a starving cat--by God. I regret nothing; nothing that I have done. Abdulla--twenty others--no doubt Hudig himself, were after me. That's business--for them. But that you should . . . Money belongs to him who picks it up and is strong enough to keep it--but this thing was different. It was part of my life. . . . I am an old fool."

He was. The breath of his words, of the very words he spoke, fanned the spark of divine folly in his breast, the spark that made him--the hard-headed, heavy-handed adventurer--stand out from the crowd, from the sordid, from the joyous, unscrupulous, and noisy crowd of men that were so much like himself.

Willems said hurriedly: "It wasn't me. The evil was not in me, Captain Lingard."

"And where else confound you! Where else?" interrupted Lingard, raising his voice. "Did you ever see me cheat and lie and steal? Tell me that. Did you? Hey? I wonder where in perdition you came from when I found you under my feet. . . . No matter. You will do no more harm."

Willems moved nearer, gazing upon him anxiously. Lingard went on with distinct deliberation--

"What did you expect when you asked me to see you? What? You know me. I am Lingard. You lived with me. You've heard men speak. You knew what you had done. Well! What did you expect?"

"How can I know?" groaned Willems, wringing his hands; "I was alone in that infernal savage crowd. I was delivered into their hands. After the thing was done, I felt so lost and weak that I would have called the devil himself to my aid if it had been any good--if he hadn't put in all his work already. In the whole world there was only one man that had ever cared for me. Only one white man. You! Hate is better than being alone! Death is better! I expected . . . anything. Something to expect. Something to take me out of this. Out of her sight!"

He laughed. His laugh seemed to be torn out from him against his will, seemed to be brought violently on the surface from under his bitterness, his self-contempt, from under his despairing wonder at his own nature.

"When I think that when I first knew her it seemed to me that my whole life wouldn't be enough to . . . And now when I look at her! She did it all. I must have been mad. I was mad. Every time I look at her I remember my madness. It frightens me. . . . And when I think that of all my life, of all my past, of all my future, of my intelligence, of my work, there is nothing left but she, the cause of my ruin, and you whom I have mortally offended . . ."

He hid his face for a moment in his hands, and when he took them away he had lost the appearance of comparative calm and gave way to a wild distress.

"Captain Lingard . . . anything . . . a deserted island . . . anywhere . . . I promise . . ."

"Shut up!" shouted Lingard, roughly.

He became dumb, suddenly, completely.

The wan light of the clouded morning retired slowly from the courtyard, from the clearings, from the river, as if it had gone unwillingly to hide in the enigmatical solitudes of the gloomy and silent forests. The clouds over their heads thickened into a low vault of uniform blackness. The air was still and inexpressibly oppressive. Lingard unbuttoned his jacket, flung it wide open and, inclining his body sideways a little, wiped his forehead with his hand, which he jerked sharply afterwards. Then he looked at Willems and said--

"No promise of yours is any good to me. I am going to take your conduct into my own hands. Pay attention to what I am going to say. You are my prisoner."

Willems' head moved imperceptibly; then he became rigid and still. He seemed not to breathe.

"You shall stay here," continued Lingard, with sombre deliberation. "You are not fit to go amongst people. Who could suspect, who could guess, who could imagine what's in you? I couldn't! You are my mistake. I shall hide you here. If I let you out you would go amongst unsuspecting men, and lie, and steal, and cheat for a little money or for some woman. I don't care about shooting you. It would be the safest way though. But I won't. Do not expect me to forgive you. To forgive one must have been angry and become contemptuous, and there is nothing in me now--no anger, no contempt, no disappointment. To me you are not Willems, the man I befriended and helped through thick and thin, and thought much of . . . You are not a human being that may be destroyed or forgiven. You are a bitter thought, a something without a body and that must be hidden . . . You are my shame."

He ceased and looked slowly round. How dark it was! It seemed to him that the light was dying prematurely out of the world and that the air was already dead.

"Of course," he went on, "I shall see to it that you don't starve."

"You don't mean to say that I must live here, Captain Lingard?" said Willems, in a kind of mechanical voice without any inflections.

"Did you ever hear me say something I did not mean?" asked Lingard. "You said you didn't want to die here--well, you must live . . . Unless you change your mind," he added, as if in involuntary afterthought.

He looked at Willems narrowly, then shook his head.

"You are alone," he went on. "Nothing can help you. Nobody will. You are neither white nor brown. You have no colour as you have no heart. Your accomplices have abandoned you to me because I am still somebody to be reckoned with. You are alone but for that woman there. You say you did this for her. Well, you have her."

Willems mumbled something, and then suddenly caught his hair with both his hands and remained standing so. Aissa, who had been looking at him, turned to Lingard.

"What did you say, Rajah Laut?" she cried.

There was a slight stir amongst the filmy threads of her disordered hair, the bushes by the river sides trembled, the big tree nodded precipitately over them with an abrupt rustle, as if waking with a start from a troubled sleep--and the breath of hot breeze passed, light, rapid, and scorching, under the clouds that

whirled round, unbroken but undulating, like a restless phantom of a sombre sea.

Lingard looked at her pityingly before he said--

"I have told him that he must live here all his life . . . and with you."

The sun seemed to have gone out at last like a flickering light away up beyond the clouds, and in the stifling gloom of the courtyard the three figures stood colourless and shadowy, as if surrounded by a black and superheated mist. Aissa looked at Willems, who remained still, as though he had been changed into stone in the very act of tearing his hair. Then she turned her head towards Lingard and shouted--

"You lie! You lie! . . . White man. Like you all do. You . . . whom Abdulla made small. You lie!"

Her words rang out shrill and venomous with her secret scorn, with her overpowering desire to wound regardless of consequences; in her woman's reckless desire to cause suffering at any cost, to cause it by the sound of her own voice--by her own voice, that would carry the poison of her thought into the hated heart.

Willems let his hands fall, and began to mumble again. Lingard turned his ear towards him instinctively, caught something that sounded like "Very well"--then some more mumbling--then a sigh.

"As far as the rest of the world is concerned," said Lingard, after waiting for awhile in an attentive attitude, "your life is finished. Nobody will be able to throw any of your villainies in my teeth; nobody will be able to point at you and say, 'Here goes a scoundrel of Lingard's up-bringing.' You are buried here."

"And you think that I will stay . . . that I will submit?" exclaimed Willems, as if he had suddenly recovered the power of speech.

"You needn't stay here--on this spot," said Lingard, drily. "There are the forests--and here is the river. You may swim. Fifteen miles up, or forty down. At one end you will meet Almayer, at the other the sea. Take your choice."

He burst into a short, joyless laugh, then added with severe gravity--

"There is also another way."

"If you want to drive my soul into damnation by trying to drive me to suicide you will not succeed," said Willems in wild excitement. "I will live. I shall repent. I may escape. . . . Take that woman away--she is sin."

A hooked dart of fire tore in two the darkness of the distant horizon and lit up the gloom of the earth with a dazzling and ghastly flame. Then the thunder was heard far away, like an incredibly enormous voice muttering menaces.

Lingard said--

"I don't care what happens, but I may tell you that without that woman your life is not worth much--not twopence. There is a fellow here who . . . and Abdulla himself wouldn't stand on any ceremony. Think of that! And then she won't go."

He began, even while he spoke, to walk slowly down towards the little gate. He didn't look, but he felt as sure that Willems was following him as if he had been leading him by a string. Directly he had passed through the wicket-gate into the big courtyard he heard a voice, behind his back, saying--

"I think she was right. I ought to have shot you. I couldn't have been worse off."

"Time yet," answered Lingard, without stopping or looking back. "But, you see, you can't. There is not even that in you."

"Don't provoke me, Captain Lingard," cried Willems.

Lingard turned round sharply. Willems and Aissa stopped. Another forked flash of lightning split up the clouds overhead, and threw upon their faces a sudden burst of light--a blaze violent, sinister and fleeting; and in the same instant they were deafened by a near, single crash of thunder, which was followed by a rushing noise, like a frightened sigh of the startled earth.

"Provoke you!" said the old adventurer, as soon as he could make himself heard. "Provoke you! Hey! What's there in you to provoke? What do I care?"

"It is easy to speak like that when you know that in the whole world--in the whole world--I have no friend," said Willems.

"Whose fault?" said Lingard, sharply.

Their voices, after the deep and tremendous noise, sounded to them very unsatisfactory--thin and frail, like the voices of pigmies--and they became suddenly silent, as if on that account. From up the courtyard Lingard's boatmen

came down and passed them, keeping step in a single file, their paddles on shoulder, and holding their heads straight with their eyes fixed on the river. Ali, who was walking last, stopped before Lingard, very stiff and upright. He said--

"That one-eyed Babalatchi is gone, with all his women. He took everything. All the pots and boxes. Big. Heavy. Three boxes."

He grinned as if the thing had been amusing, then added with an appearance of anxious concern, "Rain coming."

"We return," said Lingard. "Make ready."

"Aye, aye, sir!" ejaculated Ali with precision, and moved on. He had been quartermaster with Lingard before making up his mind to stay in Sambir as Almayer's head man. He strutted towards the landing-place thinking proudly that he was not like those other ignorant boatmen, and knew how to answer properly the very greatest of white captains.

"You have misunderstood me from the first, Captain Lingard," said Willems.

"Have I? It's all right, as long as there is no mistake about my meaning," answered Lingard, strolling slowly to the landing-place. Willems followed him, and Aissa followed Willems.

Two hands were extended to help Lingard in embarking. He stepped cautiously and heavily into the long and narrow canoe, and sat in the canvas folding-chair that had been placed in the middle. He leaned back and turned his head to the two figures that stood on the bank a little above him. Aissa's eyes were fastened on his face in a visible impatience to see him gone. Willems' look went straight above the canoe, straight at the forest on the other side of the river.

"All right, Ali," said Lingard, in a low voice.

A slight stir animated the faces, and a faint murmur ran along the line of paddlers. The foremost man pushed with the point of his paddle, canted the fore end out of the dead water into the current; and the canoe fell rapidly off before the rush of brown water, the stern rubbing gently against the low bank.

"We shall meet again, Captain Lingard!" cried Willems, in an unsteady voice.

"Never!" said Lingard, turning half round in his chair to look at Willems. His fierce red eyes glittered remorselessly over the high back of his seat.

"Must cross the river. Water less quick over there," said Ali.

He pushed in his turn now with all his strength, throwing his body recklessly right out over the stern. Then he recovered himself just in time into the squatting attitude of a monkey perched on a high shelf, and shouted: "Dayong!"

The paddles struck the water together. The canoe darted forward and went on steadily crossing the river with a sideways motion made up of its own speed and the downward drift of the current.

Lingard watched the shore astern. The woman shook her hand at him, and then squatted at the feet of the man who stood motionless. After a while she got up and stood beside him, reaching up to his head--and Lingard saw then that she had wetted some part of her covering and was trying to wash the dried blood off the man's immovable face, which did not seem to know anything about it. Lingard turned away and threw himself back in his chair, stretching his legs out with a sigh of fatigue. His head fell forward; and under his red face the white beard lay fan-like on his breast, the ends of fine long hairs all astir in the faint draught made by the rapid motion of the craft that carried him away from his prisoner--from the only thing in his life he wished to hide.

In its course across the river the canoe came into the line of Willems' sight and his eyes caught the image, followed it eagerly as it glided, small but distinct, on the dark background of the forest. He could see plainly the figure of the man sitting in the middle. All his life he had felt that man behind his back, a reassuring presence ready with help, with commendation, with advice; friendly in reproof, enthusiastic in approbation; a man inspiring confidence by his strength, by his fearlessness, by the very weakness of his simple heart. And now that man was going away. He must call him back.

He shouted, and his words, which he wanted to throw across the river, seemed to fall helplessly at his feet. Aissa put her hand on his arm in a restraining attempt, but he shook it off. He wanted to call back his very life that was going away from him. He shouted again--and this time he did not even hear himself. No use. He would never return. And he stood in sullen silence looking at the white figure over there, lying back in the chair in the middle of the boat; a figure that struck him suddenly as very terrible, heartless and astonishing, with its unnatural appearance of running over the water in an attitude of languid repose.

For a time nothing on earth stirred, seemingly, but the canoe, which glided upstream with a motion so even and smooth that it did not convey any sense of movement. Overhead, the massed clouds appeared solid and steady as if held there in a powerful grip, but on their uneven surface there was a continuous and

trembling glimmer, a faint reflection of the distant lightning from the thunderstorm that had broken already on the coast and was working its way up the river with low and angry growls. Willems looked on, as motionless as everything round him and above him. Only his eyes seemed to live, as they followed the canoe on its course that carried it away from him, steadily, unhesitatingly, finally, as if it were going, not up the great river into the momentous excitement of Sambir, but straight into the past, into the past crowded yet empty, like an old cemetery full of neglected graves, where lie dead hopes that never return.

From time to time he felt on his face the passing, warm touch of an immense breath coming from beyond the forest, like the short panting of an oppressed world. Then the heavy air round him was pierced by a sharp gust of wind, bringing with it the fresh, damp feel of the falling rain; and all the innumerable tree-tops of the forests swayed to the left and sprang back again in a tumultuous balancing of nodding branches and shuddering leaves. A light frown ran over the river, the clouds stirred slowly, changing their aspect but not their place, as if they had turned ponderously over; and when the sudden movement had died out in a quickened tremor of the slenderest twigs, there was a short period of formidable immobility above and below, during which the voice of the thunder was heard, speaking in a sustained, emphatic and vibrating roll, with violent louder bursts of crashing sound, like a wrathful and threatening discourse of an angry god. For a moment it died out, and then another gust of wind passed, driving before it a white mist which filled the space with a cloud of waterdust that hid suddenly from Willems the canoe, the forests, the river itself; that woke him up from his numbness in a forlorn shiver, that made him look round despairingly to see nothing but the whirling drift of rain spray before the freshening breeze, while through it the heavy big drops fell about him with sonorous and rapid beats upon the dry earth. He made a few hurried steps up the courtyard and was arrested by an immense sheet of water that fell all at once on him, fell sudden and overwhelming from the clouds, cutting his respiration, streaming over his head, clinging to him, running down his body, off his arms, off his legs. He stood gasping while the water beat him in a vertical downpour, drove on him slanting in squalls, and he felt the drops striking him from above, from everywhere; drops thick, pressed and dashing at him as if flung from all sides by a mob of infuriated hands. From under his feet a great vapour of broken water floated up, he felt the ground become soft--melt under him--and saw the water spring out from the dry earth to meet the water that fell from the sombre heaven. An insane dread took possession of him, the dread of all that water around him, of the water that ran down the courtyard towards him, of the water that pressed him on every side, of the slanting water that drove across his face in wavering sheets which gleamed pale red with the flicker of lightning streaming through them, as if fire and water were falling together, monstrously mixed, upon the stunned earth.

He wanted to run away, but when he moved it was to slide about painfully and slowly upon that earth which had become mud so suddenly under his feet. He fought his way up the courtyard like a man pushing through a crowd, his head down, one shoulder forward, stopping often, and sometimes carried back a pace or two in the rush of water which his heart was not stout enough to face. Aissa followed him step by step, stopping when he stopped, recoiling with him, moving forward with him in his toilsome way up the slippery declivity of the courtyard, of that courtyard, from which everything seemed to have been swept away by the first rush of the mighty downpour. They could see nothing. The tree, the bushes, the house, and the fences--all had disappeared in the thickness of the falling rain. Their hair stuck, streaming, to their heads; their clothing clung to them, beaten close to their bodies; water ran off them, off their heads over their shoulders. They moved, patient, upright, slow and dark, in the gleam clear or fiery of the falling drops, under the roll of unceasing thunder, like two wandering ghosts of the drowned that, condemned to haunt the water for ever, had come up from the river to look at the world under a deluge.

On the left the tree seemed to step out to meet them, appearing vaguely, high, motionless and patient; with a rustling plaint of its innumerable leaves through which every drop of water tore its separate way with cruel haste. And then, to the right, the house surged up in the mist, very black, and clamorous with the quick patter of rain on its high-pitched roof above the steady splash of the water running off the eaves. Down the plankway leading to the door flowed a thin and pellucid stream, and when Willems began his ascent it broke over his foot as if he were going up a steep ravine in the bed of a rapid and shallow torrent. Behind his heels two streaming smudges of mud stained for an instant the purity of the rushing water, and then he splashed his way up with a spurt and stood on the bamboo platform before the open door under the shelter of the overhanging eaves--under shelter at last!

A low moan ending in a broken and plaintive mutter arrested Willems on the threshold. He peered round in the half-light under the roof and saw the old woman crouching close to the wall in a shapeless heap, and while he looked he felt a touch of two arms on his shoulders. Aissa! He had forgotten her. He turned, and she clasped him round the neck instantly, pressing close to him as if afraid of violence or escape. He stiffened himself in repulsion, in horror, in the mysterious revolt of his heart; while she clung to him--clung to him as if he were a refuge from misery, from storm, from weariness, from fear, from despair; and it was on the part of that being an embrace terrible, enraged and mournful, in which all her strength went out to make him captive, to hold him for ever.

He said nothing. He looked into her eyes while he struggled with her fingers about

the nape of his neck, and suddenly he tore her hands apart, holding her arms up in a strong grip of her wrists, and bending his swollen face close over hers, he said--

"It is all your doing. You . . ."

She did not understand him--not a word. He spoke in the language of his people--of his people that know no mercy and no shame. And he was angry. Alas! he was always angry now, and always speaking words that she could not understand. She stood in silence, looking at him through her patient eyes, while he shook her arms a little and then flung them down.

"Don't follow me!" he shouted. "I want to be alone--I mean to be left alone!"

He went in, leaving the door open.

She did not move. What need to understand the words when they are spoken in such a voice? In that voice which did not seem to be his voice--his voice when he spoke by the brook, when he was never angry and always smiling! Her eyes were fixed upon the dark doorway, but her hands strayed mechanically upwards; she took up all her hair, and, inclining her head slightly over her shoulder, wrung out the long black tresses, twisting them persistently, while she stood, sad and absorbed, like one listening to an inward voice--the voice of bitter, of unavailing regret. The thunder had ceased, the wind had died out, and the rain fell perpendicular and steady through a great pale clearness--the light of remote sun coming victorious from amongst the dissolving blackness of the clouds. She stood near the doorway. He was there--alone in the gloom of the dwelling. He was there. He spoke not. What was in his mind now? What fear? What desire? Not the desire of her as in the days when he used to smile . . . How could she know? . . .

A sigh coming from the bottom of her heart, flew out into the world through her parted lips. A sigh faint, profound, and broken; a sigh full of pain and fear, like the sigh of those who are about to face the unknown: to face it in loneliness, in doubt, and without hope. She let go her hair, that fell scattered over her shoulders like a funeral veil, and she sank down suddenly by the door. Her hands clasped her ankles; she rested her head on her drawn-up knees, and remained still, very still, under the streaming mourning of her hair. She was thinking of him; of the days by the brook; she was thinking of all that had been their love--and she sat in the abandoned posture of those who sit weeping by the dead, of those who watch and mourn over a corpse.