PART V

CHAPTER ONE

Almayer propped, alone on the verandah of his house, with both his elbows on the table, and holding his head between his hands, stared before him, away over the stretch of sprouting young grass in his courtyard, and over the short jetty with its cluster of small canoes, amongst which his big whale-boat floated high, like a white mother of all that dark and aquatic brood. He stared on the river, past the schooner anchored in mid-stream, past the forests of the left bank; he stared through and past the illusion of the material world.

The sun was sinking. Under the sky was stretched a network of white threads, a network fine and close-meshed, where here and there were caught thicker white vapours of globular shape; and to the eastward, above the ragged barrier of the forests, surged the summits of a chain of great clouds, growing bigger slowly, in imperceptible motion, as if careful not to disturb the glowing stillness of the earth and of the sky. Abreast of the house the river was empty but for the motionless schooner. Higher up, a solitary log came out from the bend above and went on drifting slowly down the straight reach: a dead and wandering tree going out to its grave in the sea, between two ranks of trees motionless and living.

And Almayer sat, his face in his hands, looking on and hating all this: the muddy river; the faded blue of the sky; the black log passing by on its first and last voyage; the green sea of leaves--the sea that glowed shimmered, and stirred above the uniform and impenetrable gloom of the forests--the joyous sea of living green powdered with the brilliant dust of oblique sunrays.

He hated all this; he begrudged every day--every minute--of his life spent amongst all these things; he begrudged it bitterly, angrily, with enraged and immense regret, like a miser compelled to give up some of his treasure to a near relation. And yet all this was very precious to him. It was the present sign of a splendid future.

He pushed the table away impatiently, got up, made a few steps aimlessly, then stood by the balustrade and again looked at the river--at that river which would have been the instrument for the making of his fortune if . . . if . . .

"What an abominable brute!" he said.

He was alone, but he spoke aloud, as one is apt to do under the impulse of a strong, of an overmastering thought.

"What a brute!" he muttered again.

The river was dark now, and the schooner lay on it, a black, a lonely, and a graceful form, with the slender masts darting upwards from it in two frail and raking lines. The shadows of the evening crept up the trees, crept up from bough to bough, till at last the long sunbeams coursing from the western horizon skimmed lightly over the topmost branches, then flew upwards amongst the piled-up clouds, giving them a sombre and fiery aspect in the last flush of light. And suddenly the light disappeared as if lost in the immensity of the great, blue, and empty hollow overhead. The sun had set: and the forests became a straight wall of formless blackness. Above them, on the edge of lingering clouds, a single star glimmered fitfully, obscured now and then by the rapid flight of high and invisible vapours.

Almayer fought with the uneasiness within his breast. He heard Ali, who moved behind him preparing his evening meal, and he listened with strange attention to the sounds the man made--to the short, dry bang of the plate put upon the table, to the clink of glass and the metallic rattle of knife and fork. The man went away. Now he was coming back. He would speak directly; and Almayer, notwithstanding the absorbing gravity of his thoughts, listened for the sound of expected words. He heard them, spoken in English with painstaking distinctness.

"Ready, sir!"

"All right," said Almayer, curtly. He did not move. He remained pensive, with his back to the table upon which stood the lighted lamp brought by Ali. He was thinking: "Where was Lingard now? Halfway down the river probably, in Abdulla's ship. He would be back in about three days--perhaps less. And then? Then the schooner would have to be got out of the river, and when that craft was gone they--he and Lingard--would remain here; alone with the constant thought of that other man, that other man living near them! What an extraordinary idea to keep him there for ever. For ever! What did that mean--for ever? Perhaps a year, perhaps ten years. Preposterous! Keep him there ten years--or may be twenty! The fellow was capable of living more than twenty years. And for all that time he would have to be watched, fed, looked after. There was nobody but Lingard to have such notions. Twenty years! Why, no! In less than ten years their fortune would be made and they would leave this place, first for Batavia--yes, Batavia--and then for Europe. England, no doubt. Lingard would want to go to England. And would they leave that man here? How would that fellow look in ten years? Very old probably. Well, devil take him. Nina would be fifteen. She would be rich

and very pretty and he himself would not be so old then. . . ."

Almayer smiled into the night.

. . . Yes, rich! Why! Of course! Captain Lingard was a resourceful man, and he had plenty of money even now. They were rich already; but not enough. Decidedly not enough. Money brings money. That gold business was good. Famous! Captain Lingard was a remarkable man. He said the gold was there--and it was there. Lingard knew what he was talking about. But he had queer ideas. For instance, about Willems. Now what did he want to keep him alive for? Why?

"That scoundrel," muttered Almayer again.

"Makan Tuan!" ejaculated Ali suddenly, very loud in a pressing tone.

Almayer walked to the table, sat down, and his anxious visage dropped from above into the light thrown down by the lamp-shade. He helped himself absently, and began to eat in great mouthfuls.

. . . Undoubtedly, Lingard was the man to stick to! The man undismayed, masterful and ready. How quickly he had planned a new future when Willems' treachery destroyed their established position in Sambir! And the position even now was not so bad. What an immense prestige that Lingard had with all those people--Arabs, Malays and all. Ah, it was good to be able to call a man like that father. Fine! Wonder how much money really the old fellow had. People talked--they exaggerated surely, but if he had only half of what they said . . .

He drank, throwing his head up, and fell to again.

. . . Now, if that Willems had known how to play his cards well, had he stuck to the old fellow he would have been in his position, he would be now married to Lingard's adopted daughter with his future assured--splendid . . .

"The beast!" growled Almayer, between two mouthfuls.

Ali stood rigidly straight with an uninterested face, his gaze lost in the night which pressed round the small circle of light that shone on the table, on the glass, on the bottle, and on Almayer's head as he leaned over his plate moving his jaws.

. . . A famous man Lingard--yet you never knew what he would do next. It was notorious that he had shot a white man once for less than Willems had done. For less? . . . Why, for nothing, so to speak! It was not even his own quarrel. It was

about some Malay returning from pilgrimage with wife and children. Kidnapped, or robbed, or something. A stupid story--an old story. And now he goes to see that Willems and--nothing. Comes back talking big about his prisoner; but after all he said very little. What did that Willems tell him? What passed between them? The old fellow must have had something in his mind when he let that scoundrel off. And Joanna! She would get round the old fellow. Sure. Then he would forgive perhaps. Impossible. But at any rate he would waste a lot of money on them. The old man was tenacious in his hates, but also in his affections. He had known that beast Willems from a boy. They would make it up in a year or so. Everything is possible: why did he not rush off at first and kill the brute? That would have been more like Lingard. . . .

Almayer laid down his spoon suddenly, and pushing his plate away, threw himself back in the chair.

. . . Unsafe. Decidedly unsafe. He had no mind to share Lingard's money with anybody. Lingard's money was Nina's money in a sense. And if Willems managed to become friendly with the old man it would be dangerous for him--Almayer. Such an unscrupulous scoundrel! He would oust him from his position. He would lie and slander. Everything would be lost. Lost. Poor Nina. What would become of her? Poor child. For her sake he must remove that Willems. Must. But how? Lingard wanted to be obeyed. Impossible to kill Willems. Lingard might be angry. Incredible, but so it was. He might . . .

A wave of heat passed through Almayer's body, flushed his face, and broke out of him in copious perspiration. He wriggled in his chair, and pressed his hands together under the table. What an awful prospect! He fancied he could see Lingard and Willems reconciled and going away arm-in-arm, leaving him alone in this God-forsaken hole--in Sambir--in this deadly swamp! And all his sacrifices, the sacrifice of his independence, of his best years, his surrender to Lingard's fancies and caprices, would go for nothing! Horrible! Then he thought of his little daughter--his daughter!--and the ghastliness of his supposition overpowered him. He had a deep emotion, a sudden emotion that made him feel quite faint at the idea of that young life spoiled before it had fairly begun. His dear child's life! Lying back in his chair he covered his face with both his hands.

Ali glanced down at him and said, unconcernedly--"Master finish?"

Almayer was lost in the immensity of his commiseration for himself, for his daughter, who was--perhaps--not going to be the richest woman in the world--notwithstanding Lingard's promises. He did not understand the other's question, and muttered through his fingers in a doleful tone--

"What did you say? What? Finish what?"

"Clear up meza," explained Ali.

"Clear up!" burst out Almayer, with incomprehensible exasperation. "Devil take you and the table. Stupid! Chatterer! Chelakka! Get out!"

He leaned forward, glaring at his head man, then sank back in his seat with his arms hanging straight down on each side of the chair. And he sat motionless in a meditation so concentrated and so absorbing, with all his power of thought so deep within himself, that all expression disappeared from his face in an aspect of staring vacancy.

Ali was clearing the table. He dropped negligently the tumbler into the greasy dish, flung there the spoon and fork, then slipped in the plate with a push amongst the remnants of food. He took up the dish, tucked up the bottle under his armpit, and went off.

"My hammock!" shouted Almayer after him.

"Ada! I come soon," answered Ali from the doorway in an offended tone, looking back over his shoulder. . . . How could he clear the table and hang the hammock at the same time. Ya-wa! Those white men were all alike. Wanted everything done at once. Like children . . .

The indistinct murmur of his criticism went away, faded and died out together with the soft footfall of his bare feet in the dark passage.

For some time Almayer did not move. His thoughts were busy at work shaping a momentous resolution, and in the perfect silence of the house he believed that he could hear the noise of the operation as if the work had been done with a hammer. He certainly felt a thumping of strokes, faint, profound, and startling, somewhere low down in his breast; and he was aware of a sound of dull knocking, abrupt and rapid, in his ears. Now and then he held his breath, unconsciously, too long, and had to relieve himself by a deep expiration that whistled dully through his pursed lips. The lamp standing on the far side of the table threw a section of a lighted circle on the floor, where his out-stretched legs stuck out from under the table with feet rigid and turned up like the feet of a corpse; and his set face with fixed eyes would have been also like the face of the dead, but for its vacant yet conscious aspect; the hard, the stupid, the stony aspect of one not dead, but only buried under the dust, ashes, and corruption of personal thoughts, of base fears, of selfish desires.

"I will do it!"

Not till he heard his own voice did he know that he had spoken. It startled him. He stood up. The knuckles of his hand, somewhat behind him, were resting on the edge of the table as he remained still with one foot advanced, his lips a little open, and thought: It would not do to fool about with Lingard. But I must risk it. It's the only way I can see. I must tell her. She has some little sense. I wish they were a thousand miles off already. A hundred thousand miles. I do. And if it fails. And she blabs out then to Lingard? She seemed a fool. No; probably they will get away. And if they did, would Lingard believe me? Yes. I never lied to him. He would believe. I don't know . . . Perhaps he won't. . . . "I must do it. Must!" he argued aloud to himself.

For a long time he stood still, looking before him with an intense gaze, a gaze rapt and immobile, that seemed to watch the minute quivering of a delicate balance, coming to a rest.

To the left of him, in the whitewashed wall of the house that formed the back of the verandah, there was a closed door. Black letters were painted on it proclaiming the fact that behind that door there was the office of Lingard & Co. The interior had been furnished by Lingard when he had built the house for his adopted daughter and her husband, and it had been furnished with reckless prodigality. There was an office desk, a revolving chair, bookshelves, a safe: all to humour the weakness of Almayer, who thought all those paraphernalia necessary to successful trading. Lingard had laughed, but had taken immense trouble to get the things. It pleased him to make his protege, his adopted son-in-law, happy. It had been the sensation of Sambir some five years ago. While the things were being landed, the whole settlement literally lived on the river bank in front of the Rajah Laut's house, to look, to wonder, to admire. . . . What a big meza, with many boxes fitted all over it and under it! What did the white man do with such a table? And look, look, O Brothers! There is a green square box, with a gold plate on it, a box so heavy that those twenty men cannot drag it up the bank. Let us go, brothers, and help pull at the ropes, and perchance we may see what's inside. Treasure, no doubt. Gold is heavy and hard to hold, O Brothers! Let us go and earn a recompense from the fierce Rajah of the Sea who shouts over there, with a red face. See! There is a man carrying a pile of books from the boat! What a number of books. What were they for? . . . And an old invalided jurumudi, who had travelled over many seas and had heard holy men speak in far-off countries, explained to a small knot of unsophisticated citizens of Sambir that those books were books of magic--of magic that guides the white men's ships over the seas, that gives them their wicked wisdom and their strength; of magic that makes them great, powerful, and irresistible while they live, and--praise be to Allah!--the victims of Satan, the slaves of Jehannum when they die.

And when he saw the room furnished, Almayer had felt proud. In his exultation of an empty-headed quill-driver, he thought himself, by the virtue of that furniture, at the head of a serious business. He had sold himself to Lingard for these things--married the Malay girl of his adoption for the reward of these things and of the great wealth that must necessarily follow upon conscientious book-keeping. He found out very soon that trade in Sambir meant something entirely different. He could not guide Patalolo, control the irrepressible old Sahamin, or restrain the youthful vagaries of the fierce Bahassoen with pen, ink, and paper. He found no successful magic in the blank pages of his ledgers; and gradually he lost his old point of view in the saner appreciation of his situation. The room known as the office became neglected then like a temple of an exploded superstition. At first, when his wife reverted to her original savagery, Almayer, now and again, had sought refuge from her there; but after their child began to speak, to know him, he became braver, for he found courage and consolation in his unreasoning and fierce affection for his daughter--in the impenetrable mantle of selfishness he wrapped round both their lives: round himself, and that young life that was also his.

When Lingard ordered him to receive Joanna into his house, he had a truckle bed put into the office--the only room he could spare. The big office desk was pushed on one side, and Joanna came with her little shabby trunk and with her child and took possession in her dreamy, slack, half-asleep way; took possession of the dust, dirt, and squalor, where she appeared naturally at home, where she dragged a melancholy and dull existence; an existence made up of sad remorse and frightened hope, amongst the hopeless disorder--the senseless and vain decay of all these emblems of civilized commerce. Bits of white stuff; rags yellow, pink, blue: rags limp, brilliant and soiled, trailed on the floor, lay on the desk amongst the sombre covers of books soiled, grimy, but stiff-backed, in virtue, perhaps, of their European origin. The biggest set of bookshelves was partly hidden by a petticoat, the waistband of which was caught upon the back of a slender book pulled a little out of the row so as to make an improvised clothespeg. The folding canvas bedstead stood nearly in the middle of the room, stood anyhow, parallel to no wall, as if it had been, in the process of transportation to some remote place, dropped casually there by tired bearers. And on the tumbled blankets that lay in a disordered heap on its edge, Joanna sat almost all day with her stockingless feet upon one of the bed pillows that were somehow always kicking about the floor. She sat there, vaguely tormented at times by the thought of her absent husband, but most of the time thinking tearfully of nothing at all, looking with swimming eyes at her little son--at the big-headed, pasty-faced, and sickly Louis Willems--who rolled a glass inkstand, solid with dried ink, about the floor, and tottered after it with the portentous gravity of demeanour and absolute absorption by the business in hand that characterize

the pursuits of early childhood. Through the half-open shutter a ray of sunlight, a ray merciless and crude, came into the room, beat in the early morning upon the safe in the far-off corner, then, travelling against the sun, cut at midday the big desk in two with its solid and clean-edged brilliance; with its hot brilliance in which a swarm of flies hovered in dancing flight over some dirty plate forgotten there amongst yellow papers for many a day. And towards the evening the cynical ray seemed to cling to the ragged petticoat, lingered on it with wicked enjoyment of that misery it had exposed all day; lingered on the corner of the dusty bookshelf, in a red glow intense and mocking, till it was suddenly snatched by the setting sun out of the way of the coming night. And the night entered the room. The night abrupt, impenetrable and all-filling with its flood of darkness; the night cool and merciful; the blind night that saw nothing, but could hear the fretful whimpering of the child, the creak of the bedstead, Joanna's deep sighs as she turned over, sleepless, in the confused conviction of her wickedness, thinking of that man masterful, fair-headed, and strong--a man hard perhaps, but her husband; her clever and handsome husband to whom she had acted so cruelly on the advice of bad people, if her own people; and of her poor, dear, deceived mother.

To Almayer, Joanna's presence was a constant worry, a worry unobtrusive yet intolerable; a constant, but mostly mute, warning of possible danger. In view of the absurd softness of Lingard's heart, every one in whom Lingard manifested the slightest interest was to Almayer a natural enemy. He was quite alive to that feeling, and in the intimacy of the secret intercourse with his inner self had often congratulated himself upon his own wide-awake comprehension of his position. In that way, and impelled by that motive, Almayer had hated many and various persons at various times. But he never had hated and feared anybody so much as he did hate and fear Willems. Even after Willems' treachery, which seemed to remove him beyond the pale of all human sympathy, Almayer mistrusted the situation and groaned in spirit every time he caught sight of Joanna.

He saw her very seldom in the daytime. But in the short and opal-tinted twilights, or in the azure dusk of starry evenings, he often saw, before he slept, the slender and tall figure trailing to and fro the ragged tail of its white gown over the dried mud of the riverside in front of the house. Once or twice when he sat late on the verandah, with his feet upon the deal table on a level with the lamp, reading the seven months' old copy of the North China Herald, brought by Lingard, he heard the stairs creak, and, looking round the paper, he saw her frail and meagre form rise step by step and toil across the verandah, carrying with difficulty the big, fat child, whose head, lying on the mother's bony shoulder, seemed of the same size as Joanna's own. Several times she had assailed him with tearful clamour or mad entreaties: asking about her husband, wanting to know where he was, when he would be back; and ending every such outburst with despairing and incoherent

self-reproaches that were absolutely incomprehensible to Almayer. On one or two occasions she had overwhelmed her host with vituperative abuse, making him responsible for her husband's absence. Those scenes, begun without any warning, ended abruptly in a sobbing flight and a bang of the door; stirred the house with a sudden, a fierce, and an evanescent disturbance; like those inexplicable whirlwinds that rise, run, and vanish without apparent cause upon the sun-scorched dead level of arid and lamentable plains.

But to-night the house was quiet, deadly quiet, while Almayer stood still, watching that delicate balance where he was weighing all his chances: Joanna's intelligence, Lingard's credulity, Willems' reckless audacity, desire to escape, readiness to seize an unexpected opportunity. He weighed, anxious and attentive, his fears and his desires against the tremendous risk of a quarrel with Lingard. . . . Yes. Lingard would be angry. Lingard might suspect him of some connivance in his prisoner's escape--but surely he would not quarrel with him--Almayer--about those people once they were gone--gone to the devil in their own way. And then he had hold of Lingard through the little girl. Good. What an annoyance! A prisoner! As if one could keep him in there. He was bound to get away some time or other. Of course. A situation like that can't last. Anybody could see that. Lingard's eccentricity passed all bounds. You may kill a man, but you mustn't torture him. It was almost criminal. It caused worry, trouble, and unpleasantness. . . . Almayer for a moment felt very angry with Lingard. He made him responsible for the anguish he suffered from, for the anguish of doubt and fear; for compelling him--the practical and innocent Almayer--to such painful efforts of mind in order to find out some issue for absurd situations created by the unreasonable sentimentality of Lingard's unpractical impulses.

"Now if the fellow were dead it would be all right," said Almayer to the verandah.

He stirred a little, and scratching his nose thoughtfully, revelled in a short flight of fancy, showing him his own image crouching in a big boat, that floated arrested--say fifty yards off--abreast of Willems' landing-place. In the bottom of the boat there was a gun. A loaded gun. One of the boatmen would shout, and Willems would answer--from the bushes. The rascal would be suspicious. Of course. Then the man would wave a piece of paper urging Willems to come to the landing-place and receive an important message. "From the Rajah Laut" the man would yell as the boat edged in-shore, and that would fetch Willems out. Wouldn't it? Rather! And Almayer saw himself jumping up at the right moment, taking aim, pulling the trigger--and Willems tumbling over, his head in the water--the swine!

He seemed to hear the report of the shot. It made him thrill from head to foot where he stood. . . . How simple! . . . Unfortunate . . . Lingard . . . He sighed, shook his head. Pity. Couldn't be done. And couldn't leave him there either!

Suppose the Arabs were to get hold of him again--for instance to lead an expedition up the river! Goodness only knows what harm would come of it. . . .

The balance was at rest now and inclining to the side of immediate action. Almayer walked to the door, walked up very close to it, knocked loudly, and turned his head away, looking frightened for a moment at what he had done. After waiting for a while he put his ear against the panel and listened. Nothing. He composed his features into an agreeable expression while he stood listening and thinking to himself: I hear her. Crying. Eh? I believe she has lost the little wits she had and is crying night and day since I began to prepare her for the news of her husband's death--as Lingard told me. I wonder what she thinks. It's just like father to make me invent all these stories for nothing at all. Out of kindness. Kindness! Damn! . . . She isn't deaf, surely.

He knocked again, then said in a friendly tone, grinning benevolently at the closed door--

"It's me, Mrs. Willems. I want to speak to you. I have . . . have . . . important news. . . ."

"What is it?"

"News," repeated Almayer, distinctly. "News about your husband. Your husband! . . . Damn him!" he added, under his breath.

He heard a stumbling rush inside. Things were overturned. Joanna's agitated voice cried--

"News! What? What? I am coming out."

"No," shouted Almayer. "Put on some clothes, Mrs. Willems, and let me in. It's . . . very confidential. You have a candle, haven't you?"

She was knocking herself about blindly amongst the furniture in that room. The candlestick was upset. Matches were struck ineffectually. The matchbox fell. He heard her drop on her knees and grope over the floor while she kept on moaning in maddened distraction.

"Oh, my God! News! Yes . . . yes. . . . Ah! where . . . where . . . candle. Oh, my God! . . . I can't find . . . Don't go away, for the love of Heaven . . ."

"I don't want to go away," said Almayer, impatiently, through the keyhole; "but look sharp. It's coni . . . it's pressing."

He stamped his foot lightly, waiting with his hand on the door-handle. He thought anxiously: The woman's a perfect idiot. Why should I go away? She will be off her head. She will never catch my meaning. She's too stupid.

She was moving now inside the room hurriedly and in silence. He waited. There was a moment of perfect stillness in there, and then she spoke in an exhausted voice, in words that were shaped out of an expiring sigh--out of a sigh light and profound, like words breathed out by a woman before going off into a dead faint--

"Come in."

He pushed the door. Ali, coming through the passage with an armful of pillows and blankets pressed to his breast high up under his chin, caught sight of his master before the door closed behind him. He was so astonished that he dropped his bundle and stood staring at the door for a long time. He heard the voice of his master talking. Talking to that Sirani woman! Who was she? He had never thought about that really. He speculated for a while hazily upon things in general. She was a Sirani woman--and ugly. He made a disdainful grimace, picked up the bedding, and went about his work, slinging the hammock between two uprights of the verandah. . . . Those things did not concern him. She was ugly, and brought here by the Rajah Laut, and his master spoke to her in the night. Very well. He, Ali, had his work to do. Sling the hammock--go round and see that the watchmen were awake--take a look at the moorings of the boats, at the padlock of the big storehouse--then go to sleep. To sleep! He shivered pleasantly. He leaned with both arms over his master's hammock and fell into a light doze.

A scream, unexpected, piercing--a scream beginning at once in the highest pitch of a woman's voice and then cut short, so short that it suggested the swift work of death--caused Ali to jump on one side away from the hammock, and the silence that succeeded seemed to him as startling as the awful shriek. He was thunderstruck with surprise. Almayer came out of the office, leaving the door ajar, passed close to his servant without taking any notice, and made straight for the water-chatty hung on a nail in a draughty place. He took it down and came back, missing the petrified Ali by an inch. He moved with long strides, yet, notwithstanding his haste, stopped short before the door, and, throwing his head back, poured a thin stream of water down his throat. While he came and went, while he stopped to drink, while he did all this, there came steadily from the dark room the sound of feeble and persistent crying, the crying of a sleepy and frightened child. After he had drunk, Almayer went in, closing the door carefully.

Ali did not budge. That Sirani woman shrieked! He felt an immense curiosity very unusual to his stolid disposition. He could not take his eyes off the door. Was she

dead in there? How interesting and funny! He stood with open mouth till he heard again the rattle of the door-handle. Master coming out. He pivoted on his heels with great rapidity and made believe to be absorbed in the contemplation of the night outside. He heard Almayer moving about behind his back. Chairs were displaced. His master sat down.

"Ali," said Almayer.

His face was gloomy and thoughtful. He looked at his head man, who had approached the table, then he pulled out his watch. It was going. Whenever Lingard was in Sambir Almayer's watch was going. He would set it by the cabin clock, telling himself every time that he must really keep that watch going for the future. And every time, when Lingard went away, he would let it run down and would measure his weariness by sunrises and sunsets in an apathetic indifference to mere hours; to hours only; to hours that had no importance in Sambir life, in the tired stagnation of empty days; when nothing mattered to him but the quality of guttah and the size of rattans; where there were no small hopes to be watched for; where to him there was nothing interesting, nothing supportable, nothing desirable to expect; nothing bitter but the slowness of the passing days; nothing sweet but the hope, the distant and glorious hope--the hope wearying, aching and precious, of getting away.

He looked at the watch. Half-past eight. Ali waited stolidly.

"Go to the settlement," said Almayer, "and tell Mahmat Banjer to come and speak to me to-night."

Ali went off muttering. He did not like his errand. Banjer and his two brothers were Bajow vagabonds who had appeared lately in Sambir and had been allowed to take possession of a tumbledown abandoned hut, on three posts, belonging to Lingard & Co., and standing just outside their fence. Ali disapproved of the favour shown to those strangers. Any kind of dwelling was valuable in Sambir at that time, and if master did not want that old rotten house he might have given it to him, Ali, who was his servant, instead of bestowing it upon those bad men. Everybody knew they were bad. It was well known that they had stolen a boat from Hinopari, who was very aged and feeble and had no sons; and that afterwards, by the truculent recklessness of their demeanour, they had frightened the poor old man into holding his tongue about it. Yet everybody knew of it. It was one of the tolerated scandals of Sambir, disapproved and accepted, a manifestation of that base acquiescence in success, of that inexpressed and cowardly toleration of strength, that exists, infamous and irremediable, at the bottom of all hearts, in all societies; whenever men congregate; in bigger and more virtuous places than Sambir, and in Sambir also, where, as in other places,

one man could steal a boat with impunity while another would have no right to look at a paddle.

Almayer, leaning back in his chair, meditated. The more he thought, the more he felt convinced that Banjer and his brothers were exactly the men he wanted. Those fellows were sea gipsies, and could disappear without attracting notice; and if they returned, nobody--and Lingard least of all--would dream of seeking information from them. Moreover, they had no personal interest of any kind in Sambir affairs--had taken no sides--would know nothing anyway.

He called in a strong voice: "Mrs. Willems!"

She came out quickly, almost startling him, so much did she appear as though she had surged up through the floor, on the other side of the table. The lamp was between them, and Almayer moved it aside, looking up at her from his chair. She was crying. She was crying gently, silently, in a ceaseless welling up of tears that did not fall in drops, but seemed to overflow in a clear sheet from under her eyelids--seemed to flow at once all over her face, her cheeks, and over her chin that glistened with moisture in the light. Her breast and her shoulders were shaken repeatedly by a convulsive and noiseless catching in her breath, and after every spasmodic sob her sorrowful little head, tied up in a red kerchief, trembled on her long neck, round which her bony hand gathered and clasped the disarranged dress.

"Compose yourself, Mrs. Willems," said Almayer.

She emitted an inarticulate sound that seemed to be a faint, a very far off, a hardly audible cry of mortal distress. Then the tears went on flowing in profound stillness.

"You must understand that I have told you all this because I am your friend--real friend," said Almayer, after looking at her for some time with visible dissatisfaction. "You, his wife, ought to know the danger he is in. Captain Lingard is a terrible man, you know."

She blubbered out, sniffing and sobbing together.

"Do you . . . you . . . speak . . . the . . . the truth now?"

"Upon my word of honour. On the head of my child," protested Almayer. "I had to deceive you till now because of Captain Lingard. But I couldn't bear it. Think only what a risk I run in telling you--if ever Lingard was to know! Why should I do it? Pure friendship. Dear Peter was my colleague in Macassar for years, you know."

"What shall I do . . . what shall I do!" she exclaimed, faintly, looking around on every side as if she could not make up her mind which way to rush off.

"You must help him to clear out, now Lingard is away. He offended Lingard, and that's no joke. Lingard said he would kill him. He will do it, too," said Almayer, earnestly.

She wrung her hands. "Oh! the wicked man. The wicked, wicked man!" she moaned, swaying her body from side to side.

"Yes. Yes! He is terrible," assented Almayer. "You must not lose any time. I say! Do you understand me, Mrs. Willems? Think of your husband. Of your poor husband. How happy he will be. You will bring him his life--actually his life. Think of him."

She ceased her swaying movement, and now, with her head sunk between her shoulders, she hugged herself with both her arms; and she stared at Almayer with wild eyes, while her teeth chattered, rattling violently and uninterruptedly, with a very loud sound, in the deep peace of the house.

"Oh! Mother of God!" she wailed. "I am a miserable woman. Will he forgive me? The poor, innocent man. Will he forgive me? Oh, Mr. Almayer, he is so severe. Oh! help me. . . . I dare not. . . . You don't know what I've done to him. . . . I daren't! . . . I can't! . . . God help me!"

The last words came in a despairing cry. Had she been flayed alive she could not have sent to heaven a more terrible, a more heartrending and anguished plaint.

"Sh! Sh!" hissed Almayer, jumping up. "You will wake up everybody with your shouting."

She kept on sobbing then without any noise, and Almayer stared at her in boundless astonishment. The idea that, maybe, he had done wrong by confiding in her, upset him so much that for a moment he could not find a connected thought in his head.

At last he said: "I swear to you that your husband is in such a position that he would welcome the devil . . . listen well to me . . . the devil himself if the devil came to him in a canoe. Unless I am much mistaken," he added, under his breath. Then again, loudly: "If you have any little difference to make up with him, I assure you--I swear to you--this is your time!"

The ardently persuasive tone of his words--he thought--would have carried irresistible conviction to a graven image. He noticed with satisfaction that Joanna seemed to have got some inkling of his meaning. He continued, speaking slowly--

"Look here, Mrs. Willems. I can't do anything. Daren't. But I will tell you what I will do. There will come here in about ten minutes a Bugis man--you know the language; you are from Macassar. He has a large canoe; he can take you there. To the new Rajah's clearing, tell him. They are three brothers, ready for anything if you pay them . . . you have some money. Haven't you?"

She stood--perhaps listening--but giving no sign of intelligence, and stared at the floor in sudden immobility, as if the horror of the situation, the overwhelming sense of her own wickedness and of her husband's great danger, had stunned her brain, her heart, her will--had left her no faculty but that of breathing and of keeping on her feet. Almayer swore to himself with much mental profanity that he had never seen a more useless, a more stupid being.

"D'ye hear me?" he said, raising his voice. "Do try to understand. Have you any money? Money. Dollars. Guilders. Money! What's the matter with you?"

Without raising her eyes she said, in a voice that sounded weak and undecided as if she had been making a desperate effort of memory--

"The house has been sold. Mr. Hudig was angry."

Almayer gripped the edge of the table with all his strength. He resisted manfully an almost uncontrollable impulse to fly at her and box her ears.

"It was sold for money, I suppose," he said with studied and incisive calmness. "Have you got it? Who has got it?"

She looked up at him, raising her swollen eyelids with a great effort, in a sorrowful expression of her drooping mouth, of her whole besmudged and tear-stained face. She whispered resignedly--

"Leonard had some. He wanted to get married. And uncle Antonio; he sat at the door and would not go away. And Aghostina--she is so poor . . . and so many, many children--little children. And Luiz the engineer. He never said a word against my husband. Also our cousin Maria. She came and shouted, and my head was so bad, and my heart was worse. Then cousin Salvator and old Daniel da Souza, who . . ."

Almayer had listened to her speechless with rage. He thought: I must give money

now to that idiot. Must! Must get her out of the way now before Lingard is back. He made two attempts to speak before he managed to burst out--

"I don't want to know their blasted names! Tell me, did all those infernal people leave you anything? To you! That's what I want to know!"

"I have two hundred and fifteen dollars," said Joanna, in a frightened tone.

Almayer breathed freely. He spoke with great friendliness--

"That will do. It isn't much, but it will do. Now when the man comes I will be out of the way. You speak to him. Give him some money; only a little, mind! And promise more. Then when you get there you will be guided by your husband, of course. And don't forget to tell him that Captain Lingard is at the mouth of the river--the northern entrance. You will remember. Won't you? The northern branch. Lingard is--death."

Joanna shivered. Almayer went on rapidly--

"I would have given you money if you had wanted it. 'Pon my word! Tell your husband I've sent you to him. And tell him not to lose any time. And also say to him from me that we shall meet--some day. That I could not die happy unless I met him once more. Only once. I love him, you know. I prove it. Tremendous risk to me--this business is!"

Joanna snatched his hand and before he knew what she would be at, pressed it to her lips.

"Mrs. Willems! Don't. What are you . . ." cried the abashed Almayer, tearing his hand away.

"Oh, you are good!" she cried, with sudden exaltation, "You are noble . . . I shall pray every day . . . to all the saints . . . I shall . . ."

"Never mind . . . never mind!" stammered out Almayer, confusedly, without knowing very well what he was saying. "Only look out for Lingard. . . . I am happy to be able . . . in your sad situation . . . believe me. . . ."

They stood with the table between them, Joanna looking down, and her face, in the half-light above the lamp, appeared like a soiled carving of old ivory--a carving, with accentuated anxious hollows, of old, very old ivory. Almayer looked at her, mistrustful, hopeful. He was saying to himself: How frail she is! I could upset her by blowing at her. She seems to have got some idea of what must be

done, but will she have the strength to carry it through? I must trust to luck now!

Somewhere far in the back courtyard Ali's voice rang suddenly in angry remonstrance--

"Why did you shut the gate, O father of all mischief? You a watchman! You are only a wild man. Did I not tell you I was coming back? You . . ."

"I am off, Mrs. Willems," exclaimed Almayer. "That man is here--with my servant. Be calm. Try to . . ."

He heard the footsteps of the two men in the passage, and without finishing his sentence ran rapidly down the steps towards the riverside.

CHAPTER TWO

For the next half-hour Almayer, who wanted to give Joanna plenty of time, stumbled amongst the lumber in distant parts of his enclosure, sneaked along the fences; or held his breath, flattened against grass walls behind various outhouses: all this to escape Ali's inconveniently zealous search for his master. He heard him talk with the head watchman--sometimes quite close to him in the darkness--then moving off, coming back, wondering, and, as the time passed, growing uneasy.

"He did not fall into the river?--say, thou blind watcher!" Ali was growling in a bullying tone, to the other man. "He told me to fetch Mahmat, and when I came back swiftly I found him not in the house. There is that Sirani woman there, so that Mahmat cannot steal anything, but it is in my mind, the night will be half gone before I rest."

He shouted--

"Master! O master! O mast . . ."

"What are you making that noise for?" said Almayer, with severity, stepping out close to them.

The two Malays leaped away from each other in their surprise.

"You may go. I don't want you any more tonight, Ali," went on Almayer. "Is Mahmat there?"

"Unless the ill-behaved savage got tired of waiting. Those men know not politeness. They should not be spoken to by white men," said Ali, resentfully.

Almayer went towards the house, leaving his servants to wonder where he had sprung from so unexpectedly. The watchman hinted obscurely at powers of invisibility possessed by the master, who often at night . . . Ali interrupted him with great scorn. Not every white man has the power. Now, the Rajah Laut could make himself invisible. Also, he could be in two places at once, as everybody knew; except he--the useless watchman--who knew no more about white men than a wild pig! Ya-wa!

And Ali strolled towards his hut, yawning loudly.

As Almayer ascended the steps he heard the noise of a door flung to, and when he entered the verandah he saw only Mahmat there, close to the doorway of the passage. Mahmat seemed to be caught in the very act of slinking away, and Almayer noticed that with satisfaction. Seeing the white man, the Malay gave up his attempt and leaned against the wall. He was a short, thick, broad-shouldered man with very dark skin and a wide, stained, bright-red mouth that uncovered, when he spoke, a close row of black and glistening teeth. His eyes were big, prominent, dreamy and restless. He said sulkily, looking all over the place from under his eyebrows--

"White Tuan, you are great and strong--and I a poor man. Tell me what is your will, and let me go in the name of God. It is late."

Almayer examined the man thoughtfully. How could he find out whether . . . He had it! Lately he had employed that man and his two brothers as extra boatmen to carry stores, provisions, and new axes to a camp of rattan cutters some distance up the river. A three days' expedition. He would test him now in that way. He said negligently--

"I want you to start at once for the camp, with surat for the Kavitan. One dollar a day."

The man appeared plunged in dull hesitation, but Almayer, who knew his Malays, felt pretty sure from his aspect that nothing would induce the fellow to go. He urged--

"It is important--and if you are swift I shall give two dollars for the last day."

"No, Tuan. We do not go," said the man, in a hoarse whisper.

"Why?"

"We start on another journey."

"Where?"

"To a place we know of," said Mahmat, a little louder, in a stubborn manner, and looking at the floor.

Almayer experienced a feeling of immense joy. He said, with affected annoyance--

"You men live in my house and it is as if it were your own. I may want my house soon."

Mahmat looked up.

"We are men of the sea and care not for a roof when we have a canoe that will hold three, and a paddle apiece. The sea is our house. Peace be with you, Tuan."

He turned and went away rapidly, and Almayer heard him directly afterwards in the courtyard calling to the watchman to open the gate. Mahmat passed through the gate in silence, but before the bar had been put up behind him he had made up his mind that if the white man ever wanted to eject him from his hut, he would burn it and also as many of the white man's other buildings as he could safely get at. And he began to call his brothers before he was inside the dilapidated dwelling.

"All's well!" muttered Almayer to himself, taking some loose Java tobacco from a drawer in the table. "Now if anything comes out I am clear. I asked the man to go up the river. I urged him. He will say so himself. Good."

He began to charge the china bowl of his pipe, a pipe with a long cherry stem and a curved mouthpiece, pressing the tobacco down with his thumb and thinking: No. I sha'n't see her again. Don't want to. I will give her a good start, then go in chase--and send an express boat after father. Yes! that's it.

He approached the door of the office and said, holding his pipe away from his lips--

"Good luck to you, Mrs. Willems. Don't lose any time. You may get along by the bushes; the fence there is out of repair. Don't lose time. Don't forget that it is a matter of . . . life and death. And don't forget that I know nothing. I trust you."

He heard inside a noise as of a chest-lid falling down. She made a few steps. Then a sigh, profound and long, and some faint words which he did not catch. He moved away from the door on tiptoe, kicked off his slippers in a corner of the verandah, then entered the passage puffing at his pipe; entered cautiously in a gentle creaking of planks and turned into a curtained entrance to the left. There was a big room. On the floor a small binnacle lamp--that had found its way to the house years ago from the lumber-room of the Flash--did duty for a night-light. It glimmered very small and dull in the great darkness. Almayer walked to it, and picking it up revived the flame by pulling the wick with his fingers, which he shook directly after with a grimace of pain. Sleeping shapes, covered--head and all--with white sheets, lay about on the mats on the floor. In the middle of the room a small cot, under a square white mosquito net, stood--the only piece of furniture between the four walls--looking like an altar of transparent marble in a

gloomy temple. A woman, half-lying on the floor with her head dropped on her arms, which were crossed on the foot of the cot, woke up as Almayer strode over her outstretched legs. She sat up without a word, leaning forward, and, clasping her knees, stared down with sad eyes, full of sleep.

Almayer, the smoky light in one hand, his pipe in the other, stood before the curtained cot looking at his daughter--at his little Nina--at that part of himself, at that small and unconscious particle of humanity that seemed to him to contain all his soul. And it was as if he had been bathed in a bright and warm wave of tenderness, in a tenderness greater than the world, more precious than life; the only thing real, living, sweet, tangible, beautiful and safe amongst the elusive, the distorted and menacing shadows of existence. On his face, lit up indistinctly by the short yellow flame of the lamp, came a look of rapt attention while he looked into her future. And he could see things there! Things charming and splendid passing before him in a magic unrolling of resplendent pictures; pictures of events brilliant, happy, inexpressibly glorious, that would make up her life. He would do it! He would do it. He would! He would--for that child! And as he stood in the still night, lost in his enchanting and gorgeous dreams, while the ascending, thin thread of tobacco smoke spread into a faint bluish cloud above his head, he appeared strangely impressive and ecstatic: like a devout and mystic worshipper, adoring, transported and mute; burning incense before a shrine, a diaphanous shrine of a child-idol with closed eyes; before a pure and vaporous shrine of a small god--fragile, powerless, unconscious and sleeping.

When Ali, roused by loud and repeated shouting of his name, stumbled outside the door of his hut, he saw a narrow streak of trembling gold above the forests and a pale sky with faded stars overhead: signs of the coming day. His master stood before the door waving a piece of paper in his hand and shouting excitedly--"Quick, Ali! Quick!" When he saw his servant he rushed forward, and pressing the paper on him objurgated him, in tones which induced Ali to think that something awful had happened, to hurry up and get the whale-boat ready to go immediately--at once, at once--after Captain Lingard. Ali remonstrated, agitated also, having caught the infection of distracted haste.

"If must go quick, better canoe. Whale-boat no can catch, same as small canoe."

"No, no! Whale-boat! whale-boat! You dolt! you wretch!" howled Almayer, with all the appearance of having gone mad. "Call the men! Get along with it. Fly!"

And Ali rushed about the courtyard kicking the doors of huts open to put his head in and yell frightfully inside; and as he dashed from hovel to hovel, men shivering and sleepy were coming out, looking after him stupidly, while they scratched their ribs with bewildered apathy. It was hard work to put them in

motion. They wanted time to stretch themselves and to shiver a little. Some wanted food. One said he was sick. Nobody knew where the rudder was. Ali darted here and there, ordering, abusing, pushing one, then another, and stopping in his exertions at times to wring his hands hastily and groan, because the whale-boat was much slower than the worst canoe and his master would not listen to his protestations.

Almayer saw the boat go off at last, pulled anyhow by men that were cold, hungry, and sulky; and he remained on the jetty watching it down the reach. It was broad day then, and the sky was perfectly cloudless. Almayer went up to the house for a moment. His household was all astir and wondering at the strange disappearance of the Sirani woman, who had taken her child and had left her luggage. Almayer spoke to no one, got his revolver, and went down to the river again. He jumped into a small canoe and paddled himself towards the schooner. He worked very leisurely, but as soon as he was nearly alongside he began to hail the silent craft with the tone and appearance of a man in a tremendous hurry.

"Schooner ahoy! schooner ahoy!" he shouted.

A row of blank faces popped up above the bulwark. After a while a man with a woolly head of hair said--

"Sir!"

"The mate! the mate! Call him, steward!" said Almayer, excitedly, making a frantic grab at a rope thrown down to him by somebody.

In less than a minute the mate put his head over. He asked, surprised--

"What can I do for you, Mr. Almayer?"

"Let me have the gig at once, Mr. Swan--at once. I ask in Captain Lingard's name. I must have it. Matter of life and death."

The mate was impressed by Almayer's agitation

"You shall have it, sir. . . . Man the gig there! Bear a hand, serang! . . . It's hanging astern, Mr. Almayer," he said, looking down again. "Get into it, sir. The men are coming down by the painter."

By the time Almayer had clambered over into the stern sheets, four calashes were in the boat and the oars were being passed over the taffrail. The mate was looking on. Suddenly he said--

"Is it dangerous work? Do you want any help? I would come . . ."

"Yes, yes!" cried Almayer. "Come along. Don't lose a moment. Go and get your revolver. Hurry up! hurry up!"

Yet, notwithstanding his feverish anxiety to be off, he lolled back very quiet and unconcerned till the mate got in and, passing over the thwarts, sat down by his side. Then he seemed to wake up, and called out--

"Let go--let go the painter!"

"Let go the painter--the painter!" yelled the bowman, jerking at it.

People on board also shouted "Let go!" to one another, till it occurred at last to somebody to cast off the rope; and the boat drifted rapidly away from the schooner in the sudden silencing of all voices.

Almayer steered. The mate sat by his side, pushing the cartridges into the chambers of his revolver. When the weapon was loaded he asked--

"What is it? Are you after somebody?"

"Yes," said Almayer, curtly, with his eyes fixed ahead on the river. "We must catch a dangerous man."

"I like a bit of a chase myself," declared the mate, and then, discouraged by Almayer's aspect of severe thoughtfulness, said nothing more.

Nearly an hour passed. The calashes stretched forward head first and lay back with their faces to the sky, alternately, in a regular swing that sent the boat flying through the water; and the two sitters, very upright in the stern sheets, swayed rhythmically a little at every stroke of the long oars plied vigorously.

The mate observed: "The tide is with us."

"The current always runs down in this river," said Almayer.

"Yes--I know," retorted the other; "but it runs faster on the ebb. Look by the land at the way we get over the ground! A five-knot current here, I should say."

"H'm!" growled Almayer. Then suddenly: "There is a passage between two islands that will save us four miles. But at low water the two islands, in the dry season,

are like one with only a mud ditch between them. Still, it's worth trying."

"Ticklish job that, on a falling tide," said the mate, coolly. "You know best whether there's time to get through."

"I will try," said Almayer, watching the shore intently. "Look out now!"

He tugged hard at the starboard yoke-line.

"Lay in your oars!" shouted the mate.

The boat swept round and shot through the narrow opening of a creek that broadened out before the craft had time to lose its way.

"Out oars! . . . Just room enough," muttered the mate.

It was a sombre creek of black water speckled with the gold of scattered sunlight falling through the boughs that met overhead in a soaring, restless arc full of gentle whispers passing, tremulous, aloft amongst the thick leaves. The creepers climbed up the trunks of serried trees that leaned over, looking insecure and undermined by floods which had eaten away the earth from under their roots. And the pungent, acrid smell of rotting leaves, of flowers, of blossoms and plants dying in that poisonous and cruel gloom, where they pined for sunshine in vain, seemed to lay heavy, to press upon the shiny and stagnant water in its tortuous windings amongst the everlasting and invincible shadows.

Almayer looked anxious. He steered badly. Several times the blades of the oars got foul of the bushes on one side or the other, checking the way of the gig. During one of those occurrences, while they were getting clear, one of the calashes said something to the others in a rapid whisper. They looked down at the water. So did the mate.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Eh, Mr. Almayer! Look! The water is running out. See there! We will be caught."

"Back! back! We must go back!" cried Almayer.

"Perhaps better go on."

"No; back! back!"

He pulled at the steering line, and ran the nose of the boat into the bank. Time was lost again in getting clear.

"Give way, men! give way!" urged the mate, anxiously.

The men pulled with set lips and dilated nostrils, breathing hard.

"Too late," said the mate, suddenly. "The oars touch the bottom already. We are done."

The boat stuck. The men laid in the oars, and sat, panting, with crossed arms.

"Yes, we are caught," said Almayer, composedly. "That is unlucky!"

The water was falling round the boat. The mate watched the patches of mud coming to the surface. Then in a moment he laughed, and pointing his finger at the creek--

"Look!" he said; "the blamed river is running away from us. Here's the last drop of water clearing out round that bend."

Almayer lifted his head. The water was gone, and he looked only at a curved track of mud--of mud soft and black, hiding fever, rottenness, and evil under its level and glazed surface.

"We are in for it till the evening," he said, with cheerful resignation. "I did my best. Couldn't help it."

"We must sleep the day away," said the mate. "There's nothing to eat," he added, gloomily.

Almayer stretched himself in the stern sheets. The Malays curled down between thwarts.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said the mate, starting up after a long pause. "I was in a devil of a hurry to go and pass the day stuck in the mud. Here's a holiday for you! Well! well!"

They slept or sat unmoving and patient. As the sun mounted higher the breeze died out, and perfect stillness reigned in the empty creek. A troop of long-nosed monkeys appeared, and crowding on the outer boughs, contemplated the boat and the motionless men in it with grave and sorrowful intensity, disturbed now and then by irrational outbreaks of mad gesticulation. A little bird with sapphire breast balanced a slender twig across a slanting beam of light, and flashed in it to and fro like a gem dropped from the sky. His minute round eye stared at the

strange and tranquil creatures in the boat. After a while he sent out a thin twitter that sounded impertinent and funny in the solemn silence of the great wilderness; in the great silence full of struggle and death.

CHAPTER THREE

On Lingard's departure solitude and silence closed round Willems; the cruel solitude of one abandoned by men; the reproachful silence which surrounds an outcast ejected by his kind, the silence unbroken by the slightest whisper of hope; an immense and impenetrable silence that swallows up without echo the murmur of regret and the cry of revolt. The bitter peace of the abandoned clearings entered his heart, in which nothing could live now but the memory and hate of his past. Not remorse. In the breast of a man possessed by the masterful consciousness of his individuality with its desires and its rights; by the immovable conviction of his own importance, of an importance so indisputable and final that it clothes all his wishes, endeavours, and mistakes with the dignity of unavoidable fate, there could be no place for such a feeling as that of remorse.

The days passed. They passed unnoticed, unseen, in the rapid blaze of glaring sunrises, in the short glow of tender sunsets, in the crushing oppression of high noons without a cloud. How many days? Two--three--or more? He did not know. To him, since Lingard had gone, the time seemed to roll on in profound darkness. All was night within him. All was gone from his sight. He walked about blindly in the deserted courtyards, amongst the empty houses that, perched high on their posts, looked down inimically on him, a white stranger, a man from other lands; seemed to look hostile and mute out of all the memories of native life that lingered between their decaying walls. His wandering feet stumbled against the blackened brands of extinct fires, kicking up a light black dust of cold ashes that flew in drifting clouds and settled to leeward on the fresh grass sprouting from the hard ground, between the shade trees. He moved on, and on; ceaseless, unresting, in widening circles, in zigzagging paths that led to no issue; he struggled on wearily with a set, distressed face behind which, in his tired brain, seethed his thoughts: restless, sombre, tangled, chilling, horrible and venomous, like a nestful of snakes.

From afar, the bleared eyes of the old serving woman, the sombre gaze of Aissa followed the gaunt and tottering figure in its unceasing prowl along the fences, between the houses, amongst the wild luxuriance of riverside thickets. Those three human beings abandoned by all were like shipwrecked people left on an insecure and slippery ledge by the retiring tide of an angry sea--listening to its distant roar, living anguished between the menace of its return and the hopeless horror of their solitude--in the midst of a tempest of passion, of regret, of disgust, of despair. The breath of the storm had cast two of them there, robbed of everything--even of resignation. The third, the decrepit witness of their struggle and their torture, accepted her own dull conception of facts; of strength and

youth gone; of her useless old age; of her last servitude; of being thrown away by her chief, by her nearest, to use up the last and worthless remnant of flickering life between those two incomprehensible and sombre outcasts: a shrivelled, an unmoved, a passive companion of their disaster.

To the river Willems turned his eyes like a captive that looks fixedly at the door of his cell. If there was any hope in the world it would come from the river, by the river. For hours together he would stand in sunlight while the sea breeze sweeping over the lonely reach fluttered his ragged garments; the keen salt breeze that made him shiver now and then under the flood of intense heat. He looked at the brown and sparkling solitude of the flowing water, of the water flowing ceaseless and free in a soft, cool murmur of ripples at his feet. The world seemed to end there. The forests of the other bank appeared unattainable, enigmatical, for ever beyond reach like the stars of heaven--and as indifferent. Above and below, the forests on his side of the river came down to the water in a serried multitude of tall, immense trees towering in a great spread of twisted boughs above the thick undergrowth; great, solid trees, looking sombre, severe, and malevolently stolid, like a giant crowd of pitiless enemies pressing round silently to witness his slow agony. He was alone, small, crushed. He thought of escape--of something to be done. What? A raft! He imagined himself working at it, feverishly, desperately; cutting down trees, fastening the logs together and then drifting down with the current, down to the sea into the straits. There were ships there--ships, help, white men. Men like himself. Good men who would rescue him, take him away, take him far away where there was trade, and houses, and other men that could understand him exactly, appreciate his capabilities; where there was proper food, and money; where there were beds, knives, forks, carriages, brass bands, cool drinks, churches with well-dressed people praying in them. He would pray also. The superior land of refined delights where he could sit on a chair, eat his tiffin off a white tablecloth, nod to fellows--good fellows; he would be popular; always was--where he could be virtuous, correct, do business, draw a salary, smoke cigars, buy things in shops--have boots . . . be happy, free, become rich. O God! What was wanted? Cut down a few trees. No! One would do. They used to make canoes by burning out a tree trunk, he had heard. Yes! One would do. One tree to cut down . . . He rushed forward, and suddenly stood still as if rooted in the ground. He had a pocket-knife.

And he would throw himself down on the ground by the riverside. He was tired, exhausted; as if that raft had been made, the voyage accomplished, the fortune attained. A glaze came over his staring eyes, over his eyes that gazed hopelessly at the rising river where big logs and uprooted trees drifted in the shine of mid-stream: a long procession of black and ragged specks. He could swim out and drift away on one of these trees. Anything to escape! Anything! Any risk! He could fasten himself up between the dead branches. He was torn by desire, by fear; his

heart was wrung by the faltering of his courage. He turned over, face downwards, his head on his arms. He had a terrible vision of shadowless horizons where the blue sky and the blue sea met; or a circular and blazing emptiness where a dead tree and a dead man drifted together, endlessly, up and down, upon the brilliant undulations of the straits. No ships there. Only death. And the river led to it.

He sat up with a profound groan.

Yes, death. Why should he die? No! Better solitude, better hopeless waiting, alone. Alone. No! he was not alone, he saw death looking at him from everywhere; from the bushes, from the clouds--he heard her speaking to him in the murmur of the river, filling the space, touching his heart, his brain with a cold hand. He could see and think of nothing else. He saw it--the sure death--everywhere. He saw it so close that he was always on the point of throwing out his arms to keep it off. It poisoned all he saw, all he did; the miserable food he ate, the muddy water he drank; it gave a frightful aspect to sunrises and sunsets, to the brightness of hot noon, to the cooling shadows of the evenings. He saw the horrible form among the big trees, in the network of creepers in the fantastic outlines of leaves, of the great indented leaves that seemed to be so many enormous hands with big broad palms, with stiff fingers outspread to lay hold of him; hands gently stirring, or hands arrested in a frightful immobility, with a stillness attentive and watching for the opportunity to take him, to enlace him, to strangle him, to hold him till he died; hands that would hold him dead, that would never let go, that would cling to his body for ever till it perished--disappeared in their frantic and tenacious grasp.

And yet the world was full of life. All the things, all the men he knew, existed, moved, breathed; and he saw them in a long perspective, far off, diminished, distinct, desirable, unattainable, precious . . . lost for ever. Round him, ceaselessly, there went on without a sound the mad turmoil of tropical life. After he had died all this would remain! He wanted to clasp, to embrace solid things; he had an immense craving for sensations; for touching, pressing, seeing, handling, holding on, to all these things. All this would remain--remain for years, for ages, for ever. After he had miserably died there, all this would remain, would live, would exist in joyous sunlight, would breathe in the coolness of serene nights. What for, then? He would be dead. He would be stretched upon the warm moisture of the ground, feeling nothing, seeing nothing, knowing nothing; he would lie stiff, passive, rotting slowly; while over him, under him, through him--unopposed, busy, hurried--the endless and minute throngs of insects, little shining monsters of repulsive shapes, with horns, with claws, with pincers, would swarm in streams, in rushes, in eager struggle for his body; would swarm countless, persistent, ferocious and greedy--till there would remain nothing but the white gleam of bleaching bones in the long grass; in the long grass that would

shoot its feathery heads between the bare and polished ribs. There would be that only left of him; nobody would miss him; no one would remember him.

Nonsense! It could not be. There were ways out of this. Somebody would turn up. Some human beings would come. He would speak, entreat--use force to extort help from them. He felt strong; he was very strong. He would . . . The discouragement, the conviction of the futility of his hopes would return in an acute sensation of pain in his heart. He would begin again his aimless wanderings. He tramped till he was ready to drop, without being able to calm by bodily fatigue the trouble of his soul. There was no rest, no peace within the cleared grounds of his prison. There was no relief but in the black release of sleep, of sleep without memory and without dreams; in the sleep coming brutal and heavy, like the lead that kills. To forget in annihilating sleep; to tumble headlong, as if stunned, out of daylight into the night of oblivion, was for him the only, the rare respite from this existence which he lacked the courage to endure--or to end.

He lived, he struggled with the inarticulate delirium of his thoughts under the eyes of the silent Aissa. She shared his torment in the poignant wonder, in the acute longing, in the despairing inability to understand the cause of his anger and of his repulsion; the hate of his looks; the mystery of his silence; the menace of his rare words--of those words in the speech of white people that were thrown at her with rage, with contempt, with the evident desire to hurt her; to hurt her who had given herself, her life--all she had to give--to that white man; to hurt her who had wanted to show him the way to true greatness, who had tried to help him, in her woman's dream of everlasting, enduring, unchangeable affection. From the short contact with the whites in the crashing collapse of her old life, there remained with her the imposing idea of irresistible power and of ruthless strength. She had found a man of their race--and with all their qualities. All whites are alike. But this man's heart was full of anger against his own people, full of anger existing there by the side of his desire of her. And to her it had been an intoxication of hope for great things born in the proud and tender consciousness of her influence. She had heard the passing whisper of wonder and fear in the presence of his hesitation, of his resistance, of his compromises; and yet with a woman's belief in the durable steadfastness of hearts, in the irresistible charm of her own personality, she had pushed him forward, trusting the future, blindly, hopefully; sure to attain by his side the ardent desire of her life, if she could only push him far beyond the possibility of retreat. She did not know, and could not conceive, anything of his--so exalted--ideals. She thought the man a warrior and a chief, ready for battle, violence, and treachery to his own people--for her. What more natural? Was he not a great, strong man? Those two, surrounded each by the impenetrable wall of their aspirations, were hopelessly alone, out of sight, out of earshot of each other; each the centre of dissimilar and

distant horizons; standing each on a different earth, under a different sky. She remembered his words, his eyes, his trembling lips, his outstretched hands; she remembered the great, the immeasurable sweetness of her surrender, that beginning of her power which was to last until death. He remembered the quaysides and the warehouses; the excitement of a life in a whirl of silver coins; the glorious uncertainty of a money hunt; his numerous successes, the lost possibilities of wealth and consequent glory. She, a woman, was the victim of her heart, of her woman's belief that there is nothing in the world but love--the everlasting thing. He was the victim of his strange principles, of his continence, of his blind belief in himself, of his solemn veneration for the voice of his boundless ignorance.

In a moment of his idleness, of suspense, of discouragement, she had come--that creature--and by the touch of her hand had destroyed his future, his dignity of a clever and civilized man; had awakened in his breast the infamous thing which had driven him to what he had done, and to end miserably in the wilderness and be forgotten, or else remembered with hate or contempt. He dared not look at her, because now whenever he looked at her his thought seemed to touch crime, like an outstretched hand. She could only look at him--and at nothing else. What else was there? She followed him with a timorous gaze, with a gaze for ever expecting, patient, and entreating. And in her eyes there was the wonder and desolation of an animal that knows only suffering, of the incomplete soul that knows pain but knows not hope; that can find no refuge from the facts of life in the illusory conviction of its dignity, of an exalted destiny beyond; in the heavenly consolation of a belief in the momentous origin of its hate.

For the first three days after Lingard went away he would not even speak to her. She preferred his silence to the sound of hated and incomprehensible words he had been lately addressing to her with a wild violence of manner, passing at once into complete apathy. And during these three days he hardly ever left the river, as if on that muddy bank he had felt himself nearer to his freedom. He would stay late; he would stay till sunset; he would look at the glow of gold passing away amongst sombre clouds in a bright red flush, like a splash of warm blood. It seemed to him ominous and ghastly with a foreboding of violent death that beckoned him from everywhere--even from the sky.

One evening he remained by the riverside long after sunset, regardless of the night mist that had closed round him, had wrapped him up and clung to him like a wet winding-sheet. A slight shiver recalled him to his senses, and he walked up the courtyard towards his house. Aissa rose from before the fire, that glimmered red through its own smoke, which hung thickening under the boughs of the big tree. She approached him from the side as he neared the plankway of the house. He saw her stop to let him begin his ascent. In the darkness her figure was like

the shadow of a woman with clasped hands put out beseechingly. He stopped--could not help glancing at her. In all the sombre gracefulness of the straight figure, her limbs, features--all was indistinct and vague but the gleam of her eyes in the faint starlight. He turned his head away and moved on. He could feel her footsteps behind him on the bending planks, but he walked up without turning his head. He knew what she wanted. She wanted to come in there. He shuddered at the thought of what might happen in the impenetrable darkness of that house if they were to find themselves alone--even for a moment. He stopped in the doorway, and heard her say--

"Let me come in. Why this anger? Why this silence? . . . Let me watch . . . by your side. . . . Have I not watched faithfully? Did harm ever come to you when you closed your eyes while I was by? . . . I have waited . .. I have waited for your smile, for your words . . . I can wait no more.. . . Look at me . . . speak to me. Is there a bad spirit in you? A bad spirit that has eaten up your courage and your love? Let me touch you. Forget all . . . All. Forget the wicked hearts, the angry faces . . . and remember only the day I came to you . . . to you! O my heart! O my life!"

The pleading sadness of her appeal filled the space with the tremor of her low tones, that carried tenderness and tears into the great peace of the sleeping world. All around them the forests, the clearings, the river, covered by the silent veil of night, seemed to wake up and listen to her words in attentive stillness. After the sound of her voice had died out in a stifled sigh they appeared to listen yet; and nothing stirred among the shapeless shadows but the innumerable fireflies that twinkled in changing clusters, in gliding pairs, in wandering and solitary points--like the glimmering drift of scattered star-dust.

Willems turned round slowly, reluctantly, as if compelled by main force. Her face was hidden in her hands, and he looked above her bent head, into the sombre brilliance of the night. It was one of those nights that give the impression of extreme vastness, when the sky seems higher, when the passing puffs of tepid breeze seem to bring with them faint whispers from beyond the stars. The air was full of sweet scent, of the scent charming, penetrating and violent like the impulse of love. He looked into that great dark place odorous with the breath of life, with the mystery of existence, renewed, fecund, indestructible; and he felt afraid of his solitude, of the solitude of his body, of the loneliness of his soul in the presence of this unconscious and ardent struggle, of this lofty indifference, of this merciless and mysterious purpose, perpetuating strife and death through the march of ages. For the second time in his life he felt, in a sudden sense of his significance, the need to send a cry for help into the wilderness, and for the second time he realized the hopelessness of its unconcern. He could shout for help on every side--and nobody would answer. He could stretch out his hands, he could call for aid,

for support, for sympathy, for relief--and nobody would come. Nobody. There was no one there--but that woman.

His heart was moved, softened with pity at his own abandonment. His anger against her, against her who was the cause of all his misfortunes, vanished before his extreme need for some kind of consolation. Perhaps--if he must resign himself to his fate--she might help him to forget. To forget! For a moment, in an access of despair so profound that it seemed like the beginning of peace, he planned the deliberate descent from his pedestal, the throwing away of his superiority, of all his hopes, of old ambitions, of the ungrateful civilization. For a moment, forgetfulness in her arms seemed possible; and lured by that possibility the semblance of renewed desire possessed his breast in a burst of reckless contempt for everything outside himself--in a savage disdain of Earth and of Heaven. He said to himself that he would not repent. The punishment for his only sin was too heavy. There was no mercy under Heaven. He did not want any. He thought, desperately, that if he could find with her again the madness of the past, the strange delirium that had changed him, that had worked his undoing, he would be ready to pay for it with an eternity of perdition. He was intoxicated by the subtle perfumes of the night; he was carried away by the suggestive stir of the warm breeze; he was possessed by the exaltation of the solitude, of the silence, of his memories, in the presence of that figure offering herself in a submissive and patient devotion; coming to him in the name of the past, in the name of those days when he could see nothing, think of nothing, desire nothing--but her embrace.

He took her suddenly in his arms, and she clasped her hands round his neck with a low cry of joy and surprise. He took her in his arms and waited for the transport, for the madness, for the sensations remembered and lost; and while she sobbed gently on his breast he held her and felt cold, sick, tired, exasperated with his failure--and ended by cursing himself. She clung to him trembling with the intensity of her happiness and her love. He heard her whispering--her face hidden on his shoulder--of past sorrow, of coming joy that would last for ever; of her unshaken belief in his love. She had always believed. Always! Even while his face was turned away from her in the dark days while his mind was wandering in his own land, amongst his own people. But it would never wander away from her any more, now it had come back. He would forget the cold faces and the hard hearts of the cruel people. What was there to remember? Nothing? Was it not so? . . .

He listened hopelessly to the faint murmur. He stood still and rigid, pressing her mechanically to his breast while he thought that there was nothing for him in the world. He was robbed of everything; robbed of his passion, of his liberty, of forgetfulness, of consolation. She, wild with delight, whispered on rapidly, of love,

of light, of peace, of long years. . . . He looked drearily above her head down into the deeper gloom of the courtyard. And, all at once, it seemed to him that he was peering into a sombre hollow, into a deep black hole full of decay and of whitened bones; into an immense and inevitable grave full of corruption where sooner or later he must, unavoidably, fall.

In the morning he came out early, and stood for a time in the doorway, listening to the light breathing behind him--in the house. She slept. He had not closed his eyes through all that night. He stood swaying--then leaned against the lintel of the door. He was exhausted, done up; fancied himself hardly alive. He had a disgusted horror of himself that, as he looked at the level sea of mist at his feet, faded quickly into dull indifference. It was like a sudden and final decrepitude of his senses, of his body, of his thoughts. Standing on the high platform, he looked over the expanse of low night fog above which, here and there, stood out the feathery heads of tall bamboo clumps and the round tops of single trees, resembling small islets emerging black and solid from a ghostly and impalpable sea. Upon the faintly luminous background of the eastern sky, the sombre line of the great forests bounded that smooth sea of white vapours with an appearance of a fantastic and unattainable shore.

He looked without seeing anything--thinking of himself. Before his eyes the light of the rising sun burst above the forest with the suddenness of an explosion. He saw nothing. Then, after a time, he murmured with conviction--speaking half aloud to himself in the shock of the penetrating thought:

"I am a lost man."

He shook his hand above his head in a gesture careless and tragic, then walked down into the mist that closed above him in shining undulations under the first breath of the morning breeze.

CHAPTER FOUR

Willems moved languidly towards the river, then retraced his steps to the tree and let himself fall on the seat under its shade. On the other side of the immense trunk he could hear the old woman moving about, sighing loudly, muttering to herself, snapping dry sticks, blowing up the fire. After a while a whiff of smoke drifted round to where he sat. It made him feel hungry, and that feeling was like a new indignity added to an intolerable load of humiliations. He felt inclined to cry. He felt very weak. He held up his arm before his eyes and watched for a little while the trembling of the lean limb. Skin and bone, by God! How thin he was! . . . He had suffered from fever a good deal, and now he thought with tearful dismay that Lingard, although he had sent him food--and what food, great Lord: a little rice and dried fish; quite unfit for a white man--had not sent him any medicine. Did the old savage think that he was like the wild beasts that are never ill? He wanted quinine.

He leaned the back of his head against the tree and closed his eyes. He thought feebly that if he could get hold of Lingard he would like to flay him alive; but it was only a blurred, a short and a passing thought. His imagination, exhausted by the repeated delineations of his own fate, had not enough strength left to grip the idea of revenge. He was not indignant and rebellious. He was cowed. He was cowed by the immense cataclysm of his disaster. Like most men, he had carried solemnly within his breast the whole universe, and the approaching end of all things in the destruction of his own personality filled him with paralyzing awe. Everything was toppling over. He blinked his eyes quickly, and it seemed to him that the very sunshine of the morning disclosed in its brightness a suggestion of some hidden and sinister meaning. In his unreasoning fear he tried to hide within himself. He drew his feet up, his head sank between his shoulders, his arms hugged his sides. Under the high and enormous tree soaring superbly out of the mist in a vigorous spread of lofty boughs, with a restless and eager flutter of its innumerable leaves in the clear sunshine, he remained motionless, huddled up on his seat: terrified and still.

Willems' gaze roamed over the ground, and then he watched with idiotic fixity half a dozen black ants entering courageously a tuft of long grass which, to them, must have appeared a dark and a dangerous jungle. Suddenly he thought: There must be something dead in there. Some dead insect. Death everywhere! He closed his eyes again in an access of trembling pain. Death everywhere--wherever one looks. He did not want to see the ants. He did not want to see anybody or anything. He sat in the darkness of his own making, reflecting bitterly that there was no peace for him. He heard voices now. . . . Illusion! Misery! Torment! Who

would come? Who would speak to him? What business had he to hear voices? . . . yet he heard them faintly, from the river. Faintly, as if shouted far off over there, came the words "We come back soon." . . . Delirium and mockery! Who would come back? Nobody ever comes back! Fever comes back. He had it on him this morning. That was it. . . . He heard unexpectedly the old woman muttering something near by. She had come round to his side of the tree. He opened his eyes and saw her bent back before him. She stood, with her hand shading her eyes, looking towards the landing-place. Then she glided away. She had seen--and now she was going back to her cooking; a woman incurious; expecting nothing; without fear and without hope.

She had gone back behind the tree, and now Willems could see a human figure on the path to the landing-place. It appeared to him to be a woman, in a red gown, holding some heavy bundle in her arms; it was an apparition unexpected, familiar and odd. He cursed through his teeth . . . It had wanted only this! See things like that in broad daylight! He was very bad--very bad. . . . He was horribly scared at this awful symptom of the desperate state of his health.

This scare lasted for the space of a flash of lightning, and in the next moment it was revealed to him that the woman was real; that she was coming towards him; that she was his wife! He put his feet down to the ground quickly, but made no other movement. His eyes opened wide. He was so amazed that for a time he absolutely forgot his own existence. The only idea in his head was: Why on earth did she come here?

Joanna was coming up the courtyard with eager, hurried steps. She carried in her arms the child, wrapped up in one of Almayer's white blankets that she had snatched off the bed at the last moment, before leaving the house. She seemed to be dazed by the sun in her eyes; bewildered by her strange surroundings. She moved on, looking quickly right and left in impatient expectation of seeing her husband at any moment. Then, approaching the tree, she perceived suddenly a kind of a dried-up, yellow corpse, sitting very stiff on a bench in the shade and looking at her with big eyes that were alive. That was her husband.

She stopped dead short. They stared at one another in profound stillness, with astounded eyes, with eyes maddened by the memories of things far off that seemed lost in the lapse of time. Their looks crossed, passed each other, and appeared to dart at them through fantastic distances, to come straight from the incredible.

Looking at him steadily she came nearer, and deposited the blanket with the child in it on the bench. Little Louis, after howling with terror in the darkness of the river most of the night, now slept soundly and did not wake. Willems' eyes

followed his wife, his head turning slowly after her. He accepted her presence there with a tired acquiescence in its fabulous improbability. Anything might happen. What did she come for? She was part of the general scheme of his misfortune. He half expected that she would rush at him, pull his hair, and scratch his face. Why not? Anything might happen! In an exaggerated sense of his great bodily weakness he felt somewhat apprehensive of possible assault. At any rate, she would scream at him. He knew her of old. She could screech. He had thought that he was rid of her for ever. She came now probably to see the end. . . .

Suddenly she turned, and embracing him slid gently to the ground.

This startled him. With her forehead on his knees she sobbed noiselessly. He looked down dismally at the top of her head. What was she up to? He had not the strength to move--to get away. He heard her whispering something, and bent over to listen. He caught the word "Forgive."

That was what she came for! All that way. Women are queer. Forgive. Not he! . . . All at once this thought darted through his brain: How did she come? In a boat. Boat! boat!

He shouted "Boat!" and jumped up, knocking her over. Before she had time to pick herself up he pounced upon her and was dragging her up by the shoulders. No sooner had she regained her feet than she clasped him tightly round the neck, covering his face, his eyes, his mouth, his nose with desperate kisses. He dodged his head about, shaking her arms, trying to keep her off, to speak, to ask her. . . . She came in a boat, boat, boat! . . . They struggled and swung round, tramping in a semicircle. He blurted out, "Leave off. Listen," while he tore at her hands. This meeting of lawful love and sincere joy resembled fight. Louis Willems slept peacefully under his blanket.

At last Willems managed to free himself, and held her off, pressing her arms down. He looked at her. He had half a suspicion that he was dreaming. Her lips trembled; her eyes wandered unsteadily, always coming back to his face. He saw her the same as ever, in his presence. She appeared startled, tremulous, ready to cry. She did not inspire him with confidence. He shouted--

"How did you come?"

She answered in hurried words, looking at him intently--

"In a big canoe with three men. I know everything. Lingard's away. I come to save you. I know. . . . Almayer told me."

"Canoe!--Almayer--Lies. Told you--You!" stammered Willems in a distracted manner. "Why you?--Told what?"

Words failed him. He stared at his wife, thinking with fear that she--stupid woman--had been made a tool in some plan of treachery . . . in some deadly plot.

She began to cry--

"Don't look at me like that, Peter. What have I done? I come to beg--to beg--forgiveness. . . . Save--Lingard--danger."

He trembled with impatience, with hope, with fear. She looked at him and sobbed out in a fresh outburst of grief--

"Oh! Peter. What's the matter?--Are you ill? . . . Oh! you look so ill . . ."

He shook her violently into a terrified and wondering silence.

"How dare you!--I am well--perfectly well. . . . Where's that boat? Will you tell me where that boat is--at last? The boat, I say . . . You! . . ."

"You hurt me," she moaned.

He let her go, and, mastering her terror, she stood quivering and looking at him with strange intensity. Then she made a movement forward, but he lifted his finger, and she restrained herself with a long sigh. He calmed down suddenly and surveyed her with cold criticism, with the same appearance as when, in the old days, he used to find fault with the household expenses. She found a kind of fearful delight in this abrupt return into the past, into her old subjection.

He stood outwardly collected now, and listened to her disconnected story. Her words seemed to fall round him with the distracting clatter of stunning hail. He caught the meaning here and there, and straightway would lose himself in a tremendous effort to shape out some intelligible theory of events. There was a boat. A boat. A big boat that could take him to sea if necessary. That much was clear. She brought it. Why did Almayer lie to her so? Was it a plan to decoy him into some ambush? Better that than hopeless solitude. She had money. The men were ready to go anywhere . . . she said.

He interrupted her--

"Where are they now?"

"They are coming directly," she answered, tearfully. "Directly. There are some fishing stakes near here--they said. They are coming directly."

Again she was talking and sobbing together. She wanted to be forgiven. Forgiven? What for? Ah! the scene in Macassar. As if he had time to think of that! What did he care what she had done months ago? He seemed to struggle in the toils of complicated dreams where everything was impossible, yet a matter of course, where the past took the aspects of the future and the present lay heavy on his heart--seemed to take him by the throat like the hand of an enemy. And while she begged, entreated, kissed his hands, wept on his shoulder, adjured him in the name of God, to forgive, to forget, to speak the word for which she longed, to look at his boy, to believe in her sorrow and in her devotion--his eyes, in the fascinated immobility of shining pupils, looked far away, far beyond her, beyond the river, beyond this land, through days, weeks, months; looked into liberty, into the future, into his triumph . . . into the great possibility of a startling revenge.

He felt a sudden desire to dance and shout. He shouted--

"After all, we shall meet again, Captain Lingard."

"Oh, no! No!" she cried, joining her hands.

He looked at her with surprise. He had forgotten she was there till the break of her cry in the monotonous tones of her prayer recalled him into that courtyard from the glorious turmoil of his dreams. It was very strange to see her there--near him. He felt almost affectionate towards her. After all, she came just in time. Then he thought: That other one. I must get away without a scene. Who knows; she may be dangerous! . . . And all at once he felt he hated Aissa with an immense hatred that seemed to choke him. He said to his wife--

"Wait a moment."

She, obedient, seemed to gulp down some words which wanted to come out. He muttered: "Stay here," and disappeared round the tree.

The water in the iron pan on the cooking fire boiled furiously, belching out volumes of white steam that mixed with the thin black thread of smoke. The old woman appeared to him through this as if in a fog, squatting on her heels, impassive and weird.

Willems came up near and asked, "Where is she?"

The woman did not even lift her head, but answered at once, readily, as though she had expected the question for a long time.

"While you were asleep under the tree, before the strange canoe came, she went out of the house. I saw her look at you and pass on with a great light in her eyes. A great light. And she went towards the place where our master Lakamba had his fruit trees. When we were many here. Many, many. Men with arms by their side. Many . . . men. And talk . . . and songs . . ."

She went on like that, raving gently to herself for a long time after Willems had left her.

Willems went back to his wife. He came up close to her and found he had nothing to say. Now all his faculties were concentrated upon his wish to avoid Aissa. She might stay all the morning in that grove. Why did those rascally boatmen go? He had a physical repugnance to set eyes on her. And somewhere, at the very bottom of his heart, there was a fear of her. Why? What could she do? Nothing on earth could stop him now. He felt strong, reckless, pitiless, and superior to everything. He wanted to preserve before his wife the lofty purity of his character. He thought: She does not know. Almayer held his tongue about Aissa. But if she finds out, I am lost. If it hadn't been for the boy I would . . . free of both of them. . . . The idea darted through his head. Not he! Married. . . . Swore solemnly. No . . . sacred tie. . . . Looking on his wife, he felt for the first time in his life something approaching remorse. Remorse, arising from his conception of the awful nature of an oath before the altar. . . . She mustn't find out. . . . Oh, for that boat! He must run in and get his revolver. Couldn't think of trusting himself unarmed with those Bajow fellows. Get it now while she is away. Oh, for that boat! . . . He dared not go to the river and hail. He thought: She might hear me. . . . I'll go and get . . . cartridges . . . then will be all ready . . . nothing else. No.

And while he stood meditating profoundly before he could make up his mind to run to the house, Joanna pleaded, holding to his arm--pleaded despairingly, broken-hearted, hopeless whenever she glanced up at his face, which to her seemed to wear the aspect of unforgiving rectitude, of virtuous severity, of merciless justice. And she pleaded humbly--abashed before him, before the unmoved appearance of the man she had wronged in defiance of human and divine laws. He heard not a word of what she said till she raised her voice in a final appeal--

". . . Don't you see I loved you always? They told me horrible things about you. . . . My own mother! They told me--you have been--you have been unfaithful to me, and I . . ."

"It's a damned lie!" shouted Willems, waking up for a moment into righteous indignation.

"I know! I know--Be generous.--Think of my misery since you went away--Oh! I could have torn my tongue out. . . . I will never believe anybody--Look at the boy--Be merciful--I could never rest till I found you. . . . Say--a word--one word. . ."

"What the devil do you want?" exclaimed Willems, looking towards the river. "Where's that damned boat? Why did you let them go away? You stupid!"

"Oh, Peter!--I know that in your heart you have forgiven me--You are so generous--I want to hear you say so. . . . Tell me--do you?"

"Yes! yes!" said Willems, impatiently. "I forgive you. Don't be a fool."

"Don't go away. Don't leave me alone here. Where is the danger? I am so frightened. . . . Are you alone here? Sure? . . . Let us go away!"

"That's sense," said Willems, still looking anxiously towards the river.

She sobbed gently, leaning on his arm.

"Let me go," he said.

He had seen above the steep bank the heads of three men glide along smoothly. Then, where the shore shelved down to the landing-place, appeared a big canoe which came slowly to land.

"Here they are," he went on, briskly. "I must get my revolver."

He made a few hurried paces towards the house, but seemed to catch sight of something, turned short round and came back to his wife. She stared at him, alarmed by the sudden change in his face. He appeared much discomposed. He stammered a little as he began to speak.

"Take the child. Walk down to the boat and tell them to drop it out of sight, quick, behind the bushes. Do you hear? Quick! I will come to you there directly. Hurry up!"

"Peter! What is it? I won't leave you. There is some danger in this horrible place."

"Will you do what I tell you?" said Willems, in an irritable whisper.

"No! no! no! I won't leave you. I will not lose you again. Tell me, what is it?"

From beyond the house came a faint voice singing. Willems shook his wife by the shoulder.

"Do what I tell you! Run at once!"

She gripped his arm and clung to him desperately. He looked up to heaven as if taking it to witness of that woman's infernal folly.

The song grew louder, then ceased suddenly, and Aissa appeared in sight, walking slowly, her hands full of flowers.

She had turned the corner of the house, coming out into the full sunshine, and the light seemed to leap upon her in a stream brilliant, tender, and caressing, as if attracted by the radiant happiness of her face. She had dressed herself for a festive day, for the memorable day of his return to her, of his return to an affection that would last for ever. The rays of the morning sun were caught by the oval clasp of the embroidered belt that held the silk sarong round her waist. The dazzling white stuff of her body jacket was crossed by a bar of yellow and silver of her scarf, and in the black hair twisted high on her small head shone the round balls of gold pins amongst crimson blossoms and white star-shaped flowers, with which she had crowned herself to charm his eyes; those eyes that were henceforth to see nothing in the world but her own resplendent image. And she moved slowly, bending her face over the mass of pure white champakas and jasmine pressed to her breast, in a dreamy intoxication of sweet scents and of sweeter hopes.

She did not seem to see anything, stopped for a moment at the foot of the plankway leading to the house, then, leaving her high-heeled wooden sandals there, ascended the planks in a light run; straight, graceful, flexible, and noiseless, as if she had soared up to the door on invisible wings. Willems pushed his wife roughly behind the tree, and made up his mind quickly for a rush to the house, to grab his revolver and . . . Thoughts, doubts, expedients seemed to boil in his brain. He had a flashing vision of delivering a stunning blow, of tying up that flower bedecked woman in the dark house--a vision of things done swiftly with enraged haste--to save his prestige, his superiority--something of immense importance. . . . He had not made two steps when Joanna bounded after him, caught the back of his ragged jacket, tore out a big piece, and instantly hooked herself with both hands to the collar, nearly dragging him down on his back. Although taken by surprise, he managed to keep his feet. From behind she panted into his ear--

"That woman! Who's that woman? Ah! that's what those boatmen were talking about. I heard them . . . heard them . . . heard . . . in the night. They spoke about some woman. I dared not understand. I would not ask . . . listen . . . believe! How could I? Then it's true. No. Say no. . . . Who's that woman?"

He swayed, tugging forward. She jerked at him till the button gave way, and then he slipped half out of his jacket and, turning round, remained strangely motionless. His heart seemed to beat in his throat. He choked--tried to speak--could not find any words. He thought with fury: I will kill both of them.

For a second nothing moved about the courtyard in the great vivid clearness of the day. Only down by the landing-place a waringan-tree, all in a blaze of clustering red berries, seemed alive with the stir of little birds that filled with the feverish flutter of their feathers the tangle of overloaded branches. Suddenly the variegated flock rose spinning in a soft whirr and dispersed, slashing the sunlit haze with the sharp outlines of stiffened wings. Mahmat and one of his brothers appeared coming up from the landing-place, their lances in their hands, to look for their passengers.

Aissa coming now empty-handed out of the house, caught sight of the two armed men. In her surprise she emitted a faint cry, vanished back and in a flash reappeared in the doorway with Willems' revolver in her hand. To her the presence of any man there could only have an ominous meaning. There was nothing in the outer world but enemies. She and the man she loved were alone, with nothing round them but menacing dangers. She did not mind that, for if death came, no matter from what hand, they would die together.

Her resolute eyes took in the courtyard in a circular glance. She noticed that the two strangers had ceased to advance and now were standing close together leaning on the polished shafts of their weapons. The next moment she saw Willems, with his back towards her, apparently struggling under the tree with some one. She saw nothing distinctly, and, unhesitating, flew down the plankway calling out: "I come!"

He heard her cry, and with an unexpected rush drove his wife backwards to the seat. She fell on it; he jerked himself altogether out of his jacket, and she covered her face with the soiled rags. He put his lips close to her, asking--

"For the last time, will you take the child and go?"

She groaned behind the unclean ruins of his upper garment. She mumbled something. He bent lower to hear. She was saying--

"I won't. Order that woman away. I can't look at her!"

"You fool!"

He seemed to spit the words at her, then, making up his mind, spun round to face Aissa. She was coming towards them slowly now, with a look of unbounded amazement on her face. Then she stopped and stared at him--who stood there, stripped to the waist, bare-headed and sombre.

Some way off, Mahmat and his brother exchanged rapid words in calm undertones. . . . This was the strong daughter of the holy man who had died. The white man is very tall. There would be three women and the child to take in the boat, besides that white man who had the money . . . . The brother went away back to the boat, and Mahmat remained looking on. He stood like a sentinel, the leaf-shaped blade of his lance glinting above his head.

Willems spoke suddenly.

"Give me this," he said, stretching his hand towards the revolver.

Aissa stepped back. Her lips trembled. She said very low: "Your people?"

He nodded slightly. She shook her head thoughtfully, and a few delicate petals of the flowers dying in her hair fell like big drops of crimson and white at her feet.

"Did you know?" she whispered.

"No!" said Willems. "They sent for me."

"Tell them to depart. They are accursed. What is there between them and you--and you who carry my life in your heart!"

Willems said nothing. He stood before her looking down on the ground and repeating to himself: I must get that revolver away from her, at once, at once. I can't think of trusting myself with those men without firearms. I must have it.

She asked, after gazing in silence at Joanna, who was sobbing gently--

"Who is she?"

"My wife," answered Willems, without looking up. "My wife according to our white law, which comes from God!"

"Your law! Your God!" murmured Aissa, contemptuously.

"Give me this revolver," said Willems, in a peremptory tone. He felt an unwillingness to close with her, to get it by force.

She took no notice and went on--

"Your law . . . or your lies? What am I to believe? I came--I ran to defend you when I saw the strange men. You lied to me with your lips, with your eyes. You crooked heart! . . . Ah!" she added, after an abrupt pause. "She is the first! Am I then to be a slave?"

"You may be what you like," said Willems, brutally. "I am going."

Her gaze was fastened on the blanket under which she had detected a slight movement. She made a long stride towards it. Willems turned half round. His legs seemed to him to be made of lead. He felt faint and so weak that, for a moment, the fear of dying there where he stood, before he could escape from sin and disaster, passed through his mind in a wave of despair.

She lifted up one corner of the blanket, and when she saw the sleeping child a sudden quick shudder shook her as though she had seen something inexpressibly horrible. She looked at Louis Willems with eyes fixed in an unbelieving and terrified stare. Then her fingers opened slowly, and a shadow seemed to settle on her face as if something obscure and fatal had come between her and the sunshine. She stood looking down, absorbed, as though she had watched at the bottom of a gloomy abyss the mournful procession of her thoughts.

Willems did not move. All his faculties were concentrated upon the idea of his release. And it was only then that the assurance of it came to him with such force that he seemed to hear a loud voice shouting in the heavens that all was over, that in another five, ten minutes, he would step into another existence; that all this, the woman, the madness, the sin, the regrets, all would go, rush into the past, disappear, become as dust, as smoke, as drifting clouds--as nothing! Yes! All would vanish in the unappeasable past which would swallow up all--even the very memory of his temptation and of his downfall. Nothing mattered. He cared for nothing. He had forgotten Aissa, his wife, Lingard, Hudig--everybody, in the rapid vision of his hopeful future.

After a while he heard Aissa saying--

"A child! A child! What have I done to be made to devour this sorrow and this

grief? And while your man-child and the mother lived you told me there was nothing for you to remember in the land from which you came! And I thought you could be mine. I thought that I would . . ."

Her voice ceased in a broken murmur, and with it, in her heart, seemed to die the greater and most precious hope of her new life.

She had hoped that in the future the frail arms of a child would bind their two lives together in a bond which nothing on earth could break, a bond of affection, of gratitude, of tender respect. She the first--the only one! But in the instant she saw the son of that other woman she felt herself removed into the cold, the darkness, the silence of a solitude impenetrable and immense--very far from him, beyond the possibility of any hope, into an infinity of wrongs without any redress.

She strode nearer to Joanna. She felt towards that woman anger, envy, jealousy. Before her she felt humiliated and enraged. She seized the hanging sleeve of the jacket in which Joanna was hiding her face and tore it out of her hands, exclaiming loudly--

"Let me see the face of her before whom I am only a servant and a slave. Ya-wa! I see you!"

Her unexpected shout seemed to fill the sunlit space of cleared grounds, rise high and run on far into the land over the unstirring tree-tops of the forests. She stood in sudden stillness, looking at Joanna with surprised contempt.

"A Sirani woman!" she said, slowly, in a tone of wonder.

Joanna rushed at Willems--clung to him, shrieking: "Defend me, Peter! Defend me from that woman!"

"Be quiet. There is no danger," muttered Willems, thickly.

Aissa looked at them with scorn. "God is great! I sit in the dust at your feet," she exclaimed jeeringly, joining her hands above her head in a gesture of mock humility. "Before you I am as nothing." She turned to Willems fiercely, opening her arms wide. "What have you made of me?" she cried, "you lying child of an accursed mother! What have you made of me? The slave of a slave. Don't speak! Your words are worse than the poison of snakes. A Sirani woman. A woman of a people despised by all."

She pointed her finger at Joanna, stepped back, and began to laugh.

"Make her stop, Peter!" screamed Joanna. "That heathen woman. Heathen! Heathen! Beat her, Peter."

Willems caught sight of the revolver which Aissa had laid on the seat near the child. He spoke in Dutch to his wife, without moving his head.

"Snatch the boy--and my revolver there. See. Run to the boat. I will keep her back. Now's the time."

Aissa came nearer. She stared at Joanna, while between the short gusts of broken laughter she raved, fumbling distractedly at the buckle of her belt.

"To her! To her--the mother of him who will speak of your wisdom, of your courage. All to her. I have nothing. Nothing. Take, take."

She tore the belt off and threw it at Joanna's feet. She flung down with haste the armlets, the gold pins, the flowers; and the long hair, released, fell scattered over her shoulders, framing in its blackness the wild exaltation of her face.

"Drive her off, Peter. Drive off the heathen savage," persisted Joanna. She seemed to have lost her head altogether. She stamped, clinging to Willems' arm with both her hands.

"Look," cried Aissa. "Look at the mother of your son! She is afraid. Why does she not go from before my face? Look at her. She is ugly."

Joanna seemed to understand the scornful tone of the words. As Aissa stepped back again nearer to the tree she let go her husband's arm, rushed at her madly, slapped her face, then, swerving round, darted at the child who, unnoticed, had been wailing for some time, and, snatching him up, flew down to the waterside, sending shriek after shriek in an access of insane terror.

Willems made for the revolver. Aissa passed swiftly, giving him an unexpected push that sent him staggering away from the tree. She caught up the weapon, put it behind her back, and cried--

"You shall not have it. Go after her. Go to meet danger. . . . Go to meet death. . . . Go unarmed. . . . Go with empty hands and sweet words . . . as you came to me. . . . Go helpless and lie to the forests, to the sea . . . to the death that waits for you. . . ."

She ceased as if strangled. She saw in the horror of the passing seconds the half-naked, wild-looking man before her; she heard the faint shrillness of Joanna's

insane shrieks for help somewhere down by the riverside. The sunlight streamed on her, on him, on the mute land, on the murmuring river--the gentle brilliance of a serene morning that, to her, seemed traversed by ghastly flashes of uncertain darkness. Hate filled the world, filled the space between them--the hate of race, the hate of hopeless diversity, the hate of blood; the hate against the man born in the land of lies and of evil from which nothing but misfortune comes to those who are not white. And as she stood, maddened, she heard a whisper near her, the whisper of the dead Omar's voice saying in her ear: "Kill! Kill!"

She cried, seeing him move--

"Do not come near me . . . or you die now! Go while I remember yet . . . remember. . . ."

Willems pulled himself together for a struggle. He dared not go unarmed. He made a long stride, and saw her raise the revolver. He noticed that she had not cocked it, and said to himself that, even if she did fire, she would surely miss. Go too high; it was a stiff trigger. He made a step nearer--saw the long barrel moving unsteadily at the end of her extended arm. He thought: This is my time . . . He bent his knees slightly, throwing his body forward, and took off with a long bound for a tearing rush.

He saw a burst of red flame before his eyes, and was deafened by a report that seemed to him louder than a clap of thunder. Something stopped him short, and he stood aspiring in his nostrils the acrid smell of the blue smoke that drifted from before his eyes like an immense cloud. . . . Missed, by Heaven! . . . Thought so! . . . And he saw her very far off, throwing her arms up, while the revolver, very small, lay on the ground between them. . . . Missed! . . . He would go and pick it up now. Never before did he understand, as in that second, the joy, the triumphant delight of sunshine and of life. His mouth was full of something salt and warm. He tried to cough; spat out. . . . Who shrieks: In the name of God, he dies!--he dies!--Who dies?--Must pick up--Night!--What? . . . Night already. . . .

* * * * * *

Many years afterwards Almayer was telling the story of the great revolution in Sambir to a chance visitor from Europe. He was a Roumanian, half naturalist, half orchid-hunter for commercial purposes, who used to declare to everybody, in the first five minutes of acquaintance, his intention of writing a scientific book about tropical countries. On his way to the interior he had quartered himself upon Almayer. He was a man of some education, but he drank his gin neat, or only, at most, would squeeze the juice of half a small lime into the raw spirit. He said it was good for his health, and, with that medicine before him, he would

describe to the surprised Almayer the wonders of European capitals; while Almayer, in exchange, bored him by expounding, with gusto, his unfavourable opinions of Sambir's social and political life. They talked far into the night, across the deal table on the verandah, while, between them, clear-winged, small, and flabby insects, dissatisfied with moonlight, streamed in and perished in thousands round the smoky light of the evil-smelling lamp.

Almayer, his face flushed, was saying--

"Of course, I did not see that. I told you I was stuck in the creek on account of father's--Captain Lingard's--susceptible temper. I am sure I did it all for the best in trying to facilitate the fellow's escape; but Captain Lingard was that kind of man--you know--one couldn't argue with. Just before sunset the water was high enough, and we got out of the creek. We got to Lakamba's clearing about dark. All very quiet; I thought they were gone, of course, and felt very glad. We walked up the courtyard--saw a big heap of something lying in the middle. Out of that she rose and rushed at us. By God. . . . You know those stories of faithful dogs watching their masters' corpses . . . don't let anybody approach . . . got to beat them off--and all that. . . . Well, 'pon my word we had to beat her off. Had to! She was like a fury. Wouldn't let us touch him. Dead--of course. Should think so. Shot through the lung, on the left side, rather high up, and at pretty close quarters too, for the two holes were small. Bullet came out through the shoulder-blade. After we had overpowered her--you can't imagine how strong that woman was; it took three of us--we got the body into the boat and shoved off. We thought she had fainted then, but she got up and rushed into the water after us. Well, I let her clamber in. What could I do? The river's full of alligators. I will never forget that pull up-stream in the night as long as I live. She sat in the bottom of the boat, holding his head in her lap, and now and again wiping his face with her hair. There was a lot of blood dried about his mouth and chin. And for all the six hours of that journey she kept on whispering tenderly to that corpse! . . . I had the mate of the schooner with me. The man said afterwards that he wouldn't go through it again--not for a handful of diamonds. And I believed him--I did. It makes me shiver. Do you think he heard? No! I mean somebody--something--heard? . . ."

"I am a materialist," declared the man of science, tilting the bottle shakily over the emptied glass.

Almayer shook his head and went on--

"Nobody saw how it really happened but that man Mahmat. He always said that he was no further off from them than two lengths of his lance. It appears the two women rowed each other while that Willems stood between them. Then Mahmat

says that when Joanna struck her and ran off, the other two seemed to become suddenly mad together. They rushed here and there. Mahmat says--those were his very words: 'I saw her standing holding the pistol that fires many times and pointing it all over the campong. I was afraid--lest she might shoot me, and jumped on one side. Then I saw the white man coming at her swiftly. He came like our master the tiger when he rushes out of the jungle at the spears held by men. She did not take aim. The barrel of her weapon went like this--from side to side, but in her eyes I could see suddenly a great fear. There was only one shot. She shrieked while the white man stood blinking his eyes and very straight, till you could count slowly one, two, three; then he coughed and fell on his face. The daughter of Omar shrieked without drawing breath, till he fell. I went away then and left silence behind me. These things did not concern me, and in my boat there was that other woman who had promised me money. We left directly, paying no attention to her cries. We are only poor men--and had but a small reward for our trouble!' That's what Mahmat said. Never varied. You ask him yourself. He's the man you hired the boats from, for your journey up the river."

"The most rapacious thief I ever met!" exclaimed the traveller, thickly.

"Ah! He is a respectable man. His two brothers got themselves speared--served them right. They went in for robbing Dyak graves. Gold ornaments in them you know. Serve them right. But he kept respectable and got on. Aye! Everybody got on--but I. And all through that scoundrel who brought the Arabs here."

"De mortuis nil ni . . . num," muttered Almayer's guest.

"I wish you would speak English instead of jabbering in your own language, which no one can understand," said Almayer, sulkily.

"Don't be angry," hiccoughed the other. "It's Latin, and it's wisdom. It means: Don't waste your breath in abusing shadows. No offence there. I like you. You have a quarrel with Providence--so have I. I was meant to be a professor, while--look."

His head nodded. He sat grasping the glass. Almayer walked up and down, then stopped suddenly.

"Yes, they all got on but I. Why? I am better than any of them. Lakamba calls himself a Sultan, and when I go to see him on business sends that one-eyed fiend of his--Babalatchi--to tell me that the ruler is asleep; and shall sleep for a long time. And that Babalatchi! He is the Shahbandar of the State--if you please. Oh Lord! Shahbandar! The pig! A vagabond I wouldn't let come up these steps when he first came here. . . . Look at Abdulla now. He lives here because--he says--here

he is away from white men. But he has hundreds of thousands. Has a house in Penang. Ships. What did he not have when he stole my trade from me! He knocked everything here into a cocked hat, drove father to gold-hunting--then to Europe, where he disappeared. Fancy a man like Captain Lingard disappearing as though he had been a common coolie. Friends of mine wrote to London asking about him. Nobody ever heard of him there! Fancy! Never heard of Captain Lingard!"

The learned gatherer of orchids lifted his head.

"He was a sen--sentimen--tal old buc--buccaneer," he stammered out, "I like him. I'm sent--tal myself."

He winked slowly at Almayer, who laughed.

"Yes! I told you about that gravestone. Yes! Another hundred and twenty dollars thrown away. Wish I had them now. He would do it. And the inscription. Ha! ha! ha! 'Peter Willems, Delivered by the Mercy of God from his Enemy.' What enemy--unless Captain Lingard himself? And then it has no sense. He was a great man--father was--but strange in many ways. . . . You haven't seen the grave? On the top of that hill, there, on the other side of the river. I must show you. We will go there."

"Not I!" said the other. "No interest--in the sun--too tiring. . . . Unless you carry me there."

As a matter of fact he was carried there a few months afterwards, and his was the second white man's grave in Sambir; but at present he was alive if rather drunk. He asked abruptly--

"And the woman?"

"Oh! Lingard, of course, kept her and her ugly brat in Macassar. Sinful waste of money--that! Devil only knows what became of them since father went home. I had my daughter to look after. I shall give you a word to Mrs. Vinck in Singapore when you go back. You shall see my Nina there. Lucky man. She is beautiful, and I hear so accomplished, so . . ."

"I have heard already twenty . . . a hundred times about your daughter. What ab--about--that--that other one, Ai--ssa?"

"She! Oh! we kept her here. She was mad for a long time in a quiet sort of way. Father thought a lot of her. He gave her a house to live in, in my campong. She

wandered about, speaking to nobody unless she caught sight of Abdulla, when she would have a fit of fury, and shriek and curse like anything. Very often she would disappear--and then we all had to turn out and hunt for her, because father would worry till she was brought back. Found her in all kinds of places. Once in the abandoned campong of Lakamba. Sometimes simply wandering in the bush. She had one favourite spot we always made for at first. It was ten to one on finding her there--a kind of a grassy glade on the banks of a small brook. Why she preferred that place, I can't imagine! And such a job to get her away from there. Had to drag her away by main force. Then, as the time passed, she became quieter and more settled, like. Still, all my people feared her greatly. It was my Nina that tamed her. You see the child was naturally fearless and used to have her own way, so she would go to her and pull at her sarong, and order her about, as she did everybody. Finally she, I verily believe, came to love the child. Nothing could resist that little one--you know. She made a capital nurse. Once when the little devil ran away from me and fell into the river off the end of the jetty, she jumped in and pulled her out in no time. I very nearly died of fright. Now of course she lives with my serving girls, but does what she likes. As long as I have a handful of rice or a piece of cotton in the store she sha'n't want for anything. You have seen her. She brought in the dinner with Ali."

"What! That doubled-up crone?"

"Ah!" said Almayer. "They age quickly here. And long foggy nights spent in the bush will soon break the strongest backs--as you will find out yourself soon."

"Dis . . . disgusting," growled the traveller.

He dozed off. Almayer stood by the balustrade looking out at the bluish sheen of the moonlit night. The forests, unchanged and sombre, seemed to hang over the water, listening to the unceasing whisper of the great river; and above their dark wall the hill on which Lingard had buried the body of his late prisoner rose in a black, rounded mass, upon the silver paleness of the sky. Almayer looked for a long time at the clean-cut outline of the summit, as if trying to make out through darkness and distance the shape of that expensive tombstone. When he turned round at last he saw his guest sleeping, his arms on the table, his head on his arms.

"Now, look here!" he shouted, slapping the table with the palm of his hand.

The naturalist woke up, and sat all in a heap, staring owlishly.

"Here!" went on Almayer, speaking very loud and thumping the table, "I want to know. You, who say you have read all the books, just tell me . . . why such

infernal things are ever allowed. Here I am! Done harm to nobody, lived an honest life . . . and a scoundrel like that is born in Rotterdam or some such place at the other end of the world somewhere, travels out here, robs his employer, runs away from his wife, and ruins me and my Nina--he ruined me, I tell you--and gets himself shot at last by a poor miserable savage, that knows nothing at all about him really. Where's the sense of all this? Where's your Providence? Where's the good for anybody in all this? The world's a swindle! A swindle! Why should I suffer? What have I done to be treated so?"

He howled out his string of questions, and suddenly became silent. The man who ought to have been a professor made a tremendous effort to articulate distinctly--

"My dear fellow, don't--don't you see that the ba-bare fac--the fact of your existence is off--offensive. . . . I--I like you--like . . ."

He fell forward on the table, and ended his remarks by an unexpected and prolonged snore.

Almayer shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the balustrade.

He drank his own trade gin very seldom, but when he did, a ridiculously small quantity of the stuff could induce him to assume a rebellious attitude towards the scheme of the universe. And now, throwing his body over the rail, he shouted impudently into the night, turning his face towards that far-off and invisible slab of imported granite upon which Lingard had thought fit to record God's mercy and Willems' escape.

"Father was wrong--wrong!" he yelled. "I want you to smart for it. You must smart for it! Where are you, Willems? Hey? . . . Hey? . . . Where there is no mercy for you--I hope!"

"Hope," repeated in a whispering echo the startled forests, the river and the hills; and Almayer, who stood waiting, with a smile of tipsy attention on his lips, heard no other answer.