The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.—The Sirdar, having among her passengers Iris Deane, daughter of the owner of the ship, and Robert Jenks, who is working as a waiter, is wrecked. II.—All are lost save Miss Deane and Jenks, who are cast ashore on an islet in the Pacific.

CHAPTER II (Continued).

Her color came back with remarkable rapidity. She tried to assume a sitting posture, and instinctively her hands traveled to her disarranged costume.

"How ridiculous!" she said, with a little note of annoyance in her voice, which sounded curiously hollow. But her brave spirit could not yet command her enfeebled frame. She was perforce compelled to sink back to the support of his knee and arm.

"Do you think you could lie quiet until I try to find some water?" he gasped anxiously.

She nodded a childlike acquiescence, and her eyelids fell. It was only that her eyes smarted dreadfully from the salt water, but the sailor was sure that this was a premonition of a lapse to unconsciousness.

"Please try not to faint again," he said. "Don't you think I had better loosen these things? You can breathe more easily."

A ghost of a smile flickered on her lips. "No—no," she murmured. "My eyes hurt me—that is all. Is there—any—water?"

He laid her tenderly on the sand and rose to his feet. His first glance was toward the sea. He saw something which made him blink with astonishment. A heavy sea was still running over the barrier reef which inclosed a small lagoon. The contrast between the fierce commotion outside and the comparatively smooth surface of the protected pool was very marked. At low tide the lagoon was almost completely isolated. Indeed he imagined that only a fierce gale blowing from the northwest would enable the waves to leap the reef, save where a strip of broken water, surging far into the small natural harbor, betrayed the position of the tiny entrance.

Yet at this very point a fine cocoanut palm reared its stately column high in air, and its long, tremulous fronds were now swinging wildly before the gale. From where he stood it appeared to be growing in the midst of the sea, for huge breakers completely hid the coral embankment. This sentinel of the land had a weirdly impressive effect. It was the only fixed object in the waste of foam capped waves. Not a vestige of the Sirdar remained seaward, but the sand was littered with wreckage, and—mournful spectacle—a considerable number of inanimate human forms lay huddled up amid the relics of the steamer.

This discovery stirred him to action. He turned to survey the land on which he was stranded with his helpless companion. To his great relief he discovered that it was lofty and tree clad. He knew that the ship could not have drifted to Borneo, which still lay far to the south. This must be one of the hundreds of islands which stud the China sea and provide resorts for Hainan fishermen. Probably it was inhabited, though he thought it strange that none of the islanders had put in an appearance. In any event water and food of some sort were assured. But before setting out upon his quest two things demanded attention. The girl must be removed from her present position. It would be too horrible to permit her first conscious gaze to rest upon those crumpled objects on the beach. Common humanity demanded, too, that he should hastily examine each of the bodies in case life was not wholly extinct.

So he bent over the girl, noting with sudden wonder that, weak as she was, she had managed to refasten part of her bodice.

"You must permit me to carry you a little farther inland," he explained gently.

Without another word he lifted her in his arms, marveling somewhat at the strength which came of necessity, and bore her some little distance until a sturdy rock jutting out of the sand offered shelter from the wind and protection from the sea and its revelations.

"I am so cold and tired," murmured Iris. "Is there any water? My throat hurts me."

He pressed back the tangled hair from her forehead as he might soothe a child.

"Try to lie still for a very few minutes," he said. "You have not long to suffer. I will return immediately."

His own throat and palate were on fire owing to the brine, but he first hurried back to the edge of the lagoon. There were fourteen bodies in all, three women and eleven men, four of the latter being Lascars. The women were saloon passengers whom he did not know. One of the men was the surgeon, another the first officer, a third Sir John Tozer. The rest were passengers and members of the crew. They were all dead; some had been peacefully drowned, others were fearfully mangled by the rocks. Two of the Lascars, bearing signs of dreadful injuries, were lying on a cluster of low rocks overhanging the water. The remainder rested on the sand.

The sailor exhibited no visible emotion while he conducted his sad scrutiny. When he was assured that this silent company was beyond mortal help he at once strode away toward the nearest belt of trees. He could not tell how long the search for water might be protracted, and there was pressing need for it.

When he reached the first clump of brushwood he uttered a delighted exclamation. There, growing in prodigal luxuriance, was the beneficent pitcher plant, whose large curled up leaf, shaped like a teacup, not only holds a lasting quantity of rain water, but mixes therewith its own palatable and natural juices.

With his knife he severed two of the leaves and hastened to Iris with the precious beverage. She heard him and managed to raise herself on an elbow. The poor girl's eyes glistened at the prospect of relief. Without a word of question or surprise she swallowed the contents of both leaves.

Then she found utterance. "How odd it tastes. What is it?" she inquired.

But the eagerness with which she quenched her thirst renewed his own momentarily forgotten torture. His tongue seemed to swell. He was absolutely unable to reply.

The water revived Iris like a magic draft. Her quick intuition told her what had happened.

"You have had none yourself!" she cried. "Go at once and get some! And please bring me some more!"

He required no second bidding. After hastily gulping down the contents of several leaves he returned with a further supply. Iris was now sitting up. The sun had burst royally through the clouds, and her chilled limbs were gaining some degree of warmth and elasticity.

"What is it?" she repeated after another delicious draft.

"The leaf of the pitcher plant. Nature is not always cruel. In an unusually generous mood she devised this method of storing water."

Miss Deane reached out her hand for more. Her troubled brain refused to wonder at such a reply from an ordinary seaman. The sailor deliberately spilled the contents of a remaining leaf on the sand.

"No, madam," he said, with an odd mixture of deference and firmness. "No more at present. I must first procure you some food."

She looked up at him in momentary silence.

"The ship is lost?" she said after a pause.

"Yes, madam."

"Are we the only people saved?"

"I fear so."

"Is this a desert island?"

"I think not, madam. It may by chance be temporarily uninhabited, but fishermen from China come to all these places. I have seen no other living beings except ourselves. Nevertheless the islanders may live on the south side."

"It surely cannot be possible that the Sirdar has gone to pieces—a magnificent vessel of her size and strength?"

He answered quietly: "It is too true, madam. I suppose you hardly knew she struck, it happened so suddenly. Afterward, fortunately for you, you were unconscious."

"How do you know?" she inquired quickly. A flood of vivid recollection was pouring in upon her.

"I—er—well, I happened to be near you, madam, when the ship broke up, and we—er—drifted ashore together."

She rose and faced him. "I remember now," she cried hysterically. "You caught me as I was thrown into the corridor. We fell into the sea when the vessel turned over. You have saved my life. Were it not for you I could not possibly have escaped."

She gazed at him more earnestly, seeing that he blushed beneath the crust of salt and sand that covered his face. "Why," she went on, with growing excitement, "you are the steward I noticed in the saloon yesterday. How is it that you are now dressed as a sailor?"

He answered readily enough. "There was an accident on board during the gale, madam. I am a fair sailor, but a poor steward, so I applied for a transfer. As the crew was short handed, my offer was accepted."

Iris was now looking at him intently.

"You saved my life," she repeated slowly. It seemed that this obvious fact needed to be indelibly established in her mind. Indeed the girl was overwrought by all that she had gone through. Only by degrees were her thoughts marshaling themselves with lucid coherence. As yet she recalled so many dramatic incidents that they failed to assume due proportion.

But quickly there came memories of Captain Ross, of Sir John and Lady Tozer, of the doctor, her maid, the hundred and one individualities of her pleasant life aboard ship. Could it be that they were all dead? The notion was monstrous. But its ghastly significance was instantly borne in upon her by the plight in which she stood. Her lips quivered; the tears trembled in her eyes.

"Is it really true that all the ship's company except ourselves are lost?" she brokenly demanded.

The sailor's gravely earnest glance fell before hers. "Unhappily there is no room for doubt," he said.

"Are you quite, quite sure?"

"I am sure—of some." Involuntarily he turned seaward.

She understood him. She sank to her knees, covered her face with her hands and broke into a passion of weeping. With a look of infinite pity he stooped and would have touched her shoulder, but he suddenly restrained the impulse. Something had hardened this man. It cost him an effort to be callous, but he succeeded. His mouth tightened, and his expression lost its tenderness.

"Come, come, my dear lady," he exclaimed, and there was a tinge of studied roughness in his voice, "you must calm yourself. It is the fortune of shipwreck as well as of war, you know. We are alive and must look after ourselves. Those who have gone are beyond our help."

"But not beyond our sympathy," wailed Iris, uncovering her swimming eyes for a fleeting look at him. Even in the utter desolation of the moment she could not help marveling that this queer mannered sailor, who spoke like a gentleman and tried to pose as her inferior, who had rescued her with the utmost gallantry, who carried his quixotic zeal to the point of first supplying her needs when he was in far worse case himself, should be so utterly indifferent to the fate of others.

He waited silently until her sobs ceased.

"Now, madam," he said, "it is essential that we should obtain some food. I don't wish to leave you alone until we are better acquainted with our whereabouts. Can you walk a little way toward the trees, or shall I assist you?"

Iris immediately stood up. She pressed her hair back defiantly.

"Certainly I can walk," she answered. "What do you propose to do?"

"Well, madam"—

"What is your name?" she interrupted imperiously.

"Jenks, madam. Robert Jenks."

"Thank you. Now listen, Mr. Robert Jenks. My name is Miss Iris Deane. On board ship I was a passenger and you were a steward—that is, until you became a seaman. Here we are equals in misfortune, but in all else you are the leader. I am quite useless. I can only help in matters by your direction, so I do not wish to be addressed as 'madam' in every breath. Do you understand me?"

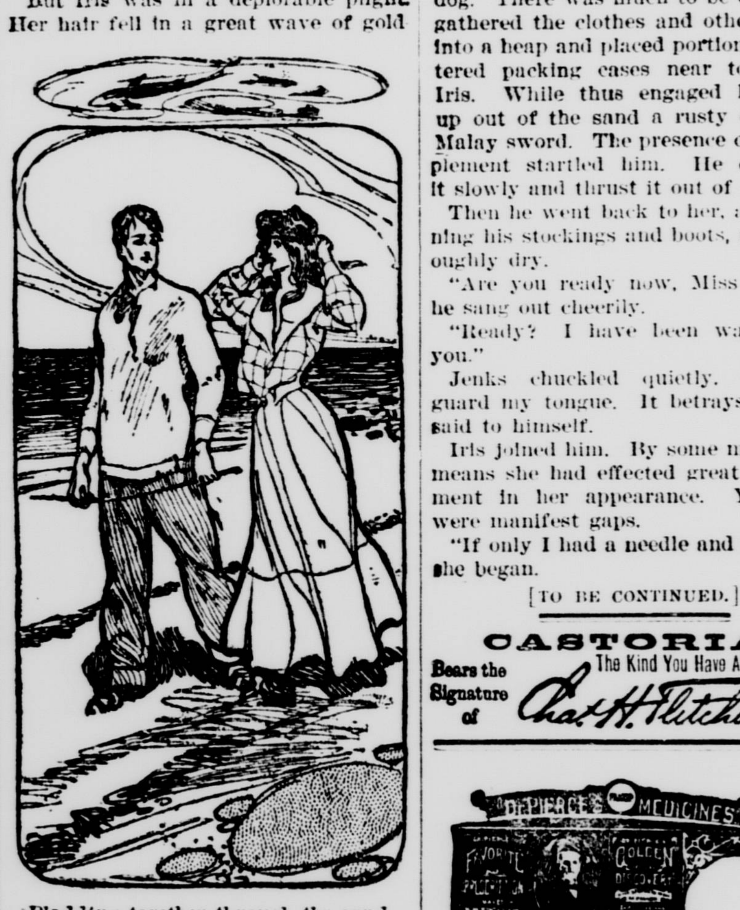
"As you wish, Miss Deane," he said. "The fact remains that I have many things to attend to, and we really must eat something."

"What can we eat?"

"Let us find out," he replied, scanning the nearest trees with keen scrutiny.

They plodded together through the sand in silence. Physically they were a superb couple, but in raiment they resembled scarecrows. Both, of course, were bareheaded. The sailor's jersey and trousers were old and torn, and the sea water still soughed loudly in his heavy boots with each step.

But Iris was in a deplorable plight. Her hair fell in a great wave of golden brown strands over her neck and shoulders. Every hairpin had vanished, but with a few dexterous twists she coiled the flying tresses into a loose knot. Her beautiful muslin dress was rent and draggled. It was drying rapidly under the ever increasing power of the sun, and she surreptitiously endeavored to complete the fastening of the open portion about her neck.



Plodding together through the sand.

Suddenly he gave a glad shout. "By Jove, Miss Deane, we are in luck's way! There is a fine plantain tree."

The pangs of hunger could not be resisted. Although the fruit was hardly ripe, they tore at the great bunches and ate ravenously. Iris made no pretense in the matter, and the sailor was in worse plight, for he had been on duty continuously since 4 o'clock the previous afternoon.

At last their appetite was somewhat appeased, though plantains might not appeal to a gourmand as the solitary joint.

"Now," decided Jenks, "you must rest here a little while, Miss Deane. I'm going back to the beach. You need not be afraid. There are no animals to harm you, and I will not be far away."

"What are you going to do on the beach?" she demanded.

"To rescue stores, for the most part."

"May I not come with you. I can be of some little service surely?"

He answered slowly: "Please oblige me by remaining here at present. In less than an hour I will return, and then perhaps you will find plenty to do."

She read his meaning intuitively and shivered. "I could not do that," she murmured. "I would faint. While you are away I will pray for them, my unfortunate friends."

As he passed from her side he heard her sobbing quietly.

When he reached the lagoon he halted suddenly. Something startled him. He was quite certain that he had counted fourteen corpses. Now there were only twelve. The two Lascars' bodies which rested on the small group of rocks on the verge of the lagoon had vanished.

Where had they gone?

CHAPTER III.

The sailor wasted no time in idle bewilderment. He searched carefully for traces of the missing Lascars. He came to the conclusion that the bodies had been dragged from off the sun dried rocks into the lagoon by some agency the nature of which he could not even conjecture.

They were lying many feet above the sea level when he last saw them, little more than half an hour earlier. At that point the beach shelved rapidly. He could look far into the depths of the rapidly clearing water. Nothing was visible there save several varieties of small fish.

The incident puzzled and annoyed him. Still thinking about it, he sat down on the highest rock and pulled off his heavy boots to empty the water out. He also divested himself of his stockings and spread them out to dry.

The action reminded him of Miss Deane's necessities. He hurried to a point whence he could call out to her and recommend her to dry some of her clothing during his absence. He retired even more quickly, fearing lest he should be seen. Iris had already displayed to the sunlight a large portion of her costume.

Without further delay he set about a disagreeable but necessary task. From the pockets of the first officer and doctor he secured two revolvers and a supply of cartridges, evidently intended to settle any dispute which might have arisen between the ship's officers and the native members of the crew. He hoped the cartridges were uninjured, but he could not test them at the moment for fear of alarming Miss Deane.

Both officers carried pocketbooks and pencils. In one of these, containing dry leaves, the sailor made a careful inventory of the money and other valuable effects he found upon the dead, besides noting names and documents where possible. Curiously enough, the capitalist of this island morgue was a Lascar, who in a belt around his waist hoarded more than a hundred pounds in gold. The sailor tied in a handkerchief all the money he collected and ranged pocketbooks, letters and jewelry in separate little heaps. Then he stripped the men of their boots and outer clothing. He could not tell how long the girl and he might be detained on the island before help came, and fresh garments were essential. It would be foolish sentimentality to trust to stores thrown ashore from the ship.

Nevertheless when it became necessary to search and disrobe the women he almost broke down. For an instant he softened. Gulping back his emotions with a savage imprecation, he doggedly persevered. At last he paused to consider what should be done with the bodies. His first intent was to scoop a large hole in the sand with a piece of timber, but when he took into consideration the magnitude of the labor involved, requiring many hours of hard work and a waste of precious time which might be of infinite value to his helpless companion and himself, he was forced to abandon the project. It was not only impracticable, but dangerous.

Again he had to set his teeth with grim resolution. One by one the bodies were shot into the lagoon from the little quay of rock. He knew they would not be seen again.

He arose and shook himself like a dog. There was much to be done. He gathered the clothes and other articles into a heap and placed portions of shattered packing cases near to mislead Iris. While thus engaged he kicked up out of the sand a rusty creese, or Malay sword. The presence of this implement startled him. He examined it slowly and thrust it out of sight.

Then he went back to her, after donning his stockings and boots, now thoroughly dry.

"Are you ready now, Miss Deane?" he sang out cheerily.

"Ready? I have been waiting for you."

Jenks chuckled quietly. "I must guard my tongue. It betrays me," he said to himself.

Iris joined him. By some mysterious means she had effected great improvement in her appearance. Yet there were manifest gaps.

"If only I had a needle and thread"—she began.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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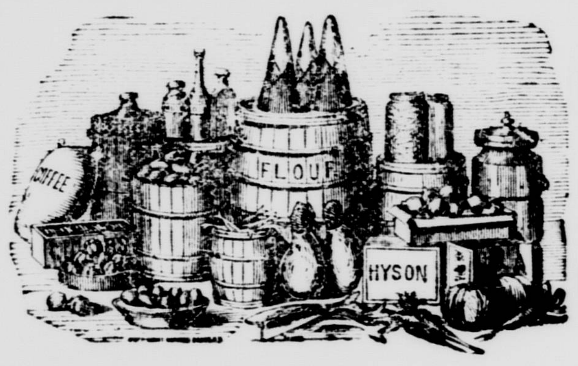

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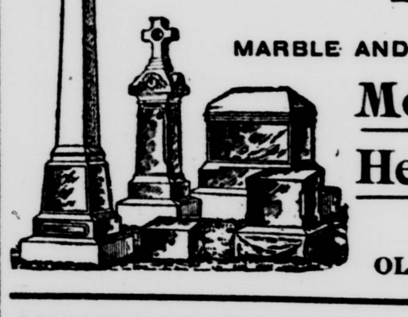

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