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. III—Jenks recovers stores and weapons from the wrecked vessel. He finds the skeleton of a European on the island.

CHAPTER III (Continued).

A creepy sensation ran up the man's spine and passed behind his ears. At this spot the drowned Lascars were lying. Like an inspiration came the knowledge that the cuttlefish, the dreaded octopus, abounds in the China sea.

His face was livid when he turned to Iris. "You are overwrought by fa-

Revealed the skeleton of a man.

tigue, Miss Deane," he said. "What you saw was probably a seal." He knew the ludicrous substitution would not be questioned. "Please go and lie down again."

"I cannot," she protested. "I am too frightened."

"Frightened! By a dream! In broad daylight!"

"But why are you so pale? What has alarmed you?"

"Can you ask? Did you not give the agreed signal?"

"Yes, but"—

Her inquiring glance fell. He was breathless from agitation rather than running. He was perturbed on her account. For an instant she had looked into his soul.

"I will go back," she said quietly, "though I would rather accompany you. What are you doing?"

"Seeking a place to lay our heads," he answered, with gruff carelessness. "You really must rest, Miss Deane. Otherwise you will be broken up by fatigue and become ill."

So Iris again sought her couch of sand, and the sailor returned to the skeleton. They separated unwillingly, each thinking only of the other's safety and comfort.

CHAPTER IV.

ACROSS the parched bones lay the stick discarded by Jenks in his alarm. He picked it up and resumed his progress along the pathway. So closely did he now examine the ground that he hardly noted his direction. The track led straight toward the wall of rock. The distance was not great—about forty yards. At first the brushwood impeded him, but soon even this hindrance disappeared, and a well defined passage meandered through a belt of trees, some strong and lofty, others quite immature.

More bushes gathered at the foot of the cliff. Behind them he could see the mouth of a cave. The six months' old growth of vegetation about the entrance gave clear indication as to the time which had elapsed since a human foot last disturbed the solitude.

A few vigorous blows with the stick cleared away obstructing plants and leafy branches. The sailor stooped and looked into the cavern, for the opening was barely five feet high. He perceived instantly that the excavation was man's handiwork applied to a fault in the hard rock. A sort of natural shaft existed, and this had been extended by manual labor. Beyond the entrance the cave became more lofty. Owing to its position with reference to the sun at that hour Jenks imagined that sufficient light would be obtainable when the tropical luxuriance of foliage outside was dispensed with.

At present the interior was dark. With the stick he tapped the walls and roof. A startled cluck and the rush of wings heralded the flight of two birds alarmed by the noise. Soon his eyes, more accustomed to the gloom, made out that the place was about thirty feet deep, ten feet wide in the center and seven or eight feet high.

At the farther end was a collection of objects inviting prompt attention. Each moment he could see with greater distinctness. Kneeling on one side of the little pile, he discerned that on a large stone serving as a rude bench were some tin utensils, some knives, a sextant and a quantity of empty cartridge cases. Between the stone and what a miner terms the "face" of the rock was a four foot space. Here, half imbedded in the sand which covered the floor, were two pickaxes, a shovel, a sledge hammer, a fine timber felling ax and three crowbars.

In the darkest corner of the cave's extremity the "wall" appeared to be very smooth. He prodded with the stick, and there was a sharp clang of tin. He discovered six square kerosene oil cases carefully stacked up. Three were empty, one seemed to be half full, and the contents of two were untouched. With almost feverish haste he ascertained that the half filled tin did really contain oil.

"What a find!" he ejaculated aloud.

So far as he could judge, the cave harbored no further surprises. Returning toward the exit, his boots dislodged more empty cartridges from the sand. They were shells adapted to a revolver of heavy caliber. At a short distance from the doorway they were present in dozens.

"The remnants of a fight," he thought. "The man was attacked and defended himself here. Not expecting the arrival of enemies, he provided no store of food or water. He was killed while trying to reach the well, probably at night."

He vividly pictured the scene—a brave, hardy European keeping at bay a boat load of Dyak savages, enduring manfully the agonies of hunger, thirst, perhaps wounds; then the siege, followed by a wild effort to gain the life giving well, the hiss of a Malay parang wielded by a lurking foe and the last despairing struggle before death came.

He might be mistaken. Perchance there was a less dramatic explanation. But he could not shake off his first impressions.

"What was the poor devil doing here?" he asked. "Why did he bury himself in this rock, with mining utensils and a few rough stores? He could not be a castaway. There is the indication of purpose, of preparation, of method combined with ignorance, for none who knew the ways of Dyaks and Chinese pirates would venture to live here alone if he could help it, and if he really were alone."

There was relief in hearing his own voice. He could hum and think and act. Arming himself with the ax, he attacked the bushes and branches of trees in front of the cave. He cut a fresh approach to the well and threw the litter over the skeleton. At first he was inclined to bury it where it lay, but he disliked the idea of Iris walking unconsciously over the place. No time could be wasted that day. He would seize an early opportunity to act as gravedigger.

After an absence of little more than an hour he rejoined the girl. She saw him from afar and wondered whence he obtained the ax he shouldered.

"You are a successful explorer," she cried when he drew near.

"Yes, Miss Deane. I have found water, implements, a shelter, even light."

"What sort of light?"

"Oil."

"And the shelter—is it a house?"

"No, a cave. If you are sufficiently rested you might come and take possession."

Her eyes danced with excitement. He told her what he had seen, with reservations, and she ran on before him to witness these marvels.

"Why did you make a new path to the well?" she inquired after a rapid survey.

"A new path!" The pertinent question staggered him.

"Yes, the people who lived here must have had some sort of free passage."

He lied easily. "I have only cleared away recent growth," he said.

"And why did they dig a cave? It surely would be much more simple to build a house from all these trees."

"There you puzzle me," he said frankly.

They had entered the cavern but a little way and now came out.

"These empty cartridges are funny. They suggest a fort, a battle." Womanlike, her words were carelessly chosen, but they were crammed with inductive force.

Embarked on the toboggan slope of untruth, the sailor slid smoothly downward.

"Events have colored your imagination, Miss Deane. Even in England men often preserve such things for future use. They can be reloaded."

"Yes, I have seen keepers do that. This is different. There is an air of"—

"There is a lot to be done," broke in Jenks emphatically. "We must climb the hill and get back here in time to light another fire before the sun goes down. I want to prop a canvas sheet in front of the cave and try to devise a lamp."

"Must I sleep inside?" demanded Iris.

"Yes. Where else?"

There was a pause, a mere whiff of awkwardness.

"I will mount guard outside," went on Jenks. He was trying to improve the edge of the ax by grinding it on a soft stone.

The girl went into the cave again. She was inquisitive, uneasy.

"That arrangement"— she began, but ended in a sharp cry of terror. The dispossessed birds had returned during the sailor's absence.

"I will kill them!" he shouted in anger.

"Please don't. There has been enough of death in this place already."

The words jarred on his ears. Then he felt that she could only allude to the victims of the wreck.

"I was going to say," she explained, "that we must devise a partition. There is no help for it until you construct a sort of house. Candidly, I do not like this hole in the rock. It is a vault, a tomb."

"You told me that I was in command, yet you dispute my orders." He strove hard to appear brusquely good humored, indifferent, though for one of his mold he was absurdly irritable. The cause was overstrain, but that explanation escaped him.

"Quite true. But if sleeping in the cold, in dew or rain, is bad for me, it must be equally bad for you, and without you I am helpless, you know."

He laughed sardonically, and the harsh note clashed with her frank candor. Here at least she was utterly deceived. His changeful moods were incomprehensible.

"I will serve you to the best of my ability, Miss Deane," he exclaimed. "We must hope for a speedy rescue, and I am inured to exposure. It is otherwise with you. Are you ready for the climb?"

The crest of the hill was tree covered, and they could see nothing beyond their immediate locality until the sailor found a point higher than the rest, where a rugged collection of hard basalt and the uprooting of some poon trees provided an open space elevated above the ridge.

For a short distance the foothold was precarious. Jenks helped the girl in this part of the climb. His strong, gentle grasp gave her confidence. She was flushed with exertion when they stood together on the summit of this elevated perch. They could look to every point of the compass except a small section on the southwest. Here the trees rose behind them until the brow of the precipice was reached.

The emergence into a sunlit panorama of land and sea, though expected, was profoundly enthralling. They appeared to stand almost exactly in the center of the island, which was crescent shaped. It was no larger than the sailor had estimated. The new slopes now revealed were covered with verdure down to the very edge of the water, which for nearly a mile seaward broke over jagged reefs. The sea looked strangely calm from this height. Irregular blue patches on the horizon to south and east caught the man's first glance. He unslung the binoculars he still carried and focused them eagerly.

"Islands," he cried, "and big ones too!"

"How odd!" whispered Iris, more concerned in the scrutiny of her immediate surroundings. Jenks glanced at her sharply. She was not looking at the islands, but at a curious hollow, a quarry-like depression beneath them to the right, distant about 300 yards and not far removed from the small plateau containing the well, though isolated from it by the south angle of the main cliff.

Here, in a great circle, there was not a vestige of grass, shrub or tree, nothing save brown rock and sand. At first the sailor deemed it to be the dried up bed of a small lake. This hypothesis would not serve, else it would be choked with verdure. The pit stared up at them like an ominous eye, though neither paid further attention to it, for the glorious prospect mapped at their feet momentarily swept aside all other considerations.

"What a beautiful place!" murmured Iris. "I wonder what it is called."

"Suppose we christen it Rainbow island?"

"Why 'Rainbow?'"

"That is the English meaning of 'Iris' in Latin, you know."

"So it is. How clever of you to think of it! Tell me, what is the meaning of 'Robert' in Greek?"

He turned to survey the northwest side of the island. "I do not know," he answered. "It might not be farfetched to translate is as 'a ship's steward, a menial.'"

Miss Iris had meant her playful retort as a mere light hearted quibble. It annoyed her, a young person of much consequence, to have her kindly condescension repelled.

"I suppose so," she agreed, "but I have gone through so much in a few hours that I am bewildered, apt to forget these nice distinctions."

Jenks was closely examining the reef on which the Sirdar struck. Some square objects were visible near the palm tree. The sun, glinting on the waves, rendered it difficult to discern their significance.

"What do you make of those?" he inquired, handing the glasses and blandly ignoring Miss Deane's petulance. Her brain was busy with other things while she twisted the binoculars to suit her vision. Rainbow island—Iris—it was a nice conceit, but "menial" struck a discordant note. This man was no menial in appearance or speech. Why was he so deliberately rude?

"I think they are boxes or packing cases," she announced.

"Ah, that was my own idea! I must visit that locality."

"How? Will you swim?"

"No," he said, his stern lips relaxing in a smile; "I will not swim, and, by the way, Miss Deane, be careful when you are near the water. The lagoon is swarming with sharks at present. I feel tolerably assured that at low tide, when the remnants of the gale have vanished, I will be able to walk there along the reef."

"Sharks!" she cried. "In there! What horrible surprises this speck of land contains! I should not have imagined that sharks and seals could live together!"

"You are quite right," he explained, with becoming gravity. "As a rule, sharks infest only the leeward side of these islands. Just now they are attracted in shoals by the wreck."

"Oh!" Iris shivered slightly.

"We had better go back now. The wind is keen here, Miss Deane."

She knew that he purposely misunderstood her gesture. His attitude conveyed a rebuke. There was no further room for sentiment in their present existence. They had to deal with chill necessities. As for the sailor, he was glad that the chance turn of their conversation enabled him to warn her against the lurking dangers of the lagoon. There was no need to mention the devilfish now. He must spare her all avoidable thrills.

They gathered the stores from the first dining room and reached the cave without incident. Another fire was lighted, and while Iris attended to the kitchen the sailor felled several young trees. He wanted poles, and these were the right size and shape. He soon cleared a considerable space. The timber was soft and so small in girth that three cuts with the ax usually sufficed. He dragged from the beach the smallest tarpaulin he could find and propped it against the rock in such manner that it effectually screened the mouth of the cave, though admitting light and air.

He was so busy that he paid little heed to Iris. But the odor of fried ham was wafted to him. He was lifting a couple of heavy stones to stay the canvas and keep it from flapping in the wind when the girl called out:

"Wouldn't you like to have a wash before dinner?"

He straightened himself and looked at her. Her face and hands were shining, spotless. The change was so great that his brow wrinkled with perplexity.

"I am a good pupil," she cried. "You see I am already learning to help myself. I made a bucket out of one of the dish covers by slinging it in two ropes. Another dish cover, some sand and leaves supplied basin, soap and towel. I have cleaned the tin cups and the knives, and, see, here is my greatest treasure."

She held up a small metal lamp.

"Where in the world did you find that?" he exclaimed.

Buried in the sand inside the cave."

"Anything else?"

His tone was abrupt. She was so disappointed by the seeming want of appreciation of her industry that a gleam of amusement died from her eyes, and she shook her head, stooping at once to attend to the toasting of some biscuits.

This time he was genuinely sorry.

"Forgive me, Miss Deane," he said penitently. "My words are dictated by anxiety. I do not wish you to make discoveries on your own account. This is a strange place, you know—an unpleasant one in some respects."

"Surely I can rummage about my own cave?"

"Most certainly. It was careless of me not to have examined its interior more thoroughly."

"Then why do you grumble because I found the lamp?"

"I did not mean any such thing. I am sorry."

"I think you are horrid. If you want to wash you will find the water over there. Don't wait. The ham will be frizzled to a cinder."

Unlucky Jenks! Was ever man fated to incur such unmerited odium? He savagely laved his face and neck. The fresh, cool water was delightful at first, but when he drew near to the fire he experienced an unaccountable sensation of weakness. Could it be possible that he was going to faint? It was too absurd. He sank to the ground. Trees, rocks and sand strewn earth indulged in a mad dance. Iris' voice sounded weak and indistinct. It seemed to travel in waves from a great distance. He tried to brush away from his brain these dim fancies, but his iron will for once failed, and he pitched headlong downward into darkness.

When he recovered, the girl's left arm was around his neck. For one blissful instant he nestled there contentedly. He looked into her eyes and saw that she was crying. A gust of anger rose within him that he should be the cause of those tears.

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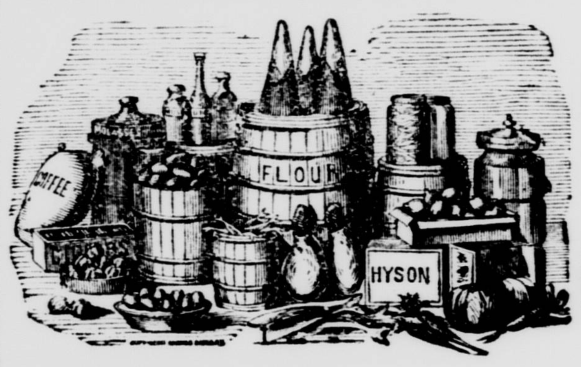

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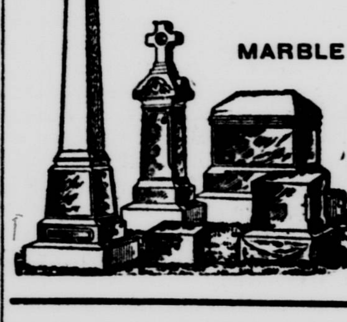

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