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. IV—A cave on the island is fitted up as a habitation. A chart of the island, mysteriously marked, is found on the skeleton.

CHAPTER IV (Continued).

He tried to rise.

"Oh! Are you better?" Her lips quivered pitifully.

"Yes. What happened? Did I faint?"

"Drink this."

She held a cup to his mouth, and he obediently strove to swallow the contents. It was champagne. After the first spasm of terror and when the application of water to his face failed to restore consciousness Iris had knocked the head off the bottle of champagne.

He quickly revived. Nature had only given him a warning that he was overdrawing his resources. He was deeply humiliated. He did not conceive the truth, that only a strong man could do all that he had done and live. For thirty-six hours he had not slept. During part of the time he fought with wilder beasts than they knew at Ephesus. The long exposure to the sun, the mental strain of his foreboding that the charming girl whose life depended upon him might be exposed to even worse dangers than any yet encountered, the physical labor he had undergone, the irksome restraint he strove to place upon his conduct and utterances—all these things culminated in utter relaxation when the water touched his heated skin.

"How could you frighten me so?" demanded Iris hysterically. "You must have felt that you were working too hard. You made me rest. Why didn't you rest yourself?"

He looked at her wistfully. This collapse must not happen again for her sake. These two said more with eyes than lips. She withdrew her arm. Her face and neck crimsoned.

"Good gracious!" she cried. "The ham is ruined!"

It was burnt black. She prepared a fresh supply. When it was ready Jenks was himself again. They ate in silence and shared the remains of the bottle. A smile illumined his tired face.

Iris was watchful. She had never in her life cooked even a potato or boiled an egg. The ham was her first attempt.

"My cooking amuses you?" she demanded suspiciously.

"It gratifies every sense," he murmured. "There is but one thing needful to complete my happiness."

"And that is?"

"Permission to smoke."

"Smoke what?"

He produced a steel box tightly closed and a pipe.

"Your pockets are absolute shops," said the girl, delighted that his temper had improved. "What other stores do you carry about with you?"

He lit his pipe and solemnly gave an inventory of his worldly goods. Beyond the items she had previously seen he could only enumerate a silver dollar, a very soiled and crumpled handkerchief and a bit of tin. A box of Norwegian matches he threw away as useless, but Iris recovered them.

"You never know what purpose they may serve," she said. In after days a weird significance was attached to this simple phrase.

"Why do you carry about a bit of tin?" she went on.

"I found it here, Miss Deane," he answered.

Luckily she interpreted "here" as applying to the cave.

"Let me see it. May I?"

He handed it to her. She could make nothing of it, so together they puzzled over it. The sailor rubbed it with a mixture of kerosene and sand. Then figures and letters and a sort of diagram were revealed. At last they became decipherable. By exercising patient ingenuity some one had indented the metal with a sharp punch until the marks assumed this aspect:

Iris was quick witted. "It is a plan of the island," she cried.

"Also the latitude and the longitude."

"What does 'J. S.' mean?"

"Probably the initials of a man's name. Let us say John Smith, for instance."

"And the figures on the island, with the 'X' and the dot?"

"I cannot tell you at present," he said. "I take it that the line across the island signifies this gap or canyon, and the small intersecting line the cave. But 32 divided by 1 and an 'X' surmounted by a dot are cabalistic. They would cause even Sherlock Holmes to smoke at least two pipes. I have barely started one."

"It looks quite mysterious, like the things you read of in stories of pirates and buried treasure."

"Yes," he admitted. "It is unquestionably a plan, a guidance, given to a person not previously acquainted with the island, but cognizant of some fact connected with it. Unfortunately none of the buccaneers I can bring to mind frequented these seas. The poor beggar who left it here must have had some other motive than searching for a cache."

"Did he dig the cave and the well, I wonder?"

"Probably the former, but not the well. No man could do it unaided."

"Why do you assume he was alone?"

He strolled toward the fire to kick a stray log. "It is only idle speculation at the best, Miss Deane," he replied. "Would you like to help me to drag some timber up from the beach? If we get a few big planks we can build a fire that will last for hours. We want some extra clothes, too, and it will soon be dark."

The request for co-operation gratified her. She complied eagerly, and without much exertion they hauled a respectable load of firewood to their new camping ground. They also brought a number of coats to serve as coverings. Then Jenks tackled the lamp. It was a most difficult operation to open it.

Before the sun went down he succeeded and made a wick by unraveling a few strands of wool from his jersey. When night fell, with the suddenness of the tropics, Iris was able to illuminate her small domain.

They were both utterly tired and ready to drop with fatigue. The girl said "good night," but instantly reappeared from behind the tarpaulin.

"Am I to keep the lamp alight?" she inquired.

"Please yourself, Miss Deane. Better not, perhaps. It will only burn four or five hours anyway."

Soon the light vanished, and he lay down, his pipe between his teeth, close to the cave's entrance. Weary though he was he could not sleep forthwith. His mind was occupied with the signs on the canister head.

"32 divided by 1; an 'X' and a dot," he repeated several times. "What do they signify?"

Suddenly he sat up, with every sense alert, and grabbed his revolver. Something impelled him to look toward the spot, a few feet away, where the skeleton was hidden. It was the rustling of a bird among the trees that had caught his ear.

He thought of the white framework of a once powerful man, lying there among the bushes, abandoned, forgotten, horrific. Then he smothered a cry of surprise.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "There is no 'X' and dot. That sign is meant for a skull and crossbones. It lies exactly on the part of the island where we saw that queer looking bald patch today. First thing tomorrow before the girl awakes I must examine that place."

He resolutely stretched himself on his share of the spread out coats, now thoroughly dried by sun and fire. In a minute he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER V.

He awoke to find the sun high in the heavens. Iris was preparing breakfast; a fine fire was crackling cheerfully, and the presiding goddess had so altered her appearance that the sailor surveyed her with astonishment.

He noiselessly assumed a sitting posture, tucked his feet beneath him and blinked. The girl's face was not visible from where he sat, and for a few seconds he thought he must surely be dreaming. She was attired in a neat navy blue dress and smart blouse. Her white canvas shoes were replaced by strong leather boots. She was quite spick and span, this island Hebe.

So soundly had he slept that his senses returned but slowly. At last he guessed what had happened. She had risen with the dawn and, conquering her natural feeling of repulsion, selected from the store he accumulated yesterday some more suitable garments than those in which she escaped from the wreck.

He quietly took stock of his own tattered condition and passed a reflective hand over the stubble on his chin. In a few days his face would resemble a scrubbing brush. In that mournful moment he would have exchanged even his pipe and tobacco box, worth untold gold, for shaving tackle. Who can say why his thoughts took such trend? Twenty-four hours can effect great changes in the human mind if controlling influences are active.

Then came a sharp revulsion of feeling. His name was Robert—a menial. He reached for his boots, and Iris heard him.

"Good morning!" she cried, smiling sweetly. "I thought you would never awake. I suppose you were very, very tired. Please wash quickly. The eggs will be hard."

"Eggs!"

"Yes. I made a collection among the trees. I tasted one of a lot that looked good. It was first rate."

He had not the moral courage to begin the day with a rebuke. She was irrepressible, but she really must not do these things. He smothered a sigh in the improvised basin which was placed ready for him.

Miss Deane had prepared a capital meal. Of course the ham and biscuits still bulked large in the bill of fare, but there were boiled eggs, fried bananas and an elderly cocoanut. These things, supplemented by clear, cold water, were not so bad for a couple of castaways hundreds of miles from everywhere.

For the life of him the man could not refrain from displaying the conversational art in which he excelled. Their talk dealt with Italy, Egypt, India. He spoke with the ease of culture and enthusiasm. Once he slipped into anecdote apropos of the helplessness of British soldiers in any matter outside the scope of the king's regulations.

"I remember," he said, "seeing a cavalry subaltern and the members of an escort sitting half starved on a number of bags piled up in the Suakin desert. And what do you think were in the bags?"

"I don't know," said Iris, keenly alert for deductions.

"Biscuits! They thought the bags contained patent fodder until I enlightened them."

It was on the tip of her tongue to pounce on him with the comment, "Then you have been an officer in the army." But she forbore. She had guessed this earlier. Yet the mischievous light in her eyes defied control. He was warned in time and pulled himself up short.

"You read my face like a book," she cried.

"No printed page was ever so—legible. Now, Miss Deane, we have gossiped too long. I am a laggard this morning, but before starting work I have a few serious remarks to make."

"More digs?" she inquired saucily.

"I repudiate 'digs.' In the first place, you must not make any more experiments in the matter of food. The eggs were a wonderful effort; but, flattered by success, you may poison yourself."

"Secondly?"

"You must never pass out of my sight without carrying a revolver, not so much for defense, but as a signal. Did you take one when you went bird's nesting?"

"No. Why?"

There was a troubled look in his eyes when he answered:

"It is best to tell you at once that before help reaches us we may be visited by cruel and bloodthirsty savages. I would not even mention this if it were a remote contingency. As matters stand, you ought to know that such a thing may happen. Let us trust in God's goodness that assistance may come soon. The island has seemingly been deserted for many months, and therein lies our best chance of escape. But I am obliged to warn you lest you should be taken unawares."

Iris was serious enough now.

"How do you know that such danger threatens us?" she demanded.

He countered readily. "Because I happen to have read a good deal about the China sea and its frequenters," he said. "I am the last man in the world to alarm you needlessly. All I mean to convey is that certain precautions should be taken against a risk that is possible, not probable. No more."

She could not repress a shudder. The sailor wanted to tell her that he would defend her against a host of savages if he were endowed with many lives, but he was perforce tongue tied. He even reviled himself for having spoken, but she saw the anguish in his face, and her woman's heart acknowledged him as her protector, her shield.

"Mr. Jenks," she said simply, "we are in God's hands. I put my trust in him and in you. I am hopeful—nay, more, confident. I thank you for what you have done, for all that you will do. If you cannot preserve me from threatening perils no man could, for you are as brave and gallant a gentleman as lives on the earth today."

Now, the strange feature of this extraordinary and unexpected outburst of pent up emotion was that the girl pronounced his name with the slightly emphasized accentuation of one who knew it to be a mere disguise. The man was so taken aback by her declaration of faith that the minor incident, though it did not escape him, was smothered in a tumult of feeling.

He could not trust himself to speak. He rose hastily and seized the ax to deliver a murderous assault upon a sago palm that stood close at hand.

Iris was the first to recover a degree of self possession. For a moment she had bared her soul. With reaction came a sensitive shrinking. Her delicate nature disapproved these sentimental displays. She wanted to box her own ears.

With innate tact she took a keen interest in the felling of the tree.

"What do you want it for?" she inquired when the sturdy trunk creaked and fell.

Jenks felt better now.

"This is a change of diet," he explained. "No; we don't boil the leaves or nibble the bark. When I split this palm open you will find that the interior is full of pith. I will cut it out for you, and then it will be your task to knead it with water after well washing it, pick out all the fiber and finally permit the water to evaporate. In a couple of days the residuum will become a white powder, which, when boiled, is sago."

"Good gracious!" said Iris.

"The story sounds unconvincing, but I believe I am correct. It is worth a trial."

"I should have imagined that sago grew on a stalk like rice or wheat."

"Or Topsy!"

She laughed. A difficult situation had passed without undue effort. Unhappily the man reopened it. While using a crowbar as a wedge he endeavored to put matters on a straightforward footing.

"A little while ago," he said, "you seemed to imply that I had assumed the name of Jenks."

But Miss Deane's confidential mood had gone. "Nothing of the kind," she said coldly. "I think Jenks is an excellent name."

She regretted the words even as they fell from her lips. The sailor gave a mighty wrench with the bar, splitting the log to its clustering leaves.

"You are right," he said. "It is distinctive, brief, dogmatic. I cling to it passionately."

Soon afterward, leaving Iris to the manufacture of sago, he went to the leeward side of the island, a search for turtles being his ostensible object. When the trees hid him he quickened his pace and turned to the left in order to explore the cavity marked on the tin with a skull and crossbones. To his surprise he hit upon the remnants of a roadway—that is, a line through the wood where there were no well grown trees, where the ground bore traces of humanity in the shape of a wrinkled and mildewed pair of Chinese boots, a wooden sandal, even the decayed remains of a palki, or litter.

At last he reached the edge of the pit, and the sight that met his eyes held him spellbound.

The labor of many hands had torn a chasm, a quarry, out of the side of the hill. Roughly circular in shape, it had a diameter of perhaps a hundred feet, and at its deepest part, toward the cliff, it ran to a depth of forty feet. On the lower side, where the sailor stood, it descended rapidly for some fifteen feet.

Grasses, shrubs, plants of every variety, grew in profusion down the steep slopes wherever seeds could find precarious nurture until a point was reached about ten or eleven feet from the bottom. There all vegetation ceased, as if forbidden to cross a magic circle.

Below this belt the place was a charnel house. The bones of men and animals mingled in weird confusion. Most were mere skeletons. A few bodies—nine the sailor counted—yet preserved some resemblance of humanity. These latter were scattered among the older relics. They wore the clothes of Dyaks. Characteristic hats and weapons denoted their nationality. The others, the first harvest of this modern Golgotha, might have been Chinese coolies. When the sailor's fascinated vision could register details he distinguished yokes, baskets, odd looking spades and picks strewn amid the bones. The animals were all of one type—small, lanky, with long pointed skulls. At last he spied a withered hoof. They were pigs.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The place was a charnel house.

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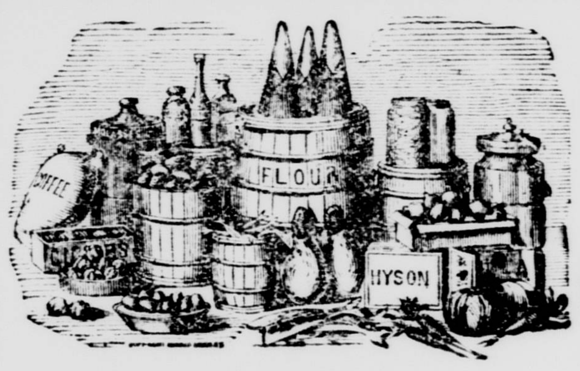

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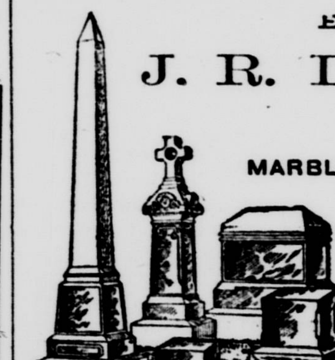

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