

The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTER.

CHAPTER I.—The Sirdar, having among her passengers Iris Deane, the daughter of the owner of the ship, and Robert Jenks, who is working as a waiter. Iris, wrecked in the Pacific. III.—Jenks recovers and weeps from the wrecked vessel. He finds the skeleton of a man on the island.

"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 it 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 strange 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 reticence.

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 superstition! This speck of land contains! I should not have imagined that sharks and seas could live together!"

"You are quite right," he explained, with becoming gravity. "As a rule, that is the safest side of the island. Just now they are attracted in shoals by the wreck."

"Oh!" Iris shivered slightly.

"We had better go back now. The wind is keen, and the sea is very rough. She knew that he purposely misunderstood her gesture. His attitude conveyed a rebuke. There was no further room for sentiment in their present excitement. 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 devilish man. 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 collected 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 tarponella 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, soap 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 for 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 here 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 uncomfortable 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 indined 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 images, 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.

He tried to rise.

"Oh! Aye, 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 been waiting that he was over-drawing 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 that time he fought with wild beasts that he knew at Epheesus. 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 more dire dangers than he himself, 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?"

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

"Good gracious!" she cried. "Your hair 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 smoking amuses you?" she demanded suspiciously.

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

"Smoking to smoke?"

"Smoke what?"

He produced a steel box tightly closed and a pipe.

"Your pocket is the absolute shops," Iris declared, 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?"

"And that is it, 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 extraordinary patient ingenuity some one had indicated the metal with a sharp punch upon the marks assumed this aspect:

"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 repeat '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 the 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. Do you take me 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 he reaches us we may be visited by cruel and bloodthirsty savages. I would not even mention it if it were a remote contingency. As matters stand, you ought to know that such a thing may happen. Let us turn to God's goodness that assistance may come soon. The island has recently 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 sea and its frequenters," he said. "I am the last man in the world to alarm you needlessly. All I mean along the coast is that certain precautions should be taken against a risk that is possible, not probable. No more."

"The child 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 your hands. I put my trust in him and in you. I am hopeful—may be more confident. I thank you for what you have done, for all that you will do. If you cannot preserve me from the threat, you may at least be kind enough to bring me some of the things you are so brave and gallant a gentleman as to bring me from 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 has had to go a more dangerous way than was so taken aback by her deed. The girl's eyes were full of tears. The girl's face was pale. The girl's hands were cold. The girl's heart was full of a strange, new feeling.

"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. Five hundred tons of heavy iron that the girl asks 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 innocently assumed a sitting posture, tucked his feet beneath him and yawned. 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 brown leather boots. She was quite spick and span, like a young lady.

"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 repugnance to the pick out of the floor, he had selected yesterday some more suitable garments than those in which she escaped from the wreck."

He quietly took stock of his own attire. He had passed a night in a defective hand over the stable 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 for a pair of trousers and a shirt.

"Who can say why his thoughts took such a turn? 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 appear. I suppose you were 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 irrepensible, 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 biscuit still bulked large in the bill of fare but there were boiled eggs, fried potatoes and a cherry compote. 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 conventional 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 Sunkin desert. And what do you think were in the bags?"

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

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