

# The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY  
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## 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 shifted 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 she 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?" she 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.

"If that is all," said the sailor, fumbling in his pockets. He produced a shabby little huss containing a thimble, scissors, needles and some skeins of unbleached thread. Case and contents were sodden or rusted with salt water, but the girl fastened upon this treasure with a sigh of deep content.

"Now, please," she cried, "I want a telegraph office and a ship."

When they reached the sands she caught sight of the pile of clothes and the broken woodwork, with the small heaps of valuables methodically arranged. The harmless subterfuge did not deceive her. She darted a quick look of gratitude at her companion. How thoughtful he was! After a fearful glance around she was reassured, though she wondered what had become of them.

"I see you have been busy," she said.

nothing toward the clothes and boots. "Yes," he replied simply. "Lucky find, wasn't it?"

"Most fortunate. When they are quite dry I will replenish my wardrobe. What is the first thing to be done?"

"Well, Miss Deane, I think our programme is, in the first place, to examine the articles thrown ashore and see if any of the cases contain food. Secondly, we should haul high and dry everything that may be of use to us, lest the weather should break again and the next tide sweep away the spoil. Thirdly, we should eat and rest, and, finally, we must explore the island before the light falls. I am convinced we are alone here. It is a small place at the best, and if any Chinamen were ashore they would have put in an appearance long since."

"Do you think, then, that we may remain here long?"

"It is impossible to form an opinion on that point. Help may come in a day. On the other hand—"

"Yes?"

"It is a wise thing, Miss Deane, to prepare for other contingencies."

"Do you mean," she said slowly, "that we may be imprisoned here for weeks, perhaps months?"

"If you cast your mind back a few hours you will perhaps admit that we are very fortunate to be here at all."

She whisked round upon him. "Do not fence with my question, Mr. Jenks. Answer me!"

He bowed. There was a perceptible return of his stubborn cynicism when he spoke.

"The facts are obvious, Miss Deane. The loss of the Sirdar will not be definitely known for many days. It will be assumed that she has broken down. The agents in Singapore will await cabled tidings of her whereabouts. She might have drifted anywhere in that typhoon. Ultimately they will send out a vessel to search, impelled to that course a little earlier by your father's anxiety. Pardon me, I did not intend to pain you. I am speaking my mind."

"Go on," said Iris bravely.

"The relief ship must search the entire China sea. The gale might have driven a disabled steamer north, south, east or west. A typhoon travels in a whirling spiral, you see, and the direction of a drifting ship depends wholly upon the locality where she sustained damage. The coasts of China, Java, Borneo and the Philippines are not equipped with lighthouses on every headland and cordoned with telegraph wires. There are river pirates and savage races to be reckoned with. Casting aside all other possibilities and assuming that a prompt search is made to the south of our course, this part of the ocean is full of reefs and small islands, some inhabited permanently, others visited occasionally by fishermen."

He was about to add something, but checked himself.

"To sum up," he continued hurriedly, "we may have to remain here for many days, even months. There is always a chance of speedy help. We must act, however, on the basis of detention for an indefinite period. I am discussing appearances as they are. A survey of the island may change all these views."

"In what way?"

He turned and pointed to the summit of the tree covered hill behind them.

"From that point," he said, "we may see other and larger islands. If so, they will certainly be inhabited. I am surprised this one is not."

He ended abruptly. They were losing time. Before Iris could join him he was already hauling a large undamaged case out of the water.

He laughed unthinkingly. "Champagne!" he said. "A good brand too!"

This man was certainly an enigma. Iris wrinkled her pretty forehead in the effort to place him in a fitting category. His words and accent were those of an educated gentleman, yet his actions and manners were studiously ungentlemanly. The veneer of roughness puzzled her. That he was naturally of refined temperament she knew quite well, not alone by perception, but by the plain evidence of his earlier dealings with her.

To the test of her ability she silently helped in the work of salvage. They made a queer collection. A case of champagne and another of brandy, a box of books, a pair of night glasses, a compass, several boxes of ship's biscuits, coated with salt, but saved by their hardness, having been immersed but a few seconds; two large cases of hams in equally good condition, some huge dish covers, a bit of twisted iron-work and a great quantity of cordage and timber.

There was one very heavy package, which their united strength could not lift. The sailor searched around until he found an iron bar that could be wrenched from its socket. With this he pried open the strong outer cover and revealed the contents—regulation boxes of ammunition, each containing 100 rounds.

"Ah!" he cried. "Now we want some rifles."

"What good would they be?" inquired Iris.

He softly denounced himself as a fool, but he answered at once: "To

shoot birds, of course, Miss Deane. There are plenty here, and many of them are edible."

They worked in silence for another hour. The sun was nearing the zenith. They were distressed with the increasing heat of the day. Jenks secured a ham and some biscuits, some pieces of driftwood and the binoculars and invited Miss Deane to accompany him to the grove. She obeyed without a word, though she wondered how he proposed to light a fire. To contribute something toward the expected feast she picked up a dish cover and a bottle of champagne.

The sailor eyed the concluding item with disfavor. "Not while the sun is up," he said. "In the evening, yes."

"It was for you," explained Iris coldly. "I do not drink wine."

"You must break the pledge while you are here, Miss Deane. It is often

mentarily dismayed, but her senses confirmed the sailor's explanation—"Sea birds."

"Can you use a revolver?" he asked. "My father taught me. He thinks every man should know how to defend himself if need be."

"Excellent. Well, Miss Deane, you must try to sleep for a couple of hours. I purr examining the coast for some distance on each side. Should you want me, a shot will be the best sort of signal."

"I am very tired," she admitted. "But you?"

"Oh, I am all right! I feel restless—that is, I mean I will not be able to sleep until night comes, and before we climb the hill to survey our domain I want to find better quarters than we now possess."

Perhaps she was less fatigued she would have caught the vague anxiety, the note of distrust, in his voice. But the carpet of sand and leaves on which she lay was very seductive. Her eyes closed. She nestled into a comfortable position and slept.

The man moved the revolver out of her way to a spot where she must see it instantly, pulled his sou'wester well over his eyes and walked off quietly.

They were flung ashore on the north-west side of the island. Except for the cove formed by the coral reef, with its mysterious palm tree growing apparently in the midst of the waves, the shape of the coast was roughly that of the concave side of a bow, the two visible extremities being about three-quarters of a mile apart.

He guessed by the way in which the sea raced past these points that the land did not extend beyond them. Behind him it rose steeply to a considerable height, 150 or 200 feet. In the center was the tallest hill, which seemed to end abruptly toward the southwest. On the northeast side it was connected with a rocky promontory by a ridge of easy grade. The sailor turned to the southwest as offering the most likely direction for rapid survey.

He was not surprised to find that the hill terminated in a sheer wall of rock, which stood out, ominous and massive, from the wealth of verdure clothing the remainder of the ridge. Facing the precipice and separated from it by a strip of ground not twenty feet above the sea level in the highest part was another rock built eminence quite bare of trees, blackened by the weather and scarred in a manner that attested the attacks of lightning.

The intervening belt was sparsely dotted with trees, casuarinas, poon and other woods he did not know, resembling ebony and cedar. A number of stumps showed that the ax had been at work, but not recently. He passed into the cleft and climbed a tree that offered easy access. As he expected, after rising a few feet from the ground his eyes encountered the solemn blue line of the sea, not half a mile distant.

He descended and commenced a systematic search. Men had been here. Was there a house? Would he suddenly encounter some hermit Malay or Chinaman?

At the foot of the main cliff was a cluster of fruit bearing trees—plantains, areca nuts and cocoa palms. A couple of cecropias caught his eye. In one spot the undergrowth was rank and vividly green. The cassava, or tapioca plant, reared its high passion flower leaves above the grass, and some sago palms thrust aloft their thick stemmed trunks.

"Here is a change of menu, at any rate," he commended.

Breaking a thick branch off a poon tree, he whittled away the minor stems. A strong stick was needful to explore that leafy fastness thoroughly.

A few cautious strides and vigorous whacks with the stick laid bare the cause of such prodigality in a soil covered with drifted sand and lumps of black and white speckled coral. The trees and bushes enclosed a well-secured, in fact, from being choked with sand during the first gale that blew.

Delighted with this discovery, more precious than diamonds at the moment—for he doubted the advisability of existing on the water supply of the pitcher plant—he knelt to peer into the excavation. The well had been properly made. Ten feet down he could see the reflection of his face. Expert hands had tapped the secret reservoir of the island. By stretching to the full extent of his arm he managed to plunge the stick into the water. Tasting the drops, he found that they were quite sweet. The sand and porous rock provided the best of filter beds.

He rose, well pleased, and noted that on the opposite side the appearance of the shrubs and tufts of long grass indicated the existence of a grown over path toward the cliff. He followed it walking carefully, with eyes seeking the prospect beyond, when something rattled and cracked beneath his feet. Looking down, he was horrified to find he was trampling on a skeleton.

Had a venomous snake coiled its glistening folds around his leg he would not have been more startled. But this man of iron nerve soon recovered. He frowned deeply after the first involuntary heart throb.

With the stick he cleared away the undergrowth and revealed the skeleton of a man. The bones were big and strong, but oxidized by the action of the air. Jenks had injured the left tibia by his tread, but three fractured ribs and a smashed shoulder blade told some terrible unwritten story.

Beneath the mournful relics were fragments of decayed cloth. It was blue serge. Lying about were a few blackened objects, brass buttons marked with an anchor. The dead man's boots were in the best state of preservation, but the leather had shrunk, and the nails protruded like fangs.

A rusted pocketknife lay there, and on the left breast of the skeleton rested a round piece of tin, the top of a

canister, which might have reposed in a coat pocket. Jenks picked it up. Some curious marks and figures were punched into its surface. After a hasty glance he put it aside for more leisurely examination.

No weapon was visible. He could form no estimate as to the cause of the death of this poor unknown nor the time since the tragedy had occurred.

Jenks must have stood many minutes before he perceived that the skeleton was headless. At first he imagined that he had disturbed the skull. But the most minute search demonstrated that it had gone—had been taken away, in fact—for the plants which so effectually screened the lighter bones would not permit the skull to vanish.

Then the frown on the sailor's face became threatening, thunderous. He recollected the rusty creese. Indistinct memories of strange tales of the China sea crowded unbidden to his brain.

"Dyaks!" he growled fiercely. "A ship's officer, an Englishman probably, murdered by head hunting Dyak pirates!"

If they came once they would come again.

Five hundred yards away Iris Deane was sleeping. He ought not to have left her alone. And then, with the devilish ingenuity of coincidence, a revolver shot awoke the echoes and sent all manner of wild fowl hurtling through the trees with clamorous outcry.

Panting and wild eyed, Jenks was at the girl's side in an inconceivably short space of time. She was not beneath the shelter of the grove, but on the sands, gazing, pallid in cheek and lip, at the group of rocks on the edge of the lagoon.

"What is the matter?" he gasped.

"Oh, I don't know!" she walked brokenly. "I had a dream, such a horrible dream. You were struggling with some awful thing down there." She pointed to the rocks.

"I was not near the place," he said laboriously. It cost him an effort to breathe. His broad chest expanded inches with each respiration.

"Yes, yes, I understand. But I awoke and ran to save you. When I got here I saw something, a thing with waving arms, and fired. It vanished, and then you came."

The sailor walked slowly to the rocks. A fresh chip out of the stone showed where the bullet struck. One huge boulder was wet, as if water had been splashed over it. He halted and looked intently into the water. Not a fish was to be seen, but small spirals of sand were eddying up from the bottom, where it shelved steeply from the shore.

Iris followed him. "See!" she cried excitedly. "I was not mistaken. There was something here."

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-

food had restored his faculties. The girl thought dreamily, as he stood there in his rough attire, that she had never seen a finer man. He was tall, sinewy and well formed. In repose his face was pleasant, if masterful. Its somewhat sullen, self contained expression was occasional and acquired. She wondered how he could be so energetic. Personally she was consumed with sleepiness.

He produced a revolver.

"Do you mind if I fire a shot to test these cartridges?" he inquired. "The powder is all right, but the fulminate in the caps may be damaged."

She agreed promptly. He pointed the weapon at a cluster of cocoanuts, and there was a loud report. Two nuts fell to the ground, and the air was filled with shrill screams and the flapping of innumerable wings. Iris was mo-



The bottles were shot into the lagoon.



Revealed the skeleton of a man.

ture, 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.

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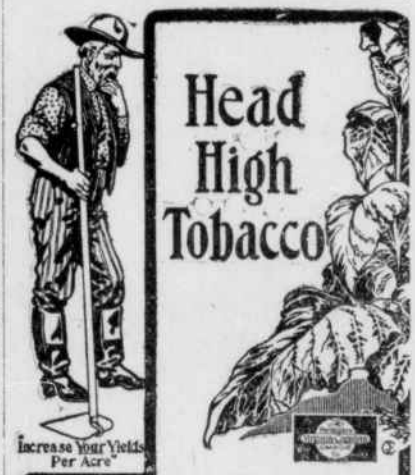
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