

The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY

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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, who can say why his thoughts took such a 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 irrepresible, 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 coconut. 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.

"A 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 remains 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 wadded and midwived pair of Chinese shoes, a wooden sandal, even the decayed remains of a palik, 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. Really 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 vi-

ston 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.

Over all lay a thick coating of fine sand, deposited from the eddying winds that could never reach the silent depths. The place was ghoulish, horribly depressing. Jenks broke out into a clammy perspiration. He seemed to be looking at the secrets of the grave.

At last his superior intelligence asserted itself. His brain became clearer, recovered its power of analysis. He began to criticize, reflect, and this is the theory he evolved:

Some one, long ago, had discovered valuable minerals in the volcanic rock. Mining operations were in full blast when the extinct volcano took its revenge upon the human ants gnawing at its vitals and smothered them by a deadly outpouring of carbonic acid gas, the bottled up poison of the ages. A horde of pigs, running wild over the island—placed there no doubt by Chinese fishers—had met the same fate while intent on dreadful orgy.

Then there came a European who knew how the anhydride gas, being heavier than the surrounding air, settled like water in that terrible hollow. He, too, had striven to wrest the treasure from the stone by driving a tunnel into the cliff. He had partly succeeded and had gone away, perhaps to obtain help, after crudely registering his knowledge on the lid of a tin canister. This, again, probably fell into the hands of another man, who, curious but unconvicted, caused himself to be set ashore on this desolate spot with a few inadequate stores. Possibly he had arranged to be taken off within a fixed time.

But a sampan laden with Dyak pirates came first, and the intrepid explorer's bones rested near the well, while his head had gone to decorate the hut of some fierce village chief.

The murderers, after burying their own dead—for the white man fought hard, witness the empty cartridges—searched the island. Some of them, ignorantly impulsive, descended into the hollow. They remained there. The others, superstitious barbarians, fled for their lives, embarking so hastily that they took from the cave neither tools nor oil, though they would greatly prize these articles.

Such was the tragic web he spun, a compound of fact and fancy. It explained all perplexities save one. What did "32 divided by 1" mean? Was there yet another fearsome riddle awaiting solution?

And then his thoughts flew to Iris. Happen what might, her bright picture was seldom absent from his brain. Suppose, egg hunting, she had stumbled across this valley of death! How could he hope to keep it hidden from her? Was not the ghastly knowledge better than the horror of a chance ramble through the wood and the shock of

discovery—nay, indeed, the risk of a catastrophe?

He rushed back through the trees until he caught sight of Iris industriously kneading the sago pith in one of those most useful dishes.

He called to her, led her wondering to the track and pointed out the fatal quarry, but in such wise that she could not look inside it.

"You remember that round hole we saw from the summit rock?" he said.

"Well, it is full of carbonic acid gas, to breathe which means unconsciousness and death. It gives no warning to the inexperienced. It is rather pleasant than otherwise. Promise me you will never come near this place again."

Now, Iris, too, had been thinking deeply. Robert Jenks bulked large in her day dreams. Her nerves were not yet quite normal. There was a catch in her throat as she answered:

"I don't want to die. Of course I will keep away. What a horrid island this is! Yet it might be a paradise."

She bit her lip to suppress her tears; but, being the Eve in this garden, she continued:

"How did you find out? Is there anything—nasty—in there?"

"Yes, the remains of animals and other things. I would not have told you were it not imperative."

"Are you keeping other secrets from me?"

"Oh, quite a number."

He managed to conjure up a smile, and the ruse was effective. She applied the words to his past history.

"I hope they will not be revealed so dramatically," she said.

"You never can tell," he answered. They were in prophetic vein that morning. They returned in silence to the cave.

"I wish to go inside with a lamp. May I?" he asked.

"May I come too?" she demanded.

He hesitated, with an explanation of his design. When the lamp was in order he held it close to the wall and conducted a systematic survey. The geological fault which favored the construction of the tunnel seemed to diverge to the left at the farther end. The "face" of the rock exhibited the marks of persistent labor. The stone had been hewn away by main force when the dislocation of strata ceased to be helpful.

His knowledge was limited on the subject, yet Jenks believed that the material here was a hard limestone rather than the external basalt. Searching each inch with the feeble light, he paused once with an exclamation.

"What is it?" cried Iris.

"I cannot be certain," he said doubtfully. "Would you mind holding the lamp while I use a crowbar?"

In the stone was visible a thin vein, bluish white in color. He managed to break off a fair sized lump containing a well defined specimen of the foreign metal.

They hurried into the open air and examined the fragment with curious eyes. The sailor pecked it with his knife, and the substance in the vein came off in laminated layers, small, brittle scales.

"Is it silver?" Iris was almost excited.

"I do not think so. I am no expert, but I have a vague idea—I have seen"—

He wrinkled his brows and pressed away the furrows with his hand, that physical habit of his when perplexed.

"I have it," he cried. "It is antimony."

Miss Deane pursed her lips in disdain. Antimony! What was antimony?

"So much fuss for nothing," she said. "It is used in alloys and medicines," he explained. "To us it is useless."

He threw the piece of rock contemptuously among the bushes. But, being thorough in all that he undertook, he returned to the cave and again conducted an inquisition. The silver hued vein became more strongly marked at the point where it disappeared downward into a collection of rubble and sand. That was all. Did men give their toil, their lives, for this? So it would appear. Be that as it might, he had more pressing work. If the cave still held a secret it must remain there.

Iris had gone back to her sago kneading. Shouldering the ax, he walked to the beach. Much debris from the steamer was lying high and dry. It was an easy task for an athletic man to reach the palm tree, yet the sailor hesitated at the almost imperceptible qualms.

"A baited rat trap," he muttered. Then he quickened his pace. With the first active spring from rock to rock his unacknowledged doubts vanished.

He might find stores of priceless utility. The reflection inspired him. Jumping and climbing like a cat, in two minutes he was near the tree.

He could now see the true explanation of its growth in a seemingly impossible place. Here the bed of the sea bulged upward in a small sand cay, which tilted round the base of a limestone rock so different in color and formation from the coral reef. Nature, whose engineering contrivances can force springs to mountain tops, managed to deliver to this isolated refuge a sufficient supply of water to nourish the palm, and the roots, firmly lodged in deep crevices, were well protected from the waves.

Between the sailor and the tree intervened a small stretch of shallow water. Landward this submerged saddle shelved steeply into the lagoon. Although the water in the cove was twenty fathoms in depth, its crystal clearness was remarkable. The bottom, composed of marvelously white sand and broken coral, rendered other objects conspicuous. He could see plenty of fish, but not a single shark, while on the inner slope of the reef was plainly visible the destroyed fore part of the Sirdar, which had struck beyond the tree, relatively to his present standpoint. He had wondered why no boats were cast ashore. Now he saw the reason. Three of them were still fastened to the davits and carried down with the hull.

Seaward the water was not so clear. The waves created patches of foam, and long submarine plants swayed gently in the undercurrent.

To reach Palm Tree rock—anticipating its subsequent name—he must cross a space of some thirty feet and wade up to his waist.

He made the passage with ease.

Pitched against the bole of the tree was a long, narrow case, very heavy, iron clamped and marked with letters in black triangles and the broad arrow of the British government.

"Rifles, by all the gods!" shouted the sailor.

The Sirdar carried a consignment of arms and ammunition from Hongkong to Singapore. Providence had decreed that a practically inexhaustible store of cartridges should be hurled across the lagoon to the island. And here were rifles enough to equip half a company. He would not risk the precious ax in an attempt to open the case. He must go back for a crowbar.

What else was there in this storehouse thrust by Neptune from the ocean bed? A chest of tea, seemingly undamaged; three barrels of flour, utterly ruined; a sloop chair, smashed from its pivot; a battered chronometer. For the rest, fragments of timber intermingled with pulverized coral and broken crockery.

A little farther on the deep water entrance to the lagoon curved between sunken rocks. On one of them rested

the Sirdar's huge funnel. The north-west section of the reef was bare. Among the wreckage he found a coil of stout rope and a pulley. He instantly conceived the idea of constructing an aerial line to ferry the chest of tea across the channel he had forded.

He threaded the pulley with the rope and climbed the tree, adding a touch of artistic completeness to the ruin of his trousers by the operation. He had fastened the pulley high up the trunk before he realized how much more simple it would be to break open the chest where it lay and transport its contents in small parcels.

He laughed lightly. "I am becoming addle headed," he said to himself. "Anyhow, now the job is done, I may as well make use of it."

Recalling the rope ends, he cast them across to the reef. In such small ways men throw invisible dice with death. With those two lines he would within a few fleeting seconds drag himself back from eternity.

Picking up the ax, he carelessly stepped into the water, not knowing that Iris, having welded the incipient sago into a flat pancake, had strolled to the beach and was watching him.

The water was hardly above his knees when there came a swirling rush from the seaward. A long tentacle shot out like a lasso and gripped his right leg. Another coiled around his waist.

"My God!" he gurgled as a horrid sucker closed over his mouth and nose. He was in the grip of a devilfish!

A deadly sensation of nausea almost overpowered him, but the love of life came to his aid and he tore the suffocating feeder from his face. Then the ax whirled, and one of the eight arms of the octopus lost some of its length. Yet a fourth flung itself around his left ankle. A few feet away, out of range of the ax and lifting itself bodily out of the water, was the dread form of the cuttle, apparently all head, with distended gills and monstrous eyes.

The sailor's feet were planted wide apart. With frenzied effort he hacked at the murderous tentacles, but the water hindered him, and he was forced to lean back in superhuman strain to avoid losing his balance. If once this terrible assailant got him down he knew he was lost. The very need to keep his feet prevented him from attempting to deal a mortal blow.

The cuttle was anchored by three of its tentacles. Its remaining arm darted



Its remaining arm darted to again clutch the man's face and neck.

with sinuous activity to again clutch the man's face or neck. With the ax he smote madly at the curling feeler, diverting its aim time and again, but failing to deliver an effective stroke.

With agonized prescience the sailor knew that he was yielding. Were the devilfish a giant of its tribe he could not have held out so long. As it was, the creature could afford to wait, strengthening its grasp, tightening its coils, pulling and pumping at its prey with remorseless certainty.

He was nearly spent. In a paroxysm of despair he resolved to give way and with one mad effort seek to bury the ax in the monster's brain. But ere he could execute this fatal project, for the cuttle would have instantly swept him into the trailing weeds, five revolver shots rang out in quick succession. Iris had reached the nearest rock.

The third bullet gave the octopus cause to reflect. It squirted forth a torrent of dark colored fluid. Instantly the water became black, opaque. The tentacle, flourishing in air, thrashed the surface with impotent fury. That around Jenks' waist grew taut and rigid. The ax flashed with the inspiration of hope. Another arm was severed. The huge dismembered coil slackened and fell away.

Yet was he anchored immovably. He turned to look at Iris. She never forgot the fleeting expression of his face. So might Lazarus have looked from the tomb.

"The rope!" she screamed, dropping the revolver and seizing the loose ends lying at her feet.

She drew them tight and leaned back, pulling with all her strength. The sailor hung the ax to the rocks and grasped the two ropes. He raised himself and plunged wildly. He was free. With two convulsive strides he was at the girl's side.

He stumbled to a boulder and dropped in complete collapse. After a time he felt Iris' hand placed timidly on his shoulder. He raised his head and saw her eyes shining.

"Thank you," he said. "We are quits now."

CHAPTER VI.

FERECE emotions are necessarily transient, but for the hour they exhaust the psychic capacity. The sailor had gone through such mental stress before it was yet noon that he was benumbed, wholly incapable of further sensation.

Being in good condition, he soon recovered his physical powers. He was outwardly little the worse for the encounter with the devilfish. The skin around his mouth was sore. His waist and legs were bruised. One sweep of the ax had cut clean through the bulging leather of his left boot without touching the flesh. In a word, he was practically uninjured.

He had the doglike habit of shaking himself at the close of a fray. He did so now when he stood up. Iris showed clearer signs of the ordeal. Her face was drawn and haggard, the pupils of her eyes dilated. She was gazing into depths illimitable, unexplored. Compassion awoke at sight of her.

"Come," said Jenks gently. "Let us get back to the island."

He quietly resumed predominance, helping her over the rough pathway of the reef, almost lifting her when the difficulties were great.

He did not ask her how it happened that she came so speedily to his assistance. Enough that she had done it, daring all for his sake. She was weak and trembling.

Reaching the firm sand, she could walk alone.

"Did—the thing—grip you?" she nervously inquired.

"All over at once, it felt like. The beast attacked me with five arms."

She shuddered. "I don't know how you could fight it," she said. "How strong, how brave, you must be!"

This amused him. "The veriest coward will try to save his own life," he answered. "If you use such adjectives to me, what words can I find to do justice to you, who dared to come close to such a vile looking creature and kill it. I must thank my stars that you carried the revolver."

"Ah!" she said. "That reminds me. You do not practice what you preach. I found your pistol lying on the stone in the cave. That is one reason why I followed you."

It was quite true. He laid the weapon aside when delving at the rock and forgot to replace it in his belt.

"It was stupid of me," he admitted, "but I am not sorry."

"Why?"

"Because, as it is, I owe you my life."

"You owe me nothing," she snapped. "It is very thoughtful of you to run such risks. What will become of me if anything happens to you? My point of view is purely selfish, you see."

"Quite so. Purely selfish." He smiled sadly. "Selfish people of your type are somewhat rare, Miss Deane."

She moved toward the cave, but he cried:

"Wait one minute. I want to get a couple of crowbars."

"What for?"

"I must go back there." He jerked his head in the direction of the reef. She uttered a little sob of dismay.

"I will incur no danger this time," he explained. "I found rifles there. We must have them; they may mean salvation."

When Iris was determined about anything her chin dimpled. It puckered delightfully now.

"I will come with you," she announced.

"Very well. I will wait for you. The tide will serve for another hour."

He knew he had decided rightly. She could not bear to be alone—yet. Soon the crowbars were secured, and they returned to the reef. Scrambling now with difficulty over the rough and dangerous track, Iris was secretly amazed by the remembrance of the daring activity she displayed during her earlier passage along the same precarious roadway.

Then she darted from rock to rock with the fearless certainty of a chamois. Her only stumble was caused, she recollected, by an absurd effort to avoid wetting her dress. She laughed nervously when they reached the place. This time Jenks lifted her across the intervening channel.

They were standing on the landward side of the shallow water in which he fought the octopus.

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.)

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NOTICE!

NORTH CAROLINA. In the Superior Court JOHNSTON COUNTY. Sept. Term, 1926.
Florence Mangum vs. Preece Mangum.
The defendant above named will take notice that an action entitled as above has been commenced in the Superior Court of Johnston County to obtain from him an absolute divorce.
Said defendant will further take notice that he is required to appear at the next term of the Superior Court of said county to be held on 10th day of September, 1926, at the Court House of said county in Smithfield, N. C., and answer or demur to the complaint in said action, or the plaintiff will apply to the court for the relief demanded in said complaint.
This March 25th, 1926
W. S. STEVENS,
Clerk of the Superior Court Johnston County, WELLS & MORGAN, Attys. for Plaintiff.