

# The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY  
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CHAPTER XIV.

**Y**OU are a dear unreasonable little girl," he said. "Have you breath enough to tell me why you came down the ladder?"

"When I discovered you were gone I became wild with fright. Don't you see, I imagined you were wounded and had fallen from the ledge. What else could I do but follow, either to help you, or, if that were not possible—"

"He found her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"I humbly crave your pardon," he said. "That explanation is more than ample. It was I who behaved unreasonably. Of course I should have warned you."

"May I ask how many more wild adventures you undertook without my knowledge?"

"One other, of great magnitude. I fell in love with you."

"Nonsense!" she retorted. "I knew that long before you admitted it to yourself."

"Date, please?"

"Well, to begin at the very beginning, you thought I was nice on board the Sirdar. Now, didn't you?"

And they were safely embarked on a conversation of no interest to any other person in the wide world, but which provided them with the most delightful topic imaginable.

Thus the time sped until the rising moon silhouetted the cliff on the white carpet of coral strewn sand. The black shadow line traveled slowly closer to the base of the cliff, and Jenks, guided also by the stars, told Iris that midnight was at hand.

They knelt on the parapet of the ledge, alert to catch any unusual sound and watching for any indication of human movement. But Rainbow Island was now still as the grave. The wounded Dyaks had seemingly been removed from hut and bench. The dead lay where they had fallen. The sea sang a lullaby to the reef, and the fresh breeze whispered among the palm fronds—that was all.

If the Mussulman kept his compact the hour was at hand. Then the light hiss of a snake rose to them from the depths. That is a sound never forgotten when once heard. It is like unto no other. Indeed the term "hiss" is a misnomer for the quick sibilant expulsion of the breath by an alarmed or angered serpent.

Iris paid no heed to it; but Jenks, who knew there was not a reptile of the snake variety on the island, leaned over the ledge and emitted a tolerably good imitation. The native was bemused.

"Sahib!"

The girl started at the unexpected call from the depths.

"Yes," said Jenks quietly.

"A rope, sahib."

The sailor lowered a rope. Something was tied to it beneath. The Mohammedan apparently had little fear of being detected.

"Pull, sahib."

"Usually it is the sahib who says 'pull,' but circumstances alter cases," commended Jenks. He hauled steadily at a heavy weight, a goatskin filled with cold water. He emptied the hot and sour wine out of the tin cup and was about to hand the thrice welcomed draft to Iris when a suspicious thought caused him to withhold it.

"Let me taste first," he said.

The Indian might have betrayed them to the Dyaks. More unlikely things had happened. What if the water were poisoned or drugged?

He placed the tin to his lips. The liquid was musty, having been in the skin nearly two days. Otherwise it seemed to be all right. With a sigh of profound relief he gave Iris the cup and smiled at the most un ladylike haste with which she emptied it.

"Drink yourself and give me some more," she said.

"No more for you at present, madam. In a few minutes, yes."

"Oh, why not now?"

"Do not fret, dear one. You can have all you want in a little while. But to drink much now would make you very ill."

Iris waited until he could speak again.

"Why did you?"—she began.

"But he bent over the parapet.

"Tello!"

"Sahib!"

"You have not been followed?"

"I think not, sahib. Do not talk too loud. They are foxes in cunning. You have a ladder, they say, sahib. Will you let your honor descend? I have much to relate."

Iris made no protest when Jenks explained the man's request. She only stipulated that he should not leave the ladder, while she would remain within easy earshot. The sailor, of course, carried his revolver. He also picked up a crowbar, a most useful and silent weapon. Then he went quietly downward. Nearing the ground, he saw the native, who saluted deeply and was unarmed. The poor fellow seemed to be very anxious to help them.

"What is your name?" demanded the sailor.

"Mir Jan, sahib, formerly corporal in the Kumzon regiment."

"When did you leave the regiment?"

"Two years ago, sahib. I killed—"

"What was the name of your colonel?"

"Kurnal I-spence-sahib, a brave man, but of no account on a horse."

Jenks well remembered Colonel Spence—a fat, short legged warrior, who rolled off his charger if the animal so much as looked sideways. Mir Jan was telling the truth.

"You are right, Mir Jan. What is Taung S'All doing now?"

"Cursing, sahib, for the most part. His men are frightened. He wanted them to try once more with the tubes that shoot poison, but they refused. He could not come alone, for he could not use his right hand, and he was wounded by the blowing up of the rock. You nearly killed me, too, sahib. I was there with the bazaar-born whelps. By the prophet's beard, it was a fine stroke."

"Are they going away, then?"

"No, sahib. The dogs have been whipped so sore that they snarl for revenge. They say there is no use in firing at you, but they are resolved to kill you and the miss sahib or carry her off if she escapes the assault."

"What assault?"

"Protector of the poor, they are building scaling ladders—four in all. Soon after dawn they intend to rush your position. You may slay some, they say, but you cannot slay threescore. Taung S'All has promised gold to every man who survives if they succeed. They have pulled down your signal on the high rocks and are using the poles for the ladders. They think you have a charm, sahib, and they want to use your own work against you."

This was serious news. A combined attack might indeed be dangerous, though it had the excellent feature that if it failed the Dyaks would certainly leave the island. But his sky sign destroyed! That was bad. Had a vessel chanced to pass the swinging letters would surely have attracted attention. Now even that faint hope was dispelled.

"Sahib, there is a worse thing to tell," said Mir Jan.

"Say on, then."

"Before they place the ladders against the cliff they will build a fire of green wood so that the smoke will be blown by the wind into your eyes. This will help to blind your aim. Otherwise you never miss."

"That will assuredly be awkward, Mir Jan."

"It will, sahib. Soul of my father, if we had but half a troop with us—"

But they had not, and they were both so intent on the conversation that they were momentarily off their guard. Iris was more watchful. She fancied there was a light rustling amid the undergrowth beneath the trees on the right. And she could hiss, too, if that were the correct thing to do.

So she hissed.

Jenks swarmed halfway up the ladder.

"Yes, Iris," he said.

"I am not sure, but I imagine something moved among the bushes behind the house."

"All right, dear. I will keep a sharp lookout. Can you hear us talking?"

"Hardly. Will you be long?"

"Another minute."

He descended and told Mir Jan what the miss sahib said. The native was about to make a search when Jenks stopped him.

"Here"—he handed the man his revolver—"I suppose you can use this?"

Mir Jan took it without a word, and Jenks felt that the incident atoned for previous unworthy doubts of his dark friend's honesty. The Mohammedan cautiously examined the back of the house, the neighboring shrubs and the open beach. After a brief absence he reported all safe, yet no man has ever been nearer death and escaped it than he during that reconnaissance. He, too, forgot that the Dyaks were foxes, and foxes can be close when hounds are a trifle stale.

Mir Jan returned the revolver.

"Sahib," he said, with another salutation, "I am a disgraced man, but if you will take me up there with you I will fight by your side until both my arms are hacked off. I am weary of these thieves. Ill chance threw me into their company. I will have no more of them. If you will not have me on the rock give me a gun. I will hide among the trees, and I promise that some of them shall die tonight before they find me. For the honor of the regiment, sahib, do not refuse this thing. All I ask is if your honor escapes that you will write to Kurnal I-spence-sahib and tell him the last act of Mir Jan, corporal in B troop."

Jenks was profoundly moved. He reflected how best to utilize the services of this willing volunteer without exposing him to certain death in the manner suggested. The native misinterpreted his silence.

"I am not a rascal, sahib," he exclaimed proudly. "I only killed a man because—"

"Listen, Mir Jan. You cannot well mend what you have said. The Dyaks, you are sure, will not come before morning?"

"They have carried the wounded to the boats and are making the ladders. Such was their talk when I left them."

"Will they not miss you?"

"They will miss the goatskin, sahib. It was the last full one."

"Mir Jan, do as I bid and you shall see I hold again. Have you ever used a Lee-Metford?"

"I have seen them, sahib, but I better understand the Mahtini."

"I will give you a rifle, with plenty of ammunition. Do you go inside the cave, there, and—"

Mir Jan was startled.

"Where the ghost is, sahib?" he said.

"Ghost! That is a tale for children. There is no ghost, only a few bones of a man murdered by these scoundrels long ago. Have you any food?"

"Some rice, sahib; sufficient for a day or two at a pinch."

"Good! We will get water from the well. When the fighting begins at dawn fire at every man you see from the back of the cave. On no account come out. Then they can never reach you if you keep a full magazine. Wait here."

"I thought you were never coming," protested Iris when Jenks reached the ledge. "I have been quite creepy. I am sure there is some one down there. And, please, may I have another drink?"

The sailor had left the crowbar beneath. He secured a rifle, a spare clip and a dozen packets of cartridges, meanwhile briefly explaining to Iris the turn taken by events so far as Mir Jan was concerned. She was naturally delighted and forgot her fears in the excitement caused by the appearance of so useful an ally. She drank his health in a brimming beaker of water.

She heard her lover rejoin Mir Jan and saw the two step out into the moonlight, while Jenks explained the action of the rifle. Fortunately Iris was now much recovered from the fatigue and privation of the earlier hours. Her senses were sharpened to a pitch little dreamed of by stay-at-home young ladies of her age, and she deemed it her province to act as sentry while the two men conferred. Hence she was the first to detect, or rather, to become conscious of, the stealthy crawl of several Dyaks along the bottom of the cliff from Turtle beach.

"Robert!" she screamed. "The Dyaks! On your left!"

But Iris was rapidly gaining some knowledge of strategy. Before she shrieked her warning she grasped a rifle. Holding it at the "ready"—about the level of her waist—and depressing the muzzle sufficiently, she began firing down the side of the rock as fast as she could handle lever and trigger. Two of the nickel bullets struck a projection and splashed the leading savages with molten metal.

Unfortunately Jenks' rifle beneath was unloaded, being in Mir Jan's possession for purposes of instruction. Jenks whipped out his revolver.

"To the cave!" he roared, and Mir Jan's unwillingness to face a goblin could not withstand the combined impetus of the sahib's order and the onward rush of the enemy. He darted headlong for the entrance.

Jenks, shooting blindly as he, too, ran for the ladder, emptied the revolver just as his left hand clutched a rung. Three Dyaks were so close that it would be folly to attempt to climb. He threw the weapon into the face of the foremost man, effectually stopping his onward progress.

The sailor turned to dive into the cave and secure the rifle from Mir Jan, when his shin caught the heavy crowbar resting against the rock. The pain of the blow lent emphasis to the swing with which the implement descended upon some portion of a Dyak anatomy. Jenks never knew where he hit the second assailant, but the place cracked like an eggshell.

He had not time to recover the bar for another blow, so he drove the point in the gullet of a gentleman who was

about to make a vicious sweep at him with a parang. The downfall of this worthy caused his immediate successor to stumble, and Jenks saw his opportunity. With the agility of a cat he jumped up the ladder and reached the ledge without injury.

These things happened with the speed of thought. Within forty seconds of Iris' shrill cry the sailor was breast high with the ledge and calling to her:

"All right, old girl! Keep it up!"

But here he was close to her, unhurt and calmly jubilant, as was his way when a stiff fight went well. He was by her side now, firing and aiming, too, for the Dyaks broke cover recklessly

in running for shelter, and one may do fair work by moonlight.

She had strength enough left to place

the rifle out of harm's way before she broke down and sobbed not tearfully, but in a paroxysm of reaction. Soon all was quiet beneath save for the labored efforts of some wounded men to get far away from that accursed rock. Jenks was able to turn to Iris. He endeavored to allay her agitation and encouraged, somewhat, for tears came, and she clung to him. It was useless to reproach him. The whole incident was unforeseen. She was herself a party to it. But what an escape!

"You have been a very good little girl and have earned your supper," he said.

"Oh, how can you talk so callously after such an awful experience?" she expostulated brokenly.

"It is a small thing to trouble about, sweetheart," he explained. "You spotted the enemy so promptly and blazed away with such ferocity that they never got within yards of me."

"Are you sure?"

"I vow and declare that after we have eaten something and sampled our remaining bottle of wine I will tell you exactly what happened."

"Why not now?"

"Because I must first see to Mir Jan. I bundled him neck and crop into the cave. I hope I did not hurt him."

"You are not going down there again?"

"No need, I trust."

He went to the side of the ledge, recovered the ladder which he had hastily hauled out of the Dyaks' reach after his climb, and cried:

"Mir Jan!"

"Ah, sahib! Pleased be the name of the Most High, you are alive. I was searching among the slain with a sorrowful heart."

The Mohammedan's voice came from some little distance on the left.

"The slain, you say. How many?"

"Five, sahib."

"Impossible! I fired blindly with the revolver and only hit one man hard near the wood after I obtained a rifle."

"Then there be six, sahib, not reckoning the wounded. I have accounted for one, so the miss sahib must have—"

"What is he saying about me?" inquired Iris, who had risen and joined her lover.

"He says you absolutely staggered the Dyaks by opening fire the moment they appeared."

"How did you come to slay one, Mir Jan?" he continued.

"A son of a black pig followed me into the cave. I waited for him in the darkness. I have just thrown his body outside."

"Well done! Is Taung S'All dead by any lucky chance?"

"No, sahib, if he be not the sixth. I will go and see."

"You may be attacked."

"I have found a sword, sahib. You left me no cartridges."

Jenks told him that the clip and the twelve packets were lying at the foot of the rock, where Mir Jan speedily discovered them. The Mohammedan gave satisfactory assurance that he understood the mechanism of the rifle by filling and adjusting the magazine. Then he went to examine the corpse of the man who lay in the open near the quarry path.

The sailor stood in instant readiness to make a counter demonstration were the native assailed. But there was no sign of the Dyaks. Mir Jan returned with the news that the sixth victim of the brief yet fierce encounter was a renegade Malay. He was so confident that the enemy had enough of it for the night that, after recovering Jenks' revolver, he boldly went to the well and drew himself a supply of water.

During supper Jenks told Iris so much of the story as was good for her—that is to say, he cut down the casualty list.

It was easy to see what had happened. The Dyaks, having missed the Mohammedan and their water bag, searched for him and heard the conversation at the foot of the rock. Knowing that their presence was suspected, they went back for reinforcements and returned by the shorter and more advantageous route along Turtle beach.

Iris would have talked all night, but Jenks made her go to sleep by pillowing her head against his shoulder and smoothing her tangled tresses with his hand.

He managed to lay her on a comfortable pile of ragged clothing and then resumed his vigil. Mir Jan offered to mount guard beneath, but Jenks bade him go within the cave and remain there, for the dawn would soon be upon them.

Left alone with his thoughts, he wondered what the rising sun would bring in its train. He reviewed the events of the last twenty-four hours. Iris and he—Miss Deane, Mr. Jenks, to each other—were then undiscovered in their refuge, the Dyaks were gathered around a roaring fire in the valley, and Mir Jan was keen in the hunt as the keenest among them. Now Iris was his affianced bride, over twenty of the enemy were killed and many wounded, and Mir Jan, a devoted adherent, was seated beside the skeleton in the gloom of the cavern.

A period of reflection could hardly pass without a speculative dive into the future. If Iris and he were rescued, what would happen when they went forth once more into the busy world? Not for one instant did he doubt her faith. She was true as steel, knit to him now by bonds of triple brass. But what would Sir Arthur Deane think of his daughter's marriage to a discredited and cashiered officer? What was it that poor Mir Jan called himself—"a disgraced man"? Yes, that was it. Could that stain be removed? Mir Jan was doing it. Why not he—by other means, for his good name rested on the word of a perjured

woman? Wealth was potent, but not all powerful. He would ask Iris to wait until he came to her unsoiled by

slander, purged of the odium cast upon him unmerited.

To awake her he kissed her; he knew not, perchance it might be their last kiss on earth. Not yet dawn, there was morning in the air, for the first faint shafts of light were not visible from their eyrie owing to its position. But there was much to be done.

The canvas awning was rolled back and the stores built into a barricade intended to shelter Iris.

"What is that for?" she asked when she discovered its nature. He told her. She definitely refused to avail herself of any such protection.

"Robert, dear," she said, "if the attack comes to our very door, so to speak, surely I must help you. Even my slight aid may stem a rush in one place while you are busy in another."

He explained to her that if hand to hand fighting were necessary he would depend more upon a crowbar than a rifle to sweep the ledge clear. She might lie in the way.

"Very well. The moment you tell me to get behind that fence I will do so. Even there I can use a revolver."

That reminded him. His own pistol was unboxed. He possessed only five more cartridges of small caliber. He placed them in the weapon and gave it to her.

"Now you have eleven men's lives in your hands," he said. "Try not to miss if you must shoot."

In the dim light he could not see the spasm of pain that clouded her face. No Dyak would reach her while he lived. If he fell, there was another use for one of those cartridges.

The sailor had cleared the main floor of the rock and was placing his four rifles and other implements within easy reach when a hiss came from beneath.

"Mir Jan!" exclaimed Iris.

"What now?" demanded Jenks over the side.

"Sahib, they come!"

"I am prepared. Let that snake get back to his hole in the rock, lest a mongoose seize him by the head."

Mir Jan, engaged in a scouting expedition on his own account, understood that the officer sahib's orders must be obeyed. He vanished. Soon they heard a great crackling among the bushes on the right, but Jenks knew even before he looked that the Dyaks had correctly estimated the extent of his fire zone and would keep out of it.

The first physical intimation of the enemy's design they received was a pungent but pleasant smell of burning pine, borne to them by the northerly breeze and filling the air with its aroma. The Dyaks kindled a huge fire. The heat was perceptible even on the ledge, but the minutes passed and the dawn broadened into day without any other result being achieved.

Iris, a little drawn and pale with suspense, said, with a timid giggle:

"This does not seem to be so very serious. It reminds me of my efforts to cook."

"There is more to follow, I fear, dear one. But the Dyaks are fools. They should have waited until night fell again after wearing us out by constant vigilance all day. If they intend to employ smoke it would be far worse for us at night."

Phew! A volume of murky vapor arose that nearly suffocated them by the first whiff of its noisome fumes. It curled like a black pall over the face of the rock and blotted out sea and sky. They coughed incessantly and nearly choked, for the Dyaks had thrown wet sawdust on top of the burning pile of dry wood. Mir Jan, born in interior India, knew little about the sea or its products, and when the savages talked of seaweed he thought they meant green wood. Fortunately for him, the ascending clouds of smoke missed the cave or infallibly he must have been stifled.

"Lie flat on the rock!" gasped Jenks. Careless of waste, he poured water over a coat and made Iris bury her mouth and nose in the wet cloth. This gave her immediate relief, and she showed her woman's wit by tying the sleeves of the garment behind her neck. Jenks nodded comprehension and followed her example, for by this means their hands were left free.

The black cloud grew more dense each few seconds. Nevertheless, owing to the slope of the ledge and the tendency of the smoke to rise, the south side was far more tenable than the north. Quick to note this favorable circumstance, the sailor deduced a further fact from it. A barrier erected on the extreme right of the ledge would be a material gain. He sprang up, dragged the huge tarpaulin from its former location and propped it on the handle of the pickax, driven by one mighty stroke deep into a crevice of the rock.

It was no mean feat of strength that he performed. He swung the heavy and cumbersome canvas into position as if it were a dust cloth. He emerged from the gloom of the driven cloud red eyed, but triumphant. Instantly the vapor on the ledge lessened, and they could breathe, even talk. Overhead and in front the smoke swept in ever increasing density, but once again the sailor had outwitted the Dyaks' maneuvers.

"We have won the first rubber," he whispered to Iris.

Above, beneath, beyond, they could see nothing. The air they breathed was hot and fetid. It was like being immured in a foul tunnel, and almost as dark. Jenks looked over the parapet. He thought he could distinguish some vague figures on the sands, so he fired at them. A volley of answering bullets crashed into the rock on all sides. The Dyaks had laid their plans well this time. A firing squad stationed beyond the smoke area and supplied with all the available guns commenced and kept up a snarl fusillade in the direction of the ledge in order to cover the operations of the scaling party.

Jenks realized that to expose himself

was to court a serious wound and achieve no useful purpose. He fell back out of range, laid down his rifle and grabbed the crowbar. At brief intervals a deep hollow boom came up from the valley. At first it puzzled them until the sailor hit upon an explanation. Mir Jan was busy.

The end of a strong, roughly made ladder swung through the smoke and banged against the ledge. Before Jenks could reach it those hoisting it into position hastily retreated. They were standing in front of the cave, and the Mohammedan made play on them with a rifle at thirty feet.

Jenks, using his crowbar as a lever, toppled the ladder clean over. It fell outward and disconcerted a section of the musketeers.

"Well done!" cried Iris.

The sailor, astounded by her tone, gave her a fleeting glance. She was very pale now, but not with fear. Her eyes were slightly contracted, her nostrils quivering, her lips set tight and her chin dimpled. Resting on one knee, with a revolver in each hand, she seemed no pulling mate for the gallant man who fought for her.

There was no time for further speech. Three ladders were reared against the

rock. They were so poised and held

backward that Jenks could not force them

backward. A fourth appeared, its

coarse shafts looming into sight like

the horns of some gigantic animal.

The four covered practically the whole

front of the ledge save where Mir Jan

cleared a little space on the level.

The sailor was standing now, with

the crowbar clinched in both hands.

The firing in the valley slackened and

died away. A Dyak face, grinning like

a Japanese demon, appeared at the top

of the ladder nearest to Iris.

"Don't fire!" shouted Jenks. And the

iron bar crushed downward. Two others

pitched themselves half on to the

ledge. Now both crowbar and revolver

were needed. Three ladders were

thus cumbered somewhat for those be-