

The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY

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With feminine persistency she clung to the subject, detecting his unwillingness to discuss a possible final stage in their sufferings.

"Robert," she whispered fearfully, "you will never let me fall into the power of the chief, will you?"

"Not while I live."

"You must live. Don't you understand? I would go with them to save you. But I would have died by my own hand. Robert, my love, you must do this thing before the end. I must be the first to die."

The sailor wrestled with the great problem. He may be pardoned if his heart quailed and he groaned aloud.

"Iris," he said solemnly, "whatever happens, unless I am struck dead at your feet, I promise you that we shall pass the boundary hand in hand. Be mine the punishment if we have decided wrongly. And now," he cried, tossing his head in a defiant access of energy, "let us have done with the morgue. For my part I refuse to acknowledge I am inside until the gates clang behind me."

They clattered in lighter vein with such pendulum swing back to nonchalance that none would have deemed it possible for these two to have already determined the momentous issue of the pending struggle should it go against them.

And so the sun sank to rest in the sea, and the stars pierced the deepening blue of the celestial arch, while the man and the woman awaited patiently the verdict of the fates.

Before the light failed Jenks gathered all the poisoned arrows and ground their venomous points to powder beneath his heel. Gladly would Iris and he have dispensed with the friendly protection of the tarpaulin when the cool evening breeze came from the south. But such a thing might not be even considered. Several hours of darkness must elapse before the moon rose, and during that period, were their foes so minded, they would be absolutely at the mercy of the sampanin shafts if not covered by their impenetrable buckler.

The sailor looked long and earnestly at the well. Their own bucket, improvised out of a dish cover and a rope, lay close to the brink. A stealthy crawl across the rocks, while the moon shined from the more distant Dyaks on the other side of Prospect park showed that they had been overheard.

"Up!" he whispered. "Tight and go as quickly as you can!"

"Not without you!"

"Up, for God's sake! I follow at your heels!"

She began to climb. He took some article from between his teeth, a string apparently, and drew it toward him, mounting the ladder at the same time. The end tightened. He was then about ten feet from the ground. Two Dyaks, yelling fiercely, rushed from the cover of the house.

"Go on," he said to Iris. "Don't lose your nerve, whatever happens. I am close behind you."

"I am quite safe," she gasped.

Turning and clinging on with one hand, he drew his revolver and fired at the pair beneath, who could now faintly discern them, and were almost within reach of the ladder. The shooting made them halt. He did not know or care if they were hit. To frighten them was sufficient. Several others

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enable him to hit one of them. But they must be shifted, or this night bombardment would prove the most serious development yet encountered.

"Are you all right, Iris?" he called out.

"Yes, dear," she answered.

"Well, I want you to keep yourself covered by the canvas for a little while, especially your head and shoulders. I am going to stop these chaps. They have found our weak point, but I can baffle them."

She did not ask what he proposed to do. He heard the rustling of the tarpaulin as she pulled it. Instantly he cast loose the rope ladder and, armed only with a revolver, dropped down the rock. He was quite invisible to the enemy. On reaching the ground he listened for a moment. There was no sound save the occasional reports ninety yards away. He hitched up the lower rungs of the ladder until they were six feet from the level and then crept noiselessly close to the rock for some forty yards.

He halted beside a small pool tree and stooped to find something imbedded near its roots. At this distance he could plainly hear the muttered conversation of the Dyaks and could see several of them prone on the sand. The latter fact proved how fatal would be an attempt on his part to reach the well. They must discover him instantly once he quitted the somber shadows of the cliff. He waited perhaps a few seconds longer than was necessary, endeavoring to pierce the dim atmosphere and learn something of their disposition.

A vigorous outburst of firing sent him back with haste. Iris was up there alone. He knew not what might happen. He was now feverishly anxious to be with her again, to hear her voice and be sure that all was well.

To his horror he found the ladder swaying gently against the rock. Some one was using it. He sprang forward, careless of consequence, and seized the swinging end, which had fallen free again. He had his foot on the bottom rung when Iris' voice, close at hand and shrill with terror, shrieked:

"Robert, where are you?"

"Here!" he shouted. The next instant she dropped into his arms.

From the more distant Dyaks on the other side of Prospect park showed that they had been overheard.

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"Not without you!"

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menous explosion that shook earth and air, dislodging every loose stone in the southwest pile of rocks, hurling from the plateau some of its occupants and wounding the remainder with a shower of lead and debris. The sailor, unmolested further, reached the ledge.

In a tall tree near the valley of death he had tightly fixed a loaded rifle which pointed at a loose stone in the rock overhanging the ledge held by the Dyaks. This stone rested against a number of percussion caps extracted from cartridges, and these were in direct communication with a train of powder leading to a blasting charge placed at the end of a twenty-four inch hole drilled with a crowbar. The impact of the bullet against the stone could not fail to explode some of the caps. He had used the contents of 300 cartridges to secure a sufficiency of powder, and the bullets were crammed into the orifice, being tamped with clay and wet sand. The rifle was fired by means of the string, the loose coils of which were secreted at the foot of the pool. By springing this novel mine he had effectually removed every Dyak from the ledge, over which its contents would spread like a fan. Further, it would probably deter the survivors from again venturing near the fatal spot.

Iris listened, only half comprehending. Her mind was filled with one thought to the exclusion of all others. Robert had left her, had done this thing without telling her. She forgave him, knowing he acted for the best, but he must never, never deceive her again in such a manner. She could not bear it.

CHAPTER XIV.

"YOU 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 provident future.

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 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 beneath.

"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 treacherous draught 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 unladylike 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.

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But he bent over the parapet.

"Hello!"

"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 not 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.

"Leaving the ground, he saw the native, who saluted deeply and said: 'The poor fellow seems to be a Kumaon regiment.'"

"When did you leave the regiment?"

"Two years ago, sahib. I killed—"

"What was the name of your colonel?"

"Kurnal I-shpence-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 Tung 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 three score. Tung 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."