

The Wings of the Morning

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER X.

NIGHT after night the Ptelades swung higher in the firmament. Day after day the sailor perfected his defenses and anxiously scanned the ocean for sign of friendly smoke or hostile sail. This respite would not have been given to him were it not for the lucky bullet which removed two fingers and part of a third from the right hand of the Dyak chief. Not even a healthy savage can afford to treat such a wound lightly, and ten days elapsed before the maimed robber was able to move the injured limb without a curse.

Meanwhile each night Jenks slept less soundly. Each day his face became more careworn. He began to realize why the island had not been visited already by the vessel which would certainly be deputed to search for them. She was examining the great coast line of China and Siam.

It was his habit to mark the progress of time on the rudely made sundial, which sufficiently served their requirements as a clock. Iris happened to watch him chipping the forty-fourth notch on the edge of the horizontal block of wood.

"Have we really been forty-four days here?" she inquired after counting the marks with growing astonishment.

"I believe the reckoning is accurate," he said. "The Sirdar was lost on the 18th of March, and I make this the 1st of May."

"It seems to be a tremendous time; indeed, in some respects, it figures in my mind like many years. That is when I am thinking. Otherwise, when busy, the days fly like hours."

"It must be convenient to have such an elastic scale."

"Most useful. I strive to apply the quick rate when you are grumpy."

Iris placed her arms akimbo, planted her feet widely apart and surveyed Jenks with an expression that might almost be termed impudent. They were great friends, these two, now.

When the urgent necessity for continuous labor no longer spurred them to exertion during every moment of daylight, they tackled the box of books and read, not volumes which appealed to them in common, but quaint tomes in the use of which Jenks was tutor and Iris the scholar.

It became a fixed principle with the girl that she was very ignorant, and she insisted that the sailor should teach her. For instance, among the books he found a treatise on astronomy. It yielded a keen delight to both to identify a constellation and learn all sorts of wonderful things concerning it.

As a variant Jenks introduced a study of Hindustani. His method was to write a short sentence and explain in detail its component parts. She knitted her brows in the effort to master the ridiculous complexities of a language which, instead of simply saying "Take" or "Bring," compels one to say "Take-go" and "Take-come."

One problem defied solution—that of providing raiment for Iris. The united skill of the sailor and herself would not induce unraveled cordage to supply the need of thread. It was either too weak or too knotty, and meanwhile the girl's clothes were falling to pieces. Jenks tried the fibers of trees, the sinews of birds—every possible expedient he could hit upon—and perhaps after experiments covering some weeks he might have succeeded. But modern dress stuffs, weakened by aniline dyes and stiffened with Chinese clay, permit of no such exhaustive research. It must be remembered that the lady passengers on board the Sirdar were dressed to suit the tropics, and the hard usage given by Iris to her scanty stock was never contemplated by the Manchester or Bradford looms responsible for the durability of the material.

As the days passed the position became irksome. It even threatened complete collapse during some critical moment, and the two often silently surveyed the large number of merely male garments in their possession. Of course in the matter of coats and waistcoats there was no difficulty whatever. Iris had long been wearing those portions of the doctor's uniform. But when it came to the rest—

At last one memorable morning she crossed the Rubicon. Jenks had climbed, as usual, to the Summit rock. He came back with the exciting news that he thought—he could not be certain, but there were indications inspiring hopefulness—that toward the west of the faroff island he could discern the smoke of a steamer.

Though he had eyes for a faint cloud

of vapor at least fifty miles distant, he saw nothing of a remarkable change effected nearer home. Outwardly Iris was attired in her wonted manner, but if her companion's mind were not wholly monopolized by the bluish haze detected on the horizon he must have noticed the turned up ends of a pair of trousers beneath the hem of her tattered skirt.

It did occur to him that Iris received his momentous announcement with an odd air of hauteur, and it was passing strange she did not offer to accompany him when, after bolting his breakfast, he returned to the observatory.

He came back in an hour, and the lines on his face were deeper than before.

"A false alarm," he said curtly in response to her questioning look.

And that was all, though she nerved herself to walk steadily past him on her way to the well. This was disconcerting, even annoying, to a positive young woman like Iris. Resolving to end the ordeal, she stood rigidly before him.

"Well," she said, "I've done it!"

"Have you?" he exclaimed blankly.

"Yes. They're a little too long, and I feel very awkward, but they're better than—than my poor old dress unsupported."

She blushed furiously, to the sailor's complete bewilderment, but she bravely persevered and stretched out an unwilling foot.

"Oh, I see!" he growled, and he, too, reddened.

And during the remainder of the day he did not once look at her feet. Indeed, he had far more serious matters to distract his thoughts, for Iris, feverishly anxious to be busy, suddenly suggested that it would be a good thing were she able to use a rifle if a fight at close quarters became necessary.

The recoil of the Lee-Metford is so slight that any woman can manipulate the weapon with effect, provided she is not called upon to fire from a standing position, in which case the weight is liable to cause bad aiming. Though it came rather late in the day, Jenks caught at the idea. He accustomed her in the first instance to the use of blank cartridges. Then when fairly proficient in holding and sighting—a child can learn how to refill the clip and eject each empty shell—she fired ten rounds of service ammunition. The target was a white circle on a rock at eighty yards, and those of the ten shots that missed the absolute mark would have made an enemy at the same distance extremely uncomfortable.

Iris was much pleased with her proficiency. "Now," she cried, "instead of being a hindrance to you I may be some help. In any case, the Dyaks will think there are two men to face, and they have good reason to fear one of us."

Then a new light dawned upon Jenks.

"Why did you not think of it before?" he demanded. "Don't you see, Miss Deane, the possibility suggested by your words? I am sorry to be compelled to speak plainly, but I feel sure that if those scoundrels do attack us in force it will be more to secure you than to avenge the loss of their fellow tribesmen. First and foremost, the sea-going Dyaks are pirates and marauders. They prowl about the coast looking not so much for a fight as for loot and women. Now, if they return and apparently find two well armed men awaiting them, with no prospect of plunder, there is a chance that they may abandon the enterprise."

Iris did not flinch from the topic. She well knew its grave importance.

"In other words," she said, "I must be seen by them dressed only in male clothing?"

"Yes; as a last resource, that is. I have some hope that they may not discover our whereabouts owing to the precautions we have adopted. Perched up there on the ledge, we will be profoundly uncomfortable, but that will be nothing if it secures our safety."

She did not reply at once. Then she said musingly: "Forty-four days! Surely there has been ample time to scour the China sea from end to end in search of us! My father would never abandon hope until he had the most positive knowledge that the Sirdar was lost with all on board."

The sailor, through long schooling, was prepared with an answer: "Each day makes the prospect of escape brighter. Though I was naturally disappointed this morning, I must state quite emphatically that our rescue may come any hour."

Iris looked at him steadily.

"Do you remember, Mr. Jenks, that soon after the wreck you told me we might have to remain here many months?"

"That was a pardonable exaggeration."

"No, no! It was the truth. You are seeking now to buoy me up with false hope. It is 1,000 miles from Hongkong to Singapore, and half as much from Siam to Borneo. The Sirdar might have been driven anywhere in the typhoon. Didn't you say so, Mr. Jenks?"

He wavered under this merciless cross examination.

"I had no idea your memory was so good," he said weakly.

"Excellent, I assure you. Moreover, during our forty-four days together you have taught me to think. Why do you adopt subterfuge with me? We are partners in all else. Why cannot I share your despair as well as your toll?"

She blazed out in sudden wrath, and he understood that she would not be denied the full extent of his secret fear. He bowed reverently before her, as a mortal paying homage to an angry goddess.

"I can only admit that you are right," he murmured. "We must pray that God will direct our friends to this island. Otherwise we may not be found for a year, as unhappily the fishermen who once came here now avoid the place. They have been frightened by the contents of the hollow behind the cliff. I am glad you have solved the difficulty unaided, Miss Deane. I have striven at times to be coarse, even brutal, toward you, but my heart flinched from the task of telling you the possible period of your imprisonment."

Then Iris, for the first time in many days, wept bitterly, and Jenks, blind to the true cause of her emotion, picked up a rifle to which, in spare moments, he had affixed a curious device, and walked slowly across Prospect park toward the half obliterated road leading to the valley of death.

The girl watched him disappear among the trees. Through her tears shone a sorrowful little smile.

"He thinks only of me, never of himself," she communed. "If it pleases Providence to spare us from these savages, what does it matter to me how long we remain here? I have never been so happy before in my life. I fear I never will be again. If it were not for my father's terrible anxiety I would not have a care in the world. I only wish to get away so that one brave soul at least may be rid of needless tortures. All his worry is on my account, none on his own."

That was what fearful Miss Iris thought or tried to persuade herself to think. Perhaps her cogitations would not bear strict analysis. Perhaps she harbored a sweet hope that the future might yet contain bright hours for herself and the man who was so devoted to her. She refused to believe that Robert Anstruther, strong of arm and clear of brain, a knight of the Round Table in all that was noble and chivalric, would permit his name to bear an unwarrantable stigma when—and she blushed like a June rose—he came to tell her that which he had written.

The sailor returned hastily, with the manner of one hurrying to perform a neglected task. Without any explanation to Iris he climbed several times to the ledge, carrying armloads of grass roots, which he planted in full view. Then he entered the cave, and, although he was furnished only with the dim light that penetrated through



"Oh, I see!" he growled.

the distant exit, she heard him hewing manfully at the rock for a couple of hours. At last he emerged, grimy with dust and perspiration, just in time to pay a last visit to Summit rock before the sun sank to rest. He asked the girl to delay somewhat the preparations for their evening meal, as he wished to take a bath; so it was quite dark when they sat down to eat.

Iris had long recovered her usual state of high spirits.

"Why were you burrowing in the cavern again?" she inquired. "Are you in a hurry to get rich?"

"I was following an air shaft, not a lode," he replied. "I am occasionally troubled with after wit, and this is an instance. Do you remember how the flame of the lamp flickered while we were opening up our mine?"

"Yes."

"I was so absorbed in contemplating our prospective wealth that I failed to pay heed to the true significance of

that incident. It meant the existence of an upward current of air. Now, where the current goes there must be a passage, and while I was busy this afternoon among the trees over there"—he pointed toward the valley of death—"it came to me like an inspiration that possibly a few hours' hewing and delving might open a shaft to the ledge. I have been well rewarded for the effort. The stuff in the vault is so eaten away by water that it is no more solid than hard mud for the most part. Already I have scooped out a chimney twelve feet high."

"What good can that be?"

"At present we have only a front door—up the face of the rock. When my work is completed—before tomorrow night, I hope—we shall have a back door also. Of course I may encounter unforeseen obstacles as I advance. A twist in the fault would be nearly fatal, but I am praying that it may continue straight to the ledge."

"I still don't see the great advantage to us."

"The advantages are many, believe me. The more points of attack presented by the cavity the more effective will be our resistance. I doubt if they would ever be able to rush the cave were we to hold it, whereas I can go up and down our back staircase whenever I choose. If you don't mind being left in the dark I will resume work now by the light of your lamp."

But Iris protested against this arrangement. She felt lonely. The long hours of silence had been distasteful to her. She wanted to talk.

"I agree," said Jenks, "provided you do not pin me down to something I told you a month ago."

"I promise. You can tell me as much or as little as you think fit. The subject for discussion is your court martial."

He could not see the tender light in her eyes, but the quiet sympathy of her voice restrained the protest prompt on his lips. Yet he blurted out after a slight pause:

"That is a very unsavory subject."

"Is it? I do not think so. I am a friend, Mr. Jenks, not an old one, I admit, but during the past six weeks we have bridged an ordinary acquaintanceship of as many years. Can you not trust me?"

Trust her? He laughed softly. Then, choosing his words with great deliberation, he answered: "Yes, I can trust you. I intended to tell you the story some day. Why not tonight?"

Unseen in the darkness, Iris' hand sought and clasped the gold locket suspended from her neck. She already knew some portion of the story he would tell. The remainder was of minor importance.

"It is odd," he continued, "that you should have alluded to six years a moment ago. It is exactly six years almost to a day since the trouble began."

"With Lord Ventnor?" The name slipped out involuntarily.

"Yes. I was then a staff corps subaltern, and my proficiency in native languages attracted the attention of a friend in Simla, who advised me to apply for an appointment on the political side of the government of India. I did so. He supported the application, and I was assured of the next vacancy in a native state provided that I got married. I was not a marrying man, Miss Deane, and the requisite qualification nearly staggered me. But I looked around the station and came to the conclusion that the commissioner's niece would make a suitable wife. I regarded her 'points,' so to speak, and they filled the bill. She was smart, good looking, lively, understood the art of entertaining, was first rate in sports and had excellent teeth. Indeed, if a man selected a wife as he does a horse, she"—

"Don't be horrid. Was she really pretty?"

"I believe so. People said she was."

"But what did you think?"

"At the time my opinion was biased. I have seen her since, and she wears badly. She is married now and after thirty grew very fat."

Artful Jenks! Iris settled herself comfortably to listen.

"I have jumped that fence with a lot in hand," he thought.

"We became engaged," he said aloud.

"She threw herself at him," commended Iris.

"Her name was Elizabeth—Elizabeth Morris." The young lieutenant of those days called her Bessie, but no matter.

"Well, you didn't marry her, anyhow," commented Iris, a trifle sharply.

And now the sailor was on level ground again.

"Thank heaven, no!" he said earnestly. "We had barely become engaged when she went with her uncle to Simla for the hot weather. There she met Lord Ventnor, who was on the viceroy's staff, and—if you don't mind, we will skip a portion of the narrative—

I discovered then why men in India usually go to England for their wives. While in Simla on ten days' leave I had a foolish row with Lord Ventnor in the United Service club—hammered him, in fact, in defense of a worthless woman—and was only saved from a severe reprimand because I had been badly treated. Nevertheless, my hopes of a political appointment vanished, and I returned to my regiment to learn after due reflection what a very lucky person I was."

"Concerning Miss Morris, you mean?"

"Exactly. And now exit Elizabeth. Not being cut out for matrimonial enterprise, I tried to become a good officer. A year ago, when the government asked for volunteers to form Chinese regiments, I sent in my name and was accepted. I had the good fortune to serve under an old friend, Colonel Costobell, but some malign star sent Lord Ventnor to the far east, this time in an important civil capacity. I met him occasionally, and we found we did not like each other any

better. My horse beat his for the Pagoda Hurdle handicap. Poor old Sultan, I wonder where he is now!"

"Colonel Costobell fell ill, and the command of the regiment devolved upon me, our only major being absent in the interior. The colonel's wife, unhappily, chose that moment to flirt, as people say, with Lord Ventnor. Not having learned the advisability of minding my own business, I remonstrated with her, thus making her my deadly enemy. Lord Ventnor contrived an official mission to a neighboring town and detailed me for the military charge. I sent a junior officer. Then Mrs. Costobell and he deliberately concocted a plot to ruin me, he for the sake of his old animosity—you remember that I had also crossed his path in Egypt—she because she feared I would speak to her husband. On pretense of seeking my advice she inveigled me at night into a deserted corner of the club grounds at Hongkong. Lord Ventnor appeared, and as the upshot of their vile statements, which created an immediate uproar, I—well, Miss Deane, I nearly killed him."

Iris vividly recalled the anguish he betrayed when this topic was inadvertently broached one day early in their acquaintance. Now he was reciting his painful history with the air of a man far more concerned to be scrupulously accurate than aroused in his deepest passions by the memory of past wrongs. What had happened in the interim to blunt these bygone sufferings? Iris clasped her locket. She thought she knew.

"The remainder may be told in a sentence," he said. "Of what avail were my frenzied statements against the definite proofs adduced by Lord Ventnor and his unfortunate ally? Even her husband believed her and became my bitter foe. Poor woman! I have it in my heart to pity her. Well, that is all. I am here!"

"Can a man be ruined so easily?" murmured the girl, her exquisite tact leading her to avoid any direct expression of sympathy.

"It seems so. But I have had my reward. If ever I meet Mrs. Costobell again I will thank her for a great service."

Iris suddenly became confused. Her brow and neck tingled with a quick access of color.

"Why do you say that?" she asked. And Jenks, who was rising, either did not hear or pretended not to hear the tremor in her tone.

"Because you once told me you would never marry Lord Ventnor, and after what I have told you now I am quite sure you will not."

"Ah, then you do trust me?" she almost whispered.

He forced back the words trembling for utterance. He even strove weakly to assume an air of good humored badinage.

"See how you have tempted me from work, Miss Deane," he cried. "We have gossiped here until the fire grew tired of our company. To bed, please, at once."

Iris caught him by the arm.

"I will pray tonight and every night," she said solemnly, "that your good name may be cleared in the eyes of all men, as it is in mine. And I am sure my prayer will be answered."

She passed into her chamber, but her angelic influence remained. In his very soul the man thanked God for the tribulation which brought this woman into his life. He had traversed the wilderness to find an oasis of rare beauty.

It was a beautiful night. After a baking hot day the rocks were radiating their stored up heat, but the pleasant southwesterly breeze that generally set in at sunset tempered the atmosphere and made sleep refreshing. Jenks could not settle down to rest for a little while after Iris left him. She did not bring forth her lamp, and, unwilling to disturb her, he picked up a resinous branch, lit it in the dying fire and went into the cave.

He wanted to survey the work already done and to determine whether it would be better to resume operations in the morning from inside the excavation or from the ledge. Owing to the difficulty of constructing a vertical upward shaft and the danger of a sudden fall of heavy material he decided

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