

The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY
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CHAPTER I.

LADY TOZER adjusted her gold rimmed eyeglasses with an air of dignified aggressiveness. She had lived too many years in the far east. In Hongkong she was known as the "Mandarin." Her powers of merciless inquisition suggested torments long drawn out. The commander of the Sirdar, homeward bound from Shanghai, knew that he was about to be stretched on the rack when he took his seat at the saloon table.

"Is it true, captain, that we are running into a typhoon?" demanded her ladyship.

"From whom did you learn that, Lady Tozer?" Captain Ross was wary, though somewhat surprised.

"From Miss Deane. I understood her a moment ago to say that you had told her."

"I?"

"Didn't you? Some one told me this morning. I couldn't have guessed it, could I?" Miss Iris Deane's large blue eyes surveyed him with innocent indifference to strict accuracy. Incidentally she had obtained the information from her maid, a nose tilted coquette, who extracted ship's secrets from a youthful quartermaster.

"Well—er—I had forgotten," explained the tactful sailor.

"Is it true?"

Lady Tozer was unusually abrupt today. But she was annoyed by the assumption that the captain took a mere girl into his confidence and passed over the wife of the ex-chief justice of Hongkong.

"Yes, it is," said Captain Ross, equally curt, and silently thanking the fates that her ladyship was going home for the last time.

"Do tell us," chimed in Iris. "Did you find out when you squinted at the sun?"

The captain smiled. "You are nearer the mark than possibly you imagine, Miss Deane," he said. "When we took our observations yesterday there was a very weird looking halo around the sun. This morning you may have noticed several light squalls and a smooth sea, marked occasionally by strong ripples. The barometer is falling rapidly, and I expect that as the day wears we will encounter a heavy swell. If the sky looks wild tonight, and especially if we observe a heavy bank of cloud approaching from the northwest, you will see the crockery dancing about the table at dinner. I am afraid you are not a good sailor, Lady Tozer. Are you, Miss Deane?"

"Capital! I should just love to see a real storm. Now promise me solemnly that you will take me up into the chart house when this typhoon is simply tearing things to pieces."

"Oh, dear! I hope it will not be very bad. Is there no way in which you can avoid it, captain? Will it last long?"

The polite skipper for once preferred to answer Lady Tozer. "There is no cause for uneasiness," he said. "Of course typhoons in the China sea are nasty things while they last, but a ship like the Sirdar is not troubled by them. She will drive through the worst gale she is likely to meet here in less than twelve hours. Besides, I alter the course somewhat as soon as I discover our position with regard to its center."

Then the commander hurriedly excused himself, and the passengers saw no more of him that day.

Her ladyship dismissed the topic as of no present interest and focused Miss Deane through her eyeglasses.

"Sir Arthur proposes to come home in June, I understand?" she inquired.

Iris was a remarkably healthy young woman. A large banana momentarily engaged her attention. She nodded affably.

"You will stay with relatives until he arrives?" pursued Lady Tozer.

"Relatives! We have none—none whom we specially cultivate—that is, I will stop in town a day or two to interview my dressmaker and then go straight to Helmdale, our place in Yorkshire."

"Surely you have a chaperon?"

"A chaperon! My dear Lady Tozer, did my father impress you as one who would permit a fussy and stout old person to make my life miserable?"

The acidity of the retort lay in the word "stout." But Iris was not accustomed to cross examination. During a three months' residence on the island she had learned how to avoid Lady Tozer. Here it was impossible, and the older woman fastened upon her asp-like. Miss Iris Deane was a toothsome morsel for gossip. Not yet twenty-one, the only daughter of a wealthy baronet who owned a fleet of stately ships—the Sirdar among them—a girl

who had been mistress of her father's house since her return from Dresden three years ago—young, beautiful, rich—here was a combination for which men thanked a judicious heaven, while women snifted enviously.

Business detained Sir Arthur. A war cloud overshadowed the two great divisions of the yellow race. He must wait to see how matters developed, but he would not expose Iris to the insidious treachery of a Chinese spring. She was confided to the personal charge of Captain Ross. At each point of call the company's agents would be solicitous for her welfare. The cable's telegraphic eye would watch her progress as that of some princely maiden sailing in royal caravel. This fair, slender, well formed girl—delightfully English in face and figure—with her fresh, clear complexion, limpid blue eyes and shining hair was a personage of some importance.

Lady Tozer knew these things and sighed complacently.

"Ah, well," she resumed. "Parents had different views when I was a girl. But I assume Sir Arthur thinks you should become used to being your own mistress in view of your approaching marriage."

"My—approaching—marriage?" cried Iris, now genuinely amazed.

"Yes. Is it not true that you are going to marry Lord Ventnor?"

A passing steward heard the point blank question.

It had a curious effect upon him. He gazed with fiercely eager eyes at Miss Deane and so far forgot himself as to permit a dish of water ice to rest against Sir John Tozer's bald head.

Iris could not help noting his strange behavior. A flash of humor chased away her first angry resentment at Lady Tozer's interrogatory.

"That may be my happy fate," she answered gayly, "but Lord Ventnor has not asked me."

"Every one says in Hongkong"—began her ladyship.

"Confound you, you stupid rascal! What are you doing?" shouted Sir John. His feeble nerves at last conveyed the information that something more pronounced than a sudden draft affected his scalp; the ice was melting.

The incident amused those passengers who sat near enough to observe it. But the chief steward, hovering watchful near the captain's table, darted forward. Pale with anger, he hissed:

"Report yourself for duty in the second saloon tonight." And he hustled his subordinate away from the judge's chair.

Miss Deane, mirthfully radiant, rose. "Please don't punish the man, Mr. Jones," she said sweetly. "It was a sheer accident. He was taken by surprise. In his place I would have emptied the whole dish."

The chief steward smirked. He did not know exactly what had happened. Nevertheless, great though Sir John Tozer might be, the owner's daughter was greater.

"Certainly, miss, certainly," he agreed, adding confidentially: "It is rather hard on a steward to be sent aft, miss. It makes such a difference in the—er—the little gratuities given by the passengers."

The girl was tactful. She smiled comprehension at the official and bent over Sir John, now carefully polishing the back of his skull with a table napkin.

"I am sure you will forgive him," she whispered. "I can't say why, but the poor fellow was looking so intently at me that he did not see what he was doing."

The ex-chief justice was instantly mollified. He did not mind the application of ice in that way—rather liked it, in fact. Probably ice was susceptible to the fire in Miss Deane's eyes.

Suddenly the passengers still seated experienced a prolonged sinking sensation, as if the vessel had been converted into a gigantic lift. They were pressed hard into their chairs, which creaked and tried to swing around on their pivots. As the ship yielded stiffly to the sea a whiff of spray dashed through an open port.

"There!" snapped her ladyship. "I knew we should run into a storm. Yet Captain Ross led us to believe—John, take me to my cabin at once."

From the promenade deck the listless groups watched the rapid advance of the gale. There was mournful speculation upon the Sirdar's chances of reaching Singapore before the next evening.

Iris stood somewhat apart from the other passengers. The wind had freshened, and her hat was tied closely over her ears. She leaned against the taffrail, enjoying the cool breeze after hours of sultry heat. The sky was cloudless yet, but there was a queer

tinge of burnished copper in the all pervading sunshine. The sea was coldly blue. The life had gone out of it. It was no longer inviting and translucent.

Long sullen undulations swept noiselessly past the ship. Once after a steady climb up a rolling bill of water the Sirdar quickly pecked at the succeeding valley, and the propeller gave a couple of angry flaps on the surface, while a tremor ran through the stout iron rails on which the girl's arms rested.

The crew were busy too. Squads of Lascars raced about, industriously obedient to the short shrill whistling of jemadars and quartermasters. Boat lashings were tested and tightened, canvas awnings stretched across the deck forward, ventilator cowls twisted to new angles and hatches clamped down over the wooden gratings that covered the holds. Officers, spotless in white linen, flitted quietly to and fro. When the watch was changed Iris noted that the "chief" appeared in an old blue suit and carried oilskins over his arm as he climbed to the bridge.

Nature looked disturbed and fitful, and the ship responded to her mood. There was a sense of preparation in the air, of coming ordeal, of restless foreboding. Chains clanked with a noise the girl never noticed before; the tramp of hurrying men on the hurricane deck overhead sounded heavy and hollow. There was a squeaking of chairs that was abominable when people gathered up books and wraps and staggered ungracefully toward the companionway. Altogether Miss Deane was not wholly pleased with the preliminaries of a typhoon, whatever the realities might be.

Why did that silly old woman allude to her contemplated marriage to Lord Ventnor, retailing the gossip of Hong-



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kong with such malicious emphasis? For an instant Iris tried to shake the railing in comic anger. She hated Lord Ventnor. She did not want to marry him or anybody else just yet. Of course her father had hinted approval of his lordship's obvious intentions. Countess of Ventnor! Yes, it was a nice title. Still she wanted another couple of years of careless freedom. In any event why should Lady Tozer pry and probe?

And finally, why did the steward—oh, poor old Sir John! What would have happened if the ice had slid down his neck? Thoroughly comforted by this gleeful hypothesis, Miss Deane seized a favorable opportunity to dart across the starboard side and see if Captain Ross' heavy bank of cloud in the northwest had put in an appearance.

Ha! There it was, black, ominous, gigantic, rolling up over the horizon like some monstrous football. Around it the sky deepened into purple, fringed with a wide belt of brick red. She had never seen such a beginning of a gale. From what she had read in books she imagined that only in great deserts were clouds of dust generated. There could not be dust in the dense pall now rushing with giant strides across the trembling sea. Then what was it? Why was it so dark and menacing? And where was desert of stone and sand to compare with this awful expanse of water? What a small dot was this great ship on the visible surface! But the ocean itself extended away beyond there, reaching out to the infinite. The dot became a mere speck, undistinguishable beneath a celestial microscope such as the gods might condescend to use.

Iris shivered and aroused herself with a startled laugh.

The lively fanfare of the dinner trumpet failed to fill the saloon. By this time the Sirdar was fighting resolutely against a stiff gale. But the stress of actual combat was better than the eerie sensation of impending danger during the earlier hours. The strong, hearty pulsations of the engines, the regular thrashing of the screw, the steadfast onward plunging of the good ship through racing seas

and flying scud, were cheery, confident and inspiring.

Miss Deane justified her boast that she was an excellent sailor. She smiled delightedly at the ship's surgeon when he caught her eye through the many gaps in the tables. She was alone, so he joined her.

"You are a credit to the company—quite a sea king's daughter," he said.

"Doctor, do you talk to all your lady passengers in that way?"

"Alas, no! Too often I can only be truthful when I am dumb."

Iris laughed. "If I remain long on this ship I will certainly have my head turned," she cried. "I receive nothing but compliments from the captain down to—"

"The doctor?"

"No. You come a good second on the list."

In very truth she was thinking of the ice carrying steward and his queer start of surprise at the announcement of her rumored engagement. The man interested her. He looked like a broken down gentleman. Her quick eyes traveled around the saloon to discover his whereabouts. She could not see him. The chief steward stood near, balancing himself in apparent defiance of the laws of gravitation, for the ship was now pitching and rolling with a mad zeal. For an instant she meant to inquire what had become of the transgressor, but she dismissed the thought at its inception. The matter was too trivial.

With a wild swoop all the plates, glasses and cutlery on the saloon tables crashed to starboard. Were it not for the restraint of the fiddles everything must have been swept to the floor. There were one or two minor accidents. A steward, taken unawares, was thrown headlong on top of his laden tray. Others were compelled to clutch the backs of chairs and cling to pillars. One man involuntarily seized the hair of a lady who devoted an hour before each meal to her coiffure. The Sirdar with a frenzied bound tried to turn a somersault.

"A change, of course," observed the doctor. "They generally try to avoid it when people are in the saloon, but a typhoon admits of no labored politeness. As its center is now right ahead, we are going on the starboard tack to get behind it."

"I must hurry up and go on deck," said Miss Deane.

"You will not be able to go on deck until the morning."

She turned on him impetuously. "Indeed I will. Captain Ross promised me—that is, I asked him!"

The doctor smiled. She was so charmingly insistent! "It is simply impossible," he said. "The companion doors are bolted. The promenade deck is swept by heavy seas every minute. A boat has been carried away, and several stanchions snapped off like carrots. For the first time in your life, Miss Deane, you are battered down."

The girl's face must have paled somewhat. He added hastily: "There is no danger, you know, but these precautions are necessary. You would not like to see several tons of water rushing down the saloon stairs; now, would you?"

"Decidedly not." Then, after a pause: "It is not pleasant to be fastened up in a great iron box, doctor. It reminds one of a huge coffin."

"Not a bit. The Sirdar is the safest ship afloat. Your father has always pursued a splendid policy in that respect. The London and Hongkong company may not possess fast vessels, but they are seaworthy and well found in every respect."

"Are there many people ill on board?"

"No; just the usual number of disturbed livers. We had a nasty accident shortly before dinner."

"Good gracious! What happened?"

"Some Lascars were caught by a sea forward. One man had his leg broken."

"Anything else?"

The doctor hesitated. He became interested in the color of some Burgundy. "I hardly know the exact details yet," he replied. "Tomorrow after breakfast I will tell you all about it."

An English quartermaster and four Lascars had been lickered from off the forecabin by the greedy tongue of a huge wave. The succeeding surge flung the five men back against the quarter. One of the black sailors was pitched aboard with a fractured leg and other injuries. The others were smashed against the iron hull and disappeared.

For one tremulous moment the engines slowed. The ship commenced to veer off into the path of the cyclone. Captain Ross set his teeth, and the telegraph bell jangled "Full speed ahead."

"Poor Jackson!" he murmured. "One of my best men. I remember seeing his wife, a pretty little woman, and two children coming to meet him last homeward trip. They will be there again. Good God! That Lascar who was saved has some one to await him in a Bombay village, I suppose."

The captain fought his way to the chart house. He wiped the salt water from his eyes and looked anxiously at the barometer.

"Still falling!" he muttered. "I will keep on until 7 o'clock and then bear three points to the southward. By midnight we should be behind it."

He struggled back into the outside fury. By comparison the steady advance

del he quitted was paradise on the edge of an inferno.

Down in the saloon the hardier passengers were striving to subdue the ennuil of an interval before they sought their cabins. Some talked. One hardened reprobate strummed the piano. Others played cards, chess, draughts—anything that would distract attention.

The stately apartment offered strange contrast to the warring elements without. Bright lights, costly upholstery, soft carpets, carved panels and gilded cornices, with uniformed attendants passing to and fro carrying coffee and glasses—these surroundings suggested a floating palace in which the raging seas were defied. Yet forty miles away, somewhere in the furious depths, four corpses swirled about with horrible uncertainty, lurching through battling currents and perchance conveyed by fighting sharks.

The surgeon had been called away. Iris was the only lady left in the saloon. She watched a set of whist players for a time and then essayed the perilous passage to her stateroom. She found her maid and a stewardess there. Both women were weeping.

"What is the matter?" she inquired.

The stewardess tried to speak. She choked with grief and hastily went out. The maid blubbered an explanation.

"A friend of hers was married, miss, to the man who is drowned."

"Drowned! What man?"

"Haven't you heard, miss? I suppose they are keeping it quiet. An English sailor and some natives were swept off the ship by a sea. One native was saved, but he is all smashed up. The others were never seen again."

Iris by degrees learned the sad chronicles of the Jackson family. She was moved to tears. She remembered the doctor's hesitancy and her own idle phrase, "a huge coffin."

Outside the roaring waves pounded upon the iron walls.

Two staterooms had been converted into one to provide Miss Deane with ample accommodation. There were no bunks, but a cozy bed was screwed to the deck. She lay down and strove to read. It was a difficult task. Her eyes wandered from the printed page to mark the absurd antics of her garments swinging on their hooks. At times the ship rolled so far that she felt sure it must topple over. She was not afraid, but subdued, rather astounded, placidly prepared for vague eventualities.

Things were ridiculous. What need was there for all this external fury? Why should poor sailors be cast forth to instant death in such awful manner? If she could only sleep and forget—if kind oblivion would blot out the storm for a few blissful hours! But how could one sleep with the consciousness of that watery giant thundering his summons upon the iron plates a few inches away?

Then came the blurred picture of Captain Ross high up on the bridge peering into the moving blackness. How strange that there should be hidden in the convolutions of a man's brain an intelligence that laid bare the pretenses of that ravenous demon without! Each of the ship's officers, the commander more than the others, understood the why and the wherefore of this blustering combination of wind and sea. Iris knew the language of poker. Nature was putting up a huge bluff.

Oh, dear! She was so tired. It demanded a physical effort to constantly shove away an unseen force that tried to push you over. How funny that a big cloud should travel up against the wind! And so, amid confused wonderment, she lapsed into an uneasy slumber, her last sentiment thought being a quiet thankfulness that the screw went thud, thud, thud, thud, with such determination.

After the course was changed and the Sirdar bore away toward the southwest the commander consulted the barometer each half hour. The telltale mercury had sunk over two inches in twelve hours. The abnormally low pressure quickly created dense clouds, which enhanced the melancholy darkness of the gale.

For many minutes together the bows of the ship were not visible. Masthead and side lights were obscured by the pelting scud. The engines thrust the vessel forward like a lance into the vitals of the storm. Wind and wave gushed out of the vortex with impotent fury.

At last soon after midnight the barometer showed a slight upward movement. At 1:30 a. m. the change became pronounced. Simultaneously the wind swung round a point to the westward.

Then Captain Ross smiled wearily. His face brightened. He opened his oilskin coat, glanced at the compass and nodded approval. Then he turned to consult a chart. He was joined by the chief officer. Both men examined the chart in silence.

Captain Ross finally took a pencil. He stabbed its point on the paper in the neighborhood of 14 degrees north and 112 degrees east.

"We are about there, I think."

The chief agreed. "That was the locality I had in my mind." He bent closer over the sheet.

"Nothing in the way tonight, sir," he added.