

# The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY

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[CONTINUED.]

A deadly sensation of nausea almost overpowered him, but the love of life came to his aid and he tore the suffocating feeling 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 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 devilish a giant of the 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 he was 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 flung 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 bowlder 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.

FERCE 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 thoughtless 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.

He snapped the locks and squinted down the barrels of half a dozen to test them. These he laid on one side. Then he rapidly constructed a small raft from loose timbers, binding them roughly with rope, and to this argosy he fastened the box of tea, the barrels of flour, the broken saloon chair and other small articles which might be of use. He avoided any difficulty in launching the raft by building it close to the water's edge. When all was ready the rising tide floated it for him. He secured it to his longest rope and gave it a vigorous push off into the lagoon. Then he slung four rifles across his shoulders, asked Iris to carry the remaining two in like manner and began to maneuver the raft landward.

"While you land the goods I will prepare dinner," announced the girl.

"Please be careful not to slip on the rocks," he said. "I am concerned about the rifles. If you fell you might damage them, and the incoming tide will so hopelessly rust those I leave behind that they will be useless."

"I will preserve them at any cost, though with six in our possession there is a margin for accidents. However, to reassure you, I will go back quickly."

Before he could protest she started off at a run, jumping lightly from rock to rock. Disregarding his shouts, she persevered until she stood safely on the sands. Then, saucily waving a farewell, she set off toward the cave.

Had she seen the look of fierce despair that settled down upon Jenks' face as he turned to his task of guiding the raft ashore she might have wondered what it meant. In any case she would certainly have behaved differently.

By the time the sailor had safely landed his cargo Iris had cooked their midday meal. She achieved a fresh culinary triumph. The eggs were fried! "I am seriously thinking of trying to boil a ham," she stated gravely. "Have you any idea how long it takes to cook

"That is one reason why I brought the crowbars," he explained. "If you will sit down for a little while I will have everything properly fixed."

He delved with one of the bars until it lodged in a crevice of the coral. Then a few powerful blows with the back of the ax wedged it firmly enough to bear any ordinary strain. The rope ends reeved through the pulley on the tree were lying where they fell from the girl's hand at the close of the struggle. He deftly knotted them to the rigid bar, and a few rapid turns of a piece of wreckage passed between the two lines strung them into a tautness that could not be attained by any amount of pulling.

Iris watched the operation in silence. The sailor always looked at his best when hard at work. The half sullen, wholly self contained expression left his face, which lit up with enthusiasm and concentrated intelligence. That which he essayed he did with all his might.

He, toiling with steady persistence, felt not the inward spur which sought relief in speech, but Iris was compelled to say something.

"I suppose," she commented with an air of much wisdom, "you are contriving an overhead railway for the safe transit of yourself and the goods?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so doubtful about it?"

"Because I personally intended to walk across. The ropes will serve to convey the packages."

She rose imperiously. "I absolutely forbid you to enter the water again. Such a suggestion on your part is quite shameful. You are taking a grave risk for no very great gain that I can see, and if anything happens to you I shall be left all alone in this awful place."

She could think of no better argument. Her only resource was a woman's expedient—a plea for protection against threatening ills.

The sailor seemed to be puzzled how best to act.

"Miss Deane," he said, "there is no such serious danger as you imagine. Last time the cuttle caught me napping. He will not do so again. Those rifles I must have. If it will serve to reassure you, I will go along the line myself."

Without another word he commenced operations. There was plenty of rope, and the plan he adopted was simplicity itself. When each package was securely fastened he attached it to a loop that passed over the line stretched from the tree to the crowbar. To this loop he tied the lightest rope he could find and threw the other end to Iris. By pulling slightly she was able to land at her feet even the cumbersome rifle chest, for the traveling angle was so acute that the heavier the article the more readily it sought the lower level.

They toiled in silence until Jenks could lay hands on nothing more of value. Then, observing due care, he quickly passed the channel. For an instant the girl gazed affrightedly at the sea until the sailor stood at her side again.

The tide had turned. In a few minutes the reef would be partly submerged. To carry the case of rifles to the mainland was a manifestly impossible feat, so Jenks now did that which done earlier would have saved him some labor. He broke open the chest and found that the weapons were apparently in excellent order.

He snapped the locks and squinted down the barrels of half a dozen to test them. These he laid on one side. Then he rapidly constructed a small raft from loose timbers, binding them roughly with rope, and to this argosy he fastened the box of tea, the barrels of flour, the broken saloon chair and other small articles which might be of use. He avoided any difficulty in launching the raft by building it close to the water's edge. When all was ready the rising tide floated it for him. He secured it to his longest rope and gave it a vigorous push off into the lagoon. Then he slung four rifles across his shoulders, asked Iris to carry the remaining two in like manner and began to maneuver the raft landward.

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"Admirable! But we can measure neither hours nor pounds."

"I think we can do both. I will construct a balance of some kind. Then, with a ham slung to one end and a rifle and some cartridges to the other, I will tell you the weight of the ham to an ounce. To ascertain the time I have already determined to fashion a sundial. I remember the requisite divisions with reasonable accuracy, and a little observation will enable us to correct any mistakes."

"You are really very clever, Mr. Jenks," said Iris, with childlike candor. "Have you spent several years of your life in preparing for residence on a desert island?"

"Something of the sort. I have led a queer kind of existence, full of useless purposes. Fate has driven me into a corner where my odds and ends of knowledge are actually valuable. Such accidents make men millionaires."

"Useless purposes?" she repeated. "I can hardly credit that. One uses such a phrase to describe fussy people, alive with foolish activity. Your worst enemy would not place you in such a category."

"My worst enemy made the phrase effective at any rate, Miss Deane."

"You mean that he ruined your career?"

"Well—er—yes. I suppose that describes the position with fair accuracy."

"Was he a very great scoundrel?"

"He was and is."

Jenks spoke with quiet bitterness. The girl's words had evoked a sudden flood of recollection. For the moment he did not notice how he had been trapped into speaking of himself, nor did he see the quiet content on Iris' face when she elicited the information that his chief foe was a man. A certain tremulous hesitancy in her manner when she next spoke might have warned him, but his hungry soul caught only the warm sympathy of her words, which fell like rain on parched soil.

"You are tired," she said. "Won't you smoke for a little while and talk to me?"

He produced his pipe and tobacco.

"That is a first rate pipe," she declared. "My father always said that a straight stem, with the bowl at a right angle, was the correct shape. You evidently agree with him."

"Absolutely."

"You will like my father when you meet him. He is the very best man alive, I am sure."

"You two are great friends, then?"

"Great friends! He is the only friend I possess in the world."

"What! Is that quite accurate?"

"Oh, quite. Of course, Mr. Jenks, I can never forget how much I owe to you. I like you immensely, too, although you are so—so gruff to me at times. But—but—you see, my father and I have always been together. I have neither brother nor sister, not even a cousin. My dear mother died from some horrid fever when I was quite a little girl. My father is everything to me."

"Dear child!" he murmured, apparently uttering his thoughts aloud rather than addressing her directly. "So you find me gruff, eh?"

"A regular bear when you lecture me. But that is only occasionally. You can be very nice when you like, when you forget your past troubles. And pray, why do you call me a child?"

"Have I done so?"

"Not a moment ago. How old are you, Mr. Jenks? I am twenty—twenty last December."

"And I," he said, "will be twenty-eight in August."

"Good gracious!" she gasped. "I am very sorry, but I really thought you were forty at least."

"I look it, no doubt. Let me be equally candid and admit that you, too, show your age markedly."

She smiled nervously. "What a lot of trouble you must have had to—to give you those little wrinkles in the corners of your mouth and eyes," she said.

"Wrinkles! How terrible!"

"I don't know. I think they rather suit you. Besides, it was stupid of me to imagine you were so old. I suppose exposure to the sun creates wrinkles, and you must have lived much in the open air."

"Early rising and late going to bed are bad for the complexion," he declared solemnly.

"I often wonder how army officers manage to exist," she said. "They never seem to get enough sleep, in the east at any rate."

"So you assume I have been in the army?"

"I am quite sure of it."

"May I ask why?"

"Your manner, your voice, your quiet air of authority, the very way you walk, all betray you."

"Then," he said sadly, "I will not attempt to deny the fact. I held a commission in the Indian staff corps for nine years. It was a hobby of mine, Miss Deane, to make myself acquainted with the best means of victualing my men and keeping them in good health under all sorts of fanciful conditions and in every kind of climate, especially under circumstances when ordinary stores were not available. With that object in view I read up

(Continued on Sixth Page)