

The Wings of the Morning

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(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XI.

THE sailor knew so accurately the position of his reliable sentinels that he could follow each phase of the imaginary conflict on the other side of the island. The first outbreak of desultory firing died away amidst a chorus of protest from every feathered inhabitant of the isle, so Jenks assumed that the Dyaks had gathered again on the beach after ridding the scarecrows with bullets or slashing them with their heavy razor edged swords.

A hasty council was probably held, and, notwithstanding their fear of the silent company in the hollow, an advance was ultimately made along the beach. Within a few yards they encountered the invisible cord of the third spring gun. There was a report and another fierce outbreak of musketry. This was enough. Not a man would move a step nearer that abode of the dead. The next commotion arose on the ridge near the North cape.

"At this rate of progress," said Jenks to the girl, "they will not reach our house until daylight."

"I almost wish they were here," was the quiet reply. "I find this waiting and listening to be trying to the nerves."

They were lying on a number of ragged garments hastily spread on the ledge and peering intently into the moonlit area of Prospect park. The great rock itself was shrouded in somber shadows. Even if they stood up none could see them from the ground, so dense was the darkness enveloping them.

He turned slightly and took her hand. It was cool and moist. It no more trembled than his own.

"The Dyaks are far more scared than you," he murmured, with a laugh. "Cruel and courageous as they are, they dare not face a spook."

"Then what a pity it is we cannot conjure up a ghost for their benefit. All the spirits I have ever read about were ridiculous. Why cannot one be useful occasionally?"

The question set him thinking. Unknown to the girl the materials for a dramatic apparition were hidden amid the bushes near the well. He cudgeled his brains to remember the stage effects of juvenile days, but these needed limelight, blue flares, mirrors, phosphorus.

The absurdity of hoping to devise any such accessories while perched on a ledge in a remote island, a larger reef of the thousands in the China sea, tickled him.

"What is it?" asked Iris.

He repeated his list of missing stage properties. They had nothing to do but to wait, and people in the very crux and maelstrom of existence usually discuss trivial things.

"I don't know anything about phosphorus," said the girl, "but you can obtain queer results from sulphur, and there is an old box of Norwegian matches resting at this moment on the shelf in my room. Don't you remember? They were in your pocket, and you were going to throw them away. Why, what are you doing?"

For Jenks had cast the rope ladder loose and was evidently about to descend.

"Have no fear," he said. "I will not be away five minutes."

"If you are going down I must come with you. I will not be left here alone."

"Please do not stop me," he whispered earnestly. "You must not come. I will take no risk whatever. If you remain here you can warn me instantly. With both of us on the ground we will incur real danger. I want you to keep a sharp lookout toward Turtle beach in case the Dyaks come that way. Those who are crossing the island will not reach us for a long time."

She yielded, though unwillingly. She was tremulous with anxiety on his account.

He vanished without another word. She next saw him in the moonlight near the well. He was rustling among the shrubs, and he returned to the rock with something white in his arms, which he seemingly deposited at the mouth of the cave. He went back to the well and carried another similar burden. Then he ran toward the house. The doorway was not visible from the ledge, and she passed a few horrible moments until a low hiss beneath caught her ear. She could tell by the creak of the rope ladder that he was ascending. At last he reached her side, and she murmured, with a gasping sob:

"Don't go away again. I cannot stand it."

tation by arousing interest. Still hauling in the ladder with one hand, he held out the other, on which luminous wisps were writhing like glowworms' ghosts.

"You are responsible," he said. "You gave me an excellent idea, and I was obliged to carry it out."

"What have you done?"

"Arranged a fearsome bogey in the cave."

"But how?"

"It was not exactly a pleasant operation, but the only laws of necessity are those which must be broken."

She understood that he did not wish her to question him further. Perhaps curiosity, now that he was safe, might have vanquished her terror and led to another demand for enlightenment, but at that instant the sound of an angry voice and the crunching of coral away to the left drove all else from her mind.

"They are coming by way of the beach, after all," whispered Jenks.

He was mistaken in a sense. Another outbreak of intermittent firing among the trees on the north side of the ridge showed that some at least of the Dyaks were advancing by their former route. The appearance of the Dyak chief on the flat belt of shingle, with his right arm slung across his breast, accompanied by not more than half a dozen followers, showed that a few hardy spirits had dared to pass the valley of death, with all its nameless terrors.

They advanced cautiously enough, as though dreading a surprise. The chief carried a bright parang in his left



They advanced cautiously.

hand; the others were armed with guns, their swords being thrust through belts. Creeping forward on tiptoe, though their distant companions were making a tremendous row, they looked a murderous gang as they peered across the open space, now brilliantly illuminated by the moon.

Jenks had a sudden intuition that the right thing to do now was to shoot the whole party. He dismissed the thought at once. All his preparations were governed by the hope that the pirates might abandon their quest after hours of fruitless search. It would be most unwise, he told himself, to precipitate hostilities. Far better avoid a conflict altogether, if that were possible, than risk the immediate discovery of his inaccessible retreat.

In other words, he made a grave mistake, which shows how a man may err when overagonized by the danger of the woman he loves. The bold course was the right one. By killing the Dyak leader he would have deprived the enemy of the dominating influence in this campaign of revenge. When the main body, already much perturbed by the unseen and intangible agencies which opened fire at them in the wood, arrived in Prospect park to find only the dead bodies of their chief and his small force, their consternation could be turned into mad panic by a vigorous bombardment from the rock.

Probably in less than an hour after their landing the whole tribe would have rushed pellmell to the boats, cursing the folly which led them to this devil haunted island. But it serves no good purpose to say what might have been. As it was, the Dyaks, silent now and moving with the utmost caution, passed the well and were about to approach the cave when one of them saw

the house.

Instantly they changed their tactics. Retreating hastily to the shade of the opposite cliff, they seemed to await the coming of re-enforcements. The sailor fancied that a messenger was dispatched by way of the north sands to hurry up the laggards, because the distant firing slackened, and five minutes later a fierce outbreak of yells among the trees to the right heralded a combined rush on the Belle Vue castle.

The noise made by the savages was so great, the screams of bewildered birds circling overhead so incessant, that Jenks was compelled to speak quite loudly when he said to Iris: "They must think we sleep soundly not to be disturbed by the volleys they have fired already."

She would have answered, but he placed a restraining hand on her shoulder, for the Dyaks, quickly discovering that the hut was empty, ran toward the cave and thus came in full view.

As well as Jenks could judge the foremost trio of the yelling horde were impaled on the bayonets of the cheval de frise, learning too late its formidable nature. The wounded men shrieked in agony, but their cries were drowned in a torrent of amazed shouts

from their companions. Forthwith there was a stampede toward the well, the cliff, the beaches, anywhere to get away from that awesome cavern where ghosts dwelt and men fell maimed at the very threshold. The sailor, leaning as far over the edge of the rock as the girl's expostulations would permit, heard a couple of men groaning beneath, while a third limped away with frantic and painful haste.

"What is it?" whispered Iris, eager herself to witness the tumult. "What has happened?"

"They have been routed by a box of matches and a few dried bones," he answered.

There was no time for further speech. He was absorbed in estimating the probable number of the Dyaks. Thus far he had seen about fifty. Moreover, he did not wish to acquaint Iris with the actual details of the artifice that had been so potent. Her allusion to the box of water sodden matches had given him the notion of utilizing as an active ally the bleached remains of the poor fellow who had long ago fallen a victim to this identical mob of cutthroats or their associates. He had gathered the principal bones from their resting place near the well, rubbed them with the ends of the matches after damping the sulphur again and arranged them with ghastly effect on the pile of rubbish at the farther end of the cave, creeping under the cheval de frise for the purpose.

Though not so vivid as he wished, the pale glimmering headless skeleton in the intense darkness of the interior was appalling enough in all conscience. Fortunately the fumes of the sulphur fed on the bony substance. They endured a sufficient time to scare every Dyak who caught a glimpse of the monstrous object crouching in luminous horror within the dismal cavern.

Not even the stirring exhortations of the chief, whose voice was raised in furious speech, could induce his adherents to again approach that affrighting spot. At last the daring scoundrel himself, still wielding his naked sword, strode right up to the very doorway. Stricken with sudden stupor, he gazed at the fitful gleams within. He prodded the cheval de frise with the parang. Here was something definite and solid. Then he dragged one of the wounded men out into the moonlight.

Again Jenks experienced an itching desire to send a bullet through the Dyak's head. Again he resisted the impulse. And so passed that which is vouchsafed by fate to few men—a second opportunity.

Another vehement harangue by the chief goaded some venturesome spirits into carrying their wounded comrade out of sight, presumably to the hut. Inspired by their leader's fearless example, they even removed the third injured Dyak from the vicinity of the cave, but the celerity of their retreat caused the wretch to bawl in agony.

The next undertaking was no sooner appreciated by the sailor than he hurriedly caused Iris to shelter herself beneath the tarpaulin, while he covered close to the floor of the ledge, looking only through the screen of tall grasses. They kindled a fire near the well. Soon his ruddy glare lit up the dark rock with fantastic flickerings and drew scintillations from the weapons and ornaments of the hideously picturesque horde gathered in its vicinity.

They spoke a language of hard vowels and nasal resonance and ate what he judged to be dry fish, millets and strips of tough preserved meat, which they cooked on small iron skewers stuck among the glowing embers. His heart sank as he counted sixty-one, all told, assembled within forty yards of the ledge. Probably several others were guarding the boats or prowling about the island. Indeed, events proved that more than eighty men had come ashore in three large sampans, roomy and fleet craft, well fitted for piratical excursions up river estuaries or along a coast.

They were mostly barelegged rascals, wearing Malay hats, loose jackets reaching to the knee and sandals. One man differed essentially from the others. He was habited in the conventional attire of an Indian Mohammedan, and his skin was brown, while the

swarthy Dyaks were yellow beneath the dirt. Jenks thought from the manner in which his turban was tied that he must be a Punjabi Mussulman—very likely an escaped convict from the Andamans.

The most careful scrutiny did not reveal any arms of precision. They all carried muzzle loaders, either antiquated flintlocks or guns sufficiently modern to be fitted with nipples for percussion caps.

Each Dyak, of course, sported a parang and dagger-like creese; a few bore spears, and about a dozen shouldered a long straight piece of bamboo. The nature of this implement the sailor could not determine at the moment.

In the neighborhood of the fire an animated discussion took place. Though it was easy to see that the chief was all paramount, his fellow tribesmen exercised a democratic right of free speech and outspoken opinion.

Flashing eyes and expressive hands were turned toward the cave and hut. Once when the debate grew warm the chief snatched up a burning branch and held it over the blackened embers of the fire extinguished by Jenks. He seemed to draw some definite conclusion from an examination of the charcoal, and the argument therefor proceeded with less emphasis. Whatever it was that he said evidently carried conviction.

Iris, nestling close to the sailor, whispered:

"Do you know what he has found out?"

"I can only guess that he can tell by the appearance of the burned wood how long it is since it was extinguished. Clearly they agree with him."

"Then they know we are still here?"

"Either here or gone within a few hours. In any case they will make a thorough search of the island at daybreak."

"Will it be dawn soon?"

"Yes. Are you tired?"

"A little cramped—that is all."

"Don't think I am foolish. Can you manage to sleep?"

"Sleep! With those men so near!"

"Yes. We do not know how long they will remain. We must keep up our strength. Sleep, next to food and drink, is a prime necessity."

"If it will please you I will try," she said, with such sweet readiness to obey his slightest wish that the wonder is he did not kiss her then and there. By previous instruction she knew exactly what to do. She crept quietly back until well ensconced in the niche widened and hollowed for her accommodation. There so secluded was she from the outer world of horror and peril that the coarse voices beneath only reached her in a murmur. Pulling one end of the tarpaulin over her, she stretched her weary limbs on a litter of twigs and leaves, commended herself and the man she loved to God's keeping and, wonderful though it may seem, was soon slumbering peacefully.

The statement may sound passing strange to civilized ears, accustomed only to the routine of daily life and not inured to danger and wild surroundings. But the soldier who has snatched a hasty doze in the trenches, the sailor who has heard a fierce gale buffeting the walls of his frail ark, can appreciate the reason why Iris, weary and surfeited with excitement, would have slept were she certain that the next sunrise would mark her last hour on earth.

Jenks, too, composed himself for a brief rest. He felt assured that there was not the remotest chance of their lofty perch being found out before daybreak, and the first faint streaks of dawn would awaken him.

When the morning breeze swept over the ocean and the stars were beginning to pale before the pink glory flung broadcast through the sky by the yet invisible sun, the sailor was aroused by the quiet fluttering of a bird about to settle on the rock, but startled by the sight of him.

His faculties were at once on the alert, though he little realized the danger betokened by the bird's rapid dart into the void. Turning first to peer at Iris, he satisfied himself that she was still asleep. Her lips were slightly parted in a smile. She might be dreaming of summer and England. He noiselessly wormed his way to the verge of the rock and looked down through the grass roots.

The Dyaks were already stirring. Some were replenishing the fire, others were drawing water, cooking, eating, smoking long thin stemmed pipes with absurdly small bowls or oiling their limbs and weapons with impartial energy. The chief yet lay stretched on the sand, but when the first beams of the sun gilded the waters a man stooped over the prostrate form and said something that caused the sleeper to rise stiffly, supporting himself on his uninjured arm. They at once went off together toward Europa point.

"They have found the boat," thought Jenks. "Well, they are welcome to all the information it affords."

The chief gave some order, at which they all hung back sheepishly. Cursing them in choice Malay, the chief seized a thick faggot and strode in the direction of the cave. Goaded into activity by his truculent demeanor, some followed him, and Jenks, unable to see, but listening anxiously, knew that they were tearing the cheval de frise from its supports. Nevertheless none of the

working party entered the excavation. They feared the parched bones that shone by night.

As he had not been able to complete the communicating shaft it was not



The monstrous object crouching in luminous horror.

now of vital importance should the Dyaks penetrate to the interior. Yet he thanked the good luck that had showered such a heap of rubbish over the spot containing his chief stores and covering the vein of gold. Wild as these fellows were, they well knew the value of the precious metal, and if by chance they lighted upon such a well defined lode they might not quit the island for weeks.

At last on a command from the chief the Dyaks scattered in various directions. Some turned toward Europa point, but the majority went to the east along Turtle beach or by way of the lagoon. Prospect park was deserted. They were scouring both sections of the island in full force.

The quiet watcher on the ledge took no needless risks. Though it was impossible to believe any stratagem had been planned for his special benefit, an accident might betray him. With the utmost circumspection he rose on all fours and, with comprehensive glance, examined trees, plateau and both strips of beach for signs of a lurking foe. He need have no fear. Of all places in the island the Dyaks least imagined that their quarry had lain all night within earshot of their encampment.

Jenks slid back down the ledge and gently awakened Iris. She sat up instantly and gazed at him with wondering eyes.

Fearful lest she should forget her surroundings, he placed a warning finger on his lips.

"Oh," she said in a whisper, "are they still here?"

He told her what had happened and suggested that they should have something to eat while the coast was clear beneath. She needed no second bidding, for the long vigil of the previous night had left her very hungry, and the two breakfasted right royally on biscuit, cold fowl, ham and good water.

In this, the inner section of their refuge, they could be seen only by a bird or by a man standing on the distant rocky shelf that formed the southern extremity of the opposite cliff, and the sailor kept a close lookout in that direction.

Iris was about to throw the remains of the feast into an empty oil tin provided for refuse when Jenks restrained her.

"No," he said smilingly. "Scraps should be the first course next time. We must not waste an atom of food."

"How thoughtless of me!" she exclaimed. "Please tell me you think they will go away today."

But the sailor flung himself flat on the ledge and grasped a rifle.

"Be still, on your life!" he said. "Squeeze into your corner. There is a Dyak on the opposite cliff."

True enough, a man had climbed to that unhappily placed rocky table and was shouting something to a confederate high on the cliff over their heads. As yet he had not seen them nor even noticed the place where they were concealed. The sailor imagined from the Dyak's gestures that he was communicating the uselessness of further search on the western part of the island.

When the conversation ceased he hoped the loud voiced scavenger would descend. But no! The scout looked into the valley, at the well, the house, the cave. Still he did not see the ledge. At that unlucky moment three birds, driven from the trees on the crest by the passage of the Dyaks, flew down the face of the cliff and began a circling quest for some safe perch on which to alight.

Jenks swore with an emphasis not the less earnest because it was mute and took steady aim at the Dyak's left breast. The birds fluttered about in ever smaller circles. Then one of them

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