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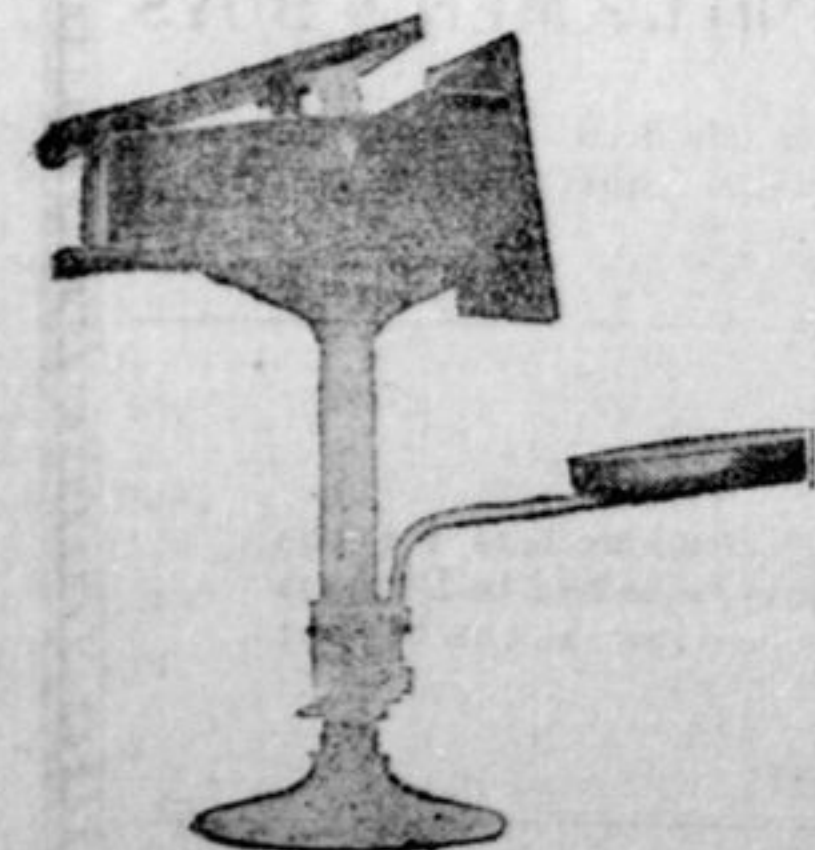
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The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY
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CHAPTER XIII.

RESIDENTS in tropical countries know that the heat is greatest, or certainly least bearable, between 2 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

At the conclusion of a not very luscious repast Jenks suggested that they should rig up the tarpaulin in such wise as to gain protection from the sun and yet enable him to cast a watchful eye over the valley. Iris obeyed to raise the great canvas sheet on the supports he had prepared. Once shut off from the devouring rays, the hot breeze then springing into fitful existence cooled their blistered but perspiring skin and made life somewhat tolerable.

Still adhering to his policy of combating the first enervating attack of thirst, the sailor sanctioned the assumption of the remaining water. As a last desperate expedient to be resorted to only in case of sheer necessity, he uncorked a bottle of champagne and filled the tin cup. The effervescent wine, with its volume of carbonic acid, looked so tempting that he took a sip and there he risked his stomach.

Jenks explained to her that the wine became quite flat and that it might use it to moisten their parched lips. Even so, in their present overheated state, the liquor was unquestionably dangerous, but he held it would not harm them if taken in minute quantities.

Accustomed now to implicitly accept his advice, she fought and steadily conquered the craving within her. Oddly enough, the "thawing" of their scorched bodies beneath the tarpaulin brought a certain degree of relief. They were supremely uncomfortable, but that was as naught compared with the relaxation from the torments previously borne.

For a long time—the best part of an hour, perhaps—they remained silent.

The sailor was reviewing the pros and cons of their precarious condition. It would, of course, be a matter of supreme importance were the Indian to be faithful to his promise. Here the prospect was decidedly hopeful. The man was an old soldier, and the ex-officer of native cavalry knew how enduring was the attachment of this poor convict to home and military service. Probably at that moment the Mohammedan was praying to the prophet and his two nephews to aid him in rescuing the sahib and the woman whom the sahib held so dear, for the all-wise and all-powerful Indian government is very merciful to offending natives who thus condone their former crimes.

But, howsoever willing he might be, what could one man do among so many? The Dyaks were hostile to him in race and creed, and assuredly infuriated against the foreign devil who had killed or wounded in round numbers one-fifth of their total force. Very likely the hapless Mussulman would lose his life that night in attempting to bring water to the foot of the rock.

Even if the man succeeded in eluding the vigilance of his present associates, where was the water to come from? There was none on the island save that in the well. In all likelihood the Dyaks had a store in the remaining sampans, but the native ally of the beleaguered pair would have a task of exceeding difficulty in obtaining one of the jars or skins containing it.

Again, granting all things went well that night, what would be the final outcome of the struggle? How long could Iris withstand the exposure, the strain, the heartbreaking misery of the rock?

He shook restlessly, not aware that the girl's sorrowful glance, luminous with love and pain, was fixed upon him. Summarily dismissing these ghastly phantoms of the mind, he asked himself what the Mohammedan exactly meant by warning him against the trees on the right and the "silent death" that might come from them. He was about to crawl forth to the lip of the rock and investigate matters in that locality when Iris, who also was busy with her thoughts, restrained him.

"Wait a little while," she said. "None of the Dyaks will venture into the open until night falls. And I have something to say to you."

There was a quiet solemnity in her voice that Jenks had never heard before. It chilled him. His heart acknowledged a quick sense of evil omen. He raised himself slightly and turned toward her. Her face, beautiful and serene beneath its disfigurements, wore an expression of settled purpose. For the life of him he dared not question her.

"That man, the interpreter," she said, "told you that if I were given up to the chief he and his followers would go away and molest you no more."

His forehead seemed with sudden anger.

"A mere bait," he protested. "In any event it is hardly worth discussion." And the answer came, clear and resolute:

"I think I will agree to those terms."

But by sheer will power he contrived to say: "You must be mad to even dream of such a thing. Don't you understand what it means to you—and to me? It is a ruse to trap us. They are ungodly savages. Once they had you in their power they would laugh at a promise made to me."

"You may be mistaken. They must have some sense of fair dealing. Even assuming that such was their intention, they may depart from it. They have already lost a great many men. Their chief, having gained his main object, might not be able to persuade them to take further risks. I will make it a part of the bargain that they first supply you with plenty of water. Then you, unaided, could keep them at bay for many days. We lose nothing; we can gain a great deal by endeavoring to pacify them."

"Iris," he gasped, "what are you saying?"

The unexpected sound of her name on his lips almost unnerved her. But no martyr ever went to the stake with more settled purpose than this pure woman, resolved to immolate herself for the sake of the man she loved. He had dared all for her, faced death in many shapes. Now it was her turn. Her eyes were lit with a scrupulous fire, her sweet face resigned as that of an angel.

"I have thought it out," she murmured, gazing at him steadily, yet scarce seeing him. "It is worth trying as a last expedient. We are abandoned by all save the Lord, and it does not appear to be his holy will to help us on earth. We can struggle on here until we die. Is that right when one of us may live?"

Her very candor had betrayed her. She would go away with these monstrous captors, endure them, even flatter them, until she and they were far removed from the island, and then she would kill herself. In her innocence she imagined that self destruction under such circumstances was a reasonable offense. She only gave a life to save a life, and greater love than this is not known to God or man.

The sailor, in a temper of wrath and wild emotion, had it in his mind to compel her into reason—to snipe her as he sniped a wayward child.

He rose to his knees with this half-formed notion in his fevered brain, then he looked at her, and a mist came to shut her out from his sight. Was she lost to him already? Was it that had gone before an idle dream of joy and grief, a wizard's glimpse of mirrored happiness and vague perils? Was Iris, the crystal souled, thrown to him by the storm lashed wave, to be snatched away by some irresistible and malign influence?

In the mere physical effort to assure himself that she was still near to him he gathered her up in his strong hands. Yes, she was there, breathing, wondering, palpitating. He folded her closely to his breast and, yielding to the passionate longings of his tired heart, whispered to her:

"My darling, do you think I can survive your loss? You are life itself to me. If we have to die, sweet one, let us die together."

Then Iris flung her arms around his neck.

"I am quite, quite happy now," she sobbed brokenly. "I didn't imagine—it would come—this way, but—I am thankful—it has come."

For a little while they yielded to the glamour of the divine knowledge that amid the chaos of eternity each soul had found its mate. There was no need for words. Love, tremendous in its power, unfathomable in its mystery, had cast its spell over them. They were garbed in light, throned in a palace built by fairy hands. On all sides squatted the ghoul of privation, misery, danger, even grim death; but they heeded not the inferno; they had created a paradise in an earthly hell.

Then Iris withdrew herself from the man's embrace. She was delightfully shy and timid now.

"So you really do love me?" she whispered, crimson faced, with shining eyes and parted lips.

He fondled her hair and gently rubbed her cheek with his rough fingers. The sudden sense of ownership of this fair woman was entrancing. It almost bewildered him to find Iris nestling close, clinging to him in utter confidence and trust.

"But I knew, I knew," she murmured. "You betrayed yourself so many times. You wrote your secret to me, and, though you did not tell me, I found your dear words on the sands and have treasured them next my heart."

What girlish romance was this? He held her away gingerly, just so far that he could look into her eyes.

"Oh, it is true, quite true," she cried, drawing the locket from her neck. "Don't you recognize your own handwriting, or were you not certain, just then, that you really did love me?"

sight of her own name. It was not very wrong, was it, to pick up that tiny scrap or those others, which she could not help seeing and which unfolded their simple tale so truthfully? Wrong! It was so delightfully right that he must kiss her again to emphasize his convictions.

They grew calmer, more sedate. It was so undeniably true they loved one another that the fact was becoming venerable with age. Iris was perhaps the first to recognize its quiet certainty.

"As I cannot get you to talk reasonably," she protested, "I must appeal to your sympathy. I am hungry, and, oh, so thirsty."

The girl had hardly eaten a morsel for her midday meal. Then she was despondent, utterly broken hearted. Now she was filled with new hope. There was a fresh motive in existence. Whether destined to live an hour or half a century she would never, never leave him, nor, of course, could he ever, ever leave her. Some things were quite impossible—for example, that they should part.

Jenks brought her a biscuit, a tin of meat and that most doleful cup of champagne.

"It is not exactly frappe," he said, handing her the insipid beverage, "but, under other conditions, it is a wine almost worthy to toast you in."

She fancied she had never before noticed what a charming smile he had.

"Toast," is a peculiarly suitable word," she cried. "I am simply frizzling. In these warm clothes!"

She stopped. For the first time since that prehistoric period when she was "Miss Deane" and he "Mr. Jenks" she remembered the manner of her garments.

"It is not the warm clothing you feel so much as the want of air," explained the sailor readily. "This tarpaulin has made the place very stuffy, but we must put up with it until sundown. By the way, what is that?"

A light tap on the tarred canvas directly over his head had caught his ear. Iris, glad of the diversion, told him she had heard the noise three or four times, but fancied it was caused by the occasional rustling of the sheet on the uprights.

Jenks had not allowed his attention to wander altogether from external events. Since the Dyaks' last escapade there was no sign of them in the valley or on either beach. Not for trivial cause would they come again within range of Jenks' rifle.

They waited and listened silently. Another tap sounded on the tarpaulin in a different place, and they both concurred in the belief that something had darted in curved flight over the ledge and fallen on top of their protecting shield.

"Let us see what the game is," exclaimed the sailor. He crept to the back of the ledge and drew himself up until he could reach over the sheet.

He returned, carrying in his hand a couple of tiny arrows.

"There are no less than seven of these things sticking in the canvas," he said. "They don't look very terrible. I suppose that is what my Indian friend meant by warning me against the trees on the right."

He did not tell Iris all the Mohammedan said. There was no need to alarm her causelessly. Even while they examined the curious little missile another flew up from the valley and lodged on the roof of their shelter.

The shaft of the arrow, made of some extremely hard wood, was about ten inches in length. Affixed to it was a pointed fish bone, sharp, but not barbless and not fastened in a manner suggestive of much strength. The arrow was neither feathered nor grooved for a bowstring. Altogether it seemed to be a childish weapon to be used by men equipped with lead and steel.

Jenks could not understand the appearance of this toy. Evidently the Dyaks believed in its efficacy or they would not keep on pertinaciously dropping an arrow on the ledge.

"How do they fire it?" asked Iris. "Do they throw it?"

"I will soon tell you," he replied, reaching for a rifle.

"Do not go out yet," she entreated him. "They cannot harm us. Perhaps

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.

hand. She picked it up. The fish bone point had snapped by contact with the floor of the ledge. She sought for and found the small tip.

"See," she said. "It seems to have been dipped in something. It is quite discolored."

Jenks frowned peculiarly. A startling explanation had suggested itself to him. Fragments of forgotten lore were taking cohesion in his mind.

"Put it down. Quick!" he cried.

Iris obeyed him, with wonder in her eyes. He spilled a teaspoonful of champagne into a small hollow of the rock and steeped one of the fish bones in the liquid. Within a few seconds the champagne assumed a greenish tinge and the bone became white. Then he knew.

"Good heavens," he exclaimed, "these are poisoned arrows shot through a blowpipe! I have never before seen one, but I have often read about them. The bamboo the Dyaks carried were steeped in the juice of the upas tree. Iris, my dear girl, if one of them had so much as scratched your finger nothing on earth could save you."

She paled and drew back in sudden horror. Another tap sounded on their thrice welcome covering. Evidently the Dyaks would persist in their efforts to get one of those poisoned darts home.

Jenks debated silently whether it would be better to create a commotion, thus inducing the savages to believe they had succeeded in inflicting a mortal wound, or to wait until the next arrow fell, rush out and try conclusions with dum dum bullets against the sumpitan blowers.

He decided in favor of the latter course. He wished to dishearten his assailants, to cram down their throats the belief that he was invulnerable and could visit their every effort with a deadly reprisal.

Iris, of course, protested when he explained his project. But the fighting spirit prevailed. Their love idyll must yield to the needs of the hour.

He had not long to wait. The last arrow fell, and he sprang to the extreme right of the ledge. First he looked through that invaluable screen of grass. Three Dyaks were on the ground and a fourth in the fork of a tree. They were each armed with a blowpipe. He in the tree was just fitting an arrow into the bamboo tube. The others were watching him.

Jenks raised his rifle, fired, and the warrior in the tree pitched headlong to the ground. A second shot stretched a companion on top of him. One man jumped into the bushes and got away, but the fourth tripped over his unwieldy sumpitan, and a bullet tore a large section from his skull. The sailor then amused himself with breaking the bamboo by firing at them. He came back to the white faced girl.

"I fancy that further practice with blowpipes will be a discount on Rainbow Island," he cried cheerfully.

But Iris was anxious and distraught.

"It is very sad," she said, "that we are obliged to secure our own safety by the ceaseless slaughter of human beings. Is there no offer we can make them, no promise of future gain, to tempt them to abandon hostilities?"

"None whatever. These Borneo Dyaks are bred from infancy to prey on their fellow creatures. To be strangers and defenseless is to court pillage and massacre at their hands. I think no more of shooting them than of smashing a clay pigeon. Killing a mad dog is perhaps a better simile."

"But, Robert dear, how long can we hold out?"

He hoped to divert her thoughts from this constantly recurring topic. Twice within the hour had it been broached and dismissed, but Iris would not permit him to shrirk it again. She made no reply, simply regarding him with a wistful smile.

So Jenks sat down by her side and rehearsed the hopes and fears which perplexed him. He determined that there should be no further concealment between them. If they failed to secure water that night, if the Dyaks maintained a strict siege of the rock throughout the whole of next day, well—they might survive—it was problematical. Best leave matters in God's hands.

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

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"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."

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ground their venomed 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 sumpitan 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 sandy valley, half a minute of grave danger, and he would be up the ladder again with enough water to serve their imperative needs for days to come.

There was little or no risk in descending the rock. Soon after sunset it was wrapped in deepest gloom, for night succeeds day in the tropics with wondrous speed. The hazard lay in twice crossing the white sand, were any of the Dyaks hiding behind the house or among the trees.

He held no foolhardy view of his own powers. The one sided nature of the conflict thus far was due solely to his possession of modern rifles as opposed to muzzle loaders. Let him be surrounded on the level at close quarters by a dozen determined men and he must surely succumb.

Were it not for the presence of Iris he would have given no second thought to the peril. To act without consulting her was impossible, so they discussed the project. Naturally she scouted it.

"The Mohammedan may be able to help us," she pointed out. "In any event let us wait until the moon wanes. That is the darkest hour. We do not know what may happen meanwhile."

The words had hardly left her mouth when an irregular volley was fired at them from the right flank of the enemy's position. Every bullet struck yards above their heads, the common falling of musketry at night being to take too high an aim. But the impact of the missiles on a rock so highly impregnated with minerals caused sparks to fly, and Jenks saw that the Dyaks would obtain by this means a most dangerous index of their faulty practice. Telling Iris to at once occupy her safe corner, he rapidly adjusted a rifle on the wooden rests already prepared in anticipation of an attack from that quarter and fired three shots at the opposing crest whence came the majority of gun flashes.

One at least of the three found a human billet. There was a shout of surprise and pain, and the next volley spurted from the ground level. This could do no damage owing to the angle, but he endeavored to disconcert the marksmen by keeping up a steady fire in their direction. He did not dream of attaining other than a moral effect, as there is a lot of room to miss when aiming in the dark. Soon he imagined that the burst of flame from his rifle helped the Dyaks, because several bullets whizzed close to his head, and about this time firing recommenced from the crest.

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