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The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY
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CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

Iris looked at him steadily.

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

"That was a reasonable exaggeration."

"No, no! It was the truth. You are seeking now to buy me up with false hope. It is 1,000 miles from Hongkong to Singapore, and half as much from Siam to Borneo. The Sitar 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 toil?"

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 beam 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 murmured. "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 our



"Oh, I see!" he growled.

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the sun sank to rest. He asked the girl to delay some of 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 hole," 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?"

"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 with affairs among the trees over there" — he pointed toward the valley of death — "it came to me like an inspiration that possibly a few hours' toiling would bring me 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."

"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 fact would be very fatal, but I am praying that it may continue straight to the ledge."

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

"The advantages are many, believe me. The more points of attack presented by the enemy the more effective will be our resistance. I doubt if they would ever be able to rush the cave were you to hold it, whereas I can go up and down out of the mine as I please. If you don't mind being left in the dark I will resume work 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 will be quiet against this arrangement," she said. "I provided you do not pin me down to something I told you a month ago."

"I promise. You can tell me as much as you like 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:

"Is it? I do not think so. I am a friend, Mr. Jenks, not an old one, I submit. He bowed reverently before her, bridged an ordinary acquaintance-ship of many years. Can you not trust me?"

"Trust me! 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. We must be true to each other. Unseen in the darkness, Iris had sought and clasped the gold locket suspended from her neck. The clasp 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."

"Why 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 Siam, who advised me to apply for an appointment on the Pacific side of the world. He was right, and I was assured of the next vacancy in a native state provided that I was 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 commissionary's niece would make a suitable wife. I regarded her 'points', so to speak, and they filled the bill. She was a 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 sadly. She is married now and after thirty grew very fat."

Artful Jenks! Iris settled herself comfortably to her tale of a 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 his bed ground again."

"Thank heaven, no!" he said earnestly. "We had barely become engaged when she went with her uncle to Siam for the hot weather. There she met Lord Ventnor, who was on the verge of his departure. I was to skip a portion of the narrative—I discovered then why men in India usually go to England for their wives. While in Siam 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 entanglements, 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. I was accepted. I had the good fortune to serve under an old friend, Colonel Costobell, but some malign star sent Lord Ventnor to the war just this time in an important civil capacity.

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I met him occasionally, and we found we did not like each other any better. My horse beat his for the Pogo Hurdle handicap. Poor old Sultan, I wonder where he is now?"

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 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 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 truth in her tone.

"Because you once told me you would never marry Lord Ventnor, and after that 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 the air.

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