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The Wings of the Morning

By LOUIS TRACY

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Robert, had made another speedy conquest, and Anstruther himself was much elated by the sudden change in Sir Arthur Deane's demeanor.

They behaved like school children on a picnic. They roared over Iris' troubles in the matter of divided skirts, too much divided to be at all pleasant. The shipowner tasted some of her sago bread and vowed it was excellent. They unearthed two bottles of champagne, the last of the case, and promised each other a hearty toast at dinner. Nothing would content Iris but that they should draw a farewell bucketful of water from the well and dress the pitcher plant with a torrential shower.

Robert carefully secured the pocketbooks, money and other effects found on their dead companions. The baronet, of course, knew all the principal officers of the Sirdar. He surveyed these mournful relics with sorrowful interest.

"The Sirdar was the crack ship of my fleet and Captain Ross my most trusted commander," he said. "You may well imagine, Mr. Anstruther, what a cruel blow it was to lose such a vessel, with all these people on board and my only daughter among them. I wonder now that it did not kill me."

"She was a splendid sea boat, sir. Although disabled, she fought gallantly against the typhoon. Nothing short of a reef would break her up."

"Ah, well," sighed the shipowner, "the few timbers you have shown me here are the remaining assets out of £300,000."

"Was she not insured?" inquired Robert.

"No—that is, I have recently adopted a scheme of mutual self insurance, and the loss falls pro rata on my other vessels."

The baronet glanced covertly at Iris. The words conveyed little meaning to her. Indeed, she broke in with a laugh:

"I am afraid I have heard you say, father dear, that some ships in the fleet paid you best when they ran ashore."

"Yes, Iris. That often happened in the old days. It is different now. Moreover, I have not told you the extent of my calamities. The Sirdar was lost on March 18, though I did not know it for certain until this morning. But on March 25 the Bahadur was sunk in the Mersey during a fog, and three days later the Jemadar turned turtle on the James and Mary shoal in the Hooghly. Happily there were no lives lost in either of these cases."

Iris was appalled by this list of casualties, yet she gave no thought to the serious financial effect of such a string of catastrophes. Robert, of course, appreciated this side of the business, especially in view of the shipowner's remark about the insurance. But Sir Arthur Deane's stiff upper lip deceived him. He failed to realize that the father was acting a part for his daughter's sake.

Oddly enough, the baronet did not seek to discuss with them the legal looking document affixed near the cave. It claimed all rights in the island in their joint names, and this was a topic he wished to avoid. For the time, therefore, the younger man had no opportunity of taking him into his confidence, and Iris held faithfully to her promise of silence.

The girl's ragged raiment, sou'wester and strong boots were already packed away on board. She now rescued the Bible, the battered tin cup, her revolver and the rifle which had "scared" the Dyaks when they nearly caught Anstruther and Mir Jan napping. Robert, also gathered for her an assortment of Dyak hats, belts and arms, including Taung S'Ali's parang and a sumpitan. These were her trophies, the spoils of the campaign.

His concluding act was to pack two of the empty oil tins with all the valuable lumps of auriferous quartz he could find where he shot the rubbish from the cave beneath the trees. On top of these he placed some antimony ore, and Mir Jan, wondering why the sahib wanted the stuff, carried the consignment to the waiting boat. Lieutenant Playdon, in command of the last party of sailors to quit the island, evidently expected Mir Jan to accompany them, but Anstruther explained that the man would await his return some time in June or July.

Sir Arthur Deane found himself speculating on the cause of this extraordinary resolve, but, steadfast to his policy of avoiding controversial matters, said nothing. A few words to the captain procured enough stores to keep the Mohammedan for six months at least, and while these were being landed the question was raised how best to dispose of the Dyaks.

"The running under wished to consult the convenience of his guests.

"If we go a little out of our way and land them in Borneo," he said, "they will be hanged without troubling you further. If I take them to Singapore they will be tried on your evidence and sent to penal servitude. Which is it to be?"

It was Iris who decided.

"I cannot bear to think of more lives being sacrificed," she protested. "Perhaps if these men are treated mercifully and sent to their homes after some punishment their example may serve as a deterrent to others."

So it was settled that way. The anchor rattled up to its berth, and the Orient turned her head toward Singapore. As she steadily passed away into the deepening azure the girl and her lover watched the familiar outlines of Rainbow island growing dim in the evening light. For a long while they could see Mir Jan's tall, thin figure motionless on a rock at the extremity of Europa point. Their hut, the reef, the ledge, came into view as the cruiser swung round to a more northerly course.

Iris had thrown an arm across her father's shoulders. The three were left alone just then, and they were silent for many minutes. At last the distant miles merged the solitary palm in the lagoon with the foliage on the cliff. The wide cleft of Prospect point grew less distinct. Mir Jan's white clothed figure was lost in the dark background. The island was becoming vague, dreamlike, a blurred memory.

"Robert," said the girl devoutly, "God has been very good to us. Do you remember this hour yesterday?" she murmured. "How we suffered from thirst; how the Dyaks began their second attack from the ridge; how you climbed down the ladder and I followed you? Oh, father, darling," she went on impulsively, tightening her grasp, "you will never know how brave he was; how enduring; how he risked all for me and cheered me to the end."

"I think I am beginning to understand now," answered the shipowner, averting his eyes lest Iris should see the tears in them. Their Calvary was ended, they thought. Was it for him to lead them again through the sorrowful way? It was a heartrending task that lay before him, a task from which his soul revolted. He refused even to attempt it.

The explanation of the shipowner's position was painfully simple. Being a daring yet shrewd financier, he perceived in the troubled condition of the far east a magnificent opportunity to consolidate the trading influence of his company. He negotiated two big loans, one of a semiprivate nature to equip docks and railways in the chief maritime province of China, the other of a more public character with the government of Japan. All his own resources, together with those of his principal directors and shareholders, were devoted to these objects. Contemporaneously he determined to stop paying heavy insurance premiums on his fleet and make it self supporting on the well known mutual principle.

His vessels were well equipped, well manned, replete with every modern improvement and managed with great commercial skill. In three or four years, given ordinary trading luck, he must have doubled his own fortune.

No sooner were all his arrangements completed than three of his best ships went down, satisfying his company with an absolute loss of nearly £600,000 and

"You will all be paupers."

seriously undermining his financial credit. A fellow director, wealthy and influential, resigned his seat on the board and headed a clique of disappointed stockholders. At once the fair sky became overcast.

Sir Arthur Deane's energy and financial skill might have enabled him to weather this unexpected gale were it not for the apparent loss of his beloved daughter with the crack ship of his line. Half frenzied with grief, he bade his enemies do their worst and allowed his affairs to get into hopeless confusion while he devoted himself wholly to the search for Iris and her companions. At this critical juncture Lord Ventnor again cocked his cap. His lordship possessed a large private fortune and extensive estates. He was prudent withal and knew how admirably the shipowner's plans would develop if given the necessary time. He offered the use of his name and money. He more than filled the gap created by the hostile ex-director. People argued that such a clever man, just recording from the far east after accomplishing a public mission of some importance, must be a reliable guide. The mere called intelligence of his intention to join the board restored confidence and credit.

But there was a bargain. If Iris lived she must become the Countess of Ventnor. His lordship was weary of peripatetic lovemaking. It was high time he settled down in life, took an interest in the legislature and achieved a position in the world of affairs. He had a chance now. The certain success of his friend's project, the fortunate completion of his own diplomatic undertaking, marriage with a beautiful and charming woman—these items would consolidate his career. His heart was set on Iris.

He seized the first opportunity that presented itself to make Sir Arthur Deane acquainted with a decision already dreaded by the unfortunate shipowner. Iris must either abandon her infatuation for Anstruther or bring about the ruin of her father. There was no mean.

"If she declines to become Countess of Ventnor she can marry whom she likes, as you will all be paupers together," was the earl's caustic summing up.

This brutal argument rather overshot the mark. The shipowner's face flushed with anger, and Lord Ventnor hastened to retrieve a false step.

"I didn't exactly mean to put it that way, Deane, but my temper is a little short these days. My position on board this ship is intolerable. As a matter of fair dealing to me you should put a stop to your daughter's attitude toward Anstruther on the ground that her engagement is neither approved of by you nor desirable under any consideration."

It may be assumed from this remark that even the earl's sardonic temper was ruffled by the girl's outrageous behavior. Nor was it exactly pleasant to him to note how steadily Anstruther advanced in the favor of every officer on the ship. By tacit consent the court martial was tabooed, at any rate until the Orient reached Singapore. Every one knew that the quarrel lay between Robert and Ventnor, and it is not to be wondered at if Iris' influence alone were sufficient to turn the scale in favor of her lover.

The shipowner refused point blank to interfere in any way during the voyage.

"You promised your co-operation in business even if we found that the Sirdar had gone down with all hands," he retorted bitterly. "Do you wish me to make my daughter believe she has come back into my life only to bring me irretrievable ruin?"

"That appears to be the result, no matter how you may endeavor to disguise it."

"I thought the days were gone when a man would wish to marry a woman against her will."

"Nonsense! What does she know about it? The glamor of this island romance will soon wear off. It would be different if Anstruther were able to maintain her even decently. He is an absolute beggar, I tell you. Didn't he ship on your vessel as a steward? Take my tip, Deane. Tell him how matters stand with you, and he will cool off."

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR ARTHUR DEANE was sitting alone in his cabin in a state of deep dejection when he was aroused by a knock, and Robert entered.

"Can you give me half an hour?" he asked. "I have something to say to you before we land."

The shipowner silently motioned him to a seat.

"It concerns Iris and myself," continued Anstruther. "I gathered from your words when we met on the island that both you and Lord Ventnor regarded Iris as his lordship's promised bride. From your point of view the arrangement was perhaps natural and equitable, but since your daughter left Hongkong it happens that she and I have fallen in love with each other. No; please listen to me. I am not here to urge my claims on you. I won her fairly and intend to keep her were the whole house of peers opposed to me. At this moment I want to tell you, her father, why she could never, even under other circumstances, marry Lord Ventnor."

Then he proceeded to place before the astounded baronet a detailed history of his recent career. It was a sordid story of woman's perfidy twice told. It carried conviction in every sentence.

At the conclusion Sir Arthur bowed his head between his hands.

"I cannot choose but believe you," he admitted huskily. "Yet how came you to be so unjustly convicted by a tribunal composed of your brother officers?"

"They could not help themselves. To acquit me meant that they discredited the sworn testimony not only of my colonel's wife, but of the civil head of an important government mission, not to mention some bought Chinese evidence."

"But you are powerless now. You can hardly hope to have your case revised. What chance is there that your name will ever be cleared?"

"Mrs. Costobell can do it if she will. The vagaries of such a woman are not to be depended on. If Lord Ventnor has cast her off her hatred may prove stronger than her passion. Anyhow, I should be the last man to despair of God's providence. Compare the condition of Iris and myself today with our plight on the ledge?"

The shipowner sighed heavily.

"I hope your faith will be justified. If it is not—the more likely thing to happen—do I understand that my daughter and you intend to get married whether I give or withhold my sanction?"

Anstruther rose and opened the door.

"I have ventured to tell you," he said, "why she should not marry Lord Ventnor. When I come to you and ask you for her, which I pray may be soon, it will be time enough to answer that question should you then decline to give it."

It must be remembered that Robert knew nothing whatever of the older man's predicament, while the baronet, full of his own troubles, was in no mood to take a reasonable view of Anstruther's position.

Thus, for a little while, these two were driven apart, and Anstruther disdained to urge the plea that not many weeks would elapse before he would be a richer man than his rival. The chief sufferer was Sir Arthur Deane. Had Iris guessed how her father was tormented she would not have remained on the bridge, radiant and mirthful, while the gray haired baronet gazed with stony eyed despair at some memoranda which he extracted from his papers.

"Ten thousand pounds!" he muttered. "Not a great sum for the millionaire financier, Sir Arthur Deane, to raise on his note of hand. A few months ago men offered me one hundred times the amount on no better security. And now to think that a set of jabbering fools in London should so destroy my credit and their own; that not a bank will discount our paper unless they are assured Lord Ventnor has joined the board! Fancy me, of all men, being willing to barter my child for a few pieces of gold!"

The thought was maddening. For a little while he yielded to utter despondency. It was quite true that a comparatively small amount of money would restore the stability of his firm. Even without it, were his credit unimpaired, he could easily tide over the period of depression until the first fruits of his enterprise were garnered. Then all men would hail him as a genius.

Wearily turning over his papers, he suddenly came across the last letter written to him by Iris' mother. How she doted on their only child! He recalled one night shortly before his wife died when the little Iris was brought into her room to kiss her and lisp her infantile prayers. She had devised a formula of her own:

"God bless father! God bless mother! God bless me, their little girl!"

And what was it she cried to him from the beach?

"Your own little girl given back to you!"

Given back to him! For what—to marry that black hearted scoundrel whose pastime was the degradation of women and the defaming of honest men? That settled it. Instantly the cloud was lifted from his soul. A great peace came upon him. The ruin of his business he might not be able to avert, but he would save from the wreck that which he prized more than all else, his daughter's love.

The engines dropped to half speed. They were entering the harbor of Singapore. In a few hours the worst would be over. If Ventnor telegraphed to London his withdrawal from the board nothing short of a cabled draft for £10,000 would prevent certain creditors from filing a bankruptcy petition. In the local banks the baronet had about a thousand to his credit. Surely among the rich merchants of the port, men who knew the potentialities of his scheme, he would be able to raise the money needed. He would try hard. Already he felt braver. The old fire had returned to his blood. The very belief that he was acting in the way best calculated to secure his daughter's happiness stimulated and encouraged him.

He went on deck, to meet Iris skipping down the hatchway.

"Oh, there you are!" she cried. "I was just coming to find out why you were moping in your cabin. You are missing the most beautiful view—all greens and blues and browns! Run, quick! I want you to see every inch of it."

She held out her hand and pulled him gleefully up the steps. Leaning against the taffrail, some distance apart from each other, were Anstruther and Lord Ventnor. Need it be said to whom Iris drew her father?

"Here he is, Robert," she laughed. "I do believe he was sulking because Captain Fitzroy was so very attentive to me. Yet you didn't mind it a bit!"

The two men looked into each other's eyes. They smiled. How could they resist the contagion of her sunny nature?

"I have been thinking over what you said to me just now, Anstruther," said the shipowner slowly.

"Oh!" cried Iris. "Have you two been talking secrets behind my back?"

"It is no secret to you, my little girl"— Her father's voice lingered on the phrase. "When we are on shore, Robert, I will explain matters to you more fully. Just now I wish only to tell you that where Iris has given her heart, I will not refuse her hand."

She took his face between her hands and kissed him. Lord Ventnor, wondering at this effusiveness, strolled forward.

"What has happened, Miss Deane?" he inquired. "Have you just discovered what an excellent parent you possess?"

The baronet laughed almost hysterically. "'Pon my honor," he cried, "you could not have hit upon a happier explanation."

His lordship was not quite satisfied.

"I suppose you will take Iris to Smith's hotel?" he said, with cool impudence.

Iris answered him.

"Yes. My father has just asked Robert to come with us—by inference, that is. Where are you going?"

The adroit use of her lover's Christian name goaded his lordship to sudden heat.

"Indeed!" he snarled. "Sir Arthur Deane has evidently decided a good many things during the last hour."

"Yes," was the shipowner's quiet retort. "I have decided that my daughter's happiness should be the chief consideration of my remaining years. All else must give way to it."

The earl's swarthy face grew sallow with fury. His eyes blazed, and there was a tense vibrate in his voice as he said:

(To be continued.)