

WORRALS GOES EAST

Captain
W.E. JOHNS



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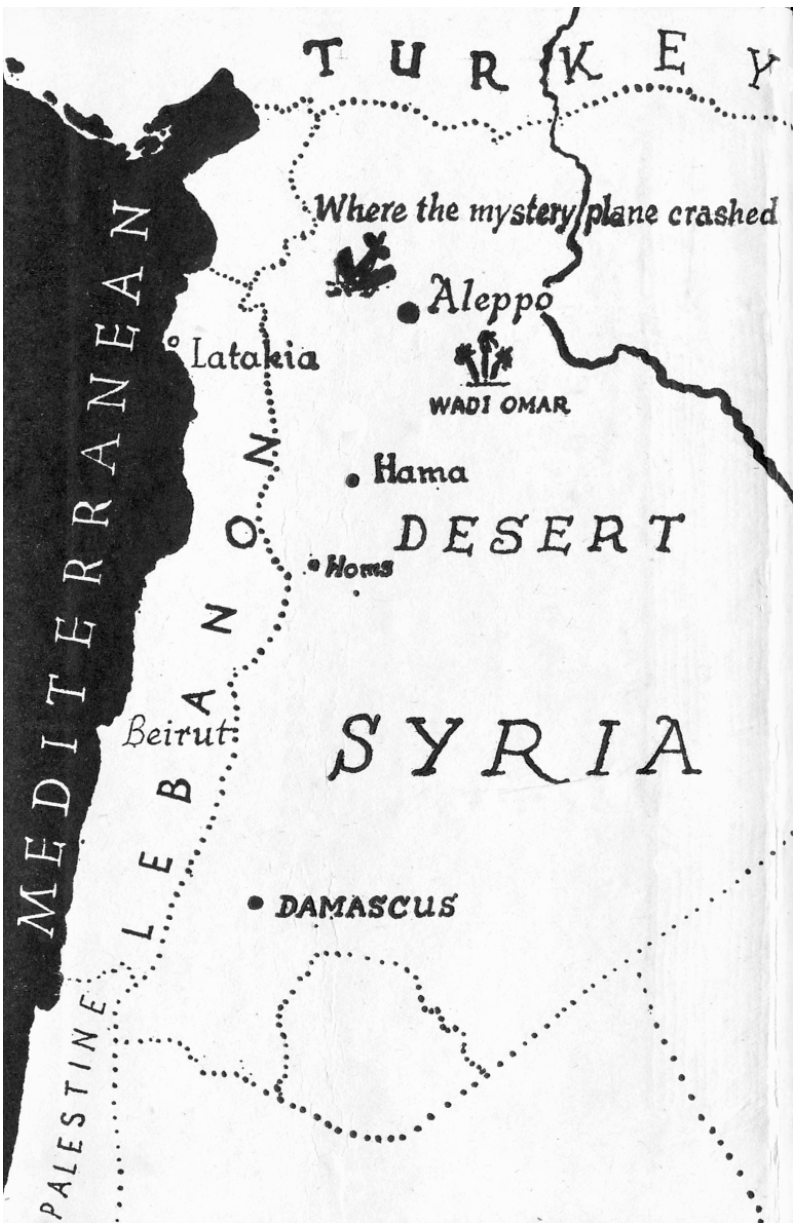
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TURKEY

MEDITERRANEAN

LEBANON

PALESTINE

Where the mystery plane crashed



Aleppo



WADI OMAR

Hama

DESERT

Homs

SYRIA

Beirut

DAMASCUS

K U R D I S T A N

to
PERSIA
→

WORRALS GOES EAST



River Euphrates

R. Tigris

Baghdad

D E S E R T

I R A Q



Baghdad, City of Romance.

WORRALS GOES EAST

A WORRALS OF THE W.A.A.F. STORY

BY CAPTAIN
W.E. JOHNS



PICTURES BY
STEAD



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WORRALS GOES EAST

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WORRALS GOES EAST

I

ASSIGNMENT IN SYRIA

THE INDIAN orderly at Combined Intelligence Headquarters, Syrian Northern Command, saluted smartly.

“Major Kenton keep you not waiting long, *memsahibs*. He is now engaged. He request you please sit down.”

“Thank you.” Flight Officer Joan Worrals—“Worrals” to her comrades in the W.A.A.F.—sank into a long cane chair. Her friend, Flight Officer Betty Lovell, otherwise “Frecks,” did the same.

The orderly retired, leaving them alone in the anteroom.

Frecks moved her chair so that she could see through the window. “So this is Aleppo,” she murmured. “Gosh! I’m tired,” she added, yawning. “Air travel isn’t all that it’s made out to be.”

“We flew high, and we’ve come a long way,” returned Worrals. “The main thing is, we’re here.”

Frecks yawned again. “It will be interesting,” she remarked, “to know just why we are here.”

Worrals did not answer. She was gazing through the open window at the scene it presented—motionless palms, their fronds sagging in the heat; minarets; sand, gleaming like silted gold dust; white walls, quivering in a glare that grew ever fiercer as the sun climbed into its throne. Down the street, under a sky intensely blue, moved a fascinating band of colour—serious-faced Arabs; turbanned Persians, looking like Ali Baba; tall-hatted Druses; Turks crowned with red tarbooshes; black-robed Maronite priests; bearded Jewish merchants, one of whom might have been Abraham come back to life; white men, brown men, black men, with occasionally a British, French or Indian soldier. Beyond the road, from a white-walled garden, cypresses made a mournful background for gay orange and apricot trees, heavy with fruit. Over the wrought-iron gate, supporting a vine, a spreading fig tree had been trained as a roof.

As Worrals gazed she began to understand dimly a hackneyed expression she had often heard—the Unchanging East. Suddenly she grasped its significance. The sun, the earth, the sky, these things had always been there, would always be there; the other things, the palms, the groaning

camels, the sullen Arabs, the medley of humanity, would go, but others, just the same, would come to take their places. Still more would come and again pass on, their brief lives an infinitesimal speck in the mighty march of Time. It was a solemn thought, one that gave life a new meaning. The people she could see had been fighting each other since the beginning of history, and, presumably, would go on fighting. Vaguely she wondered why. It seemed so much easier to do something useful, or even nothing at all.

“Major Kenton will see you now, *memsahibs*.”

Worrals started. Lost in her reverie, she had not heard the soft-footed orderly return. As she rose she noticed a tall, elderly, sunburned, good-looking man, just leaving the room, evidently Major Kenton’s visitor. He glanced at them and half smiled in passing.

Frecks spoke to the orderly. “Tell me,” she inquired. “Why do so many people here wear hats without brims—like the fez, for instance? I should have thought they would have needed something to keep the glare out of their eyes.”

“The reason is, *memsahib*, so that when they pray their heads may touch the ground,” replied the orderly quietly.

“Oh,” said Frecks, not knowing what else to say.

“This way, please.”

They followed their guide into a blind-shaded room where, behind a paper-littered desk, sat a small, insignificant little man of about fifty. His skin was the colour of parchment and his eyes had a tired, bleached look, as though they had been too long in the sun.

Could this, thought Worrals, be Major Kenton, the greatest living expert on Eastern affairs—as she had been informed?

Major Kenton rose to greet them, hand outstretched. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Please sit down. Welcome to Syria. When did you get in?”

“We arrived in Beirut early this morning, by the mail plane from England, sir,” answered Worrals. “General Headquarters sent us on by a special aircraft. We decided to report to you right away. The aerodrome gave us transport.”

“Have you fixed up quarters?”

“No, sir. We decided to take your advice on that.”

“I see. Would you like to discuss your mission now, or wait until later?”

“Now, sir, if it’s all the same to you. That will give us something to think about while we are getting settled. Besides, naturally, we are curious.”

“Very well. It will take a little while, so what about some coffee? Everyone here drinks tea or coffee at all hours.”

“I never say no to a cup of coffee, sir.”

Major Kenton touched a bell, gave the order, and then, unlocking a safe, took out a buff docket stamped “Secret.” He brought it back to his desk and opened it at the first page.

“You are recommended by Air Commodore Raymond of the Air Ministry, I see.”

“Yes, sir—at least he asked us to come.”

“Ever been East before?”

“Never.”

“Do you know why Air Commodore Raymond chose you for this particular job?”

“He didn’t say definitely, but we assumed, in the first place, it was because we have worked for him before. This having been French mandated territory, no doubt he thought our knowledge of French would be useful. And finally we are both qualified pilots—the mission has, I imagine, something to do with aviation?”

“Quite a lot. He didn’t tell you why it was decided to employ—er—girls on this job?”

Worrals raised her eyebrows. “I don’t quite understand, sir. Are you implying that this is an affair for women in particular to handle—as opposed to men?”

“That is the whole idea. Apparently you don’t know anything about it yet?”

“The Air Commodore told us that you would explain everything when we got here.”

“Quite so—quite so. Can you speak any Arabic?”

“No—but we’re willing to learn.”

Major Kenton smiled. “I hardly think you will be here long enough for that.”

“Is Arabic essential?”

“No, but it would be useful. No matter; French should see you through.”

“Is Arabic very difficult, sir?” asked Frecks.

“It’s the very devil when you first start. To give you an idea, most of the letters have four forms, according to where they occur in a word, and most

of the words have four or five meanings. But never mind, pick up what you can. It took me twenty years to learn Arabic properly.”

“You mean—you’ve been here for twenty years?”

“I’ve been in the Middle East for thirty-two years,” replied Major Kenton dryly. “Once Arabia gets in your blood you can’t tear yourself away.”

“In that case I shall take good care that it doesn’t get into my blood,” declared Frecks.

The Major smiled. “I said just the same thing when I first came here. But let us get down to business.”

The orderly brought coffee on a tray and the Major served it.

“First of all,” he resumed, “I must tell you why we have decided to give women a trial on this particular investigation. It wasn’t just a whim. The decision was practically forced on us—as you will see presently. Get this into your heads for a start. In this part of the world there is a very clear line of demarkation between men and women. They are not allowed to mix as in Europe. Women barely count for anything except as a means of getting work done or running a house. They are practically slaves, dominated by the men. You’ve heard of harems, no doubt? Well, forget what you’ve heard or read in books like the ‘Arabian Nights.’ A harem is simply the place, the tent, or the part of the house, in which Mahometans keep their womenfolk—not only their wives, but their sisters, mothers, and so on. You may see some of these women out, but they will always be veiled; but in the strictest households they are never allowed out. There are women in this town who have never been outside the house in which they were born, or to which they were taken when they were married. Terrible though that may seem to you, that is their way of life, and it is not for us to judge by our own standards. We suspect that the enemy has taken advantage of this state of affairs to organise a plot.”

“Would that make any difference to you, sir?” asked Worrals. “I mean, if you suspected a native woman of espionage, would you arrest her, or, at any rate, bring her in for examination?”

“Good heavens, girl! You don’t know what you’re saying!” exclaimed Major Kenton. “Our hands are absolutely tied. No man dare go near a Moslem woman, not even in the street, to ask a question. He might lose his life if he did. The natives would stand for a lot, but if we tried to get into their women’s quarters there would be the very devil to pay—not only here, but right through the East. Every Moslem country would go up in a sheet of flame. So, you see, by choosing women to work for him, the enemy has

muzzled us very neatly. As girls, you could do what no man dare do—go into places where no man dare venture. That is the basic reason why you are here. Have some more coffee?”

“Thank you. I’ll help myself,” answered Worrals. “This is interesting. You’ve put the whole thing in a new light.”

“You’re not thinking of putting us in a harem, I hope?” interposed Frecks nervously.

Major Kenton laughed. “It might come to that—but I hope not.”

“So do I,” declared Frecks fervently.

“Don’t worry. Most modern sheikhs are very charming men, gentlemen in every sense of the word, I assure you. They drive their own cars and have their own radios. But let us get down to things. First of all, in order to get a grasp on the situation, you must understand a little of the place you are in. Syria, like all Eastern countries, is the very deuce to run. It’s a small edition of India, only worse. The trouble is, there is no actual nation. Nationality is largely a matter of religion. The two things are one. Here have settled people of twenty nationalities, Europeans, Asiatics, and Eurasians—which is a mixture of both—Arabs, Jews, Turks, Armenians, Circassians, Druses, Egyptians, people of every colour and shade. There are about thirty religions, including a dozen varieties of Christianity—Nestorians, Chaldeans, Copts, and so on. There are also many sects of Moslems—Sunnites, Shiahs, for example. All these people are suspicious of the others, and often hate each other like poison. They are fanatically religious. Some of the sects won’t even touch anything that has been handled by a person of another faith. Uninformed people at home write to the papers and say why don’t you give the country to the Jews, or the Arabs, or somebody else? Believe me, if it were as easy as that—well, our problems would be solved for us. But it isn’t. Order is maintained by one thing only—force. There is no other way. If we withdrew, all these people would fly at each other’s throats in an orgy of carnage.” The Major lit a cigarette.

“All these people want to run the country—without allowing the others to live in it,” he went on. “What is the answer? There isn’t one. The result is, the place is always like a powder magazine; one spark might send the whole thing sky high. It happens occasionally. There have been six civil wars here in the last twenty years. Then, again, we are close to the Turkish frontier, which doesn’t improve matters. Surrounded as she is by warring nations, you can’t blame Turkey if her nerves are on the jump. I’m sorry to worry you with these details, but they can’t be avoided if you are to get even a rough idea of what we are up against, and what you will be up against when

you start work. Now, with one thing and another, you will see that as a place for enemy propaganda Syria is ideal. By causing uneasiness among the many races, the Nazis force us to keep a lot of troops here to maintain order. If they could start a civil war, so much the better for them—and in fact that is what they are trying to do. Propaganda is rife, and we've got to stop it."

"What form does this propaganda take, sir?" asked Worrals.

"Leaflets mostly, and the starting of rumours in the *souks*—that is, the bazaars, market-places. And that brings me to the point. We suspect—indeed we know—that these leaflets are being brought in by air. They are delivered to agents who, probably under cover of darkness, distribute them not only in Aleppo, but in Beirut, Damascus and other towns and villages in Syria and Iraq. We have reason to think they are delivered up here somewhere in the north, and then distributed by one or more of the many caravans. We caught two women at it, but stopping these distributing agents doesn't end the trouble. Others take their places. It's the ringleaders we want."

"And you think women are behind this?"

"Yes, although I didn't suspect it until recently, when we got our first real clue. We thought aircraft were being used because the Turks have complained that machines are flying over their territory at night. They were certainly not ours, so they could only have been enemy aircraft. A few days ago one of these machines crashed—or we must assume that it was one of these mystery planes. Apparently it had got off its course. At any rate, it had crashed into the side of a mountain about thirty miles north of here. From it two factors were revealed, and they both shook us not a little. The first was the pilot. It was a girl. She was dead, but who she was we don't know. We don't even know her nationality. She might have been white, or brown—white people get tanned pretty dark by the sun. Admittedly, she was wearing European underclothes and a close-fitting dress of dark material, but over it she wore an *abba*—that is, an Arab cape. I must tell you that most Moslem women are uniformly dressed in black alpaca, under a long black cape, with a black close-fitting bonnet from which hangs a long black veil to cover the face. As a general rule, the better the class of woman, the finer the material. Strangely enough, considering the good quality of the girl's underwear, the cape and veil were coarse—which is a problem that you, as girls, may be able to solve. By the way, we took a photograph of the dead girl for identification purposes, should the question arise later on. She was, as is usual here, buried the same day. You may see the photograph if you wish."

"I hope that won't be necessary," murmured Worrals. "I take it that had this girl landed she could have passed as an Arab woman?"

“Exactly. We went through everything with a fine comb, but there was absolutely nothing to identify her. Where she had started from and where she was going, we don’t know. Of course, this complete absence of anything that might lead to identification was an obvious precaution on the part of the people behind her, should such an accident occur. In short, the body told us nothing, except that it confirmed our suspicions that women were running the racket.”

“If there was no means of identification, what makes you think this woman was in the racket?”

“For one thing, because she was carrying two hundred pounds of paper.”

“You mean—*plain* paper?”

“Yes. You see, in this affair we were really rather lucky. The chances of a grounded plane being found in the Syrian desert by a European were remote. It was far more likely that in the event of a crash the aircraft would be found by desert Arabs, who would loot anything worth having. Had Arabs found this crash they would have taken anything worth while, including the paper, in which case we should have known nothing about it. But had the paper been printed propaganda leaflets they might have been scared to touch it, fearing that if they were caught with it they might have got into trouble with us. The enemy had another reason for sending plain paper. Had the machine been forced down in Turkey they would have denied ownership, but they couldn’t have done that if it carried anti-British propaganda. You’ll understand this point more clearly when I tell you about the machine. Remember, the Nazis try to think of everything, but it so happens that this crash was spotted by one of our fighters on patrol. He reported it at once, with the result that we were able to send out a working party with a lorry and bring the whole thing in.”

“Then the story of the crash was not made public?”

“Certainly not. We kept it quiet. It didn’t take us long to ascertain that the plain paper was the same as that on which the propaganda is being printed.”

“The aircraft was not equipped with radio?”

“No. Why?”

“I just wanted to make sure that the pilot could not have got in touch with its base before it crashed.”

“There was no radio.”

“In that case the disappearance of the machine must be a mystery to the enemy.”

“Quite. As far as we are aware, they don’t know what happened to it. No doubt they are trying hard to find out.”

“From the fact that the machine was carrying a cargo we may conclude that it was on its outward journey?”

“Yes.”

“And as it carried plain paper, it is evident that the leaflets are being printed in this country.”

“That’s right. And in case you wonder why the enemy should go to this trouble to bring in paper, I can tell you that in Syria at the present time large stocks of paper are not easy to get. Apart from that, it would not be possible for anyone to buy quantities of paper without our knowing it. We should find out where the paper was going, and sooner or later it would lead us to the illicit printing press. The enemy is well aware of that, so he ducks the risk by importing paper by air.”

Worrals nodded. “I see. To come back to the crash. I suppose there was nothing to indicate the course the machine was on?”

“Very little. The girl flew head-on into the north-west side of the mountain.”

“From which we may suppose that her destination lay to the south-east, since she was evidently flying in that direction?”

Major Kenton smiled. “I begin to understand why Air Commodore Raymond detailed you for this job. You follow an argument very closely.”

“I like to get my facts right for a start,” answered Worrals. “You say you brought in the crashed machine. Where is it?”

“In a shed on the aerodrome.”

“Did it carry markings of any sort?”

“None. I was just coming to that. It was the aircraft that gave us our second shock. It was one of ours—or apparently one of ours. Actually, we didn’t build it. It was a German job, a copy of one of ours, built either from a set of our blue-prints, or from a captured machine. There was a slight difference in the workmanship, but of course that wouldn’t be apparent to the ordinary spectator. Neither would it be possible for anyone, not even an expert, to detect any difference in the air between this machine and one of ours. Here again we see the devilish cunning of the enemy. If this machine had been brought down over Turkey the Nazis would have said that it was one of ours, which might have strained our relationship with a neutral country. Even more subtle than that, by the use of such a machine the enemy could prevent us from taking action even though we were aware that such

aircraft were operating. Let me make that point clear. The plane is the type known as the Heron, specially designed for communication work in the Middle East. It is more like a light plane than a military machine. It carries no fixed armament. The chief features are long range at high speed, with large flaps to make slow landings possible on small landing grounds. The Germans have a similar type. They call it the *Storch*—the Stork.”

“I know the Heron, although I’ve never flown one,” put in Worrals. “It’s a high-wing monoplane, a cabin three-seater, two seats side by side forward, and a spare seat behind for a passenger or luggage.”

“That’s right. At Air Commodore Raymond’s request we have put one at your disposal on the aerodrome. But you see the point of the enemy scheme in using one of these—apart from being able to deny responsibility should one be forced to land in neutral territory? We daren’t tell our boys to shoot these machines down. Herons are used right through the Middle East. If we put Herons on the list of machines to stop we should have our own aircraft being shot down all over the place. Of course, we could wash out the Heron as one of our types, but think of the trouble that would involve! The scores of Herons we are using would all be grounded, useless, and we might have to wait months for a new type to replace them. Then the same thing might happen all over again. No, that’s no use—no use at all. We’ve got to find the local nest of these enemy operatives and wipe it out of existence. We’ve got to get the head man—or woman.” The major lighted another cigarette.

“Well, there it is. That’s our job, and it isn’t going to be easy. You’ve got to find out where these machines are landing, how the propaganda matter is being distributed, and by whom. You will have a free hand, and you can rely on me to support you with every means in my power. You’ve got an aircraft. R.A.F. personnel will service it. Well, now that you know what we want, how do you feel about it?”

“We feel all right, sir,” answered Worrals. “The difficulty at the outset seems to be to know where to start. The only tangible thing we have to work on is the crash. I suppose a report was made out on it?”

“Yes. It was done very carefully. I have it in the file.”

“I’d like to see it some time.”

“You shall have a copy.”

“Thank you, sir. What do you suggest we do about quarters? I imagine we shouldn’t get far if we lived on the aerodrome because everyone would soon know who and what we were?”

“That would be no use at all. You’ll come under this headquarters for orders, but I think I know the very place for you. It’s a small hotel. The

proprietor, a Levantine Greek named Stampoulos, is trustworthy. He has served us before, and he is on the telephone, which may be useful. I'll ring up and make the necessary arrangements. He doesn't normally feed his guests, so you may have to eat out, but he'll get something for you if you want to stay in. And while we're on the subject, what about your uniforms? You can't work in them, or you would be up against all sorts of difficulties. For one thing, you wouldn't be able to believe a word you heard, because all sorts of people would come to you with wild tales in the hope of collecting *baksheesh*—that is, money."

Worrals nodded. "I see that. What do you advise?"

"We'll find you something."

"You mean you'll send us more suitable clothes to the hotel?"

Major Kenton leaned back in his chair. "My dear young lady, try to remember where you are and what you are doing. I'm the last man to create a melodrama, but every town in the Middle East is stiff with enemy agents. This place is watched. No one comes or goes without a report being made to the enemy, and that's almost impossible to prevent. It is likely that you were seen coming in, and although that wouldn't give any indication of your business, it would cause you to be marked down as probable members of the Intelligence section. If you went out in those uniforms you would probably be followed, in which case your quiet hotel would be placed under enemy surveillance. We must avoid that if we can so that you will have a fair start. I will arrange for you to change here into suitable costumes and leave by a private door."

"What would you call suitable costumes, sir?"

"For the purpose of leaving here you can throw an *abba* over your uniforms. That will make it necessary for you to veil your faces. Such a garment might not be suitable for everyday wear, because you would be expected to speak Arabic. For general use we want something that will enable you to speak French." The major thought for a moment. "We don't want anything elaborate or outstanding. I would suggest that you adopt the rôle of two young girls of French extraction from a convent in Lebanon, on a pilgrimage, say, to the tomb of Zacharias, which is here in Aleppo. There are such girls. They mostly wear plain black dresses, stockings and shoes, with black hats, and veils to protect the eyes from the sun, and sand when the wind blows. You should find something to fit you in our store-room upstairs."

"What about our suit-cases?" asked Frecks, looking slightly dazed.

“I’ll have them put in a sack and sent round to the hotel,” offered the major. “There’s one other point,” he went on. “It may take you a day or two to find your way about. I think it would be a good thing if you had a man to show you round—at all events, for a little while. Later, if you would rather be without him, so well and good. I have the very man for you, an old servant of mine and absolutely reliable. Will you be advised by me?”

“Certainly, sir. It’s good of you to go to so much trouble.”

“Not at all. Apart from our duty, this affair is my worry; it’s as much in my interests as yours that you should succeed.” The major smiled. “I’ll send for your bodyguard.”

Worrals raised her eyebrows. “Did you say bodyguard?”

“Well, I didn’t intend to put it like that. I meant the man who will show you round.” Major Kenton became serious. “All the same, I don’t want you to be under any misapprehension about this undertaking. If ever it is known who you are, and what you are doing, you will be in very real danger—make no mistake about that. Aleppo isn’t London, or Birmingham, with a policeman at every corner. It’s a town of dark streets and mysterious byways—and the desert isn’t far away. People disappear very easily, and a dead body creates little interest. I’m not trying to scare you, don’t think that, but you must know what you are doing, and it’s my duty to warn you. There are some fine men here, and that goes for all classes and creeds, but there is also the scum of the earth, creatures who would commit murder for the price of a night’s lodging. The danger is worse for women than for men. A man, even when he is an enemy, may be treated with respect, but a woman is nothing, a mere chattel, worth no more than the price she could command in the marriage market. After thousands of years of custom the women here are content to accept that state of affairs. But there, I’ve probably told you enough to go on with. Any questions you’d like to ask?”

“Just one point I’d like to be clear on,” answered Worrals. “I take it that before sending for us you did your best to stop this racket?”

“Of course, but our best wasn’t very good. We even evoked the help of people who are in close touch with the natives. As a matter of fact, I was talking about the situation when you were announced, to a gentleman who probably knows the Middle East as well as anyone—Doctor Carlson Bronfield, the famous American archæologist. He has been out here for years, representing one of the United States universities—charming man; you must meet him some time.”

“I think I saw him go out—an elderly, good-looking man, with a grey pointed beard?” interposed Worrals.

“That’s right.” As he spoke Major Kenton pressed a button of the intercommunication telephone. “Ask Nimrud to report to me,” he ordered.

“Fascinating name,” remarked Worrals, smiling.

Major Kenton’s lips twitched at a private joke. “He’s a fascinating fellow. He’s worked with me for years. In fact he occupies a position as a sort of major domo. Nimrud is an adopted name—his real name is unpronounceable.”

“Why Nimrud?”

“Oh, that’s just a fancy of his own. Nimrud, you may remember, was a mighty hunter before the Lord.”

“He must think a lot of himself!”

“He does; that’s why he’s so useful. A man with an inferiority complex would have a pretty thin time here.”

“What nationality is he?” asked Frecks.

“That’s probably something he doesn’t know himself—a not uncommon state of affairs in the Levant—which, for your information, is the coastal area of Syria. He claims that his father was a Russian, from Georgia—and that may be true. But he was probably born in a harem. He is certainly a mixture, but the main thing is you can trust him with your life; and what he doesn’t know about this part of the world isn’t worth knowing.”

“Does he speak English?”

“He speaks all the languages that are spoken here—more or less. His English is good, although it is a rather quaint form of his own. He was taught to read and write at a mission school, which has given his English a biblical flavour.” The major smiled broadly. “He swears mostly in Arabic, but don’t let that upset you. Sometimes he breaks into Turkish. Occasionally he gets mixed up and uses words of any language that come first to his lips—but you’ll soon get used to that.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” called Major Kenton.

II

NIMRUD, THE MIGHTY HUNTER

THE door opened to admit a man so unlike anything Frecks had ever seen before that she gazed at him with frank wonder. Even Worrals looked slightly startled.

He was about forty years of age, tall above the average, and extraordinarily handsome in an Oriental way. A certain portliness of figure gave him a tremendous dignity, of which he appeared to be fully conscious, for as he walked he transferred it to a swaggering carriage that in a European town would have been ludicrous. His clean-shaven face, half-way between white and brown, presented a complexion that a woman might have envied. His eyes were dark, in contrast to his hair, which was fair. His costume appeared to be more suited to the musical comedy stage than real life. Over a white silk shirt buttoned high round the throat he wore a black pleated tunic crossed diagonally by twin bandoliers filled with cartridges. His legs were enveloped in black baggy trousers, the bottoms tucked into high boots. On his head, at a jaunty angle, was a tall round hat of close-curved Persian lambskin. Around his waist was clipped a leather belt, which supported on one side a long-barrelled pistol, and on the other a silver-handled dagger.

“What a perfectly gorgeous creature!” breathed Frecks. “It can’t be true.”

“Nimrud once served in the Tcherkesses, the famous Syrian cavalry that originally came into this country from the Caucasus,” said the major softly. “He still clings to part of his old uniform, of which he is justly proud. You will be perfectly safe anywhere, any time, with him.”

“I’m glad you told us that, sir; we might not have guessed it,” murmured Worrals.

“Come right in, Nimrud,” called Major Kenton.

Completely ignoring the girls, the ex-Tcherkese advanced to the table and saluted.

“Nimrud,” said Major Kenton, “here are two officers who have come from England to find the trouble-makers. They are Flight Officer Worrals and Flight Officer Lovell. Flight Officer Worrals is in charge. You will take your orders from her, but understand, should evil befall them their blood will be upon your head.”

Nimrud's eyes went round with surprise. "But, *sahib*, these are *bints*," he said in a shocked voice.

"Girls they are, Nimrud, and for that reason they will be able to go where you and I dare not."

The light of understanding dawned in Nimrud's eyes. He swore a sonorous oath. "Marshallah! I should never have thought of that. Thy ways were ever beyond me, *effendi*, but by the Sacred Well of Islam, their mothers shall have no cause for grief."

Turning to Worrals, Nimrud touched his head and heart in token of obedience. "At thy command, O lady," said he.

"They will take up their dwelling in the *khan* owned by the Greek, Stampoulos, in the Rue Fatima, near the Grand Mosque, and there, too, you will spread your carpet. Show them the town and preserve them from harm. It is not good that they should be seen leaving here, so take them first to the changing room, where they will put on *abbas* of Arab women over their uniforms, and go out by the secret door. With them, for walking in the town, they will take the dresses of French girls from a Lebanese convent. I will talk to Stampoulos and arrange for their baggage to be sent."

"It shall be as thou sayest, *effendi*," replied Nimrud.

"That's all."

Nimrud turned to Worrals. "Follow me, O lady."

As they followed their guide to another room Frecks murmured, "I still don't believe it. Do these things really happen?"

"It looks like it," answered Worrals, smiling.

"This is certainly the real thing," declared Frecks.

Nimrud took them to a room lined with wardrobes in which there were clothes of many sorts. Without the lightest embarrassment he unhooked some female garments and held them against the girls for size.

"He seems to know what's what," murmured Frecks to Worrals in a quiet aside. Then aloud, "I suppose you are married, Nimrud?"

"No, praise be to God," answered Nimrud calmly. "I've had many wives, of course."

"What happened to them all?" asked Frecks curiously.

"Oh, they were not very much good," was the casual answer. "Some I gave away, or sold. Others—I forget where I left them. They were no good."

"You don't think much of women, then?"

"Not wives, by the Prophet! For my last wife I paid five hundred dinars. Her father was a liar—may his house be destroyed. He swore she could

cook. Marshallah! I tell you, *effendims*, the food that woman cooked was not fit for a hyena; and when I told her of it she spat at me like a moulting camel. It was hard to believe that God had made her. That sort of woman is no use to any man.”

“No use at all,” agreed Worrals, smiling, as she tried on a voluminous robe that Nimrud had handed to her. “What became of her?”

“I gave her to a seller of nuts in Baghdad. There has been enmity between us ever since.”

“Nevertheless, the gain was yours,” opined Worrals.

Nimrud laughed deep in his throat. “By Saint Simon—may he be exalted—for a woman thou hast understanding,” he said approvingly.

In twenty minutes, looking—as Frecks put it—like walking corpses, they were ready to go. Nimrud put their uniform caps and the walking-out dresses in a sack, and invited them to follow him. After traversing several corridors they came out in a dark shop where a native carpenter was carving table legs.

“*Salaam aleikum*,” said he quietly.

“*Wa aleikum es salaam*,” answered Nimrud, and went out into a quiet alley made nearly dark by overhanging houses on either side. It appeared to be a cul-de-sac. Only one man in sight, a hook-nosed Arab whose face had been hideously scarred by small-pox—a beggar judging by the filthy rags that hung on his body. Squatting in a doorway repairing a sandal, he did not even look up.

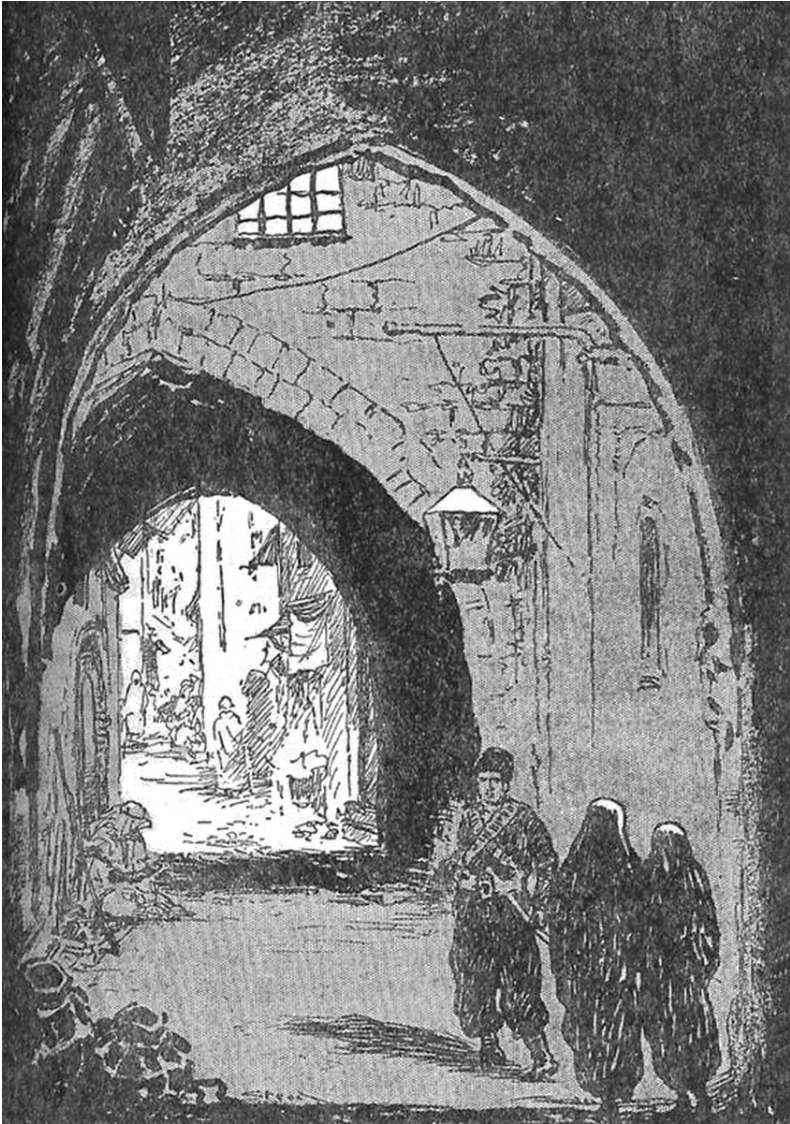
Said Nimrud: “Keep close behind me, *effendims*; this is not a good quarter.”

“You’re telling us,” breathed Frecks, glancing at the Arab.

The narrow street into which they presently turned was a place of noise, of smells, and apparent confusion, where people, mostly black and brown, in every form of garment, moved along or sat about, smoking or drinking coffee. Camels and donkeys, with enormous loads of grass or firewood, and numerous dogs that squabbled amongst the garbage, did nothing to improve matters. Beggars pleaded for alms, and vendors of water, sherbet, dates, oranges, and cheap jewellery, cried their wares. Nimrud thrust them aside with blood curdling threats of violence. Tall, windowless houses rose on either hand. Smells, some of them not pleasant, greeted the nostrils. Once Worrals stopped before a stall and looked back along the way they had come.

“What is it?” asked Frecks.

“Nothing,” answered Worrals, and walked on.



"Keep close behind me, effendims; this is not a good quarter."

At length the road entered a broad thoroughfare where trams clanged a noisy passage. Another turning into a quiet street and Nimrud passed through a small orange grove into a long, low house that stood back from the road. There was nothing to indicate that it was an hotel. Having entered, they waited in a wide hall set about with flimsy furniture, and jaded-looking

palms in pots. Through another door a small secluded garden could be seen, with a fountain playing in the middle.

“Stampoulos, O Stampoulos, hasten, hasten!” called Nimrud.

An obsequious little man with an ivory complexion, wearing a red fez, dark suit and old tennis shoes, appeared from somewhere, and stood rubbing his hands in the manner usually described as oily. Speaking in French, he assured them that the house and all that it contained was theirs. He was expecting them. All had been arranged. The rooms were ready. Would they please follow?

“Lead on, and talk not so much,” growled Nimrud.

Whereupon Stampoulos, with profuse apologies, showed them to their rooms. The girls found themselves in a large airy room in which hung the curious indefinable aroma of the East. Their baggage stood in the middle of the floor. Nimrud disappeared with the Greek, but soon returned to say that his room was next door. Should they at any time require him they had only to knock on the wall. He struck it to illustrate what he meant, and nearly brought the whole thing down. It was, Worrals observed, no more than paper-covered laths. If the room did not suit them, or if more furniture was required, they had only to say the word and he would attend to it, he concluded.

“This will do us all right,” asserted Worrals. “We’re going to unpack and rest for a bit. We’ll let you know when we are ready to go out. In the meantime, you might find out who else is staying in the hotel.”

Nimrud salaamed. “At thy command, O lady,” he said, and withdrew.

Worrals took stock of the room. Except for two rickety-looking beds, a wardrobe and two chairs, there was little in the way of furniture. There was a small brass coffee-table and accommodation for extra clothes was provided by hooks on the wall. There were two windows. One overlooked the road by which they had approached. Behind it towered the gilded dome and minarets of a mosque. The other window, a full-length window that opened on to a balcony, looked over the little garden which Worrals had noticed from the hall. It was, she perceived, enclosed within the hotel in the manner of a courtyard—the usual eastern garden. That is to say, the building was extended down two sides, the far ends being connected by a wall. There was a wooden door in the middle of the wall, but to where it led could not be observed.

Worrals came back into the room to find Frecks regarding herself in a cracked wall mirror. “If my mother could see her little girl now,” she

remarked, “she’d probably write to the newspapers to say what a scandalous thing it is to send young girls——”

“If you’re wise you won’t tell her anything about it,” interrupted Worrals. “You wouldn’t expect mothers to approve of this sort of thing. I’m not sure that I entirely approve of it myself, but we’re in this show up to the neck, so we might as well make the best of it.”

“You didn’t think it was going to be quite such a queer proposition?” queried Frecks.

“No—not that it would have made any difference.”

“Just how are we going to start looking for spies in that ropery mob is more than I can imagine. The whole blessed lot of them look capable of anything to me.”

“You can’t always judge by looks,” returned Worrals. “They’re probably not so bad when you get to know them.”

“I sincerely hope you’re right,” said Frecks warmly.

“We shall get used to them, no doubt,” remarked Worrals. “But come on, let’s see about getting fixed up in these convent outfits.”

“The best thing so far is Nimrud,” declared Frecks. “He’s a wizard. He reminds me somewhat of an elderly, well-fed cat I once had—he thought no end of himself, too. I’d like to take him home with me, so that I could say to everyone, look what I found in Aleppo. This is what you get for joining the W.A.A.F.”

“All right. Put the soft pedal on. Let’s get these uniforms out of the way. We mustn’t leave anything lying about that would suggest that we are not really two good little girls come to visit the shrine of the father of John the Baptist.”

“Who was that?”

“Zacharias.”

“Did he live here?”

“Apparently. Anyway, he died here—so they say.”

“Well—well, what do you know about that?” breathed Frecks.

“This place is as old as the hills.”

“It smells like it.”

“Get into your outfit and we’ll have a talk about things.”

For some time, while adjustments were being made to the new outfits, nothing was said.

“I think we shall do,” observed Worrals at last, looking at herself in the mirror. She sat down on the bed.

“And now what?” inquired Frecks, joining her. “Where do we start looking?”

“I think we’ve got quite a lot of work on,” replied Worrals. “The crash ought to tell us something. I’ve also got an idea it might be a good thing to look over the clothes that unfortunate girl was wearing when she was killed. I expect Major Kenton will still have them.”

“He said he went through everything with a fine comb.”

“I know, but women look at clothes with a different eye from men. After all, the whole point of our being here is that we are girls, and that being so, I propose to concentrate from that particular angle.”

“Are you going back to headquarters and ask Major Kenton for the clothes?”

“No. We ought to keep away from there as much as possible. I’ll get Nimrud to go. He might as well go now. Give the wall a knock.”

“You know, I don’t think the commandant of the W.A.A.F. would approve of Nimrud coming in and out of our room.”

“Fortunately she isn’t here,” answered Worrals. “There’s a war on and we’re on active service.”

“Very active,” murmured Frecks as she rapped on the wall.

Nimrud appeared on the threshold.

“Come right in, Nimrud,” ordered Worrals. “Did you find out who else was staying here?”

“There is one man only, O lady,” answered Nimrud. “He is a merchant of Damascus, known to all as an honest man.”

“By the way, you know why we are here, Nimrud?”

“Yes, I know, *effendim*.”

“And you know about the woman who was killed in an aeroplane, out in the wilderness?”

“Surely, *effendim*.”

“I want you to go back to headquarters and bring here everything the woman was wearing—everything, you understand?”

“At your command, *effendim*.”

“Tell Major Kenton I should like the copy of the report on the crashed aeroplane, which he promised me, as quickly as possible.”

“It shall be brought, my lady.”

“Before you go, you might look us over and tell us if you think we shall pass for what we are supposed to be.”

Nimrud swaggered round them, examining the costumes with critical eyes.

“God has ordained it,” he announced loftily, at the end of the scrutiny. “I should have said you were Christian girls from a convent. But what of your names when you are speaking in the hearing of others?”

“I suppose we had better have names to go with our outfits,” agreed Worrals. “What do you suggest? Common names would be best, I think.”

Nimrud nodded slowly. “For you, my lady, I would say Zenobia, and for the little one with the speckled face, Maida. These names are common in the Lebanon.”

“So be it,” returned Worrals, smiling at the expression on Frecks’ face at Nimrud’s casual reference to her freckles. “By the way, Nimrud,” she went on, “let us get one matter clear, so that we never hurt your feelings. You do much swearing by God and the saints. Are you a Christian?”

Nimrud gazed at the blue sky through the window. “There is but one God, although he has many prophets. Here there are some who exalt the prophets, but for me there is but one God. He alone is the Knower. He made all things—may His Name be praised.” He touched his heart and head and went out.

Frecks looked at Worrals. “What do you make of that?” she asked.

Worrals shrugged. “I don’t quite know,” she replied. “In a land of thirty religions Nimrud may be wise to keep his convictions to himself as the easiest way of staying out of trouble. It’s really no concern of ours. Let’s rest while we may.”

III

POST-MORTEM

IN half an hour Nimrud was back with a parcel, which turned out to be the dead girl's clothes, and the official report on the crash.

"Thank you," said Worrals as she took them. "We shan't want you again for a little while, but we'll take a turn round the town before sunset."

Nimrud retired.

"Get these clothes laid out on the bed, Frecks, and see what you can make of them," went on Worrals. "I'll have a look at the report."

There was silence for some time. At length it was broken by Worrals.

"You know, partner, I find this most interesting," she remarked. "I don't think Major Kenton can be a practical mechanic or he would have called attention to the possibilities offered by this report. First of all, the weather. On the night of the crash there was no wind, which is lucky for us, because otherwise we should have had to make allowance for it in our calculations regarding speed, distances, and so on. Now, the Heron is fitted with two tanks; one is a gravity tank, but it is so small that it need hardly be taken into account. The main tank holds fifty gallons. This tank was found intact. It contained approximately three gallons, which at once provides us with some vital information."

"Such as?"

"It tells us that the machine started from a base at least eight hundred miles away."

"What else, Sherlock?"

"It tells us that somewhere south-east of the crash, within a hundred miles, there is a secret dump of at least fifty gallons of aviation spirit. When we find that dump we shall be on the track of these enemy propaganda mongers."

"How do you work all that out?"

"Listen. You will agree that as the machine had not unloaded its cargo of paper it was outward bound?"

"That's pretty obvious."

"Quite. It is reasonable to suppose that it would take off with full tanks—most machines do. Very well. It had used forty-seven gallons of juice.

Normal consumption is twenty miles to the gallon, so we find that the machine had travelled in the order of nine hundred miles when it bumped into the hill—probably a little less, making allowances for deviation. Following the same line of argument, had the machine not crashed, the remaining three gallons of petrol would have taken it only sixty miles—let us say, with the gravity tank, an outside limit of a hundred miles. The conclusion is, even if the pilot had been prepared to fly on until the tanks were dry—which is hardly likely—her destination must have been within a hundred miles of where the crash occurred. If we allow for a margin of safety it would be less.”

“Nice work,” agreed Frecks. “But a hundred miles is a fair way. Within that distance there are probably quite a number of places where the machine could have landed.”

“Admittedly; but by eliminating the places where the machine could not have landed, and there must be many, we shall reduce the area to be surveyed.”

“Why should there be fifty gallons of petrol on the landing-ground?”

“Obviously, this unfortunate girl would have to go back to where she started from. It follows, therefore, that she must have known that at her objective there would be at least fifty gallons of juice available—enough to take her home. I’m going to work on those lines for a start, anyway. Now let’s have a look at these clothes.”

“I don’t think it’s quite nice messing about with a dead pilot’s kit,” protested Frecks.

“Few things in war are quite nice, but as we’ve got ourselves mixed up in one it’s no use being squeamish.” Worrals stood by the bed on which the clothes were laid out, and for a minute or two regarded them in silence. “Really, these things should be our strong point,” she went on. “You wouldn’t expect Major Kenton, or any other man for that matter, to look at this get-up as we look at it. No doubt a man can, by study, acquire a good deal of knowledge of women’s clothes, but he can never feel as we do about them because he never has to wear them. What we feel is instinctive—or at any rate intuitive. What do you make of this lot?”

Frecks stood by Worrals, and without touching anything regarded the outfit as a whole. “The most obvious thing is, the undies don’t go with the rest. The garments which in the ordinary way would not be seen are much the same as you or I might wear——”

“Shall we say European?”

“Yes. The things that would be seen, the black cloak, the veil, shoes and stockings, are Arab—or, anyway, Asiatic. As I work it out, we’ve got the outfit of a European girl who, out walking, would look like a native.”

“Yes, I think that’s pretty clear,” agreed Worrals. “For the sake of argument, we might say that the girl was a German disguised as a native. We practically followed her example when we came here after seeing Major Kenton. Did you find any marks?”

“Nothing in the way of a name—not even a laundry mark. There are one or two things, though, that are rather puzzling. First of all, this necklace, with a locket, or amulet, I suppose you’d call it, which I imagine she was wearing round her neck.” As she spoke Frecks picked up the jewel and passed it to Worrals. From a fine gold chain depended, in a plain gold setting, what appeared to be a small black pebble veined with pink. It was about the size of a thrush’s egg. “What sort of a stone would you call that?” asked Frecks.

Worrals shook her head. “I’ve never seen anything like it. I don’t think it can be very valuable. Does it open?”

“No.”

“Hm. Queer. The thing must have had a purpose or she would not have worn it—at least that’s how it strikes me. Why should a girl, setting out on a long flight, trouble about a thing like that? Had it been a ring I could have understood it, because you wear a ring without necessarily taking it off. But this girl puts on one piece of jewellery—and chooses a necklace.”

“It may have been a lucky charm—pilots are superstitious.”

“Yes, that might be the answer,” agreed Worrals. “Did you find anything else?”

“There’s a stain on the bottom of the cape—or rather, two stains, one large and one small. I can’t make out what it is. Of course, it may mean nothing, but I thought I’d better mention it. Aren’t we carrying this detective stuff rather far?”

Worrals smiled. “Perhaps. But this is all we have to work on, and if we can get a slant on something it might be a help. Where is the stain?”

Frecks passed the *abba* and pointed to a spot near the hem.

Worrals took it to the light and examined it closely. “It looks like candle grease,” she said slowly.

“It couldn’t be nail polish, or anything like that?”

“No. It’s whitish, stiff, like the stuff candles are made of. There’s another spot here, I see.”

“Can you think of anything in an aircraft that might cause such a mark?”

“No,” answered Worrals. “Sherlock Holmes, no doubt, would have known instantly what this was, but as I’m not Sherlock it just doesn’t mean a thing to me. We can bear it in mind, though. Wait a minute—here’s something interesting. Did you notice these seams?”

“They’re hand-stitched—not machined, if that’s what you mean. Rather an unusual stitch.”

“Have you ever seen it before?”

“No—have you?”

“Yes. It’s a stitch they’re very fond of in Austria, or Hungary, I forget which—possibly both. All that embroidery work they used to send over before the war was done in the same way. Funny that an Arab cloak should be stitched like that—I’ll bet Major Kenton didn’t notice it. By Jove! Yes, that Hungarian girl at school—what was her name . . .”

“Loti Fischer.”

“That’s right. She used to do this stitch. I remember she told me that in her country the children were taught to do it.”

“Which means that the *abba* was either made in Hungary or sewn by an Hungarian?”

“That’s right, although, of course, we haven’t positive proof of it; but it’s worth bearing in mind. There doesn’t seem to be anything else. Bring the sack over and we’ll put these things out of sight.”

Frecks brought the sack, and Worrals was putting the garments into it when she stopped suddenly.

“Just a minute,” she said. “Do you get that perfume?” She sniffed the garments one after the other. “Here, it’s strongest on this slip.”

Frecks sniffed the garment. “I don’t know it. Rather fascinating, isn’t it? Sort of aromatic, like spice.”

Holding up the slip in her hands, Worrals sat down on a chair and gazed at the ceiling. “I’ve smelt that perfume before, but I’m dashed if I can remember where,” she said slowly. “How irritating! The queer thing is I seem to have smelt it lately. It’s one of those cloying, scents that one never forgets.”

“You mean—since we came here?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re letting this business go to your head.”

“I tell you the memory of that perfume is still fresh in my mind,” contended Worrals. “Naturally, one doesn’t necessarily remember a perfume

unless there is some reason for it. Give the wall a tap. I'm going to ask Nimrud about this."

"Nimrud? A man? What could he know——"

"Don't argue—hit the wall."

Frecks tapped on the wall. Nimrud came in and salaamed.

"Oh, Nimrud," said Worrals, "will you please smell these clothes and tell me if the perfume reminds you of anything?"

Looking somewhat mystified, Nimrud took a handful of garments and lifted them to his nose. He smiled. "The scent, O lady, is ladanum."

"Are you sure?"

"As God is my witness."

"And just what is ladanum?"

"Ladanum, O lady, is a gum that forms on a shrub that grows in the wilderness. Scent is often made of it. In Persia the goats eat the shrub and the gum sticks to their beards, from which some people collect it for sale to the scent-makers. The gum gives its perfume to everything that remains with it. It is said that once you are tainted with the smell of ladanum it remains with you for a long time."

"How on earth did you know all that?" asked Frecks with some surprise.

"Because, *effendim*, I have been to Persia, and for years I lived in Turkey where the scent of ladanum is the most popular."

"Thank you, Nimrud," said Worrals. "That's all."

Nimrud withdrew.

"If the scent is as common as that I don't see that it can help us much, beyond suggesting that the girl may have been to Turkey," remarked Frecks. "What are you going to do with these things—send them back to Major Kenton?"

Worrals dropped the *abba* on the other things in the sack. "Not unless he needs them. We may want to refer to them again, so they may as well remain here. I had better find a safe place for this necklace—I don't like leaving jewellery about."

"There's no place in this room that I'd call safe."

"No matter. I'll wear it until I hand it back to Major Kenton." As she spoke Worrals fastened the necklace round her neck.

"I call that a horrible idea," muttered Frecks. "Fancy wearing a jewel that belonged to somebody who is dead."

“Don’t be absurd,” scoffed Worrals. “Almost every piece of valuable jewellery of any age must have belonged to someone who is no longer alive.”

Frecks shook her head. “It will bring bad luck.”

“Why bad? I don’t see why it shouldn’t bring good luck.”

“That girl was killed when she was wearing it.”

“As she collided with a mountain she would have been killed just the same if she had left it at home.”

Frecks shrugged. “Okay. Have it your own way. What do we do next?”

Worrals walked over to the window and looked out. From a minaret, dark against the pink glow of evening, a *muezzin* was calling the Arabs to prayer.

“I haven’t quite decided,” she answered. “The obvious course is to go down to the aerodrome first thing in the morning and have a look at things from up topsides, but I have a notion to try a trick or two first. If the enemy can play cunning, so can we.”

“What are you thinking of in particular?” inquired Frecks.

“The fact that the enemy doesn’t know what happened to the machine or the pilot. I feel that ought to be turned to good account——”

A movement at the far side of the room made Worrals turn quickly. She was surprised to see a man, in the uniform of a French officer, evidently standing on the balcony, looking into the room through the inner window. Seeing that he was observed, he would have withdrawn, but with a frown of annoyance Worrals crossed the room and flung the window open.

“*Monsieur!*” she cried indignantly.

The intruder, a slim, youngish man, good-looking in an effeminate way, appeared to be covered in confusion. “A thousand pardons, *mademoiselle*,” he said in French, in a gentle, contrite voice. “I did not know the room was occupied.”

Worrals answered in the same language. “Nevertheless, *monsieur*, that is no reason why you should walk round the hotel looking in windows.”

“I was merely passing, *mademoiselle*.”

Looking out, Worrals saw that the balcony was a continuous one, running right round the back of the house, over the little garden.

“I was not aware that the balcony was public property, or I would have drawn the curtains,” replied Worrals. “We have only just arrived—I did not know.”

“Your pardon, *mademoiselle*. I, too, have only just arrived. It shall not happen again,” promised the officer.

“I accept your apology, *monsieur*. There is nothing more to say.”

The Frenchman bowed gracefully and walked on.

Worrals closed the window and drew the curtains.

“Peeping Tom,” sneered Frecks.

“Very annoying,” muttered Worrals. “It was my fault. I should have looked at that balcony before we settled down.”

“No harm done, is there? After all, he’s French. He must be on our side.”

“Wearing a French uniform doesn’t make a man French,” retorted Worrals. “We wear French clothes, but we aren’t French. I don’t trust anybody, certainly not by appearances, in a place like this. I wonder how long he’d been standing there?”

“Oh, it couldn’t have been long.”

“Nimrud said there was only one man in the hotel—a merchant of Damascus.”

“I know, but you heard what the French lad said—he’s only just arrived.”

“All the same, it’s a bit disconcerting to know that any Tom, Dick or Harry could just open this window and walk in. If we were out we shouldn’t know anything about it.”

“We can soon settle that,” announced Frecks, and crossing to the window she took a piece of chewing-gum from her pocket and put it in her mouth. After chewing it for a moment she moulded it into a strip and stuck it across the central crack. “No one can come in through that window now without our knowing about it,” she observed.

Worrals smiled. “That’s an idea. But come on, we’ve just time for a stroll. Give Nimrud a rap. On the way out I’ll ask Stampoulos a few questions about this Frenchman—I don’t like people who look in other folks’ windows.”

Frecks looked at Worrals curiously. “What’s the matter with you?” she asked. “You’re not usually as touchy as this. Anyone would think you were scared of something.”

Worrals gazed at Frecks for several seconds before she replied. “I am,” she admitted. “On a job like this it pays to be scared of everyone. I’ve got a feeling we haven’t been very bright,” she added.

“What on earth do you mean?”

“If there is one place in this town that would be watched by the enemy it is Intelligence Headquarters. Major Kenton admitted that. We were silly to barge in like we did.”

“But Major Kenton sent us out by the back way.”

“A very simple subterfuge, I fear.”

Frecks frowned. “What are you driving at?”

Worrals smiled lugubriously. “I don’t want to put the wind up you, partner, but it may interest you to know that we are being followed.”

“*What?*”

“I mean it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You remember that beggar, that hook-nosed Arab with the scarred face who was repairing his sandal in the alley when we left headquarters?”

“Perfectly. I’m not likely to forget him.”

“He followed us.”

“Are you certain?”

“You remember me stopping to look at that stall as we came through the market?”

“Yes.”

“He was about twenty yards behind us then. I thought I saw him once before, so I stopped there deliberately to look. He dodged behind a camel, but I spotted him all right. I’m afraid Major Kenton’s secret exit isn’t as secret as he thinks it is.”

“It might have been an accident.”

Worrals shook her head. “When I looked out of the front window just now I saw him on the opposite side of the road, apparently begging, but I’d wager he’s watching this building. He saw us leave headquarters and he knows we’re here.”



that hook-nosed Arab-

“Phew! Are you trying to give me the heebie-jeebies?”

“No, but I thought you’d better know how things stand.”

“This is positively sinister.”

“Aleppo is a sinister place.”

“But, Worrals! Do you realise what this means? If we are being followed, the enemy must know about us—otherwise, why should they follow us?”

“Perhaps they make a habit of following everyone who leaves Intelligence Headquarters—by the back door, as well as the front.”

“Let’s tell Nimrud.”

“Not yet. He might make a scene, and we don’t want that. And it might not be wise to let the enemy know that we know we’re being watched. We’ll make quite sure of this before we consult the mighty hunter. Give him a knock. We’ll go out for a breath of air and get our bearings.”

IV

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT

FOR half an hour, until the deep blue canopy of night was drawn across the sky, under the guidance of Nimrud they walked through the main streets of the town, getting their position from the notable landmarks. He pointed out the Grand Mosque and the embattled walls of the famous mediæval citadel, but Frecks noticed that Worrals, who was usually entertained by such things, seemed preoccupied, and took only a perfunctory interest.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked at last.

“Plenty,” answered Worrals. “We’re being followed, and I don’t like it. We shall be beaten before we start if this is allowed to go on. Besides, it’s annoying. I don’t understand it. There’s a leak somewhere. We haven’t been in the place a day, yet somebody evidently knows more about us than he should. I’m going to see Major Kenton about it—I expect he’ll still be in his office.” To Nimrud, who was standing a little apart, she said, “Let us go to Major Kenton.”

“As you desire, *effendim*,” answered Nimrud. “I will take you in the back way.”

“It doesn’t matter which way you take us in,” replied Worrals curtly. “We’re being watched, anyway.”

Nimrud stopped, frowning. His hand dropped to his dagger. “By the Prophet, this cannot be, my lady.”

“But it *can* be. We have been shadowed ever since we left headquarters this morning.”

“Bismallah!” swore Nimrud. “Why didst thou not tell me?”

“Because I wanted to make sure. Now I am sure.”

“Where is this jackal?”

“If you would like a closer view of him we must set a trap,” asserted Worrals. “It would be foolish and undignified to chase him through the streets. Therefore let us go, to the cul-de-sac at the back of headquarters. When we enter it, step quietly into a doorway and wait. When the man comes, seize him, and I will flash my torch on his face. I think we shall find that he is an Arab with a hooked nose and the scars of disease upon his face.”

“If this is true, my lady, he will soon have another scar—and it will not be of disease,” swore Nimrud.

“Lead on, and do not look behind, or the stalker will take alarm.”

“This way, *effendim*.” Nimrud strode on.

It took them about ten minutes to reach the cul-de-sac by way of the *souk*. If during the hours of daylight the market had been a noisy thoroughfare, by night it was a place of mystery and suspicion, of whisperings, of furtive shadows. Nimrud walked on like one who is at home, and Frecks, to whom this was the most foreign thing she had yet seen, kept close at his heels.

Entering the cul-de-sac was like going into a vault, so dark was it. Nimrud went on for a few paces and then drew them into a deep doorway.

“Be silent, *effendim*,” he cautioned. “Doubtless this rat—may his mother be taken captive—has ears as long as his nose. Have ready thy torch of electricity, my lady.”

They stood still. For a little while nothing happened. Silence beat on the eardrums. Then, faintly, came a soft shuffling sound, drawing ever nearer—nearer—nearer, until at last it drew level.

Nimrud moved with the force and fury of a tiger. There was a scream, cut off in the middle.

“The light, O lady,” he said calmly.

The beam of Worrals’ torch stabbed the darkness. It fell on Nimrud, standing like a rock, holding at arm’s length with his right hand what appeared to be a bundle of squirming rags. With his left hand he tore the topmost wrappings aside to reveal the fear-distorted face of the hook-nosed Arab. His lips twisted and writhed, but no sound came from them, the reason being that his captor was squeezing his windpipe flat. The Arab was like a rabbit in his grip.

“*W’allah!* To think that God made this,” quoth Nimrud sadly, forcing his captive back against the wall. “Shall we despoil him of his life, or what would’st thou have of him, my lady?”

“Ask him who set him to follow us.”

Nimrud eased his grip on the man’s throat and addressed him in what Worrals supposed to be Arabic. Wheezing, the man answered.



"The light, O lady," said Nimrud calmly.

"He says," interpreted Nimrud, "that no one ordered him. He followed us hoping that Allah the Compassionate would cause us to give him *baksheesh*; but he lies—may his tongue shrivel, for this is no true Arab, but a tribesman of the Zogorites. We rely upon God—may His name be praised—but this animal and all his kind are devil worshippers—may their houses be destroyed. They lie by nature, and this one will go on lying until the rising of the sun. What is thy pleasure, O lady?"

“There are ways of making even liars tell the truth,” answered Worrals coldly. “Doubtless you know of methods that may restore his memory? Ask him why he followed us and what he hoped to gain.”

Frecks gasped as Nimrud drew his dagger and pressed the point of the steel on the exposed throat until the Arab’s eyes rolled with terror.

“He’ll kill him!” she cried.

“Leave him alone,” growled Worrals. “What gave you the idea that we were playing kindergarten?”

Nimrud spoke, and the Arab answered volubly. Words poured from his mouth.

Nimrud translated. “He says, O lady, that it is known you possess an amulet, a black stone of great potency. It will take you into places wherein no stranger could enter and live. A reward has been offered by the rightful owner of this stone, and he hoped to obtain it—cutting thy throat, no doubt, in so doing.”

“Ah, now we’re getting somewhere,” returned Worrals coolly. “By whose orders did he do this?”

Again Nimrud asked the question and the man answered.

“By orders of his chief, he says, my lady,” announced Nimrud. “I know this tribe—may their tents be burned—and I think he now speaks the truth.”

“All right, that will do. Tell him that if ever I look upon his face again I will order you to kill him.”

“Let us at least break some of his bones,” suggested Nimrud.

“No.”

“But just one leg, O lady, to discourage him from following us?” pleaded Nimrud.

“Not this time. He has had his lesson.”

“At your command, *effendim*.” With a sudden movement Nimrud flung the man from him, as one might fling an old sack.

With a slobbering gasp of relief the Arab picked himself up and fled. In a moment he was out of sight. Nimrud sheathed his dagger. “Your wishes, lady?” he inquired with majestic calm.

“Let us go in. I must speak with Major Kenton. Say nothing of what has happened.”

Nimrud took them through the carpenter’s shop into headquarters, where, as Worrals expected, they found the major still at work.

“Hello,” he greeted. “You’re soon back. Sit down. I suppose you’ve had a stroll round the town?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Find it interesting?”

“Quite interesting. I was coming to see you, anyway, but before I mention the real object of my visit, will you tell me this: how many people know of our arrival here?”

Major Kenton looked surprised at the question. “Only one or two people whom I can trust implicitly. Why?”

“I just wondered if it could have leaked out in any way.”

“Oh, no—quite impossible.”

Worrals smiled faintly.

“Not starting to imagine things, I hope?” asked the major, also smiling.

“No, no, not at all,” answered Worrals. “But I mustn’t take up too much of your time, sir. I’ve given this proposition some thought, and I’ve got a few things to work on. I shall fly over the district as soon as possible to have a look at it from the air, but before I do that I feel inclined to try an experiment. You say that the story of the crashed aircraft and the dead girl was kept secret?”

“Yes.”

“Rumour travels quickly in this country, does it not?”

“As fast as a telegraph in England.”

“It would be possible for you to start a rumour?”

“Easily.”

“Is there a hospital here?”

“Two or three.”

“You are in touch with them?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Then this is what I would like you to do. I want you to start a rumour to the effect that an unknown girl, wearing European clothes under an Arab *abba*, was found wandering in the hills north of Aleppo. She appears to be suffering from loss of memory, so she has been taken to hospital. She wears a curious necklace, which it is hoped may establish her identity.”

Major Kenton looked puzzled. “What do you hope to gain by this?”

“It seems likely that the chief enemy agent, not knowing what has become of his pilot, will come hotfoot to see this girl. I shall be the girl. I

shall feign a mental sickness in a bed in a private room at the hospital. Flight Officer Lovell will play the part of my nurse.”

“When do you propose to put on this act?”

“To-morrow—that is if you will start the rumour to-night. If nothing happens by to-morrow evening I shall try the more direct method of air reconnaissance.”

“That’s not giving the enemy long to call on you.”

“Long enough. I have an idea he’s in Aleppo at this moment, or not far away. If that is so he will go straight to the hospital when this rumour reaches his ears.”

“You’re doing a lot of guesswork, aren’t you?” asked the major, smiling. “What makes you think this man is actually in Aleppo?”

Worrals smiled back. “Call it a hunch.”

“Hunches don’t get you far in this business,” asserted the major dryly.

“No doubt you are speaking of masculine hunches?” returned Worrals. “They are quite different, you know, from our hunches.”

“This is no joking matter. You realise that in putting on this act you may be running a grave risk?”

Worrals made a deprecatory gesture. “If we’re going to start talking about risks we might as well pack up and go home. Every job that makes personal contact with the enemy is bound to carry risks.”

“All right, as you wish,” consented the major. “Nimrud won’t be able to go into the hospital with you—you realise that?”

“No matter. He can wait outside. What hospital have you in mind?”

“It had better be the Jewish hospital. I know the resident doctor and the matron, and they are quite reliable. Anywhere else may involve you in religious complications.”

“That suits me,” agreed Worrals. “Just one last thing. Do you happen to have that photograph of the dead girl handy?”

“Yes.”

“May I see it? It isn’t curiosity. I think I ought to know what this girl looked like.”

“Certainly.” Major Kenton went to the safe, took out the file, brought it over to the desk, and opened it flat at a photograph.

With a sudden chill gripping her heart Worrals found herself gazing down on a face that might have been beautiful had it not been modelled on lines so hard that not even death could soften them. Dark hair was parted flat

in the middle. The nose was a trifle large, but the nostrils delicately chiselled. Perfectly formed lips were slightly parted above a firm chin.

“Thank you, sir,” said Worrals quietly, closing the file. “That’s all. We’ll get along now.”

“What are you going to do about dinner?” asked Major Kenton.

“We haven’t made any arrangements.”

“We’ve a private mess here. Would you care to stay and dine with me?”

“Thank you, sir, we’d be glad to,” accepted Worrals.

An hour later they returned to the hotel.

“I wish I hadn’t looked at that photograph,” muttered Frecks. “War is really dreadful.”

“That’s something nobody will deny,” acknowledged Worrals. “But the matter was not of our choosing. No doubt that girl fought for her side as we fight for ours, but we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that she, or at any rate those whom she served, have brought death to millions, as they would bring death to us at this very moment if they could, because we conspire to foil their plans.”

“It seems hard to believe.”

“Nevertheless, it’s true. Come on, snap out of it.”

Nimrud followed them in and stood at the door waiting for instructions.

“One thing that puzzles me is, why didn’t you tell the major about that Arab who followed us?” averred Frecks.

“The fewer people who know about it the better.”

“But Major Kenton?” Frecks looked shocked.

“I’m sorry, but information about our arrival must have leaked out either from his office or because we were seen leaving it. For the present, at any rate, I’m not going to say anything to anybody about what we are doing or what happens.”

“But this scheme of yours? Does it make sense, now that we have been followed, which implies, surely, that the enemy knows we are on the job?”

“I don’t see that it matters in the least,” argued Worrals. “The enemy should be all the more anxious to have a look at this alleged girl who was found wandering. If he comes to see, I shall see him. I think it’s worth trying. I was interested in what the Arab said about the amulet. If, as it seems, it is a sort of passport, then it would explain why the girl was wearing it—and why the enemy is so anxious to have it back.”

“You’re risking your life wearing it.”

“We’re risking our lives, anyway.”

“Well, I suppose we may as well get to bed and have an early night,” suggested Frecks. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Just a minute,” said Worrals evenly. “Someone has been in this room.”

“How do you know?” Faint alarm lifted Frecks’ voice a tone.

“I threw my nightie on this bed nearest the window. You put yours on the other. They’ve been reversed.”

“Perhaps a chambermaid or somebody has been in to do something to the beds.”

“Do what? Stampoulos said that everything was ready for us.” Worrals crossed the room in three quick strides and parted the curtains that covered the window which overlooked the courtyard. “This has been opened,” she said quietly. “Your chewing-gum is on the floor.” Worrals allowed the curtains to fall into place and came back into the room.

“Nothing seems to have been moved,” said Frecks.

Worrals did not answer at once. She went to the sack that contained the dead girl’s kit, opened it, and half drew out a skirt. She let it fall back before she spoke.

“The last garment I put in that sack was the *abba*. Someone has had the things out and put them back in different order. I should say it was an attempt to get the necklace—they must want it badly. What I don’t understand is, why it should be necessary to touch my bed.”

“Why bed? The beds don’t appear to have been touched—only the nighties.”

“Have it that way if you like. Why should anyone reverse our nighties?”

“How should I know?”

“Try thinking.”

“I give it up.”

“My guess is that nobody did move our nighties intentionally. Why should an intruder advertise the fact that he has been here? No, it is far more likely that it was an accident. For instance, had someone a reason for going to my bed, in order not to disturb the nightie, which is folded just as it came home from the laundry, he would lay it on your bed—that being the nearest place. Having done what he wanted to do, he would replace my nightie, only in this case he picked up the wrong one. Thus they were reversed.”

“Aren’t you making a mountain out of a molehill?”

“Listen, Frecks,” said Worrals seriously. “Comparatively speaking, we are amateurs at this game, which one can only learn by experience. All our

experience so far points to the importance of little things. I know it sounds trite, but there is a reason for everything, however trivial it appears. Remember the little things in the past that have led to so much. Frankly, they put the wind up me every time I think of them. Things that happen without apparent reason scare me stiff; that's why I'm so suspicious." Worrals turned to Nimrud, who was still standing by the door. "Come here," she ordered.

Nimrud advanced.

"Somebody has interfered with my bed while we were out," went on Worrals. "What would you do in a case like that?"

Nimrud thought for a moment. "Bismillah! In the East, O lady, many people die in their beds from strange causes. It is the one place where, early or late, a man or woman is sure to go." As he spoke Nimrud glanced round the room. "Wait." He went to the brass coffee-table, and lifting the top off, came back with it in his hand. "Watch the bed closely, my lady. Are you prepared?"

"Yes," answered Worrals, without any idea of what Nimrud was going to do.

He struck the tray with his knuckles, producing a harsh metallic clang that reverberated round the room.

"It moved!" cried Frecks wildly, backing away. "I saw the sheet move—in the middle."

Nimrud's lips parted in a cold smile. "Thou art in Asia, *effendim*," he said vaguely. "Do not move until I return. Above all things, touch not the bed."

"You needn't worry about that," declared Frecks warmly.

Nimrud went out and came back with a bamboo cane. Raising it high, he took aim and brought it down across the bed with a vicious swish. Then, stepping forward, with a swift movement he flung back the sheet.

Nobody moved. The only sound was a strangled gasp from Frecks. For there, twisting and turning upon itself in a manner horrible to watch, was a small snake.

"A horned viper, the same that slew Queen Cleopatra of Egypt," said Nimrud carelessly, as if the matter were an everyday occurrence. "Fear not, it's back is broken. If it will please you, I will make sure." He struck the creature again, and then, lifting it by the cane, dropped it, still writhing, on the floor. "Praise be to God that thou hast been gifted with brains, O lady, for hadst thou entered the bed the asp would have bitten thee; had it bitten thee, nothing could have saved you, and my face would have been

blackened before my master and before all men. It is an old trick in the East, and still a good one.”

Worrals looked at Frecks, who, ashen-faced, was still staring at the snake. She fetched her a glass of water. “Take a drink,” she offered. “The reptile is dead. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Frecks took the glass with a hand that shook. “Nothing to worry about!” she cried. “I like that! I think it’s absolutely frightful. I don’t mind being shot, but snakes—ugh!”

“Forget it,” insisted Worrals. “Pull yourself together, or you’ll confirm Nimrud’s opinion of *bints*.”

“Okay—okay,” muttered Frecks. “I’m all right. I can take anything—except snakes. This gives me an idea of what we are up against. Who did it, do you think?”

“I wonder . . . ?” murmured Worrals softly, as if to herself. Suddenly making up her mind, she turned to Nimrud. “Follow me,” she ordered. “Have your pistol handy.”

She went to the window, opened it, and stepped out on the balcony. Walking quickly to the next window, she turned the handle. “Locked,” she ejaculated. Returning to her own room, she went straight through and down the stairs, calling for Stampoulos.

The Greek appeared, his eyes wide with concern.

“The French officer in the next room to us. Is he in?” snapped Worrals.

“No, *mademoiselle*; he has gone. He could not stay after all.”

“Gone! So soon?”

“He had received a sudden call to join the army—so he said. So he paid his bill and went. That is all I know.”

“Is the room open?”

“Yes, *mademoiselle*.”

“Thank you; that’s all.”



With a swift movement he flung back the sheet.

Followed by Frecks and Nimrud, Worrals went back up the stairs. "It is not good that you should go first, my lady," protested Nimrud. Worrals did not answer. She strode along the corridor, and passing their own door, threw the next one open. The room was empty. She considered it with brooding eyes and then advanced slowly.

"Yes, he's gone all right," she muttered as, with thoughtful care, she made a reconnaissance. She picked up a small object from the bed, looked at

it closely, smelt it, and passed it to Frecks. “What do you make of that?” she inquired.

“A hankie!” exclaimed Frecks. “A woman’s hankie at that. How odd. I’ve never known a man to carry a woman’s handkerchief.”

“Nor I,” returned Worrals. “Nor do men normally use perfume. Smell it.”

Frecks lifted the small square of cambric to her nostrils. “It’s the same scent!” she cried. “Ladanum! How very strange! The officer must have had a girl with him.”

“Possibly,” murmured Worrals. “We shall soon be getting to know this perfume. Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything else.”

They went to their own room.

“Well, this leaves us in no doubt as to how the enemy feels about us,” resumed Worrals. “Really, we ought to take it as a compliment. They’re afraid of us. That’s fine. It takes something like this to get me really worked up.”

“They seem determined to get that necklace. That’s what the man must have been after when he searched the sack. Otherwise he would have taken the clothes. Nothing else has been touched. For heaven’s sake take that thing off your neck!”

“And do what? Give it back to them? Not likely. Let them come and fetch it. They’ll have another shot at it, no doubt.”

“But what about this scheme of yours in hospital?” said Frecks. “Now we know they’ve got us taped, surely you won’t go through with it?”

“Who said they’d got us taped? Of course I’m going through with it. After what has happened to-night I’m all the more certain I shall have a visitor to-morrow. Nimrud, take that disgusting reptile out of the room and ask Stampoulos to bring a pair of clean sheets. You’d better have a look in your bed, too, Frecks, to make sure you haven’t got a guest.” Worrals went to the wardrobe in which she had locked her kit, and took out a small automatic. “I hate carrying a weapon——”

“Toting is the right word,” reminded Frecks.

“Thank you. I say I hate toting a gun; apart from the weight of the thing it seems so ultra-dramatic; but if the other side is going to hand out snakes I’m prepared to hand out slugs. You’d better get your gun out, too. Then we’ll turn in. We’ve got to be on the move early in the morning.”

At eight o'clock the following morning Worrals moved from one bed to another, taking up a new position in a private room at the hospital where arrangements had been made for their reception by Major Kenton. Frecks was given the next room as a dressing-room, and provided with a nurse's outfit. Nimrud, who had ascertained that the rumour about the unknown girl was now common talk in the *souks*, said he would wait near the main entrance.

Worrals put her automatic in the drawer of the bedside table, and dropped the necklace carelessly on the dressing-table.

It was a pleasant room on the first floor, the window overlooking an extensive courtyard with apricot trees peeping over the walls from adjacent gardens. A vine, gnarled with age, had climbed up to the window. It was a quiet spot. A bearded janitor sat in a shady corner, smoking, and the usual pariah dogs prowled about in their eternal quest for scraps.

Worrals got into bed, prepared to wait, and gave herself up to meditation. Frecks settled down to a book which she had borrowed from the matron. Nothing happened. The day wore on. The sun climbed to its zenith, and the thermometer on the wall climbed to the hundred mark. Outside, the apricot trees hung motionless.

At noon lunch was brought in. The meal made a break, but still nothing happened. The fiery orb of the sun began to fall towards the west. Reluctantly the mercury in the thermometer fell with it.

At four o'clock Frecks, who had made one or two remarks about heat, and being "brownd off," tossed her book on one side. "For a complete and utter waste of time you certainly did think of a peach," she remarked. "The business is a flop. Let's give up and go home."

"Patience," chided Worrals gently. "Control your Anglo-Saxon restlessness. This is Asia, where doing nothing has been brought to a fine art."

"Okay," muttered Frecks. "If nothing happens in the next half hour I'm going out to flirt with Nimrud."

Worrals smiled, but said nothing.

Soon afterwards there was a tap on the door. Frecks started expectantly and went to open it, but before she could do so the handle was turned and a man entered. Worrals recognised him at once. It was Doctor Bronfield. With a quick word of apology he would have withdrawn, but seeing that his intrusion was not resented he hesitated on the threshold, his eyes on Worrals' face.

"Hello! Haven't I seen you before somewhere?" he said easily, with a slight American drawl.

"Yes, I think you have," answered Worrals. "It's Doctor Bronfield, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Were you looking for someone?"

"As a matter of fact I was," replied the doctor. "I came in to see the wife of one of my assistants. She was in this room till yesterday. Apparently she has been moved. The matron should have warned me."

"No harm done, doctor," said Worrals, smiling. "I only moved in this morning."

Doctor Bronfield advanced slowly into the room. Suddenly he smiled. "Of course! Surely you're the girl I saw in Major Kenton's office yesterday?"

"That's right," assented Worrals. "That's how I knew who you were—Major Kenton told me. I gather you're a friend of his?"

"Yes, I guess he'd call me that. But what are you doing here?"

"Touch of fever," replied Worrals casually. She did not feel like divulging the real purpose of her presence there. "Major Kenton recommended this place, so I came in for a day or two. I find it best to give way to fever instead of fighting it."

"Very wise," agreed the doctor, strolling over to the bed. His eyes fell on the necklace. He picked it up. "Hello," he said, "what's this?"

"Just a necklace," answered Worrals.

"I should call it a very interesting piece," murmured the doctor, examining the stone closely. "You know what it is?"

"No; I should like to know."

"It's ancient Persian work. Many years ago this curious stone had a powerful religious significance. Where did you get it—if that isn't a personal question?"

"It was given to me by a friend."

The doctor stood with the jewel in his hand. “I collect such things for my patrons,” he said. “If ever you want to sell it please give me the first chance to buy it. It’s worth quite a large sum of money.”

“Really?”

The doctor nodded. “Well, I’d pay a hundred pounds for it right now—if you’d care to part with it.” He spoke casually, but as Worrals caught his eyes she realised that the offer was sincere.

“As much as that?” she murmured. “One doesn’t usually sell presents, but if it’s worth as much as that I may consider it. Anyway, I’ll think it over.”

“Do,” invited the doctor. “A hundred pounds are always useful, aren’t they?”

“Always,” agreed Worrals.

“I was hoping to find something of this sort at the dig where I am working now,” went on the doctor.

“I suppose you are an authority on such things?”

“Well, I’ve been working in the Middle East for a long time,” the doctor pointed out. “First in Egypt, then Persia, now Syria. At present I’m working on the site of what we believe to be an ancient Hittite city at Wadi Omar, about forty miles east of here.”

“How thrilling. Have you made any spectacular discoveries?”

“My best find so far has been the tomb of Isfar Khan, one of the great leaders of old Persian culture. Persian influence was felt throughout the East, you know. The tomb was high up in the rock, like the well-known one of Darius the Great. At present I’m working on some remarkable rock dwellings, buried under the dust of ages, that we think go back to the days of the Hittites.”

“That’s interesting,” put in Worrals. “Why did these people, the Hittites and the Persians, fade out if they were so highly cultured?”

“War, my dear child. War destroyed them. Always war. In the end war destroys everything worth while. Here, war has not only destroyed mighty civilisations, but has nearly destroyed the land itself.”

Worrals sighed. “It seems a pity. What else have you found at the diggings?”

Doctor Bronfield shrugged. “Oh, odds and ends. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we come upon skeletons, and old weapons, and potsherds, and if we are very lucky, inscriptions, which help us to unravel the mysteries of the past.”

“It must be fascinating work,” remarked Worrals enviously. “Skeletons sound a bit gruesome.”

“Not at all. The owners of the bones passed on too long ago for their remains to have any association with death. From these old bones we learn much, but they are the very dickens to move without the whole thing crumbling into dust. We try to keep them intact.”

“I can’t think how you do it,” prompted Worrals.

“Well, there are several ways,” explained the doctor. “I use the wax method. You must understand that some of these old skeletons have been pressed flat by the weight of the earth above. With sharp knives and brushes we lay the bones bare. Then we pour wax over the whole thing, and while it is still warm press in a layer of butter muslin. This has the effect of sticking the whole thing together so that it can be removed intact to the museum which finances the excavations, where the skeleton is carefully examined.”

“How very ingenious,” murmured Worrals. “This sort of thing has always fascinated me. May we come over and see you at work some time?”

“Sure. Come whenever you like. I’d be glad to show you round.”

“That’s most awfully kind of you, doctor,” said Worrals. “I’ll come over as soon as I’m fit to travel. Phew! Either my fever persists or else it’s stifling hot in here. Would you mind passing the water?”

Frecks moved forward, but the doctor held out his hand. “It’s all right,” he said quickly, “I can manage.” He passed Worrals a glass of water.

Just what happened next was not easy to see, but somehow the glass was upset and the water splashed on Worrals’ face. She gasped.

The doctor whipped out his handkerchief. “I’m so sorry. How very careless of me,” he muttered.

Worrals took the handkerchief and mopped her face. “Don’t apologise, doctor. It was my fault,” she insisted, passing back the handkerchief.

“Well, no great harm done,” said the doctor. He glanced through the window. “It’s getting dark,” he observed. “I must be on my way. I’ve got to get back.”

“Are you going back to the diggings to-night?” inquired Worrals.

“Yes, I must get back. I fancy we are on the eve of an important discovery.”

“How do you travel—on a camel?”

The doctor laughed. “Good gracious, no! I sometimes use camels for heavy freight, but that’s too slow for me. Personally, I use a car. I am looking forward to showing you round the dig.”

“I am looking forward to coming.”

“Remember me to Major Kenton when you see him.”

“I will,” promised Worrals.

The doctor went out and closed the door behind him.

“Major Kenton was right,” declared Frecks. “He is a most charming man. I’m glad he looked in; it helped to pass the time. You’re not going to stay here any longer, are you?”

Worrals considered the question. “No, I don’t think so,” she decided. “Had anyone been coming they would have been here by now. We’ll just give it a quarter of an hour, then I’ll get dressed. It will be dark then by the time we leave, which will suit me, because I want to call on Major Kenton.”

“Okay.” Frecks yawned.

Worrals was just getting out of bed when the matron came in carrying a white cardboard box. “A present from Major Kenton,” she said, smiling. “He thought you might be getting bored, and these would help you pass the time. They are a speciality here, you know.”

Frecks took the box. “What are they?” She raised the lid and let out a whoop of delight. “Crystallised fruits!” she cried. “If there’s one thing I adore it’s crystallised fruit. I haven’t seen any since the war started.”

“Well, don’t eat too many and make yourself sick,” warned the matron. She glanced at Worrals. “Are you leaving?”

“Right away, matron.”

“I’m glad to have been of service,” said the matron. “Any time I can help let me know.” She went out.

Frecks offered Worrals the box. “Have one,” she invited.

“Thanks, I think I will.” Worrals selected a plum and put it on the dressing-table. “Go and get changed,” she ordered.

Frecks went out, taking the box with her.

Worrals started to dress, but she did not get far. Suddenly, as though a thought had struck her, she stopped. She picked up the plum, glittering frostily with crystal sugar, and stared at it. She smelt it. Then, with a curious expression on her face, she went to the window and looked down. The scavenging curs were still there, snarling among themselves. She tossed the plum out of the window. There was a furious rush in which a large bullying hound, by thrusting the others aside, secured the prize. He swallowed it at a gulp, and then attacked some smaller animals that would have disputed possession. With her hands resting on the window-sill Worrals watched. The

hound began to walk away. Suddenly it staggered and stood swaying on its feet. Its legs seemed to collapse, and it fell.

Worrals spun round and made a dash for the door. Flinging it open, she raced to the next one and burst in. Frecks was standing by the window gloating over a crystallised pear. She bit off the smaller end. Three strides took Worrals to her. Her fist came down between Frecks' shoulder blades. The pear flew across the room, and the piece that had been bitten off went with it.

“What the——?” spluttered Frecks, glaring indignantly.

Worrals took a deep breath. “Answer me quickly and truly,” she said tersely. “Have you eaten any of those sweets?”

“No, not yet. That was the first——”

“Thank God!” Worrals sank limply on the bed and buried her face in her hands.

“For Pete's sake, what's the matter with you?” asked Frecks anxiously. “Are you ill?”

Worrals got up, and with a hand that trembled poured herself a drink of water. “I don't think I ever came nearer to losing my head in all my life,” she said in a strained voice.

“You're as white as a sheet,” asserted Frecks.

“So will you be in a minute when I tell you something,” predicted Worrals. “Come here.” Taking Frecks by the arm she dragged her to the window and pointed down at the hound that now lay twitching in its death agonies. “You see that animal?” she inquired.

“Yes—what's the matter with it?”

Worrals spoke coldly and distinctly. “It has just been poisoned.”

“How awful! With what?”

“With the crystallised plum I took from that box. I expected to find you on the floor, twitching, too.”

The colour drained from Frecks' face. “I met a nurse in the corridor and stopped to speak to her,” she whispered.

Worrals nodded. “So that was it. I thought I should be too late. This is your lucky day, partner. That delay saved your life. It nearly frightens me to death when I am reminded that upon such little things can so much depend.”

Frecks sat down suddenly. “How frightful!” she gasped. “Do you really mean that somebody tried to poison us?”

Worrals laughed with bitter sarcasm. “Oh, no. Somebody just thought we could do with a tonic.”

“Who could it have been?”

“We’ll ask the matron to find out who delivered the box—not that we shall learn much from that,” said Worrals.

“The clever devils!”

“I wouldn’t say that,” rejoined Worrals. “Murder isn’t so very difficult, and of all the ways to kill people poison is probably the easiest. The hardest thing about murder is not to be caught. There’s such a thing as being too clever.” She looked through the window to confirm that the dog was dead, only to start back with a low cry of warning. “Fool that I am,” she said fiercely, “I should have guessed it.”

“Guessed what?”

“Look!” Worrals pointed across the courtyard to where a bundle of filthy rags was moving along the inner wall. “It’s the hook-nosed Arab. He’s coming for the necklace. They’re determined to have it. This way—quick—bring the box of sweets.”

Followed by Frecks, Worrals hurried back to her room. “You’ll want all your nerve for this ordeal, but try to go through with it,” she said swiftly, taking her automatic from the drawer. “There’s no danger—while I’ve got this. I shall shoot, if necessary; you needn’t doubt that. I’ll explain later why I am doing this. Hook-nose will climb up the vine to get into this room. He will suppose we have been poisoned. We mustn’t disappoint him. Lie on the floor, tie yourself in a knot, and don’t move, whatever happens. Can you do it?”

“Sure—but keep your gun handy.”

“You bet I will. Get on with it.”

As Frecks arranged herself on the floor Worrals put the box of sweets in a conspicuous place. The necklace she thrust under the carpet. Then she rang the bell for the duty nurse, scrambled into bed with the pistol out of sight, and lay still.

Silence, a curious, attentive silence, settled over the twilit scene. For a little while only distant sounds could be heard—the twitter of birds, the call of a distant camel-driver, the wail of a *muezzin* on a minaret exhorting the Arabs to prayer. Then came a nearer sound, a rustle, as of branches being shaken, and with it the quickly-drawn intake of breath.

Frecks, lying with one eye half open, saw two brown hands appear over the window-sill. They were followed by a face, the pock-marked face of the hook-nosed Arab. For a moment he paused astride the sill, sucking in his breath, while yellow jaundiced eyes, exploring the room, dwelt on the

motionless bodies; then, with swift, furtive movements, he slipped into the room.

He went straight to the dressing-table as if expecting to find there what he sought; not finding it, he opened the drawers, and then made a fresh survey of the room. He went to Worrals, looked at her neck, and snarled with disappointment. Coming to Frecks, he bent over her, and as the evil smell he brought with him filled her nostrils, she had to clench her teeth to hold back a scream.

Footsteps coming up the corridor outside sent the Arab flying to the window. He snatched up the box of sweets in passing. Another instant and he had disappeared the way he had come. The door opened. The duty nurse came in, staring in amazement at Frecks.

“It’s all right, nurse,” said Worrals, sitting up. “We were just playing a game.”

“But you rang?”



Then came a nearer sound, a rustle, and with it, the quickly-drawn intake of breath.

“That’s right, but it doesn’t matter. I’m sorry we troubled you. Please say nothing about this.”

The nurse smiled wanly. “Queer idea of a game.”

“I’m afraid it must look that way to you,” agreed Worrals. “That’s all, thank you, nurse. We shall be leaving in a minute or two.”

“Very well.” The nurse went out.

By this time Frecks was on her feet. “What was the idea of that pantomime?” she demanded.

“Someone tried to poison us, didn’t they?” explained Worrals. “Well, they succeeded. At least, it suits me that they should think they did. Hook-nose didn’t get the necklace, which is what he was after, but he’ll report back to his boss that he saw a pair of corpses. Having killed us once—as he thinks—he won’t try to kill us again until he discovers that we are very much alive—and he will discover that in due course. For the moment we’ve stolen a march on him. But we’ll talk about this later. Let’s get dressed. I’ll have a word with matron before we leave. Then we’ll call on Major Kenton. When we get to headquarters leave me to do the talking.” Worrals recovered the necklace. “By the way, remember, before we leave, to collect that piece of pear next door. We don’t want to poison the house cat.”

VI

WORRALS ASKS SOME QUESTIONS

THEY found Nimrud waiting patiently for them outside the hospital.

“Praise be to God!” he exclaimed when he saw them. “I like thee not out of my sight in this town of infidels. Should harm come to thee——”

“Yes, we know,” cut in Worrals. “Your face would be blackened.”

“*W'allah!* That is the truth,” agreed Nimrud apprehensively.

“You’re not really concerned about us, are you?” remarked Frecks tartly. “You just don’t want your face blackened.”

Nimrud shrugged. “What is a girl, more or less?”

“You go on talking in that strain, you honey-coloured hulk, and you’ll get your eye blackened, never mind your face,” rejoined Frecks crisply as they walked on.

Nimrud chuckled. “By the ninety-nine names of Allah! This is strange talk for a *bint*.”

“You’ll hear stranger before I’m through with you, you big lug!” warned Frecks.

Nimrud looked puzzled. “Of rugs and bugs I have heard, but what is a lug, *effendim*?”

Frecks hesitated. “I’m not quite sure,” she confessed. “It’s an American word.”

“Ah, they use strange words, these Americans.”

“Where did you hear Americans talking?” inquired Worrals.

“For many months I was camel-master to Professor Blake, head of the Americans who dig in the ruins of Babylon, far to the south. Other Americans came sometimes to visit. The daughters of Bronfield *effendi* came twice, but I saw not the father at that time.”

Worrals stopped. “Did you say daughters?”

“Surely, O lady, unless people lie.”

“Are you telling me that Doctor Bronfield has daughters?”

“All the world knows it. They suffer also from the digging madness. It is said that they have written books of great wisdom about it.”

“How many daughters?”

“Two, my lady.”

“Are they at Wadi Omar now?”

“So it is said in the *souks*, although I have not seen them.”

“Would you know them if you saw them?”

Nimrud considered the question for a moment. “I would not swear it, for after the manner of most Americans I have seen, they wore over their eyes dark glasses against the sun.”

They walked on, Worrals silent and thoughtful. After a while she asked, “Oh, Nimrud, did you see the *bint* who was killed in the aeroplane?”

“Yes, *effendim*, I saw her.”

“Had you ever seen her before?”

“Never, and God will bear witness to that.”

“I see,” murmured Worrals.

They came to headquarters, where she requested Nimrud to wait while they went up to Major Kenton’s office.

“It strikes me as queer that Doctor Bronfield didn’t mention his daughters to us,” remarked Frecks as they went up the stairs.

“Perhaps he had a reason,” returned Worrals vaguely as she knocked on the door.

Major Kenton rose to meet them. There was just a suspicion of tolerant scepticism in his tone of voice when he asked, “Well, how did you get on? Did you have any visitors?”

“Only one, sir,” answered Worrals, smiling. “Doctor Bronfield. One of his men has a sick wife in the hospital and he called to see her. We were glad he dropped in—it helped to pass the time. He told us a little about his work here—a most interesting man. I suppose you told him that we were helping you to exterminate these propaganda runners?”

“Yes. He’s one of the most knowledgeable men in Syria, and one of the most influential men with the unruly northern tribes. He speaks Arabic fluently, of course.”

“So I imagine. Has he been much help to you?”

“Not so far, but he has hopes of picking up some important information fairly soon. But why stand up? Please sit down.”

“Did you tell him about the dead girl in the plane?”

“That’s what I was talking to him about when you first reported to me.”

“Why did you tell him?”

“I was trying to establish identification, and he knows most people. I showed him the photograph of the girl to see if he knew her; unfortunately he had never seen her before.”

“Did he seem at all upset?”

“No—why should he?”

“I just wondered.”

Major Kenton frowned. “What are you driving at, young woman? You’re not suggesting that Doctor Bronfield is in any way mixed up in this propaganda racket?”

Worrals laughed quietly. “I’m quite sure that he is not.”

“I’m relieved to learn that,” remarked Major Kenton, a trifle brusquely. “You seem very interested in the man.”

“Of course we are. He’s asked us to go and see him, and one should know a little about one’s host, particularly if he happens to be a noted scholar.”

“All I can tell you is, Doctor Bronfield is one of the best-known archæologists in America. He was born in Boston, and has represented the leading American universities in this part of the world for several years.”

“I assume he was working in Syria when the British troops marched in?”

“Yes.”

“Was that the first time you saw him?”

“Yes, although he had been here for some time. He is a retiring sort of chap—like most of these learned men, he dislikes publicity.”

“From all accounts, Americans have done a lot of research work in these parts in recent years?”

“Yes; there have been several expeditions. There is one working now, near Baghdad, under the celebrated Professor Silas Blake. At the moment he is studying in the museum there.”

Worrals nodded. “By the way, sir, what would be our best way of getting to Doctor Bronfield’s dig at Wadi Omar? Could we fly out?”

“There’s no landing-ground. It’s all rock and camel-thorn, with some palms round the water-hole. Unless he sends his car in for you you’ll have to take horses or camels.”

“He told us he has made some interesting finds; have you seen them?”

“Not the big stuff; I’ve seen some of the smaller things—ornaments, and so on.”

“What does he do with these things? He can’t ship stuff to America while the war is on, can he?”

“No. For the time being he is parking everything in an old warehouse in the native quarter—in the Grazi Souk. He’s got some old boy to look after the stuff for him, a man who was on his staff in Persia.”

“He told us he’d been to Persia.”

“That’s right. He was working on the ruins of Persopolis, the ancient capital of Persia, before he came here.”

“I see.”

“Is this what you came to see me about?” asked Major Kenton.

Worrals laughed. “No. It was something far more practical. We were hoping you would give us dinner in the mess.”

“With pleasure. As a matter of fact, when you walked in I was hoping that you had come to report that you were on the track of something.”

“With luck we shall have the culprit in the bag pretty soon, sir,” replied Worrals evenly.

Major Kenton frowned. “I’ve told you before, this is no joking matter.”

“We’ve discovered that all right,” interposed Frecks warmly.

“What do you mean by that? Has something happened?”

Worrals answered. “So far two attempts have been made to murder us, that’s all.”

The major stared. “Are you serious?”

“I wish you wouldn’t keep saying that,” protested Worrals. “What do you think we’re in the service for—for fun?”

Major Kenton looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry. But you—er—surprise me.”

“We’ve surprised a lot of people. We surprise ourselves sometimes. But never mind that. Last night I was given a horned viper for a sleeping partner.”

“The reptile might have got into your bed by accident.”

“Not *that* reptile. If he did he went to the trouble first of swopping our nighties over, which, you must admit, would be peculiar behaviour for a snake. In case you are still in doubt, I can tell you that this afternoon we were presented with a box of poisoned candies, alleged to have been sent by you. That, at all events, wasn’t an accident.”

Major Kenton was silent while his eyes went from one to the other. “I’m very sorry to hear this,” he said gravely. “It means that the enemy must

suspect your purpose here.”

“They don’t suspect—they know,” returned Worrals bluntly.

“In that case I must post you home out of harm’s way.”

It was Worrals’ turn to stare. “You’ll do *what?*”

“Post you home.”

“What on earth for?”

“For your own safety.”

Worrals gulped. “Why not post the whole blessed army home at the same time?” she said bitterly. “They’re all in danger.”

“But this is different. You’re girls.”

Worrals drew a deep breath. “And in just what way, may I ask, does that make any difference? Are men to have a monopoly of the risks? If we’ve to start fighting male prejudice as well as the Nazis, then we *are* in for a tough time. May I ask you, sir, to please stop regarding us as something that needs special protection? There’s no need for you to worry about us. The enemy is so anxious to be rid of us that he has already slipped badly. A few more slips and we’ll have him in the bag.”

“Who brought those candies to the hospital?”

“I asked matron before I left. They were handed to the reception clerk by a native. I’m not concerned with him. He was only a tool. I’m after the man who sent him. I’ll borrow that photo of the dead girl if you don’t mind; then we’ll clear out of your way until dinner-time—I see you have a lot of mail to sign.”

“I shall be about half an hour.”

“Don’t hurry on our account. I suppose you have a library here?”

“Yes, just a reference library. It’s along the corridor—second door to the right.”

Worrals got up. “In that case, sir, we’ll amuse ourselves there until you are ready. Come on, Frecks.”

As soon as they were inside the library, with the door closed, Frecks turned to Worrals.

“What goes on?” she demanded suspiciously. “You seem mighty sure of yourself suddenly. And why the violent interest in this chap Bronfield? You’re holding out on me. Do you really think——”

“Do I think?” Worrals laughed lightly. “I’ve never thought harder in my life than I have since those poisoned popcorns were presented to us.”

“I wish you’d let me in on this,” pleaded Frecks. “You’ve got something up your sleeve—something you didn’t show to the major, either. You’d better tell me what you know or I may make a bad boob.”

“I don’t know very much yet—for certain,” replied Worrals slowly. “But I’m doing a lot of guessing.” She thought for a moment. “To prevent accidents I think perhaps I had better tell you the lines my guesses are running on. Sit down. We’ve plenty of time. Let’s see—where shall we start? . . .”

VII

FRECKS GETS THE ANSWERS

“LET us begin,” continued Worrals, “with the entry of the hook-nosed Arab into our room at the hospital. Did you notice the first place he made for?”

“The dressing-table.”

“Quite right. We know from his own lips that he covets the necklace, so we needn’t ask what he was looking for. That is perfectly straightforward, but now tell me this. As he went straight to the dressing-table, he must have known the necklace was there—as it would have been had I not removed it just before he came in. How did he know that?”

“Ah-huh. Unless he’s a thought-reader someone must have told him.”

“Correct. Forget the thought-reader angle. It doesn’t exist. Someone told him. Who told him? Obviously someone who knew it was there. How many people knew that? Put it this way—how many people had been in our room?”

“Only two. The matron and Doctor Bronfield.”

“Exactly. You can rule out the matron. That leaves only the charming Doctor Bronfield. Now you know why I find him so interesting.”

“Of course!” cried Frecks. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Probably because, like Major Kenton, you are so taken up with the doctor’s charm that it didn’t occur to you to look beyond it.”

“For the love of Mike! You mean—you suspect him of being in the racket?”

“Unless I’ve missed my mark, he’s the big noise—the king-pin of the show.”

“Impossible!”

“The impossible has happened at least a hundred times in this war so far—but we needn’t go into that. Actually, all I know for certain against this charming doctor is that he is a liar. Once you know a man is a liar, though, you can go ahead and believe anything of him.”

Frecks stared at Worrals wide-eyed. “Isn’t your evidence rather flimsy to support such a frightful accusation?”

“Oh, that isn’t all, not by a long shot,” declared Worrals.

Frecks shook her head helplessly. “This is all so sudden that I’m in a daze. For the life of me I can’t imagine what made you suspect Bronfield in the first place.”

“His own behaviour. Remember what I said about being too clever? Had he stayed in what he calls his dig at Wadi Omar I might never have guessed. But no. He walked straight into our trap. It wouldn’t be true to say that I suspected him as soon as he walked in, because he was the very last man I expected; but to me his arrival was like a siren sounding the alert. Not only was he our only visitor, but it struck me like a ton of bricks that here was a man who knew about us from the moment of our arrival. He is one of the few outsiders in Major Kenton’s confidence. From the moment we left his office we were being shadowed. Clearly, someone had spilt the beans. Those were the lines on which I started thinking when he walked in.”

“Go on,” murmured Frecks weakly.

“Then there came the business of the necklace. He spotted it at once. Maybe that was why he came—or one of the reasons. I was watching him. His eyes went first to my neck, then to the dressing-table. He rose to the bait like a trout to a mayfly. He wanted that necklace badly. When he made his offer to buy it he tried to look nonchalant, but he was deadly serious—I could tell that by his eyes. In plain English, that offer was a bribe. When he realised that I was not to be bought he tried the poisoned sweet touch, and by that time my brain was revving so fast that I jolly nearly fell for it. Fortunately, I asked myself if Major Kenton was the sort of man to fool about with candies at a time like this—and the answer was no.”

Frecks looked horrified. “But why didn’t you tell Major Kenton all this?”

“Just a minute. I’ll come to that presently. Let’s keep things in order of occurrence, as they say on the stage. Next, possibly because my brain was keyed up at the time, I remembered that business of the ladanum perfume. The clothes of the girl who was killed smelt of it, and at the time I told you I had a feeling I’d smelt the stuff recently. I had. It was Bronfield, when he brushed past me in Major Kenton’s outer office. No doubt it was very slight, but because it was strange I remembered it. A strange smell is always more noticeable than a common one. When Bronfield was standing by me this afternoon it suddenly came to me where I had smelt the smell before. I checked up by smelling his handkerchief.”

Frecks blinked. “Are you telling me that that business of upsetting the water over yourself was an act, a trick to get his handkerchief?”

“My dear Frecks, I may be clumsy, but I’m not such a fool as to pour water over my face in bed. Having such charming manners, he lent me his handkerchief, as I hoped he would. Sure enough it smelt—faintly—of ladanum. I felt I was getting, literally, on the right scent.”

“You’re shattering me,” muttered Frecks. “All this going on and I knew nothing about it.”

“That’s what comes of letting yourself be taken in by charm, my dear,” said Worrals sweetly. “But let us get on. A final check at the hospital convinced me that I was on the right trail. Possibly because he was dealing with two girls Bronfield must have decided that he could afford to take chances. That’s where he slipped. When he opened our door he said the wife of one of his assistants had been in the room. It is true that such a woman has been in the hospital, but not in that room, as Bronfield knew quite well, because he went to see her. She was discharged ten days ago, which Bronfield also knew, because he took her away in his car. That plausible story was an excuse for coming in.”

“How do you know this?”

“I took the obvious course of checking up with the matron before I left. You remember I went and had a word with her? Of course, by this time, things were beginning to connect up.”

“He must have been crazy to suppose that you wouldn’t check his story with the matron.”

“Don’t forget, he took steps to prevent the possibility of that by sending us a box of sweets.”

“Ah, I’d forgotten.”

“As I was saying, things began to click, so I came along here and carried on by asking Major Kenton a few questions. Bronfield told him that he didn’t know the dead girl, which was another lie. He must have known her because she was working for him. She brought in his paper by air. There was another hook-up—which he kindly provided. You remember him telling us how he packed his skeletons for storage and transport?”

“By pouring wax over them.”

“And you will remember the two stains on the dead girl’s *abba*? We thought it might be candle grease. It wasn’t, but we weren’t far out. It was _____”

“Wax.”

“You’re getting good at guessing, partner,” complimented Worrals.

“Could it have been one of Bronfield’s daughters?”

“No. At one time I thought it might be, but had it been one of Bronfield’s daughters surely he would have shown signs of emotion when he looked at the photo taken after death? You remember I asked Major Kenton if Bronfield was upset? He said no. So I don’t think it could have been a daughter.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t tell Major Kenton about all this,” murmured Frecks.

“I didn’t, for several reasons. In the first place, you saw his attitude about us. He tries to be nice, but really he hasn’t a lot of confidence in us. We’re just a couple of girls trying hard to do something, but the Victorian complex in him lingers on, and he thinks we need protection. He doesn’t mean to be like that—he just can’t help it; but a man in that mood would be hard to convince that his friend is a Nazi agent. After all, Bronfield is a big name in America, and Kenton has the political angle to watch. He wouldn’t take a chance of falling out with America over a thing like wrongful arrest, or arrest on suspicion, which is all we have to work on at the moment. We’re going to call on Bronfield very soon. I have an idea he has some queer things hidden in his precious dig. We’ll do a bit of digging ourselves, maybe.”

“But I heard you tell Major Kenton that you were sure Bronfield was not in the racket? Was that a deliberate lie?”

“No. I’m pretty sure Doctor Bronfield isn’t in it.”

“But that doesn’t make sense.”

“When I say Doctor Bronfield isn’t in it I mean just that. It is my opinion—mind you, this is guessing—it is my opinion that Doctor Carlson Bronfield, the eminent archaeologist, is dead and buried. Nazis don’t hesitate about a little thing like murder. I think the real Bronfield is being impersonated by an impostor. I can’t think of any other solution, because I simply cannot imagine that the real Bronfield could be a liar—which this man most certainly is. That’s drawing a pretty long bow, but that’s how it begins to look to me.”

“Great heavens!” gasped Frecks. “We get deeper and deeper.”

“Yes, and we haven’t got to the bottom yet.”

“But what about the daughters? They’re here—or they were here—with their father.”

“You’re right when you say they *were* here. I doubt if they’re here now. If Bronfield is an impostor, it would be a simple matter to find substitutes for the daughters—probably two German girls who would help him with his

work. It may have been one of them, acting as pilot, who was killed. She was dressed for the part. At any rate, she was in the racket.”

“Assuming that one fake daughter was killed in the crash, what about the other? She must be about.”

“Very much about, I should say,” asserted Worrals. “If we follow the ladanum trail, that hankie we found in the next room to ours probably belonged to her.”

“You mean she was there with the French officer?”

Worrals shook her head. “No. It wasn’t necessary to send two people to put that snake in my bed. Not even a supposed French officer would be likely to take a girl on a murder job. I think it’s far more likely that that elegant young officer was, in fact, a wolf in sheep’s clothing—or, rather, a Nazi girl in a French uniform. If that were so, the snake-charmer might well be Bronfield’s second female assistant. The perfume points to that.”

“But would these people be such fools as to use such a tell-tale perfume?”

“I can’t quite get the hang of this perfume,” admitted Worrals. “I think you’ve struck something. I don’t think they would use such a perfume—deliberately. I feel there’s a hook-up here with Persia. The stuff comes from there. Bronfield was working in Persia. There may be two or three answers. These people may not know they smell of ladanum. In the same way that one notices a new perfume, so it is possible to get so accustomed to one that one no longer notices it. We may strike the answer to this perfume query later on. Meanwhile, it is an indisputable fact that the whole racket, or what we know of it, is tainted with the stuff.”

Frecks looked perplexed. “Surely we ought to arrest Bronfield?”

“Arrest an American citizen? Don’t be silly. We’ll talk about arrest when we’re in a position to prove what at present we only suspect. I hope we shall find proof at Wadi Omar.”

“Isn’t that like walking into the lion’s den?”

“The best place to find a lion is in his den.”

“But just a minute. I see a snag. We know these people are using aircraft. Major Kenton says there is no landing-ground at Wadi Omar. How do you account for that? Where do the planes land?”

“That’s something we have got to find out. At present I have no idea. But it’s worth noting that Wadi Omar would have been within the endurance range of the machine that crashed. We decided, you remember, from the three gallons of petrol it had left, that its objective must be within a hundred

miles. Bronfield volunteered the information that Wadi Omar is forty miles east of here. That would bring it within range. We can easily check up from the map. There's one other point. Now that the gloves are off, there seems to be no reason why we should walk about in these melancholy outfits. I'm going to get back into uniform and be dashed to the enemy."

"You haven't forgotten that if Bronfield sent that Arab to our room at the hospital the man will have gone back to him and reported that we are dead? Isn't he going to think it a trifle odd when we pop up again?"

"Very odd, I should say. But he won't dare to ask us how we did it. It'll get him guessing—and it's always a good thing to keep the enemy guessing. Bronfield, like Nimrud, and apparently some of the other smug males in these parts, is probably contemptuous of *bints*. We are going to alter that. There is this about it: while Bronfield thinks we are dead he won't try to murder us. But now I've given you something to think about I'll have a look at the books I came here to see."

"What books?"

"*'Who's Who,'* for one. I want to see what the scribes have to say about Doctor Bronfield and his work. I should like to know a little more about ladanum, too. Here's a Hortus—that should tell us." Worrals flipped through the pages and then stopped at a paragraph. "Listen to this," she said, and read aloud: "'Ladanum, from the Persian word *ladan*. A mastic obtained from a shrub. A dark fragrant resin obtained from a species of *Cistus*, or rock-rose, formerly used in medicine, but now largely used as a perfume. Centre of industry, Teheran, Persia.'" Worrals closed the book. "That only confirms what we already knew." She replaced the book, chose another, and read in silence for a minute or two. Then she went on, "According to this, the real Bronfield is a genuine hundred per cent. American, and that, to my mind, makes it all the more certain that this Bronfield we know is a fake. At any rate, the real Bronfield's record, as it is set down here, doesn't conform to the way our man has behaved since we have known him. The two daughters, Helen and Daphne, are mentioned. They have made some notable discoveries. That, again, makes the thing smell fishy. Such girls, real scholars, don't get themselves mixed up in crooked politics. Helen and Daphne were both with their father at Persopolis—s-sh, this sounds like the major coming; not a word."

Major Kenton came in. "Let's go and eat," he suggested.

"I'm ready," announced Worrals. "By the way, sir, I want to ask a favour, before I forget. It may be more important than it sounds to you. Will you please not mention us to anyone. You see, in the hospital this afternoon, we

pretended that the attempt on our lives was successful. I should like that impression to remain.”

“Why?”

“Because if the enemy thinks we are dead he may make a slip; apart from which we shan’t be followed, nor shall we have any more snakes put in our beds.”

The major smiled. “I see. Feeling a bit nervous, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” admitted Worrals, winking at Frecks. “Have I your promise that you will keep what we have told you to yourself, no matter who you may be talking to, until we see you again?”

“Certainly. But you speak as though you are going somewhere?”

“I’m hoping to do a spot of aviation to-morrow,” explained Worrals.

“Very well,” agreed Major Kenton. “Let’s go in and get some dinner.”

VIII

THE WAREHOUSE IN THE "SOUK"

As soon as dinner was over Worrals announced her intention of going home. In reply to a question from Major Kenton about why the haste, she explained that she intended leaving the ground the following morning at the crack of dawn, so an early night was advisable. After coffee, they left the major and his staff, and collecting Nimrud on the way, they went out by the back door. Deep night had fallen, but an enormous moon and a myriad stars flooded everything not in shadow with clear silver light.

Frecks stopped. "Look here, Worrals," she said seriously. "Before we leave, are you quite sure that you're not making a mistake in holding this information back from Major Kenton?"

"I see your point," admitted Worrals. "But what you don't tell can't be repeated. Mind you, it isn't that I don't trust him," she went on quickly. "I do, implicitly. He's even more anxious than we are to get this business settled. But suppose I did tell him. I was tempted to, over dinner. I doubt if he'd believe me. He knows Bronfield so much better than we do that he'd find it almost impossible to believe. After all, we've no proof. I share with most British people a strong objection to being told that I'm a fool. Then again, bogged up as he is with politics, he might get the wind up about offending America if it turned out that we were on the wrong track. He might even order us to lay off this particular trail; then what could we do?"

"We should be completely cheesed," admitted Frecks.

"Another point that finally decided me was this," resumed Worrals. "If Kenton did believe us, being a soldier he might decide to make a raid. But if Bronfield has got a printing press at Wadi Omar you can bet your sweet young life that it's where it can quickly and easily be hidden. Suppose we failed to find it? No, it would be better to locate that piece of machinery before showing our hand."

"Yes, I think you're right," agreed Frecks. "I always was a bit precipitate. But you might at least tell me the *real* reason for our sudden departure from the congenial atmosphere of the mess?"

"Certainly," consented Worrals. "What I told Major Kenton was true enough because I aim to be on the aerodrome at sunrise; but an idea struck me over dinner that it might be a good thing to have a look at this warehouse

where Bronfield parks his skeletons and what-nots. Obviously that's a job best undertaken while it's dark."

"To-night?"

"The sooner the better. Besides, I have a feeling that Bronfield may be up to something. You will remember his attitude this afternoon about getting back to Wadi Omar right away? Why? I don't know, but he may be expecting another shipment of paper. Anyway, I have an irresistible curiosity to see inside that warehouse." Worrals turned to Nimrud. "Tell me, O Nimrud, do you know of a warehouse in the Grazi Souk?"

"If you mean the one where Bronfield *effendi* stores the things he digs up in the Wadi Omar, yes, my lady, I know it," answered Nimrud.

"There is a caretaker, I understand?"

"But he lives not in the warehouse. He lives at his shop."

"Shop? What shop?"

"The dress shop that his wife keeps in the Rue Lamartine."

"So she keeps a dress shop, does she?" murmured Worrals thoughtfully. "What do you know of the man?"

"Only that his name is Mashuk, and he says he is a Syrian. His wife gives it out that she is a Circassian, but I doubt it."

"How long have you known these people, Nimrud?"

"Since they arrived, O lady."

"Did they by any chance arrive about the same time that Bronfield *effendi* came from Persia?"

"It would be about that time."

"Thank you, Nimrud. Now lead us to the warehouse in the *souk*. Have you brought your torch, Frecks?"

"In this ropey town I'm not likely to go out after dark without it," declared Frecks.

After a walk of about a mile, most of it through an insalubrious quarter, Nimrud halted in what, from the sandy state of the road, was evidently one of the outskirts of the town. When questioned, Nimrud said that this was so.

"At the end of this lane lies village Djibin, where Arabs live in mud houses shaped like the hives of bees," said he. "Beyond the village lies the desert. Here on the left is the warehouse of Mashuk, wherein, it is said, the treasures of Wadi Omar are stored. Once, many centuries ago, if old men speak the truth, it was a mosque. From its shape it might be so."

In the brilliant moonlight Worrals surveyed the building from where she stood in the lane. Little could be seen except a windowless wall, about eighty feet long and twelve feet high, built of the usual sun-dried bricks, from which an ancient coat of whitewash was peeling. The roof was flat. Dome and minarets, if they had ever existed, had disappeared, so that the structure resembled nothing so much as an enormous oblong box. Just beyond the far end a solitary palm raised its elegant crown of fronds some seventy feet into the air, while near it three camels, on some waste ground, made a picturesque silhouette against the sky.

“How would you get into a place like this?” Worrals asked Nimrud.

“There will be a door, *effendim*, in the end, although doubtless it will be locked.”

The door turned out to be a massive affair of heavy timbers studded with iron, with the usual pointed arch. It was locked.

“It would need dynamite to shift that,” muttered Worrals disgustedly.

“There should be a door in the roof, O lady, so that those who once dwelt within could mount at night and enjoy the cool air, sleeping under the stars,” announced Nimrud.

“Of course. I’d forgotten that in these parts people use their roofs,” said Worrals. “The question is, how do we get on the roof?”

“By the grace of God the means is at hand,” returned Nimrud. “Wait, my lady!” Nimrud swaggered off in the direction of the palm.

“There must be a ladder,” murmured Frecks.

Nimrud came back with a camel, which he brought to a halt under the wall. At a word of command the beast “couched.” “Seat thyself upon the hump, and fear not,” invited Nimrud.

Worrals complied, sinking her fingers into the shaggy hair.

Nimrud addressed the animal. “*Dhai!*” he grunted.

Worrals held her breath as the camel swayed to its feet, raising her to the level of the parapet. She clutched at it, and in a moment was on the roof.

Nimrud repeated the performance, and Frecks, looking somewhat shaken, joined her. “That’s one way of getting upstairs,” she observed.

Nimrud appeared, and from the roof spoke gently to the camel. “Thank you, O my father,” said he. “Return now to thy brethren and rest in peace.”

With imperial dignity, grinding its teeth in the curious manner of its kind, the camel rejoined its companions.

Nimrud was right about the door in the roof. In the West it would have been called a trap door. Strangely enough—or so Nimrud seemed to think—

it was unfastened, and the dagger which he had drawn to force it was returned to his belt. He lifted the cover aside, disclosing a fixed ladder leading down into the well of the building. Lying flat, Worrals surveyed the scene below in the beam of the torch; but the inspection yielded little, aside from what seemed to be numerous packing cases, many of them large, assembled carelessly round the walls, leaving the middle clear.

“Nobody seems to be about, so we may as well go down,” suggested Worrals. “Nimrud, you come last, and lift the cover into place—just in case we have a visitor.”

The ladder descended to the floor at the end of the oblong chamber farthest from the main door. A peculiar smell, musty, as of things long dead, hung in the air. Cobwebs festooned the roof so thickly that the vaulted ceiling could be only dimly seen. For the rest, the place had been described as an old warehouse, and that was exactly what it looked like. The centre space was clear except for a rough bench, but the sides were lined with wooden boxes, some of which were open, revealing to the curious gaze of the intruders a remarkable assortment of objects. Some were filled with pieces of rough masonry and carved stone; others, old glazed tiles; others, with bones. In one there was an extraordinary object which, on close examination, turned out to be a mummified cat. In another there was a beautifully carved head of a man with a waving beard. There were also collections of ancient bronze utensils and weapons.

“These seem genuine enough,” remarked Worrals. “Whatever else Bronfield is doing, he’s digging.”

“I suppose he would be bound to do that for the look of the thing,” Frecks pointed out.



"This is one way of getting upstairs," observed Frecks.

By the end of about twenty minutes Worrals was compelled to admit that as far as appearances went, the warehouse was all that it was reported to be—a depository for archæological specimens. "One thing that does puzzle me," she remarked, "is why so many of these cases have been left open. Admittedly, the contents are not likely to deteriorate, but as they are

supposed to be packed for shipment I should have thought that they would have been nailed up.”

“Perhaps Bronfield deliberately left them open, so that if anyone should come in it would be seen at a glance that the dump is genuine,” suggested Frecks.

“That may be the answer,” conceded Worrals.

It was Frecks who found the skeleton, waxed and shrouded in muslin. “Here’s one of those stuck-up skeletons Bronfield told us about,” she observed.

Worrals went over to look at it, and surveyed the grisly remains in the light of the torch. “Queer to think that this chap—or woman—probably lived before the days of Abraham,” she mused. “Hello, what’s this?” she went on quickly. “It looks as if the muslin had been cut open and stuck down again.” She pointed to a seam that ran for about eighteen inches down the “stomach” of the skeleton.

Before Worrals could say more, or Frecks comment on the discovery, there came a sharp noise from the far end of the room. There was no doubt as to what it was. A key had been inserted in the lock.

“Quick!” breathed Worrals, and made a bee-line for the ladder, the others at her heels. But having reached it, another sound warned her that there was no time to carry out her intention of returning to the roof. The door was being opened, to the sound of footsteps and voices, so she turned aside into a cavity between some packing cases. The others joined her in the retreat, and peered with some apprehension through the gaps between the boxes.

By this time the door had been closed behind two people who had entered. One carried a torch, but the beam being thrown forward, the rest was in comparative darkness, so that it was not possible to see the newcomers beyond the fact that they were a man and a woman. The man produced and lit a piece of candle, stood it on the bench and switched off the torch. The feeble light illuminated its immediate surroundings, but no more.

At this juncture the man uttered a sharp exclamation, which produced a cry very much like fear from his companion. He drew his dagger, and for a moment stood gazing about him; then he ran straight towards the spot where the watchers were hiding—or so it at first appeared. Frecks, with a sharp intake of breath, crouched lower. She heard the soft swish of Nimrud’s dagger as it slid from its sheath. But the man went on past the cavity and ran up the ladder. From the top he called out something, and then, descending, hurried back to the woman.

Now all this was very puzzling to Worrals, who could not make out what was happening—beyond the obvious fact that the man was alarmed. She could only think that in some way he had become aware of their entry. She dare not speak to Nimrud, who was standing like a statue. She did the only thing possible; she remained still, watching the two people near the candle.

The man said something in a low voice to the woman, who at once went out through the door by which she had entered, leaving the man alone. He, with his dagger in his hand, stood back against a wall in an attitude of expectancy, crouching slightly, like an animal about to spring. Nothing moved. Silence fell, silence so intense that Frecks—who by this time was certain that their presence had been detected—felt sure that the man must hear the thumping of her heart.

The silence was broken in a manner both unexpected and alarming. The door opened and the woman came in, followed by no fewer than five dark-skinned Arabs. All carried knives. The last one closed the door behind him. A word was spoken. One of the Arabs advanced nearly to the foot of the ladder, where he turned, facing the room. The man who had originally entered, presumably Mashuk the caretaker, now took his torch, and with an Arab on either side of him began looking behind the cases.

Worrals was now certain that they had been discovered; or at least, the man knew that someone was in the warehouse. That was obvious. It was equally obvious that it could only be a question of time before they were found. What the three of them could do against six armed men was not so obvious. They could only fight it out, she decided, and her hand went to the butt of her automatic. Nimrud still stood like a graven image.

The end came suddenly. The caretaker moved a case. A man, a coloured man, sprang from behind it, and sped like an arrow down the room towards the ladder. Had the way been open he might have got clear. But it was not. It was barred by the Arab who—it was now plain—had been posted at the foot of the ladder for just such an emergency.

When the hunted man saw that his escape was cut off he let out a scream of stark terror, and tried to climb up on the cases. It was a futile effort, doomed to failure. The Arabs were on him like a pack of wolves. One caught him by the foot, and dragged him, screaming, to the ground. The screams ended abruptly. Silence fell again. One of the Arabs wiped his knife on his robe. Two others pushed the bench aside, disclosing what seemed to be the mouth of a well. Another man took the dead thief by the leg, and with a callousness that made Worrals shudder, dragged him to the well. The body disappeared from sight. There was a splash. The bench was pushed back into

place. The Arabs spoke together for a moment and then went out, leaving the caretaker and the woman once more alone.

Worrals understood now what had happened. The thief had been there when they entered. He had been there all the time. It was he who had unfastened the trap door, so that they had found it open. It was he who, in search of reputed treasures, had forced open the cases. The caretaker—whose entry the thief evidently did not expect—had seen the open cases, and they had told their own story. He had gone up the ladder, and the open trap door had suggested that the thief was still inside. He had sent the woman for assistance, and the discovery and murder of the thief was the inevitable result.

Worrals moistened her lips, which had gone dry with strain. She could imagine how Frecks was feeling, but there was nothing she could do about it. She dare not speak. The whole incident was unfortunate—just one of those things that could not have been foreseen. She was only thankful that the thief had been discovered before the torch had been turned into their hiding place, as it would have been sooner or later had the thief not been found first. Nimrud was still standing like a rock; she could feel him rather than see him. He, like she, no doubt realised that they were not yet out of the wood. The caretaker was still there, and his brutal Arabs were obviously somewhere near at hand. The woman, Worrals reflected, must be as bad, for she had made no effort to save the thief from a fate which seemed severe, even for robbery.

With such thoughts filling her head Worrals resumed her occupation of watching the room, and saw that the man and woman had seated themselves on a box. The man had lighted a cigarette. They appeared to be waiting for something, or somebody. Worrals perceived that they, too, would have to wait.

It proved a tedious vigil. She judged that it was more than half an hour before the sound of a car outside the building indicated that the waiting was at an end. Confirmation of this was provided by the man who, rising from the case on which he had been seated, went over to the door and opened it to admit a small but curious procession. First came a woman, veiled, cloaked in a black *abba*. She was followed closely by two dark-skinned Arabs who carried between them a long flattish package, rather like a shallow coffin, held together with ropes and long splines of wood. The Arabs seemed to know just what to do. They put the package on the bench and instantly withdrew, closing the door behind them and leaving the veiled woman in conversation with the caretaker and his female companion. This did not last long. The veiled woman drew from beneath her *abba* a bag that chinked as

she put it on the bench, and then, after a final word or two, followed the Arabs out through the door. From outside came the sound of a motor-car engine being started.

All this the watchers behind the packing cases saw clearly, if not very distinctly, for the bench was some distance away and the candle gave but a feeble light, and that only for a short radius. Frecks drew a deep breath, as if supposing that the strange proceedings were now about to be concluded; but in this she was wrong. The caretaker went to the packing case on the bench, and drawing his dagger, made what seemed to be a long incision, without touching the splines of wood which were bound lengthways to the package. Inserting his hand into the cavity he had made he began drawing out bundles of paper, which he stacked on the bench beside the case.

It no longer required any great effort of the imagination to understand what was going on. A supply of propaganda leaflets had just been delivered within an archæological specimen, whatever that might be. Worrals assumed it was a skeleton, one of the waxed skeletons of which Bronfield had spoken, such a one as she was examining when the caretaker entered the warehouse. In that case, she remembered, the muslin had also been cut, evidently to permit the removal of similar contents. If there had been any doubt in her mind about this, it was finally banished when a piece of paper, about eight inches by six, fell from one of the bundles and came to rest under the bench.

The play was not yet over. There came a low knocking on the door. The caretaker opened it to admit five women, or at any rate veiled figures. They did not speak, but filed like hooded inquisitors to the bench, where the woman in charge handed over a bundle, which was quickly disposed of beneath the *abba*. The money-bag chinked as it was emptied of its contents—a heap of silver coins. A number of these were counted out. The first woman in the line picked them up and moved on.

In a silent atmosphere that was uncanny this performance was repeated five times, until no leaflets remained and the silver coins had all disappeared. The whole party then filed out, leaving the caretaker and his woman once more alone.

Worrals breathed in Frecks' ear: "I'm going on the roof. You stand fast with Nimrud."

With no small trepidation Frecks watched Worrals' silent exit up the ladder, although this was not such a hazardous operation as it might appear, because, for one thing, that end of the room was in almost total darkness, and Worrals was wearing black clothes. Even Frecks hardly saw her go.

Inside the warehouse the sinister proceedings were swiftly concluded. The two original visitors picked up the wrapped skeleton and dumped it carelessly in a case. The man blew out the candle. A torch was switched on and they went to the door. The key grated in the lock.

Frecks drew a deep breath and stretched limbs that had become cramped from long-enforced inactivity. To Nimrud she said, "It's all over. Wait a moment, then we'll go." She fetched the piece of paper that had fallen under the bench, and returning to the ladder, went on up to the roof, where she found Worrals sitting on the parapet gazing down a deserted road.

"What happened?" she inquired.

"Much as I expected. The car that brought the leaflets had gone, of course, by the time I got up here, but there were five camels, each with an Arab driver—the same five men, I think, who did the murder. They were the same type, anyway."

"You seem pretty casual, considering we've just seen a murder committed," muttered Frecks. "I'm still shaking. We came jolly near to being murdered ourselves."

"You're telling me!"

"Where did these Arabs go?"

"Major Kenton was right about this propaganda traffic being run under cover of women," went on Worrals. "Each camel had on its back one of those covered palanquins which the Arabs use to take their women about. What did Nimrud tell us they were called . . . ?"

"*Mahmals*."

"That's right. They've gone now. It doesn't matter. We know how the racket is being worked. This is the distributing centre. Bronfield sends a mummy in from Wadi Omar by car, with the leaflets inside it, bound in under the muslin. Clever idea. The women agents pick up the stuff here and put it under their capes, knowing jolly well that they're safe from interference. If a man, particularly a foreign Christian, dared to touch one of those *mahmals*, let alone the woman inside it, the whole Moslem world would be up in arms."

"What did you make of that woman who brought the money? She seemed to be in charge. These distributing agents are evidently paid in hard cash."

"She must be one of Bronfield's female assistants—possibly one of the supposed daughters."

“I notice that Bronfield himself kept out of the way. No doubt he fixed things up at the other end. That’s why he was in a hurry to get back. Did the camels all go off together?”

“No. Two went one way and three another.” Worrals turned to Nimrud, who, having replaced the cover on the trapdoor, now joined them. She pointed down the dusty road. “To where does that road lead?” she asked.

“To Latakia, my lady.”

Worrals pointed in the other direction. “And that one?”

“To Hama, and later to Homs.”

“By the way, Nimrud, you saw those Arabs who came in? Of what tribe were they?”

“*Effendim*, they were Zogorites, people forgotten of God—may they be despoiled.”

“The same as the hook-nosed man you captured?”

“Even so, my lady.”

“In what part do they live?”

“They dwell among the rocks like jackals, in the hills that lie beyond Wadi Omar. Living by robbery, they are evil people, hated by all. Their sheikh, Mirza Ali, called the Black, is not fit to live, or to die—may his sons perish.”

“Ideal confederates for Nazis,” murmured Worrals. “Nice and handy for Wadi Omar, too. Frecks, the thing begins to take shape.”

“But these women who have gone off with the leaflets—are you going to let them get away?” asked Frecks in surprise.

“I shan’t stop them,” declared Worrals. “I’m after bigger game than that.”

“Here’s one of the leaflets—I picked it up off the floor.” Frecks passed the leaflet she had collected.

Worrals took it, smelt it, and touched the print with her finger. It smudged. “The ink is still damp,” she observed. “They must have been in a hurry to get the stuff out—probably because the last load of paper failed to get through.” She passed the paper to Nimrud. “What language is that—Arabic?”

“Yes, *effendim*, it is Arabic.”

“What does it say?”

Nimrud held the paper up in the bright moonlight. “It tells the Arabs to beware, my lady, because the British are making a plot to give the whole

country to the Jews, who have sworn, with British guns and bombs, to destroy every Arab in the land.” Nimrud returned the leaflet.

“By gosh!” exclaimed Frecks, “that’s a bit steep.”

“It’s the sort of story you would expect the Nazis to hand out—the sort of story the Arabs might be induced to believe,” opined Worrals.

“What are we going to do?”

Worrals yawned. “It’s getting late. I’m going home to bed. We’ve got to be off early in the morning.”

“O lady, there is something I would say,” put in Nimrud in a tone of voice more than unusually respectful.

“Say on, O mighty hunter.”

“It is this,” stated Nimrud. “If all *bints* had thy courage, and eyes like thine, which see things that are hidden, men would no longer rule the harem.”

Worrals smiled. “Thank you, Nimrud. If all men were like you, women would not have to interfere in the affairs of men.”

“*W’allah!* I call upon God to witness that I never heard such words of wisdom from the lips of any *bint*,” declared Nimrud. “I shall remember them.”

“That’s fine,” sneered Frecks. “Now, if you two have finished slinging bouquets at each other, perhaps one of you would give me a hand down off this roof.”

IX

STRICTLY FEMININE

SUNRISE the following morning found Worrals and Frecks on the aerodrome, in uniform, examining the Heron that had been allocated to them, with Nimrud an interested spectator. He had never been in the air, and made no secret of his disinclination to enter a zone which, in his opinion, had been designed by God for the exclusive use of birds. However, he had consented—without enthusiasm—to fly, a decision which suited Worrals, who foresaw that without him, in the event of a forced landing, they might find themselves in difficulties.

Having satisfied herself that the tanks were full, and the controls in order, Worrals turned to Frecks. "I'm going along to the map-room for a minute or two," she said. "I want you to get an oblique camera and a Tommy gun. I don't suppose we shall need the gun, but you never know. I should feel happier with one, and under the seat it won't be in the way."

"Okay," agreed Frecks. "Why are you going to the map-room?"

"I want to plot a course."

"But it's no distance to Wadi Omar."

"We're going farther than that," announced Worrals.

Frecks raised her eyebrows. "Where are we going?"

"First to Wadi Omar, to get a few photos, then on to Baghdad."

Frecks blinked. "To Baghdad! What on earth for?"

Worrals laughed. "To call on the caliph," she answered lightly, and walked away towards the station buildings.

When she returned Major Kenton was just getting out of his car, which had been pulled up near the Heron.

"Good morning," he greeted. "I see you've got back into uniform."

"Yes, sir, we're back in harness," answered Worrals. "The enemy knows all about us, so it's no use trying to kid him, or ourselves, any longer. Besides, we feel more at home in blue. I didn't know you were an early bird."

"I'm not as early as this usually," confessed the major. "But you told me you'd be here, and I thought I'd have a word with you before you left."

"Has something happened?"

“Yes. After you had gone last night I received word from Turkey that another mystery plane was over the night before last. It may still be this side of the frontier, so keep your eyes open for it. I’m afraid it means that we are going to have another spate of enemy propaganda.”

“Yes, I’m afraid you are,” agreed Worrals. “The stuff is already being distributed—or at least it’s well on its way.”

Major Kenton looked hard at Worrals. “Are you pulling my leg?”

“I am not—it’s too early in the morning for frivolity.”

“You mean it’s true about this propaganda going out?”

“Absolutely.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw it being handed out for transport.”

Major Kenton started. “You *what?*”

“I saw it arrive at Aleppo and I saw it leave,” stated Worrals evenly. “You might like to have a sample of it.” She passed the leaflet that had been dropped in the warehouse.

Major Kenton’s expression was that of a man who doubts his eyes; but as he read it his face seemed to age. Then he looked at Worrals and said, “You know what it says here?”

“Nimrud translated it for us.”

“But evidently you don’t realise the seriousness of it. If this stuff gets circulated it might well start a war that would have tragic repercussions throughout the Allied Nations. If you saw it, why didn’t you stop it?”

Worrals shrugged. “I understood my job was to catch the top man, not chase the small fry?”

“It is—but . . .” Major Kenton shook his head. “This is awful. Right under our noses, too. At any cost you should have seized this stuff.”

“But had I done that, even if it had been possible, it would have told the chief enemy agent that his method was known to us, in which case he would have changed his tactics and we should have had to start all over again. As it is, I know that five camels, each with an Arab driver, left Aleppo last night in two parties. Two camels went towards Latakia, and the other three took the Hama road. One of the two that went to Latakia was a pale, mouse-coloured beast. The leading camel of the three that headed for Hama has started moulting on the near foreleg.”

“Yes, go on!” cried Major Kenton. “How is the stuff loaded?”

“On each camel there is a *mahmal*, and in each *mahmal* there is an Arab woman who has the leaflets disposed under her clothes. You were right

about this being a female party.”

Major Kenton threw up his hands with a cry of despair. “Then we’re sunk,” he groaned. “I daren’t touch those women.”

“Fiddlesticks!” sneered Frecks.

“I know what I’m talking about!” snapped the major. “Nothing would please the enemy more than I should send police or troops to search those women. Within an hour every broadcasting station in Germany and Italy would be shrieking that the *farengis*—that’s what the natives call us—had shamed Arab women by causing them to be molested by men. That would be enough to send every Moslem in the Middle East reaching for his gun.”

“The drivers are men, *effendi*,” interposed Nimrud. “They are Zogorites, the thrice-accursed, with murder fresh on their hands.”

“It makes no difference,” muttered Major Kenton despondently. “Women are women, and that’s that. The enemy has us in a cleft stick. If we don’t stop the women those leaflets will create havoc; if we do stop them, we may start an Arab war, which comes to the same thing.”

“Just a minute, sir,” put in Worrals. “Suppose these women were stopped and searched by women—what then?”

“Oh, that wouldn’t matter. The decent Arabs would probably treat the matter as a joke.”

“It seems to me,” opined Worrals, “that what you need here is a women’s commando corps to deal with situations like this.”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” rapped out the major. Then he became resigned. “Well, there it is. I shall get it in the neck for this. I might as well go and write out my resignation. You carry on. Come and see me when you get back. Good-bye.” Major Kenton turned abruptly, went to his car and headed for the town.

Worrals sighed. “Poor old Kenton, he is in a state. I didn’t think he’d take quite such a serious view. Perhaps it was a bit steep, holding out on him. It’s going to upset my programme, but it looks as if we shall have to do something about it.”

“About what?”

“Stopping these leaflets.”

“And just how do you propose to do that? The stuff must be miles away by this time.”

“We’ve got an aircraft, haven’t we?” Worrals turned to Nimrud. “How far is to it Latakia?”

“Seventy miles, my lady.”

“And Hama?”

“Farther, much farther.”

“You know these roads?”

“As my hand, *effendim*.”

“Are there flat places, such as this, where an aeroplane could land?”

“There is much *sabkha*.”

“What’s that?”

“Plains of dried mud, and perhaps sand with little stones.”

“And how far can a camel travel in a night? I mean, how far will the camels that started for Latakia have got?”

“You ask two different questions, my lady,” protested Nimrud. “A camel can travel far in a single night, but those that started for Latakia will have gone no more than nine miles.”

Worrals stared. “Nine! Why nine? How do you work that out?”

“Because after six miles there is a well, where the camels will stop for the night. At one hour before dawn they would start again, and by now would have walked three miles. The camels, O lady, will be on the road that crosses the *sabkha* nine miles from here.”

“But suppose they didn’t stop at the well?”

Nimrud looked pained. “My lady, they stopped at the well. That is the way of caravans.”

“But why start at all if they stop again after a few miles? Why not wait until morning and have done with it?” put in Frecks.

Nimrud sighed, considering Frecks sadly. “Now listen to these words, *effendim*,” he said wearily. “The first starting is ever slow. It is a thing occupying much time. Wherefore all caravans start at night and halt at the first water, ready to proceed early the following day on what is the first full day’s march. They stop at the first water because there are things to do; straps to be tightened, loads to be adjusted. Something may have been forgotten. If it is discovered at the first water, there is still time for the forgotten thing to be fetched. If the first march was a full day, it would not be possible to go back. That is the way of the East, *effendim*.”

“Oh,” said Frecks. “Thank you, Nimrud. I didn’t know.”

“Thou art still in the days of ignorance,” observed Nimrud airily.

“Don’t start an argument,” put in Worrals. “This makes it easier than I thought. We haven’t so far to go as I expected.”

In a few minutes the machine was in the air, racing low along the Latakia road. There was a little traffic near the town, but it soon thinned out, and except for an occasional car or beast of burden, the road was deserted. The nature of the ground varied. In some places it was sheer rock; in others, flat, sun-dried pasture; in others it appeared to be bare earth, a plain that rolled away in slight undulations sometimes for miles. Nimrud said that this was the *sabkha*.

“Two camels ahead,” announced Frecks after they had been in the air about ten minutes. “Nimrud wasn’t far out, if they’re the ones we’re looking for.”

“They should be,” declared Worrals. “Yes, that’s them all right. They’re carrying *mahmals*, and that’s the mouse-coloured beast leading. I’ll fly past low to make sure.” Worrals took the machine down to fifty feet. “That’s ’em,” she said laconically as the aircraft swept past. “There’s nothing else on the road, anyway. I’ll land ahead and wait for them to come along.” She cut the throttle, and the Heron glided down to land some thirty yards from the road and about a quarter of a mile ahead of the plodding camels. She switched off and turned to Nimrud. “We’ll handle this. You stay here and keep out of sight,” she ordered. Then she looked hard at Nimrud’s face, which was slightly pale. “Are you all right?” she asked anxiously.

“Alas! it is this accursed chariot of the heavens!” muttered Nimrud. “Bismillah! First we go upsides and my outsides are insides, then we come downsides and my insides feel outsides.”

“It is a bit bumpy, now you come to mention it. You’ll soon get used to it. Stay here.”

“It is God’s will,” asserted Nimrud in a melancholy voice. “This is the day of reckoning.”

Worrals walked over to the road. Frecks went with her. The two camels came on, a driver at the head of each, leading his charge by a single rein.

“Have your gun handy, but don’t show it unless there’s trouble,” said Worrals.

“I little thought, when I joined up, that I should one day be playing highwayman to a brace of camels,” murmured Frecks.

“In this war a lot of people are doing things they didn’t expect,” returned Worrals.

The camels, now only a hundred yards away, came on, but as they drew nearer the two drivers closed the distance between them as if discussing the situation. For the first time Frecks was able to get a good look at the Zogorites, and understood at once all that Nimrud had said about them.

Their skins were much darker than those of true Arabs, who are sometimes little darker than Europeans. Had these men not worn the usual night-shirt-like Arab *gumbez*, they might have been wild African negroes. High cheek bones, and low flat foreheads, suggested Mongol descent.

“They’re two pretty looking beauties, I must say,” observed Frecks. “I’m glad they’re not carrying rifles.”

“They’ll have weapons of some sort, you may be sure,” answered Worrals, walking forward to meet the camels. When the animals were about ten yards away she held up her right hand.

The camels stopped.

“Who speaks French?” she asked loudly, in that language.

One of the men answered with a strange guttural accent. “Why do you stop us on this public road?”

“Tell the women to descend,” ordered Worrals curtly.

Instantly there was a stiffening in the attitudes of the men, although they continued to stare at Worrals, not as Europeans stare, with a puzzled expression, but with their brutish features frozen and their eyes glassy. They might have been looking on some fearful horror.

“I said, ‘Tell the women to get out’,” repeated Worrals crisply.

Still the men stared in mute amazement at the incredible spectacle of women giving them orders. At last one of them moved, as if the truth had at last penetrated to his brain. His hand went to the hilt of his dagger. But Worrals moved faster. Her automatic appeared in her hand.

“Do nothing foolish,” she cautioned.

“But we are men,” protested the leader of the two Arabs. He still seemed to be shocked at the idea of taking orders from *bints*.

“Cough the camels and tell the women to get out, or I shall take you back to the police in Aleppo,” threatened Worrals.

“There will be trouble about this,” said the man harshly.

“Trouble there will be if you do not obey my orders,” flashed Worrals.

The man’s face was a picture. He looked at Worrals, at her pistol, then at his companion. Slowly and reluctantly, as though the spectacle had mesmerised him, he gave his camel the order to kneel. The other followed suit.

“The tribe will hear of this,” swore the second man, in a wild voice. It seemed that now the first shock was passing, he was getting angry.

“Yes, they will hear of it,” asserted Worrals. “They will hear of it from our soldiers.”

For a moment the two men spoke together in low tones; then, to Worrals' amazement, they dived behind their camels and fled away across the *sabkha*. The move was so unexpected that Worrals simply stared at them.

"Well, I'll go hopping!" exclaimed Frecks. "Did you ever see anything like that?"

Worrals went to the nearest *mahmal* and pulled aside the curtain. Two dark frightened eyes, over a veil, met her own. The woman crouched back, but Worrals signalled to her to get out. "You attend to the other," she told Frecks.

In a few minutes the bundles of leaflets lay in a heap on the road. The women made no protest. They did not speak. They appeared to be dazed. They simply stared with dull, animal eyes, as Worrals searched them both to make sure that no leaflets had been overlooked.

"That's the lot," she said. "Get the stuff into the machine while I keep an eye on things in case the men come back."

Frecks collected the bundles and carried them over to the aircraft. The men did not return, so Worrals followed leisurely, leaving the women standing by the camels—a rather pathetic group.

"*W'allah!*" exclaimed Nimrud. "I call upon God to witness that no man ever saw the like of that. This will be a story to tell——"

"On the contrary, you will keep your mouth shut," broke in Worrals. "This was an affair between women."

"Thou hast spoken, O lady," said Nimrud, with a new respect in his voice.

The leaflets were dumped on the floor, and the machine took off. With the map on her knees Worrals took a course slightly south of east to cut across the Hama road south of Aleppo. Twenty minutes later she achieved that object, and soon afterwards, following the long white trail, overtook three camels. She flew on for some distance to make sure that there were no similar caravans, then flew back and landed on the gravelly *sabkha*. The same procedure as before was followed.

"It's our party," confirmed Worrals, as the camels drew nearer. "I took particular note of that animal with one moulting leg."

"You might also take note that two of these Arabs are carrying rifles," observed Frecks.

As the camels came level Worrals halted them as before by raising her hand. She put the same question, and was promptly told in bad French to

mind her own business. The speaker, who was also the leader, was a tall, rough-bearded man with an emaciated face in which was set dark fanatical eyes.

“Ah-ha,” breathed Frecks. “This guy is going to be tiresome.”

Worrals’ lips set in a firm line. Not for a moment did she take her eyes from the leader’s face. “Make the camels kneel,” she ordered in a hard voice.

The other two Arabs came forward and joined their leader. As before, they stared at Worrals with a sort of animal curiosity. Clearly, this was a new experience for them.

Worrals knew instinctively that the most dangerous man of the three was the leader. He was, she thought, the man—or one of the men—who had stabbed the thief in the warehouse, the man whom she had seen wiping his knife. Her eyes dropped for a moment to his *gumbez*, and she saw the stain. He carried his rifle in the crook of his arm—the other had his rifle slung.

With her eyes again on his face Worrals took a pace nearer. “I said kneel,” she rasped.

The Zogorite glared at her. His eyes seemed to burn. Worrals stared back. For perhaps a minute they stood there, neither moving, neither speaking; then, with an oath, the Arab’s hand dropped to his belt. Worrals covered him with her pistol from a distance of six feet.

“I said kneel,” she repeated inexorably.

The Arab stiffened. His hand fell away. With his camel-wand he touched his beast on the leg. Obediently, it sank to the ground. The other two, thinking perhaps their journey was at an end, did the same.

“Now go, and look not back,” ordered Worrals.

The tall Arab seemed to go mad. He broke into a torrent of words, presumably Arabic, in a high-pitched voice.

“Silence!” yelled Worrals. And in the silence that followed she took deliberate aim at the man’s chest. “I shall count three, then shoot,” she announced in a steady voice. “One . . . two . . .”

The Arab sprang like a tiger. Worrals’ gun spat. The man stopped with a curious abruptness, an expression of utter incredulity on his face. His rifle clattered on the road with an astonishing amount of noise. A red stain began to spread over his *gumbez*, near the shoulder. His hand went to it, and he looked at the blood on his fingers with the same expression of amazement. His lips moved, but no sound came. Then, quite quietly, he walked to the side of the road and sat down. His companions, who had not moved,

watched him with eyes from which all expression had fled. They looked back at Worrals.

She addressed the man with the slung rifle. "Drop your gun on the ground," she ordered.

Moving with the slow deliberation of an automaton, the man complied.

Worrals pointed down the road. "Go," she said. "Take him with you." She pointed to the leader, who was still sitting by the road.

The man moved to obey.

"There's a car coming," said Frecks.

"Never mind about that; you watch these men," ordered Worrals. "Keep them covered, and don't hesitate to shoot if they try anything."

A car pulled up, and a man, the sole occupant, got out. Worrals looked at him. He was short, rather stout, and middle-aged. He might have been a European had he not worn a *kafieh*, the customary Arab head-dress. It was a bright shade of blue. A double cord of twisted gold thread round the crown, instead of the common plaited goat's hair, denoted him to be a person of rank.

"What is the trouble here?" he inquired in faultless English.

"Who are you?" asked Worrals.

"I am Azza bin Shibla, Sheikh of the Meni Sakhr," was the quiet answer. "Can I help you?"

"I don't think we need any help, thanks, O Sheikh," answered Worrals, in English. "We would prefer to handle this matter alone. It is a matter strictly between women. A man, a Zogorite, attempted to interfere, so I had to shoot him."

The sheikh smiled faintly. "You did the right thing." He bowed and walked back to his car where, with a foot on the running board, he watched the proceedings.

Worrals pulled aside the curtain of the leading *mahmal* and ordered the woman to descend. She did the same with the other two. They made no protest when Worrals relieved them of their burdens. In a few minutes the leaflets lay on the dusty road.

"Take them over to the machine, Frecks," said Worrals.

As Frecks did so the sheikh came forward again. "Forgive my curiosity, but I am a friend of the British. If trouble has been caused by Arabs I should like to know of it."

"The trouble was caused by Zogorites, who I understand are not true Arabs," answered Worrals. "Forgive me if I seem discourteous, O sheikh,

but for reasons which I need not explain to you, this matter must be between women. The trouble might have been worse had these papers, printed by the Germans, been distributed in Hama and Homs. You may care to read one?" Worrals passed a leaflet.

The sheikh took it, put on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, and read it through.

"Now I understand perfectly," he said, in his well modulated voice. "Do you want these people arrested?"

"No," decided Worrals. "It is enough that we have seized the papers. The man attacked me and I fired in self defence, otherwise it was just a matter between women—you understand?"

"If need be, I will bear witness to that," returned the sheikh gravely. "But I do not think that will be necessary. These men will hardly spread a story that they were defeated by two—er——"

"*Bints?*" suggested Worrals.

The sheikh smiled. Then he became serious. "A word of warning. Ridicule, in Asia, is worse than death. These men will live for one thing—revenge. They will kill you if they can. My tribe, the Meni Sakhr, is numerous and powerful. If you need help, call on me. I will give orders that you are to be what we call *dackhile*—that is, inviolate. If you meet my warriors you need only say that you are in the face of Sheikh Azza, and all that they possess will be given to you. To-day, because I go to call on the British Commandant in Aleppo, I am a town Arab, but at home I am still an Arab of the desert. One day perhaps you will honour my humble tent with your presence."

"Thank you, sir; that is very kind of you."

The sheikh bowed. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye; it has been an honour to meet you," said Worrals, and walked back to the machine.

"By God!" cried Nimrud, as Worrals got into her seat. "Hear now plain words, O lady. This is a day to be remembered."

"It is a day to forget," ordered Worrals.

"What said the Sheikh of Sheikhs?" asked Nimrud eagerly.

"He will bear witness that this was an affair of women," replied Worrals. "Also, he has asked us to call on him."

"The hand of God is in this," declared Nimrud. "Go, O lady. Sheikh Azza is the richest man between Ankara and Cairo. He will give thee ten thousand camels."

“And what,” inquired Worrals, “would I do with ten thousand camels?”

“You could give them to me,” suggested Nimrud hopefully.

“I will bear it in mind,” promised Worrals.

“It will be as God decides,” murmured Nimrud piously. “I saw you shoot that swine under heaven. I could not have done it better myself.”

“Thank you, Nimrud. That is indeed a compliment,” murmured Worrals smiling, as she started the engine.

In twenty minutes the Heron was back on the aerodrome. Worrals rang up Major Kenton. “You’ll find the leaflets in a corner of the hangar,” she told him. “Yes, the whole lot. Don’t worry, it was strictly an affair between women, and the Sheikh Azza bin Shibla will, if necessary, bear witness. I haven’t time to tell you the whole thing now—I’m already two hours behind my schedule . . . thank you—good-bye.” Worrals hung up.

“What did he say?” asked Frecks, who was standing by.

A slow smile spread over Worrals’ face. “He said we shouldn’t have done it—we might have got hurt.”

“Well, of all the——” exploded Frecks.

“Let’s get off,” suggested Worrals. “I’m anxious to have a dekko at Wadi Omar. Come on, Nimrud!”

“O lady, why do I come with you?” asked Nimrud plaintively, as they walked towards the aircraft.

“What’s the matter—don’t you like coming with us?” inquired Worrals.

“Marshallah! It is not good for a man to feel that those he protects are protecting him. It is very much not good for a woman to lead, so that a man must follow. Am I ever to be an ornament, O lady?”

“What gave you the idea that you were an ornament?” said Frecks softly.

“Major Kenton said perhaps there would be fighting,” continued Nimrud, speaking to Worrals. “Yet when there is a promise of man’s work you say to me, stay here, as though I were the *bint* and thou the warrior.”

Worrals laid a hand on Nimrud’s arm. “Listen, O mighty hunter,” she said sympathetically. “This is a war on which rests not only the fate of men, but women. Therefore, it is only right and just that women should do their share.”

“Always the ready answer rises to thy lips, O lady,” grunted Nimrud.

“Presently there may be real fighting, and then you will show us what you can do,” consoled Worrals.

“It shall be as God decides,” murmured Nimrud. “I am relying on Him.”

X

DESERT FLIGHT

THE forty miles between Aleppo and Wadi Omar were soon covered. The wadi, as its name implied, was a shallow valley that had originally been the bed of a river. Running north and south it formed a long, dreary oasis in the wilderness.

Rather than have it appear that the aircraft had come direct from Aleppo, Worrals approached well from the north, and made a straight run over the *wadi* at a height of about a thousand feet, and then went on, without turning, to create an impression that the Heron was an ordinary service machine engaged on a routine operation. Frecks "fired" the camera at such features as Worrals directed, and in passing took six photographs. Worrals made a careful reconnaissance.

The *wadi* was about three miles long, although, except that its course was marked by a lot of loose rock, only a small part of it differed from the surrounding wilderness. About half a mile of it comprised the actual oasis, which was flanked by a straggling grove of palms, with two tents pitched on the fringe of the meagre shade they provided. At the inner end of the grove was the "dig," a jumble of excavations laying bare the foundations of the supposed Hittite city. At one point, not far from the tents, what appeared to be a sheer face of rock formed a natural boundary. To the north the ground rose sharply in a chaos of boulders. About twenty Arabs were working on the excavations. They looked up as the machine passed over. For the rest, the land lay dead, open to the parching sun, a sterile plain corrugated by numerous rock-strewn *wadis*. Some distance to the east the desert broke into a series of ridges formed by successive waves of volcanic rock. The whole presented a lifeless picture in brown and grey, without any scene to remember. Except for the oasis there was nothing to break the monotony of rock and sand, spotted with the eternal camel-thorn bushes.

Looking at this depressing spectacle from the air, Worrals found it hard to believe that this land was once "flowing with milk and honey"; that it might be the site of the Garden of Eden; that in their day, mighty empires had risen and fallen. Over the tracks that scarred the earth, one of which the Heron was now following, had marched in turn the great conquerors of the past—Xenophon, Alexander the Great, Roman emperors and Crusaders, at the head of their armed hosts. These were the roads that led to the Kalach

and Nineveh of Genesis, to Assur, Babylon, Ctesephton, and Baghdad, with its shining domes and stately palms.

Freckles broke in on Worrals' thoughts. "I didn't see any sign of an aircraft on the ground, nor did I see any place where one could land."

"It looks as if Major Kenton was right on that point," agreed Worrals. "The nearest place I noticed was that sandy *wadi* on the higher ground about four miles to the north. The photos may tell us something when we have time to look at them. I'm going right on to Baghdad. I reckon it's about two hours, so we ought to arrive in nice time for lunch. Are you all right, Nimrud?"

"Yes, my lady, under the mercy of God," returned Nimrud in a resigned voice.

The Heron cruised on across the wilderness, and after a flight of nearly two hours under a sky of hard, metallic blue, came in sight of a river which Worrals knew must be the Euphrates, and beyond, in the fertile plain beside the river Tigris, the famous city of romance—Baghdad.

She landed on the big R.A.F. aerodrome at Hinaidi, some seven miles from the city, and reported first to the duty officer, then the station commander, to whom she showed her papers and explained her mission. He gave them lunch, and after issuing instructions for the Heron to be refuelled, sent them on to the city in a service car. The camera was sent to the photographic section with a request that prints of the negatives be ready by the time they returned.

"I think it's about time you told me the object of this rather weary trip," complained Freckles as they drove into the city. "It was a longish way to come for lunch—wasn't it?"

"I wanted to have a chat with Professor Blake, head of the American Archæological Mission," explained Worrals. "He might—as they say—be able to cast a light on one or two patches of this affair that are still dim. The C.O. tells me that he lives at the Hotel Maude, so that's where we're going."

They found the professor just finishing his lunch, and after Worrals had made the introductions he invited them to take coffee with him. He was a fair, genial-looking man of about sixty years of age, bluff and matter-of-fact in his manner—not in the least the sort of man Worrals expected to find.

"What can I do for you?" he asked as they sat down at his table.

"We're making a few inquiries on behalf of our Intelligence section," answered Worrals. "If you don't mind I'd like to ask you one or two questions. They may seem strange questions to you, but I can assure you that I have a good reason for asking them."

Professor Blake looked slightly amused. “Fire away—I’ll do my best,” he promised.

“Do you know Doctor Bronfield?”

“Sure I do,” asserted the professor.

“How long have you known him?”

Professor Blake smiled. “About thirty years, I guess.”

“What does he look like?”

“Well, he’s tall, thin, looks a bit sun-dried. Regular features . . . grey hair and beard.”

“Do you happen to have a photograph of him?”

“No, and I can’t say that I ever saw one.”

“How long since you saw him?”

The professor stroked his chin. “Must be getting on for three years. He’s working a long way north of here.”

“Do you hear from him?”

“Sure—he sends me a report every month.”

“What about?”

“On what he’s doing. He has to send in reports for the Government, anyway.”

“Does he sign these reports?”

“Of course. It takes his signature to draw money to carry on.”

“Oh.” For a moment Worrals looked nonplussed. “You actually see his signature?”

“You bet I do.”

“And it has never occurred to you to question it?”

“Never. I’d swear to Bronfield’s handwriting any time. These reports come from him; you needn’t doubt that. Why, what’s wrong? Has he been getting into trouble with the natives—or the British authorities?”

“Neither,” replied Worrals frankly. “Do you know his daughters?”

“I’ve known them all their lives. In fact, I’m godfather to Helen—she’s the elder, you know.”

“How long since you saw them?”

“Oh, I haven’t seen them since the war started. Transport is difficult, you know.”

“Has it ever struck you as odd that Bronfield hasn’t been to see you?”

“No—why should it? After all, our work has been upset by the war. We just carry on as best we can. Bronfield has been doing well at Wadi Omar.”

“Have you ever had reason to doubt his integrity?”

The professor smiled again. “No. That’s something you needn’t question. I doubt if there’s a straighter man in the world.”

Worrals produced the photograph of the dead girl. “That isn’t either of Bronfield’s daughters, by any chance?”

“Nothing like either of them,” declared the professor without hesitation. “I never saw this girl . . . just a minute, though. I’m not so sure of that.” The professor adjusted his spectacles and looked again at the photo. “I reckon I do know this girl,” he said with a change of tone. “If I’m not mistaken, she was one of Brunowsky’s assistants. The whole bunch disappeared after the scandal of Teheran—but I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

Worrals threw a quick glance at Frecks, but her expression did not change. “Tell me about this man Brunowsky,” she prompted.

“Sure I will if it will help you any. Brunowsky called himself an American, but I heard afterwards that he was an Hungarian. He ran a business—a shady business, as it turned out—at Teheran, in Persia.”

“Just what sort of business?”

“Well, as far as I could make out, he was a sort of agent for a perfume concern—traded in the stuff they call ladanum. It’s a gum that forms on the bushes, and is the base of many perfumes. I don’t like it myself—you can’t get the smell of it out of your things if you once use it.”

Worrals glanced again at Frecks.

“But that, apparently, was only a blind to cover the real business,” went on Professor Blake. “Let’s get the story in proper order, as far as I remember it. The scandal happened when Doctor Bronfield was working on the ruins of Persopolis. I went up there several times to see him. Helen and Daphne were there, too. It seems that this fellow Brunowsky was always around, with a little racket of his own—although we didn’t know it then. Perhaps I had better explain that excavating to-day is a scientific business, run in conjunction with the Government of the country concerned, which, naturally, has the first right to claim anything found at the diggings. If that were not so a country would soon be denuded of its treasures. Everything found has to be submitted to the Government experts, who take a fair share, but leave something to the excavator for his trouble. With that arrangement we are content. Now, this sort of thing is all right until you come upon something of intrinsic value, small portable articles, like gold, or jewels. Most of the labourers are honest and hand over anything they find—it’s

really worth their while because they are always rewarded. But, of course, there are crooks in every business.”

Professor Blake broke off to light a cigar.

“The trouble at Persopolis started when the government inspector came along and alleged that certain articles—a gold foundation plate was one thing, I remember—had not been handed over. It had been smuggled out of the diggings. Bronfield at once got into touch with me and I went up. Of course, he was not to blame. You can’t watch every man all the time. It meant that Bronfield had a thief on his staff, and also that the thief had a market for his loot. We set a trap to catch him—to catch both the thief and the receiver of the stolen goods. It worked, too. To make a long story short, the things were traced to this chap Brunowsky, who had recommended men to Bronfield for the express purpose of pocketing anything worth while and handing it on to him. The thief, when we caught him, spilt the beans, as we say in the States. I went with Bronfield to see Brunowsky, and it was in his office, in Teheran, that I saw this girl whose photograph you have here. I expect they were all in the racket. Brunowsky started throwing his weight about, whereupon we reported the matter to the Persian Government, who pretty quickly gave Brunowsky his marching orders. The country was well rid of him. I think that’s about all.”

“When did this happen?” asked Worrals.

“Just before the war.”

“Could you describe this man Brunowsky?”

“More or less. He was a tall, good-looking man of about fifty, I should say——”

“Had he a beard?”

“No—not when I saw him. But that’s nothing to go by. A man can soon grow a beard. Have you had trouble with this chap?”

“I’m not quite sure—yet,” returned Worrals. “Just one last thing, sir.” She felt in the pocket of her uniform and took out the necklace. “Does that mean anything to you?”

There was a curious expression on Professor Blake’s face as he examined the locket. “Now where the deuce did you get that?”

“Is there anything remarkable about it?” parried Worrals.

“Well—er—yes. The stone and the setting is ancient Persian work—that’s what made me wonder how you came to get hold of it. The chain is modern. Somebody must have had it put on since Doctor Bronfield found the stone in the foundations of Persopolis.”

“Oh! So Doctor Bronfield found the stone?”

“Yes. He reported it, but when the government inspector came along it couldn't be found. We were annoyed because the stone is unique. Nothing like it had ever before been found in Persia.”

“If this is a modern chain, isn't there a chance that the whole thing might be a copy of the original?”

Professor Blake shook his head. “Absolutely none. I doubt if that stone could be copied.”

“This man Brunowsky might have stolen the stone?” suggested Worrals.

“It seems likely,” admitted the professor.

“I see. Thank you, sir. This is all very interesting.” Worrals stood up. “I am much obliged to you for giving us so much of your valuable time.”

“Well, I like that. Is that all you're going to tell me?” complained the professor.

Worrals smiled. “For the present. I may be able to tell you something more later on.”

“Do you want me to do anything?”

“Nothing at all, sir. Just carry on as usual. Don't mention this interview to Doctor Bronfield.”

“Very well, if that's how you want it.”

They shook hands and Worrals went out to the car. “This thing is definitely taking shape,” she told Frecks.

“It may be to you, but I don't get it,” declared Frecks. “The professor said that he is still getting reports from Bronfield, and could swear to his signature.”

“That, I admit, was a bit of a facer,” confessed Worrals. “I must have been wrong about Bronfield being murdered. It begins to look as though he's still alive. In fact, now I've heard the professor's story, I'm pretty certain that he is. This chap Brunowsky is in the offing, of course. The ladanum perfume is evidence of that. You noticed that Professor Blake said he was a Hungarian? His assistants might, therefore, be of the same nationality, which would link up with the Hungarian stitching of the *abba*.”

“It begins to look that way. But would Bronfield, if he were alive, go on sending in reports to oblige Brunowsky?”

“Perhaps he can't help himself. We know what Nazi methods can be like when they want something. They're rather fond of mental torture. I'll think about it on the way home. I'm glad we came. Let's get back to the aerodrome and have a look at the photos of Wadi Omar.”

Soon afterwards, in the photographic room, Worrals spent half an hour over the photographs, studying them under a powerful magnifying lens, a task in which Frecks shared.

“Well, what do you make of them?” asked Worrals at last.

“They seem all right to me,” replied Frecks. “There’s no sign of an aircraft, or even camouflage, that I can see. In fact, I can’t see a thing wrong with them.”

“Have another look at the palms—particularly those along the middle,” invited Worrals.

Frecks picked up the glass and studied the photographs again. “They’re palms all right,” she declared.

“Look at the shadows.”

“What about them?”

“Well, palms in any particular locality usually run about the same height, which means that the shadows would be the same length. According to those photos, judging by the shadows, the palms in the middle of that grove are definitely shorter than the outside ones. Actually it ought to be the other way about, because if the palms are round sub-surface water—and they usually are—they should be tallest in the middle. In most cases the palms tend to get dwarfed only on the outside, where the sun strikes full on them, and consequently dries out the ground.”

“You’re right about the shadows,” said Frecks, staring at the photos through the lens. “But what does this imply?”

“It doesn’t imply anything,” admitted Worrals. “It’s just curious, that’s all. In an air photo anything that doesn’t run true to nature is worth having a closer look at. When we go to Wadi Omar I hope to have another look at those palms from close range.”

“When are you thinking of going?”

“I’m just thinking about that,” answered Worrals.

“Isn’t it about time we told Major Kenton the whole story, and asked him to make a proper raid on Wadi Omar?”

Worrals shook her head. “I’m tempted to, because that would save us a lot of trouble, but the thought of the bust-up which would follow if we found nothing scares me stiff. We should certainly get a rap over the knuckles from the Higher Command, who might in turn get a rap from the Foreign Office for allowing a couple of irresponsible girls—that’s what they’d call us—to waffle around on their own account. Air Commodore Raymond has allowed us a lot of rope, and I’d hate to let him down. Apart from that, I prefer this

freelancing to routine operations, and I want it to go on. Aside from all that, we still have no real evidence. There's a world of difference between suspicion and proof. We've got to be sure of our fish before we strike—that's why I feel like having a look round Wadi Omar before we go to Major Kenton."

"You keep talking about going to Wadi Omar, but I'm dashed if I can see how we're going to do it," muttered Frecks.

"There are two ways," declared Worrals. "The first is to take horses and ride out openly on a sort of social visit. That would be the safest way, but somehow I feel that if we did we shouldn't see very much—Bronfield would take care that we didn't. The other way would be to fly out to that sandy *wadi* about four miles to the north, leave the machine there, and do a spot of quiet scouting."

"In broad daylight? We should be seen—so would the aircraft."

"I didn't say anything about daylight," countered Worrals. "We could go out at sundown and land. Then, after the moon comes up, about half-past nine, we could walk over to the oasis."

"This sandy *wadi* couldn't by any chance be the one that Bronfield uses, do you think?"

"It might be, but I doubt it," replied Worrals. "It's too exposed, and it's rather a long way from the oasis. Moreover, if machines had been landing there, there would be wheel-marks, and I didn't notice any, although I had a good look."

"Suppose we bump into Bronfield while we're scouting?"

"I should try to prevent such a thing happening. If it did—well, we should have to say that we had made a forced landing in the desert, and walked on to the oasis for help."

"When are we going to do this show—to-night?"

"It could be done. The sooner the better, before Bronfield can hit back at us. We know he doesn't like us, and sooner or later he's bound to learn about our grabbing those leaflets this morning."

"Don't forget that Major Kenton wants to see us to get the details about that."

"That's all right. We can tell him. If we start back right away we should be home with a good hour of daylight to spare. That would give us time to see Major Kenton, return to the aerodrome and go on to Wadi Omar."

"Are you going to tell Major Kenton about this trip to Baghdad?"

“Not unless he asks where we’ve been,” decided Worrals. “If he learns that we have been to see Professor Blake he’ll wonder what’s in the wind, and start asking awkward questions. With luck, by to-morrow morning we ought to be in a position to tell him the whole story, with sufficient evidence to put this fake archæologist where he belongs. Come on, let’s go.”

XI

SORTIE TO WADI OMAR

IT was nearly six o'clock when Worrals landed the Heron on its base aerodrome and asked the flight sergeant to have it refuelled as quickly as possible.

"It will be dark in an hour," she told Frecks. "Really, there isn't time to go up to headquarters if we are to get to Wadi Omar before nightfall. We couldn't go after that—at any rate not until half-past nine, when the moon comes up. I'd rather not risk a night landing. I think I'll give Major Kenton a ring on the 'phone and tell him we hope to be along to see him in the morning. If he asks where we're going I'll tell him we intend to spend the evening at Wadi Omar—which will be perfectly true."

"Okay," assented Frecks.

Worrals turned to Nimrud. "We shall be leaving the ground in about half an hour, so you'd better get something to eat while you can."

Frecks went with Worrals to the telephone in the station office, only to find, when the call had been put through, that Major Kenton had gone to dine at French headquarters, and was not expected back until late.

"That let's us out nicely," remarked Worrals as she hung up. "He can't say we didn't try to get in touch with him. Let's go into the mess and have a cup of tea."

"What about equipment?" asked Frecks. "Shall we need anything other than what we have?"

Worrals thought for a moment. "I don't think so. We've each got a torch and a gun—I hope we shan't need either. The Tommy gun is still under the seat, so we're pretty well armed if it comes to a rough house. I can't think of anything else that might be useful. There's no point in cluttering ourselves up with a lot of junk we probably shouldn't need."

They had tea in the mess, taking their time over it, and then went back to the Heron, where they found Nimrud waiting.

"We may as well get off," said Worrals.

The Heron was soon in the air again, and after an uneventful flight, with the sun setting behind it, glided the last few miles to make a safe and comparatively quiet landing in the sandy *wadi* which they had noted. Worrals taxied the machine to the end of the depression where, between

banks of camel-thorn, it was inconspicuous. She switched off. They all got out and took stock of their surroundings.

The wadi turned out to be less of a wilderness than had been supposed from the air. There were patches of herbage, mostly dry, wiry grass; but occasionally it was green, and gay with wild flowers, indicating the presence of water at no great depth. Conspicuous among the flowers were scarlet ranunculus, mauve stocks, mallow, dwarf hollyhocks, and, some distance away, a drift of blue linum in which a stork was searching diligently—so said Nimrud—for locusts.

“I can’t look at wild flowers without wanting to pick a bunch,” announced Frecks.

“Go ahead,” invited Worrals. “It will take us an hour to walk to Wadi Omar, and as it will be dark in a few minutes there isn’t much point in starting. We’ve got to wait for the moon, so it may as well be here. This is no time to sprain an ankle, as might happen, if we tried blundering about in the dark. Besides, we might lose our way.”

Worrals found a comfortable seat. Frecks picked a bunch of flowers. As darkness closed in she put them in the aircraft and joined Worrals. The stork flapped heavily away to its nocturnal quarters. After that, speaking in a low voice, Nimrud helped to pass the time by narrating many of his adventures, some of them humorous, others of a blood curdling nature. The hush that comes with night settled over the wilderness. The only sound was the occasional distant yelp of a jackal.

“It’s queer to think that had it not been for the war, at this moment I should probably be cleaning a typewriter in a dingy office, or perhaps going off to the cinema,” mused Frecks.

“Where would you rather be?” inquired Worrals.

“I’d rather be here,” asserted Frecks. “All the same, I don’t mind telling you that this ghastly loneliness frightens me nearly to death. But there is a thrill in it.” She threw a nervous glance at Nimrud. “How far are we from the dwellings of the Zogorites?”

“This is all their country,” announced Nimrud calmly. “Fear not, though, *effendim*,” he went on quickly. “At this hour they will be in their caves in the steep hills, which are many miles distant.”

“What do you mean when you say that this is their country?” asked Worrals.

“This is the manner of it, O lady,” explained Nimrud. “There are no boundaries in the desert, but for countless years each tribe has kept to one place for the grazing of its camels and sheep. No one disputes this. This is

the land of the Zogorites. To the south, and west, is the country of the Meni Sakhr, of the sheikh to whom you spoke on the Hama road. So the desert is divided. When all is at peace, no tribe would trespass against its neighbours; should it do so it might lead to war. But a lonely traveller—that is different. Doubtless he would be robbed, or even slain, by these Zogorites. When a tribe wearies of peace it may ride in *ghrazzu*; that is to say, it makes a raid on another tribe, seeking plunder, first giving honest warning of what is intended. Thus has it ever been between the true Arabs, O lady, and no man can stop it. To the Arab of the desert this is not war, but sport and business mixed, as it is understood by all. The warriors fight without animosity, and like not the interference of others in their private affairs.”

“Then the Zogorites might be out on the warpath, riding in—what do you call it—*ghrazzu*?” suggested Frecks anxiously.

“It is possible, but not likely, or I should have heard of it,” answered Nimrud. “When a tribe rides in *ghrazzu* all the others know of it, for the Arabs ride only against each other. But, as I have told you, these Zogorites are not true Arabs. It is possible that they may ride without giving warning, for being sons of Satan they do not obey the rules. It is hard to believe, but it is said that they have even killed sleeping men, which is a thing no true Arab would do. An honourable man gives warning. These Zogorites—may their children be despoiled—would kill a traveller for a pair of old sandals on his feet.”

Frecks looked at her feet. “In that case I hope we don’t run into any Zogs,” she murmured. “I’ve got new shoes on.”

“A Zogorite would cut thy throat for the laces in them,” said Nimrud evenly.

“You might have mentioned that before we started,” complained Frecks. “I should have thought twice about coming.”

Nimrud shrugged. “What need have we to worry, when we are under God?” he inquired blandly.

Worrals smiled. “Besides, what is a *bint*, more or less?” she put in sarcastically.

“What indeed?” quoth Nimrud seriously.

At length the rim of the moon, a sickle of pure silver, appeared above the jagged crests of the distant Kurdish hills. Without speaking they rose, and set off across the four miles of silent wilderness that separated them from Wadi Omar.

“Make no noise, *effendims*,” warned Nimrud in a whisper. “In the desert, by night, sounds travel far, and are understood at a great distance by those

who listen.”

The wilderness was not a desert in the usually accepted sense of the word. It was not a vast expanse of sand, for in Syria the big sands are confined to an area towards the south. Nevertheless, the landscape was not one to inspire confidence. Parched bare earth, shallow *wadis*, and rock, both loose and in wind-worn outcrops, followed each other in monotonous succession. Nimrud explained that for the most part the earth was fertile enough, and only water was needed to make the desert smile. When the early spring rains fell the land was bright with flowers. But that time was passed, and the fierce sun had laid everything bare except in those places where water had collected in pockets of rock, either on the surface or beneath it.

An hour's walk brought them to within sight of their objective—or rather, the lights that indicated its position. They were still some distance off. They walked on, now with more caution, and as they came to the last ridge of rock, which formed one of the banks of the valley, Worrals expressed her surprise at the scene that lay before them.

“It's nearly half-past ten,” she whispered. “I expected to find the camp settled down for the night; instead of which there are quite a lot of people moving about. Isn't it time they went to bed, Nimrud?”

“Yes, my lady,” answered Nimrud, and lying flat he surveyed the *wadi* with dark, moody eyes.

Running parallel with the bank, at a distance of perhaps a hundred yards, was the grove of palms to which Worrals had called attention when examining the photographs. With their fronds forming a clear-cut silhouette against the sky this grove was the most conspicuous feature. Among the trees, the lights of several lanterns were moving. Farther along, marking the position of the labourers' tents, camp fires of dried camel dung smouldered dull crimson. Beyond the palms, which kept strictly to the floor of the *wadi*, outcrops of rock, interspersed with bushes, rose in successive tiers to end at last in a sheer face of rock about sixty feet high. On this the moon shone brightly, and revealed, about half way up, a small black square that puzzled Worrals until she remembered what Bronfield had said about a tomb. At the base of this cliff, and some distance to the left, were the excavations. They could not be seen because the palm grove intervened, but Worrals knew their approximate position from her scrutiny of the photographs. The site was marked, however, by a lighted tent. Occasionally a voice called, and once Worrals thought she heard Bronfield speaking sharply, as though giving orders.

“What are we going to do?” breathed Frecks, when they had lain and watched this scene for some time.

“I don’t think we can do anything yet,” answered Worrals. “If we go down, with all those people about we shall certainly be seen. We’re in no hurry, so I think our best plan is to stay here until the Zogs pack up whatever they are doing. I hope it won’t be long.”

In this hope, however, she was disappointed. Time passed, and far from the oasis settling down the activity appeared to increase. A steady murmur of voices rose from the palms.

“I can’t imagine what on earth they’re doing,” muttered Worrals irritably, at the end of an hour. “It’s close on midnight. Nimrud, can you offer any explanation?”

“This is as strange to me as it is to thee,” answered Nimrud in a puzzled voice. “There is something happening, but I know not what. Not even Zogorites work at night unless there is some urgent reason, O my lady. The strangest thing of all is that some of the palm fronds move, while others do not. How can palms move when there is no wind? Doubtless God knows the answer, but I do not.”

“He’s right,” declared Frecks. “Just now I thought I saw the whole top of a palm move, but I didn’t mention it because it seemed so absurd.”

Hardly had the words left her lips when a number of men appeared, carrying between them what was undoubtedly a palm, but with a curiously short trunk. This they laid outside the grove, into which they again disappeared.

“Well, for the love of Mike,” muttered Frecks. “They’re cutting down the trees.”

“Not cutting down—taking down,” murmured Worrals. “I’m beginning to get the hang of it. I’ve got a pretty good idea why that belt of palms in the middle of the grove throw shorter shadows than those on the outside. They throw short shadows because the trunks are short. They’re dummies.”

“But you can’t make a dummy palm,” argued Frecks.

“I didn’t quite mean that,” returned Worrals. “Put it this way. The palms are portable. Originally no doubt, they were fixtures here. Now, when they are not wanted for camouflage purposes, they can be lifted out of the ground and carried away, leaving an area wide enough, or long enough, for an aircraft of the Heron type to land. Look, the men are bringing another one out. Major Kenton said there was no place here for a machine to land. He was wrong, but we can’t blame him for that. Really, you have to hand it to these Nazis for originality.”

“And all the activity is people clearing the runway?” whispered Frecks. “What do you know about that! But surely that means,” she went on quickly, “if the ground is being cleared, they’re expecting a machine?”

“I don’t think there’s much doubt about that,” replied Worrals. “Unless I’m mistaken, it won’t be long either. Those lanterns are being lined up to form a flare path. On a night like this, from the air, you’d see it fifty miles away.” She looked at her watch. “It’s getting on for one o’clock,” she observed.

“What are we going to do about it?” asked Frecks.

“Don’t talk for a minute. I must think about this,” returned Worrals, and silence fell.

It lasted for about ten minutes, and then it was broken by a sound that made Frecks move sharply. “Hark! It’s coming.” From the north-west came the unmistakable hum, distant as yet, of a low-powered plane.

“Listen, Frecks,” said Worrals tersely. “I think this is our chance. If we catch that plane here on the ground we’ve got Bronfield taped. Never mind anything else, he couldn’t explain that away. The trouble is, the machine may not stay. In fact, I’m pretty sure it won’t. They won’t risk that—there’s no reason why they should. The pilot may stay for an hour or so while the tanks are being filled, but the chances are that as soon as that is done he’ll head back to where he came from.”

“So what?” murmured Frecks.

“Obviously we’ve got to make that machine unserviceable, so that it can’t get off—at any rate, long enough for us to get in touch with Kenton and bring him here. We must be careful, though. Don’t forget the machine is a three-seater. If Bronfield took fright, he and his accomplices would be off in a brace of shakes. They’d slip through our fingers, and all that would be left would be these wretched Zogorite labourers. Once that machine is down we’ve no time to lose. Would you mind flying our machine back to Aleppo?”

“Without you?”

“Yes.”

“Of course I will. But what’s the idea?”

“When that machine lands I’m going to put it out of action. You get back as fast as you can and tell Major Kenton the whole story. Ask him to get some troops out here as quickly as possible.”

“But why don’t you come with me?”

“In the first place, if I go down to that machine I may not be able to get back. Secondly, somebody ought to keep an eye on things. It’s best that I should stay here. You go back—you can take Nimrud with you.”

“You’re more likely to need him than me.”

“I’m thinking of that walk back to the machine. That won’t be very nice, alone, at this time of night. Besides, you might lose your way.”

“Okay. But why not compromise?” suggested Frocks. “Nimrud can come with me as far as the aircraft, and then return to you, in case you need help?”

“That’s a sound scheme,” agreed Worrals. “Don’t go yet. We must make sure that the machine is coming here, and that I can deal with it. As soon as it lands I’ll go down. No, better than that I’ll go right away. When that machine lands everyone will turn to face it; every pair of eyes on the oasis will be on it. That will be my opportunity to get close without being spotted. Moreover, if I’m on the spot when the machine lands I shan’t miss anything.” Worrals got ready to move. “This is the arrangement. If I yell, you’ll know I’ve been caught. In that case don’t try to rescue me—you couldn’t do anything against this mob. Get back to Kenton and bring help. If all remains quiet, and I’m not back in half an hour, you’ll know that either I have disabled the machine or can see my way to do it. That will be your cue to get back and fetch Kenton. It’s no use fetching him only to find the machine gone.” Worrals turned to Nimrud. “You understand all this?”

“I understand, O lady. But where shall I find you when I return?”

“I’ll try to get back here,” promised Worrals. “If I can’t—well, you’ll just have to keep your ears and eyes open.”

“To hear is to obey, *effendim*,” murmured Nimrud.

While this conversation had been going on the drone of the machine had been drawing nearer, so that there was no longer any doubt about its objective. A flare blazed among the palms, the white light reflecting on the under-surfaces of the aircraft which, with engine idling, came gliding towards the palms.

“Right-ho,” said Worrals softly. “This is where I leave you. See you later.”

“Watch your step,” warned Frecks anxiously.

“I’m watching it,” returned Worrals grimly, and moved like a shadow down the gentle slope towards the palms.

Frecks could see her for a few minutes; then she was lost in the gloom. She saw the black outline of the aircraft as it glided low past the lights and

came to a standstill at the inner end of the grove. The pilot, she noticed, swung the machine round ready to take off before he switched off the engine.

Comparative silence settled over the oasis. One by one the lights were extinguished until only two remained—one near the stationary aircraft and the other in what was presumably Bronfield's tent. The general murmur of voices died away except for a mutter of conversation near the machine. Vague shapes moved from the palms towards the labourers' quarters. An atmosphere of peace settled over the oasis.

Frecks waited for half an hour by her watch; then she began to back away. "Come on, Nimrud," she whispered. "Time's up. Let's get along."

XII

IN THE ENEMY CAMP

THE desert moon was soaring high in the heavens like a luminous balloon as Worrals made her way down the slope to where the palms cast curious lattice-like shadows across the sandy floor of the *wadi*. Although she had little fear of being seen at that moment, when all eyes, she knew, would be on the landing aircraft, she did not go direct, but edged away to the left so that by making a detour round the centre of activity, she might approach from the far side and take cover among the bushes which mingled with the rocks below the cliff. And in this she was successful. Taking advantage of the noise made by the aircraft while it was taxi-ing to the extremity of the runway, she advanced swiftly through the unoccupied end of the palm grove, and reached the far side without interference. From there, passing close to the diggings and Bronfield's tent, keeping the scrub between her and the little group of people who were awaiting the aircraft, she had no difficulty in reaching a point within a score of paces of where she guessed the aircraft would stop. It was, she felt, a good position, because while she was in an area of deep shadow the end of the runway was in the full light of the moon. Moreover, behind her rose the cliff, making it unnecessary for her to keep guard in that direction. Standing motionless beside a bush she watched the proceedings.

The aircraft, a Heron, had now run to a standstill at the end of the runway. Two people, a man and a woman, conspicuous in white drill clothes of European cut, moved forward slowly to meet the pilot. The natives who had formed the rest of the group began to disperse, some to extinguish the lights, others to retire to their quarters. From the fact that they did not replace the palms in the holes from which they had been lifted—sockets which she could now see clearly—Worrals drew two conclusions. The first was that the machine would leave before dawn, for it was hardly likely that the runway would be left exposed during daylight hours; the second was that the machine would be on the ground for some time, otherwise the natives would have remained to replace the palms as soon as it had taken off.

Her attention was now confined entirely to what was going on by the aircraft, from which two passengers, or pilot and passenger, had now alighted. Had there been any doubt in her mind about the legitimacy of the proceedings it would have been banished by the language used for the

conversation that now ensued. It was German. She could hear every word distinctly; and she was not as surprised at the language employed as the tone of it. This was of such a nature that at first she could not get the situation in perspective. Of the two men who had got out of the machine, one stepped forward in a confident, business-like way. Addressing Bronfield he said curtly, as though he were a superior, "What have you been doing here, Brunowsky?"

The tone of the reply confirmed Worrals' impression that the man who had called himself Bronfield was subordinate to the newcomer; but this was a minor matter compared with the revealing name, Brunowsky. Worrals had, of course, suspected the impersonation, but proof coming as it did was as illuminating as a searchlight on a cloudbank.

Brunowsky, now to give him his correct name, answered: "I'm sorry, Herr Berthold, but there has been a little trouble lately."

"A *little* trouble?" returned Berthold sarcastically. "The Gestapo reports that you are getting in a mess. I've been sent down from headquarters to see what it's all about. You'd better give me the facts."

"First, as you know, we lost a machine," explained Brunowsky. "You can't blame me for that. How Greta came to fly into the hill I don't know."

"The best pilots make mistakes," snapped Berthold. "Go on."

"Naturally, we lost the paper. That held us up. Moreover, the crash told Major Kenton, of British Intelligence here, who is no fool, that we were using women—or it suggested the possibility to him. His answer was to use the same weapon. The British sent over two girls of the Women's Air Force. For some reason, which I haven't yet discovered, they seemed to suspect me right away. It's all the more remarkable because I have access to Kenton, who has never questioned my *bona fides*, possibly because he takes me for an American. I can't decide whether these girls are really clever, or just lucky."

"Never mind about that," rasped Berthold. "The result has been the same. If these girls have been a nuisance, why didn't you get rid of them? That shouldn't be difficult in a place like this."

Worrals made a mental note that Berthold was evidently a well-trained Nazi.

"They're as hard to kill as a pair of cats," answered Brunowsky. "As a matter of fact, until two hours ago I was under the impression that they *were* out of the way. I sent them a box of sweets, and shortly afterwards one of my men actually saw them on the floor, apparently dead. I worked on that assumption until two hours ago, when word reached me that they had held

up my camels this morning and seized the leaflets—at any rate, it was done by two girls flying an aeroplane, and from the description they must be the same ones.”

“Where are they now?”

“I don’t know. I’ve sent a man into Aleppo to look for them.”

“Have they been here?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Another plane has been allocated to you, but if you’re losing your nerve you’d better say so.”

“I’m not,” rapped out Brunowsky.

“Then get on with the distribution of this last propaganda story. It’s a good one, and it’s important that it should be got out quickly.”

“I’ll handle it,” promised Brunowsky. “Did you bring me any paper?”

“Yes, it’s here.”

“What about petrol? I reported that I was short. I’ve less than fifty gallons, which you will need to take you home. Before another machine comes out I shall have to have fuel—otherwise it will have to carry enough for the double journey.”

“So! I will see to it. You think you can manage?”

“Yes.”

The next question gave Worrals another thrill.

Berthold asked: “By the way, is Bronfield still behaving all right?”

“He daren’t do otherwise,” sneered Brunowsky. “He knows what will happen to his daughters if he is troublesome. They are difficult sometimes—but I can handle that. I give them an injection.”

Worrals experienced a twinge of cold anger at what this callous statement implied. It was clear now why Doctor Bronfield’s reports were still coming through. Pressure was exerted on the doctor by the Nazis through the daughters, who were kept quiet with drugs.

“I’ll note these points in my report,” said Berthold. “But you’d better get rid of these two flying girls before they get into mischief.”

“I will,” asserted Brunowsky viciously. “I’ll make sure of them next time. It ought to be soon. I’m expecting them here on a visit.”

“Will they come if, as you think, they are suspicious?”

“Oh, yes, they’ll come,” declared Brunowsky confidently. “That’s just the sort of thing they would do. Give the British enough rope and they usually hang themselves.”

“In that case it should be easy to get rid of them,” concurred Berthold. “By the way, let me introduce you to your new pilot—Otto Voss. He knows his way about the area. He also speaks Arabic and a little Turkish. In future he’ll bring the paper and anything else you need. There doesn’t seem to be any particular reason for using another girl, particularly as the one you recommended was fool enough to lose her way and crash. Don’t forget to give Voss the stone, to see him through the intermediate aerodromes. At present he has to carry identification papers, which would look bad if he had to come down in Turkey.”

“But I haven’t got the stone,” replied Brunowsky. “Greta had it. It was lost in the crash.”

“Haven’t you got a copy of it?”

“No.”

“Fool! Why use a thing that couldn’t be duplicated?”

“That’s the very reason why I used the stone,” rejoined Brunowsky. “I was told to provide a token that could not be copied or faked. That stone seemed to be the ideal thing.”

“Then why in thunder didn’t you get it back?”

“Because the British got to the crash first,” muttered Brunowsky. “I was not to know that the girl had flown into a mountain.”

“Where is the stone now?”

“One of the English girls has got it. I’ve tried to recover it.”

“You seem to be losing your touch,” sneered Berthold. “See about getting the stone immediately, otherwise orders will have to be cancelled right through the zone. As things stand, that stone would carry a pilot, even an enemy pilot, right through to Berlin without any questions being asked at the refuelling stations.”

“I’ll get it,” promised Brunowsky.

“There’s one other matter,” went on Berthold. “What’s all this about this Zogorite Sheikh demanding more money? Tell him he can’t have it.”

“I have told him, but he’s beginning to throw his weight about, and I daren’t risk getting wrong with him.”

“Why this sudden demand?”

“There’s a reason behind it,” asserted Brunowsky. “The swine is putting pressure on me deliberately. He’s had a brain-wave. He’s been pestering me for a long time to sell him the two Bronfield girls. Apparently he’s got a collection of slaves away back in the hills, and it tickles his fancy to have two white girls among them.”

“Will he pay good money for them?”

“Oh, yes, he’ll pay.”

Worrals quivered with fury when Berthold said: “Then why not let him have them if it will get you out of your difficulty?”

“It would only raise another. I have to use the girls to get Bronfield’s signature on the monthly reports that have to go to Baghdad. I also have to get him to identify such things as we dig up—we have to make pretence of carrying on with the work. If he loses sight of the girls he might refuse.”

“Are they all together?”

“Yes.”

“Does Bronfield know about the sheikh wanting the girls?”

“Yes—that’s the chief reason why he signs. I take the Sheikh in with me sometimes to ginger him up.”

Berthold laughed harshly. “Not bad. Tell the old man you’re merely putting them in another room.”

“I could try it, and see how he reacts,” decided Brunowsky. “I’ve got to see him to-night to get his signature on the current reports—they’re due to go off to-morrow.”

“Well, it’s up to you to solve your own difficulties,” averred Berthold. “But I can tell you this; you won’t get any more cash from headquarters. That seems to be all. I must see about getting back. I’ll take a bite of food first if you can accommodate me?”

“Come to my tent,” invited Brunowsky.

Berthold turned to the pilot. “Bring that bundle of paper with you, Voss.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to fill up with petrol first?” inquired Voss, speaking for the first time.

“Hylda will attend to that—she’s done it before,” said Brunowsky.

The three men moved off in the direction of the tent, while the girl Hylda, with a familiarity that was obviously the result of experience, went to the aircraft and unscrewed the cap of the petrol tank.

Worrals watched her with pardonable hostility, for there was every reason to suppose that this was the girl who had been responsible for putting the snake in the bed. Hylda was the girl—or rather woman—who had posed as a French officer to obtain access to their room in the hotel. Her figure, Worrals perceived, was about the same.

She had a shock when Hylda turned and walked almost directly towards her; but she passed by, and moving some rocks at the base of the cliff, reappeared with a petrol can in each hand. Carrying the cans two at a time,

Hylde proceeded with the work of refuelling the aircraft, taking the empty cans back with her.

Worrals moved farther into the bushes. It was clear that she could do nothing until this task had been completed, when, she hoped, Hylde would rejoin the men, leaving her free to make the aircraft unserviceable. She judged that half an hour had elapsed since she had left Frecks, who would, therefore, be on the point of setting out for their own machine. In an hour and a half, at the outside, she should be in Aleppo, which meant that Major Kenton and an armed force should arrive at Wadi Omar about sunrise. Her scheme, thought Worrals, was going well. Indeed, it was hard to see how it could fail—always supposing that the girl did not stay by the aircraft until the men returned, which she did not think likely.

Hylde took her time over the operation, much to Worrals' annoyance, but this was something she could not prevent without employing violence, and the time was not ripe for that. In her journeys to and from the petrol dump Hylde passed close to her hiding place, so she dare not move for fear of being seen. Silence had now settled over the oasis, a deathly hush in which the slightest sound would be magnified a hundred times. So Worrals remained still, curbing her impatience, and hoping fervently that the woman would soon depart.

It took Hylde nearly half an hour to finish her task, a period of time which Worrals employed by turning over in her mind the most effective way of putting the aircraft out of action. She could not, of course, break it up literally, for that would require tools, which she did not possess. Originally it had been her intention to disconnect the ignition leads and, if time, damage the magneto; but something that Brunowsky had said caused her to change her plan. The only petrol available at the oasis was now in the tanks, so if these could be emptied it would be an utter impossibility for the machine to get away. A damaged aircraft might be repaired by efficient mechanics, but without petrol the Heron would cease to be a vehicle of transport. The emptying of the main tank could easily be effected by turning the draining tap provided for that purpose. The petrol would then run out and be absorbed by the sand beyond hope of recovery. She was not sure about the gravity tank, but if there was no tap she was prepared to puncture it. This drastic treatment would, she realised, create a strong smell of petrol, but this, in a recently refuelled aircraft, while it might provoke comment, would not be so unusual as to cause alarm. Worrals therefore determined to empty the tank, which would enable her to achieve her object in the easiest and at the same time the most effective manner. It also had the advantage of being a silent operation, whereas her original plan, which would necessitate the

lifting of the engine cowling, might result in a noise loud enough to be heard in Brunowsky's tent.

Hylde, having finished her task, walked off a little way, but then, to Worrals' infinite disgust, sat down on a horizontal palm trunk and lit a cigarette. This was annoying, but as the minutes dragged on and the woman showed no signs of leaving, irritation gave way to alarm. It began to look as if the woman intended staying there until the pilot and his passenger returned to take off. If that happened, the whole plan, which was based on making the aircraft inoperative, would come to pieces. It was a contingency for which she had not made provision. The men had now been away for nearly an hour, and they might be expected back at any moment.

Her relief when, soon afterwards, Hylde got up and strolled in the direction of the tent, was heartfelt. Once the woman was out of sight she wasted no time. She went straight to the main tank and, groping in the dark—for she dare not risk using her torch—found the tap. The ice-cold spirit gushing over her fingers told her that her object had been achieved, and she was climbing to the gravity tank, which was in the centre section, when approaching voices sent her hurrying back to the cover of the bushes.

The flap of Brunowsky's tent had been thrown open and the three men had emerged. They stopped just outside, talking. Worrals held her breath in a fever of suspense, for should they go straight on to the machine the steady drip of petrol could not pass unnoticed. There could be no question of her going back to the machine while the men remained where they were, for as it stood in full moonlight she would almost certainly be seen. So she waited, nerves tense, hoping desperately that the men would retire again, if only for the minute that was required to enable her to finish her work.

The men stood talking for about a quarter of an hour. Hylde was not with them. Why they had elected to come outside the tent to finish the conversation was not clear. There appeared to be no reason for it. One of them, perhaps, had had an afterthought. As far as Worrals was concerned, it was an unfortunate mischance—another of those trivial events upon which, as she had often noticed, the fortune of war depends. Eventually, still talking, they walked on to the machine.

Worrals' heart sank, for she saw that her chances of being able to get to the gravity tank were now remote. It meant that she had to readjust her aspect of the situation. The machine would be able to take off, but as the main tank was empty it would not be able to get far. It would have to land in Syria, although just where that would be would depend on where and when the pilot discovered his loss, which would be when he switched over from gravity to the main tank. He would take off on gravity, for that was the

purpose of the tiny tank. When he would switch over depended entirely on whim or habit. He might do so almost immediately; on the other hand, he might wait several minutes. Only one thing was certain. When he did switch over the engine would cut out. Thereafter one of the two courses would be open to him. He might continue flying for a little while, either on his original course or back to the landing-ground; or he might go straight down and land, should a place be available. Provided he came down in Syria, reflected Worrals, it really did not matter. R.A.F. machines could be sent out to look for him. The movable palms, if nothing else, would provide Major Kenton with evidence of the fraudulent nature of the diggings.

In all these assumptions Worrals gambled on one thing—that the pilot, before taking off, did not look at his petrol gauge. This, of course, since the tank was empty, would register zero. She did not think he would look, because he would take it for granted that the tank was full. Hylda would probably have told him so. Still, he might notice it more or less by accident, and just what would happen in that case provided an interesting field for speculation. There would probably be an argument, in which Hylda would get the blame, as to how the draining tap came to be turned on. The important thing was, there was no more petrol, and Voss would hardly take off with an empty main tank.

As Worrals expected, he noticed the smell of petrol, and his reaction was natural.

“*Donner!*” he exclaimed. “That girl certainly splashed petrol about. No wonder you are short, Brunowsky. You should tell her to be more careful.”

“She isn’t usually as careless as that,” replied Brunowsky in a puzzled voice.

“Never mind,” interposed Berthold. “I’m glad we’ve had this talk—it has cleared up a lot of things about which we were in doubt. You’ll get more paper and fuel in due course. Don’t use your radio more than is absolutely essential—it’s dangerous.”

Worrals noted that the oasis was equipped with radio. She thought it might be, but this was the first time it had been mentioned.

Pilot and passenger got into their seats. The door slammed. The engine started, and after a moment or two the machine began to move forward. Worrals smiled. Voss had *not* looked at his petrol gauge. A swirl of dust thrown up by the slipstream sent Brunowsky backing to within a few yards of where Worrals crouched. The aircraft took off and in a moment was lost to sight. Brunowsky blew a whistle, a signal that was evidently expected, for the Zogorite labourers at once reappeared and started to replace the palms

with a confidence that made it clear that they had done the job before. Leaving them at their work, Brunowsky walked back to his tent. Worrals stayed and watched the labourers. It was, she had to admit, a clever scheme. Each tree was raised erect and the stump of the trunk dropped into a slot prepared for it. Loose sand was then heaped around the base so that anyone unaware of the deception would not be likely to notice it. The only weakness was the shortness of the trunks, which had necessarily been reduced in length to make handling possible. The runway disappeared, and the grove once more began to take shape.

As Worrals watched she listened to the purr of the departing aircraft, expecting every moment the sudden cessation of sound that must inevitably occur when the pilot switched over to his main tank. Waiting, the break seemed a long time coming. The drone became so faint that had she not been listening she would not have heard it. When the break did come Worrals' lips parted in a faint smile of professional sympathy. She could well imagine the pilot's consternation. An engine seldom cuts out dead. It usually gives a little warning. And the Syrian wilderness was no place for a forced landing. Unless the pilot had climbed steeply he would not be very high, so he would need all his wits to get down without a crack-up—although that would depend largely on the nature of the ground under him.

Worrals listened for a little while to see if the pilot, discovering his trouble, switched back to gravity. In that case she would not have been surprised to hear him coming back. But the silence remained unbroken, so she assumed that he had gone down. She glanced at her watch and noted that an hour and a half had elapsed since she had left the others, who should, therefore, now be in the sandy *wadi*—if, in fact, Frecks had not already taken off.

Worrals decided that the time had come to explore, and she was considering where to start when Hylda came out of Brunowsky's tent carrying the bundle of paper that had just arrived. With an electric torch in her left hand she made her way towards the face of the cliff some fifty paces from where Worrals stood. Instantly the question occurred to Worrals, what was she going to do with the paper? The answer was automatic. She was taking it to the printing press to start work on the leaflets which, Berthold had said, were to be got out as quickly as possible.

Worrals was no longer in any doubt as to where to start exploring. Moving like a ghost among the rocks she followed the torch.

XIII

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PAST

HYLDA walked like one who follows a familiar path.

Skirting the excavations which, with their lines of masonry and exposed foundations looked wonderfully like the blitzed area of an industrial town, she made her way to a point where the ruins met the sheer face of rock. Here she disappeared behind a great heap of brushwood and camel-thorn, which, apparently, had once covered the site.

Approaching the spot cautiously Worrals saw that a narrow gap existed between the brushwood and the cliff, so that it was possible to pass behind the dump. Entering the gap, the reason for the dump was at once explained. It served to conceal a low, door-shaped opening in the rock, obviously artificial, similar to the one higher up in the cliff overlooking the runway.

Reconnoitring the opening Worrals found herself looking up a rough-hewn, square-cut corridor, or passage, of considerable length, the length being revealed by a light, presumably the one carried by Hylda, which was not less than fifty yards distant, and still moving forward. As she watched, it moved sharply to the right, as though the passage turned at right angles. The glow of the torch faded slowly, creating an impression that Hylda was still walking on. Faint sounds of movement reached the mouth of the tunnel to confirm this. Worrals was not particularly surprised. Brunowsky had spoken of ancient Hittite rock dwellings when he had visited them in the hospital. This part of his story was evidently true.

Worrals began walking slowly up the corridor which, apart from the roughness of the walls and the square-cut ceiling, was reminiscent of a London tube subway. She had to use her torch, for the darkness was so intense as to be almost tangible; but by covering the bulb with her handkerchief, and holding it downwards, she restricted the area of light to as much as she needed for safe progress. In this manner she proceeded towards the spot where Hylda had disappeared. It was, she observed, a good thing that she had a torch, otherwise progress would have been dangerous, if not impossible; for as she walked on, the track became narrower, due to various objects being piled against the walls, the results of Brunowsky's excavations. There were heaps of rubble, mud bricks, tiles, quantities of potsherds, several huge amphora-shaped oil or water jars, and some long stone receptacles that were unmistakably coffins. In each case the lid had

been removed, or broken, presumably in order that the excavators might examine the contents. Worrals looked into one and found a few scraps of bone; it crumbled to dust between her fingers.

In the walls on either side now appeared niches which from their shape had clearly been designed to hold the coffins. There were also openings leading into cell-like compartments. In these, too, the walls had been fashioned to hold coffins. In view of these dismal remains it struck Worrals that the labyrinth was not a dwelling place so much as an ancient burial ground, but even death had so long ago departed from the scene that no atmosphere of it remained, and Worrals went on without experiencing any qualms on that score.

As she drew near to where Hylda's torch had disappeared, a feeble glow fell across the main corridor to guide her. Sounds, too, began to occur—queer sounds for such a place, she thought—the click and snap of metal on metal, as though someone was handling a piece of machinery.

She soon discovered that this was, in fact, the case. At the extreme end of one of the chapel-like cavities, considerably deeper than most, stood Hylda, plainly revealed under a shaded electric bulb. Mounted on a rough wooden bench was a machine, not unlike a typewriter, but several times larger. A pile of paper rested on the bench beside it. Hylda was inserting a piece into the machine. Even while Worrals watched, she pulled a lever, raised it, removed the paper and held it to the light as if to examine something on it. Worrals had never seen a hand-printing-press, but it required no effort of the imagination to deduce that she was now looking at one. What Hylda was doing was obvious. She was printing a new supply of leaflets. Worrals watched for a moment; then her eyes explored the rest of the compartment. There was only one object of interest, and that was a small, but efficient-looking radio transmitter.

Worrals hesitated, not quite sure what to do next. Clearly, it was not the moment to disturb the woman at the bench and create a scene. Now that she had located the printing press there seemed to be little reason for remaining in the cave at all. Observing that it ran on past the compartment into which she was looking, she decided that it might be worth while investigating, if only to see how far it went. She had, of course, switched off her light before looking into the chamber; but as soon as she had taken a few paces beyond it, she switched on again.

In the light of the subdued beam she soon saw that she had reached the end of the cutting. But the subway did not end in a blank wall. Just before the terminus it widened to a seven-sided area of considerable extent—not less than twenty yards across. It was rather like a small theatre, except that

there was no stage and the floor was level. As in the case of the corridor, the ceiling and walls were bare rock, still showing traces of the primitive tools that had fashioned them. Round the walls were strewn coffins, potsherds and old bones. A small object on the opposite wall attracted Worrals' attention, and walking over to it she found, to her astonishment, that it was a padlock on a chain. This appeared at first sight to be attached to the rock, but closer inspection showed that one of the staples was not embedded in rock, but in wood, painted to resemble the rock. After that it was an easy matter to trace the outline of a door. Not a little interested in this discovery Worrals switched off the torch and put it in her pocket, one reason being that she wanted her hands free, and another, she was afraid that Hylda might come out into the corridor, when she could not fail to see the light.

Exploration by hand told her very little more. The door was locked. That it was built of heavy timber was made apparent by the fact that it refused to yield in the slightest degree to pressure. One thing was certain. The door was not the work of the Hittites, or whoever had built the catacombs. The wood was new. It had, therefore, been introduced by Brunowsky to conceal something. But what?

Worrals was still pondering on this problem when sounds of movement came echoing along the corridor. Looking down it she saw a light approaching. It was not a torch, but a lamp that shed an even light all round. The light fell on the white duck suit of Brunowsky, and beside him, the flowing *gumbez* of an Arab. Brunowsky was carrying something in his hand, something white. It looked like a roll of paper. The two men talked in normal tones as they walked on up the subway.



Wonnals hesitated, not quite sure what to do next.



Clearly, it was not the moment to disturb the woman.

Worrals was alarmed, but not scared, because she felt sure that Brunowsky was going to see Hylda. That was the obvious assumption. If that were so, he would not come as far as the head of the cutting. Nevertheless, Worrals realised that if she continued to stand in the open there was a chance of the light reaching her, so she moved swiftly to one of

the side walls which, on account of the shape of the head of the cutting, could not be seen from the corridor.

Risking a peep round the intervening wall she saw with consternation that the two men had passed the opening that gave access to the chamber in which Hylde was working, and were coming right on. Obviously, if she remained where she was she must inevitably be seen by the men as soon as they reached the head of the tunnel. In sheer desperation she looked round for a hiding place, not expecting to find one. Nor was there such a place as she would have chosen. But there were half a dozen coffins lying at various angles near the wall, and any one of them offered the retreat she so urgently needed; a hiding place which, if not ideal, was at least handy and adequate. The old adage, any port in a storm, came to her mind as, gathering her skirt about her legs, she disposed herself, face upwards, in the nearest one, which was of more than sufficient depth to accommodate her slim figure. As she wriggled to get as low as possible she could feel the old bones crumbling beneath her weight; and even at that critical moment the incongruity of her position nearly made her smile. The exigences of war had forced her to share a compartment with the mortal remains of a man, or woman, who had died before the dawn of history. It would be difficult she thought, to imagine anything more fantastic.

Footsteps approached. A moment later the two men walked past—Brunowsky, within a yard of where she lay. He was speaking in a language which she did not understand, but she caught the words, “*bint*” and “*sheikh*.” It was only necessary for her to move her eyes to see them; and as she glanced again at the paper which Brunowsky carried in his hand, she remembered what he had told Berthold about getting Doctor Bronfield to sign the monthly reports. It seemed a strange hour for such a visit—until she realised that it must be getting on for dawn.

Brunowsky went straight over to the padlocked door. Reaching up, he took down a key which hung on a nail. Worrals hadn’t noticed it, and she kicked herself, mentally, for the oversight. She wondered vaguely what would have happened if she had found it. It seemed likely that she would have gone in, in which case she might well have been inside when Brunowsky arrived. Perhaps she had been lucky in missing it, after all.

Leaving the key in the lock Brunowsky went in, followed by the native who Worrals now realised must be the Zogorite Sheikh Ali. She heard a man’s voice say, petulently, in English with a slight American drawl, “What do you want now, Brunowsky? Can’t you leave us alone?”

Brunowsky answered: “I work when there is work to be done—and there is work to be done now. Get up and sign these papers.”

“I won’t,” was the short answer.

“We’ll see about that,” snapped Brunowsky.

A female voice broke in. “Leave my father alone, you double crossing Nazi rat.”

“Any more of that talk and I’ll send Hylda to deal with you,” rasped Brunowsky.

At this juncture the door was shut, so that Worrals heard no more.

Still lying in the coffin she thought quickly. The situation seemed to offer opportunities of which advantage might be taken, but it was not easy to reach a decision. She might, she thought, lock the door on Brunowsky and the sheikh, for the key had been left in the lock. In that case, though, Hylda, and perhaps others, would come to see what had become of him. Brunowsky’s disappearance would certainly stir up the oasis, and she had no desire to take on more trouble than she could handle. Perhaps it would be better to wait. The key had been taken from a nail on which it was evidently kept; it seemed likely that Brunowsky, when he came out, would replace it. If so, after he had gone she would be able to get in to the Bronfields and advise them of the position.

So in the end Worrals did nothing, and after about five minutes the two men came out. The sheikh was grinning unpleasantly as though enjoying a joke. Brunowsky locked the door, and to Worrals’ infinite satisfaction rehung the key on the nail. Then, without speaking, they went back down the passage. As the light receded darkness crept back into the head of the tunnel.

As soon as they had gone Worrals sat up. The movement disturbed some dust, and for a ghastly moment she thought she was going to sneeze. Gasping, she clutched her nose and pressed on her top lip. The spasm passed. With little pieces of bone sticking to the material of her uniform she got out of the coffin and took a peep down the passage. She was just in time to see the men turn into the printing room. There was no knowing how long they would stay there. They might be some time; on the other hand, they might come out almost at once. So Worrals watched, ready to dash back to the coffin should danger threaten. Then the men reappeared and went on towards the entrance. She drew a deep breath of relief, feeling slightly weak from strain.

She was ready now to go in to the Bronfields, but she was rather worried about Hylda. The woman might come out, and notice that the door was unlocked. It might be better to wait a little while. After all, there was no particular need for haste. She knew, now, nearly all there was to know about

the oasis. At dawn, or soon afterwards, Major Kenton would be along with the troops. By this time Frecks would have told him all about it.

Sitting on the edge of the coffin she considered the situation, and as she sat there a strange noise, like the murmur of a distant tide, echoed eerily through the cutting. She could not think what it could be, unless it was one of the earth tremors not uncommon in the district—a possible explanation that gave her a nasty jolt. In a tunnel, a hundred feet or more under the earth, was no place for such an experience. Risking another survey of the subway, the earthquake theory came back with renewed force when she saw Hylda making for the entrance. She was running. This disturbed Worrals not a little. If there was cause to run, then it seemed that the matter was urgent.

The noise had now stopped—or rather, faded away; and from the manner of its cessation it suddenly struck her that it might have been an aircraft, the noise of the engine distorted by the shape of the corridor. Frecks would hardly have had time to get to Aleppo and back, but it was possible that Berthold and Voss had decided to return. If so, there was nothing she could do about it.

She waited, but as time passed, and nothing happened, she became reassured. Everything was now quiet, inky black, so she decided that she would have a word with the Bronfields. It would cheer them up to know that their troubles were at an end. She needn't necessarily stay with them, although as she knew as much as she wanted to know about the oasis to justify a raid, there was nothing more she could do until Major Kenton arrived.

Switching on her torch she went to the door, took down the key and let herself in. The room was in total darkness.

Said a man's voice, irritably, "Now what do you want?"

Worrals answered softly. "This is not Brunowsky, Doctor Bronfield. I'm a friend. Help is on the way. Please remain quiet."

A match scraped, flared up, and was applied to a candle. As the yellow light flickered Worrals closed the door and looked with commiseration at the scene before her.

The room itself was fairly large, similar to the compartment in which the printing press was installed. The furniture comprised two ramshackle deck chairs, a deal table, and three camp beds lined up against the far wall. Each bed held an occupant, who now sat up to ascertain the nature of the intruder. They were an elderly, grey-bearded man, whose face was painfully thin, and two girls in the early twenties. One of the girls was fair, with a disfiguring

scar on her forehead. The other was dark. More than that it was impossible to see in the dim light.

“Am I right in supposing that you are the Bronfields?” said Worrals.

The elder of the two girls, the fair one, got out of bed. She was dressed in shirt and slacks. “I’m Helen Bronfield,” she answered. “This is my father—and my sister Daphne. Who are you?”

“Flight Officer Worrals, of the British Woman’s Auxiliary Air Force,” replied Worrals. “I hope your troubles are nearly over. I’ve sent for help, and it should be here pretty soon.”

“But what about this villain Brunowsky?” asked Doctor Bronfield. “He’s a Nazi, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” returned Worrals. “He’s still at large, but I think the situation is in hand—as they say. I dropped in to let you know, but there is nothing we can do until the troops arrive. I’m afraid you’ve had a bad time.”

Doctor Bronfield and Daphne scrambled out of bed. They were also dressed.

“That scoundrel Brunowsky has held us prisoner here for nearly three years,” said Doctor Bronfield wearily.

Worrals caught her breath at this tragic announcement. “They’ll pay for it, sir, don’t you worry,” she said, in a hard voice. “For the moment you had better stay here, but you might be getting ready to move should it become necessary.”

“We’re ready,” said Helen. “Where is that unnatural beast of a woman they call Hylde? She’s worse than any male Nazi.”

“As bad as that?” queried Worrals.

Helen touched the scar on her face. “She did that, with a red hot knitting needle, because I tried to protect my father,” she said simply.

“You may get a chance to repay the debt,” said Worrals. “She’s still about, somewhere. Remain quiet while I see what things are like outside. Better put the light out in case anyone is about.”

Helen complied.

Worrals opened the door a few inches and looked out. She stood still, tense, for several seconds—so long, in fact, that Doctor Bronfield whispered, “What’s the matter—has something gone wrong?”

Worrals closed the door and looked over her shoulder into the room. “Yes, I’m afraid it has,” she said quietly. She drew her automatic and took a firm grip on the butt. “Wait here,” she said, “I’ll be back.”

She went out, closing the door behind her.

XIV

FRECKS HAS A TOUGH TIME

FRECKS had set a fast pace for the sandy *wadi*, a pace that eventually brought a groan of protest from Nimrud.

“O lady, what is in thy legs that thou art able to move them in the manner of a frightened foal?” he demanded in a melancholy voice as he tagged along behind.

“Ostrich feathers,” answered Frecks cheerfully. “What’s the matter? Can’t you take it?”

“The legs of a man like me were not made for walking,” protested Nimrud.

“What were they made for?” inquired Frecks.

“For gripping the flanks of a thoroughbred mare,” averred Nimrud earnestly.

“Have you ever wondered what the mare thinks about that?” asked Frecks.

“What does it matter what she thinks?” returned Nimrud wonderingly. “Once I am astride her, no power under God—to Whom all things are possible—can move me.”

“This should teach you to remember the mare’s legs next time you are on her back,” remarked Frecks calmly.

There was a short pause. “Are all *bints* in thy land like thee, *effendim*?” inquired Nimrud curiously.

“Most of them,” replied Frecks brightly.

Nimrud thought for a moment. “It may be that the men have done some evil thing in the past that they should be thus afflicted?” he suggested gravely.

“That may be the answer,” agreed Frecks.

“At all events, it is the will of God,” asserted Nimrud.

“Undoubtedly.”

“It will be a night to be remembered,” said Nimrud in a resigned voice.

“You’re telling me,” muttered Frecks.

In spite of Nimrud's complaints they made good time, and in three-quarters of an hour by Frecks' watch they came to some rising ground from where they could see the *wadi*, a few hundred yards ahead, still and silent in the clear moonlight.

Frecks stopped. "Everything seems to be all right," she observed. "I can see the machine. As you have to walk back, Nimrud, I don't think there is any need for you to come any farther."

"It is for you to decide," declared Nimrud.

"Okay. I shall be all right now. You can start back. See you later, Nimrud."

"Farewell, O persecutor of men," answered Nimrud.

Smiling at Nimrud's droll quip, Frecks strode on. Not until she had gone a little way did she realise that her previous confidence had largely depended on the presence of her companion. The wilderness seemed a lonely place without him, and she found herself glancing apprehensively at every shadow. The yap of a jackal at no great distance sent her reaching for her gun. But she walked on, and in some five or six minutes was within a stone's throw of the aircraft, which stood, she observed, precisely as they had left it.

Then the sound of a human voice made her heart give a jolt, and brought her to a stop. Her first impression was that Nimrud had followed her after all, perhaps to remind her of something; but it struck her that it was not like him to speak from a distance where he himself had advised silence. She looked back up the gently sloping bank of the *wadi*, but seeing nothing, turned her attention elsewhere. Her eyes were not long finding what they sought. From behind a fold in the ground, within fifty yards of the machine, came three figures. The white moonlight fell on loose Arab robes, giving them a ghost-like appearance.

For a moment, while the figures walked on slowly down the *wadi* towards the aircraft, Frecks stared in surprise and not a little apprehension. Her pulses quickened when it suddenly struck her that there was something familiar about the figures—one tall man and two short ones. Two of them carried rifles. The tall man, it seemed, walked with difficulty, for he was being helped along by his companions. And it was this that told Frecks the horrid truth. They were the three Zogorites whom she and Worrals had held up on the Hama road. The tall man was he who had been shot. They were, fairly obviously, making their way home, the *wadi* being, according to Nimrud, in Zogorite country.

The shock of this discovery turned Frecks' mouth dry. Bitterly she repented her haste in dismissing Nimrud, who, she realised with something like despair, would now be not less than a mile away, for they had walked in opposite directions. There was no hope of reaching the aircraft before the Zogorites, who by their behaviour had already seen it, and were making straight for it. So she sank down behind a bush, watching helplessly. Not altogether helplessly, perhaps, for she drew her automatic and derived some comfort from its cold butt. The question was, what would the men do next? If they went on, as she hoped they would, to report their find to their chief, she would be only too happy to see them go. She thought of several things that might happen—none of them correct, as it fell out.

One of the men suddenly raised his voice in excitement. What he said Frecks did not know, for he spoke, she supposed, in Arabic. But when the men, bending low, started walking towards her, she knew what had happened. Their eyes, trained from birth to read every mark in the desert, had found the tracks leading from the machine, and they were now following them.

This for Frecks was about the worst thing that could have happened, as she was not slow to realise, for she was returning along their own tracks, and was therefore in the path of the approaching men. Clearly she could not remain where she was, for if she did, discovery was certain. She was prepared to fight if necessary, but she much preferred to avoid hostilities with three antagonists who were, so to speak, on their own ground. In the hope, then, of avoiding a conflict, she began crawling out of the line of the men's advance, and by taking advantage of every scrap of cover she did succeed in getting a fair distance without being seen. With her heart pounding uncomfortably, she now rested, hoping that the men would pass on—at any rate for a distance sufficient to allow her to make a dash for the machine. But when they came to the spot where she had crouched on the track, they stopped, and with a sick feeling in the stomach she knew that their eagle eyes had again read the story in the sand. They knew that one of the party had returned, and had turned aside from the path. Their thick guttural voices came harshly to Frecks' ears, and she caught the word "*bint*." It struck her then that they had recognised the machine. Even if they had not, the two pairs of European shoe-tracks would tell them to whom it belonged. There could hardly be more than one aircraft being flown about the desert by two *bints*.



The shock of this discovery turned Frecks' mouth dry.

Frecks perceived that the situation was desperate. She thought of firing her gun in the hope that Nimrud would hear the shots and return, but before she could do that, she reflected miserably, her throat would probably be well and truly cut. If these men, in the ordinary way, would commit murder—as Nimrud had averred—for a pair of shoe-laces, what would they not do to a girl who had held them up to ridicule and shot one of their number? Whatever happened, decided Frecks, she was not going to be captured. In sheer desperation she started crawling towards the machine.

She did well, and it was to some extent her own fault that she did not do better. She was within a score of paces of the aircraft, still crawling, and was about to make a dash for it, when her hand came down on the thorns of a fallen cactus leaf. The pain brought an involuntary cry to her lips. Actually it was little more than a gasp, but in the silence of the desert it sounded a good deal louder. Realising instantly what she had done, she did not wait for the inevitable result. She made for the Heron as a startled rabbit makes for its burrow. A shout told her that she had been seen.

Reaching the cockpit, she jumped in, slammed the door, turned on the petrol and felt for the starter. A glance through the side window showed the men pelting down the hill. The starter whirred. The engine coughed, back-fired, and then stopped. She forced herself to remain calm. Again the starter whirred. As the engine came to life a bullet hit the machine somewhere with a vibrant *whang*. With her free hand, for the other still grasped the automatic, she felt for the throttle. By that time the leading Zogorite had reached the machine. He made a leap at the cockpit and clung to it like a monkey. Frecks pointed the muzzle of her gun at the glass and pulled the trigger. She did not see the result—except that the figure disappeared. The second native who now ran up swerved towards the tail, with what object she did not realise until she pushed the throttle open. She now needed her right hand for the control column. Dropping the automatic on her lap, she grasped the joystick and pushed it forward as the first move in taking off.

The engine was now roaring, but the aircraft, instead of running forward at high speed, moved sluggishly, as though there was no power behind the airscrew. For a moment this extraordinary, almost uncanny, state of affairs had Frecks completely baffled. Then she guessed what had happened. Looking round, through a blur of flying sand, she saw a Zogorite, his *gumbez* whirling in the slipstream, lying across the fuselage just in front of the fin, evidently trying to prevent the machine from moving. In this he was to some extent successful, due to the fact that the machine could not get a start. To Frecks the affair began to assume the fantastic unreality of a nightmare.

Encouraged possibly by his initial success, the man sought to improve his position or get a better grip by climbing astride the fuselage. This was his undoing. The machine got a start, and after that the result was never in doubt. Slowly but surely the airscrew won, and the machine moved forward at ever-increasing speed. Nevertheless, it had not been designed to take off with a heavy weight on its tail. Frecks had no idea what would happen next. She did not think the machine would get off. At any rate, it would need a

long run—longer than the *wadi* provided. Still, she had no intention of stopping.

Her problem was solved for her when the Zogorite fell off—or was blown off. The Heron's tail, suddenly released, swung up, so high that the airscrew nearly bit into the sand. Frecks, who had not thought about, much less adjusted, her safety belt, pitched forward. The automatic clattered to the floor, but she didn't care about that now. Recovering herself, she pulled the joystick back to get the tail down, eased it, and in a moment was running smoothly for a normal take-off. She gasped with relief, but as she looked forward to see where she was going, the gasp died on her lips. Another machine was gliding towards her. For a fleeting instant she thought that in some impossible way it was her own shadow. Then she knew that this could not be, for her own wheels still vibrated, which told her they were still on the ground, whereas those of the approaching aircraft was clear. As this thought flashed through her head her action was instinctive—or perhaps it would be more correct to say intuitive, the result of training. One of the first laws of aviation is that machines on the ground must give way to a landing aircraft. It was her duty to give way. She did not have to think of it; she did it automatically. In her heart she thought that a collision was inevitable, but she did her utmost to avoid it. With her left hand she cut the throttle. Her right foot pressed firmly on the rudder-bar. The machine, responding instantly, swerved. She bit her lip as the undercarriage, never intended for the sideways strain, groaned in protest.

The Heron flashed past the incoming machine with a few inches to spare. Cold with shock, and still moving automatically, Frecks tried to straighten out. But she was too late. With a splintering crash the undercarriage collapsed. The bottom of the fuselage struck the ground with a bang and threw her out of her seat. The machine bounced, struck, bounced again, sideways, and came to a spinning, grinding, crunching halt, in a clump of camel-thorn.

Nobody moves faster than an air pilot getting out of a crash. Ever present in his—or her—mind is the demon Fire. Frecks was out in a flash. Then, panting slightly, with one hand resting on a crumpled wing, she strove to think. Disaster had struck her so swiftly that she was dazed. As in a dream she heard voices shouting, saw the other machine taxi-ing towards her. Subconsciously she noted that it was another Heron. Not unnaturally she remembered the Heron that had landed at Wadi Omar, and wondered if it was the same one. She told herself that this was impossible, because Worrals had gone down to put it out of action. It must, she decided, be another Air Force aircraft. In any case, there was nothing she could do. The pilot would

protect her from the Zogorites if they were still about; perhaps give her a lift to Aleppo. So she waited, trembling now from nervous reaction.

The second Heron stopped. Two men jumped out and hurried towards her. One switched on a torch.

“So!” he said in an amazed voice. Then to his companion: “That is the uniform of the British Women’s Air Force.”

A Zogorite ran up. He asked a question, presumably in Arabic, and having received an answer from the younger of the two men, let out a torrent of words, pointing at Frecks with unmistakable hostility.

The second of the two white men, a stoutish man, spoke to Frecks. “What is your name?” he asked in English.

“Who are you?” parried Frecks.

“Are you Worralsen or Lovell?” snapped the man.

Frecks started as the distasteful truth at last came home to her. “I’m not answering any questions until you tell me who you are,” she said.

The men spoke together in low tones for a moment. Then the stout one asked, “Where is your friend?”

“Find her,” invited Frecks. Now that the shock was passing she was getting angry, angry with herself for getting in such a mess, angry with the unlucky star that had played her such a shabby trick.

“*Donner!*” suddenly exclaimed the thinner of the two men. He went to his machine, examined the instrument board in the light of his torch and then came back. “The main tank is dry,” he said furiously. “Hylde said she had filled it. No wonder there was a stink of petrol. Someone turned the draining cap, and I can guess who it was. The other girl is at the oasis.”

His companion now appeared to get a grasp of the situation. “*Ach so,*” he muttered. “But if our tank is dry, how are we going to get home?”

“We can’t,” answered the other, making it clear to Frecks that he was the pilot.

“Do you mean we are stuck here?” demanded the stout man, alarm raising his voice.

“A plane can’t fly without petrol. There is enough in the gravity tank to take us back to the oasis. That will be better than staying here.”

“But how will you land? They will have replaced the palms.”

“Not yet, I think—it will take time. We must risk it. If the palms are up we must wait while they are taken down.”

“And then what?” demanded the stout man. “There is no more petrol at the oasis. We shall have to stay until some can be sent down to us.”

“Wait!” cried the pilot, and ran to Frecks’ machine. He came back. “It’s all right,” he announced. “This one has a full tank—plenty to get us home.”

“Can you transfer it to our tank?”

“No,” admitted the pilot. “Come to think of it, I can’t, not without a tube for syphoning or a vessel of some sort.”

“Have we got a vessel?”

“No.”

The stout man broke into abuse, from which Frecks perceived that he was not only angry, but scared at the predicament in which he found himself. He swore at the pilot in German, lashed him for not finding out before he started that the tank was dry, and cursed aeroplanes generally.

“This sort of talk won’t help us,” muttered the pilot in a surly voice. “Let’s take the machine back to the oasis. There are empty cans there. The labourers can come out and fill them from this machine. We can’t go back in daylight, but if we did that we should be able to get away to-morrow night. Apart from the petrol we must go back to let Brunowsky know that the other English girl is there. If we don’t, she might get away and wreck everything.”

“That’s true,” agreed the stout man, somewhat mollified. “The sooner we get back the better. What are we going to do with this girl?”

“Take her with us. Brunowsky will be pleased to see her. He may be able to make her talk.”

From this conversation Frecks got a pretty good idea of how matters stood, both in regard to the oasis and herself. She realised that in order to disable the machine Worrals had emptied the main tank, but not the gravity tank. By a tragic chance that was not really remarkable considering the sandy *wadi* was the only available landing-place, the enemy pilot had glided down into it when his engine had cut out. There was nowhere else. It was a pity, thought Frecks. Just one of those things. . . . Now they were going to use her petrol to get home. She must prevent that, if possible. It was no use opening the draining tap, even if she could reach it, because the men would simply close it again. Something more drastic was required. Her pistol, she remembered, was on the floor of the cockpit. One bullet through the tank would do the trick. She began edging towards the buckled cockpit.

“Where do you think you’re going?” snapped the enemy pilot.

“To get my cap,” answered Frecks readily.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” was the terse rejoinder.

Frecks made a dash for the cockpit. She flung herself inside, hands groping. It was a forlorn hope, and, like most forlorn hopes, it failed. A hand

closed over her ankle and dragged her out bodily. She scrambled to her feet.

“Keep your dirty hands off me,” she said furiously.

The stout man caught her by the wrist. “Keep your mouth shut, and do as you are told, or I’ll give you a lesson you won’t forget,” he rapped out.

“No doubt you’ve had plenty of practice,” grated Frecks.

The man ignored the thrust. To the pilot he said. “Let’s get back.”

“What about these natives?” asked his companion.

“Tell them to guard this machine till men come from Wadi Omar.”

The pilot gave the order. Frecks was taken forcibly to the German-made Heron. She did not protest because the arrangement suited her as well as any. She certainly did not want to be left in the *wadi* with the Zogorites, and if Worrals was still at Wadi Omar, she asked for nothing more than a chance to make contact with her.

They all got into the machine. The pilot took off, and in two or three minutes they were cruising over the oasis. There was a delay while the palms were cleared. As soon as the runway took shape the machine glided down to land. They got out. The man whom Frecks realised was Brunowsky ran up, looking perturbed and rather bewildered.

“Why have you come back, Berthold?” he asked the stout man, in a voice in which there was more than a trace of alarm.

“We had to,” answered Berthold curtly. “While we were talking in your tent one of these infernal English girls turned the petrol cock and emptied the tank. Luckily, things are not as bad as they might be, because their machine is in the *wadi* just north of here. Send men with empty cans to get the petrol out of it. There should be enough to get us home. It means waiting until to-morrow night, but you’d better leave the palms down in case these girls have got a message through to Aleppo; if so, we may have to leave in a hurry.”

Brunowsky swore viciously. He gave the necessary instructions to a foreman, and then came back to face Frecks. No longer was he the suave impersonator of Doctor Bronfield. His expression was malevolent.

“So we meet again?” he sneered.

“The pleasure is yours,” returned Freckles coldly.

Brunowsky’s jaw muscles tightened. “Where is your partner?”

“Start looking,” invited Frecks.

“Bring her to my tent,” ordered Brunowsky.

They went to the tent. A black-faced Zogorite, a gold-corded but dirty *kafieh* on his head, reclined in a cane chair with a bottle on a table at his

elbow.

“I see you know how to choose your friends, Brunowsky,” observed Frecks.

A middle-aged, hard-faced woman came hurrying in. She looked from one to the other. “I was printing when I heard the machine come back,” she said. “What has happened?”

“We’ve got visitors,” replied Brunowsky. “Here’s one of them. The other must have watched you refuel the machine; after you had gone she opened the draining tap. Voss had to make a forced landing.” He looked at Frecks. “Where is your friend?”

“I’ve told you, you can start looking,” scoffed Frecks.

Hylde took a pace forward. With a viciousness that was all the more deadly because the action was unexpected, she slapped Frecks’ face so hard that her fingers left their imprint, in red.

Frecks recovered herself. “You’ll pay for that,” she promised, in a voice that was like cracking ice.

Brunowsky spoke to Hylde. “We’ve got to find the other girl. This one must know something. Do you think you can make her talk?”

Hylde smiled. “I’m sure of it.”

The Zogorite stood up. “I like to watch this,” he requested.

Hylde’s smile broadened. “All right, Ali. Bring her along.” She turned on her heel and went out. The Zogorite caught Frecks by the wrist and followed.

They went a little way, entered a cave, and continued in the light of a torch which Hylde produced, to end up in a rock chamber lighted by an electric bulb. A printing machine stood on a bench. Hylde went to it and depressed a lever so that the iron presses opened a little way.

“Put her hands in there, Ali,” she commanded.

Frecks made a sudden and desperate attempt to free herself, but she was powerless in the grip of the native, who forced her hands between the metal plates. Hylde pressed gently on the lever. The plates closed, holding her hands fast.

“Now, dear English lady,” sneered Hylde, “if you do not answer my questions truthfully, and politely, I am going to crush your hands flat. Where is your friend?”

Frecks took a grip on herself. “Find her, Nazi,” she spat through her teeth.

Hylde’s face paled with passion. “Have it your own way,” she rasped.

“No,” said a voice close at hand. “We’ll have this my way.”

Silence fell, a tense, electric silence. Frecks looked up to see Worrals moving slowly into the radius of light, a levelled automatic in her right hand. Her face was white, and looked cold, like marble. Her eyes were frosty, and her lips a thin, bloodless line.

“Get back against the wall, both of you,” said Worrals, in a voice that had the ring of steel in it. “Believe me when I say I need little encouragement to use this gun.”

The sheikh snarled, and moved like lightning. His dagger flashed.

There was a deafening explosion. A stream of orange sparks leapt across the chamber. They began at the muzzle of Worrals’ gun and ended at the sheikh’s chest. He stopped, coughing. His knees seemed to sag. Then, in dead silence, like a swimmer diving into smooth water, he slid forward on his face and lay still. The acrid reek of burnt cordite filled the room.

Worrals’ voice cut through it like a whiplash. Her eyes were on Hylda’s face. “I said against the wall.”

Wide-eyed, her lips parted, Hylda backed slowly to the wall.

Still watching her, Worrals stepped forward and raised the bar that controlled the plates holding Frecks’ hands. “There’s a piece of loose flex behind you,” she told Frecks evenly. “Tie Hylda’s hands behind her back. I’m taking no chances with that lady.” To Hylda she said, “Turn your face to the wall.”

Hylda stiffened, but did not move.

Worrals’ finger tightened on the trigger. “I said face the wall.”

Hylda turned.

Frecks tied her hands.

“Bring her along—this way,” said Worrals.

XV

FRESH PLANS

KEEPING HYLDA covered, Worrals went back to the room in which the Bronfields were waiting. She took the key out of the lock, put it in her pocket, and closed the door behind her.

To Hylda, she said, "Stand over by the wall—and stand still." To Frecks, "This is no time for formal introductions. These are the Bronfields. Tell me, and make it short, what happened to you."

In a few words Frecks explained her misfortunes.

"Have you any idea where Nimrud is?" asked Worrals.

"He must be on his way back here. He's hardly had time to cover the distance."

"I see," said Worrals. "The position outside, then, is this. The machine is on the runway and the palms are down?"

"Yes."

"There is still petrol in the gravity tank?"

"Yes—but I don't know how much."

"You left Berthold and Voss in Brunowsky's tent?"

"Yes. They know you're about. When Hylda doesn't show up I expect they'll come to see why."

Worrals nodded. "That's why we've got to move fast." She looked at her watch. "It'll start to get light in a minute or two."

"But we can't fight that bunch alone."

"I don't propose to try," asserted Worrals. "You've got to get to Aleppo for help."

"Okay. How?"

"There are horses in the gully," put in Doctor Bronfield.

"No use," decided Worrals. "Much too slow. The only way to save the situation is to grab their machine and fly down. We can't all get in it, so you'll have to go, Frecks, while I look after things here."

"You mean—you're going to stay here, in the cave?"

"No. I don't like the idea of being cooped up. I think it would be better to try to make a break for it." She turned to the Bronfields. "From the

conversation you'll have guessed how we're fixed. We can stay here, or we can try to get clear while my friend is fetching help. How do you feel about it?"

"Let us get out while we have the chance," voted Doctor Bronfield, and his daughters agreed.

"Then we might as well make a start," said Worrals.

"Would you mind lending me your gun for a moment?" requested Helen.

Worrals raised her eyebrows. "Why?"

"I've got a score to settle." Helen glanced at Hylda. "They say the female of the species is the worst, and I'm beginning to believe it. You've got to know a woman like Hylda to grasp what the word Nazi means. She wallows in cruelty for the sake of it. There's only one thing to do with a scorpion. Lend me that gun."

"You can't do that, Helen," expostulated Worrals. "She'll get what's coming to her."

"She carries a gun."

"Oh, does she?" murmured Worrals. "Get it, Frecks. Save the ammunition, Helen."

Frecks went over to Hylda and came back with a small revolver.

"Give it to Helen," went on Worrals. "We may need weapons to cover you while you get into the machine. Now let's move along." Worrals opened the door an inch and looked out. She closed it again instantly. "Brunowsky is coming up the passage," she announced.

"Alone?" asked Frecks.

"Yes, alone. When he sees what's happened in the printing room he'll know what's up. We must stop him from giving the alarm. Stand fast, everybody, till I come back."

Worrals took another look, in time to see Brunowsky turn into the printing room. She was out in a flash, tip-toeing quickly down the passage. Reaching the side turning she saw Brunowsky bending over the sheikh. Gun at the ready she went in. Brunowsky heard her and looked up. Worrals covered him.

"Get your hands up," she ordered crisply. "And if you think I'm kidding take another look at the sheikh. Get 'em up—and don't try anything silly."

Brunowsky, a look of wonder on his face, raised his hands. "Hylda!" he called sharply.

"One more bleat like that and it will be your last," promised Worrals. "Never forget that I'd as soon plug you as look at you. Now march towards

the Bronfields room. I shall be behind you.”

Brunowsky marched.

“Open the door, Frecks!” called Worrals, as they drew near.

Frecks opened the door and stood aside as Brunowsky, with his hands up, went in.

“Halt!” ordered Worrals, and moved forward until the muzzle of her automatic was touching Brunowsky’s back. “Take his gun, Frecks. I expect he has one.”

Frecks complied.

“All right, Nazi. Join your girl friend,” commanded Worrals. “Everyone else please get outside.”

The others filed out. Worrals backed out and locked the door on the outside.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re all set. Give Brunowsky’s gun to Daphne, Frecks. You won’t have time for shooting when you make a dash for the machine. Come on.”

As they neared the entrance Frecks exclaimed. “It’s daylight!” The sky was rose pink.

“No matter,” said Worrals. “The machine is our only chance. I reckon it’s a hundred yards from here. We’ll try to get at it quietly, but if we’re spotted, make a dash for it. Don’t stop. We shall have three guns behind you to deal with any opposition. Come on, everybody. Quiet, please, and keep close to the base of the cliff.”

In single file, with Worrals leading, they emerged from behind the brushwood that had been used to hide the tunnel, and made their way cautiously along the foot of the cliff. Several Zogorites were moving about, some doing nothing in particular, others, carrying tools, were walking towards the excavations. They were now in sight of the machine, and Worrals went on with more confidence.

They were just passing behind Brunowsky’s tent—that is, between the tent and the cliff—when Berthold and Voss came out. Voss called to a labourer. The question was, apparently, where was Brunowsky? The native pointed to the tunnel entrance, and in doing so saw the party at the foot of the cliff. He let out a yell.

“Run for it, Frecks,” snapped Worrals. “We’ll cover you.”

Frecks sprinted for the plane, which was now not more than forty yards away.

“Helen—Daphne—you watch the rear!” shouted Worrals, and set off after Frecks, who by this time had nearly reached the aircraft.

As if attracted by the noise, Zogorites now broke out from the palm grove at several points. Frecks knew that these were the men who handled the portable palms. She had forgotten about them. She raced on. The Zogorites, too, broke into a run, approaching the aircraft from the opposite side.

Worrals, who saw the danger, yelled, “Keep running!” Her pistol spat. Knowing that everything depended on Frecks getting away she was determined to give her every chance, but she was sick at heart, for the position looked hopeless. Even if Frecks reached the machine first the natives would be all over it before she could start up.

At that moment the harsh clatter of a machine-gun threw everything into still greater confusion. Bullets smacked, and ricocheted, screaming, from the rocks. Worrals thought that the fire was being directed at them until she saw the Zogorites going over like ninepins. Some fled. Others dived for cover. To add to the clamour came the roar of the Heron’s engine as Frecks started up. Dust swirled. The machine-gun stopped, but odd shots still punctuated the proceedings. Above the uproar came the sound of a voice, Nimrud’s voice, calling.

“Ascend, O lady,” it said.

The sound seemed to come from above. Worrals had forgotten all about Nimrud. Now, looking up, she saw him standing at the mouth of the tomb in the cliff face. With a tommy gun held against his side he fired sporadic bursts at Zogorites which Worrals could not see because of the sand flying up behind the aircraft.

“Up the steps, *effendim*, lest these sons of sin do thee a mischief,” called Nimrud.

At first Worrals could see no steps. Then she saw that the tomb was reached, not by a single flight of steps from immediately below, but by two sets of steps cut in the rock face, mounting upward diagonally from either side.

Shouting to the others to follow, Worrals ran to the nearest flight. “Upstairs, everyone,” she ordered, and waited to see the others well on their way before she followed them. Bullets smacked against the rock. Nimrud, with sublime indifference, stood at the mouth of the tomb, pumping out lead at unseen targets. Worrals could still see nothing for swirling sand, but she heard the Heron’s engine bellow as the plane began its take-off run. Panting, she reached the top of the steps, and tumbled into the tomb.

“Phew!” she gasped. “That was a bit hot.”

“Hail! O my lady,” greeted Nimrud calmly. “Marshallah! This will be a day to remember.”

Worrals did not answer until she saw the Heron rise above the whirling sand and zoom in a climbing turn over the palms.

“She’s made it!” she cried. “That’s all that matters.” She watched the machine for a moment and then turned to Nimrud. “Nice work, soldier,” she complimented.

Nimrud permitted himself the rare privilege of a smile. But his eyes were still on the danger area below. “Doubtless by the time Kenton *effendi* arrives we shall be cut into small pieces,” he observed.

“If such is the will of God,” agreed Worrals.

“He is the Knower—may He be exalted,” asserted Nimrud.

Looking round, Worrals saw that the tomb—if tomb it was—was smaller than she expected. The opening was about eight feet square, and the compartment only ran back for about twenty feet. The walls were bare. In one place a niche had been cut as if to hold a coffin, but the coffin had gone. She looked at the Bronfields. The doctor was sitting on the floor.

“Forgive me for sitting down,” he apologised. “My legs feel strange. It is a long time since I used them so much.”

“That’s all right, sir,” answered Worrals, smiling. “Keep well back, everybody,” she went on, turning to the girls, who had taken up positions against the walls. “We ought to be able to hold this place for some time,” she observed.

Helen nodded. “We’ll hold it—as long as the ammunition holds out,” she stated. Worrals noticed that she was a tall, good-looking girl with steady grey eyes.

“Don’t show yourself,” warned Worrals. “Watch the steps your side. Daphne, you watch the other side. When the dust settles we may be able to see something.” She turned to Nimrud. “Your arrival was well timed, O mighty hunter.”

“It was as God decided,” explained Nimrud, his eyes still watching the settling sand.

“How did you get that gun?” asked Worrals curiously.

“It is the one from the aeroplane,” answered Nimrud. “I was returning from the sandy *wadi* when, from afar off, I heard shots, and a great noise, as if the aeroplane had fallen. I returned at such speed that my legs will never be the same. Alas! When I reached the *wadi* I found only a broken

aeroplane, two live Zogorites and a dead one. One of those who lived told me that the *bint* had been taken in another aeroplane to Wadi Omar.”

“It was kind of him to tell you that,” said Worrals. “What did you do with these two men?”

Nimrud shrugged. “In my hands they died. After all, they were not fit to live. Afterwards I went to the broken aeroplane and took the gun from beneath the seat. Travelling in haste, I returned here. I was seeking thee when, lo! like magic you appeared out of the ground. Seeing that the Zogorites would molest thee, I slew them.”

“You certainly did,” agreed Worrals. “Thanks, Nimrud. As you say, this will be a thing to remember.”

By this time the sand, and the oasis generally, had more or less settled down. Worrals could hear the voices of Brunowsky and Hylda, raised, it seemed, in altercation with Berthold and Voss, from which it was clear that the prisoners had been found and released. The aircraft could also be heard—a fast-fading drone. Subconsciously, Worrals’ ears had remained with it.

Her expression changed when, suddenly, the noise of the engine stopped. Risking bullets, she advanced to the edge of the tomb and looked out. She could just see the machine in the far distance, a mere speck. It was gliding down. A bullet splashed against the rock near her face and she stepped back. She listened for a moment or two, but when the engine did not pick up she glanced at Nimrud. He, too, had noticed the significant cessation of sound.

“The engine no longer works, *effendim*,” he said softly.

“I am afraid the petrol is finished,” answered Worrals. “If so, it may be some time before help arrives.”

“It is forty miles to Aleppo, O lady,” said Nimrud quietly. “But at least we shall have fighting,” he added hopefully.

“Plenty, I should say,” agreed Worrals bitterly.

“Under God, upon Whom we rely, we shall slay these Nazi infidels.”

“That will be our task, Nimrud.”

“If we kill them all, it will be a thing to boast about,” declared Nimrud.

“I hope you’re right, brother,” put in Helen, who had listened to this conversation with a faint smile.

Nimrud pointed to a band of Zogorite horsemen who had emerged from a gully and, thrashing their horses, were galloping furiously towards the wilderness in the direction taken by the plane. “They, too, have seen the aeroplane fall from the sky,” said he. “Shall I endeavour to seize a horse and follow them, *effendim*?”

Worrals shook her head. “What could you do against that crowd?”

“By St. Simon! I could fight,” muttered Nimrud.

“You’ll be more use here,” decided Worrals. “We shall stay and fight it out.”

XVI

THE BATTLE OF WADI OMAR

SOUNDS of activity now came up from below, and Worrals knew that an attack on their position might be launched at any moment. Brunowsky and his confederates would realise that everything, even their lives, depended on wiping out the little party of defenders; they would therefore do their utmost to achieve this object in the shortest possible space of time. The thought of Frecks in the hands of the Zogorites made Worrals feel sick. It was bad luck, having to come down, just when success seemed assured.

A bullet arrived in the tomb simultaneously with the crack of the rifle that had fired it. It struck the rear wall, low down, and had obviously not been fired from the ground. If it had it would have hit the ceiling. Worrals perceived that it must have been fired from a height.

Helen apparently knew this, too. "Some wise guy is in line with us. If it goes on, someone is going to get hit pretty soon." Her eyes began to scan the crowns of one or two palms that at a distance of about fifty yards rose level with the tomb.

Another bullet smacked into the rock compartment. Worrals felt the wind of it as it passed her face. Like its predecessor, it struck the rear wall, but at an angle, so that it ricocheted. Nimrud spun round. His gun clattered to the floor. He recovered himself at once, with an apologetic glance at Worrals, who said, "Did it hit you?"

"It bit a small piece from my shoulder," answered Nimrud calmly, and reached for his gun.

Helen was before him. Snatching up the gun, she braced herself against a side wall. Her eyes were on the palms. "Watch this," she said grimly, and took aim. But she did not shoot. With the gun level she stood like a statue.

Worrals looked at the palms, and as she watched she saw a frond move. It was the only one that did move. The barrel of a rifle appeared. Behind it a face showed in the wealth of greenery.

The Tommy gun chattered harshly, viciously, for four seconds. There was a violent commotion in the crown of a palm. Pieces of frond scattered. A rifle dropped out of it. It was followed by a figure, a figure in white drill, a woman's figure.

"*W'allah!* It was a *bint*," remarked Nimrud disgustedly.

“Hylde,” said Helen, and passed him the gun. Glancing at Worrals, she remarked, “I guess I’ve paid my account.”

“With interest,” murmured Worrals. She turned to find Doctor Bronfield examining Nimrud’s shoulder, in spite of protests.

Brunowsky had now evidently taken over command of the oasis, for his voice could be heard, raised high, as if giving orders.

Worrals took a quick shot at Voss, who, with some twenty Zogorite labourers behind him, was making a dash for some low ground to the left of the tomb. She missed.

“I’ve got Brunowsky, with a bunch of Zogs, on my side,” said Helen.

Worrals noted Berthold, with still more natives, dodging through the palms in a direction that would bring them opposite the tomb. “They’re getting into position for a general assault,” she said. “Hold your fire, everyone, until you are sure you can make every shot tell. Then pick out the Nazis.”

The attack was not long delayed. It began with a furious barrage directed against the front of the tomb, put up by Berthold and his party, apparently to cover the charge of the two forces on the flanks. Actually, the barrage sounded more dangerous than it was, for owing to the low angle from which the sharpshooters were firing, the few bullets that did enter the tomb struck the ceiling. The greatest risk was a ricochet. Nevertheless, the noise made by the bullets striking the rock was alarming; and the fusillade served its purpose in keeping the defenders back from the front of the tomb while the attacks were launched against the steps on either side.

The instant the firing ceased, with a shout of “Take the other side, Helen,” Worrals jumped forward and looked down the flight of steps that mounted diagonally upwards from the left. A crowd of Zogorites were pouring up them. Worrals expected it. She hoped to see Voss, whose party this was, leading his men; but he had been wise enough to remain on the ground, where, from cover, he shouted advice to the natives.

She had time to fire only one shot when she was thrust aside and Nimrud’s portly figure filled the gap. The machine-gun crackled, and at such short range its effect was devastating. Men fell. Others tried to get back, pushing their companions over the edge in their selfish haste. Some jumped to escape the murderous hail of lead. The attack broke up in disorder.

Looking round to see how Helen was faring, Worrals saw that although both Helen and Daphne were using their guns, the leading Zogorites on that side had nearly reached the top of the steps. This had one good effect. It stopped the barrage, for had it gone on, the sharpshooters would have hit

their own men. Another redeeming feature was, the Zogorites had packed themselves so thickly on the steps that they had no elbow room to use their weapons. Apart from that, the situation was about as bad as it could be. Worrals fired her two last shots and yelled to Nimrud, who, seeing what was happening, came to the rescue. A swift pace took him to the steps and once again the gun crumpled the onset. The staccato chatter ended abruptly as the ammunition ran out. But Nimrud did not stop. Taking the muzzle between his hands, and using the weapon like a flail, he leapt down to meet the enemy.

At the sight of the tall figure towering over them the surviving Zogorites lost their nerve, and the result was a repetition of what had happened on the other steps. In the stampede men were pushed over the edge. Only a few reached the ground safely. With a sonorous oath Nimrud would have pursued them, but Worrals yelled to him to come back.

“We want you here,” she said as he backed reluctantly up the steps.

“At your command, O lady,” assented Nimrud.

The first attack had been beaten off, but a buzz of conversation from the near distance, and odd bullets flattening themselves round the mouth of the tomb, made it clear that the affair was not yet over. The sun was now well up clear of the palms, and its fierce rays warned the defenders that they would soon have another enemy to contend with—thirst.

“What’s going on?” asked Worrals when about ten minutes had passed without the attack being renewed.

Nimrud went to the edge of the tomb, looked down, and returned.

“The devil’s spawn are piling the brushwood beneath us, doubtless to choke us with smoke,” he announced calmly. “Hear now plain words, my lady,” he went on. “It would be better to die fighting in the open than to suffocate in this hole.”

“I guess he’s right there,” put in Daphne.

Worrals realised that their plight could hardly be worse. Quite apart from the threat of smoke, they were nearly out of ammunition. The machine-gun was empty. So was her automatic. Helen and Daphne had five rounds between them. Clearly they could not hope to stop the next attack, when it came. Nor would they be able to do much in the open. They hadn’t a chance, as far as Worrals could see—but she did not say so. She was considering taking Nimrud’s advice, which was to make a sally before the fire was lighted, in the hope of reaching the horses, when a distant sound brought an exclamation to her lips. Risking a peep, she saw the Heron coming back, flying low on full throttle. She did not know what to make of it. There

seemed to be no reasonable explanation. If Frecks had not run out of petrol, why had she landed? What was even more baffling, why was she coming back? She derived a crumb of consolation from the fact that the enemy was puzzled, too, judging by the shouting.

The Heron swept across the oasis at tree-top height. Worrals could see Frecks sitting bolt upright in the cockpit, looking down first on one side and then the other; but she did not see Worrals waving frantically from the mouth of the tomb. There was hardly time for that. The machine flashed past. It zoomed, as if in triumph; then, making a vertical half turn, it tore back in the direction from which it had appeared.

“What do you make of that?” Helen asked Worrals.

Worrals shrugged. “Beats me.”

The return of the aircraft caused a delay, but it did not last long. A sharp crackle below, and a wisp of smoke, told the defenders that the brushwood had been fired.

“I guess this is it,” said Helen. “Camel-thorn is full of resin. We shan’t last five minutes.”

Worrals did not answer at once. She had stiffened in an attitude of attention, listening. “Now what’s coming?” she asked sharply, and keeping close to the wall, looked out along the line of flight of the machine. At first all she could see was what appeared to be a cloud of dust, rolling across the wilderness. Then, from this emerged a band of horsemen, riding close together, as if for their lives. They were Zogorites.

“The sons of Shaitan—may God forgive them—ride as if pursued by ghosts,” exclaimed Nimrud in a puzzled voice.

“Hark!” said Worrals, trying to fan away the smoke that half obscured her view. “What is all the yelling about?”

Nimrud looked. “Now this is a most remarkable thing,” he declared.

“What is?”

“That at this season the Meni Sakhr should ride in *ghrazzu*.”

“What are you talking about?” cried Worrals impatiently.

Nimrud extended a long brown finger at a second group of horsemen who had emerged from the dust, riding in hot pursuit of the Zogorites. “The Meni Sakhr ride in *ghrazzu*, and the Sheikh of Sheikhs, Azza Pasha, rides at their head. Look, O lady, and you will see a blue *kafieh* streaming in the wind. It is the will of God.”

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Worrals in a voice that rose with excitement as she got her first vague idea of what was happening.

“This should be a thing to watch,” swore Nimrud.

Worrals turned to the others. “Keep guard on the steps!” she cried. “I think we’re saved. Sheikh Azza and his warriors are coming.”

“And how!” murmured Daphne, snatching a glance.

“They ride like locusts on the crest of a whirlwind,” asserted Nimrud. “What I do not understand is why they ride without giving honourable warning, for Sheikh Azza—whom God preserve—is an honourable man.”

“I’ve got it!” shouted Worrals. “Freckles must have seen their tents from the air. Yes—that’s it. She may have seen the blue *kafieh* and recognised it. That’s why she went down. She returned to try to tell us that help was on the way. Now she has gone on to Aleppo.”

“As God is my witness, the brain of that *bint* must move even faster than her legs,” declared Nimrud in a voice of wonder. “Perhaps it is the cause of the spots upon her countenance,” he conjectured earnestly. “*W’allah!* If so, I pray my children have such spots.”

Smoke now swept up in volumes, so that from time to time it blotted out the scene, but fierce yells and shouts told the story of what was happening. From nearer at hand cries of consternation suggested that the Zogorites detailed for the attack on the tomb had perceived their peril.

Worrals coughed as the pungent smoke bit into her lungs. “Let’s get out of this,” she gasped, and made for the steps.

The others followed, and as they descended and got clear of the smoke, it became possible to see how far the scene had changed, how the tables had been turned. The body of Hylde still lay where it had fallen, but the only men in sight were Zogorites running for their lives towards a gully, from which now burst several more, some on horseback, some on camels, evidently seeking safety in flight.

It was apparent that the battle of Wadi Omar was over. All that was left for the warriors of the Meni Sakhr was pursuit, and this they undertook with zeal. Worrals realised that it was beyond her power to do anything about it, even if she had so wished. She was wondering what had become of the three white men when she saw them, heading north, on horseback, Brunowsky in the lead. Taking advantage of the general confusion they had slipped through the palm grove and were riding away at a tangent from the *melée*. It looked as if they might escape to the Turkish frontier after all. In her concern Worrals shouted to several warriors as they tore past, but they were too taken up with the chase to heed her.

She remembered something, and made a dash for the foot of the palm from which Hylde had fallen. Lying near the lifeless body was the rifle.

Snatching it up, she dashed back and thrust the weapon into Nimrud's hands. She pointed at the fleeing Nazis.

"Now, O warrior, let us see how you can shoot. Bring down the leader of those three men."

Nimrud patted the weapon affectionately. "Upon thee rests my honour, and the honour of my children," he murmured. "Fail me not, O my father." So saying, he squatted with his back against the cliff and snuggled the butt against his bloodstained shoulder.

By one of those curious chances in which fate seems to take delight, Brunowsky chose that moment to rein in and look back. The rifle spoke. For a moment Brunowsky remained motionless; then, quite slowly, he fell forward, clutching at the neck of his horse. His hands slipped and he fell. The horse, startled, started off again, dragging its rider by one foot that was caught in the stirrup. Berthold and Voss, with a callousness that was beyond Worrals's understanding, galloped on, leaving Brunowsky to his fate.

"Good shot, Nimrud!" complimented Worrals in a low voice, and looked round to see an Arab, a rifle carried carelessly in the crook of his left arm, cantering towards them. He wore a blue *kafieh*, and from that she knew it must be the Sheikh Azza, or she would not have recognised him.

"*Ya Sheikh! Salaam aleikum,*" called Nimrud, touching fingers to forehead.

The sheikh lifted his head in acknowledgement. "And upon thee, peace," he said seriously in English. "Greeting, Miss Worrals." Then he smiled. "To-day, as you see, I am a sheikh of the desert. I trust I may be of service."

"Greeting, O sheikh," answered Worrals. "Look! Yonder ride two of the Nazis who have been the cause of this bloodshed. Can you stop them?"

"They shall be stopped," promised the sheikh, simply. Turning his mount, a fiery black mare, on her hind legs, he set off in pursuit, calling to some of his men to follow him.

Worrals sat down limply on the bottom step of the flight leading to the tomb. "Phew! What a life!" she murmured. "I've forgotten what it is to eat or sleep, but I think it's all over bar the shouting."

The others joined her on the steps. Only Nimrud stood, regarding the scene with dark, thoughtful eyes. And there they waited for about twenty minutes, recovering from the excitement and their exertions. Worrals exchanged congratulations with the Bronfields, who told her how, soon after the outbreak of war, Brunowsky, with whom they had had trouble in Persia, and the Zogorites, had descended upon them without warning, and made them prisoners. They had been powerless in his hands.

Then the sheikh, with a party of warriors, came back, driving the two Nazis before them. Brunowsky's body was across the saddle of his horse.

As Nimrud looked at Berthold and Voss his hand went to his dagger. "How shall I kill them, O lady?" he inquired without emotion.

Worrals smiled. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, my noble friend, but you know quite well that the British do not kill their prisoners. The lives of these two men are now in the hands of a higher authority."

"That is what I feared," murmured Nimrud.

As the sheikh and his party drew near Worrals pointed to a speck in the western sky, a speck that grew rapidly larger. "Here, I should say, comes the *bint* with the winged feet," she observed.

"Doubtless it will be a grief to her that she was not in the battle," said Nimrud sadly.

"Doubtless," agreed Worrals.

The Heron landed, and from it, in haste, descended Frecks, Major Kenton and an army officer with red tabs on his lapels. Frecks waved to the party at the foot of the steps, and pushed some loose hair out of her eyes as she walked towards them.

"Just my luck to be out of the finish," she lamented.

"It *would* have been the finish, too, for all of us if you hadn't spotted Sheikh Azza," answered Worrals.

Major Kenton strode up. He looked more dazed than pleased. "This is a nice state of affairs," he greeted.

"It might have been worse—a lot worse," remarked Worrals.

"Is everything all right?"

"More or less. You wanted the gang who were running the propaganda racket, and you've got them. Brunowsky won't run any more rackets—not in this world, at any rate. Thank Sheikh Azza for the final clean-up. The other end of the racket is in the warehouse——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Major Kenton. "Flight Officer Lovell told me. I've sent the police down."

"Good," said Worrals. "Allow me to introduce you to the genuine Doctor Bronfield and his daughters, Helen and Daphne. They've had a tough time, so the sooner they're in Aleppo, where they can get some rest, the better."

"Cars are on the way," stated Major Kenton. "I've had most of the story from Flight Officer Lovell, and I'm still suffering from shock. What beats me is, how you so soon got on the track of this infernal impostor?"

Worrals smiled. “We’ll set it all down in proper order in our reports. But while you’re here I’ll show you round these curious excavations. There are quite a number of things that should interest you—and they’re not all antiquities.”

“Thank you,” acknowledged Major Kenton. “By the way, if this was the result of one of your hunches——”

“I wouldn’t call it altogether a hunch,” protested Worrals.

“It was the will of God,” asserted Nimrud.

“I’m not going to deny that,” murmured Worrals.

Nimrud sighed. “But it will be a thing to be remembered,” he declared.

“I won’t deny that either,” agreed Worrals.

“Nor me,” confirmed Frecks emphatically.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Worrals Goes East* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]