

WORRALS

IN THE WILDS



Captain
W. E. JOHNS

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WONGOROBO

WORRALS IN THE WILDS

The First Post-war
Worrals Story

by

Captain
W.E. JOHNS



Pictures by Stead

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BILL ASHTON SAYS GOODBYE

IN all the vast dome of azure sky that roofed the lonely heart of Africa only one thing moved. Over the shimmering southern horizon it crawled—or seemed to crawl—to drone across the sultry silence, on and on, and for ever on, like some strange insect lost in space; a monstrous insect with silver wings and blue body halved with a crimson line. Eyes, unseen, looked up from jungle, plain and forest, to watch the passing of the noisy intruder. A rhinoceros, standing alone in the shade of a belt of flat-topped cedars, looking like a fantastic relic of the days when the earth was young, moved uneasily, ran a few paces and stopped, snorting, tail twitching. It settled down to its interrupted siesta as the drone receded, slowly, to die at last somewhere in the pitiless distance.

From the pilot's seat of the silver-winged invader, Squadron Officer Joan Worralsen (Retired), better known to her friends as "Worrals," gazed down upon the time-worn face of Africa without emotion. She had never seen it before, but it was much as she expected. At the sight of the indignant rhino a ghost of a smile softened for a moment her normal serious expression, and she switched a glance to her companion, her war-time friend and comrade, Flight Officer Betty Lovell, commonly called "Freckles" on account of the bounteous freckles which nature, rather unfairly, had thought fit to bestow upon her.

Freckles caught her eyes and made a little grimace. "It all looks pretty grim to me," she observed uneasily. "Did we really have to come here? I would bet," she added sombrely, "that the ground down there is fairly crawling with snakes. I loathe snakes."

"Why worry?" returned Worrals evenly. "We're not down there—we're up here."

"For the moment," admitted Freckles. "Unfortunately we can't stay up here indefinitely. There are times when even the best aircraft has to land to have its innards filled with the stuff that keeps it going."

"That, my child, also applies to those who fly it," Worrals pointed out. "And as far as I'm concerned," she averred, "that time has nearly come. Keep your eyes open for the ring of chalk which, according to the book of words, marks the site of Impala landing ground. It should be hereabouts."

Frecks resumed her critical survey of the passing panorama, at the same time ruminating on the events that had brought them on a quest which, with wildest Africa staring them in the face instead of a mere map, seemed somewhat ill-advised. It was one thing to sit at home and plan, she mused, but a horse of a different colour when faced with solid facts—such as wild animals without iron bars to keep them in one place. The rhino had looked particularly solid. The prospects of success grew more and more remote as they kept pace with the forbidding character of the land beneath. To look for one particular man in such a place was, she soliloquised, rather more hopeless than seeking for a particular pebble on a shingle beach. It was a pity about Bill, of course, but after all. . . She sought solace in a piece of chocolate. The aircraft droned on.

The Bill she had in mind was Bill Ashton, their mutual friend, until recently a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Air Force, and now—well, she didn't quite know what he was. Aside from which, at the back of her mind she had a shrewd suspicion that Worrals was looking for something else besides Bill. Adventure. Bill was only an excuse for flying—as he had put it—off the map. All the same, she pondered, there was certainly something queer about Bill's prolonged silence. This was how it had come about.

Shortly after they had been demobilised Bill Ashton had arrived at the Knightsbridge flat which she and Worrals had taken on a share and share alike basis, as a preliminary arrangement until they decided what they were going to do with the rest of their lives. Their plans, figuratively as well as literally, were in the air. As Worrals had put it, visibility, as far as the immediate future was concerned, was zero. In short, they were in much the same position as a million other girls, when peace had cut short their military careers—the only careers they had ever known—leaving them standing on the threshold of an unknown world called civil life.

Frecks was not surprised to see Bill. In fact, she had been expecting him, and when she opened the door to him she thought she knew what he had come to fetch. When he went, he would take Worrals with him. That was what Frecks thought. But she was wrong. At first the atmosphere had been a trifle embarrassing. Then, over a cup of tea, Bill dropped his brick. He announced cheerfully that he was on his way to Darkest Africa—with a capital D for Darkest. He was proceeding forthwith, by air.

Frecks drew a deep breath of relief and wished him luck, remarking that from all accounts Africa was just the place for men like Bill.

Pressed for an explanation Bill asserted—looking hard at Worrals—that he had given the project of matrimony some earnest consideration, but had decided that this would be neither fair to himself or the girl while the world

was in its present state of chaos. It would be better, he opined, to wait until the clouds rolled away, leaving a somewhat clearer course.

With this decision Worrals agreed so readily that Bill's face fell, giving Frecks the impression that this was only a feeler to test Worrals' reactions to the marriage question. It would, she thought, take little persuasion to cause him to change his mind. A word from Worrals would do the trick. But the word did not come. Instead, Worrals' enthusiasm for the Africa scheme flooded there and then any hopes he may have had in that direction. He had smiled bleakly, and swinging back to the subject of Africa explained his reasons for going there. The first was money (which Worrals agreed was a very good one) and the second, opportunity.

It transpired that Bill had an uncle in Africa, his father's eldest brother, by name Richard Ashton, commonly called Uncle Dick. He had never seen him, because most of his life had been spent chasing the elusive shadow of gold, and as this was not to be picked up on the pavement he had lived for the last thirty years in places as far removed from civilisation as possible. In this design he had a partner, one Andrew Mackintosh, older than himself. These two, both getting on in years, were now in South-West Africa, at a place called Magube Drift, on the fringe of the Kalahari Desert, working on a reef that promised well, and would, in fact, have been a paying proposition had it not been so far removed from any form of transport. As it was, the profits were swallowed up in expenses. The two prospectors could only work one month in four on the lode, the other three being taken up by a trek of some hundreds of miles across inhospitable country to fetch stores. With better transport it would be possible to work faster on the task of locating the mother-lode. If this could be found their fortunes were as good as made. For the moment it took them all their time to make ends meet by taking what gold they could find from minor reefs.

Bill, with an eye on the future, had been in touch with his uncle for some time. He had saved some money out of his pay, and this, with his gratuity, he now proposed to spend in one grand splash in the hope of making Uncle Dick's fortune—and his own at the same time.

"From what I've read, the snag about this gold mining business is, if you find one you don't always get it," put in Worrals. "As soon as the news leaks out, crooks roll up at the double and jump your claim—as I believe they call it."

"They won't jump this one," declared Bill. "I made sure of that before sinking my hard-earned money into it. This isn't just a claim. Uncle Dick has a government concession covering the whole area. No one can take that away from him."

He went on to explain his idea, which he asserted was quite simple. He proposed to buy a secondhand aircraft, fly out to Africa, and make himself responsible for the transport, operating between the goldfield and a convenient point of civilisation, a town called Keetmanshoop. It was a longish run, longer than the endurance range of an economical commercial aircraft, but fortunately there was an intermediate landing ground, a place called Impala Vley, where petrol was available. This had originally been part of the organisation of a South African “feeder” line between South-West Africa and British Overseas Airways main trunk route to Cape Town. The government had taken it over during the war; oil and petrol had been left there in charge of an Indian superintendent named Mahomet Mazuk, who was also responsible for the maintenance of the government resthouse. The whole thing fitted like a glove, declared Bill. In fact, it was the existence of these conveniences that had inspired his scheme. Once he arrived, Uncle Dick and Andrew Mackintosh would no longer have to waste time fetching stores; they would be able to get right on with the more important work of panning gold and seeking the main lode. Bill had put forward the scheme. It had been accepted. He was now a member of the company and was on his way to take up his duties. He had found no difficulty in picking up a secondhand Dragon aircraft at a reasonable price. Would Worrals like to come along—as Mrs. Bill Ashton, of course?

Worrals said quite definitely that she would not. The war was only just over, and she wanted to get her breath before rushing half-way round the world, with or without a husband. Apart from that, the presence of a woman in such a place as Bill had described would be a constant embarrassment, and perhaps responsibility, to the male members of the party. She was very fond of Bill, and all that, but she wasn't quite crazy—and after all, they still had the best part of their lives in front of them.

Bill admitted reluctantly that there was something to be said for her argument. Perhaps it would be better if he went along and made his fortune first.

Worrals agreed that this sounded a much more sensible arrangement.

Bill, his enthusiasm for the new venture not in any way damped, spread his maps on the table, and—now talking as one pilot to another—enlarged on the aviation aspect of the scheme. Now that Worrals had decided not to go he made no secret that the district was not exactly a health resort. Apart from climatic conditions the place was very much off the map. He pointed it out, with his course marked in pencil. Still, that didn't matter, he asserted. He wasn't going out for his constitution, or to see the sights. He was going for gold—good red gold.

“I’ll let you know how I get on,” he promised, folding the map. “In fact, I’ll drop you a line every time I go down to Keetmanshoop, which will probably be every fortnight.”

The following morning they had gone to Croydon to see him off.

A month later Worrals had received a long, and rather vague letter that had been posted—surprisingly, Worrals thought—in Cape Town. It dwelt chiefly on the flying conditions, which were abnormal. The air was sometimes alarmingly bumpy, due to the heat. In the evening there were often sudden changes in the wind that produced a remarkable phenomenon—a curious pink mist, called a *cacimbo*, that covered the land with a pink gauze, distorting the landscape and giving it an appearance of unreality. Seen through this gauze, elephants and giraffes looked like pink toys. Then there were sudden sandstorms that made flying tricky. Fortunately, there was a wonderful landmark, a salt-pan, a vast white sheet of crystals, thought to be a dried-up sea. A violent wind was known locally as a *soowoopa*.

Worrals read the letter aloud, and then sat for some time staring at it, a puzzled frown lining her forehead.

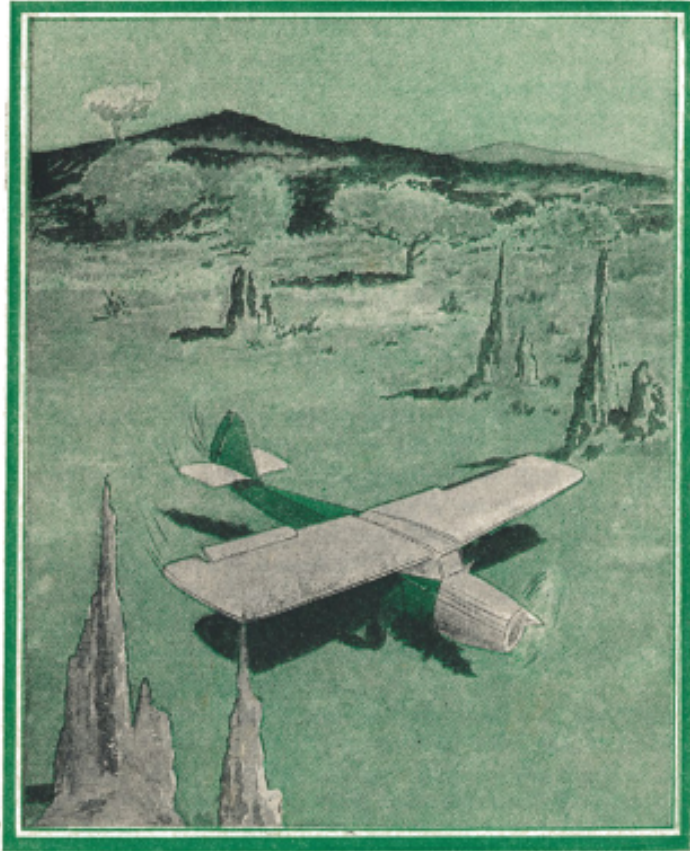
“What’s on your mind?” asked Frecks at last.

“If I didn’t know that Bill doesn’t drink when he’s on a flying job, I should say he was drunk when he wrote that letter,” answered Worrals pensively. “Pink elephants! What nonsense. What have they to do with gold mining? He writes two pages about a pink mist—but not a word about how the job is going. A sea of salt! Why tell us about it—we’re never likely to see it. There’s no shortage of salt in the world, anyway. Men are really very simple creatures—or else they think we are. Poor old Bill. He thinks that by creating pink mist and *soowoopas* we shall lose sight of the main project. If he only knew it, that’s where he defeats his object. Camouflage, that’s all it is—camouflage. I’m afraid Bill’s finding the going rather more difficult than he expected. No doubt we shall get the facts later on.”

In this Worrals was mistaken. There was no later on. No more letters came.

When two months had passed in silence she grew restive. “Something’s happened to Bill,” she declared firmly, one morning at breakfast. “He said he’d write every fortnight. Bill isn’t the sort of chap to make a promise like that and then fall down on it. The dickens of it is, since he is somewhere out in the wilds, we can’t even get in touch with Uncle Dick. Or at any rate, it would take weeks, perhaps months.”

“So what?” inquired Frecks calmly, with a good idea of what was coming.



Swerving to avoid some giant ant-hills Worrals took the machine close to the trees

“I’m thinking of flying out and having a look round,” returned Worrals, with studied nonchalance.

“If you’re in love with him why didn’t you go out with him?” asked Frecks bluntly, exercising the candid privilege of long friendship.

“Who said anything about being in love?” flared Worrals. “Bill was a good pal to us when we were in the Service. We owe him something for that. He may be all right—or he may not; either way, he’d appreciate our anxiety. Apart from that, a trip to Africa wouldn’t do me any harm. I’m about fed up with sitting here waiting for something to turn up.”

“Flying round Africa,” rejoined Frecks, reaching for the toast, “is going to be an expensive pastime.”

“We’ve got enough money between us to buy a machine,” Worrals pointed out.

“Ha! That’s a joke,” snorted Frecks. “Why should I shatter my bank account looking for your roaming Romeo? By the time we got back we should both be broke.”

“All right,” answered Worrals. “I’ll buy a bike and go alone. You can stay here and look after the flat till I get back.”

“Stay here? Alone? Not me.” Frecks grinned. “Okay, let’s go and find out how much secondhand planes are fetching. They should be cheap. What about kit?”

Worrals thought for a moment. “All I need is a sun helmet, my old jodhpurs and a shirt.”

“I’ve still got my slacks,” said Frecks. “But what about the lions and things?”

Worrals lifted her eyebrows. “What about them?”

“From what I’ve heard, lions are apt to bite. Hadn’t we better take a machine gun or something, in case they get inquisitive?”

“Civilians aren’t allowed to carry machine guns,” Worrals pointed out. “Anyway, a machine gun is hardly the thing to turn on a lion, even if occasion arose. We’ve got a rifle at home, one my father used for deer stalking. I could take that for emergencies.”

“I’ve got my automatic,” said Frecks.

Worrals shrugged. “Bring it if you like, but pray you never have to use it against an irritated lion or a restive rhino; I’m afraid you’d get the worst of the argument.”

“What about savages?” queried Frecks, wrinkling her nose. “I once read a frightful story of a white girl who was carried off into captivity and kept a prisoner in a *wonga* or a *bonga*, or something, for forty years, before she was rescued.”

“By which time, I imagine, she didn’t care much whether she was rescued or not,” replied Worrals evenly. “Don’t worry. From what I hear the average modern savage is a good deal more obliging, and a lot less voracious, than a London bus conductor in the rush hour. I’m more interested in the state of the ground, and the weather conditions, at this Kalahari Desert place. Let’s stroll along to the public library and see what the encyclopædia has to say about it.”

The information was soon forthcoming, and as they read it together Worrals remarked that Bill’s comment about the Kalahari Desert not being a

health resort was a bright example of the British habit of understatement. To start with, the desert embraced 200,000 square miles, mostly rock and sand, almost waterless, at an average altitude of from three to four thousand feet. In this wilderness existed a few nomadic native hunters called bushmen, who were little better than animals. Their favourite weapon was a poisoned arrow, the poison being obtained from the larva of a particularly venomous grub. In the absence of water these creatures were able to suck alkaline moisture out of the sand with hollow reeds. At one season of the year a form of wild melon sufficed their needs. The regular diet was lizards, locusts, snakes, scorpions, centipedes and huge moths. The centipedes were a foot long and as fat as a sausage. (At this point Frecks nearly changed her mind.) The desert was fringed by grassy plains, and some timber, in which big game was abundant. There were also two warlike tribes, called respectively Hereros and Ovambos, who resented the encroachment of white men, and were not to be trusted.

“It seems to me,” observed Frecks caustically as Worrals closed the book, “that what we need is a good suit of armour apiece, a tank, and a battery of artillery. Failing these things I shall most certainly take my pistol.”

A week later, in a silver-winged cabin monoplane with side by side seating, a light commercial type known as the Kingfisher, in which most of their combined savings had been sunk, they left Croydon on the first leg of their long run to Africa.

II

AN UNEXPECTED GREETING

THE long journey down the busy main trunk route to South Africa, with servicing facilities all the way, had been uneventful, and with machines arriving and leaving all the time little attention had been paid at Cape Town to the travel-stained Kingfisher. After a day's rest, and a morning spent overhauling the machine, the journey was resumed, northward now, over the lonely and inhospitable western side of the continent. The run to Keetmanshoop, about six hundred miles, was made in the afternoon, also without incident, and the following morning, after refuelling, the Kingfisher had headed into the truly wild heart of Africa, over the dreaded Kalahari Desert, on the last lap of its journey. The immediate objective was Impala Vley, the temporarily abandoned aerodrome, where it would be necessary to refuel again before proceeding on to the gold diggings at Magube Drift. Whether or not they would go straight on, Worrals had decided, would depend on the time they arrived at Impala, and the service available when they got there. If the Indian superintendent was actually on the aerodrome, and was able to let them have petrol right away, they would push straight on, for it would then be possible to get to Magube Drift comfortably before nightfall. If Mahomet was absent for any reason they would have to await his return. Should this involve a lengthy delay they would stay the night at the resthouse and go on the next morning. As Worrals remarked, they were in no desperate hurry.

Keetmanshoop had long ago dropped away astern, and Worrals was beginning to look ahead hoping to see the Impala landing ground, which according to her reckoning could not be far away. Up to now she had confined her attention to a close scrutiny of the ground below, because, knowing that this was the route Bill must have taken, she felt there was just a chance that they might spot his machine—or the remains of it. For this reason she had at first kept low, as low as five hundred feet; but at this altitude the air was unpleasantly bumpy, and the view, while good, was restricted. From five thousand feet, her present altitude, a wider area of ground could be inspected, although visibility was not so good due to heat haze. The terrain below was much as she expected, but now seen for the first

time in concrete form, it brought home with unpleasant force the realisation of what a forced landing would mean.

The day was windless and the air dead. It had grown hotter and ever hotter as the sun flamed across its zenith. For the most part the surface of the earth alternated between a dusty, dun-coloured wilderness of sand-dunes, torn and scarred by dried-up river-beds, and a wild tangle of rocks rising in endless succession to distant mountainous ridges. There were occasional patches of scrub, parched to a depressing greyish tint, and in the hollows among the rocks, stands of small, flat-topped trees. Sometimes animals could be seen, but the aircraft was too high for the species to be recognised, except in the case of zebras and giraffes, and on one occasion, ostriches. Ahead, Worrals was relieved to notice, there were areas of more open country, rolling plains, covered with—as far as she could make out—short, sun-bleached grass. There was no sign of Bill's Dragon, but at last there came into sight that which she sought—a pole, from which hung a lifeless windstocking, and near it a grass-thatched hut. A short distance away there was a circle of white chalk.

These things caused her no surprise, because she knew that the Impala landing ground was in the vicinity; what did astonish her was the presence, close to the hut—presumably the resthouse—of another aircraft. There was no question of it being Bill's machine. She identified it at once as a Junkers commercial monoplane, painted black and white, and as she drew nearer she made out the registration letters ZS-YKX. While she circled, preparing to land, two men came running out of the hut and then stopped, staring up at the new arrival.

Worrals glided in, landed, and brought the Kingfisher to a stop not far from the resthouse.

“So we've got company,” remarked Frecks. “What fun! They must be real he-man pilots to operate in this wild beast infested country. It wouldn't surprise me if I fell in love.”

“Somehow I don't think you will,” answered Worrals slowly, her eyes on the two men who were now walking quickly towards the Kingfisher. One was a tall, loose-limbed, middle-aged man, with a sallow complexion and a black shade over his left eye, which gave him a sinister appearance. The other was small, swart, black-haired, and so dark-skinned that he was obviously not entirely European. Without being able to decide exactly what was wrong with him, Worrals thought he was even less prepossessing than his companion. Still, she was not prepared to be churlish on that account.

“Hello!” she greeted cheerfully, switching off as the men walked up.

The tall man answered. "Where have you come from?" he demanded in a voice which, if not actually hostile, was far from friendly.

"Keetmannshoop," answered Worrals frankly.

"Where are you going?"

"Magube Drift."

"What for?"

Something in the man's abrupt manner nettled Worrals. "Surely that's our business?" she answered.

"Maybe—maybe not."

Worrals' eyebrows came down. "What do you mean—maybe not? What's our business to you?"

"Suppose I ask the questions?" was the curt rejoinder.

Worrals stared. "What's all this about?"

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here, if it comes to that?" snapped Worrals.

"This happens to be our joint," was the surly answer.

"Your joint? You mean—you own this place?"

"You heard what I said."

"But that's absurd," declared Worrals. "This is a government aerodrome."

"It was. We've taken it over."

Worrals shrugged. "Very well. I've no desire to butt in where I'm not wanted. Where's Mahomet?"

"Never you mind about him. You get off back to where you came from."

"Are you telling me where I can go?" Worrals' astonishment was not feigned.

"I am."

"Since when did you own the sky?"

"You do what you're told," snarled the tall man.

Worrals thought for a moment. "All right. We'll take in some petrol and push on." As she spoke Worrals glanced towards the resthouse hoping to see Mahomet. She caught sight of a coloured man standing in the deep shade of the interior, but he was certainly not an Indian. He was an African native. Except for a leopard-skin loin cloth he was naked. In his hand he carried a spear with the haft bound in a curious pattern with brass wire. More than that she could not see.

“You won’t get any petrol here,” said the tall man. “Moreover, what about landing fees?”

Frecks stepped into the conversation. “Are you kidding? Landing fees—in a place like this?”

“Just a minute,” put in Worrals, speaking to Frecks. “If these men have bought the aerodrome they have a right to charge landing fees.” Then, to the man, “All right. Let us have some petrol and we’ll push on.”

“You won’t get any petrol here.”

“But there *is* petrol,” argued Worrals.

“I never said there wasn’t. What I said was, there ain’t any for you.”

“Why not?”

“Never mind why not.”

Worrals was getting worried, but she tried not to show it. “Do you realise what you’re saying?” she queried. “Without petrol we should be stranded—we couldn’t get back to Keetmannshoop.”

“That’s your affair,” was the brusque answer. “No one asked you to come here.”

“Just a minute,” said Worrals quietly, but distinctly. “Let’s get this straight. You know perfectly well that without petrol we can neither get back to civilisation nor go on to Magube Drift. Are you suggesting that we get out and walk?”

“I don’t care how you go. What about these landing fees? Your wheels are on the ground—you won’t argue about that, I reckon.”

Worrals’ face had turned a shade paler, and the muscles had set in hard lines. “Listen here,” she said grimly. “I don’t know who you are or what you’re doing here; and, moreover, I don’t care. But I do know this. You can’t browbeat me. I’m not paying you any landing fees until I’m satisfied that you’re entitled to them. I’ll soon settle that, in Cape Town. If you’re entitled to the money I’ll leave it with the airport manager. Now stand out of my way because I’m going to take off.”

Far from standing away the man stepped nearer. To his swarthy companion, with a jerk of his head towards the engine cowling, he said: “Pull a plug out.”

As the little man moved to obey the order Worrals put her hand down and felt under the seat for her rifle. A cartridge bag lay beside it. Keeping low, very quietly she slipped a cartridge into the breech. Then, shooting the bolt home, she raised herself, and the weapon, so that it could be seen. The

muzzle came to rest covering the little man, whose hand was now on the cowling.

“Stand away from that engine,” ordered Worrals crisply.

The swarthy man stared for a moment unbelievably, and then looked at his companion for instructions.

“That goes for you, too,” went on Worrals tersely, to the tall man. “I’m not kidding, either,” she added. “Start moving.” To Frecks she said quietly: “Get into my seat and start up.”

Frecks complied, and the short man came near to losing an arm as the metal airscrew flashed. He jumped aside, cursing luridly. Seeing that Worrals meant business, the two men backed away.

“All right, Frecks, take her off,” ordered Worrals.

The engine roared. The aircraft moved forward, tail rising, swiftly gaining speed. Worrals dropped into the seat vacated by Frecks, and looking back saw the two men running towards the resthouse. She guessed the reason. Their weapons—they were bound to have weapons in such a place—were inside. Her guess was correct. A moment later they reappeared with rifles in their hands. By this time, however, the Kingfisher was in the air.

“Take evading action, Frecks—they’re going to shoot,” said Worrals sharply.

The aircraft swerved. Both men fired, but where their bullets went Worrals neither knew nor cared. They did not touch the machine. The fact that the men actually used their rifles was, she thought, significant. Their business was important, very important, otherwise they would not go to such an extreme as attempted murder. She unloaded her own rifle and put it back under the seat.

“All right, I’ll take over,” she told Frecks. “What do you make of that?” she went on, when the control column was in her hand.

“It beats me,” admitted Frecks, simply. “What earthly reason could they have for trying to keep us on the ground—that was obviously the idea?”

Worrals nodded. “I thought at first they were simply being nasty, but there’s more to it than that.” Then a new expression came into her eyes. “Great Scott!” she exclaimed. “I wonder if Bill fell foul of them?”

“Seems likely,” answered Frecks. “We know he reckoned on using this landing ground. It can be presumed, I think, that those two stiffs want the ground to themselves, in which case Bill would certainly have been in their way.”

Worrals looked serious. "I don't like this," she stated. "It puts Bill's silence in a very different light. For the first time, I'm really worried about him." As she finished speaking she glanced behind, and then, throttling back, began a flat glide towards the ground, which she examined critically.

"What the dickens are you doing?" demanded Frecks in some alarm.

"Now we're out of sight of the aerodrome I'm going to land."

"But what——"

"Just keep quiet for a minute till I get her on the carpet," requested Worrals. "This is no place for a crack-up."

She circled low for some minutes, and then, making up her mind, put the machine down without mishap on a patch of withered grass near a clump of flat-topped acacia trees. Swerving to avoid some giant ant-hills, she took the machine close to the trees and switched off.

"What's the idea?" inquired Frecks. "I don't get it."

"In the excitement of our argument with those two toughs I think you've forgotten something," murmured Worrals. "We landed at Impala for petrol, didn't we? Well, we didn't get any. If you'll take a look at the gauge you'll see that we haven't enough juice in the tank to take us to Magube Drift, and certainly not enough to get back to Keetmannshoop. Quite obviously, our only hope of getting to either place is in this aircraft. In short, my dear, we've got to have petrol or we're sunk. That's why I've stopped within easy distance of the only petrol available."

"You mean—we're going to refuel at Impala, after all?"

"We've got to. There's no alternative."

"But what about those men?"

"What about them?"

"They'll stop us."

"They will if they catch us—that is, assuming they remain on the landing ground. They may push off. If they don't—well, we've got to have the petrol anyway. We were in no condition to demand it just now, but you don't suppose I'm going to let them get away with it? I don't think they'll be expecting us to come back."

"They'll hear us."

"Oh no they won't. Leaving the machine here, we shall go on foot, after dark. It's only a couple of miles. The petrol will be in four-gallon cans—it's always put up like that on outlying stations. I had a look round when those fellows turned nasty. There's a small hut near the resthouse with a notice on the door which says 'No Smoking.' That, I fancy, is where we shall find the

petrol. We can both carry two cans. That will be sixteen gallons. If we do two trips we shall have thirty-two gallons, which will be enough to take us on to Magube Drift and bring us back again.”

“You’re still going on to Magube?”

Worrals laughed shortly. “You bet I am. You don’t think I’m going to be pushed off my course by those two louts? I’m all the more determined to go on.” She glanced at the sun, now dropping towards the western horizon. “It’ll be dark in an hour or so,” she observed. “While we are waiting we’ll take a bearing on the aerodrome to make sure we don’t miss it in the dark. We’ll also have a good look at the skyline. Come on, let’s get out and stretch our legs.”

Frecks did not answer. Looking to see why, Worrals saw that her face was white, and her eyes fixed in a glassy stare at something beyond her shoulder. Worrals turned, and caught her breath sharply. Walking quietly through the grass, in which they had evidently been lying, were four lions—a lion and three lionesses. With majestic dignity, and an occasional backward glance at the aircraft, they walked on and disappeared into a fold in the ground.

“Great jumping Jupiter!” exclaimed Worrals weakly. “I must have passed within a few yards of those cats when I landed.”

“I—I know,” faltered Frecks. “That’s what makes me feel so frightful.”

“There is this about it: they seemed quite harmless,” observed Worrals cheerfully.

“They may seem that way to you, but I’d hate to bet on it,” returned Frecks warmly. She went on in a voice heavy with sarcasm: “Do you expect me to get out of this machine and stroll about in this menagerie? Not me. Oh, no. My name isn’t Daniel. I’m staying right here.”

Worrals laughed. “Don’t be silly. You seem to forget that millions of people walk about Africa every day and all day. They’re used to things like lions. We shall have to get used to them, too.”

“So I suppose,” agreed Frecks sadly. “But speaking personally, it’s going to take an awful lot of getting used to.”

Worrals jumped down. “Come on,” she urged. “Let’s have a snack.”

III

MAGUBE DRIFT

As the great red African sun sank into the desert's dusty face darkness closed in swiftly, bringing with it a refreshing coolness, although the parched earth relinquished its heat reluctantly. Worrals got up from where she had been resting and arranged some equipment on a wing-tip—the rifle, Frecks' automatic, a small hacksaw and a file. She had decided to take the tools in case the petrol store was locked. A moon, nearly full, rode in the sky, and the stars glittered like brilliants, so that it was never really dark; but Frecks stared apprehensively into the vague distance from which, from time to time, strange sounds emerged.

“What was that?” she asked sharply.

“That,” answered Worrals, “was a zebra barking. Try to imagine you're at Whipsnade Zoo.”

“I have,” answered Frecks shortly, “but it doesn't work. I didn't know zebras barked.”

“That's what they call the noise they make, at any rate,” replied Worrals.

Frecks clutched at the wing, as out from the gloom came an exulting scream, followed by a series of lesser ones. “What was that?” she gasped.

“That was a hyena talking to itself,” answered Worrals. “They swarm all over Africa, but no one takes much notice of them. They come into the vermin class, like rats. For goodness' sake pull yourself together. And don't keep saying ‘what's that?’ or you'll get me jittery, too. Honestly—I'm only going on what I've read, of course—I don't think we've anything to worry about. These wild animals are not half as dangerous as those two men at Impala. Well, I'm going to move off. Are you coming, or are you going to stay here?”

“I'm coming,” replied Frecks wearily. “But don't think I'm coming because I like it. I'm only going because I shall be less scared than staying here alone.”

“Fine. Bring your gun.” Worrals picked up the tools, and with Frecks keeping close set off across the plain.

They saw nothing on the journey. Nothing at all. Once, in the far distance, a lion roared, reminding them that they were in Africa, otherwise

they might have been walking across a sun-dried field in rural England. The windstocking pole came into sight, stark against the sky, then the black bulk of the resthouse. Just beyond was the dark shape of the Junkers, still standing in the same place. Worrals expressed her disappointment. She had hoped it would have gone.

Moving cautiously now, without speaking, they approached. Yellow light filtered through chinks in the resthouse, whence came also a low murmur of voices.

“They’re still inside,” breathed Worrals. “They’ll probably stay there if we don’t disturb them.” Moving slowly and quietly she went on to the smaller hut which she took to be the petrol store. The door opened easily to her touch, and her nostrils were at once greeted by a reek which told her that her assumption was correct. “That’s fine,” she whispered. “Apparently they don’t reckon on having visitors here, so they don’t trouble to lock up. No reason why they should.”

In a minute four cans of petrol and one of oil were standing on the grass. Worrals considered them speculatively. “I’ve got an idea,” she said in a low voice. “It’s unlikely that we shall be given a chance to repeat this performance, so I’m going to grab the opportunity of laying in a little reserve store. You remember that dry watercourse we passed on the way here? It’s about four hundred yards. Let’s cart some of this stuff there. It’ll be heavy going, but worth it.”

“Okay,” agreed Frecks.

For the next hour they worked hard, and at the end of that time Worrals expressed herself satisfied. Twenty cans of petrol and four of oil were tucked away under a rocky bank, with some loose sand thrown over them. This did not entirely hide them, there was no time for that, but it was sufficient to prevent them from being seen except by anyone passing very close.

“We’ll fetch one more load and hike straight on to the machine,” decided Worrals.

They returned to the hut. All was still quiet. From the resthouse came the drone of voices. Worrals would have liked to hear what the men were talking about, but hesitated to press their luck too hard. Her immediate concern was petrol, and having got some, she did not feel inclined to take a chance of losing it. She closed the door of the hut. Then, picking up their burdens they began the return journey to the aircraft.

They had gone about a hundred yards when, with a rush and scurry, a dark form leapt up in front of them. It dashed off, and was at once lost in the darkness, but not before a shrill cry of alarm had broken from Frecks’ lips.

Almost before the sound had died away, the door of the resthouse had been flung open, and a path of yellow light streamed out.

Worrals at once dropped flat. “Get down,” she said tersely. Frecks dropped, muttering bitter words about her folly.

The voices of the two men came clearly through the still night air.

Said one: “It sounded like somebody shouting, to me.”



Frecks flung herself away from it, falling flat. . . . The sound of crashing became a thundering roar

Said the other: “I don’t think so. It must have been that damned hyena that’s always prowling round. I’ll give it something to go on with.” A rifle cracked, and a bullet zipped through the grass so close to Worrals that she

flinched. She kept a restraining hand on Frecks' arm. "It's okay," she breathed. "They think we're hyenas."

"That's about what I feel like, too," muttered Frecks.

Presently the door of the resthouse slammed, cutting out the lamplight. Worrals rose, and picked up her cans. "Come on," she ordered. "Let's push along. But for goodness' sake, if we get another scare, try not to tell the world about it."

"Okay," agreed Frecks. "But I warned you. I'm not up to this *safari* business yet. The only cats I have any time for are those you can stroke."

They marched on, talking naturally as soon as they were out of earshot of the resthouse, and reached the aircraft without mishap. It stood, Frecks was relieved to find, just as they had left it. She remarked that she was fully prepared to find that it had been trodden on by an elephant. Putting the cans under the wing they returned to their secret store for four more. This safely accomplished they poured the petrol into the tank, and disposed of the empty cans by throwing them under the acacia trees.

"I reckon we've done a good night's work," declared Worrals. "We'd better see about getting a spot of sleep."

"Sleep—where?"

"In the cabin."

"Shouldn't one of us keep guard?"

"I don't think that's necessary," decided Worrals. "If anything interferes with the machine we shall wake up."

"It won't be much use waking up to find a rhino browsing on our tail unit," remarked Frecks.

"Wild animals don't like the taste of aeroplane dope," returned Worrals lightly. "It's been proved over and over again."

"That's a comfort. I'm glad it wasn't left to us to prove it," replied Frecks. "I suppose we shall have to get used to this wide-open-space stuff, but I prefer my wild animals behind bars."

They went into the cabin, closed the door, and made themselves comfortable for the night—or what remained of it.

Worrals was the first to wake. She awoke at dawn, and spent some minutes gazing with breathless wonder at the glory of the African sunrise. The air was still, fresh and crisp, with a suspicion of frost in it. Animals were dotted about all over the plain, but none to cause alarm. Mostly they were of the gazelle and antelope family, but there were also parties of zebra

and the queer-looking wildebeest. Some of the zebras were grazing quite close, and she awoke Frecks to look at them.

Breakfast, biscuits and bully beef, with hot coffee, followed, and as soon as this was finished Worrals announced her intention of pushing on. The game scattered when the aircraft took off, a fascinating spectacle, and Flecks agreed that African flying had its compensations. After being in the air for some time, the salt-pan which Bill had described confirmed that they were on their course, and an hour later, on the bank of a brook in more rugged country, they made out a shanty, a tent, and a number of trenches, which they knew could only be Magube Drift, their destination. Two men who had been working in one of the trenches climbed out, and stood staring. There was no sign of another aircraft, or of Bill. Worrals circled a piece of level country from which all loose rock had been removed, and choosing a spot, made a good landing. Safely on the ground, she taxied on to meet the two men who were now hurrying towards the machine. They looked what they were—prospectors; men who had spent their lives in the open air. Both were getting on in years, grey, lean, with their faces and arms tanned almost to mahogany tint by wind and sun. The younger, who Worrals knew must be Bill's Uncle Dick, had a moustache, grey like his hair, and blue eyes, wrinkled at the corners. The other, Andrew Mackintosh, was a bigger man, full bearded, with dark, thoughtful eyes. Both wore woollen shirts, corduroy trousers, heavy boots and wide-brimmed hats.

Worrals jumped down, and followed by Frecks went to meet them. "Good morning," she greeted. "Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Ashton and Mr. Mackintosh?"

Uncle Dick answered, smiling. "That's right. Have you lost your way?"

This, Worrals realised, was a not unnatural assumption. "No," she replied. "We've come to see you—or rather, to be more accurate, we've come to see Bill Ashton. We're old friends."

Understanding dawned in Uncle Dick's eyes. "Then you must be Joan Worrals and Betty Lovell? Bill spoke of you. In fact, he told us quite a lot about you."

Shaking hands, Worrals acknowledged that this was so.

"But I thought from what Bill said you were in London?" remarked Andrew Mackintosh.

"We were until a short while ago," asserted Worrals. "Bill said he'd write to us. We had one letter. That was nearly three months ago. Since then we haven't heard a word, so we waffled along to see what was wrong—if anything. Being pilots we thought we might be useful. Is Bill around?"

Uncle Dick glanced at his partner before answering. “No,” he said slowly. “Bill isn’t here.”

“Where is he?”

“I wish I could tell you,” returned Uncle Dick.

“You mean—you don’t know where he is?”

“We’ve no idea.”

“And that,” put in Andrew Mackintosh, “is a serious matter for us. You see, Bill left to fetch stores. That was over a couple of months ago. Naturally, we’ve been hoping all along that he’d turn up. Now we’ve left it too late to get back to civilisation on foot, and our stores are nearly finished.”

“This is worse than I expected,” muttered Worrals. “And you have absolutely no idea of what happened to Bill?”

“All we know is he left here in his aeroplane for Cape Town,” said Uncle Dick. “He hasn’t come back. We can only think that his machine must have gone wrong and he came down somewhere between here and the Cape.”

“You haven’t been out to look for him?”

Uncle Dick made a gesture of resignation. “Where should we start? This is a big country. He might be anywhere. But what are we standing out here in the sun for? Let’s go inside and sit down.”

The interior of the hut was more comfortable than one would have guessed from the outside. There were only two chairs, of the folding variety, and the men, sitting on packing-cases, left them to the girls.

“There doesn’t seem to be much more to say,” remarked Worrals. “The obvious solution to the mystery is, Bill had a forced landing somewhere between here and the Cape. But, even so, one would have thought——”

“If he had a forced landing in the Kalahari he would stand a poor chance of getting out,” put in Andrew Mackintosh. “He wasn’t equipped for a desert march. There’s no water—or mighty little.”

“I don’t think we need pretend to deceive ourselves, or each other,” said Worrals quietly. “Bill didn’t get through. If he had, he would have been here by now, or got in touch with you somehow.”

Andrew nodded, slowly filling a pipe from a lion-skin pouch. “That’s common sense,” he agreed. “I’m afraid Bill’s a goner. He wouldn’t have a hope of getting through on foot. It took us all our time to get here and we’re old stagers, properly equipped for the job.”

“You may be right,” admitted Worrals, “but there’s one aspect of this that puzzles me. Having seen something of the wild animals I can well

understand that a body would quickly disappear. But what about the plane? Bill would fly over a deadline, on a compass course. In fact, he had his course set, except for wind variation, when he left England. He showed it to me and I made a note of it. If his engine let him down, surely the aircraft would be somewhere on that line? I flew over the same course and scanned the country the whole way. It's pretty open. We could have missed the machine, of course, but I don't think it's likely. After all, an aircraft is a pretty big vehicle."

"Suppose it went on fire, and was burnt out?" suggested Uncle Dick.

"Most modern planes have a lot of metal in them, and metal doesn't burn. Besides, a burnt-out aircraft makes a conspicuous black patch if it isn't cleared up."

"Could he have lost his way—in a duststorm, maybe?" suggested Andrew.

Worrals shook her head. "I doubt it. Pilots of Bill's experience don't lose their way, not while the compass is functioning, at any rate—and compasses seldom go wrong, thank goodness. All the same, what I think we'll do, after we've had a rest, is to make a thorough search . . ." She broke off, and started to her feet as from the distance there came the unmistakable drone of an aero engine. They all went to the door and looked out. An aircraft was heading for the spot, and one glance told Worrals all she wanted to know. It was the Junkers.

"I'm afraid there's going to be a spot of bother," she said evenly. "There's no need for you gentlemen to become involved. We can take care of ourselves." She went back into the hut.

IV

SUSPICIONS

THE others followed Worrals into the hut.

“Lend me your pistol, Frecks,” she requested.

The two men regarded her in astonishment. “What are you going to do with that gun?” asked Andrew.

“Use it, if those two thugs start throwing their weight about,” answered Worrals calmly. “I’m not taking any back-chat from them, believe me.”

Uncle Dick suddenly found his tongue. “But I don’t understand this!” he exclaimed. “What trouble could you possibly have with the men who fly that black and white plane? Have you seen them?”

“We certainly have,” answered Worrals.

“But if anybody’s liable to have trouble it’s us,” averred Andrew.

Worrals started. “What’s that? How?”

“Well, it’s a long story—too long to tell now,” answered Uncle Dick. “Briefly, the two men in that aeroplane, Shardwell and Gronk are their names—Shardwell is the tall one—want to buy us out of this concession. We won’t sell, and lately they’ve been getting nasty. In fact, we reckon they’re trying to freeze us out.”

“Is that so?” replied Worrals slowly. “Tell me, did Bill have any truck with them?”

“Yes. He met them at Impala landing ground on his way out here. They had words.”

“So did we,” returned Worrals grimly. “They tried to prevent us from getting here, and now I begin to understand why. We’ll go into this when they’ve gone.” She took the chair nearest to the door, put the gun in her pocket, and waited for the machine to land.

The new arrivals jumped down and walked briskly to the hut.

“They know we’re here, of course,” said Worrals quietly. “Our machine would tell them that.”

Shardwell stopped when he saw Worrals sitting there. Then he came on again. His expression was savage.

“How did you get here?” he demanded preemptorily.

“That’s my business,” replied Worrals evenly. “And that’s all I have to say to you. I don’t like you. I don’t like your face, your manner, or anything about you. You’re on private property. Kindly get off it. I hope I’ve made myself clear?”

Shardwell’s face was a picture—not a pretty one. Such was his anger that his nostrils quivered, and his lips stretched tight over his teeth. He thrust an accusing finger. “You broke into the petrol store!” he shouted.

“And I don’t like your choice of words,” retorted Worrals, without raising her voice. “Let us say I opened the door and took what I wanted.”

“Ha! You admit it.”

“I see no reason to deny it.”

If looks could have killed, Worrals would have died on the spot. Her unshaken calm appeared to so affect Shardwell that he hesitated, groping for words. In the end he turned to Uncle Dick. “Who are these wenches?” he stormed.

“Don’t tell him,” parried Worrals instantly. “Let him go somewhere else for his information.”

Shardwell turned back to her. His face was livid. “You’ll be sorry you came here.”

“So will you,” returned Worrals imperturbably.

Shardwell turned back to Uncle Dick and his partner. “Are you going to sell? This is your last chance.”

“Of course they’re not going to sell,” put in Worrals smoothly. “Can’t you see you’re wasting your time? Why don’t you go away?”

This seemed to be more than Shardwell could bear. His hand flashed to his pocket. But Worrals’ gun was out first. “Oh no you don’t,” she said softly. “Two can play at that game. Keep your hands where I can see them, or I’ll let some of the hot air out of you.”

Shardwell turned again to the two men. “You hear that?” he rasped. “She threatened me.”

“I’ll not stop at threatening, if you don’t quit bellowing,” declared Worrals grimly. “I’ll shoot you, you scum. I’ve killed far better men than you. You fired at me first, yesterday evening, don’t forget, so any action I take will be in self-defence, as these gentlemen will bear witness. Now push off, before I get really angry.”

Shardwell drew a deep breath. He looked at Uncle Dick. “Is this your last word?”

“You had my last word a week ago,” answered Uncle Dick.

For a few seconds Shardwell remained, eyeing the company malevolently. Then he turned on his heel and strode back to his machine. His companion went with him. In another minute the Junkers was in the air, heading eastward.

“That put a flea in *his* ear,” murmured Frecks.

Andrew Mackintosh was staring at Worrals. His expression was one of amused incredulity. “For sheer nerve, young lady, you just about take the biscuit.”

Worrals shrugged. “Fiddlesticks! It doesn’t take much in the way of nerve to stand up to that type of bully. They’re always yellow, unless they have the whip-hand. And now perhaps you will tell me what all this is about? Frankly, I’m not concerned with the business side, that isn’t my affair, but I am concerned about Bill. If he’s run foul of these two men, and it begins to look that way to me, I’m afraid he’s had a dirty deal.”

Uncle Dick made a pot of tea, and produced some biscuits out of a tin. When they were all served he told his story.

“We’ve been here, working on this field, for more than three years,” he began. “We’ve managed to get a little gold, enough to pay expenses, and a bit over, but nothing very big. Always we hoped to strike the main reef. About four months ago we hit a useful lode, and before it petered out—as these things so often do—we got quite a nice parcel of metal out of it. We trekked down to Cape Town and got some samples assayed at the same time. That, apparently, was a mistake, because word must have leaked out that we were on the track of something. Actually, we didn’t mind that much, because as a result of bitter experience in the past we’d got our title to this land well tied up. It isn’t just a claim. It’s a concession covering the whole area. No one else can touch it.

“When we got back here we found these two fellows, Shardwell and Gronk, messing about. They’d flown up. Whether they found anything or not in our absence I don’t know, but they offered us a price for the whole thing. When we turned the offer down they raised the price to a figure which was a good deal higher than it seemed possible they could pay, which gave us the impression they weren’t working for themselves, but for some big shot, perhaps a syndicate, that preferred to remain in the background.

“Anyway, we weren’t in urgent need of money, and apart from that we preferred to take the gamble of striking something big; so we told them we wouldn’t sell at any price. This had all taken some time, you understand? Shardwell and Gronk used to turn up out of the blue in that plane of theirs, argue for a while and push off again—perhaps to consult the man behind

them. But that's only surmise. Lately their manner has become menacing. Our big obstacle was, as Bill may have told you, the transport of stores—not only food, but drills, dynamite for blasting, and so on. This stuff has always been carried by native porters, the normal form of transport in a place like this; but then, suddenly, they wouldn't work for us any more. We saw Shardwell's hand in that. Naturally, if we couldn't get the stores brought up we shouldn't be able to carry on. The amount of stuff we could carry on our own backs would amount to nothing. Things were looking pretty bad when Bill turned up, bringing with him a load of stuff we'd arranged to have collected in Keetmannshoop. In fact, his arrival here with the plane was the answer to our problem. Shardwell must have realised that, too, and he wasn't pleased about it, you may be sure. His plan to starve us out was a flop.

“Well, as you know. Bill went off to get a second load. We haven't seen him since. But Shardwell has been back several times during the last couple of months trying to reopen negotiations. He must have been aware of our predicament—indeed, he used it as an argument. Things got to look pretty hopeless. I was upset about Bill, too, and Andrew and I were seriously discussing selling out, and finishing with the whole miserable business, when you turned up. That's about all there is to it.”

“I find that most interesting,” said Worrals. “It fits in with our side of the story.” She narrated the events at Impala. “It was quite obvious that Shardwell didn't want us to get here,” she concluded. “At the time, I didn't know why; but now, in view of what you've just told us, it's pretty clear. Bill's disappearance must have suited these thugs so well that we are bound to suspect they had a hand in it.”

“Yes, I can see that now,” agreed Uncle Dick. “But the point is, what are we going to do about it? Is there anything we *can* do? Suspicion is a long way from proof.”

“What surprises me is, if these fellows wanted the concession so badly that they would use force to prevent our getting through, why didn't they kill you and have done with it? I imagine it would be a simple matter to commit murder in a lonely place like this?”

“That wouldn't help them,” put in Andrew. “The concession is a valuable property, and as such the title deeds are filed in Cape Town. The Union government has a record of the transaction. If we died, or were killed, the whole thing would pass to our next-of-kin. If Shardwell couldn't buy, he'd have to go on killing people indefinitely.”

Worrals nodded. "I see. I should like to think about this for a little while, if you don't mind. There are several angles to it, and they should all be considered. We'll do your transport work for you, which means that you'll be able to carry on as usual. Meanwhile, I'll work out a scheme to find out what's happened to Bill. You don't mind if we stay here for a bit?"

"Of course not," declared Uncle Dick instantly. "We're delighted to have you. In fact, we should have been in a mess without you. Our stores are pretty low. That's right Andrew, isn't it?"

Andrew nodded sombrely. "I'm not easily dismayed," said he, "but how you hope to find Bill in this wilderness is beyond me. You haven't even a clue."

"I haven't exactly looked for one yet," Worrals pointed out. "What about Mahomet, the Indian superintendent at Impala? He might be able to help if we could find him."

"What do you mean, if you could find him?" inquired Andrew. "Wasn't he there?"

"No."

Andrew and Uncle Dick exchanged glances. "That's odd," said Uncle Dick. "He ought to be there. The job is run on a twelve month's contract. We know Mahomet well. He's a fine chap—certainly not the sort of fellow to leave his post."

"Well, either he has left it—or has been removed," stated Worrals. "He wasn't at Impala when we came through. Shardwell said he wasn't, and we didn't see him. Which reminds me. Do either of you happen to know a native, a big fellow who wears a reddish-tinted leopard-skin round his waist? He carried a spear with brass wire bound transversally round the shaft."

"Why yes, we know him," answered Uncle Dick without hesitation. "At all events, it sounds very much like Wongorobo. He's a headman, one of the lesser chiefs of the Ovambo, the tribe from which we drew our porters before they packed up. He has often passed this way. Why do you ask?"

"Because he was at Impala. I saw him in the resthouse."

"He had no business there," asserted Andrew.

"Personally, I should say he had," replied Worrals pensively. "Where does this Ovambo tribe hang out?"

"On the north-western fringe of the desert, about forty or fifty miles from here. You'd better keep away from them. Some are all right, but others are a tricky lot."

“I’ll bear your advice in mind,” asserted Worrals.

There was a short silence.

“I always felt there was something queer about Bill’s letter, and now I’m more than ever convinced of it,” resumed Worrals. “It’s when they try to be subtle that men give themselves away, poor dears. It’s my opinion that when Bill wrote that letter he was already at loggerheads with Shardwell and Gronk. They didn’t want him here and he knew it. He must also have been aware that in country like this all sorts of things can happen without questions being asked—at any rate, not for a long time. Take it from me. Bill’s disappearance was no accident.”

“We never looked at it like that,” admitted Uncle Dick. “After all, there was no reason why we should. In any case, stuck here as we were, what could we have done? What can we do now if it comes to that? Running in circles round the desert won’t get us anywhere.”

“I quite agree,” returned Worrals. “You’d do much better to stay here and keep an eye on your property. With us it’s different. We have transport, and there are so many places I want to go that the question is where to go first? I realise that we’ve got to be careful. The gloves are off. We’ve made enemies, and Shardwell and Gronk are a tricky pair. They’ve shown us already that they’ll stick at nothing.

“We’ve got to get cracking, but as I say, there are several angles. We ought to be able to find Bill’s machine. Somewhere in, or on the fringe of this desert, is Bill’s plane, or what’s left of it, because some parts of a modern aircraft are practically indestructible. I’m going to look for it. Also, I want to run down to Cape Town and ascertain the facts about Impala landing ground. We might be able to get a slant on Shardwell and Gronk at the same time. It wouldn’t surprise me if they had police records. Then again, you need stores, which we shall have to fetch. I would also like to keep an eye on the Junkers. It may have gone back to Impala—or it may not. Obviously, Shardwell and Gronk aren’t sitting there because they like the scenery. There’s Mahomet to be considered. What’s happened to him? And what about this fellow, Wongorobo? Where does he fit in? Conversely, of course, Shardwell will be trying to find out where we fit in. What’s Wongorobo doing so far from home? We may be sure he isn’t just out for a walk. From the air, we might be able to spot him, unless he’s gone off in the plane with Shardwell and Gronk. I’d like to have a look round the Ovambo *kraal*, but the snag is, if we flew over it we should be seen, and if the tribe is in the racket they’d have a good idea of what we were looking for. We mustn’t expose our hand. I feel that all these loose ends need sorting out before we decide on a plan of action, but I’m inclined to go straight to Cape

Town to check up on Shardwell and his machine. The Junkers is bound to be registered in the Air Department. We could fetch the stores, and have a look at Impala on the way. But I'm talking too much. I suggest that you, Uncle Dick and Mr. Mackintosh, carry on as usual, and leave us to wrestle with the problem of picking up Bill's trail. Make a list of the stores you want."

Uncle Dick got up. "Yes, I think that sounds like common sense," he agreed. "But be careful." He threw Worrals a warning glance. "This isn't Hyde Park."

"You're telling us," murmured Frecks dryly.

V

FRECKS HAS AN IDEA

AFTER the men had gone out to carry on with their work, Worrals sat for some time deep in thought. Frecks did not interrupt. She, too, turned over the problem in her mind, gazing across the shimmering, sun-soaked landscape. She could see the two men digging. She saw them stop work and examine a small piece of rock with interest. Her curiosity aroused, she strolled over to see what it was.

Uncle Dick saw her coming and smiled. "Ever seen gold panned?" he inquired.

"No," answered Frecks. "That brick you're holding doesn't look like a lump of gold to me."

Uncle Dick laughed. "If it were our troubles would be over. No, this is a piece of quartz. But there's gold in it—how much, we shall presently determine. But it won't be a lot; probably a mere particle. If it turned out that there was enough to cover a threepenny bit, we should have struck it rich. We should only have to bring in machinery to crush the quartz in quantities to very soon become millionaires. As it is, we have to work by hand. Watch. I've been doing this for years and years, but I never get tired of it—no miner ever does."

He put the piece of quartz in an iron mortar, which he called a "dolly," and with a pestle he ground it to powder. The sand thus obtained he then washed in a pan with water, skilfully allowing the muddy liquid to swish over the edge of the vessel so that the mud in the bottom grew ever less in quantity. At last only a little remained. Fresh water was introduced, and this went round and round until, behind the mud, could be seen a faint yellow streak which he called the "tail." "That's the gold," he said. "It sinks to the bottom because of its greater weight. If the tail is more than an inch long then you've got something worth while. That's all there is to it. It's the hope of striking a long tail that keeps us going. We've found one or two good veins of quartz, but unfortunately they soon petered out." Uncle Dick carefully put the minute quantity of gold in a small bottle which, Frecks noticed, was half full of gold dust. "With modern machinery, which would deal with the quartz by the ton, quite a lot of gold could be taken out," he remarked.

“Then why don’t you sell the concession to a company that can provide the machinery?”

Uncle Dick shrugged. “I suppose because we’re old-fashioned, and like getting the gold our own way. Once a digger always a digger, they say.” Uncle Dick smiled apologetically, half sheepishly. “To tell you the truth, my dear, like most miners we don’t really want the gold. It’s the getting of it that’s the fascination. If we sold out we should only start tramping round the world looking for another place to dig.”

Frecks nodded. “I get it.”

Uncle Dick returned to the hole he had made, and continued excavating with a small entrenching tool.

Frecks watched him for a minute or two, and then a curious expression came into her eyes. She walked back quickly to the hut, where she found Worrals still pondering on the problem. “Listen,” she said tersely. “I’ve just remembered something. It sounds silly, but Uncle Dick, digging in that hole, reminded me.”

Worrals looked up. “Go ahead.”

“You remember last night, when we were fetching that last load of petrol, we nearly fell over an animal—the one that made me yell? You thought it was a hyena or a jackal.”

“Perfectly well.”

“And then, when the men came out of the resthouse, we went flat?”

“What of it?”

“Well, I didn’t mention it at the time because there didn’t seem to be any point in it, but I fell into a hole. The animal was digging. What was it digging for?”

Worrals looked astonished. “How do I know?”

“Don’t you think it would be a good thing if we found out?” said Frecks quietly. “As far as I know, animals don’t just dig holes for fun. They have only one interest in life—food. Hyenas and jackals eat meat. That animal was digging for something to eat.”

Worrals rose slowly to her feet, her eyes, wide with sudden understanding, on Frecks’ face. “You know,” she said slowly, “there are times, Frecks, when you have flashes of inspiration amounting to sheer genius. You’re right. We’ve got to find out what is at the bottom of that hole. I hate touching it, because I’m scared stiff of what we may find, but it’s got to be done.”

“Suppose we fly Uncle Dick over and get him to do it?” suggested Frecks. “We could take them both, in the cabin, if it came to that.”

“One ought to stay here. We’ll ask Uncle Dick to come,” decided Worrals. “It will be no use landing, of course, if the Junkers is still on the aerodrome—but that’s something we shall find out. Go and ask Uncle Dick to come here.”

The old man came. “What is it?” he asked quickly, looking from one to the other.

“I want you to fly over to Impala with us, for a special reason, bringing your entrenching tool,” said Worrals. “If the Junkers is there I shan’t land—we’ll come straight back. But somehow I don’t think it will be. Shardwell will be busy, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Very well,” agreed Uncle Dick.

“Come on, then.” Worrals led the way to the machine.

Two hours later the landing ground came into view. Everything appeared to be just the same as when they had last seen it, except that there was no aircraft. Clearly, it was not there, for there was no place where it could be hidden.

“Good!” exclaimed Worrals, and glided down to land.

Her wheels were nearly on the ground when, in a single convulsive movement she flicked the throttle wide open and snatched the control column back, causing the Kingfisher to zoom wildly.

Frecks gasped, clutching the side of the machine. “What on earth are you playing at?” she cried in a startled voice.

Worrals’ face was pale when she answered. “I’m not playing. After all I said about being careful I nearly made a first-class boob right away.”

“What was it?” queried Frecks.

“I’ll show you.”

Worrals made another circuit, and throttling back on the fringe of the landing area went down at little more than stalling speed, watching the ground intently all the time. The machine landed. She taxied on for some distance, slowly, watching the ground ahead, and then stopped.

“Look,” she said grimly, pointing.

Frecks looked. And as she looked she moistened her lips. “For the love of Mike!” she breathed. “What swine. What devils.”

Stretched across the best part of the landing field, about two feet above the ground, with pegs at intervals, was a strand of wire.

Worrals climbed down. “Bring the pliers with you,” she told Frecks. “We’ll move this neat little arrangement. I saw it just in time. If I hadn’t noticed it we should have turned a beautiful somersault.”

Uncle Dick scrambled out. He looked upset. “What was all that about?” he demanded with some asperity. “You gave me a rare fright.”

“I gave myself one,” returned Worrals briefly. “Look.” She pointed at the wire.

Uncle Dick was silent for a moment. “Why, the men who did that are potential murderers,” he asserted.

“Unless I’ve missed my guess, you can forget the word potential,” returned Worrals evenly. “Come this way.”

She walked over to the petrol store. It was empty. Everything, oil and petrol, had been removed. “I’m not surprised,” resumed Worrals. “Good thing we built up a little reserve store.” She went on across the sun-scorched grass to the little depression where the animal had been digging. The hole to which Frecks had referred was no longer there. It had been filled in, but loose rock heaped on a disturbed area of earth marked the spot.

“Last night,” said Worrals to Uncle Dick, “a hyena or a jackal was digging here. It made quite a hole. Someone—we needn’t ask who—has discovered it, and taken steps to prevent it from happening again; which all goes to confirm my surmise that there is something under the ground here that would do well to remain. But we’ve got to know what it is. Will you please investigate. While you’re digging, we’ll have a stroll round.”

“I understand,” answered Uncle Dick quietly.

The girls walked over towards the resthouse. Neither spoke. Each knew what was passing in the other’s mind.

There was nothing of interest in the grass-thatched building, or outside it, so Worrals helped Frecks to cut the trip-wire, coil it, and for want of a better place, put it in the cabin of the aircraft. While this was going on Worrals threw frequent glances at the spot where Uncle Dick was working. After a time he could be seen bending over something. Then he scraped the earth back into place, heaped the rocks over it, and started walking towards them.

Worrals drew a deep breath. “Well, now we shall know the worst.”

Uncle Dick’s face was pale under its tan when he joined them. His hands were trembling. “It’s Mahomet,” he said.

“Thank God,” murmured Worrals with simple sincerity. “I was afraid . . . afraid . . .”

“It was Bill?” Uncle Dick nodded. “So was I.”

“So Mahomet was murdered,” said Worrals.

“He was killed by a spear thrust through the back.”

“That sounds as if Wongorobo may have had a hand in it.”

“Yes, but he wouldn’t have troubled to bury him. Only a white man would do that. And a white man was certainly present—look at that.” Uncle Dick held out his hand. In the palm rested a cartridge. “I found it in the hole. That’s a soft-nosed bullet for a Rimmington forty-five rifle—not a very common calibre or make.”

“Does either Shardwell or Gronk use such a weapon?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mahomet may have possessed one?”

“No,” declared Uncle Dick instantly. “He had only one weapon, an Express rifle, supplied by the government for keeping vermin—that includes lions—off the landing ground. When I last saw him he had killed seventeen, and had kept a tally by cutting notches on the stock.”

“How long would you say he has been dead?”

“At least a month.”

“Poor chap. Well, apart from anything else, his blood calls for vengeance.”

“Hadn’t we better be moving on, in case the Junkers comes back and finds us here?” suggested Frecks. “There’s no point in letting them know too much about our movements.”

“There’s just one thing before we go,” replied Worrals. “I’m curious about the petrol. What have they done with it? They couldn’t cart the whole lot about with them. This, presumably, is the only aerodrome in the district, so it’s here they would need it. They’ve taken it, of course, to prevent our having it, but they can’t have destroyed it because they need fuel as much as we do. I think we can assume that they’ve moved it to a place where it will be available to them when they want it, but not to us. It would be comforting to know where it is. Is there any landing ground in the Ovambo country, Uncle Dick?”

“No. Of course, there may be a place where you could land, although I don’t know of one off-hand. There’s no proper landing ground, anyway. The country is all broken up with trees. A lot of it is practically solid jungle.”

“They wouldn’t be likely to take the petrol back to Keetmannshoop,” murmured Worrals. “You know, I have a feeling that it isn’t far away. They couldn’t have manhandled it for any distance without labour—there was too

much of it. It would be a heavy load for the plane, if it came to that. I don't think it could lift it all. Thinking on those lines, we might say that the Junkers needn't necessarily have been airborne. It could taxi. The weight would fall on the tail, which is carried on a skid, I remember, not a tail wheel. I wonder if we could track it? After all, a tail-skid cuts the turf up with a normal load. With all that canned fuel on board, it should leave a pretty plain groove—that is, if the machine was used to move it. Let's see."

Worrals walked over to the spot where the Junkers had stood. "Ah-ha!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "There's the mark of the tail-skid—look how it cut into the ground when the machine turned. Only weight would cause it to do that. That's the way it went." She pointed. "If the machine took off, the skid mark will soon fade out; if it stayed on the ground, the track will remain fairly constant." She started walking along the groove, which could be seen plainly in the stiff, yellow, sun-dried grass.

"It didn't fly," volunteered Frecks presently. "I can see the groove running on and on—over there; there it goes, towards those flat-topped trees."

Worrals stopped. "Yes, I can see it. But we're getting too far away from the machine for my liking. We'll get in and taxi across."

They returned to the Kingfisher and got in. Worrals taxied at a fair speed across the landing ground. In fact, she went so fast that the tail lifted. "We should be silly to make the same mistake as they have, and leave a track," she remarked.

The trail finally ran to an end on the fringe of the rough country that bounded the landing ground. There was no other boundary. The grassy plain merely ended and broke down into an area of rock, scrub, and groups of trees, not unlike a neglected park in England at the close of a long, dry summer. The trail of the Junkers did not of course continue over the broken ground; it stopped at the edge of it, near two features, either of which would serve as a convenient cache for the petrol. One was a small but thick clump of stunted acacias, with flat, spreading arms. The other, a watercourse of sand and rounded pebbles, through the centre of which flowed a mere trickle of clear, transparent water.

"I thought this desert was supposed to be waterless?" remarked Frecks.

"It is, practically, as far as drinking water is concerned," confirmed Uncle Dick. "That stream is one of nature's little tricks. It isn't water. It's brine. That's why there's no vegetation near it. The sand is impregnated with salts that would give you a severe tummy-ache if you drank the water. The whole place was once under the sea, which accounts for the salt-pans in the

depressions, where the last water lingers. The sun does the mischief. The whole place is drying up. As the water evaporates, naturally, the residue becomes more and more saline.”

The banks of the *donga*—as Uncle Dick called the watercourse—were examined for some distance, but they yielded no sign of the petrol, so the little party walked back to the trees where, to her surprise, Frecks noticed a well-defined track leading in. She remarked on it.

“Game track,” said Uncle Dick casually, as they walked along it. “Africa is covered with such tracks. The natives use them as paths. Eventually, as civilisation pushes forward, they become roads.”

As he finished speaking, there was a snort, a squeal, and a crash. “Look out!” he yelled.

There was hardly time to obey. Frecks saw what seemed to be a small mountain bearing down on her. She flung herself away from it, falling flat, although this was not so much the result of thought as the instinct of self-preservation. The sound of crashing became a thundering roar, like nothing so much as a tank plunging through a wood. So close to her did it pass that she was smothered in dirt and loose pebbles. The din quickly receded. Half dazed, she picked herself up in time to see the tail-end of a rhinoceros disappearing across the aerodrome in a cloud of dust. Looking round wildly for the others, she saw that they, too, were picking themselves up.

“The silly old fool,” muttered Uncle Dick, and then burst out laughing. “They’re an absolute pest, these rhinos,” he complained. “The trouble is you never know when you are going to bump into one. He was probably having his siesta in the shade when he winded us.”

“But he charged us,” gasped Frecks.

“Nonsense,” argued Uncle Dick. “If he had, we should be pretty small meat by now. I doubt if he even saw us—they have very poor eyesight. He suddenly caught our taint and tore off in a panic. It just happened that he came our way. I’ll bet he was as scared as we were.”

“Speaking personally, I should doubt it,” returned Frecks succinctly. “I’ll give trees a wide berth in future.”

They found the petrol just inside the timber, the cans neatly stacked, and rather carelessly camouflaged with brushwood.

“Well, there it is,” said Worrals. “That’s all we want to know. This affair seems to be developing into a battle for petrol. The side that first runs out of fuel is likely to lose. We may as well top up while the going’s good.”

Twenty minutes were spent filling the Kingfisher’s tanks. When the task was finished, Worrals regarded the empty cans thoughtfully.

“Since the unpleasant Mr. Shardwell has declared total war on us, I think we are justified in trying a trick,” she asserted, with a faint smile. “No one else will suffer, because only Shardwell and his partner know the petrol is here.”

“What are you going to do—burn it?” queried Frecks.

“Don’t be absurd,” returned Worrals. “We can’t do that. We shall need more petrol ourselves, and our private dump won’t last long. I’ve a better idea than that. We’ll fill these empty cans with brine from the brook, re-cap them, and put them on the top of the pile. They’ll be the first used by Shardwell when he drops in to refuel. It would be interesting to see how his motor behaves when it starts sucking in salt water instead of petrol.”

Uncle Dick looked hard at Worrals. “I never saw such a girl. Where do you get these ideas?”

“Oh, they just come,” answered Worrals lightly.

In a few minutes the empty cans had been filled with water and replaced on the top of the pile.

“I’m worried about the death of Mahomet,” muttered Uncle Dick when the task was finished. “Really, you know, it’s our duty to report the murder to the police at once.”

“That’s true,” agreed Worrals. “And we’d do it if we had a line on Bill. But I think we must keep quiet for the moment. It wouldn’t do us any good to have the police here. Suppose they arrested Shardwell on the evidence of that cartridge you found? There’s just a chance that Bill is still alive, being held prisoner somewhere. What then? Shardwell would keep his mouth shut out of spite and Bill might starve to death. No, I think we must play our own game for the time being. Nothing we can do will bring poor Mahomet back to life, anyway, so any delay——” Worrals broke off suddenly, in a listening attitude. “Hark!”

From far away, borne on the sultry air, came the drone of an aircraft.

Worrals ran into the open, took one look, and then made a dash for the Kingfisher. The starter whirred. The engine came to life, and the aircraft came bumping and jolting over the rough ground into the shade of the nearest tree. She switched off and jumped down. “It’s the Junkers,” she announced, and took up a position from where she could watch without being seen. “Well, I’m dashed,” she went on a moment later, in a voice brittle with surprise. “I don’t think it’s going to land here. It came from the north, which suggests that it has been to the Ovambo country.”

“It may have been to Hansvelt—Shardwell has a claim up there,” said Uncle Dick.

Worrals looked round. “You didn’t tell me he had property in the region?”

“It’s some way from here, and I didn’t think it worth mentioning,” explained Uncle Dick.

Worrals turned her eyes skyward again. “Well, they’re heading southward now, as if they are bound for Keetmannshoop. I feel like keeping an eye on them—we may learn something. If they go to Keetmannshoop, and we followed, you could pick up your stores, Uncle Dick.”

“That suits me,” was the instant reply.

In another minute they were in the machine, racing across the dry grass on the tail of the Junkers, now a speck in the south-western sky.

VI

WORRALS TURNS THE TABLES

It was soon clear that the Junkers was faster than the Kingfisher—unless the Junkers was flying on full throttle. Worrals had too much respect for her motor to tax it too heavily over country where a breakdown would certainly have lamentable results; she was content to cruise on three-quarter throttle, with the result that the Junkers was soon swallowed up in the haze, still on a dead course for Keetmannshoop.

Worrals looked at the watch on the instrument panel, and was surprised to see that although so many things had happened it was still only one o'clock. She remembered that they had been up since dawn—a little before six. She now did some quick thinking, and presently conveyed her decisions to the others.

"I think this is our best plan," she said. "If we find the Junkers on the aerodrome at Keetmannshoop there won't be much we can do about it. I mean, there will be no need for all of us to hang about watching Shardwell. Uncle Dick wants to see about his stores. I want to go to Cape Town to get the facts about Impala, and learn what I can about these two crooks—I'm sure that's what they are. What I suggest is this. If the Junkers is at Keetmannshoop, I'll drop you two off there and push right on to Cape Town. I ought to make it before dark. Uncle Dick, you fix up your stores. Frecks, you drift around keeping an eye on Shardwell to see what he's up to, but for the love of Mike don't let him catch you at it. You can both stay the night at the hotel. I'll be along in the morning to pick you up, together with the stores. Then we'll head back to the diggings. I'll make an early start, so I should be along about ten, or soon after. How does that sound?"

"Okay by me," agreed Frecks.

"Yes, I think it's a sound scheme," concurred Uncle Dick.

"After we've been back to Magube with the stores, I shall slip up and have a look round this claim of Shardwell's, and the Ovambo country," went on Worrals. "Meanwhile, we might as well keep a sharp lookout on the ground for signs of Bill's Dragon—not that I have much hope of seeing it. Uncle Dick, you take the port side. Frecks, you take the starboard." The Kingfisher winged on over the arid waste.

It was three o'clock when it reached its objective. Nothing had been seen of the Dragon, but the Junkers was parked on the aerodrome in front of a hangar. The airscrew was stationary, and no one was near it.

"The men have probably gone into the town," remarked Worrals. "I'll leave you to work that out."

She landed, had her tanks filled, and leaving the others waving goodbye, took off again, heading slightly east of south on her run to Cape Town. In one respect it was a boring journey, and a tiring one, for the super-heated air was choppy, particularly over mountainous districts. She was not sorry when, just before six, she saw the whitewashed name "Cape Town" in the landing circle. Having received permission to land, she went down and taxied to the control office to report her arrival.

Barely had she done so when a tanned, shirt-sleeved South African burst in.

"You Miss Worrals?" he queried cheerfully.

"That's me," admitted Worrals, wondering what was coming.

"I'm assistant traffic manager. You're wanted on the phone—long distance. You can take it in my office. There's a girl at the other end. She's been hanging on for about ten minutes—seems to be in a panic about something."

"Thanks," acknowledged Worrals, with a sinking feeling in the region of her heart. She knew it must be Frecks, and she also knew that something must be seriously wrong for her to put a long distance call through, and hang on. She followed the official to his office and picked up the 'phone.

"Worrals here," she announced. "That you, Frecks? What's the trouble?"

Frecks' voice wailed over the line. "Oh, Worrals, thank goodness I've got you. A most frightful thing has happened."

Worrals braced herself for a shock. "Go ahead."

"Uncle Dick has been arrested."

Worrals nearly dropped the instrument. She was prepared for almost anything—but not this. "All right. Keep calm. Tell me about it and keep to the point."

"This is what happened," answered Frecks. "I left Uncle Dick in the hotel while I went off to look for—you know who. When I came back the place was buzzing with excitement. The men were all talking at once—you know how they do? Naturally, I wondered what it was, but I'd no suspicion that it had anything to do with us, till I heard Uncle Dick's name mentioned. Then I learned that the police had gone to him with a search warrant. Would

you believe it, they found a little bag—a parcel they called it—of uncut diamonds on him, seventeen of them, worth, they say, a thousand pounds. Uncle Dick was arrested for what they call I.D.B., which, I gather, means illicit diamond buying. Apparently you aren't allowed to buy or sell diamonds in this crazy country without some sort of government licence—or something like that—because it encourages the native workmen in the mines to steal. Anyhow, Uncle Dick is in jail. They say he was caught with the swag on him, and he'll get at least five years. This I.D.B. seems to be a most ghastly offence out here—worse than murder. Of course, I'm sure someone put those diamonds in Uncle Dick's pocket."

Worrals got a word in. "Have you seen him?"

"No. I thought I'd better lie low in case they arrested me as an accomplice, and flung me in jail, too."

"That was wise," agreed Worrals. "Has Uncle Dick made a statement?"

"No. I heard the men talking about it. All he said was that it was a ridiculous mistake, and he'd reserve his defence till he could get a lawyer. What shall I do?"

"Nothing—at least, not if it involves your being seen, or implicated. Keep an eye on 'S.' if you can, but don't take risks. He's behind this, of course. You won't be able to do anything at that end, except keep your ears open for news. Leave it to me. I'll be along first thing in the morning. Watch for me to land. If Uncle Dick has bought the stores, have them handy and be ready for a quick take-off."

"Okay. That's all now. My time's up."

"Cheerio—don't worry." Worrals hung up, and turned to see the traffic manager regarding her with friendly concern.

"Everything all right?" he queried, anxiously.

"Quite all right, thanks," answered Worrals.

"Sure I can't do anything?"

"No, thanks all the same, pal. Just a minute though. There is one thing you can do for me. Get my machine refuelled. I've got to slip into the town now, and I shall be leaving early in the morning. Have my bill ready."

"I'll see to it."

"Thanks again." At the door, Worrals turned. "If all airport officials were like you, private flying would be easier, cheaper, and more popular than it is. Congratulations."

The traffic manager laughed. "So long, kid."

Worrals went out and found a taxi. “Police department,” she ordered. She was tired and hungry, but could spare no time for food or rest. As it was, she was afraid she would miss the man she wanted to see.



When they heard the aircraft the natives stopped. For a moment they stood staring up

On the way, she decided on the role she would play. It was obviously useless to tell the truth and expect to be believed. Nor would it be any use demanding the release of Uncle Dick. By the employment of guile, there was just a chance. The first thing, she resolved, was to disarm the Chief of Police by pretending to be ingenuous to the point of childishness.

“I want to see the Commissioner, or the chief inspector, or whoever is in charge,” she told the officer on door duty.

“He’s busy,” was the curt reply.

“Please tell him it’s important.”

“That’s what they all say,” sighed the officer. “Hold on.”

In two minutes Worrals was in the office of the chief inspector. He looked hot and tired and harassed, as though he had had a busy day.

“Good evening, Inspector,” greeted Worrals brightly, forcing a smile.

The inspector looked at her with weary toleration. “Sit down. What’s your trouble?—I know, you’ve lost your handbag. I’m fed up with seeing people, and I’m fed up with listening to other people’s worries, so make it snappy. My patience is dying fast.”

Worrals put on her bland expression. “Oh dear. I’m so sorry. I won’t worry you if you feel as bad as that. It’s nothing, really—just a bag of diamonds I found, that’s all.”

The inspector started. His eyes narrowed. “Did you say *diamonds*?”

“That’s right. Nothing surprising about it, is there? When I was a little girl my uncle told me that diamonds were as common as dirt in South Africa _____”

“Never mind what your uncle told you,” interrupted the inspector curtly. “What about these diamonds?”

Worrals dropped her voice to an exaggerated confidential whisper. “It really was the most extraordinary thing. I can’t think——”

“Never mind about the thinking,” broke in the inspector in an exasperated voice. “I’ll do that. Tell me about the diamonds—and stick to the point.”

Worrals looked hurt. “I was going to. It was like this. When I was up at the Impala landing ground this morning, I went into the resthouse, and what do you think I found on the floor?”

For a moment the inspector looked as if he was going to have a fit, but with a visible effort he held himself under control. “A bag of diamonds,” he snarled.

“However did you guess?”

The inspector swallowed. “You told me.”

“Of course I did—how silly of me. Of course, never having seen raw diamonds——”

“You mean uncut diamonds.”

“That’s right—uncut diamonds. Never having seen such things before, I wasn’t sure what they were. Then I saw a man; he told me. He was on his

way to Keetmannshoop, too—wasn't that funny?"

"No," rasped the inspector.

"Well, I thought it was," resumed Worrals. "I offered him a lift in my plane. When we were in the air, I showed him my find, and he said the stones were diamonds. He also said I must take them to you immediately—so here I am."

An extraordinary expression came over the inspector's face. "What was this man's name?"

Worrals pretended to think. "Ashton. Yes, that's right."

"Good God!" The inspector looked shaken. "Where did you see him?"

"Up in the desert country—a place called, I believe, Magube Drift—something like that."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Did you know him?"

"No."

"Until this morning, you had never seen him before in your life?"

"That's right."

"You'd swear to that?"

"Certainly."

"I see. So you brought the diamonds to me?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

Worrals put her hand first in one pocket, then the other, while an expression of consternation came over her face. "Oh dear. I'm afraid I've lost them. No I haven't. I remember. Mr. Ashton still has them. I told him to keep them in his pocket till we got to Keetmannshoop. When we got there I forgot to take them back. How silly of me to come all this way without them. Poor Mr. Ashton will be in a state. I expect he's running about trying to get in touch with me. I'd better go back."

The inspector took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "There are times when you flying-girls make me tired. Who gave you an aeroplane I don't know—that's not my business, but——" He checked himself. "Don't you realise what you've done?"

"No," answered Worrals brightly. "What have I done?"

"You nearly had an innocent man sent to prison."

"Sent to prison! Whatever for? I don't know what you're talking about."

The inspector leaned forward and pointed an accusing finger. “Ashton was arrested this afternoon for being in the illegal possession of diamonds. Don’t you know the law?”

Worrals shrugged. “Of course, I know you’re not allowed to steal diamonds—at least, not in England. I don’t know anything about your funny little local laws. Poor Mr. Ashton. How dreadful. I do hope you’ll let him go.”

“Of course I shall let him go,” muttered the inspector savagely. “For two pins I’d put you in prison instead, for giving us all this trouble. Hen-brained women give me more work than all the crooks in Africa. What were you doing at Impala, anyway?”

“I was looking for a Mr. Shardwell,” replied Worrals meekly. “I was told I might find him there.”

The inspector registered blank astonishment. “Shardwell! What do you want him for, and what made you think he was at Impala?”

“I understood he wanted pilots to run his air-line. I thought he might give me a job.”

“Pilots—air-line—what are you talking about? Am I crazy, or are you?”

“I’m all right, but of course I don’t know about you, Inspector,” returned Worrals naïvely. “Hasn’t Mr. Shardwell bought Impala?”

“No, and he’s not likely to,” growled the inspector. “The government doesn’t sell its aerodromes—at any rate, not to men like Shardwell. You keep away from him—never mind why. He hasn’t any air-line and he hasn’t any planes.”

“No, but he has,” disputed Worrals. “I saw one of them, a Junkers. The registration letters are ZS-YKX.”

The inspector looked incredulous. “You saw Shardwell—in a plane—at Impala?”

“Yes. He took off just as I got there.”

“Then he must have been the last person at Impala before you.”

“I suppose so.”

“Then it must have been him who dropped the bag of . . .” The inspector broke off abruptly, as though he had already said too much. He touched a bell, and a sergeant answered it. “Check up on a Junkers plane ZS-YKX,” he ordered.

The sergeant went out and came back with a docket. “ZS-YKX is registered in the name of Jansen Gronk, for air-taxi work,” he announced.

“Has Shardwell applied for an aircraft registration?”

“No. Why, is he on the job again, sir?” queried the sergeant, looking interested.

“I don’t know, but I’ll soon find out.” The inspector turned to Worrals. “You’ve been misinformed, young lady. Mr. Shardwell doesn’t own a plane, although he may have hired one. And he doesn’t own Impala. You’d better go back to Keetmannshoop and apologise to the police sergeant there for all the trouble you’ve caused. You’d better apologise to Mr. Ashton, too. Be more careful in future.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry, Inspector,” said Worrals contritely. “Will the morning do?”

“I suppose so.”

“Can I have the diamonds?”

“No!”

“Oh dear, how very disappointing. I was thinking of making a bracelet of them for a souvenir.”

“Listen,” said the inspector coldly. “If you don’t get out of here I’ll give you a souvenir you’ll *never* lose.”

“All right—I’m going,” said Worrals nervously. “You’re sure it will be quite all right with poor Mr. Ashton?”

“I’ll ring up Keetmannshoop and tell them to let him go.”

“Oh, thank you, Inspector. That is kind——”

“I know, I know. Run along and play with your plane before I lose my temper.”

As Worrals went out she heard the inspector say to the sergeant: “Nuts. That’s what she is, nuts. There ought to be a law passed . . .”

Outside the door, Worrals leaned on it and laughed silently. Then she went on. She called a taxi, returned to the aerodrome hotel, had a bath and went down to the dining-room.

An hour later, after giving orders that she was to be called at five o’clock in the morning, she was in bed, sleeping the sleep of the innocent.

VII

A GRIM DISCOVERY

THE following morning, just before ten, the Kingfisher's wheels touched down on, and trundled across, the Keetmannshoop landing field. Looking around anxiously, Worrals made out Frecks and Uncle Dick waving from where they stood near some boxes and bags piled beside a repair shed. She taxied over to them.

"Good morning, folks," she greeted. "Are those the stores?"

Frecks assented.

"Then get them on board and we'll get out of this," declared Worrals. "I have a feeling that we may not be popular here presently."

"They let Uncle Dick go," said Frecks, as she helped to load up. "Did you arrange that?"

"I had something to do with it," admitted Worrals, keeping a watchful eye on the tarmac.

"Not only that, but they actually apologised to me for locking me up," stated Uncle Dick. "How did you manage it?"

"By telling a beautiful fairy tale and looking dumb at the same time," replied Worrals, smiling faintly. "Fortunately, the police inspector was a simple man; but he can't be a fool, for if he was he wouldn't be a police inspector; and when he examines my story in the cold light of day he may perceive certain flaws in it. Shardwell will be only too anxious to point them out to him, anyway, if they question him, as they may. That's why I feel that the sooner we shake the dust of this burg off our wheels the better."

"Where are we going?" asked Frecks, as the last of the stores were put on board.

"Back to Magube Drift, to get rid of this stuff, for a start," answered Worrals. "We'll call at Impala on the way and top up with petrol. Ah! Who do I see? Mr. Shardwell and his ugly pal have arrived. There they are, in that car. They've spotted us, too. They look somewhat agitated. Hello, they've got somebody with them. Who's that, I wonder?"

Frecks looked across at the car. "That's the man they were talking to in the hotel," she asserted. "I'll tell you about it when we get going. Let's push off—I feel that something may happen."

At this juncture, the unknown man who was in the car with Shardwell, jumped out and started running towards the Kingfisher, beckoning urgently.

“Oh, no,” murmured Worrals. “I don’t think we want to talk to you.” She started the engine, swung round, taxied into position and took off. In the air, as she turned slowly, climbing for height, she looked down, and saw the car speeding back towards the town. “There they go,” she observed. “I wonder what they’re going to do—but it’s no use wondering.” She settled the Kingfisher on its course for Impala.

“Did you find out anything about Shardwell?” asked Frecks.

“Not much. But what I did learn was significant. There’s no aircraft registered in his name. The Junkers is registered as an air-taxi, by Gronk, but of course, that may mean nothing. It’s probably a frame-up arranged by Shardwell. He’s the boss, as far as that pair are concerned, there’s no doubt about that. He doesn’t own Impala; it still belongs to the government. His story was just a big bluff to keep us off. From something a police sergeant let drop, I have an idea that Shardwell is known to the police. That’s all. What about you?”

“I haven’t much to say,” answered Frecks. “I hung about the bar in the hotel last night, keeping out of sight, of course, and saw that new fellow arrive. He came by car—a Buick. He looks well off—quite a different type from the others, I should say. I’d put him down as a prosperous business man. He went straight up to Shardwell and Gronk, and the three of them went into a huddle. They spent most of the evening talking, but I couldn’t get close enough to hear what they said. About ten o’clock, when Uncle Dick walked in, having been released, they looked pretty shaken. We went to our rooms then to keep out of trouble. I don’t think I should have learned any more, anyway, if I’d hung around.”

“Have you anything to add to that, Uncle Dick?” called Worrals.

“Only a little,” came the answer. “I got it from the barman this morning. That new man is a fellow named Dayne. He’s a stockbroker, or something of the sort, in Cape Town—interested in mining concerns. He must be the man behind Shardwell. At any rate, Shardwell, is supposed to be a mining engineer, a sort of agent who makes a practice of buying mining properties for big financial interests that prefer to keep in the background. He works on commission, they say. In this case, it looks to me as if he’s trying to buy Magube Drift for Dayne.”

Worrals nodded. “Yes, that all seems to add up,” she agreed. “They must be a shady lot. I think we’ll keep out of the way of them, if we can, and get on with the job that brought us out here. We’ve got to find Bill, and I have a

feeling that we've no time to lose. Shardwell must know by now that we're bucking his scheme, and he'll stump us if he can."

"But where on earth are we going to start looking for Bill?" asked Frecks in a hopeless voice.

"You'll see," answered Worrals. "I'm still convinced that it isn't possible to destroy an aircraft so completely that no sign of it remains. I think, for a start, when we've unloaded these stores, we'll carry the war into enemy country by having a look round the Shardwell property Uncle Dick told us about."

Nothing more was said. The Kingfisher cruised on through air that became more and more bumpy as the sun tortured it, but reached its first port of call, Impala, without trouble. As Worrals throttled back and glided on to the far side of the landing area, intending to finish her run as near as possible to the petrol dump, she happened to glance down. An ejaculation of surprise broke from her lips.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "The hole—the hole where they buried Mahomet. Something's happened there."

Frecks looked down, and observed that what Worrals had said was undoubtedly correct. The rocks had been flung aside, and the earth scattered, leaving a considerable cavity.

"Looks like the work of hyenas," remarked Uncle Dick.

"I'm not so sure of that," answered Worrals grimly. "Had it been hyenas, it seems reasonable to suppose that some would still be there—or there would be other signs; rags, for instance. Hyenas don't eat clothes. We'll have a look at this." Altering her course, she landed on the side of the aerodrome nearest to the hole, jumped down, and started walking briskly towards the excavation.

Uncle Dick ran after her. "You'd better leave this to me," he advised earnestly.

"Don't worry—I'm not a child," returned Worrals in a hard voice. She strode on.

As she drew near, she saw that the loose earth round the hole was pressed flat, as if by many feet; and when she reached the actual spot, she surveyed the ground intently. "You know more about this sort of thing than I do, Uncle Dick," she said tersely. "I'm no tracker. But I don't see any signs of hyenas—do you?"

"No," answered Uncle Dick in a low voice. "I do not. We'll soon settle it." He went to the edge of the hole and worked for a minute or two. Then he climbed out. "The body's gone," he announced in a strained voice.

“And hyenas would hardly be likely to kick a lot of the earth back into the hole,” said Worrals, a trifle sarcastically. “Look, there’s a footmark on the loose earth. It looks like a man’s bare foot to me.”

“There’s no doubt of it,” agreed Uncle Dick. “Natives have been here.”

“If they came here, it seems likely that they knew the body was here,” reasoned Worrals.

“Yes.”

“Is it a native habit to disinter dead bodies?”

“I’ve never heard of it—at least, not in this part of the world.”

“Are the Ovambo cannibals?”

“No. I can’t think what they would want with the body.”

“There’s one obvious answer to that,” rejoined Worrals. “They wanted to dispose of it, once and for all.”

“But savages wouldn’t trouble about a thing like that,” declared Uncle Dick.

“They might, if they were ordered to. That fellow Wongorobo was here, remember. It may be that Shardwell ordered him to get rid of the body, in case it was discovered.”

“I doubt if one man could do it in the time. It would be no easy matter to carry a dead man for miles.”

“Why confine the operation to one man? Wongorobo has friends I imagine?”

“Of course.”

Worrals’ eyes were now looking at something a short distance away. She walked to the spot, and stooping swiftly, picked something up. For a moment she stared at it, while the colour drained from her face. “Look at this,” she said in a low voice, holding out the object for Uncle Dick to see.

“What is it—it looks like a piece of rag?”

“It is—rag—of sorts,” agreed Worrals. “To be more precise, it’s a piece of aeroplane fabric. Observe the colour.”

“Dark blue.”

Worrals moistened her lips. “Dark blue was the colour of Bill’s Dragon—wasn’t it?”

Uncle Dick nodded. “Yes. Now you remind me, it was. How on earth did it get here?”

“That,” returned Worrals in a brittle voice, “is what we’ve got to find out.”

While they had been talking, Frecks had joined them. Worrals held out the fabric. It was quite a small piece, about nine inches by three. “That’s a piece of fabric from Bill’s Dragon,” she said tersely. “Natives have been here. Mahomet’s body has gone. Presumably they took it. We’ve got to find them, because where that piece of material came from there is more. And when we locate Bill’s machine I’m pretty sure Bill won’t be far away.”

“But why would they bring that piece of fabric here?” queried Frecks.

“I don’t suppose they brought it intentionally—or at least, they didn’t leave it intentionally. Come on. We’re on the track at last.”

They went back to the machine. Without a word, Worrals taxied across to the petrol dump, and having first moved the water-filled cans, topped up the tanks. She then replaced the cans in their original order, and turning to Uncle Dick, pointed towards the north-west.

“That, I think you said, is the direction of the Ovambo country?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s the direction we’re going,” announced Worrals. “I’m going that way because it seems reasonable to suppose that it is the direction taken by the despoilers of Mahomet’s grave. How far we go depends on what we find. In any case, it’s unlikely that I shall risk a landing. Loaded up as we are with stores it would be dangerous on anything but a good surface. Come on.”

The Kingfisher was soon in the air, with Worrals scanning the country ahead.

Five minutes later, after covering some twelve miles, she said quietly. “There they are.”

Straight ahead, across country that was fairly open, but near a belt of timber, was a line of a dozen men, natives. They marched in single file. In the middle of the party, four men carried a long object that swung on a pole. The object was dark blue.

When they heard the aircraft, the natives stopped. For a moment they stood staring up; then, with one accord they dropped their burden and made a rush for the trees, into which they disappeared. One man stopped on the fringe, watching the machine. He wore a leopard-skin loin cloth.

“There’s Wongorobo,” said Worrals. “He’s the head man of that party, I fancy.” She went lower, and circled over the fallen object. “I remember, years ago, seeing a film called ‘Doctor Livingstone,’ ” she remarked. “In it, natives were depicted carrying his dead body, just like that.”

“It’s the usual way, in Africa,” said Uncle Dick.

“That’s Mahomet down there, no doubt,” returned Worrals. “The body is wrapped in blue aeroplane fabric. Now we know why they brought it. The piece we found must have been accidentally torn off. They wouldn’t be particular about a little thing like that, I imagine.”

“There’s no question of landing,” said Frecks, a trifle nervously. “There isn’t a place anywhere where you could get down.”

“I wasn’t even thinking of landing,” retorted Worrals. “Those natives aren’t far inside the trees, you may be sure, and I, for one, don’t want a spear through my back, like poor Mahomet. No, we’ll push along to Magube Drift and unload these stores. This needs thinking about.” She opened the throttle, and swinging the machine round, headed west.

VIII

THE MANEATER

THE KINGFISHER reached Magube Drift without trouble, and by noon the stores were unloaded. Worrals made a quick inspection of the aircraft and then retired with the others into the shade of the hut to talk things over. She told them briefly what had happened in Cape Town.

“I’m not so foolish as to suppose that one can tell a cock-and-bull story like that to the police and get away with it,” she concluded. “But I had to do something, and do it quick. It was a case where the truth would have done no good—it would have sounded more like fiction than the story I told. All the same, when that inspector at Cape Town learns how he was tricked, he’s going to be very angry; he’ll try hard to find me, you may be sure, and no doubt Shardwell will be only too happy to help him. That’s one reason why I shan’t be able to stay here much longer.”

“You might have taken Mahomet’s body to Keetmannshoop; that would have supported your story,” suggested Andrew.

“I don’t see that it would,” returned Worrals. “Shardwell might have made a case against us, saying that we incited natives to do the murder. Apart from that, the idea of flying round with a month-old corpse isn’t exactly pleasant. Again, whatever else happened, there would be a police investigation. The police don’t just take your word for anything; they check up. All that would have taken time. Shardwell would have heard about it, with the result that all trace of Bill, and his machine, would disappear for ever. The Ovambo, who are in this business up to the neck, would see to that, anyway. Their handling of Mahomet’s body is proof. Why did they move the body? I don’t know much about natives, but I can hardly imagine them doing that on their own account. I should say it’s far more likely that Shardwell ordered them to take it away; which suggests that he’s getting windy about the situation. He knows that we are still using Impala, or are likely to, and he was scared of the body being found. He would only have to tell Wongorobo, who, judging from the spear-thrust, had a hand in the murder, to take it away. Wongorobo was in the resthouse with them when we arrived, don’t forget. They’re as thick as thieves. All the same, I’d bet that Shardwell didn’t reckon on the Ovambo using the fabric of Bill’s machine as a shroud. That wasn’t in the programme.”

“Natives usually use leaves or reeds for the purpose,” put in Uncle Dick. “Why on this occasion they should use fabric is something we may never know. The native brain works on curious lines. No white man can tell what they will do next. I wonder why Mahomet was killed in the first place?”

Worrals shrugged. “He was probably too conscientious for them. He may have heard something, or seen too much. He may have overheard the row between Bill and Shardwell at Impala. In fact, it’s pretty certain that he would. It was probably at Impala that Bill finally fell foul of Shardwell. They may have shot him, or knocked him down, and seized his machine. Mahomet, as superintendent of the landing ground, would protest. He might have gone to Bill’s assistance. He may have threatened to report the affair at Cape Town. We don’t know, but something of the sort seems feasible. Wongorobo, with or without Shardwell’s consent, killed him with his spear to keep his mouth shut.”

Uncle Dick tapped out his pipe on the heel of his boot. “You seem to be able to work these things out better than I can; what do you suggest we do next?”

“We shan’t see Bill again if we sit here and wait for him,” replied Worrals. “Nor do I think it’s the slightest use looking for him in the desert. Alive or dead, he’s in one of two places—either at Shardwell’s property up north, or in the Ovambo country. How far are these places apart?”

“Not more than ten or twelve miles,” replied Uncle Dick. “That is, from Shardwell’s claim at Hansvelt, to Nakula, which is the name of the Ovambo *kraal*.”

“Which is the nearer to us here?”

“The claim.”



The lion crashed against his shield and the man went down under its weight

“Then we’ll go there first,” decided Worrals. “If we find nothing there we’ll go on to Nakula. After seeing that fabric this morning, I’m pretty certain we shall find Bill’s plane at one place or the other. If we can find that, it will be concrete evidence of Shardwell’s dirty work. I’m afraid it’s no use going to the police until we have some such proof. I don’t like dragging you about, but you know this country, and we don’t. Will you come with us and show us the Shardwell claim?”

“Of course.”

“Is there a landing ground there?”

“I don’t know, but I should think so, since Shardwell uses a plane for getting about. As far as I know, that claim was his only interest in this part of the world till he learned that we had a good proposition here.”

“That party of Ovambo we saw must still be a good way from home,” said Worrals thoughtfully. “We ought to get to their *kraal* before they do. If they arrive there first and report that they were spotted by a plane, we might not be popular when we turn up.”

“You won’t be that, anyway,” remarked Andrew, seriously. “They’re a tricky crowd. You are not by any chance thinking of walking straight into the village, are you?”

“That was my idea,” admitted Worrals.

Andrew shook his head. “If the Ovambo are innocent, you might get away with it, although they would probably make things unpleasant for you. But if they are guilty, and it looks that way to me, you would never get out alive. They’re savages, but they’re not entirely fools. They know what would happen if it was reported to Cape Town that they had had a hand in the murder of a white man—or an Indian, if it comes to that.”

“But we’ve got to search this village—what do you call it—Nakula.”

“Why not fly over it, and have a look at it from the air?”

“Does it stand in open country?”

“No. It stands on the edge of the forest, in well-wooded country.”

“Then that’s no use,” asserted Worrals definitely. “To fly over would merely scare them to no purpose. We couldn’t see inside the huts from the air, anyhow. It looks as if we shall have to do a bit of scouting on foot.”

“You’d be taking a terrible risk,” said Andrew, looking worried. “I must say I don’t like the idea of a girl going near that *kraal*. I’d think twice before I went near it myself.”

“I’m afraid there’s no alternative,” replied Worrals firmly. “I came here to find Bill, and it would be absurd to miss the most likely place, savages or no savages. There will be three of us, all armed, so if there is trouble we ought to be able to put up a good show. But let’s have something to eat. Then we’ll push along to the claim. We’ve wasted a lot of time as it is.”

“This is harder work than war flying,” complained Frecks.

“There is this about it; we haven’t far to go,” answered Worrals. “How far did you say it was to Shardwell’s claim, Uncle Dick?”

“About forty miles.”

“That’s only twenty minutes’ flying at cruising speed,” commented Worrals cheerfully.

After a rest, Worrals and Frecks spent some time going over the machine, checking controls, bracing wires, and the like. Then they returned to the hut and prepared themselves for the flight. Uncle Dick took down a heavy calibre rifle, examined it in a business-like way, and put some cartridges in his pocket.

“Gosh! That looks a formidable piece of hardware,” observed Frecks.

Uncle Dick smiled. “It is. It has probably killed more big game than any other weapon in the country. Forty years old, it is, and hits as hard as the day it was built. It was left to me in the will of Captain Stevenson, one of the greatest African hunters of all time. I did several trips with him, years ago. A leopard got him at the finish, one night when he was asleep.”

“How horrible,” said Frecks, testing her automatic.

Worrals went over her own rifle.

When they were all satisfied, they went out to the Kingfisher, leaving Andrew standing at the door of the hut, and in a few minutes were in the air, heading north. Uncle Dick sat next to Worrals, acting as guide. The claim was only a short run, but none of them was sorry when they reached it, for the machine rolled and pitched in the bumps, as the rocky country below flung back the heat of the sun.

“There it is,” observed Uncle Dick, after they had been in the air about twenty minutes.

Worrals considered the area he indicated. There was nothing much to see. Except for a ramshackle hut, with a rusty corrugated-iron roof, there were only a few trenches to mark the claim. The ground appeared to be the same as the surrounding country—an undulating expanse of withered grass, broken by outcrops of grey rock and scarred by old watercourses, now dry. There were the usual sparse groups of stunted, flat-topped trees. To the west, the rock piled up into low, rough, conical hills.

“That must be the landing ground,” observed Worrals, her eyes on a fairly level area—in fact, the only area where there was no rock.

Concentrating on her task, she glided down and made a fair landing. With her wheels safely on the ground, she taxied on a little way to get as close as possible to the hut, and then switched off.

“I could see no sign of Bill’s machine as we glided down,” she remarked. “I’m afraid we’re going to draw blank here. We can see all there is to be seen at one glance—except inside the hut. Let’s have a look at it.”

Taking their weapons, they dismounted and walked on, disturbing a number of baboons, that retired, barking, to the rocky hills.

Uncle Dick kept an eye on them. "Never take any chances with those rascals," he advised. "They can be ugly customers on occasion."

The door of the hut was padlocked, but a storm of wind had lifted a sheet of the corrugated-iron roof, and by standing on a rock Worrals was able to inspect the interior.

"Nothing," she said quietly, as she got down. "Only picks and shovels and things." She surveyed the ground round the hut. In a search for gold, trenches and holes had been dug in several places; she made the round of them, but they revealed nothing of interest. "Well, that's that," she remarked. "What's the time?" She looked at her wrist-watch. "Four o'clock. We've still got a couple of hours of daylight left, so I think we'll drift along to Nakula. As a matter of fact, I'm inclined to think that in this scouting business we shall do better after dark. The only thing against it is making a night landing at Magube afterwards. I don't like taking chances with the machine at this stage."

"It may come to that, anyway," said Uncle Dick. "I don't think you'll find a landing ground very close to Nakula, so it may mean a long walk. I once followed a wounded elephant through that country, and from what I remember of it it's all pretty well wooded."

"We shouldn't be able to fly too close, in any case, or the Ovambos would hear the aircraft," asserted Worrals. "I don't think we can say what we will, or will not, do, till we've had a look round. You tell me when we're getting near Nakula—say, three miles or so. Then I'll throttle back a bit while we look for a place to get down."

"There is this about night work," contributed Uncle Dick. "You won't be likely to run into any natives outside the *kraal*. They don't like the dark, and for a very good reason. Lions usually hang around the *kraal* waiting for a chance to get at the cattle, so the natives stick pretty close to the camp fire."

"How very interesting," put in Frecks dryly. "I don't think I'm going to like——" She broke off abruptly, staring. "Ah-huh! Do you see what I see?" she concluded softly.

Following the direction of her eyes, the others saw, standing near some rocks against the skyline, about two hundred yards away, a man, a tall native, a warrior, judging by the spear and shield he carried. There was no time to see more for, noticing that he was observed, the native vanished.

"From the shape of his shield, I should say that chap was an Herero," said Uncle Dick. "I think it might be advisable to move off."

"Are they a bad lot?" asked Worrals.

“I wouldn’t say that, but they’re jumpy. You never quite know how they are going to behave, so the safest plan is to give them a wide berth.”

They started walking towards the machine, Frecks throwing anxious glances over her shoulder; but they had not gone far when a shout made them all turn, to see a man running after them, a native, but altogether different from the last one they had seen. The first had worn only a loin cloth. This one was dressed in an assortment of European garments that might have been collected from a scarecrow. On his head he wore a large slouch-hat with a wide brim that flapped as he ran. He called again, raising his hand.

Uncle Dick stopped, laughing. “Why, would you believe it!” he cried. “If it isn’t old Ingoona.”

“Friend of yours?” queried Frecks.

“He is indeed,” was the surprising answer. “Ingoona is probably the best gun-bearer in Africa. You remember me telling you about Captain Stevenson, who left me his rifle in his will? Well, Ingoona was his gun-bearer for many years. Got pretty badly mauled, more than once. He’s a great chap. I haven’t seen or heard anything of him for years—in fact, not since Stevenson was killed. The old man was terribly upset, they say, and just faded away into the bush. I wonder what he’s doing here? You watch his face when he sees this rifle.”

Ingoona came running up, his ebony face, mutilated on one side by claw marks, wreathed in smiles. He was an old man, with skin that looked like nothing so much as an old boot that had been left out in the sun. There was no doubt about his pleasure at seeing Uncle Dick. He saluted him again and again. Then he caught sight of the rifle. “Hail! thou slayer of the mighty,” he cried in English, in a voice that had in it a quality of reverence. He took the rifle from Uncle Dick’s hands, patted it, fondled it, holding it against his face. Then he handed it back. “Far have we travelled together,” said he, with a half-apologetic glance at the girls.

“What are you doing in these parts, Ingoona?” asked Uncle Dick. “By rights you should have been dead years ago.”

“Men like me do not die, *bwana*,” said the old man proudly. “Like the old elephants, we are killed, or just fade away.”

“I never knew you were an Herero,” said Uncle Dick.

“There was a time when it was not a thing to talk of,” returned Ingoona, rather uncomfortably. “There was trouble between the white men and my tribe. When *Bwana* Stevenson fell asleep to wake no more, in the sadness of

my heart I returned to my people. That was after I had slain the leopard that deprived him of his life.”

It turned out that the old man was leading a party of warriors, a score of them, on a hunting trip. Seeing that all was well, these now closed in, and stood staring with expressionless faces at the meeting.

“We were about to make camp when we heard the noise in the sky,” explained Ingoona. “The evil one had already heard it, and bolted into cover.” He pointed to a wide belt of dry rushes that filled a *donga* at no great distance. “That is where he sulks, wounded by an arrow from the last man he killed. For many days we have followed him, and his temper is not good. But he will not stand at bay. When he sees the spears he runs.”

It turned out that the evil one referred to by Ingoona, was a lion, an old and mangy, but still ferocious, beast, that had committed the unpardonable sin of killing a man. As a matter of detail, he had killed several men, women and children, of the tribe, for which reason sentence of death had been passed on him. While he lived, no one was safe.

Uncle Dick agreed. “We haven’t much time for lion-hunting,” he stated. “But if the thing could be done quickly, if you will drive him out we’ll see if we can make an end of him, and so save your legs another journey to-morrow.”

Ingoona greeted this suggestion with a shout, and quickly passed the information to his followers, who at once prepared for the attack.

“We will enter from the far side and drive him towards you,” declared Ingoona.

Frecks chipped in, speaking to Uncle Dick. “Do I understand that these fellows are going to drive a lion *towards* us?”

“That’s right,” agreed Uncle Dick.

“I don’t think that’s at all a good idea,” demurred Frecks with some warmth. “We came here on a man-hunt, not a lion-hunt. What’s the point of this diversion?”

“A wounded lion, to say nothing of a man-killer, is a menace to everybody,” averred Uncle Dick. “Besides, if we kill the brute, the Hereros will be grateful, and it’s much better to have them as our friends than enemies. After all, think what they have to do. They’re about to take on a job just about as dangerous as you could imagine. To follow big game into cover is to ask for trouble. They’re going to do more than that. Without a firearm of any sort they’re going to drive the brute out. You watch.”

“Oh yes, I shall watch all right,” promised Frecks.

“I’ll take this stand over here,” went on Uncle Dick, pointing to a piece of rising ground about a hundred yards distant. “From there I shall be able to keep an eye on the left side of the *donga*, in case he breaks that way. Worrals, you take that piece of high ground just in front. When he comes out it’s ten to one he’ll stop to have a look round. That’ll be your chance, but take care not to hit one of the beaters. Remember, I shall be handy. I’ve had a good deal of experience at this sort of thing, so you’ve nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worrying,” answered Worrals briefly.

Uncle Dick walked away and took up his station. By the time he had reached it, the natives, under the leadership of Ingoona, had formed a crescent behind the reeds. At a signal, they began to advance, singing, striking their spears against their ox-hide shields.

Worrals watched, fascinated, conscious that her heart was beating rather faster than usual. “This is a new sort of thrill,” she remarked to Frecks, who was standing by her left elbow.

“The old ones were good enough for me,” muttered Frecks. “I hope he bolts the other way,” she added frankly.

The natives advanced; their heads could just be seen above the tops of the reeds. Deeper and deeper into them they plunged, shouting objurgations at their hereditary enemy. They swept on through the centre, and forged towards the near side, that is, the side where the guns were waiting at a distance of some seventy or eighty yards. With a final yell, they rushed forward to drive the lion into the open. Nothing happened. Ingoona appeared, looking to left and right. One by one the rest of the Hereros broke cover—but no lion.

Worrals laughed shortly, lowering her rifle. “What an anticlimax,” she said lightly. “He wasn’t there, after all.”

Precisely at that moment the lion appeared. With a snarling cough he sprang up from some low ground midway between the girls and the natives. How he had got so far without being seen was beyond Frecks’ understanding. For a moment he stood erect, a huge, black-maned beast, lashing his sides with his tail, looking about him, as Uncle Dick had said he would.

Worrals took quick aim, and then realised that the lion was in direct line between her and the beaters. If she missed, it seemed certain that she must hit one of them; and while she hesitated, the maneater bounded away towards a flank, as if seeking to escape.

A shout went up from the natives, who dashed forward to head him off, Ingoona in the lead. The lion seemed to realise instantly their intention, and this evidently was too much for his already frayed temper. With a roar of fury he whirled round towards the natives and charged.

Uncle Dick and Worrals fired almost simultaneously. Both missed. At any rate, the lion gave no sign that he had been hit. This did not surprise Frecks, who knew well enough how hard it is to hit a moving target with a single bullet. The lion did more than move. It seemed to fly. There was no time for a second shot. With a final bound it was on the nearest native, who hurled his spear and then met the attack with his shield. The lion crashed against it, and the man went down under its weight.

To Frecks, the next few minutes were more like a dream than reality. Worrals ran forward, although what she hoped to achieve Frecks could not think. It was obvious, however, that they could do nothing where they were. To put a bullet through the lion without hitting the man underneath was clearly next to impossible. Dragging out her automatic, Frecks followed hard on Worrals' heels, and even at that alarming moment she recalled Worrals' warning, "Pray that you never have to use that gun against an irritated lion."

The lion was not having things all his own way. With superb courage a second warrior had run in close and flung his spear. It struck the maneater in the hindquarters. With another roar it left its victim and turned on its new assailant, who went down under its rush. Instantly, Ingoona was by its side. He did not throw his spear, but struck right home. The lion reared up on its hind legs, and with one sweep of its paw knocked the old man's shield aside like a scrap of wind-blown paper. Ingoona went down with the lion on top of him.

By this time Worrals had reached the spot. Without raising the rifle above her hip she fired point-blank into the lion's side, just behind the shoulder. Frecks blazed wildly, pouring three shots into its flank. For a second they seemed to have no effect. The maneater seemed to sink a little lower, that was all. Then it rolled over and lay still.

Frecks lowered her pistol. She could hardly believe that the creature was dead. But she realised that it must be, for Ingoona was dragging himself clear of the body. Uncle Dick, hatless and breathless, dashed up, as did the remaining warriors, who buried their spears in the tawny body.

Uncle Dick was pale. He wiped perspiration from his forehead with a trembling hand. "Heavens above!" he muttered. "That was close. I'm a fool. I should never have exposed you girls to such a risk."

“It’s a bit late in the day to think of that,” murmured Frecks, wrinkling her nose at the almost overpowering stench of lion that filled her nostrils.

Strangely enough, none of the natives was badly hurt, Ingoona least of all. He had three nasty gashes in the shoulder, but he took the wounds as a matter of course. One of the others had a piece of scalp torn from his head, so that it flapped over his ear, but it looked worse than it was. He, too, made light of it. The first man to fall was merely bruised; an expert lion-hunter, he had saved his body with his shield.

Ingoona came to the girls and saluted. “That was a battle even *Bwana* Stevenson would have been proud of,” he declared. “But for those shots, I was a dead man. The evil one had his mouth open to bite. I looked right into his throat. Once before I saw such a sight, and then *Bwana* Stevenson saved me. This will be a day to remember.”

“You’re telling me,” muttered Frecks, who was sitting down.

“What’s the matter?” asked Worrals.

“My legs have gone all weak,” complained Frecks.

Worrals turned to Uncle Dick. “There’s a first-aid outfit in the machine. Bring these fellows along and I’ll put some antiseptic on their wounds. It’s time we were moving—we’ve been here longer than I expected. A lion-hunt wasn’t in our programme.”

“In Africa,” returned Uncle Dick with a wan smile, “you never know quite what is in the programme.”

“I’ve noticed that,” murmured Frecks softly.

IX

VOICES OF AFRICA

TWENTY minutes later the Hereros, with their wounds bandaged, returned to the scene of the hunt. Ingoona said they would skin the lion. They would camp close by for the night, so if the plane came back that way the girls could have the skin for a souvenir. Worrals thought it unlikely that they would come back that way, and as they could not wait, they said goodbye. The Hereros walked away, and the Kingfisher took off, with Uncle Dick still sitting beside Worrals to act as guide. There was only a short distance to go, but Worrals was concerned to notice that the sun was almost touching the horizon. She derived some consolation from the fact that there would be a full moon.

The country below now became more thickly wooded, although it was not so much a forest as park-like territory, with numerous trees, and groups of trees, some large and some small. Beyond them, to the north, began the forest proper, and unbroken sea of green, rising and falling for as far as the eye could see.

“Not much hope of getting down here,” observed Worrals.

“I seem to remember some more open spaces farther on,” said Uncle Dick.

“How far are we from Nakula?”

“About four miles. The *kraal* lies away to the north-east.”

There were several open spaces, but Worrals was not particularly happy about any of them. Usually there were bushes, ant-hills, a fallen tree, or some other obstruction, to say nothing of grazing herds of zebra, wildebeest, and antelope. In nearly all of these glades a landing would have been possible, but it would have involved a risk which Worrals preferred not to take. Even a broken undercarriage, involving no injury to themselves, would have been disastrous, situated as they were so far from any possibility of repair. Dusk was fast closing in, and Worrals was seriously considering abandoning the enterprise until the following morning when a long narrow glade, on the edge of a reed-filled depression, came into view. The surface seemed reasonably level. There were no animals, or other obstructions. Twice she ran the full length of it about ten feet from the ground before she

was satisfied. Then, suddenly making up her mind, she turned, sideslipped a little and went down. The Kingfisher made a fairly smooth landing.

“Phew!” she breathed. “That was nervy work. I was scared an animal of some sort might dash out of the trees across my path and upset the applecart.”

“We’re probably too close to the village for that,” said Uncle Dick. “There may be hippos in those reeds, but they seldom come out to dry land to feed until after dark.”

“Oh well, we’re down, anyway,” returned Worrals. “How far do you reckon we are from Nakula?”

“Between two and three miles. It lies over there, beyond that belt of trees.” Uncle Dick pointed.

“In that case I’ll take the machine to the top end of the clearing, so that we shall have a clear run in case we have to take off in a hurry.”

“Before we go any farther, I should like to know what the general plan is—if you have one?” questioned Frecks.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve nothing definite in mind,” returned Worrals. “All we can do is walk along quietly towards the *kraal* and have a look round, if possible, without being spotted.” She thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you what, Frecks. If the natives did discover us, and turned out nasty, it would be rather silly if we were all caught. If that happened we might all disappear and no one be any the wiser. I think it would be a sensible precaution for one to be in a position to fetch help should the worst come to the worst.”

“Fetch help?”

“Well, go to Keetmannshoop, for example, and report the whole thing. The District Commissioner, or somebody, would then come along to see what the fuss was about. But we’ll talk about that presently, when we’ve had a look at the lie of the land. Let’s get cracking. You’d better lead the way, Uncle Dick.”

“Very well.”

With their weapons ready to hand, they set off, keeping close to the belt of trees that bounded one side of the glade, and presently came upon a well-defined trail of earth packed as hard as a macadam road. Because it led in the right direction, Worrals assumed that it was the native trail leading to Nakula, but Uncle Dick said it was a rhino path, worn smooth through centuries of time. Frecks remarked that it was kind of the rhinos to provide them with a path, but had nothing to say when Uncle Dick observed whimsically that the only snag about using a rhino path was the fact that

rhinos often used it themselves, for which they could hardly be blamed. After that there was no more talking. Darkness fell, and with it came noises, furtive creepings and rustlings in the undergrowth that suggested the stealthy approach of enemies, man or beast. Uncle Dick ignored them, saying that this was quite usual. He confessed that it was impossible to say what made the sounds, but it was always the same at night in bush country. He also admitted that until one became used to them they were inclined to give one the jumps. They marched on, to find that the track left the timber at what appeared to be a dried-up lake. At any rate, the reeds were so tall and thick round the steep banks that it was impossible to see any water. The trail ran on round the lake.

At this juncture a new sound became audible, not an unusual one, but, nevertheless, not one to inspire confidence in night travel. It was the roaring of lions. Uncle Dick asserted that the lions were farther away than the volume of sound suggested. Against this assurance was the indisputable fact that the beasts were coming nearer. Very soon another lion started roaring in the darkness just ahead; it seemed to be in the tall reeds that filled the lake. This lion roared three times, and the noise was nerve-shaking. Uncle Dick stopped. He admitted that the noise was disturbing, even to him, although he was accustomed to it; but he gave it as his opinion that lions seldom if ever roared when they were hungry. They all peered into the gloom in the direction of the roaring, but although the moon was bright in the sky, nothing could be seen. They were about to move on when the lions that had been distant—there seemed to be several of them—started off again, much nearer.

“Confound the brutes!” muttered Uncle Dick petulantly. “I fancy there must be a water-hole in the middle of that old lake, and they’re coming down to drink.” There was a tinge of anxiety in his voice for the first time.

The lions roared again, and soon they were all roaring in unison, majestic, full-toned roars that rolled like thunder across the silent wilderness, making the very air vibrate and tremble. As one finished, another took up the task, then another, and a fourth, each roar dying away in a deep coughing grunt, with a final hissing expulsion of breath. The noise was unbelievable. The little party stood still. There was no tree of any size near them.

“We’d better let them get this over,” advised Uncle Dick.

“I couldn’t move if I wanted to,” declared Frecks weakly. “I give up.” She put her hands over her ears.

“I still say lions don’t roar when they’re hunting,” asserted Uncle Dick. “When you think of it, it would be a daft thing to do—like a burglar singing at the top of his voice when breaking into a house. I’ve heard these lion concerts many times, and I believe that its the roaring of one that excites the others to do the same. I think they do it when they have fed, and are on their way to water.”

“If they haven’t fed, they’ve got a nice meal waiting,” said Frecks bitterly. “I must have been out of my mind to come to this wild beast infested wilderness.”

Still the party remained motionless; and very soon it seemed that Uncle Dick had been right about the drinking, for the roaring ended, and from no great distance came a sound of lapping. Presently this was heard no more. Silence, an expectant, sinister silence, reigned. Uncle Dick waited for a little while, his eyes on the track, rifle at the ready; then, with a softly whispered word of encouragement, he continued the journey.

After about half a mile had been covered, the trail entered some biggish trees, and before the far side of them was reached a new sound could be heard; it was the rhythmic beat of drums, accompanied by singing, and a regular clapping of hands. A red glow could be seen in the direction of the sound, which was not far off. Uncle Dick stopped again.

“That’s Nakula,” said he. “Apparently there’s a dance on.”

“Will that make any difference to us?” inquired Worrals.

“It’s hard to say,” returned Uncle Dick slowly. “Once natives start dancing, they seldom stop before daybreak, when they fall down, utterly exhausted. They work themselves into a frenzy—with the help of *tembo*, which is a kind of beer made chiefly from sugar. They go mad; but there is this about it: while they are at it they’re conscious of nothing but the dance. They hear nothing and see nothing. The whole tribe gathers in the open space in the middle of the huts, so it should be fairly easy for us to get near without being seen. On the other hand, if they do see us, anything can happen. I leave it to you to decide whether we go on or go back. If I were alone, I’d go on, but with you it’s a different matter. It’s hard to know what to do for the best.”

“Having come so far, we’ll go on,” decided Worrals. “We needn’t take deliberate risks—just make a careful reconnaissance. If things look really grim we can always retire. Will there be any sentries about?”

“No. You can rely on that. No sentry could remain on duty with those drums going. Every man and woman will be dancing.”

“Okay. Let’s have a look at these jitterbugs.”

They walked forward, and reaching the far side of the trees, soon had the scene in plain view. The village was built in a wide clearing, and consisted of dome-shaped, grass-thatched huts, set in three circles round a central area in which the dance was being held. In the light of a fire, through gaps in the huts, the dancers could be seen. They had formed into two long lines, which swayed backwards and forwards to the beat of the drums, feet dancing, hands clapping, shouting when the beats grew faster.

“Well, that’s the real Africa,” muttered Uncle Dick.

“I once saw something of the sort on the films, but I never expected to see it in real life,” murmured Frecks. “To tell the truth, I didn’t think it really happened.”

“From the way they’re behaving, I don’t think there’s much chance of their seeing us, or hearing us above the din they’re making,” said Worrals. “That is, unless we deliberately show ourselves. I’ll tell you what, Frecks, Uncle Dick and I will have a prowling round. I suggest that you stay here so that in case of accidents you can slip away, go back to the machine, and report the affair at Keetmannshoop. Otherwise, if we were all caught, we could be bumped off and no one know anything about it. You could sit up in one of these trees and watch everything. I don’t suppose we shall be away very long.”

“Okay,” agreed Frecks, but without enthusiasm. Selecting a tree that was easy to climb, she made her way up into the branches.

The others moved forward towards the outer huts of the village. They walked slowly, sometimes bent double, avoiding places reached by the glow of the fire. Sometimes a tree, or bush, provided cover, as did a thorn fence which Uncle Dick whispered was built to protect the cattle. In this way a half circle was made round the village without anything of interest being seen, and without any promise of better fortune. Then, suddenly, on the far side—that is to say the side farthest from Frecks—they came upon an object which first astonished then dismayed Worrals, although it was the very thing she sought. Under an ancient baobab tree, into the deep shade of which the firelight hardly penetrated, was an aeroplane—or the remains of one; for most of the fabric had been removed from fuselage, wings and tail unit. The wings, too, had been folded, or forced back against the fuselage, so that the aircraft looked like the skeleton of an enormous insect. Worrals was too familiar with the type for there to be any possible doubt. It was a Dragon. And from rags of blue fabric that adhered to it, she knew that it was the machine she had last seen leaving Croydon Airport.

“That’s it,” she murmured. “That’s Bill’s Dragon.”

As she spoke her heart sank. Somehow, although she knew there was a good chance of it being there, she had hardly expected to see it like that. She had imagined that it would either be complete, or broken up into small pieces. Of course, she knew from what she had already seen that some of the fabric had been removed, but it had not occurred to her that the machine would be completely stripped. In such a condition, forlorn, a mere framework, it brought home vividly the full extent of the tragedy. If the machine was in such a state, she felt there could be little hope for Bill.

“How on earth did they get it here, I wonder?” she muttered. “It didn’t land here, that’s certain. Gronk must have flown it close, after which I can only think they dragged it in by brute force. It would take quite a lot of men to do that, so the devils are all in it. See how the wings are folded? That, no doubt, was to get it through the trees—but I’ll bet the natives didn’t think of it. Shardwell and Gronk weren’t far away when that was done.”

There were a few moments of silence while they gazed at the grim spectacle.

“Well, now you’ve found it, what are you going to do?” asked Uncle Dick.

Worrals thought before she answered. “If the machine is here, it seems likely that Bill is here—or was here. He may still be here. One thing is certain, though. Whether he is here or not, these savages must know what became of him. If they do know, it’s up to us to make them speak. If Bill is here, alive, then presumably he will be in one of the huts. Look! There’s Wongorobo, talking to that creature all done up in skins and feathers.”

“He’s the witch-doctor.”

“I’ll do a spot of doctoring myself before I’m through with this lot,” declared Worrals in a hard voice. “Wongorobo’s carrying a rifle, I notice. Where did he get that?”

Uncle Dick looked hard. “Looks like an Express.”

“Ah-huh! With notches on the stock, no doubt. I’d say that rifle belonged to Mahomet. If so, it should be sufficient evidence to hang the rascal who has it now. We may get a chance to check up on that presently. I saw that witch-doctor come out of the hut—the big one just behind him. From the way he’s talking to Wongorobo, they’re close friends.”

“If that is the witch-doctor’s hut, no one else in the tribe would dare to go near it,” remarked Uncle Dick.

“In that case, if Bill’s here, that’s probably where he is. I’m going to find out. If he isn’t there we’ll grab Wongorobo and make him talk.”

Uncle Dick looked startled. “Are you crazy? You can’t go near these fellows while they are in this state.”

Worrals’ face set in hard lines. “What do you suggest we do—go home? Not on your life! If Bill’s here, it’s up to us to find him, and as far as I can see we shall never have a better chance. Shardwell has already got the wind up or he wouldn’t have bothered to have Mahomet’s body moved. Incidentally, Wongorobo was with that party. He’s made pretty fast time back. Maybe he came on his own, leaving the others to follow with the body. It doesn’t matter. The only aspect of that which concerns us is this: if these people get the idea that we are after them, they may destroy all trace of Bill and his machine. That’s what I’m afraid of. We’ve got to see inside these huts right away, particularly the one just vacated by the witch-doctor.”

“But this is madness,” protested Uncle Dick. “You couldn’t get to those huts without being seen.”

“In that case I shall be seen,” returned Worrals crisply. “But I’m not leaving here without finding out from these lunatics how that machine comes to be here. They’ll think twice before they murder a white woman.”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” replied Uncle Dick. “In that state they’re incapable of thinking, anyway. Only a shock of some sort would bring them out of that frenzy.”

“Then we’ll give them a shock,” declared Worrals. “What would be their most likely reaction if they did get one?”

“That depends on what it was. If they were really scared they’d make a bolt for the forest.”

“In which case the village would be evacuated and we should be able to search the huts?”

“I suppose so—but I wouldn’t like to bet that it will work out like that. No one can say for certain how an African savage will behave under the impetus of fright.”

“In that case we shall have to see,” decided Worrals, striking at a mosquito that had settled on her perspiring face.

“What are you going to do?”

Worrals looked hard at the aircraft. “As far as one can judge from here, the engine of that machine seems to be all right. The cowling hasn’t been opened, at any rate. They were probably afraid to touch it. If that engine will start, I’m going to start it. The noise will be considerable.”

Uncle Dick stared. “This is the craziest thing I ever heard of.”

Worrals shrugged. “I know nothing about African savages, but I’ll warrant that when that engine starts up they’ll run away from it, not towards it. If the machine will move I shall do a spot of taxiing. When they see the machine coming towards them they’ll think the devil has taken charge of it—or something of the sort.”

“They may,” admitted Uncle Dick.

“They’ll bolt, anyway,” asserted Worrals. “If they don’t—well, we’ll tackle them, and ask them straight out how the machine got here.”

“If they give us the chance,” said Uncle Dick doubtfully.

“Can you speak the language?”

“More or less—enough to get on with.”

“All right. Then watch me and prepare for ructions. If they bolt, you make a quick round of the huts, starting with the one behind that apparition in feathers.”

X

DISCOVERIES AND DISASTERS

WORRALS backed cautiously into the deep shadow behind her, and then, with eyes and nerves alert for stray natives, made her way round to the rear of the aircraft. It stood at no great distance from the dancers—perhaps thirty paces—with its nose pointing towards them. None of the dancers paid any attention to it; presumably the novelty had worn off.

Keeping close to the mutilated fuselage, she worked her way forward to the cabin, which was her first objective. In another minute she was inside, crouching below the level of the windscreen. She could not see the petrol gauge in the dark—not that it was important. If there was no petrol in the tank—well, nothing would happen. She needed very little for her purpose and she did not think it would be quite dry. A peep through the windscreen showed the natives working themselves into a state of sheer frenzy. The witch-doctor was now taking part in the dance. As master of ceremonies, he was leaping around the fire with unimaginable energy, from time to time throwing into it something which he took from a pouch that hung from his girdle. Every time he did this a greenish smoke swirled upward, and he raised his arms as if invoking some pagan god—a pantomime that was greeted with a yell of approval by the dancers. In spite of the seriousness of the situation Worrals smiled faintly as she reached for the starter; it struck her that if what she hoped would happen did happen, the witch-doctor would himself be astonished at the success of his invocation.

She was surprised when the engine started at first try, but that was nothing to her surprise at what followed. She realised afterwards that the natives must have interfered with the controls. At any rate, the throttle, which it did not occur to her to check, was wide open. Before she discovered this, however, several things had happened.

As the throttle was wide open the engine came to life with a bellowing roar that shook her not a little. Caught unprepared, for a moment she was unable to think clearly. The din drowned all other sounds, and as she observed through the windscreen, it stopped the dance as effectively as a high explosive bomb would have done. Actually, the result was ludicrous. Every dancer stopped dead, rigid, in the position he or she happened to be in. And thus, for perhaps five seconds, they remained. The only thing that

moved was the spinning airscrew, a shimmering arc of light as it reflected the lurid glow of the fire. Then, with one accord, to the accompaniment of a unanimous shriek, the party broke up in disorder. In fact, it was worse than that. It was a frantic stampede, the dancers scattering like sparks from a blacksmith's anvil, most of them making for the forest. The witch-doctor, who must have been amazed at his own powers, went with them. This was not to be wondered at, for the Dragon literally leapt into the picture.

This advance was not as Worrals had visualised it. Like the witch-doctor, she had succeeded better than she planned. It had been her intention, having got the engine started, to taxi on to the dance floor, racing the engine at intervals to add zest to the performance. But the throttle was wide open, and until she discovered this she had little or no say in what the machine would do. Not that there was anything unorthodox about its behaviour. On the contrary, the machine behaved much as the designer intended.

When the airscrew whirled, naturally, it moved forward, dragging the tattered fuselage behind it. Had the machine not been mutilated there is no doubt that it would have taken off, or attempted to do so, in which case, even if it had cleared the huts, it would have crashed into the trees on the far side of the clearing with disastrous results to the pilot, and perhaps to Frecks, who was perched in one of them. However, as the lifting surfaces were ineffective, the machine could not rise, but this did not prevent it from going through the preliminary movements. It shot forward like a torpedo, and as its nose was pointing in the direction of the dance, that was the course it took. Hard on the heels of the flying natives, it made straight for the fire, over which it passed before Worrals could prevent it, flinging sparks and blazing brands in all directions. When the slipstream came into play it flung up still more, with the result that the air was filled with flame and glowing embers.

As a spectacle calculated to cause alarm, this far surpassed anything that could have been imagined by Worrals, who was in the middle of it, almost, if not quite, as startled as the natives. But by the time the machine had passed over the fire she had got a grasp of the situation. With a swift sweep of her hand she retarded the throttle, and at the same time instinctively applied full stick and rudder. She was only just in time to avoid collision with the huts. Without any fabric on the control surfaces the machine made poor response, but the tail-skid helped to drag it round. The precise result was that the aircraft plunged on in a wide circle, gradually slowing down, bouncing and bumping and rocking as the wheels passed over the drums and other objects dropped by the natives in their hasty departure from the scene.

As soon as the machine had stopped Worrals took over complete control. For a moment she was content to remain where she was, with the engine ticking over, while she made a swift reconnaissance of her surroundings; then, easing the throttle forward, she put the aircraft in a gentle turn round the open space amongst the scattered firebrands, so that it looked like nothing so much as its original namesake—a dragon emerging from its fiery lair. She saw Uncle Dick run into the hut she had indicated. He was out almost at once, beckoning.

Now in all this commotion one man had kept his head—or had recovered very quickly. Wongorobo. Perhaps his association with white men, and the Junkers on Impala landing ground, had something to do with his swift recovery. At all events, he now reappeared on the fringe of the clearing. In his left hand he still carried the rifle, and in the right, a spear. He ran straight towards the Dragon, and from a distance of a few yards hurled the spear at the pilot whom he could not see, but doubtless guessed was in the cabin. The weapon was well and truly thrown. It hit its target and crashed through it, the blade missing Worrals' face by a matter of inches. It remained transfixed across the cockpit. Worrals grabbed her rifle, but before the man could do any further mischief, Uncle Dick had fired. Wongorobo fell, but was on his feet again in a moment. Staggering, he blundered into the trees and disappeared.

Worrals kicked the cabin door open—she had to kick it on account of the spear which impaled it—and jumped down.

Uncle Dick, wide-eyed and pale of face, ran to meet her. "Thank God!" he gasped. "I thought he'd got you. Come here." He ran back into the hut.

Worrals followed.

Uncle Dick's torch flashed on a figure that lay prone on a skin-strewn floor far back in the hut. It was a white man—that much was at once obvious. The face was emaciated, livid, and the eyes closed. Chin and cheeks, long unshaven, were black with a tangle of beard. For a moment Worrals stared without recognition. Then she drew in her breath sharply. "It's Bill!" she cried in a choking voice. "Is he dead?"

"No, but not far off," answered Uncle Dick, who was kneeling, feeling the pulse. "There's just a flicker, and that's about all you can say."

"What have the devils done to him?" asked Worrals through her teeth.

"I don't know, but he's too far gone to move or speak."

Worrals made a quick examination. "What's the matter with him, do you think? He doesn't seem to have any injury. Is it fever?"

Uncle Dick shook his head. “No, it isn’t fever. I’ve seen too much of that not to know. Far from being feverish, he feels cold.” He lifted one of Bill’s eyelids, and with his torch examined the eye closely. Then he glanced at Worrals. “It looks more like a case of poison to me,” he muttered with a worried frown. “By thunder! I wonder if Wongorobo, or that infernal witch-doctor, has had a hand in this? The stock-in-trade of these native witch-doctors is mostly poison.”

“We’ve got to get him to hospital,” declared Worrals.

“But he can’t walk.”

“Then we shall have to carry him. Buck up, before the natives come back.”

“But we couldn’t carry him for three miles, just you and I,” averred Uncle Dick despairingly. “That sort of thing is all right in books, or on the films, but in real life it just can’t be done. We should get in a terrible mess if we tried. No, we can’t carry him all that way.”

“Quite impossible, I should say,” sneered a voice.

With a gasp Worrals swung round.

Standing in the door of the hut was Shardwell, his rifle held forward, covering them. Behind him was Gronk, and Wongorobo, bleeding copiously from a head wound.

Worrals faced Shardwell like a fury. “You devil,” she grated. “You’re responsible for this. What have you done to him?”

“Me? I haven’t done anything,” answered Shardwell coldly.

“Then what’s the matter with him?”

“Ask Ooma.”

“Who’s he?”

“The witch-doctor. Never mind, you may as well know the truth. Your boy friend is dying of slow poison. Only one man knows the antidote, and that’s the man who poisoned him—Ooma. Now perhaps you’ll behave yourself.” Shardwell turned to his companion. “All right,” he said shortly. “Tie them up.”

Worrals resisted violently, but her strength was no match for the combined efforts of Gronk and Wongorobo. It was the same with Uncle Dick. With their hands tied behind their backs they were forced into a sitting position on the floor beside Bill.

“You can’t get away with this, Shardwell!” cried Uncle Dick furiously.

“Who’s going to stop me?” inquired Shardwell with a sneer. “I reckon you forget where you are. You’ve got one chance.”

“What’s that?” demanded Uncle Dick.

“You know what I want. Hand your concession over to me and you can walk out. I’ve wasted too much time already.”

“Don’t give it to him,” rasped Worrals furiously. “Bill would rather die first—so would I.”

“Have it that way if you like,” scoffed Shardwell. “I’ll give you till morning to think it over. If you’re still of the same mind then, I’ll get Ooma to give you a taste of the same medicine he gave your boy friend. After that it won’t matter much to you what happens—not all the doctors in the world could save you. Think it over, Ashton.” Shardwell went out.

Uncle Dick looked at Worrals. “It’s no use,” he said heavily after Shardwell had gone. “They’ve got us where they want us. Better let me hand over the concession and have done with the whole thing.”

“No,” insisted Worrals.

“I don’t really care about the concession,” went on Uncle Dick. “What does it amount to but gold? Of course, it goes against the grain to be beaten _____”

“We aren’t beaten yet,” broke in Worrals.

“We haven’t a hope.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. We have one very good hope.”

“What is it?”

“Frecks.”

“But what can she do alone against this mob?”

“If she’s seen what happened here to-night, and I imagine she has, you’ll be surprised,” stated Worrals. “Frecks is never at her best until things get really grim.”

“I hope you’re right,” returned Uncle Dick miserably. From his tone of voice it was evident that he did not share Worrals’ confidence.

XI

FRECKS WALKS ALONE

FRECKS had found a perch in a fork of the tree, not far above the ground, but high enough to offer a fair view of the concentric rings of beehive-shaped huts that formed the Ovambo village of Nakula. Naturally, as it was dark, all she could see clearly was that part which fell within the radius of firelight, against which the nearest huts were silhouetted like growths of monstrous fungi. Around the central open space the firelight broke quickly into flickering shadows, and then, beneath the horizontal arms of the trees, profound darkness. For this reason she did not see the pathetic remains of the aircraft in which Bill had so cheerfully left Croydon. In any case, it was some distance away, on the far side of the clearing where the dance was fast degenerating into sheer orgy. She lost sight of Worrals and Uncle Dick almost as soon as they left her, so all she could do was watch the nauseating spectacle before her while she awaited their return. She hoped this would not be long, for she was neither happy nor comfortable. The mosquitoes were particularly vicious, while the eternal thumping of the drums, and the swaying lines of dancers, had a disturbing effect on the nerves. Time passed. Nothing happened. The dancers continued to dance, swaying, clapping their hands and stamping their feet, sending up clouds of dust. The chant went on interminably, repeating itself over and over again with wearisome monotony. The drums drummed on, ceaselessly. The natives seemed to be quite mad. So, too, was the whole adventure, she thought moodily, as her anxiety mounted.

To say that she was startled and astonished when, without the slightest warning, an aero engine burst into full song, would convey only a feeble idea of her sensations. The uproar, which drowned instantly the din made by the dancers and their drums, bereft her for the moment of the power of thought; and her stupefaction was in no way abated by the incredible spectacle of a half-stripped aircraft, with its wings folded, careering wildly across the dance ground. She recognised Bill's Dragon, but the turmoil in her mind was such that she was only able to associate it vaguely with the primitive background. Breathless, still half dazed, she watched the performance.

She saw the natives bolt. This did not surprise her. She would only have been astonished had they remained. She felt that had she been on the ground she would have done the same. Some of the Ovambo ran under her tree, shouting as they ran, obviously terror-stricken. There seemed to be a lot of shouting, in several directions; but for a time she took no notice of it, her attention being riveted on what was happening in the central arena. But at last an excited babble below made her look down. It was not easy to see exactly what was going on. There was a milling crowd of natives, some going one way and some another. In the end it was a mummy-like figure swathed in blue fabric, swinging from a pole, that told her what had happened. The party bearing Mahomet's body had returned. They had run forward on hearing the commotion and had met the outgoing natives who, presumably, were now telling their story. As far as Frecks could see, this did not affect the general situation. The thing that worried her most was how Worrals and Uncle Dick would escape through the natives who seemed to be all over the place. They would not be able to retreat without coming into collision with some of them.

After another brief survey of the abandoned dance ground, her attention was attracted by the beam of an electric torch coming through the trees, in the direction from which they themselves had come. It struck her as odd that a native should possess such an instrument, but a moment later a voice told her the unwelcome truth. It was Shardwell. Gronk was with him. Shardwell was shouting, and the natives were converging on him. With sinking heart Frecks realised that there was no need for him to be told what was happening. He must have heard the aero engine, and guessed the rest. Where he had come from, and how, she could not imagine, but it was obvious that his arrival had put an entirely new complexion on the affair. Yet there was nothing she could do. There was no question of getting down from the tree to warn Worrals of her new danger, because the two white men were standing almost under it, holding a conversation with the distraught natives. Somewhere in the village a rifle cracked. Wongorobo appeared, holding his head. After that, events moved quickly. Led by Shardwell and Gronk, there was a general surge towards the village. Frecks had seen Worrals and Uncle Dick run into the big hut, although she did not know why. Shardwell and Gronk, followed by Wongorobo, made straight for the same hut. What happened inside she did not know, for of course she could not see; but when presently Shardwell and Gronk came out, leaving a native on guard at the entrance, she guessed that the others had been made prisoners. The natives drifted back into the village, but there was no more dancing. The engine had stopped, and comparative quiet settled over the scene.

Recovering somewhat, Frecks tried hard to think lucidly. One thing was obvious. The very situation Worrals had foreseen had come to pass. Things had gone wrong—very much so; it was now up to her to put them right, although how this was to be done was not apparent. Clearly, she could do nothing single handed, or so it seemed. True, there had been some suggestion of going to civilisation for help. The nearest point was Keetmannshoop. That was too much like leaving the others in the lurch. Keetmannshoop was too far away. Anything might have happened by the time she got back with assistance. The Kingfisher, too, was some way off, if it came to that. The thought of a long walk, alone, across lion-infested country, was like a cold hand on her heart. Yet something had to be done. Andrew Mackintosh was at Magube Drift. He might help. But Magube was some way off, too, and what could the pair of them do against the whole Ovambo tribe, anyway? Thus ran Frecks' thoughts as she sat huddled on her branch in the tree, nearly frantic with anxiety.

She looked across at the clearing. A figure sat huddled at the door of the big hut. Wongorobo was not far away. Shardwell and Gronk were still there. Natives were standing about all over the place. For her to reach the hut without being seen was manifestly impossible. To attempt it would merely be to throw away their last chance to no purpose.

Just when her idea was born she did not know; but suddenly it was there. Help *was* available, within reasonable distance, if only she could reach it. It meant a journey on foot to the aircraft, and a night flight. But these things were at least possible. To reach Worrals without being seen, was not.

Frecks braced herself like a diver on a high board. She looked down. All was quiet in her immediate vicinity. As far as she could make out, the natives had all drifted back to the village. Gripping her automatic, she dropped to the ground. For a minute she stood there, listening; then, satisfied that all was clear, she made her way cautiously to the path by which they had approached. Reaching it, she set off at a run. The moon was well up; she could see it, a great silver disc, through the branches of the trees; but inside the belt of jungle it was dark, and the inky shadows turned her lips dry with apprehension. Each one, she thought, might hide a lurking lion or leopard, or some other dangerous beast. This fear was not without foundation; that possibility was always there. But she ran on.

When several minutes had passed without disaster, some degree of confidence returned to her, and she began to get a grip on herself. She eyed the shadows critically, with alarm it is true, but without panic. The distant roaring of lions was not a reassuring sound, but she derived a crumb of comfort from Uncle Dick's assertion that lions did not roar when they were

hungry. She prayed that he was right. Once she trod on something soft. It squeaked, and twisted under her foot. What it was she never knew, for she tore on without once looking back. The heat was stifling, and perspiration trickled down her face. Realising that she was exhausting herself, she steadied her pace to a fast walk.

She nearly walked into an elephant. She did not know it was an elephant—in fact, she did not know it was an animal. She was on the rhino path, and observed just in front of her a shapeless mass which she could not recall seeing on the way out. She took it to be a rock. As she rounded it, it suddenly plunged forward with a crash and a series of terrified squeals, and only then did she realise that what she had taken to be a rock was the hind quarters of an elephant. It might have been a rhino, or a hippo. She did not wait to see, although it was clear from the crashing and squealing that the animal, whatever it might be, was as scared as she was. She covered a hundred yards in record time, and then weariness forced her back to a walk. From time to time there were other sounds in the darkness around that caused her heart to palpitate almost painfully—grunts, barks and coughs. What made these sounds she did not know. Nor did she care. All were equally unpleasant. The journey became a nightmare. She told herself that she was doing her best, but in her heart she had little hope of reaching her objective.

She was amazed, therefore, when she reached the aircraft without once being seriously threatened. It seemed impossible, with so many beasts about. And her relief was such that for a little while she leaned weakly against the fuselage, getting her breath and trying to steady her pounding heart. The triumph of success did much to restore her equanimity, and it was almost with unconcern that she saw a hyena slinking away through the grass under the starboard wing.

“Brrr! Push off, you brute,” she shouted recklessly, snatching up a stone and throwing it.

The animal stopped and looked back at her. It coughed. Moonlight glinted on its eyes as it rose erect, and only then did she perceive that her supposed hyena was a lion. All her strength seemed to run out of her feet. With a gasp she scrambled wildly into the cabin and slammed the door behind her; and there for a minute or two she sat, feeling suddenly weak, trying to steady the trembling of her knees. Remembering the engine, she switched on, not so much because she was in a hurry to get off, as because she felt sure that the noise would discourage even a lion from investigating the machine too closely. But having started up, she thought she might as

well go, so having surveyed the runway—not without misgivings—she pushed the throttle open and took off.

She felt better as soon as she was in the air. There was something to do. All the same, she was far from happy. An emergency night landing in any country at any time is not a pleasant prospect; in a section of Africa abounding with big game the prospect appalled her. But it had to be done. She told herself desperately that it had to be done. And she did it, choosing the spot near Shardwell's claim where Worrals had landed a short time before.

Up to this time her brain had been so occupied with other things that it had not occurred to her to try to work out how Shardwell and Gronk had so unexpectedly made their appearance at Nakula; but when, landing, she nearly collided with the Junkers, she knew. That another machine might be on a landing ground so remote was the very last thing in her mind, and it was only by swift action, when the Junkers suddenly loomed up in front of her, that collision was avoided. As soon as the Kingfisher had run to a stop, she jumped out and looked at the other aircraft. It stood alone, silent. Obviously, there was no one with it, or her arrival would have brought him out. She taxied on a little way to put as wide a distance as possible between the two machines, and then, dismounting, ran to the rise overlooking the *donga* where the maneater had been killed. A mixed gathering of hyenas and jackals that were feeding on the skinned carcass of the lion scattered at her approach. She was too agitated to pay much heed to them. It was all part of the nightmare.

It was an anxious moment when she topped the rise, for everything depended on what she found. When she saw that her hopes were fulfilled, that a brisk camp fire was burning, she could hardly repress a shout of satisfaction. She ran on. As she approached the fire, a man who stood with spear poised shouted something, and several other figures rose up from where they had been lying.

“Ingoona! Is that you?” called Frecks.

The old gun-bearer came forward. “What happens?” he inquired in a surprised voice.

Frecks walked on to the fire, and with a heartfelt sigh of thankfulness sat down. Only then did she realise the state her nerves were in.

“I am in great trouble, Ingoona,” she said. “I will tell you about it, for I have come to you for help.”

The old man threw some wood on the fire, causing sparks to fly, and sat down beside her. “Speak,” he requested.

“*Bwana* Ashton and my friend, she who shot the lion, have been made captive by the Ovambo,” announced Frecks.

Ingoona was genuinely impressed. “In these days it is seldom that white people are troubled by the black,” he said. “How did this come about?”

“It is a long story, but I will tell it quickly,” answered Frecks. “Some time ago there came here with an aeroplane a white man to help *Bwana* Ashton with his gold mine at Magube Drift. His name, too, was Ashton, for he is a relative. But it seems that there were some who did not want him here. With his flying machine, he disappeared, and has not been seen since. The two white men who own the black aeroplane, the one that at this moment stands not far away, were responsible. The Ovambo know the truth. I must tell you that Mahomet, he who kept watch for the government at Impala, has been murdered. He was killed by a spear, and his body has now been carried to Nakula. The body was wrapped in cloth torn from the missing aeroplane. In view of this, it was decided to pay a visit to the Ovambo *kraal* to see if the missing *Bwana* Ashton was there. The others went while I kept watch, and watching, I saw them seized by the two white men and the Ovambo headman, who is named Wongorobo.”

“I know this Wongorobo,” said Ingoona. “He has killed many men, and boasts of it.”

“Alone, I could do nothing,” went on Frecks, “so I have come to you for advice and help. This afternoon my friend saved you from the lion. Now you can repay the debt by rescuing her from the Ovambo.”

“The debt shall be paid,” declared Ingoona without a moment’s hesitation. “There is no love between the Hereros and the Ovambo. Wait, while I speak.”

The old man addressed the warriors, who all this time had sat gazing with expressionless faces at the white girl. He spoke to them at some length, and from their manner Frecks was afraid that his words were making no impression. Even when he had finished they said little, but they stood up and reached for their spears. This they did so calmly that Frecks was by no means sure that they understood the situation.

Ingoona rose. “All is well,” he said. “Come, let us go.”

Frecks found this decision rather more sudden than she expected. In a vague sort of way she had contemplated flying back, but she felt that the matter needed consideration. After flying, walking would be slow work. Yet in the end it would be safer. A night landing in the narrow glade would be a risky business, and a crashed machine, even if she were unhurt, would not help matters. Again, it was not much use her returning alone. She doubted if

her new friends, even Ingoona, would fly, even if she made the suggestion. Finally, there was a risk that the machine would be heard at Nakula, now that the drums and the dancing had ceased. In view of all these factors, she decided that this was an occasion when it was better to be slow but sure. The aircraft would have to take its chance. No harm could come to it, she thought, provided Shardwell and Gronk did not return to Hansvelt before her. At night they might not see the Kingfisher, but in daylight they could hardly fail to do so.

“My aeroplane is beyond the ridge,” she told Ingoona. “I will leave it there and walk with you.”

“It is better so,” asserted Ingoona. “Come.”

In single file, in silence, led by Ingoona, the party set off across the wilderness. Looking along the line of stalwart, spear-armed Hereros, Frecks wondered if this could really be happening. A fortnight ago she had been in London, with Africa as remote as the moon. It was hard to believe.

XII

WORRALS SHOWS HER CLAWS

WITH their hands tied behind their backs, Worrals and Uncle Dick sat on the floor of the hut and surveyed the prospect before them with moody resignation. While the situation remained thus, it seemed that there was nothing they could do. Worrals, after struggling for some time with her bonds, gave it up; the raw-hide thongs would not give a fraction of an inch. Even if they freed themselves they would be helpless, she reflected bitterly. In her haste to join Uncle Dick she had left her rifle in the Dragon. She had seen no one take it out so presumably it was still there. Shardwell had taken Uncle Dick's rifle with him when he left the hut. She wondered what Frecks was doing all this time.

"I'm sorry to have got you into this mess," she told Uncle Dick.

"Not at all," was the reply. "I'm only sorry that I hadn't more sense than to let you walk into it."

"I don't think we need argue about that," returned Worrals.

After that, they fell silent. There seemed to be nothing to say. Bill remained unconscious, scarcely breathing, looking terribly ill. Although she did not comment, Worrals was afraid he might die at any moment, and her impotence made her writhe.

Through the open doorway she got a fair view of what was passing outside, although the picture was obstructed to some extent by the repulsive figure of the witch-doctor, who squatted on his haunches just in front of the entrance as though keeping guard over the prisoners. A short distance beyond, Shardwell and Gronk were standing by the remains of the fire engaged in earnest conversation. From time to time they appeared to argue, as if they, too, were confronted by a difficult problem. Wongorobo sat near them, rifle across his knees, nursing his wounded head. Beyond this group a number of natives, having got over their fright, stood near the woebegone Dragon, sometimes touching it fearfully, as though they suspected it of being alive yet were anxious to display their fearlessness. Presently Shardwell and Gronk went over to it and resumed their debate; from their gestures it was obvious that the aircraft entered into the argument.

Cogitating, Worrals felt that the whole situation was now fairly clear. Unbelievable and preposterous though it appeared to be at first glance, on close examination there was really nothing remarkable about it considering where they were. It was a state of affairs that could hardly have occurred in or near a civilised community, but far removed as they were from outside interference the events were not nearly as fantastic as they might seem. It all centred on the Magube Drift concession. Shardwell, or Shardwell and Gronk between them, wanted it. They wanted it very much, which implied that they knew more about it than the rightful owners. They would not take no for an answer. It happened that they were unscrupulous, and were resolved at any cost to achieve their object. By methods that were really not more than shady—such as interfering with Uncle Dick’s porters, for instance—they had been in a fair way to succeed when Bill had arrived on the scene. This had upset their plans. After that, one thing had led to another. Bill’s advent with a swift and efficient means of transport had so far smashed their plan of isolating the partners, that they had probably gone further than they originally intended. Bill had been put out of the way, and this had been done in a manner that in the event of an inquiry the onus of responsibility could be laid on the Ovambos, who were no more than dupes of the chief plotters. Fearing the consequences, they had hesitated to kill a white man, but Mahomet, who may have seen too much at Impala, and might turn out to be an inconvenient witness, had been murdered. Once more Shardwell’s plans appeared to be in good order. Then the Kingfisher had arrived on the scene to upset them again. It became necessary to get Mahomet’s body out of the way and this had been done. After the concession had been obtained Bill could be finally disposed of, too. In such a place it would be easy to arrange.

But the conspirators now found themselves with yet another aircraft and two white girls to deal with. As a result of their arrival, Uncle Dick and Andrew Mackintosh were also on the trail. If all these people were allowed to go free, they would certainly return to civilisation and report the sinister events that had been going on in the interior. Clearly, that could not be allowed to happen. The long and short of it was, the plotters now found themselves faced with the necessity of committing wholesale murder if they were to achieve their object. In any case, whether they got the concession or not, there would be trouble with the police over the murder of Mahomet, to say nothing of Bill’s abduction, if the story got out.

Thus reasoned Worrals as she gazed at the two men standing by the aircraft. She felt that they had plenty to occupy their minds even though they seemed to hold all the cards. That her fate, and that of Uncle Dick, and the

disposal of the aircraft, were the subject under discussion, she did not doubt. She was not surprised when she saw them coming back towards the hut.

“Here they come,” she told Uncle Dick quietly.

“Now what do they want?” growled Uncle Dick.

“If you’re asking me, I should say they’re in a jam. They’ll try to reopen negotiations. If they try that, have nothing to do with them. We don’t deal with crooks.”

Shardwell came in, followed by Gronk. Wongorobo, an insolent leer on his face, squatted with the witch-doctor near the door. Shardwell’s first words made it clear that Worrals’ guess had been right.

“Look here,” he said gruffly, but in what he may have imagined to be a conciliatory tone. “We reckon this has gone far enough.”

“You’ve been a long time working that out,” sneered Worrals.

Shardwell ignored her. “What about making an end of this nonsense—clean the whole thing up and no hard feelings?”

“What’s your proposition?” inquired Uncle Dick.

“All you have to do is make the concession over to me and forget the whole affair.”

“I imagine that would suit you very nicely,” rasped Worrals. “There’s nothing doing.”

“You keep your mouth shut—you’ve had too much to say already. It’s nothing to do with you,” snarled Shardwell.

“You’ll find it has a lot to do with me, before I’m through with you,” flashed Worrals.

Shardwell went on talking to Uncle Dick. “I’ll get Ooma to fix up this nephew of yours, or whatever relation he is, then you can all go home together.”

“You’re certain Ooma can make him well?”

“Sure.”

“How is he going to bring Mahomet back to life?” scoffed Worrals.

Shardwell tossed her a venomous glare.

Uncle Dick broke in. “Does your original offer for the concession still hold good?”

“Like hell,” blurted Shardwell. “I’d have you know that this interfering wench has already cost me a thousand pounds’ worth of diamonds. The police are sticking to them.”

“That’s fine,” put in Worrals evenly. “Teach you to go about putting I.D.B. stones in other people’s pockets.” To Uncle Dick she went on. “Tell him he’s wasting his time. We have no truck with crooks.”

Still Shardwell ignored her. “I don’t see why you think so much of this parcel of land,” he told Uncle Dick. “You haven’t struck it so rich as all that. I’ve got big money behind me to develop it. After all, there may be nothing there at the finish.”

“There’s gold there, or you wouldn’t be so anxious to get hold of it,” snapped Worrals.

“Smart gal, ain’t you?” sneered Shardwell. He turned back to Uncle Dick. “Well, what about it? The land’s yours, not hers. Make up your mind. I can’t stand here jawing all night.”

“I’ve nothing more to say,” decided Uncle Dick. “I’m not parting.”

“That’s final?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay. You’ll be sorry. I’ll give you something to keep you quiet.”

“What are you going to do?” demanded Uncle Dick sharply.

“Get Ooma to give you both a dose of the same medicine as he gave your nephew. You won’t trouble about anything after that.”

“Why, you infernal rogue!” cried Uncle Dick furiously. “You’d maltreat a girl?”

“Teach her to mind her own business,” returned Shardwell sardonically. He called to Ooma, and when the witch-doctor came in with eloquent gestures spoke to him in what was apparently his own language.

Uncle Dick evidently understood. “You’ll pay for this, Shardwell,” he promised.

“What will it matter to you?” jibed Shardwell.

“It’ll matter to you,” said Uncle Dick.

“Come on, Gronk, let’s leave them to it,” concluded Shardwell.

They went out.

“They shall hang for this,” swore Uncle Dick. “Did you notice the make of rifle Shardwell carried? It’s a forty-five Rimmington—and the cartridges in his belt are soft-nosed. He helped to bury Mahomet at Impala, and dropped the one I found. The police will be interested in that. It makes him an accessory, if nothing worse. That rifle Wongorobo is carrying belonged to Mahomet—I saw the notches in the stock when he stood in the doorway just now. Shardwell must have let him keep it. It’s against the law to give firearms to natives, apart from anything else.”

Worrals shrugged. "These things are all very interesting, but they don't help us," she remarked practically. "I'm relying on Frecks. What's she doing all this time, I wonder? It's hours since we left her. She must have seen what happened. Had they caught her, they would have brought her here, surely?"

"What can she do, one girl, alone?" sighed Uncle Dick.

"I don't know, but she'll do something," responded Worrals confidently. Looking past the witch-doctor at the dance ground, she saw that it was entirely deserted. The natives had retired, presumably to their huts. Of Shardwell and Gronk there was no sign. Where they had gone she did not know. Only Wongorobo was in sight, sitting on the ground just outside the hut, the stolen rifle across his knees, making a bandage of leaves for his wounded head.

Ooma the witch-doctor, had remained with them, and Worrals watched with morbid interest as he prepared to carry out his instructions. She found it hard to believe that this bag of bones was a human being. It was impossible to see his face, so thickly was it smeared with coloured clays and adorned with gimcrack ornaments that dangled from his matted hair.

Squatting on the floor in front of his victims, he first lit a tiny fire with twigs from the pouch that hung from his girdle. A pungent aroma filled the hut. Proceeding unhurriedly, on this fire he put a small brass bowl, into which he dropped, with slow deliberation, some dark-coloured pellets, also from his pouch. The bowl was soon filled with a black, viscid fluid which seethed and bubbled and gave off a stench so foul that Worrals was nauseated. The next object to appear was a lion's claw. This the witch-doctor stropped for a minute or two in the palm of his left hand, in the manner of a razor. Then, after examining the point critically, he dipped it in the smoking fluid. Apparently all was now ready for the operation, for after shuffling nearer, he reached out and seized Worrals' arm.

"You can't go through with this, Worrals!" burst out Uncle Dick.

"Shardwell can kill us, but he still won't have the property," said Worrals through her teeth. And as she spoke she looked beyond the witch-doctor at a movement that had caught her eye. Someone had come in. She assumed it was Wongorobo. At any rate, it was a native, and Wongorobo was no longer sitting where he had been. Up to this point her interest was merely perfunctory.



Squatting on the floor in front of his victims he first lit a tiny fire

Then came a swift movement, accompanied by a sharp intake of breath. Two black hands had reached out. One caught Ooma by the throat, and the other by the wrist. The lion claw fell to the ground. Slowly and in dead silence, although the witch-doctor squirmed like an eel, his head and shoulders were forced back until they touched the ground.

“Go steady, Ingoona, don’t kill him,” said a voice sharply. It was Frecks. She came forward into the light of the little fire.

“Nice work, Frecks,” said Worrals, speaking with a calmness she did not feel. “You were just about in time. Don’t let Ingoona kill that old beast—we shall need him.”

“He deserved to die,” said the ancient gun-bearer in a hard voice. No longer in his European clothes, he wore only a short zebra-skin skirt. His black body gleamed with oil.

“If he dies, his nasty secrets will die with him, and Bill will die, too,” said Worrals. “Cut us loose, Frecks.”

Frecks stood for a moment transfixed with amazement. “Did you say Bill?”

“Yes, he’s here. Get my hands free and I’ll tell you about it.”

While Frecks was cutting the thongs that bound the prisoners’ wrists, Worrals gave her a terse and concise account of the situation. Ingoona, with a hand clapped over Ooma’s mouth, sat on the witch-doctor’s chest.

“How frightful!” exclaimed Frecks when Worrals had finished. “We’d better get out of this.”

“What’s happening outside?” asked Worrals.

“The only person in sight when we arrived was Wongorobo, sitting outside the hut,” returned Frecks. “Ingoona hit him on the head with a club. He’s out for the count. The warriors dragged him into the bushes out of the way.”

“Warriors?”

“Hereros.” Frecks gave a brief account of what she had done.

“That was a terrific effort,” complimented Worrals. “I knew we could count on you, but funny enough I never thought of Ingoona.”

“Okay—we can talk about that later,” said Frecks. “Let’s get cracking while the going’s good.”

Worrals hesitated. “The Kingfisher is still at Shardwell’s claim?”

“Yes. I daren’t risk coming back in it in case I crashed in the dark. We came on foot—ran most of the way.”

“It’s a long way to carry Bill,” muttered Worrals.

“The Hereros will make nothing of it,” put in Uncle Dick.

“I’m thinking of the state he’s in. I’m afraid we shall have to stay here for a bit.”

“What on earth for?” demanded Frecks, taking a quick look outside.

“Frankly, because in his present condition I don’t think it’s much use taking Bill anywhere. As I told you, he’s been poisoned or doped, and only Ooma knows the antidote. Shardwell said so. He said no proper doctor could cure him, and I have an uncomfortable feeling that for once he was telling

the truth. We've got to get that antidote before we leave here, or all our efforts to help Bill will have been in vain."

"Ooma won't part with the secret," averred Uncle Dick.

"Won't he? We'll see about that," grated Worrals. "Freckles, you keep *cave*. Let me know if you see anyone coming." She turned to Ingoona. Pointing at the witch-doctor, she said: "Tell this devil in skins that we want the antidote for the poison that made this man sick. You can also tell him that if he makes one bleat for help you have my permission to stick your spear through him. Let him see we mean business."

"You'll get into serious trouble if you kill a native," warned Uncle Dick.

"We're in so much trouble as it is that a little more will make no difference," returned Worrals curtly. "This gang started total war. Now we'll carry on with it. I've been through a real war, don't forget. Go ahead, Ingoona."

The gun-bearer drew his hunting knife, and holding the blade against the witch-doctor's throat, spoke quietly in the guttural native language.

The witch-doctor answered.

"He says there is no antidote," interpreted Ingoona.

"He's lying. We know there is one," said Worrals in a brittle voice.

Again Ingoona put the question, and again the witch-doctor replied.

"He says, if we kill him the sick man will die," translated Ingoona.

"We know that," rasped Worrals.

"The cunning old devil has got us cold, and he knows it," put in Uncle Dick. "He knows jolly well that we daren't kill him, because Bill would die, too."

Worrals' eyes narrowed. "Okay," she said, forcing the words through her teeth. "If that's his trick, let's see how he likes this one." Stooping, she picked up the lion claw and dipped the point again in the bubbling emulsion. Then she knelt beside the witch-doctor, who was still flat on his back with Ingoona holding him down. "Put something over his mouth, in case he yells," ordered Worrals.

Ingoona complied, using a skin from the floor for the purpose.

The witch-doctor's eyes opened wide, showing the whites, when Worrals gripped his wrist with her left hand. In her right she held the claw. Nearer and nearer to the black forearm came the point. Grunting, for a moment the witch-doctor struggled to free himself, but without success. Then he lay still.

"He knows you are only a woman," said Uncle Dick despairingly.

"What do you mean by that?" flamed Worrals.

“He knows you’re only bluffing.”

“Is that so?” said Worrals coldly. “You mean, that’s what he *thinks*! It’s time he learned that his notions about women are old-fashioned—at least, white women.”

Quite deliberately, she drove the point of the claw into the black arm and held it there. “We’ll see what he thinks about *that*,” she added grimly.

“My God!” cried Uncle Dick. “You’ll kill him!”

“Don’t you believe it,” answered Worrals. “He’s got the antidote, and if I know anything he’ll take steps to use it.”

“But we can’t wait here all night.”

“We shan’t have to. The muck on this claw must be pretty virulent. The old devil probably knows that better than anybody. He knows that if it begins to work before he can get at the antidote, he’s sunk. Don’t you see, he’ll have to cure himself while he’s conscious. If once he lapses into a coma he’s finished. Not being a fool, he’ll realise that, and whether he likes it or not he’ll have to tell us what we want to know. Take that hide off his mouth, Ingoona, and we’ll see if the claw has jogged his memory.”

Grinning, Ingoona removed the skin.

Ooma sucked in his breath with a great gulp. His eyes were round with fear, and he babbled incoherently.

“Release his arms, Ingoona,” ordered Worrals.

As soon as the old gun-bearer obeyed, with frantic speed the witch-doctor seized his pouch and emptied the contents on the floor.

“Watch him,” said Worrals sharply.

Ooma selected a small gourd and tore out the stopper with his teeth. Pouring some of the contents into his left hand, he applied it to the wound in his left arm. His relief when he did so was so evident that none of the spectators was in any doubt about it being the antidote.

“That’s it,” muttered Worrals, satisfaction in her voice. “He’s in too much of a hurry to save himself to play tricks. Hang on to him, Ingoona.”

She took the gourd, and crossing over to Bill, pulled up his sleeve to expose the arm. There were several small wounds, close together. She looked at them doubtfully, and then glanced over her shoulder at Ingoona.

“Ask him why it was necessary to make more than one wound,” she commanded. “Say that if he lies I’ll stick the claw in his throat and take the antidote away.”

These extreme methods were unnecessary. All the fight and arrogance had gone out of the witch-doctor. He seemed only too anxious to oblige.

“He says,” translated Ingoona, “that he did not want the man to die. It was necessary to make him conscious sometimes so that he could eat, otherwise he would have died of starvation. After eating, by fresh poison, he was made insensible.”

“Ask him how long it will take for this stuff to work.”

Ingoona put the question. “It will begin to work before the moon dies,” he announced.

“Then the sooner we apply the cure the better,” stated Worrals. Pouring some of the fluid over the wounds in Bill’s arm, she massaged it as she had seen Ooma work on his own arm. This she did for a minute or two, which Ooma, through Ingoona, said was enough.

“In that case, we’ll see about moving off,” decided Worrals, recorking the gourd and giving it to Uncle Dick to put in his pocket.

“It must be getting on towards dawn, and Shardwell may be back any time now,” said Uncle Dick. “At least, we haven’t more than a couple of hours. What are you going to do with Ooma? If we let him go he’ll raise an alarm.”

“We shall have to take him with us,” stated Worrals. “I intended to do that in any case, to be on the safe side until we see how Bill shapes. Ingoona, tie something over his mouth. Your men will have to carry Bill.”

“It’s all quiet outside,” reported Frecks.

Worrals stood up. “All right, Uncle Dick. You speak the language, so I’ll leave it to you to take care of things now.”

Ingoona went out, to return almost at once with six Hereros. He spoke to them in a low voice, whereupon four of them picked Bill up and carried him out. The other two laid hands on Ooma. The witch-doctor struggled, but the two warriors made short work of him. Their methods were rough, but no one interfered. Ooma was dragged out.

“Is there anything else?” said Frecks, looking round.

“I don’t think so,” answered Worrals. “My rifle is over there in the remains of Bill’s Dragon, but I don’t think I’ll risk fetching it in case I’m spotted. Unfortunately, Shardwell took Uncle Dick’s rifle—I’m afraid we shall have to let it go.”

“We’ve got Wongorobo’s rifle,” remarked Frecks.

“That’s something, anyway,” murmured Worrals. “If Shardwell and Gronk were on their own, I’d try to nab them and take them down to Keetmannshoop; but there would be no sense at this stage in starting a

general alarm among the Ovambo—we can't take on the whole tribe. Let's go."

XIII

A HOPELESS DAWN

THE retreat from the Ovambo *kraal* was made without discovery or alarm, and as soon as a reasonably safe distance had been covered, a halt was called to examine the situation, and organise the party for the ten-mile trek to Hansvelt, and the Kingfisher. As Worrals averred, they were a long way from being out of danger. The discovery of their departure could not be long delayed, when there would certainly be a pursuit, a hue and cry in which the Ovambo would travel faster than the refugees, encumbered as they were with an unconscious man, and a prisoner. Wongorobo had been left behind.

“The situation, as I see it, is this,” said Worrals. “Shardwell and Gronk are in this business too deep for them to take the risk of letting us get back to Keetmannshoop and report them. The first charge against them would be murder, the murder of Mahomet, don’t forget. You may be sure they will prevent that if they can. As murderers they have nothing more to lose by murdering someone else. The Ovambo, knowing they will get it in the neck for their part in the affair, will be equally anxious to prevent us from getting away.”

“If we are overtaken, the Hereros will fight; there’s no love lost between them and the Ovambo at the best of times,” remarked Uncle Dick.

“That may be so, but I’ve no desire to be involved in a pitched battle which, being hopelessly outnumbered, we should certainly lose,” declared Worrals. “At the moment we are on our way to Hansvelt for one reason only—because the Kingfisher is there. We must get to the machine. The big problem is Bill.”

“The Hereros can make a sling to carry him,” said Uncle Dick.

“They’d better start on that right away,” agreed Worrals. “Ooma is a nuisance, but I don’t feel inclined to let him go till we see if the antidote is effective. In any case, if we released him he would only bolt back to Nakula and start things buzzing.”

“I don’t see that Shardwell will necessarily know which way we’ve gone,” said Uncle Dick.

“He’ll have a pretty good idea. He must know the Kingfisher is somewhere handy, and there aren’t so many landing grounds around here.

Where did he suddenly pop up from, anyway?”

“Hansvelt,” put in Frecks.

Worrals started. “How do you know that?”

“Because the Junkers is there. I saw it. I’m sorry, but in the general upheaval I forgot to mention it.”

“Good heavens!” cried Worrals. “Do you mean that the Kingfisher and the Junkers are on the same landing ground?”

“That’s right,” agreed Frecks ruefully. “I had to leave the Kingfisher there—there was nowhere else to put it. The machines are some distance apart, but of course, in daylight, from one you would be able to see the other.”

“This makes things worse,” muttered Worrals. “Everything, both for Shardwell and ourselves, depends upon transport. If Shardwell gets to Hansvelt first, and takes our machine, we’re completely cheesed. It would take us days to get even to Magube—not that we should have much chance of getting there with the whole pack of Ovambos on our trail. My idea was to get to the Kingfisher, fly straight down to Keetmannshoop and lay the whole matter before the authorities. There’s no point in delaying that any longer. Bill’s evidence alone would be enough to convict Shardwell.”

“Can’t we still do that?” queried Frecks.

“We can try, but it seems that everything now depends on who gets to Hansvelt first.”

Uncle Dick stepped into the conversation. “But even if you succeeded in your plan—I mean, if we got away in the Kingfisher—Shardwell would know that the game was up. You don’t think he’d be such a fool as to follow us down to Keetmannshoop, or even wait here to be arrested? No fear. He’d escape. He and Gronk would get away in the machine and head either north for the West Coast, or east, into Portuguese territory, where they would be safe. We don’t want to let them get away if we can prevent it.”

“If we get to Hansvelt first, I’ll see to it that doesn’t happen,” declared Worrals.

“How?”

“By immobilising their machine—knock a hole in the tank, or something. That would keep them on the ground, and in this part of the world. The big question is, can we get to Hansvelt first? With Bill, that’s going to take us all our time. I reckon it will take three hours, even with Bill in a sling.” Worrals thought for a moment. “Alone, I could do it in half that time.”

“Preposterous!” blurted Uncle Dick. “You’re worn out now.”

“Fiddlesticks!” snapped Worrals. “You’d be surprised how far I can run—when there’s something to run for. I’m going on ahead, starting right now; the rest of you follow as quickly as you can.”

“You haven’t forgotten that this is Africa, not Regent’s Park?” said Uncle Dick sarcastically. “You haven’t a weapon.”

“I doubt if I shall need one, but I’ll take Frecks’ automatic,” returned Worrals. “Frecks did the trip without getting chewed up.”

“Only just, I fancy,” said Frecks softly.

“But at least take one of Ingoona’s boys with you,” protested Uncle Dick. “These chaps are at home in this country.”

“That’s a sound suggestion,” concurred Worrals. “Ask Ingoona to detail one to come with me.”

Ingoona, who, after setting his warriors to work making a sling for Bill, had stood listening to this conversation, beckoned to a tall, powerful-looking Herero, and spoke to him briefly.

“This man’s name is N’swena,” he informed them. “He is afraid of nothing.”

N’swena picked up his spear and stood beside Worrals, who took Frecks’ automatic.

“I’m on my way,” she announced. “You get along as quickly as you can.” With a parting wave, she turned to the trail and set off at a steady trot. N’swena fell in behind her.

Frecks watched her out of sight and then turned to where the Hereros were lifting Bill into an improvised sling made from poles and the pliable branches of a shrub.

Worrals ran on. She was unafraid. In the ordinary course of events she would no doubt have regarded the journey with some trepidation, but as it was she had too much on her mind to worry about wild animals. She realised the vital necessity of getting Bill into good medical hands at the earliest possible moment, for apart from the poison, or as a result of it, he was obviously in a very low state of health. But above all she wanted to beat Shardwell. The man had revealed himself to be a criminal of the most callous type, and she hated him wholeheartedly.

The journey was comparatively uneventful. Lions were sometimes heard, but only at a distance. Once, N’swena laid a hand on her shoulder and brought her to a halt. He said nothing, but pointed with his spear. Following the line indicated with her eyes, Worrals saw a herd of great beasts which

she recognised as buffalo, standing “at gaze” in their direction. They stood quite still—perhaps eighty yards away, in the open grass, on the fringe of some scrub. The moonlight glinted on their sweeping horns. Presently they began to move away until only one remained, no doubt the leader of the herd. He snorted once or twice and stamped an impatient forefoot. For a horrid moment Worrals thought he was going to charge; but apparently he thought better of it, for he walked away behind the herd—a decision which suited Worrals very well, for she knew from what she had read that the African buffalo, with its huge bulk and shrewd brain, is probably the most dangerous creature on earth.

N’swena moved on, walking like a cat, keeping a watchful eye in the direction of the browsing herd.

On another occasion he stopped suddenly, and with a grunt picked up a tiny arrow. He looked closely at the barbed point, and then flung it into the bush. Marvelling that he should detect so small an object in the darkness, Worrals would have liked to ask him about it, but having no mutual language, this was impossible. Remembering what she had read about the Kalahari, she suspected that the poisoned arrow had been dropped by one of the pigmy bushmen. She could only hope that the owner of it was not in the vicinity.

Taking the lead, N’swena went on, for a while sometimes stopping to listen and stare into the shadows, a performance which Worrals found more than a trifle disconcerting.

The stars were paling in the eastern sky when they neared Hansvelt, approaching the claim from the lower end of the landing ground. Feeling sure that she had won the race, Worrals took an opportunity provided by an old tree-stump to rest for a moment, for she was nearer to exhaustion than she would have cared to admit. The long walk, the nervous strain, and a night without sleep, had left her hollow-eyed and utterly worn out. On the march she had been hungry, but with mounting weariness the desire for food had passed. And as she sat there her attention was attracted by a glow in the sky, as though a big fire was burning. She assumed, not unnaturally, that it was a grass fire, a common event. The grass round the Hereros abandoned camp fire had caught, perhaps. Natives were careless over such matters. But she started to her feet when her nostrils caught the taint of burning. She knew the smell too well to be mistaken. Anyone who has stood on the windward side of a burning aeroplane for ever after remembers the curious, sickly, pungent reek of doped fabric.

With a horrid sinking feeling in her stomach Worrals ran forward, knowing even then that she was too late. For through the still, silent air,

came the shattering roar of an aero engine. Pilots, from long association and practice, learn to recognise aircraft by sound as well as by sight. Worrals knew only too well that the engine now being run up was not that of the Kingfisher. The note was too deep. It could only be the Junkers. Panting, she tore on. For some reason not immediately apparent, N'swena, fleet of foot, raced on ahead of her. What he intended to do she did not know. She never did know. It may be that the native had a better idea of what was going on than she supposed, or he may simply have been infected by her own excitement. At all events, he easily outstripped her, and by the time she had reached the fringe of the open landing ground he was half-way across it, running through the wan grey light of approaching dawn towards the Junkers, just as Gronk reached out his hand to close the door.

From the edge of some scrub which fringed the landing ground at the point where she reached it, Worrals saw clearly what happened, although the motives behind the actions of the two men were obscure. Gronk, seeing the Herero coming at a run, may have thought he was being attacked. At any rate, he saw N'swena, and for a moment paused with his hand still holding the open door. Then he released it and groped for something inside. A rifle cracked. N'swena stumbled, lurched forward on his face and lay still. The door of the Junkers slammed. The engine roared, and the machine began to move.

When the shot had been fired Worrals had stopped, stunned by the sheer suddenness and unexpectedness of the tragedy. By the time she had recovered her wits, the Junkers was running tail-up across the landing ground, half-way through its take-off. With a shout she dashed forward. She did not expect that the pilot would see her, nor did he—or if he did, he gave no indication of it. The machine swept on into the air. As it passed low over her, in impotent fury Worrals whipped out her automatic and fired a shot at it. It made not the slightest difference—she would have been surprised if it had. The machine disappeared behind the trees, heading in the direction of Nakula, the roar of its engine swiftly fading.

With a moan of utter despair, Worrals ran across the sun-dried grass to where N'swena lay. A glance was enough to tell her the worst. He was dead, shot through the heart. She passed her hand wearily over her face and looked at him again. It did not seem possible. Death, particularly sudden death, never does. For a little while she stood there, her eyes closed, trying desperately to think. Then, in dumb misery, she gazed at the spot where Frecks had told her she would find the Kingfisher. There was no need for her to look for it. The place was marked—marked only too well—by the glow of a dying fire. Leaving N'swena where he lay, for it was beyond her

strength to lift the body, she walked over to the burnt-out remains of the Kingfisher, and looked at it dully.

So Shardwell, or Gronk, had won the race after all, she mused bitterly. How they had managed it she did not know. Not that it mattered. The only thing that mattered was, the Kingfisher was finished, finally and irreparably. Presently, the obvious answer to the enigma struck her. When Shardwell and Gronk had left the witch-doctor's hut, at the time she assumed that they had gone off to rest; now she realised that one, or both of them, had started straight back for Hansvelt to fetch the machine, no doubt to have it handy. They had not dared to land it nearer in the darkness. Now, by the time the machine reached Nakula, dawn would have broken, and a landing would be safe.

These thoughts passed slowly through Worrals' weary brain as she stood gazing at the wreck, even then hardly able to grasp the enormity of the disaster. She did not blame herself, for she had done everything humanly possible to prevent such a catastrophe. There was nothing else she could have done. It was just one of those things . . .

Not knowing quite what to do next she walked over to the hut, and finding a convenient place on a bank, sat down. On the face of it there was nothing she could do. Already the Junkers would have covered the short distance to Nakula. No doubt Frecks and her party were pushing along as fast as they could, so even if she went back to meet them no useful purpose would be served. She doubted if she would get far, anyway. There was a limit to human endurance. She looked at the sky. The glorious African dawn was breaking.

XIV

DESPERATE MEASURES

WITH her chin cupped in the palm of her hand, Worrals gazed across the lightening landscape, where the brown naked earth was being washed by a thin veil of transparent blue mist. On one side a family of baboons were industriously turning over rocks in search of grubs for breakfast. Along the curtain of thorn trees on the far side of the landing ground, a mother giraffe, with her calf at hoof, was making her way with stately but nervous tread. A long way off a hyrax barked to greet the dawn. It all seemed very beautiful.

Worrals did not easily give way to despair, but as the glowing ball of fire that was the sun toiled over the horizon to light the continent for another day, she came very near to it. This may have been due, or partly due, to inaction, for she could think of nothing to do except remain where she was until the rest of the party joined her. If they succeeded in that, she reflected, perhaps things would not be so bad. They had Wongorobo's rifle—or rather, the rifle that had belonged to Mahomet; there was plenty of game about, so they would not starve. They would have to trek on foot to Magube, and later on, to Keetmannshoop. In the ordinary way such a walk would not have worried her overmuch; it was Bill's condition that gave rise to anxiety. Imperative though it was that he should see a doctor, he would not be able to make the journey—at least, not until he had had a long rest. The Hereros would show them the water-holes. The natives might come with them as far as Magube, but hating civilisation, they would not go all the way to Keetmannshoop; that was certain. Not without good reason, they might turn nasty over the death of N'swena, who had lost his life in her service. They must remember to send something to the widow, if he had a wife. The murder, cold-blooded and deliberate, without any real justification or provocation, was another score against their enemies. Cold with anger, and sick at heart, she looked across the hard dry earth to where N'swena's body lay where it had fallen. It was, she perceived, another reason why she must remain; she could not leave him to the scavengers of the wilderness—the hyenas, the jackals, and the vultures, that doubtless would soon be on the spot if she went away.

She hoped the others would not be long, for she saw that Hansvelt, with its landing ground, was a dangerous place. Shardwell or Gronk might come

back, and it would not do for them to be found there. She assumed that the Junkers had been taken to Nakula, or as near to the village as possible. What, she wondered, would Shardwell do next? He had gone too far along the path of crime to turn back. Knowing they were grounded by the loss of the Kingfisher, he, with transport, would have plenty of time at his disposal.

Shardwell may have guessed that the Kingfisher was at Hansvelt, and sent Gronk to destroy it. That was a possibility that had not previously occurred to her. With the tragic result of the oversight before her eyes, she drifted to self-recrimination, telling herself that she should have thought of that.

The sun climbed higher, warming and soothing her tired body, so that although she fought desperately against sleep, she found herself dozing.

She may have dropped off, or into that restful state that is half-way between sleep and consciousness. She had no recollection of sleeping, or waking, but suddenly she was aware of the sound of an aircraft. It seemed close, surprisingly so; and from that fact she suspected that she had slept—a surmise that was partly confirmed by the position of the sun, which she observed was now well clear of the horizon. She started up in alarm as soon as full consciousness returned, assuming, naturally, that the Junkers had come back. She had no intention of running away from it if it landed. With the death of N'swena on her conscience, her mood was too belligerent for that. The time had come for a showdown. She still had the automatic, and it urged her to take the law—which seemed so far away—into her own hands.

But it was not the Junkers. She knew that the moment the machine flashed into sight, flying low, over the trees. She stared at it in amazement, hardly knowing what to make of it, for although she recognised the type as an old Monospar, a civil machine, it was wearing the markings of the South African Air Force. At any rate, she thought jubilantly, it was not the Junkers. She could hardly believe her good fortune. What the machine was doing at such an out of the way place was not easy to imagine. The only possible conclusion she could arrive at was that it was doing a routine patrol; but that it should by sheer chance arrive at that particular spot, at that particular time, was incredible. Such things just did not happen. There was a limit to coincidence.

How right she was in this assumption she was soon to learn, but at that moment she was so gratified by what she supposed to be her astonishing good luck that she thought no further than the one great obvious fact that the machine was there. It seemed that her troubles were as good as over. That the pilot, when he heard her story, would be an ally, she did not doubt. He would take Bill straight down to Cape Town. Her only fear was that he

might pass on without seeing her, for without a good reason it seemed unlikely that he would land. She took swift steps to prevent such an omission. Her weariness dropped like a discarded blanket, she dashed out to the open plain, waving her arms in a natural effort to make herself more conspicuous.

The pilot saw her at once; that was evident. It is reasonable to suppose that he was looking down at the landing ground, and there was little else to see. The machine banked steeply and circled, losing height, and then, with engines throttled back, came in to land.

Almost faint from relief, Worrals moved out of the line of the run-in, and as the machine trundled slowly to a standstill, ran forward to meet it. She was standing by the nacelle, smiling and waving a greeting to the pilot, whom she could see in the cockpit, when the cabin door opened and a man, a man in uniform, stepped out. The uniform was blue, but not air force blue.

Worrals blinked, for it was the very last man she was thinking of, the last man she expected to see. She recognised him instantly, but even then the reason for his presence there did not occur to her. She took it to be another coincidence, an unfortunate one perhaps, and one likely to be embarrassing to both parties—nothing more. It was the police inspector whom she had last seen in his office at Cape Town. He was accompanied by a civilian, an elderly, good-looking, sun-tanned man, in khaki drill.

The inspector stepped down, and quickly disillusioned her. His eyes were cold, and his expression taciturn to the point of hostility. He jerked a thumb in the direction of the cabin which he had just vacated.

“Come on,” he ordered peremptorily.

Worrals stared, dumbfounded, and not a little startled both by the expression and the tone of voice. “But——” she began. The inspector cut her off.

“Get in.”

Worrals’ brain was whirling. “But——”

“You heard me.”

“But, Inspector!” cried Worrals, suddenly seeing daylight. “You don’t understand.”

“That’s what *you* think.”

“But *please*, Inspector——”

“All right,” interrupted the inspector. “Cut out the school-girl stuff. It worked once, but you don’t catch me twice. I’ve been half over the Kalahari looking for you, my lass. You’re coming back with me to Cape Town.”

Worrals was shocked, horrified. “But, Inspector! Please listen——”
“Quit simpering and get inside before I put the handcuffs on you.”
This was going too fast for Worrals. “Handcuffs?” she gasped.
“You’re under arrest.”

Worrals stood still, fighting to steady her reeling brain. The situation, she saw, was desperate. There was no doubt that the inspector was seriously angry, but she still felt that he would listen to reason. She spoke swiftly. “I know and admit that you’ve good reason to be angry with me, but on my honour——”

“Your what?” The inspector laughed harshly.

Worrals moistened her lips. “Please let me explain,” she pleaded earnestly.

“Save it for the court,” rapped out the inspector. “No girl makes a fool of me and gets away with it,” he added grimly.

“Please, Inspector! Listen!” cried Worrals, who was also beginning to get angry at this display of male stubbornness. She could sympathise with him, but felt that he was being unreasonable.

“Nothing doing,” said the inspector. “There’s only one thing I want to hear from you. Where’s your confederate?”

Worrals staggered, literally. “Confederate?”

“Ashton, the man you got out of jail.”

Worrals laughed with bitter scorn. “You’re crazy. Listen——”

“Shut up and get inside.”

Worrals’ eyes became frosty. This was going too far. “If you don’t listen to me, you’re going to be very sorry,” she warned, in a voice which she strove to keep steady.

“That sort of talk won’t help you, my gal,” rapped out the inspector.

Worrals tried appealing to the pilot, a good-looking fellow in air force uniform. “Can’t you make him listen to reason?” she pleaded. “If he’ll give me just one minute I can explain everything.”

The pilot shrugged, looking embarrassed. “Nothing to do with me—I’m just the chauffeur.”

The civilian spoke for the first time. “What’s that I can see over there?” He was looking past Worrals’ shoulder. “It looks like a body.”

The inspector looked, and as he stared, his eyes narrowed. He grabbed Worrals by the wrist. “Let’s have a look at this.” He strode towards N’swena’s body, over which vultures were now circling, high in the blue.

Actually, Worrals was well satisfied with this turn in the drama, for she felt that the body would call for explanations which she was only too anxious to provide.

The inspector's face was grim as he turned the body and examined the bullet hole over the heart. "Shot!" He glanced up at Worrals. "Murder, eh?" And before Worrals could guess his intention, he had thrust his hands into her pockets. He found the automatic. His lips set in a thin line as he snapped out the magazine. "One shot fired," he muttered. "I reckon that's all we want to know." He turned accusing eyes on Worrals' face. "I knew you were a wrong 'un, but I didn't think you'd go as far as that."

"Are you suggesting that I killed him?" cried Worrals furiously.

"You'll have a job to prove you didn't."

"On the contrary, you'll have a job to prove I did," rasped Worrals. "I've seen some stubborn fools in my life, but——"

"Save it till we get back," broke in the inspector. "I reckon that's all. Let's go."

The inspector strode back towards the machine, taking Worrals with him. The civilian followed.

"Inspector," said Worrals with deadly calm. "You are making a terrible blunder. If you don't believe me, take the bullet out of that man's heart, and you'll see it was fired by a rifle, not a pistol."

"That isn't my job. The police surgeon will do that later on."

"But later on is no use. I want to make a statement, now."

"Wait till we get to Keetmannshoop."

In despair, Worrals turned to the civilian. "Who are you?" she asked.

"The District Commissioner. Major Wilson is my name."

"Then perhaps you will listen——"

"Don't talk so much," snapped the inspector.

In spite of her efforts to remain calm, Worrals was fast losing her temper. In fact, her face was pale with passion. "I call upon you, Major Wilson to bear witness that I've done everything in my power to make the inspector listen to reason," she said chokingly.

A shout from the pilot interrupted her. He had walked over to the cold ashes of the Kingfisher. "Hi! Inspector! Come and look at this," he called.

The inspector threw a hostile glance at Worrals. "That your machine?"

"It was."

“Ha! Now I understand why you were so anxious to be picked up.” The inspector glanced at the District Commissioner. “Using a plane for I.D.B. isn’t new, but this is the first time we’ve had a girl in the racket.” He turned to Worrals. “Someone ought to have taught you to fly before you started out on a man’s job.”

Said Worrals bitterly, as the inspector walked over to the remains of the Kingfisher: “Your smug pride, which to save a miscarriage of justice I had to injure, seems to have blinded you. If you’ll only let me explain——”

“You can do all the explaining to the judge.”

“For the last time, will you let me speak?”

“No.”

“You will drive me to desperate measures.”

The inspector laughed mirthlessly. “Go ahead.”

Said Worrals wearily: “I know you are doing your duty——”

“Oh, you know that, do you?” said the inspector sarcastically as they walked up close to the burnt-out Kingfisher and gazed on the blackened remains. He stirred the ashes with the toe of his boot.

“Okay, Inspector,” said Worrals in a different tone. “I give up. You win. What affect does fire have on diamonds?”

The inspector started. “You mean—there were diamonds in this plane?”

“Enough to buy Cape Town.”

“Where were they?”

“In a pocket of the instrument panel.” Worrals stepped forward. “They should be somewhere about here.” Stooping, she groped with her hands among the powdery ashes that had been the front part of the cockpit. The others leaned forward to watch. “Ah,” said Worrals, closing her hands. “Here they are.” Turning with a swift movement she flung a handful of ashes into the inspector’s eyes. The second handful she lashed at the pilot’s face. Then, dodging past them, she ran like a hare towards where the Monospar stood with idling engines. There were shouts and curses behind her, but she did not look back. A revolver roared, and a shot whistled past her shoulder. She sped on. There were no more shots. She wondered why, until she heard heavy footsteps close behind her and heard the inspector shout, “Stand clear, Wilson!”

Putting all she had into a final sprint, Worrals took a flying leap into the cockpit. As she flung herself into the pilot’s seat, with her left hand she knocked the throttle wide open. The engines roared. The machine quivered, and began to move forward. It rocked as someone else jumped aboard. A

hand closed over her shoulder. But by that time the machine was racing tail-up across the sun-scorched grass towards the trees. Worrals saw that the man with her was the District Commissioner.



Putting all she had into a final sprint, Worrals took a flying leap into the cockpit

“Let go of me—d’you want to kill us both?” she cried shrilly. And she meant it, for the machine was yawing violently as with ever-increasing speed it tore on to what seemed certain destruction.

The District Commissioner released his grip. He was just in time. Worrals steadied the machine, and lifting it, missed the tree-tops by inches. “Sit down and sit still!” she shouted.

The District Commissioner sat down. His face was pale under its tan. “You might have killed us,” he said angrily.

“I didn’t invite you to come with me,” snapped Worrals.

“You’re only making it worse for yourself,” said the Commissioner, as Worrals swung the machine round on a new course. “At Cape Town you would have been given a chance to prove your innocence.”

“By that time it wouldn’t have mattered,” answered Worrals coldly.

“I must ask you to land again at once,” said the Commissioner severely.

“Are you kidding?” inquired Worrals.

“Does this look as though I’m kidding?” returned the Commissioner sharply.

Worrals felt something hard prodding into her side. Looking down, she saw that it was the business end of a revolver. “What do you think you’re going to do with that?” she asked cynically.

“I’m ordering you to go down.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I shall shoot.”

Worrals flew on. “There are times,” she said sadly, “when the male brain seems to sort of seize up. Or is it caused by a rush of superiority complex, when it has a woman to deal with? Have you ever seen a really good crash, Major Wilson?”

“No.”

“Then shoot away, and you will. I know you can’t fly, or you’d have had me out of this seat by now. Don’t be silly. Shut the door—you may fall out if I turn sharply.”

The Commissioner, looking worried, closed the door and dropped back into his seat. “What do you hope to gain by this?”

“Time enough to save some friends of mine who are in danger of being bumped off by a couple of rogues. When innocent people—like me—oppose the law, you may be sure there is a good reason for it. I’m sorry to inflict it on you, Major, but while we amble along I’m going to tell you the story which, for the last half hour, I’ve been trying to tell that obstinate policeman down below. And put your gun away carefully, because unless I’ve missed my guess you’re going to need it presently. Listen.”

XV

BATTLE ON THE TRAIL

HAD WORRALS, while she ruminated in the sunrise, known what was happening a few miles away, between Hansvelt and Nakula, her mind would have been more exercised than it was. Could she have seen Frecks—but fortunately she could not, so her actions were not influenced on that account.

After Worrals had gone on, for a while the others proceeded on their way at a fair rate of progress. Bill, borne in the hammock-sling on the shoulders of four natives, was moaning slightly, which Uncle Dick said was a good sign, as it indicated returning consciousness.

Trouble started soon after leaving the rhino path, as they were walking across an expanse of park-like country. There was the usual dry grass under foot, and odd trees, or groups of trees, at intervals. Ingoona, who was marching in front, suddenly stopped, saying, "*Faru.*"

"That means rhino," said Uncle Dick to Frecks, as they walked on quickly to Ingoona at the head of the column, which had come to a halt.

There stood the rhino, head towards the party, about a hundred yards away. His great bulk could be seen plainly in the moonlight. While they watched to see what the beast would do, he trotted forward. Apparently to have a better look at the disturbers of his peace. Uncle Dick put this down to curiosity observing that such incidents as this were commonplace while on *safari* in Africa. Unfortunately, in his approach, the rhino disturbed seven buffaloes which, until then unseen by the party, had been lying in a slight fold in the ground. It is likely that these were part of the same herd that Worrals and N'swena had encountered. From the way he snorted, it seemed that the rhino had also been unaware of their presence, for he began to show signs of excitement. It was all too evident that things were going to happen, and the Hereros began to back away—a natural enough thing to do in the circumstances, for it would be as easy to stop a runaway train with a spear, as a charging rhino.

The buffaloes, infected by the rhino's excitement, also broke into a trot, unfortunately in the direction of the travellers. As yet, there was no suggestion of a charge, but Uncle Dick stood with the rifle half raised. He said later on that he thought until now the buffaloes had not seen them. It was the movement of the four Hereros carrying Bill towards the nearest tree

that precipitated the charge—if charge it was. Ingoona said it was a panic-stricken flight by the animals, which, aroused from sleep, never did really know what was happening. At any rate, with a thunder of hooves, the rhino and the seven buffaloes broke into a gallop. In an endeavour to turn them, Ingoona yelled and waved his arms. This had no effect. The Hereros broke and made for the trees. Uncle Dick fired, and this did the trick. The charging herd swerved away from the flash, the rhino parting company with them. There was a roar of hooves, a cloud of dust, and it was all over. The animals plunged on and were lost to sight in the darkness.

Laughing, as if the whole thing had been a great joke—which it may have been from their point of view—the Hereros began to rally. None was hurt. Frecks had not moved from her position behind Uncle Dick, and when he asked her why she had not made for a tree, the only thing to do in such circumstances, she replied simply, “I couldn’t move.”

Uncle Dick smiled. “These rhinos are a nuisance,” said he. “They blunder about and you never know when you are going to barge into one. I’ve been charged by an odd rhino a good many times, but that’s the first occasion when I’ve been in the way of a stampeding herd of buffaloes at the same time. Fortunately, there’s no harm done.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” said Frecks. “Hark.”

From the direction of Nakula came the thumping of drums, and yells.

“They’ve discovered we’ve gone,” announced Frecks. “I’m afraid it was your rifle shot that did it.”

“Fool that I am,” muttered Uncle Dick. “I never thought of that.”

“I wouldn’t blame myself,” retorted Frecks. “The shot made the beasts swerve; if they had kept straight on we should have been knocked down and pulped. But let’s be moving.”

Ingoona came up. He, too, had heard the danger signals at Nakula. There was a brief conference. There was no doubt, said Ingoona, that the Ovambos would come after them. It would be better, he thought, to leave the direct route to Hansvelt. By making a detour they might give their pursuers the slip. This was agreed, and the party resumed its march.

For a while nothing happened, except that sounds of pursuit were sometimes heard in the distance. The party pushed on, swinging round towards the original course, while the stars in the sky behind them began to pale with the approach of dawn. When next the Hereros who were carrying Bill changed over—they had done this several times—Frecks expressed the view that they were three-quarters of the way to their objective.

“Worrals ought to be at Hansvelt by now,” she opined.

Before them stretched a wide expanse of open, undulating country, broken at sparse intervals by low, rocky hills, the sort that in South Africa are called *kopjes*. Hitherto they had kept to timber or scrub as far as possible, as this provided cover, but to do so now would mean going a couple of miles or more out of their way. It was perceptibly growing lighter, but after a short discussion they decided to take the risk of cutting across the open. In this they were partly influenced by the fact that nothing had been heard of the Ovambo for some time, and again, because half an hour on the direct route should see them at Hansvelt. They set off, striking across the plain on a course that would bring them directly in line with their objective.

They were in the very middle of the open country, in the growing light of dawn, when the sound of an aircraft became audible. For a moment Frecks assumed it was Worrals. Not for an instant did it occur to her that it could be anyone else.

“Good!” she exclaimed. “Here comes Worrals, to see how far we’ve got. I tell you what, Uncle Dick, it wouldn’t be much trouble to move enough of these loose rocks to make a runway wide enough for her to land; then she could pick us up.” She spoke cheerfully, eagerly, for the suggestion was practical, and there appeared to be nothing to prevent them from all being back at Magube Drift in time for breakfast. Suddenly a puzzled expression clouded her eyes. “That doesn’t sound like the Kingfisher,” she remarked.

It was not. It was the Junkers. Frecks could hardly believe her eyes; she had to stare at it to make sure that they were not deceiving her.

“Stop!” she yelled, perceiving their danger. “Lie flat everyone.” There was no cover anywhere near, and only by this means could they hope to avoid being seen.

Unfortunately, it was too late. Gronk, in the Junkers, had no doubt been flying with his eyes on the ground, since there was no point in looking anywhere else. The result was that the Junkers, having passed over them, banked sharply, and made three complete turns. Then, straightening out, it roared on.

“That’s done it,” muttered Frecks, scrambling to her feet. “He’s spotted us all right, and looked close enough to see just who was in the party. He’ll set the Ovambo on our trail.”

“But I don’t understand this,” cried Uncle Dick. “Where’s Worrals?”

Frecks shrugged. “Don’t ask me.”

“Who was in that plane?”

“Gronk, presumably, since he’s the pilot.”

“But how on earth——”

“We shan’t do any good standing here guessing,” broke in Frecks. “That was the Junkers and Gronk was in it. Had it been Worrals, she would have made a signal. Gronk saw us. What’s happened at Hansvelt I can’t imagine, but the sooner we’re there the better. Let’s go—we’ve still got a chance.”

At this juncture, Bill recovered consciousness. Actually, his eyes had been open for some time, but no one noticed it. In a weak voice he called Frecks, who ran to him.

Bill smiled wanly. “You look almost real,” he said. “For a moment I thought you were really here.”

“I am, and so is Worrals,” announced Frecks. “Take it easy. Just lie still. We’re in a bit of a jam at the moment, but we shall get out of it all right.”

The journey was resumed at a trot, the party making for the scrub that fringed the far side of the open country, a distance of about a mile. Dawn had now broken, and it could be seen clearly.

The Ovambos must have been nearer than they thought, for before they had covered a quarter of the distance there were shouts behind them, and looking back Frecks saw a number of natives break from the trees they had just left. Some distance beyond them the Junkers was droning as it turned in a circle over—Frecks thought—the glade where Worrals had landed the Kingfisher the previous evening. She saw it go down to land. The natives who had broken cover came on at a run, yelling, brandishing their spears, and spreading out in the form of a crescent, apparently to prevent the refugees from turning to either side. Had they been unencumbered there was a chance that they might have won the race to the far side of the open country, and found a hiding place in the scrub, along which a giraffe and her calf were galloping in alarm; but with a helpless man to carry, it was obvious to everyone that this was not possible. Consequently, there was no argument as to what they should do. No one protested when Ingoona turned aside, making for a low, rocky hill, about a hundred yards away. Reaching it well ahead of their pursuers, they scrambled to the top.

“Here we will fight,” said Ingoona simply.

“This is going to be a nasty business,” muttered Uncle Dick to Frecks. “When the Hereros and the Ovambo fight, they don’t stop while anyone is left alive.”

“That’s cheerful,” returned Frecks. “Well, I suppose we might as well fight as be slaughtered like sheep. I wish to goodness I had my pistol.”

“We’ve one weapon worth speaking of,” resumed Uncle Dick. “That’s the rifle. No doubt Shardwell and Gronk will have rifles, too.”

“They aren’t there,” said Frecks, with surprise in her voice. “At least, I can’t see them.” She was sitting on a rock to get her breath.

“Yes, here they come.” Uncle Dick pointed to the trees in the near distance. “If we only had the Ovambo to deal with, I’d try to reason with them. In fact, I might still try that.” He stood up in a conspicuous place.

Ooma, the witch-doctor, chose this moment to break free. The first thing Frecks knew about it was a shout from the Hereros, and she saw the witch-doctor bounding from rock to rock down the hill with incredible agility. He did not get far. Before Uncle Dick could prevent it—even before Frecks realised the man’s intention—one of the Hereros, the fellow who had first run in to attack the lion, hurled his spear. It was a brilliant example of native skill. It struck Ooma fairly and squarely between the shoulder-blades. Screeching, he fell, and rolled on over and over in a small avalanche of loose rocks.

A yell went up from the Ovambo, who could see all this clearly from the bottom of the hill.

Uncle Dick groaned. “That’s done it.”

The Ovambo started up the hill.

“Have a crack at them with the rifle,” urged Frecks. “Or better still, try to plug that skunk Shardwell. He’s in easy range. I should get some satisfaction out of that.”

“You’re a bellicose young woman,” chided Uncle Dick. “We shall all end up by being hung for murder.”

“I doubt it,” returned Frecks evenly. “It looks to me far more likely that we shall finish on the business end of a spear, like snipe on a skewer.”

The crack of a rifle, and the shrill whine of a ricocheting bullet, made them both duck. Shardwell had fired.

“Okay. He’s started it,” snapped Frecks. “Go ahead.”

The Hereros, without showing the slightest sign of fear, had formed themselves in a small ring round the summit of the hill. With their eyes on the enemy, and their spears ready, they waited. Bill crawled out of his sling, which was resting on the ground, and with some difficulty joined Frecks and Uncle Dick. His eyes were brighter and he looked better altogether.

“What’s going on?” he pleaded. “Am I awake or am I still dreaming? I seem to have been asleep for weeks.”

“You have,” answered Frecks. “I’ve no time to tell you about it now, so please lie here and keep still.” She made Bill lie behind a boulder.

When she got back to Uncle Dick, and looked down the slope of the hill, she gave a little cry of dismay. At least forty Ovambo were clambering up the rocks, and more were coming, urged on by Shardwell and Gronk.

“We haven’t a hope against that mob,” she muttered.

“The Hereros will fight it out, because they’ll be killed, anyway,” said Uncle Dick. “A lot of Ovambo will bite the dust, though, before that happens. They’re in quite a strong position here. Hello, what are those fellows down there doing?”

“Setting fire to the grass,” said Frecks calmly. “They don’t like the idea of scaling this last face of rock with the Hereros prodding at them from above, so they’re going to advance behind the cover of a smoke screen—or else they hope to smoke us out of our position.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” returned Uncle Dick, taking aim at an Ovambo who, by taking advantage of cover afforded by a fissure in the rocks, had got near enough to throw a spear. Uncle Dick’s rifle cracked. The native went over backwards and was seen no more.

Frecks snatched the rifle from Uncle Dick’s hands and let drive at Shardwell, who was standing at the bottom of the hill. But haste and anger spoiled her aim, and to her disgust all she did was kick up the dust near his feet. He fired an answering shot and took cover.

“I’m afraid this is only postponing the end,” murmured Uncle Dick.

“While there’s life there’s hope,” replied Frecks tritely. “I’m only sorry that we inflicted our troubles on these unfortunate Hereros.”

“Don’t worry, they’re enjoying it,” returned Uncle Dick dryly.

There seemed to be good reason for this observation, for the Hereros were now yelling as they fought like madmen, making frequent sorties, and driving the Ovambo back every time they looked like breaking into the defence. Some of them were bleeding from spear-thrusts, but they paid no attention to their wounds. A column of smoke rose high above the battle.

“Hark!” cried Frecks suddenly. “For the love of Mike! There’s a machine coming.”

Above the din could be heard the roar of an aero engine, coming nearer, but for a moment nothing could be seen on account of the smoke.

“It must be Worrals in the Kingfisher!” shouted Frecks. “Trust her to be in at the death.”

“No!” Uncle Dick pointed. “That isn’t the Kingfisher.”

The outline of the aircraft could now be seen. It was not the Kingfisher. In fact, Frecks did not know what it was. “What the dickens!” she

exclaimed.

But Uncle Dick knew. “Jumping jackals!” he cried. “It’s the D.C.’s plane.”

“The what?” demanded Frecks.

“It’s the D.C.”

“Who’s he?”

“The District Commissioner. That’s the machine he uses when he’s in a hurry to get somewhere. He must have been in the district, and seeing the smoke, came along to see what was happening.”

“Does he know you?”

“Oh, yes, quite well.”

“Do the natives know that’s his plane?”

“You bet they do.”

“I thought so,” said Frecks. “Look. The Ovambo are packing up.”

This was true. The appearance of the official aircraft was at first greeted with a sudden hush. Both friend and foe stopped what they were doing to look skyward. Then the Hereros yelled with jubilation, dancing and waving their spears. The Ovambo began to beat a hasty retreat.

“They know they’re in the wrong,” asserted Uncle Dick. “The D.C. wields a stout stick when these chaps get out of hand. They know the punishment for attacking white people. They’re going home—as fast as they can get there.”

“Yes, and there go Shardwell and Gronk,” said Frecks, pointing to where the two men were now running towards the scrub. “They’ve also got good reason for not being discovered in this dogfight.”

The aircraft was now circling the top of the hill, “blipping” its engines, but the occupants could not be seen.

“I should say the D.C. wants to land,” observed Frecks. “He can’t do much good up there, anyhow. If he sees us clearing a runway he’ll know what we’re doing, and stick around until we give him the okay to come down. Let’s get the boys together and make a start.”

XVI

VISIBILITY IMPROVES

TEN minutes' hard work by all hands—except Bill, who sat on the grass—sufficed to clear a runway up to the standard demanded by Frecks. It was plain enough to see, for the small pieces of rock thrown aside formed a conspicuous boundary. While this was being done, the Monospar continued to cruise in circles; Frecks paid little attention to it, aware that the pilot, who must be watching them, would know what they were doing. As soon as she was satisfied, she waved everyone away, and signalled to the aircraft to come in. In a short time it was on the ground. A curious silence fell when the pilot switched off the two motors.

“As you know the D.C., I think you'd better do the explaining,” Frecks told Uncle Dick, as they walked towards the machine.

“I'm afraid that's going to take a bit of doing,” was the reply. “The D.C.—his name is Major Wilson—watches over his Africans like a shepherd over his flock.”

“Just tell him enough to satisfy his curiosity,” said Frecks. “Then ask him to give us a lift to Hansvelt. It isn't far, and no doubt he'll oblige. I don't mind admitting that I'm worried about Worrals. I have a nasty feeling that . . .” She stopped, clutching at Uncle Dick's arm, as the door of the Monospar was pushed open and Worrals stepped out. “Suffering hyenas!” she gasped. “Who said the age of miracles had passed?”

“That's the D.C. with her,” observed Uncle Dick.

Worrals smiled at the expression on Frecks' face when they met. “Okay, take it easy,” she requested. “Things have been happening.”

“You're telling me!” cried Frecks.

“What's happened here? From what I saw in the air I'd say that the Ovambo overtook you.”

“That's just what it looked like from the ground, too,” agreed Frecks sarcastically. “Things were looking pretty dim when you rolled up.”

“Well, everything seems to be all right now,” returned Worrals. “By the way, allow me to introduce you to Major Wilson, the District Commissioner. I see Bill's picked up a bit since I left the party.” While she had been speaking, Worrals had walked quickly to where Bill was watching.

“Hello, Bill! How are you feeling?” she greeted.

“Pretty cheap,” answered Bill. “If somebody doesn’t soon tell me what this is all about I shall go crazy.”

“Sorry, old boy, but we haven’t time for that now,” said Worrals. “When you packed up on the letter writing we decided to waffle out and see how you were getting on. We were deeply moved, as they say, to discover that you had put over a fast one in the vanishing-trick line; so, naturally, we made a reconnaissance to find you.”

“Where was I?”

“At Nakula, a guest of the Ovambo, taking no interest at all in your hosts, due to the fact that a disgusting creature calling himself a witch-doctor was keeping you doped by injecting a soporific into your arm. We’ve just collected you.”

“It wasn’t as easy as all that, believe me,” put in Frecks coldly. “You men go tearing about the world——”

“Never mind the compliments,” interrupted Worrals impatiently. “The sortie isn’t over yet. To start with, I’m under arrest.”

“You’re what?” cried Frecks.

“Under arrest.”

“For what?”

“Nothing serious—just murder, that’s all,” said Worrals smiling.

Frecks’ eyes sauced. “For the love of Mike! Who did you murder?”

“Nobody—yet. But I’m beginning to see red. That hound Gronk shot poor N’swena, after having made a bonfire of the Kingfisher. While I was staggering about slightly dazed, who should roll up but my friend the police inspector from Cape Town, complete with the District Commissioner. They weren’t in these parts by accident, either. They were looking for me—with handcuffs. Naturally, we had a slight difference of opinion over this choice of bracelets and to make a long story short, I took evading action. Borrowing their Monospar, I came looking for you. At this moment, no doubt, the inspector is biting bits off his moustache and spitting them at the landscape. He held me in no high esteem before this episode, but by this time I should say he positively dislikes me. But what could I do? He wouldn’t listen to reason. I couldn’t let him take me down to Cape Town. The D.C. followed me into the aircraft, and got a joy ride he won’t forget in a hurry, I’ll warrant. I took the opportunity of giving him a broad idea of the true situation, with the result that he isn’t quite so peeved as he was. In fact, he’s quite tractable.”

“So what?” queried Frecks.

Worrals shrugged. “Don’t ask me. This whole business is beginning to get me down. As the D.C. represents the law, I suppose we shall have to leave it to him to decide what we do next. I need a bath, a sleep, a meal, and a dip into my compact, before I shall be able to think coherently.”

The D.C. strolled up with Uncle Dick. “I’m very sorry about all this, Ashton,” he said. “Having known you for some time, I was waiting to hear what you had to say before forming an opinion on the I.D.B. business. I had a feeling there was more behind it than appeared on the surface. All the same, I think you should have reported the matter to the authorities before allowing it to get into this state. There’ll be trouble, of course. The deaths of these natives will have to be explained in court. I can’t imagine what came over the Ovambo; I haven’t had any trouble with them for a long time—they’re not a bad lot on the whole. But there, a white man’s influence—the wrong sort of white man—can do infinite harm. But that will have to wait. There’s only one thing we can do, and that’s get back to Hansvelt and make the inspector *au fait* with the facts.”

“Had he listened to me, he could have had them long ago,” put in Worrals bitterly.

“He was sore. No man likes being fooled by a girl.”

“Why a girl, in particular?” demanded Worrals hotly. “Shardwell fooled him—I suppose he didn’t mind being fooled by a man?”

Uncle Dick grinned. The D.C. looked uncomfortable. “There may be something in that,” he admitted.

“What does it matter?” muttered Worrals. “I’m dead on my feet. We’ve got Bill, so far as I’m concerned the inspector can do all the arresting he likes. He can load me with fetters as long as he’ll let me go to sleep. The pity of it is, while he’s yammering, Shardwell and Gronk will get away.”

“Where are they?”

“They bolted when they saw the Monospar lurch up over the tree-tops,” contributed Frecks. “I imagine they knew it was your machine. They went that way.” She pointed. “No doubt they’re pulling out in their Junkers, leaving the wretched Ovambo to hold the dirty end of the stick.”

“We shall have to leave them to the inspector to deal with,” decided the D.C. “I’m only concerned with the natives. Come on, let’s get back.”

“What had we better tell these fellows?” asked Uncle Dick, indicating the Hereros. “We should have been in a nice mess had it not been for them.”

“I’ll tell them to make for Hansvelt, where I will hear what they have to say. They’ve nothing to worry about.” The D.C. spoke to Ingoona, who saluted, military style.

“Can we all get in?” inquired Frecks, as they approached the Monospar.

“Just—it’s a five-seater,” answered Worrals. “As you’re the lightest, you’d better get in the little seat at the back. The D.C. can sit in front with me. Uncle Dick, you and Bill will have to take the two seats behind us. We haven’t far to go. Take a good look at the inspector’s face when he sees me; it ought to be worth watching.”

Very soon the machine was again in the air, heading back for Hansvelt, a trip that occupied only a few minutes. Looking down, Worrals smiled faintly when she saw the inspector, and the pilot, standing on the landing ground with their hands in their pockets, two lonely, disconsolate figures.

“I’m afraid he’s going to be very, very angry,” said Worrals demurely to the D.C. “If he wouldn’t listen to me before, he certainly won’t listen now, so I think I’d better leave the talking to you. Tell him to keep a grip on himself till he’s heard what you have to say.”

She was right about the inspector being angry. His face was scarlet, and his manner menacing; for a moment, as she stepped out, she thought he was going to strike her.

The D.C. walked forward quickly, holding up a hand. “Take it easy, Inspector,” he requested. “This is a bigger business than you suppose. Things will buzz when the story hits Cape Town. If ever it gets out that this girl fooled you in your own office, your life won’t be worth living. If you handle her right, she might forget that part when she gives evidence.” The D.C. winked at Worrals. “If you take my advice, you’ll listen to what she has to say,” he resumed, addressing the inspector. “I’ve heard the story, and while I won’t go so far as to say she was justified in what she did, a lot of people may think so. Had I been in her place, I should have done the same thing.”

The inspector appeared to swallow something in his throat. “All right,” he said gruffly. “Make it snappy.”

“Don’t worry; I’m in as big a hurry as you are,” retorted Worrals. “What I’m going to tell you is what I tried to tell you just now. Put your pride in your pocket and listen. These, briefly, are the facts, and there are plenty of witnesses to confirm them. If, after I’ve finished, you are still in doubt, you’ll find plenty of convincing evidence at Nakula, including a stolen aeroplane.”

Standing in the shade of the fuselage, Worrals gave a concise account of the events that had occurred since her arrival, sticking to facts, and leaving surmise to the inspector, whose face was a picture. So, for that matter, was Bill's. "That's just the bare outline," concluded Worrals. "Now you know how things stand at the moment. I owe you an apology on two counts; first, for misleading you at Cape Town, and secondly, for snatching your machine. But lives were at stake and the position was desperate, as I am sure you will admit when you've had time to consider the thing carefully. I should have been only too happy to tell you this when you landed here, but you wouldn't listen, so I had no alternative but to resist arrest. I'm sorry things happened the way they did. Now, if you wish, you can pop me in jail, but for pity's sake, see that there's a bed in my cell, because I'm dead beat." Smiling, Worrals held out her wrists.

"Okay—okay—don't rub it in," growled the inspector. He looked round the circle. "You must all think I'm a fool," he said bitterly. "All I can say is, I'm a practical man, and if I listened to every story people want to tell me I should go out of my mind. I reckon you'll agree that the tale we've just heard sounds more like fiction than fact. But there it is. I accept your apology, Miss Worrals, and apologise in turn for being over hasty and jumping to conclusions. But no man likes being fooled by a woman."

"We'd better keep off the subject of sex equality or we're liable to start scrapping again," suggested Worrals.

The inspector laughed and held out his hand. "No hard feelings, I hope?"

"None, as far as I'm concerned," replied Worrals, taking the hand.

"Good," said the inspector. "That's that. Now let's get down to brass tacks. What do you want to do?"

"Sleep, mostly, and eat a little, but I've got an invalid on my hands," returned Worrals. "He ought to be taken without delay to Cape Town for proper food and treatment."

"If I take him straight to Cape Town, Shardwell will get clean away," the inspector pointed out. "He must know that the game's up."

"An hour of two, more or less, won't matter, as far as we're concerned," asserted Worrals.

"What I suggest is, then, that I leave you here while I try to locate these crooks. Later on, I'll come back and give you a lift to Magube, for a start, anyway. By that time we shall know if Shardwell has left the district. Do you think we've got any hope of catching him?"

"I think you've got a very good chance," declared Worrals.

"What makes you say that?"

“It seems reasonable that Shardwell and Gronk will make for foreign territory, to escape arrest,” explained Worrals. “It’s ten to one they’ll head for Portuguese East Africa, but before they start on that trip they’ll want to fill up with petrol. There’s only one place here where they can get it, and that’s Impala. If we started right away we ought to be there pretty well as soon as they are.”

“What do you mean by ‘we’?”

Worrals smiled. “Having gone so far, I’d like to see the thing through.”

“Well, I can hardly deny you that satisfaction,” agreed the inspector. “But I’m afraid Shardwell will beat us to Impala. He only needs a few minutes’ start to give us the slip.”

“It may not matter if he does get a start,” said Worrals casually.

“What do you mean by that?”

“He won’t get far.”

“How do you know?”

Worrals shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

“I don’t believe in hunches.”

“I’ve heard men say that before,” answered Worrals sweetly. “Maybe you’ll believe in mine, when you see how good they are. Suppose we get cracking?”

“We can’t all get in,” said the Monospar pilot, who had been a silent witness of all this.

“I shouldn’t go, anyway,” remarked the D.C. “My job is with the natives. This rascal Wongorobo must be picked up. He’s a bad hat. I’ll walk along to Nakula.”

“Is it safe for you to go there?” queried Frecks.

“Quite. They won’t dare to try any tricks with me. They’ll be as docile as tame rabbits, and looking as innocent, I’ll bet, by the time I get there.”

“Bill will have to remain here,” decided Worrals. “Frecks, I think you and Uncle Dick had better wait with him.”

“Suits me,” agreed Frecks. “I’m just about all in.”

“That leaves only the inspector and me, although I expect the pilot will insist on flying his own kite.” Worrals looked at him. “I don’t think I caught your name?”

The pilot grinned. “My pals call me Joe.”

“Okay, Joe. The Monospar’s your bird, so you fly her. It’ll be a change for me to have someone else do the work. Give her all the throttle she’ll

take, because we're in a hurry. The target is Impala. Let's go."

"I shall have to pick up some petrol there myself," said Joe.

"You'd better have me with you when you're doing it," Worrals told him with a curious smile.

"Why?" demanded Joe.

"You'll see," murmured Worrals. "Go ahead."

XVII

DEATH STRIKES AT IMPALA

WORRALS slept most of the way to Impala. She was awakened by the inspector nudging her.

“Look!” he cried. “We’re just too late—missed ’em by five minutes. Confound it!”

Worrals looked down and saw that there was reason for the inspector’s irritation. The Junkers was there, but it was taxiing away from the far side of the landing ground where the petrol had been hidden, obviously getting into position to take off. Even while they watched, the machine swung round, tearing up the ground with its tail-skid, and then sped across the tawny grass, flinging dust high into the air behind it.

“There they go,” muttered the inspector bitterly. To the pilot he said! “Is there anything we can do to stop ’em?”

“No,” replied Joe, flatly. “We’ve no guns, even if we felt justified in using them. A pistol is no more use than a pea-shooter. I’ve got to go down for juice, anyway; as it is, my gauge is too low for my peace of mind—over country like this.”

“How long will it take us to refuel?”

“Twenty minutes.”

The inspector snorted. “By that time they’ll be well clear. They’re heading east, so it looks as if they’re making for Portuguese territory.”

“And with full tanks they’ll make it,” asserted Joe, in a resigned voice.

“I don’t normally bet,” put in Worrals, “but I’d risk a small wager that they don’t get far. In fact, I’m surprised they’ve got as far as they have. They must be running on the gravity tank, or the petrol that was in the leads. When they switch over to the main tank——”

“What the deuce are you talking about?” broke in Joe.

“Keep going, and we’ll see what sort of prophet I am,” returned Worrals blandly. “You’ve got enough petrol to run on for a mile or two. Ah-huh!”

The concluding exclamation was induced by the behaviour of the Junkers, which was apparent to them all. It was no longer climbing, but side-

slipping in what was obviously a desperate attempt to get down before passing over the edge of the landing ground to the broken country beyond.

“My God!” cried Joe sharply. “What are they up to?”

“Trying to get down,” replied Worrals evenly.

“I can see that,” snapped Joe. “But why?”

“You’re a pilot. You should know why people try to get down in a hurry.”

“You mean—they’re in trouble?”

“Can you think of any other reason?”

“They’ll never do it,” declared Joe.

“I think you’re right,” agreed Worrals. “You may as well go down yourself. The chase is over. Am I a prophet?”

The inspector looked at Worrals curiously. “No. You’re no prophet. You *knew* something like this was going to happen.”

“I had an idea,” admitted Worrals.

“Why?”

“Remember what I said about hunches? Ah!” Worrals drew in her breath sharply. “The fools!” she cried. “Gronk must be crazy.” Her face had lost some of its colour.

“How many times have I seen that happen,” muttered Joe sadly. “There he goes. *Wow!* He’s bought it. Holy hippos! What a mess.”

The pilot of the Junkers had failed to get in. At the finish, to the professionals in the pursuing machine it was clear that he had lost his head. Seeing that he would fail to clear the trees that lay across his path, rather than risk collision with them, he had succumbed to a temptation that has probably brought disaster to more pilots than any other single cause. With a failing engine he had turned back to the aerodrome—a fatal thing to do, although in such circumstances the temptation is almost irresistible.

The Junkers lost flying speed. At a height of about a hundred feet, for a moment it hung in the air, wobbling like a bird with an injured wing; then its nose swung down in a vicious stall and it struck the earth with a crash that could be heard above the whine of the gliding Monospar. Splinters and fabric flew. A pillar of dust shot skyward.

“Well, he did it,” murmured Joe philosophically.

He glided down and landed not far from the stricken aircraft. As soon as the Monospar had finished its run, he jumped out. “You’d better stay here,” he told Worrals curtly. “This isn’t going to be pretty to look at. Come on, Inspector.” The two men ran to the crash.

Worrals sat still. She had no desire to see at close range the tragedy for which she had been responsible. Not that she had intended it to be like that. When she had filled the empty petrol cans with water her motive had been simply to immobilise the Junkers. In theory, it should not have got off the ground. Even now, she suspected that in the ordinary way it would not have done so. Normally, a pilot runs up his motor and then taxis slowly to a good position before taking off. Had Gronk done that, the water would have made its presence felt before the machine was off the ground. But he had not done that. Seeing the Monospar approaching, in his haste to get off he had rushed straight into the air without the customary preliminaries. Bad pilotage had caused the crash. When his engine had cut out, Gronk still had a good chance of getting down—at any rate, without serious injury to himself and his passenger, although the machine would have been damaged. He should have glided straight on and risked the consequences. Had he collided with the trees the wings might have been stripped off, but they would have absorbed most of the shock. Instead, he had made the fatal blunder of turning back. From the way the Junkers had gone into the ground, Worrals felt that there was little hope for the occupants—a view that was confirmed when she saw Joe and the inspector lift the bodies out and lay them on the ground; they did not return to the Monospar for the first-aid outfit, as they would have done had not the men been past help.

Worrals could only watch from a distance while the inspector knelt beside the bodies, taking the things from their pockets. Joe stood beside him, looking down. There was a brief discussion. Then the inspector made a little bundle in a handkerchief and the two men walked back to the Monospar.

“They’re dead,” the inspector told Worrals curtly.

“Funny the machine didn’t take fire,” said Joe.

“There was a reason for that,” remarked Worrals.

The inspector looked up. “What was it?”

“Brine doesn’t burn,” answered Worrals. “You may as well know the truth. The stuff in the tank was salt water, not petrol—or some of it was.”

The inspector stared. “Holy smoke! Did you put it in?”

“No. They put it in themselves. Admittedly, they thought it was petrol, no doubt.” Quite calmly, she told the inspector of the substitution of brine for petrol in the cans, and the reason why she had done it. “This was really a battle of petrol,” she said. “I ask you to remember that Shardwell tried to leave me stranded here without any petrol at all, so I think I was justified in retaliating—playing his own game, so to speak. Gronk’s haste to get off was

their undoing. Had he run his engine up it would have choked before leaving the ground.”

“That’s true enough,” put in Joe.

The inspector mopped his brow with a large handkerchief, for the heat was intense. “This is about the limit,” he said wearily. “I came here to pick up a girl, and find myself in the middle of a war, with casualties littering the landscape. I don’t know what to think, and that’s a fact. Well, Miss Worrals, it isn’t for me to say whether you were right or wrong; that’ll be for the jury to decide at the inquest. The question is, what do we do next?”

“I think before we do anything else we’d better go over to the petrol dump and make sure that there is no brine left in any of the cans, in case some perfectly innocent party comes along and tries to run an internal combustion engine on salt water.”

The inspector nodded. “Okay. Give me a hand, Joe, to get these bodies in the resthouse for the time being. Then I suppose we must go back and pick up young Bill Ashton, collect the evidence, and push along to Cape Town. This affair is going to cause a sensation.”

Another shock awaited them at the petrol dump. They were greeted by a reek of spirit. Cans lay about as if they had been thrown down in haste. In every case the cap had been removed.

“Well, well,” said the inspector, scratching his head. “That’s what they were up to. They were going to make sure we didn’t get any petrol to follow them. Not a bad idea, either, if they hadn’t crashed.”

“It wasn’t a bad idea, anyway,” said Joe, bitterly. “Don’t you realise what this means, Inspector? Our tanks are dry. We’re stranded.”

The inspector started. He swore softly. “Of course we are. Now we’re in a nice mess.” He glanced at Worrals. “I reckon even you haven’t got an answer for this one, Miss Worrals?”

“As it happens, I have,” corrected Worrals smoothly. “Quite early in the affair, I took the precaution of establishing a little private petrol dump against such an emergency as this.”

The inspector shook his head and looked at Joe helplessly. “Did you ever know such a gel? It ain’t natural. We’d better start a women’s section in the Force.”

Worrals laughed. “Coming from you, I take that as a top-sized compliment. Let’s go and fetch the petrol.”

This was done, after which Joe and the inspector carried the casualties to the resthouse and locked the door. Worrals showed the inspector the grave

from which Mahomet's body had been exhumed.

"Wongorobo took Mahomet's rifle," she informed him. "Mr. Dick Ashton has the bullet we found here. It's a soft-nosed Rimmington. I think you'll find it fits Shardwell's rifle. From that you can draw your own conclusions. With one thing and another, you should have enough evidence to furnish the jury with a clear case against Shardwell and Gronk."

"I reckon those two fellows must have wanted the Magube concession pretty badly to go as far as they did," averred the inspector, as they walked back to the machine.

Then, with one accord, they all pulled up short, staring at the sky, as from the south came the hum of an aircraft.

"Holy smoke!" cried the inspector. "*Now* what's coming? Anybody would think this place was a terminal airport; it gets more traffic than Cape Town."

"Looks like a Rapide," murmured Worrals, shading her eyes to get a better view of the machine, which was obviously making for Impala.

"Got any idea who's in it?" queried the inspector sternly, looking hard at Worrals.

"Not the remotest. Why ask me?"

The inspector snorted. "I asked you because you seem to know the answer to most things."

"You've got me guessing this time," admitted Worrals. "I don't think it can be anything to do with our affair."

Here she was wrong. The Rapide roared over the landing ground, circled, and then came in. It taxied to the resthouse. A man in white ducks alighted. Worrals recognised him. "Gosh! He's arrived at what you might call the crucial moment," she muttered. "That's Dayne, the financier who was behind Shardwell and Gronk."

"So I see," replied the Inspector.

"You know him?"

"Everyone in Cape Town knows him. He's one of the biggest men in the city."

Dayne strode up. He looked annoyed, harassed, and not a little surprised. "Hello, Inspector," he greeted. "What the devil's going on here?"

"Are you asking me?" queried the inspector.

"Yes."

"Do you mean to say you don't know?"

“Know? Me? Why should I?”

“Well, you should, if anyone does,” muttered the inspector.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” declared Dayne. “Have you seen anything of Shardwell? He flies in a Junkers with a fellow named Gronk.”

“You mean he *did*.”

Dayne stared. “What are you getting at?”

“Shardwell and Gronk have finished flying—unless they’ve sprouted wings of their own,” stated the inspector. “They crashed and were both killed on this aerodrome half an hour ago. That’s what’s left of their machine.” He pointed to the remains of the Junkers.

Dayne looked shocked. “I always did say this flying was a dangerous game. It was against my better judgment that I chartered this plane at Cape Town to bring me up here to find out what was going on.”

“You came here specially to see Shardwell?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“To find out what he was doing. He’s on my payroll, you know, and _____”

“Before you go any further, Mr. Dayne,” broke in the inspector, “it is my duty to warn you that Shardwell has been engaged in crooked business—nothing short of murder. So be careful what you say.”

Dayne looked startled, as well he might. “I know nothing of it,” he said sharply.

“This is neither the time nor place to discuss that, Mr. Dayne,” said the inspector.

“Rumours in Keetmannshoop brought me here,” declared Dayne. “I thought Shardwell’s behaviour was strange the last time I saw him. What’s all this talk of I.D.B.?”

“That’s only a side issue—now,” averred the inspector.

“I ask you to believe that Shardwell was employed by me simply in the capacity of a mining engineer, and as an agent.”

“You were interested in the Ashton property?”

“Yes. Shardwell had authority to buy it—if he could get it.”

“Nothing wrong with that, Mr. Dayne. It was the way he tried to get it that is going to cause the stink. I shall have to ask you to come with me.”

“Certainly. Where are you going? To Cape Town, I suppose?”

“No. To Hansvelt first, to pick up a sick man, then to Magube Drift. You can go straight to Magube and wait for us.”

“You’ll find Mr. Mackintosh there,” put in Worrals. “You might tell him to tear open some tins of bully. He’s going to have quite a party—and some of us are hungry.”

“Magube Drift?” exclaimed Dayne. “That’s Ashton’s place.”

The inspector nodded. “That’s right. You’ll see Ashton yourself presently. I fancy you’re going to get some shocks.”

“If there was trouble, why didn’t someone tell me about it?”

“I wish I had,” murmured Worrals sadly.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because,” answered Worrals frankly, “I felt sure that as Shardwell was in your employ, you were the head crook and claim-jumper. I apologise. We all make mistakes.”

“Yeah,” muttered the inspector softly, with a sidelong glance at Worrals. “We all make mistakes.” Then, to Dayne, “Your pilot can fly you in your machine. We shall probably need it to take the crowd to Cape Town. Let’s get along.”

XVIII

VISIBILITY CLEAR

SOME three hours later the entire party assembled in the shanty at Magube Drift, much to the embarrassment of Andrew Mackintosh, who remarked from time to time that the hut had been built for two, not nine—more white people than had ever been seen at Magube at one time. The little crowd comprised, Worrals and Frecks, Bill, the inspector and his pilot, Joe, Dayne and the pilot of the Rapide (who seemed slightly bewildered by all this), Uncle Dick and Andrew. The District Commissioner was still away at Nakula. Bill had shaved; he still looked ill, but was able to sit up and take an interest, and it was clear that he only needed food and rest to put him properly on his feet again. Worrals had told him during the run from Hansvelt to Magube how she and Frecks came to be there.

While food was being prepared, the inspector sat alone near the door going through Shardwell's papers; he did not comment, but occasionally made an entry in his notebook. Some time was occupied with a meal that was long overdue. In fact, it did not end until Andrew informed the company that stores had given out and there was nothing more to eat.

"In that case, we may as well get down to business," said the inspector. "I want to get back to Cape Town to-night, but before I start I'd like to get things in line. There are still one or two points I'm not clear about. It's my duty to warn anybody who cares to make a statement, that it may be used as evidence. Who's going to start?"

"I think I'd better," said Bill. "It won't take me long to say my piece because it concerns only the beginning."

The inspector, notebook on knee, nodded. "Go ahead," he invited.

"You know, of course, that Richard Ashton is my uncle, and that the Magube concession belongs to him and Andrew Mackintosh, in partnership," began Bill. "Having learned something of their transport difficulties, when the war looked like ending, thinking my flying experience might be useful, I got in touch with them, with the result that it was arranged I should bring a plane out. I arrived at an opportune moment because the native porters had gone on strike—this, as we know now, at the instigation of Shardwell."

The rest of the story was much as Worrals had surmised. There had been trouble right away with Shardwell and Gronk at Impala on the question of petrol, and the use of the landing ground. Shardwell had tried to put over the same story with which he had greeted Worrals and Frecks—that the landing ground was his private property. Doubting this, Bill had made a trip to Cape Town and quickly ascertained that the claim was untrue. It was during this visit to the Cape that he had written his first, and last, letter to Worrals. He admitted that he expected more trouble with Shardwell and Gronk, and for this very reason avoided making any references to the men in his letter. He thought he would be able to handle the situation; in any case, he did not want to hint at possible failure so early in the enterprise, but, nevertheless, prepared for this contingency by enlarging on the natural difficulties of air operations over such country as the Kalahari Desert.

“That’s where you overdid it,” put in Worrals softly.

“Lucky for me I did,” said Bill dolefully.

Resuming his narrative, he said that apparently Shardwell learned, or guessed, that he had been to Cape Town, for later he found them waiting for him at Impala. Wongorobo was with them, but Mahomet was no longer there. Still, he had no reason to suppose that Shardwell would use force to prevent him from getting through to Magube. There had been words when he discovered that the petrol had disappeared. He accused Shardwell of taking it. Words ended in blows. All of them, Shardwell, Gronk, and Wongorobo, had set on him, declared Bill. That was all he remembered. Presumably he had been knocked down unconscious. When he recovered he was in a native hut, he did not know where. He never did know, for after that he had been kept in a state of coma by a witch-doctor. He lost all count of time. He had a vague recollection of eating once in a while at the bidding of the witch-doctor, but the whole thing was in the nature of a nightmare. That was all. Not until he was enlightened by the others did he know where he had been, or what had happened to him.

Worrals now took up the story, saying why she had come, and narrating the events from the time of her first encounter with Shardwell and Gronk at Impala. Frecks corroborated her statement, as did Uncle Dick, as far as he was concerned. Both had seen the trip-wire at Impala, which might have killed them all.

The inspector turned to Dayne. “What have you to say about all this?”

“I think I can fill in the gaps,” was the quiet answer. “Let me say at once that this is all news to me. I’m shocked by the whole thing, and angry, because I’m partly to blame, for letting Shardwell have so much rope. He

first came to me about three years ago, and I must say that as a mining engineer he knew his job. I took him on as my agent, his work being to keep an eye open for likely properties, either for sale, or in need of money for development. Before bringing a property to me it was his job to satisfy himself that it was, or could be made, a paying concern. He brought several deals to a successful conclusion, although in the light of what I've just heard I'm beginning to wonder if his methods were what I imagined them to be. It was he who brought Magube Drift to my notice. He told me—this was some time ago—that he had been up to the property, but finding no one there had had a look round.”

“Did he say he found anything?” queried the inspector.

“I don't think he found anything to shout about,” replied Dayne. “What he told me was, he thought it looked like a promising site, and worth buying. I told him to go ahead. He then made an unusual proposal. He said that he was tired of working for a fixed salary; he would rather work on commission, or have a financial interest in any undertakings he acquired for me. That was, shall we say, irregular; but because he was a hard worker, I agreed. As far as Magube was concerned he had given me no indication that it was anything unusual. Even now, as far as I know, there is nothing startling about it. Well, that's about all. He went to work, and I only saw him occasionally. He flew regularly, providing his own transport. Gronk was the pilot. A short time ago, though, I learned by accident that Shardwell's record would not bear close inspection. There were whispers about I.D.B., but it was hard to get the facts. As there is a law of slander, people are careful what they say. Maybe I should have gone to the police and asked them to put me wise. I'm too well known in South Africa, and my business enterprises are too important, for me to risk having a questionable character on my staff. As soon as I could get away, I ran up to Keetmanshoop in my car and had a word with Shardwell personally—I knew he was there. He convinced me that there was nothing to worry about, so I went back to Cape Town. Then came this rumour of a girl, flying her own plane, being mixed up in I.D.B., and Shardwell's name was mentioned in connection with it. I chartered a plane and came up, determined to get to the bottom of it. I thought I'd have a word with Ashton and Mackintosh at the same time to see how negotiations in connection with the concession were getting on. That's all. Not finding Shardwell at Keetmanshoop, I came on, expecting to find him here. I stopped at Impala for petrol—and found more than I bargained for. I can only say I'm sorry about the whole thing. Shardwell was my agent, so, naturally, I can't do less than offer to recompense you all for the financial loss you have incurred.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Dayne, but do you realise what that will cost you?” put in Worrals. “There are two aeroplanes, to start with, and planes are expensive vehicles.”

“Don’t worry about that,” returned Dayne promptly. “I’m not short of money, and a man doesn’t build up a big business by dodging his debts. What I owe, I pay, and I take full responsibility for liabilities incurred by those I employ. You tell me what this affair has cost you altogether and I’ll settle the account, with a bonus to cover your time and trouble.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dayne; that’s handsome of you. I happen to know that Bill sank all his capital in this venture, so it’s only fair and right that he should be compensated for his loss. As far as I’m concerned—and I’m speaking for my friend—another aircraft to replace the one we’ve lost will square things up.”

Dayne turned to Bill. “Do you still intend to go on with this transport business?”

“Since you’ve been good enough to say you’ll set us right, yes,” answered Bill.

“I shall be happy to fix you up with anything you need.” Dayne turned to Uncle Dick and Andrew. “And if you want financial backing to develop your property here, I hope you’ll come to me.”

The inspector pushed in to the conversation. “Before either side commits itself, I reckon there’s something you should all know. Shardwell knew what apparently none of you knew. He even double-crossed you Mr. Dayne. There’s a reef here that’s fairly rotten with gold.”

This statement caused a sensation.

“I knew it!” cried Uncle Dick. “I knew it was here!”

“But you didn’t find it,” put in the inspector shrewdly. “Shardwell did—no doubt the time he came up here when you were away.”

“That man had a nose for gold,” declared Dayne. “If what you say is true, Inspector, it explains everything. Although he was supposed to be working for me, Shardwell was concerned chiefly with feathering his own nest.”

“It’s true all right,” said the inspector, offering some documents. “Take a look at these. Here’s the assayer’s report on samples taken from this property, and a plan showing the lie of the reef. Shardwell knew what he was up to when he muscled in on a profit-sharing basis. Even a small share would have put a fortune in his pocket.”

“I suspected something of the sort,” murmured Worrals. “In fact, I told him so. A man doesn’t commit murder on mere speculation. He knew he was on a winner if he could get hold of the concession. After all, what other reason could make him so crazy to get it?”

Uncle Dick looked up from the report which he had read. His face had turned pale. “This is staggering,” he asserted. He looked at Andrew. “We’ve struck it rich, partner.”

“Yes, it’s big business,” agreed Dayne. “Have either of you got any money?”

“Er—no,” admitted Uncle Dick.

“You’ll need a bit, to handle this thing the way it should be handled. A rich reef doesn’t mean that you can dig gold out like dirt. Why not let me in on it? We’ll form a private company, cutting four ways. You two can control the concession. I’ll put up the money. Bill can organise and run the transport—and believe me, that’ll give him plenty to do. There’s no need to decide now. Think it over. I must get back to Cape Town.”

“So must I,” said the inspector. “I think everybody had better come.” He looked at Worrals, his eyes twinkling. “I should like you where I can keep an eye on you.” Then he became serious. “There’ll be an inquest, of course, and a government inquiry. You’ll have to give evidence. While these things are going on you’ll be able to have a nice holiday in the sunshine. It’s mid-winter in England, don’t forget.”

“That suits me fine,” agreed Frecks. “I’ve seen all I want of the Kalahari. Besides, I like my animals in cages.”

“What about the D.C.?” asked Worrals.

“We needn’t worry about him,” answered the inspector. “He’ll handle things his own way. If everyone’s ready, we’ll get along.”

The subsequent court of inquiry at Cape Town provided the newspapers with headlines for a few days and was then quietly forgotten. Worrals was exonerated from blame in connection with the deaths of Shardwell and Gronk, which, with undoubted truth, but with a grim twist of humour that amused Worrals not a little, was ascribed to “an error of judgment on the part of the pilot.” Wongorobo, who recovered, was brought in by the D.C. and for his ill-advised behaviour was sentenced to a long term of penal servitude. The charge of murder, the murder of Mahomet, could not be proved, as Wongorobo pleaded that the fatal blow had been struck by Shardwell, although he admitted that his spear had been the weapon used. This may have been true; anyway, he was given the benefit of the doubt, and

so escaped capital punishment. The Ovambos were fined for their part in the affair. They, of course, laid the blame on Ooma who, being dead, could not dispute it. On the other side of the picture, Ingoona was warmly complimented by the judge for his loyalty, and returned to his tribe laden with presents for the Hereros who had taken part in the rescue. These were provided by Mr. Dayne, whose plea of ignorance of the methods employed by his agent was accepted. His long record in South Africa was one of fair and honest dealing, so this was not to be doubted.

In other respects, he was as good as his word, the whole party being accommodated, and entertained in regal style, at his magnificent estate overlooking the famous Table Bay. In the hands of competent doctors, Bill's recovery was swift and complete. A cluster of scars remained on his arm to remind him of his sinister adventure.

As soon as the inquiry was over, the formation of the Magube Drift Mining Corporation was put in hand, with Dayne, Uncle Dick, Andrew Mackintosh and Bill, as directors; and what had been an enjoyable holiday all too soon came to an end. Worrals and Frecks were invited to choose an aircraft to replace the lost Kingfisher, and decided to return to England to look over the new models before making their choice. Places were booked for them with British Overseas Airways. Bill, who had been busy organising the air transport system of the new company, expressed disappointment at this arrangement, and hinted that he could think of a much better one—at least, as far as Worrals was concerned.

“Ah-huh,” sighed Frecks. “Here we go again.”

Worrals soon set her fears at rest.

“You've got plenty to do without getting involved in housekeeping complications,” she told Bill. “One thing at a time is an old, but sound policy. Besides, as traffic manager you'll have to live at Magube, and, frankly, I've seen enough of that sun-smitten wilderness to last me a lifetime. When I settle down it will be where the grass grows green——”

“And the lions live behind bars,” murmured Frecks.

“You get on with your gold-digging, Bill,” concluded Worrals. “When you've got things going, and the tin shanty at Magube is replaced with accommodation slightly less primitive—well, maybe Frecks and I will waffle along and spend our holidays with you. But don't get lost again, because as a pastime, looking for a lost plane in Africa is altogether too strenuous for my delicate constitution.”

Bill smiled wanly. “Okay, kid, maybe you're right,” he agreed.

“Of course I’m right,” returned Worrals, taking his arm. “We always are, aren’t we, Frecks? And don’t call me kid. Come on, let’s go and collect Uncle Dick for lunch.”

“Now you’re talking,” agreed Frecks enthusiastically. “This South African air certainly does give one an appetite.”

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 and avoid plot-spoiling.

[The end of *Worrals in the Wilds--The First Post-war Worrals Story* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]