



# *Worrals Down Under*

by **W.E. JOHNS**

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“This place ain’t fit for girls,” he stated emphatically.

# WORRALS DOWN UNDER

*by*  
W. E. JOHNS



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*First Published 1948*

*To*

*Captain Duncan MacNiven, to whom I am  
indebted for many of the details of the events  
narrated in the following pages, this story is  
respectfully dedicated.*

*W.E.J.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

## *A Chance Encounter*

“**I** ALWAYS KNEW I should like Australia, and I was right. Of all the cities I’ve seen Sydney is the tops. It suits me fine.” Betty Lovell, more often known to her friends as “Frecks”, made the statement as one who speaks without fear of contradiction.

Her companion, Joan Worrals, one-time squadron-officer of the W.A.A.F., did not answer at once. She was looking across the street at a slim, neatly-dressed, fair-haired girl who was walking briskly along the opposite pavement.

“I say, Frecks,” she said suddenly, “isn’t that Janet Marlow over there—you remember, the girl who got the George Cross for keeping the station ’phones going that night at Hendon when we were blitzed? She was a flight officer, if my memory serves me correctly.”

Frecks’s eyes followed the direction indicated. “Good gracious! Yes, that’s Janet,” she confirmed without hesitation. “She looks different out of uniform, but I’m sure it’s Janet. I remember her saying something to me one day about going to Australia when the war was over.”

“Let’s have a word with her,” suggested Worrals, starting in pursuit.

After a few minutes’ sharp walking the subject of this conversation stopped and turned as a hand fell on her arm.

“Hallo, Janet!” greeted Frecks. “You remember me—Frecks Lovell? And Worrals? We were at Hendon with you that night Jerry came over and pranged the station good and proper—the night you did the show that put your photo in the papers.”

Janet smiled a smile of pleasure as well as of recognition. “Of course I remember you—particularly as the newspapers splashed *your* names more than once. What on earth are you doing in Australia?”

“What are *you* doing here, if it comes to that?” asked Worrals slowly, her eyes making a thoughtful reconnaissance of her war-time comrade. “You know, Janet, you aren’t looking too fit,” she went on frankly. “But why are

we standing here? I think the occasion demands a minor celebration. How about a cup of tea?"

Janet hesitated. "Thanks very much, Worrals, but—er—as a matter of fact I'm in a bit of a hurry just now. I shall have to be getting along."

Worrals's hand closed firmly over her arm. "Oh, no you don't," she said softly. "You can't get away with that. Who are you trying to kid? You're coming with us for a cup of tea and a bite of something to eat. How long is it since you had a square meal, anyway?"

Tears came to Janet's eyes. She did not answer.

"All right—hold it," said Worrals shortly. "Let's go somewhere and talk. Where's the best place?"

"What about Prince's?"

"Fine. Let's go." Holding Janet's arm, Worrals started off.

"As a matter of fact, I have been a bit browned-off lately," admitted Janet as they crossed the street.

"You needn't tell us," answered Worrals. "You're not browned-off. You're half-starved, my lady—that's what's wrong with you. Forgive me for being blunt, but that happens to be my unfortunate nature. Somehow I get along, though. Here we are."

In five minutes they were in the restaurant, comfortably settled at a small table with a fairly substantial meal being served.

"What brought you to Australia?" Janet asked Worrals, who was pouring tea.

"I can satisfy your curiosity in a couple of sentences," replied Worrals. "Frecks and I had an idea that we'd like to run our own airline: nothing very ambitious, you know; just a nice little private concern to keep us out of mischief. England was no use—the big companies have grabbed every run likely to show a profit; so we decided to have a look round the Empire to see what it had to offer. To make a long story short, finally we drifted here and, while we have nothing settled, I must say it's the most promising territory we've struck so far. We like the country and the people, which is the main thing, and there are possibilities for those who, like us, have a little capital and don't mind hard work. That's all."

"Did you bring a machine out?" asked Janet.

"No. We found air touring a bit too expensive," returned Worrals. "There are plenty of good second-hand machines available should we find ourselves in need of equipment."

Frecks looked at Janet. "How about you?" she prompted.



“And we’ll have the truth, if you don’t mind,” requested Worrals softly, as she refilled the cups.

“Oh, I don’t know. Mine’s a long story,” said Janet wearily.

“So what?” demanded Frecks. “We’ve got all day, haven’t we? Spill it. It’ll do you good to get it off your chest. We’re sympathetic listeners—aren’t we, Worrals?”

“Definitely,” agreed Worrals, smiling.

Janet shrugged. “I don’t see why I should worry you——”

“You’ll worry us far more by holding out on us,” broke in Worrals. “Go ahead. Take your time.”

Janet thought for a minute or two. “All right,” she agreed, “but don’t think I’m looking for help, or anything like that.”

“Fiddlesticks!” snapped Worrals. “Don’t be so dashed independent. If you’re going to beat about the bush, we shan’t get anywhere. Let’s get down to brass tacks. You’re broke, aren’t you?”

Again tears welled to Janet’s eyes. She nodded.

“You must have had a tough time,” murmured Worrals sympathetically. “All the same, you can’t go on like this. With G.C. tacked on to your name, you’ve got a reputation to live up to, you know. How did it happen?”

“I’ll tell you all about it,” decided Janet. “It’ll take some time.”

“No matter.”

“I’ll start at the beginning.”

“That’s always a good place to start,” agreed Worrals.

“It’s a year since I came to Australia,” began Janet. “I had a good reason for coming out—or I thought I had. But things didn’t work out as I anticipated—far from it.”

Worrals nodded. “That’s quite a common state of affairs.”

“I hadn’t much spare cash when I landed,” Janet went on. “It dwindled and dwindled, and finally gave out, except for a shilling or two, about a month ago. For the last week I have managed on a cup of tea and bun per day. I tried to find work, of course, but all I found was a lot of other girls looking for the same thing. You see, I’ve no real qualifications for a peacetime job. When you spoke to me I was on my way to cash in on my last available asset. I’d clung to it as long as possible, for sentimental reasons, but it was sell or starve.”

“What is this asset?” asked Worrals.

Janet opened her handbag and laid on the table an object about the size, and roughly the shape, of a hen's egg. It was black, but in its heart there glowed and flashed like living fire all the colours of the rainbow.

Worrals was visibly moved by the sheer beauty of the thing, Frecks, more demonstrative, caught her breath sharply and cried: "What a glorious stone!—or is it a stone? What is it, Janet?"

"Opal," answered Janet quietly. "Black opal. The finest opal in the world is found in Australia," she explained. "This, I am assured, is something exceptionally fine, even for Australia."

"Where did it come from?" asked Frecks.

"That," replied Janet, "is what I'd like to know."

"How did you get it?" asked Worrals.

"That's the story I'm going to tell you, because, in a way, this is what brought me to Australia," said Janet. "The tale begins a long time ago—in 1890, to be precise—when my Aunt Mary, then a young woman, and her husband, emigrated to Australia. Their dream of sudden wealth did not last long. In short, their experience was that of a lot of other people. I don't know the details beyond the fact that they had a pretty thin time. Eventually they decided to go in for sheep. They acquired a piece of land from the government and 'sat down' on it, as they say out here. All this I learned in a casual sort of way from my mother before she died. In recent years, one by one, all my relatives died, so that, as far as I knew, Aunt Mary was my only living blood relation. Her husband died some years ago. Carter, his name was—John Carter. Curiously, perhaps, Aunt Mary always took a great interest in me. Maybe it was because she had no children of her own. I don't know. All I know is, Mother sent her a photo of me when I was a baby, and as I grew up she sort of adopted me by post. She wrote me long letters, and was always talking of the day when she would have enough money to come home. Poor thing! It was very pathetic. In her heart she must have known that she would never see England again. That's more clear to me now than it was years ago." Janet stared for a moment at the tablecloth.

"She never complained of her lot, although it must have been grim," she continued. "How grim it was, I have only just realized. She spent her life in a lonely, sun-scorched wilderness, ninety miles from the nearest white woman. Mind you, she wasn't alone in that respect. A lot of women in Australia live that sort of life. I am quite sure my mother had no idea of these dreadful conditions, any more than I had until I saw the place. Perhaps pride made Aunt Mary refrain from saying how ghastly it was; or she may

have been happy in her own way—who knows?” Janet poured out a fresh cup of tea.

“About seven years ago her husband died,” she went on. “With a blackfellow named Charlie, their only remaining servant, she buried him. Imagine what an ordeal that must have been! She stayed on at the so-called farm either because she had nowhere else to go, or because living there so long had made the place a habit from which she was too old and tired to break away. Anyhow, she stayed. The place, by the way, is called Wallabulla. She continued writing as before, but I had a feeling that she was getting near the end. It was all so hopeless.

“Then, in 1944, I had a most amazing letter from her. It came in a small parcel with this piece of opal. I’ll give you the letter to read in a minute. I’ve read it a thousand times, for reasons which you’ll understand presently. The gist of it was this. At last her dreams had come true. She had made her fortune—or, as she put it, she had struck it rich from the grass down. Thinking that I might be sceptical she sent me that stone to prove it. There were, she said, plenty more where that came from. She invited me to come out and join her in the fun of getting rich quick. What happened to her, she said, didn’t matter, because she had been to a lawyer in Adelaide and bequeathed the property to me in her will. While she was in Adelaide she had had the stone examined by an opal expert, who pronounced it to be of the very finest quality. She mentioned some other details, which I needn’t go into now. I was in the Service at the time, so I couldn’t do anything about it. Naturally, I expected to hear from her again, but I didn’t, and now I know why.

“When the war was over I packed my bag, put my rather slim savings in my pocket and came out. As soon as I landed I wrote to say that I was here, and how was I to get to Wallabulla? There’s no regular transport, of course—I knew that. There was no reply, so, after waiting about for a bit, I took a chance and set off for Wallabulla. It took me weeks to get there. An Afghan camel-driver, the man who delivers the mails in the region, took me over the last lap. When I got there and saw a comparatively fresh grave, I realized why Aunt Mary hadn’t replied. Charlie, the blackfellow, had gone. The place, a wooden shack that had been Aunt Mary’s home for most of her life, was deserted, abandoned.

“You can imagine into what a state of mind this threw me. All my plans came down with a crash. What was I to do? Well, I decided to stay—that is, if the lawyer confirmed that I had inherited the property. I went to Adelaide and saw him. Aunt Mary mentioned his name in her last letter. It was all as she had said. The deeds of the property were handed to me, and I went back

to Wallabulla. Goodness knows why. I think I had some wild idea of trying to find the opal deposit, or, failing that, I thought I might run the place as a farm. I stayed at Wallabulla for three days. Then I came back to civilization. I haven't seen Wallabulla since."

Worrals raised her eyebrows. "Why not?"

Janet shuddered. "It's a terrible place. You haven't been here long enough to know what untamed Australia is like. For a start, imagine thousands of square miles of dreary, waterless wilderness. All that grows is mulga—that's a shrub of the acacia family—and spinifex, which is a sort of spike-grass. It's just a brown stony desert, with sandhills and rivers of sand, and ranges of hills, some of them volcanic with burnt-out craters. The heat is awful. They say that most of the middle of Australia is the bed of a dried-up sea, and I can well believe it. Actually, Wallabulla is below sea level."

"But if there's no water, how did your aunt live there?" asked Worrals.

"There's a soak."

"What's a soak?"

"It's a phenomenon that occurs in many of the waterless regions of Australia. It's a depression where, by digging down a few feet, you come to water. The water is held in such places as it might be in a pan, by a clay bottom through which the water cannot pass. I didn't mind that. It was the ghastly loneliness that got me, and, worse still, the noises at night."

Worrals frowned. "Noises?"

"Moans, screams, and howls—frightful!"

"What makes these noises?"

"Nobody knows. Dingoes—wild dogs—may be partly responsible, I suppose. But the blackfellows say it's 'debil-debils', spooks who inhabit the desert. All the same, I'm sure that no dog, wild or otherwise, made some of the noises I heard. I stuck it for three days and nights, then I bolted. Carrying a can of water, I walked to the railway line, ninety miles away, and stopped the train."

Worrals shook her head. "You won't mind my saying, Janet, that this sounds a pretty wild story, and a bit vague. Let's try to sort the thing out. First of all, this letter that your aunt wrote to you. What exactly did she say?"

Janet took a much-thumbed letter from her handbag. "Here it is. Read it yourself," she invited.

As Worrals unfolded the letter and glanced at the address she remarked: "I see she wrote this in Adelaide—not Wallabulla."

"That's right. She wrote it at the Post Office. I suppose she didn't put a proper address, apart from the Post Office, because she knew she'd be gone before I replied. She probably stayed at a small hotel or boarding-house. Maybe she wrote the letter after she'd paid her bill and was on her way home. But that's guess-work. What happened, I imagine, was this. After she and Charlie, the blackfellow, found the opal, she went off to Adelaide to have it examined by an expert. Having been told that it was the real thing, she made her will and wrote to me straight away. Then she set off for home."

"I'm beginning to wonder what sort of chap this Charlie was," put in Frecks.

"I'm sure he was trustworthy," asserted Janet quickly. "He must have been a very old man, for she had mentioned him in her letters for years, and spoke most highly of him. She often said she didn't know what she'd do without him."

Worrals was reading the letter. "Pity she doesn't mention the name of the opal expert she consulted," she remarked. "If we knew who it was he might be able to tell us something. But she names her lawyer, fortunately. You saw him?"

"Yes. I found him a very nice man. As soon as I produced evidence of my identity, he handed me the relevant documents. He was most helpful."

Worrals thought for a moment. "Poor old soul! She was determined that you should have the property. Then she went back to Wallabulla. She died, and Charlie buried her. I suppose that grave *was* hers?"

"I'm not certain, of course," replied Janet. "I wasn't likely to dig up the grave to see who was in it."

"Of course not," returned Worrals quickly. "I wonder what happened to Charlie."

"After Aunt Mary died there was no reason why he should stay, was there? The lawyer told me it was almost certain that he'd go back to his tribe. They usually do at the finish."

"If he's still alive, and if we could find him, he should be able to give us some vital information—if, indeed, he couldn't give us the answer to the whole mystery."

"Yes, but what hope have we of finding him?" said Janet gloomily.

"Well, you never know," replied Worrals cheerfully. "Tell me, Janet, is there any way we can get an idea of when Aunt Mary died? I mean, how long was it after she got back to Wallabulla? In what sort of a state did you find the house?"

“Pretty bad. It had obviously been empty for weeks, if not for months.”

“How big is this place, Wallabulla? I mean the whole property?”

“I don’t really know,” confessed Janet. “There are no fences. It seems to go on for ever. I had a walk round, but I didn’t get far.”

Worrals smiled. “No sign of any opals?”

“None.” Janet grimaced. “All I saw was gibbers, and there are plenty of those.”

“We shall have to learn to speak this language,” declared Worrals. “What are gibbers?”

“Round stones—water-worn, like those you see on the sea-shore. I saw some gypsum and mica. There are places where the desert sparkles with it. I didn’t know where to start looking for the opal. I had no clue. You see, opal is queer stuff.”

“In what way is it queer?” asked Worrals.

“Well, it’s unlike any other mineral or metal. Metals usually run in reefs, or lodes—but not opal. Nobody can say where opal is likely to occur. You just dig. It may be there, or it may not. Some men on their first trip stick a spade straight into enough to make them rich for life; others dig for years and find nothing. That’s the way it goes. Incidentally, ‘dig’ isn’t the right word. You gouge for opal. The men who make their living by finding it are called gougers. When opal is discovered in a certain locality, usually hilly country, the gougers make for the spot and dig holes, so that the place soon looks like a rabbit warren. Most of them live in the holes they dig. You can understand the fascination of it. There is always the hope that the next spadeful of dirt will uncover a thousand pounds’ worth of precious stone.”

“What is opal, exactly?” asked Frecks.

“I can answer that because, since I became interested in the stuff, I’ve swotted it up and asked questions about it,” answered Janet. “It’s a mineral, a crystal of silica, although it isn’t a crystal in the true sense of the word. It’s the only precious stone that can’t be made artificially. Those colours you see aren’t actually there. They are light rays. Somehow the spectrum is split by microscopic veins, and the brilliant colours are the result. If you burnt that piece on the table all you’d have left would be a little pile of grey limestone. Some opal is better than others. The price depends upon the quality. Black is the most valuable. It’s queer, fascinating stuff. It seems to mesmerize some people. They spend their lives looking for it.”

“And then lose their lives when they’ve got it,” put in Frecks.

“What are you talking about?” demanded Worrals.

"I always understood that opal was unlucky; that's why a lot of people won't touch it."

Janet shrugged. "Other people say it's lucky."

"It didn't bring your Aunt Mary much luck, did it?" remarked Frecks moodily.

"No, I must admit it did not," conceded Janet.

Frecks shook her head suspiciously. "There must be something in it for such a superstition to start."

"I'm told the Australian blackfellows are scared stiff of it; they associate it with their evil serpent gods. Don't ask me why. Perhaps that was the origin of the superstition," suggested Janet.

Worrals stepped into the conversation. "Just a minute, Janet," she requested. "Who told you that the blackfellows are scared of opal?"

"Now I come to think of it, I read it in a newspaper article. Naturally, being interested in opal, I read anything about it. Why? What's the point?"

"Only that this aboriginal fear of opal, this attribution to it of unholy power, may have a bearing on our case," said Worrals. "What about Charlie? He knew about Aunt Mary finding opal—in fact, he was with her. What were his reactions? We don't know. But in view of what you say, he may have been scared; he may have objected to her touching the stuff; he may have refused to handle it himself, or go near it. A scared native is capable of behaving in a way that would not occur to him if he were normal. I think that aspect is worth bearing in mind. As far as I, personally, am concerned, I judge the superstition about opals being either lucky or unlucky to be hooey. Absolute hooey. Never mind what the natives say. I refuse to believe that a piece of dead limestone can exert any influence on anything or anybody. Aborigines are the same the world over, once you get off the beaten track. Anything unusual is enough to put the wind up them. It's always bad luck. They spend their lives dodging bad luck, with the result that, at the finish, they're terrified of their own shadows. Let's be intelligent. Show me a pile of opal, and I'll risk taking it home."

"Well, if it brings good luck to some people, maybe we're among the lucky ones," said Frecks hopefully.

"As I'm broke it's unlikely that we shall have the chance of finding out," put in Janet pessimistically.

"I wouldn't say that," disputed Worrals. "Actually, the thing boils down to this. You own a property, and on it somewhere there is a quantity of black opal—enough, presumably, to make you rich if you knew where it was."

“Exactly.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

Janet made a grimace. “What can I do? I’ve no money, and even if I had, I don’t see how I could start off with a pick and shovel on the mere chance of finding a fortune.”

“Seems a pity,” murmured Worrals. “We haven’t unlimited money, but we have enough to go on with, and we have plenty of time at our disposal. I feel inclined to have a look for this treasure trove. It’s a gamble. If it came off, it would be more profitable than running an airline.”

Janet’s eyes sparkled. “You mean—you’ll help me to find it?”

Worrals looked at Frecks. “How do you feel about it, partner?”

“I’m crazy to start digging right away,” declared Frecks.

Worrals turned back to Janet. “Suppose we make it a business proposition?” she suggested. “We’ll finance the expedition and help you to find the stuff. If we strike lucky we split the profits three ways—that is, between you, Frecks, and me?”

“That sounds marvellous to me,” assented Janet enthusiastically. “Some kind angel must have sent you to Australia.”

“I doubt it,” said Worrals dryly. “If you asked me, I’d say it was my own restless spirit. But let’s be practical. We’ve got to get to Wallabulla.”

“It’s absolutely off the map,” warned Janet.

“Nothing is off the map for an aircraft, as long as there is somewhere to put it down,” stated Worrals.

“There are plenty of places at Wallabulla,” announced Janet. “In fact, you could land right in front of the house. It’s flat, sandy ground, with patches of dried-up spinifex.”

“Sounds easy,” replied Worrals. “We’ll see about buying an aircraft. I find myself growing more and more curious about this place, Wallabulla. For a start we’ll collect your kit, Janet. You’re moving into our hotel. We shall have to be together, because there are quite a lot of things I shall want to talk to you about.”

“Are you going to make the hotel our headquarters?” inquired Frecks.

Worrals looked thoughtful. “I don’t think so,” she answered pensively. “The place where we shall finish up sooner or later is Wallabulla, so we may as well push along right away and get our bearings.”



## CHAPTER TWO

## *Sundown at Wallabulla*

A WEEK LATER, at four o'clock in the afternoon, a blue-painted aircraft, flying low, circled three times over Wallabulla before making a somewhat rocky landing on the rough but fairly level ground in front of the weather-bleached homestead. The door of the machine swung open, and from the aircraft stepped Janet, Frecks, and Worrals, in that order.

"There's a lot of truth in the saying that many a good tune is played on an old fiddle," remarked Worrals tritely, and she surveyed the machine with professional interest before throwing open the luggage compartment and lifting out several heavy bags. "This aircraft is as sound as the day it was built."

The machine was, in fact, a Desoutter Coupé of ancient vintage, a single-engined cabin monoplane which, long before the war, had been popular for air-taxi work. Its advantages, as far as Worrals was concerned, were numerous. In the first place, on account of its age and low speed compared with modern machines, she had been able to buy it for a song—having satisfied herself, of course, that it was in good order, although, as it carried a Certificate of Airworthiness, there was no need to question this. A second advantage was that it provided seats for just as many passengers as were likely to require them—normally three, but four at a pinch, with accommodation for luggage. Another useful factor was an exceptionally wide undercarriage which greatly reduced the risk of overturning should a wheel strike an obstacle when landing away from a proper airfield. Again, the light engine was economical on fuel. As they were in no desperate hurry, speed was of little importance. As Worrals said, all they needed was transportation, so whether they travelled at a hundred or two hundred miles an hour didn't really matter. Indeed, as the machine would probably be wanted to survey the territory, slow speed was an advantage rather than otherwise. Finally, the machine was quiet and easy to fly. In short, Worrals was well satisfied with her bargain, and she made a remark to this effect as she arranged the dust-cover over the engine.

“Let’s hump these stores over and have a look at this quaint residence of yours, Janet,” she suggested, picking up two heavy parcels and turning towards the homestead, a long, low, timber-built house with a rusty corrugated iron roof, the whole in a generally bad state of repair. No attempt had been made at decoration. It was evident that the building had been designed simply as a place to live in; just that and nothing more. There was no garden, no road, no path. The house stood stark in the wilderness, although a faint trail could just be discerned, leading away to the east, the direction of the distant railway line.

On all sides stretched a dreary sun-dazzled wilderness, dotted with the eternal spike-grass called spinifex, clumps of withered saltbush and occasional mulga shrubs. About fifty yards from the back of the house there was an area of reedy grass. This, Janet told them, was the soak from which water could be obtained, the water which made life possible, and was, of course, the reason why the house was there. The only other outstanding feature was a clump of sparse, stunted gum trees on a slight eminence to the left of the house. They formed a conspicuous landmark. These also helped to make the house possible, for from them had been cut the timber of which the building was constructed. Worrals observed that she would park the aircraft under these trees when not in use, as the shade they afforded would be some protection against the glare of the sun. To the north and west, in the middle distance, gaunt rocky hills rose sharply against a pale blue sky, unbroken by a suspicion of a cloud. In the intervening distance countless gibbers, the round water-washed stones of the dried-up sea, flung back the heat of the day. There were areas where the stones glistened with crystalline deposits. Not a living creature moved; not a bird of any sort, not an animal or reptile.

“You see what I mean about the place being lonely,” said Janet quietly, as, carrying their loads of necessary stores—“tucker” Janet called it—they walked on towards the house.

“Lonely!” exclaimed Frecks. “It’s worse than that. How anyone could live here for any length of time without getting the willies beats me. What sort of crops, or stock, did your Aunt Mary raise, anyway?”

“When her husband was alive they ran a few sheep, I believe,” answered Janet. “Towards the end, though, she lived mostly on dingo scalps. She mentioned that in one of her letters to me, although I hardly knew what it meant at the time. In her letter she says that she and Charlie were tracking dingoes when they found the opal.”

“I don’t get it,” announced Frecks bluntly. “What on earth are dingo scalps? Who wants them, anyway? What do you do with them?”

“The dingo is the native wild dog,” explained Janet. “He’s a cold-blooded murderer, who does an immense amount of damage among the lambs, for which reason the government has put a price on his head. To keep the numbers down, the state pays so much for each scalp—the scalp proving, of course, that a dingo has been killed. The reward paid varies in different counties, but it averages about a pound. The result is that some people earn a living by dingo-hunting. It isn’t easy. The dingo is a cunning beast, and it really takes a blackfellow to track him and hunt him down. Aunt Mary and Charlie used to go dingo-hunting. Charlie did the tracking and Aunt Mary the shooting. Somehow they managed to scrape a living.”

Worrals paused by two pathetic mounds of earth. One, obviously much older than the other, carried a small but well-made wooden cross at the head. The second one, with the earth still fresh, also carried a cross, but it was primitive in the extreme, no more than a rough bough with a twig tied across it.

“Those are the graves,” said Janet. “The one with the well-made cross is my uncle’s, I imagine. Aunt Mary must have made the cross. She lies in the other, having been buried, I suppose, by Charlie. It could have been no one else.”

“Poor souls,” murmured Worrals softly, and walked on. “By the way, Janet,” she continued, “you might have shut the door when you left.”

Janet looked up. “I did,” she asserted with some asperity. “I shouldn’t be likely to go away and leave the door open.”

“Well, it’s open now,” observed Worrals. “Either the wind blew it open, or else you’ve had visitors.”

They walked on.

Worrals and Janet arrived at the threshold together. Both stopped, looking into the room beyond, for the door opened straight into the living-room.

“Well, of all the——” began Janet, in a voice high with indignation.

“Is this how you left it?” inquired Worrals.

“Should I be likely to leave a house like this?” demanded Janet warmly. “What a pigsty! Someone has been here. Look at that!” She pointed at the table, which was a litter of dirty plates, cans, and empty bottles. The whole room was in much the same state. Cigarette ends littered the floor. Dust was thick on everything. All sorts of rubbish had been thrown into the fireplace.

“I left the place absolutely tidy,” declared Janet. “I put everything away. Someone has been here. I don’t mind that, but they might have had the decency to leave the house as they found it.”

“Some *men* are like that,” remarked Worrals philosophically. “No woman could leave a room in this mess. We’d better get busy and clean up before we do anything else.” She took off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves. “Let’s start on the cupboards so that we can put our tucker away.”

It needed two hours of hard work to put the house into a reasonably habitable condition. All the garbage was carried out and thrown in a pit which obviously had been used for the same purpose for years. The floors were swept, and the furniture, such as it was, dusted. The fire was laid and Janet fetched water from the soak. Worrals moved the aircraft into the trees. Preparations were then made for the night. There were only two bedrooms, one large and the other very small. It was decided to use only the large one, so in that the beds were made. By the time all this was done the sun was going down in a blaze of glory behind the western hills. Candles were put out ready for darkness.

Frecks went to the door to look at the sunset. Instantly she spun round with an exclamation of astonishment, not unmixed with alarm. “There are some men coming here,” she told Worrals tersely.

“Men?” Worrals, too, looked surprised.

“Three of them,” reported Frecks. “Two white men and a black. They’re carrying picks and shovels. They’re coming from the direction of the hills.”

Worrals frowned. “Is that so?” she said slowly. “I’m afraid we were a bit hasty in assuming that visitors had merely called here.”

“What do you mean?” asked Janet sharply.

“It seems more likely that they are staying here—or they were.”

“*Staying* here?”

“That’s what I said.”

“What a cheek!”

Worrals shrugged. “Maybe they found the house empty and decided that they might as well use it. If so, I’m afraid they’re going to be horribly disappointed when they discover that we’ve moved in. You’d better leave the talking to me.”

A few minutes later, as the last glow of sunset flooded the melancholy landscape with gold, heavy feet swished through the spinifex, and the men were at the door. There they stopped, staring at the new arrivals, their eyes wide and their expressions almost comical with incredulity.

Worrals considered the men dispassionately. As Frecks had said, there were three of them; two white men and a black. One was a stoutish, middle-aged man with red hair and a heavy moustache and rough beard of the same

colour. Blue eyes were conspicuous in a florid, sun-tanned face, otherwise there was nothing remarkable about him. The second white man was an entirely different type. He was small, swart, and as lean as a desert rat. His hair was long and black. Like his companion he was unshaven, but the result was not so much a beard as a dark stubble below prominent cheek-bones. His eyes were dark, too, and deeply set. His expression was not improved by a livid scar that crossed his forehead to bisect the right eyebrow, lending to that eye a sinister squint. Both men were dressed as miners—rough shirts open at the neck, and dungaree trousers very much the worse for wear. If the white men were unprepossessing—and they certainly were, thought Frecks—they faded into insignificance when compared with the third man, the black, who wore only an old pair of shorts. Never could she have imagined, much less had she seen such a face. His nose was flat above enormous flabby lips. His lower jaw protruded to an abnormal degree. His hair, a filthy, tangled mop, hung down over brows that reminded her of a gorilla, an impression strengthened by his having a deep upper lip.

Worrals spoke first. “Do you want something?” she asked.

The red-haired man answered, resting on his shovel, although for a moment he appeared at a loss for words. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, in a hard, puzzled voice.

“I should be asking you that question,” returned Worrals. “You see, we happen to live here.”

“You—live here?”

Worrals nodded. “That’s right. By the way, are you the men who turned the place into a pigsty?”

The red-haired man frowned. Ignoring the question he asked: “Are you gals alone?”

“We are,” Worrals told him.

This answer seemed to puzzle the man still more. “What have you come here for?” he questioned.

“Surely people don’t have to give a reason for living on their own property?” said Worrals curtly.

“But you can’t stay here *alone*!”

“Indeed? And why not?”

For this the red-haired man apparently had no ready answer. “We’re living here,” he asserted, including his companions with an inclination of his head.

"You may have been living here, but you're not living here any longer," said Worrals firmly. "That's quite definite," she went on. "Who you are and what you are doing, I neither know nor care—but you're not staying here. If you need water you can help yourselves at the soak; but you're not coming into this house, and as it's nearly dark you'd better start looking for new quarters."

There was a short, rather embarrassing silence; then the dark man spoke—spoke with a curious accent that revealed that he was not British born. "For how long are you staying?" he queried.

"That's something we don't know ourselves," replied Worrals. "It may be weeks, it may be months; but that's no concern of yours, anyway, because, whether we are here or not, you have no right to break in."

The two white men looked at each other. Then the red-haired man spoke again. "This place ain't fit for girls," he stated emphatically.

"We're the best judges of that," returned Worrals. "We're staying, and that's all there is to it. It happens to be our house, so let's not have any more argument about it. Incidentally, you're trespassing on this land, and you know it, so you'd better find some other place to dig."

The red-haired man stared at Worrals as if he could hardly believe his eyes and ears.

Worrals met his gaze squarely. "I mean it," she said, crisply.

The man stared a moment longer, and then nudged his companion. "Come on," he said, and turning on his heel, followed by the others, he strode away into the gathering gloom.

Worrals walked over to the door to watch them go.

"That's a nasty-looking bunch," said Frecks, wrinkling her nose. "I'm glad to see the back of them."

"If that's what you're thinking, you never made a bigger mistake in your life," replied Worrals softly. "They won't go far."

"Why not?"

"Because, as you saw, they want to stay here."

"But why should they be so anxious to stay here?" queried Janet, "They look like ordinary prospectors. Most prospectors are content to live in a bough-shelter."

"That's probably what they will do, now," answered Worrals. "I fancy it is not so much the house they're interested in as the whole property. If we live here, we shall be in their way; if only because we shall see what they're doing."

"But why should they be so interested in this particular place?" asked Janet.

"Obviously because they think there's something here worth finding."

Janet's eyes opened wide. "They couldn't possibly know about the opal."

"Why couldn't they?" Worrals's manner was blunt. "How can you say that? You don't know what they know. They're not carrying picks and shovels for mere exercise, you may be sure!"

"But how could they *possibly* know?" persisted Janet.

Worrals shrugged. "Don't ask me. Where's Charlie? We don't know. He knew about the opal. He may have talked."

"I'd forgotten him," admitted Janet.

Worrals drew a deep breath. "Those men know there is something here," she insisted. "Their whole manner, and their reluctance to go, made that perfectly clear. Take it from me, they're not just going to walk away because three nitwit girls have chosen to take up residence here. Oh, no! I'm sorry, but I'm afraid the presence of these men puts a very different complexion on our project. We're in their way, and they're bad types, all three of them. I'm beginning to take a different view of several things—your Aunt Mary's sudden death and Charlie's disappearance, for instance."

"Good heavens!" Janet looked shocked.

"And what about your last visit?" went on Worrals. "I was always a bit suspicious about those noises that drove you away. I may be wrong, but I fancy I can see a hook-up there, too. We can't be sure, of course, that these men are looking for opal; but if they are, then it would be a very strange coincidence that they should choose this particular spot. I'd like a little time to think about this."

"But they'd never dare to hurt us," said Janet nervously.

"They could do us all the mischief in the world without laying a finger on us," returned Worrals in a hard voice.

"How?"

"One way would be by destroying or damaging our link with civilization," answered Worrals. "We're relying on the aircraft for food and stores. Without it, we should be in a pretty mess, shouldn't we?"

"I didn't think of that," confessed Janet.

"I'm afraid we may have to do quits a lot of thinking in the near future," observed Worrals.

“Do you think we ought to mount a guard over the machine?” asked Frecks.

“Not yet,” decided Worrals. “In the first place, we’ve no proof that these men are anything but what they appear to be. If they are, we shall soon know about it. If they have designs on this house, or the land, or the opals, for which reason our presence here would interfere with their plans, I doubt if they will resort to force to shift us until they have tried methods that would not bring them into collision with the law, should we complain to the police. Following the same line of argument, they will not interfere with the machine—yet; because—don’t you see?—if we were left without any means of getting away it would defeat their object. They would like us to go; of that we need have no doubt whatever; so they would be silly to sabotage our only means of transport. Later on, it may be a different story, but at the moment, nothing would please them more than to see the machine in the air, heading for where it came from. We shall see. In the meantime, there is no reason why we should starve. Let’s eat. This air gives one an appetite, if nothing else.”

“I should feel happier if I had a gun,” muttered Frecks, belligerently.

“Things haven’t come to that yet,” murmured Worrals.

“I noticed Aunt Mary’s rifle—the one she shot dingoes with, I suppose—in the store pantry,” said Janet. “It looked pretty ancient to me, but at a pinch it would be better than nothing.”

“We’ll bear it in mind,” said Worrals casually, opening a tin of bully beef.



## CHAPTER THREE

## *Noises in the Night*

WORRALS said little during the meal. Observing that she was preoccupied, Frecks did not interrupt her train of thought at the table, but after the meal had been cleared and the crocks washed, she invited conversation by saying; “Well, what do you make of it?”

Worrals resumed her seat at the table, with her chin between her hands. “Until I saw those men it did not occur to me that this trip was going to be anything but a picnic—a picnic with an object, shall we say? I supposed that we should just potter about in our own time looking for opals. If we found some, well and good. If not—well, we shouldn’t lose anything, anyway. But now I have an uneasy feeling that we were treating the whole thing too lightly. There may be more in it, a lot more, than meets the eye at first glance. Things often work out that way when big money is involved, and there may be bigger money in this affair than we imagine.”

“Aunt Mary talked about a fortune, and I think she was too much of a realist to indulge in flights of fancy,” put in Janet.

“Exactly,” murmured Worrals. “When you said you had abandoned Wallabulla because you were scared of noises in the night, to be quite frank I thought you’d let your nerves run away with you. Not that there is anything to be ashamed of in that. Solitude has given men the heebiejeebies before to-day, and you were a girl on your own, without any experience of the Australian desert. Now I’m not so sure that your nerves did let you down. Really, it comes to this. You assumed, quite naturally, that Aunt Mary had said nothing to anyone about making a rich strike of opals at Wallabulla.”

Janet nodded. “Yes. I thought any sane person would keep a discovery of that sort secret.”

Worrals continued. “Aunt Mary probably knew as well as anyone that if the secret got out the usual human sharks would soon be along to grab what they could, particularly as they had to deal only with an old lady and a blackfellow. But she may have let the cat out of the bag, perhaps by a chance remark. The question is, did she? I can see now that so much would depend

on it. Did she part with her secret? If so, where? To whom? Obviously it wasn't here, because there was no one to talk to except Charlie, and he knew. It could only have been in Adelaide, when she was there. In view of what has happened here to-day, I feel inclined to run down to Adelaide and make a few inquiries."

"Then you are definitely suspicious of these men?" interrupted Frecks.

"I am," asserted Worrals. "These suspicions may be quite unfounded, but before we go any further we ought to know one way or the other, so that we can see just how we stand. Anything can happen in a place like this. I might pick up a clue in Adelaide."

"How would you go about it?" asked Frecks. "I mean, where would you start?"

"Obviously, by calling on the people we know Aunt Mary spoke to when she was there. We know she talked to the lawyer. She may have talked to someone in the hotel where she stayed. She consulted an opal expert. For all we know, she may have talked, said more than was prudent, to some jeweller, or pawnbroker, or shopkeeper."

"Why should she?" Janet asked the question.

"She sent you a piece of opal, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"All right. Let's try a little logical thinking. It's hardly likely that she would have sent you the one piece she possessed."

"True enough."

"Nor would she have said in her letter to you that she had struck it rich from the grass down on the strength of finding one small piece of opal. Surely it is reasonable to suppose that, having found one piece, she would promptly abandon dingo-hunting for the far more profitable pursuit of opal-gouging. The first thing any sensible person would do would be to ascertain the value of the discovery. The bare fact that she wrote that letter to you, and tore off to Adelaide to see her lawyer, suggests that she investigated her find and found it a rich one. Which means that she must have found more opal. Where is it?"

Janet looked hard at Worrals. "I didn't think of that," she said slowly.

"Well, I'm thinking of it—now," rejoined Worrals. "I think we may accept it as certain that Aunt Mary found more opal, perhaps a lot more, than the fragment she sent to you. We've got to find it, or find out what she did with it. Either she kept it or she parted with it. If she kept it, she wouldn't keep it lying about; she would hide it. And if she hid it, it would be

somewhere in this house. She would keep only the piece which she took to Adelaide with her for expert opinion. If she parted with the rest, then it must have been to someone in Adelaide, because she went straight there and came straight back. Where else could she have sold it? If she sold that opal in Adelaide, the chances are that it would be to a regular dealer, in which case there should be a record of the transaction. If that is, in fact, what happened, we needn't wonder how the secret of her find leaked out; and if the secret did get out, we needn't wonder why these men are walking about Wallabulla with picks and shovels. At least, that's how it seems to me. There's only one snag. If she sold the opal, what happened to the money?"

"This is all getting very complicated," muttered Janet moodily.

Worrals glanced up at her. "Things usually do get complicated when there's a fortune in the offing. I've got an idea those men were already here when you came last time. In what sort of state did you find the house?"

"Rather the same as when we arrived to-day, but not so bad," answered Janet. "I thought nothing of it then, supposing that Aunt Mary had been too ill to clean up before she died."

"Those men were here," declared Worrals. "They hadn't been here long; that's why they hadn't got the place in such a mess. They must have seen you arrive, and decided to frighten you off as the easiest way of getting rid of you. They broke no law by doing that. It was all quite simple. They won't find it so easy this time, though."

Frecks opened her eyes wide. "Do you think they'll try more tricks?"

Worrals smiled faintly. "I think it's a certainty. They'll try the same trick first. Why not? It worked last time. People always repeat an experiment that is successful—that's where they go wrong. Sooner or later it lets them down. We shall soon know if I'm right. What sort of a night is it?"

Worrals went to the door, opened it, and looked out. Not a breath of air stirred. A young moon, a sickle of blue light, hung low in a sky bedecked with stars, some steady, some flashing like jewels. The earth was a vague, colourless expanse, that rolled away on all sides until it merged into the formless distance.

For a little while Worrals stood watching; then she closed the door and came back into the room. "Fetch Aunt Mary's rifle, Janet," she requested. "If any spooks start throwing their weight about to-night, we'll see what effect hot lead has on them."

Janet fetched the rifle and a handful of cartridges.

"There's another point that has just occurred to me," she said, speaking to Janet. "You say Aunt Mary's lawyer made no bones about your taking

over the Wallabulla property?”

“That’s right.”

“Did he just take your word for it that Aunt Mary was dead?”

“Apparently. He made me produce documentary evidence of my own identity, of course.”

“There seems to be something queer about that,” said Worrals thoughtfully. “Lawyers are not normally so ready to accept evidence of death on the mere word of the third party, particularly if that party happens to be a beneficiary under the will. I doubt if it’s legal, anyway.”

“He may have known Aunt Mary was dead.”

“Did you ask him if he knew?”

“No, we didn’t discuss it.”

“Was he surprised when you told him?”

“No, I can’t say that he was. He said he was expecting to hear from me, and after he had looked at my papers he took the will out of his safe.”

“And Aunt Mary’s death was sort of taken for granted?”

“Yes. You see, the order of things was this,” explained Janet. “Not knowing that Aunt Mary was dead, I went straight to Wallabulla. She wasn’t there. Nobody was there. I found the new grave, and assumed that she was dead. I can’t say that I was particularly surprised, because she was an old woman and her health was not good. It was then that I went to the lawyer named in her letter—Mr. Harding—and introduced myself. He seemed to take my word for it that Aunt Mary was dead.”

“Didn’t that strike you as odd?”

“No. After all, this isn’t England, where everything can be checked and cross-checked. Here, in a million square miles of out-back, they can’t verify everything. I imagine they often have to take the word of travellers about births and deaths. How can it be otherwise in a country where odd people—prospectors, for instance—are wandering about thousands of miles of practically uninhabited territory? Nobody knows where they are half the time. If a man dies of thirst, or by accident, as sometimes happens, his bones just lie there, or else the next man who comes along buries him. Later, months later perhaps, he reports that old Bill So-and-So is dead. That’s all there is to it.”

Worrals nodded. “Quite. I can see that now.”

“It was after seeing the lawyer that I came to Wallabulla, intending to stay,” went on Janet. “As you know, I didn’t stay long because I was scared.”

“You didn’t go back to the lawyer and tell him?”

“No.”

“You didn’t write to him and tell him about it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Well, in the first place there didn’t seem any point in it. As I felt then, nothing would have induced me to come back here. He couldn’t do anything about it, anyway. Besides, think what a fool I should have looked, having to admit that I was scared of noises. He would have thought I was a complete nitwit.”

Worrals smiled, and then became serious again. “You told Mr. Harding that you intended coming here to live?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then, as far as he knows, you’ve been here ever since?”

“I suppose so.”

“What was your impression of him? I seem to remember your saying that he seemed a decent sort of chap?”

“He was. I liked him. He was most helpful.”

“I may have a word with him——” Worrals broke off, stiffening to a listening attitude as, from outside, some distance away, a sound came floating through the silent night. It was a long-drawn wail that rose and fell like a cry of agony, until it ended in a choking sob.

Janet sprang to her feet. Her face had paled. “That’s it,” she breathed, in a tense whisper. “That’s the noise. Sometimes it’s far away, sometimes it comes close. There are other noises, too. Isn’t it horrible?”

Worrals looked doubtful. “I must admit it isn’t very pleasant, and I can well understand now why you were shaken,” she conceded. “Could it possibly be a dingo?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard one,” answered Janet, “Personally, I can’t imagine anything making such a ghastly noise.”

“Hark! Here it comes again,” said Worrals. She rose and, crossing the room quickly, opened the door. The sound was at once magnified.

“That’s enough to scare a platoon of V.C.s,” asserted Frecks in a thin voice, as the wail came sobbing and moaning across the wilderness.

“It doesn’t scare me as much as the wail of a falling bomb,” declared Worrals. “At least it doesn’t go off bang at the end.”

“The blackfellows say it’s the debil-debils who live——” began Janet.

Worrals cut in impatiently: "Debil-debils my foot! That tale may go down with blackfellows, but I, personally, have no faith in spooks, spectres, or what-nots. When I see one that can stop a bullet without flinching, I may change my mind." She picked up the rifle, loaded it, and put some spare cartridges in her pocket.

"What are you going to do?" asked Frecks apprehensively.

"I'm curious to see how this baleful banshee reacts to musket balls," answered Worrals in a hard voice. Then she smiled. "I may hit a dingo, and dingo scalps, according to Janet, are worth money. I'll do the shooting; you two can do the skinning. If we can get enough scalps to pay our running expenses, that will be fine. If we have any luck, when I'm in Adelaide I'll buy something a bit more up-to-date in the way of small arms equipment." She moved towards the door. Looking over her shoulder she concluded: "Are you two coming out to watch the fun?"

"Fun!" snorted Frecks. "This isn't my idea of fun."

"Wait and see how our sortie turns out," suggested Worrals, as she stepped into the darkness. The others followed close behind, Frecks closed the door behind her, and looked around.

The moon cast an eerie, unreal light across the arid plain, turning it into a grey lake in which little islands of spinifex seemed to move, to swim, like mist. Everything was exaggerated. The mulga bushes might have been haystacks or elephants. The clump of gums that housed the machine rose stark, like a monstrous medieval castle. The silence was uncanny, as of another world, a world from which all life had departed. It was, thought Frecks, an ideal place for debil-debils to haunt, and she felt a superstitious shiver run through her as the cry came again, a long gibbering wail ending in a sob.

"It comes from over there," said Worrals in a low voice, pointing to a group of mulga bushes about two hundred yards away. "Let's get nearer." She walked on towards the gum trees which halved the distance, and there, leaning against a tree, the rifle half-raised, she waited, waited while the minutes passed slowly. For a time everything remained still, in a curious attentive hush. Then from the bushes burst such a hideous clamour of screams, shrieks, and groans that Frecks clapped her hands to her ears.

"Watch this," said Worrals grimly. She raised the rifle, took aim at the bushes, and fired.

The report split the stagnant air like a thunderclap. Without waiting to see the result of the shot, Worrals jerked another cartridge into the breech and fired again; and this she continued to do until the magazine was empty,

the bullets whistling and whining as they struck and ricocheted off the stony floor of the desert. Before the reverberations of the first shot had died away, the wailing stopped abruptly. At the fourth shot a dark, indistinct figure burst from the bushes, and sped away on a swerving course across the plain. When Worrals fired her last round, the figure turned at right angles, and a moment later disappeared from sight.

“Did you hit it?” asked Frecks quickly.

“No,” answered Worrals. “I didn’t particularly want to. We’ve no justification for killing a man, even if he was making a nuisance of himself.”

“You think it was a man, then?”



She waited while the minutes passed slowly. ([Here](#))

"It wasn't a dingo, and it certainly wasn't a kangaroo, so what else could it have been but a man?" answered Worrals. "No white man could run like that; nor could a white man make such an appalling din unless he were raving mad. I fancy it was the blackfellow companion of our two white visitors. No doubt they put him up to it. I'll bet my first shot startled him more than he startled us. That was something he didn't expect. When he broke cover, running like a hare, he was bent double; that's why he looked such an odd shape. Well, I don't think we shall have any more music to-night; we might as well go home."

They returned to the house. Worrals stood the rifle in a corner, and resumed her seat at the table.

"That's that," she said calmly. "If that howling humbug was the aboriginal companion of those fake prospectors, we may take it that they're up to no good. There could only be one reason for to-night's performance. They were trying to put the wind up us, as they scared Janet when she was alone. In simple words, they want us to go; and they want us to go, obviously, so that they can have the place to themselves. If they only knew it, if any inducement were needed to make me stay here, it was this. And now, as there's nothing more we can do to-night, we might as well turn in. I'll keep the rifle handy, just in case we have an encore. I shall probably slip down to Adelaide in the morning."

"By yourself?" asked Frecks.

"Yes, by myself," decided Worrals. "You two can stay here and hold the fort till I get back. Either of you left alone might get nervous, and reasonably so. You can amuse yourselves by trying to find Aunt Mary's secret opal store. I'm pretty certain she had one—in this house, too. Even if she sold some, she would still keep a good piece for herself, if only to look at and gloat over. If those men come snooping round, don't stand any nonsense from them."

"Suppose they do, what do we do about it?" queried Frecks anxiously.

"Tell them that I've gone to fetch the police," suggested Worrals. "That should make them think twice before starting any rough stuff."

"O.K.," agreed Frecks.

Worrals turned the key in the door. "Let's hit the blankets," she suggested. "I want to get cracking early in the morning."



## CHAPTER FOUR

## *Worrals Takes a Trip*

TURQUOISE dawn found Worrals in the air on her way to Adelaide, five hundred miles away, on a course almost due south-east. For the most part she flew over an undulating expanse of spinifex and saltbush, with never a town or village to challenge the sun-scorched wastes, a wilderness broken only by occasional flat-topped hills or a river long run dry. It was not, she thought, the most comfortable country to fly over. However, the engine ran sweetly, and by ten o'clock she was talking to the control officer at Parafield, the airfield for Adelaide, who promised to have the aircraft refuelled against her return later in the day.

"Where have you just blown in from?" he queried curiously.

"Wallabulla," Worrals told him, "It's a farm just south of the Everard Range. I'm helping a friend to run it."

The officer looked serious. "You must be flying on a fine margin of petrol."

"I am," admitted Worrals. "But it isn't as bad as it sounds. I carry a few spare cans, and a supply of water for emergency. At a pinch, I can always turn east to Mount Eba for fuel, or, farther south, drop in at Whyalla or Port Pirie."

The Australian nodded. "Watch how you go, miss. You're in bad country, should you find yourself on the carpet."

"So I noticed," answered Worrals. "Thanks all the same, for warning me."

A car took her the eleven miles into the city, and ten-thirty found her in the office of Mr. Harding, Aunt Mary's lawyer. He was a tall, good-looking man, younger than she expected, with a cheerful, breezy manner. Worrals liked him on sight. As she told the others later, there was no nonsense about him. She stated her business without preamble.

"My name's Joan Worralsen," she began. "You don't know me, but I'm a friend of Janet Marlow, the girl who inherited the Wallabulla property from Mrs. Mary Carter. You remember Janet?"

"Of course," replied the lawyer instantly. "How's she getting on?"

"Oh, she's all right," returned Worrals. "Another friend and myself are staying with her at the moment. We've got an aircraft, so we can get to and fro easily. But that isn't what I came to see you about. The fact is, Janet wants me to have a word with you because there are one or two points about the property that seem to need clearing up."

"Go ahead."

"First of all, it struck us that you took rather casually Janet's assertion that her aunt was dead."

Mr. Harding looked astonished. "I didn't take her word for it," he corrected. "I knew Mary Carter was dead."

It was Worrals's turn to look surprised. "Oh, you did? May I ask how you knew?"

"Certainly. Dan Terry told me."

"Who's Dan Terry?"

"The mounted constable at Oodnadatta; that would be about a hundred miles or so east of you. It's the old railhead."

"How did he know?"

"The death was reported to him by Mary Carter's blackfellow servant, Charlie. Charlie went into Oodnadatta and said she was dead, and that he had buried her. Dan rode out, saw the grave, and reported the death officially."

"Wasn't that a bit casual?"

The lawyer hesitated. "No. Not necessarily. In certain circumstances, it might have been, I'll admit, but Dan knew them both well, had known them for years, and that made all the difference. Out here a lot depends on a person's known character."

"I see," said Worrals, slowly. "So he knew them?"

"Wallabulla is on Dan's beat. Naturally, he'd look in from time to time."

"I understand," murmured Worrals. "That clears up that point. As Aunt Mary's lawyer, you were not surprised to see Janet Marlow when she rolled up?"

"Mrs. Carter told me she was expecting her."

"Quite so," rejoined Worrals. "It is interesting to know that Charlie spoke to someone before he disappeared. Is Constable Terry always at Oodnadatta?"

"He covers the district."

Worrals nodded thoughtfully. "I must have a word with him some time. You see, Mr. Harding, there is more in this Wallabulla property than meets the eye. Did Aunt Mary, by any chance, mention to you a lucky strike she made just before she came to see you?"

The lawyer smiled. "I know about the opal, if that's what you mean."

Worrals drew a deep breath. "Good. That saves a lot of explaining. I imagine Aunt Mary told you in confidence?"

"One reason why she told me was because she was anxious to get an idea of the value of her find. She asked me for the name of the leading opal authority here."

"Did you give her that information?"

"Yes. I advised her to see Felix Moran. I don't know him personally, but he handles most of the opal business in these parts."

"Would you give me his address?"

"Certainly." The lawyer jotted the address on a slip of paper, and passed it over.

"One last question, Mr. Harding," concluded Worrals. "Where did Aunt Mary stay when she was in Adelaide?"

"Chambers's Hotel, on Waterside Road. It's a small private hotel."

"How long was she there?"

"Three days, I believe." The lawyer looked at Worrals speculatively. "Don't think I'm trying to pry into your business, but as you seem a level-headed young woman I must assume there is a definite reason for these questions?"

"There is," answered Worrals frankly. "If I stay in Australia, I may need legal advice, in which case I hope you will act for me, Mr. Harding. And when I seek advice, I put all my cards on the table. Naturally, we—that is, Janet Marlow, my friend, and myself—are interested in Wallabulla chiefly on account of the opal strike which Aunt Mary made, and which we have every reason to believe is true. Unfortunately, we also have reason to think that someone else knows about it, and it was in the hope of getting confirmation of this that I came to Adelaide this morning."

"As Mrs. Carter's adviser, I haven't mentioned it to a soul," said Mr. Harding earnestly.

"I believe that," returned Worrals. "It narrows the field of inquiry."

"You're not in any trouble at Wallabulla?"

"Not exactly. I'll let you know if things get serious. What about this hotel? I wondered if Aunt Mary said more than was wise when she was

there.”

“I think it’s extremely unlikely,” replied the lawyer quickly. “Mrs. Carter—Aunt Mary, as you call her—had been in Australia too long not to know the danger of chattering about a lucky strike. In fact, she told me so. Frankly, I don’t think you need bother about the hotel. Had Aunt Mary parted with her secret there, Wallabulla by this time would be overrun with prospectors and miners. That’s always the first thing that happens when word of a new strike gets out. The news travels like wildfire.”

“So I imagine,” said Worrals. “I’m glad you mentioned it.” She rose, and held out her hand. “Well, I’ll be getting along. Thanks for your patience with me.”

“If I can be of any help, let me know,” said Mr. Harding, as they shook hands.

“I will,” promised Worrals, and went out into the street.

Ten minutes later she was knocking on a door marked “Inquiries” in the offices of Felix Moran, opal dealer and expert. On being invited by a female voice to enter, she went in and found herself in what was evidently a small waiting-room. A girl sat at a desk on which rested a typewriter and sundry papers.

“I’d like to see Mr. Moran,” requested Worrals.

“Have you an appointment?”

“No,” admitted Worrals. “Mr. Moran doesn’t know me,” she added. “I’ve come to see him in connection with some business concerning opal.”

“Just a minute.” The girl went through a door marked “Private”, to reappear almost at once. “Come in,” she invited, holding the door for Worrals to pass through before returning to her desk.

Worrals walked on into a spacious, well-furnished office, in which, behind a massive desk, sat a man whom she disliked on sight, just as the reverse had been the case with Mr. Harding, the lawyer. In a dark town suit he was immaculately dressed—too immaculately dressed, thought Worrals. Not that she was concerned overmuch with clothes, although in this case they indicated a type with whom she rarely had anything in common. Apart from that, the face was not one to inspire confidence.

“You wish to see me?” he began smoothly, with a smile which, since there was no reason for it, Worrals believed to be insincere.

“I do,” she answered evenly. “I want to speak to you about a matter concerning which I am making some inquiries on behalf of a friend of mine.”

Moran's smile faded. "Please proceed," he said, in a curt, businesslike voice.

"Some time ago you were consulted by an old lady named Mrs. Carter about the quality of a piece of black opal which she showed to you," stated Worrals distinctly.

Moran gazed at the ceiling, as if trying to recall the incident.

"Visitors with high grade black opal can't be so common that you would be likely to forget the occasion," prompted Worrals dryly.

Moran looked back at her. "Quite so. I remember now—yes, I remember her distinctly."

"I thought you would," murmured Worrals. "It was very good opal, I believe."

"Yes, very good."

"Did you ask her where she got it?"

Moran looked pained. "My dear young lady, my business is to answer questions, not ask them!"

"Then you have no idea where that opal came from?"

"None whatever."

"She paid a fee for your advice?"

"Of course. That is my business."

"You also buy opal, I believe?"

"Sometimes, when it is on offer."

"Did Mrs. Carter offer to sell you any?"

"No."

"How much had she, when she came to see you?"

"One piece only."

"Was this the piece?" Worrals laid Janet's specimen on the desk.

Moran picked it up, glanced at it, and handed it back. "Yes, that is the piece."

"Was anyone else present when this interview took place?"

Moran frowned. "Please be careful," he said shortly. "Are you implying that I would be likely to betray the confidence of a client?"

"I'm not implying anything," answered Worrals. "I'm merely trying to ascertain some facts. You haven't answered my question."

"The interview to which you refer was conducted in private," said Moran curtly. He stood up. "And now, if you will excuse me . . . I am a busy

man.”

“Yes, I’m sure you are,” returned Worrals quietly.

She rose. “Thank you for answering my questions. Good day, Mr. Moran.” She went out.

In the outer office she stopped and threw a smile at the girl behind the typewriter. “No luck,” she murmured sadly.

The girl raised her eyebrows. “No?”

Worrals shrugged. “I thought I had found some really good opal, but it turns out to be poor stuff after all.”

The girl looked interested. “You don’t look much like an opal-gouger.”

“I’ve only just started,” explained Worrals.

“It isn’t easy, you know.”

Worrals sighed. “What I really want is someone to give me a few hints. I suppose you have most of the leading opal-gougers in here at some time or other?”

The girl nodded. “Yes, I know most of them.”

“I met one the other day,” went on Worrals. “Foolishly I let him go without asking his name, or I’d look him up. He was a small, dark chap with a nasty scar across his forehead, splitting the right eyebrow.”

The girl smiled. “That’s Manila Joe,” she volunteered. “His real name is Joe Barola.”

“He was with a big red-headed fellow.”

“That’s right—Luke Raffety. They work together. They have a black with them, a frightful-looking Arnhem-lander, named Yoka. The three of them have worked together for years. They’re real experts. They sell their stuff to the boss.” The girl inclined her head towards the private office.

“Where could I get hold of them, do you think?” asked Worrals ingenuously.

“They were in here not long ago, but where they went I don’t know,” replied the girl, “They’re probably at Coober Pedy—that’s the big opal field in the Stuart Ranges.”

“Thanks,” said Worrals. She had opened her lips to continue when the inner door was opened suddenly, and Moran appeared.

For a minute he stared at Worrals with undisguised suspicion and more than a hint of hostility. Then he spoke sharply to the girl. “I want you,” he said brusquely.

“Good morning,” said Worrals demurely, and went out into the street. For a minute or two she stood on the pavement, thinking; then, as if she had reached a decision, she returned to Mr. Harding’s office.

He looked up in surprise when she entered. “Hallo! You’re soon back. Did you forget something?”

“Yes,” answered Worrals. “What are the regulations in force about the purchase of firearms?”

Mr. Harding’s eyebrows went up. “What do you want with firearms?”

“We’re pestered with rather a lot of vermin at Wallabulla—dingoes, and so on,” explained Worrals. “We thought we might reduce the number a bit, or at least scare them off.”

“Why not try poisoning them?” suggested the lawyer. “A lot of the old hands carry strychnine for the purpose.”

“Not for me,” returned Worrals. “Poisoning is a nasty painful business—even for a dingo. I’d rather shoot ’em.”

“What sort of weapons do you want?”

“Something easy to carry. Say, a couple of thirty-eight automatic pistols, and a twelve-bore sporting-gun. We’ve got an old rifle.”

“You’d have to get a permit and a licence from the Commissioner of Police.”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, quite well.”

“I wonder if you’d try to get us permits right away? You see, I must get back to Wallabulla to-day, and I may not be in town again for some time. If the Commissioner demurs, you can tell him that three girls on their own ought to have some sort of protection.”

The lawyer smiled. “You strike me as being well able to take care of yourself—but I’ll see what I can do. Where shall I find you?”

“I’m going along to Prince’s for lunch. Come in and have coffee with me.”

“Fine.”

“Thanks, Mr. Harding.”

Well satisfied with her morning’s work, Worrals went along to the restaurant and ordered lunch.

She had Just finished her first course and was gazing about her in an abstract sort of way when her eyes suddenly focused on a man who had entered and was walking briskly towards her table. It was Felix Moran, the

opal expert. To her surprise he came straight to her table, pulled out another chair, and sat down.

Worrals stared. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Moran," she said stiffly, "I don't remember inviting you to join me."

"You didn't," returned Moran bluntly, considering her with frank hostility. "I want a word with you, though."

"This is hardly the way to go about it."

"I didn't want to lose sight of you," explained Moran casually.

"You didn't *what*? Do I understand that you've been following me?" Worrals's astonishment was genuine.

"I had you followed after you left my office," admitted Moran.

"Why?"

"That secretary of mine's a nice girl, but she talks too much—and you ask too many questions."

Worrals nodded. "Ah! I understand. You think she told me more than was prudent?"

"My business is confidential. I don't like people coming into my office asking questions."

"Of course. I can quite understand that," said Worrals evenly.

The opal dealer regarded her critically. "What's your game?" he demanded abruptly.

"I'm not playing a game, Mr. Moran," returned Worrals. "The business I'm engaged in is just as serious as yours."

"All right. Call it business. What's your angle?"

"To what, precisely, are you referring?"

"What did you have to go and see that lawyer about?"

"Really, Mr. Moran, such a question amounts to impertinence. However, I'll answer it for you. Mr. Harding is getting me some firearms permits. Since arriving in Australia I have learned that there are some very nasty snakes about. There's only one way of dealing with snakes, and that is to shoot them. You would hardly believe it, Mr. Moran, and it may sound like boasting, but during the recent war I disposed of quite a number of snakes. But this catechism has gone on long enough. Would you mind finding yourself another table, or shall I call the head waiter and tell him that I'm being annoyed?"

Moran smiled. But only with his lips. His eyes were cold and hard. "You're interested in this Wallabulla property, aren't you?" he challenged.



"I am," admitted Worrals.

"How about selling it to me?"

"It isn't mine to sell."

"But this Marlow girl would sell it if you advised her to."

"She might."

"O.K. Go ahead and tell her to sell. I'll make it worth your while—say, ten per cent. How's that?"

Worrals shook her head sadly. "How very crude you are! You know, Mr. Moran, the more I see of you, the less I like you. I'm expecting Mr. Harding with those permits at any moment. If he finds you here I may feel inclined to tell him why you came."

Moran got up. "All right, if that's how you want it," he said in a hard voice. Turning on his heel, he strode away.

Worrals watched him go, a thoughtful expression in her eyes.

A few minutes later the lawyer came in and announced that he had been able to get the permits. There were some forms to be signed. Worrals thanked him, and over coffee signed the forms. They talked for a little while, and then Worrals, after a glance at her watch, said that she would have to be getting along.

"Let me know if I can be of further service," said Mr. Harding.

"I certainly will, thanks."

The lawyer became serious. "Be careful," he warned. "There are a lot of nice people in Australia, but there are a few who are not so nice."

"I'm just beginning to realise it," returned Worrals quietly. "I'll bear it in mind, and I'll keep in touch with you."

They parted at the door.

An hour later, having made her purchases, which included two thirty-eight calibre automatics and a twelve-bore shot-gun, with ammunition for all three, Worrals was back at the airfield. Having paid her dues, she took off and headed north, following the railway line for Oodnadatta, which her map revealed to be about the same distance as Wallabulla and rather more than a hundred miles to the east. After a bumpy flight through blazing sunshine, over sandhills and arid plains littered with gibbers that quivered in the grip of mirage, she circled three times over the straggling roofs of the once-vital railhead before putting the Desoutter down on the landing field. As it happened, she did not find it necessary to seek the police officer. A tall, good-looking young man in the uniform of the Australian Mounted Police, his face tanned by wind and sun, stood talking to the airport manager.

Worrals noted that he wore a row of war medal ribbons on his tunic. Sitting at his feet, held on a lead, was a rough-haired mongrel terrier with an alert, intelligent face.

“Do you happen to be Dan Terry?” she greeted.

“That’s me,” confirmed the constable cheerfully.

“The very man I want to see,” said Worrals.

“Suits me,” returned the police officer, smiling.

The aerodrome manager walked away.

“My name’s Joan Worrals,” went on Worrals. “I’m living at Wallabulla with two friends. One of them is a niece of Mrs. Carter, who used to live there. She inherited the property from her.”

The constable looked interested. “So Miss Janet’s come out, after all?”

Worrals’s eyes opened wide. “What do you know about Janet?”

Dan smiled half sheepishly. “Well, I feel I sorta know her. Old Mary, not seeing many folks, used to talk to me about her. Showed me photos of her. She looked a nice kid.”

“She is,” stated Worrals. “And a plucky one. She got the George Cross in the war.”

“So her auntie told me.” Dan became confidential. “Between you and me, I was looking forward to seeing Janet.”

“Apparently you don’t know that Janet came out to Wallabulla some time ago, and stayed there by herself for three days?”

Dan looked bewildered. “I never knew that.”

“Well, as she didn’t know you she could hardly let you know, could she?” teased Worrals.

“This is all news to me,” declared Dan. “I wish I’d known.”

“You’d have looked her up, maybe?” suggested Worrals.

“It would have been part of my job,” asserted Dan.

“Quite so,” murmured Worrals. “Now let’s be serious. From what you say I take it that you haven’t been to Wallabulla since Mary Carter died?”

“No, I haven’t. With no one there now there was not much point in it.”

“You knew Mrs. Carter quite well, then?”

“Sure I did. Dear old soul. I was very fond of her.”

“It must have come as a shock to you to learn that she was dead?”

“It did.”

“It was you who reported her death in Adelaide?”

"That's right. How did you know?"

"Mr. Harding, Mrs. Carter's lawyer, told me."

The constable nodded. "Ah-huh."

"You got the information in the first place from a blackfellow named Charlie who has since disappeared, I understand?" went on Worrals. "I want you, if you will, to tell me, for reasons which I needn't go into now, just how and where you received this information."

"That won't take long," agreed Dan. "Charlie came here. We'd known each other for some time. He told me he'd walked in to say poor old Mary was dead, and that he had buried her. I had no reason to doubt it, but I rode over and had a look at the grave."

"Do you remember the date when Charlie turned up and told you she was dead?"

"Sure I do. It happened to be my birthday—December 1."

"Then she wasn't ill for very long?" said Worrals, looking hard at the constable. "On November 20 she was in Adelaide, because that is the date on a letter which she wrote to Janet. I imagine it would take her about three days to get home?"

"I guess so."

"And it would take Charlie about three days to walk here from Wallabulla?"

"About that."

"Which means that Mary Carter got home on or about November 23. Charlie must have left Wallabulla by the twenty-seventh to reach you by December 1. So even if Mary Carter was taken ill the moment she got home, she must have died within four days."

Dan nodded. "Yes, now you mention it, I reckon she must."

"A bit sudden, wasn't it?"

"People die suddenly in the out-back."

"Maybe," said Worrals thoughtfully. "A person dying as suddenly as that must have shown some fairly obvious symptoms, don't you think?"

"Probably."

"Had Charlie anything to say about that? I mean, did he give any reason for her death—her rather sudden death?"

"Yes, he did say something about it. Naturally, I asked him. He said she died making wonga."

Worrals frowned. "Making what?"

“Making wonga is the blackfellow’s way of saying fun and games—dancing, and so on. He said she had pains in her stomach.”

“Were those his actual words?”

“Of course not. He used blackfellow yabber-yabber. What he actually said was, as near as I can remember: ‘Mary make plenty wonga; stomach belonga her walk-about plenty, finish her up quicktime.’ ”

“What did you take that to mean?” questioned Worrals.

“Nothing in particular. Charlie wouldn’t know himself. I tell you it was all blackfellow stuff. Means nothing—not a thing.”

“But surely he must have had some idea as to why Mary should make wonga, as he called it.”

Dan shook his head wearily. “Of course he had. It was debil-debils. To a black, everything unpleasant is caused by debil-debils. I get sick of hearing about debil-debils.”

“I understand there are different sorts of debil-debils?” persisted Worrals. “Was there any particular devil associated with this particular tragedy?”

“Yes; as I remember, Charlie put it down to opals. Mary had been opal-gouging. That’s why I say that this yabber of his amounts to nothing. Most likely Mary died of plain straightforward dysentery. But what’s the idea of all these questions?”

“Naturally, having come all this way to see her, Janet would like to know the cause of her aunt’s death.”

“Sure, that’s right enough,” agreed Dan. “Tough luck for her.”

“One last question and I shall have finished worrying you,” said Worrals. “How did Charlie behave when he came in? I mean—did he strike you as being quite normal?”

Dan thought for a moment before answering. “No, I don’t think he was,” he said slowly. “I couldn’t say there was anything definitely wrong with him, though, beyond the fact that his manner seemed a bit strained. I put that down to grief. I might almost say he seemed a bit scared, too—but then he would be, having seen the debil-debils at work.”

“But he was not so abnormal as to cause you to have any doubts about his story?”

“Well, he really had no story to tell. Old Mary was dead, and that’s all there was to it. You must understand that no white man ever has, and ever will, understand just what goes on inside a blackfellow’s head. Charlie was limping, I remember. He told me he had fallen over a sharp stone. One thing

he said struck me as a bit odd; he mumbled something about Mary being the richest woman in heaven.”

Worrals’s eyebrows went up. “Say that again.”

“I wasn’t paying much attention to him, but I seem to recall his saying something about Mary being the richest woman in heaven.”

“What did you take that to mean?”

“Nothing, I thought it was more blackfellow stuff. They get queer notions.”

“You don’t know what happened to Charlie after he left you? Did he say where he was going?”

“No, but I imagine he went back to his tribe.”

“What is his tribe?”

“I don’t think he ever told me. Of course, even if he decided to go back to his tribe he might be years getting there, working his way and sitting about. Time is no object to the blacks.”

Worrals nodded. “If you hear anything of him, or if you could by any means make contact with him, you might let me know.”

“Sure.” Dan looked at Worrals curiously. “Funny you should say that.”

“What’s funny about it?”

“Because only the other day a man came to see me, and he asked a lot of questions about Charlie.”

“Who was this man?” inquired Worrals quietly.

“He came here first a long time ago—soon after Mary Carter died. Said he was anxious to get hold of Charlie and asked me to try to locate him. Told me he’d give me fifty pounds for the information.”

“Sounds like bribery and corruption,” murmured Worrals half jokingly. “What was this fellow’s name?”

Dan puckered his forehead. “Let’s see. I’ve got his card somewhere. Moran. That’s it—Felix Moran. He’s an opal dealer or something in Adelaide. He came up again the other day and doubled his offer for information about Charlie.”

Worrals’s expression did not change. “From which I gather that so far you’ve had no clue to Charlie’s whereabouts?”

“That’s how it is. He just vanished. No one’s seen him.”

“By the way, where did he live when he was at Wallabulla?” queried Worrals. “Did he sleep in the house?”

“No. He had a wurlie in the mulga scrub, back of the gum trees.”

“Would you mind translating wurlie?”

Dan grinned. “A blackfellow’s house. A bough-shelter. Sort of a wigwam we used to make with branches when we were kids.”

Worrals nodded. “I see. Well, thanks, Dan. You’ve been most helpful. Now I’m going to trespass on your patience. Will you do me a favour?”

“Why, sure. Anything for a lady.”

“If you should happen to hear anything of Charlie will you tip me off before you tell this city snooper, Moran? I’ve a reason for asking that. It’s in Janet’s interest. Maybe she’ll tell you why, some day.”

“O.K.”

Worrals moved. “I’ll be getting along. Thanks again, Dan.”

“Don’t mention it, Miss Worrals.”

Worrals smiled. “I allow people I like to call me Worrals, for short.”

“O.K.—Worrals.”

“Look in and see us if you ever find yourself near Wallabulla.”

“You bet I will,” promised Dan. “By the way, what are you girls doing there?”

“We’re not doing anything—yet,” answered Worrals. “We’ve only just arrived. We haven’t even had time to look round.”

Dan laughed, “There won’t be much to see when you do, except gibbers and spinifex. Well, let me know if you need help at any time.”

“We might—you never can tell,” replied Worrals seriously. “I’m glad we’ve got to know each other, anyway. So-long.” Leaning forward she patted the dog’s head. “So-long, mister.”

The dog smiled and wagged his tail.

“Yes, I’m afraid it is so-long for him,” said Dan sadly.

Worrals looked up quickly. “What do you mean? Is he sick?”

“No, but I’ve got to put him to sleep.”

Worrals looked distressed. “For goodness’ sake, why?”

“His master died the other day and nobody wants him.”

“That doesn’t seem sufficient reason for killing the poor little chap.”

“I’m afraid it is, here,” stated Dan, “If you leave a dog on the loose he soon develops bad habits—sheep-chasing, for instance. That means a death sentence here, so it comes to the same thing in the end, anyway.”

Worrals looked at the dog sympathetically. “Seems a pity. What’s his name?”

“Maginty.”

The dog looked up and wagged his tail at the sound of his name.

“Just a minute,” said Worrals thoughtfully. “I think I could use a friendly animal like that. In fact, I’m sure I could. I can’t think why it didn’t strike me before.”

“Use him for what?”

“House-dog.”

“He’ll do that for you.”

“Can I have him?”

“Sure.”

Worrals took the lead. “Come on, Maginty. You’re reprieved.” She smiled as the dog followed obediently, “So-long again, Dan.”

“So-long.”

Worrals helped the dog into the aircraft, made him comfortable on a seat, climbed in and, after a wave to Dan, who was watching, took off.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## *Suspicious and Alarums*

THE fierce light of day was fading and the evening shadows were lengthening across the desolate distances when Worrals landed at Wallabulla and taxied the Desoutter on into its arboreal hangar. Maginty was first out. Worrals, carrying her purchases, followed, and walking towards the house saw Frecks coming to meet her.

“Who’s this?” demanded Frecks, pointing at the dog as she drew near.

“Meet a new boy-friend of mine,” answered Worrals, smiling, “He answers to the name of Maginty.”

“Where did you pick *him* up?” inquired Frecks, patting the dog.

“Oodnadatta. Here, give me a hand with some of these parcels.”

“But what’s the idea? Why a dog?” asked Frecks, looking mystified. “What are we doing—running a kennel club or something?”

“No. I had occasion to look in at Oodnadatta on my way home, and there I saw poor Maginty under sentence of death because his master was inconsiderate enough to die before him. That struck me as a bit tough. Then it occurred to me that by taking him on we could get him out of a jam and help ourselves at the same time. He’ll let us know if strangers come snooping round.”

Frecks nodded approval. “That’s a good idea.”

“Any news?” inquired Worrals, as they walked on towards the house.

“None.”

“No sign of those men?”

“No.”

“Did you find the opal?”

“No.”

“Did you look for it?”

“We turned the place inside out and upside down, without seeing a sign of it. Did you pick up anything in Adelaide?”



“I did—quite a lot of things.”

“Such as?”

“Some very interesting information, two automatics, and a shot-gun.”

After they had reached the house and deposited the packages, Worrals looked round. “Where’s Janet?”

“She’s up near the soak, burying a dead dingo.”

“Doing *what*?”

“You heard me. Don’t worry; the dingo has been dead for ages. The sun has dried it up like a mummy. Janet thought it was a nasty thing to have lying around, so she’s burying it.”

“Let’s go and join her.”

Followed by Maginty they walked on through the rose and golden glow of sunset to where Janet, her sleeves rolled up, was busy with a spade. Coming up with her, Worrals looked with disgust at the sun-dried corpse of the first native wild dog that she had seen. Not only was it shrivelled, but its body and legs were twisted almost into a knot.

Maginty eyed the creature suspiciously, bristling, until Worrals quieted him with a sharp word. Janet paused in her work to be given the brief history of the new member of the party.

“I’m glad you’re burying that thing,” Worrals concluded, indicating the dead dingo. “It certainly is a nasty-looking mess. The poor brute must have died in agony.”

“That’s what I thought,” returned Janet, resuming her work. “Somebody must have shot at it and wounded it.”

“I should probably have agreed with you but for a remark made to me by Mr. Harding. Apparently a popular way of destroying dingoes is by poisoning them.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Janet. “I remember Aunt Mary saying something about it in one of her letters, when she was telling me about her dingo-hunting exploits. She’d have nothing to do with poison, though. It was too cruel, even for dingoes. She only used her rifle.”

“Is that so?” murmured Worrals. “If Aunt Mary only used a rifle what is that creature doing so near the house, for I’ll swear it was never killed outright by a bullet, and had it been wounded it would have gone away. Why wasn’t it scalped, I wonder?”

“Don’t ask me,” replied Janet.

“It might have been poisoned some distance off, and was on its way to the soak for water when it died,” suggested Frecks.

“That seems a reasonable explanation,” acknowledged Worrals. She was silent for a little while, then went on: “All right, Janet; I think that hole’s deep enough. Cover the thing up, and let’s get back to the house. I’m hungry, and a trifle weary. It’s hard work flying in this heat.”

Janet had just finished scraping the dry sandy earth over the distorted carcass when Maginty called attention to himself by uttering a long, low growl. Looking down at him, Frecks saw that his hackles were up; with one foot raised, he was glaring across the darkening desert.

“That dog can see something,” asserted Worrals, in a low voice.

They all looked in the direction indicated by Maginty’s muzzle.

“I can’t see anything,” declared Frecks.

“Neither can I, but his eyes are better than ours in this light,” averred Worrals. “Look at him!”

Maginty was advancing slowly, a step at a time, crouching. Not for a moment did his nose waver from its original line.

“It may be a dingo,” suggested Janet.

“We’ll soon settle it,” answered Worrals, and ran forward, urging the dog on. “Sock ’em, boy. Fetch ’em out!”

Frecks and Janet followed. They had not far to go. Worrals pulled up on the top of a fold in the ground so shallow that in the ordinary way it would not have been noticed. “Look!” she exclaimed, pointing, as the others came up with her. “Maginty was right. There he goes. Back, Maginty—come back,” she ordered, as the dog would have gone on.

Frecks was just in time to see a shadow fade into the gathering gloom. “That was a blackfellow,” she stated tersely.

“It was,” agreed Worrals.

“What was he doing?”

“Watching us, I imagine.”

“It must be the black who was with those two white men,” put in Janet.

“That’s a natural supposition, but I’m by no means sure you’re right,” replied Worrals. “For a couple of seconds I had a pretty clear view of him, and he struck me as a much taller man.”

“Maybe he was just a harmless nomad. Blacks wander about all over the place, I’m told.”

“Had he been a harmless stranger, there would have been no need for him to spy on us, or bolt when he was discovered,” Worrals pointed out. “Well, there’s no point in trying to follow him. Maginty wasn’t long in

earning his rations. If we've got Peeping Toms about, I'm more than ever glad I brought him. Let's get back."

"This suspicion that people might be prowling about the establishment is a bit sinister," remarked Frecks, regarding with misgivings some bushes which they had to pass.

"As long as they confine themselves merely to prowling about I shan't worry overmuch," murmured Worrals. "But I'm afraid they won't; and when we get indoors I'll tell you why."

Reaching the house they closed the door, lighted candles, drew the blinds and set about preparing the evening meal—not a very lengthy proceeding for, fresh food not being available, most of the cooking was done, as Frecks put it, "with a can opener".

"What about this Adelaide trip?" inquired Frecks, as she laid the table.

"I'll tell you about it while we eat," promised Worrals, who was busy with the weapons she had bought. She assembled the twelve-bore and stood it in a corner of the room, with cartridges handy. She loaded the automatics and handed one to Frecks. "Keep this in your pocket," she advised. "You may need it."

Frecks stopped what she was doing, and turned to Worrals a face that expressed surprise and mild alarm. "Need it? When?"

"Any time," answered Worrals evenly.

Frecks's expression became one of undisguised concern. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Are things as bad as that?"

"They might be—we shall soon know," returned Worrals. "I hate being an alarmist," she continued, "but I have an increasing feeling that more has been going on at Wallabulla—and is still going on—than Janet had reason to suspect. It may come to nothing, but I'd rather err on the safe side."

"This is getting quite exciting," put in Janet.

"I wouldn't say that," demurred Worrals. "To me, it begins to look grim. Sit down, and I'll tell you."

Over supper, and the coffee that concluded the meal, she told the full story of her visit to Adelaide and Oodnadatta. Frecks and Janet heard her through, their eyes on her face, without once interrupting.

"So much for what we know to be fact," went on Worrals. "Now let us try to work out what it all adds up to. I thought about it a lot—indeed, I thought about little else—on the trip home. Some things are obvious; others look suspicious—mighty suspicious. They provide us with ample grounds for speculation."

"Tell us what you think," requested Frecks.

"First of all, this fellow Moran," resumed Worrals. "He's a crook. Of that I'm in no doubt whatever. Judged on his behaviour to-day, he's not only a crook, but an unscrupulous one. He may be cunning, but I don't think he's outstandingly clever, and I'll tell you why. His blatant attempt to get me to double-cross Janet proves that he's crooked, and that provides a solid foundation on which to build a pile of surmise. Why was he upset when he learned that I'd been pumping his secretary, if he had nothing to be ashamed of? Why have me followed? Why did he attempt to bribe Dan Terry? When I said just now that he wasn't particularly clever, I was thinking of one bad slip he made. *He* introduced Janet's name into the conversation—not me. What does he know about Janet? Why should he know anything about her? The obvious answer is, because he made inquiries about the Wallabulla property and learned that it had passed to her. That alone proves his interest in Wallabulla. Why should he suddenly take an interest in this property? Again, the answer is obvious. Aunt Mary showed him a piece of rare opal. He soon learned who she was, and where she came from. He may not have realized until after Aunt Mary was dead that she had made a will, leaving the property to Janet. Janet's arrival on the scene was probably something he did not anticipate. That may have altered his plans. It certainly made things more difficult for him. True, Janet didn't stay long at Wallabulla, but he had to act cautiously while she was about. Now we've arrived, he's got to be even more careful, even though we are standing in his way."

"He would probably learn about me from Mr. Harding," interposed Janet.

"Possibly," agreed Worrals. "After all, your inheritance of the estate was no secret. I'm sure Mr. Harding had no idea of the sort of man Moran is, or he wouldn't have sent Aunt Mary to him in the first place. Harding is as straight as they make 'em. In sending Aunt Mary to Moran no doubt he acted for the best, prompted by the man's reputation as an opal expert. I think he suspects now that something is in the wind. That was my fault. I had to ask him about permits to carry firearms. But the main point arising out of all this is, Moran is a crook, and he either wants Wallabulla, or he wants us out of the way so that he can get his hands on the opal, which he knows is here. Incidentally, Moran knows that I suspect him. He knows we're armed, and why. But I'll talk about that later. Let us indulge in a little reasonable surmise. When Moran saw that piece of opal he would realize that where it came from there must be more—a fortune, perhaps, waiting to be picked up. Who had he to deal with? An old lady living, to all intents and purposes, alone, far away in the out-back. His crooked brain was soon busy.

It must have looked an easy business to rob this old woman, and had we not arrived on the scene, he would probably have got away with it, without anyone's suspicions being aroused, for, single-handed and without money, there was little Janet could do. As soon as Aunt Mary left his office, Moran called in two confederates, two men who know all there is to know about opal—Raffety and Manila Joe Barola. They may have done jobs for him before. They might have been in Adelaide at the time. That doesn't really matter. What matters is, they were put on Aunt Mary's trail. How they got here, we don't know—but that, again, doesn't matter. They came here. Unaware of the fact that, in showing her opal to Moran, she had jeopardized her life and property, Aunt Mary returned home. I am pretty certain from what we actually know that what I have said so far is a fairly accurate account of the sequence of events. One could, of course, think of several theories to fit the case, particularly in view of the long interval of time that has elapsed from the day when Aunt Mary died to the present moment. Moran might have acted on his own in the first instance. He might have hoped to induce Aunt Mary to sell the estate to him. He might have tried to intimidate her. Having failed, and having failed to find the opal, or a map showing the position of the deposit, his only course was to get hold of a couple of unscrupulous gougers like Raffety and Barola and put them on the job. They're still on it. One of these days we may know the truth. Whatever happened, Moran was, and still is, the boss. I feel certain of that. But we now come to a more disconcerting, I might say sinister, field of surmise," Worrals refilled her cup.

"By a remarkable chance," she continued, "by a chance which, on the face of it, was as lucky for Moran as it was unlucky for you, Janet, Aunt Mary faded out of the picture. She died. She died suddenly. In view of Moran's interest in her, we are bound to ask ourselves, did she die a natural death, or was she—as they used to say in the war—liquidated? If she died a natural death, it was an astonishing stroke of luck for Moran, for the one obstacle between him and the opal no longer existed. Just now I used the expression 'on the face of it' and I'll tell you why. In the light of subsequent events it may not have been such a stroke of luck for Moran as at first he must have supposed. If, in fact, he was responsible for Aunt Mary's death, it begins to look as though he blundered. Aunt Mary may have been too clever for him. We don't know—yet."

"Good gracious! Are you suggesting that Aunt Mary might have been murdered?" interrupted Janet in a sharp voice.

For a moment Worrals looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry if the thought distresses you, but in the light of what we know, it is a possibility that we are

bound to take into consideration.”

“When did this terrible thought first occur to you?” asked Frecks.

“I can’t say exactly,” answered Worrals. “Let us say that the idea came to me slowly. I must admit that there is no single outstanding piece of evidence that points to it, but there are a number of minor events which, collectively, are sufficient to make me uneasy, if not definitely suspicious. But let me go on. Moran wanted—and he still wants—the opal. One person stood in his way—Aunt Mary. She died, suddenly and conveniently. I was just saying, though, that this did not pan out as Moran must have hoped—whether he was responsible for Aunt Mary’s death or not. *Her secret died with her*. Maybe Moran thought he would have no difficulty in finding the opal deposit; he may have thought there was a big collection of opal already in the house; he may have thought that he had only to get hold of Charlie to make him spill the beans. We don’t know what he thought, but there is no getting away from the fact that Moran’s plans must have come unstuck, because the opal has not yet been found, otherwise Moran wouldn’t be behaving as he is. He would not be so anxious to have us out of the way. He would not still be searching for Charlie. Raffety and Barola would not be prowling about. They didn’t wear the appearance of men who had unearthed a fortune. If they had found the opal, they would probably be in Adelaide now, drinking their money. No, I’m convinced that with Aunt Mary’s death Moran’s plans came unstuck. Charlie wasn’t here to be questioned. If he was, then he escaped from them and faded away into the blue. Of course, assuming for the moment that Aunt Mary was murdered, it does not follow that Moran personally contrived her death. Raffety, Barola, or that hideous black may have done it, not having the wit to get the secret of the opal first. Moran is now looking for Charlie. He may have two reasons for that. Not only might Charlie know the whereabouts of the opal deposit, but he may know more about Aunt Mary’s death than is healthy for this bunch of gangsters. Charlie may know that they are after him, which would account for his keeping out of the way.” Worrals paused to sip her coffee.

“Charlie’s description to Dan Terry of the manner of Aunt Mary’s death is peculiar, if not actually fantastic,” she resumed. “If there is one word of truth in it, then it seems to me most unlikely that Aunt Mary died a natural death. People don’t dance about when they’re dying. Possibly because Charlie’s statement about this *was* so fantastic, Dan put the whole thing down to blackfellow yabber-yabber—as he calls it. I’m not so sure that he’s right. After all, Charlie wasn’t a primitive barbarian straight out of the bush. He had lived with Aunt Mary and her husband for years. He can’t be so ignorant as Dan supposes. Again, what about Charlie’s personal feelings in

the matter? They ought to be taken into consideration. Even savages are not altogether devoid of such fundamental virtues as affection, loyalty, and gratitude. Charlie must have been very fond of Aunt Mary, or he wouldn't have stayed with her for years. She was perhaps the only person who had ever shown him kindness."

"He was fond of her," put in Janet. "Aunt Mary assured me of that in her letters."

"Very well: Aunt Mary's death, which left him alone in the world, would almost certainly upset him—perhaps prey on his mind. If he had reason to suspect that she had been murdered, we should, I'm sure, have another human reaction asserting itself—the desire for revenge. He would do everything in his power to defeat the object of those responsible for the outrage."

"If natives are scared of opal, Charlie may have taken a dim view of Aunt Mary's collection of it," Frecks pointed out.

"True enough: that may have a bearing on the case," agreed Worrals. "If he had superstitious fears of the stuff, then Aunt Mary's sudden death would seem to justify them. But let's get back to Moran. You asked me just now what first put the idea into my head that Aunt Mary may have been murdered. One thing was, I think, Moran's behaviour. He's a worried man. Would he have gone to all this trouble, would he be so concerned, if he had merely tipped off a couple of opal gangsters that they might find something on the Wallabulla estate? I doubt it. There's more to it than that, and we shall soon know how the land lies.

"Be sure that Moran and his assistants are not going to sit down and wait for us to depart. We've got to ask ourselves, what are they likely to do? First of all, what would be the natural thing for Raffety and Barola to do when they came back to this house, where they had been living, and found us installed? Surely they would get in touch with their boss. The quickest way of doing it would be to go to Oodnadatta and get on the telephone to Adelaide: perhaps they are doing just that.

"What about Moran? My interview with him in his office must have given him a shock. Naturally, I didn't tell him too much. I said nothing about having an aircraft. What would be his most natural line? Surely he'd try to get in touch with Raffety and Barola. He knows I've seen them—he'd learnt that from his secretary. So he must know I've been here. We can assume with safety, I think, that Moran's first reaction will be to get in touch with his confederates on the spot—particularly if he's got a murder on his mind. After all, a body can be exhumed. Again, Charlie might turn up. He might

talk. With us here, and Charlie on the loose, Moran's determination to get the opal might take second place to a fear that we might learn too much, and call in the police. That's why I say we shall see more of Moran—and why I've bought the guns."

"Why not go to the police straight away?" suggested Janet.

"I think it's too early," said Worrals. "We've no proof of anything except that three men are trespassing on your land. That means nothing. They might be miles away by now. When I was at Oodnadatta I was half inclined to take Dan Terry into my confidence, but that would have meant telling him the whole story which, considering that I was a complete stranger to him, would have been going a bit too far. He would probably have taken that attitude of tolerant condescension that males are so fond of when dealing with girls. He may not have taken me seriously, in which case I should have been angry. On the other hand, had he taken me seriously, he would probably have asked us to keep out of the way while he handled the thing himself. Anyhow, I decided to say nothing for the moment. We can always make contact with him should we need him. It's not unlikely, though, that he'll be making contact with us."

"You think he'll come here?" queried Janet.

Worrals smiled. "I'm pretty sure of it."

"Why?"

"Aunt Mary used to gossip to him about you. She showed him your photograph, and told him you might be coming out. He's curious to see you."

Janet flared up. "What nonsense!"

Worrals nodded sagely. "You'll see whether it's nonsense or not," she bantered.

Worrals's expression changed suddenly. "Just a minute," she said slowly. "Talking of photographs, Aunt Mary had some of you, Janet. Where are they?"

Janet looked blank. "I don't know."

"Didn't you find any when you were searching the place to-day?"

"No."

"What about letters?"

Janet shook her head. "I haven't seen any."

"That's very strange," said Worrals. "Be sure that Aunt Mary wouldn't have destroyed your letters."



“Raffety may have taken them; perhaps sent them to Moran, to see if there was a clue to the opal deposit,” suggested Frecks.

“Quite likely,” agreed Worrals. She turned to Janet. “If that happened, it would explain how Moran knew about you. If he knew that you were likely to come out, he might have been ready for you when you turned up—planted his men ready to scare you off. That would also explain why he daren’t do much until you came, and had been dealt with.”

“What are we going to do about all this?” asked Frecks. “What are we going to do to-morrow?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” returned Worrals. “My brain has been too busy trying to sort out these loose threads of information I picked up at Adelaide and Oodnadatta. Not that there is much we can do beyond look for the opal. Naturally, one thinks of using the aircraft, because that would enable us to cover a lot of ground, but unfortunately we’re not likely to spot an opal deposit from the air. We could get an idea of the lay-out of the place, though. We might also be able to spot these men who are probably still hanging about. It would be something to know where they are. We might have a fly round in the morning before doing anything else. I’m a bit worried about the machine being parked outside without a guard over it, but I don’t see that we can do anything. We can’t bring it into the house. A single guard would be futile if the enemy decided to sabotage it, and if we all mounted guard we should get no sleep. It looks as if we shall have to chance it. I comfort myself with the thought that, as the enemy wants us out of the way and knows it is our only means of transport, he’ll leave it alone.”

“You intend to stay here, then?” said Janet.

“Definitely,” replied Worrals. “Frankly, I’m hoping that Dan, to prove his ability to you, will renew his exertions to find Charlie, who, I’m sure, could answer most of our questions. It’s always on the board that Charlie will come back here some day; be drawn back, perhaps, by home-sickness, for, after all, this was his home for many years, and he must have some attachment for it. Something tells me that there was more than mere fancy behind his remark about Aunt Mary being the richest woman in heaven. Of course, he knew she’d found the opal, but even his simple brain would realize that the dead can’t take their riches with them. Well, it’s ten o’clock. It’s time we washed up and hit the blankets. Maginty will tell us if we have intruders—won’t you, Maginty, old boy?”

The dog stood up, yawned audibly, and wagged his tail.

Still discussing the problem, they made everything tidy and went to bed, and eventually, after Worrals had nipped the candle, to sleep.

Frecks was some time going off. In fact, as she stated later, she was not sure if she did actually go to sleep. But she must have dozed, for when, with a start, she returned to full wakefulness, she realized that she had lost count of time. She did not know what had roused her, but her nerves were tingling. She thought it was a sound, but she was not sure. She only knew that she was wide awake, waiting for a repetition. It soon came. When Maginty in the next room growled, she was no longer in doubt. She sat upright.

“Worrals,” she breathed. “Are you awake?”

She heard Worrals move. “O.K.—I heard it,” came the soft reply.

“There’s somebody about.”

“I think so.”

“Shall I light the candle?”

“No. Listen!”

For a little while the only noise was the uneasy sniffing and snuffling of Maginty. Then came another sound, a sound so strange, so eerie, that they could not afterwards describe it. It seemed to be a soft hiss, or swishing, that started from nothing and ended in a dull thud. The whole thing lasted perhaps three seconds. Simultaneously with the thud, pandemonium broke loose. It began with a single wild scream, but into it burst such a series of demoniacal yells that Frecks’s blood ran cold. Added to this uproar came a frenzied barking from Maginty. In a matter of seconds this was the only sound, but by now Worrals was moving fast.

“Don’t light the candle,” she said tersely; “bring your gun.”

Janet was muttering: “What is it? What’s happened?”

“Goodness knows!” Still half-dazed by shock, Frecks found her pistol, which she had put on a box beside her bed, and groped her way through the living-room to the front door which Worrals was in the act of opening.

The door swung open, letting in a flood of brilliant moonlight and revealing a section of star-embazoned sky against which, for a moment, was silhouetted Worrals’s slim figure as she slipped through. Maginty was outside before her, barking furiously.

Frecks stood on the threshold. “For goodness’ sake be careful, Worrals,” she implored, in a voice brittle with apprehension. She looked out. Worrals was standing a yard away, her back against the wooden wall of the building.

“I can’t see a thing,” she muttered.

Frecks could see Maginty running to and fro, nose to the ground. He was no longer barking.

“Watch Maginty,” said Worrals. “He’ll find them if they’re still about.”

“Them?”

“There were at least two people. At one moment they were both yelling at once.”

Maginty had stopped, nose to the ground, about thirty yards away, between the house and the gum trees.

Frecks knew the spot. “He’s at the graves,” she said, in a voice that was not quite steady. “That’s a bit grim.”

“Let’s put something on our feet, and see what he’s doing,” returned Worrals curtly. “We shan’t need a torch in this moonlight.”

“This is ghastly,” muttered Janet, who had joined them.

They returned to the house, pulled shoes on their feet and, going out again, made a cautious reconnaissance from each corner of the house. Nothing could be seen. Nothing moved except Maginty, who was still at the graves.

“I think they’ve gone, whoever they were,” said Worrals, and walked briskly towards where the dog, his anger abated, walked round and round, sniffing, always returning to one spot.

The first thing that Frecks noticed was a spade thrown down near Aunt Mary’s grave. “Look at that,” she said, pointing. “It doesn’t belong to us.”

“And it wasn’t there when I came home this evening,” asserted Worrals. She walked on slowly to where Maginty was sniffing at what appeared to be a dark patch on the grave. Stooping, she looked at it closely. Then, stretching out a finger, she touched it, and held it to the light.

“It’s wet,” observed Frecks.

“It’s blood,” said Worrals softly.

There was a brief silence while they all stared at the sinister stain. Then Janet said: “Let’s get out of this, Worrals. Let’s go home—anywhere—but let’s get away from this place. It’s horrible.”

“Not on your life,” answered Worrals, firmly. “Be yourself, Janet. You didn’t run away when Jerry pranged us at Hendon, did you? Why didn’t you? Because you owed it to the Service to stay on your job. You owe it to Aunt Mary to stay on this job until we’ve got the thing buttoned up. Listen!” She ended on a note high with urgency.

Conversation stopped abruptly, and the reason for Worrals’s warning was instantly evident. Again through the silent night came the smooth yet vicious swishing noise that had been audible in the house.

“Look out—duck!” cried Worrals, throwing herself down.

Frecks dropped. Quick as she was, she felt the wind of a missile as it flashed between her and Janet, a foot or so above their heads. She caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark object that whirled along at incredible speed in level flight before soaring suddenly into the sky, where she lost sight of it. She did not see it again, but she heard it, heard a sibilant whisper that seemed to pass back over their heads. It ended abruptly with a thud. Then silence.

Worrals jumped up. "Back to the house," she ordered crisply. "Make it snappy. Come on, Maginty."

Without speaking, they ran back to the house. Worrals shut the door, locked it, and lit a candle.

"What do you make of that?" asked Frecks breathlessly. "After that thing whizzed past us, I heard it go back the way it came. I'm beginning to get the hang of this debil-debil talk. No wonder the blacks are windy, with this sort of thing going on."

"Fiddlesticks!" retorted Worrals. "I may be wrong, but I have a notion what it was. As far as I know, there's only one missile that turns round and comes back, and it happens to be peculiar to Australia. I'd say someone slung a boomerang at us. That's something I didn't expect, although, considering where we are, I suppose there's nothing remarkable about it. We've got to be careful."

"The thing is, what are we going to do about it?" demanded Frecks.



“A dark object that whirled along at incredible speed.”

([Here](#))

“To-night? Nothing,” answered Worrals promptly. “I’m not going out there again to get my skull split open. This is where we stay, under cover, until we can see what we’re at.”

“This is frightful,” muttered Janet. “Who would do such a thing?”

“Three o’clock in the morning is not the best time to work out problems,” returned Worrals. “We’ll sit quietly for a little while in case there are any more diversions. If nothing happens, we’d better get some sleep, or we shall be fit for nothing in the morning. Quiet, now.”

They sat still without speaking for about twenty minutes. Then Worrals got up. "I think it's all over for to-night," she announced. "We'll risk it, anyway."

They made much of Maginty for his warning, and returned to their beds.

## CHAPTER SIX

## *Reconnaissance*

WORRALS was astir before the moon and a few tenacious stars had lost their age-old losing battle with the rising sun. She roused the others. By the time she had dressed and thrown open the door, amethyst dawn was breaking across the melancholy waste of scrub and spinifex, now silver grey with dew.

Addressing Janet she said: "Would you mind getting breakfast while Frecks and I have a look round?"

"Of course not," agreed Janet readily.

Worrals beckoned to Frecks, called Maginty, and together they walked towards the graves. "I thought it better not to have Janet with us," remarked Worrals as they drew near. "I'm pretty certain that business last night had some connection with the graves, and it might be a bit embarrassing to discuss the possible reasons with a relative of the dead standing by."

Reaching the graves she stopped, considering them with reflective eyes. The bloodstain was now plain enough to see. It had, of course, turned black. The spade still lay where it had fallen. There were, however, three features that had been overlooked in the deceptive moonlight. The first was a trail of blood, a mere sprinkling of drops, leading away across the desert. It quickly petered out, however. The second was, the primitive cross at the head of Aunt Mary's grave had been knocked askew. The third was a mark in the mound of earth that formed the same grave. It was a thin, clean-cut slit, about six inches long. Worrals picked up the spade and applied the blade to the slit. It fitted exactly. She glanced at Frecks significantly and threw the spade aside.

"I don't think it needs a Sherlock Holmes to explain what happened here last night," she said softly. "Thinking the thing over after I went back to bed, I suspected something of the sort. Someone came here, bringing a spade. There could be only one object in bringing a spade—to dig. And there could be only one objective in which to dig at this particular spot—a grave. The reason for such a disgraceful undertaking is not so clear, unless we take it for granted that the defiler intended to expose the body. I can think of no

other reason for digging into a grave. The creature did not succeed. He failed in his purpose because he had barely started work when he was attacked by another person, someone who had either followed him, or happened to be near the graves at the time. The man who was about to dig was wounded. He dropped his spade and fled, as anyone would, being suddenly interrupted in such a gruesome task. In his terror he let out a howl. That was the first scream we heard. The attacker also did a spot of yelling, possibly as he pursued the object of his attack. They must have gone off in a hurry because before we could get going they were away. Frecks, this is all very nasty and very mysterious. One thing is quite certain: unless we can entertain the idea that Moran's men have fallen out among themselves—which hardly seems likely—there is at least one factor here outside our calculations, one actor in out drama about whom we know nothing. He was here last night, armed with a boomerang. I'm only assuming that it was a boomerang, of course; I've never seen one in action, but I can't think of anything else it could be. Let's go along to the trees and see if the machine is all right."

"What are we going to do about this spade?" asked Frecks.

"Leave it where it is."

"By taking it away we could stop the owner using it."

"If we leave it where it is, we may spot the owner of it when he comes back to recover it—if he does."

"Have you formed any theory as to why anyone should want to dig up the grave?" inquired Frecks, as they walked on towards the trees.

"I have," answered Worrals. "Obviously, there must have been a reason, and a very good reason. It is not the sort of thing anyone would do for amusement. When you come to think about it, there are very few reasons for digging up a body. Occasionally, at home, a body is exhumed. How many reasons for that can you think of?"

"It might be to verify identification."

"Yes, but there's a more common reason than that."

"For a post-mortem examination when foul play is suspected."

"Exactly."

"But that could hardly apply to this case," argued Frecks. "Who else besides us suspects foul play?"

"Nobody, I should say."

Frecks looked at Worrals curiously. "I don't get it. What's on your mind?"



“Put it this way,” suggested Worrals. “Who else, besides us, is interested in that grave?”

“Nobody that I can think of, apart from Moran and his gang. But why should they want to dig the body up? I should have thought that they would be more than content to leave it where it is.”

“Would they? Suppose Aunt Mary was murdered? No matter what we might suspect, or what we might induce the police to believe, how could violence be proved without the body? Aunt Mary’s body would, in fact, be the only proof. If it couldn’t be found, the police wouldn’t be able to start a case, much less prove anything.”

Frecks stared. “Are you suggesting that Moran might take the body away?”

Worrals shrugged. “Without the body there could be no evidence against him, or anyone else. That, at least, would be a pretty strong motive for removing the body. It might well be that right here, thirty yards from our door, is ample evidence to hang Moran and his outfit. We don’t know, but it *might* be so. I’m only trying to think of reasons for these mysterious happenings.”

“Why don’t we go to the police and ask them to examine the body?”

“There would have to be grounds much stronger than we possess before an exhumation order would be granted. We’ve no real evidence at all. All we have are suspicions, and flimsy ones at that. We couldn’t even produce a motive for the murder.”

“What about the opal?”

“What about it? Where is it?” Worrals shook her head. “We’ve no actual proof that there is opal at Wallabulla. The one piece we have seen might have come from anywhere.”

By this time they had reached the aircraft. They made a careful examination, but could find nothing to suggest that it had been touched.

“Let’s go back and have breakfast,” decided Worrals. “Don’t say anything to Janet about the grave, and what we suspect. After breakfast I’m going to have a look at the wurlie Dan mentioned, the bough-shelter that was occupied by Charlie when he was here. It’s on the far side of the gum trees.”

They returned to the house. Worrals said little over breakfast. She ate with a faraway expression in her eyes. But, as soon as the meal was over, her manner changed.

“Let’s wash up,” she suggested. “Then we’ll go and have a look at Charlie’s wigwam.”

In a few minutes they were on their way to the trees. It did not take them long to find the wurlie. From a short distance it looked like a pile of dead sticks, but closer investigation revealed that these had been so arranged as to leave a cavity inside. Worrals halted and gazed at the primitive structure.

“Well, well,” she murmured. “Do you see what I see?”

“I can see a heap of dead branches,” replied Frecks.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Worrals quietly. “What about this one?” She broke off a small twig, and held it up, “What about that? The wood is still green. The leaves still hang on. They aren’t even brittle. According to all accounts, Charlie has been gone from here for months, but the branch from which I broke this twig hasn’t been here for weeks, perhaps not more than a few days.”

“You mean——” began Frecks.

“What I mean is, someone has repaired this crazy dwelling quite recently. Why should anyone repair it? There can be only one answer to that. To live in it. This lines up with our ideas of a stranger being about: the man whom Maginty barked at over by the soak last evening; the man who attacked the intruder by the graves last night. Now we’re getting somewhere. Let’s see if we can find anything else.”

As she finished speaking Worrals dropped on her knees at the entrance of the wurlie and peered inside. For a minute she was intent to gaze. Then she broke off a small stick and with it stirred the dry leaves that covered the ground.

“If a black is using this wurlie he’ll know someone has been tinkering with it,” suggested Janet.

“If a black is using this wurlie he must know we’re in the house,” retorted Worrals. “It’s quite likely that he’s been watching us all morning. He’s probably watching us at this moment. Come out of that, Maginty,” she concluded sharply.

Maginty had gone into the wurlie and, nosing about among the leaves, had found what turned out to be a bone. Worrals took it from him and held it up.

“Take a look at that,” she invited. “That bone was in a live animal or a bird less than a week ago. I think that’s about as much as we need to know. There’s no doubt about it—we’ve got a neighbour!”

“What about the black—this Arnhem-lander named Yoka—who was with Raffety and Barola?” queried Frecks.

“He’ll stay close to his two white bosses,” declared Worrals. “There were two blacks in the argument round the graves last night. I’d say this is where the second one lives, or lived, until the house was occupied. It was the man who repaired this wurlie who threw the boomerang at the fellow messing about by the graves. Judging by the blood, he hit his man, too.”

“Who on earth could it be?” questioned Janet.

Worrals smiled faintly. “Think of all the blackfellows in Australia, and ask yourself which one would be most likely to visit Wallabulla. Who has the most right to live in this wurlie?”

Janet looked blank for a moment; then understanding dawned in her eyes. “Charlie!” she cried.

Worrals nodded. “That’s the way I figure it out. If Charlie was still around, it would account for a lot of things. Maybe he never went away, which would explain why Dan hasn’t been able to find him. He may have been here all the time. Maybe he went away, but, having no ties except those he’d known for years, drifted back, just to be near the old place. If that is so, what does he think, now that the place is suddenly overrun with people? He may hardly know himself, but of this you can be sure: he’d resent having strangers about the place. Like an abandoned dog, he’d go into hiding, ready to bite anything or anybody if he got the chance.”

“But if you’re right, surely Charlie would have shown up when Janet was here alone?” suggested Frecks.

“He may not have been here then.”

“Very well. If he was watching us, wouldn’t he recognize Janet as Aunt Mary’s niece, and reveal himself? He must have seen her photograph.”

Worrals shrugged. “I don’t know about that. I imagine it would depend on the strength of his intelligence. I know there are blacks in Africa who can’t even grasp what a photograph represents, much less identify a person from one. They don’t even know the right way up of a photo. Like animals, they only understand movement. It may be so with Charlie. All we know is, he hasn’t shown up, but the possibility of his being here puts a very different complexion on our problem. Our first job must be to find him, make contact with him before the others get hold of him. If they rumble that he’s about, they’ll be after him; and if they once get their hands on him, I wouldn’t give much for his chance. Let’s see if this has any effect.” Worrals cupped her hands round her mouth, and shouted: “Charlie!”

There was no answer.

“It was just an idea,” murmured Worrals. “Another idea would be to fly round and try to spot him from the air. That wouldn’t interfere with another plan I had in mind for this afternoon.”

“What was that?” asked Frecks, as they walked back towards the machine.

“I thought you might like to take a trip as far as Oodnadatta,” answered Worrals.

Frecks looked astonished. “Oodnadatta! What on earth for?”

“To check a little conjecture of my own. When I was in Adelaide I learned that a daily air service operates between Adelaide and Darwin—that’s over sixteen hundred miles to the north. The plane leaves Adelaide at eleven-thirty, and calls at Oodnadatta at three-fifty-five. That’s the quickest way Moran could get here if he decided to come. He may be on the plane. If he’s on the way here, it would be a good thing if we knew about it. By flying in, you can check up on that. You can’t mistake him.” Worrals gave a brief description of Moran. “Don’t let him see you,” she warned. “Keep out of his way, and park the machine where he’s not likely to notice it. Watch what he does, and then come back.”

“Wouldn’t you rather go yourself?”

“No. I have a reason for staying here. You can do the job as well as I can. Take Janet with you, if you like, for company; but take particular care, if Moran comes, that he doesn’t see her, or he may recognize her from a photograph.” Worrals smiled. “I don’t mind her having a word with Dan Terry. He’s going to be a useful man to know before this affair is over. By the way, you can fill up with petrol while you’re there. You needn’t leave until after lunch. Meanwhile, let’s have a look over the Wallabulla estate from topsides to see if there are any signs of life. Are you coming to have a bird’s-eye view of your property, Janet?”

“What about lunch? Hadn’t I better see about it?”

“It will take us three minutes to rip the lid off a can of bully when we get back. Come on.” Worrals climbed into the machine. “I shall head away from Wallabulla while I grab some altitude,” she explained. “Then I’ll come back in a long glide. We shall make less noise that way. I’m afraid anyone who may be about will have time to hide, though.”

“What are we going to do about Maginty?” asked Frecks.

“He had better come with us,” answered Worrals. “He travels all right. He can sit on Janet’s lap.”

In a few minutes the Desoutter was in the air, a speck of blue, climbing steadily into the eastern sky. Worrals nudged Frecks and pointed to a trail

that cut as straight as the flight of an arrow across the landscape, to vanish at last in the mirage-distorted distance.

“That’s the trail to Oodnadatta,” she observed. “It shows up more plainly from the air than from the ground. When you go, you couldn’t do better than follow it.”

She put the aircraft into a slight bank that developed into a succession of wide turns, which were maintained until the needle of the altimeter rested on the eight thousand mark; then, gradually losing height, she began a long shallow glide back over Wallabulla. Below, the plain looked as smooth as a lawn, except where mulga and saltbush gave it a roughed-up appearance. Away to the west rose the gaunt, barren ranges, burnt to a dull orange by the sun, and disfigured by innumerable gulleys carved by the merciless hand of time. High though it was, the Desoutter rocked in the bumps of a heat-tortured atmosphere. Frecks studied the landscape closely, section by section, mile by mile; but in all the vast expanse of wilderness, only one thing moved, and this, strangely enough, was at no great distance from the house. A dark object in a semi-erect hunched-up attitude was bounding away in long leaps towards a fairly extensive outcrop of rock, half hidden by mulga bushes. She touched Worrals on the arm. “Look! That must be a kangaroo. It’s the first one I’ve seen. We must have disturbed it.”

Worrals tilted a wing to get a clearer view, and watched the creature until it disappeared from sight in the bushes. “Yes,” she said thoughtfully. “As you say, we must have disturbed it.”

Still gliding, she continued the flight. For nearly twenty minutes she held the machine in the air at just over stalling speed, then headed back for the landing area.

“Not a very profitable effort,” remarked Frecks, as the wheels bumped on the rough ground.

Worrals allowed the machine to finish its run, taxied it into the shade of the trees, switched off and looked at her watch. “Twelve noon,” she observed. “We’ll have a bite of lunch, then you two can waffle along to Oodnadatta to see if there’s anything doing there.”

Leaving the machine where it stood, they were walking towards the house when, passing the graves, Worrals pulled up short.

“So we *were* being watched,” she muttered. “Somebody took the opportunity of collecting the spade. It’s gone. Whoever took it must have known that we were all in the air, or he wouldn’t have risked showing himself in the open so near the house.”

"I don't like this feeling of being watched by unseen eyes. It gives me the creeps," said Frecks.

"Well, we are at least aware of it," answered Worrals. "Moreover, it's a game that two can play." She went on to the house.

Lunch was a simple affair. For a little while they lingered over a cup of tea, discussing the question uppermost in their minds; then Worrals rose, picked up the dingo-rifle, and loaded it. "You'd better be getting along now," she told the others.

"What are you going to do with that rifle?" asked Frecks in mild surprise.

"I'm coming to see you off," replied Worrals. "After that, I shall be alone, remember. There's something comforting about a nice, smooth piece of metal under your arm when you're on your own."

They strolled back to the machine. Frecks climbed into the pilot's seat and Janet took her place beside her.

"So-long. Don't forget what I told you about keeping clear of Moran if he comes," reminded Worrals, and, closing the cabin door, walked round to the far side of the aircraft.

"What's the big idea?" inquired Frecks, showing a puzzled face at her side window.

Worrals smiled. "It's all right. I want anybody who happens to be watching to think we are all aboard."

Frecks nodded. "I get it."

As the engine came to life and the machine moved forward, Worrals stepped behind a tree, calling Maginty to her. By the time the tail unit had passed, she was lying in a slight depression facing the house, with Maginty, looking slightly bored, by her side. Taking care not to show herself, she moved her position slightly to some higher ground that commanded a clearer view of the house, and then, lying flat, made herself comfortable, the rifle at her side.

It was quiet and restful under the trees. Maginty went to sleep. But not Worrals; she lay still. Only her eyes moved as from time to time they left the region of the house to survey the harsh terrain beyond, now quivering under the lances of white heat flung down by the midday sun.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## *A Death at Wallabulla*

WORRALS lying motionless among the straight boles of the gums, knew that if Frecks had asked her what she hoped to see, she would not have been able to answer. But she thought she had a reasonable expectation of seeing something, even if she did not know what it would be, for in her heart she was convinced that the house was under constant observation—had been watched, in fact, ever since their arrival and, perhaps, before that. She felt that if the watcher, or watchers, could be deceived into thinking that they had all gone off in the aircraft, they might show themselves, although to what purpose she could not hazard a guess. It was a chance, and as she had nothing better to do for the time being, it was worth taking.

Events justified this surmise, but not immediately. Indeed, as minute succeeded minute, and time ran on into the second hour of her vigil, she began to fear that she was going to be disappointed. She became depressed by the stark loneliness of the parched grey wilderness before her. In its weary monotony the melancholy spinifex seemed to go on for ever. Through the glare, the only things that moved were the distant ranges, as they quivered in the blistering heat. The utter absence of sound beat on her eardrums, irritating her nerves and inducing a feeling of impending calamity which she tried to shake off, but could not.

It was getting on for four o'clock before her patience was rewarded by a definite movement. It was distant and lasted only a few seconds. Far away beyond the house, in line with the hills, something had bounded across an open space between two clumps of mulga. Her first thought was, naturally, that this was the kangaroo they had seen from the air, a conjecture that was supported by the direction. More in a spirit of idle curiosity than for any other reason, she watched the scrub into which the creature had disappeared, a point well over a mile away. Time passed. Nothing happened. She assumed that the bushes had been the creature's objective and that it had taken cover in them. Her surprise, therefore, was considerable when it suddenly reappeared much nearer to the house. This second appearance was

practically identical with the first. The creature suddenly rose out of the ground, it seemed, and after loping for a short distance vanished in the same mysterious way that it had arisen.

Worrals was puzzled. She was puzzled by this behaviour, which struck her as curious. As far as she could see, the animal had no cause for alarm; and if there was no cause for alarm, why these furtive movements? She knew nothing about the habits of the kangaroo, but there seemed to be no reason why it should not sit down and feed, if that was what it wanted to do. Was it, she wondered, on its way to the soak to drink? Pondering this, it seemed a queer time for an animal to drink. She knew that most wild animals rest in the heat of the day, and drink at sundown. Again, she thought the colour of the beast was unusual. She had seen kangaroos at the Zoo, and her memory of them was of tawny-coloured creatures. This one seemed much darker.

Just when the first suspicion entered her head that it might not be a kangaroo, she did not know. At first she thought of the other animals indigenous to Australia. There was, she recalled, the wallaby, but to her annoyance she could not remember ever having seen one, either in life or in a picture. But this line of thought was shattered when, about ten minutes later, she saw the thing again, now within two hundred yards of the house. Its movements were even more peculiar than before. Flat on the ground now, it was worming its way from one rock to another, a method of locomotion that could be attributed only to a reptile, such as the crocodile. But a reptile of such a size in such a place was not in the nature of things. Thus she thought swiftly, her brain trying to keep pace with the phenomenon. Then, in a flash of understanding, she grasped the truth. The creature was neither animal nor reptile. It was a man. A black. And from the line of his advance, it was evident that his objective was the house.

With her nerves now tingling with mild excitement and anticipation, Worrals flattened herself closer against the ground and waited, watching. After this slight movement she remained motionless, for her common sense told her that a man so cautious, so clever in his approach, so adept in fieldcraft as to employ animal mimicry, would not fail to scrutinize closely every inch of the country ahead of him.

The next time Worrals saw the man he was in the shadow of the house, pressed flat against the front wall, edging towards the door. At first she could hardly believe her eyes. It was only movement that gave him away. How he had got there without being observed, she could not imagine. It was in the nature of a miracle. No white man could have performed such an astonishing feat.



Tense now with interest, she kept her eyes on the black who, with infinite caution, was still approaching the door. It was not the blackfellow who had been with the two whites. His height alone was ample evidence of that. This man was every inch of six feet; the other had not been more than five. This man, too, wore long trousers. The other black had worn shorts. Worrals noticed something else. The object of her interest carried something in his hand. At first, such was her interest in his manœuvres that she paid no attention to this, but she now perceived, from its unique shape, that it was a boomerang. This, then, she thought, was one of the participants of the affair at the graves. She felt sure that it must be Charlie, but there was still a doubt, and she could think of no way of testing her suspicions without frightening into instant flight a man who, obviously, was as wild and nervous as a hawk.

The black crept on, paused at the window to make a wary inspection of the living-room, and reached the door. Worrals had left it closed, but not locked. A black hand closed on the handle, and turned it. Slowly, very slowly, the door opened an inch—two inches. Again the intruder waited, taking the opportunity of making a quick survey of the landscape, so that Worrals had a good view of a long narrow head with a receding forehead, topped by wavy hair tied into a mop, and a prominent jaw that carried a short straggling beard. Another factor which she did not overlook was this, for it supported her belief that the man was Charlie: he knew his way about. The manner in which he had approached the house, and had gone straight to the front door, proved at least that he was not a stranger.

The black opened the door, went in, and, leaving the door ajar, disappeared from sight.

What Worrals wanted to know now was what was the man doing? What did he want in the house? Obviously there must be a purpose in this visit which involved such risks. If it was Charlie, would he come just to have a look round, to see what was going on? Worrals did not know. She could think of only one way to find out, and that was by spying on him through the window. If he saw her, as was not unlikely, she decided that she would challenge him with his name, in the hope that his fears might subside. If it turned out that she was mistaken in his identity, well, she would have to handle the situation as circumstances dictated. If it was Charlie, why then, with careful manipulation, she would hold in her hand the trump card of the whole sinister game.

With this object in view, she had half risen to her feet when a new actor stepped into the drama; stepped on to the stage in a manner so utterly unexpected that she sank down again with a little gasp that expressed both astonishment and consternation. From a few tufts of scrub, so sparse that it

seemed impossible that they could have concealed a rabbit, much less a man, a figure jumped up and, crouching low, raced towards the house. It was a black. In his hand he carried a spear. Worrals recognized him by his figure. It was Yoka, the black who had been with Raffety and Barola. Something had happened to him, though—happened to his face. It was half smothered in what appeared to be a mass of dirty bandages. She had no time to wonder at this, for in a flash the man had reached the house at the very spot where the man who had gone inside had reached it. There he crouched, and from the way he held his spear poised, his intention was never in doubt.

In such conditions the human brain can work fast, and in the brief interval before she acted, Worrals thought she had grasped the situation. The black before her eyes was the man who had started to desecrate the grave. Charlie had caught him at it, had thrown his boomerang and wounded him in the face. Now, with a spear, the wounded man was out for revenge.

For a second or two Worrals hesitated, perceiving clearly the difficulties confronting her if she were to prevent a horrible tragedy from being enacted on her doorstep. To shout a warning would, in all probability, scare both men without serving any useful purpose. It might also precipitate the obviously contemplated murder.

Actually, it was the man inside the house who answered Worrals's question for her. Whether he had become suspicious, had heard a sound, or had finished what he had come to do, Worrals did not know. But he appeared again at the door. Fortunately for him he stopped on the threshold, although from this position Worrals realized that it was impossible for him to see his prospective assailant, who was still crouching hard against the same wall as the doorway, and about six paces distant from it. The arm holding the spear went up and back. The weapon remained poised. The black inside the building had only to take one step forward, and he would be impaled. Of this there was not the slightest doubt in Worrals's mind, for the distance between the two men was too short for a miss to be possible.

In her heart Worrals doubted if, in the eyes of the law, she would be held justified in shooting the man with the spear, for as yet he had committed no crime; but it was evident that if she did nothing the crime would be committed. The other man would be slain, and nothing that she then did, nothing that anybody could do, would bring him back to life. Moreover, if she was to save the life of this man, she would have to act on the instant, for he was now edging forward, preparatory to making his exit not only from the house, but, in all probability, from this world. There was only one thing Worrals could do. She brought the rifle to her shoulder, took quick aim at the spearman, and squeezed the trigger.

Simultaneously with the report—or as near to simultaneously as makes no difference—Yoka went over backwards. He did not collapse and fall as is customary when a body is struck by a bullet: the spear leapt into the air, and he was hurled over backwards with such violence that Worrals, who had never seen anything like it, was astonished. She could not understand what had happened, although later on this remarkable performance was explained, when she found that by one of those freak chances that occur from time to time the bullet had not hit the man but had struck the blade of his spear. The force of the concussion did the rest.

Having fired the shot, Worrals sprang to her feet, thinking that the affair was over. But in this she was mistaken. It had only just begun.

The man inside the house acted contrarily to her calculations. Instead of dodging back into the living-room for cover he leaped into the open, possibly with the idea of bolting; or he may have jumped from sheer shock. Anyhow, the result was, being clear of the door, he saw the other black, as he was bound to.

Yoka, instead of lying where he had fallen, as would have been reasonable conduct for a man who had supposedly just been shot, was again on his feet, looking about him in a bewildered manner which in different circumstances would have been funny. This state of affairs did not last long. Yoka saw the man whom he had been stalking appear in the doorway, and being weaponless he did not stop to argue. With an animal yell of fear he made a bee-line for the nearest bushes. Worrals, who was quite sure that he would reach them, was prepared to let him go. But not the other fellow. With a bellow of rage he flung his boomerang. Worrals watched, fascinated. For the first thirty yards the uncouth weapon skimmed low along the ground; then, like a high-performance aircraft taking off, it began to rise, straight in line with the running man. Had he turned, all might have yet been well; he might have escaped the shadow of death that was overtaking him, as a stooping hawk overtakes a sparrow. But he did not. Perhaps he thought he was safe. Be that as it may, the boomerang struck him on the back of the neck with a crack that Worrals heard distinctly from where she stood, a spell-bound watcher, unable to take a hand, even if she had so wished.

As the stricken man crashed forward on to his face in a little cloud of dust, the man who had thrown the missile let out a shout of triumph. It was short-lived. A shot rang out. He spun round twice, and then fell sprawling in a grotesque attitude across the threshold. Worrals was aghast. Where the shot had come from, she had no idea.

Maginty rushed forward, barking furiously, and she ran after him. She was half-way to the house when she realized the folly of what she was

doing, but as it would now take as long to run back to the trees as forward to the house, she held on. Nothing happened. Reaching the door, she jumped over the body lying there, to safety. Throwing her rifle on the table she turned, and seizing the fallen black by the ankles dragged him inside. This done, she slammed the door, hurried to the window and, without exposing herself, took a peep in the hope of seeing the man who had fired the last shot. But all she could see was Yoka, lying motionless where he had fallen. She felt certain that he must be dead. Judging from the sound of the impact of the boomerang on the base of his skull, either his spine must be broken or his head split open. She waited for a minute, but he did not move. Silence reigned. A little flock of white cockatoos, bound towards an unknown destination, drifted across the scene like scraps of wind-blown paper.

Deciding that nothing was to be gained by watching, she turned back to the man on the floor, and caught her breath when she saw a little pool of blood forming under his face. If he had been hit in the head, it seemed likely that he was dying, too—if he were not already dead. She noticed that he was a much older man than she had supposed. Fetching a basin of water and an old pillow for his head, she bathed the wound, and, examining it, was not a little relieved to find that, although a piece of scalp had been torn clean off, the bullet had evidently come from an angle to strike a glancing blow without penetrating the bone. He remained unconscious while she cleansed the wound and bandaged it. Apart from that, there was nothing she could do. When the aircraft returned, one of them would have to fly him to the Inland Medical Mission at Oodnadatta. Knowing of the vitality and recuperative powers of natives, she was quite prepared for the man to regain consciousness before that happened. She made another survey from the windows, but saw nothing of interest except Yoka, still lying motionless. She felt a little uneasy about ignoring him, for there was a faint chance that he might be alive; but, she reasoned, the man who had fired the last shot—presumably Raffety or Barola—must have seen his black companion struck down, and if he were not prepared to run the risk of showing himself, she did not see why she should.

She sat down to think the matter over. She was worried about the man outside—the active one, not the black. He knew that she was in the house. More important, perhaps, he knew the black was there. He and Yoka must have been watching the house. What was he doing now? What plan was he making? A plan he would certainly have to make, knowing that this violence must result in the police being brought in. Charlie—if the man on the floor was Charlie—had been attacked and wounded. The intention had been to kill him. She would bear witness to that. As it turned out, it had been Charlie

who had done the killing. He would hardly relish a police investigation. Knowing what he had done, Worrals thought, he would probably bolt as soon as he was able. Quite apart from that, if Yoka was dead, then Dan Terry would have to be informed. With one thing and another, Worrals was more than a little worried. She had hoped that something would happen, but she had not imagined anything like this. Still, there was nothing she could do about it. She wished the others would return. She realized that they might be in some danger when they landed, but, on thinking the matter over, she could not believe that Raffety, or Barola, or whoever was in the bushes outside, would shoot, or attempt to shoot, all three of them. Looking at her watch she saw that it had turned half-past five. The machine should be back by now, she thought. She hoped that nothing had gone amiss, but she began to fear that it had.

She settled down to wait, brushing away the flies that tried to settle on the face of the unconscious man on the floor. Her anxiety seemed to be felt by Maginty, who walked about uneasily in spite of repeated orders to sit down and be quiet.

The evening wore on.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Moran Pulls a Fast One*

**W**ORRALS was right about things going amiss at Oodnadatta, although for this Frecks was hardly to be blamed.

The expedition started well enough. No navigational skill was needed to keep the machine on its course, for she had only to follow the trail which, except for an occasional detour to avoid an obstruction, ran straight across the dreary sea of spinifex. Heat bumps there were in plenty; the machine rose and fell on invisible waves; it might have been sailing a choppy sea. There is an old saying amongst airmen that bumps never killed anyone; they can, however, be tiresome, and make flying a physical labour. Frecks took comfort from the knowledge that the flight would be a comparatively short one.

Just as Oodnadatta crept up over the horizon, she remarked the only human being they had seen during the whole trip. A man in an open ramshackle car was stirring up a cloud of dust as he drove along the track towards the township. The vehicle looked incongruously out of place, and she wondered vaguely where the man had been. Beyond that, she paid no attention to it. If the man enjoyed bumping about the desert in an old car, it was, she decided, no concern of hers. In which, as she was to learn in due course, she was mistaken—very much mistaken. However, without the slightest suspicion of this, it was with an easy mind that she flew on to her destination and landed.

Her first action was to have the machine refuelled, after which she got permission from the airfield manager to park it in a convenient place not far from the booking-office. The time was then nearly two o'clock. A few minutes later the south-bound regular service plane came in. Frecks paid no particular attention to it. It was the north-bound plane, from Adelaide, that she had come to meet.

She had hoped by a lucky chance to find Dan Terry at the airfield, but he was not there, and as they had time on their hands she had just suggested to Janet that they should go in search of him, when the arrival of a motor car

threw her plans into confusion and brought to an end her peace of mind. From out of the car stepped a man whom she had only seen once, but would not be likely to forget. It was Raffety. White with dust, he looked hot and bad-tempered. Frecks understood now the purpose of the car she had overtaken on the way in. This was it. Its arrival was outside her calculations—or, rather, the arrival of the man in it. True, neither she nor Worrals had any idea of where the men had gone, but the last place she expected to see either of them was at Oodnadatta. Nor had they taken into account the possibility of a motor car as a means of transport. Why, she could not imagine, for, seeing it now as an established fact, it seemed a most natural thing.

The most unfortunate part about the whole business was that Raffety had seen them standing there. There had been no time to hide. The car was within twenty yards of them before she had troubled to glance at it. Raffety had showed no surprise when he looked at them, and Frecks understood why. He must have known they were there, having seen the machine pass over him as he neared the town. He stopped the engine of the car, got out, and, without another glance at the girls, walked briskly to the office.

“That’s torn it,” muttered Frecks bitterly. “Trust something to go wrong as soon as I start to do anything on my own.”

“What’s he doing here, do you suppose?” asked Janet.

“I imagine he’s here for the same purpose as ourselves—to meet Moran; unless he’s going to fly down to Adelaide to see him. The machine that came in just now is scheduled out at two-fifteen, so Worrals told me. I’ll tell you what. I’m going to try to find out what he’s up to. You stay here and keep an eye on the machine.” Frecks hurried away towards the rear of the office buildings.

She was absent about five minutes. When she came back her forehead was knitted in a puzzled frown. “He’s not going on the plane,” she announced, although this was now evident, for the pilot had already climbed aboard and was taxi-ing into position to take off. “He must be waiting for Moran,” she continued. “I had a word with the chap in the office. He says Raffety was here yesterday. He made a ’phone call. I can’t understand it. We saw him arrive just now from the direction of Wallabulla.”

“He might have come in yesterday and gone back,” suggested Janet.

“It’s a long trip.”

“He could have done it, though,” asserted Janet. “The car ought to do the journey in four hours. Of course, we didn’t know anything about the car, but supposing they had it somewhere handy, the most natural thing for them to

do when they found us in possession of the house would be to drive into Oodnadatta and get in touch with Moran on the 'phone to ask what they were to do. I reckon Moran would give them orders about how to deal with the situation. It may have had something to do with the business at the graves last night. Anyway, if Raffety was here yesterday, it looks as if he went back to Wallabulla to tell Barola what Moran had said."

"Yes, I think that's reasonable," agreed Frecks. "But what's he doing here again to-day?"

"I should say he's either come in to report by 'phone what happened last night, or else he's here to meet Moran. If Moran is on his way to Wallabulla to take charge of things himself, he'll need the car. He couldn't walk out under three days. It takes a good camel at least three days to do the trip. A horse, ridden hard, might do it in two. Obviously, the car would be the easiest way."

Frecks shrugged. "Well, I suppose all we can do is wait and see. It's a pity Raffety spotted us. Naturally, he'll wonder why we're here. What construction will he put on that, I wonder?"

Janet shook her head. "Don't ask me. He was probably just as annoyed to see us here as we were to see him."

"There's one thing about it I don't like, and that is, he must realize that Worrals is alone at Wallabulla," stated Frecks moodily.

"I don't see that it matters. We can always get back before him," returned Janet.

"Yes, that's true enough," assented Frecks. "Well, there's nothing we can do except wait. There is this about it. If Moran is on the Adelaide plane, nothing Raffety can do will prevent us from seeing him arrive."

"And then what?"

"Goodness knows! I imagine the car will go back to Wallabulla."

"In which case we shall do the same thing, and beat them to it?"

"That's the idea," agreed Frecks. "There's nothing else for us to do here."

"Unless we have a word with Dan Terry," suggested Janet casually.

Frecks glanced up at her. "Remember what Worrals said about it being a bit early to call in the police? Hallo! There's Raffety now, standing outside the office. He's waiting for something. It can only be the plane."

Raffety had appeared, hands in his pockets, smoking.

"If we stand here he'll realize that we're waiting for the plane, too," said Janet.



“What of it?” murmured Frecks. “He must know we’re watching him, and he knows that we know he’s watching us. That’s all there is to it.”

She was silent for a little while, and then went on: “I’ll tell you what, Janet. We’ve still got some time to kill. Instead of us both standing here, why don’t you walk into the town to see if you can find Dan Terry and have a word with him?”

Janet looked surprised. “Why?”

“Oh, just to keep in touch with him. He may have some news that will interest us. You needn’t tell him anything that matters. He might stroll back with you. Come to think of it, it would perhaps be a good thing if Raffety saw us talking to the local policeman. The knowledge that we were in touch with the police might prevent him from trying to put over any more rough stuff, or interfering with us at all.”

“There’s something in that,” conceded Janet. “All right; I shan’t be long.”

“Try to be back by the time the machine comes in. It’s due at three fifty-five.”

“Right!” Janet departed at a brisk walk.

Frecks found a place in the shade, and settled down to kill time. It was a weary business. Occasionally Raffety glanced in her direction, and she would not have been surprised if he had come over to her; but he did not, and when eventually a distant drone announced the approach of the passenger machine she stirred herself with a sign of thankfulness. A minute later Janet appeared. Frecks greeted her with eyebrows raised questioningly.

“No luck,” announced Janet. “I had my walk for nothing. He’s away.”

“What a nuisance!” consoled Frecks.

“There’s been a spot of bother somewhere, and he had to go to see about it,” explained Janet. “They’re expecting him back any time, though.”

“He’ll have to be quick if he wants to see us; here’s the machine,” said Frecks, as the plane came gliding in. “Stand fast,” she added. “There’s no need for us to move. We can see all we want to from here.”

Nothing more was said for a few minutes while the aircraft came slowly along to the parking area.

The first man out was Moran, carrying a small suitcase. Frecks had no difficulty in recognizing him from Worrals’s description. If confirmation was needed, it was provided by Raffety, who went straight to the man and at once engaged him in earnest conversation.

Frecks watched with interest to see what they would do. It turned out that they did very little. They stood talking for perhaps five minutes; and from the way Moran glanced from time to time in their direction she knew that they were one of the subjects under discussion. Apparently a decision was reached, for the two men then walked directly to the car.

“There they go, bound for Wallabulla, I’ll bet,” muttered Frecks.

The two men got into the car. Raffety took the wheel. The engine came to life. The car started to back, preparatory to turning—or so Frecks assumed, for this appeared to be the intention. But the car continued to run on in reverse. Raffety seemed to be having trouble with the steering. The car stopped, then started to back again. Suddenly it swerved towards the Desoutter.

For a second Frecks stood still, rigid, as a suspicion struck her. Then, as the car continued to back and suspicion became a certainty, she dashed forward with a shout of warning. But she was too late. The rear of the car ran under the Desoutter’s wing, and with a crash came into such violent collision with the wing-strut that the fish-plate which fastened the root of it to the longeron was ripped clean off. The car stopped instantly. The two men in it looked behind them as if to see what they had collided with. They both got out.

Moran spoke first. Raising his hat he said suavely: “I am most dreadfully sorry. It was entirely our fault. Something jammed. That’s the worst of an old car—something’s always going wrong. I accept full responsibility. I will, of course, pay for the damage.”

Frecks was white to the lips, and almost speechless with fury and mortification. “You did that on purpose!” She forced the words through her teeth.

Moran looked pained. “Come, come, my dear young lady! Why should we do a thing like that? Be sensible, now. It was an accident, and I’m very sorry. I can’t say more than that. Here’s my card. Please send me the bill for the repairs, and I shall be happy to pay it.” He tendered a slip of pasteboard.



Suddenly it swerved toward the Desoutter. ([Here](#))

In her rage, Frecks swept it aside. “Keep your card, you—you——” She nearly choked. “I can’t get spare parts here, and you know it.”

Moran smiled sadly. “Well, that’s too bad,” he observed. “I shall probably be going back to Adelaide in a day or two. Make a list of what you want; if I can get the things I’ll have them sent up to you. I’m sorry I can’t stay here arguing about the matter any longer, as I have a long journey in front of me.”

Frecks glared, quivering with impotence. Never had she felt so utterly helpless. She realized that Moran had been too clever for her. In one simple action he had dealt them a blow from which she could not see how they would recover—at least, for some time. They were grounded, stuck at

Oodnadatta, and Worrals was at Wallabulla in a similar fix, but without knowing the reason. The infuriating part of it was, Moran had immobilized them without breaking the law; indeed, without doing anything for which he could be blamed, even by anyone who had witnessed the accident. No one, not knowing all the circumstances, would believe that the collision had been deliberately planned.

Still speechless and motionless, Frecks watched Moran raise his hat in a sardonic gesture. The car drove off. Stunned by the calamity, she watched it until it passed out of sight round the first bend in the road. Then she turned to Janet. "I'm a fool," she said bitterly. "This is the sort of thing I do when I'm entrusted with any sort of responsibility. I always seem to slip up."

"I don't see how you could have prevented it, even if you'd known what Raffety was going to do," argued Janet. "Had you tried to stop the car, it might have been worse; you'd have been run over."

"I should have foreseen that they might try something like that," retorted Frecks.

"Nobody would have foreseen it," replied Janet emphatically. "How bad is the damage? Is it absolutely hopeless?"

"I don't know till I've had a look at it," answered Frecks miserably, turning to the aircraft. "Even if the damage can be repaired, it will take a long time—and they're already on their way. Let's see, anyway. There is this about it," she went on in a hard voice, "if there's any way of getting this aircraft into the air, even if it's only tied together with string, even at the risk of having it fall to bits under me, I'll take it up. I'm going to get back to Wallabulla somehow. I'll teach those wretches they can't get away with this. Not with me." Frecks was very angry.

"Dan Terry may be along any minute," suggested Janet. "I left word that we were here and would like to see him. Never mind what Worrals says, in view of what has just happened I think it's time we warned him that something serious may happen at Wallabulla."

"So do I," agreed Frecks warmly. "I feel like telling him the whole blessed tale—but there, what good will that do, now? That car will be at Wallabulla by eight o'clock. If Dan went after it, even if he rode his horse to death, he couldn't get to Wallabulla inside a couple of days, and anything might happen in that time. No, I'm afraid it's the plane, or nothing. Let's have a look at it. Thank goodness, the strut isn't broken. That's something to be thankful for."

She made a careful inspection of the damage. "The longeron is all right, I think," she said. "It's been weakened, of course, by the fish-plate's being

wrenched off. But the plate is only buckled, not fractured. There is this about British machines; the A.I.D. people see to it that there's a wide margin of safety. If we can borrow some tools we ought to be able to fix this. I'm no engineer, so it won't be a pretty job, but if I can get the thing to hang together, I shall be satisfied. Of course, we've no business to take the machine into the air without first having the job passed by an inspector, but I'm in no mood to bother about red tape. We'll risk that."

"What happens if the strut pulls out when we're in the air?" asked Janet naïvely.

Frecks threw her a sidelong glance. "I wouldn't think about that if I were you," she advised. "Let's get busy."

"How long do you think the job will take?" inquired Janet.

"I don't know till I tackle it, but I can't see our getting it done inside a couple of hours," answered Frecks. "It doesn't pay to skimp a repair job on the aircraft you're going to fly," she added dryly. "There is this about it. If anything goes wrong, it's our own funeral. We're not asking someone else to fly the machine."

Her estimate of time turned out to be an optimistic one. For three hours they stuck to their task without pause, Frecks doing the actual work, and Janet helping under her instructions. It had turned seven-thirty when Frecks, dirty and dishevelled, straightened her back wearily and declared that she could do no more. It would have to do. She had, she said, made as good a job as was possible in the circumstances. They would have to hope for the best.

Dan Terry had not shown up. At first they had remarked several times on his prolonged absence, but in the end Frecks gave him up as a bad job, assuming—correctly, as she found out later—that his return to Oodnadatta had been prevented by unforeseen circumstances.

She insisted on making a short trial flight alone before allowing Janet to risk her life in the machine. The test took place at dusk. It occupied only a few minutes, but they were anxious ones. Frecks handled the machine with respect. It behaved all right. Back on the ground, she announced her intention of going straight to Wallabulla.

"It will mean a night landing," she said, "but there'll be a moon, so we ought to be all right. Anyway, I'm not going to leave Worrals in the house alone. Moran and Raffety must be there by now—or they'll be there by the time we are. Get aboard, and keep your fingers crossed."

With Janet now in the aircraft, Frecks took off, and holding the machine steady on an even keel to avoid putting any unnecessary strain on the

repaired members, she headed through the fast-fading light for Wallabulla.

Nothing untoward happened, and in due course the machine landed in bright moonlight without mishap. The strut even stood up to a rather bumpy landing.

“I should have thought Worrals would have been out to meet us,” remarked Frecks, as she taxied on to the trees.

“I don’t see a light in the house,” observed Janet.

Frecks switched off. They jumped out and walked quickly towards the house, Frecks looking round for Raffety’s car, which she fully expected to see. She did not know why, but she had an uneasy feeling that something had happened, or Worrals would have been out to meet them. She could not see the car, which puzzled her, for it had set off in the direction of Wallabulla, and, ruling out a breakdown, there had been ample time for it to do the journey.

As they approached the graves, Janet uttered a little cry, and pointed. Explanation was unnecessary. Aunt Mary’s grave, as such, no longer existed. It was a rough heap of gravel. The crude cross had been flung aside.

Frecks broke into a run towards the house. Moonlight glinted on something near the door, and she paused in her stride to look at it. It was a spear. She ran on through the open door into the living-room.

“Worrals!” she called. And then again: “Worrals!” There was no answer. “Maginty!” she shouted. Silence.

With fingers that were not quite steady, she lighted a candle. The first thing she saw was a pool of blood on the floor. There were cigarette ends.

She sat down abruptly, feeling suddenly weak. “We’re too late,” she told Janet bitterly. “She’s gone!”

## CHAPTER NINE

## *Shocks for Worrals*

WHEN six-thirty came and still the Desoutter had not returned, Worrals became alarmed. She no longer attempted to deceive herself by wishful thinking. Something had gone wrong. Even if Frecks and Janet had stayed talking to Dan for over an hour, they should be back by now.

The sun was dropping like an enormous red balloon into the western ranges. The blackfellow on the floor remained unconscious. Yoka, outside, still lay as he had fallen. Nothing moved. Silence reigned.

Once—it was about six o'clock—Worrals thought she heard a slight noise in the kitchen. She went through to look, although she did not expect to see anything, for the window was too small for anyone to get through. It was open, but that meant nothing, because it was always left open. She noticed that there was very little water left in the drinking-water bucket that stood in its usual place next to the sink under the window. It would have to be refilled at the soak. That would mean leaving the wounded man alone for a little while, which was something she would rather not do just yet if it could be avoided. There was no hurry about the water. She would wait a little while longer to see if the machine came back, she decided, and returned to her seat in the living-room.

With her chin cupped between her palms, she gazed at the half-human face on the floor. The man was breathing stertorously, which she judged to be an indication that he might soon recover consciousness. What, she wondered, went on in that simple, half-developed brain? She recalled that when Charlie had reported Aunt Mary's death to Dan, he had been limping. He had, he said, struck his foot against a rock. Automatically her eyes went to the man's bare feet and ankles, and her pulses quickened when she observed on the side of the left foot, behind the instep, a comparatively recent scar. This seemed to be almost conclusive proof that the man was Charlie. Looking closer she saw that there were, in fact, two scars, one on each side of the foot. She frowned. There seemed to be something wrong with the story after all. She could hardly imagine Charlie's striking his foot against a rock with sufficient force for the rock to go in one side and out the

other. Nor could she visualize any sort of rock that would inflict such a wound. Contemplating the scar, she decided that it looked much more like a gunshot wound. He had been struck in the foot by a bullet which had gone clean through. Why had he concealed this from Dan? She could not hazard a guess. There might not have been a reason. As Dan had said, no white man could fathom the workings of an aboriginal brain.

The same applied, no doubt, to the curious remarks he had made. Aunt Mary had died “making wonga”. It was hard to accept that statement literally. And why should he make the remark about Aunt Mary being the richest woman in heaven?

Why should he make such a remark if it meant nothing—absolutely nothing, pondered Worrals. What could it mean? What riches did poor Aunt Mary possess, anyway? She had never possessed anything of value until the closing days of her life, after she had found the opal. The opal! Was Charlie’s remark linked up in some way with the opal? Would he suppose that she could take the opal to heaven with her? A new thought shot into Worrals’s brain. He had buried her. Did he in his naïve simplicity suppose that she would enjoy the riches of this world in the next, if the riches were buried with her?

Worrals’s brain turned a figurative spotlight on the question, and the more she examined it, the more likely did the explanation become. Here was a belief shared by primitive peoples everywhere since the dawn of time. The warriors of warring nations had had their weapons buried with them. Even the mighty Pharaohs had had their treasures buried with them. In Africa, America, Asia—even in Eastern Europe—this age-old rite was still practised. She did not know if it was practised by the Australian aborigine, but it would be more surprising if it were not than if it were.

Not only was Worrals sure now that she had hit on the solution to the problem of the missing opal, which she was certain existed, but she marvelled that she had not thought of such a simple and obvious explanation before. The theory could easily be proved, although it was a task which she herself was not prepared to undertake.

From this soliloquy she was aroused by a moan from the wounded man. He was showing definite signs of returning to consciousness. He would need water. She decided it was time to fetch a fresh supply. Walking through to the kitchen, she picked up the bucket, tipped the small quantity of water it contained into the dog’s basin, and returned to the living-room. A quick but thorough survey of the landscape revealed nothing new, and no movement, so she opened the door and stepped out.



She could hear Maginty having a good drink, so she paused again to make a reconnaissance. The mellow light of early sunset was softening the scene. She saw Yoka's spear still lying near the wall, and, walking up to it, made the discovery that her bullet had struck the blade, which at once explained Yoka's curious antics when she had fired. Calling Maginty, she walked on.

The dog ran ahead eagerly, but as soon as he caught the taint of the prone body, he stiffened, growling, and his cautious, nervous approach went far to confirm Worrals's suspicion that the man was dead. She imagined that Maginty's instinct had already told him that. It had not been her intention to go near the man, but as everything seemed quiet she decided that she might as well go a few yards out of her way to make sure that the man was actually dead.

One glance was enough. The boomerang had inflicted a fearful wound. The weapon lay a few yards away, where it had fallen. As nothing was to be gained by lingering, she walked on, deep in thought, to the soak.

She still could not see how the matter was likely to end. The police would have to be notified of the killing. There would be trouble. There would certainly be an inquiry and the whole story would have to come out prematurely. The unfortunate part of this was that they could still not prove anything against Moran. Even if it was revealed that Aunt Mary had been murdered, it would probably be the easiest thing in the world for Raffety and Barola to throw the blame on Yoka, who would not be able to defend himself. In point of fact, he might actually have done the killing, mused Worrals. Charlie would have to accept the responsibility for killing Yoka. They might assert that he had killed Aunt Mary. They might even try to make her, Worrals, an accessory to the killing of Yoka. She could only tell the truth and hope for the best; but it was all very confusing and upsetting.

Keeping sharp watch, and expecting every minute to hear the hum of the returning Desoutter, now long overdue, she filled the bucket and without misadventure returned to the house. The wounded man was now breathing regularly and easily; otherwise there was no change in his condition. She stood the bucket in its usual place, returned to the living-room, and, after moistening the sick man's dry lips, sat down to resume her vigil.

It was at this juncture that she first noticed something odd in Maginty's behaviour. He was walking round and round in circles, panting. She watched him curiously, conscious of a mounting apprehension as it became increasingly evident that there was something radically wrong with the dog. He began snatching at himself, catching his breath in deep gasps; at the same time his legs began to twitch in an alarming manner. It was obvious

that he was in great distress. She spoke to him, patted him, but he did not respond. She did not know what to do, although she tried desperately to think of something. There was, in fact, nothing that she could do. She thought it might be a fit, possibly a heart attack due to the heat, but when the dog collapsed, writhing in agony, she knew that the trouble was even more serious. It still did not occur to her that Maginty might be going to die. The symptoms became even more heart-rending to watch, and when a few minutes later, after a last fearful convulsion, the dog went rigid and expired, she was stunned.

She could not think. Still staring at the pathetic little body, she found herself muttering: "It must have been a snake . . . he was bitten by a snake." The one dominating fact was, Maginty was dead. Tears came to her eyes. It seemed incredible when, such a short while before, he had been in the best of health and spirits. She suddenly hated Wallabulla and everything about it.

Still staring at the body, it slowly dawned upon her that there was something familiar about its attitude in death. At first she could not recall what it was. Then, in a flash, she remembered the dingo—the dead dingo. Its rigid limbs had been twisted in a knot in much the same way. They thought the dingo had been poisoned. That was it! Poison! Maginty had been poisoned. When? How? How was it possible? He had eaten nothing for some time.

Then she remembered the water, the water in the drinking bucket that stood under the window. She remembered the slight noise in the kitchen, and that told her all she needed to know. Someone had approached the house from the back, and had dropped poison, probably strychnine, into their water supply. By a twist of fate, Maginty had been the victim. Unknowingly she had given him the fatal draught. She felt sure that it had not been intended for him. It had been intended for her, or Charlie, or both of them. The first thing the wounded man would ask for when he came round would be water. That was it, reasoned Worrals swiftly. It was hoped that the poison would achieve what the spear had failed to do. Either Raffety or Barola had done the foul deed. Not that it mattered much who had done it. Maginty was dead, gone beyond recall. She was sick with grief. But behind her grief was anger, an anger that grew like a flame. "They'll pay for this," she muttered through set teeth. "They shall pay." She picked up the fatal basin and stood it on the table. A fair amount of water remained. She smelt it, touched it with the tip of a finger and put it on her tongue. The water had a slight bitter taste, nothing more.

A deep husky voice speaking near at hand made her jump. She had forgotten all about the wounded man. Whirling round, she saw that not only

were his eyes open, but he was sitting up.

“Him been make plenty wonga. Him been finish-em quicktime,” he said in a weak voice, pointing at the dog.

The word “wonga” struck a chord in Worrals’s memory. According to Dan, that was what Charlie had said about Aunt Mary. She had “made wonga” before she died. Worrals began to understand many things. Her eyes met those of the black.

“What name belonga you?” she demanded, automatically using the pidgin English she had picked up among the Islands during the war.

“Name belonga me Charlie,” was the answer. “What name belonga you?”

“You savvy Janet, white-fella sister belonga Mary?” questioned Worrals.

“I savvy plenty.”

“Janet all same sister longa me.”

“No gammon, no lie?”

“No gammon.”

How this conversation would have ended had it been permitted to continue, is a matter for speculation. It would probably have gone on for some time, because there were many questions Worrals was anxious to ask. But at this point there was an interruption. It came in the form of a sound so unexpected that Worrals was amazed. It was the rattle of a car. She hastened to the window and, looking out into the twilight, saw a car coming up the track. There were two men in it. She knew them both. They were Moran and Raffety. The car stopped with a jerk as Barola suddenly appeared in the track ahead of it, waving his arms excitedly, and pointing towards the house. Worrals’s heart sank. She made a quick scrutiny of the darkening sky, but of the aircraft there was no sign. Her anger flamed again as her eyes returned to the car. So it was Barola who had been watching the house. It was he who had fired at Charlie. It was he who had crept up to the back of the house and, through the open window, dropped the poison into the water that had slain Maginty. Her face set in hard lines. Her lips came tightly together, corners down. She turned back to Charlie.

“White-fella debil-debil killem Mary come now,” she said quietly.

Charlie dragged himself up, walked unsteadily to the window, and looked out.

“You seeum?” questioned Worrals.

Charlie’s flat nostrils quivered. He drew a deep breath. “I been seeum longa my eye,” he said in a hard voice.

Worrals thought swiftly. It was obvious that a collision between herself and Moran was inevitable. She could not fight these three men with any hope of success. Events would have to take their course. It did occur to her for a moment to lock the door with the object of defending the house, but the futility of such a plan was so apparent that she dismissed it instantly. She could not rely on the already wounded Charlie for assistance. She could not watch four directions at once. She doubted if the wooden walls would stop a bullet, and Moran could, if he wished, drive her out by the simple expedient of setting fire to the place. Force being useless, her only hope, she decided, lay in her wits. They had saved her before; they might do so again. Brute strength the men undoubtedly had, but so far she had seen nothing to indicate that their mental equipment was of a very high standard. She should be a match for them. Her chief concern was for Charlie. She was afraid they would kill him. If they did not kill him forthwith, they might torture him to extract the secret of the opal, and kill him afterwards.

She made her plan and, having made it, moved quickly. She picked up the body of Maginty, carried it into the bedroom, and returned with an old blanket. To Charlie she said:

“You layum down here and stay still like dead-fella. You stay dead-fella you been all right.”

Charlie would have protested, but she almost forced him down in a corner of the room, folded his hands on his chest and covered him entirely with the blanket.

“No more walk-about, no more yabber,” she ordered firmly. “You move you finish altogether quicktime. You dead.”

Charlie closed his eyes in well-simulated death, for the Australian blackfellow is nothing if not a perfect actor: the result of untold centuries of corroboree—native play-acting.

Satisfied, Worrals picked up the twelve-bore, loaded it, put some extra cartridges in her pocket and, laying the weapon on the dresser, covered it with a towel. She felt in her pocket to make sure that her automatic was handy.

The car was just stopping outside. She heard the men get out. She smiled contemptuously at the way they approached the door, for although they must have known that she was alone apart from a black, they made quite a business of it. At length Moran pushed the door open a little way, and peeped in.

Worrals was leaning against the dresser. “What’s the matter—nervous?” she taunted.

Moran started. His eyes switched to her. “So there you are,” he said, and walked in. Raffety and Barola followed him.

Worrals waited, wondering how Moran would begin.

He did not keep her in suspense. “Where’s that nigger?” he asked shortly, glancing round the room.

“Whom are you talking about?” asked Worrals blandly. In view of what Dan had told her she entertained a hope that Moran did not know about Charlie’s being at Wallabulla. The hope was quickly squashed.

“Charlie,” snapped Moran.

“What gave you the idea that Charlie was here?” asked Worrals.

“Joe Barola just told me. He saw him. Yoka saw him first and told him.”

So that was it, thought Worrals. “Well, Joe ought to know,” she said evenly.

“What do you mean—he ought to know?”

“He shot him, didn’t he?”

Moran started. “He *what?*” He swung round to Barola. “You didn’t say anything about shooting him!” he challenged.

“I didn’t have time, did I?” expostulated Barola.

“Well, it was a good shot,” volunteered Worrals. “He got him in the head.”

“You mean—he’s dead?”

“Come and look for yourself.” Worrals strolled over to the blanket and drew it aside. It was a nasty moment, for she was terrified that the supposed corpse would move and give the show away, but Charlie did not let her down. Indeed, so perfect was his acting that Worrals experienced more than a slight twinge of uneasiness, fearing that he had actually died. Pointing to the pool of blood on the floor, she observed: “That’s where he got it.” With a casual movement she threw the blanket back over the body.

Moran had looked at it, and at the blood. He turned on Barola with bitter invective. “You fool!” he snarled. “You addle-brained fool! What did you do that for?”

“He killed Yoka, and Yoka worked for me for years,” growled Barola sullenly.

“Yoka asked for what he got,” put in Worrals dispassionately, walking back to the dresser. Her face was expressionless. “Yoka started it by trying to kill Charlie.”

“Charlie slammed Yoka in the face with his boomerang when Yoka was at the grave——”

“Shut up!” shouted Moran, presumably to stop Barola from saying too much. He turned back to Worrals. “Now you look here, my gal,” he rapped out. “I’m not going to stand and argue with you. Your little game has gone on long enough.”

“What gave you the idea that it was a game?” inquired Worrals imperturbably.

“Never mind about that,” rasped Moran. “You’re through. I’m running this show now, and I’m going to finish it.”

“You’ll have to be quick,” taunted Worrals, whose brain was working fast, and as smoothly as a well-oiled machine. Knowing that she stood little chance against the three men if it came to a show-down, she decided to employ again the weapon called bluff—a weapon which, skilfully handled, can achieve much. Already it had seen her through a difficult situation.

“What do you mean?” demanded Moran. “What have I got to be in a hurry about?”

“Only this,” replied Worrals. “I’ve had a word with Dan Terry. He’s on his way here. Whatever you may do to me, there’s enough evidence at Wallabulla to hang the lot of you, and you know it.”

Moran stared at Worrals in a way that told her that her shot had gone home.

“She knows a sight too much,” muttered Raffety.

“Shut up!” snapped Moran, whose nerves, Worrals perceived, were on edge. Turning to Worrals, he went on: “When is Terry coming here?”

“He’s probably on his way here now,” answered Worrals casually. “My friends, when they return from Oodnadatta, will know.”

Again Moran considered the prospect. Then he turned to the others. “You two get out and get on with the job,” he ordered. “Do it properly this time, and don’t waste any time over it. There’s a pick and shovel over there in the corner. Take them.”

These instructions did not appear to fill either Raffety or Barola with enthusiasm, but they moved to obey. Worrals, of course, had not the remotest idea of what the “job” was, but Moran’s next words told her.

“Had you tackled the job properly when I first told you, instead of leaving it to Yoka, this wouldn’t have happened,” he complained. “The body can’t be very deep down.”

“What about dumping the two dead niggers in the hole?” suggested Raffety.

“For the police to find?” sneered Moran. “We’ll get rid of them some other way. You go and get on with it, and leave the thinking to me.”

Worrals experienced a sensation as if a cold hand had been laid on her heart as she realized that the men were going to disinter Aunt Mary’s body. Moran’s words could mean nothing else. Apart from her natural revulsion against such an act, she realized that if her suspicions about the hiding-place of the opal were correct, the men were likely to succeed in the very purpose that had first brought them to Wallabulla although they were unaware of it. However, unless she resorted to open warfare, in which case she felt she was likely to come off worst, there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

Raffety and Barola went out into the gathering darkness.

“Have you sent those brutes to dig up one of those graves?” Worrals asked Moran, in a curiously steady voice.

“I have,” answered Moran bluntly.

“You realise that you won’t be able to get away with this? You’re in too deep,” asserted Worrals.

“You’ll soon be in too deep yourself to know anything about it,” returned Moran significantly, smiling at his own joke, or what he supposed to be a joke. “Without the old woman’s body the police won’t be able to prove a thing. On second thoughts, Yoka’s body can stay where it is.”

Worrals raised her eyebrows. “How do you propose to account for it?”

“We shan’t have to account for it,” retorted Moran. “He was killed by a boomerang. It won’t take the police long to find that out. Whites don’t carry boomerangs—they couldn’t use them if they did. That’ll prove he was killed by a black. Whose black? Not ours. He was the man killed. No, Miss Smart-Alick, Yoka was killed by *your* black. You ordered him to do it. Would you deny on oath that you shot at Yoka yourself? You missed him, so you got your man to kill him. That was the way of it, and Joe Barola, who saw the whole thing, will swear to it.”

Worrals did not answer, for there was more apparent truth in this accusation than she liked to think about. Her rather dismal thoughts were interrupted by Raffety, who came running. He seemed excited to the point of agitation.

“It’s a fake!” he shouted.

Moran’s brows came down. “What’s a fake?”

“The grave. It’s a fake, I tell you!” cried Raffety.

“A fake! How can it be a fake?” demanded Moran with asperity.

“It ain’t a grave at all.”

Moran became angry. “What are you talking about?” he almost shouted. “Talk sense.”

Raffety recovered some of his lost composure. “I tell you, it ain’t a grave,” he said, speaking slowly and distinctly. “It’s just a heap o’ gravel. There’s nothing under it. The topsoil ain’t never been cut.”

Moran still seemed to find it hard to grasp the truth. “How do you know there’s no body under it if you haven’t dug down?”

Raffety became exasperated. “I tell you it ain’t no use diggin’,” he stormed. “Under that pile o’ gravel the ground’s as hard as iron. It ain’t been moved in a million years. Don’t tell me I don’t know: I’ve dug enough ground in my time to know whether my spade’s goin’ into disturbed dirt or virgin soil. There’s nothin’ there, and that’s all about it.”

Moran looked thunderstruck—not without excuse, as Worrals would have been the first to admit, for she herself had been severely shaken by this astounding piece of information.

“But—but you told me Yoka saw the old woman’s blackfellow working on the grave,” declared Moran, in a bewildered voice. “He stuck a cross in it.”

“That’s right,” agreed Raffety. “So he did. It don’t make no difference. That cunning black planted the body somewhere else. He made a little pile o’ dirt and stuck a cross on it to fool us. We ought to ’ave plugged ’im and done the job ourselves. He’s outsmarted us.”

“That’s right enough,” agreed Barola, who now came in. His face was flushed with excitement. “The grave was blackfellow work all right. So’s this.” He tossed something on to the table, a small, hard, dark object.

“Opal!” cried Moran. “Black opal! Where did you get that?”

“Out of this dummy-grave. It was tied on the bottom of the cross with a bit of bone stuck in it. Blackfellow business. Magic. *Maamu*, they call it. I guess that poor misguided sap, Charlie, reckoned it ’ud protect the grave from debil-debils.”

“More likely he thought it might protect it from vandals like you,” put in Worrals icily.

“Pah! Bosh!” scoffed Barola. “Gimme a drink, anyway. I’m as dry as a gibber lying out there in the sun all day. We ought to have given Charlie a dose o’ lead when we had the chance.”

“That’s what I said,” agreed Raffety warmly.



“You tried to shoot him and made a mess of it,” sneered Moran. “Couldn’t do better than hit him in the foot.”

“That was when he was already on the run,” declared Barola, hotly defending his shooting. “He never ought to have been given a chance to bolt.”

“Never mind about that now,” said Moran. “What about this opal?”

“It proves Charlie knew about it.”

“Was this the lot?”

“If there’d been any more I should have brought it,” said Barola. “You can be sure I had a good look. I shouldn’t have found this bit if I hadn’t struck a match to make certain that the ground under the grave had never been turned.”

“Apparently you’re not superstitious?” observed Worrals. “Ordinary opal has a sinister reputation with some people. Opal that’s had a spell put on it by a black must be quite potent. When, on top of that, it’s taken from a grave \_\_\_\_\_”

“Oh, shut yer mouth,” broke in Barola impatiently. “It takes more than nigger-stuff to scare me.” He laughed. “I wish it’d cure a thirst.” As he finished speaking, he picked up the basin of water—Maginty’s basin—that still stood on the table where Worrals had put it, and tossed the contents off in two or three gulps.

Worrals did not actually see him do this because she was looking at Moran at the time. Her brain was still spinning from the shock of the fantastic news that the grave was a fraud. Vaguely she was wondering what Moran would do about it. Her eyes switched to Barola just as he was putting the basin back on the table. She knew instantly what he had done, and the shock—the second in as many minutes—was like a physical blow. Her mouth went dry. Her heart and brain and lungs seemed to stop working together. She was conscious of a prickling sensation under the skin of her face as the blood receded from it. Much as she disliked the man, she would have prevented the tragedy had it been possible. But it was not. The thing was done, and could not be undone.

“That’s funny-tasting stuff,” muttered Barola. Then a thought seemed to strike him. His body stiffened. When he moved again, his actions were as slow and deliberate as those of an automaton. His face, which had turned a sickly yellow under the tan, came round to Worrals. His eyes were wide with horror. Twice he tried to speak and failed. His mouth opened, but no words came. He gulped. “Where—where did that water come from?” he asked in a queer, halting voice.

Worrals answered: "From our drinking-water bucket under the kitchen window."

Barola gasped. His tongue flicked over his lips. He turned to Moran. "I'm poisoned," he said, in a dull, even monotone. Then, as if he had suddenly grasped the truth of his words, he screamed. "I'm poisoned!" he shouted hysterically. "I'm poisoned! D'you hear me? I'm poisoned!"

Moran backed away looking alarmed. "What's the matter with you?" he asked wonderingly. "Have you gone out of your mind?"

All Barola could do was run from Moran to Raffety and back again, striking them on the chest with his fists, and shouting: "I'm poisoned! Do something! I'm poisoned!"

Strangely enough, Moran looked at Worrals for an explanation. He seemed puzzled. It was evident from his expression that he did not take Barola seriously. "What's he raving about?" he inquired, almost plaintively.

"Why ask me?" returned Worrals evenly. She was beginning to recover from the first effects of the shock.

"Did you put poison in the drinking water?" asked Moran.

"Should I be likely to put poison in our drinking water?" Worrals's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

Barola's legs appeared to collapse under him. He slumped into a chair with his elbows on the table. His eyes stared into space. Worrals lit a stump of candle and looked at him. Never, she thought, had she seen such a dreadful expression on a human face.

"What's gone wrong with you?" Moran asked him irritably. Somehow the question sounded foolish.

"I'm done for," answered Barola, in a voice that was already dead.

Moran looked at Raffety. Raffety looked at Moran and shrugged his shoulders. It was obvious to Worrals that neither of them had an inkling of what had happened. Evidently Barola had not told them about the poisoning of the drinking water. He might not have had time. He might have acted on his own account, with no intention of telling them. One thing was now certain: Barola was the man who had put the poison in the water, or he would not have known about it. Had he not known about it, he would not be acting as he was.

Worrals decided that something ought to be done for the man, but she had no intention, yet, of revealing that she knew the truth. She looked at Moran. "Your friend seems to be in a bad way," she remarked. "He says he's been poisoned. Why don't you do something about it?"

“He isn’t poisoned! What he’s got is a touch of sun from lying out in the glare this afternoon,” asserted Moran. “Let’s get a move on, or we shall be here half the night.”

The effect of these words on Barola were electrical. They seemed to drive him to distraction. Springing to his feet, he aimed a vicious blow at Moran. “You’re a liar!” he cried hysterically. “The sun’s got nothing to do with it. I’m poisoned, I tell you. It’s strychnine. I ought to know.”

Moran stared. “Strychnine! How do you know it’s strychnine?”

“Because I put it in the water!” shouted Barola.

Worrals held her breath. Here was the truth with a vengeance. The atmosphere was now tense. She prepared herself for an explosion.

At last Moran seemed to get a grip on the situation.

“You—you *what?*” he cried, aghast.

“I poisoned the water,” moaned Barola.

Moran continued to stare. “You poisoned . . . Why?”

“You wanted to be rid of ’em, didn’t you?” raved Barola, who seemed to be working himself up into a fury.

“Shut up!” snarled Moran, with a quick apprehensive glance at Worrals. “I didn’t say anything about using poison.”

“I was sick of this messing about. I reckoned on making a quick job of it,” muttered Barola, burying his face in his hands. “That’s what you said when we used the stuff on the old woman.”

“Shut your mouth,” flared Moran.

Barola half rose, his face distorted with hate. “I ain’t shutting my mouth for you or anyone else,” he panted. “I’m done for, so what does it matter to me?” He laughed, a wild cackle that made Worrals wince.

She stepped into the conversation. “Whether or not your friend dies is no concern of mine,” she told Moran candidly. “But if what he says is true, don’t you think you ought to be doing something?”

Moran lifted his hands helplessly. “What can I do about it?”

“I don’t know the antidote for strychnine, if there is one, but there’s a doctor in Oodnadatta. Why not take him there in the car? You’re wasting time.” She thought she saw a way of getting rid of her unwelcome guests.

“The car!” Moran laughed harshly. “The trip would take at least three hours.”

“All right. I’m expecting my aircraft back any minute. I’ll fly him in,” offered Worrals.

“It’s no use reckoning on that,” muttered Moran.

“Why not?”

“Because the plane won’t be coming.”

Worrals frowned. “Why?”

“Because it’s smashed,” snapped Moran, a rising inflection in his voice.

Worrals caught her breath. “Smashed? Who did it?”

“I did it.”

“Where?”

“Oodnadatta.”

Worrals sank into a chair. “O.K.,” she said calmly. “If ever I saw men determined to drive the hearse at their own funerals, it’s you.”

Barola had broken down, and was sobbing with his face in his hands.

Worrals looked at him. She found it hard to withhold compassion, although this was the fate he had intended for her. Never, she reflected, had a villain been dealt with by justice more poetic.

“How long does strychnine take to work?” asked Moran.

Worrals shrugged. “I reckon it depends on the strength of the dose. The man will certainly die if you do nothing. If you can get him to Oodnadatta, he may have a chance.”

“He’ll die on the way,” stated Moran callously.

“And that’s all you thundering-well care,” rasped Raffety, breaking in with some heat. “Joe’s been poisoned, and you’ve got to do something about it.”

Now Moran’s temper began to show signs of breaking. “You’re like a lot of parrots with your ‘do something, do something’! What can I do?”

“Get him to the doctor.”

“At Oodnadatta? You’re nuts. Not me. I’m not leaving here.”

Raffety’s voice dropped to a tone which, to Worrals, sounded more threatening than abusive. “So you won’t take him, eh?”

“I’ve told you. Why should I?”

“Because Joe’s my mate, and has been for years. We’re giving him a chance. We’re going to Oodnadatta.”

“Are you giving orders to me?” cried Moran incredulously.

“I am.” In a flash Raffety had whipped out a revolver. “This is my argument,” he added venomously.

Moran looked at the pistol and at the angry face above it. “O.K.—O.K. There’s no need to get excited. Why not drive him in yourself?”

“And leave you here to lift the opal and push off with it before I get back? Not likely. Besides, you’re better at talking than we are. You got us into this; you get us out.”

“So you don’t trust me?”

Worrals smiled faintly. That the crooks should start fighting amongst themselves was more than she had dared to hope. “While you’re arguing the toss about it, Barola will die,” she announced dispassionately, with obvious truth. Actually, she did not think that there was the slightest hope of their getting the man to Oodnadatta alive.

Moran produced a new argument. “What about this girl? Are we going to leave her here?”

Raffety had an answer for the question, “What if we do? She can’t get away. She’s no plane, no car—nothing. She’ll be here when we get back. Or if you like, we can settle her before we go.”

Moran smiled craftily. “Just a minute—there’s a better way than that. If we bump her off, how are we going to account for these killings? We can’t say she shot herself—that wouldn’t make sense after what’s happened. If she starts bleating for the police, why, we can tell them what happened here. She got Charlie to kill Yoka. Then she shut his mouth by shooting him. Barola saw her do it, and he tells her so, so she gives him a drink and poisons him with strychnine. How’s that?”

Raffety nodded understandingly. “You always did know the answers.”

“That suits me, too,” put in Worrals, with a calm assurance she did not entirely feel. “You go and tell the police all about it. I’ll be here when they come.”

Moran swung round to her with what appeared to be a sincere earnestness. “Now look here. I’ll tell you what. I’ll do a deal with you,” he offered.

“I’m listening,” murmured Worrals.

“You clear out and leave this place to us—we’ll chance finding the opal—and we’ll keep quiet about what happened here to-day. If the police come along, we’ll say we know nothing. How’s that?”

“Rotten,” replied Worrals laconically. “You trot along and tell the police all you know.”

Moran scowled. “O.K., if that’s how you want it. But get this. I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be here,” promised Worrals.

“Let’s get going,” said Raffety.

Taking Barola by the arm, the other two helped him outside into the moonlight. Worrals heard them get in the car, and moved to the window to watch, to make sure that the departure was not a trick. Apparently it was not, for the car moved off down the track. She went out and ran to the nearest rising ground to watch the vehicle out of sight, for she could not help feeling that there was something insincere about the way Moran had allowed himself to be threatened into doing something he obviously did not want to do. Raffety’s behaviour in trying to save his partner was natural enough, but Moran . . . He must know that there was little hope of saving Barola’s life. Why, then, had he gone? Was he really satisfied with his argument that she had been responsible for the killings—that she had poisoned Barola? Possibly, she decided. After all, Barola had been poisoned in her house. She might find it difficult to disprove Raffety’s accusation that she had put poison in the water. The police would certainly find it difficult to believe that Barola had put poison in the water and then drunk it himself.

She remembered suddenly that the basin was still on the table. There might be some water left in it. Charlie’s first action, if he got up, would be to drink. She dashed back to the house. Her eyes went straight to the basin. It was still there. She looked in it. There was still a little water left. Deciding to take no risks with it, but unwilling to throw the water away in case it should be needed for evidence, she wrapped the whole thing in a towel and put it on the top of the dresser where she thought it could do no harm. This done, she told Charlie that he could get up.

There was no reply. Taking a quick pace round the table in the light of the now guttering candle she looked down at the place where Charlie had lain. The blanket was there. But not Charlie.

“Charlie!” she called, in something like a panic.

He did not answer.

## CHAPTER TEN

## *Moran Makes an Offer*

FRECKS'S consternation when she and Janet had ascertained definitely that Worrals was not in the house need hardly be described. The spear outside and the blood on the floor were mute but positive proofs of tragedy. Worse was to come. She was staring fearfully at the blanket in the corner, vainly striving to guess its purpose, when a cry from Janet took her into the bedroom, where she beheld the lifeless body of Maginty. For a minute she could only stare at it, grief and anger blunting her apprehension.

With an effort she got a grip on herself. "I'm afraid something terrible has happened here," she said in a voice that she strove to keep steady. "Never mind Maginty. We can do nothing for him now. It's Worrals we've got to find. That's all that matters."

"But where are we going to start looking?" cried Janet.

"Yes, that's right—where?" muttered Frecks. "I'm not going to waste time searching hundreds of miles of desert. I'm going back to Oodnadatta straight away to make contact somehow with Dan Terry. I——"

A swift patter of footsteps outside made her break off, grab her automatic and swing round to face the door. Relief almost overwhelmed her when Worrals hurried in.

"Thank goodness!" she gasped. "What's happened? Where have you been?"

Worrals was panting as if she had been running. "Take it easy—give me a chance to get my breath. I was out looking for Charlie. I ran back as fast as I could when I heard the machine coming."

"Charlie! Then he is actually here?"

Worrals nodded. "He was. Make a pot of tea and, while we're having something to eat, I'll tell you about it."

When, presently, they were all settled at the table, she continued: "First of all, what happened to you at Oodnadatta? Moran's been here; he told me he had smashed the machine."

“He did—more or less,” answered Frecks. In a few words she narrated her story. “What about Maginty?” she concluded.

“He was poisoned,” stated Worrals. “Tears won’t help him now. The main thing is, you’re here, safe and sound. I don’t mind telling you that we’re all lucky to be alive—not that the thing is over yet, by a long way. Listen to this.”

Worrals then ran over the events that had occurred since the plane departed for Oodnadatta, a story to which Frecks and Janet listened with parted lips. “We’ve got to do some quick thinking,” she went on, “Moran and Raffety will be back—we needn’t doubt that. I don’t think for a moment they’ll go near the police, even if they get as far as Oodnadatta. That talk was bluff. Nothing would please me more than to see Dan Terry walk through that door right now.”

“Then let’s go and fetch him,” suggested Frecks practically.

“You just said he wasn’t at Oodnadatta.”

“He might be back by now.”

“‘Might be’ is of no use to us. He might be away for some time, and we’re in no state to hang about doing nothing. Besides, I don’t feel inclined to make a night trip in the machine with three aboard without having a look at your repair job. Moreover, we’ve got to find Charlie before Moran gets back here.”

“What did you mean just now when you said ‘even if they get as far as Oodnadatta’?” questioned Frecks.

“I think Barola will die on the way,” returned Worrals. “I fancy Moran was pretty sure of that when he knuckled under to Raffety about going. I’d go as far as to say he hoped Barola would die.”

“Why?” queried Janet.

“Because Moran doesn’t want to go to Oodnadatta. He wanted to stay here. If Barola dies he’ll say to Raffety: ‘It’s no use going on; let’s go back.’ Actually, he’d be right; because, if Barola died, there would be no object in their going on.”

“They might take Barola’s body to the police and say you poisoned him.”

“They might say that if it came to a show-down, but I can’t see Moran going to the police from choice. He and Raffety will come back here. They think Charlie’s dead, but if they once get wind that he’s alive, he won’t have a chance.”



“What makes you so sure that Moran will come back here?” queried Frecks.

“As I told you, he was rushed into starting for Oodnadatta. As soon as he’s had time to think, he’ll realize that he must come back here to settle with me. He daren’t let me go, knowing what I know. That goes for you, too. He’ll have heard your machine pass over on the way home, and he’ll know that by this time I shall have told you all about it. It’s no use kidding ourselves. Moran’s got himself in a spot, and he’ll stay in it while we’re alive to tell the story to the police. He may be sorry he started the business; our arrival was something he couldn’t possibly foresee; but he’s too far in now to go back. The real danger for us lies in the fact that he’s committed, or been party to, one murder—Aunt Mary; and on the principle of in for a penny, in for a pound, he might as well commit more. The punishment can be no worse. From his point of view the ideal thing would be to liquidate the three of us. He may try to do that if he can think of a way without laying himself open to suspicion.”

“I don’t see what’s to prevent him from shooting us out of hand,” interposed Janet pessimistically. “A more remote spot for a murder could hardly be imagined.”

Worrals shook her head. “I doubt if he dare risk doing that. He knows that Mr. Harding knows we’re here; he knows Dan Terry knows we’re here; the airport manager at Adelaide knows we’re here. If we disappeared into thin air, sooner or later one or other of these people would wonder what had become of us, and inquiries would be set afoot. It’s sometimes a good plan to put yourself in the enemy’s position. Moran’s no fool. Putting myself in his place, I should say that the only way of disposing of us without putting my head in a noose would be to do it in such a manner that it would look like an accident. If Moran overlooks that possibility, he isn’t the shrewd schemer I took him to be.”

“You’re making it look a pretty dim prospect for us,” muttered Frecks. “What are we going to do?”

“Our best hope is to find Charlie,” declared Worrals. “He knows where Aunt Mary is buried. He must know. We know now that she was poisoned. A post-mortem examination will reveal it. That can’t be blamed on us for the simple reason that none of us was in the country at the time. What beats me is, why did Charlie bolt? We were getting on fine. He must have realized that he’d nothing to fear from me. It never occurred to me for a moment that he’d run away. I wonder if that piece of opal——” Worrals half turned and glanced at the table. “Hallo! Where’s it gone?”

“What?”

“The piece of opal I told you about—the piece Barola found in the dummy grave. It was on the table.”

“Not when we came in, or I should have seen it,” declared Frecks. “Are you sure Moran didn’t take it with him?”

“Positive. It was on the table when he went out. I particularly noticed it.”

“Then Charlie must have taken it.”

“That’s the only answer. What was his object in that, I wonder?”

“More superstition, perhaps,” suggested Janet.

Worrals made a gesture of irritation. “This mumbo-jumbo stuff is making me tired,” she said wearily. “Although I must admit there was something pretty staggering about the way Barola scoffed at what he called ‘nigger-stuff’, and then straight away took a drink of poisoned water.” Worrals paused. “I’m sick and savage about poor Maginty. I was just beginning to get fond of him.”

“There is this about it,” consoled Frecks. “If you’d left him at Oodnadatta, he’d have been dead by now anyway.”

Worrals sighed. “I suppose you’re right, but it’s poor comfort.”

“What about the body of this dead native, Yoka?” inquired Frecks nervously.

“We shall have to leave it where it is for the time being,” decided Worrals. “I wouldn’t dream of touching it until the police have been.”

“Then you’ll have to fetch the police pretty soon,” asserted Janet.

“I shall fetch the police to-morrow,” answered Worrals. She had walked over to the window and was peering out into the moonlight. “Queer,” she murmured. “I can’t see the body.” She opened the door and advanced a few paces slowly, the others following. She ran forward a little way, and then pulled up short, “It’s gone!” she exclaimed.

“There are such things as dingoes,” reminded Janet.

“I’ll not believe that dingoes carried a body away wholesale,” averred Worrals. “Moran didn’t go near it. He and Raffety went straight off in the car—I saw them. It’s Charlie. He must have come back.”

“Maybe he’s scared of being arrested for the murder,” offered Frecks.

“Quite likely,” agreed Worrals. “I’m getting so that I’ll believe anything. I’m beginning to understand what Dan Terry meant when he said that no white ever understood the workings of a blackfellow’s brain. If Charlie has made off with the body out of fright, then he must be burying it somewhere.

He can't be far away. At least, I don't think he could get far with that wound in his head. By the way, Frecks, where did you park the machine?"

"In the usual place—why?"

"I'm afraid we shall have to do something about it. The situation has changed a lot in the last few hours. Until to-night Moran wanted us to go. That's the last thing he wants now. He'll stop us if he can. The easiest way would be to sabotage the machine. I'm afraid it means mounting guard." Worrals turned back towards the house. She stopped again, pointing. "There was a spear lying there a little while ago."

"I know," said Frecks. "It was there when we came in."

"Well, it isn't there now," murmured Worrals. "That will be Charlie again. I imagine he's collected his boomerang, too, so he is at least armed. What on earth does he think he's doing?"

"Maybe he's gone crazy," suggested Frecks.

"It's going to be a poor lookout for everybody if he has," said Worrals dryly.

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Frecks.

"Let's go inside and try to work out some sort of plan," replied Worrals.

They went back into the house.

"I think, for a start, we'd better make an effort to find Charlie," resumed Worrals. "Obviously, it's useless trying to catch him if he doesn't want to be caught. Our only hope is to cajole him into coming close enough to be spoken to. Whether or not he'll fall for that depends on why he bolted, I suppose. There seem to be several reasons why he went. He may have gone to dispose of Yoka's body; he may have gone to get weapons; the opal might have had something to do with it; having heard Moran's conversation, he might even have gone to Aunt Mary's grave."

"If he doesn't want her body found, nobody on this earth will ever find it," declared Janet.

"Why not?"

"Because the blacks bury their dead that way. After burying a body they level the ground and smooth it over with a bunch of feathers, so that not even the debil-debils will be able to find it—at least, so I've heard."

"Well, Charlie's right about the debil-debils in this case," asserted Worrals. "Moran wants that body, because if it *is* found it will hang him. We'll look for Charlie. He may be near the wurlie. If he can't be found, we'll stand by the machine until morning, and then go to Oodnadatta for the police. We can't keep the police out of this any longer. We shall have to

watch the trail, of course, so that we shall spot Moran and Raffety if they come back. I imagine we shall hear the car before they get here. Let's go out and look for Charlie."

Worrals had half turned towards the door when, for no apparent reason, it swung open. On the threshold appeared Moran, with a pistol in his hand.

"Don't move, anybody," he said, advancing into the room. "I can save you the trouble of looking for Charlie," he added. "I've brought him along."

Raffety followed Moran into the room. With him, his hands tied behind his back and tethered by a short length of rope, was Charlie.

"Where did you find him?" Worrals asked Moran evenly.

Moran smiled. "You'd never guess."

"What about Barola?"

"He died before we'd gone five miles. So we came back."

"I didn't hear the car."



“Don’t move, anybody.” ([Here](#))

“We took good care of that,” stated Moran. “We stopped a mile away and walked the rest, very quietly. We heard the plane go over, so naturally we were sort of anxious to find out who was here before we walked in. The plane might have brought Terry for all we knew. We came along so quietly that we walked right into our old friend Charlie before he saw us. He tried to give us the slip, but with that sore head of his he wasn’t fast enough. Now we can really get down to things.”

“Just as a matter of interest, what was Charlie doing?” asked Worrals.

“We’ll come to that in a minute,” replied Moran. “One good job he did was to bury Yoka, which saves us the trouble.”

“All right. So what?” inquired Worrals.

“No hurry,” sneered Moran. “I’m just getting things as I wanted them.”

“I see. What are you going to do with that unfortunate black?”

Moran grinned. “Keep him for a pet.”

Said Worrals: “Suppose we get down to brass tacks? What you want is the opal, isn’t it?”

“Quite right.”

“Suppose Charlie refuses to show you where it is?”

Moran smiled—a smile that Worrals did not like. “We needn’t ask him,” he said softly. “We know where it is. He fetched this from somewhere, and was on his way to you when he ran into us.” Moran waved a piece of paper. “He kept it all nice and clean and dry in a jam-jar.”

“What is it?” asked Worrals, not suspecting the truth.

“A note from Mary Carter—written on her death-bed—to her niece, with a map showing the opal field. She gave it to Charlie to take care of—which he did.”

“You thief! That’s mine. Give it to me!” cried Janet hotly.

Moran nodded. “Sure I will—for a consideration.”

“What consideration?”

“The deeds of the estate and a promise to keep your mouths shut about what’s happened here.”

“Never!” declared Janet firmly.

Moran shrugged. “No matter. It’ll come to the same thing in the end.”

“How do you work that out?” inquired Worrals coldly. “Too many people know we’re here for you to go in for mass murder.”

“Accidents do happen,” Moran pointed out. “For instance, you may have noticed that this house is built of wood. The sun has dried it very nicely. If Terry happened to drift along and found that it had been burnt down with you inside—well, it’d be just too bad. And do you know what people would say? They’d say that’s what happens when three daft girls fancy their chance at running an out-back station. You’d be forgotten in a week.”

“But they’d remember us again when a couple of crooks started gouging opal on that same station,” Worrals pointed out.

Moran shook his head. “That’s something they’ll know nothing about. Well, what about it? Do I get the deeds?”

Janet looked at Worrals for advice.

Worrals pretended to hesitate. “Suppose we think about it, and give you our answer in the morning?” she suggested.

“O.K.,” agreed Moran, after a brief pause. “You stay in the house, though. We shan’t be far away, and we shall be watching. Anyone who tries to leave will run into a piece of metal coming the other way. When you’ve made up your minds, if the answer’s ‘Yes’, all you need do is wave a handkerchief through the window.”

Moran and Raffety went out, taking Charlie with them. Worrals locked the door. For a minute no one spoke. Then Frecks remarked: “What do you make of that?”

Worrals shrugged, helplessly. “I don’t know what to make of it, and that’s a fact. The whole thing’s phoney.”

“They’ve got Charlie,” observed Frecks despondently.

“There was nothing we could do about it,” returned Worrals. “Considering Moran had the drop on us, we’ve got off lightly. Had we tried to resist by pulling a gun—and there was no other way—the next step would have been shooting. That would certainly have meant casualties, perhaps on both sides. Getting shot wouldn’t help matters.”

“We’re lucky he didn’t take our guns,” remarked Frecks.

“Yes,” replied Worrals slowly. “I don’t understand why he didn’t take them. It could hardly have been an oversight. Apparently he didn’t mind leaving us with weapons. If so, there must have been a reason for it.”

“Suppose he smashes the plane? There’s nothing to prevent him!” Janet pointed out.

“Again, I don’t see how we can stop him—unless, as I said just now, we start a pitched battle, in which case we might get the worst of it. For the moment I’m satisfied that they’ve gone. By coming back so soon they stole a march on us—but there, one can’t think of everything. We might as well get some sleep and see what the morning brings. We’d better mount a guard. I’d like Janet to take first shift. Wake Frecks in three hours. At the rate things are going, to-morrow ought to see the final show-down. Meanwhile, we’ve got to think—and think hard.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## *Move and Countermove*

**W**ORRALS took over from Frecks for the dawn guard. She had made that arrangement deliberately, feeling confident that if anything was going to happen, it would be during this period. If nothing happened, it would be a good time to meditate on a situation which, instead of simplifying itself, was rapidly becoming more involved. Sitting near the window with the twelve-bore across her knees, gazing across a lonely world of moonlit spinifex, she considered the problem confronting them.

First, she tried to foresee how Moran would be most likely to act. There were, she perceived, several things that he could do, all leading to the same objectives—the opal, and the elimination of those who now knew enough to send him to the gallows. The two things went together. In offering them their lives in return for the property and a promise of silence, he was trying the easy way first. Or was he? She was by no means sure. She could not help feeling that behind this apparently simple bargain there was a sinister purpose, a trick to bring about their undoing, perhaps their deaths by what would appear to be an accident; for that, clearly, would suit him admirably. This suspicion, she thought, was supported by the curious fact that he had not disarmed them. She had fully expected that he would—or would try. Why had he not taken such an elementary precaution? She had asked herself the question a dozen times before going to sleep. That he should leave them in possession of the house was surprising enough; but that he should leave them weapons, weapons which he knew they possessed, to defend it, was so incredible that there must have been some reason for it. For the situation thus created, as he must have been fully aware, was this: should they refuse his offer of an armistice on the terms suggested, they were in a position to prevent his reentry into the house. There was something wrong with that; although she did not lose sight of the fact that the thing cut two ways. Just as those outside the house would not be able to get in, those inside would not be able to get out. The result would be a stalemate. A protracted siege would not suit Moran, she reflected. With food and water in the house, they might



hold out for days. He could not with equanimity regard the project of keeping watch indefinitely while waiting for their provisions to run out.

The more she thought about this, the more certain she became that behind the offer was a trick to bring about the speedy ending that Moran obviously desired. What was this trick? All she could think of was that it had some connection with the aircraft which was their only method of communication with the outside world. She could not bring herself to believe that Moran would be such a fool as to allow them to fly away and report to the police what had happened at Wallabulla. Suppose he destroyed the machine? What would that achieve? It would prevent them from reaching Oodnadatta for a matter of perhaps four days. Would that, she wondered, be sufficient for him to do whatever it was that he had in mind? More than once she looked long and steadily at the trees under which the aircraft was parked, but she saw nothing.

She had no intention of allowing Janet to hand over or sign away the deeds of the property. Not for a moment had she seriously contemplated such a compromise, which would have been to acknowledge defeat. The object of her suggestion that they should postpone the decision until the morning had been merely to gain time. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing to think about; consequently there would be no question of waving a handkerchief through the window.

She tried to foresee what Moran would do when this signal of surrender failed to appear. She thought of several things, but in the event none was right, as she later admitted. In one matter she was resolved, however; she would prevent Moran's reentry into the house, if necessary by force of arms. Still deep in thought, she made a tour of the house, studying the landscape from every available window; but for all she saw there might not have been another living soul within a hundred miles.

At last the stars began to pale as the gold and rosy glow of another day diffused the eastern sky. Quietly, pausing from time to time to listen, she made a pot of tea, boiling the kettle on a little paraffin stove, then roused the others.

"Did anything happen?" asked Frecks, getting off the bed on which she had been lying, only half undressed.

"Not a thing," answered Worrals. "There was no time limit set for the handkerchief stunt, but I imagine Moran was thinking of dawn. He may wait a little while, but as soon as his patience gives out, we shall be hearing from him, no doubt. One thing I've decided is, he isn't coming back into this

house. I've made a pot of tea. We'll have breakfast and then wait for the balloon to go up." She went back to the living-room window.

They had breakfast standing, keeping careful watch from the windows, while the sun soared up over the horizon and began its daily march across the heavens. An hour passed. Nothing happened. When another hour wore on with no sign of movement outside, Worrals began to show signs of uneasiness.

"What on earth's the man doing?" she said for the tenth time. "He must realize by now that we're not going to make the signal."

"Maybe he's waiting for us to go out," suggested Frecks.

"With what object?"

"He might shoot the first person he sees."

"What good would that do him?" demanded Worrals. "The others would still be inside, so the position would be practically the same. He could have shot us last night had that been the idea. Don't tell me he's going to be content to squat out there in the sun, knowing that Dan Terry might roll up at any time." She looked at Frecks for a moment, then continued slowly. "All the same, I'm beginning to think that he does want us to go out."

"Why?"

"That's what I want to know. We'll give him another half hour. Then, if nothing happens, we'll make a move."

"What would you do if you had the chance?" asked Janet.

"As law-abiding citizens there's only one thing we can do," declared Worrals. "Murder has been done here. We must fetch the police."

"That should be easy if the machine's all right," observed Frecks.

"I'm glad you said, 'if the machine's all right'," murmured Worrals. "The whole thing is beginning to revolve round the machine. If it's still there, untouched, we're all right. But Moran isn't a fool. He knows that as well as we do. It seems to me that we've no reason to hope that the machine will be all right. However, we'll see about that presently."

A quarter of an hour passed, and Worrals spoke again.

"Moran, in a spirit of boastfulness, made a silly remark last night. He showed us one of his cards—an important one. You remember what he said about burning the house down on us, to make it look as though we had been wiped out by an accident? I didn't pay much attention to it at the time, because it seemed to me that, if he seriously entertained such a scheme, he wouldn't be likely to tell us about it. But we must admit that our departure from this world in some such manner—that is, in what would look like an

accident—would be the ideal way out for him. He may have some such scheme afoot.”

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

“I’m still thinking about the machine,” answered Worrals. “So many people are killed flying that such an accident, happening to us, would cause little comment.”

“I see what you mean,” murmured Frecks. “He might tinker with the machine in such a way that it would break up in the air and spread us over the landscape.”

“That would suit him so astonishingly well that we should be wise to bear the possibility in mind,” asserted Worrals dryly.

“In that case, we’d better give the machine the once-over,” suggested Frecks.

“I shall give it the twice-over, believe me, before I get into it,” stated Worrals. She glanced at her watch. “Well, time’s up. I’m going out. You two can stay inside and watch through the window. If Moran is about we shall soon know it. If he starts anything, I shall try to get back. If I don’t, lock the door and hang on. But remember this: if you let Moran or Raffety get into this house, you’re sunk.”

In dead silence Worrals moved towards the door. She unlocked it, opened it an inch or two, waited a minute, and then allowed it to swing ajar. Warning the others to keep out of line, she took a hat from the rack and advanced it cautiously into the open doorway. Still nothing happened, so tossing the hat aside with the remark: “He’s probably too old a bird to be caught by that trick,” she stepped boldly into the doorway and looked round. Nothing stirred, not even a breath of air. The spreading expanse of spinifex and mulga lay as dead as a petrified forest. Pistol in hand she walked a few paces forward, stopping again to survey the gum trees.

“For goodness’ sake, be careful!” cried Frecks in a voice vibrant with anxiety.

Worrals ignored the warning. “Moran, where are you?” she called loudly.

There was no answer.

With her face wearing a puzzled expression, she came back to the house. From the door she looked in at the others.

“I’ve got a feeling he’s pulled another fast one on us,” she said. “They aren’t here. I don’t think Moran ever intended to be here. I played to gain time. So did he, apparently. The question is, what did he want to do?”

“Locate the opal,” suggested Frecks.

“Make Charlie show him where he really buried Aunt Mary,” offered Janet.

“Either might be right,” returned Worrals pensively. “But I still can’t believe that he’d be content to do that, knowing that at the first opportunity we shall bring the police along. This smells uncommonly like a trap. What about the car, I wonder? He said last night that he’d left it about a mile away. We ought to be able to see it from the air—if we can get into the air.”

“You think there’s a doubt about it?” inquired Frecks.

“I do. But we can soon settle that. Stand fast—I’m going to look at the machine. I may be some time.” Worrals strode away in the direction of the gums. She walked direct, scorning to take cover which she knew would avail her nothing should Moran and Raffety be watching.

She was surprised to find the machine standing in its usual place, apparently unharmed—although this, she realized, did not necessarily mean that it had not been touched. Sabotage, unless carefully done, would be useless, for, if the damage was obvious, they would not be likely to fly the machine.

Beginning with the controls, she set to work to make a thorough examination of the aircraft. She worked quickly and methodically for an hour without finding anything out of order. All working parts moved easily and smoothly; nowhere could she find a place where the fabric had been cut to get at a member underneath. But she still regarded the aircraft with a feeling of distrust. She had to admit to herself that there was no sign of structural damage anywhere—at any rate, such damage as a layman might inflict. A skilled aircraft mechanic might, she was well aware, do some mischief not easily discoverable without a complete overhaul. It seemed highly improbable that either Moran or Raffety was a skilled mechanic. In any case, they would have to work in the dark. Had they used a torch, or a light of any sort, it would have been visible from the house. Still, she could not believe that Moran was so ready to let them go.

Breaking off a twig to use as a dip-stick, she unscrewed the cap of the gravity tank and tested the contents. It was about three-quarters full. Replacing the cap, she climbed down and went to the main tank. It appeared to be in order. She was about to replace the cap when her questing eyes saw something that brought her movements to a sudden stop. It was a minute white speck, apparently of some crystalline substance. Looking closer she saw more specks, as if little white grains of sand had been spilled. Some were adhering to a smear of oil. She brought two or three of the specks

together with a finger, and carried them to her tongue. Even before she realized that the substance tasted sweet, she had half guessed what it was: sugar.

She drew a deep breath. So *that* was it! She had been right, after all. They had sabotaged the plane by putting sugar in the petrol. It was an old saboteur's trick and, when it came off, a good one. She had had no actual experience of this, but she knew from tales she had heard in the Intelligence Service that an internal combustion engine, running on such fuel, quickly overheats and takes fire. So Moran had a better trick than burning us in the house, she mused. He decided to burn us in an air crash. With a faint smile playing round the corners of her mouth, she replaced the cap and walked back to the house.

"You've been a long time," greeted Frecks.

"It took me a long time to find the fly in the ointment," replied Worrals.

"Was there one?"

"I'll say there was! Moran has put sugar in our petrol—in the main tank. I believe gravity is all right. He might have forgotten that an aircraft has a gravity tank—or maybe he couldn't find it. The point is, he's fixed the main tank."

"We can drain it and fill up from our spare cans," suggested Frecks.

Worrals shook her head. "I wouldn't risk it. I believe it's a difficult business to clean out a tank. We can do better than that. We'll beat Moran at his own game. He didn't just pour Raffety's store of sugar into our tank and walk away. Not he! He's lying around somewhere, waiting to see us take off and come down in a cloud of smoke. That's what he's going to see, too."

Frecks's eyes opened wide.

"All right—don't get alarmed," went on Worrals, smiling. "This is what we're going to do. We're going to bolt in the machine, just as he hoped we should. We shall, of course, fly on gravity. When we get a few miles away, too far for him to see exactly what happens, I shall make a spectacular landing—a landing which, I hope, will create the impression that we are going down in a deuce of a hurry. You'll be ready with a can of oil. As soon as we're on the carpet, jump out, pour the oil over the spinifex and set fire to it. That should send up a nice cloud of smoke. Moran will think we've crashed in flames—at least, I hope he will."

"But if the machine will fly on the gravity tank, why don't we go straight on to Oodnadatta?" inquired Janet.

"Because a full gravity tank only carries enough fuel for about twenty minutes," answered Worrals. "True, we might do the trip in a series of hops,

by landing from time to time and refilling the gravity tank with petrol from our reserve cans; but the snag about that is finding a place to get down every time we needed one. We should look silly if we piled up half-way between here and Oodnadatta.

“I think a better plan would be this. Moran will think we are burned out, as he intended. As soon as he sees the smoke he’ll head for the opal field. We shall start walking back to the house. As I shall fly down the track when I take off, there should be no difficulty in locating the car. When we get to it on the walk back, Janet will take it and drive to Oodnadatta for Dan Terry.”

“Why Janet?” asked Frecks.

“Because I may need you to fly the plane later,” explained Worrals. “To start with, you’ll come back with me to the house to see what’s happening there. What we do will depend on what we find. It may be that our best plan will be to sit down and wait for Janet and Dan. We shall see. It will take us some time to walk back, anyway. We shall have a fair distance to go, and for obvious reasons we shan’t walk back up the middle of the track, in case Moran or Raffety happens to be watching it. How does that scheme sound to you?”

“O.K. by me,” acknowledged Frecks.

“If it works out according to plan, we ought to have the handcuffs on Moran and Raffety by to-night,” said Janet enthusiastically.

“One of the minor troubles of this world is that things seldom work out according to plan,” murmured Worrals. “Still, we’ll do our best. One thing we must do before we leave is bury poor Maginty. Let’s see about it.”

This melancholy task occupied half-an-hour. Little was said, and they were all glad when it was over.

“We’ll move off now,” said Worrals quietly. “We’ll take all the weapons with us, in case we’re prevented from getting back into the house.”

“Are you going to lock the door?” asked Frecks.

“I don’t think there’s any point in it,” returned Worrals. “They’d only force the door if they wanted to get in.”

They walked briskly to the Desoutter. Worrals started up. The engine ran smoothly enough. With Frecks holding the tail down, Worrals ran it up to make sure that it was giving its revolutions. Satisfied, she throttled back, got out and surveyed the landscape.

“If Moran is within two miles of us he’s bound to hear the engine running,” she remarked. “That can only mean that we’re leaving. If he had any sense he’d make some show of trying to stop us, for the look of the

thing. By keeping out of the way, he's making it plain that he wants us to push off—or does he take us for such nit-wits that we shouldn't think of that? Let's go."

They got in, Frecks having collected a can of oil from the luggage compartment. She opened it, and sat with it on her knees. Worrals taxied out to the open space they used as a landing ground, took off, and made a circuit of the house, thinking that from above they might see something of the men. But if they were still in the vicinity they kept well under cover, for nothing was seen of them. Climbing, she headed down the trail for Oodnadatta.

Almost at once, rather more than a mile away, Frecks spotted the car behind a clump of mulga bushes, about fifty yards from the track. She pointed it out to Worrals, who smiled and went straight on. She was watching the ground closely.

"That's where I'm going down," she told Frecks presently, indicating a dry river-bed that meandered across the wilderness. "It should be a few feet lower than the ground on either side, so Moran won't be able to see the machine after it's down, even if he's watching."

"Keep clear of the gibbers," warned Frecks. The river bed was mostly sand, but there was a fair sprinkling of the inevitable water-worn stones.

"We shall have to take our chance with them," declared Worrals. "Be ready to jump out as soon as we're down. Hold your hat on. I'm going to land as if all the debil-debils in Australia had suddenly appeared in the cockpit."

"Go ahead," invited Frecks, bracing herself.

Worrals cut the throttle, kicked hard on the rudder-bar and pulled the control column back and sideways. The machine roared, fell over on its side, and then, as Worrals eased the joystick forward, went into a steep sideslip, a position in which she held the aircraft until it was within fifty feet of the ground. Then she brought it to even keel, sideslipped a little in the opposite direction to reduce drift and, without touching the throttle, landed. The machine bounced badly as a wheel struck a gibber, but this happened near the end of the run and no harm was done.

The moment the machine had run to a standstill, Frecks opened the cabin door, jumped down, made for the nearest clump of spinifex and poured the oil over it.

Worrals switched off and got out leisurely. Janet followed. By the time they had reached Frecks a big cloud of black, oily smoke was making a conspicuous pillar against the blue of the sky.

"That should do the trick," observed Worrals approvingly.

They threw more spinifex on the fire, tossed the oil can into the blaze, and then backed away to watch the result.

“O.K.—that’s fine,” said Worrals. “Moran, with a smirk on his face, is probably pointing at the smoke, and saying to Raffety, ‘See what a clever boy I am!’ But it’s a bit early to start laughing. Let’s hoof it back to the car.”

“Are you going to leave the machine where it is?” queried Frecks.

“We must,” returned Worrals. “I daren’t start the engine again. There’s a chance Moran might hear it. Sound travels a long way in this silence. If he heard the engine now, our whole plan would come unstuck. Come on.”

It took them an hour to get back to the car, for the distance was the best part of four miles. It stood just as they had last seen it. Worrals confirmed that there was plenty of petrol in the tank, then turned to Janet.

“You don’t mind going alone?” she questioned.

“Not in the least.”

“All you have to do is fetch Dan Terry. You can tell him all about it on the way.”

“Right.”

“Be as quick as you can, but be sure to get there. You’ll find us waiting near the house.” Worrals looked at her watch. “It’s just on eleven. We shall start looking for you about sundown.”

“I’ll do my best to make it,” promised Janet, as she climbed into the driving seat. She started the engine, and after a parting wave set off on her journey.

Worrals and Frecks watched her for a little while; then continued towards the house.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

## *Frecks Strikes Out*

WORRALS did not hurry back. Nor did she walk up the track. She kept about fifty yards to one side of it, making full use of every depression in the ground and every patch of scrub.

“There’s just a chance that Moran will walk out to see the result of his dirty work,” she told Frecks. “Or he may send Raffety. They may both come. Frankly, I don’t think they’ll bother. If I know Moran’s type, the idea of a long walk in the sun will make no appeal to him. Besides, he’ll be anxious to get on with his graft. Still, as we’ve time on our hands, it would be silly to take risks.”

So they went on without haste, sometimes stopping to rest and reconnoitre the track, which they could always see cutting across the dreary waste ahead of them. In this fashion it took them well over an hour to get near the house.

“What are we going to make for—the trees?” asked Frecks.

“Not on your life—at least, not yet,” returned Worrals. “Those trees are the best bit of cover for miles.”

“That’s why I thought we should make for them.”

“Precisely; and the enemy, if he’s on the watch, will think the same. Any good scout will tell you that obvious cover should always be avoided, because it automatically comes under suspicion. The man who gets places is the one who creeps up where there doesn’t appear to be any cover.”

Applying this precept, Worrals made a cautious reconnaissance of the house. The nearer they drew, the slower became the advance. Sometimes they found it necessary to crawl on hands and knees, or worm their way across areas where the spinifex was sparse. Every few minutes Worrals stopped and subjected the house and its precincts to a long scrutiny. They saw nothing. On one occasion Worrals squirmed to within fifty yards of the house and, having lain there for some time, returned to Frecks.

“I don’t think they’re there,” she reported. “If they supposed that we had been killed, they would be talking. And had there been talking in the house,

I should have heard it. They've gone. I didn't really expect to find them here."

"Are we going to the house, then?"

"No. There's no need. If we went in, we might leave some trace of our visit, which would upset our plan. Still, I've no intention of lying out here in the sun. Let's make for the trees."

Another tedious stalk brought them to their objective, where, still taking care not to show themselves, and still watching the house, they were able to relax.

"You're not going to try to find Moran?" queried Frecks.

"No. If we tried that they would be more likely to see us first. Sooner or later, now they think we're out of it, they'll come back to the house. I imagine they'll have to come back to the soak for water, anyhow. We'll let them come, and keep an eye on them until Dan arrives. They've probably gone to the opal field. If they have, what time they'll return will depend on how far it is away. They should be back by sunset. I'm afraid we shall have to skip lunch, but that won't hurt us."

Lying on the ground in the shade behind a shallow ridge, facing the house, with the dingo-rifle and the twelve-bore ready to hand, they settled down to their vigil. The time, Worrals noted, was nearly two o'clock.

The watch was maintained for three weary hours before a low exclamation from Worrals brought Frecks to the alert.

"Here they come," said Worrals, holding out her hand in front of her. "Take a line two fingers left of the chimney, distance about two miles, and you'll see three moving specks. If it's them—and I can't imagine it will be anyone else—they've still got Charlie with them. It's a relief to know that. I was afraid they'd kill him—as I'm pretty sure they will, eventually. If they've actually been to the opal field, and seen the stuff with their own eyes, as the saying is, there will be no reason for keeping Charlie alive—particularly as he must be a constant menace to them." Worrals continued to watch the specks, and went on: "They're coming this way. It'll take them half-an-hour to get here. I'm pleased to see they're walking in the open, as if they owned the place. That's important. They wouldn't be walking like that if they had the slightest suspicion that we were here. They think they've got everything nicely fixed up. Well, they've got another thing coming!"

"In a way I'm sorry Barola has passed out," murmured Frecks.

"Why?"

"I put a poisoner on about the same level as a snake," opined Frecks. "I was looking forward to putting several bullets through him. I felt it was a

little debt we owed Maginty.”

“The death Barola died must have been worse than that suffered by Maginty,” asserted Worrals. “Maginty knew nothing about it. Barola did. He knew what he was in for. He was dying slowly before the poison began to take effect. But this conversation is getting a trifle hard-boiled. Keep your eyes on the mark.”

The three men were now about a mile away. There was no longer any doubt as to who they were. The two white men strode along, but Charlie, who carried a load on his back, often stumbled. It was evident that he was in a bad way.

“They’re using him as a mere beast of burden,” muttered Worrals, in a voice hard with indignation. “I imagine that’s why they haven’t shot him. No more talking now.”

The three men came on, the whites confidently walking straight towards the house. It took them about twenty minutes to reach it. Without taking any precautions, they went to the door and entered.

“That suits us fine,” breathed Worrals. “I hope they’ll stay there till Dan arrives. He should be along in an hour or so.”

A few minutes passed in silence. Then Frecks said:

“I’ve got an idea.”

“I’m listening,” returned Worrals briefly.

“Those men have just had a long walk,” stated Frecks. “It looked to me, from the direction they came, as if they’d been to the hills. They’re tired. Having gone in, it’s unlikely that they’ll come out again. It would be a good thing to know what they’re talking about.”

“It would,” agreed Worrals.

“They might be making some new plan. If we knew what it was, we should be able to spike their guns.”

“You’re suggesting a spot of eavesdropping?”

“You’ve got it. It should be possible to get to the house without being seen. The window will be open, I could listen for a minute or two, and then come back.”

“You’re suggesting going by yourself?”

“I should feel happier if I knew you were here, watching, to cover my retreat in case I had to retire in a hurry.”

Worrals hesitated, “It’s risky.”

“But it’s a risk worth while taking,” urged Frecks. “Suppose the men do spot me: what can they do? Although they don’t know it, Dan is likely to

roll up presently. That'll put an end to their capers."

"It won't help you if they put an end to you first—with a forty-five calibre bullet."

"I think it's worth it," argued Frecks.

"All right. Try it if you like." Worrals reached for the rifle. "Don't overdo it."

"Trust me," murmured Frecks, raising herself, preparatory to moving forward.

"You'd better leave the trees from the side, and approach the house from the rear," suggested Worrals. "Leave the twelve-bore here—it will only be in your way if you have to do any crawling."

"O.K."

Frecks faded into the trees, emerged from the side of the copse and from there advanced stealthily, but with confidence, taking a line of approach that was not overlooked by a window. She made good progress, and ten minutes later was crouching against the nearest corner of the wooden building. From this position, keeping close against the wall, she moved to the kitchen window. As she expected, it was open; but the door between the kitchen and the living-room was shut, with the result that, although she could hear the men talking in low tones, she could not actually hear what was said. Retracing her steps, she rounded the opposite corner of the end wall, which brought her outside the living-room, and not far from the window. Congratulating herself, she sank down, for she could now hear every word distinctly. It was not the position she would have chosen; it was too close to the front door for that. But it had this advantage: Worrals, she knew, could see her clearly. She had a fright when, moving a few inches nearer, she collided with, and nearly knocked over, an old clothes-prop that was leaning against the wall; but she just saved it from falling and, with her heart beating rather fast from the shock, she settled down to listen.

Moran was speaking, and almost his first words caused her nerves to retract like cut elastic.

"The stuff's there, all right," said he, in tones of satisfaction. "We shan't need him any more, so you might as well get the job done now, and make a clean finish in case anyone should drift along."

"What shall I do with him?" asked Raffety.

"You'll have to get him under the ground—that's the only safe way," was the reply. "You can make him take a spade and dig the hole for himself. When that's done, if anyone comes along, we don't know anything about anything. This is how the place was when we found it."

Now Frecks was never in any doubt as to what these words meant. The remark about taking the spade and digging the hole for himself could refer only to Charlie, and they could mean only one thing. The white men no longer needed his services, so he was to be disposed of by brutal, cold-blooded murder.

She was allowed no time to ponder this shocking development, for, on top of Moran's final words, came Raffety's voice, calling Charlie.

"Come on; I want you. Bring that spade," he ordered peremptorily; and, although Frecks realized perfectly well what this meant, she had no time to do anything. Before she could retire, or reach a decision as to what to do for the best, before she could even make a signal to Worrals, Charlie, carrying the spade, appeared at the door and stepped out. An instant later Raffety, a revolver in his hand, emerged behind him.

What strange impulse made Frecks behave as she did, she could not afterwards explain. She may have forgotten that she had a pistol in her pocket. She may have thought, in the brief moment granted her to think, that there was no time to draw it. She was, of course, seething with anger, and it may have been this that decided her actions. Be that as it may, the fact remains that she grabbed the nearest available weapon, which happened to be the clothes-prop which, a minute before, she had nearly knocked over. She seized it with both hands and swung it down with a vicious swipe on Raffety.

Charlie, out of the corner of his eye, must have seen what was coming a split second before Raffety saw it. He ducked. Raffety ducked, too, instinctively throwing up his revolver arm to shield his head. And in this, to some extent, he succeeded. The prop struck his arm first, and beat it down. The revolver went off as it flew out of his hand, the bullet ripping into the roof of the house. But the arm was not sufficient to break the force of the blow, and the prop smote him fairly on the head, beating him to his knees. Had the prop not broken, it is likely that Raffety's skull would have been crushed in, for Frecks, in no mood to mince matters, had put all her strength behind the stroke. And as she struck she shouted: "Run, Charlie, run!"

Raffety cursed luridly. Charlie ran. Where he went after his first dash, Frecks did not see, for she was in no position to play the part of an idle spectator. Her attack had resulted in a good deal of noise, and it is not to be supposed that this had passed unnoticed by Moran. He came out in a hurry to see what was going on—in too much of a hurry, as it turned out. Before he could pull up, he had fallen over his partner and measured his length with some force on the ground—a bit of good fortune for which Frecks was

grateful. His face, she was delighted to see, ploughed into the sandy soil. A blood-curdling oath burst from his lips.

Frecks waited for no more. She fled; realizing that Worrals must have seen all this, she did not run straight towards the trees, but swerved to get out of the line of fire, should Worrals decide to shoot.

As a matter of fact, Worrals did shoot, but Frecks was still too near her line of fire for her liking. Moreover, seeing Moran, now on his knees, raise his pistol, she fired quickly, determined at least to upset his aim if she did not hit him. She missed, but the bullet tore into the sand sufficiently close to Moran to make him dive into the doorway for cover. From this position he fired two shots at Frecks. Raffety, who by this time had recovered his revolver, also fired. But in their haste and confusion their shooting was wild. Anyway, they were firing at long range at a fast-moving target.

Fast-moving only half describes Frecks's retreat. She ran like a startled deer, swerving round or jumping over obstacles in her path. There is nothing more conducive to speed than the whistle of a bullet. Panting, she flung herself over the slight eminence behind which Worrals was lying, and with that, for the moment, she was content.

"Sorry," she gasped, "but they were going to kill Charlie. Where did he go?"

"As far as I could make out, he went down the track," answered Worrals. "He's got clear, anyway."

Frecks dragged herself forward and peered over the bank. She could not see either of the men.

"Where are they?" she asked.

"They've gone back into the house," returned Worrals. "To think things over, no doubt," she added, smiling wanly. "Your spectacular entry into the arena, armed with a clothes-prop, must have shaken them to the core."

"Shook me, too," confessed Frecks.

"I should say Raffety was shaken more than you were, when he got that crack on the nut."

"They know we're not dead."

Worrals smiled again. "They know you're not, anyway. They know at least one of us was in the trees at the same time, so they've probably guessed by now that their design to convert the Desoutter into an incinerator went off at half-cock. No doubt they'll try to improve on it without loss of time. With us on the loose, and Charlie running wild, they must realize that

things are pretty desperate, so we should be silly to suppose that the present calm will continue.”

“What will they do, do you think?”

“One thing they can’t do, is to stay where they are. They’ll either have to come out and get us, or bolt. But I don’t think we’ve much to worry about. If Janet got through all right, Dan should soon be here.” Worrals glanced at the sun, now falling into the western hills. “I hope he gets here before dark. It would be a ticklish business trying to winkle those two crooks out of the house in moonlight.”

For ten minutes they lay watching the house. Then Frecks remarked:

“It begins to look as if they intend to stay where they are. Had they been going to make a move, they’d have been out before now.”

“Maybe they’ve decided to wait for nightfall,” surmised Worrals.

Soon after this they heard the car coming in the distance. Worrals breathed a sigh of relief. “This should take the responsibility off our shoulders, anyway,” she observed. “You might go to meet the car, and tell them where we are. I’ll stay here and watch the house. Leave the trees by the back, so that you won’t be seen.”

“Good enough.” Frecks departed.

Five minutes later she came back, running. “It’s Janet, and she’s got Charlie with her in the car, but Dan isn’t with her,” she reported.

“Are you sure?” Worrals was incredulous.

“Certain. If Dan was in the car I should have seen him. Janet’s driving, with Charlie sitting beside her. There’s no one else.”

“Go and stop the car at a safe distance, and bring them here,” ordered Worrals.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## *The Showdown*

JANET and Charlie, guided by Frecks, arrived at the rendezvous in the gums about ten minutes later. Janet looked disappointed, crestfallen at the failure of her mission. Charlie's face registered no particular expression beyond the sort of morose resignedness usual with black faces in repose.

"Dan was still away," reported Janet wearily. "He hasn't been back from the business that took him out. They told me it was at a place called Finka Creek. I rang up. He wasn't there. He left early yesterday. He's on horseback. No one seems to know where he is. I didn't know what to do for the best. I decided to come back here in case you needed me, or the car. I left a message for Dan that he is wanted urgently at Wallabulla."

"I suppose that was all you could do," agreed Worrals. "How did you come to pick up Charlie?"

"I saw him running down the track towards me as if he didn't know what he was doing, or where he was going. He hid when he saw me, but I marked the place, stopped the car and shouted to him. He was a bit slow coming out, but he came. He's sick and tired. I think all this trouble has affected his brain. He says Moran and Raffety knocked him about. They went to the opal mine and made him carry a sack home. They've been digging all day. Frecks has told me roughly what happened here. What are we going to do now Dan isn't available?"

Worrals pondered the question for a minute. "We've still got the machine. But for the petrol difficulty I'd suggest that one of us slipped down to Adelaide, consulted Mr. Harding, and then reported to police headquarters. Apart from the fact that I don't know how we're going to get over the petrol difficulty—I mean clearing the sugar out of the tank—it will be getting dark presently, so we couldn't make the trip to-day. We can't sit here indefinitely, yet to try to take the house by storm, with those two desperate thugs inside, would be asking for it."

At this point of the conversation Frecks caught Worrals by the arm, and with the other hand pointed into the distance, beyond the house.



“Look!” she exclaimed. “Who’s this coming? There are two men on horseback. They’re coming this way!”

Worrals had a good look before she answered. “I don’t know who they are, but I’ve an idea. One of them is in uniform. Not many people wear a uniform in this part of the world.”

“It must be Constable Terry,” put in Janet.

“That’s how I figure it,” agreed Worrals. “He said he’d look in some time. So that’s why he didn’t go back direct to Oodnadatta. He decided to call here.”

“They’ll be some time getting here at the rate they’re travelling,” observed Frecks. The two riders were, in fact, walking their horses.

“They’re not to know that there’s any reason for haste,” said Worrals. “This should hurry them along.” Taking her automatic from her pocket, she fired three shots into the air at regular intervals.

The signal had the desired effect. The riders reined in for a moment, then came on at a steady canter.

“What do we do in a case like this?” asked Frecks.

“We may as well stay where we are,” replied Worrals. “We’ll call Dan over when he gets within earshot. We’ll tell him what happened, and leave it to him to decide what to do. That’s a blackfellow with him—probably one of those trackers we hear about.”

By this time the two riders were approaching the house. There was no longer any doubt as to the identity of the man in uniform. Worrals stepped forward, and cupping her hands round her mouth let out a hail. “Hi! Dan!” she shouted.

Dan, followed by his black companion, came straight on to the trees, and with easy grace dismounted. “What goes on? What’s the shooting about?” he smiled. “Scared of something?”

“Yes, we were scared you might get plugged,” returned Worrals smoothly. “Listen, Dan. There’s been murder done here, and things are about to boil over.” Wasting no words, she gave a concise account of the situation.

Dan listened with an ever-deepening expression of wonder on his face. “Gosh!” he muttered at the finish. “Where are these two crooks now—in the house?”

“As far as we know.”

“O.K. You stay here. I’ll soon have ’em out of that.” Handing his horse over to his companion, Dan drew his revolver and walked briskly towards the house.

“He’s going the right way to get himself perforated,” observed Frecks.

“I doubt it,” murmured Worrals. “In the British Empire people think twice before they plug a policeman. They might just as well commit suicide.”

Dan disappeared into the house.

Frecks waited, fully expecting to hear shots. None came. Presently Dan reappeared. He made a gesture, then walked back to the trees.

“They’re not there,” he reported. “The window at the far end of the house is open. Looks as if they’ve skedaddled. Don’t worry. They won’t get far. We’ll have them. My tracker can trail a wood-louse. I reckon they saw us arrive.” He started suddenly as, clearly through the still air, came the unmistakable sound of a motor car engine running.

“What’s that?” he asked sharply.

“Sounds as if they’ve got to the car,” answered Worrals. “They must have slipped out of the back window and made a detour round us while we were talking.”

Dan frowned. “Then they look like getting clear,” he said tersely. “I’ve a good horse, but he can’t give a car a start and catch it. If they get to the railway first—and I don’t see what’s to stop them—they’ll get away.”

“I think we can put a spoke in that particular wheel,” declared Worrals. “The car can’t leave the track. We’ve an aircraft a few miles along the route. It would take a fast car to beat that.”

“How far away is it?”

“About five miles.”

“That’s a long way. It’ll take over an hour to get to it.”

“Not necessarily,” returned Worrals evenly. “It’s no use your going on ahead, because you can’t fly a plane, and you couldn’t leave your horse running wild, anyway. What I suggest is this. You stay here. I’ll take your horse. Your blackfellow can come with me. When we get to the machine I’ll hand your horse over to him, take off, fly back here, land, and pick you up. We ought to be in the air after the car in a little over half-an-hour.”

“You seem to know the answers,” observed Dan. “But I can see a snag in that scheme. When they hear the aircraft overtaking them, they’ll get out of the car and lie low in the spinifex. You won’t be able to cruise round all night. As soon as you go, they’ll push on again.”

“We can get over that,” asserted Worrals. “I shan’t fly straight down the track. I’ll make a half-circle round the car, and strike the track about thirty miles down. We can then walk back up the track to meet the car, or, if you

like, set an ambush for it. There's one little snag about that, though. My main tank's half-full of sugar. But if we start with the gravity tank full, we ought to be able to cover forty miles. I hope that will be enough. If it isn't, we shall find ourselves in the spinifex. But it's better to try that than do nothing. Let's go. We're wasting time."

"O.K.," agreed Dan, smiling. "You seem to have taken charge."

"While I'm away, Janet will be able to fill in the details of the story," suggested Worrals, taking the reins of Dan's horse. She swung up into the saddle. "What's your name?" she asked Dan's black companion.

The blackfellow grinned. "Sooty," he said.

"Good enough, Sooty. Let's ride." Worrals touched the flanks of her mount with her heels, and headed for the track. Reaching it she settled down to an easy canter. By this time, of course, the car was out of earshot.

Neither she nor Sooty spoke during the ride to the machine. To her great relief, she saw that it was just as they had left it. Her one fear had been that Moran would remember it and, suspecting how he had been tricked, might leave the car in order to wreck it. He did not know precisely where it was, so she assumed that, even if he had remembered it and guessed that it was undamaged, he had not thought it worth while to waste time on it. She dismounted and handed her reins over to Sooty. "You'd better take the horses back to the house," she advised. "We shall all be back there before long, I expect."

In three minutes she was in the air, heading back for Wallabulla. Time was now the important factor, for the lower rim of the sun was almost touching the western hills. Dan, Frecks, and Janet were waiting by the landing area as she put the aircraft down carefully and threw open the cabin door.

"Give me a hand to fill the gravity tank," she told Frecks briskly. "I'll hand the cans to you."

The task occupied about ten minutes. When it was finished, Worrals announced that they were all set. "You'd better sit in the back with Janet," she told Dan.

"So we're all going?" queried Frecks.

"We'd better keep the party together," answered Worrals. "I may need you to help with the machine should we have any trouble with it. Dan must come, and we can't very well leave Janet here alone. Charlie will have to take his luck till we come back."

"I've had a long talk with him—told him he's nothing to be afraid of," put in Dan. "He'll look after the house while we're away."

“Sooty will soon be back to keep him company, anyway,” asserted Worrals.

As soon as the engine was started, she took off, but now, instead of following the track, she set a course well to one side of it, making a wide detour beyond earshot of the car. This course she held to as near the limit of her petrol as she dared risk; then, feeling that they must be well beyond the car, she swung back to the track and, finding a suitable place, landed on it. There was no wind, so the direction of the landing did not matter. Leaving the aircraft as it stood at the end of its run, having refilled the gravity tank, they started walking up the track to meet the car. Worrals told Dan that she was now leaving things in his hands.

They did not go far. Coming upon a section of track where the ground on either side was rough and broken, Dan halted, saying that it was an ideal place for an ambush. Such a ruse, he claimed, would be better than walking straight on to the car. He also pointed out that the farther they went from the machine, the greater the distance they would have to walk back to it. Visibility was now reduced to about two hundred yards, so it was unlikely that those in the car would see the aircraft standing on the track some distance below.

Worrals admitted the force of this reasoning, and left Dan to arrange the trap. Here his experience as a fighting soldier in the war came in useful. Having put them in position on the right-hand side of the track from where they could cover it without exposing themselves, and warning them to keep low, he rolled a number of large gibbers on to the track, with the object, as he said, of causing the car to stop, and preventing the driver from charging through the trap when he was challenged. The rough nature of the ground on either side made it impossible for the car to leave the track to by-pass the obstructions.

“If a rough-house starts, as it might, you girls keep under cover, and leave the shooting to me,” he ordered.

Worrals observed that the ambush, as it was set, was a formidable one. For weapons she had the rifle, Frecks had the twelve-bore, Janet was given Frecks’s automatic, and Dan carried his heavy service revolver. Lying in their places, they settled down to wait. Silence fell. The sun sank into the hills, and twilight deepened.

After a little while they heard the car coming, but it was still distant, and some minutes elapsed before it came into sight, travelling at a fair speed. Frecks’s nerves tingled. This, beyond any doubt, was the show-down! Raffety, she saw, was driving. As the car drew near, apparently he noticed

the gibbers, for he slowed down and finally stopped just short of them. He muttered something to Moran and got out, presumably to move the stones.

Dan stood up, revolver in hand. "All right, that's far enough," he said crisply. "Keep your hands where I can see them—both of you. Get out of that car, Moran."

For a few seconds the two men could only stare—wondering, Worrals imagined, how Dan had got there.

"What's the idea?" demanded Moran, brusquely.

"You'll learn," retorted Dan curtly. "Don't try anything funny, that's all."

"What right have you to stop us?" demanded Raffety hotly. "We're in a hurry," he blustered.

"I'm arresting you on suspicion of having murdered Mary Carter," said Dan.

Worrals detected a stiffening in the attitudes of both men as Dan thus showed his hand. They were guilty, and they knew it, so she got ready for trouble.

Moran laughed harshly. "That's O.K. with me. I was never at Wallabulla in my life until the other day, and I can prove it."

"Tell that to the court," advised Dan.

Suddenly Raffety jumped sideways like a cat. At the same time he whipped out a gun and fired at Dan. The shot missed. Instantly he dodged behind the car and, bending low, raced across the spinifex. Dan took two quick paces and fired. He also missed.

Worrals was watching Moran, whom she regarded as the more dangerous of the two men. The moment Dan became occupied with Raffety, Moran started to move. He slammed the car into reverse, and started back up the track. Worrals ran out from cover, and fired at the nearest tyre. The tyre went flat. The car stopped. By this time Dan had fired again at Raffety, who stumbled and fell. Moran's hand came up, holding an automatic. He took deliberate aim at Dan.

"Look out, Dan!" yelled Worrals, and fired a quick shot at the man in the car. The bullet did not hit its mark, but it smashed into the windscreen, spoiling Moran's aim. The automatic blazed, but the shot had no effect. Before Moran could fire again, Dan had swung his gun round, and fired twice. One of the shots struck Moran—Worrals thought in the arm or the shoulder; anyway, the automatic dropped out of his hand, and he flopped back into his seat. Seeing that Dan was about to fire again, he raised his other hand in surrender.

“O.K.,” he said weakly, as Dan moved towards him, keeping him covered. “Don’t shoot. I’ll talk. I’m in the clear, and I can prove it.” Ashen-faced, he got out of the car. “I’ll tell you all about it, Terry,” he offered. “I’ll admit I was interested in the opal, but it was Raffety and Barola who killed ——” He broke off short, his body twitching as a shot crashed. For perhaps two seconds he stood swaying on his feet; then his legs seemed to crumple under him, and he slumped like a wet sack falling off a peg.

“Who fired that shot?” snapped Dan, looking at the three girls, who were now on their feet.

Worrals pointed at Raffety, a little way out in the spinifex. He was on his knees, gun in hand. He was trying to raise it to shoot again, but his strength failed him, and his arm dropped.

Dan walked over to him, keeping him covered, and wrenched the gun out of his hand.

Raffety spoke. “I’ll teach that dirty, double-crossing . . .” He fell forward limply.

“When crooks fall out . . .” murmured Frecks.

Worrals walked over to Moran, and Dan joined her. She dropped on her knees. “He’s dead,” she announced, rising. “Got him through the back.” She pointed to a spreading stain on Moran’s shirt. “The bullet must have gone through his heart, or pretty close to it.”

“Well, they asked for it,” murmured Dan calmly.

“I don’t think there ever was any love lost between Moran and Raffety,” remarked Worrals. “Anyway, not after Barola died. How is Raffety?”

“He’s hard hit, but he isn’t dead,” answered Dan. “There’s nothing we can do for him here, beyond simple first-aid to stop the bleeding. We’d better try to get him to Oodnadatta in the car.”

“I’ve busted a tyre,” reminded Worrals.

“I expect there will be a spare wheel.”

“I’d fly him in, but with my main tank out of action, I couldn’t do it,” said Worrals.

“All right. I’ll take him in the car. Moran too. You can give me a hand changing the wheel. Then you’d better get back to Wallabulla and wait there till you hear from me. You’ll be wanted to give evidence.”

“That suits me,” agreed Worrals.

When the wheel had been changed, they lifted Moran’s body into the back of the car. Then, with some difficulty, for he was a heavy man, having dressed his wound with such materials as were available, they got the

unconscious Raffety in beside him. Dan climbed into the driving seat. "I'll be seeing you," he said, and set off on his journey.

Worrals turned to Frecks and Janet. "Let's get back to Wallabulla," she said quietly. "At last we ought to be able to get a night's sleep in peace."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## *The End of the Trail*

THE rest of the story is soon told. Raffety reached the Australian Inland Medical Mission at Oodnadatta alive, but died later. Knowing that he was dying, he made a full confession—more, it seemed, from animosity against Moran than for any other reason. Moran's callous treatment of his partner, Barola, after he had been poisoned still rankled with him.

The story fitted in with what Worrals knew, or suspected, and much of it was confirmed later by Charlie, who, without appearing to understand clearly what was going on, gave his evidence in drawling pidgin-English. It was the view of the police doctor that Aunt Mary's death, and the solitude that followed it, had affected his brain, never very strong. Lawyer Harding attended the inquiry as the girls' legal representative.

The story, briefly, was this. As soon as the crafty Moran had realized the value of Aunt Mary's lucky strike, he had tried to buy the estate from her. On his offer being declined, he had called in Raffety and Barola, both of whom had engaged with him before in shady practice. Their task had been, in the first place, by any means they could devise to cause Aunt Mary to leave Wallabulla. They had tried to scare her away, but in this they had failed, although they did succeed in scaring Charlie—always apprehensive of debil-debils—nearly out of his wits. At length, losing patience, Moran had told his two assistants to "get rid of the stubborn old woman anyhow".

Barola had taken this order literally, and had put salts of strychnine—which he used for "dogging" (dingo-hunting)—in the household drinking water. Aunt Mary had been poisoned, although Charlie, who usually fetched his own water straight from the soak, had escaped. Raffety and Barola had not troubled about him. Indeed, they decided that he was better alive, as he would be needed to show them the opal field should they fail to find it. They had failed to find it, and Charlie refused to show them where it was located. Nor did he show them the plan which Aunt Mary, just before she died, had entrusted to his care. Not that he realized that it was a plan. To him it was just a piece of magic paper. Watching his chance, he had managed to escape, although, in his flight, he had been shot through the foot. His disappearance



left Moran with the almost impossible task of finding the opal field by searching for it over a wide stretch of difficult country. Raffety and Barola had spent months looking for it, but in vain.

A curious factor was this: Charlie, after wandering about for a time, had found it impossible to keep away from his old home. Returning, he had hung about, leading the life of an animal, to watch over Aunt Mary's grave. Yoka had hardly come into the picture. This poor, ignorant Arnhem-lander was little more than a tool of the white men.

Charlie had seen Aunt Mary die, he said simply. The twitching and contortions that are symptoms of strychnine poisoning, which he had called "making wonga", did not surprise him. There was never any doubt in his mind that this was the work of debil-debils, the result of meddling with opal, which he held in superstitious dread. Apparently Aunt Mary knew, or suspected, what ailed her, for before she had died she had given Charlie a piece of paper, the importance of which he did not understand. A plan was something beyond his comprehension. He did not give this to Janet at once, because, suspecting that it had some bearing on the opal, he feared it might do her mischief.

He had buried Aunt Mary on the day she had died, before Raffety and Barola were aware that she was dead; and he had buried all the opal she had gouged in the upper part of her grave to fend off prowling debil-debils. This opal was subsequently recovered when Aunt Mary's body was exhumed for medical verification of the story, and proper burial. It turned out, too, that his scheme in making a dummy-grave, with its "white-feller magic" (the cross), had not been so much to deceive Raffety and Barola as to outwit the debil-debils, which the discovery of the opal had brought to Wallabulla. Indeed, it was clear that his entire behaviour had been governed by his fear of opal and its association with evil spirits.

In a crowded court-room Charlie described, in his weird pidgin-English, how the opal had been found. In the hills, dingo-hunting, Aunt Mary had shot and wounded a dingo. It had taken refuge under a rock. Refusing to leave the wounded beast to die a lingering death, she had sent Charlie home for a crowbar. With this the rock had been prised up, to disclose the dingo's lair of disturbed earth. The animal was then shot. This became a matter of no importance, however, when a large piece of opal, glowing with internal fire, was seen embedded in the soil. The crowbar soon uncovered more. In a broken voice, Charlie narrated how he had implored Aunt Mary to leave the accursed spot, and never return to it. Not sharing his superstitious fears, this she refused to do, and again Charlie was not surprised at the result.

After Aunt Mary's death, convinced absolutely now of the jewel's diabolical powers, he had used it against the white men who now arrived on the scene. And, as Frecks pointed out uneasily, he had used the stuff to good purpose—or so it seemed. Even Worrals, always sceptical, had to admit that there was something uncanny in the way disaster had followed on the trail of the fascinating mineral. When Moran and Raffety had fled in the car, they had taken with them a quantity of opal which they had that day gouged in the dingo's lair. This was the load that Charlie had been made to carry to the house when the girls were watching it. The fate of the white men was, from Charlie's point of view, no matter for wonder.

The investigations by the police department occupied several days, during which Worrals, Frecks, and Janet were obliged to stay in Oodnadatta. The whole unpleasant business having been explained to the satisfaction of the authorities, the question for Janet became one of what to do about the property. She stated emphatically that, after what had happened, she had no intention of residing on it; and there was no reason why she should, for the opal already gouged realized a considerable sum of money—which was, of course, divided in accordance with the arrangement made. A good offer for the property by an important syndicate offered an easy solution, and it was accepted. The matter was finally clinched, as far as Janet was concerned, when Dan Terry asked her to marry him. This offer she also accepted, for she had got to know the cheery police officer very well while the investigations were proceeding. Charlie, well rewarded for his faithful service, departed for his distant tribe.

Worrals and Frecks stayed on for the wedding and then returned to Sydney where, having abandoned the project of starting an air company, they sold the Desoutter, which is now ending its days as an air taxi. After a few weeks of sight-seeing, they took ship for the United Kingdom, richer in pocket and in experience.

Before boarding the ship, Frecks made a thorough search of her kit to make sure that a piece of opal had not got in by accident.

## 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.

The cover and frontispiece were illustrated by Reginald Heade (1901-1957). Reginald Heade illustrations have been added from the 1950 “New Illustrated Edition”.

[The end of *Worrals Down Under* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]