

# Worrals Investigates

Capt. **W. E. JOHNS**

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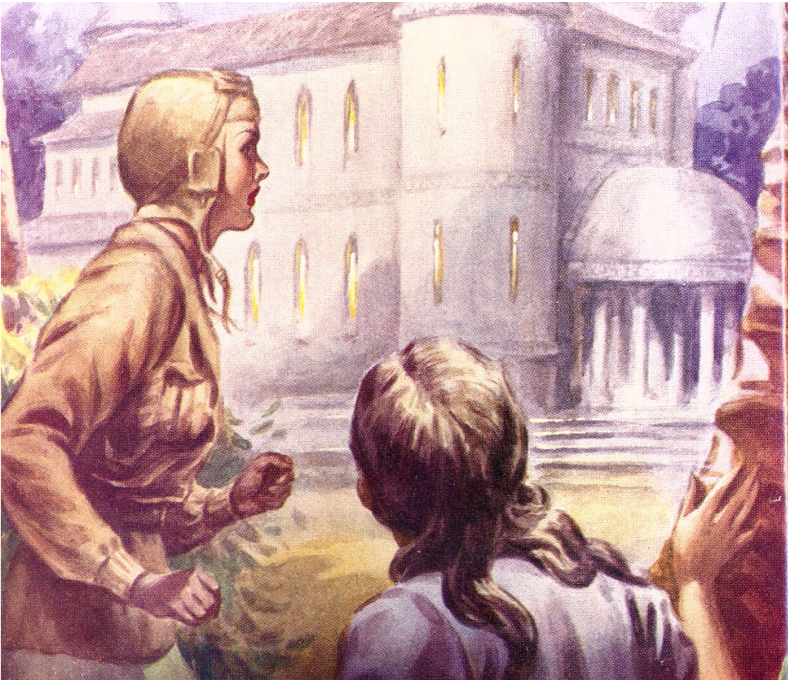
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*The little party halted.*

# WORRALS INVESTIGATES

*A further adventure in the career of Joan  
Worrals and her friend "Frecks"  
Lovell, one time of the W.A.A.F.*

*by*

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



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CHAPTER  
ONE

*Coffee for  
Three*

IF JOAN WORRALSON, better known to her friends as Worrals, hadn't run into Air Commodore Raymond, Assistant Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard, by accident in Piccadilly, the mysterious happenings on Outside Island might have remained a mystery for all time. With her friend, Betty—otherwise “Freckles” Lovell, she had just turned out of the Burlington Arcade, where they had been shopping, when they came face to face with the Air Commodore.

“Hallo!” greeted Worrals. “Are you sleuthing or just taking the air?”

“I've a lunch appointment at the Aero Club and decided to walk to stretch my legs,” answered the Air Commodore.

“Business slack?” inquired Worrals.

“On the contrary, it's brisk—too brisk. Don't you ever read the newspapers? I've been so overworked that I'm beginning to feel like the ragged end of a misspent life.”

Worrals shook her head sadly. “I never heard anything like you men for broadcasting misery. Do you need any help?”

“Not particularly, thanks. Our hands are mostly full of sordid crime. What are you girls doing?”

“Oh, struggling along, you know, to keep the wolf outside the door.”

“Speak for yourself,” grumbled Frecks. “I'm so bored it'd be a pleasure to dig my own grave.”

“How about a cup of coffee?” suggested the Air Commodore.

“We were just going along to Stewart's to get one,” Worrals told him.

“Would you like me to come—and pay the bill?”

“That would be very nice of you,” agreed Worrals.

“Why not make it an early lunch?” suggested Frecks. “I am so hungry I could eat a dish of fried horseshoes.”



“Sorry, but I’ve got to meet a man,” said the Air Commodore apologetically.

Frecks sighed. “In that case I shall have to stave off the pangs with coffee and a couple of doughnuts.”

They walked along to the well-known café at the corner of Bond Street.

Having found a table and ordered coffee the Air Commodore remarked: “I’m afraid I’ve nothing in your line at the moment.”

“I suspected it, otherwise we should have heard from you,” averred Worrals with gentle sarcasm.

The Air Commodore rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Just a minute though. I’ve just remembered something. There is perhaps one little matter . . .”

“Go on—don’t keep us waiting,” pleaded Worrals.

“The thought has just occurred to me that there is a little job in our files that might help to keep you out of mischief. It isn’t really important though.”

“Some wretched woman lost her ration book or something?”

“Plenty of people, men as well as women, lose their ration books, but this isn’t quite as prosaic as that. In fact, in a quiet sort of way it’s a pretty little mystery.”

“Do women come into it?”

“Oh yes.”

“Then tell us about it,” invited Worrals. “Maybe by turning on the female angle we can solve it for you sitting here.”

The Air Commodore smiled. “I see you are beginning to fancy yourself as a detective.”

“Well, you must admit that you have provided us with a fair amount of practice,” Worrals pointed out. “And anyway,” she went on, “one doesn’t have to be anything very wonderful to be a detective.”

“So that’s what you think, eh?”

“What I think is this,” returned Worrals. “There’s an awful lot of nonsense written about this detective business. Mysteries are made where none exists. Of course, that’s all part of the game. If there were no mysteries there’d be no Scotland Yard. All this talk about deduction makes me laugh. Boil it down and what have you? Just common sense. If a man can’t arrive at a conclusion by common sense plus scientific research, for which the Yard has every facility, then he has no right to call himself a criminal investigator. After a bit of practice one finds oneself deducting

automatically, at least, I do. I wish I didn't. Usually I have other things to think about."

The Air Commodore laughed outright. "You know, you may have got something there," he conceded. Then he became serious. "But don't flatter yourself that it's all easy. Whoever solves the little puzzle that I have in mind will have to travel a long way. I can think of no other way of getting to the bone of the thing."

"Tell us about it and we'll judge for ourselves," requested Worrals.

They waited while the waitress served the coffee and the Air Commodore continued. "The riddle is wrapped around what is commonly called a desert island."

"That's a good start, anyway," said Worrals approvingly. "Islands are fascinating things as long as they're not too big. Where's this one?"

"In that part of the Pacific where all the spare bits of land seem to have been tossed. It used to be called the South Seas, but is now more usually known by the French name Oceania. You know where I mean?"

"We went to school," murmured Worrals.

"In that case you may have noticed that on the map the names of many of these islands are underlined in red. That denotes a British possession. Most other countries have a share. Until recently nobody bothered much about these islands—at any rate the smaller ones, of which there are literally thousands. You could have helped yourself to one, and as the postman doesn't call it's unlikely that anyone would have known about it for a long time. But lately these bits of rock and coral have taken on a new value because they form ready-made refuelling stations on the trans-ocean air-routes. However, in this particular case that aspect doesn't enter into it, although it might later on. I only mention it because countries are getting touchy about foreigners landing on their islands without permission. Already there has been a spot of claim-jumping. Anyway, every island has now been claimed by some country or another. None, really, is privately owned. Very well." The Air Commodore paused to light a cigarette.

"One of our islands enjoys the unromantic name of Outside Island. It was probably so named by the mariner who discovered it because it lies far outside the main groups of islands. With the exception of another small atoll, named Raratua, about ninety miles away—which is French property—the nearest land is the Paumotu archipelago, sometimes known as the Low or Dangerous Isles. The Paumotus belong to France. Being of coral formation they are not strictly islands, but atolls. Outside Island is also, strictly speaking, an atoll. While we are on the subject, as you'll want it, I might as

well give you all the gen available. I have had it looked up in Admiralty Sailing Directions and Findlay's South Pacific Directory. Just a minute." The Air Commodore took out his notebook and, selecting a slip of paper, read aloud.

"Outside Island. A lonely atoll lying three hundred miles east of the Paumotus. Once inhabited but now deserted. Shaped roughly like a letter S. Length approximately nine miles by half a mile wide. Highest point twelve feet above sea-level. In general features like other atolls but unusual in that it has two lagoons within the surrounding reef. The lagoon at northern end, five miles across, generally used by landing parties, but there are passages through the reef to both. They are narrow and dangerous. The island lies within the hurricane belt and is subject to inundation. It has the reputation of being haunted and is usually avoided by natives and consequently by trading schooners." The Air Commodore folded and replaced the paper. "So much for the island itself," he went on.

"Why is it uninhabited?" asked Worrals. "As these islands go, it's large enough to hold a native population. Is it because of the risk of inundation or because of the alleged haunting?"

"That's something I can't answer," replied the Air Commodore. "But there is a good reason why the island has a sinister reputation, and may account for the natives who once lived there abandoning the place. From early records it seems that they were a friendly lot. Many inter-island traders called because these lagoons yielded particularly fine pearls. Maybe that was the root of the evil. At all events, in the middle of the last century there arrived on the island a man named Prout, who claimed to be a missionary. Nothing is known about him but he seems to have had more than a touch of Hitler in his make-up. He was certainly a religious maniac, although when the world heard about his behaviour no church would acknowledge him. Anyway, he arrived, and he stayed, and he introduced the easy-going Polynesian population to something about which they knew nothing. Work. They didn't work because there was no need. They could get everything they wanted without it. But this madman arrived and saw to it that everyone worked according to our standards. You might ask, for what? Apparently for his own glorification and enrichment. How he, one white man, did it, has always been a mystery—except that he seems to have gone about the thing in the modern totalitarian manner. Having frightened everyone to death with threats of hell-fire, by offering dispensations he was able to organize a private police force. The rest, men, women and children, became slaves pure and simple. Some had to dive for pearls; others had to plant coco-nuts, although there were already enough to support the population. The pearls,

and the copra produced from the nuts, Prout sold to traders who, as they made money out of the traffic, said nothing about what was going on. Really, there was nothing unusual about this in the bad old days in the South Seas. But Prout carried the thing too far. His crowning piece of infamy was this. He forced the natives to build what he called a cathedral, but which was, in fact, a palace for himself, for by this time he was calling himself King of the island. Even the traders had to bow and call him King, or they got no pearls or copra. The palace still stands—derelict, of course. People who have seen it say it is an incredible building. Every slab of coral, of which it is built, was hewn with blood and sweat by the wretched natives.”

“How disgraceful!” put in Frecks indignantly.

The Air Commodore agreed. “Well, you can imagine what happened,” he went on. “The natives died like flies. Even sick men were made to work. Those who refused were murdered as an example to the others. For a time Prout replaced the casualties with natives brought from other islands by unscrupulous traders. But eventually even they were sickened and one of them reported what was going on. That was in 1900, by which time the natives were reduced to a mere handful of emaciated wrecks. Inquiries were set afoot, but before anything could be done a hurricane hit the island. Just what happened we don’t know for there were no survivors. Judging from the report of the next trader who called big seas must have washed right over the place carrying everything before them. Not a soul was left alive. The only thing still standing was Prout’s incredible palace. But all this has nothing to do with our mystery.”

“Are you sure of that?” put in Worrals.

The Air Commodore frowned. “What do you mean—am I sure?”

“What I say. How can you assert positively that this palace, or whatever it is, has nothing to do with the case? Has someone been to look at it lately?”

“No.”

“Never mind. I’m only trying to get my facts right,” murmured Worrals. “Go ahead.”

“As far as we’re concerned, the island is uninhabited,” went on the Air Commodore. “The first intimation we had that there *might* be someone there came in the form of a rather curt note from the French Foreign Office, passing on a complaint of the French Administrator of Oceania, at Papeete, in Tahiti, which is the metropolis of the Islands. In effect, their complaint was this. It seems that some of their Polynesian nationals from the Paumotus, at sea in one of their big canoes, called at the island for fresh water. Before they could land they were greeted by a volley of rifle shots,



most of which, fortunately, went wide. But one man was killed. Naturally, as the natives had no firearms they did not persist in their attempts to land. The canoe returned to its own island and reported the incident to their Resident Administrator, who, quite naturally, took a dim view of it. According to him, this was no mere inter-tribal dispute. The natives reported that they were fired on by wild women, and these women were *white* women. One had red hair, which is something that just doesn't happen in that part of the world." The Air Commodore smiled. "Of course, such a fantastic story didn't make sense," he resumed. "It seemed to us far more likely that the natives had drunk too much *kava*—the local toddy—and got to fighting among themselves. One of their number was killed, and the rest, to account for his disappearance, concocted the story."

Worrals shook her head. "It doesn't sound that way to me."

"Indeed! And why not?" asked the Air Commodore with a touch of asperity.

"Because, in the first place—although I'm no expert in Polynesian affairs—I can't think of any possible reason why these men should invent such a story. All they had to say was that one of the crew had been washed overboard by a wave, or had been grabbed by a shark while bathing. Such a story would not have been doubted or questioned because it's the sort of thing that must happen every day. You're asking us to believe that these natives, who could quite easily have accounted for a missing man in a score of perfectly natural ways, deliberately sat down to concoct a yarn which was bound to be received with incredulity and suspicion even by the Administrator himself. The Polynesian may not possess a high degree of intelligence according to our standards, but I imagine he's got more sense than to lie, knowing that the matter would be investigated—surely the last thing the crew wanted if they were trying to put something over. And to specify red hair, which is probably something not one of them had ever seen, is giving them credit for too much imagination. But go on. What was the basis of the French complaint?"

"As the island is ours, the behaviour of people living on it is our responsibility. We admitted that in our reply, but pointed out that we had no idea that anyone was there."

"That was pretty weak, anyway," averred Worrals.

"In what way?"

"If we own something, surely it's our business to look after it, and know what goes on?"

“The truth of the matter was this,” confessed the Air Commodore. “We didn’t believe a word of the story, and neither, I’d wager, did the French Administrator. Naturally, we couldn’t say that in our reply. It would hardly have been diplomatic. But the French were quite right to complain, and we had to send a reply. Of course, there is just a chance that some white men were there—the crew of a trading schooner after copra, for instance; although it’s hard to see why they should fire on a native boat. On mature consideration, my personal opinion—and the Admiralty agree—is this. The Polynesians had gone to the island either for coco-nuts or pearls. Copra, by the way, which is the dried kernel of the coco-nut from which fat is extracted, is a valuable commodity to-day. As the island is ours the natives had no right to do that, and they knew it. Having got there, they found they had been forestalled. A party from another island was there on the same job. Seeing another boat coming, and being unwilling to share the loot—or perhaps they didn’t want to be identified—they smeared their bodies with wood ash and tried to frighten the newcomers away by pretending to be spooks. This having failed they opened fire. Doesn’t that sound reasonable to you?”

“I don’t find it very convincing,” answered Worrals dubiously. “There are several flaws in that theory. It presumes that the men already on the island were carrying rifles. Even if they possessed such weapons, which is unlikely, why take them ashore? There are no hostile natives, or wild beasts, on Pacific atolls. And in what sort of craft did these men reach the atoll? There’s no mention of a boat. Admittedly, we must allow for the fact that we have only got the Polynesians’ word for it that there was any shooting.”

“Very well,” answered the Air Commodore. “The alternative theory is that there are castaways on the island.”

Worrals shook her head. “That won’t do. Castaways normally receive a boat from the outside world with open arms, not musket-balls.”

“What an awkward woman you are,” protested the Air Commodore.

“You’re telling the story,” asserted Worrals. “If I’m not to do a little deducing on my own account, why waste your time telling it? If you’d rather I remained dumb in the face of these pretty but quite unconvincing theories, you have only to say so and I’ll endeavour to keep my tongue under control.”

The Air Commodore smiled. “Don’t do that. I am enjoying the argument. But there’s more to come and this coffee is cold. Shall I order some more?”

“That’s okay with me,” declared Frecks. “This is nearly as good as going to the flicks.”

“Our time is all yours,” Worrals told the Air Commodore.  
The Air Commodore beckoned to the waitress.

## CHAPTER TWO

## *More Coffee for Three*

“**N**ow tell us what you did about this complaint,” invited Worrals, when fresh coffee had been brought.

“We told the French authorities that we’d look into the matter,” replied the Air Commodore. “We could do no less. But how were we going to look into it except by sending an expedition to the island? The French must have realized that. They must have known it would be unreasonable to expect us to ask the Navy to send a vessel on a special voyage to the other side of the world to check up on a vague and most unlikely story told by a party of Polynesians.”

“Unlikely, but not vague,” disputed Worrals. “These natives seem to have been particularly observant in the matter of detail—even to the extent of noticing the colour of a woman’s hair.”

“All right. Have it your own way,” said the Air Commodore. “But get ready to hold your hat. It now seems that there was some foundation of truth in the story.”

“Ah! Now we’re getting somewhere,” stated Worrals. “To me that’s been the most sensible explanation of the thing all along. Have you had confirmation?”

“Up to a point. The Admiralty doesn’t forget. Two months ago, having a sloop passing within a few hundred miles of Outside Island, the Skipper was ordered to look in and investigate. Standing by—naturally he wouldn’t hazard his ship by getting too close to the dangerous reef—he lowered a boat with half a dozen men under an officer. This boat was nearing the shore when a rifle shot rang out and a bullet hit one of the sailors in the arm.”

Worrals smiled. “The mad white woman with red hair had evidently had a spot of practice,” she commented. “Her shooting had improved.”

“I don’t know about that, but in view of this hostile reception the naval officer did the only thing he could. It wasn’t for him to risk the lives of his men so he went back to the sloop and reported what had happened. The



captain was at a loss to know what to do. There was nothing in his orders about taking the place by storm. He did not want casualties himself, and to inflict them on other people might start an international row. It doesn't take much nowadays to do that. In any case, it seemed silly to waste shells on coco-nut palms. He radioed to his base for instructions, at the same time stating that the glass was falling and he was on a lee shore. He was told to proceed on his way. There was no sense in risking a costly ship to save somebody who obviously didn't want to be saved."

Worrals nibbled a biscuit thoughtfully. "It was difficult," she admitted. "Still, it seems a pity the thing wasn't buttoned up while the ship was there."

"Maybe so," agreed the Air Commodore. "The fact is, the matter isn't really important enough to give anyone a headache. Our chief concern is to settle the matter amicably with our French friends. We certainly don't want their nationals shot on our territory. There's enough bickering going on in the world as it is."

"What about these alleged women on the island?" asked Worrals. "Did this naval officer see anything of them?"

"No. He had a good look at the place through his glass, but he saw no sign of life. The sharpshooter, whoever he or she was, was well hidden. The island is pretty well covered with coco-nut palms, which supports the copra theory. The palace is still standing. The top of it could be seen through the trees, though not in any detail owing to the distance."

"And that's how the thing stands at present?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing about it?"

"Nothing at the moment. The Admiralty is against sending a ship all that way for the one purpose of looking at an island which nobody wants. When they have another ship passing that way it will be told to call."

"But it begins to look as if somebody *does* want the island," argued Worrals. "Not only wants it, but is prepared to fight to keep it," she added.

"All the same, it would be an expensive business to send a ship all that way," insisted the Air Commodore. "But it struck me just now—I don't know why I didn't think of it before—that a far more economical plan would be to send an aircraft. In fact, an aircraft would have several advantages. It would be quicker than surface-craft. It could land on the lagoon instead of taking chances with the dangerous passage through the reef. Indeed, it might not be necessary for it to land at all. It might see all that was necessary by simply flying low over the atoll."

“Which, as the occupants are obviously all against publicity, would merely have the effect of sending them all diving for cover,” observed Worrals dryly. “I think you’ll find that it will be necessary for the aircraft to land. Are you suggesting that we do the job?”

“If you’ve nothing better to do. Frankly, I shan’t lose any sleep if nobody goes, although I suppose the thing will have to be sorted out sooner or later. We owe that to the French authorities. In suggesting that you go, I’m bearing in mind that if by any remote chance there *should* be females on the island you would be better able to cope with them than men. Women might be prepared to greet other women with something less hostile than gun shots.”

Worrals nodded. “True enough. Can you tell me this? What was the date of the last official British visit to the atoll?”

“The Admiralty have no record of any ship calling there since 1906.”

Worrals’s eyes opened wide. “That’s a long time ago. A lot could have happened there between then and now.”

“Some islands haven’t been visited for much longer than that. The Navy has more important jobs to do than sailing round the globe inspecting uninhabited islands.”

“And these Paumotuans? When were they last there—I mean, before the time they were shot at?”

“I didn’t inquire. I assumed it was their first visit.”

“I wouldn’t assume anything of the sort.”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters a lot. If on a previous occasion they landed unmolested we might get a rough idea of the date when the shooting party arrived. If one knew that to within a few months, or even a year, the information would be useful.”

“What makes you think that these natives might have been there before?”

“Several things. To start with, I can’t believe that these fellows were sculling about that particular section of the ocean with no particular object in view. They must know those waters as I know Piccadilly. They knew the island was there, in which case they must have known jolly well that there was copra to be had for nothing, or, maybe, pearls. They also knew they had no right there, and if one of their number hadn’t been shot they would have carried on poaching and no one would have known anything about it. I’d say those men made a special trip to the island, and in that case the chances are they’d been there before.”

The Air Commodore nodded. "I didn't look at it like that," he admitted.

"Would it be in order for you to ask the French authorities to question these men again, to find out if they had been there before, and if so, when? Make it clear that you're not interested in their unofficial visit to the island, or they may lie about it. Say you're merely following up the complaint with a view to getting the thing straightened out."

"I could do that," agreed the Air Commodore. "We should have a reply in a few days. But what's the point of this?"

"Let us assume for the moment that the natives told the truth, and there are white women on the island," suggested Worrals. "If there are, where did they come from? When did they arrive? Has nobody missed them? People do vanish, of course, and some have good reason. But most women have friends or relations, and when people go missing they soon start asking questions. Remember, the natives said women—plural; not a woman. There were several gun shots, not one. That means that at least two or three women are there. They must have arrived together. Has nobody missed them? If we could ascertain *when* they arrived it might tally with names on your list of missing women. I imagine you have such a list?"

The Air Commodore looked grave. "We have, but I'm afraid that won't help you much."

"Why not?"

"There are too many."

"Too many! You shock me."

"Odd women—and men for that matter, do disappear more or less regularly," said the Air Commodore. "Some, no doubt, are concerned only with dodging conscription or national service."

"But even they have to eat. What about their ration books?"

The Air Commodore shrugged. "Don't ask me. Some time ago—it must be nearly two years now—there was such a crop of female disappearances that we became seriously alarmed. We had about twenty cases reported in a month."

Worrals frowned. "Who reported them?"

"Parents, mostly."

"Were none of these women ever found?"

"No. They just vanished leaving no trace, as we say."

"But how frightful. What sort of women were they?"

"Girls mostly—girls of between eighteen and twenty-five."

"Wasn't that unusual?"

“Very.”

“From what sort of homes did these girls come?”

“They were all girls of good character. Some were domestic servants. Some were in good jobs, and until the time they disappeared seemed quite happy and contented. Apparently some of them knew what they were going to do because they took their best clothes and so on with them.”

Worrals stared. “You amaze me! Well,” she went on slowly, “you’ve certainly got my curiosity weaving. But let’s stick to the point. When do you want us to leave for Outside Island?”

“When you’re ready. There’s no hurry. Make your own arrangements. Get what you want and I’ll see the bills are okayed.” The Air Commodore looked at his watch. “But I must be getting along—I’m late as it is. Do I take it definitely that you’ll go?”

“Of course.”

“All right, then.” The Air Commodore got up, beckoned to the waitress and paid the check. “Look in and see me before you go. I shall want to know just what you intend to do.”

“And I shall want you to know,” returned Worrals warmly. “From all I’ve read a coral island can be a fascinating place, but that doesn’t mean that I’m pining to spend the rest of my life on one.”

With a wave and a smile the Air Commodore departed.

Worrals looked at Frecks. “Our shopping expedition looks like taking us farther than we thought,” she observed. For some time she sat pensively stirring her coffee. “The more you think about this business, the more odd it becomes,” she said at last. “I’m afraid we shan’t prove anything sitting here; but we can look at the thing from all angles and sort out the probable from the improbable. We must have some sort of line to work on. My feeling is, the Air Commodore is inclined to treat it too lightly. My instinct tells me there’s more behind this than has so far met the eye. Some of the most astonishing affairs have come to light through an incident far more trivial than the one about which we’ve just been told.”

“What’s your opinion of it?” asked Frecks.

“I haven’t one,” admitted Worrals frankly. “But let’s tackle the thing logically and try to arrive at one. The facts are quite simple. Some natives try to land at a British island supposed to be uninhabited. They are shot at. One is killed. We know that the first part of their story is true because it has been corroborated by the Navy. The next point is, as the first part of the native story is true, there seems to be no reason to doubt the second part. It sounds fantastic, but on that very account, to my way of thinking, it’s more



likely to be true. As I said to the Air Commodore, why invent a story so incredible that it was certain to be doubted? What was this story? The natives saw white women. These women were behaving in a manner which they described as wild. Exactly what they meant by that we don't know, but as these women were crazy enough to start shooting we can suppose they were in a state of high excitement. One of these women had red hair." Worrals finished her coffee at a gulp.

"Put it like this," she went on. "Either the natives were lying or they were telling the truth. If we say they were lying, we must find a better reason for such an outrageous lie than the one the Air Commodore provided—that it was simply to account for the death of one of the crew in the canoe."

"The island is supposed to be haunted," reminded Frecks, "The natives would know that and be ready to bolt."

"They said nothing about spooks. And even if spooks were on their mind, they'd have the sense to know that spooks don't carry rifles. They said they saw white women, and I'm prepared to believe they did—or thought they did. They certainly saw somebody. Nobody lies without a reason, and I simply can't see why these natives should create white women if none were there. No, Frecks, these fellows tried to land and were shot at. That's been proved. If we accept that, then we might as well accept the assertion that the shooters were white women."

"Or natives dressed as whites?" suggested Frecks.

"A native dressed as a white wouldn't dye her hair red, even if that were possible, which I doubt. Let's examine this carefully. These natives must have known that their story would sound extraordinary even if they said the shooters were women, because women do not normally possess firearms. But they don't stop at that. They qualify these women. They were white. They were wild. One had red hair. Native imagination will go a long way but don't ask me to believe that it will go as far as that. These men themselves live on a lonely atoll. They can have seen very few white women in all their lives. They'd have about as much chance of seeing a woman with red hair as a dwarf would have of getting into the Life Guards. I doubt if they know that there are women with red hair."

"I'm inclined to think they must be castaways gone out of their mind," opined Frecks. "That's the only reasonable explanation."

"My dear Frecks, be yourself," protested Worrals. "When people are shipwrecked, they stick to the ship while there's any hope of it keeping afloat. When it becomes certain that they're going to sink, they take to the

boats. On such alarming occasions they're concerned only with saving their lives. They don't clutter themselves up with unnecessary junk, and I'd put rifles and cartridges into that category. Remember, these are friendly islands. The natives are not hostile. And then there's the point I made to the Air Commodore. Castaways are only too anxious for the world to know of their predicament. Anyone cast away on Outside Island might stay there for forty years. One imagines that a diet of coco-nuts soon becomes monotonous. Why drive salvation away when it comes? No. These people aren't castaways. They want to be there. They went there of their own free will and they don't want to be disturbed. They are prepared to drive away invaders. That's why they took rifles. What is there to shoot at on an atoll? Rats, crabs and seagulls. You don't need a rifle to kill rats and you can't eat seagulls."

"The bluejackets didn't see any women, white or otherwise," remarked Frecks. "Why?"

"I can think of a reason."

"What is it?"

"When the natives tried to land, the people on the island didn't mind showing themselves. A bunch of natives didn't matter. But when a ship flying the White Ensign steamed into the offing it was a very different matter. They took jolly good care to keep under cover."

"Why? I'm not very bright this morning."

"Because if the Navy announced that a party of white women were stuck on a lonely Pacific atoll the story would get into the papers and a public outcry would demand their rescue. From their behaviour that's the last thing these wild white women want."

"But how did these women get there? Neither the natives nor the Navy saw a ship?"

"That's one I can't answer," admitted Worrals. "Of course, some people have had themselves marooned deliberately, as did Alexander Selkirk, the original of Robinson Crusoe. I'll own it doesn't sound feasible in this case. What is there on Outside Island to attract anyone? And how, if it comes to that, did these people know the island was there? Not one person in a million has ever heard of the place."

"Maybe they looked at the atlas."

"Okay. They looked at the atlas. I'll bet the island isn't marked. It takes the cartographers all their time to show the main groups of islands in the South Seas. Then all they can manage is a few pin pricks. Why pick on Outside Island—unless it was for the very reason of its remoteness? The main archipelago is remote enough in all conscience."

“These people may be British. Outside Island is British. The Paumotus are French.”

“Yes, that’s sound reasoning.”

“There’s a ready-made palace there.”

“A palace on a South Sea island would be just about as useful as a wigwam in Piccadilly Circus.”

“That crook missionary, Prout, wanted a palace there, don’t forget.”

“That was probably to impress the natives, to boost his importance, so that they’d sweat their lives away making his fortune out of copra. I think we’d better reserve our opinion of this palace till we see it.”

“But all this is taking for granted that there are people on the island—living there,” Frecks pointed out.

“Rifles don’t fire themselves,” argued Worrals.

“But women!”

“If anyone is daft enough to choose that sort of existence, it might as well be a woman as a man.”

“There might be men as well.”

“I doubt it. When that boatload of natives came over the horizon, would it be natural for the men to run away and hide leaving the women to do the shooting?”

“No.”

“Of course not. Men are more accustomed to firearms, anyway. The shooting in the first place was poor. A volley of shots was fired. Only one hit the boat. That sounds like people unaccustomed to firearms.”

“All right,” agreed Frecks. “Where does all this get us?”

“Nowhere, except that I’ve shown you why I believe the natives’ story to be substantially true. The only way we shall arrive at the answer to all the whys and wherefores is by going to the island and seeing for ourselves just what goes on.”

“There’s nothing more we can do at home, you think?”

“There’s one angle we might explore,” said Worrals slowly. “I don’t set much store on it, but one never knows. If there are white women on Outside Island it’s pretty certain that they went there in a ship of some sort. What ship? When? Where is it now? Did it return to its home port after putting these Crusoes ashore? If it did, why haven’t the skipper or the crew said anything about it? Surely one of them would have talked? The ship may have been lost after landing these people. It might be worth while going through Lloyds’ Register of missing ships, covering, say, the past three or

four years. There won't be very many if we confine our inquiry to that particular section of the Pacific, because it's only once in a blue moon that a ship is within hundreds of miles of the place, and then it could hardly be there from choice. It's far from the main traffic routes."

"A ship might have drifted there out of control."

Worrals shook her head. "You're still clinging to the castaway theory. Forget it. If women were cast away they'd have men with them, and the men would have done the shooting."

"It's women and children first in the boats, don't forget."

"But women don't man the lifeboats, to pull on the oars and do the navigating. The ship's crew do that. Apart from which, the theory won't hold water because all ships carry radio, and the first thing they do when in trouble is send out an S.O.S. and give their position."

"This ship might have done that."

"In which case a search would have been made for possible survivors. If none was found, the ship would be presumed lost. If survivors reached Outside Island they'd want to be picked up—but we've been over all this before."

"All right," countered Frecks. "Your argument is that there are women on the island."

"Yes."

"They are not castaways?"

"That's my contention."

"The alternative is, they put themselves there deliberately."

"Quite right."

"That doesn't make sense to me."

"Why not?"

"You're asking me to believe that a number of white women, sane women, of their own free will, planted themselves on a crust of land in the middle of nowhere, without a male escort, prepared to stay there."

"I don't remember saying anything about them being sane," returned Worrals. "Alexander Selkirk had himself marooned on Juan Fernandez and was there for over four years."

"He was a man."

"So what? Is there any reason why a woman shouldn't do the same thing?"

"That still doesn't make sense to me."

“Maybe not, but people don’t all think alike. What may not sound sense to you may be a brain-wave to some people. These women—assuming they are there—wouldn’t be the first to choose a life of absolute seclusion, and without male escort. Some religious orders do that.”

“Yes. In civilized countries. That’s a different thing altogether.”

“All right. What about Lady Hester Stanhope, in the middle of the last century? She was a famous society beauty. She renounced civilization and tucked herself away in the heart of a Syrian wilderness where she spent the rest of her days. And Syria was a wild place then.”

“What was that about? An unhappy love affair?”

“Nobody knows. What does it matter what it was all about? The fact remains, she did it. There’s no telling what some people will do if they get a bug in their brains. But we’ve done enough talking. It all boils down to this. We have three questions to answer. Are these white women there? If so, why are they there, and why do they shoot at visitors? Apart from the last item, they’ve done nothing wrong—as far as we know. The Air Commodore was right in one respect. We shall have to go to Outside Island to get the answers. Having got them we can come home. Apparently there’s no question of putting these people off the island, or bringing them home if they don’t want to come. Now we’d better go and see about getting things organized.”

CHAPTER  
THREE

*Beyond the  
Blue Horizon*

SEVEN weeks after the conversations narrated in the previous chapters an aircraft droned its way across an infinity of blue water towards the rim of the world and a lonely island that lay beyond the woes and worries of civilization. Worrals was at the controls. Frecks sat beside her, her eyes on the waste of water where the ocean met the sky, a horizon over which marched a majestic pageantry of clouds. It seemed so long since the last land they had sighted had disappeared down the reverse slope of the sea that a feeling had grown on her that they were no longer on the earth, but had entered a new province of the universe.

They had made a leisurely trip out, for, as the Air Commodore had said, there was no great urgency about their mission. Nevertheless, there had been much to do at home, for Worrals knew only too well that the success or failure of a long-distance flight is something that, more often than not, is decided on the ground before the start. Arrangements for refuelling had to be made, and here the Air Commodore's influence, through service channels, made possible facilities which would not have been available to ordinary civil aircraft. The same with the complicated travel and customs regulations. Of course, the fact that the machine and its crew were on official British Government business, as was noted on their documents—passports, log books, carnets and the like—smoothed out the usual difficulties.

The selection of an aircraft had been a consideration of first importance. And here they had been lucky, since not even the Air Commodore was in a position to demand from the Air Ministry just any machine that might seem best adapted for their purpose. But it so happened that there was a prototype, a flying-boat amphibian, that had not gone into production, readily available, and as it was precisely what Worrals needed she jumped at it. The Air Ministry had approved the design during the war. The machine had been built and paid for, but at the end of the war put on the obsolescent list, since the particular purpose for which it had been designed no longer arose. It

was, it seemed, a sort of ugly duckling. At any rate, nobody wanted it. Worrals did not hesitate. As she remarked to Frecks, it was 'just the job'.

The provisional name for the type was Seafarer, and as such it was known. As a type, its classification was Long-Distance Sea-Air Rescue. It was not a very attractive machine to look at, but Worrals was not concerned with looks. Strength and reliability were what she wanted, and since it was expected that the machine might have to land in heavy seas, these qualities had been kept to the fore by the designer.

Actually, the Seafarer was a monoplane with accommodation for four passengers in addition to the crew. The pilot's cockpit, forward of the wings, was enclosed. An open cockpit amidships gave access to the cabin, conveniently close behind. Behind the pilot's cockpit was a radio and navigation compartment, backed by a bulkhead through which a door gave access to the passenger cabin. The power unit was a single Bristol Mercury radial air-cooled engine of nearly nine hundred horse power, which gave the machine a top speed of one hundred and fifty miles an hour and a cruising speed of just over a hundred miles an hour. Normal endurance range was rather better than twelve hundred miles, but as all the seating in the cabin was not likely to be required Worrals had sacrificed some of it for the installation of an auxiliary fuel tank which lengthened the range to more than two thousand miles. There was no armament.

Worrals tested the machine and expressed herself well content. It was, she found, easy to handle both in the air and on the water. True, it was not fast, but it had a slow landing speed, which was more to be preferred considering the nature of the work on hand. The cabin accommodation would contain more stores than they were likely to need. So, taking it all round, Worrals was well pleased. Armament was not required, but personal weapons had been discussed in view of the reception accorded to recent visitors to the island. In the end, as weapons would only be needed in self-defence, they decided each to take a small automatic pistol and let it go at that.

Nothing is more boring than a long, over-water flight, and Frecks had lost interest in the unchanging scene below. They had passed over several small islands earlier in the day, but from an altitude of five thousand feet there had been little to excite curiosity, much less enthusiasm. The weather had been kind, and looked like holding, much to Worrals's satisfaction, if only because with good visibility there would be less chance of missing the island—a circumstance which, even for the most experienced navigators, is always possible in anything but the best weather. This, really, was why Worrals maintained an altitude which otherwise would not have been

necessary. From it, she reckoned, they could see a hundred miles in every direction.

With the Seafarer practically flying itself along its set course, Frecks nibbled a bar of chocolate as she kept a lookout ahead. And presently, when an isolated speck of land appeared, she remarked: "That must be Raratua: according to the book of words there's no one on it. From all I've heard of desert islands it seems to fill the bill."

"We're on our course, anyway," observed Worrals. "Only another ninety miles to go."

Frecks watched the tiny atoll, looking pathetically lonely in so much water, pass below, and finishing her chocolate fixed her eyes on the horizon over which their objective should, from their altitude, soon creep into sight. Her mind, naturally, revolved round the known facts of their unusual enterprise.

Investigations at home had thrown practically no more light on the mystery. The Air Commodore had been in touch with the French authorities who, at his request, had ascertained that the Paumotuans, as Worrals suspected, had been to the island before. The previous time was over a year before, on which occasion there had been no one there. Of this they were sure, because they confessed to having removed some of the pearl shell that had been used to decorate the walls of the palace. This, as Worrals pointed out, meant that the present occupants—assuming they were still there—had arrived within a known period of about two years.

The next step had been to find out what ships had been lost in the region during that period. The results were disappointing. Inquiries at Lloyds and at the Admiralty revealed that no registered vessels had disappeared anywhere in the Pacific during that time. Indeed, only three ships had disappeared without trace during the last three years in all the oceans of the world. Others had, of course, been wrecked; but the details were known from survivors. The first of the ships that had vanished completely was a French freighter named Babette, which, in ballast, had disappeared between London and East Africa. There were no women on board. The second was a cattle-boat that had presumably gone down with all hands between Buenos Aires and Bristol. Weak S.O.S. signals had been received. After that, silence. It was not known if there were women on board, but it was unlikely that there would be any on a cattle-boat. The third was a privately owned luxury steam yacht named Vanity, outward bound on a pleasure cruise to California from Cowes, via the Panama Canal. It had not gone through the Canal so was presumed lost somewhere in the Atlantic. The weather was bad at the time. There was a party on board. Not all the names were known, but it included



women, among them Lady Amelia Haddington, the owner, daughter of the late Sir Eustace Haddington, a millionaire ship-owner and yachtsman for whom the vessel had been built.

All these ships, the Air Commodore asserted, could be dismissed from the case, as none could have been within thousands of miles of Outside Island. Worrals agreed.

One point of interest, however, had come to light—not that Worrals paid a great deal of attention to it. The period between the two visits of the natives to the island coincided roughly with the time Scotland Yard was faced with the crop of female disappearances to which the Air Commodore had referred. But that, as the Air Commodore remarked—and Worrals again agreed—was almost certainly coincidence. Not by any method of reasoning, or exercise of imagination, was it possible to see how these girls, most of whom came from humble homes, could get to a remote island like Outside. None was known to have booked a passage for anywhere—not that any ship called at Outside Island. For the most part the girls were domestic servants, but there were typists, shop-assistants, and one or two university students. It was unreasonable to suppose that they had all taken it into their heads to do the same thing at the same time. They came from all corners of the United Kingdom and certainly could not have known each other.

“All the same,” Worrals had commented thoughtfully, “one feels that there might have been a hook-up somewhere. If these girls did not disappear voluntarily, they might have been actuated by the same motive, or agency. To suppose that they, not knowing each other, suddenly and simultaneously took it into their heads to disappear, would be a remarkable coincidence. There’s something fishy about that.”

The Air Commodore had smiled. “Well, I don’t think you’ll find them on the island, so you can leave them out of your calculations. Anyhow, if you can work out how they could have got there, you’re cleverer than I am.”

Worrals admitted that she could think of no way, and the matter was not pursued any further.

Frecks was aroused from the reverie into which she had fallen by a cry of “Land ho!” from Worrals.

Looking up with a start she saw a feathery fringe of palms showing above the ultramarine edge of the sea, slightly to the left of their line of flight.

“Nice work, Frecks!” went on Worrals. “Your navigation was on the top line.”

“Thank you,” acknowledged Frecks, who, now that she had something to look at, took more interest in the proceedings.

Very slowly the strip of land, looking tiny in such an immensity of ocean, crept over the horizon. Half an hour later, from a distance of about twenty miles, the entire plan of the atoll could be surveyed, although not with any detail. All that could be seen was the general shape of the narrow, curving strip of coral, which appeared as a belt of emerald palms outlined on one side in the snow-white foam of the surf. On the other side, the two lagoons lay tranquil under the sun, with their outer reefs again outlined in purest white where the great green rollers broke in a smother of foam. There was no sign of life anywhere, but presently a white tower broke through the verdant palms at the northern end, which was also the widest part of the atoll.

“That, I imagine, is the palace,” remarked Worrals.

A little pressure on the rudder bar put the aircraft on a new course that would take it clear of the southern end of the island, where lay the smaller of the two lagoons on which Worrals had already decided to make her landing. She was anxious not to be seen. Not that she thought there was much chance of this, for it is usually the noise of an aircraft that betrays its presence in the first instance, and the drone of their engine would, she thought, be drowned in the booming of the surf.

Not until she was level with the southern extremity of the island did she turn directly towards it. By that time she had cut her engine, and so was gliding noiselessly for the last two or three miles. There was still no sign of life, which was really no matter for surprise, for in discussing the project they had decided that the unknown population had most likely established itself at the northern end, where the island was at its widest and where the palace was situated.

Neither Frecks nor Worrals spoke as the machine glided the last few hundred feet towards the limpid waters of the lagoon. Not a ripple broke its surface. They crossed the reef with the engine idling, so that the noise of the surf came up like the rumble of distant thunder. The machine bumped a little. The roar of the surf became a growl. Looking down Frecks could see the bottom of the lagoon quite plainly. For the most part it appeared sandy, but here and there were luxuriant growths of coral. The shadows of fish moved across the lighter background, but as far as the actual depth of the water was concerned, she could not hazard a guess.

Worrals flattened out. The Seafarer glided on a little way, losing speed. Then the keel hissed as it touched the water. Creamy waves swept in a broad

arrow from the bows. The aircraft lost way quickly and came to a stop about fifty yards from the southern tip of the island, or the point where it joined the reef which there swung round in a sweeping curve. A touch of the throttle took the machine right in. The engine died. Movement ceased. The only sounds were the sullen roar of the surf and the screaming of resentful seagulls.

Worrals straightened her back and stretched her arms. "Well, we're here, anyway," she observed.

"It's pretty to look at too," answered Frecks. "Shall I make fast?"

"Not for the moment," returned Worrals. "If we are accorded the usual reception we might want to take off again in a hurry. If anyone saw us land, they'll soon be along for a closer look, no doubt."

"I could do with a bite of food," said Frecks.

"We'll attend to that in a moment," promised Worrals.

Opening the locker she took out a pair of binoculars and studied the long sweep of beach for as far as it could be seen. "Don't see a soul," she murmured.

Frecks climbed out of her seat for a better view, and sitting on the cockpit cover contemplated a scene as enchanting as the imagination could conceive, for an atoll is an example of nature at its best.

Of the island itself little could be seen, for the view was curtailed by a grove of palms which grew on ground so close to water level that in the distance they appeared to be growing out of the sea itself. Between the trees there was a sparse covering of undergrowth, although not a blade of grass could be seen. All that could be observed clearly was a long curving beach of white coral sand that glistened in the sunlight. On the lagoon side the water lay as flat as a mere, a harmony of blue, with areas of vivid green marking shoals. The water was of a wonderful transparency. So clear was it that fish, which occurred in all sizes, shapes and colours, appeared to be floating in air. On the bottom lay an incredible variety of shells. On the far side of the lagoon, a circular cluster of small, rocky islets, from which palms sprang at many angles, gave a fairy-like touch to the picture. Overhead great white gulls passed on rigid wings as if inspecting the intruder. As a scene, decided Frecks, it was pretty rather than imposing or dramatic.

But on the seaward side of the island, along the outer rim of the reef, perhaps a hundred yards from where she sat, the effect was altogether different, and magnificent in contrast. Here the mighty ocean rollers rose up to hurl themselves against this impudent fragment of land, only to destroy themselves in showers of diamonds. The coral appeared to quiver under

their ceaseless impact. It was easy to see how in a hurricane the island could be overwhelmed, and the recollection that such things did occur awoke in Frecks an uneasy feeling of insecurity. Worrals closed the binoculars. “All right,” she said. “Nobody seems to be coming, so we may as well make fast and go ashore to stretch our legs. We’ll take some food with us.”

“What are you going to wear?” asked Frecks. “It’s pretty hot.”

“I think a bathing costume is the best thing; then we can potter about in the water as much as we like. I shall wear a cotton frock over mine. I know what sunburn can do. Too much ultraviolet—and there’s plenty of it here—will tear your skin off as fast as boiling water. We shall have to wear beach shoes or we’ll be cutting our feet on the coral. Don’t forget your dark glasses. This glare is going to be hard on the eyes. Better put something on your head, too. We don’t want sunstroke to complicate matters. I’m keeping my gun handy. If that wild redhead starts shooting at me she’ll find two can play at that game. Being women we can meet on equal terms. One thing I can promise you: having come all this way I’m not leaving here until I’ve turned the mystery inside out. Come on; give me a hand to get this stuff ashore.”

“I think I’ll change in the cabin first,” decided Frecks.

“Okay,” agreed Worrals. “Don’t be long about it. I’ll follow you.”

CHAPTER  
FOUR

*Mystery  
upon Mystery*

HALF an hour later, after a plain meal of biscuits, tinned butter, sardines and jam, Worrals got up and shook the crumbs from her skirt. “We might as well make a move,” she announced. “There’s no particular hurry, but having thought about this business so much I’m really curious to know what is going on here. Apart from that, the longer we’re here the more chance we have of striking dirty weather. The machine is safe enough where it is while this weather holds, but if it started to blow it would be a different story. She’d never ride out a full gale, not even in the lagoon. One good bump on that coral would be enough to tear her keel off. We’ve still plenty of time to walk the full length of the island and back before bedtime, so we might as well start. The next hour or two should tell us all we want to know.”

Frecks agreed, for she, too, was curious to know the secret of the lonely island.

“I’ll take the glasses,” went on Worrals. “Just a minute, though. I’ve got an idea. I think we might walk a little way out on the reef. That should give us a view of what lies beyond that bank of coral.” She pointed to a reef that rose to an exceptional height on the opposite side of the lagoon, nearly two miles away, from where they stood they could not see the beach behind it.

“Good enough,” concurred Frecks, and she followed Worrals to where the reef swung in to join the tongue of land that formed the end of the island proper.

At this point the reef was broad, but so low that the waves ran half-way across it. It might create a more accurate impression to say that the coral barrier consisted of not one, but a number of reefs, some large and some small, some straight and others curving round in crescent formations. Between them ran lanes of jade and amethyst water. On the seaward side the rollers swept in, mountains of water that rose up as if conscious of their might, with the whole weight of the ocean behind them. But the coral walls tripped them up, and they crashed helplessly on the reef in a spreading

smother of white foam that sent up showers of glittering jewels. The coral itself was of every shape and size. In the limpid water of the many pools swam brightly coloured fish. Fascinated, Frecks would have stayed to study them, but Worrals did not stop until she reached a high bank of dead coral for which she had been making. She was about to sit down when an exclamation brought Frecks to her side.

“What is it?” asked Frecks quickly.

“Look!” Worrals pointed.

“Cartridge cases!”



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*“Cartridge cases!”*

“Yes. Brass rifle cartridges. That settles one point definitely. Those natives were shot at all right—from here, apparently. They must have been making for the passage through the reef.” She indicated the narrow opening about a hundred yards farther along. “This is where the people on the island came to stop them.” She turned away to make a scrutiny of the distant beach, but almost at once startled Frecks again by exclaiming: “What’s that?” She pointed to the distant curve where the reef came back to meet the mainland.

Frecks was just in time to see something disappear into the palms of the island proper; but she did not get a clear view of it.

By this time Worrals had her glasses to her eyes, but although she watched for some time the object did not reappear. “What did you make of it?” she asked Frecks.

“I couldn’t even guess,” was the reply. “All I know is, something moved.”

“It looked to me like a human being.”

“It could have been,” agreed Frecks. “But it gave me more the impression of something crawling.”

“It was brown.”

“That means a native.”

“Not necessarily,” argued Worrals. “Anyone staying here for any length of time would get pretty well tanned, I imagine.”

“Could it have been an animal?”

“There couldn’t be an animal of that size on the island.”

“Don’t forget the island is supposed to be haunted,” reminded Frecks.

“You can forget that drivel,” replied Worrals curtly. “If you start talking about spooks in broad daylight, by the time it gets dark you’ll be seeing them. Forget it. I think we might as well go back. There doesn’t seem to be anything more to see from here.”

Frecks agreed. She didn’t say so, but the fury of the big combers pounding on the reef less than fifty yards away, causing the ground on which she stood to shake, filled her with vague alarm. Her common sense told her that the reef, which must have stood the onslaught of hurricanes for centuries, was not likely to crack at that moment; but there was something awe-inspiring in this spectacle of the ocean’s eternal war against the land. She kept well to the lagoon side. But here again she had a twinge of uneasiness when she caught sight of a long dark shadow gliding through the transparent water.

“There are sharks in the lagoon,” she observed moodily.

“Bound to be,” returned Worrals. “But they’re not necessarily man-eaters.”

“To me, a shark is a shark,” asserted Frecks. “What these particular specimens eat is something I shall not, I hope, have occasion to investigate. I’ll do my bathing in shallow water.”

Returning to their starting point, Worrals did not stop, but carried on diagonally across the beach towards the palms that fringed it some thirty yards from the water’s edge. The beach itself was a place of strange creatures. Hermit-crabs, carrying borrowed shells on their backs, moved clumsily. Battalions of red-backed soldier-crabs marched and counter-marched with military precision as if getting into position for battles which never took place. Nearer the palms, coco-nuts and dead fronds made an untidy litter. Reaching the trees they walked on in the welcome shade they provided.

“Keep your eyes open,” warned Worrals. “I’m quite sure we haven’t got this place to ourselves, although it may look like it at the moment.”

In the longish walk that followed only once did Worrals stop, and that was to look through an opening in the palms to the far side of the island where huge waves kept up a continuous booming and filled the air with spray. The distance across at that point was not more than two hundred yards, and the highest point, Frecks judged, could not have been more than ten feet above sea level. She was amazed that the two beaches, so near to each other, could be so utterly unlike. One was all noise and tumult. The other, the lagoon side along which they were walking, was a place of peace and tranquillity, where only the tiniest of ripples whispered to the silver beach.

Worrals went on, and did not stop again until they were nearing the high bank of coral that had obstructed their view—the same on which they had seen something move. She now proceeded with more caution. “Take it quietly,” she told Frecks. “We may get a surprise at any moment.”

This, in the event, proved true, but she little guessed what form it was to take.

Frecks nodded. She was already alert, and her heart was beating a trifle faster.

They went on slowly, their eyes, naturally, concentrating on the new length of beach that came into view. The result was disappointing. In all its length, a curving crescent of some miles, there was not a living soul. Nothing moved. There was not a house, a hut, or a wisp of smoke from a



fire. The palace was still out of sight, apparently in the trees. Not that Frecks expected to see it, for she knew it must still be some distance farther on.

Worrals studied the ground for possible tracks, but here the beach was composed for the most part of broken shells and granulated coral, and would not have shown the footprint of an elephant, much less of a human being. Then, quite casually, she turned to glance at the bank of coral, now at their right hand and quite close. She did not speak, but at the expression on her face Frecks spun round with a quick intake of breath to see what she was looking at.

It was a ship. A ship of some size, but in such a state as she had never before seen. It was on an even keel, for which reason she at first supposed it to be at anchor, for it was some thirty yards from the reef, towards which it lay head-on, and fifty from the beach. But looking harder she saw that it was in fact wedged between two submerged shelves of coral that rose from the bottom of the lagoon to end in broken ridges like the backs of gigantic crocodiles.

Still staring Frecks saw that the vessel was, or had been, a yacht. It had once been a thing of beauty; but elegance was a quality it would never know again. The paint-work, once white, was now all brown and grey, blistered and peeling. Down her sides ran ugly lines of red rust. Some of the seams had opened. Some gaped. Her masts lay in a tangled litter of gear and cordage—which, Frecks realized, was why the vessel had not been noticed until they were right up to it. Strips of canvas that had once been a gay, red and white awning hung miserably from twisted stays.

Worrals was the first to speak. “Well, now at least we know how the shooters got here,” she said simply.

“I was right after all about their being castaways,” declared Frecks.

“I’ll reserve my opinion of that,” answered Worrals. “I still say that castaways don’t shoot at possible deliverers.”

“They may have been scared of the natives.”

“They couldn’t have been scared of the Navy.”

Frecks shrugged. “Okay, we’ll see. Are you going aboard?”

“Of course,” returned Worrals. “But just a minute, this needs thinking about. What’s her name, I wonder?” She moved her position until she was in line with the starboard bow, on which it was possible to read some faint painted letters. “Cleopatra,” she said softly.

“I know what you were thinking,” said Frecks.

“What?”

“You thought it was the missing yacht *Vanity*.”

“Quite right, I was,” admitted Worrals. “We know a yacht of that name disappeared, although it had no business in this part of the world. Why weren’t we told about the *Cleopatra*, I wonder? She most certainly must be missing, and has been missing for some time by the look of her. You know, Frecks, there’s something queer about this.”

“How long has she been here do you suppose?”

“Goodness only knows. I couldn’t guess. Some time, anyway. Of course, we don’t know what sort of state she was in when she got here. She must have been dismasted by a storm, and that was probably after she had run aground; on the open sea her masts would have gone by the board. The fact that they’re down explains why the Navy didn’t spot her. From the way she’s weathered to nearly the same colour as the coral I doubt if we should have spotted her even if we’d flown over the place.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” returned Frecks. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that there might be someone on board?”

“It did at first, but now I don’t think so,” answered Worrals. “Somebody might have been on board recently though. It was just about here that we thought we saw somebody move. Mind you, I’m still not sure that it was a human being, although, as I said before, I can’t think what else it could be. If it was a person, he—or she—might have been going to the wreck for something. That would be a reason for somebody being here, anyway.”

“How about having a closer look at her?” suggested Frecks. “We might strike a clue which would solve the whole mystery of the place.”

“Never mind a closer look, I’m going on board,” asserted Worrals, walking out along the reef. “It means swimming—not that it matters. I don’t think sharks would come in as close as this.” As she finished speaking she reached the point of coral nearest to the stranded vessel. She stopped suddenly and then threw a quick glance at Frecks. “I was right,” she said tersely. “Take a look at that!” She pointed to the coral near her feet. Comment from Frecks was unnecessary. What she saw spoke for itself. The coral was wet, but wet at only one place, as if someone had climbed out of the water at that spot. There was no question of waves being responsible for there were none. The water was motionless, without even a ripple where it touched the rock.

Worrals spoke, slowly. “When we were at the far side of the lagoon someone came here—or was already on the wreck. We just caught sight of the person when he, or she, was leaving.”

Looking across at the wreck, Frecks noticed steps hanging from the deck to the water. “Those steps are wet too,” she observed.

“Which proves that someone went from here to there quite recently,” said Worrals. “Had they been on board for some time, and then come ashore, the steps would be dry. This would have been the only wet place. The inference is, there’s nobody there now. I’m going over.” Worrals kicked off her shoes, advanced to the edge of the coral and took a stance as if she intended diving in. But that was as far as she got, for a very good reason.

From somewhere inside the wreck came a long drawn-out cry, so heart-rending, so melancholy in its anguish, that Frecks went cold all over. Her skin turned goose-flesh, to use the common expression. Saucer-eyed, she turned to Worrals, and saw that even she had turned pale. “What on earth was that?” she asked in a voice that she didn’t recognize as her own.

Worrals, tight-lipped, shook her head. “Don’t ask me.”

“It was frightful.”

“Frightful is the word.”

“No human being could make a noise like that,” declared Frecks, and then flinched as the sound came again.

Worrals drew a deep breath. “I’m going over,” she announced.

“Don’t be a fool!” Frecks’s voice was shrill with apprehension.

“I’ve got to know who is in there,” argued Worrals.

“Why?”

“Because that’s what we came here for,” averred Worrals. “We should be a bright pair of investigators if we bolted home at the first bleat. I’m going over.”

“All right, I’ll come too,” decided Frecks. “I’m not staying here alone.”

“Come on, then!” said Worrals. And with that she took a header into the water.

A dozen strokes took her to the steps. Seizing them she went up hand over hand to the deck and there waited for Frecks to join her. Another minute and they were together, surveying such a spectacle of ruin as would not be easy to describe, although in view of what they had already seen, this was only to be expected. Rotting cordage and canvas lay about in a tangle of running and standing gear that had come down with the masts. The deck had split in several places, the bolts protruding from pools of rust. From the state of everything gulls must have been using the place as a roost for a long time.

“What a mess!” breathed Worrals. “If that wouldn’t break a sailor’s heart, I don’t know what would.” She picked a path to the companion-way

amidships. Halting at the top she looked down. Below, all was silent. “Anyone there?” she called.

A wild, terrified scream, mixed up with what sounded like gibberish, made her step back hastily.

Frecks began to back away. “For the love of Pete,” she pleaded. “Let’s get out of this.”

“And spend the rest of our lives wondering what made that noise?” sneered Worrals. “Not likely.” She started down the steps, and after a brief hesitation, Frecks followed her, marvelling at the state of what had been the interior of a smart yacht. Not only had the fittings been stripped, and everything portable removed, but even doors had been torn off and carried away. The yacht was, in fact, nothing more than an empty shell.

A low moaning and sobbing guided them at last to a door deep in the hold, although by the time they had reached it, the noise had stopped, as if their arrival had been heard.

Said Worrals, rather shakily, “Hallo there!”

There was no reply.

Worrals tried the door. It did not yield to her pressure. “Locked,” she said laconically.

“I couldn’t care less,” muttered Frecks.

“Whatever was making that noise is behind that door,” asserted Worrals. “The question is, has the door been locked from the outside or the inside?”

Frecks shrugged.

Worrals knocked sharply. “Hi there! Can you get out?”

Still no answer.

Said Worrals, crisply, to Frecks: “I’m going to open this door. It shouldn’t be difficult. Slip along to the engine room and find a tool of some sort—a lever if you can find one. A hammer, or spanner, would do, as long as it’s pretty heavy.”

Frecks went off. She was away about five minutes. Then she returned with a long, rusty, iron spike, flattened at one end.

“Just the job,” said Worrals, taking it.

She forced the flattened end between the door and the framework near the lock and then took the opposite end in both hands. “Hold your hat!” she said grimly, and pulled.

The door creaked as it took the strain. It groaned. The framework near the lock began to crack. Then, suddenly, with a splintering crack the door burst open, flying back on its hinges.

The next second Frecks was sent reeling as a black and white object leapt past Worrals and collided violently with her. It did not stop, but sped on like a streak and in a moment was lost to sight. Without hesitation Worrals dashed after it, and she, too, disappeared. Frecks, bewildered, and slightly dazed from shock, stood still for a moment or two, and then followed as quickly as she could. She heard a cry, a splash, and another cry. Silence followed. She hurried on, but as she reached the deck, she met Worrals coming back.

“What the dickens was it?” she demanded.

“A woman,” answered Worrals briefly.

“A *woman!*”

“A female, anyhow. Say a girl, if you like. Didn’t you see her long black hair?”

“I didn’t see anything to speak of,” admitted Frecks. “What was the white thing?”

“It seemed to be the rags of an ancient pinafore, and not too clean at that, tied round her. She went over the side like an otter before I could stop her. Still, I got a pretty good look at her, as she disappeared into the trees. To try to catch her then was a waste of time, so I didn’t go beyond the deck. I’d put her age at about sixteen—but, of course, a girl of that age is a woman in this part of the world.”

“But what in the name of goodness was she doing here?” demanded Frecks.

Worrals lifted a shoulder. “I wouldn’t know. One thing that seems pretty certain, though, is this; she wasn’t here from choice.”

Happening to glance at Worrals’s face, Frecks noticed that it wore a frown of perplexity. “What’s worrying you?” she asked.

“I’m thinking about that girl.”

“In what way? Was there anything odd about her?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“For one thing she was black, or nearly so.”

“Surely it would have been more remarkable had she been white?”

“I don’t know that it would,” said Worrals.

It was Frecks’s turn to frown. “Sorry to be so dumb, but would you mind telling me what you’re getting at?” she requested.

“Not at all,” answered Worrals. “As you know, before starting on this jaunt, I read as many books as I could lay hands on about the Pacific. This is one of the things I learned about it. The South Sea Islands—we’ll call them that—cover an awful lot of ocean, and they are divided into zones known as Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, these zones being determined by the racial characteristics of the inhabitants. Here we are quite definitely in Polynesia. The Polynesians are a nice shade of brown, some of them quite a pale tint of café-au-lait. The Melanesians, as the name suggests, are black, more or less. Their islands lie at least two thousand miles to the east of us. Micronesia is farther off still. Here again the people are pretty dark, and quite different, having mixed themselves with Mongolian or Malayan stock.”

Frecks blinked. “Never mind the school-book stuff,” she protested. “What does all this add up to?”

“Merely this,” explained Worrals. “That girl we saw just now was most certainly not a Polynesian. She was, I’d say, either a Melanesian or a Micronesian, but not being an expert I couldn’t swear to it. All that matters to us is, she wasn’t a Polynesian. How did she get here? And what is she doing here?”

Frecks looked vague. “Don’t ask me.”

“She no more belongs to this island than you do,” asserted Worrals. “And I’ll tell you something else. As she sprinted up the beach, I noticed some nasty-looking marks on her back. They may have been natural sores caused by thorns or poisonous coral, but I don’t think so. They looked to me more as if they’d been caused by a whip, or cane.”

Frecks stared. “How perfectly horrible! Who could have done such a thing?”

Worrals smiled curiously. “That’s something we shouldn’t be long finding out. Let’s go and look at the place where the girl was shut up.”

They went through the broken door. Worrals stopped on the threshold, her nose wrinkling. “Phew! Talk about a glory hole,” she muttered. “Not even a chair to sit on. Well, there’s nothing much to see here; let’s get back to the fresh air.”

Without speaking they returned to the deck. Then Frecks remarked: “Far from solving the mystery, we seem to be getting deeper into it. I can’t get over that wretched girl. Nor can I imagine what sort of creature would shut her up in such a foul den.”

“I’ll admit it is a bit of a poser,” agreed Worrals. “There is this about it. As she’d obviously been locked in, there must be someone else on the

island. And if that person is capable of such brutality we'd better watch our step. And don't forget, someone was here to visit that girl not long ago."

Worrals was walking to the side where hung the steps by which they had gained the deck when she stopped suddenly, peering at something that was wedged between a locker and the bridge. Walking over to it she pulled it out and held up a ragged lifebelt. On it a single word had been painted in black letters, and although it was almost obliterated by sun and sea-water it was still legible. Very slowly, Worrals said the word aloud. "Vanity." She turned her head to meet Frecks's eyes. "Work *that* one out," she said softly.

"But the Vanity—that was the name of the rich woman's yacht that disappeared. . . ."

"Quite right."

"But how on earth did that get here?" inquired Frecks, her voice rising in astonishment as she pointed to the lifebelt.

"It got here because, unless I have missed my guess, this is where it belongs," answered Worrals.

"But—but this is the Cleopatra," cried Frecks.

"Who says so?" Worrals smiled, a strange light in her eyes. "According to Lloyds, and they should know, only one yacht has disappeared without trace, and its name was Vanity. There's no record of a Cleopatra. This craft we're standing on may have arrived here sporting the name of the last Queen of Egypt, but I'd wager that when she left port her name was Vanity. It's the only explanation. She wouldn't be the first ship to change her name. If I remember rightly her avowed destination was California. Don't ask me how she got here. I haven't a clue. But we can soon check up on this." She walked quickly to the bows, and hanging over by holding on to the twisted rail, examined the name. With her left hand she rubbed off some flakes of blistered paint. Then she climbed back. "That's it," she said conclusively. "'Vanity' was painted out and 'Cleopatra' superimposed on the letters."

Frecks said nothing for a moment. "This begins to look like mutiny," she said at last.

"Could be," agreed Worrals. "Honest mariners don't change the name of their ship on the high seas."

"This is doing nothing to solve our mystery," said Frecks.

"We'll solve it before we leave the island," promised Worrals. "Let's get on with it. For a start we'll go back to the beach."

"What about that native girl?"

“I don’t think we need worry about her for the moment,” replied Worrals. “She was scared stiff. Poor wench! I’ll bet she’s still running. Come on, let’s get ashore.”



CHAPTER  
FIVE

*A Curious  
Encounter*

A MINUTE later, on the beach, the conversation was resumed, but with a different topic. After satisfying herself that there was no one in sight, Worrals turned her face to the palm fronds high above their heads. They were no longer waving gently, but were beginning to toss about with a good deal of noise, obviously agitated by a rising breeze.

Said Worrals: "I don't like this wind getting up. There may be nothing to it and it might peter out; on the other hand, if it should get worse, something will have to be done about the machine. She might start swinging about and damage herself against the reef. I'd rather she were clear of it, nose to wind with an extra anchor down to make sure she doesn't drag. I suppose we should have done that in the first place and not taken it for granted that it would remain calm; but there, I didn't think we should be away as long as this. Finding the yacht has sort of delayed things. As long as the wind gets no worse the machine won't come to harm; all the same, I feel inclined to get back right away, just in case. Better be on the safe side than sorry when it's too late."

"That's a pity having come so far," said Frecks, in a disappointed voice. "I was hoping at least we should be able to see what's round that next bend in the beach."

"There's no need for you to come back if you feel like going on for a bit," suggested Worrals. "I can manage the machine alone. In fact, it might be a good thing if you did go on and do a spot of scouting. It would be useful to know that there's no one at this end of the island. If we knew that for certain we could relax."

"What about that native girl?"

"I don't think you need worry about her. The poor kid was badly frightened. She certainly wouldn't interfere with the machine in case it turned round and bit her."

"All right, then," agreed Frecks. "I'll stroll on a bit farther."

“Don’t go far,” warned Worrals. “Keep close against the palms in case there’s anyone about and be sure to be back by sunset. I’ll have a bite of food ready.”

“Good enough,” confirmed Frecks. “If there’s food about, I’ll soon be back, you know that.” So saying, keeping just inside the shade of the grove, she began to make her way along the sweeping stretch of coral sand which from this point swung round like a great horse-shoe.

Worrals turned the other way, and, walking briskly, reached the Seafarer to find everything as it had been left. As a matter of detail the breeze seemed already to have blown itself out, but that the sea had felt it was evident from the noise the big combers made as they crashed on the reef, sometimes flooding right across it to send long ripples into the lagoon and make the machine move uneasily at its mooring.

It did not take Worrals long to take the precautions which she felt were necessary, and with the machine secure from anything less than a gale of wind she set about getting some foodstuffs ashore. This done, she collected a little pile of driftwood, of which there was an ample supply along the high-water mark, and then busied herself in the preparation of a substantial meal. By the time she had finished the sun was well down, staining the lagoon with all the soft tints of mother-of-pearl, and she looked along the beach more and more often for Frecks, expecting to see her coming. The breeze had died away completely, she was glad to note. The palm fronds had ceased their whispering and now hung silently at rest. The boles, catching the last rays of the setting sun, stood out against the sombre shadows of the grove like a long line of exclamation marks.

It was during one of these surveys of the beach in expectation of seeing Frecks—for she had decided not to put the kettle on until she saw her coming—that a movement in some straggling undergrowth beneath the palms, at a distance of perhaps forty yards, caught her eye. She did not start, or stare, but carried on with what she was doing, keeping one eye, as the saying is, on the spot. She was not particularly alarmed. As a matter of fact she was by no means sure that the movement had not been a shadow, caused by the slight movement of a low-hanging palm frond in line with the sun. But she watched closely, and when, a few minutes later, she saw a slim dark object flit from palm to palm, nearer now, she knew that she had not been mistaken. There was somebody moving just inside the grove, and from its shape and size she took it to be a native. Thinking the matter over swiftly she thought there was good reason to suppose that it was the girl who had bolted from the yacht, attracted possibly by the sight of food. She hoped that this might turn out to be the case, for could she make contact with her a

conversation might yield important information. The girl must be somewhere about, anyway, she thought.

For five minutes Worrals watched for another movement, but when no more came she guessed what had happened. The watcher was now comfortably ensconced near at hand, in which case it would not be necessary for her to move again. That she was being watched Worrals was quite certain, and she was not prepared to allow the matter to rest in a manner so disconcerting, to say the least of it.

Presently she got up from the fire, and moving casually set about collecting some more fuel, selecting now the spines of the many dead palm fronds that lay along the back of the beach. In this way her steps, as if by accident, took her ever nearer to some scrubby bushes that grew near the outer extremity of the grove, close to the spot where the last movement had been observed. Then, suddenly, when she was not more than ten yards away, she spun round and ran straight for the bushes.

Her suspicions were confirmed forthwith. The girl was there—or at any rate a girl—lying flat, the position from which she had obviously been watching. The native, finding herself discovered, sprang up with a cry of fear and would have fled; but she was caught at a disadvantage and Worrals was too quick for her. Before she could get properly on her feet Worrals had grabbed her by the arm and brought her to a halt, lips parted and eyes wide with terror. For a moment she was inclined to struggle, but Worrals smiled, and soothed her as she would have done a frightened kitten. Upon this the girl stopped pulling, and with a little whimpering noise began to cry. Still smiling, but holding her by the arm, Worrals led her prisoner to the fire and by a simple signal invited her to sit down. To support her friendly intentions she gave the girl a handful of biscuits, and these at once achieved their object. The girl, obviously very hungry, began to munch them ravenously, at the same time keeping her dark eyes on Worrals's face as if she still suspected a trick. But when Worrals released her and went on with her culinary operations the girl fell silent and made no further attempt to run away. Worrals gave her another smile, and some more biscuits, together with an open tin of jam. The girl seemed to know what the tin contained, for without bothering about such niceties as party manners, she stuck her fingers in it, and scooping out as much jam as they would hold conveyed it to her mouth.

Worrals sat down beside her. "What name belong you?" she inquired, in the picturesque jargon common throughout the South Seas.

"Mati name belong me," answered the girl through a mouth well stuffed with jam and biscuits.

“You stay along here and you eat plenty,” promised Worrals, pointing at the tinned foods she had brought ashore to illustrate her point.

Mati’s eyes gleamed, and Worrals judged it to be a suitable moment to explore the possibilities of conversation. In the hope of simplifying this she spoke to the girl in French, and received an answer in the same language. This made things easier although it conveyed no hint as to the girl’s birthplace, for, as Worrals knew, French possessions are scattered all over the Pacific. In answer to the question, where was she born, Mati named a place which, as far as Worrals was concerned, might have been anywhere. It was obviously a native name and she had never heard of it. All she knew was, it was not one of the larger islands.

Without any hope of a definite answer, for native ideas of distance are usually hazy, Worrals asked how far away this place was. It was soon evident that the girl had no idea. When Worrals suggested that it was several days distant, Mati agreed. When Worrals suggested weeks, she still agreed. To the question, how she got to this particular atoll, the girl was more explicit. She said she had come in a ship. Worrals pointed in the direction of the yacht and asked if that was the ship. Mati agreed. All this, of course, did nothing to explain her presence on the island, or the harsh treatment to which clearly she had been subjected.

Actually, by this time, Worrals was getting concerned about Frecks. Only the rim of the sun still showed above the horizon, and in a few minutes it would be dark. It was time she was back. Indeed, had she gone no farther than her avowed intention she must have been home some time ago. Far from being back she was not even in sight. Worrals could not allay her mounting anxiety by telling herself that Frecks had found something of interest, and had either stayed to watch or had gone on for a closer inspection.

To pass the time she spoke again to Mati, who, with the easy indifference of the South Sea Island races, appeared to have made herself at home. Worrals asked her who had locked her in the ship, and why?

The reply puzzled her. The queen, said the girl, had put her there for punishment, for not working hard enough. It was, she explained, the usual punishment.

“And did the queen do this to you?” asked Worrals, pointing to the fresh weals on the girl’s arms and back.

Mati agreed that for this the queen was also responsible.

Worrals persisted in her inquiries, and what she learned was so fantastic that she was in some doubt about accepting it as truth. The queen, said Mati,

was a white woman. There were many, many white women, and some brown ones, too. How many she was unable to say, being unable to count; but she held up the fingers of her right hand so often that Worrals was convinced that this was simply wild exaggeration. To the question, what were these women doing there, Mati made no answer, and the reason was fairly obvious. She simply did not know. The queen lived in a big house, which Worrals supposed meant the palace, and the other women worked for her. What the nature of the work was, however, Worrals could not make out.

She did not continue the conversation as long as she would have wished, for by the time it had reached this point the sun had disappeared and the dark blue curtain of night had been drawn across the scene. Frecks had not returned, and Worrals was seriously worried about her. It began to look as if she had met with a misadventure.

Worrals decided that if she was not back in five minutes she would have to go to look for her. In the meantime she ate some food, gave some more to Mati, and asked her if she would show her the way to the queen's house.

Mati's answer was definite. It was no. In no circumstances would she go near the far end of the island. Indeed, when Worrals pressed the point, the native girl looked around furtively as if contemplating a fresh attempt to escape. Seeing that argument was useless, Worrals perceived that she would have to go alone, leaving Mati to please herself what she did. She would, presumably, remain near the aircraft, for it was evident that she had no means of leaving the island, and on her own assertion would not go near the far end.

The allotted time having passed without any sign of Frecks, Worrals wrote a short note on a page of her notebook saying what she intended doing. She folded it, got up, and splitting the end of a stick inserted it, and then stuck it in the sand where Frecks could not fail to see it should she return without their having made contact. This done, she informed Mati that she was going to look for her friend, of whose existence she was aware, having seen them both in the wreck. Mati implored her almost hysterically, even falling on her knees, not to go near the far end of the island.

But Worrals, who could see no reason to fear this queen, so-called, or any other woman, told her not to worry on her account. Her mistake, as she realized later, was that she was thinking of normal women, even though it might well be supposed that the queen of the island was a trifle peculiar. This was understandable. In any case, with her small but efficient automatic, she felt able to deal with any danger that might arise on a small coral island, where men, good or bad, were entirely absent, and wild beasts unknown. So,

with a wave and a parting smile to Mati, squatting disconsolately by the dying fire, she set off along the beach.

As far as Frecks was concerned, really, her chief emotion was one of annoyance rather than of alarm. She was irritated because she felt that Frecks must either have been careless, or had tried to do too much. Now, as a result, instead of being able to rest quietly where she could keep an eye on the aircraft, Worrals was confronted by a walk of unknown duration, one which, she suspected, was more likely to be measured in miles rather than yards. One consoling reflection was, Frecks must be within walking distance. The size of the island determined that. So the job of finding her could at the worst only be a matter of hours.

She strode on along the silent beach, paying scant attention to the land-crabs that scattered at her approach.

CHAPTER  
SIX

*Freckles Goes  
Her Way*

IT is likely that Freckles, as she strode confidently along the edge of the palms towards an unknown objective, made the not unnatural mistake of supposing that even if there were women on the island, as had been alleged, she had nothing to fear from them. Certainly she did not think herself in any particular peril. For this, in some part, her innocent-looking surroundings may have been responsible. With the sun serene in a sky unbroken by a cloud, and clean white sand underfoot, it was hard to imagine anything likely to upset the harmony of a scene that was almost perfect. The only beasts to be feared dwelt in the sea, but as she had no intention of disturbing them she had no qualms on that score. She did not forget the strange reports that had brought the Seafarer to the spot, reports of women who shot at strangers; but here again she felt that as far as she was concerned such unaccountable behaviour, even if it were true, was something not to be taken very seriously. If there were women on the island, she reassured herself, what possible reason could they have for doing her a mischief? She would not be in the least surprised, she thought, as she trudged on in the shadows of the palms, if the whole thing turned out to be a gigantic hoax.

There was, of course, the native girl who had been locked up, to be accounted for. But she was, after all, a native, one who, perhaps, had been guilty of some misdemeanour. There was no proof that the marks on her body, which Worrals had seen, had been caused by a whip.

From this inconsequential train of thought she was presently jerked in no uncertain fashion.

She had walked perhaps the best part of two miles without seeing any sign of life, and in this, if the truth must be told, she was somewhat disappointed. Her curiosity prompted her to go on, to see what was round the next corner; but she knew from the position of the sun that, if she was to be home by dusk, as she had promised, it was really time for her to turn back. She hesitated, undecided, and as she did so a thin, harsh voice behind her said: "Stand still!"

So unexpected was the sound that every nerve in Frecks's body seemed to tingle from the shock. Indeed, so rude was this awakening from a pleasant soliloquy that she obeyed the order literally. For a moment her limbs refused to function; but then the sound of someone moving, as if stepping out of the undergrowth, made her turn, and at the sight that met her eyes her mouth opened in sheer astonishment, and her brain whirled in a turmoil of strange thoughts.

The speaker was a woman, a tall, gaunt white woman, of middle age, with a thin angular face crowned with a pile of red hair. It was to this last feature that Frecks's eyes were drawn, and held as if fascinated by it, while through the whirl of her thoughts one became dominant. The natives had not lied. They said one of the women had red hair, and she had. It was obviously not a natural red, but an artificial red induced by some dye. In her hands she held a rifle, the muzzle of which, Frecks noted with some concern, was pointed directly at her stomach.

The woman wore a short white linen jacket, buttoned high at the neck, and a skirt of the same material. Well-worn canvas shoes protected her feet from the broken shells that littered the ground. Her eyes were blue and as hard as glass. Her skin appeared to be drawn tightly over large bones. Her mouth was small, with thin lips turned down at the corners, which produced an expression of arrogant ill-temper, if not actual cruelty.

So much Frecks observed before the woman spoke again, for she herself had been the subject of keen scrutiny. Frecks could only suppose that this strange creature had seen her coming and stood back in the trees to wait for her. She had an idea, which may have been true, that the woman had been on her way to visit the native girl in the wrecked yacht.

Said the woman in a hard voice: "Who are you?"

"My name is Betty Lovell. Who are you?" returned Frecks evenly.

The woman scouted the question. "Never mind who I am," she said icily. "What are you doing here?"

"Just looking round," answered Frecks. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"Don't ask questions. Answer them," was the uncompromising retort.

"Why should I?" replied Frecks crisply, resenting the woman's tone of voice and manner. "This isn't private property and I've as much right here as you have."

"How did you get here?"

This time it was Frecks's turn to ignore the question. "Would you mind turning the muzzle of that rifle in another direction?" she requested. "That's



how accidents happen, you know.”

The woman took a step nearer. “How did you get here?” she fairly rasped.

“I flew,” snapped Frecks.

It was clear at once that the woman did not take her seriously. Perhaps in her isolation she had forgotten such things as aeroplanes, or she may have thought Frecks incapable of handling such a vehicle.



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*“What are you doing here?”*

“Ah! So you’d be cheeky, would you?” was her rejoinder. “Well, my fine lady, you’ll see where that will get you here. Where’s your boat?”

By this time Frecks was definitely angry. Her heart began to beat faster. What right, she asked herself, had this fantastic female to speak to her as if she were an urchin caught robbing an orchard? “I don’t like your tone of

voice,” she said coldly. “I shall answer no more questions until your behaviour is more in accord with the circumstances of this meeting. In the meantime, if you persist in pointing that rifle at me, I shall take it as a threat, and take any steps I think fit to remedy the matter.”

A curious gleam came into the woman’s eyes. They narrowed, wrinkling shaggy eyebrows. The corners of her mouth came down, and for the first time Frecks perceived, with a tightening of the heart-strings, that she really was in danger. This strange creature was obviously no ordinary woman.

How right she was in this belief she was presently to learn.

“You’ll do what I tell you, you insolent child, or take the consequences—and they will not be pleasant,” stated the redheaded woman grimly. “Off you go!”

“Go? Where?”

“Straight along the beach, the way you were going. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

There was nothing Frecks could do but obey. Actually, of course, there was something she could do, for she carried an automatic pistol, a weapon which, at that range, on account of its size and weight, was likely to be more effective than a rifle. There was an added advantage in the fact that the woman was unaware of this. Frecks knew that she could bring her gun into action before its existence was suspected; but how could she, she asked herself helplessly, shoot down and perhaps kill another woman for no other reason than that her manner had been threatening? No, Frecks decided, that wouldn’t do. She would go with the woman, and perhaps solve the mystery of the island. Her automatic she would keep in reserve until such time as its employment was fully justified.

She set off along the beach. She did not look round, but she could hear the woman following close behind. The thought of the rifle pointing at her back, as she was sure it was, did nothing to ease her anxiety at this unforeseen outcome of her reconnaissance.

It was a longish walk to the broadest part of the island, where the so-called palace was situated overlooking the lagoon; and by the time it was reached the sun had almost disappeared below the distant horizon. According to her arrangement with Worrals she should by now be back, but it was apparent that whatever happened she could not get back to their base until long after Worrals had set out to look for her—as she was sure she would; for that is what she herself would have done had the position been reversed. But her chief concern was this; the aircraft would be left without a guard. While the weather remained fine no harm could come to it. But the

woman marching behind her, knowing that she must have used a boat of some sort to reach the island, would look for it, or would send someone to look for it. In that case the discovery of the aircraft was certain, and she dared not think what was likely to happen to it at the hands of people who discouraged visitors with rifle shots.

But now there were other matters to occupy her mind. The palm grove, along the edge of which they had been walking, ended abruptly, disclosing an area of perhaps an acre of open ground before continuing again on the far side. In this open space stood the palace that had been built by the fanatical priest, and Frecks was astonished by the size of it. Built of blocks of hand-hewn coral, obviously at immense labour, its main architectural features were those of a church rather than of a palace. Windows and doors were in the orthodox Gothic style, but for the rest, the structure, thought Frecks, might have been a combination of church and dwelling-house. She had little time to ponder on this, however, for filing towards the building from all sides, in the manner of prisoners, were girls—or at any rate, females—mostly white, but with a sprinkling of brown and black. All were dressed alike, in the simple shapeless garment known as a ‘mother hubbard’. Frecks could only stare at them in mute amazement, wondering if she were asleep, for the spectacle was so fantastic as to be more in the nature of a dream, than reality. It seemed futile to speculate on what was happening.

This sensation of unreality was to be enhanced rather than dispelled.

Straight across the open space, with many eyes on her, Frecks was marched to the main door of the building. Passing under a gloomy portal she found herself at once in what came nearer to a picture from a book of fairy tales than anything she could have imagined.

It was a room of considerable size. It might, in fact, have been the nave of a church, with the seats removed from their normal positions and placed end to end round the walls. It was the walls that for the moment held Frecks’s attention. They shimmered in the light of the setting sun, and this, she saw, was occasioned by the fact that they were decorated with thousands of oyster shells, or mother-of-pearl extracted from them. At one place some had been removed, presumably by vandals after the death of the insane priest, who she felt sure must have been responsible for this extraordinary decoration.

However, Frecks was not allowed to stand and admire this masterpiece. She was marched on to where, had the building been of a religious nature, the altar would have been. Here, on a raised dais, in the manner of a throne, sat a woman, a white woman, attended by four others. Two of the attendants were white, and stood one on either side. The other two were natives, and

with long fans kept the air moving. Or perhaps they kept the many flies from settling.

Frecks was brought to a halt about ten paces in front of the throne, and stared in frank incredulity at what she saw. The occupant was a tall, grey-haired, sad-faced woman, whose age she judged to be in the late fifties. She had never been pretty, thought Frecks, but she must at one time have been strikingly good-looking in a commanding sort of way. She had a poise about her that would have called for respect in any society. She was dressed, or rather, draped, in a single billowing gown of some flimsy white material that flowed down over her feet and entirely concealed her figure. The two white women who stood beside her, as if they might have been bodyguards, were about the same age. Their figures were lean and their faces hard.

Frecks's first thought, at this juncture, was a curious one. When she and Worrals had set out on their present enterprise she had assumed, without giving serious thought to it, that if there were people on the island they would be engaged in some project productive of wealth in one form or another, some scheme for their enrichment. That was the way of the modern world. Everyone, from the highest to the lowest, was engaged primarily in the business of making money. Money was the common incentive to effort, the oil that kept the wheels of civilization turning. Whether the activities of the island population would turn out to be criminal or legal was a matter for conjecture, but she suspected they would be criminal, because she could think of no reason why honest people should isolate themselves absolutely, and protect their isolation with lethal weapons. In her mind, therefore, she had been quite sure that at the finish there would emerge from the affair, if in fact there was anything in it, some sort of profit-making venture.

She now saw with a shock that in this belief she had been entirely mistaken. Whatever these strange people were doing, the acquisition of wealth was not their object. For the woman who sat upon the throne already wore upon her person such a collection of jewels as would arouse the envy of an Indian rajah. Enormous diamonds descended from her ears, flashing with all the colours of the rainbow from the mere action of their wearer's breathing. Ropes of pearls encircled her rather scraggy neck. Brooches adorned her corsage, and the fingers of both hands, as they rested on her knees, displayed such a collection of rings that Frecks could only stare at them in wonder.

To this remarkable person, the woman who had brought Frecks in, who had somewhere disposed of the rifle, bowed low before advancing. She then spoke for a minute or two in a voice too soft for Frecks to hear what she said, although the two attendants craned their necks to catch the words. All

the time the woman on the throne kept her eyes unwinkingly on Frecks's face. From time to time she nodded slowly. Then she of the red hair stepped aside, at the same time making a signal to Frecks to advance.

Frecks, wondering what was coming next, walked slowly to the foot of the throne, then stopped.

"Kneel!" commanded Redhead.

Frecks's eyebrows went up. She frowned. "Why?" she inquired.

"Do as you are told," was the brittle answer.

Some unsuspected streak of independence now seemed to touch the mettle of Frecks's temper, although the only outward indication of it was a faint flush that came to her cheeks. "I bend my knee to no human being but my lawful King and his Royal Family," she said curtly.

Redhead started forward, but a gesture from a jewelled hand restrained her. Then she who owned it smiled, and as she smiled she spoke, spoke in a soft, slow voice, that was something between a purr and a sneer; and there was something in the sound of it that made Frecks shiver, as if cold water were trickling down her back.

"Come nearer, my child," said the voice.

Frecks took a step forward.

"You heard Miss Borran tell you to kneel?" queried the slow, gentle voice.

"I did," admitted Frecks.

"Then perhaps the next time you will remember to obey her," went on the voice. And before Frecks could move, before even she could suspect the woman's intention, a jewelled hand flashed out and struck her a vicious blow on the cheek.

Frecks staggered back, her hands to her face, down which a trickle of blood ran from where her cheek had been cut by one of the rings.

The woman laughed softly. "Take her away," she drawled. "We'll see if a diet of biscuits and water for a few days will break her rebellious spirit. If not, we'll try other methods."

Frecks, still slightly dazed, was seized by the arms. She did not struggle, for now at last she understood.

These women were out of their minds. The crazy priest's palace, she told herself, was still a madhouse.

CHAPTER  
SEVEN

*The Singular Story  
of Mabel Stubbs*

MEANWHILE, WORRALS was hurrying along the beach, anxiety lengthening her stride. That something unforeseen by Frecks had happened was now certain, or she must have met her coming back. She passed the derelict yacht, looking even more pathetic in the darkness, and continued on over what was new ground to her although as far as the scenery was concerned it remained unchanged.

She had covered about another mile when a movement some distance ahead brought her to a halt. Another moment and she was back in the dark shadow of the trees, motionless but alert. Watching, it was not long before she was able to make out a figure fairly tearing down the beach. She saw a white dress and thought at first it must be Frecks. As the runner drew nearer, however, she saw that it was not. It was a girl, or a woman—in the uncertain light it was not possible to distinguish details—but a good deal taller than Frecks—and, moreover, the clumsy, single-piece dress she wore bore no resemblance to anything owned by Frecks.

Worrals's first inclination was to stand still and let the runner go by; but then it occurred to her that the girl might be the bearer of a message from Frecks, or at any rate, might have some information concerning her. So she stood still until the stranger was almost level with her, and then stepped out, at the same time saying: "Hey! What's the hurry?"

The girl, a white girl, as Worrals now saw her to be, gasped and swerved wildly before coming to a skidding stop at a safe distance. "Who are you?" she panted.

"It wouldn't mean anything to you if I told you," answered Worrals. "But you can reckon I'm a friend."

There was a deep sigh of relief. "Lor! You didn't half make me jump," said the girl, with an accent that told Worrals at once that she was a Londoner. "Where's the ship?" she went on urgently.

"Ship? What ship?" inquired Worrals, stepping closer.

“The ship you came on. Buck up! For mercy’s sake, let me get aboard.”

Answered Worrals: “As far as I know the only ship here is the wreck with its nose stuck in the reef.”

The girl let out a groan. “Then that finishes me,” she said heavily. “I might as well chuck myself in the sea and get it over.”

“Personally,” said Worrals gently, “I’d prefer any end to being chewed up by a shark. Where were you making for when I stopped you?”

“I saw a strange girl being brought into the palace yard and I could only suppose that a vessel of some sort had put in,” explained the girl wearily. “I took a chance on it and bolted. I shall be missed, and that’ll be that. But half a minute, if you didn’t come here in a ship, how did you get here? I reckon you didn’t swim.”

“Quite right, we didn’t,” admitted Worrals. “But never mind how we got here,” she went on, realizing that the strange girl alluded to must have been Frecks. “You say you saw a strange girl being brought into the palace yard? I take it you mean a white girl?” she questioned.

“Of course.”

“And what exactly do you mean by being brought in?”

“She was being marched in with a rifle pointing at her back.”

Worrals frowned. “Marched in? By whom?”

“The P.M. But, of course, you don’t know what that means. P.M. stands for Prime Minister.”

Worrals’s frown deepened. “And who exactly is the Prime Minister here?”

“Dr. Borran. She’s a woman doctor.”

Worrals assimilated this curious information. “I see,” she said slowly. “And what’s *your* trouble? Come and sit down and tell me about it. What’s your name?”

“Mabel—Mabel Stubbs.”

“And you come from London?”

“Lumme!” exclaimed Mabel fervently. “Don’t I wish I’d never left it.”

“How did you get here?”

“In that yacht, the one that’s wrecked. You must have seen it.”

“And what are you doing here?”

Mabel laughed bitterly. “What am I doing? That’s a good ’un. Wasting the best years of my life, that’s what I’m doing.”

“Sit down.”

The girl, who Worrals now saw was on the big side, with a frank, open face, obeyed. Worrals sank on to the warm sand beside her.

“Now,” she went on. “Try to be coherent. I want you to tell me as much as you know about what’s going on here; what you’re doing here, who brought you here, and why.”

“Love a duck! That’s going to take some time.”

“No matter. There’s no hurry.”

“You mean, you want me to tell you everything right from the beginning?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, it’ll be a treat to tell someone,” declared Mabel. “Another week or two of this and I shall be about ready for a real lunatic asylum. Some of the other girls here are more than half-way, I can tell you. Three are nearly blind from the glare and several others are so sick that they’re not likely to get well unless they soon see the inside of a hospital.”

“What girls are you talking about?” inquired Worrals. “How many are there?”

“There are eleven other white girls, five brown and three black. That’s not counting Alice and Mary. They’re dead. Couldn’t stand it and did themselves in.”

Worrals stared. “For Heaven’s sake!” she breathed, shaken more than a little by this information. “And how long have you been here?”

“Couldn’t say exactly, but it must be getting on for two years now.”

Worrals was shocked. Then she remembered something, something the Air Commodore had said about a sudden crop of missing girls. Was this, then, the answer to the mystery, she wondered? The time of the disappearances coincided, anyhow. “What was your job in London?” she asked.

“I worked at Camden’s Laundry, in Hoxton.”

“I see,” said Worrals. “You worked in a laundry. Now go on from there. Tell me the whole story.”

“Well, dear, it was like this,” began Mabel, in a confidential voice. “I got a bit fed up with my job. Money wasn’t bad, mind you, but there was no chance of bettering myself so I took to reading the Situations Vacant columns in the papers. One day there was an ad. for a laundress, light work and good wages. I answered it, and I got a letter back from a Miss Amelia Haddington, staying at a London hotel, asking me to go and see her. I thought it was a rum go, her living in a hotel, but I went.”



“Haddington . . . Haddington,” murmured Worrals. “Never mind, Mabel, go on.”

“Well, as I was saying, I went and saw Miss Haddington,” resumed Mabel. “She struck me as a bit queer, even then; and the job wasn’t what I expected. Still, it sounded all right. Miss Haddington said she wanted one or two good laundresses for her yacht, which was going to take her and some friends for a six months’ cruise round the world. Wages £5 a week, and of course, live in—couldn’t do otherwise on a boat, I suppose. It looked as if I’d be able to save all my money. I’ll admit I was a bit nervous about the sea, but, I thought, if it’s safe enough for the boss, it’s safe enough for me. I could see by the jewels she wore that she’d got plenty of money.”

“So you took the job?” prompted Worrals.

“I did. Miss Haddington told me not to talk about it because she was well known in society, and if the newspaper people got to hear about the cruise they’d only come pestering her. I’ll bet they would have done, too, if they’d known what was in store for some of us. But of course, it sounded reasonable enough at the time.”

“So you told no one?”

“Not a soul, right up to the time I joined the yacht at a little place called Wivinghoe. She gave me my fare.”

“And what was the name of this yacht?”

“Vanity. I don’t know much about yachts but she was lovely inside—everything you could think of, there was.”

Worrals nodded. She remembered now where she had heard the name Haddington, and the circumstances in which it had been introduced. Haddington was the name of the millionaire ship-owner who had built the lost Vanity. “Her name isn’t Vanity now?” she suggested.

“No. The name was changed at sea—or rather, one day when we were at anchor off a little island. It seemed a funny thing to do, but later on we saw why. But I’ll come to that presently. At first the cruise looked like being a lovely party. There was a lot of top-hole girls on board, most of them a bit younger than me. Talk about staff, you never saw anything like it. There were two people at least for every job—cooking, parlourmaids, seamstresses and everything. I couldn’t think what we were all going to do. But why should I worry about that? Later on I knew better, but then it was too late to do me any good.

“The Vanity sailed on the tide in the middle of the night,” went on Mabel. “Next day the sea was rough and we girls were nearly all sick. For that reason it was a couple of days before we noticed something that set our

tongues wagging. There wasn't a man on board. The whole crew, engineers, deckhands and officers, were women. None of us knew much about ships, but even to us this seemed a bit queer, to say the least of it. Some of the girls didn't like it, and said so; but the only answer they got from the skipper, who, incidentally, was Miss Haddington, was we were now on the high seas and such talk was mutiny. If there was any more talk the ringleaders would be put in irons. Whether she had the right to do that or not was neither here nor there; she had got us where she wanted us and could do what she liked. Well, that was the beginning."

"And what happened next?" inquired Worrals, whose interest was now held by the narrative and the honest way it was being told. Not for an instant did she question the truth of it.

"Of course," went on Mabel, "being only a working girl I didn't know anything about Miss Haddington, but some of the other girls, who were a bit better class, had heard a thing or two. Then again, those who waited at table in the officers' quarters used to hear things. But what we learnt didn't make us any happier. It seemed we were on a sort of floating loony-bin. Some of the girls swore they'd skip it at the first port we touched at. But they didn't get a chance. Her ladyship was too smart for that."

"And what did you learn about her ladyship?" prompted Worrals.

"Well, it seems her father was a millionaire."

"Quite right. He was."

"Made his money out of ships. I suppose that's how his daughter knew so much about them. He was a widower, and when he died Amelia came in for everything—six or seven million, so they say. But before that, being an only child and thoroughly spoilt, she had everything in the world she wanted except one thing, and that was the man she wanted to marry. He married someone else, with the result that Amelia, who'd never had 'no' said to her in her life before, had a nervous breakdown which left her a bit queer in the head. She began to get funny notions, particularly about men, who she reckoned were a useless lot. When she had the fit on her, she used to threaten to do herself in, for which reason they had to bring in a relay of nurses from a mental home to look after her. I know that's true because Janet told me so herself."

"Who's Janet?"

"Her old nurse. She's here, and a decent sort she is, too. Still, there's nothing she can do about it. The others treat her like dirt."

"What others?"

"The nurses I told you about."

“You mean—they’re here?”

“They are, and it’s my belief they’re more than half the cause of the trouble. They’re supposed to look after her, and they do, it’s true, pander to her whims; but I fancy there’s an idea behind that. It’s either that or they’re as crazy as Amelia. Of course, Amelia’s real trouble was that she had so much money she didn’t know what to do with it. Had she been a certified lunatic she couldn’t have touched it; but she wasn’t, so according to law she was sane. That’s what Janet told me. Things got worse instead of better, and one of Amelia’s notions was that she was the queen of somewhere or other. She could lay down the law. When she gave orders everyone had to jump to it. I’m talking now about the time she was at home, you understand. Another idea was, the country ought to be run by women. She actually started a sort of society to put this over, and with all her money you can imagine the sort of females, spongers and hangers-on, this brought to her house. Some of them may have been genuine, and really thought, like Hitler, they’d been born to run the world. I don’t know. Naturally, this scheme only made Amelia a laughing-stock, and seeing she wasn’t getting anywhere she got an even crazier brain-wave. If England didn’t want her she would start a little kingdom of her own, run by women. No men on the premises at all. In that way she could satisfy both the bugs in her brain—her hatred of men and her belief that she was born to be a queen. After all, why not? She had a yacht and unlimited money. Of course, they should never have let her do it, poor thing! But no one stopped her, and she started by sacking all the male crew of the yacht and replacing them with women. Some, like the radio operator, she found amongst girls who’d been in the Services. Others she had specially trained. I know that’s a fact because Susie, one of the engineers, told me so. She was at college studying engineering for a career when Amelia found her. Oh yes, it’s all plain enough to see now. But Amelia didn’t want staff so much as what she calls loyal subjects to bow and scrape to her. You can’t be a queen if you’ve no subjects to rule, can you?”

“No,” admitted Worrals. “But tell me this. Why didn’t these attendants of hers stop this nonsense?”

“You might well ask. No fear. They bow and scrape like everyone else. And do you know why, dearie? Amelia’s made a will leaving them all a fortune—as long as they do what she tells them. Now they’re worse than she is. They must always have been tough by nature, I reckon. They, really, run the show.”

“How many of these women are there?” inquired Worrals.

“You mean—running the island?”

“Yes.”

“There’s nine altogether. First, there’s Amelia. She’s the queen. Then there’s her three ministers, who are never far away from her. They’re women of about the same age, the wrong side of fifty, all in the swim together. First and worst, is a woman doctor named Miss Borran. She’s the Prime Minister, and a fair swine she is, too. Then there’s the two nurses. One’s the Home Secretary and the other the Minister for Labour. We call this bunch the three flowers.”

“Why?”

“Because of their names. They are Nurse Rose, Nurse Lillie, and the Geranium—and a pretty lot they are.”

Worrals blinked. “Why Geranium?”

“Dr. Borran? Because she dyes her hair a bright red.”

Worrals drew a deep breath, as in the case of Frecks, the significance of this struck her. So the natives had been right about a wild white woman with red hair. Indeed, it began to look as if they had been nearer the truth than they supposed. “Go on,” she invited, fascinated by this incredible story. “What about this £5 a week you were promised? Do you get it?”

“Oh yes, we get it regularly, unless there’s a stoppage for punishment.”

“What do you do with it?”

Mabel laughed bitterly. “What can we do with it? We’re paid by cheque, anyway. See the idea? Unless we get home we can’t present the cheques. I fancy that was the Prime Minister’s bright idea. But I was telling you about the gang that runs the island. In addition to those I’ve mentioned there are three old servants Amelia has had for years. They’re not too bad. Then there are two of the older girls who used to be with us. They went over to the enemy, so to speak, in order to have an easier time. When they saw how we despised them for it, they got as tough with us as the Geranium. I reckon they were rotters in the first place.”

“Tell me how you got here?” suggested Worrals.

“That won’t take long,” answered Mabel. “Whether they actually started out for this particular island, I don’t know, but they must have had something of the sort in their minds because the yacht was packed with enough food, mostly in tins, to last for years. And there was everything else on board anyone would be likely to want. Someone had thought it all out, and made a right job of it. Oh yes, they knew what they were up to. One thing was soon certain. Amelia didn’t want anyone to know where she was or what she was doing. We kept away from land—that is from civilized countries—and the radio was never used except for listening. The name of

the ship was changed, in case we met another ship, I fancy. When we got to the islands—a long way from here it was—Amelia, who was now putting on the queen act, reckoned she could do with some more subjects. Native girls were invited aboard, and once aboard they were kept aboard. We picked up quite a few that way. Two jumped overboard one night, but what happened to them after that I don't know."

"I've spoken to one of these native girls, I think, a very dark girl who said her name was Mati."

"That's right, ducks. We picked her up hundreds of miles from here. She's doing punishment for being late on duty. Went bathing and forgot, she said, which was no doubt true. She got six cuts of the cane, applied by the Geranium, and a week of Number 2 solitary confinement. There are regular punishments. Number 1 is done in one of the penitent cells in the church part of the palace. That's bad enough. For Number 2 you're locked in the bottom of the yacht. That's worse. I've done both, for answering back."

"How did you actually get here, and how came the yacht to be wrecked?" asked Worrals.

"Well, it was like this," returned Mabel. "We'd been through some pretty rough weather, and the yacht was getting in a bad way, when we came in sight of land, which turned out to be this island. Whether we were actually making for here, or any other particular island, I can't say. We weren't told. Anyhow, I for one was mighty glad when we turned towards the land looking for an anchorage. We ran through a gap in the reef, where there was no surf; but it seems that after we were in the lagoon something went wrong. The engines were left running with the result that the poor old Vanity shoved her nose into the rocks. There was no danger because she stuck fast, and the water was shallow anyway—but you've seen her, so you know. So Amelia got her little private kingdom, and some subjects, although they weren't all what you might call loyal. Mind you, I don't think wrecking the yacht was in the programme. Sooner or later we should want more stores and the yacht would have to fetch them. Amelia doesn't seem to worry, though. She gave orders for everything on the ship to be carried ashore. By this time we were all in a state of mutiny. A deputation went to Amelia and told her straight that if we ever got home we'd report her for abduction, which I think we could have done. Some of the girls were for setting off right away in the Vanity's boats, because the native girls said they could handle them. But her ladyship must have got wind of this because when we woke up in the morning all the boats had been smashed to pieces, except one, which is kept locked up at the palace. The planks were afterwards used for making seats and things. That's about all. There was nothing we could do about it. We

couldn't fight with our bare hands while the queen and her pals had guns. Anyone who started trouble, they said, would be shot, and I think they were good enough for that. So here we are, down to biscuits and coco-nuts. Once or twice ships have come into sight, and tried to land; but they weren't allowed to. After being shot at they pushed off. That's the story. To-night I saw a stranger, and thinking there must be a ship in the offing, made a bolt for it. But tell me, dearie, how did you get here? You still haven't told me."

"As a matter of fact," replied Worrals, "we came here in an aeroplane."

"Just the two of you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm blessed!" Mabel seemed astonished—perhaps not without reason. "Where is this plane of yours?" she asked.

Worrals told her.

"Well, you'd better put it somewhere else," said Mabel seriously. "They'll come looking for it for a cert, and if they find it, you can say good-bye to it. They'll smash it like they did the boats and you'll be stuck here with the rest of us. They are not likely to let you go home to spill the beans about what's going on here."

"Yes," said Worrals pensively. "I think you're right."

"How many will the plane hold?" asked Mabel.

"Only two or three, I'm afraid."

Mabel's face fell. "That's not much use."

"Don't worry about that," encouraged Worrals. "We'll fetch a ship."

"How long will it take?"

"It all depends on what ships are available and whether there are any British vessels in this part of the Pacific. If not, it may be weeks, or even months, before you can be taken off."

Mabel shook her head. "Months? I'll tell you this, ducks," she declared grimly. "It won't take months, or even weeks, before murder's done here. Everyone's had about enough, and Amelia's little empire is about ripe for a first-class revolution, weapons or no weapons."

Chin in hand, Worrals gazed across the darkening lagoon. "We shall have to prevent that from happening," she said softly. "What are they likely to do with my friend?"

"Put her in one of the punishment cells, I guess, unless she agrees to obey orders."

Worrals smiled wanly. "Somehow I don't think she'll do that," she said gently. "She can be a very awkward young woman. In the meantime what

are you going to do? Are you going back to the palace?"

"Me? Go back? Not likely," asserted Mabel positively. "They can come and find me. I shall get it in the neck anyway, so I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. What are you going to do?"

"That," answered Worrals slowly, "will need thinking about."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Worries for Worrals*

WORRALS sat still for some time, thinking the matter over. A more extraordinary situation, she felt, could hardly be imagined. She had certainly not visualized anything of the sort. She realized that it would have to be handled carefully or she and Frecks might find themselves in a very awkward predicament indeed. The release of Frecks, and the security of their only means of leaving the island, were the first things that would need attention, she decided; for if anything happened to the machine, not only would they find themselves marooned, but they would have lost their only means of communicating with civilization by radio, which was, of course, installed in the Seafarer. At first she found it hard to believe that these queer people in control of the island would dare to destroy the aircraft; but then she recalled the shooting incidents, and it seemed to her that if these women were prepared to go as far as that, they would not hesitate to render useless this new threat to their puppet kingdom.

Another factor she bore in mind was this. At the moment she held the advantage of surprise, as it were, in that the self-appointed rulers of the island were unaware of the existence of herself or the aircraft. This, she thought, was a trump card that should be exploited. Nevertheless, what Mabel had said was obviously a matter of common sense. The women, having seen Frecks, would waste no time finding out how she got there. That would not take long.

Another angle she did not overlook was this: there might be something in Miss Haddington's argument on the score of mutiny. She was undoubtedly the owner and skipper of the yacht. The girls who had signed on for the voyage were therefore in the same position as merchant seamen, and subject to the rather drastic laws covering their behaviour. Refusal to obey orders, much less a personal assault on the ship's officers, might still be mutiny, even though the vessel was no longer seaworthy. On this point Worrals could not be sure. But if it was the law, then she and Frecks, if they incited or headed a mutiny, might find themselves in hot water when they



got home. Of course, if all the circumstances were known, then they might be held justified in taking direct action. But would the circumstances be known? Miss Haddington and her supporters would undoubtedly deny the allegations of the crew, so it would be the word of one party against the other; and in such circumstances Worrals had an uncomfortable feeling that a court would accept the explanation of the ship's officers. It was a knotty point.

However, at last she said: "I've a good mind to go along and have a show-down with this parcel of petty dictators right away, while I have the chance. Once they know I'm here, and start looking for me with rifles in their hands, it will be more difficult to argue."

Mabel turned a startled face to Worrals. "You must be as crazy as they are," she declared. "I don't think you can have grasped what you're up against. Perhaps you think because this bunch are women they are less to be feared than men. If that's what you think, you've never made a bigger mistake in your life. Don't you see, however bad men may be, deep down most of them still have a sneaking respect for women, and hesitate before they start knocking them about. You can't reckon on that here. Women can be cats with women under them—you ought to know that. This lot are bad enough for anything. This female doctor, the Geranium, has a temper like a tigress that has had its cub pinched. Rose and Lillie aren't much better. They must all have had a screw loose when they started on this jaunt, but now, having had a taste of power, and knowing they're safe and can do what they like, they're just a pack of bloodthirsty she-wolves. I'm not kidding. You don't know, but I do. No, ducks; you take my tip and keep clear." Mabel spoke with such sincerity that Worrals was impressed.

"Tell me this," said Worrals. "You said they'll probably put my partner in a penitent cell?"

"That's what the places were."

"Where are they?"

"Inside the palace, the part that was once a church."

"Can we get her out?"

"Not a hope. The walls of that chamber of horrors are three feet thick."

"What about windows?"

"There aren't any in the cells. They're just little square holes long enough to take three planks for a bed. Once you're locked in there's no getting out. The Geranium keeps the keys."

"Where do the rest of you girls sleep?"

“In one big room, a sort of hall, at the far end of the palace. We’re locked in at night. There isn’t another building of any sort on the island.”

“And where will the queen and her staff be at this hour?”

“They’ll be in what we call the pearl room, having dinner.”

“Pearl room?”

“Yes; the walls are all decorated with oyster-shells. They spend most of their time there. Two girls are told off every day to act as waitresses. Of course, some of them might be out even now, looking for a ship, supposing your friend came in one. If you take my tip you’ll hide your plane before you do anything else—that’s if you intend staying here.”

“I’ve no intention of leaving,” asserted Worrals sternly. “The question is, where can I put the machine where it’s not likely to be seen? It’s got to be in one of the lagoons. I daren’t leave her on the open sea.”

“Where is she now?”

Worrals explained.

“What about parking her in the middle of those little islets—you know, the ones in the lagoon where she is now?”

Worrals hesitated. “There are two snags about that. The first is that it means starting the engine. True, I needn’t open the throttle wide—just enough to move her—but there is sure to be a certain amount of noise.”

“We’re miles from the palace and they’ll probably be inside with the door shut,” replied Mabel. “Apart from that, there’s always the noise of the surf on the seaward side of the island to drown any other noise unless it’s very close.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Worrals. Indeed, the steady thunder of the surf came clearly to her ears where she sat, although from its very persistence she had begun not to notice it.

“What’s the other snag?” inquired Mabel.

“These islets are at least a hundred yards from the nearest point of the reef. Having parked the plane, how do we get back?”

“Swim, of course. I reckon you can swim?”

“Yes. But what about sharks?”

“Oh! We don’t worry about them any longer, although at first we were scared stiff. The big white man-eaters only come in when a gale blows. The thing to be most afraid of is what the native girls call a *tutuhoe*. The girls say it’s an enormous decapod. That’s what an octopus is called when it has ten arms,” she explained naïvely. “Luckily they’re very rare. I’ve only seen two, and each time it was after a hurricane. They’re dreadful things. They’ll even

pull a boat under—so the native girls say. But there won't be any in the lagoon while it's quiet like this."

"Well, that's nice to know, anyway," murmured Worrals cynically. "All right. I'll move the plane over. What are you going to do?"

"Mind if I stay with you?"

"Not at all. In fact I'd be glad if you'd come along. You know the place. I don't. You can act as guide. Let's start walking."

They got up, and Worrals retraced her steps back along the beach, with Mabel filling in more details of her story as she remembered them. They reached the camp fire, which was still smouldering, with Mati squatting beside it, looking rather miserable, waiting for Worrals's return.

Worrals wasted no time in further parley, but proceeded at once to move the aircraft to a place where, if it was not entirely concealed, it was at all events much less likely to be seen. Mabel and Mati followed her on board and helped to haul in the anchors. Mati, somewhat to Worrals's surprise, showed no concern at finding herself in a vehicle of which she could have had no experience. Indeed, it is unlikely that she had ever seen an aeroplane before in her life. Apparently she took it to be merely another kind of boat invented by white men, in which case there was nothing to worry about. She showed no surprise, either, when Worrals started the engine, and gave it just enough throttle to send it moving slowly in the direction of the cluster of islets that had been selected for its new moorings.

This operation did not take long, and Worrals was well satisfied with the change, for not only was the machine practically out of sight from the landward side, but in the event of anything short of a gale it would lie snug in the protection of the projecting coral reefs—which was what the islets really were. The aircraft secure, the next step was to get ashore again, an undertaking that found less favour in Worrals's eyes. She regarded the hundred yards of placid water that lay between them and the nearest point of the reef with deep suspicion.

"You're sure it's safe to swim?" she questioned, looking at Mabel.

"Safe as houses," declared Mabel. "We all go swimming. That's all there is to do. I've swum out here many a time."

"I fancy one has to get accustomed to the idea of swimming in the same water as sharks," observed Worrals.

"That's true enough," agreed Mabel. "When we first got here nothing would have got me more than a few yards from the beach. But there, you soon get used to it."

Mati settled the argument by launching herself, almost without a splash, and striking out for the reef with a long easy stroke that took her through the water more in the manner of a marine creature than a human being.

“Look at her!” said Mabel admiringly. “They’re half fish, these native kids.” She dived in and set off in the widening ripples caused by Mati’s passage through the water.

Worrals followed, trying to prevent her toes from curling at the thought of what might be underneath her. However, nothing happened, although it was with a little gasp of relief that she drew herself on the coral where Mabel and Mati were waiting quite unconcerned. Actually, Worrals was not much happier on the reef, for as they made their way along it to the beach all sorts of creatures scuttled away to the safety of the many water holes. She took some comfort from the fact that as far as Mati was concerned they might not have existed. Just ahead, to the right, loomed the silhouette of the once-gay yacht, now abandoned and dying in the tropic sea.

Five minutes brought them to the end of the reef, from where another short swim took them to the sandy beach. Worrals wrung some of the water from her clothes, and shook herself, although as the air was warm, and the sand gave off the heat it had accumulated during the day, there was no feeling of chill.

“And now what are you going to do?” asked Mabel.

“I’m going to fetch my friend,” answered Worrals.

“You’ll have a job,” promised Mabel.

“Maybe,” returned Worrals. “The only alternative is to go and fetch a ship, and that may take a long time. I don’t feel inclined to leave my partner cooped up in a dirty cell for an indefinite period, so I intend to release her first. And if your precious Geranium starts throwing her weight about she may learn a thing or two from me.”

“She’s got a rifle, you know.”

“I’m not entirely without means of protecting myself,” answered Worrals evenly. “Are you going to stay here or are you coming with me?”

Mabel hesitated. “Could I do any good if I came?”

“Yes, I think you could. As I said just now, you know your way about.”

“Right you are, dearie. It’ll be a pleasure to hear someone tell this bouquet of beauties where they step off. This is the way we go.” She pointed along the beach.

“Come on, then,” said Worrals.

She set off. Looking round she saw that Mati was still with them, following close behind. Whether or not the native girl really understood what they were going to do, she did not know, but she did not stop to explain. Not knowing what else to do with her she thought she might as well come.

CHAPTER  
NINE

*Taking the Bull  
by the Horns*

THE little party halted when, reaching the gap in the coco-nut grove, the palace came into view.

“Well, dearie, there it is,” said Mabel, with a sort of finality in her voice.

Worrals studied the building with a good deal of curiosity, not to say astonishment. The description ‘palace’ she had always supposed to be an exaggerated term, but she now saw that this was not the case. She took into consideration the fact that the building probably appeared bigger than it actually was on account of the absence of any other edifice with which to compare it; but even so, she made a mental note that had she not known of its existence she might well have thought that she was suffering from a hallucination. She was appalled to think of the misery and labour that must have gone into its creation. There was no one about. The only indication of human occupation came from some lighted windows.

“Is there any likelihood of anyone being on guard?” she asked Mabel.

“No. What is there to guard against?” was the reply. “The girls will be locked up for the night.”

Worrals did not speak again for a moment or two. She could not altogether agree with Mabel’s view that there was no reason for posting a sentry—at any rate, now that Frecks had appeared on the scene. Crazy though these people might be, she reflected, they must surely have enough wit to realize that Frecks was not alone. However, there was no sign of a guard, so she could only assume that this precaution had been considered unnecessary.

“Who keeps the keys of the girls’ quarters?” she asked.

“Whoever happens to be on duty. To-day it’s the Geranium.”

“Are all the keys of this place on one bunch?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Looking about her Worrals walked on slowly to the door. Glancing over her shoulder she whispered: “You can wait here or you can

come in with me. Please yourselves. But if you decide to come in, do nothing or say nothing unless I ask you.”

“I’m scared stiff,” admitted Mabel. “But I wouldn’t miss this for all the tea in China.”

Worrals tried the door, and finding it open, pushed it an inch or two.

“You’ve fairly got a nerve,” breathed Mabel from the rear.

Worrals did not answer. She pushed the door ajar, took a pace forward, looked inside, and then stared at the strange spectacle that greeted her eyes.

The near end of the room was in darkness, for which reason perhaps the scene at the far end appeared all the brighter. Here, at a long table, lighted by a number of candelabra, several women, in full evening dress, sat at dinner. She counted them as her eyes ran over them. There were eight. One, presumably the self-appointed queen of the island, sat at the head. A woman with a mop of conspicuously red hair was talking to her. Jewels flashed as the queen leaned forward to listen. They all appeared to be made-up—in fact, over made-up, so that the picture presented gave the impression of a scene in a play. Two girls, in nightdress-like garments, waited at table. Near the end there was a vacant chair.

So much Worrals was able to take in at a glance, but from sheer wonder she stood and watched for a full minute. There was no indication—apart from the fact that the women were there at all—that they were mad, as Mabel had insisted.

As there seemed to be no point in waiting any longer, she walked slowly down the hall, only coming to a halt when she was within the radius of the light. By that time she had been observed, as was evident from the hush that had fallen, and the attitudes of those at the table. Those who had had their backs to her had turned, to see what the others were looking at. With all eyes on her Worrals took another slow pace forward, and looking at the woman who sat at the head of the table, opened the conversation.

“Am I addressing Miss Haddington?” she said quietly, but with just a suspicion of curtness in her voice, in the hope that this would at once convey an impression that she was not easily to be intimidated; or, alternatively, that she was in a position of authority.

Instantly the redheaded woman was on her feet, bristling with indignation, real or affected. “Who are you and how dare you come in here?” she demanded harshly.



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*“Am I addressing Miss Haddington?”*

“Who I am does not for the moment matter,” replied Worrals imperturbably. “We’ll come to that later on. But I’ll tell you what brings me here. I understand that a friend of mine was brought into this building by force this evening. Where is she?”

Again it was the Geranium who answered. “How dare you speak like that in here?” she demanded furiously. “Apparently you don’t know where you are, or in whose presence you stand. Withdraw at once, or it will be the worse for you, you insolent creature.”

Worrals did not move. “I asked a question, and it was not addressed to you,” she said evenly.

The queen now got a word in. “What is it you want?” she asked in a thin reedy voice.



“I want several things,” answered Worrals. “First of all I want the girl who was brought in here this evening. Will you send for her or shall I fetch her?”

“So you think you can come in here demanding, do you?” sneered the queen.

“That is exactly what I am doing,” replied Worrals coldly.

“Then you must be behaving as you are from ignorance, not knowing who I am. Otherwise it would be gross impertinence.”

“You can call it what you like,” retorted Worrals. “May I suggest that you waste no more time trying to put this high-flown nonsense over me. It won’t work.”

“Mabel Stubbs, come here at once!” snapped the redheaded doctor.

“Stay where you are, Mabel,” said Worrals crisply.

“You dare to question my orders,” flamed Redhead, who was obviously working herself into a fury.

“I’m likely to do more than that before I’ve finished with you,” promised Worrals caustically, for she, too, was beginning to get angry, and out of patience with the whole ridiculous set-up.

“Oh! And what else are you going to do?” scoffed the queen.

“I’m going to see, as soon as may be, that you’re taken home to explain the things you have dared to do here,” said Worrals.

“Oh you are, are you?” muttered the Geranium ominously. She began to sidle away from the table.

Worrals, looking in the direction for which she was making, saw a rifle standing in a rack. What the doctor would do if she got her hands on it was a matter for surmise, but it was a risk, Worrals decided, that she dare not take. She herself had tried to avoid open hostilities, at all events the use of lethal weapons; but it now looked as if the argument could only be settled by force. Her automatic appeared in her hand. “Touch that rifle and you’ll be responsible for the consequences,” she said tersely, hoping sincerely that the woman would not force an issue which might be difficult to justify.

The queen threw up her hands with a cry of horror. “Threats!” she cried. “She threatens us.”

The Geranium had stopped. “I’ll kill you for this, you impudent little hussy,” she rasped. And she sounded as if she really meant it.

“Mabel, please remember that remark,” requested Worrals. “I may ask you to give evidence that she threatened my life.” To the doctor she went on. “Hand me those keys.”

The Geranium laughed scornfully.

“Very well,” said Worrals. “I now give you warning, and this applies to everyone present, that I was sent here by Scotland Yard, with whom I am in touch by radio. Think that over, and think twice before you do anything foolish. My advice to you is, don’t make things worse for yourselves than they already are.”

This statement was received in dead silence, and it was clear that it was not without effect. Even the Geranium’s expression changed.

Worrals raised her voice. “Mabel, come here!”

Mabel, as white as a sheet, obeyed.

“Go and bring me that rifle,” ordered Worrals.

Mabel, her eyes fixed nervously on her mistresses, complied.

Worrals jerked the bolt, emptying the magazine, and handed the weapon back to Mabel. “Take care of that,” she said quietly. “Pick up those cartridges from the floor and put them in your pocket.”

There was a curious, attentive silence, while this was done.

“Now go and collect those keys from Dr. Borran,” was Worrals’s next order.

Mabel hesitated.

“Do as I tell you.”

The wretched girl gasped. She was fairly shaking with fright, which gave Worrals an idea of the rigid discipline that had been imposed on her. However, walking like an automaton, she advanced, until the doctor, snatching the keys from her belt, flung them at her. Mabel picked them up and hurried back to Worrals.

“There’s no need to get upset,” Worrals told her gently. “Go and open the cells and release anyone in them. Then let all the girls out and tell them to come in here. I want to speak to them.”

Mabel started to move off, but the queen stopped her with a quavering cry. “Wait!” she said weakly. Then, to Worrals, she went on in a voice not far from tears, “Surely this is unnecessary? Stay with us here. I’ll make you chief of my police at a salary of £10,000 a year—no, £20,000.” She smiled ingratiatingly.

Worrals shook her head. “I’m sorry, Miss Haddington, but I already have a job.” She spoke quietly, for in her heart she could not help feeling sorry for this unfortunate woman who, had she been in normal mental health, would never have made such a preposterous proposition. “Go ahead, Mabel,” Worrals concluded.

The other women were now all on their feet, and for a moment it looked as if they might make a concerted effort to prevent Mabel from carrying out her instructions. Had they done so, Worrals might well have discovered that she had taken on rather more than she could handle. But in the end her personality dominated, and only the redheaded one showed signs of doing anything desperate. In a voice full of venom, she started telling Mabel what she would do to her; but Worrals put an end to this with an angry gesture.

“If I have any more trouble with you, Dr. Borran—or anyone else for that matter—you’ll go to the cells, and there cool your heels until you come to your senses. Behave sensibly and you’ll not find me unreasonable. I suggest you all sit down and finish your meal.”

Muttering, the women resumed their seats. Only the doctor remained standing, and the expression on her face was not pleasant. The queen seemed on the verge of tears.

With some impatience Worrals waited for Mabel to return; for she knew that once these women had got over their shock, and were able to get together to make a plan of action, things would be a lot more difficult. They would then realize that Worrals, really, was bluffing; that by sheer weight of numbers the situation was still in their hands. At the moment no one was anxious to take the initiative. Everyone hoped that someone else would do something, with the result—as so often happens in such circumstances—no one did anything. As for the two waitresses, they merely stood together in the background, wide-eyed at this sudden and unexpected turn of events.

The first person to appear from the back regions was Frecks, looking rather sorry for herself. Joining Worrals she inquired: “What goes on?”

“Have you still got your gun?” breathed Worrals.

“Yes.”

“Then be ready to produce it,” warned Worrals. “Things are in a state of touch-and-go. Stand fast.”

A minute later came a babble of voices. It died away, however, as into the room trooped a queue of girls, Mabel at their head.

“Line up each side of the table where I can see you,” requested Worrals, somewhat peremptorily, although actually, now that much of the first dramatic tension had relaxed, the whole thing began to take on an aspect not far removed from comedy. The situation reminded her vaguely of a schoolmistress about to lecture a class of children. The truth of the matter was, for once she was by no means clear in her mind about what to do next. She had been quite unprepared for such a unique state of affairs, and it was not easy to decide how to handle it. How she was going to keep peace on the

island until its extraordinary population could be taken off, she did not know. Already growing on her was a fear that the two sides might come into conflict, with results she preferred not to contemplate. If the native girls who had been whipped, perceiving that their abductors no longer held the upper hand, took it into their heads to exact retribution, as they might, the upshot might well be bloodshed. Therefore, although Worrals still had the situation in hand, she was by no means happy about it. The trouble was, by the disappearance of Frecks it had been forced upon her before she was aware of the facts of the case. There had been no time to make a plan. She had not even seen Frecks since the mystery of the island had burst wide open, much less had a chance to discuss it with her, and devise ways and means to deal with it.

The girls were now where she had told them to stand, waiting expectantly for her to say something. Some of them, she noticed, looked ill, but the general atmosphere was one of suppressed excitement.

Raising her voice so that all could hear, Worrals began: "The conditions that have prevailed on this island since you were brought here are at an end," she announced bluntly. "I did not arrive here by accident. As an accredited agent of Scotland Yard, I was sent here to find out what was going on. I now have a very good idea. Is there any girl here who was satisfied with things as they were, and would like to stay here?"

No one moved.

"Do I take it you all want to go home?"

The unanimous shout of "Yes!" that went up made Frecks jump.

"Very well," resumed Worrals. "That settles any doubt about that. Now, what I am going to say applies to everyone. I intend to assume control here, pending the arrival of transport, which does not, however, mean that I'm going to start laying down the law. All I ask is co-operation. With the reasonable behaviour of all parties this business can end without any serious unpleasantness. I have no authority to predict any course the law might take until the matter has been thoroughly investigated. Any opposition to the wishes of the majority can only result in trouble. From now on, everyone will take equal status, under my direction. There will be no more beatings or lockings up. What food or comforts there are here will be shared equally, although priority will of course be given to the sick. That's all I have to say for the present." Worrals looked along the lines of girls. "Are you all prepared to accept that?"

Again the shout went up. "Yes."

Worrals turned to the table. "Are you prepared to accept it?"

There was a moment of hesitation. Then one of those at the end farthest from the queen stood up. "I accept," she said. Another followed her lead. Then another, an elderly woman, stood up. "I accept," she said nervously.

"Treason!" screamed the queen, springing to her feet. "Treason!—treason!—treason!"

"Will you please sit down, Miss Haddington," requested Worrals sternly.

The queen—or rather the ex-queen—sank back, muttering.

None of the others had moved.

"All right, if that's how you want it," said Worrals grimly. "As I have no intention of jeopardizing the security of the whole community, those who by their attitudes have dissented will have their liberties curtailed so that they can do no harm."

Upon this, another elderly woman stood up. "All right," she said. "I agree."

This left four rebels only, including the queen and the Geranium.

Worrals beckoned two of the older girls to her. "You will take Miss Haddington to her room and remain with her until you are relieved. She is not to be left alone, you understand?"

"Very well, ma'am," said one of the girls, and the pair were walking towards the table when there came an interruption which brought to an abrupt conclusion a situation which Worrals was just congratulating herself she had well in hand.

This, in detail, was the sequence of events. First came a swift rush of bare feet followed by a shrill scream. A firearm crashed, making the lights jump. Almost simultaneously, there was a dull plop that made Worrals wince, for she knew the meaning of it. Finally there came the sound of a fierce scuffle somewhere in the gloom at the other end of the hall. It was accompanied by noises such as wild cats might have made.

Worrals spoke, and her voice was as brittle as ice. "Take care of things here," she told Frecks. Then "Attend to that girl some of you!" she called, pointing to one of the two waitresses who now lay on the floor in a crumpled heap. Then, with a terse "Come with me, Mabel!" she ran down the hall to where two figures, one black and one white, were rolling over and over on the floor.

As she reached them they broke apart, and she saw that one was Mati, and the other a thin, middle-aged woman whom she had not seen before. A rifle lay on the floor. Both made a dive for it. The white woman got it, and before Worrals could prevent it had swung it round to give Mati such a blow

that she reeled away with a cry of agony. Worrals did not mince matters. As the woman raised the rifle again, the butt of Worrals's pistol came down smartly on the hand that held it. It was the white woman's turn to cry out. As the weapon clattered on the floor Worrals kicked it aside.

The woman groaned, nursing bruised fingers. "You'll get worse than that if you don't behave yourself," Worrals told her with scant sympathy. "Go down to the table and let's have no nonsense about it." To Mabel she said: "Look after Mati." Then she followed the woman who was now walking sullenly towards the lighted end of the hall, from where there came a sound of frantic sobbing.

CHAPTER  
TEN

*Desperate  
Measures*

IT took Worrals some time to discover precisely what had happened, to get a fresh grasp of a situation that for a little while bordered on confusion. Fortunately the queen had fainted, so she, at least, remained quiet. Eventually, with order restored, and Mati more or less coherent, Worrals was able to get at the facts.

The woman who had caused the disturbance was Nurse Lillie, known to the girls, behind her back, as Dizzy Lizzie. The vacant chair at the table was her usual place at mealtimes, but she had, it appeared been sent out to locate the ship which, it was presumed, had brought Frecks to the island. In this quest she had, of course, failed, although Worrals could only pray that she had not spotted the aircraft. Anyway, she had returned home, and so discovered what was going on at the palace.

Standing unobserved, as she had supposed, in the unlighted part of the hall, she had watched the proceedings two or three minutes before taking a step which, had it succeeded, would have had fatal consequences for Worrals. But it so happened that Mati had hung back in the rear of the hall, not daring to reveal herself to the white women whom she had good cause to fear. Unseen, she had watched without moving until the nurse brought the rifle to her shoulder, and taken aim at Worrals with the evident intention of shooting her through the back. Realizing this, with a cry of warning, Mati had courageously dashed forward and knocked the rifle aside. This had spoiled Lillie's aim, but it did not prevent the weapon from going off. The bullet had flown wide of its mark and by an unfortunate chance had struck one of the two waitresses, a girl named Lucy Gray. She had not been killed, but was unconscious with a serious wound below the shoulder. The bullet had gone right through her so the question of extracting it did not arise. Worrals's opinion, for what it was worth, was that if the bullet had not touched the lung, Lucy had a reasonable chance of recovery. While Worrals was examining the wound, the only doctor on the island, the Geranium—if in fact she was a doctor—had stood by with arms folded and a cynical smile

on her face. She did not offer her services and Worrals did not ask for them, for knowing the woman's evil nature she was afraid she might deliberately do more harm than good, or at least cause the wounded girl unnecessary pain.

Some of the girls, one of whom had taken a course of First Aid, had carried her to her bed and were looking after her. Mati, too, had been hurt by the blow she had received from the rifle. It had caught her on the upper arm, which was badly swollen; but the bone had not been broken.

The woman responsible for all this, a lean, untidy, hard-faced female, had gone on to the table and taken her place, and was now calmly eating some of the food that remained. Whether she was just utterly callous, or mentally defective as Mabel had asserted, was still not clear, although it was obviously one or the other. All Worrals had to say to her was to warn her that if the wounded girl died, she would find herself on a charge of murder.

The woman went on eating, apparently unconcerned.

The queen, who by this time had recovered from her swoon, after a brief but embarrassing period of hysteria returned to her chair, where she sat giving orders which no one heeded, at intervals muttering to herself. Worrals could only feel sorry for the unfortunate creature. She, without any doubt, was a mental case. How far this explanation could be applied to her companions was still an open question, although from their actions it was evident that they were not normal. As Worrals reflected, no ordinary person would have been party to such a fantastic adventure.

As a result of all this upset she had not been able to keep as firm a hand on the situation as had been her intention; and, indeed, as the circumstances demanded; but with order restored she turned to take up matters from the point she had reached when the interruption had occurred. The queen was sent to her room in charge of the two girls already detailed for the duty. Sobbing something about having been betrayed, she went without protest.

As far as the queen's intimate associates were concerned, Worrals's original intention had been, with one exception, to leave them at liberty after rounding up all the firearms; then, with some of the older girls in charge, they would not be able to do much mischief. She had already decided that of these the doctor was the most dangerous, for, according to Mati's story, it had been she who had been the leader of the shooting party when the Polynesians had tried to land on the island. Thus was their story corroborated. Her subsequent actions made it abundantly clear that she was not to be trusted, and with her, therefore, Worrals purposed taking more drastic steps to ensure their personal safety. She now decided to put Nurse



Lillie, who had also shown herself to be a desperate character, into the same category. But in looking round for the doctor she discovered, with a twinge of dismay, that she was no longer there.

“Where’s that redheaded demon?” she asked Frecks softly.

Frecks looked round, and failing to see her, replied: “It looks as if she took advantage of the general flap to slip away.”

Worrals drew a deep breath. “Then we’d better keep our eyes skinned for more trouble,” she said. A thought struck her. “Go and collect that rifle,” she requested. “I mean the one I kicked across the floor. I should have picked it up before this, but with so much going on I couldn’t think of everything.”

Frecks went off but was soon back. “It isn’t there,” she reported.

“Ah! I was afraid of that,” muttered Worrals.

“You think Redhead . . . ?”

“No one else would have taken it,” asserted Worrals. “Keep an eye on that end of the room to make sure she doesn’t have a crack at us while I’m talking to the girls. There’s nothing more we can do about it for the time being.”

Turning, she beckoned to Mabel, who still carried the keys, and to two of the most heavily-built girls of the party. “Come with me,” she said quietly. “There may be a spot of bother.” She then walked over to the table. “Have you finished your dinner, Nurse Lillie?” she inquired.

The woman looked up, a sneer on her face. “Mind your own business,” she answered rudely.

“That,” returned Worrals evenly, “is precisely what I am doing. You are under arrest for attempted murder. As I have already warned you, should the girl you wounded die, the charge will be a more serious one.”

Another sneer. “Well?”

Worrals’s voice hardened. “I’m going to lock you in one of the punishment cells to make quite sure that you hurt no one else. Are you going quietly?”

The face that the woman now turned to Worrals fully justified the action Worrals was taking. Never had she seen murder written more clearly on any face.

“I’ll give you five seconds to make up your mind,” said Worrals softly.

Five seconds passed. Still the woman did not speak, or move.

“All right,” said Worrals calmly. “If you prefer to make a scene, you can have it that way, but if you get hurt you’ve no one to blame but yourself. All right, Mabel. Go ahead, girls. Take her away.”

The woman struggled like a fury, spitting language that made Worrals wince. But the three girls had old scores to settle, and they went about their unpleasant task with firm deliberation. Screaming and swearing vengeance, Nurse Lillie was finally dragged away.

“I’m afraid that was a nasty business, but I had no alternative,” Worrals told Frecks sadly. “I’m not having people of that sort running loose.”

“I should say not,” agreed Frecks warmly.

Mabel and her companions, more than a little dishevelled, returned.

Worrals again faced the table, and addressing those who remained, spoke to them quietly. “I hope you’ll behave more sensibly,” she said. She told them to go to their rooms, and remain there until the morning, when she would speak to them again. She warned them that the island would shortly be evacuated, and those who made trouble would have to answer for it. She also pointed out that whatever they did they could not escape from the island. “So you see,” she concluded, “violence will not help you.”

One by one the women got up and left the room. Only one spoke—one of those who had sat at the far end of the table. “Well, I’m not sorry it’s all over,” she remarked. “I’d had about enough of it.”

When they had gone Worrals turned to where the majority of the girls were standing in little groups, the different nationalities together, talking excitedly in low voices. Calling for their attention she selected half a dozen of the most capable-looking and told them to form themselves into a sort of working committee for the running of the place in the meantime. The others were to give all the assistance possible. Apart from that they were at liberty to do as they pleased. She then tried to find out how many firearms there were on the island, but no one seemed to know. There was some argument. It appeared, however, that there were at least two rifles, a shotgun and a revolver, although where they were, again, nobody knew. Mabel pointed out that they—that is, the girls—were not allowed to touch them; but the doctor and the two nurses seldom moved without a rifle. It was by this means that they had been able to impose their will on the rest. Worrals could account for the two rifles; the one she had unloaded and the one that had been used by Nurse Lillie, and was now presumably, in the possession of the doctor. So she could only order a search to be made, and any firearms found brought to her at once. She also asked some of the girls to go to the doctor’s room to see if she was there, or anywhere in the building.

As the girls disappeared on their errands Worrals turned to Frecks with a sigh of relief, for she was anxious to have a talk with her to decide what should be done on the morrow.

On the face of it this needed a little thought. Obviously, the next step was to bring transport to the island to take off the unfortunate girls who had been marooned there. The difficulty lay in knowing how this might best be brought about. There was, of course, nothing to prevent them from flying home and making their report, leaving the authorities to clear the thing up in their own time; but this Worrals dared not do, feeling sure that if she left the island the women would somehow regain control, in which case, from sheer spite, they would make the lives of the girls even more intolerable. An alternative was for one of them to take the machine up and try to make contact with home, or a ship, by radio; but she was by no means sure that her signals would be picked up. In any case, there was bound to be a long delay before help came. Finally, discussing the matter, it was decided to try both methods. Frecks would take the machine up alone, and from the air try to get in touch with the outside world by radio. If she failed, she was to fly on to Papeete, in Tahiti, capital of French Oceania and the nearest town of any size, and report there what had happened. From there, at any rate, it should be possible to get a message through to London, Worrals thought. Again, owing to the urgency of the situation the French authorities themselves might lend a hand.

Frecks agreed that this seemed all they could do. "When shall I start?" she asked.

"The sooner the better," answered Worrals. "This is a nasty business and I shall be glad to see the back of it. You might as well get off as soon as it's light. The only thing is, I don't like the idea of you going alone. I'd go with you, but with this black-hearted doctor on the prowl, I daren't leave the place. That woman is capable of any devilment."

"Don't worry about me. I'll get through all right," asserted Frecks.

"Good enough, if you say so," answered Worrals. "And now, I think, it's about time we had something to eat." She called one of the girls and asked her if she could find some food—they weren't particular what it was.

The girl said she thought she could, and went off, while Worrals and Frecks sat down at the table, still discussing the astonishing situation they had discovered.

Presently two girls came in bringing canned salmon, bully beef, biscuits and the remains of a coco-nut pudding. Frecks attacked the food with enthusiasm, for the events had not interfered in the least with her appetite; but Worrals, who was not entirely happy, ate little. She explained to Frecks exactly where the machine was hidden, pointing out that it would be necessary to swim out to it. "I don't know what I shall do here," she said.

“In fact, there’s little I can do except keep order until you come back. My biggest worry is the Geranium. She’s a nasty piece of work, and not the sort to sit and do nothing. She knows she’ll be in for trouble when she gets home and that may make her desperate.”

“You ought to be able to find her when it gets light,” said Frecks. “After all, the island isn’t all that big.”

“True enough,” agreed Worrals. She opened her mouth to say something else, but turned quickly as from somewhere outside there came a long moan.

“That sounds to me like wind,” said Frecks.

A gust of air swirling down the room from the door confirmed her belief.

Worrals sprang up, as did Frecks, and together they ran to the door. One look was enough. The palms were tossing their heads wildly. Above, low clouds were scudding across the moonlit sky. The moon had a pallid ring round it.

“Just hark at that surf,” muttered Frecks.

Worrals could hear it thundering on the outer reef, but she did not comment on it. She was thinking fast. In the rush of events inside the palace she had forgotten all about the weather—not that there had been any reason to suspect a change. Now she realized that it was a factor that dominated everything.

“Look, Frecks!” she said quickly. “Without the machine we’re sunk, but I needn’t tell you that.”

“You don’t think she’s safe where she is?”

“She’s as safe there as anywhere, but that isn’t saying much. I think she’ll ride out this storm if it gets no worse; but if it does, she may drag her anchor and smash herself against the coral. The sea is rising. Just hark at it! If it comes over the reef the machine won’t stand up to it. It would be impossible to swim out to it, and suicide to try to take off, anyway.”

“What are we going to do—you tell me?” asked Frecks anxiously.

“We can do one of two things,” answered Worrals. “We can either let things rip and hope for the best, or one of us could go to the machine and take her off while it’s still possible. There’s one crumb of comfort. The wind is blowing in the right direction. Otherwise the machine would be out of petrol before it could make a landfall. If anyone goes, I’m afraid it will have to be you. I daren’t leave things here in the state they are.”

“I’ll go,” offered Frecks.

Worrals wavered. “I don’t like it. Perhaps we’d better chance it and stay on the ground.”

“The machine was built for heavy weather. I’ve flown in worse,” remarked Frecks.

“But not with the whole Pacific under you. If anything went wrong with your navigation you wouldn’t have a hope.”

“Well, let’s make up our minds one way or the other,” said Frecks practically. “I’ll tell you what,” she went on. “I’ll take the machine off and hang around for a bit. If it only turns out to be a squall, I’ll come in again. If it persists I’ll head for Tahiti.”

“I’d say ‘no’ definitely, were it not for one thing,” declared Worrals. “There’s just a chance that this storm is only local, and we happen to be in the path of it. Fifty miles away, even less, you might run out of it.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” returned Frecks. “I’d rather go than wake up in the morning to find the machine smashed to pulp.”

“All right,” agreed Worrals, without enthusiasm. “I loathe the idea of letting you go alone—but you see how I’m fixed? Having given these girls a ray of hope, we can’t let them down. If we turned our backs on them there would be murder done.”

Frecks nodded, “Okay, then. If it’s all the same to you I’ll push off right away, or it will be too late. From the sound of that surf every minute counts. Cheerio!” She went off down the beach at a run.

Worrals watched her until she was out of sight and then walked slowly back to the palace.

There was nobody in the main hall. All was quiet. She put the lights out except one and sat down at the table, her chin in her hand. But her anxiety soon took her back to the door. She went outside, and finding a sheltered place stood listening. All she could hear was the lashing palms and the dreadful thunder of great waves breaking on the beach. Lightning flashed in the distance.

How long she sat there she did not know. It seemed a long time. Eventually she got up and went back into the palace. She closed the door behind her and locked it. Sinking wearily into a chair, she rested her head in her hands.

Soon afterwards a sound made her start. It was Mabel, carrying a shotgun. “We’ve made a search, but the Geranium doesn’t seem to be inside anywhere,” she reported.

“And is that the only weapon you could find?”

“The only one.”

“Is it loaded?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how to work it.”

Worrals took the gun, opened the breach and ejected two cartridges. “All right, Mabel, you can leave this with me,” she said, putting the cartridges in her pocket. “You’d better go and get some sleep. It must be getting late.”

“You look as if you could do with some sleep yourself, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Worrals smiled wearily. “I am rather tired,” she admitted.

“Where are you going to sleep?”

“Oh, I’ll find somewhere to curl up.”

“There’s a spare mattress in our room,” suggested Mabel.

“You can bring it to me here,” requested Worrals. “I want to keep an eye on things.”

Mabel went off, to return presently with a thin ship’s mattress and a blanket.

“Thanks. You’re a good girl,” acknowledged Worrals. “Now get to bed.”

“Right-ho. Good night, dearie.”

Worrals smiled faintly. “Good night.”

CHAPTER  
ELEVEN

*Doubts and  
Dangers*

ALTHOUGH she was more tired than she was prepared to admit, Worrals had a bad night. For a long time she could not sleep, but lay listening to the storm, worried to distraction by the thought of Frecks being out in it and regretting now that she had let her go. It was not until it seemed to be abating somewhat that she slept, but even then it was only a doze, fitful and uneasy, haunted by dreams of raging seas, of wrecks and other disasters.

From such a dream she awoke to see, with relief, the windows grey with dawn. On this occasion she must have been asleep for some time, for now, although she listened, there came no sound from outside. Too worried about Frecks to court further rest she got up, walked to the door, and looked out upon a scene as entrancing as only sunrise in the Tropic of Capricorn can be. The storm had passed, leaving only a trail of fallen trees and scattered fronds to show that it had ever been. The big lagoon lay tranquil, gleaming with all the mystic hues of mother-of-pearl. But with scenic beauty Worrals was not for the moment concerned. She was concerned with only one thing, and that was Frecks. Until she knew for certain that she had got the machine into the air her mind could know no peace. Not that her anxiety would even then be banished altogether. But it would at least be allayed to some extent, and she resolved to satisfy herself on this forthwith, knowing that if the machine had failed to get away she would find it piled up somewhere on the reef, on the beach, or on the island itself.

Returning to her bed she folded the blanket, made a quick toilet, and put the cartridges in the gun. She had not forgotten the doctor, and wondered vaguely where she had passed the night. Should they meet, and the doctor decide to fight—well, she could have it that way. Naturally, she hoped it would not come to that. For a moment she considered waking the girls, and telling Mabel at least of her intentions; but in view of the early hour, and the fact that there was little they could do should she rouse them, she decided against it.

Returning to the door she opened it a little way and made a cautious survey of as much of the island as was within her view. She did not expect to see the doctor. Nor did she. So, gun under arm, she walked quietly to the nearest palms, the only cover that the island provided. Keeping just within the fringe, picking a way through the many fallen nuts, she struck off in the direction Frecks had taken overnight, all the time watching the beach, and the distant surf on which the thwarted seas still foamed, for any signs of the calamity which she feared.

She walked some way without seeing anything of interest, although this did little to raise her hopes, for she knew that it was at the far end of the island, by the smaller lagoon, that what she was afraid of was most likely to be found. She had never yet seen the seaward beach, on which the great waves thundered, although it was no great distance away; but that could wait until later. There was not much chance of the aircraft being there. It was in the take-off that the greatest danger lay. Once clear of the lagoon and the obstructions that surrounded it, Frecks would be all right, she thought. One aspect that depressed her was this; if there had been an accident it must almost certainly have been fatal; or at least Frecks must have been badly hurt; otherwise she would have returned to the palace. From time to time Worrals told herself that her fears were groundless; that Frecks should, with her experience, have got the machine into the air. But the risks attached to such a take-off in the dark were very real, and with so much depending on it, Worrals knew that she would never rest until she knew the best, or the worst. She did not forget the doctor. Moving quietly, exploring the ground ahead with her eyes, she walked on while the sun rose out of the sea and another day began.

The smaller lagoon came into sight, with the derelict Vanity still fast on the reef in the foreground, and the picturesque palms of the islets rising beyond.

In her anxiety she quickened her pace, her eyes busy. The islets came into full view and she saw at once that the machine had gone—at least, she thought so, although she could not be certain, because there was still a small area behind some trees that remained out of sight. In order to survey this, to make absolutely sure that the machine was not there, she went to the reef and walked a little away along it. This was the reef that ran out beyond the islets, the one that Frecks would have used to take her as near as possible to the Seafarer. Now she could see. The aircraft was not there. That meant that Frecks must at any rate have got to it safely. So far so good.

Turning to retrace her steps to the beach something jingled underfoot. Her eyes went down. She caught her breath. It was a brass cartridge case, a



rifle cartridge, so new-looking that it could not have been there long. So conspicuous was it that she felt sure it had not been there the previous day, when she, Mabel and Mati, had walked over the spot when returning to the beach after moving the aircraft to the islets. She picked it up and raised the open end to her nostrils. The smell of burnt cordite was still fresh and strong. A cold hand seemed to settle on her heart when she realized what this implied. There had been shooting there within the last few hours. Frecks had no rifle. The doctor, then, must have done the shooting. At what? There could only be one answer—no, two, thought Worrals, clutching desperately at straws. The doctor had fired either at Frecks, or at the machine. There was nothing else. Had she fired at the machine, presumably as it took off—since had she shot at it when it was at anchor she would surely have chosen a better firing point—there was little chance of her doing any damage. Yet had she fired at Frecks and killed her, the machine would still be there. Or would it? wondered Worrals feverishly. Having killed Frecks the doctor might have gone to the machine and knocked a hole in it, in which case it would now be at the bottom of the lagoon.

With a resurgence of her doubts and fears, she became suddenly aware that she herself was offering an easy target should the doctor still be in the vicinity. Hastening to a mass of dead coral, she crouched behind it and subjected the reef and the islets to a closer scrutiny. But there was no sign of either Frecks or the doctor. Slowly her eyes scanned the length of the distant reef, on and along it to the point where it swung round to the extreme tip of the island. And still they travelled on, now coming back along the beach. Suddenly they stopped, focused on a white object that lay on the dry sand just where the beach met the coco-nut grove. From the distance it was impossible to say definitely what it was; but from its shape and size it looked unpleasantly like a human body, a body clad in light clothes. She could not recall seeing the object before, although the machine had first landed near that very spot.

There was, she told herself, only one way to settle the matter. It was no use staring at it from where she stood. She would have to go closer.

With anxiety lining her face she sped back along the reef to the beach, and without pausing hurried on along the sand. The fact that she was running a big risk of being shot herself did not deter her, such was her determination to learn the worst at once, if worst it was to be.

From a distance of two hundred yards the truth became apparent. The object was a body. From a hundred yards it was revealed to be that of a white woman, sprawl on the white sand. Still Worrals did not stop. It was only when she was a score of yards away that she steadied her pace. She

went on, slowly now, her face pale and her eyes rounded with horror, as if she were being drawn by some magnetic force towards the object on which her gaze was fixed. Slower and slower became her steps until at last she no longer moved. Then she might have been a statue, so still did she stand, her eyes on what lay at her feet.

It was the doctor. With her rifle beside her, she lay with one leg drawn up, an arm outflung, her red hair half buried in the sand. She was dead. And the reason was not hard to find, for the instrument that had struck her down was there, projecting from between her shoulders. It was an arrow.

Now Worrals had been prepared for many things. For almost anything. But not for this. To say that she was shaken would be to say nothing. Accustomed as she was, from the life she had chosen, to rapid thought, on this occasion for a moment her brain refused to function. In the shock of this gruesome discovery her limbs failed in their purpose.

In simple words she stood and stared, as any normal person would have done. How long she stared she did not know. Time, as a factor in her life, had ceased to be. But it could not have been for very long. Then, suddenly, she was herself.

Her first coherent thought, which seemed to sweep over her like a wave, was thankfulness that it was not Frecks. Such was her relief that her knees became weak and she found her fingers trembling. Her second thought, hard on the first, was that she herself must be in peril, from something which, until this instant, she had been in ignorance. The realization of this sent her ducking behind the nearest tree; and there she crouched, her breath coming fast, her eyes alert and every nerve on edge, a prey to such fear as she had rarely known. She kept quite still. Only her eyes moved, jerkily, from palm to bush, and bush to palm, seeking she knew not what. Nothing moved. The discordant cry of a passing gull seemed curiously loud.

For a time she saw nothing—that is, nothing to explain the mystery. Then her eyes came to rest on an object which, while motionless, seemed out of place. There was nothing else like it, and she was sure it had not been there a moment before. It appeared to be a round, dark object, crossed by broad, horizontal bars of white. Even as she stared at it, it sank into the ground. That told her it was alive; and it did not take her long to work out what it was. It was a human face, the face of a native, daubed with paint.

For a second or two she was nearer to panic than she had ever been. It was not so much fear as an obsession to remove herself as quickly as possible from a spot that had suddenly become a place of horror. Slipping the safety-catch of her gun, very slowly and deliberately, she raised it to her

shoulder, her eyes still on the spot where the head had vanished. It did not reappear, and she imagined the owner of it now stalking her. It was unlikely that he would be alone.

She watched until she could stand no more of it. Fighting was one thing, but this inaction, this doing nothing while expecting death to strike at any moment, was another. Bracing her muscles like a runner at the start of a sprint she sprang to her feet and ran, ran as she had never run before. At first it was along the beach, but even then realizing that she was fully exposed to anyone behind her, she swerved into the trees. As she did so, from behind came a yell and a loud musical *twang*. A crisp thud, and an arrow appeared like magic, quivering in the bole of a palm just in front of her.

She tore on, aware that only by keeping trees between her and the archer could she hope to get away. As she ran she swerved slightly, choosing always a course in which the palms grew thickest, hoping in this way to spoil the aim of the man behind her and so reduce the chances of her being hit.

She heard no more sounds other than those caused by her own flying feet. She saw nothing—not that she looked behind. She ran, and still ran on, until her breath had gone and her legs were weak under her. Suddenly she remembered that she still carried a gun, and that a shotgun, with its spreading charge of shot, is a deadly weapon at close range. And suddenly, too, she was ashamed that she had fled from a murderer whom she had almost caught red-handed. Anger, with herself and with the murderer, followed. She had no reason to regard the doctor with anything but disgust; but this was not the point. The woman had been murdered and it was her duty to do something about it.

Under the impulse of this new emotion she pulled up short, turned swiftly and stood with the gun half raised, eyes seeking a target. None appeared. Nothing happened. Silence, an uneasy silence, fell.

She stood thus for a full five minutes, every nerve tingling, her only movement the uncontrollable rise and fall of her chest as she recovered her breath. Satisfied at last that the immediate danger had gone she ran on again, and did not stop until she reached the palace.

She found most of the girls in the hall, apparently waiting for her to appear.

“Ah! there you are, dearie,” said Mabel cheerfully. “Your breakfast’s getting cold. I was just getting worried about you.”

“I was getting worried about myself,” returned Worrals shortly. “Don’t go out, anyone. There are men on this island—savages.”

This statement was received with a curious silence.

“But it can’t be,” argued Mabel. “There aren’t any savages in this part of the world. The islanders are all friendly. Everyone says so.” She turned to a pretty brown girl who stood near her. “That’s right, Tepi, isn’t it?”

Tepi smiled. “You speakum no lie,” she confirmed. “Everyone on islands, white man, brown man, all same brothers. No more fight. Him finish altogether.”

“That’s what I understood, but you wouldn’t think so if you’d seen what I’ve seen,” replied Worrals grimly. “There is at least one man on this island. I’ve seen him. His face was painted, and when I saw him he had just killed the doctor with an arrow. Your Geranium, Mabel, will trouble you no more. She’s lying dead on the beach with an arrow sticking out of her back.”

The silence that greeted this statement was more prolonged. Some of the girls turned pale. Mati’s face clouded with an incredulity that was comical to see. She turned to some of the girls of her own race and for a minute or two they chattered excitedly among themselves. Then Mati came back to Worrals.

Speaking in French, she said: “This man you saw. Was his face painted this way?” She drew imaginary lines on her face.

“That’s right,” agreed Worrals.

Tepi broke in. “I catchum plenty. These men come one time pickum coco-nut. Geranium, she shootem. One man, he fall in sea, him finish altogether. Men go. Now men come back and Geranium she finish quick time.”

Understanding dawned in Worrals’s eyes. “Tepi,” she said slowly, “I think you may have got something there.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Hard  
Going*

IT was a good thing for Worrals's peace of mind that she had no indication of what happened to Frecks within a short time of their parting.

Frecks ran down the sandy beach intent only on getting to the machine with all possible speed. She had no interest in anything else, except, of course, the storm and its immediate threat to the aircraft. She did not entirely forget the doctor, but she now considered her of secondary importance.

As a matter of fact Frecks might well have lost her life from a cause which, through ignorance, she did not take into account at all. It was brought to her notice when a large object hurtled past her head to collide with the ground with a heavy thud. Naturally, she stopped to see what it was. Another similar missile bounded past her. It was, she observed, a coco-nut, and then she understood. The lashing palms were casting off their ripe nuts. Her peril now apparent, she departed hurriedly from the danger zone and carried on along the water's edge. Even so, she was narrowly missed by the crown of a tall palm as it came crashing down in front of her.

Climbing over the smooth trunk, she ran on without further incident until she was level with the end of the coral reef along which she would have to go in order to get as near as possible to the islets, and so reduce to a minimum the distance she would have to swim. She noticed the yacht, but paying little attention to it, started off on what soon revealed itself to be no simple undertaking. In the first place, with banks of cloud blotting out the moon with increasing frequency, it was only on occasion that she could see where she was putting her feet; and on such a rugged causeway a fall might have had serious results. Then again, she was now exposed to the full force of the wind, which buffeted her and threatened to blow her down either on the coral or into the sea. However, telling herself that these factors were no more than irritations only to be expected, she pushed on.

What made her look back she did not know. It may have been some premonition of danger. It may have been that she took advantage of a blink of moonlight to see how far she had come. At all events, she looked back,

and stopped at once, not a little puzzled by what she saw. A hundred yards or so away, and apparently following her, was a white-clad figure—a by no means welcome apparition in the circumstances. She had too much common sense, of course, to attach any sort of supernatural significance to it. She thought it must be Worrals, who had changed her mind; or perhaps it was one of the girls sent to recall her for some reason. So she stood still, waiting. She even considered turning back. Naturally, she kept her eyes on the oncoming person, but even so it was a full minute before she observed her error. The figure, she noticed suddenly, was carrying something. She made it out to be a rifle. Would Worrals . . . ? Suddenly she realized who it was. A long skirt really told her the horrid truth. It was the doctor.

Frecks did not wait to argue. Where the woman had suddenly appeared from she could only surmise. She must, she thought, have taken refuge on the yacht, and, seeing her go past, followed, either to ascertain her errand or work some mischief on her. Of one thing she was quite certain. The doctor intended no good.

Turning, Frecks sped on at a speed which two minutes earlier she would have regarded as nothing short of madness. Faintly, as from a great distance, she heard the rifle crack. The bullet struck a projecting piece of coral just ahead, and ricocheted with a shrill hum. This left her in no doubt as to the woman's intentions, and what would be her fate were she overtaken. She made no attempt to retaliate with her pistol. There was no time for that. Besides, with only a short-range weapon, she would be at a disadvantage.

If there was any more shooting she heard nothing of it, and at length, panting from exhaustion, she reached the point for which she had been making—the place where the reef passed closest to the islets. A quick glance behind showed her that she had increased her lead somewhat, probably because, in the wind, the doctor's movements had been impeded by her full skirt. Thankful for this mercy she went to the edge of the coral, took a header from a convenient promontory, and struck out for her objective.

The water was warm, and still calm at this point where it lay in the lee of the outer reef. Only the surface was ruffled by the wind, although Frecks's entry set up a spectacular display of phosphorescent ripples, a phenomenon not uncommon in stormy conditions in tropic waters. Frecks saw no beauty in it because it meant that the turbulence caused by her passage through the water would reveal her position to her pursuer. However, she was thankful to find that the outer seas were not yet breaking into the lagoon, and, as she told herself philosophically as she swam on using her fastest stroke, she couldn't expect to have it all ways. In the greater fear of the woman on the

reef she was relieved to some extent of her fear of sharks, or other unpleasant creatures that might be in the water.

The splash of a bullet near her sent her diving. When she was forced to come up for breath there were more shots, and this disconcerting state of affairs persisted until she neared the islets. She knew that in such an uncertain light it would only be by a fluke that the doctor could hit her; but still, the risk was there. The shooting did at any rate tell her that the woman had not followed her into the water. Maybe she was not prepared to abandon her rifle, as she would have to if she took to the water. Possibly, knowing nothing of the aircraft, the doctor thought she had her trapped, supposing that sooner or later she would have to return to the island.

These were the thoughts that filled Frecks's head as she drew near the first of the islets, and presently, with a gasp of relief, pulled herself up on it. From a safe position she looked back. The doctor was still on the reef, a tall, ghost-like figure, with the wind plucking at her skirt. Feeling that she had nothing more to fear from her, Frecks made her way along the coral to get as near as possible to the Seafarer, which she could now see clearly. It was straining at its moorings, but as far as could be judged had so far taken no harm. Returning to the water, she swam the few yards between it and the shore and climbed on board.

The first thing she did was to get out of her wet clothes, have a rub down, and get into dry ones; for while she was not in the least cold, she had no intention of starting on a long flight in a state of discomfort. This done, she had a quick look to see what the doctor was doing; but the place where she had last seen her was now out of sight, so returning to the cockpit she made ready to start up.

This brief operation complete, she hauled in the anchor, having a little difficulty with it as one of the flukes had stuck in the coral bottom. However, she got it clear, whereupon, of course, the machine became at once the plaything of the winds, and began to drift in a manner for which she was not prepared. It was in something like a panic that she flung herself in her seat to regain control.

She was only just in time. As it was, a wing tip caught in the fronds of a fallen palm with the result that the hull began to swing dangerously towards a mass of coral. A burst of throttle took it clear, but it was a close thing. Another burst, and the machine was on the open lagoon. The effect was even more alarming, for having lost the protection of the islets the Seafarer yawed badly as the wind caught it broadside on, and there was a nasty moment or two before it could be brought nose into wind. With the machine now behaving as if it were a live creature, Frecks saw with something like

consternation that in another minute the moon would be blacked out by a bank of cloud, so it was almost in sheer desperation that her fingers tightened on the throttle.

For the next minute her nerves were stretched as taut as they had ever been in an aeroplane. As the machine 'unstuck', a gust of exceptional violence seemed to get under its nose, and, although Frecks thrust the control column forward almost savagely, tossed it up like a scrap of paper. Three times the Seafarer seemed to soar over great invisible waves of air, falling into the trough behind each one with a sickening feeling of helplessness. There was another tremendous bump as the aircraft passed over the reef, where the upflung wind caught its under-surfaces. After that it was not so bad, for which Frecks was truly thankful, for she knew that neither she nor the machine could for long have stood up to such a buffeting. Having grabbed some altitude, she swung round and raced away on the face of the wind.

Happening to glance below, she had the merest glimpse of a long dark object making the passage through the reef into the lagoon that she had just left. She didn't know what it was. She didn't particularly want to know, being only too glad that it hadn't come in five minutes earlier, when she might easily have collided with it when taking off.

Still climbing, she headed out over the open sea into a sky from which the moon had been blotted out by cloud, a sky as menacing as she had ever seen. A flash of lightning temporarily blinded her. There were more flashes, and she knew she was in the middle of an electrical storm. After a while the moon reappeared from behind the billowing vapour to shed an eerie blue light on a world of cloud and water. There was nothing else. Below, the ocean stretched away on all sides to, as it seemed, eternity, creating such a sensation of utter loneliness that Frecks turned to her instruments for relief. She seemed to be stationary over an immeasurable black bowl.

She knew that, with the wind under her tail, she must be travelling towards the distant rim of the world at not less than two hundred and fifty miles an hour; but it did not seem to be getting any nearer. It was always there, in the same place, a hard black line that marked the end of the universe. She throttled back to a steady cruising speed.

There were no longer any bumps. The last ragged remnants of cloud scudded past, leaving the sky serene and clear, a background for a thousand stars. She knew that she was running out of a tempest, which was, as had been hoped, of local character. She did not feel inclined to go back into it on the off-chance of its having passed over the island. Moreover, she did not like the idea of the doctor waiting for her with a rifle. It would, she thought,



be better to go on. Meanwhile, with the engine running sweetly and the machine on its course, she could fly ‘hands off’ while she tried her luck with the radio. She soon discovered that the instrument, at any rate for the moment, was useless. She was, she supposed, still within the influence of the electrical storm, which had charged the atmosphere around it, making both transmission and reception hopeless. She would try again presently, she told herself, when she had run clear of the disturbed area.

Looking ahead and below for Raratua, the island they had passed on the way out, which would serve as a check that she was on her course, she settled down and resigned herself to the boredom which usually accompanies a long flight over unchanging scenery, when there is really nothing for the pilot to do.

CHAPTER  
THIRTEEN

*Frecks Tells  
Her Tale*

ON the island, the situation created by the arrival of natives who had so quickly demonstrated their readiness to commit murder was a peculiar one. At least, Worrals found it so. She also found it an unpleasant one. The explanation offered by Tepi and her friends, that the murder of the doctor was an act of vengeance, was, she thought, a reasonable one, and as she could think of no other, she accepted it.

That in the past there had been trouble in the islands between the brown men and the white, she knew; and the records in most cases laid the blame on the whites, who, in the days of the notorious Bully Hayes, had shamefully abused the hospitality of the trusting islanders. But that was a thing of the past. For many years now the islands had been at peace, brown man and white working together in complete accord. It was because she knew this that the shock of finding the doctor's body had been so severe. Whether or not the natives were justified in doing what they had done, to avenge a murdered comrade, was not for her to judge. It was a matter for the French authorities.

But this was really beside the point. What mattered most at the moment was, how far the natives intended to carry the feud, which, in this case, without any doubt whatever, the crazy white women had started. The natives would have no means of knowing that the situation on the island had entirely changed since their last attempted visit. They would suppose, quite naturally, that every white woman on the island was an enemy. In that case, clearly it would not be safe for any white person to leave the protecting walls of the palace. In fact, Worrals was by no means sure that they would be safe even there.

How many men had landed on the island was a matter for conjecture. She had seen only one, but it was not to be supposed that he had made the long canoe journey alone. There would be others. Where were they? Had they remained at the far end of the atoll, or were they even now concealed in the palms outside, waiting, with their deadly arrows ready, for someone to

appear? She could only put girls on duty at the windows to keep watch. What weighed on her as much as anything was the knowledge that if Frecks returned, and landed—as she no doubt would—on the smaller lagoon, she would find herself in a death trap.

She discussed the affair with the Polynesian girls who, having been abducted and then ill-treated, had no tears to shed for the sinister doctor. Nor were they in the least alarmed—but then, as Worrals perceived, they had no reason to be. In the event of an attack their brown skins would be sufficient protection.

It was Tepi who suggested in her quaint pidgin English that if her countrymen knew what had happened on the island, all would be well. Worrals agreed, but pointed out that the conveyance of this information was likely to be a hazardous operation. Tepi promptly disputed this and stated her readiness to undertake the task. At first Worrals did not like the idea at all, as she felt responsible for the girl's safety; but when Tepi's friends joined in, laughing her fears to scorn and offering to go with her, after a little hesitation Worrals assented. The girls were probably right, she thought. The natives were not likely to harm women of their own race. If they could make contact and explain matters the whole problem might be solved forthwith. The girls were obviously keen to go. Indeed, Worrals had a suspicion that with or without her consent they would have gone anyway, in a perfectly natural desire to see men of their own kind.

So the door was opened and they departed; and far from exercising any caution, they went racing along the beach, whooping and shouting in their own language. Worrals, with a rifle across her knees, could only await their return with as much patience as she could muster.

It was three hours before they came back, by which time Worrals felt sure that their plan had miscarried. She regretted letting them go, although she took into account the possibility that the girls, having found their menfolk, had elected to remain with them. It was, therefore, with relief that she saw them coming back, deep in earnest conversation.

She was not prepared for the story they had to tell, which turned out to be the one contingency that had not occurred to her. With a disappointment which they made no attempt to disguise they reported that there were no men on the island, native or otherwise. They had been all over it calling. Moreover, there were no canoes. This was not all. They asserted that the doctor was not on the island either, dead or alive. Worrals had, of course, told them exactly where the body was lying. They had been to the place. The body was not there, and nothing to indicate that it ever had been. The sand was all smooth.

Under the impact of this astonishing news, Worrals sat down. Reasoning the thing out, she came to what she thought was the only possible conclusion. The doctor had been killed. There was no question about that. She was equally sure that she had been killed by a native. The arrow was sufficient proof. In her mind's eye she could still see the one that had been aimed at her, quivering in the tree. No. What had happened was this. She had seen the body before the murderer, or murderers, had been able to dispose of it. They knew that she had seen it, and as soon as she had gone, knowing what the consequences would be if they were caught, they had obliterated all traces of the crime, either by burying the body in the sand or by throwing it into the sea. Then, rather than run the risk of being identified, they had hidden themselves and their canoe, or withdrawn from the island altogether. This, however, was only surmise. It would have to be confirmed. There could be no peace for anyone while there was a chance of the men still being on the island. If they were, the first indication of it would in all probability be another arrow. There was only one way to settle the matter. She would go herself and find out.

When she made known her decision to Tepi, she was assured that she was wasting her time. And the fact that the native girls made no remonstrance was proof that they, at least, were sure that the men had gone. They said they would go with her. Mabel said she would go too. The upshot was, at the finish, everyone who was not engaged in some duty left the palace and started walking along the beach. And as they walked along, Worrals was struck suddenly by the absurdity of the expedition, which was like nothing she had ever before undertaken. The party was more in the nature of a school treat setting out on a ramble, than a serious reconnaissance for a party of murderers with blood still wet on their hands.

In the event, they found nothing. Worrals went straight to the place where the body of the doctor had lain. It was not there. There was no mark of it. Nor did digging in the soft sand with their hands bring it to light. The arrow that had struck the tree was no longer there, either; but the hole that it had made was, and Worrals pointed it out to confirm her story.

While they were still on the spot discussing the mystery there came a sound which Worrals did not expect to hear for some days—if then. It was the drone of an aircraft engine. Worrals ran into the open, face upturned, and a moment later the aircraft swept into view round the end of the palm grove. It was the Seafarer. It made a circuit, zooming low over the palace, and then, losing height, came round again to make a good landing. Then, contrary to Worrals's expectation, instead of taxi-ing either to the islets or to its original mooring, it remained where it had run to a stop, the engine idling. Frecks's

head appeared—only her head and shoulders. She seemed to be looking for something, and with a good deal of caution.

Worrals, followed by the crowd, ran to the nearest point of the beach, shouting and waving. Frecks waved back and dropped into her seat. The engine roared. The machine moved on and came to rest with its keel touching the sand. Frecks stood up and shouted: “Watch out! The doctor’s around and she’s got the rifle!”



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*The machine came to rest.*

Then Worrals understood her precautions. She waded out to the cockpit. “It’s all right,” she announced. “You needn’t worry any more about the doctor.”

“Why not?”

“She’s dead.”

Frecks opened her eyes wide. “Dead! How did it happen?”

“Some natives have been here and shot her with an arrow. I believe they’ve gone now, but I’m not certain.”

“They’ve gone,” declared Frecks. “I passed a canoe about five minutes ago heading for the Paumotus. There were seven or eight men in it as far as I could judge. I thought it must have been here. Matter of fact, I believe I saw it arrive last night just as I took off. I did not realize then what it was, though.”

Worrals drew a deep breath of relief. “So they’ve gone. Good! But what’s happened? Why have you come back? You haven’t been to Tahiti.”

Frecks grinned as she waded ashore. “Nowhere near it. I’ve been having a most interesting conversation with a big, sandy-whiskered Scot named Donald MacDougal.”

Worrals frowned. “You’ve *what!*”

“You heard me. There’s another white man, so don’t get jealous. He’s the supercargo—but not a patch on Donald.”

“Suppose you get yourself under control and tell me exactly what you’ve been doing?” requested Worrals stiffly. “Never mind the glamour. Just give me the facts.”

“Well, it was like this,” explained Frecks. “I got off all right, and if my hair isn’t grey it jolly well ought to be. What a night! To start with I had to swim out to the machine with the doctor taking pot-shots at me from the reef. A man-hater above and man-eaters below. That wasn’t funny, I can tell you. Neither was my take-off in the teeth of that howling gale, with the machine bucking like a broncho and——”

“Okay—okay——” broke in Worrals impatiently. “So you got off. Go ahead from there. I’m waiting to hear where this ginger-whiskered Highlander comes in.”

“All in good time,” returned Frecks unabashed. “As soon as I’d run out of the storm, I tried the radio, but all I did was nearly blow my eardrums out. I went on, intending to try it again presently. As I approached Raratua what do I see but a light shining in the darkness, like a beacon beckoning——”

“Never mind the poetry. Just stick to prose,” pleaded Worrals. “You saw a light?”

“Exactly. Naturally, I slipped off a bit of height to see what it was. It was a ship—and was I glad to see it! It took off the feeling that I was all alone in the world. At first I thought it was a star——”

“You’ve said it was a light. Just stick to the facts.”

“Then another light started winking at me, in Morse. Do you know what it said?”

“I’m not good at guessing this morning,” asserted Worrals. “What did it say?”

“It said, ‘Come right in, pilot, and give yourself a rest.’ ”

“Ah! So you went right in?”

“Not straight away. I had a dekko first. I could see a ship in the lagoon. I got the radio functioning and asked what ship it was. To make a long story short it was the trading schooner Viete, Donald MacDougal owner and skipper. So down I went. And I’m glad I did.”

“I’ve gathered that already,” put in Worrals sarcastically. “So instead of getting on with your job you spent the night carousing with a bunch of sailors?”

“On the contrary,” answered Frecks sweetly, “we spent a pleasant evening, although I admit it would have been nicer if the copra in the hold had been a trifle less whiffy. My word! You should have seen those men’s faces when I stepped on board. They weren’t expecting a lady pilot—that’s what they called me, which was rather nice of them, don’t you think?”

Worrals nodded slowly. “Very nice indeed. And instead of going to Tahiti you decided to stick around with Donald.”

“And the supercargo. He’s an Englishman they call Tim. Not a bad type, but——”

“Not a patch on Donald?”

“How did you know?”

“You’ve told us already,” moaned Worrals. “Get on with the story.”

“Then there’s Tom. He’s a half-caste sailing master. There’s a crew of four Polynesians.”

“All I’m concerned with,” said Worrals deliberately, “is the outcome of this romantic episode.”

“Well, Donald suggested that there was no point in my going on to Tahiti.”

“Ha! Of course he did. And you fell for it.”

“Any more of that sort of talk and I won’t say another word,” declared Frecks coldly. “You’re jealous because you weren’t in on it, so you try to spoil my story. Believe it or not, the Viete was actually on its way here, but hitting the storm, ran to Raratua for shelter. Apparently there have been funny rumours about Outside Island, and Donald was asked by the French

authorities, as he was passing the place, to look in and see what went on. He told me he thought if there were people on the island there might be some copra—that's his line of business—to pick up. I put him wise. You see, I really went down because it struck me that if for any reason I didn't get through to Papeete, it would be a good thing for you if someone knew how you were fixed. I couldn't say it all on the radio."

"Very good idea," agreed Worrals. "What happened next?"

"Donald is coming on here. He reckoned he'd get here about sunrise tomorrow morning. I thought I'd fly back and let you know, so that you could be ready. He started very early, but I've had enough of night-flying for a bit, so I had a rest until it got light. That's all. And now, after your cynical remarks, I hope you'll agree that I've put in a good night's work."

Worrals smiled. "Very good indeed. What's Donald going to do when he gets here?"

"He thinks he can take everyone. Anyway, he'll take the white girls straight to Papeete, which is his home port. He'll discuss that with you when he gets here."

"Fair enough," agreed Worrals. "In that case, we'll make the machine snug and then go back to the palace to get ready for the evacuation."



CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN

*Home  
Again*

**S**HORTLY after sunrise the *Vieta*, with sails spread, appeared off the reef. Her helm was put over. The schooner heeled to the wind and shot through the passage into the lagoon. Two smooth waves spread from her bows across the placid water to die on the beach, where Worrals, Frecks, and most of the girls stood waiting. The anchor splashed. A boat was lowered with the speed and efficiency of long practice and Donald MacDougal came ashore. Frecks introduced Worrals, and there and then, on the beach, the situation was discussed. There were many details to settle.

After hearing Frecks's story Worrals had supposed that all her troubles were over, and from the point of view of any immediate danger, they were. But there were minor worries. In the first place, the deposed queen, who alternated between tears and anger, refused absolutely to leave the island. The two nurses took the same line, and challenged Worrals's authority to move them by force. Worrals did not accept the challenge. She thought probably they were right. In any case, she shrank from employing physical force which, she realized, might end in tragedy. She tried to discuss the matter sanely with them, putting the matter as fairly as she could. But the queen was adamant, and apart from the nurses, her old servants elected to remain with her. It was a difficult, embarrassing state of affairs, and in the end Worrals decided to let them have their way. As she told Frecks, there were several of them, so one would be able to look after the other. They still had a fair stock of stores so were not likely to starve. If, after she had made her report, the authorities at Home decided that they should be taken off—well, they could fetch them. By that time the business would have passed out of her hands.

All this was explained to Donald, who concurred. The question then arose, what to do about the remainder. Donald said he couldn't accommodate everyone. He might manage a dozen but that was the absolute limit. In this matter it was decided that Worrals should fly the two girls who

were nearly blind from glare to Papeete. Donald would take the rest of the white girls to the same port, which in any case was his destination.

The native girls, he declared, could stay where they were for the time being. It would be no hardship to them for this was the life to which they were accustomed; and no harm could come to them. They would have nothing to fear from the queen and her attendants, who, knowing that the story would soon be in the hands of the authorities, would not be likely to make their position worse.

These details settled, Donald had a look at the island's coco-nut crop and decided that it would be worth collecting at a later date. As a matter of fact it was he who afterwards accepted a contract from the British Government to call at the island every six months to see how the white women were faring.

It may as well be reported here that the contract did not operate for very long, for the following year, during the hurricane season, the atoll was subjected to one of its periodical inundations and everything was swept off it. On this occasion the palace disappeared, too, and Donald reported that as there was no life left, it must be presumed that the peculiar white women who dwelt on it must have perished. However, this was not foreseen at the time, although later, when she heard of it, Worrals recalled that Donald had said there was a risk of it. It had happened before and would probably happen again, for which reason the atoll carried no permanent native population. The remark was made in passing, and Worrals had paid little attention to it at the time, her mind being occupied with the present.

Donald set his boys to work looking for the body of the ill-fated doctor, saying that they, being Polynesians, would probably know where to look. They did not find it. It never was found, so whether it was buried deep in the coral sand, or carried off by the men who had killed her, was never known, and probably never will be known. Nor were the men responsible for the murder found. There was some gossip, in the Paumotus, but nothing was ever proved, and the French authorities there had to let the matter drop. It was they who, shortly afterwards, sent a lugger out to pick up the native girls and return them to the islands from which they had been taken.

There is little more to say. Donald did not want to linger at the island longer than was necessary, and Worrals, who could do no more, was anxious to get off while the weather remained fine. In this, too, she was advised by Donald, who pointed out that they were approaching the season when bad weather might be expected.

And so it came about that the same evening Worrals and Frecks watched the white girls, carrying their few belongings, go aboard the *Viete*, which in

a few minutes had run through the passage in the reef and was standing out to sea. They saw the schooner once more after that—a speck on the face of the ocean the following day as they roared past high overhead. Worrals and Frecks, with the two sick girls they were taking with them, preferring to make the trip in daylight, waited until the following day before taking off. The last sight Frecks had of the atoll was of the unfortunate woman who wanted to be a queen, standing, a pathetic figure, on the beach watching them go. Although Frecks still carried on her cheek the marks where the queen had struck her, she could only feel sorry for her. Turning away she reflected that all her wealth seemed to have brought her nothing but unhappiness.

Three weeks later, having left the two sick girls in Tahiti, there to await transport to bring them home, they were back in London, making their report to Air Commodore Raymond. With what curiosity and amazement he listened to their stories can be left to the imagination. When they had finished, and he had congratulated them on the successful outcome of their investigations, he said that the matter could now be left in his hands. Not that there was much to be done except send a message of apology to the French Government for the events in which some of their nationals had been involved. The queen and her attendants, he opined, had probably been wise to remain on the island, for had they come home, the things they had done would probably mean for them a prison sentence or a lunatic asylum. No doubt the Admiralty would make arrangements for the atoll to be visited at more frequent intervals. Miss Haddington's relations would, of course, have to be informed. For one thing, the question of the inheritance of her wealth was involved. He had no doubt that the cheques that had been paid to the girls would be honoured when the circumstances were known.

“For the rest,” he concluded, “as far as I'm concerned these crazy women can go on playing at being a royal family until they get sick of it. They can no longer do any harm to anyone but themselves.” He got up. “Well, this queer business started over a cup of coffee; how about concluding it with one?”

“And cakes?” questioned Frecks.

“Of course.”

“That sounds a good idea to me,” declared Frecks. “I've eaten so many hard biscuits lately that my teeth are worn down to the gums.”

The Air Commodore laughed. “That's the price that must always be paid for venturing too far from the beaten track,” he pointed out.

“Ah well,” sighed Worrals. “It’s worth it. There’ll be plenty of time for doughnuts when we’re too old to get around.”

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Worrals Investigates* by Capt. W.E. (William Earl) Johns]