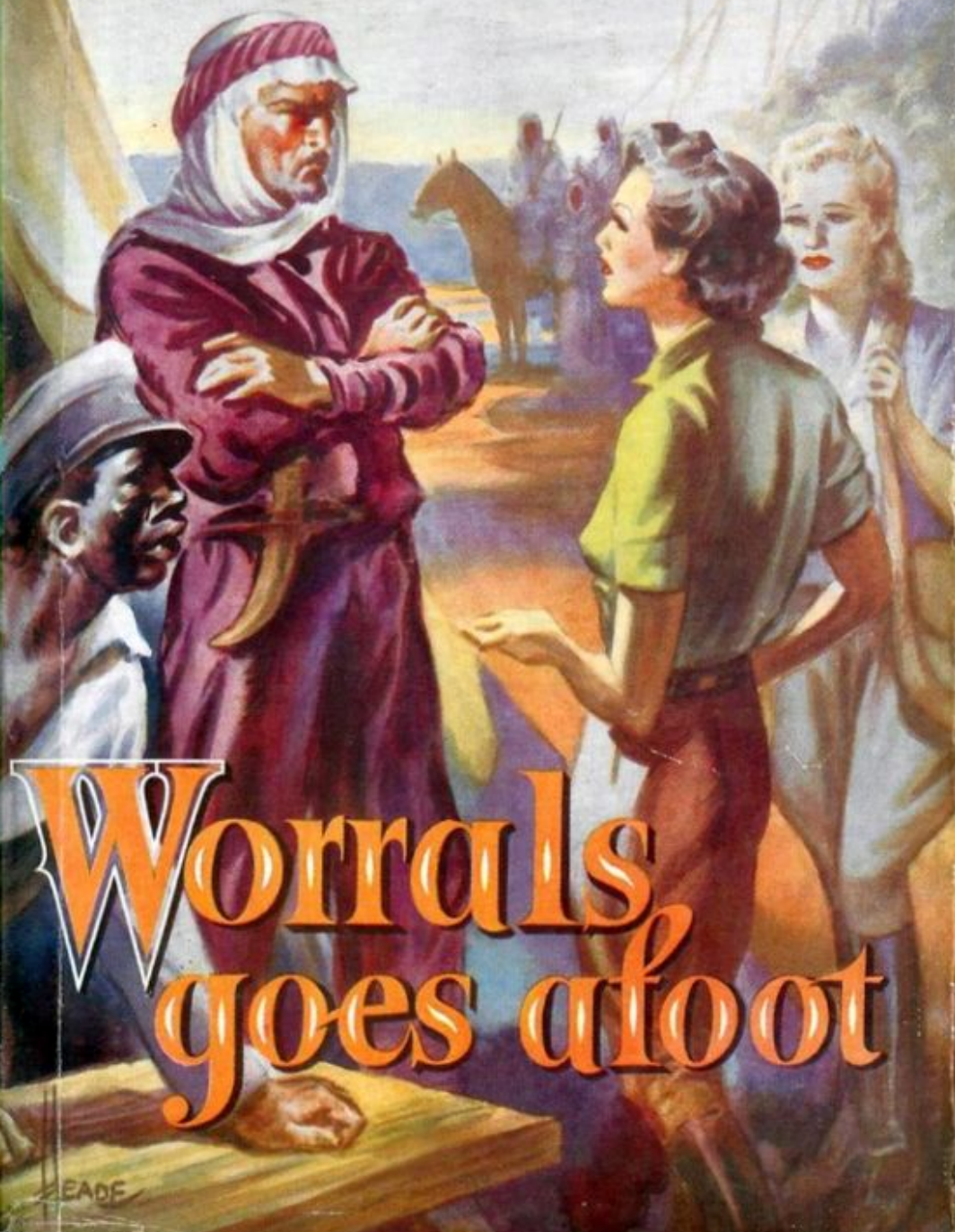


Capt. W. E. JOHNS



Worrals goes afoot

LEADE

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“Two clever girls—but not quite clever enough,” he sneered.

WORRALS GOES AFOOT

by
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



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CHAPTER ONE

An Argument and an Assignment

JOAN WORRALSON, better known at one time as “Worrals of the W.A.A.F.”, watched her friend and comrade, Frecks Lovell, take off her hat and coat and toss them carelessly into the nearest chair.

“I’ve been to the pictures,” announced Frecks, shortly.

Worrals put down the book she had been reading. “Not a very good show, I gather?”

“And just how did you gather that?” inquired Frecks airily.

“Because had it been a good picture you would have been telling me about it by now,” replied Worrals, her face relaxing in a smile.

“Ha! Practising the old Sherlock Holmes stuff, eh?” returned Frecks, mildly sarcastic. “Well, you’re right. It was a pretty poor effort. These artificial westerns make me tired.”

“Not enough action for you, I suppose?”

“Too much action and not enough realism,” retorted Frecks. “If the rustlers had had half the rustle that a dead leaf has, the beautiful cowboy hero would have been killed more times than I could count. Was he? No!”

“I can remember occasions when *we* would have been killed—but we weren’t,” Worrals reminded her.

“Exactly,” argued Frecks. “And why weren’t we killed? I’ll tell you one of the reasons: we put some realism into the proceedings.”

“Just what do you mean?”

“I’ll give you one example,” answered Frecks. “When anybody shoots at me I either go flat or I run. In this film, every time the rustlers fired at the celluloid hero, he either stood goofing at the horizon or he made his horse do a sort of circus act on its hind legs, thereby giving the rustlers ample time to improve on their shooting. On the other hand, when there was no need to hurry he galloped his wretched horse to death, presumably to show the audience how well he could ride. My sympathies were all with the animal, which had a lot more intelligence than its rider.”

“Too bad,” murmured Worrals. “By the way, would you mind putting your hat and coat in the proper place? We may need the chair: visitors are due to arrive at any moment.”

Frecks stopped moving. Then, very slowly, she turned her head until her eyes, narrow with suspicion, rested on Worrals. “What’s been going on while my back was turned?”

“Nothing.”

“Who’s coming—the Big White Chief?”

“Ah-huh.”

“Now what does he want?”

“I haven’t an idea,” answered Worrals. “All I can tell you is, his voice had that nice cheerful tone which experience has taught me means that he wants us to go somewhere and do something. He’s bringing a man with him.”

“What sort of a man?”

“How would I know?”

“Another of these frosty-faced old warriors, all whiskers and no teeth, I expect,” muttered Frecks. “I can’t think where he finds them.”

“I know,” sighed Worrals. “But there may be a reason for that.”

“Reason?”

“As Air Commodore Raymond is Assistant Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard he probably has enough sense to know that on the day he starts introducing Romeos into our operations our efficiency is likely to decline. Having to work with a good-looking colleague wouldn’t make the task any easier.”

“It would make it a jolly sight more interesting,” asserted Frecks.

“Well, you’ll soon know the worst,” murmured Worrals. “This sounds like them coming up now.”

There was a tap on the door, and in answer to Worrals’s invitation to enter the Air Commodore came in, followed by a tall, sunburned, good-looking man in his early thirties.

Worrals threw a sidelong glance at Frecks and burst out laughing.

“What’s the joke?” inquired the Air Commodore, looking puzzled.

“Oh, that’s between ourselves,” replied Worrals casually.

The Air Commodore introduced his companion. “This is Mr. Cedric Collington, of the Foreign Office. Cedric, this is Miss Worrals and Miss Lovell.”

After handshakes, the Air Commodore went on: "I've been telling Cedric about you two."

Worrals's eyebrows went up. "Indeed! I don't know that I altogether approve of that."

"It was all on the credit side, I assure you," put in Collington. "Matter of fact, I'd heard quite a lot about you before Raymond brought your name up this afternoon, in connection with that job you did in Syria during the war. Naturally, I was interested to see what sort of—er—girls—er—could handle a job like that and get away with it."

Worrals's eyes narrowed. "Well, have a good look," she invited coldly. "And when you've finished looking perhaps you'll tell me what looks have to do with it. And after that you might tell us by what conceit you suppose that Intelligence operations can normally only be brought to a successful conclusion by the invincible male?"

Collington turned startled eyes to the Air Commodore. "Have I said something?" he asked plaintively.

"I'm afraid you've stepped off with the wrong foot," sighed the Air Commodore. "Worrals is a bit touchy on alleged female inferiority——"

"Nothing of the sort," interrupted Worrals stiffly. "What I object to is this supposed masculine superiority, this inherent vanity in the male which makes him so sure that he can do things better than we can——"

"But——"

"Just a minute, let me finish," requested Worrals. "Yet when he gets everything into a hopeless tangle he isn't above asking us to help him out."

"But I never——" protested the Air Commodore.

Worrals cut him short. "You're as bad as the rest. If you can handle a case yourself you forget that we exist. When you bump into something that's a bit beyond you, you remember where we live."

The Air Commodore looked at Collington helplessly. "You see? Now I've put my foot in it." He turned back to Worrals. "Come, come. Now that it has been revealed by the newspapers that some of the best and most dangerous Secret Service work during the war was done by girls of the women's services, who parachuted into enemy territory, no man would be so foolish or churlish to claim that men are better than women at the game. The very fact that we have come here to-day should be ample proof of what the Higher Command thinks of your efficiency."

"My efficiency? I'm not talking about myself—don't get that idea, please," requested Worrals curtly. "I'm sticking up for the women's services

generally. Any jobs they've been asked to do they've done as well as the jobs men have taken upon themselves—and we don't go on strike at the slightest provocation. I sometimes think it would be a good thing if we did."

"All right," agreed Collington. "If I've said anything that calls for an apology, consider it offered."

Worrals regarded him thoughtfully. "I'm sorry if I went off at the deep end, Mr. Collington, but we do get a bit tired, you know, of every man who wants something done opening his case by explaining just why it has been necessary to call us in."

"Another minute and I should have been guilty of just that," said Collington sadly. "You must take into consideration, though, that the idea of asking women to take on really dangerous work is something new. We don't like doing that—I don't, anyway. It was at the Air Commodore's suggestion that I came here."

"If you will read your history books," said Worrals slowly, "you will find that in the matter of moral and physical courage women have never been behind men. In big game hunting, most hunters are agreed that the female of the species is just as dangerous as the male, sometimes more so."

Collington smiled. "All right. You win. I was once mauled by a lioness after her husband had bolted."

Worrals smiled too. "Quite right. But I'm afraid I've wasted a lot of your time. After what has been said I gather you have a sticky problem to solve?"

"Yes."

"You can't solve it yourself?"

"Well, not exactly——"

"Now don't give me that," said Worrals severely. "You know perfectly well that had you been able to sort the thing out yourself you would never have come to us. Am I right?"

"Frankly, yes."

"Good. Now we're beginning to understand each other," conceded Worrals.

"I'll go further," said Collington. "In my line of business there are some things women can do better than men."

"Then why not employ them more often?"

"I've told you the reason," answered Collington. "A man naturally hesitates to ask a woman to do something which may bring about her death by violence. In total war—well, such a course may be justified; but in peace time, no."

“Hm. I suppose I can’t blame you for being old-fashioned,” said Worrals sadly. “Is this job you’ve brought us as dangerous as all that?”

“Worse, if anything,” admitted Collington. “Once you start—if you do—you’ll be sitting on a bomb with the detonator ticking.”

Worrals smiled. “Now that is nice of you,” she said softly. “And you really think we can do something about it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“We’ve failed. I’ll admit that freely. I believe you may succeed for the very reason you mentioned just now. I’m talking about male vanity. Where other men are concerned, men are alert, suspicious, on their guard; but they may see no danger in a woman. Following that line of argument, you girls might win where our best men have failed.”

“I think there’s another angle to that, one you may have overlooked,” said Worrals. “It may happen that you’ve been blundering about in the forest for so long that you can’t see the wood for trees. Male minds on regular jobs tend to become orthodox and run in a groove, so to speak. Women are apt to introduce new ideas, a new technique that is not cluttered up with red tape. Moreover, men work by logic. Women don’t always do that. They have a thing called instinct, which often serves them well. See what I mean? But there, you didn’t come here to discuss the respective qualifications of the sexes. I’m still wasting your time.”

“You certainly are not,” denied Collington. “Your remarks have interested me tremendously. After all, it’s part of my job to know people. The fact is, you have crystallized the very thing that took me to Air Commodore Raymond. I wanted new ideas, and I’ve got them. If nothing else emerges from my visit I shall be glad that I came.”

“That’s very nice of you,” said Worrals. “Now we’ve crossed swords and got the measure of each other suppose you tell us what’s on your mind?”

“That won’t take long,” replied Collington. “The Air Commodore has told you that I’m in the Foreign Office. To be specific, I’m in the Egyptian Section—that’s how I came to hear about your show in Syria. If you read the newspapers you will have noticed that there is trouble in the Middle East. There always is, more or less; but at the moment it’s particularly serious, and we have a feeling that before long something is going to boil over. That must be prevented, and in this you may be able to help us. Here, briefly, is the general picture. The details we can leave until later. Mind if I smoke?”

“Not at all,” said Worrals.

“The crux of the situation is,” continued Collington, “we are building a new road to link the Sudan with Southern Transjordan. Part of it will cross the Sinai Peninsula. We have said nothing about this because had the project become known to certain people they would have started a scream that it was a military project, which it is not, although part of the work is being done as an exercise by the Royal Engineers. Of course, a thing like this couldn’t be kept under the hat for very long, and there was a bit of a stir when news of the undertaking leaked out. There was no official protest, but before long someone was stirring things up among the native workmen. Up to a point we were prepared for that. We didn’t mind because we had got off to a flying start and the road is well on its way to completion. Once it is finished it will be there and all the shouting in the world won’t destroy it. Now, the people who are opposed to the road realize that it is too late for official diplomatic protests, because while they are being discussed the work will be pushed on and the road finished. For this reason they have decided to employ more direct methods to achieve their object. They are getting at the native workmen and the sheikhs who supply them. They are upsetting them with stories that are entirely false, saying, for example, that we intend to deprive them of their most valuable commodity, which is water. The result of this has been a go-slow programme, backed up by a succession of strikes. These we have overcome, but the matter is now taking a more serious turn. The recalcitrant natives are being supplied with weapons and ammunition, and it only needs a spark to set the country alight. We don’t want a minor war on our hands. Apart from anything else it would prevent the completion of the road—which is, of course, the idea behind the trouble. In short, we’ve got to stop this gun running racket by the same underground methods which are being employed to organize it. It isn’t easy. In fact, until we know who the operatives are and how the guns are being smuggled into the country, there is little we can do. If we could get that information we should be able to jump on the thing and squash it.”

“You want to know how the guns are being smuggled into the country?”

“Exactly.”

“Tell me this,” requested Worrals. “Are the gun-runners the agents of another power, or private individuals simply out to make money?”

“Both, probably, although for diplomatic reasons it wouldn’t do to accuse another power, even if we had proof. What I mean is, the scheme was probably financed in the first place by foreign agents, who would then retire and leave private individuals, inspired by purely mercenary motives, to carry on. Of course, there is just a chance that a big business organization may be behind it. In any case, foreign powers and big business must not even be

mentioned in connection with the affair. Our job is to grab the actual operatives and seize the weapons. The people behind the racket would not dare to complain, because that would be admitting complicity.”

“Would these operatives be Europeans or natives of the country?”

“It is more likely that the actual operatives are cosmopolitan mercenaries—people without a country. There are plenty of that sort in the Middle East, men who specialize in just this type of work. They’ll do anything for money, and they’re always at the service of the highest bidder.”

Worrals looked at the speaker. “What exactly do you want us to do?”

“Find out what is happening. Find out who the local operatives are and how they are getting the guns into the country. Once we know that we can soon stop the rot.”

“Have you any ideas, any information at all that might help to put us on the right track?” queried Worrals.

“Not really; but there is just one line that might help you. We’re pretty sure that the scheme is being worked through an existing organization, a clever gang that knows every trick of the game: otherwise we should have nabbed them by now. There’s only one really big, well-established racket in Egypt, and that’s the dope syndicate—the hashish merchants. Hashish, in Egypt, isn’t so much a drug as a popular poison. It is what tobacco is to this country. We’ve tried for years to stop it, but one might as well try to stop the Nile. While the natives demand the stuff it will always get through. It costs practically nothing to produce, and it’s the very fact of our control that keeps the price up and makes the profits high. The only thing against that line of investigation is this. It seems queer that the dope ring should risk upsetting their business by messing about with weapons. They know we should take a more serious view of that than of dope running.”

Worrals thought for a moment. “The man you want to find is the fellow who is actually handing out the weapons to the Arabs—who, of course, are mere dupes. They will be the first to suffer if the thing ends in bloodshed. Do you by any chance happen to know who is at the head of the dope syndicate?”

“No. We think we know one or two of the top men, but suspicion isn’t proof. We’ve nothing on them; they know it, and they take good care we don’t get anything on them. On the other hand, it’s a waste of time picking up the small fry; they are easily replaced. The heads of the concern are millionaires, and if one of its employees so much as looked like squealing he’d be bumped off before he could utter a bleat.”

“I see.” Worrals looked at Collington again, thoughtfully. “Are you suggesting that we might succeed where you, living on the spot, have failed?”

“I think it might be a good idea if you had a close look at the thing, anyway,” answered Collington. “You see, we can only work through the regular channels, whereas your methods would be as you have said, unorthodox. You’d be free agents, and start with the big advantage that nobody in Egypt knows you. Practically all our regular men are known. In a country like Egypt, where intrigue is the very breath of life, that’s inevitable.”

“All right,” agreed Worrals. “Without definitely committing ourselves to anything, we’ll have a look at it.”

“When can you start?”

“As soon as you like.”

“I’m going back to Egypt to-morrow, by air. I could get you priority seats in the ’plane if that isn’t too soon for you?”

“Not at all. Talking of aircraft, could you get me a machine in Egypt if I needed one—a light ’plane, for choice?”

“There should be no difficulty about that.”

“O.K., we’ll see you to-morrow.”

“Good—but you’d better not know me. It wouldn’t do for you to come near me in Egypt—where, by the way, I work under the name of Colin Pasha. You’d better use that name if in emergency you have occasion to get in touch with me. Another thing, the service code name for the new road is ‘Operation Highway’.”

“I see. But we’re not actually in the road scheme,” reminded Worrals. “We ought to have a code name for our own private effort.”

Colin Pasha nodded. “Good idea. What is it to be?”

Worrals thought for a moment. “The female half of a family is known as the distaff side. Let’s call our show ‘Operation Distaff’.”

Colin Pasha smiled. “Good enough. The words Operation Distaff will prefix all your signals. That should get the enemy guessing, if he ever picks one up.”

“Another thing,” said Worrals. “If we’re not to know you, how and where do we start? I mean, there must be some liaison. Where does Operation Distaff hook itself on to Operation Highway?”

“I’ve got that already fixed, in anticipation of getting outside help, which, incidentally, was the purpose of my visit to England. When you

arrive in Alexandria go to the Hotel Medina and ask for room fourteen. When you're in it, ring the bell. I'll have a man there waiting for you. He's a good fellow, one of the most efficient on my staff. He'll give you all the latest information. Any requests you make through him will be granted by me. His name is Melinos."

"That doesn't sound very British to me."

Colin Pasha smiled again. "Never mind about that. In Egypt few things are what they seem to be. Melinos will try to sell you some cigarettes called Sultans. Buy them, and pay for them with an English pound-note torn across the corner. That will get you acquainted without fear of mistake. It may sound silly, but you can't be too careful. After that he'll do the rest. Go your own way. Melinos will be the only person in Egypt apart from myself who will know who you are and what you are doing. Only in case of desperate emergency will you get in touch with me direct. By that I mean if you should lose touch with Melinos, or in case you get on a red-hot trail and pick up information which you think I ought to have immediately. But, while it is possible, always work through Melinos, because once you've been in direct touch with me it will be known, and you'll be marked agents. Egypt is, and always has been, the hunting-ground of half the spies of Europe."

"I'll remember it," promised Worrals. "From where and at what time does the 'plane start in the morning?"

"Heath Row, nine o'clock. Are you all right for money?"

"Yes."

"If you need more get it from Melinos."

"Fair enough," agreed Worrals. "I'll think out my line of attack on the journey over."

Colin Pasha got up. "Splendid. Don't think me rude for dashing off as soon as I've got what I came for, but I've a lot to do between now and tomorrow morning. When we meet again I shall cut you dead. That's for your own safety. I'm a dangerous man to have anything to do with." He held out his hand. "Good-bye, and good luck."

The Air Commodore put a friendly hand on Worrals's shoulder. "Thanks, Worrals," he said earnestly. "I hope you won't think I've let you in for something, but when the Foreign Office comes to Scotland Yard for advice we may take it that things are pretty serious. Be careful. Peace-time Egypt may look a gay place, and so it is—on the surface; but believe me, you've never accepted a more dangerous assignation in your life than you have this evening. Good-bye. Good-bye, Frecks, and good hunting."

Worrals nodded. “We won’t let you down,” she promised as she saw the men to the door.

When she returned to Frecks her manner was pensive. “Well, well,” she murmured. “What a queer thing life is! This morning I was so sure that we should be in London to-morrow that I’ve booked seats for the opera; instead of which we shall be in the land of the Sphinx, pyramids, and riddles.”

“That’s the trouble, once you have anything to do with these Intelligence people,” Frecks said sadly. “You never know where you’re going from one day to the next.”

“True enough,” agreed Worrals. “Their job never stops. Peace or war, this underground battle of spy and counter-spy goes on just the same. Yet on the surface everyone is shouting about peace. The strange thing is, if it were not for the spies who find out what other people are doing there might be more wars than there are. Let’s console ourselves with that thought, and do our best to scotch the efforts of these unscrupulous beasts who are now trying to start one in the Middle East. But this is no time for philosophy. We’d better start packing.”

CHAPTER TWO

Operation Distaff

TWO days later, shortly after ten o'clock in the morning, Worrals and Frecks were in Alexandria watching their kit being carried up the steps of the Hotel Medina, a not very prosperous-looking establishment on the outskirts of the city.

The journey out, after a delayed start caused by fog, had been made without incident. As far as Worrals and Frecks were concerned, who were more accustomed to flying themselves than being flown, the journey was a period of boredom. For the most part Worrals sat silent, deep in thought, gazing without real interest at the ever-changing panorama below. Colin Pasha was one of the passengers, but not once from first to last did he in any way reveal that he had ever seen them before. Even when the aircraft landed at its destination he strode away without so much as a glance in their direction.

On reaching the hotel reception desk they registered under their own names, Worrals having decided that there was no point in adopting assumed ones. She asked the dark-skinned receptionist if they could have room fourteen, which, she said, had been recommended to them by a friend who had stayed at the hotel. The ivory-complexioned Greek manager, who was standing near, told them that he was honoured. The room was unoccupied so they could have it. It was a double room, he added, reserved for special guests, although just what he meant by that was not evident.

"I wouldn't trust that fellow with an expired clothing coupon," murmured Frecks, as they walked up the stairs.

"Don't say that," returned Worrals. "This is Egypt, and in Egypt it doesn't do to judge by appearances. That manager may be all that he pretends to be, but it's just as likely that he's a member of the Intelligence Corps. Of one thing you may be sure: Colin Pasha must have confidence in him or he wouldn't have sent us here."

They followed the native boy who was carrying their kit to room fourteen, which turned out to be a large bed-sitting-room, with twin beds, on the first floor overlooking the street. It was somewhat over-furnished and

held the usual indefinable smell common to the Eastern Mediterranean. The boy dumped the bags and departed, whereupon Worrals, after a brief inspection of the room, suggested that they should have a wash and get into their working clothes, which consisted of well-worn garments calculated to give them the appearance of second-class tourists.

“What about guns?” queried Frecks. “Are you going to carry one?”

Worrals considered the question before answering. “Yes,” she decided. “I think it best to have them handy. We may never need them, but we might be glad to have them. They’re heavy, and a nuisance to carry about, besides which they introduce an atmosphere of drama into the show; but against that I must say that it does give one confidence to know that one isn’t entirely helpless if it comes to a rough-house.”

“Have you decided how you’re going to start?” inquired Frecks, putting her automatic into her handbag, a commodious receptacle that hung from her shoulder.

“I’ve thought out a scheme, but whether or not it can be put into practice depends on how much co-operation we get from this fellow Melinos. I wish Colin Pasha had told us more about the man instead of leaving us to find out everything for ourselves. But there, I suppose these security measures are necessary. One mistake in this business can make an awful mess. We might as well find out if Melinos is on the job, although I can’t see that Colin Pasha has had much chance to contact him.”

“He might have got in touch with him from England, through service channels,” conjectured Frecks.

“True enough,” agreed Worrals. “According to Colin Pasha we can produce him by merely pressing the button. Let’s see if it works.” She pressed the bell.

“What sort of type are you expecting?” asked Frecks.

“Anything,” answered Worrals. “Nothing would surprise me.”

Frecks watched the door with the liveliest anticipation. Such details as this, she found, gave an atmosphere of mystery to the proceedings. Apart from that she was curious to see what sort of man they had to deal with, not forgetting that in the near future their safety, perhaps their lives, might depend on his efficiency.

There was a gentle tap on the door and a slim, black-haired waiter appeared. He was dressed Egyptian fashion, complete with red tarboosh, but it took Frecks only a few seconds to decide that he was a Eurasian. He salaamed and stood waiting for instructions.

“Do you speak English?” asked Worrals.

“I spik the Engleesh very, very good,” purred the man.

“Do you think you could get us some coffee?”

“It ees your command, lady,” was the obsequious reply. The waiter salaamed again and withdrew.

Frecks turned her eyes from the closing door to Worrals. “Shades of Pharaoh!” she breathed. “If that’s going to be our only link with the Higher Authority I sincerely hope we never get in a jam. What did you make of him?”

Worrals shrugged. “As I said just now, this is Egypt, the original home of sorcerers, necromancers and what-have-you, and it doesn’t do to jump to conclusions.”

“Well, if the British Secret Service has to pin its faith in creatures like that, then it must be in a bad way,” declared Frecks in a disappointed voice.

The waiter reappeared, bringing with him Turkish coffee on an oriental tray. Conspicuous also on the tray was a bright pink box. “Coffee, ladies?” he lisped smoothly. “You like cigarettes? I have very good cigarette, very cheap, very nice Egyptian cigarette. Ten piastres only, one hundred cigarettes.” He held up the pink box suggestively.

Worrals took out her notecase. “We’ll try them,” she decided, and tendered a pound note without appearing to notice that it had been torn across one corner.

The waiter bowed, took the note, and went over to the door.

Again Frecks was conscious of a feeling of disappointment, because she assumed that he was going out. Actually, he locked the door quietly on the inside. When he turned there was something different about him, although it was not easy to say just what had happened. He smiled. Then he spoke, and when he did so he was certainly a different man. The lisping accent was absent. His English was faultless.

“So Operation Distaff has started,” he said casually. “Forgive the little pantomime I had to go through, but we’ve found that it pays to be sure one is on safe ground before saying too much. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Nothing at the moment, thanks,” answered Worrals. “We just wanted to make contact.”

“Mind if I sit down?”

“Please do.”

“May I ask a question or two?”

“Surely.”

“Do you know this part of the world well?”

“Not very well. I’ve passed through, but never stayed here,” answered Worrals.

“I see.” Melinos pursed his lips. “I asked because—well, you realize you’re in a dangerous place playing a dangerous game?”

“So we’ve gathered.”

“Do you realize *how* dangerous, I wonder?”

Worrals smiled. “This isn’t the first dangerous game we’ve played.”

The man who was called Melinos, but whom Frecks now realized was as British as they were, also smiled. “I don’t mind admitting that it shook me a bit when I received orders to stand by for two ladies. This is a new experience for me.”

“You’ve been missing something, evidently,” returned Worrals cheerfully. “You’ll get used to the idea. All you need is practice.”

Melinos became serious. “Let’s say no more about that. But you’ll have to watch every step you take. Assassins here are two-a-penny. One false step and you’ve had it. I shall keep in close touch with you.”

“Thanks,” acknowledged Worrals. “By the way, why do you call yourself Melinos? That isn’t the name you were born with.”

“No,” admitted Melinos. “Nothing like it. Between ourselves, my name has a handle to it. That made it a bit conspicuous, and after a while it got a bit too hot to hold, so I change it from time to time. On one unfortunate occasion I forgot the name I’d borrowed, with results that nearly terminated my career abruptly.”

Worrals looked at the man curiously. “Why do you do this work?”

“For one reason because I like it, and for another, because ill-health prevented me from taking up the family career, which was soldiering. This was the nearest thing I could get to it.”

“Are you always here?” was Worrals’s next question.

“No, I have different assignments. But for purposes of Operation Distaff I shall be here for as long as I’m needed. I’m your link with Colin Pasha and his department. As he probably told you, it wouldn’t do for you to make personal contact with him.”

“What about the hotel staff here—are they to be trusted?”

“I shouldn’t be here if they weren’t,” returned Melinos grimly. “As I have to eat, drink, and sleep, I have to trust somebody. The day that somebody I trust accepts a bribe for my scalp, I’m finished. I shall just fade out. Nobody will know how, or when, or where. That’s how it’s done here. Still, it adds zest to life while it lasts. That goes for you, too, once it

becomes known who you are and what you are. But tell me: have you decided yet how you're going to start?"

"Yes," replied Worrals. "We're going to start by getting into the dope ring."

Melinos looked startled. "You're going to do *what*?"

"I said I was going to get into the hashish racket," returned Worrals evenly.

Melinos smiled faintly. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"Quite well."

"And just how do you hope to accomplish this?"

"First of all, let me ask a few questions," requested Worrals. "Could you put me in touch with someone whom you know, or have reason to suspect, handles hashish?"

Melinos thought for a moment. "Yes, I think I could manage that."

"Good. Now tell me, how is hashish usually brought into this country?"

"That's a long story."

"What would you say is the most common way?"

Melinos explained. "Most of the hemp from which hashish is derived is grown in Greece or Turkey. One popular way of bringing it into the country is to drop the stuff overboard from liners in rubber sacks, at night, at pre-arranged points where it is picked up by fishing boats." Melinos smiled sadly. "When you have been here for some time you may notice what a lot of fishing boats hang about where no fish are ever caught. Fishing boats in Egypt handle strange fish. The fishermen, some of whom are part of the dope organization, hand the stuff over to Bedouins, who hide it in water-jars which they bury in the sand and subsequently deliver as the stuff is required. It is then hawked in such harmless things as nuts, melons, and so on."

"You've no record of anyone using aircraft?"

"No. No doubt that will come one day."

Worrals looked at Melinos inquiringly. "Do you happen to have any hashish?"

"Yes. We manage to seize a consignment from time to time. Why?"

"I want some."

"How much?"

"The more the better. Say, about a hundred pounds or so."

Melinos stared. "What on earth are you going to do with a hundred pounds of hashish?"

“Sell it.”

Melinos blinked. “Are you crazy?”

“Possibly, but I hope not.”

“What’s the idea?”

“I know a little about rackets,” answered Worrals. “Racketeers all think alike. You seem to imagine it’s hard to find a way into the dope syndicate. Well, if Mohammed can’t get to the mountain we must bring the mountain to Mohammed. In other words, when the dope kings learn that somebody is trespassing on their preserves it won’t be necessary for me to look for them. They’ll look for me. I hope we shall establish friendly relations by doing a deal, in which case I shall at least get a glimpse of the people I’m anxious to see.”

Melinos looked interested. “That certainly is an idea,” he admitted. “You haven’t overlooked the detail, I hope, that the agent of the syndicate will probably announce his arrival with the sharp end of a dagger?”

“We shall have to risk that,” said Worrals. “The syndicate, of course, is only the first step. I’m hoping it will lead me to the gun-runners. The point is, can you get the dope?”

Melinos shook his head slowly. “Not in that quantity. I’ve got a pound or two you can have.”

“No use,” decided Worrals. “The man I want to see wouldn’t be interested in chicken-feed. I need enough dope to make him sit up and take notice.”

“Well, I don’t think we have anything like that quantity of hashish,” said Melinos. He looked up suddenly. “I tell you what we have got, though, and it might suit you just as well. We’ve a big load of charas.”

“What’s that?”

“Same thing—dope. The Indian form of hashish. It comes from Chinese Turkistan, usually into India via the Himalayas. We don’t see a lot of it here. A little while ago a bright lad got the idea that he could make a fortune in one stroke by smuggling in from India about a hundred seers of charas in old army kit-bags. He nearly got away with it, too. We picked him up, however, and I think we’ve still got the charas.”

“Fine! That would suit us even better than hashish,” declared Worrals. “The syndicate might get worried, fearing the new dope will prove more popular than the old, apart from which they would be interested to know how a big consignment of stuff got through without their knowledge. By the way, I shall need two vehicles.”

“What sort?”

“First, an aircraft. A light ’plane will do. I may never have to use it, but I must have one at my disposal and allow it to be known on the airfield that the machine is mine. You see, if I am asked how I got the charas into the country I shall say by air. The dope king may check up on that, so I had better have an aircraft.”

Melinos nodded. “I get it. You’ll find a machine in your name in the club hangar at the airport. What else?”

“I shall need a boat—a native craft for choice.”

Melinos lifted his eyebrows again. “Why a boat?”

“To put the charas in. You don’t suppose, do you, that I’m going to carry the stuff about with me? Nor should I be so childish as to pretend that I’d smuggled a load of charas through Customs at the airport. My story will be that I flew the stuff from India and landed on a lonely beach where my boat was standing by to meet me. The boat, with the charas on board, then proceeded to Alex. That sounds feasible, I think?”

“Yes, that’s all right,” agreed Melinos. “You’d better have a felucca. I have the very job in mind.”

“Where is it?”

“At the Mocha Company’s old coffee warehouse, at the old port.”

“Is it yours?”

“No. It belongs to a retired Askari sergeant, and his son. They’re a hundred-per-cent trustworthy, and they can both speak English. They do jobs for us occasionally. Their names are Maki—that’s the old man—and Ali. Maki is a taciturn old bird who knows how to keep his mouth shut—and he’s all the better for that.”

“Good enough. Then all you have to do is put the charas in the felucca and arrange for me to meet Maki. When we’ve got that all set you can tell me the name of someone who is suspected of retailing hashish.”

“We can settle that now,” said Melinos. “I don’t think you could do better than Nicopoulos. Ostensibly he runs a carpet shop in the Stretta Pedros, on the outskirts of the *Kasbah*—the native quarter. We’ve known for some time that he dabbles in hashish, but we’ve never been able to pin it on him.”

“That should do for a start,” said Worrals. “How soon can you be ready with the boat?”

“You’ll have to give me an hour or two. How would ten o’clock to-night suit you to meet Maki at the waterfront?”

“That’s O.K. with me.”

“Very well. I’ll get everything organized,” promised Melinos. “You be ready to leave here at nine-forty-five. On the hotel steps you’ll be accosted by a dragoman with a shade over one eye. He’ll offer to show you the sights. Engage him. He’ll take you to the boat. The charas will be on board.”

“Good,” acknowledged Worrals. “I think that’s about all we can do for the moment.”

The pseudo-waiter moved towards the door. “I’ll be seeing you,” he said, as he turned the key. With his hand on the handle he hesitated. “As I’m in this business myself it isn’t for me to make a song about danger,” he said softly. “But—be careful. You’re not in London now. After all, I don’t wear this get-up for fun.”

Worrals smiled. “I can believe that. By the way, how many people know you are not what you appear to be?”

“Very, very few. Just one or two privileged friends,” answered Melinos. “You see, the man I used to be is dead. He died some time ago, of fever. He had to die, or get out of the country. I didn’t want to leave the country, so officially I died, and was buried with all due solemnity. It had to be that or I should really have died, with unpleasant suddenness. A lot of people here didn’t like me.”

“I can believe that,” murmured Worrals.

Melinos smiled again. “Still, it’s all in the day’s work. We’ll tear a chop together at the Ritz next time I come home on leave—I hope. Cheerio.”

As the door closed behind him Worrals turned to Frecks with an expression that was almost wistful. “You know, Frecks, soldiers, sailors, and airmen are always grouching and grumbling about this and that. They feel they don’t get credit for what they do. What about fellows like Melinos? They join up in an unseen army, the army that lubricates the wheels of our foreign policy. Most of the public are not even aware of their existence, yet their lives are one long ghastly risk. They’re always in the front line. One mistake and they’ve had it. If they win their underground war—well, no one is the wiser. If they lose, no one knows that, either. No casualty lists for them. One day, when I’ve got a lot of money, I’ll raise a statue to these fellows. But what am I saying? I must be getting soft. Let’s have a look round the town and see about a spot of lunch.”

CHAPTER THREE

Worrals Bait her Trap

AT nine-forty-five precisely, Worrals, accompanied by Frecks, walked down the front steps of the hotel into the street. As they reached the pavement a tangle-bearded, dark-skinned dragoman, in a dirty white *shamma*, moved forward out of the shadows. Had he not worn a black shade over one eye, Frecks would have taken him for a typical specimen of the native guides that hang on the tourist traffic of every eastern town. But the black eye-shade told its own story.

The man came forward, leering, spreading out his hands, palms upward, in the manner of his kind. “I show you all de sights, plenty dance, plenty music. You like dance, eh? I show.”

“What’s your name?” demanded Worrals curtly.

“Me Abdullah,” was the cringing reply. “Me show.”

“All right, let’s see what you can show us,” returned Worrals. “Lead on.”

The man set off down the street. Worrals and Frecks followed, Frecks by no means happy at Melinos’s choice of a guide.

“That dirty tough looks as if he’d cut our throats for a couple of piastres,” she murmured disgustedly.

“Don’t judge by appearances—you’re still in Egypt,” reminded Worrals.

They were soon out of the main thoroughfares threading a way through a maze of shabby sidestreets where boys in *gandouras*—robes like elongated nightshirts—were serving drinks in sinister-looking dives to tall Arabs, negroes, sailors from all quarters of the globe, and the usual riff-raff which the sea seems to throw up everywhere in the Eastern Mediterranean.

“I don’t think too much of this,” muttered Frecks to Worrals, keeping close behind their guide. “This is the sort of place you read about in books—you know, the place where people disappear for ever.”

“Sometimes their bodies are washed up by the next high tide,” returned Worrals, smiling.

“Not here,” argued Frecks. “And anyway I’ll bet that water is swarming with sharks.”

Another five minutes and they arrived at the end of the waterfront, a dilapidated area of mean houses, dingy shops, ramshackle huts and warehouses. Before one of these Abdullah stopped and gave three knocks, the last two in quick succession. After a little delay, with the squeak of rusty hinges a door opened to reveal a vague figure in the shadows. The guide went in.

Frecks hung back, but Worrals followed the guide, so Frecks went on to find herself in a low, evil-smelling building which, in the light of an electric torch held by an unseen person, seemed to be half warehouse and half wharf. That is to say part of the floor was boarded with rotting timber, and the rest, some three or four feet lower, was water. On it floated a felucca, a long, sleek native craft partly decked over. The usual lateen sail had been furled across the deck. A second man, a slim figure, stood near it.

The dragoman suddenly straightened himself, putting two inches on his height. “Here we are,” he said calmly in perfect English. “I’ll show you the stuff, then you’ll know where to find it when you want it.”

Frecks nearly fell into the water at the sound of the voice, which she recognized at once. The guide was Melinos.

“Is it really necessary for you to do all this dressing-up?” she asked sharply, feeling that she had been cheated.

“I’ve told you before, I don’t do it for fun,” answered the guide. “The underworld here knows me as well as it knows the Nile. Had I been recognized in one of the streets we came through I might not have got here—in which case, neither would you. And I’ll tell you something else. If the scum in those taverns knew what was in this boat we shouldn’t get out of here alive. To them, any form of hashish is meat, drink, and a fortune.

“But meet the crew. These are the two Askaris I was telling you about, father and son, Maki and Ali respectively. They’re Somalis, and I don’t mind telling you they took a chance when they brought the stuff here. You can trust them with your lives. If I wasn’t sure of that I shouldn’t be here. Let’s go to the cabin and look at the charas. You ought at least to know what it looks like.”

Melinos led the way to the cabin. “There you are,” he said cheerfully, pointing to a heap of dirty kit-bags. “That’s charas.”

One of the sacks had been undone, and Frecks examined with interest, and not a little disgust, what appeared to be a mass of dried cow-dung. It had a clinging, resinous smell.

“Is that stuff really a narcotic?” she asked incredulously.

“A piece the size of a hazel nut, well chewed, would put you on the floor for a long time,” asserted Melinos. “It’s good quality.”

Worrals took out her penknife, cut a small cube of the stuff, wrapped it in a piece of grease paper which she had brought for the purpose and put it in her pocket.

“Thanks,” she said. “I don’t think we need waste any more time here. The smell of the stuff makes me feel sick.”

“Yes, it’ll do that,” replied Melinos.

“How much is there in these bags?”

“About a hundred seers.”

“Hm. If I remember my conversion tables a seer is the equivalent of about two pounds.”

“Quite right.”

“What’s that lot worth?”

Melinos considered the question. “The fellow who brought it here probably got it quite cheaply in India. In Egypt it would probably retail for about five thousand pounds.”

“You realize that I’m serious when I say I may have to sell this stuff?” said Worrals.

Melinos shrugged. “It’s your party,” he said in a resigned voice. “My orders were to give you a free hand. But tell me this. How are you going to deliver it to the man you sell it to? You can’t carry this stuff about the streets—at least not without causing a first-class sensation.”

“Is there any objection to my telling the man that he may fetch it from here, providing his own transport?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“How shall I describe this place?”

“Just call it the old coffee warehouse at the old port. That will be enough.”

“Then would you be good enough to tell Maki that if people come to collect the charas he’s to let them have it.”

“If that’s how you want it,” answered Melinos. He spoke to the two natives for a minute or two in a language neither Frecks nor Worrals understood. “I’ve told them to let in anyone who gives the proper signal of knocks when he arrives,” he went on, turning back to Worrals. “I’ve also told them that henceforth they’re to take orders from you if I’m not here.”

Worrals had a word with Maki herself, to break the ice. He was a tall, grave, intelligent-looking man of between fifty and sixty, but still as straight as a lance. A short, greying beard gave him a curious dignity. She explained that her movements were likely to be uncertain. She might come back with someone to collect the charas, or a man might come alone. She confirmed that any man who gave the proper signal knock would be fetching the charas on her instructions.

Maki, who apparently did not believe in wasting words, said that he understood.

“Well, that’s all very satisfactory,” remarked Worrals, turning to Melinos. “Now, suppose you lead the way to the carpet merchant you mentioned this morning.”

“You’re going right on with this, then?” said Melinos doubtfully.

“I am.”

“O.K. You’re the boss.” Melinos looked at Worrals curiously. “Aren’t you scared?”

Worrals looked slightly taken aback at the question. When she recovered she smiled. “Far from that; I’m enjoying myself. This has all the makings of a first-class thriller. We usually have to depend on films for this sort of entertainment nowadays, you know. The real thing is much more satisfying.”

“All the same,” said Melinos slowly, “I shall be surprised if, at the rate you’re going, you don’t have enough thrills to last you for a long, long time.”

“That’s fine,” said Worrals cheerfully. “Let’s go. By the way, I don’t want you to come into the shop when we get there. Just show us where it is and leave us. And don’t get in a flap if we’re not back at the hotel by——”

“Just a minute,” interrupted Melinos. “You don’t suppose I’m going to leave you in that stinking bazaar, do you? I told you the place was on the fringe of the *Kasbah*. You’d never find your way out of that rabbit-warren without a guide. I’ll walk along a bit and wait for you.”

“Well, that suits me—if I’m not spoiling your evening,” agreed Worrals.

“You’re spoiling my evening, anyway,” grumbled Melinos. “I know better than you what you’re doing and it gives me the jitters.”

“Why? After all, we’re only a couple of girls,” replied Worrals in a bantering tone. “Who would suspect danger from us?”

“I don’t want to seem depressing, but that, I fancy, is something you will find out all in good time,” answered Melinos grimly. “Come on, then.”

A walk of about a mile took the party to a narrow, insalubrious little street on the outskirts of the native quarter. This, Melinos told them, was the Stretta Pedros. He pulled up, indicating a small, almost windowless establishment a little higher up on the side opposite from which they stood. “That’s the carpet shop of our questionable friend Nicopoulos. No doubt he sells carpets, but we have reason to suppose that they are merely a cover for a more profitable line of goods.”

“What sort of fellow is he?” asked Worrals.

“I’m not sure that I’ve ever actually seen him,” returned Melinos. “I went to the place two or three times a little while ago hoping to see him and to check up on one or two things. I saw a man, but whether he was actually Nicopoulos or not I don’t know.”

“From his name I imagine he’s a Greek?” suggested Worrals.

“Greek or Turk, or half-and-half, maybe with a touch of Egyptian in him,” replied Melinos. “Names don’t mean much in this part of the world—take mine, for instance. I’ll walk on and wait in that archway at the end.”

“Don’t let us keep you if you have something better to do,” said Worrals.

“I have plenty of things to do, but none more important than keeping an eye on you in a place like this,” averred Melinos. “Just get it clear in your head that to an Arab a woman is a mere chattel, worth less than a horse or a good dog. Quite apart from what you are doing you are fair game for an ordinary thief who happened to decide that your shoes might fetch a few piastres in the market. To speak plainly, what you have to fear in a place like this is ordinary common-or-garden robbery. A man is pretty safe because he commands respect, but unattached females are another matter. It would be assumed that they had no male friends or their men would be with them. Women don’t walk about places like this alone—not if they’re wise.”

“Thank you for those few kind words,” murmured Worrals. “The native who tries any rough stuff with these particular women will find that they have stings. Let’s get along.”

Without another word Melinos strode ahead and disappeared into the archway to which he had referred.

Worrals, with Frecks at her side, crossed the road and continued on to the door of the “shop”. At that hour it was of course closed, but Worrals thumped on the heavy door with her fist.

For a minute nothing happened. A silence, which Frecks found rather trying to the nerves, prevailed. Then she heard a faint noise overhead as of a window being opened, and she suspected that they were being scrutinized. There was another delay. Then came a gentle scrape close at hand as a small

panel in the door was slid aside. But she could still see nothing. At last a voice spoke, so close that Frecks jumped. The words conveyed nothing to her for she did not even recognize the language.

Worrals answered in English. "I wish to see Mr. Nicopoulos," she said quietly.

"Who are you?" The voice answered in the same language, although with a marked foreign accent.

"We are friends."

"From where you come?"

"From over the sea."

"What you want?"

"I want to see Mr. Nicopoulos—on private business."

"What business?"

"We have merchandise for sale," said Worrals, with slight emphasis on the word merchandise. "If he is not interested let him say so, for this is no place for women to stand all night."

There was another delay. Then, to Frecks's relief, for two white-clad figures looking unpleasantly like ghosts had halted in the gloom a little lower down the street, she heard the door being opened.

"Inside, please," whispered a voice.

Frecks followed Worrals into utter darkness. The door was closed, locked and chained, behind them. A match scraped, and in its light she saw a man, a man whose nationality she could not remotely guess although he was obviously of the country, lighting a lamp. All around, just visible in the dim light, a complicated pattern of carpets formed an appropriate background to the scene.

Having got the lamp going the man beckoned with a crooked finger and led the way up a flight of stairs, along a corridor and into a room lighted by an ornate hanging lamp. Frecks had just time to notice that it was furnished more in Asiatic than European style, when a door at the far side opened to admit a man who, she suspected, was the one they had come to see.

It was a long time since she had seen a figure so remarkable. He was enormous, so huge that he seemed to overpower them by his presence. Dressed in wide blue velvet trousers into which was tucked a crimson shirt, he reminded Frecks of nothing as much as the Hollywood version of a Mexican bandit. Red leather slippers, with curling, upturned toes, were on his feet. Gold rings gleamed in his ears. A pair of spectacular turned-up black moustaches decorated his face.

“You wish to see me?” said he, in a deep sonorous voice, his dark eyes flashing from one to the other.

Worrals replied: “Yes, we have some merchandise in which—so we were told—you might be interested.”

“Who told you?” The question was delivered in a voice so fierce and menacing that Frecks recoiled.

“That is a part of the business I prefer not to discuss,” answered Worrals coolly.

“This is unwelcome news,” said the man slowly, his eyes on Worrals’s face.

Worrals shrugged. “What does it matter? The man we know is one who has done business with you himself. Because it was unhealthy for him to stay in Egypt he returned to India.”

Nicopoulos breathed a sigh that sounded to Frecks very much like relief. “So. What is this merchandise you have brought?”

“Not being a fool, I have not brought it—only a sample,” answered Worrals. She took the charas from her pocket, removed the wrapping and passed it over.

“Please to sit,” said Nicopoulos, indicating a divan. The charas he took close to the light and examined by sight, smell and taste. “This is very good,” he said softly. “Yes, very good.” He turned to Worrals. “How much have you?”

“A hundred seers.”

Nicopoulos started. “By the Beard of the Prophet!” he breathed in a terse whisper. “A hundred seers! Who are you, that you can——?”

“Just merchants,” interposed Worrals evenly.

“Did anyone see you come here?”

“No one. We have no more desire to see the inside of a prison than you have.”

“Where have you come from now?” asked Nicopoulos.

“From India.”

“But a hundred seers! This is a lot of charas . . . yes, a lot . . .” Dark suspicious eyes met those of Worrals. “What are you, mere women, doing with all this charas?”

“Trying to sell it at the best price, Monsieur Nicopoulos,” replied Worrals calmly. “What has our sex to do with it? Has nobody told you that women now do men’s work sometimes better than men?”

“Yes, I have heard this,” returned Nicopoulos in a doubtful voice. “It does not seem possible. Is this charas here, in Egypt?”

“It is.”

“But how, in Allah’s name, did you get it here?”

“It happens that we have an aeroplane—and friends in Egypt.”

“And you are English?”

“We are.”

“Then why do you do business in charas, which is against your laws?”

“Because we need money, and while I do not say money cannot be made in lawful business, it is easier to make it unlawfully,” answered Worrals frankly. “You yourself may have discovered that. Too many people are now in the ordinary black market. Charas is easier. After all, we are women. Who would suspect women of dealing in charas?”

“Who indeed?” said Nicopoulos sadly. “But a hundred seers!” The quantity still seemed to stick in the man’s mind. “I could not buy all this.”

“We are not asking you to,” returned Worrals imperturbably. “We’re going to start in business on our own account. For this we need two things: agents to sell the stuff for us and a safe place to store it. Are you interested in that way?”

Nicopoulos thought heavily, stroking his big moustache. “I must consider this,” he said slowly. “I will let you know. Where can I find you?”

“At the Hotel Medina, room fourteen. Make up your mind quickly, because the charas is still in bulk, in a place that may not be altogether safe.”

“Is it still in the aeroplane?”

“Aeroplanes are searched when they land, Monsieur Nicopoulos,” said Worrals with gentle sarcasm. “When we landed at the airport the charas was no longer in the ’plane. We had given it to a friend, on the way, to mind for us.”

“Ah! A boat.”

“Where it is, is no concern of yours—yet,” said Worrals.

“Of course. Quite right. But you think it should be put in a safer place, yes? Perhaps I can arrange that. I will let you know.”

Worrals rose. “Very well. Let us leave it at that. I shall expect to hear from you, one way or the other, to-morrow. Meanwhile, fear nothing from us. After all, we are in the same business.”

“It might be so,” answered Nicopoulos cautiously. Reaching out he struck a small silver gong.

The man who had opened the front door reappeared. Worrals prepared to leave. "Peace be upon you, Monsieur Nicopoulos."

"And upon you, peace," answered the hashish-vendor.

The guide led the way back through the shop. Worrals and Frecks stepped into a deserted street. The door closed softly behind them.

Worrals walked for some distance without speaking. Then she said: "I quite enjoyed that little talk. It's a strange world. To-night has shown us one of its more interesting sidelights."

"Did he bite, do you think?" asked Frecks anxiously.

"Hook, line, and sinker," replied Worrals. "The beautiful merchandise we offered to that picturesque gentleman should, I think, set the ball rolling. If it doesn't nothing will."

A shadow detached itself from a nearby wall. Frecks sidestepped, but it was only Melinos.

"Don't speak to us in case we are being watched," said Worrals in a terse whisper. "Go back to the hotel. We'll follow."

"Everything go off all right?" breathed Melinos as he strode past them.

"Perfectly," murmured Worrals. "We had a very interesting half-hour."

"That's more than I did," said Melinos grimly, and went on ahead.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Bait is Taken

IT was not yet ten o'clock the following morning when the first indication came that the bait Worrals had offered was being nibbled. There was a tap on the door, and in response to Worrals's invitation, Melinos came in. He was once more the obsequious waiter—at least, as far as appearances were concerned.

"There's a man below, asking for you," he reported. "He says his business is urgent."

"Splendid," answered Worrals. "We'll see him here. Bring him up."

"Now what are we going to see I wonder?" murmured Frecks.

She had barely finished speaking when Melinos returned with the caller. He was a short, stout man of about fifty years of age, with sharp features and a conspicuously hooked nose. His skin was yellow and seemed to fit loosely, hanging on his face in waxy folds, like the skin round the eyes of a bloodhound. But as far as clothes were concerned he might have stepped straight out of the establishment of a fashionable tailor, so immaculate was his morning dress. His hat he carried in one hand; in the other, a highly-polished walking-stick with a gold knob. A large pearl gleamed in a black cravat, which had been tied with care round a stiff butterfly collar. He bowed with exaggerated courtesy.

Melinos withdrew, closing the door behind him.

"Please sit down," invited Worrals. "I understand you wish to see me?"

"Yes. I have called on a matter of importance." The man spoke English in a brisk, businesslike way, with a curious clipped accent. He looked quickly round the room, "I suppose it is safe to talk here?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Perfectly safe, Mr.—er——?"

"Markoff. Julius Markoff, madam, is my name."

"Thank you. Mine is——"

"Yes, I know, I know," interrupted Markoff impatiently.

Worrals glanced at Frecks.

“Let us proceed with the business I have come to see you about,” went on the visitor. “It is urgent.”

“So it would seem,” said Worrals softly. “Go ahead, Mr. Markoff.”

“I understand you have some merchandise for disposal?”

“Indeed? And what caused you to understand that?” inquired Worrals cautiously.

“I was told by a friend.”

“News travels quickly in Alexandria.”

“By this time quite a number of people are aware that a large consignment of charas has arrived in Egypt.”

In a mild way Worrals was genuinely surprised. “News *does* travel fast,” she murmured. “In what way does that interest you, Mr. Markoff?”

“In this way,” was the reply, made rather curtly. “No merchandise of this sort enters Egypt without passing through the hands of the important financial group which I have the honour to represent.”

“Ours did,” reminded Worrals, smiling faintly.

“Precisely, and that is one of the things we find so interesting. We understand you used an aeroplane. We have not so far employed one, although it has of course been considered. No doubt that day will come. It seems that you have forestalled us. Still, we bear no resentment. We have been in the business too long ourselves not to appreciate original methods of transportation. One day you might do me the kindness to tell me just how you organized the flight. Indeed, we might offer you something substantial to organize something for us on the same lines. We have not the technical knowledge. But let us leave that for the moment. To-day my business is of a more direct nature. How much do you ask for the whole consignment?”

“I’m not prepared to sell the whole of it,” Worrals surprised Frecks by saying.

“Why not?”

“Because wholesale prices in any commodity are usually much lower than retail. We are in this business for real money, Mr. Markoff.”

“Of course. So are we all. If our information is correct, and apparently it has been so far, you propose to market the goods yourself?”

“That is my intention.”

“Is that wise, do you think?”

“Is there any reason why we shouldn’t?”

“A very good reason, my dear young lady. We are trying to be reasonable, even helpful, as my presence here must prove; but there are limits to our patience and generosity. I fear you do not fully understand what you are doing. Do you realize that in order to keep the price of our commodity compatible with the risks we take, and the enormous expense to which we go on that account, careful control is necessary? By suddenly releasing a large quantity of charas you would flood the market and so upset our existing arrangements, arrangements which have taken much time and thought to organize.”

“You are very frank about it.”

“Why not? Surely it would be better for you to co-operate with us than spoil a profitable enterprise by ill-considered and amateurish distribution? At the moment everything is running smoothly. You have only to make one mistake and you will not only land yourself in prison, but force us to curtail our activities until the trouble has blown over.”

Worrals thought for a moment. “I see your point, Mr. Markoff. You have put it plainly and fairly. You would prefer to buy the whole consignment from us and handle the distribution through your organization?”

“Yes.”

“Regardless of the fact that we could go back to India and in a few days return with another consignment?”

“Not regardless of that fact, if you please. We should require an undertaking that you would not again bring charas or hashish into Egypt.”

“That’s not unreasonable, provided it did not apply to anything else that promised good profits.”

Markoff’s dark eyes rested on Worrals’s face. “What else have you in mind?”

“I don’t think we had better discuss that at present: it is better to deal with one question at a time. Tell me this. Why should you regard hashish, or charas, as your particular monopoly?”

“Because it is.”

“And if we refuse to bind ourselves to such a stipulation?”

Markoff shrugged. “So far we have been frank. Let us continue so. If you made one more attempt to repeat what you have just done so successfully, we should take steps to ensure that you could never again interfere with our business.”

“I don’t like threats,” said Worrals slowly.

Markoff held out his hands, palms upwards. “We must speak plainly. And it is not the practice of my company to make threats it cannot carry out.”

Worrals considered the matter—or pretended to. “It would be a pity if we were to fall out after such a promising start,” she said thoughtfully. “Still, we too have been to some trouble to get our method of transportation organized, so we are bound to regard this question of further consignments as a matter of considerable importance. I should like to discuss this business with your principals.”

“I am authorized to act for them.”

“In a matter of such consequence as this I would prefer—with all due respect to you—not to proceed too far with a subordinate. It wastes time and often ends in misunderstanding.”

It was Markoff’s turn to think. It was obvious that he did not view the proposal with favour. However, having given the matter some thought he said: “There is something in what you say. In any case, we have reached a point in our negotiations where I shall have to ask for further instructions myself. A meeting might be arranged. Will you excuse me for a moment?”

“Certainly.”

Markoff got up and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Worrals threw a sly glance at Frecks. “Nicopoulos didn’t waste any time, did he?” she breathed.

“Where’s Markoff gone, do you think?” whispered Frecks.

“He’s either gone to ring up—or see—his boss. He’s the man I want to get to. Markoff would take a message, no doubt, but I want to see the head man’s face when he hears my *real* proposition. That should tell me if he knows anything about the gun-running racket.”

At this juncture Markoff returned. “It’s all right,” he said. “You are to come with me at once. You are lucky.”

“In what way?”

“I have never before known my employers grant an interview in a matter of this sort.”

“Why have we been made exceptions?”

Markoff shrugged. “Perhaps because it is not usual to encounter people like you in the business.”

“In other words, your chief would like to look us over?”

“I think he is interested to see what sort of women would take up importing charas as a profession—who wouldn’t be?”

“Men have had it all their own way for too long,” asserted Worrals crisply.

With their new acquaintance Worrals and Frecks went down the stairs and through the swing door into the street. An imposing saloon car, with a coloured chauffeur, a full-blooded negro, at the wheel, was at rest by the kerb. At Markoff’s invitation they got in the rear seat. He himself sat next to the chauffeur. The car glided forward. Almost at once a black glass panel, apparently operated by the driver, slid up between the front and rear seats. The same thing occurred at the side windows, so that the rear of the car was at once in total darkness with the view outside effectively sealed off. An electric light in the roof blazed suddenly and enabled Worrals and Frecks to see each other.

“I hope this simple precaution will not cause you any inconvenience,” came Markoff’s voice, from an aperture in front of the seats. “We shall only be a few minutes.”

“No inconvenience at all,” answered Worrals.

Frecks said nothing, but she was thinking a lot. What amazed her was the open manner in which the negotiations had so far been conducted. Thinking it over she put it down to the fact that since they were obviously in possession of charas they were not to be feared, as they, like the people they were dealing with, were breaking the law.

The drive occupied only ten minutes, although it was evident that at times the car was travelling fast. Then it stopped. The blackout screens dropped. Markoff opened the door. Worrals stepped out. Frecks followed, and looked around quickly. The inspection told her little. The car had stopped in the courtyard of a big house, but any view was obstructed by a high wall. Markoff walked to a side door and unlocked it with a Yale key. “This way, please,” he requested. They entered, and the door was closed behind them. After traversing a corridor of some length, Markoff showed them into a small waiting-room—or so Frecks took it to be. Said Markoff: “I shall have to leave you for a moment.” He went out.

Worrals looked at Frecks and laid a finger on her lips for silence.

Frecks understood. Worrals was suspicious of some device by which anything they said would be overheard.

Markoff was back in a couple of minutes. He raised a podgy finger. “This way.”

He took them to a large, pleasant room in which, at a big, central, mahogany table, five men were seated. One, an elderly, dignified Egyptian, sat at the head. Of the other four, two were obviously European, and the

other two, coloured men. All were quietly but expensively dressed in European clothes. They might have been prosperous merchants. Indeed, the scene reminded Frecks of nothing so much as a company board-meeting. Markoff pulled forward two chairs for the girls and then sat down himself a short distance away.

Nothing less dramatic than these proceedings could be imagined, and Frecks found it hard to believe that she and Worrals were now in the headquarters of the most ruthless, unscrupulous racket in the world, and probably the most lucrative.

The man at the head of the table spoke. "Good day to you," he said in soft, well-modulated English, without a trace of accent. "We need not waste time in unnecessary preliminaries. We know what you are doing, and we are glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you. Let us now endeavour to settle the matter to our mutual satisfaction. You have, we understand, a hundred seers of charas for disposal?"

"That is correct," acknowledged Worrals.

"Where is it?"

"Surely that question is out of order?" protested Worrals. "You have my word that it can be produced at any time."

"And you wish to sell it?"

"That is why I brought it here. There are, however, certain provisos."

"How much do you ask for it?"

"Five thousand pounds sterling."

Not by so much as a blink did the old man express surprise. "That seems a fair price," he agreed. "You deserve some reward for your enterprise. Let us say that that is agreed. What are these provisos?"

"They concern our future operations."

"You realize, of course, that we can get as much hashish as we need?" said the old man dryly. "We do not require you or anyone else to bring it to us. Our supplies are assured. If, in that case, you wonder why we are buying this consignment of charas, I may say that the chief reason is to save misunderstandings that might have unpleasant consequences—particularly for you. At the moment we take the view that what you have done you did in ignorance."

"I see," said Worrals slowly. "I was not thinking of hashish particularly; and the charas was merely a new line we were trying out. We have other interests. How would they be affected?"

There was an attentive silence that lasted several seconds. “Could you be a little more explicit?” inquired the man at the head of the table.

“Certainly,” agreed Worrals readily. “We’ve seen eye-to-eye so far, and that encourages me to be frank with you. We have for disposal a quantity of modern rifles with ammunition.”

Frecks sensed a general stiffening in the atmosphere of the room.

“Where did these weapons come from?” asked the old man seriously.

“Originally, from Abyssinia. They were consigned there by the Italians during the war. When it was evident that they had arrived too late to be of any use, they were hidden. We bought them from the man who had the handling of them.”

“Where are they now?”

“I prefer not to answer that question.”

“As you wish.” The speaker considered Worrals with a curious expression on his face. “You have twice used the word ‘we’. Are you referring to yourself and the young lady with you, or is there someone else?”

“We work as partners; but we have the financial backing of a man in a high position. He needs money—as we all do. His position has made possible things that otherwise would be extremely difficult.”

“I understand.”

The man at the head of the table held a whispered conversation with his associates before he spoke to Worrals again. “No,” he decided, “we have never handled anything of that sort nor do we intend to do so now. We have specialized in the commodity in which we deal and we have never departed from it. What you do in this respect is no concern of ours, always provided that it does not come into collision with our organization. In short, we are interested only in the charas. How soon can we take delivery of it?”

“As soon as your money is in my bank,” replied Worrals.

The old man drew a cheque book towards him. He wrote a cheque, blotted it carefully, and handed it to Worrals. “There you are, dear lady,” he said graciously. “If you pay it in to-day it will be cleared immediately. We should like to collect the charas as soon as possible.”

“And I shall be glad to be rid of it,” returned Worrals, smiling. “You’re not afraid of my disappearing with the money and the goods?”

The head of the drug traffickers shook his head. “Not in the least,” he said quietly.

“If you will arrange for a vehicle to be outside our hotel at eight o’clock to-night I shall be delighted to hand the charas over to you,” said Worrals.

“It will be there.” The Egyptian stood up, presumably to indicate that the meeting was at an end. “Good day to you. We trust that what has passed between us will be treated in the strictest confidence by you, as it will be by us.”

“By to-night the incident will have been forgotten,” Worrals assured him.

“One last word of advice,” said the old man gravely. “Be careful. You have chosen to engage yourself in what would be dangerous work for men, let alone women. Let not the success of this, your first venture, lead you to suppose that this is a simple business, for thus might you be tempted to indiscretions that would assuredly be fatal to your liberty, if not your life.”

“I shall bear your words in mind,” answered Worrals seriously. “Good day, gentlemen.”

Markoff now made himself conspicuous and took the visitors out by the door through which they had entered. The car was still there. The same precautions were observed on the homeward as on the outward journey. When the door was next opened the car was outside the hotel.

Markoff did not get out, but Worrals spoke to him through the window. “Thank you for your excellent staff work,” she said. “I trust that any transactions we may have in the future will be as successful. Good-bye.” With Frecks at her elbow she went in, and on to their room.

CHAPTER FIVE

Markoff comes Back

NOT until they were inside their room with the door shut did Worrals speak. “Pity about that,” she said, tossing her hat into a chair.

“What’s a pity?” asked Frecks wonderingly. “I thought everything went off well.”

“It did, as far as the charas was concerned. But I’m afraid we’ve had our trouble for nothing. Colin Pasha will no doubt be pleased to hear what we’ve learned about the charas syndicate, but the dope racket was not the trouble that brought us here. The people we saw had no interest in guns, I’m sure of that. My every instinct tells me that the old man spoke the truth when he said they never touched weapons. Had he been, he would have shown more interest in our proposition. We’ve been barking up the wrong tree.”

“They seemed quite a decent crowd,” observed Frecks.

“Don’t fool yourself,” said Worrals grimly. “They behaved as they did because it suited them. Had it suited them to have our throats cut they would have done it. Believe you me, we’ve never been on thinner ice than we were in that room. One whiff of suspicion that we were government agents and we shouldn’t have left the house alive. Well, I don’t know about you, but I could do with a long iced drink.” Worrals touched the bell.

It was answered by the dutiful Melinos, who closed the door and stood with his back against it.

“Squeeze some lemons into two long glasses with some sugar, ice and soda water,” ordered Worrals.

Melinos did not move. “How did you get on?”

“Not bad, as far as it went.”

“How far did it go?”

“We sold the charas to the syndicate.”

Melinos stared. On his face was an expression of astonishment that was almost comical. “You’ve—sold—the charas?”

“We have.”

“Are you telling me that you’ve actually been in personal contact with the heads of the syndicate?”

“We’ve just left a full committee meeting.”

Melinos swallowed. “Suffering crocodiles! We’ve been trying for years to do that.”

“It just needed a woman’s touch,” bantered Worrals.

“Do you seriously mean that you’ve arranged to hand over two hundred pounds of dope?”

“That’s what I said.”

Melinos made a gesture of helplessness. “You’ll have half the population on their backs.”

“Half the population lie on their backs all day, anyway. The syndicate has all the hashish it needs; this consignment will make no difference.”

“There’ll be one mighty row about this, if it ever gets out.”

“It needn’t get out. But don’t stand yammering about a pound or two of narcotic—can’t you see we’re swooning for liquid refreshment?”

“Sorry.” Melinos went off, but was soon back with the drinks. “I’m still thinking about this dope,” he muttered. “I shall have to account for it.”

“That’s your worry,” Worrals told him heartlessly. “No harm has been done. The government will be five thousand pounds better off—they couldn’t have sold the stuff themselves. They ought to give me a rake-off, and I’ll tell them so if they start bleating about it. Seriously, the sale of the stuff will make no difference to the amount of dope in circulation because the syndicate has all it needs. They took this lot off my hands simply to prevent it from spoiling their market. What shall I do with the money—give it to you?”

“Not on your life. I don’t want it. What would I do with it? If I handed it over to Finance they’d ask me what it was for and that would spill the beans.”

“Well, it will have to go through my bank anyway, or the syndicate would smell a rat,” asserted Worrals. “I’ll tell Colin Pasha about it later.”

Melinos nodded. “All right, let’s leave it like that. When are you handing the stuff over?”

“To-night.”

“Hm. Tell me this. What good has this move done? Has it put you in touch with the people you’re looking for?”

“I’m afraid not—at least, things don’t look very promising. You can take it from me that the syndicate as a whole is not in the gun racket. But I’ve

sown a few seeds, and one of them might germinate. By the way, I suppose Maki and Ali will be all right when I hand over the charas to-night? I know we arranged that with them, but——”

“You needn’t worry about that. They’re two of the best men we’ve got.”

“Could I use them if the occasion arose?”

“Certainly. For what purpose are you thinking?”

“I may need an interpreter some time.”

“They’ll do that for you. They know every lingo spoken between Alex and Mombasa.”

“Good enough. Let’s leave it at that, then. You’d better not stay here too long.”

“Quite right. See you later.” Melinos, with a cheerful wave, departed.

Worrals handed Frecks her drink, and drank deeply herself. “That’s better,” she gasped. “I was panting for that. It’s pretty warm, even in here.”

“Do you think there is a chance of anything developing out of this morning’s business?” inquired Frecks. “I know you told Melinos that you’d planted some seeds, but have you any hopes that some of them will take root?”

“Frankly, I’m not very happy about it. Of course, there’s just a chance. I’m sure that the syndicate as a whole doesn’t touch guns; but that doesn’t mean that one of the men in that room hasn’t got a private interest or two. Look at it this way. Colin Pasha is a shrewd man. He can’t have made many mistakes during his service or he wouldn’t be holding the responsible job he’s got now. He is convinced that this gun-running racket could only be handled by someone who knows the ropes from A to Z, someone with some sort of organization. What other organization is there, apart from the hashish syndicate? None, presumably, or he’d have mentioned it. There’s only one hashish syndicate. The people we saw this morning wouldn’t tolerate competition. It begins to look as if either Colin Pasha was wrong, or else there’s a member of that syndicate playing a game of his own. He wouldn’t be likely to mention that this morning in front of the others, but there’s just a chance that he might contact us later. We shall see. Meanwhile I’ll slip round to the bank with this cheque. You hold the fort here until I come back, in case anything turns up.”

“O.K.”

Worrals was away about ten minutes. Hardly had she returned to the room when Melinos came in.

“You look like having a busy day,” said he. “Your yellow-skinned friend is below, asking for you. By the way, while I have a chance to ask, what’s his name?”

“Markoff.”

“Nationality?”

“I’ve no idea,” admitted Worrals. “He probably doesn’t know himself. Bring him up.”

Melinos went off, to return almost at once with the man who had negotiated the morning’s transaction. Frecks could not imagine what he wanted, but assumed that it was something to do with the charas deal. Not for a moment did she suspect his real errand. It struck her that he did not seem quite so sure of himself as he had been on the previous occasion, and when he began to speak the reason became evident.

Worrals invited him to take a seat, which he accepted; but he declined refreshment.

He lost no time in coming to the purpose of his visit. “You may be surprised to see me back so soon,” he began. “But there is a little matter in which I may be of assistance to you—for a consideration, of course. I refer to the offer you made to my employers concerning some—er—guns.”

Frecks’s nerves tightened. In a flash she understood. So Worrals had been right after all. Here was one of the seeds she had sown, germinating.

Worrals answered. “Ah—yes,” she said casually. “In what way are you interested?”

“For the same reason as most people are interested in a business proposition—money.”

“You would like to buy the goods?”

“No. But I could find you a buyer. Judging by what you said this morning you have the goods, but no market for them. I could get you out of that difficulty. It would involve some trouble and risk so I should expect to cut in on a profit-sharing basis.”

“That’s fair enough,” agreed Worrals. “What would you expect if the deal came off?”

“Ten per cent.”

Worrals did not make the mistake of being over eager. She shook her head. “No, no, Mr. Markoff. That’s too much. Our own margin of profit is likely to be small. We’ve had to move the stuff; we had to pay for it in cash, and we’ve stood out of our money for some time. There can be little risk where you are concerned.”

“But there is.”

“I should have to be convinced of that.”

Markoff hesitated like a man faced with a big decision, or like one who is being forced to disclose something he would prefer to keep concealed. “Very well, I will tell you,” he decided. “We are all in business to make money and I need some badly at this moment or I would not put myself in your hands. But there is this to be said. You could not betray me without betraying yourselves.”

“Suppose we leave this talk of betrayal out of the argument, Mr. Markoff?” said Worrals coldly. “Are we doing business together or are we not?”

“Yes, yes. Quite so,” said Markoff hastily. “But let me explain. As you probably realize, I am paid a salary—a fair salary, I admit—by my employers. My work is to organize the transport and distribution of all hashish coming into the country. It all passes through my hands. I arrange everything. I buy the transport equipment. I pay the men, and all other charges. I control the boats, the camels, the porters—everything. Of course, the money is provided by my employers, who assume that these lines of communication exist for their business alone. But in the circumstances, with such a widespread and efficient organization at my disposal, it would be strange, would it not, if I did not employ it for one or two sidelines of my own?”

“Of course,” agreed Worrals in a curious voice.

“Mind you, I never jeopardize my employers’ interest. I wouldn’t do that,” went on Markoff, in a voice of horror at the bare suggestion of such a thing.

“Of course not,” murmured Worrals. “But aren’t you taking a big risk?”

“Of course I am. That is exactly my point,” declared Markoff. “If this were known to my employers it would cost me my life. Now that you understand the risk I run, I hope you will agree that a profit of ten per cent is not asking too much?”

“Maybe you are right,” conceded Worrals.

“It will mean a lot of work for me, too,” asserted Markoff. “But the organisation is there, and as I come in contact with all sorts of merchants I can sometimes use it for my benefit. It comes to this. If the man I have in mind is interested in your goods I would use my organization on your behalf.”

“What makes you think he might be interested?” inquired Worrals.

Markoff looked pained. "Why must you ask so many questions?" He shrugged. "I suppose it is because you are women. Still, I may as well tell you. I have already used the organization for the transport of the same goods as you are offering."

Not by a flicker of an eyelid did Worrals reveal what was passing in her mind. "I suppose there is no risk of our stepping on someone else's toes, as we did by importing the charas?"

"None whatever," declared Markoff. "The position is entirely different. In Egypt there is no shortage of hashish. We can get all we want. But in some places there is a shortage of rifles, so the market is always open. Naturally, we should have to be very careful. If it became known what we were doing, the consequences would be more disastrous than if we were caught with hashish. I should also tell you that the profits of this venture would not all be mine. I have to purchase the silence of some of my operatives when they are engaged on my private business."

"Well, thank you for being so frank," said Worrals. "Now we understand each other perfectly. In the circumstances I'll tell you what I think is the best thing to do. You have been most helpful, and I do not like the idea of putting you to so much risk. Let us reduce that risk as far as possible. All you need do is to put us in touch with the man you have in mind, the potential buyer, and leave us to negotiate the entire transaction with him. If you will do that I'll give you two hundred and fifty pounds now as a guarantee of good faith. If the deal comes off I'll give you a further two hundred and fifty, plus ten per cent of the net profits. You will also be on a ten per cent commission of all future transactions we make with the same man. That, as far as you are concerned, will be money for nothing, because you need have nothing to do with it."

"Very good," said Markoff, his dark eyes sparkling. "So there may be further transactions?"

"Yes, transactions running into real money, not mere chicken-feed like this one. We've been offered some machine-guns but we don't feel inclined to take them up until we've established a market and made direct contact with it. Oh, and that reminds me. I owe you something for the efficient manner in which you conducted the charas sale." While Worrals had been speaking she had opened her bag and taken from it a big wad of new notes. She peeled several off and passed them. "There you are, Mr. Markoff. There's no taste in nothing."

Markoff's dark eyes gleamed as he took the money. "Thank you. Thank you indeed. That is most generous of you, dear lady."

“It’s a mistake to be niggardly with people who give good service,” returned Worrals casually.

“Quite so—quite so.”

“Now, what about this new deal? How shall we leave it?”

“I will get in touch with my man right away to see what he says,” suggested Markoff.

“How long will that take?”

“About a fortnight, if all goes well. There may be delays beyond my control.”

Worrals looked horrified. “A fortnight! That’s hopeless. We can’t hang about all that time. Every day we hold the goods is an added risk. Besides, the delay won’t do the weapons any good.”

“Where are they?”

“On the coast, between Ras Mingiri and Kosier, buried in the sand dunes.”

Markoff looked distressed. “I couldn’t get a reply earlier.”

“Why not?”

“The man is a long way from here, with sea and land, both difficult to cross, between us.”

“But I could travel round the world in that time!” exclaimed Worrals.

“Perhaps so. But it is not altogether a matter of distance. This man is on the other side of the Gulf of Suez and one must travel by boat and on foot to reach him. There may be hold-ups. The patrol boats are very active.”

“Then why not let us go to him?” suggested Worrals. “The whole thing could then be fixed up right away. You could give us a letter of introduction, and perhaps send one of your men with us to act as guide.”

Markoff looked worried. “I don’t like putting anything in writing. It’s dangerous.”

“You needn’t sign the letter. Haven’t you some private mark, or seal, that the man would recognize? One thing is certain. I’m not going to hang about here for weeks—it’s too risky.”

Markoff considered the matter. “Very well. I think perhaps your way is best. I’ll write a letter and give it to you to-night, when I will tell you how to proceed. I shall have to provide transport and an escort. You would never get there otherwise.”

“Where is this place?” asked Worrals.

“I cannot tell you that.”

“But I must have some idea of where I’m going,” protested Worrals.

“I cannot tell you any more,” answered Markoff firmly. “This I insist. You will go with an escort I shall provide. My men will take you there and bring you back. This much I will say because of the clothes you will need. Part of the journey will be on water, part on foot, and part on horses, or perhaps camels. Therefore you cannot take much luggage—just your toilet things and something to sleep in.”

“Shall we give up our room here?”

“No, I would not do that. Reserve the room and leave your things here. You will then have somewhere to go on your return.”

“When shall we start? The earlier the better.”

“Very well. Be ready to travel to-night after you have handed over the charas. I shall take it over myself. That is part of my job.” A note of resentment crept into Markoff’s voice. “My employers take care never to come in contact with the stuff they sell. I take the risks. They make the money.”

“Too bad,” consoled Worrals. “But there, I’m afraid that is usually the way in big business.”

Markoff got up. “I must go. I have stayed here too long already.”

“The time has not been wasted,” murmured Worrals.

Markoff walked towards the door. “I will bring the car round to-night. You will direct me to the place where the charas is stored. Be ready for a hard journey. If you find it tiresome remember that the choice was yours.”

“What is a little discomfort if the profits are high?” said Worrals airily. “We’ll see you to-night.”

Markoff departed.

Worrals waited until she saw him, through the window, enter his car and drive away. Then she turned to Frecks with a sparkle in her eyes. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” she declared.

“Yes, and I should feel happier if I knew just where,” returned Frecks succinctly.

“What does it matter? We shall be in the real business. What a rogue that fellow must be! It took me all my time not to be sick.”

“You handled him very nicely,” complimented Frecks.

“Pah! There was nothing to it,” asserted Worrals, in a tone of disgust. “Once you know that a man makes money his god you can’t go wrong. It’s only a matter of price. If I offered Markoff enough money he’d sell his employers without batting an eyelid; which means, of course, that he’d sell

us, too, if he thought it worth while. That tip I gave him did the trick. After that he was ready to eat out of my hand. All the time he was babbling about risks he never realized the risks he was taking in talking like he did. The sight of easy money and the prospect of more blinded him. Money is his weakness. One day it will be his downfall; and that day, I hope, is not far distant.”

Frecks finished her lemonade. “Talking of risks, it occurs to me that we’re taking a few ourselves,” she observed.

Worrals took her by the arm. “Suppose we forget about that and look for a spot of lunch? I think we’ve earned it. Then we’d better have a rest. I have a feeling that we’ve a busy time in front of us.”

There was a tap on the door and Melinos put his head in. “I saw Yellow-face go,” he said softly. “Any news?”

“Only this,” answered Worrals. “We shall be leaving here to-night for an indefinite period, so don’t get in a flap, thinking we’ve been bumped-off.”

Melinos closed the door. “What’s the idea?”

“We’re going to meet a man who is interested in buying rifles. In other words, I think we’ve struck the trail we were looking for.”

Melinos’s face brightened with enthusiasm. “By Jove! That’s marvellous. Where are you going?”

“Beyond the fact that it’s somewhere the other side of the Gulf of Suez I have no idea.”

“The other side of the Red Sea! The Sinai Peninsula!” Melinos looked really startled. “Are you out of your minds? Anything could happen to you there.”

“Anything could happen to us here, if it comes to that,” Worrals pointed out.

“Yes, I know; but here I might be able to do something about it. But the other side of . . . D’you know the sort of country you’re going to?”

“More or less.”

“It’s ghastly,” declared Melinos. “Look here. Seriously, you’d better call this off and let us carry on from here.”

“Not on your life,” protested Worrals indignantly. “What we start we finish. Having gone to all this trouble, I have no intention of handing the thing over to people who admitted themselves that they couldn’t even get started on it.”

Melinos shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “I shall have to report this to the chief.”

Worrals regarded him with calculating eyes. “Now you listen to me,” she said sternly. “We’ve got along very well so far, and I’m grateful to you for the assistance you’ve given us; but if you do anything now to upset my plans, you and I are going to fall out in a big way. You stick around and wait for us to come back. If we don’t come back—well, at least we’ve given you a start on the thing, so our efforts will have been worth while. Before we leave I’ll tell you all we’ve discovered. If we need help, we’ll get in touch with you fast enough, don’t worry.”

“How?”

“I’ve no idea. I’m going to take Maki with us—or try to. He’ll act as interpreter if necessary, and at a pinch could become a messenger. Things are going quite nicely, so all I ask is, don’t do anything to upset them. We’re going out to lunch now.”

Melinos looked resigned. “What time are you leaving?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Is there anything else you want—anything I can get you?”

“Yes,” assented Frecks, almost flippantly. “You can get me a couple of pounds of really good chocolates.”

What prompted her to say this she did not know, as she later admitted to Worrals. The words came on the spur of the moment. In any case, she did not expect to be taken seriously. The time was to come when she was to give thanks for the inspiration—if inspiration it was.

Anyway, Melinos accepted the suggestion without question. Perhaps he thought it was a natural request for a girl to make. “Good enough,” he agreed. “As it happens, I know where there’s a really good line of chocolates. I’ll put them on the table if you’re not here.” He raised a hand in salute. “So-long for now.”

Worrals picked up her hat. “Come on, let’s eat. A hot trail always did give me an appetite.”

CHAPTER SIX

Journey by Sea

FIVE minutes to eight found Frecks ready for departure, standing by the window overlooking the street, every detail of which was clear in the white light of the Egyptian moon. Over her arm hung a canvas shoulder-bag containing the absolute minimum of things she thought she would require. From the top peeped a piece of white paper, the outside wrapping of the chocolates which she had found on the table on her return from lunch. With them were two other packages, containing small mandarin oranges and peaches respectively. These also she had put in her bag, grumbling at the extra weight as she did so. As Melinos had been to the trouble of getting them she felt that she could not leave them behind. She was not to know that before long they were to thank Melinos from the bottom of their hearts for his thoughtful gesture.

Watching, Frecks saw Markoff's car arrive and pull into the kerb. "He's here," she told Worrals.

"I'm ready," announced Worrals, slinging her own bag on her arm.

They went down the stairs and into the street. Upon their appearance the rear door of the car swung open. "I thought ladies were never punctual," said the voice of Markoff, from inside.

"It depends on who they are meeting, and where they are going," bantered Worrals.

"Ah, that may be the answer," came back Markoff glibly. "Where am I to tell the driver to take us?"

"To the old coffee warehouse at the old port," replied Worrals.

Markoff repeated the address to the driver and the car glided forward. "How did you find that place?" he queried.

"It was found for us by a friend," returned Worrals. "We have friends, you know, as well as you," she added tartly.

This time the windows were not blacked out. There was, as Frecks realized, no point in such a precaution.

The only words spoken during the run to the waterfront came from Worrals, who asked their companion if he was not afraid to take such a pretentious vehicle through such insalubrious streets.

Markoff said he was not afraid. Only a man contemplating suicide, he added, would be so foolish as to molest a car as well known as his.

Frecks had no qualms about this part of the operation. The charas had been paid for and the money was in the bank. There was, therefore, no incentive for Markoff to play them false. In a few minutes the car ran to a stop at the place to which, on the occasion of their first visit, they had been taken by Melinos. Worrals got out and gave the pre-arranged knock. The door was opened by Maki with an alacrity which suggested he had been on the watch. He stood aside to allow them to enter, closed the door behind them, and walked with them to the felucca.

The rest of the programme was carried out in a manner just as inconsequential. Markoff looked at the charas, examined some of it, and then asked that Maki and Ali be requested to carry it to the boot of the car, which they did. Nothing could have been more simple. They might, thought Frecks, have been handling a few sacks of potatoes, instead of enough narcotic to drug half the city.

Markoff spoke to Worrals. "I shall have to ask you to wait a few minutes for me," he said. "This place is as good as any. I should be back in about a quarter of an hour. You see, I shall have to deliver the charas and use this same car to take you to the point of embarkation."

"You've got everything organized?" questioned Worrals.

"Yes, there should be no hitch."

Markoff went out and the car drove off.

Worrals looked at Frecks in the dim light. "Well that's that," she remarked. "I've had more trouble getting a pound of sausages. I'm glad he's gone because that gives me a chance to have a word with Maki." She called the old Askari close to her. "Maki," she went on, in a low, serious voice, "tonight we are going on a journey of great importance. We don't know where we are going or how long we shall be away. There will be danger. We need a man with us who knows his way about, a man of courage and resource, one who knows the local languages. One whom you know has told us that you are such a man. He speaks well of you. Will you come with us?"

"Also he has spoken to me of this, lady," answered Maki. "I will come."

"Thank you," answered Worrals. "There is no more to say. We know no more ourselves. We shall act as we think best as we go along. Ali will stay

here to mind the boat, and to tell the one whom we know, if he should come for news, that all went well.”

Frecks put in a word. “What if Markoff should refuse to allow you to take Maki?”

“If he objects, I have reasons ready,” answered Worrals.

At this juncture Markoff returned. “That part is settled,” he announced with satisfaction. “Now, if we are all ready, let us start. We have a long journey before us.”

“Did you bring the letter of introduction?” asked Worrals.

“It is here.” Markoff drew an envelope from his pocket and passed it. “It is written in words that will be understood only by him for whom it is intended. When he has read it you can talk business.”

“How shall I know who to give it to?”

“I shall go with you to the port where the boat is waiting. There, I shall pass you on to the *nakoda*, or, as you would say, the captain. He is my man. He knows everything. He will take you to the one to whom you will give the letter. As it turns out, in this matter we are fortunate. A telephone call has advised me that the boat would have to sail to-night in any case to keep an appointment and pick up merchandise for which this same man is waiting. Come, I shall drive you to the boat myself.”

“I see,” murmured Worrals. “Where is this starting point? You might as well tell us because we shall recognize the place when we get to it.”

“We go to Suez,” said Markoff shortly.

For a moment Worrals was startled. Markoff had warned them that they had a long journey before them, but this was farther than she expected. Trying to visualize the map she thought it must be far outside the range of any help that could be expected in Alexandria.

“Your one danger is a patrol boat,” said Markoff. He looked at Worrals sideways. “If you are caught you will have to make up your own story. If such a thing should happen that you are stopped and questioned, it is to be hoped that you will stand by the usual rules of the business and take whatever punishment you get without betraying your friends.”

Just what this sinister statement implied was not clear, but Frecks began to wonder with what sort of merchandise their boat was loaded. Hashish, probably, she thought. However, she said nothing, supposing—correctly—that the answer would be forthcoming in due course.

“We are not the sort that betray their colleagues,” said Worrals crisply.

Frecks was still thinking hard. She perceived that if their vessel was loaded with contraband, and they were stopped by a patrol boat, the danger to them might be even greater than Markoff imagined. In order to avoid arrest they would have to reveal who they were and what they were doing, in which case the syndicate, with its extensive spy service, would certainly get to hear of it. In that event they would be lucky indeed to get out of Egypt alive.

Markoff moved towards the door.

“You don’t mind if I bring one of my men with me?” said Worrals casually.

“What man?” demanded Markoff sharply. “What for?”

“One of my personal servants. No doubt we shall need an interpreter.”

“Who is this man?”

“He’s here—one of my boatmen.”

“Is he to be trusted?”

Worrals spoke with scorn. “Do try to use your intelligence. For days he has been here in charge of enough charas to make him rich for life. As you see, he hasn’t touched it. Do you suppose I should leave a man here unless I could trust him with my life?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” agreed Markoff, grudgingly. “Bring him if you like. One more will not make much difference, although the boat will be fully loaded.”

“He knows enough already if he wanted to make mischief,” Worrals pointed out.

They left the warehouse, with Maki in the party, and got into the car. Frecks noticed that the chauffeur was no longer in it. Markoff said nothing more, but taking the wheel set off on the long run to Suez, where, after an uneventful drive, they arrived about two o’clock in the morning. Frecks dozed part of the time.

“I must be back in Alexandria before daylight,” said Markoff, breaking the long silence.

The car was by this time making its way through narrow, squalid streets, to arrive presently at a small basin, where a number of craft, all native types, floated on black, stagnant-looking water.

“There’s your *boutre*,” announced Markoff, pointing to a sailing boat that lay alongside a rotting jetty.

Frecks looked it over with interest, but without enthusiasm, knowing that they were to spend some time on it. It was obviously native built, a clumsy-

looking craft of eight or ten tons, half decked-over, with a large, triangular lateen sail. She could only hope that it would prove more seaworthy than it looked. On the deck lounged seven or eight natives.

The captain—or *nakoda*, as Markoff called him—was waiting. He came forward, and with Markoff carried on a swift conversation in a language Frecks did not even recognize. It ended abruptly and Markoff turned to Worrals. “All right. Go aboard. You are casting off immediately. I hope everything goes well. Good-bye.”

As Frecks followed Worrals to the deck she said softly: “He seemed in a dickens of a hurry suddenly.”

Maki, who was close enough to hear, whispered: “There is a government boat not far away.”

“That probably explains it,” murmured Worrals.

No sooner were they all on board than the *nakoda* rapped out an order and the crew cast off.

“Well, here we go,” observed Worrals. “This is going to be a bit slower than our usual way of travelling, but at least it will be a change.”

“I wish I knew where we were bound for in this tub,” returned Frecks uneasily. “She stinks like the fo’c’sle of a Dutch onion boat. The *nakoda*, as they call him, isn’t a bad-looking type, but the crew are a pretty ropery lot.”

“What would you expect to find on a craft of this sort? She will have carried some queer cargoes in her time, I imagine. According to Markoff, we have either got some queer cargo on board now, or we are due to pick some up. It’ll be interesting to see what it is. No wonder the Navy is always busy in the Red Sea. This sort of thing has always gone on, and always will, I suppose.” She half-turned to Maki. “Of what tribe are these men?” she inquired.

“Danakils—savages. Not good,” answered the taciturn ex-Askari. “They eat their children or sell them for slaves,” he added casually.

“Nice people to know,” murmured Frecks.

By this time the harbour lights were fading astern, behind a wake of rippling phosphorescence. A little breeze stirred; the *nakoda* gave an order; the crew moved quickly; the lateen sail went up, and under its broad triangle the boat stood away towards the south over black water so smooth that it looked as if it had been ironed out by the heat. A white moon hung over the edge of the world and glinted eerily on the gleaming wake. On the breeze came that smell peculiar to the Middle East, which seems to be a mixture of sheep-folds, dry grass, and spices.

“It looks as if we are going to have a smooth trip, anyway,” observed Frecks.

“The trouble with the Gulf of Suez at this time of the year is, you can never count on it,” replied Worrals. “It can change in a few minutes.” She walked along the sloping deck and spoke to the *nakoda*. She discovered that he spoke a little English and a little French, so between the two they were able to get along. He said that two bunks had been prepared for them in the cabin so that they could go to sleep if they were tired.

“I’m not sleeping in that fug-hutch,” declared Frecks, who had overheard. “I’m all for sleeping on deck.”

The *nakoda* said they could sleep where they liked as long as they kept out of the way of the crew, who might have to work the sail. He suggested a place in the bows not occupied by ropes that littered most of the deck.

Worrals asked Maki to bring up some blankets, and this he did, spreading them over the place indicated, not as a covering, which was unnecessary, but as a mattress. Frecks was not surprised to find them a bit smelly, but, as she remarked, they were better than lying on the hard deck.

“I don’t know about you,” she told Worrals, “but I’m falling asleep on my feet. How about getting a spot of shut-eye while we can?”

“I think that’s a good idea,” agreed Worrals.

Frecks’s last recollection was gazing up at the mystery of the heavens, which, with its myriad stars, was a thing to wonder at. But she must have fallen asleep almost immediately, for when she looked at the sky again it was broad daylight, with the sail standing out above her, taut in a breeze. The *boutre* had come to life, and was sticking her nose into a short, choppy sea. Sitting up Frecks saw that Worrals was already afoot, leaning against the mast and holding on to the standing rigging, watching a low desert coastline on the starboard side.

Maki appeared, bringing metal mugs of hot sweet coffee with some coarse bread.

“Good man,” complimented Worrals. “Have you been able to find out from the crew where we are going?”

“No, lady,” answered the old man. “I have spoken with these sons of dogs who man the ship, but they are well-trained and their lips are as hard to open as oysters.”

“Do you know where we are now?”

“Only this,” answered Maki. “We are sailing down the coast of Egypt. It is always the same, but if there is a mark I shall recognize it.”

There was nothing more to be said. Breakfast finished, Frecks nibbled a chocolate with the freshening breeze caressing her face and ruffling her hair.

And so the day wore on. Sometimes Frecks dozed. Sometimes she lay, chin in hand, watching the never-changing coast, an endless succession of sand dunes broken sometimes by wind-torn sun-scorched palms. The *nakoda* and his men lounged in the stern while a man on the bowsprit kept watch. Maki sat a little apart, watching the coast with dark, inscrutable eyes, speaking only when spoken to. The breeze continued to freshen and the boat made good progress, but made no move to turn off its course. Frecks began to wonder how much farther they were going. There was nothing else to think about, or do, except move into the shade of the sail as the fierce sun marched across the heavens.

“This isn’t going to be too good for our complexions,” she remarked dolefully on one occasion.

“We haven’t any worth worrying about, so what does it matter?” replied Worrals philosophically, reaching for her bag. “These oranges were a good idea. I don’t know what we should have done without them.”

Towards evening Maki produced more coffee and bread, with a dish of rice strongly flavoured with what seemed to be gravy of some sort. Frecks made several guesses as to what it might be, until Worrals told her it was better not to know. Night brought relief from the heat, but still the boat held on its course. The breeze nearly died away. Bored, for there was nothing left to say, Frecks settled down to sleep.

It was still dark, although the first faint flush of the false dawn tinted the sky, when she was awakened by the crash of the sail coming down. Jumping up with Worrals, who had also been sleeping, she saw that they were lying close to the shore, in a little cove hemmed in on all sides with precipitous rocks of black basalt.

“It looks as if we’ve arrived,” she said. “Thank goodness for that.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong,” answered Worrals. “We’re still on the western side of the Red Sea. Unless Markoff deliberately lied to mislead us, our rendezvous is on the Arabian side. What I think we’re doing is picking up the cargo he spoke about.”

Frecks groaned. “This is a slow business,” she grumbled.

“Things will probably move fast enough before we’ve finished,” prophesied Worrals. “I’m going to watch this. I have a suspicion that this may be what we’re hoping to find. The trouble is, we’ve got into the habit of dashing about in an aircraft. It may do us good to slow down for a while to the speed some people still travel.”

By this time there was a good deal of activity among the crew, and staring into the darkness Frecks thought she could see the reason for it. Close under a cliff she could just make out the shape of a fairly large steamer. A dinghy, which their own *boutre* had been towing, was making its way towards it.

“I hope we shall be able to see what it brings back,” murmured Worrals. To Maki, who was also watching, she said: “Do you know this place?”

“I know it well,” answered Maki. “It is called Douba.”

When the dinghy returned it carried a number of boxes which Frecks had seen too often not to know what they contained. “Cartridges,” she breathed. “Small arms ammunition.”

Worrals nodded. “That’s it.”

Four trips the dinghy made, and then Frecks heard the steamer’s anchor coming up. “That’s the lot,” she breathed.

Presently the steamer, showing no lights, glided past, and disappeared into the south. The boxes were quickly stowed below, but the dinghy had not finished its work. There was a longer delay while it went to the shore. When it came back it was piled high with something neither Worrals nor Frecks could identify. Worrals asked Maki what it was.

“Hides,” answered the old man. “Green hides.”

“Hides? What on earth do they want those for?” asked Worrals.

“To cover up the boxes,” replied Maki.

“He’s right,” said Worrals presently, as the heavy, still-wet hides were dragged below and piled over the ammunition boxes.

“Well, well,” breathed Worrals. “So that’s how it’s done. Very interesting.”

The activity on board was now feverish, and it was evident that the *nakoda* was anxious to get away from the scene of the sinister loading operation. In the light of the growing dawn the sail was hoisted and the boat stood away towards the east, into the eye of the rising sun.

“Well, that’s that,” murmured Worrals. “If we learn nothing else the trip will have been worth while. I wish I could have read the name of that steamer; but I had a good look at her silhouette, and I think I could recognize her again.”

“It looks as if we’re going to have another hot, dull day,” was all Frecks had to say as they returned to their couch under the sail.

In one respect her prediction was correct. The day was hot; but not by any stretch of the imagination could it be called dull.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alarms and Complications

OUT of sight of land, Worrals and Frecks had just finished breakfast when a sudden shout from the lookout caused a stir among the crew, most of whom sprang to their feet in obvious alarm.

“Now what!” exclaimed Frecks, taking a quick look round the horizon.

It was her ears, not her eyes, that answered the question. From a long way off came the faint but unmistakable hum of an aero engine—or engines. All eyes were turned upwards, and it was evident from the nervousness of the crew that guilty consciences feared the approach of an R.A.F. patrol. And so it was. At any rate, the machine turned out to be a service flying boat, cruising at a great height. For a time it stood towards them; but when it showed no sign of coming lower, and presently turned away on a north-westerly course, the relief of the crew was made manifest in broad smiles. The drone faded and the machine disappeared into the blue distance.

Frecks thought no more about the incident. Nor, for that matter, did Worrals. Both assumed that the aircraft was on some business of its own, which did not concern them, a supposition natural enough in the circumstances.

It was about an hour later, by which time the breeze had fallen somewhat so that the *boutre* was scarcely making headway over a shimmering sea, that Frecks was aroused from the reverie into which she had fallen by another shout from the lookout, followed by a shrill chatter of voices and the patter of bare feet over the deck. It was clear that this time something really serious was afoot, and Worrals as well as Frecks sprang up to ascertain what it was.

Maki, who seemed to have the useful faculty of appearing when he was most needed, came over and supplied the information. He announced without emotion that a government patrol vessel was coming up astern, very fast.

“How very annoying,” muttered Worrals. “I suppose they have a job to do, but I wish they would be a little less efficient at this moment. If they board this boat and find the cartridges our whole scheme falls to pieces.”

“Melinos should have warned everyone to keep clear of us,” said Frecks.

“Don’t be silly,” flashed back Worrals. “How could he do that without letting our particular cat out of the bag.”

By this time the crew was in a state bordering on consternation—as it had every reason to be. What was worse, from remarks and gestures made in furious altercation with the *nakoda* it was plain that the passengers were suspected of bringing the vessel on their trail.

“I shall have to do something about this, and quickly, or there’s going to be a mess,” said Worrals briskly. She had a look at the patrol boat and then went to the *nakoda*. “What’s the matter with you?” she demanded angrily. “Keep calm. Tell your men to sit down and behave naturally, or we shall all find ourselves in prison.”

“But the boxes——” stammered the *nakoda* in a panic. “They will find them.”

“If you go on behaving like this they will,” Worrals told him curtly. “Say nothing. Leave everything to me. They will not arrest two white people on their own ship. This is *our* boat—you understand? We’re on a pearling trip. Drop your sail and heave to.”

The *nakoda* brightened a little at this news, apparently perceiving that there was some truth in what Worrals had said. The government would take more notice of white women than of him.

There was no time for further discussion. The sail came down with a run, and a sullen silence settled on the *boutre* as the patrol vessel came racing up under the lash of its powerful engine. It swung smartly alongside, its native crew grinning, and the young white officer in charge efficient and unsmiling. His eyes ran over the crew and came to rest on Worrals. His voice, when he spoke, was uncompromising. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Joan Worrals is the name. Nationality British,” answered Worrals calmly. “With me is my friend, Miss Lovell. What can we do for you?”

“What are you doing here?”

Worrals’s eyebrows went up. “Is there any reason why we shouldn’t be here?” she inquired tartly.

“That’s what I’ve come to find out.”

“Indeed! And since when have you taken upon yourself the right to stop a ship on the high seas? There’s still a law against piracy, you know.”

The naval officer modified his tone somewhat. “Where are you going?”

“That’s entirely my business,” returned Worrals. “But since I am by nature a co-operative sort of person I’ll volunteer the information that we’re

on our way to the other side of the Red Sea. They tell me that the pearls are bigger and better over there.”

“All right. Would you mind coming aboard, both of you, and signing my log to that effect? Sorry to trouble you, but that’s part of my job.”

“That’s better,” approved Worrals. To the *nakoda*, who had turned several shades paler, she said quietly: “Don’t worry. Leave this to me.” Followed by Frecks she stepped on to the launch.

“This way, please,” invited the officer, and went below.

Worrals and Frecks went down the short companion-way into a tiny cabin.

Having got there Frecks stopped dead, staring, speechless with amazement. For there, in a cane chair, was the last man she expected to see. It was Melinos, and it was obvious from his face that he was in no congenial mood. He got up and addressed Worrals in no friendly voice.

“Are you girls out of your minds?” he demanded.

“You must be out of yours,” retorted Worrals, more angry than Frecks had seen her for a long time. “And if you must talk, talk quietly,” she added.

“You’ve led me a nice dance,” went on Melinos. “I had to move heaven and earth to find you. An R.A.F. flying boat spotted you and radioed your position to us. At least, we assumed it was you.”

“But why all this flap to find us?” demanded Worrals. “You knew what we were going to do. Everything is going fine.”

“That’s what *you* think. I’ve come to get you out.”

“Out of where?”

“Egypt.”

Worrals looked thunderstruck. “Why?”

“Your game’s up. Markoff knows who you are. The word has gone out to get you.”

“So what?”

Melinos clutched at his hair in exasperation. “Don’t you realize that at this moment a thousand wogs are on the lookout for you, with their hands on the hilts of their knives?”

“Really?” sneered Worrals. “Do you get hysterical every time something slips in your department?”

“This is different.”

“How?”

“You’re women.”

Worrals looked at Frecks. “You see,” she said bitterly. “We’re women, so we have to be shepherded about like a couple of lost lambs.” She turned back to Melinos. “How did Markoff find out about us?”

“I’m not certain, but he has spies everywhere. The only thing I can think of is, somebody tipped him off that a hundred seers of charas have gone out of bond. You’ve supplied him with just that amount of just the same quality. He’s not a fool. He knows that can’t be coincidence. He’s put two and two together and the answer is four. He knows you’re working for us, and that means you’re for it.”

“Pity, but it can’t be helped,” said Worrals sadly.

“What do you mean—can’t be helped? Surely you’re not going to argue about coming back with us? We’ll do our best to get you out of the country with whole skins.”

“We’re going on,” said Worrals. “I’ve told you before, what we start we finish. Thanks, and all that, for what you’ve done, but you chug-chug along home like a good boy and——”

“But my dear girl——”

“Please let us not start an unbecoming argument in front of two native crews,” requested Worrals in a pained voice. “We’re going on. We’ve got a bit of a story for you already. Give us time and we’ll get the complete low-down. We’ve got a load of cartridges on board and we’re going to find out who is waiting for them at the other end.”

Interest cooled Melinos’s concern. “Where did you pick them up?”

“At Douba, about dawn, from a twin-funnelled steamer of about four thousand tons. She’s got a broad band, white or yellow, near the top of her funnels.”

Melinos looked at the naval officer, who smiled and nodded as if he knew the ship. Then he turned back to Worrals. “All right,” he said wearily. “Have it your own way. It’s your funeral. I hope you get away with it, but I’m scared stiff. Good luck. You kids certainly take your nerve with you when you go out.”

“Not so much of the ‘kids’,” returned Worrals. “Thanks for the oranges—we’re finding them most useful. And thanks for coming along to warn us. Don’t think we don’t appreciate your efforts. We do at least know how things stand. Now push off and forget us.”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“No, but we hope to find out.”

“If you stick to your present course you’ll end up in one of the wildest parts of the Peninsula. It would be difficult for us to help you there.”

“Don’t let that worry you. Maki is a great stand-by. Now we’d better get a move on or our *nakoda* will be getting suspicious.” Worrals turned to the naval officer. “Be a bit curt with us when we go on deck, just for the look of it. It may help things if our *nakoda* thinks we’ve been clever enough to prevent you searching his boat.”

“Good enough.”

“Cheerio,” said Melinos. “If you want help, and can get word to me, I’ll do my best. I’ll keep a lookout for you, anyway. I shall have to report what’s happened to Colin Pasha, or if anything goes wrong he’ll skin me alive.”

Worrals and Frecks went back to the deck pretending to be still arguing with the naval officer. Worrals made a few final remarks and then, turning her back, reboarded the *boutre*. As the two vessels parted company she turned to the still pale *nakoda*. “All right,” she said. “They only think we are mad. Proceed.”

The *nakoda* repeated this information to the crew, with the result that the sullen faces broke into smiles. As the men jumped to the sail Worrals returned to Frecks. “I think that little incident has done more good than harm,” she observed. “They were so sure they were for it that from now on they’ll think we’re the cat’s whiskers. Phew! It’s hot. Let’s get in the shade.”

The sail went up and the boat resumed its interrupted voyage to its unknown destination.

“Pity about Markoff getting wise to us,” said Worrals, as she returned to her couch. “He’ll be after us, no doubt, but we should be all right if we can keep ahead of him. We’ve got a start, anyway.”

Frecks selected a peach from her bag. “I wish it wasn’t so brutally hot,” she remarked.

Some time later, how long they did not know, for they had both dozed in the shade of the sail, they were brought to full consciousness by yet another babble of voices.

“What, not again!” cried Frecks, raising herself on her elbow and looking around.

The scene had changed. For one thing, they were now in sight of land, which lay directly ahead at a distance of perhaps three or four miles—a strip of yellow sand backed by dark forbidding mountains criss-crossed by a thousand gullies cut in them through the ages by storm water. But it was not this that had caused the excitement. Coming along behind them was another

boutre, very much like their own. Its crew had got out their sweeps and were obviously trying to overtake the leading vessel.

Worrals called Maki over. “What does the *nakoda* think of it?” she inquired.

“He not like it—thinks pirate,” answered the old Askari.

“Pirate!” Worrals frowned. This was something outside her calculations.

“Me not think pirate,” said Maki. “I know that *boutre*—see mark on sail. Comes from Suez. Belong the same man bring you Suez in car.”

This information gave Worrals a jolt. She was not sure that she would not have preferred a pirate. If Maki was right—and there seemed no reason to doubt him—it was easy to see what was happening. The pursuit was on. Markoff had sent a second *boutre* to overtake them and bring them back—or, more likely, kill them and throw them into the sea.

She spoke to Maki. “You tell the *nakoda* that you know that boat. Say it is a pirate and tell him that we are all dead if it catches us. Ask him if he can lend me a rifle.”

“Yes, lady.” Maki went off to carry out the order.

“If that boat overtakes us we’ve had it,” remarked Frecks in a thin voice.

“It mustn’t overtake us,” answered Worrals. “Our only chance is to stop it. We mustn’t let it get within hailing distance.”

At this point Maki arrived with the *nakoda*. The captain of the *boutre* had looked sick when the naval vessel had appeared. Now he looked thoroughly scared. However, he said he had a rifle. What did Worrals intend doing with it?

“Bring it to me and I’ll show you,” replied Worrals.

The man went below and came back with an old Mauser rifle and some ammunition. Worrals took the weapon from him, made her way aft, and lay down facing the pursuing boat, now about four hundred yards away. The entire crew gathered to watch, talking excitedly among themselves. This was evidently something they understood.

A faint hail came over the water, borne on a breeze that was now freshening.

Worrals fired, and water flicked up near the bows of the *boutre*.

“Try to pick off the man at the tiller,” suggested Frecks.

“The trouble is I can’t see him clearly from here,” returned Worrals. Turning on her elbow she told the *nakoda* to get the sweeps out and start rowing.

The *nakoda* seemed to understand the situation perfectly. As the two boats were, they were more or less in line, a position which prevented Worrals from seeing the man steering the other boat because the mast was in the way. The *nakoda* ran to the tiller and threw his weight on it. This threw the boat on a new course and showed Worrals the man she wanted to see. She fired, and missed, but it did a good turn in that a shot was fired back. The result of this was to set their own crew scrambling for the sweeps. Worrals fired again, and her target disappeared, although whether the man was actually hit or not could not be ascertained. However, this caused the pursuing *boutre* to fall away. Another helmsman took over, but Worrals opened rapid fire and he soon vacated his post. Accurate shooting was practically impossible on account of the movements of the boats.

“Exactly how far are we from land?” Worrals asked the *nakoda*.

The reply was disconcerting. The man explained that the first land was a chain of low-lying islands that stretched across their path about a mile from the true shore.

Frecks glanced at the sun. “It will be dark in about twenty minutes. Can we hold them off until then?”

“The trouble is, those fellows know where we’re making for,” Worrals told her in a low voice. “Even if we made a landfall they’d be on our heels. Our only hope is to sink them.” She fired one or two more shots and then spoke to the *nakoda*. “You know this coast well?”

The man said he did.

“Is there any shoal water, or perhaps a reef, near the islands?”

The *nakoda* seemed suddenly to understand what Worrals was driving at. He said there was a narrow channel between two of the islands. It was guarded by a reef, just submerged.

“Head for it,” ordered Worrals. “If these pirates try to follow they may go aground. Take care not to go aground yourself.”

The *nakoda* shouted some orders to the crew. Apparently it was a trick the Danakils were able to appreciate, for they responded with shouts and renewed efforts at the sweeps.

Worrals kept up a steady fire for about ten minutes, during which time the gap between the two boats remained constant. The sound of surf, Frecks was pleased to note, drowned all others, so the danger of information being shouted from one boat to the other was no longer to be feared. Looking round she saw that they were passing between two flat, sterile islands, devoid of a blade of grass or a human habitation. The channel thus formed was not more than fifty yards wide, and through it the water raced and

boiled. The *nakoda*, now at the tiller, shouted himself hoarse. The crew hung on to their sweeps. Yawing dangerously the *boutre* plunged on through the channel. Frecks held her breath, but nothing happened, and they reached the calmer water beyond.

The excitement as the pursuing boat attempted to follow was intense. Then, suddenly, a wild yell rent the air. Even Maki joined in it, and the cause was plain enough. The ruse had succeeded. The pursuing *boutre* was aground. Her sail flapped madly and came down with a run. The entire crew leapt overboard, like frogs jumping into a pond.

“Have they gone crazy?” cried Frecks, who saw no reason for this.

Maki understood, however. “They lighten the boat in hope she will float off,” he informed her.

By this time the sun was sinking into the western horizon and the brief dusk had already started. Worrals told the grinning *nakoda* to carry on with the sweeps, and the boat held on towards the mainland, which like a great purple cloud filled the eastern sky. Then night came swiftly as day departed, and when Frecks last saw the pursuing *boutre*, it was still on the reef with its crew trying to rock it off.

“I don’t want to appear vindictive,” Worrals told Frecks, “but I hope that boat stays there for a week. It should be all plain sailing now.”

In this, however, she was mistaken. Their troubles were not yet over. The weather, having been kind for so long, now turned against them. The wind freshened suddenly and a curious livid band appeared on the northern horizon. The *nakoda* seemed to know what it meant, and, apparently, so did the crew, for they broke into an excited gabble.

Maki said he thought it was the monsoon, coming earlier than usual.

To Frecks, monsoon meant wind, and she took a firm stand in case it struck without further warning. The wind did not come. Instead, the breeze died away altogether, and this, in a curious way, had an even more tragic result. The crew, exhausted by their efforts at the sweeps, chose this moment to rest. The result was that the boat lost way, and refusing to answer to her rudder began to drift. Not until this happened did the *nakoda* appear to realize his danger. He took prompt steps to recover control, but he was too late. The boat stopped moving. The *nakoda* raised his hands in a despairing gesture, crying, “*Zema ari!*”

“What does that mean?” Worrals asked Maki.

“We are aground,” was the answer.

Even then Frecks was not alarmed. She could see no cause for worry, much less panic. The *nakoda* was shouting orders.

“I suppose that means we’ve got to jump overboard?” murmured Frecks.

The crew had a better idea—or thought they had. They started to throw overboard the heavy hides that had been used to camouflage the cartridge boxes. This took some time, during which the sky clouded over. The water started to gleam and flash with such phosphorescence as Frecks had never before seen. It began to boil. Fiery circles raced round the motionless *boutre*, making a network of green flame. Sometimes they seemed to collide, throwing up fountains of spray that fell like green rain. It was one of the most remarkable phenomena Frecks had witnessed, and little guessing the reason she remarked on it.

“Sharks,” said Maki, imperturbable as ever. “They come for the hides. Smell blood a long way.”

Frecks went cold all over, and when the *nakoda* came along to report that they must have sprung a leak because the vessel was making water she hung on to the mast for support. “If we get off this reef we shall sink,” she told Worrals in a horrified voice.

Worrals admitted that this was so.

Frecks stared at the water as if it fascinated her. It needed no effort of the imagination to picture the fate that awaited them should they find themselves swimming among the blood-maddened monsters that flashed in fiery circles through the drifting hides.

Then came the wind, and it arrived with a gust that settled the matter. The boat heeled over at a dangerous angle, and then with a shudder slid off whatever was holding her into deep water. The crew baled feverishly. The *nakoda* screamed. The sail filled with a crash and drove the boat towards the land. Frecks clung to the mast, looking not at the sea, but at the black mass of land that loomed more clearly every moment. The thought of what was likely to happen when they got into the surf bereft her of the power of speech and movement.

This well-founded fear did not, as it happened, materialize. The boat surged past a towering mass of rocks into smooth water. The wind fell like magic. The horror of the last ten minutes seemed as if it had never been. Presently their keel scraped on a shingle beach.

“Well, we’ve made it,” said Worrals, in a voice which suggested that she herself was more than a little surprised.

Frecks drew a deep breath. “That was absolutely ghastly,” she asserted. “I’ve never been so petrified in my life.”

“This morning you were complaining that we looked like having a dull day,” reminded Worrals. “I hope you’re satisfied.”

“I am,” replied Frecks coldly. “I should have been satisfied with less.”

“O.K. Let’s go ashore,” suggested Worrals. She turned to Maki. “I suppose they’ll be able to repair the leak by the time we are ready to go back?”

Maki said there would be no difficulty about that. Such little accidents were always happening.

“I only hope,” said Frecks fervently, “that I’m not present when they have a *serious* accident.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Difficult Going

NOW WORRALS had supposed that the desolate coast on which they had landed would mark the end of the journey. This, obviously, was the point to which the gun-runners were operating, and she imagined that here would be the dump from which the weapons were being distributed. If this were so, then the man or men responsible should not be far away. All she needed to know was the name of the place, and her task would be practically finished. Once the authorities knew where to strike the rest could be left to them. In this, however, she was to be disappointed.

Precisely where they were she did not know. She had never been within sight of the mysterious coast that bounds the eastern side of the Gulf of Suez. All she knew about it was that most white men were content to give the Sinai Peninsula a wide berth, for the very nature of the coast itself, a labyrinth of reefs, sandbanks, islands, and creeks, with a background of sun-parched rocks rising in places to a height of eight thousand feet, made it a place to avoid. Beyond the cliffs lay flat, waterless *sabkha*, the mixture of sand and gravel that comprises most of the Sinai desert.

From what they could see of it in the dim light, the place at which they had arrived was as wild as anything that could be imagined. It consisted for the most part of a cove with an entrance so narrow that from the open sea it would almost certainly escape the notice of anyone who did not know that it was there. No doubt it had been chosen for that very reason, thought Worrals. Inside the cove was a pool that gave the impression of being the crater of an extinct volcano—as, indeed, it may have been. Around this, on three sides, rose impressive masses of coal-black basalt, backed in turn by mighty cliffs that ended in razor-edged ridges. In the whole scene there was only one light, a yellow smoking flame that looked like a signal.

Worrals edged nearer to Maki. “Do you know this place?” she whispered.

Maki said he thought he did, but he was not quite sure. So much of the coast was alike, but he seemed to remember the cove, which he had seen on

one occasion only, when he was serving on a government boat. If he was right, there was a village near at hand called Djebel Abda.

The return of the *nakoda*, who had been supervising the hauling of the boat on the beach, put an end to further conversation of an intimate nature. He requested Worrals and Frecks to accompany him, although where he was going he did not say. He simply strode away into the darkness leaving them to follow.

As they walked up the beach towards the rocks it was revealed that they had an audience. A number of men, all natives, were squatting about; but there was no sign of hostility. A sullen silence prevailed. The men gave the impression of being spectators of a common occurrence. As Frecks passed close to some of them she observed that they literally bristled with weapons.

The *nakoda* turned sharply into a narrow defile, presently to emerge in an open sandy area of some size, one side of which was occupied by a number of small, palm-roofed native dwellings. Near one a fire smouldered with a crimson glow. From all around came the plaintive bleating of goats.

The guide did not stop. Going on past most of the smaller houses he only halted when he came to one of some size, which, moreover, was surrounded by a formidable stockade of thorns. Here, several natives stood about, and Frecks, realizing that this must be the chief's establishment, felt that they had at last come to the end of their journey. The *nakoda* said they must wait, while he went on alone. Accompanied by two natives who came to meet him he went on to the door of the big house, which, Frecks was bound to admit, was not unattractive in the dim light, although it might present a different appearance in the broad light of day.

The *nakoda* was away about ten minutes, and came back only close enough to make a sign that the girls were to follow him. Then, turning again, he went back through the stockade and entered the house through a narrow doorway. A short corridor gave access to a commodious room lighted by a single oil lamp, the fumes of which were to some extent overpowered by the aroma of incense. There was no time to observe details. Frecks's eyes went straight to the most conspicuous feature, which was a raised platform covered with rugs on which sat a bearded, dignified Arab, smoking a hookah. On his head was a white *kafieh*, secured by a cord of twisted black horsehair.

"This is the Sheikh Abd-el-Katil," said the *nakoda* in a voice of great respect, and then stepped back.

The sheikh regarded his visitors thoughtfully with dark inscrutable eyes. "*Salaam aleikum*," he greeted.

Worrals made the orthodox reply. "*Aleikum salaam.*"

The sheikh indicated a divan with a wave of his pipe in an invitation to his visitors to be seated.

Now Worrals was in something of a quandary. Nothing had been said about the letter she carried, the letter of introduction which Markoff had provided. It was merely a sealed envelope. There was no address. Of its contents she was entirely ignorant. She did not even know the language in which it was written. Not that it mattered. But somehow, up to now, she had assumed that the language would be European; in fact, she had hoped to get a sight of the letter, for that would probably tell her the nationality of the man for whom it was intended. She perceived now that it was more likely to be in Arabic. Anyway, that this was the man whom she had been sent to see she did not doubt. The *nakoda* had already spoken to him, and must have conveyed a verbal message to account for their presence there in the first place. The next move, she decided, was up to her, so taking Markoff's letter from her bag she passed it over before joining Frecks on the divan.

The sheikh clapped his hands. The summons was answered instantly by a negro. The sheikh gave an order. The negro retired, to return presently with some simple refreshments, which turned out to be sherbet and dry biscuits.

Meanwhile, the Sheikh had opened the letter. Worrals, who was watching, saw him take a sheet of paper and another sealed envelope from the one she had given to him. The envelope he placed in his lap. The letter he read.

To Worrals, this was significant. The second letter could only mean that there was someone else in the picture. The sheikh, she now surmised, was only a go-between. The sheet of paper was probably an explanation of their presence, for the sheikh's guidance. She was not altogether surprised. From the outset she had almost taken it for granted that the man behind the gun-running racket was a European. Colin Pasha had not actually said that, but he had thought so, too. In a way, Worrals was relieved. As she told Frecks presently, she would have been disappointed if, after all their trouble, the trail had ended at a minor native chief.

The sheikh looked up from the letter. For a full minute he treated his visitors to a speculative appraisal. Then he spoke, and the words gave Frecks something of a shock, for the language he used was English. It was fairly good, too, although it was spoken with a strange guttural accent.

"You come at a good time," said he. "Soon we go." Then, to Worrals's surprise, he handed the letter back to her, retaining only the loose sheet,

which he tucked into his *gumbez*—the shirt-like robe that he wore.

Worrals made an attempt to get more information. “Who is this letter for?” she asked, adopting a casual tone, as if the matter was of no real importance.

“You will see,” was the non-committal reply.

“When shall I see?”

“Soon. We make a journey.”

“A long journey?”

“Yes. A long journey.”

Worrals was somewhat disconcerted, for a long overland journey was something she hadn’t reckoned on, although much depended, of course, on what the sheikh called long. She was aware that native ideas of distance can vary considerably. However, nothing could be done about it. “What about our *boutre*?” she asked, not without anxiety. “Will it wait for us?”

“It will wait,” answered the sheikh. “My men will mend it.”

Worrals said no more.

Frecks sensed that she was not entirely happy about the way things were developing. Nor, for that matter, was she, Frecks. She, like Worrals, had supposed that they would be taken to the man whom they were to meet, as soon as they landed. This, clearly, was not to be. In the ordinary way there would have been no cause for alarm, but in the circumstances the peril in which they stood was all too plain. If there was to be a delay, as now seemed certain, a messenger from Markoff would arrive while they were still there, with results not pleasant to contemplate. While she was still pondering this distasteful probability a native arrived and spoke to the sheikh in a language which she recognized as Arabic, but without understanding what he said.

The sheikh at once got up. “We go,” he said. “The time has come.”

Worrals made one protest, which gave Frecks an idea of how she was feeling about things. “We were not told of this journey, O Sheikh,” she said. “We are not prepared. We have no food.”

The sheikh brushed the objection aside. “Fear nothing,” said he. “All will be provided.”

Worrals glanced at Frecks and shrugged.

With the sheikh they left the house. As they emerged into the area enclosed by the stockade two figures stepped from the shadows of a mimosa tree. Both carried rifles. Frecks held her breath fearing that the end had already come. But the sheikh spoke to the men and they fell in behind. They were, presumably, his personal guard.

Worrals dropped back a little and spoke to Maki, who had waited for them. "This is the Sheikh Abd-el-Katil," she said softly. "What do you know of him?"

Answered Maki, simply. "Only this. All men know he is a buyer of slaves that are brought from Abyssinia."

"If it is known, why has he not been caught?" asked Worrals.

"Because he remains always within his province," replied Maki. "Sometimes his boats are caught by government; but the sheikh remains always out of reach."

Worrals made a mental note of the information and said no more. In any case, they had now arrived back at the beach, the appearance of which had changed since they last saw it. A caravan had been formed and was evidently waiting for them. Conspicuous were a number of mules and donkeys loaded with what Frecks recognized at a glance as rifle and ammunition boxes. After a glance to make sure that his visitors were still with him the sheikh took his place at the head of the column. At a word of command it moved forward. Worrals and Frecks found places close behind the leader. Maki remained with them. Worrals would have questioned him further, but no opportunity offered without risk of their conversation being overheard.

The way lay uphill; in fact, up the face of the cliff, up a track so narrow that it had to be taken in single file. Once the lower slope had been left behind it wound a tortuous course through masses of black rock, sometimes sheer, sometimes receding great screes. It became ever steeper. Then the ground to the right fell away, so that the sea, already far below, came into view. Narrower and still narrower became the track until it was no more than a mere cornice on the face of the cliff, overhanging a dizzy precipice. Frecks was not a little relieved when the clouds dispersed and the moon swung up above the jagged silhouette ahead. Their chances of ever getting back, she thought with mounting apprehension, became with every step more and more remote. The wretched animals grunted under the strain of their burdens.

An hour's steady walking brought the caravan to a small plateau, where stood waiting an object unpleasantly like a ghost. It turned out to be an Arab in a white *gumbez*—either a guide or a sentry. He advanced and spoke in a low tone to the sheikh, who, as soon as the tail of the caravan was on the plateau, called a halt.

To Frecks the whole thing was beginning to take on the unreal character of a dream. Not only was the scene strange to her eyes, but the sounds that

reached her ears enhanced the uncanny effect. Crickets chirped among the rocks, and once the insane scream of a hyena floated down from somewhere above. Behind, and a terrifying distance below, lay the sea, a shimmering expanse of quicksilver, stretching, it seemed, to eternity. On precisely such a picture, she reflected moodily, must the Children of Israel have gazed when they turned their backs on Egypt and began their years of wandering in the wilderness. For them, she recalled, the waters of the sea had parted to allow them to cross. Then she stopped thinking about getting back and began instead to wonder how much farther they had to go to reach the end of this alarming trail.

Presently, at a word from the sheikh, the caravan moved forward again, still climbing. Frecks, from force of habit acquired when flying, looked about her in the hope of picking up landmarks in case they came back alone; but all she could see was a chaos of jagged peaks against the sky, all looking alike in the deceptive moonlight. She had an uneasy suspicion that travelling down the track would be even more tiring than climbing up. That they would have to do that seemed certain, for ahead lay the vast, waterless, Arabian desert.

The air turned cool, then chilly, as the caravan continued an ascent that began to seem endless. Frecks gave up thinking about their position. They had, she felt, passed the stage where thinking could help matters. Their lives were no longer under their control. They could only go on doing what they were told, hoping for the best. Before them was the desert; behind them, the sea—and Markoff's men. She found herself wishing that they had taken Melinos's advice. He knew what he was talking about. They must, she brooded bitterly, have been out of their minds to persist in the face of his knowledge and experience. Well, it looked as if they would have to pay for their folly in the way that folly is usually paid for beyond city lights and police protection.

So occupied was she with these melancholy thoughts that she did not for a moment or two perceive that they had reached what was evidently their destination. At least, they had emerged on a broad plateau, or rather, into a large flat depression where on all sides camp fires smouldered in the darkness. That the place was a camp of importance was clear. On the ground lay Arabs, some asleep, others sitting up or reclining on an elbow to watch the arrival of the caravan. A man with a steaming kettle approached. He offered mugs of coffee and Frecks made a grab for one. She was cold, tired, and worried.

The sheikh went away while the pack animals were being unloaded; but before Frecks could engage Worrals in conversation he returned to tell them

that as the hour was late their business would have to wait until morning. Their man would find them rugs and blankets and a place to rest.

With this arrangement Frecks was content. "I'm dead on my feet," she told Worrals wearily.

"I'm not feeling so fresh myself," returned Worrals.

Maki, who had gone off with the sheikh, came back loaded with rugs and saddle blankets. "Come," he said. "I will show you a place where you can sleep."

They followed him to a clump of stunted palms, with wind-bedraggled fronds, beneath which, in still-warm sand, grew some aromatic shrubs. Here he spread the rugs, leaving the blankets for an upper covering. "I am not far away," he said, as he departed.

Frecks gazed after the retreating figure. "Maki doesn't say much, but he's a good scout and it's a comfort to have him around," she said, yawning.

"I don't know what we should have done without him," agreed Worrals.

Frecks rolled herself in a blanket. "I can't say that I'm altogether looking forward to to-morrow," she said drowsily.

"To-morrow will be another day," returned Worrals tritely. "Let's hit the hay while the going's good."

CHAPTER NINE

Worrals does a Deal

DAWN was staining the east with turquoise and gold when Frecks was awakened by Worrals shaking her by the shoulder. She sat up, not without difficulty, for in spite of the blankets she was stiff with cold. Her teeth chattered. She could not have imagined that the desert could get so cold at night, although she realized that this was partly due to altitude. The air felt thin, and brittle with frost; but it was invigorating. "What's happening?" she asked.

"Things are beginning to move," returned Worrals. "Take a look round. You can see as much as I can."

Frecks sat up and took stock of their surroundings, for the first time in the light of day. It was at once apparent that they were in a fairly large Bedouin encampment, situated on a spot so eminently suitable for one that it was to be supposed that a camp had always been there. It comprised an oval depression, in the centre of which was a water-hole, probably a natural one in the first place, although it had been improved in the casual way the average nomad Arab does such work. Over the water a leather bucket hung suspended from the projecting arm of a simple pivot. Here and there a few tired-looking palms, solitary or in groups, had established themselves amid tufts of sun-parched grass and camel-thorn. This oasis, if such it could be called, being slightly below the level of the surrounding country, could not be seen by anyone crossing it. But its real value lay in its strategical position at the head of the path that gave access to the sea. As a stepping-stone between the beach and the desert proper it could hardly have been improved. It was, in fact, as perfect a place as could be imagined for the purpose for which it was being used.

At the moment it was well occupied. Camels, goats, donkeys, and mules, as well as Arabs, wandered about in the apparently aimless manner of Arab encampments. What interested Frecks more than any of these things was a European-looking tent no great distance away. The flap was closed. Outside it a group of lean Danakils squatted round a fire. Near them lay a pile of water-skins, the filling of which they had just completed. One, a mere boy,

was milking a goat into an earthenware vessel. Farther off, at the head of the track up which they had come overnight, a gigantic negro, apparently a sentry, leaned on a rifle as he gazed down into the void below him. Behind the tent, tethered to a gnarled fig tree, stood four wiry-looking desert ponies. Nearer at hand Maki was regarding the scene with an expression on his face that gave no indication of what he was thinking.

Satisfied with her inspection, Frecks turned to Worrals, who was combing her hair. "Have you any idea of what's going on?" she asked.

"Not much. The sheikh came over just now while you were still asleep and said the head man would see us presently. That's why I woke you up. He's gone back into the tent. Maki has brought a bucket of water. There isn't enough for a proper wash, but we shall have to manage. I dipped the end of a towel in it and had a cat-lick. I'd advise you to do the same. It'll wake you up if nothing else."

"What about breakfast?" inquired Frecks. "Has anything been done about it? I could eat a considerable amount of food."

"I expect something will be done about that presently," answered Worrals. "Get washed, in case we have to move. Apparently the coloured gentry have been told to give us a wide berth. I've always found that the average Arab is well-behaved in that respect, anyway."

Frecks's simple ablutions occupied only a few minutes, and she was just putting her toilet things away when the sheikh appeared at the door of the tent, and beckoned.

"Well, this should be it," remarked Worrals. "We should soon know what all this is about."

They walked over to the tent and entered.

Frecks had no fixed idea of what she expected to see inside, so she was not entirely surprised to see a man of obvious European descent, even if he had not actually been born on that continent. He stood by a camp table on which a meal had been laid for three. A coffee-pot and a dish of liver and kidneys was, she thought, one of the most fascinating sights she had seen for a long time; and it must be admitted that her chief concern at that moment was to know if they were the guests for which the meal had been prepared. As to the man himself, he was tall, short-bearded and good-looking in a massive sort of way, although there was nothing amiable about his expression. On the contrary his eyes were cold and hard, and the corners of his lips turned down. High cheek bones and a pale, sallow skin suggested Slav blood in his ancestry. He was dressed in the manner of a better-class Arab; and he could have had Arab blood in his veins, thought Frecks; but

Europe predominated. Support for this belief was furnished by his teeth, some of which had conspicuous gold fillings. A white scar over his right eye created a slightly sinister effect.

He greeted them courteously but without enthusiasm. "Had I been given notice of your coming I would have made more hospitable plans for your reception," he said in good English, but with a curious halting accent which Frecks could not place. "I regret so much I have not proper accommodation for ladies. I am a man much alone, you understand? I trust you did not find the journey exhausting too much? Please sit and help yourself to what you see. It is not much, but it is my best. If you will permit me, we will talk while you eat because I have a long journey to make and must be away soon."

"Very well, you carry on," suggested Worrals, taking a seat at the table, while Frecks sat opposite to her. "The Sheikh Abd-el-Katil has no doubt told you who we are. Here is a further letter of introduction," continued Worrals, passing Markoff's letter.

The man took the letter and read it while Worrals and Frecks continued their breakfast.

"If I understand the situation, you have rifles for sale?" said their host, after a while. "I must confess this makes me surprised."

"Why?" inquired Worrals.

"Our mutual friend says you are British."

"Quite right."

"Then why do you employ yourselves in a business which you must know is against the interests of your country?"

"A very natural question," replied Worrals, who had her answer ready for a query which she knew would arise. "We are in business for the same reason that you are, Mr. . . .?"

"Cosmo," interposed the man, with a cynical smile. "That is not my name, of course, but it is the one that I sometimes find convenient to use. But continue."

"Very well, Mr. Cosmo," resumed Worrals. "We need money, and how we get it has become a matter of secondary consideration. Those who govern us have made it clear that they are out for themselves; so, therefore, are we. You have only to look around to see that most people share that view to-day. There is money to be made in the black market, of course, but it is overcrowded. We have chosen to be original. Quite apart from that, we hold the opinion that if an Arab in his own country needs a rifle—well, he is entitled to have one. Need I say more?"

Cosmo's cynical smile persisted. "No," he answered. "You have expressed my sentiments. We should get on well together. Where are these rifles and of what make are they?"

Frecks wondered how Worrals would answer this question; but she need not have worried, as she presently realized when she recalled that in such situations as this Worrals was at her best.

On this occasion her fertile imagination astonished even Frecks. She gave a detailed account of the weapons they were supposed to possess and described how they had come by them. "We did not start in the arms business," she explained. "You know how one thing leads to another? We started in a small way with hashish. From hashish we turned to Indian charas, but there we ran into certain complications which it seemed better to avoid."

"Quite so," murmured Cosmo, with an understanding smile. "I once nearly made the same mistake."

"We thought of turning to the slave business," continued Worrals calmly. "The present method of transporting slaves across the Red Sea struck us as being antiquated, but I needn't go into that now. It was while we were making preliminary inquiries on the Abyssinian frontier that the rifles were brought to our notice. We decided to give the thing a run. Our first step, naturally, was to find a market, and here we sought the advice of a friend who had been helpful in our charas venture. He said he thought he could put us in touch with someone who would be interested, and, well—here we are."

"Where are these rifles?" inquired Cosmo, curiously.

"Does that matter?" said Worrals cautiously. "They are where we can get at them when we want them."

"How could you get over the transport difficulties?"

"In the same way that we handled the charas. This, my dear sir, is the age of the aeroplane."

Cosmo raised his eyebrows. "You mean—you have an aeroplane?"

"Why not?"

"And you fly it yourselves?"

"Of course. There's nothing remarkable in that."

"Where is your plane now?"

"In Egypt—but why need you concern yourself with that? Do you want the guns or don't you? That's all I need to know. If you do, we will bring them over. Well, are you interested?"

Frecks, watching the man's face closely, saw that he was very much interested, as, considering the business he was in, he had good reason to be. This he admitted, and raised the question of price.

Worrals drove a hard bargain, although at the finish it was evident the man thought he had the best of the deal.

Then came the question of delivery. Worrals pointed out that as the weapons would have to be flown over it didn't matter to her where she put them down provided there was a flat area on which she could land.

Frecks, of course, saw what this was leading up to. Worrals was hoping that Cosmo would reveal his headquarters, or distributing centre—the information which was the real object of their mission. But the man hesitated. It was clear that this was something he was not yet prepared to divulge.

“Of course,” went on Worrals, “we could land the stuff here, if that would suit you . . . or farther up the coast, if you'd rather have it that way?” It was, she averred, all the same as far as they were concerned.

For a moment Frecks was puzzled by this hint that the weapons could be landed higher up the coast, for not a word had been said about the new road. Then she understood. The place where they now rested was south of the road. It was likely, therefore, that the gun-runners' main dump was some distance north of them. Worrals was still hoping that Cosmo would reveal its whereabouts, as he might, in order that the rifles might be landed there and so avoid the long trail up from Djebel Abda—the village at the foot of the cliff. If her supposition was correct it would save a lot of trouble in transport.

The ruse succeeded. Cosmo produced a map, pointed out the cove where they had landed, and then indicated a creek some thirty miles farther north.

“There is an excellent flat area here, on the foreshore,” said he. “Use that. I could arrange to have men there to meet you. In fact, on the first occasion I would be there myself, and pay cash for what you bring. It might not be wise for you to fly too far inland.”

“As you wish,” agreed Worrals readily. “What day would suit you?”

“Any day that suits you,” replied Cosmo. “How long will it take you to collect the stuff and bring it over?”

Worrals considered the question. “A week should be long enough.”

“Very well. Let us say that we will meet there on this day week. What time?”

“I would prefer to fly by night to avoid being seen, but I should prefer to land in daylight. Let us say about dawn—six o’clock.”

“Good. So be it.”

“Make a smoke signal when you hear me, then I shall know I have not mistaken the place,” requested Worrals.

“It shall be done.”

Frecks sipped her coffee so that the satisfaction in her eyes should not be seen. This was the man the authorities were after; of that there was no longer the slightest doubt. If nothing occurred to upset the plan he was as good as in the bag.

“One last point,” said Worrals. “You don’t know us. We don’t know you. Business is business. What guarantee have we that you’ll stand by the deal when we deliver the goods?”

The answer was frank and not unreasonable. “I’m afraid you’ll have to take my word for it,” said Cosmo. “I’ll pay you in any currency you desire, and you can have an advance payment if you like.”

“We would prefer British pound notes.”

“Certainly. I shall be too interested in further consignments to go back on our arrangement.”

“Have you an agent in Egypt with whom I could communicate in case anything should go wrong at my end?” asked Worrals.

“I have no agent in Egypt,” was the reply. “The only man with whom I ever made contact is the one who sent you here. With him I feel safe because, as he is aware, I know enough about him, and the people for whom he works, to send them all to prison for life. So I have nothing to fear from him. That is why I know he would not have sent you unless he had proof that you were to be trusted.”

“I’ve just sold him a hundred seers of good Indian charas,” said Worrals, with a smile.

“So I understand from his letter. If you can get more, bring some to me. My men would work more willingly if they had some of the stuff in their pouches.”

“I’ll remember it,” promised Worrals. “Thank you for an excellent breakfast—we were in need of it.”

Cosmo put on his hat. “I could not do less,” said he. “I must be off now. Already I am late at starting. Soon the sun will make travel uncomfortable. The sheikh will take you back to your boat. Good-bye now. We meet again a

week to-day. I trust that this is only the beginning of good business between us.”

“And I,” returned Worrals.

Cosmo went out. From outside the flap of the tent they watched him mount a pony and take his place at the head of a caravan that stood waiting to march. It comprised most of the cavalcade that had come up from the sea the previous evening, although there were now also some camels. Another horse was being ridden by an important-looking Arab, possibly a tribal leader.

“Looks like a complete evacuation,” observed Frecks, as they watched the caravan move off in a northerly direction, carrying, of course, the rifle and ammunition boxes that had been brought up from the sea.

“We’re doing fine,” murmured Worrals softly. “All we have to do now is get back. We know enough to get these merchants buttoned up. Let’s have a look round to see what’s happening.”

As they walked across the almost deserted camp the sheikh came over to them to announce that preparations for their return to the boat were nearly complete.

Worrals told him they were ready to start as soon as he gave the word.

As the sheikh strode off Worrals looked at him thoughtfully. “I don’t quite know what to make of that fellow,” she mused. “He’s not a pukka sheikh. He rings false somewhere. I can’t help feeling that he’s not entirely what he pretends to be—not that it matters. Here comes Maki. What news does he bring? He doesn’t talk unless he has something to say.”

The old man came up. “Come,” was all he said. But there was something about the way he said it that Frecks did not like.

They followed him for about a hundred yards, to a point where the plateau dropped almost sheer to the sea.

“Look,” said Maki.

At first Frecks could see nothing unusual. The sea lay spread out below them. There was not a vessel of any sort in sight. To north and south the coastline made a broken jig-saw puzzle as far as the eye could pierce the heat haze that was beginning to form. Scattered along it were small islands similar to the two between which they had passed just before making their landfall. Automatically, Frecks’s eyes went to the place where the pursuing *boutre* had gone aground. It was not there. Her eyes switched to the beach. Then she saw it, alongside their own. Now she understood what was causing Maki concern, although the full significance of it did not dawn on her at once.

In quite a normal voice she said: “So they got their boat off after all.”

Worrals glanced at her. “From the way you said that I’m afraid you don’t quite grasp what that means. Maki does—fortunately for us.”

Frecks moistened her lips as the truth struck her.

“It means,” continued Worrals, “that if we go down that trail we shall either meet Markoff’s men coming up or find them waiting for us at the bottom. In either case it’s going to be a nasty business.”

“The lady understands,” said Maki simply.

“I was afraid it might happen,” sighed Worrals.

Frecks was still staring down at the boats. “Well, we’ve still got a choice,” she said wanly.

“Choice of what?”

“Going down the track and having our throats cut or bolting into the desert and frying like a couple of sausages in a pan. What a pity, just as we’ve got what we came for.”

“That must be our first consideration,” said Worrals crisply. “Whatever happens we must let Melinos know what we know.”

“That’s impossible,” declared Frecks. “We haven’t a hope.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” returned Worrals evenly. “We’ve been in worse jams than this. Strictly speaking, we haven’t quite finished our job.”

“It looks to me very much as if we have,” asserted Frecks bitterly.

“To round off our assignment nicely we ought to know where Cosmo has gone. He’s got a hide-out, and an arms dump, somewhere in the desert. He wasn’t prepared to tell us where it was, but I imagine it is somewhere not far south of the new road. The road was marked on his map. I saw it. I reckon it’s about forty to fifty miles north of where we are now.”

“So what?”

“I feel like following him, although I must admit that the idea only occurred to me when I realized we couldn’t get back the way we came.”

“Go on,” requested Frecks grimly.

Worrals turned to Maki. “You know what we came here for?”

“Yes, lady.”

“Good. You know what we know, now. That information must go home. Do you think you could get back if you went alone? I mean, you might pass. For us, that would be impossible.”

“But if I go alone, what would be said of me, that I abandoned you in this place?” argued Maki.

“Listen, Maki,” said Worrals sternly. “You have been a soldier. To a soldier duty must come first. Your duty is to get our information home to Melinos.”

“I will go,” said Maki, in a curious voice. “And what of you, lady?”

“We shall follow the caravan. A caravan of such size must leave a trail, one that should be easy to follow. Forget us. The information is all that matters. If we are not caught we shall keep near the coast. Tell Melinos to watch for us there, if it can be arranged.”

“So be it,” said Maki simply.

“Then be on your way, and good luck,” said Worrals. “Every moment is precious.”

“Farewell,” murmured the old man. “If we live we shall be able to boast of this to our children.” Turning, he walked away with his usual unhurried gait.

“Did you hear that?” breathed Frecks. “We shall be able to boast of this to our children! He must think white people delight in giving their children nightmares! Anyway, our chance of having children never looked more dim than it does at this moment.”

“Stop babbling like an infant yourself and let’s get busy,” said Worrals tersely. “We’ve things to do, and if my guess is right we haven’t much time to do them in.”

CHAPTER TEN

Into the Wilderness

As soon as Maki was out of sight Worrals led the way back to the palms near the tent. No one appeared to be taking the slightest notice of them, one reason for this being, no doubt, because the sheikh was getting together, for the return trip to the beach, those of his men who had not gone on with the caravan. A few were evidently to remain on duty in the camp, for they were lounging about smoking, making coffee, or tidying up. The tent was still standing, which, as Worrals remarked, made it pretty certain that the site was a permanent camp, and that Cosmo would be coming back. The two horses that had been left behind stood listlessly, with hanging heads, in the scant shade of the tree to which they were tethered.

“Now see here, Frecks,” said Worrals tersely. “This has got to be properly organized. We’re going to follow Cosmo. There’s no other way. We may as well ride, so you wander over to the horses and get them untied. I’ll go and get our bags and collect a water-skin on the way back. The one thing we can’t do without is water. Food doesn’t matter so much. How do we go for fruit? Have we any left?”

“A little, I think. I don’t know exactly how much.”

“No matter; we shall have to chance that. No one should pay much attention to us even if what we are doing is noticed. The sheikh will hardly be expecting us to dash off to apparent suicide in the desert. He may get suspicious, though, if he sees us pick up the saddles and bridles. The thing is to move casually. On no account start hurrying—unless, of course, the balloon goes up—in which case everything will depend on speed. There is this about it; there are only two horses, so if we can get clear we shan’t have to worry about being pursued. All right; let’s get weaving.” As she finished speaking Worrals started to stroll towards the place where their bags still lay by their sleeping blankets.

Without hurrying Frecks moved towards the horses. Reaching them, she was able to turn and watch the camp while she untied the head-ropes. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Worrals start back with the bags; saw her stoop and pick up a water-skin, hold it against her so that it would not be

conspicuous, and then walk on towards the tree under which she stood waiting with the horses. No one appeared to have noticed them. Under the direction of the sheikh the Arabs were busy putting some bundles together.

“O.K.,” said Frecks, as Worrals approached her. “No one’s looking.”

Worrals dropped the water-skin near the horses and without stopping for a moment went over to where the saddles and bridles lay on the ground. Returning again she dropped the saddles and started to bridle the nearest horse. Fortunately, the animal did not protest. “You watch the camp,” she told Frecks. “Tell me at once if the sheikh looks this way. The bridles are the chief thing—at a pinch we could do without saddles.”

Frecks continued to watch the camp, her hopes of getting away without being noticed growing with each passing minute.

Worrals saddled the horse and handed the reins to Frecks. “That’s one,” she said. “It’s your mount. Get the water-skin.” She slipped the bridle on her own horse and reached for the saddle.

Frecks picked up the water-skin and hung it on the high pommel of her seat. In spite of her efforts to remain calm her heart was now thumping from suspense, and from the excitement of a moment on which so much depended.

Worrals reached for the buckle of her girth and was just slipping the strap through when a babble of voices broke out from a small group of men who had been lounging at the top of the mountain trail. They were on their feet, gesticulating. Even the horses seemed to sense that something was happening for they raised their heads and pricked their ears. Then came a shout and the sheikh walked quickly towards the group, in the middle of which Frecks now noticed a native, a Danakil, who was so far gone with exhaustion that he swayed on his feet. She understood instantly what this meant. The man had come up the track from the village and had exhausted himself by the speed of his ascent. It needed little effort to guess the information he had brought.

Frecks spun round to Worrals. “Jump to it,” she rapped out. “A runner has just arrived from the beach.”

By the time she had finished speaking all eyes in the camp were turned in their direction. The sheikh shouted something, snatching a pistol from his belt. Fortunately most of the men were unarmed, having left their rifles where they had been resting. They made a rush to get them. One or two ran straight for the now restive horses. A shot rang out, making one of the animals rear.

“Run for it!” snapped Worrals, who was still trying to tighten her girth. She appeared to be having some difficulty with it.

Frecks swung up into the saddle, but waited for Worrals. She groped in her bag for her pistol.

“Never mind shooting—ride!” shouted Worrals, as with the girth adjusted at last, she got astride her mount and clapped her heels into its flanks with a force that sent it forward with a bound. “Hang on to the water-skin!” she cried.

By this time Frecks was riding. In another minute both horses were stretched at full gallop with their riders crouching low, while from behind came a ragged fusillade of shots. A bullet must have stung Frecks’s horse, for it swerved wildly and nearly unseated her. Recovering, she raced on, weak with shock at the narrowness of her escape, but thankful for a curtain of dust which her now terrified mount was throwing up behind her.

Worrals took a straight course for the nearest cover, a big outcrop of rock not far away. With this between them and the camp the immediate danger was past, and they were able to steady their breakneck speed.

“Phew!” panted Frecks. “That was a bit hot. I thought we’d had it.”

“You hang on to that water-skin,” Worrals told her grimly. “We’ve got a worse enemy to face than the one we’ve just left—thirst. Without water we’re sunk. What happened to cause that sudden commotion? I’m still not clear about it.”

“A messenger arrived from the village—one of the crew of Markoff’s *boutre*, I imagine. He spilt the beans. We were only just in time.”

“There is this about it,” observed Worrals, reining in to a steady canter as she followed a clearly defined track. “With everyone looking at us Maki should have got a clear start!”

Frecks gazed ahead over a flat, sterile landscape, on which heat waves shimmered as on a distant sea. To their right lay the vast arid desert of Arabia, composed, as far as the eye could see, of a desolation of sand and stones, colourless and without outline, a barren plain where the tyrant sun had slain every living thing. To the left it was nearly as bad, but not quite. Here, as the land approached the unconquerable sea, erosion had laid bare outcrops of grey rock, piling the sand into long, sweeping dunes, between which stunted growths of camel-thorn made hopeless battle against its age-old enemies, sun and sand. Along the fringe of this inhospitable wilderness the trail wound a serpentine course, shrinking away from the desert proper yet hesitating to lose itself amid the treacherous dunes and frowning rocks.

Frecks brought her mount level with Worrals, who was slightly ahead. “Have you any idea at all of where this track is likely to end?” she asked.

“None whatever,” answered Worrals frankly. “Eventually it will end at an oasis or water-hole, though; we may be pretty sure of that. Desert tracks always do, otherwise there would be no purpose in them. When you are on a track, therefore, you’re reasonably safe, as long as you have water. It’s when you lose the trail that the desert gets you. But it’s better not to think about such things.”

“You had a better chance than I had to see Cosmo’s map,” said Frecks. “How far do you reckon we have to go?”

“Not more than forty miles, I think. It might be less,” answered Worrals, pulling in her horse to a walk. “We can afford to take our time. We’ll save our nags against a time when we may really need them.”

“Phew! It’s getting hot.”

“It’ll be hotter presently.”

“What will the sheikh do, now that he knows who and what we are?” asked Frecks.

“He may follow us. He’s bound to try to warn Cosmo, but I don’t see how he can get to him before we do unless there is a nearer way than the one we’re on. I don’t think there can be or the caravan would have taken it. People don’t travel farther than is necessary in this sort of country. One thing is certain; we can’t go back, so we must go on.”

“What was Cosmo’s nationality, do you think?”

Worrals shook her head. “I’ve no idea. He might be anything. There are plenty of his sort in the Middle East—adventurers, outcasts, men without a country. But that’s something Colin Pasha can work out later on.”

There was silence for a little while. Then Frecks said: “That caravan won’t be able to travel very fast. Isn’t there a risk of our overtaking it?”

“There is, and we shall have to watch out that it doesn’t happen. Of course, I’m hoping it will lead us to Cosmo’s main dump. That’s all I want to know. Then we’ll see about getting back. I imagine the destination of the caravan will be within striking distance of the new road. My goodness! It’s certainly getting hot. We’d better stop talking. We shall get less thirsty if we keep our mouths shut.”

The horses walked on. Occasionally Frecks looked back, but there was nothing to indicate that they were being followed. The trail still maintained a generally northern direction. Occasionally, to the left, it was possible to see the escarpment of black basaltic rock that followed the coast, from which it

was reasonable to suppose that they were keeping more or less parallel with the long arm of the Red Sea.

The heat grew with the day. The sun toiled wearily towards its zenith in such a blaze that it scorched Frecks even through her clothes. It was impossible to look upwards; she could only bow her head, while the heat struck the ground with silent force and rebounded into her face. The horses wilted. On all sides lay the shapeless wilderness, stark and dead. The horizon was a band of burnished steel. The silence was profound. As Frecks bent lower in her saddle she could hear it drumming in her ears. Any sound, however slight, was magnified a hundred times. Nothing moved except the horses, and already they were beginning to show signs of distress. Frecks was not surprised. Thirst was already making its presence felt. Of shade, there was none. The trail wound on relentlessly, fading always into the quivering haze.

By early afternoon the heat had become intolerable, and Frecks, although she said nothing, was afraid. She felt that she, like the blistered earth, was being dried up. All that she had ever read about travellers dying of thirst in the desert came back to her with disconcerting vividness. The dunes, when she looked at them, were beginning to sway. Not that she looked at them for long; the glare was so fierce that it hurt her eyes. Her lips rasped when they touched. She wanted to drink. Indeed, she could think of nothing else; but she would not give in while Worrals could hold out.

It was typical of Worrals that when she called a halt her first thought was for the horses. "The animals will have to drink," she said as she reined in and dismounted. "We can do with one ourselves, if it comes to that. But I tell you straight, Frecks, I'm scared stiff of using that water. Give me the skin."

They each drank a little, sparingly, slowly, and then gave the horses a small quantity, using Frecks's hat for the purpose—Frecks covering her head with a handkerchief in the meantime. The water was warm, smelt abominably, and had an unpleasant taste of goat about it; moreover, it was reddened by some colouring matter in the skin. But to Frecks it was nectar. She allowed it to trickle down her throat drop by drop.

"I've got four oranges and two squashed peaches left in my bag," she murmured suggestively.

"I know—but not now," answered Worrals shortly. "Let's stick it out. We shall appreciate them more in the cool of the evening."

Frecks was disappointed, but tried not to show it, perceiving the wisdom of Worrals's decision. She knew that had she been alone she would have

succumbed to the almost irresistible temptation to eat an orange. It was, she thought, a good example of the strength of Worrals's will-power, for the temptation must have been equally great for her, and her decision must have been hard to make. But she made it without hesitation.

There was no shade, so they had to drink where they stood. As soon as they had finished, as nothing was to be gained by remaining, they remounted and went on, Worrals always keeping close watch ahead for the caravan.

By the time the sun was nearing the serrated crests of the escarpment on their left Frecks was slumped in her saddle, holding on to it with both hands; but as the sun dropped out of sight and purple twilight settled over the land she raised herself with a deep sigh of relief and looked at Worrals with red-rimmed eyes. "I don't think I could stand another day of that," she said in a thin voice. "Don't you think we had better pull in and give our nags a rest and a drink? They've stuck it well, poor brutes."

"We haven't done so badly ourselves," murmured Worrals with a wry smile. "That was bad going, I imagine, even for this part of the world. After all, the horses are used to it. They've never known any other sort of life. That sun would have killed an English horse unless it was watered regularly. We'll give ours a drink and have one ourselves. We can afford to be a little more generous with the water now because we can't have much farther to go. It may have been fancy, but I thought just now I could see a cloud of dust ahead. If so, it could only be the caravan. It wasted no time. I feel pretty sure there must be an oasis not far ahead, or Cosmo wouldn't have pushed on at that rate. It's likely he tries to do the trip in one jump to save spending a night in the desert."

They drank—a good drink this time—and watered the horses, which had the instant effect of restoring them considerably. This done, Worrals handed her reins over to Frecks. "Hold these for a minute," she requested. "I'm going to the top of that dune on the left to see what lies ahead."

She was away only about five minutes and when she returned she brought news. "There are a lot of high rocks not far in front of us," she reported. "There seems to be camel-thorn and some scrub which suggests that we're getting near water. Beyond the rocks I could see what looked like the tops of palms. If there is an oasis there it must be the one for which the caravan is making."

"And just what do you suggest we do next?" asked Frecks. "I have a feeling we shouldn't be welcome at the oasis."

"I'm quite sure we shouldn't," answered Worrals. "I think our best plan would be to go on as far as the rocks and there find a place to rest ourselves

and the ponies. We'll wait for the moon to come up and then reconnoitre the oasis. We'd better keep clear of the track while we're resting in case anyone comes along. Sooner or later, of course, a messenger will arrive from the sheikh, and once the alarm reaches the oasis we shall have to make ourselves scarce. It will be known that we came this way because there is no other, so they'll start looking for us. Cosmo's Arabs would probably find us, too. They must know every inch of this ground and can probably read tracks like a book; so anything we're going to do will have to be done quickly. Come on."

Leading the horses they walked on to the rocks of which Worrals had spoken. The sand still flung back the heat of the day, but now that the sun had hidden its face the atmosphere was bearable.

"This looks just the job for us," observed Worrals, leading the way into a narrow defile between high rocks. "I'm afraid there's nothing to tether the animals to except camel-thorn, but as long as they can browse they shouldn't stray far away."

This was done, and Frecks sank down in the sand with her back against the rock. "What wouldn't I give for a nice cup of tea?" she said wistfully.

"Queer, isn't it, how one's thoughts always turn to the simple things at a time like this?" returned Worrals, finding a seat beside her. "Thank goodness the world is beginning to cool down a bit. At one moment it felt as if it was likely to melt under our feet. This is the time, I think, for an orange apiece—and I'll have a couple of your chocolates if you've got any left?"

"I haven't many," said Frecks sadly, unfastening her bag. "We'll have three each; that should leave one or two for breakfast. I little thought when I asked Melinos to produce some chocolates that in a day or two they'd stand between us and starvation. I nearly didn't bring them, too. I grumbled about the weight. I wish now they'd been heavier."

She counted out the rations, an orange and three chocolates apiece. She ate her chocolates first, slowly and with ineffable relish. Then she peeled her orange, divided it carefully into sections and ate them one by one. Neither spoke, but sat gazing out into the great loneliness.

After a time Frecks must have dozed, for when next she looked around, the horn of the moon had crept up over the dunes, and it was actually getting chilly—something which, a few hours earlier, she could not have imagined.

"I think it's time we were moving," said Worrals, rising.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Desperate Reconnaissance

FRECKS brushed her hair out of her eyes and emptied from her shoes the sand that had silted into them. “Tell me,” she said, “just what do you intend doing?”

“We’re going to try to find out just where Cosmo has gone, and confirm, if possible, that it’s his headquarters dump. It may not be. The oasis ahead may be another temporary camp. But he’s on the job, and if we can locate him we should learn as much as Colin Pasha needs to know to put him in the bag.”

“And then?”

“Then we shall try to get back to Egypt. Don’t ask me how because I don’t know. But try we must, because we have no alternative. We can’t go on much longer without food and we certainly couldn’t last another day without fresh water. Wherever the caravan has halted there will be water. We must get some of it, and when I say *must* I mean just that. Somewhere to the north of us is the new road. I’m tempted to try to get to it, but the trouble is, I don’t know the way to the nearest point. What makes it even more difficult is the fact that we don’t exactly know where we are at this moment. If we started wandering about there would be a serious risk of running into hostile Arabs. Anyway, this is no country for guesswork. One mistake and you’ve had it. My idea is to go forward on foot, leaving the horses here. We’ll have a look at the oasis, get some water, and come back. That, I think, is enough to go on with. If we succeed—well, we’ll head due west for the sea, which can’t be far away, and try to attract the attention of a patrol boat. We should find shade during the heat of the day, at any rate.”

“The chances of being spotted by a patrol boat don’t look very bright to me,” muttered Frecks. “Pity we couldn’t hit the road.”

“I looked at that possibility from all angles before I abandoned it,” answered Worrals. “When word reaches Cosmo that we’re government agents, and that we headed this way, he’ll drop everything he’s doing and try to hunt us down. The ground he’ll cover first will be the area between the oasis and the road, because he’ll assume that we shall make for the road—

there being nowhere else for us to make for. He'll know we daren't go back the way we came. No, I think our best chance is the sea. Melinos said he would keep a look out for us. He'll expect us to try to get back across the sea—in fact I confirmed that with Maki. Maki will get back if it's humanly possible, you may be sure, and if he's picked up by a patrol you can bet Melinos will redouble his efforts to find us."

"I wish it was a little less like looking for a needle in a haystack," murmured Frecks. "However, what you say is all right with me. But why walk to the oasis? Why leave the horses here?"

"Because if we take them near the oasis they'll try to get to the other animals. They might whinny and give us away. They probably know the oasis; no doubt they've been there before; and if they smell water there'll be no holding them. We don't want to arrive in the middle of Cosmo's camp at full gallop."

"No, you're right there," asserted Frecks warmly. "All right. Let's start prowling. By the way, are there any poisonous snakes in this part of the world?"

"I think so," replied Worrals evenly. "There is, I believe, a very unpleasant reptile called the horned viper. There is also, so I've been told, a good line in scorpions. They're black, if I remember right."

"The colour doesn't matter," returned Frecks grimly. "We'd better look where we're putting our feet."

"It's better not to think about it at all," advised Worrals.

"O.K. Well, let's get cracking and learn the worst," suggested Frecks. "Sitting here won't get us anywhere."

"You never said a truer word," admitted Worrals. "Let's go."

"What about our bags?"

"We shan't need them so we might as well leave them here. I'll put them on a ledge of rock where the horses can't get at them."

"And the water-skin? There's still some juice in it."

"We'll leave that here, too, as a reserve if all else fails. In any case I doubt if we should get a chance to fill it. We shall have to try to grab a skin already filled. There will be some lying about, no doubt. There usually are, in Arab camps. Come on."

Leaving the horses where they stood, for they seemed content to rest, Worrals led the way back to the track, which was still plain to see in the moonlight. The walking was not unpleasant, although Frecks found the awful loneliness depressing.

“Keep your eyes open,” breathed Worrals. “We don’t want to bump into anyone travelling the other way.”

They walked on in silence.

It was not long before the oasis came into view, appearing from a distance to be a ragged line of palms which formed an inky frieze between the horizon and the sky. In length it was perhaps about two hundred yards. It did not end abruptly, but faded out, as it were, with straggling palms, leaning at all angles, that became ever more weedy as they came into contact with the sun-scorched *sabkha*.

“There’s one thing that puzzles me,” said Worrals softly, as they trudged on towards the objective. “I’m convinced that the oasis can be no great distance from the new road. In that case, why haven’t our troops raided it for illegal weapons?”

“It may be that the rifles are not left at the oasis for any length of time,” surmised Frecks. “The place could be no more than a distributing centre. When the rifles have been dished out, the people to whom Cosmo gives them disappear into the blue until they are wanted.”

“Yes, that might be the answer,” acknowledged Worrals. “Pity we don’t know the name of the oasis. I must have been crazy to come without a map, but things haven’t gone the way I expected. But we’d better stop talking. We’re getting close, and sound travels a long way in this thin air.”

Moving with increasing caution as they drew near, they continued to advance. Fortunately there was plenty of cover. Camel-thorn grew in spreading mats as it neared the life-giving water that supported the oasis. Then came tufts of coarse grass with occasional growths of scrub. Palms, spindly at first, but soon growing more strongly, crowded together as the ground fell away into a slight depression at the bottom of which the water would naturally come nearest to the surface. Towards this Worrals made her way, knowing that whatever was happening at the oasis it would not be far from the water-hole.

Signs of human occupation were soon evident. There were noises of men and animals moving about, and the reek of smouldering camel dung in the stagnant air. Proceeding a step at a time, taking advantage of every scrap of cover, Worrals and Frecks moved on until the centre of the oasis came into view. When Worrals sidestepped into the crown of a fallen date palm Frecks did the same, and from the ample cover it provided they surveyed the scene in silence.

There was nothing remarkable about it. Indeed, the spectacle presented was very much what Frecks had expected to see. Camels, mules, and

donkeys wandered about in the haphazard manner of animals when they are not tethered—and the Arab rarely bothers to tether his beast. Camp fires glowed. Around them were men, some standing in groups, some talking, and others squatting. Few were of the true desert type, Frecks noted. The majority were the mixed, nondescript sort, usually found in or about the settled districts. A number of these formed a large group near a man who, standing on a box, towered head and shoulders above the rest. It was Cosmo. At first she couldn't make out what he was doing. Around his feet lay a number of broken boxes. From time to time another box appeared like magic out of the ground, to be quickly broken open and have its contents distributed.

Frecks stood on tip-toe and the mystery was solved. There was a hole in the ground, apparently a fairly deep hole, for she could only just see the head and shoulders of two Arabs who stood in it. They were passing up the boxes. This, then, she thought, was the dump, an underground hiding place. No wonder it had remained undiscovered by the authorities. When filled in, and the sand spread evenly over it, its existence would not be suspected. Spies working with the gangs on the road would no doubt warn the oasis every time a raid on it was planned. The only other object of interest was a tent of the "bell" type. It stood well back in the palms, almost between them and the water-hole, at a distance of not more than forty yards. This, she assumed, was Cosmo's headquarters.

The rustle of a dead palm frond made her turn her head sharply. To her consternation she saw an Arab, apparently a sentry from the way he carried his rifle, walking towards the very palm in the fallen crown of which they stood. She touched Worrals on the arm. But Worrals had already seen the danger. It would have been folly to move. All they could do was crouch down where they were and remain still. From this position they could not see the man, and as he made no sound they were left in doubt as to what he was doing, a situation which Frecks found very disagreeable. She stiffened with alarm when, without warning, the man uttered a sharp challenge, for she supposed, not unnaturally, that they had been seen. It was a nasty moment. She held her breath. Then there came a soft thud of hoofs; a voice spoke, and although it was perilously near she realized with unspeakable relief that it was to this newcomer that the sentry had addressed his challenge. She breathed again. But the respite was short-lived. The new arrival spoke again, and this time she recognized his voice. It was Sheikh Abd-el-Katil. Presently he passed within three yards of them, riding on a mule, the sentry walking by his side. They went straight on to Cosmo.

Frecks had no doubt about the errand on which the sheikh had come. He had followed them to warn the man who called himself Cosmo that they were government agents, and had last been seen heading towards the oasis. And the sheikh wasted no time. He accosted Cosmo in a voice harsh with urgency.

Frecks turned to Worrals. "Come on, let's get out of this," she urged. "In another minute this mob will be looking for us."

"We can't go without water," answered Worrals, in a voice that discouraged argument.

"But how can we get water here? We couldn't get anywhere near the water-hole without being seen," declared Frecks aghast.

"That's obvious," replied Worrals. "We've one chance, though. There should be water in that tent—water for washing, if not for drinking. Cosmo had water in his other tent—remember? There should be some in this one."

"But——"

"Wait here," ordered Worrals tersely. "Don't move. I'll go. It's a risk we've got to take. If they get me run back to the horses and make for the sea. It's your only chance. There should be enough water left in the skin to see you over to-morrow." With that, before Frecks could protest, she glided away into the shadows on a line that would bring her behind the tent.

Frecks could only stand still, her heart in her mouth. The sheikh and Cosmo were still talking, with the Arabs now crowding about them. She prayed fervently that they would remain there; and so in fact they did, for two or three minutes. Then, to her utter consternation, they started walking towards the tent, while the Arabs began rounding up their animals as if for a definite purpose. Some set to work on the dump. They flung all the broken boxes into the hole. Over it was placed a wooden lid, about the size of a door. On this sand was thrown, and made level. In a moment the hiding place had disappeared so completely that its existence would never have been suspected. Frecks made careful note of its exact position.

By this time the sheikh and Cosmo had reached the flap of the tent, where they paused, while the sheikh, with eloquent gestures, continued what Frecks did not doubt was a recital of how she and Worrals had made their escape. Where was Worrals? In a fever of impatience she wondered what she was doing. Why didn't she come?

The reason, although Frecks was not to know it, was because she—that is, Worrals—dared not leave the tent. She could not leave it without being seen. The men were too close. What actually had happened was this.

She had approached the tent from the rear—from the side opposite the entrance. In this way she had the tent between her and the men in the centre of the oasis. With her penknife she made a slit in the canvas and looked in. No one was there. An oil lamp was burning on a folding table. Using her knife again, in a single slash, she extended the slit to a length that would enable her to enter. Another second and she was inside. To her intense satisfaction she saw at once what she hoped to find—water, a two-gallon petrol can, a vessel used throughout the East for the transport of water. Two strides took her to it. She tested its contents by weight. It was nearly full. Her object achieved, she started back towards the slit, hastened by the sound of approaching voices. She was only just in time. As she stepped through the opening the speakers entered the tent behind her. Dropping the petrol can she turned in a flash and held the two edges of canvas together with her fingers; and there she stood, not daring to let go, for it would have been ridiculous to suppose that if she released her hold so that the two edges fell apart, such a gaping rent would not immediately be noticed. A more extraordinary predicament, she thought, could hardly have been imagined. She was desperately anxious to get back to Frecks. Every second was vital. Yet there she stood, not daring to move.

A bare three paces away, separated from her only by the thickness of the canvas, were the two men who would certainly put her to death if they caught her. They were talking. At first she was too occupied with her quandary to take much notice, although subconsciously she was aware that the conversation was being carried on in French, with an occasional Arabic expression. Then a sentence made her pay closer attention.

Said Cosmo, viciously: “This is the doing of that double-dealing fool Markoff. I knew he’d overdo it one day. Now he allows himself to be taken in by two women. The imbecile. He must be out of his mind.”

The sheikh answered: “He sent a *boutre* after them, but it ran aground. Word came to us just too late. The women must have smelt trouble. There were only two horses. They took them. They came this way. We should catch them yet.”

Cosmo went on, furiously: “You realize what this means? We must hurry. Another week and it would not have mattered. Monday is the day. After that they can do what they please. This is the worst possible time for trouble to start.”

“We shall find them,” declared the sheikh confidently.

“Unless they reach the road.”

“They will not do that. Their horses must be finished, I think, and their water. They took only one skin.”

“Well, get after them,” ordered Cosmo. “Send everyone out. Scour the country. Search . . .”

Receding voices told Worrals that the two men had left the tent. She waited for no more. Picking up the petrol can she ran back to Frecks, to find her almost incoherent with anxiety.

“Don’t talk,” said Worrals crisply. “Run!”

Suiting the action to the word, bending low she set off at a sprint. She paused only once, and that was when they reached the area where the palms gave way to open desert. There she stood to make sure that no one was in sight before breaking cover. Seeing no one, she sped on.

“We’ve got to get back,” she panted, as they raced towards the place where they had left the horses. “Something is due to happen on Monday—don’t know what—but it’s serious.”

They may have been lucky in that they encountered no one during their run across the moonlit desert, for they certainly paid more attention to speed than to caution. But with the hunt for them about to start speed was everything. Panting, they reached the rocks that hid the horses. Worrals made straight for the defile in which they had been tethered. The horses were not there. For a moment she thought she must have made a mistake and she looked about for a similar feature. There was none. Then she saw their bags, which they had left behind, and that settled all doubt. She turned to Frecks. “They’ve gone,” she said simply.

Frecks scrambled up on a rock. She pointed. “There they go,” she muttered in a flat voice. “They must have wined the sheikh as he went past, or perhaps the other animals in the oasis, and tore themselves free.”

“Quite right. They pulled the thorn bushes up by the roots,” returned Worrals, who was looking at the ground. “No use blaming ourselves for that. There was nothing else to tie them to.”

“The point is, what are we going to do?” asked Frecks, jumping down.

“Walk,” answered Worrals curtly. “We’ll head for the sea. Come on. Bring the skin.” Picking up her bag and the petrol can she strode off towards the west.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Back to the Sea

THE long walk across the moonlit wilderness had a strange effect on Frecks; and perhaps on Worrals too, for she rarely spoke, although from time to time she stopped to survey the broad solitudes over which they had passed. Of pursuit there was as yet no sign. Nothing moved. There was no sound, only a profound silence. Everywhere the wilderness presented the same relentless face. Hour after hour they advanced and saw no change. Always overhead was the same dome of star-encrusted sky. Always around, as far as the eye could see, was the same circle of sand, pale yellow sand, studded with pebbles that had been polished to the brightness of jewels through the long silent years. There was no valley, no hill, no shadow—only the desert. The air cooled as the sand lost its fevered heat of the day.

Frecks was no longer afraid, only subdued. The immensity of her surroundings overwhelmed her. Curious thoughts, disturbing thoughts, came into her mind. She remembered clearly things that she had nearly forgotten. Stories of the Bible took on a new meaning, an unsuspected reality. It must have been not far from here, she pondered, that the Children of Israel had passed on their way to the Promised Land. The wilderness must have been the same then as it was now, terrifying in its awful calm. Perhaps their eyes had gazed upon this same scene, and their sandalled feet trodden on the very stones over which she walked.

Thus she meditated. Gazing out across the dismal wastes she began to understand the meaning of the word peace. This was the world as God made it, as it always had been, as it always would be. The frenzy of cities with their clamour for something new seemed strange and unreal. Here nothing changed. Everything went on untouched by the march of years, of centuries. People were born; presently they died, leaving their bones in the eternal land. For the first time she perceived how puny were the things men fought for; how futile the things they so often prized.

She was jerked abruptly from her reverie by Worrals, who said: "I don't think we're being followed. They'll probably concentrate their attention, at

first, anyway, in the direction of the road, thinking we shall make for it. They'll find our horses, but the tracks may lead them astray."

"How much farther do you suppose we have to go?" asked Frecks. "This frightful silence is getting on my nerves." She spoke almost in a whisper. It seemed like sacrilege to break the hush.

"I don't know," answered Worrals. "Let's keep going. I think I can see broken ground in the distance ahead. It may mean that we're getting near to the sea."

Very soon the *sabkha* began to show outcrops of rock, polished like the stones by the action of wind and sand. They became larger as the ground became more broken, at first by shallow *wadis* and then by water-torn gullies all leading to the west, which showed that the fall of the land was that way. There was now plenty of cover, should it be needed, and Frecks began to breathe more freely. Anything was better than the terrifying sameness of the unbroken desert. The air became chilly.

Then, so slowly as to be hardly noticeable, the moon lost its brilliance. One by one the stars began to fade. Pale, wavering beams of light swept upwards from the east to cast a mysterious light over the arid land. The sky shivered into pink. The disc of the sun rose clear of the horizon, turning the sand into streaming gold. The canopy of heaven resumed its immutable serenity, and another day was born.

The girls walked on, mounting a dune that crossed their path. Worrals reached the top first. She stopped suddenly and pointed. "Look!" she said.

Joining her, Frecks looked, and there, spreading away far below them, rolling on and on to the very edge of the world, lay the sea, as unchanging as the desert sands. From far below came the measured beat of the surf. Over it a solitary gull drifted like a scrap of windblown paper. There was nothing else.

"Let's find a place where we can rest," suggested Worrals practically. "It will have to be where we can see the sea, and it will have to offer shade as the sun climbs or we shall be toasted like a couple of snipes on a spit. No wonder people used to worship the sun. He's certainly the big boss here."

There was no lack of hiding-places among the chaos of rocks and gullies that fringed the last few hundred yards to the point where the plateau ended abruptly in an almost sheer drop of several hundred feet to a deserted sandy beach. The problem was to choose the best, and this Worrals did with an eye to the requirements that she had stipulated. In the end she selected a little bay of sand that lapped the foot of a great cairn of boulders that had been flung together by some mighty convulsion of the earth in ages past. Here, on

the western side overlooking the sea, they settled themselves down with their backs against the rock.

“I don’t see anything looking like a patrol boat,” murmured Frecks, gazing across the expanse of water on which no craft of any sort was to be seen.

“I hardly expected to find Melinos waiting for us,” returned Worrals dryly. “Something may come along. Let’s have a drink. What have you got left in the way of food?”

“One small orange, one rather dirty peach, and six chocolates. I’m afraid they’re all in a bit of a mush.”

“Let’s eat,” suggested Worrals. “Believe you me, I’m not particular. We shall never need the stuff more than we do now.”

“Which will you have, the orange or the peach?”

“Which would you rather have?”

“It’s all the same to me.”

“In that case I’ll have the peach—but I’ll eat my chocolates first or I shall want to drink again.”

The fruit and chocolates were divided, and eaten slowly, to make the most of a frugal breakfast. They finished the water that remained in the original skin and stood the can out of the sun.

“What are we going to do—just wait here for something to come along?” inquired Frecks.

“We’ll stay here for a time, anyway,” decided Worrals. “We need a rest, and it would be sheer madness to try walking in the sun. As soon as the sun goes down we’ll march north in the hope of striking the road. It runs from south-west to north-east, so if we can hold out long enough we’re bound to come on it eventually. Meanwhile, we’ll watch the sea. There’s a fair chance that something will come along even if it isn’t the Navy.”

After that they rested, rested while the sun continued its daily climb into its throne. From time to time they sipped a little water, using it sparingly, and all the time watching the sea. But there might not have been such a thing as a ship in the world for all they saw of one. Later, languid from the heat and lack of food, Frecks dozed.

Suddenly her ears caught a sound, one common enough in some parts of the world, but one which, in their present position, brought her stiffly to a sitting position. It was the distant, the very distant, drone of a high-powered aircraft. She looked at Worrals and saw that she was sitting bolt upright, too, listening. Her eyes roved the sky. Not a speck broke its pristine surface,

although the reflected glare from the sea did nothing to make observation easier.

“Can I hear an aircraft?” said Frecks, with hope in her voice.

“You can,” returned Worrals laconically.

“Are you sure?”

“Certain.”

“Funny we can’t see it.”

“That’s probably because of the heat haze. You can’t see the haze, but it’s there. I remember running into the same sort of haze when we were in Syria during the war. I’ll tell you something else. That machine is coming this way.”

Their eyes remained on the section of sky from which the sound came, or seemed to come, increasing slowly in volume; and then, suddenly, as if it had emerged from a cloud, the machine was there, a great pale ghost of an aircraft, flying at perhaps two thousand feet above the sea and less than half a mile from the shore.

“There she is!” cried Frecks.

“A Catalina,” identified Worrals. “She must be from one of the squadrons stationed in Egypt.”

The flying boat came on, cruising with majestic dignity along the coast, its outline hardening against the flat blue sky as it drew nearer.

“I’d give something to be in that aircraft right now,” announced Frecks. “I wonder what it’s doing here?”

“On a routine patrol I imagine.”

Frecks frowned. “I’m not so sure,” she said thoughtfully. “That pilot’s flying as though he were looking for something. He’s cruising on about three-quarters throttle. If he was going some place he’d kick her along faster than that.”

Worrals stood up, keeping her eyes on the machine. “He’s going to pass us pretty close. I wonder can we attract his attention?”

“He’s almost bound to see us if we wave.”

“I know; but that may not mean a thing to the crew. You know how it is yourself. Everybody waves to a low-flying aircraft. All the same, we’ll try it. It isn’t much use waving a handkerchief, or anything silly like that. It’s got to be something different. I know!” By this time Worrals had opened her bag and was groping with feverish speed amongst the contents.

“What are you after?” demanded Frecks.

“This,” answered Worrals shortly, holding up her small face mirror. She turned the glass at an angle towards the aircraft and then moved it slightly this way and that.

“I’ve got it!” cried Frecks enthusiastically. “If you can catch the sun on that glass they’re bound to see the flash.”

“If I can catch the eye of the radio operator maybe I can talk to him,” said Worrals briskly. She continued to operate the glass, directing the flash as accurately as she could towards the aircraft. Flash! flash! flash! went the mirror.

“They *must* see it,” declared Frecks, as if trying to convince herself.

“If they’re looking this way,” muttered Worrals grimly. “Don’t stand doing nothing—jump, wave your arms . . .”

But the aircraft, nearly level with them now, cruised on serenely.

“What a crew,” muttered Frecks savagely. “Why on earth don’t they keep a lookout?”

“I’ll bet they’re listening to some tin-can dance band on their own radio,” growled Worrals. “No! Wait! I think they’ve got us,” she went on in a voice of suppressed excitement. “They’ve changed course!”

The flying boat had, in fact, begun a gentle turn that would bring it closer inshore. This course it held for a minute, losing height slowly; then it completed its turn until it was again broadside on.

Worrals continued to flash her glass, but the signal she made was no longer haphazard. Long and short flashes followed in the regular rhythm of the International Distress Signal, S.O.S., in the Morse Code.

The aircraft turned again and came back parallel with the coast. The drone of the engines dropped a tone lower as its nose went down. A man’s head appeared above the gun turret. He waved. Closer came the machine, until it was a bare two hundred yards away.

Worrals sprang on the nearest rock. Frecks did the same and waved with desperate energy. Then Worrals brought her glass into action again, now sending a definite signal.

This occupied about ten minutes, with the machine cruising past and turning to fly past again. That they had been seen was no longer in doubt, but whether the radio operator was receiving Worrals’s message they had no means of knowing.

“I’ve sent the message twice,” said Worrals, still staring at the machine.

“Perhaps they wonder why we don’t go down to the sea where they could pick us up,” remarked Frecks.

Worrals shook her head. “They must realize that we can’t get down that cliff. In any case, I doubt if the pilot would dare to risk a landing so near the shore. If I was flying that machine I wouldn’t be too keen on risking tearing my keel off on a submerged reef or something.”

At this juncture the machine turned slowly inland to fly over them.

“What’s he going to do!” cried Frecks, now pale with excitement.

“I don’t know—watch,” answered Worrals crisply.

As the machine passed over them something appeared to detach itself, a narrow strip of material that fluttered wildly as it hurtled earthwards. Worrals and Frecks watched it strike the ground, bounce, and then come to rest.

“Signal streamer!” cried Worrals, and together they raced to it.

Worrals picked it up, waved acknowledgment to the flying boat which, after rocking its wings ponderously, turned and headed out to sea.

“What message did you send?” asked Frecks, as Worrals, with fingers that trembled slightly in spite of herself, unfolded the sheet of paper that she found in the container.

“I sent ‘Operation Distaff. Arms dump buried centre of oasis twenty miles east’.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes. Wasn’t it enough? I repeated it.”

“But didn’t you tell them who we were and that we were in a jam, and _____”

“There wasn’t time—and it wasn’t necessary, anyway,” said Worrals shortly. “The thing was to let them know the location of the dump.”

“Hang the dump!” snorted Frecks. “What about us?”

“They’ll have pin-pointed our position, you can be sure of that. When Headquarters gets that signal they’ll realize how we’re fixed and do something about it. Let’s see what the aircraft has to say.” She read the message aloud. “Operation Distaff. Message received. Picked your man up from canoe twenty miles south. He brought us along. Have story from him. Stand by. Will send help.” Worrals drew a deep breath of relief. “That’s marvellous.”

“Man—what man are they talking about?”

“Maki—who else?”

“Of course. This heat is making me dizzy.”

“Maki must have got down to the sea, where he pinched a canoe and tried to get across the ditch. The Catalina spotted him and picked him up—at least, that’s how I read it.”

“A bit of luck the aircraft came along.”

“I’m not so sure that it was all luck,” answered Worrals thoughtfully. “Melinos might have called the Air Force out to watch for us. It was an aircraft sent out by him that spotted us in the *boutre*, you remember? He said he’d do all he could—but what are we doing, standing out here in the heat? Let’s get back to the shade.”

In a very different mood now that they knew help was on the way they returned to the rocks, from where they watched the aircraft out of sight. Somehow the heat did not seem so fierce.

“What do you think Melinos will do when he gets our signal, and hears what Maki has to say?” inquired Frecks, as the flying boat was swallowed up in the haze from which it had appeared.

“He’ll try to pick us up, we can rely on that.”

“Shouldn’t we go down to the beach?”

“I don’t think so. It might be better to wait here to see what happens. They may send over a *Lysander* to pick us up. It could easily land on the *sabkha*. If they send a patrol boat, then we shall have to get down to the sea somehow. For the present, at any rate, we ought to stay where they know we are. It would be silly to move and give them the job of finding us again. We’ll see what happens. Meanwhile, we’d better get off this rock. We’ve been making ourselves pretty conspicuous for the last twenty minutes.”

“I got so worked up over the aircraft that I didn’t think of that,” asserted Frecks, turning casually to survey the sun-scorched terrain behind them.

What she saw gave her such a shock that she was temporarily paralysed. She could only remain in a fixed position, staring. For a split second she thought, and hoped, that the heat haze was playing a trick, and what she saw was a mirage. But her hopes died even as they were born. She found her voice, and when she spoke it was curiously calm. “I’m afraid we’ve left it a bit too late,” she said. “It looks as if we’ve had it.”

Less than a hundred yards away the Sheikh Abd-el-Katil, followed by a dozen or so of his men, was galloping towards them.

By this time Worrals, startled by Frecks’s tone of voice, had also turned, and she saw what Frecks had seen. “Pity about that,” she murmured. “Take it easy. They’ve seen us, so it’s no use trying to hide, and running won’t help us.” Moving swiftly she buried the message streamer, and the message it had contained, in the sand.

“We might as well fight it out,” asserted Frecks, groping for her pistol.

“If we do, we shall, without any doubt whatever, be shot,” declared Worrals. “If we can avoid being shot there’s a chance that help may come in time to see us through. They don’t know that our position is known to our own people.”

The sheikh, closely followed by his men, galloped up, and pulling the horse he was riding to its haunches regarded the girls with a sardonic smile.

“Have you any bread?” asked Worrals calmly. “We’ve run out of food.”

This question—or perhaps it was Worrals’s manner—seemed to cause the sheikh some surprise. He deliberated on it for a moment or two before he replied. Then he wasted no words. All he said was “Come.” And his tone of voice did not encourage argument.

Worrals walked closer to the group. “Certainly,” she said. “Anywhere is better than this place. Where are we going?”

The sheikh ignored the question. Turning, he spoke quickly and gutturally, whereupon two of his men dismounted and brought their horses forward.

“Ride,” ordered the sheikh harshly.

Worrals nudged Frecks. “Come on,” she said. “The great thing is to keep calm.” Picking up her bag she swung into the saddle of the nearest horse.

Frecks did the same.

The Arabs closed in around them. The sheikh drove his heels into the flanks of his mount, sending it forward at a canter. The others followed in close order.

“Why didn’t he shoot us on the spot?” Frecks managed to ask Worrals.

“Firstly, I imagine, because he wants to save his face by showing us to Cosmo—to prove that he really caught us. And secondly, Cosmo will want to know how much we know. He has no other means of finding out than by asking us, and he can only do that while we’re alive.”

“Then the thing is not to tell him anything.”

“Exactly.”

The party galloped back towards the oasis, moving swiftly over the same ground which, the night before, Worrals and Frecks had walked with so much travail.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Touch and Go

THE ride back to the oasis was a dismal affair. Hardly a word was spoken. Frecks, depressed by a feeling of frustration and failure just when success seemed in sight, was in no mood for talking. The terrific heat did nothing to improve matters. It struck upwards from the burning sand as well as from above, even though the sun was now well down in the west. She hung her head, her eyes on the lengthening shadows of the horses and their riders. Even the Arabs seemed to shrink within their *burnous*.

However, this discomfort passed with the dying of the day. Night brought relief, and it was nearly seven o'clock when the weary horses pricked their ears at the sight of the oasis. Frecks looked around. The place appeared much the same as when she had last seen it except that there were fewer men about. Most of them, she surmised, were still out in the desert, looking for them, a view that was more or less confirmed later, when in twos and threes and small parties they began to trickle back.

Shouts of satisfaction greeted the arrival of the sheikh's party, with its prisoners. These brought Cosmo out of his tent, a smile twisting his saturnine face when he saw that the sheikh had been successful. With him was a man whose face was familiar to Frecks, although she could not at first place him. Then she remembered. It was Markoff's chauffeur.

The sheikh and his party dismounted near the tent and the horses were led away. Arabs, apparently permanent residents of the oasis, drifted over from where they had been resting and formed a ring of interested spectators. Frecks, seeing them at close quarters for the first time, perceived what she had already suspected—they were not true desert Arabs. Most of them were powerful-looking fellows, ranging in colour from brown to jet-black. Some were dressed in semi-civilized fashion, in clothes such as native workmen often wear, which led her to guess that these were some of the people who were causing trouble on the road. They looked that type. However, in the circumstances this was of scant importance.

Cosmo took up a position in front of Worrals, and with arms folded across his chest regarded her with cold hostility. "Two clever girls—but not

quite clever enough,” he sneered.

“That’s a matter of opinion,” answered Worrals calmly.

“What do you mean by that?”

“What I said. You have your opinion. I have mine. Time will show who is right.”

Cosmo came a pace nearer. “You’ve been here before,” he challenged.

“Have I?” returned Worrals evenly.

“I’m asking you.”

“I thought you were telling me.”

“Answer.”

“I’m not prepared to discuss my affairs with you.”

“Oh. So you’re not?”

“I am not, and moreover, I object to this interrogation. Your stooges have already laid hands on us, and that is something for which you will be required to give an explanation to the British Government, which still has some authority in this part of the world.”

Cosmo looked at Worrals thoughtfully before he spoke again. He seemed puzzled by her manner, her assurance. “How much do you know?” he demanded bluntly.

“About what?”

“About my business.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Worrals, with significant warmth.

Markoff’s chauffeur stepped in. “What matter what she know?” he said stridently. “Cut their throats and settle the business. Give them to me. I waste no time talking.”

Cosmo waved a hand sharply in a gesture of dissent. “Not so fast, you. All you think about is yourself. You can go. I have to stay here. I want to know how much they know.”

“As far as that’s concerned you can save your breath,” put in Worrals curtly. “You’ll learn nothing from me.”

Cosmo nodded slowly. “I have ways of making obstinate people talk,” he said softly.

“That, I imagine, would be part of your education,” rejoined Worrals, imperturbably.

Markoff’s man spoke again. “My boss say——”

“I don’t give a rap for your boss!” broke in Cosmo irritably. “I’m not interested in him or his hashish racket. He was responsible for this mess, the

fool. I'm only interested in what these two women know. I stand to lose big money." He turned back to Worrals. "Well, are you going to talk?"

"I've nothing to add to what I've already said," answered Worrals.

"All right, if that's how you want it." Cosmo turned and spoke to some of his men in Arabic. Apparently it was an order, for they advanced, and taking Frecks and Worrals by the arms dragged them roughly to the nearest palms. Their arms were pulled behind the rough boles and their wrists tied.

Cosmo took up a fresh position in front of them. "Now," he said viciously, "will you talk?"

"I will tell you this much," said Worrals, speaking slowly and distinctly. "If you dare to lay a finger on us you will regret it for the rest of your life, however long or short that may be."

"I'm giving you a chance," replied Cosmo. "You've still time to save yourselves a lot of trouble. Tell me what you know, and what you've done, and you can go where you like."

Worrals laughed scornfully. "Really, Mr. Cosmo, you have indeed a poor idea of my intelligence if you imagine that I could be taken in by such a childish trick. Let's get down to brass tacks. We are British Government agents. That's not telling you anything because you know it now. We're on the right side of the law, you're on the wrong side. This is a British zone of influence, and we, as British subjects, are free to come and go. You're not even British, yet you've had the nerve to kidnap us—that's the word, kidnap. As you might say, you've caught us, so at the moment you hold the cards—or you think you do. Presently, perhaps sooner than you expect, you will be caught, too. Murder us, and mark my words, you'll pay for it. Don't think you can get away with it, even here. The people who really matter in Egypt know where we are, and if we disappear they'll come looking for us; make no mistake about that. Unless you can produce us, safe and sound, you'll be for the high-jump. That's all I have to say to you, Mr. Cosmo."

"I'll deal with that situation when it arises," returned Cosmo, in a voice which suggested that Worrals's words had not been entirely without effect. He beckoned to an Arab who stood close by, holding a camel wand.

At this point an unexpected intervention occurred—at least it was unexpected as far as Frecks was concerned. The sheikh stepped into the picture. "How much do you want for these two women?" he asked, in a voice that he might have employed when buying a couple of sheep.

Cosmo spun round, making it evident that he, too, was startled by the question. "What are they to you?" he demanded suspiciously.

“Merchandise—good merchandise,” returned the sheikh smoothly. “Dead, they are worth nothing. Alive, they are worth money, plenty money.”

“Where? How?”

The sheikh held out his hands, palms upwards. “I have friends in the interior.”

“Ha! So that’s it,” growled Cosmo. “I forgot you were a slave dealer. No. Alive, they know enough to hang me.”

“Where I shall send them they will be as good as dead,” argued the sheikh. “Perhaps they will wish they were dead, but alive they are worth money. Doubtless we could both make a good profit.”

Here Markoff’s man stepped in again with a violent protest. “No!” he shouted. “Do not listen to such talk. These women know too much. If you let them go alive I will report it to my master, and never again will any of you dare to set foot in Egypt.”

“You’re on the wrong side of the sea to start threatening me, you dog,” snarled Cosmo. “Try that and *you’ll* be lucky to see Egypt again. In future, you keep your side and I’ll keep mine. You let these women in here. I’ve got them. Now I do what I like with them.”

“I should say they are worth two hundred pounds apiece,” put in the sheikh, stroking his beard reflectively. “Two hundred pounds in gold.”

Cosmo hesitated. It was clear that he was torn between avarice and fears for his safety. Frecks could almost read his mind. Four hundred pounds in gold was real money. Dead, the girls would be mere food for the hyenas.

Worrals spoke. “Don’t believe him, Cosmo,” she said. “We are worth more than four hundred pounds. Why, our ransom money would certainly run to a thousand.”

Frecks gave her a sidelong look. She realized what Worrals was doing, or trying to do. She preferred death to being sold to one of the sheikhs of the interior, and was trying to prevent the sale.

“What does it matter to you? You’re finished, anyhow,” muttered Cosmo.

“Call it vanity,” murmured Worrals. “I should hate to think that my value in the slave market was a mere two hundred pounds. I should be ashamed of that all my life.”

“Perhaps you wouldn’t have long to be ashamed,” sneered Cosmo.

“Kill them!” burst out Markoff’s man. “Give them to me, I’ll do it.”

“If you give us to that rascal he’ll probably sell us behind your back, anyway,” scoffed Worrals. “These hashish wallahs would sell their dying

mothers.”

Markoff’s man made a rush at her, but Cosmo flung him back. “You keep your mouth shut!” he rasped. “Shut up, all of you! Before we settle the matter I’ll see what these women have to say. You can do what you like with them when I’ve finished.” He made a signal to the man with the camel wand.

The man stepped forward, raising the wand high with obvious relish.

Then, suddenly, a hush fell. Faces were raised skyward, whence came the distant hum of an aircraft. It was faint, but audible to everyone.

Markoff’s man pointed an accusing finger at Cosmo. “I told you!” he shouted. “They bring the Air Force here!”

“Shut up!” grated Cosmo through his teeth, and then stood still, listening.

A minute passed. The sound grew steadily nearer.

“They couldn’t have brought the Air Force here,” said Cosmo in a low voice, as if speaking his thoughts aloud. “They’ve no radio, so they couldn’t have got in touch with them.” Then, turning to the Arabs, he spoke swiftly in guttural Arabic.

There was a wild stampede and in a moment all lights were extinguished. The only light left was the soft moonlight which, filtering through the palms, cast lattice-like shadows across the sand.

The drone of the aircraft indicated its position, and although it could not be seen, all eyes followed its course across the heavens until it appeared to be passing immediately overhead.

“It’s high up and it’s going over,” said Cosmo, with a sigh of relief. “It’s just a routine flight.” He threw Worrals a triumphant grin, which revealed how seriously he had been alarmed.

It must be admitted that Frecks thought he was right. There was certainly nothing to indicate that the machines—for she thought there was more than one—were coming down. For a moment or two her hopes that it might be a rescue party had soared; but as the drone continued on beyond the oasis, with no suggestion of the aircraft losing height, they fell lower than before.

Cosmo moved quickly. “This talking has gone on long enough,” he said in a brittle voice. “I’ll make these women speak. When I’ve finished with them you can fight among yourselves for any pieces that are worth having.” Again he made a sign to the Arab who held the cane.

The man stepped forward in a businesslike way. He raised the camel wand.

It did not fall. There was a tremendous crash in the palm fronds overhead. Similar sounds came from all over the oasis. An object which presently resolved itself into a man appeared like magic within a dozen yards of the party standing by the trees. A monstrous cloud floated down behind him. Another man appeared, another, and another. One came smashing through the very palm to which Frecks was tied. He was on his feet in an instant, clutching in his hands a Sten gun. Frecks had never seen a man move so fast. There were shouts. A shot rang out.

Now all this happened in less time than it takes to tell. Frecks was as dumbfounded as the men around her, not one of whom had moved. Then everyone seemed to realize at the same instant what had happened—what was happening. The result was pandemonium.

Worrals shouted: “Hi! Soldier! Quick—or we’ve had it!”

Markoff’s chauffeur spat a bitter oath, and whipping out a pistol pointed it at Worrals; but before he could pull the trigger an automatic weapon chattered. He spun like a top before diving into the ground.

By this time the sheikh was running towards the horses. In fact, men were running in all directions, shouting. Cosmo yelled furiously in Arabic, but when he saw that he was wasting his breath he turned on Worrals, but finding himself confronted by a man still wearing parachute harness he turned and raced after the sheikh.

Several Tommies came running up. “Cut us free, somebody, and the rest of you get after those two men!” shouted Worrals, carried away for once by the excitement of the moment.

A paratrooper whipped out his dagger and in a flash had cut the thongs which until then had held Worrals and Frecks to their respective trees. More troops came running up. Worrals pointed at the horses, and the two men who had nearly reached them. “Get those two!” she cried. “They’re the leaders.”

As for Frecks, she ducked, for bullets were whistling, kicking up the sand and smashing through the trees. “For the love of Mike,” she gabbled hysterically. “What a party!”

Worrals stood by her tree, watching Cosmo and the sheikh, who looked like getting away, although several troops were converging on them; and so they might have done had not Cosmo behaved foolishly. Perhaps he lost his head, and if he did it was no matter for wonder, considering the circumstances. Paratroops were something not one of them—not even Worrals, as she afterwards admitted—had thought of.

Cosmo had some difficulty with his horse, which, taking fright in the general panic, reared. Seeing that a soldier was close to him he levelled a

pistol and fired. The soldier stumbled and fell, but the action was to cost Cosmo his life. A ragged volley of shots rang out and he fell. The horse bolted, dragging him, for his foot was caught in the stirrup. The sheikh, who succeeded in getting on a horse, got a little way; but there were paratroops outside the oasis as well as inside. Several voices shouted to him to halt. The sheikh, bending low, ignored them. Weapons flamed. The sheikh's horse fell, throwing its rider, who rolled over and over before coming to a stop in a crumpled heap. He did not move again.

Worrals, seeing that there was nothing for them to do, and realizing that if they tried to do anything they would only be in the way, advised Frecks to lie flat, as there was a real danger of being hit by one of the bullets that still zipped about the oasis. So, from the prone position, they watched the mopping-up completed. It did not take long, for most of the gun-runners, seeing that they had no chance, fled, or gave themselves up. After a while a whistle shrilled and from all sides the paratroops began to rally by the water-hole.

Frecks watched the scene with undisguised delight. "Now that's what I call a pretty piece of staff work," she remarked enthusiastically.

"For us, it certainly was," returned Worrals. "I still can't work out, though, how it happened."

"What does it matter? It was a slice of cake," declared Frecks. "It beats anything I've seen on the flicks. What a bit of luck."

"I'm not so sure about luck," said Worrals slowly. "I fancy there was more to it than that. There was some pretty snappy organization somewhere, and I think I can see the man responsible. Isn't that Colin Pasha over there, with Melinos? Yes, it is. All in at the death. That's how it should be. Come on, let's go over." Rising, Worrals walked quickly to the group that was forming in the open centre of the oasis.

Melinos saw them. He touched his companion on the arm and together they moved forward to meet the girls.

"Are you all right?" called Colin Pasha anxiously.

"Very well indeed, thank you," answered Worrals.

"You're not hurt?"

Frecks answered. "No, but we're jolly hungry. We've had nothing much to eat for two days."

Colin Pasha halted and regarded them sternly. "I don't know what to say to you," he muttered helplessly.

Worrals smiled. “Surely you should be incoherent with gratitude? You ask us to do a job, and lo! in a few days it’s all buttoned-up.”

Colin Pasha shook his head sadly. “When Melinos came back to me and told me where you were, and what you were doing, I nearly passed out. Seriously, you had no business to take such outrageous risks.”

Worrals turned to Frecks. “You heard that? Isn’t that like a man? We do the job for him; now he’s going to complain about the way we did it.” She turned back to Colin Pasha. “If we hadn’t come here you *would* have had something to worry about.”

“What do you mean?”

“A general rising was timed for Monday. Everything was all set for a nasty little war.”

“Good heavens!”

“Right well you say ‘good heavens’. We’ve nipped the plot in the bud. I’m afraid a lot of rifles and ammunition have been dished out, but not all. There are some here.”

“Can you prove that?”

“I can show you.”

“Then show me, because I shall have a bit of explaining to do over this affair, and if I can’t prove——”

“We can prove plenty,” interrupted Worrals. “Call some of your men and come over here for a start.” She led the way to the secret dump—not that there was anything to be seen of it.

“Now what am I supposed to do?” asked Colin Pasha.

Worrals pointed to the sand. “Dig.”

An order was given, and in a few minutes the rifles were exposed.

Colin Pasha looked at them, at Worrals, then at Melinos. He shook his head. “I give up,” he said in a resigned voice. “I don’t know how you did it.”

“When we’ve had something to eat I’ll tell you,” promised Worrals. “But how about you answering one or two questions? How did you know we were here?”

“We didn’t, but we thought you might be. What happened, as far as I can make out, was this. Maki tried to get back. By that time I had heard from Melinos what you were doing, and we put out as many sea and air patrols as we could muster. The pilot of one of the aircraft spotted someone waving in a canoe, so he landed and picked him up. It was Maki. Maki gave the pilot a good idea of where he thought you must be. As a matter of detail, he was in the machine when you were spotted. Your message was received and the

radio operator sent it over the air to Headquarters straight away. Naturally, the first thing I did was try to pick you up. I sent out an aircraft to your last known position. You weren't there. The pilot risked his neck landing, to make sure. What he found was horse tracks in the sands, which revealed pretty plainly what had happened. The tracks led in a straight line towards this oasis and he sent a signal through to that effect." Colin Pasha smiled. "I tell you, the air has been fairly buzzing with Operation Distaff signals for the last twelve hours. I realized, of course, that if the enemy had got hold of you, your number was up unless we acted quickly. There was only one thing to do. I got in touch with the Higher Command and they turned out the paratroops. I flew out with Melinos to the road and followed up in an armoured car. We weren't far behind the machines. All the same, had you not given the position of the arms dump in your signal I wouldn't have dared to call out half the armed forces of the Middle East Commands. I hoped to find you here—alive. It was a shot, literally, in the dark, and it came off."

"That was all very nice of you," acknowledged Worrals. "You rolled up—or rather, dropped down—just in time. The king gun-runner was just about to get busy on us with a big stick—to make us talk. It was all rather alarming."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. He called himself Cosmo, but his real name is something you'll have to find out. He was shot trying to get away. His body is over there." Worrals pointed.

"Well, you may have done a bigger job than you realize," said Colin Pasha.

"I don't think there's much doubt about that," murmured Melinos.

Frecks looked at him. "And you did a bigger job than you knew when you dished us out with chocolates and fruit. They've kept us on our feet. At the moment I could do with something rather more substantial."

Colin Pasha laughed. "Well, we can soon fix that. There's nothing more for us to do here. The troops will tidy up. We might as well get along."

"You mean—we're going to fly home?"

"No," answered Colin Pasha. "My car's waiting outside the oasis. We're only about thirty miles from the road. The engineers have a mess there. I feel sure that when they learn what you've done they'll be only too happy to share their rations."

"They may not be so pleased when they see how much I can put away," rejoined Frecks cheerfully, as they walked towards the waiting car.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

The cover and other illustrations were done by Reginald Heade (born Reginald Cyril Webb) (1901-1957).

[The end of *Worrals Goes Afoot* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]