

During the evening, when there was dancing on the concrete patio where I usually hung up my washing, I had the chance of dancing with my husband again for the first time since leaving Germany.

Rolf had bought a motorboat for his fishing, and several days after the wedding he invited me on a cruise around the island. I accepted with alacrity, having had far too little time for a thorough exploration of Floreana even by land. We sailed north at an amazing speed! Rolf's boat went 10 times faster than the little fishing boat in which we first arrived on the island.

Rolf brought the boat skillfully into Post Office Bay, where ships had left our mail through the years. "What about seeing if there's any mail?" Rolf said. "I'll stay in the boat for a bit. I'd like to clean the engine while I'm waiting."

I walked off to the white barrel that was our "letter box" and opened the flap to see if there was anything inside. There wasn't, of course. No ship had called recently.

Before closing the flap again, I reached inside and felt around the bottom of the barrel. I gave a start: my fingers had touched some sort of letter or package stuck inside. I couldn't pry it loose without using a little stick.

It was a thick envelope, shriveled and yellow with age. The writing was very indistinct, whether from the salty sea water or the sharp salty air. I read my own name and noticed that the stamps were German: old German stamps, long withdrawn from circulation. The letter must have been stuck to the bottom of the barrel for years!

"SO THERE was mail after all," said Rolf, as I returned to the boat deep in thought. I shook my head. "Not really."

We cruised around for an hour or so more without another word being said. My thoughts were far away in time and place; they were back in October, 1935, when I left Floreana to go to Germany on my first "home leave."

I remembered the strange man who had come to see me as I was preparing for the voyage back to South America. He admired our enterprise, but insisted with vehemence that we had already proved what we could do.

He very much wanted us to return to Germany and manage his farm for him; he would even pay our passages home. And when my ship reached Antwerp—how it all came back to me!—there was that telegram from him saying: "Hope to see you back here very soon with all your family. Will be sending check to Floreana shortly."

Heinz was at home when we got back. "Mail," I said. "It has certainly been some time reaching me, hasn't it?" I handed the thick envelope to him.

He looked at the faded address and shook his head in a puzzled way. "Oh, well, the most important things often take longest." "It's not so important as all that," I said, and took it back from him, then slowly opened the envelope.

When I saw several sheets closely written, the ink smudged, and the lines running into each other, I realized it would be a difficult job to read the letter. But there was something attached to the letter which made me gasp.

"Aren't you going to read your letter?" Heinz asked.

"It's almost unreadable," I answered, "but anyhow I don't need to read it now. I know just what it says. Look at this, though. The ink hasn't faded so badly here—you can make the words out quite easily. And the figures." I handed him a check made out for \$1,000.

Heinz stared at it, completely flabbergasted. "A thousand dollars! But that's—that's quite a lot of money! It's incredible!"

When I returned to the island 22 years before, I hadn't told Heinz much about the man who was so anxious to rescue us from our adventure. He only smiled at the time. Now he burst out laughing when I explained about the letter which had taken so many years to find us.

"Suppose we'd found it then?" I remarked. "After all, it is a lot of money."



Margret (right) is proud of her island-born offspring; Inge is now 24, and Rolf is 28.

"I wouldn't have sold my freedom for a thousand dollars then, either."

"And what do we do now?"

"Now? I say that we've got money to burn." He winked at me.

"Money to burn?" I repeated. "Yes, I think that's the best thing to do." I put the check back in the envelope along with the letter. Then I made a taper from newspaper, lighted it from the small fire in the stove, and held it under the envelope. Soon the envelope and its contents turned to ashes.

When the last spark was out, Heinz, usually a stickler for tidiness, simply kicked the ashes to one side and chuckled heartily. "I'm certainly glad the postal service is a bit slow here," he said.

And so was I.

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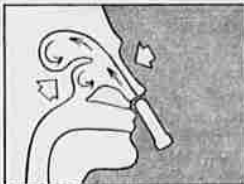
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