

FLOREANA—A Modern Swiss Family Robinson

By MARGRET WITTMER



* This story of a modern Swiss Family Robinson began in July, 1932, when the author, her husband Heinz, and her 12-year-old stepson Harry left their home in Germany to find a new life on a remote island in the mysterious volcanic chain of the Galapagos. Told that their son needed several years in a sanitarium, the Wittmers decided to leave civilization and "go back to nature," hoping the primitive life would restore the boy's health. The adventures of the Wittmer family begin below, condensed from the book "Floreana" by Margret Wittmer, to be published by E. P. Dutton in April, 1961.

THE GRAY OUTLINES of the little fishing boat slowly faded in the mist lying over the sea, till at last they disappeared altogether.

She was the boat which had brought us here, and half an hour before we had been still aboard with her skipper and crew. Now we were on our own, stranded on Floreana, this lonely island. Behind us lay the sea and the shifting mist, above us the sky, infinite as the sea and a dismal gray. Ahead lay the future we had ourselves chosen, our new life.

We turned around in silence, our eyes searching desperately for the little boat. There was no sign of her. The mist over the sea had long swallowed her up. We still did not speak; we felt too down-hearted. This was where we were going to live; this was to be our "New Eden."

Heinz and I were alone, for Harry had gone up the coast a bit with the two dogs. We looked at each other, my husband and I, knowing without a word spoken that we were both thinking the same thing: there's no going back. We had "burnt our boats" in the old phrase, or anyhow "our boat" had gone; and it might be months before another ship put in here. Even if a ship came, we couldn't get home on that. The nearest mainland, part of Ecuador, was 600 miles away. Surely no more lonely, forlorn, and "dead" place could be imagined than this island with the lovely name like a flower in bloom. But we had come to Floreana now, and there was no going back.

We walked a little way over the gray sand, past the black blocks of lava, knowing that many before us had tried to settle on this island, that all of those former settlers had failed, given up, gone away.

"I think I'll just explore inland a bit," said Heinz. "You coming?"

"No, I'll stay here," I answered, and watched him going off through the gently rising bush.

Completely alone, I sat on one of the shelves of lava, dabbling my feet in the water of the Pacific Ocean, which stretched away in all its monotonous vastness.

I thought back to all I had read in books about the islands and about our new home, of which we were rather timidly taking possession. For a few moments I imagined myself sitting in my house in Cologne with a book open in front of me. But

then I looked around and saw that this was reality: the sea, the shore with its dark boulders, the two iguanas which waddled past me with only a curious glance.

Meanwhile, Heinz had returned, and some 50 yards behind me had quickly put up our main tent—in case the rain started again—with a tarpaulin next to it covering our kitchen and stores: crates, boxes, hampers, sacks and cases, plants we had brought with us—bananas, sugar cane, coffee, yucca, kamotte—all in a jumble together. I decided that the big crate of books should be our table, and I put a tablecloth on it; some of the other crates would serve as chairs. It was beginning to look more comfortable, quite different anyhow from those first few minutes when the boat sailed away.

We Visit Our Neighbors

"How about getting us something to eat?" Heinz said. "After that we'll pay our social call."

"Social call?" I asked. "Oh yes, Dr. Ritter."

It was certainly our duty to visit the two people, Germans like ourselves, who had been living on our island for three years now, its only human inhabitants besides us: Dr. Karl Friedrich Ritter and Frau Dore Strauch. It was their example which had given us the idea of coming here in the first place; if they could do it, so could we.

Dr. Ritter was a dentist who suddenly left Berlin in 1929 to live out a new "nature philosophy"

on Floreana away from the world—which he hated and despised. He was a vegetarian and intended to prove that you could attain the age of 140 if you lived according to nature as interpreted by his philosophy.

Despite all I had heard, I had a slight shock when I first saw the former Berlin dentist. Altogether he looked rather frightening, and if I had been on my own I might almost have fled. His eyes shifted uneasily as he inspected me and had a gleam in them which suggested the fanatic. He was short and thickset, with a mop of untidy black hair above a deeply wrinkled brow, a broad nose in a triangular face, with a black mustache.

"Let me show you my garden," I heard Dr. Ritter telling Heinz. I went over and joined them and Frau Strauch on a tour of his small domain. It was nothing more than an allotment, about half an acre. This was the strip of ground he had cleared, sown, and planted; his "farm" looked pretty well cultivated—perhaps more so than he did himself.

For the first time we saw all the things that grew here: bananas, coconut and date palms, tamarinds, plums, mangoes, figs, papaws. There was a hen house with about 20 chickens squawking away in it. We found all this wonderful.

When we were on our way to Floreana, I had pictured a romantic South Sea Island, a paradise of peace and plenty, where work had little place. The books and press reports we had read in Ger-

many had not warned us adequately that it would be a Herculean task to "make a living" in our new home, but Dr. Ritter got us right without discouraging us.

The first day on Floreana was ending. Days here, I knew, were not as long as at home, for we were almost on the Equator; 12 hours day and 12 hours night, all through the year. While Heinz and Harry had been exploring, they had found pirates' caves which would be our home till we had built our own house.

"You must have a look at the caves yourself," said Heinz after we left Dr. Ritter's. "The spring is simply wonderful! The three caves will do splendidly for our temporary residence, better anyhow than this windy tent. When I think of that rain starting . . ."

So we were to move in the morning, up where the spring was and the caves. This would solve the water problem, the all-important one just then, for there was only a tiny drop left in the water bag.

We Become Cave Dwellers

We slept magnificently in the tent our first night on Floreana. The tent had a rubber ground sheet, and the sand on the shore was as soft as any couch.

The next morning we had coffee warmed up from the evening's brew. Then we washed the cups in the sea, packed them, and were ready to start loading for the move. We took only the bare essentials—bedclothes, some crockery and cutlery, ra-

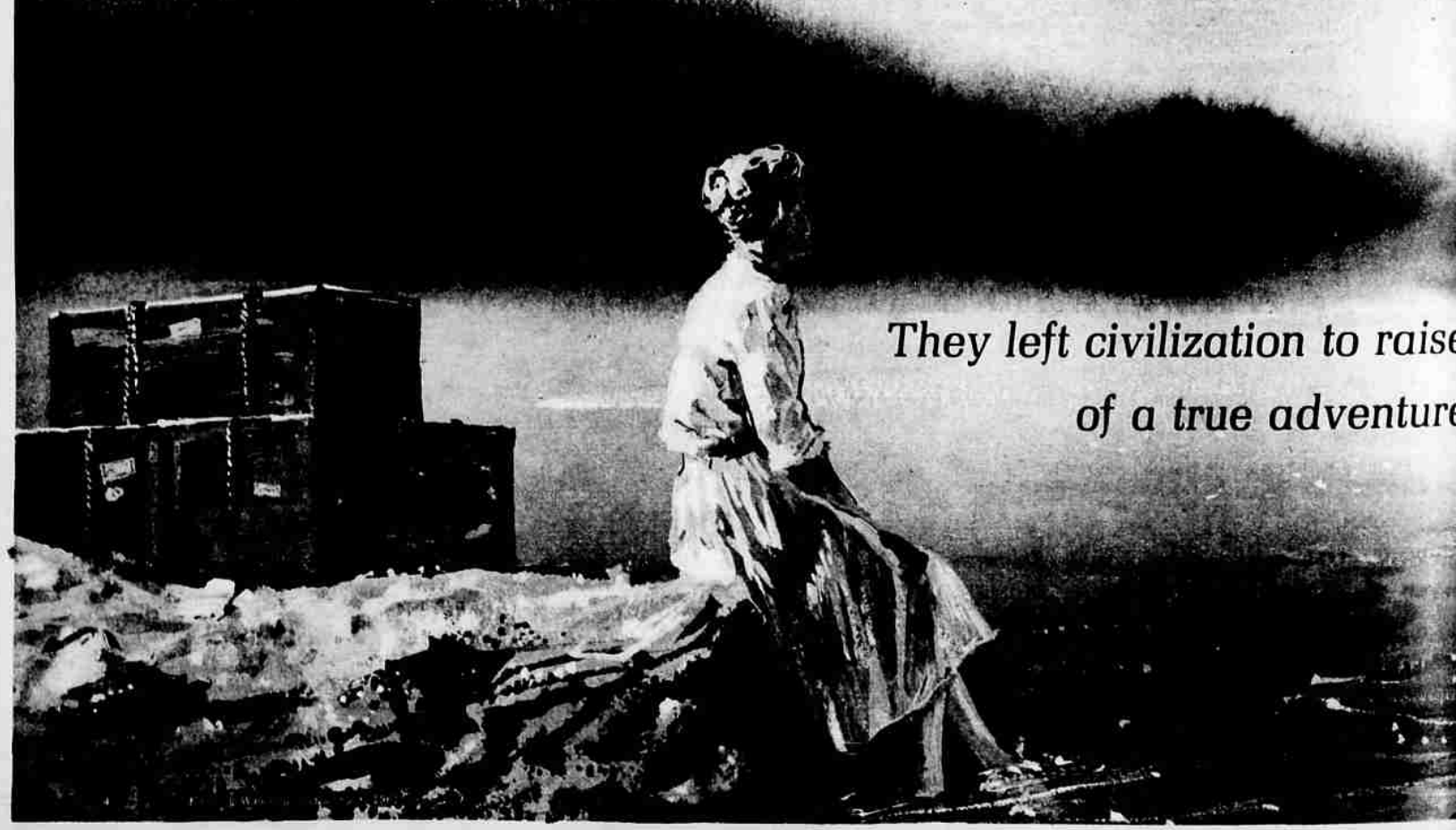
tions and tools. Everything else we left behind: our ten crates, that is, containing all our possessions, carefully packed in waterproof paper to protect them against dampness. We had brought hundreds of things, but no furniture; that was something we would have to make ourselves.

The caves had been hollowed out of soft lava stone which was brownish with some patches of white basalt. The living-room cave was the size of a large room and looked like a vault. The walls must have been finished by pirates' hands, and one wall even had a fireplace hewn out of it, with a chimney going through the "ceiling"—a thin layer of lava above the cave. In front of the cave were papayas and melon trees; this was something else that was different on Floreana—melons grew on trees, not on the ground as at home.

The cave had two benches hewn out of one wall. Not exactly comfortable, of course, but at least something to sit on. I was so tired when I sat down that I didn't notice at all how extremely hard they were. I saw, however, that the pirates had also left some furniture: a table carpentered out of old crates and two warped stools. We had not expected even this much comfort.

Right in front of the entrance there was a papaya tree heavy with ripe fruit, and near it bushes with lemons. The lemons were not important at the moment, though; the thing that mattered most was water—the spring. Without that, life here would not be possible at all.

(Continued)



They left civilization to raise their family on a remote Pacific Island; here is the first part of a true adventure rivaling the famous castaways of fiction

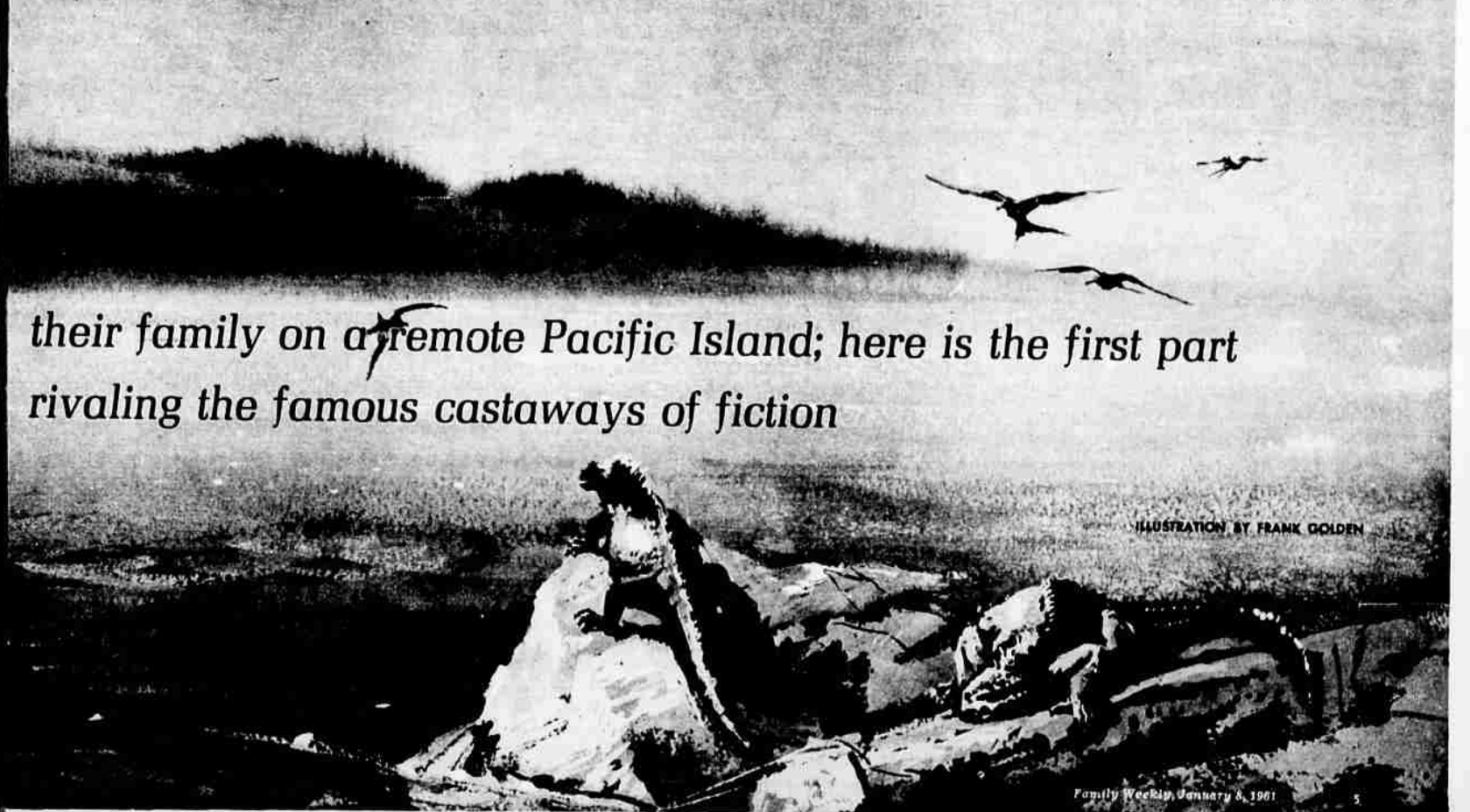


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