

## An Indian Woman

San Nicolas Island, Santa  
Barbara Channel

*This article is adapted from "A Female Robinson Crusoe", by Arthur Woodward, in Adventure Magazine and is used in this issue in connection with the cover picture by Ray Bethers.*

**A**BOUT 1810, Russian fur-hunters cruised into Southern California waters seeking new hunting-grounds. The prized sea-otter then existed in great numbers in the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. Thither came the Russians and their imported Aleutian hunters, slaughtering not only the fur-bearing animals but the Indians as well.

Tiny, fog-bound San Nicolas Island was the spot the savage northern raiders visited more often than any other. Numerous clashes took rapid toll of the Indians who were left after the Mission padres had induced numbers of them to work in the mainland missions at Santa Barbara, Ventura, Fernando, and San Gabriel.

The luckless San Nicolenos in 1835 were reduced to a mere handful. The mission authorities, seeking to save the lives of these pitiful few, sent a boat to bring the remnant of the tribe from their island home.

Good landing-places are rare on any of the Channel Islands. San Nicolas is one of the worst of the lot. Consequently the rescuers, working in a heavy sea, were under severe handicap. Despite the difficulties, they managed to get the last boatload on board, when suddenly a woman screamed!

### A Forgotten Papoose

One of the islanders, a young Indian matron, shrieked fearfully, plunged overboard into the seething tide, and swam back to shore. In the confusion attending the packing and moving, the squaw had forgotten her few-months-old baby, leaving it asleep in her rude hut.

Night was falling. The captain of the ship did not dare launch a small boat in such uncertain waters. So he put in for shore, leaving the Indian woman and her infant alone upon the island, and intending to return within the week. Next day a terrific storm arose. For many days it was impossible to get near the island.

Days mounted into weeks, weeks into months,

and months into years. The Indian woman was practically forgotten. It was argued that she was probably dead anyhow. What was one Indian more or less?

Years drifted by. The Americans arrived to take over California. Newcomers hunted for sea-otter and other marine animals in the Channel waters. Gradually a story spread that San Nicolas was haunted. Hunters spoke of seeing the wraithlike figure of a woman high up on the rocky headlands or running along the moonlit beach. Then someone recalled the story of the lost Indian woman.

Nearly 18 years had passed since the San Nicolenos had been removed and scattered among the missions. In that time the missions themselves had suffered reverses and were rapidly becoming historical landmarks. Surely the squaw could not be alive! It must be her ghost the hunters had seen!

### Footprints in the Sand

But there were a few hard-heads who did not believe in ghosts. These men, residents of Santa Barbara, chartered a small vessel and put out to the island, intending to search it thoroughly. Within a few days they found slender, naked footprints on a path of sandy beach, tangible evidence that the Indian was alive after 18 years isolation.

One day they found her, crouched in her rude hut of whale-ribs covered with rush matting, surrounded by her primitive tools and utensils of basketry and steatite. At first she was terrified, but soon overcame her fear. When the men told her, in a rude sort of sign language, that they had come to release her from her island bondage, the poor creature became quite animated.

She chattered excitedly, trying to tell them of her experiences. By signs she made them understand that her baby had died shortly after her abandonment. She had existed during the remainder of the years, as her people had done before her, catching fish, killing birds and seals, making garments of their skins and tools of their bones.

Her robe of bird-skins, neatly sewed together with sinew, a patched basket or two, some bone awls and other primitive trinkets,—these she took with her. Upon the return of the boat to Santa Barbara with the "female Robinson Crusoe" everyone tried to make the bewildered woman comfortable. But whether it was homesickness, age, or change of diet, in spite of all they could do for her, she wasted away and died within a month or so after her release from exile.