A Message to Mr Smith

I'd not been long on the train before sleep overcame me. The smooth slightly rocking ride and the regular rhythm of the sound transported me through a slide-show of half-familiar scenes to a mildly rolling boat, or a ship rather.

Strange that I should have found myself there, for I had never (at that time) been on a passenger ship. Yet I was at home on its decks and in its corridors, and easily found my way to my own room or cabin.

The interior was appointed somewhat in the manner of the train, though much more spacious. How cleverly our minds expand and rearrange things when we dream – I actually thought this, for I somehow knew that the pictures on the wall were the pictures in the railway compartment, but redistributed over a wider wall-space. The upholstery of the seats was the same too.

I was taking inventory of the room, everything familiar in a degree, when our sudden slowing distracted me, and a slight squeak of brakes. I'm sure it was that, the sensation of slowing mainly, that woke me, and not the gentleman sliding open the compartment door, though it happened the instant after.



He bustled in with his cumbersome luggage, which I thought gave me time to blink my eyes and raise the magazine from my lap to give an impression of being wide awake and absorbed in my reading. The page before me contained various advertisements – pleasure steamers, bathing machines, a European hotel – and the beginnings of an article about primitive beliefs among the islanders, which I pretended to myself I was keen to read.

I'm sorry to burst in upon you, he said between the grunts and efforts of stowing his baggage, both on the overhead rack and on the seat. Can't fit in any of the other cabins with all the stuff. He groaned as he heaved a case to the shelf. Sorry to have interrupted your slumbers.

I widened my eyes at him as if I couldn't imagine what made him think such a thing. He finally settled on the seat facing me, and took his hat off.

Do feel free to nap again, I shan't disturb you. Jonquil's the name. He held his hand out, and we shook hands, rather limply. Married with multiple offshoots. Happily I mean. I've a picture if you care to verify.

I suppose I was looking at him quizzically.

He returned a to-be-frank sort of expression. I just thought ... I mean, travelling alone you're entitled to wonder – if I'm trustworthy I mean. He had reached out and opened his wallet. These are my credentials ...

A nice looking woman, about my age, and four children, from babe-in-arms to a boy who looked about ten, squinted out of the creased photograph.

Mrs Jonquil is very pretty, I said.

She is my heart's every beat, he said proudly. And the newest baby, our first girl, we've named for her: Alice Rose. That was her name entire – Miss Alice Rose – before she ruined it in marrying me. So our girl's called Alice Rose. Here ...

We exchanged the group photograph for a portrait of a baby's face. It looked like any of a million babies. Having carefully restored the other photograph to his wallet he looked at me expectantly, and when I said nothing he prompted me. Isn't she heavenly? Alice Rose Jonquil. My little girl.

You are right to be proud, Mr Jonquil, I said.

She is a replica of her mother. I venture to say, her very double ... She's going to Cambridge, and after that – (he shook his head) the world won't know whether to be stunned by her beauty or her brains.

He had handed me the photograph with another piece of paper, masked beneath it, seemingly by accident. When I handed them back, having taken no heed of the extra paper at all, he retrieved the photograph but left the paper, sliding the one upon the other dexterously like a card player. A message ...

Then he immediately overrode my gesture by lounging back in his seat and launching obliviously upon further details of his Alice Rose Jonquil: how heavy she was when born, how heavy she is now; how many times a day she must be fed, how many times a day she must be changed; how her most adored plaything is a string of beads he brought back from his last trip.

I could scarcely have imagined there were so many trivial details of a child that a father however doting would be interested to hear himself recount to a stranger. Oh and do you know? she has a cute birthmark just like her mother – but I shan't say where.

It impressed one with the sincerity of his affection, for both of his Alice Roses, as well as the decency of his character. But it was also exceedingly boring.

A message ... I'd given up proferring the little piece of paper that had been left in my hand. Allowing my eyes to rest upon it as he talked I saw that it was folded several times, and inscribed on the outside in small writing: 'A message to Mr Smith'.

I think as I gazed upon it his talk ceased to have meaning, blending into the rhythm of the train as my head drooped. A message to Mr Smith. The gentle rocking and the monotonous sounds I'm afraid lulled me back to sleep.



When I realised I was lying along the seat, and he was lying alongside me, one of his hands inside my dress and his face nuzzled into my hair, I felt too lazy to protest or stiffen up. In fact I relaxed the more, for I remembered who it was, such a nice man. My heart's ... I consciously yielded to him. I moved my legs into a more comfortable position for him, I placed an arm across his back.

My heart's ... I don't know if he whispered it, perhaps he didn't need to, there are times when hearts and thoughts coincide. But I knew distinctly that what he would like most of all was to make a baby with me, a little girl, a replica of her mother that he would adore with all his heart. My heart's every beat. I thought it an excellent idea, I wanted to give him a baby more than anything in the world, in that moment. Even the train wanted me to.

I helped him lift away my underskirts and unlace my knickers, and slip them down. It is unfair on men (I thought), all the clothing a lady must wear these days, it must be so inconvenient to them.

I let him grip me tightly. I abandoned myself to him. My heart's every beat. Our bodies moved with the rhythm of the train. Somewhere deep within me the rhythm found its echo, a warmth diffused. My heart's every beat, our hearts and the train seemed to be saying.

I think he whimpered at length, and as he did so I stroked his head, I quietly kissed his hair. I felt but little. Except that inner warmth, and a thrill – I don't know if in body or mind – at the thought of our making a baby. I sank back into a deeply contented sleep.

It was the seagulls woke me, or perhaps the stillness – that we had come to a halt was certainly my first thought. I could see the island through the window, bright as a lantern slide. Mr Jonquil was leaning back in the corner nearest the door, snoring softly. My hair and my clothes were dishevelled, and as I rose up and placed my feet down on the floor the sounds stirred him.

Although I did not dare look his way at first, giving attention to straightening my dress, he greeted me with Morning! in a yawning but

cheery way. So I looked him in the face and smiled unrepentantly, and lifted my hands to tidy my hair.

A steward was coming along the corridor tapping at each door to announce disembarking. I staggered up, slid the door back and looked out. Have we been here long? I said.

Just anchored Madam, he replied. He called me Miss when I got on board, but I suppose he saw Mr Jonquil, still scratching himself awake.

I had so little to carry – my one portmanteau – that I reversed the rules of gentlemanliness and carried one of his mountain of bags for him. By no means the largest, though it was quite heavy. At the end of the gang-plank the man looking at tickets and passports examined Mr Jonquil's documents but then waved me past. He thinks I'm part of the baggage, I thought.

I have to go immediately to my first meeting, I'm afraid my dear, he said, loading his luggage, including me, into a motorised taxi-cab. I just need the handcase – he took the one I was carrying. Would it be an awful imposition for you to see the rest of it to the room?

Without particularly waiting for an answer he said Fallon's Hotel to the driver, and handed him a banknote.

He closed the door gently, it made a beautiful thud like an unexpected heartbeat. Don't forget ...

The window being open, I placed my face in it, and the fingers of one hand over the edge. His hand rested on mine and he leaned forward as if he were about to kiss me, as if he were going to kiss me on the lips. I feel sure he meant to; I wanted him to.

But he hesitated, the taxi jerked into motion, and Mr Jonquil slid away like a picture.

Don't forget ... I looked at him through the back window until the busy street absorbed him. He hadn't spoken, he hadn't said anything. Yet in my head I heard it, echoing like a memory. Don't forget the message. His mind and the motor of the taxi must have said it, directly into my thoughts.

I had no recollection of what had become of the little piece of paper. I felt in the secret pocket of my dress, where I have my essential documents and some paper money. It was there. A message to Mr Smith.



The luggage whisked away by several boys, the taxi-cab gone, I stood in the lobby of the hotel feeling rather forlorn, wondering if I should ask for a room. It was a nice hotel.

Madame Jonquil! a voice called, in the local accent. And before I could think how to respond a most attentive manager, every bit as if he knew me, was apologising for having kept me in the foyer, taking my portmanteau from my hand, snapping his fingers with the command Tea and sandwiches for Madame Jonquil, and guiding me up an elegant staircase and along the corridor to a spacious room.

It struck me as oddly similar to the one on the ship (in my dream, I mean), but decorated in pleasanter colours than the railway livery. Though the pictures on the wall were the same.

Half the luggage was already unpacked and stowed in wardrobes and drawers, and maids were scuttling about. Before I could decide whether I wanted to be Mrs Jonquil (or perhaps I simply did) I was eating her sandwiches and drinking her tea.

And before I'd finished doing that, the flowers arrived. The manager himself brought them. I apologise that they were not here to greet you Madame, he said. I know Monsieur Jonquil always has flowers, and the message is always the same.

They were exceptionally beautiful. I feel sure they were more colourful and interesting than flowers are at home. A small card attached to them read: My heart's every beat. W.J.

I gave no further thought to not being Mrs Jonquil. I unpacked my case, rang for a maid to fill me a bath, lounged in it thinking about the baby I was going to have, and then brushed my long damp hair. I left it shamelessly loose, like a schoolgirl, and slipped on my lighter summer dress.

My window like a picture postcard, or one of those sliding panoramas, looked across the town towards the harbour, and bid me out into the bustling market streets, the alleyways and hidden ghettos.

A lady alone should not stray beyond the main street and the English quarter, I had been reliably counselled, and it was there the concierge expected I'd find my Mr Smith.

For I'd asked at the desk if they knew of such a person. None was registered; but the chief concierge would be back shortly, he knows everyone who ever comes to the island.

He knew for a fact that no Mr Smith had ever stayed at their hotel – seeming not to appreciate why it might amuse me. Adding that Mr

Jonquil's business naturally takes him to the Latin quarter, so-called. Though I should not go there if I were you, Madam.

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The streets were all alleys, the urchins were all shoeless, and the names above shops were all Spanish. Other than Mr Smith I did not of course know what I was looking for as I scoured the Latin quarter. I didn't even know what Mr Jonquil's business was, a fact I could hardly reveal in the hotel if I was playing the part of his heart's every beat. Alice Rose ...

Probably a salesman – though by no means of the brash sort one tends to think of. And yet – I found myself reflecting – had he not in a manner of speaking sold *me* something? Perhaps he was a confidence trickster. Alice Rose ... How odd that it occurred to me only now – that, and also that I should never see him again. I felt suddenly certain of it.

I decided to visit a fortune teller. Alice Rose, there it was again. My eyes were not entirely deceiving me. The sign said: Alicia Rosa, Genuine Spanish Gypsy.

Rrosalita, Alithia Rrosa was my mamma – gypsy dress, spotted scarf, large earrings, long beads – I am hhappy you hhave found me, I did not know if you would come. Yourr hhearrt is full of goodness but therre is a doomful thing you muss do.

Her green eyes were dazzlingly beautiful, her hand's grip firm and thrilling. We sat with our arms across the little round table, but she neither read my palm nor gazed into her crystal ball – she looked straight into my eyes. You and I ... She looked into my eyes and held my hand throughout.

Yourr old self is on the trren. But you hhave a message to deeliva beforre you can rretun, you muss not tek it back. You will tek back a strring of beads forr the niño. Forr you arre with child. It is too soon forr anyone to know: you alone know this, you and I ...

An English leddy, it will be hharrd forr you, frriends will deesut you. But yourr hhearrt will take strrength frrom yourr adorretion of the niño, and yourr memorry of hhis pappa. You will brring hhim up well.

I smiled.

Then, a terrrible warr will engulf the wold – hhe will die in it.

We sat in silence. After an age she stood up, leaned towards me, and kissed me. She kissed me on the lips. On the lips and beyond, for they parted, our tongues touched. You and I ... Our mouths watered and

merged, we breathed each other's breath. I had never been kissed like that before.

It is what you wished, it is frrom hhim. Do not blem hhim, therre is much you do not know. You and I, we will meet again.

She let my fingers slide from her hand. I bowed my head shyly and sat for some moments, quietly composing myself. I didn't know what to say. You and I, we will meet again.

I paid her, and then remembered to ask about Mr Smith. She gave me an exact address to go to at twelve o'clock tomorrow.

Out in the warm evening I felt forlorn, and surprised by my own heart. I made my way slowly back to the hotel. It wasn't the fortune-telling I'd planned, nor the future I'd planned. Rosalita's kiss was very nice. Alone in our room, Mr Jonquil's room, I felt like a bride abandoned on her wedding night. I may have sobbed a little – for myself I suppose; but also for my baby, for little Wilfred.



I've a notion I may have been followed back to the hotel after my early-morning swim. Has Madame ... At any rate the streets were busier than I'd expected, at so early an hour. I felt conspicuous in my dishabille.

Has Madame ... The same greasy little man in a beige suit was lurking in the lobby as we came from breakfast. And he seemed to ignore the other guests and single me out. Has Madame considered voodoo?

It was natural to assume he was trying to convert me to it, or else sell me some. I therefore brushed him aside with the haughty colonial dismissiveness that is not in my nature at all, but that must be learned or assumed out here, for one is importuned continuously by everyone from bedraggled urchins to besuited businessmen with hydraulic schemes on the other side of the island, that one may buy shares in.

He followed me to the stairs and even part way up, where he said it again. Has Madame considered voodoo? Adding quietly, with a side-glance in case a porter was listening: I help you Mrs Jonquil. English magic strong ...

His use of my name – or rather Mrs Jonquil's name – pulled me up. I stopped and turned to him. But at that very moment the concierge slid between us and shooed him back down.

He knew my name, I said. Perhaps he—

An English lady's name within a short space of her arrival will have travelled all about the island Madam, from fortune tellers to the Marchioness of Portmadoc. I should lend it no heed whatever.

As he was speaking, the bell-boy at the foot of the stairs had grappled the greasy little man to the ground and was kicking him.

There is no need for that, please put a stop to it, I said. The concierge obediently pulled the boy away by the ear.

I took the opportunity – for I think he would have prevented me had he not had a hand full of ear – to step down and squat by the greasy little man and ask him what he meant, how he thought he might help me.

You carry the hex, he said, his eyes wide as if with fear. English magic strong, but voodoo release you, voodoo stronger.

I rose and stepped back, partly at the strangeness of his message, partly because he was perspiring and seemed in dread of my proximity. The concierge returned, and gave him his marching orders.

He couldn't really have thought me under a curse, could he? Yet his fear of me was palpable, even though he'd persisted in following me, speaking to me ... English magic strong ... Rosalita had said there was a doomful thing I must do, yet all I had to do – aside from having babies – was to take a message to Mr Smith ... Voodoo stronger ... On reflection it *was* an odd task, or had been wished upon me oddly, but it was hardly a curse. Yet why would the greasy little man be so keen to help me – or hinder me?

Actually he seemed too well-dressed for voodoo. I thought it was the superstition of the barefoot, as well as the livelihood of multitudes of street vendors, peddling potions and charms. And I don't doubt, curses too if one asks – voodoo stronger.

From what I'd read on the train it sounded a rather distasteful brand of witchcraft. They sacrifice chickens and bring people back from the dead (who are probably not dead in the first place). I had no intention of getting involved in it. And as for English magic ...

Perhaps Madam should have her fortune told, the concierge suggested, seeing I was at a loss. I smiled agreeably.

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It reminded me of my dream. I'd got up in the middle of the night meaning to explore the English quarter. I'll do it now, I thought, then I can dedicate my waking hours to the unsalubrious parts.

My glittering window framed a ghostly picture of me, and I seemed to glide through it, with that floating sensation one gets when gliding through windows. Down in the street it was sunny. I suppose, swept off my feet as I was, it was hardly surprising I should have such an Alice in Wonderlandish dream.

I suddenly felt – I was well aware it was not sensible – a compulsion to catch a tram. I don't mean just any tram. I must chase and catch the very tram I had just seen leave the stand. I ran after it with unaccustomed vigour, in spite of being encumbered with a voluminous dress that I hadn't worn in years. I distinctly remember giving it to the Salvation Army.

I think the driver must have slowed to let me on, though he did not stop. The conductor took hold of my arm. Breathless, I slid on to the first seat I came to, beside an elderly lady.

I'm so glad you made it my dear, she said, and proceeded to introduce herself as the Duchess of Portugal. Or that's what it sounded like, though she was as English as Queen Alexandra.

She seemed to know me without introduction, for I couldn't yet speak. When I did all I said was: I'm ..., and then paused – I wasn't sure who I was.

You're Mrs Jonquil, she said, and tapped her nose. English ladies on the island are all reported to me. Anyhow, we've seen your picture.

I'm happy to meet you your Grace, I said.

Alex, she said, *please*. We're not in Torquay now.

We had a charmingly muddled conversation about nothing in particular, or at any rate about all sorts of things she supposed I knew about though I didn't. I said (I made it up for the sake of not feeling left out of my own dream) that I was hoping to enter something in the next photographic competition.

A street scene my dear, she advised, but most emphatically: *Not* a photograph of a baby.

I shook my head in agreement. I hadn't actually brought a camera, though I wondered if such a thing might be among Mr Jonquil's extensive baggage.

He always brings one, she said; just in case.

For some reason – her resemblance to a great-aunt I suppose – I confided in her my feelings for Rosalita, and asked her advice.

Why Alice my dear it's perfectly natural, and I couldn't be more pleased for you, she said, adding: Though it would never do in the English quarter ... They're all witches you know, these Gitano gels; but they *are* dashed fetching. One teensy tip, since you ask: the next time she gets all Spanish with you, cross your fingers. She chuckled, as if it were a naughty thing to have said. We don't want that baby of yours turning up with earrings, now do we? And she chuckled some more.

As she evidently kept tabs upon everyone English on the island, I asked her if she knew of Mr Smith, as I was taking a message to him that very—

The Duchess's countenance and whole demeanour transformed in an instant, and before I'd even finished my explanation she was awkwardly pushing past me and hailing the conductor to stop the tram. I let her past of course, though I feel sure she poked me with her parasol deliberately.

Off she bustled without a further word. I tried to think that our conversation had distracted her from her stop and she'd suddenly realised it. But I cannot really persuade myself of any explanation but that Mr Smith's mere mention put her nose out of joint, or scared her.

I stayed on the tram until I was the only person left, even the conductor and I think probably the driver too had jumped off. We gained a good speed going down the hill that leads straight to the harbour, and as we plunged over the edge into the sea I thought it might be time to wake up and avoid getting wet.

On the other hand, I was just in the mood for an early-morning swim. So instead I slid out of my heavy uncomfortable dress, and my underskirts and stockings and knickers, and swam to and fro in my petticoat. To and fro between the bobbing tram and a fishing boat, the men on which threw me fish, thinking me a mermaid.

I sat on a sunny rock across the harbour, combing my long damp hair. Rosalita, being Latin, had no time for such sillinesses as swimming in petticoats. She climbed on to the rock and basked beside me in nature's splendour, her hair aflame, her eyes and her tail green and scintillating.

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The address she had given me was in a quarter that was neither Latin nor English, neither Chinese nor Belgian.

Mr Jonquil's camera came with me, but the warren of gloomy alleyways was not in the least photogenic. The commercial ones were an unsavoury mixture of voodoo shops and staircases leading to ladies of a certain sort; the residential ones worse, for the dogs were mangy and the children listless and wide-eyed – much poorer than the

energetic urchins who beg in the main streets. And I shudder to think what sort of ladies the staircases led to.

It was a flight of metal steps that took me to the door I must knock upon; and it was Rosalita who opened it. How beautiful ...

Somehow, oddly, I wasn't surprised. Perhaps I had so stiffened myself to endure the environs I must pass through, or else to ignore the greasy little man, who followed me all the way, that I was anaesthetised to surprise. Or perhaps it was my apprehension about meeting Mr Smith.

How beautiful ... She took me into a small room, the far wall of which was curtains. And she undressed me. She removed all my clothes, every stitch. How beautiful you are. I don't think she spoke – her hands and her eyes were enough. I allowed her to do it; I wanted her to.

She undressed me unhurriedly. She unfastened my hair. She threw everything, from the camera to the last hair-slide, and each garment as she removed it, out of a window, as though they would never be needed again.

She opened the wall of curtains and I stepped into a shallow bath, like a paddling pool. An overhead pipe drizzled warm water down into it. I raised my arms and held on to two strings of beads that hung from the pipe, while Rosalita anointed my body with a soapy, aromatic oil. She spread it all over me with her fingers and the palms of her hands. I allowed her to do it.

She washed me with her bare hands. She washed me all over, my front and my back, she didn't miss an inch. I don't think there's flesh on my body, however private, that hasn't felt her fingers slide over it, firmly, unflinchingly.

She opened the next wall of curtains. A couch was draped with large white towels. She dried me all over, my front then my back, ending with my hair. How beautiful you are. Then she retraced her journey over my body, my back then my front, with her bare hands, her fingers. I wanted her to; it was very nice.

She bowed her head now and then, and kissed me. Not my mouth, but parts of my body. How beautiful you are. I abandoned myself to her. I closed my eyes, I relaxed entirely, I rocked from side to side. My heart's every beat. At least twice I had to grasp a pillow or her hair and cry out with joy. I had never been caressed like this before.

She slid open the next curtains and sat me on a chair, combing my long damp hair. Then she made up my face, but only lightly, a little lip rouge, a smoothing of the eyebrows, a darkening of the eyelids. She

dabbed a little rouge on to the points of my bosoms. She painted my finger and toe nails green.

She took from her own neck and placed about mine a long string of turquoise beads, long enough to curve inwards at my breast. I'd noticed her wearing them before, unevenly shaped stones, they were genuine turquoise.

She stood me by the final curtains.

I had realised, obviously, that I was being prepared for a ritual. Or rather, I was being ritually prepared – for sacrifice, most probably, I thought. I was to be layed on an altar and sliced with a curved dagger from neck to abdomen, my flesh pulled apart like a pie, my organs and my two-day baby plucked out of me and eaten by voodoo cannibals.

But a different sacrifice also crossed my mind – a vivisection of a different sort. By Mr Smith, presumably; or a large black-man. Layed on an altar, my flesh pulled apart: another pale slave to the obscene god of voodoo.

I thought of Mr Jonquil. I would rather it were him, he was such a nice man. My heart's every beat. He was, after all, in a manner of speaking my husband. But of course he had already done so – Rosalita too – they had each initiated me already. How beautiful you are. And I'd allowed them to do it ...

Whichever sacrifice they wished of me now, I was prepared, I was ready. I was ready to do it for *them*. Mr Jonquil had given me a message to Mr Smith, and Rosalita had brought me to him.



And there he was, behind the curtains. The final room slid into place, empty but for the little round table. Far too small to lay me on and sacrifice me, or the other thing, I thought. On it was a candle and a glass of water.

Standing beside it, a short thick-set man in a cream suit. He was shorter than me, balding head and thick neck, his squarish face foreign-looking, tanned, ugly, strangely contorted. An expression of foreboding, occasional blinks and widenings of the eye, suggested he was on the verge of an emotional outburst, anger or fear, or remorse. He looked me up and down as I stepped towards him.

This is Mrs Jonquil, Rosalita said.

I remember thinking how odd, for I had never told her my name (nor Mrs Jonquil's name).

Nervously, slightly hoarsely, the man said, in the local accent: I am Meester Smeeth.

I offered him my hand, but his arms remained stiff by his sides. His eyes flickered between my face and my body, never looking me directly in the eye. They rested mostly on my beads, or perhaps it was my bosoms. I extended my arm fully towards him, to within a foot of him, my hand held limply as if I expected him to kiss it rather than shake it. A message ...

I have brought you a message, I said.

He lifted his arm, but with such reluctance one might have thought it painful, or heavy; and eventually his hand reached mine and clasped it stiffly, and quickly drew away. A message ... It was sufficient for the little piece of paper, which I was holding to my palm with my thumb, to be passed dexterously into his unwelcoming hand.

He slowly unfolded it, and beads of perspiration made lines down the sides of his face. I could see the inscription in tiny writing on the outside: ‘A message to Mr Smith’.

I had no idea what the message was, I had never looked. I had never even thought of looking.

As he read it the expression of horror that had been waiting to burst forth consumed his face.

He gazed at the paper for some time, or so it seemed, though tension does something to one’s sense of time ...

Rosalita standing behind me lifted my arms and slipped over them and over my head a simple white slip or vest, light-weight and sleeveless; it slid down to cover my body, though it barely did so, it was very short. She lifted my hair outside it, and my beads.

I didn’t take my eyes off Mr Smith.

He gazed at the message for some time, or so it seemed. Then he placed it nervously down on the table, beside the candle, simultaneously picking up from the same spot – I hadn’t noticed it – a small black pistol, which he pointed awkwardly at his temple. A message to Mr Smith.

Another incalculable pause ... He shot himself through the head. His stocky body jerked to one side and was in the process of falling; his bulging eyes and horrible facial expression sank with it, under a small cloud of red.



Rosalita was pulling my arm and we were running back through the series of curtained rooms. We burst out of the door into the sunny afternoon, down the metal steps into the dirty alleyway, through the maze of alleys into the bustling crowd of the wider market street. Don't miss ... Deeper and deeper into the crowd, my arm stretched before me, Rosalita hurrying ahead but keeping a firm, almost painful, grip on my hand.

The crowd became so dense I could see nothing of her, only my arm disappearing as she pulled me through. Don't miss ... Then suddenly, as if something had snapped, my fingers slid free. I came to a breathless halt. My outstretched arm dropped. Don't miss your boat.

I was standing in the middle of the street, my bare feet sore, my hair in my face; I pulled it aside and looked about. There was no sign of Rosalita. I don't know if she had called it from a distance or if she just thought it. Don't miss your boat, Rosalita and the chattering crowd seemed to say.

I stood for a while, rather forlorn. Then I moved on.

I was surprised how little notice anyone took of me. Nearly naked by English standards – in fact I *was* but for the short slip, which barely *reached* my legs never mind covering them – a white-skinned lady dressed like a gutter child. Yet most people paid me no heed, I'd become inconspicuous. Lady ...

As I walked it began to feel right, being bare legged and barefoot. That's how the poor children of the island, and even some of the grown women, are. I felt it was justice in a way – I mean that it was not unreasonable, here, to go as they go, to cast off the layers of protection and pretension that English ladies must endure. Lady ... To mingle and merge into the crowd, disguised by dishabille. It was rather pleasant.

Lady buy frock. Another advantage was that no one, neither beggar nor businessman, assailed me – until a little girl tugged at the hem of my vest.

Lady buy frock, her wide eyes said. I squatted down and asked her her name. Alessia.

That's my name too, I think. But I doubt your frock would fit me, though it's very pretty. It was very tattered too.

She took my hand and I let her lead me to a second-hand clothing stall on the edge of the market place, where there was a dress exactly like the one I'd been wearing earlier. And also a Vest Pocket Kodak exactly like Mr Jonquil's. Its film was wound to number 3, just the

same. And out of the secret pocket of the dress slid documents and money, the same as had been in the secret pocket of my dress.

I paid the woman the banknotes, kept the documents and the camera, and gave Alessia the frock.

I grow tall like English lady, she said.

I took her photograph.

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The crowd may not have been as indifferent to me as I'd thought. Through the camera I began to see them, heads and eyes turning away, or not doing. I became convinced that the streets were full of henchmen – the late Mr Smith's perhaps, or the Marchioness's – bent upon spoiling my photographs or worse. Or at any rate, stopping me catching my boat.

I'd been heading vaguely towards the hotel at first. But the more I thought about Mr Jonquil's luggage the more I drifted, until eventually I was on an even course for the harbour. After all, Don't miss your boat had been my latest message. If no one pays the hotel bill and they impound the luggage, whose fault is that? If the greasy little man has strewn the place with curses I shall be powerless. English magic strong, but voodoo stronger.

They were the slippery ones, the short men in light-coloured suits; each time I spotted one the crowd swallowed him. I couldn't tell if there were just the two, or a legion of them. Has Madame considered voodoo?

Thinking I was being jostled by another child, I looked down to see a midget in a pale suit and trilby hat, cheek-by-jowl with my hip and brandishing a dagger. I wasn't sure if he was trying to look up my vest, or meant merely to stab me. Nor did I trouble to ask.

I pushed him away with all my strength and he tumbled backwards into a barrow of vegetables, which collapsed entirely under and around him.

Tomatoes and onions slid into the street and the stall-holder uttered loud curses in a language I'm glad I didn't understand. And kicked him as he sprawled in the cabbages. Bless you ...

I had my camera poised by now and got several blurred action shots, but also a good street scene of vegetable-stall disruption.

It was the victory I needed to raise my spirits and steel me – I strode on, invincible.

As the crowd thinned towards the harbour I could see the ship, and so accelerated my pace. Until noticing the greasy little voodoo man who'd followed me from the hotel, waiting to waylay me on the quay. Bless you ... I was in no mood to barter with him.

The group of fishermen busy unloading their boat nearby were the ones who'd thrown me fish when I was a mermaid. I don't know if they recognised me, but they were looking at my pale bare legs as if they were every bit as pretty as a big green tail. So I smiled nicely and asked them to push the greasy little man into the harbour for me.

The whiskery one who spoke English said, in the local accent: For you, Madame Jonquil, it will be a pleasure. Nothing can repay what you've done for us this day. Bless you, and your little baby too.

I had no idea what he meant, but I allowed them a little more time admiring my legs before pirouetting and walking on. I liked being Mrs Jonquil.

There was another foreign curse (I presume) and a mighty splash, as the steward at the end of the gang-plank beckoned me hurriedly.

You've near missed us Missus, he said. I've kept the driver as long as I durst but was fair resigned. I had you kidnapped for sure and took into slavery, or else lured into the voodoo gaffer's harum by some blinking fortune teller.

I laughed casually, as if evading these fates had been an easy matter – which I suppose it had.

Mr Jonquil's luggage come from the hotel near two hours since, he added, somewhat to my surprise. It's all in the compartment ready. And o' course the flowers.

He slid in the plank and blew his whistle.

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I was glad to be back on the ship, and gladder still to be under way, so that the gentle rolling rhythm could once more rock me into contented repose. As I sat in my comfortable seat and allowed my head to tip back and my thoughts to roam, I wished and wished for the door to slide open and nice Mr Jonquil to come in, and check up on his baggage. And his baby.

My heart's every beat, he would say, as it said on the beautiful flowers that were there to greet me.

Or if it couldn't be so, I wished I could dream it.

There have been times when I think I dreamed it all – when I've almost persuaded myself none of my adventures on the island were true.

But then I remember Rosalita's kiss – which was really Mr Jonquil's kiss. Don't forget ... He meant to kiss me, I know he did. And then I remember Rosalita's caress – which really was Rosalita's caress. You and I ... I didn't cross my fingers.

Anyway I have more than memories to remind me, to bring me down to earth. I entered a couple of bustling street scenes – an overturned vegetable stall, a little beggar girl – in the following year's Torquay exhibition. Though they didn't win any medals.

And I have my baby; or rather, I should say, now, my young man.

How proud I am of him. He is a replica of his father, dear Mr Jonquil, I venture to say his very double. Except he has a cute birthmark just like his mother – but I shan't say where.

Oh such a heavenly baby he was – I have the photograph to prove it. How he loved to play with Rosalita's beads as they dangled over my bosoms.

She was right, it was hard for us, friends deserted me. We had to struggle against much disapproval. Yet how could anyone frown upon the nicest thing one can do, to conceive and bear a child, a replica of a person one has loved, in true sacrifice, in true adoration?

I've worked hard to bring him up, to give him a chance in life. And what a fine young man he's turning out – the world won't know whether to be stunned by his brains or his beauty.

Of course I tell him often of his father, whose name he bears proudly – Wilfred Jonquil Smith. My little boy; my young man.

And in case it seems my story must end sadly, I have to add that – love her as I do and think of her still – Rosalita was not exactly right about everything. The war she predicted did come; and it was terrible indeed. But Wilfred was still a little boy, too young to serve in it, too young to die in it, thank God.

They say it's ended war for good. With any luck it has – I can't imagine them allowing there to be another one, ever.

She wasn't really wrong: the Great War just came sooner than she thought. Had it not, I know my Wilfred would have wanted to serve his country and humanity, and if need be die for them – that's the sort of young man he is.

Oh and the flowers – one more reason, as things that happened begin to seem like dreams, or dreams and memories begin to seem the same, one more reason that I know it was true, and is true, however strange it all seems. Every so often, if I'm feeling forlorn, when Wilfred's away at school – and I'm sure it will happen again when he goes up to Cambridge in the autumn – there will arrive a bouquet of beautiful, exotic flowers.

And the message is always the same.

You made him up Ma, he says, teasingly, when I'm telling him about his father, or mulling over whether he was a salesman or a spy.

So who sends the flowers? I say.

He smiles. He's always been such a thoughtful boy, such a good son to me. He is my heart's every beat.



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