

JEAN RHYS

The Collected Short Stories

With an Introduction by Diana Athill



PENGUIN BOOKS

Temps Perdi

'Rolvenden' is a square, red-brick house, and it stands with two others on the farthest outskirts of a good-sized village on the east coast. It belongs to one of the masters of a small public school which has moved to Gloucestershire for safety's sake. There is nothing in the house that you can say is ugly; on the other hand there is nothing that you can say is beautiful, impulsive, impetuous or generous. All is sparse, subdued, quiet and negative, or so you would think – a lawn, a large vegetable garden, an empty garage and, when I first came, a few last sad flowers. Outside the front door a gravel path, once bordered with lavender, leads to a green gate.

The two other houses have been taken over by the Army. The one opposite has large grounds and I never hear a sound from it. But from the one on the side there is often the clatter of men washing up ill-temperedly. How they chuck the things about! This is the time of smash and grab. Some poor devil – or rich devil or stupid devil – had tried hard with that house. There are four bathrooms – pink, black, green and blue. But there is venom in the way those men wash up, and there won't be much left of the pink, black, green and blue bathrooms when the military have got out.

But why be glad? Above all, why be sad? Death brings its own anaesthetic, or so they say . . .

Behind the garden wall there is land and a row of cottages. Never a sound from them either. At first I thought there wasn't a living soul there, but I learnt better later.

In justice to 'Rolvenden' I must say that it has changed a great deal since I have lived in it, and in fairness to myself I must add that I knew at once that we shouldn't get on and argued that I did not want

to live there alone – especially in October, November, December and January. But there are times when one is helpless. However, only the helpless know this – and why preach to the converted?

A few days ago, or a week ago – I have forgotten – it began to snow. Since then I have been quite happy. Yes, since the snow started falling I have been much happier, though I don't trouble to look at it. Why look at it when I remember so well the first time I saw it? It was better then – it was a marvel, the only thing in England that hadn't disappointed me. (Remembering when I used to have to touch and taste it every time it fell . . .)

Now, on my way to the garage in the morning to bring in coal, I see the black trunks of the trees in the garden and the thin, pointing branches, then hurry in to light the fire and make my bacon sandwich and cup of coffee essence. After that I can lie for a long time watching the neutral sitting-room and the rows of extraordinary books without being angry or afraid or hoping. Now I am almost as wary of books as I am of people. They also are capable of hurting you, pushing you into the limbo of the forgotten. They can tell lies – and vulgar, trivial lies – and when there are so many all saying the same thing they can shout you down and make you doubt, not only your memory, but your senses. However, I have discovered one or two of the opposition. Listen: . . . to conduct the transposition of the souls of the dead to the White Island, in the manner just described. The White Island is occasionally also called Brea, or Britannia. Does this perhaps refer to White Albion, to the chalky cliffs of the English coast? It would be a very humorous idea if England was designated as the land of the dead . . . as hell. In such a form, in truth, England has appeared to many a stranger.' (To many a stranger . . .)

Also I have discovered how to keep warm. You drape a blanket over the door, which stops the draught from the keyhole and the cracks, and a bolster finishes it off. And now I know how to pile the cushions so that I can sit on the floor in front of the fire without slipping backwards. The solid, uncomfortable chains help. I am learning how to make use of you, my enemy.

The piano is out of tune. It gives a cracked, shattered and ghostly sound, it complains like a hurt animal when I play 'Mama, I want to make rhythm, I want to make music' and 'Time on my hands', then backwards to 'Si'awais su – *évidement*', backwards again to the waltz of Nina Rodriguez, never forgotten, heard so long ago.

Said to be twelve, Nina was probably sixteen or seventeen. She was a performer in a Havana circus which was touring the smaller Caribbean islands. It was the first theatrical performance I had ever seen. The circus tent was as huge as a cathedral to me, and the trap-eze impossibly high and frail. It was lighted by glaring acetylene lamps.

The Rodriguez family were the stars. Mr Rodriguez, burly and sinister, always wore light-blue tights; Madame Rodriguez, pale, sad and mournful under her make-up, wore pink or red, and lovely Nina – the Only Girl Who Works Without a Net – wore black. Black tights to match her black eyes. And her golden curls were hanging down her back, too. We craned our necks to watch her, a black and gold butterfly caught in a web, weaving in and out of the web, miraculously escaping, miraculously coming to earth again, giving the two little stylized hops, smiling, kissing her hands to us.

Pale Madame Rodriguez worked on a higher trapeze. The net was brought in with much ceremony and there was a big roll of drums for the dangerous bit, but it wasn't the same thing and I don't remember a note of her waltz.

I was in the kitchen making a bacon sandwich when the coal arrived. It had been worrying me – there was so little left in the garage and all the coal in the bin outside the kitchen had disappeared. The people from the cottages in the lane took most of it – at first surreptitiously when I was out; after they had sized me up, openly.

The clatter of coal on zinc. Then a man's voice said, 'That's the bathroom.'

'Well what about it? Why are you looking at it? Is there a woman in the ditch?' said a second voice.

'Why'd you think I'd look at her if there was?' the first voice said, very offended. 'Why should you think I'd look at a blank, blank cow in a blank, blank, blank ditch?'

I walked out of the kitchen and scowled at them. These people are altogether too much . . . They jeered back at me.

'You shouldn't have put the coal in that bin,' I said in an old shrew's voice. 'You should have asked me. You should have put it in the garage. Every lump of it will get stolen there. It was full when I came and it's all gone now because there are a lot of thieves round here, and mean thieves too. There are meaner thieves here than anywhere I've ever been in my life.'

'A-ah?' said one of them.

'It ought to have a padlock on it,' the second one said, helpfully.

'What can you expect if it hasn't got a padlock on it?'

They both wear the local mask – beige in colour as usual.

'Go to hell,' I said.

The first man answered gently. 'Yes, it's very cold today, isn't it, Miss?'

The second one said, 'Very cold weather. Madam,' he said, winking at the first one.

They went off and I started after them. They must be frozen. Shall I call to them and ask them in to have some coffee essence? They might warm the place.

But before they got to the garden gate – 'Rolvenden' is painted on it – I saw that they were shaking with laughter. Silent, smothered laughter – never, even with them, a good hearty shout or curse, just this silent, sly, shy laughter. I can imagine what they would have said about me if I had asked them indoors.

That's an exaggeration. They don't think or say anything that I would imagine they would think or say. Speak for yourself and no falsities. There are enough falsities; enough harm has been done.

For all that was left of the afternoon I carried scuttles of coal from the bin outside the kitchen to the garage, which can be locked, and the house watched me haughtily, seeing me as I really am. And once or twice I looked back at it and thought that maybe I too saw it as it really was. But it will certainly defeat me, for it has one great quality – it is very cunning. It knows how to hide its hate under a hypocrite's mask – again a beige mask, of course – for all here is beige that can be beige, paint, carpets, curtains, upholstery, bedspreads.

Everything wears this neutral mask – the village, the people, the sky, even the trees have not escaped.

But before I had half-emptied the bin I felt as tired as if I had walked fifty miles – tired and in utter despair. This bath will always be a ditch to me now and a dirty ditch at that. I was too tired to eat but went up to bed with a beer-bottle filled with hot water to keep me warm.

All the beds are cold, narrow and hard. There are three bedrooms. Photographs of Greek temples – I suppose they are temples, pillars anyway – decorate the wall of this one. There is a cheap dressing-table with a glass that won't stay put, a wardrobe to match the dressing-table and a straightbacked chair. Here too I have put bolsters along the window-sills, because I remember how well they kept out the cold in Vienna. Slowly I grow calmer, and then quite calm. I know that the second stage of loneliness is over and the bad moment is past.

Looking at the bolsters and remembering the piles of yellow-white snow and that statue of the Holy Ghost. 'Clouds in stone,' said André. 'Very German! Like the insides of a turkey.' Another time he said 'The legs are the most noble, beautiful, harmonious and interesting part of the human body.' I said No, I didn't agree. We argued sitting at a table in the *Parisien* with bottles of German champagne before us. But it was not chic to drink it. Now and again you foamed up your glass with one of those wooden instruments they had and then pretended to sip. I can see us sitting there and I can see my *astrakhan* coat and the dress I was wearing, but it is not myself inside it. Everything is sharp, bright, clear-cut – a little smaller than life, perhaps, and the voices coming from some way off, but very clear. It is 'Rokvenden' that is behind me in the mist.

In the bedroom of the flat in the *Razumoffskygasse* there were low coffee tables, Bohemian glass, a big picture of Franz Josef and smaller pictures on either side of General and Madame von Marken. Pierre came in and said 'Bravo' when he saw me in my new black dress. There was a smell of lilac when you got out into the street, of lilac, of drains and of the past. Yes, that's what Vienna smelt of then . . .

2. The Sword Dance and the Love Dance

Every fortnight the officers of the Japanese Commission entertained their following at Sacher's Hotel. The Japanese were very dependent on their following, for not one of them could speak all three of the necessary languages – French, English, German. There were perpetual arguments over the exact translation of documents. They were afraid of not being as tactful as the representatives of an Asiatic power ought to be, or of voting with the minority instead of the majority – that would have been the end of them in Tokyo. So Colonel Hato had his secretary and confidential adviser – that was André – and Lieutenant-Colonel Matsu had his – that was Pierre. Then there were four other officers (at first – the number increased by leaps and bounds later on), a naval attaché, the typists, who had been carefully chosen by Matsu in Paris and were all very easy on the eye though by no means all of them were efficient according to Pierre, a Hungarian interpreter, and various other *hangers-on*.

At the end of the long, elaborate meal some of the guests would leave and the rest of us would go into Matsu's sitting-room next door – high, silk-curtained windows, gilt furniture, shining mirrors. Then bottles of Tokay and kummel appeared and the Japanese mask dropped. Then photographs would be produced and handed round.

'This is Madame Yoshi.'

'How pretty she is!'

'She's wearing European clothes.'

'Oh, doesn't she look smiling and happy?'

'Of course she is smiling,' Captain Yoshi said – rather grimly, I thought – 'Madame Yoshi is a most fortunate woman. Madame Yoshi *knows* that she is a most fortunate woman.'

Matsu's photographs were of his little son and of his three daughters, whose names meant Early Rising, Order and Morning Sun. He had bought them each a typewriter as a present. He never told us the son's name, or what present was destined for him. Too sacred?

Captain Oyazu had no photographs, but in next to no time he could transform the evening paper into a frog which looked as if it might start hopping at any moment, and he smiled in a pleased, childlike way when you admired it.

On this particular evening Colonel Haro and Oyazu left after the first glass of Tokay, and as soon as they had gone Yoshi began to dance.

Yoshi was the tallest, handsomest and best-dressed of the Japanese officers and he spoke French and German better than any of the others. First he danced the sword dance, using umbrellas instead of swords, and then what I suppose was a love dance, for, turning his feet out at right angles and holding an umbrella upright, he shuffled past us, looking at the women of the party very slanting-eyed and mocking.

But Simone, who was the prettiest of the typists and only eighteen years of age, answered that challenge at once. She danced opposite him with her hands on her hips, laughing, imitating exactly every step he made, and after a bit of this the strain and defiance went out of his face. He pulled her to him and began a clumsy foxtrot. André played 'Dardanella' for them on the piano.

When 'Dardanella' was finished Matsu announced, 'I will now play you a Japanese song.'

He played it with one finger, striking the notes carefully and gently, with a sad, absorbed, intent expression.

He said – he was the one who spoke English – 'That is a sleep song.' Matsu had spent a fortnight in London and for a whole day of it he had been lost in the Inner Circle. 'When I came out it was very dark and cold. I grew frightened and sad.' (He was in London in November.)

After the lullaby he went off into a long, monotonous succession of notes, as if he were trying to make a pattern of the keys, black and white. There was music in him somewhere – he touched the piano so gently.

Yoshi and Simone were sitting at a table at the far end of the room. The others were gossiping about Haro. There was always a new

story going about him. He was the one who loathed white people and said so, maintaining that contact with them would bring nothing but misfortune to Japan. He was the one who, safe in his bedroom, André said, would at once take off his European clothes, saying that they made him feel unclean, and put on a kimono and slippers with hisses of relief.

He was a small, thin man, much older than any of the others. Really very old, we thought, quite gaga. He had only one eye – he had lost the other in the Russo-Japanese War, and it had not been dolled up, either. On social occasions he would sit bolt upright, silent, starting into the distance.

'What can he be thinking of, André?' André said, 'The poor devil is supposed to speak French. And he can't. I should say that gives him enough to think about.'

But he, too, liked music. His favourite song was 'Marijolaine': 'Encore "Marijolaine", he would shout. (*Si gracie, si fragile . . .*) 'Encore, encore "Marijolaine".'

When they had finished with Haro, Odette, another of the typists, began to tell us what she thought about Viennese clothes. She said that they were pretty but they had no real chic. 'When I went back to Paris on leave last month Maman told me, "You look like a little provincial." Maman is thirty-nine but one would say twenty-five. She cried like a Magdalene when I left.'

André interrupted, 'My God, what's happening over there?'

Yoshi was sprawled on the floor, the table and the bottle of wine were upset. He got up and brushed his clothes down, though without smiling or looking at us. André rushed forward and picked up the table and the bottle. Simone said, 'Oh, do excuse me. I'm such a clumsy girl. I've always been like that. You've no idea – the trouble I get into because –'

Soon afterwards we said good night and were out in the lilac-scented street. After we got round the first corner Simone began to laugh. She had held it in like a good one, but now it had to come out.

'How did it happen, Simone?' André said at last.

Simone said, 'I don't know how it happened. He was practising kissing the hand and I'd had enough of it and tried to pull away. He

held on and crashed into the table, and down he went. I expect he'd had too much to drink. Oh, his face when he fell! Aren't they funny? And those dances with the umbrellas!

Off she went again.

Pierre said, 'I hope he won't bear you any malice Simone. I'd hate to be somebody the Japanese bore malice against.'

'Not he,' Simone said. 'He won't bear any malice against me, poor boy.'

None of us thought of taking cabs home that night. Perhaps there was a moon. Perhaps the streets were lovelier or more deserted than usual. Then there was that smell of lilac and of the past. Vienna still smelt very strongly of the past. We walked along, keeping rather close together.

'Well,' I said, 'he looked as if he were telling you all his secrets.'

'He was,' Simone said, 'he was. Do you know what he was saying? He was saying how much he admires the Germans. He said they'll soon have the best army in Europe, and that they'll dominate it in a few years.'

'No bouquet for the French?' André asked, laughing. 'And think how I sweat, translating their idiotic ideas into diplomatic language!' Simone answered seriously, 'But he did say something about the French. He said the French love women too much. He said only the Germans know how to treat women. The Germans and the English think the same way about women, he said, but the French think differently. He said the English and the French together won't last another year, and that they are splitting up already.'

Pierre said, 'Oh, he's found that out, has he? Not much they don't find out.'

We walked on.

Odette said in a sullen voice, 'I'm not Anglophile, me. And why do all their songs sound like hymns?'

'I like them,' Simone said happily. 'Oh, I like some of those boys. Their clothes are so chic and they can be very nice. I like them. I like everything – everybody.' She spread her arms wide open.

And then you wake up, I thought.

'What beautiful enthusiasm, Simone!' said André.

Odette said, 'It's true that the English have droll ideas. The other day I was talking to Captain—. You know the one, the one with the long nose and the monocle. And he said, "I've just seen an amazingly pretty woman –" Then he stopped and went as red as fire. So out of spite I pretended I hadn't heard; I made him repeat it. "I've just seen rather an attractive person," he said, "in the Kärntnerstrasse." Why should he have to blush like that, when he says the word woman? Is it a dirty word in English?'

'Because he's an idiot,' Pierre said, 'and so are you a little idiot, Odette.'

'All the same,' André said, 'there's something in it. "*Ma femme*", you say; "*Meine Frau*", you say. But what would happen if you said "May I introduce my woman, Mrs Colonel?"'

'It depends on Mrs Colonel, but I shouldn't risk it,' I said.

'I used to mix up the words myself when I first learnt English,' André remarked. 'That's how I know the difference is very important. Also there's lady and girl. Very complicated.'

Of course we all knew that there were a lot of sly jokes, misunderstandings, cartoons and so on, about the British in Vienna. It was not altogether their fault – they were severely handicapped. Love affairs with Viennese girls were very much discouraged, so when they occurred they were carried on cautiously and often ended brutally. On the other hand, 'great friendships' with boys were winked at – even with the boys who at one café were to be found heavily made up and dressed in women's evening clothes. But everybody said that you ought to see them in Berlin; Vienna wasn't their home town.

André said, 'I bet if they knew in Tokyo what Yoshi told Simone there'd be trouble. They're not orthodox, these confidences.'

'No need for Tokyo,' Pierre said. 'You've only got to tell Haro. Then Yoshi would have to commit hara-kiri. Haro detests him.'

'Wouldn't that be a feather in Haro's cap?' I said.

And we all knew that not one of us would stick that feather in Haro's cap. He hated us, so we hated him – it's easy.

We had nearly reached the hotel where the girls were staying.

'Did he really say that, Simone,' asked André. 'About the English and the French splitting up, and the next war?'

'He did, I assure you,' said Simone, 'he did. He said he gave it ten to fifteen years, and after that Germany would probably dominate Europe. He said it would happen because the English and the French don't trust each other and can't stick together and that's the only thing that might stop it.'

'Ten to fifteen years is a long time,' Odette said.

'And Japan?' said Pierre. 'And beautiful Nippon? Banzai Nippon!'

'He didn't say anything about Japan,' said Simone, 'now I come to think of it. Not a word about Nippon.'

We said good night to the girls. We didn't talk for a bit. Then André said, 'The Japanese! They are not to be taken seriously. What can they possibly know about it?'

Yes, I can remember all my dresses, except the one on the chair beside me, the one I wore when I was walking on the cliffs yesterday. Yesterday – when was yesterday? . . .

I had a striped taffeta dress, with velvet flowers tucked into the tight waistband. (And the waistband was round the waist, whatever the English fashion was then.) I had a white satin dress, very slick and smooth, the prettiest of the lot but the cheapest. Round the throat there were coloured stones imitating a necklace. I had a black satin dress with three flounces bordered with green, hand-sewn. With this dress I had two sashes to wear, each as elaborate as a Japanese *obi*. One was black, boned so that it made my waist look very small; the other was green, to match the borders of the flounces. I had a white muslin dress that washed like a rag, and a blue one too, made just the same. Those were my favourites. Washed and ironed like rags, they did, and always came up as fresh as daisies. I had a dirndl, and a check dress. I had a blue serge dress, the bodice fitting closely but the skirt wide and full. Its sleeves were loose, embroidered in gay colours and finished with a tassell. I had a classic English *twiller*, but I always hated that. I had a yellow and blue dress to wear when I wanted to lie down, when I was tired. It was long and loose, the neck and sleeves bordered with blue. It was like cornfields and the sky, and looking at it made you feel happy, made you feel free. And thinking of it I am free again, knowing that nobody can stop me

thinking, thinking of my dresses, or mirrors and pictures, of stones and clouds and mountains and the days that wait for you round the corner to be lived again. Riding round and round the Inner Circle, but unlike Matsu I ride knowing that it will be dark and cold when I come out, that it will be November, and that I shall be a savage person – a real Carib.

'But Caribs live under different skies, by a different sea. They run and hide when they see anybody,' Nicholas said. Perhaps I shall do that too.

3. Carib Quarter

Nicholas was the overseer of Temps Perdi, an estate near the Carib Quarter. Temps Perdi is Creole patois and does not mean, poetically, lost or forgotten time, but, matter-of-factly, wasted time, lost labour. There are places which are supposed to be hostile to human beings and to know how to defend themselves. When I was a child it used to be said that this island was one of them. You are getting along fine and then a hurricane comes, or a disease of the crops that nobody can cure, and there you are – more West Indian ruins and labour lost. It has been going on for more than three hundred years – yes, it's more than three hundred years ago that somebody carved 'Temps Perdi' on a tree near by, they say.

The estate house had been empty for so long that a centipede fell out of a book when I opened it. Everything had run wild, but there was still hibiscus growing by the stone garden walls and butterflies made love over the thorny bougainvillea. Every morning Myra, Nicholas's daughter, put little earthenware bowls of fresh flowers along the low partition which separated the veranda from the sitting-room. From the veranda we could see *Guadeloupe*, the Saints and Marie Galante; sun on dark trees . . .

But the white-cedars at the end of the garden – the lowest about eighty feet high – had dropped their leaves and were covered with flowers, white flowers very faintly tinged with pink, so light and fragile that they fell with the first high wind and were blown away as

soon as they fell. There used to be a famous Creole song about the white-cedar flowers but I can't remember it. 'Here today and gone tomorrow' – something like that, it must be.

'There is nothing to see in the Carib Quarter,' Nicholas insisted. He had a handsome Negro face, a big chest, a deep, booming voice.

'These people,' he said, 'don't even live near together. Their houses are each far away from the other, and all hidden in the bush. There is nothing to see in Salybia. Besides, the new road only goes as far as the river. After that you'll have to ride. It will take a couple of hours or so.'

'But can't it be arranged? Can't we get the horses?'

'Oh yes, it can be arranged,' Nicholas said disapprovingly.

But I wasn't so easily put off. All my life I had been curious about these people because of a book I once read, pictures I once saw.

Whenever the Caribs are talked about, which is not often, the adjective is 'decadent', though nobody knows much about them, one way or the other or ever will now. There are a few hundreds left in the West Indies, or in the world, and they live in the part of this island called Salybia. They had not intermarried much with the Negroes and still have smooth, black hair, small slanting eyes, high cheekbones, copper-coloured skins. They make baskets, beautifully plaited, light and waterproof, dyed red and brown or black and white. The largest is the island's substitute for a trunk, the smallest would just hold a baby's shoe. Sometimes the baskets are made to fit one inside the other, like Chinese boxes.

Nobody else seemed to want to visit the Carib Quarter, nobody seemed at all anxious to take a long ride in the sun with nothing much to see at the end of it.

'They are supposed to have two languages. The women have a language that the men don't know. So they say.'

'They say so, do they?'

'Well, we'll ask Nicholas . . . Nicholas, isn't it true that the Carib women have a secret language?'

Nicholas said, grinning, that he thought he had heard something of the sort. Yes, he fancied he had.

Tormented with the fear that I had imagined the closely-printed book, the gaudy illustrations pored over as a child, I produced the special number of *L'illustration*, 23 November 1935, for the *Tricentenaire des Antilles Françaises* and exhibited '*Homme Caraïbe Dessiné d'après nature par le Père Plumier*'. Early eighteenth century, probably. Bow and arrows in his right hand, a club in his left, a huge, muscular body and a strange, small, womanish face. His long, black hair was carefully parted in the middle and hung smoothly to his shoulders. But his slanting eyes, starting from their sockets, looked wild and terrified. He was more the frightened than the frightening savage.

'We had a print very like this – perhaps it was the same one – in the dining-room at home.'

'He isn't very attractive.'

'Everybody used to say that.'

And he always used to look so sad, I thought, when they laughed at him. With his wild, strained eyes and his useless bows and arrows.

'The original West Indian, is he?'

'Oh no, that's a Carib. The original West Indians were killed by the Spaniards or deported to Hispaniola – Haiti. Well, most of the men were. The Spaniards told them they were going to Heaven. So they went. Weren't they suckers? Then the Caribs, the cannibals, came from the mainland of South America and killed off the few men who were left.'

But that book, written by an Englishman in the 1880s, said that some of the women, who had survived both Spaniards and Caribs – people were not so thorough then as they are now – had carried on the old language and traditions, handing them down from mother to daughter. This language was kept a secret from their conquerors, but the writer of the book claimed to have learned it. He said that it was Mongolian in origin, not South American. He said that it definitely established the fact that there was communication between China and what is now known as the New World. But he had a lot of imagination, that man. Wasn't there a chapter about the buried Carib treasure in La Soufrière, St Lucia – one of the mouths of Hell, they say – and another

about the snake god, and another about Atlantis? Oh yes, he had a lot of imagination.

The day we went to the Carib Quarter the wind was blowing heavy luminous clouds across the sky, tormenting the thin crooked cocounut-palms on the slope of the hill opposite the thin crooked ferent from the straight, healthy, glossy-green veranda, so dif- the corner of the road - fame trees, planted in rows to make copra We arrived punctually at the place where the horses were to make copra us, but it was a long wait before they turned up, so young Charlie, aged sixteen, who was our guide, went on ahead. He was beautifully got up in white shirt, shorts and socks, but hideous, heavy black boots that squeaked with every step he took. There were stepping- stones across the shallowest part of the broad river. On one of these Charlie's horrible boots betrayed him and I thought he had fallen into the water, but he managed to save himself. When he got to the other side it was a relief to see him sit down, take off his boots and socks and hang them round his neck before he walked on.

The horses came at last. They were so thin that every bone showed in their bodies and they had the morose, obstinate expression which is the price of survival in hostile surroundings. Negroes like to be in the movement and hate anything old-fashioned, and horses are now definitely old-fashioned.

However, when we mounted they jerked their necks strongly and clip-dropped without hesitation into the clear, shallow river. I had forgotten the lovely sound of horses' hooves in water, that I had heard for so many damnable years.

Then they heaved and strained us on to a wide, grassy road. There was a flamboyant tree with a few flowers out. Next month, I thought, it will be covered; next month all the flamboyant trees, the flame trees - will be covered, and the immortelles will flower, but I shan't be here to see them. I'll be on my way back to England then, I thought, and felt giddy and sick. There were a lot of ignanas along that road. I shut my eyes and saw one of the illustrations in the book about the Caribs, vivid, complete in every detail. A brown girl, crowned with flowers, a parrot on her shoulder, welcoming the

Spaniards, the long-prophesied gods. Behind her the rest of the population crowded, carrying presents of fruit and flowers, but some of them very scowling and suspicious - and how right they were!

In the midst of this dream, riding through a desolate, arid, lizard-ridden country, different and set apart from the island I knew, I was still sensitive to the opinion of strangers and dreaded hostile criticism. But no, it was approved of, more or less. 'Beautiful, open, park-like country. But what an extreme green!'

The road had been gradually rising and, as we came round the shoulder of a hill, smiling Charlie met us, accompanied by a Negro policeman. An official welcome to Salybia? ... Below us we saw small clearings among the low trees - low for that part of the world - and the bush riddled with narrow paths. But not a human being. ('These people live all separated from each other, and all hidden in the bush. These people hide when they see anybody'.)

'That's the king's house,' the policeman announced, and I thought 'So, there's still a king, is there?'

Round another bend in the road we saw below us the big clearing where the police-station stood with five or six other houses, one of them a Catholic church.

In the station the rifles were stacked in a row, bayonets and all. The room was large, almost cool. Everything looked new and clean, and there was a circular seat round the palm tree outside.

'We had trouble here,' our policeman told us. 'They burnt the last station and they burnt twenty feet off this one while it was being built.'

'Why?'

'Well, it seems they thought they were going to have a hospital. They had asked the Government for a hospital. A petition, you know. And when they found out that the Government was giving them a police-station and not a hospital, there was trouble.'

'Serious trouble?'

'Pretty serious. They burnt the first one down, and they burnt twenty feet off this one.'

'Yes, but I mean was anybody hurt?'

'Oh no, only two or three Caribs,' he said. 'Two-three Caribs were killed.' It might have been an Englishman talking.

'There is a beautiful Carib girl,' the policeman said, 'in the house over there – the one with the red roof. Everybody goes to see her and photographs her. She and her mother will be vexed if you don't go. Give her a little present, of course. She is very beautiful but she can't walk. It's a pity, that.'

When you went in it was like all their houses. A small room, clean, the walls covered with pictures cut from newspapers and coloured cards of Virgins, saints and angels, Star of the Sea, Refuge of the Distressed, Hope of the Afflicted, Star of the Sea again, Jesus, Mary and Joseph . . .

The girl appeared in the doorway of the dark little bedroom, posed for a moment dramatically, then dragged herself across the floor into the sun outside to be photographed, managing her useless legs with a desperate, courageous grace: she had white, lovely teeth. There she sat in the sun, brown eyes fixed on us, the long brown eyes of the Creole, not the small, black, slanting eyes of the pure Carib. And her hair, which hung to her waist and went through every shade from dark brown to copper and back again, was not a Carib's hair, either. She sat there smiling, and an assortment of brightly-coloured Virgins and saints looked down at her from the walls, smiling too. She had aquiline features, proud features. Her skin in the sun was a lovely colour.

We took a few photographs, then Charlie asked if he might take the rest. We heard his condescending voice: 'Will you turn your side face? Will you please turn your full face? Don't smile for this one.'

(These people are quite savage people – quite uncivilized.)

Her mother, who looked like an old Chinese woman, told us that in her youth she had lived in Martinique in service with a French family and then had been taken to Paris.

'I come back here,' she said, 'because I want to see my mother before she die. I loved my mother. Now I must stay because I am old, I am old and who will take me away?'

'She like that since she four,' she said, pointing to her daughter.

'*Hélas!*' she said, gesticulating. She had thin, lovely hands. '*Hélas, hélas!*'

But the girl, sitting in the sun to be photographed, smiled contentedly at us, pushed a strand of hair from her shoulder to her back,

smiled again. And all the Virgins and saints on the walls smiled at us too.

The night in Temps Perdi is full of things chirping and fluttering. The fireflies are out – they call them *labelles*. It is at night, lying caged under a mosquito-net, that you think, 'Now I am home, where the earth is sometimes red and sometimes black. Round about here is ochre – a Carib skin. In some lights like blood, in others just pretty, like a picture postcard coloured by somebody with a child's paintbox and no imagination.'

It is at night that you know old fears, old hopes, that you know unhappiness, turning from side to side under the mosquito-net, like a prisoner in a cell full of small peepholes. Then you think of that plant with thick, fleshy leaves edged with thorns, on which some up-to-the-minute Negro has written over and over again 'Girls muck, girls muck', and other monosyllabic and elementary truths. When I was a child we used to draw hearts pierced with arrows on leaves like that and 'Z loves A'. It all comes to the same thing, probably.

But when you have drunk a good tot of rum nothing dismays you: you know the password and the Open Sesame. You drink a second, then you understand everything – the sun, the flamboyance, the girl crawling (because she could not walk) across the floor to be photographed. And the song about the white-cedar trees. '*Ma belle ka di mamman-i* –' (A lot of their songs begin like that – 'My lovely girl said to her mother.') 'Why do the flowers last only a day?' the girl says. 'It's very sad. Why?' The mother says 'One day and a thousand years are the same for the *Bon Dieu*.' I wish I could remember it all but it is useless trying to find out because nobody sings these old songs any more.

It had a sweet sound sometimes, *patois*. And I can't get the words out of my mind, Temps Perdi.

Before I leave 'Rolvenden' I'll write them up – on a looking glass, perhaps. Somebody might see them who knows about the days that wait round the corner to be lived again and knows that you don't choose them, either. They choose themselves.