

Release: Part 1

By Freida Theant

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The master of the topgallant crew sang out the command “heave” at intervals and thus the deck hands drew in bight after bight until the last of the sail was hauled in and made flat over the yard. To secure the salt-crusted bundle they wrapped it with hemp cords and “made fast” to the jackstay, that metal rod protruding a few inches above the spar for a handgrip and anchoring post.

The last of the furling now finished, each man jack announced his leaving of the spar “Laying off footrope; laying on ratlines” to warn the remaining crew since at each departure, the footrope jumped violently. Scrambling down the web-ladder that leads to the deck, all but Allen Dane of the fore topgallant gang descended the web to the broad safety of the ship’s waist or main deck.

He left the ratlines, the rope ladder, at its intersection with the crosstrees’ miniature platform, swinging around the steel cable support and landing his deck shoes on the solid planks. Staring in the general direction of the bow, he sought out signs of the approaching enchanted island, the magical place Shakespeare used for “The Tempest.”

Bermuda. Less than half a day’s sailing, or maybe steaming, would bring their three masted bark to the Port of Hamilton and some desperately need liberty ashore. This would be the ideal port of call; semitropical temperatures; all English-speaking people; public safety as good (if not better) than any home Coast Guard base, no anti-Yank prejudices, prices within the budget of a military man, and the exotic tang of a British flavored civilization plunked on an island with a South Carolina latitude (only 100 miles further east). And of course, as is legendary for sailors on shore leave, unattached women.

“Hey Mr. Dane! What’s the story? Get below!” The cry came from the master of the topgallant crew. “No sky larking on the crosstrees!”

"Aye Aye, sir," he called down to the chief. Adrenaline was animating him from the dangerous and rigorous sail-hauling so he moved quickly. Jolted out of his day dreams of upcoming adventures, he curved his body around the heavy vertical steel cable supporting the mast and scrambled down the remaining web to the firm footing of the teakwood deck.

"Form up in the waist!" commanded the chief, "Let's secure and pass the duty on to the midwatch."

That was good news. Freed from ship's work at last, a glance at his watch told him there remained a few moments of leisure here on the main deck before laying to mess for evening chow. He drifted to the rail, peering out toward over the white capped waves of denim blue, and returned to day dream of his ideal shore-leave. He thrust his left hand into his dungaree pocket. What his fingers found and fetched up was the protective polyethylene box that housed what was left of his pack of Pall Malls.

Popping the sliding top off, he extracted the closest Pall Mall from the half empty pack, tapped its base several times on the lee rail and parted his lips just enough to insert the tamped end. He dredged his brushed steel Zippo from the other pocket, and held it just below eye level, torquing the serrated wheel with his thumb to spark up the vaporous wick. His left hand instinctively cupped around the forward tip of the white cylinder, and the right drew the dancing flame to union. But the sea breeze was strong, and the flame wriggled and ducked under the cigarette's edge. He had to draw hard on the Pall Mall with the flame jumping about so capriciously and even so only the base of the tip caught fire. The top half remained tobacco brown while the underside charred black and instantly turned ash white. After a long draw the glowing coal ate its way backwards, first as a luminous triangle, growing intense and larger until finally engaging the full diameter of the cigarette as a shimmering golden-orange band.

He lowered his jaw slightly and let the ocean's wind sweep the smoke away in a white smear that faded and tapered off into clear infinity. The next draw went in as a deep lungful which he held for some seconds to flood out the adrenaline tension with nicotine calm. What was it about salt air and smoking? Why is it that there is no place on Earth that supports so perfectly the smoking experience as a sea breeze with the ocean's smell? No wonder smoking and sailors are so often paired in the public imagination.

A rogue gust of air blasted the smoking figure; the curling ashes from the coal peeled off and showered his face. He winced for an instant but turned his face into the wind and let her brush

off the miniscule gray flecks. Extending the little finger from his free hand, he swiped out the last mote from his eye and blinked heavily several times to clear the irritation. This time, when he lifted the cigarette to his mouth he grasped it between thumb and forefinger, pinching the cylinder a bit but sheltering the smoldering comfort within the hollow of his palm. This drag was harder, pulling more smoke than usual, and he mixed a healthy draft of air before sending this deeply into his chest. Expelling forcefully, his plume was dissolved by the wind almost as soon as it left his lips.

Groups of two and three sailors just off watch clustered at the lee rail, the ideal place to enjoy the waves while gamming some shipboard gossip. Several fought to light up their own Tareytons or L & Ms in the gusty afternoon. To better flame the tips, they huddled together with their backs to the breeze to provide a human windbreak, which succeeded only after several concerted trials.

The sailor with the red hair barely hidden by his White Dixie Cup sauntered over to Allen's rail, greeting him: "So, have you thought about what you're gonna do tomorrow?"

Frank's red hair was legendary; he needed no further proof of his Irish heritage. A steadfast friend, his company is always welcome. It showed in the warmth in Allen's voice, "Yeah, Sort of. When we dock at Hamilton, I wanna get as far from the harbor as I can. I plan on getting to the east end of the island. That's where the old towns are. You know, the historical shit."

"That's what you're gonna do?" Frank chuckled. "Be the tourist? You're not gonna get drunked up and laid in Hamilton?"

"Nah. There's gonna be too many of us in the capital anyway." Allen had already reasoned this out, "The further away I get, the less competition. And if I get laid, great. If not, well, I like lookin' at the really old stuff. At least I'll have something to show for my time ashore."

"I might join ya. Depends on when my duty finishes up tomorrow. You're right. There's gonna be a blizzard of white uniforms in that city. Everyone can't get lucky, now can they?" Frank's smooth Irish humor made him one of the best liked mates on this crew.

Bathed in the pinks and yellows of the morning sunrise, the tall white bark steamed into the Hamilton harbor the following day. A few major docks harbored the ocean going vessels, but recreational docks were plunked along the water's edge littered with yachts and sailboats of all sizes. Few inhabitants were there to watch the great ship as it slid alongside the dock, secured her hawsers and dropped her gangplank owing to the early hour, but her sailors had already lined the decks wearing their cleanest white jumpers and bell bottoms. A few hours of final shipboard housekeeping preceded the first of the anxious liberty parties forming up on the main deck to be loosed on a city that had seen its like for four hundred years. Every fifteen minutes or so, clusters of half a dozen or so spotless sailors were inspected, given final instructions and released.

Allen Dane didn't appear in the waist of the ship until sometime after midmorning, full of breakfast and a burning need to be away as promptly as the "regs" would permit. Frank was nowhere in sight, and it was impossible to know if he had shoved-off already or was still at work finishing ship's business. Allen fell-in with those forming up into ranks, remained at attention during the inspecting officer's scrutiny. He had his brass belt buckle gleaming like burnished gold and his leather shoes polished to an obsidian finish, glassy black. His whites radiated reflected tropical light in a halo; he was the very picture of order and cleanliness.

As there were no deficiencies uncovered, the officer left them with the pre-shore advisory, "This island is based on British laws and customs, so drivers here use the left hand side of the road. Therefore, as per the captain's orders, you men will not rent or drive vehicles while ashore. Even though you have drivers' licenses, you don't have the experience with this reverse traffic. Furthermore, you men will not rent or ride the motor scooters or motorbikes. They are extremely hazardous and every year, outsiders are injured or killed. Are there any questions?"

The universal silence during the pause decreed that the orders were understood; especially when they were merely seconds away from freedom!

"Very Well," the officer concluded, "Liberty party go ashore. Remember, Liberty expires Oh one hundred hours tomorrow morning."

The sloping gangplank rose and fell under their footfalls but the first steps dockside were as solid as rock. Proof indeed that for the first time in two weeks, they were on land!

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Allen surveyed the harbor landscape, and saw by the general traffic of seamen and yacht owners which direction would get him onto the main streets of the city. Following the crowd, he was pleased to find the main thoroughfares were within a block or so, and that signs of public transportation broadly posted. He oriented to the nearest bus stop, and waited only moments before the ride pulled in.

“Is this the bus that goes to the Fort St Catharine?” he asked.

“Yes, but you *mawst* first transfer downtown onto the eastbound bus,” the driver said in his best Jamaican style accent. “That takes you to St. George. There you can *ahsk* any body; they’ll direct you to the Fortress. Now remember, there’s about three or four of ‘em there, so be sure to tell’em *wheech* one you mean.”

“Is it far to St George?”

“No. *Ahfter* you change buses here in Hamilton, it will take about *fohrty* minutes.”

And just as the kindly busman predicted, an hour later the adventuring seaman stepped down from the second bus to the much quieter, smaller and intimate atmosphere of St George.

Looking round about, he was initially bewildered by the new and unfamiliar setting, but at the same time excited. To make sense of it all, he thought ‘I need to orient myself by wandering around a bit, and get the lay of the land. Maybe talk to a few folks. Ask a few questions. Try some of the local stores, restaurants. Go native for a few hours.’

He headed for the larger streets, noting the possibilities and offerings to the casual visitor and was pleased.

'Lots of variety in the homes and buildings,' he commented to himself as he drifted along the streets, 'some brick, some stone, and the rest wood frame. Nothing taller than two stories, except the old public constructions. And everything stuccoed or whitewashed. Pastel colors everywhere. It's like walking through a toy village only life size.'

A hand painted sign in front of a slight cottage nestled between two looming cake frosting-painted brick shops caught his eye. It announced 'Harbor Rose Tearoom' and from the looks of things the home had been turned into a restaurant. The whitewashed wooden Victorian front with the multipane windows and oyster shell lace curtains compelled customers to enter by virtue of its fairytale charm alone. Allen was no exception.

Entering the doorway with the overhead bell that clanged at each opening, his first glance showed that the living room and parlors had been converted into dining rooms festooned with linen covered tables and crystal centerpieces. The high-backed wooden chairs were clearly 19th century; ornately carved from dark colored woods that contrasted sharply with the varnished oak floorboards. Paintings, or copies of paintings featured English gardens and cottages or else watercolors of various flowers in full bloom. Clusters of customers, mostly elderly and women, occupied only a few tables, and they were mostly in the front rooms; Allen wanted more private seating so he moved deeper into the house. The dining room he selected had no inhabitants so he seated himself at the rear, facing forward; the better to see whosoever might enter.

The waitress wore a starched white apron with the lace fringe; she offered him the parchment menu, meticulously scripted in an Edwardian hand, "And what may I bring you today?"

Looking at the square table; the cut crystal vase with the fresh stem roses, linen napkins three folded and floral embellished silverware, things looked quite proper except for a single oversight: "Can you bring an ashtray before I order?"

"Of course. Take your time. There's lots of really nice selections here, you can read it over while I bring you your water and ashtray," she said, while sliding off into the dark void behind him.

And the menu did offer more kinds of tea than he knew existed. He barely scanned the full offering when his server reappeared with the tinkling glass of ice cube laden water and the

sparkling glass ashtray. "Thanks. I'll have two breakfast pastries....no, wait, make that three. And the pot of English Breakfast tea."

It was time to extract his polyethylene case from the slit pocket of his white uniform, and slide out the unopened burgundy wrapped Pall Malls. 'Hope a pack lasts me all day' he thought to himself as he striped of the dull silver opener band from the upper perimeter of the pack, and ripped off the cellophane top. He looked out the side window to soak up the local scene while he automatically slide his fingernail under the folded foil corner and tore away a rectangle opening from the top. The last-century darkness within was a pleasant relief from the semitropical glare of the sunlight outside, and made even more dramatic the view from the white rimmed panes, but his hands unconsciously inverted the pack and then selected the highest protruding rod. His eyes still fixed on the St. George street traffic and figures traversing the sidewalk, his index finger and thumb withdrew a cylinder from its tightly packed companions, tapping the selection on the linen and thrust it into his smile. Instinctively he cupped his left hand around the leading edge of the cigarette while his Zippo fired the tip of the filled tube. A brisk labial pull, and a jet of chalky vapor shot forth. The activity outside, however held him so rapt that he barely noticed the clang of doorway bell, nor the furtive entry of two women into Allen's otherwise empty dining room.

As the ladies slid the chairs away from the table to seat themselves, the scraping sound of aged wood on floorboard caught his attention. The first to seat herself was a round faced dishwater blonde who looked to be about thirty in a faded pink, loose fitting blouse that draped casually over spotless white shorts. Despite her clothing, her figure looked heavier than medium but her breasts protruded pleasingly and her height was in decent proportion. Gripping the chair arms smartly, she jumped her seat forward in a quick series of pulls. To her left, the brunette companion was taller, thinner which was accentuated by the pale lavender blouse and canary yellow three quarter length pants. She was clearly younger, closer to twenty than the blonde. The brunette clasped the table and slid her seat forward in a smooth motion, and then placed her pearl tinted handbag to the left of her table setting. The two faced each other in quiet but spirited conversation, which had barely begun before the waitress intervened. Allen watched the scene as if the volume were turned down: the waitress distributing menus, the animated but hushed dialogue with the server, some waving of hands edged with red fingernails until the server nods approvingly as she disappears back into the dark hallway beyond. Their chatter was musical; refreshingly feminine, but their words weren't distinguishable. The older one faced her partner and speaking excitedly, but with never a glance downward, rescued her silver cigarette case from the bulky handbag. Continuing the dialogue, she snapped open the gleaming lid to reveal a palisade of cigarettes arranged like the teeth of a movie star's smile. She broke eye contact momentarily to examine the contents and select the one most accessible, and like Allen moments earlier, tapped it on the linen tablecloth. She did this a few times, as if she wasn't sure the precise moment to break the conversation and so to gain a few more seconds, she set her golden plated lighter next to her linen napkin. The younger companion understood; she too reached for her clutch purse acknowledging that now they

would both enrich the moment with inhaled pleasure.

Pink blouse click-snapped her gilt lighter and lifted it to the tobacco edge, igniting more than just the face; she bathed the first quarter inch in fire. While she drew in volume enough to get the tip roundly flamed and burning independently, she peered along its length and watched the newly formed collar of smoke envelop the broad, glowing ring. Flowing upward along the paper skin, a ghostly tendril crept towards her eyes but veered upwards about an inch from her lips, spinning itself into curls and whorls before spreading horizontally at the ceiling. She returned her gaze to her partner, and as she plucked her wand from her mouth in a defiant arc, she pursed her mouth with the lower lip protruded. The resulting fan of exhaled smoke politely angled higher and arched over her younger associate's face.

Brunette lavender shirt set her lighter on the table but fidgeted with her gold cigarette case, looked up in dismay, and made some response that Allen couldn't hear. Immediately the smoking woman retrieved her silver cigarette case and offered her one of her own. The brunette's relief was visible even across the room as she took one and slid into her lipstick-tinted mouth. She lit her cigarette by barely brushing the flame across the tip, moving the lighter slightly right-to-left and as her lips maintained a prolonged kiss. The instant the lighter snapped shut, she shot a quick, slender jet of smoke straight forward, without touching the cigarette, to expel that first unusable puff. Then she coaxed out that satisfyingly heavy draft, pulling more gently and over greater time than her older companion. She parted her lips, lifted the cigarette from the lipstick, and made round her mouth; the opaque hemisphere captured inside was all that was visible, all the rest mysteriously hidden by the cottony diffusion. Just as she inhaled some air to mix with her captive draft, a fugitive curl twisted up over her lip and slid past her nose. Then the cloud vanished, drawn into her lungs, to be held there until the rhythm of breath called for its release. And this release was as satisfying as the soothing, scratchy but fulfilling sensation that penetrated her lungs whilst it dwelt therein. Streams of smoke simultaneously flowed from both her nostrils and slightly parted lips, then the lips closed and the final spurts pulsed from her nose, in a last few eddies.

"Here you go, sir," the server set the steaming teapot and pastries before Allen.

Startled, he looked up. She caught him so fully absorbed in the scene across the room that he never saw her approach.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" she asked.

“No... no I think this will be just fine, thanks.”

She tore the bill off of the pad and placed it before him, “If there’s anything else you need, just call me,” and disappeared back into the dark.

Pouring himself the first cup of tea, he took care not to soil the tablecloth with unwanted dribbles, and bit into the first of the sugary pastries, a veritable sin with blueberry flavor. Then he resumed watching the pair of women at the distant table.

Blond pink blouse spoke with lively hand movements, and the cigarette wand in her left hand traced her gestures with a trail of curling smoke. Brunette lavender, on the other hand, left her cigarette in the ashtray, and waited until her companion launched into a monologue before she kissed it again tenderly. Each time, before returning it to the curved depression in the side of the ashtray, she tapped the rod with her forefinger, popping off any loose ash. She turned her face to the left and blew the expended fumes in a thin feathery cone far away from pink blouse. Then the tea and scones arrived, so the was tea poured and time for conversation shortened by eating and drinking.

The chatting pair had proven so captivating that Allen’s face never left their table; so bound up was he in their unfolding drama that when the brunette looked directly at him, their eyes met head on. He neither turned aside, nor glanced away but met her gaze steadily and warmed his face with the barest of smiles. Still peering into her eyes, he brought his smoldering Pall Mall up for a drag, took a lengthy pull and sent the flavor by the nasal path to his chest. He needed to feel the tangy burn deep within to help steady himself in this visual duel, and no sooner was he expelling the spent fumes when she brought her glow-tipped wand to her mouth. Her gaze never left him either; a slow and studied pull on her cigarette animated the tip, glowing like a lighthouse beacon. She lifted her teacup to cool the surface, and the steam mixed with her smoky exhale formed mist snakes that swirled and writhed upwards and then drifted off into oblivion. Then she offered the ghost of a smile and turned to her companion and spoke again.

The tea had the predicted effect on Allen bladder; he looked around to see where the restrooms might be, and left his table to seek them out. Asking directions, finding and using the facilities took longer than usual so that when he returned, he saw that only the brunette occupied the table where his two charming subjects had been. Pink blouse was absent and so was her

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handbag. Pretending not to notice, he walked resolutely; eyes fixed on his own table, but she hailed him before he could slide past.

“Excuse me,” Her voice pleaded.

“Do you mean me?” he asked.

“Yes, quite sorry to bother you, but I have a favor to ask of you. That is if you don’t mind, awfully.” The flavor of her voice was as English as the breakfast tea he had just drunk, with all the proper schooling in that accent.

“Sure,” he said, startled but delighted. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I couldn’t help but notice that you smoke, and I’m afraid that I’ve rather run my supply down to zero. Fags, that is. My own fault, of course. Don’t suppose you could let me have one of yours now do you?” She spoke crisply, but with quiet warmth that commanded.

“Yes, of course. I’ll get them from my table. Give me a second and I’ll go get’em.”

“Wait,” she said, “Since you’re by yourself, why don’t I join you over there at your table. My friend has left me for an appointment and it seems so silly for us each to be having tea by ourselves.”

“Sounds good,” Allen replied. “It’d be nice to have someone to talk to.”

After bringing her tea and purse to his table, Allen offered her a selection from his plastic case,” Pall Malls.... Unfiltered. That Okay?”

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“Oh yes, quite good, actually. You see, I smoke Navy Players.”

Allen sparked his Zippo into action, and she reached for that hand, drawing it to the target and lighting as she had before by moving his hand right-to-left, barely brushing the flame across the tip. Her hand held his in the softest grip he had ever felt and the warmth shot up his arm and inflamed his face. “They’re quite similar,” she affirmed, as she sampled the resulting flavor and angled the exhale to one side. “Yes, I like this. Very much.”

“You sound like you’re from England from the way you talk,” Allen said, closing the Zippo with a clank and struggling to regain his calm.

“Yes I am. And how about you, America, Right?”

“Yeah, New York. Upstate New York, not the city,” Allen struggled not to stutter. “What part of England’re you from?”

“When I stay with the family, I’m in Cheshire. That’s where the family is situated, but it’s quite alone, and there’s really nothing to do all day. So I’ve taken a flat with some of my chums in London. And you, Allen, do you live on your ship all the time or do you have a quarters somewhere ashore?”

“How did you know my name was Allen?” he asked, confounded once more.

To be continued...