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Voyage of Innocence

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

OCTOBER 1938

'Sir, it's an emergency.'

The officer of the watch tried again, speaking more loudly and urgently. 'Sir, Captain, sir, please wake up. It's an emergency.'

Reginald Sherston, Captain of the SS *Gloriana*, passenger vessel bound for India, lifted his grizzled head from his starched white pillow.

His eyes opened, the faded blue eyes of a man who had been at sea since he was a boy of fourteen. They looked at the first officer, a capable man, not given to fuss, and across to where his steward was hovering, his uniform in his hand.

'Tell me about it, Mr Longbourne.'

Minutes later, Captain Sherston was on the bridge.

The officers in their white uniforms went quietly about their duties, the man at the wheel, locked on its course, was alert. They were all intent on what the first officer and captain were saying.

The ship sailed on through the waters of the Red Sea. Above them the sky blazed with the brilliant stars that were the gift of ocean travel, and were reflected in the inky, gentle swell. The throb of the engines was steady, reassuring.

'This Mrs Hotspur, a passenger to Bombay, she went ashore at Port Said?'

'Yes, sir. For the day.'

'Did she go on one of the tours? To the pyramids?'

'No, sir. She went ashore with friends.'

'But came back on board.'

'As far as we know, sir. Her re-embarkation card was handed in.'

‘And her stewardess says her bed wasn’t slept in last night? Who is the stewardess?’

‘Pigeon, sir.’

‘She didn’t report it?’

‘It happens, sir, that a woman might . . .’ the first officer looked at Captain Sherston’s Presbyterian face, and he swallowed, ‘. . . spend the night elsewhere, sir.’

‘The dining room stewards say she didn’t take breakfast, lunch or dinner today?’

‘That’s correct sir.’

‘And this ten-year-old boy, Peter Messenger, says he saw her standing by the rail on C-deck at about nine o’clock, one hour and ten minutes after we sailed from Port Said?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Tell me about Mrs Hotspur.’

The first officer consulted his notes. ‘Mrs Verity Hotspur. A widow, I understand. A very charming lady, and a cousin of Lady Claudia Vere, who is also aboard – she joined at Lisbon. It was Lady Claudia who raised the alarm.’

‘Lady Claudia Vere. So this missing passenger, Lady Claudia’s cousin, will turn out to be connected to all kinds of important people?’

‘Bound to be, sir.’

Captain Sherston let out a long sigh. ‘Emergency procedures for man overboard, Mr Longbourne.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Then when the orders had been given, the first officer asked, ‘Not much chance for her, is there?’

‘None whatever. If she missed the propellers, the sharks will have got her. If not, she’ll have drowned.’

PART ONE

SEPTEMBER 1938

ONE

Verity came out on deck into one of those pale autumn days that hovers between rain and sunshine; a breath of wind rippling the still waters of the harbour warned that summer was yielding to autumn.

Despite the light wool jacket she wore, she shivered, both from the chill in the air which heralded the approach of winter, and from an inner cold of fear. Fear for the times, with the shadow of war looming over the country she was leaving; fear for herself. She was no longer afraid of war itself, since there was nothing she could do to prevent or prepare for that. What made her afraid? Her nightmares? Klaus, and his successor, that flat-faced man with no discernible personality? Her future, her brother's fate?

All of those.

Gulls drifted in the sky above her and bobbed on the oily waters far below, their eerie mews a counterpoint to the whistles and hoots of tugs and the flotilla of other vessels going to and fro in the busy harbour. Vee sniffed the salty air, the dockland tang of tar and sea and smoke, and it brought a bitter taste to her mouth. The vast area of Tilbury Docks, alive with the bustle and activity of one of the busiest ports in the world, held no appeal for her; she longed for the boat to leave, for the line of water between the ship and the quay to widen and become an arm's length, a fifty-yard gap, for the land to fade into the distance, for there to be nothing but green-grey waves and foam and sky.

By some trick of the breeze, voices floated up to her from the quayside, the words reaching her ears with extraordinary clarity. A cheerful woman's voice: 'I say, isn't that Mrs Verity Hotspur up there? Looking fearfully smart? In the red hat!'

'Who's Mrs Hotspur when she's at home?

'She's a society lady, a widow, her husband . . .' the words were lost on the wind, then were clear again. 'I expect she's off to Egypt, for the winter.'

'Running away somewhere safe, more like,' said a morose nasal voice. 'Wish I could do the same.'

'Come on, Jimmie,' said the cheerful voice, 'got to fight for your country, you know. Anyhow, who says there's going to be a war? Let's look on the bright side.'

'They're all running away. One law for the rich and another for the rest of us.'

Running away. Dear God, if only they knew what she was running away from. War? It was laughable. Inevitable, but irrelevant and nothing to do with why she was standing on the top deck of the SS *Gloriana*, soon – not soon enough – to be setting off on a voyage to India.

She rested her arms on the teak rail. On board ship was an orderly world, where wood and brass were polished to a gleaming, reflective finish. It was a world run by bells and routine and people who knew their duty. Where lascars rose before dawn to scrub down and dry the decks to immaculate perfection before foot of passenger or officer stepped on them. Where meals were provided on the dot of the appointed hour, where the distance travelled was noted at precisely twelve o'clock each day.

It was, nonetheless, a more changeable world than the one she was leaving. As the *Gloriana* made her steady way across the sea, the stars would move imperceptibly out of their customary places, until, one day, they would be different stars, the stars of the southern skies, and the ship would have sailed out of Europe and into the Indian Ocean.

New skies, a new country, but an old life. She wished that this voyage marked a clean break in her life, one of those turning points when the door shut on the old and you stepped out into the beginning of something completely new.

How often in life did that happen? When you were born, of course. When you learned to walk, although no one ever remembered, at least not consciously, what a difference that made to a life: the first steps, the first taste of independence. School, perhaps, was another new start; for her, going away to boarding school had marked the end of her childhood. And the biggest step – no, stride – of all, when she'd taken the train from Yorkshire to university.

Where, even while she was still an undergraduate, a new, adult life had begun. Like a nun hearing the call of God and taking up her vocation, that was how she had seen it. How wrong she had been, how dewy-eyed and naive and angry and full of herself and so sure of what was right.

And because of listening to that deceitful inner voice and giving in to her anger, she was here now. On board the SS *Gloriana*, sailing at another's bidding, full of fear and hatred, uncertain whether she could possibly do what was asked of her, knowing that she didn't want to. And the price of failure?

A life.

She looked down the steep sides of the great liner, down over three more railings and decks and then rows of portholes, down to the quay, where the wind stirred scraps of paper and litter on the quayside. Down there, pieces on a chessboard, people were milling around as the moment of sailing drew near.

The last few passengers hurried out of the customs house, checking passports and boarding cards. Porters with trolleys laden to improbable heights with towers of luggage, each suitcase and box and trunk labelled with stickers: P & O; SS *Gloriana*; initials, a large capital letter in a circle, B for Brown, J for Jones, S for Smith; destination labels for Lisbon, Port Said, Bombay; Wanted on Voyage. The Not-Wanted-on-Voyage luggage had all been taken away to the hold, to sit in staid rows until the port of disembarkation; she wished she could wrap herself up and pass the time among the lumber in the darkness of the hold. That was where she belonged, among the rats and the detritus, not here in the comfort and luxury of first class.

'Rats leaving the sinking ship, that's what they are,' said the nasal voice. Vee looked towards the great hawsers stretching to the capstans on the quay, holding the vessel tightly in place; she had heard that rats did indeed know when a ship was going to founder, when something was amiss, and would be seen streaming down the ropes and on to land. No, there were no rats. She was the rat, in that man's eyes. She and all the other passengers.

'Watch out for Sam and don't be so uncharitable.'

That was the cheerful-sounding woman who had recognized her; who had no doubt seen her photo in *Tatler*, or in the more scurrilous papers when . . . No, she wasn't going to think about that.

Vee narrowed her eyes, trying to identify who, of all those standing so far down there, had called her a rat. It was that man in the shabby mac, with a hat that had seen better days. Beside him stood a perky young woman, wearing a coat too thin even for this weather. She had a look of dogged good humour on her face; her hair, escaping from a velvet hat that had been brushed to raise a fading pile, was blonde and brassy. She wore too much lipstick, but she had a personality, a confidence about her. Vee envied her. She felt that whoever she was, Miss Velvet Hat had a better, less complicated life than her own. She probably slept soundly and dreamlessly at night, and woke with a curiosity and excitement about the day to come, even though she no doubt had to work hard for a meagre living, never had quite enough to eat and little hope of a better future.

'Sam's not running away, Jimmie. He's got a job to do out there, same as you and me have here.'

'I didn't say Sam was running away, and I don't suppose the rest of them going tourist class are either. Ordinary people they are, like Sam and you and me. No,' with a contemptuous gesture up at the deck where Vee was standing, 'it's that lot up there get my goat. All those first-class passengers, hoity-toity, not lifting a finger to do anything for themselves. Seven-course meals and dancing every night, and not a care in the world, and get out of England, quick, before the Nazi bombs come raining down and they might get hurt.'

'Like I said, maybe there isn't going to be a war.'

'Like the sun isn't going to rise tomorrow. Those toffs all know there's going to be a war. If they can't scarper to America, then they think they can hide away in some warm spot where life isn't going to change, and they can have their servants and their whiskies and let other people be blown to pieces. It makes me sick.'

'Everything makes you sick, Jimmie.'

'I know who that Mrs Hotspur is.' Jimmie's voice was indignant. 'It was all in the paper when her husband died, fishy business, that, if you ask me.'

Vee was following the swooping, soaring flight of a gull with her eyes, but she saw nothing. She was looking inwards, at another scene, a bloodstained study. Klaus's words, from that day in Paris, came creeping into her mind, 'We have arranged for certain things to happen.'

Certain things? No, it was impossible. Why should they have done that? And then, if they were responsible, then how safe was she? In

London, here, anywhere? Words drifted into her head. Don't put a foot wrong, always do as they say, they've no forgiveness in their souls. You don't want to come to a gory end . . .

There was a smell of fish in her nostrils, fish and seaweed, the smell of the beach when the tide turns and goes out, revealing the debris that lies beneath the sea.

'Look, there's Sam waving.' Her face beaming, the young woman in the velvet hat pulled off the red scarf she was wearing round her throat and flapped it towards the other end of the ship, where the tourist-class passengers were coming out on deck to wave their goodbyes and watch their native land fade into the distance.

She was looking up at Vee again and, for a moment, their eyes met. Then the woman turned back to the man in the shabby mac. Once again the words reached Vee. 'Scandal wherever she goes, she's often in *Tatler*, and her cousin, Lady Claudia Vere, oh, she's lovely, blonde hair and huge blue eyes. Her picture's always in the society magazines.'

'Yes, and she's got a noble brother who's stark staring bonkers and will swing from the nearest lamp-post come the revolution.'

'Oh, you and your revolution. I tell you, there isn't going to be any Bolshevik revolution, and the sooner you realize it, the happier you'll be. Then you can get on with life instead of moaning about it.'

Vee turned away, dismayed as the girl's words struck home. She pitied Jimmie and his illusions. Probably, even before the year was out, he would be in uniform, at close quarters with his brothers to a degree that would make him long for less comradeship, and without a minute in the day to ponder on the rights of men or the oppression of the workers.

There was a greater sense of urgency on the quay below; a car arrived and its doors flung open even before the brakes were on, three men got out, a porter came hurrying to unstrap cases from the boot, an official with a clipboard and a frown ushered them towards the customs shed, pulling out a watch as he did so.

Vee stiffened, her eyes fixed on a tall, dark man in a grey suit standing beside a wicker basket. She couldn't put a name to him, she had never been introduced to him, but she had seen him before, several times, always as a shadowy, lurking figure. A watcher. In the park, when she and Klaus . . . And outside her flat. A man with a bony face. Not distinctive, and yet his features were etched on her

mind. He wore the kind of clothes that would never stand out in a crowd, he was a blender.

Panic set in. If he were coming on board, it could mean only one thing.

She must get off. This was a hideous mistake. She would get off the boat right now, this very minute, never mind her luggage, never mind anything. She would take the train to London, and then to Scotland, to Ireland, anywhere . . .

She couldn't. Despair swept over her.

But was he embarking for the voyage? He was making no move towards the ship. Instead, his eyes were scanning the decks, resolutely and systematically. She stepped back and tucked herself behind a metal buttress. The watcher's eyes paused, moved on, came back. Only his eyes weren't on her. His hand rose in casual acknowledgement, then he turned abruptly, and was lost in the crowd of onlookers.

He hadn't been looking for her. Who then? Someone on the deck below, over to the left. She hung over the rail; all she could see were hats; everyone was looking down at the quay or over to where the tugs were manoeuvring into position.

She ran along the deck, pushing past other passengers, and almost tumbled down the steep gangway to the deck below. It was teeming with people, some sombre, tearful, even; others cheerful. Which of them had the man been looking for? She caught a glimpse of a man who looked just like Joel. It couldn't be, of course, Joel was the last man to leave his college and set sail just before the start of term.

Some of her fellow passengers recognized her, there were whispers and curious glances. But not one of them was the right kind of person; none of them could be an associate of the man on the quay.

A cheer went up from the quayside, paper streamers rained down from the decks and the gangways were trundled aside. Answering cries and shouts floated down from the decks, there was a burst of steam, a whistle and then a blast from the SS *Gloriana*'s funnel, an oddly lightweight sound in comparison to the bass notes of the tugs. A band was playing, bunting flapped and a strand fell loose, swooping down into the sea.

Inch by inch, the boat glided away from her mooring. There was a foot of murky water, a yard, fifty yards. Then the *Gloriana*, attended by her acolyte tugs, was sailing serenely down the grey stretches of the Thames, moving slowly past warehouses and wharves. People in

small boats waved, more hooters and horns and whistles sounded; the voyage had begun.

Vee stayed at her post, watching without attention as they sailed past cargo boats, unkempt and tubby and rusty, holds gaping, crates and laden nets being swung down into their bowels on winches. Business, purpose, activity.

Lucky, lucky people.

Unlucky her?

The moment of self-pity passed before it had begun. It wasn't a question of luck. It was a matter of taking the wrong decisions, in acting out of anger and temper and folly, and of one disastrous mistake, a well-meaning mistake, leading to another and another and another until here she was, where she had no wish to be, acting and living like a puppet, with strings pulled by a puppet master who had no more interest in her or her rage or wretchedness than if she had indeed been a painted marionette.

If only . . .

The if only's went back a long way, she knew that. If only her sister Daisy hadn't died. If only Grandfather hadn't been such a tyrant. If only . . .

Her life might have taken a very different path. If she could have those years back, be given a magical chance to live them again, the one place she wouldn't be was here, on this boat.

There they were again, the terrible thoughts that rattled round and round in her head. She'd need a sleeping tablet tonight, to bring her at least an hour or two of the heavy and dreamless sleep that she craved. For that brief space of time, no dreams broke through the pharmaceutical veil of her white tablets: take one at bedtime.

She was profoundly grateful to a medical friend for prescribing them.

'You're a fool, Vee,' he'd said. 'They aren't any kind of an answer, and if your own doctor won't give them to you, he's probably right.'

'Darling, he's simply too old-fashioned. The only reason I sleep badly, according to him, is because I'm a young woman without husband or children, not fulfilling my *raison d'être*, do you see?'

'He can't blame you for being a widow.'

'He can blame me for being a well-off young widow who, after a decent interval, hasn't remarried. That's an affront to the natural order of things, almost as bad as someone like Cynthia Lovelace going

off to live in a cottage in Wales with her burly woman friend who teaches PE at Grandpont, or the unfeminine types who choose to go to university and have a career instead of sacrificing their virginity and independence on Hymen's altar to an eligible and suitable young man. So, no, he won't give me sleeping pills.'

Vee's thoughts flitted to Cousin Mildred, who had her own means of dealing with the strains and stresses of life, 'Do try some, dear child, there's nothing like it.'

There were bound to be people she knew on board, several of them with Mildred's habit. Most of them from the ranks of the idle rich, not people going out to do a job of work like the unknown Sam with his friends Jimmie and Velvet Hat waving him goodbye from the quayside. Egypt? India? Their week's holiday would be spent hiking in Wales or at a b. & b. in Weymouth; they wouldn't have the luxury of weeks and months of leisurely travel in warmer climates, with expensive substances to change their spirits and mood if they felt the need.

Oh, yes, there would be friends and acquaintances on the *Gloriana*, people going to winter in the Egyptian sun, and it was the time of year when mamas with daughters who hadn't taken during the season, or during several seasons, chose to go on pilgrimage, to set off for foreign shores where the heat and the inward-looking British communities might produce the elusive mate not found in the ballrooms of Mayfair or the country houses of Shropshire and Gloucestershire.

Vee went slowly down the wide, mirrored staircase that linked the upper and lower decks. She attracted a good deal of attention; the junior officer on his way to the radio room with a sheaf of telegrams; the florist going the other way with an armful of flowers; the lady's maid hurrying to the beauty salon to acquire some essential forgotten item; passengers, anxious to find their cabins; all of them noticed to some degree the particular allure that Vee had. Some noticed with only a fraction of their attention, some admired, some envied.

Vee herself was oblivious both to her surroundings and her fellow human beings. Her ability to attract the attention – and the affections and desires, it had to be said – of those around her was an old story, and one that no longer interested her.

A stewardess was hovering at the end of her corridor. 'Mrs Hotspur? Cabin sixty-seven? It's on the left, I'll show you. Are you travelling with your maid?'

She was not. A smile, a *douceur*, and this ungainly but kindly-looking woman would be her slave for the voyage. A maid! That was the last person she needed on this journey.

It was a single cabin, spacious for a liner, with a dressing table and neatly fitted cupboards and drawers, an outside cabin, with a rectangular window looking out on to a secluded deck. No strollers or nosy-joes were allowed along this stretch of deck, this was a reserved area for the lucky occupants of cabins sixty-five to seventy-seven. Her luggage was already in the cabin, strapped and labelled with a large round H for Hotspur, First Class passenger to Bombay.

She sat down at the dressing table, and took off her scarlet hat, laying it carelessly down on the glass top. The stewardess, hovering in the doorway, came forward and took it. Vee smiled at her. 'What's your name?'

'Pigeon, madam.'

'Thank you, Pigeon.'

'Shall I unpack for you now, madam?'

'Later, if you don't mind.'

Still Pigeon lingered. 'We were expecting a Mr Howard to have this cabin.'

'Mine was a late booking, a cancellation.'

It had been a risk, leaving it so late, but the clerk at the shipping line had murmured confidentially that there was usually a cabin available at the last minute. It didn't trouble the company, because there was always a waiting list, especially for a vessel like the SS *Gloriana*, and at this time of year.

A smile, a note, and Mrs Hotspur moved to the top of the waiting list. What had happened to Mr Howard? she wondered for an idle moment. An elderly gentleman, struck down with apoplexy? A prosperous businessman with urgent business to attend to, that prevented him from sailing? A man of substance, undoubtedly, to travel in this type of cabin. A young man in disgrace, being sent out to the East by a distressed family? Did young men still get sent out to India to keep them out of harm's way? What if her parents had sent Hugh out to India? No, she wasn't going to think about Hugh. The list of people and things she didn't want to think about was alarmingly long. Back to Mr Howard. 'I dare say he was a family man, escaping to a new life,' she said out loud.

'I beg your pardon, madam?' said a startled Pigeon.

Vee laughed. ‘Oh, nothing. I was just thinking aloud.’ She got up, smoothing out the wrinkles from her slim-fitting skirt. ‘I’m going to look around, so you can see to my things while I’m gone. There’s a wine-coloured dress in that big suitcase, the one on its side. That’ll do for this evening.’

‘Best go and see the purser about your place in the dining room, madam,’ said Pigeon as she made a dive for the suitcase. ‘You’ll want to be at a good table at the second sitting.’

One look at Mrs Hotspur, a fashionable woman and a real lady, you could see that at a glance, thought Pigeon as she held out her hands for the keys, and the purser would be delighted for her to sit wherever she wanted. Which wouldn’t be at the captain’s table, if she, Pigeon were any judge of a passenger. Too dull for such a smart and lively lady. She was sure she’d seen her picture in the *Tatler* more than once. It pleased her, she much preferred upper-class passengers to some of the riff-raff you got on board these days.

TWO

Peter Messenger loved ocean liners with all the enthusiasm of his ten years. He loved catching the boat train and arriving at the docks where the great sleek white liners were moored with unbelievably huge cables stretching far up into the bows. He loved the oily briny smell and the gulls and the gloomy customs shed and the piles of trunks, all labelled and waiting to be trundled up into the ship, some to disappear into the hold, that mysterious place where the Not Wanted on Voyage went, or to appear in your cabin, waiting to be unpacked and then stowed away by the baggage steward until the end of the voyage, three weeks in the future.

The first time he'd been on a boat, he'd been overwhelmed by the size of it, by the notion that anything that big could sail without sinking. This time, he'd led the way up the gangway with jaunty steps, ahead of his stepmother, Lally, with that Miss Tyrell bringing up the rear.

Miss Tyrell was the one blot on his happiness. What had possessed his mother to bring her?

'Darling, I'm not bringing her. She's on her way out to India in any case, to look after her brother and her nephews and nieces. Her sister-in-law died recently, so sad, a tropical disease she said.'

Peter wished Miss Tyrell could be struck down by a tropical disease, right now, before they were even on board. 'She's a nanny.'

'Not any more, and she's coming to look after me as much as you. My clothes and so on. I shan't be taking a maid, your father says an English maid is always a nuisance in India, they don't adapt. Miss Tyrell will be very helpful, and you'll grow to like her.'

'I'm far too old for a nanny.'

'You're not too old to need some extra looking after, you've been so ill, darling. It'll make me feel much happier when I'm not there to know that Miss Tyrell has you under her eye.'

'Why won't you be there?'

'Well, there's a social life on board ship, you know that. Bridge and games, and then dancing and so on in the evenings. I don't want to have to worry about you all the time.'

'I can look after myself.'

'Of course you can. You're the man of the family while Daddy isn't here, but even so, we'll be glad of Miss Tyrell. I don't think she's a fusser. She seems very practical and down-to-earth.'

Lally kept her own doubts to herself. Miss Tyrell had, although she wouldn't say so to Peter, been wished on her. Claudia's sister-in-law had telephoned her.

'Mrs Messenger? My name is Monica Sake. We met once, in London, when you were staying with Claudia, but I don't expect you to remember me.'

'Oh, of course . . .'

'I hear from Agnes that you're going out to India.'

Lally's heart sank, as it always did when her mother-in-law was mentioned.

'On the *Gloriana*.'

'Yes.'

'Then I'd like you to take our old nanny with you.'

Visions of some decrepit family retainer sprang to Lally's astonished mind. 'Oh, no, really, I don't think –' And why was their old nanny going out to India in any case?

'We're desolated to lose her, she's the best nanny imaginable, been with the family since she was a nursery maid, she was my husband's nanny. And Claudia's of course, she was nanny to all of them.'

Monica Sake was Lucius's wife, that was it; she was the Countess of Sake. And the nanny Lady Sake wanted to foist on her had looked after Claudia, and Lucius, whom Claudia and Vee said was – what was the word they used? Bonkers.

Monica's voice was quacking away. 'We've tried to persuade her to stay. However, her brother's wife died a little while ago, some foreign illness, and Nanny Tyrell feels she owes it to her brother

to go and keep house for him. It isn't a particularly convenient time for us, she was due to go to Henrietta and take care of the baby. But I suppose she must be allowed to do what she thinks best.'

Lally began to warm towards this unknown Miss Tyrell.

'She wants to work her passage out. She's a thrifty soul. I heard you'd be taking your stepson – sickly, isn't he, and so not yet up to school? She'll be perfect, she can take the boy off your hands. You won't want to be bothered with a boy that age when you're on board. Or are you taking your own nanny?'

'Well, no.'

'Or your maid?'

'No.'

'She can do that for you as well. She's extremely competent, she'll be a great help to you. That's settled then.'

And it was, to Lally's dismay. She still hadn't told Henry that she was bringing Peter with her, and she hoped that news about the sickly boy didn't reach her husband through the letters that his officious family wrote to him whenever they had an idle moment. Fortunately, Henry rarely read private letters; she suspected the only ones he looked at with any attention were the ones from her, and she took care to keep them brief.

'Official correspondence is enough for any man,' he would say, opening a long screed from his mother, flicking through the pages and crumpling the letter into a ball before tossing it into the waste-paper basket.

This wasn't Miss Tyrell's first voyage. She'd crossed the Atlantic more than once, had accompanied the Veres out to Hong Kong – now, there was a strange country – and had spent six months in Bombay. She liked India. She liked the heat and the people and the energy, although the shocking poverty and the skinny animals made her uncomfortable.

She was pleased for the chance to work her passage rather than pay for it herself. For one thing, it meant she would be travelling first class, which was what she was accustomed to. If she'd had to pay, it would have been tourist class, and a shared cabin down in the bowels of the ship, and not at all the kind of company she was used to. She wasn't sure about this Mrs Messenger, though. Lady Sake had spoken

of her in the pitying tone her employers used about half-wits, cripples and social outsiders.

'Of course Harry is absolutely one of us, the Messengers go back for ever, but Lally, as they call her, I believe her name is actually Lavender, is not. She's American, well that's another world, don't you think? Headstrong, I'd say, by the look of her, but then you'd need strength of character to cope with Harry, I never knew a man with so much energy. Her father's a politician, from Chicago of all places. He was a doctor before he went into the Senate, Irish, of course, her name was Fitzpatrick. And she's Catholic. Will that bother you, Nanny?'

Having no religious convictions of her own, merely subscribing to the conventional Anglicanism of her employers, Miss Tyrell said no, in the tone of voice that made Lady Sake feel for a moment that she had committed a solecism by even mentioning religion.

'I do hope you don't suffer from seasickness, Miss Tyrell. It can be very bad in the Bay of Biscay at that time of year.'

Seasick? Not her. As the SS *Gloriana* sailed into what her crew called a dirty night, her stomach was perfectly in order. She gave Peter a dose of tonic, though, just in case there should be any inclination to collywobbles, as she called any kind of stomach upset, and it would help to keep him regular, so important when a child was convalescent. Peter was the nervy sort, you could see that, although that might be due to his having been so ill. And Mrs Messenger? Miss Tyrell felt sorry for her. She didn't care to see a young woman with those tired eyes and that look of haunted care to her. The child had been in danger, yes, but he was better now, and he was a stepson, not one of her own. Perhaps that was the problem. But here she was, on her way back to India, to be reunited with her husband. This was a time for happiness, not for fretting.

And not a good sailor by the look of her.

'Run along, Peter, Mummy's not feeling very well and isn't in the mood for your chatter.'

'I was only telling her about some people she knows on board, that's all.' It wasn't for Miss Tyrell to keep him away from his mother. Then he understood. 'She's seasick,' he said with scorn.