



Jane Lockyer Willis

Tea at the Opalaco

& other stories

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TEA AT THE OPALACO

'It was quite awful!' The slight curl of the lip, the half-smile of despair. 'I forgot he was coming, you see. I must have looked a complete clown with cream smeared all over my mouth. And Ralph catching me like that. Too awful!'

She waves a heavily ringed hand over the deep cushioned sofas, at the waiters: conciliatory, charming, serving tea at occasional tables set with white cloths and silver cutlery.

Sitting in the corner, an American couple. They nod, smile. I smile back - a nervous, wish I weren't here sort of smile.

'So, what did you do?' My eyes once more fixed on Jesse.

'I re-ordered.'

'For Ralph?'

'For both of us.'

'A full afternoon tea for the two of you? Are you serious?'

'I have just said so, Helen. In any case, teas at the Opalaco are decidedly paltry compared with other places. And how could Ralph enjoy his food with me sitting there watching every mouthful?'

She takes her napkin and wipes her mouth a lip at a time. 'It would have embarrassed him had I not done so. It was the least I could do.'

Latria homage to this man, thirty years her junior with whom she plans to share her worldly goods.

I glance again at the Americans - at the windows - fabric heavy, at the pale panelled walls, the chandeliers. The golds, the reds and the greens; trademarks of absolute luxury. Now back to Jessie - peevish, bored - waving her teaspoon at the waiter to attract attention.

'A bottle of *Dom Perignon*, please, and three glasses.'

I am about to ask why three glasses when I notice the waiter's eyes fix on the spoon.

'Have you finished with that, madam?'

She looks at him: half smiles, allows it to drop into the saucer.

'Yes, thank you.'

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