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Octopussy
by
Ian Fleming

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Octopussy

‘You know what?’ said Major Dexter Smythe to the octopus. ‘You’re going to have a real treat today if I can manage it.’

He had spoken aloud and his breath had steamed up the glass of his Pirelli mask. He put his feet down to the sand beside the nigger-head and stood up. The water reached to his armpits. He took off the mask and spat into it, rubbed the spit round the glass, rinsed it clean and pulled the rubber band of the mask back over his head. He bent down again.

The eye in the mottled brown sack was still watching him carefully from the hole in the coral, but now the tip of a single small tentacle wavered hesitatingly an inch or two out of the shadows and quested vaguely with its pink suckers uppermost. Dexter Smythe smiled with satisfaction. Given time, perhaps one more month on top of the two during which he had been chumming up with the octopus, and he would have tamed the darling. But he wasn’t going to have that month. Should he take a chance today and reach down and offer his hand, instead of the expected lump of raw meat on the end of his spear, to the tentacle – shake it

by the hand, so to speak? No, Pussy, he thought. I can't quite trust you yet. Almost certainly other tentacles would whip out of the hole and up his arm. He only needed to be dragged down less than two feet, the cork valve on his mask would automatically close and he would be suffocated inside it or, if he tore it off, drowned. He might get in a quick lucky jab with his spear, but it would take more than that to kill Pussy. No. Perhaps later in the day. It would be rather like playing Russian roulette, and at about the same five-to-one-odds. It might be a quick, a whimsical way out of his troubles! But not now. It would leave the interesting question unsolved. And he had promised that nice Professor Bengry at the Institute. Dexter Smythe swam leisurely off towards the reef, his eyes questing for one shape only, the squat sinister wedge of a scorpion fish, or, as Bengry would put it, *Scorpaena Plumieri*.

Major Dexter Smythe, OBE, Royal Marines (Retd), was the remains of a once brave and resourceful officer and of a handsome man who had made easy sexual conquests all his military life and particularly among the Wrens and Wracs and ATS who manned the communications and secretariat of the very special task force to which he had been attached at the end of his service career. Now he was fifty-four, slightly bald and his belly sagged in the Jantzen trunks. And he had had two coronary thromboses. His doctor,

Jimmy Greaves (who had been one of their high poker game at Queen's Club when Dexter Smythe had first come to Jamaica), had half-jocularly described the later one, only a month before, as 'the second warning'. But, in his well-chosen clothes, his varicose veins out of sight and his stomach flattened by a discreet support belt behind an immaculate cummerbund, he was still a fine figure of a man at a cocktail party or dinner on the North Shore, and it was a mystery to his friends and neighbours why, in defiance of the two ounces of whisky and ten cigarettes a day to which his doctor had rationed him, he persisted in smoking like a chimney and going to bed drunk, if amiably drunk, every night.

The truth of the matter was that Dexter Smythe had arrived at the frontier of the death-wish. The origins of this state of mind were many and not all that complex. He was irretrievably tied to Jamaica, and tropical sloth had gradually riddled him so that while outwardly he appeared a piece of fairly solid hardwood, under the varnished surface the termites of sloth, self-indulgence, guilt over an ancient sin and general disgust with himself had eroded his once hard core into dust. Since the death of Mary two years before, he had loved no one. He wasn't even sure that he had really loved her, but he knew that, every hour of the day, he missed her love of him and her gay, untidy, chiding and often irritating presence, and

though he ate their canapés and drank their martinis, he had nothing but contempt for the international riff-raff with whom he consorted on the North Shore. He could perhaps have made friends with the soldier elements, the gentleman-farmers inland, or the plantation owners on the coast, the professional men and the politicians, but that would mean regaining some serious purpose in life which his sloth, his spiritual accidie, prevented, and cutting down on the bottle, which he was definitely unwilling to do. So Major Smythe was bored, bored to death, and, but for one factor in his life, he would long ago have swallowed the bottle of barbiturates he had easily acquired from a local doctor. The lifeline that kept him clinging to the edge of the cliff was a tenuous one. Heavy drinkers veer towards an exaggeration of their basic temperaments, the classic four – Sanguine, Phlegmatic, Choleric and Melancholic. The Sanguine drunk goes gay to the point of hysteria and idiocy. The Phlegmatic sinks into a morass of sullen gloom. The Choleric is the fighting drunk of the cartoonists who spends much of his life in prison for smashing people and things, and the Melancholic succumbs to self-pity, mawkishness and tears. Major Smythe was a Melancholic who had slid into a drooling fantasy woven around the birds and insects and fish that inhabited the five acres of Wavelets (the name he had given his small villa is symptomatic), its beach and the coral reef beyond. The fish were his

particular favourites. He referred to them as 'people' and, since reef fish stick to their territories as closely as do most small birds, after two years he knew them all intimately, 'loved' them and believed that they loved him in return.

They certainly knew him, as the denizens of zoos know their keepers, because he was a daily and a regular provider, scraping off algae and stirring up the sand and rocks for the bottom-feeders, breaking up sea eggs and urchins for the small carnivores and bringing out scraps of offal for the larger ones, and now, as he swam slowly and heavily up and down the reef and through the channels that led out to deep water, his 'people' swarmed around him fearlessly and expectantly, darting at the tip of the three-pronged spear they knew only as a prodigal spoon, flirting right up to the glass of the Pirelli and even, in the case of the fearless, pugnacious demoiselles, nipping softly at his feet and legs.

Part of Major Smythe's mind took in all these brilliantly coloured little 'people', but today he had a job to do and while he greeted them in unspoken words – 'Morning, Beau Gregory' to the dark-blue demoiselle sprinkled with bright-blue spots, the 'jewel fish' that exactly resembles the starlit fashioning of a bottle of Worth's 'Vol de Nuit'; 'Sorry. Not today, sweetheart,' to a fluttering butterfly fish with false black 'eyes' on its tail and, 'You're too fat anyway, Blue Boy,' to an

indigo parrot fish that must have weighed a good ten pounds – his eyes were searching for only one of his ‘people’ – his only enemy on the reef, the only one he killed on sight, a scorpion fish.

Scorpion fish inhabit most of the southern waters of the world, and the ‘rascasse’ that is the foundation of *bonillabaisse* belongs to the family. The West Indian variety runs up to only about twelve inches long and perhaps a pound in weight. It is by far the ugliest fish in the sea, as if nature were giving warning. It is a mottled brownish grey with a heavy, wedge-shaped shaggy head. It has fleshy pendulous ‘eyebrows’ that droop over angry red eyes and a coloration and broken silhouette that are perfect camouflage on the reef. Though a small fish, its heavily toothed mouth is so wide that it can swallow whole most of the smaller reef fishes, but its supreme weapon lies in its erectile dorsal fins, the first few of which, acting on contact like hypodermic needles, are fed by poison glands containing enough tetrodotoxin to kill a man if they merely graze him in a vulnerable spot – in an artery, for instance, or over the heart or in the groin. They constitute the only real danger to the reef swimmer, far more dangerous than barracuda or shark, because, supremely confident in their camouflage and armoury, they flee before nothing except the very close approach of a foot or actual contact. Then they flit only a few yards on wide and bizarrely striped pectorals and settle

again watchfully either on the sand, where they look like a lump of overgrown coral, or amongst the rocks and seaweed, where they virtually disappear. And Major Smythe was determined to find one, spear it and give it to his octopus to see if it would take or spurn it, see if one of the ocean's great predators would recognize the deadliness of another, know of its poison. Would the octopus consume the belly and leave the spines? Would it eat the lot and, if so, would it suffer from the poison? These were the questions Bengry at the Institute wanted answered and today, since it was going to be the beginning of the end of Major Smythe's life at Wavelets and though it might mean the end of his darling Octopussy, Major Smythe had decided to find out the answers and leave one tiny memorial to his now futile life in some dusty corner of the Institute's marine biological files.

For, only a couple of hours earlier, Major Dexter Smythe's already dismal life had changed very much for the worse. So much for the worse that he would be lucky if, in a few weeks' time – time for the sending of cables from Government House to the Colonial Office, to be relayed to the Secret Service and thence to Scotland Yard and the Public Prosecutor, and for Major Smythe's transportation to London with a police escort – he got away with a sentence of imprisonment for life.

And all this because of a man called Bond,

Commander James Bond, who had turned up at ten thirty that morning in a taxi from Kingston.