

Arrival of the Snake-Woman

One

Everything about the snake-woman was magical from the start, even the way she arrived without our seeing, though we were all looking. I was looking especially hard for I knew more about the snake-woman than anyone except Cephas and SonSon and Moses, and I knew that Cephas and SonSon had drawn straws to see which one of them would be lucky enough to go to the Bay and bring her back to the district as his wife. And even though SonSon already had three children in the district with two different women, he was so obsessed with the idea of the snake-woman that he was willing to risk the wrath of these women, plus that of their mothers and grannies and sisters and cousins and fathers and brothers to have her. He was that taken with her. So was Cephas and so was I, though I was not old enough. But when Moses stuck out his fist with the two straws, I held my breath and wished hard that Cephas would draw the short one for

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then she would become my sister-in-law which was as good as being a wife or sister. SonSon winning her was almost as good though, for he was my cousin and his land was next to ours and so I would still be in close proximity to the snake-woman when she came. Waiting, I became distressed that SonSon who was lovable and kind, but lazy, was doing nothing about fixing up his house and yard for the time when he would bring the snake-woman back from the Bay.

The house had belonged to his mother who had died a few years back and SonSon since then had done nothing to stop the sagging of the floors or the leaking of the thatch or even to clear the weeds from around the yard. SonSon in fact spent little time there, being usually at the home of one or other of his baby-mothers especially Jestina who was the youngest and prettiest, or over at his ground in the cock-pits which he shared with Cephas and Moses when he came up after the cane-cutting season was over in the Bay.

Moses was the first of the young men among us to work in the cane; he had been doing it for three years now, earning enough money in the season to bring home and sweeten Geraldine's temper long enough so that by the time he left she would be pregnant with another of his children. He cared for them though, and was helping Geraldine to build up a good house on her father's land and one day would settle down with her just as all the other young men settled down eventually. Only Cephas, SonSon, and me knew that Moses had another family living with him during the time he spent on the sugar estate.

"Is so it does go, boys," Moses explained, "yu just cant help yusef. Woman down on plain like leggo beas. Yu can pick, choose, and refuse."

But he had settled down with Trinna, a sixteen-year-old whose family lived year-round in the Bay and who was his wife for four months of the year until he came home to Geraldine. Such deviousness made me nervous but Moses had always been more daring than the rest of us. And it was Moses who told us about the snake-woman.

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While Trinna was young and pretty and the place was full of other women for the asking, the kind of woman he really wished he had, Moses told us, was one of the snake-women but he couldn't have one now for he couldn't live with her in the Bay and he couldn't live with her in the district either.

"Snake-woman?" we all cried together, even I, who was supposed to be seen and not heard. In the cockpits snakes were very real to us then, hardly a day went by that we didn't see one; sometimes for sport we killed one and took it back to the district to frighten the women and children.

"That is how they does call them," Moses said, "from the way their body so neat and trim and they move their hip when they walk just like a snake and they dont wear no proper clothes just these thin little clothes-wrap, thinner than cobweb, yu can see every line of their body when they walk."

Snake-women. Whai! Now we were even more confused and began shouting at once.

"Is some woman they does call coolie-woman," Moses explained further, "they bring them all the way cross the sea from a place call India when slavey-days end and they come with their man to work the sugar-cane when black people say no, we naa work with the cane no-more for them little scrumps a pay. So the government bring in these people from a place call India fe work in the cane fe nutten. Them is the wutlessess set of people, though. Imagine come from so far to tek weh black man work. The man them is a wicked set of beast, man. Dont trifle with them. But the woman them! Whai!"

Cephas and SonSon didn't know where India was because they hadn't been to school but I was going to school and I knew all about India and the Ganges and the Heathens who lived there, for Parson Bedlow had us pray for the Heathens of the Indies whenever we got to that part of the world in geography and in church almost every Sunday. So the snake-woman was now even more frightening to me

than if she had been half-snake, half-woman which is what I had at first imagined, for all of us under Parson Bedlow's sway believed that to be a heathen was the very worst thing and now here was Moses talking about bringing to our district a heathen woman from the banks of the Ganges.

"These coolie-woman like nayga-man," he was saying, "for the coolie-man is the wussest man in the whole world. If they have a wife and she just say 'kemps!'—he quick fe chop off her head. So plenty of the coolie-woman fraid of the coolie-man and want the nayga-man working in the cane to take them back to the hill with them so they can get far away from the wicked coolie-man and furtherer away from the sea which they hate like pisen for is the sea that carry them away from India."

So Moses said. Moses told us so many stories we never knew what to believe. But when he insisted that he knew one of these coolie-women who was young and slender and pretty with snake-like hips who was dying to get away from the Bay (he never told us why) both Cephas and SonSon boldly volunteered to take her. For the few weeks that Moses had remaining at home the snake-woman was the only thing they talked about when they were in their tatu in the cockpits. I noticed that they never mentioned her if others were around and I, I was too frightened to mention to anyone that we were talking about a Heathen-woman from the Ganges as if she were human like us. And I was frightened by what Parson would say when they brought her into the district wearing, Moses told us, gold bangles all the way up her arms and her ankles, gold earrings in her ears, gold chains around her neck, gold rings on her fingers and—a sure sign of heathenness, a gold ring in her nose. Any thoughts I might have had that she was not a true Heathen vanished when I heard this, for Parson Bedlow had been very explicit about one thing and it was the Heathen's sinful lust for gold—"Their tinkling ornaments about their feet . . . The chains, and the bracelets . . . the ornaments of their legs . . . the rings, the nose

jewels”—exactly as it was in the Bible!

And yet, I didn't care. I was already half in love with the snake-woman, with her nose ring and tinkling ornaments and her outrageous, barbaric ways; I could hardly wait for Cephas and SonSon to go with Moses to the Bay and bring her back to the hills.

Although I never heard the men tell anyone of their plans, people must have suspected that something was about to happen, for there was an expectancy in the air and after the men finally left—and there was nothing unusual about his friends accompanying Moses back to the Bay—everyone seemed to be excitedly wondering when Cephas and SonSon would return. Part of their interest was because the two men were making purchases for everyone in the district, but in my own excitement and my guilt, I saw them waiting expectantly not for their pots and their cloth, their salt, machetes, and files, but for a snake-woman to arrive.

Every night in the yard next to SonSon's I could hardly fall asleep, night after night waiting for the squeak of the hampers on the donkeys that would signal that SonSon and Cephas and the snake-woman had arrived. At that sound, I planned to rush out for my first glimpse of her. But the nights wore on and they never came and I would fall asleep until dawn and my mother waking me. My first thoughts were always of the next yard but it was too dark to see anything and I had to be up to tie out the goat, fetch wood and water, then I had to come back to the house and sit at the table and have breakfast as my mother insisted, another irritating thing she had learnt from going to classes in housewifery which Parson's wife Miss Rita had organised.

The day was well advanced before I was able to shake my mother off and head for the bank of sweet-smelling khus-khus which separated our yard from the next—to be greeted with the disappointing spectacle of an empty house. But one morning my heart somersaulted for there, framed in the doorway, was the snake-woman herself. Who

else could it be? She was wearing her gold bangles and necklaces and earrings and a nose ring and a garment which seemed like bits and pieces of spiders' webs draped all about her from head to foot. Her head was covered so I didn't immediately see her hair which Moses said was black as a sink-hole and straight as Miss Rita's own though the snake-woman's skin was as dark as ours. And so it was. After the initial thrill though, I felt a little let down, the snake-woman was so small, her body as slender as a child's, and since she stood so still in the doorway I had no idea what her hips were like and if she moved like a snake when she walked or even like a Daughter of Zion. I wondered if Parson had had a premonition of the snake-woman's arrival for that Sunday he had preached fulsomely, warning the men against a specific temptation: "The daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet."

But what really held me even far away were her eyes, which were black like a dark night and took up half her face and when I finally came close and looked into these eyes, they seemed so far-away and sorrowful that I felt I was looking deep into the Ganges.

But before that moment came she vanished from the doorway. In a little while, I could tell from the smoke coming from the lean-to that she had got a fire going. How wonderful, I thought, the ashes have been cold in the fireplace for so long yet here's a snake-woman kindling a fire. Who could have imagined this happening in our district? But she soon reappeared from the kitchen with two large calabashes and began to look around the yard frantically. How like SonSon, I thought, not to have filled the barrel with water and to sleep late on such a morning. And though I was fearful and shy of the snake-woman, of what Parson, everyone in the district was going to say, and though my heart was pounding just as it did when Parson was about to take me up in my lessons, I couldn't stand the way that that frail figure stood lost in the early morning and without conscious

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thought I found myself moving from my hiding place behind the khus-khus and walking confidently towards her.

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