



Queen Rat

By Vanessa Woolf

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Francine marched past the grocers on Spa Road, past the station, towards the Thames.

It was spring, but you wouldn't know it by looking around. A stiff breeze blew the scent of the ships towards her. *Wheat* for the mills, pickled *herring*, *tea*... and over it all, the smell of humanity. The dirty clattering stomach of the British Empire.

As she went along Tooley Street, a man smiled at her. "Hullo Sweetheart!" His skin was pale with some kind of sickness. Lifting her head, she walked faster. Jane didn't know her letters, but she'd described the place perfectly. 'Black basement door on 'ibernia Wharf, a right low one. By the Jolly Caulkers, if you know it Mum.'

Carts lumbered by, piled with sacks, the steaming flanks of horses on either side of her. Men shouted. Everywhere you looked, there were signs of the most desperate poverty. Curtainless windows, cracked walls, mouldy pumps, barefoot children.

Hibernia Wharf had the mucky salty smell of the Thames. In the nearest doorway sat an old woman, her jacket a bundle of rags. Her face was grained with dust, her eyes were blank. Filthy feet with black toenails stuck out from the bottom of her skirt.

Francine slowed her pace. 'Oh please', she thought, 'let it not be *this* creature'. Then, a few yards along, she saw the door.

Ancient steps led down to an archway so low that even a child would have needed to stoop. She hurried past the woman gladly. Taking a deep breath, she put one foot on the first step. Suddenly she noticed how tight and heavy her clothes were. She'd bought a new hat last week, a stunning blue swoop which framed her face with feathers. Her hair began to prickle wildly underneath.

She ran down the last few steps and knocked on the door, which was loose. A morbid smell wafted up to meet her. The door swung outwards, making her step back. Behind it, the basement was dark and empty. For a moment, Francine thought the draught had blown it open. Then she saw a flicker by the floor. A rat as big as a casserole dish was sitting on the flags staring up at her.

A woman’s voice called out, “please come down.”

As her eyes accustomed to the dark, Francine saw the second staircase. Her hackles rose. The air was cold and stale.

She thought of her sop of a husband, and she was brave again. Anything was better than living in that tomb, Myrtle Villas. Light glimmered from the bottom of the stairs. She walked towards it. She’d expected candles, or at best, oil lamps. Certainly not gas like they had in Myrtle Villas. But she was wrong. The steps curved around a corner and opened out into a stone chamber. Pools of light mottled the walls- the work of electric bulbs.

“Do you like them?”

Francine started. The end of the room was in shadow. One side had a chaise lounge, and lying on the chaise was a woman. “Oh I beg your pardon!” she exclaimed.

“I adore my lamps.” the woman said. “They’re so wonderfully modern. Do you like modern things?”

“Yes.”

The woman got up. She was tall, and wore a flowing gown like an actress. She stepped into the light, revealing lots of naked shoulder and neck. A plait swung down her back in bohemian style. She held out her bare hand. Her skin was as white as blancmange, and smooth as steel. Francine took the hand.

The soft fingers were tipped with sharp fingernails.

Francine’s mind began to gallop. What an extraordinary scene. What an elegant woman! What a fine rug- so very Nouveau! Surely the woman had arranged the contrast on purpose. All this opulence was meant to startle and disconcert. Well it worked. Unconsciously, she frowned, and resolved not to part with a single farthing until AFTER the result...

Yes the result. She didn’t even know what result she wanted.

The woman still held her hand. “I’m Cynthia.”

“I’m Mrs. Fallwell...” she paused. “I mean... you may call me Francine.”

“What beautiful gloves, Francine. May I see one?”

To her astonishment, the woman- Cynthia- gently pulled the fingers free from her right glove. Her skin brushed against Francine’s wrist, and as it did, her whole body jolted. It was as if a strong magnetic force had been passed over them.

“Gracious they’re French! What fine leather. Who bought them for you?”

“Edwar-My husband.”

“I see.” Cynthia handed it back. “And what can I do for you, Mrs. Francine Fallwell?”

“I- well- I...” Suddenly she wanted to start crying herself. She frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Sit down.” Cynthia led her to the chaise, and sat next to her. “How did you know to find me?” “Jane- My maid.”

Cynthia glanced across, her eyes flashed like a mirror. They looked more like a cat’s eyes than those of a woman. “But the problem,” she said. “What is the problem?”

Francine took a deep breath. “My husband. He’s weak.”

Cynthia nodded. “It is the failing of men.”

“I mean- when I told him I didn’t love him- he started crying. Crying!”

Cynthia blinked.

“He’s simply unmanly. I should never have married him- but I was twenty six- all my friends were wed...”

She smiled sympathetically. “How easy and simple if he were to drown.”

Francine flinched. “No.” she said quietly. “That’s not fair. I just want my freedom again.” “There’s divorce...” she crossed her long legs.

“He’d never agree. And then there’s the shame. I’m no scarlet woman.”

“But you would live alone? You have money?” Cynthia soothed. “You deserve better, Francine. A woman of your character, your boldness. You are bold, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes.”

“So am I.” Cynthia looked at her sharply. “I can see past that bourgeois hat, Francine. Take it off for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to see your hair. Is it as long as mine?”

Her eyes flickered up and down, taking in the dress and shoes. Francine took off the new hat and unpinned her hair. It felt exposed lying across her back.

Cynthia smiled. “There’s just one more thing. The child.”

Francine shook her head. “No. No children.”

An eyebrow was raised. “You shared a bed?”

“Sometimes. In a fashion.”

“Fashion enough.” she touched her belly. “Under those stays,” she said. “A baby.”

Francine’s mouth fell open. “But-”

“Even the weakest man can manage that.”

Francine was silent. There had been changes recently- discomfort, sickness...

Yes. But surely was not a mother? “I’m not ready!” she said. “I can’t. I won’t. Not with Edward.”

“Now, now.” Cynthia patted her belly again. “We will have her. She will be a beautiful baby. Leave everything to me. You trust me?”

Francine paused. In the silence, you could hear the screeching of rats.

Cynthia started to laugh. “Come here.” She put an arm around Francine’s shoulders and pulled her close, leaning in to bite. Her breath smelled of rotten meat.

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Edward Fallwell was always full of human weakness. In 1902 he became a catholic priest. He cared for the poor and desperate for the rest of his life, sharing in their sorrows.

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Myrtle Villas was bombed in 1943.

Edward Fallwell died in 1950.

The docks have closed.

Hibernia Wharf was demolished. On the site is a very nice Café Nero.

But there are still plenty of rats.