

Poems from *Olive Senior's Gardening in the Tropics*, [www.dloc.com/olivesenior](http://www.dloc.com/olivesenior)

"All Clear": <http://www.dloc.com/l/AA00061851/>



"All Clear", text of the poem, annotations, and commentary are on (or to be added) the following pages and online: <http://www.dloc.com/AA00061851>

Audio: *forthcoming*

## **ALL CLEAR, 1928**

1. I was beating chaklata when someone
2. came shouting: A stranger man come!
  
3. I dropped everything. Same way
4. in my sampata, my house dress,
  
5. my every day head-tie, I rushed to
6. the square wondering: could it be?
  
7. How many gathered there so long
8. after our men disappeared into
  
9. the black water dividing us from
10. Puerto Limón, Havana, Colón
  
11. knew it was he? Not his sons lost
12. to a father fifteen years gone
  
13. There he was. Leather-booted and
14. spurred, sitting high on a fine horse
  
15. Never spoke a word. This Spanish
16. grandee sat on his horse and
  
17. looked at us. Looked through us.
18. Never could lump poverty. Used
  
19. to say: Esmie, when I strike it rich
20. in foreign what a fine gentleman
  
21. I'll be. And you with your clear
22. complexion will sit beside me
  
23. your hands stilled from work
24. like silk again (silk of my skin
  
25. my only dowry!) Ashamed now of my
26. darkened complexion, my work-blackened
  
27. hands, my greying hair, a loosening
28. of my pride (three sons with Mr. Hall
  
29. the carpenter who took me in) I
30. lowered my eyes and tried to hide.
  
31. I needn't have bothered. He looked
32. so troubled, as if he'd lost his way.
  
33. And suddenly, with nothing said,

34. he wheeled his horse and fled.

35. And ever after we talked of the  
36. wonder of it. The stranger never

37. spoke to anyone. Forgotten the young  
38. man who left home with a good white

39. shirt (stitched by these hands and  
40. a borrowed black serge suit (which

41. the owner never recovered), a heng-pon-me  
42. with four days of ration of roasted salt fish,

43. johnny cakes, dokunu and cerasee for tea  
44. to tide him over to the SS *Atrato*

45. lying in wait in Kingston Harbour.  
46. All, all the men went with our dreams

47. our hopes, our prayers. And he  
48. with a guinea from Mass Dolphy

49. the schoolteacher who said that boy  
50. had so much ambition he was bound

51. to go far. And he had. Gathering  
52. to himself worlds of experience

53. which allowed him to ride over us  
54. with a clear conscience. I never

55. told anyone. For I would have had  
56. to tell his children why he hadn't

57. sent money for bread, why his fine  
58. leather boots, why his saddle,

59. his grey mare, his three-piece suit,  
60. his bowler hat, his diamond tie-pin

61. his fine manicured hands, his barbered  
62. hair, his supercilious air. Never

63. was a more finely-cut gentlemen  
64. seen in our square. And I trembled

65. in anger and shame for the black limbo  
66. into which my life had fallen

67. all these years till my hands touched

68. the coarse heads of my young sons

69. recalling me to a snug house clad

70. with love. And I cried then, because

71. till he came back I had not known

72. my life was rooted. Years later

73. I learned that his gentlemanly air,

74. his polished boots, manners, and Ecuador

75. gold bought him a very young girl of very

76. good family in Kingston. And they wed.

77. He, with a clear conscience.

78. She, with a clear complexion.