

A Brazilian Affair : The Further Adventures of Lydia Bennet

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We have been swaying around on this dreadful vessel, vomiting and bewailing our lot for twenty one days since our departure in August in this year of grace 1817. As I write this in my journal Adelaide is muttering in the background, ‘This is a coffin ship.’

It is not quite that: my maid has a tendency to exaggeration. Our plight is best described as being imprisoned in a cell with its bare stone walls hidden with a velvet cover, but a cell, nevertheless, smelling badly and constantly moving. The captain of this prison keeps a brightly coloured parrot in similar circumstances.

Not that the cramped cabin I share with Adelaide boasts much in the way of velvet covers. My maid attempts to make it more comfortable with the linens and coverlets taken from our trunks, but after a few weeks at sea with little or no washing facilities the place has become somewhat foetid. And during the frequent bouts of bad weather the entire ship leaks. It is scarcely to be borne.

I have become salt-encrusted in soul and body. The sanitary arrangements at sea are not to be thought of, as far as possible. I am not much troubled by sea sickness but the entire Portuguese contingent is prone to vomit with every roll of the waves – surprising behaviour from such a stout, seafaring people. My royal employer, Dona Leopoldina, is not affected. ‘We must maintain self-control at all times,’ she admonishes us.

Thank heavens for my duties with the princess, varied by the distractions provided by Jerry Sartain’s presence on the ship. I often recall with mixed emotions our previous encounters in England.* My plight, otherwise, would be unendurable. There is much grinding of teeth when I recall that my situation results from an unfortunate liaison with

* *Who Needs Mr.Darcy?*

an Austrian Count; but I will not bore you, dear reader, with more details of my problems with the male sex. I bade farewell to the Count when we left Vienna at the beginning of June and it will be November before we see the shores of Brazil.

At dinner last night the captain announced, 'I expect this voyage to last for another seventy five days at least, due to the constant bad weather.' He waved a bottle of cognac at the parrot while cries of dismay rose from the ladies, accompanied by a severe lurching of the ship. Several wine decanters upended their contents in sympathy.

Our meals invariably end in this way, sometimes they start in the same mode. People rushed to assist the princess before her gown became soaked in red wine. She gave a brave smile and the captain's parrot – always present – uttered several loud profanities in English which, fortunately, the Portuguese ladies do not understand. Dona Leopoldina was pre-occupied with her dress. Jerry told me later that the parrot had done long service on a British man-of-war.

I am learning an entire new vocabulary from this bird. I release my pent-up feelings of rage and despair by repeating them softly to myself when I am alone in my cabin. Adelaide told me that she does the same thing but she already knew most of the words.

My highwayman, who must now be known as my sailor, or as Adelaide calls him, my jolly Jack Tar, meets me whenever he can. He pops out from behind a cable or a cannon, or emerges from a hatch below deck in an unnerving manner.

'You must not accost me in this way,' I reproved him. 'We may be seen by the chief lady-in-waiting and I shall be ruined. She hates me, you know.' Jerry was as unsympathetic as ever.

‘What can they do to you, my sweet? We are at sea. They can scarcely throw you overboard.’

Another intolerable thought occurred to me. ‘If they are displeased with me my contract might be terminated when we reach Brazil. I could be put on a ship back to England immediately.’ This prospect made me grow faint. It did not prevent him from seizing me around the waist in a sticky, salty embrace.

‘Be brave, mon vieux!’ he whispered incorrectly, before disappearing behind a water tank. Weak at the knees I made my way to Dona Leopoldina’s apartment.

You will notice that I did not refer to her living area as a cabin. Sixty cannon had been removed from the ship’s decks to make way for her splendid quarters. The lady was watching disconsolately as servants wedged packing cases around her grand piano to prevent it from rolling around due to the worsening weather. She gave me a listless smile.

‘Even the consolations of Bach and Mozart are denied me in this situation,’ she sighed. ‘A piano is of little use at present.’ Indeed, I would willingly have exchanged the piano for more salubrious sanitary arrangements, but I did not voice my opinion. ‘Shall we study my botanical drawings?’ the princess invited. She opened a gilt-embossed leather volume before frowning again. ‘Later we will have to visit the heads.’ I repressed a groan. The ‘heads’ consist of a platform fastened to the bow and suspended over the ship’s wake. This is where all the passengers queue to relieve themselves into the ocean. It is a frightful experience, although the area is cleared when the princess appears.

I stared at a sketch of the Great Bustard. ‘It is extinct,’ the princess remarked. I was not greatly diverted.

‘Shall I call some of the musicians, Your Highness?’ I asked in an attempt to lighten

the mood. The lady's eyes brightened and two fiddlers were soon summoned to play some lively airs during a blissful hour of calm weather. As rays of sunshine penetrated the roof window of the salon our spirits rose a little. Through a half opened door I caught a glimpse of the royal bedchamber, full of gold plated pitchers and bowls and red and white silk decorations.

Despite this grandeur, life at sea was taking its toll on the princess's appearance, as it was on her attendants. She is not as soignée as of late. Real finesse is impossible in a constantly swaying environment. Similarly she could not avoid the occasional wafts of stinking air that emerged from the hold where dozens of animals are kept – enough to fill a zoo. At times we heard other noises as the poor creatures were executed to provide our dinner.

After the musicians left we turned our attention to our Portuguese grammar books. Dona Leopoldina caught sight of one of the few novels I have been able to bring on board, *Glenarvon* by Lady Caroline Lamb. It is a thinly disguised account of dear Lord Byron and a great favourite of mine.

The princess frowned at the title and told me, I 'should not read any literature that excited passion and sensuality.' When I glanced at her coiffure she pulled at the stray tendrils and added that, 'we should also avoid long and scandalous toilettes.' It saddened me to see this young woman, so privileged yet so weighed down by expectations and duties, mouthing sentiments I would have expected to hear from my self-righteous brother-in-law, Mr. Darcy, or my sister Mary.

Scandalous books and toilettes are among the greatest pleasures life has to offer and both are in short supply on this ship. I murmured an agreement as the vessel started to roll

again. It was time for our visit to the heads followed by a break for refreshments. The ship has an evil mind of its own, always reserving its worst behaviour for these two events – or was it the elements at fault? My brain is becoming addled, probably by salt.

‘At least you are not surviving on hard tack and rum,’ Jerry grumbled when we met later that day. ‘You cannot imagine the conditions below deck while you are swanning around in the royal salon.’ Speechless, I pointed to my salt dried hair and limp muslins which Adelaide had attempted to revive with a little lavender water, unsuccessfully.

‘As you can see, conditions for ladies at sea are especially difficult,’ I protested. ‘You men do not object to a lack of soap and water, for the most part. I agree that your rations must be poor but you have rum to blot out everything when necessary.’ This argument did not prevail with him and ended with a promise from me to smuggle out a chicken leg or two.

‘It’s nothing but rum, sodomy and the lash for the crew,’ he muttered, as he disappeared below deck.

Why do our encounters always end in capitulation on my part? Our relationship is so problematic. How far am I from my dearest ambition – marriage to an amiable gentleman of means with a country estate and two matching footmen? I am unlikely to meet such a person in darkest Brazil. As for the Austrian noblemen on board, they are as stiff as boards and I have had enough of their ways.

Back in my cabin I started to write a letter to my dear friend, Selena. My news will be stale indeed after it travels for six months across the Atlantic. I dared not mention Jerry’s presence on board. All I could say was that Dona Leopoldina dreaded meeting her mother-in-law.

‘Who doesn’t?’ Adelaide remarked when I read this aloud.

Dinner that evening ended in chaos once more. At one point the ship keeled over completely onto one side. Chairs were upended, wine spilled and plates and glasses shattered. The Portuguese ladies descended into hysterics, the men shouted, the parrot cursed, and even the princess shed a tear. At least I would have something exciting to tell Selena. When the ship righted itself members of the crew arrived to carry us to our quarters. Jerry was not among them, I noted.