

Love and Loss in the Amazon

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To Luli

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Preface

There is much more fiction than facts in what follows. Nonetheless, many names may be similar, or even bear a remarkable resemblance to people, places and times. However, even what might ring a bell is likely to fall into intentional anachronisms.

I have chosen to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction because my overall intention was to heighten the personal drama of what would otherwise feel biographical. One can find biographies elsewhere, including in several countries' public archives, which historians have used extensively.

However, public archives only hold facts. Those can only hint at the richness of the individuals we might stumble upon when researching public libraries. Still, some hints can be enticing. When I was young and studying in the early 1980s at the British public archives on matters pertaining to England and Brazil, I realized this. That was when I first came across the decades of correspondence on a certain gentleman's claim against Brazil—correspondence that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

I have taken many liberties on this account. I may have glorified this gentleman, transforming him from an obscure failed scientist who spent decades complaining into a man who sought adventure where others would only see unrewarding risks. Whether this interpretation is accurate or not does not matter much to me now. My academic dissertation was on another matter altogether. I could not then take the time to write this story fully. Subsequently, my professional life prevented me from looking back on it for almost four decades.

Yet there was much of this gentleman's plight in my own cross-cultural life, and the story kept coming back to me, if under different angles. I lived it, in a sense. The divided loyalties, the impossible choices, the children one cannot claim, the loves one must abandon for the sake of respectability.

I have departed dramatically from the historical correspondence I found in those archives. Yet I hope I have captured something true—not factual truth, but emotional truth. The truth of what it means to be caught between worlds, between loves, between the person you want to be and the person circumstances force you to become.

I was fortunate enough to have led a relatively long life in several cultures myself, and to be able to look back and write this story where I now reside. I had much fun while at it, though also much sorrow, remembering things I had tried to forget, acknowledging failures I had tried to justify.

But in the end, this is not just the story of a man who lost his schooner and scientific equipment to a petty Brazilian official. It is the story of what we lose when we choose safety over passion, respectability over truth, the life we can defend over the life we want to live.

I wrote this for the daughter I did not meet until she was twenty-five years old. I wrote it so she might understand why her father made the choices he made, however cowardly, however painful. And I wrote it for anyone who has ever had to choose between two impossible alternatives, and has spent the rest of their life wondering if they chose wrong.

Perhaps we all make such choices. Perhaps we are all divided creatures, riding on two horses, trying to balance our public lives and our private truths. If this story speaks to that experience—if it helps anyone understand the human cost of the choices we make—then it will have served its purpose.

I hope you will enjoy reading this as much as I loved writing it, even though the writing brought tears as often as laughter, regret as often as joy.

Porto, January 2021 Edward Gibbon Swann (or the man who borrowed his name)

Chapter 1: I was thrown into prison at Breves, Amazon

"Scoundrels! Swine! Brutes!" I shouted at the sentinel from my cell, pointing with what I hoped was the imperial stroke of a Cambridge Fellow. "Only generations of ignorance could, in the middle of the 19th century, throw a gentleman into this cesspit and call it a cell!"

"You!" I shouted again, "Bring me water!"

"If he brings it, do not drink it." A voice spoke from the darkness, in a strong French accent.

"Thanks, but I'm thirsty! And impatient!" I replied.

"Those who drank from that water did not leave here alive," said the Frenchman.

"Thank you, if you will allow me," I said, attempting some civility in this wretched place. "I am Edward Gibbon Swann, naturalist, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. With whom do I have the honour to converse?"

"Avec Jean Godin des Odonais, cartographe et naturaliste, comme vous, je vous en prie."

"Thank you. I am jailed with a Frenchman! This begins to feel worse by the minute. I am beginning to believe that it was not a mistake. In the Amazon they enclose the enlightened, do they?"

"There are jungles partout, including where the orders that empower les Tartouffes des Tropiques comme commissaire Lacerda come from," said Monsieur des Odonais, pointing upwards with a finger.

"Do you know him, Delegado Lacerda?" I asked anxiously.

"In this cesspit, as you say, we are all his victims. But there are worse ones."

"Worse people?"

"Worse cesspits."

"Can there be a worse one than this?" I exclaimed incredulously.

"There are, there are, and they are reserved for blacks, Protestants, and those who do not have studies. Your assistant, for example, is in one of those."

"It's not possible!"

"Yes, it is, you must admit that there is a certain grace in discrimination," the Frenchman said, settling himself on the ground.

Resigned for the moment, I accommodated myself to Jean's side, and with the complicity of those who share misfortunes, I asked, "Jean, if you would allow me to call you by that name, how long have you been here?"

"Edward, I think it has been over four months, perhaps four years!"

"Edward, if you please."

"Comme tu veux."

"How do you know my name?"

"I heard it when they threw you in here, unconscious."

"What else did you hear?"

"That your page is in the second-class cesspit!"

"Smallpage? Charles Smallpage? Oh, poor Charles!"

"As you can see, they may be ignorant, but they have their method. Smallpage had no formal studies, and they sent him to the second-class pit."

"Virgolino too?"

"No, Virgolino walked; it seems he has a cousin who knows Lacerda, the dog."

"At least Virgolino is free! But for me? I do not have relatives anywhere near."

"On this river, it is most convenient to have cousins. Friends or girlfriends might even be better," said Jean, looking sideways at me as he pronounced 'girl'.

"Did you also hear something about Bonita?"

"Who would she be?"

"It does not matter. Did you hear of Bonita?"

"Something I heard, yes," Jean finished with a smile. "We all have a pretty one."

"It's not that!"

"Yes it is, and a Bonita will come in handy to get you in touch with the British consul."

"Why her?"

"Because it will not be Lacerda, the dog, who will notify the consul that you are here."

"But it is the Law to notify the consul!" I said, stunned.

"If there were Law we would not be here. Incidentally, why did they drop you here?"

"Because I refused to lower my flag."

"You wore it in your arse, did you?"

"How do you dare!" I said, rising indignantly.

"Calm down! It was a joke. Being an Englishman from Cambridge, I thought..."

"I am not in a mood for jokes!"

"Well, tell me more about the flag of contention."

"I have a schooner, Mary Anne."

"Mary Anne? Would it not be Bonita?"

"The flag is the subject."

"Fair enough, the flag, even if it interests me less. What happened to the flag?"

"Lacerda demanded that I lower her."

"Naturellement."

"I have the right to navigate with my flag!"

"Not if you do not have money," said Jean.

"What do you mean by that? I'm a scientist!"

"Me too, but that's a virtue, and the virtues fetch no price where the market reigns."

"Virtues are priceless anywhere."

"Here too, except that money can purchase them. Did Lacerda the dog ask you for money?"

"That's how it was."

"And you did not give it to him, that's why you're here."

"But how could I pay for a right that is mine, to navigate under my flag?"

"Here, such rights are bought."

"I refuse to pay for what is mine."

"I like it."

"What do you like?"

"That you have principles. It means that you will spend a good time keeping me company."

It was getting dark, and even the rainforest quiets down at this time of day. Jean and I would soon fall asleep. My last thought before darkness took me was of Bonita—whether she was safe, whether she knew what had happened to me, whether I would ever see her again.

Chapter 2: Bonding among fellow prisoners

"Good morning Jean," I said as I stretched my arms.

"Oui, oui, bonjour," answered the Frenchman in a perky mood.

"I am getting used to the lack of light in this cesspit. What is that hole in the middle of the floor?"

"That, Mr Swann, is an Aleph."

"And what would an Aleph be?"

"A point that contains all points."

"It looks more like what I would call a shithole."

"Only if you look at it with your arse!"

"And if I dared to look through it from close enough with an eye?"

"Looking into it you will see all timeless places in the world, from all angles."

"You mean to say this is what we get instead of a window, a hole to shit through?"

"There is no room for poetry in pragmatic Britain. Indeed, a shithole it is, and I would beg you to aim accurately because nobody comes to clean this place up."

"And the sound of water? Where does that come from?"

"Our cosy prison is built on stilts on the river. Very Roman, I would say: one shits through the Aleph, and the Parauáú river takes our messages away."

"The hole is rather small."

"Yes, it is. Otherwise, you may feel tempted to escape through it."

"I meant even too small to aim that well."

"Not to worry, during high tide, the river rises and washes all remnants away."

"I am glad we are only a few hours from high tide. Why are you here?" I asked.

"Because I fell in love."

"With Nature?"

"I was in love with Nature before I met Isabel, my Bonita."

"How could that put you in jail?"

"Jail was not in our plans, though the risks were high."

"Tell me more!"

"Here, the soup is being served. Grab yours!"

"Soup for breakfast?"

"Shut up and have it! Here you don't know when something else will come your way!"

"It looks terrible!"

"Funny you saying that!"

"What's funny?"

"Only Cambridge soup could be worse."

"Were you there?"

"No, but it was English soup, was it not?"

"Oh, shut up you frog eater!"

"I could do with a frog, now. Lacerda, the dog, only puts alligators in our soup here."

"Alligators? Here, have my soup."

"Have it, I told you. I need someone to last long enough to keep me company. Even if it is a snotty Englishman."

"Fair enough, though I hope to leave soon. Tell me about Isabel."

"I am a scientist, you know? I was on a French geodesic mission in Riobamba, Ecuador, when I met her, a force of Nature."

"So?"

"Forget it! You will never get it. Alone in this cesspit, and who do I get to speak to about Isabel, the love of my life?"

"An Englishman?"

"Precisely. You Brits are too pragmatic."

"Try me; I like poetry."

"I loved looking into Isabel's eyes and seeing in them the strength of earthquakes, volcanoes, torrential rains, hearing the songs of all the birds of her jungle! Yes, the moment I met her, I realized I could not go back to France without her."

"So what did you do?"

"I married her, and we had children, four of them. Two girls and two boys."

"In Riobamba?"

"Yes."

"You were mad!"

"Madly in love, yes!"

"So, why are you here?"

"I crossed the continent to French Guyana to get the paperwork right, so we could all live in France together."

"You mean to say you followed the trail of Francisco de Orellana along the Amazon from Ecuador to the Atlantic?"

"I did."

"You must have been madly in love. Did you get the papers?"

"I still am madly in love with her, and yes I did get the French papers alright, but not the Portuguese ones, not even five years after requesting them."

"So what did you do?"

"I decided to risk it and return to Riobamba by way of Pará, to avoid the heavily guarded mouth of the Amazon."

"So you took the Tocantins river route."

"Indeed, I did. When I was returning to Isabel at Riobamba, Lacerda, the dog, took me for a spy and threw me in here!"

"But this is not poetry; it is a tragedy!"

"It is life! And I cling to it as I can, drinking this soup too, hoping I will see Isabel and my children again!"

"Are you a spy?"

"Of course not! Not any more than you are!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because that is what was said of you as Lacerda's dogs threw you in here!"

"Holy cow! How am I going to get out of here now?"

"In a week or two they will allow visitors. Ask your Bonita to pass the word on to your consul."

"What if she doesn't come?"

"They always do, they are loyal beasts, these women are, not something a Brit would understand."

"There you go again! So, is Bonita my only way out?"

"I can see no other."

"What about Virgolino, who is also free?"

"He is in cahoots with Lacerda, the dog, remember?"

"But Virgolino works for me."

"He works for pay. Can you pay him?"

"Well, not now, but as soon as I get out, I will."

"Forget him; he has probably taken justice with his own hands."

"What do you mean?"

"You had a schooner, Mary Anne, remember?"

"I still do."

"Not if you are not in a position to exercise your rights over it."