

## DAVY KING

### THE WOMAN GULLIVER LEFT BEHIND

Allow me to introduce myself: Mary Burton, second daughter of Mr Edmund Burton hosier of Newgate Street. You probably know me better as the wife of one Lemuel Gulliver, ship's surgeon, later Captain, & eponymous author of the famous Travels. I don't expect you to have heard of me in my own right. My humble, unexciting life hardly merits the kind of autobiographical coverage afforded his. My dear husband, bless him, only ever made passing reference to me in his celebrated memoirs, I was a fleeting appearance, occasionally glimpsed, very much a bit-part, an unimportant extra in a cast of thousands. If you'd care to read between the lines of his narrative, you can no doubt guess what it must have been like for me.

At the outset, things looked promising. In the initial matrimonial euphoria, this blushing bride dared to suppose that we'd set course for an idyllic future. Life would be one long honeymoon cruise. I didn't give a thought about hidden reefs, storms & perils of the deep. Scylla & Charybdis weren't on my mind. Young & innocent, I swooned at the sound of those siren voices.

I felt flattered to be so much in demand. He needed me, 'to alter his condition', as he put it. He altered mine alright. I was a changed girl at the altar! Marriage was a package-deal. Little did I suspect what was in it for me. For better or for worse, he gained yours truly, a mother for his children, & a four hundred pound dowry into the bargain. Exactly what *I* got out of it, I've had cause to wonder. I can enumerate the items I acquired, the contents, material & other, of that specious wedding-box with

which subsequently I was so discontent. You know, the usual sort of things: a house, married respectability, a breadwinner whom I seldom saw, &, to be honest, more than a little heartache. Yes, all that & more. And O yes, I *loved* him — once upon a time.

As it turned out, we didn't live happily ever after. While Gulliver travelled, I stayed at home — in gullible travails, if you'll excuse the pun. I was left literally holding the baby. It was my lot to explain to the kiddies why their daddy never came home in the evenings. Perhaps he saw himself as a bold explorer, returning with treasure & traveller's tales, but to me, at times, he seemed reckless, irresponsible, neglecting his duty as husband & father. Gulliver gallivanted round the globe, while I was house-bound looking after the children.

His intentions were good, I know: he wanted to provide for the family by going to sea. I can understand why he ventured forth. We agreed it was for the best. His practice was failing through lack of patients & an idealistic over-scrupulosity which prevented him from stooping to the unethical conduct of his more successful professional colleagues. So much for high standards. In the circumstances, there was no apparent alternative. He had to make a living somehow. Having already been at sea before he met me, it seemed the obvious solution to his problems.

Well, during the next six years he went on a number of uneventful voyages. I got my first taste of what it was like to be a seafarer's wife. But then he returned & fully intended to remain with me & his family. We were living in Wapping at that time, not exactly an exotic location, nonetheless it was a home together. I should have counted my blessings while I could. Those halcyon days were too soon over. Harsh reality disrupted my naive fairy tale of the happy couple making good. More often than not the world

refuses to conform to our wishes, however earnestly we hope. After three years' trying & failing, business still didn't improve. So, against my will, my husband, press-ganged by economic forces, had to hazard a further nautical expedition. That's when his troubles, & mine, began . . .

The mishaps he encountered, his incredible adventures, previously described at length, from his subjective point of view, surely need no reiteration. I'd just like to make some observations on how all that affected me.

Lilliput was wonderful, marvellous, you should have seen it, he told me. But I don't know what he found so fascinating about that miniature world. If he'd taken time to play with the children & their toys, he would have had equal amusement at home. He could have built a little town of doll's-houses, inhabited by puppets & toy-soldiers. The children would have loved it. Maybe I'm being unfair to him. It's not as if it was his fault. It's just that he could have given more consideration to my predicament.

Anyway, after just over nine months (a pregnant pause for thought, you could call it), he was back. By that time, our son, Johnny, (who I hope & pray remains a landlubber) was at Grammar School & Betty, our daughter, (since married like me, with children of her own, God help her), devoted herself to the ladylike pursuit of needlework. What a cosy little family we were!

Within two months, the novelty of normal people & everyday events wore off. His restlessness got the better of him. He hadn't learnt his lesson yet. To have been shipwrecked once might have taken the wind out of the sails of any ordinary mortal but Mr Gulliver was made of sterner stuff. Having ensured that I was well-provided for — with £1500 & a good house at Redriff — the intrepid mariner embarked once again, to 'improve his fortunes'. It was a

tearful parting. I begged him not to go. If only he had listened.

When he went, it was like a painful amputation to me, a vital part of my being was cut' off, but the feeling, the ghost of the limb, as it were, remained. And the wound festered. A ship's surgeon should have known about that.

Though he was out of my sight, he was never far from my mind. He thought of me too, or so he said. There must have been times, when tired & alone in an unknown country, fearful for his life, he remembered regretfully the home & family he had left behind. For instance, on the occasion he discovered himself among those giants, he (to use his own words) 'bemoaned' his 'desolate widow & fatherless children' —self-pity mingled with compassion at my plight. A touchingly accurate picture. I did feel 'desolate', deserted. He dreamt of us, as I dreamt of him & that distorted land of dreams where we met could not have been stranger than the extraordinary situation he found himself in.

Late at night, as I lay in bed, over & over, I'd say *soto voce*, so as not to wake the children: 'Lemuel, Lemmy, my Lem ... O when will I see you again, dear love?' Often I cried myself to sleep. Suchlike sentimental invocations & nocturnal tears were the only outlets for emotions I had to bottle up by day. For the sake of the children, I put a brave face on inner grief. I made myself busily efficient, & overindulged them, to disguise the hiatus his absence produced. I was lucky having such dutiful offspring. They took it well, with the adaptability of youth. Or so I like to tell myself. As close as I was to them, I can't be certain they didn't suffer, inwardly. We're apt to console ourselves with cherished illusions & dismiss the subtleties of sensitivity (especially in others) with a ready-made phrase or two.

Long years passed between appearances, then, suddenly

without warning, he would turn up, expecting a meal ready. The prodigal husband returned & of course, being a forbearing Christian wife, I made him welcome, more fool I (in retrospect). Then, rested, refreshed, he would be off again on his urgent Travels.

I could never hold him long, but, to give him his due, he always came home to me. However wide he ranged, I was the centre of his circle, his fixed point of reference, his trusty sheet-anchor. But such metaphors, though complimentary, hardly make one feel any better. I could just as well say that I was little more to him than a port of call — here he could lie at anchor for a while waiting for a favourable wind or tide.

Time passed swiftly when he was here, but as soon as he'd gone the clocks seemed less brisk in their daily rounds. Never-ending housework & melancholy longing filled the interim till his return. I'd weigh his time with me against his time away & find the former wanting. *I* was wanting — wanting more of his precious time.

Needless to say, on the rare occasions when we were together, we had a lot to catch up on, though the dull mundanities of my quotidian existence could never match his escapades. The children loved this stranger, their father, who told them exciting stories of the world beyond their ken.

I won't bore you with the minute detailing of my action-packed routine. I lived in quiet domestic seclusion — a widowed mother — apart from interludes of ecstatic reunion with my absentee husband. It was a struggle, I can tell you, raising the children single-handedly & never knowing if I would see their father, my husband again.

I was perpetually waiting: waiting on the children & waiting

for him. No sooner had he come than he was gone again. I'm repeating myself, I know, but that was what my life was like, a repetition of empty days of waiting that seemed to blur into one another like his voyages.

But where was I? Where was he? Lacking the surgical skills of my husband, I can only hack at memory, leaving a formless mass of bloody feelings, concealing the narrative skeleton, the bare bones of date, place & incident. Lemuel could wield a scalpel with more precision. His cutting wit probed & revealed. I knew only instinctively the tissue was diseased. Can you expect a simple housewife to perform a post-mortem on love?

Let me see, when did he first show signs of the strange behaviour that later made him a stranger to me? It must have been on his return from the voyage to Brobdingnag. I'll never forget it. He'd been away for two long years. One day, out of the blue, he appeared. Delighted to see him, I ran to his embrace. He bent down & hugged my knees. At first I thought he was overcome with emotion or perhaps just clowning, but when our daughter kneeled in front of him, he stared upwards unaware of her & started talking wildly about how we had starved ourselves & were shrunk to nothing. In fact, he acted so oddly that I couldn't help thinking he had taken leave of his senses.

Talk about tall tales — the one about the Giants topped them all. I said, 'Lemuel, dear, don't exaggerate'. I hadn't realised he felt so inferior. However, when he got round to explaining his experiences, his unorthodox responses became understandable &, giving him the benefit of the doubt, I was prepared to believe his sanity intact. But there was no doubt that his ordeals had had a marked effect on him, &, as far as I was concerned, he had changed for the worse.

I made it clear to him that enough was enough & he should never go to sea again. Some hope. He hadn't been at home for more than ten days, when a captain he had once served under came to see him. I construed it as a casual visit. I might have known better. The captain returned again & again & finally the cat was out of the bag. Would Mr Gulliver care to be surgeon on a ship bound for the East Indies? Despite his former misfortunes, Lemuel still had that old wanderlust. I took some persuading, but agreed in the end because, frankly, we needed the money. I had to think of the children's welfare before my own. The captain had made an offer we couldn't afford to refuse. Financial necessity compels like Fate.

So, he was off another last time & I didn't see him for five & a half years. Describing his adventures during that period, he refers to the ladies of Laputa: The wives & daughters lament their confinement to the island . . . they long to see the world, & take the diversions of the metropolis'. Did it occur to him that I might feel the same?

From my father's house to Wapping, from there to Redriff: this was my protracted itinerary. I've come a long way over the years, not as far as him of course. Travel broadens the mind, they say. Would it have been surprising if I were narrow-minded, confined, as I was, in domesticity? No, I went on journeys, too: to market. Someone had to do the shopping.

This sad old story must seem tedious. It was tedious for me too, as the days, the months, the years stretched ahead & behind. I felt stranded: in the seeming everlastingness of time &, within that, the enclosed world of the house. Forlorn castaway on a desert island. There were no passing ships to come to my rescue.

He couldn't have blamed me if I'd taken a lover for comfort in

my loneliness. I'd have been no worse than those inconstant ladies of Laputa that he wrote about. Fortunately, the children were my lifeline to love. How could I cuckold their heroic father? Without them, who knows, I may have been tempted. There would have been little risk of my adultery being discovered, but gull my Gulliver I couldn't, &, I think, in his way, he stayed faithful to me.

The imputation of infidelity with the Lilliputian Treasurer's wife was, of course, as he averred, an unfounded slander. It would have been physically impossible to consummate a liaison with a six inch midget. As for the erotic carryings-on of those Brobdingnagian hussies, dishonourable so-called Maids of Honour (putting him astride their outsized nipples & other unspecified unseemly tricks'), he himself protested to be 'much displeased' & I believe him. Mind you, he seemed more upset at being parted from that Glumdalbitch, or whatever her name was, than from his own wife. Though bigger than him, she was a mere child. I don't think my Lemuel was that way inclined. Then, there was that time when he was almost raped by a female Yahoo, but, to his credit, he didn't acquiesce in her blatant advances. No, I couldn't fault him on that score. If anything, his travels made him less keen on sex, (so much so that since his final return he refuses to touch me).

'Mary', I told myself, 'Mary, you're a martyr to that man. Why do you put up with his waywardness?' We get used to the unacceptable, learn to live with what is so obviously not right. What alternative did I have? There I was, stuck with a family to bring up as best I could. I thought maybe, one day, he would mend his ways & make recompense for all the lonely nights I had endured. Imagine how I felt, left to care for growing children, all those years, worried sick about what had happened to him. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, within limits. In time, I grew



resigned. I might never see him again. And when I did, it was a relief.

His sense of 'prudence & justice', as he charmingly put it, brought him back, back to ruddy Redriff after five & a half years away & yes, as he put it so tactfully, he found us 'in good health'. *He* looked well, as well! If only he had known what I'd gone through. Pray, surgeon, staunch my wounded pride & joy. Our once strong love grows weak through loss of that life's blood which only tender care can save! I seek to hide behind rhetorical defensive irony. My raw nerves are vulnerable, exposed.

This time, he stayed for all of five months, that is one month home for every year he had been away on his last voyage — he was generous with his time! I shouldn't complain. It was a happy interval for us all. I wish it could have lasted. I should have known by then it was too much to hope for. Just when I needed him most, (I was pregnant again), he accepted an invitation to be a ship's captain. Naturally I was pleased for him — such a promotion was an undeniable honour — but, all the same, I felt selfishly sorry for myself.

I nearly lost him for good, & considering what was about to happen, I might have been better off if he'd never returned. He really wanted to stay with the Houyhnhnms for the rest of his life, & only left them because he was asked to. Even after that, I doubt if he'd have shown up unless that Portuguese Captain, who came conveniently to the rescue, had persuaded him (he needed persuading!) that he should go back to his dear wife & family 'as a point of honour & conscience'. That was considerate of a foreigner, who had no wife himself.

After five years' absence, I really thought he'd had it this time. All those close shaves. Hadn't he exhausted his nine lives by now?

Imagine my astonishment therefore, when one afternoon he turned up large as life. However, in a sense he *had* died, for he was no longer the old Lemuel I knew. When he came into the house & I hugged & kissed him, he fainted. It took nearly an hour to bring him round. He treated us coldly, as if he were disgusted at our presence.

It was a nightmare. I tried to pretend it wasn't happening, humoured him, but his bizarre behaviour continued. Cantered about the house & whinnied he did! It may sound funny to you, but it was no joke for me. For a whole year, he wouldn't allow me or the children anywhere near him. Even now, five years after his return, we aren't permitted to hold his hand or even so much as touch his food. He acts as if I'm unhygienic. Stuffs his nose with rue, lavender or tobacco leaves. Says I smell. He's bought horses & spends hours every day talking to them. Thinks more of them than he does of me. A while ago, he started letting me sit at dinner with him, but at a safe distance at the far end of a long table — passing the salt assumes the dimensions of an heroic endeavour, stretching both arm & patience to the utmost. Salt from the briny to rub in my wounds! Oh but we're getting quite close. Why, on a clear day, with the aid of a telescope, I can just make out his craggy features as he yells across the room at me! I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Recently, he's been almost sociable. He even condescends to engage in conversation, though he cuts me short peremptorily. When he courted me, my voice was music to his ears, & what he wouldn't have done then for one caress! I suppose there's many the wife who's discovered that familiarity breeds contempt. In my case, it was less familiarity, & more contempt.

Is the man mad? Did the equatorial sun turn his brain? Were it not for the souvenirs he brought back & the complete conviction

with which he recounted his improbable adventures, I might have concluded he had simply been deluded by vivid dreams resulting from the ingestion of over-rich foreign food or perhaps he had been hoodwinked by hallucinations induced by inscrutable Far Eastern opiates. Whatever really happened, does that excuse his attitude towards me?

He's given *his* side of the story. It's bound to be a bestseller & I can't help feeling a certain sense of pride in his achievement. After all, I suppose you'll say it befits a woman to live vicariously for her man. But am I totally unjustified in resenting his freedom of movement in comparison to my own imprisonment (that's what it seemed like to me). He'll become a famous man, on the strength of deserting me & the kids, while I, the abandoned wife, who faced my responsibilities without complaint (till now), get hardly a mention & no praise. He's done well for himself, I'll give him that: mixing with Emperors & Kings. My neighbours weren't so high & mighty. But preferring the company of horses to his own flesh & blood?! I call that callous.

Various disparaging remarks in his book make me suspect he had a poor opinion of women in general. He talks about female 'lewdness, coquetry, censure & scandal' & the caprices of womankind'. I would have hoped that he thought better of his own wife but he seems to have had it in for me, in particular. Presumably in his estimation, I am one of the 'ranting, lewd, expensive wives' he refers to. After all I've done for him, he has the effrontery to call me 'an odious animal'. That's gratitude for you! I read what he, the once proud father, wrote about our lovemaking & his own children.

Listen to this, from the horse's mouth, so to speak: 'When I began to consider that by copulating with one of the Yahoo species, I had

become a parent of more, it struck me with the utmost shame, confusion & horror.' Well, his evaluation of our tender togetherness & the very issue of his loins, my womb, strikes me with greater shame, confusion & horror. How can I forgive him for those words &, worse than words, the way he treated me? And if I could forgive, forgetting would be harder. There's no revenge that's sweet. Retaliation & recrimination taste like gall. I'll get over it alright, sooner or later. I'm not going to die of heartbreak — it's just our love that's broken by that heartless last straw.

Excuse my going-on like this, but he's had his say & it's about time I got a word in edgeways. I have to set the record straight. He considers himself a 'perfectly blameless' author, who hasn't given the least offence' (he has to me). Well, let that saint, so fond of finding fault in others, take a critical look at himself for a change. It's a pity that what I've been able to put into words is clumsily-expressed & deficient in the satirical perspicacity that he displays. However, this commentary is not so much a way of getting my own back as an attempt to come to terms with my experience, to sort matters out in my own mind.

If any of this ever gets further than my locked drawer, perhaps my little excursion into the world of letters will serve as a warning to young ladies with illusions about wedded bliss. Heed well this cautionary tale by one who speaks from bitter experience. The moral, I suppose, must be that commonplace advice: 'Never marry a sailor', or is it 'a doctor'? It makes no odds, he was a bit of both & worse than either.

If nothing else, I want the Reader to understand why, after so long hoping against hope he would settle down, finally *I* have to leave.

So goodbye Mrs Gulliver! Godspeed Mary Burton! This female

Yahoo intends to do some travelling of her own. Let Lemuel go for a Burton! Once I couldn't get enough of him, but now I've had too much. Gulliver has gone too far ...

*Davy King* (1978)