

Captain May – July 12, 2003 – letter:

to Penelope Brook, World Bank

We met a Liberty Fund conference in Colonial Williamsburg in January 1998, and it was rather cold for my Texas blood. You remember, the one John Danford held on Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* and Machiavelli's *Il Principe*.

You were intelligent, that was clear, and we laughed at the foolishness of all the professors, who thought they were smart just because they were established in academe. They reminded you of your estranged professor husband, and you were none too pleased with it. "They're all full of shit," you told me. "I can fool Taylor or any of the rest of them any time I want to, and he's on the way to winning a Nobel Prize! The more intelligent people are, the easier they are to fool!"

I told you I had discovered the same things in dealing with people of high intellect, particularly if they also had high self confidence. You looked at me with that candid look of yours and asked me how I had discovered this. I told you that I had grown up with real people in the poorer side of town, had risen by dint of talent, but saw little difference between an ambassador and a rip-off artist.

You said you had discovered the same things by handling international affairs for the World Bank, and by being cheated on by your husband. We laughed at the differences and smiled at each other. After a while we stopped laughing, but we kept smiling. I guess it was at that moment that I knew you wanted me to seduce you. We walked in silence a while, then stopped to sit on the edge of a frozen wood. I gave you my coat to sit on and pretended not to be cold; you knew that I was, though, and you took my hand. I told you I was a Texas captain with a silly grudge against Yankees; you told me you were a New Zealand Rhodes Scholar with a silly grudge against the English. We laughed again, and I proposed an alliance of renegades. You offered your hand for a kiss, and the pact was made.

I wanted to impress you before we had to rejoin the drudges that evening for weak wine and weary wit, so I recited poetry I'd written twenty years before, but hadn't recited in years for want of a worthy audience. You smiled, sighed and wept, depending on which poem you heard.

Afterwards you spoke of painting soft watercolors of cool, misty islands and listening to Brahms' piano music, and of the sadness of the betrayal. You told me about Neruda, recited some of his lines, I forget whether in his Spanish or our English. To pull you from your sorrows I regaled you with Lord Byron, who you teased was noted for consoling the unhappy wives of the elite. You quoted his remark that he "liked to go roving in the gardens of the aristocracy," then stared at

me, a day lily facing the rising sun. I asked if you wanted to go to the garden and you laughed at my brazenness, then flirted that there were no flowers because it was winter, but that the folk art museum had its own blooms. Inside the museum I showed you how a cavalryman treated an adventurous lady. You called me a Rasputin afterwards and we laughed again. The rest of the afternoon you flushed pink and you were beautiful.

Remember the dinner, my dear P? I provoked Danford into a sucker's argument by saying that it was the Soviets, not the U.S., that did most of the work in WWII. I played with him for a while, then let him escape to discuss some vague topic, about which he had vague ideas, with some vague person. The cat-and-mouse was what you wanted, wasn't it? You wanted to see an intellectual smacked around a little bit, humbled. You smiled the whole while, and we rubbed legs beneath the table. I didn't mind a bit, because I knew *you* didn't mind a bit; you had already decided that the sweetest revenge against your husband was sitting in reach.

After dinner Danford sang (he's a good tenor, I've got to say) and you looked coy as I fought it out with a chess player. After the game, I came back to you. All the other singers had sung their songs, so I proposed a poem as my contribution to culture. I looked right at you across dozens of eyes, and we fixed each other throughout, and I recited the following:

*Kings and queens lie buried in the sand,
And what have they, who ruled the world, become?
Time has withered fierce Achilles' hand;
Hector's lips, which roused all Troy, are dumb;
Leonidas' sword is turned to rust;
Egypt's Cleopatra lies alone –
Every line of beauty now mere dust,
Nestled in a tomb of heartless stone.
Millennia will cruelly bring their blight,
but let them spare you love, and know your grace:
your eyes, your lips, your laughter in the night –
they must not fade, then vanish with no trace.
I've put them in a bottle, made of rhyme,
and cast it on the misty sea of time.*

The poem got the genial applause it deserved from a liquored up crowd, and you blushed crimson with the pleasure of knowing that every academic there would whisper about the evening behind your husband's back. Ever wonder why I chose that sonnet, when I had a quiver full of others I could have recited just as easily? Because it's an acrostic, Penelope. The first eight lines spell the name of Kathleen,

a worthy muse, a lovely woman and a patroness. She stood by me in battle. She's the kind of woman I can't altogether forget, even when I'm dancing the dance of Eros with a new woman. Ain't that modern love, darlin'? You tease and please the new one with all the tricks you learned from the earlier ones.

We didn't even say goodnight to the Liberty Fund and all its deep-wits when we walked out of dinner into the winter night, cutting across paved ways, forging a trail through the virgin snow to the back door of your dwelling. It didn't end in Williamsburg, though. It only began in Williamsburg. We indulged in a passionate love affair across the country. We wept to see each other's scars, and thrilled to see each other's souls. You divorced your husband; you wanted me to divorce my second wife. You got tired of waiting and I took too long. You broke it off. I always held myself to blame and thought myself unworthy.

This morning you have changed my feelings. Throughout the whole time I knew and loved you there was one thing you expressed again and again as your ideal: a rational, cooperative world, free from militaristic madness. You spoke eloquently of this as your gospel, and of yourself as its minister, and of the World Bank and the one true Church of Progress. It was so, well, Oxfordian, that I felt a provincial's awe at your magnificent clarity.

That's why I called you for the first time since I got married again to tell you a few things that I knew would upset you as much as they had upset me: The Battle of Baghdad; the cover-up; Private Jessica; the Imperial push by the Bush Team; the assassination of media; the drive to world war... You listened to it all, agreed with it all, then coolly asked what I wanted you to do. I told you that I wanted you to forward my email to international contacts. At first your Anglo-aloofness crashed. "I can't do that! I'll get killed if I do that! You can't ask me to do that!" You shouted.

Then you showed the quality of your Rhodes Scholar mind by seizing control of yourself and saying with iron finality: "Eric, I can't do that because it would be *unethical* to do that." At that moment you ceased to be anything worthy to have been loved. You became inhuman, for it is inhuman, my no longer dear Penelope, to say that it is *unethical* to stop a world war.

I didn't mince words with you then. I told you I would put you in a book for being an intellectual whore, because that's what you were, are, and will be remembered for after you die.

You didn't deny a word of it; I'll give you credit for facing stony truth in the face. You just told me you would sue. I gave you my wife's name and number, explained that she was my lawyer. I said that there was no defense for the truth, then I hung up.

It's only occurred to me since then that I still have all our email correspondence on disks. Tell you what, if I get through this mess alive, you go ahead and sue. I've been riding the bull at the rodeo called war and I could enjoy sitting back and watching a circus called court. I think you'll be blushing again, darlin', and this time you won't seem beautiful.

Captain May