A Woman of Independent Means

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Mrs. Susanna Lambert was a woman of independent means when she married Captain Gomer Lambert, and that was a rare thing at the time. She owned a trading vessel. It was a three masted barque “Madrigal”, a fine ship capable of sailing at speed with full holds. She owned it by virtue of the hard work and little bit of good fortune on the part of her late father, who won it by salvage. The boat had been abandoned as sinking but had remained afloat and was repaired at sea and returned to port.

Gomer Lambert was reputed to be the most competent sailor out of the port – a man who could turn around long voyages in good time, without risk to the boat under his feet. He was also a shipwright in some respects and he mad proper but inexpensive improvements to “Madrigal” and operated his wife’s vessel at a profit. It was in large measure, a business-based marriage.

“But she is my second wife,” Gomer would say. “For my first wife is the sea.”

He would also say that he would never have married Susanna for her looks. She was a plain woman where he was a handsome man, but in the times that they had ashore there was intimacy. Susanna gave birth to their child, Arabella. Despite the healthy maritime climate afforded by Charleston, the child was always sickly.

Susanna was independent in her nature too. She was not one for servants. But in the absence of a man about the house she took into her home young Louis, at the time at the age of 14 he was more than a year younger than her daughter. He had turned up on the quayside looking for work aboard “Madrigal”, but her husband had suggested that he be employed ashore first.

“You will need to put some meat on those bones before you take on a life before the mast,” said Gomer

The boy was grateful for any employment. Susanna persuaded her husband to take him into the household to help in Gomer’s absence. She had work for him.

“You not much, but you will do,” she said sternly, but there was a warmth in her eyes that may the boy readily agree.

That voyage took longer than expected. Susanna took to teaching the child alongside her own daughter in both words and numbers, and also history and literature. The boy was a late starter in all of this, but quickly caught up with his adopted sister. The two youngsters got on well, and found that they had much in common. But whereas she was confined to the house, partly by custom and partly by health, he had some freedom to explore the town he now called home.

Louis had but one suit of clothes for outings and otherwise wore garments fashioned from those cast off from Arabella. But that was of no concern to the boy, within the household. So long as he could go outside in his own clothes to wear shirts fashion from blouses or old bloomers for pants was of no concern, even when Arabella teased him by calling him “Louise”.

“You could be so pretty with that hair of yours,” she said. In the custom for young sailors at the time the boy had grown his hair and kept it in an oiled braid.

Louis was a curious and resourceful young man with a talent for imitating the gaits and bearing of others, and even their voices. He delighted in amusing Susanna and Arabella with nightly performances mimicking people from the town. He was observant and knew many of them, but it seems that none of them knew him.

Susanna felt herself becoming closer to the boy than her business sense would allow, but in the absence of her husband his presence was welcome. That absence continued, and Susanna began to question whether her husband was safe. She made enquiries with shipping agents at all the ports he should have called at, but of course the mail from these ports would be coming mainly by ship. This is yet another burden carried by the wives of men at sea, but she was well equipped to bear it.

What concerned her was that she was no longer treated as the owner of the vessel. The fact is that the law in the State of South Carolina was a little backward in 1850 than many others, but not by much. By law only single women and widows could own property and sign contracts. When a woman married, her husband gained the ownership of her property. Her ship was Gomer’s ship, and she as neither single nor a widow, although she might just as well have been either.

Susanna consulted a lawyer, who explained that while the property of her husband may never be hers, even though it had been hers, it could be her daughter’s by operation of testamentary rules.

“Madam, your power to deal with the ship and the business of the ship can be traced to the fact that you are your daughter’s guardian and agent by being her parent,” the man explained. “At least that will secure your position until your hisband reappears or, God forbid, never dies.”

There was stock in the warehouse to be dealt with, and bookings for future freight and passage to be received. While there was a business, there was income, even if the whereabouts of the ship were unknown. And Susanna was running things

The only thing that could go wrong, did go wrong. Arabella died.

It was so sudden, neither she nor Louis actually believed it. At her insistence Louis put Arabella’s lifeless body to her bed, but he knew, and he wept. And slowly and with reluctance, she accepted and they shared their grief together. And still nobody in the town knew of the death.

There were letters delivered to their home, and there was still business, but in their mourning either side of Arabella’s bed, that was of little importance. It was Louis who picked up the letters and then opened the one marked urgent. The barque “Madrigal”, was “under arrest” in Valparaiso and simple documents were required to release the vessel. Something needed to be done. Captain Gomer Lambert and incommunicado, which is to say, not able to help himself

But Susanna was still deep in grief. In her wailing she pointed out to Louis that she (Susanna) was powerless. Arabella had the rights and she was dead.

That was when it was Louis who suggested that she did not have to be. As he put it – “If you power to deal depends on Arabella then she must live on in some manner.”

Despite her good humor and sharp wit Arabella had remained housebound and rarely seen. Her mother did not require her presence to do business, but her mother was clearly inhibited by her present mental state. Although older than Louis they were the same size. Louis suggested that he could pretend to be her.

“I could get together the documents as Arabella and get copies dispatched to Valparaiso by two brand new services – the Pacific Mail Steamship Company by sea via Cape Horn, and The Overland Mail Company to California and then south by sea.”

His knowledge of things impressed Susanna, but she was still very mournful.

“I will need your help,” the boy said. He knew that he had to bury the body of Arabella and then take her form. It was not something a young man could do without a woman’s help.

Susanna steeled herself with their private funeral for Arabella, but the she collapsed again. She had no strength. Louis’s plan seemed workable, in particular when he appeared in one of Arabella’s dresses with his hair washed with soap and draped over his shoulders.

“You have the look I will concede,” she said. “But that is not the problem. You need to learn how to conduct yourself as a young lady.”

But it has already been said that the boy was a fast learner and born to imitate. It took very little work for him to become the new Arabella. She was quite different from the first one – more energetic and it must be said, prettier. And while the one now dead was forthright enough she had the reticence expected of young women of the time, which was lacking in the new version.

Josiah Gittens, the local shipping agent was horrified to see his regular customer Mrs. Susanna Lambert looking so unwell, and surprised to finally meet the young Arabella Lambert who would by now be only 16 years old, but showed all of her mother’s intelligence and ability, but clearly her looks more closely following her absent father, the Captain.

After Susanna had left back to their house he said as much – “I understood that you were the sickly one, young lady, but I see that your mother is poorly.”

“My father’s absence is putting a strain on her,” said the new Arabella. “But the situation will be easily solved by collecting these documents required by the authorities in Valparaiso.”

A trip to see the harbormaster and the insurer was also called for, and once again in the company of her mother, the bank.

Documents were dispatched, and in the halls of business in Charleston the name of Arabella Lambert was mentioned more than once.

“An extremely capable young woman, and beautiful too. Some young man could do not much better, especially if her father’s vessel returns from the East fully laden.”

But Gomer did not return. They heard news that the vessel had been released and that Captain Gomer Lambert had headed for open sea, but the vessel that brought that message was notoriously slower than “Madrigal”. Nevertheless, Susanna was encouraged to revisit the merchants with good news, and she took with her Arabella as a capable assistance.

Many remarked that Arabella looked so much like her father. The only real similarity was that both were attractive people, whereas Susanna was not. And Arabella had learned how to make herself even more attractive, by finding friends among the young women of the town, and learning about the fashions of the age and beauty products available by mail order.

But money was getting tight, and Susanna had to reign in her new “daughter”. “Madrigal had still not appeared, and Susanna was losing faith in her husband.

“I fear that he is conducting his own trade on the West Coast of South America,” she bemoaned. “There is nothing for us. He has no regard for his family.”

Some say that it was this despair that led to her death. She poisoned herself, but Arabella swore that it was an accident. She took tincture of arsenic, a common enough remedy for many illnesses, but deadly if taken continuously.”

“Nobody would choose to die in that way,” she said, and most would agree.

Arabella became the sole operator of the business which continued to remain in the ownership of Captain Gomer Lambert, so long as he was assumed alive. And for Arabella’s purposes he must remain alive. Still, she could act to preserve the business. That meant selling their house and setting up living quarters in the warehouse. It meant letting space in the warehouse to other traders. It meant doing business.

As a single woman she could sign contracts that her “mother” could not. She could not only store goods but broker freight with other shippers. They say that commerce abhors a middleman, but a woman in the middle, if an attractive, charming and capable one, seems more often tolerated.

Arabella Lambert received suitors, and she favored those who brought gifts. It seemed that her commercial instincts could easily transfer to her social life. But she refused all offers of marriage, to the frustration of the ardorous and affluent youth of Charleston. But she loved social occasions and the opportunity to dress and to impress.

It seemed that it would continue for so long as she remained beautiful. She was aware of the fact, and took drastic steps so as not to lose the femininity that she had become so dependent on. It seemed but a trifle in the wider scheme of things.

But then one day, “Madrigal” arrived back in the harbor, something of which she was eagerly advised by some well-meaning fellow. He misunderstood her shock as intense surprise, but given her circumstance Arabella was troubled. She declined to go to the quay to welcome her father, and suggested that he be redirected to visit her at her new and now plushy furnished home, above the warehouse. She wanted to ensure that the first encounter was private.

But Gomer had some others with him when he entered – old acquaintance who had brought him up to date on events such as the death of his wife and the success of his daughter in business – news that had already reached him in South America.

So there were others in the room when Arabella rose from her desk in her primrose finery and crossed the room to embrace her long lost father.

“Welcome home father,” she said for all to here. “Your absence threw us into misfortune, but we have made good of it, you and I.”

Gomer did not recognize this person but he knew that she was not the daughter that he had left behind. It had been years, but time could not make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, and this was a silk purse in his arms.

“Arabella, my lovely daughter,” he said. “Please forgive me for being away for so long.” The other men in the room must have sighed at the heart-warming scene.

“A loving daughter will forgive her brave and intrepid father anything,” she said, hugging him tightly so she did not have to look into his face until she was sure.

“I only wish that your poor mother was here to do the same and forgive me,” he said. “But in her absence, you have done well. The house has gone, but our new home looks very comfortable. A place of love, I think.”

Now they were apart he could see the intelligence in her face. She recognized the look in his, as she had seen it before. It was lust.

When the other men had gone, with gifts of cactus liquor from Gomer, he sat back and smiled at his “daughter”.

“Whoever you are, I suppose that I have you to thank for keeping the business going,” he said.

“And for burying you wife and child,” she said. “But I have made a name for myself here. Perhaps we can stay in business together?”

“I don’t see why not,” he said. “I have changed over the last few years on the longest voyage of my life. I have learned that dishonesty and deceit can be more rewarding. Susanna would disapprove, but how could you? You are deceit personified, and in a very attractive package.”

If we are to remain in business it would be as father and daughter,” she said.

“And that is the way it will be outside these four walls,” he said. “But if you want secrets kept then we will add another. You are bringing on a rise in me, and lately I have taken to satisfying the natural urges when they happen.”

Arabella was then forced to break a secret to keep many, but if she considered that it would put an end to his advances, she would be disappointed. There were men working in the storage area below who were uncertain what was going on upstairs between a father and daughter, but when they reappeared neither would give any clue.

In fact they had both derived pleasure, if not that afternoon then in the nights that followed. Arrabella had learned yet another of the joys of womanhood and she would pursue it in later years.

But not with Captain Gomer Lambert. Before he could return to sea he had an accident in the warehouse when a large load fell upon him. The circumstances were puzzling.

Before he died he had made some kind of legal settlement in favor of his daughter. All thought it reasonable given that this young woman had so capably expanded the Lambert fortunes almost despite the efforts of Gomer himself. Arabella’s lawyer had prepared the documents and they had been signed in the offices of the business with two of Gomer’s South American crew acting as witnesses. Both gentlemen have since returned to their home port.

“Madrigal” was sold, and the business of Lambert Trading remains in the sole charge of the beautiful and capable Arabella Lambert. Of course she refuses offers of marriage. Why would a woman surrender her wealth to a husband. And why marriage if you can enjoy the pleasures of a man outside of matrimony, if they be one of the few of us who know Arrabella’s secret, and love her the more for it.

The End

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Footnote: From “South Carolina Encyclopedia” on “Women”:

“The story of South Carolina’s women is one of slow progress. While women could inherit money and property in colonial and antebellum South Carolina, only single women and widows could own property and sign contracts. When a woman married, her husband gained the ownership of her property unless her family had set up a trust or some other kind of legal settlement. Married women had no other legal protection for their property until 1868 when the delegates at the state constitutional convention gave them the right to make contracts and to control property. Protecting women’s property was in part a recognition that some husbands were not good stewards of their family’s affairs.”