



The Rotary Club of Wynberg

# Wynpress



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## A BRIEF LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE 'QUEEN ELIZABETH 2'

*A short novel by Bev Bird*

I guess most of us have at some stage in the past come across glamorous images of the Queen Elizabeth 2, that most majestic of all passenger liners, looking sleek and gorgeous in all her classic splendour, and wistfully dreamed of one day sailing on her. That was me in 2005, poring over a half-page spread in one of the weekend papers giving dates and ports-of-call of the QE2's next around-the-world voyage, due to start one year from then. The ad promised half-price fares if you booked immediately, plus the choice of virtually any cabin on the vessel. Half-price fares! That sounded like an offer too good to refuse, I reasoned with my unsuspecting husband. And so, the very next day, there we were huddled over glossy brochures with detailed plans of the ship's layout, carefully selecting the best affordable cabin and debating which leg of the voyage would be the most enticing, given our budget. Not such difficult choices, actually : we pretty quickly decided on Cabin 145 on Deck 3, on the leg due to start in New York on 6 January 2006 and end in Los Angeles nineteen days later, calling at ports in Florida, the Caribbean, Panama and Mexico en route. Done!

With our half-price tickets secured, it was then just a matter of deciding what to pack, with temperatures ranging from -6°C in New York to +35°C in the Caribbean. Fast forward twelve months and we were standing with crowds of cheering passengers on the top deck of the QE2 in the freezing cold New York winter's evening, waving goodbye to the Statue of Liberty as we set off on our exciting adventure.

At dinner that first evening in the splendid white-and-gold dining saloon down the corridor from our cabin we met Leonard, a refined middle-aged bachelor, dining alone at the table next to ours. He turned out to be a mine of information concerning the ship and her various seasoned passengers. Having pre-booked our sought-after two-seater dinner table for the entire duration of our trip, we sat alongside Leonard every evening thereafter. He knew the names of all the passengers he

considered worth knowing and how many voyages each had completed on the QE2. He didn't count single trips, only completed around-the-world voyages. He would point out our various dinner companions and refer to them, conspiratorially, by numbers, representing their completed voyages (as in, 'Thompsons 4 at your right', 'Cronwrights 7 over there'), imparting choice details regarding their risqué lifestyles. Leonard himself had completed 6 voyages and was clearly well-known to all the brilliant young waiters serving at our respective tables. He never once demeaned himself by so much as glancing at that evening's menu, yet without fail each evening a large plate of beautifully prepared grilled prawns with a selection of tempting side-dishes would arrive unbidden at his table. Oh, what it is to have friends in high places.

After two days at sea our first port-of-call was Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Already the outside temperature had risen by more than twenty degrees and from now on we were sailing in balmy climes. Going ashore, we decided to join an organized trip by motor-dinghy through some of the swampy rivers of the Florida Everglades. It was a unique experience but we found ourselves less than impressed with the guides' concept of conservation, which seemed not to concern itself with the choking engine fumes emitted by our spluttering, overpowered pontoon-boat nor the thick oily slick left behind in the water as a troublesome souvenir for the resident alligators.

Our departure that evening from Fort Lauderdale harbour was memorable. As the QE2 prepared to sail, it became evident to those on deck that a rollicking party was taking place in one of the suites high up in a tall apartment block overlooking the harbour entrance. The whooping party-goers had a perfect bird's eye view of the departing liner as they danced about on the balcony, fervently waving Union Jacks, brandishing bottles of champagne and shouting lusty farewells to all on board. We soon learned that they were all Cunard staff based in Fort Lauderdale who'd got together to ensure the QE2 had a rousing send-off. It seemed they were in for quite a weekend because the QE2's sister ship, the brand new Queen Mary 2, then on her way to Brazil, was due to dock there just days later, when another such party would most certainly be called for. And indeed two evenings later, midway through dinner, the Captain announced over the ship's speakers that the Queen Mary 2 was passing by, several miles to our port side, on her way to Fort Lauderdale harbour. Since it very rarely happened that the two grand dames crossed paths at sea, he encouraged all passengers to go up on deck to observe the moment. Of course everyone rushed on deck. There across the sea in the velvety darkness was the dazzling outline of the Queen Mary 2, slowly plowing away from us. She looked like a glittering diamond brooch on a rich black cloth; I will never forget the image. What ultimately became significant about that sighting was that some hours later, as the Queen Mary 2 was approaching the narrow Fort Lauderdale harbour we had come to know quite well only days before, she collided with the harbour entrance. The news spread around the QE2 like wildfire the next morning: something of an embarrassment and horror for the Cunard Line. The Queen Mary 2 was eventually towed into dock and obliged to curtail part of her remaining cruise itinerary amidst considerable public humiliation for Cunard. What a shame. So much for the planned Fort Lauderdale welcoming party. -

There was more than enough on-board activity on the QE2 to keep passengers fully entertained during the long at-sea days : ongoing chess matches, photography lessons, a library and book exchange, dance classes, church meetings, bingo sessions, movies in the ship's theatre or in your own cabin, philately groups, craft classes, a busy gym, bridge groups, talks by knowledgeable and entertaining speakers concerning upcoming ports-of-call, wine tastings, nightly dances and entertainment, and so on and so on. Even a Rotary-At-Sea Club, which I didn't know existed, which I attended one afternoon with a bunch of assorted Rotarians from all parts of the globe. All of this in addition to the many on-deck activities happening outside all day long. There was really no reason ever to be bored. And then, of course, there was eating, eating, eating...

We figured out that at any given time of the day or night there was at least one restaurant or canteen open for service - usually more. Bearing in mind that you don't pay for any food whatsoever at any of the venues, you could in theory prowl continuously from one restaurant to

another and eat your way right through their entire delectable menu before heaving yourself off to the next one. In practice we found even two of those rich, sumptuous meals per day too much for us. For the good of our bodies (and souls?) every day we would do the traditional Four-Times-around-the-Deck walk, enjoyed by many of the passengers, and in addition, as often as we could pleasantly motivate ourselves to do, we would tackle the ship's main staircase. The staircase is a huge carpeted spiral stairway, running all the way up from Deck 10 far below-decks to Deck 1 up in the clouds, and comprising 112 steps. We would see how many continuous up-and-down return laps we could complete, at speed, before fizzling out completely. I managed at least one on most days, my best effort being six early one morning, jumping over the vacuum-cleaner halfway up the staircase each lap and excusing myself politely to the startled cleaning lady each time I did.

Given the average age of the passengers (early sixties, I would guess), it's to be expected that some travelers might suffer health problems during the voyage or (dare we mention this?) perhaps even die on board. We had reason to test the ship's medical services somewhat when we ourselves became ill one day. Directed down to one of the lower decks, we discovered a busy established medical practice headed by one Dr Schalk van der Walt, of all unexpected names. Naturally there was much talk of braaivleis, biltong, sunny skies and Chevrolet in between the medical discussions. Questioned about possible deaths on board, he reassured us the ship was fitted with several special fridges to cater for such unmentionable eventualities. In earlier years the routine practice had been to conduct burials at sea but the ship's owners had later come to realise this was too upsetting for passengers, so that corpses are now instead transported to the next port-of-call for disposal.

One evening, halfway through an after-dinner show in one of the entertainment lounges, we became aware of a disturbance going on in the front row. A passenger was apparently in trouble. Quick as a flash several members of the ship's personnel appeared, as if from nowhere, and deftly carried the patient outside, wafting him out of sight of the rest of the audience. Turns out it was an elderly passenger who had died, then and there, mid-aria. Well, we knew by then where he would be spending the rest of the cruise - oh dear. And in true naval style, the band played on...

One of the interesting little facts Leonard pointed out to us was that many of the older, single gentlemen on board were, in fact, professional escorts whose passage was paid for by the ship's owners as a means of ensuring that older single women, arguably the company's largest market sector, continued to be attracted as passengers. Once aware of this, we came to recognise that certain men in the various lounges and saloons on any particular evening were all wearing the same, elegant dinner-jackets, identifying them as escorts for the night. Another night, another set of smart matching evening jackets. We gathered the gentlemen were under orders to mingle at large amongst all the single women and to ensure that each one had the opportunity of dancing at some stage during the evening, should she so wish. I must say, the escorts looked charming and suave and they were all mighty natty dancers.

A highlight of our voyage was passing through the Panama Canal. At that time the QE2 was the largest ship able to fit through the Canal locks, with only one meter clearance on either side of the vessel. Viewed from eight decks above the water-line, one meter looks more like one centimeter, with absolutely no room for error. The passage takes one entire day, starting in the Caribbean Sea, north-west of Panama City at 7 in the morning and finishing in the Pacific Ocean, south of Panama at sunset. At the start of the day an expert ship's Captain, with specialist experience in maneuvering vessels through the Canal's narrow locks and waterways, comes on board the QE2 and takes over command of the ship for the duration of the day's passage. Once the QE2 reaches the Pacific Ocean in the evening the specialist Captain, his job completed, clambers down the long rope ladder dangling from the side of the ship into a small waiting boat bobbing below, salutes the bridge of the huge vessel towering next to him, and the chain of command reverts to the regular Captain once more. The QE2's passage through the Panama Canal was booked one year in advance (about the same time we were buying our tickets!) and cost one million dollars. Smaller

vessels pay commensurately less and yachts may pass through for free. It was a continuous source of enjoyment to see the amazed expressions of workers on board approaching commercial vessels as their particular ship rounded a bend in the Canal and they looked up to find the QE2 sailing directly towards them in the narrow waters. As one they would all rush below decks, only to reappear moments later, camera in hand, to capture the rare sight. Starting out their shifts that morning they had certainly not counted on passing cheek-to-cheek next to a Queen hours later.

Over the course of our many dinners together we heard from Leonard about one rich widow (and there were plenty of them on board, it appeared) who'd booked a whole year's passage on the QE2 and had arrived with 365 evening dresses so she wouldn't be seen ever wearing the same gown twice. (Leonard didn't seem to consider this too extreme since he admitted to following the same policy himself in regard to the exquisite silk ties he wore to dinner each evening during his many, long QE2 voyages.) And then, he told us, there was Mrs Muller. Pause. Mrs Muller actually lived permanently on the QE2. Another pause as he let that piece of information sink in. When learning earlier that year that the ship was going to the dry-docks for some routine maintenance, Mrs Muller had refused to vacate her cabin. She eventually had to be induced to leave through the ship's owners offering her free accommodation at a luxury hotel of her choice until such time as she could 'move back home' into her own cabin once more. From then on I became determined to meet Mrs Muller somehow.

One afternoon I decided to go and find out what happens at Afternoon Tea. This is a grand affair, held every day in the large formal lounge at 4 on the dot. It's like going to a royal garden party: silver teapots, bone china cups, lace tablecloths, trolleys laden with delicate cakes and designer sandwiches, waiters lined up in starched white jackets, the lot. Except for me, all of the guests took it very seriously and dressed up for the occasion. I was sitting alone at one of the small tables when an elegant older woman in a floral dress and a large picture-hat came waltzing over rather grandly and asked if she could share my table. Of course. 'Where do you come from, my dear?' she asked in a mildly condescending, duchess-type manner. When told Cape Town, she enthused about how 'simply lovely' the place had been when she'd called in there last. 'And where do you live?' I ventured, somewhat timidly. 'Oh... here', she said after a slight pause, looking distractedly around her and indicating with outspread arms. Well, since we were then halfway up the west coast of Mexico and since she looked about as unMexican as anyone I'd ever met, I thought I must have misheard. 'Where did you say?' I asked, confused. 'Here', she said, more firmly now. 'I live here', pointing at the floor. Aha! Lightbulb moment: Mrs Muller!! I had at last come face-to-face with the indomitable Mrs M. 'How did that come about?' I asked, more bravely. 'Well, I was spending so much time on the QE2', she said, 'and my two sons were having to run about fetching me from so many places, they finally suggested I just go and move on board for good ... So I did', she concluded briskly. And with that she was off again, to hover at the table of someone more stylish and more interesting, no doubt.

At the time of our trip it was not yet public knowledge that the QE2 was to be sold and taken out of service fairly soon afterwards, so that that particular voyage turned out, in fact, to be one of her last. The grand dame set sail from Southampton on her final journey on 11 November 2008 bound for Dubai, where she remains, unoccupied and forlornly at anchor, to this day.

After our fleeting but tender acquaintance with the majestic Queen, we feel sad to know that her sailing days are over. Just imagine what it's like for Mrs Muller....

**LOGIC:** Teacher: How old is your father?

Kid: 6 years.

Teacher: What?? How is this possible?

Kid: He became a father only when I was born.

# Minutes

3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2016

	Compiled by Lina Howard
Attendance	19 Rotarians present: 69%
Visitors	Dr Colleen Stone and Carl Stone (USA – IOWA) Jean and Sanmari Crous
Fellowship	Marietjie Van Eeden who celebrates her birthday on 10 <sup>th</sup> March
From the President	President Stephen- welcomed our guests and Jean and Sanmari Crous - who will be guests for the last time as they will be inducted next week. PP Are Hovstad is out of hospital and getting stronger. Don Lidgley has been in the Constantiberg Clinic, and since transferred to Nurture Hospital, Rondebosch.
Slots	CYCLE TOUR on Sunday 6 March – String handed out the bibs and flags to all the Marshalls.
BUSINESS MEETING	PROMS- in 2 weeks' time- Graham exhorted all Rotarians to be present and help, as this is our main fund raiser of the year. BE there at 18.30 on Saturday and 16.00 on Sunday. No-one to go home until ALL the clearing up has been done. Francois is in charge of manpower. KHANYISA – Jackie gave a comprehensive report on the stages of management for the school. The new Rotary badge was chosen – thank you Justin for showing us the 3 options The card was 5 CLUBS – always elusive – but unbelievably it was taken out the pack by none other than BARRY!! Bravo.
Swindle	He left R250 in the 'pot' and took home the grand sum of R420.  The attendance prize was won by Jean..



# Duty Roster

	Mar			
	10	17	24	31
Sergeant	Hovstad	Murphy	NO MEETING	Club Social
Wynpress Editorial	Dessington	Danckwerts		
Wynpress Minutes	Smith	Cleveland		
Door Duty	Howard	Jackson		
Grace	K van Niekerk	Van Wyk		
Loyal Toast	James	Lidgley		
International Toast	Bird	Cleveland		
Speaker Intro	Barnard	Vivian		
Speaker Thanks	Murphy	Schonegevel		
Entertainment for the month	Barnard, Dessington, Jackson, Maunder			

## Going Forward

### Dates To Diarise

10 March	Guest Speaker: Jade Jacobsohn of NaI'ibali
17 <sup>th</sup> March	Raid by R.C. Melkbos
<b>19/20</b>	<b>Last Night of the Proms</b>
24 <sup>th</sup> March	No meeting
26 <sup>th</sup> March	Two Oceans marathon
31 <sup>st</sup> . March	Club social?
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> April</b>	Rotary Family Fun Day: Sea Point
7 <sup>th</sup> April	Business meeting
<b>9<sup>th</sup> April</b>	Hands on project: SOS at Train Park (Keela)

14 <sup>th</sup> April	Foundation: Carl Heinz Duisberg
21 <sup>st</sup> April	Speaker TBA
28/29/30	DISTRICT CONFERENCE – in Stellenbosch

## President's Quotes

Sustainable development is the pathway to the future we want for all. It offers a framework to generate economic growth, achieve social justice, exercise environmental stewardship and strengthen governance. *Ban Ki-Moon*

Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development. *Kofi Annan*



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