

## **Smooth Sailing and Fine Dining**

### **Only Half the Story**

**Donald J Plefka**

The hope was for a smooth voyage so that they could spend a lot of time on deck. The cabins were small and did not provide much comfort, even for first class accommodations. Jennie was concerned with the conditions in steerage considering that their expensive accommodations were so relatively crude. But this was a much smaller ship than they had taken on their trip to Italy and now there were all these individuals and families that, in her view, were herded aboard like cattle, all immigrants to the "new world". Belle reminded her that it wasn't too long ago that the two of them would not have been able to travel first class but Jennie retorted that even in their worst state they were better off than these consigned to the bowels of the ship. Jennie remarked, "I wonder why on earth they call that place steerage?" Belle replied, "Because that is the deck of the ship that has the cables and mechanisms that connect from the bridge of the ship to the rudder for steering the ship."

Jennie said, "How do you know all these things?", to which her friend replied, "You forget I was a librarian and had a lot of time to read. You pick up all kinds of things from books." She continued, "But I must agree that I would not want to travel in those conditions with almost no privacy, minimal toilet facilities and even worse food service, if it could be considered service at all. Imagine spending all that time thrown together with all those unwashed people, men, women and playing or crying children in one space." They agreed that they should, by all means, count their blessings and decided to go up on deck to experience the departure from the port of Naples, always an exciting as well as interesting time aboard ship. It marked a break with what was and the start of something new.

After lunch was served and it being a pleasant day, the girls settled into deck chairs, intending to just enjoy the air of the Mediterranean until the bell summoned them to dinner. After a while a steward, who had inquired to their comfort and needs, informed them that the ship was making an unscheduled stop at the port of Trapani in Sicily. It would be a brief stop since the ship would not dock but would be met by a motor launch delivering several passengers. He had no idea who they may be but assumed them to be of some importance or influence to have been able to make such arrangements.

And so it was that as the ship neared the entrance of the harbor, the engines stopped as a launch approached. The anchor was not dropped as the sea and wind cooperated and the gangway stairs, or 'ladder' as it is called in seafaring parlance, was lowered and three well dressed men came aboard. Their luggage was brought aboard after them and they were greeted by the ships purser and another officer and then escorted to their cabins as the ladder was raised and the engines came to life propelling the ship towards the open sea. Shortly after, the bell announced dinner and the girls slipped into more formal attire before going to the Dining salon.

When they arrived at the Dining salon and identified themselves they were escorted to their assigned table with the explanation that it would be their table for dinner for the duration of the voyage. As they approach, two young men in perfectly tailored suits jumped to their feet and a more mature gentleman struggled to his. No proper gentleman sits while a lady stands. The middle aged lady looked at them with interest, probably pleased to know that she would, after all, have feminine company for dinner. The steward who had escorted them to the table and another who had materialized from places unknown, held their chairs as they sat down and then the gentlemen resumed their seats. Introductions revealed their dinner companions to be Mr. and Mrs. Stillburt from Buffalo, New York who were returning home from a vacation in Naples and Vito and Rocco Caulderone, brothers from Chicago who had been on family business in Sicily.

Jennie asked why they had boarded in Naples and not Sicily. The brothers said that they would have, but the ship does not stop in Sicily. Jennie then informed the surprised men that an unscheduled stop had been made and related the boarding of the three new passengers but of course she could not say who these passengers were.

Their curiosity was soon satisfied although it was obvious that the two men were anything but satisfied with the knowledge. It was just as their first course was being placed before them that the three newcomers were being seated at a table on the other side of the room. It was Rocco who saw them first and nudging his older brother said, "God ... Don Caulderone is aboard!" Vito's response was something in Italian that Belle could not understand but had the impression that it was, at least in part, a profanity. She asked, "Is this Don Caulderone a relative?" Vito replied that he was the Godfather of the family, their uncle, and he slipped back in animated and hurried conversation with his brother. Belle was able to piece together pieces of their conversation which was that they wondered if the Don had found out (she had no idea what he may have found out) and they better go and offer their respects or it will be taken as an affront. Rocco had protested that their food would get cold and Vito said it was better their food go cold than they go cold.

The two then excused themselves saying they had to pay their respects to their uncle.

After they had gone, Jennie mentioned, "I am surprised he called his uncle by his first name." to which Belle responded, "He didn't. Don is a title of respect and honor to the Italians, one who is to be feared." Mrs. Stillburt, acknowledged, "I didn't know that!" Which drew the response from Jennie, "Belle was a librarian and knows everything", with a smile to her friend. A general discussion followed with each pair learning trivial facts about the other. As they spoke, Belle was watching their table mates with their uncle and the other two. The Don remained calm throughout while the younger ones occasionally erupted into anger and at times their voices rose to the distraction of those around them. But the Don always interceded to calm them down, at least outwardly.

When the Caulderone brothers returned to their now cold dinners they were obviously upset. In Italian, Rocco was saying that the Don knew (what?) and they were going to Chicago and would upset everything. ( again ... what could that be?) There would be hell to pay. Belle, trying to be civil, asked who the two other men were and was informed that they were the sons of the Don, their cousins. She remarked, "Your cousins didn't seem to be very friendly." and Rocco just said, "It's a family thing." Dinner proceeded along with idle chit-chat with little participation from the brothers who hurriedly finished their meals and not waiting for desert, left the salon.

Before leaving the table, Jennie asked their waiter if it was permissible to take some of the fruit, which was in the large bowls on each table, back to their cabins. She was assured that it was not only permitted, but encouraged. Jennie took a very generous amount of the fruit, too generous for the girls to eat thought Belle. As they left, Jennie again spoke to the waiter. After the girls had been back in their cabin a short time, Belle suggested they take a walk on deck but Jennie told her friend that she was waiting for the waiter. Before the puzzled Belle could ask why, there was a polite knock on the door. Jennie admitted the waiter and said, "I asked you here to inquire if you could take me to the steerage deck." The puzzled waiter said he could, but why would such as she want to go to that place. Jennie said she wanted to bring the fruit to the children there. A smile erupted on the face of the waiter and he agreed to take her. Belle asked if she could join them and the three of them made their way down to the steerage deck.

It was worse down there than they imagined. It was dark, not very clean and crowded with row upon row of racks of bunks. There was an odor that assaulted the nostrils. As soon as Jennie offered a piece of fruit to a nearby child who bashfully but eagerly accepted it, others appeared as from nowhere and her meager supply was soon gone. They left as quickly as possible and Jennie asked the waiter

if he could get more fruit for these poor children. It was not allowed for him to take the fruit. Well, if she could take the fruit, could she give it to him to bring down? No, he could not. That was not allowed and he would lose his job. From that first evening, both the girls left the Dining salon with as much fruit as they could stuff into their largest hand bags and after changing to more casual clothes, brought their treasures to the eager children who soon learned to expect their visit. What they didn't expect to witness was the children cutting the fruit into pieces and sharing it with those who did not get any.

Belle and Jennie enjoyed the second day out just relaxing in the warm sun. They were grateful for the calm wind and the smooth sea. The ship seemed to glide through the water making good speed. They asked a steward if they could expect the crossing to be less than the scheduled 8 days. He said that it is hard to say and that although they were making up time now, they would probably lose time that night because they soon be in the cold waters of the Atlantic and with the warm air and no wind, a heavy fog could develop at night and they would need to proceed more slowly.

At dinner that evening, the talk went from the weather to the expected fog which had already started to form. The Caulderone brothers were generally quiet during the meal and didn't speak with the others unless directly addressed. Between the two of them their exchanges were cryptic to say the least and always in Italian. They paid more attention to their cousins and uncle across the room than to their own dinner companions. The men appeared to hurry through their meal and with a seeming attitude of resignation, excused themselves to go to the Don's table.

On their arrival their conversation started in a friendly manner but soon evolved into obvious disagreement. Voices rose in spite of the Don's attempts at control. Rocco and Vito's remarks, though in Italian, were detected as being insulting and even abusive from the loud words that Belle could decipher. The cousins jumped to their feet and had drawn pistols from inside their well tailored dinner jackets. At that point the Don was on his feet motioning the guns away and calming his sons. As the trio stood there in their rage, Vito and Rocco hurriedly left the Dining salon. All eyes were on the Don and the two young men and the Don's frown turned to an engaging smile as he announced to the occupants of the room, "Please forgive our rude behavior and return to your meals and more pleasant thoughts. This is only family business and shall not happen again." whereupon the three settled back into their chairs. Belle heard a passing steward mumble to himself, "Mafioso scum!" This all, of course, gave much for all the dinners to discuss and the next time Belle looked, the three men were gone.

It took until mid morning the next day for the heavy fog to burn off and although somewhat cooler, the day passed pleasantly enough. About 3 in the

afternoon, a steward approached the ladies and told them that they were requested to meet with the captain in his office. Puzzled, they followed the man and were ushered into a well appointed office and into the company of the captain, purser and two other officers, all of whom jumped to their feet until the ladies could be comfortably seated. The captain, apologizing for the inconvenience, told them they were holding an informal inquiry and since the Caulderone brothers were seated at their table for dinner, they may be able to provide some information. The girls asked if it was in regard to the unfortunate incident in the Dining salon the previous evening and were told "that may have been the start of it or at least part of it".

Belle and Jennie related all they knew of the two men and their relationship to the Don and his sons. It was only then that Belle asked what initiated the inquiry. The captain requested that they keep everything in confidence in order not to unduly alarm the other passengers and they agreed. He then related that last night, two well dressed men were seen throwing a large object resembling a chest into the sea. They did it in full view of the bridge of the ship and two seamen who were set as a special fog watch. But because of the fog and the fedoras the men wore, they could not be identified. The seamen could not leave their posts and before an officer from the bridge could get to the scene, the men were gone. The chest of course was soon lost in the fog and it was judged at the time to be both fruitless and dangerous to turn the ship around to search for it even if it was assumed not to sink. The decision not to try to recover it may have been different if they knew about the subsequent discovery this morning. About mid morning a steward had found the door of the Caulderone brothers' cabin ajar slightly and on further investigation found the cabin in disarray. There were traces of blood and their large trunk was missing. A search found no trace of the two men. Belle said, "I assume you suspect the son's of Don Caulderone as murderers." And the captain replied, "Yes, and with the Don's knowledge and probably under his direction considering the family reputation. They have been relieved of their weapons and their cabins searched but since we have no concrete proof, they will be under close watch even though we can not confine them. The matter will be referred to the authorities when we reach New York."

At dinner that evening, Mrs. Stillburt asked in a whisper, "Were you questioned too?" Jennie who was seated next to her replied even more quietly to the affirmative and added, "Mum's the word." And so it was, although in the privacy of their cabin, but still in whispers as if the walls had ears, the girls spoke of little else. By the last days of the voyage, the Stillburts were adding to the supply of fruit and a steward had found a basket which Belle and Jennie could use to make their deliveries. The girls were horrified when they found that each steerage passenger had been given a tin bucket and set of utensils and their meals all came from a common stew pot and eaten from their buckets. They were somewhat

pleased to hear that this ship was one of the few that still used steerage for this crude and degrading mode of transporting these poor people. They were even more pleased to be informed that after this voyage the ship was to be refitted to install four and six bunk cabins as well as improved toilet facilities and that a 3rd class dining salon would be installed. There would be food served in a civilized manner although not in the elegant manner and quality of that in first or even second class.

It was on the last night of their voyage that while Jennie and Belle were distributing the fruit to the happy children that Belle saw something that startled her. There was a man asleep in his bunk at the far end of the room whose clothing, though rumpled and disheveled from sleeping in them, was obviously a much better quality than that worn by the rest. His well tailored suit also looked strangely familiar. She gathered up her courage and moved down the aisle for a better look only to notice, as she approached the sleeping man, another, similarly attired and although he did not see her, she saw it was Rocco Caulderone! She quickly returned to Jennie and said, "Leave the basket ... let's go." and so they did.

When Belle revealed what she had seen, the two found one of the ships officers and asked to see the captain regarding the Caulderone situation. They were soon in his office and relating their new find. The captain remarked, "How stupid of us! It never occurred to any of us to look in steerage for first class passengers." Belle remarked, "If you will forgive my saying it sir but, maybe not so much stupidity as pride-fullness and attitude of superiority." To which the captain replied, "I must confess that you are exactly right and that those two rascals were smart enough to know that because of that fact they would be safe there." The captain thanked Belle and Jennie for the help they gave and commended them on their compassion for the steerage passengers. He added that there was little he could do to improve their conditions but had to comply with the rules set by the line's owners. But, he confirmed that things would change. He also promised to let the ladies know the outcome of all this.

The following morning as the ship entered New York harbor to dock at Ellis Island, Belle and Jennie were again invited to the captain's office. He told them that the two men were confronted in steerage and removed for safe keeping under guard in a part of the crew's quarters. They had planned to go ashore with the immigrants and then show their American passports in the hope that they would be then sent into the city without the 1st class authorities or passengers knowing they had left the ship. The captain commented that the plan may have worked. He also told the ladies that Rocco and Vito admitted that the altercation in the Dining salon had been instigated by them and they threw their own trunk overboard knowing they would be seen, all in the hope that the Don's sons would be suspected of killing them. They even cut themselves to leave blood to make it look like murder. Their uncle and cousins had not been told that the two had been found and still think

**they are suspected of killing them. But, Vito and Rocco gave information about the Don and his family which will be turned over to the American authorities and which should lead to their arrest and conviction on a number of serious charges including several Mafia murders. In turn, Vito and Rocco would probably be held on Ellis Island and subsequently deported back to Italy.**

**The captain added that as for the references to "something going on in Chicago regarding family business", they would probably never know what that was all about since Vito and Rocco were apparently willing to risk death rather than have the Don discover what that was.**

**The girls thanked him for letting them know how of the outcome to date and as they left, the captain said "I hope you had a pleasant voyage." Belle retorted, "We had hoped for an uneventful one. But the excitement wasn't your fault. However we do extend our thanks to you for smooth seas and good dinning even though two of our table mates left something to be desired." They left laughing and soon were on the boat with the other first class passengers to the mainland.**