

## Sailing to Purgatory *by Paul Rodgers*

The story tells of Paul's 8,000-mile *swallowing the anchor* voyage through both hemispheres, and down into the Southern Ocean, then up to St Helena island, and more ... Chapter 9's scene is of notorious Isla de Margarita, a Caribbean island famous for its offering of adult pleasure. The yacht has arrived to give Paul and Bob (an extra pair of eyes for the island-strewn Caribbean) the chance to see if the Venezuelan island deserves its international reputation for *naughtiness*.

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Back on board, I was admiring the resting yachts when a vast obstacle suddenly rose in a corner of an eye. I leaped up in shock. A huge vessel, a behemoth of a ship, was squeezing into the harbour. It looked massive enough to have escaped from H G Wells' imagination. Its challenging harbour manoeuvre seemed an illustration on a gigantic scale of squeezing a quart into a pint pot. For a few minutes, it seemed we'd have the life crushed out of us, too. The monster must be a warship, of aircraft carrier dimensions. As I watched, breath-held, the remnants of daylight vanished. The colossal mountain of steel transformed instantly to towering banks of brilliance, row upon rising row of floodlights. It seemed the night was taken by surprise, too, for impatient stars arrived dimmed and as shy as shadows.

The ironclad monster cruised right up to the moored craft. A thunder of spilling anchor chain echoed off the plastic fleet and the ravaged Admiral's Cupper and from each of the tall buildings on watch. In the brilliance of that extravagant light show, every huge link was countable as each clanked down the mountainous hull. The lighting was astounding, blinding, as if the ship rated itself as a second sun. *Sal's* cockpit became as bright as day. The dazzle overpowered the cabin lights below. In fact,

we didn't need them even when shaving for the island's promised feral nightlife.

Wary of Venezuela's vampire-shaming night critters, I swamped myself with a not unpleasantly scented insect repellent. Bob looked shocked when I offered him a dousing. *Repellent!* Didn't I know oz jokers, the real male ones, had skin tougher'n bull hide, protecting the purest blood envied, *en-feed*, by the world? It sounded as if he was also familiar with Shakespeare's Petruchio. 'Critters' teefs, insets! No bovver.' No pun interended, he insisted, but *insets* knew better than to risk their drilling gear on a strine.

With the dinghy safely tethered, we set out on Shank's pony for some promised grown up entertainment. Behind us, the Coast Guard warship, ablaze from stem to stern, glowed huge and frightening on the tenuous waltz of the tide. We walked briskly and skirted round unmourned canine ooze which had announced itself a block or two ahead and tailed us closely for a few hundred fathoms beyond.

The island's breed of Transylvanian thirsts hadn't been warned of a certain reinforced epidermis, it seemed. Bob's percussion, the smacking of arms and face, might have outmatched the best efforts of a flamenco dancer. Near the *Girlie Bar* a giant of a mosquito proved wilier than Bob's defence. It squeezed through just below an eye. It also won a considerable whack, the last sound it heard. I couldn't help but wince in sympathy - for the shipmate's skin more than the new corpse. Like a successful hunter visualising the head and horns on a lounge chimneybreast, Bob dangled it by a hind leg for examination. The tormentor seemed as obese as a September spider. A thin red stream

oozed down Bob's cheek and quickly resembled a fashionable tattoo of the stick-on sort.

The *Girly Bar* proved to be no equivalent of a dive from back home. The drinks were far too cheap, and the people dispensing the poison too friendly, the atmosphere much too hospitable. Yet, allegedly, this was *the* haunt for naughtiness which might almost be the island's GNP. True, we were surrounded by lovely unaccompanied enthusiasm which could have stepped out of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* – '... (young girls') heads of luxuriant hair reflected in the sunshine every tone of gold, and black, and brown. Some had beautiful eyes, others a beautiful nose, others a beautiful mouth and figure: few, if any, had all.' What these girls had in common was their upmarket personal presentations. Yet where were the ravenous males stampeding from the ferry and plane? We looked about the half-empty cavern and wondered. However, come midnight, a crush of prowling males crowded through the doors. Now the beauties began displays of bubbling animation and yet as if the performances were only for their chums. They managed to convey, in that clever way the fairer gender has, a total blindness, a complete ignorance that but a breathe away hovered many a worshipping soul, gasping for attention. I found I gulped, too, but through some previously unnoticed personal quirks. A large percentage of the leers were of my newly reached generation. It really rankled. I wondered why. Logically, surely, it shouldn't be a bother, could be seen as encouraging. When we're younger, we are not upset that other contenders belong to our age group. Yet here I was resenting fellow baby-boomers. I didn't understand the reason, unless it was further proof of the new ancientness. It had found something else to niggle over, it had found a fault, a molehill to make into a mountain. I admit it readily: it was crazy, ridiculous, yet as I merged with the elder lounge lizards, I

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prayed not to be taken for (*mistaken for*, the ego prompted) one of the *sildenafil* seagulls flocking, an ancient obliged to pay for what before had been so readily given, and from lovelies who resembled remarkably these chic wolverines, who might well have been them. Well, perhaps their mothers. A voice prompted, 'Or grandmothers.' I ignored it. And through the hypocrisy, here I was trying to find an excuse for a philosophy that may well have been prompted by Satan: Wasn't it better to reward an amorous grasp with practical dinero rather than possibly deceitful endearments?

I could see the ridiculous situation: was my objection to these new pensioners very different from toddlers squabbling selfishly over toys? Philosophy didn't adjust my attitude. I still wanted to condemn them even as I comprehended why these places were such magnets for the mature. Our urge to procreate, and all that accompanies it, was formed long before societies made their own rules. Men function, putting it politely, from about fourteen to the end of time. Modernity erects obstacles to lessen the chance of older folk erecting anything else. The *senoras* might not be here expressly to respark our *oxytocin* hormone after an enforced sabbatical, but they could be present as releasing agents.

I felt a little happier having thought that through. It allowed me to feast guiltlessly on attractive faces and forms and forgave or forgot the competition. I wondered if style or skill, professionalism, might accompany their work. Would they be good actors for the *act*, or resemble lazy wives, considering their presence as present enough? Perhaps therein lay an advantage of elderly Romeos: a grateful lover might not be an analytic lover. However, in public the *senoritas* were accomplished thespians and I saw no hint of distastefulness in negotiations underway all around, no eyes and brows lifted heavenwards,

no fingers pointing down throats, no conspiratorial smiles to the competition. It was quite as good as being at the theatre. Some lines from Hardy's knowing verse, *The Ruined Maid*, played in my mind and it encouraged a smile. I'm not sure exactly why, but the outing had me thinking, it's such a joy to be human and among humans.

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The DIY-counselling in the *Girly Bar* recommended relaxation, even if delivered somewhat impatiently. Being an obliging soul, I followed instructions. Looking around now, with an adjusted, corrected look, I confess the scene felt improved, almost as if reviewed through different eyes. I felt glad to be among the fellow revellers. The increasing show of promoted femininity seemed good to study in that noisy, smoky place. These weekend workers knew the game of flattery and wooing and winning. Endless enactments were being staged to charm we disparate males. In return we seemed shy and succumbing, uncomprehending how we were won over so easily.

The space was packed now with multi decibels of pop music. It became darker, too, rather like a disco with the strobes on strike. A dense fog of the sort that London used to know but here of cigarette smoke hardly brightened the surroundings. Groups of mostly older fellows steadied the bar with skilful elbows. Fifteen women of varying proportions sat at Formica-topped tables. Those of slim hips and the more matronly made it seem the chairs might have been nabbed from a junior school. Differing shapes, it's true, but there was a common denominator - stunning glossy-smooth skin that must have made a wonderful specialism here of dermatology.

Bob and I hugged cans as if determined to thaw the icy cerveza. We were balanced on high stools at the bar, not exactly the most novel pose for a place like this. The other aspiring wolves were lined either side of us, all along the varnished top. A sort of uniformity goes with this leisure pursuit: the discomfort of stools, always giving the brewery brand with each order, the dress code, the packet of fags with the gas lighter on top, change heaped beside the glass or can on the bar. Something else of a uniform nature became obvious – we moved in unison, very precisely, each gesture replicated, as if in rehearsal as a chorus line. The strangest thing, or so it seemed to me, was a lack of prompting or direction. Not a word about it had been uttered in any of our native languages. Yet it was as if we had memorised the movements and rehearsed the timing.

Just along from Bob, the first chorister raised his can. Next to him, the tenor with a shiny dome raised his. Dense eyebrows did so next, and then Bob's can went up, hiding thankfully that swelling skeeter bite. Something seemed to prompt me, too. The snowy mop next to me lifted his perfectly in time. And so the routine went along the line at the bar, time after time like clockwork.

What would happen, I wondered, if the first soloist changed the timing? Would we adjust, or would we ... There was no time for questions. I simply had to raise my can and sip, right now, because a moment ago Bob had. Up comes my drink. Sip. Arm lowers it. The ancient next to me raises his beer, and drinks. The routine maintains the same cadence. The action continues along the line. We might be hypnotees.