

# *Lady Caroline* *the* *Corsair's Captive*

*a short spicy romance*

*Regency Rakes & Rebels*

*Book III*



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*The scourge of the Barbary Coast is the corsair Barbarossa, and his favorite booty is an English virgin.*

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## Chapter 1: Casting Off

*Oh, dear God, what have I done?*

Standing at the rail of the packet schooner *Alcion*, Lady Caroline Sarratt gripped the smooth wood with a trembling hand.

*Why am I spurned by the man who only yesterday made me his wife?*

One afternoon ago, Lady Caroline had stood in this same spot gazing out at the same sparkling Mediterranean Sea. Shading her from the scorching North African sun were the same basket-willow poke bonnet and fashionably fringed parasol. Dwindling to dots were her parents and her father-in-law, waving good-by from the dock at Tunis.

And standing by her side was her husband of six hours: Jerome Sarratt, Comte de Gilordeau.

What incredible good fortune, to have been chosen by the handsomest, most charming man she had ever met!

After their whirlwind courtship, she looked forward with nervous anticipation to the discoveries ahead. There was so much she and Jerome did not know about each other! Would their first night together be awkward? Alarming? Delightful?

The one thing Lady Caroline had not expected her wedding night to be was solitary.

She braced herself against the rail to stop her parasol from fluttering. *Alcion's* smooth deck was slippery under her blue kid boots, but her matching gloves gave her a firm grip. They were a perfect complement to her pale pink cambric walking-dress, which Jerome particularly admired.

*My English rose*, he called her. In Tunis, surrounded by dark-

skinned and dark-haired men, Caroline's blonde complexion made her conspicuous.

Their marriage ceremony had been short, their departure wrenching. Jerome arranged everything. If he was sorry to leave his aged father, and this dusty port which had been their home these ten years, his excitement for a bright future in London outweighed his regret for the past.

Parting from her mother and father had filled Lady Caroline's eyes with tears. Tales of pirates, tempests, and shipwrecks sent chills up her spine. But only one thing did she fear: becoming seasick and spoiling the start of their intimate life together.

When he had kissed her at the altar, his lips had barely brushed hers. Jerome loathed public displays of emotion. Tonight at last they could embark upon the great adventure of getting to know each other in private.

Both the sea and Caroline's stomach remained calm. When night fell, however, and their party at the captain's table broke up, Jerome directed her to the stateroom next to his.

"Why?" she blurted in astonishment.

"It will be better so." He did not meet her eyes. "See how small and hard are these berths? Add to that the motion of the sea, and we should not enjoy each other's company."

"Dear husband, I'm sure I shall always enjoy your company."

"I think not."

With a brief kiss—dry lips grazing her cheek—he ended the discussion.

Caroline obediently went to bed alone. She lay awake all night, heartsick and puzzled.

In the morning, Jerome greeted her with the formal courtesy of a stranger. Yes, he had passed a tolerable night. She must excuse him, however, from joining her at breakfast (hand on his waistcoat, eyes rolling in his humourous French way).

He agreed to walk with her on the deck. He fetched her parasol; he allowed her to take his arm. He was friendly and gracious—that was his nature—but he seemed preoccupied. After one circuit around the ship he excused himself to confer with the captain on a matter of business.

*Am I dreaming?* wondered Caroline in dismay. It was almost as if the past three months had never happened.

Almost—except that now she wore his ring on her finger, and miles of salt water separated her from her home and family.

Three months ago the newlyweds had in fact been strangers. Jerome's widowed father, Colonel Sarratt, had eagerly welcomed a long-awaited visit from his childhood friend the Earl of Grantby. The men had not seen each other in twenty years—not since the Colonel smuggled his French wife and infant son out of Paris onto the Earl's sloop at Calais, one step ahead of the guillotine.

That son now bore the title proudly worn by his grandfather and lately restored by the Emperor Napoleon.

Grown to young manhood, the Comte de Gilordeau combined his French mother's dark beauty and his father's English strength, woven together with the sultry air of mystery which filled this exotic trading post. When he reached up to help Lady Caroline descend the gangplank, he literally swept her off her feet.

For the first week she could not speak to him without blushing and blubbing. Eventually her heart stopped pounding whenever

he entered a room, and she was able to accept his offer of a tour of the medina, the ancient heart of Tunis.

She found the area fascinating: a lively maze of walls and tents, merchants' souks and traders' caravans, dominated by a colonnaded mosque built from the ruins of Carthage more than a thousand years ago.

Jerome Sarratt she found delightful: not only a pleasure to look at, but a well-informed companion. He told her about this Maghreb region with its Barbary Coast, its traders and corsairs, its Arabs and Berbers and Turks. He never lost his way, nor his patience. He spoke the local tongue fluently enough to bargain and interpret for her.

Within a month, Caroline's heart was captured as completely as the songbirds for sale in the market.

She had not thought that Jerome shared her feelings until the afternoon three weeks ago when he asked her to marry him.

Could a wedding be arranged in just three weeks? With her father's approval secured, both households launched hasty preparations. It must be done, if Jerome wished to take his bride with him to England. His new position in London would not wait.

And it must be done here. The Earl of Grantby and his wife still faced many more weeks of travel in the Maghreb before returning home. As for Colonel Sarratt, his advancing age and declining health meant he might never see his native land again.

Lady Caroline was happy for her future husband to take so much trouble on behalf of their parents. She did not mind that they saw little of each other alone. Soon they would be together all the way from Tunis to the British port of Gibraltar, where they

would embark for England. Bless Jerome for his consideration and restraint!

Only, now they were alone together. They were husband and wife, with every right and reason to enjoy each other's company. Why did his restraint continue?

She frowned at the waves rising and falling alongside the schooner as if hoping to find the answer there.

*Have patience, Ca-ro-leen!* counseled Jerome's voice in her mind.

Was that it?

This marriage, after all, was as new and foreign to him as it was to her. More foreign, for Jerome lacked the example of a loving father and mother in a happy English home. With her husband off in North Africa, Madame Sarratt had insisted upon bringing up their son in France among her own family.

When Jerome reached the age of twelve, they sailed for Tunis. The boy had no suspicion that his mother was ill. Her death soon after their reunion with the Colonel left him devastated. His father—eager to make a man of this prodigal son—dismissed his grief impatiently. Tears were girlish, or (worse) French.

For that dreadful loss, Caroline vowed to console him. She would make a new home for him, filled with love, joy, comfort, and children.

Yes! How could she forget? Whatever anxiety or queasiness preyed upon Jerome, she must remain steadfast. All would be well once they reached England.

Behind her, bells rang. Heavy feet responded, tramping across the deck, thumping up and down ladders. Another change of the

watch.

She had not expected so much noise at sea, particularly on so small a ship. Jerome had chosen this schooner for safety's sake. Although they might feel the weather more than on a larger ship, he said, they were less likely to attract pirates.

An order was barked. Answering shouts came from the bow and stern. So many gruff male voices! Even in Tunis Caroline had encountered few women. Aboard the *Alcion*, so far as she knew, she was the only lady.

That lone soprano was the cabin-boy. His small figure came dashing toward the mainmast, grabbed the webbing of ropes alongside it, and began to climb.

Caroline glanced around uneasily. Such a dangerous task! Was anyone looking out for this child?

The boy ascended with the agility of a monkey. Halfway up he shouted down to someone—the first mate?—who shouted back. With a wave he resumed his climb.

The gentle tilting of the deck under her feet made Caroline shudder for him. Up at the top, that mast must be swaying like a stalk in a breeze.

Yet, if one could tolerate it, how far one could see! All the way to the Barbary Coast? Perhaps the very curve of the earth became visible!

She could no longer discern his face, only a tiny shape and a waving hand.

On the deck, the bell rang again. The men surged into motion.

“Madame Sarratt.” The first mate appeared beside her. “I must ask you to go below. You and your husband will please remain



there until you hear further from me.”

Caroline nodded. “What is happening, Mr. Brunel?”

“Probably nothing. A ship. We cannot make out her colours. In these waters, it is best to err on the side of caution.”

“Of course.”

She walked quickly to the deck-house, through the door leading to the passengers’ cabin, and descended the ladder-like stairs.

Jerome was not in his stateroom. Ought she to look for him?

No, she decided, not with so much commotion overhead: tramping feet, shouts, and now heavy wheels.

A cannon fired.

Jerome appeared in her doorway. “Caro-leen! Thank God.”

“Jerome!” She rose to meet him. “What is happening? Have they recognised the ship?”

“Not as yet.” He was frowning, his dark hair wind-tousled, his coat unfastened. “She flies the Union Jack, but does not respond to signals. They have fired a warning shot. You and I are to remain below.”

He stepped back, turning away. No, no! thought Caroline. “I am so glad you have come!”

It was plainly a plea. Jerome hesitated. “I must keep a close watch on our belongings. Most particularly that casket for Algiers which was entrusted to my care.”

“Of course.” She rose. “Shall I come and sit with you, then? I should not like to be alone.”

“Of course.” Smiling, he held the door for her.

Caroline’s heart surged as she stepped toward her husband.

That dear cupid's-bow mouth; those adorable brown eyes! Surely all would be well now! Surely it was only his heavy responsibilities—

A great crash rocked the ship. The planks under their feet heaved up and threw Caroline and Jerome violently together in a heap on the floor.

*from Chapter 6: Barbarossa*

The image of her husband's anguish burned in Caroline's memory when Yolande led her back into Barbarossa's chamber.

Gone were the platters of beef and fish, the wine, the glasses, the table and chairs. Once again she entered her first prison aboard the *Amina*.

That carved teak chair Jerome had fetched for her, when she could not stand. On that oriental carpet his coat and pantaloons had been ripped away. Onto that bed he had been pushed by rough hands which proceeded to search every inch of him.

How, after all that, could she expect him to mount a successful defense against Barbarossa?

Despite her throbbing ankle, Caroline would gladly have walked around the deck for another hour. The reunion with sky, stars, and sea was exhilarating—a too-brief taste of the sweet familiar world in which life might be pleasant or difficult, but was rarely terrifying.

The terror came back when the corsairs separated her and Jerome. They herded the three gentlemen forward into a second

deck-house. Caroline they forced back down the ladder to the officers' cabin.

Yolande awaited her at the bottom.

"Where have they taken my husband?"

"Crew forward, officers aft, prisoners below in the brig. Your husband, I do not know."

"I must—"

"Enough," Yolande cut her off. "That is finished. You must let it go."

She ignored Caroline's questions and pleas. If she suspected how urgently this English girl in her smudged pink dress craved conversation, company—anything but to be left alone in Barbarossa's bedchamber like a sacrificial lamb—well, what could she do?

"Can you not at least give me your advice? How am I to speak with him, with no language in common?"

To her surprise, Yolande laughed. "Oh, you and Barbarossa have a language! You need not concern yourself about that."

Caroline's stricken expression brought another laugh. "Don't worry! You know, I am quite jealous of you."

"Jealous? Of me?"

"Certainly! Most of us have a rougher initiation. These men—Well, you are lucky. You may not believe it now, but you will see."

Footsteps outside. Yolande patted Caroline's cheek.

With the click of the key in the latch, Caroline's insides convulsed. Her cheeks went hot, her hands went cold. The little she had eaten was churning in her stomach.

Yolande opened the door. Her cheerful greeting to her master

seemed to come from miles away.

*If I am sick, surely he would not . . . ?*

In spite of her nausea, Caroline rose. With her foot disabled, she could neither flee nor fight; but she could not bear to sit helplessly waiting.

Yolande stood back for Barbarossa to enter. Then she slipped out and locked the door.

The tall turbaned corsair put his hands on his hips and cocked his head, looking over his prize with a faint smile.

Not even when the *Alcion* was seized had Caroline felt so frightened. Then, too many things had happened too fast for fear to grip her. Now, like a mouse being stalked by a cat, she had time to watch her fate approaching.

He had changed his shirt. When? Had he worn a clean one at dinner? Perhaps afterwards, during the prisoners' walk on deck. Perhaps he had bathed? Did pirate ships carry enough clean water for anyone to bathe? The blood of combat they could rinse off with seawater—

He was moving toward her.

If she stepped back, her knees would catch on the chair and she would crumple.

His arm snaked around her waist. His hand slid up her back. His beard brushed her chin as his mouth fastened onto hers.