

Mother, I'm Bored

Or -- How a young lady found amusements in the Regency countryside
by Susanne Marie Knight

To be amused... or to be bored: that is the question. All too often, "Mom, I'm bored" is the refrain modern-day mothers hear over and over again once school is out. Perhaps the question should be: how can anyone be bored living in a high-tech, fast paced world with, among other things, computers, Nintendo, and cellular phones? And if "young ladies" are bored now, whatever did their counterparts do to amuse themselves in Regency times?

According to Diana Sperling, a young lady of the English minor gentry, (1791 to 1862), they did plenty. Yes, of course there were times when a young lady contentedly sat doing needlework;

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: *Elizabeth took up some needlework, and was sufficiently amused in attending to what passed between Darcy and his companion.*

or spent some time reading;

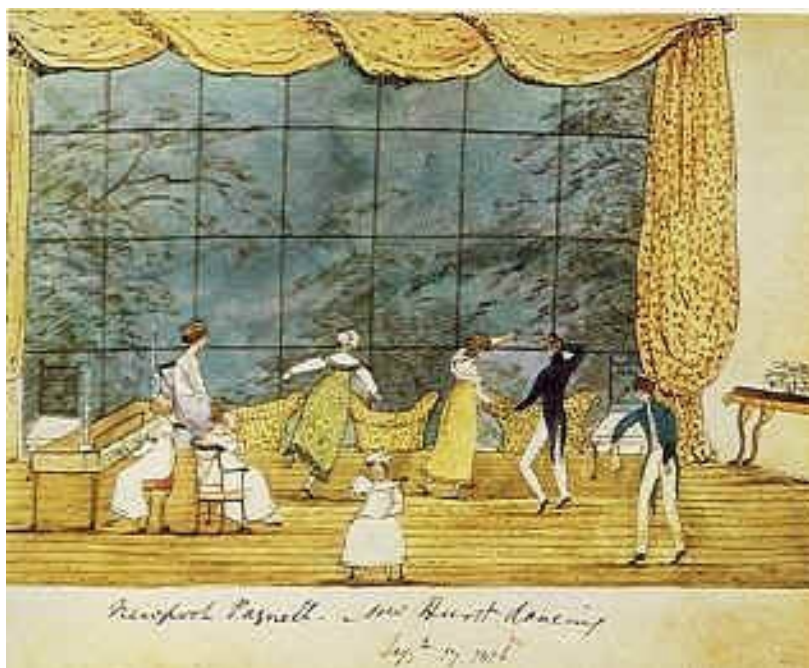
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: Miss Bingley: *"How pleasant it is to spend an evening in this way! I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading!"*

or wrote letters to family and friends.

MY DEAR CASSANDRA: From a letter by Jane Austen: *"My dearest Frank, Behold me going to write you as handsome a letter as I can!"*

And this monotony of *entertainment* was occasionally enlivened by a local ball.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: *[Lydia] was very equal therefore to address Mr. Bingley on the subject of the ball, and abruptly reminded him of his promise, adding that it would be the most shameful thing in the world if he did not keep it.*



But Miss Sperling, with a keen eye for comic detail, used watercolors to give us insights into how genteel people passed the time. In *Mrs Hurst Dancing and Other Scenes from Regency Life 1812-1823*, text by Gordon Mingay, we are allowed to peek at typical activities that enlivened day-to-day country living.

Games and Sports

What could be more fun than the game of **battledore** or **shuttlecocks**, a precursor to today's badminton? Miss Sperling depicts her brother and her sister's mother-in-law fighting to claim the conical shuttlecock made of feathers. In the background, a young lady impatiently waits her turn to take on the winner while two female children keep their gazes on the action.

Always a popular drawing-room amusement was the game of **charades**. Miss Sperling uses a dash of color to reveal some of the "actors" in special costumes. Some charades could have rehearsals, stage props, and printed programs.

Nowadays, **chess** is usually thought to be a man's game. Behold Russian chess player Gary Kasparov's sexist comment:

Women, by their nature, are not exceptional chess players: they are not great fighters.

Ms. Sperling would have disagreed. She portrays her parents, Pappy and Mum, going head to head over a game of chess, and also writes:

After a well concerted plan digested on many a sleepless pillow one oversight to leave the Queen unguarded and the misery of hearing an unharmonizing tone from your adversary that there is check.

Cricket was not a sport that ladies participated in, however observing the male player was a source of good-natured fun. Miss Sperling confirms this with a watercolor showing two ladies taking in the sight of eight men cavorting about on a field. Fanny Austen Knight, Jane Austen's favorite niece, also corroborates this.

JANE AUSTEN'S TOWN AND COUNTRY STYLE: *"My brothers are ... rather mad about cricket & we are frequently having meetings ... in the neighbourhood. As the gentlemen play, the ladies look on and altogether it is very pleasant."*

As Nicholas Courtney says in *The Very Best Of British*, "**Hunting** is still an essential part of English life (unless you happen to be a fox when it can be decidedly unhealthy) because: ... it unites men/women with each other." Miss Sperling shows this to be true in three of her watercolors. The first one is of a **stag hunt**, more reminiscent of the days when deer were plentiful. Three young ladies brave the practice of riding side-saddle to pursue the fleeing stag along with two men. The second sketch is of a **fox hunt**, where two women and four gentlemen are "in at the death."



In the third hunting scene, three young ladies are courageously riding donkeys while a man in his dashing red coat is on his horse, surrounded by a pack of hounds.

Another picture shows the sport of "**coursing**": the use of greyhounds to pursue hares by sight rather than smell.

Lawn Bowls was a popular sport for both men and women. The object of the game was for a player to have one or more bowls closer to a small white ball called the jack, than the other players. It also has a colorful history, with King Henry VIII banning the game for those who were not well to do because instead of playing, they should have been practicing their trade. Miss Sperling paints two young ladies playing a game with six men including two officers of the 13th Light Dragoons. In another drawing, she shows her brother-in-law and herself on the grounds, preparing the lawn for a game of bowls.

The Great OUTDOORS

What could be more natural for a Regency young lady than to go for a brisk, healthy **walk**? As Miss Sperling shows, walking can be an adventure in itself. Whether walking the dogs knee-deep in snow, walking to the neighbors' house for dinner while carrying clean shoes and getting stuck in the mud, walking and then slipping on wet grass, or Charles Sperling's ingenious method of carrying ladies over wet grass (by having the lady sit between two men's linked hands and arms while holding onto their shoulders), each slice of Regency life is fresh and full of homemade fun.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: ... Elizabeth continued her walk alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise.

Another popular form of exercise was **riding**. Nicholas Courtney, in *The Very Best Of British*, succinctly puts English infatuation with riding and their horses: "*To the British, the horse is not considered a sport but a religion.*" Whether riding astride, side-saddle, or traveling in a carriage, Miss Sperling depicts amusing scenes of solitary ladies and ladies in a group beset by various perils of riding, such as having bonnets fly off, negotiating streams and muddy paths, and most of all, managing obstinate horses. Or high-strung horses, whichever word you prefer! Surprisingly, not only horses were ridden on Miss Sperling's family estate, but donkeys, as well. In many pictures, the ladies are shown on the donkeys with the men on the horses. In addition to riding and falling off these sometimes stubborn animals, we see scenes of the donkeys trained as pack-bearers, fed by the young people of the house, and urged forward in a donkey race with Miss Sperling competing against her brother. The most imaginative form of riding however, is provided by a young couple: he is astride, she is side-saddle--on the trunk of a newly-cut tree!



Also inventive was how Miss Sperling showed family and friends **ice skating**. Two gentlemen have skates made with metal soles and blades, fastened by leather straps. The young lady is seated in a chair while one of the men pushes her around on the ice!



A pleasure often pursued in the summertime was **fishing**. Miss Sperling records two scenes of this unusual pastime for ladies. One is with her and her younger sister by an old boat house, and the other is of a party with three ladies and two men, all hoping for the catch of the day.

An additional recreation on the water was **bathing** or **swimming**. Miss Sperling sketches two children in the waters by the boat house. As to whether ladies participated in this activity is unknown, however, given the unaffected nature of these drawings, it's not hard to imagine lively young women slipping off in private to enjoy the cool waters of the lake on a hot summer's day.

Gardening, planting, digging, watering, and gathering berries are all drawn with an amused eye. One young lady is unlucky enough to find herself knee-deep in British soil!

For Miss Sperling, the activity she most enjoyed was **sketching**, both indoors and outdoors. In addition to the above scenes, some of the other drawings include a "sketching party," a servant feeding pigeons, and gentlemen burning out a wasps' or hornets' nest. Females are also in at the kill at another wasps' nest site. It's interesting to note that despite the endeavor, gentlemen and ladies are always formally dressed.

ACTIVITIES IN THE HOUSE

Miss Sperling was of gentle birth, but of the minor gentry. Because her estate had fewer servants, the family took up the slack, performing duties normally carried out by the hired help. So in addition to scenes of **needlework** and **playing musical instruments** like the flute and the harpsichord, Miss Sperling shows us the fun of "**papering the saloon**", which was pasting paper on the walls, taking care to flatten the curled edges. Here the three ladies make concessions in their dress by wearing aprons.

Making lavender oil and water from fresh flowers was also a noble enterprise. Not only was lavender oil used as a perfume, but also as a medicine. This was usually a female activity, however Miss Sperling shows a gentleman assisting in the lavender oil preparation.

Perhaps the most humorous sketches of a household activity deal with the **murder of spiders and flies**. The

mother-in-law of Miss Sperling's sister appears to be flattening a wall-climbing spider with her foot. And as for flies, Miss Sperling's mother is precariously perched on a window ledge, reaching up to swat at the flies, while a maid catches casualties with a basket! With activities such as these, how could a Regency miss ever complain of being bored?



Household duties aside, *dinner parties* and *informal dances* were what young ladies looked forward to. Whether at their own estate or the nearby neighbors', these events gave everyone a chance to catch up on the latest gossip, as well as enjoy music and dance a merry jig. Miss Sperling shows a family dinner that includes everyone, even a food-begging dog and a parrot in a birdcage. And as for dances:

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: Sir William: *"What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr. Darcy! There is nothing like dancing after all. I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished societies."*

Miss Sperling's mother shows her son a dance step or two, while the Mrs. Hurst of the title's *Mrs Hurst Dancing and Other Scenes from Regency Life 1812-1823* is seen scampering about merrily, without a partner. Elizabeth Longford, in the book's foreword, calls these activities "home-made happiness."

The most unusual amusement deals with an electronic device. Even the early nineteenth century wasn't untainted by "useless" gadgets. Miss Sperling paints her brother-in-law, Henry, as he tries out his latest "toy," an *electrifying machine*, on the family. Forming a human chain, Mrs. Sperling holds a cord connected to the apparatus, with Miss Sperling holding her mother's hand, and so on. While Henry turns the crank on the electrifying machine, the current presumably passes through each person, perhaps causing their hair to stand on end. What an agreeable way to end one's day!



As you can see, Regency life was chock-full of activities... and adventure. Boredom was caused only by one's own limitations. As a side note, Miss Sperling, however inadvertently, dispelled a Regency myth about marrying young or else "being on the shelf." Like her younger sister, she married when she was 43.

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