

Lonely Parade

Fannie Hurst

A scene was being enacted during the last fifteen minutes of the nineteenth century which doubtless had millions of counterparts in the hundred years that were about to conclude on this New Year's Eve of 1899.

The usualness of the thing that was happening to her did not, however, mitigate the arrow of pain in Sierra's heart, although before the first dawn of the new century had spread against her window, she was to lie in her wide bed in her wide room in a wide brownstone house on Madison Avenue, and try to apply the balm of consoling thought to her hurting soul.

After all, it wasn't the first, and it would not be the last time, that one of a pair of sisters had been obliged to stand by, and see the other achieve the happiness she had coveted for herself.

Novels, poems, dramas, melodramas immemorial, had been wound around such a theme.

As a matter of fact, in the days when Sierra's mother had been spending a thousand dollars a week on Paris clothes and giving pails of champagne to her span of horses before her afternoon drive through the park, Sierra could recall that her mother had once remarked to her two little daughters—herself and her sister Florence—as they sat opposite her with their backs to the coachman and footman, that their father had originally been in love with her sister Sweet, who, while riding at a rodeo, had been thrown and instantly killed.

At this time, which was long before the inroads on her mother's mentality had begun to seem alarming, it had occurred to small Sierra that the flamboyant woman twirling her parasol and eager to be the cynosure of all eyes, must have suffered flamboyantly during John Baldwin's courtship of her sister, Sweet.

As chimes began to tilt out the century, Sierra fell to wondering if she, these many years later, were not just repeating an old agony bequeathed to her by her mother, who, decades ago, in a mining town in the High Sierras, had suffered her siege of this same kind of anguish.

If there were any types of women more remote to her, and for that matter to her sister Florence, than her mother and this storied aunt Sweet, who had been the long-range shot of ten counties, then Sierra could not imagine it. Yet here she was, having in common with the flamboyant but pitiful woman her mother, upon whom madness uncompromising, final and fatal had swooped one night, the same sense of denial that must have been Mamie Trehane's during the months when her sister Sweet was being wooed by John Baldwin.

It was almost the first sense of kinship she had ever felt with the outlandish mining camp woman, her mother, who simultaneously had been the laughingstock and character woman of New York, and those parts of Europe in which she had traveled in irrepressible magnificence during those first years that Baldwin's copper began to yield in millions.

Florence, blonder than her mother had been, china-eyed as her mother had been, blue and gold and pink as her mother had been, was a miniature and thoroughly devitalized version of the semiliterate Mamie Trehane, whose indiscretions of grammar, behavior and dress had set the whole town laughing.

Yet compared with the ivory-colored Sierra, with her large pale hands (pads of calm), her level eyes and her level lips, her sister Florence, standing flustering beside Buri Leigh for the toast of their just announced troth, was immed-

ately in their tragic mother's image. How stranger than strange, considering the multiple interests Sierra shared with Buri Leigh, that she should be thus choosing to take her sister Florence in marriage.

The fact that Florence, with a mind as white as her voice, had no inkling that Sierra, high and mighty in her reserve as the mountain for which she was named, would even deign to look with favor upon just a nice darling boy like Buri Leigh, did not make it appreciably easier.

To be sure, Florence was three years younger, breezy in the bright blond way suggested by early portraits of their Wild West mother, but lacking in all that

high individualism and brain power, which, however crudely, had motivated much of her mother's defensive social clowning.

Goodness, it must simply mean that Buri Leigh, despite what had seemed a profundity in his chosen work along social investigation lines, was something of a nitwit himself. That, or the law of the attraction of opposites was more than pseudo-scientific twaddle.

Florence and Buri Leigh, standing there side by side those last fifteen minutes of the century, while the night of their newly made and newly announced troth seemed to sparkle in the rocco old drawing room as the champagne sparkled in their raised glasses, were the traditional poles apart: Florence, a

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Ellen's Diary

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rain or shine—with cars to carry folks" we know these are empty thoughts. To reach that peak of perfection they deserve, a September Chicken Supper should arrive at the end of a golden day, with a round full moon rising out of the dusk above a hill to set all most happily on their way.

Into what Aunt Kitty Mahoney used to describe as "a heavenly peace" James opened a door minutes ago to look in upon us in this house across the lane at edge of twilight. He whispered, with obvious concern: "Did he stir yet, Ellen?" adding then "do you think

that you'll be able to manage him if he happens to waken?" And then turning to leave us for his old armchair and his reading "see that you keep him warm, Ellen—and watch out that he doesn't smother—you know he's pretty young and tiny yet! And he's not in a draft, is he?" skeptically "are you sure? They catch cold very easily..." And we smiled at this, though we admit he does have a fine way with small ones: "well, if you should happen to need help, just call and I'll hear you!" Very peaceful has been... and is, our spell of sitting, though we shall "cross our fingers", as we come now to a convenient spot of reading.

Until tomorrow — Diary — Good-night...

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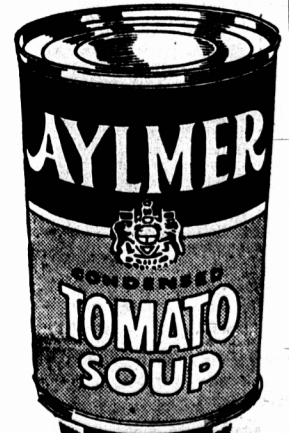


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