

NOBODY'S SISTER

James Henle

THE clock in the corner marked twelve-thirty. The waiter, having brought our drinks, lounged wearily against the wall. My companion set down his glass, looked at me with a deep, impersonal earnestness, and began to speak in a slow, quiet tone that seemed hardly to keep pace with his thoughts:

"I call her nobody's sister. As a matter of fact, she is the sister of us all, though no one ever thinks of her as anybody's sister. She is everywhere and she sees all things, and she knows more than we guess. She meets us at our weakest and our worst and leaves us angered and degraded. Yet has she faith, and the courage of the meek, and the charity born of suffering.

"She endures much, and she unwittingly and unwillingly avenges on us the misery she cannot escape. We pay for our sins and she pays for them, too, so the Devil is satisfied in double measure. And who pays for her sins? My friend, your connection with her may at times have been close, but it is plain you do not understand the honest, simple-hearted little creature. Sins?—she has none, none save those we force upon her. . . . And perhaps when the galleys are emptied and the last form is locked up and the Final Edition goes to press, we, even we, may be found to be blameless.

"Honest? If I cared to be flippant, I would say that she is as honest as the day is long. And even at night. . . . She is honest if honesty consists in giving what you offer for value received. True, she does not give much, but she has not much to give. She gives her body, and with it neither lies nor sighs. She may murmur nothings, but they are part of the conventions of her profession, and are not accepted nor meant to be accepted as more. Other women are different. Mary in 'The Passionate Friends' would have run with the hare and hunted with the hounds. That is the secret desire of every 'straight' woman—to receive all and to risk nothing. It is only when we force her to be 'crooked' that she realizes the futility of attempting to eat her cake and have it too. . . . She is satisfied with dry bread.

"You may call this sickly sentimentality. You very probably have done so. Let me tell you of a friend of mine, a true friend, for our friendship is secure. It is not founded upon moping and moonshine.

"I had spent several hours in her apartment. You could call them joyous hours or sensuous hours or wicked hours. I shall call them plain 'hours.' She had given herself to me as freely as though she loved me, which certainly she did not, and I—well, I had at any rate been ordinarily sociable.

"I rose to go. I noticed that she was getting ready to go, also. It was three o'clock in the morning. 'Where on earth are you going, Marjorie?' I inquired. (What an improvement such a relation is upon the marital state! A husband under the same circumstances would have asked his wife where in hell she were going.)

"'I'm going to see a friend,' she replied. 'She's had an operation performed on her. She has to keep in bed, and she can't sleep all the time.'

"Bats! They are called that because they flit about

after nightfall. But Marjorie, whom I now know that I respect in a deep and true sense—you are the kindest and gentlest of little winged creatures. I see you now, dressing to sally forth in the cold, windy, winter darkness, you to whom all men and all hours are alike! I took you to your friend's house and on the steps held your hand for a moment. If I had told you what I thought you would have laughed . . . or cried. For you like to be respected, much as do people a great deal worse, such as politicians and poetasters and pimps.

"I wonder if the world realizes just how much Marjorie is always willing to do for a companion. Do you know that if Marjorie should die and, for such things happen, leave behind her a little one, the baby would be taken care of tenderly and later given a good schooling and a 'chance in life,' better it may be, than Marjorie herself had? This would especially be true if Marjorie were the sort that lived in a 'house' and at her death left behind her half a dozen intimate associates who would assume charge of her child. And please do not laugh when I say that Marjorie herself is the most devoted and faithful of mothers when she is assigned that rôle. I know that this doesn't agree very well with the popular notion of gayety and laughter and abandon, nor with the 'uplift' one of anatomical charts and microscopic slides, but I am not responsible for the wrong impressions of others.

"The second point of view is nearer the truth than the first. There is very little gayety in Marjorie's life. Fundamentally my sister (nobody's sister, if you will) is honest. Do not forge that. It is difficult and it hurts her to pretend that she is what she isn't. She must seem glad to receive your embrace—and she might be, but she has received so many embraces. . . . It is nothing against you personally. . . . And to the end she shrinks from certain liberties you take. . . . Upward and downward there are many steps to the ladder. Marjorie may be upon one of them—and so may you. You may not like your work, but you must earn a living; Marjorie may recoil in every nerve when, wearied and worn, she must receive you. . . .

Not a Sparrow Falleth

A DECENT distance from the mercy seat
I stood, one judgment day. A little shy,
A little confident. I could rely
Implicitly upon my winding sheet,

Modish, yet not extreme. Without conceit
Even such an ultra-nothingness as I
Might hope for modest quarters in the sky:
With falling sparrows dared not I compete?

Suddenly stood an old man, noble, blind,
Before the throne. An angel took his card.
The overtaken Creator read the same,

And reread, puzzled. Then, his head inclined,
He spoke with much politeness to the bard:
"John Milton? Yes, I think I've heard your name."

PHILIP LITTELL.

Sometimes she seeks to forget this in whiskey or cocaine, and then is the beginning or the end.

"It is strange how much of the old morality Marjorie has preserved. She is 'loyal.' Shakespeare tells us that she dupes all men and is duped by one. I challenge the first clause. Marjorie is too simple and straight-forward and business-like to dupe anyone very long. But she is usually duped by some one. And in spite of everything that he may do she remains true to him, not geographically true, of course, but deeply and spiritually true. He may be, and usually is, a man of unspeakable vices—because men without these vices demand something that Marjorie with all her virtues cannot give. But, vices or no vices, Marjorie is loyal to him to the end, ready and willing to give him her last cent, to shield him and protect him, and to lavish upon him all the kindly care she gets such little chance to give free play. It is silly to say she loves him. It is something bigger than that. He is at once her domineering lover, her stern father and her naughty, erring son.

"I am afraid that I have idealized slightly upon this relationship. Like marriage, it never works out exactly as it should. Too often its golden—or green-back—simplicity is marred by brutality and suspicion, and lack of Faith and Charity. Too often will he accuse her of Holding Out, too often will she reply with bitter recriminations. Let us turn the leaf upon this unfortunate phase of the subject.

"But do not imagine that Marjorie never follows the fortunes, or the fortune, of a 'good man.' Sometimes she marries such a one, and then in most cases she becomes a model wife. . . . She has had her taste of ashes.

"What does Marjorie think about herself and us and the world? What goes on inside her mock-sophisticated little head? It may surprise you to learn that she is not in the least revolutionary. She does not feel that she is greatly wronged. Though she is somewhat dubious concerning the virtue of other women, she half believes that she is suffering for her sins. As a rule, she blames no one for the path she follows, not even that First. 'I was a fool,' is the way she puts it. She makes few excuses. She condemns her own weakness, where wiser people do not, though the cause lay in the cruelly low wages she was receiving. She is something of a stoic. Enduring so much now, she believes that she should have endured more then.

"She thinks that what she does is wrong. There is no attempt at justification, no blind hatred of society. It would be better if there were, but there is no room for such emotions in her kindly little heart. Sometimes she is timidly religious. I doubt not that she prays more sincerely than most of our professed and obsessed reformers. I do not think that she prays for rain.

"So Marjorie is Nobody's Sister. When you approach her you lock your soul and open your purse. To that other world of womankind she is a painted plague. She is cursed and hounded and mulcted and jailed for earning her livelihood by the only means she knows. I wonder if God loves her the less for all this. Nobody's Sister . . ."