

A Latter Day Sphinx

By Zoe Anderson Norris, Copyright, 1905, by Zoe Anderson Norris.

I CAN'T say that I was prepossessed in Cornelia Hardman's favor from the first in spite of her excellent introductions from some dear writer friends. There was in her nature an inexplicable something difficult to understand, a certain sphinx-like calm, an impenetrability, the wariness of the animal that covers up its tracks for fear of detection, that looks upon the world as its natural enemy, from which it must conceal all things possible of concealment.

Cornelia was from the far west. She was said to have had some little success with her work of writing with a magazine or two. Evidently she wrote. Always upon her desk was a typewriter, into which some paper had been rolled. There were often unfinished sentences upon this paper.

However, in contradictory evidence one saw nothing of her work in print—that is, next to nothing. On the wall of her sitting room a newspaper article elaborately illustrated with photographs taken by herself was displayed. The photographs were good, the article mediocre.

This was the sole specimen of Cornelia's work ever exhibited to me.

She lived in a three room flat at the top of a great new building of flats in a miserable neighborhood.

After our first introduction there were months that I did not see Cornelia. Then she called upon me.

After a little in her quiet way she spoke of a young German whom she had met.

They were engaged, she said. Soon they were to be married.

She was glad. She was very tired of the constant work for magazines and newspapers, of trying to follow up her work, of waiting for it to appear so that they would send her her money. The existence was a strain upon the nerves of any woman. She often wondered how I endured it. Except that I wrote with such exceeding rapidity when I did write—I passed over the unfulfilled inference that this was seldom—she was sure that I would scumb.

With that she arose and extended me an invitation to meet her fiancé. As she stood in the light of the window I observed the crowlike blackness of her hair without a curl, the straightness of her nose, a peculiar pallor that was not of New York in her complexion.

Prompted more by curiosity than anything else, I accepted her invitation and in due time made a visit to her flat. I climbed six breathless flights, part light, part dark, and entered.

I was amazed at sight of the young German with whom she was infatuated. I compared the two, resting my eyes first on one and then on the other. Years younger than Cornelia, apparently he was also far her inferior in point of intellect. I was astonished that she could for a moment consider him. It may have been that his lack of knowledge of the language accentuated his intellectual inferiority, but before I had made my adieu I found myself regretting the fact that an American woman, particularly an American woman gifted with the ability to write, could so descend. The difference in intellect was not my sole regret. The difference in their heights! Cornelia was exactly one foot taller.

Strange to say, it seemed that at intervals she felt the necessity of my



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presence and the need of turning me into a confidant of both sorrow and happiness.

Verbally she confided the happiness; instinctively I felt the sorrow in a sympathetic way common to me.

Some months afterward she made me a visit.

She sat very still in a rocking chair, looking out my window with lackluster eyes. She folded her hands in her lap and began to talk to me.

"He has gone home," she told me. "His father sent for him. You know that Alfred belongs to a very aristocratic family in Berlin."

"They all do, from their own accord," I inserted.

"Alfred does," she said firmly. "You can tell that from his manner, his

"But not from his English." "He has had busy time," remarked she, "to learn the English. He improved much before he went away. I taught him. I could not see him off. One grieves so to watch the boat leave the dock.

"But I helped him get ready. I write to him every day. Soon I am going to him. I shall not expect a letter from him for a week or two. The boat may be delayed this time of year—the storms, you know; the winds. But that will not prevent my writing to him every day. Soon I am going to him," she repeated. "He wanted me to marry him before he went away.



"WHO IS IT?" I ASKED.

but I refused to do that. I refused on account of his father, who is very stern. If Alfred married without his consent he would disinherit him. He would never forgive him if he married without his consent.

"But a bird in the hand, you know." I argued, "is worth a flock in the atmosphere."

She turned her quick eyes on me. If there existed a spark of humor or relish of it in her nature I had yet to discover it.

"I am quite sure of him," she said. "I have every confidence in him, in his integrity and in his love for me."

Apparently this ended the argument. The light flashing on a face in her brooch attracted my attention.

"Whose is it?" I asked, leaning forward and touching it. "I have never seen you wear it before."

This partly to change the subject, which failed to trend toward happiness, and partly to know. The face interested me.

"It is a picture of my mother," she said, taking the brooch off and handing it to me.

I held it in the light and in the shadow, looking at it, at the dusky face, at the calm dark eyes.

"It is something like the pictures of Pocahontas," decided I finally. "She looks as if she might have a trace of Indian blood."

"My great-grandmother," said Cornelia, "was a beautiful Indian squaw."

I compared her face with the face of the brooch. The likeness was remarkable—the same straight hair, the same straight nose, the same calm quiet of countenance, the repose of the Indian, subtle, watchful, alert to danger, but possessing at the same time an impenetrable calm, the inheritance of centuries of watchfulness.

"It won't be long now," reiterated Cornelia, "before I shall go to him."

"But suppose you never hear from him," I suggested, a bit brutally. "Suppose he never writes to you or asks you to come."

Thinking this over afterward, I endeavored to convince myself that I said it with a benign purpose of fortifying her against the infidelity of man, of placing her on her guard, but I never quite succeeded.

Again she turned the quiet impenetrability of her gaze upon me.

"I think," she said, "that I could even stand that."

But her cheeks were blotched with the tears that she had shed the night before.

It was impossible to refrain from admiring such strength of character.

Of myself I went to make her a little visit some six weeks later. I found her in rooms disfigured by upturn carpets, by swathed furniture.

"You are going, then?" I queried.

"As soon as I can get ready, perhaps next week, perhaps the latter part of this. I am selling my things bit by bit. I thought at first that I would buy my wedding clothes here, but they are much less expensive in Paris. He will meet me there. Are you cold? I will light the gas fire." And, touching a match to the logs, she brightened the bare room.

We sat in chairs before the imitation logs.

"I think I shall have two very handsome dresses made in Paris," she resumed—"one black, the other white, both of lace. I shall have them made plainly. Alfred's father is very rich. He goes to the baths twice a year. I shall go with them, of course. I have been studying Schiller, Heine, all the

German poets, so as to be well versed in them when I get there.

"I have been studying German, too, and rubbing up my French. Alfred will want his American wife to make a good impression on his people," she concluded, her dull eyes on the fire.

"You anticipate no unhappiness from the fact that he is younger than you," I said. "Such marriages seldom make for happiness."

"I never borrow unhappiness," she told me.

This rebuke afflicted me momentarily. I was silent, studying the fire. Then I looked at her. There was no expression in her face one way or another. It might have been made of stone.

By and by I got up to go. She, too, arose. Contrary to all precedent between us, I put my arm around her. I kissed her cheek.

"I hope you will be happy," I sighed. "After all, life is very short, and love is the scarcest and sweetest thing in it."

As I descended the weary stairs, part light, part dark, and emerged into the street, I discovered in my heart just a little envy of this great happiness in store for Cornelia. Before I reached home I contrasted it, with some degree of bitterness, with my own life of constant work. My room was like a cave for loneliness when I entered it.

The rashness of her prospect left its impression upon me. It remained to such an extent indeed that before the week was over I climbed those stairs once more to her three roomed flat.

I regretted my distrust of her. I wished by some slight personal service to compensate before she went away.

I found the flat closed. At my knock the woman who lived in the adjoining flat opened her door and thrust out her head.

It was a frownsided head, not yet well combed, and it rose from a collarless throat.

"Are you looking for Miss Hardman?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"She has gone home to the west," she said. "She went home yesterday."

"To the west?" I exclaimed. "I thought—"

She fractured my sentence by coming into the hall. She shut the door and stood braced, her back against it. "That poor girl!" she lamented, "I never felt so sorry for anybody in my life as I did for that poor girl."

"Why?" I questioned.

She had paused theatrically, awaiting this question to roll the history of Cornelia's wretchedness on her tongue.

"She was the strangest girl I ever saw," she began explaining. "She never told you anything. You had to find out everything for yourself."

"I never saw anybody so still mouthed as that girl was. She didn't tell me, but I found out that if it hadn't been for her people in the west she would have starved here in New York. Once in a great while she got registered letters. They had money in them. She had to sign for them. That was how I knew they had money in them. She never got any work from the newspapers—at first maybe a little, but not afterward. I think she got so infatuated with the little German she couldn't write. Writers are like that sometimes, they tell me."

"She went without everything after the German went away. She let him have some money because his father hadn't sent him quite enough, he said. I heard them talking about it in the hall. That left her almost penniless. She never complained, but you could hear her talking to the ice man and the milkman, apologizing to them. Sometimes she kept perfectly still in her room when they rang, pretending she wasn't there."

She shifted from one foot to the other. Apparently Cornelia's history was to be strung out indefinitely, at least so long as I cared to stand and listen to it.

I cut it short.

"But what about the young German she was going to marry?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He went away," she said, "and never came back. He never even wrote to her. She didn't say so. No, but I watched the mails. I saw that there never was a letter with a foreign postmark; not once. You never heard her complain. She talked to me of going to him, of having her dresses made in Paris, of going to the baths in the summer time, of his father, his mother and his sisters."

"To hear her talk you would think she was to be the happiest woman in the world, but the walls are thin, and I could hear her crying in the night. Many and many a time I have waked and heard her crying in the night."

She shook her head and sighed.

"You couldn't guess it from the way she acted," she finished, "but he never wrote to her even once after he went away."

"Rooks and Potatoes."

The well known intelligence of rooks is curiously illustrated by their use of potatoes. A clergyman in north Wales noticed that twice in the course of the year the ground beneath a rookery was strewn with small potatoes. This happened in the breeding season and also in the autumn, before the winter storms begin, when the birds reassemble to carry out repairs necessary against rough weather. The potatoes were all about the same size, but the observer was at a loss to discover their use to the rooks. An old pariahoner supplied him with this explanation: The rooks employ the tubers for measuring the inside of their nests to satisfy themselves that the dimensions are correct for the accommodation of their eggs. The potatoes when measured agreed very closely with the size of an average rook's egg.—London Standard.

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