PARADE

by Evelyn Campbell

WNU Service

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"None o' that, now, or up you go. Clear out, you—an' you!" monotonous with the duty of a hundred such nights.

The woman's voice faded whining away. "Three o' 'em . . . all in race!" As if that were a matter of mourning.

Then Brian heard another sound—too faint to be a sigh, but breathed against his ear, like the echo of a lost summer. He turned his face and saw her standing there she had been all this time, close beside him, so that he could have touched her if he had known. "Linda," he said, and she put out her hand to him like a lost child, as he had known she would do.

They took the few steps to the pavement side by side, as if they belonged to one another and had come there together. The line of questioners closed in behind them.

It was a dark street of closed shop windows and little businesses where women did not belong. A wide-open poolroom was flooded with yellow light. A fruit stand, open to the world, offered public shelter. They walked on a little way, wordlessly.

Then all at once there was a door opened to them. A broad, white-coated arm drew them, without contact, into the warm fragrance of a narrow place where one must walk in single file or be enwrapped in the steamy vapors of huge coffee urns and frank griddles.

"There'll be a little corner back beyond," explained Coffee John, signaling over his shoulder with a massive curled thumb.

They went as he told them.

Coffee John had been there so many years that no one remembered when he came. His shop was large enough to turn a window and a door to the world and deep enough to shelter his philosophy. From his narrow counter he had fed the great ones of the city and offered the cup of charity to the lost children of God. He had not moved from this place, so that he had grown wide and heavy and his face was livid with the moisture of his sustenance. But he had seen the world go by and he knew of all its faces, even the false ones, and what was hidden behind the papier mache. His broad back, turned upon Brian and Linda, shut them into a narrow crevice of their own and stranded them upon a shallow wooden bench, wedged behind a little table spread with pale, slipping oilcloth and pewter spoons.

But he was there and she was there and that was enough.

"Why didn't you tell me, Linda, Linda! What do you know of love if you could throw it away for such a little reason?" he said.

She drooped in her corner, fragile and bending from the outrift of the storm. Her face was a small white triangle against the blackness of her furs. Somehow he got hold of her hands and held them, warming them until the thread of life came back.

"Tell me, Linda."

And she told him; meaningless things that were freighted with the tragedy of the world; dark, noisome things, like paths through a fever swamp. She told of her shame that was weakness and her pride that was without honor. She abased herself with words so cruel that he was abased with her, and in the narrow cell they clung together like wind-driven moths, not enduring the blue white light. But through it all he believed in her and warmed her hands and through her hands to her heart.

"I could not let you be hurt through me, Brian."

She wanted to go, in spite of his arms. She struggled to be free, knowing that freedom meant the end of all things for her.

"You could not leave me—you never will, my sweet, my sweet! There is nothing else but you. There is no other life than ours! Listen, Linda, we will find our own. It will be small and fine and sweet, and it will belong to just ourselves. There will be no grandeur and there will be no lies. Those little houses in the snow that night—don't you remember?"

A reporter finished his coffee in the lighted front shop and slammed down the cup.

"Not much news in a smashup like that," he complained. "No news after all the boys got it. A cop an' a couple of frails. Huh. Did you see it off, John?"

Coffee John nodded, polishing a cup.

"Yes. I was lookin'. He was a fine man, though—O'Hara."

"Would have been. He'd have made the grade or been down at the bottom for keeps. Wooden sort of a guy, wasn't he?"

"Yes. Like wood. Hard."

The door slammed. The reporter's face, buried sourly in his turned-up collar, showed pale for a moment at the window. He glanced sardonically at the broad man in his narrow groove and vanished.

Coffee John finished glossing the cup. It shone like old ivory. Then he glanced at the dark shallow wall behind the partition. The two figures blurred.

He handled the cup lovingly, yet with delicacy; filled it with a stream of dark golden liquid, touched it with yellow cream from a private bottle and laid three little cubes of sugar upon the thick saucer edge. One could have been no better served.

With a light step he went back to them and put the cup before her.

"A lady might need war-r-min' up on such a night," he said in a distant, rumbling voice and returned to his place.

She was spent and exhausted. She had said all that she could say and he had listened to nothing at all. Her hand, moving, touched the handle of the thick cup, wavering, but with a sudden poignant longing for life, she lifted it and drank.

The door opened from the night. Two men entered, inquiries. Coffee John came again.

"Your taxi's a-waitin' out front, sir. He's getin' him a bite o' lunch."

They lifted new faces.

"The taxi! By George! Tell him we're coming!" cried Brian.

[THE END.]

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