

The Thrills of 1924

% Dorothy Day

The New Orleans Item, February 27, 1924, p. 5

*Summary: (DDLW #21)

—Gossip has it, that one night, a month or so ago, an adventurous spirit seized one young woman who decided that she must stowaway on one of the huge freighters.

Everybody knows about the “Morning Call” that little coffee stand in the middle of the French Market. There debutante and matron, working girl and blue stocking, sit elbow to elbow, cheek by jowl with what Evangeline Booth and Thomas Burke, both master stylists, would call denizens of the underworld, lost and abandoned creatures who slink in from the mist of the river front, evil faces from ill lit streets, murky shadows so impalpable as to be almost improbable.

The “Morning Call” is to New Orleans what Child’s Fifty-Ninth street restaurant is to New York. There is a harmless, though basically morbid (honesty compels us to say) thrill in sitting on the high stools at a late hour of the night and drinking the coffee which is really good and has a welcome warmth in this little circle of cold light hemmed in by the night mists of the river. And there is an interesting waiter there with an Egyptian, or would you call it an Assyrian profile?

Underworld for Cats

All around are the vegetable stalls, colorful and odorous, and far down the block, are the long dank alleys of the fish market, which we have decided is the underworld for cats. If you have ever noticed the fastidious grace which even the most bourgeoisie of cats will avoid the wet and odorous, hastily scrubbing paws and jowl after any contamination, you will realize that only the most abandoned cats will sink to the horrid depths of the fish market. Why, we have even noticed kittens of tenderest age—however this is a story about humans.

It was this midnight or early morning coffee habit which led some of the younger set of New Orleans to discover that there is a watchman who will sometimes allow you to cross the tracks along the river front down in this section, go through the piers, and wander along the docks, a thrilling adventure even to the bravest on a misty night. Big freighters loom above the docks, so high when the river is up that they assume a wraithlike quality, and there is

a swell on the river which you can hear rising and falling with a soft hiss against the piles. On a dry night there are spars to sit on, and the edge of the pier is raised so that it forms a convenient though terrifying seat. On some nights there is a moon.

Escort Registers Protest

Gossip has it, that one night, a month or so ago, an adventurous spirit seized one young woman who decided that she must stow away on one of the huge freighters. There was a convenient ladder—an escort (the thing simply isn't done without an escort, you know), and the night was clear enough so that she could see her way, and yet misty enough to cover her actions. She was an athletic young woman, and silent as a cat. Under protest, her escort followed and grumbled as he found a place by the side of her, on a pile of rope. It might have been the coffee they were drinking which made them overlook the fact that it might be well to find out when the boat was sailing before looking for the hold (if ships have holds nowadays) as all stowaways should.

After the two of them had wandered around the deck for a few minutes in search of someone who would give them the information, they had forgotten their purpose. Nevertheless, they found an affable and courteous young officer who took it for granted that it was perfectly all right for them to be where they were, and showed them around the ship, and tried to explain all about oil burners.

The young woman, however, had seen "The Hairy Ape" and wanted to find a ship with a stoke hold, so they took leave of the officer. As to whether they found it or not, we don't know, because it was the young officer who told us of this escapade although to him it did not seem an escapade but a perfectly natural desire of a young woman to want to explore a ship in the dead of the night. It is indeed hard to find a man who will be surprised at anything a woman will do nowadays. Anything may be expected of them.

In Black Draped Room

Then there is the gossip of the woman who had a studio down in "the quarter," that thrilling section of town, who was tired of the ordinary run of parties. This is truly gossip, because we heard it from someone who had heard it from someone else. And we don't know whether the someone else was at the party he mentioned, or not.

At any rate, the story goes that a large assembly gathered at the invitation of this woman who was widely known about town as an eccentric and an exotic, and sat in a black draped room with lowered lights while an orchestra with muted strings played Chopin's funeral march. It is not mentioned in the story we heard, whether any of the guests made any remarks about their hostess during this enforced wait for her appearance. If they had, like as not she would have appreciated these impromptu obituaries for her studied funeral party. When the black curtain which was suspended from one end of the room was finally drawn aside, the hostess was discovered to be lying on a black draped bier, clad in a long black gown, with her eyes

closed and a lily on her breast. When she had appreciated the gasp of astonishment to its fullest, she languidly opened her eyes, rose from her couch, and joined her guests.

The story does not tell whether, like Des Esseintes, the French decadent, a dinner was served consistent with the opening of the party Russian rye bread, turtle soup, black ripe olives, smoked black pudding, game with sauces the color of licorice and truffle gravy, black heart cherries and rich dark wines.

Anything is Possible

But in New Orleans, the only city in the United States where cooking is a fine art not confined alone to the best restaurants, anything is possible. Nor was it stated the reason for this party. Everyone took it for a whim of a notoriously eccentric woman.

But here we find ourselves wandering from the “Morning Call,” to the docks, to the decks of ships, to studio parties when what we were aiming at are the poker parties which add to the tensivity of existence for the women of New Orleans.

However, have you ever noticed the hectic, fevered, wandering and irrelevant conversation of the present day woman who indulges in a continual and frenzied search for thrills? Then let this day’s story act as an illustration and an object of what even two weeks of a thrilling life will do to you. Carried to such an extreme that it becomes a vice; indulged in only by those women who can afford to lose, and lose continually, huge sums in the hopes of some day making a clean up; a pleasure that can be indulged in at the home, at the club, while traveling—this is a game of chance more widespread among women than roulette, mah jongg, bridge, or any other game of chance.

(To Be Continued)