Sketch

Volume 10, Number 1  1943  Article 13

New Song in a Strange Land

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Abstract

I AM lying in a little bedroom my great-grandfather built when he started this rambling farm house to which every generation since has made an addition...
New Song
in a
Strange Land

Esther Warner

I AM lying in a little bedroom my great-grandfather built when he started this rambling farm house to which every generation since has made an addition. I listen to the October night-wind in the maples north of the house and feel the old house creak and shudder. There is no rest in the swaying maples; no sleep nor desire to sleep in my tired body. The wind gathers force and the shuddering is in the earth as well as in the house and in the trees. Deep in the earth the very roots of the maples must be shaken and quivering, and deep within myself there is the quivering also.

Tomorrow I am going away! Deep roots are being lifted, and in the lifting there is much of tearing, and of loss, and of pain. I am glad for the storm tonight, glad that I am not alone in my trembling, for the earth I love and the house I love are shaken with me.

Finally, the wind and the quivering are eased and there is full and quiet rain falling on the maples, falling on the roof, and I have no need to cry for the rain is my tears, and tomorrow I shall walk dry-eyed.

I rise and go to an old chest where I find a red plaid shawl to wrap out the chill of the night and go to the living room. I want to run my hands over old walnut so the feel of it will stay in my finger tips through the months ahead; I want to see the double windows against the curtain of black night and oblique rain outside, and inside, the shining on glass shelves of old bottles in amethyst and amber, framed by the tracery of ivy hanging from blue pots. I want to sit in the big chair and remember all the
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living in this room since I was very small and they wrapped me in this plaid shawl that is now around my shoulders, and laid me in a patch of sunlight in front of these windows where somehow, the red warmth of the shawl and the gold of the sun became a kind of singing happiness, so that always when I have closed my eyes in moments of great happiness red and gold are the colors that sing through my body. I want to unfold the goodby letter that my grandma Cathran gave me today and read it again alone in this room where she was married, where I learned to read, where she taught me to knit and use a needle. It is written in pencil on old-fashioned lined paper:

"My Deare Esther:

"When I was four years old my father put his family on a sail ship and started out to Beautiful AMERICK! We were on the ocean seven weeks. I do not remember anything about the trip except that we were all four holed up in a bunk with side boards so we children could not fall out. When we got out of the ship neither my sister nor I could stand; we had to learn to walk all over again.

"Finally, we reached Davenport, Iowa. Father went to a pile of discarded lumber and sorted out the best wood that was there and took it home to dry it behind the kitchen stove. From it he made that cupboard that is still upstairs, the one where you always kept your dolls. He made a kitchen table with a drawer in it where we kept our tin dishes. I remember mother pulling the table away from the wall just far enough so we girls could get back of it and stand up while we ate our meals. That is the table out on the porch. It is still useful.

"One day a big raft of timber came floating down the Mississippi, and lodged on the river bank. Mother took her children down to the river and made them sit down on the bank. Then she stepped out on the raft and pulled bark off of the logs, putting them in her big kitchen apron, and carrying it home to the wood-box. "There!" she said. "There is that much fuel."

"When I was nine years old we came to the farm. I had not been to school yet. Mother taught me to knit, and a ball of yarn and shiny steel needles were my toys. My work was to help with the ONIONS! The onions took all summer. We crawled along on hands and knees and pulled the weeds from around the tiny plants, and mother followed us with the hoe. Those
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onions meant a lot to us. If they did well, they meant a pair of high-top shoes, 'goods' for a new dress, a scarf to tie up our heads, and a tin lunch pail. All of that meant that we could start to the school four miles away, and go until the blizzards became too bad. We knit our stockings and mittens. We all worked together at everything.

"Part of the farm was prairie, and part was newly broken land. Tumble weeds rolled with the wind and we liked to chase them. The house started out as rough boards with slats nailed over the biggest cracks to stop the wind and the snow. Gradually father was able to put siding on the outside, and laths and plaster on the inside, and a floor of wide boards in the loft where we children slept on a corn-husk tick. That is the part of the upstairs that is your room now. He went to the timber and felled logs to make a stable for the horses. The roof was covered with slough grass which had to be replaced every year. It must have been hard for the Folks to 'sing a new song in a strange land!'"

Prairie and tumble weeds... This room unplastered! The maples not yet planted! Slough grass thatch on logs instead of the big barn where my brother and I jumped from layer to layer of hay in the dim loft!

*   *   *   *

The contour of every swelling hill, the angle of every turn of the creek through the pasture, the colors and shapes, and glittery spots in the rocks in the rock pile, the pitch of the barn roof—all these things that are as familiar to me as the shape of my own hands and feet were strange sights in a new land to Cathran Jacobs. It is the most-wish of my heart to stay here with these dear familiar things for always, to keep on planting and building as the three generations of women before me have done. Cathran's part was to help build the fences, my part should be to plant the fences she has built with red ramblers. To sing the song of Beautiful America! But these are not days for singing, and my part for the land that Cathran's mother, and Cathran, and my mother, and I have loved is to leave it! I can not leave it with singing, but at least I must leave without weeping, and in the strange land to which I am going I must make some sort of new song. The big cases which are supposed to contain the things I shall need for the next two years are standing on the porch wait-
ing for the truck to carry them to the station, the passports are in order, someone has put a red ear of corn on top of the folded clothing in the steamer trunk. I take the plaid shawl that came with Cathran in the bunk of the sail ship and put it back in the little painted chest. Morning is breaking, I am ready to go. In a few days my husband and I will be steaming out of the same harbor where seventy-four years ago a little girl had to be carried up out of the steerage of a sail boat because her cramped legs would not support her weight.

* * * *

The new song is slow in shaping. I stand in a land unrelated to everything in the landscape, unrelated to the people, unrelated to time and season. We live in a sort of timelessness because the names of the months mean only a memory of what we did at home in the month by that name. "April" is not the month when I am sitting at this table writing; it means a time when somewhere in another world I stood in a mist of fine rain discovering new growth in the garden, and the mist made drops like scattered pearls in my hair. I go out into the night and look into the tropic sky, and I say to myself over and over so I will believe it, "This is the way the southern constellations look in April, and the way I feel now is the April-feel." But this is not a thing that can be learned in one night!

* * * *

The only words that old chief Kondea and I know of each other's language are "Good morning," and "Thank you," yet between us has grown an understanding that has little need for words. I have held in my hands a unique wooden bowl he has carved. I have turned it slowly around so its satin-like finish, achieved by much rubbing of the wood with a smooth stone, could pass slowly by my finger tips. He has handed me the country chisel his father used. It is a blade of iron attached to the end of a V-shaped stick. The color of the wood is golden brown from time and the body-oil of much handling through many years. It is worn at the end from the firm grasp of gnarled hands which have filled the air with the flying chips of many sticks. He caresses the tool as though it were a live thing. He has stood for hours watching me carve. He has opened the palm of his clever old hands and lain them beside my own and laughed that the young white hand and the old black hand had the same kind of blisters
and callouses. We have stood together reverent before the sur-
prises in grain revealed in newly carved wood. What need have
we for the feeble inadequacies of speech? Old man in country
cloth, chief robe, and American hat, you of the sensitive hands,
and shining eyes, and booming laugh, you are a vibrant chord in
the new song I am slowly learning in this vast, strange land!

I am lying on an indigo-dyed country cloth under a musaenga
tree looking up into the green umbrellas made by each clump of
leaves. Morning sun has cut through the bluish mist that
screened the sacred Gbebie Mountains and is filtering through the
forest. I close my eyes against the light and the caress of the sun
on my lids is warm, throbbing, red, and gold, and beautiful,
singing through the long length of my body, and now no longer
red, but only golden, golden and intoxicating, golden like
Catawba wine, golden like the sun through old amber bottles
on a glass shelf, golden like a winter patch of sunlight on the
living room floor, and warm—warm and intimate, and secure, like
the red plaid shawl.

To Jane
Charlene Fredricksen

When you were three you found it hard
To climb a stair,
But trustingly you struggled up.
My hand was there.

When you were ten your puppy died.
I still can see
The heavy unshed tears in eyes
That looked to me.

And now at seventeen you know
I'll understand
When you reveal your heart to me.
Here is my hand.