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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆ HISTORICAL

Call Me Sonja

Arthur E. Hedstrom
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There were few places as glamorous as Cannes, France, in the early twentieth century, and few women as lovely and mysterious as a Russian princess. For Princess Samaroff's young daughter, Sonja, meeting American Norman Carey was perhaps the best and worst thing that could have happened to her.

As the beautiful Sonja comes into her womanly glory, men fall at her feet. She is pursued by every rank of royalty, but royalty does not ensure gentility. However, no man can protect Sonja from the upheaval of war and the insurgence of the Bolsheviks. After losses both great and small, she accepts her only escape: America.

A soldier returned from war, Norman finds that much has changed, including his former girlfriend. He sees that their love is nothing but a faint, wistful impression of what it once was. But the loss of his first love is the least of his tribulations, and Norman finds escape from his pain through his travels across America.

The meeting of Sonja and Norman is a collision of emotions made even more poignant because of what each has suffered individually. Their adventures and escapades—from Mexican bandits to the Communist criminal courts—find them thrust together and wrenched apart.

Hedstrom tells an event-filled tale with, on occasion, marvelously descriptive prose. The writing demonstrates the author's keen eye on the little details that bring everyday scenes to life: "The sun was hot, and men in white flannels and women lightly clad, carrying parasols of different hues, presented a pretty picture. As usual, in the harbor were anchored the private yachts of American and English visitors. A few fishing craft with gaily colored sails were coming ashore to dry and mend their nets for the following day. Children were playing on the beach, their tin shovels and pails glistening in the brilliant sunshine."

Too often, however, Hedstrom does more telling than showing, especially when it comes to character development. There is also too much back story shared in the narrative, as evident in this passage: "Before the war, when Norman had been a college man, prominent and popular at Yale, and when Bobby was only a schoolgirl, he had chosen to 'give her a rush.' Of course, Bobby had fallen for him completely, and being young and unversed in the art of coquetry, she had let him see that she was entirely absorbed in him." Much of this information could have been incorporated in other, more active ways, such as through dialogue or direct reminiscences.

Call Me Sonja suffers from flat storytelling and, at times, a passive voice. Further editing and improved character development would lift this respectable book, replete with some intriguing twists, into a very good one.

DONNA RUSSO MORIN (November 16, 2012)

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