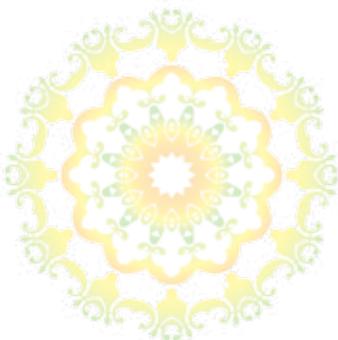


THE SOCIALIST

and the Southern Belle



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Did you see the movie *Midnight in Paris*? It's a romantic comedy splashed with fantasy. That fantasy begins one midnight when Gil Pender, played to the hilt by Owen Wilson, is whisked back in time to 1920s Paris. On a deserted, cobblestone street, a vintage Peugeot creeps to a stop, a door opens, and a gloved hand bids him enter. He does. Once inside, he discovers he's in the presence of some of the 20th Century's greatest writers and artists.

But what if you were whisked back in time? Imagine a balmy summer's eve on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Gentle waves lap the shore. Ribbons of silvery moonlight dance across the water. Suddenly, out of the dark, you hear the clip-clop of horse hoofs. An elegant carriage approaches. You hear laughter as it glides to a stop. Riding in it are a distinguished gentleman and a

beautiful lady dressed in the latest *haute couture* fashions. They smile, introduce themselves, and you discover you're in the presence of Upton Sinclair and his Southern belle wife, Mary Kimbrough Sinclair. It's August, 1915. Europe has descended into the madness of WWI, but your night of fantasy with the Sinclairs has begun.

Both the Sinclairs came from wealthy families, although Upton's father's family lost its wealth in the aftermath of the Civil War. Upton's father, a liquor salesman, was also an alcoholic, which greatly affected Upton. His mother's family lived in Baltimore, where he was born. At age 16 Upton could no longer adhere to his mother's strict rules and overbearing presence in his life, and went to live with his grandparents, who were wealthy in their own right. Sandwiched in between their wealth and the impoverished world of his father, Upton quickly discovered that all men are not created equal. It would set the stage for his future, socialistic ideas.

Mary, on the other hand, never knew poverty. She was reared "in the Southern manner" on her father's delta plantation near Greenwood, Mississippi. As a child she had sat on the knee of Jefferson Davis. Her early years were filled with cotillions, beaux, and all the pomp and circumstance that old Southern money could buy. She fell in love with one of her beaux, but her father, Judge Allan Kimbrough, quickly doused that love with these words: Jerome Winston is not worthy of the love of my little daughter. You must break your engagement at once. Like the good Southern daughter she was, Mary did. In her dismay, her mother, Mary Hunter Southworth, convinced Mary to start writing. Her writing would introduce her to the next love of her life.

While editing her biography of Winnie Davis (Jefferson Davis' daughter), Mary ac-



A young Upton
Sinclair.



Mary Kimbrough
Sinclair's graduation
photo (1900), by
Aime Dupont, Fifth
Ave. New York.



A watercolor of Ashton Hall, the Sinclair's summer home on the Mississippi Coast, painted in 1897 by Charlotte Gray Kimbrough.

accompanied her mother to the Kellogg Sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan. It was world renowned and became THE place to visit for the rich and famous alike. They came seeking the principles it espoused for a healthy lifestyle. Among others, the sanitarium attracted writers. One of them was Upton Sinclair. Just before being introduced to Upton—which Mary had requested, hoping he might help her edit her book—she was told, “Talk fast if you want Mr. Sinclair to read your book. He says if he read all the manuscripts that aspiring ladies ask him to, he wouldn’t have any time to write his own.” Mary did. And their romance began.

What attracted her? Was it Upton’s reputation as a muckraker? His 1906 fictional exposé, *The Jungle*, had not only exposed the nasty, unsanitary world of the meat packing industry, but the struggles of the working class, as well. Jack London called the book “the Uncle Tom’s Cabin of wage slavery.” Perhaps Mary was attracted to Upton’s sweet-looking smile, his curly blond hair, or his stunning blue eyes. And what attracted him to her? Was it Mary’s vivacious Southern manners? Or the lilt of her Southern accent? Whatever their reasons, they fell in love and were married on April 21, 1913. When word arrived in Greenville concerning their marriage, Mary’s friends were a bit shocked. Upton had once said that marriage is “nothing but legalized slavery...for the average married woman.” Legalized slavery or not, their marriage lasted until Mary’s death.

Throughout their life together, Mary

assisted Upton in his quest to “redeem the disinherited of the earth.” Upton always credited her with helping him to “write and publish three million books and pamphlets, flowing into every country in the world.” In his autobiography he portrayed Mary as someone “who may not always have believed in what her husband was doing but cheerfully helped him do it.”

Because of Upton’s social causes, Mary was befriended by some of America’s most famous people of that time: Sinclair Lewis, Albert Einstein, George Bernard Shaw, and the likes of Charlie



Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks. Because of their travels, friends, and hectic lifestyle, the peaceful times the Sinclairs spent at Ashton Hall must have felt like heaven on earth.

Ashton Hall, the Kimbrough’s summer home, was located where Gulfport’s Red Lobster once stood on the southwest corner of DeBuys Road. It was part of an elusive enclave of summer mansions owned by the rich of

New Orleans, Mobile, and the northern part of Mississippi. Located along the old white-shell road that eventually became Highway 90, this tony little village had its own L&N depot and was considered one of the swankiest sections of the Coast.

The house, which stood well back from the water under a cathedral of sprawling live oaks, was spacious and hospitable. It was built by slaves in the 1850s from hand-hewn lumber shipped from Florida by schooner. Purchased by Mary’s father in the late 1880s, the house would be the family’s summer home until it burned in 1935.

If you were whisked back in time, can you imagine the evocative, heated conversations you’d hear floating from Ashton Hall’s parlors and porches? In her autobiography, *Southern Belle*, Mary states that her father and Upton disagreed on just about everything. But in an attempt to get acquainted with his son-in-law, Judge Kimbrough took Upton fishing. They also took long afternoon beach walks together; Upton would sing the praises of Socialism, the Judge would applaud the virtues of Capitalism. Although Upton’s visits and discussions never made the local newspapers, Mary quickly learned that his presence had created a lot of excitement. And due to his outspoken nature, Mary realized “how impossible it would be for me to keep Upton quiet in Mississippi.”

She needn’t have worried. The Sinclair’s idyllic days at Ashton Hall were numbered. The 1916 hurricane season was active. Ten hurricanes developed, five of which were major storms. On the day that one of those storms hit the Coast, Upton was writing in his small tent that he had set up on the grounds of Ashton Hall. Perhaps he was working on an essay concerning his attempts to organize the local shrimp-pickers and dock workers into unions. Mary stated in her book that once the wind picked up, “a powerful gust of wind roared into his tent and nearly lifted it from its moorings, platform and all.” She also wrote that “the shaken author lost no time in rushing for refuge to the strong, solid old house...these violent

storms had never damaged Ashton Hall.” When the storm abated, and everyone was safe, Mary told Upton, “Well, that is the voice of our guardian angel, telling us that all is over for us in Mississippi. Papa will understand...and for me it was goodbye forever, dear old Ashton Hall.”

The Sinclairs then moved to California where they surged into a world of socialist demonstrations and liberal causes. She supported him in a bitter, ill-fated campaign for the California governorship, where he ran as a Democrat and not a Socialist, as he had done in previous elections. For the next forty-eight years of their marriage, she was, as Upton often stated, “the helpmate of a man who set out to help end poverty and war in the world.”

That helpmate suffered a fatal stroke on April 26, 1961, in Pasadena, California. One of her last wishes was to be buried in her home state: “I want again to be part of the soil of Mississippi.” After her death Upton recalled her as “the loveliest woman



President Lyndon B. Johnson greets Upton Sinclair.

I have ever known.” Although he would marry once more, Upton never fully recovered from Mary’s death. He continued to fight for the causes that he deemed worth fighting for until his death on November 25, 1968, in Bound Brook, New Jersey. Very few authors in American literary history have had so much passion for social justice as did Upton Sinclair. And there by his side, through much of that literary history, was a sweet Southern Belle named Mary. It was said of Mary that she gave up her moonlight and magnolias for Upton and his causes, but never her Southern grace, manners, and charm.

So this summer, as you walk along the beach in the cool of the night, be careful. You might hear the clip-clop of a horse drawn carriage. You might see an erudite-looking gentleman in a seersucker suit, along with a charming lady in a hat and gloves sporting a lilting Southern accent. They may offer you a ride. And if they do, take it! Who knows, maybe—just maybe—you’ll be whisked back in time—and find yourself in the presence of a Socialist and a Southern belle.

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless you and keep a song in your heart.

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Anthony Wayne Kalberg
Come visit me at
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