

The Nomad

It was Saturday night at the central station, and the prison cells were crowded with men and women. The trickle of the water from the hydrant on the marble floor, the odor of accumulated damp, and the laugh and jest held each their revelry. The bitter word and ribald song, mingled with a wail of sorrow and ever and anon a piercing cry, rose out of the din. Scattered on the banks some lay sleeping, and others rolled upon the floor in the ecstasy of their low debasement. Pale faces pierced curiously from the iron bars, and watched for sympathy in the idle crowd that hung around, or sought to find in the jailor's hardened face some touch of human pity. It was a world within itself. The high and low met here upon a common level. One bond of sympathy united them—a mutual misery.

In one corner of the larger cell some half dozen women sat in a group or semicircle, and at their feet a child lay sleeping. Coarse shawls had been fashioned into a rude couch, and on this the girl was placed. Every eye of that watching group was bent upon her face, and on their hardened features lingered the light that one sometimes sees upon parental faces. It was no stranger's pity that regarded her. The emotion visible upon every face sprung from no alien sympathy. Only love or devotion, or a sense of cast or superstition, could alone produce it. whatever it might be, the child's face was one which even a stranger would pause to regard. It gleamed white and ghastly from the tresses of yellow hair that framed it like a picture. The young golden lashes lay above the blue veined underlids like silken floss, and a smile that fevered on the parted lips resembled sunshine on the snow—so white, so ghastly and so chilly did it appear. It was a face, too, that seemed to have no care. It was not want or sorrow that drove the roses from her cheek and set the lilies in their place. It had a spiritual look, and one could scarcely think the beautiful object could be a child of sin.

“Who is it?” I asked of one of the women, who sat crooning a low voiced song, and watching with a look of devotion the sleeping girl.

She looked surprisedly into my face as she repeated my question.

“Who is it?”

“Yes, who is it?”

“The Nomad.”

“The what?”

“The Nomad, sir. Did you never hear of her?”

“I never did.”

“Take us out of here, and I'll tell you her history.”

The woman looked up beseechingly, and there was a tremor in her utterance as she spoke.

“I don’t care for myself,” she said, “but this is no place for her.”

“How many of you are there?” I asked.

“Only us two,” she replied, eagerly, “the rest will remain. Only take the Nomad from this vile place, and me to nurse her.”

My curiosity, stimulated by the wondrous beauty of the young girl, scarcely fifteen, soon aroused my compassion, as well, and I bade the jailer to turn them out.

As the iron hinges creaked on their pivot, I asked the woman where she would take the child.

“To her home, sir, to her home. She has one, oh! believe me!”

“First come into the office, and tell me the child’s history.”

Seated before the blazing grate, for it was in the dead of winter, I inquired of the woman why the child was called “the Nomad.”

“She is the spirit of the Vaudons, sir, and goes everywhere.”

“She does look like a spirit, that’s a fact,” I replied, laughingly.

“Do not jest, sir—the child is flesh and blood, I know, sir; but she is not as you and I are. You can think, speak, reflect. She can do neither; but deaf and dumb, and crazed as you may think her, she is a spirit of good to us.”

You may imagine I was almost spellbound at this revelation. The poor child was deaf and dumb, and insane as well. No wonder she looked spiritual, and the eyes, so gentle and soft as she looked into the glowing coals, had no sense of beauty or of life.

The woman then went on to say that the group of women in the cell were tenants of a cluster of buildings far down in the city. They had lived there for years, and in the epidemic of 1853 a stranger—a young girl, beautiful as an angel—had dropped sick and helpless in the narrow street. She had been taken in by her, and died, leaving this child, then a babe. It had grown up among them, fair as an angel, and helpless as the babe we received her.

The superstitions of our people think her spirit ever present, and when they get sick she is sent for, and they think her presence merely frightens away disease. When her mother was dying she tried to tell us the name the babe should be called, but we could only understand “Nomad!”

“Why were you brought here tonight?”

“A disturbance in the neighborhood caused the police to arrest us all!”

“And you had committed no wrong?”

“None, sir.”

“There, go home and take care of your charge.”

In another moment I was left alone. The light of a beautiful vision seemed to have faded when the child was gone. So innocent, so pure and in that bad company. I felt that a secret blessing warmed my heart when I saw her released from the prison cell, where the dark and impure alone abide. I never saw her again; but I have often heard since of the *white spirit of the voudous*.

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