

The Picture of a Ruin

“What face is that?”

Pressed against a shutterless window a wild, haggard face looked out into the darkness. Age had seemed the face with lines, and sorrow had whitened the hair like snow. Long and silky the tangled locks swept around the shoulders just seen above the sill.

“Is it a woman[?]”

“Yes.”

“How sad she looks!”

“Yes,” replied a third voice, “and her life has been as piteous as that sad face.”

“You know her then?”

“Yes.”

And again we looked to the window where defined against the glass the wistful face looked out into the night. The glare of the burning gas made all bright in the room. In the shadow of the clouded night we were unseen. Silently we looked up at the poor lady while our comrade recited the story of her life.

You would hardly think that a face as wild and [wrinkled] as that could once have been beautiful. Yet I knew her when few, indeed, could rival her. Her hair was long and black, and wound in many a rich coil and braid adorned a head small and beautiful. The olive tint of cheek and brow was fresh as the bloom of flowers, and there was a fascination and charm in the wondrous eyes that none might resist. But it was not in personal charms alone she excelled. There was genius in the glance of her eye; the cunning of the limner was in the fair, delicate hands, and many a beautiful thought; many a fair vision seen in dreams, grew into form beneath the delicate touches of her pencil. At home she was an idol; in society she reigned a queen. Not one whose dominion was signaled by crushed affections; by the arts and practices of the coquette, but one whose smile was like sunshine, and every one found gladness in its light. Kindly of heart, gentle and loving, none were so regnant as the beautiful artist girl.

It would be impossible for such a nature to escape the fate of her sex. She loved, as other women have done, not wisely, but too well for her peace of mind. Hers was the ardent temperament of the tropics. The fierce sun that had fevered her blood, had left it without guile. Innocent herself, loving and confiding, she believed others so. She reveled in the bright creations of her own fancy, and as some beautiful vision grew into form beneath her pencil she smiled to think how he would praise it, how the world would applaud, and she would rejoice because he was proud. Others were dowered with wealth, but the seal of genius had been put upon her intellect, and hers was the better portion.

It is an old saying, however, that the gifted have always a legacy of sorrow. However fair the dawn of life may open, clouds will rise to shadow it. For a season, the bright sunlight will hallow it like a glory crown, but at last the storm will burst, and beneath the shock, life or happiness fade. It was so with her. The glowing thoughts, the bright visions that her love created faded at last. The man who had won her love was a mere adventurer. The dream that she cherished was only the forerunner of a rude awakening. It is useless to recall what it was, and how the facts were made known. There was enough of horror in it to shatter the poor girl's reason.

For days she was stupefied, and then a weird fancy took possession of her faculties. Her art, neglected for a time, became again a passion with her. Strange shapes grew upon her canvas, and sometimes faces so sad and full of sorrow were painted there that few could look upon them untouched by the silent but piteous appeal for sympathy. And at last all the energy and fire of her intellect was [centered] upon a picture she studiously concealed. When the finishing touches were given it her reason fled forever. From that hour she became a maniac. It was the picture of a ruin. A miniature valley, bordered by flowers and green with summer foliage. The ruins of a vine-clad cottage rose from the ground and, half hid, peeped from a tropic landscape. The arches were broken, the gables had crumbled to decay. A dense grass overswept the lawn, and tangled briars wound curiously amid clumps of roses. Half opened buds peered from ruined parterres. A fountain yet flung its waters into a broken urn, and the mould and weeds of years had half concealed the sculptured *Triton* that played hide and seek with the wood nymphs, [illegible] in broken statuary stained with age. The shadow of a cottage, as if cast by the moonlight, faintly playing on the hill beyond, was delicately penciled on the landscape. Overshadowing all was the glow of a mountain livid with fire. The lurid eruption had burnt upon its side, and the track of the lava showed how this cottage was ruined. No living creature was seen upon the waste—none, save a girl, wandering alone. The tropic bloom and verdure spread around her, alone in her desolation. The face was upturned, and the features looked pallid in the light of the moon. Yet all know the resemblance. It was her own.

“And that sad wreck, peering so hopelessly into the gloom, is she of whom you speak?”

“The same.”

“I pity her.”

“Few who know her could help it.”

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