

Skid Row

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IT IS nearly time for the fog to pay its nocturnal visit. At about seven o'clock each evening the fog rolls in from the river, bringing with it that indescribable stench caused by the mere presence of the waterfront. A bleak-appearing four-storied tenement, with light shining from its cobweb-curtained windows, stands as a sentinel, an impotent sentinel, against the fog.

The neighborhood youngsters are still running roughshod about the vicinity, taking full advantage of the few remaining minutes to play before the fog calls an end to their recreation. One group of ragamuffins is playing hop-scotch on the cracked and buckled sidewalk. Further down the street is a gang of boys loudly protesting a decision in their stickball game. Elsewhere a number of the rebelliously inclined, hidden behind a white-washed fence pockmarked with political and religious propaganda, are stealthily smoking cigarettes. Some young entrepreneurs have gravitated over to the main dock where they attempt to panhandle coins from the evening-clothed ladies and gentlemen who have braved the district in the hope of enjoying an evening of dancing on one of the swank river boats.

The onrushing fog has nearly obscured the neighborhood. It is time for the small, long-legged waif in the faded, checked dress to make her way up the long flight of stairs to the dingy three-room suite where she, her parents, and her four brothers and sisters live. Each stair moans with weariness as her light step, not yet beaten down by the disappointments of life, touches it. She is so accustomed to the ancient building that she no longer stops to read the etchings on the walls. Initials, dates, and obscenities in several languages grace the walls as the sole remnants of generations of dwellers.

Back outside, the day-being has its place taken by the night-being. Across the street, two doors south, a woman's face, heavily made-up, peers through a nearly opaque window. She opens the door. As she emerges from the wooden shack and the harsh light from the jagged street lamp plays upon her deeply-lined face, it is easily discernible that the make-up is intended to hide several years of her obviously full life. An aura of weariness and resignation permeates her entire being. A man rounds the corner; her tired limp vanishes and she gyrates towards the oncoming prospect. They meet, talk, and . . . the omnipresent fog creeps further up the block, now enveloping an unfortunate human castaway who is softly serenading himself in the gutter. More shabby buildings, some pale yellow lights, a line laden with forgotten laundry. And the fog creeps on, travelling over the city as a blanket covers a sleeping person.