

The Santa Cruz Venetian Carnival

By Frank Norris

You got off the train feeling vaguely intrusive. The ride from the city had, of course, been long and hot and very dusty. Perhaps you had been asleep for the last third of the way, and had awakened too suddenly to the consciousness of an indefinable sensation of grit and fine cinders, and the suspicion that your collar was limp and dirty. Then, before you were prepared for it, you were hustled from the train and out upon the platform of the station.

There was a glare of sunshine, and the air had a different taste that suggested the sea immediately. The platform was crowded, mostly with people from the hotels, come down to meet the train, girls in cool, white skirts and straw sailors, and young men in ducks and flannels, some of them carrying tennis rackets. It was quite a different world at once, and you felt as if things had been happening in it, and certain phases of life lived out, in which you had neither part nor lot. You, in your overcoat and gritty business suit and black hat, were out of your element; as yet you were not of that world where so many people knew each other and dressed in white clothes, and you bundled yourself hurriedly into the corner of the hotel bus before you should see anybody you knew.

It was a town of white and yellow. You did not need to be told that these were the carnival colors. They were everywhere. Sometimes they were in huge paper festoons along the main street of the town, sometimes in long strips of cambric wound about the wheels of the hacks and express wagons, sometimes in bows of satin ribbon on the whips of the private drags and breaks. The two invariable color notes sounded, as it were, the same pleasing monotone on every hand. It was Thursday, June 18th. By then the carnival was well under way. Already the Queen had been crowned and the four days' and nights' reign of pleasure inaugurated amidst the moving of processions, the clanging of brass bands, and the hissing of rockets. Nothing could have been gayer than the sights and the sounds of the town of Santa Cruz, as that hot afternoon drew toward evening. The main street seen in perspective was as a weaver's loom, the warp white and yellow, the woof all manner of slow moving colors—a web of them, a maze of them, intricate, changeful, very delicate. Overhead, from side to side, from balcony to balcony, and from housetop to housetop, stretched arches and festoons and garlands, all of white and of yellow, one behind another, reaching farther and farther into the vista like the reflections of many mirrors, bewildering, almost dazzling. Below them, up and down through the streets, came and went and came again a vast throng of people weaving their way in two directions, detaching against the background of the carnival colors a dancing, irregular mass of tints and shades. Here and there was the momentary flash of a white skirt, again the lacquered flanks of a smart trap turned gleaming to the sun like a bit of metal, a feather of bright green



This photograph shows the Santa Cruz Union Depot, on Washington Street near Pacific, in 1898. Next to the depot are several wagons. These are the "hotel buses" Norris mentions.—RAP ed.

shrubby overhanging a gate stirred for a moment in the breeze very brave and gay, or a brilliant red parasol suddenly flashed into view, a violent, emphatic spot of color, disappearing again amidst the crowd like the quick extinguishing of a live coal.

And from this scene, from all this gaiety of shifting colors, rose a confused sound, a vast murmur of innumerable voices blending overhead into a strange hum, that certain unintelligible chord, prolonged, sustained, which is always thrown off from a concourse of people. It is the voice of an entire city speaking as something individual, having a life by itself, vast, vague, and not to be interpreted; while over this mysterious diapason, this bourdon of an unseen organ, played and rippled an infinite multitude of tinn, staccato notes, every one joyous, the gay treble of a whole community amusing itself. Now it was a strain of laughter, hushed as soon as heard, or the rattle of stiffly starched skirts, or bits of conversation, an unfinished sentence, a detached word, a shrilly called name, the momentary jangling of a brass band at a street corner, or the rhythmic snarling of snare drums, as a troop of militia or of marines passed down the street with the creaking of leather belts and the cadenced shuffle of many feet.

And then little by little the heat of the afternoon mingled into the cool of the evening, and the blue shadows grew long, and the maze of colors in the street was overcast by the red glow of the sunset, harmonizing them all at last, turning white to pink and blue to purple, and making of the predominant carnival colors a lovely intermingling of rose and ruddy gold. Then far down at the end of the street a single electric light flashed whitely out, intense, very piercing; then another and another. Then as rapidly as the day darkened the little city set its constellation. Whole groups and clusters and fine nebulae of tiny electric bulbs suddenly bloomed out like the miraculous blossoming of a Lilliputian garden of stars. The city outlined itself, its streets, its squares, its larger buildings in rows, and chains and garlands of electricity, throwing off into the dark blue of the night a fine silver haze. Then all at once from the direction of the lagoon the first rocket hissed and rose, a quickly lengthening stem of gold suddenly bursting into a many colored flower. A dozen more followed upon the moment; where one was twenty others followed; a rain of colored flames and sparks streamed down; there was no pause; again and again the rockets hissed and leaped and fell. The lagoon glowed like a brazier; the delicate silver electric mist that hung over the town was in that place rudely rent apart by the red haze of flame that hung there, fan-shaped, blood-red, distinct.

Later that same evening, about ten o'clock, Queen Josephine made her entry into the huge pavilion and gave the signal for the opening of the ball. The procession moved up the floor of the pavilion toward the throne (which looked less like a throne than like a photographer's settee). It advanced slowly, headed by a very little girl in a red dress, resolutely holding a tiny dummy trumpet of pasteboard to her lips. Then, in two files, came the ushers, Louis Quatorze style. They were all in white-white lace, white silk, white cotton stockings-and they moved deliberately over the white canvas that covered the floor against the background of white hangings with which the hall was decorated. However, their shoes were black—violently so; and nothing could have been more amusing than these scores of inky black objects moving back and forth amidst all this shimmer of white. The shoes seemed enormous, distorted, grotesque; they attracted and fascinated the eye, and suggested the appearance of a migratory tribe of Brobdingnagian black beetles crawling methodically over a wilderness of white sand. Close upon the ushers came the Queen, giving her hand to her Prime Minister, her long ermine-faced train carried by little pages. Pretty she certainly was. Tall she was not, nor imposing, nor majestic, even with her hair dressed high, but very charming and gracious nevertheless, impressing one with a sense of gaiety and gladness—a Queen opera comique, a Queen suited to the occasion. The Prime Minister handed her down the hall. He wore an incongruous costume, a compound of the dress of various centuries--boots of one period, surcoat of another, a sword of the seventeenth century, and a hat of the early



Queen Josephine and Her Court

nineteenth; while his very fin de siècle E. & W. white collar showed starched and stiff at the throat of his surcoat. He was a prime minister a travers les ages.

When Her Majesty was at length seated, the dancers formed a March, and, led by, Lieutenant-Governor Jeter, defiled before the Queen, making their reverences. Directly in front of the throne each couple bowed, some with exaggerated reference coming to a halt, facing entirely around, the gentleman placing his hand upon his heart, the lady sinking to a deep courtesy, both very grave, and a little embarrassed; others more occupied in getting a near sight of the Queen merely slacked their pace a bit, bending their bodies forward, but awkwardly keeping their heads in the air; others nodded familiarly as if old acquaintances, smiling into Josephine's face as though in acknowledgment of their mutual participation in a huge joke; and still others bowed carelessly, abstractedly, interrupting their conversation an instant and going quickly on, after the fashion of a preoccupied priest passing hurriedly in front of the altar of his church. The music was bad; there were enough square dances to the ball something of a provincial tone, and the waltz time was too slow; yet the carnival spirit-which is, after all, the main thing-prevailed and brought about a sense of gaiety and unrestraint that made one forget all the little inconsistencies.

Friday afternoon brought out the floral pageant on the river. What with the sunshine and the blue water and bright colors of the floats, and what with Roncovieri's band banging out Sousa's marches, it was all very gay, but, nevertheless, one felt a little disappointed. Something surely was lacking, it was hard to say exactly what. The tinsel on the boats was tinsel, defiantly, brutally so, and the cambric refused to parade as silk, and the tall lanterns in the Queen's barge wobbled. The programme-that wonderful effort of rhetoric wherein the adjective "grand" occurs twenty-two times in four pages-announced a Battle, a "grand" Battle of Flowers, but no battle was in evidence. True, I saw a little white boy with powdered hair, on the Holy Cross float, gravely throw a handful of withered corn-flowers at an elderly lady in a pink waist, in a rowboat maneuvered by a man in his shirt sleeves, and I saw the elderly lady try to throw them back with her left hand while she held her parasol with her right. The corn-flowers fell short, being too light to throw against the wind; they dropped into the water, and the elderly lady and the little white boy seriously watched them as they floated down stream. Neither of them smiled.

At about half-past eight Friday evening the rockets began to roar again from the direction of the lagoon. The evening fete was commencing.

On one side of the river were the Tribunes, two wings of them stretching out, half-moon fashion, from either side of the Governor's pavilion, banked high with row upon row of watching faces. Directly opposite was the Queen's pavilion, an immense canopy-like structure, flimsy enough, but brave and gay with tinsel and paint and bunting. Between the two pavilions was the waterway where the boats maneuvered. The *Bucentaur*, the Queen's barge, came up the river slowly, gleaming with lanterns, a multitude of floats and barges and gondolas following. It drew up to the pavilion-the Queen's pavilion-and Josephine disembarked.

It was quite dark by now, and you began to feel the charm of the whole affair. Little by little the numbers of boats increased. Hundreds and hundreds of swinging lanterns wove a slow-moving maze of trailing sparks, and reflected themselves in the black water in long stilettoes with wavering golden blades; the rockets and roman candles hissed and roared without intermission; the enormous shafts of the searchlights, like sticks of gigantic fans, moved here and there, describing cartwheels of white light; the orchestra was playing again, not too loud. And then at last, here under the night, the carnival was in its proper element. The incongruities, the little, cheap makeshifts, so bare and bald in an afternoon's sun, disappeared, or took on a new significance; the tinsel was not tinsel any longer: the cambric and paper and paint grew rich and real; the Queen's canopy, the necklaces of electric bulbs, the thousands of heaving lights, the slow-moving *Bucentaur*, all seemed part of a beautiful, illusive picture, impossible, fanciful, very charming, like a painting of Watteau, the *Embarquement Pour Cythere*, seen by night. More lights and lanterns came crowding in; a wheel of red fireworks covered the surface of the water with a myriad of red, writhing snakes. The illusion became perfect, the sense of reality, of solidity, dwindled. The black water, the black land, and the black sky merged into one vast, intangible shadow, hollow, infinitely deep. There was no longer the water there, nor the banks beyond, nor even the reach of sky,

but you looked out into an infinite, empty space, sown with thousands of trembling lights, across which moved dim, beautiful shapes, shallows and curved prows and gondolas, and in the midst of which floated a fairy palace, glittering, fragile, airy, a thing of crystal and of gold, created miraculously, like the passing whim of some compelling genie.

While the impression lasted it was not to be resisted; it was charming, seductive—but it did not last. At one o'clock the fete was over, the last rocket fired, the last colored light burnt out in a puff of pungent smoke, the last reveler gone. From the hill above the lagoon on your way home you turned and looked back and down. It was very late. The streets were deserted, the city was asleep. There was nothing left but the immensity of the night, and the low, red moon canted over like a sinking galleon. The shams, the paper lanterns, and the winking tinsel, were all gone, and you remembered the stars again.

And then, in that immense silence, when all the shrill, staccato, trivial noises of the day were dumb, you heard again the prolonged low hum that rose from the city, even in its sleep,—the voice of something individual, living a huge, strange life apart, raising a virile diapason of protest against shams and tinsels and things transient in that other strange carnival, that revel of masks and painted faces, the huge grim joke that runs its threescore years and ten. But that was not all.

There was another voice—that of the sea—mysterious, insistent; and there through the night, under the low, red moon, the two voices of the sea and of the city talked to each other in that unknown language of their own; and the two voices mingling together filled all the night with an immense and prolonged wave of sound, the bourdon of an unseen organ, the vast and minor note of Life.

Sources

- *Frank Norris, author of McTeague and The Octopus, grew up in Oakland and San Francisco. He attended the University of California for four years, but failed to graduate because of poor grades in mathematics. After spending a year studying literature at Harvard, Norris left for South Africa to report on the Boer War. Two years later he returned to San Francisco. From April 1896 until he moved to New York in 1898, he was the assistant editor of a weekly periodical, The Wave. On Thursday June 18, 1896, Frank Norris took the train to Santa Cruz where the Venetian Carnival was in full swing. His evocative piece appeared in the June 27, 1896 issue of The Wave.—RAP ed.*
- *Norris, Frank. Frank Norris of "The Wave". San Francisco, The Westgate Press, 1931.*
- *Walker, Franklin. Frank Norris. New York, Russell and Russell, 1963.*
- *The photograph of the depot is from the Santa Cruz Public Libraries' collection; the photograph of Queen Josephine is from Santa Cruz County, a Faithful Reproduction in Print and Photography of its Climate, Capabilities and Beauties, 1896.*

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