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## WITCHCRAFT IN WEST POLK STREET

BY ALICE HAMILTON

EVERY now and then the Maxwell Street Police Court, over on the West Side of Chicago, is the scene of a curious trial. The accused is an Italian, an old man or woman whom the police have arrested for obtaining money under false pretenses. There is usually little doubt as to the money; fees of ten dollars, or even twenty, have apparently been paid for services which any American court would regard as purely fictitious, but conviction practically never follows, for the supposed victims will not testify against their defrauders. The police say the Italians dare not accuse one of their countrymen for fear of the Black Hand, but those of us who know them better believe that the reason they do not bring charges against the witchman or witchwoman,--in Italian *il mago* and *la maga*--that they have got what they wanted, their money's worth. Without the help of these mysterious and powerful magicians they believe that they would be defenseless before terrors that the police and the doctor and even the priest cannot cope with. All such supernatural help must come from one born and bred in the old country. He can bring his gift with him to America, and to a certain extent he can pass it on to another, but the latter can never be a really potent witchman, like one who has learned his art in Italy. America does something to the Italian. Life here makes it impossible for a native to penetrate very deeply

into the ancient mysteries.

The Catholic Church denounces witchmen and witchwomen, and forbids its children to have any traffic with them. They listen to the sermon and then go their way, a way worn smooth ages before the priests came to Calabria. When a charm has bewitched one of the family it is the mago who is invoked to save the victim. Then, when it is all over, the priest may possibly be called in to sprinkle the doors with holy water and say his prayers, as a sort of final house-cleaning after a serious illness. In my twenty-five years at Hull House I have heard many a weird and dramatic tale of this hidden side of life in the Italian colony.

One evening not long ago our Italian women's club was having a thoroughly up-to-date entertainment, a lecture on Child Hygiene, with moving pictures. I was interested to find in the front row Rafaeluccia, with her five youngest children, listening with an attention which was surprising, for in all the years I have known her she has never treated modern medical science with much respect. When I first came to Hull House she was nine years old, a pitiful little household drudge, the victim of an almost spectacularly wicked stepmother who passed for a witch among the Italians. Rafaeluccia's life is none too easy even now, with seven children and a nervous, sickly husband who wakes her in the middle of the night to say, 'Feluccia, I am dying and you don't care even enough to keep awake.' As Feluccia says to me, reasonably enough, "If he's going to die so often, why doesn't he do it once?"

After the lecture I tried to discover what she had got out of it, but she was vague and I gave it up, and asked about the health of the family. It appeared

that both Mike, her husband, and Pasquale, her

-71-

eldest son, had been very sick. Was it the flu? Feluccia looked both important and mysterious. "It wasn't no common sickness. They was witched."

"Now why do you say that, Feluccia? Why wasn't it just a sickness that comes naturally?"

Feluccia had her answer ready. "You can tell easy. If the doctor can cure you it's a sickness. If he can't do nothing for you and the more medicine you take the worster you are, you're witched. They was witched." Mike's blood, it seemed was changed to water and he had strong fits, while Pasquale's blood was tied up in hard knots and he shook all over; "even his teeth shook on him."

Feluccia's mind is very tenacious when she gets an idea, and I made no effort to argue with her that evening, but a few weeks later the affair grew serious. This time she came in triumph to tell me they had found the witch. She and Mike had gone to a maga who had spoken thus:

"It is one who sits at table with you. Her hair is black, her eyes are black, and sometimes she rests her chin in her two hands."

They recognized her at once. It was Feluccia's stepsister, Rose, a young widow with a two-year-old child, who had been boarding with them. They rushed home to confront her as she came back from work. Mike, always a tearful soul, wept and upbraided her. Feluccia said, "Take your baby and beat it out of here," and all Rose's frantic denials--"if God kills me tonight, I didn't do it; if God kills me tomorrow, I didn't do it"--were of no avail, and so she was driven out.

"Where did she go?" I asked. "You'll have to tell me, Feluccia I am not going to have a poor young woman with a little child treated like that."

A look of cruel triumph came over Feluccia's gentle face. "You can't find her. She's hiding. Four times in one week she had to move. Nobody wouldn't keep her, soon as they heard. Now she's gone to the North Side, where they's all Sicilians or maybe Abruzzesi, because they won't know, and she'll change her name."

The family is Calabrian and so is most of our neighborhood. I was appalled at the thought of the poor Rose, hounded like that, though she always was a selfish, trouble-making girl, and I did my best to persuade Feluccia that though these things may be true over in the old country, they do not happen in America. But she was unmoved. She knows and all her neighbors know that witching works almost as surely in this country as in Italy, and she piled up instance after instance in proof. Beside, does not Rose come of a family of witches? "The one learns the other," she said, "The mother learns the daughter and so it goes on."

"What did she do to Mike and Pasquale?" I asked.

"For Mike it was for death, so she did it to him in his wine, but for Pasquale it was only for suffering all his life, so she put three hairs on his coat sleeve. He was lucky: he touched them with his left hand. If he'd have touched them with his right hand, the maga says he'd have died sure."

I asked what the maga had done to un-witch them.

Feluccia hesitated, searching for the right word. "It's prayers," she said, "but not Christian prayers."

"Well," I said, "I don't think there is anything Christian about the whole

thing. Why don't you go and talk to the priest about it? He will tell you that there is no such thing as witchcraft."

"It's in the Bible," retorted Feluccia, and Protestants like you hold by the Bible."

"The Bible!" I exclaimed. "Why, I didn't know you ever read it, Feluccia."

I don't. I can't read nothing. But there's a Frenchman in the back of us and he does. He tells me how it's all there, about witches, and devils inside people, and spirits, and this and that."

I began a quick protest, but memories of the Witch of Endor, of Jezebel and her witchcraft, of "Thou shalt not suffer a

-72-

witch to live" came crowding in to confuse me, and Feluccia, seeing me quite put to rout, rose to go, folding her shawl about her.

"So you see everybody believes it. Only," this by way of parting shot, "only Protestants don't because they can't do it. Protestants don't know how to witch and they don't know how to un-witch."

II

Sometimes the story is less tragic: it is of love potions and charms. One evening, when I had just got back from my Summer vacation, Filomena Cardamone and her mother came to invite me to Filomena's wedding. I knew that a marriage had been arranged with an eligible young barber, so I offered appropriate congratulations, but something was plainly wrong, for Filomena began to cry and Mrs. Cardamone to groan and shake her head.

Then it came out that the bridegroom was not the barber, but Tony Navigato, a clothing worker who had been a despised suitor because he was not making as good money as Filomena herself, a skilled buttonhole worker on Hart, Schaffner and Marx dress-coats. Tony, instead of taking his rejection humbly, had gone to a witchman and for ten dollars secured a love potion. This he dropped into a bottle of pop and tried to make Filomena drink it, but she saw that the pop looked soapy, and refused, challenging him to drink it himself. Of course he was obliged to do it or confess, so there were ten good dollars gone and no result except to make him more in love than ever. So he went to a stronger and more expensive witchman, who said that the charm would not work unless he could have something Filomena had worn. Tony bribed a small brother of hers to steal a little Dutch collar, which was duly delivered to the witchman.

Somehow it leaked out that the famous mago had in his possession something belonging to Filomena, and Mrs. Cardamone heard it with a cold terror. She sent for Tony. "I take him by the neck," she told Me--she is about five feet two inches high--"and shake him till his teeth was loose. 'You bring me that back,' I say, 'or I kill you in your bed.'" Tony brought the collar back, "stuck through and through with pin holes and smelling like the grave."

Well, of course, the charm must be removed, so she appealed to a witchman who sold her three white powders, one to be sprinkled on the collar every Friday for three Fridays; on the last day the collar must be buried. But even this was not enough. Mrs. Cardamone was possessed with the thought that only the one who had done the witching could really do the unwitching, so she took twenty dollars and

went to Tony's witchman. That old sinner assured her that she was quite right ; it was he alone who could take away the charm. But so strong was that charm that even he could do it only partially. Filomena's life would be saved, but she must forsake the barber and marry Tony before the last Friday in October. Therefore they had come to invite me to the wedding. I may say in passing that it was a most enjoyable wedding, with an aroma of romance and excitement which is usually quite lacking in the mariages de convenance of the Italian colony. Filomena's tears were soon dried. Indeed, she was decidedly puffed up by the fuss that had been made over her. As for Tony, it was the general opinion that he had acted with great gallantry. As one of the bridesmaids said to me, "Gee, wouldn't any girl be crazy about a man who done as much for her as Tony done for Filomena!" That the pinpricks in the collar might have killed Filomena was known to all the Italians. Just recently a young man in our neighborhood died after a lingering illness which the doctors called a consumption, but that was all they knew. His mother told the neighbors what had really happened. Vincenzo was to marry Carolina, but Concetta wanted him, and when she found she could not get him she

-73-

took a doll and called it Vincenzo. She stuck a pin into it every day and each time she did so a stroke went through Vincenzo's heart. Then, when the doll was full of pins, she threw it into the Lake. At this point Vincenzo's mother consulted a famous maga who told her that the only way to save her son would be to find the doll and pull out all the pins. How could the poor woman find a doll in Lake Michigan? So of course Vincenzo died.

This method is a favorite, not only with disappointed lovers, but with mothers who see their sons turning from eligible maidens and following after the daughters of Heth. Rocco's mother used it to throw into a decline the girl he was going with, Cristina, as fine and fat a girl as you ever saw. When she fell ill her mother could not understand it, but soon she guessed and then she knew Cristina was for death, no matter what the doctors did for her.

I was told of an old woman far off in the mountains of Calabria who sent a death stroke over the ocean into a tenement in West Polk street. She did not need a doll to do the deed; a lemon was enough. In the Chicago tenement were her eldest son and the girl he married against his mother's will. So, for revenge, when news came to her of the birth of a baby, the old woman took a lemon and stuck it full of pins and as it withered and shrank, the baby pined away and died.

Narduccia, the young mother, came and told me about it. She was born in Chicago, she has never seen Italy, she has gone to our schools, all her life has been spent here, yet she knows what the dark ways of Italian magic are as well as if she were living in Calabria.

There is a form of Italian lore magic which seems to me even more primitive and savage than charms and philtres. One of my Hull House friends went to a dreary tenement to see a young woman who had been deserted by her husband. As she walked up and down soothing her sickly, fretful baby, her old mother told in Italian the story of her daughter's misfortune. It was not Ricardo's fault that he left his wife and baby and went off with the woman downstairs. She had witched him. He cried sad cried. Sitting right there in the kitchen he cried

because he must go; she was drawing him. She was a big, handsome woman, the mother of six children, but she left them and she took Ricardo with her. How did she do it? With her own blood. Into a glass of wine she dropped three drops of her blood and gave it to him to drink, and after that he was helpless. Her blood within him drew him to her and, fight as he would, he had to follow her.

Something of unbelief must have shown in my friend's face, for the old woman added, with much dignity, "You of the New World do not know these things, but we come from a very old country and we know."

### III

It is quite plain that there are some alleviations to the grief and horror of the witched and of their relatives. After all, it is less mortifying to be deserted by one's husband if it is demoniacal magic that has done it and not the superior charms of the lady downstairs. Even the death of a beloved son is less hard to bear when one is the center of interest and excitement Or a whole neighborhood, with people coming in all the time to hear the story and lap up eagerly each horrifying detail. It also makes for charity toward the erring, who are not really responsible for their sins, and perhaps helps to explain that fact which is so strange to an Anglo-Saxon, that in Italian the same word stands for disgrace and misfortune. Ricardo, the wife-deserter, is *disgraziato*, a term of pity, perhaps not untinged with contempt, but quite free from moral condemnation.

We Anglo-Saxons are dependent on a proper setting for our sense of romance and mystery. To us West Polk street is inconceivable as a background for anything

but the drab details of life in a poor

-74-

neighborhood, enlivened a little by the ever-present danger of violent death under a motor-truck, but with nothing for the imagination to fasten to, no single touch of the weird, the supernatural. But to the Italian these things are as much a part of the real stuff of life as is his job in the street-cleaning gang, his tenement home, the push-carts and garbage wagons on the street. La belle dame sans merci in West Polk street has no elfin grot in which to snare her lover. She lives at 947, second floor rear, and her victim is only a teamster, but he can be brought to quite as complete collapse of mind and will as if he were a knight-at-arms, alone and palely loitering. Rossetti's sister Helen must have a wonderful background of gloomy castle, and moon, and frozen dew, and midnight incantations while her waxen man slowly melts before the fire. Concetta Rovello needs none of these things. She spends her days packing cracker-jack at Florsheim and Griesheim's and her nights in a tiny bedroom with her younger sister, but her charms are just as deadly. She does not even need a waxen man. A doll from the ten-cent store will do as well, and for a nickel she can buy enough pins to utterly destroy the faithless Vincenzo, who "clerks by the Twelfth Street Store."

The police court in Maxwell street dismisses the old mago for lack of evidence against him and he goes forth with his aura of dark sorcery undimmed, and where he goes the commonplace is changed to mystery and terror, horrendous and delightful at the same time. Is he obtaining money under false pretenses? I

think not. There are so many unseen perils lurking round every corner of these West Side streets and at any moment a curse may fall on an unsuspecting victim. Who can tell whence it came and who can lift it? Only the mago, and surely it is worth ten or even twenty hard-earned dollars to unlock his tongue and then listen to his amazing revelations.

-75-