

“New York Fountains and Astor Baths”

by Catharine M. Sedgwick

As I opened my window this morning the air came in freshly, and as sweetly as if it were freighted with the fragrance of all the blossoming orchards on Long Island. I did not resist its invitation, and left my darkened chamber for a morning walk. " God made the country and man made the town," Cowper said in poetic phrase, and thousands have repeated the sentiment in prose and poetry. But is the city all man's journey-work? We leave out of consideration its in-

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ner world, where, in its most abject conditions, Crabbe and Dickens have found the elements and most abounding sources of poetic creation. But is not the sky, God's noblest architecture, hanging over the thronging homes of the city? Do not the eloquent tides of the ocean twice in twenty-four hours beat against it? And is there no natural beauty in the young trees planted on either side of our streets, whose boughs almost interlace over our heads? There are noble old trees, too, marking the site of some former country-home, now taken into the heart of the city and surrounded with brick and mortar walls; they seem like patriarchs looking complacently on the new homes of their children, and the fresh wreathing of their old boughs in this spring-time is like the clasp and embrace of childhood. Windows are filled with the loveliest flowers of the season, and Nature's hymn is not less sincere nor less touching because it comes from the prisoner-birds that are hung on the outer wall. With their music chimes in well the chorus of merry boys' voices, who are letting out the gushing water from an open hydrant. Children, birds and flowers are fresh from the hands of their Maker, and have still the air of Heaven about them. Such thoughts came thronging as I pursued my walk. I felt that God's witnesses were around me, and, undisturbed by the dissonant morning cries, I walked up to Union Square, where the din of the busy city subsides into a distant murmur. The herbage within the railing was freshened by last evening's shower, and the fountain was playing. The smaller fountains were sparkling around it—no, *playing* too, for this word, which all the world uses, best expresses what seems the sentient joyousness of a fountain.

If an artist can perceive divine forms in the unwrought marble, a poet should discern a divinity or nymph showering brilliants from her floating tresses invested in this column of water as it springs sixty feet sheer up into the blue atmosphere.

We are called a boastful people, and it must be confessed that we sometimes deal in superlatives when it would be more true as well as modest to fall a little lower in the scale of comparison, but surely we may hold up our heads beside our fountains. We have seen the renowned fountains of Rome. Those before St. Peter's are exceedingly beautiful from the simplicity and grace of their ornaments, but the small amount of water makes them inexpressive compared with ours. The Fountain

Paolina, though its name was designed to illustrate its architect and Pope Paolo V., does them little honor. The effect of the rich volume of water is impaired by the cumbrous ornaments that are placed about it. Art has indeed oftener injured than adorned the abounding fountains of Rome. We can see neither reason nor beauty in water being poured through the mouths of lions and dragons; and an immense labor and expense seems to us wasted on the huge fountain of Trevi, which has been thus pleasantly enough described.

"The fountain of Trevi has been renowned through the world, and so highly extolled that my expectations were raised to the highest stretch; and great was my disappointment when I was taken into a little, dirty, confined, miserable piazza, nearly filled up with one large palace, beneath which spouted out a variety of tortuous streamlets that are made to gurgle over artificial rocks, and to bathe the bodies of various seahorses, tritons, and other marble monsters, which are sprawling about in it. After some cogitation, you discover they are trying to draw Neptune on, who, though stuck up in a niche of the palace wall as if meant to be stationary, is standing at the same time with his feet on a sort of car, as if intended to be riding over the waters."

In our fountains we are safe in our simplicity. Nature is made our captive by art, and then left to her own power and inimitable grace. Is not this wisest? If the art of the old world, aided by the profuse expenditure of papal revenues, has failed to attain its object, we could hardly hope for success.

We are but beginning to feel the immense benefits to be derived from the introduction of the Croton water. If we have said "something too much" of our canals and unpaid and unfinished railroads, this great work of the Croton aqueduct has been going quietly on, and the people have intelligently given their consent, man by man, to an enormous tax to procure the incalculable good of pure water and plenty of it at every door—yes, plenty for our present handful of three hundred thousand—and plenty, too, for the three millions in perspective.

So unobtrusively has the work been done, that to many visitors to our city it is first proclaimed by the voice of the fountains.

Calculations have been made of the economical effect of the water in the promotion of health, and the reduction of insurance against fire. But has any one calculated the refining influence of the power to cover every ragged wall with a grape-vine, and to fill every yard—be it but a space of ten feet square—with flowers. Heat and water are the elements of vegetation. That we have heat enough, and tropical heat, no one will deny that has survived a New York summer; and now we have pure water without measure.

The lovely fountains seem like a message from the spirit-land. They give a new value to existence in our city, see and hear them when we may; in the brightest of hot noonday, or with the rose and purple of the twilight clouds upon them, or

with the rainbow hovering round them—in the moon-beams, or by the pale star-light, or if you but hear their silken rustling in a dreary winter's night, when nothing can be seen but the dimmed lamp-light struggling through the foggy atmosphere. Material results may be estimated, but who that marks the hard faces softening into smiles as they gather round the basins of the fountains, and the clusters of children that linger there, will undertake to calculate the amount of soul they breathe into this dull mass of humanity? Body and spirit, languishing in the fiery summer heat of the city, will be refreshed by these fountains. Old age will have its tranquilizing seats about them, and friends and lovers moonlight strolls within the sound of their music.

They will inspire ideas of grace and beauty, and prompt longings for higher species of enjoyment than mere animal gratification. A scrubbed little boy brought a parcel to a lady in Union Square the other day. She told him she was sorry she must detain him for half an hour. " Oh, never mind, ma'am," he replied, " I can go in and look at the Fountain!" How many dead and idle half hours may thus have life and enjoyment breathed into them! How many fretted and galled in the harness of dull working-day life may here find refreshment! The gifted and educated have more direct ministrations to their spirits, but the Fountains are ministers to the great mass, whose minds are reached only through their sensations. And, perhaps, as their

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dews fall on the cheeks furrowed in Wall Street, the cares accumulated there may press less heavily—and perhaps, too, as their cool airs float around younger and fairer brows, the mass of city frivolities may melt away, and a response come from the living nature, deep buried in the heart, to beautiful external nature.

No—if man has made our city, God has not abandoned it. We have gained another great source of spiritual refinement in the Greenwood Cemetery. The position of this burial place is well chosen, being separated by water from the city, so that it can never, in any case, endanger its health; while it is near enough to be of easy and pleasant access. We can hardly imagine a mind so dull as not to be excited by a visit to this great cemetery. There is magnificence in its extent. It was a great thought to rescue from our accumulating, thronging, living population, four hundred acres for the repose of the dead. Near as it is to the city, the consecration of nature is yet upon it. Man has not mutilated nor in any way changed the natural form of the ground. There is every variety in its face, hills and wavy eminences, glades, dells, and ravines. There are still lovely woodlands, where the dog-wood blossoms in the springtime over sheets of violets and anemones. There are bits of water that look out upon you like living eyes from the green earth, and deep sunk amidst surrounding hillsides is a little lake—" Sylvan Water." It is fitly set here, still, serene, and shadowy, an image of death, and silently breathing forth in its reflection of the ever-burning light of Heaven, a promise of immortality.

There are points of view where you perceive your proximity to the city, and this juxtaposition produces the effect of sublimity. There is the "full tide of human existence," and those living throngs whose blood is now hot with projects, pursuits, loves and hates are to be borne, one after another, in solemn procession, hither to await the resurrection and the life. What a comment on their present being!

The noblest and perhaps the most harmonious feature of this scene, is the far-stretching view of the ocean—the best image of eternity—the sublimest type of His power, whose power is love.

It is in its scenery that Greenwood Cemetery seems to us far to surpass any thing we have seen at home or abroad. Beside the metropolitan city and its suburbans, (we beg pardon of beautiful, independent Brooklyn) there is the bay, and its accompaniments, islands, fortifications, ships and steamers, the lovely villages of Long Island, that seem sleeping on the lap of their mother earth, while Heaven smiles on them; the fruitful farms and homesteads of the Long Island fanners, images of rural occupation and contentment.

These multiplied objects are not stretched out before you in one great overwhelming and confusing scene, but are in parts perceived at different points as you emerge from the deeply shaded drive, each view an harmonious picture beautifully set in a leafy framework. Yes! surely this Greenwood Cemetery is an antagonist spirit to our city-world.

But, to return once more to the fountains. I crossed Union Park this evening in the twilight, and saw a man, as I thought, asleep on one of the benches. As I approached I recognized him. "Are you sleeping here?" I said. He roused, and smiling replied, "Yes—no—yes, I have been in a sleep, or *reverie*, as my mother calls it, when she has been surprized in her chair, in what the rest of us call rather a profound nap. At any rate, I have been dreaming."

"Of some Undine?"

"No, but of some things naturally suggested by the fountain, and naturally enough too, intermingled with previous thoughts. As I passed Mr. Astor's door this morning I saw him getting into his carriage. I looked at the old gentleman, who you know is infirm, and has rather a sad countenance, and I sighed—for truly I do not envy any man his riches—at the thought that his immense wealth could procure for him neither health nor happiness. And now, as I sat dreaming here, I thought some years had passed over my head, and that I was wandering about the city, from which I seemed to have been absent for many years. Suddenly I came upon a pretty range of buildings that were new to me. On a tablet over a door was inscribed, in large golden letters,

ASTOR BATHS,

and underneath,

The Lord forgetteth not him who remembereth the Poor.

"Astor baths!" I exclaimed to a passer by, " what is the meaning of this?"

"Oh, you are a stranger in the city," he replied. " This building, sir, was erected by our rich fellow citizen, Mr. Astor, soon after the introduction of the Croton water, for the free use of the poor. A very noble charity it is, sir. I live at the next house, and I see sometimes hundreds in a day—certainly hundreds during the hot months—who go in here wearied and exhausted, and come out refreshed and invigorated. Mothers, from close streets, and over-crowded habitations, bring their pale little children here. It would do your heart good to hear their splashings and shoutings."

" Strange," I said, " that I never heard of this before—I have heard of a library Mr. Astor gave to the city."

" Yes," replied my informer, " he did that too, and that was a noble benefaction—food and refreshment for the mind. I have heard it was that put him upon thinking of doing some great thing for the poor. He could, you know, without wronging relations, or friends. It would be well if all rich men would think, as the shadows of the grave are falling upon them, that they but hold in trust what God has given them. They say Mr. Astor was a happier man ever after he built these baths, and I should not wonder if it were true. The breath of thanksgiving that rises from the comforted poor should make a healthy atmosphere about their benefactor; and surely when he departed hence, this work followed him to His bar, who saith, ' By their works shall they be judged.'"

Would it were not a dream!