

CHAPTER XVIII.

Poetry in the Table Rock albums—Poems by Colonel Porter, Willis G. Clark, Lord Morpeth, José Maria Heredia, A. S. Ridgely, Mrs. Sigourney, and J. G. C. Brainard.

BEFORE the last fall of Table Rock, there stood upon it for many years a comfortable summer-house, where people could take refuge from the spray, look at the Falls, partake of luncheon, and procure guides and dresses to go under the sheet. In the sitting-room was a large round table, on which were placed a number of albums, as they were called. In these visitors could write whatever thoughts or sentiments might be suggested by the scene. With the grand reality before them but few persons attempted anything serious, by far the greater number adopting the facetious vein. It was emphatically light literature. One or two collections of it have been published, furnishing the reader with only a modicum of sense to an intolerable quantity of nonsense.

The following specimens are better than the average :

“To view Niagara Falls, one day,
A Parson and a Tailor took their way.
The Parson cried, while rapt in wonder
And list'ning to the cataract's thunder:
‘Lord! how thy works amaze our eyes,
And fill our hearts with vast surprise!’
The Tailor merely made this note:
‘Lord! what a place to sponge a coat!’”

"THOUGHTS ON VISITING NIAGARA.

- " I wonder how long you've been a roarin'
At this infernal rate:
I wonder if all you've been a pourin'
Could be ciphered on a slate.
- " I wonder how such a thund'rin' sounded
When all New York was woods;
I suppose some Indians have been drowned
When rains have raised your floods.
- " I wonder if wild stags and buffaloes
Hav'nt stood where now I stand;
Well, 'spose—bein' scared at first—they stub'd their toes,
I wonder where they'd land!
- " I wonder if the rainbow's been a shinin'
Since sunrise at creation;
And this waterfall been underminin'
With constant spatteration!
- " That Moses never mentioned ye, I've wonder'd,
While other things describin';
My conscience! how loud you must have thunder'd
While the deluge was subsidin'!
- " My thoughts are strange, magnificent, and deep
While I look down on thee.
Oh! what a splendid place for washing sheep
Niagara would be!
- " And oh! what a tremendous water power
Is wasted o'er its edge!
One man might furnish all the world with flour
With a single privilege.
- " I wonder how many times the lakes have all
Been emptied over here?

Why Clinton didn't feed the Grand Canawl
From hence, I think is queer."

The most graceful verses on Niagara ever written by a resident are the following by the late Colonel Porter, who was an artist both with the pencil and the pen. They were written for a young relative in playful explanation of a sketch he had drawn at the top of a page in her album, representing the Falls in the distance, and an Indian chief and two Europeans in the foreground:

- " An Artist, underneath his sign (a masterpiece, of course)
Had written, to prevent mistakes, 'This represents a horse':
So ere I send my Album Sketch, lest connoisseurs should err,
I think it well my Pen should be my Art's interpreter.
- " A chieftain of the Iroquois, clad in a bison's skin,
Had led two travelers through the wood, La Salle and Hennepin.
He points, and there they, standing, gaze upon the ceaseless flow
Of waters falling as they fell two hundred years ago.
- " Those three are gone, and little heed our worldly gain or loss—
The Chief, the Soldier of the Sword, the Soldier of the Cross.
One died in battle, one in bed, and one by secret foe;
But the waters fall as once they fell two hundred years ago.
- " Ah, me! what myriads of men, since then, have come and gone;
What states have risen and decayed, what prizes lost and won;
What varied tricks the juggler, Time, has played with all below:
But the waters fall as once they fell two hundred years ago.
- " What troops of tourists have encamped upon the river's brink;
What poets shed from countless quills Niagaras of ink;
What artist armies tried to fix the evanescent bow
Of the waters falling as they fell two hundred years ago.

* * * * *

“ And stately inns feed scores of guests from well replenished larder,
 And hackmen drive their horses hard, but drive a bargain harder ;
 And screaming locomotives rush in anger to and fro :
 But the waters fall as once they fell two hundred years ago.

“ And brides of every age and clime frequent the island's bower,
 And gaze from off the stone-built perch—hence called the Bridal Tower—
 And many a lunar belle goes forth to meet a lunar beau,
 By the waters falling as they fell two hundred years ago.

“ And bridges bind thy breast, O stream ! and buzzing mill-wheels turn,
 To show, like Samson, thou art forced thy daily bread to earn :
 And steamers splash thy milk-white waves, exulting as they go,
 But the waters fall as once they fell two hundred years ago.

“ Thy banks no longer are the same that early travelers found them,
 But break and crumble now and then like other banks around them ;
 And on their verge our life sweeps on—alternate joy and woe ;
 But the waters fall as once they fell two hundred years ago.

“ Thus phantoms of a by-gone age have melted like the spray,
 And in our turn we too shall pass, the phantoms of to-day :
 But the armies of the coming time shall watch the ceaseless flow
 Of waters falling as they fell two hundred years ago.”

On turning to the more serious poems that have been written on the theme, the reader naturally experiences a feeling of disappointment that a scene which has filled and charmed so many eyes should have found so few inter-

preters. Only those who see Niagara know how fast the tongue is bound when the thought struggles most for utterance. One who seems to have experienced this feeling thus expresses it :

“ I came to see ;
 I thought to write ;
 I am but — dumb.”

The late Mr. Willis G. Clark thus expands the same sentiment :

“ Here speaks the voice of God—let man be dumb,
 Nor with his vain aspiring hither come.
 That voice impels the hollow-sounding floods,
 And like a Presence fills the distant woods.
 These groaning rocks the Almighty's finger piled ;
 For ages here his painted bow has smiled,
 Mocking the changes and the chance of time—
 Eternal, beautiful, serene, sublime !”

The following from the Table Rock Album was written by the late Lord Morpeth :

NIAGARA FALLS.—BY LORD MORPETH.

“ There's nothing great or bright, thou glorious Fall !
 Thou mayest not to the fancy's sense recall.
 The thunder-riven cloud, the lightning's leap,
 The stirring of the chambers of the deep ;
 Earth's emerald green and many tinted dyes,
 The fleecy whiteness of the upper skies ;
 The tread of armies thickening as they come.
 The boom of cannon and the beat of drum ;

The brow of beauty and the form of grace,
 The passion and the prowess of our race;
 The song of Homer in its loftiest hour,
 The unresisted sweep of human power;
 Britannia's trident on the azure sea,
 America's young shout of Liberty!
 Oh! may the waves which madden in thy deep
There spend their rage nor climb the encircling steep;
 And till the conflict of thy surges cease
 The nations on thy banks repose in peace."

The extracts below are from a poem written after a visit to the Falls by José Maria Heredia, and translated from the Spanish by William Cullen Bryant:

"NIAGARA.

"Tremendous torrent! for an instant hush
 The terrors of thy voice, and cast aside
 Those wide involving shadows, that my eyes
 May see the fearful beauty of thy face!

* * * * *

"Thou flowest on in quiet, till thy waves
 Grow broken 'midst the rocks; thy current then
 Shoots onward like the irresistible course
 Of destiny. Ah, terribly they rage,—
 The hoarse and rapid whirlpools there! My brain
 Grows wild, my senses wander, as I gaze
 Upon the hurrying waters; and my sight
 Vainly would follow, as toward the verge
 Sweeps the wide torrent. Waves innumerable
 Meet there and madden,—waves innumerable
 Urge on and overtake the waves before,
 And disappear in thunder and in foam.

"They reach, they leap the barrier,—the abyss
 Swallows insatiable the sinking waves.
 A thousand rainbows arch them, and woods
 Are deafened with the roar. The violent shock
 Shatters to vapor the descending sheets.
 A cloudy whirlwind fills the gulf, and heaves
 The mighty pyramid of circling mist
 To heaven. * * * * *
 What seeks my restless eye? Why are not here,
 About the jaws of this abyss, the palms,—
 Ah, the delicious palms,—that on the plains
 Of my own native Cuba spring and spread
 Their thickly foliaged summits to the sun,
 And, in the breathings of the ocean air
 Wave soft beneath the heaven's unspotted blue?"

"But no, Niagara,—thy forest pines
 Are fitter coronal for thee. The palm,
 The effeminate myrtle and pale rose may grow
 In gardens and give out their fragrance there,
 Unmanning him who breathes it. Thine it is
 To do a nobler office. Generous minds
 Behold thee, and are moved and learn to rise
 Above earth's frivolous pleasures; they partake
 Thy grandeur at the utterance of thy name.

* * * * *

"Dread torrent, that with wonder and with fear
 Dost overwhelm the soul of him who looks
 Upon thee, and dost bear it from itself,—
 Whence hast thou thy beginning? Who supplies,
 Age after age, thy unexhausted springs?
 What power hath ordered that, when all thy weight
 Descends into the deep, the swollen waves
 Rise not and roll to overwhelm the earth?"

“The Lord hath opened his omnipotent hand,
Covered thy face with clouds and given his voice
To thy down-rushing waters: he hath girt
Thy terrible forehead with his radiant bow.
I see thy never-resting waters run,
And I bethink me how the tide of time
Sweeps to eternity.”

The lyric from which the following extracts are taken
was written by Mr. A. S. Ridgely, of Baltimore, Md.:

“Man lays his scepter on the ocean waste,
His footprints stiffen in the Alpine snows,
But only God moves visibly in thee,
O King of Floods! that with resistless fate
Down plungest in thy mighty width and depth.
* * * Amazement, terror, fill,
Impress and overcome the gazer's soul.
Man's schemes and dreams and petty littleness
Lie open and revealed. Himself far less—
Kneeling before thy great confessional—
Than are the bubbles of the passing tides.
Words may not picture thee, nor pencil paint
Thy might of waters, volumed vast and deep;
Thy many-toned and all-pervading voice;
Thy wood-crown'd Isle, fast anchor'd on the brink
Of the dread precipice; thy double stream,
Divided, yet in beauty unimpaired;
Thy wat'ry caverns and thy crystal walls;
Thy crest of sunlight and thy depths of shade,
Boiling and seething like a Phlegethon
Amid the wind-swept and convolving spray,
Steady as Faith and beautiful as Hope.
There, of beam and cloud the fair creation,
The rainbow arches its ethereal hues.
From flint and granite in compacture strong,

Not with steel thrice harden'd—but with the wave
Soft and translucent—did the new-born Time
Chisel thy altars. Here hast thou ever poured
Earth's grand libation to Eternity;
Thy misty incense rising unto God—
The God that was and is and is to be.”

Mrs. Sigourney wrote the following poem, it is said,
during a visit to Table Rock:

“APOSTROPHE TO NIAGARA.

“Flow on, forever, in thy glorious robe
Of terror and of beauty. God has set
His rainbow on thy forehead, and the clouds
Mantled around thy feet. And He doth give
Thy voice of thunder power to speak of Him
Eternally, bidding the lip of man
Keep silence, and upon thy rocky altar pour
Incense of awe-struck praise.
And who can dare
To lift the insect trump of earthly hope,
Or love, or sorrow, 'mid the peal sublime
Of thy tremendous hymn! Even ocean shrinks
Back from thy brotherhood, and his wild waves
Retire abashed; for he doth sometimes seem
To sleep like a spent laborer, and recall
His wearied billows from their vieing play,
And lull them to a cradle calm: but thou,
With everlasting, undecaying tide
Dost rest not night nor day.

The morning stars,
When first they sang o'er young creation's birth,
Heard thy deep anthem; and those wrecking fires
That wait the archangel's signal, to dissolve
The solid earth, shall find Jehovah's name

Graven, as with a thousand spears,
 On thine unfathomed page. Each leafy bough
 That lifts itself within thy proud domain
 Doth gather greenness from thy living spray,
 And tremble at the baptism. Lo! yon birds
 Do venture boldly near, bathing their wings
 Amid thy foam and mist. 'Tis meet for them
 To touch thy garment here, or lightly stir
 The snowy leaflets of this vapor wreath,
 Who sport unharmed on the fleecy cloud,
 And listen to the echoing gate of heaven
 Without reproof. But as for us, it seems
 Scarce lawful with our broken tones to speak
 Familiarly of thee. Methinks, to tint
 Thy glorious features with our pencil's point,
 Or woo thee with the tablet of a song,
 Were profanation.

Thou dost make the soul
 A wondering witness of thy majesty;
 And while it rushes with delirious joy
 To tread thy vestibule, dost chain its step,
 And check its rapture, with the humbling view
 Of its own nothingness, bidding it stand
 In the dread presence of the Invisible,
 As if to answer to its God through thee."

The following lines were written by the late John G. C. Brainard, who never saw the Falls. They were dashed off at a single short sitting, for the head of the literary column of the *Connecticut Mirror*, of Hartford, which he then edited:

"THE FALLS OF NIAGARA.

"The thoughts are strange that crowd into my brain
 While I look upward to thee. It would seem

As if God pour'd thee from his 'hollow hand'
 And hung his bow upon thine awful front,
 And spoke in that loud voice which seem'd to him
 Who dwelt in Patmos for his Saviour's sake,
 'The sound of many waters,' and had bade
 Thy flood to chronicle the ages back,
 And notch his cen'tries in the eternal rocks.

"Deep calleth unto deep. And what are we
 That hear the question of that voice sublime?
 Oh! what are all the notes that ever rung
 From War's vain trumpet by thy thundering side!
 Yea, what is all the riot man can make
 In his short life to thy unceasing roar!
 And yet, bold babbler, what art thou to HIM
 Who drown'd a world and heap'd the waters far
 Above its loftiest mountains?—a light wave
 That breaks and whispers of its Maker's might."