

NIAGARA: A DESCRIPTION

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Niagara: A Description by Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer

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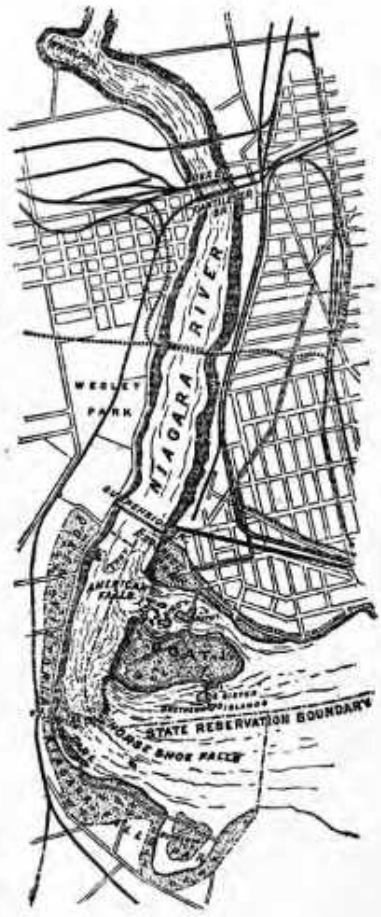
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MRS. SCHUYLER VAN RENSSELAER

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NIAGARA

I

LIGHT and atmosphere are magicians who take time to show us all the phases of any landscape, and at Niagara their interpretations are peculiarly important. The evening of our first day by the falls will differ greatly from its morning; neither will be quite like the evening or the morning of any other day; and yet some indispensable aids to appreciation may be long postponed. There must be strongest sunshine to show the full glory of the place—the refulgent possibilities of its opaline falling sheets, snow-white rising mists, and prismatic bows. But only a soft gray light can bring out the local colors of its horizontal waters and its woodlands, and only the shadow of storm-clouds the vehement temper of some portions of its rapids. Night brings her own revelations—lambent, ineffable in the full, and occult, apocalyptic in the dark of the moon. Again, a wind is needed to raise the clouds from the cataracts in fullest volume, and to whip the crests of the rapids into farthest-flying scud. But if it blows too strongly

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it dissipates the clouds and flattens the white crests, and may drive us back from some of the best points of view, drenched and blinded by torrents of vapor.

Even if light and wind never altered at Niagara, still it could not be seen in a day or a week. It must be studied in detail—in minutest detail—as well as in broad pictures. Its wealth in idyllic minor delights is as astonishing as its imperial largess in dramatic splendors. Its fabric of water, rock, and foliage is richly elaborate, as a cathedral's fabric might be if carved and damaskeened all over with intricate patterns and colors, each helping to explain the ideals of its builders. One whole side of Niagara's charm is unfelt unless every great and little passage of its waters is learned by heart, and every spur and recess of its shores, and especially of its islands, is lovingly explored.

Moreover, the eye alone cannot really perceive high beauty of any sort. It needs the help of emotion, and the right kind of emotion develops slowly. True sight means the deep, delicate, and complete sensations that result, not from the shock of surprise, but from the reverent, intelligent submittal of sense and soul to the special scheme that the great Artificer has wrought and the special influence it exerts. We cannot see anything in this way if we hurry. Above all, we cannot see Niagara, the world's wonder, which is not a single wonder and yet is a single creation complete in itself—a volume of wonders bound compactly together and set apart between spacious areas of plain, as though nature had said, Here is a piece of art too fine, to

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individual, to be built into any panorama, to need any environment except the dignity of isolation. Such a volume must indeed be studied page by page; but it must also be read so often that it will leave us the memory of a harmonious whole as well as of a thousand fine details.

And the best season for Niagara? Each has its own claim. Winter sometimes gives the place an arctic picturesqueness, a dazzling semi-immobility, utterly unlike its affluent, multicolored summer aspect; but one could hardly wish to see it only in winter, or in winter first of all. It is most gorgeously multicolored, of course, when its ravine and its islands commemorate its long-dead Indians by donning the war-paint of autumn. And it is most seductively fair in early spring. Then, at the beginning of May, when the shrubs are leafing and the trees are growing hazy, its islands are the isles of paradise. This is the time of the first wild flowers. Spread beneath the forest that still admits the sun-floods through its canopies, massed in the more open glades, and wreathed along the edges of pathways and shores, they fill Goat Island full, whitely bank and carpet it—snowy trilliums in myriads, bloodroots, dicentras, smilacinas, and spring-beauties, varied by rose-tinted spring-cresses and yellow uvularias, and underlaid by drifts of violets. Hardly anywhere else over so large an area can these children of May grow in such profusion, for even when the sun shines hottest upon them the air is always delicately dampened by the spraying floods. Here nature so faithfully fosters them that they need not be jealously

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guarded by man. Whoever will may gather them by the armful.

It is good to see Niagara at this time. But it is still better to see it when its trees and shrubs and vines are in fullest leaf and many of them in blossom. Then their value is greatest as a setting for the endless series of large and small, near and distant water pictures; and then the temperature incites to lingering. The very best time of all is in June.

II

ABOVE the falls the broad river runs between shores so flat that one wonders why it never mistakes its course; and where its rapids begin, at the head of Goat Island, it is nearly a mile in width. For half a mile these rapids extend along both sides of the island, and at its farther end the waters make their plunge into the gorge that they have themselves created, cutting their way backward through the table-land which extends from Lake Erie to a point some seven miles south of Lake Ontario. They make this plunge as two distinct streams, with the broad, precipitous face of Goat Island rising between them. The American stream falls in an almost straight line, the broader, stronger Canadian stream in a boldly recessed horseshoe curve. And there is another difference also. Just at this place the river-bed makes a right-angled turn around the lifted shoulder of Goat Island; and the Horseshoe Fall, which is doing the real work of excavation, drops into the edge of the gorge and faces northward, while the American

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Fall, like the island's bluff, faces westward, sending its waters over the side of the gorge into the current that flows down from the Horseshoe.

The wonderful hemicycle that is thus created measures almost a full mile from mainland brink to brink.¹ But the gorge, about one hundred and seventy feet in height above the surface of its stream, is less than a quarter of a mile across. Its cliffs rise almost sheer from their slanting bases of detritus, naked in some spots, in a few defaced by the hand of man, but still for the most part clothed with hanging robes of forest. At first, just below the falls, they look down upon waters that no longer rush and foam, but slip and swing with an oily smoothness, exhausted by their daring leap, still too giddy from it to flow quite straight, and showing proofs of it in long twisting ropes of curdled froth. For nearly two miles their lethargy lasts. One may swim in this part of the Niagara River, the smallest rowboat need not fear to put out upon it, and the *Maid of the Mist* pushes past the very foot of the American Fall, up toward the Horseshoe until she is wrapped in its steamy clouds. This is because, within its gorge, the Niagara is the deepest river in the world. Even near the falls the distance from its surface to its bottom is greater than the distance from its surface to the top of its gorge walls—more than two hundred feet; and down into these depths the falling sheets are carried solidly by their tremendous

¹ Precisely, it is 5,870 feet, the Canadian Fall measuring about 3060, the face of Goat Island 1800, and the American Fall 1000. The narrower branch of this fall, between the two islands, is 150 feet in width; yet at Niagara it seems so unimportant that no one has ever given it a name.