The Iron City

BY CHARLES P. SHIRAS*

Upon a hill with round and beaten point,
Where man's disfiguring hand had cut and marred,
Until the very rudeness lost the charm
That Nature ever wears—a wanderer rested.

His dress was covered with the highway's dust,
His brow was moistened by the sweat of toil,
Fatigue and fasting showed their marks of pain
Upon his drooping form and pallid face.

He was a stranger to the land and people;
A voluntary exile from his home,
And friends, and country. He had braved and passed
The wide and fearful deep, filled with the hope
That in the freshness of the Western World,
Amid the half-hewn woods and new-born cities,
He might drink freely of that quickening cup
Without which, life is but a breathing death;
He dreamed of Freedom on the couch of Hope.

His thought had been, that day to reach a city,
Which, for a time, should be his resting place;
And now it was beneath him; yet he paused
And strained his eyes, and was entranced in wonder.

The city lay upon a pointed valley,
That held apart two broad and noble rivers,
Whose waters met beyond the sloping wharves
And mingled into one; but, as no glare
Of day revealed these things, he looked above
And saw a cloud of dark and sulphurous smoke,
Rolling and lifting, as it passed away
Upon the southern breeze, but not diminished,
For, underneath, a thousand roaring furnaces
Poured forth, from chimneys that stood up
Like ancient monuments, their dull black streams,
That served to feed the moving sea of darkness.

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Beneath this cloud were half revealed the forms
Of blackened dwellings ranged on gloomy streets,
To which, partaking not of that great life
That moved in turmoil and confusion round them,
Seemed like the piles of Herculaneum
New-risen from their long forgotten tomb.

On every side were workshops, foundries, mills
And glaring furnaces; round these appeared
The toiling throng that hurried to and fro,
And fed the raging fires, wielded the sledge,
Or dragged, with hooks, great bars of heated iron,
While to the wondering stranger's eye they seemed
Black as their dwellings, as their mighty engines
Restless and tireless.

Meanwhile there arose
A strange and mingled noise of belching steam,
Of clattering hammers, iron-freighted cars,
And vessels shrieking on the troubled rivers;
And yet these sounds were all half-lost and dulled,
Amid a ceaseless, changless roar that came
From all the city, like that fearful voice
With which the ocean speaks when chafed and maddened
By the tempest.

The stranger asked himself
With thoughts akin to fear, "Can these be men
That dwell within this sea of smoke and fire?
Can any living thing whose life depends
Upon the breathing of the vital air,
Sustain that life amid this stifling vapor?

"The summer winds that rise at early morn,
And play along the valleys plains and hills,
And chase away the vapors of the night—
Baring earth's bosom to the sun's hot glances—
Here vainly pour their purifying breath,
And while they bear dark clouds upon their wings,
Can but make room for other clouds to rise.

"Sad is the life of those whom fate hath doomed
To waste their manhood where the light of Heaven
Can scarcely come to cheer their gloomy hours;
And sadder yet their moral life must be,
For ignorance and vice will ever thrive
Where toil and anguish wear upon the spirit."

Oppressed with these sad thoughts the stranger tarried
Until the sun had sunk behind the hills
That stretch beyond the city; and even then
He moved with hesitation, for he felt
None of that hope of ease and luxury
With which the traveler finds himself repaid
For past fatigue and pain; rather he seemed
Like one who goes to seek a dangerous shelter
Amongst the rocks and caverns of a desert.

But soon these cheerless thoughts gave place to gladness
And a new wonder rose upon the first;
For, on the inner streets, he found himself
Surrounded by the show of solid wealth,
The dazzling streams of light, the rich display
Of fine-wrought merchandise, the excited throng,
And all the outward pageantry that marks
The civil life of an advancing age
In that true home of art—a growing city.

And nothing was as in imagination
It had appeared: The air seemed not impure,
The cloud of smoke had mingled with the night,
And to the upturned eye, as clear a light
Come from the watchful stars as that which sleeps
Upon the lawn, or leaps from wave to wave
In laughing dalliance with a mountain river.
And though not even the silvery veil of starlight
Could hide the unseemly blackness of the walls,
This sombre hue appeared the impress of time;
And thus the wanderer thought to tread once more,
An ancient city of his native land.

The citizens were such as he had seen
In wealthy capitals; intelligence
Appeared in every face; his eye was pleased
With tasteful dress and cultivated mien;  
And more than once, a form of tempting grace  
Or face of startling beauty, roused his heart  
To deeper throbbing, and called up a smile  
Of gladness, and withdrew his thoughts  
From all around him; then he called to mind  
That, in the fables of the ancient time,  
The god of toil and patron of the forge  
Had won the peerless queen of love and beauty;  
In which there seemed to lurk this simple meaning,  
That labor was deserving of all honor,  
And would be found, in man's more perfect state,  
United with the virtue, grace and wisdom  
That lift the mortal nearer to that fount  
Whence flow all blessings.

Thus the wanderer,  
Who, but an hour ago, had sat alone  
Upon the barron height, and viewed in sadness,  
Distrust and scorn, the iron-hearted city,  
Now stood at home upon her narrow streets,  
And looked on all her people as his friends.

With joyous heart, light step and rising hope,  
He sought for food and rest; he found an inn  
That was a palace, and was quickly served  
With choicest flavored meats; his bed was down,  
And, in his dreams, the sooty smiths were kings  
In purple robes, and he their honored guest.

Selected by Emma D. Poole.