

Notes and Documents

AN EARLY TALE OF THE FALLS OF ST. ANTHONY

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THE FALLS of St. Anthony, ever since Father Hennepin's memorable visit of 1680, have played a conspicuous role in picture and story, even though to later travelers reports of their romantic grandeur seem considerably exaggerated.¹ But storytellers before the nineteenth century generally knew too little about the western country to dare to localize their tales there. Indeed it has been assumed that James Athearn Jones and William J. Snelling gave the first fictional currency to the Falls of St. Anthony in 1829 and 1830 by employing them as the scene of Indian legends.²

In 1825, however, there appeared in New York a collection of short stories entitled *National Tales*, edited by George Houston and published in two volumes. One of the eight stories in the second volume, all of which appeared anonymously, was "The Falls of St. Anthony," which came "from the pen of a young gentleman of New-York."³ As the collection is little known, the following remarks are perhaps pertinent.

The author begins by quoting two lines from Byron, then circuitously introduces "the following tale, which we heard some years since; it has lost none of its interest through its age." First introduced is the heroine Marguerite, a widow with two small children living in

¹ Charles Lanman, for example, wrote in 1846: "These Falls are more famous than remarkable. . . . They are surrounded with prairie, and therefore easily approached from every direction." *A Summer in the Wilderness*, 61 (New York, 1847).

² See "Ampato Sapa," in J. A. Jones, *Tales of an Indian Camp*, 2:189-197 (London, 1829); and "Weenokhenchah Wandeteekah," in William J. Snelling, *Tales of the Northwest*, 197-212 (Boston, 1830). Each of these tales recounts how an Indian squaw commits suicide by allowing her canoe to dash over the falls rather than submit to a bigamous marriage.

³ George Houston, ed., *National Tales*, 2:146-168 (New York, 1825). The writer used a copy of volume 2 of this rare collection in the library of the University of Chicago. A third volume of tales was promised but apparently never appeared.

a straggling village on the bank of the Mississippi. As she wanders toward the river one day, the scenery, which around the falls is "strikingly romantic," is pictured. In the center of the cataract is a small island covered with trees and shrubs. Cedars and pines form castles and battlements on the high bluffs. "The river, as it flows by these, reflects from its glittering surface the various other objects which adorn its banks—hills and valleys covered with the brightest gems of nature—the crowded forests and prairies waving gently with the breeze."⁴

As Marguerite stands on the brink of the water presumably admiring the prospect, she sees an Indian on a distant hill and correctly takes him to be a spy. She immediately warns the village. When the Indians attack at midnight, the aroused villagers easily drive them off. But Marguerite goes to succor the wounded and accidentally comes across a stricken Indian "bathed in gore" and wearing the "beautiful jet-black skin of the buffalo." As she approaches him, he half rises and says: "He who made this deadly mark [*a sword cut*], hath truly taken away my strength, and I am now your prisoner; still I fear nothing from you, for from your eye is reflected the benign ray of pity; yet even if thou would'st, I feel as if you could not save that life which is now so fast fleeting." Despite this grandiloquence Marguerite nurses the wounded man, known as Telumah, back to health and he pledges his eternal gratitude.

When Telumah returns to his people, he finds that they are about to renew the attack and, although he counsels against it, he is overruled. This time the foray is successful, the village is burned, and Marguerite and her children are at first rescued by Telumah and then made captives with him. At a tribal council the prisoners are condemned to death. When Telumah hears this verdict, he faints. But later he recovers sufficiently to steal out of his own prison and to enter Marguerite's. When the heroine confronts him again, she tear-

⁴ It is possible that the unknown author got some of his scenic notions from early pictures of the Falls of St. Anthony. An engraving of the falls, giving its height as thirty feet and its breadth as six hundred, appears in Jonathan Carver's *Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America*, 70 (London, 1778). A colored aquatint by John Hill, after a view "taken and coloured on the spot by Captain Watson of the British navy," is in a portfolio of *Picturesque Views of American Scenery* (Philadelphia, 1820).

fully confides her children to his care and falls backwards, "a lifeless corpse." Telumah also weeps but shows sufficient fortitude to seize the children and dash with them to a canoe. Down the Mississippi paddle pursued and pursuers, until finally Telumah maneuvers his frail craft into an eddy which leads to the island separating the falls, and there as he pants in safety he watches his savage enemies whirl over the rocks. Later an uncle of the children extricates the fugitives from their island, and as the story closes Telumah speaks: "Marguerite, your last request is obeyed!"

Little comment is necessary. Obviously the anonymous author of this tale was overcome by the noble savage idea and he was negligent of fact. Chippewa and Sioux were not overly given to weeping, fainting, and soliloquizing except in the pages of romantic novelists. Moreover, Indians did not attack at midnight, and they seldom wore jet-black buffalo robes. Worst error of all, there was certainly no village of white settlers at the Falls of St. Anthony before 1825. But none of these blunders apparently bothered the author. He had a romantic tale to tell and romantic scenery to apotheosize.



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