

NOTES ON THE ASTORS

In my youth I knew twelve people who remembered the founder of Astoria; six of them were his grandchildren, six were not related to him; but my mention of his name would bring to each and all the glow of recollection which makes the dead and gone live again. He was our favorite grandfather; he was so fond of children. His invitations were commands my parents obeyed at any inconvenience, and some of us were always with him in the country. We sang a great deal, for we all sang, as did my grandfather. The old gentleman was much plagued by begging letters, most of which began with the plea that the writer was a relative. Finally the following formula was used in replying:

"My Dear Sir: You ask me to support you on the ground that your father was my cousin and playmate. I remember my cousins and playmates very distinctly. I do not find your father among them; but if he was I refer you to the Home for the Destitute Old which I have built and endowed at Waldorf. I know of no reason why it should not be occupied by my own relations."

There is another humorous story current in my childhood which is probably apocryphal, as so good a financier probably insured his buildings. I tell it as indicative of the kind of things the poor in New York believed about the painstaking methods which built up the Astor estate. Young William Astor returned hastily to the family one evening to find his father on all fours searching for something. "Father," he cried, "I bring bad news; our house on blank street has burnt to the ground—it is a total loss." There was no response from the figure on the carpet for several moments. When it arose a calm voice said "Now that I have found the five dollar bill I had dropped, you may tell me about the house—a bill in the hand is of more importance than a house in ashes."

The Astors spoke German in the family circle—at least among the men of the family; even the grandson, when on General McClellan's staff was referred to by his father as Johann. "Where is Johann now" he would mournfully say, while the great battles were in progress, and silence would be observed until the mournful mood passed. The son William was being educated while the

Astoria project was begun and ended. The two ambitions went on at the same time. On the Astor library is the Founder's intention clearly stated; the library is not to satisfy a thirst for reading—it is "To Increase Useful Knowledge." In the "pursuit of useful knowledge" the son was educated with an ambition commensurate with his father's notions of international trade. The boy is sent to Heidelberg; he is the roommate of a Schopenhauer, the classmate of the Elder Max Muller, and becomes a life long correspondent of the Humbolts. Very modest, with nothing of his father's glowing personality, he takes after his mother's trading Quakers, absorbing rather than radiating. On leaving Heidelberg the great Savant Baron Bunsen was engaged to travel with William Astor. All this useful knowledge was a life preparation of six very long days a week in the family office up to the age of eighty. In my recollections of these ancestors of mine three surprises stand out. Mrs. Julia Ward Howe said to me, "We always enjoyed being asked to accompany the young Astors to their grandfather's. His personality was so striking, his manners so affectionate, his fondness for music in which he always joined, was fastidious and the friends selected were those who could sing with him." Here we see him unbending in the family circle. My second surprise was when an old lady who had been a child from South Carolina visiting Dutch relatives in New York, suddenly told me one day, "We heard a great deal about the importance, possessions and customs of the Knickerbockers; I was a little girl with my own ideas. I came from a formal society where manner counted for a great deal, and I was always delighted when Mr. Astor dropped in of an evening. To begin with he was very handsome; his long silver hair, his courtly manner of bending his head, the silver buckles he wore on his shoes would engross a child; but I realized that his arrival raised the tone of the conversation to a higher effort and attention—it was as though he were the Great Gentleman of the circle."

One more anecdote and I am done. An American astronomer, a Mr. Lewis Morris Rutherford, a world astronomer, for he was the first person to photograph the stars, said to me, "My Dear, the most learned person I have known in New York, was not connected personally with science, or education; he spent his days in a real estate office. The most profoundly educated man among us was your great grandfather, William B. Astor. There was no subject requiring knowledge, thought and memory on which he was not posted—the really great education of his youth was con-

tinued in his ceaseless reading—he kept up with the sciences of the nineteenth century, he knew literature as he knew his friends.”

Astoria and Education, far-flung Empire, an individual challenge from one man in New York to the trade genius of Great Britain already absorbing the French voyageur, and established in the neighborhood of the Pacific; all this is not forgotten. You have retained the Founder's name in this, the oldest of your Pacific Cities; I ask you to remember him as a man who gave his son the only thing he could not give himself; profound education which made his boy the admiration of men of genius.

MRS. RICHARD ALDRICH.