

A CURIOUS CALL

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I have often wondered what the various statues standing about the city think of all day, and what criticisms they would make upon us and our doings, if they could speak. I frequently stop and stare at them, wondering if they don't feel lonely; if they wouldn't be glad of a nod as we go by; and I always long to offer my umbrella to shield their uncovered heads on a rainy day, especially to good Ben Franklin, when the snow lies white on his benevolent forehead. I was always fond of this old gentleman; and one of my favourite stories when a little girl, was that of his early life, and the time when he was so poor he walked about Philadelphia with a roll of bread under each arm, eating a third as he went. I never pass without giving him a respectful look, and wishing he could know how grateful I am for all he had done in the printing line; for, without types and presses, where would the books be?

Well, I never imagined that he understood why the tall woman in the big bonnet stared at him; but he did, and he liked it, and managed to let me know it in a very curious manner, as you shall hear.

As I look out, the first thing I see is the great gilt eagle on the City-Hall dome. There he sits, with open wings, all day long, looking down on the people, who must appear like ants scampering busily to and fro about an ant-hill. The sun shines on him splendidly in the morning; the gay flag waves and rustles in the wind above him sometimes; and the moonlight turns him to silver when she comes glittering up the sky. When it rains he never shakes his feathers; snow beats on him without disturbing his stately repose; and he never puts his head under his wing at night, but keeps guard in darkness as in day, like a faithful sentinel. I like the big, lonely bird, call him my particular fowl, and often wish he'd turn his head and speak to me. One night he did actually do it, or seemed to; for I've never been able to decide whether I dreamed what I'm going to tell you, or whether it really happened.

It was a stormy night! and, as I drew down my curtain, I said to myself, after peering through the driving snow to catch a glimpse of my neighbour, 'Poor Goldy! he'll have a rough time of it. I hope this northeaster won't blow him off his perch.' Then I sat down by my fire, took my knitting, and began to meditate. I'm sure I didn't fall asleep; but I can't prove it, so we'll say no more about it. All at once there came a tap at my door, as I

thought; and I said 'Come in,' just as Mr. Poe did when that unpleasant raven paid him a call. No one came, so I went to see who it was. Not a sign of a human soul in the long hall, only little Jessie, the poodle, asleep on her mat. Down I sat; but in a minute the tap came again; this time so loud that I knew it was at the window, and went to open it, thinking that one of my doves wanted to come in perhaps. Up went the sash, and in bounced something so big and so bright that it dazzled and scared me.

'Don't be frightened, ma'am; it's only me,' said a hoarse voice. So I collected my wits, rubbed my eyes, and looked at my visitor. It was the gold eagle off the City Hall! I don't expect to be believed; but I wish you'd been here to see, for I give you my word, it was a sight to behold. How he ever got in at such a small window I can't tell; but there he was, strutting majestically up and down the room, his golden plumage rustling, and his keen eyes flashing as he walked. I really didn't know what to do. I couldn't imagine what he came for; I had my doubts about the propriety of offering him a chair; and he was so much bigger than I expected that I was afraid he might fly away with me, as the roc did with Sindbad: so I did nothing but sidle to the door, ready to whisk out, if my strange guest appeared to be peckishly inclined. My respectful silence seemed to suit him; for, after a turn or two, he paused, nodded gravely, and said affably, 'Good-evening, ma'am. I stepped over to bring you old Ben's respects, and to see how you were getting on.'

'I'm very much obliged, sir. May I inquire who Mr. Old-Ben is? I'm afraid I haven't the honour of his acquaintance.'

'Yes, you have; it's Ben Franklin, of City-Hall yard. You know him; and he wished me to thank you for your interest in him.'

'Dear me! how very odd! Will you sit down, sir?'

'Never sit! I'll perch here;' and the great fowl took his accustomed attitude just in front of the fire, looking so very splendid that I couldn't keep my eyes off of him.

'Ah! you often do that. Never mind; I rather like it,' said the eagle, graciously, as he turned his brilliant eye upon me. I was rather abashed; but being very curious, I ventured to ask a few questions, as he seemed in a friendly mood.

'Being a woman, sir, I'm naturally of an inquiring turn; and I must confess that I have a strong desire to know how it happens that you take your walks abroad, when you are supposed to be permanently engaged at home?'

He shrugged his shoulders, and actually winked at me, as he replied, 'That's all people know of what goes on under, or rather over, their noses. Bless you, ma'am! I leave my roost every night, and enjoy myself in all sorts of larks. Excuse the expression; but, being ornithological, it is more proper for me than for some people who use it.'

'What a gay old bird!' thought I, feeling quite at home after that. 'Please tell me what you do, when the shades of evening prevail, and you go out for a frolic?'

'I am a gentleman; therefore I behave myself,' returned the eagle; with a stately air. 'I must confess, I smoke a great deal: but that's not my fault, it's the fault of the chimneys. They keep it up all day, and I have to take it; just as you poor ladies have to take cigar smoke, whether you like it or not. My amusements are of a wholesome kind. I usually begin by taking a long flight down the harbour, for a look at the lighthouses, the islands, the shipping, and the sea. My friends, the gulls, bring their reports to me; for they are the harbour-police, and I take notes of their doings. The school-ship is an object of interest to me, and I often perch on the mast-head, to see how the lads are getting on. Then I take a turn over the city, gossip with the weathercocks, pay my compliments to the bells, inspect the fire-alarm, and pick up information by listening at the telegraph wires. People often talk about "a little bird" who spreads news; but they don't know how that figure of speech originated. It is the sparrows sitting on the wires, who receive the electric shock, and, being hollow-boned, the news go straight to their heads; they then fly about, chirping it on the housetops, and the air carries it everywhere. That's the way rumours rise and news spread.'

'If you'll allow, I'll make a note of that interesting fact,' said I, wondering if I might believe him. He appeared to fall into a reverie while I jotted down the sparrow story, and it

occurred to me that perhaps I ought to offer my distinguished guest some refreshment; but, when I modestly alluded to it, he said, with an aldermanic air, 'No, thank you; I've just dined at the Parker House.'

Now, I really could not swallow that; and so plainly betrayed my incredulity, that the eagle explained. 'The savoury smells which rise to my nostrils from that excellent hotel, with an occasional sniff from the Tremont, are quite sufficient to satisfy my appetite; for, having no stomach, I don't need much food, and I drink nothing but water.'

'I wish others would follow your example in that latter habit,' said I, respectfully, for I was beginning to see that there was something in my bird, though he was hollow. 'Will you allow me to ask if the other statues in the city fly by night?'

'They promenade in the parks; and occasionally have social gatherings, when they discuss politics, education, medicine, or any of the subjects in which they are interested. Ah! we have grand times when you are all asleep. It quite repays me for being obliged to make an owl of myself.'

'Do the statues come from the shops to these parties?' I asked, resolving to take a late walk the next moonlight night.

'Sometimes; but they get lazy and delicate, living in close, warm places. We laugh at cold and bad weather, and are so strong and hearty that I shouldn't be surprised if I saw Webster and Everett flying round the Common on the new-fashioned velocipedes, for they believed in exercise. Goethe and Schiller often step over from De Vries's window, to flirt with the goddesses, who come down from their niches on Horticultural Hall. Nice, robust young women are Pomona and Flora. If your niminy-piminy girls could see them run, they would stop tilting through the streets, and learn that the true Grecian Bend is the line of beauty always found in straight shoulders, well-opened chest, and an upright figure, firmly planted on active feet.'

'In your rambles don't you find a great deal of misery?' said I, to change the subject, for he was evidently old-fashioned in his notions.

'Many sad sights!' And he shook his head with a sigh; then added, briskly, 'But there is a deal of charity in our city, and it does its work beautifully. By the by, I heard of a very sweet charity the other day,--a church whose Sunday school is open to all the poor children who will come; and there, in pleasant rooms, with books, pictures, kindly teachers, and a fatherly minister to welcome them, the poor little creatures find refreshment for their hungry souls. I like that; it's a lovely illustration of the text, "Suffer little children to come unto me;" and I call it practical Christianity.'

He did like it, my benevolent old bird; for he rustled his great wings, as if he wanted to clap them, if there had only been room; and every feather shone as if a clearer light than that of my little fire had fallen on it as he spoke.

'You are a literary woman, hey?' he said suddenly, as if he'd got a new idea, and was going to pounce upon me with it.

'Ahem! I do a little in that line,' I answered, with a modest cough.

'Then tell people about that place; write some stories for the children; go and help teach them; do something, and make others do what they can to increase the sabbath sunshine that brightens one day in the week for the poor babies who live in shady places.'

'I should be glad to do my best; and, if I'd known before'--I began.

'You might have known, if you'd looked about you. People are so wrapt up in their own affairs they don't do half they might. Now, then, hand me a bit of paper, and I'll give you the address, so you won't have any excuse for forgetting what I tell you.'

'Mercy on us; what will he do next?' thought I, as he tweaked a feather out of his breast, gave the nib a peck, and then coolly wrote these words on the card I handed him: 'Church of the Disciples. Knock and it shall be opened!' There it was, in letters of gold; and, while I

looked at it, feeling reproached that I hadn't known it sooner, my friend,--he didn't seem a stranger any more,--said in a business-like tone, as he put back his pen, 'Now I must be off. Old Ben reads an article on the "Abuses of the Press at the present day," and I must be there to report.'

'It must be very interesting. I suppose you don't allow mortals at your meetings?' said I, burning to go, in spite of the storm.

'No, ma'am. We meet on the Common; and, in the present state of the weather, I don't think flesh and blood would stand it. Bronze, marble, and wood are sterner stuff, and can defy the elements.'

'Good evening; pray, call again,' I said, hospitably.

'I will; your eyrie suits me: but don't expect me to call in the daytime. I'm on duty then, and can't take my eye off my charge. The city needs a deal of watching, my dear. Bless me! it's striking eight. Your watch is seven minutes slow by the Old South. Good-night, good-night!'

And as I opened the window, the great bird soared away like a flash of light through the storm, leaving me so astonished at the whole performance that I haven't got over it yet.