THE HEART OF THE GARDEN: BY ESTHER MATSON

The fountain surely is the garden’s pulsing heart. Whether it be in the guise of a simple spring, an old-fashioned well, or some elaborate piece of bronze and marble, it sends forth through channel, canal or rivulet its refreshing and renewing water.

The mere word "fountain" is magical. At sight or sound of it, the Fountains of Youth, Forgetfulness and Immortality are brought to mind. It is a happy coincidence, too, that we use the selfsame word to describe a simple upgush of waters and the most naive season of the year. Bringer of fresh life to the thirsting earth and needy plants—the water-spring. Bringer of fresh hope to mankind—the spring o’ the year.

In every language, moreover, and among all peoples, the name of this mysterious natural thing has been a symbol of the spiritual. From under the throne of Jove sprang a sacred well, and a fountain fed the Norseman’s Tree of the Universe, Ygdrasil. The Hebrews were continually using the symbol, in the New Testament as well as in the Old. In Proverbs the mouth of the good man is likened to a well, and abstract wisdom is compared to a spring. John elaborated this idea, applying it to the new knowledge which he was promulgating and which he promised would be as “a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” In Revelations there is a still further promise—that the proffered spiritual life should be given freely “to him that is thirsty.”

In our own literature we find this symbol standing for the Deity—now in Chaucer, who writes of the Being “Who is of Worthinesse the Welle,” and now in Milton whose phrase “Author of All Being, Fountain of Life” recalls that similar phrase in the Book of Common Prayer, “Almighty God, Fountain of All Goodness.”

Wordsworth philosophizes over the heart as “the Fountain of love and thought and joy.” Longfellow, seeking to describe the famous pyx in Nuremberg can do no better than call it “a foamy sheaf of fountains.” Nothing could be happier than Spenser’s resonant praise of Chaucer—“well of English undefyled,” while John Burroughs’ prose-portrait of England itself as a country “like the margin of a spring-run, near its source—always green, always cool, always moist, comparatively free from drought in summer” has a charm of its own.

There are two elements, in especial, which enter into the mysteriousness of springs and fountains: the miracle of the water upspringing from the unexplored depths of earth, and the strangeness of that water’s transparency. Emily Dickinson, in her piquant way has
touched on the first of these mysteries with a wonder how the grass blades around a well

"Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is dread to me."

As for the miracle of transparency, Fiona Macleod has spoken of it as water's unique and "last secret of beauty." "All else that we look upon is opaque: the mountain in its sundown purple or noon-azure, the meadows and fields, the tethered greenness of woods, the loveliness of massed flowers, the myriad wonder of the universal grass, even the clouds that trail their shadows upon the hills or soar so high into frozen deeps of azure that they pass shadowless like phantoms or the creatures of dreams—the beauty of all these is opaque. But the beauty of water is that it is transparent. Think if the grass, if the leaves of the tree, if the rose and the iris and the pale horns of the honeysuckle, if the great mountains built of gray steeps of granite and massed purple of shadow were thus luminous, thus transparent!"

Having this curious transparent quality, it is quite reasonable that springs should appear to us all as the most exquisite linkage between this very solid material earth of ours and the inexplicable, spiritual world. Nor is it strange that throughout the ages men have delighted to adorn these natural things with all the art of which they were capable.

And how different is this art from that of architecture, in which man must manoeuvre to circumvent Nature's laws—that of gravitation, for instance. In the making of a fountain-head Nature seems to say, "Go to, now, my son; let us call a truce here for once. Let us work together, you and I, this time, to an end of magic that all shall marvel at."

Perhaps that is why there is so potent a spell in many an Old World fountain-head, like those of Italy, whether they be in city square or villa garden. No one can gainsay that a veritable magic lingers in Viterbo, City of Fair Fountains and Fair Women, a spell due chiefly to the fountain in its public square. Is not Perugia's Fonte Maggiore a three-fold work of art—monumental, sculptural, philosophical? Are not Sienna's fountains beautiful enough almost, one might think, to atone for her cruelties? As for the countless villa fountains, surely they lend an indescribable glamour to every recollection of Italian ways and days.

Yet the spell depends not always upon art, nor even upon the mingling of art and nature. The heart of the garden has potency in its own natural right. A fountain, whether simple and unadorned or richly carven, is always an enchantment. Quieting our restless spirit, it leads us into paths of peace.