

HENRY SPENCER ASHBEE

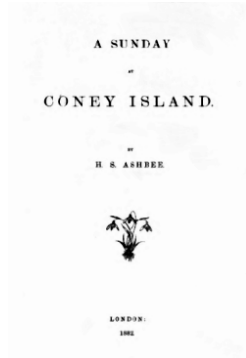
A SUNDAY
AT
CONEY ISLAND



SCISSORS & PASTE BIBLIOGRAPHIES

SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA

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Note

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A SUNDAY AT CONEY ISLAND

“THOUGH this island seems to be desert, uninhabitable, and almost inaccessible – yet the air breathes upon us here most sweetly. The ground, indeed, is tawny. Let me not dwell in this bare island.” - *The Tempest*.

Coney Island, Sir,” said an American gentleman to me – “Coney Island is a revelation.” With this assurance I “shelved” the good intention I had of passing my last Sunday in the United States at the feet of some of New York’s noted preachers, and determined to spend the day of July 17th, 1881, at Coney Island.

We have a proverb in the Old World that every road leads to Rome; with equal truth every road in the New World may be said to lead to Coney Island, and I am confident that there is not a railway in the Union which would not book its travellers, more or less directly, to that favoured resort. It seems at any rate that the whole railway system of America culminates there; nor is Coney Island satisfied with this, but must have distinct and independent lines of its own.

The means and modes of reaching this remarkable island are numerous, the railway being the most expeditious and generally preferred. As I had, however, had more than enough of American cars during the long journey from San Francisco to New York, I elected to go by steamboat, more especially as it afforded me a favourable opportunity of seeing the harbour of New York.

So much had the beauty of this harbour been impressed upon me, that I must own to a certain amount of surprise

at finding no fine scenery whatever, but simply an extensive roadstead with comparatively low-lying, and in no way picturesque banks. The river here is eminently well-disposed for the purposes of commerce; the piers and wharves are convenient, and their arrangement and appointments good; but beauty there is none. I was disappointed too at the scarcity of shipping in the harbour. I did not of course expect to find so many vessels there as one is accustomed to see in the Thames, although I had been prepared for such a discovery, but considering the undoubtedly important commerce of the United States, the shipping in the port of New York seemed to me extremely sparse.

The steamers and steam ferry boats which constantly ply in the Hudson are entirely different from anything we have in England. These huge monsters have one or two terraced decks, parts of which are reserved for the especial use of ladies, and contain saloons, drinking bars, &c. Hideous in appearance, they are convenient and commodious, and quite in keeping with nearly everything one meets in the States – thoroughly practical, but eminently inartistic.

Let us endeavour to form a notion of Coney Island. It is a very narrow strip of land, four miles and a half long, lying off the main land below Brooklyn, and forming part of the town of Gravesend; it is ten miles from New York city by water. But how shall I succeed in conveying any idea of the aspect and peculiarities of this odd watering-place to my readers, accustomed perhaps to the luxuriant verdure and picturesque scenery of Torquay or Ilfracombe, of Ventnor or Scarborough, or even of the less romantic Margate or Ramsgate? Imagine, then, a barren waste with “such quantities of sand” that the most stony-hearted Carpenter might be expected to “weep like anything at the sight of it,” endowed with no natural beauties

whatever, devoid of trees, shrubs, or anything green – shadeless, consequently, from one end to the other – no cottages, no fishermen, no nets spread out on the beach, no small boats on the sea, no Peggotty dwellings on shore, no adjuncts, in fact, of any kind to a seaside place of recreation as we understand it. On the other hand, Coney Island possesses some marvels peculiarly its own: it is covered with wooden pavilions, each one surmounted by a tall flag-staff, on which the stars and stripes are ever conspicuous; there are skeleton towers in which one sees elevators going up and down continually; numerous short railroads, of which one is “elevated” as at New York; telegraph posts, enormous hotels and restaurants, shops, bazaars, drinking bars, open iced soda fountains, museums, camera obscuras, dancing booths, in full swing on this Sabbath day, merry-go-rounds, and shows of all kinds; an imitation cow life-size, and so life-like that I took it for a living creature, from which milk is obtained through the udder, quite in the natural way; there is an institution for taking care of children while the parents are bathing, furnished with velocipedes, swings, &c, and there is the largest advertisement in the world; into the sea project in all directions iron piers and wooden jetties, at which steamers are constantly discharging their living freights; the “margin of the sea” is everywhere crowded with bathers of both sexes immersing themselves in sweet companionship; and amphitheatres with seats, for which fixed charges are made, have been erected, the more conveniently to watch their pranks, or skill in natation. Everything, in fact, possible to the architect, the engineer, or the machinist has been done for Coney Island, and if one could be made happy by machinery it is here that such happiness would be obtainable. My taste does not unfortunately lie in that direction. I value to their full extent lifts, tramways, and

railroads, and have a keen appreciation of their utility in the state of civilization in which we live, yet I avoid them as much as possible when in quest of repose and recreation.

“Spirit of Beauty, tarry yet a while!
Although the cheating merchants of the mart
With iron roads profane our lovely isle,
And break on whirling wheels the limbs of art,
Ay! though the crowded factories beget
The blind-worm Ignorance that slays the soul, O
tarry yet!”

The steamers for Coney Island start from a pier at the extreme lower end of Broadway, the oldest, and to me by far the most interesting part of New York.

“Where nowadays the Battery lies,
New York had just begun,
A new-born babe, to rub its eyes,
In Sixteen Sixty-one.”

I left the Battery, then, at half-past ten, and landed on the Iron Pier about an hour afterwards. The steamboat was crowded, but hardly more so than the pier on our arrival, even at this comparatively early hour, while the sea was already swarming with bathers. The Iron Pier is at once a landing-place, a promenade, a concert hall, a restaurant, and a bathing establishment, all combined, and all on the largest scale. It possesses, according to its own placard, no less than 1200 bathing-houses. What could I do better than avail myself of this vast accommodation? I paid my twenty-five cents, and got into one of the twelve hundred boxes. I cannot speak either of the purity of the water, or of the enjoyability of the bathing at this part of the island. One has to take one's bath underneath the pier and among its supports, the effect of which is depressing, and one must

be very careful how one strikes out. I narrowly escaped a misadventure similar to one of those of which Le Sage's celebrated hero was the victim. I was floating on my back when suddenly a trap door immediately above me was opened, and without holloa-ing "heads below," or even crying, "agua va," a waiter emptied out a pail of slops. I made one vigorous stroke, and, regardless of the risk I ran of striking my head against an iron pillar, managed just to escape the direful contents of the slop-pail. This satisfied me with the bathing, and I retired as speedily as possible to my box, where I purified myself with a pail of fresh water provided for the purpose.

The most amusing and lively, albeit the least refined part of the island, is that in the immediate vicinity of the Iron Pier; and I devoted an hour to inspecting the various shows, in and out of which the people were flocking. Afterwards I took an omnibus to Brighton, and thence the railway to Manhattan, the journey in each instance occupying a few minutes only. Brighton and Manhattan exactly resemble one another; they are not towns as their names might lead one to suppose, nor even villages, but simply stations, at each of which is an enormous hotel, not unlike those which one sometimes finds at Continental watering-places. These, and another large caravansery in a more westerly direction, are the favourite resorts of the richer, I may not say more aristocratic visitors. At Manhattan I lunched, or rather endeavoured to swallow some food, the only eatable part of which was that which had not passed through the cook's bands, viz. the clams, a shellfish not dissimilar from an oyster. This was at the great hotel. During the meal I was entertained by the gossip of the coloured waiter, who, perceiving my greenness, took pity on me, and was good enough to enlighten me as to the beauties and advantages of Coney Island. I made my way back

to the Iron Pier by the elevated railway. People were still arriving in thousands, and I had some difficulty in threading my way through the advancing crowd to reach the steamer, which was going back at once to bring more pleasure-seekers. To New York I returned, a sadder, if not a wiser man, in time to have a quiet dinner at Delmonico's, one of the most expensive institutions of its kind in the States, and the only one where I found the food enjoyable.

The tastes of humanity are proverbially difficult to account for. That men who have been moving about New York all the week by tramways and railroads for their business, who have been ascending the floors of their warehouses in lifts, should find relaxation on Sunday in frequenting the same means of locomotion at a place like Coney Island, is remarkable. But so it is – the inhabitants of New York appear to take delight in iron, steam, and machinery, and the satisfaction which the visitors to Coney Island evinced as they rode backwards and forwards in the cars, or up and down in the elevator, was a phenomenon worthy of study. A quiet walk on the Battery, or in the pretty, if somewhat cockneyfied Central Park, would seem to be more enjoyable and quite as healthy. Coney Island is a reproduction in miniature of the United States, an epitome in fact of the great country – as active, as pushing, as materialistic, as unartistic. To New York one goes for business, to Coney Island for pleasure; the difference is in the name only, the equivalent for the dollar is the same in both places.

The people I saw reminded me strongly of those one finds at Ramsgate or Margate in the summer months, with an admixture of coloured folk. I have already mentioned that on this Sabbath day dancing was going on continually;

whilst music, vocal and instrumental, was to be heard everywhere. There appeared to be no restriction as to drinking; and yet I was agreeably struck with the fact that during the whole day I met no one the worse for liquor, heard no bad language, witnessed no disputes; everybody conducted himself in an orderly and decorous manner.



Coney Island around the time Ashbee visited