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# The Johnstown Horror

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In writing of the indescribable horrors that befell the people residing in Johnstown and other villages situated in the Cone-maugh Valley,<sup>1</sup> no effort will be made to introduce pen pictures of the awful scenes that transpired. In due time, the camera, the photographic art, will supply, in some measure, the demand for pictures of death, destruction and desolation brought about by the deluge of water, but, when the most, in that line, has been done, the half will not be presented to the eye or to the mind. Graphic pens have been at work from the first. Men of fervid imaginations, having at their command the wealth of all languages will find their descriptive powers totally inadequate for the task of portraying incidents of the mountain tide of desolation, as it rolled, in awful majesty, down the valley of death.

The Johnstown catastrophe, for such it is to be known, is to be monumental. It is to pass into history, and will be referred to when centuries are gone. There is nothing to compare with it in modern times. Nor does fancy conjure up anything more horrifying, in the contemplation of the overthrow of Pompey, Herculaneum, or Sodom. The rain of ashes and the storm of fire could not have been more sudden or overwhelming, and had an earthquake lent its earth-splitting force to the mad wave of the mountain reservoir the horrors of the hour could scarcely have been more appalling.

Occasionally some one refers the awful visitations of Providence; to the mysterious ways of Providence; to Jehovah's inscrutable will. When such things can be saddled upon an Omniscient God, the convenient verdict, "nobody to blame," is natural, and always in order.

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<sup>1</sup> The Johnstown Flood of May 31, 1889, was the greatest civilian disaster of the 19th Century in the United States, resulting in the loss of 2,209 lives.

The Conemaugh river was subject, like all mountain streams, to sudden floods. The people living along its banks were familiar with its eccentricities, and though frequently giving them trouble and inconvenience, was not regarded as specially dangerous, but in the mountains, a few miles distant, was a reservoir, originally constructed as a feeder to a canal. Its elevation above the bed of the Conemaugh was at least 175 feet. When the canal was abandoned a number of rich persons obtained possession of this reservoir, extended its area until it became a lake, three miles long, one and a half miles wide and of a depth of from forty to one hundred feet. It was for private sport, fishing, duck shooting and sailing; elegant residences and club houses adorned its banks. It was a place for elegant, luxurious leisure. It was known to be dangerous, and the millionaires who owned it had been required to give bond in the sum of \$3 million to make the banks of the lake safe, and keep them in that condition, but the bond was never executed. Millionaires have a happy way of avoiding responsibilities; it is so much easier and less expensive to make Providence responsible. The cry had often been heard, "the dam has broken," or some similar warning, but as the dam did not give way, the people were lulled into security.

The storms of the week preceding the fatal Friday, May 31, created alarm. The pleasure lake was often referred to, but men had heard such things before, and went about their business. But the rains had swollen all the mountain streams, and they poured their floods into the lake far above the doomed valley. The Conemaugh had risen rapidly, but the people were familiar with its tantrums. It would rush and roar for awhile and then subside, and they pursued their avocations. The mountain streams continued to pour their floods into the lake. The pressure increased, until finally its banks collapsed. Then the desolating tide began its march. One man mounted his steed and sped down the valley, crying "the dam has broken, fly to the mountains!" A few heard the alarm and fled for their lives — only a few. A bank of water 40 feet high, descending from an altitude of 175 feet, gathering momentum as it flowed, swept down the valley of the Conemaugh. Its roar was the "voice of many waters."<sup>2</sup> In its pathway

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<sup>2</sup> Allusion to the apocalyptic biblical book of *Revelation*, which twice uses the phrase to describe the sound of God or his heavenly minions. See: *Revelation* 14:2, 19:6.

were villages, hamlets, towns, cottage homes, palatial homes, massive public buildings, churches, schoolhouses and factories, shops, stores and warehouses, depots, and industries too numerous to mention: splendid triumphs of labor and capital were on every hand. It was the abode of enlightened civilization, of education, art, and culture. There was wealth and luxury. It was a busy valley— one company, the Cambria, employed from 5,000 to 6,000 workingmen. Other industries employed hundreds of men. It was a highly favored locality. There was iron and coal in the surrounding mountains. It is not difficult to fancy such a valley — such a hive of industry. It requires no effort of the imagination to picture the towns or villages of Conemaugh, Woodvale, Kernville, Ninevah, and the thriving city of Johnstown.

The mind readily grasps the picture. The Conemaugh is rising, but the swelling river gives wild beauty to the scene. It whirls and foams and roars, but it sounds no death notes. Occasionally, some one refers to the reservoir in the mountains, but no special solicitude is aroused. Now, suddenly, like thunder from an unclouded sky, comes the cry, “The dam has given way!” “Fly for your lives!” In the near distance, the moving mountain of waters is seen, and in 20 minutes — hamlet, village, and town have disappeared, and in the track of the flood there is desolation and death, and thousands of men, women, and children are dead. The millionaire pleasure lake has done its work.

We could fill the *Magazine* from cover to cover with harrowing details of the flood. This is not required, our readers are familiar with the story, as it has been flashed over the country and under the ocean. Referring to the force of the wave we note its effects upon the railway tracks. A special from Johnstown, June 5, says:

Everyone has seen the light iron beam shafts and rods in a factory lying in twisted, broken and criss-cross shape after a fire has destroyed the factory. In the gap above Johnstown the water has picked up a four-track railroad covered with trains, freight and passenger, and with machine shops, a roundhouse and other heavy buildings with heavy contents, and has torn the track to pieces, twisted, turned, and crossed it as fire never could. It has tossed huge freight locomotives like barrels, and cars like packing boxes, torn them to pieces, and scattered them over miles of territory.

Railroad men will readily comprehend that only incomprehensible power could do such things. The dispatch adds that

thirty-three locomotives were in and around the round-house and the repair shops near. Of these 26 have been found, or, at least, traced, part of them being found scattered down into Johnstown, and one tender was found in Stony creek. The other seven locomotives are gone; not a trace of them has been found up to this time. It is supposed that some of them are in the 60 acres of debris at Johnstown, above the bridge. All the locomotives that remain anywhere within sight of the roundhouse, all except those attached to the trains, are thrown about in every direction, smashed, broken and useless, but for old iron. The tenders are all gone. Being lighter than the locomotives they floated more easily and were quickly carried away. The engines were apparently rolled over and over in whichever direction ran the current which had hold of them, and occasionally were picked up bodily and slammed down again, wheels up or whichever way chanced to be most convenient to the flood. Most of them lie in five feet of sand and gravel, with only a part showing above the surface; some are out in the bed of the river.

Such a catastrophe staggers credulity, and fiction sits dumb in the face of the horrifying facts. As we write thousands are engaged in exploring the miles of debris to rescue and bury the dead. The great heart of the nation is touched, and contributions are flowing in from all directions. The estimated loss in money is placed at \$25 million — and another estimate is that the flood made hundreds orphans. As we have said, the loss of life reaches thousands; some of the survivors have gone insane, and finally, comes the fears of the physicians that a scourge will set in, the ravages of which must be a matter of conjecture.

After a time inquiries as to the cause of the unparalleled catastrophe will be in order. It need not be protracted. The final conclusion will be that a select number of rich men wanted a pleasure lake in the mountains — they wanted a place to fish and shoot, and sail their pleasure yachts. Their ambition was gratified and the world knows the result.