

## AQUA PURA IN OLD NEW YORK

BY GRACE ADAMS AND EDWARD HUTTER

THE chimes of Grace Church had just rung in the New Year. A few blocks west on Tenth Street a party was being thrown. It had the standard set-up of arty Greenwich Village. The guests sat in candle-light before an open fire, on couches and on the floor, and discussed poetry and art and political reforms and Life. A pretty girl, who had recently shocked her family and her family's friends by deserting society for the stage, sang in a throbbing, throaty voice a new and vaguely naughty song. The radical son of a wealthy father, who naturally had been stuck for the party's refreshments, talked excitedly about the latest social experiments in Europe. And a thin, sad man with a pear-shaped head and a small dark moustache, recited his most doleful and therefore most popular poem.

What made this party a little different from others in this neighborhood through nine decades was that the society singer was Cora Mowatt, whose play, *Fashion*, Deems Taylor and Brian Hooker

revamped for the opening of the Greenwich Village Theatre seventy-five years later; the declaiming radical was Albert Brisbane; and the morose poet was Edgar Allan Poe.

It was also at this party that Mary Neal Gove and Thomas Nichols came face to face for the first time. And from this meeting there developed one of New York's strangest institutions.

Unlike most of the guests, Mrs. Gove and Mr. Nichols were not content just to be winchelled in Poe's "Literati" columns of *Godey's Lady's Book*; they had wider and grander interests. Mrs. Gove, whom Poe thought perhaps the most remarkable female novelist of her day, was also, according to Poe, "a Mesmerist, a Swedenborgian, a phrenologist, a homeopathist, and a disciple of Priessnitz — more I am not prepared to say." And Mr. Nichols, although he had some four novels to his credit, had edited James Gordon Bennett's *Herald* and had got out a couple of papers of his own, had also spent several

months in jail for stirring up laboring men against their bosses.

But the really great thing that these two had in common was a profound faith in the dietary theories of Sylvester Graham and the healing powers of water. Both had written extensively for radical magazines about the wonderful effects of eating unbolten bread and taking lots of baths, so each knew the other by reputation before this eventful meeting. But the minute Thomas's eyes actually fell on Mary, a "new light broke upon me — the mingled rays of love and wisdom. My destiny was joined to hers, in the holiest of bonds; and our studies and work, as well as our lives, lay henceforth in the same track." More specifically, they decided to set themselves up in the water-cure business.

There were, to be sure, a few academic and legal details to be attended to before their bonds could become as holy, or even as respectable, as a really high-class water-cure establishment demanded. In the first place, although Mrs. Gove had been carrying on a tidy little practice in the very house where the party was given, and there was nothing to prevent Mr. Nichols from moving in and assisting her with it — as he did — she had no medical degree

of any kind. Also, both had left spouses in their native New England hamlets. A little untangling had to be done before the new mingling could take place. While they waited impatiently for their divorce decrees, Mr. Nichols put in his time profitably by getting an M.D. from New York University. By 1850 their mutual track was so well cleared that they were able to place this advertisement in the New York papers:

WATER-CURE HOUSE  
THOMAS L. NICHOLS AND  
MARY GOVE NICHOLS,

Water-Cure Physicians, wish to apprise their friends and the public, that they have removed to a more eligible, convenient, and accessible residence, No. 87 West Twenty-Second Street, near the Sixth Avenue, in the center of the most beautiful and salubrious "uptown" portion of New York. . . .

At this house, combining the advantages of country air with a city residence, Dr. and Mrs. Nichols will receive patients for full board and treatment, for day treatment, and for consultation and examination. Patients also treated at their residences. Professional visits made within a reasonable distance, and the principles of Water-Cure applied to every department of medicine, surgery and obstetrics. . . .

The Nicholoses did not, of course, think up the water-cure. That had been done several years before by an ignorant Austrian peasant. By the time they set up their salubrious establishment, Europe was

dense with spas, Saratoga was flourishing, and curative powers were being discovered in the iron, sulphur and limestone springs of the Southern Alleghenies where fashionable resorts were built around them. But it was the Nicholse's contention that the free, pure "waters of Croton," administered by competent hydrotherapists, would work greater wonders than the evil-tasting effusions which bubbled forth at these distant and more expensive places — where, because of the dictates of fashion, women laced themselves almost to suffocation, men absorbed into their systems "spirituous drinks" and such "poisonous narcotics" as tea, coffee and tobacco, and both, together with their children, "crammed themselves with impure flesh and heating spices."

The Nicholse allowed their patients no pork, no fat meat, no gravies, no pastries, and no condiments except a little salt. Their only drink was cold water. The women patients could wear only loose-fitting garments. At night persons of both sexes were required to remove all clothing worn in the daytime, to open their bedroom windows, and to sleep on mattresses (instead of the customary feather beds) with wet cloths

around their abdomens. Their waking hours were spent in experiencing the various kinds of water-cure. At regular, carefully prescribed intervals they were obliged to take hand baths, foot baths, head baths, sitz baths ("underclothes on, feet out") and douches. Between times, attendants packed them in wet sheets, festooned them with "dripping sheets" and threw buckets of water at them.

Among the maladies that the Nicholse treated "with entire success" in this manner were brain fever, typhus fever, lung fever, ship fever, delirium tremens, smallpox, scarlatina, measles, chicken pox, varioloid, spinal disease, hernia, ague, croup, injuries to the lungs and other injuries, diseases of the eyes, jaundice, cholera, and the "whole Train of Female Weaknesses."

As the fame of their cures spread, their establishment thrived. The Water-Cure House was always booked to capacity and patients came there to board from Rhode Island, Ohio, Kentucky and "the Southern States." It also carried on a flourishing mail-order business. Patients from a distance were cautioned to

give a full and clear account of their diseases, the time they have been affected, the health of their parents,

if dead of what diseases they died, and at what age, and all facts which may throw light upon the case, especially those relating to diseases, medicines, habits, and temperature, or reactive power against cold.

They were instructed to "enclose five dollars in the first letter, and one dollar in subsequent letters, if such are required." Mrs. Nichols soon had to relinquish all active practice, except the Train of Female Weaknesses, in order to answer the mail.

## II

All might have continued in this respectable, prosperous way had not a "rare and exquisite beauty," one day in 1855, alighted from the Bloomingdale stage at Twenty-Second Street and entered the Water-Cure House. Although Mrs. Nichols was immediately taken with her "outward seeming" — "her form was plump, her cheeks rosy and her complexion like the lily in fairness" — she had been but a few minutes in her presence when she "became penetrated by a great sadness." It seemed justified, for her visitor took a little bottle of cologne from her bag, poured some upon her handkerchief, and passed it over her face. "A frightful pallor succeeded," and the handkerchief held up to Mrs. Nichols' aston-

ished gaze was covered with rouge.

"I am made up. I am bloated with porter," the young lady said. Besides, she announced herself wretched, nervous and diseased. This declaration on such short notice did not feaze Mrs. Nichols. As the visitor prattled on in a candid vein, she kept fiddling with a letter. Mrs. Nichols diagnosed the scene. "That letter," she burst out impulsively, "is from one you love!" "It is, it is," said the weeping woman. Whereupon Mrs. Nichols said "solemnly" if abruptly, "Then you are saved. . . . Turn not away from this love. It is the only sacred thing left you. . . . You are safe in following my counsel."

The giving of such counsel had a profound and rather disastrous effect upon the future of both Mrs. Nichols and her husband. She soon became so absorbed with prying into and diagnosing the sex lives of her consultants that she scarcely had time to prescribe pouring baths and sitz baths and dripping sheets for the less interesting boarders. Her advice in these matters was catholic. She felt just as much sympathy for the husband who had the misfortune to be married to a mate lacking in "amative want" as for the robust young wife of an aging husband. In fact things came to such a pass that

she could not hear the word "purity" without exclaiming "Bah!!!"

Matters might still have gone on peaceably, and her patients might have derived as much happiness from her counsels as their counselor was sure they should, had not the Nicholises been congenital and incorrigible writers and speech-makers. As soon as Mrs. Nichols came across a new "victim of diseased amativeness" — her description of a wife more commonly spoken of in those days as "chaste as ice" — she made haste to transcribe the details of her consultation to the pages of *Nichols' Journal* and broadcast them to the world.

Inevitably a copy of the *Journal* — which the Nicholises used for expressing their most fervent beliefs as well as for drumming up trade for the Water-Cure House — found its way into the hands of her ex-husband in New Hampshire. This pure Quaker lost no time in spreading unkind words about the former Mrs. Gove's business in New York. But she squelched him prettily by retorting in the next month's *Journal* that were she actually "conducting a house of infamy" Hiram Gove would never be admitted on its premises.

There was another former, though less intimate, acquaintance,

however, whom she could not silence so easily. That was Horace Greeley. He had been almost as favorably impressed by the negative eating habits of Sylvester Graham as the Nicholises. And so long as the Water-Cure House confined its treatments to the waters of Croton and unbolten bread, he gave it a good press. But as Mrs. Nichols delved deeper and deeper toward the mysterious nadir of the amative instinct, he became leery. Finally, when she announced and delivered a public lecture on the thesis that "A woman should decide when she would bear a babe, and should choose the father of her child," there was no reporter from the *Tribune* at the meeting. Mrs. Nichols took this to be an oversight on Mr. Greeley's part and sent him the complete text of her address. Still it remained absent from the pages of the *Tribune*. When Mr. Greeley was pressed for a reason for this omission he said simply that the article was "unfit for the columns of my paper." This hurt Mrs. Nichols but it did not daunt her. In the very next number of *Nichols' Journal* she addressed this question to Mr. Greeley:

"Suppose a woman loved seven men in turn, had a child by each, and *continued* to love them, what hurt is it to you?"

Mr. Greeley ignored her question, but continued editorially to call her licentious and libidinous.

The letters, containing the hopeful five dollars for the first consultation, came less frequently. Boarders packed their Saratoga trunks and returned to Rhode Island, Ohio, Kentucky and "the Southern States." Even calls for consultations from reasonable distances became scarce. In 1856 the Nicholoses, with seven still-faithful patients and *Nichols' Journal*, quit 87 West Twenty-Second Street in the most beautiful and salubrious uptown portion of New York for the environs of Cincinnati. But that thriving community had changed considerably during the thirty years since Fanny Wright and the two Robert Owens had made of it a kind of anticipatory Southern California. In the 'fifties Cincinnati had become almost effete Eastern and temporarily fed up with reformers.

Moreover, the Nicholoses were particularly unfortunate in divining the site of their newest enterprise, land close to that upon which Horace Mann was even then erecting the first buildings of Antioch College. He was just as adamant as the Horace in New York against having free-lovers for neighbors, and wrote to the Ohio

papers just as intemperately about them. Again the Nicholoses had to move on. This time, not even taking *Nichols' Journal* with them, they headed down the Mississippi. For a while they found refuge in a convent near New Orleans. And then, just as less amusing reformers in the pure New England from which they had escaped were tightening their lips for fratricidal slaughter, they took a cargo boat for England and landed in Liverpool with thirty shillings.

There, bewildered, friendless, and ill (Mrs. Nichols had suffered from tuberculosis while she cured others of more spectacular ailments), they had once more to turn to writing in order to make a living. It was then that they wrote the only things by which they are known today. Dr. Nichols set down his honest, homely remembrances of *Forty Years of American Life* — a book which was published for the third time just three years ago. And Mrs. Nichols sold to a two-penny magazine her *Recollections of Edgar Allan Poe* — those simple, tender little sketches which no biographer neglects to quote and from which the rest of us have learned about the frightened, pitiable months that Eddie and Muddy and Virginia spent in that bare, clean cottage at Fordham.

## WHERE LIVING COSTS LITTLE

BY LARRY NIXON

IT DOESN'T take a fortune to settle down in most of the interesting places of the world. A family of four can live in comfort and some style on an income of \$100 a month. Ten dollars a week will take care of the living expenses of a single man or woman; if you want to eat fish caught by yourself, there are places where food costs come down to the proverbial song. And I'm not talking about Tahiti, or Bali, or Granada. I mean places where you can go without a passport, without waiting eight weeks for a ship, and without posting a bond to cover your return-trip passage as you must if you go to Tahiti or to any of the foreign-owned islands of the West Indies.

There are places right here in our own land as remote as any escape seeker could ask. Some of them are on the main highway, with daily newspapers stuck in tubes on posts twice a day. Others are reached by twice-a-week boats carrying occasional passengers and the always important mail. Here and there hideaways exist that shelter wise

men who have become fed up with city life and retreated to fastnesses invaded by visitors only once or twice a year. You have met people who get "starry eyed" when they talk about the South Seas. But I know a chap who can match their tales — and he gets back to New York to talk to his publishers on twenty-four hours' notice, when necessary.

You can live in Tahiti for \$50 a month. Just as good a house in Arkansas, however, runs your budget no higher, with better servants and fully as tasty fish; in fact it can be done for a lot less. No country offers bargains in escape more plentifully than our own. Take the case of the ranch at Elgin, Arizona. You sleep in the big house with its two-foot-thick 'dobe walls, ride horseback every day, eat huge Western-style meals, and rest in the sun. The cost is exactly \$75 a month, for everything. Of course this is cheaper than most dude ranches, but it takes no Sherlock Holmes to find it — just one of the ranches listed in the prosaic travel