



Picturesque America; or, the land we live in

a delineation by pen and pencil of the mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, water-falls, shores, cañons, valleys, cities, and other picturesque features of our country ; with illustrations on steel and wood, by eminent American artists

Bryant, William Cullen

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Weyer's Cave, Virginia.

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WEYER'S CAVE, VIRGINIA.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRY FENN.



The Entrance.

WEYER'S CAVE, which has been not inappropriately termed the Antiparos of Virginia, is situated in the northwestern part of Augusta County, about seventeen miles north of Staunton, and a few miles west of the

Blue-Ridge Mountains. It is located in a large hill, or rather a spur of a range of small mountains, branching out southwesterly from this spine of the Atlantic watershed, and for many miles overhanging its uppermost tributaries.

This cavern derives its name from one Bernard Weyer, a dweller in the neighborhood, who discovered it while hunting an opossum, ferreting out the little animal to its retreat within the mouth. It is approached from the rustic inn, half a mile distant, by a broad carriage-road to the foot of the hill, and thence by a zigzag, precipitous foot-path to the opening near the crest of the summit.

The entrance, when discovered, was scarcely large enough for Mr. Weyer to enter on his hands and knees; and his astonishment and terror may be imagined when on and on he groped in the darkness, without finding the cunning little quadruped which had secured such commodious and gorgeous quarters. Since then the entrance has been enlarged, so as to be about seven feet in height, and is covered over by a rustic shed, to which is affixed a strong wooden gate, secured by a heavy lock.

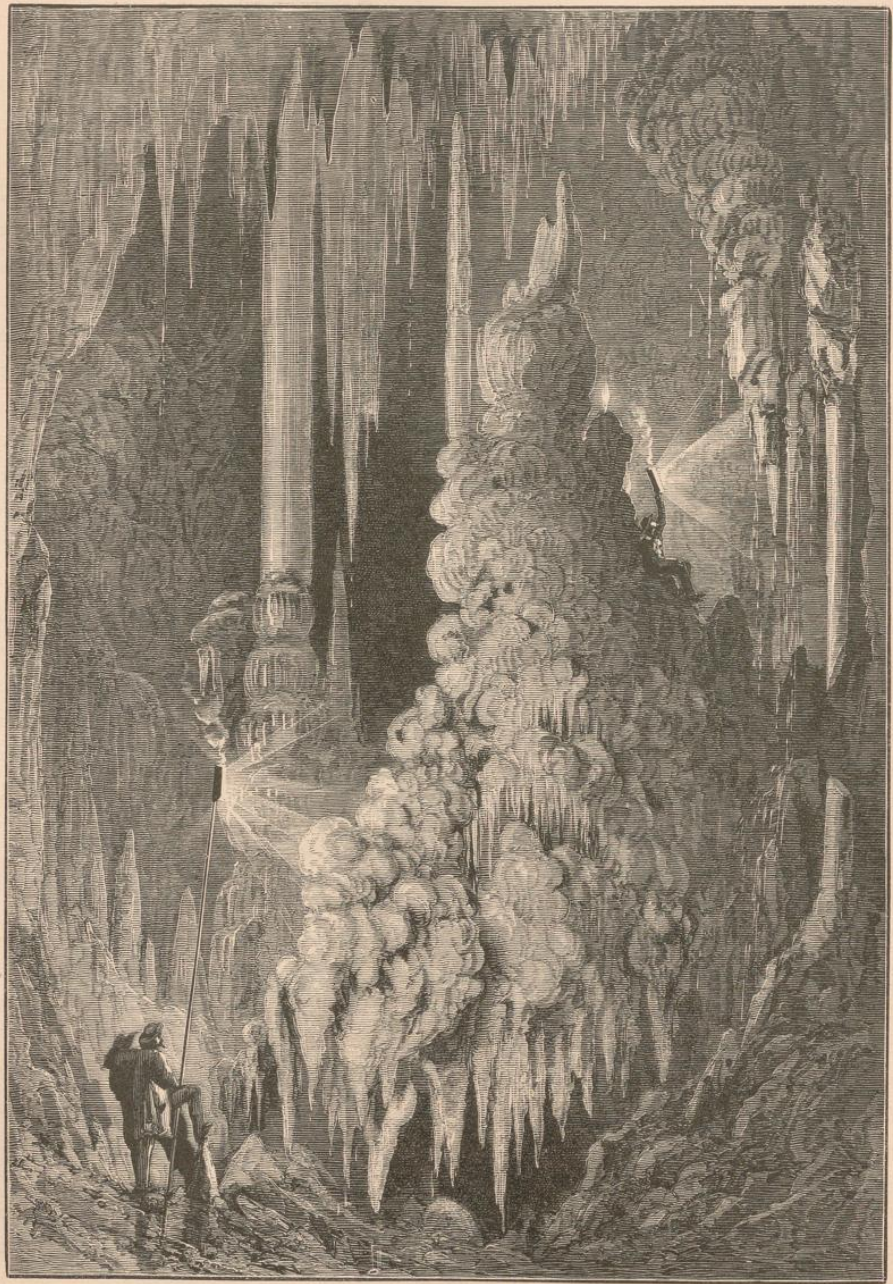
A chill creeps over one upon entering, and he feels an intensity of awe as he looks forward, beyond the dim, flickering lights in the sconces, to the profound darkness which spreads its impenetrable gloom in the distance. But the guide is master of his business; he is cheerful, facetious, loquacious; and, winding a yarn of some adventurous explorer before his visitor (perhaps some illustrious personage—the Duke of Buckingham, who sadly offended a liege lord of America; Frederika Bremer, who, in her geological researches here, was taken by a neighboring husbandman to be an escaped unfortunate from the Staunton Lunatic Asylum), or cracking some wily joke, leads on until dusky, indefinable figures loom up in the midnight, when by a skilful shifting of his lights are discovered all around grim, grotesque stalagmites, and opening out is a long gallery, at the nether end of which a single mute, stark-white figure gives to this apartment its significant title, the Ghost-Chamber.

From this the Hall of Statuary is entered, when imagination readily conjures up the galleries of the Vatican by moonlight, or rather by torchlight. Above, in the ceiling, is a circular opening, about fifteen feet in diameter, fringed around with white, sparkling stalactites. Through this opening is seen the interior of a dome many feet higher, draped and columned as by the deft hand of some fantastic architect. Upon one side of this hall is the similitude of an altar, with curtains and candlesticks on the top; and, on the other, fancy brings out a cathedral-organ, with its rows of pipes and pendent cornices.

A few paces forward, and down a rude flight of some twenty steps, we reach the Cataract, seemingly a water-fall petrified in its leap, affording one of the finest spectacles in the cave. The sullen stillness of this hushed Niagara is very impressive, and instinctively leads the imagination to the roaring and rushing green waters of the true cataract after which it is named.

A little farther on is the Senate-Chamber, with the speaker's chair at one end, in front of which are rude representations of the desks of the honorable members; and above, at one side, is an unmistakable gallery, fenced around by a fanciful balustrade, over which seemingly peer the heads of waiting visitors.

Next in order comes the Cathedral, from the centre of which hangs the fancied resemblance to a chandelier; and beyond it rises the pulpit, an elevated circular desk, covered with the most graceful folds of white drapery. On the opposite side is a baldachin fringed with glittering crystals, the whole ceiling being hung with stalactites,



CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE AND ANTHONY'S PILLAR.

dropping in long points and broad, wavy sheets, some of milky whiteness, others of a muddy red bordered with white, or with the darker cornelian shades of the Piedmont brown. This apartment has also been vulgarly termed the Tan-Yard, the broad sheets of yellow spar suggesting a striking resemblance to hides hung to dry. These stone draperies are translucent, faintly emitting the rays of light when a candle is held behind them; and also sonorous, yielding soft musical tones, like the gently-touched keys of an organ, on being struck, while all the notes of the gamut may be produced by skilful blows, the side-walls responding to blows of the hand or foot with the echoing notes of "deep-toned bells."

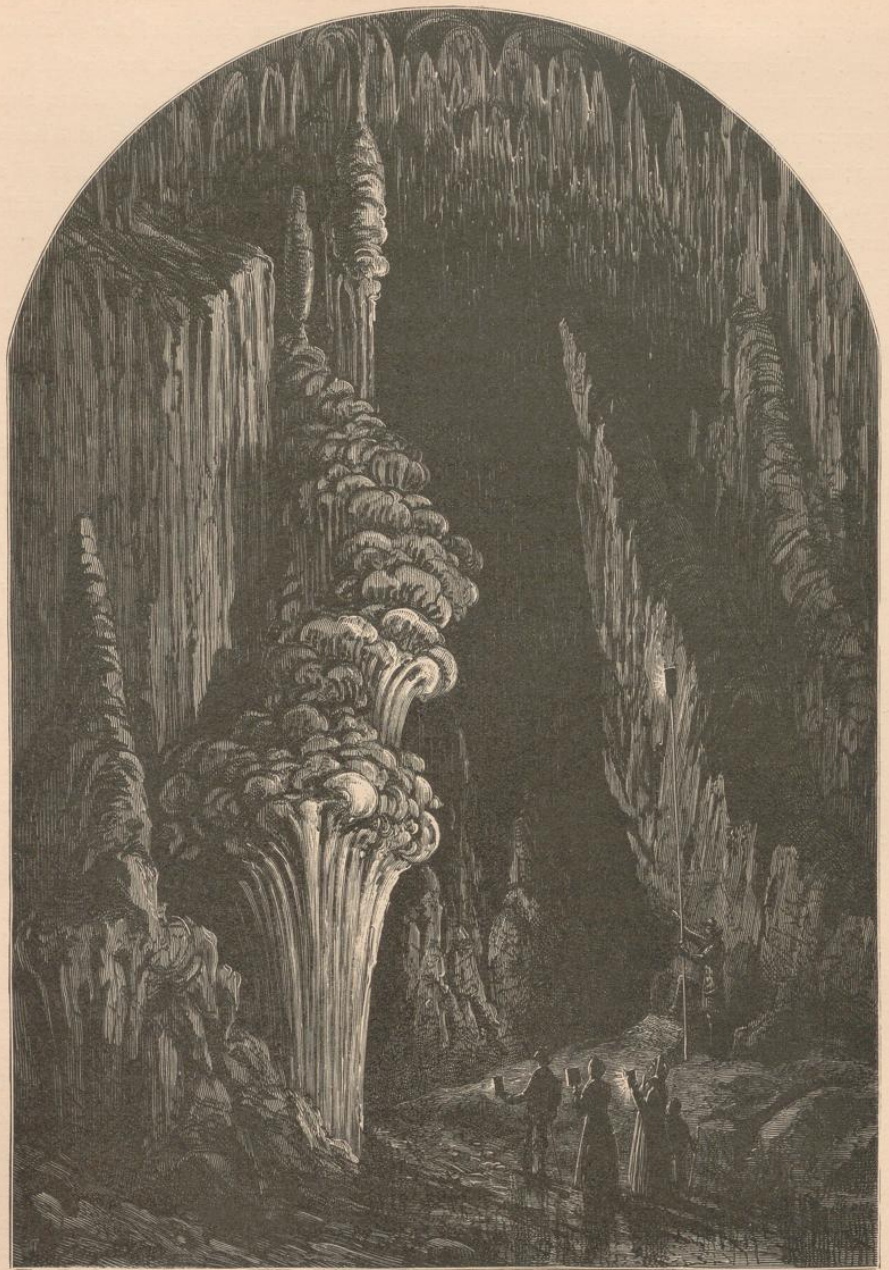
In this vicinity a huge pyramidal heap of cornelian-tinted stalagmite, veined and spotted with white, as is the Swiss stone, sustains on one side a tall, slender, towering column, which has received the name of Cleopatra's Needle; and on the right a more massive and taller shaft, bearing the appellation of Anthony's Pillar, rears its pointed head until it touches the sparkling stalactites that stud the dark ceiling; and all around are formations more or less resembling objects in Nature, or as wild and weird as the most imaginative brain could conjure out for fiction.

From this section of the cavern, a natural stairway, with natural supports on the left hand, is descended, called Jacob's Ladder; and, beyond, a square rock covered with a white incrustation, resembling a table-cloth, is called Jacob's Tea-Table; and near by is an ominous-looking cavity, bearing the name of Jacob's Ice-House, or the Bottomless Pit. Whether bottomless or not, has never yet been fully ascertained; but, it is certain, a torch dropped in seems to twinkle away into infinite nothingness, and a stone let fall returns no sound to the waiting listener.

In this part of Weyer's Cave is what, for want of a more appropriate term, must be called the Geyser, an immense stalagmitic accretion, with streaks and sparkles of white, lighting the waves of the cumuli as the play of sunlight the turbulent volumes of one of Nature's boiling springs.

Farther on is Washington's Hall, otherwise called the Gnome-King's Palace, rising into a vaulted roof, upward of *ninety feet* in height and *two hundred and fifty* in length. An intelligent traveller, who once visited Weyer's Cave at an annual illumination, has thus finely described this magnificent apartment:

"There is a fine sheet of rock-work running up the centre of this room, and giving it the aspect of two separate and noble galleries, till you look above, where you observe the partition rises only about twenty feet toward the roof, and leaves the fine arch expanding over your head. There is a beautiful concretion here, standing out in the room, which certainly has the form and drapery of a gigantic statue. It bears the name of the nation's hero; and the whole place is filled with these projections—appearances which excite the imagination by suggesting resemblances and leaving them unfinished. The general effect, too, was perhaps indescribable. The fine per-



THE GEYSER.

spective of this room, four times the length of an ordinary church; the numerous tapers, when near you so encumbered by deep shadows as to give only a dim, religious light, and, when at a distance, appearing in their various attitudes like twinkling stars on a deep-dark heaven; the amazing vaulted roof spread over you, with its carved and knotted surface, to which the streaming lights below in vain endeavored to convey their radiance; together with the impression that you had made so deep an entrance, and were so entirely cut off from the living world and ordinary things—produce an effect which, perhaps, the mind can conceive but once, and will retain forever.”

It is a trick of the guide to extinguish the tapers when in this hall, and leave the visitors for a few moments to experience the Cimmerian darkness—darkness which can almost be felt—the utter abstraction of what gives life and beauty to the outer world.

Near this apartment is Lady Washington's Bedchamber, on one side of which is a rude resemblance to a couch, with a milk-white canopy, richly fluted around; while on the other side of the beautiful little room is a toilet-table, with snowy drapery, overhung by an imaginary mirror, and scattered over with the usual paraphernalia of a lady's dressing-room.

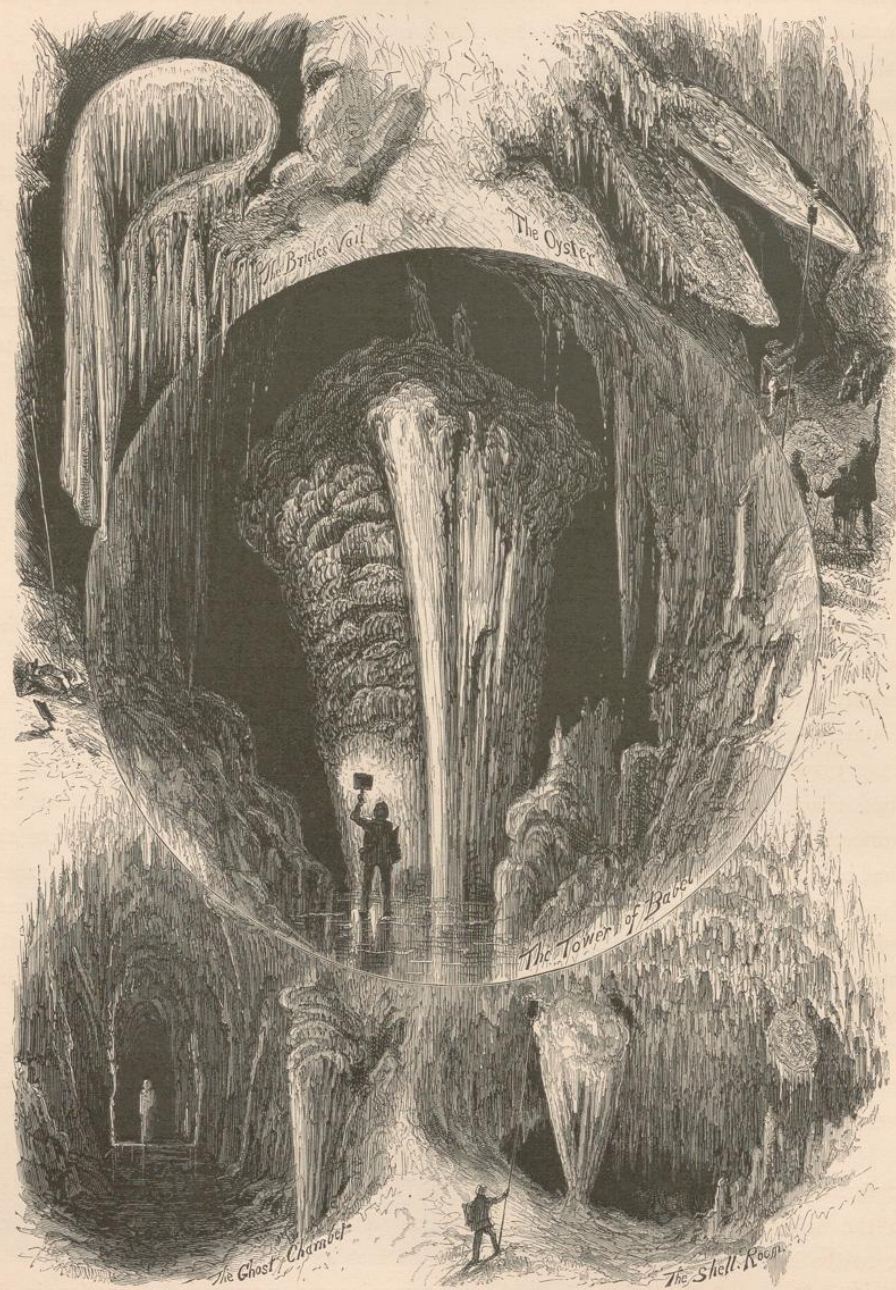
In this vicinity is the Bridal Veil, a splendid sheet of white, glittering, translucent spar, which seems thrown over a hat, or, as has been suggested by others, the shelving back of an immense Spanish comb, and hangs in full, classic folds or heavy volutes almost to the clay-red flooring of the little chamber.

And, on and on, one is conducted, through narrow passages and more commodious arches; up and down precipices; among tumbling heaps of pilasters, columns, and friezes, divided by strata at regular or irregular intervals, and pillared with the skill of the architect and mathematician, like the ruins of some vast Old-World temple; before the Diamond Mountain, flashing with its buried gems, and stalked over by the gigantic and ghostly Crane, which looks inquiringly toward the Rising Moon that throws its silvery light out in the voiceless midnight; and on and on, until we arrive at the end of the cavern, and are refreshed by a glass of as sparkling water as ever gushed from upper-world fountain and made merry music in the glad sunlight.

This subterranean spring is perfectly incrustated with stalactites and stalagmites; and an earthen jar kept in this part of the grotto, where the water is constantly dripping from the ceiling, is incrustated with younger but similar concretions.

The egress is somewhat varied from the ingress; and, in returning, the visitor is conducted to the Tower of Babel, or Magic Tower, a huge, columnar accretion, rising to the height of thirty feet or more, irregularly divided by strata at distances of ten or twelve inches, and fluted around by pillars an inch or more in diameter.

The Tower of Babel is perhaps the most regular and symmetrical formation in all this wonderful grotto, and most readily suggests the title it bears. It occupies the



CHAMBERS IN WEYER'S CAVE.

centre of an apartment filled with indefinable figures, which may suggest statues, ghosts goblins, or whatever will best please the fancy.

Near this is the Oyster-Shell, consisting of two huge, shelving pieces of spar, of a peculiar grayish white, and absurdly resembling the late home of a defunct monster bivalve. And Nature, to vindicate her providence, in close proximity to this fanciful concretion, has placed Solomon's Meat-House, from the fretted and groined roof of which is suspended a Leg of Mutton—a single instance of the old king's gastronomic propensities. In prudent nearness to the Meat-House is Solomon's Temple, or, as it is better known, the Shell-Room. In the centre of this apartment rises a massive column of dazzling white, as rich with grooves and flutings as if chiselled out to fill an artistic design; and this reaches the ceiling, which is thickly studded with sparkling stalactites, reflecting, as the tapers are held underneath them, the hue and lustre of every gem that holds light imprisoned. The Shell-Room, from the radish-like shape of the stalactites that hang from the ceiling, has also been called the Radish-Room; while almost every intelligent visitor finds some suggestive title to this magnificent hall.

And this, with the 'Possum-up-the-Gum-Tree—doubtless, Weyer's opossum, upon the final capture of which tradition is silent—completes a list of the most noticeable of the many noticeable freaks in which Nature indulges in these subterranean retreats.

Out of the usual route of exploration, but to be visited by special request, is a most beautiful pond, over which is the shelving sheet of spar from which the specimens usually sold are obtained. As a visit to this lake is very fatiguing and somewhat dangerous, it is not generally attempted, but well repays all fatigue or danger incurred.

A few moments after leaving the Shell-Room, the visitor grows sensible that the dim candles emit a dimmer light; if in summer, a warmer, and, if in winter, a colder, atmosphere greets one; and, climbing a slight ascent, he is once more in the face of day, and listening to other sounds than that of the human voice alone.

"Weyer's Cave," says the writer quoted, "is, in my judgment, one of the great natural wonders of the New World, and, for its eminence in its own class, deserves to be ranked with the Natural Bridge and Niagara, while it is far less known than either. Its dimensions, by the most direct course, are more than sixteen hundred feet, and, by the more winding paths, twice that length; and its objects are remarkable for their variety, formation, and beauty. In both respects, it will, I think, compare without injury to itself with the celebrated grotto of Antiparos."

Within a few hundred yards of Weyer's Cave is Madison's Cave, described by Mr. Jefferson; but it is less interesting than the former. Indeed, it is supposed that the entire mountain is a cavern, and, it is hoped, in time will be fully explored.