

The Baronet of Fine Arts Drive

1966

There was a baronet who lived across the small lake from the Temple, and he lamented its fall into ruin. Every day he took a walk to the benches and sometimes all the way around to the pantheon of weeping goddesses. It made him a little weepy to see armatures exposed where the the plaster of fifty years ago had broken off. His thoughts ran back to his youth when the Great Exposition of 1915 featured this “Palace of Fine Arts.” There were many other wonders to see there: the 400 foot tower of Light, for example...but this melancholy temple with the paintings & sculptures inside had had a great effect on him. It was a romantic scene. As he said at a civic fundraiser “many a marriage offer was made on the banks of that pond”. Something had to be done; the California/Greek dream was exposed as no more than a stage prop.

He had offered up a quarter of his treasure if the City and other philanthropists would match it and fund a reconstruction. It took a few years, but eventually the money was raised, the voters approved, a builder was chosen. The whole of it would be recaptured in lightweight tinted concrete by making castings of the original.

Now he could watch the progress daily from his house opposite the Pond. He often conferred with the engineers and architects, and once a month would have his chauffeur drive him onto the jobsite in his black Lincoln Continental. The car would ease up through the muddy parts directly into the arc of the Pantheon columns and park. Then the chauffeur would get out and open the door for Mr. Johnson. We watched from our scaffold perches eighty feet above, as the small, dapper, white-haired peer of the realm stepped out in his black three-pieced suit. He placed his feet, in their spats and shoes, gingerly on dry spots while the contractor pointed out the progress. Eventually he looked up to where we stood..and gave a little salute, which we answered in modest fashion.

A deep old world pleasure came over him, an aristocratic swelling for having effected benevolent works that live on forever. After a few minutes we watched the little black-clad being re-enter his car. Then we watched as the chauffeur got in and slowly motored the Continental around thru the trees and staging on the South side, then another city block to his house. We watched him up the stairs and inside and to the window facing us, where he looked over at the Temple of Cranes and scaffolding with its mendicant orangutan pounders.

This little beetle has brought all of us here with our machinery. Hundreds of families will eat decently for a year. Jack will break both his feet. Eastman will end up on Skid Row. Three of us apprentices will be broken in to the Trade. Travis will shoot a raccoon and offer us the meat . Four of us will retreat before an angry swan. Red will fall through three levels of scaffold. My hardhat will earn its biggest dent. In the end, the Goddesses resumed their weeping.