



PYRNA: A COMMUNE *or Under the Ice*

[Ellis James Davis] G.B.

First published in 1875 by Rickers & Son, London

Summary: Crossing the Rhone Glacier on a night excursion in the Swiss Alps, an English tourist meets with a ghastly and solemn man who takes him into a world all made of ice, under a firmament of ice from which a light falls brighter than the sunlight.

In a very fast sledge drawn by powerful deer, the visitor is led into into a magnificent city: wide roads, large palaces carved with flowers and festoons of leaves from top to bottom, vast flights of steps, colonnades, towers, spires, cupolas, domes, some silvered, some gilt, all made of a material that looks like polished alabaster with an effect of beauty and grandeur not to be equalled by any of our most famous cities. In the centre of the main square an enormous pyramidal block of pure ice, as transparent as a diamond, towers far above the tops of the loftiest buildings.

After the Supreme Council have made sure the visitor believes in the creator of the Universe and in the law “Love your neighbor as yourself”, a guide takes him through the community.

The people in the streets are tall and athletic, with a noble intellectual countenance and a beautiful gliding motion (they move on skates). The women are smaller than the men and they seem quite as active and intelligent.

The visit begins with the museums of Science and Art whose halls are free to everyone from the earliest age: Art and Science are twin sisters, as Art must be guided by Nature.

Next comes the Academy of Music, the most honored of arts, as “it raises the soul above the earth” in contact with the harmony of the Universe.

Then the visit proceeds to the nurseries, schools and colleges. Every child leaves its mother at one month and is given a name (and later a number) by the Mune (the Governing Body) and placed at a Universal Nursery where boys and girls are brought up alike. Up to five years they play and grow. Then their education commences and it will be perfected from 12 to 15. After one year ‘s holiday, at 16 the real hard work of life begins: for 2 years they learn some trade useful to the State, being allowed a choice of occupation as far as possible. The boys are taught every out-of-door work, the girls every kind of domestic labour. At 20 the educational or 1st period is completed and for the following five periods of life till 60, the members must work for the Mune in the morning and may cultivate the arts and sciences in the afternoon. “Every

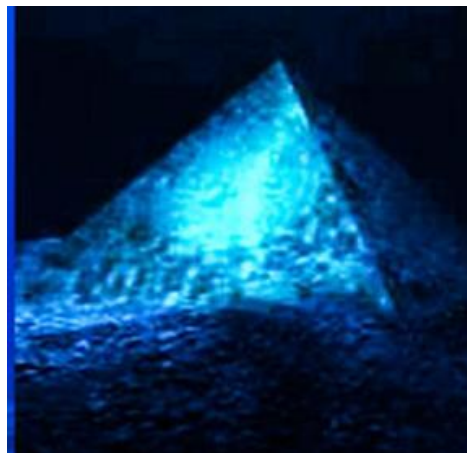
distinction between the sexes, except that required by modesty, is removed”, but women seldom choose to study abstract sciences and never enter the governing councils.

People are fed, clothed and housed by the Mune. They have small private flats and enormous public eating rooms. No one owns individual property. No family consists of more than two people, as children are born in a Government Lying-in. They marry by the consent of the State and live on brotherly terms. Sexual love is banished and selfishness is unknown.

The Constitution of The Universal Community of Free Brethren is based on the principle of brotherly love and is enforced by the Government which consists of The Supreme Council and six departmental Councils, all of them appointed for life. For all offences against the will of the Community—such as disobedience at work—there are but two alternative punishments: death or exile. Only in case of murder, the murdered man is entombed with the murderer, who is made to pass away by euthanasia.

Medicine is highly esteemed. Every member is examined at fixed periods by the doctors and has to abide by their orders. “Incurable disease that might affect the wellbeing of the Mune is punished like crime” and the patient is passed away, (and so are deformed infants) in accordance with the law of natural selection.

After a visit to the graveyard - an emblematical ghastly extent of corpses in icy, pyramidal shrouds - the guest is taken to the border of the glacier where he is recovered senseless by his friends.



Analysis: For its form and content, *Pyrna* is so classical a utopia as to appear as transparent as the ice of which it is made, that is, as to reveal itself as a potential dystopia.

Such duplicity is clearly embodied by the book’s significant symbology which is effectively summed up in the ice pyramid or pryn. Ice expresses a desire for order and transparency but at the same time it implies also a panoptical anxiety and fear towards the warm and disordered complexity of life; similarly the pyramid, representing both the tension upward to the sky and the flight from the mud of earth, voices the hierarchical distinction between heaven and earth, Mind and Body. The ice pyramid in fact is presented both as a symbol of the community with the meaning of “the beautiful home” and as “the symbol of death”.

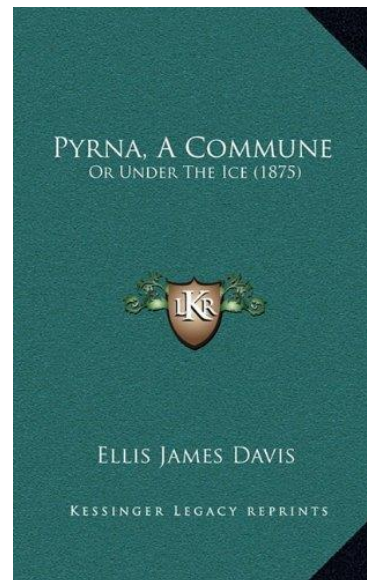
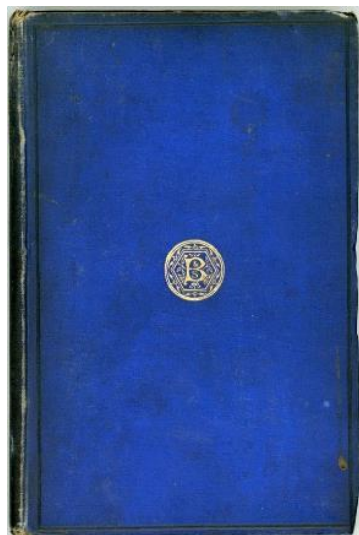
Pyrna’s “most beautiful system” is described as characterized by freedom, justice and love, but its world, full of inflexible discipline and terror, would be an uninhabitable place, if its people were something more than automata.

This utopia is openly based on the implacable enforcement of the first principle of bourgeois liberalism—the survival of the fittest—and on the respectful keeping of the consequent natural hierarchy: *Pyrna* embodies the natural right of Victorian bourgeoisie, thanks to their superiority as the Mind of society, to use the unintellectual, animal-like, lower classes and races

“as an inferior creation, made to be of service to them and in duty bound to contribute from their own abundance all that was necessary for the food, clothing and all the raw material required by the members of the Mune”.

The problems of the rising depression in the seventies (the development of science and machinery, the conflict between capital and labour, the women’s question), which are put, even if not answered, in *The Coming Race* (1870) or in *Erewhon* (1872) , in *Pyrna* have been simply solved into non-existence through a naturalization of differences and conflicts: so “the good people of *Pyrna*” does not know war and violence but as means to have the natural hierarchies respected.

The euphoric triumph of patriarchal values is achieved on the complete humiliation of the female sphere: sex and food are but disagreeable necessities; women do not differ from men but for their constant inferiority and their always smiling faces appear not less dreadful than the causeless wailing of Burdekin’s women in *Swastika Night* of which *Pyrna*, with its parodical echoes, appears as a tragically serious and unconscious ancestor.



Bibliography:

Peter Morton, *The Vital Science, Biology and Literary Imagination, 1860-1900*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1984.

Clute and Nicholls (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993), p. 36.

Glenn Negley, *Utopian Literature: A Bibliography*, p. 261.

L.T. Sargent, *British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985*, p. 63.

Marta Komsta, “The Utopian and the Gothic in Ellis James Davis’s *Pyrna, A Commune; or Under the Ice*”, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin.