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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Letter XX.

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LETTER XX.

FIRE! FIRE!

Lorch, August.

At Bacharach, when the clock strikes twelve, you go to bed, close your eyes, dismiss the ideas that have assailed you during the day, and attain the happy moment of reverie betwixt sleeping and waking, when sleep begins to wake, and life sinks gently into sleep.

On a sudden a vague, unearthly, incongruous, and horrible kind of savage growl, both menacing and plaintive, mingling with the murmur of the night, and seeming to proceed from the cemetery above, where in the morning you saw the eleven dog-headed spouts of St. Werner, with their open jowls prepared for howling, disturbs your rest. Starting up in your bed, you inquire what is the matter; and are told that it is the town-watch, announcing with his horn that all may sleep in peace. Valuable information, certainly; but which could scarcely be imparted in a more alarming manner.

At Lorch they wake you up in a still more dramatic way. But I have a great deal to tell you first about Lorch.

Lorch is a considerable town, of eighteen hundred inhabitants, situated on the right bank of the Rhine,

and following in an angle the Wisper, of which it marks the embouchure. The Wisper is the valley of legends and fables, the country of the fairy grasshoppers.

Lorch is situated at the foot of the Echelle du Diable, a high rock which the valiant Gilgen scaled on horseback to win his bride, who was concealed by the fairies on the summit. It was at Lorch, say the legends, that the fairy Avé invented the art of making cloth, to protect her lover, the Roman knight Hippus, from the cold, whence the name of the town of Heppenheim.

It is somewhat remarkable, that amongst all people, and in all mythologies, the invention of the art of weaving is assigned to a woman. Among the Egyptians, to Isis; by the Lydians, to Arachne; by the Greeks, to Minerva; by the Peruvians, to Menacella, wife of Manco Capac; on the banks of the Rhine, to Avé the fairy. The Chinese alone attribute this invention to a man—the emperor Ya; but our emperor of China is an imaginary being, whose reality is annihilated under the absurd titles he is compelled to assume. Ignorant of his nature, the people call him “The Dragon;” ignorant of his age, they call him “Ten Thousand Years;” ignorant of his very sex, they call him “Mather:” but whether or not his Celestial Majesty invented the art of weaving, let us return to Lorch.

The first red wine made on the Rhine was at Lorch. This town existed as far back as the time of Charlemagne, and left traces in charters of the date of 732. Henry III., Archbishop of Mayence, resided there in 1348. At present, though stripped of its

fairies and Roman knights, it is a happy little town, and contains the most hospitable inhabitants.

A beautiful Gothic house on the borders of the Rhine has a façade comparable with that of our famous manor-house of Meillan. The romantic fortress of old Sivo of Lorch protects the town, which is frowned upon from the opposite side by the historical castle of Fürstenberg, with its vast tower, round without and hexagonal within. Nothing can be more charming than this happy little colony of peasants, prospering under the threatening brows of these two citadels.

I was strangely disturbed in my rest at Lorch. Last week, at about one in the morning, the whole town being asleep, I was writing in my room, when, suddenly, my paper became red under my pen, and looking up, I found my room brightened by a vivid light from the windows, which had become two great sheets of opal, through which a mysterious light was diffusing a fearful radiance: on opening them, I beheld an immense vault of smoke and flame bending over my head with an alarming roar. The neighbouring inn, the "Gasthaus P.," was enveloped in flames!

In an instant the whole house was up, shrieking out *Feuer! Feuer!* The quay was soon crowded, and the alarm-bell rung. Having closed my windows, and opened my door, another scene presented itself. The great staircase in wood of my hotel, all but connected with the burning house, and having large windows, seemed likewise on fire, while a crowd ran up and down carrying all sorts of objects. The whole house was trying to escape,

many in their shirts ; the travellers with their port-manteaus, the servants with the furniture. The flames were frightful ! As for myself (for every one thinks for himself on such occasions), having no baggage, and being lodged on the first story, my only fear was being compelled to escape from the window.

A storm luckily came on, and torrents of rain fell. As is always the case in such hurries, people got out with difficulty, and a terrible confusion ensued ; some chose to rush out, others to rush in. The furniture was let down from the windows by ropes ; and mattresses, carpet-bags, chairs, tables, and dirty linen were showered from the windows above. Children were screaming with fright ; and on all sides, summoned by the fire-bell, the peasants flocked into the town, fire-buckets in hand. The fire, which had already gained the attics, was said not to be accidental, a circumstance which always imparts a gloomy interest to such a catastrophe. The engines arrived, water-parties were formed, and I mounted to the loft, in which was a super-complication of frame-work, such as is usual under the high slated roofs of the houses on the Rhine. The whole timber-work of the adjoining house was in a blaze, which, waving over our roofing, let fall burning flakes, and ignited it in several places. The thing became serious, for if our house caught fire, others must certainly share its fate ; and the wind, being favourable, endangered the whole town.

No time was to be lost ; and under a shower of burning embers they set to work, tore off the slating, and cut away the projecting timbers of the gables.

The engines worked well. From the windows of the loft I looked into the furnace. A conflagration, closely viewed, is a noble spectacle. Having never seen such a scene, and the opportunity presenting itself, I profited to the utmost by the occasion.

At first, on finding oneself enveloped in an immense cavern of fire, amid the blazing and sparkling, the cracking, splitting, screaming, and shouting, it is impossible to avoid a feeling of anxiety. Everything seems lost; for it appears in vain to contend against the irresistible force of the terrible element called fire!

It is curious to observe with what impetuosity water seems to attack its enemy. Scarcely has the snake-like hose passed its neck above the wall, and shown the glittering copper tube in the flames, than it is seen to spout its stream of liquid steel full at the frame of the thousand-headed Chimera. The furnace, roused by the attack, roars amain, springs up more fiercely, and from its ardent gorges spouts up flames and showers of ruby sparks in all directions, while endless tongues of flame dart simultaneously upon the doors and windows. Steam now blends with the smoke, and clouds, black and white and grey, eddied by the wind, writhe and struggle in the dark. The hissing of the water responds to the roar of the fire. Nothing can be more terrible than this renewal of the ancient and eternal combat betwixt the hydra and the dragon. The force of the column of water sent forth by the engine is prodigious. It shatters the slate like glass. The fall of the timbers is a magnificent moment. The flames vanishing for a moment in the midst of a

startling crash, a rush of sparks succeeds. A chimney, left standing alone, is next suddenly knocked down by the force of the spout of the engine. As I stood contemplating the scene, the Rhine, with all its villages, ruins, and churches, became visible in the midst of the horrid glare, and, combined with the crash of the falling walls, the strokes of the axe, and all the storm and tumult of the town, produced a truly fine and appalling spectacle.

Nothing can be more curious than to watch the details of such a scene. In the interval betwixt a cloud of smoke and a sheet of fire, you see men's heads on the tops of ladders, who bravely attack the advancing flame with the tube they hold in their hands. In the midst of the general confusion, there are always unnoticed corners where the fire silently rages, and where the window-frames are opened and banged to by the wind. Small blue flames flicker at the extremities of the rafters. Heavy beams give way and remain half-suspended in the air, shaking with the tempest and enveloped in flame. Others falling across the street, establish a bridge of fire. In the interior rooms, the smart Parisian hangings appear and disappear amidst the clouds of smoke. On the third story I saw an unfortunate panel in the style of Louis XV., with its rockwork, trees, and gentle shepherds of *gentil Bernard*, offer a prolonged resistance. I gazed at it with admiration. Never did I see an eclogue put on so brave a face. At length, a devouring flame penetrated the room, seized the unfortunate pea-green landscape, the shepherd kissing his shepherdess, and Tyrcis, while softly cajoling Glycera, disappeared in the smoke.

A tiny garden covered with burning cinders lay close to house, in which an acacia, confined to a trellis, would not take fire, and remained untouched for four hours, showing its pretty green head amid the shower of sparks, as though it found them refreshing. In addition to all this, there was a group of fair and pale Englishwomen, who stood half-naked by the side of their boxes, a few paces from the river, with all the children of the town laughing and clapping their hands every time the water fell upon them. This is a true and particular account of the fire at Lorch! The most afflicting part of the story is that a man was killed on the spot.

At four in the morning the fire was what is called "got under:" the Gasthaus P. was still burning in the interior; but we had succeeded in saving our inn.

Water now succeeded to fire. A host of girls, wiping, scouring, and dusting, invaded all the rooms, to set them in their accustomed trim: nothing had been stolen; everything hastily taken away was religiously brought back by the poor peasants of Lorch.

Such accidents are frequent on the Rhine, the houses being mostly of wood. At St. Goar I saw several indications of recent conflagration.

Next morning I was surprised to see two or three chambers on the ground-floor closed, and in a perfect state, though the fire had raged about them, but without effecting the least damage. I must tell you a story current in the country on this subject, for the truth of which I by no means vouch.

Some years ago an Englishman arrived late at the inn of Braubach, where he supped and slept.

In the course of the night the inn caught fire ; and they burst into the Englishman's room, who was fast asleep. They woke him hastily, informing him that he must rise and fly—

“Go to the devil!” cried he. “Why disturb me for such nonsense? Leave the room ; I am tired, and will *not* get up. Do you suppose I am going to run about the country in my nightshirt? Not I ! I must have my nine hours' rest. Put out the fire, if you choose, but leave me to my rest—good night, my good friends : come again to-morrow.”

He then lay down, and the fire advancing, the people made their escape, having closed the door upon the snoring Englishman. With great difficulty the fire was extinguished. Next morning, in clearing away the rubbish, upon reaching the Englishman's room they found him half awake and rubbing his eyes. On perceiving them, he quietly inquired for the bootjack, then rose and breakfasted, to the great disappointment of the waiters, who had reckoned upon having an English mummy of the kind called in the Rhine country “a smoked Burgomaster,” to show for a few sols to future travellers. With such a curiosity in hand, they felt sure of procuring from every new comer “something to drink.”