

ENCHANTED GROUND

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IF any spot on earth is entitled to be called Enchanted Ground, it is surely the Phlegræan Fields which lie to the west of Naples, just beyond the usual circuit of the sight-seer. The glamour which bewitches the spot is not merely that of myth; it has marvels for the living eye to-day which awe and terrify. Nature has outlived fantasy. The centuries have transformed the latter into the dream of poets; but the sullen, mysterious force which makes you feel the earth's hot breath and hear its groans still exists as of old. Here, more I think than on the summit of Vesuvius, you come in touch with those fiery agencies which are ceaselessly at work below your feet, and realize what a Lilliputian man is. Between the mountain and this isolated crater there is a hidden connection. When Vesuvius is in eruption, Solfatara is strangely moved.

For this expedition an early start with car and guide is imperative, for there is so much to see that you have to race with time all the day. In this article I can describe only a few of the sights. We thread our way westwards through the busy traffic which links up the increasing trade of Pozzuoli with that of Naples. Suddenly out of the hurlyburly our car turns to the right and stops in front of a tablet. We are in the presence of the guardian spirit of this region of romance. It is fitting that we should begin our day by doing homage at the shrine of Vergil, whose poetic wand has cast its magic over the land we are about to enter. We read the old epitaph, which he himself is said to have composed:

*Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc
Parthenope; cecini pascua, rura, duces.*

We look into the little vault where the ashes of the great poet may have been laid; and our minds are busy with a past when fields and flowers and the love of adventure all found expression in the sweet flowing lines of Rome's great poet. To stifle doubt, the off-spring of modern criticism, we recall the evidence for hallowing this spot.

Augustus certainly carried out the last wishes of the poet, who died at Brindisi on Sept. 21, B. C. 19, and brought his ashes to Naples. Where else would he lay them but near the poet's

own villa on Posilipo? Silius Italicus eventually bought it out of love for his master, for he too was a poet, and here Statius in A. D. 45 wrote these lines:—

Lo! idly wandering on the sea-beat strand
Where the fam'd Syren in Ausonia's land
First moored her bark, I strike the sounding string;
At Vergil's honoured tomb I sit and sing;
Warm'd by the hallowed spot my Muse takes fire
And sweeps with bolder hand my humble lyre.

Perhaps the thieving waters, as they moan their dirge on the rough headland, really cover the tomb of Vergil which they have filched with many other things from the retreating land. Anyhow we have paid our homage to the great magician and now pass on. How welcome is the cool shadow of the Grotta Nuova as we dash into its tunnel! It is 845 yards in length, though I only wish it was the mile which the guide in his Neapolitan exaggeration says it is. Pleasures in this world, like the poppy, are soon past, and we are out again in the scorching sun running through the second rate suburb of Fuorigrotto. Judging from the hooting of our horn and the exasperation of our driver, one would think children are as plentiful in this land of luxuriant growth as are the vines which flourish on the volcanic soil.

Climbing a hill we get our first introduction to our Enchanted Ground. There on our right lies the drained Lago d' Agnano. Its sinister character is still retained in its name, which is derived from the fact that serpents falling from the cliffs perished in it; while one writer who describes its waters, when they still existed, says that not even fish could live in them: a place certainly of evil repute. Originally it was a crater, four miles in circumference, and you have only to scratch its surface to discover its true character. Sulphurous fumes rise here and there, and you feel that the entrance to Pluto's domains cannot be very far off. However, modern science, which has harnessed Niagara, has even put Pluto himself between the traces, or perhaps I should say Vulcan, for between them they divide the honours of this infernal region. Nearby there is an up-to-date bathing establishment, and those sulphur fumes and boiling mud are turned on and off at will for the benefit of the rheumatic. The cure is drastic, but I believe effective. One has never to complain of the shortage of hot water, and it almost looks like coquetting with fate to come so near this place of fire and brimstone. One is glad that even it can be turned to a good purpose. Great is the victory of Science!

Here our car stops, and our guide armed with a torch and a big key leads us down a dusty road, and opens a rather dilapidated door. He utters words of caution. In front of us is a small cave. At a first glance there seems no reason why it should be called after such an ominous person as Charon. Yet truly it is his back door. In those days of man's inhumanity to man, slaves have been driven in and pulled out corpses that the distinguished visitor might see a practical experiment of its weird power. Even in our own day dogs were kept for that purpose, though now English sentiment has killed that cruel practice. The visitor can experiment on himself up to a point. The guide goes first, and you follow him into the cave. A hot invisible hand grips your ankles, and moves up to your knees. You venture a few yards farther, and that hand of death rises higher. Were you to bend or trip, you would be dead in a minute. As we stand, the guide takes his torch and lights it. The flame leaps up. Then half in humour he pushes the burning torch at our knees. There is no need to jump out of its way. No sooner has it reached that invisible layer of carbonic acid gas, which has enwrapped your legs, than out it goes: not a spark is left. Then the guide does a curious thing. He takes a can and dips it down as if he were ladling water. When he brings it up, the can seems as empty as before; but as soon as the lighted torch is dipped into it, out it goes.

We are glad to emerge alive from this uncanny cave. It has served as an introduction to what is before us. However, we are to have a little respite as we spin through a land of olive and orange groves and rich with vines. The guide exclaims that we are now in the Elysian Fields. I am not sure but that he makes them a little more extensive than what they really were; for I am inclined to think that they were originally restricted to the luxuriant slopes of the promontory of Misenum. However, we shall not quarrel with his breadth of view: the landscape around us is fit enough for Heaven, and walking under its shade we can easily picture a Dante in his *Paradiso*.

A sharp turn, and we are confronted with "the other place." We dismount from our car, and our guide enjoins us to follow him carefully in single file. After a short walk under trees we emerge on the floor of a crater which is by no means extinct. This is the famous Solfatara. Already strong fumes of sulphur have warned us that we are nearing the openings of the underworld. The very flowers which had carpeted our path through the woods droop their heads. They can accompany us no farther into this region of death. What is that we have almost stepped on? It is a puff of white

smoke coming up from somewhere under our feet. Now we are out on the flat bottom of the crater. The curls of smoke increase. To our left from a yawning opening there is issuing a perfect blast from the nether world. The heat is too intense for a nearer view. However, the guide leads us across the quaking surface to where there is a large hole. Out of this, smoke is rolling in volumes. We approach the edge and look over, and there within reach is a caldron of boiling mud. Up it spurts into the air almost touching our faces, and strange sounds come from the hollows underneath. The guide jumps on the ground and it trembles. We are actually on a crust only inches thick. With an enthusiasm that seems a bit impish, he leads us to another opening which he says burst out only a few weeks ago. Again we watch lumps of earth being flung about, and feel the burning breath on our cheeks. At last with a sigh of relief we see our guide turning his back on these uncanny fissures which vomit forth their fumes, and when we reach the edge of that arena of desolation and touch the grass again the welcome of the anemonies is never more sweet.

The ancients called this place the *Forum Vulcani*, and it is a worthy work-shop for such a god. Somehow it impresses me more than Vesuvius. On the summit of that mountain there is a certain dignified aloofness; but here you actually rub shoulders with the infernal world. It is its horrible proximity which fascinates you. Yet Vulcan is not busy about nothing all these ages. His touch beautifies all our public buildings. When we admire the elegant tracery which embellishes our architecture, we do not think of offering a "Thank you" to Vulcan and his busy forge for the stucco which has made this possible. Yet for ages which cannot be numbered he has been piling up in the cliffs round this crater the material out of which the best potter's clay is produced. He has manufactured for us those chemical ingredients which fit it for delicate moulding. Our guide takes us to a building nearby, where we see men busy shaping blocks of this clay for exportation. The ancients had discovered its properties, and used it also for decoration.

"Well done Vulcan!" we exclaim, as we leave his workshop. "Your rough hand has a delicate touch. Your black mud heals our ailments, and your white clay adorns our homes. If we have never said Thank you' before, we do it now! Go on with your beneficent work. Only be not over-zealous, for we wish no more disastrous eruptions. They say the ceiling of your workshop is gradually falling in. Prop it up. Smoke in moderation. It is better for the health of the community. I am glad to have

had a peep at your work-shop, but am also glad to say Good-bye!"

A little farther on our left is another spot which threw its enchantment over Vergil and Dante. It is the Lake of Avernus. So named because it was said that no bird could fly across its waters. The gloomy forests which clothed it with mystery are gone. It lies exposed to-day and its waves look innocent enough, as if they had never concealed the path to Hades. The Grotto of the Sibyl still remains, but it is useless to call, for she is no longer "At Home." The gods have vanished; yet in this enchanted ground they have left a trail of their departed glory.