

Victor Hugo The Rhine

LETTER XV. THE MOUSE.

Sankt-Goar, august.

ON Saturday last it rained all day. I embarked from Andernach on board the steamboat, the *Stadt Mannheim*; and we had been ascending the Rhine for several hours, when suddenly a gust of wind from the south-west (the Favonius of Virgil and Horace), which, under the name of Fohn, occasions such hurricanes on the Lake of Constance, broke through the canopy of clouds suspended over our heads, dispersing them in all directions with the boisterous glee of a schoolboy.

In a few minutes the true and eternal blue cupola, sustained by the four points of the horizon, re-appeared, gladdened by a genial southern ray, which enabled the passengers to resume their place upon the deck. We were just then progressing (as usual, between the vine and the oak) in face of an old and picturesque village, Velmich, whose Gothic tower, now stupidly restored and disfigured, was flanked only a few years ago by four watch-towers, like the military tower of a Burgrave. Above Velmich stands, almost vertically, one of those blocks of lava frequently met with on the Rhine, of such immense dimensions as to resemble the trunk of a huge tree half-split by the axe of the woodman. Upon the same volcanic ridge a superb feudal fortress of the same stone and color shoots up like a natural excrescence of the mountain. On the bank of the Rhine a group of young washerwomen, laughing merrily, were hanging out their linen in the sun.

I could not resist this picture, and set foot on shore. I knew the ruins of Velmich from report, and that they are less visited than any other on the Rhine, being difficult and even dangerous of access. The peasants shun the spot as full of spectres, and the scene of dreadful events. It is said to be infested with ardent flames, which conceal themselves during the day in subterranean caverns, and are only visible at night, issuing from the great round tower, the continuation of an immense well, now filled up, its source being below the level of the Rhine.

In this well a lord of Falkenstein (a fatal name in Rhenish legends), who lived in the fourteenth century, was in the habit of dropping, without confession, such of his own vassals or casual passengers as he thought proper; and their souls, emerging from purgatory, are supposed to haunt the castle. In his time there was a silver bell in the steeple of Velmich, given and blessed by

Winifred, bishop of Mayence, about the year 740: a period memorable for the reign of Constantine VI., in Rome and Constantinople; for the rule of the pagan king Massilius, over four kingdoms in Spain; and for the reign of Clotaire in France, who was afterwards triply excommunicated by St. Zacharias, the ninety-fourth Pope. This bell was never rung except for the prayers of forty hours, on the approaching end of a Lord of Velmich. Falkenstein, believing neither in God nor devil, and wanting money, resolved to obtain this precious bell; and had it unhung and brought to his stronghold.

The prior of Velmich, in great indignation, instantly proceeded to the castle of the delinquent, in his sacred robes, accompanied by two choristers carrying the cross, to demand restoration of his bell. But Falkenstein laughed him to scorn, exclaiming, "You want your bell, eh! You shall have it, and more of it perhaps than you desire!" saying which, he had the bell tied round the poor prior's neck, and flung him into the well; which, by command of the Burgrave, was filled with stones to the depth of fifty fathoms.

Some days afterwards Falkenstein fell ill: night came on; when lo! the astrologist and physician who watched over the Burgrave heard, with awe and anguish, the tollings of the silver bell issue from the depths of the earth! On the morrow, Falkenstein died.

Since that time, every year, at the hour of the Burgrave's death, in the night of the 18th of January (the festival of the pulpit of St. Peter at Rome), the strokes of the bell are said to be distinctly heard under the mountain. So runs one of the legends of Velmich.

A neighboring hill, which confines the torrent on the other side of Velmich, is said to be the tomb of a giant; for the imagination of man, judiciously regarding volcanoes as the vast forges of nature, has placed the Cyclops species wherever smoke issues from a mountain: every Etna has its Polyphemus.

I clambered to the ruins, my fancy haunted at once by Falkenstein and the giant, after inquiring from the village children the most eligible path, a service for which I allowed them to select their reward among the contents of my purse; for the minor coinage of this people is the most incomprehensible thing in the world; for my part I cannot pretend to understand the mysteries of their barbarian mint.

The path is difficult, but not dangerous, unless to persons subject to vertigo; and after heavy rains, which render the rocks slippery. Moreover, this fantastic and accursed ruin has the advantage over all the others of being wholly unfrequented. No one follows you; no cicerone of hobgoblins asks you for "*beer money*", no bolted door impedes your progress. You ascend the old basaltic steps used by the Burgraves, by the aid of brambles and tufts of grass, and no officious hand interferes.

In twenty minutes I reached the summit of the height forming the basis of the ruin, when I paused an instant previous to entering. Behind me, under a postern now a shapeless mass, was a flight of steps, overgrown with turf. Before me, an extensive landscape developed itself; at my feet lay a village grouped round its steeple, encircled by a bend of the Rhine; and beyond the Rhine a crescent of hills, crowned here and there with castles, and surmounted again by the horizon of a deep blue sky.

Having taken breath, I crept, under the postern, and began to ascend the sod-covered steps. At that moment, the ruined fortress struck me as being so wild and solitary, that I literally should not have felt surprised at beholding some supernatural form creeping from under the thick curtains of ivy, and bringing in her apron fantastic flowers from another world: Gela, the bride of Barbarossa; or Hildegarde, the wife of Charlemagne, that charming empress, who was learned as Solomon in the occult virtues of simples and minerals, and herborized among the mountains of the Rhine.

I gazed some time upon the northern wall, with the vague desire of seeing imps start forth from its crevices; "for even in the North do gnomes abound," said the gnome of the legend to Cuno of Sayn. Three little old witches are said, in the legend of the giant of Velmich, to chant the following stanza :—

Sur la tombe du geant
J'ai cueillie trois brins d'orties;
En fil les ai converties,
Prenez ma soeur ce present.

I was forced, however, to content myself with hearing and seeing nothing more romantic than the ironical whistling of a blackbird perched upon some distant sprig.

In order to give a complete notion of this famous yet obscure tower, I cannot do better than transcribe my notes as I made them on the spot;—the only authentic mode of description. "I have reached the ruins. The round tower, though dilapidated at the summit, is still of prodigious elevation; at two-thirds of which are the vertical grooves of a drawbridge, the entrance to which is now walled up. On all sides, dilapidated old walls, the broken windows of which define them into halls, though they have neither door nor ceiling. Stories without stairs, stairs without rooms, gaping vaults, and overgrown floors. I have often marked with what scrupulous jealousy solitude keeps and defends that which man has once abandoned. She barricades the very entrance with the most formidable and impenetrable thickets of holly, nettles, thistles, thorns and heath; in fact, more fangs and nails than are furnished by a whole menagerie of tigers. Amidst this savage seclusion, briars, those serpents of the wilderness, creep about and prick at ease your feet. But Nature in all her pranks is beautiful, and the whole mass presents a rich entanglement of wild plants, some showing their blossoms, some their fruits,

some gaudy autumnal foliage. Around me I find mallow, bindweed, blue bells, aniseed, pimpernel, torch-weed, yellow gentian, strawberry, thyme, the purple sloe-tree, the hawthorn with its scarlet berries, with the snaky coils of the bramble, loaded with their berries, now of a sanguine hue; an elder, two beautiful acacias. In a retired corner, there is a plot of ground planted with beet-root, by some peasant having a Voltairian contempt of ghosts—perhaps a sufficient crop to produce a lump of sugar. To my left is a tower without any visible aperture; to my right, a subterraneous passage, the roof falling in, and changing it to an abyss. Superb blasts of wind; an admirable blue sky seen through the fissures of an immense wall. I am about to ascend a grass-grown stair to a lofty room. I have reached it. Nothing gained but two charming landscapes on the Rhine, of hills and villages. I lean over the compartment, at the bottom of which is the subterraneous passage. Above me are two remains of sculpture; chimneys in blue granite of the fifteenth century, still retaining vestiges of soot and smoke. Traces of painting upon the windows. Above, a pretty turret without stair or roof, overgrown with flowers, which seem to droop over and look at me. I hear the washerwomen laughing on the bank of the Rhine. I descend to a lower room. Nothing! Traces of attempts at pulling up the pavement; some treasure, supposed to be concealed by the gnomes, has been searched for by the peasants. Another room. A square hole in the centre of the vaulted floor. Two names on the wall: *Phcedovius*, *Kulorga*. I inscribed mine by the side of them. Another vault. Nothing! From hence I commenced the open subterraneous passage; but it is unapproachable: but a ray of sun has found its way thither. This subterraneous passage lies at the bottom of the great square donjon, which occupied the angle opposite the round tower. It must have been the prison. A vast compartment facing the Rhine. Three chimneys, one of which retains fragments of columns. Three stories fallen below me. At the bottom two arched vaults; one covered with dead branches; over the other twigs of ivy are gracefully waving. I descend, and find vaults built upon the basaltic stone of the mountain itself. Traces of smoke. In the other great compartment into which I first entered, and which must have been the court, near the round tower, there is white plaster on the wall, vestiges of paint, and these two figures traced in red : 23 – 18 – . I went round the exterior of the castle, following the fosse. Here you have to clamber from bush to bush, above a rather formidable precipice. Neither door nor traces of aperture at the base of the great tower. The wind flutters the leaves of my note-book, and prevents my writing. I re-enter the ruins, and am now writing upon a little moss-grown projection of the old wall. Such are, *verbatim*, my rough notes.

I forgot to state that this immense ruin is named *the Mouse*, and for the following reason:—In the twelfth century, the site was occupied by a small burgh, much watched, and often molested by a strong castle, about half a

league distant, called the Cat (*die Katz*), so abbreviated after the name of its lord, Katzenellenbogen. Kuno of Falkenstein, who inherited the insignificant burgh of Velnich, constructed here a far stronger castle than its neighbor, which he named *Die Mouse*, declaring that, at some future time, his Mouse would devour the Cat.

His vaunt was fully justified, and *Die Mause*, though now in ruins, is not the less a sinister and powerful fortress created out of the volcanic remains on which it stands, and which seem to sustain their offspring with pride and affection. I am inclined to think that no one ever presumed to think lightly of the mountain which brought forth the Mouse.

I lingered in the ruins till sunset, which is a favorite moment of spectres and phantoms. I felt, my dear friend, as though I had returned to the joys of boyhood; and wandered, and jumped about, deranging the old stones, eating blackberries, and tried all means in my power to provoke the presence of the supernatural agents of the place. While treading down and crushing the grass, I inhaled the acrid emanations of certain weeds which thrive in ruins, to which from my boyhood I have been partial. After all, considering the ill repute of its well, full of souls and skeletons, this impenetrable tower, without door and windows, is a singular and gloomy place. Meanwhile, just as the sun sank behind the mountains, something suddenly rustled by my side; and on looking down, I saw an enormous lizard, of extraordinary shape, about nine inches long, with a swollen body, short tail, and flat triangular head, like that of a serpent, black as ink, and marked from head to tail with two golden stripes: it was gliding upon its four elbowed legs, on the wet grass, towards a crevice of the old wall. Such was the mysterious and solitary inhabitant of the ruins—the genius—the real and fabulous animal—a salamander—which seemed to regard me kindly, as it slowly retreated to its hole.