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Memoranda of Vesuvius and its Neighbourhood.

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We shall now pay a rapid visit to the volcanic district westwards of Vesuvius—appropriately named the Phlegrean fields, “the fields of fire,” if the Greek etymology of the name be the correct one. We shall tread on ground teeming with recollections of illustrious or remarkable men. I shall be pardoned, then, if here and there, though still looking at things in general in a volcanic point of view, I indulge in some brief historical notices as I pass. Traversing the whole length of the ever-lively Naples—where, doubtless, we have before our eyes a picture of an old Greek community, in modernized costume,—we arrive on its western side at a tunnel perforating the mass of ancient volcanic tufa, known as the hill of Posilipo. Here, before you enter, you may leave your carriage for a short time, and ascend by some steps on the left, and examine the dilapidated columbarium to which tradition points as once the receptacle of the ashes of Virgil. It is certain that the poet had a house on this hill, and that therein he composed his *Georgics* and *Eclogues* and the greater portion of his *Æneid*. It is a spot which harmonizes well with the poet’s memory, having within view numerous localities whose names have become household words through his pen—a spot rendered in an additional degree venerable now, by reminiscences of illustrious men, who, from Statius and Petrarch, to Milton, Thomson, and Gray, with pious steps, have visited it.—Milton at the tomb of Virgil! Was it not there, while standing at the shrine of a kindred soul, that the inspiration, already stirring the fair young English bard, shaped the effectual resolve to leave words behind him which the world “should not willingly let die?”—It is curious to remember that in the middle ages the name of Virgil was popularly known only as that of a magician—doubtless from the assumed familiarity which he exhibits in his 6th Book with the world of spirits. It was from the prevalence of this idea, that Dante made him the conductor of himself through the realms below.—Dante in his turn was, for similar reasons, pointed at by the rustics of his day as the man who had visited the abodes of the dead. And to close the list of popular misunderstandings in respect to famous persons—Horace, by the peasantry in the neighbourhood of the Sabine farm, is at this moment believed to have been an Englishman, from the numerous English who take such pains to scramble to the spot.—But we must return to the tunnel below, which itself—though it bears to this day visible marks, not of the magician’s wand, but of instruments more substantial—was once popularly attributed to the supernatural power of Virgil. It may be briefly described as 2244 feet long, 21½ feet wide, from 69 to 25 feet in height; gloomy, dusty, and unsavory. There are several other similar grottoes, as they are illusively called, in this neighbourhood—all artificial, and dating back before the Christian era. They are short cuts from town to town, made through the rather soft volcanic rock.—You are now on the road which leads to Pozzuoli. You are interested at observing evidences of the latitude in which you are. You notice in the hills

specimens of the palmetto-palm. You perceive the stone-pine—the familiar object in Italian views—stretching out its flat peculiar top. You see the aloe and the cactus in profusion. You observe peasants under trees dancing to the sound of the guitar. You meet rude ass-drawn and ox-drawn vehicles loaded with strange tropical-looking fruits and vegetables.

You soon enter upon the Phlegrean fields in earnest. You arrive at the well known Lake Agnano—an irregularly-shaped ancient crater, three miles in circumference, filled with a sheet of water. From fissures in its walls issues sulphurous vapour of a temperature of 180° Fahrenheit, showing that a highly heated mass is not far off. Here you have exhibited to you the world-famous but rather insignificant *Grotto del Cane*—a small cell containing a spiracle from below, up which rushes carbonic acid gas, mingled with steam.—A little to the westward you come to another partially extinct crater—the *Solfatara*—an irregular oval plain, sounding treacherously hollow to the tread, and full of steaming and smoky fumeroles, which at night emit a glow as from a furnace, showing that they communicate immediately with red-hot material. Within the base of what was the ancient cone of the *Solfatara*, in the far depths, water is incessantly heard heard in the act of boiling, in which state it finds an outlet. It is stated to be an aluminous water containing iron, lime, and free sulphuric acid. Some of the hills which form part of this ancient crater are white with an aluminous efflorescence.

You next approach *Astroni*, a very perfect crater, four miles in circumference, bearing on its floor three small but deep lakes. It reminds you, on a small scale, of those circular valleys, which, with the aid of a good telescope, you see on the surface of the moon. Indeed I doubt not but that in these Phlegrean fields, we have by analogy many hints given of what we should meet with, were we permitted to take a stroll on the lunar disc.—Travelling still westwards, you come next to a very conspicuous and perfectly formed crater, three miles and a half in circumference—*Monte Barbaro* (the ancient *Gaurus*)—covered with vineyards producing the wine which Horace sings of as *Falernian*; and near by are two more similar craters, only smaller—*Cigliano* and *Campana*. Proceeding yet westwards, you come to *Avernus* itself, the dread entrance to Hades. In the old prehistoric era, this crater no doubt possessed some of the awfulness of the present interior of Vesuvius. The *Cumaean* colonists transplanted to this neighbourhood the myths of their native Greece, and easily established Campanian duplicates of their own *Styx*, *Cocytus*, and *Acheron*. Here is the scene of the well-known *Nekuia* of the 11th Book of the *Odyssey*, and of the descent of *Æneas* in the 6th Book of the *Æneid*. The ancient Italians must have enjoyed these references of the poets more keenly than modern readers can. They must have felt the *Æneid* to have been a national poem much more thoroughly than we do—the mere naming of a locality being sufficient to call up to their minds the often visited spot—with its brilliant colouring and historic and poetic associations.—*Avernus* is now a cheerful place; a beautiful lake, abounding with fish, lies in its basin, and over it and on it feathered fowl sport with impunity. The etymology of *Avernus* (quasi *Aornos*, “birdless”) is now supposed to be fanciful, though Virgil, and Lucretius before him, adopted it. The true origin of the name appears to be in the Phœnician *Evoron*, denoting “gloom” or “darkness.” But though the old composition of the name may not be true, still it is probable that in the ancient times birds would seldom be seen about the spot. Instinct would lead them to shun the breath of a volcano, as surely as it leads their congeners to revel so joyously, as we see them doing, in the wholesome spray of our *Niagara*.