

BAYARD TAYLOR'S DESCRIPTION OF VESUVIUS.

THE LAST ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS.

(Continued.)

It was scarcely three-quarters of a mile further to the foot of the great cone, which now rose dark against the sky, pouring from its crater immense volumes of steam, white and lustrous as new silver. The growth of young oaks on the ridge soon terminated, giving place to a dead, waste region of black lava, opening on the left into the Atrio del Cavallo. The bare, red precipices of Monte Somma, once a part of the mountain itself, shone in the sun, but on the right hand all was smoke, confusion and fire. The double stream of lava from the crater was pouring its fluid, incandescent rock into the valley, and the burning mass, constantly pushing from behind, had already entered the ravine we had crossed a little distance below, moving downward over the distorted lava beds of 1868. There was much smoke but little flame; at times a roaring, rattling noise was heard, but I noticed no trembling or oscillation in the earth, either then or later.

At the edge of the old lava—which here took only the shape of loose stones—we left our horses, and went forward on foot. There was a trodden path at first, but it soon disappeared, and our progress over the rolling and sliding heaps, which had the sharp grit of ground glass, was rather painful. We had already passed the lower point of the lava current, and reached it at a point where the large eruption of the previous night had come down. The heat and smoke increased with every step; the rattling noises were continuous, and lines of creeping fire became visible. There appeared to be two streams, both moving in the same manner—that is, only partly flowing upon the surface of the old lava, but burrowing under the loose crust, splitting and upheaving it, and mixing its materials with the new mass. The noise of the flow was thus produced. The fire was silent and irresistible; there was no hiss or sputtering of the molten elements, but the stream lifted and threw off solid masses, even tons in weight, without the least apparent force or check.

I had always imagined a thick, sluggish stream, with a tolerably smooth surface, something like the flow from a smelting furnace—but here were moving mounds, rough and shapeless, the chief power of which lay in their bases, hidden from sight—strange, creeping, mining forces, moving forward with a horrible, pitiless certainty in their manner of locomotion. If the scene was less grand in its features than one would expect, it was at least diabolically impressive. It expressed only destruction, and of the most cold-blooded, deliberate kind.

The main stream had raised a long ridge, some twenty feet in height, apparently cold on the surface, until some squirming movement in advance shook off the crust in scales, and showing fangs and throats of intensest fire. The front of this ridge was constantly hurling huge masses, some of them red-hot, down the gorge. The nearer stream was not more than four feet in height, and allowed us to approach near enough to poke its glowing sides with a stick. All along its edge boys were busy roasting eggs for travelers, or imbedding coins in the fluid lava, which they snatched out of the mass and twisted off, very much as I have seen children manage molasses candy. The heat, even at a hundred yards distance, was uncomfortable, and I could not stand beside the moving lava for more than a few seconds at a time.

We could distinctly see the new crater, just under the summit of the cone. It was not in violent action, and an enterprising person might have climbed to within a short distance of it. I was not strong enough to undertake the ascent, nor did I feel sure that the fatigue would be repaid. Such an amount of steam and smoke issued from the opening, and rose from the lava as it overran the lower rim, that I doubt whether much else could have been seen. I was most interested in observing the manner in which the lava shoved itself forward, and the possibility of its cooling in such irregular forms was now explained. It is not likely that the present flow will reach the lower parts of the mountain, as the old fields over which it must pass will interpose greater obstacles to its movement. The smoke of the eruption, however, finding its way through subterranean crevices, already issues from all parts of these old fields, and, at the present rate of advance, the road to the Hermitage will

be cut off in two or three days more. January 9th.—My glass shows me that the left hand stream of lava has descended considerably since yesterday. The other branch, toward Torre del Greco, has entirely ceased to flow. The flood from the crater is evidently narrower and more languid than heretofore, which would seem to indicate that the eruption has spent its chief force. As we have the mountain in view day and night, I shall watch its aspects with all the more interest, now that I have seen something of its operations.

B. T.

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