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THE LONDON FOG.

BY J. VILA BLAKE.

APPROPOS of the dense fog which recently enveloped the English metropolis, the news and some details of which have crept from the English press into our own, the following extract from a private letter describing this rather rare occurrence as seen (and felt also) by American eyes, will probably be read with interest, especially as we have here no similar phenomenon which can be compared with a genuine London fog :—

“One of the many things that I enjoyed in London was a London fog—only think of it! It was a great piece of good fortune; for, although at this season of the year it is always foggy, yet one of these very dense ones is not of very frequent occurrence. Really, it was a thing well worth the seeing, and for nothing, too, without a fee. It had been very foggy for about twenty-four hours, though not so much so but that we could get about well enough. At six, after tea, H. proposed that we should go to hear Trovatore; so we went, and such a sight I never saw as that stage. It was really ludicrous, trying to peer through the smoky mist to see what was going on. Scenes, dresses, sparkling jewellery, all were thrown away; nothing could be seen, and the atmosphere, in addition, was so *irritating to the eyes*, that although there was nothing in the opera to move one, the audience seemed to be perpetually in tears. On coming out we saw at once what had been going on in the two or three hours since leaving home. The fog lay thick and dense around us; the link-boys were out in all their glory, dashing wildly about among the bewildered crowds, with their ‘Have a torch, sir?’ ‘Light you home, sir?’ ‘Better take me, sir!’ Then darting frantically into the blackness they were lost, only to reappear again, thrusting their blazing fire-brands so near your clothing that it really seemed frightful. Drivers were offered enormous sums by terrified people to take them home,—offers refused with frightful oaths; helpless women clung to railings for safety; now and then a solitary omnibus came along, each horse led by a link-boy with his flaming torch; men knocked against each other, and *we* clung tightly to each other’s arms and strove to keep each other in sight. On crossing the street opposite Charing-Cross Hotel, which is there very wide and is the point of meeting of five different ways, we were only guided by the sound of the horses’ hoofs, and even then it was very hard to judge of the direction of the sound. We walked in faith, com-

pletely, if never before. Milton speaks of the 'palpable obscure.' He must have had a London fog in his mind, when he described the flight of the cursed angel through the misty, murky air. Finally we reached home in safety, fully appreciating what we had been through. The next day the papers were full of it, and, strange to say, reported but few accidents. Some women actually spent the whole night in the streets, afraid to stir, and no policeman, or watch, could be bribed to guide them home. H. passed quite a number clinging to the rails of Charing-Cross Hotel, and an hour afterwards, on his return, they were still there, and there, the paper said, the morning found them."

That the foregoing description of this remarkable feature of the meteorology of London is not at all exaggerated, appears from the account of many of the more noteworthy fogs recorded in Howard's "Climate of London." That authority mentions fogs, in the forenoon, of such density that drivers could not see their horses' heads; and in the evening of such opacity that "the most brilliant gaslight could scarcely penetrate the gloom."

Describing a very thick fog occurring in November, 1828, and remarking upon its physiological effects, the author says:—

"It began to thicken very much about half-past twelve o'clock, from which time, till nearly two, the effect was most distressing, making the eyes smart, and almost suffocating those who were in the street, particularly asthmatic persons. . . . In the great thoroughfares, the hallooing of coachmen and drivers to avoid each other, seemingly issuing from the opaque mass in which they were enveloped, was calculated to awaken all the caution of riders, as well as of pedestrians who had to cross the streets."

These vaporous visitations are commonly very limited in extent. Often while the city is in more than midnight obscurity, and men and horses are groping their invisible way, step by step, only four or five miles from town the sky is unclouded and the sun shining brilliantly. The authority before referred to, records:—

"The fog of Wednesday (Dec. 31, 1817) seems to have been confined to the metropolis and the immediate vicinity. No further northward than the back of Euston Square, the weather was clear and even bright. A gentleman, who came to London from Enfield, saw no fog till he approached London. Southward of London, it extended as far as Clapham, and it was rather worse in some of the environs than in the metropolis itself. Upon an average, ten feet was the distance at which objects became invisible, out of doors. Within doors it was impossible to read without a candle."

But while this fog was thus limited at London, there was a sim-

ilar one the same day in Dublin which was probably a part of the same meteorological phenomenon, as appears from the following paragraph quoted from a Dublin journal of Jan. 1, 1818 :—

“The oldest person living has no recollection of a fog so thick as the one which enveloped this city last evening, between the hours of six and nine. It was more dense in some streets than in others, and where this was the case it was impossible to pass with convenience without the aid of opened lanterns.”

The occurrence of these fogs in frosty weather, is often the occasion of rare and exquisite displays of wintry beauties on shrubs, trees and buildings. Howard writes :—

“1814. January 4th. The mists, which have again prevailed for several days, and which have rendered travelling dangerous, are probably referable to stratus clouds. The air has been, in effect, loaded with particles of freezing water, such as in a higher region would have produced snow. These attached themselves to all objects, crystallizing in the most regular and beautiful manner. A blade of grass was thus converted into a pretty thick stalagmite; some of the shrubs, covered with spreading tufts of crystals, looked as if they were in blossom; while others, more firmly incrustated, might have passed for gigantic specimens of white coral. The leaves of evergreens had a transparent varnish of ice with an elegant white fringe. Lofly trees, viewed against the blue sky in the sunshine, appeared in striking magnificence; the whole face of nature, in short, was exquisitely dressed out in frost-work.”

As an example of a similar beautiful phenomenon in a distant latitude and very different climate, I extract the following from Knox’s “Overland through Asia,” just published :—

“Our road for seventy versts lay along the bank of the Angara. A thick fog filled the valley and seemed to hug close to the river. In the morning, every part of our sleigh, except at the points of friction, was white with frost. Each little fibre projecting from our cover of canvas and matting became a miniature stalactite, and the head of every nail, bolt, and screw, buried itself beneath a mass like oxydized silver. Everything had seized upon and congealed some of the moisture floating in the atmosphere. Our horses were of the color, or no color, of rabbits in January; it was only by brushing away the frost that the natural tint of their hair could be discovered, and sometimes there was a great deal of frost adhering to them.

During my stay at Irkutsk I noticed the prevalence of this fog or frost cloud. It usually formed during the night, and was thickest near the river. In the morning it enveloped the whole city,

but when the sun was an hour or two in the heavens the mist began to melt away. It remained longest over the river, and I was occasionally in a thick cloud on the bank of the Angara when the atmosphere a hundred yards away was perfectly clear. The moisture congealed on every stationary object. Houses and fences were cased in ice, its thickness varying with the condition of the weather. Trees and bushes became masses of crystals, and glistened in the sunlight as if formed of diamonds. I could never wholly rid myself of the impression that some of the trees were fountains caught and frozen when in full action. The frost played curious tricks of artistic skill, and its delineations were sometimes marvels of beauty. Any one who has visited St. Petersburg in winter remembers the effect of a fog from the Gulf of Finland after a period of severe cold. The red granite columns of St. Isaac's church are apparently transformed into spotless marble by the congelation of moisture on their surface. In the same manner I have seen a gray wall at Irkutsk changed in a night and morning to a dazzling whiteness. The crystalline formation of the frost had all the varieties of the kaleidoscope without its colors."

Lest some Yankee, whose study of Latin has not robbed him of his birth-right utilitarianism, should ask of the London fog, *cui bono?*, I will quote in conclusion, a pleasing little speculation of Howard, which may serve as an answer in some sort. Thomas Hughes remarks that he considers the power and glory of England to be due in no small degree to the prominence and virtues of the family of "Brown." Our meteorologist seeks to explain one way in which those same "Browns" are developed, and traces the connection between that illustrious family and a London fog (and other forms of moisture) thus:—

"Since man includes in his composition the elements of the inferior natures, and among these the *vegetable*, it is probable that the very growth of our bodies may so depend on moisture, that it could not go on in air of a certain degree of dryness. It is at least plain, that mankind is of a larger growth in rainy countries (whether these be warm or cold) than in those that are subject for a great part of the year to the dry extreme. In like manner, and from like causes, in part, we see that the inhabitants of crowded cities, and manufacturing towns, arrive at a less growth than those in even worse circumstances, as to diet and clothing, in the country; the latter being so much more exposed, in childhood and during adolescence, to the weather."