

HAPPY 200TH BIRTHDAY, HENRY

Beverly Stanier, Center Sandwich, NH

The Mouse Tower

Castles, turrets, round-towers, and dungeons... exciting images when I first heard Longfellow's poem as a child and learned by rote the ten rhyming verses. I had no inkling whether or not the setting for the poem was anything but a figment of the poet's creative imagination, and I didn't care. I only knew that I loved the rhythmic flow of the lines and the imaginary childhood chums of *Grave Alice and laughing Allegra, and Edith with golden hair*. I delighted in the images of the girls *plotting and planning together to surprise their adoring father as he sat in his study contemplating a pause in the day's occupations... known as the Children's Hour*.

Longfellow's poem had long been shelved and tucked away with other childhood treasures in a corner of my mind when, in October 2006, my husband and I cruised the "Great Rivers of Europe" down the Rhine, Mainz and Danube from Amsterdam to Vienna.

Sailing from Koblenz along the narrow, twisting Rhine, we cruised the most picturesque portion of our river adventure passing storybook German towns and half-timbered houses, ancient cathedrals on tiptoes with steeples stretching into the sky, and nearly two dozen Medieval castles. Clinging to the cliffs overhanging the shore, perched on piles of rocks mid-river, or set into the framework of vineyards on the hillsides, the ancient stone castles of Germany dotted the landscape. Some were newly refurbished or partially restored while others remained abandoned ruins, having been pillaged and destroyed by the French on their march through The Rhineland (present-day Germany) in 1689.

At the mouth of the Rhine before its confluence with the Mainz, the town of Bingen swam into view, and there, on a little island in the river, stood a small stone tower known as the Mause Turm (Mouse Tower). Ecstatic to learn that the tower mentioned in *The Children's Hour* truly existed, my thoughts scampered back to childhood, searching the dusty recesses, pulling together the bits and fragments of once familiar lines. Slowly, my beloved poem began to take shape. *A sudden rush from the stairway/ A sudden raid from the hall!/ By three doors left unguarded/ They entered my castle wall*. As the Program Director began to relate the story of the tower, I was astonished to hear the gruesome legend of the lyric poem I'd loved as a child.

In 968, the Archbishop of Mayence, a cruel and oppressive ruler, caused an old Roman tower to be re-built. He used the tower as a customhouse, demanding payment from passing ships and shooting their crews with crossbows if they did not comply. Soon after the rebuilding of the customhouse, a famine swept the countryside spreading misery among the poor.

A ragged mob of men, women, and children, with hollow cheeks and pale faces threw themselves at the bishop's feet crying for bread. Beckoning with hypocritical kindness, the bishop promised them corn and had them led outside the town to a barn, where each one was to receive as much corn as they wished. The starving folk hurried forth, their hearts full of gratitude; but when they were all in the barn, the bishop ordered the doors locked and the building set on fire.

The punishment, which Heaven sent, was even more horrific than the bishop's deed. Thousands of mice came out of the burning barn, made their way to the palace, filled every chamber and corner, and at last attacked the bishop himself. He fled the town to his tower on the Rhine, hoping to defend himself from his terrible pursuers. The innumerable horde swam in legions after him, gnawed through the tower doors and devoured the cruel Bishop.



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Responding to Longfellow is a partnership of the Maine Historical Society; Maine's Poet Laureate; and the Stonecoast MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine. For more information, please visit

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Longfellow - poet, scholar, linguist - must have known the grim legend of the Mouse Tower yet chose to draw a parallel more charming and lyric.

*They climb up into my turret
O'er the arms and back of my chair
If I try to escape they surround me
They seem to be everywhere.*

*They almost devour me with kisses
Their arms about me entwine,
Till I think of the Bishop of Bingen
In his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine!*



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