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The Pilgrims of the Rhine

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Chapter XVIII.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

COBLENTZ.—EXCURSION TO THE MOUNTAINS OF TAUNUS; ROMAN TOWER IN THE VALLEY OF EHRENBREITSTEIN.—TRAVEL, ITS PLEASURES ESTIMATED DIFFERENTLY BY THE YOUNG AND THE OLD.—THE STUDENT OF HEIDELBERG; HIS CRITICISMS ON GERMAN LITERATURE.

GERTRUDE had, indeed, apparently rallied during their stay at Coblantz; and a French physician established in the town (who adopted a peculiar treatment for consumption, which had been attended with no ordinary success,) gave her

father and Trevelyán a sanguine assurance of her ultimate recovery. The time they passed within the white walls of Coblenz, was, therefore, the happiest and most cheerful part of their pilgrimage. They visited the various places in its vicinity; but the excursion which most delighted Gertrude, was one to the mountains of Taunus.

They took advantage of a beautiful September day; and, crossing the river, commenced their tour from the THAL, or valley, of EHRENBREITSTEIN. They stopped on their way to view the remains of a Roman tower in the valley; for the whole of that district bears frequent witness of the ancient conquerors of the world. The mountains of Taunus are still intersected with the roads which the Romans cut to the mines that supplied them with silver. Roman urns, and inscribed stones, are often found in these ancient places. The stones, inscribed with names utterly unknown—a type of the uncertainty of fame!—the urns, from which the dust is gone—a very satire upon life!

Lone, grey, and mouldering, this tower stands aloft in the valley; and the quiet Vane smiled to see the blue uniform of a modern Prussian, with his white belt and lifted bayonet, by the spot which had once echoed to the clang of the Roman arms. The soldier was paying a momentary court to a country damsel, whose straw hat and rustic dress did not stifle the vanity of the sex; and this rude and humble gallantry, in that spot, was another moral in the history of human passions. Above, the ramparts of a modern rule frowned down upon the solitary tower, as if

in the vain insolence with which present power looks upon past decay; the living race upon ancestral greatness. And indeed, in this respect, rightly!—for modern times have no parallel to that degradation of human dignity stamped upon the ancient world, by the long sway of the imperial harlot, all slavery herself, yet all tyranny to earth;—and, like her own Messalina, at once a prostitute and an empress!

They continued their course by the ancient baths of Ems, and keeping by the banks of the romantic Lahn, arrived at Holzapfel.

“Ah,” said Gertrude, one day, as they proceeded to the springs of the Carlovingian Wisbaden, “surely perpetual travel with those we love must be the happiest state of existence. If home has its comforts it also has its cares; but here we are at home with Nature, and the minor evils vanish almost before they are felt.”

“True,” said Trevelyman, “we escape from ‘THE LITTLE,’ which is the curse of life; the small cares that devour us up, the grievances of the day. We are feeding the divinest part of our nature,—the appetite to admire.”

“But of all things wearisome,” said Vane, “a succession of changes is the most. There can be a monotony in variety itself. As the eye aches in gazing long at the new shapes of the kaleidoscope, the mind aches at the fatigue of a constant alternation of objects; and we delightedly return to REST, which is to life what green is to the earth.”

In the course of their sojourn among the various baths of Taunus, they fell in, by accident, with a German

student of Heidelberg, who was pursuing the pedestrian excursions so peculiarly favoured by his tribe. He was tamer and gentler than the general herd of those young wanderers, and our party were much pleased with his enthusiasm, because it was unaffected. He had been in England, and spoke its language almost as a native.

“Our literature,” said he, one day, conversing with Vane, “has two faults—we are too subtle and too homely. We do not speak enough to the broad comprehension of mankind; we are for ever making abstract qualities of flesh and blood. Our critics have turned your Hamlet into an allegory; they will not even allow Shakspeare to paint mankind, but insist on his embodying qualities. They turn poetry into metaphysics, and truth seems to them shallow, unless an allegory, which is false, can be seen at the bottom. Again, too, with our most imaginative works we mix a homeliness that we fancy touching, but which in reality is ludicrous. We eternally step from the sublime to the ridiculous—we want taste.”

“But not, I hope, French taste. Do not govern a Goëthe, or even a Richter, by a Boileau!” said Trevelyman.

“No, but Boileau’s taste was false. Men, who have the reputation for good taste, often acquire it solely because of the want of genius. By taste, I mean a quick tact into the harmony of composition, the art of making the whole consistent with its parts, the *concinnitas*—Schiller alone of our authors has it;—but we are fast mending; and, by following shadows so long we have been led at last to the

substance. Our past literature is to us what astrology was to science, false but ennobling, and conducting us to the true language of the intellectual heaven."

Another time the scenes they passed, interspersed with the ruins of frequent monasteries, leading them to converse on the monastic life, and the various additions time makes to religion, the German said: "Perhaps one of the works most wanted in the world, is the history of Religion. We have several books, it is true, on the subject, but none that supply the want I allude to. A German ought to write it; for only a German would probably have the requisite learning. A German only too is likely to treat the mighty subject with boldness, and yet with veneration; without the shallow flippancy of the Frenchman, without the timid sectarianism of the English. It would be a noble task, to trace the winding mazes of antique falsehood; to clear up the first glimmerings of divine truth; to separate Jehovah's word from man's invention; to vindicate the All-merciful from the dread creeds of bloodshed and of fear: and watching in the great Heaven of Truth the dawning of the True Star, follow it—like the Magi of the east—till it rested above the real God. Not indeed presuming to such a task," continued the German, with a slight blush, "I have about me an humble essay, which treats only of one part of that august subject; which, leaving to a loftier genius the history of the true religion, may be considered as the history of a false one;—of such a creed as Christianity supplanted in the north; or such as may perhaps be found among the fiercest

of the savage tribes. It is a fiction—as you may conceive ; but yet, by a constant reference to the early records of human learning, I have studied to weave it up from truths. If you would like to hear it—it is very short—”

“ Above all things,” said Vane ; and the German drew a manuscript neatly bound, from his pocket.

“ After having myself criticised so insolently the faults of our national literature,” said he, smiling, “ you will have a right to criticise the faults that belong to so humble a disciple of it. But you will see that, though I have commenced with the allegoric, or the supernatural, I have endeavoured to avoid the subtlety of conceit, and the obscurity of design which I blame in the wilder of our authors. As to the style, I wished to suit it to the subject ; it ought to be, unless I err, rugged and massive ; hewn, as it were, out of the rock of primæval language. But you, Madam ;—doubtless you do not understand German.”

“ Her mother was an Austrian,” said Vane ; “ and she knows at least enough of the tongue to understand you ; so pray begin.”

Without further preface, the German then commenced the story, which the reader will find translated* in the next chapter.

* Nevertheless I beg to state seriously, that the German student is an impostor ; had he taken any other tale of mine, I would have borne it ; but one of my very best—Ah, *scelerat!*