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The Pilgrims of the Rhine

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London, 1834

Chapter XXVIII.

[urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120544](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120544)

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE VOYAGE TO BINGEN.—THE SIMPLE INCIDENTS IN THIS TALE EXCUSED.—THE SITUATION AND CHARACTER OF GERTRUDE.—THE CONVERSATION OF THE LOVERS IN THE TEMPLE.—A FACT CONTRADICTED.—THOUGHTS OCCASIONED BY A MADHOUSE AMONGST THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPES OF THE RHINE.

THE next day they again resumed their voyage, and Gertrude's spirits were more cheerful than usual; the air seemed to her lighter, and she breathed with a less effort: once more hope entered the breast of Trevylyan; and, as the vessel bounded on, their conversation was steeped in no sombre hues. When Gertrude's health permitted, no temper was so gay, yet so gently gay, as hers; and now the naïve sportiveness of her remarks called a smile to the placid lip of Vane, and smoothed the anxious front of Trevylyan himself; as for Du—e, who had much of the boon companion beneath his professional gravity, he broke out every now and then into snatches of French songs and drinking glees, which he declared were the result of the air of Bacharach. Thus conversing, the ruins of Furstenberg, and the echoing vale of Rheindeibach, glided past their sail. Then the old town of Lorch, on the opposite bank, (where the red wine is said first to have

been made,) with the green island before it in the water. Winding round, the stream shewed castle upon castle alike in ruins, and built alike upon scarce accessible steeps. Then came the chapel of St. Clements, and the opposing village of Asmannshausen; the lofty Rossell, built at the extremest verge of the cliff; and now the tower of Hatto, celebrated by Southey's ballad; and the ancient town of Bingen. Here they paused for some while from their voyage, with the intention of visiting more minutely the Rheingau, or valley of the Rhine.

It must occur to every one of my readers that, in undertaking, as now, in these passages in the history of Trevylyan, scarcely so much a tale as an episode in real life, it is very difficult to offer any interest save of the most simple and unexciting kind. It is true that to Trevylyan every day, every hour, had its incident; but what are those incidents to others? A cloud in the sky, a smile from the lip of Gertrude; these were to him far more full of events than had been the most varied scenes of his former adventurous career; but the history of the heart is not easily translated into language; and the world will not readily pause from its business to watch the alternations in the cheek of a dying girl.

In the immense sum of human existence, what is a single unit? Every sod on which we tread is the grave of some former being: yet is there something that softens, without enervating the heart, in tracing in the life of another those emotions that all of us have known ourselves. For who

is there that has not, in his progress through life, felt all its ordinary business arrested, and the varieties of fate commuted into one chronicle of the affections? Who has not watched over the passing away of some being, more to him, at that epoch, than all the world? And this unit, so trivial to the calculation of others, of what inestimable value was it not to him? Retracing in another such recollections, shadowed and mellowed down by time, we feel the wonderful sanctity of human life; we feel what emotions a single being can awake; what a world of hope may be buried in a single grave. And thus we keep alive within ourselves the soft springs of that morality which unites us with our kind, and sheds over the harsh scenes and turbulent contests of earth the colouring of a common love.

There is often, too, in the time of year in which such thoughts are presented to us, a certain harmony with the feelings they awaken. As I write, I hear the last sighs of the departing summer, and the sere and yellow leaf is visible in the green of nature. But, when this book goes forth into the world, the year will have past through a deeper cycle of decay; and the first melancholy signs of winter have breathed into the Universal Mind, that sadness which associates itself readily with the memory of friends, of feelings, that are no more. The seasons, like ourselves, track their course, by something of beauty, or of glory, that is left behind. As the traveller in the land of Palestine sees tomb after tomb rise before him, the landmarks of his way, and the only signal of the holiness of

the soil; thus the memory wanders over the most sacred spots in its various world, and traces them but by the graves of the Past.

It was now that Gertrude began to feel the shock her frame had received in the storm upon the Rhine. Cold shiverings frequently seized her; her cough became more hollow, and her form trembled at the slightest breeze.

Vane grew seriously alarmed; he repented that he had yielded to Gertrude's wish of substituting the Rhine for the Tiber or the Arno; and would even now have hurried across the Alps to a warmer clime, if Du — e had not declared that she could not survive the journey, and that her sole chance of regaining her strength was rest. Gertrude herself, however, in the continued delusion of her disease, clung to the belief of recovery, and still supported the hopes of her father, and soothed, with secret talk of the future, the anguish of her betrothed. The reader may remember that, the most touching passage in the ancient tragedians, the most pathetic part of the most pathetic of human poets—the pleading speech of Iphigenia, when, imploring for her prolonged life, she impresses you with so soft a picture of its innocence and its beauty; and in this Gertrude resembled the Greek's creation—that she felt at the verge of death, all the flush, the glow, the loveliness of life. Her youth was filled with hope, and many-coloured dreams; she loved, and the hues of morning slept upon the yet disenchanted earth. The heavens to her were not as the common sky; the wave had its peculiar music to her ear, and

the rustling leaves a pleasantness that none, whose heart is not bathed in the love and sense of beauty, could discern. Therefore it was, in future years, a thought of deep gratitude to Trevelyhan, that she was so little sensible of her danger; that the landscape caught not the gloom of the grave; and that, in the Greek phrase, "death found her sleeping amongst flowers."

At the end of a few days, another of those sudden turns, common to her malady, occurred in Gertrude's health; her youth and her happiness rallied against the encroaching tyrant; and for the ensuing fortnight she seemed once more within the bounds of hope. During this time, they made several excursions into the Rheingau, and finished their tour at the ancient Heidelberg.

One morning, in these excursions, after threading the wood of Niederwald, they gained that small and fairy temple, which, hanging lightly over the mountain's brow, commands one of the noblest landscapes of earth. There, seated side by side, the lovers looked over the beautiful world below; far to the left, lay the happy islets, in the embrace of the Rhine, as it wound along the low and curving meadows that stretch away towards Nieder Ingelheim and Mayence. Glistening in the distance, the opposite Nah swept by the Mause tower, and the ruins of Klopp, crowning the ancient Bingen, into the mother tide. There, on either side the town, were the mountains of St. Roch and Rupert, with some old monastic ruin, saddening in the sun. But nearer, below the temple, contrasting all the other features of landscape, yawned a dark and rugged gulf,

girt by cragged elms and mouldering towers, the very prototype of the abyss of time—black and fathomless amidst ruin and desolation.

“I think, sometimes,” said Gertrude, “as, in scenes like these, we sit together, and, rapt from the actual world see only the enchantment that distance leads to our view—I think sometimes, what pleasure it will be hereafter to recal these hours. If ever you should love me less, I need only to whisper to you, ‘The Rhine,’ and will not all the feelings you have now for me, return?”

“Ah! there will never be occasion to recal my love for you, it can never decay.”

“What a strange thing is life,” said Gertrude; “how unconnected, how desultory seem all its links. Has this sweet pause from trouble, from the ordinary cares of life—has it any thing in common with your past career—with your future? You will go into the great world; in a few years hence these moments of leisure and musing will be denied to you; the action that you love and court is a jealous sphere; it allows no wandering, no repose. These moments will then seem to you but as yonder islands that stud the Rhine—the stream lingers by them for a moment, and then hurries on in its rapid course; they vary, but they do not interrupt, the tide.”

“You are fanciful, my Gertrude, but your simile might be juster. Rather let these banks be as our lives, and this river the one thought that flows eternally by both, blessing each with undying freshness.”

Gertrude smiled; and, as Trevelyán's arm encircled her,

she sunk her beautiful face upon his bosom, he covered it with his kisses, and she thought at the moment, that, even had she passed death, that embrace could have recalled her to life.

They pursued their course to Mayence, partly by land, partly along the river. One day, as returning from the vine-clad mountains of Johannisberg, which commands the whole of the Rheingau, the most beautiful valley in the world, they proceeded by water to the town of Ellfeld, Gertrude said—

“There is a thought in your favourite poet which you have often repeated, and which I cannot think true,

‘In nature there is nothing melancholy.’

To me it seems as if a certain melancholy were inseparable from beauty; in the sunniest noon there is a sense of solitude and stillness which pervades the landscape, and even in the flush of life inspires us with a musing and tender sadness. Why is this?”

“I cannot tell,” said Trevelyman, mournfully, “but I allow that it is true.”

“It is as if,” continued the romantic Gertrude, “the spirit of the world spoke to us in the silence, and filled us with a sense of our mortality—a whisper from the religion that belongs to nature, and is ever seeking to unite the earth with the reminiscences of Heaven. Ah, what without a Heaven would be even love! a perpetual terror of the separation that must one day come! If,” she resumed,

solemnly, after a momentary pause, and a shadow settled on her young face, "if it be true, Albert, that I must leave you soon——"

"It cannot—it cannot," cried Trevelyman, wildly; "be still, be silent, I beseech you."

"Look yonder," said Du ——e, breaking seasonably in upon the conversation of the lovers; "on that hill to the left, what once was an abbey is now an asylum for the insane. Does it not seem a quiet and serene abode for the unstrung and erring minds that tenant it? What a mystery is there in our conformation!—those strange and bewildered fancies which replace our solid reason, what a moral of our human weakness do they breathe!"

It does indeed induce a dark and singular train of thought, when, in the midst of these lovely scenes, we chance upon this lone retreat for those on whose eyes Nature, perhaps, smiles in vain! *Or is it in vain?* They look down upon the broad Rhine, with its tranquil isles; do their wild illusions endow the river with another name, and people the valleys with no living shapes? Does the broken mirror within reflect back the countenance of real things, or shadows and shapes, crossed, mingled, and bewildered,—the phantasma of a sick man's dreams? Yet, perchance, one memory unscathed by the general ruin of the brain, can make even the beautiful Rhine more beautiful than it is to the common eye;—can calm it with the hues of departed love, and bid its possessor walk over its vine clad mountains with the beings that have ceased to *be!*

There, perhaps, the self-made monarch sits upon his throne and claims the vessels as his fleet, the waves and the valleys as his own. There, the enthusiast, blasted by the light of some imaginary creed, beholds the shapes of angels, and watches in the clouds round the setting sun, the pavilions of God. There the victim of forsaken or perished love, mightier than the sorcerers of old, evokes the dead, or recalls the faithless by the philtre of undying fancies. Ah, blessed art thou, the winged power of Imagination that is within us!—conquering even grief—brightening even despair. Thou takest us from the world when reason can no longer bind us to it, and givest to the maniac the inspiration and the solace of the bard! Thou, the parent of the purer love, lingerest like love, when even ourself forsakes us, and lightest up the shattered chambers of the heart with the glory that makes a sanctity of decay!