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An Autumn near the Rhine; or Sketches of courts, society, scenery, &c. in some of the German states bordering on the Rhine

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Letter XXXII.

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LETTER XXXII.

AIX-LA-CHAPELLE stands in a fertile bowl, surrounded by bold hills, on descending from which, either on the road from Liege or from Juliers, the slated roofs and minarets of the *Hotel de Ville*, and the grotesque dome of the cathedral, give to the old Imperial City an air of imposing dignity. On entering it you find it, however, far from a handsome town, according to the modern acceptation of the phrase — nor is the interest of antiquity united with any of that architectural curiosity, which give the great cities of the Netherlands so striking a character. The city, which is by no means large, is as usual surrounded by a thick rampart, now half in decay, with small Roman towers at nearly equal distances. Below the ramparts are agreeable shrubberies and gardens, chiefly the work of the French, and which form favourite

promenades to the company of the Bathing-Place.

Our visit in the summer, when the place was overflowing with company, gave us some idea of the mode of life of the diversified groupes who were drinking deeper of its waters and amusements than ourselves: both of which have no small resemblance to those of similar scenes in England. Gaiety has, however, a more decided character; pleasure is more the avowed business of every body; and if *ennui* may be the motive of as many visits to this place, as to similar ones in Great Britain, the remedy here appears more successful; for you can rarely read in a single countenance, as you so often may in the libraries of Brighton or Cheltenham, the inveterate disease of which persons come to be cured. The system of the day commences with a bath, taken early, for about half an hour. After breakfast follow excursions in the environs, the walks in the gardens, visits to the *cafés* and billiard-rooms, and, above all, the pleasures of the Redoubt, or Grand Saloon, which occupy the gay world till dinner, at two or three. This last-men-

tioned place of rendezvous is the great centre of attraction; and with the exception of much more gaiety, more avowed vice, and the absence of all pretence at rational resources, acts the part of the library at an English watering-place. The Redoubt is a large handsome building, the ground floor open with a colonnade in front, appropriated to print, toy-shops, &c. A wide stair-case conducts to the first-floor, where, after depositing your hat and stick with the *gens d'armes* at the door, you enter the Grand Saloon—a splendid room, with a carved ceiling, and lined with mirrors. On one side a crowd of motley, but well-dressed and gay-looking persons, (I regret to say, of both sexes,) are pressing over each other's heads, round two large banks of *Rouge et Noir*. An anxious silence reigns, only interrupted by the rattling of the roulette, the clink of the Napoleons and francs, and the titters and jokes of the few whose speculations are a matter of mere frolic. The play is frequently very high, but the bank does not refuse to sweep in a solitary franc. Pretty, interesting women were putting down their

Napoleons, and seeing them swept away, or drawing them in doubled, with a *sang froid* which showed they were no novices in their employment.

A Russian officer of my acquaintance was subject, like many of his countrymen whom I have known, to the infatuation of play in a most ridiculous excess. His distrust of himself, under the assailments which he anticipated at a place like Aix-la-Chapelle, had induced him to take the prudent precaution of paying in advance at his hotel for his board and lodging, and at the bathing-house for his baths, for the time he intended to stay. The remaining contents of his purse he thought fairly his own; and he went of course to the table all the gayer for the sort of licence he had taken of his conscience. On fortune showing him a few favours, he came to me, in high spirits, with a purse full of Napoleons, and a resolute determination to keep them by venturing no more: but a gamester can no more be stationary than the tide of a river, and in the evening he was put out of suspense

by having not a Napoleon left, and nothing to console himself but congratulation on his foresight, and the excellent supper which was the fruit of it.

Between four and five o'clock, groupes of the *beau monde* repair to the Louisberg — a bold sandy hill, rising abruptly just above the ramparts of the town, the view from which overlooks the city and the rich valley beneath, and stretches over the neighbouring hills and fertile pastures, to a range of even mountains which bound the horizon towards Germany. The scene of attraction on the mountain is a large tavern, with a splendid saloon, commanding a noble prospect. Music, dancing, smoking, tea-drinking, walks in the gardens, &c., occupy the various descriptions of guests; and the scene has few features of difference from our cockney rendezvous near town, except the characters of the parties, who, instead of being worthy cits, with fat spouses, are often a gay assemblage of Counts, Barons, &c. &c. of various nations and qualities.

During the continuance of the season

there is generally a company of German players at Aix-la-Chapelle, and the company hastily return from the Louisberg to the theatre. The building is small, and by no means handsome. An opera was given the night I was there, the music of which was agreeable, but the actors by no means extraordinary.

The Cathedral of Aix is interesting for its history, and its rude specimens of early Saxon architecture: but has neither beauty nor grandeur to recommend it. The quaint old dome, which comprehends the whole edifice, except the light Gothic choir of a later date, is a venerable relic of the old minster with which Charlemagne adorned his native city. It was consecrated by Pope Leo III. in 804, with a ceremony worthy of its splendour. Three hundred and sixty-five Archbishops and Bishops were to be present at the solemnity; but unluckily two were missing, and there is no knowing what might have resulted if two reverend prelates of Tongres, long ago dead and buried at Maestricht, had not been so kind as to walk out of their graves and supply the vacant seats at the cere-

mony. Some of the variegated marble pillars which adorned the old edifice are now returned from their temporary visit to Paris, and are shown with the curiosities of the church. Under the centre of the dome repose the ashes of the great Charles, with the simple but impressive inscription on the pavement — *Carolo Magno*. Immediately above hangs an immense circular sort of chandelier in the shape of a crown, composed of silver and brass — a present to the church from Frederic the Great, called Charlemagne's crown.

The absence of the sacristan and his key deprived us of the gratification of admiring the choice assortment of relics; among which are the *soi-disans* neck and arm-bones of Charlemagne, his hunting-horn and a golden cross which he is said to have worn. The religious treasures which we thus missed inspecting, appear to tax the credulity of good Catholics with even more than usual severity. Our guide at the Cathedral assured us, that if we could but wait an hour we should have the felicity of seeing the girdle of the Virgin, a bit of the cord that served to bind our Sa-

viour, a fragment of Aaron's rod, and a morsel of the manna of the desert. The possession of these treasures, which are preserved in a costly case, and exposed periodically to the wondering multitude, formerly made Aix-la-Chapelle the favourite resort of pilgrims from all parts of Europe. An old chronicle relates that in 1490 above 140,000 visited the relics in one day; and that, at the end of the ceremony, the donation-box was found to contain 80,000 florins. The miserable morbid-looking wretches scattered about before images and altars on their knees in every corner of the church, seemed to remind one that the Catholics of the nineteenth century were not so much advanced beyond those of the fifteenth as, for the sake of humanity, one might wish. Some were kneeling, with extended arms, before a saint, or a little figure of the Virgin, dizened out in flowers and lace, with an air of vacant ignorance and misery, perhaps feeling an undefined consolation in their blind devotions. Others were mechanically gabbling over their *Ave Marias*, staring around them all the while; and se-

veral wretched objects left their prayers to crowd round us with the importunities of hunger and misery. Each ragged suppliant has his favourite altar or image, which he rarely varies, and where you are sure of finding him on his knees, with his mass-book in his hand, half an hour before mass, *salut*, and vespers, and sometimes almost throughout the day. The more conscientious, or those who wish to do neither too much nor too little, are seen counting their *Ave Marias* and *Benedicites* by their rosary.

The poor wretches who pass their existence in the aisles, many for want of any other home, seem to find their only comfort in the treasures and magnificence of the church. They take as much pride in describing or pointing them out to you, as if they were their own property — and will relate the sufferings and pillagings which their cathedral has undergone, with as lively a regret as if they had deprived them of so many personal comforts. If you talk to them, they are ignorant and confiding to the last degree. They never attempt to give you any other account of their faith in

this or that miracle or relic than that they were brought up in it — that their father believed before them, and that is enough for them.

This is the sort of scene which Catholic churches generally present ; and though this assemblage of slavish superstition and beggary is ill-assorted with the pomp of the ceremonies and the grandeur of the buildings, it perhaps, on the whole, heightens the strong undefinable and mixed impression which a Catholic Church never fails to make on a stranger. The contrast of sublimity and wretchedness, of pomp and meanness, is very striking. Without the slightest feeling of intolerance for these multitudes, they present to one the touching spectacle of so many victims of error, deluded by the gaudy ceremonies of a spiritless worship. All that is poetical, solemn, and impressive in religious rites, seems here abused to the purpose of riveting the chains of ignorance, and gilding folly and darkness with the brightest illusions. The peelings of the organ, the voices of the choir, the triumphs of the arts, appear not so much employed to

elevate the devotions of beings capable of feeling them, as to produce ignorant awe in the multitude, and to clothe a delusive farce with imposing stage effect.

The Priests of the Catholic churches, in Germany and the Netherlands, with whom I have formed acquaintance, I have in general found heavy, besotted, beings; who drudge on in their calling, selfish, grumbling, and without a spark of intellectual life beyond a low cunning, if that can be called so. One of the number, whose abode I will not mention, was a lively exception to the *animal* stupidity of this character. He lived in a little shabby house, leaning against the buttresses of the cathedral. To see the Reverend man at the altar, his demure face suited to his canonicals, and going through the solemn pantomime with a pompous gravity, you would have thought him the very saint of orthodoxy — but in his parlour we found him the gayest of wags, the most lax of theologians, and one of the most entertaining and easy fellows we ever met with. The arch leer of his eye seemed to confess him too knowing for his blind vocation —

and that a joke, or a pretty girl, were as much in estimation with him as a father or a tenet. He ordered out a bottle of his best ale, which was served up by a very pretty housekeeper — and when a German friend joked him on his interesting companion, he put on a half-sly, half-sanctified look, turning indifferently to another subject, as if his reputation on such a matter was not the precise point on which he was most desirous of standing clear with us. His conversation was interlarded with scraps of Monkish Latin, sometimes mystical, sometimes bordering on indecorum — and when our English pronunciation of the vowels was spoken of as being different from that of the rest of Europe, he accounted for it with a chuckling smile — “ Ah, that was only a trick of the Reformers — before their time you pronounced them like other people, but they wished to keep the common people in the dark, and so they altered the sound of the vowels, that they might not understand their own language!” I could not help smiling at the worthy Catholic’s satisfaction, with his whimsical

theory, so strictly borrowed from the tactics of his own church.

Our Reverend guide left us to prepare for the *salut* — but anxious that we should have a good view of the little image of Our Saviour, used at the service, which he assured us was solid gold, he placed us in a corner of the choir opposite the altar, promising when he held it up to the congregation, to hold it before us long enough to ensure a full inspection. When he marched solemnly up to the altar, with the two other Priests, he turned his eye to the appointed rendezvous and recognised us with a familiar nod and wink. His occupation in his sacred office did not make him forget his promise; and when the organ was sounding, the bells ringing, the incense fuming, and the priest held up the image to the gazing multitude, with an air of fervent piety, he turned it round to us, and held it for some seconds, eyeing us with a look that meant to ask what we thought of it. The image was small and what such images usually are, except that it was of solid gold — but the manner in which the priest thus

mixed up his office of ciceroni with his holy functions struck us as very curious. While the admiring crowds thought him rapt in the solemnity of his office, he was making an arrangement for the gratification of a traveller's curiosity with the hope of increasing his fee a few francs by his zeal. Lest we might not be at home in the etiquette of accompanying our *douceurs* with the phrase "*pour les pauvres,*" which the delicacy of a Catholic Priest cannot resist, our shrewd friend gave us some very explicit hints — "*Pour moi tout ce que je fais c'est pour les pauvres — vous savez bien — il faut absolument soigner les pauvres — nous en avons tant.*" These hints were not lost upon us; and when we pressed a few francs into his hand we did not omit the talismanic words which enabled him to receive our money with as unembarrassed a dignity as if he had literally intended every sou, *pour les pauvres*.

The lofty Hotel de Ville, with its antique minarets, and its roof studded with diminutive windows, crowns with a venerable dignity the Grande Place of the town — a bustling square, adorned by an immense

bronze basin and fountain in the centre, surmounted by an antique bronze statue of Charlemagne, fully accoutred. Two large black eagles flap their metal wings on pedestals by side of the fountain. The Monarch and the eagles turn their heads towards the Hotel de Ville — the ancient Palace in which Charles was born. The statue was honoured by the French with a visit to Paris, among the other works of art. The modern Prussian eagle now figures over the door of the Hotel, announcing the Police and Municipal Offices of the Prussian Regency, and perking his upstart head in the face of the venerable birds who have reigned for centuries. We entered the hotel by a spacious hall, with vaulted roofs, and grotesquely carved and painted walls. A wide stair-case conducted us to the Grand Saloon, where the memorable Congress was held which concluded the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, in 1748. An immense well-executed picture represents the whole *corps diplomatique*, with their secretaries in full costume, at the deliberative table, to the number of about thirty. *Le Chevalier Robinson*, meaning Sir

Thomas Robinson, and Lord Sandwich, were pointed out to us as our plenipotentiaries; and Maria Theresa's famous minister, the Prince of Kaunitz, as that of Austria. The separate portraits of the different ambassadors also adorn the room: but that of the French ambassador is singularly enough absent, Louis XV. having, as it is said, absolutely declined to furnish it, in consequence of his dissatisfaction at the peace. The arms of the different kingdoms are represented on a small shield attached to the costume of each ambassador: but the *fleur de lis*, the emblem of the Bourbons, and which is common to the arms of England, France, Spain, and other Sovereigns, has been invariably erased, with great care, by the revolutionary French, and a black daub left in its place — a curious instance of the trifles to which political animosity often attaches importance. Handsome portraits of Maria Theresa, and her husband Francis, and Joseph II., also hang on the walls, once their own, but now dirty and neglected — while a glittering full length representation of His Prussian Majesty, protected by a green

silk curtain, occupies one end of the saloon in all the blooming dignity of a Sovereign in possession.

As is naturally often the case in towns on frontiers, or which have been subject to changes of masters, the people of Aix-la-Chapelle speak many languages, and none well. At Cologne they speak simply a coarse vulgar German, which degenerates in approaching the flats of Holland: but at *Achen*, bad German, bad French, some Dutch and Flemish, (bad or good I know not,) and a mixture of the *Walloon* dialect, of which you hear more at Liege, conspire to form a Babel of harmonious diversity. If you ask a question in French, the person you address probably only speaks German. If you address the next in German, he perhaps answers in French. German is, upon the whole, however, the language which you are most sure of finding useful; and if its re-Germanised condition is permanent, a few years will probably make Aix-la-Chapelle completely *Achen*; and the next generation may know as little of French as some of the juniors of the present do of German. In

such a case it is to be hoped that habit and wise administration may have gained for the Prussian government a popularity which it as yet wants.

These hasty epistolary communications are now probably to your great relief brought to a close. The scenes of the Netherlands are familiar to you — and from necessity I ran through them too rapidly, even for a description equally superficial with the preceding sketches. Waterloo has been exhausted, and though it is hardly necessary to say I visited it, I am unwilling to add one to the number of the prose-men and verse-men who have done their best to render the noblest of subjects common-place — And as for the cathedrals, the antique cities, the galleries, the fertile flats, and the gay jovial inhabitants of Belgium; circumstances rather than free choice have compelled me to postpone them to the sands, the ceremonies, and the heavy good-humour of Germany, beyond the Rhine.

THE END.

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ERRATA.

- Page 13. line 2. for *commissaires*, read *commissionnaires*.
 54. line 4. for Philip, read Gustavus.
 61. line 19. for talents, read some talents.
 94. line 13. for Court — Fourrier, read Court-Fourrier.
 98. line 5. from the bottom, for *une*, read *un*.
 142. line 17. for Rhingan, read Rhingau.
 254. line 2. for *assert*, read *assist*.
 273. line 6. from the bottom, insert an apostrophe after *bourgeois*.
 299. head of the page, for SCANDAL, read SOCIETY.
 386. line 2. for *cicatrize*, read *impress*.
 488. line 14. for *allow*, read *allows*.
 501. line 3. from the bottom, for *tous* read *tous*.