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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

Dodd, Charles Edward

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Letter XXXI.

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LETTER XXXI.

WE departed early in the morning for Aix-la-Chapelle — myself, the bulky merchant of Frankfort, a French merchant from Lyons, and a young German, whom I had before met at Stutgard, squeezed into a stout calèche, drawn by a couple of hardy troop horses, and driven by an old soldier of Napoleon, who had taken up the trade of *voiturier*. The fellow had been at the battle of Waterloo, and, in the course of much bragging of his exploits, encouraged by his mercantile compatriot, took out his watch, assuring me, with a triumphant air, “*Voilà c’est un Anglais.*” The watch was certainly an English one, but whether he had taken it from the pocket of an Englishman on the field, as he asserted, is perhaps doubtful. The Lyonnese merchant, a shrewd conceited Frenchman, with the substantial air of a man of opulence, gene-

rally monopolised the conversation, of which I had the principal benefit, the Germans speaking little French, and the Frenchman of course knowing none but his own language. His range of loquacity was confined to the only two subjects on which he had two ideas — France and himself. In half an hour we were apprised that his firm was known all over the world; that his country-house and vineyards were the admiration of the department; his wife a “*superbe femme*,” and the Mayor his “*meilleur ami*.” As to France, “*Ah voila ce qu’ on appelle un beau pays. Qu’est ce que vous n’y trouvez pas? Vous avez la du blé, vous avez des fruits, vous avez des vignobles — enfin — vous avez tout.*” And turning to me, with triumphant satisfaction, “*Vous n’avez pas de vignes en Angleterre?* And then, with a commiserating shrug at our deficiency, “*Ah non il n’y a pas de pays comme la France.*” Every thing in France prospered. The King’s speech had told them they were rich; and the allied troops were sure to be removed in the spring. All that was French, or connected with France, was to be held sa-

cred. If a word was dropped in disparagement of Buonaparte — “*Ah mais il faut convenir que c'était un grand homme ;*” or if the imbecility of the Bourbons was hinted at — “*Mais cependant ils sont de bons gens.*” As for Paris, and the Palais Royal, “*Le paradis sur la terre*” was the eternal climax with which he wound up all his extacies. “*Il n'y a qu'un Palais Royal dans le monde,*” he exclaimed, with a rapture that never dreamt how great a compliment he was paying the world. The *filles de joie* were so handsome and so modest — “*elles sont justement comme des femmes honnêtes. Ah il n'y a que les Français qui aiment les femmes. A Paris on se marie rarement — c'est vrai — ce n'est pas la mode — Ah les Français sont le seul peuple gallant — toutes les femmes aiment les Français.*” In this strain of voluble egotism he continued to amuse us the whole journey, not less by his vivacity and happy vanity, than by his displays of profound ignorance on every subject not French, or even Parisian.

Sometimes the old gentleman gave us some amusing particulars of the siege of

Lyons, in the defence of which he had taken a part, and had narrowly escaped the guillotine. He was at Lyons when the Duke of Tarentum and Monsieur repaired there to attempt to stop Buonaparte's progress from Elba to Paris. He saw the troops drawn up in the *Grande Place*, and reviewed by the Duke and Monsieur. The men had had three francs each given them; and it was hoped the exhortations of the Marshal would excite universal devotion to the cause. His Royal Highness and the Duke rode through the ranks again and again, and the Marshal, after repeated addresses, and exhausting every topic calculated to rally loyalty, called to the men to give a token of their attachment by saluting the Prince with *Vive le Roi*. Scarcely three voices broke the dismal silence. The Marshal turned away in despair, the tears streaming from his eyes — and the Count d'Artois and he shortly afterwards left Lyons. The gay Frenchman assured me that he, and almost all present, were moved to tears by this cruel scene. — A Colonel of cavalry on half pay, a friend of our companion's, resided near Lyons, with his wife, to whom he was

much attached. On hearing of Napoleon's approach, he let fall some hints of an intention of joining him, on which his wife indignantly broke forth—“*A ton age, mon ami,— et tu ne connois pas le chemin d'honneur? pense y bien. Si tu le quittes, tu ne me verras plus de ta vie.*” The Colonel, persuaded by his wife, fully resolved to serve his King, and left her with a vow never to forget her injunctions: but, on arriving at Lyons, the cries of *Vive l'Empereur*, and the sight of the *tricolor* cockade, were too much for his firmness; and neither his spouse, his vow, nor his honour had influence enough to prevent his flocking with his comrades to the standard of his old leader. This is a curious illustration of that invariable resignation to momentary impulses which forms the consistent inconsistency of the French character. Military glory, that vainest and most delusive of feelings, appears to be the only one to which they have ever been true.

The diverting vivacity and grace of the Frenchman, contrasted with the looby stupidity of the German merchant, who, in bad French, was opening a negotiation for

dealings in silk with the firm at Lyons, aided by a card in French and German, professing to transact all brokerage *au juste prix*, made up for the want of interest in the country we passed. My Stutgard acquaintance, a simple German youth, never took his eyes off the eternally narrating Frenchman; and when he occasionally caught the force of an exclamation or a description, testified his admiration by a burst of horse-laughter.

We stopped a few minutes at the little town of Bergheim, at an inn, to which the handsome sign of "*The Duke of Wellington*" gave a certain interest. While we were drinking chocolate, the Frenchman, aware of the notoriously good odour in which his nation is held by the majority of the King of Prussia's new subjects, was dissembling his country, and persuading the jovial landlord that there were no people under the sun to be compared to the Prussians. "*Je sais bien — vous n'aimez pas les Français — vous avez raison — ce sont des mechans — vous êtes tons pour les Prussiens dans ce pays ci — n'est ce pas ?*" The landlord was startled, and stared at a predilection of which he

was so consciously innocent being thus forced on him, and, in spite of all his disposition to adopt whatever feelings were most agreeable to his guests, did not hesitate to avow, on being a little more pressed, that his own feelings, and those of the inhabitants of the town of Bergheim and the vicinity were as much the reverse as possible of those imputed to him. The Frenchman chuckled at the success of his irony, and winked at me, whispering "*Vous voyez comme les Français sont aimés.*"

The bias in favour of the French, which a traveller who observes any thing of the inhabitants, cannot fail to detect in every conversation at a table d'hôte in these provinces, is in a great degree attributed to the decline of the manufactures, which form one main occupation of the inhabitants. Buonaparte's system of exclusion had fostered these to the highest pitch of prosperity; and now the complaints of the fair politician at Bonn of their ruin are loud throughout the country, and continually find vent in the journals of the Netherlands. The productions of Aix-la-Chapelle, Verviers, Mountjoie, Cologne, &c. formerly spread over

all Germany and Russia — the draperies of Crefeld were seen in the Haram of Constantinople, and were especially patronised by Frederic of Prussia. They are now quite unable to compete with the manufactures of Birmingham, Wakefield, and Manchester, which inundate the country. Numberless manufactories consequently stand still, and large bodies of population are out of employ. During the Continental system, the country boasted no less than twenty-seven of Buonaparte's notable chemical manufactories for making beet-root a substitute for sugar — a trade, which in spite of its serviceableness in keeping up the luxuries of *compôtes* and coffee, when they were in imminent danger of being annihilated is, as you may suppose, little able to maintain itself against the influx of colonial produce.

The presence of the Prussian troops, who are stationed in every town, by no means conciliates the good will of the people. Here, as elsewhere, they are complained of as haughty, vain, and tyrannical. At Cologne they are very unpopular. The officers often behave imperiously — a little while ago no

one dared to speak a word of French in their hearing. — The removal of almost all the native *employés* in the provinces, and the substitution of Prussians, also causes discontent — although with some few exceptions, the French laws and systems which had so importantly improved on the German ones, are left by the government nearly as they were found — a policy also wisely adopted in the Bavarian and Hessian provinces which comprise the remainder of the reconquests of Germany from the French empire. But as yet every thing in these provinces appears on a provisional and temporary footing — it is to be hoped the discontents are so too. — All are looking with expectation to the sort of diet which the Prince Chancellor Hardenberg is shortly to hold at Coblenz, for the purpose of organising the constitution of this large and valuable limb of the gigantic Prussian empire — a possession which, besides being incomparably richer than any thing that the King of Prussia possesses elsewhere, gives him a footing in the heart of Europe and a frontier on France. His Silesian provinces penetrate into the heart

of Austria; and with the exception of about fifteen or twenty intervening leagues which are all that separate Rhenish and Westphalian Prussia from Old Brandenburg, the kingdom of Prussia now connects France with Russia! This excessive aggrandisement is thought favourable to the balance of power—but if any but graduated diplomatists may presume to form an opinion on that vast subject, surely the political equilibrium is equally injured by Brobdignags and Lilliputs. The King of Prussia, by side of his royal neighbours, the sovereigns of Lippe-Waldeck, Hesse-Homburg, &c. looks like the Irish Giant in company with Lady Morgan—but there are symmetry and rational proportion in neither—and the Continent is as likely to suffer from being overrun by two or three immoderately sized sovereigns, as from the miserable stagnation of intellect and frittering of character in the principalities of three leagues by two.

We stopped to dine at Juliers, a little town whose ample ditches and fortifications, announce one of the strongest fortresses of the Prussian provinces. It is garrisoned by

about 3000 Prussian troops, who were at parade as we passed.

We arrived late at Aix-la-Chapelle — The road from Juliers runs through a fine corn country, well wooded, and picturesquely fertile.