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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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London, 1818

Letter XXIX.

[urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120472](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-120472)

LETTER XXIX.

THE barge arrived at Bonn, just as the evening closed in. In company with our Swiss companion we went to the best inn, by no means superabundant in comfort. The children in the streets flocked around us begging for a trifle to buy wood to make a fire on the mountains, on the approaching Martinmas-day. The landlord received us with a sulky indifference, and the fat landlady, who with her son was seated at the long table in the saloon devouring a romance, condescended to raise her eyes and cast on us a look of cool scrutiny, after which she resumed her studies. Literature seemed the fashion of the house. The landlord, taking up an Itinerary which I laid on the table, and casting his eye through it with a critical knowingness, laid it down with an assurance that the book was *very incorrect* —

But when I requested to be informed in what respects, it seemed that the author had given the town of Bonn credit for one or two manufactories, which no longer existed—as mine host was pleased to add, “thanks to the English.”—Manufactures I soon found were a sore subject at Bonn, and had even interest enough to divert the attention of the sentimental hostess. The Swiss was endeavouring to extract from her spouse a true confession of his feelings towards the new Prussian Government, which, in spite of equivocation, it was evident, coincided with that of most of its subjects on the Rhine—when the fair romance reader broke out, addressing herself to me.—“No—it is not the Prussians—we should not complain of them—if it was not for the English—it is they that cause all our misfortunes, why can’t they keep their manufactures to themselves? instead of ruining others.—When the French were here we had twenty or thirty manufacturers who employed all the people in the town—now they are all out of work and begging—we must starve that they may get rich—and then they come

abroad proud of their money, but won't spend it. — It is the English that we dislike — and that is the truth." And, reposing her head on her arm, she returned to her book in triumphant satisfaction at her unanswerable logic. The landlord contented himself with an occasional pithy expression of assent to his spouse's burst of eloquence — and at supper, which presently interposed, I endeavoured, by mollifying civilities, to dissipate the good lady's bile which seemed to rise to her eyes every time she regarded an Englishman.

Bonn is a compact little town, white, cleanly, and cheerful in spite of its antiquity. The light Gothic Cathedral is a graceful structure, and the old Electoral Palace presents a handsome white *façade* towards the seven mountains, which close the picturesque view through the avenues of the palace gardens.

From Bonn to Cologne there is nothing worth describing, either by land or water — a dreary plain of sands stretching, on both sides of the river, nearly to the boundary of the horizon. The first entrance into this wide level, on descending a hill on the

road from Juliers, was very striking as we passed in the summer. The grand expanse of flat before us seemed to announce the magnificence of the stream we were approaching. At three or four leagues distance, in the midst of a sandy plain, rose the wide city and innumerable steeples of Cologne — and to the right the horizon was bounded by the blue irregular tops of the seven mountains. Cologne, once the Holy City, now the dirty focus of decaying Catholicism, loses all its grandeur and much of its interest, on a nearer survey. It is, beyond question, the dirtiest and most gloomy city of its size in Europe. It runs along the Rhine about a league, from one wall to the other; — its depth is about half a league; — but its streets are all shabby, narrow lanes, and its *places* irregular open spaces, overgrown with weeds, whose dreary chasms and mouldering tenements are now and then varied by a solitary mansion, a vestige of old-fashioned splendour. The people you meet are as motley and miserable as the buildings. It is difficult to give you an idea of the squalid wretchedness of the sa-

vage looking, bustling crowds, who flew upon us, seizing our luggage as we landed on the quay. Porters, commissioners, guides, *valets de place*, and *voituriers* assailed us with a clamouring activity doubly striking, after the phlegmatic and decorous respectability to which we had been accustomed in Germany. The *Kölners*, or inhabitants of Cologne, are regarded in Germany as a people quite *sui generis*. They have nothing German in their character or appearance, and some pretend still to trace in their features their origin as Roman Colonists. The population, which is now diminished to about 50,000, comprises abundance of foreigners resembling each other in the common character of superstitious Ultra-Catholics, which the dress, dirt, and lazy wretchedness of most of those one meets sufficiently indicates. Its steeples, which were once said to be as numerous as the days in the year, have undergone a considerable thinning, which has also luckily extended to its beggars, who before the occupation by the French, carried on a systematic trade to the number of 12,000, having appropriate stations, which de-

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scended from father to son. About half a dozen of the sixty-nine convents remain to enjoy the meagre-relics of plunder. Those of the *Dames Nobles* are completely annihilated. In one place you see a spacious monastic building occupied by some scanty bales of merchandize or a rusty iron crane, announcing the mercantile *secularity* of its uses; or a handsome church with a portico and ornamented walls, turned into a caserne; or with boarded windows, announcing its present uselessness. I visited a Convent inhabited by about half a dozen Ursuline Nuns, in a retired quadrangle, where they appeared to lead a tranquil and easy life. It is, I believe, the only one which remains for women above the lower orders. The superior, a portly middle-aged lady, was at first disposed to be haughty and incommunicative, but relaxed, on a few civil speeches, into an easy affability. The convent had once contained three times the number of nuns — but the French had stripped it of its treasures; and the remaining few live narrowly on some small funds which had escaped.

The Cathedral is indeed a splendid ves-

tige of magnificence, in the midst of the Catholic rubbish which surrounds it. Had the original plan, of which you have seen drawings, been completed, it would have surpassed in size and grandeur any work of architecture in the world. In its present, not even half-finished state, it is the most imposing specimen of massy, majestic, and yet graceful Gothic which I ever saw. The entry at the western gate was very impressive, in spite of the litter of workmen and scaffolding in the nave. The church, like most continental cathedrals, has five wide aisles, divided from each other by a quadruple range of massy clustered columns which in spite of their gigantic dimensions, have an air of well-proportioned elegance, enriched by a highly wrought capital of flowers varied on every column. The number of columns in the cathedral is said to be a hundred — and as you look obliquely across the gloomy aisles they give you the idea of an architectural forest. The choir and the external aisles only are complete — the pillars of the nave are cut short at half their designed height by an unseemly cieling of boards. The lofty

arches and chaste groined ceilings of the side aisles are very beautiful. As the eye wanders up their almost interminable perspective, the mellow colours of the rich painted windows of the choir close the grey vista with a striking effect. The walls and pillars of the cathedral (the stone of which came from the quarries on the Drachenfels, and is durable and entirely undefaced) are judiciously left in their natural grey colours — this adds much to the solemn gloom of the edifice. — Its characteristics are a substantial majesty and a grand simplicity of style, unspoilt by the minute finishings and beauties of detail, which some consider the perfection of Gothic architecture.

Our hobbling old *valet de place*, (whom His Majesty of Prussia had kindly selected for us — a solemn order in the Inns forbidding the use of any person of this description, except a score, licensed by the Prussian government,) conducted us with a mechanical impulse to the great Lion of the Catholics — the tomb of the Three Kings. He had no idea that any thing could be so interesting as their real skulls and

mock crowns. These invaluable bones repose in a neat little Grecian chapel, at the back of the choir, in which we were received by a palsied old priest, groping about its darkness with a flaring candle in his hand, by the assistance of which, he pointed out to us very elaborately the beauties of the various treasures of which he was the guardian. — The tomb is a large long case composed of solid gilded silver, curiously wrought, and adorned with pillars and architectural representations, images of the three kings, and a variety of saints, many of them of massy gold. The texts and inscriptions are in golden letters, and the little nicely proportioned pillars, are of the richest blue enamel. The intermediate spaces between the statues, columns, &c. are studded with beautiful antique gems, and precious stones, of rare size and quality, to each of which the old ecclesiastical Ciceroni, as he held the candle to them, affixed the value of at least so many thousand francs. On opening the side of the case the skulls of the three wise men appeared, carefully lodged on a shelf in a bed of wool — each supporting a sim-

ple gilded crown, decorated with pearls. On the ledge above, their names, Gaspar, Melchior, Balthazar, are inscribed in letters of rubies. To trace the journey of these precious skulls from Judea to their present abode, has hitherto puzzled all but the believing Catholics of Cologne, who have no more doubt of the fact than if they possessed authenticated vouchers from all the hands through which they must have passed — It appears they were presented in gratitude by the Emperor Frederic the First, on the taking and pillage of Milan, in 1170, to an Archbishop of Cologne, his follower, who deposited them in the cathedral; but how they arrived at the city of Milan, unless, like the Santa Casa in Italy, they flew there, it seems difficult to ascertain. — According to Moore's lines —

And they believe him — oh the lover may
Distrust that look which steals his soul away,
The babe may cease to think that it can play
With Heaven's rainbow; — Alchemists may doubt
The shining gold their crucibles give out;
But Faith, fanatic Faith, once wedded fast
To some dear falsehood, hugs it to the last.

The old priest uncovered these sacred re-

lics with a reverential caution, regarding us with a sort of inquisitive triumph, as much as to ask if we were not penetrated with admiration and respect—a conclusion which we left him to infer from silence, while some fair Catholics who were with us burst out “*Voyez vous? voila les trois sages!*” as if they saw the *bona fide* crowned figures in their Oriental robes—an ejaculation of pious credulity, soon followed up by one of purely feminine admiration “*Regardez lez perles! qu’elles sont superbes!*” The reign of French violence which has thinned the convents and churches of Cologne, was not as you may imagine more lenient to its superstitious treasures; and this splendid tenement of crumbling bones, was danced about with the exiled Chapter into Westphalia, to Hamburg, and in various other directions. The shocks of the journey, the pilferings of the hands through which the treasures passed, and the conversion of many a splendid gem into bread for the use of the hungry Chapter, sent back the bones in high preservation, but the case considerably impoverished. — The place of the gold crowns is consequently now

supplied by gilded metal — and the faithful *Kölners* have come forward with all the precious stones and paste imitations they could muster, which under the direction of a distinguished professor and skilful artists have been used to patch up the mausoleum into something like its original costliness. — The old priest, who looked as if one of the diamonds would put him in possession of more comforts than he had enjoyed for some years, assured us with evident satisfaction, *Après tout, il vaut encore au moins huit millions de francs* — eight millions of francs! locked for admiration in a grated chapel, in a cathedral whose half-starved canons skulk about with barely *soutanes* to their backs, and whose altars are thronged with the mendicity and misery of the town!

We ascended one of the magnificent fragments of the massy towers at the west front, which were designed for a height of 500 feet; but one of them reaches only about twenty, while that which we mounted is about half perfect. — The immense rough area overgrown with weeds on the top appeared like a spacious yard, from which we

had a noble prospect over the thickly built city with its still numerous towers and steeples, — the Rhine washing one flank of it and separating it from the dirty town of Duitz. The upward course of the river lay before us through a flat scene as far as Bonn and the Seven Mountains; — and towards Holland we just discovered the steeples of Dusseldorf.

Our valet-de-place proposing, amidst a string of other ecclesiastical curiosities, that we should pay a visit to the "*onze milles Vierges*," we considered the sight much too singular to be neglected. Following through mazes of dirty lanes, we came to the church of St. Ursula — a fair dame, who is said to have landed, after a shipwreck, at Cologne, with *eleven thousand virgins* in her suite. The Huns, who occupied the place, were much smitten with this bevy of beauties: but the young ladies all of course preferred taking the veil to listening to these uncouth paramours; and, in commemoration of their virtue, was founded the convent of Noble Ladies of St. Ursula. The church, a respectable Gothic edifice, is entirely lined with their bones, or some

others equally good, arranged carefully in glass cases round the walls; while, in one distinguished cabinet, called the Golden chamber, you are shown, through a window, the skulls of a select few of the number. A picture in the choir represents St. Ursula, a bulky lady, surrounded by her virgins in white, landing at the port of Cologne.

We visited the Church of St. Peter, in which Rubens was christened, and saw the tomb of his father, who was buried here. The altar piece is his admirable composition of the crucifixion of St. Peter, which, after a transportation to Paris, is now restored to the place for which the artist designed it. It may fairly be considered one of his master-pieces.

Cologne, which has contributed several to the distinguished early artists of Germany, still possesses a number of picture-galleries and artists of celebrity — many more than we had time or inclination to visit. Pictures are like poetry, unless very excellent they are very uninteresting. Useful arts are *necessary*, and if we cannot find perfection in their productions one is

obliged to put up with mediocrity: but as arts which profess to amuse are purely gratuitous, one has a right to be as fastidious as one pleases in judging them, and to prefer going without them to admiring what is second rate. With this feeling I have forbore to fatigue you with descriptions of many very respectable collections which I have visited in my travels; suspecting that, highly as you value a respectable man, you never wish to see a respectable picture, or read a respectable poem.

With our Swiss companion, and a fat heavy merchant from Frankfort, who had accompanied the barge from Bonn, we accordingly visited some works of taste, certainly *more* than respectable in their style, though that style was a singular one. They were a collection of small wax models of characteristic figures, such as personifications of Misery, Avarice, Opulence, &c., coloured and executed with a truth and expression which I could not have imagined the wax capable of exhibiting. The artist, equally original with his performances, was an old paralytic canon of the cathedral, the *Herr Canonicus Hardy*, whom we found lodged,

with a housekeeper nearly equally aged, in a little wretched tenement. His study was littered with a few mass books, and tomes of Latin theology, half buried under pallets and brushes, mathematical instruments, and fragments of statues, bespeaking the old divine's *dilettanti* pursuits. The Canon, a little emaciated figure, with a countenance bespeaking genius, crowned by a nightcap, received us at first with an irritable impatience, stammering out "*Non, Messieurs — je demande pardon — les figures sont toutes vendues — je suis bien fâché — mais je n'en ai plus.*" A little flattery, however, soon drew forth one, and then another, and then a third, till the old gentleman, something in the spirit of Horace's singers, became anxious to make the housekeeper bring forth his whole stock, which were ranged in his comfortless bed-room. The figure of misery, a haggard old man, with a scanty crust and a brown jug before him, was executed with a spirit and reality which were really astonishing; and the keen-looking Jew miser, counting his guineas was equally striking. A Flemish painter, Hogarth, or Wilkie could hardly have worked up the

feeling of the figure more impressively. The figures are small, and in neat gilt frames; and the old Canon was contented to demand two louis d'ors each, as a recompense for the immense labour with which they were evidently worked. The Frankfort dealer, who had a mind for a speculation in wax, offered to take a *gross* at a louis d'or and a half each; a proposal which the old housekeeper authoritatively forbade the Canon to accept: and when I was hesitating whether to purchase the two best figures, the merchant persuasively suggested that if I did not like to keep them I might unquestionably make 100 *per cent.* of my money in London. The old Canon showed us besides, through his microscope, a curious insect, which he had been the first to discover, and which had stood him in good stead on the occupation of Cologne by the French. Purely as a reward for his discovery, he had been exempted by an order of the French General from the obligation of quartering half a dozen soldiers who fell to his share in the billeting the troops on the towns-people.