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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

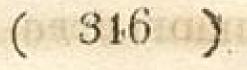
Dodd, Charles Edward

London, 1818

Letter XXII.

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LETTER XXII.

I know you have an idea of the German women as a race of fair blue-eyed dames: but these beauties, which in the north are predominant, share admiration in the south with hazel eyes, dark hair, and other charms of a soft, not a lively brunette. It is very rare to see a woman with deep black eyes or hair, or any thing sparkling, or strongly marked in her features. The complexion of the southern German women is far from beautiful. In the fairest women it has often a thick sallow sort of tinge, the reverse of that transparent lustre of our countrywomen, which Doctor Donne's beautiful lines suit: —

> "The pure and eloquent blood Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought, That one might almost say her body thought."



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Striking beauty is, in fact, not the forte of the fair Germans near the Rhine -- but they have often fine eyes, pleasing voices, and a sentimental grace, and tenderness of manner, interesting because quite natural. All the charm of a German woman, peculiar to herself, centres in this. -- Her deportment is often stiff and ungain -but her soft voice and kind sympathising manner give her a charm purely her own. - She seems moulded out of nature's softest materials -tenderness and sentiment appear to be her life. Unlike Pope's heroine, whom he would have only "a softer man," a German woman is purely and exclusively a woman. Her looks, voice, manners, and conduct, place the soft, supple qualities of her sex in a sort of exaggerated contrast with those of ours. She appears more eager to captivate than to shine; to steal softly to the heart, than to take it by storm. It would be a mistake, however, to consider this a symptom of depth of sensibility. It is only the expression of that sort of indolent slowness, little excited by cultivation, which finds in sentiment the resource of an unoccupied mind. If this softness were merely one of

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the shifting weapons of a coquette, it would be intolerable — its bonâ fide sincerity in the German ladies makes it interesting, for a time. But the misfortune too often is, that this is not merely the graceful ornament, but the whole substance of character; it turns out that there is no solid base to support this pretty sentimental superstructure. When it is discovered that the unvarying languor is half want of tact and alacrity, and the perpetual coaxing often the resource of heavy intellect, these qualities lose half their first-sight graces. The poet, who has left us the finest picture of woman, gives her "lowliness majestic," and "obsequious majesty," - but the German women are too apt to be lowly and obsequious without majesty. Their character wants more of the noun-substantive --- they have too much suppleness even to be graceful. But the softest clay most depends upon the moulding; and education and corrupt manners must be charged with all the defects I have observed in the German women. Those of the upper, that is the noble classes, are brought up from the cradle under a sort of upper servant, dig-



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nified by the title of governess, and who generally couples with her higher functions those of nursery-maid, housekeeper, and assistant at the toilette of the noble mamma. They learn to waltz — a little music — to speak French enough for use bye and bye at Court - to make gowns, bonnets, and tur-Their acquaintance with books bans. rarely extends beyond sentimental romances and washy poems - and many a lady of no mean title writes neither French nor her own language with moderate correctness. Sixteen is the important æra when they emerge from this petty sphere to the full enjoyments of the court, to which they have looked forward from infancy. Mamma is often a heavy, uninformed, or still worse, a coquettish and unscrupulous person, who little constrains her favourite speculations on sentiment, intrigue, or dress before her attentive daughters. An old Baroness, with the reputation of ci-devant beauty and intrigues, entertained me on my first visit, and in the presence of two fair relations under twenty, with a sufficiently intelligible history of her intimacy with one of my compatriots at a German Court --- he

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was a handsome man — she had not seen him for many years — but she had his portrait — and for some time she was in regular correspondence with him. This was related with an unconscious sangfroid, and listened to, gravely, by the young ladies, as to a strain to which they were well accustomed.

The example of almost all around them, their own mothers or some of their mothers dear friends included, helps to finish the weak

inflammable character which such an education has too frequently commenced. Sentiment, dress, coquetry, and frivolity reign sometimes by turns, but oftener with a sort of struggle for supremacy more thoroughly intoxicating to the head. The sentimental lady is nearly as fond of her toilette, as her lover; and the coquette who borrows the airs of sentiment is entrapped by her own weapons and falls partly from soft-heartedness, and partly to secure a conquest. The German women have in fact too much feeling to play the coquette with entire security — and not enough to resist playing it at all.

The education of the women of the



THE LADIES OF THE BOURGEOISIE. 351

Bourgeoisie is much the same as that of the noble dames, with the exception of rarely speaking or understanding French. Sometimes they are sent to boarding schools - an advantage which their rivals rarely enjoy, because the above-mentioned compound of gouvernante, lady's maid, and housekeeper proves a useful personage to a gay mother. The fair Bourgeoises have also the advantage of some rational, housekeeping occupations, which employ time and attention. With the assistance of one slave of a servant, they perform all the culinary and other business of the menage - and the fair hands which join with the Court beaux once a fortnight at the Casino ball, would be found in a true Griselda condition if their partners called the next morning to make inquiries. Domestic deshabille is not however entirely peculiar to the Bourgeoisie. On paying a visit of form one morning to a dignified Count, the Grand master of a small Court, I found his residence on a second floor in a bye street. A scullion hot from the kitchen showed me into a comfortless parlour, where the

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THEIR DOMESTIC EMPLOYMENTS. 852

Countess in the absence of her spouse met me in a half adjusted coloured gown, a half naked child squalling in her arms, and two or three more hanging about her, dirty and munching. To have seen the Count bowing in full costume at court you would have thought he could not breathe out of the il bus bigut tapestry walls of a palace.

This sort of anti-romantic drudgery, and their exclusion from court gaieties leave the city ladies open to fewer temptations than the Noblesse. The men too are toiling in the public offices at the Chancellery all the morning; and in the evening instead of the intriguing tea drinkings of the nobles a savoury supper must be prepared by their wives and daughters, the latter of whom often wait at table during the meal, and then take their seats with the company, or enliven them with a little music on the piano, such as would do credit to our most accomplished young ladies. Still, however, many moments remain to the young damsels for romance reading, picking up at third hand and detailing court gossip, watching and imitating the beau monde, and rivalling in finery their







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fellow imitators. Their weak heads too are often turned by the unprincipled attentions of the young nobles, who dance with them at the balls and amuse themselves with their affections, by way of change to the elegant insipidity of the court ladies. When danger falls in their way they have not always more strength to oppose to it than others, but keep them out of harm's way, and they are kind wives and daughters, who mix up sentiment and drudgery with tolerable harmlessness. If the obligations of marriage (which, from the idleness and poverty of the nobles, is frequently a purely mercenary engagement) had more influence than they can have in such a state of morals, the facility of obtaining divorces affords an easy means of gratifying inclination without offence to conscience. In the Protestant States mere alleged incompatibility of disposition is a sufficient ground for procuring them; and the Catholics remedy the strict prohibition of their religion, as to all points except marrying again, by an arrangement called, a separation de corps et de bien. The history of the complex sentimental arrangements of a well-known Prime Minis-

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354 MATRIMONIAL ARRANGEMENTS.

ter of one of the greatest German powers and his second spouse, is an illustration of all that is bad in German systems of matrimony and morals. His Excellency and this lady met at Hanover, both being then married and parents of families. A vehement and mutual passion was the consequence, of course speedily followed by a divorce of both parties and their marriage. Their attachment survived the union for some little time, when each party began to find their active hearts in want of new occupation. The Minister had been smitten at Frankfort, by a fascinating actress whom he engaged to follow him; while his lady consoled herself by taking lessons on the flageolet of a captivating musician of a regimental band. His wife's musical pursuits becoming such as to compromise the Prince's dignity, he had recourse to a second divorce; and thus left at liberty he has lately married the actress, who lived with him as his mistress above fifteen years, and who is now received and recognized as the Princess of — . His spouse declared without shame the musician the father of one of her children, and did all in her power



DIVORCE.

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to engage the man to leave for her his own wife and family. He appears however to have possessed more principle than either the Prince or his wife, and firmly refused. Marriage is thus too often made a farce of unmeaning forms—an empty name to sanction vice—and to console people with the idea that while they are indulging licentious inclinations, they are transgressing no moral law and consulting decorum in their conduct. In cases of divorce the children are frequently divided, according to their sexesthe husband taking charge of the sons and the wife of the daughters. The common stock of property is shared, by each party taking their own — a regulation which has sometimes the effect of keeping together a restless pair who would otherwise unhesitatingly break their chains. A gallant officer of my acquaintance left behind him a pretty wife on following the army in the Spanish campaign. - On returning, after two years absence, he found himself in possession of an increase of family, for which he had to thank a young student from the University. A divorce would have been the immediate remedy, but that his wife had brought him · AA 2



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SENTIMENTAL APATHY.

a considerable fortune of which he would thus have lost the enjoyment. He therefore put a gay face on the matter, and consoled himself by the philosophical reflection - Eh bien si ma femme a eu un enfan, moi j'en ai eu deux. This instance is in the class of the Bourgeoisie. When I knew the lady, she was just ennobled and shining at Court with her easy spouse.

The perfect phlegm and indifference with which these arrangements are treated, and

with which the parties concerned live together in society afterwards, are natural consequences of their frequency, and prove that the "Double Arrangement" of the Anti-Jacobin wits is hardly a poetical exaggeration. A friend of mine received a note from a lady of her acquaintance inviting herself to pass the evening - but happening to expect, amongst others, the two former divorced husbands of the lady, out of regard for her feelings, she requested her to delay her visit. The hardy lady, however, immediately answered, that she suspected the cause of the excuse, that she was much obliged by my friend's considerateness, but it being quite unnecessary she



MARRIAGE.

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ould erecontion moi lass ady, ourt vith begged permission to be of the party. She accordingly came, bringing her present husband to make up a friendly trio with her two former ones; and all parties spent the evening most sociably and happily. This extraordinary apathy will be, in some degree, accountable, when you reflect that these husbands were, in fact, to this lady nothing more than two discarded lovers; for marriage is thus literally a connection as transitory as light, and in no respect more sacred or solemn. It is highly possible indeed that this easy fair one would not have encountered lovers to whom she had not been united by decorous forms with so unconscious a coolness. But here she had no occasion for reproaches of conscience — she had acted in compliance with the received regulations of society - and merely availed herself of the privilege they give of shifting husbands as easily as dresses or residences. No one can live in German society without being struck by the little consequence which the women appear to possess in it. This is, perhaps, at once the cause and consequence of the soft humility of manners which distinguishes them. From AA 3

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the peasant's wife who drudges in the fields and farm yard, without shoes or stockings, to the noble ladies who are treated with a cool unceremoniousness by the beaux in the saloons, they have all the air of submissive slavery. This will always be more or less the case in society where the women often want

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with which virtue alone can invest them. But the respect which they thus lose is supplied by few of the little attentions of gallantry. The women are neither treated with the respect due to virtuous matrons, nor the incense paid to mistresses. The ceremony of standing hat in hand till the lady you are talking to tells you to be covered, and others of a similar description, are old-fashioned formalities which mean nothing; but they enjoy none of those flattering attentions - those little sacrifices to comfort - which proceed from gallantry of feeling. In society the men talk in clusters, sometimes for a whole evening; not, as is in England, from an



WANT OF GALLANTRY.

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indolent mauvaise honte, which admits, in the most striking way, the respect inspired by the females, but with an air of indifferent superiority which disdains to submit to a gene for those whom it does not respect. Loose, and frequently gross conversations, and oaths, are indulged in their presence, which they often suffer in silence, for want of dignity and influence to check thèm. The want of gallantry goes the length of not entirely exempting the women from humble observances of rank in the other sex. I have seen a party of ladies uneasy, and hardly venturing to keep their seats, because a young Prince was on his legs in the circle; and a fair friend of mine, educated in a different school, was considered rude, because she declined requesting a presentation to the young junior sons of royalty, to whom the German ladies thought it necessary to volunteer their formal obeisances. You will admit this is the height of anti-chivalrous spirit. The men are naturally losers in the grace of their own manners for their neglect of feminine influence. The rude manners, and savage Hussar habits which AA4

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you still sometimes find in the best society have, in more civilised countries, vanished before the mild influence of the ladies : but in Germany they are not likely to be for some time in condition to banish sordid habits of debauchery, or to laugh tobacco and mustachios out of countenance. The fair ladies lament these habits; and at Vienna they are beginning not to dance quite so readily with a partner who smokes: but in the smaller circles it is sometimes the sentimental occupation of the noble belle to furnish her lover with an elegant embroidered bag for the tobacco, fungus, and flint, with which his pocket must be stored. Do not suppose, however, that I have not met with many exceptions to the character of uninformed and unstable sentiment which is too often to be found in the German women. The same soft tempers, the same kindness of heart, which are now too often their ruin, in other instances produce models of domestic tenderness and pure affection. The German women are all but delightful domestic creatures. One laments that society has so much abused



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iety hed but for did cco The at nce at nce ble ant sus, be their qualities. In an improved state of morals they will be more than most women capable of solacing and sweetening private life. The fleeting triumphs of wit and the graces will always be monopolised by the more lively beauties of the south : but the fair Germans need by no means envy them; formed as they are by nature — it would be well if equally so by education and habit for the quiet of the heart's affections, and the lap of domestic happiness.

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