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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 XVIII.

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LETTER XVIII.

HAVING given you one or two specimens of the gaieties of the capitals of Baden and Hesse, I will not expose you to the *ennui* of accompanying me into the saloons of the metropolis of Wirtemberg — but as life passes in the same way, with the same pleasures, the same occupations (with slight shades of difference) in all the little capitals, I prefer sending you a general sketch of their average society and resources. Of the twenty-five or thirty Courts and Capitals, which Germany contains, there are only about four — those of Berlin, Vienna, Dresden, and Munich — more considerable than those I have visited, which are about of *octavo* dimensions. *Ex his disce omnes* may, therefore, fairly be said with regard to the whole herd — these four *folios*, and Weimar, the little Athens, excepted; and you may make a

pretty good guess at the little duodecimo Hohenzollerns, Hombergs, Lippes, Waldecks, &c. who enjoy whole thirds or fifths of a vote at the Diet, by imagining the national army 50 or 100 strong — the Prime Minister in the enjoyment of about 200*l.* a-year — and the Court composed of a Grand Master, an Aid-de-Camp, and one solitary Maid of Honour, residing in a garret in the palace, and enjoying the title of Excellency, 30*l.* a-year, and — her wax candles.

The ordinary style of visiting in the little capitals, is confined to *reunions particulieres*, or circles in the evening — dinners being as unfrequent in private houses as they are common and a matter of course at Court. This is chiefly owing to the limited fortunes of the nobility, which are by no means adequate to ostentation and solid comfort united. — Now the German noble likes both, but gives a preference to the former. Few men have a more lively relish for the good things of the table, as he plainly manifests at the court dinners — but for the sake of his carriage and horses, and laced liveries, he sometimes submits to let bread soup, *pommes de terre*, and savoury anticipations of

the approaching court entertainment, cut rather a conspicuous figure in his family meal. The absorbing influence of the little court, also checks any entertainments of splendour or preparation. Not to say that it would be uncourtier-like to rival the sovereign, one third of the first circles eat daily *ex officio* meals at the palace; while the remainder are constantly in apprehensive hope of the gracious summons from the *Fourrier* of the Prince, who, equally despotic in politics and politeness, admits no evasion of his hospitable commands. Thus none but the humble *non-Vons* are fairly masters of their time—all others must make engagements *Duce volente*. The court dinner is over, however, and every one disencumbered of swords and sattins by six o'clock. An hour or two are then perhaps spent at the theatre, half out of compliment to the Royal Host or Hostess, with whom one has dined; who will sometimes bespeak a crowded house by their friendly "*Vous allez au spectacle ce soir?*"—a question denoting too well Sovereign wishes for a good courtier to hesitate. The circles, in the evening, are pleasant

and familiar — and you are received with a friendliness which proves that the want of more substantial compliments does not arise from inhospitality. One or two houses of the first nobility or Ambassadors are generally open to company every evening — once initiated, you are always welcome. The saloons are open and tea, made in a family way, by the young Mademoiselle La Comtesse, or La Baronne, is in progress from seven or eight, till nine or ten. When the party is large, the drain on the resources of conversation, not too interesting or too abundant, is relieved by card-tables set out for the grave ribboned and starred papas; while the young people find a never-failing resource in an extempore waltz, or the pleasures of *Comment l'aimez vous? pourquoi l'aimez vous? Qu'en voulez vous faire?* and similar *petits jeux de société*, among which, *Colin Maillard* and hunt-the-ring are by no means despised. — Conjuraton with cards, *la bonne fortune*, and little drawing-room sorceries, I have seen amuse and occupy a circle of dowagers and misses for a whole evening; and an accomplishment in these mystic arts, with

other agreeable qualities, has sometimes helped an enterprising young Bourgeois to overleap the barrier of birth, and gain a footing, with éclat, in the circles *comme il faut*. At first he is looked upon a little *à travers les epaules*. No one ever saw him at court, — and his fitness for society is not vouched for by the cross of an order, or the knot of an aide-de-camp; but he is found droll and entertaining — he makes the dowagers laugh, suggests new games, lards his cabalistic divinations* with an engaging stock of compliments — and the young baronesses, too sentimental to be very haughty, at last vote the Bourgeois *beau tres bonne société*. This is partly the result of the good-humoured *bon-homme* of the German character, which frequently relaxes the *hauteur* of their systems — and

* Any thing connected with the superstitious is, quite in keeping with the German character. A grave Prince, whom I have the honour of knowing, never goes to Paris without having his fortune told by the famous Madlle. Norman; and an amiable Princess who apprehends evil from every thing of a dark colour, one day stopped the Emperor of Russia, as he was on the point of drinking her health, in a glass of Burgundy, and made his Imperial Majesty change it for Hock.

partly of a readiness to catch at any source of amusement that can enliven the *ennui* of contracted circles of persons without resources.

Conversation affords the most precarious chance of interest or amusement. The men are superior to the women. The Ambassadors from the larger states sometimes possess knowledge of the world and cultivation of mind; but the nobles of the court are often heavy *petit maitres*, or coarse debauchees, the former of whom seek to adorn society, while the latter judiciously avoid it. A gallant War Minister of my acquaintance, is laced up in his stays every morning like a lady — while a Grand Master of Forests, and a Minister of State, muddle their heads with small Rhenish, at the Post-house every evening.

But the want of rational topics of common interest is the main cause that gives an insipid frivolity to conversation, equal to all that the decriers of market-towns or genteel villages, in England, can conceive. The Germans are a literary nation — but literary genius here, as elsewhere, rarely wears the coronet, and without that the bays are no

recommendation. The Professor is rarely a *Herr Von*—his wife, a good housewife, cannot speak French—and these are exclusions from court and the saloons of the nobility. At Weimar alone the constellation of laureats have been qualified, by patents, to sit at the table of their miniature Augustus; and the great Goëthe and his brethren, I understand, wield their bags and swords not less gracefully than their pens.— But in the south of Germany, literature is still looked upon as the musty old book-worm whose habits little qualify him for the drawing-room—and in the absence of his imposing company, frivolity and dullness revel. The ladies, in general, barely know the titles of Schiller's works—they have wept over Werter, know something of Kotzebue—and have sometimes studied the poetry and tales in some of the swarms of fashionable almanacs.— Politics, which in England are a rallying point among the most stupid, have here no interest. The politics of the *German nation* are too vague—the politics of the *little monarchy*, are matters of petty routine, which interest none but *employés* and Chancellery clerks.

The only subjects which come home to all, and which are discussed with lively interest, are — the opera of last Sunday — the approaching gala, in honour of some travelling Highness — speculations as to the length of his stay — and whether he will or will not lodge at the hotel, from being rather too poor to pay the usual 100 louis to the servants of the palace — the prospect of a court mourning, the amours of a great or little prince, or remarks on the recent ennobling of a batch of Generals' ladies who (poor souls!) can't speak three words of French. This is the average level of conversation, and the persons of superior acquirements whom one occasionally meets, never venture to interrupt it by the obtrusion of any thing more rational.

With all the occasional languor and heaviness of the intervals between the stimulating *waltz* and the drawing-room games, this society has however one charm which redeems a host of defects — that of natural good humour and the absence of pretension. The freshness of nature and simplicity — little improved by cultivation 'tis true, but little spoilt by affectation — are often to be

found here in a higher degree than in more refined and cultivated circles. The cant of criticism which is afraid to trifle, the ambition of wit and satire, and the dread of compromising the dignity of cleverness, have not yet appeared in these unlettered circles to damp the free flow of mirth and good spirits. The joyless amusements of fashionable exhibition, and the *ennui* of extravagant searches after pleasure are also for larger and more splendid societies — compared to which, those of a small German Court and Capital have something of a primitive nature and simplicity as well as much of a primitive rust.

The *jour de fête*, or the birth-day of the Sovereign or any of his family, creates a commotion among all ranks, which a little enlivens the ordinary tranquillity — some would say dullness — of the Residence. Promotions of the servants of government take place in abundance — Many a plain Baron walks forth from the Cabinet an Excellency — Crosses and ribbons are showered about in profusion — from the Grand Cross of his Highness's Order, which glitters on the breast of the great digni-

taries of the Court, to the badges of the fourth or fifth class, which decorate the *Fourrier* or *Major Domo*, figuring behind his Highness's chair at table. The parade is more than ordinarily splendid. The troops in their best uniforms. The nobility, *corps diplomatique*, and *employés* — including those from the provinces, who crowd the residence on these occasions — pay their felicitations in the morning to their sovereign in his cabinet. Every namesake, male and female, of his Highness partakes, of course, in the honours of the *jour de fête*; and it is an arduous task for a stranger to know, by intuition, every Louis or Louisa, Frederic or Frederica, to whom it behoves him by no means to omit due congratulations. At two or three o'clock the *grand gala* at court takes place — distinguished from ordinary dinners by the presence of a number of strangers — the best liveries of the domestics — the gala uniforms of the courtiers — the long trains — the double portions of rouge and diamonds — the absence of all spinsters, and the unusual length and ceremony of the entertainment. The opera, in the evening, is

made pre-eminently grand and attractive — the orchestra, all in uniform — and it is often an etiquette for the Court and company to contribute to the brilliance of the house by appearing in their full court costume. The day not unfrequently concludes by a grand ball or assembly given by an Ambassador, or some loyal leader of the *haut ton*, who has the supreme satisfaction of seeing his rooms crowded with stars and court dresses ; and who to fill up a splendid throng, invites a gross of subaltern officers*, by a general invitation sent to the general, at head quarters, to be dispensed to such of the worthy captains and lieutenants as he considers best fitted for society *comme il faut*.

It is curious to observe how the scandalous and censorious spirit of the little

* An exception to the rules of rank is made in favour of the military — officers of the rank of captain being admissible at court, whether noble or not. — But on occasion of court balls, partners for the fair waltzers are so much in request, that a general invitation is often sent to head-quarters *pour les officiers dansants*. Those who come are, of course, obliged to fulfil the condition of their visit, by never allowing their heels a moment's repose while there is a lady ready to dance.

town is mixed up with the fashionable licentiousness of the Court and metropolis; and how the worthy Courtiers are driven to compromise between their equal tastes for criticising their neighbours, and partaking their delinquencies. Our respectable spinsters, and tea-drinking matrons, frame their moral code in conscious purity, and fearless of falling under their own enactments. They are, therefore, severe and sweeping—but the German drawing-rooms, not being prepared for similar sacrifices, and yet willing to enjoy the pleasures of censorship, are obliged to legislate with a cautious lenity, of which all in turn stand in need. Innocent trifles are, therefore, severely noted; but capital offences come off honourably acquitted. If you talk to one belle for five minutes longer than the rest, or make the *agréable* with any zeal to your fair neighbour at the Court Dinner, every eye draws inferences—it swells the catalogue of events for discussion, and you are continually saluted with insinuating enquiries after the pretty foot, the pink sattins, or the red roses, of your suspected favourite, in the true tea-table country-

town style. But not half so much would be said or thought of it if you were notoriously in the most intimate of all possible relations with the lady — that would be an ordinary occurrence — you would be invited at the same time by your considerate acquaintances — and the connection would be generally recognised with all the easy liberality of a Court. A lady, arranging her party, said “I invite Monsieur — and his wife, of course. He is a pleasant man; but to keep him in good humour he must have his *belle Madame* ———, and then her husband must come with her, though you know he is little better than a *garçon d'ecurie*.” I happened to sit by the neglected wife, an elegant woman, who was said to feel her situation. Her husband and his *inamorata* were generally together, not flirting, or making love, but enjoying the quiet understanding of an established tender connection; while the Baron without mate talked with his wife's beau as freely as any other, and lounged about in the happy tranquillity of settled indifference. The public intercourse of the two sexes is guarded by all the little

restraints of the nicest delicacy. It is as much as one can venture to do to hand a lady down stairs to her carriage—and no lady ever takes a gentleman's arm in the street. But the gravest imprudences, which ought in consistency to call forth all the severity of these rigid censors, find every one tolerant, and even good-naturedly indifferent. Society is, in fact, filled with complex relations of sentiment (so called); and who can blame very loudly what is perhaps their own case to-day, or may be to-morrow, or was the other day? For Cupid may here safely address every one,

*“ Qui que tu sois — Voila ton maitre !
Ou il est, ou il fut, ou il doit l'être.”*

The difference, in fact, between the morals of little capitals and the large ones, such as Berlin and Vienna, whose licentiousness is proverbial, appears to be little more than that between bold, dashing, assured corruption, and that which is somewhat more timid, contriving, and hypocritical—something like the contrast in Cowper between the gay splendour of fashion and the pinch-

ing shifts of the humble partaker of its pleasures.

“ All catch the frenzy downward from her Grace,
Whose flambeaux flash against the morning skies,
And gild our chamber cielings as they pass,
To her who, frugal only that her thrift
May feed excesses she can ill afford,
Is hackneyed home unlacqueyed.” —

Vice is here on a petty, provincial scale. A grave noble, of diplomatic dignity, got, the other day, a severe thrashing from a private soldier, the sweetheart of a poor girl whom he was pursuing with offensive proposals. A Vienna Lothario would have lost his life in a duel for a Duchess. That is all the difference.

The narrowness of the social circles gives public opinion some little more influence on conduct than in the shrouding vastness of a great metropolis: but where virtue has no more solid basis, this influence will make few people virtuous—it will, however, make many hypocritical as long as they can keep up the mask, and strictly decorous where decorum costs nothing.

The little capitals thus often contrive to unite the immorality of a great metropolis

with all the dullness and the stagnation of a provincial town. The absence of all the serious political occupation which engages more gigantic courts, leaves nothing to check or vary — not the unbridled gaiety of amusement, but — the round of heavy frivolities, and the pursuit of scandal and licentious pleasures. — The *ton* of the Court and the elegant circles is also often as *humdrum* and provincial as that of any genteel borough in Great Britain. Many of the maids of honour — good substantial persons, all of unimpeachable family — have perhaps hardly crossed the frontier of the little State, except in the *suite* of the Princess on a summer visit to the baths, or to some neighbouring reigning cousin ; and the noble damsels who take observing hints from the official belles of the Court on their periodical visit to the Palace have much more the air and the manners of the primisses of a country town, than the *cynosures* of a gay Court circle.

The torpid influence of the petty sphere in which people move, communicates itself, in fact, to the minds, the manners, the occupations of all. The faculties of the

whole residence are concentrated in its microscopic pursuits, intrigues, ceremonies, and routines; and as the idea of belonging to the capital of the state — although that Capital is a Lilliput — satisfies every one with their own consequence and dignity, their curiosity is rarely called forth as to what is passing on the great arena around them. Each little state is “itself alone,” and each Sovereign of a nut-shell “accounts himself King of infinite space.” Their own Grand Duke, or Landgrave — their own Palace and Theatre — their own handful of books called “the Court Library” — and the few third rate Tenierses, spars, and monsters in brandy and water, yclept “the Court Museum,” are, to the little optics of the Residence, the *ne plus ultra* of splendour and taste. The Gazette and Journals of the capital, wretchedly printed, on coarse paper, are little more than collections of notices and official announcements from long-titled authorities, promotions, and conferrings of dignities, lists of arrivals at the inns, without a word of original writing or remark, eked out by a gleaning from the foreign

papers, made up of what is alone interesting to the little dependants of the Court — the movements, audiences, and journeys of Princes, ambassadors, &c. With such resources, among a people of so little natural vivacity as the Germans, is it to be wondered if the capital of the German Prince is as dull and as lifeless as a street of Herculaneum? The eternal larum of the drums on mounting and relieving guard, and the rumble along the streets of a heavy baron's calèche, the only sounds which interrupt the ordinary stillness, are symbols of the dreary monotony which reigns throughout the place. If you wish to seek the repose and tranquillity of unbroken *ennui*, I recommend you to use your interest at the Foreign Office to get appointed *Chargé d'Affaires* at a second or third rate German Court.