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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 XV.

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LETTER XV.

WE have often remarked that what forms the superiority of our English frame of society, is that happy amalgamation of its parts, that nice shading off of ranks one into another, which leaves the freest elbow room to ambition and talents, and preserves the indispensable gradations of rank, without subjecting any classes to absurd and galling exclusions. No country has so dignified an aristocracy, and yet none so much real equality, so free a mixture of ranks. Those who thought to extinguish ranks, and make society as level as Salisbury Plain, by inveterately calling each other Citizen, ended, with the sure affinity of extremes, in erecting a rank higher than their country ever knew before, and surrounding it with ultra-aristocrats. The Swiss profess to have no titles; but the

Swiss Seigneur takes care never to be described in an instrument without the word Noble before his name, and thinks it one of the saddest effects of the late misfortunes of his country that his sons are obliged to soil their hands with commerce. The fact is, whether recognised or not by titular distinctions, a virtual aristocracy is as necessary a concomitant of society as an inequality of talents or of stature; and let the analogy be kept up, and the respect paid to it be just what ordinary men involuntarily pay to superiority in brain or in shoulders, and rank has its due, and has no reason to complain. But the mistake made in Germany was to permit to nobility not merely a monopoly of bows, and titles, and royal society, but almost of the fresh air and the bread and cheese of life. Nothing that was valuable was attainable by any other passport than a prescribed number of quarters of nobility.

But these days of pure blood and privileged casts are now fast on the wane. The flimsy fabric of society has received a good dislocating shake from the late commotions

and concussions. “*Externus timor, maximum concordiae vinculum*” made common cause between all classes; and the Sovereigns and their gingerbread courtiers in the hour of need were happy enough to owe their deliverance from the iron rod to the sturdy strength of the plebeians, who were alone able to break it. The intercourse of the grave race with the Revolution and its sons was also well calculated to rout them out of some of their obsolete systems. If it was startling to a decorous German to see his Sovereign and haughty Court proceeding to the frontier to welcome, with cringing submission, the approaching Protector of the Rhenish Confederation, or retiring — Princesses, Maids of Honour, and all — to the Golden Sheep, or the Red Bull, in a provincial town, to avoid encountering in the Residence a domineering French General, who had perhaps been a shoe-black; it was hardly less so to see a high-born delegate, incrustated in ribbands and crosses; and armed with credentials half occupied by the enumeration of his titles, set out on a trembling mission to head quarters, to negotiate with an Aide-de-

camp or Secretary, who would perhaps have been puzzled to swear to the name of both his parents. The secularising of the chapters, and confiscation of the rich canonries, for admittance to which it was difficult to prove nobility enough, and very few of which now exist, were more substantial blows to the system; for as title in Germany propagates nothing but title *ad infinitum*, these were most convenient resources to large families of young Barons and Baronesses, who are now often obliged to remain dignifiedly idle and dignifiedly unmated.

Owing to these causes, in these degenerate days, the precious *æruugo* of antiquity on the Baron's escutcheon is so much declining in repute, that with the exception of eligibility to great household offices at some Courts, and the Grand Crosses of some strict orders, a title of the first edition is nearly as good as one which has gone through a dozen; and even the total want of the particle *Von* (the talismanic symbol of nobility) before the name, is now an exclusion from nothing of more vital importance than the Court dinners and the

tea-and-turn-out of the noblesse. A Court physician of my acquaintance has even dared to write a treatise on nobility, admitting the use of the order upon the whole, but hazarding, in contradistinction to the German creed, that new nobility is decidedly preferable to old. It is hardly necessary to add that the worthy doctor is himself of the new-baked batch.

The offices of the government, the first political charges, every thing but the gay saloons, are now principally filled by the *bourgeoisie*. They are good drudging men of routine, who make able Privy Counsellors, and War Counsellors, and Forest Counsellors, &c. while the activity and intellect of their noble rivals rarely qualifies them for any thing beyond a commission in the *Chevaux Legers*, or Hussars, or the very arduous offices about the Court Drawing Room, which far surpass in estimation any of a political character. You might live at a German Court for a month without ever hearing of such a person as the Prime Minister. I sat at the Court dinner one day next to an awkward looking man, who seemed little to belong to the company around him, in spite

of a star and a cordon, whether or not of the celebrated order of the "*Blue Herring*," I cannot say. On enquiring who he was, I was flippantly answered, "Oh! it's the Prince's minister." But it is impossible to spend a day in the Residence without hearing the name of His Excellency the Grand Chamberlain, or Grand Marshal, who orders the Court dinner, and announces it when ready, or His Excellency the Grand Equerry, who paces a score of the Grand Duke's nags every morning, rung in one's ears with all his titles and qualifications. These "*hautes charges*," as they are called, not demanding any unreasonable portion of talent or activity, are still monopolised, without detriment to the public, by the possessors of pure blood.

The clashings of consequence between the *bourgeoisie* and the noblesse, which arise from this occupation by the former of all important objects of ambition, coupled with their scrupulous exclusion from the insipid elegance of noble society, occasion the most ridiculous inconsistencies, and give to society the character of a phial of oil and any heavier fluid, which, after infinite shaking, still pertinaciously refuse to amal-

gamate, but the separate bodies of each roll about mutually repelling, sometimes one uppermost, sometimes the other. The Cabinet of one Court is composed of a Council of Ministers who are at the head of all the departments of government, communicate immediately with the Sovereign, and are the main springs of the machine. The seats at this board, requiring more noddle than often falls to the lot of the pure blood gentry, are all naturally occupied by the *bourgeoisie*: but for want of the indispensable Von, these Cabinet Ministers, the most important men in the State, are never permitted to set foot in the Court Saloons, and rarely in those of the noblesse, which are crowded by young sprigs of nobility, who act under them in the subordinate offices of government. An acquaintance of mine who now represents a German Sovereign at a great Foreign Court, has, from the same want of qualification, never had the honour of visiting that of his own country. The Forest Masters of the districts, as I before mentioned, are offices exclusively set apart for the wearers of the coronet; but the finan-

cial and official business of the department is conducted by a Forest College in the Residence town, to which the Forest Masters are in all respects subject, and which it often happens is fully possessed by the active Bourgeoisie. The consequence is a perpetual clashing between the College and the noble Forest Masters; the former, happy in the opportunity of paying off old piques, and the latter glad to dispute the authority of men superior to them in office and in all talents—except those of felling a tree or flaying a boar—but who are by no means worthy to play penny Boston and sip lemonade with the rouged Baronesses in the evening.

The Bourgeoisie are, in short, every day growing such consequential and important personages that I have known the *Herr Ober Director* of a Court library, a *cidevant Valet de Chambre*, refuse the loan of a book to a Princess of the family; and his Royal Highness, the son of a Sovereign, take a snug cup of tea *en famille*, with a Bourgeois in financial administration, palaver his fat wife, and condescendingly flirt with Mademoiselle, his

daughter, from a desire to stand well with the administrator of the Treasury. These instances will give you an idea of the undermining of the importance of nobility which the increased activity of the middle ranks is every day pushing farther, and which noble stupidity and frivolity are not likely to check. The nobility are continually startled with some fresh explosion of their rivals' consequence — new appointments, new favours, acquired by untitled wights, nobody knows how. These strides they always set down to their rivals' unscrupulous use of dirty underhand roads to preferment — but though this is sometimes the case, their own inertness and imbecility often leaves the door open, and the Bourgeoisie profit by opportunity with nothing more than honourable ambition and activity.

Of course, the noblesse are the more chary of their supremacy in the drawing-room, in consequence of their declining importance everywhere else. Their political insignificance makes them doubly absolute as *arbitri elegantiarum*. But the modish winks and nods which note the little deficiencies in

Court *ton*, in the untitled ladies and gentlemen at the Casino balls, and the criticisms of the dress, manners, and bad French of the Baronesses of yesterday, on their *entrée* at Court, are only laughs on the wrong side of the mouth (to use the vulgar phrase)—the superiority they assert being so exclusively trivial and superficial. I happened to have for a neighbour one day at a Court entertainment, the recently ennobled spouse of a Minister of State, making her *debut* at Court, at the interesting age of sixty, appropriately qualified by her patent, her sattins and her blotches of rouge.* My fair neighbour appearing somewhat embarrassed by her new blushing honours, and the observation of the Argus-eyed belles around her, I was happy to relieve her by conversation, which cost me some trouble, as her Bourgeoise education had not extended her acquirements beyond her native language. My commiserating politeness to

* This last ornament is so necessary a passport to the Court Circles, that the want of it drew down a reprimand on a fair friend of mine, the natural *rouge* of whose handsome cheeks did not satisfy the fastidious taste of his late Majesty of Wirtemberg.

this *debutante* lady of the Minister afforded, afterwards, an ample theme of merriment to my friends of less impeachable purity of blood.

The only recognised opportunities of contact between the two classes, are the alternate public Balls and Evening societies, which take place every week, at the Casino: the citizens owing their favoured participation in these amusements to the convenience of their subscription for the support of the handsome establishment. Sometimes, on grand occasions, the Court condescend to attend. They occupy one end of the noble Saloon, sometimes raised by a step above the rest of the room, surrounded by courtiers and noblesse, who, in all the concentrated splendour of dresses and decorations contrive to keep up an atmosphere around them not derogatory to Sovereignty.

The worthy beaux and belles of the City, in their humbler array of finery, keep the distance of respectful spectators, eyeing and admiring the movements of Royalty and the glitter and graces of the Court, which they have only a precious periodical

opportunity of observing. In the dance, of course, the Court and Nobility take the lead, and the gradation of fashion and grace, in the string of whirling couples, is sometimes very curious — commencing with a Prince and Princess, whose easy evolutions bespeak refined tuition, and closed by a dapper Bourgeois, in his best clothes, who twirls his perspiring partner with an ardour little tamed by the graces. Though the Court belles are the models of *ton* and grace in the room, the fresh charms of their humble rivals sometimes subject them to unpleasant mortifications. Their volatile beaux will sometimes profit by the occasion for variety, and dance the whole evening with the happy Bourgeoises, while the Maids of Honour and Baronesses not having an opportunity of consoling themselves by similar overtures to the young citizens, are sometimes obliged to remain quiet spectators of their rivals' triumphs. When not there on official duty, the Court ladies and many of the noblesse consequently often neglect these promiscuous meetings; and would absent themselves oftener, if a ball — the opportunity for a waltz — were not almost

equally irresistible to all ranks. The assemblies, or evening circles, a good deal like those at private houses, are more thinly attended. Tea, cards, conversation, refreshments, and *jeux de société* are, as usual, the bill of fare of amusement. The billiard-rooms draw off many of the beaux. The young people of all ranks join in grown up children's games, and sometimes, *impromptu* dances, with a good-humoured ease. The Dowagers, both of the Court and the City, hang together a little more scrupulously, keep to their separate card-tables, are nice about speaking first, and exchange, when brought into contact, various little announcements and defiances of superiority — the City Dames being generally quite as starched and slow in making advances as their titled rivals. This is naturally the growing character of the *bourgeois*, who show, pretty abundantly, all the airs of successful *parvenus*. Their acquisitions of importance, at the expence of the privileged class, make the ridiculous exclusions — trifling as they are — to which they are still subject, doubly galling; for that species of philosophy which would be content to

smile in the consciousness of real importance at these frivolous inferiorities, is a feeling far above the flight of the worthy Bourgeois gentry. The noblesse, very unjustly taunt them with this soreness at their ineligibility to the pleasures of the *beau monde*, and affect to wonder that having gained the lucrative bureaux, they should still covet the *entrée* of the drawing-rooms. — But the feeling is quite natural. Absurd sweeping disqualifications — however really unimportant the object — are always galling to any body of men; and to be proscribed *en masse* from what is, in fact, the only society in a small town, is neither very reasonable nor very agreeable. Among themselves, the worthy Bourgeois lead that sort of muddling drudging life, which affords little opportunity for society; their social pleasures extend, therefore, little beyond the *reunions* at the Casino — the eagerly anticipated scene of the rivalries and conquests of the gaudy damsels. At some Courts the barrier against the non-nobles is a little relaxed, and high diplomatic office is sometimes a passport without the recommendatory *Von*;

but this is rare — and to the ladies, the monosyllable is the only introduction. On enquiring after two pretty and graceful women, whom I knew at Carlsruhe, and whom I missed in the gay circles, the conclusive answer was, “*Elles ne sont pas de la société — Elles sont de la Bourgeoisie.*” All this child’s play will, in time, fall into disuse — as much of what once existed has already done; but the good Germans, you know, do nothing rashly — and shut up in their forests and ceremonies, they appear slower in catching the improvements in the spirit of the age than their more mercurial neighbours.