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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 XIII.

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LETTER XIII.

FROM Karlsruhe we made a pleasant excursion to Baden, the Capital of the old Margraviate of Baden-Baden — now as fashionable a place of water-drinking, bathing, and gaming resort in this part of Germany, as Toeplitz, Pyrmont, or Carlsbad, more to the north and east. The last season was unusually brilliant, and boasted among its guests half the crowned heads and grandees of Germany. We hired for the journey a *Lohn Kutsch*, an old crazy caleche, tumbling along behind a couple of animals of the true hackney-coach breed, at the true German rate—about a league in an hour; for these mensurative terms of distance and time so exactly correspond in German, that they are synonymes in the language; and a league and an hour are both expressed by the phlegmatic *stunde*.

Our route to Rastadt crossed the fertile

plain of the Rhine, between rows of young fruit trees for five leagues of undeviating, but cheerful formality. Rastadt is a neat town on the river Murg, not without traces of its former consequence, as the residence of the last Margraves of Baden-Baden. The Castle, a sort of miniature imitation of that of Versailles, is a formal edifice, with a Belvedere surmounted by a gilt Jupiter, whose flaring limbs were burnished by his friend Phœbus into conspicuous lustre. The God holds, however, a decayed sceptre, and looks down on desolate colonnades and grassy quadrangles which now distinguish the palace of the great hero, the Margrave Louis of Baden, whose exploits against the Turks, live in the traditions of the people and the trophies of the palace. The physiognomy and figure of the warrior, recorded in large portraits in the gallery of the castle, are remarkably striking, though by no means characteristic of his profession; but rather expressive of intellectual superiority and refinement, looking doubly sapient under the flowing wig of the day, and which distinguish him

not a little from his moustachio'd and harnessed grandfathers and great uncles around, who all appear better fitted than himself for ransacking the haram, and capturing the Bashaw's tails. A large glass case of swords, turbans, embroidered saddle-cloths, chemises, and other appendages of eastern state, are shown as testimonies of his prowess; and a picture of a soft eastern beauty — the Briseis who graced his spoils. Besides a variety of family pictures, in which the hero and his wife Sybilla (as the housekeeper, according to the stately German idiom, entitled her) are often times repeated, the Castle displays a collection of stags' branches, and pictures of forest monsters, killed at a recorded time and place by this and that Margrave, and the famous Congress saloon.

The memorable negociations on the politics of Europe, of which it has been the scene, give an interest to this homely whitewashed chamber. Here the Prince Eugene and Villars concluded the Peace of Utrecht, and, in later days, the famous Congress of Rastadt, to which the eyes of Europe were directed from 1797 to 1799,

held here their sittings. You remember the horrid tragedy of the murder of the French deputies, which terminated this diplomatic combat. A monument now records the spot, just out of the gates of the town, where Bonnier and Roberjot were massacred by Austrian Hussars, as they departed from the Congress with the usual passports. The latter was butchered in the arms of his wife, who endeavoured to prevent their dragging him from the carriage. Jean Debry, the third Minister, whom the assassins left apparently dead, crawled back to the town, where he met the wives, children, and servants of his murdered companions, who had escaped. The inhuman barbarity and treachery of this transaction, from which the Austrian commander only exculpated himself by a reference to his superiors, are exceeded by few political crimes which have sullied the age.

After dining at the table d'hôte, crowded with Swiss merchants returning from the Frankfort fair, we crossed the rapid Murg, and leaving the high Basle road, entered a rich pasture valley, in the green recesses of which Baden is situated. The villages by

the road side were neat and bustling, and the hills higher and bolder as we penetrated up the valley, now and then covered with vines, but more frequently with rich forest foliage, beginning to reflect the diversified tints of autumn.

Baden is romantic without being wild. A chain of the fir-clad Black Forest Mountains rise on one side of the smiling valley; while another irregular ridge screens the back of the town, its rocky wooded top crowned by the ruins of the old Castle of Baden. The town stands stragglingly on an abrupt slope, with the stream of the valley at the bottom; the more modern Castle overlooking it from a commanding terrace. The streets are narrow, and not remarkable for cleanliness. The summer residences of the Grand Duchess of Baden, and some others, occupied by different Princes during the season, are neat and pleasantly situated: but its natural beauties, and the virtues of its waters, are the only recommendations of the place. This was peculiarly the case on our visit, when the season was at an end; the saloons shut up, the actors gone, the *rouge et noir* tables dusty and deserted,

and about a dozen heavy Germans, the only remnants of the motley assemblage of all nations who had enlivened it in July and August.

We lodged at one of the principal bathing hotels, containing about twenty-four baths, and thirty or forty rooms, fitted up with tolerable comfort; but almost all empty. There were seven or eight more houses of similar capacity in the town, and one-third of the private houses let lodgings in the season. Baden contains not less than thirteen sources of hot water; the heat of the principal one is about fifty-four degrees. Their names are curious enough; such as the Jew's Spring, the Moor's Spring, the Hellish Spring, which rises in a part of the town called the Hell, and the Scalding Spring, christened from the useful purpose it serves of scalding pigs, poultry, &c. A fat kitchen maid was saving herself the trouble of picking a lapful of pigeons by dipping them in the spring, which, with a slight rubbing, stripped them with an agreeable expedition. The waters are increasing every year in celebrity, and are said to work surprising cures of gout, rheumatism, indigestion, and surgical disorders.

The air of the place is fresh and pure; and the neighbouring scenery abounds with beauties, which good roads render accessible.

In spite of the unfashionable season, a pretty numerous party assembled at the table d'hôte, headed, as usual, by the substantial landlord and his pretty wife, who fed daintily, and looked and talked softly to the admiring *convives*. Her spouse was a complete German host, dignified, bulky, and stupid. On discovering my country, he recounted a long list of Englishmen who had lately visited Baden: but who might as well have been Hindoos, for any indication of their country conveyed by the names the good host assigned them. They were all, however, either Lords or *vornehme leute* (people of distinction); but as to most of them he remarked, with some surprise, "*Sie machten nicht viele aufwande, nicht viele pomp,*" they did not spend a great deal, or make much show; a circumstance which seemed not to accord with his notions of a *Milord Anglais*. A German host presides at the table d'hôte, carves the dishes, and dispenses his politenesses to the guests with a sort of taciturn

dignity which are sometimes highly amusing. The subaltern officers, and other regular frequenters of the table, court his conversation, and are pleased to be well with this important personage—generally a well-fed portly man, who, especially if he happen to be a State *employé*, as Mr. Postmaster of the Station, is well wrapped up in fat official self-complacency. His eldest son has, perhaps, held a commission in the army—Mrs. Postmistress has been, or is yet a beauty—or he has a fine family of little ones, who, in such case, frequently adorn the walls of the saloon, and whom I have seen appear in their best dresses after dinner, as if their company must be as interesting to the guests as that of the children of a friend. If the sons and daughters dine at table they generally occupy, with their visitors, the best places round papa and mamma—rarely offering civility to any one, rather declining intercourse, talking easily among themselves, and showing, by their whole deportment, that they consider themselves to the full the equals of papa's guests. One of the sons frequently holds the office of *Herr Ober Keller*, (Mr.

Upper Waiter,) — the Germans never cheating this useful personage of his title—who, after waiting upon his sisters and their beaux, in common with the company, during dinner, I have seen resign his official napkin, and take a hand at whist with the family friends, which he would not lay down though the bells rang, and “*Herr Keller*” resounded from all corners of the inn. I have not often met with any thing like real civility in a German inn, for the matter of course bows, and old-fashioned wishes of “a good appetite,” “a prosperous journey,” “sound sleep,” &c., &c., are mere German formalities. The host’s indifferent *hauteur* rarely gives way to any thing but a stupid servility towards consequence which he is capable of appreciating. Our Baden host, the most silent and sententious of his breed, became all bows and awkward graciousness to a little man with the cross of Malta, who came in late to supper, and who proved to be a Baron, holding some office under government. “*Would the Gnädiger Herr (Gracious Gentleman) like this dish,*” or “*should he fetch something hot for His Grace?*” and other similar attentions,

were poured forth with an alacrity quite surprising. This servility to rank proceeded from the same littleness of mind which made the good Boniface dignifiedly incommunicative to all without badges or titles ; and its contrast with the promise of independence held out by his broad rubicund face and solid figure, gave it an air of the ludicrous, which reminded of Falstaff's solidity of person, coupled with his milky heart.

Baden presents in the season all the usual resources of a German watering-place ; a theatre, balls, promenades, hazard, and *rouge et noir* tables. Gaming, with the exception, perhaps, of the great Capitals, appears exclusively confined to the bathing-places, where it forms the principal resource of all ranks ; and the sums lost in a season by Princes and other individuals would sound considerable in countries where fortunes are more colossal than in Germany. With such distinguished patrons, it is easy to conceive that the Government of Baden is more ready to tax than to prohibit the gaming establishments. They pay a considerable duty for the benefit of the poor, and almost as much to the land-

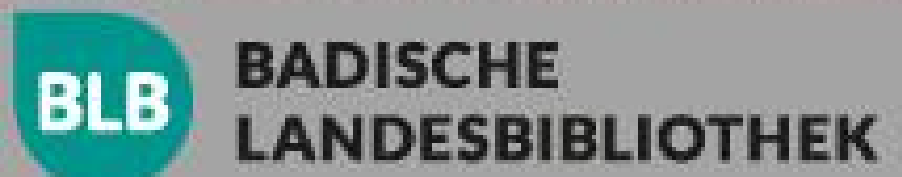
lord of every Bathing-house, where they set up their bank ; in spite of which, three or four banks find it a good trade, and return every year. A distinguished Russian General whom I knew at Carlsruhe, had been stripped at the tables of Baden of a small portion of the spoils which his Cossacs had procured him in the war. His propensity was too inveterate to be cured by experience. His debts had been once paid, and his fortune augmented by the Emperor of Austria, in reward for the dispatch with which he had brought the news of the birth of the young Napoleon from Paris to Vienna — a journey which the gallant General performed on horseback in five days and nights. Sensible persons complain loudly of the effects of these absorbing gaming-tables on the society of Baden. Ladies, as usual on the continent, partake their enjoyments, to which every other pursuit is sacrificed. The agitation of the game counteracts the benefit of the waters ; and unfortunate players are often obliged to shorten their stay, and depart with their disorders uncured, and their bills unpaid.

A principal table is in the old Jesuit's

Convent — now converted into a *Maison de Conversation* — the choir of the church unhallowedly serving for a *Salle à Manger*. The building stands prettily on the edge of a sort of cliff, planted with shrubs, up which you ascend by some winding rocky steps to the saloon. A cave in the rocks below, which served the Jesuit *bons vivans* for their cellar now answers the same purpose to the *restaurateur* of the establishment. Here and at the Promenade House the balls and assemblies are held. Sunday is the day when they are gayer and more crowded than ordinary; and, of all others, the hours from four to eight, immediately following dinner, are frequently selected in the heat of summer for the vigorous exertion of waltzing.

The inhabitants of Baden are principally Catholic; the Margraviate of Baden-Baden, having been a Catholic Principality, now devolved on the family of Baden-Durlach, who have long been Protestants.

The *ci devant* collegiate, but (to use a violent Germanism) in-eighteen-hundred-secularized Catholic church is an awkward building, of that sort of impure Gothic, with a



minaret steeple, so universal in this part of Germany. It is now the parochial church, the foundation being united to the Gymnasium or Lyceum, the professors of which have stepped into the ancient stalls, and officiate at the mass. Their salaries, though, like other ecclesiastical emoluments by no means enormous, are somewhat raised since the foundation of the college in the fifteenth century; when the worthy Provost had one hundred florins, (between nine and ten pounds,) a-year, the Dean half the sum, and so in proportion. The modern priests of Baden would probably consider the old statutes of the founder as unreasonable, and obsolete as his salaries; one of them enacting that none of the choir shall laugh or make faces in service time; that no Prebend go in ironed wooden shoes into the choir; and “that if any shall behave himself unpriestlike, be it in ladies, gaming, or other gross cause, the Chapter shall not pay him his salary, be it money, fruit, or wine, until he give up *concupinatum publicum*, gaming, or other matter for which he was suspended.” The church, which was

like the castle, and most of the considerable buildings in the country, damaged in the devastation by the French in 1689, presents nothing remarkable but the monuments of the Catholic Margraves of Baden. A benefactress of the Church is recorded by an inscription modestly beginning "Here lies N. I." but afterwards explaining that she had bestowed 5000 florins, under an express injunction of concealment of her name. Surely there is some coquetry in the modesty of Madame N. I., whose bounty becomes known to every visitor of the church from the peculiarity of this record; whereas the simple statement of her name would have effectually answered the object of attracting no notice.

The Lyceum, or Foundation School, was formerly an institution of the Jesuits, who, on the dissolution of their order, contrived, by intrigues, and exciting the popular spirit in their favour to retain possession of it for some time in spite of the government. At first a single secular teacher of philosophy was introduced, but found their cabals too hot to remain. The celebrated

Martin Wierhl was then placed in his stead, whom they involved in disputes on his philosophical tenets, which were referred to six Universities. Wierhl was, however, protected by the Margrave Charles Frederic, and the Jesuits were at last driven out.

There is at Baden a neat small convent, with its little church, of nuns of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, who originally came from Liege, and who have avoided secularization, in latter days, by undertaking a school for poor girls of the place. They have also a few boarders, of higher rank, who pay little more than eleven or twelve louis a-year for board and education. The convent has its own baths, and the nuns are strict in not showing themselves.

The poor appear to be well taken care of at Baden. Besides a considerable Hospital, or Poor-house, and a smaller one called, the Good-people House (less from the qualifications of its occupants than the dispositions of its founders) there is a large bath for them — where, besides the benefit of the waters, they receive weekly allowances, good Rumford soups and other comforts.—

The establishment is, in part, supported by the heavy tax on gaming, and by a weekly contribution for the poor, collected by a police officer, from the company at the bathing hotels.

The Castle of Baden, built about 1579, by the Margrave Philip II. is a rambling desolate building, with a dreary quadrangle little worthy of notice. The King and Queen of Bavaria, and the Queen of Sweden, and other connections of the Baden family, occasionally occupy it during their visit in the season.

The only curiosities are the subterranean passages and dungeons of the Castle, which have excited much speculation as to their origin and use. A narrow stair-case conducts to them from a tower of the castle. They consist of a number of small vaulted chambers and passages, communicating with each other, and evidently of great antiquity. Two of the principal ones have still immense stone doors, nine or ten inches thick, and about six feet high, opening inwards, and which, with difficulty, move on their hinges; in others you see the hooks on which iron doors once hung.

One of the vaults has a secret communication in the roof, with the main entrance to the Castle; and another, which goes by the name of the Torture Chamber, presents a row of iron rings in the wall, which tradition says, were used for some purpose of torture. A deep dungeon, now nearly filled up, which adjoins it, is said to be the place into which condemned criminals were precipitated. The dungeon remained empty till about thirty years ago, when, according to *on dit*, a dog accidentally fell into it; and in descending to fetch him out, the remains of two wheels, armed with sharp knives, were discovered at a depth of many yards. The last and principal vault, which is supposed to have been the chamber of a court, has double rows of holes in the wall and low stone supports for benches, with the remainder of a screen of wall, said to have formed part of a baldachin.

It is clear, from the dimensions and construction of these vaults, that they could not be designed for a mere refuge in case of siege or danger. Light and air are excluded from them, and they are too small to hold any considerable number of persons. The

traditions of the country (not to mention the firm belief of the good old housekeeper who showed them to me) ascribe them to a seat of one of those terrific institutions, the *Vehm Gerichts*, or Secret Westphalian Tribunals, common in Germany till the reign of Charles V. The proceedings of these tremendous courts are so curious and interesting, that you will pardon my sending you some particulars of them.

The Holy *Vehm*, or Bloody League, was a mysterious tribunal, which existed, originally, in Westphalia, and from thence spread itself throughout Germany. It was also called *Frei Gericht*, (Free Tribunal,) and the place of its sittings, *Frei Stuhl*, (Free Chair,)—and it is not uncommon in Germany, to meet with a district (like that I have mentioned near Hanau) which still bears the name of *Frei Gericht*, derived from this source. The greatest secrecy pervaded their proceedings; all that was known of them was arbitrary, bloody, and terrific. The members of a tribunal consisted of a supreme Judge, or *Stuhlgraf*, and, at least, fourteen Assistants, or free Assessors, (*Frei schöpper*,) composed of all

ranks, Princes, Nobility, and Citizens — every one being eager to shield himself from the terrors of the tribunal by becoming a member. In the fifteenth century, when the tribunal was in its most daring power, there were about 100,000 free judges in Germany. The judges, who ordinarily went by the name of the *wissenden*, (the *knowing* or *initiated*,) recognized each other by a sign, discoverable by none but the fraternity. The court was thus the powerful instrument of ambition, private malice, and oppression. No one knew his accuser or his judge — both might be his neighbour or seeming friend. On their initiation, the members bound themselves by the most solemn oaths to bring all before the tribunals that deserved punishment, respecting neither friends nor relations; or, in the words of their terrible oath, to “uphold and conceal the Holy Vehm, before wife and child, before father and mother, before sister and brother, before fire and wind, all that the sun shineth on and the rain wetteth, before all that floats between heaven and earth.”

The proceedings, as may be supposed,

were very summary. — The officers of the tribunal stole in the night to a Castle or a town, and affixed, on the gates, a judicial summons to this Prince or that citizen to appear at the Frei Stuhl, at a given time and place, to be examined on a given matter. If the summons was repeated three times, without effect, the accused was condemned, *par contumace*, once more summoned — and if that proved fruitless, outlawed and hanged by the road-side whenever caught. If he resisted he was bored through the body, bound to the tree, and left with the executioner's knife sticking by him, to show that he was not murdered, but a convict of the Frei Gericht. The tribunal used to assemble at midnight, in the church-yard of the place where they intended to hold a sitting. At break of day, the ringing of the bells announced to the inhabitants the presence of these formidable visitors. All were obliged to assemble in an open field, sitting down in a circle, in the middle of which sat the President and Judges of the Tribunal—the *insignia* of a sword and rope before them. When any one of bad reputation appeared

in the circle, one of the Judges would step up to him, and touching him with his white staff, say to him — “*Friend, there is as good bread to be eaten elsewhere as here.*” If the conscience of the person was so clear that he did not choose to take the hint and go away, he might sit still and run the chance of accusation; but it was generally more prudent to decamp. When the Judge touched any one, three times, with the formidable white wand, it was a signal that he was a hapless convict already secretly accused and convicted; and no time was lost in hanging him at the next tree or beam which presented itself. This was the invariable punishment of criminals of all ranks; although now it is out of use in Germany, and the meanest criminals have the honour of decapitation. The youngest Judge generally performed the office, which was managed with so much secrecy that the hangman was rarely known. The crimes taken cognizance of by the *Vehm Gericht*, were chiefly heresy, infidelity, sacrilege, high treason, murder, incendiarism, rapes, robbery, and contumacy to the Tribunal, its Judges and Messengers.

The flagrant cruelties and injustice to which the Tribunals were perverted, at last, excited frequent leagues among princes and cities to restrain their power; and on the improvements of criminal jurisprudence, by the Emperor Maximilian, in constituting the Imperial Chamber, and Charles V. in introducing a new criminal code, the court gradually fell into disuse; and by the end of the sixteenth century it was no more heard of. There seems some probability in ascribing the vaults of the castle to one of these bloody seats of judgment; particularly as it is well known that a *Vehm Gericht* once existed somewhere in the Margraviate of Baden-Baden. In 1459, the Margrave Karl I. granted his protection to the town of Esslingen, solely on condition that none of the citizens should either become judges or suitors in a Secret Westphalian Tribunal. The Margrave's Privy Council then contained, however, many of these secret judges; and five years afterwards he concluded a league with the Elector Frederic of the Palatinate and other Princes for the express suppression of the Tribunal. The

subterranean vaults are evidently much older than the castle built over them, and their appropriation to such a tribunal seems one of the most probable conjectures as to their use.

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