

Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Digitale Sammlung der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

**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 VIII.

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

LETTER VIII.

ANOTHER excursion which I made to the Odenwald deserves describing, from the curiosity of its object — the Riesensäule, or Giant's Column—a large well-proportioned pillar of granite lying in a wood on the summit of the Feldsberg Mountain, one of the highest and wildest in the Odenwald. In company with a German friend, we drove as far as Seeheim in a droski—a light Russian carriage, on which you ride astride, much used in this part of the world. Our road lay through one of the sandy forests of light coloured pines, with tall bare trunks, which in summer contrasted with the richness of other foliage have a dim dull appearance—but surrounded by brown leafless woods, acquire a warm aspect in the winter landscape.

Seeheim is a pretty village under the Berg-strasse Mountains, with a neat little

pleasure-house and gardens of the Grand Duke of Hesse, on a pleasant terrace overlooking the valley, at the opening of which the village stands. If you discover, from the road, any white building surrounded by a few shrubs and pretending to the character of a rural box, you may safely set the owner down for a prince. A nobleman's country seat, or even an old chateau that is tenantable, are very rare objects; and a German village, in fact, a little stinking paved town—is too miserable to be the residence of anything like gentry. All flock to the Residence Town; and the country is abandoned to the peasants, whose habitations are clustered together into small walled villages. The more populous ones containing an old town-house, a market-place, and a couple of churches, are occupied by little shopkeepers, mechanics, tobacco manufacturers, &c. The grandees here are the Bailiffs of the district, the pastor, sometimes an *avocat* or *schreiber*, and the little provincial *employés* whose titles and airs are so happily pictured in Kotzebue's farce of "The little German Townsman;" the scene of which

is laid in the respectable borough of *Krähwinkel*, alias Crow Corner. The airs of his *dramatis personæ*, *Mrs. Under-tax-gatheress*, *Mr. Building-Mine-and-Road-Inspector's-Substitute*, &c. &c. are not wanting in the *Krähwinkels* of southern Germany.

At Seeheim we had an agreeable rencontre with the pretty *Prima Donna* of the Darmstadt opera, who arriving for an excursion of pleasure, with the usual state of a Court equipage, condescended to be highly interesting and amusing in our walk round the gardens. In the Grand Duchy of Hesse, owing to the theatrical taste of the Prince, singers, actors, and *id genus omne*, may be ranked among the privileged classes. Not to speak of the Grand Duke's arm in returning from the opera, and his privy purse, which are often at the service of the *Prima Donna*—the whole *corps dramatique* have—in common with the Prince's Chamberlain and his Butcher, his Prime Minister and his Body Tailor, and other dignitaries of the state—the privilege of making free use of their sovereign's stud; and the *Stall Meister* (Equerry) has orders not to refuse their drafts, *ad libitum*, for nags

for their high travelling necessities. Thus, when you meet on the road the dashing court carriages, with laced liveries and long tailed horses, the contents often turn out to be — *Mademoiselle la Figurante* taking an airing with *Monsieur le Primo Buffo*.

Leaving our *droski* at Seeheim, we followed a path across the fields to Jugenheim — a pretty village under the mountain, at the entrance of a romantic valley. A thick fog unfortunately obscured many of its beauties, but did not entirely conceal the rough rocks of granite and red almond stone, half covered with brushwood, between which a brook rapidly descended the sloping valley, sometimes turning a solitary mill, or rattling in cascades over its rocky bed. The slopes of the mountains on each side covered either with wood or cornfields, were half hid in the fog, which gave to the valley a gloomy stillness. In following the narrow path we came to a little hamlet with a small chapel — opposite the cottage doors the women were beating the seeds of dried hemp on a machine, with which they hacked the straw till the seeds flew out. Here we took a path across the

fields at the foot of the Feldsberg, which we began soon rapidly to mount, and having gained half the height, a brilliant blue sky appeared through the fog, which on reaching the summit we had left entirely beneath us—involving the whole country in a sea of hoary mist. The points of the highest mountains in the Odenwald appeared like wooded islands in the ocean around them. The sides of the steep Feldsberg are covered with a beech wood, at the skirts of which, on the summit of the mountain, stands the lonely lodge of a Chasseur, in a well-cultivated cornfield.

The fatigue of ascending rendered the repose by no means unwelcome which we found in a neat room hung with guns and pictures of stags; and the excellent home-made bread, butter, and cheese, with a bottle of Rhenish wine afforded us by the *Jäger's* wife, were not less acceptable. During our meal she entertained us with a description of the complete blockade in which they are kept by the snow through the winter, which obliges them to lay in provisions sufficient to weather out several months without com-

munication with the villages in the valley. On the top of the mountain they have no sparrows, and few birds, except swallows.

The *Riesensäule* lies in a wood on the declivity of the mountain. Descending a narrow winding path, conducted by the Jäger's little girl, the great column presently lay before us, half buried in thick brushwood, in a hollow made by its own weight. It is above thirty feet long and about four in greatest diameter—nearly cylindrical, and tapering with an exact proportion. At one end a sort of semicircular step is cut, apparently either to fit it to some other stone, or to fix machinery for moving it. The granite is of the hard dark description, of which all the masses in the neighbourhood are composed. The appearance of this gigantic and well-finished column, whose perennial hardness has remained for centuries, without a trace of the effects of time, is extremely striking. One little expects so singular a vestige of the power and ingenuity of man in a wild sequestered scene where its use and object are unaccountable. The column has excited much speculation in

Germany. The magnificent Elector Palatine Charles Theodore, would fain have brought it down from the mountain to grace his capital Manheim: but it was too massy and weighty for removal entire, and the stone baffled the saws of his workmen who, in attempting to cut it, have left on it two insignificant incisions in evidence of their failure. Kotzebue, who has sprinkled ink upon almost every imaginable subject, proposed that it should be erected on the field of Leipsic, in memory of the victory — a scheme easier to propose than to execute; — without considering that the Grand Duke of Hesse, to whom it now belongs, though a very patriotic German, would hardly admire furnishing a monument to commemorate a battle in which his son and his troops were beaten and taken prisoners.

Not far off the column lies an immense rough block of granite, with a complete step cut in it, and a deep incision made by a saw above, as if the commencement of another. It goes by the name of the Giant's Altar. Scattered about in the wood near, are many other blocks with si-

milar traces of workmanship—some of them presenting in the incisions the marks of wedges as perfect as if recently made. Some antiquaries have attributed the column, and these vestiges of art, to a commencement of the ancient Germans to erect a temple to their god Odin, who gives its name to this wild district: but is it likely that the good Germans, in the days when they worshipped Thor and Odin, were proficient in the art of hewing granite, which their enlightened descendants of the eighteenth century can barely scratch? Others ascribe the work to the middle ages: but there appears more reason in giving the credit of it to the Romans, who were established in this part of Germany for near three hundred years, and vestiges of whose encampments, &c. abound every where in the Odenwald, which formed part of the *Agri Decumates*. Of this latter opinion—in common with many German *savans*—was a sort of village antiquary from the neighbourhood, who was loitering among the granites with his rule and spade, and reasoned to me in Germanized French on the depth and shape of this and that incision, con-

necting his ocular discoveries with historical data about the legions of the Emperor Commodus, &c. &c. which he always summed up with a "*Foila, Monsieur, ce qui she pense.*"

On pursuing the declivity a little lower, you come to a work of nature no less remarkable than that of art you have just left—the *Felsen Meer*, or Sea of Rocks; a name which accurately describes the object. A sort of channel in the side of the mountain is filled with piles of huge granites, heaped one on the other in the rudest disorder. The singularity of the object is increased by the roundness of the rocks, which, unlike the mossy angular masses in the neighbourhood, are here bare and rounded off, as if by attrition—like pebbles on the sea shore. The hollow position of the masses gives to the whole pile, which extends a considerable way down the mountain, the character of an avalanche of rocks, hurled by a convulsion of nature from the summit into their present situation. Superstition, however, which is the same among all people, has here unconsciously hit upon the poetical fable which it sug-

gested to a very different race, and ascribes them to certain Giants, who, in fighting together, threw them at each other.

A country like the Odenwald has not failed to suggest to a people like the Germans many traditions equally romantic. At no great distance from the Feldsberg is the Castle of Rodenstein, on the top of a shaggy mountain. Here, as the tale goes, resides the Knight of Rodenstein, or the wild *Jäger*, who, issuing from his ruins, announces the approach of war by traversing the air with a noisy armament, to the opposite Castle of Schnellerts. The strange noises heard on the eve of battles, are authenticated on the spot by affidavits; and some persons profess to have been convinced by their eyes as well as their ears. In this way the people were forewarned of the victories of Leipsic and Waterloo. This superstition reminds one of the wilder one of the inhabitants of the plains near the Andes, who fancy a thunder-storm a battle between their enemies and themselves, and hail with shouts of joy the motion of the clouds towards their enemies' country as the signal of their flight and defeat. The

flying army of Rodenstein may probably be owing to as simple a cause as the aerial battles of the Araucanians. The power of the wind is very great, and its roar solemn in these great districts of forest. In the pine forests it sometimes tears up thousands of trees in a night; a havoc which has in some of the little Courts, suppressed the old and honourable office of *Grand Veneur*, or Grand Master of the forests and hunting, whose emoluments consisted of all the trees blown down. These, with a moderate patronage from Boreas, sometimes produced the dignitary from 50 to 100,000 florins in a year—an income five or six times as considerable as that of half the Prime Ministers in Germany.