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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 VII.

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LETTER VII.

I MADE the other day a short excursion into the Odenwald (*the wood of Odin*) — a wild and interesting district extending about ten leagues from Darmstadt to the Neckar in length, and from the Berg-strasse to the Maine in breadth. We posted as far as Heppenheim — a small village under the mountains on the Berg-strasse, which so much resembles all the villages on this beautiful road, that to describe one is to describe all. They are generally situated at the opening of a narrow valley in the chain of woody mountains. A rapid stream descends through this opening by a winding valley from the mountainous Odenwald, rattling along the village street — the village housewives washing their cloaths — the children playing — and the ducks and geese dabbling in its limpid course.

We took a *bot* or guide at Heppenheim,

and pursued on foot the course of the little stream, which came brawling through the narrow valley between two high shelving mountains, covered with trim vineyards, or luxuriant beech woods. The mountain on the right, at the mouth of the valley, is crowned by the mouldering walls of the old castle of Starkenburg—one of the most considerable of the many ruins along the Berg-strasse chain. The castle was built in 1066 by an old Abbot of Lorsch, as a bulwark against the attacks of his rival, a Bishop of Bremen, who coveted the Abbot's fat monastery. In later years it fell into the hands of the Elector of Mayence, and was the residence of a Burgrave, and a Garrison, giving its name of Starkenburg (Strong Castle) to the surrounding county of Starkenburg now comprised in the Grand Duchy of Hesse.

After proceeding up the valley for some distance, we crossed the fields, gradually ascending a hill, from whence the wild, rich, scenes of the Odenwald with their forests and mountains lay before us as far as the eye could reach. We appeared now in an entirely new world. The intermin-

able plain of sands and fir forests stretching on the west side of the Berg-strasse mountains, now gave place to a rich diversified scene — presenting a continual succession of abrupt mountain and dale, forest and corn country. With all its cultivated fertility, the rugged mountains, the luxuriance of the beech forests which cover them, the masses of granite stuck in the slopes of every hill, and the rough rocky roads impassable to any but pedestrians, give an air of sequestered wildness to the country which adds much to its interest. The whole scene for thirty miles each way has the air of a chaos of hills thrown one against another in picturesque irregularity. The valleys between them are deep and romantic — dotted with spires and smoking villages whose pastures and orchards are watered by streams from the mountains which find a rambling passage through the valleys towards the Rhine.

The soil no longer a meagre sand, is infinitely richer than that of the plains below the mountainous district — and it is cultivated with a proportionate care. The small farms of from ten to fifty acres, are tilled

by the peasants to whom they belong. Their farming establishment consists of a small cottage, the exterior better and cleaner than the interior, a hovel used for a barn, a home-built waggon, and two or three small fawn-coloured cows, which supply the dairy, and do the work of horses. The light waggons drawn by these handsome little animals, climbing the sides of the hills, driven by the peasant in his cocked hat and blue jerkin, pleasingly enliven the landscape. The cows and oxen draw by the horns and forehead, a mode which the Germans assert is easier than drawing on the shoulder.

In spite of these Arcadian scenes and this Arcadian mode of life, I am sorry to say my friends the Odenwalders are not renowned for a romantic virtue. Half the crimes of the Grand Duchy are said to be committed by them; and the *Gens d'armes* generally make their first searches in their wild woods and valleys. But their country affords so excellent a shelter, that they have probably gained credit for furnishing some delinquents whom they only concealed.

At two long leagues from Heppenheim we descended to a small village called Furth — its dirty street watered by the little river Weschnitz, which rises on one of the highest points in the Odenwald, and whose name the antiquaries rather circuitously derive from a God Visucius, to whom an inscribed stone was erected near its source. We entered here the first little *Wirth's Haus*, (a low inn,) denoted by the usual withered bush over the door. The kitchen, a black dirty room, with a stove in one corner — the floor caked with dirt — was crowded with peasants lounging over their *chioppine* (pint) of sour Berg-strasse wine. Beer is very bad, and little drunk in these wine districts. Those, who cannot afford grape wine, drink, in summer, *apfel wein*, (apple wine,) a flat muddy cider; and in winter a frequent *schnapps* (dram) of a cheap sort of gin. To this feeble and deleterious beverage, and the quantities of sour black bread which they devour, the sallow unhealthy looks of the German peasants are perhaps, in some degree, to be attributed. You constantly see stout square-built fellows, equal to any labour,

with pale cheeks, dim eyes, and all the air of invalids. The sun, which in the sandy fields is extremely powerful, rarely gives men or women the ruddy brown, which seems the peasant's natural colour. The blood seems cold in their veins — their animal life appears dull — and they have none of that over-flowing health natural to their occupations, and which helps to vivify character.

Having refreshed ourselves with some wine soup, and taken another guide, we walked on another league to Lindenfels, — The road winds up to the village, at first through well cultivated fields of corn and vegetables ; afterwards through a fine wood of beeches. The women were working in the fields, and the woods resounded with the cracking whips of the boys keeping their cows on the sides of the hills. Lindenfels is one of the most romantic spots in the Odenwald — perched on the apex of a conical hill, surrounded on all sides by deep glens, their sides covered with luxuriant forests, sloping pastures, and orchards of walnut and apple. The hill by which you ascend forms a sort

of false breast-work to Lindenfels itself. When you are nearly on the summit of the former, the castle seems almost within a stone's throw: but a few minutes ascent discovers that Lindenfels is on a detached hill, separated by a deep valley, round the edge of which it is necessary to wind half a mile to the village. The old ruin of the Castle crowns the highest part of the mountain, above the little town. It is a mass of rough wall, in which one discovers vestiges of a large octangular tower, and an outer rampart. The village — like so many others in the neighbourhood of an equally picturesque exterior — is dirty and miserable in the extreme. The *amt-mann*, or bailiff, lives in a large dismal house, in a courtyard, with great gates: his gardens sloping beautifully down the sides of the hill. The *amt-mann* is the Grand Seigneur of the little district; and dispenses justice among the peasants, and those who are not entitled by birth to seek it at a higher source. These offices, which are of some emolument and influence, are filled by men of no birth or consequence, and who belong to about the third ranks of the *bourgeoisie*.

Our long walk, and the ascent of the mountain, disposed us to be by no means fastidious as to the accommodation of the inn — a miserable black hole, full of filth and wretchedness. It, however, furnished a good supper of milk, and bread, and butter; and beds, in which, though none of the cleanest, we slept with all the luxury of fatigue.

The next morning early, under the auspices of a new *bot*, a neat little peasant girl, with her trim blue frock and straight combed hair, we directed our course towards the Berg-strasse, in order to regain it near the Melibocus mountain. Our walk lay through scenery of the same description as the day before; along a rough, irregular path, ascending and descending; winding through woods of beech, or rich orchards; and at the brow of a hill occasionally agreeably surprised by a picturesque village lying immediately beneath us. The village stream, after being conducted with much management through artificial sluices and troughs far above its bed, frequently turns a gigantic, rude mill-wheel, of a construction more picturesque than ingenious.

The sides of the hills were still chequered with masses of granite, of all shapes, and immense size; sometimes lying so thick as to form a sort of sea of rock; at others scattered here and there in the corn-fields. In the woods of tall young beech, where the grey masses are not less frequent, and covered with green moss, their appearance is still more striking.

In the Odenwald, the great granites, which are called the ribs of the Earth, lie scattered about on the sandy surface, like wrecks of some storm of the elements. The whole country, which is abruptly irregular and diversified, and displays more of what has been called the beautiful deformity of nature, than is often to be seen, affords traces of severe convulsions of nature. Even the vast plains of sand through which the Rhine runs, from Basle to Bingen, have hardly the character of her ordinary features. Skeletons and bones of gigantic animals, have been found in the flats of Darmstadt, and are preserved in the Grand Duke's Museum. These circumstances add to the interest of a country — they appear to bring one more forcibly into contact

with nature's primæval features. The great granites, lying useless in the fertile fields, defying the power of man, are so many pleasing mementos of her supremacy — which, in these days of advancement, art appears continually to be questioning.

After breakfasting, for about five-pence, on eggs and milk, at the pretty little village of Gadenheim, we walked on to Reichenbach, a larger village, in a fine valley, the residence of a pastor. We procured with difficulty rough peasants' nags, to ride to Auerbach, the nearest village on the Berg-strasse. The ride was romantic, in the highest degree; the road following the course of the stream, which watered Reichenbach, and had now swollen into rattling importance. A rich valley of pasture, sunk between irregular mountains, presented points of view of constantly varying beauty, in which a sequestered wildness was unusually mixed with smiling fertility. Schönberg, a village with an old chateau, belonging to the Count of Erbach, a mediatized Prince, now subject to the Grand Duke of Hesse, — is the most beautiful spot on the road.

The mountains on each side, majestic in their cloathing of beeches and firs, have here assumed a bolder character, and nod at each other across the valley at no great distance. On the edge of the most abrupt, nearly perpendicular, and called the *Allanberg*, stands the Castle of the Count; his plantations sloping down the gentler parts of the declivity. The village lies in the valley, by the side of the brook, and the road winds steeply up to the castle, passing through the outer court.

From Schönberg, we descended to the deep valley of Auerbach, which, for its mineral waters, its delightful walks and points of view, was chosen by the Grand Duke and Duchess of Hesse for a place of summer retirement. A gravel road winds up the valley, through rows of poplars, from the village, to the cluster of small white buildings of the Court. The sides of the mountains immediately round are laid out in shrubbery walks, with seats and summer-houses, from which one catches a view of the village beneath, and, through the opening of the valley, of the wide plain of the Rhine.

A fortnight ago I spent a delightful day at Auerbach, in company with a party of agreeable friends. The Chamberlain of the Count lent us the keys of the Court buildings, in which we enjoyed a merry pic-nic dinner, in which the omelets made on the spot by the hands of a pretty French Countess and German Baroness, and the champagne of a jovial Bavarian Plenipotentiary, were not the least agreeable ingredients. Another part of the party, to whom a residence in England had given predilections for the *cuisine anglaise*, had provided good roast beef and English apple pudding, on which our foreign friends abundantly retaliated the justice rendered to their national cookery. Some of our grave friends would have frowned, and some wondrous clever ones smiled, at our unrestrained abandonment to the *dulce est desipere in loco* at Auerbach. A sunny day, animating scenery, agreeable ladies, and the resolution to be happy, with which, like London cockneys on a party to Hampstead, we had set out in the morning, made fun and merriment — nonsense, if you will — the presiding guests of the entertainment. We

l lounged about the plantations, sat down in the grottoes, admired the rich vineyards and the mountains, explored the Court apartments, laughed at the sentimental scandal attached to one room, and the romantic adventures connected with another, and dined with a mixture of appetite and gaiety which made the good things eaten almost as numerous as those said. A gay French friend, (whose gaiety, is his least estimable quality,) though never out of his element, was more than usually in it here. Without the smallest affectation of wit, he had something smart and graceful for ever on the tip of his tongue. He never *cracked a joke* and stopped to laugh at it — a species of vivacity often anything but animating: but his conversation and spirits glided on in the same sparkling flow, acting like a cordial to the spirits of the party. The day ended as such days usually do. The sun was getting down before any one was aware of it; and, on consulting watches, the hours were found to be fairly laughed away — and the Castle on the mountain not yet visited: that would do for another day. The ladies feared the damps of

the evening ; the carriages were ready ; and we did not separate in getting into them without promising ourselves another visit to Auerbach — a promise, of course, made to be broken.

No traveller who passes the Berg-strasse should omit exploring the beauties of Auerbach—one of its most picturesque villages. The neat white church, with its slated spire, stands on a little grassy ledge, on one of the vineyard mountains that overhang the village. The mountain on the other side rises more boldly—covered half way up with vines trained with the greatest care, and crowned by a thick copse and beech wood, out of which rise the tall towers, and battlemented ruins of Auerbach Castle. The Castle, which tradition says was built by Charlemagne, was, in later days, the residence of the Counts of Catzenellenbogen, whose territory came by marriage to the Landgraves of Hesse Darmstadt. The ruin is still black from the storming by the French in the last war. It resembles in architecture and situation those which abound in the neighbourhood. Tall round turrets, so thin as to have the appearance of

columns at a distance, with a battlemented head, sometimes round, sometimes octangular, are the most picturesque and perfect parts of the ruin. Almost every mountain on the Berg-strasse, and many of those in the Odenwald, are crowned by one of these relics of the days of knighthood, which, embosomed in the woods of beech, or surrounded by vineyards, adds the interest of its associations to the charm of the landscape.

We slept at Auerbach, at a good inn—the scene of a grand assembly every Sunday evening of the *Badauds* of Darmstadt and the beaux and belles of the whole neighbourhood—at which waltzing and smoking are the never-failing resources.

Passing once on a Sunday evening, the windows were open, and the whole house appeared alive. I descended and walked up stairs—the saloon was one cloud of smoke—Some fiddlers were playing in the little gallery above, and twenty or thirty couple of almost all ages, dresses, and ranks, excepting the very low and the very high, were in full whirl to a quick waltz; while several couples were reposing from their

exertions in the windows—the men wiping their faces and puffing tobacco—the belles adjusting their drooping curls. The first person I saw was a little Pastor, whom I knew, with a pipe as long as his arm in his mouth—being the walking-stick (convertible, at will, into that indispensable companion) with which he had walked four leagues after service from his cure, to celebrate Sunday evening, according to the German manner. The fondness for the pleasures of these assemblies sometimes even gets the better of that aristocratic decorum for which the higher Germans are remarkable; and a Princess, too well known to be named, has been known to join in them with as much gaiety as a plebeian belle.

From Auerbach we proceeded early in the morning on horseback, accompanied by a peasant guide to the Melibocus—the king of the Berg-strasse Mountains, and one of the loftiest in this part of Germany.

Leaving the Berg-strasse at Zwingenberg, a village under the mountains, with a dismal old residence of the Counts of Erbach, we passed by a bye-road to Alsbach—a

little village situated beautifully at the foot of the Melibocus. Having here procured a guide, with a key of the tower on the top, we entered the thick Forest of beeches, ascending by a steep and difficult path which did not, however, oblige us to dismount. Our nags, being true German animals, passed, with all the *sang froid* of their master trudging by their side, the startling openings in the forest, which occasionally let in a view of the vast plain low beneath us. The mountain is nearly conical, and its fine vesture of rich beech foliage, here and there relieved by a few dark firs, gives to it an air of apparelled majesty; which the white tower, on the top, glistening in the sun, renders more conspicuous at a distance. The view from this tower, is one of the noblest and most extensive in Europe, owing to the flatness of the valley of the Rhine below. It was about seven in the morning when we arrived on the summit—the vapours from the Rhine, and the streams in the valleys, were hanging about the woody mountains and obscuring the scenes in the distance. As the sun gradually dispersed the mist, the spires and villages

in the plain lay, one after another, clear and glittering beneath us. The distant objects came one by one into view—Spires and Manheim to the left—Worms and its Gothic cathedral opposite—and Mayence lower down. The tower is built on the edge of the declivity. The plains below, with their pine forests and cultivated sands, and the villages of the Berg-strasse, which we had just left, appeared immediately beneath us. We traced the course of the Rhine which now glittered in the sun, and appeared little removed from the base of the mountain—though at four leagues distance—from above Manheim, almost to Bingen—a distance of nearly 60 miles, where it loses itself in the Rhingan Mountains which bound the view on that side. The course of the Neckar and its junction with the Rhine is very visible, as also that of the Maine. A good telescope is kept in the tower, by the help of which, in a clear day, we were told, you might distinguish the tower of Strasburg Cathedral, at a distance of above 100 English miles. On the opposite side, towards the north, the view reaches the mountains in the neighbour-

hood of Giessen, in northern Hesse, sixty miles distant. To the east lies the Odenwald, over the chaotic hills of which the prospect stretches as far as the vicinity of Wurtzburg — a distance of sixty or seventy miles ; while on the west, across the Rhine, it is bounded by the Mont Tonnerre and the Vosges Mountains, at a nearly equal distance. We descended delighted with this noble prospect, after having inscribed our names in the travellers' book in the tower, in which we recognized some few of our compatriots.