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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 VI.

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LETTER VI.

THE quantity of forests, and their importance as sources of revenue, render the Department of Forest and Hunting a considerable branch in the machinery of the little governments. The Forest Masters of the districts are high offices, to which nobility is a necessary passport, as also to that of *Gentilhomme de la Chasse*, (*Jagd Junker*)—an ornamental character, who, in a green military uniform, adorns the Prince's suite, on state occasions.

I made a visit, in company with the young Princes of Hesse and their Governor, to a young friend, just promoted from *Gentilhomme de la Chasse* to Assistant Forest Master, in the district of Lorsch near Worms. Driving for a few leagues along the beautiful Berg-strasse, we came to Bensheim—a small old town, whose massy walls and portals give it an air of ancient consequence,

now fallen into the hands of peasants and tobacco-driers. The town stands agreeably at the foot of a bold mountain, surrounded by gardens and orchards, which give to the whole Berg-strasse, its air of luxuriant fertility. The Berg-strasse or Mountain Road, is a fine *chaussee*, stretching from Darmstadt to Heidelberg,—on the left, the wooded and vine-covered range of mountains, with their old castles, forming the boundary of the Odenwald, runs parallel with the road immediately above it. On the right stretches a vast sandy flat, through which the Rhine wanders—bounded by the heights of Tonnerre and the Vosges, at 50 or 60 miles distance. The villages and towns on the road are beautifully situated at the foot of the mountains—overhung by vineyards, and embosomed in orchards, which extend in cheerful avenues along the road, from one town to another. The country is one continued garden, which for its romantic luxuriance, was accused by the Emperor Joseph, of aping the beauties of Italy.

Leaving the road here, we drove over the plain, towards the quaint slated bell-fries of Lorsch, which announced the an-

cient scite of one of the most considerable princely Abbeys in Germany ; a centre from whence civilization first spread itself in the neighbouring wilds of the Odenwald. Numerous crucifixes by the road side, also told us that we had entered a Catholic district. A mouldering fragment of the lofty nave of the church is still standing, but degraded into a useful out-building to the house of the Master of the Forests, which has usurped the scite of the cloister ; and the humbled Catholics of Lorsch, are driven to hear mass in a shabby parochial church, whose disgusting daubs of *Ecce Homo* and Crucifixions are well calculated to awe ignorant superstition.

It was Sunday — and the peasants in their old-fashioned blue coats, and best cocked hats, with their wives in neat blue gowns, descending just below the knee, with tapering waists and protuberant hips, were returning from church, and surrounded us, to take a half inquisitive stare at their little future Sovereign, as we descended from the carriage. Their obsolete costume, grave, set, physiognomies, and erect figures, had a character of primitive quaint-

ness, which might have made one forget their connexion with this lively age, and take them for their worthy great grandfathers, and great grandmothers, a century ago. Our friend, the *Gentilhomme de la Chasse*, was established at the house of a menial Chasseur, who announced his creed by a little virgin in full attire of lace and roses, over his door. We climbed by a stair-case, considerably resembling a ladder, to his apartments, comfortably furnished, hung with hunting prints, and a complete assortment of guns, sabres, *couteaux de chasse*, horns, and other *insignia* of his calling. In the true spirit of a sportsman, his horses and groom were far better lodged — in well appointed stables, decorated with stags' horns. After taking chocolate, we explored the village, or rather the little dirty walled town — listened to details of hair-breadth 'scapes from wild boars, and to some explanations of forest economy and customs.

The greatest part of the forests in the little States are domain lands of the Prince; and as there is no other fuel in the country, they are cultivated with great care, thinned and cut periodically and systematically, and

not converted in too large quantities into corn country. In some of the larger States, such as Bavaria and Wurtemberg, they export considerable quantities of wood to Holland, by the Rhine, and the little rivers that join it; but from Hesse little or none at all. The policy of a German State is generally to make itself as independent as possible of its neighbours, by producing within itself all the necessaries of life. It therefore endeavours to keep up such a proportion between its wood and corn country as to be sufficiently supplied with both. The Forests which belong to subjects are also cut, and arranged under the direction of the Masters of Forests, the owners not being entrusted with their management, lest they might cut them down, or suffer them to deteriorate — an interference with individual property worthy of little despotisms. The Forest Revenues of the Grand Duke of Hesse produce 600,000 florins a year (between 50 and 60,000*l*.) The offices of the Noble Forest Masters are rarely worth more than 3 or 4000 florins a year — no inconsiderable stipend

for the servants of a German Prince. — They have a house provided in their district, where the authority of their office, and the circumstance of being frequently the only gentry in the country, gives them a provincial consequence, something between that of a feudal Lord and a modern Squire.

On another visit to Lorsch we paid our respects to the Upper Forest Master, to whom our friend was attached—residing in a dismal house, in a dirty yard, which had about the exterior respectability, without the snug solid comfort, of an English farmhouse. We were hospitably received by the Baron—a good-natured man, fond of his rude profession, which had rusticated the courtier into a rough gentleman—a great smoker—speaking little French, and seldom making his appearance at Court, but to congratulate his Prince on his birth-day or his *jour de fête*. His wife—an elegant domestic woman—with the exception of occasional visits to the Court or to Frankfort, passes her time contentedly in this secluded, but not picturesque village, surrounded by peasants, woods, and wild boars. The party was enlivened by a relation of the Baron's, a

gallant Knight of the Bath, in our Hanoverian service, who spoke English, and whose character of a fellow-subject of George the Third, gave him half the interest of a compatriot.

After drinking tea, and eating home-made cakes, talking bad German with the Baron, and French with his more polished lady, we took leave, in order to pay our respects early in the morning to the wild tenants of the forest. Our friend, who resigned his bed to one of the party, amused himself the live-long night throughout, by playing duets on his horn with his servant, who had received instructions, *tout exprés*, to accompany his master; while I took some broken slumbers at the village inn, disturbed every half hour by inharmonious blasts from the horn of the watchman, who, as the morning advanced, additionally bawled out the hour, *vivâ voce*, accompanied by a quaint German reprimand and exhortation to the snoring villagers.

At three o'clock, our friend appeared under our window, equipped for the *chasse*. We walked through a league of sand with our bags and guns, with a Chasseur, to the

Forest; where, after waiting an hour for dawn in listening to the distant matins bell of Worms Cathedral, we commenced our walk round the outer alleys to intercept the game — if game there should be — returning from their repast in the fields. Sport, however, did not favour us — and, after a romantic parading in the dew, without an opportunity of firing, we returned with the consolation of having seen a small roe — and heard many more. This sort of *chasse*, (a more dignified name for what we call shooting,) is called the *Buschgang*; and is precarious and tedious enough. It is the commencement of the German sportsman's day — which the bad success of this first essay little inclined us to prosecute in its subsequent acts. Our friend, who has more patience and enthusiasm, rises from his sound slumber three or four times a week, for the forlorn hope of a shot once in four or five mornings.

The other most ordinary *chasse*, called the *Track*, takes place in the middle of the day. The sportsmen are stationed along one side of a wood, at the other end of which the peasants entering, beat

through it, driving out the game, which the sportsmen shoot at, as they pass. In case of their escaping wounded, hounds are used to hunt them down. The sportsmen keep up the pursuit, on horseback, till the thickness of the forest obliges them to force a scrambling passage on foot. When the wild boar turns and attacks the hunter, he slips his *Couteau de chasse* from his girdle, and, the boar approaching him, sticks him with it, adroitly, in the throat. If he misses, the boar probably returns the intended compliment with his tusks.

A cowardly sort of butchering is sometimes practised by a collection of Princes, without sportsman-like taste. A well stocked preserve is besieged on all sides by troops of chasseurs, &c. who drive the game into a small space inclosed by nets, where the illustrious hunters, with their attendants in gala uniforms, murder and wound them from their pavilions, with as much ease, and I should conceive, as little gratification, as a man might shoot hogs and geese in a farm yard. The late King of Wirtemberg was a great sportsman in this style — and with the Count of Erbach, and other ama-

teurs, never failed to offer up Hecatombs of the motley inhabitants of the Forest. These exploits — which were equally the terror of the wild boars, and the country boors, whose crops were little respected — are recorded by the Court Painters, in highly-finished pieces, with portraits of the dignified hunters.

Our want of sport was, in some degree, supplied to our friend by the chace of a poor poacher — an animal pursued by the Chasseurs with as much inveteracy as game. He luckily saved himself, by escaping, from a sentence of long imprisonment, or hard labour, which would have visited his offence, if taken. A perpetual warfare is kept up between the huntsmen and these depredators; not long before, one of the former had been shot by a poacher in the wood we visited. The poachers are excluded from the protection of the law of murder; and a Chasseur may shoot at one of them in the forest, with as much impunity as at a stag. It is not surprising to find this severity in German game laws, since, in a country, where feudal customs are far more completely obliterated, the laws rela-

ting to game are not without traces of the system. We returned to breakfast at Lorsch, not ill-prepared by fatigue and bad sport. Our friend went to bed to make up for his nocturnal vigils; and we left him to the enjoyment of his day-dreams and sleep in a hot sun-shine — not without some laughs at the singularity of his life and the toilsomeness of German hunting.

To go back to our former visit, — on returning, an excellent dinner awaited us in our friend's apartment. Rice soup, (a meagre but frequent dish in a German dinner,) venison from the forest, and crawfish from the little river in the village, formed part of the bill of fare. The venison is generally the flesh of the stag, which is stronger and higher flavoured, but not so delicate as that of park deer. Champagne and Rhenish were not wanting during our repast, and, as usual, were succeeded immediately after by coffee with the desert; for the Germans, though not invariably sober, have little idea of the conviviality of a *friendly bottle*. Their drinking is mere boozing — often solitary and silent — and, from the lightness of their wine,

capable of being continued for a long time, without any very indecorous result. Though a lady was of the party, we therefore did not perplex our friend by inquiring for his drawing-room; but contrived to enjoy much mirth and good spirits, with a tenth part of the inspiriting liquids which a similar friendly meeting would have consumed in England. The young Princes, who are brought up with simplicity and good sense, enjoyed themselves like true boys — eating voraciously — playing with the guns and horses — exploring the stables, and keeping the attention of their Governor constantly on the alert; the result of which was, that like true boys, fatigued with the pleasures of the day, they slept all the way home to Darmstadt. The Prince Louis, the eldest, is a fine manly lad, who with great simplicity, gives symptoms of a decided character.

When we took leave of our hospitable friend, it was a clear, sultry, summer's evening. The vineyards and woods on the Berg-strasse mountains, were clothed with brilliant rich hues as we approached them. The bell was sounding for Vespers

at Lorsch; and the peasants were in motion, either towards the church, or loitering about in the enjoyment of rest. The villages in the Berg-strasse as we passed through them, were all alive, in the gay celebration of Sunday evening. Parties of beaux and belles, above the lower orders, were either returning early from some place of gay rendezvous, or lounging in the shade of the fruit trees, which make the road a continued avenue. The beer-houses were overflowing with peasants; and the places of genteeler resort, with smoking beaux and laughing belles, refreshing themselves after a wander in the vineyards and the neighbouring mountains. — The German ceremony of taking off the hat as we passed, kept our hands and hats in continual activity to return the obeisances, with which all ranks gravely salute each other on the road. We arrived at Darmstadt as the sun set with a magnificent blaze, behind the dark pine forests in the plain.