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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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London, 1818

Letter III.

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

LETTER III.

THE public revenues of the Grand Duke of Hesse are about 400,000*l.* per ann. — besides which he has a private fund of about 10,000*l.* per ann. chiefly arising out of estates which he has purchased, and over which he has the disposal during his life, but which become domains of the Crown on his death. His successor will have the same powers over any private property he may acquire during his reign. The little States have most of them a national debt, incurred in the necessities of the late wars. That of the Grand Duchy of Hesse is not, however, so very insignificant, the interest amounting to 80,000*l.* The Hessian Stock is just now in very good repute, at about 70 per cent. In the war it was at 40, but the good faith of the Government, which, unlike many others, both great and small, has

never stopped in all its distresses the payment of the interest, has given confidence to the public Creditor. Like many little Sovereigns, the Grand Duke is more beloved in his Capital than in the country — a popularity partly acquired by little immunities by which these Princes favour the inhabitants of their residences. The metropolitans, for instance, buy all the wood they consume from the forests of their Sovereign, at not above half the price paid by the unprivileged rustics; and any person who builds a house in the town, in conformity with the plan arranged by the Prince, has a twenty years freedom from taxes, timber for building at a cheap rate, and other facilities. Partly owing to these encouragements, but more to the accession of territory and population acquired by the Grand Duke, from Napoleon, and from the arbiters at Vienna, new buildings and streets are adding daily to his metropolis. Building is cheap and expeditious; the houses speedily start up of a rough composition of stones and mortar, overlaid with a neat coat of white plaster, roofed with slate from the mountainous banks of

the Rhine: and these flimsily constructed buildings have an air of far greater neatness and elegance than more substantial brick and tile edifices.

The peasants complain of the weight of taxes, and the excessive dearness of necessaries, occasioned by the failure of the last year's crops. And though it stands to reason that their hardships are augmented by the burthen of a large establishment of troops, and the salaries of a crowd of Privy, Finance, War, and other Counsellors, &c. who clog the heavy machine of government, and of Singers and musical Professors, who vie, in price and fame, with the great operas of Germany, you rarely hear them vent a complaint against their Prince. In the midst of a lively history of his grievances, the painting of which will sometimes a little rouse his characteristic apathy, the peasant will tell you, *oh ya*, his Prince is a *guter man*, a *recht ehrlicher mann*, (a good man, a right-honest man,) with a sort of mechanical loyalty, which is half quiescent dullness and half upright goodness of character.

The Grand Duke of Hesse was one of the last Princes who acceded to the Con-

federation with Napoleon. He hesitated, till hesitation exposed himself and his territory to imminent danger, persuaded by the counsels of an excellent Minister to attempt every possible means of effecting a counter alliance with the great German Powers. This Minister, the Baron ———, was sent to Berlin, to urge the co-operation of Prussia. Every one knows the designs of Prussia upon Hanover, in 1806, and the temporising game she played in pursuit of aggrandisement, and regardless of the interests of Germany. The Baron quitted Berlin, having arranged the basis of an alliance, guaranteed by the word of the King. A few days after, the views of Prussia changed—the King's promise was recalled—and the Grand Duke threatened by Buonaparte, and, without hope of a German alliance, was driven, like his neighbours, to attach himself to the Protector of the Rhenish Confederation. The first injunction of his new ally and master was the banishment of his Minister, whose unceasing hostility Buonaparte had reason to apprehend. The Grand Duke, who was much attached to the Baron, refused; and

even remained firm on Napoleon's threatening him with the immediate pillage of his Capital: but the Minister, unwilling to endanger the country by his presence, retired, of his own accord, with his family, and never returned, but in disguise, till the retreat of Buonaparte after the battle of Leipsic. He was then received in triumph, with rejoicings, from all ranks. The Baron's conduct was in direct hostility to his interest, as during his undaunted opposition to Buonaparte the chief part of his possessions were situated in Luxembourg, then a French province, and he daily expected to hear of their pillage or confiscation: this, however, they escaped. His conduct at this period is not the only instance of his talents, and devotion to the public service. I regretted that this upright and able man, now Grand Master of the Court, and beloved by the whole country, was absent during my stay at Darmstadt. His pretty wife was our graceful hostess at the fête champetre I described in my last.

The Grand Duke, once compelled to join the Emperor, politicly performed his

forced service with a good grace. His stipulated contingent, in the Act of the Rhenish Confederation, was 4000 men, but in the emergencies of the last campaign in Germany he brought 10,000 into the field. The Prince Emilius, his youngest son, a gay young man, of talent and spirit, commanded the troops. The Prince has something very striking in his small active figure — a keen eye, and a shrewd expression of face, little German in their character — and quite in harmony with the wit and graceful vivacity which make him the life of society. On the retreat from Russia, where his army was almost annihilated, his judgment and humanity gained him the warm affection of the troops. In the campaign of 1813, his courage and generalship received high eulogiums from Napoleon, which appear, naturally enough, to have stimulated His Highness's military zeal. In the disasters of Leipsic he still faithfully adhered to the fortunes of his leader, and, unlike the Grand Duke of Baden, the King of Wurtemberg, and others, who deserted him, the Prince Emilius suffered himself and his troops to be taken prisoners by the

Allies; alleging that, as the General of his father, he had no discretion to desert the cause for which he was fighting by his orders. In the confusion of the defeat His Highness was missing — officers were dispatched in all directions in search of him, who found him with his shattered army in safe custody of the Allies at Berlin. On the slightest committal of the Grand Duke's policy he might have been set at liberty; but he insisted on being treated strictly as a prisoner of war, till he received further orders for his conduct.

This zealous adherence has, whether justly or not, drawn upon the Prince Emilius some suspicions of Buonapartism among the violent professors of a German patriotism. It is not impossible that he may have partaken that fervour of military admiration which appears common to all the troops who have served under Napoleon. At least there is more heroism in his conduct than in that of the Kings of Bavaria, and Wurtemberg, and others, who, more eager than the Grand Duke of Hesse to sell their services for crowns, and the plunder of their weak neighbours, deserted their bene-

factor in his extremity without scruple. In reward for his services the Grand Duke of Hesse might have received from Napoleon the title of King: but he wisely contented himself with that of Grand Duke. His territories received large additions in Westphalia, and the Electorate of Hesse Cassel, disjoined from his original state. The latter he still retains; the former have been exchanged in late territorial arrangements for the fine possessions on the left bank of the Rhine. He has now about 640,000 souls under his dominion, precisely double the population of his country before the Rhenish Confederation. The Grand Duchy is now, in all respects, one of the most considerable of the smaller states of Germany. Its freedom of the press, the improvement in its government and laws, and the liberal ideas of the reigning family, add greatly to its consequence; and though it ranks in precedence immediately after the Electorate of Hesse Cassel, as ninth Power of Germany, it has, in most respects, a virtual superiority.

The Court of the Hereditary Prince occu-

pies a white handsome Palace in the *Grande Place* of the town — a large square, one side formed by this Palace, and the opposite by the handsome *Chancellerie*, the seat of the public offices — the Downing-street of the little Cabinet. The Prince is a man of an honest sedate character — simple and unpretending almost to a fault — an epitome of worthy German qualities. On a first acquaintance his simplicity might be taken for the symptom of a weak diffident character; but on a nearer observation, it is easy to discover, that the Prince has both thought and read to advantage, and observes more than he speaks. This is a character with which I have not unfrequently been agreeably surprised in Germany; where the calm flow of spirits, and the slow abstract turn of intellect, seem to keep down the *besoin de parler* which a Frenchman often feels from animal spirits, and an Englishman from activity of mind. The Prince is married to a Princess Wilhelmina of Baden, the sister of the Grand Duke of Baden, the Empress of Russia, the Ex-Queen of Sweden, &c. It is the happiest *menage* imaginable. Their little Court,

with some additional ceremony, has all the air of a well regulated easy gentleman's family. A Grand Master, an Aide de camp, two Ladies of Honour, and the Governor of the two Princes, an amiable young Swiss, compose the whole suite. The Prince superintends his own household, regulates its expenditure, and supports the necessary pomp on an income by no means ample, without incurring debts. You meet him walking with his wife and boys, quite *en particulier*, or the Princess, driving in a simple calèche, with an absence of ostentation, doubly pleasing, because it is a rare, and by no means a national quality.

The Princess, with a tall majestic figure, has not the beauty for which her sisters, the Empress of Russia and the Queen of Sweden, are renowned; but she has an expression of sweetness, and good-humoured *naïveté* in conversation, almost as attractive as beauty, and a voice of infantine softness, which gives a tone of mirth, and simplicity to all that she says. Her mild character, and graceful manners, have gained her great popularity in Germany. She has a fondness for English

literature, which she studies with much diligence; timidity alone prevents her speaking our language. Her curiosity about our manners and customs, and the interest she takes in every thing English, at once made her conversation more attractive, and oftener procured me the honour of it. The works of Lord Byron, which every day excite a stronger interest in Germany, are Her Royal Highness's chief favourites. She is in possession of two prints of the noble bard; and I was happy to have the opportunity of bringing her from England his work of perhaps the deepest interest and the boldest characteristics of genius—the last canto of Childe Harold. The language of poetry, and particularly of a style so subtle and replete with imagery as that of Lord Byron, presents appalling difficulties to a foreigner: but the Princess comprehends enough to repay her labour, and to excite a strong desire to drink deeper of its beauties. Her curiosity as to the character and personal qualities of the poet, afforded her a never-failing fund of enquiry.

There is a strong family resemblance between the German and the English lan-

guage, which materially facilitates the literary acquaintance of the two nations; and the English language is, I apprehend, unquestionably more cultivated in Germany than any where else on the continent. A prophet has no honour in his own country; and it is curious to observe the different judgments of compatriots and foreigners on literary works and authors. In Germany, Ossian — whose reputation in England, whether as Ossian or Macpherson, is at least very qualified—is idolised by every reader of poetry, and forms the first exercise of every sentimental lady who commences English. The mere German reader tastes his sublimities through the medium of translation. I incurred a reproach from the Princess of Hesse for hinting the possibility of her favourite rhapsodies being the manufacture of the Honourable Member for Camelford. Nor was Her Royal Highness at all consoled by my assurance that, on such a supposition, she might felicitate herself on a sort of genealogical connection with her favourite bard; the Macphersons all boasting their descent from the Catti, from whom came the Counts of Katzenel-

lenbogen, the ancestors of the house of Hesse, and the ancient occupiers of the territory of Darmstadt. The same fate attends the Robbers of Schiller, which in Germany are slighted as a youthful extravagance — to be pardoned — not admired; while in England they are, undoubtedly, more read and talked of, if not more approved, than his other works. It is, perhaps, not difficult to account for this. By far the greatest proportion, both of English and Germans form their acquaintance with each others literature, by means of translations. And I apprehend it is not the most finished work which appears the most striking, through this imperfect medium. On the contrary, works of coarser workmanship and broader effect, like the two in question, may often be transfused into a foreign language, with less damage to the original. As for the comparatively few persons who peruse, with difficulty, the originals — in reading a language but imperfectly understood, whatever is broadest, and has fewest shades, is most intelligible, and therefore most interesting. Words acquire a value, independent of the ideas

they express, from the pains one is at to comprehend them; and what is most florid strikes most.

Among other great and little grandees—to use an Hibernian licence—I met at Darmstadt, a Prince of Hesse Homberg, a distinguished officer in the Austrian service, and son of the Landgrave of Homberg, *vor der hohe*, (before the height)—a less than duodecimo territory, at the foot of the Taunus Mountains, near Frankfort. Homberg was, before the late system of making and unmaking Sovereigns, an appanage of a younger branch of the family of Hesse Darmstadt, under the sovereignty of the Grand Duke, with a territory literally not much exceeding, in size, that of Lilliput, as described by Gulliver, “twelve miles in circumference.” It contained, then, about 6000 inhabitants. Now the little state is swelled into an absolute monarchy. A patch of territory is given to it on the other side of the Rhine; it musters from 18,000 to 20,000 subjects, and contains 10 square German about 50 square English miles. This enormous aggrandizement, is owing to the influence at Vi-

enna of the four or five sons of the reigning Sovereign, distinguished and meritorious officers in the service of the Emperor of Austria. The Prince Philip, whom I met at Darmstadt, is a pleasant middle-aged man, of simple unaffected manners. His elder brother, the Hereditary Prince, is reported to have sent in his proposals for a marriage with our Princess Elizabeth*, who, it is said, has signified to her Royal Brother her desire of changing her spinster life at Windsor, for that of a wife. Every body speaks well of the Prince, as a brave honest soldier; and though the alliance is not one of much territorial dignity, good character and military distinction are, perhaps, all an English Princess need demand, in the individual whom she honours with her hand. One of the brothers is married to a Princess of Prussia. Homberg is a pretty little place, in a beautiful country under noble mountains. The Reigning Sovereign, a

* This was written long before this happy event had taken place, and even before "a Prince of Hesse Homberg" had excited universal speculation by his appearance at the Pavilion under the wing of the Austrian Ambassador here, and our Ambassador to Austria.

worthy infirm old Prince. The revenue of the state about 15,000*l.* a year.

It is a curious fact, of which I am apprised by a German friend, that this will not be the first connection of little Hesse Homberg with England. As far back as the year 1294, Homberg became, by a singular bargain, a fief of our Edward I. The Emperor Adolphus (of Nassau) was involved in a dispute with Philip of France, with whom our Edward being also disposed to quarrel, entered into a close alliance with the Emperor, and engaged him to declare war against Philip. The chief agent between the two Sovereigns, and promoter of the alliance, was Adolphus's favourite, Eberhard Count of Katzenellenbogen and Lord of Homberg. The King of England, in his anxiety to secure him to his interest, persuaded him to become his vassal, seconding his proposal by 500*l.* of English gold, which it appears possessed as much attraction to little Princes in those days as in these. The Count could not resist the offer, and actually took the oath of allegiance, before an English Ambassador, to the English King, for the castle and town of Homberg.