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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 II.

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LETTER II.

WE crossed the Rhine by the fine bridge of boats from Mayence to Cassel, a small but fortified place, where neat new houses are starting from the black ruins of the last bombardment. The Rhine has here a majestic appearance: it is at least half a mile broad, and its stately bed lies before the eye for a considerable reach each way. Opposite Mayence, the Main unites its tranquil stream, which any where but by the side of the Rhine would be a noble river. Both sides of the Rhine are now once more German; but it is not till you have passed the river that you begin to feel yourself fairly in Germany. As far as Mayence, francs and Napoleons are more in circulation than the German money; but the toll is demanded on the opposite side in *kreutzers*, a little coin, sixty of which make a florin. At Mayence you find French

cafés, French restaurateurs, and are pestered with the little blackguard *commis-saires* whose manifold resources of activity seem exclusively of French growth. Every body at Mayence speaks French, bad or good; at Cassel, only here and there an individual; and after passing the Main at Kostheim, you would be puzzled to find one in a hundred who could answer the simplest question.

It is difficult to describe the change of character which many features of the scene present on arriving on the right bank. You appear in another world, as you touch the commencement of the sandy plains which seem to assure you, you are really in Germany. The boat in which you pass the Main on the road to Darmstadt, affords specimens of that stillness and slowness with which every thing here is transacted. One quarter of an hour is occupied in expectation of its arrival from the opposite side; another in passing a river about half as wide and rapid as the Thames at Windsor. Your postilion drives in. You are punted across by three or four heavy boatmen, without the exchange of a syllable. The

fare is fixed—no more is demanded; you pay it, and receive neither thanks nor murmurs. The postilion cracks his whip; his horses blunder their own way out; while he draws forth the fungus and flint, with which a German pocket is always supplied, and lights his pipe to beguile the seven leagues journey, through a sea of sand to Darmstadt. The country, in spite of its soil, is cultivated and moderately fertile, rich in orchards, the roads lined with luxuriant fruit-trees. The peasants were at plough in their quaint cocked hats and blue jerkins, and the women quite as industriously employed without the same advantage of shoes and stockings—luxuries with which the German housewives dispense in summer, though neat in their appearance, and with few symptoms of poverty. We were now again in the Grand Duchy of Hesse, announced by the Hessian Lion on the posts of the *Chaussée Geld* (Turnpike) houses, having entered the Duchy of Nassau at Cassel, and quitted it on passing the Main, the boundary between the two Principalities. About two leagues from Darmstadt, we entered a

noble forest of firs, which continues nearly to the town. A wide straight avenue leads for a league through the forest to this handsome little capital. The main street, three-quarters of a mile long, and handsomely built, is a continuation of the avenue, the *façade* of the Grand Duke's Castle, finishing handsomely the long stately vista. The town is pleasantly situated on the great high road from Frankfort to Basle, in a flat country, relieved by the view of the Bergstrasse mountains at a few leagues' distance. The handsome white buildings, the neat lodges of the *corps-de-garde*, the avenues, the noble Exercise Place, the well-appointed troops, announce the importance of the residence of a little court. The metropolis of a little sovereign of Germany, which is generally much less than an English provincial town, has a curious mixture of splendour and insignificance, a sort of miniature elegance which is perfectly novel to an Englishman. There is nothing in England that resembles them. Our cities are more antique, handsome, and gloomy, our little towns more mean and vulgar — a neat watering place, with its re-

Historical remains of the Emperor Joseph II.

gular buildings, its absence of the bustle of trade, and its quiet gentility, will perhaps best bear a comparison. The resemblance may be pushed to the inhabitants, in one single particular — a sort of straitened elegance and economical show in the manner of life, which you generally find among persons of better family than fortune. The town of Darmstadt has increased rapidly with its Master's consequence. The Capital of the old Landgraviate of Hesse was a collection of shabby streets at the back of the Palace, as old-fashioned and insignificant as the title and territory, now forming a dirty *fauxbourg* to the smart modern town which has grown up since the territory has been doubled, and the humble Landgraviate has started into a Grand Duchy. The little Capital has thus like its greater prototypes its Court End and its City. The Palace, a remnant of the humble Landgraviate, has only the merit of being a little more respectable than that of St. James's. If it had been completed on the plan in which two sides were finished by the Grand Duke's grandfather eighty years ago, and the magnificence of which excited a satirical remark of the Emperor Joseph, it

would have been commodious and splendid; but Bellona found other employment for the Landgrave's revenues, and the Court at present reside in a part of the dark, dirty, ancient building without much splendour or comfort, while the fragment of the new Palace is appropriated to the Court Library, the Museums, &c. and forms a showy face to the old one.

Hospitality is a praise eminently due to a German Court; and this is no contemptible one, considering that it is costly, and their revenues are by no means enormous. The Court entertainments at Darmstadt are principally dinners, to which invitations are issued pretty lavishly; Sunday, being a grand day, when the table is more than ordinarily crowded and splendid. The guests assemble at the old fashioned hour of two o'clock, in the large receiving Saloons of the Palace. The Grand Duchess enters, and after half an hour occupied by her progress around the circle, strewing politenesses as she goes, the exchange of affectionate kisses of greeting, between the members of the Reigning Family, and of civil speeches between the company, the party file off, arm in arm, with

much ceremony to the large dreary dinner Saloon, where they take their seats in the order of the procession, the Grand Duchess and Court occupying the centre of the table. The system of a German Dinner, the same at Court, and at the *Table d'hôte* of an Inn — bating the additional plate and delicacies of the former — would have hit the taste of Justice Greedy, as admirably contrived for the undisturbed dispatch of the business of a meal. On sitting down you find the table well covered with dishes — there, merely to afford the eye a preliminary feast; an instant transports them to the side-board, from whence they are handed, one after another, ready carved to the company. In this way the knife and fork are kept, less in constant play than constant work, without awkward interruptions of politeness, by a succession of from fifteen to five-and-twenty dishes; beginning with invariable soup and *bouilli*, continued by sour ragouts, made dishes, creams, pastry, &c. summed up by the substantial roast meat. Every lady and gentleman have their decanter of light Rhenish or Burgundy before them, which they drink without ceremony; and the more

precious wines are handed round in the course of dinner. An attractive neighbour is thus the only possible diversion from the business in hand, which can happen at a German table. The Germans, in fact, dine like people who do not breakfast—a meal much out of use with them, and which rarely extends beyond a light milk roll and a cup of coffee. The desert is the conclusion of the dinner—not a systematic recommencement—it is soon dispatched, and the company rise—for the men have no politics to talk; and they prefer coffee, *liqueurs*, and the company of their ladies to toasting them in bumpers in their absence. The German Cookery is seldom *au naturel*, like the English—nor delicately sophisticated, like the French; but it is strong, and savoury—full of acids and oils—and, upon the whole, somewhat calculated for stout stomachs, and not the most delicate palates.

The Grand Duke of Hesse, now an old man, is prevented by an infirmity in his leg from taking a part in the amusements of his Court. I was, however, presented to him, and found his conversation, which he turned on the distresses of his subjects and those of neighbouring countries, owing to

the failure of the crops of 1816, rational and sensible. He is pretty generally beloved by his subjects; though here, as in greater States, a dissatisfied opposition look for the remedying of every defect to the golden accession of the Hereditary Prince. On some occasions, the Grand Duke has displayed much firmness of character. Unlike others, he has always refused promises of constitutions to his subjects, referring them to the decisions and arrangements of the Diet. In times of scarcity he has been firm in preventing monopolies and exportations of grain; he resisted the alliance with France as long as it was possible, and has often thrown off the habitual indolence of his character where emergencies have called for energy. In general, however, the good old Prince is too easily governed, too ready to let other matters take their chance, provided his orchestra play in tune, and his favourite songstress does not sing false. These grievances he does his best to obviate by a personal attendance at rehearsals, where he presides with the *bâton* of Leader of the band, beating time with an energy

those of neighbouring countries, owing to

which he rarely displays about other matters. An inharmonious scrape at the Opera is sure to be detected by His Royal Highness's critical ear, and the unhappy son of Orpheus never escapes a reprimand from his Sovereign behind the scenes after the Act.

Under this active superintendance of a patron and professor in the same high individual, the Opera of Darmstadt has risen to high celebrity; and though a club of gentlemen make but bad theatrical Managers in London, the Grand Duke of Hesse is one of the best in Germany. The Theatre is small, and by no means handsome; a Decree for a new and more splendid one has just passed the sign manual, to the joy of all but the peasants, who will pay without admiring. The doors of the *Grande Salle*—where files of Grenadiers and Courtiers wait to honour their Sovereign and his family with a salute as they pass—open into the beautiful English Garden, which, in the long summer Evenings affords a cool promenade to the fashionable world in the intervals between the Acts. The musical performances are exquisitely tasteful and

well managed. The *premiere chanteuse* is a pretty, interesting, woman, with a clear voice, of animating shrillness, which she wields with a voluble ease, and accompanies by an air of hilarity and sentiment, which would gain her admirers in a more extended sphere: it would be difficult to find a more scientific one. The Grand Duke, the Court, and the town, are just now rejoicing in the acquisition of Wild from Berlin, one of the first singers in Germany, whose salary is to be at least equal to that of a General Officer, and only exceeded by that of three or four of the first Dignitaries of the Court. The accessories of the little Theatre are admirable; the scenery sometimes little inferior, on a small scale, in taste, good keeping, and splendid execution, to that of Covent Garden. It is principally the work of Schönberger, one of the first Landscape Painters in Germany, the husband of Madame Marconi the singer. His scenes are better than his pictures; though the last display some genius principally in exhibiting the varied effects of sunlight upon scenery. The Germans call him their

Claude, with not half the reason that Turner has been styled the English one. The merchants of Frankfort, and the courtiers of Darmstadt, who agree about as cordially as vulgar solidity and aristocratic elegance generally do, mutually boast the pre-eminence of their respective orchestras. The judgment of impartial critics appears to be, that the performers at Darmstadt are more equal, more judiciously assorted, like the hounds of Theseus,

“ Match'd in mouth like bells each under each :”

but that the Orchestra of Frankfort contains several musicians of greater genius. In the mean time, the Barons and the Brokers mutually sneer at each other's *connoisseurship*; and “ Who shall decide when doctors disagree ?”

The Grand Duchess of Hesse, who has long survived the bloom of female charms, has been one of the most celebrated beauties of Germany. The pictures of her in her youth are exquisitely handsome; and her person has still some remains of grace. Her manners are affable and gay; she

has more natural vivacity than cultivation of mind. She is mistress in an eminent degree of all the amiable politenesses which acquire popularity in Court Circles, and adds to them a friendliness of disposition which gains her much affection.

I rejoiced to have an opportunity of becoming acquainted, at Darmstadt, with one of the most distinguished women, and the wife of the most popular Prince of Germany—the Grand Duchess of Saxe Weimar. She is the sister of the Grand Duke of Hesse, the friend and patron of Schiller, Wieland, Goëthe, and Herder, and the ornament of the only Court in which literature has flourished in Germany. Though one of the smallest of the German States, the character of the Prince and Princess, and of the enlightened men whom they have assembled around them, have spread the name of Weimar throughout Europe; a literary Court being no slight phenomenon in a country where the Courts are generally the antipodes of cultivation and intellectual graces. The Grand Duchess of Weimar has, however, displayed qualities which rank her much above a mere *savante*.

Owing to her undaunted influence, the Grand Duke was prevented from joining Buonaparte, in despair of the utility of any other conduct. After the battle of Jena had decided the fate of the North of Germany, when the Grand Duke was still absent with his army, the Duchess remained in Weimar. On the approach of the French, headed by Buonaparte, the poor deserted women, and inhabitants of the town flocked to the Castle for safety. The gates were opened to them, and the Grand Duchess sheltered and protected them with the kindness of a mother. On Napoleon's entry, he summoned Her Royal Highness to abandon the Castle and attend him. She refused; and an order for the pillage of the palace and town was instantly issued. The Duchess remained firm; determined, if possible, to avert this fate from her Capital. She succeeded — her dignified firmness at last induced the Emperor to wait on her in person. The interview between Napoleon and the Grand Duchess might have afforded a subject for the Historical Painter. Her noble deportment and reasonings wrought upon the Conqueror, and he

withdrew his cruel order. The Grand Duchess underwent every hardship for the accomplishment of her purpose; remaining shut up in the castle with her helpless subjects several days, almost without the bare necessaries of life. A triumph like this, of the pure power of character, over animosity, backed by physical force, is one of those rare examples which sometimes occur to tinge history with a tone of romance.

When I was presented to this excellent woman I felt a pre-disposition to respect her, which the old-fashioned dignity of her appearance, her sensible countenance, and the almost quaker-like simplicity of her dress by no means diminished. The Grand Duchess, now about sixty, has no vestiges of beauty—but her face bears the stamp of a character, decided, fixed, and perhaps somewhat severe—an expression which relaxes, in conversation, into a cheerfulness, the result at once of good humour and simplicity. Her conversation is rational rather than gay; and she appears not to possess much of what is called the *aimabilité* of society: but there is shrewd sense in what she says, and plain

sincerity in her manner, quite of a-piece with her almost rustic neatness of attire, and her erect dignity of deportment. She talked to me of English literature, with which she has considerable acquaintance, having formerly cultivated it with industry. On my mentioning that I had learned German, in London, of a Saxon, she enquired particularly for his name, &c. as if the title of a compatriot interested her, and the good old lady fell, as if involuntarily, into conversation in her own language, with a volubility that obliged me to confess, in French, my inability to keep pace with her. Surrounded by ladies, who had all the flaunty air of a modern Court, the Grand Duchess of Weimar had something of the character of a simple and respectable *Bourgeoise*. With her plain, high, mob-cap, brought down under her chin, her white handkerchief folded across her bosom, and her respectable slate-coloured silk gown, she would have formed a subject for Hans Holbein. In her conversation, however, you not only found the easy self-possession of rank, but the dignity of intellect, and an upright plainness of manner, which fastidi-

ous Courtiers called rusticity, but which to me was interesting for its harmony with the sterling qualities which have gained her the veneration of Germany.

In the suite of the Princess I found a sensible and graceful woman, the Countess ———, with whom my neighbourhood at the ceremony of a German dinner, gave me an opportunity of some pleasant conversation. Her friend, Goëthe, the idol of German readers, on whom our northern critics expended so much gall, was naturally brought on the *tapis*. The poetical Baron, to the no small concern of the German *connoisseurs*, has just retired from the direction of the Court Theatre at Weimar, which his taste had raised to one of the most distinguished in Germany. Amongst various reports on the subject, some ascribed the event to the bard's pertinacious good taste, which had opposed itself to the performance of a quadruped performer who had inspired the Grand Duke with a strong curiosity to see him. This is not precisely the fact—though it is true that a clever canine Roscius, like those we have been treated with in London, who could carry a

lanthorn or knock at a door, was the cause of a misunderstanding between the poet and his master and friend. “*Tantæne animis cælestibus iræ?*” But Goëthe’s years and declining health were the immediate causes of his quitting his theatrical duties ; the dog was only a *gravamen*, which hastened his resignation. His peace is now made with the Court, where he dined the day before the departure of the Grand Duchess. The Countess, though a friend of the Bard, and a member of the literary *Coterie* at Weimar, appeared to me by no means his unqualified admirer. The caustic comments of our Edinburgh Reviewers have been translated into the German Journals, particularly into one at Weimar, the Editor of which owed the great Poet a grudge* ; which, from all accounts, he could not have hit upon a more efficacious mode of paying with interest, Goëthe’s character is one of consummate vanity, and replete with littleness. The

* I since understand that the aggrieved Bard has taken a dignified revenge in publishing a translation of the critical enactments against him, with the simple comment, “*This the English call criticism !*”

critic found the clue to many a deep recess of the poet's psychological structure; touching all his sores with his bitter applications; and the poor bard has smarted not a little under this adroit discipline. He is not, however, quite so generally pitied or defended as I expected; for Goëthe, idolized as he is in Germany, is by no means the object of the universal love inspired by Schiller. People speak of the latter with a fondness and respect as much inspired by his character as his talents. He was a good man, — a good German — simple as a child — with a noble and high-minded nature. Goëthe is the idol of a circle; but there is not a German, high or low, who did not love Schiller: so strong is the fascination of simplicity of character, united with the power of genius.

I had the satisfaction of seeing more of the Grand Duchess of Weimar at a little fête and ball, with which her illustrious hosts entertained her, at an *Orangerie* of the Grand Duke, a mile from Darmstadt. This may be taken as a fair specimen of the summer amusements with which the little Princes vary the eternal *ennui* of daily state dinners. Those who witness

the long journeys through sandy roads, to dine inconveniently at some old hunting Chateau, whose long corridors, lined with stags' horns, echo to the rarity of human footsteps, and where the Prince meets his ancestors, the old Landgraves or Margraves, on the walls, in all the state of bags, ruffles, and cobwebs, may conceive the full force of the motive which actuates these journeys after pleasure. The Gardens of Bessungen are small, and rather prettily laid out, with a summer-house in the middle, in which the Court dined; and a handsome Orangery, to which the evening assembly, intended for a *fête champêtre* in the gardens, was obliged, by unpropitious weather, to be adjourned. The Court had dined at the usual primitive hour; and the Evening visitors, who, by a pleasant abatement of state, were permitted to appear without swords or trains, were assembled by five o'clock. The Orangery, a lofty spacious building, in a garden laid out in the French taste, was decorated with ranges of orange trees and festoons of flowers on the spur of the occasion. When the company was assembled, the court arrived from the little Summer-House, where

they had dined; the Grand Duchess entering arm in arm with her illustrious Sister from Weimar, surrounded by the official ladies and gentlemen of their suites. The two Princesses then made the tour of the circle, in the ordinary style, commencing with the ladies, among whom youth and virginity often gives the privilege of a condescending kiss, while the matrons are only honoured by a few words of passing politeness. When the two Grand Duchesses had finished their arduous progress, and were seated side by side on chairs prepared for them at the upper end of the hall, Tea, Coffee, and substantial cakes were handed about in abundance. A favourite Waltz, struck up by a military band among the Orange trees at the lower end, afforded a signal for dancing, to which German beaux are never remiss in attending. After the initiatory Polonaise — a promenade, rather than a dance, in which the dowagers join, who have bid adieu to livelier exertions — waltzing commenced. In an instant the beaux were at their posts, encircling their fair partners' waists, headed by the little Duke of Anhalt Cöthen, an amiable

young Sovereign of fifteen, a grandson of the Grand Duchess of Hesse, who already shows proficiency in the first accomplishment of the German Prince and peasant. The ladies, all partaking this national passion, readily overlooked the inconvenience of a paved floor, which required toes unplagued with corns to be at all supportable; and the boots and spurs of the officers in full uniform were no impediment to grace or agility.

A pretty girl, waltzing with great gaiety, was dressed in becoming black, with an orange-coloured *cordon* slung gracefully across her breast. It was a young *Chanoinesse*, in the costume of the *Couvent des Dames Nobles* at Francfort, one of the very few of those establishments still existing. Protestant and Catholic noble ladies are here alike admitted; and enjoy, besides a yearly allowance of some hundred florins, board, lodging, and equipages, under the superintendance of an abbess. They are subject to none of the strict regulations of a religious order. They leave the convent when they like; sometimes are suffered to retain their pensions when married; sometimes

to sell their situations. These institutions, which formerly abounded in Germany, have been, with few exceptions, pillaged of their funds, and abolished, in late years, to the great disadvantage of the poor and haughty noblesse.

In the intervals of the rotatory pleasures, which the parties engaged never allow to be very long, we were regaled with fruit-cakes, punch, lemonade, *kalt schale*, or wine soup, and sour milk. These two last drinkables are very common in summer, particularly on rural occasions. *Kalt schale*, or a cold bowl, is a pleasant composition of wine, lemon, currants, &c. served up in soup plates. Sour milk bears an honest name, and is neither more nor less than milk put into a jar in a cellar till it becomes sour and curdy; a curious process, similar to that which produces sour kroust. This celebrated dish is nothing more than finely sliced cabbage, pressed down in jars, sprinkled with salt and kept till fermentation gives it that putrid acidity so congenial to the German palate. The evening at Bessungen was gay and agreeable, in spite of the wretchedness of the weather, and the

coldness of the scene of action. There was less of ceremony than on the generality of Court entertainments. The Princesses, as usual, affable and conversable, were less intrenched within the barriers of etiquette than in the Saloon of the Palace; and the opportunity which I thus acquired for a further acquaintance with the Grand Duchess of Weimar was my principal resource during the evening; not having, at that time, acquired the art of whirling like a top, without being, like a top, in danger of losing the perpendicular when the motion ceased. Dancing was concluded by a Cotillon, at the end of which the old fashioned hour of nine gave the signal for the Court's departure to supper. The heavy carriages appeared at the glass door, into one of which, more than ordinarily gilt, and drawn by a pair of prancing cream coloured horses, the two Grand Duchesses stepped, after a profusion of bows, in return for the low obeisances of the assembly. The little Princes, and their cousin the young Duke, with the ladies and officers of the Court, followed in the substantial old coaches, with long tailed black horses, and the rest

of the company filed off as their carriages drove up, with less delay and damage than sometimes occur at a London *rout*.

A few days after, I was present, or—as a Frenchman says when he but sits in the gallery of the Chamber of Deputies to listen to the speeches—I *assisted*—at another rural entertainment, given by a pretty Lady of Honour of the Grand Duchess of Hesse, in the *Bosquet*, or public English Garden, one of the principal ornaments and resources of the elegant little Capital. Half the towns of consequence, in Germany, have something dignified with the appellation of an English garden—often, a little plot of ground, crammed with grotesque seats, rustic bridges over tortuous canals, and ruins and hermitages half hid in tufts of shrubs, to surprise the wanderer in a path meandering like a corkscrew. There are, however, imitations of more taste and resemblance—of this number is the garden in question, which covers forty acres of pleasing shrubbery and lawn. In a retired thicket, is the simple little urn in memory of the Landgravine, mother of the

present Grand Duke, with Frederic the Great's complimentary inscription:

“SEXU FŒMINA INGENIO VIR.”

A large piece of water, which moderate *grandiloquence* might term a lake, with an island planted with luxuriant weeping willows, ornaments the gardens, and afforded the merry part of our party the juvenile amusement of aquatic excursions between the island and the main land; a diversion which delighted the little Princes. A *pont volant*, sliding on ropes, gave a securer passage to the steadier beaux and belles, and did not fail to elicit all the nautical jokes and similes which the Court beaux, who generally sparkle more in stars than in wit, could muster. The little Princes, rocking their crazy bark, set up a cry of shipwreck. The ladies screamed, and an interesting scene of laughing, scuffling, handing, splashing, and practical joking ensued, fortunately terminated by the safe landing of each ruffled belle under the auspices of her favourite beau.

After these lively out of door amusements we retired to a large summer-house,

interestingly rural rather than elegant, where cards and refreshments awaited us. Whist, Boston, and Zwingen, the last resembling loo, are the games most in vogue. The time was thus whiled away in good-humoured mirth, with the chance of losing a fortune of *Kreutzers*, till nine o'clock, when half the party, called by official duties, as usual, took their hats and shawls to be in time for the Court supper. The absence of Royalty—perhaps Sovereignty is the more correct expression—from this entertainment, added to its ease and unrestrained enjoyment: an enjoyment, not of the most lively cast to any one accustomed to society, in its more active haunts—or in what is preferable—its cordial privacy. Here it presents all the disadvantages of the *petit grand monde*—it is ceremonious and heartless, without being gay or busy—and contracted and provincial, without the charm of retirement or friendly relations. These defects are, however, much counterbalanced by the good-nature and *bonhommie* of the Germans, which to strangers is very prepossessing; and, as, at present, the average activity of character does not aspire beyond such en-

joyments, every one has an air of content and unsuspecting happiness:—"Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise."

A fair friend of mine used to shed many a soft tear for these pleasures whenever she found herself at her husband's beautiful country seat.