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Up the Rhine

Hood, Thomas

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To Miss Wilmot

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TO MISS WILMOT.

MY DEAR MARGARET,—Since my last, we have passed from Holland into Prussia, but, alas! a change of country has only brought a change of troubles. As I foretold, there was a plot against the Dutch linen, which, by my Brother's and Nephew's contrivance, was seized at the German frontier. I suspect they thought it would be an incumbrance; but, if so, it would have fallen only on my unfortunate self. It's so different to poor George, who never cared, in travelling, how he was loaded. Heaven knows the packages, and boxes, and bundles, we have taken only on a thirty miles' journey, without a murmur on his part, or an objection. Indeed, my course from Rotterdam to Cologne has been marked by a series of misfortunes; and, in particular, a most mortifying adventure on board the steam-boat, which I do not like to trust on paper,—but you shall hear it when we meet.

Only this very morning, I met with something that hurt me very much, not merely on my own account, but for the sake of human nature. It always shocks one to meet with ingratitude, selfishness, and hard-heartedness in any body, but especially in one of our own sex, and above all, a lady of birth and breeding, who ought to possess more refined and delicate feelings. I allude to Lady De Farrington, who came over with us in the

Lord Melville, and was nearly washed away whilst sitting in her own carriage on the deck. Providentially she was released from her perilous situation, and carried down to the ladies' cabin, but in a most deplorable state. She was drenched from head to foot, and so terrified and sick, it made me forget my own distresses to see her, and particularly when one reflected on the delicate nature of her bringing up, and all the elegant comforts and luxuries, and the devoted attention she had been accustomed to from her infancy. Her own maid and the stewardess being quite incapable, from fright and sickness, I felt it my duty to try to alleviate the poor sufferer's afflictions, and can only say she could not have received more assistance from me had she been my own sister. To do her ladyship justice, she expressed herself in the most handsome and grateful terms—indeed, in such warm and affectionate language, and her manner was so winning and friendly, even to kissing me, that I felt as if we had known and loved each other for years, instead of only a day's acquaintance. In short, I quite grieved at parting with her, on the quay at Rotterdam, perhaps never to meet again in this world. You may fancy my delight, then, at recognising the carriage and liveries at a milliner's door in Cologne; and seeing her ladyship in the shop, I went in, and endeavoured to recal myself to her remembrance. But, instead of the warm reception I expected, after taking what I must call a rude stare at me through her glass, all she said was, "O, I suppose you are one of the persons who

came over in the Lord Melville?" I told her I was, and hoped she had recovered from the effects of that awful storm. "O, of course," she said, very coolly; "we soon get over those things on shore;" and then, turning away from me to the shopwoman, went on bargaining for a piece of lace. I was so shocked and hurt, I hardly know how I got out of the shop, or if I even wished her ladyship a good morning. But it was really too much;—to think that the same woman who had clung to me, and rested her head on my shoulder; who had received my best assistance, even in undressing, for she was as helpless as a child; who had begged me to hold her hands, to feel for her, and even to pray with her—could treat me in so cruel a manner. I confess I could not help shedding tears, and almost made a vow never to attach myself to any one again. Indeed, my brother warned me from the beginning, and told me, in his style, that I was "hooking on to the wrong train." But oh, Margaret! what is this world worth, if we cannot trust to our first impressions? But I must not repine; for, at all events, I was not deceived in poor George. As for Frank, he only laughs, and reminds me of the saying of Mr. Grundy, which I took at the time for ill-nature, "When you are abroad," said he, "you will meet with great folks, or would-be great folks, on their travels, who will suck all the information they can out of you, make use of you in every possible way, and then cut you dead in the street the next morning."

To-day I dined, for the first time, after the foreign fashion, at a table-d'hôte; it was entirely by Frank's persuasion, as I am not fond of eating in public, and to any one in spirits it would, no doubt, have been an amusing scene. The master of the Hotel took the head of the table, which accommodated about fifty persons. As I had stipulated beforehand, my brother sat on one side of me and my nephew on the other. Directly opposite was a Prussian officer in a blue and red uniform, and nearly a dozen little crosses and medals hanging from the breast of his coat. Next to him was a fellow-traveller from London; Frank calls him a Cockney, who dreadfully alarmed us at Nimeguen by letting off pistols in the night; on the other side of the officer was an empty chair, with its back turned to the table to show that the place was bespoken. The rest of the company was made up of foreign ladies and gentlemen, and at the bottom of the table a person so very outlandish that I must try to describe him. Personally he was a large man, but from the breadth of his face and the size of his head, which looked all the bigger from a great quantity of hair that fell over his shoulders, he ought to have been a giant. His features were rather coarse and vulgar,—they could never have been handsome, and yet could never look ugly, with such an expression of good humour. But to my fancy it was the good humour of one who had never had anything to try it. He seemed always ready to smile at something or nothing,—but not as if from having cheerful thoughts, but from having no

thoughts whatever to trouble him, good, bad, or indifferent. The only idea he seemed to entertain was of his dinner, in expectation of which he had hold of his fork rather awkwardly, with his third and fourth fingers over the handle, and the others under it, so that the prongs came out beyond his little finger. As for his dress, it set at defiance all rules as to colours that go well together. His coat was chocolate brown, with a pompadour velvet collar,—his waistcoat so gay with all the hues of the rainbow, that it resembled a bed of tulips—and then plum-coloured pantaloons. Across his bosom he wore several gold or gilt chains, to one of which hung a very large watch-key in the shape of a pistol; and his shirt was fastened with mosaic studs, besides a complicated sort of brooch, that looked like two hearts united together by little chains. Besides these ornaments, his hands were covered with rings, his right forefinger always sticking straight out like that on a hand-post, as the joint could not bend for an immense ring, with an amethyst as big as a shilling. Frank whispered that he was travelling for Rundell and Bridge, but I suspect that was only a quiz.

In the meantime a dinner bell kept ringing, by way of invitation to all the town, but as no more guests appeared, the ceremony began. First came the soup, very like barley broth, supposing rice instead of barley, and then the beef which had been boiled in it, of course very insipid. It reminded me of the patent Pimlico bread I once tasted, when, as poor George said, they had

extracted all the spirit and left nothing behind but the corpse of a loaf. I was obliged to leave it on my plate, where, as it got cold, it turned almost as white as a piece of wood. But you would have admired the dexterity of the waiters. One of them brought a large pile of clean plates, holding one between each finger, and dealt them out to us as if they had been cards. The worst is, the plates and dishes are all stone-cold, and, as instead of a bill of fare, every course is put on the table to show what you are to expect, and is then taken off again to be carved, the hottest of their hot dinners is only like a hasty attempt in warm weather at a cold collation. But what most surprised me was the order of the eatables, so different to any established by Mrs. Glasse or Mrs. Rundell. After the soup, &c., came in a monstrous dish of asparagus, with a sauce made of oiled butter and hard-boiled eggs. Next appeared a capon and salad, then a very sweet pudding, and then some very sour kroust. The next dish that went its rounds, like a novel in a circulating library, was of very small, very waxy kidney potatoes (Frank called them "Murphy's thumbs"), and then followed some unknown vegetable, with a very unpleasant smell, in a brown sauce, looking, according to Frank, like "sailor's fingers stewed in tar." Next we had salmon and perch, in jelly, and cold, and last, and certainly not least, a great solid piece of roast veal. My brother, who partook of everything, was amused at this putting the cart before the horse. "Egad! Kate," he whispered, "I have eaten the

wrong end of my dinner first, and suppose, to digest it properly, I must stand on my head." Indeed, I came in for my own share of novelties, for what seemed a pickled walnut was so sweet, that the mere surprise made me return it rather hastily to my plate. I was provoked enough, and especially as the Londoner thought proper to notice it. "Just like them Germans, ma'am," said he, "they arn't even up to pickled walnuts!" But what followed was worse, for, after helping himself to what looked like preserved plums, but proved to be sour, he spluttered one out again without any ceremony, calling out loud enough for the whole room to hear him, "Pickled bullises, by jingo!" As you may suppose, I made up my mind to dine no more at a table-d'hôte, and especially as I did not know in what tavern doings it might end, for, on asking Frank the meaning of something painted up in large letters on the wall at one end of the room, he told me it was that gentlemen were requested not to smoke during dinner! In fact, when dinner was nearly over, who should walk in, and seat himself in the vacant chair just opposite to me, but a *common soldier*! Of course, such an occurrence is usual, for no one objected to his company; on the contrary, the Officer conversed, and even hobnobbed with the new comer. But as trifles serve to show low breeding, I was not surprised to observe the private helping himself first to the wine: it was only after partly filling his own glass that he recollected himself and helped his superior. Every moment I grew more uncomfortable, for this

young fellow showed a great inclination to address me, and the Londoner got still more vulgar, and fault-finding; in short, I had just resolved to rise and make my retreat, when all at once, pity me, my dear Margaret, the door flew wide open, and there stood Lady De Farringdon, with her horrid glass up to her eye! I could have dropped off my chair! Instead of coming in, however, her Ladyship contented herself with a haughty stare round the table, and then departed, with a last glance at myself, and a scornful sneer on her face, that seemed plainly to say—"Yes, there you are, at an Innkeeper's ordinary, with all kinds of low company, and a common soldier for your *vis-à-vis*." Without waiting for the dessert I —

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MY DEAR MARGARET,—The above was written last night. The occasion of my breaking off so suddenly was rather an odd one, and has raised a pretty laugh at my expense. Imagine me writing up in my own bed-room, by the light of a single wax-candle, but which was not above half burned down, when all at once out it went, and left me in utter darkness. I instantly rang the bell, but the hour was so late, or the Germans were so early, or both, that I found I could make nobody hear without disturbing the whole hôtel; so I undressed, and groped into bed. This morning has explained the mystery. The wax-ends, it appears, are somebody's perquisites, and in order to make sure of handsome ones, the candles are fabricated

on purpose with only a certain length of wick. Frank says he was forewarned of this German trick upon travellers by Mr. Grundy.

Besides the secret of the wax-candles, I have learned some particulars that make me a little ashamed of my precipitation at the ordinary dinner. The German hotel-keepers, I understand, are respectable persons, who always take the head of the table; and as for the common soldier, he was a young Prussian Baron, who, as every native must be a soldier, had volunteered into the line. The helping himself first, to a little wine, and then the officer, was only a customary politeness, in case there should be any dust or cork in the neck of the bottle. It will be a warning to me for the future not to be so rash in my judgment of foreigners and foreign customs.

I have said nothing of Cologne Cathedral, and the Sepulchre of the Three Kings; but to *me* tombs only bring painful reflections; and instead of the Cathedral, I would rather have seen a certain village spire, rising above the trees, like a poplar turned into a steeple. But a broken spirit always yearns towards home. As to health, we are in our usual way; except Martha, who has low crying fits that I cannot, and she will not, account for. Adieu. My Brother and Nephew unite in love to you, with, dear Margaret, your affectionate Sister,

CATHARINE WILMOT.

P. S.—There is a great stir here about a religious agreement that some hundreds of young Catholic females have signed, binding themselves not to marry unless to one of their own persuasion. A very tragical affair has happened in consequence, which Frank has made into a poem. I inclose a copy. To my taste it is rather pretty; but my Brother says it is not good poetry, for it does not sing well to any tune that he knows.

THE ROMANCE OF COLOGNE.

'Tis even—on the pleasant banks of Rhine
The thrush is singing, and the dove is cooing,—
A Youth and Maiden on the turf recline
Alone—And he is wooing.

Yet woos in vain, for to the voice of love
No kindly sympathy the Maid discovers,
Though round them both, and in the air above,
The tender Spirit hovers!

Untouch'd by lovely Nature and her laws,
The more he pleads, more coyly she represses;—
Her lips denies, and now her hand withdraws,
Rejecting his caresses.