

# **Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe**

**Digitale Sammlung der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe**

## **Excursions along the banks of the Rhine**

**Hugo, Victor**

**London, 1843**

Letter XXV.

[urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-125010](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-125010)

## LETTER XXV.

FRANKFORT-ON-THE-MAIN.

*Mayence, September.*

I WAS at Frankfort on a Saturday. Long had I been seeking my old Frankfort in a labyrinth of ugly new houses and fine gardens; when suddenly I found myself at the entrance of a singular-looking street. Two parallel rows of houses, black, gloomy, lofty, and sinister, possessing however those trifling distinctions which characterize the better periods of architecture. Between these contiguous and compact lines of houses, huddled together as if in a panic, runs an obscure narrow street, every door of which, surmounted by a curious iron grating, is scrupulously closed. The windows on the ground-floor are protected with shutters, stoutly lined with iron, and invariably shut.

In the upper stories the same precautions are visible: the windows being barred like a prison. A deep silence prevailed; neither voice, song, nor breath was audible; but now and then the sound of some muffled step in the interior of the houses. By the side of the door a judas-wicket, half open, leading into a gloomy alley; everywhere dust, cinders, cobwebs, mould, and misery, more affected than real; an air of despair and fear imprinted

upon the fronts of the houses; one or two passers-by watching me with a look of suspicion, while, in the windows of the first floor, sit beautiful and richly attired girls, with dark complexions, furtively exhibiting themselves; or else old ladies, with owl-like noses, in marvellous caps, pale and motionless, behind the clouded glass. In the passages of the ground-floors I noticed heaps of bales of merchandise. The street contained, in short, fortresses rather than houses, caverns rather than fortresses, spectres rather than human beings: for it came to pass that I had wandered into the Jews' quarter of the town, and on their Sabbath-day!

At Frankfort, there are still genuine Jews and Christians, mutually hating and despising each other. On either side there is detestation and avoidance; civilization, which tends to hold all ideas in equilibrium, and suspend all prejudices, cannot comprehend looks of execration, interchanged betwixt strangers. The Jews of Frankfort live in retired and gloomy houses, to avoid the contagious breath of Christians. Twelve years ago, this street of the Jews, rebuilt in 1662, had two iron gates at its extremities, well secured. At night, the Jews were locked up, like people infected with the plague, while they also took the precautions against the citizens of a besieged town.

The Jewish quarter is a city within a city. On emerging from the Judengasse, I discovered the ancient town. It was there I made my entry into Frankfort. Frankfort is the city of caryatides. Never did I behold such a multitude of robust porters. Impossible to have tortured or twisted wood,



marble, and bronze with more copious invention, or more diversified cruelty. Whichever way you turn, figures of all periods, styles, and sexes, ages, and phantasmagories, writhe under the weight of enormous masses. Horned satyrs, nymphs with Flemish busts, dwarfs, giants, sphinxes, dragons, angels, devils, supernatural beings, selected by some magician who fearlessly dived into every mythology at once, are imprisoned under entablatures, imposts and architraves, half sealed into the wall. Some support balconies, others towers, while some, less puissant, have horses on their shoulders.

A few are fated to bear aloft some audacious negro of bronze, with a gilt tin toga; or some Roman Emperor in stone, with all the pomp of costume of Louis XIV., including his wig, armchair, estrade, the table with the crown, the canopy with sumptuous draperies, a colossal embodiment of an engraving by Audran, carved in relief upon a monolith, twenty feet high.

These immense monuments are signs for inns; and under such Titanic burthens, the caryatides groan in all possible postures of rage, grief, and fatigue. Some bend their heads, others half turn round, others rest their hands upon their hips, or compress their chests about to burst. Here some disdainful Hercules supports a six-storied house upon one shoulder, while with the arm that is free he dares the gaping public. There a hump-backed Vulcan aiding himself with his knee; or wretched syrens, whose scaly tails lie crushed by the remorseless stone; exasperated chimeras, furiously devouring each other; some crying, some laughing bitterly,

others making grimaces at the passers-by. I remarked that the wine houses, re-echoing with the ring of glasses, rested upon caryatides. It seems to be the custom of the old freeburghers of Frankfort to pile their goods and chattels upon the shoulders of agonized statues.

The most horrible nightmare one can have at Frankfort is neither the invasion of the Russians, the irruption of the French, nor European war crossing and ravaging the country; nor the old civil wars pillaging the sixteen quarters of the town; nor the typhus, nor the cholera; but the sudden revolt and liberation of the caryatides.

One of the greatest curiosities of Frankfort will shortly disappear, I mean the public slaughter-houses. They occupy two antiquated streets. It is impossible to see older or blacker houses lean over a more abundant supply of meat. An air of jovial gluttony is impressed upon these curiously carved and slated fronts, while the ground-offices seem like a profound and ever-yawning gullet, ready to swallow up herds of oxen and flocks of sheep. The sanguinary slaughterers and their rosy help-mates chat peacefully and agreeably under garlands of legs of mutton. A blood-red stream, unaltered by two unceasing fountains, flows in the middle of the street.

Just as I passed, there was a shout of horror. The butcher-boys, with their Herod-like faces, were slaughtering a litter of sucking pigs, with which the market-girls standing by seemed highly diverted. There are certain absurd emotions one had better suppress; but I must confess that had I know



before the poor little pig, which a butcher's boy was carrying before me by the legs, was on the verge of martyrdom, I would have bought and saved him. A pretty little girl close by me, who likewise betrayed some compassion, seemed to encourage the idea. I did not obey the imploring eye of childhood, and I deeply repent it.

A superb and gilded sign, suspended from an iron holder, composed of all the implements of the trade, and surmounted by the Imperial crown, presides over this splendid establishment of blood and slaughter, worthy of Paris in the olden time.

On leaving this quarter, you enter into a moderate sized Place, worthy of Flanders, which may be admired even after seeing the old Market-place of Brussels.

It is one of those trapezia-formed Places, round which all the styles and fancies of the domestic architecture of the middle ages are richly displayed; and in which, according to the different periods, every kind of embellishment has been resorted to, whether in slate, wood, or stone. Every front has its peculiarity, yet contributes to the general harmony of the whole. At Frankfort, as in Brussels, two or three newly constructed houses, which look like so many fools intruding in a meeting of wits, impair the general effect; while they serve to enhance the beauty of the adjoining old edifices. A decayed building of the fifteenth century, devoted now to I know not what purpose, but composed of the nave of a church and an old belfry, fills up, with its graceful and elegant outline, one side of the trapezium.

In the midst of the Place, having risen as if by accident, are two fountains; one of the revival of the arts, another of the eighteenth century. Upon the summits of these two fountains are statues of Minerva and Judith; the Homeric virago, and the Biblical virago; the one with the head of the Medusa, the other with the head of Holophernes. Judith, haughty and beautiful, standing in the midst of four syrens, who blow trumpets at her feet, is an heroic maiden of the revival of the arts; she has lost the head of Holophernes, which she used to carry in her left hand, but still holds the sword with her right, and her robe, yielding to the wind, exhibits her marble knee, and the most beautiful and finished leg that can well be seen.

Some assert that this statue represents Justice, and that she held in her hand the scales, and not the head of Holophernes. I do not believe it! A figure of Justice holding the scales in the left and the sword in the right hand, would be *injustice*. Besides,—Justice is not so pretty, and wears longer petticoats.

Opposite to this figure, stand the three gables of the Rømer, with their black dial and five grave windows. It was there that the emperors were elected and proclaimed in former centuries.

In this Place are held the two far-famed fairs of Frankfort, one in September, instituted in 1240, by letters patent of Frederick II.; the other at Easter, established, in 1330, by Louis of Bavaria. The fairs have survived both the emperors and their empire!

I now entered the Rømer, and wandered about without meeting a soul, in a hall with an arched



roof, in which stalls for the fair were already erected. It had a spacious staircase, with a balustrade of the style of Louis XIII., decorated with mean paintings. By groping along dark passages, and knocking at all the doors, I at last found a woman, who, upon my pronouncing the word, "*Kaisersaal*," took a key off a nail in the kitchen, and led me to the hall of the emperors!

First, however, I went into the hall of the electors, which is now used, I believe, by the high senate of the city of Frankfort. It was there that the electors, or their delegates, decided the election of the Emperor of the Romans. The Archbishop of Mayence presided in an armchair betwixt the windows. Then came every elector in his order, seated round an immense table, covered with yellow leather, each under his escutcheon, painted upon the ceiling. To the right of the Archbishop of Mayence, Trèves, Bohemia, and Saxony. To the left, Cologne, the Palatinate, and Brandenburg. In front, Brunswick and Bavaria. The looker-on receives the impression ever conveyed by trifles which in themselves contain great things, when he touches the worn and dusty leather of this table, upon which was signed the election to the Imperial crown. With the exception of the table, removed to an adjoining room, the council room of the electors is the same now as during the seventeenth century. The nine escutcheons on the ceiling, surrounding ill-executed fresco; red damask hangings; old plated candelabra, representing figures of Fame; a huge old-fashioned mirror, opposite which is suspended a portrait of Joseph II.; above the door a portrait of the last of



the grandsons of Charlemagne, who died in 910, on the point of ascending the throne, and whom the Germans name "The Child." Such are its adornments. The general effect is austere, grave, and calm; inducing you to dream rather than contemplate.

After the hall of the electors, I visited that of the emperors.

About the fourteenth century, the Lombards, who left their names in the Rœmer, and who had their counters in the hall, thought proper to surround it with recesses, in order to exhibit their merchandize. An architect, whose name is lost, constructed forty-five. In 1564, Maximilian II. was elected at Frankfort, and showed himself to the people from the balcony of that room; which from that period was called the *Kaisersaal*, and served for the proclamation of the emperors.

It was then thought necessary to embellish it, and the idea suggested itself of installing, in the niches constructed round the hall, the portraits of all the German Cæsars crowned and elected since the extinction of the race of Charlemagne; reserving to future emperors the vacant niches. From Conrad I., in 911, to Ferdinand I., in 1556, thirty-six emperors had been crowned at Aix-la-Chapelle. Adding the new King of the Romans, there only remained eight niches empty for future emperors. Few enough certainly, nevertheless the thing was executed, and the hall was to be enlarged if wanted. The vacant places were filled at the rate of four emperors in the century; and in 1764, when Joseph II. ascended the Imperial and Cæsarean throne,

there remained but one niche empty! They then seriously thought of prolonging the *Kaisersaal*, as well as adding to the niches constructed by the Lombard merchants five centuries before. In 1794, Francis II., forty-fifth King of the Romans, filled up the forty-fifth niche, which was the last. But it was fated to be the last in request! The hall complete, the German Empire fell to pieces!

The unknown architect must have been destiny.

The mysterious hall, with its forty-five niches, forms an abstract of the history of Germany. The race of Charlemagne extinct, it was fated to contain exactly forty-five emperors.

In that oblong hall, vast, cold, and gloomy, with one of the angles occupied by lumber, (among which I was shown the leather-covered table of the electors); scarcely admitting light at its eastern extremity from the five unequal windows, built pyramidally to suit the external gables; between four high walls covered with half effaced frescoes, under an arched roof, with groinings formerly gilt; alone, in a kind of penumbra resembling the beginning of oblivion; coarsely painted and represented in busts of brass, of which the pedestal bears the dates which begin and close their reign, some crowned with laurels like the Roman Cæsars, others wearing the Germanic diadem; there gaze upon each other in silence, each in his gloomy niche, the three Conrads, the seven Henrys, four Othos, one Lorraine, four Fredericks, one Philip, two Rodolphs, one Adolph, two Alberts, one Louis, four Charleses, one Wenceslas, one Robert, one Sigismund, two Maximilians, three Ferdinands, one Mathias, two



Leopolds, two Josephs, two Francis; constituting the forty-five phantoms, who, during nine centuries, from 911 till 1806, traversed the history of the world, the sword of St. Peter in one hand, and the orb of Charlemagne in the other.

At the extremity, opposite the five windows, near the roof, is a decaying but indifferent painting of the judgment of Solomon.

When the electors had decided upon their emperor, the senate of Frankfort used to assemble in that hall; which the burghers divided into fourteen sections, according to the fourteen districts of the city, assembled without. The five windows of the Kaisersaal were then thrown open; the centre one was surmounted with a canopy, and remained unoccupied. At the lesser window on the right, before which was a black iron balcony, upon which I perceived the wheel of Mayence, the emperor appeared, alone, in his Imperial crown and robes. To his right, were assembled in the same window the three electors, Archbishops of Mayence, Trèves, and Cologne. At two other windows, to the left of the principal one, were, in that of the centre, Bohemia, Bavaria, and the Palatine of the Rhine; in the other and lesser, Saxony, Brunswick, and Brandenburg. In the space before the front of the Rœmer, in the midst of a square, surrounded with guards, was placed a great heap of oats, an urn filled with gold and silver coin, a table upon which stood a silver-gilt ewer and bottle, and another table, upon which was an ox roasted whole. On the emperor appearing, the trumpets and cym-

bals clashed, and the archmarshal of the Holy Empire, the archtreasurer and archcupbearer and archcarver entered the square with pomp. Amid the roar of trumpets and acclamations, the archmarshal pushed his steed into the heap of oats up to the saddle-girth, and filled a silver vessel; the archchancellor took the ewer on the table, the archcupbearer filled up the gilt bottle with wine and water; the archtreasurer took money from the urn and flung it to the people, and the archcarver cut off a slice of beef.

Next, the high referendary of the empire rose up, proclaiming the new Cæsar, and read aloud the formula of the oath. When he had finished, the senate in the hall and the people on the Place cried aloud, "Yes!" During the tendering of the oath the new emperor took off his crown, and held his sword in his hand.

From 1564 to 1794, this Place, now overlooked, and the now deserted hall, witnessed nine times this imposing ceremony of election.

The great offices of the empire, belonging hereditarily to the electors, were discharged by their deputies. In the middle ages the secondary monarchies held to the honor of filling the offices of the two empires succeeding the Roman period. Every prince gravitated towards the Imperial centre nearest to him. The King of Bohemia was chief cupbearer of the Empire of Germany; while the Doge of Venice was protospatary of the Empire of the East.

To the proclamation at the Rœmer succeeded



the coronation at the church; and, observing with due deference the order of the ceremony, I proceeded there at once.

The collegiate church of Frankfort, dedicated to St. Bartholomew, is composed of a double crossed nave of the fourteenth century, surmounted by a fine tower of the fifteenth, unfortunately incomplete. The church and tower are of a red gritstone, darkened and impaired by time. The interior only is stuccoed.

Another Belgian specimen! White walls, no stained glass, but an ample collection of sculptured altars, coloured tombs, paintings, and basso-relievos. In the aisles are frowning knights and mustachioed bishops of the time of Gustavus Adolphus, looking like lansquenets; sculptured niches of the most fairy-like elegance; magnificent copper lamps, recalling that of the alchymist of Mieris; a Christ at the tomb, painted in the fourteenth century, and a virgin on her death-bed, sculptured in the fifteenth.

In the choir there are some frescoes; horrible with St. Bartholomew, but charming with the Magdalen; a rude and unskilful wood-carving, given about 1400, by the knight of Ingelheim, who is himself represented kneeling in a corner, and whose arms were chevrons of *gules* on *or*. On the walls figures a complete collection of those frightful helms and crests so common in the German chivalry, hanging to the walls on nails, like so many saucepans. Near the door is an enormous clock, like a two-storied house, a book in three volumes, or a poem in twenty cantos, a world in itself. At the top, in a wide Flemish fronton, is the diurnal dial; underneath

mysteriously revolves that of the year. The hours revolve above, the seasons below. The sun, with his golden rays, the pale moon, and stars upon a blue ground, effect the most complicated evolutions, which act upon a succession of little pictures at the other extremity of the clock, in which little boys slide, and old men warm themselves; the reapers cut the corn, and the lasses gather flowers. Maxims and sentences, not the brightest in the world, shine out in the sky, illumined by the stars, which are wretchedly in want of gilding. Every time the hands point to the hour, doors open, and figures issue forth armed with hammers, which strike the hours on a bell, and instantly disappear. All this mechanism palpitates in the wall of the church; making a noise such as might proceed from a whale floundering in the tun of Heidelberg.

The collegiate church has an admirable picture of the Crucifixion by Van Dyck, and Holy Virgins by Albert Durer and Rubens. Rubens has placed upon the knees of the divine mother an infant Jesus, Albert Durer a Christ crucified. Nothing can surpass the grace of the first painting, except perhaps the anguish of the second. Rubens has triumphed in life, Albert Durer in death!

Another picture, painted on leather, in which grace and anguish are displayed, represents the interior of the sepulchre of St. Cecilia. The frame is composed of the principal events of the life of the saint. In the midst of a gloomy vault, the saint lies upon her face, in robes of gold, with the gash of the axe upon her neck, which resembles a beautiful mouth, to which you could wish to press your lips.



You imagine that you are about to hear her holy voice sing "*per la boca de su herida.*" Above the open coffin is written, in letters of gold, "*En tibi sanctissimæ virginis Cecilie in sepulcro jacentis imaginem, prorsus eodem corporis situ expressam.*" In the sixteenth century a pope, Leo X. I believe, had the tomb of St. Cecilia opened; and this exquisite picture is said to be a faithful portrait of her lifeless remains.

It was in the centre of the collegiate church, at the entrance of the choir, at the point of intersection of the transept and the nave, that, from the time of Maximilian II., the emperors used to be crowned. I saw in the corner of the transept, wrapped up in brown paper, the immense gilt crown which was suspended over their heads during the ceremony. I remember to have seen, two years ago, the liliated carpet of Charles X. tied up and forgotten in a hand barrow, in the lumber room of the Cathedral of Rheims.

To the right of the gate of the choir, exactly on the spot where the emperor was crowned, the Gothic carving in wood complacently displays this antithesis of St. Bartholomew flayed alive, carrying his skin upon his arm, and looking with disdain over his left shoulder at the devil, perched upon a magnificent pyramid of crowns, sceptres, diadems, tiaras, swords, and helmets!

Further on, the new Cæsar could discern, under the tapestries with which they doubtless covered it, upright against the wall, like an ominous apparition, the stone spectre of that unfortunate pseudo-emperor Gunther of Schwarzberg, his eyes scowling with

hatred, holding in one hand his shield emblazoned with the lion rampart, and in the other his imperial morion; a proud and awful tomb, which, for two hundred years, witnessed the Imperial enthronizations; and whose stern granite figure has survived the flimsy materials used in the ceremony. I wished to ascend to the steeple. The vergger who conducted me through the church, and knew not a word of French, left me at the foot of the stairs, and I went up alone. Having made my way high up, I was intercepted by a barrier with iron spikes. I called, but no one answered, so I decided upon climbing over, which having accomplished, I found myself upon the platform of the *Pfarrthurm*.

A splendid spectacle presented itself. Under a brilliant sunshine, beneath me lay the city; to my left, the square of the Rœmer; to my right, the long street of the Jews, and here and there, gables of antique churches in decent preservation; two or three tower-flanked belfries, embellished with the eagle of Frankfort, and repeated by the three or four watch towers formerly marking the limits of the little free states. The Main was in my rear, a silver sheet, streaked with gold, by the ploughing of the boats, the old bridge with the roofs of Sachshausen, and the red walls of the ancient Teutonic hall. The city is belted by beautiful and well planted gardens; and the adjacent country, richly cultivated, terminatés with the blue ridges of the Taunus. As I stood, lost in thought, leaning against a fragment of the mutilated steeple of 1509, the heavens became overcast, and the clouds, driven by the wind, covered and uncovered every moment



large patches of azure, shedding 'upon the earth corresponding allotments of light and shade.

Both city and horizon were beautiful in this guise. Nature is never fairer than when arrayed in her striped tiger-skin. I thought myself alone upon the tower, and would fain have stayed there the rest of the day; when suddenly, hearing a slight movement, I turned about, and found a young girl close to me, half protruding from a trap, and smiling at me.

Turning an angle of the Pfarrthurm, I found myself surrounded by the inhabitants of the steeple, a small but happy world. The young girl, who occupies herself with knitting; an old woman, with her spinning-wheel; doves cooing upon the water-spouts of the church; a facetious monkey, who from his hutch courteously extends his hand; the clock weight rising and falling with a deadened noise, to give life to a set of puppets in the church, where the Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire were crowned; the whole enveloped in the profound calm peculiar to such lofty places, composed as they are of the whispers of the breeze, the rays of the sun, and the splendour of nature. What can be more pure or charming? The old bell-room has been converted into the sleeping-room of the young girl; there she has placed her bed in the shade, and sings her life away, like the chimes before her, but with a softer voice, for she sings only for herself and God. Beside one of the unfinished buttresses, the poor widow makes the thrifty fire by which she prepares her frugal fare.

Such is the steeple of Frankfort. Why these

people live there, I know not. What may be their occupation, I cannot guess; but still the little household pleased me. This old Imperial city, which has figured in so many wars, received so many shots, and enthroned so many Cæsars—whose walls were once like a coat of mail, whose eagle held in its talons the diadems which the Austrian eagle placed upon her double head—is now dominated by the humble hearth of an old woman, which puts forth its meagre smoke, high above all—whenever she can afford to have a fire.