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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Letter XXIII.

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LETTER XXIII.

BINGEN—MAYENCE.

September.

BINGEN is a charming and pretty town; solemn, like a town of ancient date, and yet exhibiting the gaiety of a modern one; which, from the time of the consul Drusus to that of the Emperor Charlemagne, from Charlemagne until Archbishop Willigis, from the archbishop till the merchant Montemagno, from Montemagno to the visionary Holzhausen, and from him to the notary Fabre, now ruling and reigning in the castle of Drusus—has increased and crept on, house by house, in the Y of the Rhine and the Nähe, just as the dew accumulates in the corolla of a lily. Excuse the comparison, but it has the merit of being true, and faithfully describing, in all cases possible, the mode of formation of a town situated upon a confluence of rivers.

Everything contributes to render Bingen a kind of antithesis, built in the midst of a landscape, which is another antithesis. The town, hemmed in to the left by the river, to the right by the stream, develops itself in the form of a triangle; in the midst of which is a Gothic church backed by a Roman citadel. This last is of the first century, and, having after served as a stronghold to marauding

knights, now contains the garden of the curate. In the church, which is of the 15th century, stands the tomb of the reputed sorcerer Barthélemy of Holzhausen, whom the Elector of Mayence would have burned as a magician, if he had not preferred to hire him as an astrologer. In the direction of Mayence, commences the verdant and fertile country of the Rheingau, and in that of Coblenz, the mountains of Leyen knit their savage brows. Here nature laughs like a beautiful nymph frolicing upon the grass; while there, on the contrary, she scowls like a reclining giant.

Numerous remembrances, represented in one instance by a forest, in another by a rock, in another by an edifice, present themselves in this corner of the Rheingau. Lower down, yonder green hill is the joyous Johannisberg, at the foot of which stands the formidable square fort flanking the angle of the strong town of Rudesheim, for some time the advance-post of the Romans. On the summit of the Niederwald, opposite Bingen, on the borders of a fine forest, upon a hill commencing the stricture of the Rhine, and which in the olden time barred up its passage, stands a small temple with white columns, not unlike the rotunda of a Parisian coffee-house, on the site of the superb and gloomy Ehrenfels, constructed in the twelfth century by Archbishop Siegfried, once a formidable citadel, now a superb ruin. The baby-house predominates, and humiliates the fortress.

On the other side of the Rhine, upon the Rupertsberg, which looks towards Niederwald, among the ruins of the convent of Disibodenberg, is the

holy well dug by St. Hildegarde, adjoining the infamous tower built by Hatto. The convent is buried in vines, the tower surrounded by gulphs. The latter is used as a forge, while the Prussian custom-house is established in the convent. The spectre of Hatto listens to the clang of the anvil, and the shade of Hildegarde is privy to the gauging of spirits!

By a curious contrast, the insurrection of Civilis, which destroyed the bridge of Drusus; the war of the Palatinate, which destroyed the bridge of Willigis; the legions of Tutor, the quarrels of the Burgraves, Adolph of Nassau and Didier of Isembourg, the Normans in 890, the townsmen of Creuznach in 1279, the Archbishop Baldwin of Trèves in 1334, the plague in 1349, the inundation in 1458, the Palatine bailiff Goler de Ravensberg, in 1496, the Landgrave William of Hesse in 1504, the Thirty Years' war, the revolutionary and imperial armies;—all these devastations have successively swept over this happy and serene plain; while the most captivating personages of the liturgy and legend, Gela, Jutta, Liba, Guda; Gisela, the lovely daughter of Brœmsen; Hildegarde, the companion of St. Bernard; Hiltruda, the penitent of pope Eugene; have by turns abided among these gloomy rocks. The smell of blood is still on the plain; the odour of sanctity and perfume of loveliness still linger among the mountains.

The more you examine this beautiful spot, the clearer to look and thought becomes the antithesis. It assumes a thousand forms. Just as the Nähe clears the arches of the stone bridge, upon the

parapet of which the Hessian Lion turns its back upon the Prussian Eagle, which the Hessians say is a sign of contempt, and the Prussians, on the contrary, of fear; at the moment, I say, that the Nâhe, which flows gently on from Mont Tonnerre, passes under this frontier bridge, the bronze-green arm of the Rhine seizes upon the languid river, and carries it straight off into the Bingerloch. What passes in the gulf into which it is there plunged, is known only to the gods; but certain it is, that never did Jupiter of old bestow a more sleepy nymph upon a more impetuous monster.

The church of Bingen is plastered without and within with a grey colour; this is absurd enough. But the abominable restorations now going on in France will end by reconciling me with plaster and whitewashing. The most deplorable instance I know of this kind is the reparation of the abbey of St. Denis, now alas! complete; and that of Nôtre Dame de Paris, at this time in progress. I shall return some day to these two acts of Vandalism, feeling a personal shame in thinking that the first was accomplished in the heart of our metropolis, and the second in the eyes of all Paris. By our silence, our endurance, our indifference, we are all guilty of this double architectural crime, and we shall all justly merit the condemnation of posterity, when, in the presence of these defaced, mutilated, and degraded edifices, they call our century to account for those two admirable monuments, beautiful among the beautiful, illustrious among the illustrious of temples; the one, the metropolitan church of royalty, the other of France!

Let us hide our faces! Such restorations are tantamount to demolition.

To wash or plaster is only an act of stupidity, it does not destroy, but merely soils, smears, tattoos, disfigures, and renders buildings ridiculous and frightful. It travesties the bright idea of Cæsar Cæsariano, or Herwyn de Steinback, into the mask of Gautier Garguille; beflowering the face of a fine building like that of a clown—nothing more. Scrape off the offending plaster, and you will find the aspect of the venerable church pure and dignified as ever.

To repose upon the summit of the Klopp, about the approach of sunset, and gaze upon the city beneath, and the immense horizon around you, watch the hill-tops darken, the curling smoke, the extending shadows, the verses of Virgil vivified in the landscape; inhaling the united breezes of the river and the mountains, when the air is genial, the season mild, and the day fine, is an exquisite and inexpressible sensation, replete with a mysterious charm, derived at once from the grandeur of the scenery, and the depth of contemplation it engenders. Beside the open attic windows, young girls are sitting, with their eyes fixed upon their work; the birds chirp gaily in the ivy on the walls; the streets re-echo with industry and happiness; you hear the splash of the oars from the boats upon the Rhine, and watch the fluctuations of the sails. The pigeons hover round the steeples, the river subsides into a mirror, the sky grows clear and pale, a horizontal sunbeam in the distance penetrates the clouds of dust afar off upon the ducal road from Rüdesheim

to Biberich, showing the brilliant equipages, which seem to glitter in its light, as if drawn by four flying stars. The washerwomen on the banks are drying their linen on the bushes; those on the Nähe beating it with naked feet, upon rafts of fir, moored at the river's edge, and laughing heartily as they work at the tourist, who stands near them, sketching the Ehrenfels. The Mäisethurm, amidst this general joy and sunshine, smokes on in silence, under the sombre shade of the mountains.

The sun sets, and night usurps its place; the roofs of the city appear to form but one. The mountains become confounded into one gloomy mass, amid which vanishes the white lustre of the Rhine. Crape-like mists rise slowly from the horizon to the zenith. The diminutive steamer from Mayence to Bingen takes up its station for the night before the Victoria Hotel. The washerwomen return home with bundles on their heads. All noise ceases. A last rosy gleam, like the reflection of a better sphere upon the face of a dying person, still colours, on the summit of the rocks, the pale visage of Ehrenfels, marked with haggard traces of decay. Even this disappears, and the tower of Hatto, almost imperceptible two hours before, now becomes a prominent feature in the landscape. Its smoke, black during the day, becomes luminous at night with the fire of the forge; and like the revengeful soul of the wicked, seems to rejoice in the general gloom.

Some days ago, I was on the towers of the Klopp, and while indulging in these reveries, and my mind wandering I know not where, a window suddenly

opened in a roof beneath me ; and I heard the pure fresh voice of a young girl singing the following plaintive and mournful words :—

Plas mi cavalier Frances,
 E la dona Catalana,
 E l'ouraz del Ginoes,
 E la court de Castelana.
 Lou cantaz Provençales
 E la danza Trevisana,
 E lou corps Aragones,
 La mans a Kara d'Angles,
 E lou donzel de Toscana.

I recognized the joyous verses of Frederick Barbarossa, and cannot describe to you the effect they produced upon me, in that Roman ruin transformed into a notary's villa, amid the darkness brightened only by the candle of my pretty songstress, two hundred yards from the Maïse tower, now a smithy ; close to the Victoria hotel, and with a steam omnibus moored before its door. This imperial song, accented by the lips of a German peasant, this outburst of the Provençal gaiety of times of yore, subsided into a melancholy ditty ; this ray of the time of the Crusades, piercing the darkness of ages, and awaking me, a poor wandering dreamer, from my reveries, was a curious and striking trait of the pertinacity of life of immortal verse. As I have alluded to the music I heard on the Rhine, why should I scruple to relate to you that at Braubach, as the steamer stopped to set some passengers on shore, a band of students, seated upon the trunk of a tree detached from some raft of the Murg, were singing in chorus, with German words, that beautiful air of Quasimado, which forms one of the remarkable

beauties in Mademoiselle Bertin's opera of the 'Esmeralda.' Some day or other, justice will be done to that remarkable composition, which at its first appearance was so harshly and unjustly treated. The public, too often misled by cabals fatal to the efforts of genius, will eventually revise a condemnation fomented by the malice of political party, professional envy, and the venom of literary coteries; and admire, as it deserves, that truly beautiful music, so pathetic, so graceful, yet at moments so melancholy; a creation combining all that is most tender and most grave in the heart of woman, and all that is earnest in the soul of man. Germany has done justice to this work: so will France, *in time!*

Having little faith in guide-book curiosities, I confess that I did not go to see the horn, the nuptial bed, and iron chain of old Brœmser. But I visited the square donjon of Rüdeshheim, now belonging to an intelligent proprietor, who fully understands that, in order to remain a palace, it must remain a ruin. Mansions, like gentlemen, are the nobler for their antiquity.

How perfect is this donjon! Roman crypts, Gothic walls; a banquet room, of which the table is lit by a chandelier formed like a fleural crown, similar to that of Charlemagne; stained glass of the period of the revival of the arts; watchdogs of Homeric size, which guard the court; iron lanterns of the thirteenth century hooked to the wall; winding staircases; bottomless oubliettes; sepulchral urns ranged in a kind of ossuary; thousands of fearful things, on the summit of which extends a beautiful terrace of flowers and verdure.

The present proprietor of the ruin bestows his attention entirely upon its floral embellishments; which consist of the natural vegetations of the spot, cultivated into richness. There are walks intersecting this monstrous bouquet; which, on the spot, proves to be a garden; and, at a distance, looks like a crown of flowers.

The acclivities of Johannisberg shelter these venerable remains, which the genial air of the south reaches through windows opening on the Rhine. I know no breeze more grateful or literary, than that self-same south wind. It inspires ideas which are profound, cheering, and ennobling. While warming the body, it seems to enlighten the mind. The Athenians, who knew everything, have expressed this idea in their ingenious sculptures. In the reliefs of the Temple of the Winds, the north winds are hideous and hairy, have a look of stupidity, and are dressed like barbarians; while the soft and genial winds are attired in the garb of the philosophers of Greece.

At Bingen, I saw, at the extremity of the public-room, two tables differently served. At one sat a fat Bavarian major, speaking more or less French; who every day saw set before him a regular German dinner of five courses, which he scarcely ever touched. At the other table sat a poor devil before his solitary dish of sauerkraut, which having devoured, he passed the remainder of his time in feasting his hungry eyes upon the pantagruelic display of his neighbour. Till then I never understood the saying of d'Ablancourt: "Providence gives to one man meat, to the other appetite."

The poor devil was a young scholar, pale, serious, much addicted to entomology, and a little in love with the chambermaid; a common characteristic of learned men; though, by the way, a learned man in love is to me a problem. How is it possible to reconcile the crosses, jealousies, angers, and lost time of love, with the solitudes and unceasing meditations essential to the life of a scholar? How, for instance could the learned Huxham, who, in his fine treatise, "*De aëre et morbis epidemicis*," has calculated, month by month, from 1724 to 1746, the quantity of rain fallen at Plymouth during twenty-two years consecutively, find leisure for the exactions of a tender passion?

Imagine Romeo counting through a microscope the seventeen thousand facets of a fly's eye; or Don Juan, with an apron, analysing the paratartrate of antimony, and the paratartrovinat of potash; or Othello, leaning over a lentile, attempting to detect vegetable mysteries, by means of decomposition, in the fossil farina of the Chinese.

Nevertheless, my young entomologist was decidedly in love; spoke French better than the major; and had an original system of the universe—but not a penny in his pocket. I love systems, though I have little faith in them. Descartes was a visionary; Huyghens modified the dreams of Descartes; and Mariotte modified the modifications of Huyghens. Where Descartes saw stars, Huyghens saw globules; and Mariotte, needles. What has been proved by all these hypotheses? Nothing but the insignificance of man and the greatness of God. This, however, is something. As I said before, I

love a system. Systems are the ladders by which we ultimately scale the altitudes of truth.

My young scholar sometimes came, about the hour of the table d'hôte, to drink a bottle of beer; when I used to take up a newspaper and watch him, as I sat in the recess of the window. The table d'hôte of the Victoria was ill composed and inharmonious, as is the case with most things which chance brings into juxtaposition. At the upper end, there sat an elderly Englishwoman, with three beautiful children; a duenna rather than a nurse, an aunt rather than a mother. I pitied these little creatures; for the bony fingers of the old woman were ever ready for reproof. The Bavarian major occasionally sat by her side, in order to improve his appetite. He usually conversed with a Parisian lawyer, who said he was going to Baden, because "every body seemed to go there." Near the lawyer sat an old gentleman, more than octogenarian, his hair white, and having that look of goodness which often precedes the close of human existence. He was fond of quoting from Horace; and being toothless, the word "*mors*" became "*mox*;" which, in the mouth of so aged a man, sounded melancholy enough.

Opposite the old man, was a gentleman who indulged in French versification; and read us some verses upon Holland, in which he alluded to the "*harangues*" which swarm in their seas!—I confess I never heard of any other fishy fry there than *harengs*.

To complete the party, we had two Alsatian tradesmen, enriched by the smuggling of weasel skins; who have now votes, and are eligible for

juries. They sat smoking their pipes, and relating their adventures—the same old stories, told over and over again, of which, having invariably forgotten the names of the *dramatis personæ*, one was sure to be called Mr. Whatdoyecallhim, and the other, Mr. Thingumee.

The versemonger was one of those erudite, philosophical, constitutional, Voltairian fellows, who, as he was always boasting, delighted in the mining of prejudices; indulging in commonplace sneers upon all established usages, and disparaging those holy and grave institutions which are respected by decent minds. He liked, as he said, to thrust his lance into the focus of human errors; and though he seldom selected the real windmills of the century, chose to nickname himself, in his facetious moments, Don Quixote.

Now and then the lawyer and the poet, though well suited to each other, chose to dispute. The poet, to complete his portrait, was a man of incomprehensible comprehension; a man of chaotic understanding; one of those men who stammer in conversation, and scribble when they write. The lawyer, on the other hand, was triumphantly fluent; and could triumphantly spout on, for two hours together, like a water-pipe opened by a turncock,

“In one weak, washy, everlasting flood.”

Upon this, the entomologist, who was really clever, used, in his turn, to annihilate the lawyer. He spoke admirably, and generally with applause; but ever and anon kept looking askance, to ascertain whether the “*magd*” were listening.

One day, he was perorating upon the virtue of

resignation and self-abnegation. But as he was fasting, and philosophy is a sorry supper without dessert, I asked him to dinner. Though he could scarcely infer to what country I belonged from the words I uttered, he accepted my proposal; and we entered into conversation, and made friends.

We made several excursions to the Mäusethurm and the right bank of the river together, for which I hired the boat.

Such were my adventures at Bingen. The town, though not large, is remarkable for its incessant demands upon your purse. A perpetual recurrence of the words "something to drink," leaves the traveller, at the close of his sojourn, reduced almost to extenuation.

By the way, at Bacharach, I left the realm of dollars, *silbergrossen* and *pfennings*, for that of kreutzers and florins. Darkness invisible!

Here is about the manner of proceeding in making a purchase.

"How much is this?" you inquire.

The shopkeeper replies, "one florin, fifty-three kreutzers."

"I do not understand?"

"Sir, it makes in Prussian money, a dollar, two groschen, and eighteen pfennings."

"I beg your pardon, but I do not exactly understand?"

"Sir, a florin is worth two francs, three sols, and a centime; a Prussian dollar is worth three francs and three quarters; a *silbergrossen*, two sous and a half; a kreutzer three quarters of a sou; a pfenning three quarters of a liard."

To all this I can only answer, like Don Cæsar, "clear as daylight;" open my purse, and trust to the proverbial honesty which is probably the Ubian altar alluded to by Tacitus; "*Ara Ubiorum*." Moreover the Hessians pronounce kreutzer, "*creusse*," the Badeners "*criche*," and the Swiss "*cruche*"—confusion worse confounded, to a traveller.