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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Letter VIII.

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LETTER VIII.

BANKS OF THE VESDRE—VERVIERS.

Aix-la-Chapelle, August 4.

YESTERDAY, at nine in the morning, as the diligence for Aix-la-Chapelle was about to start, a worthy Walloon chose to refuse a place on the imperial; reminding me of the Auvergnat peasant, who declared he had paid to be in the box, and not in the opera. I offered to change places with him, and mounted to the roof, which pacified him, and the diligence started. Luckily for me, the road was gay and interesting. We are no longer upon the Meuse, but the Vesdre, the former striking off, by Maestricht and Ruremonde, towards Rotterdam and the sea.

The Vesdre is a torrent which descends from St. Cornelis-Munster, between Aix-la-Chappelle and Duren, flowing through Verviers and Chaudfontaines to Liège, along a most beautiful valley. The road runs parallel with the river, and they journey on happily together through thriving villages, among the trees, where there is a rustic bridge before every door; or in a lonely bend of the valley, they creep together under the shade

of some old manor, with its square towers, high pointed roof, and front containing curiously-contrived windows, at once proud and unassuming; an edifice that is something between the residence of a farmer and a lord. Suddenly the scene becomes more gay and noisy; and on the turn of a hill, the eye falls into a mass of willows and alders, through which the rays of the sun bring to light a low built house, with an immense black wheel glittering with showers of jewels, which, in vulgar parlance, is called a watermill.

Betwixt Chaudfontaines and Verviers, the valley is almost Virgilian. The weather was divine; charming children were gambolling about the gardens; while groups of cattle were picturesquely basking in the green meadows. Further on, in the midst of a luxuriant enclosure, stood a solitary cow, of such remarkable beauty as would have entitled her to be watched by Argus—a second Io. A shepherd's pipe was audible from the mountains:—

“Mercurius septem muleet arundinibus.”

but every now and then a factory chimney, or pieces of cloth drying in the sun, afforded a sad interruption to these eclogues.

The railroad which traverses Belgium, from Ostend and Antwerp to Liège, and which will shortly reach Verviers, will penetrate these fine hills, and invade these tranquil valleys.

According to this colossal project, the railroad

will pierce the mountain twelve or fifteen times. At every step one perceives terraces, mounds of rubbish, foundations of viaducts, and bridges; or at the base of a block of granite, a busy multitude of human ants, busily engaged in their arduous toil. These little black insects are achieving the work of giants.

Occasionally, when the holes they have perforated are large and deep, thick vapours and a roaring sound are emitted, as if the mountain were giving vent to its sufferings. This is some mine on the point of exploding. The diligence stops, the workmen on the adjoining terrace fly in all directions, and the thunder of an explosion is echoed from hill to hill, while fragments of rock are showered on every side. I heard of a man having been killed, and a tree cut in two, by a mass weighing twenty tons, and that a workman's wife, carrying food to her husband, had shared the same fate. More interruptions to my pastoral!

Verviers, an insignificant town, is divided into three quarters, named the *Chick Chack*, the *Basse Crotte* and the *Dardanelle*. I saw a little boy sedately smoking his pipe, who was not more than six years old; and on witnessing my surprise, the young smoker laughed immoderately, by which, I conclude, that I appeared as ridiculous to *him* as he to me.

From Verviers the road runs along the bank of the Vesdres as far as Limbourg, that pasty of

which Louis XIV. found the crust so hard to digest; but which is now only a dismantled fortress, prettily situated on the brow of a hill.

We are now once more upon the plain, and entering through a wide gate-way, discover by the ceremonial of a custom-house, and a sentry-box striped with black and yellow, that we have entered the dominions of the King of Prussia.