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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Letter VI.

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LETTER VI.

THE BANKS OF THE MEUSE—DINANT—NAMUR.

Liege, August 3.

I AM just arrived at Liege by a most charming road, having followed the course of the Meuse from Givet hither.

The banks of the Meuse are indeed beautiful: I wonder they are so little cited. A few words may serve to describe their leading features.

After the village in which myself and the morning sun had the satisfaction of presiding at the toilet of the pretty peasant girl, you ascend a hill which reminded me of the Val-Suzon, near Dijon, and where the road winds upon itself snakewise during three-quarters of an hour, in the midst of a forest, through deep ravines, the channels of torrents. Then follows an extensive landscape of plains resembling those of Beance; when suddenly the ground breaks to the left; and the road commands an awful precipice, accessible only to vegetation. It is at least three hundred feet high, and at the bottom, as if sailing among the trees, one perceives the boats peacefully gliding along the Meuse; while on the bank

stands a pretty villa, somewhat resembling the ornaments of a clock-case of the time of Louis XV., with a Liliputian basin, and a whimsical miniature Pompadour garden, in which at a glance you may discern every detail of the place. Nothing is more disgusting than this Chinese burlesque of nature; a protest made by the vulgar taste of man against the poetry of nature. On losing sight of the gulf, the plain recommences, for the ravine made by the Meuse cuts asunder the plain as a furrow a field.

A quarter of a league farther, they lock the carriage-wheel; and the road gradually declines towards the river. This time the abyss is delightfully ornamented by multitudes of flowers, and fine trees, brightened by the clear light of the morning sky.

Orchards, fenced by high hedges, enliven either side of the road, and the green Meuse flows along between precipitous banks. Another river, less considerable, but still more beautiful, here joins the Meuse—the Lesse. Three leagues farther is the well-known grotto of Han-sur-Lesse, from which the road rapidly recedes. The noise of the numerous water-mills of the Lesse produces a curious echo from the mountains.

The left bank of the Meuse hereabouts presents an uninterrupted series of farms and villages, gradually declining, while the right bank as gradually increases in elevation. A buttress of rocks encroaches even on the road, while the briars on

their jagged brows are seen to tremble two hundred feet above our heads. A high pyramidal rock, pointed and bold, like the spire of a cathedral, suddenly shows itself at the turn of the road.

"Yonder is Bayard's rock," exclaimed the conductor, as we pursued the road leading between the mountain and this colossal stone, and then turning sharply at the foot of an enormous mass of granite, crested with a citadel. The eye now traces a lengthy street of antiquated houses, connected with the left bank by a fine bridge, and terminated at the extremity by the sharp roofs and broad windows of a church of the fifteenth century. This is Dinant, where you halt for a quarter of an hour, just long enough to remark a pretty little garden, so cultivated as to convince you that you are in Flanders; the flowers being exquisite, but interspersed with the inevitable statues of pottery-ware. One of them represented a woman dressed in a gingham gown and straw hat. But on a closer investigation, and thanks to the indications afforded by a little trickling sound, I discovered that she was intended for the water-nymph of a fountain.

The spire of the church of Dinant is, as usual, a huge pipkin. Nevertheless, viewed from the bridge, the front is imposing; and altogether the town has an interesting appearance. At Dinant you quit the right bank of the Meuse. The suburb of the left bank, through which you pass, is

admirably disposed round an old stronghold, now crumbling to pieces, which formed part of the old fortress. At the foot of this tower, I detected, amid a block of houses, an interesting specimen of architecture of the fifteenth century, with the usual turrets, stone-windows, and fantastical weather-cocks.

On leaving Dinant, the valley widens; and the Meuse becomes broader. To the right, upon distant heights, are seen two castles in ruins. The valley still widening, the rocks disappear, and pastures, of a velvet green, embroidered with flowers, are everywhere visible, interspersed with hop-grounds, orchards, and trees, covered with more fruit than foliage; the purple plum, the rosy apple, and the scarlet clusters of the service-tree, looking like vegetable coral. The road appears to swarm with cackling poultry; and the boatmen send forth their merry carols from the river, for the amusement of the smart young maidens, with bare arms, and heavy baskets of grass upon their heads, who are seen trudging along the road. Then comes the village cemetery, as if to rebuke this lightness and joyousness of the scene. In one of these village churchyards, I read the following inscription:—

“O pie, defunctis miseris succurre, viator!”

No memento can, in my opinion, be more touching. Generally the dead warn the living; here they supplicate them. Further on, having passed a hill where the rocks are worn and fluted

by the rain, like our old time-worn fountain of the Luxembourg (which, by the way, is now submitted to such ill-advised restoration), the vicinity of Namur becomes apparent. Villas begin to obtrude themselves on the peasants' hovels; statues are to be seen among the rocks; the hop-grounds blend with parks. Nor is the effect of this admixture by any means disagreeable.

Our diligence changed horses in one of these composite villages; where, on one side, I perceived a magnificent garden, embellished with colonnades and Ionic temples; and on the opposite one, a beer-house with a group of Flemish carousers, shaded by a splendid rose-tree in full bloom. Within the gold-pointed spears, forming the palisade of the villa, stood a pedestal supporting a statue of Venus, half concealing herself amid the surrounding verdure, as if indignant at being contemplated by the coarse eyes of a horde of Flemish boors. Further on stood a well laden plum-tree, submitting to the ravages of some laughing girls; one of whom, poised with one foot upon a branch, seemed like a fairy about to take her flight. An hour afterwards, I was at Namur.

The two valleys of the Sambre and Meuse unite at Namur, which is situated at the confluence of the streams. The women here are peculiarly prepossessing, while the men exhibit grave, good, and hospitable countenances. As

to the city itself, it has nothing remarkable, with the exception of the view from the two bridges of the Sambre and Meuse. The history of the city is effaced from its configuration; and it possesses neither architecture, monuments, edifices, nor old houses. Four or five mean looking churches,* some bad specimens of fountains, in the style of Louis XV., are all it has to exhibit. Namur never inspired but two odes; that of Boileau and another, the subjects of which are an old woman and the prince of Orange. To say the truth, this is as much as she merits.

The citadel predominates coldly over the town; still I could not view, without feelings of respect, those lines which were attacked by Vauban, and defended by Cohorn.

Where there are no churches to interest my attention, I study the signs of the shops, which, to the curious eye, afford much information. Independent of the various callings and local trades, there is also as much physiognomy in the phraseology and names of the inhabitants, as in the more highly sounding titles of the nobility.

I send you three names taken at hazard from the shop-fronts of Namur; each possessing a peculiarity. "*L'épouse Debarsy, negociante*;" in reading which, one knows one-self to be in a country French one day, and the day following, belong-

* Victor Hugo seems to have neglected the superb interior of the Church of the Jesuits.

ing to some other nation, where the language has altered and degenerated. A clumsy German idiom is sure to ensue. The next name is "*Crucifix Piret, mercier*." Here one perceives the influence of Catholic Flanders. Whether as name or surname, Crucifix could not exist in Voltairianized France.—"*Menendez Wodon, horloger*." What a strange jumble of Spanish, Flemish, and French;—the whole history of the low countries included in three words! By the interpretation of these three shop-fronts, I am enabled to trace three national peculiarities; the one as regards the language, the other as regards the religion, the last, as regards the history of Flanders.

Let me also remark that, in Dinant, Namur, and Liege, the name of *Demeuse* is of common occurrence; just as in the neighbourhood of Paris or Rouen you see *Desenne* and *Deseine*.

I must not forget the name of "*Janus*," a baker; which reminds me that, in the faubourg St. Denis, at Paris, there is also one *Nero*, a confectioner; while at Arles, upon the entablature of a Roman temple in ruins, you read the name of "*Marius*, hair-cutter and peruquier."