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Up the Rhine

Hood, Thomas

London, 1840

To Peter Bagster, Esq., Canterbury

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TO PETER BAGSTER, ESQ., CANTERBURY.

MY DEAR PETER,—I am not a man to be easily shocked, but I don't know when I've been more struck of a heap, since my pitch off Jupiter into the gravel pit, than by your precious letter to my nephew. Suppose you did not hear from me, what then? A hundred things might turn up to prevent my taking pen in hand—but no,—dead I was to be, and dead I am, and I suppose stuck into all the newspapers, with a flourish about my Xtian fortitude and resignation. I know I named Rotterdam, but why didn't you wait for my letter from Nimeguen? I cannot help thinking that, as an old friend, you might have staid a post or two, and hoped for the best, instead of taking a flying leap to such a melancholy conclusion. Even as an old sportsman, you ought to have known better, than to cry who-ooop before I was fairly run into. God knows, I am but too likely to die every day and hour of my life, without being killed before my time. If it had been a first warning, there was some excuse for giving me over—but you know as well as any one, how many fatal attacks I have pulled through in the most miraculous manner. Go I must, and suddenly, but owing to a wonderful original constitution, as you are well aware of, I die particularly hard. Besides, you and Truby were always incredulous, and even if you had seen me laid

out in my coffin, it's my belief you would both have sworn it was all sham abram. I must say, Peter, it has gone to my heart. Five and twenty years have we been hand and glove, more like born brothers than old friends, and here you knock me on the head with as little ceremony as a penny-a-line fellow would kill the Grand Turk, or the King of France. Hang me, Peter, if I can believe you are your own man. As for proving the Will, and so forth, it's the first time I ever knew you to be prompt in law business, instead of quite the reverse; for, asking your pardon, you did not get the nickname of "Lord Eldon" for nothing amongst your clients in Kent. Then to put the whole house into mourning! I don't mind expense; but it goes against the grain to be made ridiculous, and a laughing-stock, which I shall be whenever I get back to Woodlands after being made a ghost of to my own servants. A rare joke it will be amongst them for John to be sent by a dead and gone master for a jug of ale! Besides, who knows but I may be run after by all the fools in the parish, and kissed and sung hymns to, and made a prophet of, for coming back out of my own grave, as you know your idiots down at Canterbury expected about Mad Thom!

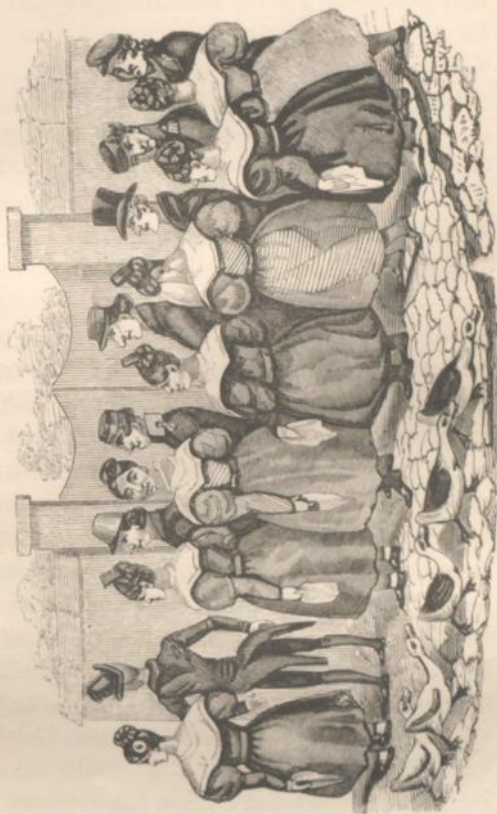
But that is not the worst. You not only kill me out of hand, but, forsooth, you must take away my character to my own nephew. In your Burking letter to him you say, "and so, those gloomy forebodings which, amongst your late worthy Uncle's friends were looked upon as mere nervous fancies, and vapourish croakings,

have, alas! been sadly fulfilled." Croakings indeed! I always knew I should die suddenly, and I always said so, and proved it by my symptoms and inward feelings; but is a man for that to be made out a complete hypochondriac, which I never was in my life! I don't wish to be harsh, but if anything *could* frighten and flurry such a poor hypped croaking creature as you have made of me, out of this world into the other, it would be just such an undertaker's black pall as you have chucked over me in the shape of a condoling letter! Luckily my own nerves are of a tougher texture, but poor Kate cried and sobbed over your infernal black-edged funeral sermon, with its comfortings and sympathisings, as if I had been fairly dead and buried in the family vault. However, I shall now drop the uncomfortable subject, hoping you will not take amiss a few words of serious advice, namely, not to treat an old friend like a defunct one, just because he don't write by every post that he is alive.

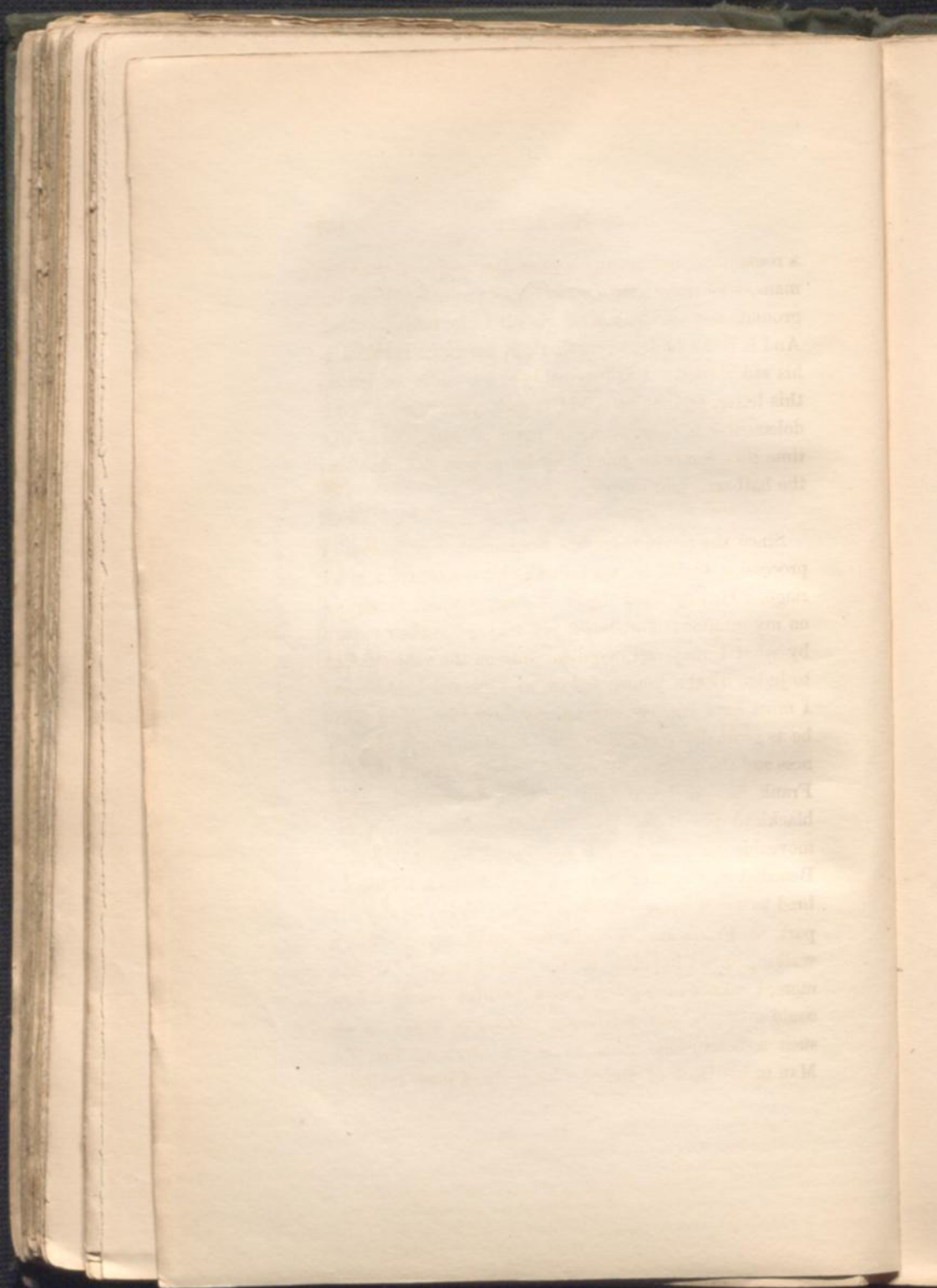
This plaguy business has so put me off the hooks, that you must excuse particulars as to our foreign travels. But I writ to Truby from Cologne, and what's better, I sent the Hock wine I bet him, and if you ride over, mayhap he will let you look at a bottle and the letter at the same time. At this present we are at Coblenz, where we have taken lodgings for a month. The truth is, it is all on poor Kate's account, for foreign travelling is harder work than in England, for females—and I shall not be sorry myself to fetch up my sleep, for between shipboard and outlandish short beds, and

strange bedding, and the musical disturbances at Bonn, I have never had one good night's rest since I left the Tower stairs.

But you must not go to suppose, old friend, from the month's lodgings that I have better hopes of myself, or of a longer run; but there were no apartments to be had for a shorter time, and I was sick of the bustle of the Hotel. If I was foolish enough to try to forget my dispensation, I should have been reminded by two German funerals that passed this very morning to the parish church of St. Castor's, hard by. As you may like to know the ceremony—the hearse, very like a deer-cart, was covered by a black pall with a large white cross, and the letters B. S., which I suppose meant Burial Society; for, besides a cross-bearer and a flag-bearer, there were about a score of regular attendants, all carrying lighted tapers and singing a hymn, though the solemnity of the thing was a little put out of sorts by the jerking antics of one man, who kept rolling his head about like a Harlequin with St. Vitus's dance. The mourners walked behind the hearse, with a prodigious long train of friends and towns-folk; but after the service they all dispersed at the Church door, whereby, the ground being a good mile out of town, the poor old gentleman went to his grave with only a boy with a cross before him, and nobody at all behind him; just as if he had gone off in a huff, or been sent to Coventry by all that belonged to him. The same, to our English notions looking rather neglectful and disrespectful, and to my mind, not in character with such



"PVE, LET US A' TO THE BRIDAL."



a romantical, feeling, and sentimental people as the Germans,—whereby I have made Frank promise to go to the ground, and see the last of me till I am fairly earthed. And it won't be long, poor fellow, before he is called to his sad duties. I feel sensibly worse since beginning this letter, and as such, old friend, your card of condolment was only wrong in point of date, and by the time this comes to hand may be a true bill, down to the hatbands and gloves.

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Since the above there has been another guess-sort of procession to old St. Castor's Church—namely, a marriage. Having lived single so long, without enlarging on my opinions of wedlock, you may guess their nature by what I may call my silent vote on the subject. But to judge by the young fellow who played bridegroom I must have been wrong all my days, for there must be as great difference of quality between single blessedness and the other, as between single Gloster and Stilton. Frank has sketched him off with his "tail,"—but blacklead pencil can give no notion of his action and moveable airs. Zounds! you would have thought a Benedict was as much above a Bachelor as a thoroughbred to a cart horse. And mayhap so he is; but for my part, as Frank said, I could not make myself such a walking object in public, for the best of women. What's more, I cannot even guess how a bashful young fellow could ever get over a German courtship, if it's at all such a before-folk affair as is described by the Old Man in his Book of Bubbles—namely, a lover taking a

romantic country walk with his intended, and eight or ten of her she-cronics, singing, laughing, and waltzing, after her heels. Without being particularly sheepish or shamefaced as a young man, I don't think I could have gone sweet-hearting with half a score of bouncing girls, ballad-singing, and whirligigging along with me, all agog, of course, to see how love was made, giggling at my tender sentiments, and mayhap scoring every kiss like a notch at cricket, provided one could have the face to kiss at all in such a company. But foreign love-making is like foreign cookery; an egg is an egg all the world over, but there are a hundred ways of dishing it up.

And now, old friend, God bless you and all your family, by way of a last farewell from your old and faithful friend,

RICHARD ORCHARD.

I wish you could see the breed of pigs in these parts. They are terribly long in the legs, and thin in the flanks, and would cut a far better figure at a Coursing Meeting than a Cattle Show. Some of them quite run lean enough for greyhounds.

