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**Up the Rhine**

**Hood, Thomas**

**London, 1840**

To Miss Wilmot, at Woodlands

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## TO MISS WILMOT, AT WOODLANDS.

MY DEAR MARGARET,—With any one else I should feel ashamed and alarmed at my long silence ; but you well know the state of my nerves and feelings, and will give me credit for not wishing to disturb your happier thoughts with the effusions of my own bad spirits. Besides, I have met with so many annoyances and disagreeables ! However, you will be glad to hear that I am getting more reconciled to foreign travelling : it is very fatiguing ; but the lovely scenery, since we left Bonn, has almost repaid me for all my troubles by the way. I will not attempt to describe the beautiful mountains, the romantic old castles, and the pretty outlandish villages,—but whenever you marry, Margaret, pray stipulate for a wedding excursion up the Rhine ! One painful thought, indeed, would intrude,—if *he* could have enjoyed the scenery with me—for you remember poor George's fondness for picturesque views and sketching—but I must not be so ungrateful as to repine whilst our tour has brought such relief to my own mind, as well as amendment to my health. Even my brother seems to have benefited by the change of air and scene,—he is decidedly less hypped, and his warnings come at longer intervals. I even think he is getting a little ashamed of them, they have failed so

very, very often—and especially since a letter from Mr. Bagster to Frank, supposing his Uncle to be deceased:—but above all, after a warning he had on the top of a mountain, when a ridiculous German offered to die along with him, which turned the tragedy into such a comedy, that my poor brother, as Frank says, threw up the part, and we have hopes will never perform in the piece again. He almost expressed as much to me, in relating this last attack. “I’m afraid, Kate,” said he, “you will begin to think that I’m as fond of dying over and over again as the famous Romeo Coates.”

I am delighted with Coblenz, where we have taken lodgings for a month. For some days after our arrival we dined at the table-d’hôte, but I cannot say that I like the style of cookery. Somebody declares in his travels, that when a German dish is not sour it is sure to be greasy, and when it is not greasy it is certain to be sour; but the cook at our hotel went a step further in his art, for he contrived to make his dishes both sour and greasy at the same time. Luckily there were other things more English-like in their preparation,—such as roast beef, though it was rather oddly introduced to me by the waiter—“Madame! some roast beast?”

Our cookery is now done at home under the superintendance of Martha, who agrees better than I expected with the German maid whom I have engaged. Perhaps there is some cause in the back-ground for this unusual harmony, but as yet it is only a suspicion: in

the mean time, you will be amused with a scrape which poor Martha's allspicy temper got her into this morning as we were passing over the Rhine bridge. There is a toll on all provisions brought into the town, even to a loaf of bread; and men are stationed at each of the gates to collect it. We had often seen these officers, in a green uniform, stopping the country-people, and peeping into their baskets and bundles, with a rather strict vigilance; but I was hardly prepared to see one of them insisting on searching a baby. The poor mother loudly remonstrated against such an inspection, and hugged her infant the closer to her bosom; but the man was inflexible, and at last seized hold of the child's clothes in a very rough manner. A struggle immediately took place between the officer and the woman, who was almost overcome, when she suddenly met with very unexpected assistance. Since the seizure of my unfortunate Dutch linen, the custom-house people have never been any favourites with Martha,—but besides this dislike, the assault on the baby aroused all her womanly feelings, and she flew to the rescue like a fury. In a very short time she had almost regained the little innocent, when to her inexpressible horror, as well as my own, owing to the violence of the scuffle, the body of the poor baby slipped through its clothes, and actually rolled some seconds on the ground, before we could feel convinced that it was only a fine leg of mutton!

It seems that the frequent visits of the supposed infant to Coblenz, in all weathers, had first excited

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suspicion ; and one of the Douaniers remarked besides, that the little dear came rather plumper from the country than it went back again from the town. Hence the *dénouement*, which raised an uproarious horse-laugh from the spectators, and not a little, you may suppose, at the expense of my magnanimous maid.

There is no accounting for foreign customs, but it seems to me a very odd proceeding for the heads of a town to lay a tax on the persons who bring it victuals. I am sure food is not over-plentiful here, to judge by the poor of the place. This morning, a wretched famished-looking woman came to the kitchen, Martha tells me, to beg for "the broth that the ham was boiled in!" But oh! Margaret, in spite of their own wants and misery, how kind are the poor to the poor! At the next door, in an upper room, there is a harmless crazy woman, who, either from the poverty or the niggardliness of her relatives, is but scantily supplied with food. From the back of the house where she is confined, there runs a row of meaner dwellings, wholly occupied by common mechanics with their families,—and amongst the rest a sickly-looking weaver, so thin and sallow, that he looks like a living skeleton. At the height of the first floors, there is a sort of wooden gallery, common to all the inhabitants of the row, and on this platform, which is overlooked from my bed-room window, I often see her needy but kindly neighbours standing to talk to the unfortunate maniac, and thrusting up to her, on the end of a long stick, some morsel of food, such as a carrot or a potato, saved out of their

own scanty meals. A rather comely young woman, who has several hungry-looking children, is one of the foremost in these daily charities. The first time I saw it, the sight so affected me, that I sent directly for all the bread in the house, and contrived to make myself understood by holding up a roll in one hand, and pointing to the mad woman's window with the other. The young wife was the first to observe the signal, and never, never shall I forget the delighted expression of her countenance! It brightened all over with a smile quite angelical, as she clasped her hands together and uttered the word "Brod!" in a tone which convinced one that bread was a rarity in her own diet. In a minute the good warm-hearted creature was round at our door, to receive the rolls and some cold meat, which she took as eagerly, and thanked me for as warmly, as if they had been intended for herself, her lean husband, and her hungry children. But my commission was faithfully performed: and I had soon afterwards the gratification of hearing the poor crazy woman singing in a very different tone to her usual wailings. Of course I did not forget the young wife—but what are the best of our gifts—the parings of our superfluities—or even the Royal and Noble Benefaction, written up in letters of gold, to the generous donations of the humbler Samaritans, who, having so little themselves, are yet so willing to share it with those who have less! As I have read somewhere, "The Charity which Plenty spares to Poverty is human and earthly; but it becomes divine and heavenly when Poverty gives to Want."

On the back of this occurrence I had a rather different scene. A woman, of the lower class, very shabbily dressed, found her way up to my room, and, by her manner, intimated to me that she came to beg. I was so impressed with the notion that she could want nothing but food, that I directly offered her some victuals there happened to be on the table, but which to my astonishment she declined. So I summoned Kätchen, our German servant, to interpret, and after some conversation with the stranger, she told me in her broken English that the thing wanted was some "white Kleiden," at the same time pointing to her own gown. As the woman had made a motion with her finger round her head, as if describing a fracture, it occurred to me that the white kleiden might be wanted for bandages, and going to a store of old linen which I always keep in reserve for such purposes, I made up a bundle of it for the poor creature, but, after a slight inspection, she rejected it, as it seemed to me, with no small degree of contempt. But I could get no better explanation—Kätchen still referred to her gown, and the woman waved her hand round her head. All at once the truth flashed across me—the secret was baby linen—a little nightgown and a nightcap—but I had no sooner suggested the notion to Kätchen, who repeated it to the other, than they both began to laugh. At last I sent for an old friend in need, the "German and English Dictionary," and by its help I managed to learn, that the woman wanted a white muslin frock for her youngest daughter to be confirmed in; and the motion round her



CONFIRMATION STRONG.





head signified a wreath of artificial flowers. Although rather surprised by the nature of the object, I gave a trifle towards it; and in return, the woman brought me the girl to look at in her holiday costume. By dint of gifts and loans, she was decked out like a *Figurante*, in a white muslin dress, white cotton stockings, and light-coloured shoes, with a wreath of artificial lilies-of-the-valley on her head, and a large white lace veil. During the morning the street swarmed with similar figures, besides as many boys in full suits of black, with large white collars, white gloves, and a white rose at the button-hole. They all seemed to have a due sense of the unwonted smartness of their appearance—the little girls especially looked so clean, so pretty, and so very happy in their ephemeral finery, I could not help grieving to reflect, that on the morrow so many of them would be pining again in their dirt and rags. Even their little day was abridged; for towards noon it came on to rain, and to save the precious white kleiden from spot or splash, the wearers were obliged to hurry home, as the Scotch people say, particularly “high kilted.”

Frank has discovered an old acquaintance here, a Mr. Markham; and I have been introduced to his wife. She would be an acquisition merely as a companion and a countrywoman; but she is really a pleasant and warm-hearted person, and in spite of the warning of Lady de Farringdon, we are already sworn friends. They came here to retrench, and she makes me sigh and smile by turns with her account of their great and

little troubles in a foreign land. Their worst privation seems to have been the separation from all friends: my heart ached to hear her relate their daily walks to see the packet discharge its passengers, in the vain hope of recognising some familiar face: but the next moment she made me laugh, till the tears came, with her description of a blight in her eyes, and her servants' uncouth remedy. What do you think, Margaret, of having your head caught in a baker's sack, hot from the oven,—then being half suffocated under a mountain of blankets and pillows,—and at last released, quite white enough, from the heat and the loose flour, for a theatrical ghost!

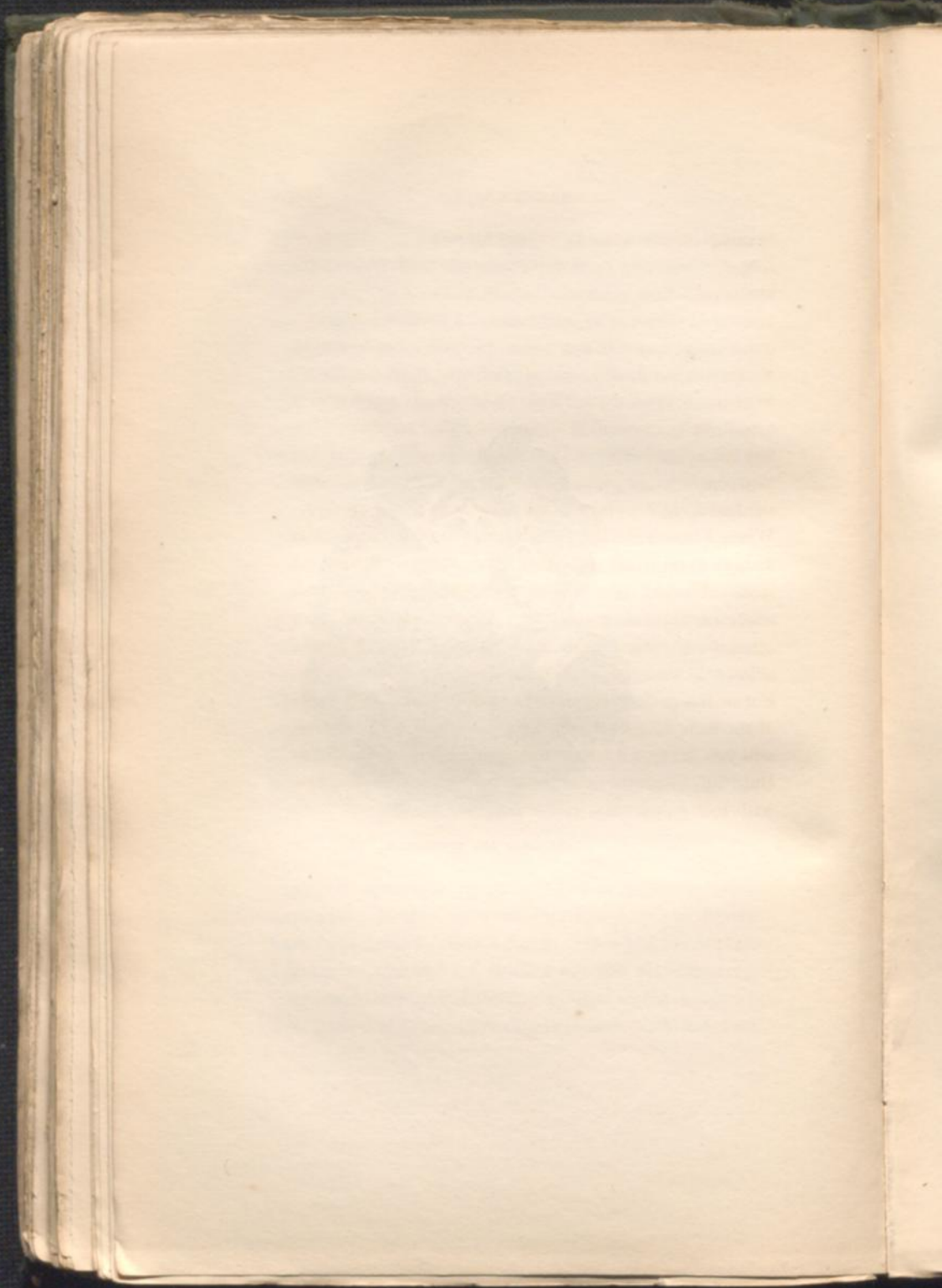
I have purchased two head-dresses to send you, as samples of the costume of the place. One, to my taste, is very pretty, a small black silk cap, embroidered with gay colours at the top of the head, and from the back hang several streamers of broad black sarcenet ribbon. The other cap is also embroidered or beaded, but two plaited bands of hair pass through the back, and are fastened up with a flat silver or gilt skewer, in shape like a book-knife. Adieu. Love to all from all, including, dear Margaret, your affectionate Sister,

CATHARINE WILMOT.

P.S. I open this again to tell you that my suspicions about Martha were wrong; but they had better have been correct. She is not in love—but has turned a Roman Catholic! I think I see you all lifting up your hands and eyes, from the parlour to the kitchen! But it is too true. Frank, it appears, met her two



CAVALIERS AND ROUNDHEADS.



evenings ago, with a taper in her hand, posting to a chapel, where the Coblenz single women go to pray for husbands! This, then, accounts for her frequent absences both of body and mind. I fancied her goings out were to meet some sweetheart, but it was to attend at mass or confession, and all her wool-gatherings were from puzzling over the saints on her beads and her new catechism. I consulted with my brother on the subject, but all he said was, that "Martha's religion was her own concern, and provided she did her duty as a servant, she had a right to turn a Mussulwoman if she pleased." When I taxed Martha herself, she owned to it directly, and, as usual in all dilemmas, gave me warning on the spot. *That* of course goes for nothing; but I shall never be able to keep her. As they say of all new converts, she runs quite into extremes, and I firmly believe is more of a Catholic than the Pope himself. For instance, there are several masses, at different hours of the day, to suit the various classes of people; and, will you believe it? she insists on going to them all! But this comes of foreign travelling. Well might I wish that I had never left Woodlands!