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Up the Rhine

Hood, Thomas

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To Gerard Brooke, Esq. Lemington, Hants

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UP THE RHINE.

TO GERARD BROOKE, ESQ., LEMINGTON, HANTS.

MY DEAR BROOKE,—Your reproach is just. My epistolary taciturnity has certainly been of unusual duration; but instead of filling up a sheet with mere excuses, I beg to refer you at once to “Barclay’s Apology for Quakerism,” which I presume includes an apology for silence.

The truth is, I have had nothing to write of, and in such cases I philosophically begrudge postage, as a contradiction to the old axiom *ex nihilo nihil fit*, inasmuch as the revenue through such empty epistles gets something out of nothing. Now, however, I have news to break, and I trust you are not so good a man as “unconcerned to hear the mighty crack.” WE ARE GOING UP THE RHINE!!!

You who have been long aware of my yearning to the abounding river, like the supposed mystical bending of the hazel twig towards the unseen waters, will be equally pleased and surprised at such an announcement. In point of fact, but for the preparations that are hourly

going on before my eyes, I should have, as Irish Buller used to say, some considerable doubts of my own veracity. There seemed plenty of lions in the path of such a Pilgrim's Progress; and yet here we are, resolved on the attempt, in the hope that, as Christian dropped his burthen by the way, a little travelling will jolt off the load that encumbers the broad shoulders of a dear, hearty, ailing, dead-alive, hypochondriacal old bachelor uncle. If my memory serves me truly, you once met with the personage in question at one of our coursing meetings: if not, you will be glad to have what Willis the *Penman* calls a *Pencilling*, but which ought rather to be denominated an *Inkling*. Imagine, then, a handsome, stout, well-built specimen of the species, somewhat the worse for wear, but still sound in wind and limb, and in possession of all his faculties—a little stiff in the anatomical hinges—but still able to find a hare and not bad at a halloo—in short, the *beau idéal* of a fine old country gentleman, for such he is. But here comes the mystery. To all appearance a picture of Health, painted in the full florid style by Rubens himself, or one of his pupils, my hale uncle is a martyr to hypochondriasis, not the moping melancholy sort anatomized by old Burton—not the chronic kind—but the acute. Perhaps he has some latent affection of the heart or obstructions of the liver, causing sudden derangements of the circulation, and consequent physical depressions,—I am not physician enough to determine,—but I have known instances of the same malady in other individuals,

though never so intense. As jovial a man, between his paroxysms, as you shall find in a chimney corner; the next moment, he sees a coffin, as the superstitious call it, fly out of the fire, and fancies his Death-watch standing on the domestic hearth. But as Shakspeare says, "a man dies many times before his death," and my uncle is certainly no exception to the canon. On an average he has three or four attacks a week,—so that at the end of the year his "dying moments" would probably amount to a calendar month, and his "last words" to an octavo volume.

As you may suppose, it is sometimes difficult to preserve one's gravity during such solemn leave-takings at Death's door, at which you know he is only giving a runaway knock. Like the boy in the fable, he has cried "Wolf!" too often for those about him seriously to believe that the Destroyer is at hand;—though at the same time, being thoroughly in earnest himself, and long habit and frequent rehearsals having made him quite at home in the part, he performs it so admirably and naturally, that even his familiars are staggered and look on and listen, with a smile and a tear. As yet I have never seen the stranger who was not horrified by what appeared so sudden a visitation, as well as edified by the manly fortitude, good sense, and christian spirit, with which the victim invariably prepares for his departure. He has made his will, of course; and I verily believe every member of the family has his instructions for his funeral by heart. Amongst

other memorials, there is an old family watch,—nick-named, *entre nous*, the Death-watch,—which he has solemnly presented to me, his unworthy nephew, a hundred times over. On such occasions, I always seriously accept the gift, but take care to leave it about on some shelf or table in the way of the owner, who, when the qualm is over, quietly fobs the time-piece, without any remark on either side, and Nunky, Nevy, and Watch, go on as usual till another warning. I once ventured to hint that he died very hard; but the joke was not well taken; and he often throws my incredulity in my teeth. “Well, God bless you, my boy,” he said the other day, in his *gracest* manner, though I was only to be a week absent,—“Well, God bless you, Frank,—for you’ve seen me for the last time. You know my last wishes. Yes, you may grin,—only don’t be shocked at your return if you find the shutters closed, or the hearse at the door!”

Such is my worthy hypochondriacal uncle, with his serio-comic infirmity,—and I assure you there is not a particle of exaggeration in the account. For the last five years he has regularly paid a neighbouring practitioner 200*l.* per annum to look after his health,—and really the post is no sinecure, for besides the daily visit of routine, the Esculapius is generally sent for, in haste, some twice or thrice a week, extra, howbeit the attack not unfrequently goes off in a hit at backgammon. A whimsical instance just occurs to me. My uncle, who is both a lover and a capital judge of horses, and always

drives a remarkably clever nag, chose one morning to have a warning in his *gig*,—influenced, doubtless, by the sight of his medical adviser, who happened to be some hundred yards in advance. The doctor, be it said, is a respectable *gigman*, who also likes a fast horse, and having really some urgent new case on his hands, or being unwilling to listen to the old one, he no sooner recognised the traveller in his rear, than he applied a stimulant to his steed, that improved its pace into twelve miles an hour. My uncle did the like, and as pretty a chariot race ensued as any since the Olympic Games. For a mile or two the doctor took the lead and kept it; but his patient was too fast for him, and by degrees got within hail, bellowing lustily “Hang it, man, pull up! I’m dying, doctor, I’m dying.”—“Egad,” cried the doctor, looking over his shoulder, “I think you are! And I never saw any one *going so fast!*”

It is with the sanction, indeed by the advice of the medicus just mentioned (an original of the Abernethy school)—that we are bound on an experimental trip up the Rhine, to try what change of scene and travelling will do for such an extraordinary disease. The prescription, however, was any thing but palatable to the patient, who demurred most obstinately, and finally asked his counsellor, rather crustily, if he could name a single instance of a man who had lived the longer for wandering over the world? “To be sure I can,” answered the doctor, “the Wandering Jew.” This timely hit decided the battle: my uncle, who is no

hand at *repartee*, gave in; and at this present writing his passport is made out for Rotterdam. In common with most invalids, he likes to have womankind about him; so he has invited his sister, a widow, to be of the party, and she in turn has stipulated for the attendance of her favourite maid. Your humble servant will make the fourth hand in this Rhenish rubber; and for your sake, I intend to score with pen and pencil all the points of the game.

My kindest regards to Emily—and something more; remember, should I ever get beyond prosing, all verses belong to her from,

Dear Brooke, your's ever very truly,

FRANK SOMERVILLE.

TO PETER BAGSTER, ESQ., SOLICITOR,
CANTERBURY.

MY DEAR OLD FRIEND,—Being about to leave England, and most likely for good, it's my wish to give you a parting shake of the hand, as far as can be done by letter before I go, time and circumstances forbidding my personally taking a last farewell. At present our destination is only Germany; but inward feelings tell me I am booked for a much longer journey, and from which no traveller returns. As such I have informed all parties concerned, that my will is lodged in your hands; and, regarding the rest of my worldly affairs,