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Up the Rhine

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The last of the Romans

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THE LAST OF THE ROMANS.

A TALE OF EHRENBREITSTEIN.

THE night was breezy and cloudy, but the moon was at full, and as the opaque vapours flitted across her silver disk, that grand mass of rock and masonry "the Broad Stone of Honour," gleamed fitfully or frowned darkly on the valley beneath. On the right, rose the mouldering, slender, round Tower, of Roman origin; on the left, the wind moaned through the waving poplars on the height of Pfaffendorf; below, lay the snugly sheltered Thal Ehrenbreitstein, beyond which the broad rapid Rhine reflected the red and yellow lights of the opposite city of Coblenz.

The hour was late, for Germany; and the good Pfarrer Schmidt, aided by the steep descent, was stepping homeward at a good round pace, when suddenly a sound struck on his ear like a groan. He instantly paused to listen, and distinctly heard a rattling, which, to his surprise, seemed to come from the ancient Tower, and in another minute a tall stalwart Figure came stumbling down the dilapidated steps of the old grey building; and, staggering like a drunken man towards our wayfarer, addressed him with a few words, in one of the dead tongues. The language,

however, was not unknown, for it was the same in which the good Pastor repeated the offices of his religion—wherefore, replying to the Stranger in Latin, they entered at once into discourse. But the conversation had not gone far, ere, suddenly recoiling three or four steps backward, the Priest began to mutter and cross himself with the utmost fervour. And little wonder; for, by help of a glance of the moon, it was plain that the Figure had no kind of clothing on its body, save an old rusty cuirass, which, with the extraordinary tenor of its last question—"And how fares the noble Cæsar?" sufficed to convince the astonished Priest that he was communing with either a resuscitated Roman, or a Roman Ghost!

At so awful a discovery it is natural to suppose that the Priest must have immediately taken to flight; but in the first place, he had a strong belief in the efficacy of the exorcisms and other spiritual defences with which he was armed; and secondly, terror, which acts variously on different individuals, seemed to root him to the spot. In the mean time, the Figure, folding its arms, turned from side to side, cast a glance at the dark modern citadel, then at the opposite fort of Pfaffendorf, and then muttering the word "Confluentia," took a long, long look across the glittering river. Again and again the Apparition rubbed its eyes as if doubtful of being in a dream. At last, arousing from this reverie, the Figure again addressed the Pastor with great earnestness, at the same time laying its hand upon his arm.

The action made the Priest start, and tremble excessively ; but by a very sensible pressure, it served to convince him that the Figure, whatever it might be, was not merely a phantom. Wonder now began to mingle and struggle with fear, and by degrees getting the mastery, the Priest, after a devout inward prayer, took courage, and by a sign invited the Stranger to accompany him towards his home. The Figure immediately complied,—and walking parallel with each other, but with a good space between, they began to descend the steep, the Priest noticing with secret satisfaction, as the moon shone out, that his mysterious companion, like a solid body, threw a distinct shadow across the road.

Arrived at the parsonage, which was not far distant, the Pastor conducted his strange guest into his study, and carefully closed the door. His next concern was to furnish his visitor with decent garments ; and with much difficulty and persuasion, the Ancient was induced to put on a modern suit of black. For some considerable time neither of them spoke a word, each being absorbed in the same occupation of gazing and marvelling at the other ; and remembering that the host was a Catholic Priest of the nineteenth century, and the guest a contemporary of Julius Cæsar, it is easy to imagine that they mutually found matter enough for admiration to tie up their tongues. But at last, the Stranger breaking the silence, they again engaged in discourse, which was long and earnest, as needs must have been where one party had to be convinced that he had been dead and

buried above a thousand years. However, the hasty observations he had made on the altered aspect of Confluentia and its vicinity, helped to confirm the Roman that only a vast lapse of time could have wrought the great changes he had remarked. In reply to the Priest, he said that he was a Centurion, by name Paratus Postumus, of the 22nd Legion, who had accompanied Julius Caesar in his second passage across the Rhine to make war on the Catti.—That he was subject to fits, and had once or twice been on the point of premature interment whilst he lay in a trance. Thereupon, as if recollecting himself, he suddenly started up on his feet, and eagerly inquired for the nearest temple, that he might go and offer up his grateful vows for his wondrous revival. Such a question made the pious Pastor look extremely grave, and he again crossed himself very fervently, on being thus vividly reminded that the Stranger introduced beneath his roof, was in verity a heathen! However, on reflection he comforted himself with the hope of the glory that would accrue to himself and to his church, by making so miraculous a convert; and to this end, after giving a rapid sketch of the decline and fall of Paganism, he began to unfold and extol the grand scheme of Christianity, according to the interpretations of the Council of Trent. But to this latter part of his discourse, the Roman listened with impatience, and finally ceased to listen at all. The downfall of his own multifarious faith—the destruction of its temples and altars, under Constantine, alone engrossed his

thoughts, and to judge by the workings of his rugged countenance, gave him singular pain and concern. For some time he remained buried in meditation, but at length suddenly raising his arms towards heaven, and lifting his eyes in the same direction—"O great Jupiter!" he exclaimed, "it cannot be! There must be some relics of that glorious theogony still left upon earth,—and I will wander the whole wide world through till I discover where they exist!" So saying, he pointed to the door with so stern a look that the trembling Priest, giving up all hope of his miraculous convert, was fain to obey the signal, which was again repeated at the outer gate. For a moment the Figure paused at the threshold, and then, after a gracious expression of thanks, strode forth into the blank darkness, and disappeared!

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Years had rolled away; and in their course had wrought further changes on the Rhine and on its banks. Shooting past the slow barge, with its long team of horses, toiling against the stream, the gay, smoking steam-beat now rushed triumphantly up the arrowy river, freighted with thousands of foreigners, who haunted the healing springs, the vine-clad mountains, the crumbling fastnesses, and romantic valleys of the lovely provinces. The pious Pastor Schmidt, now old and infirm, was one evening sitting dozing in his ample and high-backed elbow-chair, when the door of his little study abruptly flew open, and uninvited and

unannounced, an unceremonious visitor stepped boldly into the room. The eyes of the good Priest were somewhat dimmer than aforesaid, but a single glance sufficed to recognise the unmistakeable Roman features of the Centurion. He was clothed, however, in a costume very different to the old suit of black: and his countenance had undergone a still greater alteration than his dress. Instead of the stern settled melancholy that had darkened it at the close of his former visit, the expression of his countenance was now complacent, and even cheerful. After mutual salutations, being both seated opposite to each other, the Centurion began as follows; not, however, in Latin, but in passable German:—“Holy father, congratulate me! As I predicted, my ancient religion, in some degree, is still extant!” The Pastor pricked up his ears. He was a bit of an antiquarian, and a classical scholar to boot, and the announcement of the Pagan Polytheism being still in existence, raised his curiosity to the highest pitch. “Was it in India, in Persia, or by the Egyptian Pyramids; in Numidia; at Timbuctoo; amongst the savage islands of the Pacific; or in Peru, the country of the Incas?” “Father,” replied the Centurion very coolly, “I have not travelled out of Europe.” The Priest was dumbfounded. Except one portion devoted to Mahomet, the whole spiritual empire of that quarter of the world was divided, he knew, between the Greek Patriarch, the Levitical Priesthood, Luther, and the Pope. The Centurion continued—“You told me, I think, that the

people called Christians worship only one God?" The Priest nodded an assent. "But I tell you they have almost or quite as many gods as we had in our ancient mythology." The Priest stared, and shook his head. "Yes, I tell you," said the Centurion, vehemently, "their altars and rites are as various—their divinities as numerous as our own. Look, for example, at Britain." "The English are Protestants and heretics," said the Priest, making the sign of the cross. "But they are Christians," retorted the Centurion. "Yes, and as such," said the Priest, "they worship the same God that I do,—the one and indivisible,—whatever mortal errors otherwise belong to their doctrines." "At least so they profess," said the Centurion: "But tell me, is the Deity whom one sect bows to, in reality the very same that is revered by another? No, verily—with one God there would be but one worship, offered up in the same spirit!"

"Alas! alas!" said the pious Pastor, "it was the accursed schism of Martin Luther that led to such discordances! After separating from the holy Mother Church, the fallers off became again split and subdivided amongst themselves!"

The Centurion took no notice of this lamentation, but resumed his discourse. "I have visited their temples—I have stood before their altars—I have witnessed their rites, and listened to their doctrines, and what wide diversities do they all present! In one temple, I heard groans and yells and female shrieks; in a second,

a full-toned organ, and melodious choristers; in a third, I heard nothing, not even a word, and was I to blame if I looked round for a statue of Harpocrates? Then again, in one temple I saw infant children sparingly sprinkled with water; in another, grown men and women were wading up to their chins in a sort of Frigidarium, or cold bath. Under one sacred roof the votaries leaped and shouted like the Bacchantes and Corybantes; in a neighbouring fane, they stood, and sate, and knelt, by turns, with the steady uniform precision of soldiers at drill. In one rustic temple, standing amidst the fields, they played upon fiddles, oboes, bassoons, flutes, and clarionets; in another, in North Britain, Euterpe was dethroned, and all musical instruments were accounted profane, except the human larynx and the human nose. Then the sacred buildings themselves, how different! Here a very Temple of the Muses, adorned with painting and sculpture, and the most gorgeous architecture; there, a sordid structure, as plain and unadorned as a stable, or a barn. Even the priests displayed the same incongruities. One wore an elaborate powdered wig and an apron; another, the natural hair combed in long lank locks down the forehead and cheeks. Some prayed uncovered, some in a broad-brimmed hat;—here prayed a minister in a white robe—yonder prayed another in a black one; a third wore his every-day clothes. In short, there was no end to these varieties.”

“It is even so,” said the Priest, shaking his grey

head. "So many heresies, so many new modes. Yet these are mostly external matters. Whatever the form may be, the worship of all Christians is offered up to the same one and indivisible God!"

"The same! one and indivisible!" almost shouted the Centurion. "Tell me, and as thou art a religious man and a Christian Priest, answer me truly.—Is it the same universal God that the parish pauper must only address from a wooden bench, and the proud noble can only praise from an embroidered velvet cushion? Is it the same Providential Being that the lowly peasant thanks for his scanty hardly-earned daily bread, and the rich man asks to bless his riotous luxury and wasteful superabundance? Is the merciful Father, of whom the weeping child on bended knees begs the life of its sick and declining parent, the same, the very same as the God of Battles invoked by the ambitious conqueror, on the eve of slaughtering thousands of his fellow-men? Is the Divine Spirit, who gave his only Son in atonement for the sins of the whole world, the same God of the Gospel, whose name is paraded as the especial Patron of exclusive pious factions—of uncharitable bigots and political partisans? Is there anything in common between the fierce vindictive Creator wrathfully consigning the creatures he has made to everlasting and unutterable torments, as depicted by the gloomiest of fanatical sects, and the beneficent Jehovah, silently adored by the Quaker, as the God of peace and good-will towards men? Is it the same Divine Author—" "Enough,

enough," interposed the Priest, with a deprecating wave of the hand. "Nay, but answer me," said the Centurion. "Have I described one God, or many? In the list I have only partly sketched out, can you find nothing answerable to our plurality—to Plutus, to Mars, to Mercury, and Jupiter Tonans? Is the Christian Deity indeed one and indivisible, or made multi-form, like Jove of old, by the separate impersonation and worship of his various attributes?"

"You have at least broached a curious theory," answered the Catholic Priest, with great placidity, for his own particular withers were as yet unwrung. "But where," he asked, "would you find your great host of inferior deities, your *Dii Minores*, your demi-gods and demi-goddesses and the like?" "Where!" cried the Centurion—"where else but close at hand. They are only disguised under other names. For instance, we had our *Vertumnus* and our *Pomona*, the patron of orchards.—Our *Bona Dea*; *Hygeia*, the goddess of health; *Fornax*, the goddess of corn and of bakers; *Occator*, the god of harrowing; *Runcina*, the goddess of weeding—*Hippona*, the goddess of stables and horses—and *Bubona*, the goddess of oxen. Now, we need only go into the *Eifel* —"

"*Sancta Maria!*" exclaimed the Priest, reddening to his very tonsure—"Do you mean to adduce our blessed saints!"

"Exactly so," replied the calm Centurion. "They are your *Dii Minores*—your demi-gods and demi-

goddesses, and so forth, answerable to our own, and appointed to much the same petty and temporal offices. Have you not St. Apollonica for curing the tooth-ache, St. Blaize for sore throats, and St. Lambert for fits? Is not St. Wendelin retained to take care of the cows and calves, and St. Gertrude to drive away rats?"

The indignant Priest could bear no more: it was like being compelled to swallow the beads of a rosary, one by one. "Anathema Maranatha!" he exclaimed in a paroxysm of anger. "Accursed pagan! libellous heathen! Begone! You shall no longer profane my dwelling! Hence I say!"—and extending his arm to give force to the mandate, the venerable Pastor thrust his attenuated fingers into the flame of the candle, and started up broad awake!