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A steam voyage up the Rhine

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Letter XVII.

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LETTER XVII.

BY THE WAYSIDE.

St. Goar, August.

I COULD with difficulty tear myself from the ruins. Several times I quitted them, always to return. Nature, like a kind and smiling mother, lends herself to our dreams and cherishes our fancies. As I was about finally to quit *die Mause*, I conceived the idea, quickly executed, of applying my ear to the sub-basement of the great tower; that I might conscientiously say to myself, if I did not actually enter, I at least listened at the wall. I certainly hoped to hear something; not supposing, however, that the bell of St. Winifred's well would wake up for me from its silence of centuries. When, lo!—Oh! prodigy!—at that very moment I heard with my ears what might be termed a metallic echo, the feeble but distinct sound of a bell, which rose up to me as if through the twilight, and seemed to proceed out of the bowels of the earth.

I confess that, upon hearing this strange noise, the lines of Hamlet to Horatio recurred to my mind's eye, as if written in characters of fire, and they seemed to illumine my mind. But I soon returned to the material world, and admitted that it was only

the Angelus of some village church borne along the wind. Nevertheless, I have a right to assert, and believe (if I choose), that I heard from the depths of the mountain the tinkling of the mysterious silver bell of Velmich!

As I was leaving the northern ditch, now a ravine full of thorns, the neighbouring hill, the giant's tomb, suddenly appeared before me. From the point where I stood, the rock at the base of the hill adjoining the Rhine assumed the appearance of the colossal profile of a head thrown backwards, with the mouth wide open. One might fancy that the giant, according to the legend, lying crushed by the weight of the mountain, had succeeded in partially raising the mass above him, and that his head had been forced through the rocks; and that some Apollo or St. Michael had set his foot on the hill, so that the monster expired in that posture while uttering a howl of agony. The howl has been lost in the night of forty centuries; the mouth remains open. Neither the giant, nor the silver bell, nor the spectre of Falkenstein, by the way, have hindered the vines from climbing from terrace to terrace, up to the fortress of the Mouse.

Phantoms who choose to haunt a country propitious to vineyards must put up with such insults; for wine will always be made under their noses, and the vine enlace its tendrils round their retreats; unless the sprites should take to cultivating the hill of Velmich themselves; when one might apply to these goblin vine-dressers a phrase I read in some guide-book of the Rhine: "Behind the hill

of Johannisberg is the village of the same name, with seven hundred souls who make excellent wine."

Let the most thirsty traveller take heed how he touch a bunch of the said grapes, bewitched or not. Velmich lies in the duchy of Nassau, where the laws are right rigid against such transgressions. A delinquent so convicted is answerable for all anterior misdemeanours which have gone unpunished. An Englishman lately gathered a plum by the way-side which cost him fifty florins!

I was desirous to reach St. Goar, on the left bank, half a league higher than Velmich: a village boatman took me over, and politely deposited me in the states of Prussia. At parting, my companion gave me directions concerning the road, in a dialect half-German, half-French, which it seems I did not understand, for instead of following the course of the river, thinking to save distance, I cut across the mountain, and lost my way. As I was trudging over the freshly cut stubble, upon the elevated plains where the evening winds blow boisterously, a ravine suddenly presented itself to my left; which I entered, and after a rapid descent along a path which every now and then seemed like stairs cut out of slate, I once more caught sight of the Rhine. Being very tired, I sat down to rest.

Though it was still daylight, the ravine where I sat was involved in darkness, as well as the valleys of the left bank, backed by the black declivities of the hills. A roseate light, however, the reflection of the setting sun, fluctuated along the mountains on the opposite side of the Rhine, where the vague out-

lines of ruins were apparent in all directions. In an abyss below me flowed the Rhine, whose murmurs reached me where I sat, vanishing into a sheet of white fog, from which arose the pointed shaft of a steeple, half submerged in mist; the town to which it doubtless belonged being concealed in the vapour. To my right, at some furlongs' distance, I descried the grass-grown roof of a grey-looking tower, standing fiercely on the brow of the hill, but without embattlements. Above me, I heard the voices and steps of people whose shadows I saw, moving through the dusk, reflected on the opposite side of the ravine. The rosy hue had now disappeared.

I rested myself for some time upon a stone, absorbed in reflection, and silently watching the gradual evanescence of the landscape in the mist, and the various objects around me assuming a mournful and fantastic form. A few stars seemed to nail to the zenith the black winding-sheet of night, enveloping one half the firmament, while the white sheet of twilight was mysteriously stretched across the other.

By degrees, the noise of steps and voices had ceased in the ravine. The wind fell, and with it subsided the soft rustling of the grass. No noise came from the invisible town. The Rhine itself seemed reposing; a livid and ill-boding cloud had spread over the space from west to east. The stars vanishing one by one, I had now over my head one of those leaden skies where, visible only to the eye of the poet, soars the enormous bat on whose flowing body is inscribed the word *melancholia*.

A gust of wind suddenly dispersed the fog. The church detached itself from the mist. A dark mass of houses, pierced by thousands of windows, brightened by the evening lights within, appeared at the bottom of the abyss, which the fog had hitherto concealed.

A cheerful town lay before me, which I gladly recognised as St. Goar!