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A steam voyage up the Rhine

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Letter XIX.

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LETTER XIX.

Lorch, August 23.

I AM living just now in the most charming old town in the world; as well as the most unknown, and the civilest. My chamber has a truly Rembrandt-like air, with windows full of bird-cages, its curious lanterns suspended from the ceilings; and in a corner of the apartment, a winding flight of stairs with a ray of sun silently creeping up the steps. An old woman and her spinning-wheel murmur harmoniously together in a corner. I know not which be the most musical.

I passed three days at Bacharach, a kind of *Cour des Miracles* that lies on the banks of the Rhine, overlooked by the Voltairian era, by the French revolution, by the battles of Louis XIV., by the cannon of '97 and 1805; and by the architects who delight in building houses after the pattern of bureaux and cabinets.

Bacharach is the most antiquated specimen of human habitations I ever beheld. Compared with Bacharach, Oberwesel, St. Goar, and Andernach resemble the most modern street in Paris. Bacharach is the ancient *Bacchi Ara*. One might fancy that a gigantic curiosity-shop had been established there; and that the mountain-side, from top to bottom, was arranged for the display of its wares.

It begins at the very brink of the river, where lies a volcanic stone, which some assert to be a Celtic, others a Roman altar, called *Ara Bacchi*. There are also close to the river two or three old hulls of boats, cut in two, which, placed perpendicularly, serve as hovels for the fishermen. Behind these is an embattled walled enclosure, flanked by four square towers, in the highest perfection of ruin. Abutting on this walled enclosure, through which the modern houses have pierced their windows and balconies, and farther on at the foot of the mountain, is an indescribable confusion of edifices: delicious dilapidations—fantastic turrets—bowed façades—impossible gables, every step of whose double flight of stairs has a knobbed staff shooting up like a head of asparagus—massive beams carved to imitate the most delicate arabesques—corniced lofts—open balconies—chimneys shaped like tiaras and crowns, philosophically full of smoke—fanciful weathercocks, sometimes in capital letters cut out of iron, which squeak with the wind: (above my head there was an R, which kept me awake the whole night).

In the midst of this admirable medley is an irregular open space or place, formed by houses which seem to have been pitched accidentally from the sky; and having more bays, islets, reefs, and promontories than a Norwegian gulf. On one side of this *place* are two polyhedrons of Gothic structures, bulging out, sloping, and all awry,—yet standing firm, in defiance of every law of geometry and equilibrium!

On the other side is a church of fine Gothic archi-

ecture, with a lozenge-embellished portal surmounted by a high military tower, the choir having a groined gallery with black marble columns running round it, and a multitude of beautiful tombs in all directions. Above the Byzantine church, half way up the hill, is another church in ruins, of the fifteenth century, without either roof, doors, or windows; but a magnificent specimen, when seen with its profile well-defined upon the sky. To crown the whole, there stands upon the summit of the mountain the ivy-covered walls of the castle of Stahleck, belonging to the Counts Palatine of the twelfth century.

Such is Bacharach. This old town, teeming with traditions and legends, is inhabited by picturesque-looking people, who, old and young, children and grandfathers, the goitrous and the beauty, retain in their features a something of quaintness, that speaks of the thirteenth century, without the least prejudice to the beauty of the women.

From the old castle there is an extensive view, in which you discover five more ruined castles on the brows of the mountains. Upon the left bank, Fürsternberg, Sonneck, and Heimburg. On the other side, to the west, you perceive the stately Gutenfels, radiant with the memory of Gustavus Adolphus; and towards the east, over a valley which is the fabulous Wisperthal, upon a projection on the ridge of a hill, a cluster of black towers resembling the Bastille of Paris, being the inhospitable manor-house of Sibo of Lorch, who refused to open his doors to the fairies for shelter on a stormy night.

The landscape about Bacharach is wild and

savage. Its cloud-capped ruins, precipitous rocks, and impetuous torrents harmonize well with the severe features of the town, which has been successively Roman, Celtic, and Gothic; and does not choose to become modern. It is singular that a belt of shoals on all sides prevents the steam-boats from approaching near the curious spot, which thus holds civilization at bay. No discordant blotch or colour disturbs the harmony of its perfect whole. All is antique, even to the name of Bacharach, which you might imagine to be the cry of the Bacchanals of old.

As an authentic historian, however, I am bound to record that I saw a display of millinery, with ribbons, pink, yellow, and green, under a stern and blackened arch of the twelfth century!

The Rhine roars magnificently around Bacharach, as if it watched and guarded with pride its beloved old city. You feel inclined to exclaim, "Well roared, lion!" A gunshot from the town, the river doubles upon itself, foaming round a circle of rocks with the foam and torrent of the ocean. These rocks are named the *Wildes Gefehrt*, and are more alarming, though less dangerous, than the whirlpool of St. Goar. When the sun, displacing a cloud, smiles through a plug-hole in the sky, Bacharach is divine. Its quaint and wrinkled fronts unknit their brows; the shadows of the towers and fantastic vanes form the most whimsical angles: flowers (for everywhere there are flowers) unite at all the windows with female faces; and at the door-sills are stationed old men and blooming children enjoying peace and happiness, basking in the beneficent rays

of the sun. In the pale faces of the aged men is inscribed, "*'Tis over!*" On the blooming cheeks of the children, "*'Tis to come!*" In the midst of this patriarchal simplicity, a Prussian corporal in full uniform prowls about, with an air something between the dog and the wolf.

Whether it proceed from the jealousy of their Prussian master, or from the innate feeling of the country, I know not, but certain it is that I saw no other heroic portrait in the clumsy frames of these old houses than the worn-out profile of that combination of Louis XV. and Napoleon, Frederick II.

A stranger is a phenomenon at Bacharach; and, being not only a stranger, but most strange, is stared at with wondering eyes. None but pedestrian artists consider the antique city of the Counts Palatine worthy of a visit; eschewed as it is by all steam-boats, and described by all German guide-books as a melancholy spot.

I must not, however, forget to mention that there was a lithograph in the room adjoining mine, purporting to represent "EUROPE" by means of two smart ladies, and a smart-looking dandy assembled round a piano, and singing the following verses:—

"Delightful EUROPE—whom victorious France
Teaches in graceful guise to dress and dance,
The arts of peace, the joys of luxury,
Form the sole study of thy sons and thee."

The milliner with her ribbons and garlands, and the trio at the piano, afford some slight hint and indication of the dawning of the nineteenth century at Bacharach.

Under my window there was a charming little

world in miniature ; a kind of yard belonging to the ruined church, from which a flight of steps ascended towards the Gothic church. In this were playing, all day long, up to their chins in grass, a group of five lovely children, whose united years might reach fifteen. The turf, gently undulating, was of the finest texture ; on which stood two arbours, covered with magnificent-looking grapes. Among the vines were two scarecrows, dressed like figurants of the opera, set up to terrify the birds. But all in vain, for the chaffinches and wagtails were constantly perched upon the half-ripe bunches. Roses and China asters abounded in every nook, round which myriads of butterflies and feathers from the neighbouring dovecot perpetually hovered ; to say nothing of swarm of flies glittering like jewels in the sun. Added to the buzzing of the flies, the gabbling of the children, and singing and twittering of the birds, there was the eternal cooing of the neighbouring pigeon-houses, a Babel of the gentlest discords.

On the evening of my arrival, having enjoyed till night the contemplation of this delightful garden, my fancy prompted me to ascend by starlight the steps which lead to the Gothic church, dedicated to St. Werner, martyred at Oberwesel. Having mounted seventy steps without any aid for the hand, I reached the platform, from which springs the basement of the dismantled nave. There, while the town beneath was profoundly calm, I contemplated the skies above ; and below, the rugged ruins of the castle of the Palatine, visible through the shattered window. A gentle wind scarcely served to wave the

rye-grass on the ruins; when suddenly the earth gave way under my feet, and, by the help of the starlight, I found I had sunk into a new-made grave! I looked around, and, beholding black crosses with the insignia of death thick about me, I remembered the undulations of the ground below, and shuddered to think that my beautiful garden, with its birds, music, butterflies, doves, light, life, and joy, was neither more nor less than a burying-ground!

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