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The upper Rhine

the scenery of its banks and the manners of its people

Mayence to the lake of Constance

Mayhew, Henry

London, 1858

§ 1. Lodgings, Stoves, Beds, and Bed-chambers

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I.

HOUSEHOLD ARRANGEMENTS.

§ 1.

Lodgings, Stoves, Beds, and Bed-Chambers.

We will begin, in due order, with the German dwellings—we cannot say *houses*, as the people have a congenial love of "flats." A Teutonic home is a floor, or even half a one, for the King himself at Coblenz does not aspire to the English grandeur of an entire residence, but shares it, with true patriarchal humility, among the members of his family; his Majesty occupying, we believe, the first floor of the Schloss; the Crown Prince the ground ditto; while the young Princess, we suppose, is to be found "*au second*" (ring the middle bell twice). Moreover, as the "establishment" of a general officer seldom consists of more than one maid-of-all-work, the reader will readily understand how even an entire suite of apartments may be too spacious for so extensive a retinue.

The best floors in the best part of Coblenz usually let at the rate of 25*l.* a-year, or 2*l.* a-month, and for this sum six moderate-sized rooms and a kitchen are obtainable. Good furnished apartments average about twice the amount; and the rent of the furniture, if hired, as it often is by the Engländers, of Hoffmann in the Clemenz Platz (a very fair-dealing man, by the way), may be estimated at about as much as the house-rent itself. Such English people as cannot forego the comfort of a

carpet must expect to pay higher for the rarity; and those who prefer a bedstead somewhat bigger than a plate-chest must make up their minds to find the total inflamed by their objection to sleep in a tool-box. For the sum we have named, Hoffmann supplies all but crockery and cooking utensils, finding linen, and washing the same (though our compatriots must be prepared for Rhenish astonishment if they think it necessary to have their bed-linen changed oftener than once a-month), and providing plate — real "*German;*" for of course, in the land of nickel, we are sure to be supplied with the true "white copper," rather than silver forks.

At the above-mentioned terms, however, an English family may be tolerably lodged in the Rhenish capital; and they will find on entering their make-shift home that, in addition to their "flat," they are the temporary proprietors of a cellar on the basement and a servants' room in the attics, and are entitled to a share in a "bleaching-ground," or grass-plot, about the size of the top of a billiard-table, at the back of the premises. They will then begin to understand, for the first time in their lives, the misery of stairs held on the communistic principle, and the barbarous inconvenience of living in a house as destitute of cisterns as the deserts of Arabia; as well as the nasal annoyance of having to keep the dust and ashes and refuse of the place in a barrel by them, till the "*schmuzkarren*" comes round for the hoard the next morning.

Moreover, if the Engländer go into Prussian society, he will have an opportunity of comparing the furniture of his own rooms with that even of the Graffs in the town; and though the comforts of his hired residence may be scanty, compared with what he has been accustomed to at home, they will appear almost luxurious in his eyes when he comes to contrast them with those of the Counts round about him: for he will find even the drawing-rooms of the Prussian nobles tricked

out with home-made trumpery of every description, rather than the handsome solid furniture of an English mansion. The bell-pulls will be composed of strings of glass beads; the sofa-cushions and footstools of Berlin-wool manufacture, with hideous pictures in carpet-like mosaic work; the hand-screens of painted velvet; whilst the ornaments on the side-tables will be bead pens, and witches with huge red petticoats for pen-wipers, and hair bouquets, and bunches of wax-flowers; then the works of art about the walls will be crayon heads done at school; and there will be crochet flower-mats on the table, and baskets in rice-work, and knick-knacks formed out of coffee-berries, and a profusion of anti-macassars, and netted curtains and window-blinds, and indeed everything to convince the visitor that the room has been furnished by the handiwork of the ladies of the house rather than the upholsterer.

If such, however, be the style of the nobleman's show-room, what must be the character of the apartments in which the lordly family usually dwell? An open door, on the occasion of one of our visits, revealed to us the mystery; and we can but assure the reader that a Dutch labourer's cottage—that of a man earning but his six guilders a-week—was considerably more comfortable, and had more of the appliances of civilisation about it, than the sitting-room we beheld; while the lodging of many a journeyman tailor, in regular work at the West End of London, is a little paradise of comfort and cleanliness in comparison with the parlour of a Rhenish Count.

But the principal peculiarities of a *Preussische wohnung* are the beds and the stoves. The bedsteads are, without exaggeration, scarcely bigger than our babies' cots, and are made in the same fashion as the miniature "testers" in which we place children that are just out of their babyhood; with the exception that the German "*bettstelle*" has no protection at the sides

to keep the "child of larger growth" from rolling on to the floor. The Prussian standard of height for soldiers of the line descends as low as 5 feet 2 inches,* so that it will be readily understood that a box, which is little bigger than an orange-chest, may still afford plenty of room for a Rhineländer to stretch his legs in; though when an unlucky Englishman, who happens to stand 5 feet 10 out of his Wellingtons, comes to have his limbs stowed away in a wooden trough of more limited dimensions than a berth in a Dover steamer, it can be readily imagined that he must suffer the same physical inconvenience throughout the night as Gulliver must have experienced whilst taking a bed in Lilliput.

Further, bolsters are unknown in Rhineland; and as a substitute for a head-cushion, the sleeper is provided with half a mattrass, made in the form of a slice of Cheshire cheese: so that, being condemned to sleep on an inclined plane, he keeps sliding, as he dozes, down towards the end of the bed, and thus his soles are driven hard against the footboard; whilst in his drowsy struggles to straighten himself his cranium is pushed with equal force against the opposite extremity of the bed-press. The consequence is, that on waking in the morning the crown of the head feels positively as numb with the pressure as a Covent Garden market-woman's must after a hard day's porterage; while the legs are as stiff at the joints as a London cab-horse's.

Nor is this all. The Germans being innocent of the comforts of under-blankets, even in the best-regulated families, expect the stranger to lie upon a horse-hair mattrass that has merely a sheet over it to protect the skin from the tick; so

* A German maid-servant whom we brought with us to England, on passing the Knightsbridge barracks, and seeing one of the Blues in his undress-jacket outside the gate, exclaimed, "*Lieber Gott! Er ist ein grosser Mann!*" ("Good God! there is a big man!") adding immediately afterwards, "Why, *our* soldiers are not as long as one of his legs!"

that, owing to the sharp points of the protruding horse-hair, you enjoy your night's rest,—if you do not happen to belong to one of the pachydermatous class of animals,—about as much as you would if you were sleeping on a scrubbing-brush; and, before morning, you become so irritated with the continual chafing, that the bed on which you are lying seems to your drowsy imagination to be literally stuffed with ladies' hair-pins.

Still the catalogue of miseries is not ended—for a German bed is one of the most exquisite instruments of torture—almost as barbarous and trying to the nerves, indeed, as the sewing up of criminals in hides and leaving them to be pressed to death by the contraction of the skin in the rays of the sun. The bed-clothes are no wider than jack-towels, and therefore incapable of being tucked in under the edges of the mere ribbon of mattrass on which you have to pass the night; so that with every turn of your body you are left as lightly clad as an African prince—an airiness of costume which, in a country where the thermometer ranges from 90° in the shade to several degrees below zero, is not *particularly* recommended for rheumatism. The Prussians in winter roll themselves up in the "*bettdecke*" as tight as a grub in its cocoon; but Engländers who have never known the necessity to use their bedclothes as an Indian does his blanket, suffer severely in resorting to so primitive a mode of covering themselves by night.

Nor should it be imagined that even sheets and blankets are inventions that have yet made their way into every German dwelling. As we said before, the majority of Deutschers are as ignorant of such things as a Carib is of a tooth-brush, for it is still a national custom to sleep *between the beds* throughout Rhineland—the under-bed being often only a sack stuffed with straw, and the upper one always a gigantic

pillow-case filled (for the sake of lightness as well as warmth) with feathers. In the houses of the well-to-do, the underside of the upper bed has *sometimes* a square of white linen tacked to it, and this is changed at intervals that are longer or shorter than a month, according to the habits and refinement of the family. In remote villages, however, you find, even at the best inns, that the before-mentioned rude attempt at a white sheet has not yet reached the heart of Germany, and that you are expected to turn in (after Heaven knows whom) between beds that are covered with chintz of so dark a colour that you can tell at a glance the stuff has been chosen with the view of "not showing the dirt." At one of the principal towns in the Westerwald we ourselves were conducted to a bedstead furnished with these same black sheets, and the family of the innkeeper thought us proud out of all reason on our shuddering at the prospect of having to bury our body in so filthy-looking a resting-place, and considered us insanely fastidious when we persisted on having a couple of clean table-cloths as substitutes for bed-linen.

Then this same feather-bed positively cooks you like a potato by steam; and when you grow restless in the vapour-bath produced by the sudorific tendency of the eider-down, the huge puffy squab is sure to roll on to the floor and leave you to shiver and dream that you have joined the Arctic expedition, and that Albert Smith is desirous of showing you at Egyptian Hall as a gentleman who has been dug out of the ice in a state of complete preservation.

But if the beds punish you by night, the Prussian stoves do the like by day. Every one is familiar with the horrors of a winter in the Crimea, but we *do* verily believe we would rather have dwelt in the camp outside Sebastopol, and have suffered all the agony of Russian frost, than have lived as we

did, from December to April, in a room heated like a hot-house and as stifling as a melon-frame—a circumstance which has rendered us so exotically alive to the slightest change of temperature, that we fancy we shall have either to be done up in matting every winter for the future, or else to be wheeled, like the orange-trees of Paris, into some mild oven immediately November sets in.

It is considered by those who have never passed the brumal quarter in Rhineland, that it was a prodigious feat of M. Chabert, "the fire-king," to sit in an oven while a beef-steak was being fried; but this is the delightful verdure of inexperience. *We*, however, have unluckily learnt to look upon such an achievement as in no way worthy of the devotion of your true fire-worshipper; and we have serious thoughts, after what we have undergone, of exhibiting ourselves (according to the approved fashion of modern literary aspirants) as a human Salamander, and remaining quietly seated on the hob as we lecture through the boiling of a plum-pudding, or (what is even a longer operation) while a German joint of meat is being cooked.

Verily, we have already passed four months of our lives in rooms with the windows hermetically sealed, and heated to a temperature that has made the pomatum on the German ladies' hair trickle down their cheeks positively as if their heads were being basted; and in which, if we had only thought of keeping eggs, we might have hatched a whole farm-yard, as well as, if not better than, by a Cantelo's incubator. Physiologists tell us, that when the human body is thoroughly dried, but 25 pounds of solid matter remain of all that made up brain, heart, arteries, muscles, blood, and bones of the once reasoning animal; and so completely was the desiccating process being carried out by the German stoves upon ourselves, that we really felt day by day we were fast approaching the

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moistureless standard. Never before, indeed, were we so conscious of being made of dust; for we almost began to fear that a good puff of wind would dissipate us in a cloud, like the powdery stuff in "the devil's snuff-box," and that our frame at the next gale would assume the airy expansiveness of smoke—after the fashion of that of the Genii of the bottle in the "Arabian Nights."

Moreover, the same work of desiccation goes on among the furniture as in one's own body. To stand the baking of a German stove, it is necessary that the mahogany of the German chairs and tables be more than duly seasoned, or assuredly they will split, like bad gloves, immediately we come to use them. Often, therefore, while sitting quietly in our domestic oven, we were startled with a series of explosions like small cannon, arising first from the sudden warping of the bureau, next from the violent cracking of the card-tables, and then from the forcible parting of the planks at the back of the chiffonnier. But even the best-seasoned timber becomes, after a time, so thoroughly parched, that the material grows almost like touchwood; and thus the backs of the sofas are continually yielding to the pressure, and legs of chairs giving way under the sitter. At the *table d'hôte* at Cologne we saw the latter calamity befall a respectable British publisher; in the ball-room at Bertrich we beheld the wife of the Governor thrown from her chair suddenly on to the floor; and we ourselves have taken off as many legs as an army surgeon. Moreover, the very bed has sunk under our weight twice in one winter; so that we have been abruptly roused from our slumbers with a sense of being precipitated headlong through the trap-door of a theatre.

Then, the overpowering metallic or earthen stench of the stoves themselves is hateful to every civilised nostril; for if the retort, which in Germany does duty for a fire-place,

happen to be made of earthenware, your sitting-room smells like a brickfield of burning clay; and if it be made of iron, the apartment is filled with the same grateful odour as is evolved from the tire of a railway wheel with the drag upon it. The so-called porcelain stoves are for wood, while the metal ones are for such coals as are used at our blacksmiths'.* The latter are invariably kept in an open iron box about the size of a small portmanteau, and herein the coal-powder is mixed with water; so that the resulting slushy black mess forms about as pleasing a sight in a sitting-room as an eye with any sense of refinement can rest upon.

Of hearth there is not the least trace; neither are fenders known in the land; nor is it possible to catch sight of even so much as a twinkle of the fire. Fire-irons certainly are not wanting, but these are of such droll shapes and dimensions that we wonder why they do not form part of the United Service Museum, where all kinds of barbarous curiosities are collected. If you burn wood, the tongs you are furnished with are but little bigger than those with which *we* serve asparagus; the shovel is more like a French salt-spoon than an article designed for ladling up Walls-End; whilst the mere sight of the poker would appal an English housewife. In shape, the last-named instrument is exactly like the Indian *boomerang*, being so formed to "roke" at the burning coals from under the grating at the bottom of the stove.

Nor must simple-minded English ladies imagine that the German housewives take the same pride as themselves in having their fire-places and fire-irons beautifully polished, for the Rhenish pokers, shovels, and tongs, so far from being

* The price of coals, or rather coal-powder, is 12*s.* the small cartload (equal to about half a ton in our measure). Wood for the stoves costs 10 thalers (30*s.*) the "*klafter*" (a cart-load), and about 1½ thalers (4*s.* 6*d.*) extra for sawing and splitting it into usable pieces.

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anything like bright, are usually of the foxy complexion peculiar to the irons that stand in the water beside a smith's forge; whilst the stoves, together with the iron tubing that serves for chimney, are generally as dingy-looking as the tops of old Wellington boots.

The heating apparatus which stands in the room that we are now writing in is about as elegant in design as would be three mignonette-boxes supported one above another upon flower-pots. This is all in cast-iron of the rudest possible workmanship, and from the back of it there rises about a yard and a half of chimney like a gas-pipe.

Such is the fireside of an Englishman in Rhineland!

Still the most pernicious effects of these domestic kilns remain to be told. Open chimneys ("*Käminer*") are necessarily precluded in Deutschland by the use of chemical furnaces for grates; and the Prussians, believing that the *Kamin* serves only to carry off the smoke from the fire, have substituted a slip of iron-tubing in its stead. But in "uneducated England"—to adopt a favourite German phrase—almost every labourer's wife knows that a chimney is necessary for the due ventilation of either sitting or sleeping-rooms, whilst any one in the *least* acquainted with sanitary phenomena is well aware, that for the preservation of life and health, it is as requisite there should be some apparatus in every chamber for conducting away the products of combustion in the body, as for getting rid of the fumes of burning carbon in the stove,—the breath and transpiration of the skin being merely transparent smoke, and as poisonous to inhale even as the "choke-damp" of our coal-mines, with which, indeed, it is chemically identical.

The "educated" Prussians, on the other hand, are either ignorant of simple facts like these, that are taught daily at our Mechanics' Institutes, or else they are so fond of living amid

the foul heated atmosphere of their unventilated apartments, that by long use they are able to remain immured without fresh air, like toads in rocks, and still to exhibit signs of life upon coming into the external world. So averse, too, are they to quit their close, reeking rooms, and to venture into the cool, invigorating atmosphere without, that on arriving at a Prussian turnpike, it is most probable that the half-torpid toll-keeper appears at the window with his pipe, as big as a bassoon, dangling from his lips, and thrusts out a long pole with a bag at the end of it, like an extended butterfly-catcher, for you to deposit the "*Chaussée-geld*" in.

How the Prussians manage to live in apartments that are almost as air-tight as the receiver of an air-pump—in which, every schoolboy knows, the lowest animals will die—is a physiological mystery beyond Liebig himself to explain. But that their blood, owing to the custom of dwelling in hermetically-sealed chambers, is not duly aërated or arterialised is painted in almost every Deutscher's face in the ugliest possible colours. Scarcely a man or woman will you see without a complexion as greasy and yellow-brown as if it had been smeared with tobacco oil; and on the forehead or cheeks of many a young lady you will observe spots or bile-stains, that seem positively like patches of "poor man's plaster" on the skin. Assuredly we have not met with one really healthy-looking individual during our stay in Coblenz, and the town swarms with dwarves and deformed people of all shapes and sizes, to such an extent that human monstrosities are almost as common in the Rhenish capital as well-shapen and healthy-cheeked women and men with us; while *goîtres* (called expressively in German, "*Kropfs;*" *Angl. crops*) abound on all sides—the market-women having enormous wens at their throats, as big as the air-sack to a bagpipe; and there are whole islands

and villages full of drivelling cretins close in the neighbourhood.

That such things should come of vitiated air may, perhaps, startle those who know not that unless oxygenated blood be sent to every part of the human body, it is impossible, not only for the functions of nutrition to proceed, but even for a nerve to feel or the brain itself to think, and that no Rheinländer can have a due quantity of such aërated blood in his arteries the stifling character of the German chambers is sufficient to demonstrate.

But to make this part of the subject clearer to the reader, we will play the prosy professor for a while, and deliver as brief a lecture as possible concerning the requirements of human nature with regard to the matter of air. The atmosphere, says the learned author of "Physiology taught in Ten Minutes," in its ordinary state, contains only one-thousandth part of carbonic acid—the gas evolved from burning charcoal, which is known to be one of the most deadly products in nature. But though the inhalation of this gas, when mixed with the atmosphere in such a proportion, is attended with no noxious effect, it acts as a narcotic poison immediately the ratio is slightly increased; so that, when it forms only one part in a hundred of the volume of air round about us, the atmospheric fluid becomes poisonously injurious to life. Now this same carbonic acid is *ex*haled by every human being in return for the oxygen which is *in*haled by him, so that during respiration in closed chambers a double vitiating process goes on in the air. Not only is a given amount of the oxygen, which is necessary for maintaining existence, withdrawn from the atmosphere of the room at every *in*spiration, but very nearly an equal bulk of carbonic acid, which is unfit for continuing life, is poured into it at each *re*spiration. A full-grown individual inhales

about 27 cubic feet (46,656 cubic inches) of "vital air" in the course of 24 hours, and exhales, in lieu of this, about 24 cubic feet of "mephitic gas" in the same time. To obtain the daily cubic yard of oxygen, a person must be supplied with about 5 cubic yards of fresh air per diem (for this is the proportion in which the vital gas exists in the atmosphere), and even this quantity should be so continually changed throughout the day, that the carbonic acid evolved from the lungs may never reach the noxious ratio of 1 per cent of the air in which we live.

Now let us apply these facts, that have become almost platitudes in our own country, as tests of the sanitary condition of even the middle-class Rhenish sitting and sleeping-rooms. The bedroom in which we and our wife have to sleep measures exactly 14 feet square and 8 feet high, so that it contains not quite 1600 cubic feet of air. To this there is no inlet for any fresh supply, nor outlet for the products of respiration, except through the windows or door — the chimney to the stove consisting of a yard or so of narrow iron-piping thrust into a hole in the wall, and the 4-inch door to the cast-iron furnace being intended to be kept closed. Now the 1600 cubic feet of air locked up within the walls of our chamber contain, in an ordinary state, rather more than 1½ cubic foot of carbonic acid; but when, as we have said, the proportion of the latter gas rises to 16 cubic feet (1 per cent) the atmosphere becomes poisonous. Let us see, then, in what time this would take place. A grown person evolves, say, 1 cubic foot of mephitic gas from the lungs every hour, so that two persons would exhale 14½ cubic feet in little better than 7¼ hours; and this, with the normal quantity of 1½ cubic foot, would raise the amount of carbonic acid to the poisonous proportion. Consequently, in a night of rather more than 6 hours' duration,

the atmosphere of our "*Schlaf-zimmer*" would have reached malaria-pitch.

The bedchamber of our two children measures 17 × 12 × 8, and contains, therefore, rather better than 1600 cubic feet of air; but here there is not even a stove, nor any perforation whatever in the walls, so that if their lungs exhaled the same amount of poison as is evolved by a full-grown person, they would be stifled in their beds long before their 10 hours' sleep was ended. Our servant's bedroom measures 9 × 7 × 8, so that it has a capacity of but 504 cubic feet; consequently, if the door and window of this apartment were tightly closed throughout the night, the girl would be suffocated in not quite 4½ hours' time.

Muddle-headed Germans will, of course, sneer sceptically, in the profundity of their scientific ignorance, at such truths as these, though they themselves know that the majority of their people are obliged to sleep with their windows open; and we ourselves have lived to see our young children rise from their beds, when the nights have been too cold to admit of unclosed casements, with almost ulcerated eyelids, their bodies unrefreshed by their rest, and their cheeks pallid with the noisome vapours they had inhaled throughout the night. Even in our sitting-room it is impossible to allow a German to remain for upwards of an hour without throwing open the windows to purify the air. In all weathers—cold or wet—even though an easterly wind or damp fog prevail—the casements must be repeatedly set a-jar throughout the day, while the nights must be passed with gaping "*fenstern*," reckless of rheumatism or catarrhs; for it is impossible to sleep with open doors instead, owing to the stench that steams up, like a nauseous miasma, from the waterless "*Abtritte*" on every landing of the staircase, the festering cesspools in the yard, and the barrels of rotting dust and garbage kept on every floor.

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