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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

Interpolated Rhenish Scenes-Oppenheim

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Visual Library

Interpolated Rhenish Scenes.

(1.)

OPPENHEIM.

Oppenheim is one of the prettiest spots in the world—upon paper.

The picturesque, however, is almost always at variance with the comfortable, and the associations in connexion with it are frequently offensive to every other sense but the one it appeals to. The artistic taste thinks only of the play of line, the balance of light and shade, and the harmony of colour; for, abstractedly considered, the painter is a mere eye,—a being in whom every other sense is merged in that of vision. And as the geologist, travelling through a country, sees only "secondary and tertiary formations," and "eocene," "miocene," or "pliocene deposits," so the artist on a tour beholds nothing but *pictures*, and though he have nose, ears, imagination, &c., like other folk, discovers, and indeed extracts, beauty from things that are generally found to be repulsive or unpleasant in real life.

What a hateful object, for instance, is the living Italian beggar! How detestable is the hypocritical whine of his mumbled Latin prayers!—how fawning and slavish the smile with which he seeks to wheedle you into charity! Was there ever so loathsome a mass of filth and sores? As he wriggles his body in his tatters, your own flesh positively creeps at the thought of the creatures infesting him. And yet, under the magic pencil of a Murillo, what an exquisite feast of visual beauty is this same revolting spectacle transformed into! for, now that the eye alone is appealed to, what chromatic loveliness is revealed in the rags that offended you before, and what

charm of tint exhibited in the very dirt that you sickened at in the original!

So utterly different is the beggar in life and the beggar on canvas.

It is the same with Oppenheim on paper here, and Oppenheim on the banks of the Rhine.

As a picture, it seems the very spot that the "*blazéed*" Londoner would select to end his days in. The little village, nestled at the foot of the old half-ruined Gothic church that stands on the hill-top, and the broad Rhenish prairie stretching far away below, with the silver band of the river sparkling in the light as it comes circling from out the distance, and the whole scene rimmed in, as it were, by the hazy hills of the Oden Wald,—all conspire to make the view as palatable to the eye as it is soothing to the imagination.

But Oppenheim in reality is something *more* than a view, and it is the extra qualities,—qualities which the artist cannot possibly render,—that make the place far from agreeable to those who have noses as well as eyes to gratify, and whose souls are not quite insensible to human misery and squalor.

The town is built on a hill, and consists principally of one long street winding up the steep slope. The habitations on either side this street are mere hovels, of the true Continental stamp, and utterly wanting in all that neatness and comfort which distinguish our own village-homes. Shops there are none, nor any manufactures appertaining to the place; neither is there any traffic to give life to the thoroughfares. The street itself is covered with an eruption, as it were, of pebbles, that are as trying to the feet as would be a paving of petrified potatoes. Drainage, or rather sewerage, is as unknown as rose-water in the town; so that every hut and gutter smells as "high" as a guano-ship: and as for the civic luxuries of

"lighting" or "watering," one might as well look for them in Polynesia as here. Indeed you see, in Oppenheim, all the degraded forms of German life, and can almost count the centuries that the Rhenish people are behind our own in the various appliances of social welfare.

It is strange that the sites of the eminent old churches were almost invariably a *nidus* for every kind of vice, infamy, and misery. This arose from the fact, that the cathedral in olden times had generally a "spittal" for the relief of the indigent, and a sanctuary for the protection of the criminal, in connexion with it; so that such spots became the centres around which the lazy, the diseased, the depraved, and the ruffian, were all huddled together in one filthy and corrupt crowd. Those who remember our own Almonry at Westminster will need no description of such places; whilst those who have read of the dense army of beggars and priests that once preyed upon the "holy city" of Cologne, or have seen the swarms of lazzaroni congregated about St. Peter's at Rome, will not require any further proof of the fact.

Such as have never visited Oppenheim, have merely to imagine the Mint in the borough of Southwark to be transplanted to the banks of the Rhine, and the hovels of Kent Street, &c., to be rendered even *less* fit for human habitation, in order to have a vivid image of the town in question.

The Church of St. Catherine at Oppenheim was once one of the proudest edifices in all Germany, and the village itself was an ancient city of the Empire,* having formed part of the associated Rhenish towns since the thirteenth century. Its ancient prosperity was due to the patronage of the Emperors of the Middle Ages, especially that of Henry IV. In 1689,

* Indeed, it dates as far back as the Romans, by whom it was called *Bonconica*, being represented in the Roman maps under that name.

however, it was entirely destroyed by the French, one house only having been left standing.

The western part of the church was begun in 1262, by Richard of Cornwall, emperor of Germany, and finished in 1317; but it was reduced to ruins by the French, in the seventeenth century. The eastern part was built in 1439, and escaped the general destruction. To this day, however, the edifice forms, in the words of the guide-books, "one of the finest monuments of German architecture," being, we are told, "a pure example of the Gothic style, and displaying the utmost richness of decoration consistent with elegance and propriety."

Assuredly the contemplation of this fine structure is sufficient to repay the traveller for the inconvenience of a sojourn at the town. It is now half in ruins, and half restored to its original grandeur; and a most interesting object, too, seeming to be formed, as it were, of three distinct edifices joined in a line to one another,—a roofless and windowless shell of a chapel at one end; a small reculver-like church, with twin square towers, in the middle; and a tiny cathedral, with a transept, and tall, elongated dome, at the other extremity.

We first saw this church at early morning, in company with a celebrated Belgian architect, and certainly the sight of the cold blue-grey of the dawn, peeping in beautiful patches through the meshes of the lace-like tracery that still remains intact at the ruined western chancel,—together with the fine twilight gloom that hung about the several pinnacles, and buttresses, and towers, gave it a solemnity and an interest (for there is always something touching in a ruin) that enchanted the pair of us.

The Belgian architect was travelling in search of the "Gothic," and when he beheld the wondrous "*rosaces*" (rose traceries) to some of the windows of the outer nave of the

church—the fine trefoil ornaments of others, and the exquisitely-various devices in all—as well as the delicate, fretted pinnacles and buttresses, and the elegant "arcade" that (like a light and graceful lattice of stone) trellises the wall above the long lancet-window of the transept gable—it was almost as pleasant to witness our friend's enthusiasm as it was to contemplate the ornaments and proportions of the edifice itself.

Then, as the daylight grew and grew in brightness, it was really like magic to watch the beautiful little bits of "filagree" work, that fretted every corner and edge of the building, start into sight, till the whole structure seemed to be carved over, and the stone wrought as finely and elaborately as if it had been so much ivory; whilst the colours of the stained glass lent the richest and most brilliant positive tints to warm and vivify the solemn neutral-grey hue of the old walls themselves.

Round about the church were the crumbling remains of an old cloister; and cresting a vineyard-hill at the back, that was grooved over with lines of vine-stocks, was all that now exists of the ancient imperial castle of Landskron,—a mere shell of walls, that seemed positively as rotten and discoloured as old cheese, whilst the windows had crumbled away into holes that looked like embrasures for cannon.

As we returned to the town, the walk along the mere ledge of the rock on which the church is built was a thing not to be forgotten; for there we saw the rich yellow vineyards slanting above and below us, and the tiny city lying far under our feet, half veiled by the white cloud of its morning fires; while the liquid-looking orb of the newly-risen sun itself stood trembling as it seemed to rest on the summit of the "Melibocus" mountain, over by the dark chain of the Oden-Wald hills, and pouring a flood of yellow lustre over the vast plains,

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till they appeared to glitter again with all the rich green hues of the beetle's back—the Rhine itself shining where the beams fell full upon it like a sheet of crumpled golden foil.

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§ 2.

Modes of Cleaning, and Habits of Cleanliness and Decency.

"Cleanliness," says Dr. Viron, the quondam Editor of the *Constitutionnel*, in his *Mémoires d'un Bourgeois*, "was imported from England into France at the beginning of the present century." From our own observations we should say, that no German voyager has yet introduced the British luxury into Rhineland.

A Rhenish professor, whilst discoursing to us of the difference between the towns and the villages in his own land, assured us, that when he lived in the country he only washed himself once a-week, and was *not then* dirty. "But in Coblenz," said he, "my hands and face I am obliged to clean once every day."

A better illustration, however, of the ideas popular among Prussians concerning the proprieties of the toilet is afforded by the following anecdote:—Two German Professors were once speculating concerning some anomalies in the *Physiologie du Goût*. "How is it," inquired one of the "*Philosophs*," "that we eat hares and not foxes?" "Oh! it is merely habit," answered the other; "you might as well ask the reason why we wash our hands and not our feet!"

After this it is, of course, idle to tell the reader that such