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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

§ 2. Modes of Cleaning, and Habits of Cleanliness and Decency

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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

things as baths and wash-houses for the poorer classes are unknown in the Rhenish capital; though it still may throw some light upon the subject if we say, that no hotel-keeper on the Rhine thinks it necessary to supply the traveller with soap in addition to water in his bedroom — that foot-baths are comparatively unknown — that a gentleman is considered as a wild Engländer who thinks of sponging himself with cold water every morning throughout the year — and that when we ourselves commenced housekeeping, we actually mistook and bought as pie-dishes what we afterwards discovered the Prussians used for washhand-basins, and that of these it was impossible to obtain any sufficiently large to make a tart for a small family. Need we add, that of such luxuries as water-cans, toilet-pails, and sponging-baths, the Germans, as well as the French, have no more knowledge than swine of flesh-brushes.

But let us be methodical, and deal first with house matters. Of domestic cleaning there appear to be two kinds:

(1.) The dry-polishing process as pursued in France, where the *garçon* skates, as it were, on brushes over the bees'-waxy floor.

(2.) The wet-scrubbing process of England, where the housemaid goes down on her knees, and labours away with soap and water and a hard brush, as if she were determined to have the deals as white as biscuit-ware.

For our own part we are sufficiently unprejudiced to prefer the French to the English plan; for though abroad, where carpets are scarce, the polished floors and stairs are, for walking upon, attended with all the inconvenience of ice, nevertheless, in our own country—where almost every cottage has its "Kidderminster"—we think the dirt would be more easily removed from the floor if the boards were protected by a coat of varnish, than it is by the present method of soaking them with water

every week. Moreover, we should, by such means, avoid the cold vapour-bath that an Englishman is obliged to submit to upon cleaning-days, and be no longer required to sleep in rooms the boards of which had that morning been soddened with wet, and from which an imperceptible mist must continue to rise for, at least, a day or two afterwards.

Still, some may think it a debatable matter as to whether the French-polishing plan be preferable to the English-scrubbing method of house-cleaning.

Nevertheless, there cannot be any dispute as to the Rhenish mode having all the sloppy inconveniences of the English without any of its cleanliness. A Prussian "*braves Mädchen*" (maid-servant), *when* she thinks it requisite to clean the boards of your rooms, dips a cloth into a pail of water, and twisting the wet rag round the end of a broom, proceeds to smudge the planks over with it, so that any dirt or dust that is on the floor is rubbed indelibly into it—for no previous sweeping has removed it thence. Even the stairs, common to the whole house, are never scrubbed from year's end to year's end, but merely smeared occasionally over with a moist cloth, while the stone passages are cleaned with a hard brush at the end of a long handle—"hearth-stoning" being a process of which the Rhenish housewives are supremely ignorant, and whitened doorsteps and passages never seen in the land. Indeed the staircase of the house in which we lodged—uncarpeted and filthy as it was—could have found a parallel only in a common lodging-house in St. Giles's.

The above-described muddling, slobbery mode of cleansing is practised, it should be added, only upon such parts of the rooms as are unencumbered by furniture; for your "brave girl" (*braves Mädchen*) takes care not to overheat herself by moving any table, chair, or sofa, that may be in her way while engaged in the operation, but smears her nasty damp

dishclout round about her. To remove the dust from under the beds would be assuredly considered a stretch of labour amounting to over-nicety, and we have repeatedly seen a layer of fluff and dirt under German bedsteads in which a crop of house-leek might have flourished.

Of regular "dusters," such as we use in England, the Prussian housewives are utterly ignorant, so that our servant (who, it should be stated, in order that we may seem to draw no highly-coloured picture of the people, had lived in a Princess's family, and at a *Herr General's*, before coming to us,) positively stared with wonder at being furnished with a few yards of "check," for removing the dust from the furniture, saying that she had been generally accustomed to use the stove-broom for the purpose.

Glass-cloths, again, are novelties in Rhineland,—bits of old rice or coffee bags being preferred by the "*Mädchens*," and this on the plea that the sacking soaks up the water better than the linen fabric common with us. Knife-boards, too, rank as foreign luxuries,—the approved method of brightening the "*Messers*," (though clean knives are extraordinary luxuries in the land) being by rubbing the blades with ashes sprinkled on a piece of old sacking. Your linen is washed by the laundress with black soap, so that the shirts on your back smell of pauperism as strongly as a low lodging-house. The water-bottles, even at the best Rhenish hotels, our maid assured us, are cleaned with what an English chambermaid empties into the slop-pail; the iron cooking-pans are rendered fit for use, when new, by boiling horse-manure in them; and even slop-pails themselves are comparatively unknown in the houses, the utensils being, openly and unblushingly, carried by the women down the public stairs

To an English fishwife such a state of shamelessness among

women would appear incredible. A long residence, however, of our family in the French capital, had somewhat prepared us for a greater want of decency the farther we travelled from home. In Paris we had seen the *garçon* at an hôtel ushering French ladies towards the "*cabinet*," and the "*dames*" curtseying at the door to the man with all the grace of Parisian manners for the favour. At a respectable French hôtel at which we stayed there was a placard in one of the filthy private apartments saying, "*il est défendu d'—— par terre.*" We had known, moreover, the waiters of the neighbouring *restaurant* to enter the sleeping-rooms of well-to-do ladies, in order to serve them with their breakfasts in bed. We had seen, too, elegantly-dressed women in the "*balcon*" at the theatres hold their handkerchiefs out by the corners and spit into the middle of the cambric, with a noise that made one's blood curdle with disgust. Indeed, scarcely a day had passed with us in Paris but what we were positively turned sick by the women of the "politest nation in the world," and had to thank God that our English ladies were still not *utterly* corrupted by French habits and manners.

In the Rhenish capital, the shamelessness of women and the obscenity of men are even more degraded than in the city which the French delight to call "*la plus civilizée du monde.*"

We remember once visiting Egyptian Hall during the exhibition of the Ioway Indians, and being struck with the unabashed character of the woman among the savage tribe, who stood, without the faintest blush upon her cheeks, at the edge of the small platform, suckling her infant from her nude breast in the presence of some hundreds of male and female spectators.

"Is it then *unnatural*," we asked ourselves, "for woman to be shame-faced, since there stood one in a state of nature, who was evidently destitute of any such feeling?"

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The answer soon rose to the mind—that shame in woman is as unnatural as it is to love one's enemies and to do good to those that persecute you,—as unnatural as is the love of the beautiful and the good, rather than a delight in putting the aged to death, and drinking wine out of the skulls of those whom we have slain in battle.

Shame, indeed, is one of those developed and educated feelings which, like the sentiments of the conscience itself, may often appear so utterly wanting in the raw material of human nature, that many might believe the sense to be merely the caprice of fashion,—an artificial taste, as it were, begotten by prejudice.

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But if shame be really an *educated* sentiment, what shall we think of the schooling of those where all are said to be trained, and yet where even an English hound is taught more cleanliness than the great body of the people,—where our prize-pigs' backs are less scurfy than the heads of the women of the middle classes,—where spittoons are as common at every gentleman's house as baths with us,—and where at the public gardens well-dressed ladies retire behind trees with less privacy than cats?

The Germans pride themselves that they have a high love of poetry in their nature, but, in the name of common sense, is it possible to appreciate the beautiful without having an equally lively sense of the ugly? Can we admire purity and adore virtue without loathing filth, and hating, in our inmost souls, anything that borders upon obscenity? Does the poetic quality lie in singing of the deeds of some robber noble, some chivalrous vagabond, and talking of the secret functions of nature with a gusto that might be excusable in nightmen, but which becomes unpardonable in a nation of men assuming to be the æsthetic teachers of the world? Must we not believe it to be merely morbid sentimentalism to affect raptures at the perfume of the

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rose and immaculateness of the lily, whilst fathers talk moral filth in the presence of their daughters, and men and women are nasally and mentally insensible to the stench of their own refuse?

In many a barbarous country cleanliness forms part of the religion of the people. In our own land there is a proverb current among us, which ranks the homely virtue next to godliness. In the forms and ceremonies of Christianity, too, baptism is but a type of the purity which is acceptable in the eyes of God. The Rheinländers, however, seem to have no sense of that unchastity of soul which is offensive to the Almighty, nor of that physical or mental filth that is loathsome both to the senses and understanding of every decently-educated man and woman throughout the really civilised world.

Interpolated Rhenish Scenes.

(2.)

WORMS.

"THE UPPER RHINE" differs not more in its scenery than it does in its associations from "THE MIDDLE" portion of the stream.

Between Cologne and Mayence, the Rhine shores are here solemn and sombre, with their rocky passes and mountain gorges, and there luxuriant and sunny with their rich vineyard slopes and broad orchard plains.

Between Mayence and Schaffhausen, however, the scene changes to one long, dreary, willow-tufted swamp, with the wildness of the great German river tamed down to the dullness