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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. "Red Eagles"-Titles-and Models of Letter-writing

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Visual Library

IV.

FORMS OF ETIQUETTE AND MANNERS.

§ 1.

"Red Eagles,"—Titles—and Models of Letter-writing.

The key to the manners of the Prussians—apart from their behaviour at table and their utter want of decency and refinement at home—is to be found in the fact that they are a people only just emerged from "predial slavery." Even as recently as 1807, none but nobles or other privileged persons could acquire property, it being impossible till then for tradesmen and peasants to possess even the smallest portion of a landed estate in their "own right." Those plebeians who occupied farms then, did so by the favour of their "lords," and were bound in return either to help to till the lord's own land, or else to give him as much as *half* of the produce of theirs—though many were compelled to do both the one and the other. Nor was it till the year 1811 that the peasants and merchants were allowed to become the unconditional proprietors of the lands they held; and to obtain this privilege, they had to surrender to the lord one *third* or one *half* of the entire estate, according as they had been previously bound either to do services or to pay rent for the same.

In a nation, therefore, in which the great body of the people, only forty odd years ago, existed in a state of serfdom, we can hardly expect to find much liberty or independence of feeling; for it is the peculiar character of slavery, that the condition is

scarcely so intolerable to the slaves themselves as it is to the members of free and enlightened communities. Who, for instance, are so proud of their liveries as footmen? and as Jeames believes his crimson plush to be a dignified rather than degrading costume, even so do the half-feudal Germans see no moral debasement in the slavish forms to which they have to submit when addressing princes and graffs, who, as regards either landed possessions or intelligence, are not comparable to our yeomen.

At the court of Siam his barbarous majesty expects every one who enters his presence to prostrate himself on his stomach at the foot of the throne, and Englishmen alone have had spirit enough to break through the custom; whereas in Great Britain nothing is so hateful to the members of the aristocracy as to hear themselves beslavered with the repetition of their titles at each sentence. It is the mark of a true gentleman, indeed, to desire to raise others to his own dignity, and to behave towards all persons as if they were on an equality with himself: whilst it is the act only of a titled tom-fool, that some crowned head has been pleased to nickname noble, to conduct himself with arrogance towards those whom he fancies to be his "inferiors."

During the Congress at Vienna, where all the foreign ambassadors appeared in a blaze of stars and garters and "orders," the English minister presented himself in the unpretending costume of a simple gentleman. "*Il n'a pas de décoration,*" whispered one of the envoys to Prince Metternich, on learning from him the dignity of the potentate in plain clothes. "*Ma foi!*" replied the Prince; "*c'est bien distingué.*"

At a recent concert of Jenny Lind's at Ems, however, almost all the Germans occupying the front seats came placarded with their rank, their coats being decorated with stars like the front of a tradesman's house on an illumination night. But as it is a very bad portrait of a "Red Lion" that requires to have

the title affixed to it before it can do duty as a tavern sign, even so he who must have his nobility branded always on his breast cannot but be a very poor specimen of the species—as if your peers required, like magnums of fine old Port, to have a label hung about their neck, marked "VERY SUPERIOR;" and assuredly, had the trumpery princes, present on the occasion above alluded to, come *unticketed*, we should have found great difficulty in taking them even for gentlemen.

A gentleman has remarked, that "the height of human happiness consists in having 1000*l.* a-year and a toady;" and toadyism, doubtlessly, is particularly sweet to the toadied. Your German Princes, indeed, seem to think it as great a delicacy as the French do frogs' legs, and appear determined, even if they cannot boast the thousand *per annum*, to take out in sycophancy the amount of happiness which they are unable to make up in cash.

As an illustration of the servile tone in which the nobles of Deutschland require others to address them, even when soliciting the most paltry favours at their hands, we may cite the following literal translation of a letter that was sent to a Rhenish Prince for permission to enjoy a day's fishing on his estate:—

Most Illustrious Prince,

Most Gracious Prince and Lord!

With the most thorough humility (ganz unterthänsgst) I beg that your High and Princely Serenity will most graciously allow me to dare to fish with a rod for one day in your equally Princely (hochderselben) pond at ——

In the deepest awe I expire (in tiefster Ehrfurcht ersterbe ich),

Your High and Princely Serenity,

Your most submissive servant,

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The length of the vertical line separating "Your High and Princely Serenity" from "Your most submissive servant," marks the extent of the assumed inferiority of the writer to the person he is addressing; and such people as would debase themselves to an unusual degree extend the line to an inordinate length, taking care to prolong their letter so that the conclusion, as here printed, may fall upon a fresh page, and thus leave them an entire side of appropriate foolscap to indicate how much lower they consider themselves than the noble to whom they are writing.

Now, it is easy to make allowance for the wretched vanity of the Emperor of China, when, to mark his fancied superiority to his earthly subjects, he translates himself titulary to the Heavens; and in proof of his celestial nature declares that he is "brother of the sun" and "grandfather of the moon." But if a sense of human frailty teach us merely to smile at such fanatical conceit on the part of his lunatic majesty (for self-love lifts us all, more or less, to the seventh heaven of our own admiration), we can but feel an indignant contempt for those poor abject toadies who, without the excuse of self-esteem, are mean enough to apply such monstrous terms of adulation to a being like themselves.

We are taught, however, to regard the Chinese as a barbarous nation; whereas the Germans are ambitious of being ranked as a thinking race, and pretend to look beneath the surface into the "*essences*" of things, setting themselves up as the "Critics of Pure Reason," and reducing the understandings and consciences of all men to an abstract psychological "oneness." And yet in this same nation, which assumes to be civilised, and aspires to be rational and conscientious, we find the great body of the people—professors and philosophers included—so deficient of all sense of real human dignity—so utterly wanting in independence of spirit on the one hand, and

generosity of nature on the other—that the so-called nobles are as arrogant as dunghill-cocks, and the people as fawning and servile as hounds: the one class exacting an amount of sycophancy from the other that would be absolutely nauseous to every right noble nature (as if your true German Prince, boa-like, could swallow nothing but what was well covered with slaver), and the other ready to stoop to an act of self-degradation, against which even an educated negro would rebel.

How different is this arrogance of the titled "*Hunger-leute*" of Deutschland from the unassuming dignity of our own monarch, who, though Queen of the richest and greatest nation in the world, can yet afford to be addressed as simple "Madam;" as if among enlightened people there were really no title higher than that of *gentlewoman!* How different, too, on the other hand, is the sycophancy of the German people from the manliness of Englishmen, who, while maintaining the *social* distinctions of Majesty and Nobility, yet do not attribute to them any *moral* or *intellectual* superiority; so that each member of the State, asserting his own innate dignity as a gentleman, does not hesitate to apply the same language, even to the head of the nation, as he would use to any and every person of a refined and honourable nature.

Indeed, the parade of mere nominal titles throughout Germany is not only offensive to every unprejudiced mind, but we are happy to add it has already began to appear ridiculous even in the eyes of the solemn natives themselves. What a profound insight into the apishness of human nature did the First Napoleon exhibit, when he invented a little strip of red ribbon for the would-be ennoblement of French government-clerks and tradesmen! Monboddo thought that the human race had a brace of baboons for their original ancestors; and assuredly, if mankind *had* been descended directly from the simian

species, we could not have been more fond of indulging in the monkey mimicry of the manners of others. A Chinaman is in the very elysium of delight if he can only be allowed to wear a peacock's feather, because, poor human mandrill! (rather than mandarin,) some harmless idiot before him thought it a sign of moral greatness to do so. In like manner the Red Indian Chief, "Thunder Cloud," scores his cheeks after the fashion of our legs of roast pork, carving his fancied nobility upon his face, as young people cut their title on the bark of trees; and then immediately all the other red-faced apes proceed to disfigure their countenances, in the hope of being thought better than their neighbours.

But as the homely proverb tells us, "good wine needs no bush," so a really great character requires no bit of red ribbon on his coat to ruddle him with the mark of a superior breed. Arago had ribbons enough to decorate a May-pole rather than a man, and yet he could afford to appear in public with nothing but his brains and his worth to distinguish him from the ordinary run of humanity. In Prussia, however, no person could venture to make the same sacrifice, for with the *Preussen* it is mostly the same as with our booths at a fair,—the external decorations are of the showiest kind, whilst the interior is of the meanest and dirtiest character. Spies are decorated—postmen are decorated—policemen also belong to the distinguished classes—whilst turnpikemen and tax-collectors can hardly avoid the vulgar honour of ribbons. "Two things," says the "*Eckensteher*," "are inevitable to a Prussian government officer—death and the third class of the 'Red Eagle';" for medals that seem equal in costliness to new halfpennies are distributed to the "*beamte*" as plentifully as silver pennies to our old women on Maunday-Thursday: so that it is no extraordinary sight to meet an official with a row of coins displayed upon his coat as

thick as "bachelors' buttons" on a sheet of paper. It is merely by such means that the ricketty state is kept from falling to pieces; for the Prussian government is very much like the chickens popular at English supper-parties — the several members being held together merely by ribbons.

Not only, however, are "Red Eagles" more plentiful than "*Groschens*" in the land,—a Preussisch *Ritter* often having a greater supply of coins on his breast than in his pocket,—but titles are as common as nicknames among our thieves and beggars.

However paltry the government post that a person may happen to fill, the denomination of his office is used upon all occasions as a "handle" to his name; and this, with the ordinary prefix of "Sir," tends to make such a title as "Herr Privat-Brief-Eröffner Schleicher" sound almost as imposing as that of "Lord High-Chancellor of England."

Indeed, nearly every person belonging to the middle classes (with the exception of shopkeepers) has some long-winded official addition to his patronymic. A petty clerk of the works, for instance, is "Herr Bau-Inspektor Dummkopf," and a mere tide-waiter, "Herr Zoll-Einnehmer Keinstrumpfe;" then the law-stationer to the Courts is addressed as the "Herr Gerichts-Schreiber Nudelnfresser;" whilst the book-keeper at the garrison has the outlandish designation of the "Herr Rechnungsrath-und-Garnison-Verwaltungs-Director von Rüchzugführer;" and, to crown the whole, the principal police agent is for the future, it is said, to be styled—we *must* have an entire line for the euphonious appellation—

"Herr Andern-Menschen-Geschäften-Nase-Darinstecker Spitzbube."

Now these Ojibbeway-like, crackjaw titles, if rendered into

English, would sound about as rational to plain British ears as would the designation of "MR. PURVEYOR-OF-ASSES'-MILK-TO-THE-ROYAL-FAMILY DAWKINS," or "MR. DUST-AND-RUBBISH-COLLECTOR-TO-THE-UNITED-PARISHES-OF-ST.-PANCRAS-AND-MARY-LE-BONE GORE.

Even a German writer—though the people are sad, dull dogs at a joke, being about as funny as mutes—has endeavoured to show the absurdity of the practice by the invention of such a denomination as,

HERR HÜHNERAUGEN-UND-UEBERBEINEN-VERTREIBUNGS-MITTEL-LEHRBUCHS-STÄMPEL-KOSTEN-ERSATZ-BERECHNUNGS-KOMMISSIONS-ASSESSOR SCHMIDT;*

which, literally translated, means—

MR. ASSESSOR-OF-A-COMMISSION-FOR-ESTIMATING-THE-AMOUNT-OF-COMPENSATION-DUE-FOR-THE-COST-OF-A-STAMP-ON-A SCHOOL-BOOK-CONCERNING-THE-MEANS-OF-ERADICATING-CORNS-AND-BUNIONS SMITH.

The death-blow to the Bloomer agitation for universal pantaloons, was the introduction of some fair damsel in inexpressibles behind almost every public-house bar; as well as a like means of attracting custom being adopted—"to extend the cause," as the announcements ran,—at each of the more enterprising eel-pie shops and sweet-stuff establishments throughout the metropolis; for such bigots to "fashion" are mankind, that the sure way to blight even a far more righteous object than the attainment of trowsers for the ladies, is to put the taint of vulgarity upon it. Hence, as titles have got to be "*low*" in Germany, we may soon expect to see every real gentleman in the land (for such prodigies must spring up shortly—even among their Teutonic "Excellenzes" and "Magnificenzes") begging to be allowed to bear a name as plain and unadorned

* Jean Paul Richter—but with a slight alteration, for the sake of decency.

as Adam himself; since in a country where even the royal diligence conductor ranks as a state-dignitary, and the head watchman has some polysyllabic titular prefix to his name, it is evident that mere *nominal* nobility itself must soon come to be regarded as ignoble, and that none but those who are reckless of reputation will, eventually, consent to suffer the indignity of having any social dignity thrust upon them.

Titles for the million are like pine-apples for the same multitudinous class,—the increase in the quantity of the article is accompanied with a proportionate decline in "the quality;" and in illustration of the point we may add, that at the time of the last Coblenz Schützenfest (shooting-feast), one of the little beer-and-sausage booths outside the grounds was kept by the Herr Baron von Ellenwurst.*

"Great judgment," says Otto Friedrich Kammler, in his "*Universal-Briefsteller und Musterbuch*,"† "is required in addressing people of rank—German titles being very critical things to deal with. Many persons, for instance, pretend to be of higher birth than they really are; consequently, it is necessary to be very careful when speaking with such arrogants. Though there are some who have little or no title-vanity, there are others, again, with whom the passion is so extravagant, that they would feel insulted if one were to make the slightest mistake as to their social dignity." The same author farther assures us, that if a letter beginning with "Most gracious Lord," were to end with "your most *devoted* servant," instead of "your most *submissive* ditto," it would be highly improper; the term "gracious," he tells us, is applied only to the characters and acts of "kings, emperors, and princes,"

* A fact—of course, with the exception of the name.

† We quote from the edition of 1846, by Dr. Wilhelm Hoffmann—this being at present the work of reference upon all such subjects at the principal Prussian schools.

and the proper designation for *ourselves*, in juxtaposition with such personages, is "most submissive," or "most humble."

Kammler, moreover, favours us with several curious specimens of the various modes of addressing the different grades of rank, "*down* to our own equal"—as he says, with exquisite snobbishness.

To a prince, he tells us, we must begin by saying, "The great Benevolence and Grace with which your Serenity has favoured me," &c. &c., and wind up our epistle by protesting (even though we be in the most robust health at the time) that we "die," or are "extinguished," "with the deepest awe, submissiveness, and humility,"—for the groschenless nabob.

To lesser nobles, such as barons, &c., we are, however, to write, "I shall be proud to follow the commands with which your high-and-nobly-born-ship," or "your high-and-well-born-ship," or else "your (mere) high-born-ship (as the case may be)—has deigned to honour me;" and to conclude with, "I commend myself to the high kindness and condescension of your nobleness, and remain, with the deepest regard," or "tremendous respect," or "with the highest consideration, Your devoted," &c. &c.

To our equals and relatives, however, we are to begin with, "Honoured, true, and never-altering friend," and finish by remaining "with the sincerest," or "unchanging," or "ever-enduring esteem," &c. &c.

Again, under the head of "State-titles," the same epistolary authority informs us, that in writing to a high military officer we should address him as "*Dread*," or "*Most powerful* Mr. Lieutenant-General" (even if the bugaboo have never been exposed to any fire severer than that of his own pipe).

The Rector of a University is, on the other hand, to be styled "*Magnificent*;" and even the burgermeisters of the cities to be dubbed "Your *Magnificences*" also.

Finally, we learn, "that well-to-do merchants and manufacturers," &c. (though their grandfathers, maybe, had their ears cropped for giving short weight), are, among others, to be denominated "Most *high-born* Sirs."

So necessary, too, are the professional titles considered by the supreme Snob of an authority from whom we quote, that he tells us, "if the family or birth-titles were to be abolished, still the professional ones *must* be retained, in order to show the occupations to which the people belong." So that, even among informed Germans, there is a vulgar belief extant, that it is impossible for society to be carried on without indulging in such absurdities as giving even to the editor of a paltry provincial newspaper the Chrononhotonthologos-like appellation of "HERR HERAUSGEBER-DER-COBLENZER-PAPILLOTE LANGSAMKUTSCHE."

Interpolated Rhenish Scenes.

(7.)

FREIBURG.

"By a remarkable symmetry," says a French topographer of the Rhine, "the extremities of the Grand Duchy of Baden are occupied by two towns, famous alike for their relics, their wars, and their colleges,—*Heidelberg* (once the capital of the Palatinate), and *Freiburg*, (formerly the *Haupt-Stadt* of Breisgau)."

Between these distant points lie the cities of Carlsruhe and Baden-Baden; the former being the "*Badische-Hauptstadt*," and built with the same unpicturesque eye to "system" as Mannheim—with the blocks of houses arranged in the form of a half wheel, like the wings of a model prison; and the latter