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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

§ 3. Customs at Birth-"Wickel-kind"-hood-Feeling between Father and Son-"Clanship"

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pine-stems before it reached the lower Rhine. The raft lay close in front of the forest on the bank, where the ground was littered with the long trunks of trees that had been recently felled—the axes of the wood-cutters flashing in the light between the stems as the coach rolled by—and where, as usual, we saw the customs officer, in his deep-caped cloak, seated officially on a neighbouring log, and smoking his china-bowled pipe in fine governmental ease.

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§ 3.

Customs at Birth—"Wickel-kind"-hood—Feeling between Father and Son—"Clanship."

The Prussian customs at the time of birth have but little peculiar about them.

The announcement of the event, however, is usually made in so different a manner from that in which *we* give publicity to an increase in a family, that we will once more take an extract from the German newspapers.

Here, for instance, is a curious (and not particularly delicate) outburst of paternal pride:—

Early to-day my dear wife, Elizabeth M., born S——, after a happy and easy delivery, delighted me with a lively and strong boy, which I do myself the honour to announce to my distant friends and acquaintances.

Cöln, this 12th February, 1855.

Wilhelm M——,
Assistant at the Royal Post.

The babies in Prussia are usually handed over as soon as born to the tender mercies of a *Saug-amme* (suckling nurse), for German women are far too selfish to allow themselves to be troubled with the suckling of their own offspring; and though this wretched custom prevails among our own fine ladies to a greater extent than is creditable to us as a nation, still we are glad to say, that our middle-class wives have, as yet, sufficient natural feeling left to nurse their infants themselves.

In Germany, however, it is far different.

"What! does your aunt suckle her own child?" said a German maid to our little girl. "Why, the poorest lady in Germany would think it a disgrace!"

In Rhineland, almost nine out of every ten women, if they be only sufficiently well-to-do to afford the "luxury," hire some deputy-mother for their little ones, and seem to regard the function which is, perhaps, in all the economy of nature, the most wondrous provision of the Almighty's loving-kindness (making, as it does, the very food of the child spring into existence at the same moment as itself), as a cruel tax, instead of a high benevolence, in connexion with a mother's duties. So that all the fine development of affection which has been ordained to be associated with the sustenance of the little one, is reduced to a sad waste of social machinery for binding being to being.

Verily, too, there is in the creation of this same mother's milk so much of love and wisdom comprised, that it seems to us to be absolutely impious in a woman to refuse to make use of it. Even chemically considered, it is the most exquisite nutriment that human imagination can conceive, containing as it does every element of the body—bones, muscles, and nerves—in the best possible form for being assimilated: whilst, morally considered, it is a source of such strong

attachment both to the nourisher as well as the nourished (linking the parent with the child as fast as it does the child with the parent), and so intimately connected with that inexplicable maternal instinct, which is assuredly a woman's greatest glory, that ladies who do not hesitate to deprive their offspring of this their special birthright appear to us to have lost all that tenderness of nature, without which a woman is utterly unsexed.

Then the motives which prompt the mother to hand her child over to a foster-woman betray the grossest selfishness and meanness of disposition. Either nursing will spoil the lady's figure—or it will interfere with her rest at night—or prevent her going to parties, &c. &c. For such paltry reasons as these the great scheme of Moral Nature is thrown out of its course and the highest duty ignored. For the poor woman who sells her child's nourishment, there is the excuse of poverty and temptation—for the rich who buys it, none but laziness and vanity.

This system of wet-nursing, too, is intimately connected with bastardy, since no decent married woman, even in Germany (where there is a greater greed for money than in any other nation with which we are acquainted), likes to sell the nutriment of her own child; and we have been assured by many respectable people, that the greater portion of the Prussian *Saug-ammen* are women of loose character—whom, nevertheless, German ladies do not scruple to introduce into their families, in order to prevent any infantine interference with either their slumbers or their pleasures.

To English minds, the infant costume of Prussia seems about as enlightened as that adopted by the Indian squaws, who convert their babies into kinds of human chrysales, encasing them, as it were, in a hard shell of bandages, that

allow them no more freedom of motion than can be enjoyed by a young maniac in a strait-jacket.

Increased knowledge in "*un*educated" England has taught mothers, that if there be a being on earth that requires liberty of limb, it is the little human creature whose frame is destined, when allowed to be properly developed, to expand itself into that of a man. In "educated Germany," however (where, by the by, there are more dwarves and more idiots than in any other part of the globe), mothers have still to learn, that if the limbs of children be swathed in cloths like mummies, the growth of the tissues must be more or less impeded—in the same manner as a Chinese woman's foot comes to be unnaturally stunted by the mere compression of the part. Nor does the swaddling of children injure the youthful frame by pressure alone; for every one with us is well aware that exercise of limb is necessary for the due increase of the muscles, and bodily activity required for the maintenance of health.

It is lamentable, however, to see how much the German people have still to learn upon such matters; and we know of no more melancholy sight than a Prussian baby bound hand and foot in its costume of a "*Wickel-kind*." It is impossible for minds that have any sense of the tender nature of such creatures, not to feel acutely for the sufferings that the little things must undergo in such a state. When we think of the extreme irritability of the whole body at such an age, and of the high temperature of the tiny frame—bordering, indeed, almost on fever; and when we call to mind, too, the utter inability of the poor babes to protect themselves, we are roused to indignation at the thought of the tortures they must be subject to, both in the stifling heat they must experience and the painful cramps they must undergo, from the continual constraint of their tender little limbs.

But we forget, in the fury of our disgust, to place the reader in the same circumstances as ourselves, and to give him a definite notion of what these same "*Wickel-kinder*" really are.

Among the shady walks of the "*Glacis*" outside the fortifications that environ the town of Coblenz, you may see dozens of them any fine day, carried by their Westerwald wet-nurses, whom you may know by the long, broad, black ribbons, streaming from the crown of their head. At the first glance you have a notion that the nurse is carrying a cushion in her arms, for you perceive merely a white pillow-case with a deep frill or border to it. As you approach, however, you discover that a wretched little infant is packed up in the squab somehow, for you can just see its tiny ball of a head—and its head only, mind!—peeping out of what is called the "*Steck-bett*," and which, literally rendered, means the bed into which the child is stuck. After the first impression has worn off, the apparatus appears to be more like a large squab of a watch-pocket, into the fob of which the poor little infant has been crammed.

Now, with your permission, gentle reader, we will play the Pettigrew, and proceed to unroll this tiny Deutsch mummy. In the first place, what is called the "*Steck-bett*," is not very unlike, but much larger than, the large slipper used with us in carriages for thrusting the feet into during cold weather. The entire body of the infant is stuffed into this apparatus, which is usually made up of carpet and covered with a white dimity or coloured chintz case.

On removing the stiff shell, as it were, we find that the poor little being within it is wound round and round with bandages, after the fashion of a brigand's legs; so that as the head only of the wretched infant is seen above the hard roll, that gradually tapers off towards the feet, the *Wickel-kind* strikes you as the very model of a baby Caryatides.

The outer bandage, which is called the "*Windel*," is as long as the pennant to a "man-of-war," and about as wide as a hat-band, and is wound spirally about the body, after the manner of the ribbons painted on a barber's pole.

When we have unrolled this we come to the "*Steck-tuch*," that is to say, the inner cloth in which the child is enveloped. It consists of a white quilted wrapper, not unlike a home-made wadded counterpane, and in it the babe is *hermetically* sealed, as it were, with its little arms imprisoned in the folds tight against its sides, and its legs bound down straight and close together.

The swathing-cloths are removed only once in 24 hours, during all which time the poor little thing remains stewing amid its own ejections; so that really the strictest precautions are thus taken, not only that the infant should move neither hand nor foot, but that the little strength of which its frail life is made up should be steamed out of it by incessant perspirations.

To the listless, inactive Deutsch women, however, such a mode of swaddling is agreeable, as it saves them all the trouble of dandling and dancing the child; for the baby, packed up as it is, can be stood against the wall, or even hung upon a peg, like an old coat—as, indeed, they often are.

Nor is the torture of this barbarous "*Wickel*," apparatus in the least mitigated until three long months of absolute motionlessness have passed, and then the little prisoner is allowed to have its arms free for the first time since its birth. Its lower extremities, however, do not obtain this blessed privilege, until another three months of the same inconceivable torments have been endured.

Now, during our stay in Coblenz, we happened to know an English gentleman who was suffering from *anasarca*, or dropsy under the skin, and part of the treatment to which he

was subjected by his German physician consisted in being tightly rolled up in birch-leaves and blankets, in which he had to remain for *only* seven hours every day. But though this gentleman was an officer in our army, so that bravery was his profession, he assured us that the agony induced by such treatment was almost more than he had strength of mind or body to bear. Indeed, we know it so exhausted him, that his medical adviser was obliged to allow him an interval of rest for a few days after each week's perseverance in the practice.

Surely, then, unless our minds be besoddened with German prejudices, we can form a faint conception of the exquisite suffering that must be inflicted upon a tender, irritable little creature, like a new-born baby, on being subjected to a swaddling, which even a soldier has not power, nor barely courage enough, to persist in.

And yet this goes on in what Mr. Cobden would have us believe to be "*educated* Germany!"

"But haven't you a number of cripples in England?" we were coolly asked by a native, after explaining to the booby that English people looked upon this swaddling of young children as a remnant of barbarism.

As a further proof, however, that the manners and customs of the Germans of the present day are those which we discarded a hundred years ago, we may quote the following from a work entitled "*The Eighteenth Century; or, Illustrations of the Manners and Customs of our Grandfathers:*"—

"There was a belief among grandams and nurses," it says, "that infants' bones and joints required extraordinary external support, and consequently ample provisions were made to prevent sprains and dislocations by the baby-limbs being put in a sort of frame-work, composed of whalebone, wood, and strings. The chin had a pillow for its support, which went by the name of 'chin-stays,' and from this bandage a strap was passed down

to the breast, and was called 'a gop,' serving to preserve the head from an undue inclination backwards. Then each sleeve was fastened tightly down to the side, lest the arms should be diverted from their true position; and the gristle of the legs was left to harden into bones and muscles within a strong casing. Around the child was affixed a small 'pad' resembling a bolster, stuffed with some soft and elastic substance, which was to answer the same purpose as the 'fender' of a steam-vessel or 'buffer' of a railway-carriage, and preserve it from apprehended bruises, contusions, and lacerations, from a collision with the floor or corners of the tables; and when the day of unbinding, unstrapping, and uncasing the infant *did* arrive, it was quite a domestic festival."—P. 46.

But this custom of swathing infants is as old as the Romans, and even the Indians have from time immemorial treated their papouses in the same manner. The following engraving, copied from one in Dr. Smith's *Roman Antiquities*, shows the manner in which the ancient Roman mothers were wont to bind up their babies like young mummies; and the picture is exactly similar to the appearance of Rhenish *Wickel-kind* to this day.

There is a popular saying in the Rhenish villages, that every child born always brings something with it; and to maintain belief in the saw, it is customary for the children of the family and neighbours to be called in on the birth of an infant, and each presented with a trifling present, which is duly recorded as the gift brought by Frau Dingskurchen's baby. The children often, while showing their toys to one

another, say, "This is what FRAU WIEHEISST's baby brought me," and "This came with the *becker's kindchen*," and so on.

As with most primitive nations, there appears to be a strong feeling of "clanship," or attachment, throughout the various members of a family in Germany.

This love of kindred extends even to remote cousins; so that a newly-married lady, though she will hardly think it worthy of her to pay attention to her husband, would consider herself as utterly deficient in all the better feelings of human nature if she were not to lavish every resource of her house upon the remotest relative who visited her.

Again, it is well known that the Germans, on leaving their parents, soon become afflicted with "*Heim-weh*" (home-sickness), all of which, it may be urged, shows strong affections, rather than that callousness of temperament which we have asserted to prevail throughout a German household. So we ourselves argued when we knew the people less; but closer observation has taught us that this love of kindred among the Germans is an educated rather than a natural sentiment: or, in other words, the sons and daughters love their fathers and mothers because they are taught that it is right to do so, and certainly not from any remembrance of past kindnesses experienced at their hands.

Indeed, filial affection in Germany appears to be mere sentiment—an artificial kind of feeling, into which the intellect, backed by a faint sense of propriety, has *schooled* the heart, and not a *spontaneous* emotion naturally begotten in answer to the love shown to the child during its youth.

In England, children love their parents simply because their father and mother have, generally speaking, been the best friends they have ever known, and who not only watched

over and protected them in their helplessness and weakness, but who shared with them almost every comfort and luxury that industry or prudence was enabled to obtain.

But if English fathers behaved as selfishly as German ones, assuredly English children, with the liberty of thought current throughout the country, would soon get to question the paternal love for them; and seeing in the greediness of the father but little affection on his side, would ultimately come to regard him with but little affection in return.

In Prussia, however, all are of too phlegmatic a nature to be emotional upon any such matters; and as marital indifference leads to perfect toleration between man and wife, and toleration begets domestic tranquillity, even so with German children, after many years' association with their parents, a vague feeling of regard naturally springs up in the mind for the persons with whom they have passed almost all their lives—such, indeed, as we in England feel for the animals that frequent our hearths.

In illustration of the selfishness pervading every member of a German family, we may cite the following curious little history.

A young friend of ours, during the fair, purchased some cakes, and presented them to the father of a family, to whom he was under some slight obligations, and whom he knew to have rather a penchant for pastry. To his utter astonishment (for our young friend was an Englishman, and unprepared for the act) the *paterfamilias*, on receiving the bag of confectionery, said he would "lock it up in his desk," urging that then he could eat it by himself "just as he wanted, unknown to anybody."

Now, our friend had naturally intended the present to be shared with the Deutscher's wife and daughter, and was fairly taken aback by the piggishness. However, the youth was

determined that the German ladies should not go without their share of the good things; so he returned to the fair, and buying another packet of the same toothsome articles, hastened to carry them to the wife, feeling assured that *she*, at least, would divide them with her child. But the lady informed him, in a whisper, that she would keep them for herself in her closet, as that child of hers was so greedy after pastry that she would want them all.

To gain a thorough insight into the character of the people, a third packet was bought and given to the girl, in order to see what *she* would do with it. True to the nature of those from whom she had sprung, and with whom she had been reared, the young cormorant retired with the cakes to her own room, and ate every crumb of them by herself in secret.

This, again, is no extreme illustration of national habits, for while it is customary, in almost all families of the middle classes, for the wife and children to have merely soup and *bouilli* for *their* repast, the husband and father has generally a better meal prepared for *himself*, and this he eats at the same table with the others, without the generosity to offer any of them a morsel of the dainties over which he is smacking his lips; nor, even if there should be a tart, does he bestow so much as a flake of the crust on the little ones eying his every mouthful, but swallows it *all* before them. Indeed, we have seen a German professor eat a whole plateful of peaches, and his children be content to pick up the stones and suck them as fast as they were spat from their father's mouth on to the floor.

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