Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

Digitale Sammlung der Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe

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. Of the Moral Creed of the Prussians-Duelling-Sense of Fair Play-Wellington and Blücher-English and Foreign Judges-Deficient Gentlemanly Feeling-Treatment of Poor and Servants

urn:nbn:de:bsz:31-161475

Visual Library

of flour and saw-mills. Here the place seems to vibrate with the throbbing of the water-wheels at work between the piers below, and the clatter of the machinery above; whilst there is a kind of mixed smell of new bread and turpentine from the sacks of flour and sawdust hard by. Before the mill-doors, too, stand wagons with sides like plate-racks, and with the unyoked oxen feeding in front of them, as they wait for their load. Here dusty-haired millers are seen lolling out of the square window-holes, and the pathway is littered with huge trunks of trees, sliced three parts down into planks, and looking like immense fans, or logs divided into so many leaves.

Then, as the one wagon crawls by, you can feel the very piles and joists of the bridge totter again; and on your return the wind blows smartly down the long covered way, as if it were some ventilating shaft to the town.

---

§ 2.

Of the Moral Creed of the Prussians — Duelling — Sense of Fair Play — Wellington and Blücher — English and Foreign Judges — Deficient Gentlemanly Feeling — Treatment of Poor and Servants.

That the Prussian people are not remarkable as a body for their wisdom — even though there be a greater amount of school-learning in the kingdom than in any other European state — none who have read the preceding articles can for a moment doubt. But if clear-headedness be not their *forte*, they are, perhaps, good-hearted, and are kindly and charitable to one another; and, moreover, impressed with so high a sense of

honour, that they would not only be incapable of any meanness themselves, but unwilling to witness any wrong done by others to their fellows: — in a word, if we are unable to speak of them as an intellectual race, can we, consistently with truth, call them a noble, a generous, a just, a kindly, or a philanthropic one?

Let us see.

Last "*Fastnacht*" (Shrove Tuesday) a public "*Maskirte Bal*" was given at Trèves, and late in the evening a Prussian officer went to rouse a companion-in-arms, who was asleep on one of the tables in the refreshment-room. As he shook his friend, and called him by his name, a Jew, who was drinking there, mocked him; whereupon the officer seized a glass of wine that was standing near him, and dashed the contents into the Israelite's face. The Jew muttered some words of revenge between his teeth, and withdrew from the "*saal.*" The officers returned to the ball-room, and shortly after, while they were dancing there, the Hebrew came back and threw a tumbler of water at the lieutenant who had treated him in a similar manner. In an instant the officer's sword was unsheathed, and the Jew, though unarmed, attacked upon the spot; he raised a chair to defend himself, but was soon run through the body, and whilst in the act of falling, thrust through the throat by the enraged lieutenant. On the morrow the officer went to his colonel, and reported himself as having "stuck a Jew," whereupon he was placed under arrest, and subsequently tried; but though he was found guilty, the punishment awarded was *nominally* a year's confinement in the fortress of Ehrenbreitstein, but which *virtually* consisted in being compelled to return to his quarters at the same hour as the private soldiers every night.

It may, however, be urged in justification of so lenient a sentence, that it is necessary to uphold a high feeling of

"honour" among gentlemen in the army; though, surely, honour, even in Prussia, cannot be supposed to lie in drawing a sword upon a defenceless man.

In Prussia it is by no means uncommon to see the face of gentlemen seamed with long white scars. These are generally the marks of "honourable" wounds obtained in duels that were fought during the University life of the individuals; and in the cemetery at Bonn tombstones may be seen bearing some such tragic record of boy-murders (see *ante*, p. 130).

This species of sanguinary barbarism is winked at by the authorities of Prussia, where it is still believed to be noble to take life, and where the silly and savage custom of duelling to this day prevails—*silly*, because the trial by single combat, though, perhaps, justifiable amid the ignorance and superstition of the Middle Ages (for in the wager of battle God was supposed to "defend the right"), becomes an idiotic ceremony, now that we no longer believe the Almighty pronounces his judgments at affairs of honour and savage ferocity; and silly, because in times of police, when personal defence is rendered unnecessary, the qualities of the bulldog cease to be a virtue.

The Prussians, moreover, are, as a nation, utterly ignorant of that kind of chivalrous equity which in England is denominated "*fair play*"—indeed, there is no word in German by which to express the idea. Hence, not only do we find officers to believe it to be honourable to draw their swords on defenceless men, but almost every German carries a long knife, which the law alone restrains him from using at each insult. In illustration of this custom we may remind the reader, that when the German Legion quarrelled with our Marines at Shorncliffe, the Deutschers drew their knives upon our men, though the Marines used only their belts against the Legion.

Hence it is idle to tell the reader that a Prussian neither

thinks it unfair to strike or kick an antagonist on the ground, nor cowardly to attack a person much smaller or weaker than himself. Two grown men may often be seen during some street-brawl to flirt their hands like a fan close before each other's face, in very fear of striking a blow; and, on the other hand, two less cautious boys will, while quarrelling, slip off their boots and proceed to batter one another's head with the hob-nailed heels.* As an additional illustration of the bravery of the Prussian youth, we may cite the fact, that at the "*Schwimm-schule*" (swimming-school), where the pupils are made to dangle in the water by means of a rope attached to a long pole—as if they were gigantic minnows at the end of a Brobdignagian fishing-rod—great hulking lads may be repeatedly found heard to howl at the dread of entering the water.

* The following is the customary scene that precedes a street encounter among the German boys:—

SMALLER BOY (*throwing a stone at another, and running off afterwards as fast as he can*). Dau Laus-jung!—(Thou lousy brat!)

BIGGER BOY (*rushing up to the other, and putting his face quite close to that of the* SMALLER BOY, *whilst he holds his clenched fist straight down by his thigh*). Machst dau dat noch ein mal sonst gebe ich dir ein paar tüchtige auf die Backen.—(Doest thou that again, and I will give thee something strong to strike against thy cheek.)

SMALLER BOY (*thrusting his face close against that of the* BIGGER BOY, *and holding his fist down by his thigh in the same manner as the other*). Geb dau nur Acht sonst kriegst dau auch ein paar.—(Give heed, or else thou wilt also catch something.)

BIGGER BOY (*nodding his head very rapidly, close in front of the other's face*). Dau frecher Gasse jung! dau bist in den Püdelen geboren!—(Thou impudent street urchin, thou be'st born in the gutters!)

SMALLER BOY (*showing his clenched teeth, and thrusting his fist further behind him*). Dau Sou-hex!—(Thou pig-witch!)

BIGGER BOY (*also thrusting his fist further from him, and getting closer up to the other*). Rühre mich nur an.—(Lay only a finger on me.)

SMALLER BOY (*drawing closer to the other as well*). Ich will dir dat schön zeigen.—(I will soon let thee see that.)

BIGGER BOY (*working his fist backwards and forwards by his side, as if he was preparing for a stroke at billiards rather than to deal a blow at his anta-*

But if the Prussians be not characterised by an excess of manly courage, assuredly they are not remarkable, as a body of people, for any great nobility of spirit.

We were once speaking with a Coblenz professor concerning the barbarous atrocity of the wounded Russians at Inkermann, who shot young Edgington, of the 95th, whilst his generous enemy was in the act of giving him some water to drink. "And why should they not so do?" inquired the simple Deutsch savage. "They did want one another to kill, and surely it was like a '*dummer Engländer*' to vish him some vasser to give. Oh! no, the Deutschers would never that do." And the Lehrer chuckled, as if he believed any generosity shown to an enemy to be an act of folly rather than virtue.

Now many may fancy that we do the Prussians some

gonist). Ich bin gar nit bang vor dir du kleiner Köweschen!—(I am not at all afraid of thee, thou little dwarf!)

SMALLER BOY (*working his fist backwards and forwards like the other*). Ich bin auch gar nit bang vor dir du geckiger Kerl!—(I be also not at all afraid of thee, thou stupid dolt!)

BIGGER BOY (*growing white in the face*). Dau wirst schön sehen.—(Thou wilt soon see.)

SMALLER BOY (*running away as he cries*). Dau laus-kop dat dau bist! dau hast ja tausend Läus auf den Koff. Ich habe eine gesehen deinen Hals herunter kreichen.—(Thou lousy head that thou be'st! thou hast yet a thousand lice in thy head. I have seen one crawling down thy neck.)

The BIGGER BOY *chases the* SMALLER BOY *and strikes him on the back, his arm describing a half circle as he makes the blow, and his head being kept down like that of a goat when butting.*

SMALLER BOY *butts goat-fashion in return, and thumps roundly at the back of the* BIGGER BOY *for a few moments.*

BIGGER BOY *begins to howl, and taking his leathern belt from round his tunic, commences belabouring the head of the* SMALLER BOY *with the metal clasp.*

SMALLER BOY *removes his shoe, and thumps away at the crown of the* BIGGER BOY *with the heavy iron heel.*

Both howl loudly, till the mother of the BIGGER BOY *comes and drags him from the encounter.* SMALLER BOY *scampers off shouting,* "Dau Laus-kop dat dau bist!"

wrong by instancing the above as a type of the national feeling, but that their greatest Generals have been equally deficient in a sense of magnanimity, the following extract from the "Wellington Despatches," concerning the conduct of Blücher after the battle of Waterloo, will abundantly testify:—

"General ——— has been here this day to negotiate for Napoleon's passing to America, to which commission I have answered that I have no authority. The Prussians think the Jacobins wish to give him over to me, believing that I will save his life. *Blücher wishes to kill him;* but I have told him that I shall remonstrate, and shall insist upon his being disposed of by common accord. I have likewise said that, as a private friend, I advised him to have nothing to do with *so foul a transaction;* that he and I had acted too distinguished parts in these transactions *to become executioners;* and that I was determined, that if the sovereigns wished put him to death, they should appoint an executioner,—that should not be me.

"WELLINGTON."*

Not only, then, does the above letter stand as a lasting record as to the difference between the characters of the Prussian and English heroes of Waterloo, but to this day it may be cited as an illustration of the difference of feeling between the two nations.

Nor have even the better class of Prussian people any belief in the honesty of great men. According to their ideas, every individual, however high his standing in a country, has his price. Though they talk a great deal about their "Vaterland," the Germans, as a body, have little belief in the disinterestedness of patriotism, and are satisfied that even the noblest among them would sell his country if he could only get enough for it.

"Of course," said a Prussian "*gentleman*" to us, "your Admiral Napier was bribed by Nicholas, or he would never have come home without doing anything in the Baltic." This was said as if *we* really had the same belief in the purchasa-

* Gurwood, vol. xii. p. 516.

bility of honest Charley as the low-minded German himself; and when we politely informed the Prussian, that if he had made such a speech in public company in England he would have been thrown out of window, he shook his head, and said, —" Oh, the '*dummer Kerls*,' we would not the best man among us trust any farther than we could him see."

In order to probe to the bottom of this belief as to the bribality of the chief functionaries of Prussia, we asked the above worthy whether he really felt convinced that it was possible to influence the decision of the judges of his country by the private presentation of some gifts to them. He turned the matter quietly over in his mind for some little time, and then answered, " That money would certainly go a long way in the Prussian Law Courts; but though he could not remember any instance of a judge having been paid to give a cause against a person, still he was *quite sure* about the corruptibility of all the subordinate legal officers."

Whether such be really the case or not we cannot undertake to state; all we can conscientiously affirm is, that no Prussian has the same *thorough* belief in the Brutus-like integrity of the judges of his country that we have in England. Whether the distrust arise from the moral ignorance of the people, and their consequent incapability of believing in acts of disinterestedness, or whether it proceed from a sense of the low tone of moral feeling pervading the entire nation, it is difficult to decide; but that the suspicion generally, if not universally, exists, must be known to all who have lived for any time among the Germans.

The members of the Prussian police, however, certainly are not proof against the influence of groschens; this we can vouch for from our own personal experience, for even the superior officers of the *corps*, if they have any business to transact for you,—and the police manage all things in Prussia,

—look for their fee at parting as naturally as a fashionable physician.*

Moreover, the system of bribery is practised by every shopkeeper upon every German domestic: for a servant never pays a bill for her master but what she expects her customary allowance of a groschen out of every thaler. In the same manner, if you happen to enter a shop with one of your young children, the cunning tradesman will be sure to present the little thing with some trifling article, as a means of bribing you yourself to return to his establishment at a future time; and that this is the real motive for the gratuity there cannot be a doubt, since, owing to the utter selfishness of the people, no one in Prussia would ever dream of giving anything for nothing.

This bribery and corruption of an entire household is fraught with considerable inconvenience: the smallest evil in connexion with the practice being that the groschens given to the servant are added to the price of the articles you pay for; since, in addition to this, your cook never rests quiet until she has worried you into dealing with the butcher or baker who allows her the highest per-centage out of your month's bills. If you go to any other shop than her own favourite, either she daily declares that the meat is tough, or the coffee has more than the usual amount of burnt acorns with it, or else the "milk breads" are not so large as at Herr Kartoflen's; so tuat not a morning passes without some complaint about the tradespeople, until she fairly worries or wheedles you into her own "*Lagers.*" Moreover, whenever you change maids you have the same

* During our stay at Coblenz a new English chaplain came to do duty at the town, and, being of a "sporting" turn of mind, he went into the fields one day to shoot *krammets-vogel* (field-fares). The sentries on duty at the Karthauser fortress heard the report of the clergyman's gun, and the field-police was directed to look to the matter. The minister was found with two birds in possession and no "*schiesse-erlaubniss.*" The policeman vowed that he must have the clergyman up before the court; but, on some half-dozen groschens being presented to the fellow, nothing more was heard of the matter.

annoyance to go through with the new ones, each "*Mädchen*" having a different set of tradesmen by whom she is retained.

Indeed, one universal feeling of distrust seems to pervade every class of society in Germany. "I tell you I hate my fellow-creatures!" said one of the principal hotel-keepers of Coblenz to the British Chaplain; "and there isn't a Deutscher in the whole town that I would give credit to for six thalers."

Nor is this feeling of suspicion limited only to pecuniary matters. We hardly ever knew two Germans sit down in our rooms at the same time; for though the couple might have come to spend the evening with us, either of them would be sure, immediately that a fellow-countryman entered, and the one fancied the other was likely to stop, to remember, all of a sudden, some urgent business to carry him homewards,—this one had forgotten his door-key, (for all the houses in Coblenz are closed at ten), and that had merely called to apologise for having omitted to mention that he had promised to meet Herr von Somebody at the Casino. No matter, too, how lively or confidential the conversation had been before the entry of the other, a dead silence would be sure to ensue directly a second German put his head in at the door.

Thus it will be seen that the Prussians, taken in the aggregate, have neither any nobility of feeling nor any of that high sense of honour and generosity which is termed "chivalry of nature." Assuredly there is hardly a costermonger in England who has not perfect faith in the moral integrity of the judges by whom the laws are administered; and scarcely a mechanic would dream of doubting the pecuniary honesty of the ministers governing the country. In Germany, however, there is such a furious greed for groschens upon the heart of the whole nation that no Deutsch virtue, however austere its character may appear to the world, is deemed to be privately proof against

the temptation of thalers. Every one in Prussia,—ministers, generals, judges, journalists, police and custom-house officers, —are all regarded as capable of being *bought*, and every interest and public good, on the contrary, as being liable to be *sold*. This proceeds partly from the phlegmatic and callous nature of the race, and partly from the utter absence of all *moral* education among the people. True, the schoolboys are taught to say their "*Katechismus*" by heart, but such parrotry never was known to make pupils admire magnanimity, or to lead them to love the good merely for the good's sake. The consequence is that the Germans, as a nation, are grossly insensible to all moral greatness, and value every excellence merely by the number of "*Pfennings*" it will bring.

"Herr Luther, the astronomer at Dusseldorf," said we to a Lehrer of Coblenz, "has discovered a new planet."

"The large fool!" was the reply. "How many groschens will that into his pocket put?"

From the tone of the teacher it was evident, that had he learnt that the same individual had perilled his life to save another's, the same high-minded response would have been made.

Nor is there throughout Prussia anything equivalent to what Englishmen term "*gentlemanly* feeling,—none of that intense objection to any meanness or dirtiness of conduct, —none of that freedom from all suspicion, and that generous tendency to believe every one of our associates to be as honourable as ourselves, until he is proved to be otherwise;—none of that liberal disposition to regard money as almost valueless in comparison with the real dignities and charities of life;—in fine, not a glimmer of any of the complex multitude of positive and negative virtues which we in England believe to be necessary for the moral constitution of a true *gentleman;* such a character, so far as our observation goes, being

utterly unknown in Deutschland. For, no matter how high the worldly station of the individual we may converse with in Germany,—be he even one of the so-called "nobles" of the land,—you will find him, if you but probe the fellow by long acquaintance to the core, either ready to justify the opening of private letters, or else to uphold the use of spies, as a social institution, in order to obtain secret information for the ministers of the crown,—in a word, you will sooner or later discover that he is as utterly insensible to all moral ugliness as well as to all manly dignity as a Jew bumbailiff with us.

But, if there be little chivalrous feeling among the phlegmatic Germans of the present day—and surely it wants an emotional race to be a generous and self-denying one—there is, at the same time, but little sympathy to be found among them for the sufferings of their less lucky fellow-countrymen.

In England, the general development of the feeling of philanthropy constitutes the peculiar feature of the age; so much so, indeed, that many of our sterner writers have spoken of the public commiseration that is now shown, even to the vilest classes among us, as belonging to the "rose-water" school of sentiment. But though, perhaps, our fellow-feeling may occasionally lapse into the maudlin, it certainly speaks well for our national character that many of the charitable institutions of our land may be numbered amongst the most magnificent edifices of the capital;—our hospitals, our schools for the indigent blind, our asylums for veteran seamen, being absolute palaces designed for the shelter and relief of the poor. Nor do we ourselves care much for the nation where the "well-born" have not even imagination enough to view their position in life as a lucky accident — a prize drawn in the great lottery of existence; where the wealthy are unable to comprehend the difference that would have been produced in

their own sentiments and feelings had they been born among the needy classes; where the prosperous lack the sense to see that their own worldly advantages are, in the generality of cases, the result of birth or "good luck," or some peculiar physical or mental gift, rather than being prizes won solely by their own exertions—and that the sufferings and defects of the less lucky classes, on the other hand, either spring in the aggregate from the general frailties of human nature, or are the necessary evils of the prevailing social arrangements, rather than arising from any special vices of the people themselves; where, indeed, the gentlefolks cannot perceive that the vulgar would have been the same as they themselves, had Providence been but equally kind to the poor—and the most refined, the same as the unwashed, had Fate only treated the rich as harshly as the rest.

In Germany, no such sentimentality can be said to exist; for though there are no poor-houses in the land, and the great mass of the people almost as ill-conditioned as the peasantry in Ireland, and though even black bread is becoming a luxury, that is, being daily displaced from the tables of the poor by the still cheaper potato—nevertheless beggary in Prussia is a crime "*bei Strafe verboten*," (on pain of punishment forbidden).

Again, the treatment of the poorer class of domestics is but little less harsh than our mediæval villeinage.

"But will you tell her what will be her duties in the house?" said an English lady to a German, who was engaging her first Deutsch servant for her, the lady naturally thinking that it was necessary to see whether the girl *objected* to the situation.

"Oh! no, we never such foolish tings do," responded the gentleman; "she is born to obey; and if she will not, you have only to the '*Polizei*' to go, and they will soon make her."

"The '*Polizei!*'" was the simple exclamation.

"Yes! she brings her character from the Police-office," added the Deutscher; "and if you did not choose to speak vell of her ven she vas leaving you, they vould not let her another place take."

Nor have these wretched bondwomen much indulgence to hope for at the hands of their German mistresses. Many "ladies" have the coffee-grounds re-burnt for the use of their servants, and upon a decoction of these (without either milk or sugar) and a piece of sour black bread, without butter, the poor creatures have to make their breakfast, whilst their dinner consists of the poorest possible soup and dough dumplings; so that when a German "*braves Mädchen*" hears that English domestics sometimes grumble at having to eat cold meat, she considers the story to be one of those *Munchausenish* exaggerations that travellers are supposed to delight in. When the girl, too, finds that in an English family she gets sugar and butter, and meat *every day*, she boasts to her less lucky acquaintances that there is not a "*Fürstin*" in all Deutschland that lives better than she.

Some of the serving-girls, again, have to sit without fire in the winter nights, for even the wives of Generals we knew to have the ashes raked out of the kitchen-stove immediately after the dinner was cooked. And often when the poor creatures fall ill, they are left to moan in solitude in their wretched loft, (the usual sleeping-place allotted to German servants), and compelled to pay another girl to do their work for them.

"Yes," said one to us, "they are hard grinding mistresses, and *will* have every groschen they may pay, out of the very bones of any one who works for them. That poor woman you see washing in the '*Hof*' yonder, has to stand at the tub from 5 o'clock in the morning till 10 o'clock at night, and then they will almost grumble to give her the eight groschens (9½*d.*) in addition to the weak coffee and soup she has had

in the course of her day's work; and yet, poor soul, she has six children to keep at home."

That this is no extreme view of the hardships that the Rhenish domestics have to endure at the hands of many of their mistresses, we may cite the fact, which all who were in Coblenz at the beginning of the year 1855 will well remember, that at the time of the visit of some eminent Catholic missionaries to the town, they made the want of charity displayed by the German mistresses to their servants the subject of one of their discourses at the church.

Now, domestic servitude, especially with maids-of-all-work, is no very pleasant lot, even in the best of houses; — to have to bear the tyranny of every burst of temper, without exhibiting even the least sign of displeasure; — to be upbraided in no very measured terms, and yet not permitted to say a word even though the accusation be unjust; — to be doomed to the almost solitary confinement of a kitchen, and yet allowed to speak to no one, even on the doorstep of an evening; — to know no rest from labour, not even of a Sunday, except for one day in each month; — and to feel that your very bread *depends upon* the caprice of mistresses, who may object to give you a character immediately the least ill-feeling arises in their minds; — all these, surely, would be felt as severe trials, even by the most philosophic of mankind. But when we add to the above list of hardships that of coarse, ungenerous food, as well as utter neglect at the time of illness, and the continual dread of the police for the least offence — together with such a mere pittance in the shape of wages for the work, that nothing but beggary seems to await the poor things in their old age, and that too in a land where begging is "*bei Strafe verboten;*" — surely even a "stone-heart" would be softened, and show some little consideration for the sufferings of these wretched "*braves Mädchens*" of Deutschland.

BLB BADISCHE LANDESBIBLIOTHEK
Baden-Württemberg

BLB BADISCHE LANDESBIBLIOTHEK
Baden-Württemberg