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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

Domestic manners of the Prussians

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THE RHINE.

DOMESTIC MANNERS OF THE PRUSSIANS.

The surest way to make an Englishman love his country is to send him out of it.

At home, John Bull is so proud of the liberty of grumbling, that he delights in exercising the glorious bilious privilege whenever his dinner has disagreed with him.

A true-born Briton gives vent to his indignation and indigestion in national abuse of the cabinet ministers, and growls aloud for "the right men in the right places." We groan audibly in the "Times" under the pressure of the income-tax. We cry out lustily from the platform at the number of our placemen, and raise our voices as patriotic, "constant readers," against the jobbery, bribery, and corruption that we declare to prevail throughout the land. The British labourer, it is said, is "crushed under the chariot-wheels of a Juggernaut oligarchy;" and in no country, we are assured, are the poor so multitudinous, so pitiable, and yet so despised and neglected, as with us.

But two hours' sea-sickness, and the cloud of discontent is for ever dispelled from our brain. Once across the Channel,

our vision is no longer bleared by narrow experience; for no sooner do we find ourselves in the land of passports—and sabriferous policemen—and military tide-waiters—and daily papers no bigger than play-bills, and less informing and informed than village gossips—and bread tariffs—and spies—and uncovered sewers like small Dutch canals, polluting every highway—and bearded bed-makers—and bare-boarded sitting-rooms—and water-carriers—and public temples to Cloacina, where the Vestal moneytaker sits unabashed, reading the last sentimental novel—no sooner, we say, do we find ourselves amid such abominations, than even the least squeamish of English gentlemen is forced to throw up his hands and eyebrows, and thank his stars that he was born and educated on this side of the Dover Straits.

In Prussia—or rather that part of it known as the Rhineland (and be it understood, once for all, that our observations here refer to the Rhenish provinces only)—we see people in the same state as prevailed in the remote villages of our own country, according to accredited writers, a hundred years ago. In Dr. John Davy's life of his brother Sir Humphry, there is a picturesque account of the habits and manners of the inhabitants of Penzance towards the latter part of the last century. The Doctor tells us how the Cornish gentry then dined at noon, and had their tea-parties and Pope Joan at three in the afternoon—how carpets were unknown in the houses, even of the affluent—how a private carriage was a rarity seldom or never seen in the streets—how the "Sherbourne Mercury" was of the same dimensions as a sheet of music; and how gentlefolks had not yet learnt to eat with silver forks.

Now, if for Penzance (the town almost at our Land's End) we substitute Coblenz (the capital of the Rhenish provinces, the site of a royal "*residenz*," and the great stronghold of Prussia), the account will hold good to this day, and the

reader will have a vivid notion of the present condition of the Rhenish folk as contrasted with that of our own countrymen. Nor is this comparison made from any national invidiousness on our part; for if we add, that in many places in Prussia, wolves, that were exterminated from England six hundred years ago, are still allowed to infest the forests; and witches, that we desisted from burning in the year 1716, were persecuted in Northern Prussia (where, Mr. Cobden says, all are educated) only so recently as the year 1830, it will be seen that in placing the Rhenish people at *only* one hundred years behind our own, we incline to the liberal rather than the strict view of the case.

Well, in Coblenz, the only private carriage that appears in the streets is the Princess's shandredan, hack-looking brougham,—a "turn-out" about equal in style to one of our "flies." The floors of even many of the Graffs' sitting-rooms are still uncarpeted, excepting a narrow strip stretched before the sofa, such as we in England place beside our servants' beds. The Coblenzer Zeitung measures exactly 17 inches by 11, and consists of four pages of such print and paper as our illustrious Catnach used to devote to the "last dying speeches" and "confessions" of the Newgate criminals, and contains neither leading articles nor criticism, nor indeed any further token of intellect on the part of the editor, than if it were a piece of "potichomania"—a pure work of scissors and paste. The usual hour for tea-parties, or rather "coffee-drinking," is four in the afternoon, when scandal is propagated to an alarming extent. The mails are built after the style of our old-fashioned hackney-coaches, and persist, even in these days of rapid locomotion, in travelling at their slow prototype's pace. Oxen are still used in the ploughs and wagons—the same as they were in the time of the Romans, who first taught the people the arts of civilised life.

The houses are unsupplied with water,—a thing that *we* have learnt to consider almost as necessary as air to a dwelling for the due purification of its chambers and inhabitants. Sewerage is comparatively unknown (though there is a fall of nearly 20 feet to the Rhine), so that the streets, under the very nose of the palace, are offensive, even to nausea, in every educated nostril. The gutters of the *Schloss Strasse* (the Coblenz Regent Street) are generally like whitewash with soap-suds, and as redolent of sulphuretted hydrogen as imported eggs. The gates of the town are locked at ten, at which hour the curfew-bell still rings to remind the Coblenzers that it is time for all good citizens to be between the beds—we cannot say sheets, such luxuries being still unknown to the refined *Preussen*.*

Fire-brigades, and fire-mains, and fire-escapes are appliances for the preservation of property and life that the simple Germans have yet to become acquainted with; for, in the capital of Rhenish Prussia, the less civilised and efficient plan is adopted of keeping an individual perched up in one of the steeples the night through, and compelling him to blow a huge cowherd's horn at every hour, to convince the inhabi-

* During our stay at Cologne, we set out one fine summer's evening to make the tour of the suburbs, with the view of inspecting the fortifications that enclose the town. Descending from the *droschke* (hackney carriage) at Bayenthurm, in order to make a purchase at one of the shops inside the walls, we found, on returning from the tobacconist's, that the gates had been closed in the interval, and we were compelled to make a circuit of some two miles, in order to regain the vehicle. As we neared the spot, we heard the coachman shouting wildly in all directions; for, owing to the long time we had been gone upon our errand, the man had got to fancy that we, in the dusk, had stumbled into the river. Moreover, on resuming our journey outside the walls, we were stopped no less than three times by sentries and police, who were good enough to inform us that we had no business out at that late hour. At Mayence the gates close punctually at ten, and the guide-books say, "those who wish to enter the town after that time (unless when arriving by diligence or post), should furnish themselves with the permission of the commandant!"

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tants that he is still wide awake. So utterly innocent, too, are the people of all sanitary laws and regulations, that ventilation is unknown, even where every house reeks with its festering cesspools and waterless closets on every landing, and where the entire windows are opened only at the time of death, in order, as the childish superstition runs, "to let the spirit fly out." *

Indeed the habits of the Rheinländer are of such an intensely primitive character, that a long sojourn in the Rhenish capital is like living centuries back in the past, and which, though very interesting to gentlemen of antiquarian predilections, is exceedingly uncomfortable to any one whose head happens to be cumbered with notions of progress, liberty, and refinement. Here it is that our eyes are still cheered with the sight of a pair of snuffers, for even "composites" have not yet made their way into the houses of the Teutonic middle classes; here it is that the heads of even the most enlightened families still persist in swathing their poor little babies after the fashion of Indian papooses. Here it is, too, that we find dames still engaged in the Arcadian accomplishment of spinning; for, to the great majority of the *Deutschers*, Arkwright's invention of the "jenny" still remains a blank, though the patent dates nearly a century back. Again, upon this nation of Daphnes and Chloes, John Lee's exquisite machinery of the stocking-frame has been comparatively wasted, for the women still knit the hose and guernseys, even as they spin the threads for the blankets, sheets, and under-clothing of their families. To such an extent, too, does this prevail, that as the wife

* The usual means of looking out of window at Coblenz consists in thrusting the shoulders through *one* of the panes, which is made to turn upon a hinge; so that at the time of any procession appearing in the streets, you will see a number of heads protruded through the sashes, and reminding one of the picture of the "Smuggler on the Look-out," in which the *contrabandist* is made to appear as if stretching his neck out of the frame.

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of Tarquin was an excellent spinner, and Augustus Cæsar usually wore no garments but such as were spun by his wife, or sister, or daughter (31 B.C.); so we should not wonder, if we could come at the truth of the matter, that the King of Prussia, to this day, has his flannel-waistcoats fabricated by the fair fingers of the Royal Family (A.D. 1855).* Further, in this the modern Arcadia, the pseudodox yet lingers, even among the people of the middle classes, that vermin in the heads of children are healthy. And as Pelasgus, the shepherd king, was honoured as a god for teaching his artless subjects to feed on acorns, as being more nutritious than herbs, even so the descendants of Arminius — strange that such analogies should hold in Europe to the present day!—not only love to eat all kinds of green meat as salads, and to drink infusions of nettle, and sage, and woodruff, and strawberry leaves, as tea, but they have been recently enlightened by some revered Teutonic patriarch as to the fact that a decoction of burnt acorns is more strengthening and better flavoured than coffee: so that this wash is positively drunk by them three and four times a-day, the people vowing the while to the poor "uneducated Engländers" that it is far preferable to the most delicious Mocha ever brewed at the "Rotonde."

But, lest the reader should mistake our literal truths for fanciful pleasantries, we will descend to particulars, and paint a more accurate, though perhaps less glowing, picture of the manners of the Rhenish folk than that perpetrated by Mr. Cobden, when he assured the Parliament that every German baker could serve his customers with (black) bread in Latin as well as *Deutsche*.

* At Rheinstein, in the toy "robber-castle" of Prince Frederick of Prussia, may be seen the Princess's spinning-wheel — as well as the less graceful ornaments of his Royal Highness's and the King's *spittoons!*