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The city of the fountains, or Baden-Baden and its immediate neighbourhood

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Chapter III. The Conversation-house

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CHAPTER III.

THE CONVERSATION-HOUSE.

On trouve ici le jeu, les livres, la musique,
Les cigarres, l'amour, les orangers,
Le monde tantôt gai, tantôt mélancolique,
Les glaces, la danse, et les cochers.
De la bière, de bons diners,
A côté d'arbre une boutique,
Et la vue de hauts rochers.
Ma foi!

Anonyme.

How shall I describe to my readers in language sufficiently graphic one of the resorts the most celebrated in Europe; a place if not competing with Crockford's in gorgeous magnificence and display, at least surpassing it in renown, and known over a wider sphere. The metropolitan pump room of Europe conducted on the principle of gratuitous admittance to all bearing the semblance of gentility, and conducting themselves with propriety, opens its Janus doors to all the world with the most laudable hospitality and with a perfect indifference to exclusiveness, requiring only the hat to be taken off upon entering, and rejecting only short jackets, cigar, pipe and meerschaum; a room of this description; a temple dedicated to fashion, fortune and flirtation requires a pen more current, a voice more eloquent than mine to trace, condense, vivify and depict. I must really appeal to



MANISON THE GONY RECEPTION
A BAUDE



honest Mercury again to assist me, for I am sure, he cannot be indifferent in the matter, and must as a matter of course from interested motives wish me success, seeing that the temple is so peculiarly his own. Is he not the president of exchange, discount and banking, vice president of oratory and music, and as he is a sort of cousin-german to the muses, intimately connected with dancing and I don't know what? — Taking every thing therefore for *granted*, let us suppose a vast saloon of regular proportions, rather longer than broad, at either end garnished by a balcony: beneath doors to the right and left and opposite to the main entrance conduct to other apartments, dedicated to different purposes. On entering the eye is at once dazzled by the blaze of lights from chandeliers of magnificent dimensions, of lamps, lustres and sconces. The cieling and borders set off into compartments, showered over with arabesques, the gilded pillars, the moving mass of promenaders, the endless labyrinth of human beings assembled from every region in Europe, the costly dresses, repeated and echoed by a host of mirrors, all this combined, which the eye conveys to the brain at a single glance, utterly fails in description. As with the eye, so it is with the ear, at every step a new language falls upon it, and every tongue with a different intonation, for the high and the low, the prince, peer, vassal and tradesman, the proud beauty, the decrepid crone, some fresh budding into the world, some standing near the grave, the gentle and the stern, the sombre and

the gay, in short every possible antithesis that the eye, ear, heart can see, hear or respond to, or that the mind itself can imagine, is here to be met with in two minutes: and yet all this is no Babel, for all, though concentrated, is admirably void of confusion: and evil or strong passions if they do exist, are religiously suppressed, a necessary consequence indeed, where there can be no sympathy, and where contempt and ridicule would be the sole reciprocity. In case however any such display should take place, a gendarme keeps constant watch at the door, appointed by government it is true, but resembling our bow-street officers in more respects than one. Now that we have taken a survey of the brilliant and moving throng, let us approach the stationary crowd to the left hand and see what it is that so fascinates and rivets their attention. They are looking upon a long table covered with green cloth, in the centre of which is a large polished wooden basin with a moveable rim, and around it are small compartments, numbered to a certain extent, namely 38, alternately red and black in irregular order, numbered from one to 36, a nought or zero in a red, and a double zero upon a black, making up the 38, and each capable of holding a marble. The moveable rim is set in motion by the hand, and as it revolves horizontally from east to west round its axis, the marble is caused by a jerk of the finger and thumb to fly off in a contrary movement. The public therefore conclude that no calculation can foretell where the marble will fall, and

I believe they are right, inasmuch as the bank plays a certain and sure game, however deep, runs no risk of loss, and consequently has no necessity for superfluously cheating or deluding the public. It also plays double, that is to say on both sides of the wheel of fortune at once.

When the whirling of both rim and marble cease, the latter falls, either instantaneously or after some coy uncertainty into one of the compartments, and the number and colour etc. is immediately proclaimed, the stakes deposited are dexterously raked up by the croupier, or increased by payment from the bank, according as the colour wins or loses. Now the two sides or tables are merely duplicates of one another, and each of them is divided something like a chess-board into three columns of squares, which amount to 36, the numbers advance arithmetically from right to left, and consequently there are twelve lines down, so as to complete the rectangle, as one therefore stands at the head, four stands immediately under it, and so on.

At the bottom lie three squares with the french marks 12 p—12 m—12 d, that is first, middle, third dozen. The three large meadows on either side are for red and black, pair and odd, miss and pass, which last signify the division of the numbers into the first and second half, from 1 to 18 and from 19—36 inclusive. If a number be staked upon and wins, the stake is increased to six and thirty times its amount, and so on, always less, as the stake is placed in different positions, which may be effected

in the following ways; by placing the piece of gold or silver on the line (*à cheval*) partly on one and partly on its neighbour, two numbers are represented, and should one win, the piece is augmented to eighteen times the sum; three numbers are signified upon the stroke at the end or beginning of the numbers that go across; six, by placing the coin on the border of a perpendicular and a horizontal line between two strokes; four, where the lines cross within; twelve numbers are signified in a twofold manner, either upon the column where the figures follow in the order of one, four, seven and so on, or on the side-fields mentioned above; these receive the stake trebled, and those who stake solely upon the colour, the two halves, or equal and odd have their stake doubled when they win. Now the two zeros, that is the simple and compound, stand apart and may be separately staked upon: should either turn up, the stake is increased in a far larger proportion. — To render the game equal, without counting in the zeros and other trifles, the winner ought to receive the square of thirty six, instead of thirty six. It is a melancholy amusement to any rational being not infatuated by the blind rage of gold, to witness the incredible exertions so repeatedly made to take the bank by storm, sometimes by surprize, anon by stealth, and not rarely by digging a mine, laying intrenchments and opening a fire of field-pieces, heavy ordnance and flying artillery; but the fortress proud and conscious of its superior strength, built on a rock of adamant,

laughs at the puny attacks of its foes, nay itself invites the storm, as the brave Elliot did when assailed in the rock of Gibraltar. They say a man's character may be known by the dog he keeps, much more may it be known by the way in which he gambles; setting his intellects therefore out of the question, let us look at what people call his courage, game, pluck, coolness. One, an Englishman for instance, charges desperately—neck or nothing, an earldom or a scaffold: you cannot help admiring the man's courage, for at every failure he returns again with rallied strength; and with one or more soldiers in yellow-uniform or with his scotch-greys attacks a whole army: temporary success allures him into the belief of victory, but sooner or later his gallant band succumb, one by one picked off with an unerring and deadly fire, and retreat is the inevitable consequence, with the sacrifice of arms, baggage and ammunition.

For those classes of mankind who possess a little more prudence than the foregoing a game called 'trente et un,' trente et quarante or Rouge and Noir has been invented. This game is too well known in England to require any description. The Lord of the temple himself pays, I believe, to government a yearly sum of thirty five thousand florins, about three thousand pounds a year, for permission to keep such an establishment. He has gone to immense expense in decorating the building, he pays a crowd of croupiers at different salaries and officers of his own, who superintend and direct matters, he lights up the building

and he presides over the festivities of the town, in short he is the patron of it all. With all this liberality he himself derives an enormous revenue, an income as sure and determined as that of my Lord Mayor himself. On a saturday night a ball takes place, superior to those held on the other nights in the room to the right. It is called the '*bal paré*'; the grand saloon is then usurped by the dancing world, and beauty, rank, wealth, adventurers join in the mazy dance or swim through the voluptuous waltz. A Beau Nash is wanting, nay, such a personage would be impossible. The left wing of the Conversation-house consists of an hotel for dinners and refreshment, what is called a Restauration: an estaminet or smooking-room separates it from the temple of fortune; the right wing is a theatre, where during the season French and German plays are alternately represented, the library of Mr. MARX separates this building also from the temple. This is the news-room and circulating library of the town, where all Englishmen meet with courtesy and attention. Before the building is a promenade, the loveliness of which may be ascertained by referring to the engraving in this work; shops or rather small bazaars are close at hand, and grounds laid out in something like the English taste surround the edifice. Ices and other refreshments are taken '*al fresco*', and happiness or the mask of happiness is the order of the day. As far as the bazaars are concerned, the owners are mostly non residents of the town, and come from various parts such as Carlsruhe, Strasburg,

Nancy etc., but who, as soon as the season is over, depart as they came, like swallows. Concerts from renowned masters occur more or less frequently as chance wills it. In closing this chapter, one sad conviction presents itself to the mind of every one, namely, that the enchanting summer climate of Baden, its waters of health, its peaceful and unostentatious natural beauty attracts visitors less than the meretricious and syren charms which I have here somewhat too prolixly perhaps enlarged upon. But the line of Fontaine is immortal for its truth,

Le monde est toujours jeune, il faut le traiter d'enfant.

The voluptuous, the gay, the rich and effeminate, the epicurean, the spendthrift, the adventurous will always exist in every age and clime, not even Holland excepted: were the means of dissipation denied them here, they would flutter elsewhere: butterflies must live, pigeons must coo, and the government of this country knowing the evil to be unavoidable has endeavoured to place it under as much wholesome restraint as possible; the same scenes although not sanctioned by the government take place secretly in London and Paris; suppression is out of the question, for the law-givers are the guilty parties. Besides this, look at the royal exchange, think on south-sea-bubbles. I can only hope that the existence of this palace of pleasure may not silently undermine the country of Baden itself and corrupt the whole mass of its citizens, a country and people who have suffered many calamities, and who are fully entitled to prosperity. Where

territorial strength does not exist, a moral strength may. Baden by its excellent laws and mild policy possesses this, and it is a problem whether the toleration of any excess, even from the purest motives, conduces to the well-being or happiness of the collective nation, whatever may be the gain that accrues to a few favoured individuals.