ADVERTISEMENT.

Some justly admired Authors having condescended to glean a few stray thoughts from these Letters, which have remained dormant a great many years; I have been at length emboldened to lay them before the public. Perhaps, as they happen to contain passages which persons of acknowledged taste have honoured with their notice, they may possibly be less unworthy of emerging from the shade into daylight than I imagined.

Most of these Letters were written in the bloom and heyday of youthful spirits and youthful confidence, at a period when the old order of things existed with all its picturesque pomps and absurdities; when Venice enjoyed her piombi and submarine dungeons; France her bastile; the Peninsula her holy Inquisition. To look back upon what is beginning to appear almost a fabulous era in the eyes of the modern children of light, is not unamusing or uninstructive; for, still better to appreciate the present, we should be led not unfrequently to recall the intellectual muzziness of the past.

But happily these pages are not crowded with such records: they are chiefly filled with delineations of landscape and those effects of natural phenomena which it is not in the power of revolutions or constitutions to alter or destroy.
A few moments snatched from the contemplation of political crimes, bloodshed, and treachery, are a few moments gained to all lovers of innocent illusion. Nor need the statesman or the scholar despise the occasional relaxation of light reading. When Jupiter and the great deities are represented by Homer as retiring from scenes of havoc and carnage to visit the blameless and quiet Ethiopians, who were the farthest removed of all nations, the Lord knows whither, at the very extremities of the ocean, — would they have given ear to manifestos or protocols? No, they would much rather have listened to the Tales of Mother Goose.

London, June 12th, 1834.

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THE LOW COUNTRIES AND GERMANY.

LETTER I.

Passage to Ostend.—The Capuchin church.—Ghent.—Quiet and Content, the presiding deities of Flanders.—Antwerp.—The Place de Meir.—Silence and solitude of the town, contrasted with the tumult and uproar of London.

Ostend, 21st June, 1780.

We had a rough passage, and arrived at this imperial haven in a piteous condition. Notwithstanding its renown and importance, it is but a scurvy place—preposterous Flemish roofs disgust your eyes when cast upwards—swaggering Dutch skippers and mongrel smugglers are the principal objects they meet with below; and then the whole atmosphere is impregnated with the fumes of tobacco, burnt peat, and garlick. I should esteem myself in luck, were the nuisances of this seaport confined only to two senses; but, alas! the apartment above my head proves a squalling brattery, and the sounds which proceed from it are so loud and frequent, that a person might think himself in limbo, without any extravagance.

In hope of some relief, I went to the Capuchin church, a large solemn building, in search of silence and solitude; but here again was I disappointed. There happened to be an exposition of the holy wafer with ten thousand candles; and whilst half-a-dozen squeaking fiddles fugued and flourished away in the galleries, and as many paralytic monks gabbled before the altars, a whole posse of devotees, in long white hoods and flannels, were sweltering on
either side.
This papal piety, in warm weather, was no very fragrant circumstance; so I sought the open air again as fast as I was able. The serenity of the evening—for the black huddle of clouds, which the late storms had accumulated, were all melted away—tempted me to the ramparts. There, at least, thought I to myself, I may range undisturbed, and talk with my old friends the breezes, and address my discourse to the waves, and be as romantic and fanciful as I please; but I had scarcely begun a poetic apostrophe, before out flaunted a whole rank of officers, with ladies and abbés and puppy dogs, singing, and flirting, and making such a hubbub, that I had not one peaceful moment to observe the bright tints of the western horizon, or enjoy those ideas of classic antiquity which a calm sunset never fails to bring before my imagination.

Finding, therefore, no quiet abroad, I returned to my inn, and should have gone immediately to bed, in hopes of relapsing into the bosom of dreams and delusions; but the limbo I mentioned before grew so very outrageous, that I was obliged to postpone my rest till sugarplums and nursery eloquence had hushed it to repose. At length peace was restored, and about eleven o’clock I fell into a slumber. My dreams anticipated the classic scenes of Italy, the proposed term of my excursion.

Next morning I arose refreshed with these agreeable impressions. No ideas, but such as Nemi and Albano suggested, haunted me whilst travelling to Ghent. I neither heard the coarse dialect which was talking around me, nor noticed the formal avenues and marshy country which we passed. When we stopped to change horses, I closed my eyes upon the dull prospect, and was transported immediately to those Grecian solitudes which Theocritus so enchantingly describes.

To one so far gone in the poetic lore of ancient days, Ghent is not the most likely place to recall his attention; and I know nothing more about it, than that it is a large, ill-paved, plethoric, pompous-looking city, with a decent proportion of convents and chapels,
monuments, brazen gates, and gilded marbles. In the great church were several pictures by Rubens, so striking, so masterly, as to hold me broad awake; though, I must own, there are moments when I could contentedly fall asleep in a Flemish cathedral, for the mere chance of beholding in vision the temple of Olympian Jupiter.

But I think I hear, at this moment, some grave and respectable personage chiding my enthusiasm—“Really, sir, you had better stay at home, and dream in your great chair, than give yourself the trouble of going post through Europe, in search of places where to fall asleep. If Flanders and Holland are to be dreamed over at this rate, you had better take ship at once, and doze all the way to Italy.” Upon my word, I should not have much objection to that scheme; and, if some enchanter would but transport me in an instant to the summit of Ætna, anybody might slop through the Low Countries that pleased.

Being, however, so far advanced, there is no retracting; and I am resolved to journey along with Quiet and Content for my companions. These two comfortable deities have, I believe, taken Flanders under their especial protection; every step one advances discovering some new proof of their influence. The neatness of the houses, and the universal cleanliness of the villages, show plainly that their inhabitants live in ease and good humour. All is still and peaceful in these fertile lowlands: the eye meets nothing but round unmeaning faces at every door, and harmless stupidity smiling at every window. The beasts, as placid as their masters, graze on without any disturbance; and I scarcely recollect to have heard one grunting swine or snarling mastiff during my whole progress. Before every village is a wealthy dunghill, not at all offensive, because but seldom disturbed; and there sows and porkers bask in the sun, and wallow at their ease, till the hour of death and bacon arrives.

But it is high time to lead you towards Antwerp. More rich pastures, more ample fields of grain, more flourishing willows! A
boundless plain lies before this city, dotted with cows, and speckled with flowers; a level whence its spires and quaint roofs are seen to advantage! The pale colours of the sky, and a few gleams of watery sunshine, gave a true Flemish cast to the scenery, and everything appeared so consistent, that I had not a shadow of pretence to think myself asleep.

After crossing a broad expanse of river, edged on one side by beds of osiers beautifully green, and on the other by gates and turrets preposterously ugly, we came through several streets of lofty houses to our inn. Its situation in the “Place de Meir,” a vast open space surrounded by buildings above buildings, and roof above roof, has something striking and singular. A tall gilt crucifix of bronze, sculptured by Cortels of Malines,[1] adds to its splendour; and the tops of some tufted trees, seen above a line of magnificent hotels, add greatly to the effect of the perspective.

It was almost dusk when we arrived; and as I am very partial to new objects discovered by this dubious, visionary light, I went immediately a rambling. Not a sound disturbed my meditations: there were no groups of squabbling children or talkative old women. The whole town seemed retired into their inmost chambers; and I kept winding and turning about, from street to street, and from alley to alley, without meeting a single inhabitant. Now and then, indeed, one or two women in long cloaks and mantles glided by at a distance; but their dress was so shroud-like, and their whole appearance so ghostly, that I should have been afraid to accost them. As night approached, the ranges of buildings grew more and more dim, and the silence which reigned amongst them more awful. The canals, which in some places intersect the streets, were likewise in perfect solitude, and there was just light sufficient for me to observe on the still waters the reflection of the structures above them. Except two or three tapers glimmering through the casements, no one circumstance indicated human existence. I might, without being thought very romantic, have imagined myself in the city of petrified people which Arabian
fabulists are so fond of describing. Were any one to ask my advice upon the subject of retirement, I should tell him—By all means repair to Antwerp. No village amongst the Alps, or hermitage upon Mount Lebanon, is less disturbed: you may pass your days in this great city without being the least conscious of its sixty thousand inhabitants, unless you visit the churches. There, indeed, are to be heard a few devout whispers, and sometimes, to be sure, the bells make a little chiming; but, walk about, as I do, in the twilights of midsummer, and be assured your ears will be free from all molestation.

You can have no idea how many strange, amusing fancies played around me whilst I wandered along; nor how delighted I was with the novelty of my situation. But a few days ago, thought I within myself, I was in the midst of all the tumult and uproar of London: now, as if by some magic influence, I am transported to a city equally remarkable indeed for streets and edifices, but whose inhabitants seem cast into a profound repose. What a pity that we cannot borrow some small share of this soporific disposition! It would temper that restless spirit which throws us sometimes into such dreadful convulsions. However, let us not be too precipitate in desiring so dead a calm; the time may arrive when, like Antwerp, we may sink into the arms of forgetfulness; when a fine verdure may carpet our Exchange, and passengers traverse the Strand without any danger of being smothered in crowds or crushed by carriages.

Reflecting, in this manner, upon the silence of the place, contrasted with the important bustle which formerly rendered it so famous, I insensibly drew near to the cathedral, and found myself, before I was aware, under its stupendous tower. It is difficult to conceive an object more solemn or more imposing than this edifice at the hour I first beheld it. Dark shades hindered my examining the lower galleries; their elaborate carved work was invisible; nothing but huge masses of building met my sight, and the tower, shooting up four hundred and sixty-six feet in the air, received an additional
importance from the gloom which prevailed below. The sky being perfectly clear, several stars twinkled through the mosaic of the pinnacles, and increased the charm of their effect.

Whilst I was indulging my reveries, a ponderous bell struck ten, and such a peal of chimes succeeded, as shook the whole edifice, notwithstanding its bulk, and drove me away in a hurry. I need not say, no mob obstructed my passage. I ran through a succession of streets, free and unmolested, as if I had been skimming along over the downs of Wiltshire. The voices of my servants conversing before the hotel were the only sounds which the great “Place de Meir” echoed.

This characteristic stillness was the more pleasing, when I looked back upon those scenes of outcry and horror which filled London but a week or two ago, when danger was not confined to night only, and to the environs of the capital, but haunted our streets at mid-day. Here, I could wander over an entire city; stray by the port, and venture through the most obscure alleys, without a single apprehension; without beholding a sky red and portentous with the light of houses on fire, or hearing the confusion of shouts and groans mingled with the reports of artillery. I can assure you, I think myself very fortunate to have escaped the possibility of another such week of desolation, and to be peaceably lulled at Antwerp.

LETTER II.

Visit to the cabinets of pictures in Antwerp.—Monsieur Van Lencren’s collection.—The Canon Knyff’s house and gallery of paintings.—The Canon himself.—His domestic felicity.—Revisit the cathedral.—Grand service in honour of St. John the Baptist.—Mynheer Van den Bosch, the organist’s astonishing flashes of execution.—Evening service in the cathedral.—Magical effect of the music of Jomelli.—Blighted avenues.—Slow travelling.—Enter the United Provinces.—Level scenery.—Chinese prospects.—Reach Meerdynke.—Arrival at the Hague.

Antwerp, 23rd June, 1780.

After breakfast this morning I began my pilgrimage to all the cabinets of pictures in Antwerp. First, I went to Monsieur Van
Lencren’s, who possesses a suite of apartments, lined, from the base to the cornice, with the rarest productions of the Flemish school. Heaven forbid I should enter into a detail of their niceties! I might as well count the dew-drops upon the most spangled of Van Huysum’s flower-pieces, or the pimples on their possessor’s countenance; a very good sort of man, indeed; but from whom I was not at all sorry to be delivered.

My joy was, however, of short duration, as a few minutes brought me into the court-yard of the Canon Knyff’s habitation; a snug abode, well furnished with ample fauteuils and orthodox couches. After viewing the rooms on the first floor, we mounted an easy staircase, and entered an ante-chamber, which they who delight in the imitations of art rather than of nature, in the likenesses of joint stools and the portraits of tankards, would esteem most capitally adorned: but it must be confessed, that amongst these uninteresting performances are dispersed a few striking Berghems and agreeable Polembergs. In the gallery adjoining, two or three Rosa de Tivolis merit observation; and a large Teniers, representing the Hermit St. Anthony surrounded by a malicious set of imps and leering devilesses, is well calculated to display the whimsical buffoonery of a Dutch imagination.

I was enjoying this strange medley, when the canon made his appearance; and a most prepossessing figure he has, according to Flemish ideas. In my humble opinion, his reverence looked a little muddled or so; and, to be sure, the description I afterwards heard of his style of living favours not a little my surmises. This worthy dignitary, what with his private fortune and the good things of the church, enjoys a spanking revenue, which he contrives to get rid of in the joys of the table and the encouragement of the pencil.

His servants, perhaps, assist not a little in the expenditure of so comfortable an income; the canon being upon a very social footing with them all. At four o’clock in the afternoon, a select party attend him in his coach to an ale-house about a league from the city; where a table, well spread with jugs of beer and handsome cheeses,
waits their arrival. After enjoying this rural fare, the same equipage conducts them back again, by all accounts, much faster than they came; which may well be conceived, as the coachman is one of the brightest wits of the entertainment.

My compliments, alas! were not much appreciated, you may suppose, by this jovial personage. I said a few favourable words of Polemberg, and offered up a small tribute of praise to the memory of Berghem; but, as I could not prevail upon Mynheer Knyff to expand, I made one of my best bows, and left him to the enjoyment of his domestic felicity.

In my way home, I looked into another cabinet, the greatest ornament of which was a most sublime thistle by Snyders, of the heroic size, and so faithfully imitated that I dare say no Ass could see it unmoved. At length, it was lawful to return home; and as I positively refused visiting any more cabinets in the afternoon, I sent for a harpsichord of Rucker, and played myself quite out of the Netherlands.

It was late before I finished my musical excursion, and I took advantage of this dusky moment to revisit the cathedral. A flight of starlings had just pitched on one of the pinnacles of the tower, whose faint chirpings were the only sounds that broke the evening stillness. Not a human form appeared at any of the windows around; no footsteps were audible in the opening before the grand entrance; and during the half hour I spent in walking to and fro, one solitary Franciscan was the only creature that accosted me. From him I learned that a grand service was to be performed next day in honour of St. John the Baptist, and the best music in Flanders would be called forth on the occasion, so I determined to stay one day longer at Antwerp.

Having taken this resolution, I availed myself of a special invitation from Mynheer Van den Bosch, the first organist of the place, and sat next to him in his lofty perch during the celebration of high mass. The service ended, I strayed about the aisles, and examined the innumerable chapels which decorate them, whilst
Mynheer Van den Bosch thundered and lightened away upon his huge organ with fifty stops.

When the first flashes of execution had a little subsided, I took an opportunity of surveying the celebrated Descent from the Cross. This has ever been esteemed the master-piece of Rubens, which, large as it is, they pretend here that Old Lewis Baboon[2] offered to cover with gold. A swingeing St. Christopher, fording a brook with a child on his shoulders, cannot fail of attracting attention. This colossal personage is painted on the folding-doors which defend the grand effort of art just mentioned from vulgar eyes; and here Rubens has selected a very proper subject to display the gigantic boldness of his pencil.

After I had most dutifully surveyed all his productions in this church, I walked half over Antwerp in quest of St. John’s relics, which were moving about in procession. If my eyes were not much regaled by the saint’s magnificence, my ears were greatly affected in the evening by the music which sang forth his praises. The cathedral was crowded with devotees, and perfumed with incense. A motet, in the lofty style of Jomelli, performed with taste and feeling, transported me to Italian climates; and I grieved, when a cessation dissolved the charm, to think that I had still so many tramontane regions to pass before I could in effect reach that classic country. Finding it was in vain to expect preternatural interposition, and perceiving no conscious angel or Loretto-vehicle waiting in some dark consecrated corner to bear me away, I humbly returned to my hotel.

Monday, June 26th.—We were again upon the pavé, rattling and jumbling along between clipped hedges and blighted avenues. The plagues of Egypt have been renewed, one might almost imagine, in this country, by the appearance of the oak trees: not a leaf have the insects spared. After having had the displeasure of seeing no other objects for several hours but these blasted rows, the scene changed to vast tracts of level country, buried in sand and smothered with heath; the particular character of which I had but too good an
opportunity of intimately knowing, as a tortoise might have kept pace with us without being once out of breath.
Towards evening, we entered the dominions of the United Provinces, and had all their glory of canals, treck-schuyts, and windmills, before us. The minute neatness of the villages, their red roofs, and the lively green of the willows which shade them, corresponded with the ideas I had formed of Chinese prospects; a resemblance which was not diminished upon viewing on every side the level scenery of enamelled meadows, with stripes of clear water across them, and innumerable barges gliding busily along. Nothing could be finer than the weather; it improved each moment, as if propitious to my exotic fancies; and, at sun-set, not one single cloud obscured the horizon. Several storks were parading by the water-side, amongst flags and osiers; and, as far as the eye could reach, large herds of beautifully spotted cattle were enjoying the plenty of their pastures. I was perfectly in the environs of Canton, or Ning Po, till we reached Meerdyke. You know fumigations are always the current recipe in romance to break an enchantment; as soon, therefore, as I left my carriage and entered my inn, the clouds of tobacco which filled every one of its apartments dispersed my Chinese imaginations, and reduced me in an instant to Holland.

Why should I enlarge upon my adventures at Meerdyke? To tell you that its inhabitants are the most uncouth bipeds in the universe would be nothing very new or entertaining; so let me at once pass over the village, leave Rotterdam, and even Delft, that great parent of pottery, and transport you with a wave of my pen to the Hague.
As the evening was rather warm, I immediately walked out to enjoy the shade of the long avenue which leads to Scheveling, and proceeded to the village on the sea coast, which terminates the perspective. Almost every cottage door being open to catch the air, I had an opportunity of looking into their neat apartments. Tables, shelves, earthenware, all glisten with cleanliness; the country people were drinking tea, after the fatigues of the day, and talking
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