Letters from the Rhine by H. Zschokke
LETTERS FROM THE RHINE.

BY H. ZSCHOKKE.

Two volumes 12mo. New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1849.

In the reign of cheap literature, a few years ago, among the shoals of books issued by a prolific press, and which loaded down the counters of every country shopkeeper, was one entitled "The Walpurgis-Night, from the German of H. Zschokke." This book, although now almost forgotten, excited in its day much attention, and was in truth a work of no small merit, and gave evidence of being the production of no ordinary mind. Since then nothing was heard of H. Zschokke, until, a few years ago, he appeared as the author of two handsome volumes, bearing the attractive title of "Letters from the Rhine." This work gained immediate popularity in his own country; was translated into English, and was scarcely less popular there; and is now, by the kindness of Messrs. Stringer & Townsend, presented to the American public. As yet, it has by no means attained the popularity in our country which it deserves; is but little known beyond the precincts of our cities. But, though neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, we venture to predict that in a short time there will not be a more universally read and admired work in any department of the literature of the day. We hasten to bring it to the notice of our readers, as not among the last to do justice to merit, and with the faint hope that our labors, however humble, may be instrumental in introducing it to a portion of the reading public.

We confess to a deep rooted love for the Rhine, consecrated as it has been for centuries by the offerings of genius—where still remain the mementoes of former generations, the secluded monastery, and the gloomy castle, around which still linger the traditions of bygone days. No stream is more world-renowned, and, as a consequence, none is more written about. But we have no hesitation in saying, that all the previous efforts, which have come to our knowledge, to give a life-like description of the regions of the Rhine, have been most signal failures. No ordinary talents, and no ordinary share of attainments are requisite to do justice to such a subject. The author before us is peculiarly fitted for the task he has undertaken; to a remarkable keenness of observation, to an ardent enthusiasm for his native land, to a reflecting and liberal mind, he adds all the accomplishments of learning; there are few sciences into which he has not made incursions, and brought from them choicest treasures. Whether rambling over hill and mountain, gathering curiosities, examining ancient remains in the museum of Treves and Cologne, criticizing paintings in the galleries of Carlsruhe, pouring forth eloquent opinions in the libraries of Frankfort and Mayence, he is equally at ease, and equally attractive. And, to crown all, his style, strange thing for a German, is exceedingly lucid, forcible, and elegant.

Our limits will not allow us to pretend to give a connected view of his No. V.—July, 1849.
Letters from the Rhine.

wanderings. All we can do is, to give here and there a brief extract, more to exhibit the field gone over by our author, than as a specimen of the work, or of its style.

The following general description must be taken with some grains of allowance:—

"Uniformity is the prevailing characteristic of the scenery of the Rhine. The tidy villages with their slate roofs, scarcely perceptible above the banks of the stream, form the foreground of the picture; behind them rise the vine-clad mountains, on whose summit stands some gloomy castle, last relic of the days of chivalry! The churches and walls found in almost every village are in appearance at least as old as the castles themselves. What an interest these structures, the work of rude hands, in barbarous days, excite! Unequalled by any inspired by the chaste relics of the classic period."

These feudal castles form one of the most prominent features of German scenery. To each are connected numberless legends and traditions. Our author is well skilled in legendary lore, and delights to retail it out to a circle of listening admirers. We are favored with no few specimens of his skill in this, by no means despicable, department.

Among the most celebrated of the German castles, is that of Mt. Godesberg. Our author's philological skill is put in requisition to settle the correct derivation of the name of the Mount; this done, he proceeds to describe the castle, and relate its traditionary history. It appears that it was once garrisoned by the troops of Archbishop Gебbhard. Beneath it lay the territories of the lovely Countess of Mannsfield. The archbishop, in spite of his mitre and surplice, was a mortal; the countess, although, in the songs of the minstrels of her day, an angel, a divinity, could, like Dian of old, stoop to notice a mortal lover. But what was to be done? The archbishop was a dignitary of the church, and the vows of celibacy were upon him, and the countess was no friend of Catholicism. Love was the strongest. He resigned his archbishopric, and forsook his church. Our author will tell the rest:—

"Arrangements for the wedding were made, to be celebrated with all the pomp of the expiring days of chivalry. The sun sank calmly to rest behind the summit of Godesberg. And the moon soon arose, and floated serenely in the blue ether. The halls of the castle shone with the blaze of hundreds of torches, and its arches echoed with the gay laugh and the sprightly jest, and ever and anon would arise the song of the minstrel, in praise of the 'fair lady,' and the brave warrior that night to be joined in bands of holy wedlock. And never had minstrel a lovelier theme—of all the beauties of the land there assembled, none could vie with the Countess of Mannsfield. But the destined bridegroom is absent—an hour passes on, and he appears not—another, and still he makes not his appearance! Intense anxiety and fear seize upon every breast. A band of gallant spirits start out to find him.
Their path led them through a dark, deep defile—a spot still a place of terror to the simple peasant—and there, bathed in blood, lay the corpse of him they sought. He was borne to the castle, and the late scene of gaiety became a place of mourning. The archbishop was buried in the vaults of the castle. A few days after, the halls of the castle of Mannsfield were alive with the din of a bustling crowd. But she who before had been the bright star of the assembly, now lay motionless and lifeless—locked in the embrace of death."

This touching tale has been the foundation of some of the noblest productions in German literature. Richter, Klopstock, Goethe, and Schiller, have each labored to embellish it—Klopstock’s poem on this is decidedly his best production.

Our traveler is an amateur in wines, and dwells with evident satisfaction on the far-famed wines of Bacbarah. "The vintages in this place are among the most renowned in Germany. Pope Pius the Second exhibited his good taste and judgment by ordering two tuns of its wine to be annually sent to Rome; and one of our good emperors granted independence to the town of Nuremberg for four butts of it." He warns all from touching, tasting, or handling the vile trash sold at the inns, but to apply to the generous citizens of the place, by whom he will be cheerfully supplied.

As specimens of our author's descriptive powers, we would refer our readers to his account of his visit to the Black Forest, to the mines of Eifen, and more particularly to his description of the prospect from the summit of Mt. Torrenne. Their length renders it impossible for us to give them here.

But we turn to another portion of the work. Our author is a literary character of no small note in his own country, and has access to many of the most distinguished characters in Germany. His interviews with these constitute one of the most delightful portions of his work. Indeed, we cannot but think he is too free in communicating to the public the conversations and domestic affairs of his cotemporaries. But he certainly amuses, although it is at the expense of propriety. No less amusing, and more delightful, are his reminiscences of the dead. He dwells on their memory with delight, and criticizes their works with genial sympathy. Jean Paul was never more fairly estimated and more graphically pictured than by H. Zschokke, his disciple, and in a manner his imitator. And nowhere can there be found a more eloquent tribute to the memory of departed genius, than in the brief and glowing eulogy of Körner, the poet-warrior, in these letters. We cannot deny that his prejudices have, in several instances, led him to do manifest injustice to some of his cotemporaries. His attack on Lamartine we cannot see the provocation of, and the exhibition of ill humor does him no credit.

We have but barely time to refer to the most elaborate portion of the work before us—that relating to the Dramatic Literature of Germany.
Our author devotes several letters to the subject, and writes as one well acquainted with his subject. His aim is to vindicate it from the aspersions of foreign writers. We do not think he has altogether succeeded in his attempt, although he has given us a more favorable opinion of the German drama than we were wont to entertain.

Germany, in the opinion of one of our modern critics, is not the soil for the drama. There it is a "sickly exotic;" the plays are "monsters, misshapen, deformed, disagreeable, Calibans." This in the face of Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller! Our English readers may see how far the assertion of the critic is borne out by fact, by perusing, and no one who lays the least pretension to anything like a love for literature, has not already read with delight, Coleridge's translation of Schiller's Wallenstein, a play inferior, either in variety of character and events, intensity of interest, development of plot, and magnificence, to none of Shakespeare's himself. Translations, though brief, from Goethe's and others' tragedies may be found in the published works of Shelley.

There is one disease, if we may so speak, characteristic of the German mind, and which taints its whole literature, a morbid straining after originality. To think as no one else thinks, to speak as no one else speaks—this, in the German's opinion, is genius. This has led them to wildest sophistry, to the confounding of all distinctions of right and wrong. And this is evident in their dramatic works. Many of their most popular plays are based on principles of morality revolting to every cultivated American mind. One, and a very popular one it is, too, inculcates the doctrine compressed by Rahel into an aphorism, that, "Always to love the same, or something else, is constancy; not to love, inconstancy." The play gives us a specimen of a German lady's constancy on this rule. Those who are curious, will find the tale eloquently told in letter lxxvi. of his series. This licentiousness may also be attributed, in part, to the influence of French literature, which has exercised a baneful influence on all with which it has ever come in contact. Our author attempts a defence of his licentiousness, on the ground that they are pictures of real life—of human nature. This, our readers will see, is but a lame way of apologizing for what cannot be excused. But we refer them to the work itself—we must close. In conclusion, we take the liberty of recommending it to the notice of all who may honor this with a notice. They will be amply repaid for their money, and the time spent upon its perusal.