The Black Forest:

From Notes taken by L. Hart, during a tour in Germany in 1861.

[Read before the Fine Art Section, 27 June, 1879.]

The name brings to most minds visions of robbers, murderers, impenetrable thickets, dangerous wild beasts, and who knows what other horrors. The country is comparatively unknown, and therefore more or less unexplored by tourists. It cannot be said to have become fashionable, and therefore is supposed to be still uncivilized. But when the traveller, either from love of novelty or curiosity of any kind, is induced to penetrate this unknown region, he is surprised to find much the opposite of what he had expected. The country is as grand if not far grander than he had imagined—the wild beasts are simply wild boars, roe deer, and such like game. The inhabitants, if somewhat rough from want of frequent communication with the outer world, are honest and friendly. Villages and farm-houses are met with in every direction,—where the forest is thick it is intersected by innumerable paths, fountains meet the thirsty wayfarer at every turn, seats placed where magnificent views are cut out in the forest invite him to rest, while green meadows, rushing torrents, and rocky precipices afford such variety as can probably be found nowhere else—not even in Switzerland, in the course of one day’s walk. While there are spots like the far-famed Höllenthal or Valley of Hell, the Albthal, or the scenery of the Felburg, of a wild and even savage character, there are others like the Murgthal near Baden Baden, or Günsbersthal near Freiburg, or the Baths of Baden Weiler, whose chief beauty consists in their very quiet and peaceful repose. Any one studying the aspect of the Black Forest country on the spot, or even on a good map, will see traces in its formation of the violent action of fire and earthquake, as well as of the softer influence of water. Abrupt walls of rock, gently rounded hills, traces of ancient lakes of vast extent, now reduced in some cases within narrow limits, in some cases wholly dried up, are to be found on all sides; granite, porphyry, sandstone, and alluvial deposits are blended together, sometimes covered by the thick forest, sometimes cleared and open for miles around. Its natural productions are numerous, as might be expected. Antimony, silver, iron, rock crystal, agate, amethyst and opal, and in some parts garnets, rank among its more valuable treasures. In botanical treasures the Black Forest is very rich, possessing some thirty specimens peculiar to itself, and others common to it with the Alps, Jura, and Vosges. The immense variety of soil and differences of elevation make the flora of this region a
sort of epitome of that of Germany and Switzerland. The Romans knew the forest as the Sylva Marciana, forming the south-west corner of the great Hercynian Forest, which extended through the middle of Germany, the length of which is estimated by Cesar at sixty days' march. Modern geographers reckon the Black Forest to extend from the Rhine near Bale in the south-west, up to Bruchsal and Pforzheim on the north-east; on the west it is bounded by the wide plain forming the Rhine valley, and on the east it dies away gradually in the high table-land of Württemburg.

The number of its inhabitants amounts to about half a million, of whom 133,000 belong to Württemburg, and the remainder to the grand duchy of Baden. It is divided into the upper Black Forest, between the Rhine at its southern extremity, and the valley of the Kinsig flowing by Offenburg, where the hills attain a mean height of 3,000 feet above sea level. The lower portion, from the valley of the Kinsig northwards, has a mean height of 2,000 feet, and its highest points reach only to some four or five hundred feet more. As a rule, the hills rise abruptly from the Rhine valley on their western side and sink gradually in other directions.

The accounts left by the Romans people the Black Forest with horrors of all kinds, and possibly through these traditions has its evil name been handed down to our own day. The earliest inhabitants who left any traces were the Celts, but it is probable they did not penetrate far into the Forest; such names as with any certainty can be traced to them are usually found on the western side towards the Rhine valley, whilst the names deeper in the Forest are purely German. Little by little, charcoal-burners, herdsmen, woodmen, and others pursuing similar occupations penetrated the recesses hitherto tenanted by bears and wolves, until the whole district was peopled. The highest inhabited part of the Forest is about 3,940 feet above the level of the sea. The gradual process of peopling has in many cases been traced out by means of ancient documents, showing that much was due to the monks, who in seeking out spots retired and free from disturbance, set an example which was followed by many neighbouring proprietors.

And so the Black Forest changed its aspect. Already in the 15th Century it is spoken of as thoroughly peopled and cultivated. In the following century an ancient chronicler speaks of it as a rough and cold country, mostly covered with pine forests, but yet, through the industry of its inhabitants, producing a fair amount of corn, and better cattle than Hungary, Poland, Bohemia and Switzerland; nor does he forget to mention its medicinal and other springs, known before by the Romans, but at this time again coming into notice.
As was to be expected, however, the chief Black Forest trade was in wood; other productions sufficed for home consumption, but this was the source of that well-being that even to the present day distinguishes the inhabitants. As the population grew larger, it was necessary to seek some other means of subsistence, and the staple industry of many districts of the Forest commenced. In the 17th Century clock-making was introduced, and, with the kindred trade of musical boxes, has ever since employed a considerable population.

There are also various other branches of industry pursued in the Black Forest; glass, and the coarser kinds of pottery, straw hats, and brushes are made in large quantities, and of late years a considerable number of cotton and wool manufactories have been established, more particularly in the southern half, where they were first introduced about a hundred years since, and were fostered by the now suppressed monks of the Abbey of St. Blaise. The aspect of comfort and solidity in the houses and villages of the Black Forest is a subject of astonishment to every stranger who passes through it, and furnishes a striking contrast to the state of the lower orders in most other countries in Europe. The whole secret of this prosperity lies in the rough and hardy education which the inhabitants as a race have undergone, and which has left its impress too strongly upon the character for it to be speedily effaced by even the growing luxury and free communication with the outer world of the present day.

The German proverb "Aller Anfang ist schwer" has proved nowhere more true than in the history of the peopling and cultivation of the Black Forest. Every little gain had to be diligently laboured for, and came to be prized almost in proportion to the difficulty of obtaining it. Before even a crop of oats could be grown the land had to be cleared and the ground prepared, requiring the labour of several years. Moreover the difficulties of transport, in the almost total absence of communications, are in the present day inconceivable. Many and many a wayside cross or small chapel tells of some fatal accident connected with the early settling and clearing of the country. Nor had those inhabitants who busied themselves chiefly with pasturing cattle fewer difficulties with which to contend. Even down to the 15th Century the wolves, now wholly extinct, committed extensive ravages, and obliged the herdsmen to take precautions now unknown, while many a danger and difficulty now forgotten kept the people in a constant state of preparation and watchfulness.

And so the race grew up, hardy, enduring and temperate, protected by its poverty and separation from many things which ruin richer and more luxurious tribes.

When the manufacturing industry of the Black Forest first arose, the ambition of each man was to found for himself a house,
with perhaps a field and a cow. He carried himself the produce of his labour on his own back to distant parts, and living as frugally there as at home, gradually amassed a sufficient sum to crown his wishes with success.

This is, in the case of nations as of individuals, the only sure road to prosperity; hardiness, patient endurance and diligence in youth, lead to competence in old age. And even now, when the inhabitants of the Black Forest are as a people prosperous, they preserve much of their original simplicity.

It is everywhere observed that the people inhabiting a mountainous country preserve their hereditary distinctness of dress, customs and manners, much longer than the dwellers in plains; and this is especially true in the case of the Black Forest, where there are few level tracts, as in North Germany, inviting communications and commerce. The consequence is that, amongst the people, a considerable amount of ancient customs and dresses are still to be found, although fewer and fewer every year, while different causes and the lapse of time have in some cases more or less modified the original types. Not the least among these disturbing causes have been religious differences.

Because the Catholic population used bright colours and joyous expressions, the Protestants employed black for many parts of their dress and gave utterance to their feelings in solemn words, marking the distinction as was done in England by the Cavaliers and Puritans.

The characteristic dresses of the Black Forest must however be allowed by all, even where sombre, to be at least picturesque, and many may claim a right to be handsome. Black knee-breeches, white stockings, a scarlet waistcoat, a coat of grey, black, or brown cloth lined with scarlet or white, a large black necktie, a felt hat with a prodigious brim, make up the usual dress of the male population. That of the fair sex is not easily described; a singular kind of skirt or petticoat, an apron with many plaits, a low body of some bright colour, sometimes laced across the breast, a linen or muslin cloth above this; these with an endless variety in the head-dress, are some of the usual points in which the costume of the country displays itself. But every district has its distinctive mark, either in material, colour or form, especially in the female dress; and not only has every larger valley a costume differing in some respects from that of all others, but even in the case of neighbouring villages, where a stranger might perceive no difference, the native's experienced eye would detect it, and by some knot, cut or button, assign every person he might meet to his or her own home.

This originality of dress extends even to the local military. While the writer of this paper was staying at Petersthal (a watering place of medicinal note), the Grand Duke of Baden was to pass through the village. A guard of honor was formed to receive the sovereign;
the men turned back their coat-tails, the red lining making them appear like some of Napoleon's old guard, the broad-brim hat was arranged in proper fashion and trimmed by the addition of a cockade; poor old brown bess, that had been for years lying quietly over the chimney, was taken down and carefully repolished, &c., and so the army was ready for—inspection. The day over, coat-tails fell back into their proper place again, the cockades were returned to the fair hands that prepared them, to be kept as mementoes of the valour of their fathers, husbands, or lovers, and the inoffensive weapon once more reposed in tranquillity in its habitual place.

This variation in the dresses of the inhabitants of the Black Forest is however equalled by the diversity of their dialects. As every county in England has its own distinctive accent, pronunciation, and even distinctive words, so is it with the various districts of the Black Forest. The two chief tribes who people this country, the Alemanni and Suabians, have left their traces upon the language, and beside these, most valleys, and even parishes, have, as in their dress, so also in their language, some peculiarity easily distinguishable by the practised ear. The purest form of the south-west German dialect is probably to be found in the highest parts of the central Black Forest, about Lengkirch, Neustadt, &c. The Swiss and Alsacians have given a coarseness of accent to the district which they bound, which gradually loses itself as the people are removed further from its influence, but in the whole district the grammatical forms are purer than in many parts of the north of Germany.

Among the customs and sports which have been handed down from the remotest antiquity are pre-eminent, here as elsewhere, the Christmas and church dedication feasts, marriages, &c. In some towns, at the Carnival, exists an old custom called "Hansellanfen." A man dressed up in motley garments, and furnished with bells, goes about and introduces himself in the various groups of holiday-keepers, teasing them to the utmost of his power by jibes, criticisms on their past or present acts, and in every other way his wit can suggest.

The ancient free country of the Baar, on the high ground of the eastern Black Forest, in which the Danube has some of its springs, furnishes another subject, the "Hahnen-tang-Gasnm Tang," a dance of which a cock is the prize. In the middle of the room the fowl is placed aloft on a perch, under which a stand is hung containing a glass. When a couple in their dance come under the glass, the lady sinks on one knee, and with her right hand, on which the man places one foot, raises him as high from the ground as she can reach. If by this means he can, with his head, throw down the glass, the prize is won and the merry-making continues in still more boisterous fashion. Many more similar amusements still exist among this people, especially among the outlying
districts, but every year sees the end of some of them. The people are gradually becoming too much spoilt by contact with the outer world to take pleasure any longer in amusements which sufficed for a simple age.

Those who purpose visiting the Black Forest should do so in the height of summer, not only because the temperature and weather are then more suitable, but also because the character of the higher country is then seen to the best advantage. The highest mountains freed from snow are easily ascended, and the sight of the distant Alps gradually lighted up by the rising sun forms a sight which must be seen to be appreciated, and which will never fade from the memory.

The Feldberg, the Belchen, and the Erykasten may be considered types of the high Black Forest hills, and are respectively 4,890 feet, 5,685 feet, and 4,635 feet above the level of the sea. The summit of the Feldberg is flat and perfectly devoid of trees. From this point can be seen the four great arms of hills which stretch from this giant towards the four quarters of the compass, and which, with their dependent ridges and valleys, make up almost the whole of the Black Forest mountain group. Through this lofty group almost all the chief passes of the forest make their way, at the commencement usually deeply cut in the mountains, but gradually rising till they cross the watershed between the Rhine and the Danube, at a height not far below that of the chief summits.

Of these the most celebrated is the Höllenthal, through which the unfortunate Marie Antoinette passed, on her way to marry the French King Louis XVI, and through which also, subsequently, Moreau conducted his celebrated retreat, in 1796, without any loss. Its height is 2,980 feet above the sea level. The highest pass in the Forest is over the Belchen, at a height of 3,640 feet.

In this high and wild country lie also embedded several lakes, but none of any great extent. The chief are the Feldsee, on the east side of the Feldberg, the Titisee, the Schluchsee (a lovely little lake surrounded by fine forests), and the Nonnenmat Weier See, in which is a floating island. In the northern district is the Mummelsee and a few other. They never exceed a depth of 200 feet, and are mostly full of fish. Much, however, of the charm of the Black Forest lies in its valleys. In many of them, especially in the higher regions, tower over each other masses of granite, gneiss, porphyry and other rocks, shooting up sometimes abruptly many hundred feet, or filling the valley with a troubled sea of rocks; through this a mountain torrent forcing its way, here hidden under some overgrowing crag, there falling from one terrace to another, and leaving frequently no room even for a foot-traveller to force his way between the walls of rock and itself.
"See yonder gulf yawn in the purple hills,
No morning ray there drinks the early dew,
No voice is heard, save when afar complains
The croaking frog, sole in the cheerless vale.
The wild bird revels in the lonely wood,
And sadly creaking turns the infrequent wheel,
Where lonely stands the peasant's darksome home,
And pious nous fungi choke the sunless glade.

In misty twilight high the towering rocks
Dart up their peaks; there sounds no harvest song,
No wheaten load e'er glistens in the sun;
The guerdon of the ploughman's arduous toil,
The joyous cries of reapers there are still,
Nor proud stream bears the richly freighted barque.
Down horrid rocks the torrent's dashing spray
Falls, and is lost 'mid the surrounding gloom." *

One of the most striking valleys reaching from Säckingen, near Bale, towards the Feldberg, is worthy of special notice. About 1½ hour's walk from the first-named place, at the foot of the ruined castle of Barenfels, the narrow valley commences, being about one hundred and fifty yards wide, but it soon narrows to as many feet, and at last to very few, so that the road has in some parts been necessarily constructed in the very bed of the torrent. Another twenty minutes leads to a most interesting spot. Here huge masses of rocks tower aloft, sharply cloven as by the ponderous blows of some huge giant, rising many hundred feet, and decked on their summits with a garland of shrubs and creepers. A large amphitheatre opens, the walls of this character, the centre filled with huge masses of rock in the wildest confusion; no human sound or habitation is perceptible—nothing but the torrent's rush or cry of some bird of prey breaks the silence. At last the upper end is reached, and green meadows, through which the now silvery waters wind their way, make a glorious panorama, and, not the least, the habitations of men form a delightful change.

With a few words about one of the natural beauties of the Black Forest I will conclude this rather disjointed paper.

There are, as might be expected in a mountainous district containing so many kinds of rock, caverns of various sorts. A very fine natural stalactite cavern called the Haseler Hökle is worthy of note. Through a passage of some three feet wide and eight feet high the traveller penetrates into a lofty hall, full of broken fragments of rock. On the left, through another cavern, and mounting some steps, a bridge is reached, under which a torrent rushes, supposed to communicate with the Rhine under ground. Above, the roof is studded with ponderous stalactites. There are passes and steps leading to other vaults, all more or less beautiful, in one of which is a motionless lake.

* Translation from Schutt.
Little wonder, then, if the ancient inhabitants of the country peopled these caves with creatures of their own imagination, and if the belief has hardly died out among their simple descendants at the present day.

The spirits of fire and water, tamed to obey the will of man, now pass near this spot, and the railway has even laid bare an entrance to one of the caves near that described, and I much fear that a journey now made through the Black Forest would lose much of the interest that it had in the year 1861.

View This Item Online: https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/126818
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5962/p.358872
Permalink: https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/358872

Holding Institution
Missouri Botanical Garden, Peter H. Raven Library

Sponsored by
Missouri Botanical Garden

Copyright & Reuse
Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the Biodiversity Heritage Library, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org.

This file was generated 16 July 2023 at 00:17 UTC