

THE VARSITY.

A Weekly Journal of Literature, University Thought and Events.

VOL. XVII.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, FEBRUARY 24, 1898.

No. 17.

THE COMPLEXITY OF GERMAN CHARACTER.

It is strange that the English regard the Germans as phlegmatic, while the Germans hold exactly the same opinion of the English. "An Englishman," they say, "is all head and no heart; he has made up his mind that he has seen everything and 'nil admirari' is his motto; he is too cold and reasoning to enjoy life." "The German (generally "Dutchman") is heavy, slow and stolid," says the Englishman. Are both right? or are both wrong? What has secured this character for the German which is attributed to him pretty generally all over the world? Glancing first at the intellectual world of Germany we soon see how it is regarded as a heavy style. It has been said that German scholars are "the hewers of wood and drawers of water for the intellectual world." In other words they undertake the most laborious, and what the great majority would term the most disagreeable work in all branches of science. It is the German scholar who spends year after year of patient industry in his study, unheard of by the world, while bent on some great aim, making countless experiments, till at last the crowning discovery is made and the whole world rings with the name of the before unknown student.

Many people disrespectfully call the Germans "diggers." If "digging" means turning up the field of knowledge, they are surely the best gardeners of the sciences in the world. And whether we admire the line of work that the Germans as a body have adopted or not we must yield our homage to the persevering thoroughness with which they carry out their task. They have laid the basis for the editions of the ancient classics for the whole world. In philosophy they have collected and compiled scattered and seemingly hopeless fragments, and built up therefrom the teaching of the great minds of the past. Of course this is the style of work that a German delights in, and is just as happy when buried in a codex as the æsthetic Englishman writing his polished Latin verse. For from the "gymnasium" in its earliest stages the "digging" style is ever impressed upon the youthful minds; and it is not a case of choice, they must like it. So it is not hard to imagine how boys taught thus will grow up following the same path of their own choice. I would not maintain this of boys in general, for that class of individuals are not as a rule intellectually inclined. But the Germans have nothing that can be called "boys" in the English sense, but rather "little men." The German boy (for we shall use the name) at twelve years looks far too wise. It is a pitiable sight to see in a German gymnasium scores of boys at that age wearing strong glasses, their sight already greatly weakened by the long hours of study. Unfortunately they have few, if any, out-door games, and the consequence is their physical development is sadly neglected. An Englishman, who had been a public school master, once remarked to me: "You have only to look at the German men to know that they never played Rugby football or hare-and-hounds when they were boys." I once asked a youngster in Germany what he did in his summer holidays, and he replied proudly, "I study"; his principal exercise as far as I could learn was collecting postage stamps. The Emperor saw only too clearly in his young days what was the effect of this over-development intellectually, and there-

fore sounded a warning note in the convention of teachers some time ago. If we follow these boys to the university we find that it is not much better. True, there is the exercise of fencing, which, setting aside the question of its being a barbaric custom or not, is undoubtedly good for nerve, eye and muscle. But this is only done by the various "corps" which form, except in certain universities, only a part of the mass of students. There is also a gymnastic club among the students, but this does not embrace a very large number. Here we find not only the "heaviness" of the precocious gymnasium boy, represented in a more advanced stage by the student wearing more powerful glasses, and never seen on the street except with a vast pile of books, who takes his exercise by standing up to read when he is tired sitting, but also the "heaviness" of the student who works but little. Of course such a student is almost certain to be a member of a "corps," and therefore fences a little. After that his chief amusement is to sit hour after hour drinking beer. Monday night only differs from Tuesday night in that the "Kneipe" (for so these beer-gatherings are called) may be held in a different "Lokal." The inevitable effect of such a life is an antagonism to vigorous and healthy sport, hence the reputation of "heaviness."

And indeed the Germans look with a mild kind of pity on the Englishman who is willing to undergo weeks of careful training for a boatrace.

In Breslau a boating club was organized not long ago by a few enthusiasts. The so-called aristocracy frowned upon this, and declared it the sport of "tradesmen." Having shown the course of "heaviness" in the intellectual life of Germany, beginning with "hot-house" development in the young sage of the gymnasium, continued in the student life, and culminating in the laborious research of the professor—not casting any reflection on the latter, but in contrast to the æsthetic culture of Oxford, certainly a "heavy" style—let us cast a glance on the rest of the German people and see if we find the same characteristic. Generally speaking we find the same extreme moderation in out-door exercise. Fortunately, now, by the present military system, the men are forced to go through a regular routine of exercise, the object of which is to develop power of endurance. I once asked a German who had served part of his time to come for a walk. He replied: "No, thank you; I had enough of that kind of thing in the army."

One can always tell a German, when touring through a mountain district, by the extremely leisurely way he walks, and by his frequent deviations into the picturesque beer-garden. But watch how he delights in the scenery about him! And this brings us to the other side of the German character, which we may call the "emotional." Here indeed we have a peculiar and seemingly contradictory dualism, for, verily, the most phlegmatic and deliberate German is capable of an emotion that his appearance may belie. And in all ranks and classes it is alike in this respect.

The professor who has been buried all day deciphering manuscripts joins the students at their "Commers" (a grand reunion of a club), drinks his beer, joins in the toasts, sings the songs, and then rises and in glowing terms upholds the glory of the classics. In this uproarious