THE

AMERICAN FREEMASON;

A MONTHLY

MASONIC MAGAZINE.

CONDUCTED BY

BROS. ALBERT G. MACKEY, M. D. AND J. F. BRENNAN.

Ser. 2

VOLUME IV.

NEW YORK:
J. F. BRENNAN.
1859.

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MASONIC MISCELLANY.

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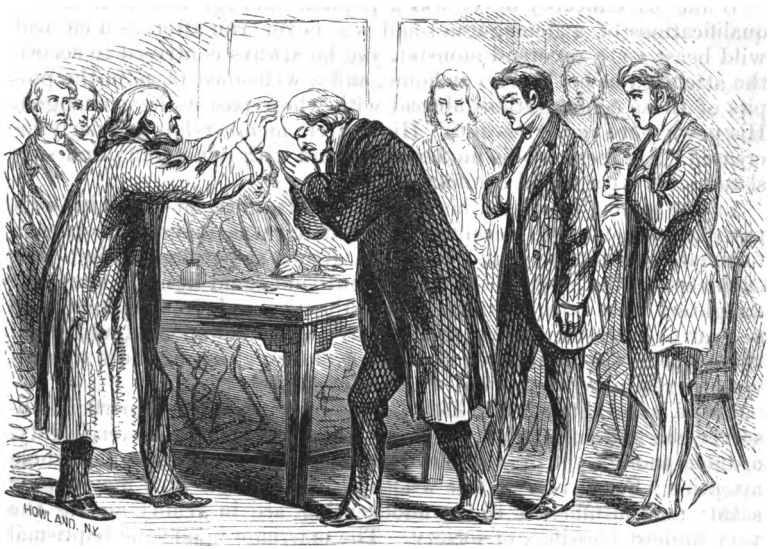
VOL. 4.—OCTOBER, 1859.—No. 22.



LITERARY LIFE IN GERMANY.

Two graceful and charming volumes are lying before us, to which we would invite our readers' attention.[1] The author's design is to give a popular history of German poetry, with sketches of the lives of the poets; and this is executed in such a manner that we rise from the perusal with a wonderfully clear view of so extensive a field; while the career of many of the personages is so artistically delineated as to give the narrative all the interest of a romance. We cannot, however, include the verse in this warm commendation, for the volumes, to use a favorite phrase of our ancestors, are "interspersed with poetry"—consisting of translated specimens of the German works referred to. If those translations are faithful, the specimens must be ill chosen, since they do not bear out our author's criticism; but the most courteous, and probably the most correct, supposition is, that, as usually happens, the subtle spirit of poetry has escaped in the process of transfusion from one language to another.

In the first volume, the history is brought down to the period when in Germany—devastated by the Peasant War, then by the atrocities of Anabaptism, and the more dreadful atrocities in which it was extinguished, then by the Thirty Years' War, which cut off two-thirds of the population of the country—the lamp of poetry, and indeed of literature generally, after one or two fitful flickers, was wholly extinguished. It was later and more slowly re-illumed at the Revival than in any other country in Europe; but gradually, at length, the spirit of German poetry arose from its ashes, though streaming no longer in the national gushes of a homogeneous character which had before distinguished it. Acted upon by new influences, it was divided into numerous schools, all insignificant when viewed from the column of history, but each appearing great in the eyes of its contemporaries. In the eighteenth century, the prosaic hymns of Gellert, and the lackadaisical idyls of Gessner, procured for their authors unbounded reputation; but, at the same epoch, Klopstock came forth, and achieved a fame that even now, though dimmed, is not altogether extinguished. Then, as time flowed on, Lessing, Herder, Bürger, Wieland, Schiller, and Göethe rose above the brightening horizon. It is not with the genius of individual poets, however, we have anything to do for the present; we wish to inquire into their status in the aggregate as a portion of the literary body; and while obtaining some idea of this, an instructive comparison will unconsciously suggest itself between them and their brethren of our own country.

In America, there is no such thing as a republic of letters; there, each literary man stands alone, and he does not obtain even the personal acquaintance of his fellows in virtue of his calling. It is different in Germany, where literature is a species of freemasonry, in which the members of the craft look upon themselves as brethren, and where these members are recognised by the rest of the people as belonging to a distinct profession. When the young and poor Klopstock, for instance, the victim of love and poetry, was indulging his dreams and

[1] *Poets and Poetry of Germany.* Biographical and Critical Notices. By Madame L. Davesies de Pontes. 2 vols.

his sorrows by the Lake of Zurich, he suddenly received a letter from the king of Denmark, inviting him to his court, and offering him a trifling annuity in the meantime, and the reversion of some post worthy of his acceptance. When Lessing published his drama, the *Laocoon*, he was at once invited, as much to his surprise as delight, to remove from Berlin, and undertake the superintendence of a new national theatre just opened at Hamburg; and when his salary ceased here, and he was reduced to desperation, being in want of the very necessaries of life, the Duke of Brunswick, who knew him only by his works, tendered him the post of librarian at Wolfenbüttel. When the Elector of Mainz wanted a director for the university of Erfurt, he applied at once to Wieland, as a man whose fitness for the post was proved by his published books. The poet did not find the situation an agreeable one; but he was soon invited by the duchess of Weimar to become tutor to the young duke; and various unsolicited compliments were paid to his genius by other princes and nobles. Nor were other classes of the community less discriminating. German authors have usually had a resource in tuition; for the people considered that they who showed themselves capable of turning to good advantage their own education, must be well fitted to educate others.

Let us not imagine, however, that literature in Germany was, or is now, a flourishing profession in the pecuniary sense of the term. The nobles, although indeed shorn of their beams, were still the dominant party, and they alone were eligible for either civil or military posts of any consequence. They were no longer, it is true, the rivals or masters of the sovereign, who now kept them in their places by means of a standing army; but the very hopelessness of their subjection to the crown rendered them the more tenacious of their tyrannical hold upon the people. They still kept up their heritable jurisdictions, by means of which they fined, scourged, and put to death the peasant tenants; and many of those ancestral privileges remained intact until the revolution of 1848. The emoluments, therefore, even of those literary men who basked in the sunshine of royalty, were not great. Wieland, for instance, when invited to be tutor to the young duke of Weimar, was offered $450 a year for his three years of service, and after that, a pension of $115 for life. But let us not smile at this princely generosity in a country and at a time when beef was three cents a pound, veal less than even this, and house-rent, fuel, &c., in proportion. A thorough maid-servant thought herself well off with less than $15 a year; a first-rate cook had $20.75; and a maid-of-all-work not quite $10. This was at Frankfort, Berlin, or Vienna; in the country, the remuneration of domestic labor was not so extravagant. When Voss contributed to the *Musen-Almanach*, his precarious income was about $300 a year—a sum which Schiller declared he could live on charmingly with his wife and family—but when he was appointed director of that publication, with a fixed salary of $350 a year, he at once married his Ernestine, with her anxious mother's approbation, which she had hitherto withheld.

Poverty, however, was, and is, no crime and no shame in Germany. It was never there inconsistent with the highest refinement and the most genial sociality. Look at this picture of the *ménage* of the au-

thor we have last mentioned: "In May, 1778, Voss became the husband of her he so fondly loved, and bore her back to his humble home at Wandsbeck. As, however, the single chamber with which he had been contented during his bachelor-life was now insufficient, he hired a little garden-pavilion, and here they established themselves as well as the narrow space allowed. A clear and sparkling rill flowed at the foot of their abode; and the trees and flowers that surrounded it gave it an air of cheerfulness and gaiety which, in the eyes of the young lovers, atoned for the absence of everything but the most simple necessaries. The evening after their arrival, they visited Claudius, and many a happy evening did they spend in his garden, where a chosen few were wont to meet three or four times a week. Every description of luxury was banished as unsuited to the means of the entertainers; neither tea nor coffee was allowed; beer, home-brewed, with bread and cheese, and sometimes a little cold ham, or bacon, were the only refreshments permitted; but the mirth and good-humor of the party required no stimulants; they were as happy as youth, health, friendship, and congenial society could make them. One evening it was discovered that the provision of home-brewed beer was exhausted, and even that of cheese was making low. Some potatoes, however, and a little rice-soup remained from dinner, and with these, Ernestine tells us, they were as happy as princes. 'When Claudius came to spend the evening with us, he always bound his little daughter to his back; she was then laid in our bed till his return home.' Campe and Lessing were frequently of the party, and joined in all their innocent gaiety.

"We have lingered on this picture of rural enjoyment, because it proves how possible it is to unite the highest literary culture with the simplest mode of existence, the most perfect refinement of mind and manners with the total absence of wealth or splendor."

This is delicious; but to comple the idea it conveys, we must give a glimpse of a very different interior, that of Wieland, in which refined comfort is heightened by the same genial warmth: "The house of my friend is at once elegant and rural. It has a fine kitchen-garden extending to a beautiful wood, which, in its turn, stretches to the banks of the river. I dine every day with the patriarch and his four charming daughters in the library, which commands a view of an extensive and verdant meadow. I inquired who was that robust and handsome youth, mowing the grass around a thicket of roses. It was his son. I for my part assist the mother and daughters in their household duties. Country-life reigns here in all its charming simplicity. Göethe came to dine with us the other day; nothing could be more simple than his manners. It was delightful to see these two poets seated side by side, without jealousy, pretension, or affectation, calling each other by their Christian names, as they did in their youth, resembling much less two *beaux esprit* than two good merchants of Gröningen, united by the ties of affection and relationship. The daughters of the great Herder shortly after joined us. Beauty, goodness, wit, genius, and sincere affection—all united in this little room."

The minnesingers passed away with the thirteenth century, and the meistersangers were practically extinct at the close of the seventeenth; but the poets of Germany seem gregarious by nature; and in the lat-

ter part of the eighteenth century another national association arose of a similar kind, called the Hainbund. The *Musen-Almanach*, already mentioned, was established by them as their poetical organ; and the association in the course of time included the names of many distinguished authors, such as the Stolbergs, Schlegels, and Bürger. The earlier members met every Saturday "at each other's houses, and there read and criticised their own productions and those of men of more established fame. At times they would assemble in some romantic spot 'under the shade of lofty oaks, in the glimmering moonlight, by the side of murmuring streams or in grassy meads,' and there give full vent to that passionate and somewhat exaggerated love of romance and nature which form the principal characteristics of their poetry." On one occasion they went out to a neighboring village. "The weather was most lovely," says Voss; "the moon full; we gave ourselves up completely to the enjoyments of nature, drank some milk in a peasant's cottage, and then hastened to the open meadows. Here we found a little oak-wood, and at the same moment it occurred to us all to swear the holy oath of friendship under the shadow of these sacred trees. We crowned our hats with ivy, laid them beneath the spreading branches of the oaks, and clasping each other's hands, danced round the massive trunk. We called on the moon and stars to witness our union, and swore eternal friendship. We pledged ourselves to repeat this ceremony in a still more solemn manner on the first occasion. I was chosen by lot as the head of the Bund."

Among the compensations of that tribe whose badge is poverty, we find love the most remarkable. Elsewhere, love is usually an episode; here, it is an important part of the history, its golden threads interwoven throughout the whole web. We have seen literary men introduced by their works alone to such offices as they were supposed to be capable of filling with advantage; but the same works gave them entrance—sometimes personally unseen and unknown—into the hearts of women. Klopstock affords an example of this. A friend one day read to him from a letter some criticisms on the *Messiah*, which struck the gratified poet by their depth of thought and poetic feeling. He learned that the critic was a maiden; and although at the moment smarting under a love disappointment, called on her with a letter of introduction. "Margaretha Moller was one of the most enthusiastic of Klopstock's admirers. Ardent and imaginative, endowed with talents of no common order, with a heart as warm as her intellect was cultivated, the author of the *Messiah* was in her eyes the ideal of all that was great and good in human nature. To see him, to know him, seemed to her a privilege that would gratify her utmost wishes, but which she could scarcely ever hope to enjoy. Her delight and astonishment may be conceived when she actually heard his name announced. Meta was at that moment engaged in some domestic occupation—no other, we believe, than that of sorting out the household linen—and the room was consequently in no little disorder. Her sister proposed declining the visit for that morning; but the fair enthusiast would not hear of such a suggestion. The linen was quickly concealed, and Klopstock introduced." In this first interview, at which he found the young lady "at once so gifted, so amiable, and so

charming, that he could hardly avoid giving her the name dearest to him in the world," a correspondence was agreed upon. He found that she wrote as naturally as she spoke, and that, besides French, she was well acquainted with English, Italian, Latin, and "—adds Klopstock—"perhaps Greek, for aught I know."

Meta never thought of concealing her love—a love which marriage had only the effect of increasing. "'Since Klopstock and I have met,' writes she to her correspondent Gleim, 'I firmly believe that all those who are formed for each other are sure to meet sooner or later. How could I ever dream, when I knew Klopstock only by his *Messiah* and his odes, and so fondly wished for a heart like his, that very heart would one day be mine? . . . . Even in my thirteenth year, I thought seriously how I should arrange my life, whether I married or remained single. In the first case, I settled how I should manage my household, educate my children, and above all, conduct myself toward my husband. I formed the *beau idéal* of the consort I should desire, and Providence has given me precisely him whom I had pictured to myself as the type, the model of human perfection.' . . . 'I must tell you a new happiness,' she writes to another, which increases the number of my calm enjoyments. Klopstock, who had hitherto written out his compositions himself, begins to dictate them to me. This is indeed a delight. Klopstock's first manuscript is always written by my hand, and thus I am the first to read his beautiful verses! Rejoice in the advent of the second volume of the *Messiah*. Abbadona appears more frequently in the ninth song. Do I love Klopstock particularly as the author of the *Messiah?* Ah, for how many causes do I particularly love him! But on this account more than on any other. And what a love is this! How pure, how tender, how full of veneration! I am most anxious he should finish the *Messiah*, not so much on account of the honor which will redound to him in consequence, as of the benefit it will confer on mankind. He never works at it without my praying that God may bless his labors. My Klopstock always writes with tears in his eyes!' "

The irritable and melancholy Lessing obtained a wife whose admirable qualities acted like heavenly balm upon the spirit of every one who came near her. "The spell which Madame Lessing threw over those around her could not fail to exercise a potent influence on a mind like that of her husband's, so keenly alive to all that was good and noble. His irritability decreased; his whole nature seemed to be tranquilized and softened, and the very spirit of love and concord reigned over the little household." Wieland's first love was unfortunate, although he was beloved in return. His second was so also; and we mention it because the description of the lady shows, what one is inclined to suspect throughout, that the attachment of the German literary heart is determined by qualities different from physical beauty. "A greater comfort to Sophia could scarcely be conceived. Julia was plain even to ugliness; somewhat pedantic withal, fond of talking with a loud voice and dictatorial manner, not unlike the picture drawn of the gifted and unfortunate Margaret Fuller. Like her, too, she contrived to make all these imperfections forgotten by her intellectual charms, and exercised on every one who came within her sphere an influence absolutely magical. 'There is nothing in the

world I would not do—nothing that ought to be done, I mean,' Wieland writes to Zimmermann, 'to win the hand of Julia; but I fear this is impossible.' So it proved. Julia was resolved to live and die in single blessedness, and, strange to say, fulfilled her resolution." Notwithstanding later attachments, however, his early love was never forgotten. At the ripe age of fifty-five, he once more met Sophia. "Wieland had inquired after her with some impatience, and seemed most anxious to see her. All at once he perceived her. I saw him tremble; he stepped aside, threw his hat down with a movement at once hasty and tremulous, and hastened towards her. Sophia approached him with extended arms; but instead of accepting her embrace, he seized her hand, and stooped down to conceal his features. Sophia, with a heavenly look, bent over him, and said, in a tone that neither clarion nor hautboy could imitate: 'Wieland, Wieland! Yes, it is you—you are ever my dear good Wieland!' Roused by this touching voice, Wieland lifted up his head, looked in the weeping eyes of the friend of his youth, and let his face sink into her arms."

But the loves of the poets is too extensive a theme for our space, and we shall conclude by citing the case of Bürger after the death of his second wife, to whom he was even madly attached. "Bürger's poems were peculiar favorites among the fair sex, and one of their warmest admirers was a Suabian maiden, called Elisa H——. Young, ardent, and romantic to excess, she had hung with rapture over Bürger's poems; she had listened with pitying sympathy to the recital of his love and his sorrows, and her imagination had pictured him under the most attractive form. Wayward and passionate, thoughtless and unreflective, now gladsome as a child, now plunged into the depths of sadness—'everything by turns, and nothing long'—Elisa was the most charming and the most provoking of her sex. Though far from wealthy, her position was at least independent, and her wit and beauty attracted numerous admirers. As none of her adorers had yet found favor in her eyes, probably because they fell short of the standard of excellence her imagination had formed, she was still unmarried and fancy-free, when the tidings of Molly's—the wife's—death reached her, and awakened feelings which at first she herself scarcely dared to analyse. Bürger, he whose poems had been so long the delight of her heart, now thrilling her with terror, now moving her to tears, was free! That being whom he had so passionately loved was torn from him by the cruel hand of death; and as Elisa pictured his wild despair, his hopeless anguish, his utter loneliness, her enthusiastic soul warmed with tenderness and pity. To see him, to know him, to console him, was at first the sole aim and end of wishes. Might she not by her love and care reconcile him to that world which was now become a desert to him, and replace his lost Molly in his heart? She did not pause to consider the disparity in their ages, or whether a union would insure her happiness. She trusted to her charms, to her influence, to efface all remembrance of his beloved Molly, and to mould him to her wishes."

Among the names mentioned by our author are not those of Goethe or Schiller, or of any who have flourished in our own time; but we doubt not our readers will derive much interest from the histories of those here recorded.