

GOETHE ON AMERICA.

BY THE EDITOR.

GOETHE'S references to America are very few, and among his poems there is only one which indicates that he ever took an interest in the destiny of the new world. The immediate occasion of these lines was a journey of Karl Bernhard, duke of Saxe-Weimar, the second son of the poet's patron and friend, the reigning grand-duke Karl August. This prince, born May 30, 1792, had been dreaming of a visit to the new world since his early boyhood, and at last in his thirty-second year his father gave him permission to cross the Atlantic. In April, 1825, Karl Bernhard left Ghent for the United States, and after a year's stay came back in June 1826. The diaries of the prince's travels were submitted to Goethe who commented on them favorably, and they appeared in print in 1828.*

The impressions which the prince had received in the new world justified all his most optimistic expectations. The active life, the spirit of enterprise, the boldness in building, the rapid increase of trade and commerce, the regulation of rivers, the expanse of the country with its untold opportunities, and above all the free and manly ways which the inhabitants exhibited in their daily life. Every honest worker felt himself the equal of every one else, and was treated as such; it was a country of universal brotherhood without class distinction. The prince was well received in society and also in military circles, and being a soldier who had fought in several battles (Jena and Wagram, etc.) he was honored with the boom of cannon. So enthusiastic was the prince over his experiences in the new world that he seriously considered the plan of settling there and making it his permanent home, but the old world had after all too great attractions for him, and having returned he took up his abode again in the chateau of his ancestors in Weimar.

Like Goethe the prince was a member of the Masonic lodge

* Compare on the subject the correspondence of the Grand Duke Karl August with Goethe, Vol. II, page 284; and also Goethe's Correspondence with Zelter, Vol. IV, page 228.

Amalia of Weimar, and on his return the brethren greeted him at a lodge meeting with the recitation of a poem, specially made for the occasion by Goethe and afterwards printed in 1833 in Goethe's Posthumous Works.

Goethe's poem on America was made at the same time and under the influence which the perusal of the Prince's diary made on him. The ideas there expressed are also found in a poem of de Laprade, entitled *Les Démollisseurs*, in which America is characterized as a country unhampered by the past. De Laprade says: "There the people do not drag about the inconvenient burden of superannuated regrets." He speaks of their paths as free from prejudice and declares that "never a tomb, nor an old wall has to be torn down." Goethe further met with the statement that geologists had not discovered basalt rocks in the mountains of the new continent, and this strange error was interwoven into his notion of the nature of the people. Basalt being a rock of volcanic eruption he thought that the element of social upheavals, of the club law, and their historical resemblance was absent. At any rate he deemed the lack of mediæval traditions, the lingering remembrance of the age of robbers, of knights, and haunted castles as especially fortunate, and under these impressions he wrote his poem which we translate as follows:

"America, a better fate
Of thee than of Europe's expected.
No ruined castles of ancient date
Nor basalts in thee are detected.
The past won't harass thee; there rages
In this, thy busy active life
Remembrance not of bygone ages,
Nor futile antiquated strife.
The present utilize with care,
And if thy children write poetry books,
May, by good fortune, they beware
Of tales of robbers, knights and spooks.
(Translation by P. C.)

This poem appears in Goethe's handwriting as the enclosure of a letter of June 21, 1827, addressed to his musical friend, the composer Zelter, to whom the poet intended to forward it in order to have it set to music. It was first printed in the *Musen-Almanach*, 1831, page 42; and also in Goethe's Correspondence with Zelter, IV, 341.

In Goethe's Collected Works it appears in XXII, entitled "Xenions and Kindred Poems" and bears the title of "The United States."