

**FIRST STEPS IN GERMAN: AN  
ELEMENTARY GRAMMAR AND  
CONVERSATIONAL READER,  
BASED ON DIESTERWEG, BECKER  
AND OTTO**

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First Steps in German: an Elementary Grammar and Conversational Reader, Based on  
Diesterweg, Becker and Otto by M. Th. Preu

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**M. TH. PREU**

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DIESTERWEG, BECKER AND OTTO.

By M. TH. PREU.

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Little at a time,  
But — always!  
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TO  
WILLIAM T. BLODGETT, ESQ.  
*This Volume*  
IS GRATEFULLY INSCRIBED.





## INTRODUCTION.

During many years occupied in teaching German, both in England and America, we have never found a preparatory course which follows Nature's teachings, which addresses itself to the imagination of the learner, and furnishes that most primitive faculty of his with views and descriptions—both in poetry and prose—simply requiring him to do for them, what the sulphuric acid accomplishes for the photographic picture on the silver tablet : to create an indelible impression upon his mind ;—Nature's second gift ever completes the first.

The authors of many higher grammars have condescended to write preparatory books for the larger work ; but we are sorry to say, without especial regard to our American wants, these we have studied during the past ten years, and as the result of that study, we trust this book is calculated to supply a great educational deficiency. Conscious though we are of still remaining imperfections, we have been driven by an almost irresistible inward force, to smite the rock, at last, for fresh and living waters, over the first stepping-stones of the German language. And, where should we seek for these gushing springs, save in the Songs of the People? in their writings inspired by Nature, and tuned through the scale of their distinctive originality in thought and feeling? The life and spirit of a people is imbedded in the idiom of their language, and there alone can be revealed to us that new soul we wish to acquire, when we resolve to study a foreign tongue.

And now we stand before an ever agitated question, that of the orthodox manner of attacking the first instruction in a language ; for the latter can be either analytic or synthetic, practical or grammatical. Two camps, defending the opposite extremes, have appeared, and still exist ; the watchword of the one : "Here Ghibellines! No Grammar at all! Practical exercises exclusive of everything else! the theory of the language latent in them!" And of the other : "Here Guelphs! Theory! Grammar! the practical part is only the corollary of theory!" "They are both right," says a logician, "and therefore they are both wrong." It seems to us that the poet's words equally censure them, when he says :

„Wer will was Lebendig's erkennen und beschreiben,

Sucht erst den Geist herauszutreiben,  
Dann hat er die Theile in seiner Hand,  
Fehlt leider! nur das geistige Band.“

„Who would describe and study aught alive,

Seeks first the living spirit thence to drive,  
Then are the lifeless fragments in his hand,  
There only fails, alas! the spirit-band!“

Where, then, are the means for uniting these contending powers? for in their contact must the hidden treasure lie! Voices from master spirits remind us in our transient perplexity of an axiom, that every simple principle must necessarily be one-sided; a truth arrayed in opposition to a contrary truth. And yet they say—"There is a possibility of life for an elementary method that should be, *at once, analytic, synthetic, practical and grammatical.*"

In this little book which we offer to the American public, we venture to divine these prophetic words. In doing so, we rely, above all, on a liberal investigation by the teachers of German. May it be considered worthy of their approval, and become for the student an encouraging not less than a useful companion, advancing him to loftier regions of study. *This Course is not intended for Children, we all know that there is at present scarcely a single child between eight and twelve years, pursuing the German language, to the hundred of those who study French at that age; but if it gain friends that wish us well, we shall follow it by the first elementary teachings, adapted to the youngest mind.*—The student's object in attempting a modern language, is to become acquainted with the manifold tissues in its fabric of moral, intellectual and practical existence, which he needs to absorb for the benefit of his own individual power and development. From the purely practical side of the question, he desires to become a weaver, and to use, with liberty of expression, the different threads composing the language. That the bare rules of grammar do not suffice to accomplish this object, we all know; but let us beware lest the pupil finish his first season of German with the pernicious impression that it is a language too difficult for mastery. *And where are the rational grounds for making French obligatory in schools through the States; whilst German is but optional with two pitiful hours a week allotted to it? happy enough if the latter is not altogether excluded from the programme of studies!* This fact, which is greatly to be regretted, causes a perpetual contest with adverse circumstances, and is certainly disheartening to the lovers of the German language and literature.

As one of the principal evils of the different methodical grammars in use—if misapplied at the first outset of study—we point out the spirit-killing materials wherewith the learner is taught his new creed. What cares he for the oxen of the English, the cheeses of the Dutch, and the candlesticks of the French! Of what interest can it be to him that Karl laughs, or Louisa cries—that Henry has a dog and Emily a cat! We destroy all possible enthusiasm in the pupil by having him to beat this empty air; each repetition becoming the more distasteful. Jean Paul says: „Wenn der Knabe recht schnell in einer fremden Sprache und zugleich im Erlinnern wachsen soll, so lern' er nicht Wörter, sondern ein ausländisches Kapitel, das er einigemal durchgegangen, auswendig; Worte werden durch Worfüßung gemerkt, und das beste Wörterbuch ist ein Lieblingsbuch.“ (If a boy would improve rapidly in a foreign tongue, and at the same time in memorizing, let him learn by heart not words, but a foreign

chapter which he has gone over several times; words are marked by their connection, and the best of vocabularies is a favorite book.)

Secondly: We notice the unreasonable demand that the pupil should at the outset compose in a foreign tongue before he has been taught to say "Bah!" as if we could learn correct language by dint of blundering! we know, on the contrary, that it is more difficult to unlearn errors, than to acquire correctness in the first instance.

And again: The lessons in each of these grammars we find parceled out. Truly a Procrustean bed, whereon both teacher and pupil are fettered! If the latter learn not the whole he cannot write the exercise. With the recitation, correction of the faulty exercise, reading and explanation of rules, and the German version of the coming lesson, the hour has gone, granting neither teacher nor pupil liberty of action.

Also: A number of disconnected words are given in the respective lessons, which afterwards find no immediate use, and therefore only impede the progress by overcharging the memory on the one hand, and by promoting superficiality on the other, when imperfectly pronounced, incorrectly committed, and confusedly remembered.

We deplore, moreover, a vacuum existing between lessons: To repeat in immediate succession is tedious and distasteful to the pupil. Hurrying him into the next, having caught but a spark of the foregoing one, is literally to engraft chronic dyspepsia upon his memory and intellect.

The worst, however, has not been mentioned: The methodical grammars invariably carry the ten parts of speech in their regular succession; debarring those which follow, and creating both in teacher and student an unhealthy hurry and flurry, lest the term expire with unfurled sails over *Irregular Verbs accompanied by their Prefixes*; a sure means of finally dismissing the pupil with the pernicious impression that German is appalling indeed! Grammar—it has been said—is to a language what thorough-bass is to Music. And to acquire the art of Music we are invariably taught the use of an instrument, that the after-study of the science may prove a fruitful one.—A language well spoken is the Music of all Music! And the pupil's mind through his progressive steps in the foreign tongue must needs grow both physically and intellectually: the growth of the first is the basis of the second. And as a musical instrument is such only in its completeness—so is a language a language only in its entirety. But the successive strings of the instrument, in the grammars extant, have been sealed, alas! with the seven seals!—they frown from strongholds upon the student of an unfinished first year of application, while he struggles in vain for a spontaneous expression of thought, and finally despairs of ever reaching his "Mount Salvatch," and of becoming a chosen knight of the "Grail." But in truth there is no need for heroism! The German language is no other than Dornroeschen, "the Sleeping Beauty" of the olden Saga, and an ordinary mind armed with determination