

# VAGARIES OF THE GERMAN "MICHEL": In Plain American It Means "Boob." ...

By A. CURTIS ROTH. Former American Consul General at Plauen, Saxony. Illustrated by Carlo de Fornaro

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## VAGARIES OF THE GERMAN "MICHEL"

In Plain American It Means "Boob," Yet the German Applies It to Himself and Seems Proud of the Title

By A. CURTIS ROTH,

Former American Consul General at Plauen, Saxony.

Illustrated by Carlo de Fornaro.

**M**ICHEL bleibt Michel." A fool remains a fool. There is the catch-phrase of all Germany. It is singular that, in all this analysis of Germany, her thoughts, plans, and ambitions, it has not occurred to students and contemporaneous historians that the German people call themselves fools and insist upon it. For, in Germany, a "Michel" is, freely translated, a fool, a clown, a weak-wit of great physical power when aroused, but wholly dominated by his masters of higher intellect or greater power. You hear it every day and everywhere in Germany.

"Der deutsche Michel" is what all Germany calls her great man power, and it means, in plain United States slang, "the German boob." And they seem to take pride in the title. Whenever anything goes wrong with a German he vehemently exclaims: "Michel bleibt Michel." I fully believe that every intelligent person will agree with me that the German is right. He has proved it in many ways, in a thousand instances of diplomatic and military blunders during the war. He is a "Michel," a "boob."

Although I had lived in Germany for half a dozen years, this fact never struck me forcibly until I heard it, under very dramatic circumstances, on the day that Austria declared a state of war to exist between her and Serbia. That was on July 28, 1914, and I was sitting in the Café Trömsel, in Plauen, Saxony, in company with a distinguished manufacturer. There were several others at the table, some Germans, others English, and one an American. We were chatting on the likelihood of war because of the attitude of Austria toward Serbia and the mobilization of the Russian Army. The Germans were all for war unless the demands of the Kaiser for the demobilization of the Russian Army were immediately met by the Czar; the English were inscrutably quiet, and the American, appreciating the dislike of his country by the average German and having no direct personal interest in the matter, also kept quiet and listened. We were interrupted by a commotion and quickly everybody in the place grew excited and began to gesticulate and talk volubly. The cause was the arrival of a newspaper "extra," containing the official Government telegram announcing a state of war.

It was a great hour for Germany, the hour for which the nation had waited for more than forty years. It was "der Tag."

My friend, the manufacturer, rapidly read the news aloud. Austria had declared war on Serbia, and, since Russia, the news item continued, was rapidly mobilizing, it would be necessary for Germany to act quickly.

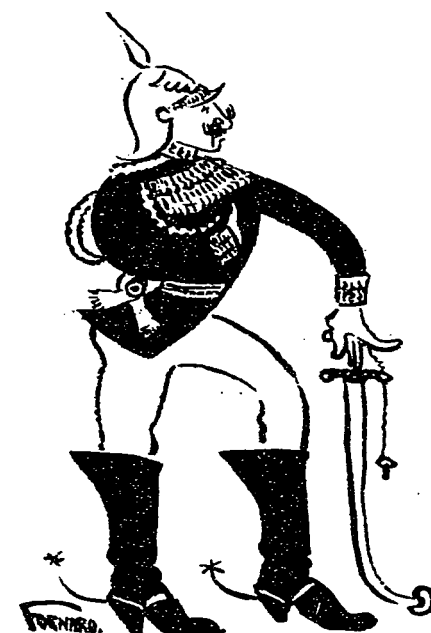
"Gott Sei dank!" he fervently exclaimed. "Der Michel muss jetzt aufwachen und losschlagen!" ("Thank God! 'Michel' must now awake and strike.")

"But," I ejaculated in amazement, "you don't mean to say that you want Germany to go to war because of something that does not concern her? War means death, poverty, misery, especially for women and children, who will not share any of the so-called glories of war. This is Austria's quarrel, and, in my opinion, the German would be truly a 'Michel,' as you call him, if he interfered in something that did not concern him."

But he was firm in his attitude, and I never argue with a German. It was war he wanted, he said, because Austria was the ally of Germany. It was war that was wanted by all Germany.

Therefore, I said to myself in the Café

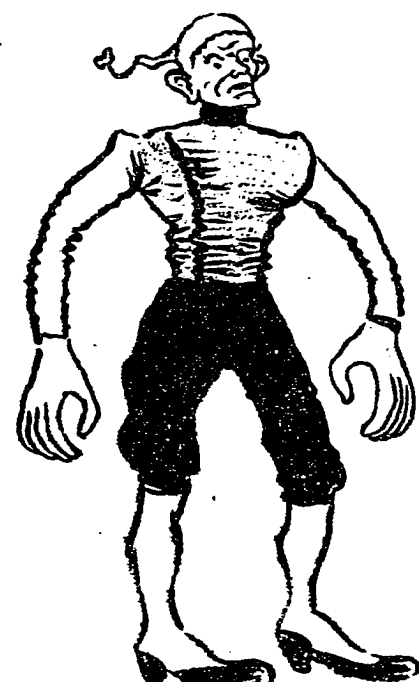
Trömsel, as I have said many times since: "The German is right about being a Michel," and he not only confesses it but forever seeks to prove it. And I have concluded that there are three grades of "Michel," which I classify as follows: The Kaiser is "der g r o s s e Michel," the great boob; he is followed by "der Junker Michel," comprising the great landowners and rich manufacturers; and, thirdly, the mass of the people are simply "der deutsche Michel." All three together constitute the power of Germany—hence, power and Michel, in the German mind, are synonymous terms. Of course, the German could not understand that he was calling his people clowns and dunces, nor could the American mind grasp the German point of view. All I could comprehend was the insuffer-



THE GREAT MICHEL, THE KAISER



THE JUNKER MICHEL.



DEUTSCHER MICHEL.

able conceit of the nation that could calmly believe its power superior to all the world and that power comprised of a composite football kicked here and there by its masters, whose bidding it was ever ready to do at any time, supinely, stupidly, and without protest. And I told my friend that he would possibly change his views, which I think he has, for, just before I left Germany for home, my eye caught, in a daily paper, the announcement of the death, on the field of battle, of the third son given by this fire-eater to his Fatherland because Austria had started a row with Serbia. I sent him a card of condolence, but I never received an acknowledgment; and I wondered whether he recalled that day at the Café Trömsel when he hoped the German Michel would awaken and strike.

"Der deutsche Michel" is a mimic.

never an originator of anything good or useful. Every man, woman, and child in Germany has some one above him in the social, military, commercial, or intellectual scale, some one whom he admits to be his superior—all save the Kaiser himself, who declares that he is responsible to God alone. Yet the German Socialists call the Kaiser the biggest "Michel" of all, while the masses kowtow in servile genuflection and imitate in all things these acknowledged masters of their destiny.

When the Kaiser grew his mustache countless representatives of the "deutscher Michel" in the empire followed his lead until all Germany became a land of hire-sute lightning rods and nearly every officer a swaggering braggart who pushed the lesser "Michels" off the sidewalk. Or, if the Kaiser painted his motor car red,

less tolerance for bluster. He often tries to be English, but seldom to be an American; in his heart of hearts he seldom becomes one, and, in a vast majority of instances, he does not seek naturalization in America until caution or business expediency virtually compel such action. Was there ever a more typical case of the German "Michel" than the bungling attempt to embroil the United States in war with Japan through Mexico, or Count Luxburg's "spurio versenkt" message?

One of the most conspicuous manifestations of the German "Michel" is the practice of dueling in vogue at German universities. Is there any spectacle more laughable than the swaggering pride with which a big German carries a gashed face as a souvenir of what some fellow-student gave him at Heidelberg or Bonn? He was never in the slightest danger, you may be sure of that. He was well muzzled and chest-protected when some other equally intelligent "Michel" slashed away at him with a sword.

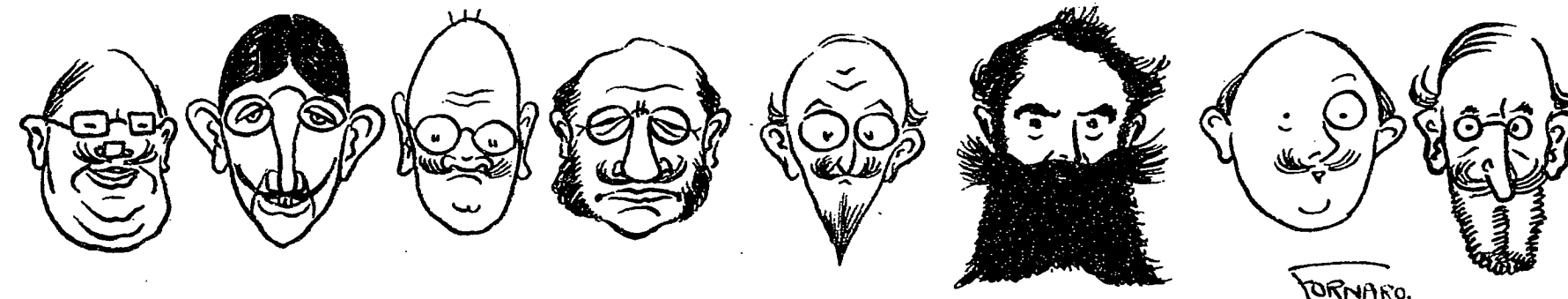
Here is another example: The Germans in America, while I was still acting for our Government in Saxony, through their societies, Vereins, newspapers, and private sources, had collected a considerable sum of money which they wished to devote to the relief of German war widows and orphans. This money, after much trouble, was forwarded to Germany and thence distributed among various agencies, which were asked to allot it in the towns and villages where it was most needed. The work was generally to be undertaken by the Town Councils and I was personally much interested, since I knew of a number of deserving persons whom I wished to have share in the fund. Imagine my surprise when I learned that, following a long and serious conference among themselves, the various Town Councils had voted unanimously to decline the money, because it came from America and was tainted, even though it had all been contributed by men of German blood, or men and women born on the soil of Germany. And this was long before America took a hand in the fight! It was decided to return it, but I never heard that it came back and I suspect the Kaiser got it, not being so sensitive. The donors got no thanks whatever for their pains and money. Perhaps the childer might not have held such views if they had been consulted about having a new pair of shoes, but they had no hand in the matter and the German "Michel" again proved his right to the title. He was, at least, consistent, for he hated America and would not accept anything that came from the despised land.

The untraveled German, the true "Michel," is extremely provincial. He carries his absurd and brutal prejudice to extremes; he has no sense of innate refinement and vents his anger with equal brutality on both sexes and all ages—Belgium is proof enough of this. I recall a specific case of unnecessary brutality toward two American ladies who were traveling from Bad Elster to Plauen, where they were temporarily living. They were mother and daughter. The daughter knew German, the mother did not. In the railway carriage they were conversing in low tones, using English. A German, overhearing them, left his seat and approached theirs. Standing before them he deliberately spat on the floor at their feet and exclaimed, loudly. "Pfu! Speak German, you Engländer swine!" The word "Pfu" is of deepest insulting import; the elder woman did not understand it, but the daughter did. She explained to the brute that her mother did not speak German, and, besides, as they were American

and America was not at war with Germany, they had a right to speak any language they saw fit.

"Well, if Americans," answered the German, "do not speak German, they have no business in Germany. Go back where you belong!"

On another occasion I was a witness of brutal German treatment of Germans. It followed a brief visit of mine to a friend in England when England was at war with Germany but America was not. At the border station between Holland and Germany the train was held for the night and I went to a hotel. The next morning I boarded the train to continue my journey, and observed a handsomely dressed young German woman standing near the military authorities, who were examining her luggage, which had been dumped on the platform. She appeared frightened and I soon realized why this was: They had discovered in her effects several letters from an English Lieutenant, all of which showed that she was engaged to marry him. When the soldiers began to read her letters she understood that all was over and I shall never forget the sadness in her face as she walked toward the window of the car in which I sat. She looked into my eyes, but I gave no sign and later became aware that it was just as well that I had so acted. She was then taken in charge by two soldiers and led away to—God knows where. I shifted my gaze from the window to the seat opposite me and saw a German officer regarding me intently over the top of his newspaper. He instantly averted his eyes, but I had seen enough to know that my actions toward the young German woman had been closely watched, and I felt relieved to know that my sympathies had not got the better of my ripe judgment not to address her. It would have done her no good and might have made my position as a representative of the United States decidedly uncomfortable.



"WHEN THE KAISER GREW HIS MUSTACHE ALL GERMANY IMITATED HIM."

another said that, of all places on earth, Paris was to her the most delightful and that she looked forward to the day when she could live there all the time. The General heard all this praise of other lands and his indignation grew with every word. Finally he could stand it no longer and, rising abruptly, he dashed his napkin on the table and stalked furiously out of the room.

At a dinner given by a fashionable lady, a Prussian Major and an American diplomat were guests. The fruit was served and the Major, selecting an apple, exclaimed: "What a beautiful apple!"

"Yes, responded the hostess; "it is an American apple."

An expression of deepest anger, mingled with humiliation, distorted the Major's face. He instantly replaced the apple and selected in its stead a smaller one.

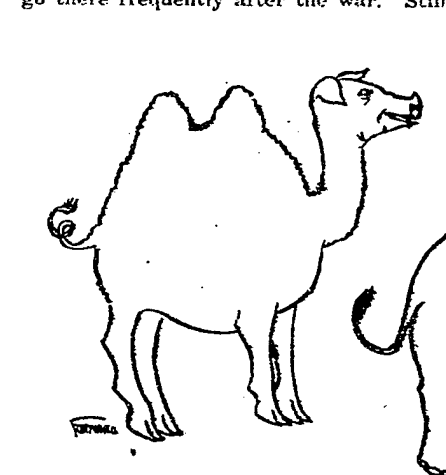
"I prefer a German apple," he said, looking pointedly at the American diplomat across the table.

No further reference was made to the matter, but when the guests began to leave, the Prussian Major approached the American and stiffly offered his hand. The gentleman from Washington looked the Prussian straight in the eye and held his hands at his sides, then turned away. It was an insult of the gravest nature, but the Prussian swallowed it, although plainly showing his intense mortification.

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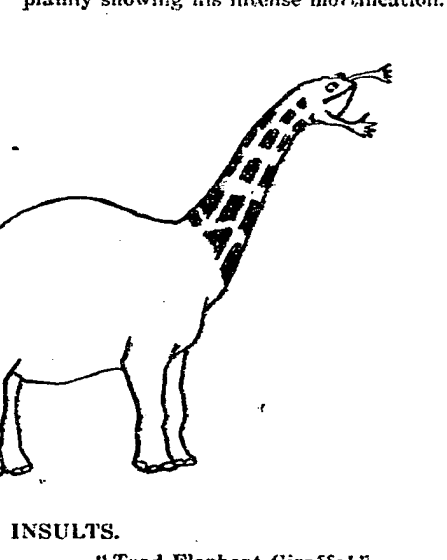
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this. While walking along the street one day I heard a vocal uproar opposite and stopped. Two Germans were frantically gesticulating, shouting and shaking their fists under each other's noses. A stroiling policeman separated them. One crossed the street to where I stood and, still volubly anathematizing the other, stopped and addressed me:

"Did you hear me call him a camel-pig?" he asked.

I told him that I had heard it all.

"Well, I won, didn't I?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; you won," I answered.

He went his way, much pleased with me as referee, but his late opponent had seen him speak to me and hastened over.

"What did that rat say to you?" he demanded, excitedly.

"He told me you won," I cheerfully lied, not caring to start him off again.

"Certainly I won," he said. "He only called me a camel-pig, and I called him a toad-elephant-giraffe!"

"You won!" I decided, promptly.

"That's much worse than a camel-pig."

And he, too, went away happy. Never argue with one of them. It can't be done.

Their reasoning powers are not our kind. I have been frequently aroused over the complicated official diplomatic notes sent to Germany by the powers at war with her, for I have known for years that no German can think in any way that is disadvantageous to Germany, nor can he see any point along a line of reasoning contrary to that which has been inbred by the autocracy. I knew the Germans to be "Michels."

Daily the evidence of justification for their selection of "Michel" to designate themselves multiples. Now we see it in Russia, where military success against a mob of undisciplined and ungoverned people has gone to their heads and led them to believe that they are world conquerors. They do not see, as the world does, the hideous deceptions that they have used against the Russians, for anything is right, in their view, that is for the good of Germany.

The military and the Junker see world domination and "der deutsche Michel" blindly follows. Nothing but force will ever convince them that they are wrong. When that conviction comes the "Michel" is likely to turn and rend the autocratic power that made and kept him a "Michel." But, until that day, the fact remains that the German has well named himself.