

SCIENCE.

FRIDAY, JUNE 4, 1886.

COMMENT AND CRITICISM.

IN A RECENT NUMBER of the *Revue internationale de l'enseignement*, M. Breal, who has written before on educational topics, has an essay on the methods of acquiring foreign languages. Among some old considerations of value, he adds the less well-known remark, that, when a person goes to a foreign country to 'learn the language,' he rarely succeeds. But if he goes to pursue some definite profession or business, — M. Breal suggests banking at Frankfort, the book-trade at Leipzig, and brewing at Munich, among others, — then he acquires the language very rapidly as well as very thoroughly. The reason for this is plain enough: it is the substitution of natural for scholastic methods. And nature, being the better teacher, comes out ahead. In the former case, dictionaries and grammars figure largely; while, in following M. Breal's suggestions, the phrases of ordinary conversation, as well as the terminology of some particular calling, become part of the student's daily experience from the first. The hint is a valuable one, and it might save time and money, to say nothing of a discouraged spirit, to the numerous young men and women who go to Germany, France, and Italy each year to 'learn the language.'

IN THE DEATH, on May 16, of the aged German historian, the world has lost a scholar who has done as much as, if not more than, any one else for the extension of scientific method, and for the application to history of those rules and tests which mark the nineteenth century as pre-eminently the era of science. Born in 1795, when the reign of terror was hardly passed, and when the metaphysical notions as to the theory of the state and the rights of man which had been formulated by Bodin, Grotius, Montèsquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, were finding their logical outcome in anarchy, Ranke grew up in a period of transition. The wave of constitutionalism was gathering a force to which even the reaction from the revolutionary excesses of the commune, aided by the holy alliance, could be but a temporary check.

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With a genius that detected the chain of causation amid a complicated mass of detail, with an exactness and an accuracy that made even the smallest event of importance, and with a power of lucid, graphic statement which attracted and interested while it instructed, Ranke was born a scientific historian. He appreciated to the full the meaning of the contemporary development, but with true historical instinct he turned to the elucidation of that previous period of transition from feudalism to absolutism which is the key to the history of western Europe in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. In this field he was the acknowledged master. In addition to his own magnificent labors, we owe to Von Ranke the *seminarium*, that peculiarly scientific department of university work. And it is from him that Waitz, Giesebrecht, Von Sybel, George Bancroft, and a host of lesser historians have drawn their inspirations.

FABRY'S AND BARNARD'S COMETS, the two that have been with us since last December, have now disappeared from view in the northern hemisphere. Very few astronomers appear to have seen these comets under the most favorable circumstances. Mr. T. W. Backhouse, however, reports that on April 26 he followed the tail of Fabry's comet to a distance of thirty-eight degrees; and Barnard's comet he found on May 1 had two tails, the principal one four and a half degrees in length. To replace these comets we have three new ones discovered by Mr. Brooks, on April 27 and 30, and May 22, respectively. They are all fairly bright for what are called 'telescopic' comets. The calculated elements show that the first reaches its nearest point to the sun on June 6, and is increasing slightly in brightness: the second comet is decreasing in brightness, having passed its perihelion on May 4.

HEALTH OF NEW YORK DURING APRIL.

THE total population of New York on April 1 was estimated at 1,428,898, and is believed to be increasing at the weekly rate of 799.

The total number of deaths from all causes was 2,965, or about 99 each day. Comparing this with