

A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Salzburg, June, 1921

CARL LUDWIG SCHLEICH has now written his reminiscences, *The Recollected Past* (*Besonnte Vergangenheit*, Ernst Rowohlt, Berlin, 1921). Schleich is one of the greatest benefactors of suffering humanity. Since Lister, the inventor of the antiseptic method, no surgeon has relieved the sick of so much pain as Schleich by his method of local anæsthesia. His famous teacher, Ernst von Bergmann, has called it "absolutely the greatest German achievement in surgery." And it is very remarkable how Schleich made this discovery. It was not the result of long, strict, and methodical scientific investigations. He did not think it out, just as a poet does not think out a poem or a musician a theme. The poem suddenly and unexpectedly comes to the poet, the theme to the musician. Just so one day the idea of local anæsthetics came suddenly to Schleich as a gift of the moment, as a *glückliches Aperçu*, as Goethe used to call such things. And Schleich, though he was destined to medicine from his youth up, was not, in fact, one of the men who are born for science. He always wrote poetry in secret, and now, being an old and famous man, he writes poetry in public.

He was a truly romantic child, with a strong bent for music, and in his youth he had so enchanting a tenor voice that for a time he seriously considered going on the stage. And when he had been for a long time a successful surgeon in Berlin he was still continually drawn towards art and the society of artists. He was a friend of Joseph Kainz, the greatest German actor of that time, and the dearest companions of his youth were August Strindberg and Richard Dehmel. Strindberg, then in his wild Berlin period, resembled a young northern Beethoven, called himself "a tired pilgrim in search of knowledge and a little happiness," often drank all night, and devoted himself passionately to alchemy. For he had got it into his head that he was to make gold and to wrest from nature the secret of the transmutation of metals—which then, and until Madame Curie discovered radium, was thought impossible. Strindberg arrived one day with a substance he had really manufactured, and swore that it was gold. The chemists discovered on examining it that it was not gold; but none of them was able to say what it actually was. But it was not only with the manufacture of gold that Strindberg indefatigably busied himself. He wished to discover the nerves of plants and spent whole days drawing their ganglia-cells. Many of his guesses were later confirmed by scientific research, especially by the botanist Reinke. There was an atmosphere of Faust about young Strindberg—an atmosphere which, however, was strongly impregnated by alcohol. Genius, playing with all spiritual adventures even to the then fashionable coquetting with Satanism, attacks of real madness, mixed with such as were caused temporarily by intoxication, undergraduate tricks, jokes of the studios, Bohème, the cabaret, a breath of Montmartre, the insolence of the old unadulterated Berlin, the cynicism of the rising great city, the mysticism that beckoned from the romantic Berlin of the War of Liberation—these things changed and whirled in this eager, aspiring, still heated young generation of the early 'nineties. And in the darkness of this obscurely disturbed atmosphere rose also the element of music: Chopin, ravishingly played by a strange young Pole. This was Stanislas Przybyszewski, who had at that time an almost dæmonic power over young Berlin, but who suddenly disappeared and is lost to sight. He was a poet, a musician, a prophet of Nietzsche, an enthusiast and a passionate physiologist at once. With him one day sat Schleich, the young surgeon brooding over the problems of existence and turning over the pages of a pamphlet in which the Pole had marked certain observations of

the great anatomist Walderzer, his master. And in the middle of a conversation Schleich cried out, following a sudden inspiration, with his own delight in paradox, "Stanislas! Man! The neuroglia [a framework of fine supporting cells in the brain, the meaning and function of which hitherto were not properly understood], the neuroglia is a damper for the piano-strings! An electric Sordino, a soft pedal, a brake!" At that moment it must have seemed to the two mad young men as if they heard the wings of genius hovering about them. And immediately grasping the whole implication of the idea, the Pole yelled, "Thunder! Heaven! Brother, say it again! He has gone mad! Or else it is a revelation!" It was a revelation. Schleich had only to think out his idea consecutively to the end, and then to prove it, and the discovery of local anæsthetics followed, which has been used for twenty-five years all over the world. It was the idea of a lucky moment. Schleich needed two years to put it to practical use and to test it daily in dozens of painless operations. But the most difficult part was still to come. It took Schleich nearly ten years, in which hardly a day passed without such painless operations, to overcome the opposition of his learned colleagues and to obtain scientific recognition. At first Schleich and his discovery were simply ridiculed by the Berlin Congress of Surgeons, and he was driven from the meeting by the animosity of his colleagues. But he was not much surprised, for he had made up his mind that "every advance in medicine requires a struggle of fifteen years. Nothing is triumphant earlier than that."

Yet a second time has Schleich experienced the flash of such a fertile *aperçu*. When he was taking a State-examination, Dubois-Raymond, then one of the scientific lights of Berlin, asked him what the Sympathicus was. "The Sympathicus," answered Schleich, "is a sort of intermediary between the cerebro-spinal system and the apparatus of the senses." Dubois-Raymond, beside himself, demanded whence the Herr Examinand had got this "mad mirage." Schleich answered modestly, "I thought of it myself, Herr Geheimrat!" But the Herr Geheimrat cried out, "When you are here you mustn't think, you must know something!" And he almost broke his neck in the examination. But the "mad mirage" grew in him in secret, and from it was evolved the conception that the Sympathicus is the sympathetic nerve that brings us the world-will, the organ in which our consciousness of the world is placed, through which we communicate with the world-spirit—so that, for example, he calls consciousness a short circuit between the cerebro-spinal apparatus and the sympathicus. Out of this he has made a philosophical system which by means of the decision with which it champions "the cardinal diversity of spirit and nature" undertakes to prove from the pathology of hysteria the truth of Plato and to show the possibility of the origin of the world from ideas. This unexpected confession of idealism by a physician has aroused a healthy horror in all religious Nihilists. And if ever again it becomes possible in Germany to confess one's belief in God without being ceremoniously expelled from the society of the "cultured," then the courageous Schleich will have had a great part in bringing about the change. His virtues as a surgeon are now praised suspiciously loudly so that his philosophy may be made to seem the work of a dilettante. As formerly, when he made his great surgical discovery, the surgeons attempted to kill him by silence, so now the philosophers are killing him by silence. And so it happens that the decisive intellectual achievements of Germany are first heard of abroad about twenty years late. Freud's decisive first book, *Studies in Hysteria*, appeared in Vienna in 1895. But the Freudian method in England and France is hardly five years old. It may therefore be prophesied that there will be a fashion for Schleich in London in about 1940. This is advice to translators that they may assure themselves of the work at the right time! The books which the public will then most eagerly demand are *Vom Schaltwerk der Gedanken*, *Das Ich und die Dämonen*, and *Gedankenmacht und Hysterie*, the first two published by S. Fischer, Berlin, the third by Ernst Rowohlt, Berlin.

Gustav Landauer, formerly in the old imperial Germany a socialist on a lone hand, bitterly opposed to the official Social-Democrats, waiting quietly in quiet Hermsdorf in the Mark for a more beautiful future, thinker and poet of the dreamy kind, reaching into mysticism, a friend of Fritz Mauthner, then translating Kropotkin, then Shaw's *Socialism for Millionaires*, and also, in collaboration with Hedwig Lachmann, his wife, Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*—Gustav Landauer was called from his fruitful loneliness by the outbreak of the Bavarian Revolution, summoned by Eisner to his ministry, and struck down after Eisner's assassination. He left behind him a book on Shakespeare which has now been published by Martin Buber, *Shakespeare, dargestellt in Vorträgen* (two volumes, Rütten & Lönig, Frankfurt a/M.). It is Goethe and Shakespeare who introduce the German youth to life. How far Landauer's book on Shakespeare has in it anything new and real and important for English readers I cannot decide. To us Germans Landauer speaks here for himself. He sees in Shakespeare a way opened to humanity, a way to the future, in which the eternal conflict between spirit and impulse is aided, the impulse spiritualised, but so that spirit becomes impulse and morality a second nature. He believes that his own ideal is preached by Shakespeare, that the ideal of this supposed Anarchist was common to all men of aristocratic nature. Therefore he is enthusiastic about "the manly love of freedom of those who are not in subjection and refuse to be." By this he means Brutus, and he expresses himself more memorably in that in reality he has himself in mind when he calls Brutus "a nature fundamentally private . . . which can endure its desire to be private only when all men without are free and happy." Perhaps this is a formula to describe many Germans who now, to their own astonishment, are becoming Spartacists or see themselves taken for Spartacists without having the least talent for the rôle. They are born "private men" whom the all-interfering state disturbs and will not allow to be "private." It is for this right, "to be private," that they struggle with so much bitterness.

In the February number of THE LONDON MERCURY I complained that our exchange had now quite cut me off from England, that we could no longer buy English books or periodicals. A week later I was overwhelmed with English papers, and now again every week I can enjoy the *Times Literary Supplement*. This fills me with heartfelt gratitude: I am touched, and also almost ashamed. For what I wrote was meant otherwise. I was thinking not so much of myself as of the future connection between Germans and Englishmen. Now I have been helped, but no help has been given to the generality; and the danger I so much fear, the danger of a growing estrangement between the Germans and the English, remains. I am no Pacifist, I am not a member of *Clarté*. I do not believe that the war can be wiped out of memory, nor do I wish that it should be: I believe that it is "the father of all things," of the most contemptible but also of the noblest. "For every great people," said Dostoievski once, "believes and must believe that in it and only in it lies the salvation of the world." Thus Dostoievski believed of his people and d'Annunzio and Barrès also, and, I would wager, even Bernard Shaw, though he may not know it; and thus I must be allowed to believe of mine. Conflict will always be. But we would attempt to conduct our struggles in a humane, chivalrous, Christian manner, or, to say it in a single word: *fair*.* And that will be easier the better we know one another, the more closely we learn to understand one another. And so it seems to me to be dangerous if the hundred thousand Germans who formerly shared in the spiritual life of England are now to be shut out of it. And it will be worth while for the English to consider what help this will be to them

HERMANN BAHR

* Thus in original.