

## A LETTER FROM GERMANY

Salzburg, March 1922

THE rulers of German literature during the last thirty years are celebrating, one after another, their seventieth birthdays. They change from the revolutionaries as which they began into persons with something to celebrate ; and youth, impatiently pressing forward, takes some pleasure in treating them as old fogeys. Maximilian Harden, who has opened this series of jubilees, is still inwardly by far the youngest of these old gentlemen. He went early into the battle, for he was a fighter from the beginning, and he has remained a fighter even till to-day. Battle was his element to such an extent that sometimes he seems to resemble one of those men of arms of old times who had no other occupation and who in their joy in combat did not ask very much why and wherefore and against whom it was. He has often been reproached with this, he has always been accused of caring nothing for the matter in question, only for the noise and the joy of making a disturbance, the adventure, the smell of powder. Many have believed him to be a duellist who requires occupation above all things, and is continually in quarrelsome mood. But one can see that he is more than this from the fact that, if it is not always the best cause for which he fights, it is always the most dangerous, often almost a forlorn hope, a cause without hope from the first. I have known him since 1890, when I came from Paris to Berlin, rich only in hopes, plans and desires, unknown, without counsel or position, and met the former provincial actor, who was as forsaken in the strange city as I. During this long period of time I have watched his stormy, almost adventurous career, and I have often enough had to shake my head at it, for he has attacked men whom I consider worthy, and poured scorn on things which I value. But now when I look back and consider the sum of his career, I cannot but say that his passionate readiness to support the oppressed and the defenceless and the weak, his recklessness of his own advantage and his own safety demand admiration, and that the deep generosity of his nature shines out so strongly that one is not aware of the shadows. If at times he almost resembles a Don Quixote, we must not forget how much real courage was required to tilt against the windmills of the Kaiser. We must not forget that when the youthful Harden shared that now almost legendary bottle of wine with the old and fallen Chancellor in the Sachsenwald, Bismarck was held by official Germany to be *un vieux radoteur*, over whom people shrugged their shoulders. Harden has been reproached with his changes of opinion but, at bottom, through all these supposed changes, he has remained the same. He has always been found on the opposite side to public opinion. Always the public has given way to him ; but at the same moment he has crossed over to the other side. Public opinion has never caught him up, he has been too quick for it, and this is what his slow fellow-countrymen cannot forgive him. And there is something more. German as may be his joy in combat, his spirit of contradiction, his craving to be always, as it were, the minority in person, welcome as are these traits in him to the average German citizen, the use he makes of them estranges people. The German is accustomed to use a sabre but Harden fights with a rapier. And he is so in love with the art of sword-play, he is so proud of fighting well, that at times the cause for which he fights seems to be much less important to him than his own skill. He is indeed, when he begins his battles, always in earnest about his cause, but it does happen now and again that in his sheer delight in the art of fence he forgets what the battle is about. He will perhaps think hardly of me, if he reads this, but I must take the risk and speak out. I believe that fundamentally he is not a politician at all but a born artist of a very high order. But he is an artist of a French, rather than of a German,



order. His spirit derives from the French writers of the eighteenth century, from Beaumarchais and Diderot and Voltaire. Only his strange preference for long, overgrown, sometimes almost inextricable sentences conceals this.

Meanwhile we are girding ourselves to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of Gerhart Hauptmann; and he also is girding himself for this purpose. At the same time when I first met the young Harden, I also became acquainted with Hauptmann. He, too, came by a detour into literature. Harden began life as an actor, Hauptmann as a sculptor. We got to know one at his *Friedensfest*, his second play and his first success. He then resembled the young Schiller, but now he looks more like the old Goethe. He has also had moments in which he resembles Gerhart Hauptmann, and in such quiet hours I like him best. We used to sit together more than ten years ago in the garden on the Festspielhügel at Bayreuth; and there often his spirit rang out so purely that it made my heart beat. In a quiet corner of his heart Hauptmann is so simple and unaffected, so close to nature, so far removed from the influences of the time: he has remained, in the best sense, so much "of the people," that no other German poet now writing can be compared with him in this respect. No other German poet to-day has so much in him that is natural, no other is so little an artist, no other is so redolent of German soil. Whenever his work comes from the poor man of the people, which at bottom he is, it conquers us. But it does not always come from this source. He has at times fits of ambition which lure him over the frontiers of his genius; and in this he is very German. For, as it is typical of the German never to be content with himself but always to wish to transcend his own limitations, so it is typical of the German poet that poetry is not enough. He will not be merely a poet, he wishes to be a sage, a prophet, almost a kind of saint, and in any case the spokesman of his people, its counsellor and agent, the man in whom it most puts its trust. Every German poet plays in secret with the idea of being a sort of Goethe, even if only in a modest way and for a small circle. And since this is a national disease among German poets, we cannot be surprised if Hauptmann has been to a certain extent infected by it. And indeed when, as in his recent visit to Vienna, which was something almost like a public case he feels in it, how little talent he has for this kind of thing, this of itself speaks in his praise. Exactly what is best in his quiet, honest, almost shy nature withstands every attempt to make a show of him. On these occasions he looks like any worthy simple man of the people who, for bravery at a fire or because he has saved a child from drowning, is being publicly decorated and, in his embarrassment, does not know how he ought to behave and wishes only that it were all well over. But fortunately his old publisher, S. Fischer, has shown us again the young, the true, the quite uncelebrated Hauptmann by publishing his latest work, *Anna*, a country love-poem in hexameters. It is bucolic, a thing of fields and meadows and stables, a little reminiscent of Voss, the translator of Homer and the author of *Luise*, and also somewhat in the style of Goethe. But the original note of Hauptmann gushes out of it so purely, with so much power over the heart, that we become, like the poet, as we listen to him, thirty years younger. It is a remarkable thing that Thomas Mann, perhaps the most powerful of all the German novelists of our time, has never moved us so personally by any of his great novels as by the hexameters of his *Gesang vom Kindchen* (Fischer). So now the German nation has not taken to its heart any work of its greatest dramatist so much as this lovely country-poem about a farm on Silesian soil.

The Inselverlag has performed a great service by its new edition of a book which has long been out of print and forgotten, but which is the master-piece of a famous poet whose name is highly rated in all text-books, though nobody remembers his two chief works, because everybody contents himself with a pleasing work of his youth, unimportant as it is when compared with his greater achievements. Adalbert Stifter, an Austrian and a friend of Grillparzer, became in his youth a favourite writer of



the nation through his *Studien*, a collection of reflective tales. But readers are obstinate and demand that as a writer has begun, so shall he go on; and this is true of all countries. When Stifter attempted something new instead of contenting himself with the repetition of those little reflective stories, the reader was disappointed: no matter how beautiful it might be, it was not what was expected of Stifter. So his *Nachsommer* remained unread, though Nietzsche counted it among the few things which stand out in German prose literature and deserve to be read again and again. His last, purest and finest work, the finest, in my opinion, which has appeared in the German language since Goethe, the *Witiko*, was so much misunderstood that it soon vanished from the German memory and Nietzsche, who was enthusiastic about Stifter, did not know it. Nietzsche did not know even its name, the truest followers of Stifter were at a loss when the conversation turned on *Witiko*, and even his own biographer, Raimund Hein, failed him here. For many years I have preached to the deaf, asserting that *Witiko* has a spiritual elevation and an artistic beauty such as cannot be found elsewhere in our literature since the *Wahlverwandschaften*. But *Witiko* was out of print, it was hardly ever sought out in libraries, and it had the reputation of being tedious. Now the Inselverlag has had the courage to reprint it and, behold, all the world is astonished to find how exciting it is. It does indeed seem almost providential that it should emerge from its fifty years of oblivion just now when it seems to Central Europe so topical; for this novel of Bohemia in the twelfth century deals with our own problems, with the problems of this very time. It has been called a "Bohemian Iliad," and it has the appearance of an historical romance; but neither on its epic nor its historical side does its true importance lie. It is, above all, like Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandschaften* or his *Unterhaltungen Deutscher Ausgewanderter*, a moral tractate, in which indeed the lesson is never explicitly stated but is shown in a picture, as the heroic manners of Athens were taught in the frieze of Phidias on the Parthenon, or as the Catholic world is shown in the frescoes of Giotto. The hero, Witiko, a man of the bishop of Passau, desires, from youth up, to do right, "that which things demand." But this is hard in his time, since two Dukes are struggling for his country, one legitimate, but weak and contemptible, the other a born ruler but without just claim. On the side of which of these lies the right? To which of them will the duty of a right-thinking, right-wishing man incline him? The oldest of all the questions of German history, the question which was often fateful for Goths and Lombards, the question of legitimate government is here treated. We see in this novel with beating hearts how an old legitimacy is worn away and a new legitimacy created, how a good thing can lose its rightness when it is falsely used, and how an unright thing can be brought to honour by noble intent, how at times there can be bad right and good unright, and how in such times a true man will step from the side where the bad right is perishing of its own weakness and go to that where he can be of use. As we see these things, we cry: *De te fabula narratur*, this story is about us. To-day this book seems as though it had been written for us, as though it would lift us out of our confusion and need and lack of counsel. For everything which to us all our lives long has seemed "legitimate" is now broken up, and yet we feel that this destruction alone means nothing, that strength can destroy an enfeebled right but thereby does not become right itself, that in order for might to become right it must first legitimise itself by good deeds! And now it may be imagined with what wonder and eagerness the German falls on this old forgotten book, in which a voice from the grave instructs the living generation on the problems of its fate!

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