

## **Chapter VI--Hamlet and the Danes**

In the one classic and perfect literary product that ever came out of Germany--I do not mean "Faust," but Grimm's Fairy Tales--there is a gorgeous story about a boy who went through a number of experiences without learning how to shudder. In one of them, I remember, he was sitting by the fireside and a pair of live legs fell down the chimney and walked about the room by themselves. Afterwards the rest fell down and joined up; but this was almost an anti-climax. Now that is very charming, and full of the best German domesticity. It suggests truly what wild adventures the traveller can find by stopping at home. But it also illustrates in various ways how that great German influence on England, which is the matter of these essays, began in good things and gradually turned to bad. It began as a literary influence, in the lurid tales of Hoffmann, the tale of "Sintram," and so on; the revisualising of the dark background of forest behind our European cities. That old German darkness was immeasurably livelier than the new German light. The devils of Germany were much better than the angels. Look at the Teutonic pictures of "The Three Huntsmen" and observe that while the wicked huntsman is effective in his own way, the good huntsman is weak in every way, a sort of sexless woman with a face like a teaspoon. But there is more in these first forest tales, these homely horrors. In the earlier stages they have exactly this salt of salvation, that the boy does not shudder. They are made fearful that he may be fearless, not that he may fear. As long as that limit is kept, the barbaric dreamland is decent; and though individuals like Coleridge and De Quincey mixed it with worse things (such as opium), they kept that romantic rudiment upon the whole. But the one disadvantage of a forest is that one may lose one's way in it. And the one danger is not that we may meet devils, but that we may worship them. In other words, the danger is one always associated, by the instinct of folk-lore, with forests; it is enchantment, or the fixed loss of oneself in some unnatural captivity or spiritual servitude. And in the evolution of Germanism, from Hoffmann to Hauptmann, we do see this growing tendency to take horror seriously, which is diabolism. The German begins to have an eerie abstract sympathy with the force and fear he describes, as distinct from their objective. The German is no longer sympathising with the boy against the goblin, but rather with the goblin against the boy. There goes with it, as always goes with idolatry, a dehumanised seriousness; the men of the forest are already building upon a mountain the empty throne of the Superman. Now it is just at this point that I for one, and most men who love truth as well as tales, begin to lose interest. I am all for "going out into the world to seek my fortune," but I do not want to find it--and find it is only being chained for ever among the frozen figures of the Sieges Allees. I do not want to be an idolator, still less an idol. I am all for going to fairyland, but I am also all for coming back. That is, I will admire, but I

will not be magnetised, either by mysticism or militarism. I am all for German fantasy, but I will resist German earnestness till I die. I am all for Grimm's Fairy Tales; but if there is such a thing as Grimm's Law, I would break it, if I knew what it was. I like the Prussian's legs (in their beautiful boots) to fall down the chimney and walk about my room. But when he procures a head and begins to talk, I feel a little bored. The Germans cannot really be deep because they will not consent to be superficial. They are bewitched by art, and stare at it, and cannot see round it. They will not believe that art is a light and slight thing--a feather, even if it be from an angelic wing. Only the slime is at the bottom of a pool; the sky is on the surface. We see this in that very typical process, the Germanising of Shakespeare. I do not complain of the Germans forgetting that Shakespeare was an Englishman. I complain of their forgetting that Shakespeare was a man; that he had moods, that he made mistakes, and, above all, that he knew his art was an art and not an attribute of deity. That is what is the matter with the Germans; they cannot "ring fancy's knell"; their knells have no gaiety. The phrase of Hamlet about "holding the mirror up to nature" is always quoted by such earnest critics as meaning that art is nothing if not realistic. But it really means (or at least its author really thought) that art is nothing if not artificial. Realists, like other barbarians, really believe the mirror; and therefore break the mirror. Also they leave out the phrase "as 'twere," which must be read into every remark of Shakespeare, and especially every remark of Hamlet. What I mean by believing the mirror, and breaking it, can be recorded in one case I remember; in which a realistic critic quoted German authorities to prove that Hamlet had a particular psycho-pathological abnormality, which is admittedly nowhere mentioned in the play. The critic was bewitched; he was thinking of Hamlet as a real man, with a background behind him three dimensions deep--which does not exist in a looking-glass. "The best in this kind are but shadows." No German commentator has ever made an adequate note on that. Nevertheless, Shakespeare was an Englishman; he was nowhere more English than in his blunders; but he was nowhere more successful than in the description of very English types of character. And if anything is to be said about Hamlet, beyond what Shakespeare has said about him, I should say that Hamlet was an Englishman too. He was as much an Englishman as he was a gentleman, and he had the very grave weaknesses of both characters. The chief English fault, especially in the nineteenth century, has been lack of decision, not only lack of decision in action, but lack of the equally essential decision in thought--which some call dogma. And in the politics of the last century, this English Hamlet, as we shall see, played a great part, or rather refused to play it.

There were, then, two elements in the German influence; a sort of pretty playing with terror and a solemn recognition of terrorism. The first pointed to elfland, and the second to--shall we say, Prussia. And by that unconscious symbolism with which all this story develops, it was soon to be dramatically tested, by a definite

political query, whether what we really respected was the Teutonic fantasy or the Teutonic fear.

The Germanisation of England, its transition and turning-point, was well typified by the genius of Carlyle. The original charm of Germany had been the charm of the child. The Teutons were never so great as when they were childish; in their religious art and popular imagery the Christ-Child is really a child, though the Christ is hardly a man. The self-conscious fuss of their pedagogy is half-redeemed by the unconscious grace which called a school not a seed-plot of citizens, but merely a garden of children. All the first and best forest-spirit is infancy, its wonder, its wilfulness, even its still innocent fear. Carlyle marks exactly the moment when the German child becomes the spoilt child. The wonder turns to mere mysticism; and mere mysticism always turns to mere immoralism. The wilfulness is no longer liked, but is actually obeyed. The fear becomes a philosophy. Panic hardens into pessimism; or else, what is often equally depressing, optimism.

Carlyle, the most influential English writer of that time, marks all this by the mental interval between his "French Revolution" and his "Frederick the Great." In both he was Germanic. Carlyle was really as sentimental as Goethe; and Goethe was really as sentimental as Werther. Carlyle understood everything about the French Revolution, except that it was a French revolution. He could not conceive that cold anger that comes from a love of insulted truth. It seemed to him absurd that a man should die, or do murder, for the First Proposition of Euclid; should relish an egalitarian state like an equilateral triangle; or should defend the Pons Asinorum as Codes defended the Tiber bridge. But anyone who does not understand that does not understand the French Revolution--nor, for that matter, the American Revolution. "We hold these truths to be self-evident": it was the fanaticism of truism. But though Carlyle had no real respect for liberty, he had a real reverence for anarchy. He admired elemental energy. The violence which repelled most men from the Revolution was the one thing that attracted him to it. While a Whig like Macaulay respected the Girondists but deplored the Mountain, a Tory like Carlyle rather liked the Mountain and quite unduly despised the Girondists. This appetite for formless force belongs, of course, to the forests, to Germany. But when Carlyle got there, there fell upon him a sort of spell which is his tragedy and the English tragedy, and, in no small degree, the German tragedy too. The real romance of the Teutons was largely a romance of the Southern Teutons, with their castles, which are almost literally castles in the air, and their river which is walled with vineyards and rhymes so naturally to wine. But as Carlyle's was rootedly a romance of conquest, he had to prove that the thing which conquered in Germany was really more poetical than anything else in Germany. Now the thing that conquered in Germany was about the most prosaic thing of which the world ever grew weary. There is a great deal more

poetry in Brixton than in Berlin. Stella said that Swift could write charmingly about a broom-stick; and poor Carlyle had to write romantically about a ramrod. Compare him with Heine, who had also a detached taste in the mystical grotesques of Germany, but who saw what was their enemy: and offered to nail up the Prussian eagle like an old crow as a target for the archers of the Rhine. Its prosaic essence is not proved by the fact that it did not produce poets: it is proved by the more deadly fact that it did. The actual written poetry of Frederick the Great, for instance, was not even German or barbaric, but simply feeble--and French. Thus Carlyle became continually gloomier as his fit of the blues deepened into Prussian blues; nor can there be any wonder. His philosophy had brought out the result that the Prussian was the first of Germans, and, therefore, the first of men. No wonder he looked at the rest of us with little hope.

But a stronger test was coming both for Carlyle and England. Prussia, plodding, policing, as materialist as mud, went on solidifying and strengthening after unconquered Russia and unconquered England had rescued her where she lay prostrate under Napoleon. In this interval the two most important events were the Polish national revival, with which Russia was half inclined to be sympathetic, but Prussia was implacably coercionist; and the positive refusal of the crown of a united Germany by the King of Prussia, simply because it was constitutionally offered by a free German Convention. Prussia did not want to lead the Germans: she wanted to conquer the Germans. And she wanted to conquer other people first. She had already found her brutal, if humorous, embodiment in Bismarck; and he began with a scheme full of brutality and not without humour. He took up, or rather pretended to take up, the claim of the Prince of Augustenberg to duchies which were a quite lawful part of the land of Denmark. In support of this small pretender he enlisted two large things, the Germanic body called the Bund and the Austrian Empire. It is possibly needless to say that after he had seized the disputed provinces by pure Prussian violence, he kicked out the Prince of Augustenberg, kicked out the German Bund, and finally kicked out the Austrian Empire too, in the sudden campaign of Sadowa. He was a good husband and a good father; he did not paint in water colours; and of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. But the symbolic intensity of the incident was this. The Danes expected protection from England; and if there had been any sincerity in the ideal side of our Teutonism they ought to have had it. They ought to have had it even by the pedantries of the time, which already talked of Latin inferiority: and were never weary of explaining that the country of Richelieu could not rule and the country of Napoleon could not fight. But if it was necessary for whosoever would be saved to be a Teuton, the Danes were more Teuton than the Prussians. If it be a matter of vital importance to be descended from Vikings, the Danes really were descended from Vikings, while the Prussians were descended from mongrel Slavonic savages. If Protestantism be progress, the Danes were Protestant; while they had attained quite peculiar success and wealth in that small ownership and

intensive cultivation which is very commonly a boast of Catholic lands. They had in a quite arresting degree what was claimed for the Germanics as against Latin revolutionism: quiet freedom, quiet prosperity, a simple love of fields and of the sea. But, moreover, by that coincidence which dogs this drama, the English of that Victorian epoch had found their freshest impression of the northern spirit of infancy and wonder in the works of a Danish man of genius, whose stories and sketches were so popular in England as almost to have become English. Good as Grimm's Fairy Tales were, they had been collected and not created by the modern German; they were a museum of things older than any nation, of the dateless age of once-upon-a-time. When the English romantics wanted to find the folk-tale spirit still alive, they found it in the small country of one of those small kings, with whom the folk-tales are almost comically crowded. There they found what we call an original writer, who was nevertheless the image of the origins. They found a whole fairyland in one head and under one nineteenth-century top hat. Those of the English who were then children owe to Hans Andersen more than to any of their own writers, that essential educational emotion which feels that domesticity is not dull but rather fantastic; that sense of the fairyland of furniture, and the travel and adventure of the farmyard. His treatment of inanimate things as animate was not a cold and awkward allegory: it was a true sense of a dumb divinity in things that are. Through him a child did feel that the chair he sat on was something like a wooden horse. Through him children and the happier kind of men did feel themselves covered by a roof as by the folded wings of some vast domestic fowl; and feel common doors like great mouths that opened to utter welcome. In the story of "The Fir Tree" he transplanted to England a living bush that can still blossom into candles. And in his tale of "The Tin Soldier" he uttered the true defence of romantic militarism against the prigs who would forbid it even as a toy for the nursery. He suggested, in the true tradition of the folk-tales, that the dignity of the fighter is not in his largeness but rather in his smallness, in his stiff loyalty and heroic helplessness in the hands of larger and lower things. These things, alas, were an allegory. When Prussia, finding her crimes unpunished, afterwards carried them into France as well as Denmark, Carlyle and his school made some effort to justify their Germanism, by pitting what they called the piety and simplicity of Germany against what they called the cynicism and ribaldry of France. But nobody could possibly pretend that Bismarck was more pious and simple than Hans Andersen; yet the Carlyleans looked on with silence or approval while the innocent toy kingdom was broken like a toy. Here again, it is enormously probable that England would have struck upon the right side, if the English people had been the English Government. Among other coincidences, the Danish princess who had married the English heir was something very like a fairy princess to the English crowd. The national poet had hailed her as a daughter of the sea-kings; and she was, and indeed still is, the most popular royal figure in England. But whatever our people may have been like, our politicians were on the very tamest level of timidity and the fear of force

to which they have ever sunk. The Tin Soldier of the Danish army and the paper boat of the Danish navy, as in the story, were swept away down the great gutter, down that colossal cloaca that leads to the vast cesspool of Berlin.

Why, as a fact, did not England interpose? There were a great many reasons given, but I think they were all various inferences from one reason; indirect results and sometimes quite illogical results, of what we have called the Germanisation of England. First, the very insularity on which we insisted was barbaric, in its refusal of a seat in the central senate of the nations. What we called our splendid isolation became a rather ignominious sleeping-partnership with Prussia. Next, we were largely trained in irresponsibility by our contemporary historians, Freeman and Green, teaching us to be proud of a possible descent from King Arthur's nameless enemies and not from King Arthur. King Arthur might not be historical, but at least he was legendary. Hengist and Horsa were not even legendary, for they left no legend. Anybody could see what was obligatory on the representative of Arthur; he was bound to be chivalrous, that is, to be European. But nobody could imagine what was obligatory on the representative of Horsa, unless it were to be horsy. That was perhaps the only part of the Anglo-Saxon programme that the contemporary English really carried out. Then, in the very real decline from Cobbett to Cobden (that is, from a broad to a narrow manliness and good sense) there had grown up the cult of a very curious kind of peace, to be spread all over the world not by pilgrims, but by pedlars. Mystics from the beginning had made vows of peace--but they added to them vows of poverty. Vows of poverty were not in the Cobdenite's line. Then, again, there was the positive praise of Prussia, to which steadily worsening case the Carlyleans were already committed. But beyond these, there was something else, a spirit which had more infected us as a whole. That spirit was the spirit of Hamlet. We gave the grand name of "evolution" to a notion that things do themselves. Our wealth, our insularity, our gradual loss of faith, had so dazed us that the old Christian England haunted us like a ghost in whom we could not quite believe. An aristocrat like Palmerston, loving freedom and hating the upstart despotism, must have looked on at its cold brutality not without that ugly question which Hamlet asked himself--am I a coward?

It cannot be But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall To make  
oppression bitter; or 'ere this I should have fatted all the region kites With this  
slave's offal.

We made dumb our anger and our honour; but it has not brought us peace.