

## "Frightfulness" in German Fiction

By N. P. D.

AFTER the peace terms, the publication of a short story by Hermann Sudermann, called *The Silent Mill*, is rubbing it in. But "frightfulness" is apparently not confined to the German army, being sometimes found in German fiction, when it should doubtless be exposed and delivered over to the people for judgment. It is told that this story was written by Sudermann "many years ago," whereupon it was "tucked away," and "completely forgotten" (fortunately), until "some five years ago it came to light." It may well have been one of the causes of the war. It is unbelievably silly in its sentimentality, naive in its tragedy, and quaint—to use a mild word—in its expression. It has scenes, however, that might well make a sentimental German *machen shiver* to her soul.

It is the story of two brothers, Martin and Johannes. Martin is the sober, less attractive elder brother, who in a violent rage once had hit his little brother Fritz, with the result that the boy was an idiot until he died. After that, whenever Martin showed signs of anger, the words, "Think of Fritz," were sufficient to calm him instantly. In a secret room in the mill, he writes "Think of Fritz" on the wall. After their parents' death, Martin and Johannes live happily together at the mill, until the younger brother is called away to Berlin to be a Uhlán. Each had promised the other not to marry, so that Johannes is angry when he hears that Martin has brought a bride to the mill, and when he receives his discharge from the army he does not at once go home. As Sudermann exclaims in the peculiar style in which this story is written: "How now, Johannes? We are so obstinate that on no account will we go home, and prefer to seek our fortune in foreign parts; we roam about, now to right, now to left, up hill and down hill." It sounds like a nursery rhyme.

But finally the handsome young Uhlán comes swaggering home, with his hat cocked on one side and clanking his spurs. In the garden, he has the first glimpse of his new sister-in-law. "Good heavens, what a sweet girl! How her bonny cheeks glow, how her dark eyes gleam, how her pouting lips seem to invite a kiss!" Whereupon, Sudermann interjects: "Uhlán, beware! Take care!"

Johannes and his sister-in-law are soon, of course, great friends. In the evening they read together the "Album of Lyrics," about Count von Saekingen and his bride, and the Lovely Miller-Maid; or they wander to the romantic weir, where there is a draw bridge. Think of the draw bridge! In fact, it is not long before things become pretty hot between Johannes and Gertrude. One evening, "like a tiger he springs towards her—he encircles her with his arms—he presses her to him—she closes her eyes and breathes heavily—then he bends down and lays his hot and thirsting lips upon hers. She gives a loud moan—her body trembles feverishly in his embrace."

The Schützenfest dance brings matters to a climax in the miller's family. The slippers Johannes buys for Trude are too small for her. She confesses to him that her feet "burn like hell-fire." But they dance, and "she leans her face with a deep drawn breath upon his breast." Finally, however, Gertrude's feet hurt her so much that Johannes has to carry her home. Poor Johannes. "Her bosom heaves upon his breast; her wavy hair ripples over his neck; her warming breath caresses his glowing countenance."

The final catastrophe occurs—guess where? Why at the fatal draw bridge by the romantic weir. Martin "thinks of Fritz" too late. Gertrude enters the Church, where "she expiates the great crime which is known as 'youth.'" The translator blushes unseen. Perhaps, after all, publishing the book at this time is a piece of anti-German propaganda.

THE SILENT MILL. By HERMANN SUDERMANN. Brentano's. \$1.25.

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## De-Moralizing Chesterfield

By BENJAMIN DE CASSERES.

IN the *Aphorisms* of Guglielmo Dildah [Italian—1682-1759—translated by Louis C. McCarthy in 1881. Very rare.] there is this profound line written by that hardly known philosopher, "Civilization is the art of bowing." Further on are other curious and gnomic axioms, such as, if we remember correctly, "To climb properly you must crawl perfectly;" "Diplomacy is the art of making friends by lying;" "A gentleman never looks out of a window" (the latter was repeated without quotation marks by Oscar Wilde; but what are quotation marks among geniuses? Do they not live by absorbing one another's wisdom?).

Dildah was a cynic—that is, he thought with his brain instead of with his tear ducts. Rochefoucauld had the same unusual trait. So had Voltaire, Swift, Chamfort, Ambrose Bierce and many of the capitalistic class. But they were raw compared to one Nicholas Machiavelli and his great English disciple, Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield. Of cynicism these two made an art; of irony a political (in one case) and a social (in the other) philosophy. It is for this reason that I have always believed *The Prince* and the *Letters of Lord Chesterfield* to be the two most dangerous and demoralizing books ever written; and it is for this reason that we have all agreed they are immortal. The *Dangerous* and the *Demoralizing* are two pet ideas of old Homo. In literature, art and philosophy we would be nowhere without them.

"Manners, poise and good breeding are the credentials that advance mankind," says the "jacket" on *The Modern Chesterfield*, edited by Robert McCurdy. It is a selection of Chesterfield's letters to his son. Mr. McCurdy has followed the advice of Dr. Johnson, "take out the immorality." This will drive most of the boys who read these comstocked letters to the unexpurgated editions in the library—that is, all healthy, curious minded boys.

As Dildah and Mr. McCurdy have so well said, civilization is the evolution of politeness. "Please" is a substitute for the stiletto. Good breeding is the very cunning of the preying instinct. Salvation is a question of making the proper curtesy at the psychological moment. I have known men who went to Congress merely because they were suave. Amiability is the mother of many a ten year "touch." If France had only been polite enough she would have allowed the Kaiser to have his Christmas dinner in Paris.

Honeyed phrases will land you a bonus. Never raise your voice at the table; the waiter will get your number. Mind your Ps and Qs even though you never learned your A, B, Cs.

The world is, as you see, held together by this cunning called politeness and its pimpled pleiades. It is social glue. Peace treaties are of no consequence; it is the bow that lasts. If Cain had not been so rude to his brother they would have compromised fifty-fifty and both died behind their delicatessen scales. Ah! What space we might use up on the historical, social, mystical, religious and monetary consequences of Graciousness! Suppose "damn!" "hell!" "darn!" and "you boob!" had never been invented? We should be as null and void as the son to whom Chesterfield wrote his letters, who after swallowing for a good many years the words of the First Gentleman of Europe died mentally, morally, physically and spiritually intestate. Thus politeness doth make eads and cowards of us all. Phil even died with Sunday manners.

But the letters themselves, even in their de-moralized state, are great masterpieces of irony. It is probable that the Earl did not consciously intend to give to the world the most immoral, debilitating and manhood-destroying book which we have in the language. Nor did he intend to write the most terrible indictment of organized society of which we have any knowledge. It is pure social Machiavellism from first to last and the most subtle piece of parlor Bolshevism of which we have any knowledge.

If the fabric of society has to be kept up with such tricks and truckings, with such babblings and fawning hypocrisies, then away with it! Are these men and women that Chesterfield talks about?—

then I prefer the sewers of Paris with Jean Valjean, the filthy cellars of Gorky, the damned souls of Tolstoy and the vital brainy aristocracy of the barroom.

To put Lord Chesterfield in the hands of the greatest boy on earth—the American boy—is death. Chesterfield teaches him how to lie, to skulk, to shamble, to become a social spine climber, a sissy and a mental cunuch. The advice of the noble Earl is a perfect hothouse of secret vices, villainies and bon-doir baubles. It was quite calculated to build the boy that it did. Nature answered the Earl in an ironic thunderbolt. His boy was a "dead one."

The book concludes with Lord Chesterfield's speeches on the Gin Act in 1743. The Earl thunders against liquor just as Touchnot Tastenot does to-day—although he has not the style, the vivacity or the ability to use English like our own Chesterfields of vulgarity who are infinitely more interesting. But can this book, after all, be a camouflaged prohibition tract, and do all these letters only lead up to his Lordship's fulminations on gin?

THE MODERN CHESTERFIELD. Edited by ROBERT McCURDY. Richard G. Badger. \$1.50.

The *London Bookman* thus guesses about Hugh Walpole: "Reading about Trellis (in *Maradick at Forty*) one would say Mr. Walpole was a Cornishman, if it were not for the fact that when you are reading about London in his books you are sure that he is a Londoner. When you have decided, on such internal evidence, first that he is a Cornishman, and then that he is a Londoner, you read a passage from *The Secret City* and have no doubt whatever that he is a Russian."

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