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DISORDER AND EARLY SORROW

BY KLAUS MANN

IF YOU ONLY WERE A *little* OLDER!" Father complained. "You're just *too* callow, that's all." And Mother sighed, "What are we going to do with you?"

My poor, puzzled parents! I had just disclosed to them, under dramatic circumstances, that I was through with Greek grammar and arithmetic. My method of passive resistance was simple and effective. I stayed in bed and informed the family that I was undergoing a major psychological crisis. My parents were rather upset. How about my examination? My academic career? My future? I pointed out to them—not rudely but obstinately—that I didn't give a damn for my academic career but had made up my mind to become a dancer. Yes, indeed, *en effet*—a ballet dancer: what's so funny about it? Something like Harald Kreuzberg, whom I admired so. He would give me lessons, perhaps. In two or three years from now I might be wealthy and celebrated: dancers make loads of money—some of them.

My parents—though accustomed to all sorts of vagaries on my part—seemed seriously worried this time. Mother sadly observed that she had always hoped her oldest boy might become an architect. She would content herself with a physician, an artist, or even an opera singer. But a dancer, of all things!

As for Father, he had no prejudices against the profession as such, but only wondered if I was fit for it. Wasn't I rather on the gawky side? He suggested that I think it over, once more. It was April now. The family council decided to adjourn any further discussion until September or so. Then the problem should be faced squarely and a solution be found. But *where* and *how* was I to spend the meantime? I did not want to resume my studies. Nor did my parents think it a good idea to have me hang

about in the house, without any purpose or schedule. They seemed relieved when I, on my part, made a suggestion.

How about Heidelberg? I submitted. On the occasion of a recent trip I had stayed there for a while and found the place attractive. Above all I was smitten with a spooky-looking old house situated on the Neckar River—a former monastery of the Dominican friars, now in the possession of Baron Alexander von Bernus, the poet, alchemist, and student of occultism. Wasn't Bernus an old acquaintance of ours? Why not ask him if he wanted me as a paying guest? It would be cozy and stimulating. I thought, to spend a few months in such quaint surroundings. The scenery was delightful. The Baron's reputation had awakened my curiosity. Besides I might attend some courses at the University, perhaps. . . .

The Baron, who was by no means in the habit of receiving strangers in his private residence, may have been astonished by my father's request, especially as the relations between the two men were far from being intimate at the time. Yet the master of *Stift Neuburg* agreed. He wanted to find out, perhaps, what kind of a lad it was who wished to partake of the conventual life of the castle.

It surely was an odd community of which I became a member when I moved into the ancient chapter house on the bank of the Neckar River. As for Bernus himself, he looked and acted precisely the way in which the popular fancy wants a poet to behave and look. His face—pale, soft, and flabby, but not without a certain dreamy energy—was framed by a mane of rich, silky hair. He had begun his career as a bohemian but soon abandoned the idle games of aestheticism for the sake of more profound experiences. After a period of apprenticeship with various esoteric organizations, he joined

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Dr. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the Anthroposophic movement. Henceforth the Baron devoted his time to the exegesis of Steiner's gospel and the promotion of Anthroposophic wisdom. Besides he was occupied with deciphering the secret idiom of the stars and producing salubrious concoctions.

The Baroness certainly matched her husband as far as metaphysical training is concerned. She too was initiated into the arcana of magic roots, supernatural hygienics, and the meticulous hierarchy of the cherubim, demons, and minor goblins. She was an arresting personality—the Baroness Imogen von Bernus, mistress of *Stift Neuburg*. At once roguish and august, she resembled an intellectual *grande dame* of the French rococo, an analogy she underlined by the capricious mode in which she wore her fine, silvery hair. Besides she liked to drop occasional remarks hinting at her relation to certain distinguished individuals of the eighteenth-century period. In fact, she once confided to me, laughingly but by no means as a joke, that she was the reincarnation of a famous courtesan at the court of King Louis XIV—a noble, if light-minded lady of unusual talents who enjoyed the graces of many a royalty.

A little chat about metempsychosis was nothing extraordinary in the daily routine of *Stift Neuburg*. Of course, everybody knew that the Baron, during his last sojourn on this planet, used to be the buxom chambermaid of Goethe's mother in Frankfurt. A redhaired anarchist, who stayed with the Bernus family as their permanent guest, prided himself on having been Robespierre. In his present incarnation, however, he played a certain rôle in the upheaval of November 1918, but subsequently withdrew from the political scene. For he had it from "usually well-informed sources" that there would be no World Revolution until the tenth day of August 1929. A reliable ghost had told him so—employing a helpful peasant boy as his mouthpiece.

The peasant boy was named Max and worked with the Baron in the laboratory. An efficient lad, notably gifted both as chemist and medium. Small wonder that the spirits had a penchant for him: he was conspicuously handsome. Nobody would have suspected the huge, sinewy youth of having mediumistic talents. Yet such was his sensibility to the appeal of otherworldly regions that he was sometimes struck by mystic energies under the most awkward circumstances. It chanced that the voices

and apparitions would haunt him when he was lying in the bathtub, pleasantly relaxed. I have watched him raving through the corridors of the castle, naked, dripping with water, his hair disheveled, his eyes widened in panic. He looked frightful and admirable in his trembling bareness, bellowing, gesticulating, snorting: an antique hero hit by the holy insanity.

The most commonplace person in this somewhat eccentric milieu seemed the young daughter of the Baroness, a peevish little thing called Ursula Pia. Sober and precocious, she looked after the household, the stable, the orchard, and her own schoolwork, while the adults were absorbed in their weird and whimsical studies! What archangel will take over the cosmic government in 1950? What repercussions is this change to have regarding the developments of alchemy? Will it be possible, under the new constellation, to discover what even the great Paracelsus has sought in vain—the Stone of Ultimate Wisdom?—the supreme formula which transmutes the ordinary metals into the desired substance, gold. . . .

"They're batty—all of them," muttered Ursula Pia, when she dropped by to deliver the mail or a cup of tea in my room. "Why do you stay here, anyhow?" she asked suspiciously. "Are you nuts too?"

Was I nuts? What an embarrassing question! And why did I really stay? It seemed difficult to explain. I could hardly make it clear to the little girl that I had chosen the castle as my temporary residence, simply because there seemed no other place for me. So I just observed, with a sort of suggestive vagueness, "It's so *quiet* here . . . and I'm kind of fond of this view."

The scenery to which I pointed was indeed superb. In serene brightness the Neckar River flowed through the most idyllic panorama of gentle hills, lush meadows, and stately linden. At a distance you could discern the famous Castle of Heidelberg on the other side of the river, a fragile silhouette in the silvery haze.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" I sighed, overwhelmed anew.

"It's all right, I suppose," she said dryly.

A queer kid she was, Ursula Pia. Her eyes were strangely pale and yet intense in a wan little face with inflamed nostrils and a turned-up, tiny nose.

She was at once grave and nimble, a cat-like creature with the attitude of a matron.

"I just wonder what you're doing here, all day long," she said—flippant and yet with a certain motherly concern.

I became elusive, once more. "Lots of things," I said, while still looking out of the window.

There was a greenish flash in her eyes—rather uncanny, full of distrust and curiosity. "Magic stuff?" she asked in a pressed little voice, as if there were some sor-did mystery she wanted to be let into. "Sorcery?" she insisted, with a disgusted grimace. "The same kind of monkey business, I guess, dad and mama fool around with, as soon as I leave them alone in that so-called laboratory?"

I tried to explain to her the difference. "Your daddy," I said, "wants to transform one thing into another—mushrooms into sleeping tablets, for instance. Now, that's not exactly what I am after—see? I want to make something *new*—do you get that? Something pure and beautiful and alive. A dance, perhaps; or a poem; or a melody."

The little girl shrugged her shoulders, pursed her lips, and produced a brief, whistling sound, soft but penetrating and somehow very frightful. "Poets . . . dancers . . . sorcerers . . ." she said, shaking the upper part of her body as if under an icy shower. "It's all the same to me. The same waste of time; the same mess; the same bore." After a pause she added, "Of course, I could practice magic too—if I cared to. But I don't. Not a bit. I just don't think it's worth while. Horseback riding is worth while. Or watering the garden. The rain is worth while; so are some of the things our teacher tells us about: what a flower looks like inside, or what kind of clothes people wore hundreds of years ago. There are plenty of things worth while. But *magic*? Puh! It stinks." And she made a disgusted grimace.

There she stood, a neat and stolid thing. No doubt, she could do her bit of magic as efficiently as the next fellow—a little better, perhaps. But she

didn't bother. The sorcerer's child was fed up with sorcery.

And how about myself? Didn't I intend to venture on the same sort of witchcraft in which my father excelled? Did I actually hope to contribute a new device to the repertoire of poetry and the invocation of demons?

"Well, it's getting late," observed Ursula. "Dinner time, I suppose." But she didn't move.

The day was over, all right. This was the hour when the rivers turn nacreous, the foliage shivers, and a mystic chill descends from colorless skies. The stillest hour when the curfew has ended its wail; the hour of forebodings and caresses, *l'heure exquise*, *l'heure bleue*—there it was, wafting its message from the sleeping well and the juniper tree

into this room and straight into my heart.

Don't look now, Ursula Pia! This is sorcery. We are motionless, you and I, pallid and petrified in the eerie dusk: but the things begin to talk. The crimson blooms in the vase, the lilac bush in the garden, the candle, the crucifix, the pictures on the wall—they all whisper and sing and tell their stories. Those whom I love the most, smiling in ebony frames, exchange meaningful glances. What enchantment is it that makes them beam and beckon? What irresistible voice hovers from the Neckar valley up to our solitary hill?

Don't listen now, Ursula! Close your ears and your eyes! For this is the River God's song.

Behold! he rises from darkness, heaving the weight of his purple flesh; his prodigious brow wreathed with vine, the antique flute in his hand—the token of Pan and the Satyrs. Beware of his savage allurements, little Ursula! Avoid the spectacle of his pranks and grimaces! He is not the child-God, coquettishly toying with the miniature bow and arrows. He is cunning and fierce—a merciless hunter, a shark. But he is also a jester, fond of masquerades and all kinds of banter. He may appear bland and tender, until his whisper becomes a yell

KLAUS MANN, oldest son of Thomas Mann, is at the age of thirty-five the author of fifteen books, including a novelette, and is the co-author with his sister, Erika, of two books. In January 1941, he founded in America a literary monthly, "Decision," which appeared under his editorship until last February.

His article in this issue is part of his latest book, "The Turning Point," an autobiographical record written in English, and about to be published in this country. The title of his article is an allusion to a short story by his father, which deals with the same epoch Mann, Jr., describes.

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and his features turn wolfish. Don't watch him when he stumbles through the park, magnificent and obscene in his drunkenness. He addles the mind: his path is covered with the traces of crimes and the ashes of suicides.

Look at him, Ursula! There is no chance to escape, neither for you nor for me. It is always the same disorder: from time immemorial—the old sorrow and primeval joy. The depths of organic life are disorderly, a maze and mire of lust and suffering and rampant energy. The roots of our being are tangled in boggy ground, soaked with sperm, blood, and tears. The unending orgy of lechery and decay—how sorrowful! oh! how lustful!

Have a good look, little sister! Don't be bashful and gingerly! There he is, the Satyr and Bull, ebullient with potency; covered with foam and mud; panting with desire; guffawing, weeping, quivering in raptures; blind and ravenous, all aimless fervor; torrential, wayward, demoniac. His grip and spell are inescapable. He blinds and deafens and inspires us; he entangles us in his great disorder; he sweeps us away, billow-like. Where does he carry us, the holy monster? When will he release us from his clasp, the wanton deity?

Never mind, Ursula Pia! Accept it! Bear it! Enjoy it!

"We don't know the way," I said aloud, to my

own surprise. "Take it, little sister! But take it easy."

"I'll try my best," she said, with gentle determination. "So should *you*, young man. You must try very hard, or you may go astray. For you are easily fooled and easily wounded."

What was that? Was I hearing things? How could this little girl babble such Pythic stuff? How much did she know? How far had she followed me into my reveries?

But this was neither the place nor the hour to ask questions. Hadn't I been told that Ursula Pia could practice magic, if she wanted to? Didn't I know this was an enchanted house? And the river outside, the Neckar, was enchanted too, the cradle of poetry and romantic madness.

Don't ask questions! This is the hour of stillness and divination. The message from the well, the inaudible call from the juniper tree delights and calms the vulnerable, seducible heart. A breath of lilac and evening soothes the sorrow, transforms the disorder into harmony. For one transient moment everything fuses and integrates: the crucifix, the flowers, the beloved faces and desired lips, the masks of the River God, the aimless lust, the wordless suffering, the dances yet to be danced, the tears to be shed, the unspoken, unspeakable prayers.

The Unportrayed

In the brave future when new maps are made
And reconstructive plans for nations laid,
Will a skilled draftsman use vermilion stain
To mark the refugee-dark roads of pain?
The peaceful dales, once food for eye's delight
Revamped to charnel valleys in a night?

What calipers will chartist use to plot
The homeland boundary bought, rebought,
With splintering mintage of a cannon's mouth?
To nicely gauge heartaches to north and south
Of cities where in blithest sunlight swooped
A red destruction on the doubly duped?

by Roland Ryder-Smith