

Jeremias Gotthelf (1797-1854)

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JEREMIAS GOTTHELF (1797-1854)

From a lecture given to the Anglo-Swiss Society and the Nouvelle Société Helvétique in London, November 1st, 1954, by Dr. H. M. WAIDSON. (*Dr. Waidson has recently published a book on Jeremias Gotthelf.*)

A hundred years ago a few days ago there died a man known to the world as Jeremias Gotthelf. He died a quiet death at the age of fifty-seven, attended by his wife and three children, in the village of Lützelflüh in Canton Berne, Switzerland. Jeremias Gotthelf was the pseudonym which the Protestant pastor Albert Bitzius assumed as a writer of fiction. His day-to-day life had been ordinary enough on the surface, and there is nothing unusual about his personal biography which is likely to draw especial attention to him. His career in the church to all outward appearances followed the familiar pattern of many of his contemporaries. His father and grandfather too had been ministers of religion, and the boy had taken it for granted when, after a childhood spent with peasant lads in the country, he was sent to boarding-school and then to the university at Berne. After completing his studies there, he spent about a year in Germany, mostly at Göttingen, in the company of other Swiss students. Then followed a period as curate during which he threw himself into local educational affairs with great energy. He was given an opportunity to show what he could do as curate at the fashionable Holy Trinity Church in Berne, but failed to make a good impression, and in 1831 he was transferred to the hilly and scattered parish of Lützelflüh. It was here that he married, brought up his family, and became a famous author. The rhythm of his daily life became settled, though it continued to be charged with that dynamic energy which enabled him to live at the pace he did.

Today the reputation of this man has extended far beyond the locality where he spent most of his life. He is quite clearly in the front rank of Swiss authors who wrote in German, to be thought of in the same breath with Gottfried Keller and Conrad Ferdinand Meyer. His position in the wider field of German literature too is firmly established. He has been described as one of the three important realists in nineteenth century German writing, along with Wilhelm Raabe and Theodor Fontane. He is indeed one of the greater novelists in his century — the richest period in the European novel — and has a quality of mind, a power of characterisation and a capacity to depict a living world which compare with the achievement of Dickens, Balzac or Tolstoy.

When we look beyond the outward texture of his life, we see that he was no conventional country parson of romance, that his life was no bucolic idyll unruffled by the problems of modern civilised living. Gotthelf was a man of unusual energy and gifts, but these failed to find complete expression in his career in the church. He was an unimpressive speaker, and was slow to get promotion in the church for this reason and also because of his obstinate temperament and his refusal to compromise on matters of principle. As a young man he was especially concerned for elementary education, and his vigorous demands for

reforms in this sphere made him unpopular with his superiors. He became particularly interested in politics during the period of the French Revolution of 1830, which had its repercussions in Switzerland with the overthrowing of the patriciate régime of the Restoration and a broadening of the basis of Swiss democracy. On taking up his parish work in Lützelflüh, Gotthelf was full of enthusiasm for the newly completed revolution in Berne, and supported the Liberal party in its demands for democratic reform, particularly in the sphere of education. Now began his association with the *Berner Volksfreund*, the Liberal newspaper to which Gotthelf contributed numerous articles, mostly unsigned, between 1831 and 1845. But events in the Swiss political field moved very quickly in the important and eruptive second quarter of the century. The new Liberal government in Berne which had sponsored the revolution of 1831 was within a few years ousted by a Radical government, and from being a Liberal Gotthelf became an Old Liberal; he remained faithful to his ideals of 1831, and refused to accept the more radical tendencies of the eighteen-forties. In fact Gotthelf persistently engaged in controversy with the Radical party and its leaders, and in his turn became an object of their hostility; in 1845 he was deprived of his office of inspector of schools and all but lost his living as a minister of religion. The Sonderbund War of 1847 saw a Radical victory and the foundation of the Swiss state in its modern form; Gotthelf regarded this as a disaster, and in his last years continued his polemical sallies against the new order of things.

I mention this aspect of Gotthelf's personal life in order to emphasize that he must not be regarded as a quietist because he lived most of his life in a village and wrote mostly about the people of the Bernese countryside. He was an activist if ever there was one, and his enthusiasm for social and political causes was not parochial, but derived from his deep concern for the broader principles underlying European political thought in his day — and this concern for the social and political situation was itself subordinate to his deep religious sense. We cannot trace any sudden conversion in the life of Gotthelf, when the sinner repented and turned to the way of faith—there is nothing of the St. Augustine or Tolstoy about Gotthelf's private life. But from his student days, when theological study was a tedious routine, through his years as a curate, when the young man threw himself heart and soul into practical, humanitarian activities, a gradual development in his attitude to religion must have been taking place; until in his novels and stories we encounter the artistic expression of various forms of religious experience — prophetic, apocalyptic fervour as well as a more spiritualised, pentecostal mysticism.

By the age of thirty-eight pastor Albert Bitzius was leading a busy enough life; at home he had a young family, as pastor he had varied and responsible work, while his concern for education and politics was leading him to yet more commitments. But it was now that he wrote his first novel *Der Bauernspiegel* ("The Peasants' Mirror", 1836), and once this

had been published under the pseudonym of Jeremias Gotthelf, the creative artist was born, and for the next eighteen years, until his death, he was under an almost demoniacal urge to write. And it is because of what he wrote that we are remembering him now, the man who in twelve long novels and over forty shorter stories or Novellen succeeded as only the greater novelists can do in creating a living world out of his own imagination and experience. In a letter written a little time after the appearance of his first novel Gotthelf expresses the reasons which led him to write:

"Thus I was hemmed in and kept down on all sides, I could express myself nowhere in free action. I couldn't even tire myself out riding, and if I had been able to go riding every other day, I should never have written. You must realise now that a wild life was moving within me which no one suspected the existence of, and if a few expressions forced their way out of my mouth, they were taken as mere insolent words. This life had either to consume itself or to break forth in some way or other. It did so in writing. And people naturally don't realise that it is indeed a regular breaking-out of a long pent-up force, like the bursting forth of a mountain lake. Such a lake bursts out in wild floods until it finds its own path, and sweeps mud and rocks along in its wild flight. Then it gets cleaner, and may become quite a pretty little stream. My writing too has broken its own path in the same way, a wild hitting-out in all directions where I have been constricted, in order to make space for myself. How I came to writing was on the one hand an instinctive compulsion, on the other hand I really had to write like that, if I wanted to make any impression on the people."

In later letters Gotthelf usually asserted that his first, conscious aim as a writer was to preach and teach the peasants he knew. And the didactic, indeed polemical element is present in much of his work. But his motives in writing are indeed difficult to analyse. Hand in hand with the wish to preach, instruct, cajole, harangue and castigate ordinary folk like his parishioners went the instinctive compulsion of the true artist which reveals itself in the letter from which I have just quoted. Gotthelf denied that he was a literary artist; he was contemptuous of aestheticism, as equally of theology and philosophy, because he saw them as consisting of abstractions

which could have no meaning for the mass of ordinary, non-intellectual folk. He himself read very little literature after his student days, and was scarcely touched by the literary fashions of his day. He could find time to live and to write, but not to read what other people had written. A young woman, he wrote, should not waste her time reading the lurid fiction of Eugène Sue or trying to learn to play the piano, but should look after the pigs. If Gotthelf expresses himself in deliberate provocativeness and sarcasms on themes such as this, it does not make him any the less genuine a creative artist himself. And the creative vitality permeating nearly all his fiction is the more amazing on account of its irrepressible spontaneity, and because he took his gift so much for granted.

There is no time to speak of Gotthelf's development as a writer in any detail. His first novel *Der Bauernspiegel* immediately established his reputation in Canton Berne, having something of a succès de scandale; it is an indignant protest against the sordidness and stupidity of peasant life, a sharp satire and sombre picture, imbued with a pessimism that sees no solution to human problems except in terms of a future life. The writings of Gotthelf's first period are of a social-reformatory nature, exposing with naturalistic frankness the evils of a peasant society. There then follows a middle period of creative splendour, between about 1840 and 1845, when some of Gotthelf's greatest novels and shorter tales were written. The first of Gotthelf's novels of this middle

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period indicates that he is adopting a more reconciliatory attitude to the community he writes about; he no longer exposes and satirizes the peasants, but, adopting their point of view, he really succeeds in getting under their skins and seeing the world with their eyes. *Uli der Knecht* ("Uli the Farmhand", 1841,) is Gotthelf's best known novel, though I would not call it necessarily his best. It is the most cheerful and optimistic of them, certainly, and less complicated in its psychology than the masterly *Anne Bäbi Jowäger* (1843), that wise and penetrating analysis of the border-country of mental and physical sickness in family life. The farmhand's progress is rather obviously didactic, but *Uli* is a novel which reveals especially well Gotthelf's colourful portrayal of the peasant way of life and his sense of humour, with its slapstick, its wordy battles, its grotesque exaggerations and its irony. It is in these fruitful years that Gotthelf's genius is at its sunniest, when the artist in him triumphs over the moralist and politician. But as the Sonderbund War draws near, the horizon darkens, and Gotthelf feels the impulse to throw himself whole-heartedly into the political maelstrom and to use his fiction as a vehicle for sombre prophecy. In the shorter tales and an occasional lighter novel, such as *Die Käserei in der Vehfreude* ("The Cheese-Dairy in Vehfreude", 1849), Gotthelf's sunny humour and artistic sensitivity remain as convincing as at any earlier period. But it is in considering all the work that went into the massive and bleak political novel *Zeitgeist und Bernergeist* ("The Spirit of the Age and the Spirit

of Berne", 1851) that we cannot but wish that in his last years Gotthelf had taken life around him less to heart and had remained more faithful to his purely creative urge as a writer.

I should like to single out at this point two works by Gotthelf which are among his very finest — one novel, and one shorter tale. The novel *Geld und Geist* (1843) indicates clearly enough by its title what it is about, though the title is not easy to translate into convincing English. In the eighteen sixties two English translations of this work appeared; the title of one was "Wealth and Welfare", of the other "The Soul and Money". The title indicates the

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theme, and the implicit dichotomy promises a dramatic conflict which is amply satisfied: on the one hand are the demands of material life, the normal, everyday desire of every one of us to amass money and the power and easy living that may go with it; on the other hand is the awareness that there are other, higher claims to be made on our lives than those of material success, that the mind and the soul are open to the voice of unselfish idealism, and that religious experience should express itself in moral social behaviour. The novel has the classical simplicity, the inwardness and purity of Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. As in most of his works, Gotthelf takes a straightforward plot with a limited number of characters (he seldom falls into the temptation of many nineteenth century novelists, for example Dickens and Hardy, to make their work dependent on a complex machinery of intrigue and coincidence). He limits his action to a small number of characters who represent the highest ethical and cultural level attainable by the social group to which they belong. *Geld und Geist* is a novel of family life set in one of the traditional wealthy peasant farmsteads of the Emmental — the house of the particular family in this novel, with its vast expanse of steep-sloping roof covering the wooden structure of the living quarters and part of the farming quarters, is still to be seen, one of the proud old houses of a district rich in old farmsteads, about two miles from Lützelfüh. In such an "aristocratic" setting Gotthelf could present a picture of tranquillity and of concern for fundamental problems, and could use his slightly idealized presentation of a peasant family in order to depict their psychological reactions in a state of self-consciousness that would not be right in a racier, earthier piece of writing like *Uli*. The family in *Geld und Geist* live easily; they are true peasants in that the whole family takes an active part in the running of the farm, but with their inherited wealth they may approach this work in a leisurely, indeed symbolical or sacramental way. They are true peasants too in that they do not voice their intimate thoughts easily, and much of the action depends on small inferences, a slight change in the tone of a voice, or the omission or inclusion of a certain gesture in a fitting context; their self-control is indeed aristocratic, and happiness and unhappiness are not the result of angry words or violence, but of a fine sensitivity to the unspoken thoughts of others.

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Gotthelf's plots are nearly always simple (though nevertheless presenting many problems of interpretation), and the emphasis is not on the slick presentation of incident, but on the building-up of character and of a concrete world in the background. To put it in Gotthelf's own words, from a phrase in *Geld und Geist*: "Characters are more significant than situations, just as love is more significant than curiosity". Gotthelf has indeed dispensed with sensationalism, with the exploitation of the more lurid or perverse aspects of human nature, so that his work takes on a different quality from that of most novelists. He can say things naturally and convincingly which more self-conscious writers would be unable to express without becoming banal and affected. This is part of the Homeric quality of his writing, the naive, epic timelessness of myth, which Gottfried Keller was the first to appraise.

Geld und Geist, its author says, depicts the sunny side of peasant life. It has a serenity which might well justify its being classified as an idyll. But to emphasize this aspect of Gotthelf's work only would be to give a one-sided impression of the author's creative range. I should like therefore to spend a little time on what is, I imagine, the most famous of Gotthelf's shorter narrative works, *Die schwarze Spinne* ("The Black Spider", 1842). All Gotthelf's novels and the major part of his shorter tales are set in an environment of contemporary, or near-contemporary realism. There is, however, an important group of tales which are historical or legendary in setting, taking as their subject incidents

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from the Swiss past. Gotthelf's interest in history and legend was part of the heritage of the Romantic movement — we know, for instance, that he read some of Scott's work in translation — and it is in these tales that Gotthelf shows certain affinities with fashionable literary movements, rather than in the contemporary peasant novels where he goes so much more his own way. The interest of these legendary-historical tales lies in the author's treatment of legend and myth rather than in the accuracy or inaccuracy of his transcripts of bygone facts. Dark, chthonic forces and puzzling, fascinating archetypal figures are deployed with a fierceness of imagination that makes abundantly clear that Gotthelf's creative range was by no means confined to the sunny side of life. *Die schwarze Spinne*, written at much the same time as *Geld und Geist*, tells the legend of the havoc wrought by the Black Death in a country community in the late Middle Ages; the starkness of the legendary narrative is in deliberate contrast to the framework-story in which it is set. While the framework tells of a peasant christening with everyday realism and good humour, the legend weaves a web of fantasy that arouses wonder, pity and terror in face of the bare clash between good and evil; great cosmic forces are let loose in the peaceful valley. The action presses forward with a sense of dynamic inevitability that is in no way bound by the limitations of the common-sense world. The spider can decimate the population, its fire can penetrate a knight's armour, and heavy doors and thick castle walls are no defence against its entry. Yet a weak woman whose heart is pure and strong can grasp it and imprison it within an ordinary beam of wood. At the Green Huntsman's command giant squirrels transport full grown trees, though no one save an innocent boy may see this with impunity. The priest hastens to the christening of a child through the thunderstorm as if on wings of prayer. The new, unhallowed farm-building is mysteriously destroyed by fire after the final defeat of the spider; "How it happened, was never found out". Throughout the legendary narrative, in *Die schwarze Spinne* as elsewhere in Gotthelf's work, we are repeatedly confronted with a further dimension than those we know in everyday life. From the mind of the author is created with giant luminosity a world of myth that exemplifies his conception of the eternal struggle between good and evil.

The range and variety of Gotthelf's writings are such that one cannot illustrate their qualities if one

limits oneself to one or two works, rich as these works may be. I have for instance not attempted to give any impression of Gotthelf's sense of humour, which is revealed not only in *Uli der Knecht* but in many other novels and tales as well; it is a sense of humour which is racy and bouncing, full of vitality and sheer fun, with a fine command of grotesque imagery and hyperbole. Nor have I illustrated Gotthelf's writing when it is being realistic in the unflinching, objective, unconcealing manner which many people associate with the realism of French literature; the hard realism and satire of his first novel *Der Bauernspiegel* is very different from the idyllic touch of some of the later

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work. One of the remarkable characteristics of Gotthelf's work is its strength and variety. Two novels alone will not give us the essence of Gotthelf, for he was not the type of writer who produced one or two masterpieces and a whole series of potboilers. Very little that he wrote can be dismissed in the latter category, as there is something of the live and original Gotthelf in almost all he wrote.

Gotthelf has, I am convinced, the format of a major novelist, in a century when the novel flourished as never before or since. How is it then that this name is not the household word, outside his own country, that Dickens for instance is? There is the element of didacticism and polemicising, which I have mentioned, but more of a barrier than these elements is the language in which his works are written. Gotthelf wrote in a modern standard German which is coloured by the German of Switzerland, the Alemannic form of the language which has remained so pronounced in German-speaking Switzerland. A friend of Gotthelf's, Eduard Fueter, wrote to him once and pointed out the limiting quality of the Swiss form of German, in comparing him with Dickens:

"You are our Boz or Dickens, only that I find in you more poetry, more delicacy, more practical philosophy and higher aspirations than in him; if our everyday German were understood by thirty millions, if our peasant farmers, day-labourers and farm-servants were part of the London or Parisian population, you would have your triumphs and get your hundreds of thousands just like Boz . . . How far he may go in idealizing the language and style of the lower classes in London, for instance, I do not know, whether he goes as far as you in sturdiness and coarseness would certainly be very interesting for you to know; this much is sure, that his extraordinary effects are derived above all from his faithful description of the lower classes."

But the place and the language are limiting factors, and there is no doubt that Fueter was right; Bernese German is much less accessible to a wide circle of readers than English. There have been English translations of a few of Gotthelf's works, including *Geld und Geist* and *Uli der Knecht*, and John Ruskin was a great admirer of the Swiss author; but these translations have been out of print a long time now.

The England of Dickens' and Gotthelf's time was already much closer to the industrialised, urban living of our time than the peasant society in which Gotthelf lived. It is difficult to find any comparable environment described in English literature, for the social conditions of English country life are so different. The names of Scott and Dickens have already been mentioned as being likely to give an indication of the nature of Gotthelf's creative imagination to someone who does not read German. George Eliot's evocation of the rural Midlands has something of the quality of Gotthelf's love of the Emmental; Gotthelf's shorter tales occasionally portray eccentric, dried-up misers not unlike Silas Marner, and there is a wistful, melancholy note in the character of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* which recalls something of the nature of Gotthelf's heroines. It is interesting to compare and contrast Gotthelf for a moment with

Thomas Hardy. The latter's vision of Wessex has an elegiac sensitiveness that is largely absent from the Swiss novelist's work. Gotthelf can identify himself with his peasant characters, can get under their skin without self-consciousness, while Hardy seldom forgets that he is writing about country people for a more sophisticated town audience. Gotthelf is naive, in Schiller's sense of the word, while Hardy, and many more writers on rural themes, is sentimental; or, to express the difference in other terms, Gotthelf is realistic and spontaneous, while Hardy is romantic and introspective. In their attitude to country society both authors are on the defensive. With the industrial revolution the structure of European society was being profoundly modified, and the old way of life in the country was threatened with destruction. Gotthelf, living earlier in the century and in a country which was only just beginning to feel the approach of the industrial revolution, regarded city life hardly as a serious threat to his peasantry; Hardy, on the other hand, writing in England towards the close of the century, saw the industrial revolution as an accomplished fact, and depicted the traditional life of Dorsetshire as being endangered by the changing social conditions — in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* we see the social and moral decline of a family, in particular the helpless sacrifice of Tess to a fate which acts through social circumstances. The most obvious and fundamental difference between the two writers is that, while Hardy's novels reflect the author's loss of faith and regrets at not being able



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to find it again, Gotthelf remained throughout his life a believing Christian.

The comparison with Hardy brings out differences even where there are resemblances. In his themes, his devotion to moral and educational causes and his uncompromising boldness, Gotthelf has more in common with Tolstoy. Not that Gotthelf's work can offer the broad canvas of *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina* — few novels in world literature can. But Gotthelf's faithful delineation of peasant life is paralleled by Tolstoy's devoted concern for this same social class. Tolstoy's appraisal of the value of the peasant way of life by the side of urbanised art is that of Gotthelf. The reformatory, moralising zeal of Tolstoy in his later years recalls Gotthelf in various ways. The ideal family as expounded in *Geld und Geist* would have made a strong appeal to the Tolstoy of the "Twenty-Three Tales".

Gotthelf's work is regional in its characteristic setting, and in its concern with the life and well-being of the country communities of Canton Berne. But this regional quality does not prevent it rising to universality. Humanity, its struggles and problems, is the theme of his work — man's place in society and the universe. In other words his is the theme of every great novelist, and Gotthelf's work, quite independent of the place or language of its setting, rises to this universal quality because of the quality of the author's mind.

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The last meeting of the year was held at Messrs. Hagenbachs' Restaurant as usual, with over 50 members present. Mr. O. Schneider, our Consul, had come from Manchester to pay us one of his very welcome visits and to inform us about the Swiss-British agreements concerning National Insurance and Income Tax in connection with transfer of pension. This brought home very forcibly the valuable work which our Legation is doing for us in so many different ways. Mr. Schneider also told us how happy he had been to work with M. de Torrenté who is leaving us for Washington, and said that he would be glad to convey to him our gratitude for his work in this country and our best wishes.

Coming from the opposite direction, M. Bringolf, a colleague of Mr. Schneider, told us how he had gone to Sunderland to meet a Swiss ship at the end of a transatlantic journey. His description of the state of the ship after a very rough passage, funnels carried away, huge steel beams torn like match-wood, made us feel more vividly what we owe to the sailors' courage and endurance. Furthermore, it made us realise the great value of the Swiss Navy which should no longer be regarded as a stage joke, as it increasingly becomes an asset in our economy and even offers a new opening for the adventurous spirit of our young compatriots.

The meeting, as usual, was most informal, friendly and happy, many bringing in their own way, their contribution to the general enjoyment. Now, that we have an accordionist, Mr. André Dubler, our young people are more full of zest than ever, whatever the national language in which they express their enthusiasm.

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