WILHELM MEINHOLD (*27 Jan.* 1797—*Nov.* 31, 1851)

THE historic novel might be set aside as wholly inartistic and impossible were it not for a few examples of distinct beauty and power in this singular form. Defoe's *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, though not one of his finest works, is yet excellent in parts. Balzac has greatly triumphed in this style. Scott does not approach the intensity of Balzac, though his historic novels made an epoch and are, of course, remarkable. With Dumas the local colour is barely more than a convention. The essence of the *Three Musketeers* is not their costume but the play of incident and character. Some of our modern English hands have essayed the adventures of the historic romance with quite respectable success, but scarcely with complete victory. As far as we know, neither in Italy nor Spain has any man gone near these in excellence; but, and this is passing strange, considering the signal badness of German novels (that most miserable Ekkehart, for example), a Pomeranian pastor of this century has written two of the very first rank. Naturally, with German taste as it is—and as, in spite of French and Norwegian influence, it is likely to be for some time—Meinhold has been little honoured in his own country, though Göthe gave him sound advice when he asked for it; and Frederick William IV. of Prussia not only understood the wonderful power of his work, but with princely courtesy printed one of his two great stories for him unasked. The Bavarian king has earned the poet's praise and the musician's love by his real sympathy with the highest art, but cases such as this and that of Rückert should plead favourably for the Hohenzollern.

Wilhelm Meinhold's was a curious personality: fiercely individual as Beddoes, with an instinct that brought him not only to assimilate details, but to enter easily into the very life and feeling of the past, as it has been given to few men to do. One, too, that saw through the vulgar popular ideas of his day, and took refuge from cant and noisy insincerity and cowardly lack of patriotism in historic studies and intellectual interests, not without turning occasionally to smite the yelping curs he despised. Small wonder that a man of his sympathies, who of course scorned the futilities of Lutheran apologetic, should have felt drawn toward the old Church of the West, with its more antique, more

more dignified, more mysterious associations. He wanted an atmosphere more highly charged with the supernatural than the hard, dry, cast-iron traditions of his own sect could supply.

The portrait (prefixed to the edition of 1846 of his collected works) shows a type not uncommon in Ireland: round head domed up from a fine brow; keen level eyes behind the student's glasses; straight well-shaped nose, not of the largest; good firm mouth, and well-turned chin. Shrewd, obstinate, not to be convinced save by himself, persistent, observant, and keen in feeling and word and deed—so one would judge the nature from the face.

That Meinhold should have deigned to use his two notable stories as controversial weapons against his uncritical and bemused adversaries is curious enough, but it is not necessary to suppose that *Sidonia* and *Maria* were composed for the sole purpose of puzzling the Sadducees. In the case of the *Cloister Witch*, he had the story in hand as far back as 1831, and two of his early poems come from the drama he had first written; while the censor, with instinctive dread of true talent, of course withheld his favour from the *Pastor's Daughter*, a play founded on the story that was to grow into the *Amber Witch*.

It was not till after a fair amount of poetical and controversial work that our author, in 1843, issued his *Amber Witch* in book-form, and had the wonderful luck to find a gifted woman to clothe it in appropriate English form. There is lying at my hand a little pocket Tasso, with the pretty autograph, 'Lucie Duff Gordon, Wurtzburg, 1844,' a relic of the girl whose pen naturalised at once a work that is probably more widely known here, and far better appreciated, thanks to her, than in Germany. Meinhold gracefully appreciated his translator's skilful work, and *Sidonia* was dedicated, on its first appearance in 1848, to

> der jungen geist-reichen Uebersetzerin
> der Bernstein-Hexe.

It was not Sarah Austin's daughter, but Mrs. R. W. Wilde, the *Speranza* of the *Nation*, who turned the *Cloister Witch* into English, and she, too, had well earned a dedication if the novelist had lived to complete his last work—'Der getreue Ritter oder Sigismund Hager von und zu Altensteig und die Reformation, in Briefen an die Gräfin Julia von Oldofredi-Hager in Lemberg'—which was issued at Regensburg in 1852 with a preface by Aurel, his son, and has not yet, to our knowledge, found a translator.

So

So much for the circumstances and the man. As to his two famous romances, it would be difficult to over-praise them; within their limits they are almost perfect; and of what work of art can more be said? The life of Maria Schweidler, the Amber Witch, is supposed to be told by her father—a kindly, cowardly, honest old creature, who writes the story of the providential escape of his beautiful, brave, and clever daughter from the fiendish malice of her enemies at the time of the Thirty Years' War. The plot is the simple scheme of an English melodrama (as Mr. Jacobs has noticed), where villainy uses occasions to drive an innocent heroine into dire stresses, till the lover, long delayed, manages to rescue her at the eleventh hour. It was, however, necessary that the plot should be simple and easy to grasp, when there is so much action in the detail. Appropriate setting, delicate touches of character, most skilfully enhance the nobility of the helpless innocent child, and draw the warmest sympathy from us for her unmerited suffering from the ignorance, envy, and lust of her persecutors, who urge her charity, her learning, and her courage against her as proofs of the horrid guilt of which they accuse her. The pretty episodes of the glorious Swedish king, and of the ring of Duke Philippus, the grim matter-of-fact narrative of the famine, are in Defoe's vein; but the serious, beautiful charm of the girl is somewhat beyond his range, though the method by which it is indicated is one of which the author of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* was a past master. It would be interesting to learn what knowledge of his famous predecessor Meinhold possessed; he must at least have read of 'poor Robin.' But the Pomeranian has qualities the Briton never possessed; Defoe's ghosts and spirits are vulgar, and he cannot deal with the supernatural so as to arouse horror or terror; he does not meddle save with sordid crime, which remains sordid under his hand. Meinhold has the true Elizabethan power of shocking the reader's soul with the repulsion and the sympathy he can arouse by his presentment of depths of sin and abysses of dread. And this without Tourneur's extravagance, without the mere sham and unreal taste for blood and bogeys that long haunted the childish Teutonic mind, and inspired the absurdities of the German romantic drama. This man is no Walpole with vapid, ill-begotten rococo invention; no Monk Lewis with crude, Surrey-side imaginings. He is of the true stock of Kyd and Webster and Shakespeare. He can mix you broad humour with horror, and banal incident with the most pitiful tragedy, so that the relief enables the catastrophe to tell the more surely and vividly.

Sidonia

Sidonia is far more ambitious, certainly in some respects finer than the *Amber Witch*, illustrating its author's rare qualities in fuller measure. Astonishing for breadth and power is the conception of Sidonia herself—the true adventuress nature—with her hatred for the pretences about her, proud of her own birth, and full of disdain for those below her, with eager greed and envy for all that was out of her reach, but had come to others without an effort, and armed in that selfish, revengeful cruelty and callousness for others' sufferings that belong to the habitual criminal, who urges pretended right to punish a society so constituted as to show symptoms of not existing mainly for his ease and comfort. There is something of Becky in her petty malignity, her indomitable courage, her elaborate and long-prepared schemes, her quick change of plan when it becomes obvious she is on the wrong track, her contempt for plain-dealing and honesty, which she accounts crass animal stupidity. Yet Meinhold rises far higher than Thackeray ever could; the little Mayfair tragedy shrinks beside the monstrous crime of Saatzig; even Regan or Goneril might have recoiled from ordering the merciless torment that Sidonia never scrupled to inflict. It is a feat to have imagined and put into being a creature so devilish and yet so human as the *Cloister Witch.* For such is Meinhold's marvellous skill that he forces us to pity her, and rejoice that Diliana's pleading won a painless death for the wretched old sinner who had suffered so terribly, both in soul and body, before the inevitable end came. Dr. Theodorus Plönnies is a less pronounced figure than Pastor Schweidler, and this rightly, for the story he has to relate is twice as long as the Caserow cleric's, and the adventures of his incomparable heroine fill his canvas; but his dogged fidelity to the bestial hog-like brood of dukes that reign over Pomerania, and his infantile credulity, are distinctly marked. One recalls scene after scene of wonderful graphic force, ingeniously various in tone, but always lit with that spark of humour which alone could make so much horror endurable—the swift and unforeseen end of the mighty young standard-bearer on the ice; the aimless beery revolt of the town rascalry; the squalid encounters on the boat by which the outraged father and the brutal paramour are brought to their deaths: the devout ending of young Appelmann; the boisterous horseplay of the castle, with death ever close at the heels of drunken idle mirth; the futile squabbles of the peasants and the hangman over the gipsy witch; the bear-hunt; the ridiculous fray with the treacherous malignant Jews, followed by the impressive

sive conjuration of the Angel of the Sun; the bits of half-comic, squalid convent-life; the haughty ceremonies of the feudal court; the cruel martyrdom of the innocent 'dairy-mother,' and the vulgar quarrels of the girls in the ducal harem. But wherever the unconquerable Sidonia comes on his scene the author rises to tragic heights, and his work grows in power and gains in colour. Admirably rendered is the mischievous fooling and insolent mockery of the wanton artful beauty who brings lust and hate and impiety in her train, withering all that is good wherever her influence spreads, so that, till accident foils her, she pulls the wires of the wooden-headed court-puppets, defies Her silly Grace and the honest chamberlain, and is blessed by the very victims she has bespelled. That midnight incident should surely find an illustrator where the brave-hearted maiden, cross in hand, has chased the werewolf out of the church into the churchyard, and lo! at the touch of the holy symbol, the foul beast has suddenly disappeared, and there stands Sidonia trembling, with black and bloody lips, in the clear thin moonlight beside an open grave. The climax of her career is reached with the coffin-dance, when the 'devil's harlot' sang the 109th Psalm, and took her revenge while the hymn was pealing through the church above, and the plank beneath her feet quivering with the death-agony of the girl-mother who had stood her friend in the midst of her disgrace when even her own kinsfolk had cast her off.

Nor is it possible to forget Sidonia, crouching in her wretched cell in the witches' tower, with the black scorched half-roasted head and cross-bones of her miserable accomplice flung on the floor beside her; Sidonia writhing and shrieking in impotent rage and agony on the rack at Oderburg; Sidonia, perhaps even more pitiful to remember, as she curses and blasphemes in her despair over her lost beauty and ruined life, when the court painter, Mathias Eller, brings the portrait of her youth to be completed by the likeness, at sixty years' interval, of her hideous senility. Sidonia, it is always Sidonia! She haunts the mind and shakes the imagination, long after one has laid down the book that has created her. She is complete; her awful life from childhood to age one unbroken tissue of impressive wickedness, with only the gleams of courage and wit and recklessness, and instinctive loathing for pretentious folly, to lighten its dark web. Once only is she repentant; for a brief moment she pities the child she has orphaned. But her end is a relief, when, not without the kind of dignity with which Dekker or Webster can bestow upon the foulest criminal, Meinhold's fearful

fearful heroine makes her last exit. 'At length the terrible sorceress herself appears in sight, accompanied by the school, chanting the death-psalm. She wore a white robe seamed with black [the death-shift that her worst sin had brought her]. She walked barefoot, and round her head a black fillet flowered with gold, beneath which her long white hair fluttered in the wind.' So she passes to her doom.

After which, most fit and congruous is the epilogue, wherein, with true Shakesperean craft, Meinhold soothes his readers' tense nerves with soft melancholy, and shows us the faithful servant by his master's coffin in the vaults of the castle-church of Stettin on the anniversary of his burial, with the paper bearing the record of that burial in his hand. 'But my poor old Pomeranian heart could bear no more; I placed the paper again in the coffin, and, while the tears poured from my eyes as I ascended the steps, these beautiful old verses came into my head, and I could not help reciting them aloud:—

'So must human pride and state
In the grave lie desolate.
He who wore the kingly crown
With the base worm lieth down,
Ermined robe and purple pall
Leaveth he at Death's weird call.

Fleeting, cheating, human life,
Souls are perilled in thy strife;
Yet the pomps in which we trust,
All must perish!—dust to dust.
God alone will ever be;
Who serves Him reigns eternally.'

Has such weird tragedy been written in Europe since the Elizabethan stage was silenced by the Puritan, as this of Sidonia? When we compare it with Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, the Frenchman's raw colouring is almost ludicrous, and his coarse conventional scene-painting ceases to impress. Scott's *diablerie* and magic is child's play, mere gossamer, beside Meinhold's firm, strong, natural work. Marryat has produced some coarse half-wrought effects; Barham and Stevenson have done well within restrained limits; Poe is too fantastic, for all his talent; Emily Brontë had the requisite power, but hardly attained to the exquisite art. Not Michelet with the splendid glow of his romantic effects, not Flaubert for all his rich and elaborate prose, not Huysmans with his artful chameleon embroidery of phrase and shrill neurotic narrative,

narrative, have been able to attain to Meinhold's marvellous creations. Only Balzac's *Succube*, 'ceste ange froissée par des meschans hommes' —a tale (like Maria Schweidler's) of pitiful charity brutally betrayed to torture and death,—this tiny masterpiece of a great master, is fit to stand beside them. It would seem that upon this German pastor of the nineteenth century there had descended the skirt of Marlowe's mantle. He who drew the pride of Tamerlane, the ambition of Faust, the greed of Barabbas, was the true ancestor of the creator of Sidonia, and we must go back to the time of Ford to find a right parallel among English men of letters to him that portrayed the meekly borne sufferings and soft courage of the Amber Witch.

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