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Hermann Hesse

Steppenwolf

STEPPENWOLF

HERMANN HESSE

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STEPPENWOLF

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AUTHOR'S NOTE—1961

Poetic writing can be understood and misunderstood in many ways. In most cases the author is not the right authority to decide on where the reader ceases to understand and the misunderstanding begins. Many an author has found readers to whom his work seemed more lucid than it was to himself. Moreover, misunderstandings may be fruitful under certain circumstances.

Yet it seems to me that of all my books *Steppenwolf* is the one that was more often and more violently misunderstood than any other, and frequently it is actually the affirmative and enthusiastic readers, rather than those who rejected the book, who have reacted to it oddly. Partly, but only partly, this may occur so frequently by reason of the fact that this book, written when I was fifty years old and dealing, as it does, with the problems of that age, often fell into the hands of very young readers.

But among readers of my own age I also repeatedly found some who—though they were impressed by the book—strangely enough perceived only half of what I intended. These readers, it seems to me, have recognized themselves in the Steppenwolf, identified themselves with him, suffered his griefs, and dreamed his dreams; but they have overlooked the fact that this book knows of and speaks about other things besides Harry Haller and his difficulties, about a second, higher, indestructible world beyond the Steppenwolf and his problematic life. The "Treatise" and all those spots in the book dealing with matters of the spirit, of the arts and the "immortal" men oppose the Steppenwolf's world of suffering with a positive, serene, superpersonal and timeless world of faith. This book, no doubt, tells of griefs and needs; still it is not a book of a man despairing, but of a man believing.

Of course, I neither can nor intend to tell my readers how they ought to understand my tale. May everyone find in it what strikes a chord in him and is of some use to him! But I would be happy if many of them were to realize that the story of the Steppenwolf pictures a disease and crisis—but not one leading to death and destruction, on the contrary: to healing.

HERMANN HESSE

STEPPENWOLF

PREFACE

THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE RECORDS LEFT US by a man whom, according to the expression he often used himself, we called the Steppenwolf. Whether this manuscript needs any introductory remarks may be open to question. I, however, feel the need of adding a few pages to those of the Steppenwolf in which I try to record my recollections of him. What I know of him is little enough. Indeed, of his past life and origins I know nothing at all. Yet the impression left by his personality has remained, in spite of all, a deep and sympathetic one.

Some years ago the Steppenwolf, who was then approaching fifty, called on my aunt to inquire for a furnished room. He took the attic room on the top floor and the bedroom next it, returned a day or two later with two trunks and a big case of books and stayed nine or ten months with us. He lived by himself very quietly, and but for the fact that our bed-

rooms were next door to each other—which occasioned a good many chance encounters on the stairs and in the passage—we should have remained practically unacquainted. For he was not a sociable man. Indeed, he was unsociable to a degree I had never before experienced in anybody. He was, in fact, as he called himself, a real wolf of the Steppes, a strange, wild, shy—very shy—being from another world than mine. How deep the loneliness into which his life had drifted on account of his disposition and destiny and how consciously he accepted this loneliness as his destiny, I certainly did not know until I read the records he left behind him. Yet, before that, from our occasional talks and encounters, I became gradually acquainted with him, and I found that the portrait in his records was in substantial agreement with the paler and less complete one that our personal acquaintance had given me.

By chance I was there at the very moment when the Steppenwolf entered our house for the first time and became my aunt's lodger. He came at noon. The table had not been cleared and I still had half an hour before going back to the office. I have never forgotten the odd and very conflicting impressions he made on me at this first encounter. He came through the glazed door, having just rung the bell, and my aunt asked him in the dim light of the hall what he wanted. The Steppenwolf, however, first threw up his sharp, closely cropped head and sniffed around nervously before he either made any answer or announced his name.

"Oh, it smells good here," he said, and at that he smiled and my aunt smiled too. For my part, I found

this matter of introducing himself ridiculous and was not favorably impressed.

"However," said he, "I've come about the room you have to let."

I did not get a good look at him until we were all three on our way up to the top floor. Though not very big, he had the bearing of a big man. He wore a fashionable and comfortable winter overcoat and he was well, though carelessly, dressed, clean-shaven, and his cropped head showed here and there a streak of grey. He carried himself in a way I did not at all like at first. There was something weary and undecided about it that did not go with his keen and striking profile nor with the tone of his voice. Later, I found out that his health was poor and that walking tired him. With a peculiar smile—at that time equally unpleasant to me—he contemplated the stairs, the walls, and windows, and the tall old cupboards on the staircase. All this seemed to please and at the same time to amuse him. Altogether he gave the impression of having come out of an alien world, from another continent perhaps. He found it all very charming and a little odd. I cannot deny that he was polite, even friendly. He agreed at once and without objection to the terms for lodging and breakfast and so forth, and yet about the whole man there was a foreign and, as I chose to think, disagreeable or hostile atmosphere. He took the room and the bedroom too, listened attentively and amiably to all he was told about the heating, the water, the service and the rules of the household, agreed to everything, offered at once to pay a sum in advance—and yet he seemed at the same time to be outside it all, to find it comic to be doing as he

did and not to take it seriously. It was as though it were a very odd and new experience for him, occupied as he was with quite other concerns, to be renting a room and talking to people in German. Such more or less was my impression, and it would certainly not have been a good one if it had not been revised and corrected by many small instances. Above all, his face pleased me from the first, in spite of the foreign air it had. It was a rather original face and perhaps a sad one, but alert, thoughtful, strongly marked and highly intellectual. And then, to reconcile me further, there was his polite and friendly manner, which though it seemed to cost him some pains, was all the same quite without pretension; on the contrary, there was something almost touching, imploring in it. The explanation of it I found later, but it disposed me at once in his favor.

Before we had done inspecting the rooms and going into the arrangements, my luncheon hour was up and I had to go back to business. I took my leave and left him to my aunt. When I got back at night, she told me that he had taken the rooms and was coming in in a day or two. The only request he had made was that his arrival should not be notified to the police, as in his poor state of health he found these formalities and the standing about in official waiting rooms more than he could tolerate. I remember very well how this surprised me and how I warned my aunt against giving in to his stipulation. This fear of the police seemed to me to agree only too well with the mysterious and alien air the man had and struck me as suspicious. I explained to my aunt that she ought not on any account to put herself in this equivocal and in any case

rather peculiar position for a complete stranger; it might well turn out to have very unpleasant consequences for her. But it then came out that my aunt had already granted his request, and, indeed, had let herself be altogether captivated and charmed by the strange gentleman. For she never took a lodger with whom she did not contrive to stand in some human, friendly, and as it were auntlike or, rather, motherly relation; and many a one has made full use of this weakness of hers. And thus for the first weeks things went on; I had many a fault to find with the new lodger, while my aunt every time warmly took his part.

As I was not at all pleased about this business of neglecting to notify the police, I wanted at least to know what my aunt had learnt about him; what sort of family he came of and what his intentions were. And, of course, she had learnt one thing and another, although he had only stayed a short while after I left at noon. He had told her that he thought of spending some months in our town to avail himself of the libraries and to see its antiquities. I may say it did not please my aunt that he was only taking the rooms for so short a time, but he had clearly quite won her heart in spite of his rather peculiar way of presenting himself. In short, the rooms were let and my objections came too late.

"Why on earth did he say that it smelt so good here?" I asked.

"I know well enough," she replied, with her usual insight. "There's a smell of cleanliness and good order here, of comfort and respectability. It was that that pleased him. He looks as if he weren't used to that of late and missed it."

Just so, thought I to myself.

"But," I said aloud, "if he isn't used to an orderly and respectable life, what is going to happen? What will you say if he has filthy habits and makes dirt everywhere, or comes home drunk at all hours of the night?"

"We shall see, we shall see," she said, and laughed; and I left it at that.

And in the upshot my fears proved groundless. The lodger, though he certainly did not live a very orderly or rational life, was no worry or trouble to us. Yet my aunt and I bothered our heads a lot about him, and I confess I have not by a long way done with him even now. I often dream of him at night, and the mere existence of such a man, much as I got to like him, has had a thoroughly disturbing and disquieting effect on me.

Two days after this the stranger's luggage—his name was Harry Haller—was brought in by a porter. He had a very fine leather trunk, which made a good impression on me, and a big flat cabin trunk that showed signs of having traveled far—at least it was plastered with labels of hotels and travel agencies of various countries, some overseas.

Then he himself appeared, and the time began during which I gradually got acquainted with this strange man. At first I did nothing on my side to encourage it. Although Haller interested me from the moment I saw him, I took no steps for the first two or three weeks to run across him or to get into conversation with him. On the other hand I confess that I did, all the same and from the very first, keep him under observation a little, and also went into his room

now and again when he was out and my curiosity drove me to do a little spy work.

I have already given some account of the Steppenwolf's outward appearance. He gave at the very first glance the impression of a significant, an uncommon, and unusually gifted man. His face was intellectual, and the abnormally delicate and mobile play of his features reflected a soul of extremely emotional and unusually delicate sensibility. When one spoke to him and he, as was not always the case, dropped conventionalities and said personal and individual things that came out of his own alien world, then a man like myself came under his spell on the spot. He had thought more than other men, and in matters of the intellect he had that calm objectivity, that certainty of thought and knowledge, such as only really intellectual men have, who have no axe to grind, who never wish to shine, or to talk others down, or to appear always in the right.

I remember an instance of this in the last days he was here, if I can call a mere fleeting glance he gave me an example of what I mean. It was when a celebrated historian, philosopher, and critic, a man of European fame, had announced a lecture in the school auditorium. I had succeeded in persuading the Steppenwolf to attend it, though at first he had little desire to do so. We went together and sat next to each other in the lecture hall. When the lecturer ascended the platform and began his address, many of his hearers, who had expected a sort of prophet, were disappointed by his rather dapper appearance and conceited air. And when he proceeded, by way of introduction, to say a few flattering things to the audience, thanking them for their attendance in such numbers, the Steppenwolf threw me a quick look, a look which

criticized both the words and the speaker of them—an unforgettable and frightful look which spoke volumes! It was a look that did not simply criticize the lecturer, annihilating the famous man with its delicate but crushing irony. That was the least of it. It was more sad than ironical; it was indeed utterly and hopelessly sad; it conveyed a quiet despair, born partly of conviction, partly of a mode of thought which had become habitual with him. This despair of his not only unmasked the conceited lecturer and dismissed with its irony the matter at hand, the expectant attitude of the public, the somewhat presumptuous title under which the lecture was announced—no, the Steppenwolf's look pierced our whole epoch, its whole overwrought activity, the whole surge and strife, the whole vanity, the whole superficial play of a shallow, opinionated intellectuality. And alas! the look went still deeper, went far below the faults, defects and hopelessness of our time, our intellect, our culture alone. It went right to the heart of all humanity, it bespoke eloquently in a single second the whole despair of a thinker, of one who knew the full worth and meaning of man's life. It said: "See what monkeys we are! Look, such is man!" and at once all renown, all intelligence, all the attainments of the spirit, all progress towards the sublime, the great and the enduring in man fell away and became a monkey's trick!

With this I have gone far ahead and, contrary to my actual plan and intention, already conveyed what Haller essentially meant to me; whereas my original aim was to uncover his picture by degrees while telling the course of my gradual acquaintance with him.

Now that I have gone so far ahead it will save time

to say a little more about Haller's puzzling "strangeness" and to tell in detail how I gradually guessed and became aware of the causes and meaning of this strangeness, this extraordinary and frightful loneliness. It will be better so, for I wish to leave my own personality as far as possible in the background. I do not want to put down my own confessions, to tell a story or to write an essay on psychology, but simply as an eyewitness to contribute something to the picture of the peculiar individual who left this Steppenwolf manuscript behind him.

At the very first sight of him, when he came into my aunt's home, craning his head like a bird and praising the smell of the house, I was at once astonished by something curious about him; and my first natural reaction was repugnance. I suspected (and my aunt, who unlike me is the very reverse of an intellectual person, suspected very much the same thing)—I suspected that the man was ailing, ailing in the spirit in some way, or in his temperament or character, and I shrank from him with the instinct of the healthy. This shrinking was in course of time replaced by a sympathy inspired by pity for one who had suffered so long and deeply, and whose loneliness and inward death I witnessed. In course of time I was more and more conscious, too, that this affliction was not due to any defects of nature, but rather to a profusion of gifts and powers which had not attained to harmony. I saw that Haller was a genius of suffering and that in the meaning of many sayings of Nietzsche he had created within himself with positive genius a boundless and frightful capacity for pain. I saw at the same time that the root of his pessimism was not world-contempt but self-contempt; for however merci-

lessly he might annihilate institutions and persons in his talk he never spared himself. It was always at himself first and foremost that he aimed the shaft, himself first and foremost whom he hated and despised.

And here I cannot refrain from a psychological observation. Although I know very little of the Steppenwolf's life, I have all the same good reason to suppose that he was brought up by devoted but severe and very pious parents and teachers in accordance with that doctrine that makes the breaking of the will the corner-stone of education and upbringing. But in this case the attempt to destroy the personality and to break the will did not succeed. He was much too strong and hardy, too proud and spirited. Instead of destroying his personality they succeeded only in teaching him to hate himself. It was against himself that, innocent and noble as he was, he directed during his whole life the whole wealth of his fancy, the whole of his thought; and in so far as he let loose upon himself every barbed criticism, every anger and hate he could command, he was, in spite of all, a real Christian and a real martyr. As for others and the world around him he never ceased in his heroic and earnest endeavor to love them, to be just to them, to do them no harm, for the love of his neighbor was as deeply in him as the hatred of himself, and so his whole life was an example that love of one's neighbor is not possible without love of oneself, and that self-hate is really the same thing as sheer egoism, and in the long run breeds the same cruel isolation and despair.

It is now time, however, to put my own thoughts aside and to get to facts. What I first discovered about Haller, partly through my espionage, partly