DEMI AN

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HERMANN

HESSE

DEMIAN

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Translated by W. J. Strachan

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Prologue

I cannot tell my story without going a long way back.

If it were possible I would go back much farther still to

the very earliest years of my childhood and beyond them

to my family origins.

When poets write novels they are apt to behave as if

they were gods, with the power to look beyond and com-

prehend any human story and serve it up as if the

Almighty himself, omnipresent, were relating it in all

its naked truth. That I am no more able to do than the

poets. But my story is more important to me than any

poet’s story to him, for it is my own — and it is the story

of a human being — not an invented, idealised person

but a real, live, unique being. What constitutes a real,

live human being is more of a mystery than ever these

days, and men — each one of whom is a valuable, unique

experiment on the part of nature — are shot down whole-

sale. If, however, we were not something more than

unique human beings and each man jack of us could

really be dismissed from this world with a bullet, there

would be no more point in relating stories at all. But

evcpy man is not only himself; he is also the unique,

particular, always significant and remarkable point

where the phenomena of the world intersect once and

for all and never again. That is why every man’s story

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is important, eternal, sacred; and why every man while

he lives and fulfils the will of nature is a wonderful

creature, deserving the utmost attention. In each indi-

vidual the spirit is made -flesh, in each one the whole of

creation suffers, in each one a Saviour is crucified.

Few people nowadays know what man is. Many feel it

intuitively and die more easily for that reason, just as I

shall die more easily when I have completed this story.

I cannot call myself a scholar. I have always been and

still am a seeker but I no longer do my seeking among

the stars or in books. I am beginning to hear the lessons

which whisper in my blood. Mine is not a pleasant story,

it does not possess the gentle harmony of invented tales;

like the lives of all men who have given up trying to

deceive themselves, it is a mixture of nonsense and

chaos, madness and dreams.

The life of every man is a way to himself, an attempt

at a way, the suggestion of a path. No man has ever

been utterly himself, yet every man strives to be so, the

dull, the intelligent, each one as best he can. Each man

to the end of his days carries round with him vestiges

of his birth — the slime and egg-shells of the primeval

world. There are many who never become human; they

remain frogs, lizards, ants. Many men are human beings

above and fish below. Yet each one represents an attempt

on the part of nature to create a human being. We

enjoy a common origin in our mothers; we all come

from the same pit. But each individual, who is himself

an experimental throw from the depths, strives towards

his own goal. We can understand each other; but each

person is able to interpret himself to himself alone.

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I

Two Worlds

I begin my story with an event from the time when I

was ten years old, attending the local grammar school

in our small country town.

I can still catch the fragrance of many things which

stir me with feelings of melancholy and send delicious

shivers of delight through me — dark and sunlit streets,

houses and towers, clock chimes and people’s faces, rooms

full of comfort and warm hospitality, rooms full of

secret and profound, ghostly fears. It is a world that

savours of warm corners, rabbits, servant girls, household

remedies and dried fruit. It was the meeting-place of two

worlds; day and night came thither from two opposite

poles.

There was the world of my parents' house, or rather it

was even more circumscribed and embraced only my

parents themselves. This world was familiar to me in

almost every aspect — it meant mother and father, love

and severity, model behaviour and school. It was a world

of quiet brilliance, clarity and cleanliness; in it gentle

and friendly conversation, washed hands, clean clothes

and good manners were the order of the day. In this

world the morning hymn was sung, Christmas celebrated.

Through it ran straight lines and paths that led into the

future; here were duty and guilt, bad conscience and

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confessions, forgiveness and good resolutions, love and

reverence, wisdom and Bible readings. In this world you

had to conduct yourself so that life should be pure,

unsullied, beautiful and Well-ordered.

The other world, however, also began in the middle

of our own house and was completely different; it smelt

different, spoke a different language, made different

claims and promises. This second world was peopled

with servant girls and workmen, ghost stories and scan-

dalous rumours, a gay tide of monstrous, intriguing,

frightful, mysterious things; it included the slaughter-

house and the prison, drunken and scolding women,

cows in labour, foundered horses, tales of housebreaking,

murder and suicide. All these attractive and hideous,

wild and cruel things were on every side, in the next

street, the neighbouring house. Policemen and tramps

moved about in it, drunkards beat their wives, bunches

of young women poured out of the factories in the even-

ing, old women could put a spell on you and make you

ill; thieves lived in the wood; incendiaries were caught

by mounted gendarmes. Everywhere you could smell this

vigorous, second world — everywhere, that is, except in

our house where my mother and father lived. There it

was all goodness. It was wonderful to be living in a

house in a reign of peace, order, tranquillity, duty and

good conscience, forgiveness and love — but it was no less

wonderful to know there was the other, the loud and

shrill, sullen and violent world from which you could

dart back to your mother in one leap.

The odd thing about it was that these worlds should

border on each other so closely. When, for example, our

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servant Lina sat by the door in the living-room at even-

ing prayers and joined in the hymn in her dear voice,

her freshly washed hands folded on her smoothed down

pinafore, she belonged wholly and utterly to mother

and father, to us, the world of light and righteousness.

But when in the kitchen or woodshed immediately after-

wards she told me the story of the little headless man or

started bickering with her neighbours in the little

butcher’s shop, she became a different person, belonged

to another world and was veiled in mystery. And it was

the same with everybody, most of all with myself. Doubt-

less I was part of the world of light and righteousness

as the child of my parents, but wherever I listened or

directed my gaze I found the other thing and I lived

half in the other world, although it was often strangely

alien to me and I inevitably suffered from panic and a

bad conscience. Indeed at times I preferred life in the

forbidden world and my return to the world of light —

necessary and worthy though it might be — was often

almost like a return something less attractive, some-

thing both more drab and tedious. I was often conscious

that my destiny in life was to become like my father

and mother; pure, righteous and disciplined; but that

was a long way ahead; first one had to sit studying at

school, do tests and examinations, and the way always

led through and past the other, dark world and it was

not impossible that one might remain permanently in

it. I had read, with passionate interest, stories of prodigal

sons to whom this had happened. There was always the

return to their father and the path of righteousness that

was so fine and redeeming that I felt convinced that this

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alone was the right, good, worthy thing; and yet I found

the part of the story which was played among the wicked

and lost souls far more, alluring. \*If it had been per-

missible to speak out and confess, I should have admitted

that it often seemed a shame to me that the Prodigal

Son should atone and be ‘found’ again — though this

feeling was only vaguely present deep down within me

like a presentiment or possibility. When I pictured the

devil to myself, I found no difficulty in visualizing him

in the street below, disguised or undisguised, or at the

fair or in a tavern but never at home.

My sisters belonged likewise to the world of light. It

often seemed to me that they were closer in temperament

to father and mother, better and more refined and with

fewer faults than I. Of course they had their defects and

their vagaries but these did not appear to me to go very

deep. It was not as with me whose contact with evil

could become so oppressive and painful and to whom

the dark world lay so much closer. My sisters, like my

parents, were to be spared and respected, and if one

quarrelled with them one always felt in the wrong after-

wards; as if one were the instigator, who must crave

forgiveness. For in offending my sisters, I was offending

my parents, which made me guilty of a breach of good

conduct. There were secrets that I would have been less

reluctant to tell the most reprobate street urchin than

my sisters. On good days when everything seemed light

and my conscience in good order, I enjoyed playing

with them, being good and kind to them and seeing

myself sharing their aura of nobility. It was like a fore-

taste of being an angel I That was the highest thing we

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could conceive of and we thought it would be sweet

and wonderful to be angels, surrounded with sweet

music and fragrance reminiscent of Christmas and happi-

ness. How rarely did such hours and days come along!

I would often be engaged in some harmless and author-

ized game which became too exciting and vigorous for

my sisters and led to squabbles and misery, and when I

lost my temper I was terrible and did and said things

that seemed so depraved to me that they seared my heart

even as I was in the act of doing and saying them. These

occasions were followed by gloomy hours of sorrow and

penitence and the painful moment when I begged for-

giveness and then, once again, a beam of light, a tran-

quil, grateful unclouded goodness for hours — or mom-

ents as the case might be.

I attended the local grammar school. The mayor’s

son and the head forester’s son were in my class and

sometimes joined me. They were wild fellows, yet they

belonged to the ‘respectable’ world. But I also had dose

relations with neighbours’ sons, village lads on whom

we normally looked down. It is with one of these that

my story begins

One half-holiday — I was little more than ten years old

— I was playing around with two boys from the neigh-

bourhood. A bigger boy joined us, a rough, burly lad of

about thirteen from the village school, the tailor’s son.

His father drank, and the whole family had a bad name.

I knew Franz Kromer well, and went about in fear of

him so that I felt very uneasy when he came along. He

had already acquired grown-up ways and imitated the

walk and speech of the young factory workers. With him

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as ringleader we climbed down the river bank near the

bridge and hid ourselves away from the world under the

first arch. The narrow strip between the vaulted bridge

and the lazily flowing river consisted of nothing but

general rubbish and broken pots, tangles of rusty barbed

wire and similar jetsam. Occasionally we came across

things we could make use of. We had to comb these

stretches of bank under Franz Kromer’s orders and show

him our discoveries. These he either kept himself or

threw into the water. We were told to notice whether

there were any items made of lead, brass or tin He

retained these together with an old comb made of horn.

I was very uncomfortable in his presence, not because I

knew my father would forbid this relationship but out

of fear of Franz himself, but I was grateful for being

included, and treated like the others. He gave the orders

and we obeyed as if it was an old custom, although it

was my first time.

At length we sat down on the ground; Franz spat into

the water and looked like a grown-up; he spat through a

gap between his teeth and scored a hit wherever he

aimed. A conversation started and the boys boasted

about their grand deeds and beastly tricks. I remained

silent and yet feared to offend by my silence and incur

Kromer’s wrath. Both my comrades had made up to

him, and avoided me from the start. I was a stranger

among them and felt that my clothes and manners were

taken as a kind of challenge. Franz could not possibly

have any love for me, a grammar schoor boy and a

gentleman’s son and I was in no doubt that the other

two, if it came to it, would disown and desert me.

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Finally, out of sheer nervousness, I began to talk. I

invented a long story of robbery, in which I featured as

the hero. One night in the corner by the mill a friend

and I had stolen a whole sackful of apples, not just

ordinary apples but pippins, golden pippins of the best

kind at that. I was taking refuge in my story from the

dangers of the moment and found no difficulty in invent-

ing and relating it. In order not to dry up too soon and

perhaps become involved in something worse, I gave full

rein to my narrative powers. One of us, I reported, had

always stood guard while the other sat in the tree and

chucked the apples down, and the sack had got so heavy

that in the end we had to open it and leave half behind,

but we came back half an hour later and fetched them

too.

I hoped for some applause at the end of my story; I

had warmed up to the narrative at last, carried away by

my own eloquence. The two smaller boys were silent,

waiting, but Franz Kromer gave me a penetrating look

through his narrowH. eyes. "Is that yarn true?” he

asked in a menacing tone.

"Yes,” I said.

"Really and truly?”

“Yes, really and truly,” I asserted defiantly while I

choked inwardly with fear.

"Can you swear to it?”

I was very afraid but I said ‘Yes’ without hesitation.

"Hand on your heart?”

"Hand on my heart;”

"Right then,” he said and turned away.

I thought this was all very satisfactory and I was glad

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when he got up and turned to go home. When we were

on the bridge I ventured timidly that I must go home.

"No desperate hurry/’ Franz laughed. "We go the

same way."

He sauntered along slowly and I did not dare to go

.ahead, but he was in fact going in the direction of our

house. When we arrived, and I saw our front door and

the fat doorknocker, the sun in the windows and the

curtains in my mother’s room, I breathed a sigh of

relief. Back home I O good, blessed home-coming back

to the world of light and peace I

When I had quickly opened the door and slipped in

ready to slam it behind me, Franz Kromer edged in too.

In the cool, gloomy paved passage which was lit solely

from the courtyard he stood close to me and said in a

low voice, "No hurry, you I ”

I looked at him terrified. His grip on my arm was

like a vice. I tried to guess what was going on in his

mind and whether he was going to do me some mischief.

If I were to let out a loud and vigorous shriek would

some one above be quick enough to save me? But I

gave up the idea.

“What is it?” I asked, “what do you want?”

"Oh nothing much, I merely wanted to ask you some-

thing. The others needn’t hear.”

"Well? What do you want me to tell you? I must go

up, you know.”

“I suppose you know who owns the orchard by the

corner mill?”

"No, I don’t. The miller I think.”

Franz had put his arm round me and drawn me close