

## GOTTFRIED KELLER AND HIS LATEST NOVEL.\*

GOTTFRIED KELLER had the rare lot of being made known abroad through the French. The *Revue des Deux Mondes* introduced him to its readers as the single example in Germany of a writer of novels of society. This was after Gustav Freytag had gone over to the ranks of historical essayists, instead of continuing in the line marked out by *Debit and Credit*. German fiction, in spite of its increasing bulk, was showing a yearly diminution of talents at work in realistic fields. The writing of historical romances, that began with the *Waverley Novels*, received a new impetus from the military successes of the wars of 1866 and 1870, and the national demand for further self-congratulation was supplied by the imitations of the Brandenburg romances of Wilibald Alexis, by the ancient German romances of Dr. Felix Dahn, and the mediæval romances of Julius Wolff. Even Georg Ebers left Egypt to depict a homely native town, while Fredrich Spielhagen gave up social problems for the nonce, to exhibit the superiority of German colonists in the

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\* Martin Salander. Gebr. Paetel, Berlin, 1889.

early days of New York (in *Die Deutsche Pioniere*). Paul Heyse stood almost alone, like Goethe in the Napoleonic wars, upon the neutral ground of pure poetry; not unmindful, perhaps, of the disturbances that were going on in geographical boundaries, but persistent in keeping the current of his creative thought from being engulfed in the ephemeral maelstrom of diplomatic and popular politics. Heyse's novels, however, have a bias of their own. They are not drawn from general social life, but from the life of artistic circles. His hobby is the superiority of the "genial" folk of the brush and pen over the conventional world of moralists; this hobby he is wont to mount in forming the plan of any of his longer works.

The verdict of the author of the article in the *Revue* was hardly exaggerated. A little later there appeared the realistic school of South German writers; but at the date of the review, Gottfried Keller was, in fact, almost alone in his devotion to common life and in his method of depicting it without partisan or moral aim. His earliest work was autobiographical, but not all the details of *Green Henry* are from real life. Keller had a sister who supplied the place taken in the book by Henry's mother, but the consumptive country-gentleman's daughter whom Green Henry loves had no existence save in the romances which Keller read as a boy. The minor details of both these characters, however, such as the frugal disposition of Henry's mother and the chaste delicacy of Anne, together with innumerable other deliciously portrayed traits, were drawn from his sister and from his actual first love. Judith, a figure as glowing as Hawthorne's Zenobia, and even healthier, is also a portrait from life. Keller, like his Green Henry, actually began, and followed for a long number of youthful years, the career of an artist, traveling, as Henry describes himself as traveling, from Switzerland, over the Rhine, and settling down at last in Munich.

*Green Henry* and a volume of poems remained together for a long time as the precious twins of his muse; they were a solitary pair in the busy book market of the world. *Zurich Novelettes* took better with the public, owing to the circumstance, perhaps, that one of them was quite historical. *The Seven Legends* made up a thin volume; but the *People of Seldwyla*, which appeared next, was a large collection of stories longer and shorter, with rude Swiss villagers for the personages. One of the tales, "A Rustic Romeo and Juliet," made the fortune of the whole collection; it was hailed throughout Germany as an inimitably powerful piece of work. A second volume of *Poems* and *Das Sinn Gedicht* came next, and finally the latest novel, *Martin Salander*, which first appeared as a serial in the *Deutsche Rundschau*.

It will be at once remarked that the productions of the poet are very few in number. An ordinary writer, even one of great talent with skillful publishers, could hardly keep his name before the public with such a scant supply of books, spread as these have been over a whole generation. But Gottfried Keller has no ordinary talent. His genius, on the contrary, is perhaps the most genuine in contemporary Germany. My space is too limited for the full characterization which the American unacquaintance with it seems to require. But the fact must be noticed of the great difference between this latest volume and the author's preceding works, a difference that includes the conception, the treatment, and the composition. *Green Henry* is clumsy in composition, full as it is of incomparably clear poetic pictures, both in its first edition, where the biography is put forth as a tale, and in the second, where it appears as a confession. Over forty pages are given, in the second part, to a description of a fancy ball, and several scores of pages to scientific discussions of nearly every kind. Similar inconsequences recur on a smaller scale in the *Zurich Novelettes*; while *Das Sinn Gedicht* is a veritable laughing to scorn of all the common practices of modern composition. Three chapters only of the book have a close connection with one another, and these are the earliest and the last: the intervening chapters are separate tales told by the personages of the *Gedicht* as in the *Decamerone* of Boccaccio.

*Martin Salander*, in contrast to the earlier works, is strictly coherent and devoid of extraneous episodes. The novel, in fact, is one of the very few perfectly simple and congruous compositions in German literature. The plot, which has no more exciting incident than the arrest of the son-in-law of the hero for forgery, is carried forward by conversations of a domestic, inconsequential kind with a mastery unknown to German writers except of the most recent school. There is plenty of humor, moreover, to give the last touch of easy lightness. The book is a reminder throughout of "art for art's sake;" it has certainly less substance and more literary polish than are often seen in a great German novel.

The phenomenon has naturally aroused considerable comment in the press. Keller's genius has long been supposed to labor helplessly under a surplus of inspirations. The slowness with which he publishes was taken as a proof of the painfulness of the struggle to attain succinctness. The question rises how this was done with such a sudden mastery. Paul Heyse put it to me upon my return from Zurich in the spring, where I had seen the poet. He knew that *Salander* is not so recent in date as the public take the work to be. It lay, as all Keller's manuscripts are wont to lie, a long period of time shut up in his desk. I could only say that, being ill and feeble, the doctor

has read much in politics and French literature, and if one can suppose that these inspired the subject and the style of composition of the book, the finish of the conversational parts may be due to the prolonged revision which he was meanwhile giving to one of his early comedies. *Martin Salander* is probably Keller's last novel.

COUNTESS V. KROCKOW.