

A VAIN SEARCH FOR GOD.

BY HERMANN BALZ.

I HAD LOST SIGHT of my school comrade a long, long time. We called him Satan on account of his Mephistophelian face, and he was proud of the name. He was a Jew, very slender, with olive complexion and dark, restless eyes. He was the youngest of us all, only twelve years, and we ridiculed him, but his absence would have been felt. His talents were not very deep, though he was a good scholar. But his mind had an uncommon agility. He had always a new idea, the winds from the four quarters filled his hand with the seeds of exotic trees of life, and he distributed them freely, for he himself had no use for them; all he could do was to grind them for their oil. He never thought to plant them and gather the harvest.

We were a gang of a dozen boys, between twelve and fifteen years, in our little German town, ambitious and full of idealism. The word philosophy electrified us, and when some mysterious expression from Schelling or Hegel fell amongst us, from all kinds of out-of-the-way-books which our curiosity had discovered, we debated on its meaning with youthful earnestness, revolving it in our heads during the night and reappearing with new explanations in the morning. There were no general meetings, but what was said between two and three made its way to the rest.

We did not return much wiser from these excursions into dark regions. But if we were poor philosophers, we were poets, or had at least the poetic enthusiasm. The world was for us a book of rhyme and rhythms. Our small weekly allowance of pocket-money, varying between five and ten cents, went all to the book-sellers, and each of us had his own province: the one possessed a collection of old German epics, another cultivated the eighteenth century, a third had got hold already of political satire. He was the

pike in our peaceful carp-pond, a sceptic in whom nothing was genuine but his liberalism and who wielded his sarcastic poetry, in imitation of his models, against us all.

Our friend the Jew—we scarcely allowed him the title, though he certainly deserved it—always busy with new devices and harmless machinations, was the first who started a journal, the *Lantern*, published once a week and copied by himself in his beautiful artistic handwriting. He wrote the editorial himself, verbose and with all stylistic embellishments, as a true son of his race. The rest of the paper was anecdotes and poetry taken from printed books, as he seldom had contributions from one of us.

But he had roused our ambition. And soon my intimate friend Robert and I opposed him by a rival publication. This was not an unfair action in itself: our intention was to carry out what he had only attempted, to fill the pages entirely with the products of our own imagination. Robert, who was thirteen years old, put in a long-winded novel of old Greek life, "Mnesikles." I perfectly remember the opening of the tale: a stranger, "we will call him Mnesikles," in the streets of Athens asking for the house of his friend and immediately falling into a political dispute about King Philip of Macedon. Robert was a genius of learning and noble-hearted, with his fresh round cheeks the joy of his teachers and the pride of me, his best friend, for many aspired to his intimacy. I had the lyric and dramatic department of our paper, to which after long deliberation we had given the name of *Peira* (experiment, attempt). Of course my great tragedy was from the Old Testament, and I dressed it like a big turkey with the fine herbs and more substantial chestnuts of juvenile aphorisms.

Nathaniel, the young Jew, did the writing for us, two copies which went from hand to hand among the subscribers who paid a dime a month. I am ashamed to say we did not pay Nathaniel for the pains he took, thinking him amply remunerated by the opportunity to read what he transcribed. He never complained and indeed wrote our numbers as nicely as his own, every single letter was a work of art done with the love of the artist. He did not even show indignation or heartache when we openly attacked his periodical in our columns. Whatever may have passed through his young and valiant heart,—when he delivered the copies, the words of mockery that caused him pain stood as firm and erect as ever on their little feet without a quiver in their fragile bodies.

He was a man, that boy of twelve, taking up the sad conditions of life in his helpless isolation; always gentle, never a tear.

And we thought he lacked the sense of honor, accepting without outward show of mortification whatever we threw on him. How sorry I am for our rudeness; it was nature's cruelty working in us, as it works in children, women, and love.

Our enterprise met with full success for a year, when I left our club, with its unwritten rules of friendly commerce, for another town, and the *Peira* ceased to appear. After I had been away another year, a letter from Nathaniel reached me: he addressed me as "Dear Sir" and told me a new literary paper was to be started under his direction, and that his standard for excellence was the *Peira*, still unrivalled in spite of all new attempts. "I want to make sure of your assistance," he continued, "the assistance of the greatest lyric genius of our time. If you will kindly add the strength of your name to the efforts of my feeble hand, I shall easily triumph over all the intrigues that are lying in my way with treacherous traps."

The compliments were absurd; if ever I felt elated over them, it is hard punishment I mete out for myself in publishing them now. But whence had the little man his phrases? I could not help admiring his business-like letter.

I am not proof against flattery, though it has always given me a kind of physical pain; besides, he had hit on the right time, for I was just in my first great love and had a regular lyric cold, the verses dropping from me through the channels of my brain with the certainty of water drops that fall from an icicle melting in spring. Nevertheless, I declined and am very much afraid I did so in the haughty language of the boy of sixteen who has already seen his little things printed in an obscure family-review.

Soon after I heard Nathaniel had gone to America. There were some letters to our mutual friend Robert from him, one of them stating that he was now on a newspaper. He may have been seventeen then, but his prematureness, his facility to adapt himself to any form required in literary routine work seemed to guarantee his future, and none of us who had been his school-fellows tortured himself with heavy reflections when he stopped writing. Thus I lost sight of Nathaniel. The rest of us held together in true friendship through the years of university-life and of our entrance into the world of fact and money. Youthful friendships endure longest, because they are formed at a time when the character is pure and uncorrupted. When later on time and human intercourse and the struggle for life have impaired the character, the old friend of early days still recognises in all its features the

portrait of juvenile beauty, even if it exists only in very slight traces. But whoever makes a new acquaintance in maturer years takes a character as it presents itself, unable to find out its once ideal sides.

* * *

Twelve years have passed. We have all awakened from our dreams and aspirations, only to see that no change is possible in the substance of our nature, that we cannot add, by our will, to our intelligence. To youth it appears as if the mental and the moral side of the mind are independent of each other; therefore, when young, we are so exacting with regard to moral conduct and men are judged as either good or bad. Little by little we apprehend by our own experience how closely all the human faculties are intertwined. How willingly we would be good, supremely good, as we cannot be great! And it is easy to follow our character where it is good in itself; we are generous, if it is in our nature, courageous if we are born so. But beyond our inborn virtues, how can we achieve perfection without a great, an all-comprising intelligence? It fills us with a wild stupor when first we realise that our errors, our faults, our vices come not so much from the heart as from weakness of mind. We read, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak": Ah, how often it is just the contrary, flesh and feeling are misled by an erring spirit!

It is nature's fault that endowed us so purely, when mankind will not advance in its morality and happiness.

Twelve years had passed. I had recently come over from Europe to make a study of American journalism and had a busy time reading the newspapers, taking notes, and interviewing editors and reporters. One day, loitering through the streets of one of those young cities which have sprung into existence like Pallas Athena, in full armor, and ring with the clangor of a great battlefield, my eyes fell on the sign-board of a German gazette office. As I had read, the night before, some copies of the paper, a socialistic one, I entered the house, and having mounted a flight of dark, narrow stairs, I stepped into the editor's room. An ungenial aspect is common to all the ilk, but here an atmosphere of barrenness hung thickly around every object. In the corner by the door, on a dusty pile of newspapers, a strong-looking negro sat, chewing tobacco, and dozing away his time. When he lazily turned his reclining head toward me his black, dilated nostrils faced me like the muzzles of a double-barrelled gun.

Near the window, with his eyes on the door, stood the editor

behind a desk, an elderly man with grizzled beard. He wore a wide surtout but no coat under it. When I advanced he looked sternly on me, nor did his face grow more friendly when I stated my business. So, to win his favor, I told him I had read with great sympathy his noble appeal to his adherents that whatever party we follow we must do so in the spirit of universality, mindful of the precept to be the salt of the earth.

His eyes lightened and he offered me a seat. I was not long in recognising his intelligence as he began to speak. But when I looked on the poor surroundings and thought of the small influence which the man's work to all appearance had, I again felt the sadness of my old theory that the world is spared no stupidity whilst half of its talents are thrown away and wasted.

When the conversation had gone on for about an hour, it stopped for a moment. "You have a collaborator," I said to fill the pause, and pointed to another desk opposite his own.

The editor looked up. "Poor Nathaniel," he sighed and became silent again. "By the bye," he suddenly exclaimed, "he was from your province, as your dialect shows, from the south—a Jew and a gentle soul," he added pensively.

"You do not say Nathaniel L——?" I cried out.

"And didn't you say your name was Frank?" he began again without answering me. "Of course you did, you are Frank, his friend of boyhood days."

And he drew his chair closer and looked gravely but not without kindness in my face.

"What is all this?" I exclaimed, "how do you know me and what is the meaning of your seriousness?"

He pushed his chair back again and gave no answer.

"Nathaniel was taken to the insane asylum five months ago," he said at last.

There was a long silence between us. "Tell me more about it," I said at the end.

"Alas," he replied, "it brings back to me all the anguish I felt when I saw it nearing. He had become my friend since he came here, four years ago. I am an old bachelor, but then I had a feeling as if I had been married and as if the memory of my dead wife was hovering about him. He seemed related to me through an unknown person whom I might have loved and lost.

"He had been our correspondent before the paper engaged him," the man continued. "His articles had a peculiar charm besides their easy flow; not so very deep, but effusions of an open

heart, a childlike soul. They fully expressed our theories, which he had studied apparently with zeal, but his delicate fingers took out the stings that are the necessary weapon of any political party. At first I grumbled, I wanted more trenchant firmness and I sharpened his letters with a pungency of my own.

“He never complained of it. But as soon as he joined the Gazette definitively and began to work with me in the office, I came under his influence, though he was all submissive gentleness. On the second day I caught myself in the act of secretly observing him with sympathy, as he stood composing behind his desk, closely bent down to his paper to assure, as it were, the words that parted from his pen that his soul was still near them. Sometimes he looked at me with a wondering eye as I watched him, unaware in his modesty of the pleasure he afforded me.

“That day I felt it impossible to spoil his work by my stronger conceptions, and indeed henceforward I never did.

“We had not yet spoken of many things besides our business, when after a few weeks, I asked him how he had become a socialist.

“‘I was in search of God,’ he answered. ‘I have always searched the world for God, though I scarcely knew it. In the child it was curiosity but without a way, in the boy it became ambition but still without direction. But when I saw that I did not even win the hearts of my friends, I felt lonely. In that feeling I learned to understand my curiosity, my ambition, myself. For my loneliness was not so much the feeling of being excluded from access to the hearts of my friends, but something different: I could not help acknowledging their superiority, and when I thought why this was so, I could find no other explanation but that it came from God, that it was He who preferred them to me and had endowed them better. I felt neglected by God, therefore I bore their behavior towards me, for being with them seemed to bring me nearer to God Himself.

“‘I have never known what it means to converse with God personally, but only through His works, Nature or man, and yet it was He whom I began to seek, His own person, not His manifestations. When I came to America I was full of hope. Here, I thought, where nothing checks the greatest aspirations, I must find Him. Must not hearts beat higher in the land of the free and be more ready to show human sympathy as a gift from God and His love and kindness? Do they not call it God’s own country?’”

“As he spoke, Nathaniel seemed to read his words somewhere

outside of himself. His eyes were far open, as when we see something strange which the eye of the soul however recognises as a thing familiar to its own life.

“ ‘God’s own country,’ he exclaimed. ‘If it is, surely its responsibility is beyond another’s. But it is not up to its task. I met with hunger and misery myself and endured it: but when I saw them in others my heart was wrung. What desire for love there is in the world, and of how little love are we capable, we who long for it! Gradually I found that God, whatever He is, cannot be a God of love. There would be infinitely more of it in the world if He were. He must have seen with a kind of curiosity or even bewilderment how in man, from that longing for love, arose the great virtues of which He, God, has nothing. Around His unmoved majesty He lets the world roll, curiously attentive to all the utterances of its life, and there behold, out of the narrowly encircled brain of man is developed something new, strange, and super-godly: compassion, love, kindness, justice.

“ ‘If we were sure of God’s love, we could be sure also that His kingdom would come, spontaneously, from the human heart. But as it is, we cannot rely on the free and easy play of godly qualities within us. There is no other way to the fulfilment of love but to organise mankind, even by force. Duty must do what the free heart fails to perform. This is a sad truth, for what is duty else but a poor substitute for a great heart? It is thus I accepted socialism, though, after all, I scarcely know whether I am a socialist. I wish all that my friends say may be true. I am a socialist by heart only, and because I thought there must be such as believe in it. I sacrifice myself, for it is a sacrifice to believe in it.’

“ ‘This was a naïve statement for one employed on a socialistic paper. It embarrassed me, but I did not like him the less for it. How straightforward and simple he was!’

The editor made a pause and I tried in vain to break the silence. The whole story was an accusation against my former self. Surely I might have recognised the boy’s desire for friendship as a thing superior to the usual ambitious strife in school circles. I might have seen that his restless doings were only acts of an anxious soul whom nobody allows a place to build his nest.

At last my interlocutor resumed his narrative:

“ ‘And then you became an atheist too?’ I inquired.

“ ‘An atheist?’ he replied. ‘No, I am not an atheist, not as long as I can rejoice in beauty.’

“‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

“‘There is some mysticism about it,’ he answered. ‘I had perhaps better not speak of it.’

“Our friendship was soon established,” the editor went on. “Not quite on equal terms though. I built the house, as it were, and he inhabited it. That was no selfishness on his part: from the rebuke he had experienced when a boy he must have lost all initiative in contracting friendships. His knowledge of human individualities, too, scarcely reached beyond the distinction of rude and gentle, as his modesty would not allow him to engage the deeper passions of a man in his behalf. When we were sitting together in the saloons behind our beer, with a third and fourth companion as the wind blew them in, Nathaniel, with his head between his hands, would look on his men as if he used their eyes as a telescope to explore the country behind, the *terra incognita* of their philosophy. He wanted to have it stretched out before him like a map. He smiled blandly at their bravadoes and perorations. He spoke with zeal himself, but without touching the centre of his own belief. Even when alone with me he held back.

“‘What is the good of looking for God?’ I could perhaps ask him. ‘Is the world not large enough by itself? Why do you expand it to a monstrous immensity by adding a figure which admits of no limits?’

“‘God is the necessity of my life,’ he answered, ‘and I cannot argue his existence. God is not for me a preconceived idea which I pursue with stubbornness. Perhaps if I were better endowed I would not care for Him; it may be the lack of my talents only.’

“‘I have met with people,’ I remarked, ‘who with an ideal turn of mind were yet not strong enough to satisfy it in the research of some science where they without doubt would have found material enough to dilate and to fill their soul. They became religious because they did not trust their strength. I will not speak of the moral side; but from the intellectual one religion is the easiest way to give the mind a great aim. I would not envy their happiness if they were aware of the psychological facts to which they owe it. All our comforts, though they have the strength of realities, are illusions, be they prayers or lines from Shakespeare or whatever else. But we, the unbelievers, submit to it as to life’s melancholy, whereas our adversary cannot acknowledge it.’

“‘His case is not mine,’ Nathaniel answered. ‘My want of God is not a moral but an intellectual one. It is not a new rule of

life I need, but something that enlarges my whole being. Nor do I believe in God because it is easiest; I cannot even say that I have found him.'

"'And your theory of the beautiful?' I asked smiling.

"He blushed a little.

"'You are on a dangerous way,' I added more seriously.

"The house where he lived was on the outskirts of the city. His room, whose antique furniture was somewhat out of joint and showed the impress of age, was vast, with three windows, all on one side. He had always kept a few flowers; but suddenly he became wild with a new enthusiasm: he had visited the botanical gardens in their fullest beauty and immediately resolved to lay out a diminutive specimen of it in his own room.

"All he could spare now went to the gardener's; the most beautiful and the most modest plants were equally in his favor: the floor, the walls, the ceiling, all were hidden under a luxurious growth of vines and flowers, and when I entered I felt like an ant in the grassy sea of the prairie.

"In this green isle and amid its many-colored nationalities of blossoms he spent his time. Somehow a tribe of bees had found it out and the whole room used to swarm with hundreds of the small folk. Nathaniel was in raptures. When he lighted his pipe he watched with joy and humor the excitement he produced among them, the buzzing tone which changed from its silvery ring to a deeper sonority of anger and consternation. Thus agitated they would plunge with nervous violence into the secret recesses of the flowers. How delighted he was when they emerged and the petals and pistils began slowly to readjust themselves after the trance into which that sweetest hymen had thrown them, like birds that stroke their feathers when they have been with their mates. A spider waited in through the open window by the wind: he caught it and pushed it to and fro with a little stick till the frightened little animal stood on its head and fore-legs, and issuing a long, fine thread from its uplifted body it waited for the gentle breeze which played through the window to bear it off again. Thus he protected his friends, the insects.

"But his greatest joy was to watch the development of the flowers to their state of vigorous ripeness. He could tell the hour when they reached it, when their delicate limbs stretched out as if they knew their strength, every curve and line conscious of its beauty and health. 'It is the hour when God passes through

them,' he said, 'how silent they are, silent as only God can be.' And Nathaniel himself grew silent.

"He began to speak less, he seemed even dejected sometimes. Often his head rested on his hand. 'It is nothing,' he said when asked. But he could not help repeating the action, being obviously attacked with a serious headache.

"'You see what your fancy leads to,' I said to him at last. 'Your whole nervous system will be ruined if you do not stop the thing. To breathe the oppressive air of your botanical colony day and night, who could stand that?'

"'It is the punishment of him who is seeking the divine,' he answered.

"For the first time I grew wild.

"'This is sheer madness,' I exclaimed. 'You should be ashamed of yourself. It is a punishment indeed, but not inflicted by a mysterious power that is playing at hide-and-seek with you, but by the state of your innocent brain-cells, disorganised and revolting against the insane government to which they are subjected.'

"Some months after this Nathaniel changed all on a sudden. This time the cause of it was love. I will be short on the subject, for she proved a worthless creature. Beautiful she was without doubt, but as coquettish, and when he had spent his money for her pleasure's sake, she soon discovered that of all the vices of which a man can be guilty the most despicable is poverty. And so she turned from him coolly, in unapproachable sereneness, just as if she had only mistaken him, a minute or two, for somebody else.

"He was now in a truly pitiful state. His religion of the beautiful had been pleasant enough as long as it stood on the neutral ground of nature. But when he had tried to read the principle of his belief from a human face he had failed at the outset. He had to learn that beauty is not the sun-centre from which divinity pours its rays into the world, but only a spark incessantly rising and sinking in the great fire-work of life. All that moves around in the stillness of nature beyond the gates of mankind is irresistibly engulfed in the vast whirlpool of self-sovereign humanity as soon as it comes near it, encircled by human passions and encircling them, till the confusion is inextricable.

"Shortly after she had broken off with Nathaniel the girl sent back the collection of choice flowers which he had presented her. When he saw them he burst into a paroxysm of tears. Most of the gentle things, piteously neglected, were dead. He made not even

an attempt to revive them. A sternness came over him. His headache, too, came back: As Thomson has said in a beautiful line, 'All nature feels the renovating force of winter,' so he had felt the vivifying force of love—in vain, as he knew now. But he did not yield; his idealism was still uppermost, only more austere. The new phase manifested itself in his style: no more of that self-forgetful winding along a sunny pathway, but a straight pushing forward with only one guide, logic.

"One day we were sitting together, he and I, in a restaurant, when a mutual friend entered, a physician, a man of a strong and clear head but a little boisterous.

"He sat down to a substantial supper, and while he was joyfully engaged in dispatching it he asked Nathaniel: 'And what place does eating take in your philosophy? I am inclined to think like the mad painter in Zola's *L'Oeuvre*: "*Le ventre c'est Dieu.*" Only he meant it in an artistic sense, which is not my point of view. Is it not the real creative force, the centre of life for the milliards of living cells within me? It embraces them all in its providence as they lie, bound to their places, waiting for their food.' He swallowed an oyster, a poor and solitary remainder of his slaughter. 'Look here,' he said, 'the little deity of this microcosm had to give up his life for me: It is like the war of gods in old mythologies.'

"He had now finished and lighted a Havana. 'Apropos, Nathaniel,' he began again while we looked at him good-humoredly, 'your articles have much improved of late. They have hand and foot, and sometimes they even carry heavy weapons. Have you come to a harbor at last on your Odyssey after God?'

"The doctor was regarded as a friend by us both, nevertheless Nathaniel answered with a certain nervousity: 'I have searched the human passions, ethically and artistically, for the manifestation of the divine. But at the end I had to confess that the good and the bad, the sublime and the virulent are so mingled, encroaching at the same time upon the intelligence, that no one can ever unravel this chaos. If I shut my eye I see it all before me. It is like a drop of stagnant water seen through a microscope: monstrous forms heaped upon one another, crawling about with envy, hatred, and anxiety, an endless generating of new lives destined to be devoured by the surviving, and dead limbs swimming between. Such is the human heart and the rising and sinking of its hopes and passions. It is awful, maddening. Let the purest passion, let love take shape in you, and you will as soon see it disfigured and dis-

membered by the hateful company in your breast. Better stifle them all. God is not in the heart, He is only in the great intelligence, and His manifestation is logic.'

"The doctor glanced at me and shook his head.

"'Nathaniel,' he said, 'do not make a fool of yourself. Let the Old Man take care of Himself. He has nothing to do with logic. It is an old trick, but it is nevertheless false. The harmony of the world is not the effect of a logical plan according to whose statutes all has been settled. Logic cannot have created the world, for what you call the logical order of things is only their fixed relation to one another. Wherever things exist they must needs be in an unalterable mutual relation, not because logic requires it but because that is what we understand by existence. What the world is nobody knows; but once existing, not a thousand Gods could undo its order or destroy the laws of logic.'

"At that moment another guest came to our table, and as the doctor had an old quarrel to fight out with him he immediately attacked him, and thus the subject was dropped. My friend remained silent during the rest of the evening.

"The next morning he did not come to the office; he left his house, travelled to New York on no purpose, and came back after a week without money. He was lost in a profound melancholy for some days, then he became the victim of irritating hallucinations and showed his resentment in a peculiar manner. Believing that the flowers in his room were mocking at him, he took the scissors and cut out all the pistils, saying they were the tongues of his traducers. A few days more and he became a maniac. It was then that we took him to the asylum. The physicians hope he will soon die.

"I have sometimes thought whether that conversation with the doctor could have affected him so seriously, but believe that the forerunners of the malady had already undermined his intelligence; when the doctor showed him the mental perversity of his philosophising, the danger of insanity as the true state of his mind suddenly broke upon him. Who can trace such a thing back to its sources? But this much is sure: in the makeup of his character there was something wrong from the beginning: he had the heart of a man and the soul of a woman."

*

I left the scene of Nathaniel's sad end, but I was haunted by its remembrance for weeks and weeks. It still steals over me like a phantom, and at places where I would least expect it.

The ghost of night goes silently around
 In the broad daylight, in the glaring sun,
 And touches of the few he loves and knows
 The shoulder slightly.
 And they, wh'er they be, in noisy street,
 In crowded market-place, with merry friends,
 Then feel the halt of time.
 It is a moment only and has gone.
 With strength renewed breaks in the flood of life;
 What was it then? . . .
 An echo from Eternity.