

MAX NORDAU—THE JEREMIAH OF THE CENTURY

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THE death of Max Nordau terminates the career of an anomalous personality, a scholar and philosopher whose greatest aspiration was to write novels and dramas. Because he was denied that ambition he became the Jeremiah of the century. Whether as scientist, philosopher, or sociologist; whether as dramatist, novelist, or journalist, his utterance is a jeremiad.

His first memorable cry was: "Our world is an immense hospital-ward, the air filled with groans and lamentations, every form of suffering, twisting and turning on its bed!" He opens his "Degeneration" with the groan: "Over the earth the shadows creep with deepening gloom, wrapping all objects in mysterious dimness, destroying all certainty." These words remained the refrain of practically all his works to his dying day.

The cause of this lament will be found not alone in his calamitous generation, appalling as it was. Much of it may be traced to a frustrated ambition.

Whatever his heredity, his own life is an ample fountain gushing jeremiads. As a child he suffered more than the usual privations genius is commonly heir to. His father had been a private teacher in Hungary, eking out the most precarious existence imaginable. Thus was Max initiated early into the physical pains, the unutterable humiliations, and the dark despairs which poverty inflicts upon souls tender and proud.

Besides, Nordau was a Jew—a Jew in Austria-Hungary, where Jew-baiting is a fine art, some of the most cunning minds specializing at it as we specialize in law and medicine. It seared his soul, driving him into exile.

No sooner had he settled in his new home (Paris) than he betook himself to his long-cherished task—literature. But poverty, toil, and humiliation had drained him of that zest, that ecstatic joy, without which art is lifeless. His stories, novels, and dramas of this period possess all the requirements—culture, skill, intellect. More than enough. But they are dry, bereft of that glow which must radiate from art.

He must have sensed that outside forces were responsible for this deficiency; and he flung himself into sociology. He would recreate the world. Henceforth no such tragedies as his should be possible. All men should be made free to do the things for which nature intended them. No one should be denied that modicum of happiness without which all effort is dead. The impetus of his attack upon our social and economic order, embodied in his *Conventional Lies of Civilization*—his onslaught upon the selfish powers which sacrifice the choicest of the race to advance their criminal caprices shook the intellectual world. The work was burned in his own country and barred from sale in Russia and Germany.

But he could not remain away from his first love. He again tried fiction and drama. But he was too miserable. The spring as it were, the spontaneity, was not there. Worse, his feet had been firmly planted in his childhood life—Jewish life. The demands of the time were for fiction and drama dealing with everything but that.

It is true, some of his books of this period are readable, the characters pretty much alive. But there is no feeling, no sympathy, no pathos. Mere journalism. Above all else, they lack humor. Life had been too serious with him, and he could not laugh. Only now and then may one meet a smile; the smile of a man on the gallows. The situations are insipid. The characters are worth meeting, but not if one has to wade through four hundred pages. No man travels across continents to meet a commonplace hodcarrier. They are like food to a mouth which has lost the sense of taste, Dust.

By the time he got to the third period of his imaginative work he threw popular demand to the wind and wrote what was nearest his heart. *Dr. Kuhn* (translated into English under the title, *A Question of Honor*), was among his important works of this period. It deals with intermarriage, a theme which has at some time or other captivated all Jewish writers, from the New York East Side back to Israel Zangwill. Besides, Nordau himself had married outside the fold and had remained one of the foremost Jewish leaders. The drama should have been a masterpiece. But what he achieves is a play pretty dull in the first act and hopeless in the last. It ends with

nothing, "peters" out long before the last curtain. Instead of doing what he promises, either solve or unfold the question of intermarriage, he takes the young man concerned and has him shot. It is as much as an acrobat would appeal to an audience, "Ladies and gentlemen, watch me plant a pole and shin up to the top!" and after taking their time for two hours in preparation goes off to a corner and begins to turn cart wheels. His novels of this period fare a bit better, so far as plot is concerned, but there is little of life in them. In fact, by this time (He was now past fifty) almost all his imaginative powers were sapped.

Circumstances had robbed him of his birthright. He was born in the wrong time and in the wrong place. Had Shakespeare exchanged places with Nordau— Well, who can tell? Maybe Nordau would have written "Midsummernight's Dream" and Shakespeare would have died of a broken heart because he could not do the things his soul longed for.

However, this very defect made him one of the intellectual giants in the realm of Sociology. His *Conventional Lies of Civilization*, *Degeneration*, *The Philosophy of History*, and *Morals and the Evolution of Man* ("*Biologie der Ethik*") are works deservedly ranked among the best sociology has to offer. *Degeneration* created a furor at the time of its publication, lined up all the scholars of the period for and against him. The characteristics which should have served him in fiction found an outlet here—an extraordinary powerful brain; enough facts to fit out ten dramatists, and tireless energy. But the world would not afford him a modicum of happiness.

At first blush it would be thought that he could have found it in the Zionist movement. The Jewish masses considered him next to Herzl. Herzl was the Moses and Nordau the Joshua who would lead them into the Promised Land. But it really afforded him nothing but grief. He was unduly attacked by some of the numerous factions in the movement, shot at by a fanatic. Worse, though as a journalist he was thoroughly acquainted with international intrigue in general and with British diplomatic double-dealing in particular, he had never believed that the Jews would emerge from the World War so shamelessly betrayed. After being decoyed in pouring out their blood and money as a price for the Holy Land, Palestine became the only British possession from which Jews are excluded by law. He beheld the land devastated of its priceless flora and fauna by Tommy's sacred urge for manly sport, the few democratic rights it had enjoyed under Turkey taken away, and the country turned into a military post to watch British possessions in the Orient.

This proved more bitter than his own experiences during the war, when he was stripped of his all, exiled to a strange land and, upon returning, had to spend the remainder of his days on the top floor of a "walk-up" tenement in Paris. In fact, he lost hope in the whole Zionist enterprise and relinquished all activity.

Anyway, his imaginative faculty had been paralyzed by despair. Otherwise one finds ample evidence of greatness in this field. Besides, he constantly hankered for it, did not give it up till away in his fifties.

Looked at from this point of view his work in sociology is merely the record of a vast tragedy—the record of a genius denied the privilege to do what nature intended it to do. The deepening gloom of which he speaks in his *Degeneration* is the deepening gloom of his soul as he beholds his life bereft of that modicum of happiness which must be had for imaginative work.

Those reared in the faith which affirms that anguish is the mainspring of art will find the idea rather heretical. The rest may think it merely conjectural.

Granted that it is a conjecture. But a conjecture based on a study of Nordau's life and work. More, I grant that another writer might diagnose the case altogether differently. Nordau himself might have given altogether different reasons for the anomaly.

But a man often understands himself much less than others understand him. Were each genius to write his own biography, however honest his intentions, we should very likely have far worse distortions than we do now. As to the idea that anguish is the mainspring of art— Well, the Dantes and the Shakespeares should have come from the gutter. I once heard a starving poet exclaim: "Oh that misery were the essence of greatness! I should then be greater than Homer."

While it is true that some great novelists and dramatists have been exceedingly miserable, this is no proof that misery was the condition of their success. All that can be said is that their misery was not great enough to overwhelm them. It is a safe guess that the number of truly great men who have succumbed because of misery is as great as the number of those who have surmounted it.

The reason the belief is at all entertained is because it enables us common mortals to bear our mediocrity with more pluck. We reason, "If Shakespeare was as miserable as we, we must be as great as Shakespeare." No one need be a logician to grasp the absurdity of such logic.

On the contrary, one hits the mark pretty close when he thinks that no truly great imaginative work can be created without a modicum of happiness. It might be preceded by unhappiness. But this only renders the happiness more intense.

And so far as this idea concerns Nordau, it can be said that he was great enough to rise above his anguish to create great scholarly works; but that it had sapped his choicest possession—his power to do imaginative work. It was this that made of him the Jeremiah of the century.