

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02245-3 - The Works of Thomas Carlyle, Volume 22

Edited by Henry Duff Traill

Excerpt

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E. T. W. HOFFMANN

VOL. II.

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Cambridge University Press

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HOFFMANN'S *Life and Remains* have been published, shortly after his decease, and with an amplitude of detail corresponding rather to the popularity than to the intrinsic merit of the subject; for Hoffmann belongs to that too numerous class of vivid and gifted literary men, whose genius, never cultured or elaborated into purity, finds loud and sudden, rather than judicious or permanent admiration; and whose history, full of error and perplexed vicissitude, excites sympathising regret in a few, and unwise wonder in many. From this Work, which is honestly and modestly enough written, and has, to all appearance, been extensively read and approved of, I borrow most of the following particulars.

Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann was born at Königsberg, in Prussia, on the 24th of January 1776. His father occupied a post of some dignity in the administration of Justice; the mother's relatives were also engaged in the profession of Law; most of them respectably, some of them with considerable influence and reputation. The elder Hoffmann is said to have been a man of talent; but his temper and habitudes were irregular; his wife was sickly, sensitive and perhaps querulous and uncompliant: in our Ernst their second child's third year, the parents discovered that they could not live together; and, apparently by mutual consent, dissolved their ill-assorted union. The father withdrew from Königsberg, to prosecute his legal and judicial engagements elsewhere; and seems to have troubled himself no farther about his offspring or old connexions: he died, several years after, at Insterburg, where he had been stationed as a Judge

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in the Criminal Court of the Oberland. The other parent retired with young Ernst to her mother's house, also in Königsberg; and there, in painful inaction, wore out seventeen sick and pitiable years, before death put a period to her sufferings. Prior to the separation, the elder child, also a boy, had gone astray into wicked courses, and at last set forth as an infant prodigal into the wide world. The two brothers never met, though the elder is said to be still in life.

Cut off from his natural guardians and directors, young Hoffmann seems to have received no adequate compensation for the want of them, and his early culture was but ill conducted. The grandmother, like her daughter, was perpetually sick, neither of the two almost ever stirring from their rooms. An uncle, retired with the barren title of Justizrath from an abortive practice of Law, took charge of the boy's education: but little Otto had no insight into the endowments or perversities of his nephew, and spent much fruitless effort in endeavouring to train the frolicsome urchin to a clock-work life like his own; for Otto lived by square and rule; his history was a rigid, strenuous, methodical procedure; of which, indeed, except the process of digestion, faithfully enough performed, the result, in Otto's case, was nothing. An unmarried aunt, the only other member of the family, the only member of it gifted with any share of sense, appears to have had a truer view of young Hoffmann; but she loved the little rogue too well; and her tenderness, though repaid by equal and continued tenderness on his part, perhaps hurt him more than the leaden constraint of his uncle. For the rest, the boy did not let the yoke lie too heavy on his shoulders: Otto, it is true, was his teacher, his chamber-mate and bed-mate; but every Thursday the little Justizrath went out to pay visits, and the pupil could then celebrate a day of bedlam jubilee: in a little while too, by superiority of natural cunning, he had sounded the Justizrath; and from his twelfth year, we are told, he scarcely ever spoke a word with him, except for purposes of mystification. In

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this prim circle, he grew up in almost complete isolation ; for, by reason of its fantastic strictness, the household was visited by few ; and except one boy, a nephew of the Author Hippel's, with whom he accidentally became acquainted, Hoffmann had no companion but his foolish uncle and his too fond aunt. With young Hippel his intimacy more and more increased ; and it is pleasant to record of both, that this early connexion continued unbroken, often warm and helpful, through many changes of fortune ; Hoffmann's school-friend stood by his death-bed, and took his farewell of him with true heartfelt tears.

For classical instruction, he was early sent to the public school of Königsberg ; but till his thirteenth or fourteenth year, he acquired no taste for these pursuits ; and remained unnoticed by his teacher, and by all his schoolfellows, except Hippel, rather disrespected and disliked. Music and painting, in which also he had masters, were more to his taste : in a short while, he could fantasy to admiration on the harpsichord ; and there was no comic visage in Königsberg which he had not sketched in caricature. His tiny stature (for in youth, as in manhood, he was little, and 'incredibly brisk') giving him an almost infantile appearance, added new wonder to these attainments ; and so young Ernst became a musical and pictorial prodigy ; to the no small comfort of Justizrath Otto, who delighted to observe that the little imp who had played him so many sorry tricks, and so often upset the steady machinery of his household economy, was turning out not a blackguard, but a genius.

With more prudence and regularity than could have been expected, Hoffmann betook himself, in due time, to preparing for the legal profession ; to which, as if by hereditary destiny, he was appointed. In the Königsberg University, indeed, he confessed that Kant's prelections were a dead letter to him, though it was at that time the fashion both for the wise and simple to be metaphysically transcendental : but he abstained from the riotous practices of his fellow-*bursche*, and

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pursued with strict fidelity the tasks by which he hoped ere long to gain an independent livelihood, and be delivered from the thralldom of his grandmother and Justizrath Otto. In this hope he laboured; allowing himself no recreation, except once a-week an evening of literary talk with his fellow-student Hippel, and an occasional glance into *Winkelmann*, or other works on Art, to which, as formerly, the better part of his nature was passionately devoted.

In 1795, he passed his first professional trial, and was admitted Auscultator of the Court of Königsberg: an establishment administrative as well as judicial; in which, however, owing to the pressure of applicants, it was impossible to give him full employment. This leisure, which, with so hot and impatient a spirit, hung heavy enough on his hands, he endeavoured to fill up with subsidiary pursuits: he gave private lessons in music; he painted wild landscapes, or grotesque figures, to which 'a bold alternation of colour and shade' gave a specific character; he talked of men and things with the most sportful fancy, or the most biting sarcasm: in fine, he wrote two Novels. One of these, at least, he had hoped to see in print; for a bookseller had received it with some expressions of encouragement: but after half a year, his fair manuscript was returned to him all soiled and creased, with an answer, that 'the *anonymity* of the work was likely to hurt its sale.' In the mean time, his situation had become still more perplexed by a private incident in the style of the *Nouvelle Héloïse*. One of his fair music-pupils was too lovely and too soft-hearted: no marriage could be thought of between the parties, for she was far above him in rank; and the contradictions and entanglements of this affair so pained and oppressed him, that he longed with double vehemence to be out of Königsberg. At last, after much wavering and consulting, he snatched himself away, with a resolute, indeed almost heroic effort, from the unpropitious scene; and proceeded, in the summer of 1796, to Great Glogau in Silesia, where another uncle, a brother of Otto's, occupied a

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post in the Administration, and had promised to procure him employment.

In Great Glogau he did not find the composure which he was in search of; his uncle and his cousins treated him with great affection, and his labour was not irksome or unprofitable; but, in his letters, he complains incessantly of tedium, and other spiritual maladies; and, in 1798, he joyfully took leave of Silesia, following his uncle, who was now promoted to a higher legal post in Berlin. Here too the young jurist continued only for a short time. Having passed his third and last trial, the *examen rigorosum*, and this with no common applause, he was soon afterwards appointed Assessor of the Court at Posen, in South Prussia (Poland); whither he proceeded in March 1800.

With Hoffmann's removal to Poland begins a new era of his life: he was now director of his own actions, and unhappily he did not direct them well. At Berlin, and even at Great Glogau, he had been accustomed to enliven the routine of legal duty by the study of Art; for which the public collections of pictures, and the numerous professors of music, had in both cities afforded considerable opportunity. In Posen, these resources were abridged; there was little music, little painting; his official associates were dry weekday men, who worked hard at their desks, and lived hard when enfranchised from them; without taste for literature, or art of any kind, except it were the art of cookery and brewing. The Poles also were a lively, jolly people, and much addicted to 'strong Hungary wine.' Hoffmann yielded too far to the custom of the land; and here, it would seem, contracted habits of irregularity, from which he could never after get delivered. Another refuge against tedium, derived from his own peculiar resources, was even less to be excused. In private hours, he had condescended to become the scandalous chronicle of Posen, and to sketch a series of caricatures, exhibiting, under the most ludicrous yet recognisable aspects,

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a great number of individuals and transactions; sparing no rank or relation, where he fancied himself to have been provoked, or thought his satire might be expected to tell. On occasion of a masquerade, a gay companion, his future brother-in-law, equipped himself like an Italian hawk; and proceeding to the ball with this pestilent ware in his basket, distributed the pictures, each picture to some ill-wisher of the person whom it represented; and then vanished from the room. For the first half hour there was a general triumph; which, on comparing notes, passed into a general wail. The author was speedily detected: his talent, the only thing admirable in the transaction, betrayed him, and the punishment followed close on the offence. Intelligence was sent to Berlin; and the patent, lying ready for signature, which should have made him Rath (Councillor) at Posen, was changed for a similar appointment at Plozk; a change which, in all points, he regarded as an exile, but which his best friends could not help admitting that he had richly merited.

From Plozk he failed not to emit his *Tristia*; soliciting, with pressing earnestness, deliverance from this Polish Tomos. What was more to the purpose, he seems to have amended his conduct: he had married while at Posen; his wife, a fair Poless, was possessed of many graces, and of contentment and submissiveness without limit; and the husband was beginning to substitute the duties and enjoyments of domestic and studious life for the revelry and riot in which of late he had much too deeply mingled. In his official capacity, his assiduity and perseverance so far gained on his superiors, that at length, by the influence of Hippel and other friends, he was transferred from Plozk to Warsaw; after having spent two regretful but diligent and not unprofitable years in this provincial seclusion. In the summer of 1804, he hastened to his new destination, which his fancy had decked for him in all the colours of hope.

To Hoffmann, the Polish capital was like a vast perpetual

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masquerade; and for a time he enjoyed his exotic many-coloured aspect, the more from its contrast with his late way of life. His public duty was not difficult, and he performed it punctually; his salary sufficed him; there were theatres and music on every hand; and the streets were peopled with a motley tumult of the strangest forms: 'gay silken Polesses, talking and promenading over broad stately squares; the ancient venerable Polish noble, with moustaches, caftan, sash, and red or yellow boots; the new race equipped as Parisian *Incroyables*; with foreigners of every nation'; not excluding long-bearded Jews, puppetshow-men, monks and dancing-bears. In a little while, Hoffmann had formed some acquaintances among the human part of the throng; with one Hitzig, his colleague in office, he established a lasting intimacy. It began oddly enough: one day the two were walking home together from the Court, and engaged in laborious, stinted and formal conversation, when Hoffmann, asking the character of some individual, the other answered, in the words of Falstaff, that he was 'a fellow in buckram'; a phrase which enlightened the caustic visage of Hoffmann, at all times shy to strangers, and at once raised him into one of his brilliant communicative moods. This Hitzig, himself a man of talent and energy, was of great service in assisting Hoffmann's intellectual culture while at Warsaw, and stood by him afterwards in many difficult emergencies.

An enthusiast dilettante prepared a new source of interest to Hoffmann, by a scheme which he proposed of erecting a Musical Institution. By dint of great effort, the dilettante succeeded in procuring subscribers; first one deserted palace, then a larger one, was purchased for a hall of meeting: and Hoffmann, seeing that the scheme was really to take effect, now entered into it with heart and hand. He planned the arrangement of the rooms in the New *Ressource*: for their decorations, he sketched cartoons, part of which were painted by other artists, part he himself painted; not forgetting to introduce caricature portraits of many honest subscribers,

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whom, by wings and tails, he disguised as sphinxes, gryphons and other mythological cattle. His time was henceforth divided between his Court and this Musical Ressource: here, perched on his scaffold, among his paint-pots, with the brush in his hand, and a bottle of Hungary by his side, he might, in free hours, be seen diligently working, and talking in the mean while to his friends assembled below. If called to any juridical function by any extraordinary mandate from the President, he would doff his painter's-jacket, clamber down from his scaffold, wash his hands, and, to the surprise of parties, transact their business as rapidly and correctly, as if he had known no other employment.

The Musical Ressource prospered beyond expectation: brilliant concerts were given; all that was fairest and gracefulest in Warsaw attending, or even assisting: Hoffmann officiated as leader in their performance; and, especially in Mozart's pieces, was allowed to have done his part with consummate skill. Ere long, however, these melodious festivities were abruptly closed. News came of the battle of Jena; Russian foreposts entered the city; Tartars, Cossacks, Bashkirs increased the chaos of its population. In due time arrived French envoys to treat of a surrender; the Prussians mounted guard with their knapsacks on; and one morning tidings spread over the city, that the Praga bridge of boats was on fire, that the Russians and Prussians were retiring on the one side, and Murat's advanced-guard entering by the other. The rest is easy to conceive: the Prussian government was at an end in Warsaw; Hoffmann's *Collegium* honestly divided the contents of their strongbox, then closed the partnership, and dispersed, each whither he listed, to seek safety and new employment.

To most of them this was a grievous stroke: not to Hoffmann. For him Warsaw was still a fine variegated spectacle; he had money enough for present wants; of the future he took little heed, or thought loosely that he could live by Art, and that Art was far better than Law. Leaving his

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large house, where his purse seemed hardly safe from military violence, he took refuge in the garret of the Musical Resource: here was his pianoforte and a library, here his wife and only child; without, were Napoleon and his generals, reviews, *restaurateurs*, theatres, churches with musical monks; and abundance of fellow-loungers to attend him in these amusements. It was not till after a severe attack of fever, and the most visible contraction of his purse, that he seriously bethought him what he was to do. A sad enough outlook! For Art, which had seemed so benignant at a distance, was shy and inaccessible when actually applied to for bread. Hitzig had hastened off to Berlin, and there opened a book-shop in hope of better times: but his accounts of musical profits in that city were discouraging; and for the journey to Vienna, which he advised and gave letters to forward, Hoffmann had now no funds. His uncle in Berlin was dead; from little Otto nothing could be drawn: the perplexity was thickening, and the means of unravelling it were daily diminishing. For the present, he resolved to leave his wife and daughter at Posen with their relations, and to visit Berlin himself in quest of some employment.

In Berlin he could find no employment whatever, either as a portrait-painter, a teacher or a composer of music; meanwhile the last remnant of his cash, his poor six Friedrichs-d'or, were one night filched from his trunk; and news came from Posen, that his little Cecilia was dead, and his wife dangerously ill. In this extremity, his heart for a while had nigh failed him; but he again gathered courage, and made a fresh attempt. He published in the newspapers an advertisement, offering himself as Music-director, on the most moderate terms, in any theatre; and was happy enough, soon afterwards, to make an engagement of the kind he wished with the managers of the Bamberg stage, at that time under the patronage of the Count von Soden.

To an ordinary temper, this very humble preferment would have offered but a mortifying contrast with former affluence