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CHAPTER I

THE DECISION TO BECOME A WRITER *DAS HAUSGESINDE*

Otto Ludwig's ambition as a young man was to become a composer, and from his twentieth year on he spent several hours each day poring over scores (mainly operas), studying theory and counterpoint (unfortunately from sadly outdated handbooks), composing operas, *Lieder*, and orchestral works, and playing and analyzing his compositions with a small group of intimate friends.¹ In April 1837 he won local recognition when one of his operas, *Die Geschwister*, was performed twice under his direction in Eislefeld, and the warm reception accorded his work greatly encouraged him. He realized, however, that he still had much to learn about composition and was now more anxious than ever to study with someone who could give him the expert guidance he required. His Uncle Otto, who realized how gifted his nephew was and who could easily have provided the necessary money, hesitated to offer his help because as yet no recognition had come from outside; and thus it seemed for a time as though Ludwig would never be able to realize his wish. Then, early in 1839, he had the idea of sending the manuscript of his new operetta, *Die Köhlerin*, to the Director of Music at the Court of Meiningen. An invitation to Meiningen followed shortly, and when Ludwig returned to Eislefeld he was the proud holder of a ducal stipend. This scholarship made it possible for him to begin work that fall with Felix Mendelssohn in Leipzig.

Although Leipzig still had a number of writers in residence, including a few members of the group known as *Junges Deutschland*,² it no longer had as a literary center the brilliance which had won it such renown a century earlier. As a musical center, however, it was rapidly acquiring prominence. Robert Schumann, Albert Lortzing, and Felix Mendelssohn were all living there, and during the season one gala event followed the other. One of the most sparkling occasions of the 1840's was Mendelssohn's lavish reception for Franz Liszt in the *Gewandhaus*.

Ludwig, who had never been in a large city before, found Leipzig bewildering, and his beginnings there were most inauspicious. En route a trunk containing his compositions had somehow gone astray, and since Mendelssohn naturally wanted to see his earlier

work before planning a course of study for him, the lost trunk occasioned several weeks' delay. The trunk finally turned up, but when Mendelssohn saw Ludwig's compositions his recommendation was to stop composing altogether for a while and concentrate on theory. He also advised him to hear as much live music as possible. This was, of course, sound advice. The difficulty was that Ludwig's budget would not stand the additional expense of opera and concert tickets. As if this were not enough, a painful swelling and stiffening in Ludwig's hands forced him to give up practicing the piano and improvising during the winter of 1839-40. He also found it increasingly difficult to attend concerts, for whenever he did go he suffered chills. He persisted for a while, even at the risk of incurring these unpleasant symptoms, but as the winter progressed he began to experience discomfort from listening to music, which seemed mixed with whistling sounds.³ During this period of lowered vitality and enforced inactivity he turned once again to writing poetry.⁴

Early in 1840 he chanced to see in an issue of one of the popular periodicals of the day, *Die Eilpost für Moden*, a notice soliciting contributions in fiction, and the idea occurred to him that he might perhaps be able to supplement his slender income by writing and selling a story. He set to work at once, writing almost without interruption, and in an incredibly short time had finished his manuscript which he sent off with all possible haste. The story came back with a polite letter of rejection, but Ludwig, undaunted, revised and resubmitted it. Although the editor was still unenthusiastic, he forwarded the manuscript to another periodical, *Der Komet*, which, to Ludwig's delight, accepted it. The first installment appeared on April 19, 1840.⁵

As the first work of an inexperienced writer *Das Hausgesinde* of course has many flaws. Its subtitle is quite appropriate: it is really nothing more than a *Laune*. Around the basic situation, the rivalry of the simple-minded hero and the philandering count for the love of the heroine, Röschen, Ludwig builds a harmless comedy of intrigue whose action is impelled forward not by a clash of character on character, but by the author's arbitrary manipulation of circumstances. The framework of incidents is both conventional and needlessly circumstantial. The plot centers not around *one*, but around *three* boxes, and Ludwig's main concern seems to be to manipulate these three objects in such a way as to keep both the characters and the reader in a state of hopeless confusion until the very end, when their contents are finally revealed. The characters are as conventional as the plot. All are so much like puppets that we have difficulty in feeling them as real human beings and accordingly do not care what happens to them.

In this first effort we naturally sense many influences. The amorous count, the plot of the lovers to thwart him, and the jealous countess at once remind us of the basic situation in Ludwig's favorite opera, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, but his characters are not nearly so sensitively and subtly drawn. His count has none of Almaviva's charm, and his countess completely lacks the dignity and grace of her Mozartian counterpart. The hero would be likeable enough, were it not for his eternal bungling and his stupidity; but the heroine is hopelessly dull in her faithfulness.

There are also echoes of Tieck, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and the romantic *Kunstmärchen* in *Das Hausgesinde*. The manner in which Ludwig suddenly introduces the element of the wondrous in the scenes in which the dwarf Hanspeter appears at first strikes us as quite similar to Hoffmann's use of the wondrous in his *Wirklichkeitsmärchen*. A closer look at Ludwig's story soon makes it clear, however, that what at first seemed affinities are in reality only superficial resemblances, for the element of the wondrous serves quite a different function in Hoffmann's tales.⁶

In most of the *Wirklichkeitsmärchen* the pattern is the same: a character, usually the hero, is suddenly catapulted from the everyday world into another sphere where wondrous things happen, and to which he is thenceforth able to return again and again, experiencing there each time all manner of adventures.⁶ Although these may seem fantastic, both to the character and to the reader, they prove nevertheless to be real enough, for they most often lead to some kind of a spiritual transformation. The experience of the wondrous is thus not an escape from reality. Nor does it give licence to shirk the fundamental human obligation to lead a purposeful life. Its end-result, in most cases, is to provide new insights which make possible a superior adjustment to reality.⁷

How does this compare to what we find in *Das Hausgesinde*? The element of the wondrous enters when the dwarf Hanspeter (who bears a striking resemblance to Hoffmann's Klein Zaches!) suddenly appears while Andres, the hero, is lying in wait for the count's valet who has been commissioned by the count to carry a gift and a message to Röschen. The conversation between Andres and the dwarf has all the qualities of a dream-experience and recalls interestingly the first important conversation between Peregrinus and his flea-mentor in Hoffmann's delightful tale, *Meister Floh*.⁸ In the course of this conversation a question of Andres' prompts the strange little fellow to air his views on the difference between dreams and reality. The former, half tipsy from having drunk too much at the public festival in honor of the count's birthday, asks how he can be certain that his conversation with his tiny interlocutor is not a dream. To this query Hanspeter replies with a

rhetorical question, "Was ist denn wahr?" and proceeds to answer it himself. "Was wir glauben", he declares, "ist wahr. Es gibt kein Spiel, oder alles ist Spiel. Viele nennen das wahr, was sie mit den Händen greifen, und das ist gerade die handgreiflichste Lüge. Was wir glauben und inwendig sind, davon haben wir die nächste unmittelbare Kunde (W, I, 14)." Both the circumstances under which these remarks are made and the remarks themselves remind us of similar sequences in Hoffmann's tales. Here the similarity ends, however, for the only purpose of the Hanspeter sequence, as it turns out, is to introduce into the action one of the three boxes which play such an important part in the *denouement*. The element of the wondrous serves thus not to add an interesting new dimension, as in the tales of Hoffmann, but the trivial purpose of adding complications to an already extremely confusing plot. For this reason the Hanspeter sequences might be cited as the most glaring example in the story of Ludwig's inability at this point in his development to understand the function of some of the techniques and devices which he had so freely borrowed.

Considered as a whole *Das Hausgesinde* seems rather like a patchwork quilt without a distinct pattern. The lack of coherence stems in part, to be sure, from the fact that in order to save time Ludwig incorporated into his story elements from earlier works.⁹ But it can also be explained in terms of Ludwig's lack of knowledge of the fine points of the narrative writer's craft. The only real evidence of his later skill is the brief sequence near the beginning in which he describes the village festival in honor of the count's birthday (W, I, 5-6). The scene recalls Breughel's portrayals of village life. Enormous tables groan under the weight of immense quantities of food; vast casks filled with cider repose in the cool shade of the bushes; and the villagers, in gay holiday attire, throng the streets. Ludwig focuses attention first on the elderly matrons, whose stiffly starched dresses, which sway from side to side as they walk, give them the appearance of "bells moving on their clappers." Then with a few rapid strokes of his pen he sketches the merry group of peasant boys and girls in their Sunday finery. By citing only five details he succeeds in imparting a vivid impression of the sun-tanned peasant lads with their sturdy legs and freely swinging arms, whose easy, graceful movements betray long practice in cracking a whip; and with three more he suggests the fresh beauty of the girls: "Da wehten die kurzen Röckchen um die gedrängte Form der kecken Dirnen, die bunten Bänder um die bräunlichen Heckenrosen der vollen Gesichter." With great deftness he then summarizes the busy scene by means of a series of impersonal expressions which suggest the many different activities which are

going on simultaneously as the villagers make the most of this rare festive occasion :

Da ward gezupft und geneckt, die Augen verdeckt, der Verdecker erraten. Da flogen Winke und Blicke, da klang Gesang und Gelächter... Da versteckte sich die Verschämtheit geheim sich wahnender Neigung vor den nicht schonenden Anspielungen hinter verlegenem Gekicher und scheinbar unbefangenen Eingehen auf den Scherz. Da lächelte sich Einfalt und harmlose Liebe aus vollen freundlichen Gesichtern zu, da stierte die Gedankenlosigkeit ins Blaue, da zog der Neid die Mundwinkel, da haftete sich der grimmig versteckte Blick der Eifersucht an jeden Zug seines Gegenstandes, da wiegte sich die Selbstgefälligkeit auf Schuh- und Stiefelspitzen, da spreizte sich der plumpe Geldstolz, da zierte sich die Gefallsucht, da schnellten die Pfeile von den Augenbrauen der ländlichen Koketten. Wer niemand anderm gefiel, der gefiel doch sich, wer kein Publikum fand, belachte seine Spässe selbst.

What makes this scene seem authentic is that it reflects Ludwig's own experience, for it is a picture of the kind of village celebrations which he had often witnessed in his native Thuringia. Hence his sureness of touch. In its truth to reality, and also in its delightful humor it foreshadows his later masterpieces about provincial life, *Die Heiteretei* and *Aus dem Regen in die Traufe*. It is, however, the only bright spot in an otherwise rather insipid story which disappoints us on the whole as a work weak in formal organization, obscure and confusing in plot, and totally lacking in any kind of profundity - in short, as a vision of reality which fails to come to life.

The illness which had afflicted Ludwig during the winter of 1839-40 had undermined his morale to the point where he had begun to doubt whether he could ever succeed as a composer. Along with these doubts, however, there had also grown a new conviction: that his real forte as an artist was the creation of poetic forms.¹⁰ Both his doubts and his new conviction caused him to long for a quiet existence, perhaps as a music teacher in a small town like Eisfeld, where he would have peace of mind and the freedom to work as he wished at his various literary and musical projects.¹¹ This longing, coupled with his dread of another winter in Leipzig, made him immediately receptive to Mendelssohn's suggestion that he could study the technical aspects of composition as profitably in Eisfeld as in Leipzig, and by the end of October he had finished his preparations to leave. He arrived home at the end of November full of enthusiasm and eager to work.