

THE PAINTER



During his youth a painter by the name of Albert did not manage to achieve the success and effect with his pictures that he desired. Therefore, he withdrew from society and decided just to satisfy himself. He tried this for many years, but it became more and more apparent that he could not do this either. One time, as he sat and painted the picture of a hero, he kept thinking, "Is it really necessary to do what you're doing? Do these pictures have to be painted? Wouldn't it be just as well for you and everyone if you would merely take walks and drink wine? Aren't you just confusing yourself by painting, forgetting who you are, and passing the time away?"

These thoughts were not conducive to his work. In time Albert's painting stopped almost completely. He took walks. He

HERMANN HESSE

drank wine. He read books. He took trips. But he was not satisfied by doing these things.

He was often compelled to think of how he had first begun painting with certain wishes and hopes. He recalled how he had felt and wished that a beautiful, powerful connection and current would develop between him and the world, that something strong and vigorous would vibrate incessantly between him and the world and generate soft music. He had wanted to express his innermost feelings and satisfy them with his heroes and heroic landscapes so that the outside world would judge and appreciate his pictures, and people would be grateful for and interested in his work.

Well, he had not found any of this. It had been a dream, and even the dream had gradually faded and become hazy. Then, wherever Albert was, traveling through the world or living alone in remote places, sailing on ships or wandering over mountain passes, the dream began returning more and more frequently. It was different from before, but just as beautiful, just as powerful and alluring, just as desirable and glimmering as it originally had been.

Oh, how he yearned to feel the vibration between himself and everything in the world! To feel that his breath and the breath of the winds and seas were the same, that brotherhood and affinity, love and closeness, sound and harmony would be between him and everything!

He no longer desired to paint pictures in which he himself and his yearning would be portrayed, which would bring him understanding and love, pictures that were intended to explain, justify, and celebrate himself. He no longer thought about heroes and parades that were to express and describe his own existence as picture and smoke. He desired only to feel that vibration, that powerful stream,

THE PAINTER

that fervor in which he himself would turn to nothing and sink, die, and be reborn. Just the new dream about this, the new, reinforced yearning for this, made his life bearable, endowed it with something like meaning, elevated it, rescued it.

Albert's friends, insofar as he still had some, did not understand these fantasies very well. They saw only that this man lived more and more within himself, that he spoke more quietly and strangely, that he was away a great deal, that he took no interest in what was lovely and important for other people, took no interest in politics or business, in shooting matches or dances, in clever conversations about art, or in anything that gave his friends pleasure. He had become an odd person, somewhat of a fool. He ran through the gray, cool winter air and breathed in the colors and smells of this air. He ran after a little child who sang *la la* to himself. He stared for hours into green water, at a bed of flowers, or he absorbed himself, like a reader in his book, in reading the lines and cuts in a little piece of wood, in a root or turnip.

No one was concerned about Albert. At that time he lived in a small city in a foreign country, and one morning he took a walk down a street, and as he looked between the trees, he saw a small lazy river, a steep yellow clay bank, and bushes and thorny weeds that spread their dusty branches over landslides and bleak stones. All at once something sounded within him. He stood still. He felt an old song from legendary times strike up again in his soul. The yellow clay and dusty green, or the lazy river and steep parts of the bank, some combination of the colors or lines, some kind of sound, a uniqueness in the random picture was beautiful, was incredibly beautiful, moving, and upsetting, spoke to him, was related to him. And he felt vibrations and the most fervent connection between

HERMANN HESSE

forest and river, between river and himself, between sky, earth, and plants. All things seemed to be set there unique and alone so that they could be reflected just at this moment, coming together as one in his eye and heart, so they could meet and greet each other. His heart was the place where river and grass, tree and air could unite, become one, enhance one another, and celebrate the festivals of love.

When this thrilling experience had repeated itself a few times, the painter found himself enveloped by a glorious feeling of happiness, thick and full, like a golden evening or a garden fragrance. He tasted it. It was sweet and thick, and he could no longer bear it. It was too rich. It became ripe and was filled with tension. It aroused him and made him almost anxious and furious. It was stronger than he was, tore him away. He was afraid that it would drag him down with it. And he did not want that. He wanted to live, to live an eternity! Never, never had he wished to live as intensely as he did now.

One day he was silent and alone in his room as though he had just been intoxicated. He had a box of paints standing in front of him and had laid out a piece of cardboard. Now, for the first time in years, he was sitting and painting again.

And it stayed that way. The thought—"Why am I doing this?"—did not return. He painted. He did nothing more except see and paint. Either he went outside and became lost in the pictures of the world, or he sat in his room and let the fullness stream away again. He composed picture after picture on cardboard, a rainbow sky with meadows, a garden wall, a bench in the woods, a country road, also people and animals, and things that he had never seen before, perhaps heroes or angels, who, however, became alive like wall and forest.

When he started circulating among people again, it became

THE PAINTER

known that he had resumed painting. People found him quite crazy, but they were curious to see his paintings. He did not want to show them to anyone. Yet they did not leave him in peace. People pestered and forced him until he gave an acquaintance the key to his room. He himself departed on a journey. He did not want to be there when others saw the paintings.

People came, and soon there was a great hue and cry. They had discovered a spectacular genius, to be sure, an eccentric, but one who was blessed by God, and they began using sayings to describe him that are used by experts and speakers.

In the meantime Albert had arrived in a village, rented a room from farmers, and unpacked his paints and brush. Once again he went happily through valleys and mountains and later reflected all that he experienced and felt in his paintings.

One day he learned from a newspaper that many people had seen his paintings back home. In a tavern while drinking a glass of wine, he read a long, glowing report in the newspaper of the major city. His name was printed in big letters in the heading, and there were numerous fat words of praise throughout the article. But the more he read, the stranger he felt.

“How splendid the yellow of the background shines in the picture with the blue lady—a new, incredibly daring and enchanting harmony!”

“The art of the expressions in the still life with roses is also wonderful. Not to mention the series of self-portraits! We may place them alongside the great masterpieces of psychological portrait art.”

Strange, strange! He could not recall having ever painted a still life with roses, or a blue lady, and as far as he knew, he had never made a self-portrait. On the other hand, the article did not mention the

HERMANN HESSE

clay bank or the angels, the rainbow sky or the other pictures that he loved so much.

Albert returned to the city. He went to his apartment dressed in his traveling clothes. People were going in and out. A man sat by the door, and Albert had to show a ticket in order to enter. Of course, he recognized his paintings. Someone had, however, hung placards on them, unknown to Albert. "Self-portrait" could be read on many of them, and other titles. He stood contemplatively awhile before the paintings and their unfamiliar names. He saw it was possible to give these paintings completely different names than he had done. He saw that he had revealed something in the garden wall that seemed to be a cloud to some, and that the chasms of his rocky landscape could be the face of a person for others.

Ultimately, it was not all so important. But Albert desired most of all to leave again quietly and to travel and never return to this city. He continued to paint many pictures and gave them many names, and he was happy with whatever he did. But he did not show his paintings to anyone.