**The Brothers Karamazov—The Downfall of Europe**

By Hermann Hesse

It appears to me that what I call the Downfall of Europe is foretold and explained with extreme clearness in Dostoevsky's works and in the most concentrated form in The Brothers Karamazov. It seems to me that European and especially German youth are destined to find their greatest writer in Dostoevsky--not in Goethe, not even in Nietzsche. In the most modern poetry, there is everywhere an approach to Dostoevsky, even though it is sometimes callow and imitative. The ideal of the Karamazov, primeval, Asiatic, and occult, is already beginning to consume the European soul. That is what I mean by the downfall of Europe. This downfall is a return home to the mother, a turning back to Asia, to the source, to the "*Faüstischen Muttern*" and will necessarily lead, like every death on earth, to a new birth.

We contemporaries see a "downfall" in these events in the same way as the aged who, compelled to leave the home they love, mourn a loss to them irreparable while the young think only of the future, care only for what is new.

What is that Asiatic Ideal that I find in Dostoevsky, the effect of which will be, as I see it, to overwhelm Europe?

Briefly, it is the rejection of every strongly-held Ethic and Moral in favour of a comprehensive *laissez-faire*. This is the new and dangerous faith, that Elder Zossima announced, the, faith lived by Alyosha and Dmitri, a faith which was brought into clearer expression by Ivan Karamazov. In the case of Elder Zossima, the ideal Right still reigns supreme. Good and Evil always exist for him; but he bestows his love on evil-doers from choice. Alyosha already makes something far more vital of this new creed, taking his way through filth and slime with an almost amoral impartiality. He reminds us of Zarathustra's vow: "In that day I vowed that I would renounce every aversion."

But Alyosha's brothers carry this further, they take this road with greater decision; they seem often to do so defiantly. In the voluminous book it sometimes appears as though the relationship of the Brothers Karamazov unfolded itself too slowly so that what at one time seems stable, at another becomes solvent. The saintly Alyosha becomes ever more worldly, the worldly brothers more saintly; and similarly the most unprincipled and unbridled of them becomes the saintliest, the most sensitive, the most spiritual prophet of a new holiness, of a new morality, of a new mankind. That is very curious. The more the tale unfolds itself, the wickeder and the more drunken, the more licentious and brutal the Karamazovs, the more brightly the new Ideal glows through the corpus of these raw appearances, people, and acts; and the more spiritual, the saintlier they inwardly become. Compared with the drunken, murdering, violent Dmitri and the cynical intellectual Ivan--the decent, highly respectable magistrate and the other representatives of the bourgeois, triumph though they may outwardly, are shabby, hollow, worthless.

It seems, then, that the "New Ideal" by which the roots of the European spirit is being sapped, is an entirely amoral concept, a faculty to feel the Godlike, the significant, the fatalistic, in the wickedest and in the ugliest, and even to accord them veneration and worship. No less than that. The ironical exaggeration with which the Magistrate in his speech seeks to hold these Karamazovs up to the scorn of the citizens, is not in reality an exaggeration. It is indeed a tame indictment. For in this speech the "Russian man" is exhibited from the conservative-bourgeois point of view. He had been till then a cock-shy. Dangerous, emotional, irresponsible, yet conscience-haunted; soft, dreamy, cruel, yet fundamentally childish. As such one still likes to regard the "Russian man" to-day, although, I believe, he has for a long time been on the road to becoming the European man. And this is the Downfall of Europe.

Let us look at this "Russian man" a moment. He is far older than Dostoevsky, but Dostoevsky has finally shown him to the world in all his fearful significance. The "Russian man" is Karamazov, he is Fyodor Pavlovitch, he is Dmitri, he is Ivan, he is Alyosha. These four, different as they may appear, belong inseparably together. Together they are Karamazov, together they are the "Russian man," together they are the approaching, the proximate man of the European crisis.

Next notice something very remarkable. Ivan in the course of the story turns from a civilized man into a Karamazov, from a European into a Russian, out of a definitely-formed historical type into the unformed raw material of Destiny.

There is a fairy-like dream-reality about the way in which Ivan slides out of his original psychology: out of his understanding, coolness, knowledge. There is mystical truth in this sliding of the apparently solid brother into the hysterical, into the Russian, into the Karamazov-like. It is just he, the doubter, who at the end holds speech with the devil! We will come to that later on.

So the "Russian man" is drawn neither as the hysterical, the drunkard, the felon, the poet, the Saint, but as one with them all, as possessing all these characteristics simultaneously. The "Russian man," Karamazov, is assassin and judge, ruffian and tenderest soul, the completest egotist and the most self-sacrificing hero. We shall not get a grasp of him from a European, from a hard and fast moral, ethical, dogmatic standpoint. In this man the outward and the inward, Good and Evil, God and Satan are united.

The urgent appeal ever rings out from these Karamazovs for the symbol after which their spirit is striving, a God who is also a Devil. Dostoevsky's "Russian man" is penetrated by that symbol. The God-Devil, the primeval Demiurgus, he who was there from the beginning who alone stands the other side of the forbidden, who knows neither day nor night, neither good nor evil. He is the Nothingness and the All. He is unknowable to us, for we have only the power to recognize prohibition, we are individual beings, bound to day and to night, to warm and to cold, we need a God and a devil. On the other side of that which is forbidden, in Nothingness and in The All, only Demiurgus, the God of the altogether, who knows neither Good nor Evil, can live.

There would be much to say about this, but what I have written must suffice. We have seen the nature of the "Russian man." He reaches forth beyond prohibitions, beyond natural instincts, beyond morality. He is the man who has grasped the idea of freeing himself and on the other side, beyond the veil, beyond the *principium individuationis*, of turning back again. This ideal man of the Karamazovs loves nothing and everything, fears nothing and everything, does nothing and everything. He is primeval matter, he is monstrous soul-stuff. He cannot live in this form, he can only go under, he can only pass on.

Dostoevsky has conjured forth this creature of downfall, this fearful apparition. It has often been said that it is a good thing that his Karamazovs were not developed to their last stage. Otherwise not only Russia, but mankind would have been exploded into the air.

But what has been said, though the speaker has not drawn from his words their ultimate implications, can never be unsaid. That which exists, that which has been thought, that which is possible, can never again be extinguished. The "Russian man" has long existed, he exists far outside Russia, he rules half Europe, and part of the dreaded explosion has indeed in these last years been audibly evident. It shows itself in that Europe is tired, it shows itself in that Europe wants to turn homeward, in that Europe wants rest, in that Europe wants to be recreated, reborn.

There occur to me two pronouncements of a European who indisputably represents for us an age that is past, a Europe which, if it has not already gone under, is in the balance. I allude to the Kaiser Wilhelm. The one pronouncement is that which he once wrote under a somewhat extraordinary allegorical picture. In this he warned the European nations to guard their "holiest possessions" against the approaching peril from the East.

Kaiser Wilhelm was certainly not a wise or profound person. Yet he possessed, as the repository and guardian of old-world ideals, a certain hereditary insight which warned him against the dangers that threatened those ideals. He was not intellectual! he did not like reading good books, and he busied himself too much with politics. Thus, that picture with its warning to the nations was not, as one might think, the result of reading Dostoevsky, but of a vague fear of the Eastern hordes, which through Japanese ambitions, might be enrolled against Europe. The Kaiser knew but partially the import of his words and how uncommonly right he was. He certainly did not know the Karamazovs, he had a horror of profound thought, but he had an uncannily right foreboding. The danger was coming nearer every day. That danger was the Karamazovs, the contagion from the East. What he unconsciously but rightly feared was the staggering back of the tired European spirit to the Asiatic mother.

The second imperial pronouncement which occurs to me and which at that time made an awful impression on me, is this. "That nation will win the war which has the best nerves." When at that time, quite at the beginning of the war, I heard of that pronouncement, it came upon me like the muffled forewarning of an earthquake. It was, of course, clear that the Kaiser did not mean it so, what he really had in his mind was something very flattering to Germany. Very likely he himself had excellent nerves; his hunting and troop-display comrades also. He knew, too, the old weary story of effete and degenerate France and of virtuous, prolific Germany, and believed it. But for those with knowledge, still more for those with the intuition to sense to-morrow and the day after, that pronouncement was terrible. For they knew that the Germans had in no way better nerves than the French, English, and Americans, at best better than the Russians. For to have bad nerves is the colloquial term for hysteria and neurasthenia, for moral insanity and for all those evils which one may regard in different ways, but which collectively signify the Karamazov. With the exception of Austria, Germany stood infinitely more willingly and weakly open to the Karamazovs, to Dostoevsky, to Asia, than any other European people.

Thus the Kaiser too has twice uttered a forewarning, has indeed foretold the Downfall of Europe.

But quite another question is how we are to regard this Downfall. Here we are at the parting of the ways. Those who cling definitely to the past, those who venerate time-honoured cultural forms, the Knights of a treasured morality, must seek to delay this Downfall and will mourn it inconsolably when it passes. For them the Downfall is the End; for the others, it is the Beginning. For the first, Dostoevsky is a criminal, for the others a Saint. For the one party Europe and its soul constitute an entity once and for all, foreordained, inviolate, a thing fixed and immutable. For the other it is a becoming, a mutable, ever-changing thing.

The Asiatic, the chaotic, the savage, the dangerous, the amoral, in fact the Karamazov elements can, like everything else in the world, be regarded just as well from a positive as from a negative point of view. Those who, from a fear to which they give no name, curse this Dostoevsky, these Karamazovs, these Russians, this Asia, this Demiurge-fantasy, and all their implications, have a hard time before them. For Karamazov dominates more and more. But they fall into error by seeing only the obvious, the visible, the material. They see the Downfall of Europe coming as a horrible catastrophe with thunder and beating of drums, either as Revolution accompanied by slaughter and violence, or as the triumph of crime, lust, cruelty, corruption, and murder.

All that is possible, all of it is contained in Karamazov. One never knows what a Karamazov is going to do next. Perhaps he will surprise us with a death-blow, perhaps with a moving thanksgiving to God. He consists of Alyoshas and of Dmitris, of Fyodors and of Ivans. As we have seen, they are not to be identified with any single character, but with a readiness to adopt any and every character.

But there is no solace for the apprehensive, in that these incalculable people may just as well bring about a good as an evil future, that they are just as likely to found a new Kingdom of God as one of Satan. What stands or falls on earth concerns the Karamazovs little. Their secret lies elsewhere, and the value and fruitfulness of their amoral nature also.

These new people differ fundamentally from the earlier ones, the orderly, law-abiding, decent folk, in one vital respect, namely, that they live inwardly just as much as outwardly, that they are constantly concerned with their own souls. The Karamazovs are prepared to commit any crime, but they commit them only exceptionally because, as a rule, it suffices for them to have thought of crime or to have dreamt of it, to have made their soul a confidant of its possibility. Here lies their secret. Let us seek a formula for it.

Every formation of humanity, every culture, every civilization, every order, is based upon an endowment of something over and above that which is allowed and that which is forbidden. Man, halfway between animal and a higher consciousness, has always a great deal within him to repress, to hide, to deny, in order to be a decent human being and to be socially possible. Man is full of animal, full of primeval being, full of the tremendous, scarcely-tamed instincts of a beastly, cruel selfishness. All these dangerous instincts are there, always. But culture, super-consciousness, civilization, have covered them over. Man does not show them, he has learnt from childhood to hide these instincts and to deny them. But everyone of these instincts must come sooner or later to the surface. Each instinct goes on living, not one is killed, not one is permanently and for ever changed and ennobled. And each of these instincts is in itself good, is not worse than another. But for every period and culture there is a particular instinct which it regards with special aversion or horror. Now when these instincts are again aroused, in the form of unextinguished and merely superficially, though carefully, restrained nature-forces, when these beasts again begin roaring like slaves whose spirit, long crushed by flogging and repression, is rekindled by insurgence, then the Karamazovs are upon us. When a culture, one of these attempts to domesticate man, gets tired and begins to decay, then men become in greater measure remarkable. They become hysterical, develop strange lusts, become like young people in puberty or like women in child-birth. Longings for which man has no name, arise in the soul; longings which the old culture and morality must hold for wrong. But they announce themselves with so innocent a voice, that Good and Evil become interchangeable and every law reels.

Such people are the Brothers Karamazov. Every law easily appears to them as a convention, every morality as philistine; they lightly adopt every licence, every caprice. With ever so great a gladness they listen to the many voices in their own hearts.

But these souls need not inevitably reap crime and turbulence from Chaos. As a new direction is given to the interrupted primeval current, so the seed is sown of a new order, of a new morality.

With every culture it is the same. We cannot destroy the primeval current, the animal in us, for with its death we should die ourselves. But we can to a certain extent guide it, to a certain extent we can calm it down, to a certain extent make the "Good" serviceable, as one harnesses a vicious horse to a good cart. Only from time to time the lustre of this "Good" becomes old and weak, the instincts no longer really believe in it, refuse any longer to be yoked to it. Then the culture breaks in pieces, slowly as a rule, so that what we call ancient takes centuries to die.

And before the old, dying culture and morality can be dissolved into a new one, in that fearful, dangerous, painful stage, mankind must look again into its own soul, must see the beast arise in itself again, must again recognize the overlordship of the primeval forces in itself, forces which are super-moral. Those who are fore-ordained, prepared, and ripe for this event are Karamazovs. They are hysterical and dangerous, they are as ready to be malefactors as ascetics, they believe in nothing except the utter dubiousness of every belief.

Every symbol has a hundred interpretations, of which every one may be right. The Karamazovs too have a hundred interpretations. Mine is only one of them, one of a hundred. This book of Dostoevsky's has hung a symbol round the neck of mankind, has erected a monument for it just as an individual might in a dream create for himself an image of his warring instincts and forces.

It is phenomenal that one human being could have written The Brothers Karamazov. Now that the phenomenon has occurred, there is no necessity to explain it. But there is a profound necessity to emphasize this phenomenon, to read the writing as completely as possible, as comprehendingly as possible, to learn as much as possible of its wonderful magic. My work is to contribute a thought, a reflection, a commentary to that end, nothing more.

No one must suppose that I set forth these thoughts and suggestions as Dostoevsky's own. On the contrary, no great seer or poet, even if he had the power, has ever explained his story in its final significance.

In conclusion I would point out that this mystical romance, this dream of man, does not merely indicate the threshold across which Europe is stepping, the dangerous moment of hovering between the Void and the All. It also discloses the rich possibilities of the New Life.

In this connexion the figure of Ivan is astonishing. We learn to know him as a modern, accommodating, cultivated individual, somewhat cool, somewhat disappointed, somewhat sceptical, somewhat tired. But he gets younger, more ardent, more significant, more Karamazov-like. It is he who wrote the poem of the Great Inquisitor. It is he who, after coolly ignoring the murderer whom he believes his brother to be, is driven in the end to the deep sense of his own culpability and even to his self-denouncement. And it is he too who the most clearly and the most significantly experiences the spiritual explanation of the unconscious. (On that indeed everything turns. That is the whole meaning of the Downfall, the whole new birth arises from it.) In the last part of the book is a very singular chapter in which Ivan, coming home from his interview with Smerdyakov, sees the devil seated there and converses with him for an hour. This devil is no other than Ivan's unconscious, no other than the shaken-up content, long submerged and apparently forgotten, of his own soul. And he knows it too. Ivan knows it with astonishing certainty and distinctly says so. Nevertheless he speaks with the devil, nevertheless he believes in him--for what is inward, is outward. Nevertheless he is angered against him, surges against him, even throws a glass at him whom he knows to come from within himself. Surely no poem has ever set forth with more lucid clearness the communion of a human being with his own unconscious self. And this communion, this (despite anger) intimate understanding with the devil, this is just the road that the Karamazovs have been elected to show us. Indeed Dostoevsky shows the unconscious to be the devil. And rightly. For that which is within us is distorted by our tamed, cultivated, moral vision into something hateful and Satanic. But some sort of combination of Ivan and Alyosha would indeed provide that higher, more fruitful foundation upon which a new world must be built. Then the unconscious will no longer be the devil, but the God-Devil, Demiurgus, He who was always, who comes from the All. To find a new Good and a new Evil is not art eternal matter, is not the concern of Demiurgus. That is the business of mankind and its humbler and smaller Gods.

A whole chapter would have to be written about another, a fifth Karamazov, who plays a sinister but important role, although he always remains half shrouded. This is Smerdyakov, an illegitimate Karamazov. It is he who has assassinated the old man. It is he who faces an omnipresent God, as a self-convicted murderer. It is he who has to teach Ivan, the learned, about the most godly and the most mystical matters. He is the most unpractical and at the same time the wisest of all Karamazovs. But I find no space to do justice to him, the most mysterious Karamazov, in this essay.

Dostoevsky's book is not one that you can cut bits out of. I could go on for days seeking and finding new features all pointing in the same direction. One, a specially delightful and beautiful one, is the hysteria of the two Hohlakovs. Here we have again the Karamazov element intermingled with all that is strange and sick and bad in two characters. One of them, the mother Hohlakov, is simply unhealthy. Her behaviour is the result of habit which age has confirmed; the hysteria is merely illness, debility, and stupidity. But in the case of the magnificent daughter, it is not weariness which shows itself as a form of hysteria, but a passionate exuberance. She is haunted by the future. Immaturity and ripe love oppose each other in the scale. She develops the idea and vision of evil much further than her insignificant mother and yet the astonishing thing about the daughter is that the innocence and power behind her most wicked and shameless acts point her towards a future full of promise. The mother Hohlakov is an hysterical, fit for a sanatorium and nothing else. The daughter is a neurasthenic whose illness is the symptom of a noble energy to which expression is refused.

And do these developments in the souls of imagined characters of fiction really signify the Downfall of Europe?

Certainly. They signify it as surely as the mind's eye perceives life and eternity in the grass-blade of spring, and death and its inevitability in every falling leaf of autumn. It is possible that the whole Downfall of Europe will play itself out "only" inwardly, "only" in the souls of a generation, "only" in changing the meaning of worn-out symbols, in the dis-valuation of spiritual values. Thus, the ancient world, that first brilliant coining of European culture, did not go down under Nero. Its destruction was not due to Spartacus nor to the Germanic tribes. But "only" to a thought out of Asia, that simple, subtle thought that had been there very long, but which took the form the teacher Christ gave to it.

Naturally, one can if one likes regard The Brothers Karamazov from a literary point of view, as a work of art. When the unconscious of a whole continent and age has made of itself poetry in the nightmare of a single, prophetic dreamer, when it has issued in his awful, blood-curdling scream, one can of course consider this scream from the standpoint of a singing-teacher. Doubtless Dostoevsky was a very gifted poet in spite of the enormities one finds in his books. From such enormities, a poet pure and simple, such for instance as Turgenev, is free. Isaiah too was an extremely gifted poet. But is that important? In Dostoevsky, especially in The Karamazovs, one finds certain exaggerated and tasteless things. Such things, which would not do for artists, come about where a man already stands beyond Art. No matter. Even as an artist this Russian prophet now and then proves himself, makes himself famous, makes himself a world-wide celebrity. And one reflects with a strange feeling that for the Europe of the time when Dostoevsky had already written all his books, others than he were valued with the greatest European poets, Flaubert for instance. In comparison with The Brothers Karamazov Flaubert's work becomes quite a small artistic affair. Soon, European youth will hate and sneer at him with their elementary injustice, if only as a punishment for the exaggerated patronage of their fathers. No, this is no time for artists, that time has bloomed itself away.

But here I come upon a by-road. Elsewhere will be the place for me to consider why, at this juncture, Flaubert came disturbingly across my path and tempted me away from my concept. That too will have its own special significance. Now I must stick to my chief concern. I was going to say: perhaps the less such a world-book is a work of art, the truer is its prophecy. And, besides, it seems to me that there is so much that is remarkable and yet not wilful, not the work of a single intelligence, in the romance, in the fable, and in the invention of the Karamazovs. It seems not to be a poet's work. For instance, to say the whole thing at once, the most significant fact in the whole work is that the Karamazovs are innocents. All these four Karamazovs, father and sons, are dangerous, incalculable human beings. They have peculiar paroxysms, peculiar consciousnesses, peculiar unconsciousnesses. One is a drunkard, the other a woman-hunter, another is a fantastic hermit, the last is a poet of secret blasphemous verses. These peculiar brothers threaten much danger to others. They seize people by the beard, they do people out of money, they menace people with death--and yet they are innocent and, in spite of all, none of them have done anything really criminal. The only murderers in this long novel, which is chiefly concerned with murder, robbery, and crime, the only guilty murderers are the magistrate and the jury, the representatives of an ancient, honoured order, honest and blameless citizens. They condemn the innocent Dmitri, they scoff at his innocence, they are judges who estimate, criticize God and the world according to their code. And it is just they who err, just they who do fearful injustice, just they who become murderers from prejudice, from fear, from shallow-mindedness.

That is not a discovery, it is not a matter of literature. It is not the work of the smugly efficient literary detective or of the witty and satirical man of letters playing the social critic. We know all about that sort of thing and we are distrustful and we have long ceased to believe in it. No, for Dostoevsky the innocence of the criminal and the culpability of the judge are not in the least a cunning pretence. It is a fearful thing which stands forth and grows so surely, is rooted so deeply, that finally, almost in the last stage of the book, one stands aghast before the fact. One stands and gazes at the whole pain and insanity of the world, at the suffering and lack of understanding of men, as though one were facing a wall.

I said Dostoevsky is not a poet, or he is only a poet in a secondary sense. I called him a prophet. It is difficult to say exactly what a prophet means. It seems to me something like this. A prophet is a sick man, like Dostoevsky, who was an epileptic. A prophet is the sort of sick man who has lost the sound sense of taking care of himself, the sense which is the saving of the efficient citizen. It would not do if there were many such, for the world would go to pieces. This sort of sick man, be he called Dostoevsky or Karamazov, has that strange, occult, godlike faculty, the possibility of which the Asiatic venerates in every maniac. He is a seer and an oracle. A people, a period, a country, a continent has fashioned out of its corpus an organ, a sensory instrument of infinite sensitiveness, a very rare and delicate organ. Other men, thanks to their happiness and health, can never be troubled with this endowment. This sensory instrument, this mantological faculty is not crudely comprehensible like some sort of telepathy or magic, although the gift can also show itself even in such confusing forms. Rather is it that the sick man of this sort interprets the movements of his own soul in terms of the universal and of mankind. Every man has visions, every man has fantasies, every man has dreams. And every vision every dream, every idea and thought of a man, on the road from the unconscious to the conscious, can have a thousand different meanings, of which every one can be right. But the appearances and visions of the seer and the prophet are not his own. The nightmare of visions which oppresses him does not warn him of a personal illness, of a personal death, but of the illness, the death of that corpus whose sensory organ he is, This corpus can be a family, a clan, a people, or it can be all mankind. In the soul of Dostoevsky a certain sickness and sensitiveness to suffering in the bosom of mankind which is otherwise called hysteria, found at once its means of expression and its barometer. Mankind is now on the point of realizing this. Already half Europe, at all events half Eastern Europe, is on the road to Chaos. In a state of drunken illusion she is reeling into the abyss and, as she reels, she sings a drunken hymn such as Dmitri Karamazov sang. The insulted citizen laughs that song to scorn, the saint and seer hear it with tears.