

# **The Poor Devil**

**A Memory of Robert Reitzel**

John Hubert Greusel

1909



September, 1900, saw the end of a famous Detroit newspaper, known as "Der Arme Teufel," a little German weekly periodical founded by Robert Reitzel. The paper was obliged to suspend publication because of a lack of support. Reitzel carried it on successfully for fifteen years; and for the past three years, since his death, "The Poor Devil" had been in capable editorial hands. But people wanted Reitzel.

A review of the rise, growth and decline of this unique little periodical must, in effect, be an account of Reitzel's own peculiarities. Reitzel's battle-cry was "Death to hypocrisy!" He was the foe of custom and conventionality. Strong in his personal prejudices and idiosyncrasies, he refused to bow to the spirit of the times. He insisted that the world come to him. He had many noble ideas, but he joined with no man in their indorsement. All his life he lashed men for lack of justice, and never shaded or inclined.

As a business man he was grotesque. His paper went to England, France, Holland, Iceland, China, South Africa—in a word, to the ends of the earth. United with his amazing mental stubbornness was a quality sweet and mild, and sometimes he dipped his pen in gall and wormwood, and again he wrote with an Easter lily.

Reitzel's "Arme Teufel" was first printed in a little stuffy office on Champlain street, near Randolph, Detroit. The room was littered with newspaper plunder; a few woodcuts were tacked on the walls; a batch of old papers were stacked about; there was a bookcase in full view. It was a desolate, barren place, a mere loft, as it were.

At one of the tables Robert Reitzel, the editor, usually sat smoking a long pipe with a huge bowl. He was a man of medium size, inclining to stoutness. He had a large head, broad forehead, small nose, small dark eyes, black, luxuriant hair, inclined to curl, and, as an odd personal trait, occasionally sniffed the air by thrusting out his lips slightly as he wrote rapidly. He generally wore a white shirt, but was inclined to be negligent in other portions of his dress.

Reitzel was born in Baden, Germany; his father, a retired schoolmaster, living on a pension, resided in Carlsruhe. Robert, the only son, was born in 1848. He studied theology in one of the German universities, and then came to America, sojourning for a time in New York, and afterwards in Baltimore, but without attracting attention. In 1872 he appeared in Washington as a preacher for the German reformed church, corner of Sixth and N streets. Later he preached for the "Free church," as it was called. He gradually grew out of the Lutheran theological beliefs, began touring the country near and far as a lecturer.

For the last five years of his life this German prose-poet suffered from a lingering physical affliction which kept him chained to his bed, from which, in spite of excruciating pains, he cheerfully wrote the various articles that made "The Poor Devil" a welcome visit or to highly educated Germans in all parts of the world. The subscription list, at the height of prosperity, was about 4,000, at \$2.50 a year; but many who received the paper regularly never paid money, and Reitzel, with characteristic magnanimity, carried them on, year after year. His paper was read by people who did not, by any means, always agree with the frank utterances of the redoubtable editor; but the very audacity of his opinions made Reitzel's name unique. That he was not discovered by English-speaking people during his life time is due, it is said, to his utter lack of business management, to his improvidence, and above all to his indifference to praise or blame. He did not even place a file of his little paper in the Public Library; it would be too much like forethought for Reitzel; and lack of heed for tomorrow was one of his predominating traits.

Those who are fortunate enough to have bound copies of the complete "Poor Devil" have a work that is likely to command an extremely high price.

As said before, Reitzel started his career as a Lutheran minister, but in course of time he came to know that his heart was not in the work, and, with characteristic honesty, gave it up and became a lecturer, traveling all over the United States, forming a large body of friends, some of whom advanced money to help him start his paper while others became subscribers. It was not long before Reitzel, always ungovernable, fell away from the very people who had placed their means at his disposal. His poetic spirit, his bitterness, his ardor in support of what he considered just, his implacable enmities, his ardent support of honesty, as he saw honesty, and his fanatical zeal when he had pledged his word, made Reitzel a much-misunderstood character.

There was then no middle course. Reitzel was either loved or feared. His peculiar mental force pleased the coterie to which his paper appealed; and yet, singularly enough, it is doubtful if ever an issue of "The Poor Devil" was given to whose vitriolic utterances many of the subscribers did not take issue. Yet they bought and read the paper. They were, in effect, buying Reitzel's mental ugliness and his idealism, his flambouyant youth, his effervescence, his loyalty to friends, his desperation against his enemies.

In his first issue Reitzel gave his literary program. He begins with a poem, whose sentiments are said to be very Reitzelesque. The German versification has that smoothness characteristic of all this man's best work; and, without an attempt at a poetical translation, the ideas set in English read as follows:

FOR ENEMY AND FRIEND.

Keep away from me, you hypocritic toads!  
Keep away from me, who alway smile and joke!  
Away whom only foul vulgarity pleases—  
You cringers and flatterers, away!

I do not love the ever-cautious wise;  
Nor those who always ride the steeds of pathos!

Nor those who always cry of times so hard,  
Nor those who in the self-same circle swing.

I love those joyous, happy fellows  
Who gather where the full cup beckons,  
And love to sink on beauty's bosom  
And also those who hear the trumpet's blare!

Who understand our time's most forceful striving  
And carry in their hearts the spring of indignation;  
Who help to fight sweet Liberty's battle—  
And give their hearts' blood as a sacrifice!

Continuing, Reitzel, in a somewhat elaborate introduction, tells anecdotes of Lessing, Schiller, Feuerbach and others, showing that, after all is said of their exalted station, they were merely poor devils in the end. Thus Feuerbach's life is characterized by a philosophic friend, and when Schiller was born his uncle is said to have exclaimed with a sigh: "Another poor devil born into this world!" Then, in a thoroughly Reitzelesque style, the editor, disclaiming any such splendid talents, goes on to tell of a poor Norwegian soldier of fortune who, once upon a time in Switzerland, lost that which men hold dearest, his wife and home. And after that it was observed that he was always

fighting on humanity's battlegrounds. In Baden, in 1848, with the Italian states against the pope, on the red fields of the American civil war—wherever freedom's flag was unfurled—there was he found.

Those who knew and loved the old soldier of fortune gave him bread, and with peace and joyous heart, scarce knowing the sadness of life, he strolled slowly from town to town, and at night, using his coat for a pillow, he rested at the edge of the road, and looking up at the peaceful stars, felt a happiness no human tongue could sound. He realized that he was a part of the great plan of nature. "And so," says Reitzel, "as the old soldier fought for freedom, that, too, is my mission in my little paper, which henceforth is to be known as "The Poor Devil."

Reitzel was always absolutely ungovernable, and consequently the business management of his paper did not exist at all. He refused to receive his best advertiser's card on one occasion, simply because the advertiser was overheard expressing some heretical opinion. It is said that Reitzel never solicited an advertisement in his life. When funds ran low a notice, usually couched in comical style, would appear in "The Poor Devil," calling on those in arrears; and to make sure that the request was not to be construed as a begging plan, Reitzel made it clear that his words were intended only for those able to pay. There were many persons on his lists from whom he never expected money. Thus, obtaining cash enough to supply the immediate needs of those about him, Reitzel continued his paper with a free hand and after his own good fashion of a knight-errant, hitting a head wherever one popped up.

This man was no respecter of persons, and yet there was that about him that bespoke the tenderness and the sincerity of a child. If anyone told him that a certain passage was beautifully turned, he stroked his chin and said "Ugh, ugh;" and after that the attacks of all the newspapers in the country were indifferent to him, because one person had understood him aright.

His writings at best have the classic touch, the purity of expression that marks the greatest German prose masters.

Reitzel's special study was Heinrich Heine, whom he resembled in many ways. His life, like Heine's, consisted of a long struggle against hypocrisy; his defiance of the conventions of life was similar to Heine's; his joy in greeting friends, in drinking wine, his love of life in its merriest phases, was equal to that of the great Heine; and, finally, Reitzel's death was similar to that of the German poet, even in its very form, for each man came to the last stretched for months at a time on a bed of suffering, thru spinal trouble, and thus stricken unto death, like a prisoner in a cell, waiting to be taken to the scaffold, each wrote much beautiful prose and poetry between momentary relief from great mental and physical pain.

Reitzel resembled Brann, the Iconoclast, perhaps, so far as his boldness, but unlike Brann, Reitzel's work was not disfigured by apostleship of the purely sexual, in an objectionable sense; and to an extent "The Poor Devil" had an affinity in the little "Philistine," the East Aurora publication. He wrote absolutely what he believed truth and nothing but the truth. Once a prominent Parisian publication asked him for an article on the tendencies in American newspapers, and urged that he name his own price, to which Reitzel responded with considerable disdain that "price" was a matter of indifference to him, that he wrote only for his own paper, and that, if there happened to be anything in "The Poor Devil" that fitted the proposed suggestion, the Parisian editor was welcome to use it without cost.

Reitzel, intensely erratic in all things, lived a life of total independence, upon which he prided himself as the basis of all his philosophic strength. He did what he pleased, and that ended his personal responsibility. Occasionally numbers of "The Poor Devil" would appear containing scarcely

a scratch of his pen, but filled up with letters, clippings and miscellany. He facetiously called these "champagne numbers," and they were issued whenever he was away enjoying himself, drinking. At such times he neither wrote nor thought of writing, nor did he give a snap for his paper or its subscribers. His friends and enemies soon learned to expect these whimsical moods and passed them by as a joke.

Such was the erratic Reitzel.

While he was such a poor manager, in a commercial sense, this fierce, intractable man, in some ways, had sympathies as broad as humanity. There was a standing notice in his paper to the effect that "any fellows tramping thru the country and not knowing where to get a bite to eat or a bed should come to the office of 'The Poor Devil,' in Detroit." The result of such magnanimity may readily be imagined. They say that Reitzel, from his sick bed, where he was forced to gasp in pain for the last five years of his life, sometimes, when well enough to sit up, was able to see a little meadow, at the corner of the street; and here his sensitive, poetic nature beheld beauty as the seasons came and went. Spring brought back the delicate green grasses, summer clothed the little meadow in deep emerald, which in turn in the fall of the year gradually faded into the gloom that foreshadows the long, sad winter, when the snow lays deep and level upon the frozen ground. Propped up in bed, Reitzel, the poet-painter, discovered here more glimpses of Nature's loveliness in this little meadow than many a person sees on a splendid foreign tour, from the window of a parlor car, with every luxury at hand, as the train speeds thru the most enchanting scenic backgrounds in the world.

Reitzel's paper is without an index, and as "The Poor Devil" was published for fifteen years, the confusion involved in discovering a former extract is well nigh disastrous.

His biography of Shakespeare—only a fragment—is one of the most beautiful things in the German language. Shakespeare was one of Reitzel's hero-men. So was Jesus Christ, and Reitzel was a free thinker. But he admired Christ's teachings.

Such a paper, such an individual force, must necessarily pass with the death of the editor. Every effort was made to find a successor who would follow the old lines; and Martin Drescher is declared by his friends to have been capable in every way; but it was Reitzel that the friends of "Der Arme Teufel" had been wont to buy. Now that he was no more no other editor could possibly take his place. And now it is all merely a memory.

Reitzel's ashes repose in an urn in the columbarium of the Detroit crematory.

## **Reitzel**

### **By Jo Labadie**

In a little dingy workshop,  
Past which dull toilers hied,  
A worker dreamed and pounded  
As his products multiplied;  
From his great heart came arolling  
Songs freedom sweet extolling.  
  
He toiled amaking ordnance  
In his arsenal of thought  
To use against the despots

For the havoc they had wrought  
Among the lowly legions  
In the ever-plodding regions.

He fashioned arms for freedom  
That would slay the tyrant foe,  
That would fill the heart with battle  
Of the dull, ignoble low,  
That would make invaders tremble,  
That would shame who would dissemble.

He sent these piercing missiles  
These dum-dum bullet-words,  
Where they did the gravest damage  
To false leaders of the herds,  
To the conscienceless despoilers,  
And the wooden-headed toilers.

He died in the heat of battle,  
Wounded sorely in the fight,  
'Mid the conflict's roar and rattle  
For Liberty and Right;  
'Mid the love of friends expired,  
All his comrades true inspired.

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