

Cain, where is your brother Abel?

by Moritz Nestor

Curious to read again my juvenile literature after half a century, some time ago in an antiquarian bookstore I took from a stack of the famous green Karl May volumes, which pile up next to the cash desk, each volume for five Swissfrancs, “Winnetou I and II”, “Old Firehand I and II” and the “Oil Prince”.

I belong to a generation that grew up with Karl May. “Exciting adventure novels” – in my memory there is not much more of the peace fighter and anti-colonialist of the German Empire. It is largely forgotten that on the eve of the First World War, Karl May was a committed comrade-in-arms and friend of Berta von Suttner.

Only Karl May’s preface to the first volume of “Winnetou, der Rote Gentleman” (Winnetou, the red gentleman), as the original was called, brings back memories. I am back in those nights with a flashlight under my bedspread: the injustice outraging you at that time because the Indians, natives of America, the real owners of the land, are robbed of their land by whites greedy for gold calling themselves Christians. The sharp and incorruptible thinking of the two blood brothers, unmasking deceit, injustice, and lies, assisting the disenfranchised, precisely detecting tracks and ambushes. Every issue comes to the judgment seat of reason. There Karl May is enlightener of purest water.

Now and again the radical rejection of revenge and of the right of the fist: the two blood brothers do not attack, do not provoke a fight. However, with all their powers of spirit and weapons they repel any attack, killing, robbery, injustice, even and especially when it is done to others: the two friends as a living symbol of armed neutrality, deeply disliking of having to harm if necessary in self-defence. Those who, in awe of man as the image of God and in deep contempt for the greed for power and gold, the squalid filth, know only one goal: saving and protecting life wherever possible. Living humanity under the concentrated protective power of a sharp mind, butterfly hand, silver rifle, bear slayer and the 25-shot Henry carbine. In this spirit, in the midst of seething colonialism and imperialism, the writer Karl May writes lively, exciting travel descriptions appealing to everyone and striving for an ethical purpose on hundreds and hundreds of pages: Educating the youth, on the eve of the First World War, when the plans for mass slaughter are already in the drawers and the armaments spiral is inexorably turning, on the basis of human models such as Winnetou, Kleki Petra, Intschu Tschuna, Old Shatterhand and others, in the spirit of peace, charity, humanity and international understanding. Moreover, to abhorrence of colonialism, genocide and war!

The introduction to “Winnetou I” is Karl May’s political-human credo, who has been associated with Christianity and natural law:

“If it is right that everything that lives is entitled to life, and that this applies to mankind as a whole as well as to the individual, then the red man has the right to exist no less than the white man and may lay claim to the power of developing in social, in public relationship according to his individuality.”

In 1948, the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will say: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This is the meaning of the blood brotherhood between the two main characters, white Old Shatterhand and red Winnetou. So much for adventure novel! In the German Empire, in the midst of colonialism, there is a writer creating a figure in his youth books every young person can identify with and who demands exactly what the war-mongering powers despise: the unrestricted right of self-determination of all peoples and all men, because, says May: “everything that lives, is entitled to life”.

The book cover of “Winnetou I”, edition 1904, was designed by Sascha Schneider (1870–1927) and depicts Cain and Abel: the fratricide. Winnetou is the memorial, being erected by Karl May to the “dying red man” being murdered by the white brother.

“He, the best, most loyal and most devoted of all my friends, was a genuine type of race from whom he came, and as he perishes, he, too, has perished, extinguished from life by the murderous bullet of an enemy. I loved him like no other man, and still today I love the dying nation whose most noble son he has been. I would have given my life to him to preserve his, as he dared to do for me a hundred times. This was not granted to me; he passed away, as he always was, a saviour of his friends; but he is said to have died only physically and to live here in these pages as he lives in my soul, he, Winnetou, the great Apache chief. To him I want to set the well-deserved monument here, and if the reader, who looks at it with his spiritual eye, then makes a fair judgment of the people whose faithful individual

image was the chief, then I am richly rewarded."

For the book "Winnetou II", which appears in the spring of 1904, the artist Sascha Schneider chooses, according to the historical situation, the motif "The angel of God grieves over the fighting races". First World War is on the horizon! In 1905, the couple May will attend an event by Bertha von Suttner, from which they will go home moved to tears. From then on Bertha von Suttner counts beyond the death of Karl May to his intellectual colleagues. Deeply moved by his books, she felt how much he served the common goal: peace on earth, lay down your arms! The Radebeuler Tageblatt (Radebeul newspaper) wrote on 13 February 1913: "Mrs Baroness Bertha von Suttner, the well-known author of the work 'Lay Down Your Arms!' and representative of the peace movement, stayed in Radebeul today and paid a visit to the writer Karl May's widow. As we all know, Karl May was interested in promoting the aims of the Baroness von Suttner." And the widow Klara May noted in her diary on 12 February 1913: "Bertha von Suttner [...] speaks in the highest respect of Karl May's work – that she is nothing against him." In another place, a sentence from Bertha von Suttner has been handed down: "If only I could have designed one of these works, I would have achieved more!" Only since the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928 and the UN Charter of 1948, war has been banned as a tool of politics under international law and disputes must be resolved peacefully – says the current international law. In particular, the war of aggression, including the genocide of the Indians, has since been doing violence to international law. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and its successor pacts) guaranteed for the first time the right to life to all people. In May's words, "what lives is entitled to life." Considering that in 1904, when "Winnetou I" appeared, Wilhelm II's "Hun speech" ("No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken!") from 27 May 1900 in Bremerhaven on the occasion of the adoption of German troops to crush the Boxer Rebellion in the Empire of China belonged to the Zeitgeist repertoire, then Karl May was his time very far ahead. And in sharp contrast, the first sentences in "Winnetou I" accuse:



Edition of 1904

"Whenever I think of the Indian, I always remember the Turk; this, as strange as it may seem, has its justification. Even though there are so few points of comparison between them, they are similar to each other in that one concludes with them, but with the one less than with the other: one speaks of the Turk scarcely otherwise than of the 'sick man', while everyone who knows the circumstances must call the Indian the 'dying man'. Yes, the red nation is dying! From the Tierra del Fuego to far beyond the North American lakes, the gigantic patient is stretched out, prostrated by an inexorable destiny, which knows no mercy. He struggled with all his strength against it, but in vain; his powers have more and more disappeared; he has but a few breaths to do and the twitches that move his naked body from time to time are the convulsions at death's door."

Once again: so much for adventure. Karl May writes his Winnetou in the age of colonialism and imperialism and is unthinkable without this historical-political relationship. The "sick man on the Bosphorus" is the Ottoman Empire, which during May's lifetime is about to be wiped out by the British-European colonial policy, and finally smashed in the aftermath of the First World War to secure the rich oil resources of the imperial powers. In his book "A Century of War: Anglo-American Oil Politics and the New World Order", William Engdahl describes the political connection Karl May addresses with the "sick man."

Winnetou, as Karl May wants it, is one of the dying nation of the natives of North America, in which the genocide is being carried out in his day. This is the historical framework without which Winnetou is incomprehensible. Not an adventure novel, but a tragic real story, cast in an exciting novel form and prepared to educate people, to awaken the hearts of young people out of ignorance and indifference to the land grabbing and the genocide of the rightful owners of the American continent. This is the starting point for the Winnetou stories.

While the colonial powers despise, rob and slaughter the "savages" and while the political philosophers of these imperial empires deny the coloureds the ability to reason and claim that the savages could not think and therefore could not form states, but must therefore be suppressed, Karl May appears on the scene and announces in his foreword to "Winnetou I":

"I say no! [...] The white man has gradually developed from a hunter to a shepherd, from there to a farmer and an industrialist; many centuries have gone by; but the red did not find this time because he was not granted."

Human cruelty is capable of "either a mere apparent or capable of a Christian mitigation, because the eternal wisdom given by this law is eternal love at the same time. Can we now claim that such mitigation has taken place in relation to the dying Indian race? It was not just a hospitable reception, but also an almost divine worship, which the first 'palefaces' found among the 'Indsmen'. Which reward did the latter get for it? Quite indisputably, the country they inhabited belonged to them; it was taken from them. Anyone who has read the history of the 'famous' Conquistadores knows which streams of blood flowed and which cruelties occurred. Subsequently it proceeded further based on this

model. The white man came with sweet words on his lips, but at the same time with the sharpened knife in his belt and the loaded rifle in his hand. He promised love and peace and gave hate and blood. The red man had to move, step by step, to retreat on and on. From time to time he was granted 'eternal' rights to 'his' territory, but after a short time he was driven out of it, farther, farther and farther. Land was 'bought' from him, but either was not payed for it at all or received worthless barter goods, which he could not use. However, the creeping poison of 'firewater' was brought to him the more carefully, as well as Variola and other, much worse and more disgusting diseases, which cleared whole tribes and depopulated entire villages. If the red man wanted to assert his right, he was answered with powder and lead, and again he had to give way to the superior weapons of the white men. Theron embittered he now retaliated against the single bleached face he encountered. The consequences were always literally massacres, which were done among the red men. Originally being a proud, bold, brave, truth-loving man, sincere man and always loyal to his friends, he became a secretly creeping, suspicious, lying man without being responsible for it, as it is not his, but the white's fault.

Where have the wild mustang herds gone, from among their number he once had boldly fetched his riding horse? Where do you see the buffaloes that nourished him when they populated the prairies by the millions? What is he living on today? On the flour and the meat he is supplied with? Watch how much gypsum and other beautiful things are in this flour; who can enjoy it! And if a tribe is once awarded a hundred 'extra-fat' bullocks, on the way they have turned into two or three old, emaciated cows, from which a vulture can hardly tear down a bite. Or should the red man live on agriculture? Can he count on his harvest, he the lawless one, who is constantly being supplanted, to whom is not given a permanent site? [...]

Yes, he has become a sick man, a dying man, and we stand compassionately at his miserable bed to shut his eyes. Standing at a deathbed is a serious thing, but a hundred times serious if that deathbed is that of a whole race. Many, many questions arise, above all: What would this race have been able to do if they had been granted time and space to develop their inner and outer powers and talents? Which peculiar forms of culture will be lost to mankind by the downfall of this nation?"

The events, plots, tragedies and struggles of the Winnetou-narrations are woven from this: contemporary history, vividly cast in the form of a novel, dealing with the most terrible thing that Cain can do to Abel, but where people appear who testify: it does not have to be like that. Man is capable of more. He is capable of reason and humanity. He can overcome hatred and primitive greed for gold – no matter what skin colour he has. Again and again Karl May depicts scenes in which Winnetou is able to be more human than many white people. They belong to the most moving: Because he is a human being, for that reason alone, he is capable of what the colonial European only attributes to himself: charity, education, culture. Out of the spiritual and emotional community of the blood brothers Old Shatterhand and Winnetou, Karl May develops an example becoming alive to the reader for the mutual non-violent connection and understanding of two cultures. All people are capable of doing that, regardless of their skin colour, because they are human beings. This is Karl May's message.

Can a topic be more relevant today? Where do we find books of this kind for young people today? Would it not be about time to reread old Karl May? •