

Practical proof of the adage that
Wild West stories can be harmful

Cowboy Mentor of the Führer

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The Wild West is still wild and wonderful and very far away – for the boys in Leipzig, Breslau and Hannover. The names of Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, Rio Grande, Sierra-de-los-Organos, Rianca and Guadalupe, are still charged with romantic spell. Oh, the endless prairies, the glowing sands of the deserts. Oh, those magic nights in the open, under a purple moon and amazing stars that have a so much wilder luster than on European skies! Oh, the martial and yet idyllic life in the wigwam, the stamping buffaloes, the untamed mustangs, the staunch-hearted Sioux! Oh, Winnetou, noble chieftain of the Apaches! Life in those regions is tremendous with danger, and fun. It is perpetual play, and struggle and adventure, gay and bloody. The wicked Ogellallah Indians are forever waiting in ambush for their innocent victims. Everyone is in the habit of spending a large part of his day in ambush – a very cozy but exiting place to be. Valiant Winnetou is always on the alert. Young braves are proud of their scalp collections, much as European boys are of their stamps or butterflies. The villains are shrewd and efficient: but definitely less so than Old Shatterhand, who always rushes into the picture, an experienced *deus ex machina*, just in the nick of time – a fascinating blend of young Siegfried and Tom Mix: smart and bold, tough and charming, generous and swift, exceedingly attractive, fairly cultured, even scholarly, and a shade sadistic. He plans and carries out gigantic butcheries, and his hands still dripping with blood, gives us detailed information on Indian life. For he happens also to be a highly gifted writer, who describes his innumerable adventures with eloquence and verve. On many thousands of pages he cheerfully boasts of his amazing deeds. His vanity is disarming. Over and over he says, “*I am great, I am marvellous*” – and the boys believe it. Millions of young readers in all German-speaking countries were captivated by him for decades. He was no mere favorite author: he was an idol, and all these admirers of his were possessed by the one ardent desire of becoming heroic, daring und ingenious like Old Shatterhand.

His real name was Karl May, and he was one of the most popular authors Germany has ever produced. His books have an enormous circulation even today. There is a special Karl May Publishing House, in Radebeul near Dresden, and his former residence, Villa Shatterhand, is open to the public as a Karl May Museum. It contains all the “trophies” ostensibly collected by the author-hero on his adventurous journeys through America and the Orient.

Reading Karl May, imitating and worshipping him, used to be a sort of contagious disease among boys in all parts of Germany and neighboring countries. In the beginning, parents and teachers took objection to this Karl May-mania on the part of the young. Their sound instinct told them that the literary production of this dubious adventure, was sheer trash, and not even harmless at that. They wanted to be sure, however, and therefore started reading Karl May themselves. And they, too, were completely won over. Old Shatterhand’s bubbling imagination, his brassy selfconfidence, his overwhelming naïveté proved to be quite irresistible.

One of the most ardent Karl May fans was a certain good-for-nothing from Brunau, Austria, who was to rise to impressive heights. Young Adolf was seriously smitten by Karl May, whose works were his favorite, if not his only reading, even in later years. His own imagination, his whole notion of life was impregnated by these Western thrillers. The cheap and counterfeit conception of “heroism” presented by Karl May fascinated the future Führer; he loved this primitive but effective shrewdness: the use of “secret weapons” and terrible tricks, such as carrying prisoners as shields, the brutal cunning of wild animals in the jungle; he was delighted by the glorification of savages. Lazy and aimless, Adolf was perfectly at home in this dubious labyrinth created by a morbid und infantile brain. What the unsuccessful Austrian painter und potential dictator chiefly admired in Old Shatterhand, was his mixture of brutality and hypocrisy: he could quote the Bible with the greatest ease while toying with murder; he carried out the worst atrocities with a clear conscience; for he took it for granted that his enemies were of an “inferior race” and hardly human – whereas he, Old Shatterhand, was a superman, called by God to destroy evil and promote the good. Being

the militant incarnation of all good and noble principles, anything he did was necessarily good and noble: his cruelty was praised as heroism, his lack of morals interpreted as admirable ingenuity. The depraved, ambitious youth from Brunau was convinced that that was the way to be. He could see no reason why Old Shatterhand's convictions and tactics should not work if applied to national and international politics. One might conquer civilization by going back to the principles of the jungle. ... It hardly is an exaggeration to say that Karl May's childish and criminal fantasia has actually – though obliquely – influenced the history of the world.

He was admired not merely as a great narrator, but also, or chiefly as a powerful personality – as the hero who had actually faced all the dangers and performed astounding deeds described in his books. There was hardly a reader who dared to question the credibility of his dramatic reports. He had been in the Orient, he had had adventures rivaling the *Thousand-and-One Nights*. In Baghdad and Cairo he took an Arabian disguise and called himself Kara Ben Nemsi, while in the American wilderness he appeared as Old Shatterhand. But underneath he remained the same Karl May, who earned a considerable fortune and even greater fame through his brash inventions. Even some of the critics considered May's fantastic tales a trustworthy representation of the American scene. A French writer, for instance, makes the following statements in his preface to the French version of Karl May's story *The Revenge of the Farmer*:

The traveller [Karl May] assures us that no single point in his story is invention or exaggeration. He has traveled extensively in the United States, and merely describes what he has actually seen. The peculiarities of the New World no longer shock or surprise him; he is accustomed to them American morals, no matter what certain admirers of that young civilization might say, are generally inferior to ours: they sometimes lower themselves to abject savagery, especially when it comes to ugly practices of personal revenge ...

The French admirer adds a few remarks concerning the ghastly custom of lynching – severe words which are undeniably justified in themselves, but have very little to do with Karl May's queer interpretation of American life, and finally draws this conclusion:

A kind of mutilated Christianity such as we find in that country, is unable to maintain the divine law of Pardon ... The thirst for both gold and revenge are the two most terrible passions of the Yankee.

This enlightened critic must have felt somewhat let down when the ridiculous truth at last transpired; that Herr Karl May in Radebeul near Dresden had been swindling his millions of credulous followers: he had never been in America at all. This was an embarrassing blow to all Karl May fans; but Old Shatterhand's position grew still worse when the question suddenly arose: Then where was he during all those years, which he was supposed to have spent in the United States? The answer was rather a shock!

It was he himself who had foolhardily provoked the whole scandal by bringing an action against the heirs of his former publisher, Mr. Muenchmeyer. This gentleman had published, years before, a series of cheap stories, entitled *Little Roses from the Woods* – rather maudlin stuff with a definitely pornographic flavor. The author hidden behind a romantic pseudonym was no one but Karl May. Since he had meanwhile gained a considerable popularity, Muenchmeyer's heirs thought it opportune to bring out a few editions of these greasy romances – appearing, this time, under the name of the celebrated favorite of German youth. Old Shatterhand – for the first time in his life seriously attacked – desperately tried to defend himself: he claimed that the compromising publications were forgeries, in which essential parts of the original text had been falsified. Winnetou's Great White Brother, however, made a fatal blunder: he should have been more aware of his own precarious position.

For the idol of German boyhood turned out to be an ordinary ex-convict who had served many years of severe imprisonment in various Saxon jails. He had been condemned repeatedly for all kinds of theft and forgery. He had stolen everything from billard balls and gold watches to baby carriages and horses; had cheated peasants and little store-keepers by presenting himself as a famous physician or the agent of an insurance company; one of the fanciful pseudonyms he used on these occasions, was, curiously enough, *Dr. Heilig* – which means Dr. Holy. He had been a pathological liar and a vulgar crook with a definite leaning toward delusions of grandeur. His petty crimes, his underhanded little tricks against society reflect an obvious and rather pitiable inferiority complex. He was born the son of a poor weaver, in a dreary village near Chemnitz, Saxony, and had had a miserable youth. He was exceedingly vain, and very eager to impress a world that had treated him so badly. In the beginning he may have dreamed of becoming a great robber,

feared by the rich und envied by the poor. But the only result of his fantastic attempts in this direction was even greater humiliation. So at last he became disgusted with his own identity, his dull und glamorless lot – and decided to transform himself into Old Shatterhand and Kara Ben Nemsî, the heroic acventurer of the Orient. Both were lavishly gifted with all those qualities and virtues in which the real Karl May was so deplorably lacking. Since he himself was mendacious, stingy, sickly and neurasthenic, his exotic “doubles” were naturally generous, charming and athletic. He spent most of the precious years of his youth behind the bars, but the whole world unfolded, before his dream-incarnations, they wandered across American plains and Arabian deserts, romantically garbed as cowboys or Oriental sheiks.

Once while being transported from one provincial jail to another, he managed to escape his guards. He disappeared for several months, and it seems likely that he actually spent that period between imprisonment in the South of France, Italy and Egypt. An odd witness to May’s visit in Marseille was the French poet Comte de Lautréamont, eccentric und highly gifted forerunner of the modern *surréalists*. Lautréamont – whose real name was Isidore Ducasse – occasionally mentioned a depraved German whom he had met at Marseille, and who bore an obvious resemblance to Karl May. (The latter incidentally later used Ducasse’s aristocratic pseudonym as his own *nom de plume*, changing it slightly into Latréaumont.)

His Arabian tales, *The Silver Lion* etc., are, of course, as fantastic as his stories of Texas and Arizona. Yet the author seems a trifle more familiar with the French-African background than with America. There is hardly a single detail in his “American” stories, such as *Winnetou*, *Old Surehand*, *The Black Mustang*, *Christmas*, *Winnetou’s Heirs*, that is not a total and ludicrous misrepresentation. Atmosphere and landscape, gestures, words and actions are thoroughly un-American. Un-American are the villains – who, for some mysterious reason, are usually presented as Mormons or *Americans*; un-American the noble heroes; utterly un-American above all, is the self-righteous narrator, Old Shatterhand-Karl May. His cold cruelty and the complete absence of any sense of humor even make him a decidedly anti-American type, and the only thing that he does accurately represent is the image of an American adventurer in the mind of a petty criminal from Saxony.

There had been mild protests before against Karl May’s immoderate influence over the boys of Germany. But when the appalling facts of his past were revealed, a howl of moral indignation arose throughout the conservative und liberal press. From platforms and pulpits he was ominously labeled the Corrupter of Youth. The milder of his judges declared that he was half-mad. Had he not portrayed, in his famous *Winnetou*, an insane poet, constantly struggling against inward voices and frightfull hallucinations? And Karl May, in all his shameful misery, almost believed himself that he was going crazy, and perhaps had never been quite normal. ... He was abused not only as a thief, an imposter and forger, but also as a voluptuary and sexual pervert. Journalists uncovered and ruthlessly exposed compromising stories concerning his first marriage: his indulgences were described as unspeakable.

He suffered a severe nervous breakdown, and it was cold comfort that a few sporadic voices bravely came out in his defense. A professor named Gurlitt published a pamphlet called *Justice for Karl May! A few wellmeaning critics even expressed an opinion that the author of Winnetou might have been in the United States at some time, after all. The main argument for this theory was the fact that Karl May occasionally used, in the German text of his stories, certain American words, which – according to these observers – nobody could possibly know unless he had actually lived among cowboys. The “American” vocabulary that made such an impression on these critics consists mainly of short exclamations such as He, greenhorn Ah, devils Damned, or an occasional Well..., Old Boy ..., and Good Night. It seems conceivable that even a weaver’s son from Chemnitz may have had enough linguistic intuition to grasp the meaning of such words, even without having crossed the Atlantic.*

The problem of whether or not Old Shatterhand had really been on the scene of all his alleged adventures, played a crucial role in the discussions of Karl May’s work and character. He himself retired to a purely defensive position, and his statements concerning his American experiences became more and more hazy and ambiguous. He confined himself to rather general statements: that an author, after all, has the natural right to make up stories; that he had never claimed to write only the literal truth; that a certain symbolic element, even a touch of the fairy-tale, were characteristic of his style and so on.

Karl May, harassed by questions and insulting letters, had decided to assume the attitude of a martyr, a noble victim of bigotry and petty prejudice. He appealed cleverly to the sympathy, the tolerance and psychological understanding of his fellow-citizens. He turned Catholic, and wrote books of a mystic character. Public indignation gradually calmed down. Karl May made several extensive voyages with his second wife, Frau Klara May. He tried to refute the slanderous talk about his cowardice and falsehood by venturing on a trip to Egypt. He also crossed the Atlantic with Mrs. May, in 1908, four years before his death. The belated visit to the United States was bound to be disappointing. The elderly couple inspected Niagara Falls, Yellowstone Park, the Grand Canyon, various Indian settlements, and the grave of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Karl May disliked the noisy American cities. He felt that America did not really live up to the grand vision he had so long ago conceived in his Saxon prison cells. Frau Klara wrote a book entitled *With Karl May Across America*. It also includes the story of a second trip to the United States undertaken after her husband's death. The devoted widow then faithfully followed in what she calls "Karl May's footsteps" – probably referring to the fantastic zigzag as outlined in Old Shatterhand's poetical reports. In the Denver Zoo she took a look at *Leo the Lion* – "model of the trade mark of the Mayer-Holdway (!) films," as she puts it. The proud animal was just celebrating its sixteenth birthday. The German lady was also permitted to shake hands with President Hoover. She sums up her impression of the President:

President Hoover is a man whose personality fails to arouse warm sympathy, even in America. But as I looked at his sharply chiseled features I was struck by the impression: Here is a man who knows exactly what he wants.

That the German Ambassador introduced May's widow to the White House seems to prove that at the time of his death, in 1912, Old Shatterhand had more or less regained his respected position. For German faith in authority is not easily shaken. And the author of *Winnetou* had established himself as the supreme authority in everything concerning Indians and Arabs, deserts, jungles and prairies, had, indeed, become something like a national institution. Compromised for a short while, he was again to assert his dubious sway over new generations of German boys.

Much enthusiasm was wasted, youthful imagination was tainted and confused. A whole generation in Germany grew brutish and ran wild – partly through the evil influence of Karl May. For he had deliberately falsified their picture of foreign countries, and, above all of America, of its landscape and people and its moral code. He had poisoned their hearts and souls with hypocritical morality and the lurid glorification of cruelty. He had entangled the simple notions of truth and falsehood. He anticipated, in a quasi-literary sphere, the catastrophic reality that is now before us; he was the grotesque prophet of a sham Messiah.

The Third Reich is Karl May's ultimate triumph, the ghastly realization of his dreams. It is according to ethical and aesthetic standards indistinguishable from his, that the Austrian house-painter, nourished in his youth by Old Shatterhand, is now attempting to rebuild the world. His murderous minions are perverted romanticists, infantile, criminal, irresponsible. They are hopelessly estranged from both reality and art, sacrificing all civilization and all common sense.

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Klaus Mann (1906–1949), Schriftsteller, Sohn von Thomas Mann, emigrierte 1933 nach Frankreich, 1938 nach Amerika.

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