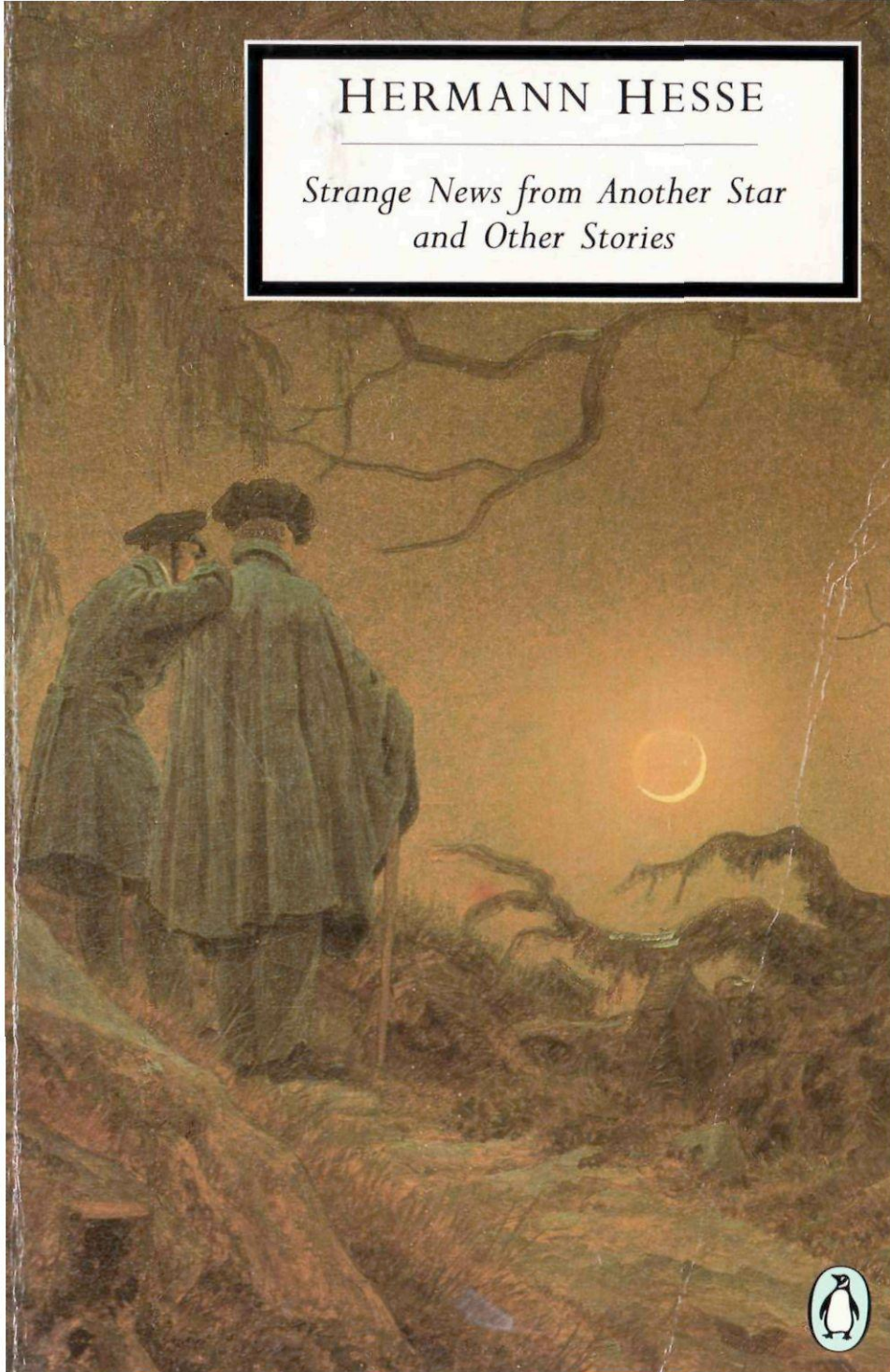


HERMANN HESSE

*Strange News from Another Star
and Other Stories*



"The Poet" - a fable by Hermann Hesse (1913)
in *Strange News....*, Penguin, London, 1976.

The Poet

The story is told of the Chinese poet Han Fook that from early youth he was animated by an intense desire to learn all about the poet's art and to perfect himself in everything connected with it. In those days he was still living in his home city on the Yellow River and had become engaged – at his own wish and with the aid of his parents, who loved him tenderly – to a girl of good family; the wedding was to be announced shortly for a chosen day of good omen. Han Fook at this time was about twenty years old and a handsome young man, modest and of agreeable manners, instructed in the sciences and, despite his youth, already known among the literary folk of his district for a number of remarkable poems. Without being exactly rich, he had the expectation of comfortable means, which would be increased by the dowry of his bride, and since this bride was also very beautiful and virtuous, nothing whatever seemed lacking to the youth's happiness. Nevertheless, he was not entirely content, for his heart was filled with the ambition to become a perfect poet.

Then one evening when a lantern festival was being celebrated on the river, it happened that Han Fook was wandering alone on the opposite bank. He leaned against the trunk of a tree that hung out over the water, and mirrored in the river he saw a thousand lights floating and trembling, he saw men and women and young girls on the boats and barges, greeting each other and glowing like beautiful flowers in their festive

robes, he heard the girl singers, the hum of the zither and the sweet tones of the flute players, and over all this he saw the bluish night arched like the dome of a temple. The youth's heart beat high as he took in all this beauty, a lonely observer in pursuit of his whim. But much as he longed to go across the river and take part in the feast and be in the company of his bride-to-be and his friends, much deeper was his longing to absorb it all as a perceptive observer and to reproduce it in a wholly perfect poem: the blue of the night and the play of light on the water and the joy of the guests and the yearning of the silent onlooker leaning against the tree trunk on the bank. He realized that at all festivals and with all joys of this earth he would never feel wholly comfortable and serene at heart; even in the midst of life he would remain solitary and be, to a certain extent, a watcher, an alien, and he felt that his soul, unlike most others, was so formed that he must be alone to experience both the beauty of the earth and the secret longings of a stranger. Thereupon he grew sad, and pondered this matter, and the conclusion of his thoughts was this, that true happiness and deep satisfaction could only be his if on occasion he succeeded in mirroring the world so perfectly in his poems that in these mirror images he would possess the essence of the world, purified and made eternal.

Han Fook hardly knew whether he was still awake or had fallen asleep when he heard a slight rustling and saw a stranger standing beside the trunk of the tree, an old man of reverend aspect, wearing a violet robe. Han Fook roused himself and greeted the stranger with the salutation appropriate to the aged and distinguished; the stranger, however, smiled and spoke a few verses in which everything the young man had just felt was expressed so completely and beautifully and so exactly in accord with the rules of the great poets that the youth's heart stood still with amazement.

'Oh, who are you?' he cried, bowing deeply. 'You who can

see into my soul and who recite more beautiful verses than I have ever heard from any of my teachers!

The stranger smiled once more with the smile of one made perfect, and said: 'If you wish to be a poet, come to me. You will find my hut beside the source of the Great River in the north-western mountains. I am called Master of the Perfect Word.'

Thereupon the aged man stepped into the narrow shadow of the tree and instantly disappeared, and Han Fook, searching for him in vain and finding no trace of him, finally decided that it had all been a dream caused by his fatigue. He hastened across the boats and joined in the festival, but amid the conversation and the music of the flutes he continued to hear the mysterious voice of the stranger, and his soul seemed to have gone away with the old man, for he sat remote and with dreaming eyes among the merry folk, who teased him for being in love.

A few days later Han Fook's father prepared to summon his friends and relations to decide upon the day of the wedding. The bridegroom demurred and said: 'Forgive me if I seem to offend against the duty a son owes his father. But you know how great my longing is to distinguish myself in the art of poetry, and even though some of my friends praise my poems, nevertheless I know very well that I am still a beginner and still on the first stage of the journey. Therefore, I beg you let me go my way in loneliness for a while and devote myself to my studies, for it seems to me that having a wife and a house to govern will keep me from these things. But now I am still young and without other duties, and I would like to live for a time for my poetry, from which I hope to gain joy and fame.'

The speech filled his father with great surprise and he said: 'This art must indeed be dearer to you than anything, since you wish to postpone your wedding on account of it. Or

has something arisen between you and your bride? If so, tell me so that I can help to reconcile you, or select another girl.'

The son swore, however, that his bride-to-be was no less dear to him than she had been yesterday and always, and that no shadow of discord had fallen between them. Then he told his father that on the day of the lantern festival a Master had become known to him in a dream, and that he desired to be his pupil more ardently than all the happiness in the world.

'Very well,' his father said, 'I will grant you a year. In this time you may pursue your dream, which perhaps was sent to you by a god.'

'It may even take two years,' Han Fook said hesitantly. 'Who can tell?'

So his father let him go, and was troubled; the youth, however, wrote a letter to his bride, said farewell, and departed.

When he had wandered for a very long time, he reached the source of the river, and in complete isolation he found a bamboo hut, and in front of the hut on a woven mat sat the aged man whom he had seen beside the tree on the river bank. He sat playing a lute, and when he saw his guest approach with reverence he did not rise or greet him but simply smiled and let his delicate fingers run over the strings, and a magical music flowed like a silver cloud through the valley, so that the youth stood amazed and in his sweet astonishment forgot everything, until the Master of the Perfect Word laid aside his little lute and stepped into the hut. Then Han Fook followed him reverently and stayed with him as his servant and pupil.

With the passing of a month he had learned to despise all the poems he had hitherto composed, and he blotted them out of his memory. And after more months he blotted out all the songs that he had learned from his teachers at home. The Master rarely spoke to him; in silence he taught him the art of lute playing until the pupil's being was entirely saturated with music. Once Han Fook made a little poem which described the

flight of two birds in the autumn sky, and he was pleased with it. He dared not show it to the Master, but one evening he sang it outside the hut, and the Master listened attentively. However, he said no word. He simply played softly on his lute and at once the air grew cool and twilight fell suddenly, a sharp wind arose although it was midsummer, and through the sky which had grown grey flew two herons in majestic migration, and everything was so much more beautiful and perfect than in the pupil's verses that the latter became sad and was silent and felt that he was worthless. And this is what the ancient did each time, and when a year had passed, Han Fook had almost completely mastered the playing of the lute, but the art of poetry seemed to him ever more difficult and sublime.

When two years had passed, the youth felt a devouring homesickness for his family, his native city, and his bride, and he besought the Master to let him leave.

The Master smiled and nodded. 'You are free,' he said, 'and may go where you like. You may return, you may stay away, just as it suits you.'

Then the pupil set out on his journey and travelled uninterrupted until one morning in the half light of dawn he stood on the bank of his native river and looked across the arched bridge to his home city. He stole secretly into his father's garden and listened through the window of the bedchamber to his father's breathing as he slept, and he slipped into the orchard beside his bride's house and climbed a pear tree, and from there he saw his bride standing in her room combing her hair. And while he compared all these things which he was seeing with his eyes to the mental pictures he had painted of them in his homesickness, it became clear to him that he was, after all, destined to be a poet, and he saw that in poets' dreams reside a beauty and enchantment that one seeks in vain in the things of the real world. And he climbed down from the tree and fled out of the garden and over the bridge, away from his

native city, and returned to the high mountain valley. There, as before, sat the old Master in front of his hut on his modest mat, striking the lute with his fingers, and instead of a greeting he recited two verses about the blessings of art, and at their depth and harmony the young man's eyes filled with tears.

Once more Han Fook stayed with the Master of the Perfect Word, who, now that his pupil had mastered the lute, instructed him in the zither, and the months melted away like snow before the west wind. Twice more it happened that he was overcome by homesickness. On the one occasion he ran away secretly at night, but before he had reached the last bend in the valley the night wind blew across the zither hanging at the door of the hut, and the notes flew after him and called him back so that he could not resist them. But the next time he dreamed he was planting a young tree in his garden, and his wife and children were assembled there and his children were watering the tree with wine and milk. When he awoke, the moon was shining into his room and he got up, disturbed in mind, and saw in the next room the Master lying asleep with his grey beard trembling gently; then he was overcome by a bitter hatred for this man who, it seemed to him, had destroyed his life and cheated him of his future. He was about to throw himself upon the Master and murder him when the ancient opened his eyes and began to smile with a sad sweetness and gentleness that disarmed his pupil.

'Remember, Han Fook,' the aged man said softly, 'you are free to do what you like. You may go to your home and plant trees, you may hate me and kill me, it makes very little difference.'

'Oh, how could I hate you?' the poet cried, deeply moved. 'That would be like hating heaven itself.'

And he stayed and learned to play the zither, and after that the flute, and later he began under his Master's guidance to make poems, and he slowly learned the secret art of apparently

saying only simple and homely things but thereby stirring the hearer's soul like wind on the surface of the water. He described the coming of the sun, how it hesitates on the mountain's rim, and the noiseless darting of the fishes when they flee like shadows under the water, and the swaying of a young birch tree in the spring wind, and when people listened it was not only the sun and the play of the fish and the whispering of the birch tree, but it seemed as though heaven and earth each time chimed together for an instant in perfect harmony, and each hearer was impelled to think with joy and pain about what he loved or hated, the boy about sport, the youth about his beloved, and the old man about death.

Han Fook no longer knew how many years he had spent with the Master beside the source of the Great River; often it seemed to him as though he had entered this valley only the evening before and been received by the ancient playing on his stringed instrument; often, too, it seemed as though all the ages and epochs of man had vanished behind him and become unreal.

And then one morning he awoke alone in the house, and though he searched everywhere and called, the Master had disappeared. Overnight it seemed suddenly to have become autumn, a raw wind tugged at the old hut, and over the ridge of the mountain great flights of migratory birds were moving, though it was not yet the season for that.

Then Han Fook took the little lute with him and descended to his native province, and when he came among men they greeted him with the salutation appropriate to the aged and distinguished, and when he came to his home city he found that his father and his bride and his relations had died and other people were living in their houses. In the evening, however, the festival of the lanterns was celebrated on the river and the poet Han Fook stood on the far side of the darker bank, leaning against the trunk of an ancient tree. And when he played on the

little lute, the women began to sigh and looked into the night, enchanted and overwhelmed, and the young men called for the lute player, whom they could not find anywhere, and they exclaimed that none of them had ever heard such tones from a lute. But Han Fook only smiled. He looked into the river where floated the mirrored images of the thousand lamps; and just as he could no longer distinguish between the reflections and reality, so he found in his soul no difference between this festival and that first one when he had stood there as a youth and heard the words of the strange Master.