

Graf Petöfy

Th. Fontane

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The story is simple. An old bachelor lives with his widowed sister in Vienna. They are both from an old Hungarian family which is coming to an end, although there is a common nephew, the issue of a sister who died young. The old bachelor - Graf Petöfy, leads a rather empty life of distraction and amusement. His sister on the other hand is a devoted Catholic who associates regularly with a priest. Both keep salons of course. In the pursuit of his interest in the theatre the old count is taken by a young actress from Northern Germany (Swinemünde in fact), and he contemplates marriage. Not out of any sexual interest, at least none consciously framed, but because he is amused by her conversation and charmed by her youth and accomplishments. His idea is more of having a Scheherazade to tell him fairy-tales, than to satisfy carnal lust. In an effort to stem his impulses he goes away to Paris for a few weeks but return and renews his acquaintance with her. He decides to marry her. He has a discussion with his sister who advises against it. There is a difference in social standing of course, and also she is Protestant while he is Catholic. But above all there is a huge difference in age. Nevertheless she agrees to explore the lay of the land. The actress Franziska is not entirely opposed to the idea, as she explains to her maid, confidante and childhood friend, who is somewhat aghast at the idea. Many arguments against the match can easily be disposed of, she counters (and she also remarks in passing that if there are many arguments against something that is rather weaker than if there is only one strong one), such as that of the difference in social standing. She is after all an actress and would be able to play the role of the Countess with aplomb as well off stage as on. There are of course many advantages to such a match, such as a rise in her social standing, financial independence, and the old man is of course very kind. Encouraged by a friendly reception, as relayed by his sister, he makes his court and setting up generous conditions such as that he will allow her a high degree of freedom. Whether amorous or not is not spelled out, if so, the end of the novel certainly would give a twist to that.

They marry, take a short honeymoon in Northern Italy and return to the family palace by the Lake Balaton (which is however given a different name in the book). This is a feudal setting if anything. The count reigns supreme and is very much loved by his subjects, including not only the staff but also families living around the estate. Franziska brings with her her old maid and is given a whole apartment to herself separate from that of the count. The count only requires her presence at breakfast and at dinner and the subsequent tea in order to amuse him, and at the intermittent walk in the park, at all other times she is left to herself. She tries to fill the void in her life by learning Hungarian and makes progress. The kind count is worried that she might be lonely, because she is being snubbed by his aristocratic social circle, and invites her to invite her old friend from her day as an actress. But she refuses. She moves now in different circles and it would be all wrong. Her decision is of course not based on pride and vanity, only on the realities of class. Nevertheless there will be company as the old sister along with the nephew

announce that they are about to visit. They do so, and the beginning report between the old duchess and the new one grows more intimate. Also there is the nephew with whom she takes rides together. At one point, including a small girl being abducted by gypsies, and later discovered unharmed, she and the nephew miss the ferry back, are forced to engage some private boat and are caught in a storm during which their lives are at jeopardy. They manage to find rescue on an island where they spend the night.

The old sister admonishes her brother for keeping his young wife imprisoned on the family residence. She must be bored out of her mind, what she requires is excitement and glamour, to meet people, to be admired and seen. The count is reluctant to beat an early retreat to Vienna, it is too early in the season to do so. It is against his routines. His sister berates him for being selfish and soon thereafter they move to their Vienna residence. Soon thereafter, as a result of a stupid accident, he notices that his nephew wears a ring that belonged to his wife. He adds two and two, and decides to commit suicide.

Soon thereafter he is interred in the family vault back in Hungary. The sister assumes that the young widow will now be free to marry the young nephew, but much to everyone's surprise including the readers, she decides not to, but to inherit the residence, convert to Catholicism and remain unmarried.

The novel is among the earliest of Fontanes attempt at fiction, an activity which came comparatively late in his life after a lengthy career as a journalist, and it does not really measure up to his mature works. What you look for in a novel by Fontane is a sense of place and time and delightful conversation. As to the latter he may be viewed as a Prussian Henry James, but with the advantage of being more attuned to the physical settings than the British-American author. Plot is not his forte and there are melodramatic parts, such as the storm on the lake, that appear contrived and out of place¹. Many critics have remarked that there is little local color in the book. After all the author had hardly ever visited Vienna, and never set his foot in Hungary. In the 19th century, although tourism was not unknown, travel was more momentous than it is now, and as a consequence carried more weight. It is true that Vienna does not appear vividly on the pages, nothing compared with the extraneous detail and attention brought to some peripheral reminiscences of Franziska regarding her hometown, one with which Fontane was very familiar. On the other hand Hungary appears as out of a fairy tale. However, this may not be the most significant criticism that can be leveled at the novel. Its central theme is psychology, or less clinically expressed, the subtle fabric of social relation and individual responses. For one thing, possibly apart from the portrait of the old countess, none of the characters in the novel possess any real individuality, least of all the nephew. Thus we are not really engaged by the story, especially as many of the crucial events seem also in retrospect unmotivated and contrived, especially the clandestine love story between Franziska and the faceless nephew.

So what is left? You read novels very differently, depending not only on your own individual stage in life, but also depending on when in public time it is written. When almost five quarters of a century had passed, you may take an antiquarian interest. Reading not so much to get involved in a story, but to look at it from a detached point of view for its historical, or maybe rather antiquarian interest. A modern adaptation of the story, which incidentally may have a real-life background, as there was a much noted marriage

¹ One is reminded of a similarly dramatic scene in 'Unwiederbringlich' (see IXb)

between an old aristocrat and a young actress at the time², would be of rather limited interest. One thing is clear, you read Fontane as a reporter from an old Prussian world that has mostly vanished. In short out of a nostalgia for a world that is almost on a level of a fairy tale. The phenomenon is of course quite well-established, although its focus of interest is in modern anglofied cultures of British Victorian and Edwardian times as well as the French 'Belle Epoque' but hardly of Central Europe. This might change.

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² In this case the union lasted four years before the older man died of natural causes, and resulted in an actual issue, and a match after the death.