

Die Verlobung in St.Domingo

H. von Kleist

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Eine entsetzliche Erzählung! Yes indeed. To modern readers it might not be politically correct, speaking about 'Negern' and the rebellion in Haiti, part of the Dominican island. There of course references as well to 'die Schwarzen und die Weißen', but to describe the Blacks as a murderous and deceitful hordes out for bloody revenge, is hardly something to endear him to readers of our age. The villain is an older Negro, with the name of 'Congo Hoango' a name to send spasms of embarrassment to contemporary readers, who having once saved his master from death, out of the gratitude of the latter has been showered with all kinds of privileges and rewards, nevertheless takes up arms against his former employer, and kills him, before becoming a leader of a band. He has as a woman, a Mulatto Babekan, who has a young daughter - Toni, a Mestiso, meaning one who is three quarters white. While the Hoango is away on an errand smuggling ammunition to the big Black Army, the two women alone in the house, are approached by a young white officer on the run with his family. He is cordially invited into the house, but this being a ruse on the part of the older woman, is not immediately obvious to the reader. The young fugitive falls in love with the girl, and she requites his ardor and they secretly engage. After that she will have nothing to do with the duplicitous plans of her mother, while deciding to go along. To cut a longer story short, Hoango arrives home earlier than expected, there is no way he is not going to discover the fugitive in the house, and Toni thinks quickly on her feet, and decides to bind her charge to the bed, while he is still asleep. In this way she gains time, while receiving the appropriation of her mother and step-father of sorts. The fugitive is not killed right away, as they plan to lure his entire entourage into the house to kill and loot their belongings. Toni runs ahead, meets up with them, and explains the situation. They arrive fully armed and manage to take the initiative, neutralize the Hoango and his gang, taking as hostage two of Hoangos small bastard boys, and about to flee with the fugitive soon to be released. Toni is accused to be a traitor to her race and cause by her mother. She denies it, she is not black, she is white, and engaged to the young officer. But when she shows up at her lover, he convinced of her duplicity, grabs a pistol and shoots her, to the consternation of his relatives, who knows the full story. When this dawns upon our unfortunate hero, and some last words by the dying girl, adds to the drama, he has nothing left to do than to blow his brains out. Why did he not have the courage to trust his beloved, and we as readers can find nothing but satisfaction from his suicide, without which the story would be too painful to conclude. The party leaves with the two bodies to be given a proper burial, and eventually manages, after having released their hostages, reach Port au Prince, and out of which after its fall, they are able to return to Europe, and in their home in Switzerland set up a monument to the two lovers.

A rather horrific story which you read with growing suspense and bitter disappointment as learning of its tragic end. The racial element, which may disturb the readers of today, was at the time not particularly virulent. Kleist refers to the atrocities committed

by the white overlords, and his censure is not against the Blacks themselves, being not without some sympathy for their cause, as their thirst for revenge, sparing not even the innocent. True, whiteness at the time was a mark of superiority, and Toni from the very first wants to show off the paleness of her skin. Yet, as Kleist is aware, the racially mixed is prone to be dismissed by both parties, hence his commendable desire to make her the real Heroine. The suspense is masterly effected, with all those dealings and double dealings and sudden changes of fortune. And of course the climax singularly affecting. This is prime material for an Opera. What could not a writer of librettos make out of the two concluding arias? As to a plot it belongs to the Romeo and Juliet tradition.

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