

L'Adultera

Th. Fontane

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Kommerzienrat van Straaten, of Dutch extraction, and his young wife Melanie, stemming from Switzerland meet very late at night at home. He has come back from an extended evening out, she is about to depart, elope in fact, and to leave everything behind. There is a very measured and calm encounter. The old Kommerzienrat does not lose his cool, being, as he thinks, in charge of the situation. So why is she leaving their home and their two young children. She answers truthfully that she has fallen in love with another man. This is not a reason he retorts, dismissing it as a just temporary foolishness. He line of attack is more measured, He admits that he does not expect to be passionately loved, He is too old for inspiring such feelings, and also too old to harbor such illusions. The point of a marriage goes beyond mere love and passion, and in a clear-headed manner he proceeds to give a variety of rational reasons why she should stay. He is very calm and very reasonable, and his very calmness and reasonableness makes her feel trapped and choking. She will out. She wants out. The desire is only getting more desperate. So desperate is indeed her wish to escape that she does not say good-bye to the children, as she is urged to do, lest she falters in her resolve.

It is a difficult situation, she feels alone in the world, and the short ride in a cab to the Bahnhof is almost a trauma. But there, she falls in the arms of her lover and she is saved, and they take off for the south, over the Alps and down to Italy. They spend an extended honeymoon. She is not happy, at least not boisterously and carelessly so, she has taken a momentous step, maybe a little bit too big for her She who married the mature man already as a teenager and has not seen much of unsheltered life. But in Venice she rebounds a bit, and starts to feel ready to return to Berlin. Back in town, where she initially lives incognito, she is shunned by her former social circle. Even her sister is instructed to stay away from her by her husband. Melanie is in fact an adulteress and an outcast. But for how long? Maybe eventually she will be forgiven? There is only so much interest society can take in a scandal, only so long that they can be vigilant. Slowly she resumes contact with her old lady friends, and there is even an attempt to meet her children at her sisters place during a period when her brother-in-law is away. But this meeting is a disaster, maybe not properly 'mise en scene' by her accomplices, as her new husband suggests. The older girl refuses to acknowledge her, claiming that they have no longer any mother.

Soon thereafter she learns that her new husband has gone bankrupt. The news rather than fill her with dread fills her with joy. Now they will be more intimately together, and the idea of restricted circumstances strikes her as romantic, used as she has been all her life to comfort and ease. Her husband is shaking his head sadly.

But lo and behold. She does adjust to a new life, a more humble one. She gives lessons in French and takes care of a small home. (And is there not also a young baby involved? I am a bit distracted while reading.). And in fact she is happy after all. And there seems even to be some kind of, if not full-fledged reconciliation so at least some peace

with her former husband. In fact as a 'julklapp'¹ she gets a pendant with the miniature of Tintoretto's 'l'Adultera' a reference to which the short story is introduced.

Fontane came late to fiction having spent most of his life as a journalist. This is one of his earliest attempts, and maybe a bit overworked as when it comes to cultural allusions and hidden symbolists. A beginner in fiction, taking his assignment very seriously. Yet, the book is something of a delight in spite of many obvious flaws. Not comparable to his later works, but as a period piece filled with charm.

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¹ Is this word generally known in Germany as an alternate to 'Weihnachtsgeschenk'? At least there is no explanation of the word in the notes that comes with the edition.