

Die Bergwerke zu Falun/Der Artushof

E.T.A.Hoffmann

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Many years ago I heard on the Swedish radio a program about a man whose well-preserved body had been found in the mine of Falun. No one knew who he was until an old woman recognized him as her old fiancée. This happened in the 18th century and the tale was spread wide and afar and fired the imagination and many writers competed against each other in imaginative embellishment. Hoffmann was one of them. We are introduced to the main character - Elis Fröbom, who has returned from a journey to China and made a lot of money, but to what avail? Upon his arrival home he has found out that his mother is dead and that strangers live in her old home. Life has no longer any meaning to him. An old man comes to offer comfort, why not leave the sea and instead to devote his life to mining, to extract from the depths all kinds of riches? Fröbom heeds his advice, arrives at the mines of Falun, meets one of the masters of the mines, together with his beautiful daughter with whom he naturally falls in love. He starts to work under the master, does very well indeed and earns his trust and ultimately the heart of his daughter. Everything is perfect, except that the old man he once met contacts him again and warns him that his devotion to mining is due less to his love for the splendors of the earth but for the road it offered to the heart of his beloved. In short he was a deceiver. The poor young man is divided between his love for his wife to be and the fascination and commitment to the splendors of the earth. In a desperate attempt to reconcile the two, and in a way to break away from the spell under which has been imprisoned he returns to the mine shaft the night before the wedding and while down there is a big slide and he is buried in debris. That was the end of that, except many years later his body is retrieved, seemingly unchanged by the passage of time. His wife to be, who has every year returned to the site on her wedding day to meet him once again, is finally rewarded. Indeed she was once again, before she died, granted to see her fiancée once more again.

This is Hoffmann and this is Romanticism and it is all very melodramatic. Predictably the highlights of the tale are the visions which the protagonist experiences, be it of the sea or the splendor of the riches of the depths below the earth. They have a definite hallucinatory character and in a modern film adaptation they clearly would present a sweet challenge for computer simulation.

While the 'die Bergwerke' is essentially tragic, the 'Artushof' becomes almost farcical, the line that separates the two indeed being very thin. The plot is a classical one, a young man about to enter the real world of commerce, going into partnership with a merchant from Danzig and about to marry his vain daughter but being pulled away by his own artistic leanings and conceit of personal talent. He befriends an old artist and his son. He gets invited to the artist in his studio and falls in love with the portrait of a young beautiful woman, jealously guarded by the old man. What has happened to her? She has vanished, but into what? Death? One day he accidentally encounters her in the studio, it turns out that she is the young man with whom he has gotten on such friendly footing.

The secret revealed, the old artist leaves town with his daughter. Our protagonist is of course stricken with grief, he gives up his marriage and his career and goes to Italy where according to rumors the old artist has fled. He lives in a colony of fellow artists and compatriots and looks for her everywhere. Eventually he runs across a very young woman who resembles her, but is not her. Anyway he befriends her and her family, and she falls in love with him. He abandons her and returns to his homeland, after all he has heard that the place of refuge was not in Italy but ironically not very far from his hometown. A new attempt to get into contact is foiled, he realizes that the woman is just a dream, and as he hears that the young woman down in Italy pines for him, he decides to return to Italy, after all a woman of flesh is worth more than one of spirit. And in this rather anti-climactic way the short story ends. You have been prepared for another tragedy only in the end to witness the triumph of common sense. Something totally unexpected.

August 11, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se