

Cécile

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The story is simple. At least on the face of it. You are thrown into *media res*. An older colonel of aristocratic provenance is traveling with a beautiful young lady. They are not happy, but happiness seems to be their goal. They address each other by first names - Pierre and Cécile respectively. Are they married or are they lovers? Somehow the first explanation seems by far the most likely one. They are heading for Thale, one of those 'Kurorts' in the Harz. They stay at a Pension and are thrown in with other guests, among which a certain von Leslie-Gordon, a young man of Scottish descent as the name indicates, will play an important role. The young man senses that the young woman is 'available' but will he seize the opportunity? As a reader you expect that he will, and that the lady will be willing, and her husband will demur, and there will be conflict and resolution. The story has been told many a time, and to take part of such a dalliance is of course irresistible would the opportunity so arise, and one of the few compensations available to a life as an adult. Definitely one of those things which is opaque and unknowlegable to the child, and which thus makes so much of adult literature incomprehensible to the young and inquisitive mind. Now to take part in such a story vicariously has of course not the keenness of the real adventure, on the other hand while the pleasures may be fleeting to the perusing mind of the reader, so are the pains. It allows you the trappings of excitement without having to pay the price. This is why we urge our protagonists on as to be able to follow along on a ride as irresponsible freeloaders.

Herr von Gordon is a delightful companion. Once an officer he has since many years given up his commission and spends his life as a civil engineer to travel around the world putting down cables engaging in such mundane yet so important work. Thus he has stories to tell from visits to Persia and the Himalayas among others. He befriends the couple, creating a charmed circle other guests are invited to join, among them a certain artist Rosa, with the added name of 'Malheur' she was awarded sarcastically as she attended her artist school¹. There are touristic visits to nearby Quedlinburg and the small village of Altenbrak. Gordon is playing with the idea of taking up with the young woman but refuses to commit himself to such a project. Does he really want to do it? She is very beautiful but she is also rather uneducated. She reveals openly her ignorance during the sights of Quedlinburg and needless to say of Rosa Bonheur she has never heard. Dalliance is a delightful diversion, but is it on the other hand so nice to be dallied with? She is obviously a superficial lady, spoiled as well. Her husband treats her condescendingly always concerned with her health and her comfort. She is treated as 'Nervenkrank' in need of peace and quiet and pastoral surroundings, such as the Harz and its environs offer in abundance. The relations between Gordon and the young woman gets warmer, but of

¹ This is an obvious wink to the well-known French painter Rosa Bonheur (1822-99), which the reader is expected to know.

course with no indication of any heat, and they seldom if ever are alone together.

Henry James is a writer who excels in delineating the subtleties that goes on in social settings. Fontane, some twenty years older than his American colleague traffics in the same line of writing. But while James is almost exclusively cerebral in his focus, Fontane does not neglect one of the duties of a classical novelist, namely the depiction of locale. In James the action takes place in a void, although modern filmatizations excel in vivid visual display, the proper setting for a James novel would be on an empty stage. Fontane furnishes the stage, and we do get a very tangible sense of being on the spot. The mighty hills of Harz towers over the action, and you could almost smell the resin from the conifers as the party makes its way on mules along slippery paths. Night and day are carefully delineated, as are the vicissitudes of the weather. I write duty because much of this word-painting, although very competently executed, does not seem to come naturally and easily to Fontane. Other writers convey much more with fewer words, on the other hand such inspired writers are relatively rare. Still it serves its purpose, and reminds you that Fontane took his craft seriously².

But Gordon does not get very far. A telegram orders him to Bremen and he has to leave the place without delay, hardly having time to have a hurried breakfast and say good-bye to the couple before entering the train to Hannover. He does not like good-byes, so much insincere nonsense is exchanged at such moments, the briefer the better. And brief indeed is the final encounter giving no time except an exchange of polite pleasantries. The final encounter? Why should he ever take the trouble to seeing them again, even if the lady is charming and her husband seems to have taken a kind of liking to the young man on the basis of his Scottish aristocratic roots that evoke the time of Wallenstein.

Gordon is busy up in Bremen and give little thought to the prospects of a dalliance. In a letter to his sister before the advent of an immediate departure had become known, he has already expressed his thoughts on the matter in a rather slapdash way providing mini-portraits of the assembly for the entertainment of his correspondent. However, when he returns to Berlin after the summer, he cannot resist renewing the acquaintance with the couple. Conveniently the husband is always absent, on the other hand he never gets a *teta-a-tete* with the young woman, because there is always another visitor, most often the court-minister assigned to serve her spiritual needs. Anyway the innocent visits continue and become a frequent habit. In fact in the beginning of October he gets an invitation to attend a formal dinner at their home, in which he not only once again meets Rosa Malhuer establishing an easy-going intimacy, but is confronted with staid aristocrats and conservative generals, expounding on matters usually not displayed to a critical public.

Soon thereafter he gets a letter from his sister, who has done some 'research' and even gotten in contact with acquaintances who knows Cécile from the past. Gordon has always been curious about the couple, wondering what secret calamities may lie at the root. The letter (what a convenient literary device, maybe even a trifle too neat) gives him more or less the complete story to the satisfaction of his curiosity. He learns that Cécile lost her father, a certain von Zacha, at a tender age, that her mother was a celebrated beauty, and that men paid their court to her oldest daughter already in her teens. She had been the

² Although Fontane early took to journalistic writing evading a career as a apothecary in the family tradition, his initial attempts at fiction were awkward.

favorite of a certain Prince von Welfen-Echingen and after his death not only inherited some fancy real-estate but also the attentions of his nephew who had showered her further with wealth until he died of disease. There had even been some courtier, who had been expected to marry her. In short she had lived a life of interest to society but not necessarily earning its respect. A godsend it must have been to her to be married to the colonel. But even that marriage seemed to be marred by a certain incident involving a duel, a dead body, and a few month imprisonment followed by a resignation from the army. Gordon knows enough.

A few days later he finally has an encounter with the young lady Cécile, which starts out with some banter on her side, making playful allusions to her jealousy with respect to Rosa, and provoking him to rise to the occasion dismissing the artist as one with whom one could travel around the world with, without feeling any amorous temptation of whatever kind. Cécile is playing the role of the invalid, complaining about heart troubles and taking her medicine, while Gordon gets excited and tells her that her problems are not physical, they are mental. What she needs is fresh air, society, excitement. Somehow he goes too far.

A day or so latter he gets a letter from her, which is an unusual thing, shy as she is to expose her lack of education, while he of course has been showering her with short billets the entire time. In the latter she regrets that another tone has come between them, one that she does not approve of. His former self was so delightful, could he not try and find the power and the will to regain that easy tone of the past, which had so delighted her? If not their friendship must cease. Once again a telegram calls him back to Bremen and his duties.

He is of course thankful for the opportunity to escape, and in isolation from her, he writes to her and promises to return back to the past, something which he admits is far easier to do at a distance than it would have been had he stayed on in Berlin. He is happy being away having other things on his mind, be called up to Denmark and beyond.

Yet he returns to Berlin a dark and rainy November afternoon, his mission accomplished. He stays at a hotel and bored he asks the waiter for what kind of entertainment is available. The offering at the theater is old stuff, but Tannhäuser at the opera would distract him pleasantly.

He very much enjoys the performance, until he by accident discover Cécile and a 'Geheimrat' (whom he recalls from the dinner at their place) in a box engaged in intimate conversation. He is blinded with a furious attack of jealousy, and in the intermission he makes his presence known and carries on a disdainful ('spöttisch') conversation, deliberately ignoring the evident displeasure his action engenders. Cécile is ever polite and assures him that he is always welcome at anytime to visit her. After the intermission he resumes his seat and follows the performance with exaggerated interest, until he notices that they are gone. This embitters his jealousy even further, and he makes a point of paying her a visit that very evening. He is let in, only to find the 'Herr Geheimrat' present. The latter excuses himself immediately and leaves for the club and Gordon finds himself alone with the mistress. But instead of a pleasant cup of tea, Cécile dismisses the maid and visibly enraged gives him a lecture on his extra-ordinary behavior. Gordon excuses himself by referring to his jealousy, to which she responds that he has no right whatsoever to harbor

such feelings. And he admits defeat and leaves.

The following morning her husband finds her worn and red-eyed at the breakfast table, obviously she has had little sleep and been crying most of the night. Of course he knows the reason, he was informed at the club the very same evening by the 'Herr Geheimrat' of the two incidents, but he needs to hear her version as well. So he asks her what has been up with der Herr von Gordon. He notes with disdain that the man has written her letters. Do you want to read them, she asks. He replies haughtily with the cutting words *Unsinn. Ich kenne Liebesbriefe; die besten kriegt man nie zu sehen, und was denn bleibt, ist gut für nichts..* She then makes a clean breast and tells him everything, because after all what is there to say? She makes a special point of the change in tone in Gordons relations to her, a change that came about after the dinner party.

Does the colonel love his wife? Only as a possession, that was the verdict of the artist Rosa. He may be proud of her beauty, but any real personal relationship does not exist. After all he is very much content with being away from her, wasting his time at the club, reading the daily papers, and gambling with his fellow members. And now, what bothers him is not so much any sentimental relation existing between von Gordon and his wife, but that such sentimental relations are allowed to spill over into society and take such manifestations as they did the other night. If nothing else, it showed an utter disregard for the husband. An act of defiance against his authority. What rankles him is that the man did not have the sense to be afraid of him. He writes a letter to his rival, explaining that he did of course excuse his infatuation with his wife, but not his callous disregard of her feelings and the abuse of the trust she had put in him. He adds that he will get further information from his friend the general.

A few days later von Gordon is dead, and the colonel has fled to Nice to escape another bout of imprisonment. He writes to his wife and begs her to join him in Nice taking advantage of the clement climate. von Gordon had certainly overestimated him, although he reluctantly acknowledged a certain respect for 'dem Kerl' in rejecting his offer of a reconciliation. Instead of a reply he gets the message from the court minister who tells him in so many words that his wife has committed suicide, and before her death reverted back to her original creed - Catholicism, and that she was now going to be interred at a favorite palace.

Now to the modern reader all of this might seem a tale of pointless melodrama. Not so much has really been going on, beyond a most decorous flirting. There had been no physical intimacy beyond the ritual hand kissing, so what is the big deal? It is easy of course to read this as an exemplary tale of what tragedies a rigid and unforgiving society can cause. In our modern age, Cécile would have led an exciting life and even if accepting her marriage she would not have denied herself the opportunities for play. Sex, nowadays, is freely available, no longer any source for neurosis. Because after all, what other reason for her weak nerves, than a lack of sexual satisfaction?

The exquisitely wrought tales of stunted love may strike the contemporary reader as quaint and of no current relevance and interest. Yet, killing your rival, is still stock in trade in contemporary movies, and the reasons for such drastic action are not more compelling now than back then. The colonel does not outright kill the young man, that would not have been vulgar and socially acceptable, but he challenges him to a duel, which apparently still

was at the end of the 19th century in Germany not truly exceptional. Socially acceptable maybe, but of course not legal, and besides socially acceptable only in the narrow circles in which he moved. On the other hand what social mores beyond those of your own circles would be of any concern? Now physical intimacy is no great thing, mental and emotional still count for much more, and can with great justification be seen as a far more intrusive sort of unfaithfulness than a purely physical engagement. And while the threshold for sexual intimacy might have been higher in the past (but even then from a general point of view, this is far from clear), the emotional involvement raises as many problems back then as it does now.

The young man von Gordon obviously has underestimated his lady. He had thought of her as a shallow, uneducated woman, of physical charm but with superficial interests. And having his curiosity satisfied as to her background, he obviously thought that she was fair game, hence this change of tone. Uneducated she may have been, having been encouraged to cultivate a carefree existence as a young beautiful woman, but she is not stupid. Where her formal education is lacking, there has instead been made room for a sensitive and delicate soul, who has a fine ear for subtlety of tone. She may be sad, not to say melancholic, and reduced to a simpleton when it comes to the enjoyment of life. She confesses that she has no interest in the large issues or the big questions, her pleasure relate to the simple things. But she has dignity, and she has sense, and she is greatly disappointed in her suitor. She had thought she had an earnest friend who sincerely wanted to delight her, only to discover his callous and conventional streak. Being married and having an affair are obviously very different things. One is part of mundane real life, while the other is in the nature of a dream, disjoint from reality, although inevitably inspired by it. We enjoy our dreams as we know that they are not real and have to come to an end. Dreams are like stories, ultimately there is no need to take responsibility. Although the dreams of an affair may collide painfully with reality, as hinted above. Cécile had expected the attentions of her suitor to be real, only to find out his lack of respect. The signs may have been subtle, but the causes were not.

But does it all have to end in suicide? Things still do. And admittedly in her case divorce may not have been such an easy option as it would have been today. Yet, from the story one gets the impression that the lady would have been independently wealthy, making the disapproval of society into a rather peripheral concern. But the heart has reasons the intellect does not know of. This saying of Pascal may serve as a universal band-aid to plaster over any inconsistency in a love story. A character is an enigma, even, and maybe especially even to her creator. And of course suicide is the fitting conventional finale to every tragedy. Conventional or not, Tolstoy too exploited the convention. After all, even as we flatter ourselves to be beyond conventions, such self-flattery only further confirms their power over us. The irony of the story is that the conventional Céline may have been the least conventional of them all. A pity she would have opted for such a conventional closure.