

## Der Findling

*H. von Kleist*

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Der Findling is one of Kleist's shorter stories. It is indeed short and very melodramatic, and as such obviously based on older stories. As with Shakespeare, who freely borrowed plots, it is not what you tell which is important, but how you tell it. The imagination is stimulated by constraints, being completely at large, only thwarts it. Roots need soil to get nourishment. Kleist writes a complicated, one would almost want to say, tortured prose. The syntax is quite involved, with many subsidiary clauses nestled within each other. This of course makes it hard to entangle, and you have to read slowly. Part of this is of course due to the sophistication of the author, or so we would like to think, still one suspects that there is also due to mannerism and self-indulgence. A reluctance to make the effort to produce a more limpid prose.

The story can easily be paraphrased. It takes place in Italy during a distant past. A successful merchant by name of Piachi embarks on a business trip, bringing his eleven year old son from a previous marriage with him. They are unfortunately caught up in an outbreak of the plague and the father intends to abort the trip for the safety of his offspring. They encounter a stricken boy, orphaned by the conflagration, and out of compassion, the father takes him on. However, his return to his home town Rome, is intercepted by the police who forcefully confines him and his entourage to a caranteen. During their stay, the sick boy recovers, Piachi is unaffected, while his beloved son dies. He is devastated, and in his state of confusion and sorrow, he agrees to bring the foundling with him. Soon he and his young wife Elviren are taken by the young boy by name of Nicolo, and who is not only given shelter and food, but is in addition receiving an education and eventually gets adopted by the childless couple. He turns out to grow into a young man of remarkable beauty. However, to the dismay of his father by adoption, he gets involved in a nearby monastic order and at a very early age gets sexually engaged with an older woman - Xaviera Tartini, who consorts with the local bishop, and in fact has a daughter with him. The monks are eager to cultivate the friendship of Nicolo, in view of the inheritance which is his due. When the adopted son gets of age he agrees to wed a niece of Elviren, a woman by name of Constanza. Everything seems to have settled beautifully, after a somewhat tumultuous youth, and when Piachi decides to retire, he bequests all his belongings to his adopted son. However, Nicolo is unable (and unwilling) to give up the old ways, and betrays his young wife repeatedly, once being caught in the act by Elviren, who says nothing, although he suspects her of disclosing his transgression to Piachi. When a year later Constanza dies in childbirth along with the offspring, Nicolo no longer seeks any obstructions to reverting to the old days and sends a message to Xaviera to meet. This message is intercepted by Piachi, who forges an answer from its intended recipient and has it returned to Nicolo, who hurries to a church, the ostensible location for their rendez-vous. Piachi has, however, brought the not yet interred Constanza to the church to have her buried at a small private ceremony. When Nicolo asks who is being put into the earth,

he is informed that it is Xaviera. He immediately catches on to the cruel joke, and sees therein the hands of Elviren, who thereby earns his lasting animosity. Elviren is burdened by a tragic memory. As a thirteen year old girl she was caught in the fire of her fathers house in Genova, and had the choice of either burning to death or to throw herself into the sea meeting a certain death by drowning. In the last minute she is saved by a young man, who, however, in his attempt at rescue is fatally wounded. He lingers on nevertheless for three years, while Elviren is faithfully attending to her saviour, and then dies. Clearly he was the one love of her young life, and she eventually finds protection in the marriage to Piachi, who is one of the few privy to her situation. This interlude is necessary in order to understand what will soon ensue. One day Nicolo catches sight of her in her room lying on her knees in front of a man professing her love. The libidinous Nicolo is egged on by the indication that this pure angelic woman is capable of physical passion strong enough to be unfaithful to her husband. He is stricken by an erotic desire for her, which will also become a mean of effecting a sinister and cruel revenge upon her. He enlists the aid of Xaviera, who reveals to him, after a clandestine visit to Elviren's chamber, that the man Nicolo thought he has seen is but an effigy of her old rescuer Colino, the details of the story she had extricated from the monks, known to them through confession. But even cynical Xaviera, who has her own reasons to aid Nicolo, cautions him from exploiting the information. Nicolo has no such compunctions however, and notices that Colino is an anagram of Nicolo, a discovery he employs artfully to upset Elviren and thereby getting further confirmation. He disguises himself as Colino, enters he room with the object of overwhelming her and to enjoy her favours. However, his scheme is interrupted by the fortuitous return of Piachi, catching him *in flagrante*. Nicolo is ordered out of the house, but he refuses to bulge, reminding his adopted father, that the house is now his, and that it is Piachi and Elviren who are forced to leave. They do so, and shortly thereafter Elviren, not surprisingly, dies. Judicial proceedings, abetted by the greed of the monks and the power of their bishop, the concubine of whom was Xaviera, result in confirming the claims of Nicolo. Piachi overcome by the accumulations of his misfortunes, returns and in rage kills Nicolo. He is then condemned to death for his deed, accepts it stoically, but refuses to receive absolution. He has no desire to go to heaven, he declares, but is bent on pursuing Nicolo to hell, where he will be bound to dwell. Without this absolution the execution cannot go ahead and the authorities are stymied and forced to postpone. But Piachi is steadfast, an eventually the execution takes place.

So what to make of it? Excellent material for an opera one would say. It can easily be fleshed out on the scene, a few arias, and it can fill out a short evening. A suitable challenge for a writer of librettos to whet his teeth on.

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