

## Mathilde Möhring

*Th. Fontane*

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The setting is the typical one of a Fontane novel. You find yourself in Berlin in a street corner, looking up into an apartment, and being introduced to its inhabitants. In this case it is a widowed mother and a daughter. The daughter, whose name provides the title of the novel, is surely going to be its main character, and the author does not disappoint our expectations. She is neither beautiful nor ugly, and has character. Once somebody remarked that her face was a 'Gemmengesicht', a rather strange word not explained in the copious notes supplied with the text, but supposedly suggesting that her face had the angularity of a gem. In profile, she is supposed to look good. The mother and her daughter seem to make their precarious living by renting out a room. In this way they encounter a handsome young man with a full black beard and by the name of Hugo Grossman. He is shown the room and promises to come by the next day and give his decision. The mother is sure he will not make good on his promise, only finding a polite way out of a provisional commitment, while the daughter senses that he will accept it, if for no other reasons than the laziness she has noticed in him. She is right, he rents the room and shows to be an exemplary tenant, who takes his breakfast rather late in the morning. He studies the law, but does not seem to be very studious, as his books collect dust as they lie open by a pulpit by the window. His interests are to be found in literature and the theatre, as testified by the well-thumbed yellow Reclam editions into which he scribbles enthusiastically. He has also in fact a friend who acts, and through whom he occasionally gets free tickets. Once he gets three in order to invite his hosts as well. He does so reluctantly, and only on condition that they sit in a different section from him. He refuses to join them afterwards to discuss the play, 'Die Räubers' by Schiller, incidentally, in fact it seems as if Schiller's plays enjoy a particular vogue and their are references to many of them. And he spends the night elsewhere.

Then one day he gets sick. It turns out to be the measles, and being a grown-up man it effects him seriously and convalescence is a drawn-out affair. Due to contagion he is moved temporarily into the apartment proper of the two ladies and the young Mathilde nurses him. As he starts to feel better, he is overcome with gratitude and proposes to her. She accepts, be it in a rather businesslike manner, and from then on she takes command of his life. As to going about town and have a nice time, which he is so eager to do, she concedes there is a time for that too, but it should not be overdone, although she is happy to indulge him for a short while. Then she not only makes him study hard and eventually to pass an exam, she also finds him a position as a mayor in a small town outside Berlin. After all his father was a mayor. He gets the position, in spite of his doubts there being so many other worthy candidates, and while a mayor, Mathilde runs not only the household but also his mayorship, suggesting initiatives to take, cultivating contacts among the local notables. He is very grateful for her aid and succumbs willingly to her running of his life. After all he is lazy and devoid of initiatives himself. But not only that he is in fact

physically weak. Just a few months after taking on the position, during the New Year festivities, he contracts pneumonia and is sick for quite a while. He rallies, gets slowly better, only to succumb again, and this time it is terminal, and during Easter he dies, his last words being an expression of gratitude to his wife.

She takes a rather businesslike attitude to it all. Her plans were foiled due to his untimely death but at least she now has a position as a widow. Much to the consternation of her mother she turns down the offer of becoming a house lady to an old and rich count, who surely would leave her handsomely after his death, her mother speculates, and instead studies to become a teacher. And the novel ends unceremoniously.

What to make of it all? Often the heroines on Fontanes novels are discarded or deserted by their male lovers, but not Mathilde. She is made out of different stuff. In this case it is the man who is handsome and weak, and who allows himself willingly to submit to her. She may not have been the wife he had dreamt about, but what he dreamt about surely was beyond his reach, and if you cannot reach the stars at least you can pick something on earth conveniently within your grasp. Surely he has little interest in any legal career and no particular desire to be a mayor. It is literature and the arts which hold a certain dreamy fascination to him, but of course he never dares to enter it in earnest, only to watch it from afar. Mathilde, on the other hand is practical, determined, not without wits and talent, who sees her way into the world. The novel seems almost as if inadvertently cut short, as if the death of the husband, was nothing that Fontane had either planned nor anticipated. Had the plot been allowed to run its course, we surely would have seen the Grossmann character slowly sink into insignificance while his wife would have risen higher and higher, becoming more and more powerful and hence more attractive, outgrowing her marriage, and maybe in the end outstretching herself. The premature death save her from coming to grief, instead a more modest career opened up. The point being that being realistic she never looked back and regretted lost opportunities. Life being what it is, you have a duty to accept it as you find it.