

## Das Frulein von Scuderi

*E.T.A.Hoffmann*

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It is a rather tall tale from the reign of Louis XIV definitely more gothic than realistic. The main character is the mistress of the title, a writer, having the ear of the king, and who due to her advanced age is saved his amorous attentions. The plot is melodramatic and wholly unbelievable, in short vintage Hoffmann. A murderous gang haunts the streets of Paris, robbing people of their jewellery, at times even killing them outright with a well-aimed stab through the heart. The police is powerless, a special commission has been set up, but with nothing tangible to address.

As readers we are thrown into *media res*. A young man bangs at the door of the house of von Scuderi, the maid being alone with her mistress is terrified, but is prevailed upon to open up, through the insistence of the young man, who, however, upon entry terrifies her by branding a knife. Anyway for some reason or another he leaves before anybody comes to grief, leaving behind a small box. In the morning the box is opened and it turns out that it contains some precious jewelry. What to do with it? Later on von Scuderi travels by carriage to her friend, a high-placed woman at the court to seek her advice. In doing so, while crossing Pont de Neuf, she is accosted by a young man that throws her a letter with a message. At her visit it is decided that they call for Cardillac, the supreme jeweler of Paris. He arrives promptly, sees the jewels, and announces that those are his, that they have been missing from his shop mysteriously, and of course no one else but himself would have been able to produce such masterpieces. Then he decides to give them to the old lady von Scuderi, but she remonstrates, she is too old to deck herself with such fancy decoration. Nevertheless, the jeweler persists. She accepts, but temporarily, and decides to return them to Cardillac. Outside his home there is a big commotion, a young lady is distraught, and is severely knocked about by the police. It transpires that Mr Cardillac has just been found dead, one of his disciples, a young man has been arrested as the undeniable culprit, while the young woman, in fact the daughter of Cardillac himself, protests the innocence of the disciple, who in fact is her lover. Mlle von Scuderi takes pity on her, brings her home and is taken by her story. She pleads that the young man should be released, but the authorities are adamant. The evidence against him is overwhelming. Anyway by pleading enough with influential people, she is granted an interview with him. As she encounters him, she shrieks out in terror, he is in fact the young man that accosted her on Pont de Neuf, and she is no longer convinced of his innocence, on the contrary, convictions based on emotions, change quickly from one extreme to another, as the author points out. But the young lady is inconsolable, and the young man pleads to have an interview again with the old lady to tell her a secret. And this secret turns out to be the key to the solution of the mystery, revealing at the same time the convoluted nature of the same. How does he manage? How come she agrees? never mind, here it comes.

It turns out that von Scuderi had one adopted daughter with whom she lost touch. This young man turns out to be the son of that daughter, hence in a relationship of being

a grandchild of sorts. He tells the tragic story of the death of his parents, and how he was taken into the custody of Cardillac, who appreciated his skill. But when he discovered that his disciple had designs on his daughter, and that the desire was reciprocated, he threw him out of the house. A bit later, the young man accidentally became the witness of how Cardillac murdered a man, and is then taken back into his grace, with the prospects of winning the hand of the daughter, who pines for him uncontrollably. At the same time he becomes privy to the secret lust of Cardillac, of how he needs to kill people to get back the jewels he has made for them, he simply cannot stand the jealousy engendered when his works of art are to be left in the possession of others. It brings to him an unrest and a disquiet he can only quench by spilling blood. Incidentally a kind of common explanation for the obsession of serial killers. The young man is aghast but the possibility of the love of the woman is strong enough to make him overcome his scruples. Then later on he becomes a witness as how Cardillac himself is killed, now by an officer. The young man brings the dying man back home, where he expires. Mlle von Scuderi is once again touched by the story and believes him, however, incredible it seems that this M. Cardillac by everybody considered a paragon of virtue, should turn out to be the sought after villain. But why does not the young man disclose this secret to the authorities. Why is he willing to bring it with him to his grave? The daughter loves her father, and to disclose to the world at large his villainy, would certainly break her. Better to sacrifice himself. But he puts von Scuderi into a quandary. What to do? She has a difficult problem. The authorities scoff at her conviction that the young man is innocent in face of all the incriminating evidence that can be born against him. Then as luck would have it, the officer appears and confesses his identity to the lady, thus corroborating the story of the young man. She is thereby greatly encouraged getting independent confirmation of the young mans evidence. But of course the officer cannot confess his guilt, that would ruin him, and that is a sacrifice he is not prepared to make. But there is one solution, to ask the king for mercy. This is not so easy, as the king is already heavily prejudced against the young man, and von Scuderi has to avail herself of all her tact, cunning and sophistication to get the king around. He being the king is able to become privy to the facts of the matter, without those reaching the ears of the authorities. He takes the matter seriously enough, and after much suspense, he finally announces that the young man should be let free, on the condition that he and his woman leave Paris, which they are only too happy to do. In fact he supplies them with money to set up a business and a new life in Geneva. So everything turns out to have a happy ending, however contrived. But of course real life can be stranger than fiction, because it has no obligations to comply to the conventions of realism but can proceed unchecked, being its own pudding so to speak. And Hoffmann himself proceeds with the same total disregard of customary conventions.

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