

Stine

Th. Fontane

November 30- December 4, 2012

The similarities between *Irrungen, Wirungen* and this novella, have been pointed out. In both cases it concerns 'impossible' love. A man of noble birth and a woman of humble origin. A standard theme if any in literature, and one which is progressively more and more incomprehensible to the Modern reading public. In the more full-length treatment the humble woman modestly and unselfishly steps aside, claiming that she knew all along that the situation was impossible, and that she was just grateful as long as the happiness lasted. The man goes on to make a match more commensurate with his position and prospects, so advised by his elder relatives. In 'Stine' the situation is a bit more melodramatic. The young man, a kind of invalid in fact from a hapless participation in a recent war, is strongly advised against making the match by his uncle, although the uncle can appreciate the desire, he prides himself after all on his unconventionality, but think it is merely prompted by youthful rashness than mature deliberation. After all there is no point in flaunting convention in the long run, no matter how exciting and stimulating in the short. His sentiments are shared by the sister of Stine, a merry widow of questionable morals, and they decide to send off Stine somewhere to let the affair cool down. But in the meantime the young man draws the necessary conclusions, goes home, writes two letters, one to his uncle and the other to his beloved. He has a pistol, but he does not use it, instead he takes poison. Then there is a funeral at the end, to which Stine attends heartbroken. A tragic ending, but how realistic really? In the other work, realism takes precedence over drama, and both parties resign themselves to circumstances. Life must go on.

What is remarkable with this short story is that the main characters are really marginal. Most of the imagination of the author is devoted to the delineation of Stines older sister - the widow, and the uncle of the young invalid. In fact the short story is something in the nature of a genre painting in the style of the Old Dutch Masters, say a painting by Jan Steen. A genre painting set not in 17th century Holland but late 19th century Berlin. The lovers plot seems to be more of an afterthought, inserted to give to the story some kind of narrative. Most of the action, such as the party at the widows apartment does little to further the story, except of course in this particular case this is when the two future lovers make their erstwhile encounter.

As known, Fontane came rather late to fiction, having spent his life as a journalist. Thus it is tempting to see it as a finger exercise, in which the main point is to paint scenes and delineate characters, not really to have a story to tell

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