

Frau Jenny Treibel

Th. Fontane

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At the center of the story is the Treibels. The head of the household is Treibel himself, a successful industrialist manufacturing Prussian Blue *Berliner Blau*. He has earned the honorary title of Kommerzienrat and tries to climb higher on the social scale, by trying to also make an political career for the conservatives, enlisting in his cause a certain former lieutenant and a crackpot with the fittingly ridiculous name of Vogelsang, an initiative which turns out to be a disaster. His wife, a certain Jenny, comes from very humble circumstances, having made a most successful match. The couple has two sons, one of whom is married to a rich daughter of a business family from Hamburg, and the other younger still unmarried Leopold.

Associated to the Treibels are the widower Willibald Schmidt with his daughter Corinna. Schmidt was once courting Jenny, but had to give up, because what could he offer as to social advancement. He was but a professor and Gymnasium teacher? Still they are still very much friends, maintaining the social bond, which makes the main event possible. Namely Corinna managing the weak Leopold to propose to her.

The secret engagement is not a secret for very long. Timid Leopold under the thumb of his mother, cannot wait to tell her, naively hoping for her approval and blessings. Such are not forthcoming. Jenny is furious. He is not to marry penniless Corinna, instead she has the sister of his sister-in-law in mind as a suitable partner. Not only is she beautiful she will bring money as well, and further enhance the business. Leopold remonstrates feebly. The next morning Jenny invites Hildegaard, the above-mentioned sister, to come and visit, something she has had in mind already before, and goes over to the Schmidts to give them a dressing down and demanding from Corinna that she gives up her son. It is not the case that he proposed to her, Jenny claims, he is too timid for such a step, but it is she that tricked him into it. Corinna defends herself valiantly, while her father is somewhat amused by the proceedings, just as Treibel himself does not see too much in the match to oppose.

Leopold is forbidden to leave the house by his mother, a stricture to which he meekly succumbs, restricting himself to writing letters to Corinna, impressing her with his desire for her, his love and devotion, and his determination to against all odds overcome the obstacles thrown in their way. Corinna receives his daily missives, soon to tire of them. They are all the same, and there are but words and concomitant with no acts. At first she shreds them after reading, then she stops bothering to read them at all. She is bored.

Eventually she realizes that it is a mistake. (Fontane lets her come to the conclusion by engaging with her 'foster-mother' the housemaid of Schmidt.) She is clear-eyed about her motivations. Just like Jenny she wanted to climb in the world, marry rich and have a more exciting life. Leopold is a nice young man, pliable and obedient, and would not interfere too much. She would not necessarily be unhappy being married to him, nor for that matter particularly happy, and with her initiative and intelligence, she would not ever

be bored. But as it turns out Leopolds fear of his mother is greater than his professed love for her. She decides to marry her cousin after all, they so to speak belong to each other. Meanwhile the letters of Leopold professing his love come pouring in.

Shortly thereafter she gets married, the Treibels are invited, although Leopold decides not to be present, taking as is his custom, a longer ride instead. One suspects that he will end up marrying Hildegaard on his mothers orders, and be provided with a beautiful if shallow wife with money to contribute.

Fontane is a skilled writer. Like in the 'die Poggenpuhls' he manages to indicate an epic with the techniques of a short story. One feels as if one has read a far thicker book than has actually been the case, and that the story of Leopolds and Corinnas aborted engagement is just an episode in a much larger saga. The secret is of course the delineation of characters, to paint them, if not larger than life, definitely larger than the ostensible plot and ensuing book. Treibel appears a rather sympathetic character after all, with much more depth and self-awareness than one would initially suspect. Frau Jenny on the other hand is a kind of hypocrite. On one hand professing a love and devotion to the so called higher things in life, the fascination with the artistic and the artistic calling, and extolling the virtues of a simple life. But when 'push comes to shove' it is status and power and riches that count. Her own modest background is conveniently forgotten, having identified herself so thoroughly with the higher Burgeois and her elevated position. Her love for the arts is nothing but sentimentalism, a kind of veneer on her more materially satisfying position. Her daughter-in-law, whom she cannot abide, is even a worse caricature, here there is not even any pretense to culture. She is hard and cold and calculating, and exerts I guess an even more rigid control on her husband Otto, than does his mother visavi his father. Contrasting the superficial culture of Jenny the author brings forth his own alter-ego Schmidt (whose daughter Corinna may very well have been modeled on his own daughter). This is culture of the burgeois at its best. A true love of learning. Schmidt speaks with great approval of his nephew and son-on-law-to-be Marcell as being an archeologist. But of course erudition is not enough, as the author illustrates by presenting a regular dinner meeting of the 'seven wise'. (The seven do not always attend, as is revealed, only when they have nothing better to do). To Fontane erudition has to be wedded to a general humane outlook on life (and Schmidt, would he not be a professor, may very well have been a Social-Democrat as he muses) to be worth anything. Otherwise it is just a case of dry pedantry.

Remarkable is the ability of Fontane to suggest with such economy complicated emotional relationships. There is no need to describe everything, and by this the master reveals himself, only necessary to outline the proverbial tip of an iceberg and let the reader imagine what may be submerged under the surface. Take the relation between Leopold and his mother. On what is her power over the son based? Why is the son under her sway? He knows that he is dependent on her, and he resents it, but is unable nevertheless to extricate himself. Is it because of a congenial weakness, a lack of initiative, or is he bonded in some other ways, say through a subconscious erotical bond? It is clear that in spite of his remonstrations to the contrary, he feels no passion for Corinne. What may have caught his fancy is her choice of him, of her taking command, just like his mother does. So Corinne becomes a kind of life-line, an alternative mother, through which he may escape. But of course as a mother-figure she cannot even start to seriously compete with the real

thing. The outcome is of course doomed from the start. His mother has no illusions of her son, she knows he is a weakling and he needs to be kept on a short leash for his own good. This kind of mother-son relationship is not so uncommon I would suspect.

Fontane makes fun of the inflated bourgeois with their pretensions, and this was a major theme of most influential writers of the 19th century, which to some extent may have contributed to the downfall of the phenomenon. (Obviously the bourgeois has not really disappeared, on the contrary, it has just changed form, and is about to have a renaissance.) It is of course a theme for which he will be appreciated by posterity and the pursuit of which will to some extent classify him as a writer and supply him with an appropriate and approving label. The ridiculing of the bourgeois sooner or later tends to bore you. Once a victory is achieved, the vanquished soon loses interest. So there must be more to a writer than political correctness to sustainably keep our interest.

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