

## Die Marquise von O...

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The language of von Kleist is difficult not to say convoluted. The sentences contain many subordinate clauses, in an intricate nesting, which at times is hard to make head or tail of. Many a time I have tried to read one of Kleist's short stories only to find myself bogged down. Yet perseverance, and reading fast, makes it come to sense. It is like a pointilistic picture, when viewed close it does not make sense, only when stepping back, and letting it all blur together, can you make it out. The same with Kleist, read fast enough and be contented with the gist, then the meanings will take care of themselves. Yet you do wonder how much you may be missing.

The story is a melodramatic one, supposedly based on a true one, but that is a well-known ruse used in fiction. Anyway it takes place in Northern Italy, where a Russian army attacks and conquers a fort. How realistic is that? Where there ever Russians in Italy? They were in Paris of course after the Napoleonic debacle, but this is literary license, and the presence of Russian soldiers is of course somewhat titillating. The daughter of the commander - 'die Marquise', a young widow with two small children is set upon by a gang of soldiers but rescued by a Russian officer, a count, needless to add. The commander has to give up and retire to a house in the city. The count gets wounded leaves and dies according to rumors, but nevertheless shows up some time later and asks for the hand of the young widow. The family is of course flattered by his offer, but wonders why in such a hurry, they do not know each other yet. The count, however, is adamant, he needs to go on some business trips and wants to settle the matter before that. In fact he refuses to leave until he gets a positive answer. They are puzzled indeed, does the count think that he conquers the heart of a woman in the same way he conquers a fort? In the end they make a promise that the young lady will not accept any other offers until he returns. Much to their relief he accepts this and departs.

The Marquise, however, does not feel well. The family doctor is called in, and he diagnoses her as pregnant. She is flabbergasted and insulted. She discusses it with her mother and protests her innocence, her mother believes her, but becomes concerned when the daughter wants a midwife. Does her daughter hide something? One thing is clear, she is not going to give birth in the house. The midwife only confirms the diagnosis of the doctor. The father is incensed and turns his daughter out of the house. When she tries to plead with him, he fires a shot with his pistol. In those days people adhered to principles. She is sent packing and as she is about to depart with her children, her brother, the son in the house, relays the command by the father that the children stay behind. No way, she retorts and brings them with her, this act of defiance raising her spirits and returning to her neglected mansion, she decides to hack it out alone and fix it up. She lives in splendid isolation and refuses to see anyone. Eventually she places an advertisement in the paper asking the father of her child to announce himself and promising to marry him. An unprecedented step, sure to bring attention and ridicule. And in fact, the author choses to

begin his story by this startling announcement. By this time it is clear to the reader that the Russian count and officer must be the father, and that this accounts for his haste in having her hand, and he or she looks forward to the happy resolution. However, inevitably, the process is not going to be smooth. Would it, there would not be much of a story. The count returns and goes to her estate. He is rebuffed by the servant but makes his way inside anyway. But the Marquise rejects his tender advances and he is at a loss how to proceed. However, he is soon alerted to the advertisement in the paper and his irresolution comes to a halt and soon thereafter an announcement is published in the paper to the effect that the sought out father will appear at eleven o'clock on the third day of the month at the house of the commandant. The daughter writes a touching letter to her father, asking him to relay to her the identity of the man, as she is forbidden by him to cross the threshold of his house. A letter able to move a stone to tears. But the commandant is a man of principle, he tears the letter into pieces and has it returned to his daughter. Meanwhile the mother thinks of a stratagem. She travels to the mansion of her daughter, repelled by the servant, her daughter nevertheless catches sight of her, and a most tender reunion follows. The mother reveals to her that the identity of the father has been revealed to them ahead of time, and turns out to be one of their servants. The daughter accepts this fact readily, thus proving to her mothers satisfaction that she is indeed totally ignorant and hence innocent of the act. She is overjoyed and reveals her stratagem, that it was all made up, and brings her daughter back. Somewhat surprisingly she has no problems convincing her spouse of the innocence of the daughter. What follows is a most intensive reconciliation, with a lot of tears being shed. The father tenderly takes his grown-up daughter into his lap, and covers her with kisses, as if she was his beloved, a fact that is bound to produce a certain uneasiness in the modern reader. But it may have no deeper meaning and plays no part in the plot. The Romantic age had its own conventions, and excessive emotion displayed may mean nothing more than the display of emotions excessive, and a fine thing as well.

On the dreaded appointed hour, the count appears. And now the daughter is appalled. Anyone but this devil. She refuses. But as her principled father reminds her, a promise is a promise and he and the count set up a contract. The following day she is married, but she refuses to look at the groom. But eventually she softens up, a second wedding much more cheerful than the first ensues, and as times goes by the happy couple is blessed with many more children. Why the devil? Because you appeared to me at first like an angel, she explains.

And so a happy ending as a nice story should have. An ending, as already noted, anticipated by the reader, but whose sweetness is ensured by the temporary suspense whether it would come about at all. There is of course a hidden moral lesson. Happiness eventually prevails. Which is another way of saying that virtue is rewarded, provided it is tested.