

Mina de Vanghel

Stendhal

March 24, 2019

This is a short and intensely romantic tale of the kind no doubt very popular at the time, yet saved from being too saccharine by the wit and irony of the author. Its style and tone are reminiscent of von Kleist who was a contemporary until he aborted his life, and the story would have been cut out for a movie by someone like Rohmer.

The plot is easy enough to summarize. A young rich and orphaned girl leaves her native Knigsberg to find adventure and happiness in Paris. However, she soon gets bored and leaves for the countryside where she accidentally meets Mme Larçay and her husband, to whom she takes an instant liking. She is initially a bit shocked and dismayed of having fallen in love with a married man but that does not stop her from her quest. The couple Larçay head for the spa in the Savoy – Aix en Savoie – and she follows suit, disguised as the chamber maid of her own. She finagles an invitation to get employed by Mme Larçay just to be close to her object of love. She manages to do so and in fact becomes an assistant to the husband during his gardening hobby in which she feigns an interest. The husband gets interested in her, especially as she starts to neglect her make-up designed to make her ugly. At one time Mmm Larçay insults her in front of her husband, who to her great chagrin does not come to her rescue. She decides to have a revenge on the wife. For that purpose she leads a certain comte de Ruppert on, a man who has pursued her in the past, and to whom she promises marriage on condition that he makes his court to Mme Larçay, something he is not too keen on. This ruse involves ardent love letters to her, intentionally intercepted and relayed to the husband. The last concerns a note of a rendez-vous in her bedroom. Mina and the husband show up at the appointed place and time and catche the comte red-handed in the bedroom. The comte escapes through a window, the wife professes her innocence and ignorance, which the husband naturally does not choose to believe. Instead he pursues and presumably catches the comte, as apparently a duel of some sort ensues, as the comte is reported to be seriously wounded but not fatally as it will turn out. The husband has to flee the scene up to Lyon and soon thereafter Mina joins him and they spend a couple of happy months together traveling around as tourists, and by now she has revealed her true identity. However, M. Larçay eventually becomes bored and depressed, obviously he is not as much in love as is Mina. He becomes suspicious and confronts her as to whether she knew, or even masterminded the whole affair with the comte, to which Mina gladly assents, making a full disclosure. He gets disgusted and decides on the spot to end it all and return to his wife, while Mina goes into an adjacent chamber after he has gone and disappeared down the street, and shoots herself. A true melodrama in other words.

Obviously the tale lacks in realism, and it would be naive to read it as such, it is a fairy-tale and what matters is the mood and the story, and the cold detachment with which it is narrated. There are to be found some nature descriptions such as

Mais enfin la lune se leva derrière la montagne de Haute-Combe. Son disque brillant réfléchissait dans les eaux du lac doucement agitées par un brise de nord. De grands nuages blancs à formes bizarres passaient rapidement devant la lune, et semblaient à Mina comme des géants immenses.

But those flights are exceptions, and those stick out, the style of Stendhal is economical with few if any purple passages added for adornment.

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