

Quitt

Th. Fontane

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This is a short novella by Fontane which somehow falls outside his usual oeuvre. The main action does not take place in Prussia or some place with which he has some intimacy. It starts out conventionally enough in Silensia, but then abruptly the action moves to the prairies and forested mountains of the Mid-West. Areas of which the author has no personal experience, but are instead refracted through the reading of the exotic literature of the time, more precisely that of the prevalent Indian books by authors such as J.F. Cooper, and his German epigone Karl May. Such books were immensely popular until the early 60's. Then they seem to have gone out of fashion. No children play 'Indians and Cowboys' as they still did in my childhood.

The plot is easy enough to summarize. The main protagonist is Lehnert Menz, who lives with his widowed mother. His life is maliciously obstructed by the machinations of the forester by name of Oplitz, whose accusations and pontifications in connection with the war have earned the young man a prison sojourn and in general barred him from further advancement. Nevertheless there is great social pressure on him to mend his ways and forget his animosity towards Oplitz and instead come to a reconciliation. For this Lehnert is too proud, and the reader cannot but sympathize with him. Further conflicts arise and consequent incriminations. At the end our protagonist has had enough and relegating his further fate to chance, he encounters the hated antagonist in the forest and shoots him dead. Fate willed it.

The body is soon found by search parties and soon enough incriminating evidence against him is found, after all the open animosity between them makes him a prime suspect and a house search fills the gap in the chain of technical evidence, but before an arrest can be made, our hero bolts, and then we meet him again several years later, now in America, the possible dream of Europeans of the past to escape constraints and breathe a freer air. He has made good, but lost it all, and now through a chance encounter on a train he throws in his lot with a Mennonite community headed by a patriarch, who appreciates Prussian labor. Lehnert makes good again, proves himself to be reliable and diligent, just as a Prussian is expected to be. He feels a certain loneliness though. An elderly Prussian couple in the community appear to him too narrow minded, and he is only able to strike up a companionship of sorts with an eccentric Frenchman who works with him. But gradually he falls in love with the young daughter of the house, and eventually asks the Patriarch for her hand. He is not discouraging, but refers to Rakel, from which our protagonist concludes that the quest will not be promptly satisfied. However, during a search mission for the lost brother (soon to appear none the worse for the temporary ordeal) which he is eager to engage in to show his worth and dedication to the family, he meets with an accident in the mountains. A fall makes his hip to be dislocated, and isolated in the forest and unable to move, he eventually dies from exposure before he is found. The old crime finally has caught up with him, people like him are never allowed to taste the sweetness

of success, as his friend the Frenchman, has told him. He was not fated to enjoy a happy marital union, either he or his bride would come to grief, his friend had prophesized.

And that is it. The news of his death is conveyed to his home region by a letter from the Patriarch and hits a nerve, as he had been rather popular among his people, but as one character points out. No one should escape justice, the Americans should have extradited him, so due process could have occurred, ending in his death by hanging. This is Prussian morality, the author seems to indicate, 'Recht und Ordnung soll sein', without it civilization breaks down.

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