

Ludwig Tieck



The Betrothal

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SECTION I

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— I HAVE been long waiting for you, cried young Ferdinand, as his friend came towards him.

— You know, replied the other, that it is impossible to get away in a hurry from our corpulent friend the Baron, when he begins to relate anecdotes of his life.

— If you were an officer like myself, answered Ferdinand, you would nevertheless have found it possible to be punctual; that at least one learns in the service. They are all assembled in the walks yonder, let us make haste, that I may introduce you to this respectable family.

The young friends turned the corner of a rock, and enjoyed the clear view along the rushing stream, which gleamed as it passed by the side of the woods and hills. The spring had this year displayed peculiar luxuriance.

— How grateful is it to the man of business, said Alfred, on a day like this, to leave behind him the city and his spiritless occupations, to feel, after long exertion and privation, this blissfulness of nature, and to hear her sacred voice! And how thankful am I to you, my dear friend, for proposing to introduce me into the circle of the best and noblest of men. For however we may strive to form ourselves, however earnestly we may be resolved to study, to collect knowledge, and to enlarge our hearts and affections, still it is intercourse with the pure specimens of human nature, that throws life into this dead, plodding, and rude endeavour, and converts our acquirements into a real

treasure. But to the tender sex it is reserved to give to man that degree of cultivation, of which his powers and talents render him capable.

The young officer looked at his friend with a shake of the head, stood still a moment, and then said, as they walked on:

— These phrases, which one has been forced to hear thousands of times, how unable am I to join in them! According to this, it would be the great world, or what is called good company, which a man should seek, in order to attain, under the influence of paltry wit, coquetry, scandal and babble, that maturity which solitude cannot afford us. Though in most things I am of your opinion, yet on this point I must directly differ from you. Women! They it is precisely who seem to have been stationed by a malignant destiny, for the very purpose of reducing man, if he is sufficiently weak, under their dominion; of stripping him of every thing manly, noble, vigorous, and ingenuous, and transforming him, as far as possible, into his opposite, that he may be just good enough to serve them as a contemptible toy. What you were just now expressing, is a mode of thinking which belonged to an age that has now almost gone by, an age, which stood in hostile opposition to truth, but particularly to religious feeling. I must also inform you, that you will not find that style of behaviour, by which our young gentlemen formerly thought they improved themselves, in the society of these women, because with them all is sacred truth, innocence and genuine piety.

His friend endeavoured to justify his opinion and himself, as in animated conversation they briskly pursued their way.

They now saw before them the garden, where, in the cool walks, the Baroness, with her family and some select friends, was awaiting their arrival. All felt refreshed and at ease amid the verdant scene.

Only the young counsellor Alfred found a difficulty, at first, in adapting himself to the tone and topics of the company. He was, as is frequently the case, too much on the stretch, to give himself up with ease to the conversation; he had also too much at his heart, which he strove to bring forward with a timidity, by means of which he often confused himself, and was put out by others; for by the time he had digested his thoughts into a speech, the proper moment for introducing it had gone by; and, among the new subjects of conversation, there occurred a multitude of things which seemed to him unintelligible, and on which he was too bashful to beg more particular information. In addition to this, he was in a manner dazzled by the charms of the ladies; the married daughter Kunigunde was a brilliant beauty; still more radiant was the loveliness of her younger sister Clementine, to which the light complexion and girlish physiognomy of the youngest, miss Clara, formed a sweet contrast; the mother herself might still make pretensions to a pleasing person, and it was evident that she had been in her youth a beautiful woman. Dorothea, the eldest daughter, attracted the least attention in this circle, beautiful as was her eye, and delicate as was her shape; she herself shrank back, and kept still and shy; she seemed even to take but little interest in the animated conversation of her sisters, and it was remarkable that no speech or question was addressed to her, notwithstanding

the pains which all the men in the company took to ingratiate themselves with the other daughters or the mother.

Among the men, there distinguished himself an elderly person, who generally took the lead in the conversation, gave information to every body, and decided all disputed or doubtful cases. Even the officer treated him with submissive humility, and this friend of the family addressed himself with kindness and condescension to all, asking them questions, setting them right, animating them, and endeavouring, in his way, to encourage or enlighten every one. He succeeded too at last in drawing the embarrassed Alfred into the conversation, and his gratitude vented itself in a glowing speech, which he now found an opportunity of introducing, and in which he unfolded his wish for improvement, his reverence for domestic happiness, and his hope that the genuine religious temper and true piety would diffuse themselves throughout Germany, with general approbation and to his own satisfaction.

The most attentive of all had been the fair Kunigunde, and she it was who most loudly expressed her approbation.

— How fortunate are we, she at last concluded, to assemble in our dear circle more and more of those spirits, who aim at what is good and noble; who have a perception of something above the earthly, and to whom the world, with all its alluring treasures, appears but vanity. But it is the property of truth and goodness to attract better natures, and to sublimate the weak. While social intercourse has this happy effect in a larger sphere, it is, in the confined domestic circle, the blissfulness of wedlock, that kindles in