

Heine and Mathilde

Richard Le Gallienne

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The love story of Heine and his Mathilde is another of those stories which fix a type of loving. It is the love of a man of the most brilliant genius, the most relentless, mocking intellect, for a simple, pretty woman, who could no more understand him than a cow can understand a comet. Many men of genius have loved just such women, and the world, of course, has wondered. How is it that men of genius prefer some little Mathilde, when the presidents of so many women's clubs are theirs for the asking? Perhaps the problem is not so difficult as, at first sight, it may seem. After all, a man of genius is much like other men. He is no more anxious than any other man to marry an encyclopedia, or a university degree. And, more than most men, he is fitted to realize the mysterious importance and satisfaction of simple beauty—though it may go quite unaccompanied by "intellectual" conversation—and the value of simple woman—goodness, the woman—goodness that orders a household so skillfully that your home is a work of art, the woman—goodness that glories in that "simple" thing we call motherhood, the woman—goodness that is almost happy when you are ill because it will be so wonderful to nurse you. Superior persons often smile at these Mathildes of the great. They have smiled no little at Mathilde Crescence Mirat; but he who was perhaps the greatest mocker that ever lived knew better than to laugh at Mathilde. The abysses of his brain no one can, or even dare, explore—but, listen as we will at the door of that infernal pit of laughter, we shall hear no laugh against his faithful little Mathilde. It is not at Mathilde he laughs, but at the precious little blue—stocking, who freshened the last months of his life with a final infatuation—that still unidentified "Camille Selden" whom he playfully called "la Mouche."

"La Mouche," naturally, had a very poor opinion of Madame Heine, and you need not be a cynic to enjoy this passage with which she opens her famous remembrances of "The Last Days of Heinrich Heine":

"When I first saw Heinrich Heine he lived on the fifth floor of a house situated on the Avenue Matignon, not far from the Rond—Point of the Champs—Elysees. His windows, overlooking the avenue, opened on a narrow balcony, covered in hot weather with a striped linen awning, such as appears in front of small cafes. The apartments consisted of three or four rooms—the dining—room and two rooms used by the master and the mistress of the house. A very low couch, behind a screen encased in wall—paper, several chairs, and opposite the door a walnut—wood secretary, formed the entire furniture of the invalid's chamber. I nearly forgot to mention two framed engravings, dated from the early years of Louis Philippe's reign—the 'Reapers' and the 'Fisherman,' after Leopold Robert. So far the arrangements of the rooms evidenced no trace of a woman's presence, which showed itself in the adjoining chamber by a display of imitation lace, lined with transparent yellow muslin, and a corner—cupboard covered with brown velvet, and more especially by a full—length portrait, placed in a good light, of Mme. Heine, with dress and hair as worn in her youth—a low—necked black bodice, and bands of hair plastered down her cheeks—a style in the fashion of about 1840.

"She by no means realized my ideal Mme. Heine. I had fancied her refined, elegant, languishing, with a pale, earnest face, animated by large, perfidious, velvety eyes. I saw, instead, a homely, dark, stout lady, with a high colour and a jovial countenance, a person of whom you would say she required plenty of exercise in the open air. What a painful contrast between the robust woman and the pale, dying man, who, with one foot already in the grave, summoned sufficient energy to earn not only enough for the daily bread, but money besides to purchase beautiful dresses. The melancholy jests, which obliging biographers constantly represent as flashes of wit from a husband too much in love not to be profuse, never deluded anybody who visited that home. It is absurd to transform Mme. Heine into an idyllic character, whilst the poet himself never dreamed of representing her in that guise. Why poetize at the expense of truth?—especially when truth brings more honour to the poet's memory."

One is sorry that Heine has not risen again to enjoy this. One can easily picture his reading it and, turning tenderly to his "Treasure," his "Heart's Joy," with that everlasting boy's look on his face, saying: "Never mind,

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Damschen. We know, don't we? They think they know, but we know." And with what a terrible snarl he would say, "My ideal Mme. Heine!"

"My ideal Mme. Heine!" No doubt "la Mouche" thought she might have been that, had all the circumstances been different, had Heine not already been married for years and had he not been a dying man. We may be quite sure what Heine would have thought of the matter, and quite sure what she was to him. Mathilde, we know, was unhappy about the visits of the smart young lady who talked Shakespeare and the musical glasses so glibly, and who held her husband's hand as he lay on his mattress-grave, and wore a general air of providing him with that intellectual companionship which was so painfully lacking in his home. Yet we who know the whole story, and know her husband far better than she, know how little she really had to fear from the visits of "Camille Selden." To Heine "la Mouche" was merely a brilliant flower, with the dew of youth upon her. His gloomy room lit up as she entered, and smelled sweet of her young womanhood hours after she had gone. But "the ideal Mme. Heine"? No! Heine had found his real Mme. Heine, the woman who had been faithful to him for years, had faced poverty and calamity with him, and had nursed him with laughing patience, day in and day out, for years. Heine had good reason for knowing how "the ideal Mme. Heine" would have treated him under such circumstances; for little bas-bleue "Mouche" had only to have a bad cold to stay away from the bedside of her hero, though she knew how he was counting the minutes to her coming, in the nervous, hysterical fashion of the invalid. One of his bitterest letters reproaches her with having kept him waiting in this way:

"Tear my sides, my chest, my face, with red-hot pincers, flay me alive, shoot, stone me, rather than keep me waiting.

"With all imaginable torture, cruelly break my limbs, but do not keep me waiting, for of all torments disappointed expectation is the most painful. I expected thee all yesterday afternoon until six o'clock, but thou didst not come, thou witch, and I grew almost mad. Impatience encircled me like the folds of a viper, and I bounded on my couch at every ring, but oh! mortal anguish, it did not bring thee. "Thou didst fail to come; I fret, I fume, and Satan whispered mockingly in my ear—"The charming lotus-flower makes fun of thee, thou old fool!"

"Camille Selden" made the mistake of her life when she imagined that Heine loved her, and did not love that somewhat stout and High-coloured Mme. Heine who had such bad taste in lace and literature.

Mathilde, as we know, was far from being Heine's first love. She was more important—his last. Heine himself tells us that from his boyhood he had been dangerously susceptible to women. He had tried many cures for the disease, but finally came to the conclusion that "woman is the best antidote to woman", though—"to be sure, this is driving out Satan with Beelzebub." There had been many loves in Heine's life before, one day in the Quarrier Latin, somewhere in the year 1835, he had met saucy, laughing Mathilde Crescence Mirat. There had been "red Sefchen," the executioner's daughter, whose red hair as she wound it round her throat fascinated Heine with its grim suggestion of blood. There had been his cousin Amalie, whose marriage to another is said to have been the secret spring of sorrow by which Heine's laughter was fed. And there had been others, whose names—imaginary, maybe, in that they were doubtless the imaginary names of real women—are familiar to all readers of Heine's poetry: Seraphine, Angélique, Diane, Hortense, Clarisse, Emma, and so on.

But she is loved best who is loved last; and when, after those months of delirious dissipation in Paris, which all too soon were to be so exorbitantly paid for by years of suffering, Heine met Mathilde, there is no doubt at all that Heine met his wife. His reminiscent fancy might sentimentalize about his lost Amalie, but no one can read his letters, not so much to, as about, Mathilde without realizing that he came as near to loving her as a man of his temperament can come near to loving any one.

Though, to begin with, they were not married in the conventional sense, but "kept house" together in the fashion of the Quarter, there seems no question that Heine was faithful to Mathilde—to whom in his letters to his friends he always referred as his "wife"—and that their relation, in everything but name, was a true marriage. Just before he met Mathilde, Heine had written to his friend and publisher, Campe, that he was at last sick to death of the poor pleasures which had held him too long. "I believe," he writes, "that my soul is at last purified of all its dross; henceforth my verses will be the more beautiful, my books the more harmonious. At all events, I know this—that at the present moment everything impure and vulgar fills me with positive disgust."

It was at this moment, disgusted with those common illusions miscalled pleasure, that Heine met Mathilde, and was attracted by what one might call the fresh elementalism of her nature. That his love began with that fine

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intoxication of wonder and passion without which no love can endure, this letter to his friend August Lewald will show: "How can I apologize for not writing to you? And you are kind enough to offer me the good excuse that your letter must have been lost. No, I will confess the whole truth. I duly received it—but at a time when I was up to my neck in a love affair that I have not yet got out of. Since October nothing has been of any account with me that was not directly connected with this. I have neglected everything, I see nobody, and give a sigh whenever I think of my friends.... So I have often sighed to think that you must misunderstand my silence, yet I could not fairly set myself down to write. And that is all I can tell you today; for my cheeks are in such a flame, and my brain reels so with the scent of flowers, that I am in no condition to talk sensibly to you.

"Did you ever read King Solomon's Song? Just read it, and you will there find all I could say today."

So wrote Heine at the beginning of his love. When that love had been living for eight years, he was still writing in no less lover-like a fashion. "My wife," says he to his brother Max in a letter dated April 12, 1843, "is a good child—natural, gay, capricious, as only French women can be, and she never allows me for one moment to sink into those melancholy reveries for which I have so strong a disposition."

When Heine wrote this letter, Mathilde had been his "legal" wife for something like a year and a half. Heine had resorted to the formalizing of their union under the pressure of one of those circumstances which compel a man to think more of a woman than of an idea. He was going to fight a duel with one of his and her cowardly German traducers, and that there should be no doubt of her position in the event of his death, he duly married her. Writing to his friend Lewald once more, on the 13th of October, 1841, he says: "You will have learned that, a few days before the duel, to make Mathilde's position secure, I felt it right to turn my free marriage into a lawful one. This conjugal duel, which will never cease till the death of one or the other of us, is far more perilous than any brief meeting with a Solomon Straus of Jew Lane, Frankfort."

His friend Campe had been previously advised of "my marriage with the lovely and honest creature who has lived by my side for years as Mathilde Heine; was always respected and looked upon as my wife, and was defiled by foul names only by some scandal-loving Germans of the Frankfort clique."

Heine's duel resulted in nothing more serious than a flesh-wound on the hip. But alas! the wild months of dissipation before he had met Mathilde were before long to be paid for by that long, excruciating suffering which is one of the most heroic spectacles in the history of literature. It is the paradox of the mocker that he often displays the virtues and sentiments which he mocks, much more manfully than the professional sentimentalist. Courage and laughter are old friends, and Heine's laughter—his later laughter, at least—was perhaps mostly courage. If for no other reason, one would hope for a hereafter—so that Charles II and Heine may have met and compared notes upon dying. Heine was indeed an "unconscionable long time a-dying," but then he died with such brilliant patience, with such good humour, and, in the meanwhile, contrived to write such haunting poetry, such saturnine criticism.

And, all the time, during those ten years of dying, his faithful "Treasure" was by his side. The people who "understood" him better, who read his books and delighted in his genius, somehow or other seemed to forget the lonely Prometheus on the mattress-rock at No. 3 Avenue Matignon. It was 1854 when Heine was painfully removed there. It was so long ago as the May of 1848 that he had walked out for the last time. His difficult steps had taken him to the Louvre, and, broken in body and nerves—but never in spirit—he had burst into tears before the Venus of Milo. It was a characteristic pilgrimage—though it was only a "Mouche" who could have taken Heine seriously when he said that he loved only statues and dead women. There was obviously a deep strain of the macabre and the bizarre in Heine's nature; but it must never be forgotten that he loved his Mathilde as well.

That Heine was under no illusion about Mathilde, his letters show. He would laugh at her on occasion, and even be a little bitter; but if we are not to laugh at those we love, whom are we to laugh at? So, at all events, thought Heine. Superior people might wonder that a man with Heine's "intellect," et cetera, could put up, day after day, with a little bourgeoisie like Mathilde. But Heine might easily have retorted: "Where anywhere in the world are you going to find me a woman who is my equal, who is my true mate? You will bring me cultivated governesses, or titled ladies who preside over salons, or anemic little literary women with their imitative verse or their amateurish political dreams. No, thank you. I am a man. I am a sick, sad man. I need a kind, beautiful woman to love and take care of me. She must be beautiful, remember, as well as kind—and she must be not merely a nurse, hut a woman I can love. If she shouldn't understand my writings, what does it matter? We don't marry a wife for that. I am not looking for some little patronizing blue-stocking—who, in her heart, thinks

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herself a better writer than myself—but for a simple woman of the elements, no more learned than a rose, and as meaningless, if you will, as the rising moon."

Just such a woman Heine found in his Mathilde, and it is to be remembered that for years before the illness which left him, so to speak, at her mercy, he had loved and been faithful to her. There are letters which seem to show that Mathilde had the defects of those qualities of buxom light-heartedness, of eternal sunshine, which had kept a fickle Heine so faithful. Sometimes, one gathers, she as little realized the tragedy of Heine's suffering as she understood his writings. As such a woman must, she often left Heine very lonely; and seemed to feel more for her cat, or her parrot "Cocotte," than her immortal, dying husband.

"Oh, what a night we have had!" Heine exclaimed one day to his friend Meissner. "I have not been able to close an eye. We have had an accident in our house; the cat fell from the mantelpiece and scratched her right ear; it even bled a little. That gave us great sorrow. My good Mathilde remained up and applied cold poultices to the cat all night long. For me she never remains awake."

And another time, he said, even more bitterly, to another friend: "I felt rather anxious yesterday. My wife had finished her toilet as early as two o'clock and had gone to take a drive. She promised to be back at four o'clock. It struck half-past five and she had not got back yet. The clock struck eight and my anxiety increased. Had she, perhaps, got tired of her sick husband and eloped with a cunning seducer? In my painful doubt I sent the sick-nurse to her chamber to see whether 'Cocotte' the parrot was still there. Yes, 'Cocotte' was still there. That set me at ease again, and I began to breathe more freely. Without 'Cocotte' the dear woman would never go away."

A great man like Heine must necessarily have such moods about a little woman like Mathilde; but the important fact remains that for some twenty years Heine was Mathilde's faithful husband, and that the commonplace, pretty, ignorant, pleasure-loving, bourgeoisie Mathilde was good and faithful to a crippled, incomprehensible mate. Perhaps, after all, the wonder in this marriage is even more on the side of Mathilde than of Heine. Think what such a woman must have had to forego, to suffer, to "put up with," with such a man—a man, remember, whose real significance must have been Chinese to her. Surely, all of us who truly love love by faith, and the love of Heine for Mathilde, and of Mathilde for Heine, alike is only to be explained by that mysterious explanation—faith.

That Heine understood his love for Mathilde, so far as any man of genius can understand his love, and was satisfied with it so far as any man of genius can be with any love, we may be quite sure. His many letters about her, and to her, prove it. All the elemental simplicities of her nature—the very bourgeoisie traits which made his friends wonder—alike interested him, and drew him closer toward her. When she weaves a rug for his friend Lewald, how seriously he takes it! He could laugh at all things in heaven and earth, but when Mathilde weaves a rug for his friend he takes life seriously.

How "domestic" Heine could be is witnessed by a letter of his—to Mathilde from Hamburg in 1823—in regard to her buying a hat for his sister and another for his niece—giving careful directions as to style and price. Mathilde and he had then been each other's for over eight years, but none the less—nay, let us say all the more—he ended his letter: "Adieu! I think only of thee, and I love thee like the madman that I am."

Perhaps the truest proof of Heine's love for Mathilde is the way in which, in his will, he flattered his despicable cousin, Carl Heine, for her sake, so that she might not suffer any loss of his inheritance. There is no doubt that Heine knew the worth of his Mathilde. If so terrible a critic of human nature was satisfied to love and live with her for so many years, we may be sure that Mathilde was a remarkable woman. She didn't indeed talk poetry and philosophy, like little "Mouche," but then the women who do that are legion; and Mathilde was one of those rarer women who are just women, and love they know not why.

In saying this, we mustn't forget that "Camille Selden" said it was ridiculous to sentimentalize about Mme. Heine. Yet, at the same time, we must remember Heine's point of view. When "Camille Selden" first sought his acquaintance, he had been living with Mathilde for some twenty years. Men of genius—and even ordinary men are not apt to live with women they do not love for twenty years; and that Heine did perhaps the one wise thing of his life in marrying his Mathilde there can be very little doubt.

To a man such as Heine a woman is not so much a personality as a beautiful embodiment of the elements: "Earth, air, fire and water met together in a rose." If she is beautiful, he will waive "intellectual sympathy"; if she is good, he will not mind her forgetting the titles of his books. When she becomes a mother, he—being a man of genius—understands that she is a more wonderful being than he can ever hope to be.

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Much has been said about the unhappy marriages of great writers. The true reason too often has been that they have married literary amateurs instead of women and wives. Heine was wiser. No one would, of course, pretend that Mathilde was his mate. But, then, what woman could have been? Certainly not that little literary prig he called his "Mouche."