

Why Gottfried Keller's "Der grüne Heinrich" ended tragically in 1855

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Why Gottfried Keller's "Der grüne Heinrich" ended tragically in 1855

The great Swiss storyteller wrote his most famous works in Berlin and by the end of "Der grüne Heinrich" was hopelessly in love with a young horseback rider.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

The first version of Keller's "Der grüne Heinrich" (Green Henry) ended with Heinrich Lee, having returned to Zurich from Berlin, perishing in futile longing for his beloved Dortchen Schönfund – and as a dead man, still holding in his hands that oracle about the fickleness of hope that was given to him by the perfidious lady. Keller had "scribbled through tears" the final pages of his novel on Palm Sunday 1855 in Berlin: that disappointment in love, from which he lets the character in his novel die, was just as painful in reality.

Berlin as "correctional institution"

In 1850 Keller arrived in the Prussian capital in the hope of being able to establish himself as a playwright, and felt so miserable under the conditions of the conservative reaction that began following the Revolution of 1848, that the city controlled by the all-powerful police seemed to him like a "correctional institution" along the lines of a "Pennsylvanian prison". Nevertheless, and even though his theatrical ambitions had failed, he stayed in the city for five years, writing there not only the most beautiful of his Seldwyla stories – "Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorf" (A Village Romeo and Juliet), "Die drei gerechten Kammacher", "Spiegel das Kätzchen" – but, after many years of ground-work and under considerable pressure from the publisher Vieweg, also the 850-page novel "Der grüne Heinrich", which ensured him a place in the ranks of world literature.

Fighting for love

The model for Dortchen Schönfund was the tall, elegant 22-year-old Betty Tendering, whom the "short, broad-shouldered, stocky, hard as iron, taciturn bearded man with the beautiful serious and fiery dark eyes" (as described by painter Ludwig Pietsch) had met in the home of the publisher Franz Duncker. In an echo of the story of the hero of his novel, Heinrich Lee, and Dortchen Schönfund, Keller himself did not dare to openly declare his love to the young woman who used to ride on horseback through the Tiergarten, whip in hand. He vented his dis-

appointment and frustration, though, on his way home at night, picking fights with uninvolved passers-by, which once landed him with a black eye and another time with a fine. All the same, it seems as though Betty Tendering was so interested in her shy and awkward admirer that during a trip through Switzerland, she made a stop in the Hottinger Gemeindegasse to have a close look at the mother of the peculiar writer.

At the end of November 1855, Gottfried Keller returned to Zurich where in the meantime he had acquired some prestige as a writer, although the first version of "Der grüne Heinrich" published in 1855 sold only 150 copies – a second, more elaborate, but also more innocuous version came out in 1880. From 1861 to 1876, he was the First Official Secretary of the Canton of Zurich, and as the author of a rich prose work and much acclaimed poems ("Abendlied", "Winternacht") died a bachelor on 15 July 1890. He was soon regarded alongside Jeremias Gotthelf as a generally revered Swiss national poet. Betty Tendering, however, married the owner of a brewery and died in 1902 at the age of 71. It is said that prior to her death, she burned the letters that Gottfried Keller had written to her.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Der grüne Heinrich" (first version) is available in bookshops in various editions – as a paperback, a hardcover and as an eBook.

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"I tell you, the greatest affliction and most wondrous arrangement that can happen to a person is to be imperious, destitute and in love at the same time, namely with an elegant personage. But for heaven's sake, keep these things to yourself."

(Gottfried Keller to Hermann Hettner on 2 November 1855)