

Christoph Werner

CASTLE  
BY THE RIVER

The Life and Death of  
Karl Friedrich Schinkel  
Painter and Master Builder

A Novel



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For Helga

Christoph Werner

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RIVER

The Life and Death of Karl Friedrich Schinkel  
Painter and Master Builder

A Novel

Editor Michael Leonard

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# CHAPTER 1

On September 11th of 1840, a small crowd of onlookers had gathered in front of the portal of Berlin's Bauakademie, the Academy of Architecture. Normally, any build-up of Berliners wouldn't come together without noise and coarse jokes, but today people were quiet. They looked at the two carriages that had stopped in front of the Academy. The few who were still talking fell silent and glanced at each other bleakly. The carriages belonged to two doctors, the Privy Councilors Dr. Horn and Dr. von Stosch, who had been summoned by Dr. Pättsch to help him in the treatment of his patient, Privy Councilor Schinkel.

The crowd waited hoping to learn something about the state of health, or rather the illness of their beloved Director of the Königliche Technische Oberbaudeputation, the Royal Office of Works.

Suddenly there was movement among the young Berliners sitting on the lower steps in front of the portal. They quickly got on their feet and stepped aside because the heavy door was opened from inside, and the three doctors walked out solemnly. Dr. Pättsch accompanied his two elder colleagues deferentially to their carriages, and the bystanders could understand some words that were exchanged between the gentlemen. They heard fever, renewed turgescence of the blood towards face and head, but couldn't make sense of it. But then, when Dr. Horn entered his carriage, closed the door and through the window turned once more to his colleague Dr. Pättsch, one could hear him saying loudly and clearly, "Well, dear colleague, don't hesitate to take the measures we've spoken about. A renewed seizure could mean the exitus letalis." With this he signaled to his coachman, and the carriage drove off through the milling crowd, following Dr. von Stosch, who had started before him. Pättsch returned to the building and the care of his patient.



... Always the canvas recoils when he tries to apply the brush. How can hope be made apparent if he doesn't succeed in putting the white dove into the painting? Brentano's smile was so friendly when he, Schinkel, had made a sketch in his notebook of Brentano's impromptu story even while it was being told. And now, in oil, almost ready on the easel, he can't reach the painting with his brush. The canvas recoils, he can't get at it, somebody is holding him from behind, embracing him with his arms, not letting him go. Ah, Herr von Bülow, Your Excellency—has long since died, the minister—the sphere of the artistic, which alone appeals to me, is of such a limitless extent that a man's life is much too short for it. I feel, with great regret, that in other circumstances I could have achieved more, but that I'm being inwardly torn apart by work that drags me away from my true calling.

Then, before he even started sketching, friend Brentano unwaveringly contended that the poet is by his very nature superior to the draftsman and painter since he can express himself more easily and in greater detail than the latter. And, to give his thesis argumentative force, he told his story to those present, among them Arnims and Rungenhagen, in as complicated and abstract a way as possible.

Nature takes possession of a manorial hunting lodge. A proud stag enters the courtyard that had been left by the lordly owners. Gropius was present, as he was often at those soirées in No 99 Friedrichstrasse and—as he was a painter, too, supported the idea from the start. There was no doubt that Brentano wanted to particularly show the outdatedness of a nobility long petrified, of a world where there was not even a place to bury the castle's last resident, the old head forester, because the ground was all rocks. Therefore, the painter let the boat with the coffin cross the river to the other river bank, to a world of hope and renewal under the sign of the cross, symbolized by the vines and the dove.

That was ANNO DOMINI 1815, when the usurpator had finally been defeated. As a reminiscence of the dictator's destructive intentions the castle looks similar to Heidelberg Castle, which had been cruelly made a ruin, as had been the cities of Worms and Speyer during the War of the Grand Alliance, started by Louis XIV of France.



Then, after his interests had long been directed towards other things, namely towards real landscapes and their description by means of the art of painting, Consul Wagener had urged him to paint Castle by the River in oil and thus led him once again into the world of romantic-poetical phantasies. Though he had to admit that he had never lost touch with the medieval world even when deeply immersed in Greek classicism. Too strong, too belle et triste is the longing for the past and the belief in the oneness of man and stone and tree and God, prevailing in the olden times. A witness of this is the Friedrichwerdersche Kirche, the church on the Werderscher Markt in Berlin. Royal Architect Schlaetzer and archeologist Alois Hirt had handed in first drafts. But Schinkel, at that time head of the aesthetic department in the Oberbaudeputation, had rejected their designs in favor of his own.

His Royal Highness the Crown Prince had wanted a church in the manner of the English Gothic chapels, a wish that had corresponded with Schinkel's innermost ideas at that time, as the Prussian National Monument for the Liberation Wars on the Kreuzberg Hill in Berlin, made of cast iron, bears witness to with its Gothic tapering turret, whose foundation stone was laid in 1818 in the presence of His Imperial Majesty the Russian Czar. But he had often tried to adapt the Gothic style, the medieval architectural forms and elements to modern times, to give them a more objective, even factual character. For example, his drafts for the cathedral in memory of the Wars of Liberation, though never carried out, shows his efforts to rid the Gothic forms of their tendency to reach upward toward the sky; and what is even more, the building has not a steep, but a flat roof as the Friedrichwerdersche Kirche has. But still, early Gothic architecture revealed something one could call modern in that it kind of opened up the buildings, displayed the forces active within the walls and roofs and vaults, thus involving the observer and making him a participant in the work of the architect. One only needed to look at how the vault thrust is visibly accommodated by well-designed inside and outside structures. The vaults themselves are supported by cross ribs and flying buttresses, hidden in older architecture, all allowing the creation of the high-ceilinged Gothic churches.

When painting “Castle by the River”, he had long departed from his medieval phase and felt ready, within himself, to paint the Rugard from nature, because he felt he had to serve the present and the tasks produced by it. The Rugard, the highest elevation of the island of Rügen, was of special interest to him because it was like a bridge between the present and the ancient past, as there had been a castle there in which princes of the Slavic tribe of the Rani resided, from which the name Rugard was derived. Schinkel felt he had to pay his tribute to this fact because it showed the continuity of man’s activity within, not against, nature, a thought that had always been close to his heart and which he wished to make his contemporaries aware of.

So, in 1821 he had traveled to Rügen, then immediately continued to Bergen, where he rested at a place that was recommended to him by one of his friends in Berlin. It was the former home for widows of Lutheran ministers, called the Pfarrwitwenhaus, and there he was served an excellent meal of rosefish with potatoes and various kinds of vegetable. But he didn’t stay long because his imagination was captivated by the portal of the Church of St. Mary, but even more by a stone there the picture on which, some people believed, represented Swantevit, a Slavic deity of war, fertility and abundance. But the parish priest said that it is more probable that the stone was put there in 1168 as a sign of the final victory of Christendom over Paganism. Victory over the heathens, really. Since his adulthood he couldn’t find any sense in such a memorial. Had Jesus Christ wanted his followers to fight and kill others in his name? Though it may be possible that myths and legends were invented inside the warm houses without regard to historical facts while outside winter storms raged.

In the same vein people were still talking about the maid jump on the Rugard. Long ago a hard and evil Junker lived on the hill. His serfs groaned under his rule, because he demanded their hard labor without regard to the work on their own fields. But worst was his preferred pastime activity. The villain was not content with the body of his own wife to satisfy his lust. His mind was set on something else, namely the maids and young women on his fiefdom. So once it happened that a young and chaste maid went for a walk on the Rugard to enjoy the view and fresh air there. Why she did that, knowing

like everybody that the land around the Rugard was the favorite hunting ground of the evil Junker, nobody knows. Should she not have been working on the farm where she was a servant? But maybe she had heard the rumor that sometimes, seldom enough, the Junker had acknowledged the fruit of his sinful exercises and compensated the maids with money.

But even if the girl had had that in mind, she quickly thought better of it, when suddenly the Junker galloped up to her and got so near that she could smell his breath reeking of cabbage, venison and wine. Also, he stank abominably of sweat from under his leather things. He attacked her with false pledges of love and tried to kiss her. Finally, the poor girl couldn't think of another escape than with her last ounce of strength to wrench herself from his arms, run to the abyss and jump into the ravine. There her foot made a deep imprint into the stone. The Junker was mad with rage, directed his horse down into the ravine on a passable path and, the maid being gone, lashed his whip with all his strength on the stone. The imprint of the whip and the trace of the girl can still be seen and, in the eyes of the simple folk, bear witness to the truth of the story.

Schinkel loved this tale of courage and sadness and tragedy, though at the same time had to smile about the naivety and imagination of the people.

It was this smile that caused Dr. Pättsch, the family doctor, who stood bent over the sick man, to recoil; it almost frightened him off. For weeks the patient had lain unconscious, had then slightly recovered and now lay with open empty eyes, not speaking, not answering questions, nor moving a limb or uttering a need whatsoever. Though the need to relieve himself, soiling his bed, particularly in the presence of others, caused him great agitation. He looked around, breathed more quickly, moved hand and foot back and forth and finally satisfied his need with visible energy without demanding a chamber pot or afterwards indicating that he wanted to be cleaned.

Now he smiled, and Dr. Pättsch feared that the symptoms which had so worried his family before he became bed-ridden would return.

It was a loud, almost hysterical laughter into which he broke out without any reason, quite unusual for him. And he couldn't stop it whatever he tried. Once Pättsch had observed, when a sad message was brought about the death