MODERN CLASSICS

Stefan Zweig

Beware of Pity

or Impatience of the Heart

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

Beware of Pity

Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) was an Austrian writer who, at the height of his fame in the 1920s and 30s, was one of the most famous authors in the world. Zweig was born into a wealthy Austrian-Jewish family in Vienna, where he attended school and university before continuing his studies in Berlin. A devotee of Hugo von Hoffmanstahl, he had published his first book of poetry by the age of 19. After taking a pacifist stance during the First World War he travelled widely and became an international best-seller with a string of hugely popular novellas, including *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Amok* and *Fear*. He also developed friendships with great writers, thinkers, musicians and artists of the day, including Romain Rolland, Rainer Maria Rilke, Arturo Toscanini and, perhaps most importantly, Sigmund Freud, whose philosophy had a great influence on Zweig's work.

Jonathan Katz was born in London in 1950 and educated in London, Munich and at Oxford, where he is currently a Fellow of Brasenose College and the University's Public Orator. His previous translations from German include works by Goethe, Theodor Storm and Joseph Roth. His translations of *Six Stories* by Stefan Zweig are also published by Penguin.

STEFAN ZWEIG

Beware of Pity

Translated by Jonathan Katz

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There are in fact two kinds of pity. One, the feeble and sentimental kind, is really no more than the heart's impatience to free itself as quickly as possible from emotional discomfort when faced with another's misfortune; it is the sort of pity which is not at all genuine sympathy – 'shared feeling' – but merely an instinctive defence of one's own soul against the other person's pain. Then there is the other kind, which is the only one that counts – unsentimental yet constructive, knowing its own mind, fully resolved to endure everything patiently, compassionately, along with that other person, right to the very limit of its strength, and even beyond that limit.

'To him that hath, shall be given.' This saying from the Scriptures can be safely substantiated by any writer, in the sense: 'To him that hath told much, shall be told.' There is no greater error than the all too common idea that an author's imagination is continuously at work, bringing forth an unbroken stream of events and stories from an inexhaustible source. In reality, what the author needs is not so much to find, or invent, anything, but rather to allow himself to be found *by characters and occurrences that will incessantly seek him out as their re-teller – provided, of course, that he has developed and preserved the essential talent for looking and listening. To him who has repeatedly attempted to expound the fortunes of others, many others will communicate their own fortunes.*

And so it was that the present story was entrusted to me, almost complete in the form told here, and indeed in a wholly unexpected way. One evening, the last time I was in Vienna, I was feeling exhausted by all kinds of affairs I had had to attend to, and I went in search of a particular restaurant some way from the centre of town, thinking the place had long been out of fashion and was now little frequented. However, the moment I entered the place I was made annoyingly aware of my error. At the very first table I came to, an acquaintance of mine leapt to his feet with every sign of genuine joy – joy which I have to say was not quite so keenly reciprocated – and urged me to join him. I cannot honestly claim that this enthusiastic gentleman was in himself a disagreeable or unpleasant person; he was one of those compulsively sociable types who collect acquaintances with the same zeal as children collect stamps, taking a particular pride in each and every specimen in their collection. For this harmless eccentric – who had a side-line as a knowledgeable and diligent archivist – the meaning of life was entirely defined by the modest satisfaction of being able to comment, as if

breezily stating the obvious, whenever a name came up in a newspaper, 'A good friend of mine', or 'Ah yes, I met him only yesterday', or 'My friend A has told me, and my friend B is of the opinion that . . .' and so on all the way through the alphabet. He could be depended on to be there at the theatre applauding his actor friends' first nights, and to be telephoning to congratulate every actress the next morning; he never forgot a birthday, unpleasing press notices he left unmentioned while sending copies of the favourable ones, and he cordially shared in the recipient's pleasure. Certainly not a bad person, then, for he was genuinely eager, in fact delighted, to help out the moment one asked for some small favour, or if he saw any chance of augmenting his collection of acquaintances with a new curio.

But there is no need for me to describe more exactly this friend Adabei, 'Also-There' – such is the nickname the Viennese tend to give to this category of good-natured parasite within the richly varied broader genus of snobs; everyone knows the type, and everyone knows that there is no way of warding off his touching inoffensiveness without being brutish. So I resigned myself to the situation and joined him. A quarter of an hour had passed in chatting, when there came into the restaurant a gentleman, tall and of striking appearance on account of his fresh, youthful face with a curious touch of grey at the temples; a certain uprightness of bearing betrayed the former military man. My companion rose eagerly to his feet to greet him, with the zeal characteristic of the man. His enthusiasm was, however, met by the gentleman with indifference rather than graciousness; the newcomer had hardly finished placing his order with the ever attentive waiter when my friend Also-There drew closer to me and whispered softly, 'Do you know who that is?' Having long known his collector's pride in exhibiting any even mildly interesting showpiece, and dreading over-lengthy explanations, I merely uttered an unconcerned 'no', and went on segmenting my Sachertorte. But my nonchalance served only to rouse the name-collector's excitement further; holding his hand cautiously before his mouth, he breathed confidentially: 'But that's Hofmiller of the Military Commissariat – surely you know him – the man who won the Order of Maria Theresa in the war.' As this piece of information did not, as he had hoped, shake me to the core, he now began, with all the passion of a patriotic school book, to recount the distinguished wartime achievements of Captain Hofmiller, first in the cavalry, then on that reconnaissance flight over the Piave on which he had

single-handedly shot down three planes, and finally in the machine-gun corps, where he had seized and held for three days a front-line sector – all of this told in copious detail (which I here omit) and with constant expressions of astonished disbelief that I had never heard of this magnificent human being, whom indeed the Emperor Charles himself had personally decorated with the rarest of Austrian military honours.

Involuntarily, I did allow my attention to be drawn to the other table, so as to have just for once a glimpse of a historically authenticated hero, and at a distance of a mere two metres. But what met my eye was a hard, resentful look that seemed to say, 'Has that fellow been spinning some yarn about me then? There's nothing in me to gawp at!' And at the same time the gentleman turned his chair round in an unmistakably unfriendly movement and pointedly showed me his back. Somewhat embarrassed, I looked away again, and from then on studiously avoided showing any hint of interest even in the cloth on his table. Shortly after this I took my leave of the worthy chatterbox, though I noticed as I left that he went straight over to join his hero, probably to deliver just as enthusiastic a report of me as I had received of him.

That was all – a single glance exchanged, and no doubt I would have forgotten this transitory encounter had not Fate so willed it that on the very next day, at a small social event, I should find myself once again in company with this estimable gentleman, who now made an even more striking and elegant impression in his dinner-jacket than in the more informal dress of the previous day. We were both at pains to suppress a faint smile – the meaningful smile two people exchange in the midst of a larger group when they share a well-kept secret. He recognized me, just as I did him; in all likelihood we felt the same irritation, or amusement, about the hapless social broker of the day before. At first we avoided speaking to one another; it would have proved fruitless anyway, since an animated discussion was in full flow all around us.

The subject of that discussion will be quickly surmised if I simply mention the year in which it took place – 1938. Future chroniclers of our times will one day establish that in that year almost every conversation in any country in our fevered continent of Europe was dominated by speculations over the likelihood or unlikelihood of another world war. The theme exerted an insuppressible fascination over every social gathering; there was sometimes the feeling

that it was not so much the people working out their anxieties in hopes and speculations, but rather the very atmosphere itself – the highly charged air of the time, laden as it was with hidden tensions – that was seeking to liberate itself through words.

The discussion was opened by the host, a lawyer by profession and opinionated by nature; he put forward the usual nonsense by means of the usual arguments, namely that the younger generation had direct knowledge of war and would not stumble as unpreparedly into a new one as it had into the last. Even at the point of mobilization the guns would be set to fire back, not forward; especially those who, like him, had fought at the front had not forgotten what lay in store for them. The vain over-confidence with which, at a time when explosives and poison gases were being turned out in tens and hundreds of thousands of factories, the man just as casually waved away the possibility of war as he might drop the ash of a cigarette with a light tap of the finger angered me. I replied, quite emphatically, that we should not always simply believe what we wished to be true; the government ministries and the military who drove the war machine had hardly been sleeping, and while we beguiled ourselves with Utopias they had been making full use of the period of peace, thoroughly organizing and preparing the masses so as to have them ready to hand and ready to fire, as it were. Right now, in peacetime, through the perfection of propaganda, the general servility of people had grown to unbelievable proportions, and one should squarely face the fact that, from the moment when the radio hurled into the parlour the announcement of mobilization, no opposition should be expected. The mere speck of dust that is man today no longer ranked as an agent of free will.

Of course it was me against all the rest of them; as experience tells us, people have an instinct for self-deception, and are predisposed to jettison dangers they are inwardly well aware of by declaring them wholly non-existent. Naturally such a warning as mine against facile optimism could hardly be welcome when there was the prospect of a splendidly laid supper in the next room.

Unexpectedly at this point the Maria Theresa chevalier himself came to my aid as a second – the very man in whom my false instinct had assumed an adversary. Yes, he declared passionately, it was sheer folly in this day and age still to want to take into account the willingness or unwillingness of human forces; in the next war the real work would be assigned to machines,

of which men would be reduced to no more than a kind of component part. Even in the last war he had not found many men actually fighting who had either clearly supported or clearly opposed the war; the majority had been swirled into it like a cloud of dust on the wind, and then simply caught up in the great maelstrom, each individual tossed around willy-nilly like a pea in a vast sack. On the whole, perhaps there were more men who had escaped into *the war than* from *it.*

I listened in astonishment. What interested me above all was the vehemence with which he now went on. 'Let's not delude ourselves. If the drums started sounding today in any land you like, for a totally outlandish war say in Polynesia or some corner of Africa, they'd come running in their thousands and hundreds of thousands without really knowing why, perhaps merely wanting to run away from themselves or to escape from some unpleasant circumstances. As for genuine opposition to a war, I wouldn't really rate it higher than zero. If an individual is going to oppose a whole system he'll need far more courage than it takes to be simply swept along with the current; it requires independent courage, and that brand is fast dying out in these times of advancing mass organization and mechanization. What I encountered in the war was pretty well exclusively the phenomenon of mass courage, the kind that you find in the rank and file. If you care to place this kind under closer scrutiny you'll find it reveals some rather strange components; much vanity, a good deal of foolhardiness, even boredom, but above all a great deal of fear – yes indeed, fear of staying behind, fear of being laughed at, of acting alone, and more than anything fear of setting one's face against the concerted mass spirit of one's fellows. The majority of those who were counted the most courageous in action became known to me personally, later in civilian life, as frankly rather questionable heroes. Please understand,' he turned courteously to the host, who was pulling a disapproving face, 'I in no way except myself.'

His manner of speaking appealed to me and I was minded to go up to him, but at this moment the lady of the house called us through to dinner and, being seated far away from each other at the table, we had no further opportunity for conversation. It was only when everyone rose to depart that we met again, at the cloakroom.

'I believe,' he smiled, 'our mutual patron has already introduced us indirectly.'

I too smiled. 'Yes, and rather thoroughly for that matter!'

'No doubt he made much of the Achilles in me, and paraded my Order with immense satisfaction?'

'You might say so.'

'Yes, he is damnably proud of it – rather as he is of your books.'

'An odd fellow! But I've known worse. Incidentally, if it's all right with you, could we walk a little way together?'

And so we did. Then suddenly he turned to me and spoke.

'Believe me – this really isn't mere words – for years there was nothing that caused me more grief than this Order, which draws far too much attention for my taste. Of course, to be quite honest, when I was awarded it out there on the field of battle, to start with it made a profound impression on me. After all, when you've been brought up to be a soldier, in cadet school this decoration seemed the stuff of legend, this one Order which comes the way of perhaps only a dozen individuals in any one war, practically like a star falling from heaven. You can just imagine what a huge amount that means to a youngster of eighteen. There you are, standing before the entire company, everyone marvelling at you as something suddenly flashes out on your breast like a miniature sun, and the Emperor himself, that unapproachable Majesty, shakes your hand in congratulation. But you know, this mark of honour only really made any sense, only really counted for something, in that military world of ours; when the war came to an end it seemed ludicrous to me to go round for the rest of one's life branded as a hero on the strength of having just once acted with real courage for twenty minutes – probably no more courage than a thousand other men, but you simply had the good luck to be noticed instead of them and, what is perhaps the more remarkable good luck, to come back alive. After only a year, when people everywhere used to stare at the little piece of metal and then allow their gaze to move reverentially up to my face, I was already well and truly fed up with parading round like a walking monument; and my irritation at this external conspicuousness was also one of my deciding reasons for switching to civilian life the moment the war ended.'

His stride now became a little more impetuous. 'I say one *of my reasons, but the main reason was a personal one, which you may perhaps find easier to understand. The main reason was that I myself had profound doubts as to my entitlement, at any rate my hero's status; I knew, better than the*

strangers gawping at me, that behind this decoration there was a person who was anything but a hero, indeed was decidedly a non-hero – one of those who rushed wildly into the war for no other reason than to rescue themselves from some desperate situation, who were actually more like deserters from their own responsibilities than heroes in the cause of duty. I don't know how it is with people like you, but at least for me life lived in a halo of glory seems unnatural and irksome, and I honestly felt relieved not to have to go around any more sporting my heroic record on my uniform. Even now it irritates me when someone digs up my former glory. I might as well confess to you, yesterday I was just on the point of walking over to your table and laying into that prattler, telling him to go and find someone else to brag about and leave me alone. That respectful look of yours went on rankling with me the whole evening. Most of all, if only to disabuse that fellow, I would have liked to force you to hear just how crooked were the paths that brought me to my hero's rank. Believe you me, the story's strange enough, but it might still show how courage is often nothing more than an inverted weakness. Actually I would happily tell you the whole thing straight out, right now. What happened to you a quarter of a century ago no longer concerns you as you are now; it seems to be about somebody quite different. But would you have time to listen? You wouldn't be bored?'

Of course I did have time; for a considerable while we continued to walk up and down the now deserted streets, and in the days that followed we were much in each other's company. I have altered little of his account, perhaps substituting 'Uhlans' for 'hussars', or slightly changing round the locations of garrisons on the map so as to disguise their identity, and taking the precaution to change all the proper names. But nothing essential has been invented or added, and it is not I, but the narrator himself, who now begins his story.

The root of it was a single piece of clumsiness, a wholly innocent, if foolish, error – a *gaffe*, as the French call it. Then came my attempt to remedy the blunder; but if you rush in too hastily to repair one cog in a clock you are quite likely to wreck the entire mechanism. Even today, years later, I cannot say for certain where sheer ineptness ended and my own guilt began. I suppose I never shall know.

I was twenty-five years old at the time, a second lieutenant serving with one of the Uhlan regiments. I can't in all honesty claim that I ever felt any special passion or personal vocation to become an officer. But imagine, in a traditional Austrian civil-service family, two young girls and four constantly hungry lads sitting round a meagrely laid table – you don't spend much time inquiring about their leanings, you just thrust them out at an early stage into the sweat and grind of a profession, so that they won't be a burden on the household for too long. My brother Ulrich, who even at elementary school ruined his eyes through studying too hard, was placed in a seminary, while I myself, on account of my physical toughness, was sent to the military academy. From there on life just unrolls mechanically without much need for further oiling. The state takes care of everything. In only a few years, without charge and in accordance with the prescribed pattern of rules, it tailors out of a pale adolescent lad a mustachioed young ensign and delivers him, ready for use, to the army. One day – it was the Emperor's birthday – when I was not yet eighteen years old, I passed out of the academy and it wasn't long before I had the first star on my collar. That was the first rung of the ladder, and now the regular progression of promotions could be reeled off at appropriate intervals, all the way through to

retirement and gout. As for serving specifically with the cavalry, that unfortunately most costly division of the army, this was not at all my own personal choice but more the whim of my Aunt Daisy, who had married my father's elder brother – her second marriage – when he moved from the Finance Ministry to a more lucrative post as director of a bank. Being at once both rich and snobbish, she could not countenance anyone who shared the name Hofmiller bringing shame on the family by serving with the infantry. And since in the service of this whim she put herself to the expense of making me a monthly allowance of one hundred crowns, I was obliged to show her my gratitude, with the utmost submissiveness, at every opportunity. As to whether it actually appealed to me to serve in the cavalry, indeed to serve in the army at all, no one had given any thought to this question, least of all myself. But so long as I was sitting in the saddle all was well with me, and my thoughts never went much further than the horse's neck.

That November of 1913 there must have been some order passed from one office to another, for suddenly without warning our squadron was transferred from Jaroslav to another small garrison on the Hungarian border. It is unimportant whether I give the town its true name or not. Two buttons on the same uniform could not be more similar than one provincial garrison town to the next; both will have the same official service buildings, the barracks, riding school, drill ground and officers' club, plus three hotels, two coffee houses, one confectioner's shop, a wine bar, a run-down vaudeville theatre complete with has-been soubrettes who have a side-line in dividing their attentions most devotedly between regular officers and one-year volunteers. Everywhere the soldier's life means the same empty, albeit busy, monotony, hour on hour planned out in accordance with the most rigid and antiquated regulations, and even your free time seems hardly more varied. In the officers' mess the same faces, the same old conversations, in the coffee houses the same card games, the same billiards. Sometimes you feel amazed it has pleased the dear Lord even to set a different sky and a different landscape around the seven or eight hundred roofs of little towns like this.

Admittedly, my new posting did offer me one advantage over the

earlier one in Galicia: this was a station town for the express train. In one direction it lay close to Vienna, and in the other it was not all that far from Budapest. Anyone with money – and you always find a good many rich fellows serving in the cavalry, not least the volunteers, many of them from the nobility or the sons of industrialists – provided he timed his escape properly, could be off on the five o'clock to Vienna and back again on the night train by 2.30, that's to say time enough for the theatre, a stroll on the Ringstrasse, playing the cavalier, and perhaps the occasional little adventure; a few of the most enviable of all even kept a permanent apartment or lodgings there. Alas, those kinds of restorative escapades lay beyond my monthly budget. My only diversion was the coffee house or the confectionery shop, and even there, since the card stakes were mostly too high for me, I had to restrict myself to billiards or, cheaper still, a game of chess.

And so it was that I was sitting one afternoon in the confectioner's – it must have been the middle of May 1914 – with one of my occasional chess-partners, the local apothecary from just by the Golden Angel, who was also the deputy mayor of our little garrison town. We had long since finished our normal three games and we were talking, in sheer boredom, just trying to keep our wits together – where could you go in this dreary place, and so on and so forth – but the conversation was now burning rather wearily like the last glow of a cigarette.

Suddenly the door opens and, with a flurry of fresh air, a flowing flared skirt wafts in a pretty young girl – brown, almond-shaped eyes, dark complexion, stunningly dressed, indeed not in the least provincial, but, best of all, a new face amidst this detestable monotony. Unfortunately, this fine young nymph doesn't even favour me with a single glance as I reverently gaze up at her; purposefully, swiftly, with athletically sound step, she crosses the room past the nine little marble-topped tables and makes straight for the counter, where she promptly proceeds to order cakes, pastries and schnappses – I'd say a full dozen of each.

What struck me at once was how very submissively Master Cakemaker bowed before her; never had I seen the back seam of his

tailcoat stretched so tightly. Even the man's wife, the amply built, boorish provincial belle who was otherwise quite nonchalant in the fawning attention she allowed all of the officers to pay her (often you were in debt, for all manner of trifles, till the end of the month), rose from her seat at the cash desk, virtually dissolving in unctuous courtesy.

While the cakemaker notes down her order in his ledger, the pretty young lady nibbles casually at one or two chocolates and converses a little with Frau Grossmaier. But for us, who sit there craning our necks in doubtless unseemly curiosity – for us, not a glance. Naturally the young lady would not burden her pretty hands with even a single package; everything, Frau Grossmaier most humbly assures her, will be sent on, she may depend on it. And not the slightest suggestion of paying in cash, like the rest of us common mortals, at the vulgar metal cash register. As is immediately clear to all of us, this is really refined clientele!

She settles her order, and just as she turns to go Herr Grossmaier springs forward to open the door for her. My apothecary friend also rises from his seat to pay his respects as she sweeps past him. She thanks him, with superior courtesy – ye gods, those velvet fawn eyes! – and I can barely wait for her to leave the shop, smothered in sickly compliments, before I start eagerly quizzing my companion about this lady, this alluring new fish in our otherwise calm waters.

'What, you mean you don't know her? That's the niece of' – well, here I'll call him Kekesfalva, though the real name was different – 'of Herr von Kekesfalva. Surely you've come across the Kekesfalvas?'

Kekesfalva – he flung the name down before me like a thousand-crown note, and then peered at me as if waiting for me to echo the name automatically with a reverential 'Ah yes, of course, Kekesfalva!' But I, the newly transferred subaltern dropped into a garrison posting just a few months earlier, innocent as I was, knew nothing of this most mysterious deity, so I politely asked for some further explanation. This was indeed forthcoming from the good apothecary, and was imparted with all the relish of a provincial's pride, far more detailed and rambling, I need hardly say, than the version I shall give here.

Kekesfalva, he explained to me, was the richest man in the entire neighbourhood. Absolutely everything belonged to him, not merely the Kekesfalva chateau – 'You must know the place, surely? You'll see it from the drill ground, to the left of the main road, the yellow house with the flat tower and that enormous old park' – but also the great sugar factory on the road to R. and the saw mill in Bruck, as well as the stud farm in M. – all of this belonged to him, plus six or seven blocks in Budapest and Vienna. 'Yes, it's hard to believe there could actually be such fabulously rich people round here – and that fellow can live like a real magnate. In the winter he's in his little Vienna palace in the Jacquingasse, in the summer in some spa resort or other; he only occupies this house here for a few months in the spring, but good God, the way he does it! Quartets from Vienna, fine French wines and champagne – only the highest quality, the best of the best! And, added my friend, if he might be allowed to do me the favour, he would be delighted to introduce me, since – here came an expansive gesture of profound self-satisfaction – he was of course on close terms with Herr von Kekesfalva; he had indeed in the past had frequent business dealings with him, and knew that he was always happy to entertain officers. Just one word from him, and I could be sure of an invitation.

Well, why not? Life was truly suffocating in the backwater of a garrison town like this, where you'd already long since come to recognize every woman on the main Corso; you knew the summer and winter hats of every one of them, you knew their more stylish and their more everyday outfits, which never changed. You knew each one's dog and each one's maidservant and children, having repeatedly seen them and then looked away again. You knew all the culinary arts of the fat Bohemian cook in the mess, and your palate was gradually weakening at the sight of the eternally unchanging menu at the hotel. You knew every single name by heart, every sign, every poster in every lane, every shop in every building, every display in every window. By now you could say, pretty well as accurately as the head waiter Eugen, at what hour the honourable district magistrate would appear in the coffee house, taking his seat in the window corner on the left and ordering his *mélange*, while the local notary in his turn would come in exactly ten minutes later, 4.40 on

the dot, and – what sweet variation! – would take a lemon tea on account of his weak digestion and repeat the same old jokes, smoking ever the same Virginia brand. Oh, you knew every face, every uniform, every horse and driver, every beggar in the whole vicinity – you knew yourself, and to a surfeit! So why not for once break away from the treadmill? And then, the pretty girl, the fawn-brown eyes! So I informed my goodly benefactor, with feigned indifference (avoid at all costs showing excessive enthusiasm before this pompous pill-purveyor), yes, certainly, it would be a pleasure to make the acquaintance of the Kekesfalva family.

And sure enough, what the apothecary had said was not mere swagger. Just two days later, quite puffed up with pride, he delivers at the coffee house, with a gesture of munificence, a printed card with my name beautifully inscribed. The invitation announced that Herr Lajos von Kekesfalva requested the pleasure of Herr Leutnant Anton Hofmiller's company the following Wednesday at eight in the evening for dinner. Thankfully, to one who was not of wholly humble upbringing it was clear what was the appropriate behaviour in this situation. The next Sunday morning I dressed up in my best outfit – white gloves and patent-leather shoes, shaved with pitiless rigour, a drop of eau de cologne on my moustache – and drove out to pay my preliminary visit. The manservant – elderly, discreet, smart livery – takes my card and says in an apologetic murmur that it will cause the family the utmost regret to have missed the Herr Leutnant, but they are at church. So much the better, I think to myself, these first calls are always a ghastly business, whether you are on or off duty. Anyway, I have done the needful. You'll be there again on Wednesday, and we'll hope it's a pleasant evening. That's the Kekesfalvas settled, then, till next Wednesday.

But I was frankly delighted to discover two days later – Tuesday, that is – a visiting card with folded corner left for me by Herr von Kekesfalva. First class, I thought to myself, these people have real manners; just two days after my preliminary visit here I am, a mere junior officer, receiving a return call – a general couldn't wish for more courtesy and respect. And, with genuinely warm anticipation, I now positively looked forward to Wednesday evening.

However, there was a jinx lying in wait right at the outset – we really should be more superstitious and take these little signs more seriously. Come Wednesday, half past seven in the evening, there I am all prepared and ready – smartest uniform, new gloves, patent-leather shoes, trousers creased sharp as a razor, my batman just smoothing away the folds of my cloak and checking my appearance (I always needed my man around for that, since all I had in that dimly lit little hovel of mine was a small hand-mirror), and suddenly there's a hammering on the door, an orderly with the message that the officer on duty, my friend the Captain Graf Steinhübel, requests that I go over to see him in the guardroom. Two Uhlans, blind drunk as likely as not, had been involved in a brawl, leading to one of them striking the other over the head with his carbine. The oaf was now lying there bleeding, unconscious, mouth open. They didn't know whether his skull was still in one piece or not, but the regimental doctor had hopped it to Vienna on leave and the Colonel couldn't be found; so in this emergency good old Steinhübel, curse the man, had sent his chap charging over to find me – it would be me! – so I could rush back to help him tend the wounded man. And I now had to take down all the details and send out more orderlies in all directions, track down a civilian doctor, in the coffee house or wherever, at the double. What with all this excitement it was now a quarter to eight, and it was quite clear to me there was no way I could get free within the next quarter of an hour, or half an hour for that matter. Damn it, it would be today of all days this had to happen, just the day I was invited out! I kept looking at my watch more and more impatiently; no, quite impossible to get there on time now if I had to spend even another five minutes fooling around here. But duty – that's the way it is, it's in our very bones – duty overrides every private commitment. I couldn't just pull out, so I did the only thing possible in this confounded mess, namely send my man out to the Kekesfalvas in a cab (costing me four crowns for the privilege) to crave their forgiveness if I should be delayed, having been held up by unforeseen circumstances in the course of duty, and so on and so forth. Fortunately the business in the barracks didn't go on much longer after the Colonel appeared in person, with a doctor they'd

managed to rustle up somewhere, so I could now slip off discreetly.

But then another stroke of bad luck: today – of course today – no proper cab on the main square. I had to wait for them to telephone for a small carriage and pair. So, inevitably, by the time I finally landed up in the Kekesfalvas' front hall the long hand of the wall clock was already pointing straight down, precisely half past eight instead of the planned eight o'clock, and I saw there was already a thick bulge of overcoats, one on top of another, in the cloakroom. It was clear from the attendant's somewhat disconcerted face that I had shown up very late indeed – a distinctly unfortunate thing to happen on one's very first visit.

Still, the servant – this time with white gloves, tailcoat, stiff shirt and stiff expression – tried to calm me down, saying my batman had delivered the message half an hour earlier, and then he led me into the salon – four-windowed, red silk hangings, gleaming with crystal chandeliers, wonderfully elegant: I'd never seen anything more stylish. Unfortunately, though, to my humiliation this room turned out to be completely deserted, and from the next room I could distinctly hear the clatter of dishes – how very annoying, I thought to myself, they're already sitting at table.

Anyway, I pulled myself together, and as soon as the attendant had opened the sliding doors I stepped forward into the dining room, clicked my heels sharply together, and gave a bow. All eyes were immediately on me – ten, twenty pairs of them, all strangers' eyes, scrutinizing this late arrival who stood, none too confidently, framed in the doorway. Immediately an elderly gentleman got to his feet, without a doubt the host himself; quickly casting aside his napkin, he came straight up to me and hospitably offered me his hand. Not at all how I had imagined him – the country gentleman with a Magyar moustache and ample cheeks, plump and ruddy with good living – there was none of this to be seen here in Herr von Kekesfalva. Behind the gold-rimmed spectacles slightly weary eyes floated above their grey bags, the shoulders appeared mildly hunched, the voice was a whisper, a little hampered by a slight cough – one could have taken him to be a scholar, what with this spare, sensitive face ending in a slender white pointed beard. The old gentleman's excep-

tional civility had a profoundly calming effect on me in my state of unease – no, no, he insisted, stopping me short as I tried to speak, no, it was for him to apologize, he knew exactly the kinds of things that can easily happen in the line of duty, and indeed it had been especially thoughtful on my part to take the trouble to inform him. It was, he said, only because they could not be certain when I would arrive that they had already started eating. But now I should, please, take my place immediately; he would introduce me later to all the assembled guests one by one. For now – he escorted me to the table – let him just introduce his daughter. Hereupon a young girl, still half a child, slightly built, pale, fragile as the father himself, looks up from out of a conversation; two grey eyes glance at me shyly. But I see only fleetingly the delicate, nervous face; I bow, first to her and then right and left to the others, who are evidently relieved not to have to put aside their knives and forks and subject themselves to the formal niceties of a proper introduction.

For those first two or three minutes I still felt deeply uncomfortable. No one from my regiment was there, no companion, no acquaintance, nor even any of the local dignitaries – no one but strangers, utterly unfamiliar figures, apparently for the most part property-owners from the neighbourhood with their wives and daughters, or government officials. But nothing but civilian dress – not a single uniform other than my own! My God, how was a clumsy, shy fellow like me supposed to make polite conversation with those unknown people? Well, fortunately I had been well placed at the table. Beside me sat that brown-eyed, proud-spirited creature, the beautiful niece. As it turned out, she did seem after all to have noticed my admiring glance at the confectionery shop; she gave me a friendly smile, as if to an old acquaintance. She had eyes like coffee beans, and when she laughed you really felt there was a crackling just like beans roasting. And she had enchanting little translucent ears under that thick dark hair, like pink cyclamen, I thought, amidst the moss. Her bare arms, tender and smooth, must be like peeled peaches to touch.

It felt good to be sitting next to such a pretty young girl, and the Hungarian tone in her accent as she spoke very nearly made me fall

in love there and then. Yes, it felt good indeed to be dining in such a brilliant room, the table so finely laid, servants in livery behind me, the most wonderful dishes before me. The neighbour to my left – she spoke with a slightly Polish intonation – also seemed, if admittedly somewhat solidly built, still not unattractive. Or was this all just the effect of the wine, the golden-hued wine, then the blood-red, and the sparkling champagne, poured by white-gloved servants from behind us in downright lavish quantities from silver carafes and broad-bellied bottles? In truth the worthy apothecary had not been having me on. At the Kekesfalvas' it was like being at court. I have never in my life eaten so well, never ever allowed myself to dream that it was possible to eat so well, in such style, such opulence. Courses ever more exquisite and costly float in on an inexhaustible succession of platters; pale blue fish, crowned with lettuce bordered by lobster slices, swimming in sauces of gold, capons riding on broad saddles of layered rice, puddings flaming in blue-burning rum, ice bombes bursting open in their colourful sweetness, fruits, that must have travelled half way round the world, jostling each other in silver baskets. There's simply no end to it, no end, and still to come finally there's a veritable rainbow of liqueurs – green, red, white, yellow – and cigars thick as asparagus to go with superlative coffee!

A magnificent, a magical house – blessed be he, my good apothecary! A glittering, joyous, resounding evening! I didn't know whether I felt so relaxed, so free, simply because to the right and left and opposite me everyone's eyes had now lit up and voices were raised, for they, like me, had abandoned all ceremony and were merrily chatting away all around me. Anyway, my normal self-consciousness had left me; I prattled away without the least restraint, paid court simultaneously to the ladies on either side of me, I drank, laughed, stared around with careless abandon, and even if it was not always purely accidental that now and again my hand happened to brush against the beautiful bare arm of Ilona (for such was the name of the delectable niece) she seemed not to take this occasional gentle contact at all amiss, being herself relaxed and elated, set free like all the rest of us at this sumptuous feast.

Gradually – was this just the accumulated effect of the unusually splendid wine, Tokay and champagne one on top of the other? – I felt a lightness coming over me, bordering on wantonness, almost unruliness. There was still something missing to complete my happiness, to make me float on air and entirely transport me, and what this was, this thing that I unconsciously craved, became wonderfully clear to me the very next moment, when all of a sudden from out of a third room, behind the salon – without drawing attention to himself, the servant had once again opened the sliding doors – there came subdued music, a quartet, and precisely the kind of music that deep down I had been longing for, dance music, at once rhythmical and tender, a waltz, led by two violins with the melancholy support of a darker cello line, and between them the sharp staccato punctuation of a piano. Yes, music, music – that had been the only thing wanting! Now music, and perhaps later there will be dancing too, a waltz, and I could be carried floating along, and feel even more joyously that lightness deep within me! Yes indeed, this Villa Kekesfalva must be an enchanted house where all you need is to dream and immediately your wish is granted! As we now stood up and pushed back our seats and crossed over into the salon pair by pair – I offered Ilona my arm and felt once again that cool, smooth, sensuous skin – we found all the tables had been miraculously spirited away and the chairs arranged around the wall. Glossy, shiny brown, the parquet was like a mirror, a heavenly skating surface for the waltz, and from the next room, unseen, came the music to inspire us.

I turned to Ilona. She was laughing – she understood. With her eyes she had already said yes, and now we were whirling, two pairs, now three, five, over the polished floor, while those more timid or elderly looked on or chatted. I love dancing, and you might say I dance really quite well. Entwined in each other, along we floated, and I felt I had never danced better in my life. For the next waltz I asked my other neighbour at dinner; she too danced excellently well and as I leant towards her, gently intoxicated, I breathed in the perfume of her hair. Ah yes, she danced wonderfully, everything was wonderful, and I was happy as I had never been in years. I no longer knew quite where I was, I felt I wanted to embrace everyone and

offer every person there some word of affection, of gratitude, so light, so enraptured, so blessedly young did I feel. I spun on from one to another, chatting away, laughing, dancing and, transported on this stream of joy, I lost track of the time.

Then suddenly I happened to look at the clock: half past ten – I realized to my dismay I had now been dancing, talking, joking away for nearly a whole hour and, stupid fellow that I was, I'd not yet once asked the daughter of the household to dance. I had been dancing only with my two neighbours at the dinner table and two or three other ladies who had most appealed to me; I had entirely forgotten the daughter of the house! How ungracious of me! What rudeness! But now be quick about it, it must be put right immediately.

However, to my dismay again, I found I couldn't remember any more exactly what the girl looked like. It was only for one brief moment that I'd bowed to her just as she was sitting down. My sole recollection was of something sensitive and fragile, and that fleeting, curious look her eyes gave me. But where could she have gone? She's the daughter of the house – surely she couldn't have left? Uneasily, I looked all the way along the walls and scanned all the ladies and the girls; no, none of them seemed anything like her. Finally I went into the third room where the quartet were playing, hidden behind a Chinese folding screen, and I heaved a sigh of relief. There she sat – yes, it was definitely her – delicate, slight, wearing a pale blue dress, between two elderly ladies in the corner of the boudoir behind a malachite-green table on which stood a shallow bowl of flowers. Her small, delicate head was lowered a little, as if she were completely absorbed in the music, and it was precisely the pink of the roses that made me aware just how transparently pale was her brow beneath the heavy auburn hair. But I didn't allow myself time for idle contemplation; thank God, I thought to myself with relief, I've tracked her down, and I do still have time to make up for my remissness.

I approach the table – the music is thrumming away next door – and give a polite bow by way of an invitation to dance. Startled eyes stare up at me in astonishment, lips remaining half open as she is about to speak, but she makes no move whatsoever to follow me.

Has she not understood? I bow once again, and there is a slight clink from my spurs as I speak: 'May I request a dance, gnädiges Fräulein?'

What happened now was really dreadful. The upper part of her body, which had been leaning forward, suddenly went back with a jolt, as if to dodge a blow; at the same moment there was a rush of blood to her wan cheeks, and her lips, just now open, were pressed tightly together and only her eyes stared at me, motionless, with an expression of horror such as I'd never encountered in my life before. The next moment a convulsion shot through her whole contracted body; she levered herself up, gripped and supported herself with both hands on the table, making the bowl clatter and rattle, and at that moment something hard fell sharply away from her onto the floor, something wooden or metal. Still clutching the swaying table tightly with both hands, still trembling all over her slight, childlike body, still she does not run away, but clings even more desperately to the heavy tabletop, and again and again that shaking, that shuddering, racks her from her clenched hands all the way up to the hair of her head. And suddenly comes an outburst, a violent sobbing, wild, elemental, like a smothered scream.

Already from right and left the two old ladies are upon her, now holding her tight, caressing, fawning, calming the trembling girl, now tenderly loosening the hands from the table, and she falls back into the chair. But the weeping continues, or rather it grows more vehement, like a haemorrhage or a violent retching, forced out again and again in burst after burst. If the music behind the screen, which is still drowning all of this out, were to stop for even a moment, the sobbing would surely have to be heard by the dancers in the other room.

I stand there dumbly, utterly shocked. What on earth can have happened? I stare on helplessly as the two old ladies try to calm the sobbing girl; she, now in growing awareness and shame, has thrown her head down on the table. But still there come new spasms of weeping, wave after wave, all through the delicate little body, right up to her shoulders, and with every sudden jolt the bowl on the table rattles too. I stand there motionless, dumbfounded, ice-cold in my limbs, my collar choking me like a burning noose.

'Forgive me,' I stuttered at last under my breath into the empty air, and withdrew into the main room – both women were tending the sobbing girl and neither had any time for me – my head positively reeling as I went. Here, apparently, no one had noticed anything yet; the couples were still whirling round impetuously, and I found I needed to lean on the doorpost, the room swayed so all around me. What happened? Have I done something really terrible? My God, I must have had too much at dinner after all, drunk too fast, and now in my drunken state I've gone and done something really stupid!

At this point the music stopped, and the pairs of dancers stood apart. With a bow, the District Commissioner released Ilona and I immediately rushed over to her and dragged her, to her great surprise, almost violently aside. 'Please, help me! For the love of heaven, help me, explain to me!'

Clearly Ilona had thought I was pulling her over to the window merely to whisper some amusing little message to her, because her eyes now suddenly hardened. Apparently I must have seemed pitiable, or else frightening, in this agitated state. With racing pulse I recounted the whole story. And, to my astonishment, she went for me with just the same absolute horror in her eyes as the girl in the room next door.

'Have you gone mad? Don't you know? Didn't you see?'

'No,' I stammered, devastated by this new and just as incomprehensible show of horror. 'See what? I know nothing at all. This is the first time I've been in this house.'

'You mean you didn't notice Edith is . . . lame? You didn't see her poor crippled legs? She can't even make two struggling steps without crutches . . . and you . . . you bru—' She quickly checked an angry word of abuse. 'You have to go and ask the poor girl to dance with you . . . oh, how awful, I must go to her right now . . .'

'No,' I clasped Ilona's arm in my dismay; 'one moment, just one moment . . . you must make my apologies to her. I couldn't have had any idea . . . I only saw her at table, and then only for a second . . . please, please explain to her . . .'

But Ilona had already shaken her arm free, rage in her eyes, and

was hurrying over to the other room. I stood there, with my throat choking and sickness in my mouth, at the entrance of the salon, which whirled and hummed and buzzed with the guests' unrestrained chatting and laughing – all of which had now suddenly become intolerable to me; just another five minutes, I thought to myself, and all of them will know all about my idiocy. Five minutes, and I'll be prey to the probing of disdainful, disapproving, ironic looks from all sides; tomorrow all over the town a hundred mouths will be smacking their lips over the story of my crude bungling, brought to all the house doors with the morning milk delivery and bandied about in the servants' quarters, relayed to the coffee houses and offices. Tomorrow it'll be common knowledge in the regiment.

At this moment, as if through a mist, I caught sight of the father himself. With a somewhat downcast expression – does he already know? – he's coming across the room. Is he heading for me? No, the last thing I need is to meet him now! Caught in a sudden panic, a fear of him and of all the others, and without quite knowing what I was doing, I stumbled towards the door leading out to the hallway – and out from this hellish house.

'Will the Herr Leutnant be leaving us so soon?' asked the servant in surprise, with a gesture of respectful disbelief.

'Yes,' I answered, startled to hear the word coming from my own mouth. Did I really wish to leave? And the next moment, as the man fetched my cloak, I was well aware that this cowardly retreat meant I was committing a fresh, and perhaps even more unpardonable, stupidity. Still, it was too late now. I couldn't hand the cloak straight back to him; he was already bowing and opening the front door, and I couldn't simply return to the grand salon. And suddenly there I was, standing in front of that strange, accursed house, the wind cold in my face, my heart burning with shame, my breathing convulsed, as if suffocating.

That, then, was the fateful blunder that started this whole story. Now, of course, now that I look back afresh, coolly and calmly and at the distance of many years, at that single episode that set off the whole disastrous course of events, I must grant to myself that I

stumbled actually quite innocently into this misunderstanding. It could have happened even to the cleverest, the most experienced of people, this *gaffe* of inviting a crippled girl to dance. But at the time, in the immediacy of that first feeling of horror, I saw myself not only as an irredeemable oaf but a genuine brute, a villain. To me, it was as if I had struck an innocent child with a whip. With some presence of mind, all of this could still eventually have been made good; the only thing that had irrevocably ruined things – this fact dawned on me the moment I had that first blast of cold air in my face outside the house – was my own running away like some common criminal.

I have no words to describe the state I was in as I stood outside the house. The music fell silent behind the brightly lit windows; it was probably just that the players had paused for a while, but in my over-excited fever of guilt I imagined it was because of me that the dancing had stopped, and that the whole party must now be crowding into the little boudoir to comfort the sobbing girl – behind that closed door all the guests, the women, the men, even the young girls, must be venting their rage and unanimous indignation at that abominable fellow who had invited a crippled girl to dance, only to make a cowardly escape once he had perpetrated his appalling deed. And tomorrow – the sweat broke out and I could feel it under my cap – the whole town would be fully aware of my disgraceful performance, alive with gossip and tittle-tattle. I could already see them in my mind's eye – my comrades Ferencz, Mislywetz, and above all that wretched wag Jozsi – they'd be coming up to me smacking their lips: 'Ah, Toni, that's a nice way to behave! The moment we let you off the leash, there you go disgracing the entire regiment!' It would go on for months at the mess, this riling and jeering; at our table it could easily be ten, twenty years of chewing over every little idiocy once committed by any one of us, every little asinine stupidity immortalized, every joke set and perpetuated in stone. Even today, sixteen years after the event, they're still telling the tedious tale of Captain Wolinski coming back from Vienna and bragging about meeting Countess T. on the Ringstrasse and spending that very night in her apartment, and then two days later the

papers carrying the scandalous story of the maid she'd dismissed who fraudulently passed herself off in shops and various adventures as the Countess herself; what's more, this Casanova of ours had to spend another three weeks under the care of the regimental doctor. Once you'd made yourself a laughing stock in front of your fellows, so you remained for ever; nothing was forgotten, nothing forgiven. The more I pictured it and pondered it, the more fevered my fantasies grew. A hundred times easier, it seemed at that moment, would be one quick pull on the trigger of my revolver, rather than have to go through the hellish agony of the next few days, powerlessly waiting to see if my comrades had already got wind of my shame while perhaps the whispering and sniggering were already going on behind my back. Ah, I know myself well enough; I know I would never have the strength to stand my ground once the mocking and jeering and story-mongering had started.

I have no idea how I got home that night. All I remember is tearing my cupboard open with one wrench; there was a bottle of slivovitz which I kept for my visitors, and I knocked back two or three half-tumblers to get rid of the ghastly sickness in my throat. Then I threw myself down on the bed fully dressed, and started trying to think the matter through. But just as the growth of flowers becomes wilder and more tropical in a hothouse, so it is with your crazed imaginings in the dark. Muddled and fantastic, there in their sultry bedding they burst forth into outlandish lianas that choke your breath; with the swiftness of dreams, the most preposterous fearful visions come into being and chase each other round and round the overheated brain. Disgraced for life, I thought to myself, banished from society, ridiculed by my own colleagues, talked about by the whole town! I'll never again be able to leave my room, or dare to go out on the street for fear of meeting one of those people who know all about my crime – for that was precisely how I saw my simple error on that first overwrought night, and I saw myself as a hounded quarry, an object of general derision. When I did finally get to sleep, it can only have been a light, unsound sleep, in which my anxiety and fear worked on feverishly. The moment I opened my eyes I had the anger of that child's face before me once again, I saw those quivering

lips, the convulsed, clawed hands on the table, heard the clatter of those falling pieces of wood, which now in hindsight I realized must have been her crutches, and I was overwhelmed by a senseless fear that the door might suddenly open and – black coat, white trimmings, gold-rimmed spectacles – the father, with that thin, meticulously tended little goatee of his, would come striding up to my bed. In this state of terror I leapt up and, staring into the mirror at my face, moist with the sweat of night and fear, I really wanted to strike that dolt behind the pale glass, to strike him full in the face.

But luckily it was already day; there was a clattering of steps in the passageway and carts on the street below. When daylight enters the room your thoughts are clearer than when you are pent up in that evil darkness that so loves to conjure spectres. Perhaps, I told myself, it's not so awful after all. Perhaps no one even noticed. Yes, *she*, of course, *she* will never forget, never forgive – the poor, pale, sickly creature, the cripple. Then, in a sudden flash, a more positive thought came into my mind. Hastily I combed my dishevelled hair, got back into my uniform and hurtled past my astonished batman, who called after me in his wretched Ruthenian German: 'Herr Leutnant, Herr Leutnant, already coffee made!'

Dashing down the barracks steps, I hared past some Uhlans standing around half-clad in the yard, so fast that they had no time at all to jump to attention. In a single leap I was past them and out through the gate. Then I ran – at least with all the speed proper for a lieutenant – straight to the flower-shop on the main square. Of course in my impatience I had quite forgotten that at half past five in the morning shops, as a rule, are not yet open. But as luck would have it Frau Gurtner dealt in vegetables as well as her artificial flowers. A cart with potatoes stood half-unloaded in front of the shop door, and no sooner had I rapped on the window than I heard the clatter of feet on the stairs. I hastily concocted a story: yesterday it had completely slipped my mind that today some close friends were celebrating a name-day; we'd be riding out in another half hour, and I should very much like some flowers to be sent at once. So it was flowers please, quickly, and the best she could find! Immediately the chubby tradeswoman, still in her night jacket, shuffled off in her

tatty slippers, opened up the shop and showed me the treasure of her collection – a huge bunch of long-stemmed roses. How many would I like? All, I said, all! Just tied together like that, or would I prefer them in a nice basket? Yes, yes, a basket. What remained of my month's pay all went on this splendid purchase; the last few days of the month I'll just have to skimp on evening meals and the coffee house, or else borrow some money. But for the moment that's quite immaterial – or rather I am actually happy to see my piece of foolishness costing me something; the whole time I'm feeling this perverse desire to make myself pay dearly for my doubly asinine behaviour.

So, everything was all right now, wasn't it? The finest roses, nicely arranged in a basket, and to be reliably dispatched forthwith. But now here comes Frau Gurtner, running down the street after me in great concern. So where, then, and to whom, was she supposed to be sending the flowers? The Herr Leutnant hadn't said a word! Good heavens, yes – now trebly idiotic! – in my excitement I'd quite forgotten to say anything. To the Villa Kekesfalva, I instructed; and just in time, thanks to that horrified outburst from Ilona, I remembered the first name of my poor victim: Fräulein Edith von Kekesfalva – the flowers are for her.

'Of course, yes, the Kekesfalvas,' said Frau Gurtner proudly, 'our best customers!'

One more question, though – just as I was ready to run off again – did I not want to send a message? Some word to go with the flowers? A message? Oh yes, I see, of course – yes, the sender's name, the giver of the flowers. How else was she to know where the gift had come from?

So back I went again into the shop, and taking a visiting card I wrote: 'Begging forgiveness.' No, that's impossible, that would make a fourth blunder; what was the point in drawing further attention to my stupidity? But what else could I write? 'In sincere regret.' No, that certainly won't do; she might think the regret was to do with *her*. Best to write nothing then, nothing at all.

'Just attach my card, Frau Gurtner, nothing but the card.'

Now I was feeling more at ease. I hurried back to the barracks,

tossed down my coffee and more or less got through my drill session, if perhaps somewhat more nervously and distractedly than usual. In the army no one really notices if a lieutenant turns up on morning duty with a hangover; so many come back from Vienna, having made a night of it, so exhausted they can hardly hold their eyes open, and actually fall asleep while trotting nicely along on horseback! In fact it suited me really pretty well to have to spend the whole time issuing orders, and then inspecting and riding out. These duties went some way to relieve my unease, though to be honest the painful memory was still constantly rumbling away in my head, and it felt as if I had something stuck in my throat like a bitter sponge.

But come midday, when I'm just on my way over to the officers' mess, my man comes running after me with an excited 'Sir Leutnant!' He has a letter in his hand, long, oblong, English paper, blue and lightly scented, and on the back a finely embossed coat of arms, with the address written in a slender, upright hand, a woman's hand. I quickly tear open the envelope and read:

Thank you so much, dear Herr Leutnant, for the quite undeserved but very beautiful flowers, which gave me, and are still giving me, enormous pleasure. Please do come and have tea with us on any afternoon you wish. There is no need to inform us in advance. I am – unfortunately! – always at home. Edith von K.

A delicate hand. It came back to me how those slim child's fingers clutched at the table, and I remembered that pale complexion suddenly flushing deep red as if claret had been poured into a glass. I reread the few lines once, twice, then a third time, and breathed again. How discreetly she had passed over my boorishness! And yet how cleverly, how tactfully she had also managed to hint at her own infirmity. 'I am – unfortunately! – always at home.' There could be no more gracious forgiveness than this. Not a hint of ill-feeling. A burden fell from my heart. I felt as if I had stood accused in the dock, already completely convinced that I was to be sentenced for life, and then the judge rises and puts on his cap and proclaims: 'Acquitted!' Obviously, I must soon go over there to thank her.

Today was Thursday. So, on Sunday I shall pay a visit. Or rather, no, better to do it on Saturday.

But I could not stick to my word. I was too impatient. Plagued with anxiety, I desperately needed to know that my guilt really was purged once and for all, and I had to be rid of this painful uncertainty as quickly as possible. My nerves were still tortured by fear – that in the mess, or the café, or some other place, someone would bring up the subject of my misadventure: 'Well, so how was it at the Kekesfalvas', eh?' If that happened, I wanted to be able to give a perfectly calm, superior answer: 'The Kekesfalvas? Charming people! I was with them again yesterday afternoon for tea.' Then all would see at once that I hadn't really fallen out of favour with the family. Just to be able to draw a line under the whole sorry affair and be through with it! And this inner restlessness of mine in fact resulted in a sudden snap decision the very next day – the Friday, that is – while I was strolling along the promenade with Ferencz and Jozsi, my best friends. Pay that call right now, today! And, quite abruptly, I took my leave of my two somewhat astonished companions.

It was really not a particularly long way to go, at the most half an hour if one stepped on it. At the start you had five tedious minutes through the town, then you went along the rather dusty main road which also led to our drill ground; this was a road on which our horses were by now familiar with every stone and every bend, so you could slacken the reins and leave them to it. Half way along, next to a little chapel on the bridge, a smaller avenue shaded by old chestnut trees branched off to the left, in a sense a private road since it was little used or driven on. The road faithfully and patiently followed the gentle winding course of a languid little stream.

But strangely, the closer I came to the little schloss, with its white outer wall and the iron gateway in it now just coming into view, the faster I felt my courage failing. Rather as when you've got as far as the very door of the dentist's and then search for some reason to back out before ringing the bell, I now longed to make a quick escape even at this late stage. Did it really have to be today? Should I not consider the whole sorry business finally wrapped up by that

letter? Involuntarily, I slowed my steps; after all, there was still time to turn back. A detour is always welcome whenever you feel any reluctance to take the more direct path, and so I turned off the avenue and crossed the little stream over a flimsy wooden plank; I entered the fields, deciding to make just one circuit of the chateau beyond the outside wall.

The house behind the high stone wall presented itself to view as a single-storey structure, extensive, in late Baroque style, painted in the traditional Austrian manner in so-called Schönbrunner yellow, and fitted with green window-shutters. Separated from it by a courtyard there were a few smaller buildings, apparently meant for the staff quarters, estate offices and stables, extending out into the large park, of which I had been quite unaware on that first evening visit. Only now did I realize, as I peered in through the 'ox-eyes', the oval piercings in that immense outer wall, that this Schloss Kekesfalva was not at all the modern villa I had taken it to be from the character of the interior alone; it was a genuine country house, an aristocratic country residence of the old style, such as I had seen from time to time in Bohemia while riding by on manoeuvres. The only unusual thing that struck me about it was the peculiar square tower, slightly reminiscent of an Italian campanile, rising into the air and looking somewhat out of place with the rest, perhaps a remnant of an old castle that had stood here in earlier days. On reflection, I remembered that I had often seen this unusual watchtower from the drill ground, but I had merely taken it to be the church tower of some village, and it was only now that I noticed how the normal rounded pommel at the top of a church tower was missing, and the peculiar rectangular structure had a flat roof which served either as a sun terrace or perhaps as an observatory. But the more conscious I became of the traditional feudal character of this aristocratic country estate the more uncomfortable I felt; to think that here of all places, where there was such care and attention given to form, I had had to make such a blundering *début*!

Finally, however, after completing my circuit, I once more arrived at the gate from the other side. I quickly braced myself. Walking the length of the gravel path between the severe rows of pollarded pop-

lars, I came to the front door and raised and dropped the heavy bronze-work knocker, which round here in the traditional way served instead of a bell. Immediately the servant appeared – strangely, he seemed quite unsurprised by my unannounced visit. Without any further questions, or for that matter taking the visiting card which I had ready to present to him, he gave a courteous bow and invited me to wait in the salon; the ladies were still in their rooms, he said, but would appear very soon. There seemed to be no doubt that I would be received. Rather as if my visit had been expected, he led me in; with renewed unease I recognized the room, with its red hangings, where the dancing had been that evening, and a bitter taste in my mouth reminded me that next door must be that other room and its ill-starred corner.

At first, to be sure, the cream-coloured sliding doors, with their graceful gold decoration, shielded from view that scene of my faux pas, which was still painfully present in my mind; but it was not many minutes before I heard the arranging of chairs behind the door, whispered words, a hushed coming and going that betrayed the presence of several persons. I tried to put my wait to use by taking a better look at the salon: rich Louis Seize furniture, to right and left old Gobelin tapestries, and between the glass doors opening straight onto the garden old pictures of the Canale Grande and Piazza San Marco which seemed to me, untutored though I was in such things, to be of considerable value. Not that I was able to take in much detail of these treasures, given that I was at the same time listening with keen attention to the noises from the other side of the door. There was a light clattering of plates, a door creaking, and at one point I even fancied I could hear the irregular, dry, faltering tap-tap of crutches.

At long last, from the other side, a still invisible hand pushed open the flaps of the door. It was Ilona, who then came over to me. 'How very nice of you to come, Herr Leutnant!' she said, as she led me straight into that all too familiar room. In the same corner of the boudoir, on the same chaise longue, behind the same malachite-green table (why did they replay this scene which was so embarrassing to me?), there sat the young crippled girl, a white fur rug spread