

Sample Translation (pp. 41-50, 57-64, 65-74)

Keyserling's Secret **by Klaus Modick**

Translated by Jake Schneider

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Iris Brandt: ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de
Dorothee Flach: dflach@kiwi-verlag.de

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Gray shadows fall on the landscape drifting past the compartment window. In an instant, there is a brief summer downpour like a glass lattice suffused with patches of sunlight. Soon the rain cloud glides south, arching a rainbow over the silver-glinted ribbon of the river and across the pastures, which are steaming a sigh of relief after the hot, leaden humidity of the past few days. The rush of air along the train shapes the last fat droplets on the window into lines and streaks until they trail off.

In the clarity of the freshened air, it seems to him as though the paddocks and fields with their borders, paths, and faces, their secluded sheds and homesteads, are not in fact drifting past him, but orbiting some far-off, real or imagined, midpoint. Objects are circling about this axis, creating a whirlpool in which all contours dissipate into colorful lines and specks.

He blinks, wipes the corner of his eye with the knuckles of his index finger, and shakes his head as if doing so could adjust his perception. When he returns to Munich after this summer getaway, he will need to pay a visit to the eye doctor, although he has long suspected that no herbs could be grown, and no lenses ground, to defeat his creeping blindness.

Shortly past Starnberg, a panorama of the lake comes into view. The setting sun leaves a fiery track on the water intersecting the keel line of a white paddle steamer. On the shore, green and blue shadows are widening like picture frames. Snow-capped Alpine peaks jut up from the southern horizon in a massive bas-relief. As if exhaling the colors that the day blew into it, the entire scene blurs into a series of undulating lines above the deepening silver-blue of the water.

At Tutzing Station, which could pass for a Tuscan manor house, Keyserling has a transfer to the Kochelsee Railway for the final few kilometers. He watches as luggage and mail is unloaded from the freight car onto the platform, including his suitcase, of which a porter relieved him in Munich. Do people live and travel any differently to those parcels and suitcases? Each of them carefully packed and sealed, each labeled with a destination and an address. Nobody knows their contents but the owner. All we know is that we travel together for only a segment of the journey, and then we part ways. Just as he traveled with Vroni through Vienna.

Also, aren't valises like certain women? The more expensive, the more likely to be lost. Just as he lost Ada von Cray back in Dorpat. Oh my, he will have to weave these metaphors and similes into one of the stories haunting his head. He will make a note of them this evening, as a poet ought to.

"All aboard!" The stationmaster holds up his signal. "Stand clear of the departing train!"

The whistle gives a shrill toot. The locomotive releases steam and gathers speed, hissing and puffing. Within ten minutes, the train reaches Bernried.

No one but Keyserling disembarks, and neither does anyone board. The leaves of the linden trees near the station building are shiny and still dripping. So it also rained here. A barefoot boy is herding a gaggle of geese down the wet platform. A dog is slurping from a puddle. It smells of moist foliage and fragrant linden blossoms. Some children are standing by the fence, marveling at the locomotive, that mythic creature spewing fire and smoke.

Louise Halbe is waiting for him at the baggage counter as planned with a handcart in tow for his suitcase. He grabs the handle with his right hand, she with her left, and they roll it through the village on its rumbling wooden wheels. They had little wagons just like this one in his childhood. In the summer, he, his sisters, and their visiting cousins used to pretend they were horse carriages, train cars, hay wagons, or potato carts. The children of the field hands and farmers did not join in the games; they had to help with the harvest.

The Halbes are renting the house for the summer from the writer Karl Tanera, who is presently on another of his world trips, which he will doubtless retell in the next of his many books. Therefore, for the summer, the master of the house is Max Halbe. And sure enough, he is standing there at the doorway, looking confident with his splayed-out knees, hands in his pockets, artistically open collar, and rolled-up shirtsleeves. He removes the glowing cigar from his mouth and gives Keyserling a forceful handshake.

"Welcome to the beehive of Bohemia."

Louis Corinth has already arrived with Charlotte Berend, but the two have gone out for a lakeside walk during the blue hour. Keyserling takes the small room on the middle floor that shares a wall with Corinth's bedroom. The Holms are expected next week and the composer Hans Richard Weinhöppel has said he is coming as well. They will be

staying on the top floor. Alfred Kerr will paddle over from Seeshaupt now and then, and Paul Cassirer also plans to make an appearance. It might get crowded at times in Tanera's house.

"Crowded is cozy," Louise offers.

"And what about Frank?" Keyserling asks.

"*Herr* Wedekind," says Halbe in an ironic voice, "has not been seen or heard since his performance at the Dichtelei. But should he grace us with his presence nevertheless, the attic is his."

From his private balcony, Keyserling has a view of the gleaming lake, its shore only a short walk from the house. He unpacks his suitcase and changes into a casual, ivory-colored linen suit, which is a bit worn in several places, over a collarless white shirt. Summer wear.

"Eddy!"

He walks out onto the wooden balcony. Halbe is in the garden, waving at him.

"Dinner!"

Louis Corinth and his fiancée have returned for the meal. With his robust skull and drooping Tatar mustache, the massive, broad-shouldered man oozes the grace, both whimsical and imposing, of a bear. At his side, a head shorter but not dainty in the least, Charlotte Berend seems almost feeble—an odd couple that was drawn together for that very reason.

On their walk along the lake shore, they bought smoked trout from a fisherman. It has been served with salad and some bread freshly baked by Louise. Halbe and Corinth drink wheat beer; Keyserling and the ladies stick to Riesling. They take their seats at the table in the garden, which is flooded by the last blood-red rays of afternoon light. An invigorating lake breeze rumples the tablecloth and the napkins and makes the sheets on the clothesline at the back of the garden flutter like ghosts. For a while, the group is mostly silent apart from the odd comment, as if they are not quite alone, as if the lake is softly, insistently intruding on their conversation. When the wind dies down and the darkness slips through the garden, they light some candles and two kerosene lamps and the chatter resumes.

Under the table lurk two cats over their little tithe. Corinth tosses them some trout skeletons. "Earlier, when Petermannchen and I bought the trout," he says, "I saw the nets hanging up to dry. They reminded me of art and artists. Do you see?"

The group looked rather at a loss. Charlotte pokes at him, laughing. “No,” she says. “We don’t see.”

“The net,” says Corinth slowly, “is like the art market. The little fish slip through the holes. But the significant ones, the fat fish, so to speak, are caught in the net, reach the market and fetch good prices.”

“Well, well, my Lovy,” Charlotte says. “You’re certainly fat enough.” She puts her hands on his cheeks and gives him a kiss.

Then Max Halbe grabs a stack of manuscript pages and slides one of the lamps closer to him. Keyserling knows what that means. They all do. Genius knows no respite, retreat, or vacation. Max is going to read his piece, and anyone who wants to sleep under his roof is welcome but must make peace with the stipulations for better or for worse. It’s a play. What else? He clears his throat and reads. His voice halting at first, then more assured, and eventually a-quiver with emotion, he reads reflections on patriotic devotion; on the kind Prussian-German temper, like the clinging flatfish, which fights the wiles of the foreigner; on down-to-earth sincerity in the clash against Slavic treachery; on the unyielding legacies of the Germanic line. The work, on its quest towards completion, is still lacking a title. Perhaps someone at the table—Halbe looks expectantly over the rim of his pince-nez—has a suggestion?

Keyserling is only able to stifle laughter by occasionally biting his lip. He realizes that Halbe intends this twaddle to gratify his friends and silence his enemies, the spiteful critics, once and for all. But Keyserling fears that this shot will backfire and hit Max himself instead. Still, he has to say something, anything encouraging, so he says, “Tremendous, Maxy, tremendous indeed.”

“What strong stuff,” Corinth adds. “And yet, yet—”

“Powerful,” Louise finishes her husband’s sentence.

“You should simply call it Rosenhagen,” says Charlotte. “After the estate in the play.”

“Brilliant,” says Halbe. “Simply Rosenhagen. That’s magnificent. I don’t know why I haven’t thought of that myself.”

First the stroke of genius is washed away with beer and wine. Later the subject turns to Karl Tanera, their world-traveling landlord. In 1870 and ’71, he fought in the war against France and wrote a book about his experiences, *Earnest and Jovial Recollections of an Officer’s Aide-de-Camp*, which earned him money by the pile.

“You poor poets can learn from his example,” says Louise. “Go to the army and tell the

people how nice war is. The glory of Prussia. And of all that bashing and stabbing and shooting. Then you can afford to buy your own lake houses and travel the world.”

“But you would have to take us along,” says Charlotte, “to America, Africa, China. Oh, how lovely it would be...”

“Regretfully, I’m not such a military man, my dear Lottie.” Keyserling takes a sip of Riesling, pulls a cigarette from his silver case, asks Halbe to light it, and blows a puff of smoke into the glow of one of the kerosene lamps.

“I’ve sometimes imagined standing at attention for a commander, who snarls at me, of course. And then, instead of ‘Aye-aye, sir,’ I only say ‘Cock-a-doodle-do.’ Just ‘Cock-a-doodle-do.’”

Laughter. Only Halbe, who reveres anything military, furrows his brow.

“No hard feelings, Maxy,” says Keyserling to appease him. “But my father advised me against joining the service. ‘Anything but the officer track,’ he always said. ‘Soon enough you’d become a lieutenant. On duty, all lieutenants do the same things. And when they are off-duty flirting with the girls, they all say the same lines. And then one day, here comes the czar with the bright idea to start a war where the likes of us, the other lieutenants, and all the other poor fellows get themselves shot, God forbid. Out of the question.’ Citizenship, nobility... What does Russia even matter to us?”

Then he falls silent. Everyone stares at him in anticipation. Keyserling knows that they are all eager for more tidbits from his youth and especially curious about his student days in Vienna, for they suspect secrets and scandals that he is afraid to bring to light. Which is why all ears prick up at any fragments from earlier in his life. But he only nods now, as if to validate his own memory of his father. And falls silent.

“You certainly don’t look so warlike now, Eddy,” Halbe remarks.

Corinth angles his head and sizes up Keyserling with a slight squint in his eyes, so piercing and sharp, like a hunter eyeing his next prey.

Keyserling grins. “Are you trying to find a reason I’m unfit for duty?”

“I want to paint you,” says Corinth.

“Forget it!”

“And if I plead with you?”

Keyserling waves him off. “Better you paint your little Petermannchen. More material to work with.”

Corinth roars with laughter and wraps an arm around Charlotte’s shoulder.

Protectively? Possessively? She shoots Keyserling a long glance with her big eyes, her dark Viennese eyes.

Paint *him*? My goodness, how did it come to this?! He is well aware of what the mirror shows him daily, but who knows what Lovis might unearth? He admits to himself it is flattering that a celebrated artist would want to paint his portrait, but, he also admits, he is afraid of the finished product. He lowers the wick of the oil lamp on the bedside table. The smells and sounds of the night are pouring through the open window. Bittersweet aromas of flowers and leaves and hedges, reeds, water lilies, and other water plants. The mating call of some bird. Crackles and murmurs in the dark from all directions. The laugh of a snipe. Two wood owls hooting at each other in passion and grief. The whole place exudes a homey, ruddy smell.

Less homey are the sounds from the next room, now seeping through the wall. A giggle, suppressed moaning and panting, too distinct to be discreetly ignored. Something clomps on the wooden floor. A chair? A suitcase? It doesn't concern him, but the wall is simply no match for the slapping and groping, the chortling and grunting. Certain paintings float past his mind's eye in the dark, paintings in which Corinth has presented highly erotic glimpses of all sorts of women. There are twisted thighs *en gros* and teetering breasts *en masse*. Some of the models no longer seem like such fresh and girlish salon ladies and might as well put on a dressing gown. If these Graces, whose sumptuous figures often spill out beyond graciousness, had been draped with a mere wisp of a garment—a scarf, a towel, a veil—their upright or reclining poses would be all the more arousing and they would seem somehow even more naked for it. One can quibble over taste, but by any account the pieces are “well executed,” technically impressive, masterfully painted. The bare skin verges at times on a translucent, glimmering fluid, a sort of open-air eroticism that elevates nudity to a trademark of painterly skill.

Corinth has never painted Charlotte, whose quickening breath Keyserling cannot tune out, or if he has, he is jealously guarding the charms of his little Petermannchen for himself. At least for the time being. One day he will unveil that beauty in his pictures for all to see and it will sell and sell.

[...]

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The next room has gone quiet. The crickets are screeching in the garden with a metallic sound, as if tiny, industrious hands are filing fantastically the fine chains that bind today to yesterday. Like an echo of the long, moonlit nights of childhood, when Nanny used to shut the storybook and give him a goodnight kiss on his forehead. How he adored that nanny—what was her name? Christina? Karina? And then the voices of the soirée would fade too, and all that used to reach his room were the summer-heavy scents and sounds of the estate. The moon wandered like a ghost among listless clouds. Its light came and went as if someone were carrying a flickering candle past an infinite row of windows. Or opening and closing the doors to brightly lit rooms down a dim corridor.

As sleep takes him in its caress, he thinks that *this* is how our memories go. From the darkening hallways of oblivion, they flash, sudden and unexpected, but as soon as we turn to look at them, the door slams and we must feel our way further down the hall. Yet we can gather up these flashes of light if we only write them down. And sometimes the act of doing so is illuminating, in the figurative sense. It no longer gives off the virginal scent of the original, living moment, yet it is a lantern whose glow can enchant and soothe us.

In the colorless transparency of dawn, he is awoken by the voices of birds. It is too late and too bright to fall back asleep, but far too early for breakfast. In the next room, Corinth is snoring in the deepest tones. How can Vroni stand it? Vroni? No, no, her name is Charlotte... He gets dressed, jots down several haunting phrases from his pre-sleep reverie last night, and tiptoes his way outside. Passing the reverential silence of the Bernried Monastery, he ambles beyond the boathouses to the lakeside and strolls to the end of the wooden pier, where a few crude steps lead foolhardy swimmers into the water.

To the east, the blush of dawn strokes the sleepy green of the forest's edge with its rosy fingers. The last nighttime clouds glide through the crystal-clear sky like long, skinny pike-fish in a pale pink sea. Before his very eyes, the colors of the lake change from gray to silver to blue. The water's surface grows rougher like lights swaying in the morning breeze. Emerging from the bobbing reeds, an egret takes off with heavy wingbeats.

Sluggish wild ducks paddle between horsetails, water lilies, and cattails. All at once, the sight of them sends him a quarter-century back to the vacation before his last year of high school, back to that vast, sticky summer at Lake Usma in Courland, back to the duck hunt he will never forget. He had already bagged several ducks and hauled them into the boat when he was overcome by a sudden unfamiliar, wondrous sensation. He looked at the dead birds in the boat; at their limp, twisted necks; at their spilled blood and their dead eyes. The last drake he shot still had its legs outstretched in languid helplessness, and a shudder shook its body until it lay motionless. Keyserling found this so unspeakably sad that it knotted his throat and he struggled to suppress tears. At that moment, he knew that a world where hunting was an unquestioned tradition was no world for him; that he was not made for a life that would take other lives without hesitation. Perhaps, if he had artistic talent, he could have painted such a world. But perhaps, he thought, he could describe such a life. For the young man he was already had literary inclinations—follies, his father said. The old Count only tolerated this, albeit reluctantly, because he saw reading and writing as a lackadaisical waste of time that did not disturb anyone. More disturbing was the ambition of one of his eight daughters to become an opera singer; at the family's stately home, she was only allowed to sing out of her father's earshot. Meanwhile, Keyserling had cultivated an interest in matters literary from an early age, and even a secret longing for the enticingly relaxed Bohemian way of life; by that age, his only doubt was whether he had the talent.

Is he sure of that now? Of the things that are increasingly absorbing his mind—memories of people whose paths he has crossed, of a world he has conclusively broken with, and a time that is irretrievably lost—he has hardly committed anything to paper. It seems to him that he has not yet properly begun, that his real work lies ahead. He will surely make a note of the sad story of the duck hunt, but also the unintended comedy of the singer condemned to silence, as soon as...

"Good morning, Mr.—I mean, good morning, Eduard!" A fresh-sounding, well-rested voice.

He spins around. Charlotte. She is wearing a bathrobe, carrying a rolled-up towel under her arm, and is barefoot. He didn't hear her soft steps on the planks of the pier. "Yes, good morning, lovely Lottie. How nice to see you."

She smiles. "What a magnificent day."

"Indeed. We get this colorful spectacle here every morning. It's an ablution, one might

say. Nature is just carelessly overflowing with all this pink and silver and gold. Probably a wake-me-up, like a morning shower or morning coffee.”

She laughs her spirited laugh. “And I’m now going to take a morning dip.”

“Go ahead, kiddo.” He smirks. “The lake suits you.”

“You’re being very ironic for this hour of the morning,” she says.

“Well, now.” He nods. “Sometimes irony is just a form of envy towards someone more capable. Or better looking.”

She laughs again. “But now you have to turn around. And close your eyes. When I say the word, you can look back this way.”

“Pity,” he says, but turns around obligingly and makes a show of covering his eyes. He hears the soft patter of her feet on the steps down to the water, then louder splashing and sloshing.

“You can open them!” she splutters.

When he looks, she’s swimming out into the lake, a few meters from the pier already, among water lilies blossoming white and violet, as if repatriated to a native territory of water and light. He watches her, that white body embraced by the lake like a lover.

On that day back then, after the duck hunt, he had gone swimming with his friends in the lake. The water was lukewarm like milk when he swam, taking his time, into the shimmering light. His consuming sadness over the hunted ducks was gone now. A silent and powerful bliss warmed his limbs, bliss at being alive and having plenty of life to go. He drifted on his back, letting the water carry him in its pleasant, lazy motion.

Dragonflies landed on his chest, and water plants tickled his skin with thin, slippery fingers. Above him, a flock of ducks quacked, as if accusing him. Justifiably. Suddenly he came to a stop, entangled in a jumble of water lilies, rushes, and water plantains, sank below the surface, rose back up spitting and wheezing, then was pulled down again as if the smooth stalks were hands and the placid lake a rushing whirlpool; here comes death, he thought, nature’s revenge for his deed to the ducks—but then, suddenly, he felt someone take his arm and pull him from under his shoulders up and out of the tangle. When he had regained firm footing, his friend Moritz held him upright until they reached the shore, where he caught his breath and lay down in the grass. The ducks quacked, wicked and savage.

He hears someone calling his name. Charlotte. She swims a hundred meters from the pier, raises a hand in the air, waves at him, and swims back with powerful strokes.

Politely, he turns his back to her again and imagines her climbing up the steps, naked as a finger. Because her eyes remind him of Vroni's, he pictures her body like Vroni's, too.

She shivers, quietly.

"Cold?" he asks.

"Wet," she says. "You can look now."

She has slipped on the bathrobe and is now drying her hair, her chest swelled forward. True cultivation is revealed when dressing, not undressing, he decides.

"If only I could paint," he says, almost in reverence. "An image for the gods. *Your* image. I could easily grow jealous of your Lovy."

She laughs, sits down on the pier, dangles her legs over the water, and gestures in invitation. He sits beside her. How long has it been since he dangled his legs like this? Twenty years? Twenty-five? He pulls his silver cigarette case out of his pocket and holds it out for her. She extracts one. He lights it and another for himself. She coughs after the first drag.

"Nile brand," he says and pats her gently on the back. "Tobacco from the Orient, blended with a little hemp. You adjust to it. It's quite an experience early in the morning on an empty stomach."

They sit there in silence, watching the clouds of smoke they breathe out into the blue.

"Is it true," she says suddenly, "that you were a wild young man in your day?"

"What can I tell you? Wild?" He contemplates for a moment. "More so restless, I would say."

And always so very afraid of missing an opportunity, he thinks. Even today, now, every day, a person misses out on something. But it no longer hurts. Now everything tastes as it should. Sweet things are sweet, tart things tart, odors are odiferous, and stench stinks.

"Of course, we took ourselves for an interesting people," he says. "And what was interesting was being young."

"Nothing else?" Her voice sounds mocking.

He finds such questions burdensome. What does she want to know exactly?

"Youthful people," he equivocates, "are like piano students who need to practice a complicated piece. They contribute their enthusiasm and vigor but keep striking the wrong keys. The result is wrong notes and broken chords."

"Well put." That sounds even more mocking. "Broken chords..."

“Goodness, yes, I—we all had many follies.”

“Follies?” She looks at him from the side.

He can feel her gaze. It feels as if she is tracing his profile with her index finger and lightly grazing the skin. Is she disgusted by him? By his illness, whose conspicuous mark he bears on his face?

“Youth is a beautiful thing, but it is often overestimated,” he says with a shrug. “Youth is like foam on champagne. It does not stay put. Just consider the kitsch that is produced in the name of youth. *Jugendstil* is not my cup of tea. I prefer Impressionism. Everything passes, everything flows. And growing older has its advantages, too. We can finally admit what an idiot we were in our youths without being ashamed of it.”

She laughs. “Lovis says you have secrets.”

“Every human being has secrets,” he says.

“Lovis thinks that makes you interesting. Which is why he wants to paint you.”

“Hogwash.” He shakes his head vigorously. “You are young, you are pretty. He should paint you. Not me in my radiant ugliness.”

“You’re not ugly,” she says quietly and even strokes his cheek with the back of her hand.

“What is beauty, anyway? Lovis says that withering flowers are the prettiest.”

“Withering flowers? Me? That’s un—”

“—and he recently painted a wonderful still life,” she interrupts, “of a bowl of fruit that was on the Halbes’ garden table. The fruit was no longer so fresh, and that was the beauty of it, Lovis said. That dignified, noble rot.”

“Noble rot? Referring to me? That’s outrageous,” says Keyserling, but his indignation is a little feigned because he is in fact delighted by the phrase. He will make a note of it. The stories that go through his head have something to do with that word, stories from a society whose beautiful façade is crumbling like dry make-up on the face of an aging woman who fears old age; their palaces are shedding plaster as the winds of change, if not the storms of revolution, blow through their leaky shingles.

“Time for breakfast,” says Charlotte, and stands up. The two of them walk up the pier side by side, her soundless, barefoot, almost gliding, and him shuffling to the rhythm of his cane on the wooden planks. Waves ruffled by the morning wind are quietly swashing against the pylons as if trying to persuade him, with their chatty tone, to do something to which he objects. When they reach the shore, Charlotte abruptly pauses, grips his

arm, and plunges her big dark Vroni eyes into his milky-blue ones.

“What if I asked you very sweetly?” she asks, as quietly as a wave. “Could Lovis paint you then?”

He smiles. “I’ll think about it.”

At that, she stands on her tiptoes and gives him a peck on the cheek.

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The breakfast table is set in the garden, wafting coffee and fresh bread rolls. There are birds chirping in the fruit trees. Louis and Max Halbe are sitting at the table. Max leafs through yesterday's edition of the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten*, puffing on his morning cigar. Keyserling breathes in the aroma. Henry Clay. Louise is peeling a yellow-green pear, which already has a few darker spots. Noble rot, Keyserling thinks. Corinth is busy setting up an easel facing the wall of the house in the shade of the balcony.

Everyone says good morning and Charlotte rushes inside to dress. Louise pours Keyserling some coffee.

Halbe lets the newspaper sag, smirks. "Have you gone for a swim too?"

"I only swim in my recollections," says Keyserling.

"Not me," says Corinth. "I'll go swimming later on. I'd rather work in the morning when the light is clearest. I want to paint the lake, but it's just... bewitched. Almost bedeviled. It refuses to be captured. I can't work out the logic of its lines and the pattern of its motion, can't get to the bottom of it. I don't grasp its essence. To make a portrait, I have to construct a sort of idealized face that combines the possibilities of all momentary faces. But I can't manage that with the lake, although I'm constantly studying it. I swim in it, I paddle around it day and night, take walks down the shore at dawn and dusk, creep past it at all hours, in every light, every weather. I am captivated by this lake and could see it as the background of your portrait, but—" He breaks off mid-sentence as if caught red-handed, having rambled himself into a corner.

"My portrait?" Keyserling asks, feigning surprise. "So you want to give me an idealized face?"

At that moment, Charlotte returns to the garden. Lake-blue summer dress, sunny smile. She looks at Corinth, then Keyserling. "And? Have you come to an agreement?"

Corinth shrugs self-consciously, fumbling with the canvas on the easel.

Keyserling smokes a cigarette, stirs some sugar into his coffee, revels in the silence like an artful fermata. "Very well," he says at last, with a patronizing nod, "but only because it's you." Whom he's referring to, he leaves ambiguous. Corinth? Charlotte?

Then he takes a seat on the chair that Corinth has already positioned in front of the wall of the house. The painter takes a few steps back, angles his head, makes a frame with his thumbs and forefingers, peers though it searchingly, furrows his brow, and

shakes his head.

“Not like this,” he says. “I have to ask you to change clothes.”

“Why?”

“In this casual linen suit, you aren’t Eduard von Keyserling, the well-known writer, but our friend Eddy, a summer guest at Max Halbe’s garden. Do you happen to have packed a darker suit? Something staidier, more elegant? Something more count-like, more, how can I put it—”

“Noble rot,” Keyserling says.

They all laugh.

“I’ll see what I can find.”

He goes into his room, shaves, changes clothes, and re-emerges on the terrace. By now the breakfast table has been cleared and the women are taking a little excursion to market day in Tutzing. Halbe retreats for his daily dose of poetic suffering at his desk, where *Rosenhagen* awaits.

Keyserling sits back down on the chair in the shade of the wall. Its brownish, slightly soiled base reaches roughly to Keyserling’s chest; the plaster above it shifts among unidentifiable shades of gray and blue.

“Am I now exuding enough noble rot?”

“It’s perfect,” says Corinth.

Keyserling’s gaunt body is now enclosed in a dark-gray suit that he filled out better several years ago. The old-fashioned frock coat is clasped at the chest by a single button. He is wearing it over a waistcoat in white silk, a white shirt with a Schiller-style collar, and a shiny blue satin cravat. He has on a floppy-brimmed brown hat. He crosses his legs comfortably and clasps one hand with the other on his lap. On his left ring finger, he brandishes his Keyserling signet ring with its blue gem.

Corinth takes another step back, crosses his arms, ponders. “Actually, please take off your hat,” he says.

“Don’t you like it?”

“I do, I do, but you have such fine hair,” says Corinth.

Keyserling doesn’t mind hearing that. He balances his hat on his bent left knee.

“That’s it,” says Corinth, satisfied.

“What? My idealized face?”

“Not yet. Hold that pose.”

Corinth grabs the palette, scrunches his eyes as one would against a gust of wind, takes some paint with his brush, and daubs it firmly on the white void of the canvas.

Quietly singing to themselves, bumblebees bumble around in the morning sun, dangle their velvet bodies from the roses and the bells of St. Benedict's thistle in the overgrown lawn. Among the hollyhocks, asters, and mallows, the summer leans back lazily against the garden fence and watches the swallows scratching their quick handwriting on the sky. Corinth stands behind the easel with his wide stance and rolled-up shirtsleeves, paints with strong, vigorous strokes, looks back and forth between the canvas and Keyserling.

The warmer it gets, the more out of place he appears in his dark suit from the last century. Idealized face? He thinks of faces from Corinth's paintings. Lovis most enjoys painting himself, one time furious and wildly resolute, another time brooding, now with an audacious hat, then with a paintbrush and palette, the next time in a suit of armor, and over and over in the company of women in various, mostly advanced, stages of undress—such as last year's *Salome*, which gave Corinth attention and a lucrative scandal. The way his Salome is bent over John the Baptist's disembodied head, it appears as if, rather than her pupils, the nipples of her splendid breasts are gazing into his dead eyes. And the half-naked executioner with his drooping mustache and bloody sword bears a striking resemblance to the painter himself.

"Your *Salome*," says Keyserling. "Where did you dredge her up? Bankrupt Russian duchess? A simple Fräulein von such-and-such? Or someone from the theater?"

Corinth grins. "That's one of those ladies," he says without pausing from his work, "whom you could mistake on the street for a lady. If you want to meet her, ask Wedekind. He recommended her to me. And now let's take a break."

When Keyserling peeks at the canvas, Corinth tosses a cloth on the easel. "It's not a painting yet," he says. "Just a visual declaration of intent, if you're generous."

They sit at the table, drink some of Louise's lemonade, which she has left out in an earthenware jug, smoke cigarettes.

"Yes, yes, my *Salome*," says Corinth. "I mean the painting, not the model, gave me a lot of grief at first because the Munich Secession rejected it. But in the end, it was my lucky day. The Berliners exhibited it and it was the talk of the town there. By the way, I'm moving entirely to Berlin soon. Petermannchen will hopefully come along. Berliners know how to appreciate me and my work. I'm an authority even before I get there. In

Munich, I'm a scandal at most. And for as long as Lenbach is pulling the strings with his old boys' club, that won't change. Munich breeds envy and mistrust. Everyone knows that artists like us contrive the worst intrigues. Its either ambition and dog-eat-dog battles or pussy-footing and toeing the line."

Keyserling nods and blows cigarette smoke into the air. "Hasn't it always been like that? Consider Raphael's intrigues against Michelangelo."

"Yes, it probably always has," says Corinth, who usually weighs his words but is now halfway through flying into a rage. "And it always will be, and will even get worse, so long as the art world is a market that cares only about prices instead of aesthetic quality. In the juries, boards of trustees, and commissions—all those committees that dictate who ought or ought not to be financially spoon-fed, who shall receive a fellowship and who may be left to starve—those artistic impotents sit there, serving a function whose status is proportional to their conceit, their lack of talent, and their corruption. And that is what we call cultural politics."

During this tirade, Corinth's face has turned an alarming shade of red. He takes a deep breath and empties his glass of lemonade in a single sip. "Besides, Eddy," he says at last with a sigh. "You know what I'm going on about. You've been in politics yourself."

"Politics? Me?" Keyserling shakes his head. "What makes you say a thing like that?"

"From reading *Number 2, Margaretenstrasse*, your Vienna novel, I got the impression that—"

"But that's just a novel," Keyserling cuts him short, "and not an especially good one. I was in Vienna studying, at least a little. And entertaining myself rather well. But at the end of it—well, never mind."

"No, tell me."

Keyserling recognizes this tactic. This is not the first time Corinth has tried to shine a light on his suspiciously shady past.

"That pretty girl—Tini? Was she real? Just as there's a living specimen of my Salome? Tell me about it. We're not in mixed company."

"Oh, Lovy, leave it—that's too vast a subject." Keyserling puts up his quote-proof stone wall. If he were to start talking about Vienna, it would inevitably lead him to the Dorpat scandal and the fatal, bittersweet presence of Ada. If he talked about that girl from Vienna, about Tini from the novel, whose real name was Vroni, then he might wind up with those ladies—what was Corinth's perfect phrase?—whom you could mistake on

the street for ladies. And that would take him, finally, to that gloomy room where sickness awaited him like an executioner awaits a sentenced criminal. He prefers to live with lips sealed like members of a previous generation, people who recounted, wrote down, or confessed many a thing—except for one, the single secret that weighed on their souls. But who knows? Perhaps one day he will write a story or novel on that very subject.

Corinth won't back down so easily. "But you used to be part of Anzengruber's round table, didn't you? Or is that just another rumor?"

"No, I mean, yes. That could not always be avoided and was sometimes very entertaining, even when self-appointed evangelists of enlightenment and thwarted social reformers were busy making their big pronouncements. As you know, I'm passionately interested in other people's experiences. Where life is concerned, I'm a communist, you might say. But muckraking and the aesthetics of pity were never my affair. Those people's prose is no better than leaden campaign rhetoric. And Anzengruber's plays, perish the thought!"

Keyserling sighs and stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray. Contemporary issues have never been the theme of a major work. He believes that fervently. True literature is ignorant of today's latest news and therefore can never become yesterday's; it may grow old, but never go obsolete. Didn't Flaubert do more to further the French Revolution by writing *Madame Bovary* than he could have by getting shot on some silly barricade?

"Up-to-date literature," he continues, a little surprised at his own loquaciousness, "is in fact nothing more than journalism. It never, ever has literary significance because it is partisan and a stranger to irony. And because it lacks distance. It's like your paintings. You need to stand back a few paces or they don't have the proper effect. A society for social reform was recently founded in Berlin. Can you imagine making a painting about *that* when you are the top dog there?"

Corinth laughs. "No, I'd rather paint you. So on with it, model for me a little longer until the ladies get back."

Keyserling returns to his seat in front of the wall following Corinth's instructions. This is an arrangement, but not truly a pose, because the middle ground between leisure and poise suits Keyserling very well. Corinth has a good eye for such things, he must be granted that. Will any of Keyserling's political views be apparent from the final painting,

from the idealized face, if Corinth succeeds?

Keyserling is convinced that a person's political proclivities are hereditary like eye color. Regrettably, they are sometimes like a club foot or a humpback. He is not unsympathetic to democratic ideas, but he fears that they will promote the rise of stupidity and a dictatorship of philistinism.

On the contrary, when the relationship between masters and servants is honorable, it is also a heartfelt, very respectful human relationship. His father used to say as much, and probably his grandfather and great-grandfather before him. When the counts of Keyserling were right, they were right.

Noonday silence pervades the house. Between the slats of the blinds, golden glimmering stripes fall on the floorboards, the bed, his body, and his face. The streaks of light are the lines of the unwritten poems that pass through his head, poems about summer gardens and parks filled with the fragrances of flowers, about hot and humid days, about nocturnal houses, estates, and stately homes with crumbling facades occupied by honorable squires; loyal caretakers; sick, drowsy, old noblemen; dainty pale ladies with names like Fastrade, Benigne, or Mareile who are very quiet, slender, genteel, and reserved and are always indisposed by migraines on the couch whenever their husbands are in the mood for them; and precocious, well-bred, gracious young ladies with awakening cravings. Stories of a world that no longer exists at the windless corner of old, foundering Courland, that society rotten to the core which for years and years has been digging its own grave with its stale conventions and lifelong lies. There is a soft scent of elder blossoms, but Max Halbe's garden has no elderberry bushes. It dawns on the half-asleep Keyserling that the elderflowers are only blooming in his memory. Even memory has a climate with local flora and fauna. The real summer is never the one you are currently experiencing, but always that other one, fragrant, wondrous, threaded with light, that you one day recall. The sunshine of one's native land glows brighter abroad; the gardens of childhood are more aromatic in memory. What we lose congeals into an image. Or becomes a story. And of course it is a burden that it remains to be written, whereas the memory is simply there, the indelible memory of Ada or of Veronika, of Vroni, whom he named Tini in his Vienna novel. What has become of her? Did she marry that healthy chap? What was his name—