

Sample Translation (pp. 5-30)

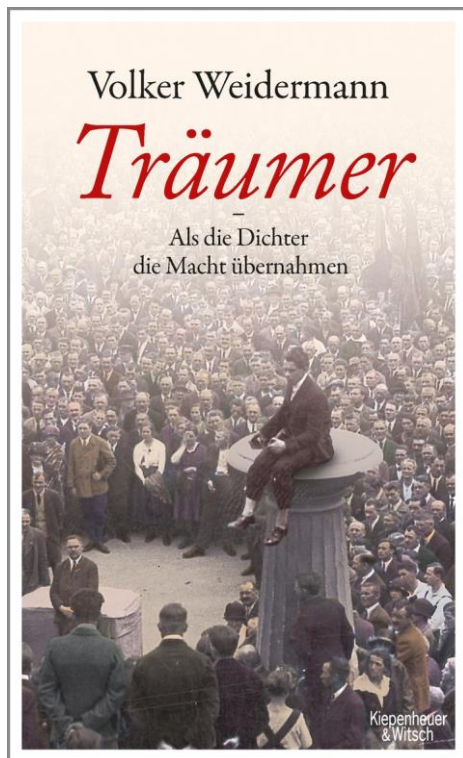
DREAMERS

When the Poets Took Power

by Volker Weidermann

Translated by Simon Pare

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Iris Brandt: ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

Dorothee Flach: dflach@kiwi-verlag.de

THE SHOT

Of course it had all been a fairy tale – a fairy tale that had come true for a few weeks. And now it was over. It would be ridiculous to cling on to power any longer. The January election results had been simply too devastating. Two per cent was a joke, an awfully bad joke. Since then he had come in for an inordinate amount of hate from the press, not to mention scorn and mockery. A king of the people without a people. A jester on the royal throne. An un-Bavarian nut. A Jew from somewhere else.

Kurt Eisner had thrown in the towel. He had negotiated far into the night with his archenemy Erhard Auer, the leader of the Social Democrats. Ah, *if only* he could have negotiated, but he had no bargaining chips. Auer had offered him the post of ambassador to Prague. He might as well have said first secretary at the consulate in Australia. It was over. He'd had his fifteen seconds of fame, and he'd done everything he could to turn the Kingdom of Bavaria into a people's republic, a land of solidarity and philanthropy.

It had been a dream, suddenly being elected Minister President during the night of 7-8 November. Sometimes one just had to be smart and recognise when the moment had come, and on 7 November 1918 it had come.

It was a sunny afternoon. Tens of thousands of soldiers, trade unionists, workers and sailors had gathered on the western slope of the Theresienwiese. The mood was tense. Interior Minister von Brettreich had made sure that there were posters all over the city proclaiming that law and order would be kept. The SPD's Erhard Auer had promised him the day before that there wouldn't be a revolution. Kurt Eisner, the Independent Socialist candidate for the Reichstag who had been raising the spectre of imminent revolution for days, would be "pushed against the wall", as Auer put it. He had the situation under control.

He had nothing under control. It was complete chaos that afternoon. Spectators continued to flood in, and soldiers continued to flood out of their barracks, most of them having torn off their insignia. The men and a few women stood in scattered groups, gathering for a while around one speaker before flocking to another. Auer had made sure he claimed the best position on the uncovered steps in front of the statue of Bavaria. However, when the masses realised that he was only trying to appease them with promises for some distant future, they moved on to the other speakers further down the slope.

At the very bottom stood Kurt Eisner. He was virtually shouting and gesticulating wildly with his arms. More and more people assembled around the man with the long grey hair, the pince-nez, the wild beard and the big hat. He had a good reputation among those who longed for revolution, since he had organised the January strike by the munitions workers and had spent six months in jail as a result.

He wasn't a particularly barnstorming orator. His voice was shrill and high-pitched, and he had trouble making himself heard over the other speakers. But he's our man for this moment, his listeners sensed; he's not going to send us home again. He can feel the energy today, the anger and passion for decisive change at last. They had seen the king strolling through the English Garden that morning. How much longer was he going to take his strolls? How much longer would he reign?

A radical young pacifist with coarse facial features in a black coat, a baker's son from Berg by Lake Starnberg, a worker in a Munich biscuit factory who had become a successful black market trader in the past few weeks, and wrote poetry and literary reviews for a Munich newspaper, is also standing there spellbound, listening to Eisner. His name is Oskar Maria Graf. He has come with his friend, the artist Georg Schrimpf, who did the cover illustration for Graf's first collection of poems, *The Revolutionaries*. It contains a short text titled "Saying":

*Sometimes we must be murderers, for humility has only defiled us
And time has diluted us, lapped by too great a tiredness. Hardened by woes, weighed
down with drudgery,
Fate's mercenary trudges
And casts himself blindly into the streaming torrent
of chastening instinct
to rise again as a quickened penitent,
conscious of his ultimate mission...*

For two years the two of them had attended the pre-revolutionary Monday evening gatherings at the Golden Anchor tavern in Ludwigvorstadt where Kurt Eisner was a regular speaker. That's how they know him – on nodding terms, in any case. "Christ! The whole of Munich's here today," says Graf. "This could really turn into something! I hope they don't all go home again today and do nothing." A bearded giant in uniform overhears this and says with a

superior smile, “No, no, we’re not going home today . . . Today we’re heading somewhere completely different . . . It’ll start any moment now.”

Right then the people around them shout “Peace!” and “Hurray for the world revolution!” and “Three cheers for Eisner!” Then it goes quiet for a minute and there is an audible swell of applause from further up, from the Bavaria, where the placating Auer is speaking. Eisner’s confidant Felix Fechenbach, a twenty-five-year-old poet with a squidgy face and a wispy beard, cries out to the crowd, “Comrades! Our leader Kurt Eisner has spoken. There’s no point in wasting any more words! If you support the revolution, follow us! Follow me! Let’s march!”

All at once the crowd surges up the slope towards Westend. On they go, past shuttered shops towards the barracks. Graf and his friend Georg, whom everyone calls “Schorsch”, are marching near the front of the procession, only five yards from Eisner. Graf later describes their unexpected leader thus: “He was pale, with a bitterly earnest expression on his face. He didn’t say a word. He looked as if the sudden turn of events had caught him somewhat off guard. From time to time he stared straight ahead, half fearful, half dazed. He was walking arm in arm with the broad-shouldered, striding blind farmers’ leader Gandorfer. Gandorfer moved much more freely, coarse in his demeanour, with the determined gait of a true Bavarian farmer. The two of them were flanked by a vanguard of their most loyal followers.”

Their numbers keep growing. The policemen have retreated. Windows open and people look out, silent and curious. The first armed men join the group. The atmosphere is festive, as if they were on their way to a party. Someone reports that sailors have seized the palace, prompting jubilant cheers. The mood grows rowdier.

Where are they marching to? It seems as if the pallid, determined leader has a plan. They head further out of the city, purposefully, then the crowd finds itself stuck in a dark hallway. Halt! comes a cry from the front. Where are they? In a school?

It is the Guldein school, which has served as a barracks in recent times. A shot rings out. There’s the threat of a stampede. A few people rush into the school, but most force their way out again. Shortly afterwards an upstairs window flies open in the schoolhouse. A man waves a red flag and cries, “The troops have joined the revolution! They’ve all come over to us! Onwards! March! March on!”

This is the moment. From this point on everything happens organically. More and more soldiers join them, having torn the epaulettes from their shoulders and wound red bands

around their arms, forming a new community. Children run yelling alongside the group. Once they meet a soldier coming in the opposite direction. He's still wearing his insignia of rank on his shoulders: a paymaster. They rip off his epaulettes, shove him around a bit, and a giant makes a grab for him. The man starts to cry, and the brawny Oskar Maria Graf intervenes: "Let him go! It's not his fault!" The giant takes a while to calm down and admits in a whisper that Graf is right but then adds, "But, you know, we shouldn't be so kind."

So they proceed from one barracks to the next. The approach is always the same. A few men go inside, Eisner and the others wait outside, at some point a window opens and a red flag is brandished from it. Cheering in the street, a wait for their own and those they bring with them from the barracks, and on they go.

After a while the group splits up. Apparently the Maximilian II barracks on Dachauer Strasse is going to cause trouble and there has been shooting. This really fires up the group around Oskar Maria Graf and they hurry on. The sentry at the gates throws down his rifle and runs away when he catches sight of the men. The revolutionaries go inside. On the barracks square an officer has made a small troop line up in front of him and ordered them to do drills. He is standing with his back to the entrance. He doesn't even have time to turn round before someone gives him a powerful crack over the head, driving his helmet down well below his ears. In the same instant the soldiers drop their guns and defect to the revolutionaries. "It's over! Revolution! March!" they cry.

Events have come thick and fast, a sudden energy coursing through people in spite of their exhaustion. The damned war had lasted for more than four years. It cannot simply be over, leaving people stuck in this twilight. Something bright, something new had to emerge from this darkness. It had to.

An Alpine herdsman shrieked with joy as if he was dancing the Schuhplatteln, and a soldier on the fringes of the crowd launched a spontaneous plea for the formation of soldiers' councils. The crowd hurried on to the military prison. Soldiers battered the closed gate with axes and rifles until it eventually burst open, as if of its own accord. As Graf would later recall: "Even today, I can still see the cell doors opening and the inmates coming out. One of them looked at us wide-eyed and strangely, shuddered and suddenly began to sob piteously. Then he fell feebly against a short man's chest and clung to him. Over and over again he cried, 'Thank you! Thank you! God bless you! God bless you!'"

Cell after cell is opened. The prisoners flood out, join the others and at last the crowd makes for the city centre. At the Isartorplatz Graf rushes into a hairdressing salon where his friend Nanndl works, calling to her, "Revolution! Revolution! Victory is ours!" She beams and drops her curling tongs, but Graf has already left.

The crowd breaks up into different groups. There are constant roadside speeches. The streets of Munich's old town are filled to bursting. Where next? Where will the republic be proclaimed?

Graf and Schorsch have lost touch with the others. They cross the Isar to the Franziskaner in der Au inn. They've heard that Eisner will speak here later. They order sausages and beer in preparation for Eisner's revolutionary speech, but everything's very quiet and cosy here. "A knuckle of pork, Wally!" someone calls. No one here is talking about politics, councils, the king or the war, only beer and sausage and tobacco. How can they be so calm? What a homely lot these Bavarians are!

By the time the two revolutionaries leave the Franziskaner, replete and merry, and walk back towards the city centre, the streets are a hive of activity. Everyone has heard the rumour. Walkers stroll in front of the palace. Is the king still inside? Will they see him one last time? Will they witness the last of the Wittelsbachers leaving the city palace from which the family has ruled for an unbroken nine hundred years? Oskar Maria Graf savours the new air and the possibilities hanging over the city and above all the end of this long, long war.

In the meantime, the main contingent has moved on to the Mathäuser beer hall between the main station and Stachus. Nine o'clock in the evening, sausage and beer and knuckle of pork here too, but instead of cosiness there is bustle, joyous concentration, disbelief and determination. A workers', soldiers' and farmers' council is elected as an organ of self-government inspired by the Russian Soviets.

The blind farmers' leader Ludwig Gandorfer never leaves Kurt Eisner's side. Eisner is determined to include the farmers in the new government. Supplying Munich with food has long been difficult and if the farmers don't support the revolution and people start to starve, the revolution will be over within days.

Lorries drive up to the front of the Mathäuser beer hall, bringing guns and ammunition. Soldiers and workers arrive and are armed and sent off in small groups to occupy public buildings across the city. Ministries, the main station, army headquarters: one after another

falls to the revolutionaries. Men wearing red brassards hurry through the city streets. Munich is to become red – red and new and peaceful and free.

The Wittelsbacher Palais, the residence of Ludwig III and his family, is in the throes of chaos and dissolution, gripped by horror and confusion. Where is the palace guard? Disbanded. Where are the royal troops who are supposed to put an end to the terror outside? Minister President von Dandl and Interior Minister von Brettreich report to the king. No, none of this could have been anticipated. Yes, Social Democrat leader Auer had assured them that there would be no revolution. No, nothing more could now be done, and it would be best for the king and his family to leave the city immediately.

Things move incredibly fast after this. The queen is ill: she is running a fever. Her personal physician has just come from her side. The situation is desperate. Where should they run to? They choose Wildenwart Castle near Lake Chiemsee. But how are they to get there? The main chauffeur has defected to the revolutionaries. His backup is with his sick wife. He is summoned. The ill queen first hears of their imminent flight at her dressing table. The king lets an old valet help him into his grey hunting coat lined with possum fur, tucks a case of cigars under his arm and stands ready for departure. He is joined by princesses Helmtrud, Hildegard, Gundelinde and Wiltrud, the queen, two court dignitaries, a baroness and the lady-in-waiting. The small royal party slips out of the city under the cover of darkness.

Kurt Eisner and his stalwarts have by this time left the Mathäser beer hall and are heading towards the Bavarian parliament building in the Prannerstrasse. The labyrinthine building's night porter, clutching a large set of keys, blocks their path. He says that he refuses to let anyone inside in the middle of the night and will keep the keys to himself. A worker steps forward, taps him on the shoulder and says, "Come on, enough of your fuss! Didn't you hear the bell toll?" The bewildered porter glances at his watch to check, but the worker, growing impatient, says that he isn't interested in hearing the time from this idiot of a porter and relieves him of the bunch of keys.

The guardian of the keys stands there in dismay as the small revolutionary party sets off towards the assembly hall. The worker tries a few keys before eventually finding the one that lets them inside. Eisner makes directly, singlemindedly and with unshakeable self-assurance for the president's rostrum. At his side are Felix Fechenbach and the playwright and journalist

Wilhelm Herzog, the husband of celebrated film diva Erna Morena. Eisner has just appointed him press secretary and the new government's commissioner for press censorship.

Eisner lowers himself into the president's chair, and Fechenbach and Herzog take their places in the secretary's seats beside him. Workers stream into the hall, some of the women holding red umbrellas. "It was a picturesque scene," Herzog later recalls. Noise, excitement, whispering, shouting, expectation, disbelief and joy filled the Bavarian parliament in the middle of the night.

Kurt Eisner gazes down at all these people. He pushes back his long hair. He has stood up and, in his imminent speech, will proclaim himself the provisional minister president and declare Bavaria a free state.

For a second, though, he merely observes. Is he casting his mind back? To his early days as a writer and his first book about Friedrich Nietzsche in 1892, at a time when very few had written about this man and his philosophy? To his contestation of what he called Nietzsche's "religion of hardness", which was "anti-socialist in its misanthropy"? For Eisner, on the other hand, socialism was even then "a clear and achievable goal".

He had worked as a journalist at the Herold wire office, then as an assistant sub-editor for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, though he was driven by higher ambitions even then. Keen to review books and write leader articles, he requested a conversation with Leopold Sommermann, the renowned newspaper's founder. To no avail.

Eisner moved to the *Hessische Landeszeitung* in Marburg, wrote articles that made him a national reputation, in which he confidently scoffed at Wilhelmine politics, large landowners and the feudal system. When he scoffed a bit too confidently in early 1897, he was sent to Plötzensee jail for nine months for lèse-majesté. In his article he had written, "Give us a people of free, strict and demanding judges and we might be king ourselves."

Was he recalling those words now, as he suddenly found himself on the throne? Or was he thinking of the time after his imprisonment? Straight afterwards he had been hired by *Vorwärts*, the powerful Social Democratic Party paper. He was in charge of the Sunday supplement and wrote articles which he himself described as "Sunday chat", a mix of the private and the political about family and party.

But he had many enemies at the paper, most of them among the elite and party officials. Rosa Luxemburg, Victor Adler, Karl Kautsky and Franz Mehring branded him a dreamer, a

madman, a fantasist, a literary aesthete. Once, he was overly effusive in his praise for a speech by August Bebel, and Bebel wrote to tell him that his over-the-top praise and enthusiasm had embarrassed him. He was fired from *Vorwärts* in 1905.

Next he wrote for the *Fränkische Tagespost* and the *Münchner Post*, and he and his family moved to Munich. He had appeared increasingly regularly to speak out against the war in recent years. His own party, the SPD, supported the war, having approved the war bonds in parliament, and any refusal within its own ranks to toe this line was regarded as treachery.

This led to a schism in April 1917, when the new Independent German Social Democratic Party, the USPD, was founded in Gotha. The new party's main objectives were to end the war and regain the trust of the Internationale. Kurt Eisner had attended the inaugural party conference, repeatedly taking the floor, and was one of the leading figures in the new anti-war party.

Now the war was actually over! At long last! So had everything suddenly come true? Was art a reality? His dreams of art, which he'd presented in all his theatre reviews? His speech back then in Berlin about Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, in which he recalled, "On 18 March 1905 Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was performed, for the first time in history, in front of a proletarian beer hall audience in a working-class area of Berlin to commemorate the March Revolution and Friedrich Schiller. About three thousand people were crammed into the hot, overfilled hall – not making a sound, utterly absorbed, struggling to understand." The proletariat, he continued, had become too mature and too strong to be infantilized any longer regarding great art. "Everywhere it reaches for the heights and touches the stars." Also: "The sense of release surged up from the depths. Joy!"

He had poured all his dreams and beliefs into that text about Beethoven. Everything he believed worth fighting for. "Art is no longer a means of escaping out of and from life. It is life itself," he had cried before proclaiming his vision: "If humankind, free and mature through the struggle of proletarian socialism, is one day reared to the earthly strains of the Ninth, if it becomes the catechism of their souls, then Beethoven's art will have returned to the home from which it fled, and that home is life."

His new book, which had been completed and typeset during his imprisonment following the strike at the munitions factory, is to be entitled *Dreams of the Prophet*. Yes, Kurt Eisner is a dreamer and a prophet and he has written and fought all his life for this moment in the Bavarian parliament.

He must gather his wits. He must make a speech now. Beside him Fechenbach is somewhat agitated. Eisner isn't a good public speaker. He thinks too much and is too haphazard. He trips over his tongue in surprise at his own pathos.

But then Kurt Eisner starts to talk in clear, bold, measured terms "with a fiery temperament so that the effect of his words was apparent on everyone's faces". He speaks for twenty minutes extempore. Even the two men at his side on the secretaries' chairs are so mesmerised by the scene that they omit to take notes. Nobody takes any notes and so the revolutionary speech in which Kurt Eisner declared Bavaria a free state and himself the head of government goes undocumented.

Herzog later recalls some of his words. This is how Eisner started: "The Bavarian revolution has triumphed. It has swept away the old plunder of the Wittelsbach kings." Then he confers power on himself: "The man now speaking to you presupposes your agreement to his serving as provisional minister president." Cheers ring out from the benches below. Eisner takes it for confirmation that he is now minister president and so he continues, urging everyone to come together and refrain from violence.

When he has finished he slumps back into the president's chair, then beckons to Herzog and whispers into his ear, "We've forgotten the most important thing: the proclamation. Please draft the text – quickly – and then we'll go into a side room and look it over together."

While Wilhelm Herzog is drafting the proclamation and Eisner is dreamily contemplating his supporters, far out on the Trudingen road the royal family is driving slowly towards Rosenheim. It is so foggy that the driver can hardly make out the road ahead, and the car suddenly veers off it and gets stuck in a potato field. All attempts to get the car up and running again fail, and the king, his cigars, his wife and his daughters are unable to continue his journey. The driver sets out on foot to fetch help, leaving the royal family to wait in the field in complete darkness. At some point the chauffeur returns with some horses and a few soldiers billeted overnight at a nearby farm. He is also carrying a petroleum lamp. The sick farmer's wife he met in the farmyard didn't want to give it to him at first, but he eventually managed to buy it from her for twenty marks. The horses drag the car out of the field. It briefly threatens to get stuck on the other side of the road, but they are finally able to extract it. Cautiously and quietly they drive on through the night.

At four o'clock the next morning the family reaches Wildenwart. They had set off as the royal family, but they arrived as ordinary people.

"The Wittelsbach dynasty has been deposed," it says at the end of the proclamation Wilhelm Herzog had drafted in a room adjoining the assembly hall. He had rushed it shortly before midnight to Kurt Eisner, who read it and, to Herzog's surprise, judged it largely acceptable, wishing only to alter a couple of sentences. The order now was to take it off to the telegraph offices and newspaper editorial rooms. Eisner added by hand: "To be published on the first (front) page."

"Fellow countrymen!" was written in huge letters at the top of the page. "After years of annihilation, the people has overthrown the civilian and military authorities and taken power into its own hands. We hereby proclaim the Bavarian government."

As he gazed at the small group that was holding out in the assembly hall, did Eisner have any fleeting doubts whether these people really were "the people"? Maybe not. His joy was too great and the opportunity to realise his dreams had fallen to him too suddenly and too easily. Also, there was far too much work to do for any great reflection.

For example, all of a sudden the executive editor of the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, Munich's biggest-selling daily, comes running into the parliament building. He is denied entry. A worker carries the outraged man's business card to Eisner.

"You talk to him," says Eisner to Wilhelm Herzog. "And by the way, we don't have anyone in charge of press censorship yet. You'll take charge of that too. Immediately." He jots down on a piece of paper the new position he has dreamed up for Herzog – an impromptu duty pass for the new republic's chief censor.

Very well: Herzog accepts and hastens out to the furious editor-in-chief, who bellows that his entire publishing house and printing works have been occupied. It's a disaster. If this continued, the paper wouldn't be able to appear the next day, or not on time, which would be the first instance of that happening since it was founded in 1848.

"Well," says Herzog, "there hasn't been a revolution in Bavaria in all that time, has there? In any case, it really wouldn't be such an awful disaster if, for once in their lives, readers only found their newspaper in the letterbox at nine or ten o'clock rather than at six. At least that way people will realise that something has changed."

The chief censor is handed some copies of the proclamation. He gives one to editor-in-chief Müller, instructs him to print it and says that his paper will be able to appear as usual.

But how? His newspaper is still occupied by those ruffians wearing red brassards. However, when Müller returns to his editorial offices and printing works, he discovers that everything is running smoothly again. The revolutionaries leave them to get on with their nocturnal business.

But where are they supposed to put the proclamation at this late stage? The on-duty editor at the machines has an idea. The second page has been reserved for a full-page advertisement. He stops the machines and moves the current page one to page two, allowing the day's news to appear on the front page, in line with government orders. "To the people of Munich!" it begins, before a brief description of the night's events from the revolutionaries' perspective and the following statement: "Bavaria is henceforth a free state. A popular government, with the support and trust of the masses, will be named without delay." It continues: "A new era has dawned! Bavaria will prepare Germany for the League of Nations. The democratic and social republic of Bavaria has the moral strength to bring about peace for Germany and safeguard it from the worst."

This text is also intended to have an appeasing and calming effect on the public, stating that the workers', soldiers' and farmers' council will preserve the "most stringent public order": "The safety of people and property is guaranteed." It contains an appeal to every man and woman in Munich: "Workers and citizens of Munich! Place your trust in the great and wondrous future that is taking shape in these fateful days! Lend us your help to render this irresistible transformation swift and smooth . . . Every human life is sacred. Keep calm and join us to build a new world!" Signed by Kurt Eisner on the night of the 7th to 8th November 1918 at the Bavarian parliament.

Shortly before midnight, the Social Democrat Auer's driver had turned up at Interior Minister Brettreich's office along with the trade union secretary Schiefer. The minister had asked Auer to come and see him. Had Auer not told him that he need not fear a revolutionary uprising that day and that everything would remain quiet? A rally, some music and then everyone would go home nice and peacefully? Had he misled him? Couldn't he keep his people under control?

Brettreich has been kept well informed, of course. Auer had in fact led his calm, disciplined group back into the city in the afternoon and sent his people home. Practically nobody else was as angry as he that afternoon that the Independents and the Communists had marched with Eisner to the barracks and had then organised their pantomime election by a few yelling and tankard-waving comrades in arms and drinking companions at the Mathäser beer hall.

Now, three men stare helplessly into one another's eyes. Auer says that the government should have re-established order during the day. Brettreich says that he no longer has any influence over his people. Auer says that the government must crack down on the uprising that very night, then the workforce would take it upon themselves to safeguard law and order. The men go their separate ways. There's nothing they can do. What will happen will happen. Without them.

The revolutionaries still have much to do that night. For example, the police headquarters is still not in rebel hands. Eisner sends Fechenbach off to take care of this. And Fechenbach does take care of it: he hastens to their headquarters. It is full of policemen, standing around in small groups, chatting about the events of the previous day and night. Fechenbach's red brassard opens every door for him. He proceeds from one office to the next until he finally reaches the office of Chief of Police Rudolf von Beckh. Von Beckh has called together his heads of department to discuss the situation. Fechenbach explains to the chief of police that the councils have just assumed provisional authority and have asked von Beckh to continue to lead the security forces until further notice. A supervisory board will be appointed that night to oversee his work. Now, this very minute, however, von Beckh must sign a declaration in front of Fechenbach that he, von Beckh, will obey the councils' every order.

The chief of police requests a little thinking time. The room is completely silent, and the department heads cast awkward glances at one another. Then von Beckh makes up his mind, writes a declaration of loyalty on a piece of paper and adds, "I reserve the right to resign if I am unable to fulfil this commitment. Munich, 8 November 1918 at 1 a.m. K. von Beckh, Chief of Police."

That same night the former warehouseman and trade union secretary, and current soldiers' council member Josef Staimer is appointed to oversee von Beckh, then appointed chief of police himself the next morning.

Events seem to develop a momentum of their own during this curious night. Power simply falls into the laps of Kurt Eisner and his followers.

But who is this now, reporting to the parliament building at two in the morning and advancing to the minister president's office? A young artillery officer, red-faced and out of breath, stands in front of Eisner and says, "I am in Schleissheim with 800 men, 20 machine guns and a few howitzers, all at your disposal!" To which Eisner responds, "Quick! Bring them all here and post your men and guns outside the parliament!"

So this neglected problem too resolves itself for the time being. The troops inside the city have been completely disbanded since noon, and even though most soldiers have sided with the revolutionaries – or in any case not with the former king –, so far the new government has had not even a single operational unit under its direct command. The soldiers have simply been roaming the city or hanging around in beer cellars or at home. The men from Schleissheim would now provide a modicum of security for the first few days.

It is now three o'clock in the morning. Bavaria's new ruler Kurt Eisner, the theatre critic with the tousled mane, the man who recognised and grasped his moment of glory with such speed and determination, is tired. His friend Fechenbach has spotted a sofa in one of the meeting rooms reserved for parliamentary groups. Wilhelm Herzog and he advise the minister president to grab some sleep.

"Where?" asks Eisner. "Where the right honourable members like to sleep – on their benches?"

"No," says Fechenbach. "We've found a room with a sofa for you. You can get an hour's rest there."

He guides Eisner to the meeting room. As the people's king sinks onto the sofa he remarks, "Isn't it wonderful? We've had a revolution without a single drop of blood being spilt! That's never happened before in history."

Outside, the streets of Munich have long since fallen silent. The odd gunshot in the night. A starry sky. A drunkard staggers alone through the streets of Schwabing. "Movement! Bang! Bang! Bang!" he croaks, cloaked in night's dark mantle. "Moove-ment!" Does anyone hear him?

This man rending the silence is Oskar Maria Graf. He lost touch with events the evening before, reached the Mathäser beer hall too late and then hastened to the palace at about the same time as the king left it by a back exit.

There Graf runs into his best black-market customer, Anthony van Hoboken, a Dutchman wealthy beyond belief, to whom Graf has recently sold beef tongue, wine, butter and other rare delicacies which he himself had obtained from a shady wholesaler. Hailing from a family of bankers in Rotterdam, Hoboken (Graf refers to him simply as the “sheep-faced” Dutchman) is a booklover and an even greater music enthusiast, but best of all he loves private parties with women artists, painters and bibulous, high-spirited, eccentric writers. Graf had often been invited to stay for a drink after they had concluded their business. And Graf had always stayed to drink. Every time.

Now they spot and greet each other from afar. Graf calls out, “The glorious times are over now!” By this he actually means the Dutchman and his money, his opulence and fine living, but the Dutchman himself appears to be in the best of spirits and enormously entertained by the revolutionary mood in the city.

The lover on his arm calls out in a girlish voice, “Yes, jolly marvellous!” This radiant woman goes by the name of Marietta of Monaco. Her real name is Maria Kirndörfer. She is 25 years old, petite and was brought up by foster parents in Munich, went to a convent school, spent several years as a vagabond and came to people’s attention by chance as an elocutionist at Simplicissimus, a small pub in Schwabing. She fled to Zurich during the war and co-founded the Cabaret Voltaire, where she introduced herself with a short text entitled “Who am I?”:

I am a brightly coloured toy ball.

Posh boys roll me across the silky rug.

Children gaze at me and cuddle me.

I slip through the elegant fingers of the upper crust.

Sometimes, though, a coarse boy gives me a kick,

and I slip under their shoes into the crystal dish

of the most noble queen.

She has been back in Munich for some time, singing and reciting in Schwabing’s artistic haunts, which have now become revolutionary hangouts, and she is currently slipping through

this estimable Dutchman's fingers. People call her the "Muse of Schwabylon", and anyone who claps eyes on her succumbs to her charms.

So Marietta and the Dutchman are over the moon at the night's events, which surprises Graf, who was convinced until now that the revolution's prime targets would be bigwigs, parasites and millionaires. What woe poverty has caused him! He has also had a baby girl in June and is unhappily married – extremely unhappily married, since the very first day – to Karolina Bretting. Most of all, however, he suffered from a constant shortage of money until he struck upon the black market: "Over time money had grown into a demon ruling my life. Poets and philosophers went on and on about morals, ethics and strength of character, idealism and God-knows-what other qualities, but it was all nonsense. Ultimately, all of these qualities were secondary – money created or extinguished them. With it humans had invented something to which over time they were forced to surrender their hide with every hair attached," he later wrote.

Might this revolution not finally abolish this devilish invention? Wasn't that inevitable? So why were this sheep-faced man and his Muse of Schwabylon so overjoyed and excited?

But none of this mattered to Graf now. The old world was teetering, at last a new world was arising and the only thing on his mind was to party. He went home with the Dutchman and Marietta, and they drank and drank through the night. In the small hours Graf staggered home. The streets of Schwabing lay quiet and empty, apart from intermittent shots in the dark. The revolution was sleeping.

When Graf got home he wrote in a letter to his wife, "I can't stand you any more! I could never stand you! It was only ever false pity! Leave me be! May each of us go their own way!" Everything had burst, both in the city and inside him. Outside everything had changed; now everything within him must also change. He loves another woman. "The young lady" or occasionally "the black young lady", he calls her. Miriam Sachs. Black eyes, a gentle face, studying in Munich, originally from Berlin, a friend of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Graf wants to live with her, this black young lady. Enough lies, enough pity, enough compromises. The letter is finished. He leaps up from the table. What he has written is madness. He shreds the sheet of paper, gets into bed and falls asleep, that night's last revolutionary. Drunk. Married. Ready for this new country. This new life.