

## FOREWORD: DREAM AND REALITY

All Karinthy's writings have the violent, blinding brilliance of a spluttering Christmas sparkler. He wrote several thousand sketches, hundreds of stories, a few novels and two volumes of poetry. He experimented with literary forms and techniques: plays, philosophical studies, anecdotes, reviews, articles. But no matter what he wrote, his message was always as fresh and sensitive as the first flash of the idea which inspired it. One could say that his real medium was the idea, the instant spark.

An outline of some of his ideas is enough to show that he was among the bravest of writers. In looking at the world, his eyes always caught the cobwebs, the lies, and he wrote with the startled impatience of the man who wants to clean up everything at once.

His bitter-sweet material, his pain-killing drug, was youth: its dreams, its shining, snow-white, stain-resistant faith; the beauty, clumsiness, the splendour and the failure which is the essence of youth. Sooner or later, every writer writes about youth; but Karinthy never really leaves it alone, he comes back to it in his books again and again, to that wonderful realm which haunts one's dreams with a recurrent feeling that the best of life is past.

Just before his death, in his last book, he wrote: "All my life I had a vague feeling that I must get something done, that I should go back for it. I have left something out, and this

something is of the greatest importance . . . This nagging, urging command often came. But what was it, this thing I should have done?"

Karinthy's underlying assumption is that youth accepts no compromise. But it doesn't accept the law of gravity, either: gravity which weighs dreams and flights of the spirit down to earth. He describes things with a double vision, in such a way as to emphasize their twofold existence: the greatest matters appear minute when circumstances change; things that are sublime can be ungainly, the solemn can be clumsy and often funny. The secret of his effects of surprise is that he used both kinds of material: the dream, and always, shimmering through the dream, reality.

Some of Karinthy's notebooks were found after his death. In these he jotted down his first ideas, whenever he used one, he crossed it out at once. But even the ones which are left undeveloped are splendid as promises.

One such jotting reads: "Humour is the whole truth." This might have served as the motto for *Please Sir!*, one of the world's unforgettable, unfading books. Unfading, in spite of the fifty years which have elapsed, and in spite of a series of educational reforms. It reaches to the raw centre, the never-congealed experience, through which we have all passed at the time of our greatest sensitivity, in the state of highest tension, in our teens.

For is there anyone who has never crept along silent, deserted school corridors, when classes had already begun, who had never been struck by the dark terror of being fatally, irrevocably late? And is there anyone who does not recall the deadly, frozen silence before opening an exam paper, when the one subject not properly covered turned out to be the compulsory question? And who did not, especially in Hungarian schools where examination is carried out by oral tests, try to shrink behind his desk, become annihilated, step out from life just this once, while the teacher was rustling his notebook to call

the next to be examined? And who has never tried to explain a school report at home, and who has never been tempted to sell a textbook second-hand, at a time when pocket-money seemed far more desirable than a grammar?

These were the great moments of life; and Karinthy, even in his early work, is a grand master of prose. He does not have to set the scene—there is never a superfluous word—we are in the thick of it at once, at explosion point. Every situation he creates chokes the reader in a suddenly tightened noose of memory.

All his props are terrifyingly authentic: the unpleasant, arrogant clichés of the A— essay, and its sibling, the naive, stupid, honest C+. Last year's Natural History, too, which could be sold, if only page 178 were not missing, and if the moustache-trainer on the walrus could be rubbed out. The sense of exam funk is totally convincing, as is the relief when it is all over; the countless exculpatory lies, the compromising scrawls on the blackboard—his entire armoury of familiar objects, familiar feelings.

He never spends more than a quick line or so on anything, for the inner discipline of his narrative dictates precision. But Karinthy can evoke characters in a sentence or two—Neugebauer, the Man Who Failed, or Mr. Schwicker, who failed him . . . This is genuine sleight of hand, the inimitable dexterity of the great portrait painters, to select from a hundred facts and details the one which is eerily characteristic and completely significant, the one which reveals all. Two such masterpieces emerge when the Good Student and the Bad Student are tested.

But the author does not merely portray these stumbling, gawky, funk-ridden, eternally self-exculpatory youngsters. His dream, his ideal, is the reckless, wild, uncompromising and aspiring spirit of youth which rises to accuse his own manhood: why was I not the first to reach the South Pole, why was it not I who invented the aeroplane? why did I not lead my country to the barricades? The brightness of these regrets

shines through the jokes, the marks, the A— and C+ essays of *Please Sir!*; this longing emerges in a faint, distant glimmer. And between the lines, there is the tragic realization that the whole truth turns into humour all too easily: the brave dreams, the wild pathos, the great desires are part of real life. But when the dream is embodied, the flesh is revealed as mortal, the body is clumsy, the dream glimmers too far away and the limbs are suspended from the gymnasium bars. "Hanging from the Apparatus" is probably the finest sketch in the book.

But each story illuminates, moment by moment, the secret passage from reality into the other dimension, fantasy; and it illuminates the aching, painful closeness of the two. And during this illumination, his humour releases our ingrained fears in sly, wicked laughter.

*Endre Illés*

I stole into the building across the yard. It must be around half past nine: the passages now ring empty and deserted, only now and then, as I pass each closed door, do my ears catch a low humming, and all of a sudden my heart sinks deep inside me and very seriously. On the second floor, to the right, next to the common room, is the classroom of 6b, its door thrown open to let in a little fresh air. I take off my hat and thrusting it in my pocket, I warily slink through the door, bowing towards the teacher's desk while looking the other way, and creep noiselessly to the back of the room, where, in the back row, next to the stove, there is an empty seat. The master never looked towards me, so it's all right. He dismissed the whole interruption with a wave of his hand, thinking that I belong to this class: he is apparently under the impression that I am the boy who went out five minutes ago. Noiselessly, I walk round the spittoon and the litter-bin. I step over half a bread-roll, and turning carefully, I sit down in the last desk. A sandy-haired, freckled boy is sitting next to me—Why, yes! Oh, yes! I nearly cry out loud with joy and surprise and happiness: Why, it's Büchner! What-ho, Büchner! Lord, what an inconceivably long time since I last saw him! The places I have seen, the horrible dreams I have had, all this time. But now I'm home again, back in good, old genuine Reality, my own real life, which I had left so reluctantly. Ah, I'm home again: this

is me—Frigyes Karinthy, of Form 6b. Why, of course, what a silly dream I've had, to be sure. Suddenly, all the familiar smells come back to me. I am trembling as I reach into my desk and pull out an exercise-book. For a moment it seems as if my eyes were playing tricks on me, but then I read distinctly—my name—then '6h' and—'Hungarian Exercises'.

"Ah, Büchner, my old friend: How are you, dear carrot-tops?" Büchner gives me a somewhat puzzled look. He can see no reason, he means to say, why I should be so happy. Well, and how could he? Psht! he says, with a shove in my ribs and an angry sidelong look. Why, of course: here I am, making all this racket when there's this oral test going on in front of the blackboard—"Who are the fellows being questioned? Ah, it's Steinmann and Bódog."—and *he* is going to smart for it. But I say, Büchner, old top—Why, I can't restrain my delight, don't you see. Büchner says he can't understand how anyone can be such a bloody fool, he says. Why on earth are you grinning like a lunatic, you know very well he's got it in for *me*, and now he believes it's *me* fooling around and that's what you're finding so ruddy funny. Why can't you keep quiet, anyway? Psht! Not so loud!

Now listen, Büchner, old pal—I've had such a stupid dream, and I'm now so damn glad to realise it's been only a dream. I dreamed that I was no longer sixteen, and many years had passed and all kinds of muddled and messy things happened, you know, and it all turned out quite different from the way I now picture to it. You know I dreamed that I'd passed my finals—just imagine! ("And you're *happy* it was just a dream, you blinking idiot? I wish to goodness I'd got over it already!")—Well, as I said, I'd passed my finals and entered the School of Life, which Mr. Lenkei talks so much about. Now, I can't tell you exactly how many classes of the School of Life I had passed but it had very many, I'm sure, and it was ("Psht! Don't shout! He may look this way and call me. He'll do that, the way he's picking on me.")—Well so, so it

was that I'd turned twenty-seven and happened to be sitting in a café and was not feeling at all happy—fancy that! To think how I've longed to be twenty-seven lately . . . Well, as I said, I was sitting in a café, and I *had* become a writer, as I've been wanting to become one, and I'd published lots of books, and knew Sándor Bródy personally, and would be chatting with Ferenc Molnár like anything, and be mobbed for autographs and all that; and yet—just imagine—in spite of all that, I wasn't happy. Isn't that strange? In short, it turned out that once you'd put the final exam behind you, things weren't getting as good as you'd figured they would be. Now, as I was sitting in that café—it was raining and everything looked sad and gloomy—then and there, in my dream, I started thinking about things, and it occurred to me that it was just not possible that I was twenty-seven and that everything was working out the way it did. And then, in a flash, it all came back to me about my class and I remembered that, as a matter of fact, I had plenty of work to do: I was supposed to do the figure for geometry, brush up the history, and meanwhile I've got to think of my future—the future, which would be just wonderful, since, after all, I was still only sixteen. In short, having carefully considered all things, it became quite clear to me that I must have been dreaming and moreover the dream I was seeing was not a beautiful and glorious dream, but a rather unpleasant and imperfect one. It then occurred to me that the best thing for me to do was to try hard and wake up and go through the geometry and then come to school. I pressed my head against the rain-splashed window and made up my mind that I would look at my real life, here in the secondary school, and see it in quite a different light. I would not think of it as all that miserable any longer, full of boredom, and depressing, but I would keep my eyes open to discover in it all that is amusing and fun, pleasant memories and being young and that I would take a better look than ever before at everything that I can now see clearly from the distance of time,

and would once again show it to you, dear friends, pupils in various Secondary Schools, and remind you how colourful and weird and alive it all is, how full of memories, and full of hope.

(1913)