

German Short Stories of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Karlchen (1882-1939)

From *Fräulein Tugendschön, die edle Gouvernante: Parodie auf einen Backfisch-Roman, und andere Humoresken* [Miss Virtuously-Beautiful, the Noble Governess: Parody of a Teenage Girl Novel, and other Humorous Stories] 6th ed. Munich, 1909.

Letitia

“He’s outside again!” the maid announced, and she bit her lip so as not to explode with laughter.

I started up from my desk. “That’s really rather strong! Didn’t you tell the fellow I’m not at home?”

“Of course I told him.”

“And?”

“He replied that you should have come up with a better excuse by now. The same evasion for eight consecutive days, that was really unworthy of a writer!”

Now that was a bit much! What a pushy beggar!

I paced angrily up and down the room and considered if I should not admit him after all. I would have given him a hearing right away, on the first day, if he had stated what he actually wanted. But he would not reveal that to the maid. He had to speak to me in person.

“What does the man look like, Anna? Respectable?”

“Alright. Sort of like you!”

“Then – hmm – show him in!”

An elegant young man entered. In his right hand, a walking stick with a silver handle; in his left, a lighted cigar.

“My name is Winkel. Oscar Winkel!” he introduced himself.

“Look here, dear Sir,” I said, “do you always pay your visits with a lighted cigar, or is this a special distinction just for me?”

He smiled. “I thought you would not offer me a cigarette –”

“You thought dead right!”

What impertinence! The man really could have had his impudence patented.

“You are now thinking, I do not doubt, that I am a truly impertinent customer?” he inquired pleasantly.

“No particularly keen perception was required to divine that, Mr. Winkel! It may perhaps interest you to hear that it is my intention to grab you by the collar in five minutes at the latest and throw you out.”

“Oh no, that holds no particular interest for me! It is moreover a delusion that you will do that. Hospitality was sacred even to the ancient Germans.”

“I am no ancient German! Will you now finally confide to me what gives me the displeasure of your visit?”

“Willingly! I have been waiting all this while for you to ask me. You see, my time is somewhat limited.”

“Thank God! If you wish to go *immediately* – I shall place no obstacle in your path!”

“Very kind! So listen: I come from Letitia!”

“I do not know the lady.”

“Nor do I!” he laughed. “She is not a lady at all. Letitia is a Ltd.”

“Really? I am so happy to hear that!” I pulled out my watch and said:

“Two minutes are already over!”

“You have a lovely watch there! Is the gold genuine? Then they will give you at least thirty marks for it in the pawn-shop. I know my onions. – Tell me, you haven’t written a stage play, have you?”

“I have absolutely no thoughts of doing that.”

“Then you *will* write one!”

“Perhaps! If a good idea occurs to me!”

“Since when does one need an idea to write plays? I did not expect such old-fashioned views from you! Up to now, you gave me the impression of being very intelligent!”

“Three minutes have gone by!” I stated. “Take care!”

He smiled. “Do you have an ashtray?” he asked. “I would not like to ruin your carpet! – Thank you very much! – So, let us assume that you write a play –”

“If you like! Let us assume that!”

I moved closer. The fellow was beginning to interest me. It is human nature to talk shop.

“Your play is performed –”

“That would be most desirable!”

“From your point of view, at least! It is performed and is of course a flop!”

“I do *not* see that natural necessity!”

“Authors never do! You will come to this realisation after ten years at the earliest!”

“Four minutes!”

“Do put your watch away! I shall know myself when the half-hour I propose to devote to you will be over! We were just at the point where your play flopped. Miserably and dismally. A young man with artistic sense even had to go to the doctor’s because he hurt his lips with whistling so much on his house-key. He will of course sue you for compensation and damages!”

“I note that you are still here, Mr. Winkel!”

“An impression which I had already received! By the way, I completely understand your impatience: one cannot expect anyone to be in a good mood when his play flopped but two minutes before. You, with your being so inherently nervous, are deeply depressed by this failure!”

“I am not in the least nervous! But *you* are beginning to get on my nerves!”

“Do not worry yourself about that: it does not harm my health at all! But let us keep to the point: You are in despair, you are tearing your hair out – a very bad habit, by the by –, you are raving and screaming: ‘I worked on this damned play for a whole year, and all that effort was in vain! The play won’t bring me two hundred marks! I could go out of my mind!’ You cry out these and similar improbabilities! And then Letitia comforts you!”

“Perhaps you may decide in the course of this century to actually explain to me who and what this ‘Letitia’ is?”

“I am just about to. ‘*Letitia*’ is *an insurance company against flops!*”

“What? Insurance against flops?”

“Perfectly correct. Your hearing is really good. It would be nice if you were to give me the opportunity to ascertain if your cigars are likewise!”

“Here you are!” I offered him my cigar-case.

“Thank you very much! Please feel free to smoke also! That does not disturb me! – You thought it strange that I founded an insurance company against theatrical flops? I consider the company to be merely a necessity for our times. You see, we have insurance companies against fire damage, accidents, illness, unemployment, motherhood and so on. A man can insure himself against all the unfortunate accidents of life. So why not also against a theatrical flop?”

“So do you take something like that to be an *accident*?”

“Up to a certain degree, yes! The most accomplished play can fail for a hundred reasons, which have nothing to do with the quality of the work. For example: an actor has a memory lapse in one of the main scenes; or the public is distracted owing to some sensational event of that day.”

“But then critics would praise the play!” I objected.

“The author cannot live on that! It is the opinion of the public which is decisive, not that of critics!”

“Alas!”

“Thank God!”

“Let us not argue that point. – What are the conditions of your insurance?”

“Very simple and convenient! As soon as we read in the newspaper that a play has been accepted for performance, we call on the author and make him the following offer: If your play flops, we pay you two thousand marks compensation. If your play is a success, we pay nothing, but rather

receive from you ten percent of the royalties of every performance in Germany. The contract is valid for thirty years. Is that not philanthropic? In this way, the author is assured of a reward for his work in all circumstances; he either receives his royalties or he has our two thousand marks. *He* is helped – and so are we. For we of course make deals only with people whose play we consider to be accomplished, or who, we are convinced, will write a successful work one day in the future!”

“A very self-centred Maecenatism!”¹

“Every Maecenatism is an insurance. Or shall we say: a lottery.”

“And does ‘Letitia’ pay?”

“Splendidly! A single resounding success compensates us for twenty flops! You would be amazed were I to tell you the names of the candidates for our insurance! Well, do you have any desire to join us?”

“I have not written a play yet, as I’ve told you already!”

“What is not can come to be. In any case, I shall leave you our prospectus here. Please convey my respects to everyone in northern Schwabing!”²

He rose to his feet and pressed a prospectus into my hand.

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When I awoke, my right hand was holding the comedy which a friend had sent me with the request that I check it, and during the perusal of which I had dozed off.

¹ Patronage of the arts.

² Schwabing is Munich’s Bohemian quarter.

Pastoral

“Miss!”

“Madam?”

“ I have a terrible headache. You may have my seat at the concert this evening. It is impossible for me to go!”

“Thank you very much, Madam!”

“But make sure you are back by ten o’clock at the latest. You hear?”

“Certainly, Madam!”

“And put Elsie to bed first! Here is the ticket!”

“Thank you very much, Madam!”

While the governess hurried up the stairs to her room, she cast a glance at the ticket. First stall, second row. So she would have to put on her white dress, even though it was pouring with rain. She would also have to do her hair carefully – what a shame, now she would arrive far too late.

“My God,” she thought as she made her toilet, “I’m really not beautifying myself for *my own* sake. At my forty-five years, I am past such puerilities. But one must appear in one’s finery for such a distinguished seat. I must not disgrace Madam. – How long is it actually since I last went to a concert? It must be a good five years. Previously, when I was still at the bank manager’s, I often went to the concert-hall or the theatre. I had to accompany his grown-up daughter. But now... I should not have accepted a position with a six-year-old girl, however much I love the little one. Curious, how the older I grow, the kinder I can be to children...”

So! – now quickly on with the earrings – they glitter as if they were real – and down to Elsie.

“Why Miss, you’re beautiful today!”

“Yes, Elsie, I’m going to a concert. Come, be a good girl while I undress you!”

“But you should stay with *me!*”

“Tomorrow, my darling! Look, you’re already in your nightshirt! Now I’ll lift you into bed –”

“I can climb in by myself!”

“That’s fine too! And now, pray nicely!”

Elsie folded her hands and prayed. The governess absent-mindedly gave her the goodnight kiss. She looked surreptitiously at her watch: already quarter past eight. She turned out the light.

“Hey, Miss!”

“Yes, Elsie?”

“Tell me a story!”

“But, dear child –”

“Only a very short one! Please, please, Miss!”

The governess told her the story of Snow-White and Rose-Red.

“Goodnight, Miss!”

“Goodnight, Elsie!”

She hurriedly put on her hat, threw on her coat, took the umbrella and ran to the nearest tram-stop.

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“Sorry, Madam, no-one is allowed to enter during the piano-concert! You will have to wait until the symphony begins! Your ticket, please!”

After the hall attendant saw her ticket, he became more gallant. He

offered her a chair. “The piece will be finished any moment now!”

She sat down and tried to listen to the music. But the notes sounded too confused.

The hall attendant chatted with the cloakroom girl, who yawned wearily. There were only a few emergency lamps burning in the hallway now, dimly and stuffily. “You may enter in a moment, Madam!”

Loud applause rang out from inside, the doors were opened, the governess walked in. She walked uncertainly through the brightly-lit hall. She had the feeling of being out of place in this fashionable society. Could everyone not tell by looking at her that she had received her ticket as a gift?

In front of her sat an elegant lady in a very low-cut dress, who was conversing with her tail-coated neighbour.

“Thank God that they’re playing the Sixth today!” said the gentleman. “Never anything other than C minor, I’ve had it up to here!”³

“The Sixth is my favourite too!” replied the lady. “The Ninth is *too* interminable for me!”

Then the conductor walked to his rostrum, raised his baton, tapped it lightly, and signalled the orchestra to come in.

“He conducts from memory!” whispered the lady.

Psst! –

... Through forests and meadows rolled the coach. The master contentedly smoked a cigarette and Madam sat beside him fanning herself

³ Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6 in F major, the Pastoral Symphony. He is notable for using C minor more than other composers – most notably in his Fifth Symphony.

cool with a pearl-studded fan. Opposite them, Elsie and the governess. How the girl's golden hair flashed in the sun!

"Oh look, Miss, those people in the field! What are they doing?"

"They are sowing grain, which bread will be made from."

"And cakes too?"

"Certainly, Elsie, cakes too!"

"They are good people," Elsie declared with satisfaction.

"Hey, Mama!"

"Yes, what is it now?"

"Are we nearly there?"

"In quarter of an hour!"

Elsie fell silent and snuggled more closely into the governess. She was thrilled. For the first time, she had been allowed to come along on the summer holiday. Never before had she been in a coach for so long a time. And even Papa was with them!

"Look, Miss, all the flowers! So many! Will you pick some for me when we're there?"

"Yes, a whole handful!"

"May I pick some too?"

"If you do not make yourself dirty, and Mama allows it."

"Will you allow it, Mama?"

"But yes! Now pray do not ask so much!"

The coach stopped in front of the summer villa. Peter leapt down from the coachman's seat and opened the coach-door. The master and mistress alighted, and the governess lifted Elise down from the coach.

They entered the house. The servants had arrived on the previous day and made everything ready.

“Miss,” said Madam, “your and Elsie’s rooms are on the second floor! Wash the girl! We take tea at five!”

“Very good, Madam!”

“I want to be on the balcony!” demanded Elsie when they were in her room.

“But do not lean too far over!”

“Miss, what houses are those down there?”

“That is the village where the people live whom you saw in the field earlier.”

“Oh, what a big forest! Is the lake deep?”

“Very, very deep!”

The girl wrapped her arms around the governess’s neck and kissed her.

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Bravo! Excellent!

The conductor bowed with a smile.

“A frightful heat!” said the lady with the plunging neckline.

“Hardly bearable!” the gentleman confirmed. “If it wasn’t Beethoven, I’d go to the bar!”

Psst!

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The governess walked along by the stream until she came to a small glade. There she sat down.

Deep silence all around. Only the stream splashing softly, very softly. The governess dreamily followed the little white clouds with her eyes. To be able to die here, she thought.

Then there was the sound of a deep sigh beside her, a hand timidly grasped hers. As swift as lightning, she turned her head. She looked into a pale, imploring face.

“Paul!” she was about to cry out, but when she saw his sad, dark eyes, she lowered her voice. “Paul,” she said, trembling, “so you have found the way back to me after all.”

“Don’t speak of the past!” he pleaded fervently. “I have paid dearly for the wrong I did you. Do you still love me?”

She smiled silently.

Softly splashed the stream. On a beech-tree, a finch began to chirp brightly. They listened to it, hand in hand, without words, blissfully happy.

All the long, lonely years were forgotten. They were young again.

“I love you!” breathed the wind as it played with the fragrant leaves.

“I love you!” said the stream, audible only to their ears.

“I love you!” chirped the finch, coquettishly making his feathers shimmer in the rays of the sun.

“Do you hear the cuckoo?” asked Paul.

She nodded; and their lips sought each other.

All was well again.

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“Yes, you know, Mottl is really the tops! Phenomenal fellow!”

remarked the tail-coated gentleman. “The way in which he gets all that out

of the orchestra! Fabulous!”

“The tempo dragged a bit!” said the lady. “Don’t you think so too?”

“Mottl always drags! But –”

Psst!

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From the distance came the sound of country-dance music. Paul conducted her to the dancing ground. The musicians sat under a chestnut tree and blew and fiddled with a zest that was a joy to behold.

“Only one dance!” she asked. “It is so long since I last danced.” He consented with a smile.

“How supply she dances!” he thought.

“How I love you!” her eyes beamed.

Sheet lightning flashed in the sky. The first raindrops fell. “There’s more on the way!” said one of the country lads, and he looked searchingly up at the sky.

The musicians struck up a new dance.

Suddenly the storm broke. Everyone rushed into the inn’s parlour in wild flight. The innkeeper and the waitresses hastily gathered up the glasses and plates. The musicians sedately packed up their instruments.

Flash after flash, thunderclap after thunderclap. A cloudburst.

The two of them stood under the sheltering branches of the chestnut-tree.

“Are you afraid?”

“No! Not with you!” But she trembled at every flash of lightning all the same.

Slowly the storm subsided. The clouds parted, the sun emerged once more from her grey hiding-place.

“Let us take a little walk through the fields!” he suggested. “The air is cool and refreshing. The rain has done the land good.”

Arm in arm they strolled up the hill. The sandy ground had greedily soaked up the wetness, they walked almost dryshod.

“Hark!” she said, stopping to listen. From over the meadows sounded the song of a shawm.

“It shall be our wedding song!” he said tenderly.

They stood there, for a long time, in silence, until the last note of the shawm had faded away...

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No sooner had the governess taken off her hat and coat than Madam rang for her. She hurried downstairs.

“Yes, Madam?”

“I expressly told you to be back by ten o’clock! It is now a quarter to eleven! Kindly comply with my orders!”

“Forgive me, Madam! It lasted so long!”

“Then you should simply have left earlier! When I give you a ticket, you must not abuse my kindness right away. Next time, I shall throw the ticket into the stove sooner than give it to you!”

“Madam...” stammered the governess.

“Do not keep giving me pointless answers! I have been waiting for you for an hour! Go into the kitchen and make me a cup of tea! The cook has already gone to bed!”

Klopstock & Co.

When my cousin Elsa had grown too old for school but was still too young for marriage, my aunt decided to send the little miss to a boarding school. And specifically one in Geneva, because it is fashionable. This decision is to blame for my falling out with my aunt for all eternity. I first made her jumpy with my stubborn assertion that Geneva lay on Lake Geneva, whereas all educated people say “Lac Léman.” I sank all the way down to the level of a robber-murderer in my dear aunt’s estimation at a tea-party, when, upon her remarking that “Elsie is at present in Genève!” I politely interrupted, “I thought she was in Geneva?” But the point of final disinheritance, curses into the third generation, together with all the other usual wishes made in families, was reached with my question, which admittedly bespoke great brutality of soul, if Elsie knew how to make coffee. Such an impertinent expectation is more insulting to an unmarried young lady, according to modern notions, than if I had asked: “Does Elsie have any children yet?”

So I have fallen out with my aunt. I may not send her my books any longer, I may not buy her flowers for her birthday or give her presents for Christmas any more. In this way does she punish me, severely but justly.

Shortly afterwards, I incurred Elsie’s lasting contempt:

Elsie had returned “on holiday” from the boarding-school in Geneva. She had become a lady. She had learned how to give a “sophisticated” laugh, when and how to blush, how to eat whipped cream, and how to follow handsome lieutenants with one’s eyes. She had furthermore learned as much French and English as is required to make oneself understood in

Germany. Of Bismarck, she knew his birthday, his year of death, and that he had a dog. Of Wagner, she knew that it is not Val-KY-rie but VAL-ky-rie, and that a ticket for Bayreuth costs twenty marks. To make her education complete, she ended up in possession of a lock of Kainz's hair and Weingartner's⁴ autograph.

In spite of all these bad habits, I would have continued to associate with Elsie on a friendly footing – if she had not also learned the History of Literature at Geneva. I have always wished to see, one day, such a person as teaches literature in a Geneva boarding school. I have seen the Chamber of Horrors in Castan's Panopticum,⁵ I have had a look at the Man with the Iron Skull at Barnum and Bailey's, I have visited the Lion Man at the Oktoberfest, but never yet have I set eyes on the Genevan Abnormality which interests me so greatly. And I would so like to take its pulse and inquire if the disease was inherited or self-acquired.

Several days after she came back under the wings – sorry – under the pinions of her mother, Elsie visited me at my apartment. Once she had finished heaping reproaches upon my head for never writing her any picture postcards, and expressing disapproval of my moustache in the bitterest terms, she walked over to my bookshelf and surveyed it with a critical eye. I watched her with amusement. At first she took out a volume of Zola, but as it was not illustrated she immediately put it back. Then she

⁴ Josef Kainz (1858-1910), Austro-Hungarian actor, one of the greatest and most influential of his generation. Felix Weingartner (1863-1942), Austrian conductor and composer.

⁵ A waxworks museum in Berlin (1869-1922) founded by the Castan brothers, Louis (1828-1908) and Gustave (1836-1899).

tapped a finger on the “History of Socialism” and asked: “Is this nice?”

“Very!” I replied. “But unfortunately, boy doesn’t get girl in the final chapter!”

She continued to survey the library and finally turned to me with the reproach-laden question: “You don’t have any Klopstock?”

I got a shock. How did Elsie come to think of Klopstock? The Genevan Abnormality was surely to blame!

“And why should I have some Klopstock, Elsie?”

She seemed to have been waiting for this question. “Because with Klopstock, a new Spring of German Literature began. He was born at Quedlinburg on July the 2nd, 1724. In his language, the spirit of Classical Antiquity was married to that of Modernity; he himself was married twice. His ‘Messiah’ is the most significant religious epic which we Germans possess.”

She looked at me in triumph.

I was crushed. But I rallied and ventured to remark: “The ‘Messiah’ is the most boring book I know! In it, the spirit of insupportable bombast is married to that of the most tedious pathos! Twice in my life, I have begun, with utter repugnance, to read the ‘Messiah.’ It is impossible. I would rather let myself be beaten to death! If I were cast up on a remote island in the Pacific Ocean, and, after twenty years of being deprived of books and magazines, I came upon a copy of the ‘Messiah’ while digging for roots, I would instantly bury it again with abhorrence!”

Elsie was appalled. “Tastes differ!” she sneered. (The good little creature probably thought I really believed that *she* had read the ‘Messiah’

to the end!) “The Messiah means to us Germans what Tasso’s ‘Liberated Jerusalem’ means to the Italian people!”

Now I was in a proper pickle! O you beautiful, green literature lessons!⁶

“Tasso? Is he so significant, Elsie?”

The look she threw at me was inherited from her mother. It was the same look that hit me when I said “Lake Geneva” instead of “Lac Léman.”

“Torquato Tasso,” she began, “first saw the light of day on March the 11th, 1544 at Sorrento. The events in Goethe’s drama of the same name are unhistorical. He died insane –”

“What?” I cried out. “Goethe died insane?”

“But no, Torquato Tasso! Tasso’s verses have a truly musical beauty. He surpassed in depth everything that the Petrarchists brought forth. His principal work, ‘Liberated Jerusalem,’ is a masterpiece of its genre, because of both the noble treatment of its subject matter and the genuinely poetic diction.”

“I thank you, dear Elsie, for having filled in these gaps in my knowledge. Mind you, the title of the work was already known to me; I even know that it is called ‘Gerusalemme liberata’ in Italian.”

Elsie began to regard me as a human being again.

Unfortunately, however, I forfeited this distinction when I continued: “At the time when I had the measles, I accomplished the trick of working

⁶ Perhaps an allusion to “O schöner, grüner Wald” (O beautiful, green forest), the 2nd line of Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff’s (1788-1857) poem ‘Abschied’ [Farewell], first published in 1815.

my way through two cantos of 'Liberated Jerusalem.' But then I chose rather to take opium again, because I consider this to be a more painless soporific. I later liberated myself from this Jerusalem by disposing of it at a second-hand bookseller's!"

Now she was incensed in earnest. "Your taste is simply utterly degenerate! The Italians are the undisputed masters of the epic. I need only name such names as Ariosto, Dante –"

"Stop! Dante!" I interrupted. "He is sold in plaster of Paris so often nowadays! What was it exactly that he invented?"

What I had wished for, happened. Irritated, she let fly:

"Dante Alighieri, one of the most profound poets and philosophers of all ages and peoples, was born in Florence in 1265. An ideal love drew him to Beatrice, after whose death he married Gemma dei Donati. His most immortal work is the 'Divina Commedia.' Like no other poet, Dante immersed himself in all the depths of mediaeval scholasticism and was even able to make full use of the subtlest questions of Thomist philosophy!"

"Bravo, Elsie! Well done! But as you yourself very correctly remarked earlier that tastes differ, I may perhaps state that reading Dante always calls to my mind the image of the Sahara Desert, which is said in the descriptions of reliable travellers to likewise be remarkable for its dreariness! From a sense of duty, I read the entire 'Inferno' with howling and gnashing of teeth, I also burnt my fingers on the first cantos of 'Purgatory,' but the delights of 'Paradise' I ultimately renounced! I find a humorous story by Mark Twain much more enjoyable than all the –"

I could spare myself the remainder of my talk. Elsie had left me with the utmost contempt.

Since then, I have fallen out with *her* as well. She considers me to be an utterly uncultured person. She has returned to Lac Léman and presently embellishes Geneva.

Whereas I am trying to delve into the question: Does Elsie stand alone, or are there yet *more* hypocrites of her type? Does the p.p.⁷ reader know some – or has he never looked in the mirror? - - -

⁷ Per procuracionem = by proxy.