



## Introduction

Anyone who has read her other books (*Gilgi, One of Us; The Artificial Silk Girl; After Midnight; and Child of All Nations*) will know Irmgard Keun (1905–82) to be an original: a witty, fearless, and unpredictable writer of the Weimar and exile periods. The last novel she published, *Ferdinand, the Man with the Kind Heart*, is a book from a unique circumstance, an underlit time, and an important place: 1950, the year after the division of Germany (until then under the jurisdiction of the four Allied powers: Russia, France, Britain, and the United States) was made official and permanent, with the proclamation of the two rival nations of West and East Germany (the former Russian sector). As Keun puts it, with her typical, unmistakable dryness, ‘Our former unlamented German dictatorship has, in the way of lower life-forms, procreated by simple fission, and is now called democracy.’ Imagine a novel about the very early days of the *Wirtschaftswunder* by the wise cynic and author of *Candide*, Voltaire, and you have *Ferdinand, the Man with the Kind Heart*.

*Ferdinand* is a book where things have been codified or heralded or announced – the rival republics, the oft-invoked currency reform, the beginnings of prosperity – but are yet to happen properly. It is a book of ironic healing, false growth, and improvised hopes; where a stupidly contrived tabloid unreality offers distraction to the plenty seeking it (‘Man seeks divorce after wife abandons him in bowl of unsalted spinach’);

a cocktail of fear and avidity and nosiness and absurdity; of 'New Look', and repurposed coats, and kerchiefs for hats, and where the whole idea of genders and hierarchies and careers and households is yet to be re-established. Where all the characters – and the author too, one might guess – were chancers, running around in a state of shock lit by flashbacks and addled by official optimism. 'He informed me that he had changed horses and was now a law student.' Conditions are still soft, mutable, adaptive, evolving. A social-Darwinian moment for the upwardly mobile fish to acquire legs. The endearingly slow Ferdinand, getting his marching orders, is apologetically rejected as 'a man for abnormal times'.

But full legality, normality, remain a ways off. Production and consumption are both in their infancy. No one here follows a useful or a respectable calling. The atmosphere remains conditioned by crime and the memory of crime: 'Insatiable and obsessed, my forget-me-not-blue mother-in-law went on the prowl, and snaffled among other things a sewing machine, various typewriters, four rugs, seventeen eggcups, a gilt frame, a bombproof door, a poultry cage, and a pompous drawing-room painting depicting a voluptuous woman lying prone in pink, puffy nudity, a blue moth teetering on the end of her pink index finger, and the whole thing somehow casual.' No one in this book lives in a house, has a regular family, a job, a budget, a plan. (Or else they have too many plans.) They are urgent and primitive in their biological needs, which are principally for terrible drink, even worse cigarettes, and one another. Where the Victorian novel aspires to stability and marriage, *Ferdinand* deals in the provisional, in pashes and penury. It is an anti-romance (our hero finally succeeds in shaking off his fiancée, and lands up in his sleeping mother's hotel bedroom, with her alert dachshund and two whimsically adopted black children, referred to as Negroes, but that was the style of the fifties, and

there's not the least malice in Keun, never mind anything like racist feeling) and an anti-*Entwicklungsroman* (he ends, our unhappy veteran of war and peace, having learned little or nothing, if anything rather behind where he began). 'I feel so deep-frozen,' he muses, and we with him; 'I wonder if I'll ever thaw out in this life.' The moment it is all set in, though, is precious and fleeting, the cultural equivalent of the predawn evoked in the words of Ferdinand's cousin Johanna, the great free spirit of the book. 'Look at that, Ferdinand – see the sky on fire! It's the sunrise. In an hour's time the first bailiff will be here.'

– M. H.



*Ferdinand, the Man with the Kind Heart*



## *I Have an Article to Write*

I am puzzled each time anyone supposes I have money. It began with the pickpocket. The most recent instance was Heinrich, who couldn't believe I wanted an advance for the article he wanted me to write.

I have never written an article in my life, but Heinrich was insistent, and I don't like to say no. For the past week, Heinrich has been the editor of an apolitical weekly paper called *Red Dawn*, and he is a mild and blameless person.

With my fifty marks, I bought a pack of Belgian cigarettes and a bottle of Moselle and settled down in my room to compose. Frau Stabhorn, my landlady, supported my efforts with a stub of pencil and the tattered exercise book of one of her grandchildren. Now the paper is willing, but the spirit is weak. What on earth am I going to write?

The Moselle tastes as flaccid and murky as the decayed philanthropy of an unhappily married vintner. The Belgian cigarettes taste of rancid hay. I wasn't in Belgium during the war and have never harmed a hair on the head of any Belgian. In the event that these Belgian cigarettes don't constitute collective punishment but some individual act of revenge, then it seems to me this is another case of the wrong person catching it. A grey melancholy lames my mind. And there I was, promising myself stimulation through the use of . . . stimulants.

My room at Frau Stabhorn's – Emmy Stabhorn, née Baske,



widow – isn't a proper room at all, but the passageway between her kitchen–living room and her bedroom. It has the feeling of a stretch coffin. The kitchen door was purloined during the last month of the war by the neighbor, Lydia Krake, and chopped up for firewood. Said Lydia straightaway came under suspicion, and this was duly confirmed by the one-eyed seer on Engelbertstrasse. In spite of which Lydia Krake and Frau Stabhorn remained on-again, off-again besties.

Prior to the currency reform,\* they were both engaged in diverse black-market schemes, which they pursued with the nervous tenacity that imparts the fiery gleam of sexual sunset to the financial machinations of aging ladies.

Lydia Krake was the occasional supplier of fresh meat whose provenance remained, at least as far as I was concerned, obscure and unexplained. I was trusted, but never let into the secret. To be more precise, I wasn't taken seriously.

Because I was hungry, I was offered some of the meat. Probably it was so that they might see how its consumption would affect the human organism. Acts of impulsive charity were not in the nature of Frau Krake or Frau Stabhorn. The meat perked me up and seemed to do me no harm. It wasn't a varietal I had previously encountered. Perhaps it came from exotic animals that had perished in one of the zoos. I only hope it wasn't human. Eating human flesh carries adverse long-term consequences.

The one-eyed seer was also involved in the trade, till one day found him in ugly opposition to the ladies. To their profound satisfaction he had to go to prison later for falsification of ration cards. On the day of his arrest, his two antagonists were all sweetness and light. They laid cards for each other, a wistful return to the habits of their fortune-telling mothers. Shortly afterwards, though, they were once more sundered, this time

\* Of 20 and 21 June 1948.

over a mild-mannered theology-student-cum-spiv, to whom Frau Stabhorn had given a hundred elastic corsets on commission. Lydia Krake had sunk some of her precious capital in the corsets. The theology student vanished without trace. God knows what he did with the corsets. Not long ago I ran into him outside a stall that sold potato pancakes. He informed me that he had changed horses and was now a law student.

The little Stabhorns stream into the kitchen through the door that isn't a door. They like to swing on the sticky curtain that separates my room from their grandmother's bedroom. At night, I hear Frau Stabhorn snoring. By day, the curtain gives way every two or three hours. It is among my tasks to reattach it.

The ceiling of my room is all holes. The house suffers from age and natural decay. It's like a gouty pensioner, who has no more reason to shave or smell nice. Even in its youth, it won't have had much in the way of charm. No traces persist of one-time beauty – not like the old ladies in fin-de-siècle novels. What it does bear are traces of bomb damage.

I have tried several times to plaster over the holes in the ceiling. Probably the plaster is no good, because it keeps falling out – to the delight of the children, who use it to mark hopscotch boxes on the floor.

The Stabhorn family consists of Frau Stabhorn and numerous grandchildren. From time to time various daughters and sons-in-law appear, to greet the existing children with noisy affection and drop off another one. The Stabhorn breed is vigorous and prolific.

I know that a dislike of children exposes one to the horrified contempt of all political parties and the main religious and atheistical philosophies. Children are the bonny little blossoms in the moldering garden of life. As I write, a couple of the bonny little blossoms are trying to spread a mixture of jam and plaster of Paris all over my arms and legs.

Among other things, Frau Stabhorn dealt in illicit jam. One of her sons-in-law seems to be sitting on the source of an inexhaustible supply of it. There are buckets of it all over, the whole flat is sticky with it. After the currency reform, the flood of jam dried up for a while. Jammy traces on furniture and infants started to congeal and lost some of their stickiness. But now things are as they were. Jam everywhere. A sweet, red, toxic jam. A decidedly malignant jam, the enjoyment of which is followed by repentance.

If it looked anything like it tasted, the jam would have to be green – a lurid poison green like absinthe, or maybe turquoise with a contrary touch of purple, like the nightmare vision of one of those degenerate painters.

You're prepared to eat many things if you're hungry, but I think for myself that if this jam were green instead of red I wouldn't be able to get it down. Though, actually, why not? What's wrong with a blue tomato? Or a lemon-yellow veal chop? Isn't it all acculturation and biological conservatism? I wonder how many more prejudices I'd find myself guilty of if I thought seriously?

At this point, I could write either a forensic disquisition or a surrealist elegy on jam. But I think Heinrich would say his readers weren't interested in anything so depressing. Or I'd have to turn the jam story into something incomprehensible, like late Hölderlin or early Rilke. The incomprehensible always gets a free pass from the reader. He imagines he understands it, and that makes him feel good about himself.

Every now and again Frau Stabhorn comes skipping through my room. Her semi-legal existence hasn't worn her down; on the contrary it's kept her vitally trim. Sometimes I think hateful thoughts and wish that instead of giving her grandchildren jam to play with she would give them a hearty spanking. But she's not a spanker. She's chirrupy and excited and she skips. Earlier

she used to skip around my bed. Not from any carnal motive, but because she kept her stock of black-market cigarettes under my mattress. I don't know what about the Widow Stabhorn might be enviable aside from her cheerfulness, but I know her to be widely envied. Envious neighbors, so she claims anyway, denounce her to the police. Then I have to lie in bed and play the poor, invalid returnee. The Widow Stabhorn would shed compassionate tears when she told the policeman about me. My bed has never been searched for contraband or substandard goods. It has been known for policemen to offer me cigarettes from the supply with which they had just been bribed.

I suppose I could write about my bed. At the head and foot it has bars of lamentable metal. I wonder who came up with that idea, and why? Why the waste of metal? If the bars were at the sides, that would at least have the effect of preventing a sufferer from nightmares from falling out. But show me the person who ever fell out of bed via the head end or the foot end. So why the bars? As an ornament? Who would take an imitation of prison bars for ornamentation? So, no, I don't want to write about that. I'm sure readers would have zero interest in an account of prison bars, broken springs, and the damaged psychology of bed manufacturers.

Why do I have to write something anyway?

It all began with the pickpocket. I was standing outside the opera, waiting for the tram to take me to my cousin Johanna.

The November day was as grey as a whole wagonload of Prayer and Repentance days.\* May God forgive me, but I have something against Prayer and Repentance Day. It offends my democratic sense of freedom to be told to repent by some external authority that has no business in my inner life. Given

\* German *Buss-und-Betttag*, 4 November, a Lutheran celebration (Cologne is very largely Catholic).

our terrible climate, November is wall-to-wall expiation anyway. Everything ought to be done to cheer people up this month. Fountains of red wine should spring up on street corners, airplanes should scatter flowering lilac boughs from the skies, bands of jolly musicians should process through the town. Municipal, tax, and post offices should be decked out with red lights, public officials should wear parrot feathers and garlands, and prosecutors and judges should punctuate legal proceedings with nifty little dances. Heads of state, finance ministers, and the like should be kept from giving speeches or from taking a position on any of the important matters of the day – at best, they might be allowed to run a carousel for the free use of disadvantaged youngsters.

Such a profligate mode of life would require the approval of the relevant ministries. But November and fog and grey and morality and repentance – that’s too much. It gnaws at the marrow of the hard-working citizen, it saps the will to live, it’s enough to lay low the most resistant elector.

So I was standing at the tram stop in the grey mizzle thinking all kinds of colourful thoughts in an effort to animate my inner landscape. A damp chill was making its way up through my leaky soles.

When the tram arrived, there was a sudden crush, as though they were handing out thousand-mark notes inside. The people surged forward as though it was a matter of getting to their loved one’s deathbed or on board the last aerial lifeboat to Mars.

I find it hard to believe that these grim elbowers and pushers were only trying to get home. Or to work. Or to some task or other. Their elbows were pointed, their muscles taut, their lips compressed with resolve. The look in their eyes became steely and hard. Ancient crones fought for a place in the sun with muscular factory workers, with pallidly resolute clerks, with grimly furious housewives. Children wailed, dragged into

close-quarters combat by their berserk mothers. Satchel-toting youths insinuated themselves into the crush – their flailing technique gave them a great advantage. They pressed past everyone except one single old lady. She would not give way, would not step aside, she rammed her shopping bag full of earthy carrots into the hair and faces of the oncomers. She stood up on the running board, holding the balustrade with her free hand, her felt hat was skew-whiff – she pushed on, she had captured the platform, she was within sniffing distance of the conductor's armpit. She had won! She looked wildly about her, panting. Perhaps she was in training for the next Olympics.

The justification for such lethal barging, at least for any rational being, could only be paradise. Inasmuch as one can imagine any sort of paradise on earth. I think of it differently every day. Today my vision is of a mild bed of clouds in smiling light, in blue sky. Somewhere there are orange balls and velvety silver leaves and dark green. A pink flamingo flies with the pinions an old eagle has developed in wise solitude, singing with the gentleness of a newly opened cowslip on the forest edge. Like a nightingale.

It occurs to me I have never heard a nightingale. The nightingale is the most important bird in literature. No mediocre poem without its nightingale, no good poem either. The nightingale sobs, the nightingale cries, the nightingale toots and whistles. For hundreds of years, poets have been dining off nightingales. I have read and heard so much about nightingales, I really believed I knew nightingales. And I have never heard a nightingale. That shows you how well publicity works, and I always thought I would never fall for publicity. Do nightingales even exist?

You never know if you'll live to see another day. If I'm spared till next summer, then I'll go and listen to a nightingale. I hope I don't forget. There's so much you forget to do or neglect to

do. I wonder if any of the poets who wrote and sang about nightingales ever with their own ears heard a nightingale?

But nightingales here or there, I don't want to write my piece about them, even though the daily press likes it when authors write about a thing of which they have no knowledge. Profound ignorance persuades great circles of readers; others find it sympathetic. Never mind the critical remnant, they feel strengthened in their self-confidence, confirmed in their superiority, and empowered in their protests, which keep their intellectual muscle from dwindling away. I assume too that the subject of nightingales has been green-lighted and would not be censored by the greater part of our current German dictatorships. For reasons of morality, a lot of things are censored today. Dictatorships are always very strict about what they understand as morals and public ethics. Our former unlamented German dictatorship has, in the way of lower life forms, procreated by simple fission, and is now called democracy.

At the tram stop, I refrain from bargaining. I have oodles of time, and what one has, one ought to enjoy mindfully. As I stood there, mindfully, I suddenly felt a hand scrabbling about in my pocket. I reached for the hand and gripped it firmly by the wrist. A man in his middle years had been attempting to rob me. Poor fellow. All I had was a multiple ticket with one ride left on it, and that was in my other pocket. 'Walk slowly, don't run, in your calling it's best to avoid drawing attention to oneself,' I said to the man, and let go of his wrist. He ran like the clappers across Rudolfplatz. A beginner, I daresay, an amateur.

I felt flattered that the man had thought me worth robbing. You see, I wear neither hat nor coat, just a rather curious jerkin, with small natty skirts. It's sort of New Look, I tailored it myself from a lady's coat with history, back when I was released from the POW camp. My cousin Johanna likes to say I look like a hurdy-gurdy man's monkey when I'm wearing it. Hurdy-