Translated excerpt

Hans Pleschinski
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Hans Pleschinski
The Königsallee
Novel

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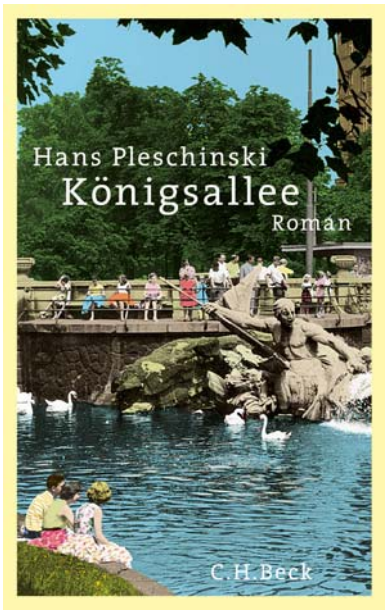

“What am I supposed to be doing here?” Klaus Heuser appeared behind Anwar Batak.

“You here now,” said the other man, looking to one side.

“I am a breath of wind in the world. What do I have to do with him?”

“I thought, writers love.”

“Who loves whom?”

“What?”

“You his work.”

“Not all of it.”

“He have consumed you. You have darker eyes than wife.”

“I did back then,” said Heuser, dismissing this.

Little hats, permanent waves and neatly parted hair all around him. Women assistants held book covers open to let the ink dry. His hair and eyebrows were grey; Thomas Mann was signing books below a light mounted on the wall. It was announced that those who wanted could express a wish for special wording in dedications inside the books. The vein at his temple betrayed his strain in fulfilling such wishes without getting anything wrong. His coat fitted perfectly. He seemed to want to let his eyes wander through the room. The Waterman fountain pen was ready to sign another copy.

“I can’t.”

“Don’t be such scared-cat.”

Their eyes met. Thomas Mann tipped his head back and closed his eyes. Klaus Heuser put the back of his hand to his mouth and cleared his throat. The writer’s admirers had to wait. He seemed to be biting his lips; obviously they were even trembling. Heuser took half a step forward: “This isn’t going to work.” Thomas Mann looked straight at him. The old face, with slight bags under the eyes, was no longer rigid, no longer entirely stately; imperceptibly, pain and grief raced over it, and an attempted smile on both faces was extinguished at the same time.

“I can’t start shedding tears now.”

“Why not? He is, almost.”

Klaus Heuser recognized the lady in the black dress hurrying towards him as Katia Mann, but an inch or so shorter than she had been quarter of a century ago. “I’d have known you anywhere, Klaus. Welcome. What a mercy that we’re all still alive. You always enjoyed my roast beef so much in those days. We had a good cook. Ah, the house, the garden in Poschingerstrasse, all of it gone now. Have you often visited your parents on Sylt?”

“No, no.”

“Well, come along. Rescue him from this torture. It goes on for ever after he’s given a reading.” Frau Mann nodded imperiously.

“Too kind.”

“Not too kind at all. Don’t deceive yourself.” As Anwar Batak was obviously following them, Katia Mann turned to look at the Asiatic in his dinner jacket. “Oh – what I said about a lady companion. Forgive me, Erika was nervous when she was telling me. A little colour always does one good.”

“Mijnheer Sumayputra,” Anwar introduced himself as he went along. They were obviously rid of the dwarfish lady who had been part of the entourage. She seemed to be taking an interest in the writer’s son, who himself was trying to keep an eye on everything from where he stood near a bar table.

“Tommy, here’s Joseph, I mean Klaus Heuser. And his friend from …?”

“Sumatra.”

Thomas Mann had moved away from the gathering as it dispersed. “Ah, the Indonesian islands, certainly a remarkable archipelago. I’ve always had a great liking for everything Asiatic. There’s a figure of Buddha on my desk, a great addition. It gives me a sense of calm when everything seems about to crack up.” Perhaps to accustom himself to the situation, or to draw the stranger into the conversation first, he had turned to the Indonesian who

had a touch of Malay in his ancestry. Mann's fingers were toying restlessly with the fountain pen. He seemed to want to keep his eye on Klaus in a fatherly, or indeed a grandfatherly way, but he kept looking sideways again, his Adam's apple showed that he was swallowing, he put a hand to his glasses, wiping the corner of one eye with his thumb.

"Klaus Heuser."

"The triton, Ekke Nekkepenn, the Frisian merman of Westerland."

Now the tired face was smiling. "I hope I may still call you Klaus? There's a good deal of pain associated with that name."

"Oh, Tommy," said Katia Mann, taking his arm.

He pulled himself together, his eyes lowered. "I was glad to hear of your arrival."

"I was glad, too." Klaus Heuser bowed.

"We're both rather older now. In you it's known as maturity, in me it's the ice of old age."

"But your work has kept you young," said Klaus.

"You're not changed at all – still the charmer."

"I was never a charmer, at least not intentionally."

"It will be a little while before the meal is ready." Katia Mann drew Mijnheer Sumayputra away with her.

"Where have you been?"

"Out in the world."

"So have I."

"I've not come to anything much. I deal in coconuts."

"But here you are in a dinner jacket. And under the protection of dark wings."

"Fickle as they were."

"But you have lived boldly."

"Life can be free and easy in South-East Asia."

“Oppression and anxiety reign here.”

Who or what did that apply to? The country? Mann himself?

Both voices sounded husky.

“What was it that I read to you in those days?”

“In your study, just for me?”

“For the triton who swam far out.”

“The story of Jacob cheating his brother Esau out of his birthright with a pottage of lentils for their father Jacob … and an amusing ballad about a Turk. You were sitting at the desk, I on my chair.”

“One leg lightly crossed over the other.”

“That was an incredibly hot summer.”

“Not too many memories, Klaus. The sheer volume of them will crush us if we don’t take care. And how can I venture to raise objections to memory? Here I am with the rest of my life unreeling, amd nothing to show for it but reminiscences, reproaches and honours. And I’m so tired. I stroll through the gallery of my past. That, despite certain sources of embarrassment, is my own property.”

The two of them had increasingly been attracting attention, and now they were almost at the centre of a loosely drawn circle. Heuser’s parents were drinking there too, in surprising silence. Erika Mann was trying to concentrate on a conversation with the clergyman. He was interested in the life of religious communities in the USA, a subject that she knew well. “Taxes on religious faith imposed by the state, unthinkable.”

With a touch of his elbow, Thomas Mann guided Klaus Heuser in the direction of the garden. They walked that way with their heads bent, in silence. Thomas Mann noticed lace-up shoes with toecaps that did not match Klaus Heuser’s dinner jacket, but how they had struck him in 1927! Beside them, the black patent leather of his own shoes shone. Ahead of them the crowd parted, a gentleman quickly wiped the froth of his beer from his lips, a lady

assumed an enraptured expression. Erika Mann moved away from the clergyman's side, her brother left his position by the bar table, and brother and sister followed the couple.

"Thank you for the greetings sent to Asia."

"You had written to me in detail about your passage through the Red Sea. Cruising there in the heat, the camels on the Egyptian side."

"By day one couldn't stand on deck without melting. The First Officer of the *Heidelberg* gave me a tropical helmet for trips ashore."

"Ah, a new Lawrence of Arabia."

"Not exactly. I was sobbing with homesickness every night, yet I wanted to be far away."

"I had just settled in Switzerland for the first time then, and that was certainly no pleasure trip."

"Your card moved me deeply. You wrote hoping that those bad times would soon be over."

Thomas Mann sighed deeply. "And they were only just beginning."

"Post from Europe, and then from you. I showed your card to all the Dutch – I hope you'll forgive me."

Thomas Mann waved that away. "I once wanted to emigrate to New Zealand myself. Yes, you may well look surprised. But heavens above, those of us who live our own lives surrounded by so many idiots have no ties. Yet where and how was I to live, speaking German among colonists from London suburbs? Hard to imagine –a permitted flight of folly. Characters and writers in the wind coming off the rocks, looking out for whales – no, they're not like me. After all, I have to keep our house in order. It is a great and venerable house, with monsters and demons always trying to lay it waste. I had to be on my guard, and it was a delicate business."

Klaus Heuser nodded a little timidly. "You've mastered the art of doing that. There's a film of your book *Royal Highness* showing now."

“It amused me reasonably well. As I see it, the character of Prince Klaus Heinrich wasn’t strongly enough cast, although the actress Ruth Leweri k stole the show in her expert presentation of Imma Spoelmann. Maybe the film of *Felix Krull* will be better. And the Eros that would guide love – whether one approves of it or not – must motivate all the action, even that of the characters on the screen. Where there are only unreceptive people at work, death is already at home.”

They had reached the edge of the terrace. Behind them, more drinks were being served, ahead of them the dark garden extended to the fountain.

“Then our contact broke off.” Klaus Heuser was not sure whether to go first down the top steps to the path through the park. Thomas Mann was taking deep breaths of the night air. “Or did it?”

It was not clear whether the shoulder of his tailcoat touched the fabric of the dinner jacket by chance and almost imperceptibly, or whether it was Klaus’s sleeve that touched the writer’s coat.

“I’m to tell you …”

Thomas Mann glanced sideways, a question in his eyes.

“Let me be frank. I’d like you to assess a book by your son,”

It was impossible to interpret the “Oh” that came as an answer.

“Don’t say any more to him about it. He’s even marked several passages that I’m to read aloud as being particularly successful. And I do think his book is very good. Won’t you give him your blessing – I mean, offer him more encouragement?”

Thomas Mann looked moderately surprised. “Golo doesn’t want to be an imaginative writer; history is more his line.”

“That’s reassuring.” Heuser placed *The Spirit of America* in Thomas Mann’s hands. “And there was something else,” he murmured apprehensively.

“Go ahead. You may.”

Klaus was moved by the reawakening of familiarity in Thomas Mann's mode of address. "We're under attack by a professor."

"A nice story," commented Thomas Mann. "Some new kind of scholar?"

"He's her godfather – your daughter Elisabeth's godfather, I mean."

"Bertram?"

"He's here. He says he was your friend and adviser." The writer did not react. "He was one of the book-burners in 1933, and wrote poetry urging the victory of the Aryan race."

"Terrible stuff, what else would you expect from an academic chauvinist?"

"I think he regrets it now and would like to be reconciled."

"He used to be a clever fellow."

"You'll recognize him at once by his cap and his broken glasses."

"Where's your handsome friend?"

"Would you like Anwar to sit next to you? He's wonderfully fragrant."

Thomas Mann stopped short – a noticeable reaction – and then smiled.

"I beg your pardon."

"I fear," he sighed, "that I could hardly make much use of His Island Majesty in my Luther novel."

He offered cigarettes from his case to Klaus Heuser, who gave him a light.

The words of welcome uttered by Mayor Gockeln had been pleasingly brief. Waiters were hurrying between kitchen and table. While many guests had already returned from the stand-up reception, others were still talking in a calmer register at the tables on the terrace of the Malkasten restaurant, while the guests of honour in the hall were served pheasant consommé in cups from the Breidenbacher Hof hotel. Muted light was reflected on the chi-

na and the new wooden parquet flooring. A platform seemed to have been provided for a musical performance.

By dint of a reasonably skilful redistribution of place settings, Erika Mann had arranged things so that senior administrators, in particular, did not eat in the immediate vicinity of the writer, tormenting the seventy-nine-year-old who had always hated the dry, factual communication of details, in this case concerning a ring road for the city and the recent controversies about celibacy clauses, stating that women teachers must not be married. City Councillor Ida Zollicz had noticed, as she took her seat between the manager of the Theatrical Museum and the director of the Hall of Art, that the writer's daughter had pressed some kind of medicament in the form of pills into her father's hand. Perhaps for his digestion or his nerves. The daughter herself had ordered a second aperitif. The Heusers, man and wife, from Meerbusch, who had obviously returned to society after the lifting of the ban on abstract painting, did the same, whereupon Ida Zollicz had also ordered another glass of Picon bitters. She was amazed to find how the laughter of the singer Martha Mödl filled the whole room when she remarked, of a smoked dish being served, "The trout is a delightful creature, particularly since Schubert set it to music. It leaps on to your plate almost *vivace*."

There didn't seem to be any fish on the printed menu.

Frau Zollicz wondered whether anyone here was going to feature in a book by Thomas Mann.

There was a smell of fresh paint.

The famous and at least to some extent very welcome couple presided from the middle of the table. Frau Thomas Mann, in her black lace collar, talked alternately to her husband who, after all, represented a good part of Germany in himself, and to the Mayor's wife. The writer lent an ear to the city historian Gönnerwein who, searching the bomb craters of the wartime ruins, had found evidence of an early Roman settlement in the water mead-

ows by the river. Perhaps the writer would rather have been sipping from his glass closer to Mödl, star of the German Opera House on the Rhine. However, the confusion over the place settings meant that the famous mezzo-soprano had ended up next to the suffragan bishop, whose opinions on mishaps in the dungeon scene in *Fidelio* and the conducting of Wagner were not nearly as decided as those of the Nobel laureate, indeed were not really decided at all. Martha Mödl and Gustav Mahler's former partner in conversation were assuring one another, talking across the candelabrums, that after you had heard the *Kindertotenlieder* you could not go out for a week.

"But in work or in life alike, that won't do," the singer confessed to the writer. Her necklace sparkled magnificently.

"Do you sing Lortzing too?" asked the suffragan bishop.

"His Clog Dance is always refreshing," said Katia Mann, joining the conversation.

"These days music is just noise," said the evangelical pastor, seated not far from the diva, who was wedged in among them. "We try to accompany divine service with just a fiddle, maybe a guitar. It does not excite the listeners."

"Many things are in a state of dissolution and rearrangement. Let us listen spellbound." After making this interjection Thomas Mann acted as if he were hard of hearing, indeed deaf, making no reference to any earlier question. "Now, you have written a novel about a composer. I will read it. What exactly is the subject?" While from the opposite side of the table Golo Mann, his forehead damp, saw a corner of his own book sticking out under his father's napkin, his sister was trying unsuccessfully to preserve her composure. She had her cup of consommé cleared away only half empty, and hissed to her father, speaking across the irritated municipal historian, "How could you? Giving him your hand! And now he'll expect yet more." Ernst Bertram himself was eating at the curved end of the table. His suit could have

come from a jumble sale, his tie was a pathetic rag. The former adviser was hungrily spooning up his soup, shoulders hunched. The young people sitting near him didn't know what to make of the old man. In between morsels, his eyes looked up behind his glasses, shining. His gaze wandered over the brilliant company present, lingered on Klaus Heuser and the Indonesian, then rested on Thomas Mann again. Having dealt with the problem of greeting Bertram, the writer had now shifted his attention elsewhere. But an echo lingered in Bertram's mind. "My old companion. You backed murderers, not life. Let us make allowances now, however. Sit down."

Anwar Batak did not drink wine, never meant to do so again, but in view of the white men toasting one another, in view of a certain tension round the table, and after Klaus had emptied a glass, he too raised his hand when the neck of a bottle approached. He would be resting in a hammock in a few weeks' time. Then all of them here would be envious, if they only knew about it.

The guest of honour ate hardly anything. His daughter nibbled a little venison. His son crumpled up his napkin. From time to time Klaus looked round, past his parents, as if he were hovering in the middle of a flickering mirage that showed him illusions. Several times, and fleetingly, his eyes met those of the writer in mutual understanding without communicating anything clearly. Scraps of conversation could be heard, faded away, the diva's jewellery sparkled, the fragrance of the summer night drifted in, improbably salty like the sea breeze, with the cry of gulls, pennants snapping in the wind along the beach, the sound of the swell of the sea, sand sticking to the skin, feet leaving wide prints, children romping with their little buckets full of shells, people sleeping in basket chairs; the tide could suddenly pull you down to the drifting seaweed under the crests of the waves. Don't go too far out! Appearances are deceptive; the swell can be unpredictable.

Applause broke out. Thomas Mann had risen to his feet. Representing the Minister of Culture, State Secretary Leubelt raised one finger to silence his half of the table. The writer unfolded a sheet of paper.

"There is something about this moment in my life" – the clearing of his throat drew similar throat-clearing from others – "that moves my heart." Those present thought about that. Thomas Mann's gold-framed glasses sparkled. "Such an emotion must not retreat entirely into silence behind this evening's objectively artistic presentation. In the calendar of my life, ladies and gentlemen, Düsseldorf is a place that has always held a particularly high rank. Your Rhineland metropolis always made me think, even when I was young, of trade through the ages, of citizens who have been their own masters for great lengths of time and who knew, moreover, how to combine their creative enthusiasm and competence with great activity during certain weeks over many years – I speak, of course, of the follies of Carnival" – here the members of his audience nodded to one another, and even the churchman laughed – "in which imagination prevails over calculation during our hours of ease, in which a cheerfully pagan atmosphere to which Goethe himself was by no means averse sweeps aside oppressive sadness, and delightful folly adds spice to an existence that is only too often narrow. Of all the places in my native land" – here he looked at his sheet of paper, and his audience listened to the historian's voice – "Till Eulenspiegel, the wisest fool and prankster in Germany, might perhaps have lived for longer behind the battlements of Düsseldorf, and might then have travelled on to teach, a second Socrates, that a stern way of life should be complemented by pleasing high spirits to supply the soul with fresh powers. My honoured audience, may your city remain true to itself in this activity that combines it with the land, and in this new building may it continue its commitment to art, washed down today with a good glass of sparkling wine. We seem to have survived evil times, indeed the worst of times; the gloomy Neandertal is not solely to be found near ru-

ined streets. Among and in view of raging hordes who knew no mercy, no law, no culture, we ourselves have remained alive. My curse is reserved for the perpetrators of evil. They have defiled our heritage, dragging what was honourably German in the mire. We have known convulsions on a large scale, the vulgar sounds of the marketplace, with dervish-like repetition of monotonous slogans until all mouths hung awry. Fanaticism was taken for a principle of salvation, enthusiasm for an epileptic ecstasy, politics were the opiate of the masses. May reason and a sense of honour, shame and sympathetic humanity – for anything less is not worth mentioning – now turn such things away from us forever."

There was perceptible awkwardness and discomfort in the air. But had the organizers thought they were just inviting a genial old gentleman to give them a chapter from an amusingly charming novel, and after it everything would be all right?

"My colleague Reinhold Schneider who remained in this country, hard pressed but phenomenally brave in faith in his God, has put it on record recently that *The necessary task of peace-making grows from the grace of disaster.* Nevertheless, misfortune and its connection with such a grace ought not to have been necessary. Düsseldorf could still be unscathed. With the utmost care, I recommend that term *unscathed* to you, laying it before you, letter by letter, as your future, your kindest way of communicating with each other and the world. Let it not be retracted. You will draw the poison from the sting of Germany, a laborious process: that is your most sublime duty as citizens, if your children's children are to be of good cheer and their sorrows tolerable."

Candlelight flickered.

Thomas Mann was not the only one to be confused for a fraction of a second. Beside the hunched guest with his broken glasses stuck together, the dwarfish figure in red almost soundlessly pushed in a chair among the

seated guests and, with her chin reaching a little way above the rim of the table, seemed to wish at least to partake of dessert.

"This may" – the speaker's voice almost died away, and he paused – "this may be the last time I stay in this city, and indeed I cannot often give even my native land much time now. But I have always had good friends here." He bowed his head to the Meerbusch couple, man and wife, he did indeed seem to catch a trace of Anwar's fragrance, and swiftly took his eyes off Klaus Heuser. Katia Mann briefly touched his right hand, which he was leaning on the table. "And I have always wanted to give a gift to the city entertaining me. So my latest narrative work begins with the lines: In the third decade of the present century Frau Rosalie von Tümmler, widowed for over ten years, lived in Düsseldorf on the Rhine … Honoured guests present here, accept this little gift from my pen, and may you never be deceived by the illusion of love, like the widow deceived by fate with a false promise of happiness. Or is her fate not so bad after all, for she has loved love?"

Was he reading all this from his sheet of paper, or varying his theme?

"But let us raise our eyes in deep emotion." The company breathed again, along with the man who was probably the most famous German of his time. At that moment his daughter looked extraordinarily elegant as, in her silvery dark moiré dress with its three-quarter length sleeves, she rested her slender chin on her hand and listened with less tension than before.

"I turn to the future, to the young people here in this hall – not very many of them, but all the more welcome for that. And let us, ladies and gentlemen, turn our attention farther afield than this place. Since leaving my native country, I have spent sixteen years of the last twenty or so in America, the land of wealth and generosity. Yet it is a psychological fact that the longer I lived there, the more aware I became that I am a European. And in spite of a comfortable way of life, for in the States the West is warm almost all the year round, my already advanced age made my almost anguished wish to go

home to the old country where I would like to rest some day ever more urgent. We live in a smaller space here, but it goes deeper in time. Moreover: we do not fear the fact that the effects of time will bring not only a united Europe, its dignity renewed, but a reunified Germany in its midst. We do not know yet when that will happen. But all of you who have listened today in the Schumann Hall to the adventures of the life-affirming Krull, to the international dancer of the Western stage who was born here, all of you will guess that I would never ask the young to take to their hearts a gloomy, sad, and indeed impossible idea, a ghost of yesterday, namely a Teutonic Europe, No, I recommend you to pursue the ideal of a European Germany, always and with all your might, with optimism and with watchful liberalism. Only through honesty does anything great take shape, and then we glean inner wealth. May this be well and firmly understood – so that, as we used to claim in my school days, we can say: 'Got it!' Thank you.

"Good luck to you, then, posterity."

Almost unnoticed, during the applause, amidst some surprise at the tone of the speaker's closing remarks, and the proposing of various toasts, students of the college of music had occupied the platform with their instruments After a suite from *Die Fledermaus* to accompany dessert, the rapt ensemble performed an arrangement of Broadway melodies.

Fräulein Kückebein mentioned dancing.