

Translated excerpt

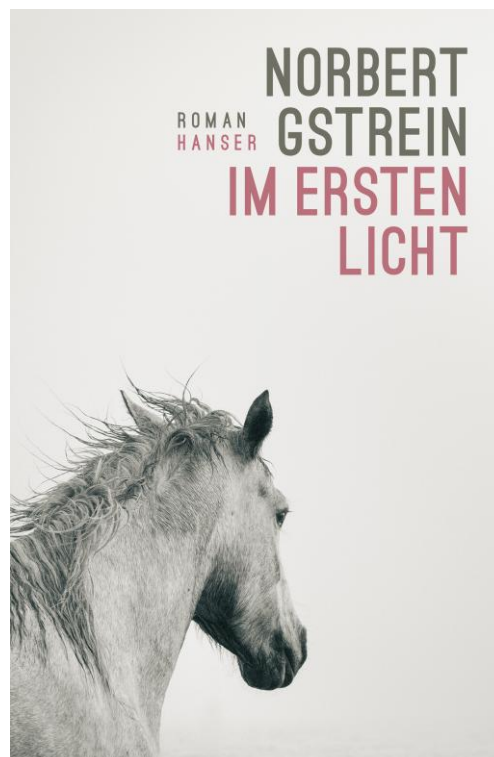
Norbert Gstrein
Im ersten Licht

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At First Light

Translated by Julian Evans



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Sample Translation of Chapter 2

by Julian Evans

Karla telling him on the way back from the Ellers' villa that the young man reminded her of someone, although she couldn't quite put her finger on who, was something Adrian didn't take at all seriously to begin with. She'd come across so many people at the Seehof since guests started arriving again, she said, that she couldn't be completely sure, but she wouldn't be surprised if she had seen him there, and if so it could even have been before the war. None of this was at all far-fetched, but the possibility of the young man, who was staying at the villa with the other facial injury casualties, actually being one of the Ellers' own two sons was a very different story.

Adrian only realised this two weeks later, when, despite having decided not to go to the villa any more, he had work there every day for almost ten days. And as if the realisation weren't enough, the son in question wasn't the one who had survived the war but the other one, the one who had supposedly died near Belgrade, though there hadn't been any fighting in the area at the time. It sounded more complicated than it was, because the Ellers, one of the Viennese families that spent their summers at the lake or at least had done so before the war, had just been looking for a way to hide him away from people until they knew what was to happen with him, and had then come up with the idea of having him declared dead, keeping him anonymously in the villa and providing him with a few fellow sufferers for company, each group staying for a fortnight before making way for their successors. The problem was that the new arrangements at the villa now revolved around the memory of their dead son, making their plan more than just a minor subterfuge, and that wasn't all, because a dinner to

commemorate their fallen sonsad also been planned for early September at the Seehof with two other Viennese families who owned villas in the neighbourhood, the Körmندی-Speisers and the Wohlgemuths, who actually had lost their sons in the war, which turned the not-so-minor subterfuge into a major one, not to mention a wicked fraud.

The Ellers' villa was not actually right on the lakeside but some way from the shore, and nor was it easily accessible on foot from the town centre. Adrian had been in the house once before the war, or almost been there. He had bicycled past its fence sometimes when his father had lent him his work bike, on Sundays or after work, so he could go for a ride out of town and up into the meadows and hills. Sometimes when he was riding past he had also seen the young men, the two sons, on the tennis court the other side of the fence, and heard the thock! of the balls as they were playing, a sound that had stirred a powerful longing in him that he had no name for yet but which was probably the first symptom of what he later called his "English longing", and once on one of these occasions a ball had flown over the fence and he had watched where it landed, found it in the bushes and rung the bell, and one of the two young men had come to the gate. He didn't know which one it was, and he didn't know their names yet, but whichever one it was standing at the gate asked him if he'd wouldn't like to come in and have a drink, he looked sweaty.

"If I may!"

He remembered his answer for a long time afterwards, and that expression and the fact that the young man had not behaved at all formally, as a gentleman would, but had greeted him with exceptional friendliness.

"Don't worry, I don't bite."

White shirt, white wide-legged tennis shorts, held together by a narrow belt high above his hips, and he seemed amused by the visitor.

"Haven't I seen you lurking around the house before?"

A dog came running down the gravel path, a great Dane, and the young man spoke soothingly to it. “Lord, be a gentleman,” and grasping the great Dane by its collar, he led Adrian past the tennis court to the house and called into the hallway for the housekeeper, asking her to bring him a glass of water. On the tennis court the other young man stood with two more young men, holding their rackets and waiting for their partner, all three dressed in white like him, and from the background came the voices of two young women or rather girls, bright bell-like voices that Adrian, even years later, remembered like everything else. They were complaining how long they were being kept waiting, that it was their turn for a game, and if the men carried on dawdling like this it would be dark before they finished their game, or it might even rain. But there was no likelihood of rain, the sky had been blue for days, barely a few high cirrus clouds, and although Adrian himself didn’t use the word because it felt like a posh word to him, he knew that all over the country there would be people talking about “Kaiser’s weather”, meaning glorious, that day, and it was only the historians (including the mediocre ones who also used such expressions) for whom clouds were already gathering on the horizon.

It was a Sunday in June, a perfect Sunday for amateur painters, 1914 was the year, he was thirteen, and there could have been days and days like this, and yet only a few weeks later the old Kaiser had put his signature to the decisive declaration, and the four young men whom Adrian had seen at the villa were on their way to war. The two Eller sons of course, Ernest and Herbert, and the other two were the young Körmendy-Speiser and the young Wohlgemuth. He had found out their identity from his father, who had been delivering the post on his bicycle for so long he knew everyone on his round or, put it another way, there wasn’t anyone with an address he delivered to that he didn’t know something about, and although Adrian himself wasn’t nearly old enough, his father had already warned him not to get the wrong idea.

“Don’t you go thinking this is something for you, ever,” he said. “If these gentlemen are so sure they need to bash each other’s skulls to bits, let them get on with it and not bother us with their stuff and nonsense.”

For Adrian’s father that was all there was to be said, but he was capable of varying his revulsion with extended diatribes. He had always kept his eye on the three Viennese families with their villas by the lake, and to him the fact they were proudly sending their sons off to war only showed the idiocy of posh people. From a court and army supplier such as Herr Eller he had expected nothing less, but Herr Körmendy-Speiser and Herr Wohlgemuth being just as foolish surprised him – one was the director of a bank and could easily afford to buy out a battalion or two, and the other was a famous surgeon to whom people came from all over the monarchy. Then again, the Körmendy-Speisers and Wohlgemuths were “of another faith”, as he said without going in for the usual jibes, which perhaps explained it, perhaps the fact that they were Jews explained why they didn’t want to step out of line and so joined in with the pointless carry-on from the very beginning, with all the keenness of apparently wanting to beat the drums of war themselves and send their sons into battle even before the Ellers did. Four young men who in the end had no choice but to be jubilant, and Adrian’s father knew the regiments they were serving in, where they were posted to, when and where they first engaged the enemy and had their baptism of fire, because he went to every house with the post and it was talked about all round the lake and someone here had heard something and someone else there, and everyone had their opinions.

Adrian was there once and heard his father talking to a neighbour, calling the young men conceited Viennese dandies who were infatuated by their own Vienneseness and deserved nothing less than to be taken down a peg or two in front of everyone. The neighbour called his father a socialist, but what did that mean apart from the fact that his angry outbursts could not just be dismissed as the outbursts of a hothead who was unable to keep his temper, but had rather better reasoning behind them? His father’s anger was always greatest when he

found himself in an oppressive situation and could not really rebel, or when rebelling would have caused him so much damage it would have been tantamount to rebelling against himself, but didn't he go to church every Sunday too, obediently kneel in front of the cross like everyone else, and wasn't he a socialist who spat out the word with the most poisonous disdain whenever someone else used it? Hadn't his father twice before the war stood in a row with delegations of enthusiastic onlookers to celebrate the Kaiser's arrival for his annual summer stay, hadn't he trodden that path as a loyal postal worker in His Majesty's service, and even answered the call outside office hours whenever cheers were required? Surely he didn't need to upbraid the young men quite so fiercely in their absence, or condemn them so thoroughly.

"All in the cavalry, of course," he said. "Dragoons, hussars, uhlans. What else for those spoiled lads? With no cavalry, there'd be no gentlemen, and no gentlemen, no cavalry. That's the whole thing in a nutshell." The neighbour had said little while his father's rant continued, so Adrian had got a clear, if one-sided, picture of the young gentlemen. They wore boots, loved their horses before they embarked on the task of loving their wives, or, if that was too much to ask, starting something with them that would allow them to pass as gentlemen. As infatuated with their animals as if they were immature schoolboys, in the middle of a war they still hadn't grasped that being on a battlefield wasn't about cutting a dash or schooling their four-legged companions to back up or perform a pas de deux as if they were competing with them at a ball or a masquerade based on the rules of the strictest imperial and royal horse-breeding establishments with their Spanish riding-school standards and their snow-white Lipizzaner dreams. Absurd fantasies of fame and glory too, visions of the adored mare, when the time eventually came, draped with a black saddlecloth and wearing a black mourning-mask and a plume of black ostrich feathers on her head, heading their funeral procession, walking directly behind the coffin. The word "corpse" had nothing and everything to do with it. "The cadaverous glow of living corpses", Adrian read later in the newspaper, and all at

once the light round him had no longer looked the same. The bodies of dead horses at the front, he'd seen pictures of them, and perhaps they explained his father's anger – who would say that if there had to be a war, then it should be somewhere in the mountains, somewhere there was snow and ice and preferably in winter, because then there would always be places those idiots and their mounts couldn't go, and if there had to be dying, then certainly not all in one go with these waltzing dandies and hand-kissing experts in their ridiculous red trousers.

“Half-witted laddies charging at the enemy's guns with their gay plumes bobbing on their heads and letting themselves be shot out of the saddle like toy soldiers, after causing as much mischief as they possibly could.”

Later, Adrian had somehow always felt ashamed to be Austrian, and long before there were completely different reasons to feel ashamed to be Austrian, these horses and these imperial, or imperial and royal, cavalymen who marched into Ukraine to invade Russia, behaving as if each of them wanted to get into the line as fast as he could to get a good thrashing and a bloody nose for once, cavalymen by conviction, by bearing, and because it was more honourable to bet on a lost cause than to look forward to the future. It was the very last great operetta they would appear in, a grotesque pursuit indulged in by the dying monarchy with the world's mocking laughter ringing in its ears, a pursuit from which its descendants would not recover because they were still up for all manner of foolishness, so long as it could be staged triumphantly enough. You didn't have to tear around like the actors did in Westerns, but you also really couldn't be some puffed-up jackass on a rope-bedecked circus horse if you wanted to be taken seriously; and then almost immediately the first devastating news arrived.

Young Körmendy-Speiser, fallen in the Carpathians, young Wohlgemuth on the Piave, mollycoddled Jewish brats, if you asked people around the lake, effeminate weaklings who just didn't understand enough about slashing and stabbing, shooting and killing to simply enable them to survive. As part of supplying the army, the Ellers were already sending

trainloads of fattened pigs from Croatia to Vienna, but even before it was reported that the elder of their two sons had been killed, somewhere near Belgrade, Adrian's father acted. He didn't want to take the risk of standing powerlessly by as his son was put through the meat-grinder, especially since no one with an iota of sense believed the war would have a positive outcome any more, so the early woodcutting for winter came at just the right time, during which he caught Adrian a blow on his leg below the knee with the axe. Accident or not, there was no doubting what people said: "A golden blow," and ever since, Adrian had limped because the wound healed badly. It had happened a few months before the year group before his was due to be conscripted, the class of 1900, and the doctor whom they had eventually gone to, who had known Adrian from childhood, had taken off the homemade bandage and looked first at him for a long time and then at his father and finally asked how it had happened and why hadn't they come to see him sooner? It didn't look good; truth be told, if Adrian happened to develop sepsis, the leg would not be salvageable.

Just the previous autumn Adrian's mother had died, a protracted bout of influenza followed by pneumonia and utter misery until she stopped eating, as if there wasn't enough for three, and his father who had not spoken for weeks now said he didn't want to lose his son too.

"There are worse things than an injury like this. What's a leg anyway? If you're going to bleed like a stuck pig, you'd be better off bleeding at home, not somewhere in the Ukrainian steppe."

This was a saying of his that he liked to repeat. "Ukrainian steppe" could be replaced by "Galician mud" or even "Serbian backstreets" or "Italian ravines," but the meaning was the same. Going to war was for fools and not for his son, whom he certainly had not sent to boarding school with the holy fathers and then let him take his high school diploma for that reason.

“When it comes down to it, these gents made their own mess, and even if they were to clean it up themselves, justice still wouldn’t be served, but they’d have made a start. Unfortunately that’s never how it is! For every one of them, there are always a few thousand others who don’t see any romantic adventure in this whole farce, but in the end die just the same, or even more horribly.”

He reacted badly too when, after the war, he heard about the invalids being housed at the Ellers’ villa, and when Adrian told him that two of them regularly came to his hotel and sat out on the terrace there, and both of them had disfigured faces, his father had him describe them in detail and could not believe what he had heard.

“They sit there with their grimaces, right in the middle of the other guests on the sun terrace of the Schwanen Hotel, and no one says a word?”

Adrian failed to see anything wrong with this.

“Not so far,” he said. “They always sit away from the other guests and are very careful not to disturb anyone. Besides, there are hardly any guests. People don’t have any money.”

His father said that wasn’t the point, it was the principle, and even when so many men had learned to endure any sight during four years of war, one needed to consider the women.

“The question is whether there’s any sense in keeping such creatures at all, or whether, beyond a certain degree of deformity, they wouldn’t be better off kept somewhere else.”

“Better off somewhere else?”

“Some hold the view that the most reasonable thing would be to put them out of their misery,” he said, leaving his own opinion unspoken. “In their eyes, they certainly don’t belong in public, and the Ellers setting up a sort of convalescent home for them is just like them, with their never-ending showing-off. Not the slightest trace of humility, even now. In memory of their dead son, but in reality they just want to put themselves in the limelight. No sooner is the

war over than they're back in charge again. Making themselves important wherever they can. Those days should really be over and done with for those gentlemen."

His father knew how much the Ellers had lost, but he also knew that despite the complete loss of their estates in Bohemia, a lot of forest in Styria remained theirs and they still had two townhouses in Vienna, both in prime locations on the Ringstrasse, as well as, of course, the villa by the lake. They were no longer suppliers to the court or army because there was no longer a court or an army to speak of, but they ran a colonial goods business now, not to mention Frau Eller's interests in the south of England. Well, that was where she came from, having been born an Ingleby, his father said, as if her name, or even just the foreignness of her name, were a distinction, and once matters had calmed down a bit, there would doubtless be something to be had from there as well. Sitting at the kitchen table in just his undershirt, starting to go bald and with his grey five o'clock shadow, all he needed to be a socialist was the calculations he made, which, depending where you stood, worked out far too easily for some or never worked out and left you empty-handed.

That was how things stood when Adrian got the request to help out at the villa for a few days, and he decided it was best not to say anything to his father about it at first. He could imagine how he would start ranting that he couldn't possibly be acting as a servant to the gentry now, what had been the point of the war if not to break down such subservience once and for all, but Adrian said nothing and in the end presented him with a *fait accompli*. The cook at the villa had fallen ill, and because a replacement could not be found immediately, the guests were to be fed by the kitchen of the Schwanen Hotel till further notice. The food was delivered every day in large containers, and because Adrian was not busy at reception and had already struck up an acquaintance with the two visitors from the villa, he was put in charge of warming up and serving the food. Each morning the caretaker drove him to the house in the hotel's car and picked him up again in the evening. He spent his afternoons at the property

and once he even stayed overnight, and it was on his fifth day there that the villa's secret was revealed, as if in a play.

August meanwhile was nearing its end, and he learned from Karla that preparations were already under way at the Seehof for the planned dinner of the three Viennese families and that the Ellers intended to use their stay at the lake as a chance to stop at the villa beforehand and pay a visit to the war veterans they had invited. The baron and baroness, as they were still called, were both supposed to come together, but the arrangements changed at the last moment and Eller, although he still insisted on attending the commemorative meal with the Körmندی-Speisers and the Wohlgemuths, had no time to go to the villa and so sent his apologies, and his wife came without him, once on her own and then a second time accompanied by a priest. What was decisive, however, was that their son also honoured the gathering with his presence, appearing unannounced at the villa the day before and rendering the whole official performance absurd. For it was he, Herbert Eller, who revealed to Adrian the identity of the young man who had appeared one day with his ravaged face on the sun terrace of the Schwanen Hotel and hadn't wanted to give his name and was called Lemberg by everyone else at the villa.