

PILVAX

Issue Seven Summer 2010

Gyula Krúdy was one of Hungary's most prolific 20th century authors, with over eighty novels and novellas to his name. His nonfiction and journalism—some of which has been translated by John Batki into English in the edition Krúdy's *Chronicles*—is still widely read. He died in 1933.

A Letter

by Gyula Krúdy

(translated by John Batki)

My Most Esteemed Friend and Editor:

I won't bore you with my private affairs—frankly, I haven't any that might be of interest. For years now I haven't done anything that wasn't for my own pleasure or displeasure... My way of life, my solitude, and indifference have nurtured this horrible luxury. But now I feel called upon to tell you about something that happened over Pentecost to upset my daily routine. Old man Szabó brought me a letter from America. (You see, in my neighborhood we know everyone by name, the letter carrier, the chimney sweep, the woman at the corner newsstand... just like in a village.)

The letter came from Edward K. (I won't spell out the name to spare him from all sorts of junk mail) of Los Angeles, 352 West 96 Street, inviting me to come to America. He'd heard about my illness, and that I am an author, and not so rich (they hear about everything in Los Angeles!). So he suggests that I should pack up and leave Margaret Island and move to Los Angeles, where recently Lajos Biró was paid \$15,000 for his play *Hotel Imperial*. The Hungarians already there, Ernő Vajda, Vilma Bánky, Ilona Fülöp, Mihály Kertész (Michael Curtis), and others, are doing quite well, "for producers are crazy about foreign talent these days." Therefore, I should embark without the least worry on an ocean liner, ticket compliments of Gyula Zukor, who is from Nyíregyháza and thus my hometown pal. Well, I haven't answered Edward K.'s letter yet, and perhaps I never will, because I owe plenty of letters. But one thing is for sure, I won't be going to America.

Back in the old days it was village folk who were enticed to go to America; these days it's actors and writers... But what would I do in America, going on 50, and no longer able, or willing, to indulge in theatrics, showmanship, razzle-dazzle, and innuendo. And what would I do with my 15 grand over there, feeling queasy abroad, where each moment would be a reminder of friends going hungry back home in impoverished Hungary? Oh yes, I could use 15 grand, right here at home in Budapest where \$15,000 is still a princely sum straight out of a *Thousand and One Nights* that would buy a house with garden, a sumptuous plot in the cemetery, and plenty of

friendship. If they only sent that \$15,000 to me here, I don't think I'd resent old man Szabó for delivering it one day.

But to travel by ocean liner, and train, a stranger among strangers, where sweets taste bitter, the cushions feels hard, and the stars in the sky seem fake; to study new faces to learn what those smiles mean, and grimaces, and what is true in their eyes and what is inside their heads, to know when open arms mean to hug or choke, and who has murder on his mind—15 grand is not enough to make me learn a whole new world. No, my dear Edward K., it's not worth it to me even to dream of 15 grand as the price of discarding my old garments, changing the expression on my face, to hop around when I'd rather stay seated, to laugh when I'm not in the mood, to play the aspiring hopeful when in truth I no longer aspire to anything; to load my shoulders with new burdens and my head with new ideas, and fall out of love with my old ideals and exchange them for new ones (that have proven to be unfortunate). A new way of breathing, a new way of sleeping, a new daily routine to confuse my limbs, and never again a whiff of the air I've gotten used to at home, or a sleep like some old vine stock that every year bears less fruit, but still does its duty... Why take on new tasks when I can't fulfill the ones I already have.

No, my dear Edward, your 15 grand is not worth it to turn me into a migratory bird, to be a distant observer of my homeland from some far-off neutral star, and never again hear the sounds of our domestic squabbles and jealous bickering—just so I can get acquainted with a new ailment: homesickness. I believe that homesickness is the most unbearable of all ailments. Why should I buy myself another illness, when I have plenty of that already?

My Dear Ödön, I won't be going to Los Angeles... So I'll just stay right here at home, because I wouldn't be able to get used to a brave new world. In the end, you get to love your unhappiness and your illness.

—1928

Gyula Krúdy's letter can be found in ISSUE 7 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.