



## INTRODUCTION

It was in the late fall of 1902. I was sitting under ancient chestnut trees, in the park of the Military Academy in the new section of Vienna, reading a book. I was so engrossed in the words that I hardly noticed when the learned and beloved chaplain of the academy, the only non-officer on the staff, Professor Horaček, seated himself beside me. He took the volume from my hands, gazed at the cover, and shook his head. “Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke?” he asked thoughtfully. He skimmed the pages, stopping now and then to scan a few verses and gaze pensively into the distance. Finally, with a nod, he said, “Well, René Rilke, my student, has turned into a poet after all.”

It was then I learned about the thin, pale boy who had been sent by his parents, more than fifteen years ago, to the Military Academy to become a commissioned officer. At that time Horaček had been chaplain there. He still remembered the former student clearly. He described him as a quiet, serious, highly gifted young man, who liked to keep to himself and who patiently endured the stress of dormitory life. After the fourth year he moved ahead with the others to the military academy in Mahrlich-Weisskirchen. There, however, he apparently lacked the necessary endurance for the regimen, so his parents took him out of the school and allowed him to continue his studies at home in Prague. How the events of his life unfolded after that, Professor Horaček could not say.

After our talk, I decided to send Rainer Maria Rilke my poetic attempts and to ask him for his judgment. I was hardly twenty, not quite at the threshold of a career against which I felt an inner revolt. I hoped to receive solace and understanding, if from anyone, from the author of the book *In Celebration of Myself*. Without actually intending it, I found myself writing letters to accompany my verses. In them I revealed my innermost self unreservedly as never before and never since to another person.

Many weeks passed before an answer to the first

letter came. The blue seal revealed the postmark from Paris. It weighed heavy in my hand and revealed on the envelope the same clear, beautiful, and confident handwriting as that in the contents of the letter, from the first line to the last. Thus began my regular correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke, which lasted until 1908. Gradually it became less frequent and finally stopped because life forced me off into paths from which the poet's gentle, warm, and touching concern would have liked to protect me.

But that is unimportant. Important alone are the ten letters — important for the understanding of the world in which Rainer Maria Rilke lived and worked, important also for the many who are growing and evolving now and shall in the future. When a truly great and unique spirit speaks, the lesser ones must be silent.

*Franz Xaver Kappus*

Berlin, June 1929



THE FIRST  
LETTER



*“I know of no other advice than this:  
Go within and scale the depths  
of your being from which your very life  
springs forth.”*

Paris  
17 February 1903

My dear sir,

Your letter reached me just a few days ago. I want to thank you for the deep and loving trust it revealed. I can do no more. I cannot comment on the style of your verses; critical intent is too far removed from my nature. There is nothing that manages to influence a work of art less than critical words. They always result in more or less unfortunate misunderstandings. Things are not as easily understood nor as expressible as people usually would like us to believe. Most happenings are