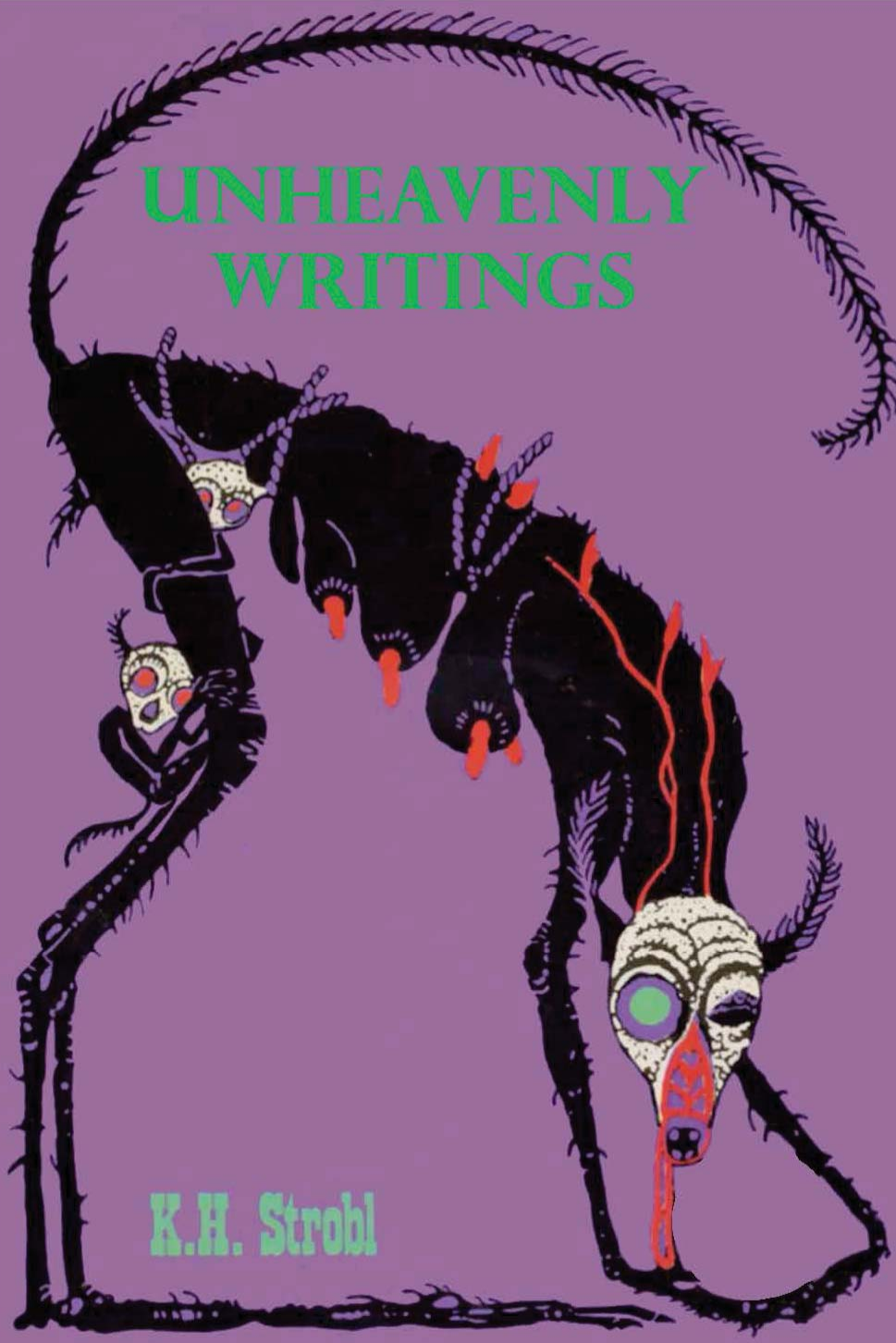


UNHEAVENLY WRITINGS



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BERSERKER

BOOKS



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The head

It was completely dark in the room ... all the curtains closed ... not a glimmer of light from the street and completely silent. My friend, I and the stranger were holding hands, convulsing and trembling. There was a terrible fear over us ... in us ...

And there ... a white, gaunt, shining hand came towards us through the darkness and began to write at the table where we were sitting with the pencil lying ready.

We did not see what the hand was writing, but we felt it inside us ... at the same time ... as if it had been written in fiery letters before our eyes ... It was the story of this hand and of the person to whom it had once belonged that was written in the deep darkness of midnight by the white, shining hand on the table.

was scribbled on the paper:

... - As I walk up the steps lined with red cloth ... my heart feels a little strange. Something swings back and forth in my chest ... a large pendulum. But the edges of the pendulum disc are as sharp as razors and when the pendulum touches the edges of my chest as it swings, I feel a sharp pain there ... and a shortness of breath that makes me want to gasp out loud. But I clench my teeth so that no sound can come out and clench my fists tied behind my back so that blood spurts out from under my nails.

Now I'm upstairs. - Everything is in perfect order; they're just waiting for me. - I take it easy

I shave the back of my neck and then ask for permission to speak to the people for the last time. It is granted to me ... As I turn round and look over the endless crowd standing around the guillotine, head to head, all these stupid, dull-minded, distorted, sometimes philistine, curious, sometimes lustful faces, this mass of people, this ten thousand-fold mockery of the name of man - the whole thing seems so ridiculous to me that I have to laugh out loud.

But then I see my executioner's official ministrations wrinkle their faces ... damned cheek of me to take the matter so lightly ... I don't want to irritate the good people any more and quickly begin my speech:

"Citizens," I say, "citizens, I am dying for you and for freedom. You have misjudged me, you have condemned me ... but I love you. And as proof of my love, listen to my will. All that I possess is yours. Here ..."

And I turn my back to them and make a gesture that they can't misinterpret ...

... A roar of indignation all round ... I lay my head down in the cavity as quickly as possible and with a sigh of relief ... a whooshing hiss
... I only feel an icy burning in my throat ... my head falls into the basket.

Then I feel as if I've put my head under water and my ears are full of it. The sounds of the outside world reach me in a dark and confused way, there is a buzzing and humming in my temples. The entire cross-section of my neck feels as if large quantities of ether are evaporating.

I know that my head is in the wicker basket - my body on top of the scaffolding, and yet I do not yet have the feeling of complete separation; I feel that my body has sunk to my left side, kicking softly, that my clenched fists, bound behind my back, are still twitching slightly and my fingers are spasmodically stretching and contracting. I can also feel the blood flowing from the stump of my neck and how my movements become weaker and weaker as the blood flows out, and my feeling for my body becomes weaker and darker until I feel darker and darker below the neck.

I have lost my body.

In the complete darkness from the neck downwards, I suddenly feel red spots. The red spots are like fire in black thunderstorm nights. They flow apart and spread out like drops of oil on a still water surface ... when the edges of the red spots touch, I feel slight electric shocks in my eyelids and the hair on my head stands on end. And now the red spots begin to spin around themselves, faster and faster

... a myriad of burning wheels of fire, glowing discs of sunlight ... it's a rush and whirling that long tongues of fire lick at the back and I have to close my eyes ... but I can still feel the red wheels of fire inside me ... it sticks between my teeth like dry, glassy sand in every crevice. At last the discs of flame fade, their mad spinning slows down, one after the other goes out, and then it goes dark for me for the second time from the base of my throat downwards. This time forever. -

A sweet languour has come over me, a

Irresponsibly letting myself go, my eyes have become heavy. I no longer open them, and yet I can see everything around me. It's as if my eyelids have become transparent and made of glass. I see everything as if through a milky white veil, with delicate, pale red veins branching out across it, but I can see more clearly and larger than when I still had my body. My tongue has become lame and lies heavy and sluggish like clay in my mouth.

But my sense of smell has become a thousand times more refined; I don't just see things, I smell them, each with its own unique odour.

In the wicker basket under the guillotine's guillotine axe lie three other heads besides mine, two male and one female. On the red-coloured cheeks of the woman's head are two beauty plasters, in the powdered, highly coiffed hair is a golden arrow, in the small ears two dainty earrings adorned with diamonds. The heads of the two men lie face downwards in a pool of half-dried blood, across the skull of one of them is an old, badly healed cut, the hair of the other is already grey and sparse.

The woman's head has narrowed its eyes and stirs herself. I know that she is looking at me through her closed eyelids ...

We lie like this for hours. I watch as the sun's rays move up the scaffolding of the guillotine. Evening falls and I start to feel cold. My nose is stiff and cold, and the evaporative cold on the cross-section of my neck becomes uncomfortable.

Suddenly a wild howling. It comes closer, very close, and suddenly I feel a strong fist grab my head by the hair with a rough grip and pull it out of the basket. Then I feel a strange, sharp object enter my throat - the point of a lance. A mob of drunken sans-sculottes and mega-men have made their way over our heads. In the hands of a sturdy, tree-length man with a red, bloated face, the lance swings with my head on its tip high above the entire wildly excited, shouting and screaming crowd.

A whole bunch of men and women have come to blows over the distribution of the spoils from the hair and ears of the woman's head. They roll wildly through and over each other - a fight with hands and feet, with teeth and nails.

Now the fight is over. They scatter, bickering and shouting, each one carrying a piece of it, surrounded by a mob of envious comrades ...

The head lies on the ground, disfigured, soiled, with the marks of fists everywhere, the ears torn by the violent jerk with which they took the rings, the careful hairstyle dishevelled, the powdered strands of dark blond hair in the street dust. One wing of her nose has been slashed by a sharp instrument, on her forehead are the marks of a heel. The eyelids are half open, the broken, glassy eyes stare straight ahead.

At last the crowd moves forwards. Four heads are stuck on long spikes. The people's anger is mainly directed at the head of the man with the grey hair. The man must have been particularly disliked. I don't know him. They spit at him and

throw lumps of faeces at him. Now a handful of street faeces hits him roughly on the ear ... what is that? didn't he flinch? quietly, imperceptibly, only perceptible to me, only with a muscle band?

Night falls. We have our heads pinned next to each other on the iron bars of a palace gate. I don't know the palace either. Paris is big. In the courtyard, armed citizens are camped around a huge fire ... Street songs, jokes, roaring laughter. The smell of roasting mutton wafts over to me. The fire spreads a scent of precious rosewood. The wild hordes have dragged all the castle's furnishings into the courtyard and are now burning them piece by piece. Now it's the turn of a delicate, elegantly ornate sofa ... but they hesitate, they don't throw the sofa into the fire. A young woman with strong features, wearing a shirt that is open at the front and shows the full, firm shapes of her chest, speaks to the men with lively hand movements.

Does she want to persuade them to let her have the precious piece?

Did she suddenly want to feel like a duchess?

The men are still hesitant.

The woman points to the lattice, on the top of which our heads are stuck, and then back to the sofa.

The men hesitate - finally she pushes them aside, tears the sabre from the scabbard of one of the armed men, kneels down and, with the help of the blade, begins to pull the small, enamel-headed nails with which the heavy silk fabric is stretched against the wood out of the sofa frame with her strong arms. The men now help her.

Now she points to our heads again.

One of the men approaches the gate with hesitant steps. He searches. Now he climbs up the iron bars and brings down the abused, violated woman's head.

A horror shakes the man, but he acts as if under compulsion. It is as if the young woman there by the fire, the woman in the red skirt and shirt open at the front, dominated all the men around her with her wildly lustful predatory gaze. With a stiff arm, he carries his head by the hair towards the fire.

With a wild cry of lust, the woman grabs the dead head. Whirling, she swings it by its long hair twice, three times over the blazing fire.

Then she crouches down and puts her head on her lap. She strokes her cheeks a few times as if caressing them ... the men in the circle around her have let themselves go ... and now she has taken one of the small, enamel-headed nails with one hand and a hammer with the other, and with a quick blow of the hammer she has driven the nail into the skull right up to the head.

Another quick hammer blow, and again one of the nails disappears in the thick woman's hair.

She hums a song. One of those terrible, lustful, strange, old-fashioned, magical folk songs.

The bloody abominations around her sit still and pale with terror, staring at her with fearful eyes from dark caves. And she hammers and hammers and drives nail after nail into their heads, humming her old, strange magic song to the beat of the hammer. Suddenly one of the men lets out a shrill

He screams and jumps up. His eyes are wide, drool is in front of his mouth ... he throws his arms backwards, turns his upper body to the right and left as if in a painful spasm, and piercing, animal-like screams come from his mouth.

The young woman hammers and sings her song.

Then a second one jumps up from the ground, howling and waving his arms around. He snatches a fire from the campfire and thrusts it at his chest - again and again, until his clothes begin to smoulder and a thick, smelly smoke spreads around him.

The others sit rigid and pale and do not prevent him from starting.

Then a third jumps up - and now the same frenzy seizes the others. A deafening noise, a screeching, hooting, screaming, howling, a succession of movements, of limbs. He who falls remains lying ... the others continue to stamp on his body ...

In this orgy of madness, the young woman sits and hammers and sings ...

Now she has finished, and now she has put her head, studded all over with small, enamel-headed nails, on a bayonet point and holds it high above the howling, leaping mass. Then someone tears the fire apart, the logs are pulled from the embers and extinguished in the dark corners of the courtyard, spraying sparks ... it becomes dark ... only a few ruthless screams and wild roaring, as if from a terrible melee - I know, all these mad men, these wild beasts have now thrown themselves over the one woman, with teeth and claws ...

It goes black before my eyes.

If only my consciousness remained long enough to see all the grey things ... it dawns ... dark and untrue, like the fading light on a dull winter's night. It's raining on my head. Cold winds tousle my hair. My flesh becomes loose and weak. Is this the beginning of decay?

Then a change happens to me. My head goes to another place, into a dark pit; but there it is warm and quiet. It becomes lighter and more definite inside me again. Many other heads are with me in the dark pit. Heads and bodies. And I realise that heads and bodies have found each other, for better or worse. And in this contact they have found their language again, a quiet, inaudible, imaginary language in which they speak to each other.

I long for a body, I long to finally get rid of this unbearable cold on the back of my neck, which has almost become a hot burning sensation. But I peer in vain. All the heads and bodies have found each other. I have no body left. But finally, after a long, arduous search, I find a body ... too low, tucked away in a corner ... a body that doesn't yet have a head - a woman's body.

Something inside me resists a connection with this body, but my desire, my longing wins out and so I approach the headless torso - moved away by my "will" - and see how it also strives towards my head - and now the two intersections touch ... A light beat, the feeling of a gentle warmth. Then one thing above all emerges: I have a body again.

But strangely ... after the first sensation of well-being has passed, I feel the enormous difference between my halves of being ... it is as if completely different juices meet and mix. Juices that have nothing in common. The woman's body on which my head now sits is slender and white and has the marble-cool skin of the aristocrat who takes wine and milk baths and wastes precious ointments and oils. But on the right side of her chest, across her hips and part of her stomach is a strange drawing - a tattoo. In fine, extremely fine blue dots, hearts, anchors, arabesques and the letters I and B repeatedly intertwined and ornate - who might this woman have been?

I know I'll know that one day - soon! Because it an outline develops from the indeterminate darkness of the body beneath my head. - The idea of my body already clings to me, unclear and blurred. But from minute to minute this image becomes clearer and more definite. This painful penetration of the juices of my sensory halves. And suddenly I feel as if I have two heads ... and this second head - a woman's head, - bloody, disfigured, distorted, - I see it before me - covered all over with small, enamel-headed nails. This is the head that belongs to this body - my head at the same time, because I can clearly feel the hundreds of nail tips in my skull and brain, I want to scream out in pain.

Everything around me sinks into a red veil that swirls back and forth as if torn by violent gusts of wind. I feel it now, I am a woman, only my mind is

male for sure. And now an image emerges from the red veil ... I see myself before me in a room decorated with lavish splendour. I am lying buried in soft carpets ... naked. In front of me, bent over me, a man with the hard, rough features of a man from the lowest strata of the people, with the hard-working fists, the weather-brown skin of a sailor. He kneels in front of me and pricks strange drawings into my soft flesh with a sharp needle. It hurts and yet it gives me a strange kind of lust ... I know the man is my lover.

A short, needle-sharp pain pulls my Body together into a twitching bliss. I wrap my white arms around the man's neck and pull him down to me ... and kiss him and place his hard, calloused hands on my chest and shoulders and kiss him again in a staggering frenzy and clutch him and pull him tight against me so that he moans breathlessly. -

Now I have grabbed him with my teeth by the brown throat, by this throat that I love so much and the sight of which has often given me raptures, my tongue caresses this throat with moist love ... and now - and now I have to press my teeth into the brown, hard flesh - I can't help it - I have to bite ... and I bite ... I bite ... his moans turn into gasps ... I feel the man in my arms writhing and twitching convulsively ... but I don't let go ... The body becomes heavy - heavy ... a warm stream runs down my body. The back of his head falls over - I let him slide out of my arms - with a dull thud

he falls backwards into the soft carpet ... a thick stream of blood gushes from his bitten neck. - Blood, blood everywhere, on the soft, white polar bear skins, on me ... everywhere.

I begin to scream ... hoarse and harsh sounds escape from my throat. The chambermaid rushes in, she must not have been far, perhaps outside the door in the next room ... was she listening? ... for a moment she remains frozen, unconscious, then she throws herself wordlessly over the dead man's body ... wordlessly and tearlessly ... she buries her face against his blood-covered chest - I can only see her clenching her fists. Now I know everything

...

And then I see another picture ...

Again I see myself and yet at the same time I am the one sitting in the wooden cart travelling to the guillotine. Then I stand at the top of the scaffolding and raise my eyes to the sun for the last time, and as I turn round at length, my gaze falls on a young woman who has pushed herself right to the front, into the first row ... she ... the lover of the man who was the instrument of my lust ... with a pale, twitching face, in a red skirt and bare shirt and fluttering hair ... her eyes glow wildly, like those of a predator, moist as if with restrained pain and lustful, as if with great joy. Then she raises her clenched fists to her face and her mouth moves ... she wants to speak, to mock me, to insult me, but she can only scream - broken and unintelligible ... then I lay my head under the guillotine.

I know everything now.

I know whose head it was that night in front of the blazing bonfire of a ghastly revenge over

I also know who the young woman was who was torn apart, mangled, crushed by the unleashed beasts in the dark palace courtyard that same night ... the hundreds of nail points ache in my head ... I am bound to this body ... to this body full of terrible memories and dreadful pain, to this sinful, beautiful body that has passed through all the gates of hell.

This terrible ambivalence of my being is tearing me apart ... oh, not for much longer ... I feel all my limbs weakening, my flesh parts becoming soft and detached ... all my inner organs becoming spongy and liquefied ... the dissolution begins.

Soon the night will embrace me, my ecclesiastical two-columned self - the night of decay ... the bodies will fall apart - the spirit will become free. -

And the hand stopped writing and disappeared.

My adventure with Jonas Barg

"Gentlemen," I began, "life! Life!

'Life is not the greatest good,' says the poet, but he is wrong. It is not only the highest good, it is even our only good. What we feel in terms of happiness, joy, Dionysian intoxication and peaceful comfort are projections of life onto our souls. And our souls? What are they but vibrations of the one infinite life, intersections of the two great possibilities of existence, of time and space, spherical consciousness and life in general, gentlemen, hurrah! ..."

I would have continued in this manner for a long time, cheered on by the excellent punch, to the murmur of applause and the encouraging shouts of my club mates, if the hated voice had not called out in between. I found myself paying more attention to my opponent's words than to my own, as I went on for a few more sentences in order to force her down. My hymn broke in half.

"You see, dear friends," he said, "you are all gripped by a chemical megalomania, animated preparations who imagine themselves to be the masters of a creation that is nothing but the green blanket over a swamp full of rot and filth. Life is a combustion process, an oxidation, or, if you like, an exchange of matter, provided you believe in the idol of matter. Life is a dark process in the ganglionic system of a monstrous abomination whose name I have given you.

rather conceal, flatulent gases in its bowels, and its glow, gentlemen, is the glow of mould."

Depending on our level of intoxication, these words had an effect. The reasonably sober became serious and morose, looked into their glasses and cast angry glances at the enemy of life, the heavily inebriated began to resist him noisily with faltering reasons, and the completely drunk fell on his neck crying, tried to kiss him and sobbingly begged his forgiveness that life was such a great evil.

Jonas Barg stood in their midst, motionless as a post, and looked after me with eyes burning with the glow of night watches, as if he expected my answer. "Children," I said, "children, what's the use of talking? Life has us and holds us, gives us new miracles every day and constantly defeats its adversary from morning to night."

I thought I had said something quite trivial, an emergency excuse, an evasion, but Jonas Barg cried out as if scorched by a red-hot iron, flung his glass away from him and fell onto his chair. The drunkards wept around him, supporting each other and soaking the shoulders of their skirts, while the others, enraged by his tactless disruption of a blazing mood, withdrew from him and gathered round me.

"Leave him alone," said the engineer Munk, "he'll calm down again."

When I had been transferred to this city from my previous station, I had made friends and found like-minded companions here in the "Club of the Unspecified".

the. We all walked devoutly through the temples of life, but also did not disdain to celebrate its mysteries with lavish orgies in the small, secluded recesses of these temples. My superiors, who had removed me from my previous place of work because of my great pranks, helped me into an environment that suited me even better by responding to even greater suggestions. I felt at home in the

"Club of the reckless", but I knew from the very first moment that a hatred was radiating towards me, that a force was working against me, striving to destroy me. Something dangerous threatened me in the strangely empty eyes of my club mate Jonas Barg, which seemed to be stuck at the end of a long tube. The friendliness with which he tried to approach me only made me more suspicious and gave me, who was otherwise quick and open in giving away my affections, dewy-eyed misgivings and cautions against him. My club mates had similar feelings, only far less clearly. When I asked them to tell me the strange story of how this secretive and uncanny man, whose civil life nobody knew anything about, had been accepted into their society, they all fell silent in dismay. Nobody had actually asked about it. In a heavy drunken stupor, at the end of a long and boisterous party, he had been promised admission to the club, in those sympathies of intoxication which even now, strangely enough, always drew people to him. When they had to decide on his admission the next day, no-one seemed to be against it. An unacknowledged fear held back all opposition. So he became a club mate, even though the others feared and hated him. Everything

It had been kept hidden as if by secret agreement until my questions had set it free. It was only then that people began to wonder why his presence had repeatedly disturbed the most beautiful festivities, and considered every possible way of removing him from our circles. In the meantime, however, everyone closed in on me as if they were seeking protection against some unknown adversary.

On that evening, when Jonas Barg so rudely interrupted my hymn with his hatred of life, this relationship was particularly evident. But Jonas Barg broke away from his crying friends and came towards me. He held out his hand to me. It was a hand whose skin seemed as cold and lifeless as leather, and whose fingers wrapped around mine like a lock snapping shut. "Principled opposition," he said, "should not divide us. You are a friend of life, I find it neither great, nor beautiful, nor good. But our personal relationship should not suffer from these opposing views."

"Listen," said the engineer Munk, "it's not the attitude, but the tone of voice ..." Courage always rose up around me: "You didn't speak like an opponent of the cause, but like someone driven mad by anger."

It was not possible to continue this conversation, for the binge returned to his bed and roared away irresistibly with all resistance. Barg sat down beside me and threw a cold kindness at me, whose limbs I felt like netting on my face and neck. In front of our drunkenness, large, red, fantastic

Flowers, the sight of which drove us crazy and awakened all the base instincts of destruction. All the jewellery was carried to a heap and pounded in a mortar; everyone took a piece of the metallic pulp into their glass, sprinkled in a little of the laurel wreaths hanging on the wall, and drank the champagne along with the gold and glory. Some took needles and stabbed them through the flesh of their bare arms and thighs, others scorched their bodies with candles and seemed not to feel the torment of the flame in their heavy intoxication. The walls slowly began to turn in circles, finally leaning at an angle towards each other, and as all the corners levelled out, a dome arched over our heads, whirling around some tilted axis at breakneck speed.

The further the night progressed, the more amazing the Drunkenly and all the more amicably, the club mates joined Jonas Barg, who sat motionless as a post in our midst; he drank immense quantities of wine from the large vessels we passed around filled with champagne. The engineer Munk had sat down on his other side and became more and more tender and urgent in his friendship. It all seemed so strange to me, and suddenly I realised with uncomfortable clarity that we were all sitting around Barg and that he was the centre of attention. I got up and went out to sober myself with cold water. From the large lion's head above the black marble basin, a wide stream gushed over my head, helping my willpower to restore a sobriety that was quite contrary to the programme. As I straightened up, I felt Jonas

Barg behind me. He looked at me with his empty eyes as if from afar, and hatred darkened his voice as he said, "You're a bad club mate. Is this the vowed imprudence? Are you interrupting the momentum of this marvellous party with a water cure?"

I pulled myself together as if wrestling with a strong opponent: "Life demands limits to madness. And besides, where is the recklessness that you also praised as a club mate? I've never seen her in the throes of joy."

As if hit by a blow, his head sank between his shoulders. He let me past him into the hall. Here the intoxication had taken most of his comrades and thrown them lifelessly on top of each other in the most despicable positions. The others sat there foaming at the mouth and slobbering confused words. "The banquet of Plato by Sophocles," cried the engineer Munk, "but when morning came and the others were under the table, they were still sitting ... my Plato." He spoke tearfully into Jonas Barg's tangled beard and swallowed with emotion.

"Let's go," said Barg, offering me his arm, "Take it, we want to return home with united forces."

"Thank you, my strength alone is enough. If you want to earn merit, support your friend Munk."

Nothing about this strange man was so terrible to me as his eyes, which seemed far less tamed by his dangerous will than his mouth. He silently took the heavily intoxicated man under his arm and, as we were being led away from the equally drunk

He followed us up the stairs, where mocking masks grinned from the walls.

The morning was damp and foggy, and in the early dawn the city began to go about the business of its defence. Huge amounts of snow had fallen during the night, weighing down all the roofs and forcing the street sweepers to work hard to clear the paths of traffic. We had hardly taken a few steps when there was a heavy thud behind us, and at the same moment we were surrounded by a heavy flurry of snow. As if in a whirl, it tore us round after our companion. Jonas Barg was standing next to a pile of snow, motionless as a post, his eyes glaring through the twilight.

"Where is Munk? Munk!"

Barg pointed to the mountain of snow, which was still trickling softly, like an animal that settles down to sluggish rest after a successful jump. We threw ourselves over the mountain, which covered half the road, and began to work with our hands and sticks. The street sweepers, after carefully considering the case, joined in the efforts to rescue the casualty; some baker's boys put down their bread baskets and dug themselves halfway into the snow. The early drifters in the street, half-frozen drunkards, gathered around us and were driven apart with a grin by some guards, who eagerly investigated the causes of the accident and wrote down the number of the house from whose steep roof the avalanche had slipped in their thick notebooks.

When we freed the friend after half an hour he lay dead in front of us. With a broken neck, suffocated or hit by a heart attack, I don't know.

We didn't ask, because it was the supreme law of the "club of the unthinking" not to talk about death or the dead. If one of our circle died, it was as if he had merely passed away, and no word of sympathy was allowed to follow his memory. For a year, there was a glass in his place at every party. That was all that our statutes allowed as a tacit memorial.

It was difficult for me to cope with my pain and horror alone. I often came close to transferring my horror to my friends; but it was all so vague, so full of merely imagined horrors, that I hardly dared to make it clear to myself. At the moment when Jonas Barg was shown to us, erect and marvellously preserved beside the mound of snow piled up like a gigantic white grave, it seemed to me as if his gesture were still sinking back as if from an order and his painfully thin lips were hiding a bestial smile. Once I had become obsessed with this thought, I would lead him through a labyrinth of questions. What if I had gone with Barg instead of Munk? Would I have been killed by the avalanche? Was that perhaps why he had offered me his arm?

That my friends also suffer from similar thoughts I had no doubt that they were suffering, but nevertheless we kept silent against each other and suppressed our fears in heroic battles. We held fast to our principles and, as it is wont to do in such cases of somewhat spasmodic cheerfulness, we inflamed each other to even madder pranks, carried us away to wild dances high above the parquet of society. I must say

that the most fantastic stories came from me, and that it was also me who instigated the acrobatic pieces. Tormented by an unquenchable thirst for the outlandish, I fell in with the idea of transforming our whole club into a gang of artists, of turning all quiet, bourgeois pleasures upside down or enclosing them with obstacles, and of adding to our old appetites the strange and new sensations of danger or at least of difficulty. As we were all obliged by our status to exercise, and most of us were excellent gymnasts, many also swimmers, rowers, fencers and horsemen, we soon succeeded in performing simple feats such as jumping through hoops, balancing and falling from the trapeze. As we progressed from easier to more difficult exercises, our enjoyment of these things grew, and we were hardly able to eat our meals in any other way than hanging upside down from swings, twirling the roasting dishes around on a fork or squatting on a taut rope that cut into our flesh. Yes, we had also included tightrope walking in our programme, and my dearest friend Dittrich, who had taken Munk's place, and myself excelled in this area. In this way we were able to compete with many travelling artists who performed in front of astonished peasants, and we did ourselves no small favour with such a strong will, which was able to replace what professional artists only seemed to achieve through years of practice. Our club rooms were transformed into a circus, their overly refined perfumes gave way to the smell of sweat and

A haze of overheated bodies. We felt comfortable in this tension of all our powers and forgot what we were obliged to keep quiet about anyway. Only Jonas Barg seemed to disagree with the transformation of things. He, who seemed to blossom in our shattering and puffed himself up, as it were, watching our convulsive merriment, felt our new fervour with unease and shrank down, becoming even more scornful and bony. When he was asked to take part in our plays, he did as the best of us did, without ever being seen to practise seriously. But there was something spinelessly angular about his manner, an articulation without joints, which seemed extremely unpleasant, like a lack of human conditions in his art.

But the greatest idea in this section of our Club life didn't come from me.

"Do you know, children," said my friend Dittrich one evening, "do you know that the shows at Bar num's circus start tomorrow?" He sat on the tightrope above the table with his legs crossed, knocked the head off a bottle of champagne and drank from it while we laughed up at him.

"Of course, of course! Well, what next?"

"What next? Gentlemen! Children! What next? The obvious is never found. We go there after the performance and greet his artists as colleagues."

The proposal was just outlandish enough to meet with our approval. I was among the most enthusiastic supporters of the idea until Jonas Barg's warm interest made me suspicious. He approached me with his obnoxious friendliness, which made me incessantly

and said: "This idea is so good that it could be yours."

"Thank you."

"Now we can show our tricks to an audience that knows how to appreciate them. Only those who know the conditions of an art will truly appreciate the mastery of its practice."

"Certainly, certainly!" I left him standing there because I couldn't bear to look at his eyes. But I felt her gaze on my back.

Barnum arrived in our town the next day with his monstrous apparatus, erected his giant structure in a few hours and was able to put on the first show in the evening. We inspected his hideous abnormalities and then followed the work of his artists in the large circus ring with expert criticism. In the cloakroom, the servants had our uniforms ready. After the performance, we informed one of the directors of our plans, overcame his reservations with the prospect of a fun and lavish night and finally persuaded him to hold back the most outstanding of his members with all kinds of mysterious hints. A strange gathering awaited us when, after a short time, we marched back into the circus ring in our disguise. At first we looked at each other like two hostile armies, but when the quickly prepared tables swayed under the weight of the dishes, we became familiar with each other.

The mistrustful director had at first only the schma-
The lights of his petrol burners were sacrificed, so that the immense room drew its darkness wall-high around an unsecret group. After the first corridors of the

At the table, which had been provided by the best restaurant in the city, the mood rose and the director rose to make a speech in broken German about the unexpected hospitality of the amiable amateurs. One of us replied in even more broken English, and now the arc lamps flickered into festive illumination. We came together on the inspiration of a grotesque whim. The moss girl sat on the lap of a financial councillor, the giant lady held a lieutenant in her arms like a baby, laying him across her monstrous breasts, and the female monkey had her fur cuddled by a cloth manufacturer. Two court secretaries and a professor studied the map of Borneo on the body of the tattooed Malay woman. The male peculiarities had also found their friends. The skeleton man was chatting with a doctor about medical issues, the tallest man in the world, perhaps attracted by the strange sympathies of opposites, was sitting next to a daintily built lawyer, and the smallest man in the world, a dwarf king from old fairy tales, had moved his high chair next to a giant pharmacist, who was rumoured to be able to crush his porcelain rubbing bowls with one hand in anger. The other club members were more modest and grouped the real artists, the parterre acrobats, Japanese jugglers and aerialists in a colourful row between them. Next to the beautiful tightrope walker, Miss Ellida, who glittered like a snake, my friend Dittrich unfurled his stupendous science of tightrope walking like a large bouquet. I saw that he was puffed up with pleasure, while I myself was dancing with the Arabian animal tamer Fatme in the hot air.

I had an intimate conversation about the training of wild animals with Fatme in her native Viennese dialect. It lasted, I say, because Fatme had the courtesy to show me certain crude tricks of her practice on my own body.

Our merriment became so loud and noisy that from the cages of the menagerie all around us the beasts answered with roars and we sat as if in a circle howled round by hellish demons. The evidence of the new friendships, these affections that were heated to the point of explosion in remote corners, became more and more burning. I felt that something was preparing to force me to exercise all caution. Into the hot whispers of Fatme, who was again showing me a grip with tight fists, I suddenly heard the voice of Jonas Barg, who was sitting in the midst of the general fraternisation, motionless as a post.

"We're sitting there, celebrating ourselves and you as colleagues, but

Apart from our jerseys, we haven't yet proven our credentials. We should show what we can do."

The others did not think twice, jumped into the sand of the ring and began to perform their tricks, which Barnum's artists watched with some amazement at so much unexpected skill. But Jonas Barg did not seem to be satisfied with this triumph and suggested that Dittrich and I should show ourselves on the tightrope. "It's only up there that you can decide whether you have strength, courage and stamina," and he pointed to the canvas roof of the round building, under which Miss Ellida's rope still stretched from the performance.

I consider it my duty to confess here that

I was seized at that moment with such horror, such a terrible fear of death, as if I, dragged to the edge of an abyss, heard the inevitable judgement to jump in. But Dittrich looked into the mocking eyes of the beautiful Ellida and, heated by her glittering serpentine body, agreed so unconditionally that I hardly dared to object. All the director's objections were overruled, and some eager performers were already holding the rope on which we were to climb up to the high wire. My mind raced past all the possibilities of rescue in an immeasurably short space of time, driven by a fear that can only occur in the madness of persecution. I found nothing, I found nothing ... I only cried out: "But the net, there is no net ..."

"It's nothing reckless with the net," said Jonas Barg like an executioner. "It's bread and butter with the net," said the beautiful Ellida and laughed.

"Come on, come on," shouted Dittrich and grabbed the rope hanging down. I saw his arm muscles swelling under the rosy jersey and could have dragged him away from there, because I saw Jonas Barg's eyes like red-hot iron in the caves. I had no choice but to follow him. I hesitantly took two steps, stumbled over a bottle half-buried in the sand of the ring - it jolted me, I cried out and collapsed. They jumped to me and picked me up, found out that I had hurt my foot and sat me down on a chair. Now my rope skills were over, and my soft whimpering moved the beautiful Fatme to such compassion that her rough fists became very soft and tender. Dittrich, however, angrily and without caring for me, reached up to the rope and pulled me down.

Dittrich climbed up and over our heads, while the tears came hot and heavy from my eyes and Fatme, softened by my pain, sobbed quietly. Now Dittrich dived into the regions of the roof, grabbed the rope and began his walk with the quickly pulled balancing pole. One foot moved forwards in front of the other until he had found a firm step and, emitting shrill cries, advanced faster and faster. All around me, the barking, grunting and roaring of the animals answered, the sounds clumped together, pushed across the ground and seemed to fill my lungs like vapours. I hardly dared to breathe, for I felt Jonas Barg beside me, and just as Dittrich sat down for a short rest in the centre of the lake, he said close to my ear: "You are too cautious, my friend, for a member of the club of the reckless. Are you also asking me to believe that you've been representing the foot?"

He knew it ... he knew that I was doing a comedy. played, by God, a miserable comedy to avoid having to go up the rope, that I had cowardly abandoned my friend because I was afraid of death, because I was afraid of him, Jonas Barg. Then he laughed beside me, and without looking I thought I felt that he was leaving me. Stretched out beside the flattering Fatme, I tried to support my friend high above with my gaze and twitched my feet involuntarily. Suddenly I saw a shadow, an elongated shadow with an angular jerk, a kind of orbital agility, climbing up the low-hanging rope. This shadow ... this hideous, spider-legged shadow - it was him. Nobody saw him.

Nobody screamed. I didn't scream either. All I could do was flap my arms and jump up, while I saw the shadow reach the rope, straighten up and glide on like a column of mist in the brightness of the electric light. Dittrich was almost at the end of the rope and was just beginning to prepare to turn round when the shadow reached him. I can still see it before me, how the ends of the balancing pole came into a strong swinging motion, how Dittrich, seeking his balance, came to a standstill. At that moment, the shadow jumped onto my friend's back, and for a heartbeat I thought I saw Jonas Barg's grin on Dittrich's pale face, which was turned towards us with a sudden jerk. Dittrich screamed out, quite differently from before, not cheering but in mortal fear, dropped the balancing pole and grabbed his neck with his hands as if he wanted to free himself from choking fists. Then there was only a very short struggle up there, a struggle with the relentless force of the earth, and now it tore the body far out and flung it down with tangled limbs. It fell so close to Miss Ellida's feet that her glistening serpent's body recoiled abruptly.

I didn't push my way through to the shattered man, I had no other favour towards this event than to look for Jonas Barg. When I turned, he was standing beside me, and his eyes, which lay like glowing iron in grey hollows, shamefully held back me, who wanted to throw myself over him. I still had no power over him, I still had to seek the word that would free me from him.

The silence after Dittrich's death was more unbearable than physical pain, most unbearable of all

for me, who thought I had seen something so strange that the strict seclusion almost destroyed me. I felt the urge to break the laws of the club, and often, when at dusk our laboured sanctity waned, I was close to uttering what everyone was thinking. The dislike of my fellow club members for Jonas Barg had become ever greater and quite obvious, as if they knew of the suspicion that made me uneasy without my being able to find a name for it. Only Jonas Barg himself seemed to be unaware of it; he came and went as before, without any of us being able to fathom the secret of his bourgeois life. Despite my efforts, I couldn't come to any conclusions either; I only realised that he didn't live in the city. He was absolute, unrelated, like a force of nature.

In place of our artistry, the first

We couldn't find a new game for weeks. Professor Hannak, who studied history in the breaks between our feasts, introduced us to the idea of historical masquerades in which we surrendered to the spirit of past times, far removed from the present. In our endeavour to quickly grasp something new and forget the two friends whose silent memory the empty glasses in front of their seats invited us to keep, we turned our attention above all to those times whose merriment, whipped up by cruel haste, seemed like a terrible vortex. The lavishness with which we lavished our orgies in the style of Persian kings, Roman decadence and French rococo almost equalled, on a smaller scale, the luxury of those times themselves. Throughout the city, whose murmurings we heard in our strictly closed

We had learnt to despise our community, they spoke of our doings. We were regarded as doomed, and the more often the prophecies of our dire end reached us, despite all precautions, the louder we laughed and the more immoderate our megalomaniacal endeavours became.

Something was driving us forward, something we were trying to escape because we hated it, and it seemed to me that there was some connection between this drive and Jonas Barg, who was as immovable as a stake and went along with everything. It was no longer the heightened addictions of life, but something else, perhaps its straight reflection, as I admitted to myself in the grey days after our angry nights. It was no longer recklessness, but madness, which dragged us through all the labyrinths of pleasure, and none of us was in any doubt for a moment that it was only by chance that the police had not yet intervened against us.

One day, Jonas Barg stood up in our midst and, his eyes fixed on me, he invited us to a party at his place.

"I see you are very surprised, gentlemen," he said, "that I ask you to come to me, because I have not yet introduced any of you to me. But my reticence, often very annoying to me, was stronger than the desire to see you with me. But now that your interests touch on my own field, I dare to make my request. I am also a historian, merely an amateur, of course, and have been staying in the rooms of Neufels Castle for several weeks during these beautiful autumn days."

"Neufels is a ruin," shouted the first lieutenant.

"That's precisely why I love the castle so much, because as you know, I seek decay. By the way, I can reassure you that you will find everything with me just as your strong instincts of life" - the empty eyes burned - "require. Let it be my concern to make your stay with me so amusing that you will lose all desire to escape from my domain. You shall miss nothing, or, rather, you shall desire nothing of what you now consider indispensable."

Although Jonas Barg tried to turn the creaking and screeching of his voice into an amiable whisper, my restlessness found hidden threats, the sense of secret malice in his words. And the others felt the same way, for their approval barely concealed an inordinate hatred of this man who seemed to be making them do his bidding. We all growled like wild beasts against the tamer, and in vain I endeavoured to free myself from the shocks in order to regain the security that had made me strong and certain of victory against Jonas Barg. It was a struggle for the better part of me, whose courage and confidence seemed to have been banished by an enchantment.

In such conditions, the most important changes tend to be

The changes occur in an almost inexplicable way, without the control of consciousness. Some imperceptible occasion, the colouring of the air, a word lost and found again, the fragment of a melody from afar, a bird call, the gurgling of the waves on the trunks of the shore acts like a violent blow, triggers a whole wealth of relationships, a sudden frenzy overthrows all the laws of psychology and logic.

gic, resonates beyond all possibilities and brings about the most marvellous transformations. Of the strange things I still have to tell, the strangest is what I experienced the evening before the festival. I was standing on the bridge over the river, looking at the dirty water in which the waste from the factories was floating, and felt myself gliding silently towards the direction of the river. The whistles and foghorns of the factories all around me howled out the end of work. Two girls walked past behind me and laughed. Someone nudged me. Over there, a policeman was standing by the man with Turkish delight and sugared figs, tying up the threads of a peaceful conversation.

At that moment I spoke very calmly and half-out loud to myself: "If you read the name Barg the other way round ... B ... a ... r ... g, it's Grab." I was so frightened and my whole body trembled that I had to touch the bridge railing. But then, with the return of all my strength, I felt a tremendous exultation, for I knew that I had found the word of power over the enemy.

Following Professor Hannak's suggestion, we had conjured up the time of Velasquez in Spain for the party and the next evening we transformed ourselves into Spanish grandees, monks, painters and soldiers in a small railway guard's cottage at the foot of the ruins. Our procession caused great consternation among some of the peasants who met us on the steep path down from the ruins, as we kept all thoughts of masked jokes at bay with our trembling seriousness. I was the last of us to leave, fully aware that we were facing a terrible experience and determined to defend ourselves by any means necessary.

In the castle courtyard, between ruined staircases, Jonas Barg squatted on a stone in the garb of a jester and, after a brief greeting, danced in front of us as our guide. The cracked walls enclosed us on all sides and squeezed us into a narrow corridor with acetylene lamps at certain intervals along the walls. They popped out of the damp walls like blooming tulips and illuminated a path on which Jonas Barg jumped ahead of us in the strangest of contortions. From time to time he turned his pale face towards us to make sure that we were all following him. Endless was this corridor, from the brightness of which side passages crept away into the darkness, and it seemed to me that Barg was deliberately leading us in circles. The giant apothecary was fearless enough to joke even here, while the others were all overcome by paralysis. His laboured exhortations were not taken up by anyone, and it was only when they were standing in the large vault of the banquet that the others found the courage to speak. Here the host had happily captured the spirit of those fanatical and closed times. A luxury at the service of an unparalleled cruelty, a piety that unashamedly allied itself with lust, seemed to have organised this feast. In this vault beneath the ruins of an ancient castle, all the treasures of an Indian princely court were on display, as only the wicked over-refinement of Spain, fuelled even more by the spirit of religious ecstasy, could succeed in doing.

In addition to devices that use shameless art to from the remotest regions of fornication, there were cups, which had been sublimely worked with not less than

masterfully depicted the suffering of Christ. The bread on the plates was engraved with the holy letters I. N. R. I. were engraved on the bread, and the towels showed a replica of Veronica's sweat cloth on the finest fabric. The fine skins of silver-grey rabbits had been used as a substitute, but the animals, from which the skins had been removed alive, lay covered in blood and still twitching under a glass lintel in front of the plate of every participant in this meal. And in the centre of the table stood a cross with a human-sized marble Christ, whose eyes, lit from within, illuminated the entire table. In addition to this light, each guest had special little candlesticks at their place, in which strange candles were burning. They looked like dried meat and smelled of spices and resin.

Around the table, at which we sit with reluctance and In the room where we sat in horror, precious tapestries were richly decorated with scenes from the life of the court, monthly pictures and landscapes from the vast territories of world-dominating Spain. Our servants fetched the dishes from an adjoining room, where they stood ready in sealed containers, and served them up with shaking limbs, while Jonas Barg jumped back and forth between the people, beating them with his whip and knocking them out for their clumsiness.

I sat between the professor, whose long gagging beard stuck out from his chin like a horn, and the lawyer, who shivered and wrapped his limbs in his monk's habit, and couldn't look away from the twitching animal that was hiding in front of me under its glass lintel.

ended. I was determined to savour none of this food and drink nothing from these goblets, whose shape was embossed with a foul joke in gold. Jonas Barg was quite different from his usual self, his immobility seemed to have fallen from him like a mask, but the foolish manner with which he performed the duties of host made him even more hideous. His eyes glowed, and suddenly I found in myself the comparison I had been searching for in vain for so long: how the fire of hell becomes visible between the fissures of a fissured earth crust. Jumping from one to the other, he forced us to eat and drink and stood with the same ceremonies in front of the empty seats where, as always, two glasses commemorated our dead friends.

So the night progressed to its centre, and a kind of rage took hold of my friends, arising from the same instinct that makes criminals want to anaesthetise themselves before they are led to their deaths. The tormenting pleasure under the glowing eyes of the image of Christ became so repulsive to me, the only one who retained his sobriety in the expectation of danger, at the sight of the dead, bloody corpses under the glass bells, at the smell of these incense burners of dried flesh, that an angry disgust threatened to overwhelm me. It became most disgusting when, at midnight, some of the town's well-known prostitutes jumped in to show off their skills in lewd dances and rolled around on the large carpet to the roar of the audience. After Jonas Barg had chased them out again with his whip, the unhealthy apothecary rose from his seat, swaying, and stood up.

He slurred his praise of his host, to which he added plenty of Spanish curses, as he had once learnt them on a summer holiday in the Pyrenees. Jonas Barg rose to reply, his eyes fixed on me, and said, seeming to roll the words around in his mouth like stones: "Oh, my friends, how pleased I am that my banquet has met with your approval. I hesitated for a long time to lead you into my kingdom because I was worried that your courage and arrogance would find it a little too gloomy here. But now, to my joyful astonishment, I must learn that life flourishes all the more brightly and loudly under the very shadows of that which our statutes forbid to be spoken. Here, surrounded by the symbols of its power, surrounded by the most manifold transformations of one and the same - how shall I put it - your joy leaps quite differently than on the indifferent surface of things. And: take care, gentlemen, it shall be much funnier still." He ordered wine to be poured and raised his cup with the heavy, viscous, dark red flood, after he had satisfied himself that the precious glass cups in front of the empty seats of the dead friends had also been filled. "Well, gentlemen, this wine, the best from the Spanish section of my cellars, is to your liking. Here's to a happy continuation of our party. Even if, as you know, I do not share your exuberant love, I know the duties of the host and therefore invite you to greet your tyrant, life, just as the gladiators who were about to die once again cheered their Caesar."

Whilst the others are all looking forward to the strange toast

I poured my wine unheeded on the ground to the contents of countless other glasses from which I had freed myself in the same way. As I did so, I looked with a desire for apparent impartiality at the places of the dead friends in front of whom the full glass goblets stood and saw ... how the dark red contents of the glasses slowly dwindled without being lifted by anyone's hand or touched by anyone's lips.

Then I knew that the moment of battle had come.

Jonas Barg looked with a disgusting grin along the entire circle of revellers, who had long forgotten the purpose of their disguise, stared each one in the face and said, cracking his whip in the palm of his hand: "Now, children, let's go for a walk. Between the two sections of a feast, the court used to indulge itself in the immense park of the Escorial. We want to follow the old, good custom, and I ask you to come with me to my park." His hand stretched out imperiously towards one of the large tapestries, on whose colourful surface the groups of trees and meadows of a park were depicted in sublime embroidery. As I followed his hand, I saw the trees and bushes becoming more and more prominent, standing out vividly, their rustling tops pressing together to form large masses. The lawns with winding paths stretched out between the groups and led into an open landscape. Until now, everything had remained like a model, but now the trees grew from toy size to the proportions of reality, bending in the night wind and veiling the open spaces.

Areas between their trunks with damp shadows. The darkened image became deep and so dangerously beautiful that I, who was ready for anything, trembled.

A mighty, mysterious park lay before us.

"Now, little children, take torches with you to light our way. The pretty mummy candles made of fingers and toes, thigh bones and collarbones should give us light." In the frenzy of victory, Jonas Barg paid no attention to me, grabbed his candlestick and everyone - everyone silently grabbed the candles next to their plates, arranged themselves into a long procession, and everyone - everyone prepared to follow him. Jonas Barg skipped ahead and was about to enter the shade of the first group of trees when I burst out, beside myself with fear and horror.

"Jonas Barg," I shouted, "Jonas Barg! Give back to the grave what came out of the grave!" It was as if a sudden earth tremor had blurred the outlines of all the objects in front of me. The trees and bushes, the whole dark park faded into the distance of a misty background against which a grimacing spectacle took place. Against this background, which emphasised every gesture like a decoration, stood Jonas Barg, convulsed by terrible spasms that were wrenching him around, now driving his body up and now pulling it together. He tried to rise and reached for me with a long arm. But his hand sank down, his face stared gruesomely like a death mask, and suddenly he disappeared with a terrible scream into a sudden darkness.

I don't know how long this darkness lay upon us. not to say; it probably lasted hardly more than a few minutes, but when life has thus plunged into the abysses of the

space, it also seems to have carried time with it. My first impressions were brought to my awakening consciousness through apprehensive breaths. They were my own breaths, but now I could soon distinguish others near me, and by groping and timid whispering we convinced ourselves that we were all still alive. We hardly dared to utter the thought of rescue and endeavoured to prove to each other the serenity in misfortune prescribed in the statutes, when lights and voices from the farthest shore of our sea, from silence and darkness, called us back into the world.

Through the narrow corridors, the crowd of our Rescuers came to us. The farmers, who had been puzzled by our strange procession, made a noise when we had not yet returned from the ruins after three days, and the rescue expedition found us after a long search and dangerous hikes through half-filled tunnels threatening to collapse. In this subterranean chamber, the torches were shaking our shadows against the wall like monsters of the primeval world. There was a desolate heap of debris where the table had stood, the walls were bare and glistened with trickling wetness. But in the place of the tapestry, whose embroidered park landscape had been transformed into the appearance of reality, in the place where Jonas Barg had disappeared with a terrible scream, a black hole gaped between the blocks of the foundation walls, behind which our investigation came to an abrupt halt. That was where Jonas Barg had gone and that was the direction of the train he was leading.

I did not let up until, with the help of together tied ladders, ropes and torches the

I dared to descend and pulled all my friends b e h i n d me, because I told myself that the burden of the inexplicable had to be lifted from us, at least in part, if we wanted to look life in the eye again. We went down into the depths of a well, more than a well, into one of those murder pits that were used in old castles to keep bloody secrets. When we finally reached the bottom, we found a skeleton next to a crevice that led even deeper and in the darkness of which water was rushing at the very bottom; Its arms were tied behind its back, its legs bound crosswise, and between the bare teeth of the skull was a cloth that was probably now mouldy and rotten, but even in this state still clearly retained the spasm of the coils, as it had been forcibly pressed into this now long-silent mouth.

Although there was no sign to suggest that this I knew that the skeleton had some connection to our missing host, but we all knew that the remains of Jonas Barg lay before us. And it was as if my friends released their long accumulated and suppressed hatred in sudden explosions. They gnashed their teeth, began to roar like furious animals and wanted to throw themselves over the carcass with fists and knives. Then the pity that had come to me darkly when I saw him swaying in the cruel convulsions against the background of the parkland at night came to me; it came big and bright, shooed my friends back and gave me the words: "My friends, keep the magnanimity of the living even against death. How he must have loved and enjoyed life that he still loves it!

is forced to visit it, even though he hates it and wants to despise it."

With a gesture of shuddering, the friends let go of the skeleton, lowered their heads and followed me out of the well and out of the old castle, where life was waiting for us with a bright autumn day.

The tomb at Pere Lachaise

Today I moved into the house that I'm not supposed to leave for a whole year.

All around me are smooth, cool marble walls, excellently joined, with no other decoration than a narrow moulding above and below, a moulding formed by a series of winged sun discs, the symbol of eternity among the Egyptians. What more does such a work need than the excellence of the work? I must say that this perfection in simplicity moves me more deeply than the most ingenious sculptural decoration. I look at these stones, which are so neatly fitted together that the joints can only be recognised as a fine line on close inspection. I run my finger over them, feel the cool, smoothly polished stone surfaces and experience all these touches as something delicious. The marble has few veins in it, they are like delicate mosses, like herbs or those plant-like sea creatures enclosed in a lump of crystal. If I look at them for a long time, it is as if these lightly coloured bands, spikes, points and strangely alien letters are under a layer of transparent ice, in a depth that can only just be seen. A frozen world of attractive forms, excluded from the coincidences and sensations of life and movement. The noblest material for a funerary monument.

In the centre of the rear wall, a few spans above
The bronze plaque with the simple inscription is
embedded in the floor: Anna Feodorowna Wassilka,
died

13 March 1911: She closes the shaft into which the coffin was sunk.

A narrow gap leads out of this marble building into the open air. Outside, the cemetery lies in the sunlight of the August day, inside it is cool, only around the entrance the air still plays in small, warm waves, bringing with it the scent of flowers. Sometimes bees buzz past, or a blue iridescent fly stands for a moment with whirring wings in front of the gap, then suddenly twitches away. Apart from the buzzing and humming of small life above the graves, there is a deeper sound, an uninterrupted trembling of the air.

This is Paris.

Paris, which lies beyond the Pere Lachaise, its surf of labour and pleasure and passion foaming against the peace of this place.

When I step into the entrance, which is just the width of a man, I have reached the limit of my territory. For a year, this view from the entrance to a tomb is the only view I have of the outside world. A view of graves and grave monuments.

But I can be satisfied with this view. When I bow down, I can still see Bartholomew's heartfelt and wondrous work on the right, the deeply felt stone memorial to a love that cannot pass away. I see the figures of the weary, the broken, the desperate, tottering towards the gates of death. I see the two touching lovers who are about to enter the darkness. The man, united and strong in the face of fate, the woman who shares his path with such infinite devotion and trust.

I will not stay in my marble room for long, even though I have to spend a year in it.

I sit like Jerome in the enclosure, but I hear Paris, I breathe the scent of all these flowering tombs, I have the glimmer of art. And like Jerome in the enclosure, I am well supplied with books, with writing materials and paper, and I will write my great work in this solitude. Not a work of @Godliness, like Jerome, but one of science. Here I will finalise my thoughts on the decay and finiteness of matter, I will build a system from all the individual facts, from the surprises that science has given us over the last few decades, which will bear my name.

What do I actually want? Aren't all my wishes fulfilled even now? Did I, the poor private scholar who could only satisfy his love of independent research by tightening his hunger belt, ever dare to hope for such a thing?

I have time to complete my work. All disturbances are kept away from me because I am not allowed to speak to anyone for a year except the servant who brings me food twice a day. Neither friendship nor love is allowed to come to me. And I have no worries about my daily bread. Madame Feodorovna Vasilska feeds me. She has even set the menu for the whole week. And truly, as much as I can say today, on the third day of my solitude, the menu leaves nothing to be desired. The lady in whose tomb I sit knew a thing or two about a good meal. Why should I deny it, I am happy to be able to eat so well and so richly ... my

Meals have my full attention. Each of them is an experience for me. I've had to starve for too long not to appreciate a stuffed poulard or a salted pork tongue with this wonderful Polish sauce or these Russian-style appetisers.

So I feel completely at ease, and I know that this well-being will last the whole year of my imprisonment.

But when the year is over, I will receive the small sum of two hundred thousand francs from the late Madame Wassilska.

This means that I don't need to whimper to any publisher to see my work printed. Because, of course, the scoundrels would laugh at me if I, as a poor devil, were to ask them to print a book that would make all the airheads in the academy roar. Now I don't need them. Now I can be my own publisher or buy one of them if it suits me.

Two hundred thousand francs?

This means that I can go on lecture tours to take my ideas wherever my book has not reached.

That means I'll pack my little Margot into a car and take her to the railway station. The next morning we'll be in Marseille, and the white yacht out on the blue sea will be waiting for us. Poor little girl, she's been through such a bad time with me that she richly deserves a trip to fairytale happiness. Sunshine and sea air every day and nothing else to do but spend it as cosily as possible.

This Madame Anna Feodorowna Wassilska must have been - may my "benefactress graciously forgive me - a strange piece of furniture, a crazy chicken, even crazier than we Parisians are used to from her compatriots.

I have a very specific idea of this Madame Wassilska. It was based on a picture and on reports from her neighbourhood.

I think of her as a kind of Empress Catherine, full of greed to grasp life in all its forms, from the finest to the most brutal. These rich Russian women come to Paris from their immense estates somewhere in the dusty steppes or between bogs and endless fields of grain. For years they have maltreated their peasants and taken part in some nice little conspiracy for a change. Now they come to Paris and want to enjoy to the full what life at home has given them drop by drop.

I think I read that in the expressions on her face.

When I agreed to fulfil the terms of her will in court, I was shown her portrait and left alone with it for an hour, as instructed in the will.

Well, Mrs Wassilska did not present the painter with any difficult dress problems. She is not one of those ladies in white or red or green that swarm around the salon in their dozens. She is, so to speak, a lady in nothing.

She stands naked in front of an open window, and she has a beautiful body ... that has to be said. The head shows the austere, autumnal beauty of a woman in

the fifties. Smart, cold eyes under splendidly arched brows, a coarse Russian nose, a full, luscious mouth whose blood-red lips seem to slowly recede from the strong, white teeth, while a cruel and cool smile - a real Gioconda smile - is more to be sensed than actually expressed. The painter has created the hands in a strange way. The fingers are so long and tapering, and there is such a strange shadow on them that they almost look like claws.

Oh, in view of this picture, one can imagine that this woman's first youthful love frenzies must have brought her unprecedented happiness.

What the neighbours told me about the Wassiliska is very consistent with this picture.

Because as soon as I was determined to earn the two hundred thousand francs I had set aside, I naturally enquired about her. You don't want to spend a whole year living in the tomb of a complete stranger, you want to know who you have to say goodnight to.

Well, I've been told a lot of strange things, but it seems to me that they've kept even more from me. Perhaps the strangest and most unbelievable things because they didn't want to be laughed at. The good people don't realise how much of the unbelievable we can take, what appeal it has for us, whose imagination is otherwise completely captivated by numbers and experiments.

Madame Wassiliska loved art, as was to be expected after her cathartic nature. Her estate contains a whole collection of paintings from the period from Goya to van Gogh. They all represent

It is only the naked body that she depicts. Landscapes, still lifes and portraits seem to have had no appeal for her.

This collection of paintings is accompanied by a porcelain cabinet assembled according to the same principle. Nymphs and Naiads, Aphrodites, Galatheas and Graces from the hands of the masters of Meissen, Nymphenburg, Vienna and Sevres, figures on whose round, shiny forms the light plays. Dainty mistresses of gallant kings, women who took pleasure in knowing that they were goddesses carrying light or holding mirrors on the toilet table of their friends.

But Madame Wassilka doesn't just channel her love into art, which still leaves a longing for life.

And she has very brutal and action-loving needs. Like Catherine the Second, young men are introduced to her. She leaves her house in men's clothes to roam the streets and seek out God knows what adventures. Sometimes she hires the rooms of a big hotel and gives a splendid party. I remember hearing here and there about these nights, which, half court ball and half orgy, attracted the attention of Paris for a few days.

Sometimes her need for love takes a turn for the cruel. None of her girls are said to have lasted long with her. Like the Roman monks, she loves to stab her chambermaids in the flesh with long needles or suddenly scorch them with a blowtorch. A truly princely and ancient inclination, except that our Parisian chambermaids were not forced to endure what the Libyan or Persian slave girls had to endure.

Strangely enough, there is also the matter of the baker's apprenticeship.

ling. One day, Madame Wassilka sees the young baker who brings the buns to her house. He has a nice round neck. Madame Wassilka takes a liking to this neck and enquires whether the boy would let her bite his neck three times. A considerable number of francs allayed his concerns and made him inclined to do so. But after the second bite, he runs away screaming, falls ill and cannot be persuaded to enter the Russian woman's flat again.

This is the portrait of my benefactress.

It will be admitted that I have occupied the vestibule to the last flat of a very interesting woman, and that under these smooth marble tiles a hot urge has come to rest.

I started my work yesterday.

The first thing to do is to organise a countless number of pieces of paper. My friends have always laughingly reproached me for working as laboriously as a German professor. There is no shame, I think, in being thorough if you intend to build a system from which a new period of science is to take off.

Various types of slips of paper make up this unheard-of quantity. White ones, on which I have recorded my experiments and my own thoughts. Blue ones, on which the opposing opinions of other scholars are written. And yellow ones on which I refute these opinions. All of this has to be organised and arranged according to subject matter ...

But I had a little mishap right at the beginning of my work. Yesterday evening, I wrote the first part of my work in these notes well ordered.

net on the table. When I got up from my cot this morning, all these hundreds of notes were scattered all over the floor. They were difficult to pick up from the cold marble, it was as if they were clinging to it as if attracted by electrical forces.

A gust of wind must have blown in through the entrance gap during the night and swept down all these hundreds of leaves. Now I can start my work all over again.

Ivan could certainly tell more about his mistress if he only wanted to speak.

But I don't know yet whether he can say anything other than "Good day" and "Goodbye". He speaks these words in a croaking voice, like a papa gei or a gramophone from those very early days of his imperfection, when it was still called a phonograph.

He arrives twice a day on the dot with his little trolley, into which the aluminium pots containing the food are sunk and in which they are kept warm by a small system of flames. He pushes this little trolley in front of him like the Italian ice-cream sellers in the streets push their trolleys.

He comes slowly up the small hill, stops in front of his mistress's tomb and places the food on the table for me.

Then he squats on the floor opposite me, legs crossed, Tartar-style, and stares at me. It's not very pleasant to have your mouth stared at while you're eating. I tried to get him to chat, if only to avoid this embarrassing anglot-

and bring life to this face. It's as if I'm trying to wrestle an answer from a fence post.

Ivan is a little chap with bristly hair, on which he wears a Tartar cap even now in summer. If he were younger and prettier, I'd think he was doing it to attract attention and get lucky with the foreign-obsessed girls from Brittany, just as the Russian students run around in tube boots and tied-up skirts to find some little salesgirl they can keep. But Ivan is protected from such suspicions. His face is a landscape of mountains and valleys. Between pockmarks are countless red pustules, each with a white, pus-filled dot in the centre. The hairs of his drooping moustache are stuck in this desolate skin as if they had no roots and no connection between them. Like little rods that playing children have stuck into a pile of sand. The limbs of this grotesque abomination are attached to the body in a similarly disorganised manner, as if they had already been torn off and only clumsily reattached.

This bristly tartar is the only servant Madam Wassilka brought with her from her home country. He has survived all the changes in her service personnel and endured with his mistress.

He must know all their habits, he must be able to describe to me many a peculiarity of their nature, for these Russian men do not force themselves on their trusted servants.

Above all, I would like to know from him what the purpose

This strange provision may have been in his mistress's will. I can hardly imagine that her good heart impelled her to it; it is contrary to every trait of her character that *she* should have done *it* to earn the gratitude of one unknown to her, to secure her memory, to have someone certain whose soul must resonate with her name in every higher impulse of life.

Three things seem possible to me as the meaning of the will. It could simply have been fear of being buried alive. From time to time the newspapers publish horror stories about such cases, and perhaps she wanted to know that someone would be there to hear her if she woke up again in the eerie confines of her grave. - Stop! Then she should have ordered that her tomb be occupied immediately after her burial, but she should not have allowed the applicant to enter the year of the wake.

Or perhaps it was the fear of body snatchers. Perhaps she once heard of the case of Sergeant Bertrand, who had chosen this very *pere chaise* as the scene of his atrocities. One day, on seeing the body of a beautiful young girl, he had suddenly felt the urge to embrace her. The night after her burial, he crept into the cemetery, tore open the fresh grave and burrowed his way to the dead woman. The disgusting pleasure of this desecration was so great that from then on Bertrand could no longer refrain from roaming the cemeteries at night and searching for corpses like a hyena. He transformed it into a spinning movement. And how does this world ether

itself? Here is the great miracle where the physical is connected with the metaphysical. Here, Mr Poincaré, is where the transition of movement into substance takes place!

The world ether is nothing other than the transition of force into matter. Energy is not a property of matter, but it is that which previously existed, from which matter emerges. This also solves the riddle of the decay of matter, which so troubles our physicists; matter must decay in order to become pure energy again. The law of the conservation of force is correct, but its validity begins even *b e f o r e* the birth of matter. There is a cycle of world energy, which first forms matter from itself.

Therefore, the world ether is both material and immaterial, it is element and energy, it is the carrier of all phenomena of the visible world, but precisely because it must assume all properties, it is itself almost devoid of properties. That is why I cannot experimentally determine any of the properties of light in the ether that has become self-luminous in my marble house for unknown reasons.

However, there are circumstances that always fill me with consternation as often as I notice them, because they point to characteristics for which I have no explanation. I am referring to the disappearance of the bronze plaque on the back wall of the tomb. This phenomenon appears quite suddenly and disappears again just as suddenly, without me being able to observe any regularity.

I look up from my work in the middle of the night, the bronze plate is gone. I get up, go over to feel the metal - it really is gone, it's gone.

without leaving a trace. And after a while the bronze plate is back in place. It seems to me necessary to note that the reappearance of the bronze plate marks the end of an unpleasant feeling, a kind of breathlessness and a desperate palpitation that overcame me at the moment of its disappearance.

I have already thought about the other circumstance, the structural change of the marble.

And so, at the end of my attempts at explanation, I always have to confess that I am as clever as before. The incompatible properties of these radiations confuse me, and at the end of my confidently begun trains of thought I am always in doubt as to whether it is really the world ether that fills my dwelling with greenish light at night.

I have received an answer to my question.

Under the last sentence of the notes, which I only finished in the grey of the morning in order to go to sleep, exhausted to the point of sinking over, something is written. Under the question with which I had to end, it says:

"It is the breath of the Katechana."

Who is Katechana? What is that? The answer to my question gives me a new puzzle.

And who gave me this answer? That is perhaps the strangest thing about this whole swarm of oddities that surrounds me.

At first glance, it appears to be my own handwriting. It bears all the characteristic features of my features, the K broken in two in the centre, the elongated A. But you only need to take a closer look,

to realise that it is only an attempt to imitate my writing. As if a stranger had taken possession of it in order to amaze me with the most faithful reproduction possible.

But who would have come in here to play this joke on me?

Then all that remains is to assume that I got up in my sleep and wrote the enigmatic answer myself, with my own handwriting somewhat altered by the abnormal state of my brain.

But then where did I get the word *katechana*, which I have no idea what it could mean? From a dream, from the abysses of consciousness, where no ray of wakefulness penetrates?

Of course, I have not yet noticed any tendency to sleepwalk in myself, I, whose body has never played any other tricks on me than paroxysms of hunger, I, whose mind was trained to walk the steepest high mountain paths of research without vertigo.

After all, it is not impossible that I could fall into a sick state of consciousness. I have to admit to myself that my body and my mind are in a strange conflict. While I am getting fatter and fatter, tormented by an uncanny desire to eat and unfaithful to my daily renewed resolutions, my mind seems to be slackening.

I have looked into the line of thought I gave you the other day, to which I received that puzzling reply. They are generally correct, but I find them clumsy and inadequate in detail, and I miss the subtlety,

which otherwise distinguished my work and otherwise had to be recognised by my enemies.

Although I clearly recognise all the mistakes, I make no effort to improve them, nor do I know how I should do it. Much more important than all the other questions now seems to me what this is: the breath of Ka- techana, as if this word really contains the explanation for all the riddles surrounding me.

I am convinced that all this must get better, that I will regain my clarity once I have overcome this disgusting greed, this animal instinct to fill my stomach. The fight against this insatiable hunger wears me down. And when I have finally had enough, I would like to tear my thinned face apart in disgust *at* myself and in shame at the weakness of my will, to crush the white, soft, fat-padded hands that are forced to bring the food to my mouth.

I didn't realise that a hangover can follow a meal. That must be the way geese feel when they are fattened to make big livers. Fattened! *It is as if I were to be fattened.* But for what purpose?

Today I slept for the first time in a long time.

Ida wanted to start work last night, as usual, but more than ever, my thoughts got mixed up.

Yesterday was All Souls' Day. An immense crowd filled the cemetery from early morning until dusk. Paris had set out to visit its dead, life came to

the graves of the deceased. Wreaths and flowers and candles were everywhere, the hum of the many people was like a murmuring cloud over the graves.

Groups of people stood outside my marble house for most of the day. The first visitors were two women dressed in black, carrying a little girl between them. Perhaps the wife and mother and child of a deceased person. The child looked at me fearfully with wide eyes: "Mummy," it said, "is that the man who has to stay inside for a year?"

The women pulled the little girl away, they felt it was intrusive to stare at me. After fifteen steps, the little girl had forgotten all about me and her whole peace and quiet, clung to the women's arms, drew in her legs and let herself be carried a little way as a floating angel.

Not all visitors were as gentle as these women; some tried to engage me in conversation. The sky alternated between sunshine and clouds of rain; all I have of the day is a general impression of groups of people, sometimes in the light, sometimes in the shade. At last I turned my back on the entrance to the tomb.

Towards evening it became quiet.

Ivan brought me dinner. While I was sitting there gulping down the food, someone else stepped into the doorway. "Sir," he said, "excuse me!" It was a young man with a fresh face, who appeared to be a workman, a salesman or something of the sort.

"Sir," he repeated, "don't stay here any longer ... I advise you to leave the money ... she bit me twice on the neck ..." Then Ivan jumped

I see him leap forward like a wild animal. I've never seen him like this, his shaggy whiskers seem to bristle. He raises his fist at the young man and he ducks his head between his shoulders, mumbles something and retreats shyly into the twilight of the cemetery, which has become silent again.

"Who was that?" I asked.

Ivan grins: "I don't know," he says in his laboured, croaking voice.

But I know - it's the baker's apprentice ... the baker's apprentice of Madame Wassilska ... whom she bit on the neck ...

After that day I slept like the dead, tired from the constant exertion of will I had to put up against the gawkers.

My awakening was like floating into a feeling of discomfort ... I feel a burning sensation on my right forearm and neck. My gaze falls on a small crust of dried blood above my wrist. It sits on the edges of a small wound consisting of a series of opposing injuries ... as if I had been bitten there. Bitten ... I can't find another word for this kind of wound. And all around, the skin is whitish in colour and flaccid to about the size of my palm, a bloodless area, as if a plaster with some kind of drawing ointment had been applied there overnight.

I reach for the neck and find a similar one there.
Wound.

I don't want to think about who could have inflicted these injuries on me. Could Sergeant Bertrand have had imitators? Should there be people

who cannot suppress a bestial lust, who roam cemeteries at night and tear corpses apart, and who are not averse to attacking sleeping people? The nights are getting very chilly. From now on I will always keep the door of my dwelling firmly shut. A stove will have to be installed soon if I am not to fall ill in this marble prison.

I ask Ivan what precautions he wants to take for the winter. He looks at me as if he doesn't understand me. Some dark voice has told me to hide my wounds from this man. So I put on a high collar and pull the cuff on the right sleeve far over my wrist. But now I'm embarrassed by the Russian's eyes, it's as if they're scrutinising my body, I feel like someone with a secret ailment.

"I need an oven!" I say angrily, "an oven ... you understand."

He nods.

Suddenly something occurs to me. "Listen, Ivan," I say ... "why didn't you actually ... there were two hundred thousand francs to be earned. That's a fortune. And it was anyone's choice ... why didn't you come forward yourself?"

Then I see for the first time that this taciturn, sullen man, this automaton, is seized by an inner power. His face contorts into a grimace of horror, his crippled hands with their bent fingers stretch out wide, and like a frightened parrot he squawks, he buzzes:

"No ... no!"

I don't know why I am also gripped by horror when I say no, why I am suddenly trembling, why I am overcome by such fear, as if a boiling-hot and at the same time ice-cold stream has been poured into me.

I reach for my wine glass to help me cope with the excitement.

The cuff shifts and pulls back. Iwan's gaze falls on the wound above the wrist.

The horror fades from his face, giving way to a grin that falters and melts between the purulent pustules ...

Margot was there.

She stood between the marble walls of the entrance, her large hat with the yellow roses topped by a bare treetop. Her eyes were full of tears that slid down her pale, haggard cheeks. She stood there like an emissary of life, the temptation in her own person, as if she had been sent by Paris, the city I hear humming down there. This battle of love lasted almost an hour.

"Ernest," she said, "I beg you, come away from here. Don't you love me any more? I let you have your way ... I didn't want you to think I didn't have the strength you have. But now I can no longer allow you to stay here ... if I may not take you with me from here ... O Ernest, how do you look? What nonsense to sacrifice your health and your life for the sake of money. Were we not happy, both of us, whether-

when we didn't know how we were going to pay the next rent? Think of the evenings in my room, of the walks in Fontainebleau, of the big colliery that we made and for which we were just five sous short ... if you love me, come away from here."

I stood three steps away, holding onto the edge of the table with both hands. Thousands of words of love were on my lips, thousands of assurances of my longing and tenderness were pouring from my heart. But I was not allowed to speak if I wanted to win my prize honestly. I could only let my eyes speak. But how could my eyes say all that needed to be said, why I could not leave here, that I did not want to have taken all this upon myself in vain, that I was now all the more determined to win the money; that I could not leave because I was a prisoner of my body; and above all because I had resolved to find out the secret of this tomb, to learn what it was - the breath of the Catediana.

It was very difficult. Margot was crying. 'Oh ... you know not what the newspapers write about you ... what your friends say ... you sent a report about your observations to the academy ...<

So they talked and wrote about the fact that I had sent out a preliminary report on the mysterious rays from my prison. Well - they could say what they liked - because of me, that I had gone mad ...

"Do you want what people say to be true ... oh, how I love you, Ernest, how I love you ..." I couldn't bear it any longer. I felt that I

I turned my back to her and stood there until her shadow receded from the marble floor, until her sobs faded among the graves. -

But she returned in the night, the faithful, the good, the best lover a man has ever had. She defied the horrors of the cemetery, before which she usually trembled like a child.

Who else could it have been but Margot?

I wake up at night from the dull sleep I always fall into now. And I feel that I am not alone. Someone is with me, has thrown himself over me and is kissing me so painfully that it is like bites. In the greenish glow I see a woman, I feel her ... I return the kisses without saying a word ... I'm not allowed to speak, but I can kiss. And Margot presses me against her with a furious force, with all the strength of longing and despair. Margot - who else could it have been but Margot? My whole body is covered in wounds ... bite marks, the traces of wild kisses.

I stagger around powerlessly, my flesh is like blood-empty ... the muscles lie limp and spongy under the withered skin.

And the wounds don't heal ... they become hideous scars, pustules full of pus ... just like Ivan's pustules.

And Margot comes every night ... every night.

Ivan has spoken.

I know what it is, the Catediana ... I snatched it from him.

I could see it in his eyes that he knew, in these

The insidious look with which he looked at my wounds, seemed to assess and count them; I have seen this scrutinising connoisseur's gaze on the judges in a boxing match when the two bleeding, bruised opponents did not stop beating each other ...

And suddenly it was quite clear to me that Ivan knew what it was, the Catediana.

I can still see him backing away from me as I creep towards him to grab him by the neck. He squeezes himself into a corner and I stand in front of him ...

"Who is that, the Katechana?" I ask.

And then I see how his fear turns into defiance, into the mocking insolence that I have put up with for too long.

He blinks at me treacherously, but I know he's about to speak the truth. "She calls herself that," he snarls.

"Who?"

"She learnt it on Crete. She lived on the slopes of Leuka Vrune for six months and I had to bring her sheep, which she tore up."

"What does that mean ... Katechana?"

"It means the same ... what in Albania is called Wurwolak and in Bulgaria Lipir, what the Czechs call Mura, the Greeks on the ruins of Sparta Bourko-lak and the Portuguese Bruxa ... it was with all these peoples ..."

"Those are names ... Elender ... I want to know what it means ..."

"It means one who can never have enough of blood and the sacrifice of manhood that goes beyond death ..."

I'll let him go, I know enough.

I am being held here in a marble prison.

... I'm being fattened up ... my spongy, bloated body is just a container for quite a lot of blood, the vessel walls have to expand to be able to hold quite a lot of the juice - for a vampire who comes to drink his fill every night.

And my manhood is incited by these criminally flavoured foods, stirred up by secret means.

It drinks away my strength, it sucks in my life, and the more I give it away, the fuller and stronger the vampire's bellows become. The figure that seemed light and airy to me at first, like a cloud, has become physically heavy in the last few nights, weighing me down ... Its breath permeates the stone and envelops me in a greenish glow. It decomposes the marble ... or it could be that the change in the marble is only apparent, that only I feel it that way, because my whole body is soaked in her breath, because my muscles and my nerves, my senses and my brain are saturated with this luminous poison of the marble. Decomposition ...

Now I am completely calm again, because I know everything: only now do I feel that I have not been completely in control of myself lately, that I was in a state of staggered along in a dazed daze.

But now I've got my courage back.

I am determined not to surrender, now that I know against what enemy I must be armed. I am determined to win my two hundred thousand francs, against the Katechana and all the horrors of the grave ...

Since it is capable of becoming physical, it must be able to

be subject to the setting of the body. Since it is able to gain life, it must be able to die a second time ...

And I use it to tear apart everything that spins me. Yes - spinning, in the very real sense of the word. Because I have realised that she has woven a web around me. It's not enough that I want to stay here myself so as not to lose my two hundred thousand francs, that the marble house has become a prison for me because I can no longer get out - she has spun me into a web for good measure.

My legs are prevented from walking, with every step I bump into elastic, ringing threads that only give way slowly. Every movement of my hands is hampered by the fact that I first have to lift these threads and push them aside ... and they only give way to a strong pressure ... over my face it flits incessantly, like the web of a spider's web, like when one walks on lonely forest paths in summer. Except that they are threads of an invisible metal. I hear them ringing, I always have the fine ringing in my ear with which they finally burst.

Oh, I will tear this net ... before it gets too tight ...

Tonight!

It has happened.

I am liberated.

The Catediana will no longer torment me. I have snatched my two hundred thousand francs from her. I am the winner.

Tonight I lurked, more awake than I have ever been in my life.

The hum of the city down there is getting quieter. I have

I left the door open, despite the autumn cold, to listen to this humming that tells me about life, about the life I want to throw myself into with my two hundred thousand francs.

On the night clouds is the reflection of the many lights. Now and then this glow becomes brighter, at regular intervals, with the flash of a neon sign promising a bath, a theatre performance, a pleasure trip ...

I wait patiently.

Towards midnight, the green glow in my prison grows stronger. I look intently at the bronze plaque with Anna Feodorovna Vasil'ska's name on it ... but I breathe calmly, as if I'm asleep ...

And now it is as if the bronze plate is slowly dissolving in the green shimmer, as if it is becoming thinner, as if a light red vapour is wafting back and forth in the green glow. Now the last of it clouds over, evaporates, disappears ... a square black opening gapes in the marble.

And now a breath emerges again, a vapour, like breath on cold winter days, clusters together, becomes denser, takes shape.

And suddenly someone is standing at my camp ... I see Madame Wassil'ska's eyes, the coarse nose, the full mouth whose blood-red lips slowly recede from the strong, white, pointed teeth ... every feature I recognise from the picture I was shown.

She bends over me, kisses me ...

I dig my hands into her throat, I feel my nails penetrating her flesh ... she gasps, thrashes around, braces her arms against my chest ... but I hold her and don't let up.

I fall from my bed, we roll on the floor ... I always with my hands in her neck, I feel the twitching in her body, oh, a body made of my blood, which is like that of a living person ...

I cling to her like a dog, my teeth gripping her throat ...

Her defences weaken ... cease ... she offers no more resistance ... but I want to be sure that I have really won. Blood fills my mouth, ah ... it's only my own blood I'm drinking back.

Now it has been lying still for a long time.

I rise ... a sweet taste fills my mouth, my lips stick together slightly, my hands are covered in blood - my own recovered blood.

She lies stretched out on the floor - the Katechana; and my marble house is dark. The katechana's breath has gone out. I sit all night without turning on the light. There is light within me. I am liberated, transformed into a revolving movement. And how does this world ether itself come into being? Here is the great miracle where the physical is connected with the methaphysical. Here, Mr Poincaré, is where the transition of movement into substance takes place!

The world ether is nothing other than the transition of force into matter. Energy is not a property of matter, but it is that which previously existed, from which matter emerges. This also solves the riddle of the decay of matter, which so troubles our physicists; matter must decay in order to become pure energy again. The law of the conservation of force is correct, but its validity begins even before

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Then all that remains is to assume that I got up in my sleep and wrote the enigmatic answer myself, with my own handwriting somewhat altered by the abnormal state of my brain.

But then where did I get the word katechana from?

I don't know what it could mean. From a dream, from the abysses of consciousness, where no ray of wakefulness penetrates?

Of course, I have not yet noticed any tendency to sleepwalk in myself, I, whose body has never played any other tricks on me than paroxysms of hunger, I, whose mind was trained to walk the steepest high mountain paths of research without vertigo.

After all, it is not impossible that I could fall into a sick state of consciousness. I must realise that my body and my mind are in a strange conflict. 'While I, tormented by an uncanny desire to eat and unfaithful to my daily renewed resolutions, grow fatter and fatter, my mind seems to slacken.

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Although I clearly recognise all the mistakes, I make no effort to improve them, nor do I know how I should do it. Much more important than all the other questions now seems to me what this is: the breath of Ka- techana, as if this word really contains the explanation for all the riddles surrounding me.

I am convinced that all this must get better, that I will regain my clarity once I have overcome this disgusting greed, this animal instinct to fill my stomach.

The fight against this insatiable hunger wears me out. And when I've finally had enough, I want to tear my thinned face apart in disgust at myself and shame at the weakness of my will, to crush the white, soft, fat-padded hands that are forced to bring the food to my mouth.

I didn't realise that a hangover can follow a meal. That must be the way geese feel when they are fattened to make big livers. Fattened! *It is as if I were to be fattened.* But for what purpose?

Today I slept for the first time in a long time.

I wanted to start work last night, as usual, but more than ever my thoughts got mixed up.

Yesterday was All Souls' Day. An immense crowd filled the cemetery from early morning until dusk. Paris had set out to visit its dead, life came to the graves of the departed. Wreaths and flowers and candles were everywhere, the hum of the many people was like a murmuring cloud over the graves.

Groups of people stood outside my marble house for most of the day. The first visitors were two women dressed in black, carrying a little girl between them. Perhaps the wife and mother and child of a deceased person. The child looked at me fearfully with wide eyes: "Mummy," it said, "is that the man who has to stay inside for a year?"

The women pulled the little girl away, they felt it was intrusive to stare at me. After fifteen steps, the little girl had me and all her peace and quiet.

She forgot all about the court show, clung to the women's arms, drew in her legs and let herself be carried part of the way as a floating angel.

Not all visitors were as gentle as these women; some tried to engage me in conversation. The sky alternated between sunshine and clouds of rain; all I have of the day is a general impression of groups of people, sometimes in the light, sometimes in the shade. At last I turned my back on the entrance to the tomb.

Towards evening it became quiet.

Ivan brought me dinner. While I was sitting there gulping down the food, someone else stepped into the doorway. "Sir," he said, "excuse me!" It was a young man with a fresh face, who appeared to be a workman, a salesman or something of the sort.

"My lord," he repeated, "don't stay here any longer ... I advise you to leave the money ... she bit me twice on the neck ..." Then Ivan leapt forward like a wild animal. I've never seen him like this, his shaggy whiskers seem to bristle. He raises his fist at the young man and he ducks his head between his shoulders, mumbles something and retreats shyly into the twilight of the cemetery, which has become silent again.

"Who was that?" I asked.

Ivan grins: "I don't know," he says in his laboured, croaking voice.

But I know - it's the baker's apprentice ... the baker's apprentice of Madame Wassilska ... whom she bit on the neck ...

After that day I slept like a dead man, tired from the constant exertion of will I had to put up against the gawkers.

My awakening was like floating into a feeling of discomfort ... I felt a burning sensation on my right forearm and neck. My gaze falls on a small crust of dried blood above my wrist. It's on the edges of a small wound consisting of a row of opposing injuries ... as if I'd been bitten there. Bitten ... I can't find another word for this kind of wound. And all around, the skin is whitish in colour and flaccid to about the size of my palm, an area drained of blood, as if a plaster with some drawing ointment had been applied there overnight.

I reach for the neck and find a similar one there.
Wound.

I don't want to think about who could have inflicted these injuries on me. Could Sergeant Bertrand have had imitators? Could there be people who can't suppress a bestial lust, who roam cemeteries at night and tear corpses apart, and who don't shy away from attacking sleeping people? The nights are getting very chilly. From now on I will always keep the door of my dwelling firmly shut. A stove will have to be installed soon if I am not to fall ill in this marble prison.

I ask Ivan what precautions he wants to take for the winter. He looks at me as if he doesn't understand me. Some dark voice has told me to hide my wounds from this man. So I put on a high collar and pulled the cuff on the right sleeve far over my wrist. But

Now I'm embarrassed by the Russian's eyes, it's as if they're scrutinising my body, I feel like someone with a secret affliction.

"I need an oven!" I say angrily, "an oven ... you understand."

He nods.

Suddenly something occurs to me. "Listen, Ivan," I say ... "why didn't you actually ... there were two hundred thousand francs to be earned. That's a fortune. And it was anyone's choice ... why didn't you come forward yourself?"

Then I see for the first time that this taciturn, sullen man, this automaton, is seized by an inner power. His face contorts into a grimace of horror, his crippled hands with their bent fingers stretch out wide, and like a frightened parrot he squawks, he buzzes:

"No ... no!"

I don't know why I am also gripped by horror at this no, why I am suddenly trembling, why I am overcome by such fear, as if a boiling hot and at the same time icy cold stream has been poured into me.

I reach for my wine glass to help me cope with the excitement.

The cuff shifts and pulls back. Iwan's gaze falls on the wound above the wrist.

The horror fades from his face, giving way to a grin that falters and melts between the purulent pustules ...

Margot was there.

She stood between the marble walls of the entrance, her large hat with the yellow roses topped by a bare treetop. Her eyes were full of tears that slid down her pale, haggard cheeks. She stood there like an emissary of life, the temptation in her own person, as if she had been sent by Paris, the city I hear humming down there. This battle of love lasted almost an hour.

"Ernest," she said, "I beg you ... come away from here. Don't you love me any more? I have given you your
"Will left ... I did not want you to think that I did not have the strength you have. But now I can no longer allow you to stay here ... if I may not take you with me from here ... O Ernest, how do you look? What nonsense to sacrifice your health and your life for the sake of money. Weren't we happy, the two of us, even though we didn't know how to pay the next rent? Think of the evenings in my room, of the walks in Fontainebleau, of the big colliery we made, for which we were just five sous short
... if you love me, come away from here."

I stood three steps away, holding onto the edge of the table with both hands. Thousands of words of love were on my lips, thousands of assurances of my longing and tenderness were pouring from my heart. But I was not allowed to speak if I wanted to win my prize honestly. I could only let my eyes speak. But how could my eyes say all that needed to be said, why I could not leave here, that I did not want to have taken all this upon myself in vain, that now more than ever

I was determined to win the money; that I could not leave because I was a prisoner of my body; and above all because I had resolved to discover the secret of this tomb, to find out what it was - the breath of Katechana.

It was very difficult. Margot cried. "Oh ... you don't know what the newspapers are saying about you ... what your friends are saying ... you sent a report about your observations to the Academy ..."

So they talked and wrote about the fact that I had sent out a preliminary report on the mysterious rays from my prison. Well - they could say what they liked - because of me, that I had gone mad ...

"Do you want what people say to be true ... oh, how I love you, Ernest, how I love you ..."

I could bear it no longer. I felt myself growing weak, and with both hands I beckoned her to move away ... I turned my back on her, stood until her shadow receded from the marble floor, until her sobs died away among the graves. -

But she returned in the night, the faithful, the good, the best lover a man has ever had. She defied the horrors of the cemetery, before which she usually trembled like a child.

Who else could it have been but Margot?

I wake up at night from the dull sleep I always fall into now. And I feel that I am not alone. Someone is with me, has thrown himself over me and is kissing me so painfully that it is like bites. In the greenish glow I see a woman, I feel her ... I return the kisses without saying a word.

... I'm not allowed to speak, but I can kiss. And Margot presses me against her with a furious force, with all the strength of longing and despair. Margot - who else could it have been but Margot? My whole body is covered in wounds ... bite marks, the traces of wild kisses.

I stagger around powerlessly, my flesh is as if drained of blood ... the muscles lie limp and spongy under the withered skin.

And the wounds don't heal ... they become hideous scars, pustules full of pus ... just like Ivan's pustules.

And Margot comes every night ... every night.

Ivan has spoken.

I know what it is, the Katechana ... I snatched it from him.

I could see in his eyes that he knew it, in those treacherous glances with which he looked at my wounds, seemed to assess and count them; I have seen that scrutinising connoisseur's look on judges in a boxing match, when the two bleeding, bruised opponents would not stop hitting each other ...

And suddenly it was quite clear to me that Ivan knew what it was, the Catediana.

I can still see him backing away from me as I creep towards him to grab him by the neck. He squeezes himself into a corner and I stand in front of him ...

"Who is that, the Catediana?" I ask.

And then I see how his fear turns into defiance, into the mocking insolence that I have put up with for too long.

He blinks at me treacherously, but I know that he is

will now speak the truth. "She calls herself that," he snarls.

"Who?"

"She learnt it on Crete. She lived on the slopes of Leuka Vrune for six months and I had to bring her sheep, which she tore up."

"What does that mean ... Katechana?"

"It means the same ... what in Albania is called Wurwolak and in Bulgaria Lipir, what the Czechs call Mura, the Greeks on the ruins of Sparta Bourko-lak and the Portuguese Bruxa ... it was with all these peoples ..."

"Those are names ... Elender ... I want to know what it means ..."

"It means one who can never have enough of blood and the sacrifice of manhood that goes beyond death ..."

I'll let him go, I know enough.

I am being fattened here in a marble prison ... I am being fattened ... my spongy, bloated body is only a container for quite a lot of blood, the vessel walls have to expand in order to be able to absorb quite a lot of the juice - for a vampire who comes every night to drink his fill.

And my manhood is incited by these criminally flavoured foods, stirred up by secret means.

It drinks away my strength, it sucks in my life, and the more I give it away, the fuller and stronger the vampire's bellows become. The figure that seemed light and airy to me at first, like a cloud, has become physically heavy in the last few nights, weighing me down ... Its breath permeates the stone and envelops me in a greenish glow.

It decomposes the marble ...

Or it could be that the change in the marble is only apparent, that only I feel it that way, because my whole body is soaked in her breath, because my muscles and my nerves, my senses and my brain are saturated with this luminous poison of decay ...

Now I am completely calm again, because I know everything: only now do I feel that I have not been completely in control of myself lately, that I was in a state of staggered along in a dazed daze.

But now I've got my courage back.

I am determined not to surrender, now that I know against what enemy I must be armed. I am determined to win my two hundred thousand francs, against the Katechana and all the horrors of the grave ...

Since it is able to become corporeal, it must be subject to the laws of the body. Since it is able to gain life, it must be able to die a second time ...

And I use it to tear apart everything that spins me. Yes - spinning, in the very real sense of the word. Because I have realised that she has woven a web around me. It's not enough that I want to stay here myself so as not to lose my two hundred thousand francs, that the marble house has become a prison for me because I can no longer get out - she has spun me into a web for good measure.

My legs are prevented from walking, with every step I bump into elastic, ringing threads that only give way slowly. Every movement of my hands is made more difficult by the fact that I first have to lift and

I have to push them aside ... and they only give way to a strong pressure ... it flits over my face incessantly, like the web of a spider's web, like walking on lonely forest paths in summer. Except that they are threads of an invisible metal. I hear them ringing, I always have the fine ringing in my ear with which they finally burst.

Oh, I will tear this net ... before it gets too tight ...

Tonight!

It has happened.

I am liberated.

The Katechana 'will no longer torment me. I have snatched my two hundred thousand francs from her. I am the winner.

Tonight I lurked, more awake than I have ever been in my life.

The hum of the city down there is getting quieter. I've left the door open, despite the autumn chill, to hear this buzzing that tells me about life, about the life I want to throw myself into with my two hundred thousand francs.

On the night clouds is the reflection of the many lights. Now and then this glow becomes brighter, at regular intervals, with the flash of a neon sign promising a bath, a theatre performance, a pleasure trip ...

I wait patiently.

Towards midnight, the green glow in my prison grows stronger. I look intently at the bronze plaque with the name Anna Feodorovna Vasil'ska on it ... but I breathe calmly, as if I'm asleep ...

And now it is as if the bronze plate is slowly coming loose

in the green shimmer, as if it were becoming thinner, as if a light red vapour were waving back and forth in the green glow. Now the last of it clouds over, evaporates, disappears ... a square black opening gapes in the marble.

And now a breath emerges again, a vapour, like breath on cold winter days, clusters together, becomes denser, takes shape.

And suddenly someone is standing at my camp ... I see Madame Wassilka's eyes, the coarse nose, the full mouth whose blood-red lips slowly recede from the strong, white, pointed teeth ... every feature I recognise from the picture I was shown.

She bends over me, kisses me ...

I dig my hands into her throat, I feel my nails penetrating her flesh ... she gasps, thrashes around, braces her arms against my chest ... but I hold her and don't let up.

I fall from my bed, we roll on the floor ... I always with my hands in her neck, I feel the twitching in her body, oh, a body made of my blood, which is like that of a living person ...

I cling to her like a dog, my teeth gripping her throat

...

Her defences weaken ... cease ... she offers no more resistance ... but I want to be sure that I have really won. Blood fills my mouth, ah ... it's only my own blood I'm drinking back.

Now it has been lying still for a long time.

I rise ... a sweet flavour fills my mouth, my lips stick together slightly, my

Hands are covered in blood - my own recovered blood.

She lies stretched out on the floor - the Katechana; and my marble house is dark. The katechana's breath has gone out. I sit all night without turning on the light. There is light within me. I am liberated.

The late autumn morning dawns grey and gloomy.

The Catediana lies on the ground, stretched out, her throat bitten through. She is dead a second time, this Madame Wassilska. I look into her face.

Oh, - she wanted to give me one last fright, because she had to give way before me. She took the form of Margot.

She wanted me to believe that I had killed Margot ... I push the brat off me with my foot. Ivan will be surprised.

The day dawns. I

am liberated ...

Signs there are tricky ones

After the death of his girlfriend Bettina, with whom Herbert Ostermann, a medical student, had lived for almost two years, the lonely man was well on the way to becoming completely unsociable.

On the pedestal of countless semesters, which brought him alarmingly closer to manhood via his academic youth, Ostermann would have stood alone as if on a cliff anyway. Now the pain of losing his girlfriend was added to this and seemed to want to separate him completely from his younger comrades. All the arrogance and recklessness in life remained behind and beneath him.

But Ostermann had more friends among the younger students than he himself knew. His manner, albeit not cuddly but always polite, the certainty with which he kept small promises made, the impression of unconditional reliability he gave, made him appear to his comrades as a role model in all essential masculine qualities. After all, he was more interesting than he had ever realised because of his relationship with the little German-Russian girl, which had now been ended so painfully by a rather rapid, somewhat mysterious death.

We knew the couple very well from the assembly hall and the lecture theatres; we had seen them together countless times and only very occasionally individually. The long, lean man and the petite, swift Baltic German did not make a good pair on the outside. His movements, which took place in corners and angles, so to speak,

and theirs, which could be traced back to the most charming curves, did not quite match. Nevertheless, there was something that, beyond the external dissimilarity, suggested the most intimate inner communion. For this reason, no one dared to attempt to take this prettiest of colleagues away from her boyfriend and bring her to himself, as usually happens only too often in similar circumstances.

Ostermann accompanied the studious student, who was enthusiastic about her science, to lectures that were far below the level of his semesters and patiently listened once again to the basics of anatomy; it seemed as if, after this second beginning through his girlfriend and with her, he would finally come to a prosperous conclusion to his much prolonged studies. One became accustomed to regarding the union of these two people as something fixed and untouchable, felt something like a consecration of the bond, and ceased to regard the relationship with piquant newness. Bettina's death shook everyone; even those who were in the habit of showing off a certain hardening of the soul and who considered cynicism an indispensable virtue of the physician could not escape the impression of this collapse.

So it was just an outpouring of general sympathy and reverence for Ostermann, that a much younger compatriot of the loner, the student Richard Kretschmer, suggested that he move in with him. At first Ostermann rejected the well-intentioned proposal outright. But then he was persuaded by the continued urging to at least consider the idea. And finally he agreed, perhaps in

the feeling of no longer being able to cope with loneliness.

So Ostermann left his previous home, a suburban cottage surrounded by wild vines, in whose tower-like extension he had lived with Bettina for almost two years, and moved in with his compatriot. From a corner still imbued with a remnant of poetry, he came to a bare dormitory in the big city. He didn't let on that he missed anything, but he didn't take much interest in his comrade's life either.

However, it was the endeavour of this sincerely devoted man to take Ostermann away from his fruitless and dangerous musings, and so he repeatedly tried to take him along to small festivities and student events.

Carnival was approaching, the first since Bettina's death, and the university's pre-clinical staff, who had recently formed an association, planned to celebrate their existence and the merry season with an evening. A party was to be held in which all sorts of comical performances were also to take account of the carnival spirit. His friend had seriously planned to lure Ostermann out of his cave for this very special celebration.

"I don't want to commit any injustice," said Ostermann, as Kretschmer got more and more violent with him.

"You're not doing anything wrong," the friend replied rather vehemently, "the dead are dead, no amount of mourning can change that."

Ostermann looked seriously at the younger and swift man, and it was as if he wanted to say something in reply.

But he persisted with this attempt, and when Kretschmer did not stop pestering him, he finally agreed to take part in the party. Although Ostermann could not shake off a feeling of injustice, the comrade's good "will was too obvious and honest for him to lose it. -

The large hall of the restaurant where the carnival evening took place was full of young doctors. The pre-clinical community was in high spirits, the young foundation was resplendent, a large number of professors were present and watched the goings-on with paternal benevolence. The tablecloths, which still stretched rather immaculately over the long tables, exuded the smell of fresh linen, the arc lamps under the ceiling sent whole wreaths of fine, glowing, needle-sharp rays into the hall, and from the kitchen, with the clattering of crockery, sometimes came the smell of food, clenched into small clouds.

The results of a fun lottery were displayed on a board. The young people had set up harmless joke articles or things that young doctors might welcome as desk ornaments: dazzling white prepared bones as paperweights, half skulls, nicely arranged into large ashtrays with a base made from a shoulder blade and a collarbone as a crossbar. The young people, among whom there were also quite a few female colleagues, walked from time to time, forming groups and dispersing again.

Ostermann, who was surrounded by so many people for the first time in a long time, was unable to make sense of this uninhibited cheerfulness. While Kretschmer next to him was endeavouring to entangle him in a network of shouts and drinking obligations.

and across the entire table, Ostermann drifted further and further into a state of unease. This noise, the needle-sharp, fine flashes of the arc lamps, all this to and fro penetrated him, sometimes excessively clumsy and coarse, sometimes exaggerated and shrill. He began to regret that he had followed his friend here.

In the meantime, the reception took its usual course. Speeches and songs followed one another, the professors jovially expressed their pleasure in the healthy spirit of the academic youth ... "sour weeks, happy festivals" ... sometimes the young girls laughed brightly at joking phrases. When Ostermann heard this laughter or saw one of the bright dresses blowing, it tore at his heart, it flowed through his body like streams of sharp ice crystals. Finally, around eleven o'clock, he thought he had done enough and announced to Kretschmer his decision to leave.

"Don't worry," he laughed, "the best things are only just beginning. The door is guarded! There's no escaping!"

And indeed, shortly afterwards, one of the gentlemen on the committee announced that we had to be prepared for some carnival jokes. In the spirit of Prince Carnival, many things were allowed, honni soit, qui mal y pense and all that. After this speech, which was somewhat reminiscent of a beer sulphur, the curtain was pulled back in front of the stage, which was set up on one side of the hall opposite the professors' seats, and a dissection table was revealed on which lay a corpse dressed only in a loincloth.

A scene broke out between the anatomy assistant and some students who had arrived hungover and would have preferred a game of skat to work. The

The main joke of the performance lay in the rather successful portrayal of one of the best-known and most popular professors, who appeared on stage with all his little idiosyncrasies of clearing his throat and spitting. This aroused the unbridled hilarity of the entire corona, especially that of the actor himself, who was confronted with his distorted mirror image. In addition to the satire on the professor, they had probably thought of using Rembrandt's anatomy as a model for the play. The final scene showed the professor in the position of Doctor Tulp at the corpse, surrounded by his pupils. The only difference was that he did not show nerves and bundles of muscles, but unearthed all sorts of unusual things from the depths of the corpse: beer felts, matchsticks, a house key and a book of comic songs. But when he turned the corpse over and began to work on its back, the dead man jumped off the dissecting table with a furious roar and the anatomical demonstration ended with a wild escape.

The grotesque humour, which is a hit with all guests. The mood he had left behind did not entirely fail to have an effect on Ostermann either. But in the end it led to an unpleasant feeling that such a play with the horror of death was not appropriate even among the most unruly youth. Ostermann also told himself that perhaps only his own sensitivity was to blame for the gravity of this view, and yet he felt so strangely captivated that he no longer thought of leaving. After a while, a young physician stepped in front of the violet curtain, a book in his hand, from which he began to read a poem with little talent and much emphasis. It was Goethe's "Dance of Death".

"The tower keeper looks down on the graves
in Lage in the middle of the night ..."

Ostermann found this laborious declamation rather superfluous, but with the last words the hall suddenly darkened and it was now clear what purpose the poem had served.

The stage reopened to reveal a cemetery. Something white emerged from the darkest darkness and a figure clothed in sheets could be made out, fumbling between the gravestones. The ghost stretched out on one of the graves, placed a violin on its bony chin and began to play an absurd tune.

Now it struck twelve somewhere, as if from a church tower.

The small orchestra in front of the stage took up the ghostly violinist's melody and wove it into a most strange, truly eerie music, whose peculiar harmonic sequences and choppy rhythms seemed to conjure up all the horrors out of the darkness. And now, in the manner of Goethe's poem, stumbling, lumbering, trudging grave-dwellers came from left and right, climbed out of the opening mounds, grew out from behind the corpse stones and staggered along between the clods of darkness. Long death shrouds waved and flapped around their limbs, their faces covered with white, phosphorescent masks of fleshless skulls with dark eyes and noses and the grin of bared teeth. They drifted along to the beat of the hideous music, meeting each other with contortions and mocking curtsies, a mockery of the usual forms of intercourse among the living. It was as if

you could hear the rattling of bones, the cracking of skinny joints under the white sheets, like a clamour of castanets, castanets of the grave, which formed a persistent accompaniment to the music.

It was clear that the inventor and director of this performance, some student, was a very original mind with a lot of imagination.

Now knots formed on the dark stage in the whirl of flitting movements, two of the discs joined each other, and it became apparent that a separation by gender was still taking place in the area of the grave. Now that the eye had become accustomed to the darkness, it was possible to see how the male and female figures formed pairs and how a round dance of phantoms began to wind its way between the gravestones.

Although everyone in the audience knew that and how this scene up there had been discussed, arranged and rehearsed by colleagues, although they thought they recognised him or her even under the ghostly cloaks, they were nevertheless caught up in a most peculiar mood, an unforeseen excitement of the nerves. A wild tension had come over the students from the Bierulk, which was perceived as frivolous without being able to escape it. This mixture of the horrific and the grotesque was repulsive and attractive, frightening and mesmerising, like looking into an abyss. The young people, whose youth and profession had led them to accept death as something commonplace and inevitable, felt that this dance of the dead, this game with decay, was somehow a challenge of danger; in the depths of their consciousness something, the will to die, was taking hold.

to life, to light, to health towards the dark influence of this scene.

Meanwhile, the dance above continued, uniting and separating the couples, weaving them into a chain, balling them into a ball that spun furiously around itself, while a whitish-blue light, the phosphorescent glimmer of decay, cast upon them from the backdrop, seemed to emanate ever more strongly from the phantoms themselves. In keeping with Goethe's poem, the performers endeavoured to inject their gestures with something pointed and tense, something malicious and whimsical, something puppet-like and angular, just as fleshy limbs might have in dance.

At the beginning of this performance, Herbert Ostermann had only felt a dull indignation inside him, which flowed into his body under great pressure as if from a storeroom, a kind of rage that drove him to jump up and make further progress impossible by doing something senseless. It flashed through his mind that he could hit the table or throw a beer glass on the floor or simply scream, bellowing and with his mouth wide open: "Haaaalt!" But while he was still thinking about all these possibilities at lightning speed, he already felt the angry outrage leaving his body again, running out, dwindling and becoming limp and powerless, faint and empty, defencelessly exposed to some shapeless horror. And now it was already creeping into this lee like a cloudy, heavy, muddy liquid, rising up the walls of his ego, the dregs of the world, horror and fear of the veiling of things. Parts, large areas of his consciousness were extinguished in this flood, drowned, while others

rose out of it like islands, pale and illuminated by an unnatural light.

He sat there, one hand clenched around the beer glass, the other clenched into a fist on his knee, his face stretched out, his eyeballs seemingly swollen to bursting point. The white things floating around him on the stage were boils of decomposition, dusky flowers of the grave, flakes of the slime of death. Did no one but he feel these dark, scorching rays emanating from this dance, comparable to the invisible, malignant rays of some metals or stones, these corrosive excretions of the round dance that ate their way through flesh and bone into the soul? Did no one feel how ulcers developed under this poisonous flow of pus, which spread with furious speed and destroyed the whole person?

While Herbert was soaking up the horror, it was He suddenly felt as if something familiar was touching him under the gestures of the dancers. It was just like seeing something familiar again in a distant distortion, as if a memory were to be fused together to take shape. This shadow of a memory flitted through the swaying, twisted, sometimes erratic and then diminished movements of the round dance of phantoms, leapt forward, disappeared, dissolved in the vortex and reappeared. After a long freeze, Herbert began to breathe more violently, seized most intimately by these fragments of a gesture, a leaning, a stepping, a raising of hands. Now the shadow, this nothingness of memory, attached itself to one of the figures, to one of the female phantoms with which it came and went. It was a

A groping growth of forms out of chaos, a tentative crawling out of darkness, in which Herbert felt something like a burst of hot tenderness, a deep compassion for himself alongside the fear. He had become entangled in a whole bundle of threads, each of which could no longer be unravelled, which stretched across him and held on to an indeterminate part of his past.

The phantoms on the stage above whirled more and more wildly between the gravestones; the motionless skull masks stood in eerie contrast to the leaps they performed with gathered shrouds; The bones clattered against each other louder and louder, a whole whirl of dry and harsh noises spun from the stage into the hall; it seemed as if a lechery not yet extinguished beyond the grave was driving the phantoms to closer entwinements and as if a hideous orgy of ribs was being prepared.

Then, as if from a great height, a chime fell in the middle of the round dance. It was as if an explosion had thrown the figures apart, the round dance broke up, the figures fell, staggered here and there, stumbled over the tombstones, robbed of all security, seemed to lose parts of the skeleton, which they fearfully searched for and had to put back together again. With their sheets pulled together, unsteadily, timidly, dangling and swaying, robbed of their freedom again, they ducked along the gravestones and disappeared into the darkness.

A great sigh of relief went through the hall before the first shy clapping of hands began. Only gradually did many hands start clapping, as if this cheerful

The noise was capable of tearing apart a thin grey web that seemed to hang over the tables from the game.

The president swung his bat and shouted some kind of command. "Ugh, that was nice!" said Kretschmer and took a big gulp of the stale beer. Then he stood up, stretched in his waistband, bent over and stretched again, as if to test whether his flesh and leg were still connected in the usual way.

Herbert Ostermann made no reply, he was struggling to come to terms with his shock, a strange taste in his mouth and a peculiar feeling that he described, in a fit of bitterness, as heartburn of the spirit. He turned and saw that the participants in the Dance of Death were entering the hall via the small staircase behind the stage. They were still wearing their shrouds, but had thrown back their masks and were showing their fresh, red, youthful faces in the wrappings of the shrouds. That was the surest way to overcome the depression of the last half hour and bring back the old exuberance. They surrounded her, asked questions, praised her and made rope-dancing jokes about the abysses they had felt.

When Herbert Ostermann returned to the table
When he turned back, it stabbed him through the heart,
icy cold and scorching.

Next to him, in the seat just vacated by Richard Kretschmer, sat one of the dancers, completely still, her hands clad in white thread gloves folded in her lap as if in surrender. She too was still wearing the

shroud like the others, but she had not yet taken off her skull mask, and when she turned her head towards her neighbour, the look in her eyes was only like a distant spark in dark caves. It seemed as if she expected to be spoken to, and after some struggle Herbert managed to force a kind of binding smile on his lips and ask whether the young lady was satisfied with the success of the performance.

The dancer, who seemed at a loss for words, merely nodded.

One must also have noticed the tremendous excitement of the audience on stage, because the dance, which at the beginning probably showed signs of amateurish inadequacy here and there, had become ever freer and bolder and more artistic, and such an emergence from limited ability only occurs with the liveliest interaction between the stage and the audience.

Herbert spoke on and on, driven by the unchanged, softly glowing gaze directed at him as if by a constant question, spoke of things he had not even remotely thought of. He endeavoured to examine and justify the mood in which they had been immersed according to the rules of reason, feeling his speech only like the swimmer who has lost his strength, the board on which he places his last hope.

"Yes, it's strange," said his neighbour, "to present the spectacle of death to the living like this."

"And this cemetery music," Herbert continued in great excitement, "this modern music with its remarkable modulations and intricate rhythms is - as if made to make the listener feel all the horror of the grave."

to be felt. It is illogical music, the logic of the music is the melody, Mozart, for example, was a logician and that is why he does not touch our hearts where he wants to be ghostly, in the Commendatore scenes in 'Don Juan' ... but this modern illogical music fits perfectly with death, which is illogicality itself ..."

"And you are a doctor?" asked his neighbour. Her voice was muffled and dull, as if it came through an impure medium, yet even in this turbidity there was an unmistakable original euphony, and Herbert regretted that the sound was so altered and broken by the mask. This thought focussed his attention sharply on this thing of papier-mache, through which death was to be turned into a hoax. He had to admit that they had by no means contented themselves with some cheap article of the mask trade. The mask was artistically accomplished in its own way. The harmless material, from *which* the faces of wicked mothers-in-law, stupid country bumpkins, lecherous vivants, double chins, puffy cheeks, reddened noses, all the excrescences and voluptuousness of the flesh could be depicted, was this time deceptively similar to bare bones. Everything was accurate in terms of colour and structure, every bone was anatomically correct and the sutures made one believe that the skull had really been put together on them. One could have mistaken this skull for a specimen and used it for study purposes without further ado; indeed, the excellent modeller had taken the accuracy of his imitation so far that in some places, in the eye and nasal cavities, between the teeth, he had indicated the remains of decaying flesh. But the most gruesome thing was that from the back of the skull

hair hanging down, of which one could not tell how it was rooted in the bones. This was a clear slap in the face of probability, for as the base of the hair was no longer there, the skull should have been bare all round; but if the creator of the mask had intended to heighten the horror as much as possible, he had succeeded, especially as these hairs, discoloured and matted and interspersed with small lumps of earth, looked as if they really had come from the grave.

Herbert Ostermann saw all this with a calmness he himself could not comprehend, sharp and clear, as one tends to see in moments of great danger, when all the tense energies of the immense human power centre are directed solely towards the assertion of the ego.

"And you're a doctor?" his neighbour repeated her question.

"What do you mean? Of course! Do you know me?"

"I know you!"

"Won't you take off your mask? The game is over! The other ladies have already done it."

Something like a soft rustling sound came from between the rows of teeth of the mask, which was supposed to be a laugh, but immediately reminded Herbert in an agonising way of a sound from childhood: when the merchant Prusik threw the large, strangely shaped scraps of dried haddock onto the counter. And immediately another image came to mind: that of completely dried out, mummy-like, black vocal chords that were shaken by this intermittent laughter so that they rustled like funeral wreaths.

The dancer stopped laughing. "The other dancers don't think the mask suits them. I am not

vain. It suits me quite well. And then you have to guess who I am."

"Do I know you?"

She turned closer to Herbert with a little jerk: "Yes!"

There was that ice-cold and searing stab through his heart again. For this tiny movement, this trivial turn of the shoulders, again threw the restlessness of memory over Herbert; by this fragment of a gesture he recognised that the dancer was sitting beside him, whose play of limbs had spoken to him out of the intricate round dance.

And immediately the blind, rebellious fear was there again, breaking down the calm of level-headed, sharp observation, rushing with him into the dark. He looked around him; to his left and right, his colleagues were talking over their glasses of beer, writing postcards, drinking to each other, nobody was paying any attention to them, it was as if Herbert and his neighbour weren't there.

Nevertheless, he suddenly found it all unbearable. The noise and light were too intrusive for him and he suddenly stood up: "Come on, we want to go somewhere else."

She agreed at once, followed him to the dressing-room, stood beside him in her coat, and then they walked along the street on a thin, poor city snow, in the bottom of a street ravine, above which a few stars stood straight between the thinly-strung wires of the telephone line. They seemed like shining little note-heads caught between a staff, making an infinitely austere and bitter melody of the degradation of the heavenly light in the earthly.

Herbert took off his hat and the cold pressed his head together, tightening the skin on his face and neck. The dancer walked beside him, strange to look at in her white sheets, her coat hanging like a double pair of short black wings. Cars came by at a rumbling trot, automobiles jumped around a corner with a grumble or a sudden bleat, threw cones of light against the glaring walls of houses, or you saw them coming from far away, two tiny balls of light at the end of a street, rolling rapidly towards you in a dark gutter of roars, now very close, sweeping a wide path of light across the pavement; Now you were standing in a blinding shock of light, and it was already over and cold darkness pressed in behind you.

From time to time, a pub or restaurant would scatter a few bars of dance music escaped from the quickly opened door, a fragment of laughter ran a little through the night, the carnival washed small waves of cheerfulness along the lonely path of Herbert and his companion; but all this seemed insignificant to Herbert against a terrible feeling that was inside him, filling him like a heavy, thick, cold smoke.

They entered a small coffee house where Herbert sometimes sat behind a newspaper for half an hour, less out of necessity than out of a sense of duty. On the doorstep, it occurred to him that his companion would now have to take off her mask, but she already said that she preferred to remain unrecognised for a while longer and that at a time when all the nightclubs were in the throes of carnival, she too would be excused from wearing a mask.

She seemed to be right, because in the smoke that

The costumes lying across all the tables were a variety of the folk costumes found in masquerade centres: Venetian, Spanish, Turkish, mixed with Tyroleans, Eskimos and Indians. As little as the costume and mask of a phantom seemed to fit in among all these worn, flimsy costumes, Herbert's companion did not stand out. She pushed her way forward through the densest groups without anyone seeming to make any particular effort to avoid her, and once again there was that familiar, unadjustable stance and movement that struck Herbert like a physical pain.

When they sat down at a table that had just become free he grabbed her fiercely by the arm: "Who are you?"

He searched for her gaze, but found only that vague glow at the bottom of the mask's eye sockets.

The waiter stood in front of Herbert. He let go of the thin, hard arm that had not yielded under his grip and ordered coffee. After a while, spent silently observing the clumsy, deserted cheerfulness all around, the waiter came and brought a single cup of coffee, which he placed in front of Herbert. When the young man wanted to get up and reprimand this carelessness, his neighbour asked him to let it go, she didn't feel like doing anything anyway.

These few words, at the bottom of which lay this enigmatic familiarity, touched Herbert with such unspeakable sadness that he put his head in his hands, four fingers on each forehead and his thumbs over his ears, as if he wanted to shut off all his senses from the senseless outside world.

He remembered that his neighbour had called him earlier with

ironically asked if he was a doctor. And why was that, he said, since she knew him ...?

Between splayed fingers, he looked into her eye sockets, angry and upset. He understood, he went on, that she had meant to say that he, as a doctor, should have learnt to accept death as a matter of course - that was the general opinion of good people and bad jokers, that the doctor and death were in a kind of company, the one the instigator of the other. And just as every class of men represented the conditions of their business as elements of the divine order of the world, as, for instance, the furrier believed that the fur-bearing animals grew for him, and the mine-owner that the primeval forests of the coal age had been planted for his pocket, and the builder that gravity had been invented especially for him, *so* the doctors asserted the logic of death because the logic of their profession demanded it.

But he does not share this view.

He always finds that death is something absolutely senseless. Not death as such: that the life of a cowardly non-starter, a cesspit person, a spiritually abandoned voluptuary should finally be given a purpose, that was only fair and in order. Self-centred people, fist-pumpers, envious people deserved nothing better. But the fact that everything that is tender, loving, joyful and shining must be mowed down blindly is undeniable proof of the senselessness of death.

No, honoured stranger, this is not popular sentimentality, but a truth that can be precisely proven. Surely there is no doubt that this world is set up in a most miserable way. And why? Because you could see every day how the good

and valuable are pushed behind the shallow and insignificant, how evil rises up and leaves the good sitting in the mud at the bottom, and how, finally, death brings about a most thoughtless equalisation, in which it removes everything together from the table of life.

But how different the world would be, how brighter and more cheerful it would suddenly be, if the proof of real human worth were a licence to die. Those who by nature could not achieve a higher self would be eliminated, but those who could purify and purify themselves would have their lives prolonged in proportion to their goodness, and the very great would grow into eternity. We could then perhaps still speak today with Dante, Michelangelo and Albrecht Dürer.

Only then would life be a meaningful whole full of mutual love and efforts to help each other ... The little flames at the bottom of his neighbour's eye sockets grew in the glow, a thin but plump air, a kind of gaseous glass surrounded Herbert and his neighbour, outside this sphere one only saw colourful, incoherent scraps of the world ...

And he could probably already tell a thing or two about death, because he had seen it close up and death had made its illogicality particularly clear to him. If the world had been organised according to that sensible plan, Bettina would still be alive and he would not be so lonely, so heart-rending, blood-poisoning, brain-destroyingly lonely. A Robinson in the middle of the pathless seas of life, the prisoner of an ice palace with all the horrors of both poles.

Bettina? Well, since the esteemed stranger claimed to know him, she must also have known Bettina.

have. Does her blood not freeze at this name when she thinks that what this name means is gone? She, who should have belonged to the eternal, who should have lived for thousands of years if there had been world justice. Oh, he knew Death very well, this old arch-scoundrel and wretched buffoon, he had had him in his hands. The guy disguises himself, masks himself, makes himself unrecognisable, but he behaves like a bad comedian, comes without a cue, forgets his punch lines, turns his fellow players into disgraced prisoners and murderers.

Yes, - to murderers, he should know. If one of his If he kills his beloved, you can't very well call him anything else, can you? There is a child growing in the womb, but with it grows the fear of the world, which does not want nature to have its due. People all around were already stretching out long, naked necks, crooked beaks and vulture claws, fingers with round, greasy, shiny tips were already thrusting forward at the disgrace, an arsenal of meat pistols, fists as pistons and index fingers as barrels, all pointed at the disgrace. And someone was shouting incessantly: Give us our daily bread today! ... Just enough for two, not enough for three.

Well, colleague, the germinating life does not have to be
destroy what is already rooted! There are ways to lead it into darkness before it has seen the light. And if damnation were upon it: once again, there are only crimes against the existing, but none against the unborn. Yes - but there somewhere in the corner crouches Death, the wretched wretch, blinking, smelling the medicine bottles a little, shaking them and it

an invisible slime sticks to everything, its slobber and poison.

Then one sees the beloved writhing in convulsion, rebelling, clawing at life with all its strength, and yet one sees life elude one's grasp, become a flood, slowly slip away, towards a dark gate into which it silently disappears. There one stands on the shore with all the art of the doctor-to-be, and when the last drop has disappeared gurgling into the channels of death, then a large, glowing nail penetrates from the crown of the head through the whole body, a firmly forged, merciless word - murderer.

And remorse ... it searches the past step by step and there is no day that should not have been different, no hour that did not reveal something that was missed ...

Herbert Ostermann slowly felt himself come together, there was a hot forehead between splayed fingers and two heavy lumps of feet under the tabletop and this up and down was connected by a wide band of pain. He couldn't have said whether he had just thought all this into his head or spoken it out loud, but he felt understood by his neighbour, as he did by himself.

The waiter had long since noticed the lone guest and mistook the young man sitting alone in his corner, sometimes looking disturbed and muttering to himself with a violent movement of his hand, for a heavy drinker in a state of misery. Now that the room had emptied and the first tram car rang past outside, he stepped in front of the last guest and let the coins jingle in his trouser pocket.

Herbert looked up and saw the stranger, black and white in an opalescent halo of hazy light, had a sharp impression of emptied glasses in the midst of sticky laughter, of burnt matches and piles of grey ashes ...

"We want to go," he muttered.

The dancer walked in front of him. But there was little that was foreign anymore, everything was familiar and deeply rooted in his life, springing from his roots, still without a name, but not far from it either.

"Who are you? Who are you?" and Herbert reached for his companion's dress. The corner blew through his hand and he saw a brief crackling blue light in the depths of his eye sockets, like a small discharge of electrical voltage. And a whirling and trembling ran through his arm, as if he had been hit by a small shock.

"Where are we going? Where are we going?" he asked, stammering.

"I'm going with you!"

Herbert didn't find it the least bit strange that the strange girl made this suggestion without further ado. Everything had been there a hundred times before, every word and every step, the sound of the voice was familiar, and so it went without saying that they were walking together. How could he have told a stranger all that he had drawn from the depths of his soul; only a human being was entitled to hear it all. Now the confession clung to her, had transformed the unknown into the known, shone back at the sender, a wistful, deep light.

So they walked side by side through the winter morning, still carrying the heavy smoke of dreams in the first hard beats of work. There-

The hoarse remnants of carnival revelry rang out between them. Like a vision, Herbert saw a sunken Pierrot on the brightly lit platform of a tram carriage, his eyes half-closed, an extinguished cigar in the corner of his mouth. His right arm hung over the parapet at the back, and a string ran from the fins, on which a brown teddy bear hopped along behind the carriage, thrown and flung in grotesque leaps by the carriage's jolting, its limbs knocked against the pavement.

That was probably the last thing Herbert Ostermann clearly recognised. From then on, he walked in a fog from which only the occasional thing or person emerged in a frantic rush, only to disappear again immediately.

So he felt more than he saw that his companion outside on the ring road was not heading for the city but for the suburbs.

"Not there ... I live in the city," he said.

"I don't know any other flat."

She was right and Herbert complied, walking alongside the dancer along endless bare streets, always black tram tracks in front of him.

His condition was strange, he said, wondering if she didn't think so too. Now he was still going into the future and at the same time into the past, so actually into the timeless. Wasn't death perhaps the timeless and therefore only the cancellation of all deception? In that case, however, it would be the solution, and it would probably be possible to call people back from it through a strong will and perhaps through the power of remorse; for even if the appearance can never give the essence, the essence can make use of the appearance! By the way, all these questions might get their answer if

once he had found her name. This name was already forming and clenching in him. It only depends on him ...

There was a well-known front door, with scrawny vine branches around the stick and lintel, the knocker with the lion's head, whose grim muzzle they had always laughed at. It opened and the steps wound ahead of them into the darkness, into which the morning mist was now penetrating ... the seventeenth step still creaked, and when they passed the innkeepers' door, they had to walk on their toes as usual. The staircase turned even narrower into the tower, in front of the small hatch the cherry tree branch from which a cluster of blossoms had once been torn off in spring. Then there was the little black picture of the Mother of God set into the wall, with the little red glass light.

And then the door to the tower room opened and you was at home ... Herbert could now see everything clearly again, each of the beloved objects, the desk and the bookcase, behind the green curtain the two beds from which they had just risen.

And when he turned round, Bettina was standing there in a white flowing robe and her parted hair, which she had just pulled through the comb, was hanging down on either side of her head.

Now she looked up and Herbert looked into her eyes, which had a bluish gleam at the bottom. But the flesh was strangely altered, it stretched like a thin pale layer of jelly over the bare bones of her dancing mask, as if through the body of a jellyfish you could see every cove and every seam of the skull, and the hairs were loose and loosely stuck in this soft, melting mass.

And everywhere this face, transparent to the bone, was pitted with cloudy spots, lumps of earth stuck in the corners of the eyes and mouth and the hair seemed to move quietly of its own accord, as if a teeming life were hidden beneath it.

Bettina, however, threw her hair out of her face, raised her arms high above her head and began the lustrous, angular, intricate dance of the phantoms with fierce, wide, triumphant gestures ...

The phlebotomist

The shards of glass with which the gravedigger's caution had peppered the churchyard wall crunched under the nailed soles of shoes. Three blokes climbed out of the shadows on ladder rungs and danced in the moonlight, which threw green sparks into the broken bottles. Then one of them reached backwards and helped a powdered wig over the edge of the wall. Under the wig, the highly honoured and honourable Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer puffed onto the crunching battlements. He had pulled wide riding boots over his breeches and silk stockings and buckled shoes, in the tubes of which thin thighs were desperate. Now he swayed in the arms of a black fellow whose tread was as sure up here as on country roads and whose blood knew nothing of dizziness.

The other two jumped from the edge of the wall into the bramble bushes were so thick that the vines flailed about and grabbed at the enemy's trousers with a hundred hooks. The third came slowly, groaning under the doctor's despondency, down with him the safe path of the ladder that now led into the hill country of death. The black roof of the gravedigger's cottage crept out of the low copse of crosses into the eloquent night, and the tower of the little church pointed straight towards a silver cloud as if to impale it. In front of the gravedigger's door a little red flame was burning over the little pewter votive cauldron, a double protection against ghosts and spirits, and the eternal light cast the shadows of men on burial mounds where

they were ruffled by the undergrowth. Eusebius Hofmayer stumbled in the midst of his companions, who now crossed the darkness again with the sure footfalls of the beasts of prey. From the rows of ancient gravestones they came to younger lands of death and at last they searched among the hills of the last days, whose softness betrayed the pain of yesterday.

"It must be here," said the doctor and swung his riding boot against an obstacle. But the other three took a better direction and pulled him a little further into the darkness under the heavy branches of the old trees of life. A spark sprang from the steel and stone and grew into the glow of a small lantern. The doctor cursed the glaring clatter of the spades and shovels, huddled together as if in fear of the night and their handiwork. Now the labour of the three lads wheezed and threw the hill apart.

"She was a good girl, Veronika Huber," grumbled one of them, kicking the spade hard into the soft ground.

"An honourable and clean spinster."

"The bridegroom wants to go to war. His mother weeps, but he is so full of pain that he has had enough of life."

The doctor's silver snuffbox rattled loudly, as if the lid was being used to stop the boys' speeches. Eusebius Hofmayer was impatient, for the work was progressing too slowly for him towards the bottom of the grave. The trees around him murmured unwillingly, and shadows fluttered from their tops like black birds whose wings wanted to extinguish the light. Somewhere there was a lost moonlight, a lost glimmer through the thick banks of clouds,

just strong enough to fill the darkness with forebodings that stared like masks. In the centre of the empty sky above the church spire stood a graceful ark, receiving its silver from the moon hidden in the west. The doctor came a short distance from this cloud to the Spanish galleys that had sunk somewhere at sea with untold cargoes of silver. Then he sank back down to the business of the night. The fellows talked and did not move.

'But, my dears, what a delay! What a waste of precious minutes! Mon dieu, He probably wants us all to be written together, Michel! Why doesn't He stand and spit in His hands so often? If I had engaged three moles for this affair, I would undoubtedly be further along than I am with your long-suffering. That's really something ..."

"Ennuyant!" said someone standing next to Eusebius Hofmay-er, looking like a gentleman in a dressing gown. A cold snake crawled over the doctor's back and wrapped its coils around his neck, while the shafts of his riding boots clattered against his thin thighs. The tools fell out of the three blokes' dirty hands. But the strange gentleman smiled in such a friendly way that two rows of sharp teeth came between his twisted lips like saws.

"Please, don't let me disturb you, mon cher. I am pleased to see that you are also interested in fresh graves and I am, how shall I put it ... selfless enough to wish you the best of success."

"You are very kind," said the doctor, unable to take his eyes off the back of the strange gentleman, from whom two pointed, jagged shadows

fell down as if wings were sitting on his shoulders.

"The immortalised spinster Veronika Huber certainly has her very special qualities. But I don't begrudge you them, truly I do. Science, my lord, science! It deserves all the support it can get. And the short-sightedness of the authorities is the greatest obstacle to serious anatomy."

"You're too kind. So you're also a professional?"

"In a way ... in a way! Not quite, but in a way." Under the dressing gown a clockwork whirred and the gentleman showed his two bare saws. And over the strange laughter, his words stumbled on: "In a way ... in a way. But the authorities protect the decomposition, my lord. They have the corpses cremated and forbid science to molest them. Decomposition, yes, decomposition is protected by the authorities. But I don't want to compete with you. You shall have the immortalised maiden Veronika Huber."

"Very friendly, very friendly. Thank you very much. But may I ask what ..." A hand rose towards the doctor. Five black claws curled against the bold mouth. "No, my dearest, you may not ask. Or you shouldn't ask. I know it is the custom of serious science to ask everywhere. But this custom must remain silent in churchyards. You see, I do not ask."

The moon had overcome the cloud banks by breaking through them close to the horizon. The night grew paler and the silver galley above the church tower floated in a terribly empty, green sky, as if it were standing still, despairing of direction and destination.

Between the trees of life glowed the bald skull of the strange gentleman, on which jagged seams marked the borders of the bones; a wreath of yellowed hair sat like a frill between the nape of his neck and the collar of his dressing gown. The two gentlemen looked at each other. Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer's teeth wiggled in his mouth when he saw the other's saws glistening, and he realised with astonishment that between these saws and the two eyeholes, in which there seemed to be no view, sat the upturned nose of a bat.

A movement from the strange gentleman seemed to be an invitation to continue the work. The three lads reached for the spades, but under the dressing gown a rusty clockwork buzzed. "No, my dearest, your method is really ennuyant. That would be a bit tedious. I want to show you how I handle such things. But first you must promise not to withhold compensation for my trouble."

The doctor realised with pleasure that his mind had returned from afar and that his breath was once more sweeping wheezingly through empty channels. It all dissolved into the comprehensible: a miserable swindler who wished to be paid for his silence, a man who knew how to turn a coincidence into money. The gentleman in the dressing gown forestalled his question, which was angling for fixed terms.

"No, no. Roman law applies in the Holy Roman Empire. I trust that your legality will not deny my service in return. We conclude an innominate contract, and you shall see that the advantage is yours. Now the performance."

Two hands came out of the dressing gown, and ten

Black claws stretched out against the grave, like bars of magnet iron against dead masses to which they wanted to give life, and it seemed as if the earth was moving under the wonders of a strange attraction. The clods followed and lifted up in their shaft, the earth crept up at the edges with the bubbling of a boiling liquid and threw up bubbles that expanded, swelled, pushed over the edge. The whole mass began to come to life, threw the three guys out of the hole, reared up, swelled out of its container as if under the pressure of gases, bulged into a mound and burst with the bang of an explosion. The grave was free and at its bottom, under a tangle of crushed wreaths and flowers, lay the coffin of the immortalised virgin Veronika Huber.

Then the three blokes threw down their tools, ran screaming into the bushes and left their earnings in the radii of horror. The doctor sent his contemplation after their escape. His tongue was suddenly sticky and heavy and could not move the words. He tormented himself with a question: "And the quid pro quo ..."

"You shouldn't ask, mon rather. We'll talk about this in your studio. You can go home now. You'll find me and the immortalised Maid Huberin there. Go on!"

A polite bow and the gesture of a hand forced the doctor out from under the trees of life. The strange gentleman in the dressing gown walked between graves beside him. Jagged shadows flapped at his back and the tassels of the dressing gown trailed like traces of blood on the now illuminated paths. A sudden aloneness tore the doctor's horror apart with an even more terrible horror. The gentleman in the dressing gown was gone.

And to the side stood an old gravestone in the moonlight, tall and narrow and insistent as a word of terror, and in the cruel brightness it proclaimed the name of one long dead, the Chevalier de Saint Simon ...

The doctor began to run in his heavy riding boots, letting himself be whipped by branches, torn apart by broken glass and overcoming obstacles as if in heavy dreams.

He came to his senses in front of his house. The long, narrow alley with its high gables concealed a threat in its folded darkness. Between the shadows of the gables, the light of the setting moon ate deep into the sleepy faces of the houses. On a cornice a flock of stone birds fluttered among the tangled tendrils of an adventure carved in stone, and beside it the butter churn stood over the study window, driving the pestle vigorously into the tub. The erudition that had filled this house through a succession of owners down to Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer was still masked from the street by the somewhat grimacing and oddly inclined humour of the builder. The doctor tilted his head towards the windows in the manner of a bird. It was quiet under the butter churn, and the moonlight filtered over the lifeless bull's-eye panes. Now the key hesitated in the boar-hunt-shod front door and found a well-bolted lock. More confident and freeing himself from evil fear, the doctor climbed to his study, and when he entered it, - he saw the naked corpse of the immortalised maiden Veronika Huber on the side table, and in his chair of sorrow, his hard, black claws resting over the armrests, the bald, dead man.

The man in his dressing gown is bent back, his skull marked with bone stitches. Black boards huddled in a corner. The moon was preparing to leave the room.

"Welcome home," said the gentleman in the dressing gown from his armchair, as if he were the master of the house, and the doctor couldn't help but stammer

"Welcome!"

"So, my dear friend, you may now ask whatever you like."

"So I ask, how did you get in here?"

"I know this house better than you do, because I've known it a little longer and that's why I know ways that you don't know. I expect another question."

The moon slipped out of the room at the top of the window, but the room remained in a pale light that seemed to radiate from the maiden Huberin on the dissecting table like a kind of phosphorescence, in which the colourful flowers of the Turkish dressing gown began to bloom with colour. The strange gentleman took one of them out of the fabric, smelled it and put it back in its place. He waited for a question that did not dare to emerge. It was *so quiet that* one could hear the butter churn outside pounding the pestle into the tub and the stone birds chirping in the neighbourhood. Damp boards cracked in the dark corner.

The question ducked under a mountain of fear until The strange gentleman stood up and, wearing his colourful dressing gown with tassels trailing traces of blood on the floor, approached the virgin Huberin. He took hold of her flesh and tightened her skin: "You see, Mr Colleague, she is good and useful for experiments, de monstracionibus and studiis. Her specialities in science

The kidney and gall bladder will make considerable progress. My performance is beyond reproach, clean and prompt."

"And what do I get in return? ..."

The gentleman in the dressing gown rushed his answer over the echo of the question: "It's simple and easy, almost ridiculous compared to my work. I want nothing more than for my colleague not to go over to the pen tomorrow and leave it up to me to let the star go to seed."

"How can that be? Is the gentleman a doctor? And does he know how to handle the lancet so that just enough blood is drawn to maintain the well-being and piety of the sisters?"

"You can rest assured that I will not disgrace your scholarship and that I will conduct myself like a man of science and not like a crank."

"Is the gentleman a doctor?"

"At least something similar. And as far as blood-letting and blood-drawing are concerned, I have more practice in these delicate subjects than anyone else."

The doctor's deliberations wavered between two decisions. The naked corpse of the immortalised Huberin showed in its own light all the qualities that could be appreciated at the dissecting table, and the doctor jerked for the instrument box to continue courting the answers to those burning questions that had thoroughly filled his last years.

"But - but. The impossibility, Mr ... Mr ... is too obvious. If I trust you completely, if I consider your knowledge to be sound enough,

Although I believe that my colleague will carry out these minor, health-promoting operations smoothly and without objection, I have no doubt that the ladies of the monastery will reject the stranger with protest. I am the doctor chosen and confirmed by the authorities, to whom the monthly bloodletting is entrusted and who is the only male individual allowed to enter the monastery. I do not see how my colleague can penetrate the gates of this virgin castle and, if he has already entered, how he could enforce his intention."

"The difficulties, mon rather, are entirely and solely with you and the slowness of our ideas."

A black claw rose with a lecturing finger in a strange gesture of instruction, here at a dissecting table on which the naked corpse of the young Veronica phosphoresced. The doctor kept to this gesture of disputation and was about to answer with a replica intended to warm to the impeccable lawfulness of human ideas when the foreign gentleman cut off all germinating objections.

"You can't 'imagine' it, can you, my dearest? You think it's impossible and that means: you haven't seen it yet. That's why I want to show you now. I would ask you to take a closer look at me."

Favours prove difficult when the eyes are afraid of some monstrous absurdity, thought the doctor, forcing himself to follow. He was alone in his studio, in a terrible loneliness that was all the more terrible because he had to share it with a second self. Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer

stood opposite himself, doubled by a sudden phantastic inspiration of a creative power, and differed from the other Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer only in that he trembled while the latter smiled, that he wore two limp riding boots under his arms, while the latter held the silver knob of a cane to his chin.

"I think," said Eusebius Hofmayer the Second, "that the sisters will not refuse me entry in this outfit, as they must have decided not to allow the chosen doctor, who has been confirmed by the authorities, into the convent at all, which would probably contradict all custom and also their own needs."

The complete helplessness of Hofmayer the First was poorly concealed behind a dull murmur. Right down to the cosy bellies of his periods and the slightly snuff-stained lace of the front shirt, down to the breeches, buckled shoes and the fleshlessness of the "calves, down to the wart above the left brow and the mole on the cheek below, this wicked duplicity threatened the doctor's well-anchored sanity. The pleasure of rising above it in dialectical exploitation of the situation was cut off by this cruelly similar reflection, as if it knew when the doctor had collected himself enough to find his supply of words again.

"You probably think I'm similar enough now to be able to talk to you.

r your kind permission to see to your position in the convent tomorrow - well to provide, I dare to add in all modesty - and give me *plenam potestatem*, power of attorney, to carry out your office with the sisters.

tion. Should you hesitate, I would just like to remind you that, by accepting the service, you have assumed the obligation to provide consideration in accordance with the applicable law and that you will hardly be able to avoid this acknowledgement."

Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer the First was too blunt to look for ways out and gave Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer the Second all the powers he could wish for.

"Your handshake, Mr Colleague," demanded the two-

te.

The first shoved out a trembling hand, but before the second could strike, something highly unexpected happened. The immortalised Maid Huber sat up on the dissecting table, let her legs slide off the edge, and while she made a gesture of modesty with one hand, she raised the other stiff arm in warning. The silent movements provoked a spray of slavering anger from Hofmayer the Second: "Lie down, maiden nose, and don't get involved in things that don't concern you. I beg you to forgive me such impertinence, you'll get your turn." The outburst was followed by a grumble: "Riff-raff! And the stuff still demands: *de mortuis nil nisi bene*. -Lie down!" he shouted once more, and struck the corpse between the breasts with the head of his stick so that it fell down and resumed its rigidity. Doctor Hofmayer the First struck the hand held out by the Second; he would now have held it in red-hot iron without thinking.

A laugh burst in the room, like a meteor in
The darkness was terrible, and a silence followed in which you could hear the rumbling of the butter churn:

Eusebius Hofmayer the Second had disappeared, as if the laughter had torn him into dust and the silence had swallowed him up in its dark funnels.

Between Adam and Eve at the gate of the monastery, the gatekeeper's peephole opened for the third time that morning. The crooked shoemaker sat in the round cut-out and showed the alley his diligence, the baker enjoyed the break between his early morning and afternoon pastries by raising himself from the steps of his front door over the pavement - profoundly working his nose with his thumb and forefinger, the butcher's dog lay in the middle of the path with his paws stretched out and did not move when the traffic of this quiet alley passed over him. Between Adam and Eve, the progenitors placed by a devout simplicity and a childlike will on either side of the abbey, the path led to the home of the ladies of the abbey. Adam and Eve stood erect, undistinguished in their bodies, except for the most obvious features, under the trees of a petrified paradise, whose foliage merged and devoured over the gate, until leaves, fruits and the animals of this confusion appeared like hieroglyphics, letters of a simple and unbiased text. The innocence of pleasure could be read here, the confidence of godliness, of comfort, which had been common to the builder, the master builder and the sculptor of this old patrician house.

Sister Ursula said to Sister Barbara, who filled the corridor behind her: "He's still not coming. Once you're used to punctuality, this unforgivable negligence ..."

"Yes, y e s , y e s , " gasped Sister Barbara and

tried to turn round in the narrow corridor, but after a short turn she remained helplessly stuck. Over the years, her quiet soul had expanded the temple of the body to three times its normal size and gasped at the small discomforts of the monstrous. She had preferred to close herself off from the uncomfortably mobile world with thick walls and lay between the monstrous cushions of her fat like an asthmatic lapdog. Sister Ursula remembered her duty, braced herself firmly against the back wall and pushed Barbara along the corridor out into the small garden. Between the somewhat puny bushes, which looked as if they were ashamed to carry seeds and carry out fertilisation within these walls, the sisters lived it up. To the fantastic Dorothea, these currant bushes became the gardens of Armida and the sparse shade of a few stunted pear trees became the darkness of the primeval forests of Ceylon. All the events of this little spot, the miserable coincidences that strayed here from the world, gave the mischievous Agathe pleasure in needle-pointed remarks, to which the devoted Anastasia, out of some need for humiliation, exposed herself incessantly and with deliberation. The busy Thekla, who felt the desire for activity like a glowing stone, mediated between them. The melancholy Angela walked between the sisters with swollen tear ducts, like the thought of an inevitable misfortune, and loved to tread the sharp gravel of the paths with bare feet in a desire for penitence. The spirit of complete purposelessness filled all the rooms and the garden of the former patrician house

and boiled the blood of these women until it cried out for the doctor's lancet. Still, still, somewhere in the hidden corners of the house, in the secret compartments of these souls, there was a pale, distant spectre that one almost dared not call hope, the hope of something beyond the walls, from above from the glistening clouds of summer or from below from the murmuring earth, an intimidated expectation that remembered its name in vain. The spirit of purposelessness seemed to have united all its strength in the headmistress Basilia, and his sober indifference held the shield before her, when her reply subdued the excitement of Sister Ursula with one of her peculiar phrases: "You put these things on too hasty a scale, my child; he will come, for it is his duty, and in the fulfilment of his duties he has never been found remiss without reason."

The busy sister Thekla broke in between
She came out of two currant bushes and warned him that she might nevertheless send him a message, and the melancholic Angela uttered an oracle that could be interpreted as the death of Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer. A barely concealed excitement brought all the sisters together around the headmistress for a consultation and even brought Dorothea from the dark primeval forests of Ceylon. All trembled for this little event, in which the life of a whole month reached its climax, and felt themselves led to rare unanimity by the same desire. The sighs of the devoted Anastasia and the gasps of the phlegmatic Barbara said the same as the silencing of the spiteful Agathe.

The barking of the bell, the ringing of which was carried by the stone hand of Adam, announced a change in the scene and prepared the appearance of the doctor Eusebius Hofmayer for the hypocrisy of indifference.

"Thank God," whispered Ursula to Thekla and accepted her addition: "Our phlebotomist is coming after all," with a satisfied nod of her head; then the calm of wishlessness welcomed the expected person.

The doctor approached the matron with a smile and bowed to her, begging her pardon for his delay: "I was kept from urgent business" - "Business!" sighed Thekla in her depths - "and I need not particularly and expressly assure my venerable patroness and her reverend sisters that it was really only difficult and urgent negotiations that prevented me from fulfilling a duty which, in my rather unpleasant business, seems to me to be the true oasis in the desert."

"Oh - we have patience and can wait, there's no rush," said the headmistress, reaching with pointed fingers for the rosary on her belt.

"Incidentally, I consider it - in all modesty, allow me to say this - on the basis of my exact research even quite expedient and beneficial to heat the blood a little more first - how shall I put it - by delaying it a little more, to boil it, so to speak, so that all the foam separates on the surface and all impurities flow off at once."

This made sense to the sisters, a different one of whom was on duty in the kitchen every week.

Doctor Eusebius Hofmayer picked up the tin of tobacco and, taking in the recognition of his profound wisdom from the glances around him, he steadily savoured a pinch.

"If you please, Doctor," said the matron and went ahead, followed as always by the doctor at a distance of half a step. The nurses followed, and between the bushes of the garden the black, ugly dresses rustled like a murmur of impatience.

At the entrance to the refectory, the doctor let the procession pass with a deep bow. Then he was the last to enter and closed the door, smiling as he counted whether everyone was present.

In the bare, sober dining room, enclosed by whitewashed walls, the preparations for the bloodletting began. The softly upholstered operating chair stretched out its arms, basins rounded to receive blood, and pale cloths yearned for the life of the red colour. The water in the large tubs trembled on the surface in ringlets of expectation, and in the circle of these things and the nurses, Eusebius Hofmayer laid his bare instruments on the small table.

"How strangely he clinks his knives," the fanciful Dorothea dared to whisper, and the mischievous Agathe replied: "The music of the doctors."

Eusebius Hofmayer nodded at her *so* vigorously that her malice froze and repeated: "The music of the doctors, Reverend Sisters! Why shouldn't the doctors make music? My researches have penetrated deeper than those of my colleagues and have recognised the connection between music and medicine; music is

Movement and the process of life is movement and the related affects the related."

The sisters liked the fact that his words seemed to penetrate into the corners of the room like a strange song, from where they returned as floating sounds. The clink of knives flickered provocatively above these harmonies, until a scream from the headmistress broke into the sisters' absorption.

"The picture ... who turned the picture against the wall?"

The image of the crucified Saviour, the bridegroom of the women in this refuge from the noise of the world, painted by Master Burgkmeier's artistic hand, watched over the women's meals here in the refectory, hanging on the wall with his face turned away. Eusebius Hofmayer stood among the startled sisters with a steely smile - while the headmistress walked towards the picture and turned the Saviour towards the hall. Then, as if exhausted by a heavy exertion, she went back to her seat, staggering under the weight of a horror, as the doctor's face appeared to her strangely changed. His jaw was thrust forward, and two rows of pointed teeth gnashed like saws between his narrow, contorted lips. The hand with the pinch stood still in front of a nose that resembled that of a bat. And in the hollows above the bony cheeks, the headmistress searched in vain for the life of a gaze. She looked into the eyes of darkness as if in eerie long nights full of whimpering voices.

The sisters were accustomed to listening to the
headmistress.

and, leaning slightly forwards, they froze, as they were
base

lia froze. Suddenly the slimy toads of fear sat in their throats and swelled up so that their breath rattled past. And all the ghosts of their dangerous desires stood behind them and lashed their souls with the scourges of sin.

Eusebius Hofmayer moved further and further away from the usual features of his prissy scholarship, grew like a shadow among them and seemed to displace all light from this high room. The bright drawings of the sun on the floor and walls left the artful regularity of their lines, moved as if in agony and retreated distorted and restless into each other, crawled like tormented deformities over the red and white tiles of the floor and finally fled through the windows into the open air, where they were sucked in by a jelly. The air of the garden outside the windows seemed cloudy and ran thickly around the trees and bushes, so that they seemed to be enclosed in a viscous mass, every branch and every leaf of a congealed, seemingly unreal naturalness.

"Blood gives power over blood," said Hofmayer, summarising

Thekla's sister by the neck and playfully plunged his iron claws into her skin with brief pressure so that small thin jets of blood spurted from the holes.

It screamed. Loud and shrill and desperate.

"The picture ... the picture!"

The Saviour was again hanging on the wall with his face turned away. Then the sisters felt that they were abandoned and given over to another cruel master. Basilia and a few others ran to the door, but the door handle reared up against the headmistress and bit down.

She clutched them in her arms with viper's teeth. All the curlicues and ornaments bristled snake humps, raised small, rough mouths and hissed. The sisters who fled to the windows and tried to reach the garden were held like flies by the curdled, sticky air.

The room was a prison in which a wicked will destroyed life. The terribly changed Eusebius Hofmayer watched the sisters' insane endeavours with narrow lips drawn up over gnashing saws. The busy Thekla's neck elongated under his playful claws. The knives and lancets on the instrument table arranged themselves in pairs to the sound of mischievously giggling music and performed a dainty, clinking minuet in perfect order.

"Ladies, please listen to me a little. What I have to tell you is very brief and will not keep us from the actual purpose of my visit for too long."

Under the doctor's compulsion, the nurses returned to the circle of chairs and wrapped a wreath of half-dead people around him. But another semblance of movement followed his inviting gestures. The whitewashed walls and ceiling of the chamber grew dark and trembled as if with buried colours now coming to life. Shapes stirred under the uniform fetter of a sober whitewash. The white shattered, and between its vanishing shreds rose the living painting of the ground, the images of cheerfulness and pleasure with which a forgotten time had once adorned this hall. All the cheerful nudity, all the over-

The humourful jokes coming from the groups on the walls radiated onto the circle of half-dead women. The women stretched out on clouds raised their heads in laughter and curiosity, mischievous cherubs pointed their fingers at the condemned, and drunken youths let go of the bacchantes' hips to swing their golden beakers mockingly at the sisters. The laughter of these merry ones rang between the music of the instruments. And like a rain of fragrance and light, the long world, banished under the white blankets, was renewed in a burst of vigour and noise.

"We salute you, Saint-Simon," shouted the walls and the ceiling.

"I invite you to come down."

"Here we come, here we come." The harmless lust of the senses, which had expressed itself cautiously at the gate of this strange house in Adam and Eve, was here fermented to the point of exuberance, as varied and attractive as sin, and revoked the hypocrisy of paradisiacal simplicity at the entrance. The lust of the senses descended here in a hundred forms and formed a circle of wild spectators around the condemned sisters. Groups snaked into the theatre's positions and seemed to be waiting for secret cues to swing over into new entanglements, while the loosely wound chains of flowers, the untwisted border ornaments dangled loosely from the ceiling between the blooming flesh.

From this round dance of lively madness around
The sisters sat in a circle of corpses, their eyes still shining with fear. In their midst stood the false Eusebius Hofmayer, who dusted a grain of snuff from his shirt and began by

interrupted the doctor's familiar movements with monkey-like grips on Sister Thekla's elongated neck, with a surprising flailing of iron claws, with a dry crunching of the saw-shaped chins, like a lawyer bringing a lawsuit: "Ladies, dear honoured Sister Basilia and you other reverend sisters! These kind gentlemen have relieved me of the trouble of introducing myself to you by calling me by name as soon as they greeted me. If you remember the gravestone bearing my name, you will be a little surprised to find me still in such good spirits and relatively well. I really am in the best of health and have come to terms with the gentleman that my friends, the doctors, call death. In return for small favours on my part, he provides me with the best dishes from his table and has even granted me certain sovereign rights to the border areas on this side of decay. You wonder, my reverend sisters, by what right I extend these sovereignties over you. By the power of my jaws! by the right granted to me over all corpses on this side of decay."

"Evoe, evoe," shrieked the women in the extensive and the sisters sank even deeper into their armchairs, as if the last hold of hope had fled from their bodies. "Saint-Simon! Saint-Simon!" Hatred whooped and threw words of rage like flickering whip lashes over the bodies of the condemned. The hideousness of an orgy of cruelty armed the painted lives and drove them against the living dead. The nudity and the lustful, dripping greed

advanced in battle lines. But the master beckoned them back: "The feast is mine. And those who want more than to warm themselves by watching must return to the wall." Then he bowed in the circle of mortal fear, which seemed to give him cheerfulness and comfort, and said in the style of Eusebius Hofmayer:

"To inform the most reverend sisters that, with the favour of the most gracious Sister Basia, I will now allow myself to proceed with the desired, this time quite thorough bloodletting."

He let go of the bustling Thekla, whose head dangled with closed eyes from an immensely elongated neck pierced like a flute, and stepped over her collapsing body towards the headmistress. Three dainty minuet steps forwards, one back, then forwards again, until he dug his iron claws into her shoulders with a polite bow and gripped her neck with the saws of his gaping mouth, while the raging spectators rattled their tambourines and cymbals, howled, fell upon each other in a frenzy and tried in vain to draw the blood they craved from the wounds in their own painted bodies.

The narrow alleyway in front of the figures of Adam and Eve was enlivened by the commotion of unfamiliar noises. A noise came from the pen, a wild shouting and - quite clearly - the clanging of hard-hitting cymbals. The cobbler and the dog raised their heads, looked at each other and tried to regain their composure. But there was something so threatening and disturbing in this noise that the dog slunk away with his tail between his legs, and the cobbler

with the baker became the centrepiece of a small gathering. The message flew through the town with a broad wing, arousing laughter and fear, curiosity and worry, and swept a riot in front of the gate, the sides of which were guarded by Adam and Eve.

"The devil must have got into the sisters," said one mocker.

"But it is clear to see that they are putting up a brave fight," replied a pious man.

The crowd began to boil and seemed to want to swell up against the houses, pushing towards a man who was waving his hands and shouting among the people. The cobbler could not understand how Dr Eusebius Hofmayer, whom he had not yet seen return from the monastery, could now appear here with his wig displaced and his cane curved. His hands flew against the gate. But nobody understood him. Under the stone trees of paradise, Adam and Eve smiled, a frozen smile that seemed so terribly knowing and cruel. The smile of adepts of a mystery in which life and death are only the characters in a masquerade. The excitement beat foaming against the gate, but the risk of a storm was distant and incomprehensible, and when the wings of the gate opened wide, a lane opened into the crowd. The building opened its mouth to reveal its secret, the gentleman in the dressing-gown came out and walked slowly away, nodding to the people. On the bald skull, the marks of the bone sutures zigzagged, leathery lips retreated from bright saws, and two thin, bright red streams of blood trickled from the corners of the mouth. The tassels of the flowered dressing gown dragged in the dust

and left red, damp furrows on the humpy pavement of the road.

The midday sun was shining. No one dared to make a sound; only a clockwork under the stranger's dressing gown purred loudly and vigorously, a mockery of this silence and the fleeing time.

A shout followed the disappearance, and the crowd was fired up with new courage, which threw them into the long corridor, pressed them apart on all sides and dragged a heap with Eusebius Hofmayer into the dining room.

There the sisters sat in a circle, still held by an invisible centre, shrunken in their chairs as shells of their former bodies, bundles of skins and clothes. The contents had been sucked out of their bodies and, without a trace of spilt blood, a terrible bloodletting had been performed on them. The walls were strangely transformed; instead of the smooth whitewash, wildly moving, colourful scenes of exuberant merriment, bacchanalian dew, frenzy of the senses, set in radiant sunlit landscapes by a strong and bold brush. The image of the Saviour, however, hung between two voluptuous painted women and looked out of dark caves with their eyes cut out at the circle of dead sisters. A myriad of small knives, lancets and needles had penetrated his face, neck and chest, as if the crucified man had been used as a disc. And Eusebius Hofmayer, who knew the picture well, noticed the terrible change in the features, the distortion of the cut face and saw that the formerly tightly closed mouth stood wide open as if in a scream of horror.

Laertes

The director telephoned it to the theatre secretary, who had just had to endure all the horrors of the Wolfsschlucht, the theatre secretary immediately let the tremendous news flow over to the director, the director passed it on to Samiel, Agathe and Kaspar, Agathe told her colleague from the play, who admired her in the darkness of the scenery, and like a waterfall falling from a height, the news rushed out of the bright hells; branching out, widening, leaping over all obstacles, sparkling and stunning down to the lowest darknesses of theatre work. Between immersion two and three, between "dusk" and

"Moonlight" on the Schnürboden, under the bridge, on which Agathe's ghost appears, behind the bristly back of the wild boar and next to the great drum of the waterfall, they whispered about it. Then the news spread throughout the city and stirred up the world, which is centred around the rarities of the theatre. The waiter at the Café Stadttheater discreetly served this latest stage event with the melange and calculated the daily rate of his tip from the surprised look on the guest's face. All the friends of the arts shook their heads and the oldest among them couldn't stop, as if they had been turned into pagodas by the shock. This news gave rise to a great deal of conversation, conjecture, aphorisms, good and bad jokes, like the ribbons, bouquets, bonbonnières and rabbits from a magician's top hat.

At eleven in the morning, Josef Prinz had informed the director that he was ready to play Hamlet, and when he came home at three in the afternoon, his landlady was waiting for him with festively doubled layers of make-up and eyebrows a little mismatched with excitement.

The tips of her feet agonised with hovering and her arms flapped up and down like the blades of an abandoned windmill: "I hear, I hear ... oh, I am beside myself. Is it possible, Mr Prince! Oh, you want us again, I can't believe it ... you want to give us your Hamlet again. Oh ... that monologue! The way you spoke it ...!"

Prince pushed past the windmill wings and struggled towards the door of his flat. Between two turns and three exclamations, he slipped out of danger, assumed the pose of a Caesar giving away a part of the world on the threshold of his door and called out: "You shall have a free pass." Then he protected himself with a strong, burglar-proof bolt. But at four he had to open the door for the theatre usher, who brought him the part and a bouquet of tactless questions and insinuations. At five, the postman handed him twenty-three letters in delicate colours from lilac to pink, with all the scents from musk to heliotrope, with the most ardent expressions of heartfelt admiration and ardent longing for the reunion of the divine Hamlet.

At half past five, his friend arrived with the dawn. He found Hamlet wrapped in grey, with two red bloodstains of the sinking evening on his chest and shoulders and the sword musing in front of him so that the narrow blade jumped in a semicircle from the basket to the floor. The mirror repeated all this again, paler, greyer and more lifelessly rigid than reality.

"I hear you want to play Hamlet again."

"I decided to do it. The director pushed me hard to make the Shakespeare cycle possible and I ... why shouldn't I play Hamlet again? My best role ... ridiculous!"

"If you yourself have overcome what happened back then, why shouldn't you play him? Certainly."

"I ... I've got over it." Prinz let the blade spring open so that it clinked softly in the basket. The bloody stains on his chest and shoulders spread out in the grey, blurred and shivered into the darkness.

The friend saw the narrow, black stripe of the blade extending from Hamlet's hand, like a will directed into the unknown. "How long ago was that?"

"You're lucky you don't have to count the years. Five years of banishment from the best and highest of my strength."

"I can imagine that any repetition would have brought back all the horror of that time."

"A whim, my dear, a whim. Or do you perhaps think my conscience ... Do you perhaps want to say that more than an unfortunate coincidence ..."

"But ... but, Prince! You still don't seem to be completely over it. Your excitement back then has taken its toll on your nerves."

"Yes, it was terrible when he lay in front of me like that. Blood on his doublet and my sword full of blood. Not a theatrical death from which one rises to bow smilingly to the applause of the audience, but real death. A few more convulsions and spasms and then

deaf to the clapping. The clapping was terrible. They knew nothing and believed in a triumph of dramatic art. Fontinbras had to find the words that had frozen the rest of us."

The landlady brought the lamp, glad to have found an excuse to approach Prince. But her kindness and the heightened colouring of her face won no attention. When she had gone away smiling, Hamlet laid his sword on the table. "A coincidence, friend, an unfortunate coincidence. An oversight by the prop master, and death was among us. I swear to you, a coincidence."

"Nobody doubts it."

"Since then, I've been carrying my own weapons, which I know are blunt and harmless." He pressed the tip of the sword against the palm of his hand as if he wanted to c o n v i n c e a judge of his innocence.

"And yet ... when the blades cross on stage, I tremble and my fencing skills are no better than those of any extra."

"I've noticed."

"Have you noticed? Not - true! Maybe the audience noticed it too. And anyway, you know, I haven't felt full since then. The criticism just goes easy on me. But I don't want a pittance of applause. When I've played Hamlet again, I'll be free. I have to face Laertes again, I have to see him stand up and smile, you know, then I will have conquered this hideous spectre."

He grew to full slenderness and fell from a swift fencing stance with a few thrusts that pierced a disembodied enemy. Then the sword sank as if in despair of victory. "You were ... not

true, you were around me most of the time back then, weren't you? When I was in a nervous fever. What did I talk about in my deliriums? I mean, what did my fantasies consist of?"

"Fragments from Hamlet, mostly. There was a lot about Ophelia and also about Laertes. You called them by their real names and threw the relationships around. There was also a bit of reality, because I think the rumour about your relationship with the widow was right after all." "Nonsense!"

"So she didn't? I thought it was because she left the engagement immediately afterwards with a penalty. There was talk of it, and some people wanted to know that there was a big row between you because of Laertes-Tiefenbach."

"Nonsense! Nonsense!"

"But it seems to have worried you. You said ... of course, they were all feverish ideas." "Nothing but feverish ideas. My brain took what it could find and mixed it all up. Thank you ... but you don't talk about it, it's best if we don't talk about it any more. Come, spirit of my father, let's go and swear off demon alcohol."

They got ready, walked past the solemnly painted landlady, grand as kings and secretive as conspirators, and quoted in the back room of the "Blue Monkey Wife" the demon alcohol.

The rehearsals for "Hamlet" were very thorough this time. Prince, who stood on the stage with clenched lips, pale and determined, resisted every slip-up and everyone trembled at the prospect of experiencing a second outburst like the one at the first rehearsal. He had a careless extra

and thrown into the wings with two slaps, so that he fell whimpering at Polonius' feet. The extra had now lamented the rough Hamlet, but the others were careful not to provoke his wrath through the naughtiness of the rehearsals. Prince stood almost eerily, as motionless as the stone guest, among his colleagues, who were in a very depressed mood, and the light jokes crept around in the dark corners. In front of his implacable face, the jokes that were always ready broke down into pathetic words full of modesty and fear, as if something stood before them whose significance was above all the glamour of the stage.

"Like someone who stages his own death plays", whispered King Claudius to Gustav Rietschl, who had to play the ghost of Hamlet's father. The young actor playing Laertes, who had only been engaged for two years, dared to ask the dangerous question about his predecessor's accident. His curiosity bounced off Rietschl's taciturnity and he had to make do with what King Claudius could tell him in the afternoon at the tarot game in the form of incoherent fragments of rumour, baroque fragments, daring conjectures and malicious allusions. What he heard excited him and he felt the tingling sensation of stepping into a place cursed and consecrated by death. The Prince clothed himself for his imagination in the armour of the strange and mysterious, and from the one whispered word rose to him the delicious delights of fearful loathing. Between two rounds, King Claudius had leaned far forward so that Guildenstern, the lapwing, could not hear: "They speak, but you will keep your mouth shut about it, that the

was not a coincidence at the time, but ... well, on purpose, because the Tiefenbach with the then Ophelia ..." A powerfully announced pagatultimo set King Claudius on a different course, and the young Laertes had to set off on his own in search of the enchanted forest of possibilities. His eagerness and nervous tension increased the more marvellous the experience of crossing swords with a murderer seemed to him. This idea attracted him like an abyss, and he felt as interesting as the tamer of an immense danger, which is incomprehensible and therefore all the greater and more beautiful. He was therefore beside himself and doubted divine justice when he felt the signs of a severe case of influenza the day before the performance. Despite investing part of his monthly fee in Ko- gnak, the fever forced him to bed in the afternoon, and the doctor took away all prospect of tomorrow evening's great success.

The theatre director and the theatre secretary were not. The audience was less desperate, cursed the bad weather, which had no regard for the programme, and also reached for the cognac. Over their fifth glass, the secretary suggested replacing Laertes with a lesser actor. But the director waved his reasons in his face: never ... never ... never would Prinz admit to casting an inferior actor. "He wants to rehabilitate himself, so to speak. To make a splendid introduction and show everything he can do. That's simply impossible." Finally, with the seventh glass, the way out shone with marvellous brightness. "Hildemann from Prague as a temp," cried the secretary, half rising from his velvet fauteuil, and "Hildemann from Prague," thundered the director.

They brought their proposal before Prince, and he nodded with the sombre expression of Hamlet's grant.

"Hildemann from Prague is good," said Gustav Rietschl, reassuring his friend, who was still uneasy about the change. "You don't need to try Hildemann, he's solid and has already played with the best people, you can rely on him." Hildemann agreed and promised to arrive at the right time, just before the performance - earlier it was impossible for him. Prinz was full of boiling anxiety on the day of the performance.

"I would have liked to have rehearsed with him," he said to the dresser in the evening as he put on his sword. Then he paced up and down the dark stage and looked into the empty house, returning again and again to his friend wrapped in the veil of the ghost.

"I'm very excited, please don't leave me."

"No wonder you have stage fright today ..."

"Stage fright? ... I almost want to say fear ... The devil knows ... is Hildemann here yet?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure he's already here."

And the Prince walked on across the stage, which was still filled with all the horror of the inanimate, from the curtain to the edge of Elsinore Castle's terrace and back again, as if he wanted to tear apart the agony of inanity with his steps. The guards drew up and leaned their halberds against the painted towers to pull up their boots and adjust their ruffs, and Hamlet shuddered before their shadows as if they were crawling across the stage from a strange, incomprehensible world. The lively, packed house, the audience gathered with expectations, gave him no confidence this time, and he dared not

to enquire about a restlessness that everyone behind the scenes seemed to miss.

The sign to begin pulled him up, and with a sudden fright he began to regret what was now irrevocable. The question of why he had got involved in this gruesome play full of uneasy memories, full of bloody figures, assailed him, and he now hoped to find the meaning of the desperate to and fro in the background of the stage in Hildemann's absence. Then the performance was impossible, had to be cancelled at the last moment, and he found a way out of all his fears. But after his first scene, a shadow awaited him and approached him.

"Mr Hildemann?"

"Mr Prince?"

Hamlet's father joked about the delay.

"Oh, I'm reliable. If I've said yes, I'll definitely come."

"Shall we try the last scene quickly?"

"The battle? It is not necessary. You fence well, and you should see that I am a capable opponent. We will do it ..."

Laertes took his leave of Polonius and Ophelia. His warning to Hamlet was dry and business-like and yet strangely exciting. Then he disappeared, and when Hamlet, driven about by a frightful restlessness, tried to look for him, he was not to be found, as if he were really beyond an unbridgeable sea. His soul lay trembling on his knees in the scene with the ghost of his father. The inexplicable and haunting nature of the so familiar process acted like poison on his blood, until he was overcome with flickers in his eyes.

eyes and ears almost collapsed at the end.

In the audience, shivers of foreboding responded to Hamlet's fear, forced into the confines of art. One felt oneself before the revelation of mystical events, before a strange symbiosis of drama and reality, and attributed all the excitement to the incomparable artistry of the performer.

Hamlet appeared at the ramp and bowed, pale as a sheet and with his hands twitching in front of the enthusiastic house. Then he chased after Hildemann again without being able to find him. Rietschl had pulled back the veils of his mind and looked like a Bedouin chieftain. He wanted to give his friend some of the cool treasures of his rest by shaking his hand. But Prinz caught hold of him and almost knocked him over: "Listen, listen, that's not Hildemann at all ..."

"Well, allow me, who would that be ..."

"It's not Hildemann. I know him from the pictures ..."

"And I know him personally and I'm telling you, it's Hil- demann ..."

"Don't you realise, man, for God's sake, how a second one is always trying to push itself forward under his face. It's as if he had two layers on top of each other. One face fights with the other and pushes it back ... but it will break out ..."

"Maybe you've had too much cognac for fear of the flu..."

"For God's sake! Does no one see that? ... does no one see that he hates me? In the scene with Ophelia ... how he gnashed his teeth and rolled his eyes when he spoke of Hamlet. That is not

Play, that's real hatred ... beyond all masks ... And where is he, where is he? I want to confront him."

"Willem, don't fall off the scaffolding."

"Don't make jokes. I beg you, don't leave me ... stay close to me. Always close to me. I want to tell you something terrible ... I ... I'm afraid."

Rietschl began to worry that the performance would end in a cancellation and intensified all the suggestive powers of his friendship. Between dull brooding, a lost indifference, a hasty flinch and an unsteady irritability, the portrayal of Hamlet continued. He gave the spectacle of a condemned man who hides inside himself before his destruction and then bangs his fists against the walls again. The monologue about being or not being fluctuated between melancholy apathy and terrible outbursts; the last sentences came out laboured and indistinct, while the teeth bit the lips so that after the last words two thin streams of blood trickled down the naked chin. Never before had anyone laughed so cruelly, never before had the mockery of the stage been so clashing and pointed, a whole collection of finely devised instruments of torture, and the audience cheered and could not contain their rapture. They felt carried away, involved themselves and felt the agony of this brain - voluptuous in itself, like the grinding of the saw in the operating theatres goes pleasantly through one's own bones.

The theatre doctor came on stage in the middle act and caught Hamlet in a corner: "You're wearing yourself out. What are you up to today?" But Prince laughed, pushed the doctor

and, accompanied by his desperate friend, ran off in search of Hildemann. His fear had an effect on the other actors, and the performance began to rise above the appearance of the stage to a sense of dreadful significance. The poetry trembled in all its depths, and the actors looked at each other in the interludes as if they now had to find out the real meaning of all these events.

"Search, search, search," Hamlet shouted to the inspirer, the director and the cloakroom attendants, and they all searched for the missing Laertes.

When the scene of his return came in the fourth act, he was suddenly there, entered the stage, and coldly and stonily joined in the play, as if he did not realise that the others were afraid to stand near him. He discussed Hamlet's murder with King Claudius and remained calm and assured, animated only by a secret joy, as if something long longed for must now finally and inevitably fulfil itself. Behind the scene, Hamlet, leaning heavily on his friend, listened intently to all the mysteries of the attack, and it seemed that he must overcome them like new and unexpected news. His restlessness was crushed by a great heaviness, and stiffened into an inert, threatening colossus, blinking from small, cruel eyes. But the action flowed on inexorably and tore past all the delays Hamlet tried to invent in the interlude. The pause was prolonged and he enjoyed it like a reprieve, silently walking with his friend up and down between the graves that were thrown open for the next scene.

In the cemetery, at Ophelia's grave, Hamlet and Laertes collided. It was a collision that brought the

The audience was shaken, and the struggle in the open grave unfolded with dreadful seriousness, a fight from which Hamlet escaped with empty eyes and wavering knees. The applause of the house was stifled by fear, and only Laertes appeared on stage, with long, strangely waving arms and a smile that seemed so thoroughly inappropriate and confused, while Hamlet clutched his friend at the back of the scene. "This is the Death" - he gasped - "this is death."

"Nonsense; hold on, then it's over."

"It's over ... yes, because this is death. He had hold of me and let me go once more. Didn't you see his other face appear, and when he squeezed me, I felt ... I felt ... he wasn't breathing. He's not breathing, man!"

"You have to go straight to bed later. You have a fever. It's affected you too much. The memory is still too strong ..."

"She's come back to life, she's killing me. This Laertes will kill me. I don't want to go out anymore ..."

The director and the stage manager fought his resistance, broke him up and chased Hamlet out.

"Mr Prince!" shouted the stage manager.

"In a minute." He grabbed his friend by the shoulder and pulled his face towards him. "I have to tell you before I go. Someone has to know. You! That was no accident. It was intentional ... murder. Laertes was murdered, I killed him."

"Mr Prince!!!"

"I'm coming." And Hamlet joined Horatio in the hall of the fighting game. Laertes stood nearby, somewhere between the wings, waiting for his cue. One

did not see him, but they knew that he was here and that nothing would prevent him from entering the stage. Confused by his friend's fear and his confession, Rietschl did not dare to look for him and only saw how the events of the stage dragged on, how Hamlet's words followed hesitantly and endeavoured to make small stops. King Claudius made his expressive, excited gestures almost in the face of the theatre artist, then the whirl of the action swept him out too, where a strange tension trembled and waited for its release.

Behind Rietschl, two firefighters made half-loud remarks: "Hamlet, he's playing today, it's a splendour."

"Jo, it flushes ... like to death and life."

Suddenly Laertes stood among the people in the scene. Rietschl saw how everything turned towards him, simultaneously attracted and repelled, and how they then all involuntarily sought to gather around Hamlet as an opposite pole. The structure of the drama swayed like a storm-tossed tower, without danger of falling, but enough to feel the trembling of the building. Laertes stood among the courtiers, slender, lithe, smiling, and it now seemed to Rietschl himself that this could not be Hildemann. He played with the blade with ardour, forcing its dexterity into fabulous lines that stood in the air for a moment like pointers.

The battle began. The blades found and bound hissed like snakes and met in wild thrusts and parades. They were swift and insidious, lurking and brutal, animated beings wrestling with each other on the edge of a precipice. The fight dragged on

The play was prolonged, far beyond the duration of a mere play, and while the director spoke desperately to Fortinbras, Rietschl was horrified to see that Hamlet had to defend himself in earnest and that Laertes was harassing him with a terrific fire of blows. Groups of spectators formed around this fight, following the reckless mimicry of real fear, and even the dead masses of extras became animated.

Then Rietschl saw that Laertes touched Hamlet's chest with a double thrust and that he drew the blade back slowly, smiling. Hamlet fell, reared up, grabbed his neck and fell back. He clutched at the queen's dress with convulsive fingers and rolled to his side, gasping.

"Curtain, curtain!" shouted the director, the theatre doctor almost ran into Rietschl and pushed his way to the fallen man. While the director in front of the curtain spoke to the restless murmuring of the audience about a minor, regrettable accident and asked them to leave the theatre in an orderly fashion, the doctor examined the body of the casualty.

Hamlet was dead.

"Laertes, Laertes ... where is Hildemann?" the director shouted, and the police commissioner ran off to look for him. But Laertes had disappeared.

A postman broke through the circle of screaming women and silent men with a telegram to the director. It contained a strange message. The train on which Hildemann was due to arrive for the evening performance had broken down halfway through the journey. There were two dead and several seriously injured. And as soon as the identity of the casualties had been established at the next railway station,

the station manager had hastened to inform the management that Hildemann's absence had to be excused on account of his death.

The triumph of mechanics

The city's toy industry had experienced a huge boom in recent years. All cultural states demanded the colourful and precisely working mechanical toys, the drum-beating sausages, the tireless fencers, the frenzied automobiles and the defiant warships equipped with real steam engines. And even the uncultivated states, whose needs were less urgent, were forcefully supplied with toys. In the backwoods of the colonies and in the deserts of Africa, Negro boys were often found with the wreckage of one of these marvellous machines. One well-known explorer even claimed to have been deceived in the wilderness of the Malagarassi by a very unusual monkey which, sitting in the branches of a Borassus palm, seemed to promise the discovery of a new species, until the discovery of the native trade mark (D. R. P. No. 105307) thwarted all hopes. But the independent press soon enough relegated this story to the category of fanciful digressions that is indispensable for African explorers and condemned it as a new gambit of despicable colonial policy.

The most sought-after items, however, were the automatic canines from the company Stricker & Vorderteil. These little animals, which were in no way inferior to nature, could hop like their living models and ran in circles five or six times when the spring was pulled. A mechanical universal genius, an American of course, to whom

his inventions seemed to fall from the sky, had improved the pathetic, lifeless animals in the service of the factory. But just when the company seemed to have reached the pinnacle of its achievements and fame, it came crashing down. With the impertinence of someone who believes himself indispensable, Mr Hopkins one day demanded that his salary be doubled, his working hours cut in half, his own experimental workshop set up and a villa built as a summer residence outside the city. Mr Stricker was inclined to give in. But Mr Vorderteil objected most vehemently: "You can't do that on principle. Hopkins would be in pain again in six months' time." Mr Stricker understood that.

The American took the boss's decision lying down. and returned the favour by resigning. A little consternation and annoyance was soon overcome by the consideration that the most important manufacturing secrets were known and that there was therefore no reason to fear any disruption to operations.

"But how," said the timid Mr Stricker, "if Hopkins himself now opens a rival factory?"

"Let me make sure," reassured Mr Vorderteil, who was connected to the mayor of the town by some subterranean route, "that he doesn't get the licence for that sort of thing."

In the meantime, Mr Hopkins carried on as before, adding a few small improvements to the factory's products, as if he intended to remain in the service of Stricker & Vorderteil forever, and as if he only had to shake his inventions out of his sleeve. During these last few weeks in particular, huge orders were received for rabbits, and

The factory felt compelled to expand its operations in order to produce all these legions of little animals. Smiling as ever, Hopkins took his leave at the end of his contractual notice period, pulled his deaf top hat low in front of the previous bosses and walked away, remaining silent about his future intentions in an almost unsettling manner.

Mr Stricker's fearful suspicions were soon to prove correct. On his underground journeys, Mr Vorderteil received the news from the mayor's office that Mr Hopkins had bought a building site and had applied for permission to build a factory.

"Think," he shouted at his partner, "think what he wants to do." "No idea," said Mr Stricker, and this time he really had no idea.

"He wants to make toys from coloured air glass. Coloured air glass, have you heard of such a thing?"

Mr Stricker had never heard anything like it, but he trusted Hopkins to do anything, even coloured air glass, and so he turned pale, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders and became three centimetres shorter.

"Coloured air glass. What a load of rubbish."

"Calm down. Maybe it's a misprint and Hopkins means air gas. I've already heard of that."

But Mr Vorderteil banged the table so that the big Shannon registrar began to sway over his head, and shouted, "We need all our sunniness, don't make jokes on the edge of the abyss. When Hopkins says air-glass, he means air-glass, and I understand he has also given a brief outline of his plan of operations, from which so much is to be realised.

is that he invented a method of making air so solid that it can withstand higher temperatures and exhibit all the properties of glass without being brittle."

"That would be a revolution for the entire industry, and it's kind enough that it's still limited to toys for the time being. Who knows for how long!"

"Very kind, of course. But just think if the children now get cubes, cones, jumping jacks and locomotives made of coloured glass, which is unbreakable and therefore harmless. Maybe he also makes automatic rabbits. Oh!" And Mr Vorderteil leaned back so hard that the Shannon regulator fell on his head after all. While the papers were still fluttering about him, he jumped up: "But that must not be, and if you, Mr Stricker, persist in your ungraspable indolence, I thank God that I have connections with whose help I can thwart his plan."

On the underground paths between the office
The "relationship" proved itself in the persistent rejection of all Mr Hopkins' petitions, appeals and complaints, so that Mr Stricker was forced to grow about two centimetres shorter every day under the constant triumphs of his compa- gnon.

When Mr Hopkins' seventeenth petition had been rejected, there was a strange commotion at the door of the mayor's office one day, and the American, followed by two enormous mastiffs, entered the entrance hall, which was cramped with filing cabinets, all kinds of reverently preserved junk and rolls of building plans.

room. The chancellors and clerks immediately jumped into adjoining rooms, the doors of which began to groan under the pressure of the bodies pressed against them. Hopkins was able to enter the mayor's room unhindered with his two monsters, whose heads almost reached his shoulders. While he stood in front of the mayor with his top hat off and the mastiffs began to sniff at the cupboards in unadulterated dog fashion, knocking over the wax jug and carelessly leaving the imprints of their paws in the pattern of the carpet, the mayor struggled for words.

"Don't you know," he finally shouted, "that dogs are to be left outside?"

"Oh, yes," Hopkins said, smiling, "dogs are to be left outside."

"So how can you have the nerve to bring your pooches inside?"

"That's not dogs at all."

"So, what?"

"Machines, Mr Mayor," and Hopkins called one of the dogs to him, unscrewed its head so that the gears inside could be seen, then explained the mechanism of the running movements, the sniffing and the particularly ingenious device of tail wagging.

"Why are you showing me this?" cried the mayor, almost pleadingly, as the wheels, pendulums, springs and electric batteries seemed to go on and on. Mr Hopkins put his dogs out of action and replied with a question: "Why won't you allow me to build my factory?"

"You'll have to ask the city planning department which building regulations are against it."

"I've already been to the city planning office. They sent me to the police station."

"Well, so?"

"They sent me to the city physicist there?"

"Well, so?"

"They wanted to send me back to the building authority. But I preferred to go straight to you myself."

The mayor found himself abandoned by his auxiliary troops and resigned himself to answering the question himself:

"Well," he said, "you were turned away because the legal conditions weren't met."

"They are there, and if you don't believe me -I will know how to force you to recognise them."

Under the lifeless, unmoving eyes of the two mastiffs, which seemed to threaten just as dangerously as those of their master, the mayor neither dared to roar without giving reasons, nor to contradict with reasons. (These three bodies, which enclosed him in a magic triangle, were like the containers of stored-up forces just waiting for the mechanism to be triggered). He put his question rather meekly: "Well ... and ... what do you want to do?"

"Oh, I have a choice of several hundred items. Let's say, for example ... the rabbits."

"Ka ... rabbit?"

"Yes ... I'm releasing a billion automatic rabbits on the city."

Now the mayor could free himself with a hearty laugh: "One billion automatic ... ha ... ha."

"You obviously have no concept of a billion

and even less of the perfection of mechanics and of the effect of inanimate objects that are given movement."

But the mayor couldn't contain his laughter and kept repeating: "Car - automatic rabbits."

"So you're calling their bluff?"

"Yes, yes, yes ...!"

"Good," said Mr Hopkins, waving his blameless top hat in farewell, pressing the release lever of his dogs' movement mechanism and striding out of the door with a friendly smile, followed by them.

The mayor could not recover for another two hours, and only when all the directors of all the departments in his office had dutifully survived their fit of laughter did he go home, exhausted by his unaccustomed activity, smiling, to tell his wife about this delicious joke. In front of his house, in the "corner next to the door, shyly pressed against the wall, he saw an adorable white rabbit of the kind that was well known as a product of Stricker & Vorderteil. Amused by the thought that Hopkins had now placed a rabbit on his doorstep, he reached out for the little animal, but the rabbit began to hop and eluded him by fleeing rather quickly. He was gratified to see, as he was still thinking of running after it, that it was caught by some gas boys further down.

The Mayor was very pleased with the report of her man's immense pleasure, and her thriftiness

immediately saw the threat of flooding as a welcome supply of cheap children's toys. When little Hedwig came in with a white rabbit that she had found outside on the stairs, she laughed heartily and didn't stop laughing when Richard also brought a rabbit that had been sitting under the kitchen table, and when Fritz and Anna each brought a rabbit from the darkness of the cellar. The animals with their dull glass eyes, jumping around uselessly, were put in a corner, from which they broke out again and again amidst the children's cheers. But when the cook reported with a pale face that a rabbit had blindly jumped into a large pot of jam, the housewife's excitement won out over her mother's laughter. In the course of the afternoon the rabbits multiplied in an embarrassing way, they seemed to lurk in every corner, growing out of the cracks in the floor, sitting on all the cornices and borders, hopping around blindly everywhere until the laughter stopped and was replaced by a somewhat annoying humming. The mayor escaped his torment and sought his reading club through a twilight speckled with bouncing white specks. But his fellow club members were just as perplexed as he was and sat in the holy of holies of silence for a palaver, while a steadily growing number of rabbits, which had somehow mysteriously invaded, disturbed their mental functions. From time to time, Josef, the club attendant, swept the animals out of the room with a broom, but a moment later they seemed to spill out of every crevice again, to wander around blindly and haphazardly with staring red glass eyes.

jump. Suddenly some of them were on the reading table, disrupting the sacred order of the newspapers. The gentlemen looked at each other, threatened each other with angry glances, beside themselves with nervousness about these disturbances, and finally left when they had convinced themselves that Joseph was powerless with the broom.

In the evening, the mayor felt a hard object under the sheets of his bed, and when he searched intently, he pulled out a rabbit staring stupidly out of glass eyes. With a curse he threw it to the floor, but the animal only made a squeaking sound like an instrument that had been bumped hard and hopped on. This proof of solidity made the mayor beside himself and its effects reached into his dreams, which were teeming with rabbits. Around a word reaching up to the sky in giant letters, the dreadful word "unbreakable", incalculable flocks of rabbits hopped, climbing up and down the letters like cats with fabulously enhanced abilities and all gazing with lifeless red glass eyes towards a point on which the mayor felt himself lying in bed, held fast by a heavy dream.

As he washed off the sweat of this evil night
As he was about to wash, he saw the marble top of his washbasin covered with white rabbits, and one of the animals was lying on the bottom of the washbasin, its fur ruffled. With a deliciously pleasurable glee, he hurled the animal to the ground and was about to happily realise its destruction when it slowly stood up and began to hop with undiminished cheerfulness.

On the street, every step stumbled over one of the

little monsters that survived all the cruel torments of the street boys, all the kicks, even the crushing by the heaviest lorries with incomprehensible tenacity. Rabbits sat on the stairs of the town hall, rabbits met him in the corridors, rabbits gazed dully down from the highest filing cabinets. The mayor strode through his distraught, rabbit-harassed office staff and entered his office with all the heroism he could muster. Thirteen rabbits were sitting on the large desk, hopping in all directions so that the papers spread out in ingenious confusion rustled under their restless hind legs.

In front of this spectacle, the mayor sank to his comfortable chair and wished for all the delights of destruction. He woke up from his reverie with a cry as his hands, sliding wearily down his lap, touched the soft fur of a rabbit. Now it seemed to him that the animals had a feature around their small, lifeless mouths that could almost have been called a smile. It was the fixed smile of inanimate things, but in this terrible multiplication it seemed to increase and gain meaning, and at last he thought he saw the smile of Mr Hopkins repeated a hundred thousand times by the little dreadful beasts.

With a mighty display of his strength, he called out Mr Vorderteil to him. The two sat opposite each other for a while, distraught, until the mayor remembered his dignity.

"This Mr Hopkins ..." he said.

"Yes, that Mr Hopkins ..." said Mr Vorderteil.

"A billion automatic rabbits ..."

"Unbreakable ... unbreakable ..." confirmed Mr Vorderteil.

"Terrible... a billion cars..." The mayor had to fend off a rabbit that suddenly sat on his shoulder and wanted to mount his head. "Your cursed make ..." he shouted angrily and wanted to start crying with rage.

"Yes ... yes ... but I don't understand"

"What don't you understand?"

"The factory has never produced so many rabbits during its entire existence."

"So where do the animals come from?"

Mr Vorderteil couldn't answer because he was flooded with a stream of red ink from an inkwell that had just been knocked over by a rabbit. The beautiful new black trousers were lost beyond repair. And the mayor laughed at this, convulsively, almost howling, until Mr Front had recovered sufficiently to reply: "I think that Hopkins himself has bought up all the last big orders. That man is a devil ... and that he is now letting everything go against us. But ..." and he leaned towards the mayor despite the red stream still trickling between them ... "I believe something else too

... More horrific."

"What is it?" The narrow fringe of hair on the back of the head of the city bristled.

"Haven't you noticed, Mr Mayor, that there are two species, two generations of rabbits, so to speak?"

Truly! Truly! Among the twenty-three rabbits on the mayor's desk

were some that seemed smaller, more delicate and younger than the others, whose fur looked softer and more supple, and who still moved with a certain youthful awkwardness. Otherwise they bore all the characteristics that united this army of little monsters, the red, staring glass eyes that stood lifelessly in their heads whenever they jumped, and the small, painted muzzles with the traces of a hideous smile.

"You see, and that's the most frightening thing of all. Because I have to tell you that when Mr Hopkins was still with us, he talked about a revolutionary discovery, about the asexual reproduction of mechanical rabbits. We laughed at him at the time. But now he has made his discovery and used it ... obviously, quite obviously ... to terrorise us. His rabbits are marvellous images of life, they give birth, and tonight we will have the third generation, tomorrow morning the fifth, and the day after tomorrow we will be heading for the second billion."

This conversation had a surprising and very rapid conclusion, from which one is accustomed to reckon the breaking off of the subterranean relations between the burgomaster and Mr Vorderteil. Guided by a quite natural endeavour to preserve his sanity, and perhaps also seized by a momentary confusion, a fever of hatred and doubt, the mayor seized the instigator of this nuisance, spun him round a few times, and finally threw him out of the door.

But this act of violence was no help against the rabbits. The city had to emerge

The rabbits had smiled, then a murmur of anger had passed through them, the anger was followed by dismay, the dismay by despair. And now horror and disgust had taken hold. One could not sit at table without these white beasts leaping blindly between the bowls, and if anyone threw the animals to the ground in a burst of fury, he only ever had to convince himself of their fragility. They only gave way to the woodchip or the fire, and with the authorisation of the magistrate, woodpiles were erected and lit in all the alleys and squares, and rabbits were fed to them in buckets, aprons and basins. But despite these measures, the number of rabbits increased by the hour and finally, overcome by disgust, they gave up the fight. The fires burned down and polluted the air with the stench of scorched hair. The rabbits disrupted business life and traffic without hindrance, swarmed through all the functions of public life and even forced their way into the secret pleasures of love.

But when a dead child was born in Neugasse
When a child was born to a mother who, as a result of the horror that had thrown her mother before her time, had a red mark in the shape of a rabbit all over her face, an outrage arose, and little was missing, and they would have marched in front of the town hall with all the attributes of the revolution. At this decisive and dangerous moment, the mayor remembered Napoleon the Third, who had known how to pacify his people, who were grumbling about their domestic misery, with the splendour of festivities. It seemed all the more necessary to him to take external action to counterbalance the internal disquiet.

He was horrified to realise that he had already seen five successive generations of rabbits. He therefore ordered that the Schiller celebration scheduled for tomorrow should take place in its entirety.

Just as a captain looks around from the mast of his sinking ship before the sea engulfs him, so the mayor looked at his town from the town hall tower the following day. Although it was only September, the streets, the roofs and the public buildings seemed to disappear under a blanket of snow. But the blanket swarmed, moved, tore apart and closed again; it was nothing other than the promised billion automatic rabbits. An old man, the mayor climbed down from the tower, slid over the soft backs of a few thousand rabbits and took the report of the policemen sent out against Mr Hopkins below. They hadn't been able to find him anywhere, and the mayor was almost happy about it, because he had of course seen it coming. Just like that ... just like that ...

The citizens gathered in the evening for the Schiller celebration

after a fierce battle with the swarms of rabbits that filled the streets. It was particularly difficult to get through at the crossroads, as the crowds of rabbits that met each other would double and triple over each other and pile up several layers of hopping, crawling rabbits. It was also difficult to stand one's ground in the hall. One had to put up with rabbits hopping between the feet of the guests, occupying the space on the chairs and running after each other on the balustrade of the galleries like on the relief of a sculptor gone mad.

A professor of great merit for the intellectual life of the city gave the speech, and when he pulled a rabbit out of his tailcoat pocket in the middle of the most splendid advertisement for the ideal goods of the nation and dragged it to the others with a gesture of disgust, this was almost taken for granted. It was more unpleasant when, during the following overture, the wind instruments emitted a peculiar squeaking every moment because rabbits had crawled into their tubes. But now Miss Beate Vogl, the youthful dramatic singer of the city theatre, took to the podium to perform some compositions to Schiller's songs. Her breasts and her beautiful neck were already rising very low from a marvellously rich dress, and the delicacy of her skin competed successfully with the delicacy of her performance. Everything seemed tense and focussed its attention on the platform, so that even the whimpering of the rabbits was less noticeable. But suddenly a silver ladder of sound broke in two, and a scream, a terrible scream, broke the tension of the audience. With eyes rolled out in horror, Fräulein Beate Vogl seemed frozen by a horror, then her eyes sank into the neckline of the dress, the sheet of music fluttered from her hands, and now she ... pulled a rabbit out of her bosom with a pitiful howl, on which nine other, very small rabbits hung as if they had just been born.

The excitement and the disgust of the audience into a clamour in which chairs were knocked over, trains were kicked down, and a panic-stricken flight for the exit doors ensued until a clear and energetic

voice from the podium. Mr Hopkins stood up there next to the swooning singer, waving his immaculate top hat and bowing to the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "listen to me for a few words. You would all have been spared the embarrassing excitement of the last few days if you had known more about the concept of a billion and had had more respect for the achievements of modern technology. But I don't want to reproach you in any way and would like nothing more than to put an end to this state of affairs that is unworthy of our city. The rabbits will disappear the moment I have the authorisation for my visit in my hand. But if, contrary to expectations, you do not take my wishes into consideration, I will have to - as much as I am sorry - increase your discomfort by a few more degrees."

Smiling, Mr Hopkins pulled out a wriggling rabbit. He took the rabbit by the ears out of his pocket, put it on his arm and continued, stroking the animal gently: "So far, you have only got to know the more harmless kind of my rabbits. You have only been disturbed in your habits, in your comfort, but now even your property is threatened. From noon tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen, rabbits will appear that can eat."

He held out a tuft of clover to the animal on his arm, and a whole silent hall filled with people watched in horror as the mouse-like mouth of the animal shifted and pulled the clover into it with blunt pleasure.

They saw it, and those who did not see it believed their

neighbour that he had seen it, until he was finally convinced that he had seen it himself. A million unbreakable, automatic, devouring rabbits! The horror lay so heavily on the people that they could neither scream nor dare to swear and fled from the room as if a prophet of the last day had spoken before them.

An extraordinary meeting of the municipal council was convened that very night, and the very next morning a municipal servant sought out the American to appoint him mayor. This time Mr Hopkins was found.

As he stood before the mayor and received the notice authorising him to set up his factory, he knew that he would have to answer a question. He waited for it.

The mayor sat wearily and thoughtfully in his chair, his veiled eyes staring into a land of incomprehension. "Tell me," he began at last, stroking his head as if to remove an agonising pressure, "tell me ... I understand all your arts to some extent, though I am not so great as others in believing the impossible. But this one thing will always remain incomprehensible to me, that you could force the principle of life through mechanical arts to such an extent that you c o u l d teach automatic rabbits to eat; the rabbit you showed us ..."

Mr Hopkins smiled even more authoritatively than usual and waved his immaculate top hat. "It all depends on the introduction," he said, "this rabbit, Mr Mayor, this rabbit was exceptionally lively."

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