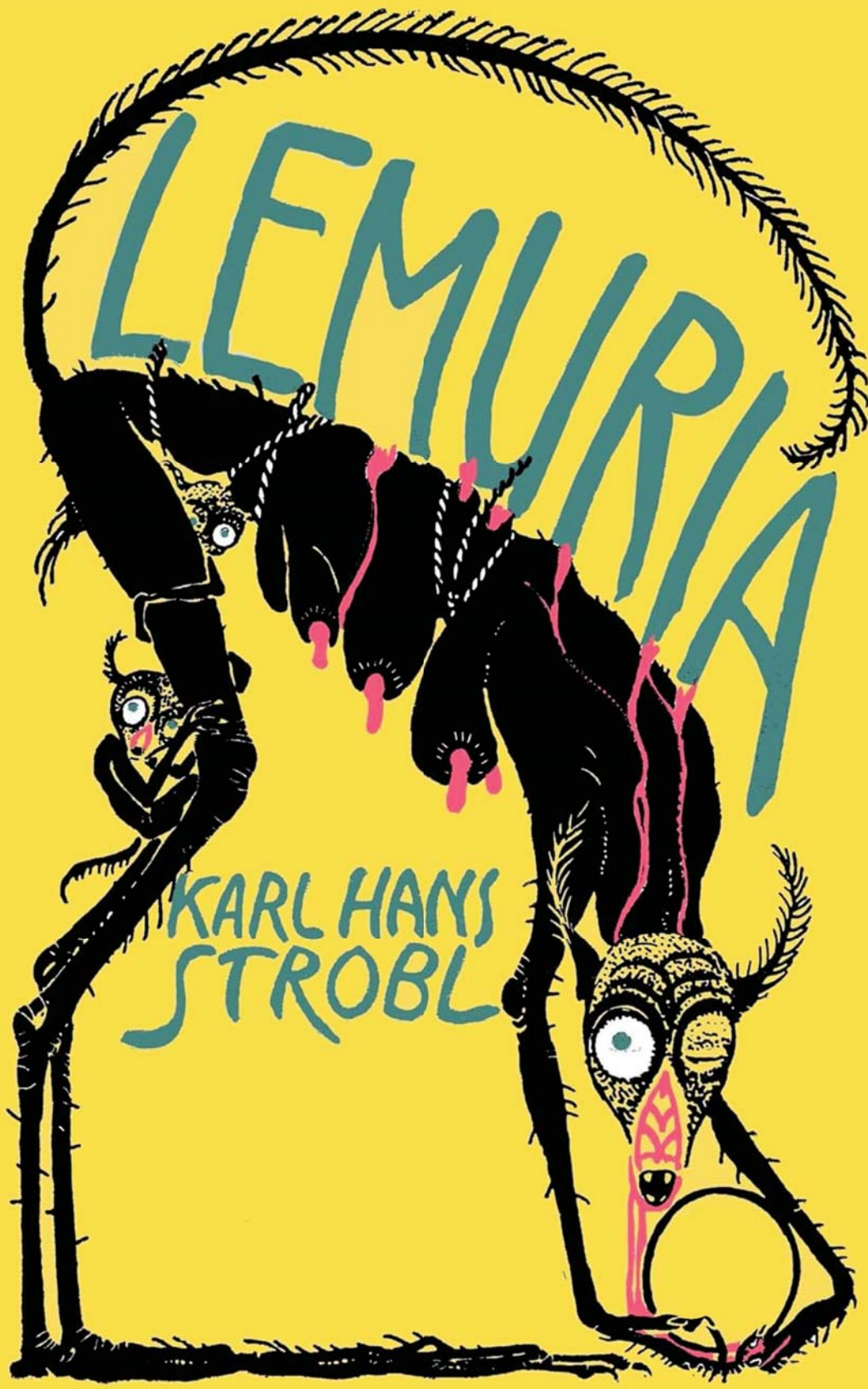


LEMURIA

KARL HANS
STROBL



BERSERKER

BOOKS



Lectulandia

Karl Hans Strobl

Lemuria

[strange and cursed tales].

Valdemar: Gothic - 104

ePub r1.0

orhi 08.10.2017

LEMURIA

(STRANGE AND CURSED TALES)

THE HEAD

Darkness and silence reigned in the room, all the curtains were closed, not even a faint gleam of light penetrated from the street. My friend, myself and the stranger were holding hands. A dreadful fear hung over us, the same fear that we felt inside ourselves.

Suddenly, through the darkness, a white, thin, luminous hand came towards us and began to write on the table at which we were sitting, with the pen deliberately placed. We did not see what the hand was writing, but we felt it in us... simultaneously... as if it had been before our very eyes, written in letters of fire.

What that luminous white hand scribbled on the paper, in the deep darkness of midnight, was the story of that same hand and of the man to whom it had once belonged.

"As I climb the steps covered by a red cloth, I feel something strange in my heart. In my chest something swings back and forth - a great pendulum. The edges of the pendulum's disc are, however, sharp as razor blades, and when the pendulum brushes against my chest as it swings, I feel a sharp pain in my chest and I feel short of breath, as if I were gasping for breath. But I clench my teeth so that not a sound can come out, and I clench my hands, tied behind my back, until the nails, digging into the flesh, make the blood flow.

"I'm already upstairs. Everything is ready, they were just waiting for me. I calmly shave the back of my neck and then ask for permission to say a few last words to the audience. I am granted. As I turn around and look at the infinite crowd pressing head to head in front of me, surrounding the guillotine, all those stupid, brutalised, bestial faces, partly of philistine curiosity, partly lascivious, that human mass, that hundredfold mockery of the name human being, the whole thing seems ridiculous to me and I can only laugh.

"But I see that the official gesture of my executioners contracts into wrinkles of severity... damn my coolness, to take the matter with such an untragic attitude. I don't want to irritate these good people any further and I quickly begin my speech:

"Citizens," I say, "citizens, I die for you and for freedom. You have wronged me, you have condemned me... but I love you. And as proof of my love, hear my will. All that I possess, is yours, here you are..."

"And I turn my back on them with an unmistakable gesture.

"All around me a roar of indignation rises, I hastily and with a sigh of relief put my head on the moulding... a hissing hum... I feel only an icy burning in my neck... and my head falls into the basket.

"I feel as if my head is submerged in water and my ears are filled with it. The noises of the outside world come to me murky and confused, in my temples.

I hear a murmur and a grunting sound. I have the sensation that large quantities of ether are evaporating from the cross-section of my neck.

"I know, my head lies in the wicker basket, my body is up on the scaffold, and yet I feel that my body, kicking slightly, has leaned to the left; that my clenched fists, tied behind my back, still twitch convulsively, and my fingers stretch and contract cramped. I feel also how the blood spurts from the stump of my neck; how, with the loss of blood, the movements become weaker and weaker, and how my sense of the body weakens and fades, until below the neck section everything becomes darker and darker.

"I have lost my body.

"From the neck section downwards I suddenly perceive red spots. The red spots are like fire in black night storms. They dissolve and spread like drops of oil on a surface of still water; when the edges of the red spots touch, I feel light electric shocks on my eyelids, and the hair on my head frizzes. And now the red spots begin to whirl around themselves, faster and faster... innumerable wheels of burning fire, scorching solar discs: it is a frantic whirling, so that long tongues of fire lick me and I am forced to close my eyes. But I still feel the red wheels of fire inside me, and it is as if I have grains of dry sand between my teeth. At last the flaming discs go out, their frantic spinning slows down, one after the other goes out, and then, from the section of my neck downwards, for me everything becomes, for the second time, dark. Now forever.

"A sweet weakness has taken hold of me, an irresponsible letting go, my eyes have become heavy. I no longer open them and yet I see everything that is going on around me. It is as if my eyelids were made of glass and transparent. I see everything as if through a milky veil, above which fragile veins of pale red branch out, but I see things bigger and clearer than before, when I still had my body. My tongue has become paralysed and lies heavy and inert as mud in my mouth cavity.

"My sense of smell, however, has become much more refined, I don't just see things, I smell them, each one different, with its own peculiar smell.

"In the wicker basket, under the blade of the guillotine, there are, besides mine, three other heads, two male and one female. Two small cosmetic patches are glued to the red-tinted cheeks of the female head; a gold arrow is pinned in the powdered, up-combed hair, and in the small ears are two elegant earrings decorated with diamonds. The heads of the two men lie face downwards in a pool of coagulated blood, a badly healed scar extends across the skull of one, the hair of the other is already grey and sparse.

"The female head squeezes her eyes tightly shut, but I know she's looking at me.

through his eyelids.

"We stay like this for hours. I watch as the sun's rays move across the scaffold where the guillotine stands. Night falls and I begin to feel cold. My nose is completely stiff and cold, and the steamy coldness of my severed neck becomes unpleasant.

"Suddenly there is an angry shouting. It comes closer and closer, and suddenly I feel a strong fist violently grab my head by the hair and pull it out of the basket. Next, I feel a strange, pointed object penetrate my neck: the tip of a spear. A mob of Furies and drunken sansculottes has descended on our heads. In the hands of a tall, strong man with a red, swollen face, the spear, with my head on the tip, swings above the howling, raging crowd.

"An agglomeration of men and women has begun to fight over the spoils of the hair and ears of the female head. It is a fight with hands and feet, teeth and nails. The fight is over and they scatter, furious and shouting, each one who has seized something, followed by a group of envious comrades.

"The head lies on the ground, deformed, dirty, with the marks of fists all over it, the ears torn by violent tugging; the carefully combed hair, dishevelled; the powdered locks of dark blond hair, covered with filth. One of her nasal lobes, cut with a sharp instrument; on her forehead the imprint of a boot heel. The eyelids are half-open; the eyes, broken and glassy, stare fixedly.

"At last the crowd advances, with four heads stuck on long spears. Against the head of the grey-haired man the fury of the people is chiefly unleashed. The man must have enjoyed little sympathy. I don't know him. They spit on him and throw mud at him. Now a handful of filth hits him in the middle of his ear... what is that, has he moved, silently, unnoticed, only perceptible to me, the mere contraction of a muscle?

"It is getting dark. Our heads have been nailed side by side to the iron railings of a palace. I don't know the palace either. Paris is big. In the courtyard, armed citizens are camped around a big bonfire. Street songs, jokes, loud laughter. The smell of roast mutton reaches me. The fire spreads a scent of expensive rosewood. The savage hordes have carried all the palace furniture into the courtyard and are burning it piece by piece. Now it is the turn of a very elegant and ornate sofa..., but they hesitate, they do not throw the sofa into the fire. A young woman with hard features, her shirt open at the front, revealing her perky breasts, speaks to the men with lively hand gestures.

"She wants to persuade them to hand over the luxurious piece of furniture, has she suddenly got the whim to feel like a countess?

"Men are still hesitating.

"The woman points to the grille and then, again, to the sofa.

"The men hesitate..., at last she pulls them aside, unsheathes the sabre from the sheath of one of the armed men, kneels down and begins to pull out of the wooden frame of the sofa, with her strong arms and with the help of the edge of the weapon, the small nails with enamelled heads, with which the silk cloth has been fixed to the wood. The men now help her.

"Suddenly he points to our heads again.

"One of the men approaches the gate with hesitant steps. He searches. He climbs over the iron bars and lowers the dirty, battered female head.

"A horror shakes the man, but he acts as if guided by an irresistible force. It is as if the young woman, there in the fire, the woman with the red skirt and the open shirt, dominates with her voluptuous and fierce look all the men around her. With a stiff arm she brings her head, held by the hair, to the fire.

"The woman grabs the dead head with a wild scream of pleasure. She twirls it by the long hairs, two, three times, over the flames of the campfire. Then she squats down again and puts the head in her lap. He runs his hand several times over her cheeks, as if caressing her; the men have seated themselves around her and she now takes with one hand one of the small nails with the enamelled head, and with the other a hammer, and with a short hammer blow drives the nail until it penetrates the skull.

"Another short hammering and again one of the nails disappears in the woman's thick hair. As she does this, she whispers a song. One of those terrible, strange, sensual folk songs of magical antiquity.

"The bloodthirsty scarecrows around her sit silent, pale with horror, and stare at her with fearful eyes from their dark sockets. And she hammers and hammers, and drives nail after nail into the head, and all the while whispers, to the rhythm of the hammering, her ancient and strange magic song.

"Suddenly, one of the men lets out a furious cry and rises to his feet. His eyes bulge out of their sockets, drool foams from his mouth... he throws back his arms, twists his trunk right and left as if in a painful convulsion, and bestial, piercing screams come from his lips.

"The young woman hammers and sings her song.

"Another man leaps to his feet, howling and waving his arms around him. He pulls a burning stake from the campfire and hits himself in the chest with it, again and again, until his clothes begin to burn and a thick, stinking smoke spreads around him.

"The others are still sitting stiffly, pale, and do not prevent him from this strange behaviour.

"A third one gets up, and now the others too are seized by the same delirium: a deafening noise, screams, howls, grunts, a confusion of movements and limbs. The one who falls remains on the ground... and his body is trampled underfoot by the others.

"While this delirious orgy is going on, the young woman continues to sit, hammer and sing.

"He has finished, and now he has inserted the head studded with small enamelled-headed nails into the point of a bayonet and holds it over the churning, howling mass. Someone then disperses the fire, from the embers glowing stakes are drawn and extinguished by sparks in the dark corners of the courtyard. All sinks into darkness... only isolated, lewd cries can be heard, a wild unrestraint, as if proceeding from a terrible arm-wrestling brawl. I know that all those raving men, those savage beasts, have now pounced upon the woman, tooth and claw....

"Everything goes black.

"I was conscious long enough to see that dreadfulness... it is dawn... but my vision is blurred; the day has that light which seems to fade on murky winter evenings. It rains on my head. Cold winds shag my hair. My flesh softens and weakens. Is it the beginning of putrefaction?

"A change takes place. My head is taken to another place, to a dark pit; but there it is warm and quiet. I feel my inner self reawaken and become clearer. With me in the dark pit there are many more heads. Heads and bodies. And I notice that heads and bodies have found each other, as badly or as well as they could. And in this contact they have rediscovered their language, a thought language, silent and inaudible, with which they communicate.

"I long for my body, I long to be free of this unbearable coldness in the cut section of my neck, which has almost turned into a burning. But I grope in vain. Every head has found a body. I have no body left. But at last, after a long and hard search, I find one... in the depths, secluded modestly in a corner, a body that still has no head... a woman's body.

"Something in me resists joining that body, but my desire, my longing finally wins out and I approach, induced by my will, the headless trunk and I see how it too strives to reach me. And now the two cut surfaces touch. A light touch and the sensation of a faint warmth. After that, only one thing matters: I have a body again.

"But how strange, after having passed the first feeling of well-being, I notice the powerful difference of my other half, it is as if very different moods meet and mix. Moods that have nothing in common.

"The woman's body, on which my head now sits, is thin and white, has the cold, marble skin of the aristocrat who takes baths in wine and milk, who splurges on expensive creams and oils. But on the right side of the chest, over the hip and part of the stomach, there is a strange drawing, a tattoo: dots, hearts, anchors, subtle arabesques in blue, and again and again the letters J and B intertwined and very ornate. Who could this woman have been?

"I know I'm going to know, and soon! For out of the confused blackness of my body, below my head, a mysterious link develops. In me there remains only a dark and blurred notion of my body. But from one minute to the next this notion becomes clearer and sharper. And simultaneously there is this painful penetration of the humours of my other half. Suddenly it is as if I have two heads... and this second head - a female head - bloody, deformed, disfigured - I see it before me - is all studded with little enamelled head nails. It is the head that belongs to this body, at the same time it is my head, for I feel clearly in the covering of my skull and in my brain the hundreds of nails:

I would like to roar with pain! Everything around me sinks in a red veil that flutters as if driven by strong blows of wind.

"Now I feel it, I am a woman, though my understanding is still that of a man. From the red veil rises an image: I see myself before me in a room adorned with sumptuous luxury. I find myself wrapped in soft carpets... naked. Before me, above me, bows a man with the hard, coarse features of the lower strata of the people, with fists hardened by toil, with the weather-beaten skin of a sailor. He kneels before me and with a sharp needle draws strange patterns on my soft skin. It hurts, and yet it gives me a strange kind of voluptuous pleasure. I know the man is my lover.

"A brief pain, triggered by the needle, jolts my body into a delicious sensation. I wrap my white arms around the man's neck and pull him to me, kiss him and place his hard, calloused hands on my breasts and shoulders and kiss him again in a delirious frenzy, and pull him into my arms and squeeze him until he groans for breath.

"Now I brush my teeth against his brown throat, that throat I love so much and the mere sight of which often causes me ecstasy; my tongue caresses that throat with moist tenderness... and now, now I must sink my teeth into the hard brown flesh, I cannot help it, I must bite... and I bite, bite, bite... his moans become a death rattle, I feel the man writhe in my arms and convulse, but I do not let him. The body becomes heavy, very heavy, a stream of warm blood flows through my body. His head tilts back, I let him slip from my arms, with a thud he falls backwards onto the soft carpet. From his bitten body gushes a fountain of thick blood. Blood, blood everywhere, on the soft white polar bear skin, all over my body.

"I start to scream, the sounds come out of my throat, hoarse and harsh. The maid rushes in, she must not have been far away, perhaps at the door, in the next room, has she been listening? For an instant she stands as if rigid, unconscious, then she throws herself silently over the dead man's body, without a word, without tears, she sinks her face into his blood-covered chest, I only see how she closes her hands.

"Now I know everything.

"And yet I see another image.

"I see myself again and at the same time I am the one sitting on a wooden cart that leads to the guillotine. Suddenly I am on the scaffold and I raise my eyes for the last time to the sun, and as I slowly turn, my gaze falls on a young woman who has made her way to the front row... she is the lover of the man who was the instrument of my pleasure, her face shocked and pale, with a red skirt, an open shirt and her hair waving in the air. Her eyes are wildly burning, like a predator's, moist, as if in restrained pain, and eager, as if in great joy. He raises his fists in front of his face and his lips move, he wants to speak, he wants to mock me, but he can only scream, brokenly and incomprehensibly, and I put my head under the blade.

"Now I know everything.

"I know whose head was the head that, in the night before the camp fire, served a dreadful vengeance beyond the grave; I know also whose head was the young woman who that same night was torn, torn to pieces in the dark palace courtyard by those rampaging beasts. In my head the many nails ache. I am bound to this body, to this body full of terrible memories and dreadful pains, to this beautiful and sinful body that has passed through all the gates of hell.

"The terrible dissociation of my being tears me apart, but not for long, I already feel a gentle relaxation, a softening and detachment of the carnal parts, a fluffing and liquefaction of all the internal organs: the decomposition begins.

"Soon the night will surround my disgusting and split self, the night of putrefaction, the bodies will decay, the spirit will be free".

And the hand stopped writing and disappeared.

THE MAUSOLEUM AT PÈRE LACHAISE

Today I moved into the house that I will not leave for a whole year.

All around me rise smooth, cold marble walls, perfectly assembled, with no other adornment than a thin moulding above and below, a moulding formed only of winged sun discs, the symbol of eternity among the Egyptians. What else does such a work need but excellence of workmanship? I must say that such perfection in simplicity thrills me far more than the most ingenious sculptural decoration. I look at these stones, so cleanly assembled that the joints are only visible when you look at them as a very thin line. I run my finger over them, perceive the smooth, polished surfaces and experience an exquisite sensation. The marble has few veins, they are like tender moss, like grasses or vegetable-like sea animals enclosed in a piece of glass. When I stare at them for a long time, it is as if those loops, beaks, teeth and those strange and mysterious letters were under a layer of transparent ice, at a depth impenetrable to the eye. A petrified world of suggestive forms, alien to chance and to the sensations of life and movement. The noblest material for a mausoleum.

In the centre of the back wall, a few feet above the ground, is a bronze plaque with the simple inscription: Anna Feodorovna Wassilska, died 13 March 1911. It closes the opening into which the coffin has been placed.

Another thin opening leads from this marble room to the outside. Outside is the cemetery illuminated by the sun of an August day; in here it is cool, only around the entrance the air still plays, producing small, warm ripples that bring the scent of flowers. Sometimes bees pass by, or a bright blue fly buzzes in front of the crack for a moment and then suddenly disappears. Apart from the humming and buzzing of the small living creatures on the graves, there is also a deeper sound, like an uninterrupted vibration of the air.

That's Paris.

Paris, which stretches beyond Père Lachaise, which pours over the peace of these dwellings its foaming waves of work, pleasure and passion.

When I stand at the entrance, which is as wide as a man, I have reached the limit of my domain. For a year this gaze from the entrance of a mausoleum will be the only one I will be able to direct at the outside world. A glance at the tombs and the pantheons.

But I can be satisfied with this view. When I bend down, I see on the right the splendid and fervent work of Bartholomè, the deeply felt stony memory of a love that cannot die. I see the figures of the desperate, the striving, the broken, who wave goodbye to the gates of death. I see

the two tender lovers entering the darkness. The man, restrained and strong in the face of destiny; the woman, sharing his path with infinite trust and surrender.

* * *

I will not be bored in my marble room even if I have to spend a whole year in it.

I feel like Jerome in his cell, but I hear Paris, I breathe the fragrance of all those flowering tombs, I have the radiance of art. And, like Jerome in his cell, I am well supplied with books, I have my writing utensils and paper with me, and in this solitude I will write my great work. And it will not be a work of theological erudition, like Jerome's, but a scientific one. Here I shall order and culminate all my ideas concerning the decomposition and finiteness of matter; from all the particular facts, from the surprises which science has given us in the last decades, I shall construct a system which will bear my name.

But what do I really want, and haven't all my wishes already been fulfilled? Has anyone like me, a poor scholar who could only satisfy his love of independent research by tightening his hunger belt even tighter, ever dared to achieve anything like this?

I have time to complete my work. I shall suffer no discomfort, for all this year I shall speak to no one except the servant who will bring me food twice a day. Neither friendship nor love will be able to reach me. And I do not care for my daily bread. Madame Feodorovna Wassilska will provide for me. She has even planned the menu for the whole week. And of course, to this day, the third day of my solitude, I cannot complain. The lady, in whose mausoleum I am now staying, understood something about gastronomy. And why should I deny it, I am glad to be able to eat so well and so copiously... my meals monopolise all my attention. Each one of them is a sensation for me. I had to be too hungry for a long time not to appreciate a stuffed chicken or a marinated tongue with that wonderful Polish sauce, or those little Russian-style starters.

So I feel very well, and I am convinced that this well-being will last the whole year of my captivity. But as soon as the year is over, I shall receive from the deceased, Madame Wassilska, the trifle of two hundred thousand francs.

Two hundred thousand francs?

That means that I shall not have to whine to any publisher to get my work into print. For naturally those rascals will laugh at a poor devil like me when I demand that they print a book about which all the airheads in the academy will bellow. Now I have no need of them. Now I can be my own publisher, or buy one if I like.

Two hundred thousand francs?

It will mean that I will be able to hold lecture series to spread my ideas far and wide. It will mean I can put my little Margot in a car and take her to the train station. The next morning we will be in Marseilles where a white yacht will be waiting for us at sea. The poor thing has had such a bad time with me that she has more than deserved a stay in paradise. Every day sunshine and sea breeze and nothing to do but spend them as comfortably as possible.

* * *

This Madame Anna Feodorovna Wassilka must have been - and may my benefactress forgive me for my boldness - rarer than a sinapism, a mad hen, of a madness even unusual among Parisians.

I have a most truthful notion of this Madame Wassilka. It is based on her image and on reports received in her neighbourhood. I imagine her as a sort of Empress Catherine, full of greed to take advantage of life in all its forms, from the most subtle to the most brutal. And now these rich Russians are coming to Paris from their immeasurable estates on some dusty steppe or among quagmires and endless fields of grain. For years they have miserably exploited their peasants and, for a change, participated in some nice little conspiracy. Now they come to Paris, and what in their homeland gave them a living in dribs and drabs, they want to enjoy here at the top of their lungs.

I think I read that in the features of his portrait. When I was willing, before a notary, to accept his testamentary legacy, they showed me his portrait and left me alone with him for an hour, as he had arranged in his last will.

Well, Mrs. Wassilka did not create any difficulty for the painter as regards clothes. She is not one of those ladies in white, red, or green, such as swarm in the salons by the dozen. She is, so to speak, a lady of absolutely nothing.

She is naked in front of an open window, and she has a beautiful body... you have to admit that. The head shows the austere, autumnal beauty of a woman in her fifties. Cold, cunning eyes under well-arched eyebrows, a somewhat vulgar Russian nose, a voluptuous mouth, whose full, red lips seem to slowly recede before the white teeth, while one guesses rather than actually sees a cruel, cold smile: a real Gioconda smile. The painter has folded his hands in a strange way. The fingers are so long and so sharp, and on them rests a shadow so strange that they almost look like claws.

Oh, in front of this picture one can imagine that the youthful amorous passions of this woman must have brought about an unheard-of joy!

This picture fits in very well with everything that the Wassilka's neighbours have told me. For as soon as I decided to win the two hundred thousand francs offered, it is obvious that I found out about her. One does not live for a whole year in the

mausoleum of a complete stranger, you have to know who to wish good night to.

Well, the truth is that they told me the strangest things, but it seems to me that they kept quiet even more than they said. Perhaps it was the most extravagant or the most improbable, because they didn't want to be laughed at. These good people don't know how many far-fetched things we are capable of putting up with, nor how attractive it all is to those, like me, whose fantasy is absorbed by numbers and experiments.

Madame Wassilka thus loved art, as was to be expected from her kindred nature with Catherine. Her bequest includes a large collection of paintings from the period between Goya and Van Gogh. All of them depict only nudes. It seems that landscapes, still lifes and portraits were of no interest to her.

In addition to this collection of paintings, there is a collection of selected porcelain pieces, assembled on the same principle. Nymphs, naiads, Aphrodites, Galateas and Graces from the manufactories of Meissen, Nymphenburg, Vienna, Sevres; figures on whose naked roundness the light plays. Graceful mistresses of gallant kings; women who took pleasure in seeing themselves, like goddesses of beauty, portrayed in candelabra or mirrors, on the dressing table of their friends.

But Madame Wassilka does not limit her love of art, which always leaves room for a longing for life. She also had the most brutal and audacious needs. Like Catherine II, she is procured by young boys. She leaves the house dressed as a man to wander the streets and to seek God knows what adventures. Sometimes she rents several rooms in a grand hotel and throws a splendid party. I remember hearing about these evenings which, halfway between dancing and orgy, aroused the interest of Paris for a few days.

Sometimes his love games take a cruel turn. None of her maids could resist for long at her side. She likes, like the Roman ladies, to stick long needles into the flesh of her maids or to burn them suddenly with a red-hot iron. A truly ancient and princely inclination, except that our Parisian maids are not forced to endure what the Libyan and Persian slaves had no choice but to endure.

But what is strange is what happened to the baker's apprentice. One day Madame Wassilka sees a baker's apprentice bringing her bread to the house. He has a nice round collar. Madame Wassilka takes a fancy to this collar and asks the young man if he would let her bite him three times on it. A considerable sum of francs clears her doubts and convinces him. But after the second bite he runs away screaming; soon afterwards he falls ill and nothing can persuade him to return to the Russian's house.

This is the portrait of my benefactor.

Admittedly, I have occupied the antechamber of a woman's final resting place.

very interesting, and that under those smooth marble slabs lies a most fiery, impetuous character.

Yesterday I started my work.

First it is a matter of sorting through a large number of notes. My friends have always smilingly reproached me for being as meticulous as a German professor. I don't think I need not be ashamed of being conscientious when one intends to put together a valid system to initiate a new period of science.

These countless notes are of different kinds. Those that record my experiments and my own ideas are on white cards. On blue cards, the contrary opinions of other scientists are recorded. And in the yellow cards, these opinions are refuted. All this has to be systematised and sorted according to subjects.

But at the beginning of my work there has been a slight setback. Last night I laid the first part of my work on the table in those notes, neatly arranged. When I got up from my cot this morning, all those hundreds of papers were scattered all over the floor. They were hard to lift off the cold marble, as if they were stuck to it, held in place by electrical forces.

During the night there must have been a draught that penetrated through the entrance opening and blew all the papers away.

Now I have to start from the beginning.

* * *

Ivan could tell more about his mistress, if he wanted to talk.

But I don't know if he can say more than "good morning" and "goodbye". He utters these words in a shrill voice, as if from a parrot or a gramophone, from those days when it had not yet been perfected and was called a phonograph.

He appears punctually twice a day with his little trolley in which he carries the aluminium pots with the food, and in which they are kept warm by a small flame system. He pushes this trolley like Italian ice-cream makers push their trolleys in the streets.

He slowly climbs the small hill, stops in front of the mausoleum of his mistress and puts the food on the table.

Then he sits opposite me on the floor with his legs crossed, Tatar-style, and stares at me. It's not very nice to have your mouth stared at while you're eating. I've tried to encourage him to speak, if only to get rid of that unpleasant, sea bream look and to bring some life into that face. But it's like he's trying to wrest a response from a stake.

Ivan is a little man with bristly hair, on which now, in summer, it is put

a Tatar cap. If he were younger and more handsome, I would suppose he does it to attract attention and seek his fortune among the young women of Brittany, who are so obsessed with all things foreign; just as Russian students go about in their wellington boots and lace-up jackets, in order to find some young saleswoman to support them. But Ivan is free from similar suspicions. His face is a landscape of mountains and valleys. Between smallpox scars are infinite pimples, each with its white dot of pus in the centre. The hairs of his dangling moustache stick out of the ravaged skin without order or order, as if they had no root. Like little canes that children have stuck, playing, in the sand. The limbs of this grotesque scarecrow assemble themselves to the body in the same inorganic way, as if they had been torn off once and glued back on with unusual clumsiness.

This hirsute Tartar is the only servant that Madame Wassiliska has brought from her homeland. He has overcome all the changes of his service and has stood by his mistress's side to the end.

He must know all their habits, he could tell me more than one peculiarity of their character, for these Russian ladies hide nothing from their trusted servants.

I should like you to explain to me what purpose is served by this strange provision in her ladyship's will. I cannot imagine that it was prompted by her good heart; it contradicts any trait of her character that she did it to obtain the thanks of a stranger, to be sure of being remembered, or to have some one whose soul would echo her name with every impulse that lifted her up in life.

There are three things that, in my opinion, could have led to this testamentary disposition. It could simply have been fear of being buried alive. Occasionally there are grisly reports of such cases in the newspapers, and she might have wanted to make sure that there was someone who could hear her if she woke up in the distressing narrowness of her grave. But stop! In that case she would have had to arrange for her mausoleum to be occupied immediately after she was buried, and not leave it to the applicant to choose the day of entry in the year of the wake.

It could also be due to concern about the existence of grave robbers. Perhaps the story of Sergeant Bertrand, who had chosen the Père Lachaise cemetery as the scene of his atrocities, had reached her. Once, when he was looking at the corpse of a beautiful young girl, he suddenly felt the urge to embrace her. The night after her burial, he entered the cemetery, opened the coffin and rolled around with the dead woman. The revolting pleasure he took in this desecration was so great that Bertrand could no longer resist it and at night he roamed the cemetery looking for corpses like a hyena. At the trial he confessed to having dug up twelve to fifteen corpses one night to find a dead woman, on whom he threw himself to kiss, bite and mutilate her. All in all, this monster was acting with a cunning

extraordinary, almost incomprehensible, and managed to get away with it for a long time in spite of all precautionary measures and watchmen, until he finally injured himself by scaling the cemetery wall with some sort of infernal machine and thus managed to be caught. It is possible that Madame Wassiliska feared falling into the hands of such a beast.

But there is still a third possibility, and this is the one which seems to me best adapted to the character of that Asiatic tyrant. Perhaps she would have allocated two hundred thousand francs for the purpose of rejoicing in advance at the torments of the petitioner, in order to enjoy the idea of that prisoner in a mausoleum gripped by all the fears and horrors of a cemetery.

Well, if that was Madame Anna Feodorovna Wassiliska's intention, she has got it all wrong. I eat like a tiger and sleep like a dormouse.

It is late in the afternoon. I have just drunk a bottle of Burgundy and I am in a good mood. I have to say goodbye to my benefactress. I stand up, bow and tap my bent finger on the bronze plaque: "Good night, Anna Feodorovna, good night.

* * *

For the second time the same setback.

My notes, which I had left neatly arranged on the table, are now back on the table scattered all over the floor. I can't forget to keep them somewhere else or put some heavy object on top of them.

Today I clearly saw how a draught blew them to the ground.

I wake up, in the middle of the night, from the deepest sleep, as if my nerves are connected to an electric battery that has sent a signal. This is perfectly understandable. All my attention, the innermost part of my being, depends on this work, is concentrated on it and I feel it as if it were part of myself. While I slept, that attention remained vigilant. The presentiment of a danger to my work interrupted my sleep.

I wake up and see my marble room invaded by a slight brightness. There is no moonlight outside. This brightness seems to be the glow of the many marble mausoleums outside, which penetrates inside and joins the strange lights that the stone also reflects around me. It is an illumination that I see for the first time, a light that is rather reminiscent of the phosphorescence of the sea, or as if the stone that has absorbed the sunlight during the day is now throwing it back with a soft halo.

I sit on my cot, the phenomenon excites me unspeakably, for is it not precisely the new luminous manifestations that constitute the object of my study, from which I start to undertake a complete revolution in our knowledge of the essence of matter? How can these enigmatic rays, unknown to me, be classified?

At this moment I notice on the wall at the back of the mausoleum, at the place where

the bronze plaque has been placed, a square black hole, as if someone had removed the plaque.

And at the same time I feel as if a gentle breath of air is passing over me, carrying with it a smell of wilted flowers and extinguished candles, the smell that sometimes pervades the cemetery of Père Lachaise. It comes from the entrance of my mausoleum and reaches the back wall, or comes from the back wall and goes to the entrance, and I see how it seizes my chips, blows them onto the table and scatters them in a whirlwind on the floor.

Half terrified, half furious, I rush out of bed to salvage the rest of my work. The chips seem to be stuck to the marble of the floor again, as if attracted to it; it is as if the stone is a little wet and sticky, like a rigid mass whose top layer is slowly beginning to dissolve.

I struggle to pick up my tokens, and when I do I remember the bronze plaque again. But now it is there, in place, illuminated by the dim light, so that I can even read the name of the deceased clearly.

A tremendous excitement seizes me. I am confronted with a new enigma, with a discovery in the field of the most mysterious of all forces, that of light. I am convinced that we are dealing here with a new kind of light, perhaps rays which, like X-rays, penetrate metals, or which, even under certain conditions, or under a special angle of refraction, might be able to make them disappear altogether.

Seen from my bed, the bronze plaque had disappeared.

I sit back down on the bed, but now it's still in place. Perhaps I have neglected the one moment when the phenomenon would have been visible.

I have slept little tonight. I have gone over with my mind all the methods of light research, to find the best one for this case. It was only at dawn, with the slow disappearance of the strange rays before the day, that I was at last able to fall asleep.

* * *

Occasionally curious people come and stand outside and try to have a look inside.

It is possible that I am being reported in the newspapers. The Parisian cannot imagine that there is a person who wants to stay voluntarily in the same place for a whole year.

Some simply mock me and take me for a fool, stand outside in the sunlight and smile cynically; others shake their heads, sympathetic and sad.

Oh, if you only knew that I do not suffer from that disease which the Parisians fear as much as death: boredom! If you only knew how much I experience, how much my thoughts have to work, and that I do not even rest at night.

A small journalist has tried to enter armed with a notebook and a pen; he would be capable of making me lose two hundred thousand francs by persuading me to talk, just to supply his newspaper with a scathing article.

(Otherwise, I'd like to know what the papers are writing about me, whether they're calling me a hero or an idiot. And I would only need to tell Ivan to bring me the papers. But I have sworn to myself that I don't want to know anything about what goes on outside the cemetery or beyond what can be seen from my entrance; nothing in the world is to distract me from my work).

My little journalist has stubbornly tried to persuade me. But by gestures I gave him to understand that I could not speak, and I showed him the door, if I could knock at the narrow opening in the marble wall.

Another visit has excited me considerably. Margot has been here, she didn't dare to approach, I could see from afar her black hat with the yellow tea roses among the graves. Then it began to rain, a group of people were returning from a funeral and passed by my dwelling. They stopped, squeezed in and peered curiously inside. A black block with umbrellas glistening in the rain, someone made a joke, a couple of them scrunched up their faces.

It was then that suddenly, just for an instant, I saw Margot's big hat between two wet umbrellas, behind a thin veil of rain, and underneath her pale, sad face. But it's also because of you, Margot, that I'm in here, also because of you!

* * *

There is no longer any doubt in my mind that intermolecular forces are at work in the marble of this mausoleum that have so far gone unnoticed by science. I have continued my nocturnal observations. As soon as complete darkness reigns, around midnight, that enigmatic illumination begins, that green glow, which seems to emanate from the stone. I would be inclined to think that it is a special type of marble which absorbs light during the day and expels it at night in a kind of phosphorescence.

But against this speaks the peculiar circumstance that through this irradiation also the structure of the marble seems to change. This impression, which I have had twice before, is now always repeated. The surface of the marble seems to soften, to turn into a sticky, gelatinous mass; at the same time, in the inexplicable light I see the patterns and veins in the stone; these ferns, mosses, starfish, corals, river systems stand out clearly, as if they were crawling towards the surface.

When I walk on the marble chairs on the floor, it is as if I am stepping on a soft carpet; when I touch the walls, it is as if an impression of my fingers is left on them.

What a strange and fortunate coincidence! Willing to begin a fundamental investigation into the disintegration of matter, I meet a phenomenon that is so closely related to my subject. A phenomenon that will essentially support my theory, as soon as I have investigated it thoroughly.

I am determined to achieve this, for there is no doubt that this luminous phenomenon and the alteration in the structure of the marble are intimately related, that they must be mutually explained and in some way derived from the first and most elementary laws of matter, just as I have succeeded with all other known luminous manifestations.

For my experiments I still need some equipment. I have given Ivan a list and asked him to get them for me.

He looked at me with incomprehension and a mocking smile. Poor devil, in his Asiatic skull he has not the remotest idea of the great and wonderful satisfaction that pervades the researcher and the discoverer.

* * *

I have started to put on weight.

It's true, as ridiculous as it sounds, and as hard as it is for me to admit it, but I can't fool myself: I'm getting fat. My starving body has assimilated food so greedily that it has taken its toll on it all too well.

For some time now I have noticed that my scrawny hands, those bundles of nerves and veins, have changed in appearance. Between the nerves there is no longer any depression, the veins are embedded in fat pads, the fingers seem to have swollen. My skinny legs have filled out my trousers, my bony knees are rounded when I sit down like the dome of the Invalides, and when I walk I feel a certain heaviness.

But today I received indisputable proof of how fat I have become.

Leaning over my work, I have forgotten myself and my surroundings. Suddenly, in the middle of prayer, something forces me to put down my pen and look outside. I see a patch of blue sky and something of the cemetery in a wonderful autumn glow. Slowly an orange lime leaf passes in front of the opening of the mausoleum. It is early, all the graves are interwoven by the fine threads of St. Martin's summer, and each of them shows rows of glistening dewdrops.

I am seized by an indomitable desire to see Bartholomè's mausoleum in that pure, cold light, to admire the procession of marble figures from the solar realm to the sepulchral night, to enjoy that sense of happiness that emanates from a great work of art.

I stand up and approach the entrance, bend down and try to catch a glimpse of the monument. But I don't succeed, my spongy body fills the slim crevice, I

I get stuck in it as if in a trap, and only by applying all my strength against the side walls do I manage to free myself by moving backwards.

I have to acknowledge the ridiculous fact that I am a prisoner. I, the starving squalid one, am a prisoner of my stomach. My voracity has deprived me of the comfort and joy of art.

No wonder, I eat like a Heliogabalus and I don't move at all. But this is going to change. From now on I will eat sparingly and run around my table for half an hour every day. What will happen if my girth keeps increasing and at the end of the year I cannot leave the mausoleum with my well-earned two hundred thousand francs?

I will start my austerity today.

Oh, ridiculous comedy of voracity, what has become of my good resolutions? I have them well riveted in my soul, nailed to my head with the hammers of the will, close together with my other great resolutions, together with my confidence in myself and in my work. When I saw Ivan coming with his cart among the graves, along the sand strewn paths, I examined whether my disposition of mind was in place and whether I was master of my will. But soon afterwards there was before me the plate with a seductive ragout. I saw my thick, round face reflected in the polished silver of the dish and renewed my resolve.

"No," I said, taking the plate away, "today I'll eat nothing but soup and some bread.

Ivan looked at me, and his sardonic smile, the look in his eyes that seemed to measure my contours, showed me that he understood me. He silently removed the plate of well-seasoned ragout and placed a bowl of soup on the table that he had heated on a portable cooker. But from the moment he sat down again, the aroma of the dense soup took such a hold on me that I felt my resolve waver. Like the steam from a laundry or a dry-cleaner's that eventually penetrates and destroys the strongest walls, so did that appetising aroma destroy my resolve, which lasted less than a breath. And as soon as I tasted the first spoonful, I was seized by a canine hunger. My stomach cried out to be fed, as if I had not eaten anything for fourteen days, my insides cramped and I put aside all scruples.

Ivan had gone out again, and as if to prepare everything for his return, he set about opening all the pans on his trolley, revealing the white meat of chicken, the crispy skin of roasts, the multicoloured joy of an Italian salad, the yellowish white of a cream-covered tart.

I stood up, leaned over the table and pulled the seafood ragout towards me. "Ivan," I said, "bring it all... bring it all... I'm really hungry.

The instant I sat down I saw my face reflected in the saucer. I had bared my teeth, my eyes wandered dreadfully, my whole face was distorted by the

greed and gluttony, it resembled an animal that is once again snatched away from the food that has been presented to it.

Of all the food there was nothing left. I devoured the ragout, all the roasts and half a turkey, and I had to force myself not to suck and gnaw on the bones like a hungry dog.

You have to admit that the cook who prepares all these meals, according to Madame Wassiliska's orders, is an artist in his profession. I don't think it is possible for anyone to cook better than this man. Each of the dishes is perfect in itself and they harmonise with each other, so that the alternation adds to the flavour. It is impossible to resist such food, prepared with such refinement, delicious to the eye, nose and palate.

I bless that great unknown artist... and I curse him. For by the looks of it, if this keeps up, I shall never leave this mausoleum again, for all indications are that I am being baited.

* * *

Ivan has brought me the apparatus I need for my research. He has placed things before me with that evil, cynical and melancholic smile that runs between the pustules of his face like a viscous mucus. How is he going to understand what prisms, telescopes, lenses, pipettes, batteries and cameras are for?

The chemical laboratory of the university has been kind enough to place all this equipment at my disposal and has accompanied it with a flattering letter: they consider themselves fortunate to be able to help a young scientist whose fame, etc., is so great.

If they only knew for what purpose they supply me with weapons; that it is my purpose to destroy the theoretical edifice they have so painstakingly erected, to hand over to the executioner their experiments, to throw the torch of destruction into their straw hypotheses. I have my whole new system in my head, my proofs are gathered in piles of chips, it only remains to integrate harmoniously into my system the strange phenomena I am witnessing.

At the moment all my efforts are in vain. The more meticulous and painstaking I am in my investigations, the more mysterious these processes become. How could I sleep without getting to the bottom of the enigma of these rays? They do not belong to any of the genres already known and described. It is a faint, greenish glow, perfectly perceptible, but which seems to emanate without any visible cause from the walls, from the marble itself.

But these clearly visible rays, which should be expected to follow the laws of optics, can neither be refracted nor polarised, nor can they be deflected by magnetic or electric fields. Moreover - and this is frankly sinister - they have no spectrum at all. They pass through the prism as if it were ordinary glass, they leave it just as they

penetrate it,

through a lens are neither concentrated nor dispersed. They do not show any chemical reagents and do not leave any traces on the photographic plate.

They make a mockery of any natural law.

Despite all this, the fact that they are not devoid of chemical effects is demonstrated by that strange concomitant phenomenon: the softening of the marble. Nor is it an illusion of the senses, just as the green glow is not. My hands can feel it, my instruments can see it. As a rule, it begins after midnight, as if the green glow has to act for a period of time before the marble begins to change its structure. In the early morning it intensifies and reaches its peak after sunrise, when the green glow dissolves and is slowly lost in the morning light. During the day the stone becomes strong and hard again... as marble should be.

While this phenomenon lasts, the stone yields to finger pressure, it can be easily cut and pricked. It behaves like a jelly, like a huge quince that is getting hard; a pressure with the hand seems to leave an imprint that slowly disappears again, the prick with a knife remains visible for a while and then disappears again. With this, the marble seems to develop special forces of attraction. Its surface feels sticky, small objects stick to it; the hand, on touching it, is held slightly and then a slight burning sensation is felt.

I don't know how to harmonise all these unique and contradictory phenomena.

I am completely baffled.

And I'm going to do what any scientist does when he's completely baffled, I'm going to try to come up with a theory. A theory that is compatible with my system.

For a period I have been thinking whether these lightning bolts could not be related to the phenomena observed by the Polish engineer Kychnowski. This engineer, in charge of the electric lighting in the regional parliament in Lemberg, has noticed the following. During night-time experiments with a dynamometer he had built, small greenish-blue luminous spheres appeared in a room adjoining the machine room, separated from it by a metre-wide wall, and always at the moment when the current was interrupted. In order to investigate this enigmatic phenomenon further, Kychnowski set up an apparatus to interrupt the current, and succeeded in generating a large number of these luminescent spheres, which ended up colliding with each other, so that a continuous illumination was produced. The discoverer took these spheres for something material and referred them to the existence of an unexplored element which he called "electroid".

Don't these luminescent spheres of the engineer Kychnowski in the regional parliament of Lemberg bear an unmistakable resemblance to the green glow of a green light?

in Madame Wassilka's mausoleum? The description given of that greenish light might tempt us to say yes. But where is the dynamometer here that is surely causally related to Kychnowski's observations? And, even disregarding the fact that science is still somewhat sceptical about the engineer's report, if we acknowledge the accuracy of his observations, the main difference lies in the fact that Kychnowski expressly designates his luminous spheres as something material.

For I am absolutely certain that my phenomena are of an immaterial nature, or rather, since there is no immateriality in terrestrial phenomena, they remain within the limits of measurability and ponderability and chemical reactivity.

In short: I regard these phenomena as a luminous ether, as the universal ether made visible, all-pervading and all-filling, whose atomic weight has been calculated in

0.00 000 96 of the hydrogen atom, and its speed at 2 240 000 metres per hour. A few years ago, Poincaré could still write in his mathematical theory of light.

"The question of whether the ether really exists is of little importance to us (physicists); it is a matter for metaphysicians to investigate.

This manifestation of Poincaré's shows all the short-sightedness of an otherwise brilliant scientist in things he thinks he should stay away from. But nothing of the sort! That question matters to us physicists, and very much so. Since Maxwell established his electromagnetic theory of light, since we have had to accept that electricity is not a natural force but a substance, since two new elements, the positive and negative electrons, have been added to the chemical elements, the scope of validity of the concept "force" has narrowed considerably. And from here it was only a step to the bold assertion of Mendeleev, the discoverer of the periodic system of the elements, that the universal ether is also of a chemical nature, and that it is also entirely dependent on the periodicity of the elements.

With this and with George Rudorf's confirmatory explanations of primordial matter and the luminous ether, the ancient view of atoms, which, as it were, float in the universal ether like wood in water, but are of an entirely different nature, coincides.

Atoms are formed from the ether itself, they become the ether or cyclones, in which the ether becomes denser, and they arise in places where that movement of tremendous and unthinkable rapidity of the particles of the ether, which normally proceeds in a rectilinear manner, is transformed into a rotating movement. And how does this universal ether originate? Here we come upon that great miracle in which physics depends on metaphysics: here, Mr Poincaré, is the transition from motion to substance!

The universal ether is nothing other than the transition from force to matter. Energy is not an attribute of matter, but is the a priori existent, from which matter arises. Thus the enigma of the dissolution of matter is also solved,

that our physicists are so concerned about; matter has to disintegrate in order to become pure energy again. The law of conservation of energy is correct, but its validity begins even before the birth of matter. There is a cycle of universal energy which generates matter from itself.

Hence the universal ether is at once material and immaterial, element and energy; it is the carrier of all the phenomena of the visible world; but precisely because it must take on all attributes, it is practically devoid of attributes. Hence, too, in the ether, which has become luminescent for unknown reasons in my marble mausoleum, none of the attributes of light can be experimentally ascertained.

But here there are circumstances which again and again fill me with confusion whenever I perceive them, for they indicate attributes for which I lack any explanation. I am referring to the disappearance of the bronze plaque on the back wall of the mausoleum. This phenomenon occurs suddenly and disappears in the same way without my being able to observe any regularity.

I'm busy at work in the evening, I look up and the plaque has disappeared. I get up, approach it to feel the metal: it really isn't there, it has dissolved without a trace. And after a while the bronze plaque is back in its place. It seems necessary to me to clarify that with the reappearance of the bronze plate, an unpleasant oppression disappears, a kind of suffocation and desperate palpitations that assail me the instant it disappears.

I have already spoken about the circumstance in which the alteration of the structure of the marble occurs.

At the end of my attempts at explanation I have to admit again and again that I have got nothing out of it. The incompatible properties of these rays confuse me, and when I conclude my arguments, so confidently begun, I relapse into doubt as to whether it is really the universal ether that fills my abode at night with that greenish light.

But if it is not the universal ether, what is it then?

* * *

I have received an answer to my question.

Under the last sentence of the notes that I finished at dawn, when I was so exhausted that I went to bed, there is something written. Underneath the question with which I concluded, it reads:

"Is it Katechana's breath?"

Who is Katechana or what is that? The answer to my question provides me with a new enigma.

And who gave me that answer? This is perhaps the strangest thing in all this swarm of peculiarities that surrounds me.

At first glance it appears to be my own handwriting. It has all its characteristic features. The R is split in half, the A is elongated. But you only need to look a little closer to realise that it is only an attempt to imitate my handwriting. As if a stranger had usurped it to surprise me with such a successful forgery.

But who could have come in here to play such a joke on me?

One can only suppose that I myself woke up in my sleep and added the enigmatic answer, in my own handwriting, but somewhat changed by the abnormal state of my brain.

But where did I get the word Katechana, which I don't even know what it means? From a dream, from the abysses of consciousness, from that place where no ray of wakefulness reaches?

I have not noticed in me any inclination to somnambulism, my body has never played any tricks on me, except the paroxysms of hunger, and my mind is trained to ascend without vertigo the steepest paths of research.

* * *

In any case, it cannot be excluded that I fall into unhealthy states of consciousness. I must confess that my body and mind are in a strange struggle. While I am tormented by a canine hunger and betray all daily resolutions, and grow fatter and fatter, my mind seems to go numb.

I have recently examined the illation of thoughts behind which I received that enigmatic reply. In general, they are correct, but, in particular, I find them coarse and deficient; I miss the sagacity, which usually distinguishes my works and which even my enemies have had to recognise.

Although I clearly recognise all the errors, I do not endeavour to correct them, nor do I know how I could do so. Far more important than all other questions seems to me to know what it is, the breath of Katechana, as if the explanation of everything were truly enclosed in that word.

I am convinced that all this has to get better, that I will regain my clarity as soon as I have overcome this disgusting gluttony, this animalistic craving to stuff my belly. The struggle against this insatiable appetite destroys me. And when I finally can't take it any more, out of disgust and shame of myself due to the weakness of my will, I would like to smash my swollen face, to crush my white, soft, greasy hands that are forced to put food in my mouth.

I have never known that food can also be followed by a hangover. That must be how geese do when they are fattened to produce big livers.

Fattened! It is as if it should be fattened.

But for what purpose?

* * *

Today I was able to sleep for the first time in a long time.

Last night I wanted to start working, as usual, but my thoughts were more confused than ever.

Yesterday was All Saints' Day. A huge crowd invaded the cemetery from the early hours of the morning until the evening. Paris had risen to visit its dead, life came to the graves of the deceased. Everywhere wreaths and flowers and candles, the murmur of the crowd settled on the graves like the buzz of a swarm.

Most of the day, groups of people stopped in front of my mausoleum. The first visitors were two women in black with a little girl between them. Perhaps the wife, mother and daughter of a deceased person. The little girl looked at me in fearful amazement:

"Mom," he said, "is that the man who has to stay in there for a whole year?"

The women took the girl away, they thought it impertinent of her to look at me with such impudence. Fifteen paces further on the girl had already forgotten me and her visit to the cemetery, she gathered up her legs and let herself be carried in the air for a while, swinging like a little angel.

But not all the visitors were as delicate as these women; some tried to engage me in conversation. The sky alternated between sunshine and rain showers, and from that day I have only been left with an impression of groups of people, sometimes in the light, sometimes in the shade. In the end I turned my back to the entrance of the mausoleum.

In the evening there was silence.

Ivan brought me dinner. As I sat down and devoured the food, someone approached the opening.

-Sir," he said, "I beg your pardon!

He was a young man with a fresh face, by the look of him a craftsman, a salesman or something similar.

-Sir," he repeated, "don't stay here any longer... I advise you, leave the money... she bit me twice in the neck....

Ivan leapt to his feet like a wild animal. I had never seen him like that before, the bristly hairs on his moustache seemed to stand on end. He raised his fist to the young man and he ducked his head between his shoulders, mumbled something and stepped fearfully away into the gloom of the cemetery, plunged back into silence.

-Who was it? -I asked. Ivan

smiled mischievously.

-I don't know," he said in his squeaky voice.

But I know, it was the baker's apprentice, whom Madame Wassilka had bitten in the neck....

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

My awakening is as if I am oscillating in an unpleasant sensation... I notice a burning in my right forearm and in my neck. My gaze falls on a small crust of dried blood on the wrist. It surrounds a small wound that consists of a series of contrasting lesions... as if I had been bitten. Bitten... I can't find another word for that kind of wound. And all around it, about a hand's breadth, the skin is whitish and flaccid, as if the blood were missing, as if I'd had a plaster with an astringent ointment on it all night.

I put my hand to my neck and discover a similar wound there.

I don't want to think about who could have caused me these injuries. Could Sergeant Bertrand have imitators, or are there people who cannot suppress the bestial desire to prowl cemeteries at night and tear up corpses with their teeth, and who don't disdain to attack sleeping people either?

The nights have turned cold. From now on I will always close the door of my dwelling. Then I'll put on a heater if I don't want to fall ill in this marble prison.

I ask Iván what he has in mind for the winter. He looks at me as if he doesn't understand me. A dark, inner voice tells me to hide my wounds from the man. So I put on a turtleneck and hide my wrist with the cuff of my shirt. But now I find the Russian's looks most unpleasant, it's as if they are investigating my body, I feel like someone who has a secret disease.

-I need a heater," I tell him angrily, "a heater! Do you understand me? He nods.

Suddenly something occurs to me.

-Listen, Ivan," I say, "why didn't you apply yourself... after all, you could win two hundred thousand francs? That's a fortune. And anyone could apply... why didn't you apply yourself?

Now I see that, for the first time, an inner power takes hold of this sullen, wordless man, this automaton. His face distorts into a grimace of horror, his deformed hands with crooked fingers spread out and like a frightened parrot he screeches and squawks:

-No... no!

I don't know why I too am overcome by fear with this "no", I don't know why I suddenly start to tremble, why I am assaulted by such fear, as if at the same time they were pouring ice-cold water and boiling water over me.

I take a glass of wine to try to subdue the excitement.

The cuff of his shirt is pulled up and Ivan's gaze falls on the wound above his wrist.

The horror fades from his face, giving way to a sardonic smile that freezes and melts between the purulent pustules.

Margot has been here.

She stood between the marble walls of the entrance; behind her big hat with the yellow roses, the bare tops of the trees could be seen. Her eyes were full of tears, which slid down her pale, weathered cheeks. She was there, like one sent by life, the temptation in person, as if sent by Paris, whose murmur reached me. This combat of love lasted almost an hour.

-Ernesto," she said, "I beg you... come out of there. Don't you love me any more? I've let you do what you wanted... I didn't want you to think I didn't have the strength you have. But now I can no longer bear that you should stay here... that I cannot take you with me... oh, Ernesto, how you look! What nonsense to sacrifice your health and your life for money; weren't we happy, the two of us together, though we didn't know how we were going to pay the next month's rent? Think of the nights in my room, of the walks in Fontainebleau, of the meal for which we lacked five sous... if you love me, come with me!

I was three steps away, clinging with both hands to the edge of the table. A thousand words of love hung from my lips; a thousand confirmations of my longing and tenderness struggled to leave my heart. But I could not speak if I wanted to win the prize honestly. I could only let my eyes speak. But how could my eyes say all that it would be necessary to say, why I could not get out of there, that I did not want to have endured all that in vain, that I was now really determined to win the prize; that I could not get out of there because I was a prisoner of my own body; and above all because I had set myself to decipher the enigma of that mausoleum, to find out what that was - the breath of Katechana.

It was very difficult. Margot was crying.

-Oh, you don't know what the newspapers write about you... what your friends say... you have sent a report on your observations to the academy!

So it was said and written that I had sent an interim report on the mysterious rays of my prison. Well, let them say what they will, for I have gone mad....

-Do you want it to be true what people say? Oh, how I love you, Ernesto, how I love you!

I could bear it no longer. I felt him falter and waved him away with both hands... I turned my back on him and stayed that way until his shadow disappeared from the marble floor, until his sobs ceased to be heard among the tombs.

But at night she came back again, that faithful and kind woman, the best lover a man ever had. She overcame her fear of cemeteries, before which she trembles like a child.

Who else could it have been but Margot?

I wake up at night from the lethargic sleep I now always fall into. And I feel that I am not alone. Someone is beside me, she has thrown herself on me and kisses me so painfully that it is like a bite. In the green glow I see a woman, I feel her... I reciprocate her kisses without saying a word... I can't speak, but I can kiss. And Margot embraces me 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 with wounds... with bites, the traces of wild kisses.

I stagger limply, my flesh is devoid of blood... muscles are soft and spongy beneath the shredded skin.

And the wounds don't heal, they turn into disgusting scars, purulent pustules... exactly like Ivan's pustules.

And Margot comes every night... every night.

* * *

Ivan has spoken.

And I know what that is, Katechana... I got it out of him.

I saw it in his eyes, that he knew it, in those malicious glances with which he contemplates my wounds, with which he seems to value them and count them; I have seen that inquisitive look of a specialist in the judges of boxing matches, when the two bloodied and flayed opponents do not stop hitting each other....

And suddenly I realised that Ivan knew what Katechana was all about.

I can still see him backing away from me, as I rush at him to grab him by the throat. He presses himself into a corner and I'm in front of him...

-What is this Katechana? -I asked.

And then I see how his fear turns into obstinacy, into that mocking impudence that I have endured for too long.

He blinks perfidiously, but I know he will tell the truth now.

-That's her name," he croaks.

-Who?

-She learned it in Crete. She lived for half a year on the slopes of Leuka Vrune and I had to bring her sheep that she tore.

-What does that mean... Katechana?

-It means the same as in Albania Wurwolak, in Bulgaria Lipir, what the Czechs call Mura, the Greeks in the ruins of Sparta, Bourkolak and the Portuguese Brura... it was in all those villages...

-Those are names, you wretch, I want to know what they mean.

-It means someone who can't get enough of blood and the sacrifice of manhood, who beyond death....

I let him go, I know what he wanted to know.

I am being fattened in a marble prison... I am being fattened... my flabby, swollen body is just a container for a lot of blood, the vascular walls have to dilate to be able to take in as much liquid as possible: for a vampire who comes every night to satiate himself.

And my virility is stimulated with those criminally spiced foods, it is excited with secret products.

She absorbs my strength, sucks the life out of me, and the more I am able to give, the stronger and more robust the vampire's hide becomes. The figure that at first seemed to me light and airy, like a cloud, in the last few nights has become corporeal, has gained weight and oppresses me.

His breath penetrates the stone and covers me with a green glow. It devours the marble... or it could be that the alteration of the marble is only apparent, that I only feel it because my whole body is impregnated with its breath, because my muscles and my nerves, my senses and my brain are full of this luminous poison of decomposition...

* * *

Now I am completely calm again, because I know everything. It is now that I feel that in recent times I have not been myself, that I have been stumbling around in a state of oppressive daze.

But now I have regained my courage.

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

As it has begun to become corporeal, it has to submit to the laws of bodies. As it is able to obtain life, it will be able to die a second time.

And so I will smash everything that entangles me. Yes, entangles, in the literal sense of the word. For I have come to the conclusion that she has woven a net round me. It is not enough for her that I must remain here to keep me from losing my two hundred thousand francs, and that my marble house has become a prison, but to make sure of it she has caught me in a net.

My legs are hindered as I walk, with every step I bump into elastic and sound threads that slowly give way. Every movement of my hands is hindered by the fact that I have to lift these threads and pull them to the sides... and they only give way with considerable pressure... I notice how my face incessantly rubs against this spider's web, just as it does when in the summer one walks along lonely wooded paths. Only they are threads of invisible metal. I hear them jingling, their sound is always in my ears, with which they finally break.

Oh, I'll tear that net... before it gets too strong... this very day.

night!

* * *

It has
happened. I
have been
liberated.

The Katechana will not torment me any more. I have taken my two hundred thousand francs from her. I am the victor.

Tonight I have stalked her, I have been as awake as I have ever been in my whole life.

The murmur of the city below is fading. I have left the opening open, despite the autumn chill, to listen to this murmur that tells me about life, about this life into which I want to rush with my two hundred thousand francs.

In the night clouds you can see the glow of lights. Occasionally, at regular intervals, it becomes brighter because of the flickering of an illuminated advertisement, promising a bath, a theatrical performance, a pleasure trip...

I wait patiently.

At about midnight the green glow of my prison intensifies. I look tensely at the bronze plaque with the name Anna Feodorovna Wassilksa... but I breathe calmly, as if I were sleeping...

And now it is as if the bronze plate slowly dissolves in the green glow, as if it becomes thinner, as if a red vapour swings back and forth in the green luminescence. Now everything dissipates, disappears... in the marble a square, black opening is visible.

And from it comes a breath, an exhalation, like breathing on cold winter days, it concentrates, becomes denser and denser, takes on forms.

Suddenly there is someone in my bed, I see Madame Wassilksa's eyes, the somewhat coarse nose, the mouth with full, red lips receding to reveal sharp white teeth... all the features I know from the picture I was shown.

He leans towards me, he kisses me...

I grab her neck with my hands, I feel my nails dig into her flesh: it's flesh I feel... she wheezes, she hits me, she pushes my chest with her arms... but I keep squeezing and I don't give in.

I fall off the bed, we roll on the floor... I always with my hands on his neck, I feel the spasms in his body, oh, a body formed from my blood and which is like that of a living human being...!

I hold the prey like a dog, my teeth digging into its throat...

Its defence weakens, it dies out, it offers no more resistance, but I want to be sure that I really have won. My mouth fills with blood, ah, it is my own blood that I recover!

It has now been lying motionless for some time.

I stand up... a sweet taste fills my mouth, my lips are slightly stuck together, my hands are dripping with blood, my own recovered blood.

She lies on the ground how long she is, the Katechana; and my marble house is dark. The breath of the Katechana is extinguished. I sit all night without turning on the light. Inside me there is light. I am liberated.

The autumn morning begins grey and dreary. The Katechana is still on the ground, completely stretched out, her throat torn with a bite. She has died for the second time, this Madame Wassilska. I can see it on her face.

Ah, he wanted to give me one last scare, since he was going to abandon me! She has adopted the figure of Margot.

He wanted me to believe that he had killed Margot. I push the wimp away from me with my foot. Ivan is going to be shocked.

Dawn.

I have freed myself...

BUSI-BUSI

Germany - ah, Germany! -said the sergeant and spat with contempt. Germans... they are not human beings like us or you, oh, no! They are like a kind of monkeys that live in trees. Some even live in the swamps, of which Germany is full. There they wallow like hippopotamuses, so that they only stick their heads out. They feed on their own filth, for God's sake, there is no such filthy race left in the world! Your children can be proud that they can help us to wipe out that pestilence. And once we invade Germany, you can have whatever you want. Those pigs have women with white skin and long blonde hair, which you can roll up in your hand... and ha, no compliments....

Gotomoro's black face was oozing with grease and a mischievous grin. He swayed in pleasure with his scalp flailing, so that the thick white hair lay, sometimes on his forehead, sometimes on the nape of his neck. Her hips made a brief, compulsive movement back and forth. The shells, animal teeth and magic stones that hung from long cords on his belt jingled softly. He had nothing against the young men of the brave Busi-Busi entering the warpath to cut the throats of the Germans. He winked shrewdly, his greasy smile petrified into a grimace, he had the exciting sight of slashed and steaming bodies, of spasming muscle fibres, of nerves, of the thin, white threads being pulled out of flesh to be strung on sharpened sticks, of all those splendid things which, since the French had forbidden them, could now only be done in secret.

Gotomoro was the greatest sorcerer in the jungles of northern Senegal and in the villages of the Busi-Busi. His skin was cracked like the trunk of a tree, his legs and arms lacked flesh and were twisted with age, for he was very old, and it was even said that he could not die. He made it rain and stop raining, he infected the neighbour's cattle with blood sickness or slumber, the men with stiff neck, sleeping sickness or beriberi, he was a malignant wild animal in the form of a negro, and even the whites were afraid of him since the former governor had once punished Gotomoro for having cut the throat of a ten-year-old girl suffering from leprosy.

Gotomoro sent notched batons to the villages and some five hundred young men became recruits for the glorious Republic of France. Gotomoro assured them that they could not wait for the occasion to fight the wretched Germans. For the rest, he received one franc for each recruit. The Busi-Busi warriors had to take off their high buns kept artistically erect with cow dung and resin, and received caps for shaven skulls and uniforms. They learned to drill and shoot, and when they were ripe for the battlefield, they were to be packed into the belly of a ship berthed in the harbour. But they declared that they did not intend to undertake this crusade without Gotomoro, for his

His participation alone guaranteed victory; he was in possession of the baktatu pills, which had to be taken before the fight in order to escape death or, on crossing its threshold, to go directly to the land of eternal bread.

There was no choice but to pick up Gotomoro, put him in uniform and take him to Europe.

* * *

Of the last hours of the struggle for the people, Staff Sergeant Cornelius Zimmergesell, a law student and member of the student fraternity Hilaria a thousand years ago, did not retain a single memory. It had been an indistinct roar from heaven and earth. The howl of fire-spewing demons, the crackle of the world's scaffolding splintering into splinters, the whinny and chirp of beastly pomegranates. He was half buried in the wreckage of his machine gun, the last of his whole platoon; burning beams had fallen, the sucking leech on his right shoulder was a shot; from his foot, almost shattered by part of the stable wall, a dead man had been hooked, who in dying had bitten the boot.

While still in the shadows of unconsciousness he perceived black whispering faces, so the French, he thought, had also employed Africans against the people... suddenly one of the faces was at a painful proximity, two wheels of eyes turned, someone pulled Zimmergesell's right arm. He felt a raging pain in what was left of his humanity, heard someone scream, then everything plunged into the blackest darkness.

He began to see sparks that drifted into eternity and coalesced into sheaves, crests of flame, fire. Zimmergesell was lethargic and had only a narrow field of vision, he began to recognise some things: campfires, one, two, three, small crackling rockets leapt from the wood. The ruins were glowing red, the walls eaten away, the remains of windows charred and stained; suddenly he saw with great clarity the innumerable shells in the mortar, the holes caused by the swarms of shells. Black Frenchmen leaned over the fire, and shadows stretched and rippled, ghosts devoid of human masks. Zimmergesell lay on his side on the ground; the legs in scrawny gaiters, which kept kicking in his proximity, were more important to him than bodies and heads; he was suddenly afraid that they would suffer a fit of rage, start a St. Vitus dance, and trample him underfoot.

A shadow fell from the fire upon him, a man passed over him and gradually disappeared behind him. A hideous black face with crusty wrinkles and oozing fat, with a white cottony topknot over his forehead, blew a sickening breath into his lungs. "Ha!" laughed the incubus, and jammed his black thumb into the corner of his eye, so that the eyeball was on the verge of

out of its orbit. A hissing sound attracted the attention of the men by the fire, who trotted over, huddled around the prisoner and stamped their feet and slapped their thighs as they whinnied.

In spite of all the pain, Zimmergesell thought he could put an end to the situation if, despite being bound hand and foot, he could suddenly lunge forward and tear a piece of flesh from a black man's leg with his teeth. Then they would pounce on him and it would be all over. But there would have to be, for God's sake, some white officer or non-commissioned officer who would take pity on him and would not tolerate the mockery of another white man, another human being of his own race.

Zimmergesell lifted his head heavily, glanced up over the confusion of constantly moving legs to the faces. Among the black cottony skulls he caught a glimpse, in the distance, on shaking shoulders, of what might be a white face.

-Comrade! -Do the French officers allow the blacks to kick and humiliate their prisoners?

He received no reply, the blacks were laughing their heads off, having a good time. The old man pointed his index finger at a button on the breastplate of his uniform.

-No white comrade! Only black comrade! Good black comrade of good German man.

Once more he caught a glimpse of what might have been a white face above the shadows bending over him, but suddenly it was gone, hidden by the agitated group that now returned to the fire chattering. There they sat in a circle as if in council, the flames reddening the black faces, making smooth bronze foreheads, flat bronze noses, savage bronze jaws, stand out from charred logs.

Cornelius Zimmergesell, a German student and second sergeant, turned weakly in the ropes with which he was tied to a beam. The ground beneath him rippled, sometimes swaying as if on a swing, he saw faces and fire as if curved and buzzing in the background. He thought of throwing himself headlong from the heavily swaying box on which he stood and taking one, at least one, with him. But then he forced himself to stop, came to his senses like a drunk who suddenly recognises danger and wants to sober up.

The horrible man, the old man with the white hair and the unbearable smell, was crouched among the campfires around a dark, shapeless mass. Zimmergesell made out in the light four stiff horse's legs, the stomach was open, the guts were sticking out, green and yellow, a sort of blackish violet cake was also visible, perhaps the liver. Now the old man danced in his frog-like posture in the crevice of the horse, suddenly thrust both arms in deep, and as he pulled out, with his arms sunk to his shoulders, bits of kidney fat, Zimmergesell saw the stiff legs of the horse contracting and with a remnant of hellishly tortured life, kicking in the air with indecisive

weakness.

There was still life in that slashed and disembowelled body?

Suddenly the German heard a rustling sound above his wounded shoulder, coming from beyond the beam to which he was tied.

-Take this knife," said someone in French, "I don't know what you are up to. Run away - or if you can't, kill yourself.

A white face had appeared above the beam, the face of a woman. Sad eyes beneath a forehead veiled by wrinkles, outrage had coloured her cheeks, unspeakable humiliation had poisoned her lips.

-What are you doing here? -Is she with those people? She did not answer, but put the handle of a knife between her fingers.

-I can't," he gasped, "you cut the rope. My hands are stiff.

The hemp of the rope rustled as it came into contact with the edge, Zimmergesell saw the hair on the back of a woman's neck, a tortoiseshell comb turning strands into braids. But suddenly there was the stench of the jungle, a black fist gripped the nape of the neck and clutched it. The woman screamed, was shaken and lifted off the ground, in the black man's thin arms she hung like a puppy that has been grabbed by the skin. He threw her somewhere, the black soldiers pulled her, shouting.

Fat from the horse's stomach ran down the old man's face. Whitish bits stuck to his scabbed skin. Zimmergesell saw himself lifted to his feet and stood there hesitating, his knees bent, in a circle of flames. And again and again the dreadful vision came to his mind: a savagery from the origins of mankind. It is possible, he said to himself, that they will kill me and devour me.

Suddenly, the palm of the black man's broad, flat hand ran over his skull, forehead, eyes, nose and mouth, as if smearing a soft mass over his face.

It was like a mask that covered his whole head, a soft mask that overflowed everywhere. He was still smearing the black and the mass was sticking more and more to his skin.

And while Zimmergesell resisted this operation in a sort of stupor, he suddenly noticed with horror that he no longer felt any disgust at the stench emanating from the black man.

He absorbed that stench of rancid grease, of sweat and filth, that breath of vice and horror with a sense of abandonment. The sudden knowledge was so dreadful that from the depths of his soul, not yet infested by the horrible black, came a scream.

What he heard was a sort of growl, not a human cry - the tormented expression of an animal incapable of speech. He lifted up his legs; to follow the black preceding him, he trod heavily on the ground; his head swung, using a sort of trunk with which he sniffed and snapped, he advanced, groping after his master.

Yes, that was it, he had suddenly recognised in the black man a master who was going to exercise his

dominion over him, and to whom he was given to life and death. But in a still unviolated part of his humanity something was defending itself against this terrible transformation. He defended that remnant of humanity with desperate strength, it was an inner effort that almost tore him in two, for the black had become so powerful in him.

Meanwhile, he stumbled like a clumsy human animal, ignorant of his own appearance, like some sort of monster, behind the old man, towards the circle of campfires. The flames were writing letters of fire in the night, he was frightened by them, he gazed at that red luminosity in anguished amazement. He noticed that as he approached, the flames came to life, like a bundle of snakes. He lifted up his legs and gave a few awkward, fearful leaps, over which great peals of laughter rang out. His small slitted eyes showed him a confusion of unrecognisable shadows next to the red bundle of snakes, which he had to beware of. But so much more her nose told him, she told him of the smell of many masters, of whom one was the supreme master, a god to whom they had surrendered themselves. The large part of an animal that stood there with its stomach open and its legs stiff and stretched out emanated an appetising odour. And then, from a little further away, coming from a corner of the courtyard, there was a mixture of many smells, the breathing of a white woman....

From time to time the soul, frightened, tried to rebel against this paralysing abandonment, it seemed to want to get out of its corner and free itself, even if only to die. But it was surrounded by walls, it hit them like a spring wind that wants to blow down a mountain, only to subside exhausted, defeated, and fall into the darkness in despair.

A dull sound echoed in the ear of the unfortunate man. It repeated itself rhythmically as if breaking up into portions. And to this was added a rustling and fluttering as if from a flock of birds. It was a swarm of innumerable hands clapping their palms, a serial singing of the hands of the soldiers sitting there, and the white-haired god stood there and played with his fingertips and carpals on a taut skin. The grunts and the clapping harmonised and were beautiful.

A sense of wellbeing flowed through the human animal's heavy torpidity, lifted his legs off the ground, the music transmitted a squeaky, nervous joy and a restlessness in bone and muscle. Limbs contracted, arms rose stiffly to shoulder height.

Slowly, like an animal that has left hibernation, Cornelius began to dance. He danced in a semi-conscious state, at times completely devoid of any residue of reason or memory, and whirled among the fires. He might have bellowed with shame and indignation, but he danced on, and the music was to that stiff tower of flesh and that torn brain a delightful pleasure, like a warm mudflat.

What kind of animal had he become? He knew nothing of himself, he only had the sensation of wearing a thick coat of winter fur, he could hear himself wheezing, white froth of drool sometimes fell from his mouth, his shadow swirled in the fires, of

so that he could not find his way around. Only an awkward body was sometimes reflected in the play of shadows as the most faithful transcript, a human figure brutalised beyond recognition.

Despite the dreadful torments of his terrible transformation and the distance that separated him from his true self, he would not give up the last remnant of clarity he had left. That wretched drop of spirit was still in him like a corrosive acid, he felt it as if poured into a bottle, burning and shattering against the aching walls of flesh. The animal gloom made itself felt with its apathetic attraction, the cleavage had been suppressed there, a beneficent spiritual blindness cast a soft and deep shadow. But he did not abandon himself entirely, for then return would be impossible, and, strange as it may seem, in this extreme torture, on the threshold of humanity, he still perceived a distant tremor of hope.

Gotomoro waved his drum and smiled haughtily:

-From you we will make pills... your fat is good against your bullets.

The black soldiers began to clap their hands again to the beat of the drum, it was the dance of death that was now beginning.

Spears, sticks, bayonets were thrust into the dancer's skin, they girthed his thighs, they began to throw stones and clods at him. He shook his head, cowered and grunted but could not free himself from the rhythm that kept his limbs moving, contracting and stretching.

Suddenly he felt a noose around his neck and close. He felt short of breath, the mighty lungs wheezed and seemed as if they would burst, black worms crawled into his head. With arms outstretched he lunged blindly at someone, a mortal anguish broke the compulsion to obey, he thrashed wildly around, tried to remove the noose that strangled him and fell to all fours.

He was dragged away as he howled and gasped in agony. He rolled on the ground, bit at the shadows around him, reared up and was cut down again and again.

A long, thin cavity, a hollowed-out tree trunk, the trough of a well... with all four limbs stretched over the opening... Gotomoro was standing with his legs spread, a flint knife tracing magic circles on his body...

To die like an animal! To die like an animal!

He screamed, from the depths of his mortal anguish, and it was a human scream... But no sooner had it escaped from his mouth than it was answered by a much louder and wilder bellowing in the courtyard, earth and stones rose to form a black crater, flames of lava leapt up and licked the walls with a burst. Gotomoro plunged down, screaming and shouting, rushed into a long, descending corridor, rushed out and sped away in something yellow, leaving only the bound prisoner who remained in the swaying trough.

Soldiers of the Bavarian Hunting Regiment, who had managed to snatch from the

The enemy again attacked the village during the night in a counter-attack, they found a seriously wounded comrade in the courtyard of a farmhouse.

He was unconscious and in hospital he still had a fever for two weeks. When he regained consciousness, he told, hesitant and shaken with horror, that he had been turned into an animal by some blacks. He seemed to have this story, which naturally reproduced the feverish delusions of a man who was completely exhausted and had been on the verge of death, for a real experience. The regimental doctor explained it to him with great patience and consideration, and Zimmergesell did not tell the story again afterwards.

THE BAD NUN

One night I awoke suddenly from a deep sleep. My first thought was some astonishment that I should really wake up; for during the day I had had a lot to do at the Jesuit barracks, and I was very tired. I turned over and tried to go back to sleep. But then I heard a scream that robbed me of my sleep. It was a scream of fear and in an instant I sat up in bed. At first I tried to get my bearings. As often happens at night, I didn't know where to look for the door and where to look for the window. At last I remembered that I, strangely enough, can only sleep in one position, north to south, and now I knew that I had the door on the right and the window on the left. In bed, on my right, slept my wife, a childlike, quiet, peaceful sleeper. After a while, which I spent tensely trying to listen, I lay back down and convinced myself that I must have dreamt it. That dream must certainly have been a most intense and strange one, for the scream had clearly penetrated the gloom of my consciousness. Two hours later I fell asleep again.

During the day my work prevented my thoughts from incessantly gravitating to sleep. Climbing through the ruins of the Jesuit barracks, I had to direct and supervise the demolition work. The sun was shining relentlessly, the dust from the crumbling walls covered me completely and settled in my lungs. At eleven o'clock sharp, as he did every day, the director of the regional archive, Dr. Holzbock, came to report on the progress of the work. He took a special interest in the destruction of this very old building, the oldest parts of which dated back almost to the founding of the city. As he was a scholar of the history of the region, he hoped that the dissection of this venerable body would shed some light on the matter. We stood in the great cloister and watched the workmen tearing down the first floor of the main wing.

"I am convinced," he said, "that we shall still find many curious things when we get to the fundamentals. There is a force at work in the evidence of the past that is akin to the force of gravitation in physics. I can't tell you how these old buildings attract me when they have such a rich history as this one. First it was a merchant's warehouse, then a nunnery, then a Jesuit fortress, and finally a barracks. Built in a proportionally disproportionately large part of the old city surrounded by walls, the building seems to have been affected by all the events, it seems to have absorbed into itself all the manifestations of life, so that its traces have been left on it. With these layers, with these sediments, whose superimposition reflects the succession of years, one could establish a geology of history. I believe that we will still find strange things within these old walls, and not simply vessels with ancient coins and covered frescoes, but also petrified adventures and fossilised destinies.

So spoke the fanatical archivist as in front of us the pickaxes worked in

the solid walls. An arcade had been left open to the air, and I imagined the aspects of the merchants, the nuns and the Jesuits who had spent so much of their lives under the heavy, grey vaults of those corridors. While Dr. Holzbock went on with his rhapsody, I made up my mind, since I cannot resist the temptation of the romantic spirit, to visit these ruins sometime in the evening. I wanted to expose myself to the excitement of the sinister and befriend the spirits of the place.

That night I woke up exactly the same as the night before and heard the terrible scream shortly afterwards. I had prepared myself to hear it and tried hard to locate exactly where it came from. But at the decisive moment an inexplicable fear seized me, so that I did not really know whether it came from inside our house or from the street. Shortly afterwards I thought I heard running footsteps in the street. Until morning I remained in an uneasy state of sleep in which I could not stop thinking about the enigma of this cry. When, at breakfast, I told my wife about it, she laughed at first. But then she said worriedly:

-I think you're starting to get nervous, and this has been going on since you've been working in the old Jesuit barracks. Take a holiday and get a colleague to take your place. You're tired and you can't put your health at risk.

But I didn't listen to him, for the rummaging through the rubble of that old building, the search for the things the archivist had been looking forward to so much, had made me passionate about it too. My wife could only get me to promise to wake her up if I woke up in the night.

That night I also woke up startled. Fearful, I shook my wife roughly, and we sat on the bed next to each other. And then there was the clear, piercing scream from the street.

-Do you hear him? Now, now...!

But my wife turned on the light and lit up my face:

-My God, how you look! It's nothing. I didn't hear anything. I became so frantic that I shouted at him:

-Shut up... now... now they're running down the street!

-You're hurting me," cried my wife, for I was squeezing her arm as if I could convince her by violence.

-Haven't you heard?

-I heard nothing! Nothing at all!

I went back to bed drenched in sweat, exhausted as if from strenuous physical labour and unable to give a reassuring answer to my wife's worried questions. Early in the morning, when she was asleep again, I understood what I had to do to maintain my mental health. By behaving in a completely relaxed and judicious manner during the day, I managed to make my wife believe that I had calmed down. I joked at dinner about my nightly hallucinations and promised her to sleep that night in one go and not to worry about the screaming and commotion at

the street. I even promised her I would ask for a long holiday when I had finished these jobs that involved a great deal of responsibility. But as soon as I sensed from my wife's breathing that she had fallen asleep, I got up and got dressed again. Not wanting my thoughts to wander and wander into nonsense, I picked up Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and tried to concentrate on his sober and logical arguments. But when midnight came, I was seized by a restlessness that made me unable to read any further. It was impossible to follow the iron compulsion of the book. Something stronger was distracting me. I crept up and crept out of the house. I could tell by my growing trembling that the moment was approaching. I waited huddled in the doorway; I steeled myself, determined to put an end to my nocturnal torments with a quick explanation of natural causes. About twenty paces away a lantern was burning and gave enough light to illuminate the part of the street occupied by my house. A young man, who had apparently had too much to drink, came to the house opposite, where he stopped and after a few abortive attempts finally managed to open the door. I heard the sounds of the entrance to his house as he entered the hallway and began to climb the stairs. Then all went back to silence. But suddenly the scream burst out of the silence. I staggered back into the darkness and grabbed the doorknob, the cold metal of which I could clearly feel in my hand. Desperate and scared to death I wanted to run away. But although I had not locked the front door, I could not open it. Then I heard the hurried footsteps of many people in the street, and something flew past me. I could not recognise whether it was a shadow or a human being. At the moment I caught it with my eyes it did not seem to have the consistency of a man, but it immediately left the full impression of corporeity: of a woman running down the street, a woman in a long, billowing garment, who had gathered herself together so as to be able to run better. And behind her came a group of men in strange costumes, from a different era than ours. They gave me the same sensation: they glided past like shadows, but left the impression of corporeality. I don't know what insanity took hold of me and forced me to run after them. It must have been a dementia akin to that of the battlefield, which is stronger than fear, and which throws the soldier into the enemy's fire. I have never run as I did that time; it was not so much running as gliding and floating, as one knows only in dreams. I always saw the hunt before me, the woman in front and the group of men behind. It seemed to me that I had been running for a long time already, but without feeling any fatigue. Suddenly the woman disappeared, I still saw a disorientated coming and going of the pursuers and then it seemed as if everything vanished into the night shadows. To my astonishment, I found myself in the hedge surrounding the ruins of the Jesuit barracks. Above the entrance hung the sign: "No entry to unauthorised personnel". I opened the door and rushed inside. There stood the night watchman, very close to the entrance, leaning on a post, and he waved when he suddenly saw me in front of him. Proud that I had surprised him at his post, he stood firm and wanted to give me some news. But I didn't let him open his mouth:

-Haven't you seen a woman around here? Just now... she was wearing like a long, grey robe, which she kept tucked up, and she came running in here.

-I have seen nothing, Mr. Engineer, absolutely nothing.

-But hell, he couldn't have just disappeared! He couldn't have fallen asleep, asleep with his eyes open?

The watchman was offended by my suspicion, and assured me insistently that he had not been asleep and had not seen a woman. I began to search myself, I rummaged everywhere, I looked in every corner, I did not leave a single room or cell, however small, on whose crumbling walls the night gleamed in the glare of the city. I took the risk of penetrating into very dilapidated places that threatened to collapse at any moment, in order to look into otherwise inaccessible spaces.

Then I went back through the half-open galleries, on whose dust-soiled paintings the light of the lantern cast a strange play of shadows. The church, which had previously been completely enclosed in the building, so that only the roof and tower stood out against the grey walls, was now largely uncovered, and there were many hiding places there. But I found nothing there either, so I went home with a heavy head and trembling knees; I went over and over everything I had seen and gave things new interpretations, but I ended up more confused than at first.

-I hope you didn't hear anything tonight," my wife asked in the morning.

-No... I slept soundly," I lied and quickly bowed my head in the sink so that my wife wouldn't discover the signs I had left on my face that night.

That same day we made a discovery in the ruins, which caused the archivist great excitement. When dismantling a beautiful old portal, which had significant works of art, we had to proceed with special care, as we wanted to exhibit this monument in another place. On two pilasters, displaying a profuse ornamentation consisting of flowers and fruits, a beautiful archway stood above the entrance. In the entablature above the arch were statues of saints in the style of the 17th century. Saints who held their attributes before them like hieroglyphs of their destiny. When an attempt was made to lift a Saint James from his pedestal, the head separated from the trunk, rolled a couple of metres and came to rest on the rubble. In the insertion of the head a round, cylindrical hole was found, as if an iron bar had been fixed there, and when the trunk was lowered it was found that this hole corresponded to a continuation in the head of the statue. I first reproached the workmen for their carelessness, but Dr. Holzbock, who had raised his head and was looking at it with interest, interrupted me:

-The workers are not to blame, my dear friend. This is not new, it was already broken

for some time now. It's not a casual separation, but an intentional one, and I wouldn't be surprised....

At that moment one of the workers came towards me and handed me a small roll of dirty paper:

-This was inside the hole," he said, "and maybe there's something written on it.

The archivist stared at me and took the roll out of my hands. He tried to unroll it carefully and finally managed to spread it out on the drawing board in my barrack and pin it down. It was a piece of that strong paper reserved for documents where important contracts used to be recorded in the past. In vain I tried to orient myself in the confusion of black and red lines. It looked like a blueprint, and once I had unsuccessfully exhausted all my engineering knowledge to make sense of it, I gave up my efforts. Dr. Holzbock, however, declared that he was determined to decipher the paper and asked me to let him take the finding with him.

He returned before the end of the working day and waved his arm at me from afar. He put his hand on my shoulder with great solemnity and led me through a side door into the church, where no one was disturbing us. A wonderful evening sky, in which violet ships with white sails plunged purple and emerald depths into the night, gave the lonely church some of its colours. The tall baroque silver candelabra, among which we stood, were tinged with red; St. Agnes, on the wall in front of us, made her melancholy disappear and obtained by the dazzling reflections a fiery sensuality of expression. The statues of saints, the pulpit, the angels under the rostrum had been transformed, as if they had been freed from the compulsion of the day and rejoiced at the coming of the night, when they could be completely free and perhaps live a life of which we suspected nothing.

In the meantime, the archivist had taken our plan out of his pocket and said:

-After some reflection, I realised that the plan, as we found it, has no meaning, or rather that it hides its meaning. If we look at the confusion of lines, we can only deduce that it could be a plan, but we are not in a position to ascertain its meaning. From the appearance of the paper and from the letters found here and there under the lines, I can be almost certain that it comes from the 17th century and, moreover, from its first half, that is, from a period when this building was still a convent. Well, I have found a chronicle in which that period and that convent are often spoken of, and not exactly well. You know that in those days it was said that the strangest things happened in some convents. Thus, this chronicle also contains a lot of information about this convent, and in general not very edifying. If we had been right in our supposition that the paper found represents a plan, it is possible that it designates some secret of the old building and that it has been intentionally muddled, so that it is incomprehensible to other people. Another consideration supported my view. Was the doorway, with whose removal you began today, in one of the inner sections?

That's right, it decorates the entrance of the connecting wing between the north and south section, the one against the façade of the so-called Trinity courtyard.

-Well, then, it will not have escaped your notice that the top of that portal reaches the height of the first floor, so that some of the figures, that is, the heads of the statues, can be reached without difficulty from the windows of that first floor.

-Right. We can check.

-Stay, there is no doubt about it. The heads of some figures, including that of Santiago, can be removed effortlessly from the first floor windows, if they are separated from their trunks. It is easy to hide a dangerous paper in a cleverly prepared hole.

-You mean...?

-Didn't I just tell you it wasn't a fresh break? That's why I was completely convinced that a secret was hidden behind those scribbles on our plan. But how could I find out? I had to think very carefully about all my steps before applying any chemical reagent, because one cannot exclude the risk of spoiling everything. As a researcher of documents I have often had the opportunity to admire the many ingenious secret means of the Middle Ages. I know many of their recipes for ciphering writings. Among them, sympathetic inks play an important role. And the simplest form of sympathetic ink is the one whose features become invisible again after drying and only stand out when the paper is heated. This is not the case here, as our plan was already quite scribbled. But couldn't the opposite happen: that the insignificant and confusing lines would disappear when heated and only the important ones would remain? I could try that without fear of damaging our treasure. Well, my dear fellow, I have done it, and it has been a complete success. Would you like to see it?

Dr. Holzbock took out a small torch and turned it on. He then applied it to the plane and we waited in silence, while the night was breaking through, hindered only by the fearful light of the small torch. After a few minutes, I thought I noticed that some of the lines were fading, they eventually disappeared altogether and only a number of lines remained.

-A full-fledged plan, a floor plan," I said.

-Now your task will be to read it. In an instant I had got my bearings.

-Here we have the cloister of the Trinity, this is the gallery and this designates the church, and from the sacristy part... what is that? These lines here don't correspond to any building, that must be... yes, that is, no doubt, an underground passage leading out of the convent.

The archivist was beside himself with joy at seeing me confirm his suppositions. And I, too, was excited; for it seemed to me as if this

discovery was somehow related to my nocturnal experiences. I was about to tell them when I was prevented by a strange fear. I have always been wary of talking much about matters that were only at the beginning of their development, for I feared the effects of the spoken word. The word is more powerful than our everyday understanding realises and influences the future in mysterious and unerring ways. But Dr. Holzbock must have sensed something of my thoughts, for he asked me almost worriedly:

-What's wrong with him, he looks strange.

I led him, without answering him, to the sacristy. There I began to examine the walls according to the measurements indicated on the plan. I found that where the underground passage must have begun, there was a huge cupboard against the wall. It was one of those gigantic wardrobes that conceal an extraordinary abundance of chasubles and other garments and objects of great value, a very elaborate piece of ancient craftsmanship. A monster, heavy as a block of stone, richly carved, a colossus from base to top edge. The archivist estimated its origin to be around the 16th century. We were both convinced that the entrance had to be behind that cupboard, but we also realised that we could not move that monster without knowing the secret mechanism.

-That was enough for today," said Dr. Holzbock, and he was able to persuade me to go home, although at first I intended to spend the night in the sacristy, as if I had to guard a treasure against the presence of thieves.

Our find and the assumptions linked to the plan haunted me so much that my wife claimed I was completely disturbed. She persisted until she got my promise that I would ask for an early holiday. Although I was determined not to spend that night out of bed again, a strange feeling, mingled with fear and curiosity, compelled me to get up and wait for the fateful hour downstairs in the street.

Twelve o'clock struck, and soon after I heard the dreadful scream. The noise of running men came nearer and nearer, and the chase passed before me, just as it had done the night before. This time I saw clearly that the woman was wearing a nun's habit, which was open a little over her breast, as if she had hastily put it on. For an instant she turned her face towards me, a beautiful, pale face, from whose dark eyes emanated a strange light. Once more I was obliged to follow the pursuers, and again it all disappeared in the hedges that surrounded the debris.

-You haven't seen anything today either? -I shouted to the night watchman. The man recoiled in fear before me and declared that he had seen nothing.

-But I know he came in here, he had to see a woman.

But when the watchman insisted that he had seen no woman or anyone else, I pushed him aside and began to search. Without realising what I was doing or why I had become so obsessed with getting to the bottom of it, I climbed over the piles of rubble, examined all the remains of walls and thought I saw

a hundred times, in the deep shadows, a woman in a long, grey nun's habit. Once I turned around suddenly, because it seemed to me as if she was following me in the moonlight, with silent footsteps, so close to me that I could hear her breathing. I unlocked the church with the key I had intentionally dropped in my jacket pocket that night. At that moment I didn't think there was any way I could have fled to the locked church. After I had convinced myself that there was no living being in the church, I went into the sacristy and took out my plan. The moonlight was reflected in a greenish halo on the old cupboard, so that its scrolls looked as if they had been worked in bronze. The beautiful carvings stood out against their golden brown background, and the mischief of the many cherubs seemed to come alive in the light. My attention was drawn to a painting above the old cupboard that I had not noticed during the day. It was an old painting, blackened by incense and candle flames, and only the face of the saint stood out against the shadows of the centuries - or was it not the face of a saint, or rather a woman who had once lived within those walls? It seemed to me more animated and personal than the image of a saint, and now, with that green halo, I had the feeling that I had seen that face before. Those dark, flaming eyes burned into mine.

I trembled with inexplicable fear. And suddenly a distressing thought came to my mind. Sometimes one has the feeling that one of those thoughts that suddenly assail us is not born in ourselves, that it is not our own, as if it came from somewhere outside us, as if it had been transmitted to us by a stranger. This sensation was so strong that I had the impression that the thought had been expressed beside me, as if someone had warned me... warned me in a whispering female voice. Yes sir, warned... for the sense of that foreign thought was a warning. It was as if someone was whispering to me to be very careful about discovering the passage consigned in my plan. I wanted to get rid of that thought and I tried to find its origin understandable by that sinister calm and by the silence saturated with incense. The old wall of the sacristy, which had been damaged by the shocks of the work and the destruction of the adjoining building, kept dripping. The moonlight seemed to be invaded by this dripping, as if it consisted of grains of silvery sand sliding down the hourglass of time. The harder I tried to concentrate on my surroundings, the more tenaciously I received the warnings: I had to be very careful not to follow my plan, otherwise I would suffer great misfortune. Again and again I made a convulsive effort to concentrate on the wandering play of the moonlight, and all the more penetrating and piercing became the thought of others. For a moment it seemed to me as if someone put his hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear. And then I could clearly feel that someone else's will wanted to take over mine. I looked up and stared into the dark, flaming eyes of the painting above the cupboard.

I then became painfully aware of the fact that when that

I had already seen those eyes, they were the eyes of the woman being chased. Although I'm not a fearful person, I was so frightened that I felt I was about to lose consciousness. I neither screamed nor ran away, but I did something even more annoying: slowly, with my eyes fixed on those in the painting, I backed away step by step, as if it were necessary to flee from a real danger. In the meantime I held the church key tightly in my hand, just as when someone is assaulted by thieves he uses the first thing at hand as a weapon. At last I reached the church and closed the door of the sacristy. It echoed in the darkness of the vaults. The paintings and statues seemed to have lost their position and looked down on me with mocking grimaces.

I left the church in a hurry.

The rest of the night I stayed awake until dawn. Although I fell asleep at dawn, I awoke early; for I wanted to start work in the sacristy at once. In spite of the night's warning I was determined to discover the passage. My fear had lost its power to influence me in the daylight.

When I arrived at the construction site, I found the archivist already there, driven by the same impatience as me. I selected a group of competent workmen and indicated how they were to begin moving the huge cabinet. The picture on the cupboard, which I looked at with some trepidation, was an ordinary picture, one of the pile hidden under a thick crust of dirt, of which little more than a pale spot, the face of the saint portrayed, was recognisable with any clarity. There was nothing sinister about it, and I was about to ask the archivist his opinion of the picture, when he turned to me:

-Listen to me," he said, "there must have been a good deal going on in this convent. Late last night I read the chronicle again, and I think that this passage will give us some interesting information. I think I have already given you some indications of what the chronicle reports about this convent. Yesterday I reread it all again because I was hoping to find a point of support for our investigations. The nuns' fear of bringing the convent into disrepute gave way here to tremendous shamelessness. They openly indulged in the worst excesses and the chronicle reports that often shameless laughter and the noise of drinking outraged the neighbourhood all night long. It must have been a kind of insanity, a delirium that infected the whole convent and drove the nuns to the most unbridled orgies. The citizens often saw the church lit up at night, and from the noise it could be deduced that the house of God had been chosen as the site of a bacchanal. As participants in these orgies they referred to the clerics of the city, and although at first they only entered the convent at night and in secret, later they did so openly and in broad daylight. Men were often seen staggering out of the convent with swollen faces, and drunken nuns were seen in the cloister and in the convent garden. It is quite understandable that pious citizens, for whom such behaviour was a scandal, denounced it to the bishop. This

The bishop himself came to make enquiries and found nothing other than a group of devout nuns leading a contemplative life in that convent, consecrated to prayer, as befits the spouses of Christ. A survey among the clergy of the city confirmed this observation. The defamers who had brought the accusation were brought to trial, where, under pressure from the bishop's authority, they were sentenced to considerable penalties. When the bishop turned his back on the city, the shameless behaviour began again, but now no one dared to denounce it, for fear of condemnation. Among all the debauched nuns, Sister Agatha was the worst. Soon she was no longer satisfied with the orgies that took place in the convent. She must have been the strangest of women, with a frightful and diabolical voluptuousness that snatched and destroyed everything. She must have possessed the insatiability of a predator, for the chronicle tells of her often leaving the convent through secret corridors and wandering through the city at night. She was a guest in the brothels and slums of the slums and sat among the rabble, with the gamblers and drunks, as if she were one of them. And yet he was of noble birth, from one of the best families in the region. All the vices of her lineage, carefully hidden for generations, had manifested themselves in her in the most disgusting way. When she liked a young man, she embraced him and would no longer let him go free; wild and fierce as a bacchante, she seized him. She soon became known throughout the city and was spoken of as an evil spirit. She was known as the "bad nun". It happened at that time that the plague came to the city. Agatha was also infected, but she was unable to give up her behaviour and continued her life as before. She continued to dance in the taverns, to sit among the riffraff and to pounce on young men like a vampire in the street.

"But what's the matter with him? -Dr. Holzbock interrupted himself, "he looks very ill.

I waved him off and asked him to wait a moment with his narrative to check on the progress of the work. Around the huge cupboard the floor had been raised, the mortar had been scraped off the walls, but the cupboard had not been moved an inch.

-I think," said the foreman, "that the piece of furniture is fixed to the wall.

It could not have been otherwise, but it must have been attached to the wall already at that time, when the sacristy was built. In that case our plan was either a mystification or...

We looked at each other, and the archivist read my mind:

-The path goes inside the wardrobe.

I was excited, I was dying of impatience for the new delay and I was furious about so many impediments.

-But how are we going to find out how to get through it? We'd have to smash the whole wardrobe and we can't do that, it's part of the inventory of the

What can we do?

The archivist was as impatient as I was.

While Dr. Holzbock was pondering, I examined the entire wardrobe and pressed all the protruding ornaments, pulled out all the drawers as long as they were not locked and measured all the dimensions in order to perhaps by some chance find a hidden door.

"Don't strain yourself," said the archivist; "that cupboard, which has surely hidden its secret from generations of the curious, will not reveal it to us so easily. We must look in the archives, perhaps...."

I didn't listen to him any longer, for, while I was estimating the height of the cupboard with my eyes, my gaze fell on the painting hanging above it. And suddenly I had the feeling that this picture would give me the key. To the astonishment of the archivist I ordered a ladder to be placed beside the cupboard and climbed up it. At such close proximity to the livid face, with my eyes level with his, the night terror wanted to take hold of me again. But I controlled myself and began to examine the portrait. The thick layer of dirt, even at such close proximity, made it impossible to recognise much more than the sitter wearing a nun's habit, while the head was free of headdresses or ribbons and seemed to be surrounded by her hair. This hair was very strange, like entangled snakes, such as might be depicted on the head of Medusa. But the poor condition of the painting did not allow a safe judgement. Around her neck she wore an ornament hanging from a cord. It was not a cross, such as one usually finds on nuns, but a sort of brooch, a mere ornament. It looked like a fleur-de-lis enclosed in a polygon. I had the feeling that I had seen that ornament downstairs in the wardrobe, the fleur-de-lis, either in a hexagon, or in a rhombus, or in a pentagon as here.

"Doctor! -I think I've found a clue to the riddle," I exclaimed, as I descended the stairs.

"-And did you find the clue up there by the painting?"

"-I think so. The fleur-de-lis on the pentagon is the key. Let's look for it."

Although I was sure I had seen the ornament, I was nevertheless so confused that I did not find it at once. The components of the cabinet seemed to dissolve into a mist, and in vain I struggled against a tiredness which now, at the decisive moment, seemed inexplicable to me. It was roughly what a person suffering from frostbite must feel. But then the archivist shouted beside me.

Here it is, a fleur-de-lis in a pentagon! What now?"

My concentration had returned, as if I was facing something inevitable, where there was no longer any doubt about the outcome. I examined the fleur-de-lis, while the workmen surrounded us curiously. I felt the wood give way under my hand, I pushed with all my strength and the old cupboard shook with a groan, a deep groan from deep inside the cabinet and a thin crack split the cupboard from top to bottom. We pushed with our shoulders, but the hinges rusted,

dormant for centuries, they only reluctantly gave way. We had to push open the doors and so had time to admire the ingenious secret mechanism. Outwardly, that part of the wardrobe also showed a division, but pressing the fleur-de-lis joined the apparently separate surfaces into one door. As the door opened, the drawers of the cupboard shifted to the left and right, and we found ourselves facing the back of the cupboard; here it was not difficult to find the button we had to press to open that door too.

Behind it was the dark opening of a passageway. I wanted to rush inside, but the archivist stopped me.

-Patience, first we need to check if the air inside is breathable.

A candle was fixed to a stick, lit and held in the passage. It burned furiously, the melted wax fell in thick drops into the darkness.

We went into the passageway.

We went down a few steps and then straight ahead, then down a few steps again and straight ahead again.

-I think we are in the secret passage of the 'bad nun'," whispered the archivist.

He just believed it, I was sure of it. Although the air we were breathing was relatively fresh, I felt suffocated.

-Jesus, Mary and Joseph," said the workman who had gone before us with the candle, and stopped. Here the walls of the passage receded into darkness, and a sort of crypt opened up, in the centre of which were wooden coffins, simple and sober, the form and workmanship of which dated back centuries. The archivist lifted one of the lids; a nun lay inside, her face dry as a mummy's, her hands folded on her breast, her clothes torn, so that in places the flesh, which had resisted decomposition, peeped through the holes.

We lifted the lids of the other coffins as well. In the fourth one lay Agate, the "bad nun". I recognised her at once, she was the woman that a group of angry men chased at night and passed by my house, she was the model of the painting in the sacristy.

The archivist then said next to me:

-Do you know that here, among these corpses, there could also be the body of Agatha, the "bad nun"?

-I know, it's this one here. I recognised it. Look how good it looks compared to the others. You can tell that the others are real corpses, but this one...

Dr. Holzbock touched my hand and said:

-Let's try to get out of this passageway as quickly as possible, I think the air is dangerous. Let's go!

We couldn't go very far. After about thirty steps we stopped. A

Part of the roof had collapsed and obstructed the passageway, and I calculated that we were below the street, and I found that the collapse must have occurred recently, probably as a result of the heavily loaded trucks carrying the debris from the old building. As there was a danger of further landslides, I had a borehole instantly drilled from the street, the whole situation meticulously examined, and every precaution taken to avoid any accident. We then returned through the crypt. On the way I became convinced that my observations had been correct. She looked completely different from the other three nuns. Almost as if she were alive. Her skin was still smooth, she had some colour and her smooth forehead shone. She was still beautiful and in the candlelight it seemed to me as if her eyes had moved under her eyelids, as if she followed my every action with furtive, sly glances.

When we reached the sacristy, I had to sit down. I was out of breath and my legs were shaking.

-I must explain to you," said the archivist, "how I have come to the conclusion that one of the mummies down there is Sister Agatha. My chronicle explains it in the continuation of her history of this convent. The epidemic, whose priestess was Agatha, spread and finally the indignation of the citizens exploded. They stalked the nun with the aim of killing her. But it was as if the danger increased her taste for adventure even more. She behaved more wildly than before, and it is strange that she found a host of protectors, of young men who loved her, even though they knew she was poisoning them. I said she must have been a terrible woman. Her power over bodies knew no bounds. But one day a group of armed men showed up at the convent and demanded that Sister Agatha be handed over. The fury of the people was exacerbated and they threatened to storm the convent and set it on fire if they did not hand over the "bad nun". The abbess was forced to negotiate with the troublemakers. She promised to punish Agatha and asked for three days. The more moderate of the assailants managed to get the proposal accepted. After the three days had elapsed, the group of men returned to the convent and heard from the abbess that Sister Agatha had suddenly fallen ill and died. The chronicle does not specify whether the abbess was benefited by chance or whether a murder was committed to calm the spirits of the citizens. The times were such that the former was as likely as the latter. But the hoped-for reassurance did not come. Although a burial was held and a coffin was buried in the ground, although anyone could be convinced that a tombstone had been placed on that grave with Sister Agatha's name on it, rumours arose that the "bad nun" was still alive. As used to happen in the old days, when people did not quite believe in the death of people who were either very vile or very loved, so it happened with her. It was said that the nun had been seen here and there, and there were stories of her raids, in which she assaulted men.

The people finally became convinced that the abbess had acted out a comedy to avert the danger. Others who were inclined to believe in Sister Agatha's death, considered it a desecration of the sacred ground of the cemetery to bury her corpse alongside the bodies of honoured and devout citizens. The believers and the suspicious were united in their desire to have the grave opened in order to convince themselves that the nun was in it. It must have been a dreadful hatred that haunted the woman. As soon as the convent learned of the intentions of the citizens, the corpse was removed at night and taken back to the convent. My chronicle describes the whole story as if it had been a serious rebellion, which prompted the citizens to return to the convent as soon as they found the grave empty. The nun's corpse was shown to them from a window. Stones and sticks flew at the dead woman, and even a shot was fired at her. And the chronicle adds that among those outraged, the young men who had loved her while she was alive were the most furious. As it was realised in the convent that Sister Agatha was not even protected from the hatred of her persecutors by death, the corpse was preserved and placed in a crypt in which those nuns who had been killed for whatever cause were hidden. That is the crypt we have found today. It is on the road by which she went out on her adventures.

-That's right," I said.

-And now you must tell me how you got the idea that we had found the "bad nun". I had not even heard the end of my story.

How could he then identify Sister Agatha as one of the mummies, and how did it occur to him to look precisely in that painting for a sign that would open the cupboard for us?

What could I tell the archivist? Could I tell him about my nocturnal apparitions?

I tried to put him on track with another question:

-Didn't you notice a resemblance between the painting and the dead woman down there?

-No," said Dr. Holzbock, and looked at the picture, which was now very visible in the morning sunlight, "you have to look at it from very close....

He placed the ladder, which was still leaning in a corner. But he was unable to unhook the painting from the wall. I... I refused to help him. I called two workmen to help him and left him, for I could not resist the superstitious thought that it was preferable for that picture to remain hanging on that wall. Once again the night ghosts took hold of me in that grotesque way in broad daylight. I was caught up in a most bizarre story and I felt with dread that I could not free myself. It was as if my whole being had become entangled. When I found myself out in the open air, surrounded by the noise and dust of the building site, I decided, without worrying about what would follow, to take sick leave the next day and to go on holiday immediately. But

Earlier that evening I wanted to finish my remarks, as I was convinced that some sort of decision had to be made.

After a quarter of an hour, the archivist returned with his two workers and declared that he had found it impossible to remove the painting from the wall, which would require cutting the frame or the canvas.

-Don't shrug your shoulders," he said, "you seem to know more than my chronicle of all these strange and enigmatic things. You will have to tell me your opinion on the matter, for I intend to write an article about our find for the local historical association.

Having said that, he left and left me with the impression of a very erudite man, very honest and not much influenced by romantic inclinations.

That day went on forever. All the hours presented grey faces and slipped by like dull, indolent shadows. When evening came, my wife noticed my excitement, and I could only reassure her with a promise not to return to work the next day. It was eleven o'clock and the light on my wife's bedside table was still on. It was precisely that day that she seemed unable to sleep, and I feared with anguish that my purpose would be frustrated. At last, at about twelve o'clock, she leaned over me, and as I pretended to sleep, she turned off the light with a sigh, and two minutes later she could not even hear me get up quietly and leave the room. Just as I walked out of the door, twelve o'clock struck in the tower of the old convent church. I heard the scream, then the sound of men running, and the woman passed before me - it was Agatha, her terrible, burning eyes looked at me - and then the pack of pursuers passed.

I ran after them.

It was the same gliding and floating as in a dream, in which the houses on the right and left looked like steep walls that watched over our race. There were only two things I saw with extreme clarity. The group of pursuers ahead of me and the night sky above us, which was covered with many white wisps of cloud as if it were a river carrying ice floes during the thawing period. In the cracks and crevices left by the clouds, the moon would occasionally emerge, like a ship in the dark, abyssal water of the sky.

The chase reached the fence surrounding the works and the figures disappeared before me. But it was not a hesitant running to and fro of the pursuers, as on the other occasions, but it seemed as if a crater swallowed them up. It seemed to me as if they were whirling upwards in a great confusion, like a column of smoke, and then sucked into the earth. I stood beside the hole I had had drilled that day. The excavated earth was piled up around it, boards and two red lamps served as a warning to pedestrians. But the boards over the hole, which led to the crypt, had been thrown aside. I opened the gate of the fence and, without first alerting the night watchman, who would be elsewhere in that vast area, I ran through the piles of rubble into the large courtyard, which still stood in the middle of the street.

I could make out as I was surrounded by the wreckage of the surrounding buildings. I don't know what voice told me I had to be there; it was a compulsion I could not resist. I had barely found a hiding place behind the remains of a large arcade when I saw the courtyard full of figures.

What I was looking at was indescribable. It was all dreamlike and yet painfully clear. The figures were coming from the church, which stood before me bathed in moonlight. But whether they came through the door or filtered through the walls, I could not tell. It seemed to me that there were so many of them that they could not have come out of the door at the same time. But the strangest thing was that I saw them in great agitation, with an enormous variety of gestures, as they shouted and called to each other, jostled each other, and moved forward gesticulating conspicuously, without my being able to discern anything but the sound of footsteps. None of the words I saw spoken reached me. I had the impression of seeing everything on a stage from which I was separated by a thick glass partition that isolated me acoustically, so that I could see the action but without sound. This impression was strengthened by the fact that the actors in that exalted scene were wearing period costumes. Most of them wore the comfortable and pleasant clothes of 16th century citizens, some of them dressed, however, more casually, like students, and others more seriously and solemnly, like aldermen.

There is a certain measure of hideousness that, once achieved, makes the I was concerned about my own person and only live through my eyes, while the rest of the senses seem to be asleep. That is the extent to which I had reached, and therefore I cannot guarantee that everything I saw actually happened. The whole courtyard was full of these figures, and at times one of them came so close to my hiding-place that I could clearly see its somewhat rigid face. After a while of excited confusion the attention of those assembled was concentrated on the open door of the church, and out of it came a group of men leading in its centre a woman. They were pushing her forward with their fists, hitting her in the face and pulling at the rope with which they had encircled her neck. I saw her shrug her shoulders, as if she were merely shooing away an annoying insect. One of the students broke through, stood before her, appeared to hurl insults in her face, and struck her twice on the head with the bare sheath of his dagger. The woman then raised her smooth, white forehead and looked at the man with dark, flaming eyes. It was Sister Agatha, the "bad nun". Between incessant blows and kicks she was dragged to the centre of the courtyard, where a number of black-clad rulers stood. I saw her figure standing tall in the pale, fearful moonlight before a group of men, in whom seemed to be embodied the common hatred of the angry crowd. The white veil had fallen from the nun's head, and her appearance was the same as in the picture in the sacristy. Now one of the rulers approached, and, as the crowd surged forward from all sides, one broke a small white cane over the nun's head and threw it with a gesture of contempt at her feet. The people now withdrew and left a clear space on the

The nun was left beside a block of wood; from the block rose a man in a red cloak. I saw all the particulars of the gruesome execution. I saw how the man drew a broad, naked sword and removed the cloak, how he opened the nun's habit, so that the white neck and beautiful shoulders were visible, and how he forced her to kneel before the block. I could have screamed and was grateful when she turned her dark, menacing eyes away from me, which for the last few minutes had been rigidly directed towards my hiding place, as if they were guessing me there. Now the head was on the block and I saw the sword of justice rise in the moonlight and spurt a stream of blood. But it did not fall to earth, it did not scatter in drops, but hung in the air as if petrified for a moment, while the head fell from the block and, as if following a last impulse of the executioner, began to roll straight towards me. The crowd threw their hats in the air and exploded in jubilation; I could see their gestures clearly, though I could hear nothing; as if by a sudden collective suggestion, they all rushed at the corpse, struck and kicked it as if their fury had not yet been satisfied. The head, however, continued to roll towards me, without changing direction, and at last came to a halt beside my hiding-place. The dark, flaming eyes looked at me, and I heard words, the first in the whole horrible scene. Words from the mouth of the head:

-You must always remember the bad nun....

And everything vanished before my eyes, the hubbub of the crowd, the head, the executioner with the block of wood, and only the red crescent of the petrified stream of blood swayed for an instant in the greenish glow of the moonlight.

There is nothing more to add except that the next morning the body of Sister Agatha was found in the crypt in a dreadful state. It had been completely deformed by blows, all the limbs were broken and the head was separated from the trunk by a clean cut. It was assumed to be an act of sexual insanity and a thorough investigation was launched, in the course of which I was also questioned. But the authorities' enquiries yielded no results, as I was very careful not to tell what I had witnessed during the night.

* * *

A dreadful crime caused great unrest throughout the city on 17 July 19... When at the house of the engineer Hans Anders, the maid, after knocking several times in vain at the door of her masters' bedroom, finally at about ten o'clock in the morning tried to open the door and found that it was open and entered the room. A young woman lay on the bed in the middle of a bloodstain. Of the gentlemen there was no sign. The maid fled screaming, suffered a cramp in her leg, and when they finally managed to get something out of her with an effort about what she had seen, the

young student on the third floor, the most judicious among the excited and horrified tenants, immediately called the police and a doctor. The police arrived and confirmed that a crime had been committed. The young woman had been dead for several hours; the head had been severed from the trunk by a cut executed with monstrous force. Otherwise, everything in the room and in the flat was in order, except for a picture in the bedroom that had come off the wall and been completely destroyed. The frame was in pieces, the canvas torn. There was no clue that the murderer had entered from the outside, the maid confirmed that the gentlemen had gone to bed as usual the night before. When asked if perhaps in recent times she had witnessed any disagreements between Anders and his wife, she reflected for a moment and declared that nothing had come to her attention, apart from the growing silence between them and sometimes a nervous trembling of the wife. Despite this statement, there was no choice but to assume that Mrs. Anders had, for reasons hitherto unexplained, been killed by her husband, and that he had fled. The remarks of the other tenants coincided with those of the maid, but from all these indications there was no conclusive clue that there was any serious discord between them, from which such a terrible deed might have resulted. The coroner declared, however, that one should not be deceived by the apparent absence of outward signs of discord and assume complete harmony in the marriage, for it was precisely between people of high culture, as Hans Albers and his wife were, that such catastrophes took place quietly and in private; and these words strengthened the opinion of the commissioner, who immediately ordered the search for and capture of the husband of the murdered woman.

Hans Albers was found in the afternoon, sitting on a park bench, his head uncovered, hat and cane at his side, just as he was about to roll a cigarette. He followed the officer's orders without resistance, saying that he had already thought of turning himself in to the police and giving an explanation of what had happened. Smiling and in a good mood, he entered the commissioner's office and asked him to listen to him for a few minutes, as he wanted to tell him why he had cut the woman's throat.

The commissioner fixed him with a startled gaze:

-Sir, do you admit to killing your wife? Anders
smiled:

-My wife? No!

And then he gave a statement so strange and incomprehensible that neither the commissioner nor the examining magistrate, who had been entrusted with the case that night, was able to understand anything. It was inferred as much as that Hans Anders confessed to having cut off the woman's head with the Turkish cutlass from his gun collection, but that he claimed that the woman was not his wife. When he found that he was not understood, he referred to an acquaintance of his, the archivist Dr. Holzbock, who with his

statements would confirm everything. But before the archivist was summoned, he himself appeared voluntarily before the examining magistrate and gave the following statement:

"I consider it my duty to shed some light by my statement on the terrible story of Hans Anders, in so far as I can do so in such an enigmatic and extremely strange matter. Having known him for a long time, I met him daily at the construction site of the former Jesuit barracks, where Anders was in charge of the demolition work. He was already familiar with my historical and archaeological studies, and I hoped that by demolishing a building so many centuries old, he would be able to discover something interesting. Some news put me on the trail of a secret passage, and Anders, whose competence as an engineer is beyond doubt, followed this trail with such shrewdness and good fortune that we succeeded in uncovering an old crypt with some mummified corpses. You will remember that, the day after the discovery of this crypt, one of these corpses was found in a state indicating the commission of a crime. But the investigation at that time produced no results. A few days later Hans Albers came to visit me. First of all, I must say that in recent times a change in his character was noticeable; he was restless, his usual energetic and yet charming temperament had given way to self-absorption, to episodes of bad humour with angry outbursts. Sometimes he trembled, as if tortured by a terrible fear. This state particularly struck me during that visit, and when I asked him if something was wrong, he answered evasively. After a while, at last, when he was no longer able to control his restlessness, he began to say:

"Your painting was sent home today.

"What painting?

"The portrait of Sister Agatha, the bad nun.

"But what an idea! The picture hangs in the sacristy, and is fixed in such a way that it cannot be taken down from the wall.

That is not true," said he, "you may not have been able to take down the picture, but I swear to you that it now hangs in my bedroom.

"Who has taken him home?

"I don't know, it came in my absence. An unknown man brought it, hung it on the wall and left without saying who sent him.

"But we can find out who commissioned him to take it!

"That's the crux of the matter, I can't find out. I went to see the priest, and he knew nothing about it; when I asked him if he wanted to assert his rights, since the picture belonged to the church inventory, he said he was glad to be rid of it, and that he had long since intended to remove it from where it was. The terrible thing is that I can't return the portrait either, even if I wanted to.

"Why?

"Because it now hangs on the wall of my house with the same force with which it hung in the sacristy. It is incomprehensible and yet incontrovertible, and I ask you to visit me to convince yourself that I am telling you the truth.

"I must confess that I found this confidential statement of the engineer's most strange; for the picture we are talking about was, according to Hans Anders' assertion, the portrait of Sister Agatha, one of the nuns whose mummies we found in the crypt. To reassure him I promised him that I would visit him one of the following days, and I remembered my promise when at the end of the week I happened to pass by his house. Hans Anders had gone out, but I found a woman in the flat.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come! -said she, "I had made up my mind to look you up. You are my husband's only acquaintance, and the one he deals with almost every day; he thinks a great deal of you, and I hope I may be able to influence him in some way.

"After I had expressed my willingness and readiness to put myself at her service, she began to complain in tears that her husband was wandering about completely disturbed, hardly talking during the day, and at night tossing and turning in bed, unable to sleep. A few days ago he had promised her that he would take an immediate holiday and that they would go on a trip, for it was clear that he was suffering from overwork and was tired, but there was no persuading him to leave the city.

"My God! -said she, "I scarcely dare speak of the doctor. At the word he becomes furious, and reproaches me, as if I would force him to some humiliating action.

"I assured Mrs. Blanca that I would do everything I could to convince her husband to leave on his trip. Shortly afterwards, Anders arrived home.

"He greeted me with visible joy, he also greeted his wife, but a premonition told me that there was something between the two spouses. A shadow, an immaterial being, an invisible influence was at work in both of them, separating them. This influence manifested itself in Mrs. Blanca in the form of fear, in Anders - at first I thought I was wrong, but I saw my observations confirmed - in the form of aversion towards his wife. A repulsion mixed with fear. This struck me as extremely strange, for I knew that Anders had previously loved his wife unspeakably. After a brief and indifferent conversation, Mrs. Blanca withdrew to give me the opportunity to exert my promised influence on Hans. As soon as I had gone out, Anders took me by the arm and led me into the bedroom.

Come on," he whispered, "you have to see her.

"On an ottoman hung, opposite the beds, the picture of the sacristy, a green veil hung withdrawn beside it. It is a somewhat sinister picture, a face that seems to speak of unrestrained hours, and if indeed Sister Agatha were portrayed in it, it fits in perfectly with all that an old chronicle tells of the nun's vicious activities. I approached the painting with the intention of taking it down. For I

I wanted to show Anders that his absurd imaginings had to yield to reality. But he rushed at me with a gesture so furious that I was frightened, and shoved me away.

"But how can he think of it, it's impossible! Now he hangs on that wall, and no power in the world can bring him down from there.

"Apparently I had forgotten that he himself had asked me a few days earlier to visit him so that he could convince me of the truth of the story.

"But why did you tell them to put the painting in your bedroom? - I asked. That face can cause uneasiness in the most peaceful dreams.

I told you," replied Anders, "that I was not at home when the picture arrived. The man who brought it hung it up, without asking any more questions, and now I can't take it down. But - and his voice grew hoarse with excitement - he doesn't tolerate being covered up either. When I put a veil over it at night, it's off by midnight. He keeps looking at me with those dreadful eyes. I can't stand it. And do you know why he looks at me like that? I'll tell you.

"He pulled me away from the painting and whispered in my ear, so softly that I could barely understand him:

"He has sworn to be revenged on me, and he keeps his word. He is planning something dreadful, and I think I suspect what it is he wants.

"And suddenly he interrupted himself with a question, as it seemed to me at the time, unrelated to his thoughts.

"Did you take a good look at my wife?

"But before I could respond, he continued unperturbed:

"Nonsense! It is a nonsense that I sometimes imagine.

"And then he relapsed back into the previous attitude:

"He wants to destroy me for having discovered the secret passage, for having sent the drill into the street, thus giving his pursuers a chance to enter the crypt.

"Anders dismissed my objections with a wave of his hand:

"Believe me, doctor, it is so. I have weighed up everything that has happened, and if you had seen what I have seen, you would agree with me.

"Later I would find out what Anders had meant by these obscure allusions. The words of that conversation stuck in my memory, and I shall never forget the look on the engineer's face when he came up to whisper in my ear. I gathered from his manner that he was very ill, but my attempt to persuade him to leave the city and go to the mountains for a few days was in vain.

I must resist," he said, "it would be no use trying to escape from her. I would be at an altitude of three thousand metres as high as I am here.

"The most sinister thing about his behaviour was that he apparently had to wrestle with a ghostly notion as if it were a real power, and I drew the lady's attention to the fact that he had to fight with it as if it were a real power.

Blanca that this is where she had to exert her influence.

"Influence? -said she, and the poor woman was on the verge of tears, "I have not even influence to let him bring me the doctor.

"To do the lady a favour, I sent my friend Dr. Engelhorn to her house the next morning. But the engineer had a fit of rage, and Engelhorn had to leave in a hurry. It was then that I had to go on a trip, because I wanted to search the Pernstein Palace archives for an important document. It took me a few days to find it, but while I was searching, I found other very interesting writings, so my stay there was extended for a few more days. I returned by rail but only for a few stations, then got off to reach the town on foot by a long walk through the forest. When I passed by a venta in a very busy place for hikers, I casually looked over the garden fence and saw Hans Anders sitting at a table. I must admit that his story had taken a back seat to my work, and at that moment I regretted that I had neglected my duty as a friend. To at least find out at once how he was doing, I went into the garden of the inn and greeted him. I noticed that Anders had been drinking heavily, and as this was completely unusual for such a sober man, I immediately connected it with his dark history.

"Oh, Dr. Archivarius! -he exclaimed on seeing me, "I am very glad to meet you, very, very glad indeed, and I greet you in the name of science.

"Anders talked a lot and very loudly, so that he attracted the attention of the ten or twelve guests who were scattered in the garden. While I drank my quart of Moravian wine, he drank three, and it was only when it began to get dark that I managed to persuade him to go home. We were walking along the river and watching, through the mist that was rolling down the valley, the lights of Königsmühle, when Anders at last began to talk about that which, as I observed, obsessed him enormously.

"Well, I finally know what she wants.

"But don't always talk about 'her'," I said, "as if you were dealing with a real person.

"Hans Anders looked at me and did not understand my objection, he was so immersed in his imagination.

"And do you know what is happening before my very eyes? It is horrible. He has taken possession of my wife.

"Come on, and what do you mean by that?

"He has taken possession of my wife and the transformation is taking place in my presence. It has begun with her eyes, with a strange, lurking look in them, watching me, watching my movements. When I say something, in those horrible eyes burns mockery. Then her figure changed. My wife was shorter and stronger, the one who now sits and sleeps beside me, or pretends to sleep, for she continues to watch me from under her eyelids, is thinner and taller. She envelops me,

entangles me in his spider's web. She has murdered my wife and possessed her body, so as to be very close to me, and on the day when she has acquired a complete resemblance to the portrait on the wall, she will take possession of me too. But I am determined to anticipate her.

"I recognised with horror that the man's nervous agitation had already progressed so far that one could almost speak of a mental disturbance. We could wait no longer, we had to intervene energetically. The next day I was discussing with my friend Dr. Engelhorn what we could do to help the poor woman, when Mrs. Blanca came into my house. She looked very upset, pale, with restless, haggard eyes, and she had lost a lot of weight, so that she looked taller.

I know everything, my lady," I said.

"She started crying:

"He can't even suspect what I am suffering. My life has become hell. And in this case it is not a mere phrase but a bitter reality. I can't take it any more; my husband has changed completely, I can clearly see that he has a great dislike for me. He watches me incessantly, I can't help feeling his terrible looks and he looks as if he expects something evil from me. Sometimes he turns around suddenly and angrily, as if he thinks I am spying on him. Apart from this, he hardly speaks at all, and when I address him, he answers me as if every word were a trap. And when I try to find out the reasons for his strange behaviour, he laughs so horribly....

"Last night he had been out all afternoon and came home somewhat inebriated; when I was about to undress, he was suddenly behind me. Earlier he had been in his office and I had seen through the glass door that he was reading in a notebook and leafing through it. But suddenly he was behind me. He had followed me noiselessly and when I turned around, he grabbed me by the collar and said:

"What a beautiful neck and it has already been cut once.

"I was frightened and wanted to know what he meant. But he laughed again in that dreadful way and pointed to the old picture hanging in our bedroom:

"Ask that one, or rather, ask yourself.

"I could not sleep all night and pondered his words. In the morning I got up and went to his office to look at the notebook from which I thought I could get some clue as to the alteration in his behaviour. It was still on his desk and my husband had practically written it in its entirety. I remembered that for the last few weeks he had been writing in that notebook, in a strange confinement, often as if disturbed and so irritated that any noise in his vicinity outraged him, and I would have given a great deal to know what work it was that obsessed and irritated him so. But when I wanted to begin to read it, a dreadful fear seized me, and overcame my curiosity. I didn't even dare to open it because... I was afraid of finding out something horrible. That is why I bring you this notebook and ask you to read it and then tell me what can be done. Share with me whatever you think is appropriate.

"And with these words he handed me this notebook which I now place in your hands, Your Honor; in it you will find some very strange notes, and I leave it to your perspicacity to guide you in this story which for me has become so much more intricate a^[1]. Dr. Engelhorn and I tried to dissuade this woman and take away her worries; though we were convinced that danger was imminent, we pretended that she had nothing to fear. Thus we managed to get her to go home somewhat reassured, after having promised to read her husband's notes and report back to him the next day. And that was unforgivable negligence. That lack of presence of mind, of energetic resolve on the part of her friends, has cost that poor woman her life. So it is with us human beings, we see the danger clearly but avoid confronting it in time. When we, Dr. Engelhorn and I, read the notebook, we looked at each other. "He's crazy," I said. But Dr. Engelhorn is a peculiar man. Although he is the representative of an exact science, he has at the same time maintained a sort of superstition about all sorts of "nocturnal states" of the human soul. He is wont to quote on any occasion the words "There are more things between heaven and earth, etc...", and when medical science is confronted with an enigma, there is no one who rejoices more than Dr. Engelhorn. So I was not much astonished when he looked at me doubtfully:

"Crazy? I don't know if I can agree with you on that. I don't get that impression. There are states that look desperately like madness and yet are not. To explain this to you, however, I'd have to...

"So what can it be? -I interrupted him. But he just shrugged his shoulders:

"I don't know.

"This conversation, Your Honour, took place at night. The next morning I learned that Mrs. Blanca had been murdered. What immediately preceded such a horrible deed, we can find out from Hans Anders. We can only assume that with the murder she wanted to free herself from her ghost, and the destruction of the painting can be perfectly related to the above. It will be up to the judge to decide whether the psychiatrist will not have the last word in this strange story.

So much for the statement of archivist Dr. Holzbock.

The mysterious case of Hans Anders met a sort of end with the death, two days later, of the engineer. He was found in the remand prison, in a sitting position, leaning against the wall, with one hand on his heart and his right arm hanging down, in such a twisted position that the prison doctor began to examine him by shaking his head. He concluded that the arm, with several fractures, was dislocated, as if it had been crushed by a terrible force. As the cause of death, however, the doctor diagnosed a heart attack due to a sudden fright.

THE LITTLE MAN WITH THE SANGRIA

The broken panes of glass with which the gravedigger had planted the upper edge of the cemetery wall as a precaution creaked under nailed soles. Three lads climbed up the rungs of a ladder, stepped out of the shadow and hopped in the moonlight, which sent green sparks flying from the glazed surface. Then one of them leaned back and helped a man in a powdered wig over the wall. Beneath the wig snorted the honourable Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer. Over half-legged trousers, silk stockings and buckled shoes, he had pulled on very wide riding boots in whose tubes scrawny thighs danced. He swung in the arms of a dark fellow, whose step up there was as firm and sure as on any main road, and whose blood knew nothing like vertigo.

The other two jumped off the edge of the wall and fell upon a blackberry bush, so that the branches rebelled against them and hundreds of thorns attacked their trousers as if they were enemies. The third went down slowly, sighing at the doctor's pusillanimous attitude, following the safe path of the ladder, which led into the land of death. Above the wooden crosses, the black roof of the undertaker's cottage stood out in the clear night, and the tower of the little church pointed at that very moment to a silvery cloud, as if it wanted to pierce it. In front of the undertaker's door a little red flame burned on the little consecrated pewter acetre, a double protection against spirits and ghosts, and the eternal light cast the shadows of the men on the burial mounds, where they were broken down by the undergrowth. Eusebius Hofmayer stumbled in the midst of his companions, who now again overcame the darkness with the sure tread of predators. From the rows of ancient gravestones they came to more recent pastures of death, and at last searched among the burial mounds of the last days, whose softness betrayed recent pains.

-This must be it," said the doctor, and his riding-boot stumbled over something. The other three chose a better direction and carried him a little way further, through the darkness, under the heavy branches of the thuja trees. From the steel and stone a spark leapt and grew into the brightness of a small lantern. The doctor cursed the shrill noise produced by the picks and shovels which, as if afraid of the night and the activity in which they were engaged, crowded into a confined space. The three men began to pant from the work as they unpacked the mound.

-She was a good woman, Veronica Huber," muttered one of them and drove the shovel hard into the soft ground.

-An honest and clean woman.

-The groom wants to go to war. His mother cries, but she has suffered so much that she has had enough of life.

The doctor's snuff tin clinked loudly, as if to silence the waiters' words. Eusebius Hofmayer was impatient, for it seemed to him that they were taking too long to reach the bottom of the grave. The trees rustled angrily around them, and shadows fluttered from their tops like black birds whose wings wanted to extinguish the light. Somewhere a faint moonlight was glimpsed, a daring gleam cut through thick banks of mist, but with just enough power to fill the darkness with presentiments, which petrified like masks. In the midst of the empty sky, a graceful ark stood out on the top of the tower, receiving its silvery gleam from the moon hidden in the west. The doctor came with his thought, by short cuts inspired by that cloud, to the Spanish galleys that had sunk in the sea with huge cargoes of silver. But then he descended again to the business which occupied him that night. The waiters were talking and making no progress in their work.

-But, my dears, what a delay! What a waste of precious minutes! Mon dieu! Miguel, he wants us all to be caught! There he stands, spitting in his hands, but not a peep out of him. If I had hired three moles to do this job, no doubt we would have made more progress than with your slowness. Well, that's something...

-What a nuisance! -said someone who suddenly appeared at Eusebius Hofmayer's side and looked like a gentleman in a dressing gown. A cold snake slithered down the doctor's back and curled itself around his neck, while his scrawny legs trembled as he kicked against the shanks of his riding boots. The three grooms dropped the tools from their dirty hands. The master merely smiled amiably, showing two rows of sharp, saw-like teeth, which peeped out from between the contracted lips.

-Please go on with what you were doing, *mon cher*, I don't want to disturb you. I am glad to see that you are also interested in fresh graves, and I am... how shall I say, detached enough to wish you much success.

-You are very kind," said the doctor, unable to take his eyes off the man's back, from which fell two pointed, jagged shadows, as if he had two wings attached to his shoulders.

-The late, young, unmarried Veronica Huber, I am sure, has very special qualities. But I give it to her, really, I give it to her. Science, my lord, science! It deserves every support. And the short-sightedness of the authorities is the greatest impediment to seriously practised anatomy.

-You are very good, even in your profession?

-In a way... in a way! Not quite, but in a way.

Under the dressing gown a watch buzzed and the gentleman showed his two naked saws. And his words kept stumbling in that strange smile:

-In a certain way... in a certain way. But, my lord, the authorities protect decomposition. They force corpses to be buried and forbid science to bury them.

bother. Decay, yes, sir, decay is protected by the authorities. But I, my lord, I don't want to give you any competition. For you it will be the late Veronica Huber.

-Very kind, very kind. I thank you. But may I ask what...

A hand was raised against the doctor. Five black claws twisted against the reckless mouth.

-No, dear, you can't ask. Or you must not ask. I know it is the custom of serious science to ask everywhere. But that custom must fall silent in cemeteries. You see, I do not ask.

The moon had risen above the bank of clouds as it stood near the horizon. The night grew paler and the silver galley on the church tower blurred in a green and terribly empty sky, as if halting, desperate to find direction and goal. Between the trees shone the naked skull of the unknown gentleman, in whose jagged sutures the border lines of the bones were marked; a crown of yellowish hairs peeped like a ruff between the nape of his neck and the collar of his dressing gown. The two gentlemen looked at each other. Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer's teeth twitched in his mouth when he saw the other's serrations gleaming, and he noted with astonishment that between those serrations and the two eye sockets, in which no gaze seemed to dwell, sat the rolled-up nose of a bat.

A movement from the unknown gentleman seemed to invite the work to continue. The three lads grabbed their shovels, but a rusty watch squeaked from under the dressing gown:

-No, my dear, your method is really tedious, a bore. I will show you how I usually act. But first you must promise to reserve for me a compensation for the effort.

The doctor was relieved to find his senses returning and his breathing returning, albeit still panting, through channels less blocked by fear. The whole thing dissolved into explanations of the most understandable kind: a poor swindler who wanted to be paid for keeping his silence, a man who wanted to take advantage of the opportunity that chance had given him to earn some money. To his question, which was intended to sound out the figure the other man was thinking of, the gentleman in the dressing-gown anticipated:

-No, no. Roman law is in force in the Holy Roman Empire. I trust your honesty will not deny me a consideration for my service. We enter, therefore, into an unnamed contract, and you will see that it is in your interest. Now, then, the service.

Two hands came out of the dressing gown, and ten black claws stretched out towards the grave, like magnetised rods towards a dead mass on which they wanted to bestow life, and it seemed as if the earth moved by some enigmatic attraction. The clods followed one after another and rose upwards, leaving a sinkhole, the earth crawled towards the

The whole mass began to come to life, threw the two lads out of the hole, steepened, burst outwards as if under the pressure of gases, gurgled into a hill and burst with a burst of gas. The whole mass began to come to life, threw the two lads out of the hole, steepened, burst outwards as if under the pressure of gases, bulged into a hill and burst with the burst of an explosion. The grave was left open, and at the bottom of it lay the coffin of the deceased Veronica Huber amidst a skein of wreaths and crushed flowers.

The three lads threw down their tools and ran screaming, scrambling through some bushes and leaving their bounty in the jaws of horror. The doctor stood as if paralysed, his tongue suddenly sticky and heavy, he could barely move it to utter a few words:

-And the consideration...

-You must not ask, *mon cher*. We'll talk about that later. Go home quietly now. There you will find me and the late Huber. Go!

A polite bow and a wave of the hand obliged the doctor to take the path under the trees. The unknown gentleman in the dressing gown walked beside him among the graves. Jagged shadows rose and fell behind him, and he dragged the tassels of the dressing gown along the now-lit paths as if they were traces of blood. A sudden sense of loneliness tore at the doctor's dread with a still more terrible one. The man in the dressing gown had disappeared. And beside him, in the moonlight, there was only an old tombstone, tall, thin and firm as an eerie signpost, and in the cruel brightness it cried out the name of a man long dead: the Chevalier de Saint-Simon.

The doctor started running in his heavy riding boots, was whipped by branches, tore through broken glass and overcame obstacles as if in a nightmare.

He regained his presence of mind when he reached his house. The long, narrow street with its high facades concealed a menace in its frowning darkness. The twilight of the moonlight broke through the shadows and reflected in the sleepy windows. On a ledge fluttered a flock of petrified birds among the intertwining branches of a scene carved in stone, and beside it was Butterhann ^{e[2]} above the doctor's study, thrusting his pestle and mortar into the bucket. The erudition, which had filled that house through the long series of owners down to Eusebius Hofmayer, was still masked to the street by the builder's slightly grotesque and extravagantly inclined humour. The doctor raised his head obliquely, like a bird, towards the windows. Beneath the Butterhann there was silence, and the moonlight filtered through the lifeless leaded windows. The key, now, hesitated to enter the door of the house, on which a wild boar hunt had been carved, and found a bolt securely locked. More confident and freed from the atrocious fear that had possessed him, the doctor went up to his study, and when he entered it... he saw on the dissecting table the naked body of the late Veronica Huber, and in her armchair: the hard, black claws, resting on the arms of the furniture; the skull

naked, marked by stitches; and the head leaning back, of the gentleman in the dressing gown. Black boards were stacked in a corner. The moon was about to leave the room.

-Welcome," said the gentleman in the dressing gown from his armchair, as if he were the master of the house. The doctor could only stammer, "Welcome.

-Well, my dear friend, you can ask me anything you like.

-Then I ask him how he got in here.

-I know this house better than you, for I have known it longer, and therefore I know ways that are unknown to you. I await another question.

The moon was lost through the upper edge of the window, but the room remained illuminated by a pale light that seemed to radiate from the young Huber on the dissecting table, like a kind of phosphorescence with which the multicoloured flowers of the Turkish dressing gown began to open. The unknown gentleman took one of them from the cloth, smelled it and put it back. He was waiting for a question that the other did not dare to ask. There was such a silence that one could hear the Butterhanne outside stirring the mortar hand in the bucket and the stony birds tripping beside her. In the dark corner the wet boards creaked.

The question was buried by a mountain of fear, until the unknown gentleman stood up and in his flowery, multi-coloured dressing gown, whose tassels trailed on the floor like traces of blood, approached the woman. He pinched the flesh and stretched the skin:

-Look, dear colleague, it is in good condition and can be used for *experimentis, demonstrationibus and studiis*. Your scientific specialities, kidneys and bile, will make considerable progress. The service I have rendered you has been impeccable, I have rendered it cleanly and without delay.

-And my consideration...

The gentleman in the dressing gown answered before he could continue with his question:

-It is simple and easy, almost ridiculous in comparison with my work. I want nothing more than for my colleague to give up going to the convent tomorrow, and to delegate to me the task of bleeding the sisters.

-But how can that be, are you a doctor, and do you know how to use the lancet in such a way that as much blood can flow as is necessary to maintain the health of the sisters and serve their devotion?

-You can be confident that I will not expose your wisdom and that I will behave like a man of science and not like a quack.

-Are you a doctor?

-At least something like that. And as for bloodletting and blood extraction, I have unparalleled experience in these two delicate procedures.

The doctor's reflections oscillated between two decisions. The naked corpse of the deceased Huber showed to his eyes all the attributes that were advisable for the table.

The doctor's hands were already reaching involuntarily towards the instrument case, ready to find answers to the pressing questions that had occupied his research for the last few years.

-But... but... but... sir, it is impossible in every respect. Even if I were to give him my full confidence, even if I were sufficiently sure of his knowledge, even if I were to believe that the gentleman colleague can perform all these health-promoting procedures in an impeccable and efficient manner, I cannot doubt that the ladies of the convent would reject the stranger with protests. I am the doctor chosen and confirmed by authority who has been entrusted with the task of monthly bleeding and the only male individual allowed to enter the convent. I do not see how Mr. colleague will be able to penetrate the gates of this fortress of virginity and, once inside, how he will achieve his intentions.

-The difficulties, *mon cher*, are only in your mind and in the slowness and clumsiness with which our performances unfold.

From the black claw a finger was raised in a strange and pedantic doctoral gesture, next to the dissecting table on which the naked corpse of Veronica Huber was throwing phosphorescent flashes. The doctor wanted to obey this gesture of academic disputes and was about to respond with his rejoinder, in defence of the unimpeachable correctness of human representations, when the unknown gentleman nipped all objections in the bud.

-You can't "represent" it, can you? You think it's impossible and that means you haven't seen it yet. That's why I want to show it to you. I ask you to look at me a little more closely.

Favours are difficult when the eyes are frightened by some monstrous absurdity, thought the doctor as he forced himself to comply with his request. He was alone in his study, in a terrible loneliness, which was all the more terrible because he had to share it with a second self. Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer stood before himself, doubled by a sudden fantastic inspiration of a creative power, and differed from the other Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer only in that he trembled while the other smiled, that he carried under his arm two folded riding boots, while the other held in his chin the silver fist of a cane.

-I believe," said Eusebius Hofmayer II, "that the sisters will not prevent me from entering in this guise; that would mean that they would not allow the doctor confirmed by authority to enter the convent, which would be in breach of all custom and would be contrary even to their own needs.

The utter perplexity of Eusebius Hofmayer I was barely concealed behind a faint murmur. That perverse duplication which threatened the doctor's well-established understanding extended from the comfortably baggy buttons to the stained tips of the breastplate; from the half-legged trousers, the buckled shoes and the fleshy calves to the wart over the left eyebrow and the mole on the cheek. Such a cruel reflection of his person faded the

He took pleasure in rising above the situation by taking advantage of the dialectic, as if he knew he would not have the strength to regain his eloquence.

So you consider me sufficiently likeable to, with your kind permission, take your place at the convent to-morrow, and I add that I dare say "He gives me *plenam potestatem*, full powers, to exercise his office with the sisters. In case you should doubt, I remind you that at the same time that you accepted my service, according to the law in force, you obliged yourself to make a consideration and that you cannot escape from this consent.

Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer I was too abulic to look for excuses and gave Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer II all the full powers he wanted.

-A handshake, colleague," demanded II.

The I extended a trembling hand, but before the II could shake it, something most unexpected happened. The late Veronica Huber sat down on the dissection table, slid her legs over the edge and, while making the gesture of modesty with her hand, raised her other stiff arm in a warning attitude. The silent movements unleashed a cascade of expletives at Hofmayer II:

-Go away, you wise woman, and mind your own business! You're shameless, you'll get your turn!

The outburst of fury was followed by a rancorous murmur:

-You scum! And on top of that he demands: *de mortuis nil nisi bene!* Get down! - he shouted again and struck the corpse with the fist of the cane between the breasts, so that it fell and resumed its original rigidity. Dr. Hofmayer I shook the outstretched hand of II; he would have put his hand in burning iron without a second thought.

A peal of laughter burst through the room like a meteor in the darkest darkness, and a silence followed in which the rumbling of the Butterhanne could be heard: Eusebius Hofmayer II had disappeared, as if the laughter had pulverised him and the silence had swallowed him up in its dark crater.

* * *

Between Adam and Eve at the convent door, that morning the porter's peephole opened for the third time. Around the corner sat the cobbler hunched over, showing his industriousness towards the street; the baker enjoyed his usual pause between the morning and the evening consignment, reflexively picking his nose with thumb and forefinger from the steps leading up to the door of his house; the butcher's dog lay with its legs stretched out in the middle of the road and did not move, no matter how much the traffic of people in that silent street passed over it. Between Adam and Eve, the first parents represented on either side of the convent door with credulous simplicity and naïve will, the way to the nuns' home opened up. Adam and Eve were standing very erect; the nuns were standing very tall.

bodies, deprived of their most conspicuous attributes, were indistinguishable, and stood under the trees of a petrified Paradise, whose foliage was united over the door and intertwined until the leaves, fruits and animals of that confusion appeared like hieroglyphs and letters of a simple and carefree text. Here was to be read the innocence of pleasure, the trust in divine grace, the beatitude which had been common to the sculptor and the builder of that ancient patrician house.

Sister Ursula said to Sister Barbara, who was filling the corridor with all her humanity:

-He's still not coming. When one has become accustomed to punctuality, this unforgivable negligence....

-Of course she did, of course she did," sighed Sister Barbara and tried to turn around in the narrow corridor, but after a brief turn she was hopelessly stuck. Her soul had grown quiet with time and had enlarged the temple of her body to three times its normal outline, and she resigned herself, sighing, to the small inconveniences of this enormity. He had preferred to shut himself up behind thick walls against the discomfort of a moving world and lay among the monstrous cushions of his fat like an asthmatic lapdog. Sister Ursula remembered her duty, leaned hard against the back wall and pushed Sister Barbara down the corridor to the little garden. The sisters spent their lives among the rather mean bushes, which seemed ashamed to be within these walls, to bear seed and fruit. To the fantastic Dorothea those blackberries became Armida's gardens, and the stunted shade of a crippled pear tree the dark jungle of Ceylon. To the malicious Agatha all the happenings on that inch of ground, all the poor contingencies of life that managed to filter down to it, gave occasion for her sarcastic remarks, to which the devoted Anastasia was exposed by some necessity of suffering, wilfully and incessantly, humiliation. Between them mediated the industrious Thecla, who felt within herself the need for activity like a burning stone. The melancholy Angela wandered with swollen tear glands among the sisters, like the thought of inevitable misfortune, and liked, with the pleasure of contrition, to walk barefoot on the sharp gravel of the paths. The spirit of utter unprofitableness pervaded all the rooms and the garden of the old patrician house, and made the blood of these women boil till they cried out for the doctor's lancet. Somewhere in hidden corners of the house, in the secret recesses of those souls, a pale and weathered spectre could still be found, that one could hardly dare to call it hope, the hope of something beyond the walls, whether it came from above, from the shimmering summer clouds, or from below, from the murmuring earth: an intimidated illusion that vainly tried to find a name. In Abbess Basilia the full force of the spirit of unproductivity seemed to be concentrated, and her sober indifference was apparent, like a shield, in her reply to Sister Ursula's excitement, which she moderated with one of her typical expressions:

-You weigh these things too sensibly, child. He will come, for it is his duty, and in the discharge of his duties he has never been negligent without good reason.

The industrious Sister Thecla burst in between two blackberries and suggested that perhaps a message might be sent to her, and the melancholy Angela uttered an oracular sentence which could be interpreted as an allusion to the death of Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer. A barely concealed excitement led all the sisters to gather around the abbess and to hold a council which even succeeded in bringing Dorothea from the jungles of Ceylon. They all trembled at this insignificant event, in which the life of a whole month reached its climax, and were driven by this desire to a rare unanimity. The sighs of the devout Anastasia and the panting of the phlegmatic Barbara said as much as the muffled speechlessness of the malicious Agatha.

The barking of the bell, held by Adam's petrified hand, announced the change of scene and introduced the appearance of Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer to the hypocrisy of indifference.

-Thank God," whispered Ursula to Thecla, who completed the sentence, nodding her head in satisfaction:

-Our little bleeding man is coming in spite of everything. And the tranquillity of apathy greeted the expected one.

The doctor smilingly approached the abbess and bowed to her, apologising for his delay:

-I have been detained on urgent business... ("business," sighed Thecla inwardly) and I need not assure my venerable and most reverend protectresses that it was really negotiations of the most peremptory and serious kind that prevented me from performing a duty which seems to me, among my most unpleasant activities, a veritable oasis in the desert.

-Oh, we have patience and we can wait, there is no hurry," said the abbess and took the rosary hanging from her belt with her fingertips.

-For the rest, I am convinced, if I may say so in all modesty, by virtue of my investigations, that it is even propitious and convenient that the blood, with a little delay, how shall I put it, should be warmed a little more, almost, if I may say so, boiled, so that all the foam may accumulate on the surface and the impurities flow off at once.

That sounded enlightening to the sisters, for every week there was a different one in charge of the kitchen service.

Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer took out the snuff box and, while welcoming the recognition of his profound wisdom, enjoyed a thumbful of snuff.

-If you please, doctor," said the abbess, and preceded the doctor, as usual, at a distance of half a pace. The sisters joined in, and through the bushes of the garden the ugly black robes rustled with a murmur of impatience. In the

The doctor, at the entrance to the refectory, with a gallant bow, let the retinue pass before him. Then the last one entered and closed the door while he smilingly counted to see if they were all there.

In the dining room surrounded by bare, sober, whitewashed walls, preparations were made for the bloodletting. The padded operating chair stretched out its arms and the basin was set to receive the blood, white cloths yearned for the life of the red. The water in the large basin trembled on the surface in circles of hope, and around these things and the sisters, Eusebius Hofmayer placed his gleaming instruments on a small table.

-What strange tinkling sounds he makes with his lancet," whispered the fantastic Dorothea, and the mischievous Agatha replied:

-The music of the doctors.

Eusebius Hofmayer nodded towards her with such force that his malice froze and he repeated:

-The music of the doctors, reverend sisters, why should not the doctors make music? My researches have gone further than those of my colleagues and have discovered the relationship between music and medicine; music is movement and the process of life is movement and the like works its effects on the like.

The sisters liked the fact that their words seemed to penetrate like a strange chant even into the corners of the room, and from there they came back oscillating like sounds. Over these harmonies vibrated, high-pitched, the exciting tinkling of the instruments, until a cry from the abbess broke the sisters' reverie.

-The painting...! Who put the painting against the wall?

The image of the crucified Saviour, the spouse of the sisters in that refuge from the noise of this world, which, painted by the inspired hand of Master Burgmeier, hung in the refectory and watched over the meals of the women, stood against the wall. Eusebius Hofmayer stood with his steely smile among the frightened sisters, while the abbess approached the picture and turned it around. Then she returned to her place, exhausted as if she had made a great effort, and faltered under the burden of a sense of dread, for the doctor's face was strangely altered. His jaws lengthened and revealed, grinding, two rows of sharp, saw-like teeth between the thin, contracted lips. The hand with the thumbful of snuff had stopped before a nose that resembled that of a bat. And the abbess searched in vain for the life of a look in the sockets above the bony cheekbones.

He looked, as in long sinister nights full of moaning voices, into the eyes of darkness.

The sisters were accustomed to following the abbess, and, slightly bowed, they stood rigid as they saw Basilia stand rigid. Suddenly,

They felt in their throats all the slimy toads of fear and they swelled up, so that their breath began to struggle for air. And all the ghosts of their concupiscent desires manifested themselves behind them, tugged at their habits and veils, scourged their souls with the scourges of sin.

Eusebius Hofmayer distanced himself more and more from the usual trappings of a smarmy erudition, grew like a shadow among them, and seemed to drive all the light out of the wide room. The clear sun-patterns on the floor and on the walls lost the neat regularity of their lines, moved as if tormented and contracted distorted and uneasy, crawled like martyred abortions over the red and white floor tiles, and finally fled through the window, where they were absorbed by a sort of jelly. The garden air at the windows seemed to have become cloudy and ran thickly through the flowers and bushes, so that they seemed enclosed in a sticky mass, every branch and leaf taking on a petrified and improbable naturalness.

"Blood gives power over blood," said Hofmayer, grabbed Sister Thecla by the neck and drove his steel claws with brief pressure into her skin, and small, thin streams of blood spurted from the holes.

The nuns let out shrill cries of despair.

"The painting... the painting!"

The Redeemer was once again facing the wall. The sisters felt abandoned and surrendered to the cruelty of another master. Basilia and others ran to the door, but the doorknob rebelled against the abbess and bit her on the arm with viper's teeth. All the ornaments and scrolls began to curl and little snouts emerged from them, smoking and hissing. The sisters who ran to the windows, intending to go out into the garden, were held like flies by the sticky air from outside.

The room was a prison in which a perverse will was destroying life. Eusebius Hofmayer, terribly altered in his countenance, gazed, with thin lips drawn back to show his gnashing saws, at the insane efforts of the sisters. Between his playful claws the neck of the industrious Thecla was stretched out. To music that seemed to be composed of mischievous giggles, the lancets and scalpels were arranged in pairs on the instrument table and danced a tinkling, graceful minuet with the greatest perfection.

"Ladies, I beg your attention. What I have to say to you is very brief, and will not delay long what is the proper object of my visit.

The sisters returned under the doctor's compulsion to the circle of chairs and formed in it a wreath of half-dead women. But their gesture of invitation was followed by another semblance of movement. The whitewashed walls and ceiling of the room darkened and trembled as if by the work of buried colours now brought back to life. New forms stirred beneath the sober, homogeneous plaster. The white burst, and among its disappearing tatters emerged the living painting of the

background, the frescoes of gaiety and joy with which a forgotten time had adorned the room. All the daring nudity, all the mischievous jokes that echoed from the groups on the walls radiated in the circle of half-dazed women. The women lying in the clouds raised their heads smiling and curious, mischievous angels pointed their fingers at the damned, and drunken young men left the hips of the bacchantes to mockingly offer golden glasses to the sisters. The laughter of this festive landscape resounded among the musical beats of the instruments. And like a shower of perfumes and light, the whole world, imprisoned in the white of the ceiling, was renewed with an explosion of strength and noise.

-We salute you, Saint-Simon! -they shouted from the walls and the ceiling.

-I invite you to come down.

-Come on, let's go.

The harmless pleasure of the senses that expressed itself at the door, in Adam and Eve, with great prudence, had here fermented to exuberance, varied and seductive as the sins and nullified the hypocrisy of paradisiacal simplicity of the entrance. The pleasure of the senses descended there in a hundred different forms and arranged themselves in a circle of unbridled spectators around the condemned sisters. Groups intertwined in theatrical figures and seemed to await secret slogans to intertwine again and sway in different forms, while the detached flower chains, the loosened ornaments of the mouldings wobbled from the ceiling amidst the glistening flesh.

The sisters sat surrounded by the mad, blissful dance, like a circle of corpses whose eyes still showed the patina of fear. In its centre stood the fake Eusebius Hofmayer, who blew off some snuff that had remained on his shirt. After interrupting the doctor's typical movements and the simian pressure on Sister Thecla's long neck with a dry crunch of his jaws and a sudden shaking of his hands, he began to speak like an accusing lawyer:

-My ladies, most reverend sister Basilia and the other most venerable sisters! These charming people have saved me the trouble of introducing myself by greeting me at once by name. You will be somewhat surprised, if you remember the tombstone bearing my name, to find me still in such good spirits and in acceptable physical condition. I am really in good health and have managed very well with that lady whom my friends, the doctors, call Death. In return for a few small favours on my part, she gives me the best dishes from her table and has even granted me certain prerogatives in regions bordering on putrefaction. You may ask, most venerable sisters, by what right do I extend these prerogatives over your persons, by the force of my jaws, for by virtue of the right I have been granted over all corpses in the stage before putrefaction.

-Evoo, evoo! -cried the women all around, while the sisters sank still deeper in their seats, as if the last spark of hope had escaped from

their bodies.

-Saint-Simon! -Saint-Simon!

Hatred shouted cries of jubilation and hurled words of rage like scourges over the bodies of the condemned. The monstrosity of a cruel orgy seized the painted life and hovered over the living dead. Nudity and voluptuous, dripping desire were put in battle order. But a gesture of the master held them back.

-The party is mine. And whoever wants more than to be warmed by contemplation must return to the wall.

He then bowed to the circle of mortal fear, which seemed to give him joy and pleasure, and said in the style of Eusebius Hofmayer:



-I inform the venerable sisters, with the permission of the most reverend abess Basilia, to prepare themselves for the desired bloodletting, which this time will be carried out thoroughly, and to allow me to carry out my work in all modesty.

He released the industrious Thecla, whose head, with closed eyes, swayed from

a neck as long as a flute full of holes, and stepped over her fainting body towards the abbess, two minuet steps forward and one backward, until, with a polite bow, he drove his steel claws into her shoulders and with the serrations of his open muzzle bit into her neck, while the excited spectators played tambourines and cymbals, howled, lay on top of each other with their horny bodies, vainly trying to attract the blood that gushed from the wounds and which they so longed for.

* * *

The narrow alley before the figures of Adam and Eve was animated by the uneasiness provoked by the sound of unusual noises. From the convent came a tumult, a wild shouting, and the clashing of loudly clashing cymbals was distinctly audible. 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 that noise that the dog fled with his tail between his legs and the cobbler became with the baker the centre of a small gathering. The news spread like wildfire through the town, provoked laughter and fear, curiosity and concern, and caused an uproar outside the door guarded on either side by Adam and Eve.

-The demon must have possessed the sisters," said a mocker.

-But there is no doubt that they are defending themselves bravely," replied a devotee.

The mass began to gurgle and seemed to want to spill over the houses; it rushed towards a man who was shouting and waving his hands through the crowd. It was incomprehensible to the cobbler how it was possible that Dr. Eusebius Hofmayer, whom he had not yet seen leaving the convent, should appear there in his crooked wig and brandishing his cane. His hands were stretched out towards the door. But no one understood him. Among the stone trees of Paradise, Adam and Eve smiled, a frozen smile, which seemed so cruel and terribly knowing. The smile of the adepts of a mystery in which life and death are only the persons in a game of masks. Excitement beat like a wave against the door, but the audacity of an assault was far away and inconceivable, so when the door opened wide, a corridor formed in the crowd. The building opened its mouth to reveal its secret, the gentleman in the dressing gown stepped out and advanced slowly, while bowing his head towards the people. Bone sutures zigzagged across the bare skull, the flews retracted to reveal gleaming serrations, and two thin streams of blood ran from the corners of his lips. The tassels of the flowered gown dragged in the dust and left red, wet trails on the cobblestones of the street.

The midday sun was shining on the scene. No one dared to open his mouth; there was only the loud, loud purring of a watch under the stranger's dressing gown, a mockery of that

silence and time running out.

Once he was out of sight, there was a shouting noise, and the mass was fired up with renewed enthusiasm, so that it closed the long corridor it had opened and compressed itself on all sides into a single body. He entered the refectory with Eusebius Hofmayer.

There sat the sisters in a circle, still fixed to a central point, sunk in their seats, like shells of their former corporeality, balls of skin and clothes. All the contents had been absorbed from their bodies, and a terrible bloodletting had been executed on them without a trace of spilled blood. The walls had undergone a strange transformation; instead of the plain white of the whitewash, there were multicoloured scenes of licentious gaiety, groups of bacchantes, debauchery of the senses, all painted by a vigorous and bold hand against a background of sunny landscapes. The painting with the Saviour, however, hung between two lushly curved women and looked out of dark sockets, for his eyes had been cut out, into the circle of the dead sisters. His face, his neck, his chest, had been penetrated countless times with lancets, scalpels and needles, as if they had used the Crucified One as a target. And Eusebius Hofmayer, who knew the painting well, noticed the terrible alteration of the features, the distortion of the cut-out face, and saw that the mouth, previously tightly closed, was wide open as if uttering a cry of horror.

MY ADVENTURE WITH JONAS BARG

-Gentlemen," I began, "life, life, life, life is not the greatest good," says the poet, but he is not right. It is not only the greatest good, it is even our only good. What we feel as fortune, as joy, as Dionysian intoxication, as pleasant tranquillity, are projections of life in our souls. And what are our souls if not vibrations of an infinite life, intersections of the two great possibilities of the existent, of time and space, spherical consciousness and, in general, life, gentlemen? Hurrah!

I could have gone on talking like that for a long time, accompanied by the murmur of applause and the exhilarated exclamations of my fellow club members, if that hateful voice had not resounded. As I strung together a few more sentences to silence it, I realised that I was paying more attention to my opponent's words than to my own. My anthem was torn in two.

-Look here, my dear fellow," said he, "they are all affected by a chemical delirium, animated preparations who think they are the lords of a creation which is nothing but the green layer over a swamp full of rot and filth. Life is a process of combustion, of oxidation, or, if you like, a metabolism, in so far as it creates in the idol of matter. Life is a dark process in the ganglionic system of a monstrous scarecrow, whose name I'd better keep quiet, suckers in its entrails, and its fluorescence, gentlemen, is the fluorescence of putrefaction.

These words had their effect according to the degree of our drunkenness. The soberer ones became serious and bad-tempered, stared at the bottom of their glasses and cast angry glances at the enemy of life; the more tipsy ones began to offer him resistance by shouting and using contradictory arguments; the completely drunk ones hung around his neck in tears, tried to kiss him and begged his pardon with sobs that life was such a great evil.

Jonas Barg stood in the centre, immobile as a mast, and looked at me with eyes burning with long sleepless nights, as if waiting for my answer.

-Children," said I, "children, children, what is the use of all this reasoning? Life has us and sustains us, it gives us new wonders every day, and from morning to night it ceaselessly defeats all its adversaries.

I think I said something most trifling, an emergency excuse, an evasion, but Jonas Barg cried out as if he were being burned with a red-hot iron bar, threw his glass aside, and fell back in his chair. The drunks wept around him, leaned on each other and wet the shoulders of their jackets, while the others, angered by his importunate and thoughtless intervention, turned away from him and gathered around me.

-Let him," said Engineer Munk, "he'll calm down.

When I was transferred from my previous posting to this city, I found company here, in the Foolish Club, with like-minded comrades. All

We walked in a recollected and devout attitude through the temple of life, but we also did not disdain, in small, hidden rooms of this temple, to celebrate its mysteries with unbridled orgies. My superiors, who had removed me from my previous position because of my wild pranks, thus helped me to enter an environment that suited my character even better by admitting even crazier proposals. I felt at ease in the Fools' Club, but from the first moment I knew that I was the object of hatred, and that against me was pitted a power that aspired to destroy me. In the strangely vacant eyes, as if they were fitted at the end of a long tube, of my clubmate Jonas Barg, something dangerous threatened me. The friendliness with which he tried to approach me made me even more suspicious and gave me, who used to openly squander my friendship, reason to harbour a thousand cautions and scruples against him. My companions felt the same, but not so clearly. When I asked them to explain to me the strange fact that this closed and sinister man, of whose civil life no one knew anything, had been taken into the club, they all fell silent in perplexity. No one had ever asked before. In an epic binge, at the end of a long and wild party, he had been promised entry into the club, with those drunken sympathies which even now, strangely enough, still favoured him. When a decision had to be made the next day about his admission, no one wanted to be against it. An unconfessed fear prevented any objection. So it was, therefore, that he became a member of the club, although the others feared and hated him. All this had been hidden as if by tacit agreement, until it came to light with my questions. It is now that they began to be amazed that time and again his presence spoiled the best parties and all possibilities were weighed up to expel him from the club. In the meantime, everyone clung to me as if trying to seek protection from an unknown adversary.

That night when Jonas Barg rudely interrupted my hymn with his hatred of life, that relationship showed itself with particular clarity. But Jonas Barg freed himself from the weeping friends and came to me. He offered me his hand. It was a hand whose skin seemed as cold and inane as leather, and whose fingers closed over mine like a lock.

-Rivalry in principles," he said, "should not make us enemies. You are a friend of life; I consider it neither great, nor beautiful, nor good. But by these opposing ideas our personal relationship must not be affected.

-Listen," said Engineer Munk, "it is not a question here of differing convictions, but of tone and manners....

In my proximity I was always encouraged.

-He spoke not as someone opposed to the issue, but as a person driven mad by anger.

It was impossible to continue this conversation, for the banquet was resumed, and with its clattering it overwhelmed all objections and resistance. Barg sat down beside me, and I

threw a cold politeness that felt like a mesh on my face and neck. Our drunkenness made us spectators of large, red, fantastic flowers, the contemplation of which drove us mad and aroused the basest destructive instincts. We put all the ornaments in a heap and crushed them in a mortar; from the metallic mass each one put a piece in his glass, poured inside some of the laurel wreaths that hung on the walls, and with the champagne drank gold and glory at the same time. Some took needles and stuck them into their arms and thighs, others burnt their bodies with candles and did not seem to feel the pain of drunkenness. The walls slowly began to turn in a circle, eventually tilted, and as all the corners levelled out, a dome formed over our heads and spun at great speed around a somehow twisted axis.

As the evening wore on, the more unrestrained the drunkenness became, and the more friendly all the members became to Jonas Barg, who sat motionless as a post in the middle of us; in the large containers we passed filled with champagne, he drank vast quantities. Engineer Munk had seated himself on the other side of him, and his expressions of friendship became more and more expressive and affectionate. This was already beginning to seem most strange to me when I suddenly saw with unpleasant clarity that we were all seated around him and that we conceived of him as the centre of the meeting. I got up and went out to cool myself with cold water. From the great lion's head over the black marble basin a broad stream of water fell on my head and helped my will power to regain a sobriety so contrary to the occasion. As I straightened up, I felt Jonas Barg behind me. He looked at me with his empty eyes, as if from a great distance, and hatred darkened his voice as he said:

Are you a bad member of the club? Is this the much-lauded foolishness?

Do you interrupt the high point of this wonderful festival with a water cure?

I took heart like a fighter against a strong opponent:

-Life calls for limits to delirium. And, besides, where is the foolishness that you also praised as a member of the club? I have not yet seen you stagger with joy.

Her head sank between her shoulders as if she had been struck by lightning. She let me walk past her into the room. There the drunkenness had knocked most of the fellows down and they lay on top of each other in the most despicable positions. The others sat frothing at the mouth and babbling nonsense.

-Plato's banquet by Sophocles! -shouted engineer Munk.

But when dawn broke and the others were asleep under the table, they were still seated. My Plato was talking weeping into Jonas Barg's tousled beard and sniffing with emotion.

-Let's go," said Barg, offering me his arm, "take it, we'll be back.

joining forces.

-I thank you, but my strength is enough for me. If you want to make merit, help your friend Munk.

Nothing was more terrible to me about this strange man than his looks. His dangerous will seemed less able to control them than his lips. Quietly he took the fool under his arm, and, when we were dressed, the servant, as drunk as we were, followed us up the staircase, from the walls of which hung mocking masks.

The morning was damp and foggy, and by this time the city was beginning to wake up and get to work. Masses of snow had fallen during the night, deposited in great quantities on the roofs, and obliged the sweepers to exert themselves to clear the streets of traffic. We had scarcely gone a few steps when behind us there was a loud noise and at the same instant a wave of snow came crashing down on us. It pushed us forward. Jonas Barg stood by a pile of snow, motionless as a post, his eyes burning through the aurora.

-Where is Munk? Munk!

Barg pointed to the pile of snow, which still moved dripping and noiselessly, like an animal that after a lucky leap shrinks in lazy inertia. We threw ourselves on the mountain of snow that occupied half the street and began to remove it with hands and sticks. The street sweepers, after weighing up what had happened, took part in the efforts to save the injured man; some apprentice bakers used their baskets to dig until half a body appeared in the snow. The last of the revellers leaving the premises, cold with cold, gathered around us with curiosity and were dispersed by some policemen, who insistently enquired about the causes of the accident and the number of the house from whose sloping roof the avalanche had fallen, writing it all down in their notebooks.

When after half an hour we managed to free our friend, he was dead before us. With a broken neck, asphyxiated or from a heart attack, I don't know.

We did not ask, for the main law of the Foolish Club forbade speaking of death or the dead. When someone in our circle died, for us it was simply as if they had gone, and no sentiment could be expressed in their memory. For a year, at every feast a cup was put in its place. That was all that our statutes allowed as a tacit remembrance.

I found it difficult to overcome my grief and horror alone. I was often on the point of communicating my horror to my friends; but it was all so uncertain, so full of supposed vileness, that I dared not even acknowledge it to myself. At the very moment when I saw Jonas Barg, standing tall and miraculously unharmed by the mountain of snow resembling a huge burial mound, I felt as if his gesture were artificial and his unpleasantly thin lips were drawn into a bestial smile. Ever since these thoughts began to haunt me, I have

What if I had gone in Munk's place with Barg? Would I have been killed by the avalanche? Did he offer me his arm for that?

For me there was no doubt that my friends were suffering from the same thoughts, but nevertheless we kept quiet and suppressed our fear with a heroic struggle.

We held fast to our principles, though, as is often the case on such occasions, with a somewhat frayed joviality; we encouraged each other to the wildest mischief, and engaged in the wildest dances on the parquet of society. I must admit that the wildest stories came from me, and that I was also the one who engineered the acrobatic numbers. Tormented by an unquenchable thirst for extravagance, it occurred to me to transform the whole club into a company of artists, to dispense with all bourgeois and quiet pleasures or to include them with added difficulty, and to add to our old entertainments the new and strange sensations of danger or adventure. As all the members of the club were obliged by the statutes to take physical exercise, and most of us were excellent gymnasts, others also swimmers, rowers, fencers or horsemen, we soon succeeded in performing the simplest numbers, such as jumping through hoops, balancing, the falls from the trapeze. As we moved from easier to more difficult exercises, our amusement with these things increased and we were barely able to eat without hanging upside down from the trapeze, spinning plates on a fork or squatting on a rope that was embedded in our flesh. Yes, we even included funambulism in our programme; and more than the others, in this area we were distinguished by my dear friend Dittrich, who now took Munk's place, and myself. In this way we were able to compete with strolling artists who showed their tricks to astonished peasants, and we applied so much willpower that we compensated with it the years of training of a professional artist. The rooms of our club became a circus, their refined perfumes gave way to the smell of sweat and the steam of overheated bodies. In this tension of all forces we felt good and also forgot what we were otherwise obliged to forget. The only one who did not seem to agree with the transformation was Jonah Barg. He, who seemed to flourish with our annihilation and who at the same time was proud to observe our frayed joviality, received our new hobby with displeasure and shrank back, becoming even more mocking and pedantic. When he was encouraged to take part in our numbers, he did as well as the best even when no one saw him seriously exercising. But his style showed a strange clumsiness, as if he were a spider, a suppleness without joints, which gave the extremely unpleasant sensation that his art lacked the human condition.

But the craziest idea in that phase of our club did not come from me:

-Do you know, children? -said my friend Dittrich one day, "Do you know that tomorrow morning the Barnum Circus is starting?"

He sat across the table with his legs crossed over a cable, cut off

the neck of a bottle of champagne and drank from it while we laughed.

-Of course we know! And what else?

-What else? Gentlemen! Children! What else? You never fall into the obvious.

We go to the performance and greet their artists as colleagues.

The proposal was far-fetched enough to gain our acceptance. I was among the enthusiastic supporters of this idea, until the strong interest of Jonas Barg aroused my misgivings. He approached me with his repulsive friendliness, which haunted me incessantly, and said:

-That's such a good idea that it could be yours.

-Thank you.

-Now we will be able to show our numbers to an audience that will appreciate them. Only those who are well acquainted with the conditions of an art will correctly appreciate the mastery of its execution.

-Of course, of course! -I stood him up, I couldn't stand his bulging eyes. But I felt his gaze on my back.

Barnum entered our city the next day with all his tremendous apparatus, set up a huge tent in a few hours and was able to hold his first performance on the same evening. We watched his repulsive abnormalities and then followed the acts of his artists on the big dance floor with the critical eye of the connoisseurs. In the cloakroom the servants had our "jerseys" ready for us. After the performance we told one of the directors of our intentions, overcame his doubts and promised him a cheerful and sumptuous evening. When we soon returned to the arena after our transformation, a strange group was waiting for us. At first we sized each other up as if we were enemy armies, but as the quickly arranged tables swayed under the load of dishes, we gained in confidence.

The wary director at first used only the dim lights of his petrol lighter, so that the huge space raised a wall of darkness around an ominous group. After the first courses, prepared by one of the best restaurants in town, the atmosphere improved considerably, and the director got up to make a speech in macaronic German in honour of the unexpected hospitality of friendly fans. One of us replied in even more macaronic English, and the arc lamps were lit, providing festive illumination. We sat together as if inspired by a grotesque whim. The snake woman sat on the lap of a financial adviser; the bearded woman of enormous size held a lieutenant colonel in her arms as if he were a baby, pierced next to her monstrous breasts; and the monkey woman had her skin caressed by a drapery maker. Two court clerks and a professor studied the map of Borneo on the body of a tattooed Malay woman. Male peculiarities had also found their friends. The skeleton man conversed with a doctor about medical matters, the tallest man in the world sat, perhaps under the attraction of the opposites, next to

a short, squat lawyer, and the world's smallest man, a king of fairy-tale dwarves, had pulled up a huge chair next to a gigantic pharmacist, who legend had it that when he got angry he could smash a porcelain mortar with a squeeze of his hand. The other members of the club were more modest and sat next to the performers themselves: the acrobats, the Japanese jugglers and the trampoline jumpers. Next to the beautiful tightrope walker, Miss Ellida, who shone like a snake, my friend Dittrich unfolded his stupendous science of funambulism like a large bouquet of flowers. I saw that he was strutting about with pleasure, while I myself was having a conversation, in the familiar Viennese dialect, with the Arab tamer Fatme about how to train wild animals. And Fatme was kind enough to teach me certain rather painful tricks of her trade in my own flesh.

Our joy became so noisy that the beasts, locked in their cages around the arena itself, responded with roars. We seemed to be sitting in a circle, surrounded by howling, infernal demons. The tests of friendship became more and more fiery, those caresses and tendernesses that in secluded corners burned until they exploded. I felt something coming on, something that forced me to use all my caution. Between the torrid whispers of Fatme, who at that moment was showing me again a key with her fists, I suddenly heard the voice of Jonas Barg, who was sitting in the middle of all this twinning, immobile as a post.

-We sit here, we celebrate each other as colleagues, but apart from our costumes we have not demonstrated anything that legitimises us to be on their level. We have to show what we can do.

The others did not wait long, jumped into the ring and began to show off their acts, while the Barnum circus performers looked on with some amazement at such unexpected skill. But Jonas Barg did not seem satisfied with this triumph and proposed that Dittrich and I should show off our talent as tumblers.

-It is only up there that you decide whether you have strength, courage and endurance," and he pointed to the sky above the tent, from which Miss Ellida's rope still hung from the performance.



I consider it my duty to admit here that at that moment I was seized with such a dread, such an intense mortal anguish, as if I had been dragged to the edge of an abyss and heard the unappealable sentence to jump into it. But Dittrich looked into the mocking eyes of the beautiful Ellida and, aroused by her sinuous, glowing body,

He agreed, and so wholeheartedly that I hardly dared to contradict him. All the director's objections were ignored, and some obliging artists were already holding the rope with which we were to climb up to the high metal cable. My mind was racing at incalculable speed through all the possibilities of salvation, incited by a terror such as can only be felt in the delirium of the chase. I could find nothing... nothing... I just screamed:

-But if there is no net... there is no net!

-With the net it is no longer foolishness," said Jonas Barg like an executioner.

-With the net, it's just a paid job," said the beautiful Ellida and laughed.

-Come on, let's go! -shouted Dittrich, and grabbed the dangling rope. I could feel the muscles of his arm swell under the pink leotard, but I would have liked to pull him away by force, for I saw Jonas Barg's eyes as if they were burning irons inside two caverns. I had no choice but to follow him. I took two hesitant steps, stumbled over a bottle half-buried in the sand of the track, screamed in pain and fell to my knees. They came to my aid and lifted me up, checked that I had twisted my ankle and sat me on a chair. That was the end of my chance to show off my tumbling skills, and my moans aroused the sympathy of the beautiful Fatme to such an extent that her hard fists became the softest and most tender. Dittrich, however, seized the rope in a rage, rose and climbed over our heads, while tears streamed down my cheeks, and Fatme, moved by my pains, suffered with me. Now Dittrich emerged into the airy regions, took his place on the rope and began to walk on it with the help of the see-saw. He advanced cautiously one foot after the other until he felt secure and, shouting with excitement, advanced faster and faster. He was answered from below by the barks, growls, and roars of the animals, and the sounds amalgamated, rose above the ground, and seemed to permeate my lungs like vapours. I hardly dared to breathe, for I felt Jonas Barg beside me, and at the precise moment when Dittrich, up there, stopped in the middle of the rope to take a breath, he said in my ear:

-You are far too cautious, my dear fellow, for a member of the Foolish Club. Do you think I fell for that about a sprained foot?

He knew... he knew, he knew that it was a comedy, for God's sake, a miserable comedy so that I wouldn't have to climb that rope, he knew that, cowardly, I had left my friend in the lurch for fear of death, because I was afraid of him, of Jonas Barg. He laughed beside me, and without seeing him, I felt that he was leaving me. Lying next to the affectionate Patine, I tried to support my friend up there with my glances, and my legs moved convulsively in imitation of his steps. Suddenly I saw a shadow, an elongated shadow with an angular back, climbing the dangling rope with mechanical flexibility. That shadow... that dreadful spider-legged shadow... it was him. No one saw him. No one screamed. I could only wave my arms and

jumping like a madman, as he saw the shadow reach the flyer's rope, rise up and, in the full brightness of the electric light, glide clear as a column of mist. Dittrich had almost reached the end and began to turn around when the shadow reached him. I can still see it before me, see how the ends of the seesaw began to rock hard, how Dittrich stopped, trying to regain his balance. At that instant the shadow leapt over my friend's back, and above Dittrich's pale, torn face, turned towards us, I thought I saw for an instant the sardonic smile of Jonas Barg.

Dittrich let out a cry, very different from the previous one, not of excitement and jubilation, but of mortal anguish, and dropped the seesaw, claspng his hands around his neck, as if to free himself from strangling hands. Then it looked like a brief struggle, a fight against the inexorable gravity of the earth, which finally threw his body into the void with contracted limbs. He landed so close to Miss Ellida's feet that his sinuous, glistening body leapt backwards.

I did not make my way towards the stricken man, for I could think of nothing else to do but look for Jonas Barg. When I turned round, he was beside me, and his eyes, which lay like hot irons in grey caverns, held me shamefully as I was about to pounce upon him. I still had no power over him, I still had to find the word that would free me from him.

The silence after Dittrich's death was more unbearable than physical pain, and for me most of all, because I thought I had seen something so strange. The severe closure almost destroyed me. I felt the need to violate the club's statutes, and often, when in the twilight our striving joviality faded, I was tempted to express what everyone thought. The aversion of the members of the club towards Jonas Barg had been growing more and more and had become evident, as if they knew of the suspicion that oppressed me, without my having found a name for it. Only Jonas Barg himself seemed not to notice anything, he came and went as usual, without it being possible for any of us to reveal the secret of his civilian life. In spite of my efforts, I did not come to any result either; I could only deduce that he did not live in the city. He was completely unrelated, like a force of nature.

In the first few weeks, no new games emerged to replace our artistic exercises. Professor Hannak, who in the breaks between our banquets was engaged in historical studies, suggested to us the idea of organising historical masquerades in which, away from the present, we would be transported into the spirit of times past. In our eagerness to find something new and to forget the two friends, whose unspoken memory was kept alive by the empty glasses in their places, we concentrated mainly on those periods when joviality seemed instigated by a cruel haste, like a terrible whirlwind. The profligacy with which we organised our orgies in the style of the Persian kings, of the decadent Roman era, of the French rococo, reached, on a lesser scale, almost the luxury of those

times. All over the city, whose gossip we had learned to hate in our rigorously closed society, our activities were talked about. We were regarded as a lost people, and the more the prophecies that we were going to end badly reached us, despite all precautions, the more we were laughed at and the more our megalomaniacal enterprises were blown out of proportion.

Something was pushing us forward that we were trying to escape from because we hated it, and it seemed to me as if between this impulse and Jonas Barg, who participated with his post-like immobility in everything we undertook, there was a relationship. It was no longer an intensification of the passion of life, but something different, perhaps precisely the opposite, as I recognised myself on the grey days that followed our wild nights. It was no longer foolishness, but sheer insanity that dragged us through all the labyrinths of pleasure, and none of us doubted for a moment that only luck had so far prevented the police from opening an investigation against the club.

One day Jonas Barg woke up and, fixing his eyes on me, invited us to a party at his house.

-I see you are astonished, gentlemen," said he, "I invite you because I have not hitherto introduced any of you into my house. But I ask you to understand that my reserved attitude, often so tiresome, has been stronger than the desire to see you in my abode. But now that your interests have brought you into my own sphere, I venture to offer you my invitation. I too am a historian, an amateur, of course, and in these beautiful autumn days I have for some weeks now, for many years, inhabited the rooms of Neufels Castle.

-But Neufels is a ruin! -exclaimed the lieutenant colonel.

-That is precisely why I like the castle so much, for, as you know, I seek decadence. For the rest, I can reassure you, in my house you will find all that your strong vital instincts demand (and your empty eyes burned). Leave it to my care to organise your stay in the most amusing way possible, so that you will not wish to leave my domain. You will miss nothing, you will covet nothing which you now consider indispensable.

But try as Jonas Barg might to change his hoarse, squeaky voice into a gentle whisper, my unease found in his words hidden threats, the sense of disguised evil. And the others felt the same, for their acceptance barely managed to conceal an immense hatred for this man, who seemed to influence their decision with his will. All of us snarled like wild beasts against the tamer, and in vain I resisted the suggestion and tried to free myself from it. I could not regain the assurance that made me strong and sure of triumph against Jonah Barg. It was a struggle for my own self, whose better part, whose courage and confidence, seemed bewitched.

In these states the most important changes tended to occur in an almost inexplicable way, unchecked by consciousness. An almost imperceptible motif, such as the colour of the sky, a forgotten and recovered word, the

The strains of a distant melody, the song of a bird, the murmur of the waves emptying on the shore, it works like a heavy blow, it unleashes a great variety of relations, a sudden vertigo sweeps away all the laws of psychology and logic, it rises above all possibilities and effects the most incredible transformations. Of all the strange things I have yet to tell, the strangest happened the night before the party. I was standing on the bridge over the river, looking at the dirty water, in which the waste from the factories was floating, and I felt myself slowly sliding against the current. The sirens of the factories around me announced the end of the working day. Two young girls passed behind me and laughed. Someone pushed me. On the other side stood a policeman next to the man selling Turkish honey and figs and engaged in a peaceful conversation.

At that moment I uttered to myself quietly and in a half-voice:

-If the name Barg... B...a...r...g is read backwards, it comes out as Grab [Grave].

I was frightened and my body trembled so much that I had to hold on to the balustrade of the bridge. But with the return of all my strength I felt a tremendous exhilaration, for I knew that I had found the word that gave me power over my enemy.

According to Professor Hannak's suggestion, we were to evoke the times of Velázquez in Spain for the festival, and the following evening in a railway sentry box at the foot of the ruin we transformed ourselves into Spanish grandees, monks, painters and soldiers. Our retinue dismayed some of the peasants who saw us climb the narrow path leading to the ruin, for with oppressive seriousness we kept all thoughts at bay in a festive masquerade. I was last of all, fully conscious of facing a terrible experience and determined to defend myself by all means.

In the courtyard of the castle, between ruined staircases, Jonas Barg, disguised as a jester, was waiting for us on a stone, and after a brief greeting he began to dance as he led the way. The cracked walls surrounded us on all sides and squeezed us into a narrow corridor, the walls of which, at regular intervals, were lined with acetylene lamps. They sprang from the damp walls like tulips and illuminated a path along which Jonas Barg led us, leaping and doing the strangest contortions. From time to time he turned his face towards us to make sure we were all following him. The corridor, from the brightness of which dark side passages opened, was endless, and it seemed to me as if Barg was leading us in a circle. The gigantic pharmacist was even there so fearless as to dare to joke, while the others were afflicted with a sort of paralysis. His earnest exhortations of encouragement fell on deaf ears, and it was only when they were in the great banquet hall that the others found the courage to speak. Here the host had hit the nail on the head with that fanatical and closed period. This feast seemed to have been organised with a luxury placed at the service of an incomparable cruelty, with a devotion that unashamedly united with voluptuousness. In that vaulted hall beneath the ruins of an old castle, the

It exhibited all the sumptuousness of an Indian palace and had been arranged with a sombre magnificence, such as only the unholy refinement of Spain, spurred still further by the spirit of religious ecstasy, could achieve.

Alongside instruments which, with shameless artistry, took their motifs from the most pilgrim realms of obscenity, there were vessels which, with sublime and masterly art, depicted the Passion of Christ. With impious mockery, there had been engraved on the loaves on the plates, as if to consecrate them, the letters I. N. R. I, and the napkins, of the finest fabric, reproduced the shroud of Veronica. The most delicate silver-grey rabbit skins had been used as dishes, skinned alive and lying covered with blood and still convulsing under a glass bell before the plate of each diner. And in the centre of the table rose a cross with a life-size marble Christ, whose eyes, lit from within, illuminated the entire table. In addition to this source of light, each diner had at his side small candlesticks in which strange candles burned. They looked like dried meat and smelled of spices and resin.

Around the table, at which we sat with disgust and loathing, valuable tapestries showed elaborate scenes of court life, depictions of the seasons and landscapes of the vast territories of a Spain that dominated the world. Our servants brought the dishes from an adjoining room, where they were already prepared in sealed containers. They came and went trembling, while Jonas Barg jumped back and forth between them, cracked his whip at them and insulted them for their clumsiness and slowness.

I sat between the professor, whose long moustache rose from his chin like a horn, and the lawyer, whose limbs trembled in his monk's habit, and I could not take my eyes off the throbbing animals agonising before me under the glass bell. I was determined not to taste any of those dishes and not to drink any of those cups, the shape of which reproduced in gold a procacious joke. Jonas Barg was very different from what he used to be, his immobility seemed to have fallen from him like a mask, the buffoonish demeanour with which he performed the duties of a host made him even more frightening. His eyes burned, and suddenly I found the comparison I had so long sought in vain: thus the fire of hell becomes visible between the cracks of the earth's crust. He pranced to and fro, instigated us to drink and eat, and paused, with the same ceremonies, before the empty seats, where, as always, there were two glasses in memory of our dead friends.

Thus the night advanced to its midway point, and a sort of furious delirium seized my friends, arising from the same instinct that prompts criminals to get drunk before they are executed. The pitiful feast under the burning eyes of Christ became to me, at the sight of the bloody corpses under the glass bells and the smell of those candles of dried flesh, to me, who was the only one who kept my sobriety in expectation of danger, so repugnant that

I could barely contain a furious nausea. Most revolting was when, at about midnight, some whores, known to the city's teeming masses, came in to demonstrate their skills with their obscene dances and to wallow on the great carpet, cheered on by the whinnying spectators. After Jonas Barg had driven them off with the whip, the giant pharmacist wobbled up from his seat and began to babble a eulogy of the host, seasoned with numerous curses and swear words in Spanish, learned during a summer sojourn in the Pyrenees. Jonas Barg rose to answer him, his lurking eyes directed at me, and he spoke as if rolling the words around in his mouth:

-Oh, my friends, how I rejoice that my banquet is to your taste! I have long hesitated to bring you into my domain because I was concerned that your spirits and your overflowing joy would find this atmosphere somewhat sombre and gloomy. But now I find to my surprise that it is precisely in the shadows of that which our statutes forbid that life flourishes with more brilliance and splendour. Here, surrounded by the symbols of its power, encircled - if I may say so - by the symbols of its power, surrounded by the symbols of its power, surrounded by the symbols of its power,

- by the most varied transformations of the same, its joviality manifests itself in a very different way than on the indifferent surface of things. And pay attention, gentlemen, the fun has only just begun.

He ordered the wine to be poured and raised his glass with the thick, dark red fluid after making sure that the precious empty glasses in front of the vacant seats of the dead friends had been filled.

-Now I hope, gentlemen, that you will like this wine, the best in the collection of my Spanish cellar. Here's to a joyous continuation of our feast! Although, as you know, I do not share your enthusiastic love of life, I know, nevertheless, the duties of the host, and I ask you to salute life as the gladiators hailed their Caesar in the hour of death.

While everyone else toasted with this strange toast, I spilled my wine on the floor, as I had done with the contents of countless other glasses. And at the same time I looked with a desire to appear unconcerned towards the seats of the dead friends, before whom the glasses were full, and saw... how the dark red contents slowly disappeared without being touched by the hand or lips of any person.

I knew then that it was time to fight.

Jonas Barg looked with a disgusted smile at the whole round of drinkers, who had already forgotten the meaning of their disguises; he fixed his eyes on the face of each of them and spoke as he struck his hand with the handle of the whip:

-Now, children, let us take a walk. In the pause of a feast the court used to go out into the great park of El Escorial. Let us follow that good old custom, and I ask you to come with me to my park.

His hand reached imperatively towards one of the large tapestries on the wall, on whose multicoloured surface groups of trees and trees of the same colour were depicted with refined artistry.

meadows in a park. As I followed the direction marked by his hand, I saw how the trees and bushes stood out with increasing clarity, how they took on a plastic form, joining together in great masses and coming to life. Between the clumps stretched the grassy surfaces with winding paths into the distance leading to a sylvan landscape. So far everything had remained within the confines of a model, but the trees grew from the size of a toy to the natural of reality, bent in the wind and hid the free surfaces between their branches with damp shadows. The darkened image acquired depth and became so dangerously beautiful that I, who was prepared for anything, trembled with emotion.

A huge and enigmatic park unfolded before us.

-Now, children, take torches to light our way. The beautiful mummy candles, consisting of fingers, toes, femurs and clavicles, will give us light.

In the paroxysm of victory, Jonas Barg paid no attention to me, picked up his torch, and everyone else picked up the candles next to their plates and formed a long line. And they all... they all set out to follow him. Jonas Barg pranced forward and was about to enter the shadow of the first clump of trees, when I, scared to death, cried out:

-Jonah Barg! Jonah Barg! Return to the grave what came out of the grave!

It was as if a sudden seismic shock erased the outlines of all the objects before me. The trees and bushes, the whole park in the nocturnal landscape, disappeared into the distance of a misty background, before which a grotesque spectacle was taking place. Against this background, against which every gesture or gesture stood out like a decoration, Jonas Barg was shaken by horrible convulsions that tore him apart and stretched or contracted him. He tried to rebel and stretched out his arm towards me. But his hand dropped, his face became rigid as a death mask, and suddenly he disappeared with a dreadful scream into unexpected darkness.

I cannot say how long we were covered by this darkness; it lasted only a few minutes, for when life plunges thus into the abysses of space, it also seems to have taken time with it. The first sensations I experienced on regaining consciousness were those of oppressive breathing. It was my own breathing, but soon I could also distinguish those close to me, and with groping and hesitant whispers we made sure that we were all alive. We scarcely dared to conceive the idea of salvation, and were striving to prove to each other the serenity in misfortune prescribed by our statutes, when lights and voices from the far shore of our sea, out of silence and darkness, called us back to life.

The party of our rescuers made their way through the narrow passages. The peasants, who had watched our strange procession, raised the alarm when they saw that after three days we had not come out of the ruin again, and the

rescue expedition found us after a long search and dangerous forays through the half-ruined galleries. The torches threw our shadows, in that subterranean room, against the wall like prehistoric monsters. Where the table had been, there was a heap of rubble, the walls were bare and glistening with moisture seepage. In the place where the tapestry had been, whose woven park had been transformed into the semblance of reality, in that place where Jonah Barg had disappeared with a terrifying scream, a black hole opened up between the ashlar of the foundations, behind which our investigations found a precipice. That was the direction in which Jonas Barg's path led, that was the direction of the retinue he was leading.

I did not let up until I had got us, with the help of ladders, ropes, and torches, to descend, and I took all the others with me, for I said to myself that we must at least partly rid ourselves of the burden of the inexplicable if we were ever to look life in the face again. We descended to the height of a well, and went on descending into that den of murderers, which in ancient castles was used to keep bloody secrets. And when at last we reached the bottom, we found a skeleton by a crevice, which was still descending, and from the darkness of which came the murmur of water; the hands were tied behind the back, the legs were bent, and between the teeth of the skull was a cloth, which was already rotten, but even in that state the signs of the struggle were clearly visible, inasmuch as it had been pressed violently into that mouth which had long since been mute.

Although there was nothing to indicate that this skeleton was related to our missing host, we all knew that before us lay the mortal remains of Jonah Barg. And it was as if my friends were released with sudden explosions of their long-accumulated and oppressed hatred. Their teeth gnashed, they began to roar like wild beasts, and they wanted to pounce on the skeleton with fists and knives. I was seized with compassion, which had already announced itself darkly when I saw him sway in those cruel convulsions against the background of the night park; that compassion came over me in a great and radiant way, drove my friends back, and put the following words on my lips:

-My friends, preserve the magnanimity of the living even in the face of death. How this man must have loved life, and how he must have enjoyed it, to be compelled to seek it again, however much he hated it and wanted to destroy it.

My friends turned away in awe from the skeleton, lowered their heads and followed me out of the well and out of the old castle to where life awaited us on a bright autumn day.

LAERTES

The director telephoned the theatre secretary, who had to suffer all the howls of the wolfhound; the theatre secretary at once threw the tremendous news over the stage manager's head; the latter passed it on to Samiel, Agatha and Gaspar; Agatha told a colleague whom she admired from the darkness of the backstage, and like a waterfall rushing down from the heights, the news spread through all the channels, branching and amplifying, leaping over all obstacles, flashing and deafening until it reached the farthest corners of the theatre workers. It was whispered about between hatch one and hatch two, between

"The news then spread all over the city, and aroused lively commentary in the world, whose interest gravitates to the gossip of the theatre. Then the news spread throughout the city and aroused lively comment in the world, whose interest revolves around the gossip of the theatre. The waiter in the Café Stadttheater discreetly served this new stage event with his latte and calculated, by the degree of surprise with which the customer looked at him, the amount of the tip. All the friends of art shook their heads, and the older ones among them did not want to hear it again, as if they had been transformed into pagodas by the shock. Many topics of conversation, suppositions, aphorisms, good and bad jokes were derived from this news, as bunches of flowers, rabbits, pigeons or handkerchiefs came out of the illusionist's hat.

At eleven o'clock in the morning Josef Prinz had informed the director that he was ready to play Hamlet, and when he arrived home at three o'clock, his landlady was waiting for him with a double layer of festive make-up and eyebrows a little crooked with excitement.

The tips of his feet were tormented in an attempt to float and his arms went up and down like the blades of an abandoned mill.

-I heard... I heard! Oh, I'm so excited! Is it possible, Mr Prinz? He wants to give us again... I can't believe it! He wants to give us his Hamlet again! Oh... that monologue! How he recited it!

Prinz walked past the windmill blades and managed to reach the door of his house. After turning three times and uttering three exclamations, he escaped from danger, struck the pose of a Caesar giving away a whole continent on the threshold of his door and exclaimed:

-I'll give you a free ticket!

He then protected himself with a strong, burglar-proof lock. But at about four o'clock he had to open the door for the theatre usher, who brought him the paper and a bouquet of questions and thoughtless insinuations. At five o'clock the postman delivered thirty-three little letters in colours from lilac to pink, scented with perfumes ranging from musk to heliotrope, with the most ardent expressions of intimate veneration and longing to see the divine Hamlet again.

At half-past six, when it was beginning to get dark, his friend Gustav Rietschl came. He found Hamlet dressed in grey, brooding with two spots of twilight blood on his chest and shoulder, and his sword in his hand, so that the thin blade leapt in a semicircle from the scabbard to the ground. The mirror reproduced all this once more, but paler, grey and inane, stiffer than the reality.

-I hear you want to play Hamlet again.

-I have made up my mind. The director has been so insistent that I complete the Shakespeare cycle and I... why shouldn't I play Hamlet again? My best role... ridiculous!

-If you're over what happened that time, why wouldn't you play it?
Of course it is.

-I'm... I'm over it.

Prinz re-sheathed the sword and the scabbard creaked. The bloody stains on his chest and shoulder spread across the grey, faded and eventually disappeared, trembling, into the darkness.

The other saw Prinz's hand draw back the blade of the sword, in a gesture that looked like a will directed at the uncertain.

-How long has it been?

-You're lucky you didn't have to count the years. Five years deprived of my best energies.

-I can imagine that each repetition would also have revived all the horror of that occasion.

-A madness, my friend, a madness. Or do you think, perhaps... my conscience... you don't mean to say that it was more than an unfortunate chance...?

But Prinz - how can you say that! You don't seem to have got over it at all.
The agitation of that day has seriously affected your nerves.

-Yes, it was terrible when I saw him lie before me like that. Blood on his doublet and my sword full of blood. Not theatrical death, at which the audience rises to applaud with smiles, but real death. A few more convulsions and deaf to the cheers. The applause was terrible. They knew nothing and believed in a triumph of dramatic art. Fortimbrás had to find the words while all the rest of us stood still.

The landlady brought the lamp, glad to have found an excuse to enter Prinz's house. But neither her affability nor the increased colouring of her face attracted any attention. When she had withdrawn in anger, Hamlet laid the sword on the table.

-A chance, my friend, an unhappy chance. An oversight on the part of the dresser, and death was among us. I swear to you, a chance.

-No one doubts that.

-Since then, I have been carrying my own weapons, which I know are harmless and

blunt.

He thrust and twisted the tip of the sword in the palm of his hand as if to convince 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 a regular figurehead.

-I've noticed.

-You've noticed it, haven't you? Maybe the audience has noticed it too. And besides, you know, since then I don't feel quite capable. The critics are indulgent with me. But I don't want applause as if it were a handout. When I have performed Hamlet again, I will be free. I must face a Laertes again, I must see him stand up and smile again, then I will have vanquished this dreadful ghost.

He rose in all his leanness and adopted a fencing stance, throwing a few thrusts that pierced a disembodied foe. Then he lowered his sword as if despairing of victory.

-You were... at that time most of the time with me, weren't you? When I was suffering from those nervous fevers. What did I say in my delusions? I mean, what did my fantasies consist of?

-Mostly excerpts from Hamlet. You spoke much of Ophelia and also of Laertes. You called her by her name in civilian life and confused relationships. Something of reality was mixed up in all this, there was a rumour that you were in a relationship with La Witte.

-That's absurd!

-So you didn't? I thought that's why you left the company immediately afterwards. There were rumours about it and some people wanted to know if you had quarrelled over the Laertes-Tiefenbach affair.

-Absurd! -Absurd!

-But it seems to have disturbed you. You said... though it is true that they were feverish delusions.

-Nothing but feverish delusions. My brain absorbed what it found, and confused it all. I thank you - you did not speak of it, I think we had better not speak of it again. Come, spirit of my father, let us go and conjure the demon Alcohol.

They went out, passed the festively painted landlady, grandiose as kings and enigmatic as conspirators, and in a secluded part of the tavern "Blauen Affengattin" they gave themselves over to the demon alcohol.

The rehearsals for the Hamlet were taken very seriously this time. Prinz, who stood on stage biting his lips, pale and determined, protested at any carelessness, and everyone trembled at the possibility of a second outburst like the one that had occurred at the first rehearsal. He had grabbed a negligent figurehead and, after slapping him twice, had thrown him into the wings, from

so that he fell groaning at Polonius' feet. The figurehead had denounced Hamlet's boorishness, but the others were wary of provoking him to anger for errors in rehearsal. Almost sinister, Prinz stood motionless, like the stone guest, among his dejected colleagues, and the jokes had been relegated to the farthest corners. Before his imperturbable face the jokes and gags broke down into incoherent words full of modesty and fear, as if before them there was something whose importance went far beyond stage appearance.

-It's like someone staging his own death," whispered King Claudius to Gustav Rietschl, who was to play the ghost of Hamlet's father. The young actor who was to play Laertes, who had already been in the company for two years, dared to ask the question about his predecessor's accident. His curiosity met with Rietschl's silence, and he had to content himself with the disjointed rumours, bold assumptions and malicious allusions, which King Claudius told him in the afternoon while they were playing cards. What he heard somehow stimulated him, and he felt an exciting itch to play a cursed and death-devoted role. Prinz clothed himself for his fancy in the armour of the strange and enigmatic, and from a whispered word there rose in him the exquisite pleasures of a fearful aversion. Between two trials King Claudius bent down so that Goldenstein, the Kiebitz, could not hear him:

-It is told, but you don't say a word, that what happened that time was no accident, but ... well, intentional, because the Tiefenbach ... with the Ophelia.

An announcement led King Claudius to other ideas, and young Laertes had to set out himself on a quest into the magical forest of possibilities. His anxiety and nervous tension increased the more wonderful the experience of having to cross swords with an assassin seemed to him. The idea appealed to him like an abyss, and he began to consider himself as interesting as a tamer in the face of a terrible danger, which, being inconceivable, is all the greater and more beautiful. Consequently, he was beside himself and doubted divine justice when, the day before the performance, he felt the symptoms of a severe influenza. Although he invested part of his monthly salary in cognac, the fever forced him to stay in bed in the afternoon, and the doctor deprived him of any prospect of taking part in the great experience on the evening of the following day.

The director and the theatre secretary were no less desperate, cursed the bad weather, which ignored the season's programme, and also resorted to cognac. With the fifth glass, the secretary proposed replacing Laertes with a lesser actor. But the director, with a wave of his hand, told him all the arguments against it:

-Prinz... will never, ever... accept that the vacancy be filled by an inferior actor. He wants, in a way, to rehabilitate himself. He wants a splendid performance, to show everyone what he knows, and can do. That is simply impossible.

With the seventh cup, the solution was finally revealed with dazzling clarity.

-Hildemann from Prague as a substitute! -cried the secretary, and half rose from his chair.

And the director corroborated like a thunderclap:

-Hildemann from Prague!

They took their proposal to Prinz and he nodded with the sombre gesture of Hamlet-like acquiescence.

-Hildemann from Prague is fine," said Gustav Rietschl, soothing his friend, who had been uneasy about the change. With Hildemann you don't need to rehearse, he's solid and has already performed with the best, trust him.

Hildemann agreed and promised to arrive on time, shortly before the performance, as it was impossible for him to do so beforehand. For Prinz, the day of the performance was a string of worries.

-I would have liked to rehearse with him," he said in the evening to the cloakroom as he hung up his sword. Then he began to walk, in the darkness, from one side of the stage to the other and looked again and again at the empty house, returning again to his friend, wrapped in the ghostly veils.

-I am very nervous, I beg you, don't leave me alone.

-It's no wonder that you've got candle fever today....

-Candle fever... I could almost say fear... Hell, has Hildemann arrived yet?

-I don't know, but I'm sure he's here by now.

And Prinz walked on across a stage still filled with the grey shadows of the inanimate, from the curtain to the edge of the terrace of Helsingor Castle and back again, as if with his steps he wished to destroy the torment of loneliness. The guard came on stage and left their halberds leaning against the painted towers to pull up their boots and fix their ruffs, and Hamlet shuddered at their shadows, as if they were crawling across the stage from a strange and inconceivable world. From the theatre, filled with a boisterous and hopeful audience, no confidence came to him this time, and in his trepidation he dared not ask backstage if anyone was still missed.

The bell announcing the start start startled him, and with that sudden shock he began to regret what was already irrevocable. The question why he had ventured into a cruel play full of unpleasant memories, of bloody figures, overwhelmed him, and he pinned his hopes on the fact that the coming and going of the personnel backstage was due to Hildemann's absence. Then the performance would be impossible, it would have to be cancelled at the last minute, and a path of salvation would lead him out of all those fears. But after the first scene a shadow awaited him and approached him:

-Mr Hildemann?

-Mr Prinz?

Hamlet's father joked about the delay.

-Oh, I am to be trusted! If I've accepted, I'll come for sure. Don't you want to rehearse the last scene quickly?

-Combat? It is not necessary. You're a good swordsman, and you'll see that I'm not bad at it myself. We'll get it...

Laertes bade farewell to Polonius and Ophelia. His warning to Hamlet was dry and routine and yet somehow thrilling. Then he disappeared, and when Hamlet wanted to look for him, driven by a terrible agitation, there was no way to find him, as if he were really beyond an unbridgeable sea. His soul was trembling at the scene with his father's spirit, where he went down on his knees. The inexplicability and phantasmagorality of a process so familiar to him worked like poison in his blood, until at last he almost collapsed with a twinkle in his eye and a ringing in his ears.

The audience sensed with a shudder the fear that pushed Hamlet to the limits of art. They felt as if they were witnessing the revelation of mystical events, a strange symbiosis of acting and reality, and attributed to the actor all the emotion of this incomparable staging.

Hamlet appeared on the proscenium and bowed, pale as a dead man and with convulsing hands to the enthusiastic audience. Then he went on looking for Hildemann without being able to find him. Rietschl had pulled back the veil of the phantom and looked like a Bedouin chieftain. He tried to reassure his friend with a handshake, but Prinz grabbed him and almost threw him to the ground:

-That's not Hildemann! Do you hear me? Do you hear me?

-Excuse me, but then who is...?

-Certainly not Hildemann. I know him from photographs.

-And I know him personally and I tell you he is Hildemann.

-But, for God's sake, don't you realise that underneath his face he always wants to show a different one? It's as if he had two superimposed layers. One face fights with the other and pushes it back... but it will eventually come out completely.

-You didn't drink too much brandy because of the flu?

-For God's sake, can't anyone 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's not acting, that's real hatred... an unbridled hatred... And where is he, where does he get to? I want to ask him for explanations.

-Come on, come on, calm down, get off the horse.

-No joking. I beg you, don't leave me... stay close, always. I'm going to tell you something terrible... I'm... I'm afraid.

Rietschl began to worry that the performance would be cancelled and applied all the persuasive resources of his friendship. Hamlet's performance continued amidst gawking musings, absent indifference, abrupt convulsions and fickle irritability. It seemed like the performance of a condemned man who, in the face of destruction, takes refuge in himself, only to beat his fists on the

walls. The monologue on to be or not to be oscillated between melancholy indolence and terrible outbursts; the last sentences came out with effort and imprecision, while the teeth bit the lips, so that after uttering the last words two thin threads of blood ran down the chin. No one had ever laughed so cruelly before, never had the mockery on a stage been so screeching and sharp, a set of sophisticated instruments of torture, and the audience shouted with glee and ecstasy. He felt rapt, participating in the action, he felt with voluptuousness the torments of that brain, as the grinding of the saw in the operating theatre pleasantly works its way through one's bones.

The theatre doctor came at intermission and managed to trap Hamlet in a corner.

-He's killing himself. What's wrong with him today?

But Prinz laughed, pushed the doctor violently aside and ran off, accompanied by his desperate friend to find Hildemann. His fear influenced the other actors, and the performance began to rise above the stage appearance to a foreboding sense of dreadful catastrophe. Diction trembled in the distorted atmosphere, and the actors looked at each other in the intermission to see if anyone knew what was happening.

-Search, search! -Hamlet shouted to the ushers, the manager, the cloakroom attendants, and they all looked for the missing Laertes.

When the scene came in Act IV in which he was to reappear, suddenly there he was, he came on stage and coolly entered the play, as if he did not notice that all the others were afraid to stand beside him. He spoke to King Claudius about Hamlet's murder and remained calm and confident, yet animated by a sinister joy, as if something longed for was to be fulfilled at last. Hamlet listened behind the scenes, tense and bearing his weight on his friend, to all the details of the attack, and it seemed as if he had to overcome in himself new and unexpected news. His uneasiness was oppressed by a great heaviness, and he stood petrified before a menacing, lumbering colossus that blinked with small, cruel eyes. But the action raced irrepressibly, leaping over all the delays Hamlet tried to invent in the intermissions. The pauses were prolonged and he enjoyed them like a grace period, walking mute with his friend among the graves that were being prepared for the next scene.

In the graveyard, at Ophelia's grave, Hamlet and Laertes unexpectedly meet. It was a clash that shook the audience, and with frightening seriousness the struggle relaxes in the open grave, a struggle from which Hamlet escaped with vacant eyes and wavering knees.

The audience's ovation expressed fear, and only Laertes appeared on stage, wobbling his long arms strangely and with a smile that seemed improper and sperpenetic, while Hamlet stood hugging his friend backstage.

-It is Death! -he gasped, "it's Death!

-What nonsense. Hold on, we're coming to the end.

-It's all over... it's Death. He had caught me and left me, didn't you see how his other face emerged when he pressed me...? I noticed, I noticed... he doesn't breathe. He is not breathing!

-Then you have to go straight to bed. You have a fever. It has affected you too much. The memory is still too strong...

-He's come back to life, he's going to kill me. That Laertes is going to kill me. I don't want to go out anymore...

Both the theatre manager and the stage manager struggled to overcome his resistance, succeeded and pushed him to come out.

-Mr Prinz! -exclaimed the transpunct.

-I'll be right there!

He grabbed his friend by the shoulders, pulled his head close and said:

-I have to confess it to you before I go out. Someone has to know, and it has to be you. What happened that time was no accident. It was intentional... it was murder. Laertes was murdered, I killed him.

-Mr Prinz!

-I'm coming!

And Hamlet approached Horatio in the hall where the duel was to take place. Laertes was nearby, somewhere in the wings, waiting for his foot. He could not be seen, but it was known that he was there and that nothing would prevent him from appearing on the stage. Confused by his friend's fear and his confession, Rietschl did not dare to look for him and only saw how events dragged on the stage, how Hamlet's words followed one after the other, hesitating, struggling to make small pauses. King Claudius put his expressive, agitated gestures almost on the very face of the theatre doctor, then slipped back into the whirl of the action, where a strange suspense vibrated and waited for his release.

Behind Rietschl, two firemen made a couple of half-voiced remarks:

-The role of Hamlet today is a luxury.

-Yes, it seems to be a matter of life and death.

Suddenly Laertes was among the characters on the stage. Rietschl saw how they all turned towards him, at once attracted and repelled, and how they all then involuntarily tried to gather around Hamlet as if he were the opposite pole. The structure of the drama wavered like a storm-tossed tower, in no danger of collapse, but enough to feel the trembling of the construction. Laertes stood among the courtiers, slim, lithe, smiling, and now it seemed to Rietschl, too, that he could not be Hildemann. He played promisingly with the blade and tested his flexibility by drawing prodigious lines, which for an instant hung in the air like signs.

The combat began. The blades met and clashed, hissed like snakes and met in wild parries and thrusts. They were swift and perfidious,

lurking and brutal, living beings fighting each other on the edge of an abyss. The duel was prolonged beyond the usual duration of a performance, and as the desperate director turned to Fortimbrás, Rietschl saw in horror that Hamlet had to defend himself in earnest and that Laertes was pressing him with thrusts. The spectators followed the mimicry of the combat with real fear, and even the dead masks of the actors became animated.

Ritschl then saw Laertes touch Hamlet's chest with a double thrust, and slowly and smilingly withdraw the blade. Hamlet fell to the ground, tried to rise, put his hand to his neck and fell again. With convulsive fingers he tried to grasp the queen's dress, and rolled to one side, and there was a rattle.

-He said, "Telon! Telon! -shouted the director. The theatre doctor almost ran over Ritschl and ran towards the fallen man. While the director turned to the uneasy murmur of the audience, speaking of a small, unfortunate accident and pleading to leave the theatre calmly, the doctor recognised the body of the unfortunate man.

Hamlet was dead.

-Laertes, Laertes, where is Hildemann? -cried the director, and the police commissioner ran out to look for him. But Laertes had disappeared.

A messenger came through the circle of shrieking women and mute men with a telegram for the headmaster. It contained the strangest news. The train with which Hildemann wanted to come to the evening performance had been involved in an accident due to a broken track. Two people had been killed and several seriously injured. And as soon as the identity of the deceased could be established at the next stop, the stationmaster had hastened to inform the management to excuse Hildemann's absence due to his death.

CURSED GESTURES

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

On the plinth of countless semesters, which brought him unpleasantly close from academic youth to adulthood, Ostermann had, in any case, already been in a difficult situation. Added to this was the grief over the loss of his girlfriend, and both of these things seemed to alienate him completely from his younger peers. What he had had of arrogance and recklessness was behind him or beneath him.

But Ostermann had more friends in the first semesters than he realised. His attitude, not sycophantic but always courteous, the assurance with which he kept his promises, the impression he gave of unconditional trust, meant that his comrades regarded him as a model of all the essential masculine virtues. Nor can it be forgotten that his relationship with the little Russian-German girl was far more interesting than he could ever have thought, a relationship that had ended painfully by a quick and somewhat enigmatic death.

They knew the couple very well from their time in the classrooms, they had been seen together countless times, but alone only on exceptional occasions. The tall, slender man and the graceful, lively Baltic German did not, from their outward appearance, make a good couple. His movements, somewhat clumsy and mechanical, and hers, the fruit of the most charming curves, did not harmonise. However, there was something that went beyond this outward inequality and pointed to an intimate understanding. Therefore no one dared to try, as is so often the case in other circumstances, to take away from her sweetheart the one who was considered the most beautiful of the students and win her for himself.

Ostermann accompanied the dedicated, science-enthusiastic student to lectures that were far below the level of her semesters and listened patiently to the basics of anatomy again; it seemed as if after this second start he would, thanks to his girlfriend, be able to finish his already too long studies to good effect. They got used to considering the relationship between these two people as something fixed and untouchable, they felt it as a consecrated bond and no longer regarded the relationship with biting curiosity. Bettina's death shook everyone. Even those who used to be noted for a certain hardness of soul and held cynicism as an inexcusable virtue of the doctor, could not escape the impression caused by this tragedy.

As a result of this general sympathy and veneration for Ostermann, a much younger fellow countryman of his, the student Richard Kretschmer, suggested that he move into his house. At first Ostermann refused the well-meaning offer, but then, at his insistence, he at least began to consider the possibility. And finally he accepted, perhaps because of the feeling of not being able to

to endure loneliness any longer.

So Ostermann left his home, a little house on the outskirts covered with wild vines, in which there was a tower-like room in which he had lived for almost two years with Bettina, and moved in with his fellow countryman. From a corner still impregnated with a remnant of poetry he moved to a bare student hovel in the big city. He did not let on that he missed anything, but neither did he participate in the social life of his companion. Ostermann, who had a sincere affection for Ostermann, tried to get him to stop his fruitless and dangerous ruminations, and kept inviting him to small parties and other student celebrations.

And so carnival time came, the first since Bettina's death, and the clinical staff of the university, who had recently joined together in an association, planned to celebrate the occasion and the joyous festivity one evening at the same time. A large banquet was to be organised, at which comic pieces in keeping with the carnival mood were to be performed. The friend had firmly resolved to bring his friend out of the cave on this special occasion.

"I don't want to commit any infidelity," said Ostermann, as Kretschmer urged him on.

"You commit no infidelity," replied his friend, "the dead are dead, no affliction can change that.

Ostermann looked at the younger man seriously, and it was as if he wanted to object. But he remained in this attempt, and as Kretschmer did not cease to accost him, he eventually consented to partake of the banquet. Though Ostermann could not suppress this feeling of infidelity, his comrade's goodwill was too sincere and too patent to refuse.

The large hall of the restaurant, where the carnival night was to be held, was full of young doctors. Senior students were present, newly graduated doctors were showing their pride, and a large number of professors were also in attendance, watching the hustle and bustle with paternal benevolence. The tablecloths, which still covered the long tables immaculately, emanated an odour of clean linen, the ceiling lamps threw thin, burning, stinging rays of light into the room, from the kitchen there came from time to time, with the clatter of crockery, a little cloud of concentrated odour of food.

On a table they had placed lottery drums, harmless joke articles and other decorative objects, such as the young doctors appreciated for their desks; bones prepared and of dazzling whiteness as paperweights, halves of skulls which by means of a base consisting of a scapula and a clavicle formed broad ashtrays. The young men, among whom there were a large number of women, went to and fro, clustered together and dispersed again.

Ostermann, who was among so many people for the first time in a long time, was unable to adapt to the cheerful and relaxed atmosphere. While Kretschmer at his side was trying to involve him in toasts and

The noise, the sharp light of the lamps, their fine rays, the whole uproar, partly inordinate and uncouth, partly shrill and exaggerated, penetrated him. The noise, the sharp light of the lamps, their thin rays, the whole uproar, partly inordinate and coarse, partly shrill and exaggerated, penetrated him. He began to regret having accompanied his friend.

In the meantime, the banquet went on as usual. Speeches and songs followed one after another, the professors jovially showed their satisfaction with the healthy common sense of the academic youth, and sometimes, with humorous turns of phrase, the young women burst out laughing. When Ostermann heard this laughter or saw one of their bright dresses flutter, his heart was torn to pieces, his body was run through with shivers that resembled ice crystals.

Finally, at about eleven o'clock, he thought he had held out long enough and announced to Kretschmer his intention to leave.

"No way," laughed the other, "now comes the best part. The door is guarded, no surrender!"

And, indeed, one of the gentlemen of the committee briefly announced that they should prepare for some carnival pranks. In the sign of Prince Carnival many things were allowed, "honny soit, qui mal pensé", etc. After these admonishing words, which sounded more like a "sketch", the curtain was raised in front of a stage at the side of the hall, opposite the teachers' seats, and an autopsy table was seen on which lay a corpse covered only with a loincloth.

A scene unfolded between the anatomy teacher and some students, who showed up exhausted from a late night and who preferred a game of tic-tac-toe to work. The funniest part of the performance was the very successful interpretation of one of the best-known and best-loved professors, who was put on stage with all his peculiarities of throat clearing and spitting. This triggered laughter from all those present, but most of all from the performer himself, who saw himself in front of his distorted reflection. In addition to the satire of the professor, Rembrandt's Anatomy had also been considered as a model for the piece. The final scene showed the professor in Dr Tulp's pose next to the corpse, surrounded by his pupils. Only he did not point out the nerves and muscle fibres, but from the depths of the corpse he pulled out the most unusual objects: keys, lighters, coasters and a student songbook. But when he turned the corpse over and began to work on its back, the dead man leapt from the table with a furious roar and the anatomical representation ended with a mad dash.

The grotesque humour, which left everyone at the table in the best of moods, did not fail to make an impression on Ostermann either. In the end, however, it ended in an unpleasant feeling, and he felt that playing with the horror of death was not to be recommended in the midst of such unruly youth. However, Ostermann also thought that it was perhaps his own sensibility that was to blame for this way of looking at things, and in any case he was so strangely fascinated that for the time being he no longer contemplated leaving.

After a while, a young doctor appeared before the violet curtain with a book in his hand, from which he began to read, with little talent and too much emphasis, a poem. It was Goethe's "Dance of the Dead".

"The tower guard looks down into the darkness of the night, down into the graves..."

Ostermann found this declamation quite superfluous, but with the last words the room suddenly darkened and it was now possible to see what the poem was for.

The stage, opened again, showed a cemetery. In the most impenetrable darkness something white was stirring and a figure wrapped in a sheet could be discerned groping among the tombstones. The ghost leaned on one of the graves, rested a violin on his bony chin and began to play in the most absurd manner.

Now it struck twelve somewhere, as if the sound came from a bell tower.

The little orchestra in front of the stage imitated the spectral music of the violin and interweaved it with other bars, forming a strange and truly frightful music, whose peregrine harmonies and choppy rhythms seemed to conjure up all the horrors of darkness. Then, in the same manner as described in Goethe's poem, there came forth from the left and the right grave-dwellers, stumbling, swaying, walking on sprawling legs; they descended from the open tumuli, emerged from between the tombstones, and staggered among the clods of darkness. Around their limbs waved and trailed long shrouds, on their faces they wore white, phosphorescent masks representing skulls with nostrils and black eyes and the malicious grin of bared teeth. They moved to the rhythm of such horrible music, meeting each other with contortions and mocking genuflections, a mockery of the ways of social intercourse among the living. It was as if one could hear the grinding of bones, the creaking of skeletal joints beneath the white sheets, like a peal of castanets that served as a persistent accompaniment to the music.

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

Now knots formed on the dark stage, in the whirlwind of the movements, they came together in pairs, and it turned out that even in the realm of the graves there was a separation of the sexes. It was perceived, now that the audience had become accustomed to the darkness, how men and women paired up and how a chorus of ghosts began to intertwine among the tombstones.

Although each of the spectators knew that the scene had been devised and rehearsed by their colleagues, although they thought they recognised one or the other among the spectral coverings, they were nevertheless plunged into an extremely strange state of mind, a kind of unpredictable nervous agitation. From the joviality of the banquet, the

had passed into a nervous tension, which, however frivolous, could not be escaped. This mixture of the gruesome and the grotesque was repulsive and fascinating at the same time, distressing and captivating like looking into an abyss. The young people, whose youth and profession led them to accept death as something daily and inevitable, somehow felt this dance of the dead, this play with decomposition, as the challenge of danger; in their subconscious something opposed the dark influence of this scene: the will to live, to light, to health.

The dance, meanwhile, ran its course, linked and separated the couples, intertwined them in a chain, agglomerated them into a ball that spun round and round itself at great speed, while a bluish-white light, the phosphorescent glow of decay, which fell upon them from the wings, now seemed to emanate more and more from the ghosts themselves. True to Goethe's poem the actors strove to give their gestures an air of doom and malignity, also of the artificiality and clumsiness of the puppet, as might be supposed in stark, dancing limbs.

At the beginning of the performance, Herbert Ostermann felt only a latent indignation, which poured as if from a reservoir, under great pressure, into his body, a kind of fury that impelled him to leap up and, on some absurd pretext, prevent the show from going on. It came to his mind that he might bang on the table, or throw a tankard of beer on the floor, or simply shout at the top of his lungs:

"Aaaaalt!" But while he was still rapidly weighing up all those possibilities, he felt that furious indignation leave his body again, empty and disappear, and how he stood helpless and languid, empty and exhausted, surrendered without defence to any disproportionate startle. And now into that emptiness crept like a dense, dark, viscous fluid, creeping up the walls of his self, the sediment of the world, fear and dread of the hiddenness of things. Large portions of his consciousness were extinguished in that overflow, sank while others rose like islands, illuminated only by an unnatural light.

He sat there, one hand clutching the tankard, the other clenched in a fist, resting on his knee, his face bent forward, in which the eyeballs seemed swollen and ready to burst. What now swarmed on the stage were purulent tumefactions of decomposition, sepulchral florescences, phlegm of death. Did no one but him feel those dark and burning radiations coming from that dance, comparable to the invisible and malignant radiations of some metals or stones, those corrosive secretions of the dance that ate flesh and bones to the soul? Did no one notice how, beneath this poisonous flow of pus, ulcers were originating, spreading with furious rapidity and tearing the whole man apart?

As Herbert absorbed the horror in this way, he felt as if he suddenly perceived something familiar in the gestures of the dancers. It was something like seeing something well known again in a distorting distance, like when a

memory agglomerates in vain to take on a form. Through the staggering, unbalanced, at times giddy, and then again as if choppy, movements of the dance of the ghosts, this shadow of a memory condensed, advanced, dissolved in the whirlwind, and re-emerged. Herbert, after a long stupor, began to breathe harder, moved in his innermost being by those fragments of a gesture, of a bow, of a step, of a raised hand. Now the shadow, that nothingness of memory, joined with another figure, with one of the female phantoms, with the one that came and went. It was a groping growth of shapes out of chaos, a hesitant crawling out of obscurities, during which Herbert felt not only fear but also something like the irruption of a burning tenderness, a deep compassion for himself. He had become entangled in a great skein of impossibly unravelling threads, which covered him and held him fast to an indeterminate portion of his past.

The ghosts on the stage whirled ever more wildly among the tombstones; the motionless masks with the skulls contrasted frighteningly with their leaps, which they executed by pulling up their shrouds; the bones creaked with increasing force as they clattered against each other, a whirlwind of dry, hard noises began to spread from the stage into the hall; it seemed as if a voluptuousness not yet extinguished beyond the grave spurred the ghosts into close embraces, and as if a horrible orgy of skeletons was being prepared.

In the midst of the dance, as if from a great height, a bell rang out. It was as if the spectres had been scattered by an explosion, the dance was interrupted, the figures fell, staggered from one side to the other, stumbled, deprived of all security on the tombstones, seemed to lose part of the skeleton they were anxiously searching for, only to reassemble it later. Deprived of their freedom, with their sheets rolled up, disoriented, stumbling, they crouched behind the tombstones and disappeared into the darkness.

A great gasp went around the room before a timid applause broke out. Gradually hands joined in, as if the joyful noise was suitable for tearing a thin, grey fabric that had been stretched across the tables from the stage.

The president banged a baton on the table and roared an order.

-Damn, that was a sensation! -Kretschmer exclaimed and took a big gulp of beer, which had already become somewhat lukewarm. Then he stood up, grabbed his belt, bent his knees and stretched again, as if to check that his flesh and bones were still in place.

Herbert Ostermann did not answer, he was busy with himself, trying to recover from the shudder he had suffered, he had a strange taste in his mouth and he had been left with a strange sensation that he designated as an attack of bitterness coming from an acidity of the spirit. He turned and saw that the participants in the dance of the dead were coming into the hall down the small staircase behind the stage.

They still wore their shrouds, but their masks had been lifted and their fresh, red, youthful faces were showing. That was the best way to overcome the oppression of the last half hour and regain the former joy. They surrounded them, questioned and praised them, and with jokes and somewhat forced jokes they bridged the chasms they had felt.

When Herbert Ostermann turned back to the table, it was as if something icy and burning at the same time had pierced his heart.

Next to him, on the seat which Richard Kretschmer had just vacated, sat one of the dancers, silent, her hands sheathed in white thread gloves folded in her lap. She too still wore the shroud like the others, but she had not yet pulled up her skull mask, and now when she turned her face to her neighbour, the look in her eyes was a distant glint in a dark cavern. It seemed as if he was waiting for her to speak to him, and Herbert managed, after some struggle, to force himself to smile and ask if the young woman had been satisfied with the success of the performance.

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

On stage, they must have felt the enormous tension of the audience, for the dance, which at first only showed some signs of amateurishness here and there, became increasingly free, daring and artistic, and such an overcoming of a limited capacity can only be achieved by a lively exchange between stage and audience.

Herbert went on talking, as if impelled by that unaltered and slightly burning look directed at him, as if it were a continual question; he spoke of things that would never have occurred to him. He endeavoured to analyse and explain, according to the rules of reason, the state of mind into which they had plunged, and he felt his words as he did so, like the swimmer, now deprived of his strength, the abandoned board on which he had pinned his last hopes.

-Yes, it is strange," said his neighbour, "to represent the spectacle of death to the living in this way.

-And that cemetery music," Herbert continued with great agitation, "that modern music with its strange modulations and choppy rhythms that seems to be created specifically for the listener to experience all the dread of the grave. It is illogical music, the logic of music is melody, Mozart, for example, was a logician, that is why, when he wants to communicate a spectral sensation, as in some scenes of "Don Juan", it does not reach our hearts... illogical modern music, on the other hand, harmonises perfectly with death, since the illogical itself..

-And you are a doctor? -asked the neighbour. Her voice was restrained and opaque, as if filtered through an impure medium, yet in that opacity there was an unmistakable original harmony, and Herbert regretted that the sound came out so altered and broken by the mask. That thought directed his attention and concentrated it on that papier-mâché thing, with which death had to become a carnival joke. There was

It must be said that they had not been satisfied with a cheap article from the shops dedicated to such matters. The mask was of artistic perfection in its genre. The harmless material by which were represented the faces of wicked mothers-in-law, the faces of stupid peasants, of green and lustful old men, inflated cheekbones, red noses, all the aberrations and ravings of the flesh, had this time been designed as if they were bones so close to the real thing that they could be mistaken for each other. In colour and structure everything was exact, every bone was almost anatomically correct, and the proximity made one believe that the skull was composed of them. One could have considered this skull as a preparation and used it as such for the study; moreover, the excellent modeller had taken the imitation so far that in some places, such as the nostrils or the eye sockets, or between the teeth, traces of putrefied flesh could be perceived. But the most frightening thing was that some hair hung from the back of the skull, of which it was impossible to tell how it was attached to the bone. This, however, contravened plausibility, since, being scalped, the skull should have been completely bare; but if the modeller of the mask had been interested above all in increasing the fright as much as possible, he had succeeded, for these hairs, discoloured and tangled, interwoven with small pieces of mud, looked as if they had really come from the grave.

Herbert Ostermann looked at all this with a calmness that seemed incomprehensible to himself, he saw it clearly and distinctly, as one usually sees it in moments of great danger when all the energies of man's enormous centre of power are directed towards the affirmation of the self.

-And you are a doctor? -his neighbour repeated the question again.

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

-I know him!

-Don't you want to take off your mask? The performance is over! The other ladies have already done so.

Between the teeth of the mask came a faint whisper that should have been laughter, but Herbert was at once painfully reminded of a noise from his childhood, when the merchant Prusik threw the strangely shaped pieces of dried haddock on the counter. And then another image came to him: the black vocal cords, perfectly desiccated and mummified, waving with that loud laughter and rustling like funeral wreaths.

The dancer stopped laughing.

-The other ladies think the mask doesn't suit them. I am not vain. It suits me very well. And besides, this way she has to guess who I am.

-Do I know her?

She brought her face close to Herbert's with a slight impulse:

-Yes!

Again he felt that icy, burning prick in the middle of his heart. For that

In that tiny movement, that insignificant turn of the shoulders, the uneasiness of memory returned to Herbert, in that fragment of gesture he recognised that the dancer sitting next to him was the one who had attracted him during the performance.

And immediately the blind, indomitable fear was there again, interrupting the tranquillity of concentrated contemplation and throwing him back into the darkness.

He looked around him; to the right and left his colleagues were talking over their beer mugs, writing postcards, toasting, nobody cared about them, it was as if Herbert and his neighbour were invisible.

Suddenly, however, it all became unbearable. The noise and the light assailed him. He stood up suddenly:

-Come with me, let's go somewhere else.

She readily agreed, followed him to the cloakroom and was instantly at his side with her coat on. They went out into the street and walked through a thin layer of snow, while in the sky a couple of stars were visible between the wires of the telephone poles. They looked like little luminous heads of musical notes imprisoned in a pentagram and gave an infinitely bitter and harsh melody of the degradation of heavenly light in the earthly realm.

Herbert took off his hat and the cold pressed down on his head, tightening the skin on his face and neck. At his side was the dancer, looking strange because of the white sheet from which the coat hung like a double pair of short black wings. Beside them horse-drawn carriages trotted past, automobiles rounded corners with a whine or sudden braking, threw cones of light against walls of houses that gave shrill cries or were seen coming from afar, two tiny balls of light at the end of a street, approaching rapidly by a trail of whirring until they were already very near, sweeping the pavement with a jet of light. Suddenly he was immersed in a dazzling shudder, only to be enveloped in a cold darkness the next moment.

Occasionally a few bars of dance music would emanate from a door that opened, fragments of laughter would pierce a stretch of the night, the carnival would throw little waves of merriment in the path of Herbert and his companion; but all this seemed irrelevant to Herbert in the face of the dreadful feeling within him, which swept over his soul like a puff of dense, cold smoke.

They entered a little café in which Herbert sometimes, less from necessity than from a sense of duty, used to sit for half an hour behind a newspaper. On the threshold it occurred to him that his companion ought to take off her mask now, but she said she preferred to remain a little longer unrecognised, and at an hour when all the night clubs were celebrating the carnival, they would excuse her showing herself thus disguised.

And he seemed to be right, for in the smoke that covered the tables, folkloric costumes of Venetians, Spaniards, Turks, accompanied by Tyroleans, could be made out,

Eskimos and Indians. No matter how little the disguise and mask of a ghost was adapted to these worn and threadbare traditional costumes, Herbert's companion was not conspicuous. She made her way through the larger groups without anyone needing to stand out of the way, and once again he sensed that familiarity of attitude and movement that was already affecting Herbert like a physical ache.

When she sat down at a free table, he grabbed her arm tightly:

-Who are you?

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

The waiter stood before Herbert. He released the hard, scrawny arm that had not yielded to his pressure and asked for coffee. After a mute moment, spent in contemplating the rude and coarse gaiety around him, the waiter came and brought only a cup of coffee, which he placed before Herbert. When he wanted to draw attention to the oversight, his companion begged him to leave it, that he didn't feel like drinking anything anyway. These few words, which again had that enigmatic familiarity in the background, plunged Herbert into such a deep sadness that he rested his head on his hands, with four fingers on his forehead and his thumb over his ear as if he were in the mood for a cup of coffee. would like to isolate all his senses from the absurd outside world.

It came to her mind that her companion had asked her earlier in an ironic tone if she was a doctor. And why had she asked him that if she knew him?

Between his open fingers he looked at her with his eyes sockets in solivation. He understood, he went on, that she had meant that as a doctor he should have learned, by his profession, to be resigned to death, that was the general opinion of good people and bad newspapers, that the doctor and death were in a sort of companionship, that one led to the other. And as each profession established the conditions of its branch as elements of the divine order, as, for example, the furrier believes that animals grow for him, as the mine owner believes that the virgin forests of the stone age were greened for his pocket, and as the architect believes that gravity was invented especially for him, so the doctors affirmed the logic of death, because the logic of their profession demanded it.

But he was not of that opinion.

He believed that death was an absolutely absurd thing. Not death itself: that a limit should at last be placed on the life of a lazy slob, a miser or a ruthless lecher, that is only right and natural. Selfish, violent, envious people deserve no better. But that all that is tender, charming, cheerful, joyful, luminous should be cut down is irrefutable proof of the absurdity of death.

No, dear unknown, this is no sentimentalism, but a scientific truth. There is no doubt that the constitution of this world is extremely miserable. And why is that? Because one can see daily how the virtuous and valuable is oppressed by the superficial and insignificant, how evil triumphs and good is left in the mud, and how in the end, death, introduces a balance of the most

questionable, by wiping everything, without distinction, from the table of life.

But how different the world would be, how luminous and joyful, if there were a conditional safe-conduct from death by virtue of a real human value. Whoever by his nature cannot attain a higher self would be eliminated, but whoever could purify himself, his life would be prolonged to the extent of his goodness, and the greatest would have eternity before them. Perhaps one could still talk today with Dante and Michelangelo and Dürer. Only then would life be a whole full of meaning, full of mutual love and the effort to help each other...

The small flames at the bottom of his table neighbour's eye sockets glowed brighter, a slight puff of air, a sort of gaseous crystal, surrounded Herbert and his companion, outside that sphere only multicoloured and chaotic shreds of the world were visible...

And he could speak of death with full knowledge of the facts, for he had seen it at close quarters; to him especially death had clearly demonstrated its illogicality. If the world were organised according to that rational plan, Bettina would still be alive, and he would not be so lonely, so despondent, in that loneliness which poisoned him and drove him mad. A Robinson in the middle of the sea of life, the prisoner of an ice palace with all the horrors of both poles.

Bettina? Well, if the esteemed stranger claims to know her, she must have known her. Does not the blood run cold in his veins at that name, when he thinks that what that name signified is gone? She, who should belong to the eternal, who should still have been alive in a thousand years if there were universal justice; oh, he knew death very well, that rogue, that wretched buffoon, he had had her in the magicians! She disguises herself, she masks herself, she goes unnoticed, but she behaves like a bad comedian, she jumps off her feet, she forgets the part, she ruins the performance of her fellow actors, she turns them into murderers and convicts.

Yes... in murderers, he knew that for a fact. When someone killed his beloved, he could not be called anything else, could he? A child grows in the womb, but with it grows the fear of the world, which does not want nature to be its right. Already men were stretching long, naked necks, crooked beaks and vulture claws, already they were accusing with gleaming, round, greasy fingertips pointing to dishonour, an arsenal of meat pistols, fists like butts and forefingers like cannons and all directed towards scandal. And someone bawls incessantly: our daily bread, give it to us today...! For two it may be enough, but not for three.

Well then, colleague, incipient life must not destroy what has already taken root! There are ways to bring into darkness what has not yet seen the light. And if this leads to perdition, I repeat: there are only crimes against the existing, but not against the unborn. Yes... but in some corner there is death nestling, that wretched one, blinks, sniffs a little in the medicine bottle, shakes it and an invisible mucus

it sticks to everything, it's their slime and their poison.

Then one sees the beloved writhing with convulsions, trying to cling to life with all her might, and yet she sees life slipping away, liquefying and spilling into a dark door through which it disappears in silence. And one stands on the other shore with all the knowledge of the soon-to-be doctor, and when the last drop has disappeared, gurgling, into the channels of death, then a great, burning needle penetrates from the head and pierces the whole body, a word as hard as forged steel, a merciless word: Murderer!

And regret... he searches step by step in the past and does not find a single day that could not have been different, nor a single hour that does not reveal a fault or an oversight.

Herbert Ostermann began to feel again, between the spread fingers there was a burning forehead and under the table two feet as heavy as clods, and that up and down was bound together by a bond of pain. He didn't know if he had said all that, or if he had just thought it, but he felt understood by his companion, as if he were himself. The waiter had long since been struck by the solitary customer. He had the young man, who sat in his corner and sometimes, with a troubled look and a sharp wave of his hand, muttered to himself, for a drunkard in misery. Now that the hall had emptied and the first trams were beginning to circulate outside, he approached the man and rattled the coins in his jacket pocket.

Herbert looked up and saw the stranger, in black and white under a hazy light that condensed into an opaline halo, had a sour expression of empty glasses amidst a sticky smile, of burnt matches and grey ashtrays....

-Let's go," he muttered.

The dancer preceded him. But there was nothing strange anymore, everything was familiar and rooted deep in his life, still without a name, though it was on the tip of his tongue.

-Who are you? -Who are you?

And Herbert grasped the dress of his companion. The end of the dress fluttered in his hand, and he saw in the depths of his eye sockets a brief, crackling blue light, like a little shock of electric tension. And also down her arm she felt a current or tremor, as if it had received a little jolt.

-Where... where are we going? -he asked stammering.

-I'm coming with you!

Herbert did not think it at all strange that the young stranger should make such a proposal without further ado. The whole thing had been repeated a hundred times before, every step and every word, the sound of the voice was familiar to him, and so it was most evident that they were walking together. How could she have said all that to a stranger, that confession out of the blue?

deep, only one person had the right to hear it. Now she knew that confession, the unknown had become known, it radiated again in the transmitter, it was a deep and melancholic light.

So they walked together through the wintry morning, which still carried the dense haze of dreams in the first harsh stages of work. From time to time the hoarse remnants of the carnival sounded. Like a vision Herbert beheld on the illuminated platform of a tramcar a pierrot curled up, his eyes half closed, an unlit cigarette at the corners of his mouth. His right arm hung down behind him over the window ledge, and through his fingers ran a string from which hung a teddy bear, which was lurching and jumping grotesquely, tossed to and fro by the swaying of the carriage, and tapping its paws on the cobbles of the street.

That was the last thing Herbert Ostermann saw clearly. From then on he was as if covered by a fog, from which only now and then a thing, a human being, stood out in a great hurry, only to disappear again in a flash.

He sensed, rather than saw, that his companion was not heading towards the city centre, but towards the outskirts.

-It's not that way... I live in the city," he said.

-I don't know any other house.

She was right and Herbert accepted it, walked with the dancer through endless, bare streets, always with black tram rails before him.

She thought her state was strange, perhaps she thought so too. He was now entering the future and at the same time the past, that is, in fact, the timeless. What if death were only the timeless, and thus the suppression of all illusion? Then he would be the solution, and one could also succeed, with a strong will and perhaps with the power of repentance, in bringing it back; for if appearance can never give the essence, the essence can certainly make use of appearance! For the rest, all these questions could be answered once he had ascertained his name. That name was already formed and concentrated within him. It only depended on that...

They stood before a well-known door, with dry vine-branches round the bower and the window, the knocker with the lion's head whose furious snout they had always laughed at. They went up, and the steps lost themselves winding in the darkness, into which the morning mist now penetrated... the seventeenth step was still creaking, and when they passed the landlords' door, as always they had to tiptoe. The staircase narrowed still further in the tower, before the little skylight overlooking the cherry branch, from which once in the spring I had plucked a blossoming branch. Next came the small, black image of the Madonna, set in a niche in the wall, with a little bright red candle.

And the door of the tower room opened and they were already at home... Herbert was

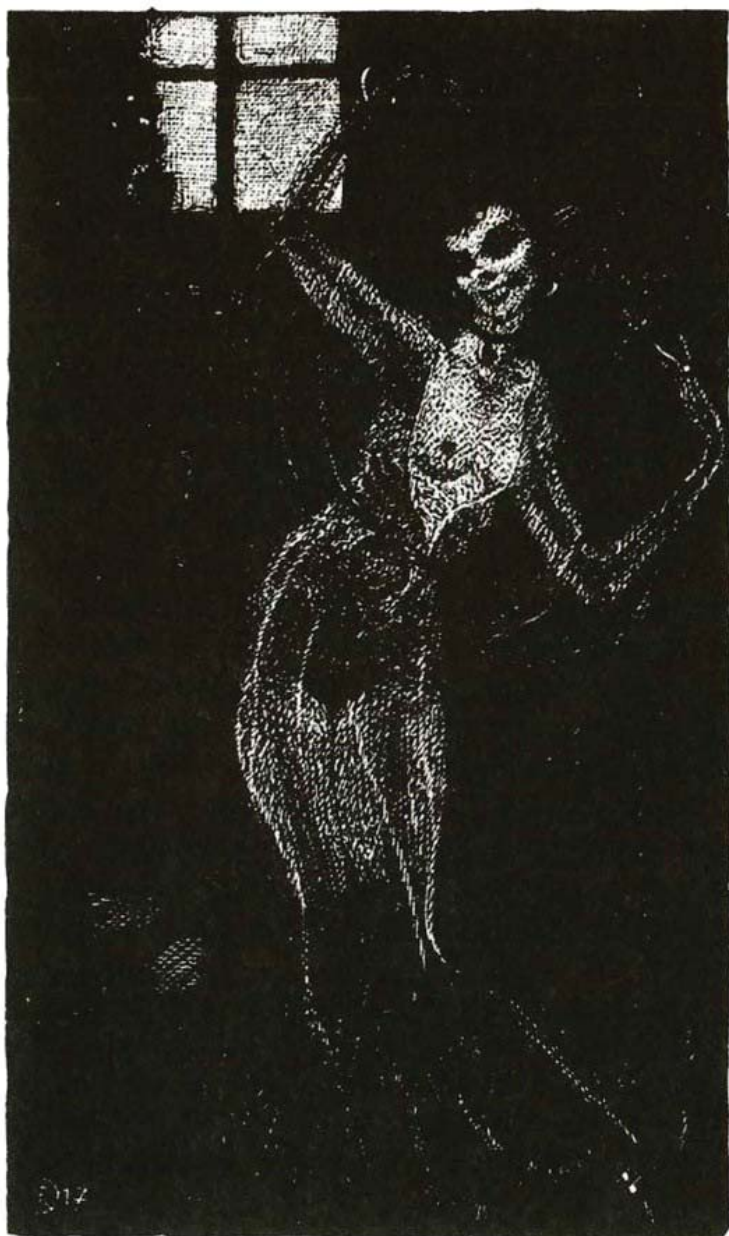
He could now see everything clearly, every beloved object, the desk and the library; behind a green curtain, the two beds from which they had risen.

Turning around, she found Bettina, wearing a white, flowing dress, her hair, parted in the middle, which she was now combing, falling on either side of her head.

She looked up, and Herbert looked into her eyes, in the depths of which there was a bluish gleam. But the flesh was strangely altered, contracted like a thin, pale layer of jelly over the bare bones of her mask; as through the body of a jellyfish, every protuberance and every suture of the skull was visible, and the hairs hung loose and scattered from that soft, unmade mass.

And that face was gnawed all over, down to the bones, by grey stains, bits of mud stuck to the corners of the eyes and mouth, and the hairs seemed to move of their own accord, as if a hidden life was swarming underneath them.

But Bettina brushed her hair out of her face, raised her arms above her head and began to dance, with exaggerated, spasmodic, victorious gestures, the lewd, clumsy, damned dance of the ghosts....



017

THE CASE OF LIEUTENANT INFANGER

Yes, it's true, I still don't look good. I'm not going to persuade myself that I'm fully recovered. But there is no doubt that I am doing much better than before. And I shall soon be over it all. It has indeed been a serious and very strange illness, all the stranger because it had nothing to do with the body in the first place.

How did it happen? Yes, can't you get a clear picture of it after all those newspaper reports? The story caused a sensation. And it has brought me enough heartache. Maybe I just needed to be less reserved to bring some clarity to the confusion. But a peculiar shyness has prevented me from speaking publicly about it. But to you, my trusted friends, I want to tell you everything, as it makes sense to me. If I am right with my side of the story, it cannot be irrefutably proven. As is well known, the investigation was concluded without any result. But it cannot be right if it is not as I imagine it to be. And with this comes the proof that the strange forces of man, as we have known them in the phenomena of hypnosis and suggestion, are still capable of considerable increase. The ancient cultures of the East knew secrets that we are not even able to glimpse. And in my case I would prefer to speak - if it were not too adventurous - of a wireless telegraphy of the will, of a remote action that needs no conductor. For a period of time I have been studying the philosophy of technology. There is a lot of talk about organic projections. All our inventions are nothing but imitations of the organs and functions of our body. The telescope is modelled on the human eye, the hammer imitates the clenched fist, which is attached to the handle or arm, the common telegraph cable corresponds to the nervous system. It can be assumed without further ado that a new and surprising invention will always find an equivalent in us. Well, that wireless telegraphy which has recently appeared corresponds to the strange phenomenon of which I have spoken.

For the rest, I do not want to anticipate your judgement. Let everyone make up their own mind on the matter.

It happened, as you know, on 18 May. I had set off on a cycling trip from Optschina to the karst plateau. I am a keen cyclist. If there is one thing I miss in my profession as a naval lieutenant, it is cycling. It gives me great pleasure to cover long distances. I don't care about motorbikes and cars. What I like is above all the use of my own energy to generate the fastest movement. Whenever I can, when I'm in the countryside for a long period, I go on my bike tour. Two days ago we had arrived at the port of Trieste and there I was able to let off steam to my heart's content. On the day I am talking about, it was very hot and I was quite exhausted when I returned to Trieste in the evening. I had to hurry, because the officers of our cruise ship

had an invitation for the evening, which I was delighted to accept. The street descended a little, so that I could abandon myself to the pleasant sensation of gliding safely along. In the gloom before me, I could dimly make out the massive body of a car, whose lights had just been switched on. The machine was at a standstill and some people were standing in a group beside it. They seemed to be undecided which way to go, for at this point the street branched off in three different directions.

When I reached their level, one of the men approached me and took off his hat in salute. Under the glare of the street lamp I noticed that the man's eyes were very divergent and he had almost no eyebrows. He asked me in very bad German about Görzer Street. From there it was difficult to find one's way around, so I took out a map to explain it to him. Just as I bent down to put the map under the torch, I felt a sudden, but not unpleasant, pressure on my head and lost consciousness.

I retrieved it in the dark. The streets of the map were still clearly etched in my brain. I could have reproduced it with my memory without any problems. But I remembered that I still had something important to do. The consciousness of great danger had taken hold of me, and I still know that I was not astonished to find myself in a situation about which I could not at first understand anything. I was bound hand and foot, and after regaining consciousness I began to make a systematic effort to free myself from the ropes that held my wrists. Suddenly I heard breathing next to me. I had to know who was with me in that space and I asked, therefore, even if I risked another blow to the head by a watchman.

-Where are we? -asked a voice from the darkness. It sounded very familiar, that voice, with its peculiar, unctuous tone.

I replied that I had no idea. Then I added, to end the back-and-forth questions, my name.

-Ah! -said the other in surprise, and after a while he added:

-I am Baron Latzmann.

So I had not been mistaken. An acquaintance stood beside me, bound hand and foot as I was. Baron Latzmann, the war correspondent of a major newspaper, who had been with us in Asia during the confrontation with the Boxers. It was strange enough that the two of us had been kidnapped and taken to that room, which was plunged into impenetrable darkness. In hushed tones we told each other what had happened to us. The baron had, like me, fallen into a trap. He had always been a womaniser, and of late he had embarked on an adventure whose goal, because of the woman's reluctance, seemed most tempting and alluring. Today a piece of news had been brought to him which opened the doors of fortune. He followed the instructions. They had waited for him in the designated square and, as in Italian novels, led him round and round to a lonely house. He was to wait in a room lined with tapestries. The baron did not know what happened next.

He assumed he had been lulled to sleep with an odourless gas.

While the baron was talking, I was struck by a slight noise, for which the sailor has a very fine ear.

-Do you know where we are? -I asked when he had finished, "We're on a boat. I hear the water lapping against the hull. The boat is stopped... we're still in the harbour.

-But where... where do they want to take us?

His voice sounded anxious and agitated.

Suddenly it felt like a jolt. It went through my whole body, from head to toe, and I felt my fingers stiffen. I think I let out a scream, a sound of surprise, a whimper, I don't know....

-What's the matter with him? -asked the baron.

A scene had suddenly emerged before me, reproduced in full colour and at great speed.

-Do you remember... do you remember," I asked him, "the Chi-man-fu pagoda?

It was ridiculous to ask if he remembered her. Such events are not usually forgotten. Nevertheless, it was hard to say what it was that had transported me to the Chi-man-fu pagoda in that instant. Was it the same feeling of danger, both then and now, the feeling that accompanies grotesque dreams? Or the fleeting impression of the face of the foreigner who had asked me about the road? The slanted eyes, the yellowish-brown glow of the skin? I don't know. I only know that the scenes in the pagoda were now clearly before my eyes.

Baron Latzmann had taken part in the expedition to Peking, had bravely intervened in the fighting against the insurgents and sent interesting reports to his newspaper. After entering the imperial city, he rewarded himself by living the high life. Hardly had the connection with the coast been re-established, when he was again offered every opportunity for gallant adventures. Venus was always on the heels of Mars. The local beauties and the ladies who followed the colonists from the great port cities entered the fray. An amusing circle formed around Baron Latzmann and his friend Hortensia, a funny and mischievous Frenchwoman. Some officers from our detachment also joined in. And once they arranged to go on an excursion to the Chi-man-fu pagoda, a masterpiece of sacred Buddhist architecture. I accepted the invitation I had received and I must say that the baron was a great cheerleader for the group. There was a lot of drinking and we were already in a somewhat unruly mood when someone suggested that we finally visit the inside of the pagoda, which was after all the reason that had brought us there in the first place. We lined up and walked, chanting and mimicking the usual ceremonies, over a small wooden bridge leading to the temple. We passed some grumpy priests who reluctantly opened the door and we entered. Inside, a perfumed gloom reigned. On a raised dais, to which a slender staircase led up, sat the sacred image of the Buddha with the grinning

The hands were folded over his stomach and his face was stiff. He was draped in splendid silk robes. Despite the objections of the temple servants, we climbed the steps to get a closer look at the image. The statue appeared to be very old, modelled in clay, and had a strange inward-looking gaze. It sat right in front of the staircase. Suddenly it occurred to Hortensia that she wanted to check how the clothes looked on her. Some of us, who still had some sense, tried to stop her. But the majority applauded and, cheered on by them, Hortensia snatched the garments from the statue and slipped into them. She did this with the skill and grace that distinguished her, and with such speed that the priests, in the dark space below us, stood rigid with fright when Hortensia had finished. The Buddha now sat with his stomach pronounced and clad only in a loincloth. The woman spun around to show off her new dress and, standing on tiptoe, began to dance a minuet. Suddenly an angry scream erupted. Before we knew it, a small priest was in our midst. No one had seen where he had come from. He was as ugly as a monkey and his mouth was foaming at the mouth. In his hand I saw a curved knife and before I knew it, he had plunged it twice into Hortensia's chest. The baron and I jumped on top of him, grabbed him and placed him face down on the stand. A terrible commotion broke out. Next to me someone fired his revolver at the priests, who were now swarming all over the temple. But no effect of the shots could be seen. A crowd of people gathered on the steps of the dais, clinging to the railing, overflowing down the steps. We saw that we were lost. With a glance I understood the baron. We threw ourselves on the Buddha statue, pushed it and, using all our strength, tilted it forward. For an instant it hovered, I know I saw its empty smile once more, then it fell, tumbled down the wooden stairs and broke under its own weight. The attackers were rolled over and crushed. There was a crack and a bang. A dense cloud of dust ascended, covering the entire space. Fiendish howls followed. When the dust cleared, we saw that the Buddha image had been shattered. But the ladder had also fallen and now we were better able to defend ourselves against the attackers. It lasted about half an hour until a patrol of our sailors arrived, which a concerned comrade had sent from Peking.

That was the incident we had in Chi-man-fu, the memory of which had come back to me so suddenly.

The Baron fell silent for a while after I had spoken. I could hear him breathing heavily.

-What do you mean? -He said, "How did Chi-man-fu come to your mind?"

-Have you ever thought that this scene could have sequels?"

I would never have thought it myself, but with the tension of those minutes I felt as if I had always counted on the possibility, that something would happen to me.

related to the struggle in the temple.

-That time we desecrated a sacred temple. The two of us destroyed the Buddha of Chi-man-fu. If there is one great passion in the Asian's nature, it is revenge and cruelty.

-It really is most strange that the two of us should have been brought precisely to this place and in this way," said the baronet, and it was felt that he was forcing himself to speak calmly.

-We have to escape from here!

-Of course, Baron, after you!

This was the ironic tone that the baron so appreciated in danger as a sign of manly courage.

I pondered for a while. Then I rolled on the floor until I felt his body next to mine. I have often entertained you with the amazing tricks I learned during my stay in Asia from a Japanese illusionist. He taught me thoroughly. Among the things to master is the untying of the most complicated knots. That came in handy. I put my bound wrists next to Lantzmans hands and asked him to help me. Once he had managed to loosen the knot a little, I only needed a quarter of an hour to free myself completely. In a few minutes the baron was also free. By the light of a few matches we examined our prison. It was a rather spacious cabin. The doors were, as was evident, locked, and a plank had been nailed to the hatch. We had to proceed with great caution and could only hold the light for a few seconds, for above our heads we heard footsteps on the planking, and also in the corridor outside something seemed to be moving.

We had no other way to escape than through the hatch. We joined forces and soon managed to pull the board out with as little noise as possible.

A pale glow entered the room, the scattered light of the harbour, the reflection of the sea.

Fortunately, the hatch frame was made of wood, and it was so rotten that with a little effort we were able to dislodge it from the hull. Then we struggled in and slid, scratched and skinned, into the sea. We had left our jackets and waistcoats on the boat. We swam between the boats, taking long strokes, slowly and cautiously; we had agreed that we would not return immediately to land, lest we should fall back into the hands of our pursuers. But it must have been late in the evening. The harbour was very silent, and we could see the hulls of the ships rising vertically before us; we swam along, following the zigzagging reflections of the lanterns on the shore, passed the quay, and left the Porto Nuovo. The black masses of the warehouses with the cranes looming and stretching overhead were left behind. Now we headed towards Barcola and swam along the ever-darkening beach. It was time to get out of the water. Our clothes were heavy and stiff and impeded our movements. We stopped at a small stone dyke that jutted into the water.

sea and we got into a boat that was moored there.

What to do?

We sat there shivering in the cold, even though the night was warm and pleasant. Or were we shivering for some other reason? You know me and you know that I am not fearful. But it may well be that fear had something to do with that shivering. The sinister assurance with which they had seized us, the mysterious hands that suddenly reached out to us: it must be admitted that it gave more than one cause for uneasiness. And I saw before me, with increasing clarity, the distorted, ape-like face of that priest, whom we had pushed down that time, I saw the foaming drool in his mouth.

"I think it would be best," said the baronet, "if we were to get away from Trieste for a few days. They must lose our trail.

He read my thoughts. Indeed, that would be for the best. And we should leave immediately, just as we were, without hesitating any longer. We could take refuge for the time being in one of the small coastal towns of Istria. I still had five days' leave, then I would return to my ship. The baron, who had nothing to do in Trieste, could have a trusted man settle his affairs and then get out of sight. We felt better once we had made that decision. We had obeyed one of the most powerful instincts, that of self-preservation, and this restoration of harmony gave us new strength. We untied the boat from the pole to which it was tied, threw the rope into it, took up the oars and pushed on with vigour.

We made a long detour to avoid the harbour, heading out to sea until we lost sight of the shimmering beach. We watched the stars bow and sink and saw the first rays of dawn. The waves were grey as lead and beat against the gunwale of the boat as if with human knuckles. We hurried on, driven by the sole desire to leave the realm of that mysterious night. Never in my life have I rowed with such strength and endurance as on that occasion. We made rapid progress. Trieste was far behind us and the morning was bright. Over our heads there were red clouds, and the drops that fell as we lifted our oars were like drops of blood.

Suddenly I was startled and looked at my fellow escapee. He, too, looked at me, his eyes rigid and wide open, reflecting an immense fear. In vain would one want to see in what happened to us a nervous mischief. In vain would one seek an explanation for it in the previous agitation. What happened to us is impossible to describe. It was an impression equal to that which our awakened senses can convey. A call had come to me. A harsh and imperious call. It contained an order, to abandon the flight at once and return. It was the order of someone who wanted to dominate me unconditionally. And when I looked at the baron, I knew he had felt the same.

The power that aspired to our doom was about to subjugate us again.

The baron hesitantly left the oar in the water. He sat opposite me and did not take his frightened eyes off me. At last he said in a strange, monotonous voice:

-We have things to do in Trieste. We have forgotten something, we have to go back.

But I knew we would be finished if we gave up. Despite this, it was a great effort for me to offer resistance. I wanted to speak, but my voice would not come out, it was inaccessible to my will. And as I struggled to form words, I felt a cutting pain in my head and in my gut. I had never experienced anything like it before. Finally, after I had overcome an attack of suffocation, I cried out:

-No! We must go on!

But no sooner had I said this than I felt like a criminal. My actions disgusted me. It was as if I had desecrated something sacred. And I longed to be good, to obey the order and return to a clear conscience. Yet something was resisting me. An unknown force that I could not name, but which gave me security because it seemed to me as if I had already entrusted myself to it often and for my benefit.

The baron was still curled up. He had averted his eyes and was shaking his head.

-Take the oars! -I shouted, "Go ahead!"

He hesitantly obeyed. And I started to row too. But the oars were as heavy as iron bars, and although I managed to get them into the water, moving them was like trying to move a slimy mass. The most terrible thing was that I despised myself and that this feeling increased with each stroke of the oar. We were moving very slowly.

Suddenly the baron once again put down his oars and turned away.

-I don't want to," he said, "I'm going back.

A transformation could be seen in the expression on his face. His eyes had taken on a perfidious, stalking look. I could clearly see that he hated me. He was furious that I was still rowing.

-OK," I said with an effort, "I'll go back, but first I want to go ashore.

Later I have reflected a lot on how it was that he submitted unconditionally to the order, while I (though with unheard-of effort) resisted. And I believe that this was due to a greater willpower, which I have gained from a rather hard life. You know that my parents were poor and that my life was not exactly easy. I had to struggle a lot and I suffered from all kinds of deprivation. The baron, on the other hand, always led a relaxed life. He had inherited a large estate which gave him security and a pleasant life. His successes did not cost him much.

I understood that I could not get the baron to row. He sat opposite me and followed my every move with a wild gaze. And I knew I had to be on my guard. But it was precisely all this strain of strength that benefited me in my struggle against the stranger, and I rowed lighter than before.

Suddenly, he waved his hand in the direction we were going and said:

-A boat.

I let myself be surprised and twisted my head slightly to one side. Then I noticed how the boat hesitated and already had his hand on my throat. He had stood up and thrown himself on top of me. With his momentum he had pulled me backwards. I was under him and the rocking of the boat made the sea water splash against my face. I knew I was lost if I couldn't get away from him. Slowly, I managed to get the upper hand. With the help of a few Jiu-jitsu keys, the art of the Japanese wrestlers, I forced him to let go of my neck, squeezed his arteries and finally managed to grab his arm in such a way that I could have broken it effortlessly if I had made any other move. That grip, which causes terrible pain, brought him to his senses. He looked at me with a disturbed expression and relaxed. Unfortunately, I shall never be able to furnish the proof of my assertion, but it is as true as that the sun rises every morning, which at that moment I was looking into the face of a stranger. The baron's face had altered completely; I did not know the man I now had in my power. He had become ugly, leglike, and the eyeballs were odd, as if turned inwards.

Now I was able to get up and pushed him away from me, whereupon he fell onto the bench.

-If you try anything like that again, I'll break your neck! -I shouted at him. My behaviour may have been brutal, but it was the only chance I had of saving myself. Now, I must mention how much I despised myself for this brutality, and how much I was at heart agreeing with the baronet, how much I longed to go back and regain that deep peace which the fulfilment of the order put me in expectation of. I was acting entirely against my innermost conviction when I took the oar in my hands again and began to row. You can have no idea of the deep dissociation of my being. I was against myself. And for reasons unknown to me, what I considered to be my worst self won out against the best of myself.

The baron sat in the bottom of the boat with his legs intertwined, like an oriental, rocking his head from side to side and moaning like an animal.

But the trick he had needed before for his attack now matched the reality. A ship was coming towards us and was going to cut our course. I felt that the time had come to end the struggle within me by surrendering myself to strangers, and I shouted towards the boat. It was a fishing boat from Capodistria, which had been fishing all night and was now returning to port. We were picked up and, with the last of my strength, I begged the captain not to be persuaded to abandon his course on any condition. I staggered into the cabin and immediately fell into a terrible, heavy sleep, as deep as an abyss.

When I woke up, it was almost noon. I heard the sounds of disembarkation. The unpleasant feeling of unease that one feels when one has not fulfilled an important duty was still there. But at least I was now able to live with myself. It was no longer as unbearable as before. With a slow and hesitant step I went out into the

cover. My first question was about Baron Latzmann. They looked at me in astonishment, laughed and turned away from me as if I were mad. If I did not know that I myself had sent the baron in the boat round the peninsula to get to Muggia. The baron had been down below and had received from me an important and urgent commission to be carried out at once. When I shouted that this was not true, the skipper looked at me sympathetically, shrugged his shoulders and walked away. I ran to the stern, where the boat had been moored. It was gone. The baron had carried out the order.

As you know, he has not been seen again. He is still missing. The events that followed are already known to you from the newspapers. I did not stay long in Capodistria. On the third day after this adventure I found my own death notice next to that of Baron Latzmann in the newspapers. I must admit that I had the strangest feeling when I read my name inside the obituary box. The authorities had hoped to find the criminals' trail through these obituaries. But all efforts were in vain. The vigorous investigative action was also delayed by the fact that, in the meantime, I was with our cruise ship on the high seas.

As far as I am concerned..., well, I will not deny that I have been very ill. The disgust I felt for myself lasted, albeit with a reduced intensity, for a long time, and sometimes I suffered relapses which brought me to my knees. It was as if I had a perfidious and insidious poison in my body. It was an infection of my mental strength that also affected my body. I should have taken a holiday. But now I am entering into convalescence, even if I am still a little weak...

THE MANUSCRIPT OF JUAN SERRANO

On his latest journey through South America, Professor Osten-Secker, the highly praiseworthy explorer of the virgin forest in the upper Amazon and in the bordering Peruvian Andes, has made a most unusual discovery. In the hardly accessible convent, situated at the altitude of a Mont Blanc, of Santa Esperanza, he has managed to find a manuscript which gives news of one of the many heroes who at the time of the discoveries helped to conquer those territories. It comes from Juan Serrano, a participant in Magellan's first circumnavigation of the earth, about whose end nothing was known until now. It is only known about him that after the bloody banquet on the island of Zubu, in which all the participants were beheaded, he appeared on the beach, and asked his companions who had remained on the ship, for the love of God and the Virgin, to rescue him from his enemies. But although he, wounded and covered in blood, dressed only in a shirt and tied up, looked pitiful, and although the rescue could have been achieved with two pieces of artillery, two metal bars and a piece of rope, the commander Juan Carvallo refused to release him and gave the order to set sail. Pigafetta, to whom we are grateful for the diary of Magellan's voyage, is of the opinion that Carvallo left Serrano in the hands of the savages so as not to have to surrender the supreme command, now passed on to him, to the captain; though perhaps also because he feared treachery on the part of the Insulans. It must be said, by way of introduction, that this took place on 1 May 1521, and that a few days earlier, on 27 April, Magellan had left his life on Matan Island, near Zubu, under the spears and maces of the savages. Professor Osten-Secker has not been able to find out how Juan Serrano's notes could have reached the convent of Santa Esperanza. Perhaps it can be assumed that some later Spanish seafarer found the manuscript on a native and took it with him, ending up in the possession of the convent. And now we will let the manuscript speak for itself:

"In the name of God, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

"I, Juan Serrano, first captain of the "Santiago", then of the "Concepción", write these lines in the face of certain death, with no hope that they will reach the hands of any of my compatriots. However, if by the intervention of divine providence or by the work of a miracle, a Spaniard or a Portuguese (against whom I bear no grudge, especially as I myself am Portuguese by birth) should read my notes, he will see in them how many tribulations the devil can prepare for us poor sinners, how weak we are and how strange is our life and death. And I ask you to pray for the salvation of my soul, if possible in the Church of María de la Victoria de Triana, in Seville, where Magellan received the imperial standard from the hands of Sancho Martínez de Leiva.

"After the slaughter of my comrades by the treacherous king of Zubu, I was

They led me to the beach, but, although I shouted and begged with all my might to be rescued, I had to watch my companions hoist sails and sail away from the land. And this although Juan Carvallo was my godfather, and although with outstretched hands and for the memory of his wife and the wounds of Christ I begged him not to abandon me on that island to certain death. When I saw that my entreaties failed to stop them, a terrible state of fury and despair seized me, and I began to curse Spain and my companions, and I prayed to God that Juan Carvallo would give an account of my soul on the Day of Judgement. And I also hope that my curse will soon reach that cruel and treacherous man, my godfather, and bring him disgrace and death; and if it is an anti-Christian and pagan wish, I ask the Virgin to forgive me.

"So I was left alone on the island of Zubu and my watchers took me back to the village, so that the king could decide what to do with me. And a crowd of women and children crowded around me, threw dirt, shells and stones at me and beat me in the face until I was bathed in blood. I decided then to show these people that I was not afraid and that I was willing to die, so I walked upright among my guards. We arrived at the chief's hut where the feast had been held and where we had been assaulted. Around the hut a row of poles had been driven into the ground, on the pointed end of which the corpses of my companions had been skewered. As we entered, I saw the king squatting on his bed, and beside him was a human body stretched on the ground, and on looking more closely I recognised Duarte Barbosa, who, like myself, during the attack, had only been wounded. The body of my companion was sectioned so that the inside of the stomach and intestines were visible, and the king was repeatedly thrusting his hands into the cavity, scooping out handfuls of the kidney fat and stuffing them into his mouth. But Duarte Barbosa was still alive and moaning and whimpering, and when he looked at me, he asked me by all the saints and by eternal bliss to kill him. But I could have asked him with the same result from a stone, for my hands were tied, and around my arms another rope had been tightened with such force that it seemed to me that at any moment they would come loose from my shoulders. I cannot fail to mention, however, that Duarte Barbosa had brought upon himself the hatred of the savages - for so I must call them, though they had all received the sacred baptism - for, by his temperament, during his stay on the island he pursued the women too persistently and bent the will of many of them, by which, however, the natives' wrath was certainly not unleashed, while Magellan kept them subdued by his looks and words.

"In the meantime the king turned to me and said a few words in his tongue. Then came in Henry, Magellan's slave, a native of Malacca, who had followed his master to Portugal and Spain and then halfway round the world until he came near his homeland, but after Magellan's death he had separated from us. This Henry, who understood the language of the people of Zubu and who had served as our

interpreter, he translated the king's words to me, saying that from the behaviour of my companions he could deduce what a people of traitors and felons the Spaniards were, that they had even deserted me for fear of him. This angered me, and I replied that he himself was the best example of felony and treason, for he had sworn to Magellan to obey the king of Spain and to be his subject, that he had received baptism by divine providence, and had received to replace his old heathen name of Rajah Humabon, the proud name of Charles in honour of our imperial majesty, but of which he had shown himself utterly unworthy, so that I could not but treat him, in spite of baptism, as a loathsome heathen and idol-worshipper.

"The king, on hearing these words, merely contracted his face, and replied that his Imperial Majesty Charles V. did not give a damn, and that I should look well to my companion Duarte Barbosa, that I might imagine how I was shortly to fare. Then he clapped his hands and two young girls came in, clad only in a little apron of leaves, tight around their hips, and a veil on their heads. In their hands they held flint knives and danced slowly around the bloodied body of Duarte Barbosa, until the king gave them a signal and they knelt down and plunged the knives into his heart. Immediately their sobs died away and I said a prayer to my patron saint, to thank him that Barbosa had finally been freed from his sufferings.

"I was taken out of the hut. As I passed the posts with the corpses of my comrades, I counted them and found that there were twenty-one, so I knew that one was missing. We had gone ashore twenty-seven and of these, Juan Carvallo and the sergeant returned immediately because they had conceived suspicions. Enrique had gone over to the enemy, Barbosa was still in the hut, I myself was still alive, and so there had to be twenty-two.

"I had no time left to find out more, for I was hurriedly driven and thrown into a hut, where I was tied to a pole with such coarse ropes and with such force that blood soon began to ooze from the torn skin.

"In the afternoon the said Henry came to see me, sat down opposite me and began to tell me how they were going to kill me and that the population of the whole island was rejoicing over the great feast. As he said this his eyes shone in such a terrible way and his face looked as distorted as if he were looking at me as Satan himself. And then he told me that he, with the help of four other kings of Zubu, had plotted the whole treachery and had convinced Rajah Humabon, and that he was glad that he could at last avenge his abduction and enslavement. I recognised at that moment that this slave too, although he had long since been baptised and bore a Christian name, was just as much a pagan as all the others.

"He left me when it was beginning to get dark, and those young women who had killed Barbosa before came. They sat on my left and right, respectively, with their flint knives in their hands, and I understood that they had been

commissioned to be my guards. But before the hut I heard the voices of men, and I knew that they were very cautious to prevent any attempt at escape. For my part, I was so weak from loss of blood, having received a blow on the head that nearly shattered my skull, that I could not even think of freeing myself. Because I was so weak and exhausted, I fell asleep at once, in spite of my bonds, and in a dream I saw the city of Seville and was passing with Doña Mercedes by the church of Santa María de la Victoria; suddenly Doña Mercedes raised her hand and caressed my face with such gentleness and affection that I was very much astonished as to why she was doing it. But then I was awakened by a cry, like the squawk of a great bird, and when I came to my senses, I noticed two things: that the squawk was coming from the roof of the hut, and that a soft, warm hand was caressing my face affectionately. But it was so dark in the hut that I could not discern whose hand it belonged to, I deduced that it must be one of my guardians, for none but a woman could caress with such gentleness. In the meantime, the squawking on the roof lasted, and it was such a sickening and sinister cry that the dogs around the hut began to howl as if in fear. In a little while the caressing ceased, and the two girls talked to each other in the darkness, followed by a low chanting that comforted my soul like a sweet relief and almost brought tears to my eyes. When the squawking on the ceiling died away, and the singing continued, sleep took hold of me quickly, and did not leave me until morning.

"At sunrise my guards went out, and in their place came four of the king's warriors with spears and maces, who examined my bonds to see if they had loosened. Then Henry brought me bread and a roast chicken, which he put into my mouth in pieces, that I might eat and recover my strength, and, as he said, bear death firmly, which he again described to me in the most terrifying manner. I ate and omitted to answer him, although he asked me insistently if I did not know where the priest Pedro de Valderrama, who, as I remembered, had also gone ashore, might be. But my senses longed only for the night to return as soon as possible to feel those caresses and hear that marvellous song.

"With the onset of darkness the two young women did indeed return with their flint knives, whereupon the warriors left the tent, so that I thought it must be customary among these heathens, and it occurred to me that my two guardians might be some sort of priestesses, such as there were in some villages in lands discovered by the Portuguese.

"While there was some clarity I tried to guess which of the two had caressed my face so softly and gently the night before. But they only talked to each other and didn't even look at me. Once they sat on my left and right, the one on the right prepared a drink with ingredients from different containers. She mumbled a few words over it and they both drank. I had decided not to fall asleep so that I could find out which of them harboured friendly feelings towards me. But I had to wait a long time, until midnight, before I sensed a

hand on my arm. The hand slowly moved up to my neck, and I suddenly felt the coldness of the flint knife on my throat, so that I was shocked and thought I was going to die in the dark. But the knife cut the rope around my neck that made it difficult for me to breathe and swallow. Then it cut the bindings on my hands and feet, so I was free. I did not move, however, as I thought that the same hand that had freed me would also give me a sign of what to do next. After a while, the same sickening, heart-rending shouting of the day before began to sound from the roof of the hut, and the dogs also began again to howl and whine. Before the tent there rose a murmur of voices and a clatter of guns, and then I heard the footsteps of several men moving away. And after a while I felt a hand grasp mine, and with a tug I was told to rise, which I did at once, to follow my guide blindly. At the back of the hut we crawled through a hole in the matting and I greedily breathed in the night air. But it was so dark that I could make out nothing of my guide except the figure and the white streaks with which the Zulu women painted their breasts and legs, and which now, in the open air, glowed a little.

"We crept between the village huts and round a hill until we reached the jungle. There we paused briefly, and the girl began to speak in a low voice, but I could not answer her in any other way than by thanking her in Spanish for having saved me. Then we walked on, and when we emerged from the jungle at dawn, we found ourselves, as I could see by the moonlight on its slope, on a broad, grassy plain; in the same light I recognised in the guide the young woman who had sat on my right. Afterwards I learned what had happened to the other, and this confirmed what I had supposed even then: that with the potion I had also given her a concoction that plunged her into a deep sleep. The walk through the tall grassy meadow was difficult and cost me a great deal of effort, added to the pain caused by the wound on my head, now exposed to the sun's rays, and by my swollen feet. When the young woman realised that I could go no further, she stopped by a waterfall, washed my wound and bandaged it with her veil, then gathered some herbs, with the juice of which she smeared the purulent sores on my feet and wrists, and I immediately felt considerable relief. So after a short time, I was able to walk on.

"On the way I met many trees whose leaves are alive. These leaves consist of two parts, which are bent like wings and are attached to the branches with short, pointed stems. At the other end they have a red thorn. When you touch them, they run away, fly a long way through the air, and if you corner them, they turn around and prick with the red thorn, similar to other animals. But they are actually leaves and I think they live off the air.

"In the afternoon we climbed a steep hill again and in the twilight we came to a gorge through which we might have walked for an hour. Then we went into

a plain whose grass spread out before us like a carpet. It was dark again, so my guide took me by the hand. At times we passed stone ruins or arches which seemed to imply that we were in a ruined city. We spent the night, after we had eaten some fruit that the young woman picked from the nearby bushes, without a fire by a pile of stones, and as I was very tired, I woke up very late the next day. When I looked about me, I recognised that I had not been mistaken the night before, for we were really in the ruins of a city, with the remains of walls and towers, wells and porticoes; but what I had failed to notice in the darkness, was that these ruins and remains were all of pure gold, so that their glittering and sparkling in the sun gave the impression of being surrounded by flames. We knew, however, that the metal in the islands discovered by us was considered of little value, so that Magellan had to strictly forbid us to show too much greed for the gold, lest the savages should know how valuable it was to us. But I could never have suspected such wealth in that country. Compared with the bark and reed huts below, on the beach, these golden ruins, which might have been scattered by an earthquake, seemed to have been built by a different people, and - though I am no sage - I would venture to say that such a city must have been built before the Flood. In the ruins there were also many gigantic idol images, standing and seated, with eyes of precious stones and rings on their fingers, with just one of which you could have bought a whole house in Seville, as valuable as the one in which Doña Mercedes lived.

"When I learned from Salaja, for that was the young woman's name, the language of her people, I learned from her that her countrymen knew very well of the existence of that golden city, but that they were very wary of entering it as they considered it to be inhabited by the devil. To my question as to why Salaja, in spite of this belief of her people, had dared to take me there, she laughed and kissed me on the mouth, as I had taught her that Spanish women did. I must add here that Salaja had become my wife, after having acknowledged that she had braved all dangers and aroused the wrath of her people because she loved me. And lest, if anyone should find these notes, he should think that I had taken an ugly woman of the black type, I must say that the women of Zubu are almost as white as our women, that the younger ones have a soft and delicate skin, and that their voices are very melodious, hence it is a pleasure to hear them sing.

"My Salaja at first wore, like all the others, little wooden stakes in her ears and painted herself with red and white earth, but she took off the stakes and stopped painting herself after I had told her that I did not like those ornaments. She was in all things sweet and obedient and did everything according to my will, so that sometimes I was not a little surprised that it was she herself who had plunged the knife into the chest of my companion Duarte Barbosa.

"We lived in the golden city, whose environment supplied us with fruit and food.

And if at first I had thought of my companions and my homeland with sadness and longing, I forgot them day by day, more and more, and lived like an animal or a plant according to physical needs. And I cannot say what would have become of me, nor to what degree of self-forgetfulness the devil would have taken me, if one day what I am going to tell you below had not happened. (NB. But sometimes it seems to me as if that period had not been under the sign of Satan, and that rather, what happened afterwards is to be attributed to his machinations and his evil play, so that I am still confused and my soul has by no means obtained clarity as to how I am to think about these matters. Therefore, before my death, I would like to pray devoutly to my patron in heaven that perhaps he will make it easier for my soul to pass over to the next life if I do not have to think about it with so much doubt and pain).

"So it must have been about six months after my release and since we had last seen another human being, when Salaja, one morning, soon after she had risen, came running to our hut of twigs and leaves and cried out that she saw some one creeping through the bushes and ruins. I followed her at once to a hiding-place, and from there we saw a man creeping very cautiously through the darkness of the bushes, hence I could make out nothing else.

"Then I seized my spear, to the end of which I had fixed a stone edge, and I prepared to kill him as soon as he came near. But when he came out of the shadows, I recognised in him our chaplain Pedro de Valderrama, whom I thought murdered like the others. His clothes were torn and his face framed by a matted beard, but he stood before me alive. As I gazed at him in amazement, he looked around and his gaze fell on one of the piles of gold rubble. Then he fell to his knees, stretched out his hands towards the sky, as if in prayer, and I approached him to greet him. But he gave a cry, fell to the ground and covered his face between his two hands, so that I had to talk to him for a while and tell him that I was really Juan Serrano, his companion. Afterwards I did not conceive his fright as something worthy of astonishment, for as I, in my flight, was wearing only a shirt, Salaja afterwards wove me a loincloth of leaves and fibres, and so, without having cut my hair or beard and toasted by the sun, I looked like a savage.

"But almost more than for me he was astonished at the golden city in which we lived, and said that all the riches of the lands hitherto discovered could not compare with those treasures. Henceforth he always carried his pockets loaded with gold, which he took out and contemplated as if there were not enough of it scattered everywhere. After we had brought him to our hut, he told how he had been saved by Cilatun, a brother of the king, the same man who had been restored to health through baptism and his prayers. The man was seriously ill when we arrived on the island and for four days he had not uttered a single word. Neither the

Neither the sorcerer nor the shaman had been able to do anything about the illness. But immediately after I baptised him and Don Pedro said a prayer for him, he felt better and in a short time he was completely healed. Cilatun had saved the chaplain's life out of gratitude, took him to his house from where he was able to flee into the jungle and then into the mountains.

"I was overjoyed to have found one of my companions, but Salaja became silent and sad, as if she did not like Don Pedro's presence, so I had to comfort her. The night after Pedro's arrival I heard again that dreadful and sinister squawking sound near our hut, and as I realised that it had also awakened Salaja, I asked him what kind of bird it was. I had to repeat the question several times before he replied that this bird was the most bitter enemy of the whales, and that when they emerged from the depths to sleep with their mouths open on the surface of the sea, this bird would reach deep into their mouths and with its sharp beak would tear out their hearts and thus kill them. Its squawk was considered infamous. That was why the watchmen stationed in front of the hut had also fled that time. Then I asked her if the bird's squawk had really announced such a great misfortune to her, and she squeezed my hands and kissed me as only a Spanish woman ever kissed a Spanish woman.

"The next day Don Pedro was climbing over the ruins and came back so confused that I could not but infer that the sight of so much gold had gone to his head. All he talked about was that these mountains of gold were immense, and that with them the kingdom of Castile could be bought. In the afternoon he came up with me to a mound from which the whole meadow could be seen and the sea could be glimpsed.

"How many things could be done with all this gold! -he said, "and it's all wasted! We two are the richest men in the world, and we shall never get any of it.

"And he went on to tell me how we could live in Seville and how we would be admired and served by the whole world. But when I replied that I avoided thinking of that, because it could lead to nothing, and that we could never leave the island, he objected that I had already noticed that by living with that woman I had lost all incentive, nay, that I was on the way to forget my Christianity. He did not even remember that he had baptised Salaja.

"To which I replied that this was quite possible since Salaja, with others of her caste, was invested with a kind of priestly dignity and that these people had probably avoided being baptised.

"He said that it was all the more necessary then to welcome her into the Christian community, because he could not recognise that I was still living as if in marriage with a heathen; he asked me if I had never told him that I was condemned to hell and that I was a reprobate in the eyes of God.

"I replied that I hadn't done it because she had saved me from death and

I had not meant to offend her.

"To this he objected that it was gratitude to me to give up to spiritual death the one who had saved me from physical death.

"I then concluded that I would tell her and try to convince her to be baptised.

"After this exchange with Don Pedro and my promise, I began to use all my strength to influence her to join the Christian community. Salaja did not object and said, though a little sadly, that she would do as I wished, and Don Pedro celebrated the baptism and gave her the name of Teresa, uniting us also in holy matrimony. After this he began to instruct her with great zeal in Christian doctrine. On Don Pedro's orders, I made a cross with two branches and placed it next to the hut. In front of this cross we said our prayers morning and evening.

"Don Pedro had brought ashore a painted image of the Virgin and a prayer book, and during his stay in the jungle he had faithfully preserved both objects. He often read to us from that book, and I must point out here that at the end of the book there were several blank pages where I later made these notes.

"In the meantime, the chaplain was not very satisfied with Teresa's progress in the Christian faith. He said that inside she was still a stubborn pagan and that she was not concentrating seriously enough on sacred doctrine, but especially that my presence distracted her, so that she had to ask me not to accompany her during class hours. As I wanted Teresa to advance so much in the Christian faith that Don Pedro would finally give up his continual efforts for the salvation of her soul and the threats he made with such great zeal, I did as he asked and left him alone with Teresa during class. But this did nothing to improve the situation, quite the contrary; one day when I was passing through the forest near the hut, I heard a cry and recognised Teresa's voice. The only thing I could think of was that Teresa had been attacked by a wild animal, so I ran to her and found her on her knees before the chaplain, who was holding her by the wrist, while with his other hand he threatened to strike her. When he saw me, he dropped his hand, but I recognised in his face that he was completely enraged, and his anger was so great that at first he was not even able to speak. At last he said that Teresa was so obtuse and reluctant to sacred truths that he had lost his Christian patience and was about to punish her.

"To this I said (because I considered Teresa to be more my responsibility than Don Pedro's) that it was my business to punish her, and that if she continued to be so incorrigible and stubborn she should let me know so that I could make her see reason.

"But Don Pedro replied that he had already lost all hope of making Teresa a true Christian and that he would no longer strive to do so.

"During that conversation Teresa remained silent, but in the evening she became

she came up to me and asked me if I wished her to give herself as a woman to the chaplain. I knew that on the island of Zubu it was the custom to offer the women of the house to friends and guests, and our contingent had made such inordinate use of the custom that there was considerable anger among the men, who found that their wives ended by preferring foreigners. But I gathered from Teresa's question that Don Pedro's Christian lessons had not sufficiently impressed her to distinguish between being the wife of a savage and of a Spaniard, for whom the custom of his land has no validity. I explained this to her, showed her that she was now a Christian and therefore had to renounce pagan customs, and finally told her that Don Pedro, as a priest, had taken a vow of chastity and could not have such relations with women. To this he made no reply.

"The chaplain, indeed, from then on no longer took the trouble to educate Teresa in Christian doctrine, and his behaviour towards her remained harsh and dour, but all the more did he again become obsessed with the great treasures of the golden city. His daily conversation returned to Spain and Seville, and he reminded me how well I would do there, and that I could buy Dona Mercedes anything she wanted. So I too began to think more than before about the homeland, a great restlessness seized me, and we made plans as to how we could get out of there. I knew that Magellan in his last days had calculated that we were now not far from the lands of the Portuguese, and the Moslem trader we had met at Zubu must have known them, for he had suggested to the king to beware of us, for we were the same men as those who had come further west. We therefore conferred very often on how to reach, with the help of God and all the saints, a Portuguese population, who, though enemies of Spain, would not leave us in the hands of savages. But however much we pondered, no plan and no idea seemed to us suitable. Even if we managed to build a beacon without being discovered by the natives of Zubu, without maps or any other means of finding our way, we would in all probability have been fish food instead of starting a new life.

"Again and again we climbed a hill overlooking the sea in case we spotted a Portuguese ship. But we saw nothing except, from time to time, the occasional sail of the heathens who were out fishing. In those hours I could see my beautiful homeland much more clearly and I thought of Doña Mercedes, how she embraced me when she said goodbye and whispered to me that I had to return, for her life depended on mine. As I thought of her so much, the features of her face came to me with extraordinary clarity, and it happened that one night, in the image of the Virgin of Don Pedro, I discovered a great resemblance to the countenance of my beloved. We had spoken again of our flight, and Pedro had taken out the image and brought it to me to kiss, saying that he trusted in the help of the Mother of God, when I saw that resemblance. And that seemed to me to be a good sign for our plans, of

So I rejoiced and began to hope more strongly than ever before. I also told Don Pedro of my new hopes, and he agreed with me that the likeness of the Virgin to my beloved was to be understood as a good omen.

"The next night, as I lay sleepless, it occurred to me whether it might not be possible to seize one of the natives' fishing boats and run away with some gold. Theresa knew where the boats were hidden, and in the darkness of the night, when the watchers might take her for a woman of the village, she might let one of them loose and take it to a place where we could board.

"But when we discussed this plan the next day and it seemed good, when we asked Teresa to collaborate with us, she replied that she would never do it. I should mention here that in recent times a great change had taken place in Therese. Whereas previously she had always been cheerful and ready to talk, she had become increasingly silent and reflective. When we talked about our escape and the homeland, she would curl up on the floor and look at us with sullen glances. Especially since she found out that I wanted to return to Doña Mercedes, she showed with increasing clarity that she was against our plans. Well, with the memory reborn in my beloved of Seville, I became aware of the great difference between Mercedes and this Teresa. I thought of how much clearer and brighter my beloved Spaniard's skin was, and how much slimmer her hips were and how much finer and silkier her hair was. How Mercedes loved to tease, and how strange and exciting her caresses were, of which Teresa knew nothing. Hence I sometimes treated her harshly and angrily when she, by her behaviour, showed me that difference with great clarity.

"So now I started shouting at her, telling her that she had to obey me and that I would not tolerate her contradicting me. She stood up and said that she would never offer her hand to help me return to my homeland and to Doña Mercedes. And also Don Pedro began to shout at her, and reproached her that how could she dare even to bring the name of Doña Mercedes to her lips, and that she, in comparison with a Spanish woman, was but dust at his feet; and to show her plainly how low she must feel, he brought out his image of the Virgin and said that my beloved looked like her. Teresa then stretched out her hands towards the image, seized it, and gazed at it for a long time with a wild expression on her face, such as had never been seen before, not even when she plunged the knife into Barbosa's breast.

"He then returned the image to the chaplain and ran out of the hut. She did not return that day, nor did she kneel with us in the evening to worship the cross, which she had done earlier. After she returned in the evening, the next morning I confronted her and punished her with very harsh words. Don Pedro had been very angry about this fault and had said that we had to pray now with more zeal than ever before and expose our plans to the Lord so that he would not deny us his help.

"Teresa, however, stubbornly kept silent and then ran off, to pass

again a whole day out. I was very angry that he again neglected the minutes devoted to the devotion of the cross, for I shared Don Pedro's opinion that God would hold us guilty for having allowed a soul entrusted to us to return to the domain of the devil. When I saw that I could not get her to pray at our side before the cross by threats, I hit her with a stick that Don Pedro had cut from a tree. But she stood firm and let herself be beaten, without complaining, and no matter how hard I tried to force her with pain to take part in the devotional exercise, in the end I had to give it up. The clear blood ran down her back and as much as I despised her for her stubbornness, I pitied her.

"We had to pray again without Teresa, and Don Pedro insisted that because of that stubborn heathen our hopes were continually diminishing. I told him that I preferred to try the good things. But Teresa gave no chance for that, she came to the hut at night making so little noise that we were not awakened, and disappeared again at dawn. This went on for three days. On the fourth day Don Pedro came and told me that he feared Teresa had completely renounced the Christian faith and given herself up to the devil, for he had found fresh fruit and flowers, as offerings, before one of the idols in the ruins, and they could not have come from anyone but Teresa. He took me to the idol and I found it as he had said. And it was a hideous idol with four legs and five arms, of which the fifth protruded from the protruding stomach. On its head was a feathered ornament with an open bird's beak. I was horrified to learn that Teresa had indulged in this revolting superstition after she had been baptised. Don Pedro thought we should hide and surprise her when she came to make her offering. So we hid for several hours in the bushes, until we heard footsteps and saw Teresa coming with flowers and fruit. We waited until she had left her offerings and began to dance, in the typical way of her people when they want to worship their idols; then we jumped out at the same time and Don Pedro grabbed her by the arm and forced her to her knees.

"Wretched idolater! -he cried, "you wench of Satan, you vessel of sin! How can you so foully defile your baptistically purified soul? You deserve to be cast at once into the abyss of hell and to be excluded from all grace and compassion.

"And I added that how could she have given herself into the hands of evil, having told me herself that according to the beliefs of her countrymen here, in the golden ruins, the devil dwells.

"But she cried out in her own language:

"That belief is the true one! In these ruins dwells the devil. And there he is.

"And with these words he pointed to the chaplain, who, hearing them, was frightened and recoiled in shock at Teresa's pagan perfidy.

"But as soon as he had recovered, he cried out that he wanted to expel Teresa's demons and that he did not want to tolerate her any longer in his proximity.

pagan atrocities and horrors. And Teresa would see that their idols are but smoke and air before the breath of the Lord. Having said this, he urged me to help him and to push the idol down. Once we had gathered ropes and rods, we set to work with determination and succeeded in bringing the statue to the ground with a dull crunch. Teresa had covered her head as if she didn't want to see our action. Then we went through the ruins and pulled down all the idols, twenty-five in all, to the greater glory of God.

"But in the night there came a terrible rumbling above our heads and a rumbling in the earth so that the ground began to rock like a ship and our hut collapsed as if the poles that held it up were made of thin reeds. We ran out and saw a great flame on the top of the highest mountain and a blood-like glow around all the ruins. The air was pregnant with the screams and shrieks of a thousand voices, as if all the demons of hell were hovering over us. The debris of the golden city rolled and made a metallic sound as it crashed together. A large rock that fell from the height in front of Don Pedro almost killed him. Then Teresa's laughter rang out in an almost cruel tone, prompting Don Pedro to tell her that she should be quiet and better commend her soul to the Virgin Mary. Suddenly we saw a bright red cloud rising from the top of the mountain and advancing down its slope. On its way it grew rounder and rounder and redder and redder. It steered its course towards us and came with such speed that, scarcely had we realised the danger, it was already covering us. It was only for an instant that we thought we were breathing fire and burning, but it passed and, to our astonishment, we were unharmed. After that explosion, the air and the earth calmed down, and in the early hours of the morning we were able to go to sleep.

"When I woke up I set out to fix up the hut with Teresa's help, while Don Pedro went to find out what had happened that night, for the floor showed cracks and crevices everywhere, wide and deep. But I had not done much work when Don Pedro came running in, and he was so confused and panting that I thought he had stumbled upon something particularly dreadful. He took me by the hand, led me to a large block of gold that stood beside the hut, and told me to touch it. I did so and it felt as if I touched a soft mass and the gold slipped out of my hands, crumbled, ran down and turned to dust. And when Don Pedro hit the block with his fist, it crumbled completely and nothing was left but a pile of ashes.

"After some reflection, I said that we had been proved wrong, that we had taken a stone very like gold for real gold and that this stone had now, by the chemical reaction that night through the glowing cloud, decomposed.

"But Don Pedro threw himself on the ground, punched about him, and shouted so loudly that I thought he was seized with cramps. At last he got up, took me aside, and told me that now it was unfortunately clear and had been demonstrated

There was no doubt that this woman we had with us was a perfidious witch, a sorceress, whom, for the salvation of our souls, we had to expel or free from her demons. This I could not believe at once, but Don Pedro pointed out to me how it was all connected, first Teresa's refusal to pray with us, then her offerings to the idol and, after she had knocked down the statues, with the help of the furious demons she had unleashed this nocturnal disaster. And to cap it all the destruction of our great treasure had followed.

"I had to acknowledge that her suspicion was not without foundation, and I therefore gave my consent to press her with our questions. But when Teresa was about to answer Don Pedro, she turned to me, and told me that she no longer wished to conceal the fact that the chaplain was pursuing her with his hatred. She had hitherto kept silent so as not to cause any discord between us, but she wanted to confess to me that Don Pedro hated her because she had not given herself to him at my command.

"Don Pedro clasped his hands together and raised them to heaven.

"Brother! -he cried, "you see how abysmal the wickedness of this lost creature is, that he even dares to cast this ignominious suspicion upon me to divert our attention from his vileness. I need not insist that all this is nothing but stinking, infernal, infamous lies, the inventions of the demons to whom he has given himself up.

"Even I myself was frightened by Teresa's vileness and depravity, and I agreed with Don Pedro that we had to punish her in the name of the Lord to expel her demons. So we tied Teresa to a post and I beat her with a rod; but after a while Don Pedro said that I was tired and did not apply enough force to the blows. So I left Teresa in the hands of the chaplain, and he set to work with great zeal. After he had broken three sticks as thick as a thumb, Don Pedro showed Teresa our image of the Virgin to see if the devil had left her. But Teresa refused to kiss the image. She said that nothing would impel her to show her respect to my beloved. We saw then that she was not yet free of the demons, and Don Pedro thought we had to resort to more effective means; he brought a couple of logs of the resinous wood with which we kept our fire and set them alight. I would not watch any longer, though as a good Christian I said to myself that it was our duty to proceed thus, with such harshness, against Teresa. So I went away and left her with the chaplain, who wanted to burn her a little with the log. But I soon regretted it, especially because I heard moaning and sobbing, and I went back to tell Don Pedro that enough was enough. Teresa had burns all over her body, but it was still impossible to force her to kiss our image of the Virgin, so that the pertinacity of the diabolical inhabitant who possessed her was clearly demonstrated. Nevertheless, I could not bear the sight of her torn back, so I gathered some medicinal herbs she had shown me and put them on her with a bandage made of plant fibres. Teresa said nothing, she just kissed my hand, so that I began to believe that she had softened and

that perhaps the next day he would not put up so much resistance to our efforts.

"But we had to prove that Teresa was completely in the power of the devil. Don Pedro had hung the image of the Virgin at night on one of the new interior posts that supported our hut, so that the Mother of God would spread her mantle over us and protect us from the evil spirits and horrors with which we were surrounded. When dawn broke and we got up, we saw that the image was not in its place and we found it at last after a long search in the bushes, completely destroyed. As Teresa's flint knife was next to it, we had no doubt that she had destroyed it. And when we questioned her afterwards, she by no means denied her vile deed, but spoke with a strong gleam in her eye and said that she had now killed her enemy.

"Then a blind fury seized me, for my heart felt a great attachment to that image, which was our relic and which at the same time showed the features of my beloved. I felt as if Teresa, by destroying the image, had also put an end to all our hopes of ever returning to Spain. I lost my self-control completely, struck Teresa with my fists and finally drove her away, telling her that I would kill her if she ever dared to return. Don Pedro had thought it would have been better to punish her first, but I had had enough of hitting and scorching and all I cared about was never seeing her again.

"For some time he stood near our camp and looked towards me as if he did not understand what I had said. But when I repeated my command to him in strong words, and beckoned him with my outstretched hand to move away, he turned and went away with his head down. I climbed up the hill over the crumbling ruins and watched her as she descended the slope and then entered the wide meadow, which I thought must lead to the village, so I assumed that she wanted to return to her people.

"And now I must report something strange which shows clearly how powerful the devil is in us, and how great is our weakness. No sooner had Teresa disappeared from my sight than I was seized with a great sadness that lasted all day, no matter how often I repeated to myself that we should rejoice that this perfidious heathen and servant of the devil had at last left us, and no matter how much Don Pedro reminded me of the words of the withered fig tree that must be uprooted and thrown into the fire. Throughout the night my sadness turned into an intense restlessness that kept me awake and forced me to toss and turn, so I ended up waking Don Pedro, who asked me what was wrong. Then I couldn't hide from him that I couldn't sleep because Teresa had left us. To this Don Pedro replied that this caused him great concern and that we should not have let the woman leave, since it was to be feared that she would reveal to her people, out of revenge, the place where we were. I knew Teresa would never do that, but I didn't want to tell Don Pedro because he might have thought I was still too fond of Teresa.

"But with every hour that passed, in spite of all the objections of the Christian within me, the power of Satan increased, so that the next night I was confused and saddened to the depths of my soul. For I had reflected on Teresa's fate, and I had to imagine continually that her people would receive her badly for having betrayed them, and perhaps even punish her severely. And I could not get this thought out of my mind until the images it provoked became more terrible and bloody. In the evening I felt as if a voice was calling my name. I sat up and at that very moment I heard close at hand the sickening squawks and howls of that bird that tears the hearts out of sleeping whales. I was so terrified that I almost lost consciousness. I got up and ran away without even informing Don Pedro of my purpose; I left the ruins, ran down the mountain and across the meadow towards the village. I ran so fast that I did not feel myself, only now and then I was frightened by the long jumps I made and also by my shadow in the moonlight.

"At about dawn I reached the forest above the village and had to move more slowly through the trunks. By the time I left the forest, the sun was just about to rise. I was on a rocky protuberance above the huts, and although the huts were situated in a hollow, so that the brightness of the morning sky did not reach them, I could see everything accurately, for in the square, by the king's house, two great fires had been lit, around which the crowd of the village was crowded. This dashed my hopes, for it was now impossible for me to reach the village without being seen, and to find out where Therese was. While I was pondering how to proceed, the king came out of his hut, and the people immediately fell back, so that a circular space was left in which the two fires were burning. Between them lay on the ground, bound with ropes, a human body, and in it I recognised Therese.

"The king was greeted with a great clatter of drums and atabales, and the warriors, standing in a circle, brandished their spears and cried out his name. After they had taken their seats on a mat in front of the prisoner, two women approached from the fire, wearing a small apron of leaves and with coral necklaces between their breasts. Three vessels were brought, in one was roasted fish, in the other some food in the form of cakes, and in the third, cloths and ribbons of palm fibre. After placing the vessels on the ground before the king, the three women stepped forward, took one of the cloths, spread it on the ground and stood on it, turning their faces towards the east, where the brightness announced the imminent sunrise. One of the women held in her hand a sort of reed trumpet, the others a flint knife. They stood there for a while, motionless, until the sun rose over the sea. Then one of them blew three times on her trumpet and began a loud chant to which the others responded. After they had continued this alternating chant until the sun had risen completely, the first woman hid her trumpet, and the second woman blew her trumpet three times.

The others put the ribbons on their foreheads and followed the first one with the same steps. From there they alternated and the first one threw the cloth and took a ribbon, while the second one covered her head. Then they threw down cloth and ribbon and began to dance around the prisoner, during which they again sang alternately. I saw the naked breasts gleaming and the coral necklaces between them swinging up and down. This dance went on for a long time, and after the king had made a sign with his hand, the first woman approached him and took from him a flat vessel filled with palm wine. She danced back, put the vessel three or four times to her lips without drinking, and ended by pouring the wine on Teresa's breast. At the same moment, the other dancer rushed at Teresa and stabbed her twice in the heart with the flint knife. The drums and the atabales burst into a hellish noise, the first woman dipped the end of her trumpet in the gushing blood and splashed it on the people, in a manner not unlike the way our priests use holy water.

"All this I contemplated in a state which deprived me of all will and left me only the activity of my senses to spare me nothing of what had happened. I strongly reproached myself for my cowardice, but at the same time I realised that no bravery in the world could have snatched Teresa from her fate. I don't know what followed in the village, I left the place and made my way slowly back through the jungle, across the meadow and towards our camp. I needed no precautionary measures, for I was indifferent whether I was discovered or not.

"When I reached the heap of ashes in the golden city, I found Don Pedro very much concerned about me, but I did not answer his questions as to where I had been, for I was overcome with a dreadful hatred for him because the devil began to whisper to me that he alone was to blame for Teresa's death. I sat down on the ground, and as I leaned on the grass with my hand, Satan put Teresa's knife in it. I had to get up at once and, with the knife in my hand, I stood before Don Pedro, and without knowing what I was doing, I stabbed him twice in the chest, from which it can be judged that the devil, and not my own will, was driving my hand.

"Peter broke down and cried out:

"Brother, what have you done?"

"And he expired.

"After I died, I became aware of what had happened and knew that the Lord and all the saints had forsaken me.

"The few pages that I can spend on these notes are running out, and I must hasten to say what is still missing. I buried Don Pedro at the foot of the cross, where we said our prayers, after taking his book. Thereupon I left the place which the natives rightly regarded as the abode of demons, and made my way to the coast, determined either to succumb or to leave the island. On one of the following nights I managed, in spite of the guards, to steal one of the boats of the

pagans and go to sea without being warned.

"After many adventures and dangers, and after suffering several days of hunger, the wind blew me to this small island, which, according to what the natives say, belongs to the empire of Cipangu, and where I have been welcomed by harmless and kind people. In the meantime, after a short stay, I have been seized with high fevers which have weakened me considerably, as they return continually and I am convinced that they will bring me death. But I did not want to die before writing about my experiences on the island of Zubu. I have prepared the ink myself and write with reed pens, and the pagans of this island, seeing what I do, regard me as a great sorcerer. These notes are not intended to be news to the world, which will never have them before its eyes, but above all to myself, for I have made up my mind, as soon as I have finished them, to put thoughts of the days in Zubu out of my mind and to live exclusively devoted to prayer and penance for the sake of my soul's salvation, and to wait for death. But if they should fall into the hands of a Christian, I repeat the request I made at the beginning and end as I began: In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen!

AUGUSTOVO'S FOREST

The five of us reservists were in the Augustovo forest, separated from our troops to go around a swamp. The others went to the left, we went to the right, just like that, through a couple of logs...

Luftschütz went ahead, trying to keep his balance on the snowy, slippery logs, flapping his arms like wings, and cawing and hopping like a jackdaw. He was a jolly fellow.

From a grey-green puddle, two hands with fingers twitching between cracked icebergs protruded. That's where one had gone down. But it was not clear from the hands whether it had been one of ours or a Russian. The yellow, thin, rotting, yellow marsh grass was tangled with the snow like a dead man's hair with clods of earth.

Then we made our big find. A deep track ran through the snow, the forest was trampled and churned up, and we noticed that the trees were incised. We followed the track for a while and came to a gully, the edges of which had been completely rammed down. The thick layer of ice in the water was shattered, the sharp fragments sticking out stiffly and in disarray.

You didn't have to be very clever to guess that the Russians had sunk one of their largest artillery pieces there, or even several of them, to hide them from us. Karl Sammt took off his coat and the upper part of his uniform, turned himself upside down and put his bare arm into the black water, which had already been covered with a thin, frozen skin. He was sure that this was where the Russians had hidden that famous cannon to which they had attributed so many victories.

We were glad to have discovered the Russians' ruse and Simonides bought us all a drink from his bottle of cognac. Afterwards, he left with Karl Sammt to report back, and the three of us stayed behind to make sure our eggs weren't carried out of the nest.

Robert Eckler was glad of the pause. His heart had given out. He was an old man, and as a lawyer's clerk he had moved too quickly from a sedentary life to long walks - and how fast! He lay down in the snow like a winter hare. Luftschütz told jokes.

It lasted three hours before the comrades returned. They were uneasy and informed us that, despite an insistent search, they had not been able to discover a single trace of our people. Luftschütz was a bit annoyed, they had lost three hours and there was not much daylight left, all they should have done was to follow their own tracks to get to the right path.

Karl Sammt put on a sullen face and crouched down in the snow. If he was so sure, why didn't he try it himself. You came to a place where the forest showed footprints in all directions and you had to be an expert to know which way to go.

Luftschütz quietly picked up his rifle and walked with long strides. I followed him.

But we, too, searched in vain; what the comrades had told us was happening. The incisions in the trees led to a confusion of tracks, impossible to determine with certainty. We followed the most probable ones. Three Russians were lying in the reddened snow. But they were dead and could give us no information. Shouting or shooting was dangerous, we could attract both our own and the enemy. The whole forest was full of disbanded Russians.

We spent the night tightly pressed against each other in a shelter in the snow that we dug under a huge fir tree. We took turns on guard, for we could hear a howl, either nearer or farther away, and we had no doubt that in that endless winter forest the wolves were at work.

In the morning we saw that it had been snowing all night. So much snow had fallen that all the tracks had disappeared and we were now in a new and seemingly pristine world.

We let the artillery pieces stay where they were, the most important thing now was, first and foremost, to connect with our people, if we did not want to die in that uncultured place. We ate half of our meagre ration and set off, telling ourselves that it was best not to search everywhere, but to stay in one direction for as long as necessary until we came across some signs of the proximity of an inhabited place. In the first few hours of our hard march we still made marks in the trees with our shovels and then found our way to the sunken artillery pieces again. But then we gave it up, because it was holding us back too long, and we had to try to finish our walk through the snow as quickly as possible, if only for Eckler's sake, who was completely exhausted.

The poor devil stopped us every ten minutes for breathlessness, coughed miserably, got dizzy several times, and staggered on, and so the day wore on with little pauses and dragging him on, without our having found the slightest sign of our way. And that horrible forest grew thicker and thicker, and with so many bogs and twists and turns and impenetrable undergrowth, that in the drab greyness of that cloudy day we no longer knew whether we still held our original direction.

In the end Eckler fared so badly that we had to carry him. Once Simonides sank chest-deep in a water-filled hole, treacherously hidden by the snow. Perhaps in that forest there were hot springs that prevented freezing. Fortunately we were able to construct with our rifles a sort of support with which he was able to pull himself out under his own power. His uniform stuck to his body, creaking completely stiff after half an hour; he complained that the frozen wrinkles scraped his joints.

We ate the rest of our canned food. After this pause Eckler refused to continue. Simonides showed us the thaler-sized sores on his ankles, knees and crotch. We had to drag them away almost violently. The snow was falling in big soft flakes between the overburdened branches.

In a hollow between two mounds our attention was drawn to an old oak tree, on the trunk of which a chalice and a Russian patriarchal cross had been carved in an extremely crude manner. This must have happened many years ago, for the carving had been deformed by the growth of the tree and many wrinkles in the bark ran along it. Nearby there was a hubbub of squawking and flapping. The rooks were fighting over some carrion. We saw a sickening mass of tangled entrails: heart, liver, lungs, all knotted together by the pale blue skein of intestines.

Luftschütz, who, because of his profession as a butcher, had a competent eye for such internal matters, seemed to want to say something. But he swallowed it with a shake of his head and simply said that there must be wolves around.

Since Eckler no longer wanted to walk, Luftschütz and I had to pass the rifles between his arms, and so, hanging from this sort of stretcher, he gathered up his legs and slowly became heavier and heavier. Karl Sammt was leading the way. Behind us limped Simonides and groaned with every step he took.

We knew we couldn't go on like this for long.

At about five o'clock the snowflakes began to dance wildly. A storm was snorting through the thick forest, from which neither capes nor cotton T-shirts could defend you. It battered our ribs and greedily devoured our faces and hands. The trees unloaded their ballast of snow, and whoever got hit, had his legs bent.

Luftschütz was of the opinion that the Russian winter was going to give us the coup de grâce and that we should prepare for the last magazine.

Sweat froze on our foreheads in the icy wind; bits of ice hung from our noses and beards in the strangest shapes, and underneath them the skin stretched painfully.

Karl Sammt turned, his ears standing out from his cheeks in their whiteness and stiffness. Up ahead, in the darkness, was a hut.

We staggered on, the forest opened up into a small clearing, something dark was stuck there in the snow. The wind blows of the storm also pushed a smell of smoke, it shone like a spark of light and soon became a steady flash of lightning.

The snow pelted us, sucked the last of our strength, the storm tossed us from side to side. We had to lean against the wall when we banged on the door with our butts and gave the impression that we were soldiers.

Something growled, a large black colossus moved heavily towards the door. Luftschütz and I held our rifles at the ready; it could be that Russians were hiding in the hut. Karl Sammt, who had learned a couple of Polish words while working as a waiter in Poland, chirped an unrepeatable tongue twister about soldiers, night and shelter.

The colossus grunted and folded his arms across his chest, as Poles are wont to do for warmth. As he seemed unwilling to move away from the threshold, I gave him

pushed Karl Sammt with the butt. But that was like the blow of a cane against a bear. The man just roared and stood up even more.

An arm from inside pushed him aside. It gave way to a woman who looked us up and down.

Karl Sammt used his Polish eloquence. Night, soldiers, snow, shelter. Good German soldiers. Do nothing! Just sleep! He put his hands to his cheeks, made the face of a little sleeping angel. She let him talk for a while, then nodded and withdrew.

We had a roof over our heads, a fire, a tallow lamp, and perhaps food. Eckler immediately threw himself on a pile of rags in a corner and lay snoring and groaning. Our lungs, which had breathed the fresh, cold air of the storm, worked hard in there. It smelt of smoke, which the squall was blowing back up the chimney in swirls, and also of all the evils of human food and digestion. The two tiny windows were caked with moss and mud, the air had only been renewed for years by opening the door.

Simonides took off, without compliment or regard for the mistress of that palace in the forest, his shirt and pants and began to rub his flayed parts. The blackish colossus sat in the darkest corner on a sack, motionless, staring at Simonides' legs. Karl Sammt put his Polish to the test again. Now it was a question of getting something to eat. Good German soldier! Hungry! He bared his teeth, stuck his index finger in his mouth, bit into it, said yum, yum.

The woman listened to him laughing. She wore a tattered blouse, its original red had been covered by a layer of dirt. The skirt hung in filthy folds down to her ankles, and the lower edges were misshapen and ragged. To the right and left of her hips, two large spots stood out, where she used to wipe her hands during work. She was not old enough to be altogether ugly. Strong, solid cheekbones stretched her face wide, the gaunt skin was pockmarked. The eyes looked brazen and lascivious. In my pack I had the adventurous Simplicissimus of Grimmelhausen, that was what the women of the soldiers who followed the armies in the thirty years' war should have looked like.

When Karl Sammt had finished his speech, she intimated that there was nothing left, no bread, no coffee, no milk, nothing, nothing at all. She spoke slowly and with a heavy tongue, the loneliness of the forest and the company of the blackened colossus had affected her faculty of speech.

Luftschütz grumbled:

-I don't believe that. There must be something to eat. The Russians can't live on air alone either.

And he began to search everything, every nook and cranny, he turned over the dirty rags with his bayonet and picked them up like a peasant picks up manure. He knocked on the walls,

looked in the hearth, felt the mud floor in case something had been buried there.

The rangy colossus had risen from his sack and followed him stomping along, his head bowed and his arms dangling. The woman shouted loudly at him as if he were a bad dog and he retreated, trotting obediently, to his corner.

Nothing was found in the adjacent dark room either, just junk and junk, nothing edible. The guy growled fiercely at the door again, and the woman pushed him back. He had the demeanour of a watchdog who does not tolerate strangers taking over the house.

We realised that we had to make do with our empty stomachs. A little water would suffice.

Next to the cooker was a wooden bucket. We filled our glasses in it but saw unspeakable things swimming inside and gulped with nausea. The last to drink was the man. He had slipped in there, lurked behind us, as if he envied us that liquid dung. No sooner had the last one turned away than he fell into the water. We watched in horror as he got down on all fours and drank like an animal, dipping his snout into the bowl and lapping at the water. The woman kicked him away.

Simonides felt that we had apparently stumbled upon a focus of Russian culture there, and that if he could play God a little, he would fly Mr Poincaré and the French Academy here to behold the Russian brother in all his splendour.

-No," said Karl Sammt, "the man is indeed an extreme case. He is an idiot. But idiots are no Russian speciality. And the woman - look at her, she shows herself. Imagine her without those rags... a clean apron... what do you say?"

He began to look at her with libidinous eyes, his enterprising spirit as a waiter was awakened. He had told us of his adventures in Posen, they even included Polish countesses, one of them had shot him with a revolver, a violin virtuoso had taken veronal for him (two more pills and he would have passed into the other world), now he seemed to want to invite us to witness what a man he was. The woman noticed we were talking about her, turned around, arched her hips and gave him a look with her black eyes.

-He's going to try diplomatic channels," said Luftschütz.

Simonides sighed, we had no luck at all in diplomacy, and despite his best efforts we would have to go to bed hungry.

The woman grabbed a pile of straw with both arms, threw it into the chamber, we put the layers over it and lay down. I was too tired to think and too tired to sleep. My mind oscillated between waking thoughts and a web of dreams in the grey gloom of consciousness. Eckler was breathing heavily and moaning in his corner. The poor man could not sleep, and I noticed that he struggled for breath in anguished fear, but he was too good a comrade to wake the others. The snowstorm was shaking the

He had it trapped in his claws, and as he passed through invisible crevices, he made piercing whistling noises. In her howls was mingled a strange noise, as if she were scratching, clawing or digging. It was some time before my nerves were sufficiently excited to overcome the paralysis. After it had been dark in the next room for a long time, light now penetrated through the crack of the door into our chamber.

That uniform scratching came from the room of the owners of the house. The door hung crookedly on its hinges, leaving the space of a finger in the latch. I saw our hostess kneeling on the floor near the hearth and scrubbing hard. The brush scraped with monotonous cadence and, with the movement, the woman's plump body swayed from side to side, shoulders and backside tight with lush flesh. This night's work, this bout of hygiene in the midst of a house brimming with filth, was incomprehensible to me, almost unsettling in its strangeness.

Eckler heard me grope and slide down the straw.

He called to me in a low voice, he brought me close to his mouth with a sweaty hand; that we should not leave him there, that we should not stay there and the next day we would have to try again to rejoin our troop. I promised him, he seemed to calm down, and after a while he fell asleep. The woman had stopped rubbing, only the storm was still shrieking through the forest.

The morning brought a new attack of hunger against the stubbornness of our hostess. But when the woman once again lamented that there was nothing, nothing at all, and pointed to her stomach, as if to indicate that there had been nothing there for days, Luftschütz angrily shoved his fist in her face. Let him not imagine that we were so stupid as to believe such lies. The way he looked, with those bacons on his body, didn't exactly suggest a very prolonged hunger.

Luftschütz flew off to one side in the midst of the brawl, the idiot having taken up position behind him and hurled him into the air with a swipe of his hand. He looked terrible, his bushy, close-set eyebrows hung over his phosphorescent eyes, his teeth were exposed, gleaming, behind his bristly beard.

The woman went to him and pushed him, hit him in the chest with her fist, and he turned away from her awkwardly and grumbling, walked away and returned to his corner where he remained with a threatening gesture.

Eckler sat at the table. His face was grey, his skin looked parchment-like, every breath he took showed it was a painful labour:

-For God's sake, my friends, let's get out of here as soon as possible! I'll make it, I'll crawl as far as I can. I won't make trouble for you.

If we did not want to use violence against our host stubbornness, in the way the soldiers used to use it in the *Simplicissimus*, tickling a little with the bayonet and singeing the soles of our feet, we had to try to get out of there as soon as possible. A gruelling march, on an empty stomach, we did not

It was a very pleasant prospect, but we had to try, if only for Eckler's sake.

Karl Sammt started new negotiations. It was more difficult than before. The woman did not understand the Polish of the waiters, perhaps she did not understand the language at all. So they struggled with gestures and grimaces and Karl Sammt became more and more angry.

During these efforts at understanding between what seemed like two mills, I remembered the night's work of that continuous rubbing. I examined the place around the hearth. There was a tile embedded in the clay soil, from the centre of which a groove led to a hole in the ground. So it was a kind of drain and you could see that the woman's activity had been aimed at the tile.

-My God! -exclaimed Karl Sammt, completely exhausted, "how is this going to end? She claims that there is no road out of the forest or that she doesn't know it... is it possible that these people live in the middle of the forest and don't know how to get to their fellows?"

Simonides was of the opinion that what mattered to the woman was to get rid of us. So it must be assumed in advance that she was not going to deny us information that she could give us and that would help us to leave.

Luftschütz said that this was absurd, that these people needed to eat and clothe themselves. It was clear that they lived and did not walk around naked, so it had to be assumed that they knew a way to their fellows. He was in favour of staying as long as necessary until hunger forced them to bring out their provisions or to show us the way.

-No, no, no staying here! -Eckler groaned.

If we didn't have to take the sick into consideration, Simonides objected, we could try to find the way by ourselves. But it can't be, to go out at random with Eckler and make our way through the thicket, would end in tragedy.

Half the day was spent in discussions and new, fruitless efforts at understanding. The woman shrugged her shoulders and laughed in the face of Karl Sammt. Eckler had gone back to lying on the straw, we could hear from the camera his struggle for breath.

At about two o'clock the woman shouted a couple of words at the idiot, who immediately got up from his coat and reached his head almost to the smoky roof, smiled slyly, and put on a thick fur that was lying on the bed. He left the hut without saying a word, and we saw him moving through the snow towards the forest.

-Let's wait until it stops snowing," said Luftschütz, as he looked out of the window at the swirling snowflakes. It is terrible, but it seemed to me as if Luftschütz had actually said something quite different. And when I looked into the comrades' eyes, I realised that they had understood it as I had. Let's wait... let's wait for the huffing and puffing to stop. Our healthy force wanted to bet

without hindrance for our salvation.

We wait.

Karl Sammt and the woman were loitering and casting meaningful glances at each other. Her coarse voluptuousness attracted him with her seductive swagger. He was back to his best waiter's manner, and it was as if he had grown tails on his worn jacket.

Luftschütz made jokes again, but they sounded forced and artificial.

-Shut up! -said Karl Sammt, "I'm doing it for everybody.

Simonides, who was an organist in Breslau, had painted a keyboard on the tabletop and was playing a Bach fugue. His feet moved convulsively on invisible pedals under the table, and he accompanied the music by singing the different voices.

Karl Sammt and the woman sat on the edge of the bed. He told stories of his life in German and Polish. Of the great swindles, of cheating at gambling, of the international adventures of a waiter. She sat beside him in her solid, coarse femininity, allowing him to become more and more confident and to put his arm around her hips.

In the evening he got up, put a log on the hearth, which crackled loudly, and put some pots on the fire, in which he began to boil water. He smiled at Karl Sammt, pointed to his mouth and went "yum, yum".

Karl Sammt rejoiced:

-You see! Now there will be food to eat. You must know how to tame them - if you didn't have me, you lazy lot, you'd starve to death here.

He looked into all the pots from which that gurgling song of boiling water rose, always with his hand lovingly resting on her shoulders or in her arms. Simonides wiped the keyboard off the tabletop, attacked our faces with his blackened finger and went outside to wipe himself in the snow.

After a while, night fell and the idiot arrived. Over his shoulders hung a bloody animal, the skin of which had been stripped off. The legs and head were swaying forward, the man's cloak, neck and hands were stained with blood, and the hair around his mouth was sticky with blood.

Simonides entered, with a flighty look on his face, after the man and his booty. The idiot threw the animal to the ground and mumbled a few words. As the woman carried the carcass to the tile and began to tear it to pieces with a large knife, Simonides took me aside. I didn't know what to think, but when I was outside wiping my hands in the snow, I had seen this man from the forest coming. But not standing upright like humans, but on all fours, just as the day before he had pounced on the water bucket. I asked him not to say anything to the comrades, for in the gloom he might well have been mistaken, and his story would spoil the appetite of the others. Now it was necessary, above all, to gather strength so that we could at last get out of that forest.

The woman, meanwhile, had finished tearing the animal to pieces. Blood was

flowing

through the slot. I had the spoils for a lamb, but Luftschütz shook his head and said that he thought it was a big dog.

-Whether it's dog or lamb," said I, "there must be a village in the vicinity where the fellow got it from. We can't be scrupulous; we must fill our stomachs to regain our strength. I don't see why they want to keep us here. But the truth is that we must not stay any longer.

Licks and slurps came from the corner of the hearth. There the idiot crouched by the water bucket and drank like a beast with a dripping snout, until the woman threw him out.

When the meat was boiled and roasted, we took Eckler the best piece of the roast to his bed of straw. The smell was tempting and we were proud that we had mastered our eagerness to serve our sick comrade first. But he hunched over in disgust and with a gesture of revulsion, refused the food and said with a rattle that he did not want to taste a mouthful of the meat.

-Don't eat of it! Don't eat of it! Not a morsel... comrades, don't eat!

Luftschütz muttered something about stubbornness and sick whims. We agreed with him, but Eckler turned over in his bed, did not want to hear anything, put his hands over his ears and put his head in the straw. This behaviour of a man, otherwise so kind and obliging, did not fail to make an impression on us. We were afraid to eat of that meat, the aversion of a man on the threshold of death perhaps corresponding to a certain suspicion, and that conveyed to us the same rejection.

Our hosts, after the woman had invited us, in vain, to eat with a smile, went at the roasted and cooked meat alone. The woman cut the morsels with a knife, the man tore the pieces with his hands and stuffed them greedily into his mouth. We sat silently and aghast in the corners of the hut and watched the disgusting feast until most of it had been swallowed.

That night our excellent comrade Eckler died.

I was the first to notice it. The sound of scraping and brushing in the hearth woke me, and when I looked through the slot in the door, I saw the woman as she had been the day before, kneeling on the floor and brushing the tile. When I wanted to return to my bed, I bumped into Eckler. It struck me at first that he was not breathing heavily. I touched him and he was cold.

In the morning we buried him in front of the hut. First we had to shovel away a metre of snow before we could find the earth. We were so weak that we needed several hours to do the job, the tools were falling out of our hands. The cold wind blew through our bodies and reached the last branches of our arteries.

Simonides said a prayer and concluded with the words:

-May God grant you eternal bliss and help us out of this forest. Amen.

The idiot and the woman stood in the doorway and looked at us without a trace of sympathy for the painful death and burial far from the homeland.

When we returned to the hut, Luftschtütz approached the hearth, where the remains of the previous day's meal still lay in one corner. We stood next to him. Our eyes and mouths were greedy, our fingers twitching. But we kept our discipline, and even though each of us wanted to snatch it all for himself, we agreed on a fair distribution, which Luftschtütz, as butcher, carried out with professionalism. Simonides muttered:

-No! No!" he looked hesitantly at a piece of meat, but soon lost his strength and his words were lost in the room.

Although each of us only had a couple of mouthfuls, after the meal we felt better, we even cheered up. Simonides played on the imaginary organ keyboard a sort of variation on the theme "The Count of Luxemburg", Karl Sammt had eyes for the woman again.

The brightness increased and increased in the world and in that hut, suddenly Simonides' fingers were playing on keys gilded by the sun, whose rays were coming through the window. He stopped playing the piece, looked out into the forest dressed in black and white, bowed his forehead reflectively and said:

-Now we have to find the way.

We decided that he and Luftschtütz would set off to go through the forest in all directions. Karl Sammt and I formed the relay. We always had to return to the hut, which in this uncultured land was to us what the ship was to the polar explorers. In vain we tried to explain to these two forest dwellers what it was all about. The idiot growled at us with hostility, pursed his lips and bared his teeth at us like a rabid dog. At last he went out and did not return.

Luftschtütz and Simonides set off on their journey.

I took off my socks and started stuffing the tomatoes into my palm-sized heels. The work soon bored me. Although I warned myself that it was necessary to endure the march well, a sort of heaviness made me give up. An apathetic indifference came over me, a satisfaction with the state of things. It was not so unpleasant to think that we should still have to stay a couple of days in the hut, and the efforts of a march through the snowy forest seemed to me inordinately great in comparison with what had been achieved. Hindenburg would make it without us. The main thing now was to fill my stomach. I walked around the hut, sniffing for anything hidden.

Karl Sammt and the woman were very affectionate. He was squeezing her full arms and she was laughing quietly with the clucking of a hen.

It was already dusk when we heard outside a "Hello!" We opened the door and Luftschütz came stomping in on the snow coloured yellow by the light of the hut.

-Where is Simonides? -he asked. Fear flashed across his face when he heard that we knew nothing about Simonides.

They had gone as far as the oak tree with the chalice and the Russian cross, had separated there to look in different directions, and wanted to meet again at the tree. Simonides had not arrived, and Luftschütz, after waiting a long time, started to retreat because he assumed that the comrade might have returned to the hut by another route.

Now we knew our friend, out there in the winter forest, freezing cold and without food. We sat in silence and bitterness. Luftschütz finally decided that we had to wait until daylight to look for him. Hunger had again increased in strength, clawing at our guts with its sharp claws. The best thing to do was to lie down to try to dampen it.

At about midnight I heard the idiot's stomping in the hut, his disgusted laughter angering me. The woman clucked contentedly and then came the noise of rubbing and rubbing. A slight groan startled me; I paid attention, it came from myself, I covered my head with my coat and fell into an agitated daze.

In the morning, meat was steaming in the pots, large chunks of meat were sizzling on the grill, splattering grease. The smell permeated the whole room. We pounced on the food, ate greedily and abundantly. The idiot was leering at our mouths and hands with envy, growling angrily, the woman had to beat him with her glares. He did not like to give of his new booty.

When we wanted to leave, Karl Sammt started complaining of nausea. No wonder, after gulping like that and on a completely empty stomach. A remnant of suspicion that Karl Sammt's discomfort might be a pretext to stay with the woman disappeared when I saw him shrink back, run out of the hut and give back. He was better now, he thought, but he felt too weak to undertake a march through the forest.

We trudged through the glittering snow, accompanied by bright glimpses of the sun. The colours of gold, blue and black intermingled, the frozen crust sometimes broke under our feet, then we often sank up to our hips in the soft snow. An inexpressible beauty of solitude radiated through the forest, but it had no effect on our hearts, for before us we felt an enormous wall of anxious foreboding.

We followed the comrade's footprints from the oak tree with the chalice. From the footsteps we saw that he walked with effort but resolutely. He had kept his direction among the trunks. We walked for two hours following the tracks. Suddenly Luftschütz pointed out something off our route in some flattened bushes. A second track ran parallel to it. Four large paws indicating the trot of a dog and

that were advancing alongside those of our comrade. We said nothing, but pressed on, fell into snow holes, climbed out again, walked as fast as we could, covered with sweat under the overhanging branches of the fir trees. The warm mist from our bodies hung over us like a cloud.

A small cavity, surrounded by bushes, opened up to both tracks. Luftschütz stumbled and fell forward in the snow. His kicking brought to light a rifle which, under his weight, had been half-covered by the snow. The layer of snow in the cavity was churned up, in some places exposing soil, moss and snow soaked with blood.

-Wolves! -cried Luftschütz. He did not look at me.

Only a trace emerged from the cavity, the paws, now imprinted in the snow with strength and weight; beside it was a furrow in which ran a string of dried blood. We followed, now hopelessly, the ghastly signs. They led through thickets, across frozen marshes, and always there was that trot of the paws and the string of dried blood beside it.

We followed the trail, unyielding and unquestioning. Even if it led us deep into the forest where there was no salvation for us... The hours turned into eternities. The region we were passing through had something familiar about it. The profile of the treetops, the line of the trees, we had already seen them all, they had become fixed in our memory with a slight familiarity.

We emerged from the thicket into a clearing. Beyond, in the gathering gloom, was our hut. Tracks circled the clearing and disappeared behind the hut.

At that instant we heard a scream. In the infinite solitude of the forest, where after our sudden stop we could hear only the racing of our hearts, there resounded a scream of terror, snatched from a human breast. Then we heard thumps and gasps coming from the hut. We threw ourselves down in the snow, arms outstretched as if we were swimming in water, with a red mist before our eyes and hammering in our brains.

A guttural, piercing scream, then insults and curses... we had reached the threshold, I was about to open the door, but then the door opened from the inside and struck me hard on the forehead. My head began to thunder, a black mass passed between us, a hairy, bristly-haired monster, black and heavy, a beast with a dripping snout, which kept running on all fours and howling until it was lost in the forest....

On the floor of the hut lay Karl Sammt with his throat torn out. Blood gushed from his neck, his face was distorted by horror, his broken gaze reflected death and horror.

The woman, bent over him, her hair dishevelled, screamed out of her mind, beat her chest, then leapt to the door and shouted curses into the forest and the darkness.

Karl Sammt seemed to recognise us, clutching his throat with a convulsive hand, each gasp expelling a trickle of blood from the tremendous wound. The hand clenched into a fist, descended, ran down his trembling body... and with a sudden jolt he lay still and silent.

We didn't waste any time, we understood each other with our eyes, took our rifles and left the house. A high, cool, wine-coloured sky still hung over the forest. Our holy anger did not ask whether it was night, whether it was cold or whether we had any chance of success. We wanted to finish off the enemy...

Not far away a wolf howled.

Before long the grey blended with the wine-coloured sky. For a while we could still see the trail in the snow, but soon the darkness blotted out everything under the trees. Our fury devoured, insatiable, our souls. We went round the cabin, stalked from the edge of the forest into the clearing. Once it was as if we were surrounded by silent footsteps. We stopped and scrutinised the darkness. It was impenetrable.

We had to wait one night for our revenge.

-Tomorrow! -said Luftschtütz.

-Tomorrow! -I swore.

We returned to the hut, which was not far away and shone with a sparkle of light.

Suddenly, a black cloud came over us, fell on Luftschtütz and threw him to the ground. A shapeless mass rolled on the ground, and we could hear gasping and clawing. A gigantic animal, a wolf, had seized the comrade's leg with gleaming teeth.

-Help! Help! -he groaned. He had managed to clamp his strong hands around the animal's neck and pull the bristling head away from him. I pulled the machine gun from its holster and searched in the confusion of the fight for a safe shot. Two green lights flashed at me with burning hatred. I aimed at the right eye and fired. The shot echoed through the forest. The wolf left the prey with a howl, broke free from the enemy's hands and tried unsuccessfully to bite my hand, then fled into the darkness.

Luftschtütz stood up wheezing, leaned exhausted on my shoulder.

-Are you all right? -I asked.

-My leg is torn, but my bones are harder than a wolf's teeth.

Moaning quietly, Luftschtütz limped towards the hut, the little stretch of forest stretching out before the wounded man like a via crucis. On the threshold there was a large pool of blood. It stretched across the floor into the chamber.

Our dead comrade lay alone.

Next door in the chamber there was a whining and rustling in the straw. The light of the tallow lamp stood on the table with a long wick and a flame flicked on it.

through the air. I picked it up and advanced into the darkness with the gun in my hand.

The idiot huddled in a corner, slapped his hands around, furiously picked up the straw and threw it back. The woman sat at the height of his head, her hair covered her face.

I approached the man. The straw was soaked with blood. The light fell on his face. He raised his head and bared his teeth at me, he snarled, his left eye glowed greenish with animal hatred. The right eye was shattered, blood and pus pooled in the socket, a thick red fluid gushed incessantly down the right side of his face to the straw.

The woman had stood up and was leaning against the wall. Between her long hair there were burning eyes. The lamp trembled in my outstretched hand. Suddenly, she detached herself from the wall and rushed towards me, mute and with tremendous momentum. The lamp fell on me, the straw caught fire, I had to defend myself against a force that almost exceeded my own. It bit at my neck, at my hands, tore shreds of my skin with its long, twisted nails.

Luftschütz came to my aid. In the smoke of burning straw, we struggled and rolled on the ground.

When at last, almost suffocated, we were able to immobilise and bind her, we put out the fire. The light from the lamp struggled to pierce the smoke with its small flame.

I approached the wounded man.

He had died during the fighting.

The contracted lips exposed the teeth. The fierce jaw showed glistening. Big, black, hairy hands lay in the straw like the paws of a wolf.

THE SHADOW ARTIST

It happened on 21 November 1759, at the Battle of Maren, when Prussian resistance had already begun to give way and the Austrian commanders were waiting for General Finck to capitulate. And it was one of the last cannonballs of that battle that tore off the right leg of the colonel of the Austrian Lascy regiment: Martin Johann Freiherr von Littrowsky. When the colonel regained consciousness in the field hospital, the surgeon showed him the leg, which still had the boot on, and it was a very strange feeling for the wounded man to see a fragment of his body separated from the rest. Shortly afterwards he learned that General Finck had surrendered with his regiments. And with a deep sigh the colonel fell back on the pallet from which he had wanted to rise in a momentary oblivion of his wound.

After his reinstatement, the baron was granted a general's patent. But he travelled to Vienna and requested an audience with his Empress and placed the patent in her hands.

-Your Majesty," he said, "this war needs whole men. I am only half full myself, and every hour would remind me that I lack something to serve your Majesty as I would wish to do. But if your Majesty had a post in the civil service that I could be trusted with, I would be willing to fill it. Then it will not be necessary for someone more capable to leave the army.

The empress smiled and promised the baron that she would try to find something suitable for such a deserving man. And some time later, the colonel got a posting as an imperial judge in the capital of a province. The office of imperial judge had in the past been of great importance, but of late it had been losing more and more of its functions to other offices, and it had not been left with much more than a sort of supervision over certain branches of administration and justice. In any case, the office gave the holder of it a chance to do some good, and Baron Von Littrowsky did not let any such opportunity pass him by. Besides, he had free time left over to cultivate his hobbies. If there was one thing he would have liked to do, and which he had to give up because of his military profession, it was working the land. It gave him great joy to watch the plants in the fields grow and ripen. And often, when he passed with his regiment through places where the fields had not yet been sown, he would ride more slowly and stay behind just so as not to miss the spectacle of this blessing of the earth. Often, too, he was seized with a feeling of regret when the hard necessity of war compelled him to destroy the crops.

He would have preferred, after his wound, to retire to one of his estates and devote himself to farming and tending his forest. But these desires had to wait, for his empress needed help and it was his duty to serve her, even if no longer on the battlefield, at least anywhere else where he could be of some use to her. But in order not to give up his favourite hobby altogether, he acquired a large garden near the city and spent all his spare time in it, with the object of converting that land into a garden for his own use.

uncultivated in a small paradise. There he was able to combine French and English style with great taste, and achieved a perfect expression of the alternation between representative dignity and pleasant lightness.

His bachelor evenings were spent, more often than not, in the company of Count Zierotin's family, with whom he maintained a close friendship. The lady of the house was an excellent chess player, which was perfectly suited to the baron's other great hobby, whose love of chess was almost as great as his love of gardening. In Count Zierotin's family the colonel met an impoverished and orphaned noblewoman, who had found shelter there partly out of compassion, partly in order that she might educate the children. When the lady of the house was occupied with other duties, Miss Sophia took her place at the chess-board, and the Colonel never tired of assuring her that she played as well as the Countess herself. But the young lady won the baron's favour decisively when, on a family visit to his park, she showed her sincere enthusiasm for the wonders of that little kingdom. And when she, encouraged by the proprietor, in well-chosen words, pointed out what was most admirable, and expressed her appreciation of the creator's excellent taste, the baron took her hand and asked her if she had not the desire to dispose of the garden as she wished. Sophia was so startled, and her trembling astonishment so embellished her that Littrowsky was no less confused before her than she was before him.

Two weeks later the town learned of the imperial judge's engagement to the young lady. And people were astonished, for the baron was nearly sixty years old and considered a confirmed bachelor. Sophia, on the other hand, was very young, barely eighteen, and people shook their heads at the thought of such a mismatched couple. Nor were there few who predicted an unfavourable future for the marriage. But the prophets must have been wrong, for no marital conflict transpired. The baron continued to lead the same secluded life, and his young wife showed no inclination to participate in high society. Both spent their time tending the garden and playing chess, the former in summer and the latter in winter.

When the marriage was a year old, the baron began to build in his garden. It was to be a pavilion, a charming and comfortable place for the young girl, which seemed to the baron a little sad. The little house, which was erected at the end of the garden, charmed all who saw it. On a folded roof, its front part overlooked the garden, to which a terrace led down. The central part was slightly vaulted, so that the side sections, which at first receded somewhat, then extended with impetus, giving, in general, an impression of elegant dynamism. The mouldings above the windows showed garlands, from which fruit hung, and above the door was the coat of arms of Baron von Littrowsky, a tree on a red field. Inside the building there were several rooms furnished with the utmost comfort, of which the strangest was the central one. It had so many corners

It was almost round, and all the walls were decorated from floor to ceiling with landscapes from exotic countries. In the foreground were enormous palm trees, painted with such realism that one really thought one was in a palm grove. The broad leaves, which the artist's imagination had given the most fanciful shapes, were joined at the ceiling to form a dense umbrella. And when one turned one's back to the two windows, the light that penetrated through the green panes really looked like the gloom of a palm grove. Between the scaly trunks you could see the landscape in full sunlight. There was the sphinx of Giza and the pyramids; there was Jerusalem, seen from the Mount of Olives; there was the South American pampas, on the edge of which rose, in the blue distance, the Andes; there was the Sahara with an endless caravan of camels and, above their heads, the deceptive vision of a mirage, while in the foreground bleached human and animal bones.

The palm tree room soon became the young lady's favourite room. But even now it was not as successful as her husband had hoped. Her character did not become any more cheerful.

One day, the imperial judge returned to inspect the prison. From time to time he had to check whether everything there was working as it should, whether the prisoners were well cared for and whether they were being treated according to the regulations. Just when he had finished his inspection and the officials were escorting him to the gate with reverence, a new prisoner was brought in.

-Wait," said the provost of the prison, for he was of opinion that in any case it would be better to wait till the judge came out. But he insisted on being brought into his presence. And so he began to enter the particulars in his book, while two warders searched the prisoner, in case he had anything in violation of the regulations.

The new man was a young man with cheerful dark brown eyes and hair of the same colour. A straight nose and bold lips gave his face a pleasing perfection; both his demeanour and his answers exuded a captivating frankness. Without being brash, he carried himself with complete naturalness and seemed as if he felt superior to those people who now had power over him. His name was Anton Kühnel and by profession he claimed to be a shadow artist.

-Shadow artist? -asked the imperial judge, "what trade is that?"

-It is an art," answered Anton Kühnel, "by which I represent to the respectable public everything that has happened since the creation of the world.

-And where do you have your stage and your actors?"

-Here are my actors.

The young man raised two slender, beautifully built hands. Slender fingers, in which his agility was evident, were stretched out before the baron's eyes.

-What about my stage? Any white wall is my stage.

She had realised at once that the man she was talking to was a

The senior official and with the instinct of the rogue sensed that it was not impossible to curry favour.

-So he casts shadows on a wall...? A strange art... But it's well executed! And why is it here?

The baron asked the prison warden to hand over the young man's file, which stated that the shadow artist had received a three-day sentence for vagrancy.

Kühnel, having attracted the baron's attention, had hoped that he could exercise his authority and pardon him, so he dared to plead with him:

-If Your Honour, with your kindness.....

-No, no, nothing of the sort, my dear, the three days must be spent here, no one can save you from that.

The director and the watchers laughed, aware of their power.

-But," continued the baron, "once you have served your sentence, you can come to my house and show me some of your art.

And after instructing the provost to bring the man, on completion of his sentence, to the pavilion in his park, the baron left the prison. He was very pleased with the chance that had led him to meet the shadow artist. For some time he had been looking for an amusement for Sophia, in order to counteract what he considered to be a growing decline in her state of mind. From this young man's arts there was promise of great benefit.

Sophia took the news rather indifferently. But the baron smiled to himself; he would see to it that the artist's performances were amusing and varied, and that they would restore his wife's joie de vivre. When, three days later, the provost brought Anton Kühnel, the baron immediately led him away in the presence of his wife.

-This is the man," he said, "who is able to represent everything that has happened since the creation of the world. You haven't forgotten your actors? -he laughed.

The young man showed his hands as before, and when the young wife raised her eyes at the same moment, their gazes met. She looked up into his eyes in astonishment and returned to her work, which she held in her lap. She had been waiting for Ja's visit with no particular curiosity. She had submitted to her husband's whim, as she submitted to all his wishes and decisions, without joy and often even with a slight, if disguised, resistance. Now she felt, as she was brought out of her indifference by the gaze of the unknown man, a painful helplessness. It was as if a strong hand had lifted her from the ground, and she knew neither where nor when she might find her discernment again. In the stranger's gaze she had read an inordinate and enthusiastic admiration and, at the same time, a desire that burned in flames around her.

The baron had already had one of the rooms in the left wing of the

pavilion for the shadow artist's performance. From one wall, which offered the largest surface area for the show, all the furniture had been removed, and when he led Anton Kühnel into this room, the latter expressed his satisfaction with the "stage". But he asked to be allowed to make a few more preparations and when night fell, he would present his art to the very respectable audience, he hoped to their delight.

With a smile at the man's phrases the baron left him after he had ordered the servant to do his bidding. In the room with the palm trees was his wife's embroidery on the chair. She herself was no longer there and the baron went out into the park to look for her. He found her between two high hedges in the French part of the garden, in front of two marble statues representing Amor and Psyche. The statues stood inside a niche pruned into the hedges, the two slender young bodies touching each other affectionately and yet chastely, as if they had hidden themselves there so as not to be seen by prying eyes.

-What do you think of our guest? -he asked as he gently put his arm over hers and took the cane in his other hand.

Sofia became morose:

-You know I am satisfied with our solitude; have I wished for any other amusement than that which chess and the garden offer us? And now you bring home to us a fairground artist... I think he still has on him the smell of the rabble he must deal with, and the perspirations of the people he has spent the last few days with. The baron looked at his wife in amazement. He would never have believed her capable of such an outburst, nor had he ever known her pride of nobility to be so strong. He said with

apologetic tone:

-I thought I could entertain her with such a performance.

And, as he limped along beside her, leaning on his arm and cane, he added in a soothing tone:

-We can tell him to leave immediately if that's what he wants. I'll give him some money and send him away. There is no need to arouse his displeasure.

But now Sofia said almost more vehemently than before:

-No, no... it can't be. He's already at home. Now he can't be thrown out... the poor man... he also has his pride as an artist. Let him stay.

-Well, then we'll see you off after the performance.

Sophia did not answer; they walked along a narrow path, on a beautiful soft grassy surface in the English part of the park. The path was just wide enough for them to walk side by side. With the twilight came a thickening mist that hung on the branches of the trees. Slowly the white cloak descended over the meadow, and Sophia, who began to shiver with cold, wrapped her cashmere shawl around her shoulders. When the baron noticed this, he put his arm around her as if to protect her. But this made his limping worse, and for the first time Sofia felt with unpleasant clarity that her husband was a

invalid. On the main road, which ran straight through the park, one of the servants was waiting with the news that Kühnel had everything ready for his performance.

The shadow-artist received his benefactors, with a profound bow, into the room arranged for the purpose, and escorted them to the seats reserved for them. On the table a large number of candles had been placed, whose light was unified into a strong focus by a reflector behind them. In front of the light source a cloth was stretched across the room and divided the whitewashed wall opposite into two parts with its shadow. After Anton Kühnel had seated the baron and his wife so that their backs were turned to the cloth and the light source, he bowed again, first to Sophia and then to the imperial judge.

-My stage! -he said, pointing to the white part of the wall.

He then slipped under the cloth and the performance began.

-The creation of the world," said the shadow artist. And a gigantic, amorphous mass rose above the edge of the shadow on the luminous surface of the stage like a column of smoke concealing a figure; it swayed to and fro and at last stopped, seeming to revolve around itself. From it a huge arm emerged and traced an imperious gesture on the stage. And at the same time the ground beneath the figure began to live. Pieces of earth seemed to clump together, to grow, to rise, and, opening up, released animals of all kinds: lions, horses, lambs, camels, turkeys, crocodiles, elephants. The order summoned more and more creatures from the fertile soil of the shadow. At last the towering figure disappeared and the stage was empty again.

-Very good! -said the baron, and bent down to read in his young wife's face what effect the young man's arts had had on her. But Sophia sat without showing any sign of interest, and stared straight ahead at the wall.

Anton Kühnel announced the following picture. "Adam and Eve! It was the creation of the first man, life in Paradise, the original sin and the expulsion, all depicted by two skilful hands, for which only a few palm trees and paper animals that Kühnel had previously cut out were used as decoration. He had not exaggerated when he said that he was able to represent everything that had happened since the creation of the world. It was really as if all the stories since the beginning of time had taken shape through it. Extremely simplified and yet retaining the most characteristic features, the shadows brought the most perplexing events onto the stage. The most important things were expressed with clear and distinct outlines, and Kühnel's greatest achievement was to bring two people face to face in an important scene. Then his hands really seemed to work miracles, his skill gave all it could; and the more the baron saw, the more he was amazed at the technique displayed by the young man. Sophia did not seem impressed to the same extent. When the baron was not biting his tongue with his praise, she would sit in silence and stare at the stage, as if waiting for the next

table.

Anton Kühnel still depicted the Flood and Noah's Ark, followed by the story of Joseph and his brothers, and after depicting Daniel in the lion's den, he moved on to the historical sphere. He saw the quarrel between Romulus and Remus, Numa Pompilius and the nymph Egeria, the assassination of Caesar by Brutus and the rest of the conspirators, among whom the latter, very well characterised, fell upon the emperor. From Greek history he chose Hector's farewell to Andromache, then Perseus and Andromeda, the struggle for the Golden Fleece and the infanticide of Medea.

The performance had already lasted two hours without intermission when Kühnel announced that the tragic story of Hero and Leandro would continue. The shadows of the two lovers appeared clearly on the stage. At first Leandro hesitantly approached the young woman, retreated and disappeared. But then he returned, by the sea, he came ashore, and Hero left her tower and hurried to meet him. In another scene the two were kissing ardently, the bodies drew closer, seemed to merge, and yet each retained its form. The shadows seemed animated by a real life, impelled by powerful passions, swept by an irresistible tempestuous current. There, on a small scale, by the meagre means of a shadow play, reality was faithfully reproduced, life found pleasure in staging, through small black figures, a presentiment of its power.

-Excellent, really excellent! -said the baronet, "it is astonishing what this young man can do. And it is not at all comical - though it might easily fall into the comical.

Suddenly Sophia got up without a word and went out. The baron sat still for a while, quite perplexed, and then turned to Kühnel. He had come out from behind the screen and was standing at the table with the candles, his eyes turned towards the door through which the woman had gone out.

-Oh, dear! -said the baron at last, got up with an effort, and limped out of the room. He found his wife in the room with the palms, sitting in the dark, her hands in her lap, and when the baron wanted to take them in his, he found that they were holding the work, as if the woman, unconscious of the darkness, had wanted to begin embroidering.

-What's the matter with you? -He leaned his cane against the wall so that he could stroke her hair with his other hand.

-Nothing, nothing.

He uttered the words with effort, as if they could only penetrate the darkness with difficulty.

-I think there's something wrong with you. Tell me. Are you feeling unwell? But I beg you, speak.

He doesn't like that man's stories! He has become restless! I will dismiss him at once.

But just as the baron was about to straighten up, Sofia grabbed his arm and held him tightly.

-No," said she, "the poor devil has nothing to do with it. He and his art - I have found them more amusing than I thought. They are not at all to blame. It was - a sudden weakness, an uneasiness - it is past now, I am well again. Let us say no more about it. I have recovered completely. You can't blame him, he's an artist in his own way.

-Yes, he is an artist," said the baron more calmly, "he could rightfully present himself to the greatest personalities.

He felt Sofia's hand slowly slide down his arm and end up staying in his hand with a flattering gesture, with an unusual affection. This happened so rarely that it touched him. He wanted to do something equally affectionate to his wife, he wanted to show her that he was grateful for her tenderness.

-Shall I tell the young man to stay a few more days? -he asked. He could think of nothing better at the moment.

Sofia did not answer. The baron stroked her hair again, as if to encourage her to give an answer.

-Yes," the woman replied, her breathing quickening, "tell him he can stay.

The shadow artist still stood in the centre of the room, next to the candle-covered table, looking towards the door, as the baron had left him.

Some of the candles had already melted to the foot of the crystal candlestick, and the flames were licking with restless red tongues, eager for more fuel. One of the dying lights was trembling, and coveting the sleeve of the shadow-artist, who had rested his hand on the table; but he knew nothing of the danger that threatened his only costume.

-Listen to me," said the baronet, "I should like you to stay here a few days longer. If you are reasonable, you would rather stay a little longer than begin your vagabond's life again at once.

The shadow artist looked at the baron, with an involuntary movement reached too close to the flame and withdrew the somewhat burnt sleeve.

-And would the illustrious lady like me to exercise my art for her entertainment?

He asked his question boldly, almost tentatively.

-My wife agrees, don't worry about it.

The expression on Kühnel's face changed so much in that instant that the baron was almost startled. Suddenly there came over the guest, as if from the depths, an irresistible power, a glow of pride, a silent and cruel joy, a hard certainty and a brutal joy. But that alteration vanished as quickly as it had surfaced, and with a submissive bow said the shadow artist:

-I would then ask the Honourable Member to accept with my thanks the assurance of

that I will know how to appreciate such honour.

So it came to pass that Anton Kühnel stayed at the baron's house. His art was inexhaustible, and he always had something new and interesting to offer. He also showed a special skill in drawing and cutting out silhouettes. Almost every evening the benefactors came to the room where he gave his performances. And once Kühnel had become familiar with his surroundings, he would accompany his performances with a text which he skilfully adapted to the performance, so that the baron and his wife would either have to laugh out loud or be moved to tears. Baron Von Littrowsky had never had much knowledge of art and literature, his fields being war, agriculture and chess. It was therefore not difficult to win his admiration with witty and clever witticisms. At first he resisted Kühnel's influence on him, but at the end of the fourteen days that had been set for the artist's stay, the baron openly declared to Sophia:

-I don't know what I can say, but I've grown fond of the boy. I shall miss him. There is something captivating in his character - and he is a modest person.

Even Sophia, who was better oriented than her husband in the world of books and possessed a more critical judgement, recognised that Kühnel was an educated and, apparently, well-read man. This pleased the baron more than he wished to admit, and he suggested a proposal to extend the shadow artist's stay for an indeterminate period.

-Bring life into this house! And when I have to be away, she would have someone by her side to help her pass the time. You can give her drawing lessons, it has always been her desire to perfect herself in that art.

Anton Kühnel had no objections to the baron's proposal and gratefully accepted all the conditions. It turned out that the present shadow artist was a former student who had dropped out of university and, out of an indomitable desire for freedom, was wandering the world. All the more grateful was the baron for the miracle he had achieved in capturing this bird for his house. And he even placed him in a higher position in his service by employing him as his private secretary, in a post for which he had long been seeking someone perfectly worthy of his confidence. The shadow-artist, however, did not go to such a fortune, did not become conceited, and was never impertinent, so that the Baron became more and more convinced that he had found in this man a loyal servant and, at the same time, a friend.

-Yes, a friend," said he, as he paced up and down the room of the palms, "a friend, I cannot but call him so. Why should there not be true friendship between a lord and a subordinate like this? Can friendship alone be found within the equality of a class? No, it is a divine power like love and is found, like this, without question of rank or station.

Sofia, who was embroidering by the window, bent her head even more in her work.

when the baron turned to her with these last words and a questioning look.

-And you yourself," continued the imperial judge, "have you not been happier these last few weeks, and, it seems to me, healthier? Yes, that young man radiates a cheerfulness one cannot resist. And he shows a deep understanding for all matters relating to gardening and agriculture. And how he plays chess... he is at the same time elegant and bold; I think he would have been an exceptional strategist, if it is true that from those attributes in the game one can conclude the same in the reality of a battlefield. One does not know what he intends, but before I know it, he has already surrounded and defeated me. Haven't you experienced the same thing? Your game is irresistible.

It took a while for Sofia's reply to arrive.

-That's true," he said at last, turning his head and looking towards the park, from the terrace of which Anton Kühnel was coming, with a large bouquet of red roses in his hand, which he had just cut for the lady of the house.

The baron was right. Sophia, who had previously seemed to wither under a shadowy power, blossomed again. She was able to laugh again. She regained a second youth and participated with interest in all activities. If there was one thing that could further strengthen what the baron already considered a friendship with Anton Kühnel, it was the favourable effect it had on his wife. The hours spent drawing gave Sophia enormous pleasure, and Anton Kühnel also put his art at the service of her handicrafts. Out of love for his wife and his friendship with Kühnel, the baron himself took an interest in this work and praised the draughtsman's sketches, which Sophia then embroidered on valuable fabrics with multicoloured silk threads.

The baron felt even less need than before to keep in touch with the wider world. Only when his position demanded it did he fulfil his social duties, and he agreed with Sophie that he was much better off in the narrow home circle, with Anton Kühnel as his tireless narrator. When they left a party they had been forced to attend, or when guests, whom they sometimes had to invite, left, they breathed a sigh of relief. And Kühnel was always ready, even in the middle of the night, to sit with them and cheer them up with his stories or a demonstration of his skill.

But the world, which the general might think he had neglected, was far more interested in him and his life than he had suspected. Behind his back there was first a rumour, then a smile, and at last he was the subject of unabashed laughter. There were a few acquaintances who dared to allude to what people thought was going on in his house. But the baron was so naïve that he did not understand what people were referring to, so he remained insensitive to the provocative hints. It would not occur to any acquaintance to speak out more clearly, for it was remembered that the otherwise good-natured imperial judge was most enraged when anyone wanted to meddle in his affairs with uncalled-for advice. And so the baron did not expose himself to a rumour.

which was spreading more and more around him. Of course the world took revenge for the fact that he could not disturb their tranquillity by asserting that the baron was aware of what was going on and that he tolerated it in silence.

When Anton Kühnel was two years old in the imperial judge's household, the baron took him away on a day's hunt. It was a gloomy, misty autumn day, and Sophia watched the horsemen as they left the courtyard in a strange malaise. Kühnel turned once more, just as he was passing through the courtyard gate, with his hat on tightly, to bow reverently to the lady of the house who stood on the steps leading into the courtyard. Outside the path was covered by a thick fog, so that it seemed as if he was going into a huge cloud. It was the last time Sofia saw him alive. A few hours later his body was brought in on a cart. He lay on the straw, with a wound in his chest, and the straw on his left side was stained with blood. A stray shot, it was not even known from which shotgun, had hit him and killed him instantly. As the cart slowly pulled into the courtyard, Sofia ran to the window. She saw the man in the cart, saw the blood on the straw, and, without so much as a scream, fell unconscious at the window, as if by a spell her body had suddenly been stripped of its bone framework.

Thus the baron found her an hour later. He lifted her up, called the servant, and carried her, still unconscious, with his help, to the boudoir, where he laid her carefully on the wide sofa. He himself was shaken to the depths of his being, his usually rosy face had taken on an ashen pallor, and his hands trembled as if he had aged twenty years. Half an hour later, while the baron was applying essences and wet towels to his wife, he regained consciousness. She slowly opened her eyes and suddenly jerked upright, and looked so frightened into the baron's face that he was startled.

-Yes, it's true," he said slowly, "nothing can be done. He is dead.

The doctor, who had been called in and had just come from seeing the injured man to take care of the unconscious woman, confirmed that Anton Kühnel was dead. The bullet had pierced his heart. The doctor prescribed a painkiller, advised him not to take it too seriously, kissed his hand and left. And Sophie still hadn't said a word.

-So young," began the baron again, "so young! If it happens to an old person - but so young! And the most terrible thing is that I don't know whether it was my bullet which....

With a groan Sofia fell backwards, losing consciousness for the second time. The baron's house was covered with a deep sadness as if it were a black veil. The baron had lost his friend, and now, with that loss, he realised what the young man had meant to him. He solemnly affirmed that the deceased had been superior to him in everything, and he could not help remembering the artist and the human being. Sophia hardly ever spoke of Kühnel, but it could happen that during a meal, when the baron was talking about his friend, he would suddenly get up and leave.

She had lost her joy, her character withered, she was sad and mute like a prisoner.

One evening, on the occasion of the opening banquet of the provincial parliament, when the baron was remembering his friend with Count Zierotin, the count said after a brief pause, while looking into his greenish glass of muscatel:

-After all, it was the best solution.

-The best solution? What do you mean? There was nothing that needed solving. Those were good times and now all the joy has died in our house.

-Well... that friendship, Martin! It's just that... you'll have to excuse this comrade-in-arms. You always talk about a friendship between you and the shadow artist. The thing is... you, the imperial judge Baron von Littrowsky, colonel of the Lascy regiment, and a failed student, a vagabond with a criminal record, a comedian from a fairground... In short, it doesn't fit in with your position. And then the other thing... I know that evil tongues are always ready and willing and that there is no truth in it, but in any case... for some people of ill will, the appearance has been given...

It was of little use for the count to refer to his comradeship with the baron. The latter rose with a serious face and asked the count to accompany him into an adjoining room. Here he demanded an explanation. And the count, who was annoyed to see that the baron was still *in albis*, told him frankly all that the people rumoured.

-I will give you all an answer," said the count, and ordered the cars to be placed in front of the gate.

-I must give them an answer... an answer..." he muttered over and over again to himself. And the next morning he entered the bedroom of his wife, who, exhausted by a sleepless night, lay between the cushions, pale and weak. Choosing his words with great caution, he repeated what the count had told him the day before. But no matter how much caution and tact he used, the pale woman burst into convulsive weeping, and her emaciated body shook with sobs. The baronet limped desperately from one side of the room to the other, and when he knew no more what to do to soothe the woman, he began to hurl soldierly curses at the loudmouths.

-I will answer them... they shall have my answer. They will see that their ridiculous imaginings do not affect us, and that we are above such whisperings and secretions.

And after some thought the baron found the answer. He had the most beautiful silhouettes cut out by Kühnel joined together in a "tableau", expensively framed his drawings and paintings and hung them in the palm room, which was transformed into a small museum. On the English side of the park, under a leafy lime tree, there was a hill, the favourite place of the deceased. There he had spent hours talking and drawing with Sophia. This spot was chosen as the site for a monument to the deceased. Among the mementoes that had remained with the baron was a silhouette of Kühnel. Sophia had cut it out according to the instructions

of his master, from whom the pupil had received a round of applause. The silhouette showed the most characteristic features of Kühnel's head: the straight nose, the high, clear forehead, the full lips and the prominent chin. The baron had the silhouette transferred to a valuable wood coloured like ivory and placed on the small hillock under the leafy lime tree. Kühnel's head looked towards the pavilion; he looked there boldly and with a slight smile, his thin neck peeping through his open shirt.

Winter came and went, and when the spring nights were beginning to take on the warmth of summer and made it possible to stay outside, the baron invited all his acquaintances to a big garden party. The museum in the room with the palm trees and the monument in the garden were gazed at in awe. And the baron never tired of assuring everyone that he was disconsolate at being unable to do more for the memory of his faithful friend. That evening he had been hard pressed, for the duties of the host rested upon him alone. Sophia had been unable to participate. She had grown weaker and weaker, and for two weeks she had not been out of bed in the city residence. As Count Zierotin was leaving the pavilion among the last visitors, the baron held him at the threshold of the palm room and pointed to the pictures hanging on the walls.

-That's my answer, Andreas! -he said.

The count shrugged his shoulders and left.

All the rooms in the pavilion had been open to guests, only one had not been accessible to them. The one used by Anton Kühnel for his shadowing duties. At the baroness's request, it had remained closed since her death. The cloth stretched across the room, the candles on the table... everything was still the same, but the curtains were drawn, the white and gold door was kept tightly shut. The room was mute and dead, like the man who had displayed his art in that space.

The baron stood before that door, and from it he could see the succession of rooms. The servants glided noiselessly to and fro, like shadows, and from the little dining-room came the tinkling of china and the clear sound of silver. Now that the guests had gone, he felt his weariness, which he had been able to fight off until then. Behind him lay hours of physical and psychic tension, always lurking to counter some evil allusion or ambiguous word. It had been a battle he had had to fight alone against everyone. Would they be laughing at him now on his way home? And, what a horrible thought, what if they were right in the end to mock him; would he not be naive and foolish, doubly ridiculous in his efforts to prove to all the world that he doubted neither his wife nor his friend? He felt that by these thoughts he was doing himself an injustice, and at the same time he felt that he must not be left alone, for these thoughts would otherwise be sure to return. He was about to leave the pavilion when after the first movement he stopped as if spellbound. It had seemed to him as if he had heard a noise behind the door before which he stood. It was like footsteps on the

The room and as if the table moved, just as Kühnel readjusted the table before the performance began. Was there anyone in the room? The baron took hold of the handle and pushed it down... the door was locked. There was no one inside, it was impossible, he must have made a mistake. As the baron came to this conclusion and prepared to leave with a smile, he was suddenly seized by a dreadful fear from an abyss beyond all logic. It happened in the most unexpected way, so that the baron did not know how it had come about. It was a feeling of unease, but intensified to the point of fright. As if he was no longer the master of that house, nor of himself, nor of his destiny. As if someone had taken all power from him and pushed him aside, grabbed him by the throat and pressed him until he could no longer breathe.

The baron freed himself with a cry from this unbearable sensation and called for a servant, on whom he leaned to carry him to his palanquin. He spent a very restless and tormented night, full of nightmares.

The next morning his wife asked him to go and see her. The baron saw that she looked very bad, and he did not conceal from Sophia that she had had a bad night.

-And how was the party? -What did the guests say?

-They didn't dare say anything. But I don't know what they thought.

The baron kept his gaze fixed on the woman's face. What was the reason for this enigmatic illness that was consuming Sophie? How lively and cheerful she had been when Kühnel was alive. And how strange that this decline should coincide with the death of the shadow artist. As the baron was about to follow this train of thought, Sophia sat up somewhat in bed.

-I must ask you something," she said, "I don't feel well here in the town house. The weather is so fine now. I would like to see the countryside, it is so beautiful now. Let them take me back to the pavilion.

-Don't ask me to do that. She is not strong enough to be moved there. It will harm her.

The baron insisted to his wife almost with anguish. The uneasy feeling he had felt the day before returned and made him lose his peace of mind.

-Do you think I can heal here when all I do is long for our park? You'll see how good it feels.

-But the doctors are against it. And they are right, for I fear that the memory that pervades the ward will agitate her too much. It will undoubtedly make her worse.

But then the baron saw tears in the eyes of the sick woman, and found it impossible any longer to resist her wish. He was ashamed of his doubts and his treacherous thoughts, found them disgusting and vile, and with the eagerness to rectify an injustice, he took Sophia's hand and kissed it with emotion.

The doctors were very dissatisfied with this decision, but in the end they had no choice but to resign themselves, although they made no secret of the fact that in their opinion, the stay of the doctors would have been more than enough time for them.

The sick woman's condition there could not be at all salutary. But the baron's suspicion suspected veiled allusions behind the doctors' resistance, he thought he heard the rumours of the people in their worried and sincere words, and he insisted that his wife's wish should be fulfilled. When he saw how happy she was, he too became happy, and began again to hope that perhaps, against the doctors' conviction, natural instinct would win out.

But Sophia's state remained the same. She was, in spite of her weakness, a little more smiling, but her mood was dominated by a resignation which seemed as if she had ceased to defend herself against an implacable fate. In spite of his love and his restlessness, the baron could not bear to be with the sick woman often and for a long time. That smiling resignation, that transfigured and faded look in the blue eyes made him sick. And there was something else that urged him not to be in the house. Ever since the baron had turned the pavilion into a temple of the shadow artist's memory, it was as if a strange, mocking spirit had taken possession of those once comfortable rooms. The imperial judge was never at ease there; even on days when Sophia was willing to play a game of chess with him, he could not be comfortable. The shadow cast by Sophia's gaunt hand with every move on the bedclothes and the chessboard frightened him. He hadn't wanted to admit it for a long time, but finally he couldn't fool himself any longer, he was afraid of that shadow. When he was walking along the moonlit forest paths at night, and as he rounded a hedge his shadow would suddenly appear, he would be frightened and turn back immediately. He could not bear to see his shadow advancing ahead of him and preferred to return to the darkness. But when he made the discovery that this discomfort was somehow mysteriously and surreptitiously connected with people's slanderous rumours, he decided to overcome it. And so he would go out to the park on moonlit nights and visit the monument to his friend, to engross himself in his pious remembrance. He would stay in the room with the palm trees, where he would contemplate the various objects in the museum. But after these exercises of his willpower he was always doubly glad to be able to leave the pavilion and the park.

-You are neglecting me, my friend," said Sophia, as she came into her sickroom one day. And smiling, she continued, "I am a bad comrade for you.

The baron withdrew the canopy to sit in a chair beside the sick woman's bed. At that moment it seemed to him as if a shadow was slowly sliding off the chair. A long, thin, transparent shadow. The baron was startled, but in an instant he had mastered it. He could let none of his damned irritability show through to the sick woman; at every opportunity he kept reminding himself that he had been a soldier.

With an apology and a complaint of how much work had fallen to him at that moment, he sat down by the bed. Sophia listened to him for a while in silence, then said, taking his hand:

-Do you want to make me happy?

-Of course, delighted!

-I feel so good today. Come with me to the palm tree room. It's the place with the best view of the park.

-But he can't leave the bed. She is so weak. And the night air will harm her.

-No... no. We'll close the window. Give me that joy.

After persisting for a while, Sofia managed to persuade the baron to take her to the room with the palm trees. As a precaution, he wrapped her tightly in a blanket and hobbled to her side, putting his arm around her shoulders. He placed one of the armchairs lined with damask silk next to the large window and helped his wife to sit down. Sophia gazed silently at the park, while the baron endeavoured to entertain her with little incidents of the day. It was late enough, and the servants, when he asked if they wanted anything, were sent to bed.

The baron was endeavouring for about an hour to engage in conversation with his wife, when he was suddenly interrupted. He thought he heard a noise in the adjoining closed room. Just like that time - footsteps, and then as if a table were being pushed. His arm fell as if paralysed on the armchair. What had that been? He leaned over to look into his wife's face. She, too, kept her head bent forward, as if listening, and a gleam of happiness rose in the transfigured, unearthly gaze of her eyes. The baron had never seen her like this.

-Did you hear that? -he said hoarsely and hastily, as he touched her shoulder. The woman turned slowly towards him:

-Hear... hear what?

-In there, in the room.

Sofia shook her head, and the glow of happiness was wiped from her face. And she let the baron quickly wrap her in the blanket and carry her back to the room. Once he had put her to bed, he left the house and spent the night in a club where aristocrats gathered to gamble and drink.

For a few days he visited the ward briefly, enquired about his wife's condition, and left the sick woman's room after a small effort to engage her in conversation. People in the city were not a little surprised that the imperial judge found the time and the inclination to be in society, where he had been missed for so long, just now, during his wife's illness. Keen observers were struck by the nervous good humour he displayed. At the same time the news of his wife's deterioration came through, and it was thought that he was trying to drown his grief and despair, so that he was pitied. A week after the night in the palm tree room, the nurse who cared for Sophia came to meet the baron on the threshold of the sick woman's room. She put her finger to her lips and asked the baron not to

The woman, who had had a bad night, seemed to have fallen asleep.

The baron approached the bed noiselessly and wanted to pull back the canopy, when it withdrew of its own accord before his hand could touch it. It seemed to him as if a shadow appeared and crept across his side. A thin shadow, but no longer as indistinct as the first time, but clearer and more solid in outline. The shadow floated past the baron and disappeared into the gloom of the background. At first the baron had stretched out his hand towards the apparition, now he was terrified and stared into the darkness of the room where no light reached. Only after a while did he dare to pull back the canopy. There lay the woman in her bed, a happy smile on her face. She had closed her eyes and seemed to be sleeping. The baron let the canopy slowly slip from his hand and quietly left the room. On this night he did not seek the company of his friends, but spent it in a tavern with pedlars and carousers, who had gathered there for the market that was to be held in the town, and whom he with generous donations had encouraged to enjoy themselves to the full.

When morning came, one of the participants, a magician and knife-gobbler, lamented that the party had to end. But the baron slammed his fist on the table and shouted:

-Why does the party have to end? We won't meet again for a long time. So let's stay together until the day is over again.

The vendors and other fair-goers celebrated their benefactor and shouted for joy, they continued to enjoy themselves noisily, and the baron drank with them and raved with them until he thought he had overcome the paralysing feeling of horror.

It was late in the evening when, somewhat unsteady on his legs, he rose from among the congregation. A murmur of lamentation rippled through the audience, who had been drunk or sober at intervals throughout the day.

-Do you want to stay with me? -asked the baron.

-Yes, yes!" they shouted from all sides.

-Well then, go ahead! All with me.

A huge roar arose, and two wrestlers lifted the baron on their shoulders and carried him to and fro amidst the jubilation of those present. Then they all went out, the baron in front, accompanied on the left by the owner of a puppet theatre, and on the right by the snake woman. The few people who were in the street at that hour saw with astonishment the imperial judge at the head of a parade of circus performers.

At first he advanced rapidly amid laughter and singing, but the nearer the baron came to his park, the slower his pace became. Sobered by the cool night air, he began to reflect, and, to gain time, pretended that he could not walk properly. It was impossible to get all that noisy horde into his house. But he had to try to overcome the fear that increased again as he neared his goal. And now he

tried to see his companions off in good manners. When he reached the wall surrounding his park, he turned and shouted to the group:

-My children, it can't be! I can't take you home. It is because of my wife's long illness that I cannot take such a noisy company. But to-morrow!

Those who were there wanted nothing to do with it; the baron had dragged them there and now they had to go back? And when the baron again explained that they could not enter the house, they began to murmur and surrounded the benefactor with a threatening attitude. But then the baron leaned against the wall of his park and exclaimed:

-And now to do my bidding, you rabble! And if you don't, I'll split your heads in two.

He raised his baton with a threatening gesture. There they dared not contradict him, they backed away and finally retreated like a dog threatened with a stone.

The baron went on his way with a sigh. But scarcely had his companions left him, when he was seized with that anxious uneasiness which always seemed to await him there. He stopped, and already wanted to call the others, when he thought whether it would not be better to return and spend the night at his house in the town. But now he remembered his duty. For a whole day he had not inquired about the state of his wife's health, although he was well aware of the seriousness of her condition. It was at least necessary to ask for news of it, then he could leave the pavilion again. And so he limped along the park wall to the entrance. Suddenly he was startled. The moon had risen behind a cloud and cast the shadow of the baron on the whitewashed wall. The silhouette was clear-cut, as if from the hand of Anton Kühnel, and the sudden memory of the dead man forced him to stop. Then he went on his way all the more quickly, and kept his head turned away from the wall so as not to see his mute companion.

From the porter the baron heard that his wife had spent most of the day unconscious, and it was evident to the old man that he had given up hope of seeing his mistress well. The baronet entered the room with the palm trees without making a sound, and was about to go into the adjoining room, by which the sick woman's room was reached, when he heard light footsteps coming towards him. He stepped back, and at that instant a man passed by him, though somewhat blurred but with a fixed form. And when the baron examined him, he thought he recognised in him the figure and face of Anton Kühnel. The man crossed the room with the palm trees and went to the closed door of the sacrosanct room, opened it and entered. The baron was seized by a desperate courage, stronger than his horror. He rushed to the door and pulled the handle... the door was locked. The baron gave up his intentions and went limping and panting, as fast as he could, out into the park. He was going mad, there was no doubt about it. And spurred on by terror, he ran through the park, disoriented, not knowing where to run. Suddenly, something stopped him. A perception pierced him, penetrated him like a red-hot iron.

inside him and reached his conscience. He found himself again and saw that he stood before the monument to the shadow artist. The moon was already so high that it fully illuminated the hill and the tablet. But... the baron was as if paralysed and it seemed to him as if some power was taking his scalp... the tablet was smooth and empty, Kühnel's silhouette was gone... gone... gone.

The baron turned away, gritting his teeth. He went along the main path of the park towards the pavilion, and it took all the strength of his will not to cry out in horror. There a gleam of light came to meet him through the trees, the baron marvelled, for the house was silent and dark when he left it. As he approached, he saw that the glare came from the closed room, and with a desperate determination to pass through all that night had in store for him of horrors, he approached by the verandah to the lighted window. The curtains were drawn, as usual, and within it was bright enough to throw a strange play of shadows on the screen. And now it emerged in the baron's memory. It was the scene of Hero and Leander, just as Kühnel had depicted it on the first day. Only enlarged, so that the shadows occupied the entire frame of the window. Bodies pressed together and joined in a wild kiss. Swept by powerful passions, by an irrepressible tempest, the two lovers melted in a delirious embrace. And the baron recognised them both: they were his wife and the shadow artist.

The baron climbed the stairs and pushed angrily at the closed door. It opened and he examined the room. Sophia was completely alone. She stood in the middle of the room, in her nightdress on the bed, motionless and with her eyes closed. All the candles were burning on Kühnel's table. The baron ran to the woman and grabbed her by the shoulders:

So you have deceived me - deceived me! -he shouted.

Sofia did not respond, opened her eyes slightly and then her head fell heavy against his chest. Frightened, he embraced her and carried her with an effort, partly in his arms, partly dragging her to his bed. The nurse was asleep in her armchair and awoke when the baron had already put the woman to bed. The baron still cast a glance at Sophia's face, a small, weathered face, but lit by a smile of happiness. Then he went out.



He went to his room, where he had an entire wall adorned with guns. He slowly took down a pistol and loaded it carefully. He didn't know what he was doing it for or why he was going out into the park with a loaded gun. Something was driving him to do it and it was driving him. And suddenly he was standing in front of Anton Kühnel's monument again. The silhouette

He was on the board again - clearly - he was there again, he was back; and the baron felt a smile on his lips, like an evil compulsion. He raised the pistol slowly and surely and aimed at the chest of the silhouette.

-You'll never get out of here, my friend," he muttered, "you'll never get out of here.

The shot rang out and the baron approached the monument as if it were a target, to examine it. He had aimed well. The bullet had hit right where the heart of the living man was.

When the baron returned to the sick woman's room, the nurse was bending over Sophia's bed. As he entered, she stood up and said in a low voice:

-She is dead.

The baron sold his possessions in the city, gave up his office and retired to a country house. But farming no longer gave him any joy and he wanted nothing to do with chess. His mood had darkened and soon after his strength declined.

The baron's park, which had been bought by the town council, was intended to be used for beekeeping. But the bees did not like it there...

THE SIXTH PARTNER

The forest on the Bohemian border is always dark. In the daytime, the fearful sister of the night dwells in it: the gloom. But when night comes from the mountains, then the werewolf howls in the thicket, and in the marshes the evil troll strangles the deer until it dies in death throes. The sky wields a bloody whip over the darkness, and below, on the plain, a cottage burns.

The two companions hit the winding road.

-I'm thinking," said Christian, "we should soon have to find the inn.

The other laughs derisively:

-If the devil hasn't swallowed it down his filthy, stinking throat, we are honest craftsmen officers through thick and thin.

They keep walking and stumbling. The bloody whip in the sky zigzags like the glow of a devouring fire. But it only points, it does not illuminate, and the two companions do not even know where they are stepping. At last a light comes into view.

-Hello, innkeeper! The broom-maker and the cooper are here.

-You will be granted entry.

The host is at the door as wide as it is wide. Behind it there is light and solace, warmth and bed. Three are already seated at the large table. It smells of roast meat, and the two companions' stomachs contract.

-Excuse me!

Christian and Gotthold put their bundles in a corner and lean their walking sticks against the wall. Then they sit down at the table.

Now they are all together, leaning on the table and emanating the stench of the walker: sweat and dust, accompanied by the grumbling of empty stomachs.

Five companions on the road that chance and the night have brought together in the lonely inn on the bohemian border.

Christian Borst, the broom-maker.

Sebastian Springer, the rocket man.

Johannes Ambrosius, the storyteller.

Georg Engelhardt Löhneiss, sword swallower, crystal eater and champion of eating or drinking huge quantities of anything.

The honest craftsman wants to go to Saxony, to Meissen, to find work and support with a good master.

But the three wandering officers want to move on to the other side, to Bohemia. There is a market in Goldenstein the next day.

Each one goes about his life and stretches out his trembling hands towards the green soap bubble of fortune. They sit at a table and lean their elbows on it and all they know of each other is what their dusty, listless, weary eyes tell them. Each dwells in a different world, in a terrible, devouring loneliness, and they do not

can say nothing to each other; their souls fall, like dead butterflies, wings outstretched, slowly, very slowly, into an ever-deepening abyss, passing through planetary systems and milky ways, from one sad wasteland to another even sadder one....

The heart-rending fear of all living things lashes at them with steel spikes...

But chance and the night have thrown them into this lonely inn. They want to celebrate being together. In reality, it is no reason to celebrate anything, except the joy of having before them the appearance of a human being who perhaps suffers like the other, who questions and torments himself in the same way without knowing it.

They want to get drunk.

From the fire in the chimney comes a strong red beam. It is the noisy glow of a copper frying pan. The young innkeeper and the maid have put a piece of meat in it, with pepper, salt and onions. Johannes Ambrosius has brought it. It sizzles and sizzles in the pan. The companions interrupt their conversation and listen as the fat drips out. The innkeeper has sat down with them, and they talk nothing but nonsense: about the passing of time, about the Turkish and the Spanish, wisdom of the road, old-fashioned anecdotes.

In the meantime they chew on dry bread to calm their stomachs. Because the peppered meat won't be enough to satisfy everyone. But the maid now has to run to pour the bohemian beer into the tin mugs. What it will be like when the peppered meat starts to burn the throat...

The three wandering officers pay for everyone, because the next day they will earn money again. So:

Yes, yes, drink up, German
brother, Fill up your belly
And whoever falls down, let him get up
again. Fill yourself to bursting,
Lilelale riquerraque,
Stagger into eternal bliss. Eat at two cheeks
Drink and drink, sing and shout,
Gaudeamus, glim, glam, Gloria,
There's nothing new in this world.

It echoes throughout the room, and the pewter cups on the walls hum too, and the glass tinkles tinkling at intervals. But it is not joy, but fear that moves them. And even the flames of the hearth seem to tremble and waver. Upstairs, in a corner, hangs a black mask, wobbling in the reddish light.

And when silence falls, the companions and the innkeeper look at each other, and everyone is afraid to utter the first word. The maid is frightened by the clanking of the jars she fills in the barrel, the innkeeper would like to take the meat out of the frying pan so that she can

don't jump and sputter; the conversation starts with effort and heaviness, like an old beggar falling asleep while walking.

But everyone is still drinking to the hilt.

-The habit of drinking to excess is a miserable, disgusting and unnatural vice," says Johannes Ambrosius.

After all, he is a former preacher who sometimes confuses the tavern with the church.

The broom cup gives a tremendous gulp:

-To tell the truth is to be called the German vice.

-Yes sir," says the eater, rubbing his stomach, which is as big as a lansquenete drum, "but it feeds the man.

The peppered meat is ready and served. When the innkeeper passes by the rocket man, he gives her a pinch on the thigh. The innkeeper screams, the companions laugh, the innkeeper smiles with satisfaction. Never mind, that will come out later on the bill, when you've had your fill.

After the peppered meat, thirst becomes a wild animal. The bohemian beer is very light, but its litres confuse the heads and put a red mist in front of the eyes. The shadows that lean behind the companions on the wall, begin to come to life and sway back and forth... lilibilale... riquirraque... Oh, there's another beautiful song!

Mistress Venus in bed
dudeldudeldudeldum.
as one would like to have it in one's own,
dudeldudududeldum.
But Mr. Bacchus is bigger, he
chases us all over the world, he
paralyses us and twists us.
but all the more do we like it,
dudeldududeldeldum...

Loudly, bellowing, the Löhneiss shouts:

-Comrades, if the devil would grant me one wish! I would like to die completely drunk so that my eyes would be injected into the firmament and my entrails would be wrapped around the stomach of the world.

And everyone else shouts:

-Me too, me too!

Suddenly, in the confused shadows behind the table, it happens like a gust of wind, they all lean over and approach each other, so that they end up forming an amorphous lump. Arms, legs, bodies and heads pile up and form a single body. A wide hat with a feather waving backwards,

a rusty dagger; one of the Lansquenets of Passau, as they were scattered all over Bohemia, stands in the dark corner.

No one has seen it. Only the maid who was serving. The fright has left her eyes and mouth wide open, and her arm outstretched, rigid, pointing at him. The guy comes out of the corner, swings his legs over the bench and is suddenly seated among his companions. But they are already so drunk, along with the innkeeper and the other maid, that they are not surprised at all.

-Hopla! -Come on! New pitchers and another beer! What do you want? Hamburg beer, Zell beer, Muhme, Arnstadt, Einbecker or English beer?

-We only have Bohemian beer in my cellar," says the innkeeper contritely.

-Come on, come on, your cellar... if I'm buying, your cellar doesn't count. The fellows prefer English beer.

The man from Passau gestures. But the maid doesn't move, her arm outstretched and her eyes wide open. He laughs and gestures again. And the mugs come of their own accord through the air and are placed in front of the guests and the innkeepers. A stupendous stout brimming with foam.

-Good trick! -babbles the rocket man. And they drink: Aaah!

-You are a conjurer," says Löhneiss, "do you want to make money tomorrow in Goldstein with your diabolical skill?

No, I have only come here to-day in your honour. But out with the fripperies. For good officers, good mugs.

The door opens. And through it, one after the other, from the kitchen, the cellar and the stable, the biggest pots and pans come in: buckets, milk churns, tubs, buckets, kettles. They are brought to the table. The crockery from the cupboard is placed before the maid. And immediately all the containers are full of beer. Finger-thick dirt sticks everywhere on the rims and handles; grease and grime accumulate in layers. But that doesn't matter. They drink, and they like it. They drink the contents of the tremendous containers in one gulp. The innkeeper, from the squeegee; the innkeeper, from the milk churn; the rocketman, from the fire bucket; the broom-maker, from the basin; the story-singer, from the cucumber barrel; the cooper, from the water jug; the eater, from the rain barrel; and the maid, from the chamber pot. It was as if the beer was being poured into an abyss.

There was only a murmur and a splash, like a waterfall.

-Now I am going to give each of you a taste of a particularly exquisite beer, each one's favourite.

-A rosemary beer, which is good for the melancholic," says the sad Johannes Ambrosius.

-Garlic beer, which helps with gout and colic," says the innkeeper.

-The rocket maker says, reaching between the legs of the innkeeper's hand, "Beer made from the root of énuła, necessary for the woman's stupidity.

-Lavender beer, which strengthens the head and is excellent for sleep," says the broom-maker and wheezes into his fat.

-Melissa beer, which strengthens the heart and helps against pregnancy," says the innkeeper.

-Sage beer, so that loose teeth will stay in place, so that the trembling of the kneecaps and other joints will disappear," says the cooper, suffering from rheumatism.

-Clove beer, which makes the stomach turn to iron and makes it as big as a house," says the glutton.

-Wormwood beer, which expels worms from the brain and is good against stupidity," says the maid.

-So be it! exclaims the conjurer, and from the buckets, basins and barrels a multi-coloured mist is released, smelling like all of India: spicy and mild, strong and light, bitter and sweet, hot and cold.

Everyone drinks and praises the master.

-Won't you join us?

-I'm coming," and he pulls out a skull trimmed with silver, from which he drinks. The skull has silver rims around the jaw, so that the teeth gleam slightly; silver rims around the elongated nostrils; the eye sockets are lined with silver, so that the glare of the fire is reflected in them; and the lid of the brains is raised so that he can drink comfortably.

-The devil has given you a splendid magic jug," moans the sword-swallower. And the innkeeper, because she is pleased and because Sebastian Springer tickles her, squeals with laughter.

-Jijiji... jijiji... jijiji!

But Sebastian Springer... ha, what a Springer he is. He doesn't want to make light of the guy's trick, he can do something too... Besides, the skull doesn't scare him in the slightest, you can find that in any fairground barrack. He takes a frog out of his pocket and sets it on fire. Purr... rrrr... rrr..., the animal jumps all over the room... on the table, among the jars and buckets... on the window sill... now it bursts... no... jumps into the fireplace and gets bigger and bigger, like a real frog, but on fire.

And he keeps getting bigger... the Springer's hair stands on end... now he's as big as a St. Bernard dog and he looks at them with burning eyes. Purr... with a wild and evil look, like a devil. The rocketman now knows that the sixth mate has played a joke on him. But he doesn't give up. He pulls his biggest snake out of the sack and sets it on fire. Slowly he rises from the ashes, grey and inapparent, pushing one ring of ash after another onto the table, between the jugs and the buckets... one ring of ash after another...

-Devil's meat, stop it! -shouts the Springer and goes to crush it. But the snake is coloured green and dark blue, in stripes all over its body, and it

It curls and whistles and sparks and grows longer and longer. In front he has a small, lively head with sharp, black eyes.

It crawls along the edge of the table, across the floor, over the maid, who is still wide-eyed and with her hand outstretched, wraps itself like a bracelet around her wrist, climbs one ring after another up to her armpit and then searches her mouth with its small red tongue....

Now Johannes Ambrosius weeps. He weeps for the misery of the world, for his spoiled life and for his great-grandmother having to die so young. His tears are as thick as a pigeon's egg and leave deep furrows on his cheeks. They burn her clothes like burning coals, and where they fall to the ground, they open great scorched holes.

-He who is ripe, falls," says the sixth companion.

And Johannes Ambrosius weeps even more loudly. Already the white bones of his jaws are visible on his face, and his nose has been devoured by tears. His body melts like butter in the sun and is softened by the burning wetness of his tears.

The broom-maker, seeing it, can't hold back his laughter. At first it sounds like the clinking of rusty iron. Then, as if it were a cart loaded with stones passing over a bridge, and at the end, as if the earth were shaking. The window panes vibrate, and the table wobbles. His face reddens, turns purplish red like the twilight sun; then black as a dark, moonless night, and blacker and blacker, like the world before there was light. His stomach has swollen and reaches up to the ceiling.

-He who is ripe, falls," says the sixth companion.

There is a sudden bang and all the lights go out. A wind blows as if a storm is blowing through the house. When the lights come back on, the broom cupboard has disappeared. His entrails are still stuck here and there on the ceiling, his brain on the doorway, and his legs are on a large cup on the shelf.

-Purrrrrr... kak..." -the fiery frog from the cooker.

-But let's stop thinking about this sad event and dedicate ourselves to the noble wine," says the man in black.



Now they drink elegant wines: Malvasia, Rhine, Neckar, with spices. Wines called: "Give me back my innocence", "Rejoice", "Don't go away", "Laugh at the world", "Look in the glass", "Sit well", "Get drunk". And so that the wine is not drunk unaccompanied, in the buckets swim live minnows, tadpoles and

elvers.

The wine rushes down their throats, getting hotter and hotter, like torrents through narrow gorges. The innkeeper goes to one side, loosens her bodice and undoes her skirt, comes back and continues drinking... yippee... yippee... glim... glam... glam... gloria!

Alas, good old Johannes Ambrosius, they have forgotten all about him. Where is he? They look for him and call out to him: Johannes Ambrosius! But he is no longer there. On the bench there is a large, damp stain, on which the last burning tears are still gurgling and spluttering.

The innkeeper and the cooper reproach each other for not paying attention.

-Such a loyal and understanding travelling companion, and such a good drinker.

Their eyes are rigid and glassy, standing out like fists in their red, puffy faces. And then they go on arguing about gout and toothaches, because they have forgotten why they started arguing. They argue about the crown of pains. The innkeeper wants to elevate his gout above every other torment, and the cooper praises his toothaches as hell on earth. Their heads become as big with anger as pumpkins, and in the end they rush at each other's throats, bite each other, fall to the floor and roll in the corners, howling and bleeding.

-He who is ripe, falls," says the man from Passau, who is still sitting quietly in his seat.

A new fury seizes both of them and they shake each other as if they wanted to snatch each other's souls. The innkeeper manages to tear off one of the cooper's arms. He hits the handsome man relentlessly on the head with it. But the cooper is no slouch, he jumps with both feet on the innkeeper's stomach until the boots appear on his back.

-Purrrrrr..." - the burning frog does on the cooker and shakes with laughter. The snake also laughs to himself, and all the buckets, basins, chamber pots begin to smile sarcastically. The cooper can't get his legs out of the innkeeper's body and shouts for his boots to be taken off. The innkeeper dies. But in the torments of agony he still manages to quickly grab the enemy's face and gouge out his eyes. From the empty sockets flows a dark, stinking liquid, fermented, rotting beer and wine with fish roe and curling elvers. The cooper falls and dies.

The rocket man and the innkeeper don't give a damn if the innkeeper gets his stomach stomped on. Now they can love each other undisturbed. And they start right away.

The sixth partner takes out a small, squeaky flute and plays on it. The flute excites them even more. The rocketman has got down on the innkeeper's knees and tears her clothes off. She screams and throws herself on his neck. And the two fall on top of each other, like animals. He stirs in her like a melter in liquid metal. Her arms are pincers and hollow the man's body so that the ends

twisted like bent sticks. Head and legs upwards, only half over the woman's body.

-He who is ripe, falls," says the guy in black.

A shrill, agonised scream. A single scream. Blood pours out of the woman's back, zigzags across the floor and mingles with the mass of tears of the unfortunate Johannes Ambrosius, with the liquid entrails of poor Gotthold Schlägel, with the fish oil of the late Christian Borst and with the intestines of her own blissful husband. With a dry crunch the rocketman's spine cracks, its raised ends fall, his soul flies away with a sigh. His dead body lies limp on the dead body.

The maid's mind is transfixed by all these events. The guy in black looks at her with a wink and mutters indolently:

-He who is ripe, falls.

The worms, now that their understanding has ceased to function, no longer move and begin to crawl out of their brains. Disgusting, greyish-white worms crawl out of his nose, eyes, ears and mouth at the same time. They writhe and wriggle and writhe, they sway back and forth as if they can't stand the air very well. They want to go back. They bite each other and rebel. They hang like violet curls that have grown in inappropriate places, in the eyes and in the mouth. Violet curls and in movement. How beautiful! The maid's head is like an old cheese, hollow and soft, and slowly the mush runs down her shoulders...

Now the sabre swallower knows who the man from Passau is. But a genuine German sword-swallower and champion drinker of liquids doesn't give up just like that. He says so to the devil's face and challenges him.

-Very well," says the demon, and accepts the wager. The sword swallower says a quick prayer to his patron, St. Ulrich, and hopes to win. So far he has always won. Last time in Augsburg against a fat Pomeranian, whom he beat by three legs of veal.

So they start from the beginning. The sword swallower only regrets that there are no spectators, for there is no one left but the petrified maid. He has never eaten and drunk so well. Not even in Nuremberg, where you had to pay three fat dogs to get in. In the end the devil fares badly. And he finds that he's no match for a real German eater. But it's already dawning, and he has to end up there as soon as possible. So he leans towards the eater:

-I honour your art, master Löhneiss, you almost surpass me. But I don't know if you are aware of what you have ingested here.

-I think English stout, spiced wine and brandy. Three good-sized oxen, twelve plates of cheese, nine suckling pigs, and six dozen hard-boiled eggs. Not counting bread.

-So it seems. But it was actually your late grandfather's fat and spleen.

watery from your dead grandmother, the juice of dead dogs that have been buried in the fields. Pus and carrion of all that has lived, that has grown and lived again in bread and animals, transformed into wine and beer. The old man up there is not rich enough to throw anything away. But he does know how to change the taste. That's it.

And an enlightening light tells the glutton that the devil has spoken the truth. And the nausea rises from his stomach like a slimy salamander, crawls up to his throat and stays there. It swells and wants to choke him. The Löhneiss jumps up and runs around the room, roaring and bellowing. He claws at the walls and tears at his face with bloody fingers. Dementia whips him and makes sparks fly from his limbs.

-He who is ripe, falls," says the demon in a very low voice. He almost feels sorry for the capable man.

The glutton leaps up onto the table, grabs a knife and plunges it into his stomach. He twists it with all his might. A large chunk of the abdominal wall falls out, the stomach, intestines sliding to the floor, and with the dreadful stench he realises that everything in him is beginning to turn to pus and carrion.

-It's the truth! -he shouts, falls flat on his face and is dead.

The demon rises. His black figure almost fills the whole house. He looks around and smiles.

-A good haul.

And he goes out. But as he passes the petrified maid, on whose outstretched arm still curls a grey, kinky bracelet, he strikes her a blow. The corpse falls and turns into a heap of ashes...

Outside the dawn breaks through the forest. In the east there is a sickly yellow light. The bloody whip in the sky flames for an instant and pales.

The demon drops to all fours... cloak and dagger fall away, a bristly skin covers its entire body, and a bushy tail extends backwards. It wanders into the forest howling.

In the distance the werewolves answer with howls and moans. Down below, in Goldenstein, a faint, trembling bell tolls, calling for the first mass in the morning.

TAKE MARINESCU

I met Professor Gergruber under the dragon lanterns at a Japanese party. It was in the garden of our ambassador's country house; a multi-coloured paper monster with a gaping snout was goggling its eyes over the professor's head, spitting colours on his bald head, while the music of the gypsies echoed into the night, like a whirlwind, from the dance hall.

We stumbled and he said "sorry". At that I recognised that he was German, for I had stepped on his foot and he said "sorry". For the rest, it later turned out that he had the strength of a bear, he had played all kinds of sports, the ribs in his chest were made of steel, his thighs were like inflated tyres, books hadn't made him the least bit incapable of punching someone in the stomach with his fists. Nevertheless, he said I said "sorry" when someone stepped on his foot. He couldn't help it, it was a hereditary vice. He was born in the Passau region.

Later we had a few beers and a couple of glasses of champagne, we became friends, our souls became porous. It turned out that Professor Gergruber was in Romania on scientific business. His university had sent him to gather material to write a major work on the Gypsy language. This work was to be the most scholarly and solid thing that had ever been written on the subject. Years later I saw two thick books which Gergruber called his schematic preparatory works, and since I know that boredom and incomprehensibility are undoubted hallmarks of great scholarship, after these trials I dare only think with deep respect of his planned monumental work. It is obvious that Gergruber used the most modern methods for his research and that he equipped himself with gramophones and records to obtain phonographic recordings of the Gypsy language.

At that time, it was the fashion in Romanian society to take an interest in harp music. The harp played the same role at the Romanian court as the flute did at the time in Sanssouci. As the queen liked to sit at the harp in her flowing robes and strum on it, drawing out silvery sounds, there were Carmen Sylva imitators at all social gatherings, including invitations to tea in the best salons of Bucharest. Everywhere the chaste folds of dresses brushed the harp's column, slender fingers trembled sobbing on the strings and the purest nobility of soul floated towards the stars with ethereal notes.

They found us in the champagne corner, we had to come out and listen to Mrs. M. denying her famous poise through the harmonies of the spheres.

Afterwards, I said to Professor Gergruber:

-I noticed what he was thinking about. About forests and their gypsies.

-Yes," he said, surprised, but it had not been so difficult to guess, for everything the professor was thinking was reflected in his face in light and shade.

As that night we shared joy and suffering with good camaraderie, and as the

exchanging our respective plans for the immediate future, we discovered that we both intended to tour the same region in the Romanian forested mountains, it is understandable that we decided to team up on the expedition. Those partnerships that are based on two hours of champagne and a joint escape from the arpeggios do not usually have much consistency or a very long life. Most of the time the next morning they are overshadowed by more important matters, and only in later chance encounters does a wry, familiar smile remind us that once upon a time in the past they had sworn eternal friendship. But Professor Gerngruber was a man who despised such frivolity and took even oaths made after midnight very seriously. So in the days that followed I had to take good note of all the peculiarities of the equipment and even procure a few things for our future stay in the woods; and I could not leave Bucharest until we had arranged the exact day and hour when we were to meet.

Touched by an attachment so quickly and so undeservedly obtained, a week later I actually found myself at the appointed time at the little railway station in the middle of the forest. Professor Gerngruber opened one of the train windows and waved cheerfully at me, then got out, came running towards me and gave me a bear hug. He looked good, almost like a trapper, his high gaiters were reminiscent of leather breeches, and if his strength were matched by an equally fierce spirit, one would have thought him capable of having human scalps hanging from those gaiters in a short time. Three men were in charge of the baggage, the scientist and the staff, two of whom were intended as servants, the third being Take Marinescu. Although he had been hired in a higher position than that of a simple porter, he carried more than either of the other two, he was brimming with diligence, zeal appeared on his forehead in the form of sweat, all his strength seemed invested, in unconditional devotion, to us and our activities. He was young and handsome, slim, with a Roman profile. When he showed that profile, one had to think of those Roman legionaries who in the old days defeated the Transylvanian rebels and who slowly transformed from soldiers into peasants. But when he turned his face and looked straight ahead, there was the Dacian, the Scythian, the Slav, the cousin of the Hun, I don't know, with the racial characteristics of the peoples of the East, with angular cheekbones, a furrowed brow, eyes that blinked gracefully, arched eyebrows.

In a small train we went into the forest on a narrow track and my friend instructed me on the division of labour and the timetable we would follow. I was to do the hunting, he was to do the research. Take Marinescu was the administrator, the watchman, the man to be trusted in dealing with the natives, the factotum; a university professor in Bucharest had recommended him strongly, saying that he was a great guy and would be of invaluable service to us. It was necessary to have an intermediary to overcome the shyness of the forest dwellers, who would not open up just like that to a European.

From the end of the journey we still rattled for a whole day in a farmer's cart along narrow forest paths. The settlement where we were to stay for a while looked like a conglomeration of dirty huts at the edge of a valley, as if the world of cleanliness and urbanity could not have kept them any further away. In those immeasurable forests on the southern slopes of the Transylvanian Alps dwelt an ignominious and degraded people who lived in abominable poverty and lived on disgusting food. It should be noted that this forested region south of the Hungarian border belongs to the most unknown regions of Europe, and the maps show the same white patches and the same perplexing schematism and generalisation in the drawing as the maps of the Albanian mountains. It is enough for the rich gentlemen to know that trees grow there, side by side, virgin forests in which one can cut down for a long time before leaving them devastated; and to know that one has a hunting lodge there in which one can entertain oneself wonderfully, for two weeks in autumn, with friends and girlfriends. And then you have recourse to those men of the forest who, because of their laziness, cannot be employed in the firewood business, but who can be employed as mountaineers.

This the professor told me as we travelled in the rattling wagon, and three times he nearly bit his tongue off. I, too, was curious to meet these primitive men, of whom I had an idea which I later recognised in an engraving in an old edition of Cook's Travels. But with these images it happened to me in reality as it often happens with the ideals of an original state. Instead of being surrounded on arrival by a tribe of savages in loincloths or animal skins and shell necklaces, we found a handful of ragged men and women. They were dirty and ragged, that was all. Countless hands, which like those of monkeys had palms whiter than the outside and just as wrinkled, stretched out, mendicant, towards us. I believe that the gypsies of those forests have to come out of the maternal cloister with those begging gestures; all the reflexes, all the impulses of the will flow into them, sleep with them, and if they were buried alive by chance and woke up in the grave, the first thing they would do would be to extend their hand begging. Of all the culture, of all the various relations of human society, they possess nothing but this one mean and shameless gesture.

For the rest, there was no evidence of shyness, but rather of an unabashed curiosity that touched everything, their behaviour indicating a kind of stupid arrogance, unfounded in anything but, perhaps, an insurmountable excess of filth and scabies. So Take Marinescu had to make less effort to attract them than to keep them away, and this he did with all his energy, beating left and right with his stick, so that we thought there must be broken bones and bruised skulls. This was also the only language in which we understood the people at first, for the knowledge of

Gerngruber of the gypsy languages were not enough for this remote corner of the world, where a most strange and bizarre gibberish was spoken, a mixture of thousands of linguistic residues.

One can imagine with what impetus a man whose life was devoted to research in this field would set to work. Scarcely had we settled properly in our tents, when he was already setting out, with notebook and gramophone, to capture this gibberish as if it were one of the most important revelations of the human spirit. The remoteness of our forest dwellers from civilisation can be deduced from the fact that they seemed to be completely unfamiliar with the gramophone. They knew nothing of this cultural toy, which could be heard squeaking in the tents of the Bedouin sheikh and in the igloos of the Eskimo chief, but they were also too obtuse or too proud to wonder at it or to fear it, as a real natural people would have done. When they heard their own voices on the gramophone, they laughed to themselves and listened as if they had shouted in the forest and waited for the echo to resound. Only the oldest in the village, an old man with a patriarch's beard and a nose like a violet mandrake, would sometimes get furious, feel mocked and spit angrily into the horn.

It was astonishing, moreover, how quickly Gerngruber got into the gibberish, babble and gibberish of his gypsies. The pages of his notebooks were covered with notes, the collection of records grew by the day, and after two weeks he had established the basics of grammar and a respectable vocabulary. Now he could understand people and try to penetrate further into their imaginative and sentimental world. His method prescribed that he should first of all ascertain their conceptions of divinity, but he soon became convinced, as he assured me ruefully, that this question was apparently too complicated to be solved for the time being with his meagre knowledge.

-In any case, and contrary to expectations, they have very subtle religious notions. -If I ask the old man, 'Are you a spirit,' he says, 'yes.

Do you know where God lives, I kept asking him, and I didn't expect him to say "everywhere" because he has the gift of ubiquity, but rather, like a child, to point to the sky. But he gets scared and restless, he shakes in his seat, he doesn't want to answer. I insist, I promise him tobacco, it makes his eyes sparkle but still his fear increases; I hold a packet of tobacco in front of his purple tuber, then greed overcomes fear, he takes it and mutters: "in the glass". Instantly he throws his arm over his eyes, groans and recoils like a dog afraid of being hit. What can one think of that? What religious notions do these men have who, by name, declare themselves Christians but who care neither for church nor school and who seem to have forgotten the State and its army?

A couple of days later this complicated notion of the divinity of the forest gypsies would become clearer. I had been out hunting early in the morning and returned in the evening, very tired and all scratched up from the march through the forest.

The thorny branches had torn my clothes and whipped my face with their thorny branches. Gerngruber sat with some old men under an oak tree in front of a small fire. He had the gramophone beside him and the notebook in his hand. The men had roasted a hedgehog, divided it up, and now answered, clicking their tongues and cleaning their teeth on the hedgehog's quills, my friend's questions, which to me seemed like a water pump that, toiling and snorting, is trying to draw water from a dry and reluctant spring.

He saw me approaching, greeted me with his eyes and said:

-Oh, there's blood all over his face!

-It's possible," I said, "the forest has given me a good beating.

And I took out a little round mirror that showed me a bloody scratch across my forehead and another on my cheek.

At that moment something unexpected and strange happened. The men, who up to that moment had been sitting comfortably munching and suckling around the fire, dropped the chunks of meat from their filthy paws and threw themselves face down with a slight whimper.

Gerngruber gave me a puzzled look and shouted something to the men.

The older one, without lifting his face from the ground, made defensive movements with his right arm and excitedly belched out a couple of words.

-It says," said the professor, "to remove the mirror.

My mirror had thrown the men of the forest to the ground, a superstitious fear of the glass that reflects our person had seized them and we suddenly understood that they knew no god, but only an idol, the mirror, that those Christians in the forests of the Transylvanian Alps were fetishists.

I put the mirror in my waistcoat pocket; the professor informed them that the god had withdrawn, and they now rose slowly with fleeing glances at me, still spellbound by the presence of the object which their miserable, helpless souls held sacred. It was impossible to resume any conversation, they remained disturbed, and after a while retired to their huts.

-You know," I said to the professor later when we were talking about what happened over a bottle of wine and trying to organise in some way the knowledge we had gained about these people, "for me the mirror has always been a sinister object. It imitates us, it makes us a double, it turns us into a ghost, a spectre, we suddenly see ourselves outside ourselves, a life-size copy, which is at the same time a caricature, an insubstantial appearance, which slides off the glass without a trace when we turn away. Deep down this has always frightened me, and only habit allows us to endure this horrible reduplication of our self. Well, since I know that there are people whose god dwells in the mirror, I find it even more sinister.

-Perhaps it's a dark sense of what you say," the professor mused reflectively. Excuse me, it's no joke: monkeys are very astonished.

when they see their image in the mirror and turn around and find nothing behind it. One step higher and the fear of the apparition arises. Then humanity emerges in the mirror of culture and the mirror becomes an object in which optics can read a lot of laws. It has its rules and its place in the world and its appearances. One step higher and from our nerves and our fantasy that old primitive fear comes back, because we know very well that with our explanations and our laws we do not explain and do not substantiate anything. In our gypsies it is the inconceivability of these creative forces of the crystal that inspires them with fear. Is there not, in fact, something divine about it, in which never, not even in our religion of love, can a trace of fear be completely suppressed... I mean, is it not like a creative act of divinity when out of the nothingness of the empty crystal suddenly appears a human figure that was not there before? And is it not an equivalent of death and destruction when the image is erased again, when it disappears completely, just as human life disappears from the mirror of the world? Is there not a profound philosophy hidden in the superstition of these people?

It is seen that the professor was inclined to give to his gypsies and their thoughts an importance by which the study of their language became all the more important. That night we spent a long time in conversation on this subject, and the next morning something forced us to take up the conversation again.

After breakfast the oldest man in the village came and sat down on the floor beside our table and seemed to be in a sort of solemn mood. He was silent for a long time, and as it often happened that he kept us company without uttering a word, we paid no attention to him at first. I got up to get my shotgun and suddenly he began to speak. The slow, bombastic way in which he spoke, so different from his usual glottals and rushed sounds, aroused my curiosity; and I saw in my companion's face astonishment, in all its registers, until a most amused smile broke out on his face.

-You can't imagine what he wants," the professor turned to me, "he demands nothing less than that we give him all the 'divine crystals' we have. What do you say? Apparently this old gentleman is also the high priest of his tribe and considers himself authorised to collect all the mirrors within his reach and to place them in his custody.

I found his demand somewhat inappropriate and said something rather loudly in German, whereupon the old man, who did not understand the text but understood the melody, looked stricken. His wrinkles contracted convulsively, the white beard began to tremble and the violet tubercle above him paled visibly as if the hand of fate had pulled his nose. I paid no more attention to him, slung my shotgun over my shoulder, whistled to my dog Belisar and took off into the woods.

When I returned in the evening, Gerngruber came to meet me smiling.

-Imagine, the old man is here again and has asked for the mirror again; I think he fears for his priestly prestige if someone other than himself possesses the crystals.

divine. Who knows how many crystals he has collected, in what shrine he has hidden them, and for what kind of extravagances they will serve him. He has become most shameless, and I have had to send him packing.

That night I was too exhausted to engage in a long conversation about mirrors. When one has been ten hours walking through impassable wooded mountains, the strangest peculiarities of one's fellow-men leave one more indifferent than a piece of cold meat and the blanket in which it is wrapped. My sleep was deep and black, without any trace of imagery. I was awakened by a jolt, it was dawn, the professor had his hand on my shoulder.

Listen, my shaving-mirror is not in its place. I want to shave and I can't find it. You didn't take it by mistake?

-How could I have picked up the teacher's mirror by mistake? I was growing my beard at will.

-So it has been stolen! Do you still have your mirror?

I looked in my waistcoat, rummaged in my pockets, found the watch, the compass, the toothpick, the key to the suitcase, but the mirror I looked for in vain, it had disappeared with Gergruber's shaving mirror, and was probably now in the shrine of the divine crystals.

We looked at each other. "Take Marinescu," we both said at the same time.

I have not yet spoken of this highly recommended trusted man, who acted as steward and foreman, because it seemed to me more important to tell first a little about the customs and characters of these forest dwellers among whom we lived. I hope that I shall be proved right later on when the course of our adventure becomes known.

Well, with Take Marinescu it happened that as the weeks went by, from an attentive, obliging and diligent boy he became a lazy, negligent and dirty rogue. Whether it was because the teacher, to whom I had left supreme command, was too good-natured to tie this young man up short, or whether it was because his dealings with this degenerate people had brought out the basic instincts of his nature, eliminating European education, the fact was that the only thing he had proved himself at was loitering; he had shown no skill except in gluttony; and the only thing we could rely on was that he would lie. We had long known that in him we were paying a hidden enemy; we had observed that he sometimes missed trifles which we heard jingling in his pockets.

When we sent him to the nearest town to buy food, he cheated us in the most shameless way. And each of these buying trips took four to five days and was so tiring that we would rather be cheated than leave the forest for so long.

With the gypsies he had built up a relationship of trust, we knew that he gave them freely of our food and that he participated unashamedly in their insatiable

voracious in their feasts of hedgehog, lizard roast and ant soup. There was no doubt that he had sprung from that dark, primitive mass of humanity, he felt a kinship with them, and had learned the language of the forest almost as quickly as the professor.

Our tolerance had made him bolder and bolder, and so it happened that, at the request of his friends, our mirrors disappeared at night.

His name had come to our lips at the same time, but no sooner had we uttered it than the professor's German conscience seized him and he began to reflect. We considered that our servants were harmless, somewhat narrow-minded, but of a bomb-proof honesty, founded on an unflappable reverence. They could not be suspected of an attack on our possessions, besides they were Bulgarians, they had no linguistic relationship with our gypsies. But that it had been neither the old man nor one of the village gang was easily deduced from the fact that Belisar had not barked. The dog used to lie between my sleeping bag and the professor's by the entrance to the tent and would certainly have attacked any stranger who approached suspiciously.

So there was only Take Marinescu left, and the professor told him so in the sternest tone he was capable of. Although he was understandably angry that his shaving mirror, the most important piece of his personal possessions, was missing, that tone of utmost severity was still as soft as butter, and Take Marinescu denied it with a shameless smile and without even flinching.

My blood boiled, I pushed the professor aside and confronted him. I no longer remember what I said to him, but it must certainly have been something more forceful than the professor's reproaches, and I must have brandished my cock in his face several times, for I still remember his eyes, how they lost their brazen gleam and began to reflect fear and humiliated perfidy. The eyeball was coated with fine red hairnets, the rim of the pupil darkened: a thin, extremely tense circle around a black, flaming pit of hatred. What I can no longer remember is what made me so angry that I slapped him so hard.

But it happened. Take Marinescu shrieked several times, went into hiding and did not reappear all day.

If we thought we had intimidated them with this robust method, we were wrong. The gypsies seemed to believe that after the seizure of our divine crystals we had been left without protection and that they need no longer fear us. In their opinion, we had been deprived of our strength and it had been passed on to them; hence their desire for other tempting objects grew, and Take Marinescu served this greed all the more diligently as it also served to satisfy his lust for revenge. Hardly a night passed without something going missing, either a towel, or an instrument, or some of our provisions, which we had piled up in our tent to protect them as far as possible. And the stolen things would emerge here

or there; from time to time, the professor found one of his shirts on the body of a savage with a face eaten by smallpox; I fished my compass among the worn and dirty breasts of an octogenarian old woman.

They carried the stolen delicacies brazenly before our eyes, and allowed us, without much agitation, to take them away again by violence, for apparently their conception of law asserted that taking was the foundation of property. Such quarrels with this degenerate people were, of course, ignominious and unworthy. Had the village been situated in the heart of Africa, I would have considered myself authorised to apply criminal punishment and to impose order and tranquillity with exemplary floggings. But we were in a state governed by the rule of law, were we to play policeman, outrage the whole population against us and in the end create God knows what diplomatic problems?

The professor opined that if it wasn't so interesting what we found there, he would vote to take down the tents and leave. He gave me a lecture, by way of apology, on the exceptional and unique composition of the language of these people and sacrificed Take Marinescu for the sake of a longer stay, saying that he was fed up and would expel him from there.

-No," I said, "it's not enough to drive him out of here, he'll hide in the woods and continue his activity there. He's a thief. Does he notice anything when he steals from us? It's as if he knows perfectly well when we are asleep. How many times we've taken it in turns to keep watch, but always a kind of drowsiness must have taken hold of us. Belisar doesn't even squeak, at most he wags his tail when he vents to the guy. Once, at least I think so, I spent the whole night watching the entrance. I think I could swear to you that not a fly moved, and the next day my binoculars had flown away. It seems to me that he releases one of the winds from the tent, throws it inside, catches something, pulls them out and fixes the wind again. No, my dear professor, we cannot get rid of him unless we give him such a scolding that he will not want to come back. Give me full powers, let me act as a hunter.

The professor gave his somewhat hesitant consent, and all day long I amused myself with watching our Take Marinescu, how he walked, with a defiant air, swaying his hips; how he lay under a tree, smoking and brazenly stalking our movements, and the pleasant presentiment of a coming satisfaction ran through my body.

In the evening I made my preparations, while the professor still sat before the fire. I did not want to shake his soft heart, or hear any pretext at the last second. Night came, the fire was burning down, above the forest glade, over our heads, the sky with thousands of stars was visible. We crawled into our sleeping bags, without having spoken again of my plan, the execution of which Gerngruber might not have expected for that night.

I myself made up my mind to stay awake, even at the risk of having wasted a night, for it was by no means certain that Take Marinescu

that very day he paid us a nocturnal visit. For a long time I struggled tenaciously against sleep, my watch saw the hands advancing from one number to the next without anything happening to reward me for my burning eyes or the effort to get out of a possible doze. Already I was beginning to believe that Take Marinescu had been warned by his animal instinct and would let this night pass like any other in which we were alert.

It must have been close to dawn when over the narrow opening of the entrance to the tent, and over the back of the sleeping dog, I saw a grey thread suddenly hang; that presentiment of light was suddenly there, perhaps I had fallen asleep during its approach, or it had just emerged above the threshold of consciousness. At that instant I heard, without having been preceded by any preparatory noise, the strong steel spring behind me suddenly spring up and close.

I got excited, the joy of the hunter went to my head, I had just captured Take Marinescu, we had him, now he could stay a while shaking, he deserved it. That he asked for our help to free him, that he humiliated himself before us and promised us that he would leave and never come back. It gave me a cruel joy to imagine how he was gripped by the hand, how he gritted his teeth to keep from screaming and how the pain, at last, tore the first moan from him. I applied my ear to what might be going on in the trap, but except for a few faint noises, scarcely louder than the flapping of a stray bird against the tent, nothing could be heard. What superhuman strength of will this fellow possessed to let his hand be squeezed so long by those steely jaws without calling out to us!

At last I became very nervous, waiting for that groan which would not come. The longer I stood out there, the more it triumphed over me; every minute that passed, the more my soul was grieved; was I a European, or had I already become one of those savages, with the cruelty of a beast and the joy of the torments of a human body?

A pale light hesitantly entered the tent, I couldn't resist it any longer, I moved back to see Take Marinescu's wrung hand in the stocks.

I shouted.

Between the jagged steel jaws was a single bloody and twisted finger.

-What's the matter? asked the half-asleep professor from his bed.

-Look here," I said, trembling. -I said, trembling, "I have put up my hunting-trap; it locks with a bolt, and to open it you need the keys, which I have with me.

-¿Y?

-But don't you understand? I put one of those traps behind the tent, so that the thief would fall into it when he reached in. Take Marinescu has fallen...!

Gerngruber climbed out of the sleeping bag.

-Here, look... but it's come loose. He's left a finger, he's cut it off, without making

noise... he has mutilated himself to free himself... like an animal, like a fox or a rat.

The professor stood beside me, in boxer shorts trimmed with red at the waist, and in socks, his bald head like a tight-fitting helmet on his head. I sensed that he disagreed with me, and that the sight of that severed toe affected him in a most distressing way. As I also did not agree with the outcome of my first manhunt, I would have needed someone to help me alleviate the disappointment, so that I could have reproached myself. But as the professor did not cooperate in this, the whole burden of apology fell on me, and I conceived the whole story as annoyingly confusing and nourished a clear resentment against the unfriendliness of my companion.

Moodily and thoughtfully we went about burying the finger, and we did it like children burying a canary, making a coffin out of a cigarette packet and padding the inside with some cotton wool. And for the rest, we agreed to keep quiet about the matter.

Take Marinescu, of course, disappeared.

On the tent canvas we found some small traces of blood; on a flat stone near the stream, a dark stain. But otherwise, the forest had swallowed the man without trace and we assumed he had wandered away from our camp.

The teacher told the gypsies that after a serious dispute we had fired him. But you could see that they didn't believe us.

After a few days we learned in a strange way that it had by no means left our vicinity, but wandered off somewhere in the forest and stalked us.

When we appeared in front of our tent one rainy morning, after we had stuck our noses out into the damp air and looked for a dry place on the ground where we could open our camp chairs, my attention was drawn to a dead mouse lying by a puddle. There were a lot of mice in the woods that year, so there was nothing unusual about the little carcass, unless there was something striking about it.

-Look, professor! -I said, "There's a dead mouse there, and on its body you can see three little pieces of wood nailed to it.

It was really like that, three splinters rose from the grey skin, sharp at the top and bottom, one at the neck, one at the stomach and one at the back.

The professor bent down to take a closer look at the corpse, and when he stood up again, he showed, as it seemed to me, a most disproportionate seriousness.

-It's a message," he said, clearing his throat, "you know, a message in the sign language of the gypsies. You know that the nomadic tribes communicate by these signs on the road, the direction they are going, and other things worth knowing. But

I don't know what that particular sign means... Let's call François and ask him.

We both pretended not to think anything of it. I know, however, that the professor thought the same as I did, that at the sight of that enigmatic sign Take Marinescu immediately came to our minds, and from that moment on it never occurred to us to imagine that he had left the forest.

François, the village chief and high priest of the mirrors, who God knows how he would have received his name, appeared before us and we led him to the dead mouse. After observing it briefly, he shook himself, as if removing something from his shoulders, and extended three fingers of his left hand towards the impaled corpse.

When he turned his face towards us, I saw in the upper part of his face a hypocritical concern, and in the lower part, barely concealed, a malicious joy at the evil of others.

-It is just as I told you," the professor translated the expert opinion, "someone is announcing misfortune and danger.

-Someone? Who? -Take Marinescu!

-François doesn't know that. The sign gives nothing away in that respect.

-Come on, man, don't believe everything these people say! Can't you see that they want to intimidate us? They're in cahoots with Take Marinescu. And, by the way, he's gone, he's left the forest and now he's walking the streets of Bucharest.

I realised that the last two opinions contradicted each other, got very angry and shooed the old man away with a threatening movement.

Moreover, I made up my mind firmly to believe that our enemy was no longer in the vicinity, and I managed to collect a good number of reasons why it had to be so and not otherwise. But I could not prevent my nerves from submitting to my good motives, and in the forest, during my hunting expeditions, I imagined all sorts of threats and dangers behind trees, bushes, and rocks. Nor was it any pleasure to crawl through the forest thinking that a rope might suddenly be thrown around my neck or a knife thrust into the back of my head. In the end, no matter how much we appeal to reason, it is not our head that gives us displeasure or satisfaction in our lives, but our nerves, which are our real masters. And, strictly speaking, when someone is capable of cutting off a finger caught in a trap without making a sound, he is also capable of much more unpleasant things than that.

Why should I deny it, under the circumstances I would have preferred the professor to have said one day that he had finished his research and that we could pack our bags. And it is possible that he felt the same way, but as is often the case, neither of us wanted to say the first word and it was my poor Belisar who suffered the consequences. I returned one day very tired from the thicket. In the mountains a storm was brewing with blue-black clouds, banks of clouds moved over grey and green peaks. Birds chirped in anticipation of rain, my skin was breaking out in thick beads of sweat. When we, me and Belisar, arrived at the fountain where we

We provided water, the dog threw himself on the ground, thirsty as he was, and began to drink greedily.

We had discovered this spring, a quarter of an hour's walk from our tents, and had reserved it for ourselves, because we did not want to drink from the stream used by the gypsies with God knows what polluted water. Their stream ran through a small lagoon and then past the huts, here, instead, it gushed in a clear, clean stream straight out of the rocks through a small spout in the basin. Belisar stood beside it, his front paws spread wide, as if he wanted to embrace the stream of water, and he slurped thirstily with a long, red tongue. I waited patiently for him to finish. At last he stood up with a dripping nose, shook himself, so that the drops flew around him, wagged his tail appreciatively and trotted so coolly back.

When he lagged behind, I paid no attention and followed, only when I was about a hundred paces from the camp, I looked for him with my eyes. He was coming very slowly behind me, with his tail between his legs, his head sunk and his legs strangely bent, as if his bones had suddenly softened. After five or six steps, he would stop, I saw him tremble and his head sway as if hanging limply. My whistles did not encourage him to hurry, and his decay was so ostensible that there could be no doubt that he was seriously ill. I ran to him and he stood with his hindquarters paralysed, as if his spine had been broken. His eyes were covered with a cloudy veil, his flews contracted, and when I wanted to put my hand on his head, he bit me blindly. Soon after, she collapsed completely, lay on her side and her muscles went into terrible convulsions, long waves of spasms ran through her whole body.

My poor Belisar had no salvation, I stood before the dying dog with a confusion of thoughts in my head. Suddenly, one jolted me, struck me painfully in the centre of my conscience. It upset me and I ran furiously to our camp. There were the two servants tending the fire, in a pot our meat was bubbling, in a small blue pan our water was boiling for tea.

I heard two screams, a loud whistle, a cloud of steam rose up and almost burned my face.

-What's the matter with him, is he crazy? -cried the professor.

I had thrown the pot of meat and the pan of water to the ground with two kicks, and the two servants were kneeling by the broken fire, in which the pieces of meat were sizzling, and they looked at me with the expression of people who are about to be decapitated the next moment.

The teacher held me by the arm and kept shouting:

-What's wrong with him?

-Belisar has just died! -I said at last, forcing my throat to speak.

Gerngruber didn't get the connection, his eyebrows raised in high arcs over his round eyes.

-Belisar has drunk from the fountain. They have poisoned our fountain.

I was proved right, we found the earth disturbed on the pipe and underneath the layer of moss we found a yellowish powder and in the same pipe a small yellow ball in a little bag. The water we consumed passed through a poisoned earth and through a pipe in which death had been planted.

That night the professor felt that he had had enough and that it would be best for us to leave. He had pretty much finished his work, once we had visited the cave gypsies, so there was nothing to stop us leaving.

The cave gypsies were certainly the strangest and most godforsaken human beings in that Romanian forest; nothing could prevent us from seeing and hearing them. We hastened our preparations for a three-day excursion into the unknown, stocked up on provisions, weapons and instruments. From the black box we took a sufficient number of records, and set out with one servant, who carried the rucksack and the gramophone, while the other stayed behind to guard the camp.

Furious torrents foamed as they pounded on the jagged rocks, the bridges consisted of two logs lying side by side and passed over deep chasms with no parapet to cling to. A maze of greyish-yellow sandstone walls surrounded us with the grotesque shapes of a haunted city. Along the ledge of a mountain we walked carefully, crossing a quagmire in which our servant once sank up to his knees.

On the second day before us loomed the clay wall, about a hundred metres high, which looked as if a giant had smoothed it with a shovel. As we came closer we noticed the wrinkles produced by time and created by the water running down it, as well as the small, pygmy-like holes at the foot of the terrible slope. In the mountain dwelt a remnant of the prehistoric world, of the dirtiest and most wretched primitive world of mankind, one thought one was visiting one's ancestors, on the borderline with the ape, as far as the darkness, dampness and filth of the dwelling was concerned. In those labyrinthine caverns the smell was unbearable, as if we were crawling through the putrid bowels of a gigantic monster. It was so far removed from the present, so paleolithic and decrepit, as if it revealed the original depths of history.

The astonishing thing was that a rather showy race of humans could survive there, more attractive than their kinsmen in the forest villages around them, thin, sinewy men, and above all women who up to the age of twenty or twenty-two possessed a strange and disturbing beauty. In them seemed to mingle Egyptian and Roman features, the softly tremulous nose-lobes of Queen Nepto, and the forehead, chin and shoulders of the so-called Sabine in the National Museum at Rome. Though they had grown up straight out of the filth, these young women somehow gave an impression of purity and grace, and only when they passed the first

They fell under the law of the nature of their origin and their environment, quickly turning into worn, tired, slimy old women, stiff and stiff with dirt. In front of our eyes they wiggled contentedly and vainly, in their rags they let us see the nakedness of their nimble bodies with a metallic sheen, they stood together, they laughed and seemed to expect something from us.

We would soon find out what they thought they expected of us. Gerngruber had already been working with his notebook for an hour and invited the whole society to meet in the most spacious cave, the throne room or the underground market place of the mole village.

About fifty people entered the room, bodies and heads crowded together in the galleries. Three or four torches were burning on the walls; as in the troglodyte caves of the Auvergne, reddish schematic drawings of animals and human beings were visible on the hard, smoothed clay of the ceiling.

In front of us, in the centre of the gathering, a group of about twenty young girls had gathered, jostling, laughing, and swaying their bodies like great flowers. The men stood with an Indian earnestness, and all the louder the old women chattered, as if they had a privilege to call the shots.

All necks stretched as our servant took the gramophone out of its case and set it up. The professor's method was always to play a couple of records to his candidates first, so that they could hear some stories, legends or poems in their own language or in a different but related one, so that he could more easily explain to them what it was all about. Experience had shown him that he always found what he needed more quickly in a meeting than when he had to seek out the storytellers or singers one by one. But this time, before the professor could explain what he wanted, one of the old women, who couldn't seem to wait any longer, stepped forward and led a young girl by the arm to the gramophone horn. And without further compliments the slim girl began to strip off her rags, and undressed herself before the eyes of the whole village.

The professor seemed to have lost his speech, he turned to me in bewilderment, but what could I say to him, I didn't understand a word of that gypsy language, so I just shrugged my shoulders and didn't know whether I should fix my gaze on the beautiful body before me or lower it.

The professor, in the meantime, had regained his self-control, at least enough to hold a conversation with the old woman and find a solution. The old women chattered and chattered, others intruded, a chorus soon fought against my companion's voice, he was shouted down, and it was seen that their opinions differed more and more.

The professor returned to me, bathed in sweat, after a quarter of an hour of hard fighting, as I was waiting impatiently and very nervously for clarification.

-Imagine that! -he exclaimed in agitation, "it's unheard of, who can consider that

possible...

-What?

-They took us for... no, wait. I asked why the girl was undressed. And the old woman answers me that it was to get an idea of her. And what for, I ask her, I just want to record your voice, your stories, tales and songs, then I'll take it to Germany and write a book with it. "So you don't want to buy any girls," she asks me...

-Buy girls!

-That's right, my friend, they think we are white slavers. It seems that every year these traffickers come to these remote regions, to these wastelands far from any culture, to buy fresh merchandise. Then they sell them in Bucharest, or export them, or who knows... and now the women are outraged because they have made a mistake with us.

They were really disappointed, we had had to offend them in their holiest, the furious chattering grew louder and louder; only the men remained rigid and with an American Indian earnestness, for according to the customs of the tribe such trade was the exclusive province of the women. The young girl at the gramophone horn put back on her dirty rags and shrugged her shoulders mockingly, the mother still ranting, uncontrollably, in the face of the professor. It was difficult to put our scientific intentions into practice, and the professor had to talk a lot and apply three times the usual monetary donations to get a couple of miserable tests on his disc.

When we emerged from the labyrinth of the caves back into the forest, it was really as if we emerged from the prehistory of time into the present. I was about to say something very socio-political when I noticed my hand being taken, and as I turned around, I saw the slender face of the young girl who had undressed in front of the gramophone. Her nose was sniffing, trembling, at the air, her lips were delicate and beautifully drawn, she said something that sounded more beautiful than anything I had heard so far in the gypsy language.

-He says he wants to read your palm," explained the professor.

From his hand a warm current was transmitted to mine, with great gentleness he turned my fingers over and turned the palm upwards. Then he looked for a long time at the lines of the skin with seriousness, and I gazed in the meantime with a kind of tenderness at that lovely bowed head and how through the black hair ran a streak of white.

Then she muttered, without raising her head, some obscure words. My gaze asked the professor.

-Hm! -he said, evading the answer, "it prophesies, naturally, something unpleasant, as was to be expected....

-Tell me.

-Bah, it's nonsense... sickness and death!

I could already feel the smile of superiority on my lips when the girl suddenly spat loudly into the palm of my hand, let out a malicious shriek and with a laugh disappeared down the nearest hole. I remained static, saliva running through my fingers, and with our knowledge and our honesty, we felt as if we had been abandoned on a desert island.

Whether from a sense of bitterness at the defeat we had suffered with the cavemen, or from a presentiment of future surprises, we returned from our excursion very dejected, and both of us expected to meet with some misfortune. We noted with a gasp that our tents were in their original place and heard with satisfaction from the servant who had stayed behind that nothing remarkable had occurred during our absence.

So we could have been at ease, but we were still not as comfortable as we had come to feel. It was as if a hostile and disturbing spirit had moved in, that something was lurking there with its rigid and malignant eyes, and I really welcomed with gratitude the professor's words that his investigation was over and that we could leave whenever we wanted.

-Let's leave tomorrow!

The professor packed his records, I helped him with the intention of bribing fate by making myself useful. We spoke of peoples in the state of nature, of slavery, of the white slave trade, of the racial enigma of that human beauty in the caves. The palm of my hand burned, as if there had been a slightly corrosive poison in the young girl's saliva.

-You know," said the professor, "I'm sick of these woods. I long for my library and my desk and the damp pavement of the streets overlooked by the illuminated shop windows. The original is no longer for us, we are partakers of a culture measured equally for all beings... please put this disc in the black box.

-I understand," I said as I leaned with the disc on the box in the corner of the shop, "I can appreciate a person like Take Marinescu aesthetically, I mean aesthetically. But deep down these appearances are nothing more than uncomfortable disturbances of the balance.

I had opened the lid and put, without looking inside, the new disc on top of the other one.

-Our energies...

I felt a cold touch on my fingers, a rushing hiss, as if the wind was blowing through a crack, then an intense pain... I withdrew my hand, from it hung, swaying, a snake body of slimy black, a triangular scaly head had sunk its teeth into my flesh.

The professor screamed, rushed at me, I don't know where he suddenly pulled out a pair of pliers with which he grabbed the snake's head. Then he plunged my hand into fire, cut and burned, poured brandy into me, I saw the tent around me begin to spin dizzily, and the centre of that

whirlwind was my swollen and deformed

hand... Soon I lost consciousness.

The next morning I awoke as if from a heavy drunkenness, but the professor had saved me by burning, cutting and brandy, otherwise I should have died long ago. Three dangerous black vipers had been taken out of the record box, but there was also one in my bag, one in the camera, and even in the thermos was one of those aggressive beasts, and the professor had been hunting snakes with the servant for a good part of the night. He killed a family at the foot of each of our sleeping bags. The prophetess girl had got the first part of her prophecy right, and the illness didn't last long either. After ten days I had recovered with no after-effects other than a hole in my right hand, paralysis of the fourth and fifth fingers and some weakness.

We started our return journey without further delay.

A day's rattling in the wagon affected me again, and the journey in the open carriage through the autumn forest made me very cold. I was glad to reach the railway station and the prospect of a soft seat in a comfortable fast train.

While the professor was buying tickets at the ticket counter and sorting out the luggage, I looked out over the wooded hill. Yellow, red and ochre leaves were falling, and the patches of the lonely valleys were more visible than in summer. In a fragment of blue sky surrounded by white clouds flew a distant bird. So vivid was the memory of all that I had experienced that when I suddenly had Take Marinescu before me, I thought of him as a creature of my imagination.

-Good morning," he said, smiling.

-You... are you? -What do you want here?

He dug his left foot backwards into the earth and lifted his hat.

-The gentlemen are leaving. I am going back to Bucharest.

-Go to hell! -I said, furious that I didn't know how to deal with such impudence.

-Oh, yes," he laughed, "but I've still got some of my wages left. The gentlemen haven't sacked me, so I've still got my wages for - wait for it - five weeks and three days, that makes....

He raised his hand and began to calculate how much we owed him, he counted nine fingers and a stump, the full complement of which we had buried in the forest.

-What? You ran away, you rascal! I said, foaming at the mouth, and pointing to his stump, "you ran away, and now you demand your wages? Think of the fountain and the snakes! Oh, that there were no police here - I'd report you at once - but I'll call the station-master and have him lock you up in the boiler-house till a policeman comes.

-What... what... what... sir... policeman? -and he stuck out his chest and approached me with a brutal and challenging gesture until he almost stepped on my feet. He expelled the air he was breathing in.

my mouth, her pupils were rimmed with an iridescent ring so tense they looked like they were about to burst.

Fortunately the professor came at that moment, otherwise, despite my weakness, I would have fought with Take Marinescu. Gergruber locked me as if I were a child in his bear-like arms and withdrew me.

-What do you want? -he asked Take Marinescu sharply.

More restrained by the professor's erect figure, but with obstinate coolness, Take Marinescu repeated his demands.

-No,' cried Gergruber, 'no, no, no! -he repeated a little weaker.

The fellow sensed some hesitation and raised a shout as if some great injustice had been done to him. We were surrounded by a circle of men, all woodcutters from the forests, who had come to receive their wages. They had drunk a great deal of alcohol and were waiting for their train to arrive. When sober, these men are usually quiet, and bear the heaviest burdens patiently, but with liquor they become dangerous, then it may happen that they suddenly remember that the lords are also made of clay, like them, and that they have only one life, like them.

Take Marinescu shouted and the men tightened the circle around us, for it seemed that an injustice had been done to one of their own.

-They want to get out without paying me my wages! -shouted the man and waved his arms, "just like that, they want to get out of here! After having served them for so long... Brothers, I live by my hands... and those gentlemen are rich! They want to get even richer by taking my wages!

I felt the hostility of these men increase, they tightened so much that they formed a wall, I felt myself being pushed from behind, they were pressing me towards Take Marinescu. The professor could have opened a breach with his bear-like strength, but he let his arms dangle and seemed to be weighing up whether a couple of broken ribs could be justified.

-Make way! What's going on here? -someone shouted.

The station master came to our aid and immediately the circle of men widened.

-This guy... this murderer..." I said, shaking with rage.

-No... no..." the professor made a gesture of refusal, "do we have proof? We do not have any...

-What's going on here?

-Let them give me my wages! -shouted Take Marinescu, and the woodcutters repeated his words with a grunt.

-He demands his salary, but he left us in the lurch," I said.

-Look, the following happened..." began the professor thoughtfully.

A signpost, which I could see between Gergruber's head and Take Marinescu's, rose up, producing a rattling sound.

-The fast train is coming! Make room! -the station master's voice overpowered the

noise from our circle. After that shout, the stationmaster leapt towards the teacher, grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him away from the tracks. We all retreated to the side.

-Don't let them get on! -howled Take Marinescu.

-Don't let them come up! -shouted the woodcutters, blocking our way.

-Let them pay! Let them pay!

-My God, what can I do? -cried the station master with a groan. Let me through...

I must go to the train... you'd better pay. What can I do?

The train entered the station with a wild whiff of remoteness and danger. The woodcutters, who were close behind, staggered somewhat.

-Don't let them come up!

Take Marinescu stood before us with his legs spread and his fists raised.

He had seized power, he dominated the moment, we could not escape him.

The professor hesitated for a few seconds; the conductors were already closing the doors again, someone gave a shrill beep. The professor took out his wallet, blew a ticket, Take Marinescu ducked...

We rushed onto the train, we threw punches...

Five minutes later we had caught our breath, and as we passed over the iron bridge over the gorge, we began to feel ashamed.

-It's been an interesting adventure so far," said the professor, "but today Take Marinescu has shown us his skill.

I looked at the multicoloured trees in the forest climbing towards the Hungarian border.

-Yes... I think we still have a lot to learn to live up to that caste.

THE TOMBSTONE OF THE BOGOMILS

When evening came, I left Bilek for the Vardar. On the other side, in Macedonia, that's the name of a big river, here it's a mountain on which there is a very old building. God knows who laid the foundations. The Serbs later ate there, and then the Turks, and finally Austrian policemen guarding the border against the Montenegrins, and now the old walls have been blown up, and it is sometimes said that "freikorps" spend the night inside and watch from there the road leading from Kobilja glava to Bilek.

But the mountain slope is pockmarked with countless graves and strewn with tombstones of a vanished race. In this region the Bogomils had a mighty empire, and perhaps one of their cities was found here. But nothing has been preserved of it except perhaps the remains of a tower above, in the Vardar, and this anthill of graves, the city of the dead on the slope of the mountain. All the other buildings have fallen victim to wars or the hammer of time, and sometimes it seems to me that the region is so deserted and abandoned because the ruins of the cities of the Bogomils are scattered all over the countryside.

I turned off the road along a narrow path towards the rock formations and did not need to search long for the graves. I was in the middle of them. Among the Christians, the Jews and the Turks, the tombstones have specific shapes, but among the Bogomils, no law seems to have prevailed. The arbitrariness of the bereaved created a great variety of forms: sarcophagi, urns, the simplest tombstones, horizontal and vertical, but also holes were dug in the rocks.

I continued to ponder among the graves as the gloom increased. What were these bogomils? A race? A sect? An empire? History didn't know much about them, and I knew even less. A serious and quiet man, a lieutenant colonel in Bilek, had told me something: that their religion had been no religion at all, but a kind of moral doctrine drawn from the best principles of Christianity and Islam. And traces of that doctrine were still to be found in the district, where the inhabitants were neither Muslims nor Christians in the strict sense of the word, since they had no churches and no need for priests. The peasants were simple, honest, hospitable, honest, and no greater injustice was done to them than to anyone else, when in Europe they were slandered as sheep thieves.

Thus I was reflecting on how cities and towns succumb and yet an idea survives them, and that our enemies would be delighted if we were to meet the fate of the Bogomils and perhaps recognise the German idea as the idea of mankind. But it had grown quite dark and I stumbled, looked a little confusedly around me, among the graves, and saw not far from where the strangest of the bogomils' tombstones stood in that abandoned cemetery.

It had the appearance of a cross and was also somewhat in the shape of a human figure. The upper end of the main body was round like a head, and from it the stone descended like two drooping shoulders into the arms of the cross body. It seemed to me that the two bodies, the horizontal and the vertical, were covered with enigmatic characters; and when I bent down to look at them closely, someone very close behind me, almost at the nape of my neck, said to me:

-Good evening, sir.

I have to admit that I was startled and jumped to the side. My hand was in a second in my jacket pocket, where I kept my Steyrer pistol. But the man remained very quiet, motionless, as if he himself were a tombstone that had begun to speak.

-Look for the ancients, sir," he continued. They are gone. There is nothing left of them but these stones. The whole empire is lost.

Now I saw that before me stood an old peasant. He wore the usual costume, from his back hung a shotgun, and what he wore of white, the cloth with which he wrapped his legs and waistcoat, gleamed somewhat in the darkness. He towered over me, certainly by a head, and I had an unpleasant feeling of being forced to stand before a stranger in the dark, who might well be one of those savages from the Montenegrin border, before whom I felt so small.

-Come with me," he said, "I'll take you to the road.

And he went ahead of me while I wondered if the best thing to do would be to take shelter by jumping into the darkness. But I didn't know where the road was, and getting lost in the area of the Montenegrin "freikorps" was not advisable.

After walking for a while along a winding route between boulders and around the edges of the dolines, the man stopped and said, as if he had to carry to the end a compulsive thought with which he had started the conversation.

-Here all empires are lost in the end. Here they cannot but be lost.

I ceased to be amazed that the man spoke like that; only afterwards, in the bright light of the officers' canteen in Bilek, was I struck by the astonishment of that and other expressions of his. But the question I asked seems to me to indicate that beneath the threshold of my consciousness perhaps astonishment was stirring:

-Who are you? -I asked.

-I am from here," he replied, "and you are one of the Austrians who came with the horseless carriage to-day. I was on the road and saw you.

-Are you from the protection corps? -I continued to ask.

He did not answer, but I thought he turned his head and glared at me from his height. I stumbled after him without asking any more questions until he stopped again and began:

-And do you know why this empire succumbed? Because of debauchery. That is the curse that weighs on the country and the people. It's the blood that makes us drunk, and for which we lose everything. It is in the

blood, through each of us flows that wild and violent current that bursts everything. Do you know why the empire succumbed? The old man took the son's wife. The last king of the Bogomils took the son's beloved. Then he fled the country, fled to the Turks, adopted the faith of Mohammed and covered the land, which was now his enemy, with wars. He destroyed castles and cities and turned his former homeland into a desert.

We were in front of a sarcophagus across our path. The Slav unholstered the shotgun and leaned it hard on the ground.

-I know many such stories. They tried hard to restrain themselves but blood would not allow it. Our blood is not like yours, which runs calmly and takes time to build, to write, to think, to conquer the world. We don't think about the world, we only think about the enemy, the nearest enemy. Crime and love, love and crime, that's our story. Again and again love and crime. We will never achieve the great things in life, because we have to hang on to our neighbour's throat to kill him with our teeth. Our blood is our curse. Curse our blood.

Suddenly I felt as if a burning steel needle was piercing my head. Something new, hitherto unknown, burst in on me like a pain. What language was this man speaking? It was the language of those mountains, it was Serbian, and I had not known until that moment that he understood Serbian. And I understood him, as I understand myself when I let my thoughts speak. But as soon as I felt that astonishment as a painful shock, it disappeared and left only a sort of stupor with which I followed my guide.

Where was that man leading me behind him as if I were tied up? We seemed to be entering a landscape even wilder and more sinister than the one we had found ourselves in. Like gigantic bones the limestone blocks rose up into the night and they were all covered with a thin, luminous skin, with a green and yellow glow, a slightly tremulous glow. The stones crawled on the black ground like skeletons, broken ribs, pulverised femurs in the churned earth of a graveyard. Ahead was a hole, a dark hole, the bottom of which could not be seen, perhaps a doline....

-Here I have seen seven hundred dead women, seven hundred women's corpses, fallen in the fight. There is not a metre of ground in our mountains that has not already drunk blood, a wild, impetuous, furious blood. It boils inside us until it confuses our brain and our hand resorts to the knife. Our empires cannot last because our blood will not allow it. They have all fallen because of the greed of a few individuals. And once again I see empires fall because of the greed that, from boiling blood, rises to the brain. And our soil drinks our blood insatiably, it cannot get enough of it, it is always dry... dry... dry...

He was in front of me, a head taller than me... or had he grown taller? And suddenly something inside me said very clearly: it's over.

It's over. What? Me? My body was paralysed, a heaviness.

The leaden air pressed my legs to the ground. I could still only move my arms, I slowly brought my right hand to my jacket pocket, but the steyrer pistol, which I had still noticed there before, was gone. Had my hand become insensitive... Had my nerves stopped conducting the information from that five-part sack of lax skin to my brain?

What I saw was not frightening, just unpleasantly slow.

The Slav stood before me on the edge of the doline, towering gigantically above the dark crater. His head was under a long cloud behind which there was a trace of moonlight, a thin, diffuse glow.

-Dry... dry..." he said.

I saw him point his shotgun at me.

-All our stones want blood, both carved and uncarved.

-I don't know," he muttered, "always blood, they all want hot blood... they can't get enough... I think he shot. I don't know. The border soldiers say that they didn't hear

nothing. Almost at the same time as the shot, I heard voices, and shortly afterwards a light swung at my feet. It was a lantern, carried by a border soldier, and four or five soldiers surrounded me....

I looked down, I saw the white road. The Slav had not fled, he was standing by the roadside, looking menacing in the darkness, still with the shotgun at the ready. I was able to move my hand again, extended it, pointed at the figure.

The soldier raised his lantern. A Bogomil tombstone stood there by the roadside, shaped like a cross, yet also reminiscent of a somewhat crude human figure, and covered with enigmatic lettering.

THREE PAINTINGS IN THE STYLE OF HIERONYMUS BOSCH

I THE SIREN

Long Peter comes running like a man possessed to the village. From afar he is already waving his arms, too long, in the air.

The pastor's wife casually glances out of the kitchen window. When she sees the long Peter running like that, waving and striding, she is so startled that she drops her ladle on the floor. The pastor's wife is in a state of good hope. The sudden shock sends a shiver through her body. Pale as dead, she sits limply on the wooden box next to the cooker. With one hand she clutches her aching body, with the other she gropes trembling and convulsive along the wall. Trembling fingers pull at the salt barrel, which falls to the floor and the white salt mixes with the grey dust by the cooker. Her eyes, rigid and wide open, dart fearfully into nothingness.

In the meantime, long Peter runs through the village and shouts. He throws his long legs back and swings his arms like the blades of a windmill. And he screams at the top of his lungs.

The women come out of the houses and follow the long Peter. But he doesn't stop running until he has run through all the streets. Then he stops in the middle of the village square, pale and coughing from the effort.

Curious and impatient women gather around him.

What happened? Yes... What happened... What... What... What?

The fishermen have caught a mermaid, down on the beach... and she's in the sand and she can't move... the sea has washed her ashore... and she's got a fish tail and green blood... and she's down there... everybody go and see her.

The women break off to put on their bonnets and shawls, and soon a line of women from the village emerges at a brisk pace. Behind them all walks Peter's small, worn, centenarian grandmother, limping as fast as her feet can carry her. She is holding the hand of her youngest grandson, who can barely walk and keeps falling over.

The wind blows in the women's skirts and shawls, so that they flutter like loose sails.

From the top of the dunes they can already see the dark group of fishermen below. They are together in a ball and are staring at something in the middle.

Now women are integrated into the men's circle and therein lies the maritime prodigy.

Half woman, half fish... A small, pale face with blue, frightened eyes.

wandering from one face to the other in mortal anguish. Her dense, damp blonde hair falls over her shoulders. Small drops of water vibrate on her young, bud-like breasts as they rise and fall with force.

But where the legs begin in humans, a soft, pinkish-green, scaly tail shines through. And the shiny scales get tighter and tighter until they close and cover the lower part of the body, cylindrical in shape, until it ends in a fin. But at the end of the tail, below the fin, there is a deep, open, greyish cross-section. The fin is only attached to the body by a thin bond. Large heavy drops of green blood slowly flow from the slit. All around it the sand is coloured green.

A razor-sharp reef must have injured the mermaid and a wave threw the defenceless creature onto the beach.

The fishermen, women and children stand in a circle and gaze with rapt eyes at the wonder.

But little by little the spell wears off. What is that? What is that? What do we do with that?

One proposes to drag her with ropes to the village. No, not to the village, the women cry...

Let the shepherd decide! Somebody get the shepherd!... And Peter with his long legs runs to fetch the shepherd.

The others shout without understanding each other. A chaos of questions. But no one has answers.

The mermaid's tired, anguished blue eyes wander from one to the other. Finally they fix on Jen.

Jen, flat-headed and broad-shouldered, has made her way to the front of the line. She asks nothing, answers nothing, just stares dumbly and rigidly at the mermaid at her feet.

The mermaid's erratic eyes have found a resting point and cling with trembling gaze to that figure. Her eyes then meet his... and her small, pale hands, as if shyly and modestly, take her blonde hair, heavy with moisture, and spread it over her delicate, youthful breasts.

The two don't hear the voices and questions buzzing around them. The rich Klaas has proposed simply beating the evil creature to death and throwing it back into the water. All the women agree, and the men already want to go to the boats and take the oars.

But then Jen comes out of her silence.

No killing that woman, he declares in his low voice. He will take her and cure her; and when she has recovered, he will take her back to the water.

But Jen," shouts her mother in the group.

And Jen doesn't give a damn what anyone else says. If animals are not to be martyred, as the shepherd says, we must help him, who is in fact the one who is the most vulnerable.

half human.

The women raise an uproar. And Jen's mother begins to cry. The pastor will prove her right, Jen thinks.

The shepherd is coming, some shout, and indeed he enters the circle.

He is very agitated and his legs wobble. His hands tremble and the sweat of fear runs down his forehead. His wife writhes in pain in the house.

What is going on?

The Jen, the Jen... they all shout.

Jen explains to the pastor what he is proposing.

And the shepherd wipes the sweat from his forehead with the palm of his hand, as if he wants to come to his senses. Then he begins to speak quickly and hurriedly.

What Jen proposes cannot be tolerated in the community. Compassion and neighbourly love are only due to God's creatures. But that is undoubtedly a creature of the devil and it would be evil to bring it into the village.

Kill her, kill her, cries Klaas, and others with him.

But the shepherd says he is not in favour of killing her either. The mermaid must be left alone; if she is a hellish illusion, she will disappear, and if she is a fish, the tide will carry her away again.

And now everyone must go and get on with their work and leave the mermaid alone. The shepherd leaves the circle and hurries home.

People slowly disperse.

Only Jen stays behind. She looks at the woman with her head downcast. Her blue eyes are calmer. In them there is gratitude and trust. She knows he has spoken for her.

Suddenly, a strong hand shakes him by the shoulder... His father is beside him. But Jen shakes her head, she wants to stay. But his father shakes him harder. A blind rage rises in his head. He threatens him... Jen grips the hand on his shoulder with her iron fingers until the joints crack.

The two men stare at each other. But... Jen sees the mother on top of the dune. Her skirt and shawl flap in the wind and she folds her hands in lamentation.

Jen then leaves her father's hand and walks towards the village. He feels the poor woman's gazes, how they stare at him inquisitively and pleadingly... but he keeps on walking towards the village...

* * *

The clouds are sliding swiftly across the thin moon. The sea is raging. Its roar reaches as far as the village. It has been dark there for a long time. Only in the shepherd's house is there still light behind the red curtains. A pale, reddish glow falls on the garden. A figure slithers along the fence - it's Jen.

He pauses for a moment and looks up at the illuminated window. He knows that there a

woman struggles with death. She grits her teeth and mutters an angry curse.

You then leave the village and walk up the dune. On the white sand you can see a dark spot...

The siren hears footsteps. She wearily raises her head. And Jen kneels beside him and speaks to him in soft, kind, compassionate words. He knows she doesn't understand him. But the sound has to do him good.

Her hands, burning with fever, have been hidden in the man's dark fists.

Then he begins to sing, in a low, murky voice, words in a strange language. Like a thick grey mist on a lonely rocky island, so dull and cadenced are the tones, and so infinitely sad.

Jen listens... and doesn't know that tears are running down her cheeks.

But she comes to. He has brought her food, bread and fish, and offers it to her. She shakes her head and goes back to singing.

Jen kneels beside him and holds her hands in his until the stars fade and the morning wind begins to blow.

Then he stands up and looks at her again: I'll be back.

And she understands the strange words and the promise, and her gaze is sweet and calm as he climbs the dune....

All day long there is a great agitation in the village. People pass by the shepherd's house with timid, silent steps, in the house where the red curtains are drawn and a deadly silence reigns. Some say they hear a choking, tearing cry and moans. At midday the shepherd had been in the back garden and had gazed, motionless, towards the distant sea, with the long pipe in his hand. And then, suddenly, with great fury, he had smashed the head of the pipe into the glass ball on a rose bush, so that the shards flew all over the place. Then he had returned home. There is something sinister in the air.

Noise was heard at home early in the morning. The father found out from the night watchman that Jen had been on the beach. And they quarrelled, and Jen raised her hand against her father and threw him against the oven, so that the old man's head had a considerable hole in it. But in the end the old man overpowered Jen and carried him down the stairs as if he were a child and locked him in a room. In the village there are murmurs against the poor, neglected mermaid. Some young lads had been on the beach and say she is still on the sand, motionless, eyes closed. Only by her faint breathing have they noticed that she is alive. They had wanted to play pranks on her and throw sand at her, but were put off when they saw her pale, agonised face.

But the elders hold the woman responsible for the disturbance of peace in the village. The rich Klaas thinks it would have been better to kill the evil creature the day before.

And then, late in the evening, people learn that the pastor's wife has given

a stillborn child was born. The child had hydrocephalus, deformed feet and a reddish-green metallic sheen, like the scales of a fish. And the shepherd's wife is going to die, without hope.

The people then become furious, they want to go down to the beach immediately and kill the mermaid, for she is the culprit. But the night is dark and the wind from the sea is so icy that even the most bitter turn back. Tomorrow... in the daylight... early.

When the most impenetrable darkness reigns and no light is left on in the village, except for the glow behind the red curtains in the shepherd's house, Jen climbs down through the window of her room. Like a cat, quietly and cautiously. She just struggles to get her broad shoulders through the window frame. But she makes it. Jen takes off and jumps onto the lawn of the house's garden. The violence of the fall buckles her knees, but she soon gets to her feet. As she runs past the window of the red curtains of the shepherd's house, she mutters a wild curse between her teeth.

And the siren knows he will come. She sits up with the help of her arms and stretches her head towards him. Jen kisses her pale lips and eyes sunken in dark sockets.

She sings again. The tones swim like mist over a cliff, and the sea accompanies her with a purple anger. The veils of mist are torn away and her song becomes golden and clear. The sun shines on the sea and the waves are lulled to sleep.

The woman has taken Jen's hand and placed it on her breast. And the hand makes its way through the heavy mop of hair and rests tenderly, calloused by work, on the woman's trembling chest.

And Jen feels the life in that heart, how it slows as her voice drops, and then one last strong beat, her hand tightening convulsively on his arm, and she falls backwards.

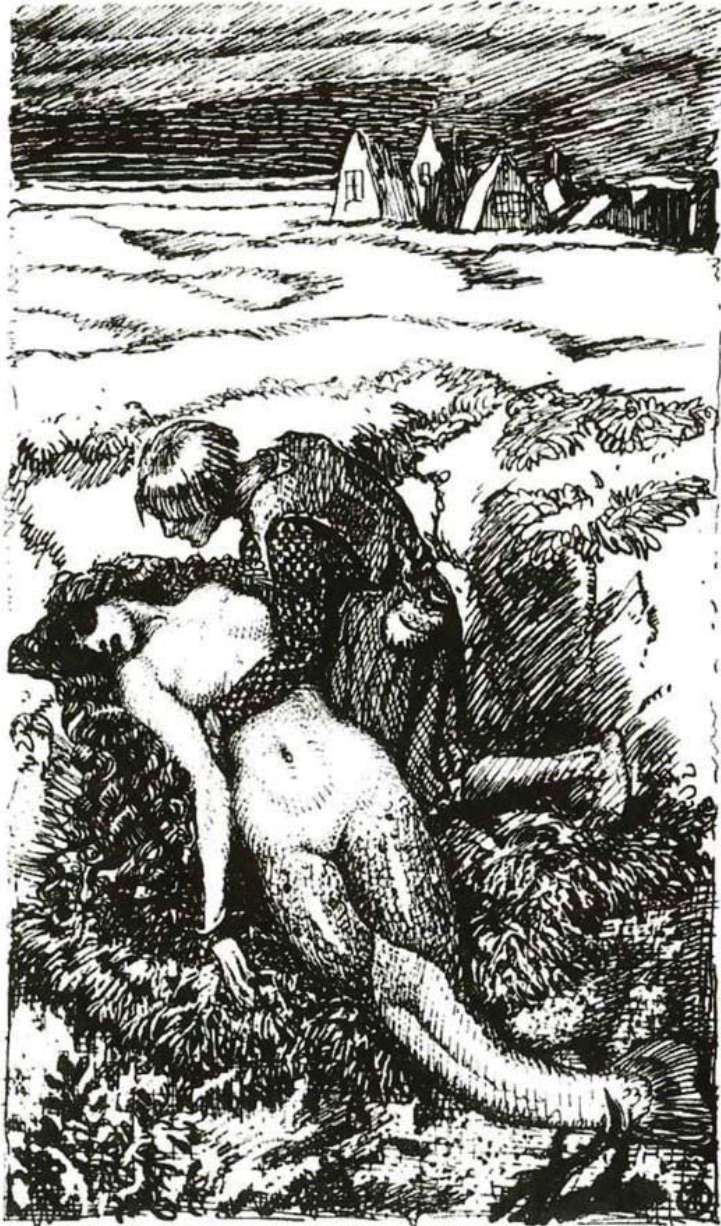
Jen sits and stares at the sunrise.

Her eyes are dry. He has not a single tear for the deep pain he suffers. And yet it is such a light and free pain. Only one thing torments him. But he does not know what it is. Now he remembers it. She heard what was said downstairs in the room. They wanted to come and kill her.

But they won't find it...

He gets up with a great effort. He takes the corpse in his arms. His gaze burns into its small, rigid face, the severed flipper sways with each step on his right arm.

So he enters the sea. With a sure step he walks from rock to rock and from the last block he throws the corpse into the sea with a strong impulse.



The water splashes against him and there is a gurgling sound... the tide carries the body away...

As soon as Jen reaches the beach, she hears the voices of the men from the village up on the dune.

He knows right away: some of them are drunk. He knows that hot laughter and

metal.

They will not see you.

He stretches out in the fold of a dune and lets the group pass. In the grey atmosphere of dawn, he sees almost all the men from the village with sticks, poles and oars. Some of them are drunk. The one leading the group is Jen's father, with a white bandage on his battered head. He clenches his fist tightly around an axe. He too is drunk. His eyes are bloodshot, his face is red.

At last they pass by. Jen runs up the dune. Halfway to the village he hears an angry cry of disappointment behind him.

Jen keeps running. She wants to reach the village and her room before the men return. They must not know what has happened that night.

When Jen passes by the shepherd's house, she sees all the windows open.

Now he knows that the woman inside has just expired. And he goes on his way crouching by the walls and mutters through clenched teeth a wild curse.

II

AT THE CROSSROADS

At the crossroads sit three gigantic women. One leans her left foot against the forester's house and scratches the dirt embedded in her scrawny, bony toes. "Hu... hu... hu..." is heard in the shivering spruce forest. Inside the room, the forester and his wife tremble with the paralysing terror of a nightmare. The child in the cradle moans softly.

The second has shrunk and carved with a large, very sharp knife on the image of the wooden Christ at the crossroads. First he makes scratches on the vertical and transverse wood of Golgotha. He sings murmuring: "Horum pitschorum... Rex Judaeorum". Then he peels off layer after layer of the Redeemer's nose until it is completely gone and the white spot gleams on the weather-soiled face. Now he takes the knife and sticks it into the navel of the wooden body. There he turns it like a pinwheel in his yellow hands, faster and faster, faster and faster, until he has drilled a deep hole in the body. Then he blows the shavings and dust out of the hole... in the darkness his eyes burn like those of a wolf.

The third sits upright. Her head rises above the black tops of the fir trees. In her hands something is stirring. A fat peasant... clack... has bitten off her right foot. She chews it calmly... "Oh...!", moans the peasant..., "let me free...". She looks at the fat morsel in his hand with a gentle smile. "I have... wife... and children... waiting for me at home." "Yes?" he says

the giantess... "My wife... I can't die". "Yes," the giantess smiles again, "there's your wife," and puts him in her courtyard, in front of the window. Inside it is lit up. He wants to get up, but falls down. The giantess puts her hand to her mouth. "Here's your foot." Now the peasant stands on tiptoe. Inside, the lamp on the table... the table set... two tankards of beer, two half-empty glasses, two plates with bones, in the middle a tray with half a goose, another with smoked meat.

On the chair by the door is a tyre cover and a wide-brimmed hat with two brushes on the back. On the chair by the table hangs a doublet and lederhosen. The blue curtain in front of the wide double bed is drawn back, a pair of high sheep's wool boots, a pair of slippers... The peasant turns away from the window, pale as a corpse. "My children," he stammers. The giantess leads him to the pigsty. The peasant trembles. With a tug, the giant lifts the wooden roof. The peasant can now look inside. An unbearable stench. The boy sits in a corner, huddled, not moving... his face earthy, his eyes glazed over. In the other corner sits the mother pig on top of the little girl and with her snout pierces the white flesh and pulls large shreds out of the delicate body. That little body is still contracting convulsively and the warm blood has left the piglets satiated, so that now they push each other grunting and rolling around.

The two of them in bed hear a scream, a piercing scream.

Up above the black tops of the fir trees, the giantess stuffs the greasy morsel, with a satisfied smile, into her fetid mouth, the hard bones crunch, fat and blood dripping from the corners of her lips.

At the crossroads the other has made a fire with cow dung and dry spruce branches. At the foot of the image of Christ. Bare feet burn in the flames of cow dung and dry spruce branches. The whole body shudders and writhes in pain. Into the cavity of the body she has thrust the torn pages of an old missal, and as the flames lick upwards and the old yellow paper begins to crackle and burn, she leaps three times over the fire and rejoices. With a serious gesture she removes the rosary from her neck and throws bead after bead into the fire, then murmurs: "Ho-rum pi tscho-rum... Rex Judae orum". Large, heavy, black drops of blood drip slowly from the severed nose onto the white face, trickle down the torn body until they fall into the fire, where they perish with a hiss.

In the forester's house the giantess has covered the chimney with her big toe. The tiles fall with a tremendous noise on the cooker. The forester's wife wakes up from the nightmare with a scream. All is silent. Time has stopped. "Hu... hu", the spruce forest outside shudders.

"Father," she shakes the man. "Father... what's wrong", she shakes him harder, even harder, desperate. "Yes, what is it?"... she takes his hand... "you are very cold... Jesus, Mary and Joseph... turn on the light".

A sudden gust of wind has torn the clouds. The moonlight falls with dazzling purity on the black spruce forest and the crossroads. Shreds of mist float around the treetops, slowly rising and merging into the moonlight. In the distant village a dog howls. In the forester's house the light has just been switched on... Orum...orum...orum...the toads in the swamp.

III THE WITCH JUDGE

Tap... tap... tap... tap... tap... tap... someone is coming up the wooden stairs. It's Mr. Doctor... unsure, damned unsure today sound the footsteps that usually sound so determined: tap... tap... tap. Suddenly klirrr... rrr... rr... a bunch of keys rolls down the stairs... again... tap... but now downwards. Then for a long while, silence... finally, again, again, hardly making a sound, shyly, as if embarrassed and confused by the nightly spectacle, from the foot of the stairs tap... tap... tap... To that is added a light scraping, like someone groping along a rough wall with his hand looking for something... carefully, step by step... along... crack... boom... a clash between steel and stone... That's the steel spike in the wall to secure the firelight that lights the staircase and the stone head of the illustrious doctor, the member of our court of scabbards, the honourable judge praised and envied the length and breadth of the country... tap... tap... tap... at last before the bedroom door a sigh of relief...

The key squeaks in the lock and the rusty bolt moves.

Dark... dark as in a wolf's den... in the bachelor's study. The doctor gropes for the lighter... well, that lasts... at last the tinder is lit... The wick burns and then... a radius of three paces is illuminated by the red-grey-yellowish light of the tallow candle. The gentleman doctor has a ruddy face, he wears his silk cap tight to the nape of his neck, the fur collar of his surcoat is open to the left with an enterprising gesture, while on the right it is fastened in its usual place around the wearer's shoulders... The doctor bends down with his legs spread wide to pick up the burning wick from the ground. The wick has already burned into the snow-white, sand strewn ground, an ugly black hole. The doctor grunts something incomprehensible... When he stands up sighing...

... at his table sits, in the centre of the room, Satan. He has tucked his tail naturally under his left arm and looks at the doctor with big, round, fiery, kind eyes. Aha, thinks the doctor... the damned sultana wine! As His Majesty sees that he is warned, he gets down from the table... tap does the human foot, clap does the horse's hoof. With an impulse he has brought his tail forward, between his legs, and holds it erect and rigid before him, like the guard at the palace...

presents his muskets when someone of respect passes by.

The doctor is very flattered. He salutes with a hand to his cap and a gesture of thanks. His Majesty leaves his parade position and steps back to the table. But he immediately jumps down again... tap... clap... he has noticed the reproachful glance of the master of the house. He goes over to the boot with painted flowers in the corner behind the cupboard and pulls out a cotton blanket. He has to know the habit of the house. He spreads the cotton blanket on the table and then the guest sits down on it comfortably.

From the dark corner where the wide, white bed lies, comes a suppressed laughter. On the doctor's virgin pillow there is a confusion of blond curls, a pinkish face peeping out from under the heavy coverlet. When two of the dense, luminous locks touch, thousands of tiny sparks fly and a faint sizzle breaks the silence... Under the confusion of curls look two deep eyes, so alluring and enigmatic, promising and longing; eyes of an angel... vampire eyes... The doctor has a strange sensation... it is as if those eyes were in him, two balls of fire, that hurt and cause pleasure, that heat and an instant later can set fire to anything that is combustible.

He puts his hands to his temples. A forge is at work in there.

He hesitantly approaches the foot of the bed and tries to lift the cover with his fingertips. He has had the uncontrollable urge to see the creature's feet. He has a fixed idea that those feet must be small, warm and white, and he wants to take them in his toad-like hands, big, red and always cold and wet. But then His Horned Majesty makes a tremendous leap from the table and slaps him on the hands. "Ow!" cries the doctor and rubs his sore hands together moaning.

-Quiet! -says the Negro, "that's for me to do.

And he pulls back the cover with a sudden movement, revealing the white female body in all its naked beauty. It seems to the doctor as if he has thrown himself headlong into hot water. At first he sees nothing. Then he stands at the edge of the bed, lightens his hand as much as he can and runs it caressingly along the line of the silky hip. "No tickling," she says softly and turns away embarrassed, but the big eyes look challenging.

The doctor then throws himself on her and covers her mouth with ardent kisses... and she puts her white arms around him... in the last moment of consciousness she feels as if these were not feminine arms, soft and warm, but monkey arms, hard, sinewy, hairy and long... but he sinks into her...

He is woken by a strong grip on his shoulder... at first he doesn't even know where he is. But they keep shaking him. His Black Majesty holds him and doesn't let go until he is fully awake. The light has gone out, an unbearable stench pervades the room... of tallow and burnt wick. The moon has risen and the room is as bright as day, and the woman is lying on the disturbed bed. Her face is blue, like that of a

strangled; the tongue hangs down to the neck, the body is contorted by convulsions.

The doctor is confused.

"I want to show you something," says Her Majesty and lightly touches a place between the woman's breasts with her black hair-covered index finger. It makes the doctor nauseous.

"Pfui, dammit! -he exclaims.

"How?" says His Majesty. The doctor is silent. The Negro plays again. With a pop the navel pops out of the woman's stomach, like the cork of a champagne bottle. From the navel hangs a long, white cord, divided into regular notches, like a tapeworm. The navel falls to the ground and drags the white tapeworm along with it. The tapeworm coils on the ground as if it were alive. And more and more white string comes out, faster and faster... in spirals, making eights and other sinuosities... inexhaustible is this woman's lap... the whole floor is already full. The doctor climbs onto a table. It makes him shudder.

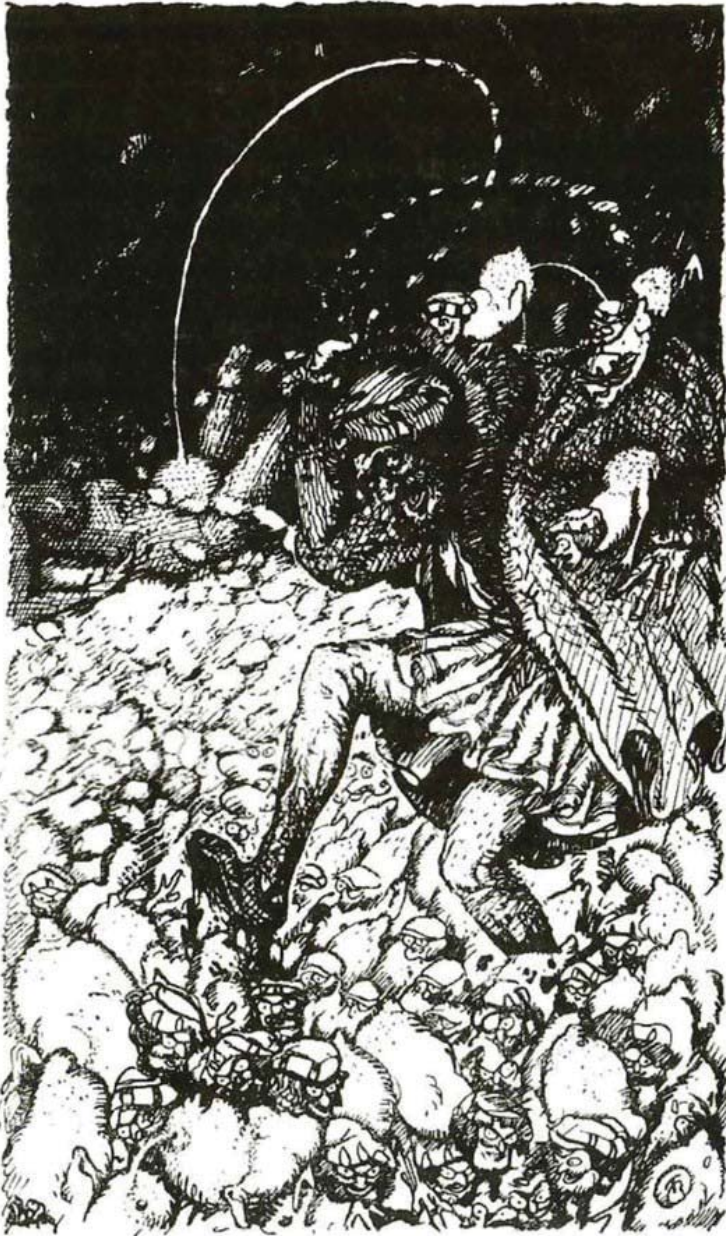
And the thin, white cord becomes thicker, already the size of an earthworm. The notches become deeper and clearly distinguish the different limbs from each other... and it continues to emerge from the hole in the navel... the cord is already as thick as a thumb. The limbs swell and almost become round... and now all the limbs separate from each other and roll with a life of their own across the room, some bouncing, others rolling with frightening speed between their brethren.

These round, white balls take on a new look. Two feet with bird's claws, a long, wide, heavily dragging back end, and a head: a serious, bearded head with a silk cap, all little doctor's heads. They are already the size of a fist and keep getting bigger.

"Look at your children," says Satan.

A red flame reaches the doctor's head. He jumps out of his chair and furiously stomps on the slimy mass around him.

"Ho... ho! -he shouts, "ho... ho!



And it curses. A squeaking and screeching as of millions of trampled birds.

-What are you thinking? -Satan shouts angrily and grabs the doctor by the leg and spins him around his head until he loses his breath. Then he

he comes down again. But as soon as he comes to, he jumps back into the mass and stomps and kicks.

-Ho... ho! -he shouts, "ho... ho!

Satan becomes silent and serious and ties a red silk cord to the end of his tail and hands it to the doctor.

The doctor's eyes stiffen and he stands still. He makes a loop in the cord, wraps it around his neck and pulls and pulls... until he collapses. The woman on the bed has sat up and looks at him with burning eyes.

The horn of the night watchman sounds in the distance. Under the window, the regular passing of the guard can be heard.

The fountain on the market square murmurs in the moonlight, the stone statue of the river god with the vessel pouring water stands and looks out of the doctor's window.

The justice commission, which the next morning wants to take the minutes of the session in which the burning of the witch of the previous day is considered justified to the doctor for his signature, cannot enter the room. A thousand rumours spread among the people. Ominous noises are also heard in the house. When they manage to force the door open, the doctor lies dead on the floor, a red silk cord around his neck, two large burns on his hands. The disturbed bed is full of dirty, stinking water.

"Hm... hm...", mutters the senior councillor. "Hm... hm...", the other gentlemen mutter cautiously in chorus.

THE TRIUMPH OF MECHANICS

The city's toy industry had flourished considerably in recent years. All civilised countries were in demand for such multicoloured and well-functioning mechanical toys: the buffoonish drummer, the tireless fencer, the fast automobile, and the haughty warships with real steam engines. And even in uncivilised countries, whose needs were less urgent in this respect, a clientele for these toys was created. In the jungles of the colonies and in the deserts of Africa, little Indians were often found with the remains of these excellent products. One famous researcher even claimed that a very strange monkey in the jungles of the Malagarasi had deceived him, for, on seeing it sitting on the branches of a Borassus palm, he had already promised himself the discovery of a new species, until the capture of the trademark of his land (D. R. P. Nr. 105307) dashed all his hopes. But the independent press was quick to classify this story under the indispensable rubric of the fantastic excursus of the Africanists and condemned it as a new ploy of despicable colonial policy.

The most sought-after, however, were the automatic rabbits of the Stricker & Vorderteil company. These little animals, which defied nature, could run and jump, like their live models, when wound up: five or six times. A universal mechanical genius, an American, of course, to whom inventions seemed to fall from the sky, had improved the inane and defective animals in the service of the factory. But just when the company seemed to have reached the height of its fame and achievements, the fall came. With the shamelessness of someone who thinks himself indispensable, Mr. Hopkins one day demanded that his salary be doubled, that his working hours be halved, that he be provided with his own workshop for his experiments, and that a villa be built for him as a summer residence outside the city. Mr Stricker was inclined to give in. But Mr. Vorderteil strongly contradicted him:

-That can't be done even on principle. In half a year's time Hopkins will have new demands.

Mr Stricker saw that he was right.

The American took the boss's decision with a smile and replied with his resignation. The displeasure and consternation this caused was soon overcome, as the most important manufacturing secrets were known, and, therefore, there was no fear of production disruption.

-But what will happen," said the hesitant Mr Stricker, "if Hopkins now competes with us with a new factory?

-Let me see to it," reassured Mr Vorderteil, who had underground ties to the city's mayor, "that he doesn't get the concession for something like this.

In the meantime, Mr. Hopkins continued to do his duty as before, enriching the products with a few small improvements, as if he intended to remain in the service of Stricker & Vorderteil for ever, and as if his inventions came to him as if from his sleeve. But it was precisely in those weeks that a large number of orders for rabbits came in, and the factory was forced to increase its production in order to produce the legion of animals. Smiling as ever, Hopkins said goodbye at the end of his contractual resignation period, took off his pristine hat to his former bosses and left, almost worryingly, hushed about his intentions for the future.

What Mr. Stricker had fearfully sensed would soon prove to be true. Through his underground channels, Mr. Vorderteil received the news from the mayor's office that Mr. Hopkins had bought a plot of land and had initiated the procedure to obtain permission to build a factory.

-Imagine! -he shouted to his companion, "imagine what you're going to do!

-No idea," said Mr Stricker, and this time he really had no idea.

-He wants to make coloured air glass toys. Stained glass, have you heard of such a thing?

Mr. Stricker had heard nothing of the sort, but he had expected everything from Hopkins, even coloured air glass, and so he blanched, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders and shrunk three centimetres.

-Coloured air glass. What nonsense.

-Relax. Maybe it's a misunderstanding and Hopkins meant to say fizzy glass. That I have heard of.

But Mr Vorderteil banged on the table, so that the file behind him began to swing over his head, and shouted:

-We need all our presence of mind! Don't joke, we are on the edge of the abyss! When Hopkins says air glass, he means air glass, and from what I have heard, he has also given a brief outline of his business plan, of which one can say as much as that he has invented a method of solidifying air to such an extent that it will withstand high temperatures and exhibit all the characteristics of glass, without being brittle.

-That would mean a revolution in the whole industry, and it is kind of you to limit yourself to the toy industry for now.

-But just think, if children are now given dice, rulers, dolls and locomotives made of coloured glass, which is unbreakable and therefore harmless, perhaps it will also make automatic rabbits.

-Oh," exclaimed Mr. Vorderteil, and he dropped heavily into the armchair, causing the file to fall on his head. While the papers were still fluttering around him, he stood up:

-But that cannot be, and if you, Mr. Stricker, insist on your incomprehensible stance, I thank God that I have relations with whose help I can frustrate your

plan.

Through the subterranean channels between the Mayor and Mr. Vorderteil there was in the following weeks considerable traffic, and the "relations" were credited with an insistent rejection of all Mr. Hopkins' requests, appeals, and complaints, so that Mr. Stricker was obliged, with every triumph of his companion, to dwarf himself daily by a couple of inches more.

When Mr. Hopkins's application was refused for the seventeenth time, a great noise and uproar arose one day at the door of the town hall, and the American entered, followed by two gigantic pugs, into the anteroom crammed with filing cabinets and junk, respectfully preserved there, as well as rolls of building plans. The secretaries and clerks immediately rushed into adjoining rooms, the doors of which began to creak with bodies straining against them to make them impregnable. Hopkins was able to enter unimpeded, with his two monsters, whose heads almost reached his shoulders, into the mayor's office. While he stood before the mayor with his hat in his hand, and the pugs sniffed the cupboards in the unmistakable manner of dogs, knocked over a vase and left paw prints on the carpet, the mayor struggled for words.

-Don't you know," he finally said, "that dogs are not allowed?

-Oh, of course I know! -said Hopkins, and smiled, "the dogs must stay outside.

-How dare he bring his mutts here?

-These here? These are not dogs.

-So what are they?

-Machines, Mr. Mayor.

And Hopkins called one of the dogs over, unscrewed his head so that he could see the machinery inside, explained the mechanism of the paw movements, the sniffing mechanism, and the particularly ingenious device for wagging his tail.

-What are you showing me that for? -exclaimed the mayor almost pleadingly, as the other overwhelmed him by showing him wheels, pendulums, springs and electric batteries. Mr. Hopkins turned off his dogs and answered with a question:

-Why don't you want to authorise me to open my factory?

You need to ask the town planning department which building by-laws you are in breach of.

-I have already been to the town planning department. They sent me to the police there.

-Well?

-Well, they referred me back to the town planning department. But I preferred to come and see you directly.

The mayor found himself abandoned by his relief troops, and so he folded to respond:

-Well," he said, "they have rejected your request because it does not meet the conditions stipulated by law.

-Of course he does, and if he doesn't want to believe me, I'll make him admit it.

Under the inane, unmoving eyes of the two pugs, which seemed to have a menacing look equal to that of their owner, the mayor did not dare either to get angry without stating reasons or to contradict him with reasons. (Those three bodies enclosing him in a magic triangle were like the containers of stored forces that were only waiting for the mechanism to be triggered).) He asked his question somewhat sheepishly:

-Well... so... what do you want to do then?

-Oh, I can choose from a few hundred means! Let's say, for example, rabbits.

-The co... nejos?

-Yes, I can unleash a billion automatic rabbits on the city. Now the mayor was able to free himself with a hearty laugh:

-A billion automatic rabbits... ha ha ha!

-He seems to have no clear idea of what a billion represents and even less of the mechanical perfection and effect of these inanimate objects that are endowed with movement.

But the mayor could not contain his laughter and just kept repeating:

-Rabbits... automatic.

-So you have nothing against it.

-Whatever you say, whatever you say.

-All right," said Mr Hopkins, waved goodbye with a wave of his pristine hat, pressed the button to activate his dogs and walked out the door, followed by them, a friendly smile on his face.

The mayor could not recover for two hours, and it was only when all the heads of department had endured his fit of laughter in his office, as duty demanded, that he went home, smiling with satisfaction and exhausted by his unusual activity, to tell his wife, too, this very funny story. In front of his house he saw, in a corner by the door, pressed timidly against the wall, with its shaggy fur and neglected appearance, one of those white rabbits so well known as a product of the firm of Stricker & Vorderteil. He stretched out his hand towards the little animal, amused at the idea that Hopkins had put such a rabbit on his doorstep, but it began to hop and scampered away with a quick getaway. He saw with satisfaction, while he was still toying with the idea of chasing him, that he would be caught later on by some of the rascals in the street.

The mayor's wife was amused by her husband's story, and her thrifty nature saw the threat of the flood as a welcome distribution of cheap children's toys. When little Hedwig came with a white rabbit which she had found outside on the stairs of the house, she laughed heartily and

He did not stop laughing until Richard also brought in a rabbit, which had been hidden under the kitchen table, and when Fritz and Anna came out of the darkness of the cellar, each carrying one of the little animals. They put the jumping, glass-eyed creatures in a corner, from which they came out again and again, accompanied by the shouting of the children. But when the white-faced cook reported that a rabbit had hopped blindly into a large jar of jam, the housewife's agitation overcame the mother's laughter. Throughout the midday the rabbits increased in an unpleasant manner, they seemed to stalk from every corner, to emerge from the cracks in the floor, they sat on every shelf and railing, they hopped everywhere without order or concert, and the laughter was wiped from the lips of the mayor's wife and was replaced by an angry growl. The mayor escaped the plague and made his way to his book club in a half-light accompanied by bouncing white balls. But his fellow club members were as perplexed as he was and sat gathered in the sanctum sanctorum of silence, while a steadily increasing number of rabbits, which had managed to penetrate the club in some enigmatic way, disturbed their intellectual functions. Josef, the servant, swept the animals from time to time with a broom, but a moment later they seemed to have sprung from every corner, to leap blindly and without any plan with their crystal red eyes. Suddenly there were some at the reading-table, and they upset the sacred order of the newspapers. The gentlemen gave each other threatening and angry glances, exacerbated and flustered by this annoyance, and at last left when they were convinced that Josef was impotent with the broom, and that their conversation was not going to succeed at all.

At night the mayor felt under the sheet of his bed a hard object, and when he reached under it full of forebodings, he pulled out one of those stupid rabbits with its bulging glass eyes. He threw it to the floor with a curse, but the animal produced only a mechanical noise, like a badly played instrument, and kept hopping. That test of solidity brought the mayor out of his mind and influenced his swarming dreams of rabbits. Around a gigantic sign on which a word reached for the sky, "unbreakable", countless hordes of rabbits hopped, climbed with fantastic cat-like abilities up and down the letters, and all looked with those bulging red, inane eyes towards a point where the mayor himself, lying on the bed, felt immobilised by the nightmare.

When he wanted to wipe off the sweat of that bad night, he saw the marble bathroom table covered with rabbits, and in the same washbasin there was one of those melancholic and shaggy animals. Anticipating a vengeful joy, he threw the animal to the floor and was about to confirm his destruction with glee, when he slowly sat up and began to hop about without diminishing his liveliness one iota.



In the street he would stumble at every turn into one of those little monsters that resisted with incomprehensible toughness the cruel tortures of the ragamuffins, the kicks, even the trampling by the heaviest lorries. Rabbits sat on the steps of the town hall, rabbits came to meet him in the corridors, rabbits came to meet him in the corridors, rabbits came to meet him in the corridors, rabbits came to meet him in the

corridors.

They stared with their stupid eyes from the top of the filing cabinets. The mayor passed his disturbed and rabbit-haunted staff and entered his office with a heroic gesture. Thirteen rabbits sat on the big desk and hopped in all directions, so that the papers, scattered in great disorder, made a rough noise under their tireless little hind legs.

At this spectacle the mayor sank into his comfortable armchair and wished himself all the pleasures of destruction. He awoke from his reverie with a cry, as if the tired hands slipping from his lap were touching the soft fur of a rabbit. Now it seemed to him as if the little animals were almost wearing what might be called a smile around their immobile little snouts. It was the stiff smile of lifeless objects, but in that terrible multiplication it seemed to grow still more accentuated and to gain in importance, and at last he thought he saw, repeated a hundred thousand times in those terrible little beasts, the smile of Mr. Hopkins.

He summoned all his strength and called Mr Vorderteil to his office. The two sat opposite each other, perplexed, for a long time until the mayor became aware of the dignity he embodied.

-That Mr. Hopkins," he said.

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

-A billion automatic rabbits...

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

-Terrible... a billion rabbits in a car...

The mayor had to defend himself from a rabbit that suddenly sat on his shoulder and wanted to climb on his head.

-Your damn product...! -he shouted angrily and wanted to start crying in fury.

-Yes, sir... yes, sir..., but I don't understand....

-What don't you understand?

-The factory has not made that many rabbits since it started production.

-So where do these animals come from?

Mr. Vorderteil was unable to reply, as he was inundated by a stream of red ink from an inkwell dropped by one of the rabbits. The beautiful new trousers had been irretrievably lost. And then the mayor laughed, with a convulsive laugh, almost a shriek, until Mr. Vorderteil managed to recover himself to answer:

-I believe this Hopkins has bought up all the last big orders. The man is a devil - and to have all that on us now - but - and he leaned, though the ink was still dripping from the table, towards the mayor - but I think there is something else - something more - something dreadful.

-What can it be?

The mayor's hair stood on end.

-Haven't you noticed, Mr. Mayor, that there are two types of rabbits in activity or, so to speak, two different generations?

True! True! Among the twenty-three rabbits that swarmed about the mayor's desk, some, the smaller ones, seemed more delicate and youthful than the others, whose fur gave the impression of being softer and more elastic, and who moved with a certain youthful clumsiness. But otherwise they displayed all the characteristics that united this army of little monsters, the bulging red glass eyes, which in all their prancing remained immobile in their heads, and the snouts painted with the traces of a ghastly grin.

-You see? And that is the most horrible thing of all. Well, I must tell you that Mr. Hopkins, when he was still with us, spoke of a revolutionary discovery, of a propagation of mechanical rabbits by asexual means. We laughed at the time. But now it is obvious that he has made his discovery... it is obvious... to terrify us. His rabbits are amazing imitations of life, they can give birth, and tonight we will see the third generation, tomorrow morning the fifth, and the day after tomorrow we will reach I don't know how many millions.

This conversation met with a swift and surprising end, to which the interruption of the subterranean channels between the mayor and Mr. Vorderteil is often attributed. Out of a natural aspiration to maintain a healthy understanding, and also impelled by an instantaneous confusion, by a fever of hatred and despair, the mayor grabbed the promoter of this plague, spun him several times on his axis, and threw him out of the door.

But this act of violence achieved nothing against the rabbits. The city had smiled at the appearance of the rabbits, then a murmur of anger took hold, and this anger soon turned to consternation, and consternation to despair. And now the horror and disgust had set in. One could not sit at table without these white beasts prancing blindly among the dishes, and when someone, in a fit of rage, threw the animals to the ground, one had no choice but to convince oneself that they were indestructible. They were only vulnerable to axe and fire. With the permission of the magistrate, piles of firewood were piled up in all the streets and squares and set on fire, and buckets, aprons and basins full of rabbits were brought to them. But in spite of these measures the number of rabbits continued to increase from hour to hour, and at last, overcome by disgust, they gave up the fight. The fires went out and stank the air with the stench of burning fur. The rabbits destroyed without hindrance the commercial life, the traffic, swarmed through all the activities of public life and even penetrated into the secret joys of love.

But when a stillborn child was born who, as a result of the mother's fright, bore a red spot in the shape of a rabbit all over his face, an indignation arose that soon caused the people to invade the town hall as if in a revolution. At this dangerous and decisive moment, the mayor remembered Napoleon III, who was able to reassure his people, who were complaining about the misery they were suffering, with the splendour of festivities. As a counterbalance, to take external action against

The inner disquiet seemed to him all the more necessary when he realised with horror that we could already be looking at a fifth generation of rabbits. He therefore ordered that the next day's festival, dedicated to Schiller, be celebrated in style.

Just as a captain looks back from the mast before the sea swallows up his ship, so the mayor looked down on his city the next day from the tower of the town hall. Although it was September, the streets, rooftops and public squares seemed covered in a blanket of snow. But that blanket was moving, bustling, opening and closing again; it was none other than the promised billion automatic rabbits. With the gesture of an old man, the mayor came down from the tower and took the police report on Mr. Hopkins. They had not been able to find him anywhere, and the mayor was almost glad of it, for in a way he had foreseen it.

The public gathered to celebrate Schiller, after a hard fight with the rabbits that invaded the streets and moved in tight swarms. The situation was particularly difficult at the crossroads, where two and three layers of hopping and tingling rabbits were piled up and piled up in various directions. In the hall it was difficult to gain a foothold, the rabbits jumped and ran between the feet of the guests, occupied the seats and fell from the railings of the galleries as if from a sculptor's relief gone mad.

A professor with many merits in the intellectual life of the city delivered the opening speech, and when in the midst of his splendid eulogies on the ideal goods of the nation he took out of his coat pocket a rabbit and threw it towards the others with a gesture of disgust, everyone took it as the most natural thing in the world. It caused an unpleasant effect that, when the wind instruments played the overture, every now and then there was a strange squeaking sound because the rabbits had got into the instruments. But now Beate Vogl, the young dramatic singer of the city theatre, took the podium to sing some of her own compositions inspired by Schiller's *Lieder*. Her breasts and beautiful neck rose from the wonderfully rich dress, and the delicacy of her skin competed successfully with the delicacy of her voice. Everyone seemed to be concentrating on the podium so that the swarming of the rabbits was less noticeable. But suddenly the singer let out a tremendous cock and a scream, a dreadful scream, tore through the audience's concentration. With her eyes popping out of their sockets Miss Beate Vogl had gone rigid with horror, then lowered her eyes to the neckline of her dress, while the sheet of music flew out of her hands, and pulled out... pulled out with a heart-rending scream, a rabbit from her breasts, from which nine other rabbits were hanging, as if they had just come into the world.

The agitation and disgust of the audience was vented in a tumult, in which chairs were thrown, dress tails were stepped on, and a frightened flight was made towards the exit doors, until a clear, loud voice from the podium commanded them to stop. Mr. Hopkins was up there, next to the faded singer on the floor, waving his immaculate chistera and bowing to the

public.

-Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "please give me your attention. You might have been spared the unpleasant turmoil of the last few days if you had known in time what a number like a billion represents and had had respect for the advances of modern technology. But I do not want to reproach them and there is nothing I want more than to put an end to this situation unworthy of our city. The rabbits will disappear as soon as I have the authorisation to go ahead with my project. However, if, contrary to expectations, they do not take my wishes into consideration, as much as I regret it, I will have to increase their discomfort a little more.

Mr. Hopkins smilingly pulled a kicking rabbit out of his pocket by the ears, put it on his arm, and continued talking, while gently stroking the animal:

-Until now they have known only the harmless breed of my rabbits. They have only been disturbed in their habits, in their comfort, but now their possessions will be threatened. From tomorrow at noon, ladies and gentlemen, rabbits will appear who can also eat.

And so he presented the rabbit with a handful of clovers on his arm, and the whole room, in silence, filled with people, watched in horror as the animal's mouse-like snout contracted and with obtuse pleasure bit into a clover leaf.

They saw it, and whoever did not see it, believed his neighbour to have seen it, until at last he was convinced that he had seen it himself in person. A billion unbreakable, automatic, devouring rabbits! The people were so terrified that they could not shout, nor dared to insult, and all those present left the room as if a prophet of the Last Judgement had spoken there.

That same evening an extraordinary session of the municipal council was held, and the next morning an usher sought out the American to ask him to come and see the mayor.

When he went to the mayor and received the authorisation to build the factory, he knew he would have to answer a question. He waited for him to ask it.

The mayor sat wearily and reflectively in his armchair, his veiled eyes staring stiffly at an incomprehensible landscape.

-Tell me," he began at last, and passed his hand across his forehead, as if to keep away a painful pressure, "tell me - I understand your arts to a certain extent, though I am not so mad as others who believe the impossible. But there is one thing that will always be incomprehensible to me: that you could so master the vital principle by mechanical arts that the automatic rabbit could eat; the rabbit you showed us.....

Mr. Hopkins smiled more obsequiously than on other occasions and waved his immaculate top hat.

-It all depends on the introduction," he said; "that rabbit, Mr. Mayor, it was,

exceptionally, a live one.

THE REPULSION OF THE WILL

A long grey beard gave our friend Eleagabal Kuperus a venerable appearance. It was growing out of his face like the wrath of Jehovah's countenance. What was most peculiar about him were two triangular yellow boar tusks protruding from the corners of his mouth. When he laughed, they protruded above his patriarch's beard, like dragons appearing above the undergrowth of a forest. And when he laughed, one could also see that he had no other teeth in his mouth than those upper fangs, rooted in red, fleshy gums. The venerable and particular nature of his eyes was revealed in a bright green colour that changed to grey. Water glistens like this when it has been stagnant for a long time and its clear naturalness is polluted by dirty factory waste, in honour of any indispensable industry. Or when the blissful clarity of the sky is suddenly furrowed by an enigmatic play of light and shadow.

Being alone with Eleagabal Kuperus was both a pleasure and a horror. We were alone with him, very alone, at least a thousand metres away from all other solitude.

Next to us a rocket burst, and Kuperus thrust his hand into the shower of tiny artificial lightning bolts, so that the fiery serpents coiled round his conjuring hand. Then all was dark again, only a faint, intermittent glow reaching us from the depths, over which the gondola seemed to glide silently. Above us the monstrous body of the balloon swelled like the swaying stomach of a gigantic monster. We were in the dead of night, static, in a state of perfect equilibrium between the upward momentum and the retaining forces of the earth.

-This would be the place to talk about those things we can't understand down there," said Kuperus, trimming with the knife his blue-black fingernails, which stood out with their white lunulae. These looked like steel capsules covering sensitive nerve endings in need of protection.

-Can these few hundred metres of altitude change our mental capacity to such an extent? -said Ricardo Löwenherz. The brave friend put this question to him in a defensive attitude, but I, who was determined to take the strange experiences of that hour into myself, felt ashamed that he wanted to save himself. Kuperus looked at him and smiled, so that his fangs protruded like dagger points with dangerous curiosity:

-Young man, you do not unjustly bear the honourable name of Löwenherz [Lionheart]. For to everything down there that wants to approach you with tooth and claw, with explosives or violence, you oppose with your steely reasonableness. You are a worthy epigone of the great century of the Enlightenment, a soul forged in the fire of pure materialism, and sometimes it seems to me as if you had shared a table with Holbach at the time, or at least collaborated in the printing of articles from

Diderot for the Encyclopédie. But now that we are between heaven and earth, we should not forget that there is more...

-I don't believe in that," said Löwenherz dryly, as if he wanted to smash with a hammer everything he did not dare to look at more closely. Faith is a crutch for whose use we need an immovable ground under our feet. This belongs to the requirements of the earth, and lies down there among the wooden and stucco palaces of the funfair from which we have fortunately emerged. The laws of the mind change rapidly the further we move away from the place where they are thought to have been codified, and this in a proportion whose graphic representation will be found in the psychophysicists.

-What do you mean by that?

I am merely stating that here we are more sensitive to all those forces which down there are forced to flow under the ice-cap of consciousness. Perhaps we would show the strangest phenomena if we could be transplanted into empty space, just as the light from Geisler's tubes produces strange effects in a vacuum.

-You compare physical experiments with the mental.

Kuperus let his hand with the pocket knife hang over the edge of the gondola, so that the glare of the fair was reflected on the blade. From the open mouth cavern the great yellow fangs peeped out in a mute cackle.

-Now he is looking for a way out in dualism, and he should be convinced, as a consistent monist, of the coincidence between physical and soul laws. I do not want to mislead you, and I ask you to take this as a mere image of Geisler's tubes.

The Italian feast of the wooden city below, over which our globe hung in the night, sent out at the same time two fiery suns which began to revolve not far below us. They whirled crackling round an uncertain axis, and a gleam of their flickering life seemed to dip into the strange and venerable eyes of our friend Kuperus. The blade of the knife glowed red as the tip of a red-hot iron.

-Let me show you a little experiment that is easy to do. In the state of equilibrium in which we are, every bodily movement must cause an oscillation in this gondola, mustn't it? But of course you don't want that, because it is not pleasant to feel up here the same sensations as a storm at sea. Imagine how unpleasant it would be if the gondola began to rock, and try to keep it as calm as possible.

Richard Löwenherz fell silent under our friend's eyes, and I saw how he really tried to keep the gondola still. The wicker floated gently on a sea of silence between sky and earth, and only the suns twinkled slower and wearily turning below us, so that the loneliness grew heavier and more ominous. Thus falls the desolation of a closed room over the buzzing of flies.

dying women who, drawn by some deadly chance to that grave, beat themselves to death in vain against dusty glass.

Now I suddenly understood why we were sitting up there, why Eleagabal had insisted on this night ascent with all his eloquence and had used large sums of money to bribe the officials of the English Aerostatic Society. I heard all the objections: no, sir, no, that is against our regulations. Besides, it is forbidden by the police. Something could really happen. And I remember our friend's counter-arguments, and finally this one, greeted with a smile: sir, I was there when the first balloons fell and nothing happened to me, except breaking my front teeth. And then I felt the sky above me, like a soft wave, and the light of the Milky Way wrapped around me like a veil.

Suddenly Ricardo Löwenherz shouted:

-Stop, stop!

His hands reached out to the edge of the gondola and gripped the wicker with fingers twitching in fear. The face was contracted with fright and breathlessness, the eyes stared bloodshot and from landmark to landmark like those of a scourged man. Eleagabal's patriarchal beard quivered at its tips:

-Now come in.

-Witch, you trickster! -said Ricardo Löwenherz, and his exhaustion left him drooping like a deflated child's balloon. He leaned back and breathed heavily.

-You have only experienced the storm and the oscillation. For us the gondola remained still, didn't it?

-These tricks can be found today at any funfair.

-You are mistaken if you think this is some sort of suggestion. I have been most passive and have left you alone to work at it. Here is a nice little experiment to demonstrate the opposing force of the will.

-He no longer confuses me with his mystical words.

-I can only give you an explanation as an instruction for use. For centuries our superior Western culture has been in the appalling error of regarding the will as a beneficent power. He who lacks will is regarded as unfortunate, he who possesses an unhealthy will is designated, in the cultural languages, as a criminal. Will is the same as force, and playwrights of all times have extolled nothing else in their plays than will. But one thing was overlooked in this: that every effective force generates a backlash or a reaction. This has been known in the physical world and the recoil has been calculated in artillery and rockets. But out of sheer pride in the action of the will at a distance, its devastating effects at close range have been overlooked. That is, it was not realised that both effects arise from the same original foundation. The dramatists consoled themselves from these unforeseeable effects by constructing a mystical destiny, and the metaphysicians, topos

blind in the subsoil of realities, they groped in winding corridors in search of knowledge. It was the repulsion of your will, oriented towards equilibrium and repose, that set the gondola, for you, in motion. It would have been necessary for me and our friend to have added the same will in the direction of yours, strengthening it, to make the storm a reality. Universal history is made up of the will and the repulsion of the masses, traversed by the same forces as the individuals.

-You are witty, Eleagabal Kuperus, but the sun will rise and your words will cool to ice.

The fair became silent and its lights went out. In the night, which was beginning to grow pale, the stars hung with the melancholy glow of farewell. Eleagabal's head stood with sombre dignity before a green damask curtain, separated from the body by the high rim of the gondola, like the Baptist's head on a dark platter.

-Do you want more examples to make me understand? Do you know the secret of infinite melody? I am not referring to Gluck's musical principle, now called Wagner's, which consists in the fact that the conduction of the melody, surpassing all natural conclusions, continues to grow towards the horizon, but to those small sequences of a few bars which, perfect by antonomasia, remain closed in themselves, so that they can be repeated countless times. A circle of sounds that keeps on rolling and with each turn reproduces itself. Mozart made these melodies emerge from himself in happy hours, inspired by the perfection of creation. When our ear first catches these melodies, the will's attempt to detach itself from them only serves as a new impulse for them to repeat themselves in a sonorous rolling. We can easily identify the man

The artist is "normal" because the force of repulsion in him is smaller than the positive force of will. The artist carries within himself the balance of both forces and, like us, hovers between heaven and earth. And insanity appears when the power of the recoil overcomes the power of the forward impulse.

Eleagabal's hand, holding the razor, that terrible, worn hand, with thin depressions forming shadows between its tendons, slid to and fro along the edge of the gondola.

-We must bear in mind the conviction that as long as the will is alive in us, we are also close to insanity. For whatever laws may regulate the relation between force and repulsion in the mental sphere, we cannot dare to judge it according to physical formulae. In us are deposited the legacies of many ancestors who have become ghosts. I will tell you something about myself which may help you to understand. It happened in one of the rich art galleries in Holland. Because of my tiredness and my aversion to the noise of the people around me, I had the desire to enjoy these treasures.

which, induced by the ardour of my greed, I had begun to regard as my own property; I wanted to enjoy them in solitude, unhindered, to let them speak and reveal their most secret voices. When the watchmen paced the halls with that boastfulness of dark incomprehension, to warn visitors that it was closing time, I hid behind a curtain where brushes, buckets and brooms were kept. Through some dusty red fringes I saw a tall guy with a seafaring beard coming down the corridor, precisely from the place where Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" was. He rattled his bunch of keys and led the last visitors past, indifferently brushing his sleeve over the works and spitting into every other spittoon he met along the way, as if that were part of his duties. He whistled past my hiding place. Then I heard other watchmen coming from different directions, I heard their conversations in the hall, and at last the triple click of the key in the front door put an end to the disgusting chain of noises. I was alone and emerged from my hiding place, on the shore of a sea of silence, stretching from my feet to the infinity of the horizon. Now I walked, humble and conscious of my vileness, under those subtle and chosen minds, yet somehow accepted in their suspended life. The pompous and lavish pieces of the public hours lost their oppressive majesty, and the little unnoticed masters, who seemed marked by the stigma of neglect, spoke with the darkness that was akin to them. I stopped before one of those suggestive little pictures that introduce us to the artistic life of that vanished Holland, of which nothing seems to have been saved in today's Holland, except the unbridled taste for eating and drinking. It was one of those gallery pictures depicting an art dealer's shop, whose walls are covered with paintings and on which there are easels displaying important canvases. Kaleidoscopic impressions with intentional disorder gave the whole the unity of a chord. At that time there was a taste for displaying wealth, and these paintings brought together dwarfed copies of all the important works of contemporaries or ancestors, so that some of them are to be regarded as an illustrated manual of Dutch art history. The small masters of these works displayed here a selection of what they had collected in their time, in a modest hobby, as a precious asset of their time. And among the paintings are groups of people, so familiar with these things of art, so free of complexes and also of critical superiority, as we contemporaries are not capable of being when faced with the things of nature. There is conversation, laughter and all the gestures and looks seem to refer to these paintings and emerge from them. It was clear enough to see that the master of the painting I was standing in front of had indulged in a little joke. Among the famous paintings on the main wall, in the incredibly multicoloured tent, among the paintings by Rubens, Rembrandt, Van de Velde, Vermeer van Delft, Frans Hals and Jan Steen, he also hung precisely this small painting and repeated once again to all the ladies and gentlemen, all the Rubens and Rembrandt

and... himself. I was going to laugh but the gloom seemed so oppressive and heavy that my laughter faded into silence. A voice spoke beside me:

"Oh, in those days, jokes were liked and stood side by side with the deepest seriousness!

"Beside me stood a small, fat man, whose hands clasped behind his back, protruded a considerable stomach, and whose round, healthy, red face looked as if it had come out of one of those gay pictures by Frans Hals, in which banquets of harquebusier companies are depicted, and which are exhibited in the gallery at The Hague. He had a noble colouring, with a black doublet and white collar, his nose shone with the noble patina of Lucas Bols, and he looked as if he had been painted in 1575. I was surprised by the stool on which he stood with natural confidence. He pointed to the painting and put his finger on the place where, in the repetition of the canvas, the picture in the gallery appeared for the third time:

"Here the end of a series seems to be conditioned by the impossibility of penetrating further into the realm of the small. But I tell you, sir, that is a mistake. There is nothing that would not have been attempted then. By your temerity in shutting yourselves up here you have shown your love and passion, well, I will show you something else.

"He took a magnifying glass from his doublet pocket, poured his breath into it, and wiped it with a silk handkerchief. When the premature light from the wide halls seemed to concentrate in thin rays on that glass and the night was interrupted by a clear, flickering illumination, I invoked prudence. I know I was trying to cling to an iron pillar cemented in all the fundamentals of logic. In rapid, circular sequences the following argument formed in me: there are technical limits in painting that are impossible to overcome. Finer than the smallest ornament of Canaletto, than the embroidery on the robes of his priests and the precious stones of his monstrosities, cannot be the meticulous work of the most undaunted brush. And with a certain confidence in the determination of my will not to be surprised, I took the magnifying glass. At first I perceived nothing but huge blobs, mountains of colour sticking together as if on the wide bars of a grille, swirls of red and blue that seemed suddenly to fix themselves in a demented whirl, something like the spiral nebula shimmering among the stars of the heavens. The piercing, tempestuous forces of unpredictable chance threw coloured clouds into confusion, gathered in one place to form rough reefs or plunged into the abysses of the grating. Then I saw a picture before me like the valley from the top of a high mountain. And I knew that this was the reproduction of the gallery that related to that magnification as the original picture with the normal eye. I lowered the lens and a small miracle occurred, one of those incomprehensible facts with which past times surprise us when we want to rise above them. But a curiosity, an almost physical compulsion, which I felt like a pressure on the back of my neck, lifted the lens. I had to look... and I was frightened. My horror was like that which

invades when we see a piece of our skin with considerable enlargement. That wrinkled piece, cut by deep furrows of a soft, gelatinous substance, with the funnel-shaped openings of the pores and the greasy secretions of the sweat glands, with the smooth, blond, sticky hairs, is like the relief of a landscape on a planet ruled by disgust. Any concentration below the limits of the smallest seems to arouse this nausea, which is the polar opposite of the feeling of elevation conferred by the contemplation of height. We measure ourselves by the oversized and our blood runs cold in our veins at things that are below the lower limit of the proportional criterion that is inherent to us. When I felt this chain of knowledge rushing through me, I stretched out my hands, staggering, towards the well-grounded pillar of my will, to embrace it. But then something terrible happened. The column to which I wanted to cling, rejected me, or was it that my hands slipped on it because of its smooth surface... I don't know: I had the sensation of a purely physical blow or push that threw me off balance. And sliding down, I saw the successive, faster and faster shrinkages of the painting in the gallery. They followed each other at great speed like the stages of a theatre, on which the characters of a nightmare play out a frightful comedy of fear. The whole world now resembled a sort of ever narrowing triangular hose, in which one could only go forward but never go back. I had been compressed and was only waiting for me to take the shape of a pyramid. On the walls of that dungeon hung pictures, pictures and more pictures in infinite succession, smaller and smaller, until they were reduced to mere mathematical proportions; and yet they still gave the impression, inexplicably, that they represented pictures which in turn represented successions of other pictures, in which one of them always repeated the picture of this picture. The smiling gentlemen and bowing ladies, the clusters of pleasant contemplation returned in the same sequence in pricelessly smaller versions, always the same smile and the same bow ad infinitum. The insanity, the utter absurdity of these repetitions following one after the other to the beyond of all spatial concepts, flamed in me like a fatuous fire of fear. I felt all laws and harmonies rushing away, and as my ears buzzed, my compressed body burst into that kind of frightful hose. My head sharpened and pierced the darkness of unconsciousness....

"The watchmen who found me on the floor of their gallery were astonished and indignant and took me to the director. When, after great effort, I managed to tell him about my strange adventure, he coined, shaking his head, the new term The "gallery syndrome" and gave the opportunity to three highly respected Dutch professors to deal with this unheard-of phenomenon in scientific detail.

During this narration, dawn had just broken. The sun was shining from a

clear in the clouds. Our friend's face was like that of an ancient comedy mask; between the toothless jaws the dark mouth cavity opened, and the fangs protruded above the patriarch's beard. I once saw in an illustrated war story the picture of a French soldier who, as he sat on one side holding his canteen to his lips, had his head torn off by a grenade. In his complete rigidity, which interrupted all vital functions in an instant, Richard Löwenherz resembled that dead soldier. And yet another thing I saw in that young, pale morning, flooded with sun clots. The hand with the knife, that horrible hand that seemed to play innocently on the edge of the gondola while our attention was distracted by the story, had been cutting almost completely through the tether that held our balloon to the ground. With a slight snap, the strands of the rope were being pulled away until only a thin link connected us to the safety of the ground.

At that instant Richard Löwenherz must also have realised the danger, for he came out of his rigidity with a sudden burst. He rushed at Kuperus and wanted to grab him by the throat. But Eleagabal threw him back with a quick wave of his hand and gave the signal, smiling silently with bared fangs, to lower the balloon.

The slow journey down was spent in absolute silence. The tension had reached that climax where it makes a mockery of all calmness and equilibrium of mind. We expected that at any moment the rope would break and with a sudden tug on the balloon we would be thrown into the unforeseen adventure of a deadly journey. For a whole year we descended into the void, and the only thing that happened in that interminable space of time was the slow, continuous picking up of the rope tied to the edge of the gondola. When the tip of a tower penetrated from below into the solitude of our fear we shivered. The tip of the tower widened, gave way to a dome and then we slid down a slender shaft. Gothic decorations passed by us... other towers. Then the glass roofs of palaces and finally the phantasmagoria in the cold morning light of a dream of lush luxury. We were trembling more and more, and when the treetops began to float around us, Richard Löwenherz wanted to jump out of the gondola. Our struggle with him caused the gondola to lose its balance. The earth let us feel its hardness. We got off amidst workers and civil servants who forgot their morning sleep and bad moods, astonished at our shock. We had fallen as if from space, on the verge of tears from the astonishment of having been saved, and we greeted the exquisite sensation of having a floor under our feet. Richard Löwenherz sniffed the air and his dull eyes flamed with a fire of hatred.

But Eleagabal Kuperus laughed silently, his fangs hanging above the patriarch's beard:

-Prudence, my friends, prudence! Do you think that this highly respectable and cautious company, with limited liability, the owner of this balloon, would trust a single mooring? To such an extent have we not

Americanised, and the old continents happily also have a security police. See this thick cable under the coiled hemp rope? Complete safety can be dressed up with a spicy stimulus, so that respectable parents can tell that they have taken part in a balloon ride that is not without its dangers.

Eleagabal Kuperus liked to play these jokes.



F I N

Notes

[1] Hans Anders' annotations have been placed at the beginning of this report. (N. of the A.) <<

[2] A female figure, depicted on some German façades, with her skirt rolled up and showing her bottom to the devil, while making butter. In the past, butter-making was hard work and often not crowned with success. There was a superstition in the village that it had to do with magical forces, witches or the devil himself, who, in exchange for a signature in blood, guaranteed the result. According to the most widespread explanation, Hanne, a woman dedicated to these tasks, did not submit to such unholy dealings, and yet she succeeded in her work. Her gesture is interpreted as a mockery of the devil. The most famous Butterhanne can be found in the town of Goslar <<<

BERSERKER

BOOKS

