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Schiller's Literary Prose Works

New Translations and Critical Essays

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6: *The Spiritualist.*

*From the Memoirs of Count von O***

Friedrich Schiller (1789)

Translated by Francis Lamport

Book One

I AM GOING TO TELL YOU ABOUT a series of occurrences which many will find incredible, and which I largely witnessed with my own eyes. Those few who are familiar with a certain affair in the political world, if they should still be alive to read these papers, will find that they cast a welcome light on that matter; and even those others who lack this key to the story will perhaps find in it a significant contribution to the history of treachery and of the aberrations of the human spirit. They will be astonished at the *daring purposes* wickedness is capable of conceiving and pursuing; and they will be amazed at the extraordinary *means* which it contrives in order to achieve those aims. Truth pure and simple will guide my pen, for if these papers ever reach the public, I shall by then be no more and shall have nothing either to gain or to lose on account of what I have to report.

I was on my way back to Courland¹ in 17**, at about the carnival season, when I called on the Prince of ** in Venice. We had served together in the ** army, and were renewing an acquaintance which had been interrupted by the signing of peace. Since I in any case wanted to see the sights of the city, and as the Prince was only waiting for certain letters of credit before he could return to **, he easily persuaded me to postpone my departure so that I could keep him company until then. We agreed not to part from one another for as long as we remained in Venice, and the Prince graciously offered me accommodation in his own lodgings at the Moor's Head.

He was staying there under the strictest incognito, because he wanted to be left to himself, and also because his modest establishment would not have allowed him to display the full dignity of his rank. Two gentlemen, on whose discretion he could absolutely rely, made up together with a few loyal servants his whole entourage. He avoided extravagance, though as much

from temperament as from financial necessity. He shunned the pleasures of the city; at the age of thirty-five he had managed to resist all its sensual temptations. The fair sex had up to this time had no attractions for him. A profound seriousness and a dreamy melancholy dominated his character. His inclinations were silent, but persistent to the point of obstinacy; his decisions slow and hesitant, his affections warm and lasting. In the midst of noisy crowds of people, he walked alone; rapt in the world of his own imagination, he was often a stranger in the real one. No one was more surely born to be dominated by others, though he was not weak. But once he had been won over, he was fearless and dependable, and was equally courageous whether in fighting one recognised prejudice or in facing death in the cause of another.

As the third in line of succession, he was unlikely ever to attain the throne. His ambition had never been awakened; his passions had taken another direction. Content to remain independent of the will of others, he felt no temptation to rule over them himself; the peace and freedom of private life and the enjoyment of cultivated company satisfied all his wishes. He read a good deal, but indiscriminately; a neglected education and early military service meant that his mind was still immature. All the knowledge he had subsequently acquired served only to increase the confusion of his ideas, because they lacked any solid foundation.

He was a Protestant, like the rest of his family — from birth, not as a result of serious enquiries, for he had never conducted any, although at one period of his life he had been something of a religious zealot. As far as I know he had never become a Freemason.

One evening when, by ourselves and heavily masked as usual, we were walking in St Mark's Square — it was getting late, and the crowds had dispersed — the Prince observed that a masked figure was following us everywhere. He was dressed like an Armenian priest, and appeared to be alone. We hastened our steps and tried to put him off our track by frequently changing direction, but it was useless — the masked figure remained close behind us. "You are not involved in some affair here, are you?" the Prince finally asked me; "Venetian husbands can be dangerous." "I have no relations with any Venetian lady," I replied. "Let us sit down here and speak German," he continued, "I think we may have been mistaken for someone else." We sat down on a stone bench, thinking that the masked figure would carry on past us. He came straight up to us and sat down close beside the Prince. The Prince took out his watch and said to me aloud in French, standing up as he did so, "Past nine o'clock. Come along, we are forgetting that they are expecting us in the Louvre."² He said this only to stop the masked figure from following us. "*Nine o'clock*," repeated the masked man, slowly and emphatically, in the same language. "Congratulations, Prince" (and here he addressed the Prince by his proper name), "*he died at nine o'clock*." And with that he stood up and left us.

We looked at each other in astonishment. — “Who has died?” said the Prince at last, after a long silence. — “Let us follow him,” said I, “and ask him to explain himself.” We explored every corner of St Mark’s Square, but the masked man was not to be found. Dissatisfied, we returned to our hotel. On the way the Prince said not a word to me, but walked by himself to one side and seemed to be engaged in some intense inner struggle — as he afterwards confessed to me was indeed the case.

When we reached our lodgings, he spoke again for the first time. “It is ridiculous,” he said, “that a madman can disturb a man’s peace of mind with two words.” We wished each other goodnight, and as soon as I reached my room I made a note of the day and of the time when this had happened. It was a Thursday.

The following evening, the Prince said to me, “Why don’t we take a walk round St Mark’s Square and see if we can’t find our mysterious Armenian? I must admit I want to know the meaning of this masquerade.” I agreed. We stayed in the square until eleven o’clock. The Armenian was nowhere to be seen. We did the same on the next four evenings, and with no better success.

When we left our hotel on the sixth evening, the idea came to me — whether by chance or by design, I do not know — of leaving a message with the servants to say where we could be found if anyone should ask for us. The Prince observed my precautions and approved them with a smile. There were crowds of people in St Mark’s Square when we arrived there. We had hardly gone thirty paces when I saw the Armenian again. He was striding rapidly through the crowds and seemed to be looking out for someone. We were on the point of reaching him when Baron von F**, one of the Prince’s retinue, approached us, out of breath, and handed the Prince a letter. “It’s sealed in black,” he added, “we thought it must be urgent.” It struck me like a thunderbolt. The Prince went over to a streetlamp and began to read. “My cousin is dead,” he cried. “*When?*” I interrupted hastily. He looked at the letter again. “Last Thursday. At nine o’clock in the evening.”

Before we had had time to recover from our astonishment, the Armenian had joined us. “You have been recognised here, Your Highness,” he said. “Hurry back to the Moor’s Head. You will find a delegation from the Senate waiting for you there. Do not hesitate to accept the honour you will be offered. Baron von F** forgot to tell you that your letters of credit have arrived.” With that, he was lost in the crowd.

We hurried back to our hotel. Everything was as the Armenian had told us it would be. Three Nobili of the Republic were standing ready to greet the Prince and to escort him with all due pomp to the Assembly, where the highest aristocracy of the city were awaiting him. He barely had time to indicate to me by a hasty gesture that I should wait up for him.

At about eleven at night he returned. Grave and thoughtful, he came into my room and took me by the hand, after he had dismissed the servants. "Count," he said to me in Hamlet's words, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies."

"Your Highness," I replied, "you seem to have forgotten that you are going to bed much richer in hope than you were before." (The Prince who had died was the sole son and heir of the reigning ***, who was old and ailing and without further hope of a direct heir. An uncle of our Prince, also without heirs and with no hope of ever having any, was now the only one standing between him and the throne. I mention this circumstance because there will be occasion to speak of it later.)

"Don't remind me of it," said the Prince. "And even if I had gained a crown, I should have better things to do now than to speculate on such a trivial matter. — If this Armenian has not simply guessed —"

"How is it possible, Prince?" I interjected.

"— Then I will yield all my princely hopes to you for a monk's habit."

On the following evening we were at St Mark's Square earlier than usual. A sudden shower of rain drove us into a coffeehouse, where some men were seated at the gaming tables. The Prince placed himself behind a Spaniard's chair to watch the play. I had gone into a neighbouring room and was reading the newspapers. After a little while I heard a disturbance. Before the Prince arrived, the Spaniard had been losing all the time; now he was winning with every card. The whole game had taken a different turn, and the bank was in danger of being challenged by the lucky punter³ who had been emboldened by this change of fortune. The Venetian who was keeping the bank addressed the Prince in an offensive tone of voice and told him to leave the table, because he was upsetting the run of the game. The Prince looked at him coldly and stayed where he was, remaining unruffled when the Venetian repeated his offensive remarks in French. Thinking that the Prince understood neither language, he turned to the others, laughing contemptuously: "Tell me, gentlemen, how can I make myself understood to this buffoon?" At the same moment, he stood up and tried to seize the Prince by the arm; the Prince lost his patience, laid a firm hand on the Venetian, and threw him roughly to the ground. The whole house was in commotion. Hearing the noise, I rushed in, and involuntarily called out to the Prince by name. "Take care, Prince," I added without thinking, "we are in Venice." The name of the Prince caused a general silence, which soon gave way to a murmuring which sounded dangerous to me. All the Italians present gathered together in groups and stood aside. One after another they left the room, until we were left alone with the Spaniard and a number of Frenchmen. "You are lost, Your Highness," they said, "unless you leave the city immediately. The Venetian that you mishandled is rich and highly regarded: it will only cost him fifty zecchini to have you disposed of." The

Spaniard offered to fetch the police to ensure the Prince's safety and to see us home himself. The Frenchmen would have done the same. We were still standing and considering what to do, when the door opened and a number of servants of the State Inquisition appeared. They produced a government warrant ordering us both to follow them immediately. We were marched off under a heavy escort to a canal. Here there was a gondola waiting, in which we were made to take our places. Before we disembarked, our eyes were blindfolded. We were led up a long stone staircase and then through a long, twisting passage with vaults beneath it, as I judged from the echoes which reverberated beneath our feet. Finally we came to another staircase, where twenty-six steps led us down into the depths. Here it opened into a large room, where our blindfolds were removed. We found ourselves encircled by a group of venerable old men, all dressed in black; the whole room was hung with black drapes and sparsely lit; there was a deathly silence in the whole assembly, which made a fearsome impression. One of these old men, presumably the chief State Inquisitor, approached the Prince and asked him ceremoniously, at the same time presenting the Venetian to him, "Do you recognise this man as the one who insulted you at the coffee house?"

"Yes," answered the Prince.

Upon this the Inquisitor turned to the prisoner: "Is this the person whom you this evening sought to have assassinated?"

The prisoner replied in the affirmative.

Immediately the men in the circle drew back, and we were horrified to see the Venetian's head severed from his body. "Are you content with this restitution?" asked the Inquisitor. — The Prince had fainted in the arms of his escort. — "Go now," continued the Inquisitor in a terrible voice, "and do not be so hasty to judge the justice of the Republic of Venice in future."

Who the unknown friend might be who had called upon the swift arm of the law to save us from certain death, we could not imagine. Rigid with terror, we reached our quarters after midnight. Chamberlain Z** was waiting impatiently on the steps.

"What a good thing that you had sent us your message!" he said to the Prince, as he lighted our way. "What Baron von F** told us when he returned from St Mark's Square shortly afterwards made us fear for your lives."

"What, I sent you a message? When was that? I know nothing about it."

"This evening just after eight. You told us that we were not to worry if you came home later than usual tonight."

At this the Prince turned to look at me. "Did you perhaps take this precaution without my knowledge?"

I knew nothing about it.

"But it must be so, Your Highness," said the chamberlain; "look, here is your repeater watch, that you sent us as a token." The Prince felt for his

watch pocket. The watch was indeed missing, and he recognised that the one the chamberlain was holding was his. "Who brought it to you?" he asked in amazement.

"No one we knew, a masked man, dressed like an Armenian; he went away again immediately."

We stood staring at each other. — "What do you think of this?" said the Prince at last, after a long silence. "Someone is secretly watching over me here in Venice."

The fearful business of this night had given the Prince a fever, which confined him to his rooms for a week. During this time the hotel was swarming with both local people and strangers, drawn by the discovery of the Prince's rank. They vied with one another in offering their services, each one wanting to stake his claim in his own way. There was no further mention of the proceedings in the State Inquisition. Because the court at ** wanted the Prince to delay his departure further, some money changers in Venice had been instructed to pay him considerable sums. And so he found himself, against his will, in a position to prolong his stay in Italy, and at his request I too decided to postpone my departure further.

As soon as he was recovered enough to leave his room again, the doctor persuaded him to take an excursion on the Brenta for a change of air. The weather was fine, and so it was agreed. As we were about to board the gondola, the Prince found that he was missing the key to a small chest which contained some very important papers. We immediately turned back to look for it. He remembered quite clearly that he had locked the chest the very day before, and since that time he had not left the room. But all our searching was in vain, and we had to give up in order to lose no more time. The Prince, whose soul was innocent of all suspicion, said that it must simply be lost, and that we were not to mention it again.

The excursion was as pleasant as could be. A picturesque landscape, seeming to surpass itself in richness and beauty with every bend in the river; the clearest of skies, bringing a breath of May in the middle of February; charming gardens and tasteful villas without number adorning both banks of the Brenta; behind us Venice the magnificent, with a hundred masts and towers rising from the waters — all combined to give us the grandest spectacle in the world. We surrendered completely to the enchantment of this natural beauty; we were in the most cheerful of spirits, the Prince himself casting off his gravity and vying with us in jesting and merriment. As we disembarked a few miles from the city, we were greeted by the sounds of merry music. They came from a small village, where a fair was being held; here there was company of every kind. A troupe of youths and girls, all in costume, welcomed us with a pantomime dance. Everything was original, every movement inspired with lightness and grace. Before the dance had quite finished, the chief girl dancer, who played the part of a queen, was

suddenly seized as if by an invisible arm. She stood lifeless, as did all about her. The music ceased. Not a breath was to be heard in the whole gathering, and she stood there as if paralysed, her gaze fixed upon the ground. Suddenly she started up furiously as if inspired, stared wildly about her — cried out “There is a king amongst us,” tore the crown from her head and laid it — at the Prince’s feet. Everyone present now turned their eyes upon him, uncertain for a long while whether there was any meaning in this performance, so convincing was the dancer’s passionate seriousness. — Finally a general round of applause broke the silence. I looked towards the Prince. I observed that he was seriously affected and was trying hard to avoid the searching looks of the spectators. He threw some money to the children and hurried away to escape the crowd.

We had only gone a few paces when a venerable barefoot monk made his way through the assembled people and barred the Prince’s way. “Sire,” he said, “make a gift to the Madonna from your riches; you will have need of her prayers.” We were taken aback by these words and by the tone in which he spoke them. Then he was swept away in the throng.

Meanwhile our company had grown in number. An English lord, whom the Prince had already met in Nice, some merchants from Livorno, a German canon, a French abbé accompanied by a number of ladies, and a Russian officer had joined us. There was something quite unusual about this man’s physiognomy, which drew our attention to him. Never in my life have I seen so many *features* and so little *character*, such attractive benevolence and such frosty indifference combined in a single human face. All the passions seemed to have raged there and then left it again. Nothing remained but the silent, piercing look of an accomplished connoisseur of men, from whose gaze all those it met shrank back. This strange man followed us at a distance, but seemed to be taking only a casual interest in everything that was happening.

We found ourselves standing in front of a stall where a draw was taking place. The ladies paid their entries, and the rest of us followed their example; the Prince himself asked for a ticket. He won a snuffbox. When he opened it, I saw him start back and turn pale. — The key lay inside it.

“What is this?” said the Prince to me, when we were left alone for a moment. “Some higher power is pursuing me. I am surrounded by omniscience. Some invisible being, from which I cannot escape, is watching my every move. I must find the Armenian and get him to cast some light on all this.”

The sun was beginning to set as we arrived at the hostelry where supper was being served. The Prince’s name had caused our company to grow to sixteen people. In addition to those already mentioned, we had been joined by a virtuoso from Rome, a number of Swiss, and an adventurer from Palermo, who wore uniform and liked to be called Captain. We decided to

spend the whole evening here and to return home by torchlight. There was animated conversation at the table, and the Prince could not resist telling the company about the occurrence with the key, which aroused general astonishment. It gave rise to a lively argument. Most of the company dismissed the matter out of hand by saying that all these occult arts were mere conjurer's tricks; the abbé, who was already well wine, threw down the gauntlet to the whole realm of spirits; the Englishman uttered blasphemies; the musician crossed himself for fear of the devil. A few, including the Prince, held that one should reserve judgement about these things; all this time, the Russian officer remained in conversation with the ladies and seemed not to be taking any notice of our discussion. In the heat of the argument no one had noticed that the Sicilian had gone out. After half an hour or so he returned, wrapped in a cloak, and positioned himself behind the Frenchman's chair. "You were bold enough just now to take on all the spirits — would you care to try your luck with just *one* of them?"

"Done!" said the Abbé — "if you will take it upon yourself to summon one up for me."

"I will," said the Sicilian, turning to us as he said this, "when these ladies and gentlemen have first left us."

"Why?" cried the Englishman. "A bold spirit won't be afraid of a merry company."

"I will not be responsible for what may happen," said the Sicilian.

"In heaven's name, no!" cried the ladies around the table and rose from their seats in terror.

"Let us see your spirit, then," said the abbé, defiantly; "but warn him beforehand that there are sharp blades here" — as he asked one of the other guests for his sword.

"Do as you please, when the time comes," said the Sicilian coldly, "if you find you still have a mind to." With this he turned to the Prince. "Your Highness," he said to him, "you maintain that your key has been in strange hands. Have you any idea in whose?"

"No."

"Can you not even guess?"

"It did cross my mind —"

"Would you recognise this person, if you saw him?"

"Certainly."

Here the Sicilian threw back his cloak and produced a mirror, which he held up to the Prince's face.

"Is this the man?"

The Prince started back in fright.

"What did you see?" I asked.

"The Armenian."

The Sicilian hid the mirror under his cloak again. "Was that the person you were thinking of?" everyone present asked the Prince.

"The very same."

Upon this everyone's expression changed, and all laughter ceased. All eyes were turned intently upon the Sicilian.

"Monsieur l'Abbé, this is looking serious," said the Englishman; "in your position I would consider beating a retreat."

"The fellow is possessed by the devil," cried the Frenchman, and ran out of the house; the ladies rushed screaming from the room, the virtuoso followed them, the German canon was snoring in an armchair; the Russian remained in his seat, indifferent as before.

"Did you just want to make a laughingstock of that boastful fellow," began the Prince again, when the others had left the room, "or might you have a fancy to keep your word for us?"

"It is true," said the Sicilian. "I didn't really mean it with the abbé, because I knew that the coward would not take me at my word. — But the matter is really too serious just to make a joke of."

"So you admit that it is within your power?"

The magician was silent for some time, and seemed to be scrutinising the Prince very carefully.

"Yes," he finally replied.

The Prince's curiosity had already reached fever pitch. To make contact with the spirit world had once been the fantasy dearest to his heart, and since that first encounter with the Armenian all those ideas which his maturer reason had meanwhile dismissed had once again risen to his mind. He took the Sicilian to one side, and I heard him negotiating with him very seriously.

"You have a man before you," he said, "who is burning with impatience to be convinced about this important matter. I would embrace any man as my benefactor, as my greatest friend, if he could disperse my doubts and draw the veil from my eyes. Would you be the man to deserve so much of me?"

"What is it that you want of me?" said the magician hesitantly.

"For now, merely a sample of your art. Let me see some manifestation."

"What is that to lead to?"

"That when you know me better, you may judge whether I am worthy of further instruction."

"Your gracious Highness, I have the greatest possible regard for you. A secret power in your countenance, of which you yourself are not yet aware, bound me to you as soon as I saw you. You are stronger than you yourself realise. All my powers are at your absolute command — but —"

"Then let me see some manifestation."

"But I must first be sure that you are not asking this of me out of mere curiosity. Even though the invisible powers are to some degree at my

command, this is subject to the sacred condition that I do not profane the sacred mysteries, that I do not abuse my power."

"My intentions are the purest. I seek the truth."

Here they left their places and went to a window some way away, where I could no longer hear them. The Englishman, who had also been listening to their conversation, drew me aside.

"Your Prince is a fine man. I am sorry to see him getting involved with this charlatan."

"It will all depend," I said, "on how he manages to extricate himself."

"Shall I tell you something?" said the Englishman. "Now the wretched fellow is putting up his price. He isn't going to show off his tricks until he hears the money chinking. There are nine of us. Let's make a collection and tempt him with a big fee. That will show him up and open your Prince's eyes for him."

"Very well."

The Englishman tossed six guineas on to a plate and passed it round the company. Everyone put in a few louis; the Russian in particular seemed uncommonly interested in our proposal, and lay a banknote for a hundred zecchini on the plate — an extravagance at which the Englishman was astonished. We took our collection to the Prince. "Would you be so kind," said the Englishman, "to put in a word for us with this gentleman, and ask him if he would give us a demonstration of his art and accept this small token of our esteem." The Prince added a valuable ring to the collection and offered the plate to the Sicilian. The man hesitated for a few seconds. — "My lords, gentlemen and respected patrons," he then began, "your generosity shames me. It seems that you are mistaken in me — but I agree to your request. Your wishes shall be fulfilled." (At this he rang a bell.) "As far as this gold is concerned, which I have no right to, you will permit me to pass it to the nearest Benedictine monastery for some charitable purpose. The ring I will keep as a precious memento, to remind me of the worthiest of Princes."

Upon this the innkeeper appeared, to whom he immediately handed over the money.

"And he's a scoundrel, all the same," whispered the Englishman in my ear. "He's refusing the money because it's the Prince he is really after."

"Or the innkeeper knows his part," said another.

"Whom do you ask to see?" the magician now asked the Prince.

The Prince thought for a moment — "Let's see some great man," cried the English lord. "Ask for Pope Ganganelli.⁴ That won't tax the gentleman much."

The Sicilian bit his lip. — "I may not summon anyone who has been admitted to holy orders."

"That's a pity," said the Englishman. "He might have been able to tell us what disease he died of."

"The Marquis de Lanoy," the Prince now put in, "was a brigadier on the French side in the previous war, and was my most trusted friend. He was fatally wounded at the battle of Hastenbeck;⁵ they took him to my tent, and soon he died there in my arms. When he was already in his last agony, he called me to him. 'Prince,' he began, 'I shall never see my fatherland again, so let me tell you a secret to which no one but myself has the key. In a convent on the borders of Flanders there lives a —' With this he passed away. The hand of death severed the thread of his words; I should like to have him here and to hear the rest of them."

"By Jove, you are asking a lot," cried the Englishman. "If you can rise to this, I declare you are another Solomon."

We admired the Prince's ingenious choice and unanimously agreed in his request. Meanwhile the magician was pacing up and down and seemed to be struggling indecisively within himself.

"And that was everything the dying man entrusted to you?"

"Everything."

"Did you not make any further enquiries in his fatherland?"

"They were all fruitless."

"And was the Marquis de Lanoy's life beyond reproach? — I may not summon just anyone from the dead."

"He died repenting the extravagances of his youth."

"Do you happen to have any memento of him about you?"

"I do." (The Prince did indeed carry a snuffbox with a miniature portrait of the Marquis in enamel, and had had it lying beside him on the table.)

"I do not want to know about it. — Leave me alone now. You shall see your late friend."

We were asked to wait in the other wing of the house until he should call us. At the same time he had all the furniture removed from the room, the sashes taken out and the shutters shut as tight as possible. He ordered the innkeeper, with whom he seemed already to be on close terms, to bring a brazier with hot coals and carefully extinguish all the other fires in the house with water. Before we left him, he made us all give our word of honour to remain silent for ever about anything we might see or hear. All the doors of our wing of the house were bolted behind us.

It was past eleven o'clock, and a profound silence reigned over the whole house. As we were leaving, the Russian asked me if we were carrying loaded pistols. "Why?" I asked. — "For all eventualities," he replied. "Wait a moment, and I will see if I can find some." He went away. Baron von F** and I opened a window which looked out towards the other wing, and we thought we heard two men whispering, and a noise as if a ladder was being

put up. But it was only a suspicion on our part, and I cannot guarantee the truth of it. The Russian came back with a pair of pistols, after he had been away for half an hour. We watched as he loaded them. It was almost two o'clock when the magician reappeared and told us the time had come. Before we went in we were ordered to take off our shoes and to appear in shirtsleeves, underclothes, and stockinged feet. Behind us the doors were bolted as before.

When we returned to the previous room, we found that a circle had been drawn with charcoal, wide enough to hold the ten of us comfortably. All around the four walls of the room the floorboards had been removed, so that we were standing as if on an island. An altar, covered with a black cloth, had been set up in the middle of the circle, standing on a red silken carpet. A Chaldean bible lay open upon the altar, beside a death's head, and a silver crucifix had been set up on it. Instead of candles, spirits were burning in a silver container. A thick smoke of incense darkened the room, almost swallowing up the light. The celebrant had undressed, as had we, but was barefoot; at his bare throat hung an amulet on a chain of human hair, and about his waist he wore a white apron, adorned with secret signs and symbolical figures. He made us hold hands and observe a profound silence; in particular he urged us on no account to address any question to the apparition. He asked the Englishman and myself (we seemed to be the ones he trusted the least) to hold two unsheathed swords quite still and crossed just an inch above his head for as long as the proceedings should last. We stood round him in a half-moon; the Russian officer pushed in close to the Englishman and was standing next to the altar. The magician, his face turned towards the east, positioned himself on the carpet, sprinkled holy water to all four points of the compass and bowed three times towards the Bible. The conjuration, of which we understood not a word, lasted the best part of a quarter of an hour; when it was finished he signalled to those who were standing immediately behind him that they should now seize him tightly by the hair. Shuddering violently, he called upon the dead man three times by name, and the third time he stretched out his hand towards the crucifix —

All at once we all felt as if we had been struck by lightning, and our hands flew apart; a sudden thunderclap shook the building, all the locks resounded, all the doors rattled, the lid of the silver container fell to, extinguishing the light, and on the opposite wall, above the fireplace, appeared a human figure, in a bloodstained shirt, pale and with the features of a dying man.

"Who calls me?" spoke a hollow, barely audible voice.

"Your friend," replied the conjuror, "who honours your memory and prays for your soul," and at the same time he named the Prince by name.

Each answer followed after a long silent pause.

"What does he ask?" continued the voice.

“He wishes to hear you complete your confession, that you began in this world and did not finish.”

“In a convent on the borders of Flanders there lives —”

At this the whole house shook again. The door sprang open of its own accord with a violent thunderclap, a flash of lightning illuminated the room, and a second, *corporeal* figure, pale and bloody like the first but more terrible, appeared on the threshold. The spirit-lamp caught light spontaneously, and the room was as bright as before.

“Who is in our midst?” cried the magician in terror, and cast a horrified glance over the whole company — “I did not summon you.”

The figure strode with quiet, majestic steps towards the altar, took up a position on the carpet, facing us, and grasped the crucifix. The first figure was no longer visible.

“*Who calls me?*” said the second apparition.

The magician began to tremble violently. Terror and amazement had gripped us all. I seized a pistol, the magician snatched it from my hand and fired it at the apparition. The bullet rolled slowly over the altar, and the figure emerged unchanged from the smoke. Now the magician collapsed insensible.

“What is going on here?” cried the Englishman in amazement, and made to strike at the figure with his sword. The apparition touched his arm, and the blade fell to the ground. My forehead burst out in a cold sweat. Baron von F** confessed to me afterwards that he had uttered a prayer. But the Prince stood the whole time calm and fearless, his eyes fixed firmly upon the apparition.

“Yes, I recognise you,” he cried at last, deeply moved, “you are Lanoy, you are my friend. — Where have you come from?”

“Eternity is silent. Ask me about the life that is past.”

“Who is it that lives in the convent you told me of?”

“My daughter.”

“What? You were a father?”

“Alas for me, that I was not a better one.”

“Are you not blessed, Lanoy?”

“God has judged.”

“Can I do you no further service in this world?”

“Only by thinking of yourself.”

“How am I to do that?”

“You will find out in Rome.”

At this there was another thunderclap — a cloud of black smoke filled the room; when it had lifted, no figure was to be seen. I threw open one of the shutters. It was morning.

Now the magician recovered consciousness. “Where are we?” he cried, as he saw the light of day. The Russian officer was standing close behind him

and looked over his shoulder. "Trickster," he said, fixing him with a terrible look, "*you will call up no more spirits.*"

The Sicilian spun round, looked more closely into his face, gave a loud cry and fell at his feet.

Now at once we all looked at the supposed Russian. The Prince recognised without difficulty the features of his Armenian, and the words which he was about to stammer died upon his lips. Terror and surprise had turned us all to stone. Silent and motionless we stared at this mysterious being, who penetrated us all with a gaze of silent power and grandeur. For a minute nothing stirred — and for another. Not a breath moved in the whole assembly.

Some violent blows on the door finally brought us to our senses again. The door fell splintering into the room, and some officers of the law entered with an armed guard. "Here they are, all together!" cried their leader, and turned to the men accompanying him. "In the name of the Government!" he cried to us, "I arrest you." We had little time to reflect; in a few moments we were surrounded. The Russian officer, whom I shall now once more call the Armenian, took the leader of the party on one side, and as far as I could make out in the confusion, he appeared to whisper a few words to him in secret and to show him a written document. The man immediately drew back with a silent and respectful bow, turned to us and took off his hat. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said, "that I confused you with this charlatan. I will not ask who you are — but this gentleman assures me that you are honourable men that I see before me." At the same time he motioned to his men to molest us no further. The Sicilian he ordered to be tied up and closely guarded. "That fellow has had more than his due," he added. "We have been waiting for seven months now to catch him."

The wretched man was indeed a pitiable sight. The double fright of the second apparition and this unexpected raid had completely robbed him of his senses. He let himself be tied up like a child; his eyes stood wide open and staring in a deathlike face, and his lips were twitching silently, without producing a sound. We expected him to fall in convulsions at any moment. The Prince took pity on his condition and took it upon himself to ask the constable to release him, identifying himself as he did so.

"Your Highness," said the man, "do you realise who this man is that you are so generously pleading for? The trick he was planning to play on you is the least of his crimes. We have taken his accomplices. They have told us terrible things about him. He will be able to count himself lucky if he escapes with a spell in the galleys."

Meanwhile we also saw the innkeeper with his people being led across the courtyard, tied up with ropes. — "That man too?" cried the Prince. "What has he done then?" — "He was his accomplice and his receiver," answered the leader of the party, "he helped him in all his thievings and

trickeries and shared the takings with him. You shall be convinced straight away, Your Highness" (and here he turned to his men). "Search the whole house and report to me immediately what you have found."

Now the Prince looked round for the Armenian — but he was no longer to be seen; in the general confusion which the raid had caused he had managed to escape without being noticed. The Prince was inconsolable; he would have sent all his people after him straight away; he wanted to hunt for him himself and drag me away with him. I hurried to the window; the whole house was surrounded by curious spectators who had been attracted by the rumour of these events. It was impossible to make one's way through the crowd. I put this to the Prince: "If this Armenian is determined to keep hidden from us, you can be sure he knows all the byways better than we do, and all our searching will be in vain. Let us rather stay here a while, Your Highness. Perhaps this servant of the law can tell us more about him, as if I am not mistaken, he made himself known to him."

Now we remembered that we were still undressed. We rushed to our rooms and hurried to throw our clothes on. When we returned, the search of the house had been completed.

After the altar had been removed and the remaining floorboards taken up, a spacious chamber was revealed, high enough for a man to sit upright in comfort, and with a door that led by a narrow staircase to the cellar. In this vault they had found an electric machine, a clock and a small silver bell, which like the electric machine was somehow connected with the altar and with the cross that was set up on it. One of the window shutters, immediately opposite the fireplace, had an opening in it, furnished with a sliding cover, in which, as we subsequently discovered, a magic lantern could be installed to throw the desired image on to the wall above the fireplace. The attics and the cellar yielded a variety of drums, with large leaden balls attached to them by strings, probably to produce the sounds of thunder which we had heard. When the Sicilian's clothes were searched, a case was found containing various powders, together with quicksilver in vials and boxes, phosphorus in a glass flask, a ring which we soon realised was magnetised, as it remained hanging on to a steel button with which it had happened to come into contact; in his coat pockets a rosary, a false Jewish beard, pistols and a dagger. "Let's see if they are loaded!" said one of the raiding party, taking one of the pistols and firing it off in the direction of the fireplace. "Mary and Jesus!" cried a hollow human voice, the very one which we had heard from the apparition — and in the same moment we saw a bloodied body fall down from the chimney. "Not at peace yet, poor spirit?" cried the Englishman, while the rest of us recoiled in terror. "Go back to your grave. You were not what you seemed then, but now for sure you will be."

"Mary and Jesus! I have been wounded," repeated the man in the fireplace. The bullet had shattered his right leg. Immediately they saw to it that the wound was bound up.

"But who are you then, and what evil demon had to bring you here?"

"A poor barefoot monk," answered the wounded man. "A strange gentleman here offered me a zecchine if I would —"

"Repeat some formula or other? And why didn't you make yourself scarce straight away?"

"He said he would give me a sign when it was time for me to go on, but the sign never came, and when I tried to climb out, the ladder had been taken away."

"And what was the formula that he made you learn?"

Here the man fainted away, so that nothing more could be got out of him. When we looked at him more closely, we recognised him as the one who had blocked the Prince's path on the previous evening and had addressed him so solemnly.

Meanwhile the Prince had turned to the leader of the raiding party.

"You have rescued us," he said, pressing some gold coins into his hand, "rescued us from the hands of a charlatan, and have done us justice without knowing who we were. Will you place us fully in your debt and tell us who the stranger was to whom it cost only a word to have us released?"

"Who do you mean?" asked the leader of the raiding party, with an expression which clearly indicated that the question was unnecessary.

"I mean the gentleman in Russian uniform, who took you aside just now, showed you a paper and whispered some words in your ear, upon which you immediately set us free."

"Do you not know that gentleman, then?" asked the man again. "Was he not in your party?"

"No," said the Prince, "and I have very important reasons for wanting to make his acquaintance more closely."

"Well," answered the man, "I don't know him closely either. I don't even know his name, and today is the first time in my life that I have ever seen him."

"What? And in such a short time, with a few words, he could persuade you that he and the rest of us were innocent?"

"Yes, indeed, with a single word."

"And what was that? I must confess I should like to know."

"That stranger, Your Highness" — and he weighed the zecchini in his hand — "Your Highness has been so generous to me that I cannot keep it secret any longer. That strange man was — an officer of the State Inquisition."

"The State Inquisition! — That man!"

"Indeed, your grace — and it was the paper he showed me that convinced me."

"That man, you say? It is impossible."

"I will tell you more, Your Highness. It was on his information that I was sent here to arrest the conjuror of spirits."

We all stared at each other in even greater amazement.

"That's the reason, then," cried the Englishman at last, "why that poor devil of a conjuror took such a fright when he got a closer look at his face. He recognised that he was a spy, and that's why he cried out and fell at his feet."

"Never," cried the Prince. "That man is whatever he wants to be, and whatever the moment calls for him to be. What he really is, no mortal has ever discovered. Did you see the Sicilian collapse when he cried in his ear, 'You will call up no more spirits!' There is more behind this. That a man can be so frightened by a mere mortal no one will ever persuade me."

"That is something the magician himself is best placed to explain," said the English lord, "if this gentleman (turning to the leader of the raiding party) will give us the opportunity of speaking to his prisoner."

The man gave us this undertaking, and we agreed with the Englishman that we would call for him the very next morning. We then returned to Venice.

Lord Seymour (this was the Englishman's name) met us early in the morning, and soon afterwards there appeared a familiar person who had been sent by the constable to take us to the prison. I have forgotten to mention that for some days the Prince had been missing one of his attendants, a native of Bremen, who had served him faithfully for many years and had enjoyed his full confidence. Whether he had had an accident, or been stolen from us, or indeed simply absconded, nobody could tell. That he had just run away seemed highly improbable, as he had always been a quiet and reputable man and no fault had ever been found with him. The only thing his colleagues could think of was that he had become very melancholy of late and whenever he could find a moment to spare had been frequenting a certain Franciscan establishment on the Giudecca, where he had been often associating with some of the brothers. This made us suspect that he had got into the hands of the monks and become a Catholic; and as the Prince was at this time quite indifferent to such things, after a few fruitless enquiries he let the matter drop. He nevertheless regretted the loss of this man, who had accompanied him on all his campaigns, had always shown him complete loyalty, and would not be so easy to replace in a foreign country. Now, this morning, just as we were ready to go, the Prince's banker was announced, who had been entrusted with the task of engaging a new servant. He brought with him a well-favoured and well-dressed middle-aged man, who had served one of the Procurators as a secretary for a considerable time,

spoke French and also some German, and was moreover furnished with the best possible references. We liked the look of the man, and as he also said that he was content to be paid according to the Prince's satisfaction with his services, the Prince engaged him on the spot.

We found the Sicilian in a private prison, where as the constable told us he had been temporarily accommodated to suit the Prince's convenience, before he was taken up to the "leads," where he would no longer be accessible. These so-called leads are the most fearsome prison in Venice, under the roofs of the Doge's palace on St Mark's Square, where the wretched criminals are often driven mad by the baking heat of the sun accumulating on the lead surface. The Sicilian had recovered from yesterday's events, and stood up respectfully when he saw the Prince. One leg and one hand were chained, but apart from this he was free to move about the room. On our arrival the guard was taken off the door.

"I have come," said the Prince, after we had sat down, "to ask you to explain two things. The one you owe me, and it will not be to your disadvantage if you can satisfy me as to the other."

"My part is played out," said the Sicilian. "My fate is in your hands."

"Only if you are honest," rejoined the Prince, "will it be any easier for you."

"Ask me your questions, Your Highness. I am ready to answer, for I have nothing more to lose."

"You showed me the Armenian's face in your mirror. How did you do that?"

"What you saw was not a mirror. It was simply a pastel drawing of a man in Armenian dress, behind a glass, that deceived you. My sleight of hand, the dim light, your own astonishment helped the trick. You will find the picture among the other things that were confiscated at the inn."

"But how could you guess my thoughts so well and choose the Armenian of all people?"

"That was not difficult, Your Highness. No doubt you have often talked at table, in the presence of your servants, about the encounters you have had with the Armenian. One of my people happened to meet one of your attendants on the Giudecca, and was able to glean from him as much as I needed to know."

"Where is that attendant of mine?" asked the Prince. "I have been missing him, and I am sure you know what has happened to him."

"I swear I don't know the least thing about that, Your Highness. I have never seen him myself, and have never had any designs on him beyond what I have just told you."

"Go on," said the Prince.

"That was how I learnt in the first place about your presence and your affairs in Venice, and I decided immediately to take advantage of it. You see

that I am telling you the truth, Your Highness. I knew about your proposed excursion on the Brenta; I had thought to make use of it, and a key which you happened to have dropped gave me the first opportunity of trying my arts on you."

"What? Then I was wrong? The business with the key was your handiwork, not the Armenian's? You say I had dropped the key?"

"When you took out your purse — and I took advantage of the moment, as no one was looking, to cover it swiftly with my foot. The woman running the lottery stall was in the business with me. She let you draw from an urn that had no blanks in it, and the key was in the snuff-box long before you won it."

"Now I understand. And the barefoot monk, who blocked my path and addressed me so solemnly?"

"Was the same one that they tell me was pulled wounded out of the chimney. He is one of my colleagues, who has done me many a useful service in that disguise."

"But what were you aiming at with all this?"

"To put thoughts into your mind — to put you into a frame of mind in which you would fall for the tricks I was going to play on you."

"But the pantomime dance which took such an unexpected turn — surely that was not part of your invention?"

"The girl who played the queen had been instructed by me, and her whole part was of my devising. I assumed that it would be no little surprise to Your Highness to find that you were known in those parts, and — forgive me, Prince — the business with the Armenian gave me hope that you would already be disposed to disregard any natural explanations and to look for higher causes of anything extraordinary."

"Really," cried the Prince, with an expression of both annoyance and admiration, with a significant glance at me in particular, "really, I was not expecting this."

"But," he continued, after a long pause, "how did you produce the figure that appeared on the wall above the fireplace?"

"With the magic lantern that was installed in the window shutter opposite — you will have seen the opening that was made for it."

"But how was it then that not one of us noticed it?" asked Lord Seymour.

"Your lordship will remember that when you came back the room was full of thick smoke. At the same time I had taken the precaution of having the floorboards that had been taken up stacked beside the window where the magic lantern was installed; so that you did not immediately notice that particular window shutter. Also, the lantern stayed concealed by a wooden slide until you had all taken your places and there was no longer any risk of your searching the room."

"It seemed to me," I broke in here, "that I had heard a ladder being set up in the neighbourhood of that room, when I looked out of the window in the other wing. Was that so?"

"Quite right. That was the ladder that my assistant had to climb up to the window with the magic lantern in order to work it."

"The figure," continued the Prince, "really did seem to bear a fleeting resemblance to my late friend; I noticed in particular that it had very blond hair. Was that just a coincidence, or how did you achieve it?"

"Your Highness will remember that you had a snuff-box lying beside you at table, with an enamel portrait of an officer in ** uniform. I asked you whether you did not have some memento of your friend about you? You answered yes, from which I deduced that it might be the snuff-box. I had taken a good look at it at table, and as I am very practised in drawing and can produce a very good likeness, it was easy for me to give the image the fleeting resemblance which you observed; all the more since the Marquis' features are very striking."

"But the figure seemed to be moving —"

"Yes, so it seemed, but it wasn't the figure, but the smoke which was lit up by it."

"And the man who fell out of the chimney — he answered on behalf of the apparition?"

"Exactly."

"But he could not hear the questions."

"Nor did he need to. Your Highness will recall that I forbade you all most strictly to put any questions to the phantom yourselves. What I was going to ask and what he should reply was agreed in advance; and so that nothing should go wrong, I told him to observe long pauses and to count them off with a watch."

"You ordered the innkeeper carefully to extinguish all the fires in the house with water; I suppose this was done —"

"So that my man in the chimney should be in no danger of choking, since the chimneys of the house all run into one another and I could not be sure what your servants might be doing."

"But how was it," asked Lord Seymour, "that your spirit appeared just when you wanted him, neither sooner nor later?"

"My spirit had been in the room for a good while before I summoned him; but as long as the spirit-lamp was burning, he was too faintly lit to be seen. When I had finished my conjuration formula, I dropped the lid on the container with the burning spirit, the room was as dark as night, and now at last you could see the figure on the wall, where it had already been projected for a long time."

"But just in the moment when the spirit appeared, we all felt an electric shock. How did you do that?"

"You saw the machine under the altar. You had also seen that I was standing on a silken carpet. I made you all stand in a half-circle around me and hold each other's hands; when the moment came, I signalled to one of you to catch me by the hair. The crucifix was a conductor, and you all felt the shock when I touched it with my hand."

"You told us, Count von O** and myself," said Lord Seymour, "to hold two naked swords crossed above your head for as long as the conjuration lasted. What was that for?"

"Only to keep you two, who were the ones I trusted the least, occupied throughout the whole proceedings. You will remember that I ordered you to keep them exactly an inch above me; and as you had to keep this distance constantly in your sight, you could not look in any direction I did not want. But at that time I had not yet caught sight of my most dangerous enemy."

"I must admit," cried Lord Seymour, "that you certainly took every precaution — but why did we have to undress?"

"Just to increase the solemnity of the occasion, and to heighten your imaginations by its unusualness."

"The second apparition stopped your spirit from speaking," said the Prince. "What exactly was it he was to have told us?"

"Very much what you did get to hear afterwards. I asked Your Highness on purpose whether you had told me everything the dying man had said to you, and whether you had not made any further enquiries about him in his fatherland; this was necessary so that I was aware of any facts that might contradict what my spirit had to say. Thinking of certain sins of youth, I asked whether the dead man had lived a blameless life; and on your answer I built my invention."

"I think," said the Prince after some moments of silence, "that you have satisfied me about these matters. But there is one most important thing remaining which I want you to throw some light on."

"If it is in my power, and if —"

"No conditions! The law, in whose hands you find yourself, might not ask so discreetly. Who was the stranger before whom we saw you fall down? What can you tell us about him? How do you come to know him? And what happened with that second apparition?"

"Your gracious Highness —"

"When you looked into his face, you cried out loud and collapsed in front of him. Why? What did it mean?"

"That stranger, Prince —" He paused, became visibly more agitated and looked at us all in turn with a look of embarrassment. "Yes, as God is my witness, Your Highness, that stranger is a terrible being."

"What do you know about him? What is your connection with him? — Don't think you can conceal the truth from us."

"I shall take care not to — for how can I be sure that he is not standing here with us at this very moment?"

"Where? Who?" we all cried out at once and looked around us in the room, half laughing, half startled. "That is impossible!"

"Oh! for that man — or who or what he may be — things are possible that are even less within our understanding."

"But who is he then? Where is he from? An Armenian or a Russian? What is the truth about him, whoever he pretends to be?"

"He is none of the things that he seems. There can scarcely be any character, nationality, or station in life that he has not used as a disguise. Who he is, where he comes from, where he is going, — no one can tell. Some say that he spent many years in Egypt, gathering his secret wisdom from one of the Pyramids — I will neither confirm nor deny it. We only know him as the *Unfathomable*. How old, for example, do you think he is?"

"To judge by his appearance, scarcely more than forty."

"And how old would you say I am?"

"Not far off fifty."

"Quite right — and if I now tell you that I was a lad of seventeen when my grandfather told me about this mysterious man that he had seen once in Famagusta looking about the age that he does now —"

"Ridiculous, incredible, exaggerated."

"Not a whit. If I were not chained up here, I could bring you witnesses whose reputable character would leave you in no doubt. There are reliable people who can recall having seen him in different parts of the world at the very same time. There is no sword that can pierce him, no poison that can affect him; no fire can burn him, no ship will sink with him on board. Time itself seems to have no power over him, the years do not wither him and age does not turn his hair white. No one ever saw him take nourishment, no woman was ever touched by him, no sleep closes his eyes; of all the hours of the day there is only one of which he is not master, in which he has never been seen, in which he has pursued no earthly affairs."

"Indeed?" said the Prince. "And what hour is that?"

"The twelfth hour of the night. As soon as the clock has struck its twelfth stroke, he is no longer among the living. Wherever he is, he must go, whatever business he is about, he must break it off. That terrible stroke of the clock tears him from the arms of friendship, tears him even from the altar, and would even summon him from the agony of death. No one knows where he goes then or what he does there. No one dares to ask him, still less to follow him; for his features suddenly take on, as soon as that terrible hour has struck, such a dark and terrifying earnestness, that no one has the courage to look him in the face or to speak to him. A deep and deathly silence puts a stop to the liveliest conversation, and all those who are in his company await his return with a shudder of reverence and awe, without

daring as much as to rise from their places or to open the door through which he has passed."

"But," one of us asked, "is there nothing remarkable to be seen about him when he returns?"

"Only that he seems pale and exhausted, like a man who has undergone a painful operation, or received some terrible piece of news. Some claim to have seen flecks of blood on his shirt, but I'll not swear to that."

"And has no one ever as much as tried to hide the time of night from him, or to distract him so that he does not notice it?"

"Once and once only, they say, he let the hour pass. The company was numerous, people stayed till late into the night, all their watches were deliberately set wrong, and he was carried away by the heat of the conversation. But when the appointed hour came, he suddenly fell silent and rigid, all his limbs remained fixed in whatever angle chance had surprised them in, his eyes glazed over, his pulse stopped beating, and all attempts to rouse him again were fruitless; and this state of affairs lasted until the hour was past. Then he suddenly stirred again of his own accord, opened his eyes and went on speaking from the very syllable he had been interrupted in. The general amazement betrayed to him what had happened, and with fearful gravity he told them all that they could count themselves fortunate to have escaped with no more than a fright. But he left the town where this had happened the very same night, for ever. Most people believe that at that mysterious hour he converses with his guardian spirit. Some even claim that he is a dead man, who is allowed to go about among the living for twenty-three hours in the day, but in the twenty-fourth his soul has to return to the underworld to endure judgement. Many think he must be the famous Apollonius of Tyana,⁶ others even that he is John the disciple, who is said to remain on earth until the Day of Judgement."

"Around such an extraordinary man," said the Prince, "there are bound to be all kinds of extravagant speculations. Everything you have said is all hearsay, but his behaviour to you, and yours to him, seem to me to suggest some closer acquaintance between you. Is there some particular story at the bottom of this, that you have been personally involved in yourself? Don't keep anything back."

The Sicilian looked at us with a doubtful expression and said nothing.

"If it is a matter that you do not want to be widely known," said the Prince, "then in the name of these two gentlemen I can promise you that not a word will be spoken of it outside this room. But tell us openly and honestly."

"If I can hope," began the man after a long silence, "that you will not let it be used in evidence against me, then very well, I will tell you about a remarkable occurrence involving this Armenian, one that I witnessed with my own eyes and that will leave you in no more doubt about the secret

powers of this man. But," he added, "you must allow me not to name certain names."

"Can you not tell us without that condition?"

"No, Your Grace. There is a family involved whose interests I have reason to spare."

"Let us hear it, then," said the Prince.

"It must be about five years ago," began the Sicilian, "that I was in Naples, practising my arts with some success, when I got to know a certain Lorenzo del M**nte, Chevalier of the Order of St Stephen, a rich young gentleman from one of the leading houses of the kingdom, who plied me with favours and seemed to hold my secrets in high regard. He revealed to me that his father, the Marchese del M**nte, was a devotee of the Cabbala and would count himself fortunate to have an adept (as he was pleased to call me) under his roof. The old nobleman lived on one of his estates by the sea, about seven leagues from Naples, where he spent his time, in complete isolation from his fellow men, honouring the memory of a dear son who had been taken from him by a terrible fate. The chevalier hinted to me that he and his family might well have need of my assistance in a very serious matter, as my secret arts might be able to cast light on something regarding which all natural methods of enquiry had been exhausted. He in particular, he added very meaningfully, would perhaps one day have cause to regard me as the author of his peace of mind and of all his earthly happiness. I did not dare to question him more closely, and for the moment that was all I got to know. But this was the truth of the matter.

"This Lorenzo was the Marchese's younger son, and had accordingly been destined for holy orders; the family properties would go to his elder brother. Jeronimo, that was the elder brother's name, had been travelling for several years and returned to his fatherland about seven years before the events I am now recounting, in order to marry the only daughter of a neighbouring aristocratic family, the C***tti, as both families had agreed ever since the birth of these two children, in order that their considerable estates should be combined. Although this engagement had been merely devised for the convenience of the parents on both sides and the hearts of the two fiancés had never been consulted, the pair had nevertheless silently confirmed the wisdom of this choice. Jeronimo del M**nte and Antonia C***tti had been brought up together, and the freedom enjoyed by two children who were already regarded as an engaged couple had from early on led to a greater degree of affection between them; this was further strengthened by the harmony of their characters, and as they grew to maturity soon turned to love. Four years' separation had made their feelings for each other warmer rather than cooler, and Jeronimo returned to the arms of his fiancée just as fiery and true as if he had never been parted from her.

The joys of their reunion were scarcely over, and the preparations for the wedding were being vigorously pursued, when the bridegroom — disappeared. He would often spend whole evenings at a villa which had a view of the sea, and sometimes enjoy an excursion on the water. On one such evening it happened that he was away for an unusually long time. Messengers were sent for him, vessels searched for him at sea; no one had seen him. None of his servants was missing, so none of them could have gone with him. Night fell and he failed to appear. Morning came, afternoon and evening, and still no Jeronimo. Already people were beginning to entertain the most frightful suppositions, when the news was received that an Algerian pirate had landed on their shores on the previous day and that several of the local people had been taken away as prisoners. Immediately two galleys which were lying ready were manned; the old Marchese boarded the first one, determined to free his son even at the cost of his life. On the third morning they caught sight of the corsair, having the advantage of the wind over him; soon they had caught up with him, and came so close that Lorenzo, who was on board the first galley, thought that he could identify his brother on the deck of their adversary, when a sudden storm arose and drove them apart again. The ships were damaged and barely survived the storm, but their quarry was lost, and they were compelled to land on Malta. The family's grief knew no bounds; the old Marchese tore his hair in despair, and they feared for the life of the young Countess.

"Five years were spent in fruitless investigations. Enquiries were made all along the Barbary Coast; a huge ransom was offered for the young Marchese's liberty; but no one appeared to claim it. Finally it seemed the most probable explanation that the storm which had parted the two ships had sunk the pirate vessel, and that all on board her had perished in the waves.

"Plausible though this supposition was, it was still far from a certainty, and there was no cause to give up hope completely that the missing young man might after all show himself again one day. But assuming that he did not, the family would die out with him, or else the second brother would have to renounce holy orders and assume the rights of the firstborn. Bold though this step was, and in itself so unfair to exclude a brother who might still be living from the exercise of his natural rights, it was nevertheless not thought proper to risk the fate of an ancient and distinguished house, which but for this arrangement would disappear for ever. Grief and age were bringing the old Marchese ever nearer to his grave; with every new failure, his hopes of recovering his lost son sank further; he saw the impending downfall of his house, which could be prevented by a small breach of justice, namely by resolving to favour the younger brother at the expense of the elder. In order to fulfil his agreement with Count C***tti, he needed only to alter a single name; the aims of both families would be fulfilled in the

same way, whether Countess Antonia were to call herself Lorenzo's wife or Jeronimo's. The remote *possibility* of Lorenzo's reappearance could not rank in importance with the immediate and evil *certainly* of the complete extinction of the family, and the old Marchese, who felt his death coming nearer every day, was impatient to die freed at least of this anxiety.

"The only person who delayed this step, and opposed it most obstinately, was the one who stood most to gain from it: Lorenzo. Unmoved by the delights of boundless wealth, indifferent even to the possession of the most charming creature who was to be delivered into his arms, he refused with the noblest professions of conscience to rob a brother who might still be alive and might return to claim his property. "Is my dear Jeronimo's fate," he said, "not already made terrible enough by this long imprisonment, that I should make it even more bitter by robbing him of all that was dearest to him? Could I have the heart to pray for his return, if his wife lay in my arms? Could I have the effrontery to run to welcome him, if one day a miracle should return him to us? And even if we admit that he is lost for ever, how can we better respect his memory than by leaving empty for ever the gap that his death has left in our circle, than by sacrificing all our hopes upon his grave and leaving what was his untouched like a holy of holies?"

"But all the reasons which fraternal delicacy could adduce were not sufficient to reconcile the old Marchese to the notion of seeing the extinction of a house which had bloomed for centuries. All that he would concede to Lorenzo was a grace of two years before he should lead his brother's bride to the altar. During this time investigations were pursued most vigorously. Lorenzo himself made several sea journeys, exposed himself to many dangers; no efforts and no expenses were spared to find the man who had disappeared. But these two years passed as fruitlessly as the ones that had gone before."

"And Countess Antonia?" asked the Prince. "You have said nothing about her condition. Can she really have submitted so calmly to her fate? I cannot believe it."

"Antonia's condition was a terrible struggle between duty and passion, revulsion and admiration. The unselfish magnanimity of fraternal love moved her; she felt herself swept away in reverence for the man whom she could never love; torn by conflicting feelings, her heart bled. But her repugnance towards the chevalier seemed to grow all the more as his claims on her respect increased. With profound sorrow he observed the silent grief that was consuming her youth. A tender pity imperceptibly took the place of the indifference with which he had previously regarded her; but this treacherous emotion deceived him, and a raging passion began to hinder him in the practice of a virtue which had till now been proof against all temptation. But still, even to the cost of his heart, he lent his ear to the promptings of his

noble nature; he was the only one who protected the unhappy victim from the family's caprices. But all his efforts misfired; every victory that he gained over his passion showed him all the worthier of her, and the magnanimity with which he refused her served only to rob her resistance of every justification.

"And that was how things stood when the young chevalier persuaded me to visit him at his country estate. The warm recommendation of my patron assured me a welcome which exceeded all my desires. I must not forget to mention here that through certain curious proceedings I had succeeded in making my name well known among the local Masonic lodges, which may well have helped to increase the old Marchese's faith in me and to increase his expectations of me. How far I succeeded with him and what methods I employed there, you need not ask me; from what I have already confessed to you, you can guess everything else. As I made use of all the mystical books that I found in the Marchese's very respectable library, I was soon speaking to him in his own language and bringing my own system of the invisible world into harmony with his own opinions. In a very short time he was believing whatever I wanted him to, and would have sworn to the unions of the philosophers with sylphs and salamanders as readily as on an article of the canon. As he was in any case very religious and had developed his propensity to faith in that school to a high degree, it was all the easier for my fairy-tales to find a ready ear in him, and by the end I had him so entangled and entwined in mystifications that nothing normal and natural had any credit with him. In no time I was worshipped as the apostle of his house. The usual subject of my discourses was the exaltation of human nature and its commerce with higher beings, and my infallible authority the good Count Gabalis.⁷ The young Countess, who since the loss of her lover had in any case lived more in the spirit world than in the real one and was drawn with passionate interest to matters of this kind by the fantastic flights of her imagination, took up my casual hints with a shudder of satisfaction; and even the servants found themselves things to do in the room when I was talking, so as to pick up a word or two of mine here and there, which oddments they then strung together after their own fashion.

"I must have spent about two months on the estate in this way, when one day the young chevalier came into my room. His face was marked by profound grief, his features were distorted, and he fell into a chair with every sign of desperation.

"'Captain,' he said, 'I am done for. I must get away. I can't bear it here any longer.'

"'What is it, your honour? What is the matter?'

"'Oh, this fearful passion!' (Here he sprang up from the chair and threw himself into my arms.) — 'I have fought it like a man. — Now I cannot go on.'

“But my dear friend, whose fault is it then but your own? Is not everything in your own power? Your father, your family —”

“Father! family! What do I care about that? — Do I want a forced hand or an affection freely given? — Do I not have a rival? — Ah! And what kind of rival? A rival perhaps among the dead? Oh, let me go, let me go! Even if it were to the ends of the earth — I must find my brother.”

“What? After so many fruitless efforts, you can still hope —”

“Hope! — In *my* heart it died long ago. But in *hers*? — What does it matter if *I* still hope? But can I be happy as long as a glimmer of hope remains in Antonia’s heart? — Two words, my friend, could end my torments — but it is no use! My fate will be wretched until eternity breaks its long silence and graves bear witness for me.”

“Is it *that* certainty then that can make you happy?”

“Happy? Oh, I doubt whether I can ever be happy again! — But uncertainty is the torment of the damned!” (After a pause he calmed himself and continued in a melancholy tone.) “If he could see how I suffer! — Can it make him happy, this faithfulness that is making his brother wretched? Is a living man to pine away on account of a corpse that can feel no pleasure? — If he knew my misery —” (here he began to weep copiously, and pressed his face to my breast) “then perhaps — perhaps he would lead her into my arms himself.”

“But is that wish quite so impossible?”

“My friend! What are you saying?” — He looked at me with an expression of terror.

“Much lesser occasions,” I said, “have woven the departed into the fate of the living. And if all the worldly happiness of another human being — of a brother —”

“All the worldly happiness! Oh, I feel it! How truly you have spoken! All my happiness!”

“And is the peace of a mourning family not cause enough to invoke the aid of the invisible powers? Surely! if ever any earthly affair can justify disturbing the sleep of the blessed — making use of a power —”

“In God’s name, my friend, no more of this!” he interrupted me. “Once upon a time, I admit, I did entertain such a thought — I think I told you about it — but I have long dismissed it as infamous and appalling.”

“You see now,” continued the Sicilian, “where this was leading us. I did my best to dispel the young chevalier’s doubts, in which I finally succeeded. It was resolved to summon up the dead man’s ghost, upon which I asked for fourteen days’ grace in order, as I said, to prepare myself appropriately. After this period had elapsed and my machinery had been properly set up, I chose one gloomy evening, when the family was gathered about me in the usual way, to persuade them to agree to this, or rather to bring them without their noticing to the point at which they made the request of their own accord. I

had the greatest difficulty with the young Countess, whose presence was of course so essential; but here the fantastic flight of her passion came to my aid, and perhaps even more so, a faint glimmer of hope that the man we believed was dead was still alive and so would not answer our summons. Suspicion of the whole business, lack of faith in my arts, was the only obstacle I did *not* have to contend with.

"As soon as I had the family's agreement, the third day was fixed for the work. Prayers, which had to be prolonged into the middle of the night, fasting, vigils, solitude and mystical instruction, together with the use of a certain still unfamiliar musical instrument,⁸ which I have found very effective in similar cases, made up the preparations for this solemn proceeding, and all went so exactly according to plan that the fanatical enthusiasm of my audience inflamed my own fantasy and helped in no small measure to increase the illusion which I had to strain to produce. At last came the hour all were awaiting —"

"I can guess," cried the Prince, "who it is you are going to produce for us now — But go on, go on —"

"No, your grace. The conjuration went exactly to plan."

"But how? And what about the Armenian?"

"Don't be afraid," answered the Sicilian, "the Armenian will appear all too soon."

"I shall not indulge in any description of my mystifications, which in any case would take too long. Suffice it to say that everything lived up to my expectations. The old Marchese, the young Countess together with her mother, the chevalier and some other relations were present. You can readily imagine that during the considerable time that I had spent in the house, I had had no lack of opportunity of making the most exhaustive enquiries about everything concerning the dead man. Several paintings of him which I found there enabled me to give the apparition the most convincing likeness, and as I only made the ghost speak through gestures his voice could not arouse suspicion. The dead man himself appeared in the dress of a Barbary slave, with a deep wound in his throat. You will notice," said the Sicilian, "that in this I departed from the general supposition that he had been drowned in the waves, because I had reason to hope that the very unexpected nature of this feature would increase the credibility of the vision in no small measure; just as contrariwise nothing seemed to me more dangerous than too close a correspondence with what was natural."

"I think that was very well judged," said the Prince, turning to us. "In a series of extraordinary phenomena, so it seems to me, it is precisely the *more probable* which falls out of line. The ease of comprehending the revelation received would only have compromised the means by which it had been made; the ease of devising it might well have cast suspicion on the proceedings, for why should one summon up a spirit just to learn something

that could be discovered without him, simply by the exercise of everyday reasoning? But here the unexpected novelty and difficulty of the discovery is itself as it were a guarantee of the miraculous means by which it is made — for who will cast doubt upon the supernatural character of an operation when what it produces can *not* be produced by natural forces? — I interrupted you,” said the Prince. “Finish your story.”

“I put the question to the spirit,” the man continued, “whether there was anything more in this world that he called his own and whether there was anything he had left behind that was dear to him? The spirit shook its head three times and raised one hand to heaven. Before he departed, he drew a ring from his finger, and after his disappearance it was found lying on the ground. When the Countess looked more closely at it, it was her engagement ring.”

“Her engagement ring!” cried the Prince in amazement. “Her engagement ring! But how did you get hold of that?”

“I — It was not the real one, Your Highness — I had had it — It was only an imitation —”

“An imitation!” repeated the Prince. “But to make an imitation you would have needed the real one, and how did you manage that, since it would never have left the dead man’s finger?”

“Yes, that’s true,” said the Sicilian, showing some signs of confusion — “but from a description which someone had given me of the real ring —”

“And *who* had given you that?”

“It was a long time ago,” said the Sicilian — “It was a plain gold ring, I think, just with the young Countess’s name — But you have quite confused me —”

“Well, what happened then?” asked the Prince, with a very dissatisfied and dubious expression.

“Now everyone was convinced that Jeronimo was no longer in the land of the living. From that day on the family publicly announced his death and formally went into mourning for him. The incident with the ring also left Antonia with no further doubts and lent force to the young chevalier’s advances. But the violent impression that the apparition had made on her caused her to fall dangerously ill, which would soon have put an end to her lover’s hopes for ever. When she had recovered, she insisted on taking the veil, from which she was only dissuaded by the most earnest representations on the part of her confessor, whom she trusted implicitly. Finally the combined efforts of this man and the family frightened her into agreeing. The last day of mourning was to be the happy day, which the old Marchese intended to make even more of a celebration by making over all his property to his rightful heir.

“The day arrived, and Lorenzo received his trembling bride at the altar. When the day drew to its close, a magnificent banquet awaited the merry

guests in the brilliantly lit marriage-hall, and loud music accompanied the abandoned revels. The happy old man had wanted the whole world to share his joy; all the doors of the palace stood open, and everyone was welcome who would congratulate him on his good fortune. But then among the crowds —

The Sicilian paused here, and a shudder of expectation made us hold our breath —

“Well then,” he continued, “among the crowds my neighbour at table pointed out to me a *Franciscan monk*, who was standing there immobile as a statue, a tall lean figure with an ashen face, and a grave and gloomy look fixed upon the bridal pair. The pleasure on the laughing faces all around seemed to pass this one man by, his expression remained always the same, like a sculpted bust amidst living creatures. The extraordinary nature of this sight, which affected me all the more powerfully as it struck me in the middle of my enjoyment and contrasted so sharply with everything that surrounded me at that moment, made an indelible impression on my soul, so that this alone sufficed to make me recognise the monk’s features in the physiognomy of our *Russian* (and you will have already understood that he and your *Armenian* are also one and the same person) — which otherwise would have been simply impossible. I tried again and again to turn my eyes away from this frightening figure, but they kept returning to him of their own accord, and every time found him quite unaltered. I nudged my neighbour, he nudged his likewise; the same curiosity, the same unease spread round the whole table; conversation dried up, suddenly there was complete silence, but the monk was unaffected. He stood there motionless and ever the same, his grave and gloomy look fixed upon the bridal pair. Everyone was horrified by this apparition; the young Countess alone found her own sorrow reflected in this stranger’s face and hung with silent delight on the only object in the whole assembly which seemed to understand and to share her grief. Gradually the crowd dispersed, midnight was past, the music grew quieter and faded away, the candlelight grew dim as only a few were left burning, whispered conversations grew softer and softer — and bleaker and bleaker grew the scene in the half-light of the banqueting hall; the monk stood motionless and ever the same, a silent gloomy look fixed upon the bridal pair.

“We all rose from the table, the guests dispersed in various directions, the family drew together in a closer circle; in that closer circle the monk remained, uninvited. I do not know how it happened that no one would speak to him; no one spoke to him. The women amongst the bride’s acquaintances were crowding around her, as she gazed imploringly at the venerable stranger, trembling and beseeching his aid; the stranger made no response.

"The men were similarly gathered around the bridegroom — a tense, expectant silence — 'Oh, that we are all so happy together,' began the old father, who alone of us seemed not to have noticed the unknown man or at any rate not to be surprised by his presence — 'That we are all so happy together, and that my son Jeronimo cannot be with us!'

"Did you invite him then, and has he not come?' asked the monk. It was the first time that he had opened his lips. We gazed at him in terror.

"Ah, he has gone to that place from where one can never come back,' replied the old man. 'Reverend Sir, you do me an injustice. My son Jeronimo is dead.'

"Perhaps he is only afraid to show himself in such company,' continued the monk. '— Who knows how he may look now, your son Jeronimo! — Let him hear the voice that was the last voice he heard! — Ask your son Lorenzo to summon him.'

"What is the meaning of this?' everyone was murmuring. Lorenzo turned pale. I won't deny that my hair was beginning to stand on end.

"Meanwhile the monk strode to the sideboard, where he seized a full wine-glass and raised it to his lips — 'To the memory of our dear Jeronimo!' he cried. 'Let all those who held him dear do as I do.'

"Wherever you have come from, reverend Sir,' the old Marchese cried at last, 'you have named a name that is dear to us. Be welcome! — Come, my friends!' (as he turned to us and had the glasses passed around), 'do not let a stranger put us to shame! — To the memory of my son Jeronimo.'

"Never, I believe, was a health drunk with such ill grace."

"One glass is still untouched. — Why is my son Lorenzo refusing to join in this friendly toast?"

"Lorenzo trembled as he took the glass from the Franciscan's hand — trembled as he raised it to his lips — 'To my dear brother Jeronimo!' he stammered, and shuddered as he set it down again.

"That is the voice of my murderer,' cried a terrifying figure which was suddenly standing in our midst, its clothes drenched in blood, and disfigured by hideous wounds —

"But you must ask me no more," said the Sicilian, whose face bore every sign of horror. "My senses had left me from the moment when I cast my eyes upon that figure, and it was the same for everyone present. When we recovered our wits, Lorenzo was in the agony of death; the monk and the apparition had disappeared. The young chevalier was carried to bed in fearful convulsions; no one would attend the dying man but the priest and the grieving old father who followed him to the grave a few weeks later. His secrets are locked within the bosom of the priest who heard his last confession, and no living man knows what they may be.

"Not long after these occurrences it happened that it was necessary to clear out a well in the rear courtyard of the villa, which was overgrown with

bushes and had been blocked with rubble for many years; and when the rubble was cleared away, a skeleton was found. The house where all this happened is no longer standing; the family of del M**nte has died out, and in a convent not far from Salerno they will show you Antonia's grave.

"So you see now," continued the Sicilian, as he saw that we were all standing in shocked silence, "you see now how it is that I came to know this Russian officer, or this Armenian, if you will. Judge now whether I did not have reason to tremble at the sight of a being who has now twice crossed my path in such a terrifying way."

"Answer me just one more question," said the Prince, standing up. "Have you been completely truthful in your story in everything concerning the young chevalier?"

"I have told you everything I know," replied the Sicilian.

"And so you really believed him to be an honest man?"

"In God's name, yes, I did," answered the man.

"Even then, when he gave you that ring?"

"What? — He never gave me a ring — I never said that *he* gave me the ring."

"Good," said the Prince, ringing the bell, and already on his way out. "— And the Marquis de Lanoy's ghost," he asked, turning back once more, "that this Russian caused to appear after the one you made, do you believe that was really and truly a ghost?"

"I can't think it was anything else," answered the man.

"Come," said the Prince to us. The gaoler came in. "We have finished," said the Prince to him. "You, sir," (turning to the Sicilian) "may expect to hear from me again."

"The last question, Your Highness, which you put to this trickster, I should like to put to you yourself," said I to the Prince, when we were alone again. "Do you believe that second ghost was a true and genuine one?"

"I? No, indeed, I no longer do so."

"No longer? Then you did before?"

"I will not deny that I did allow myself to be momentarily carried away, and to think it was more than a mere conjurer's trick."

"And I should like to see anyone," I cried, "who in those circumstances could have resisted such an impression. But what reasons have you now for changing your opinion? After what we have just heard about this Armenian, we should be more rather than less willing to believe in his miraculous powers."

"What we have just heard from this worthless fellow?" interposed the Prince with some force. "For I hope you can no longer doubt that that is what he is, this man that we have been dealing with?"

"No," I said. "But does that mean that his evidence —"

"The evidence of a good-for-nothing — even if I had no other grounds to doubt it — cannot stand up against truth and sound reason. Does a man who has tricked me more than once, who has made trickery his profession, does such a man deserve to be heard in a matter where even the purest devotion to truth must first establish its credentials before it can be believed? Does a man like that, who has probably never uttered a single truth for its own sake, deserve to be believed when his evidence runs counter to reason and the eternal laws of nature? It is as if I were to allow a branded villain to bring accusations against the most unspotted and irreproachable innocence."

"But what reasons could he have to give a man whom he has such good cause to hate, or at least to fear, such a glowing testimonial?"

"Even if I cannot see his reasons, does that mean he does not have them? Do I know *who* is paying him to trick me? I admit that I do not yet fully understand the workings of his deception, but he has served the cause for which he is fighting very ill in showing himself up as a charlatan — and perhaps as something worse."

"I confess I find the business with the ring rather suspicious."

"*It is more than that,*" said the Prince, "it is decisive. He got that ring (let me assume for the moment that the things he told us really occurred) from the murderer, and he must have known for certain at that very moment that it was the murderer. Who else but the murderer could have robbed the dead man of a ring which he never took from his finger? He tried to persuade us all through the story that he himself had been deceived by the chevalier, and that he had thought that *he* was deceiving *him*. Why these twists and turns, unless he realised himself how much he had to lose by admitting his complicity with the murderer? His whole tale is nothing but a series of fabrications designed to string together the few truths that he found it in his interest to reveal to us. And are you telling me, when I have caught a scoundrel out over ten lies, that I should have more scruple to accuse him of an eleventh, than to allow a fundamental breach of the order of nature, in which I have never yet found the least discord?"

"I have no answer to that," said I. "But the apparition we saw yesterday is still just as inexplicable to me."

"To me too," said the Prince, "though I am tempted to suggest a key to the mystery."

"What might that be?" said I.

"You surely remember that the second figure, as soon as it appeared, made for the altar, took hold of the crucifix and stood on the carpet?"

"Yes, so it seemed to me."

"And the crucifix, so the Sicilian told us, was electrified. So you see that the 'ghost' was quick to make an electric contact. So the blow that Lord Seymour struck at it with his sword could have no effect, because the shock paralysed his arm."

“Yes, that would account for the sword. But the bullet that the Sicilian fired at it, which we then heard rolling slowly over the altar?”

“Are you sure it was the same bullet that we heard rolling? — To say nothing of the fact that the marionette, or the person, if it was, that played the part of the ghost could have been so well armoured as to be sword- and bullet-proof. — But just consider *who* it was that had loaded the pistols.”

“It’s true,” I said, and a sudden realisation struck me — “the Russian had loaded them. But it all happened in full view of us — how could any deception be possible?”

“And why could it not have been possible? Did you at the time have any suspicion regarding that man that would have made you think it necessary to keep a watch on him? Did you inspect the bullet before he loaded it? It could have been made of mercury, or even of painted clay. Were you quite sure that he really loaded it into the pistol, or that he didn’t drop it into his hand? What makes you so certain — assuming that the pistols really were loaded — that it really was the loaded ones that he took with him into the other part of the building and that he did not substitute another pair, which would have been an easy matter, as it didn’t occur to anybody to keep a watch on him, and as we were in any case busy undressing? And might not the ‘ghost,’ just as the pistol smoke concealed it from us, have dropped another bullet on the altar, which it had been provided with in case of just such an emergency? Which of these explanations is impossible?”

“You are right. But the striking resemblance between the ghost and your late friend — I have often seen him in your company, and I recognised the ghost as him on the spot.”

“So did I — and I have to admit that the deception was carried out to perfection. But if that Sicilian could manage after a few stolen glances at my snuff-box to give *his* portrayal some degree of likeness, enough to deceive you and me, would it not have been so much easier for the Russian, who had the freedom to make use of my snuff-box throughout the whole meal, who had the advantage of never being watched at any time, and to whom I had also revealed in confidence who it was who was portrayed on the box? — Add to this — as the Sicilian also observed — that the Marquis’ characteristic features are such as can readily be imitated in a rough kind of way — and what is there in this whole apparition that is inexplicable?”

“But the contents of his words? What he told us about your friend?”

“What? Didn’t the Sicilian say that he had made up a similar story out of the few scraps he had gleaned from me? Doesn’t that prove how natural it was to come up with this particular invention? And on top of that, the ghost’s answers were so dark and oracular that he ran no risk of being caught out contradicting himself. If we allow that the trickster’s accomplice, the one who played the ghost, was intelligent and self-possessed and knew even in

some degree what it was all about — how much further might they not have taken this pantomime?”

“But imagine, Your Highness, what elaborate preparations the Armenian must have made for such a complicated deception! How much time he would have needed! How much time even to make one man’s face resemble another as closely as was called for here? How much time to train this substitute ghost so well that nothing could go wrong? How much attention would have had to be paid to all the nameless little things that either contributed or, because they might upset things, had in some way to be anticipated! And now just consider that the Russian did not leave us for more than half an hour. Could everything, even the absolute essentials for such a performance, be set up in no more than half an hour? — Really, Your Highness, I don’t think that even a playwright worried about his three Aristotelian unities would have crammed so much action into a single interval, or expected his audience to suspend their disbelief so completely.”

“What? So you think it completely impossible that all these preparations could have been made in that mere half an hour?”

“Surely,” I cried, “as good as impossible.”

“I don’t understand that phrase. Does it offend against all the laws of time, space, and physical causality that such a clever fellow as this Armenian undoubtedly is, with the help of his perhaps equally skilful accomplices, under cover of night, with no one to observe them, and equipped with all the means which a man of this profession will never be without — that such a man, in such favourable circumstances, could have accomplished so much in such a short time? Is it actually inconceivable and absurd to believe that with only a few words, commands, or signals he could have given his men complicated tasks, that he could have indicated lengthy and complicated operations with the minimum expenditure of words? — And can what is nothing but a manifest impossibility stand against the eternal laws of nature? Would you rather believe a miracle than admit an improbability? Rather overturn all the forces of nature than admit to an artificial and uncommon combination of those forces?”

“Even if the matter does not justify such a bold conclusion, you must allow me that it is far beyond our comprehension.”

“I am almost tempted to argue that with you,” said the Prince with a cheerful, roguish expression. “How would it be, my dear Count, if, for example, it were to turn out that not just during and after that half an hour, not just in haste and by the by, but the whole evening and the whole night everything was the work of this Armenian? Just consider that the Sicilian took almost three full hours for his preparations.”

“The Sicilian, Your Highness!”

“And where is the proof, then, that the Sicilian did not have just as much to do with the second ghost as with the first?”

“What, Your Highness?”

“That he is not the Armenian’s principal accomplice — in short — that the two of them are not hand in glove together?”

“That would be hard to prove,” I cried in no small amazement.

“Not so hard as you think, my dear Count. Really? You think it is mere chance that these two men should be engaged in such a strange and complicated plot against the same person, at the same time and in the same place, that there should be such a remarkable harmony, such a thoroughly contrived agreement between their two operations, that the one should be as it were playing into the other’s hands? Suppose that he made use of the cruder deception in order to set off the more subtle one. Suppose that he first employed the one in order to test the degree of credulity he could expect of me; to spy out the ways of worming himself into my confidence; to get acquainted with his target through this experiment, which could be allowed to fail without jeopardising the rest of his plan; in short, to tune his means to their end. Suppose that he deliberately challenged and alerted my attention on the one hand, precisely to lull it to sleep regarding another matter which was more important to him. Suppose that he needed to make certain enquiries which he wanted to be laid to the trickster’s account, so as to put any suspicions on the wrong track.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let us assume that he bribed one of my people in order to obtain certain secret information — certain documents, even — which would serve his purposes. My attendant has gone missing. What is there to stop me believing that the Armenian is involved in the disappearance of this man? But chance may bring it about that I discover these ruses; a letter might be intercepted, a servant might have gossiped. His whole reputation is ruined if I discover the sources of his omniscience. So he interposes this mountebank, who must have some design or other upon me. He takes good care to give me an early hint as to the existence and the intentions of this man. So whatever I discover, all my suspicions fall upon this trickster, and the Sicilian will lend his name to any discoveries which are to his, the Armenian’s, advantage. The Sicilian was the decoy that he let me play with, while he himself, unseen and unsuspected, was spinning his invisible nets around me.”

“Excellent! But how do you square it with these intentions that he helps to destroy the illusion himself and reveals the secrets of his art to profane eyes? Must he not fear that the exposure of a deception carried through with as high a degree of conviction as the Sicilian’s in fact was, will weaken your faith altogether and so make the execution of his further plans all the more difficult?”

“What are the secrets he is giving away? None of those, you can be sure, that *he* has a fancy to try out on me. So by profaning them he has lost nothing. — But how much on the other hand has he gained, if my supposed

triumph over deceit and trickery has given me a sense of security, if he has managed to divert my attention into a quite different direction, to fix my still vague and indeterminate suspicions on an object as far removed as possible from the real point of attack? — He could expect that sooner or later, from my own suspicions or prompted by someone else, I should look to find the explanation of his miracles in some sort of conjuring trick. — What could he do better than to put them side by side himself, to put as it were the yardstick to judge them by in my own hand, and by setting an artificial boundary to the one to give me a more elevated or at any rate more confused idea of the others? How many speculations has he cut off at once by this manoeuvre? How many explanations, that I might subsequently have fallen upon, disproved in advance?”

“Then at all events he has badly spoiled his own game by sharpening the eyes of those he was aiming to deceive and making them altogether less disposed to believe in miracles by allowing such a far-fetched deception to be exposed. You yourself, Your Highness, are the best refutation of his plan, if he ever had one.”

“Perhaps he was mistaken in me — but his judgement was no less sharp for that. Could he have foreseen that I should happen to remember the very thing that gave us the key to the mystery? Was it part of his plan that the creature who served him should give himself away so badly? Do we know whether this Sicilian has not gone far beyond his brief? — Certainly about the ring — And yet it is especially this one thing that confirmed my suspicions of this man. How easily can a subtly conceived plan be frustrated by a crude instrument! It was surely not his intention that the mountebank should have trumpeted his fame so brazenly — that he should serve up tales that the slightest thought is enough to expose. So, for example — how can this trickster have the nerve to claim that his miracle worker has to break off all commerce with men at the stroke of midnight? Have we not seen him in our midst at that very hour?”

“That is true!” I cried. “He must have forgotten that.”

“But it is in the character of people like that to exaggerate their stories, and by overstepping the mark to spoil everything that a more modest and restrained deception would have brilliantly achieved.”

“All the same, Your Highness, I cannot bring myself to regard this whole business as nothing more than a deliberate contrivance. What? The Sicilian’s terror, the convulsions, the fainting, the whole wretched state of the man that made us pity him ourselves — could all this be nothing but a part he had learnt? Granted that a theatrical illusion can be taken to such a pitch, surely the actor’s art cannot command his whole physical being.”

“As regards that, my friend — I have seen Garrick play Richard the Third” — And were we cold and detached enough at that moment to be totally unbiased observers? Could we have put this man’s passions to the

test, when we were so overwhelmed by our own? And apart from that, the critical moment, even in a game of deception, is such an important affair for the deceiver himself that *anticipation* can easily bring forth symptoms of such violence in *him* as the *surprise* does in his victim. And then add the unexpected arrival of the law —”

“But that very circumstance, your grace — it is good that you remind me of it — would he really have dared to expose such a dangerous plan to the eyes of the law? To put the loyalty of his creature to such a hazardous test? And for what purpose?”

“That is his business, but he will know his people. Do we know what secret crimes guarantee him this man’s silence? — You heard what office he holds in Venice — And even if this claim is just another of his fairy-tales — how much will it cost him to help this fellow get off when he is the only witness against him?”

(And indeed the subsequent course of events only served to justify the Prince’s suspicions. When we made enquiries about our prisoner a few days later, we were told that he had disappeared.)

“And for what purpose, you ask? How else but in this violent way could he cause such an improbable and disgraceful confession to be extracted from the Sicilian, when so much depended on it? Who but a desperate man with nothing more to lose would be capable of making such damaging admissions about himself? In what other circumstances would we have believed him?”

“I admit it all, Your Highness,” said I at last. “May both the apparitions be mere conjuring tricks; may this Sicilian, for all I know, have spun us a tale that his master has had him coached in; may they both be working together in agreement to some common purpose, and may this agreement suffice to explain all the extraordinary coincidences that have amazed us in the course of this affair. That prophecy in St Mark’s Square, the first of these miracles, that led to all the others, still remains unexplained; and what use is the key to all the others when we despair of explaining that one?”

“Look at it the other way, my dear Count,” answered the Prince. “Ask yourself, what do all those miracles prove, if I can show that even one of them was no more than a conjuring trick? That prophecy — I freely admit it — is beyond my comprehension. If it stood by itself, if the Armenian had concluded his part with that as he had begun — then I confess I do not know how far he might have carried me along with him. But in this base company it begins to look a little suspicious.”

“I agree, Your Highness! And yet it remains incomprehensible, and I defy all our philosophers to cast any light on it.”

“Must it really be so inexplicable?” continued the Prince, after few moments’ consideration. “I am far from claiming to be a philosopher, and yet I could be tempted to find a natural key to this miracle as well, or at any rate to rob it of every appearance of the extraordinary.”

"If you can do *that*, Prince, then," said I with a sceptical smile, "then *you* shall be the only miracle I believe in."

"And to prove," he continued, "how little justification we have to have resort to supernatural powers, I will show you two different ways in which we can perhaps get to the bottom of this matter without violating the laws of nature."

"Two keys at once! Indeed, now you are making me most curious."

"You were with me when I read the detailed account of my late cousin's illness. He was suffering from a cold fever when he was killed by a stroke. The extraordinary manner of his death led me, I confess, to consult a number of doctors about it, and what I learnt from them puts me on the track of this magical business. The disease from which the dead man was suffering, a particularly rare and dangerous one, has this one peculiar symptom, that during a bout of shivering the patient is plunged into a deep coma from which he cannot be roused, and which causes him in the event of a second paroxysm to suffer a fatal apoplexy. As these paroxysms recur in strict sequence and at fixed intervals, the doctor is able, once his diagnosis of the patient's illness has been confirmed, also to predict the hour of death. Now it is known that the third paroxysm of a tertiary fever will occur on the fifth day of the illness — and this is just the time that it takes a letter from ***, where my cousin died, to reach Venice. Now let us assume that our Armenian has an attentive correspondent among the late man's retinue, that he has a keen interest in receiving news from that quarter, that he has some designs on me which would be advanced by a faith in miracles on my part and by the appearance of supernatural powers, — and you have a natural explanation of that prophecy which seems so incomprehensible to you. At all events you can see how it would be possible for a third party to bring me the news of a death which is taking place more than a hundred miles away at the very moment he is announcing it."

"Really, Prince, you are putting things together which taken one by one admittedly sound very natural, but in fact can only be connected in this way by something which is no better than magic."

"Indeed? Then you are less frightened by miracles than by what is merely surprising and unusual? As soon as we admit that the Armenian has an important plan, which is either aimed at me or needs me for its execution, — and are we not *obliged* to assume that, whatever else we may think about him personally? — then nothing is unnatural or forced which will lead him by the shortest route to his goal. But can there be a quicker way of getting a man into one's power than by gaining the reputation of a miracle worker? Who can resist a man whom the spirits obey? But I admit to you that my explanation is somewhat contrived; I confess that it does not really convince me. So I will not insist on it, as I do not think it worth invoking a contrived and fabricated solution, when mere chance is enough to explain everything."

“What?” I interrupted him, “you are saying that mere chance —”

“Hardly anything more,” continued the Prince. “The Armenian knew that my cousin was in danger. He saw us in St Mark’s Square. The opportunity tempted him to make a prophecy which, if it proved false, was no more than a word wasted — but if it should be fulfilled could have the most significant consequences. The outcome rewarded his venture — and it may well have been only then that he thought of basing a coherent plan on this present of good fortune. — Time will unravel this mystery, or perhaps it will not — but believe me, my friend” (and he laid his hand on mine and took on a very serious expression), “a man who can command higher powers will have no need of mere trickery, or he will disdain to use it.”

And so ended a conversation which I have reported in full because it shows the difficulties which were to be overcome in the Prince’s case, and because I hope it will clear his memory of the charge that he threw himself blindly and unthinkingly into the snares which an unheard-of devilry had laid for him. Not all of those — continues Count von O** — who as I write this are perhaps laughing his weakness to scorn and thinking themselves in the pride and self-regard of their unchallenged reason entitled to break the staff of condemnation over him, not all of these people, I am afraid, would have so doughtily withstood this first temptation. And if we are now to see him succumb despite this fortunate preparation, if we find the assault of evil, of whose furthest approach his good angel had warned him, nevertheless achieving its purpose with him, we shall be less inclined to mock his folly than to marvel at the magnitude of the wicked plot which overcame a mind so well defended. Worldly considerations can have no part in what I choose to reveal, for *he* whose gratitude I should earn is no more. His terrible fate has run its course; his soul has long since absolved itself before the throne of truth, before which my own will long have stood before the world reads these pages; but — and may I be forgiven the tear which against my will I shed for the memory of my dearest friend — but to guide the hand of justice I write this: He was a noble man, and he would surely have been an adornment of the throne which he was duped into trying to ascend by criminal means.