

Arrigo Boito's Short Stories

Translated by Nicolas J. Perella

Introduction

Arrigo Boito (1842-1918), author of the four tales presented here for the first time in an English translation,¹ is known outside of Italy almost exclusively as the composer of *Mefistotele*, an opera for which he himself wrote the libretto. He is in fact equally esteemed as a consummate librettist, above all for the remarkable texts he created for Giuseppe Verdi's last two masterpieces, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*. But in his homeland, he ranks rather high among the literati as a significant poet in the period when Italian political unification (1860-1870) was at long last realized, and he and a number of other young literary rebels generally referred to as the Scapigliati (the disheveled or disorderly ones) wrote works meant to shock the complacent insular culture of the Italian bourgeoisie into a broader European context. The chief targets of their polemic were religion – more specifically Roman Catholicism – and the prevailing maudlin romanticism of the time, so unlike the writings of Manzoni, Foscolo, and Leopardi in the earlier decades of the century. To achieve modernity, the Scapigliati embraced a program of realism, of the kind then current in France, and a concomitant philosophy of positivism buttressed by science. It was a reliance destined to prove illusory and insufficient to carry them to anything like the supernal but vague realm of the Ideal to which they claimed to aspire. In recoiling, they fell back upon a sentiment they had too willfully repressed: a nostalgia for the simple faith and ideals of their childhood. Boito, however, who was to adopt a more rigorous stance of rejection of any compromise, refused to submit to the tendency except to avail himself of it in expressing a radically dualistic view of existence and his own sense of failure.

In a poem addressed to Emilio Praga, his friend and fellow poet, Boito writes of his vain and bitter failure to resolve the conflict between the Real and the Ideal, nothing less than the central romantic theme, to be sure; but whereas the early Romantics generally dealt with the motif in terms of a noble or heroic struggle and a deeply melancholic sense of victimism, the Scapigliati, and again Boito above all, present it from an ironic (even self-ironic) perspective:

*Sono stanco, languente, ho già percorso
Assai la vita rea,
Ho già sentito assai quel doppio morso
Del Vero e dell'Idea.*

*I am weary, languid, / and have traveled /
far enough on life's evil road; /
I've felt more than enough of the double sting /
of the Real and the Ideal.*

¹ The translation is based on Arrigo Boito, *Le novelle: L'Alfieri nero, Iberia, Il pugno chiuso, Il trapezio*, ed. Orazio Pugliese (Firenze: Loggia dei Lanzi, 1998).

Likewise in another such poem, “A Giovanni Camerana,” we read:

*Dio ci aiuti, o Giovanni, egli ci diede
Stretto orizzonte e sconfinite l’ali;
Ci diè povera fede
Ed immensi ideali.*

*God help us, Giovanni, he has given us / a close
horizon and limitless wings; / He has given us
frail faith / and immense ideals.*

Poetry may seem a saving grace, but, alas, its stupendous flight only makes the world seem all the more sterile. And in not finding the Beautiful, he writes, we grasp at the horrid: “E non trovando il Bello, / Ci abbranciamo all’Orrendo” [vv.55/56]. And it is indeed an aesthetic of the Horrid that one finds in much of the Scapigliati’s writings, nowhere so much as in the poetry of Boito, whose guiding poetic principle is the dualism suggested in the preceding quotations, and in the poem “Dualismo,” perhaps the single most effective explication of his Manichean vision of a metaphysical and moral battle between Good and Evil. Again Boito falls short of attaining a seamless fusion of the two terms of his antithetical dualism:

*Son luce ed ombra; angelica
Farfalla o verme immondo,
Sono un caduto cherubo
Dannato a errar sul mondo,
O un demone che sale,
Affaticando l’ale,
Verso un lontano ciel. (vv. 1-7)
E sogno un’Arte eterea
Che forse in cielo ha norma,
Franca dai rudi vincoli
Del metro e della forma,
Piena dell’Ideale
Che mi fa batter l’ale
E che seguir non so. (vv. 71-77)*

*I am light and darkness; an angelic / Butterfly
or filthy worm; I am a fallen cherubin /
Damned to wander over the world / Or a demon
who soars on high, / Beating his wings, / Toward
a remote heaven.
And I dream of an Ethereal Art / That perhaps has
In Heaven its norm, / Free of the crude ties / Of meter
and of form, / Full of the Ideal / That urges me to
beat my wings / But which I am unable to follow.*

Recognizing that he could not be the Italian prototype of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (the modern poet most revered by the Scapigliati), Boito consciously set about being *a poète maudit* of his own making, using his exceptional linguistic gifts in the creation of a baroquely virtuosic poem (or collection of interconnected poems) of a satirical and parodic manner. The grasping at the Horrid referred to in the poem “A Giovanni Camarana” achieved its aim in Boito’s unique masterpiece, *Re Orso* (*King Bear*), a horror-fairy tale and veritable verbal extravaganza told in twelve sections or episodes of varying metric forms. The protagonist, Re Orso, is a monstrous grotesque among lesser grotesques, tyrannical and cannibalistic, and although in the latter part of the poem his character is somewhat softened in the direction of a humanization, he is most of all a personification of Evil. Yet like all creatures he must, and does, die. The only thing eternal is the headless Worm (decapitated many years earlier by King Bear) that journeys long in making its way to the tomb of the King whose corpse it annihilates.

As a symbol of Evil, King Bear has counterparts in the figure of Mephisto in Boito’s opera *Mefistotele*, and in the person of the emperor Nero in his second opera, *Nerone*. Mephisto is well known to all opera lovers chiefly by his claim to be the inalterable spirit of negativity (“Son lo spirito che nega”: “I am the spirit that denies”). Nero is the maniacal destroyer. To these figures must be added the most intriguing of all – Boito’s rancorous incarnation of Evil in the person of Iago who in his libretto for *Otello* recites (sings) his blasphemous “Credo” equating evil with man. This monologue is unique to Boito’s Iago, who therein makes a boastfully overt declaration of what is at best only suggested in Shakespeare’s play.

In approximately the same span of time that Boito (then in his mid-to-late twenties) wrote the greater part of his poetry and the first version of *Mefistotele*, he wrote the four tales in prose that represent his entire output in the genre. Two of them, “The Black Ensign” (“L’alfier nero” 1867) and “The Clenched Fist” (“Il pugno chiuso” 1870), are among the finest Italian short stories of the nineteenth century. A third, “Trapeze” (“Il trapezio” 1873-74), never finished by the author, is the longest and the most discursive of the four and was on the way of becoming a *Bildungsroman*. The fourth tale, “Iberia” (“Iberia” 1868) has its own peculiar merits in being an extended parody. The tales share some of the basic features found in Boito’s poetry: the omnipresent concept of duality, parallelisms, dichotomies, contrasting and complementary antitheses. Boito’s obsession with duality and his mocking skepticism concerning the singularity or unity of the individual suggests a look forward to Aldo Palazzeschi and Luigi Pirandello. The fact that none of the four stories are situated in Italy has its significance; even the place geographically closest to Italy unfolds in a cosmopolitan spa in Geneva. For the rest the settings are in Poland and in the far-flung lands of China and Peru. This is in keeping with Boito’s aim of deprovincializing Italian bourgeois culture. Also common to the four stories are the themes of death, blood and the *idée fixe*.

The most gripping story is “The Black Ensign,” a tale that has its rightful place as a masterpiece in the rich literature featuring the game of chess as the focal or pivotal point of a story. Its closest rival in this context is Stefan Zweig’s richly psychological tale “Chess Story.” Boito’s story takes its title from the chess piece known in English parlance as the Bishop. The ages-old symbolic equivalence of chess with a “a game of war” becomes all the more vivid and pertinent when the chess set consists of representational figurines, a fact further enhanced when, as in the Italian set used here, it includes the exemplary military figure of an Ensign – a standard-bearer. But lest we forget, chess is also known as the “ultimate intellectual game.” Indeed, Boito’s tale achieves a remarkable fusion of these two attributes that are seemingly inherent in chess.

The place is a spa in Geneva, the time is the recently ended American Civil War and a rebellion by the Blacks in the English possession of Jamaica. The game that takes place in the recreational room of the spa is played out by the American chess master Anderssen and his opponent/antagonist, the financially successful and seemingly mild-mannered English Negro, Tom. When given the choice of the white or black chess pieces Tom instinctively chooses the black with the words “To each his own,” and from that moment, he takes on the stereotypical characteristics of blacks – highly emotional, impulsive, and instinctual, while the white American – a chess master! – appears as rational and coolly logical, in full possession of the well-developed sense of order so necessary in chess. This is precisely what Tom seems to lack, so that his moves appear illogical and reckless. Yet he has a strategy of his own. As the match proceeds through long hours of the night the players become progressively more and more absorbed in the chess board and its figurines until Tom identifies himself wholly with the Black Ensign, the chess piece that at the outset of the match had been inadvertently broken in two by Anderssen and put together by him with red wax. The high tension of the atmosphere, which had created a sense of doom hovering over the players finally breaks, and the match turns deadly and doubly tragic. The final phase of the match and its consequences make clear the red wax’s symbolic significance of blood. At the very end of the match itself the Black Ensign stands alone on the chessboard with a three-fold symbolic significance: its self as the focal point of the match and its identification with both Tom and with Gall-Ruck, Tom’s brother who heads the Negro uprising in Jamaica. Boito’s intent was to suggest that science and positivism, (note the reference to phrenology in describing the two players sitting at the chessboard) miss something important about the essence of man and of existence itself. In “The Black Ensign” it is ultimately Reason that gives way to violence and madness, the suggestion being that there is a latent madness in Reason, a paradoxical law of reciprocity in contrastive or antithetical dualism wherein each of the terms has its mirror counterpart in its opposite.

Thus no less than, say, Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (1886), Poe’s “William Wilson,” or even Mark Twain’s *Puddinhead Wilson*, among others, “The Black Ensign” belongs to the long literary convention of the Double with its dualistic vision of a conflicted self at war with itself. “The Clenched Fist” is perhaps Italy’s finest nineteenth-century example of the genre known as fantastical literature, best known in examples by E.T.A., among others, Hoffman, Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Dickens of “A Christmas Carol,” as well as by Stevenson’s novella. Although the story is centered on a prodigious event, it does not have about it the ghoulish trappings of the true Gothic tale such as one finds, for example, in the asphyxiating atmosphere of the fantastic tales of Boito’s fellow *scapigliato* I.U. Tarchetti (1839-1869). The closest it comes to such a *manne* is given as a dream had by the story’s protagonist, not as an actual supernatural happening.

Boito’s tale proceeds as a story within a story, each with its own narrator, but the two stories are wholly integrated. The initial narrator is a man of science – a doctor – who has gone to Poland with a specific mission, which is to determine the true nature of the *plica polonica*, a disease of the scalp. But this specific mission gives way to his fascination for Paw, a beggar who has a particularly bad case of the “disease”; but more important is the fact that Paw holds in his hermetically closed right hand a rare coin – the red florin. Eager to know more about this latter phenomenon, the man of science takes Paw into a tavern and plies him with liquor in order to hear the beggar’s story. With Paw’s story we are brought into the world of usury and of avarice as well as with an apparently supernatural event as he tells how he came to acquire his monetary affliction. It is in Paw’s tale that we learn of the greater part of the whole of Boito’s short story,

which is an illustration of the psychosomatic effects of a fixation – an *idée fixe* – centered here on greed that causes the money-lender Levi to awaken from a dream one morning to find his right hand petrified into a hermetically closed fist, which he has reason to believe contains a precious coin – a red florin. All the miser's efforts (which include consultations with the foremost doctors of the major European cities) to unlock his fist so as to procure the coin prove in vain. He is then tricked by a "fence" who robs him of the vast sum of money held in the miser's treasure-chest. Levi now finds himself reduced to poverty and misery, mocked by all, even by those who are of his own religious faith, until he is befriended by Paw who is barely better off than the miser. This, in fact, makes up the greater part of Boito's tale. Paw's story is occasionally parenthetically interrupted by the doctor's thoughts. Otherwise it is only near the end that we have the doctor again as narrator, lucidly objective in bringing us up to the present and Paw's death. Upon news of Paw's death the rabble rush into the room in which Paw's body lies. Hoping to lay claim to the red florin, they are instead met with a harangue by the doctor.

"Iberia" is best read for what it really is, not as a participatory indulgence by the author in telling a romantic tale on the ever-popular theme of love and death, but as an extended parody of the semi-gothic and sentimentalizing tales, many in verse, favored by the bourgeoisie of the time. To be sure, it is a tour de force in Boito's bringing together his extraordinary erudition and the creation of a mythicizing history of Catholic Spain, a history that comes to an end with the death of the young royal lovers, the last and now lost hope of a revival of the Spain that was. Boito's jaundiced eye and sardonic irony is unsparing in a story that, however heavy, has its own strange fascination, a story whose telling seems to foretell a certain side of Gabriele D'Annunzio, especially the latter's novel *Le Vergini delle Rocce* (1895). Both Boito's "Iberia" and D'Annunzio's novel have much the character of a prose poem. Boito's figure of Don Sancio and D'Annunzio's protagonist in *Le Vergini* are alike in seeking to perpetuate a heroic race. As for Don Sancio, just before dying he proffers to his granddaughter such gems as "Beware of humility as of a sin" and "God is the eternal pride that supports the life of the Universe." The love/death of the old Spain and the Catholic Church occurs with Estebano and Elisenda prostrate on the steps of the altar of their unconsummated marriage, weighed down by the religio-romantic accoutrements of their faith.

"Trapeze," left unfinished, is at once the longest, most problematic, and most adventurous of Boito's tales. Its problematic aspect lies in its being the most densely esoteric of the author's fictive writings. Fortunately, its story as such makes for a fascinating read. The story is not told *viva voce* but in Chinese characters traced on papyrus by a Chinese elder who thus relates the events of his life to a disciple who silently follows the narrator's tracings as they are being written down. The elder is a master mathematician, more specifically a geometer who lost the power of speech suddenly while discussing the nature of the trapezoid to his pupils. In his youth, he had been a trapeze artist among other things. Even in his early youth and adolescence, he was a devoted adherent of Confucius and Mencius, whose writings he always kept by his side. The greater part of his narration deals with his life in the circus in Peru, where he had been brought as a boy by a Mr. William Wood who had "purchased" him from the owner of the slave ship that sailed there from China, the aforesaid owner having obtained him by deceiving the lad's mother during a great famine in the land. In his life in the circus, but first aboard the slave ship, Yao (the narrator) forms a close friendship with a young Gypsy named Ramar, who seems to be almost of a different species. They make for an antithetical couple, in line with Boito's dualistic view of life. After great popular success in performing circus feats together, the friendship becomes strained following the arrival of a new performer, the young and very beautiful Andalusian girl

Ambra, who becomes Ramar's preferred partner in the performance of daring feats. The antithetical dualism of Yao and Ramar gives way to the apparently synthesizing dualism of Ramar and Ambra.

Numerous events follow in which Yao suffers the enmity of Ramar and the taunts of several other members of the circus company. The reader may by this time, or even earlier, see in the actions of Yao a progression of initiatory steps to a purposeful goal. One may even divine this from Yao's early and subsequent references to and quoting of Confucius, Mencius, and other ancient Chinese sages. The protagonist is seeking to attain "the moral strength that Confucius calls the heart's steadfastness," which necessitates the domination of all passion, the state of being at the "center" and therefore at the state of absolute equilibrium. The narrator Yao is one who at some time in his long life achieved the goal. At one point in his narration he gently admonishes his smiling disciple: "Laugh if you will at humanity's contradictions; you will find them in the wisest of men; but do not fail to take note of the point where two opposing impulses intersect, because it is there that you will discover the synthesis of man and the explanation of all his apparent "eccentricities."

Boito's tale ends (unfinished) when Yao, after a decade in the circus, attempts to leave it. He is thwarted by William Wood who shows him the contract, a bill of sale indicating Yao's condition as the "property," hence the circus owner's slave who had been "sold with the clothes he was wearing and a precious edition of Confucius."

Among Boito's papers there are fragments and references to his tale that suggest its continuation would have ended with or at least included an episode on the death of Ramar and Ambra caused (involuntarily or deliberately?) by Yao and in connection with the circus's trapezes.

Introduction by Nicolas J. Perella

The Black Ensign²

The reader familiar with the game of chess should prepare a chessboard before himself and try to picture what follows.

On the side of the White chess pieces, imagine a man with an intelligent face, his forehead marked by two knobs a little above the eyebrows, just where Franz Joseph Gall, the founder of the science of phrenology, locates the faculty of calculation. His light blonde whiskers cut round at the neck create the impression of a collar; but he is clean-shaven above the upper lip, a fashion not uncommon among Americans. He is dressed all in white, and though it is night and he is playing by candlelight, his *pince-nez* has dark-colored lenses through which he peers at the chessboard, in deep concentration. On the side of the Black chess pieces sits a Negro – a true African, his lips thick as if swollen; and though there’s not a hair on his face, the top of his head is wooly, like that of a ram. His cranial contour is marked by conspicuous knobs indicating astuteness and tenacity. Because his head is lowered over the table’s green cloth, his eyes cannot be seen. His clothes are so dark that he seems dressed in mourning. The two men are in a duel of intellects; the fair-skinned American defending the White pieces, the Negro defending the Black ones. These contestants of contrasting colors are silent and motionless. There is a strange aura about them, and in their solemnity, they create a sense of their being doomed. To know their identities, we must go back six hours and lend a close ear to the conversation of a group of foreign guests gathered in the recreation room of the leading hotel in one of Switzerland’s best-known spas.

It is the hour the French refer to as *entre chien et loup*. The hotel’s attendants have not yet ignited the oil lamps, so that the room’s furnishings and the guests conversing there appear enveloped in the increasingly thick shadows of dusk. On the newspaper table, a samovar boils above a large flame produced by alcoholic spirits. The semi-darkness facilitates the pace of the conversation. The speakers’ faces, however, cannot be discerned; but their voices can be heard in the following exchange:

“On the list of today’s new arrivals I saw the barbarous name of a native of Morant-Cay.”

“Oh! a Negro! Who could he be?”

“I have seen him, Madam; he looks like the Devil himself.”

“I took him for an orangutan.”

“When he passed by me, I thought he was a murderer who had blackened his face as a disguise.”

“Tut, tut! I know him, my friends, and I can assure you that the fellow is the finest gentleman on earth. Since you seem not to know his story, allow me to tell it to you in a few

² **Translator’s note:** For reasons stated in my introductory remarks to Boito’s “The Black Ensign,” I have chosen not to render the names of certain critical chess pieces in their current Anglo-American nomenclature. The retention of the names of the chess pieces in Boito’s tale seems to me very much of the essence. Hence, my version speaks, as does Boito’s original, of Ensigns rather than Bishops, or Horses rather than Knights, and of Towers instead of Rooks. In the late eighteenth and in much of the nineteenth century the Bishop itself is commonly represented as a standard-bear—that is—an Ensign, thus making for a peculiar hybrid figurine. It is worth noting that some forty years after Boito’s shorty-story appeared, his libretto for Verdi’s opera *Otello* has Iago refer to himself as Otello’s alfiere, which word, the dean of English translations from the Italian, William Weaver, renders as ensign: “... and I remain His Moorish Lordship’s ensign.”

words. When he was still a child, this native Negro of Morant-Cay was brought to Europe by a speculator who, seeing that the slave trade in America was no longer lucrative, thought of setting up a trade of grooms in Europe. He succeeded in smuggling aboard a ship about thirty very young Negroes, children of his former slaves. These he sold for two thousand dollars each in London, in Paris, in Madrid. Our Negro is one of those thirty grooms. As Fate would have it, he ended up in the hands of an old lord who was without a family and who kept him for five years as a footman at the rear of his carriage. Then, realizing that the lad was honest and intelligent, he made him his valet, then his secretary and finally his friend. When this lord was nearing death, he made the Negro heir of all his worldly goods. Following the lord's death, the Negro left England and came to Switzerland. Today he is one of the wealthiest landowners in the Geneva canton. He possesses vast tobacco plantations; and because of a secret way of treating the leaves, he is able to produce the country's best cigars. For example, the cigars we are smoking now come from his factory – one can recognize them by the triangular symbol stamped in the middle of the cigar. The Genevans call this splendid Negro by the name of Tom, or Uncle Tom, because he's compassionate and magnanimous; his workers revere him and wish God's blessings on him. For the rest, he lives alone, avoiding friends and acquaintances. His only relative is a brother who lives in Morant-Cay [Jamaica]. Tom is still young, but he's wasting away slowly and cruelly because of tuberculosis. He comes to the spa here every year, to take the waters."

"Poor Uncle Tom! By now his brother may well have been decapitated by the guillotine in Monkland. The latest news from the region speaks of a violent insurrection of the slaves and a fierce reprisal on the part of the British government. Listen to what the last issue of *The Times* has to say about it: 'Her Majesty's forces are in pursuit of a Negro by the name of Gall-Ruck, who has led a band of six hundred men in the uprising, etc., etc.'"

"Good God!" a woman exclaimed, "when will these deadly struggles between Whites and Blacks come to an end?!"

"Never!" came a voice from the dark.

Everyone turned in the direction from where the word had been uttered. There, reclining in an easy chair, with the elegant nonchalance that distinguishes the true gentleman from a counterfeit, was a man who stood out from the darkness because of his extremely white attire.

"Never!" he repeated, on seeing himself the focus of attention, "Never, because the Lord God instilled hatred between the race of Ham and the race of Japheth; because he separated the color of day from the color of night. Shall I give you an example of this ferocious antagonism between the two colors? My name is George Anderssen. Three years ago I was in America fighting for the 'just cause.' I, too, wanted freedom for the slaves, the abolition of the whip and chains, despite the fact that I myself owned a good number of Negroes in the South. I armed them with carbines and told them: 'You are free. Each of you take one of these rifles, some bullet-shot, aim well, fire with a steady hand, free your brothers.' To teach them how to shoot, I put up a target in the middle of my land. The target was formed by a black center-point, the size of a man's head, in a white circle. The slave possesses a keen eye, a strong and steady arm, and an instinct for ambush equal to that of a jaguar, in short, all the qualities of a good marksman. And yet, not one of the Blacks hit the bull's-eye. All their shots went wide of the mark. One day their leader came to me and, in his picturesque and fantastic way of speaking, gave me this advice: 'Master, change colors; the bull's-eye has a black face, make it a white face and we'll shoot accurately.' So I changed the make up of the circle and made the center white. Once that was done, of fifty Negroes who fired, forty hit the mark, like this . . ." As he spoke these last words, the speaker picked up a small practice-pistol resting on the table, aimed as well as the

darkness allowed at a small target on the opposite wall, and fired. The ladies became frightened, while the men rushed to get the flame burning under the samovar with which they hurried to check the result of the shot close up. The center was perforated as though it had been measured with a compass. Everyone looked in amazement at the shooter who with exquisite politeness asked pardon of the ladies for the unexpected explosion, adding: "I wanted to finish with a somewhat resounding proof, for fear you might not believe me."

No one dared to question his story's veracity.

The speaker continued: "But while fighting for the freedom of the Negroes, I became convinced that Blacks are not worthy of freedom. Their minds are closed, and they have savage instincts. A Phrygian cap shouldn't be put on the facial angle of a monkey."

"Educate them," one of the guests proffered, "and their facial angle will broaden. But if you really want that to happen, don't oppress them with your contempt when they are slaves nor when they are free. Open your homes to them, admit them to your table, to your clubs, to your schools, stretch out your hands to them."

"I have spent my life doing just that, Madam. I am, if you will, a sort of Diogenes of the New World, in search of the black *man*, but so far I have found only the *beast*."

At that moment, a hotel attendant entered with a large lamp that suddenly flooded the room with light, making visible, in a corner, a figure sitting quite motionless; it was Uncle Tom. Until then nobody had observed his presence there, the darkness having hidden him from view. Now, on seeing him, everyone fell silent as all eyes went from the Negro to the American, who rose from his chair to whisper something to the attendant, and then resumed his seat. The silence remained unbroken. Soon the attendant returned with a bottle of choice sherry and two glasses. The American filled both glasses to the brim and kept one while the attendant carried the other to the Negro. "To your health, sir!" said the American, raising his glass to the Negro, in accordance with British custom.

"Thank you, sir; to yours!" replied Tom, whereupon both men drank. In the Negro's voice there was an expression of gentle and shy warmth along with a deep sadness. Following his few words he sank back into silence, got up, took the latest issue of *The Times* from the table and became absorbed in reading it.

Seeking an excuse to re-engage the Negro in conversation, the American went to where Tom was reading, and with exquisite courtesy said: "I'm afraid there's nothing entertaining for you in that newspaper, sir. May I propose some kind of diversion to you?"

The Negro stopped reading and stood up with dignified respect before his interlocutor.

"First of all, allow me to shake your hand," continued the American, "My name is George Anderssen. May I offer you a Havana? "No, thank you. Smoke is bad for me."

Quickly extinguishing the cigar he was smoking, the American renewed his invitation: "May I propose a game of billiards?"

"I thank you, sir, but I am not familiar with billiards."

"Perhaps a game of chess?"

The Negro hesitated a moment before answering: "Yes, . . . willingly, sir," and the two men went to a small game table at the opposite end of the recreation room. They sat down facing one another. The American tumbled the pawns and other chessmen onto the table's green cloth, so that the two men could array them on the board. Though the chessboard itself with its roughly inlaid wooden squares was rather plain, the chess pieces were true *objets d'art*. The White were made of the purest ivory; the Black were of finest ebony. White's King and Queen had crowns of gold; Black's King and Queen featured crowns of silver. The four Towers were supported by

four Elephants, as in early Persian chess sets. The intricate carving of the chess pieces was such as to make them extremely fragile. Thus when the American tumbled them onto the table, the Black Ensign broke in two.

“What a shame!” Tom murmured.

“It’s nothing serious,” his opponent remarked reassuringly. “We can fix it easily enough.” With that, he rose and went to the writing desk, lit a candle, picked up a piece of sealing wax which he heated and then applied to the two fragments of the Ensign. Having joined the parts together, he returned to the game-table and handed the mended chessman to his opponent. In doing so, he said laughingly: “Here you are! Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could re-attach men’s heads so easily?” The Negro replied with a gloomy smile: “Today in Monkland there are many who could profit from it.” The tone in which these words were uttered elicited mixed feelings in the American, a sense of wonder, of pity, of injury, of revulsion.

Tom continued: “What color do you choose to play with, sir?”

“With one or the other, I have no preference.”

“If it’s all the same to you, then, let each of us take his own. The Black to me, if you please.”

“And to me the White. Excellent.”

In placing the chessmen, the two players assisted one another with equal courtesy, the Negro putting a White pawn in its proper square, the white man placing a Black piece or two in their appropriate squares. When the opposing “armies” were lined up, Anderssen remarked: “I warn you that I’m rather strong at this game. May I give you the advantage of an extra piece – a Tower, for example?”

“No.”

“A Horse?”

“By no means, sir. I prefer to have the foes be equals, even if their skills are not. I appreciate your concern, but I choose to play without any sort of handicap.”

“By all means! You may have the first move.”

“Let chance decide!” said the Negro as he enclosed a Black pawn in one hand and a White pawn in the other. He then invited the American to pick.

“This one.”

“White has the first move; so then, let us begin.”

While this preamble was taking place, the guests in the recreation room had quietly approached the game table one by one and were now standing around it. Among them were a few who recognized the name George Anderssen as belonging to one of the foremost chess players in America, so that for them the match about to begin took on a special interest. Descendant of a noble English family that had emigrated to Washington, George Anderssen had, in fact, become extremely rich from his prowess at the chessboard. When still young, he had already defeated Harwitz, Hampe, Szen and indeed all the most famous players of the age. This then was the man who was now pitted against poor Tom.

Before Anderssen had time to make his first move, the Negro reached to his right where the candle used by Anderssen in repairing the Black Ensign was still burning. Now Tom took the candle and put it to his own left. The American noted this action and, very much surprised, thought to himself: “The man has certainly read Lucena’s *Repeticio de Arte de Axedre* and is following the precept that says: *If you are playing in the evening by candle-light, place the candle to your left; you will be less troubled by the light and will have acquired an advantage over your opponent.*” With this thought in mind, he took out his dark-colored spectacles and set

them on his nose. Then, after making his first move, he turned to the bystanders and spoke with a cheerful nonchalance: "The first moves in chess are like the first words of a conversation; they always follow the same pattern: White pawn, two squares; Black pawn, two squares; then King's gambit, and so on." And while chatting in this casual way, he made his second move, putting his King's Ensign's pawn two squares ahead, convinced that his opponent would take it with his own. But Tom did not take the White pawn; instead, with a less customary move he defended his own pawn by lifting his King's Ensign to the third square of the Black Queen. This move also caused Anderssen some surprise, and he thought to himself: "The man is saving his pawns; he's following Philidor, who called them the soul of the game."

Five or six more opening moves were made by means of which the players were taking each other's measure, like two armies preparing to attack one another, like two boxers sizing up one another before the bout begins. Accustomed to winning, the American had not the slightest fear of his antagonist; moreover, he knew, or so he thought, how little a Negro's intellect, no matter how well educated, could compete with that of a white man's, let alone with George Anderssen, the champion of champions. Nonetheless, not the least of his enemy's tactics escaped his notice. A vague uneasiness compelled him to study Tom closely; and without seeming to, he examined him more in his face than on the chessboard. From the very start, he realized that the Negro's moves were illogical, weak, confused; but he also saw that the look in his foe's eyes and the expression of his face were intense. The white man's eye gazed fixedly at the Negro's face; the Negro's eye was fixed on the chessboard. In all only seven or eight moves had been made, and it was already evident that two diametrically opposing strategies were being played out.

The American's advance was triumphal and symmetrical, resembling the first maneuvers of a great army about to engage in a decisive battle. Order, the first rule of power, determined White's whole strategy. The Horses, which in earlier times were referred to as the "feet of the chessmen," occupied the extreme right and the extreme left. Two pawns had moved forward to reinforce on either side the outposts marked by the King's pawn. On one side, the Queen threatened, on the other side it was the King's Ensign that pressed, while the second Ensign held the middle ground two squares ahead of the King's square just behind the pawns. The array of White's pieces was more than symmetrical; it was geometric. The player deploying those ivory figurines was not just playing a game, he was designing a science. With infallible certainty his hand swooped down upon the chessmen and raced over the chessboard, halting at its desired square. It was done, so to speak, with the calm of a mathematician writing a formula on a blackboard. White's position threatened everything and defended everything. It was formidable in that it confined the enemy within a severely restricted field of action, thereby suffocating it. Picture a moving wall that advances, and think of Black as being crushed between the edge of the chessboard and this mighty, solid wall.

There are times when even inanimate things seem to take on human attributes; the most frivolous object can become meaningful in conjunction with what surrounds it. So it was that the ebony chessmen making up Black's forces facing White's awesome assault seemed prey to a tragic foreboding. The Horses, as though skittish, turned away from the attack; the routed pawns had broken their formation; the King had hurried to castle and seemed, in his little corner, to bemoan the dishonor of his flight. Tom's hand dark as night, wandered tremblingly over the chessboard.

Such was the view of the match as seen from the American's side. But when seen from the Negro's side, the view of the match was reversed. To the orderly system developed by White, the Negro countered with a system of the utmost disorder. Whereas the former were drawn up

symmetrically, Black was assembled in disarray. White placed all its strength in a balance between offense and defense; Black, with every move, increased its disequilibrium, which, as it grew greater and greater in the face of White's battle array, became, in its own way, a real force, a real threat. It was the threat of the catapult against the fortress wall, of the charge against the squared formation. With every advance of the moving wall, the Black's projection became more powerful. The two armies were complete, the one facing the other. Not a single chessman, not a single pawn was missing, and this reserve force on both sides was terrifying. At first, the American saw in Black's deployment only an inept confusion produced by a sense of panic; but precisely this disorderly formation made him think that the Negro's position precluded a regular and decisive attack. Tom, however, saw something else in that confusion; all the natural tactics of the slave, all the cunning of the African, were condensed in those moves. The disorder was artfully concocted so as to conceal an ambush; the pawns pretended to be in retreat so as to entrap the enemy; the Horses feigned their skittishness, and the King pretended to flee. The disequilibrium had a pivot, the rebellion had a leader, the confusion had a purpose. The Ensign that Tom had positioned by the Queen's third square was the pivot, the leader, the purpose. Towers, pawns, and Horses, the Queen herself encircled and defended that Ensign. It was the very chess piece that had broken in two and been repaired by the American; a blood-red line of sealing wax furrowed his brow and, descending down his cheek, encircled his neck. That piece of black wood now seemed a heroic sight – a wounded warrior determined to fight to the death. His bloodied head was bent a little toward his breast in a pose of tragic dejection. Like the Negro maneuvering him, he too appeared to be gazing at the fated chessboard. He seemed to be eyeing his adversary stealthily, waiting stoically to be attacked, or secretly plotting an attack of his own. In Tom's mind, it was the crucial piece of the match. With his fanciful but acute imagination, he saw emerging from beneath the Black Ensign's feet two threads that, having penetrated the wood of the chessboard, passed under all the enemy obstacles and made their way like two wicks of a mine bomb to the two opposite corners of White's field. He was waiting anxiously for just one move – the castling of the enemy King – so that he could put his secret plan into operation. Without that move, his entire strategy would fail; but it was almost impossible that Anderssen would omit making that move. Tom alone saw and knew of his secret plot, and no player in the world could have suspected it. To the white man's vast and symmetrical design, the black man countered with an *idée fixe* – the crucial Ensign; against White's orderly deployment Black pitted its muddled unity. To a clear and open strategy, Black responded with one that was devious and apparently lunatic. Anderssen fought with scientific precision; Tom was guided by intuition and chance. The one fought the battle of Waterloo; the other the revolution of San Domingo. The Black Ensign was the Ogè [leader] of that revolution.

The match had already gone on for two hours, and it was nearly nine o'clock. Tired of watching the players, several ladies had moved away from the chessboard to engage in a different activity, some taking up their embroidery while others, loading and reloading the game pistol, amused themselves with target shooting.

The two antagonists were rooted to their places. Not yet finding the opportunity to checkmate his opponent and making no sense of Tom's bizarre tactics, the American began to be bored and to have misgivings about the excessive courtesy that had impelled him to suggest the match. Now he would have liked to end it quickly and at any price, even at the cost of losing; but his racial pride prevented him from doing so. A white gentleman was not to be defeated by a Negro. Moreover, his self-esteem as a famous player and his long study of chess would not allow him to make a move that was less than well-pondered. When he arrived at his fifteenth move, he

saw that his King had not yet castled. Raising both hands, with the left he picked up his King and with the right, the Tower; then, as he was about to complete his move, he noticed a bright flash of hope in the Negro's eyes. But not divining immediately the reason for it, he remained immobile with the two chess pieces suspended in his raised hands while he studied the chessboard. He was visibly perplexed. Tom's eye, balanced between joy and fear, anxiously followed the slightest move of those two hands, which were as white as the ivories they held. Uneasy, Anderssen was about to put the two chessmen back in their previous positions when the Negro exclaimed with fervor:

"A piece touched is a piece played."

"Quite so," the American replied, politely but dryly, while he continued to seek a way to avoid the move, without really knowing why. But the pieces touched were two, and it was obligatory to move both of them; the rules of the game were clear on the matter: the only move possible was Castling. Anderssen made it *alla calabrista* as chess jargon calls it, that is, he placed the King in the square of his Horse and the Tower in the square of his Ensign. Then he stared searchingly at his opponent's face. When the Negro saw that the move he had so ardently hoped for had been made, he turned his gaze more fixedly than ever on the marked Ensign. Excited by a high pitch of emotion and his hot-blooded nature, he did not even try to temper the vivid reaction of his facial expression. His eye ran up and down the chessboard from the Black Ensign to the White King, charting the same course more than twenty times, as though to make a groove in the chessboard. Anderssen perceived those looks, followed their path with his own gaze and now, seeing the Black Ensign, he understood everything. His face, however, betrayed no sign of his discovery. In any case, Tom never looked at him, so thoroughly absorbed was he in his *idée fixe*.

In that immense room, Tom now saw only a chessboard, on which he beheld only one chessman. Beyond that one small black square with its ebony figurine, nothing else existed for him. With his elbows propped on the edge of the game table and his clenched fists pressing against his temples, he clutched his bristly hair, thereby supporting his head. The pressure of his wrists against his temples caused the folds of his brow to be pulled taut. His eyebrows being thus raised gave greater exposure to the opaque but intense white of his eyeballs. He remained in this posture for a good forty minutes contemplating his own masterly move, motionless, avid, exultant. Suddenly he attacked, capturing a pawn and threatening an enemy Horse with the same move. The American had foreseen the blow. The barrage had begun. Anderssen answered the first volley by capturing a Black pawn and threatening a Tower. Five or six moves followed rapidly, relentlessly. The real battle was now enjoined. On both sides of the chessboard, several pawns were already out of action – the first trophies of the two combatants. Then the long anticipated assault erupted in all of its fury. On both sides, the ranks were thinning out: one fallen chessman led to another. White avenged the White. Black avenged the Black; a Black that threatened was threatened in turn by a White. Never had the law of retaliation been paid such homage. Now it was Anderssen who began to be excited. He had both foreseen everything and planned everything accordingly. Tom's plot had become clear to him during those forty minutes in which the Negro was hatching his deadly move. Anderssen had read his enemy's intentions and answered the first charge in such a way as to entice the Negro into a position that would have undoubtedly been very attractive and highly advantageous to Tom. But it was a position that would have required Tom to sacrifice his Black Ensign. The American knew that if the Black Ensign were taken, the Negro would no longer know how to proceed.

There are *entomata* that are incapable of weaving their larva twice, thinkers who are unable to reformulate from scratch a concept they have already once established, warriors who are unable to return to the fray. It was in this light that Anderssen considered his antagonist. But having now come to the pass where the American awaited him, Tom did not waver: giving up his position, he sacrificed not his Ensign but a Horse, a move that forced his foe to submit to a trade-off of the two Queens. With that, the match took on a totally new aspect.

The height of the fray had ceased; the dead were strewn along the two enemy banks; the chessboard was now almost wholly unoccupied. The epic fury of the two armies was followed by the heightened rage of the last survivors, and the battle was transformed into a duel. White was left with two Horses, a Tower, and the King's Ensign; Black was left with two pawns and the marked Ensign.

It was eleven o'clock, and it now appeared that Black would have to surrender. Seeing the match brought to this point, the remaining onlookers bade good night to the two contestants, congratulated Anderssen, and retired to their rooms.

Our two players were now left alone, face-to-face. When Anderssen asked Tom "Have you had enough?" The Negro almost shouted his reply: "No!" and began a move which then, in his excitement, he wanted to change. But the American stopped him, saying with deliberate irony: "A piece touched is a piece played."

Tom silently obeyed, and the two men fell back into a deep sepulchral silence. Sure of victory, Anderssen once again became bored; his mind already began to lose its sharpness as drowsiness clouded it over. Tom, on the other hand, grew more and more alert, more and more agitated, and more and more somber.

The Black Ensign stood in the middle of the nearly empty chessboard, upright, alone, bereft of his companions; only one pawn remained to defend him from the attacks of White's Tower. The two other pawns had advanced far into White's field; one of them had already reached the penultimate file. Tom was deep in thought. The room's lamps had dimmed, and the only sound to be heard came from a large grandfather clock that seemed to measure the silence. As midnight struck, the last lamp went out, and the vast room was now illuminated by the lone candle burning on the game table. Anderssen was beginning to feel the night's cold. Tom was sweating. The acrid odor of the Negro race offended the American's nostrils.

There was a moment when a voice was heard from the far end of the garden — a hotel guest returning late was humming Gotschalk's "Banana Vendor." The tune triggered a cloud of distant memories in Tom's mind. He saw a gigantic banana tree bathed in the light of a tropical dawn. Among its branches, a hammock swayed in the breeze. In the hammock, two small black children were sleeping, while their mother kneeled on the ground praying and softly singing that gentle lullaby. He remained thus for ten minutes, rapt in these memories, in this vision; then, when the deep silence returned, he went back to contemplating his Ensign.

There is a kind of magnetic hallucination that modern hypnology has classified with the term hypnotism: a cataleptic ecstasy brought about by long and intense gazing at any particular object. If this phenomenon could be verified, the science of psychology could claim yet another triumph. We could then speak of a *magnetism* that proves the transmission of thought, the so-called *spiritism* that proves the transmission of a human will over inanimate objects, a hypnotism that would prove the magnetic influence of inanimate things on humans. Tom seemed under the spell of this phenomenon. The Black Ensign had hypnotized him. He was a frightful sight: he bit his lips convulsively, his eyes were out of their sockets, and beads of sweat fell from his forehead onto the chessboard. Anderssen no longer looked at him, because the darkness had

become quite thick, but even more because he too, as though under the spell of the same magnetic force, had his eyes riveted on the Black Ensign.

For Tom, it seemed the game was as good as lost. It was not the situation of the game that caused him to be so distraught and suspended, it was his subjection to a hallucination. For Tom, the ebony figurine was no longer a chess piece, it was a man; it was no longer black, it was a Negro. The red sealing wax was living blood, and the wounded head was a real wounded head. He knew that chess piece; many years ago he had seen its face. That chess piece was a living person . . . or perhaps now a dead one. No, that chess piece was a dying man, a beloved person suspended between life and death. He had to be saved! With all his might and ingenuity, Tom must save him. The words spoken in jest by the American before the match had begun now buzzed in his ears persistently, like a horrible drone: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could reattach men's heads so easily?" This anguish exacerbated his hallucination.

The face of the wooden figurine became increasingly more human, increasingly heroic, arriving almost to a superhuman ideal; and passing from a transformation to a transhumanization, from a man it became an *idea*, just as from a chess piece it had become a man. The *idée fixe* was still there, at the core of the Negro's soul, ever more exalted, ever more sublimed. From an obsession, it had evolved into a superstition, and from a superstition, into fanaticism. That night, at that moment, Tom was the synthesis of his whole race.

In this way, four more hours passed in a tomblike silence. Two corpses or two dozing men would have made more noise than these two antagonists locked in fierce combat. The mute mental struggle could not have been more violent. Ideas clashed against each other; ploys fell gasping on both sides. The faces no longer looked at one another; the mouths remained closed. At a certain move, the Black Ensign lost ground; the White Tower, with its powerful, relentless march, threatened him, and seemed on the verge of capturing him. With the daring speed of a panther, the Ensign continued to elude his formidable persecutor. The puzzled American followed hard on the Ensign's wild dash, spurring his chessman forward and forcing the enemy piece toward a corner of the chessboard. This feverish chase went on for a whole half-hour during which the Kings also took part in the mad fray; struggling against one another they were like two legendary kings of the East at the battle's end, wandering over the abandoned field, each seeking the other and hurling themselves tragically at one another.

After half an hour, the arrangement on the chessboard had again changed. The flight of the Ensign and the erratic moves of the two Kings, the Tower, and the pawns had drawn the chessmen out of their centers: White's King had ended up in Black's field, very close to the Black King, who was but two squares away from his own Ensign. Bewildered by the Black Ensign's apparently senseless moves, Anderssen continued to pursue him, to close him in, to block him.

But then inexplicably Tom had him! He seized White's King and flung him from the chessboard together with the other chessmen he had captured. Now he looked into the face of his defeated enemy with a triumphant air.

It was five o'clock in the morning. Dawn was breaking. The Negro's face gleamed with jubilation. In Anderssen's hot pursuit of the fateful chessman, he had neglected the Black pawn that was to his right on the penultimate square of the White. The pawn had been there for four hours, while the American had continued to postpone its doom. Seeing the jubilation written on the Negro's face, Anderssen shook. With a quick and violent gesture, he lowered his eyes to the chessboard.

Tom had already made his move. Had the pawn now taken over the role of the Queen? No. The pawn had replaced the Ensign, and the marked Ensign, the Black Ensign, the bloodied Ensign had arisen and checkmated White's King. It was the Negro's turn to look elatedly at the chessboard. For a moment, Anderssen remained stunned with amazement: his King was blocked along the whole Black diagonal of the diagram. On one side, his opponent's King closed off any escape; on the other side, he was blocked by one of his own pawns. The stroke was brilliant! Checkmate!

Tom was savoring his victory ecstatically when suddenly George Anderssen jumped up, rushed to the target table, seized the pistol, and fired.

Tom fell to the floor at once. The bullet had struck him in the head; a trickle of blood flowed over his face and dripped down along his cheek, staining his throat and neck with red. In the man lying on the ground before him, Anderssen saw again the Black Ensign that had defeated him.

In his death agony, Tom uttered the words: "Gall-Ruck is saved . . . God protects the Negroes," and died.

* * * * *

Two hours later the attendant entering the recreation room to rearrange the furniture found the Negro's corpse on the ground, and the checkmate on the game table.

George Anderssen had fled. Twenty days later, he arrived in New York, where, haunted by remorse, he turned himself over to the law, declaring himself Tom's murderer. The Court absolved him, first of all because the murdered man was only a Negro and because there could be no question of premeditated homicide; secondly, because the celebrated George Anderssen had reported himself; and finally, because it was discovered during the judicial inquiry that the dead Negro was the brother of a certain Gall-Ruck who had instigated the latest slave uprising in the English colony in Jamaica – the same Gall-Ruck who was still being hunted but was never found.

Anderssen returned to his home with his heart filled with a remorse not mitigated by the sentence – the lightest possible – he had received.

Following the terrible event we have recounted, he continued to play chess but never again with success. Whenever he sat at a chessboard, the Black Ensign would metamorphose into a ghost. Tom would be on the chessboard! Anderssen lost at chess all the riches he had previously accumulated in playing the game.

In his last few years, reduced to poverty, abandoned by everyone, mocked and mad, he wandered through the streets of New York making all the chess moves on the sidewalks, jumping like a horse, running upright like a Tower, hopping here and there, going back and forth like a King, and fleeing from every Negro he encountered.

I do not know whether he is still alive.

“And these damned souls will rise
from the grave with their fist
clenched.”

Dante, *Inferno* VII

The Clenched Fist

In September 1867, I was traveling in Poland on a medical assignment. I was to investigate one of the most frightful diseases ever to afflict humanity: the *plica polonica*. Although this disease is confined within Poland, its strange effects and its name are known throughout Europe, even outside of scientific circles. Would that its causes and a remedy were equally well known. Some doctors maintain that this disease of the scalp is endemic, citing as proof certain localities along the Vistula River that are infested with it. Others assert that it is a consequence of the uncleanliness of the Polish peasants and their tradition of keeping their hair long. In support of this second opinion is the fact that the *plica* seems to be a scourge restricted to the most wretched denizens of the population, to the filthiest dregs of society — serfs, vagabonds, beggars. In Poland, to have this disease is a license to beg for alms.

My assignment necessarily brought me into the very heart of the afflicted mendicants, in the midst of the *familia vagatorum*. Resolutely, I accepted the mission and began my inquiries at once.

In those parts, it happens that in September the Feast of Our Lady of Czestochowa is celebrated, and this small town, famous for its ancient sanctuary, becomes the meeting ground of Poles from Warsaw, Krakov, and Posen, and then the rest of the nation is brought together for a brief time in the ideal unity of prayer.

From the Austrian and Prussian borders hordes of believers travel to the holy city, some on foot, some in carriages. Upon arriving there, chanting prayers they climb the hill on which the church stands; then they pass through the massive walls that make of that sacred enclosure a veritable stronghold, capable of withstanding assaults and sieges. Once before the shrine, the pilgrims prostrate themselves at the gates of the temple; then, advancing contritely with bowed heads, one by one they throw themselves facedown on the marble steps of the altar. Before the dark-hued Madonna encrusted with gems, many pray for the well being of their poor fatherland; others, more selfish because more unfortunate, pray for their own health, or for the healing of an illness. The sanctuary grounds are crowded with paralytics, the blind, the lame, the hydrophobic, the chronically ill of all sorts. Among them, there is also the lurid mob of those afflicted with the *plica*. Protected by the very repugnance they arouse, they pass through the amassed crowd, who create a clear path for them by drawing aside to avoid their contact. And so, they soon reach the most desired area near the altar. There, under the glimmer of the golden lanterns, and in the hot mix of holy incenses, they beat themselves on the chest and forehead, gesticulate wildly, and howl their prayers like souls possessed. Following this, they leave, gathering before the sanctuary's main portal to beg alms of those who exit.

In 1867, I, too, was at the Feast of Czestochowa. The certainty of finding specimens for my research had drawn me into the midst of the pious hullabaloo. And indeed, when I arrived those suffering from the *plica* were in evidence, already at their places in double file along the steps of the atrium, wailing their monotonous dirge and begging a *kopeck* in the Virgin's name.

A repellent sight, all filthy with their loathsome crusted tufts of hair (some of them blond, some black, some whitish), they were all positioned there as though by some order of mine. I looked them over rapidly, threw down a copper coin and went into the church. I had not advanced a dozen steps beneath the vault of the sanctuary when I heard coming from outside the church door a ferocious fracas, as of wildly barking hounds and hurled rocks, and in the midst of the din the word *przeklęty* (damn you!) shouted with furious scorn. I turned around toward the source of the vulgar brawl and went out. A disgusting spectacle met my eyes: a howling mob of ragged beggars scuffling on the ground near where I had thrown the *kopeck*.

From that formless entanglement of people, foul heads and furiously waving arms were all that could be seen. Some of them clutched rocks with which they were striking madly at an unknown object hidden by the great mass of people.

“Hit the damn red head! Hit the old bastard! Hit the son of a bitch!” some shouted.

“Kick the thieving patriarch who steals from the poor!” shrieked others.

“That *kopeck* isn’t for you. You already have Levy’s *red florin*.”

“Kill him! Paw’s an imposter He doesn’t really have the *plica*; I myself saw him gum up his hair to look better than we do!”

“Have at him!” whereupon an old, strong-limbed beggar jumped into the middle of the wild swarm, shouting in a voice even more menacing than the others: “Paw! Open that fist or I’ll drag you out by the hair!” His vocal threat was accompanied by an appropriate gesture.

At that moment, like a spring suddenly released after having been forcibly compressed, a man leaped up from the ground. He was tall, yellowish, extremely lean, and sinewy. He had bounded up with such vigor that those who had been hitting him fell suddenly to the ground. The man’s hair was more dreadful to see than that of any of the others because of its reddish color and incredible length. On the wretched fellow’s head, it looked like a bloody mitre, tall and stiff. It was perhaps for this that they called him the patriarch. I had never seen a more horrifying case of the *plica*. Standing thus mitred, erect and immobile over the limp pack of fallen beggars, he held his arms outstretched horizontally in the guise of a living cross. His hands were clenched tightly into iron-like fists. After an instant, he unlocked his left fist and, without uttering a word, let fall the *kopeck*.

“Open the other one too,” yelled the chorus of scoffing beggars; but the other fist remained clenched. Paw then slowly lowered his arms and moved toward the descent of the hill. As he was walking away, a hail of stones and curses assailed him from behind. I followed him at a distance of about thirty feet.

The spectacle had almost terrified me. The strange fellow had affected me deeply. Pity, which is rarely unaccompanied by a selfish curiosity, drew me to that unlucky wretch who walked slowly under the barrage of stones, with the grave step of a stoic. I hurried my own pace in order to catch up with him. Before me stood an astonishing scientific phenomenon and perhaps even the fascinating plot of a drama. That pariah among beggars, that *patriarch of the plica* with his temples so atrociously marked, that vilified and embattled man who had been denied even the last human resort, charity, that lugubrious Paw had invaded my mind. We had gone a good way down the hillside, and the hail of stones had ended. When he reached the last turn of the descent, he stopped, raised his right fist to the sky in a gesture of rebellion and pain, and then resumed his journey.

I was a few feet behind him when I called out to him: “Paw!”

Hearing himself called he hastened his steps in fright. I came up beside him and spoke: “Friend, take these ten *kopecks* instead of one,” and I held out the money to him. Paw looked at

me in amazement and exclaimed: “May the Holy Virgin of Czestochowa bless you, worthy master, and may she give you good health and peace to your departed ones.”

As he exclaimed these words, he bent forward toward the ground in order to embrace my knees. I drew back a little.

The sun was setting, and the lower section of the hill was immersed in a cool light-blue shadow slowly rising like a calm tide. The evening breeze tossed my hair about my face, but Paw’s mane resisted the wind like a rock. His cap (God knows how many years had gone by since he was last able to keep it on his head) was hanging from his neck by a string.

“My good man,” I said to him, “the hour is late, and you have done enough begging. Come and warm your belly with a little *aqua vitae*.”

“May the Madonna of the Sanctuary keep you under her protection,” he murmured, and a warm flash of gratitude glittered nervously in his eye.

After we passed through the city gate, I entered the first tavern we came across. Paw followed me in.

The tavern, worthy of the conversation about to take place, was a gloomy den, completely suffused with a thick vapor. In one corner stood a gigantic stove that smoked like a Cossack, while in another corner stretched out on a table was a Cossack with a pipe in his mouth, smoking like a stove. An icon of the Virgin was nailed to the center of the wall. Before it, a small candle emitted its pale light.

I crouched into a chair in the darkest spot of the tavern and signaled to Paw to sit down in front of me. I ordered a rum and hot water, ignited two glasses of the *punch*, and handed one to my man. The evening darkness had advanced, and the flame from the *punch* cast a flickering greenish glimmer on the wan face of my guest, whom I now studied with acute interest. With his bristling, crusted hair and his wide-open eyes, the cadaverous, trembling Paw seemed to be the phantom of Terror. After a few minutes of silence, I asked: “My good man, when did you contract this terrible disease?”

“It’s a long story, worthy sir.”

“So much the better; have another glass of *punch* and tell me the whole of it.”

“This coiffure,” continued Paw with a bitter smile, “is the result of a fright I experienced on a night I passed with Levy.”

“Who is Levy?”

“Does my worthy master not know? Perhaps my worthy master is not from these parts? Levy is yet another long story.”

“Better two than one.”

From Paw’s words, I already had gathered an important fact: the *plica* could be the consequence of a fright.

Again I directed my inquiring gaze at my guest’s mane. Contemplating it at length, I was seized by so great a terror that, shivering, I brought my hands to my head, fearing that the *plica* had already taken hold there.

Looking around, I saw that the tavern was deserted. The host and the Cossack had left.

Alone, Paw and I looked into each other’s face.

Finally, Paw broke the silence: “Worthy sir, hear now the story of Levy:”

[Paw narrated the following story with such a profusion of details and in so vivid and earnest a tone that he seemed to be narrating things he had witnessed at first hand. At times, he would give a shudder. He seemed to take a certain pleasure in the terror of his tale. His words, indeed, his very thoughts, were drawn to the Horrid as to an abyss; a sinister fire shone in his

eyes. And yet, as he spoke he was in pain. There was in the man a reflection of a tragic intelligence. Without mitigating in any way the perverse character of Paw's style, I shall transcribe the story of Levy just as I heard it told by that beggar on that autumn evening in that murky Polish tavern.]

* * * * *

Simeon Levy of Czestochowa was still alive ten years ago, the most avaricious money lender in the ghetto. From childhood, he roamed the streets, gathering the rags people threw down from their apartment windows; and in twenty years, he had collected an enormous amount of them. These rags he sold to a Prussian paper mill for the price, I believe, of a thousand silver florins; and with this capital in hand, he began to lend money at interest. With the earnings, he obtained from his debtors and because of his innate avarice he soon succeeded in turning the thousand florins into ten thousand.

Levy dressed himself with the rags he found in the streets. He would sew them ingeniously together to make himself a tunic. "A hundred small coins make a ruble, a hundred small tattered rags make a garment" was a saying of his. Levy ate precisely once every thirty hours, whether it be day or night. In this way, in the course of eight days, he saved on two days of food.

All his habits were subordinated to his thirty hours. Thus his day had six hours more than other people's day and his week one day less. The day eliminated was Saturday. People called him *The Jew without a Sabbath*. He never rested, and in plying his trade, he paid no heed to the course of the sun. He could be seen hurrying up and down the town at dawn, or at midday or at night, in accordance with his own bizarre calendar. Anyone needing to deal with Levy was obliged to submit not only to the tyranny of his "interest rate" but also to the tyranny of his habits. "The sun is not my guiding light" was a phrase he liked to repeat. Meanwhile, he continued to amass his wealth. Every decade, he increased the total figure of his wealth by an additional zero. When he was thirty, he possessed no more than 10,000 florins, at forty the figure was 100,000, at fifty it had reached 1,000,000.

On the night he turned fifty, he went up to the garret he inhabited, opened his strong box, and began his count. Pile by pile, he counted out gold ducats from Holland, imperial coins from Russia, silver thalers from Prussia; stack by stack, he counted banknotes and promissory notes, rejoicing at the sight of his million.

He quickly counted half a million; soon he was up to seven hundred thousand; and when he had almost counted out the entire amount, he saw that to reach a million florins he needed but one gold florin. Happy as he was with the wealth he saw before him, he was nonetheless anguished by the thought of the gold florin that was lacking. In this state, he retired, but was unable to sleep a wink. With bitterness, he recalled that the previous week in Czestochowa a poor student to whom he had lent money at interest had died. The debt amounted to a *red florin* (the equivalent of a gold ducat), exactly the sum his hoard required. The state of indigence in which his debtor had died left Levy without hope of recovering his money. To regain it, Simeon would have willingly exhumed the corpse to sell its wretched bones.

"Death has robbed me," Levy thought to himself. "In return, I can rob death. That skeleton belongs to me." He had already set his mind on claiming his right to the wretched six feet of earth beneath which his debtor lay buried. The *red florin* was at the center of Levy's brain, like a spider in the center of its web. All of Simeon's thoughts were now fixed on that florin.

The gold coin he lacked blinded his mind, like the round spot that remains in our eyes after we have looked at the sun. He became more and more obsessed with the idea of selling the corpse in order to regain his money; and with this thought, suited more to a hyena than to a human being, he fell asleep.

The dream he had was so vivid that it seemed real.

He dreamed that a bitter stench of putrefaction had awakened him, and that a funereal figure stood before him! The horrible phantasm, its legs bound together by twine, walked with difficulty; in its opened left hand shone a round coin.

“My *red florin!*” the miser exclaimed. And in fact, it was an old gold florin bearing the image of Sigismundus III and dated 1613. To Levy, the corpse seemed to speak in a voice suffocated by the earth that had stopped up its mouth: “I have come to pay my debt. Here is the *florin* of your usury.”

While the Jew trembled, the corpse repeated its words. Its aspect was terrifying: on its head was a clod of burial ground, and nettle roots grew in its nasal cavities. The offer to restitute the *florin* sounded like a threat. While the Jew continued to tremble, the corpse repeated its offer a third time.

Entranced by the glow of the *red florin*, Levy knelt down and stretched out his hand. The corpse brought its own hand out to meet it, and the coin fell into the Jew’s hand. The specter then disappeared; the dream had come to an end. Levy hid himself under the covers, holding the *gold florin* tightly in his fist.

At dawn, he opened his eyes, jumped out of bed, and ran to his strong box to throw into it the coin that would complete the million; but his hand wouldn’t open. During the night, it had rigidified, and despite all his efforts, he now could not loosen it. The fist had locked tight.

[Here Paw suspended his tale for a moment; his face bespoke a strong emotion. I poured him another glass of the rum *punch* to reinvigorate him. After he drank, his eyes appeared enlivened. I observed for the third time that Paw always took the glass in his left hand and kept his right hand hidden in his threadbare coat of goatskin. He resumed his tale]:

Levy’s fist was locked! Though awake and facing the light of day, he could still feel the rim of the *gold florin* pressing against the inside of his hand. Moreover, the very contortion of his fist clearly proved the reality of the extraordinary phenomenon.

The thought that the million had been obtained sent a thrill throughout his frame. The *florin* lacking in the strong box was in his possession, he could feel it, he was squeezing it in his fist. But he needed to see it. He needed to put it together with the others in one of those beautiful gleaming piles.

Suddenly a thought flashed across his mind; he put on his tunic and went out. After hurrying through several neighborhoods of the town, he stopped at a door and knocked. The door having opened for him, he ran up the stairway, calling out loudly in a voice trembling with anxiety:

“Master Wasili! Master Wasili!”

A door to one of the rooms opened, and Levy rushed in. Before him stood Master Wasili, a Russian antiquarian who was both very learned and very crafty, one of those men who steer their knowledge to an evil end and direct their strength to a bad one. “I met him [Paw said] when I was keeper of the Sanctuary’s treasure; he would often say to me that if the philosopher’s stone consisted in turning the basest things into gold, he had discovered it. In fact, for every ancient *sestertius* he forged, Wasili would earn a true imperial gold coin. In short, Master Wasili – doctor, professor, antiquarian, numismatist, paleologist, chemist – was a thief.

Upon seeing Simeòn so breathless, he exclaimed: "From what bevy of witches have you escaped, good Simeòn? If you were not known as the *Jew without a Sabbath*, I would believe you had come from a German or Lithuanian Sabbat, from Brocken in the Harz Mountains, or from Mount Lysa Hora. What demon spurs you so?"

"Not a demon, but a phantom spurs me so," replied Simeòn, who went on to tell Wasili of his nocturnal vision. When the Jew had finished his tale, Wasili, who was grinning behind his thick black beard, exclaimed "*Iesusmària!*" and made the sign of the Greek Orthodox Cross, touching his forehead and his breast and cutting a transversal line from his right shoulder to his left side.

The Jew's face was wholly convulsed.

"Master Wasili," said Simeòn, "I offer you the best business deal that you have ever had. I will sell you a numismatic piece more precious than the rarest Egyptian coin. Give me a current gold *florin*, and I will give you this *red florin* that belonged to the dead man who owed it to me. Surely there must be some devil or surgeon who can open my hand."

"Let's have a look at your fist," replied Wasili. The Jew's fist was locked more tightly than an iron strong box. "What kind of game are you up to now? This hand of yours is withered."

"On the Bible, I swear to you that inside this hand there is a *red florin* bearing the likeness of Sigismund III and the date 1613. It's an old *florin* worth a great deal more than a current ducat. Judging from its weight, I sense that it's of extremely precious gold, twenty-four carat gold."

After carefully scrutinizing the Jew and the Jew's fist, Wasili said: "Done! Fair enough! I agree to the deal, but I insist on one firm condition. Your hand will be opened within three months (I shall be patient), and at that time you will give me the dead man's coin bearing the likeness of Sigismund III. I want to be honest with you. When I see your hand open and your coin in my hand, I will give you a thousand for one, that is, a thousand gold florins for your *red florin*. But if within three months, I don't have the coin that your hand now grips, it will fall to you to give me a thousand for one. In the meantime, here's the florin you've asked of me, keep it as a pledge."

Wasili threw a gold florin on the table, then he sat down at a writing desk and drew up the contract, read it to Levy, and handed it to him with the words: "Sign it."

"I can't," replied Levy, pointing to his right hand.

"Sign with your left hand, make a cross," said the Greek.

"May the Prophet save me from it!" exclaimed the mortified Jew, "this man would make me sin!" He took a pen with his left hand and with great difficulty scrawled his name. Then he put the *florin* in his pocket.

"Well then, we'll see each other in three months" said the sneering Greek, "I hope that we'll be able to shake each other's hand."

"Amen," muttered Levy as he parted.

That same day, the Jew of Czestochowa, counting on Wasili's thousand *florins*, made a trip to Warsaw where he exchanged most of his gold for bank notes. The next day, he left for London in search of Doctor Campbell.

[Again Paw remained silent for a few minutes, his exhausted lungs needed a little rest every so often. During these frequent pauses he would swallow a few spikes of *punch*. The drink, strong and boiling-hot, still gave him some spurts of energy that allowed him to go on with his tale. The more he drank, the more his speech became pressing and his face pale with anguish. The things he related to me evidently stirred the strongest emotions in him, for he often raised his

right fist, brandishing it toward his forehead; but he would stop the gesture midway, looking about suspiciously as he nestled his arm in the folds of his heavy coat. Clearly, a fatal link existed between the fantastic tale I was listening to and the fantastic character narrating it. I searched Paw's eyes, his movements, his voice for a clue to the double reference of his tale. Not infrequently the curiosity aroused in me by the speaker caused me to lose the thread of the tale itself. Paw had already resumed his story while I continued to fix my eyes on him, no longer listening to him. Through a whim of memory, while observing the awful figure before me I heard in my brain an incessant buzz repeating those lines of Dante's where he describes the damnation of the avaricious and the prodigals:

*Those from the sepulchre will rise
With fist clenched, and those others with pate shorn.*

And these words of Hell whirred round and round in my brain like the whirring of a reel. Suddenly I was jolted by the following sentence]:

"Sir," said the physician, "that fist will never open again."

But Levy was not in the least discouraged; he went to another physician, who recommended a mud-bath treatment, assuring him it would cure him.

Levy undertook the treatment. Every day for a month, he kept his hand immersed in a warm and putrid mud-pool. The soft contact of the slime loosened his stiffened muscles, and Levy was often seized by a throb of unutterable joy. He could feel his fingers stretching out ever so slowly, the cavity of his palm widening, the pores of his skin moistening with beneficent perspiration, the acrid, malignant stickiness dissolving from his fingers, and the mud's soft caress already reviving the bones and nerves of his wretched hand. Levy could feel his hand's tendons vibrating and the blood coursing right up to his fingernails.

Buried in the mire, the hand was already partly open, then almost wholly open, and the coin was soon sliding about in it when Levy, afraid of losing the *red florin*, quickly drew his hand out. His fist was still clenched! Every day, Levy suffered the mockery of this illusion.

At the end of the month-long treatment, the Jew, still not cured, set out for Vienna to consult a famous physician of that city. The physician suggested a treatment of electric currents. And so, Levy submerged his fist in a metallic container filled with salted water that was charged by a powerful current from a voltaic cell.

The electricity ran through the Jew's arm for one hour each day. In shaking his fist in the water, Levy could feel something circular, flat, and hard moving inside it, like the little metal disk inside a shaken sleigh-bell. But again the treatment proved ineffectual. From Vienna, Levy went to Paris.

He told his fantastic story to yet another famous physician and waited for the learned man's answer. The physician smiled a little, looked at the hand, and said: "This hand is a singular example of *stigmatization*; you present to me in the highest degree a proof of the effect of ideas on the human organism. You are an interesting subject for science; physiologists and hypnologists would hold you in the highest regard, but you will never be cured. There is but one way to open your hand: to amputate it."

For a moment, the miser stood there, perplexed, then Wasili's thousand gold florins flashed in his mind, and he replied: "So be it then; amputate it."

Taken aback, the physician exclaimed: "Are you mad? A clenched fist is worth more than a mutilated arm."

"And my *red florin*?" Levy screamed, "the *red florin* that it holds? I want it! Cut off my hand and open the fist, I want my coin!"

“I will never do such an operation for you; and besides,” added the physician in a markedly ironic tone, “are you really sure that the florin is there?”

This question crushed the poor Jew. The thought had never occurred to him that he might be the victim of a long hallucination. Now, for the first time, the physician’s query insinuated this doubt in him, and of a sudden all his strength collapsed. He shook his hand on high in a vain attempt to feel the coin moving; but the *red florin* no longer moved, it too had vanished, like his trust. The twenty-four carat gold coin had vanished like smoke. Levy weighed his hand; he had the impression that it had become lighter.

In despair he fled from Paris. He had spent a sizable sum for his travels, for treatments, for physicians, and now here he was, returning home, back to Czestochowa, again climbing the stairs to his garret, sicker and less rich than before. His million had diminished by several hundred florins. The three-month period agreed upon with Wasili was nearing its end; the wager of one thousand gold florins was lost. Three months earlier, he was certain that his hand held the completion of his million, and the difficulty of unlocking that hand was indeed for Levy a fatal anguish that, however, was light compared to the doubt he now experienced. The enchanted fist, sinister, impenetrable as a mystery, had become an even darker enigma from the day his trust in it had failed. It seemed as if it had locked still more tightly.

It had once encased a coin; now it perhaps enclosed nothing. That *perhaps* was the wretched miser’s cruelest punishment. Ever since he had begun to doubt, his great desire to open his fist had become more fervent. He saw how all other men opened their hands so easily; that movement, so natural and so simple, was denied to him. At times, it seemed impossible to him that it should be so, and he strove with all his might to conquer the immobility of his stony muscles. But it was all to no avail. The three months had expired, and one evening as Levy sat before his strong box, he heard a light knocking at his door.

“Come in.”

Wasili entered, saying jovially:

“Comrade Levy, give me your hand.”

“Yes!” the Jew roared, threatening him with his fist, “I’ve made it turn to marble so that I can smash your face with it, you cursed Greek.”

“Easy, easy, easy,” murmured Wasili. “You might call me blessed if you listen to me. I have an idea in my head, and you know that ideas are gold. Be a little patient. Be calm while I go out and come back with your cure, with a cure-all.”

So saying, he went out. Dumbfounded, Levy threw himself into a chair and waited. After a quarter of an hour, he heard a carriage stop in front of his building; and soon after, Wasili returned with a small sack under his arm.

“What’s in that sack?”

“The remedy. Let me cure you. In five minutes, we’ll see the fine face of Sigismundus III leap out from your hand, or we won’t see it because it won’t be there; but your hand will be opened. You said that your hand is of marble – well, I’ve brought you a force that will open it as easily as if it were a baby’s hand. The powder that blasts mountains will easily break these petrified veins of yours where there may be a precious vein of gold. Let me mine your fist; I have here a little sack of powder. The surgical procedure is new, but trust me, you know how wise I am.”

To Levy the idea of the explosive powder seemed sublime. At last a sure means of dispelling his doubts was offered to him. “If the florin is there,” he thought to himself, “the thousand florins go into my strongbox, the million will be completed, and I shall be happy for the rest of my life;

if it isn't there, *amen*, I'll lose a thousand florins, but my heart will be at peace until I die," and with a forceful gesture he extended his arm to Wasili.

Wasili took a handful of powder from the sack and began to study Levy's clenched fist. It was enveloped in a dry, shiny skin, the fingernails had penetrated the flesh, the fingers seemed sealed, the thumb was fixed between the second phalanx of the forefinger and the middle finger, the little finger was so wrinkled that it looked like a shapeless cluster of nerves, and under it was a small hole formed naturally by the two folds of the metacarpus. Into that minute cavity, Levy had often peered, trying to see if the coin glittered. Wasili inspected the minute hole with an alchemist's patience and the shrewdness of a chiromancer; into it he packed, grain by grain, an amount of powder equal to a cartridge and a half of gun powder needed for a hunter's rifle. Then with a large needle he pressed it in as one does when loading a fire-arm. Finally, he said: "The mortar is prepared; now it must be fired, something you can do by yourself. But first, let's close the windows so that the coin, if there is one, doesn't fly into the street."

After closing and barring the shutters, Wasili took a fuse of pitch and rope, lit it, and gave it to Levy who grasped it in his left hand.

"Perform your operation yourself," said Wasili to the Jew, "meantime I shall put my thousand florins in the strong box in case I must pay you. Forgive me if I turn my back to you. Spare me the trouble of witnessing the explosion of such an unusual petard."

Night was falling.

With his fist erect and holding high the fuse whose flickering flame illuminated the room, Levy, pale and silent, stood motionless, hesitating. Now that he had gone to that extreme, he felt his courage failing. The sparks and drip of the fuse fell on the fingers of his left hand, which was already sticky with pitch.

Meanwhile Wasili, bent over in front of the open strongbox, pretended he was counting out his thousand florins, but in reality, he was pocketing as much of the Jew's florins as he could get his claws on. With prodigious rapidity, he grasped the stacks of gold and the banknotes, saying:

"Let's settle our account."

Suddenly the dismayed Levy saw that the Greek was robbing him; crying out: "Cursed thief!" he started to run toward the Greek, his arms thrust forward with the burning torch.

As nimble as a vampire Wasili turned round, snatched the sack of powder that was at his feet and emptied it on the floor between himself and the strongbox; then, turning his fierce face toward Levy, he said in a still fiercer voice:

"Look at what lies between you and your strongbox," and he pointed to the high pile of black powder that separated Levy from the strongbox. The strongbox was near the door. The den was narrow and cramped. Levy tried futilely to escape from the fuse that was fatally tarring the fingers of his one good hand and showering innumerable sparks at his feet. It was impossible to extinguish it by blowing on it. The scattered powder kept him from making any move. Before him was a mine. Wasili continued to steal, and with each pocketed roll, he said laughingly: "A hundred imperial coins!"

"Master Wasili! Thief!" screamed Simeon.

"A thousand ducats! Fifty rubles! I've got it all," and he turned his glowering spectral face toward the Jew.

In Levy's brain there thundered the voice of the young student's ghost repeating the words, "*Here is the florin for your usury,*" and it seemed to him that the petrification of his fist had now pervaded his whole body.

But suddenly he gave a start and resumed his shouting: "Thief! Thief! Thief! Stop the thief!"

The thief was no longer there, and Levy could hear the sound of a carriage departing and the gallop of two horses.

Half a minute later, passersby heard a crashing noise of broken glass coming from his windows from where a burning fuse came falling down to the street. Those who ran up to his room in answer to his calls found him on the floor, unconscious.

The entire citizenry of Czenstokow were quickly babbling facetiously over the Jew's disaster, interpolating pleasantries and irony in their comments. Israelites and Christians alike rejoiced; the poor miser's calamity was a welcome event for everybody else. No one spoke a compassionate word; some smiled, some laughed, some grinned sarcastically, some guffawed, and some squealed with laughter.

"Behold the fruits of avarice!"

"Behold the fruits of usury!"

"The wicked never prosper in the end."

Such were the comments of the crowd. Meanwhile Wasili had disappeared, leaving no trace of himself.

When Levy revived, he was alone; he looked at the wide-open door, then at the wide-open window, and finally at the wide-open and empty strongbox! He wanted to kill himself, but how? His fist could grip neither knife nor pistol, and he feared the weak and uncertain blows of his left hand. Then he was seized by the fear of death. The rich miser had truly become wretched, without a single coin left in his strong box; the treasure chest so solidly and tightly built now had the appearance of a cage from which the singing canaries had flown away.

Levy turned away his eyes so as not to see it. Nothing of his former riches was left to him, nothing save *perhaps* the *gold florin* in his fist! But discouraged and exhausted, Levy no longer believed in that fatal coin. Incredulity had displaced doubt, just as doubt had displaced trust. For a few days, he dragged himself along in poverty, gnawing on some leftover food he had procured in better days.

One morning, in deep despair, hungry, unable to work, and not knowing what to do to survive, he climbed the hill and kneeled before the Sanctuary door to beg for alms. Many passersby who knew him cursed him; those who had borrowed money at his usurious interest insulted him. Others mocked him. Nobody gave him so much as a single *kopeck*.

At that time, I was the guardian of the Treasure of the Madonna. One day, while returning to my room – I lived in the convent – I saw Levy. I felt sorry for him and said: "Tonight, when the monks are asleep, come to my cell and we'll sup together."

Later that night, Levy showed up and together we ate. He had become an awful sight. The cell was illuminated by a lone candle burning before the Madonna — just like this one here. That night, Levy told me his whole story just as I've told it to you now. When he had finished speaking he got up . . . he went before the Virgin [in describing these details Paw accompanied his words with movements and gestures], then I saw him take his fist out of his fur cloak . . . [and here Paw took out his own fist] . . . raise it resolutely . . . [and Paw raised his] . . . and place it on the candle's flame, saying: "And this is where Levy's story ends."

A tremendous explosion followed these words. I thought that a lightening bolt and thunder had burst forth from that burning hand before the little picture of the Madonna. The fist had exploded into fragments; the Jew collapsed . . . the light went out . . . At the same moment I heard a metallic sound running along the floor. In the dark I picked up a coin . . . the *red florin* . . . of Sigimundus III . . . Levy was now motionless, the explosion had killed him.

When he had finished his tale, Paw's voice broke into a hoarse rattle, and he fainted. The effort of telling his story, its grievousness, and the rum he had consumed had taken their toll. His heavy head could hold out no longer, and he went into a delirium: "The devil's coin . . . it's here . . . it's here . . ." His delirium worsened.

I had Paw taken to a separate room of the tavern, and there, on a bed, he fell asleep. He was suffering from an onset of dropsy; his inordinate drinking that evening had provoked a fatal crisis. I spent the night at his bedside; but from his lips came no further word that might have helped to throw light on the obscure connection that tied him to his tale. Toward dawn, he awoke and looked about; upon seeing me, he thanked me warmly.

"When I die I'll repay my debt to you," he said, but suddenly frightened, he added "no . . . no . . . it would bring calamity on you." Having uttered these words, he relapsed into his delirium. I divined what he had in mind. Throughout the night I observed that his right hand never opened. From this and from other signs, I deduced that Paw had been infected with Levy's hallucination; he, too, believed he held the *florin of usury* in his fist. This maniacal fixation was greatly strengthened by the diseased state of his brain. Paw seemed to me like a victim of the physical phenomenon that medieval Christians called *sugillationes*, which is a form of *stigmatization*.

Such a phenomenon has appeared several times even in this rationalistic century of ours. One need only read the letters of Harwitz, published in Berlin in 1846, to find cited a great many cases of stigmatization that have occurred in our own time. Maria di Maerl, a Franciscan tertiary nun, was marked with the *stigmata* in 1834.

Maria Domenica Lazzari, known as *Our Lady of Sorrows of Capriana*, was another who, at about the same time, bore the *stigmata* on her feet, on her hands, and on her side. In 1835, Crescenzia di Nickleitsch received the *stigmata*.

Filippo d'Aqueria, Benedetto da Reggio, a Capuchin, Carlo di Gaeta, a lay friar, are other examples of those who received the inheritance of the blessed wounds of Saint Francis as a reward for their faith.

Today the science of physiology clearly demonstrates that what in past centuries was called a miracle was no more than the effect of a disease, of a general agitation of one's body, the consequence of minds convulsed by a religious exaltation, by an excessive abstinence or asceticism, by the contemplative life, an organism inordinately predisposed to nervous disorders.

In many cases of mental illness (cases in which the psyche exercises a powerful influence on the body), it can be observed that ideas have an effect on organs and transfer their own disturbances to organs. *Sugillationes* and *stigmatization* belong to one and the same order of physiological facts and can be produced not only by a religious mania but by whatsoever other mania, such as happened in the case of the miser Levy and as it was now seen in poor Paw.

Such were my thoughts as I kept vigil over my patient.

Unfortunately, I knew that medical science couldn't save him. In fact, after three days he died.

When the news of Paw's death spread throughout the city, the tavern was besieged by a crowd of curious people. They milled around the tavern keeper, begging him to let them enter the dead man's room.

Many of them wanted to break open Paw's fist so as to get at the florin. They asked that favor of the tavern keeper as an act of charity, others demanded it as a right.

Indignant, I listened to them from the room where I was. Someone said: "Paw left that florin to me in a will." Another said: "I have a greater right to it than you, because it was promised to me by Levy himself." And the first one replied: "You'll see who's right!"

And a third person: "That florin should go to the Treasury of the Virgin." And a fourth: "First of all it's necessary to wash it in holy water and purify it completely; I know how it's done."

And a fifth: "That *red florin* should be divided among Paw's fellow-beggars, among all those with the *plica*."

A boisterous applause followed this last statement spoken in a stentorian voice that I recognized as belonging to the Sanctuary beggar who more than any of the others had struck Paw.

In the meantime, the angry mob pushed forward toward the room where I was gazing at the dead man. The tavern keeper could no longer keep back the surging crowd, who pushed open the door and invaded the room. Seeing the dead man, they halted, suspended between greed and terror; but upon seeing me there, they all bowed. Then I spoke:

"Heathens! I see among you those who on the hill the other day gave fine proof of compassion by beating the poor man who now lies dead there on the bed. All of you attacked Paw for a copper coin when he was alive, and now that he's dead, you have all come to throw yourselves at his fist, to steal the gold coin it encloses. Thieves! Filthy robbers! Slimy crows! That coin will become gangrene in your hands. It will be your curse. The fate of Paw and Levy awaits you. But I will not deny you the punishment you so wildly demand. Those among you who want the *cursed florin*, raise your hand."

All of them raised their hand, whereat I seized a hammer, ran to Paw's bed and grasped his twice-dead fist; at the first blow it broke apart like that of a mummy. The anxious mob was waiting for the *red florin*; all eyes were fixed on my hammer and all ears were straining in expectation of the sound of the gold coin.

The fist shattered. The crowd stood dazed.

The *red florin* was not there.

Iberia

The time of these events is unknown; the place is Spain. A steed races furiously over a desolate land, spurred by a knight; black the one and the other, wrapped in billowing folds of an immense cloak that creates the impression of a hurricane wind scraping the earth and carrying lightning and thunderbolts in its bosom. The rider hides his face in a dark, capacious hood, beneath which one can imagine all the human types of all the ages: the Spaniard, the Saracen, the hidalgo, the inquisitor, the fifteenth-century iron breastplate, the sixteenth-century doublet, the seventeenth-century velvet coat, one or all of which could be equally well concealed there. The somber cape is a shadow that masks a man and a century. Coupled with the darkness of the vestments, the precipitate speed of the chase adds to the fathomless nature of the mystery.

Seen from afar, the curvature of the steed's bounding hooves seems to trace the arc of an aerial bridge repeating itself endlessly in the countryside. The metallic clatter of the horseshoes emits a precise, lightly paced rhythm, much as does the trochaic pace of Pindar's verses; the steed has the flight and meter of an ode. The poplars file by in procession before the knight's eyes, and their branches moving in the evening breeze produce a sound of distant applause.

Who is that fugitive? In what century did the clatter of that chase vibrate? In the great ocean of hours, what were the minutes marked by that furious gallop? What does it matter to know in what age it took place?

Throughout the course of centuries and history, the heart does not change, the earth does not vary. Whether it be the Abenceragi or Phillip II who reigns in Granada, be it the fanaticism of the turban or the Cross that rules over the whole of Spain, be it the genius of Carlos V standing guard over the throne of Madrid or the idiocy of Carlos II that sleeps upon it; of what concern is that to the troubadour of songs and to the mountain of the Estremadura? The former will always sing his *albe* beneath the balcony of his beloved, the latter will forever crown with flowers the tops of its ancient palm trees. Only that which stands between man and nature seems changeable: laws, customs, knowledge. A divine impulse propels these ephemeral forms in a perennial upward motion; but just as the heart's holy virtues cannot become holier, neither can the beautiful virtues of the creation be made more comely.

The story told here is the eternal story of love in the eternal land of poetry. Let us not put dates to eternity.

The steed never halts nor slackens its pace. All the rivers of León and Castile pass beneath its flight; with one leap, it crosses over the Esla, followed by another over the Duero, but then, on approaching the edge of the Pisurga it hesitates; implacably and furiously the rider digs his spurs into the steed's haunches from which some blood drips on the river bank; the steed struggles between the knight's knees and, with a stupendous leap, crosses over the Pisurga. The flight hurtles forward as horse and rider cross Valladolid and Zamora, plunging deep into the wild regions of Estremadura. The flight goes on from Salamanca to the mountains, every leap devouring ten cubit feet of land, as the horse's iron-clad hooves repeat on the ground the nervous gesture made by a hand rapidly turning the pages of a book. Thus the steed triumphantly casts behind itself the miles traversed.

With proud mien, the knight wheels around toward his own shadow profiled on the ground by the setting sun; he sees it stretched out a long way until it curves around and into a hollow of the mountain, like the Byzantine figures high on the inside walls of cupolas of the Eastern church. Before every cross, he passes he leans forward devoutly until his head touches the

horse's bridle, and the gallop continues ever onward. Without these manifest signs of Catholic devotion, one would take him for an escapee from the stake of the Holy Office who has just felt the first licks of the flames.

Night climbs up the mountain followed by the dark horse. The two Castiles sleep without even an *auto da fê* to serve as a nocturnal torch. A gust of wind causes the knight's hood to fall on his shoulders, and in the clarity of the sky is revealed the face of a handsome youth, of an ideal beauty, blond as an infant and bronzed as a warrior. The archangels who made their way as pilgrims over the sands of Palestine in the early years of Christianity must have risen on high similarly bronzed. And our knight had the same uncertain age of the archangels as depicted by Murillo, somewhere between fifteen and eighteen years old. Judging by the pure azure of his eyes, one would have said fifteen, but the resolute closing of his lips suggested eighteen. Notwithstanding the steep and thickly wooded nature of the terrain, his horse continued the climb at a fast pace. Again the young horseman hides his face in the increasing shadows, but for an instant his face gleams like a meteor among the fleeting reverberations of the twilight. Upon arriving at a steeper climb he dismounts and proceeds on foot. The terrifying rush of the ride gives way to a more terrifying slowness. The youth's steps, halting and wary, are followed by his exhausted horse.

Half way up the mountain, he begins to sing a *Provençal aubade* that the echo of the deserted valley repeats thus:

<i>Erransa</i>	<i>Error</i>
<i>Pesansa</i>	<i>Heaviness</i>
<i>Me destrench e me balansa;</i>	<i>grips me and divides me</i>
<i>Res no sai on ne me lansa,</i>	<i>I know not what pierces me,</i>

and the singer continues to climb ever more slowly on a path that is ever more inhospitable.

It is two hours to midnight when he arrives at the ramparts of a huge castle perched atop the edge of a cliff. The youth ties his steed to the thick baluster of the drawbridge; then he leans an elbow on the saddle and remains motionless in that position for several minutes. Now, with an intense and trembling voice he resumes his song:

Nacido en Castile
Enamorado en León
(Born in Castile
I am in love in León)

At which another voice, more fluid and lighter, replies:

Nacida en León
Enamorada en Castile,
(Born in León,
I am in love in Castile)

Whereupon the drawbridge is lowered, and a white form appears, like the voice that had responded. The youth crosses it, and at the end of the dark passage, one hears the murmuring of two names:

“*Estebano.*”

“*Elisenda.*”

“Prince, you seem to me swifter than a dream and quicker than hope!”

“I began my voyage at dawn with three horses, one white, one tawny, and one black. I mounted the white one in Castile, and the other two followed behind me. In Palenza, the white horse died, and I mounted the tawny one; in Salamanca, the tawny one died, and I mounted the black one that now sleeps below there outside of the bastion.”

“Cousin Estebano, the blood of our ancestors boils vehemently in our veins. The Castilian kings were called eagles on their steeds.”

“And the queens of León were said to be fairies in their castles, oh princess Elisenda, my gracious cousin.”

The enunciation of these latter words resounded grave and trembling on the youth’s lips, like the cadence of a song.

“In the ten years we have not seen one another, the stature of your person and the gentleness of your voice have greatly increased. Do you still remember the serenades of Valladolid?”

“The two verses I sung a few moments ago are proof that I do. I was seven years old when I composed them for you in the park of the late princess Blanca, your august mother; and you were five years old when, for the first time, you answered me, singing as you have this evening.”

“Yes, I remember so much, so much. I called you Minstrel, and you called me Queen. You wore my colors, and I repeated your songs; and I remember also the time when you hid in a grove of oleanders where you wept the whole day through upon learning that the verse *Enamorado en León* was incorrect. Nor at first did you realize it, and neither could you correct it.”

“And I still have not corrected it, princess.”

“I hope you will never correct it.”

After these words, the castle echoed with the laughter of the two merry cousins.

Then Estebano asked, “And your kind grandfather, Don Sancho, how did he die?”

“Poor grandfather, he died of old age, the death of a lion. He sensed his end was imminent. Three days before he departed for Paradise, he wrote his will, which you read yesterday in Castile. After folding and sealing it, he himself sent it to you. The following day, which was yesterday, he went out of the castle with his harquebus and slew all the crows and vultures in these gorges; then he retired. Today, before dawn, he took me by the hand and led me to the ledge of a ravine where that sturdy elder would every day contemplate the early morning sky. There, on the edge of the abyss, he leaned his back against the bare rock and spoke to me as I was looking at him from the bridge: “Princess Elisenda of Royal-Blood, daughter of one born of the son of all kings of León, know that today, when the sun’s light shall have appeared on this cliff, I shall be dead. Do not weep, but listen. This sunrise is my sunset.” (And he murmured these words while you, dear cousin, were saddling your white steed in Castile) “Do you remember,” he went on, “the old bull who, when no longer able to do battle in the arena, longed to die? You were but a small child then, and you laughed and mocked him; and I, in order to moderate your laughter, which was unbecoming in a descendant of rulers, said to you: ‘Lady Elisenda, in your open mouth everyone can see that you lack some milk-teeth,’ and then you turned serious and closed your lips. Now that you have all your teeth and nobody notices you, my child, you can smile; the decrepit bull is still here.” And while the venerable old man was

talking, one could hear in the deep blue of the sky the warbling of the first lark. Don Sancho raised his head as though better to hear the singing bird; then he exclaimed: "It's the song of Paradise! From these heights, heaven is not far . . . do not fear, dear child; I'll not disturb your nights. As the sole funeral rite, this evening in the Oratory I will light the blessed tutelary torch of our race, which has come down from Alphonse VIII to you. Take great care of the holy object, and note well that to extinguish it requires the breath of a bride. This mystery will be explained to you later. The fate of our race is concealed in that flame. Its wax was drawn from the hives that existed in the valleys where Jesus was born. It was brought from the Holy Land by one of our most noble ancestors. The prophetic friar who gave it to him said: "As long as this candle burns, the Spanish throne shall reign." Ever since then we have kept the custom of lighting the precious relic at every funeral among us and at every wedding among us. At the present time you cannot understand all the wisdom of the oracle connected with the ancient relic. Know now only that the breath of a virgin maid on the virgin candle would extinguish both the flame and the divine grace that watches over our lineage, and with it our lineage itself. Elisenda, the souls of your children will be fueled by the sparks of that Seraphic candle, but before extinguishing it look to Estebano. He will arrive this very night; I have written to him. He will arrive at nightfall, and you will be wed to Estebano. A dying old man is closer to God than is the holiest priest, and I extend to you my untrembling hand and I bless your royal nuptials. Angels will watch over the holy union of the last two gentle descendants of Royal Blood." Then he spoke words so obscure and weighty that I failed to understand them. "Think, Elisenda," he went on to say, "that from your womb will issue the history of future centuries. Of the noble imperial oak that spread its shade as far as Asturia and Aragona, two small branches are yet alive. God will join these two branches, which will then become one sole eternal root. From Lady Urraca and Alphonse *el Batallador* (the Battler) our past glory was born; from Lady Elisenda and Prince Estebano of Royal-Blood our future glory will come forth. Beautiful and august Babes, you are little flowers of kings, you are the seeds of kings! And just as from one crowned bee alone there springs an entire population of harmonious hives, so too may you, daughter, populate the noble thrones of the world! Estebano, Elisenda, love one another, and bring forth progeny! I offer up to God as a sacrifice my long years of hermitage and humility that it pleased Him to visit temporarily upon my imperial family. But as an award for my lost power, I ask an everlasting ascendancy for the progeny of my progeny. Elisenda, always remember the high virtues that were the ornament of your mighty family stocks; gather them all together in yourself and let that be your faith.

Alphonse I was called *the Catholic*;
Alphonse II was known as *the Chaste*;
Alphonse III was addressed as *the Great*;
Sancho II, as *the Mighty*;
Alphonse VIII, as *the Noble*;
Alphonse X, as *the Wise*;
and Peter I, as *the Cruel*.

If you do not scorn any of these ancient kingly virtues, and if you act with all the firmness of your soul, you shall be the genitrix of heroes, and Ceuta and Tunisia and Melilla and Cuba and Venezuela and San Domingo and Navarra will once again belong to Spain. I lived humbly in the face of the rulers of Europe; nonetheless, as a banner of my humility, I desired the highest crest of Estremadura. You must avoid humility as you would a sin. From my deliberate lowliness, you

must draw a favorable augur for your descendants. The humble pass unobserved under the eyes of the Almighty, who created the high mountains. The incense that rises from hidden and lowly places offends the Omnipotent's nostrils. God is the eternal pride that upholds the life of the Universe. Humility is the virtue of the mob. Jesus stands quite upright before the prostrate populace, and whoever wishes to speak to Phillip II, be he the very duke of Medina Celi, must kneel. Nobody must be higher than the King . . . ”

“And in the meantime, the sun rising behind the mountain that stood before Don Sancho irradiated the peaks above him. With his gaze and with his mind, my grandfather measured the sun's course, and then he exclaimed, ‘Yet one hour more to live.’

“Then he closed himself within his thoughts.

“After half an hour, he shook himself, saying ‘It is time for me to make my confession,’ and so saying, he made the sign of the Cross, then he bent his head over the deep abyss that yawned beneath his feet. Cupping his hands before his mouth in the shape of a trumpet, he howled into the abyss: ‘You shall be my confessor.’ His voice resounded in the ravine, blaring like a hunting horn's call. With its tortuous meanderings, the chasm seemed an immense ear of darkness into which these words plummeted:

‘I have three sins in my soul. Hear them.

‘The first sin: when I was twenty years old, in Zamora I saved three infidels from the stake – a Moor, a Jew, and a Lutheran.

‘The second sin: at fifty, when I came up to these cliffs, I sent away from my solitude and my poverty all my old servants, all my holy priests, and my poor maid servants.’

‘The third sin: yesterday, on the eve of my death, I killed a royal eagle in its nest.’

“And then, he arose like the mast of a ship, and when I took a step forward as though to cross the bridge that separated us, Don Sancho forbade me to continue, shouting: ‘Stop, do not approach me, do not touch me, you would cause me to fall alive into the abyss.’

“As the sun kept rising, its rays fell upon the mountain's boulders, crossing a cliff split in the middle like a gigantic crenellated battlement.

“Suddenly the sun redoubled its splendor; there was but a hand's breadth from its light to my grandfather's hair. Don Sancho seemed absorbed in thought as he stood upright, leaning against the rock; there was a flash when at the first touch of the light his white hair turned silvery. The sun seemed like an archer positioned behind the cleft cliff as though it were behind an embrasure, the archer aiming his bow slowly at my grandfather's pupils; a sparkling light vibrated in Don Sancho's eyes. The sun and the old man fixed their gaze upon one another for a moment like two rivals. The arrow was shot, and Don Sancho was dead, fulminated by the sun; and yet he did not fall but remained standing until noon. While you were mounting your sorrel steed in Salamanca, the wind pushed my poor grandfather until he fell headlong into the abyss.”

“Peace be with Don Sancho's soul,” responded Estebano, “tomorrow I shall go down in the precipice, I shall retrieve his venerable corpse and bring it to the cloister of Saint Isidoro, where all the monarchs of León rest.”

“Amen,” added Elisenda.

As they spoke, the two cousins walked slowly between the castle's dark colonnades. The steady trample of Estebano's spurs along the courtyard's marble pavement accompanied Elisenda's proud narration; all around them was a great silence. Meanwhile, the risen moon already shone on mountains and roofs; a small star wandering beside it had the appearance of a luminous tear.

Estebano murmured: "The moon weeps!" and the two young lovers stopped to gaze at it, even as it benignly bathed them with its rays, causing the young woman's face to appear lustrous and pure.

The tenuous ideal gradation existing between the features and souls of the cousins, which made them seem like brother and sister, can best be figured in the following image:

Estebano was a vivid flower with a delicate scent.

Elisenda was a delicate flower with a vivid scent.

The carnation and the violet had exchanged their fragrances, and for each to reacquire its own, it was necessary for the one to penetrate the essence of the other. All of harmony and all of sweetness seemed infused in the young couple, who varied from one another only to the degree needed for striking a sympathetic accord in created things. Moreover, they shared utterly the same divine inspiration applied to two different sexes: in Estebano the virile form and in Elisenda the feminine form of the same one divine conception. They resembled one another the way all angels resemble one another. Surely infused in their veins there flowed the sky's azure, so ethereal did they seem. The proud Castilian boast, *blue-blooded*, by which even now the ancient Spanish nobility prior to the invasion of the Saracens adorns itself, was ideally realized in the two last shoots of the *Royal Blood*.

That king of León who, wounded in battle, stained with azure his Moorish foe's scimitar, was ancestor to our royal youths. The heads of Elisenda and Estebano had been fashioned to bear either a halo or a crown; a kingly and seraphic aura condensed itself around their foreheads, and the golden skies of Zurbaran were sketched behind the space in which they breathed. Motionless, Estebano and Elisenda had their eyes fixed on the moon. Making their contemplation yet more tenacious was the bewilderment both felt in finding themselves so close to one another and the indescribable terror of looking into each other's face.

They were already in love without even suspecting it, so thick was the darkness that had fallen before the moon had risen.

They loved one another for the shared memory of their childhood love, because that love had been the first dream of their childhood hearts and the last dream of their dying ancestor's dream. They were in love because a fatal instinct and a violent circumstance had drawn them together. They were in love because the white butterfly loves the pretty white flower and the blue butterfly loves the pretty blue flower, because they both were blond and pale, because they felt alone on the earth, alone and united on those nocturnal heights of a wild land. In the same way that an astronomer contemplates the diurnal reverberation of another hemisphere, the young couple contemplated in the moon the reflected ray of their timid love.

Elisenda broke the silence with the words: "Prince, will you come with me into the oratory?" And followed by Estebano, she walked toward a dark flight of stairs that in the darkness they climbed one behind the other without another word. When they arrived at the top of the tower, Elisenda pushed open a heavy, ironclad door that shut behind them.

They were in the Oratory. A votive candle burning for the death of Elisenda's grandfather illuminated only the religious enclosure.

The Oratory was situated on the highest part of the castle; the octangular walls, hung with violet velvet, were dimly illuminated and seemed almost black. The wall's angles were so conformed that they produce the effect of a conical construction. At the opposite end from the entrance, the altar was raised on three large steps covered with a soft precious carpet. Above the altar hung a very long picture. Two gaunt faces gazed out from the heavily blackened canvas. Near the painting's bottom, one could discern in yellow the words: "*The matrimony of doña*

Uraca of Castile and Alphonse of Aragon,” and further below, the date 1144. The figures portrayed were almost entirely submerged in a sooty-like obscurity that reached up to their mouths. It was not possible to distinguish between the groom and the bride of that ancient marriage. Both had in their eyes the terrified look of drowning persons and seemed to express the irrevocable rising of the darkness submerging them. Neither a hand, nor a necklace, nor the hilt of a sword appeared through the black shroud that was enveloping them. Yet between them, emerging out of the dark was the outline of a candle some five feet long.

The irony of time that speaks from everything raised by man’s hand seems here to wish to compare that lone painted candle to the remainder of the candle burning in the middle of the chapel and which has barely a few inches left to be consumed. The irony becomes more sinister when one knows that one is the entire image of the other. The centuries have consumed the burning candle just as they have consumed the regal couple depicted in the painting; the darkness had-climbed up to the two monarchs, the light of the candle was sinking.

Among the decorative features of the altar’s molding were sculpted the words *mensa regia*. A thick silver-gilded missal lays open to the left of the ciborium. At the chapel’s right angles hung or lay stoles, censers, swords, morions, flabella, palü, chlamydas, rosaries, all jumbled up. On three ample cushions placed close to the edge of the *mensa regia*’s top step rested two crowns and a mitre. The Oratory measured but a few paces. All of Spanish genius was epitomized within those walls and in those imposing relics. Entering into that enclosure, solemn and opulent as a tomb, where so many regal and papal relics were heaped together, one thinks of the words: *Angusto et Augusto* (Crammed and Majestic).

With heads bowed before the altar, Estebano and Elisenda prayed; a light breath came from their lips, a soft buzz like that of a breeze or a mosquito. Elisenda finished her prayers before Estebano, and seeing that he continued his with devotion, she looked at him contemplatively. How handsome his profile, with his chin lowered upon his breast and his hands joined together in a sign of a profound meekness!

Ecstasy was already invading the maiden’s soul.

When Estebano moved, she was startled and hastily made as though she were still praying.

Now it was *he* who gazed at *her*. How beautiful Elisenda appeared in the candle’s light, dressed in white! Her hair seemed of pure amber, and her hands had the soft surface of polished agate. Then, almost strangely her lips were neither crimson nor pink, but almost white and very much divided in the middle; they seemed composed of four tuberous petals.

Estebano’s adoration had drifted from God to Elisenda.

The silence was so deep it oppressed one’s ears. Suddenly Estebano exclaimed in a supplicating voice: “Oh! Princess, your prayer is long!”

Elisenda replied: “I have finished.” And they looked into one another’s eyes, astonished not to find themselves frightened.

Estebano’s gaze penetrated Elisenda’s pupils, deeply, lucidly, confidently, like a blade in its sheath.

“Who is in the castle?” he asked.

She answered, “Not a living soul.”

These words had hardly been spoken when they heard a formidable knock struck behind the altar, as of a giant knocking at a door. A second blow followed the first, then a third, and a fourth, until twelve had been struck.

“Who is there? Who is there? Who is there?” shouted Estebano, seizing Elisenda with his left arm while covering her with his right arm in the act of defending her from an unknown

enemy. Then in a voice more growling than exclamatory: "Come forth, if you are a brave man! If you are a coward, retreat! Or my raised fist will respond on your skull with twelve blows no less tremendous than yours, evil disturber of prayers. Come forth! Come forth, cyclops, bear or devil, man or phantasm . . ." But here he interrupted his challenge, and holding Elisenda tight, he murmured: "Oh, woe! Peace be with the soul of Don Sancho." And he was as a leopard that has become a lamb.

The maiden trembled, but not with fear. Seeing her atremble, Estebano clasped her to his breast and kissed her on the forehead, whereupon she exclaimed: "Thank you, Don Sancho!" in a tone of childlike beatitude. Then, smiling at Estebano, she continued: "Dear cousin, so noble and strong, peace be also with you! What you heard came from the crypt below the Oratory, from the clock of Bishop Olivarez. I should tell you that when this holy Bishop, the only priest, indeed, the only other person who lived with us, died in this castle, my grandfather laid him in a beautiful copper casket that he placed under the tower's clock from which he had the bell removed so that the knocker would strike hourly on the Bishop's coffin as a perennial memento of the transitoriness of man's existence. The twelve blows we just heard tell us that it is midnight." Then, in a low voice, like one who utters something he does not understand, she said: "It is time for us to marry." And so saying, she gazed fixedly at her betrothed's face. Estebano's arm was still holding her tightly.

More quickly than love alone would have done, fear now had united the two enamored creatures, who could neither unclasp nor cease to tremble. Locked together and shaking, the young couple, urged by one same thought, advanced toward an angle of the Oratory. There, Elisenda gathered up a gold-brocade pennant and draped it over Estebano's shoulders. Then the couple went to the opposite angle, where Estebano detached from the wall a royal cloak of purple and silver with which he robed Elisenda. Then the two rummaged among the scattered relics of their ancestors, adorning themselves with Moorish sashes and gothic necklaces. Estebano also put on a precious soft linen stole, while Elisenda took up a rosary and a ring. Then the cousins knelt on the first step of the altar, Estebano on the right, Elisenda on the left. Bowing reverently, from the cushions before them they took up the two imperial crowns and placed them on their heads, silently, gravely, penitently like two children absorbed in a magical exultancy. Their bodies swayed under the weight of their sumptuous mantles, and their locks of hair felt squeezed under the thick circles of their gold crowns.

Esteban's crown, imperial and closed and with the Cross at its peak, resembled the one worn by Charlemagne, except that encircling it were the three words the Romans used when they baptized the province of León: *Legio septima gemina*.

Elisenda's mantle was embroidered in silver with the majestic *leones rampando*. The vestments of both royal youths were adorned with hundreds of topaz, rubies, and diamonds, but dust had dimmed the gold and gems, and the cloth was greatly moth-eaten.

A tragic contrast was to be noted in those two blond figures, crushed under the thick layer of dust on the royal raiments. Estebano's stole pinched at the back of his neck because of the sharp crease it made just there where it weighed heavily on the top of the youth's shoulders. An ashy spider falling from the tip of his crown down along his ear lost itself in the youth's hair. The holy ornaments and vestments covered him with majesty and derision; they crowned him and disgraced him at one same time. The limbs of the tender couple had lost their native elegance under the drapery's awkward pomp.

But the two young lovers gazed at one another, and dressed as they were, they seemed the more attractive. At this point, they initiated a strange ceremony.

Still kneeling, they took each other by the hand and recited the Rosary: Elisenda sighed *Kyrie Eleison* and Estebano responded *Christe Eleison* while the beads of the *Avemaria* passed lightly through their loosely entangled fingers. When they finished, Estebano intoned:

Veni de Libano, sponsa mea, veni

(Come to me from Lebanon, my bride, come)

and his chant vibrated with his smiles and his tears.

Elisenda responded:

Manibus date lilia plenis

(Give me handfuls of lilies)

And again Estebano:

Fulcite me floribus

(Support me with flowers)

and then, bowing his head before Elisenda, he murmured softly:

Salve Regina

and he kissed her mantle as one kisses that of a Madonna. Then the two of them raised their voices in singing proudly the hymn intoned at a Royal Wedding:

Te Deum laudamus, te, Domine, confitemur

(We praise Thee, Lord, in Thee we trust).

Their voices, in unison, rose and descended with the liturgical psalms resounding in the oratorium. The outbursts of the loudest notes caused the hanging censers to shake as if to accompany the hymn with their dance.

While singing, Elisenda had put an onyx ring on Estebano's finger, whereupon the proud youth arose and extended his hand into the darkness behind the altar from which his hand returned holding an immense sword. Now in the surrounding silence, he stood firmly as he raised his arm. Fixing the sword's point on the open missal, he spoke his oath:

"On the true Holy Cross of Christ, on the Gospel, and on this sword of Alphonse VIII of Aragona, I, Don Estebano, prince of Castile, duke of Salamanca and Zamora, swear that I will be husband on earth and in Heaven of Princess Donna Elisenda of León, marquise of Valladolid, countess of Asturia, my pre-eminent cousin. I swear to regain for us and for our progeny the last throne of Spain, to regain it by virtue or by force, with ingenuity or with the sword, with peace or with war, by good or by evil, by clemency or by violence, sustained always by our holy Catholic faith. Amen."

The heavy wooden bell clapper struck one o'clock. The sword's point, agitated by the prince's stirring words, had torn the page of the missal on which it had been fixed.

Estebano was slow in coming out of his excited state, caused by the solemn nature of his pronouncement; but suddenly, as if seized by an ineffable need to humble himself, he fell to the ground with his head on the altar's cushions, exclaiming:

Adhaesit pavimento anima mea

Then Elisenda lay down beside him and turned her cheek toward his lips. A long pearl hung from her ear. Estebano kissed the pearl and said: "You are beautiful, oh, my queen!"

The maiden replied: "You are handsome, my king!"

The scent of the melted candle entered into the young couple's nostrils. The odor was sweet and languorous and warm. But they remained there looking into one another's eyes.

"My sweet Elisenda," murmured Estebano, while his heart beat convulsively like the wings of a butterfly pierced by a pin. Then he continued:

“Place your white hand on my forehead, and I will imagine poems!” And Elisenda laid her hand on Estebano’s forehead. After a long silence, the youth spoke again, dream-like:

“Elisenda, listen; I wish that you were a *caleide* and I another pretty tiny insect and that for a pavilion we had a lily’s calyx, and that we could live our short life there, in the soft light of a dawn, mitigated by the snowy walls of our bridal chamber, and then both of us die in that sweet-smelling closed lily.”

“But don’t you see, Estebano, how this asylum of peace is also enclosed, and can’t you smell how fragrant it is?”

What the two youths spoke were words that seemed music.

Elisenda continued: “I have dreams so full and chimeras so violent in my heart that to bring them forth I would need to break it. What is born in the heart can issue only from the heart! Wound me here, dear Estebano, on the side, just enough so that along with some drops of blood some thoughts may also flow forth. Human lips know nothing of these deep matters.”

To this Estebano added: “Indeed, in the language taught to me the name of what I feel for you does not exist.”

And Elisenda asked: “Do you love me?”

And Estebano replied in a calm, low voice: “Yes,” and their faces drew close to each other, and the lips of one yearned for those of the other until they met in the chaste, religious kiss such as is bestowed upon amulets. “Let us love one another more than swallows, more than swans, and more than the colts that go in couples through Castile’s villages, hitched to the carriages of kings.”

The clock of Bishop Olivarez struck twice. Every time the clock struck, Estebano gave a start. “That clock is lugubrious” was his troubled thought: “It seems like the finger of a specter knocking from outside to urge me on to some dark mystery.”

“Dear Estebano, will you allow me to leave you for a minute? Today, I forgot to give some bread to my poor swan. Meanwhile, go to your horse with a handful of oats to keep him from dying with hunger.”

“Dear cousin, these are not princely tasks; let the swan provide for its own bread, and the horse for his own oats. Do not leave me, for time flies and the hour knocks at the door. Woe betide anybody who leaves the circle fortune has assigned to him! Ponder your life’s happiest day, because on that day you will die. I still remember these words I once heard spoken by an old Jesuit in the church of Saint Ignatius in Madrid. This is the happiest day of my life; I fear that if we do not go from here, Death will seize us.” Then, resting his head on Elisenda’s bosom, he whispered: “Life is so sweet!”

The maiden replied: “May your will be done,” and the couple lay down on the altar steps with their heads on the same cushion and their profiles close to one another. They gazed at one another’s soul by way of the pupils of their eyes. Elisenda’s pupils dilated enormously and shut convulsively at every pulse-beat. After a brief silence, she asked Estebano: “Tell me, which seems the more beautiful, love or glory?”

Estebano reflected for a while, and then he said: “Sister, glory is but a great love that differs among many peoples and many centuries; but true love is a sweet glory concentrated in one heart alone. Love is the more beautiful:

*Mejor es penar
Sufriendo dolores
Que estar sin amores.”*

*It is better to hurt
Suffering much pain
Than to be without love."*

His words died away in this cadenced murmur. Then he clung to Elisenda and kissed her on the mouth; and the embrace was tight, and the kiss was long. But their pose remained innocent like that of the cradle, and immobile like that of the tomb. The pupils of Elisenda's eyes rose slowly, cerulean, like a lunar dawn. Above the heads of the two youths, there hung from four gold basins a lamp like those the early Christians called *coronaephorae*. Unlit, it was of bronze and studded with precious gems that refracted the candle's light with all the reflections of the prism.

Estebano and Elisenda turned eyes and chin upwards. The nascent dawn on Estebano's cheeks touched Elisenda's cheek like the ducal ermine touches princely velvet. Their eyes were fixed on the facets of a large diamond that shone brighter than any other gem, and their lips bespoke the enchantment of the variegated colors that held them spellbound.

"Estebano," murmured Elisenda, "I see an azure land that is like a serene night and like the song of your voice; and now I see also a swarm of butterflies flying in the midst of myrrha smoke!"

"Elisenda, I see a green land like a liquid meadow or a calm ocean, and also angels kissing one another and swimming with their wings like celestial dolphins!"

"Estebano, I see a violet country like the distant hills of Andalusia, and like the Virgin's mantle, and like the soft furrow that continues to sink under your eyelids."

Then, as an idea rises from an effect to a cause, the gaze of the young couple went from the lamp's diamond to the candle's flame.

The candle was not longer than three inches so that its melting was quite fast in proportion to its circumference. Without doubt, its wax must have been amalgamated with some dried substance. The melting wax descended rapidly from the top of the candle to its base, pausing for a moment on the edge of the candlestick from which it dripped slowly and accumulatively to form a conglomeration of glutinous greenish stalactites that disappeared in the dark. The candlestick, which was as long as a man's leg, was made of a thick and now tarnished silver; its pedestal was shaped into the figure of a coiled snake biting its own tail. The holy relic exuded a secret air of poison. The candle, distilling its froth on the noxious tarnish and the coiled snake, seemed eerie.

A sweetish scent continued to pervade the Oratory; it was like the sweetness of opium, the acrid scent of camphor, the fragrance of aloe, all mixed with yet another mysterious odor. All the aromas of an Oriental gynaceum and all the exhalations of an alchemist's secret laboratory were condensed in that lethargic and lethal atmosphere.

From time to time, the candle's flame was encircled by that misty halo we see around the moon during insalubrious autumn nights. On the peak of its long and curved wick, there was a cinder in the shape of a violet emitting a rain of incandescent sparks.

In that fiery dew, Estebano and Elisenda discovered a new Paradise. Entranced, they gazed fixedly at the candle; silent and pale they smiled at its light.

Elisenda thought of Don Sancho's last words, trying in vain to fathom their recondite meaning; and while in deep thought, she spoke as in a dream:

"Your children's souls will ignite in the sparks of the Seraphic candle . . ."

“As long as that candle burns, the thrones of Spain will survive . . . To extinguish it requires the breath of a virgin bride . . .” and here she paused, troubled.

“Before extinguishing it wait for your Estebano . . .

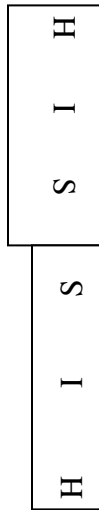
From your womb the history of future centuries will issue . . .

Love one another! And bring forth progeny!”

And she wept.

Meanwhile the flame was rapidly lowering to its end. Estebano gazed at it more and more intently. Suddenly he noticed a monogram marked in brilliant carmine at the extreme end of the candle. Written horizontally, the monogram formed three letters arranged thus: an ancient monogram of the words *Have. Iesus.*

Estebano rose and went toward the candle, he seized the candelabrum, raised it forcefully, and turned it upside down; then, pointing at the upturned monogram with the index finger of his left hand,



he shouted to Elisenda: “*Stephanus Imperator Hispaniae!*”

Elisenda looked at him, struck with terror and yet blissful, so sublime the proud youth appeared in his triumphant pose. Meanwhile, the convulsive flame devoured the candle and singed Estebano’s finger.

When the heavy candelabrum was returned to its pedestal, barely half an inch of the wax remained to be consumed; of the monogram’s letters, the *H* and *I* had melted away.

At this, Elisenda cried out: “If it goes out, it will be fatal for me!”

Estebano then noticed that the last remnant of the candle was encircled by a strip of parchment, and this he stripped away to prolong by one minute more the flame’s life.

The parchment was full of sacred symbols, Catholic formulas puzzlingly inserted among many Oriental characters, in the middle of which were inscribed in red the words:

ANATHEMA SIT

Estebano had already begun to decipher the mystery when Elisenda gave out another cry.

Exclaiming “My Elisenda!” the youth was quickly by her side.

“I am so thirsty,” she whispered, as Estebano, leaning over her felt her pulse and forehead.

Gasping for breath, she urged him: “Read, read what you hold in your grip. A curse weighs upon us in this very moment. Read, but do not leave me. Read here . . . here.”

The candle’s flame flickered wildly; it appeared almost to be a soul rebelling against death.

That dying remnant of an ancient Catholic and monarchic relic seemed to suggest doom. More than a candlewick at its end, it was an agony. The accumulation of eight centuries on that candle agonized with it. A potent religion and a triumphal race were expiring in the last flickers of the candle’s flame. The candle was suffering the rabid throes of a reprobate; its convulsions hastened its end. A cold, greenish, and troubled light roamed in the chapel, rendering difficult Estebano’s reading of the curse – half burnt, soiled, bristling with encumbering ciphers.

“Estebano! Estebano!” the maiden repeated trembling and clinging tightly around her betrothed’s neck, while his eyes searched hard to make out the obscure inscription. “Look at me, look at me before the candle goes out, before the infinite night enfolds us, look at me! Kiss me, and may your kiss give me *the breath of a bride*; and then I will blow on the candle’s flame before it dies out.”

Estebano looked at her; a feverish tremble had seized them as they fell forward with their heads on the crowns’ cushions. The stuffiness of the Oratory’s air, the furious embrace in which they were enwrapped was suffocating them.

“Stay here,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper. “I cannot rise; my forehead sweats like molten lead, and my chest drips dew of manna. I wish to die now. I want my life to dissolve in your embrace, sweet, sad, serene – like a harp’s cadence, like an organ’s dying chords . . .”

“If I were to die now,” replied Estebano, “the angel would already be by my side,” and his tears dampened their joined lips, which spoke as one . . . The candle’s flame no longer oscillated, but became dimmer. The Oratorio’s pavement was now immersed in a fluctuating dimness.

“The light is dying,” said Elisenda.

“Let it die,” answered Estebano. “In the dark, your lips will seem the sweeter to me . . .”

A vague shudder came over their bodies caught in the heavy incubus of the royal ornaments . . . It was now almost pitch dark.

Elisenda cried out: “Oh! This belt burns me . . .” and they fell mute.

The candle’s wick was half submerged in the liquefied wax that spread around it like an oily lake. When the wax brimmed over into the candelabrum, the flame revived as if by an incantation and burned brightly and steadily.

Estebano looked at Elisenda, who was silent; then, with a supreme effort, he lifted himself up and rushed to the candle’s flame, where the parchment was now unraveled. A flash in his soul revealed the inscription to him: *Quand’io morirò, moriranno i troni di Spagna (When I die, the thrones of Spain will die)*.

Now as the flame quivered, Estebano trembled. Two verses remained to be read . . . the youth’s eyes were clouding over . . . he thought he saw Elisenda stretched out at the base of the altar, motionless and white and enveloped in smoke. The wick’s strands fell into the lake of liquefied wax, without being extinguished. Estebano bent over the dying maiden. He concentrated all the force of his eyes and mind in a supreme effort even as the wick’s smoke was choking him and an acrid anguish rose in his throat. The little flame was becoming smaller, and the smaller it became, the more serene it became . . . Suddenly the following words appeared clearly on the parchment:

*Ho sulla cima il mele
E in fondo il velen dell’Upas*

*(On the top I have honey
And at the bottom the poison of the Upas)*

The flame went out, and the wooden clock struck three ominous blows. Estebano fell.

A last ember still glowed through the smoking wick. It was the blood-red eye of the dark. After a few seconds, one might have heard the shuffling of a body being dragged with difficulty . . . then the sound of two kisses . . . then a gnashing of trembling jaws . . .

The last ember went out. Everything fell into darkness and into silence.

An hour before dawn, the mountain cock crowed as if to inquire into a mystery.

Many, many years after the end of the dateless drama recounted here, the following events will take place in Spain:

A poet will recall the year 613, when king Egica, prostrated before the Catholic bishops, felt on the nape of his neck the heavy heels of those saints.

Another poet will recall the year 730, when the Orient swooped down over Iberia with all its luxury and all its plagues.

Another poet will recall the year 1578 when the invincible armada was destroyed by the sea, that is, by God.

Yet another poet will recall the year 1789, and another will even recall the present august century in which the whole of Spain will witness a great and harmonious reawakening of ideas.

A philosopher will rise up and speak thus to the crowds assembled in the gardens of Madrid:

“Spaniards! A blind instinct of submission to the throne and the Church was the mortal sin of our race. We have slept for six centuries, deferring to the cult of ancient faiths. Look now at how far beyond us the luminous spirit of progress shines.

“The assault against the prejudices and the errors of our forebears was begun at the dawn of the sixteenth century.

“While man’s intellect was carrying out prodigious feats, while discoveries were accumulating throughout the world thanks to the indomitable spirit of progress, Spain on the extreme edge of Europe, continued to sleep, impassive, indifferent, vainglorious, the lethargic incarnation of the Middle Ages.”

And then the drunken mob will not wait for the discourse’s conclusion, but will hurl itself headlong like a bull in the arena, in a furious and ferocious rush. And the severe philosopher will be left alone, sad and disillusioned before the Ideal.

The surging mob, foaming copiously at the mouth, with torrents of slaver at the mouth, armed with hatchets and daggers, will rush to demolish the thrones.

Then an old and vicious felon, a murderer, will recall that atop a certain mountain in Estremadura there had taken refuge a race of kings descending from Urraca of Castile.

The mob will race to the mountain, assault the bastions, discover the skeleton of the bridled horse on whose caparison will be seen the Castilian coat of arms. With pikes in their hands, they will climb the stairs; demented, wild, they will search in the castle’s most secret recesses for traces of the children of kings.

At last, they will reach the Oratory, open wide the entrance door, and invade the dark asylum of those who pray; the Sanctum will be completely illuminated by the dark torches of the Revolt.

Then, before the mob’s eyes will appear two royal figures, crowned and draped in the purple of Royalty and locked in an embrace of dismay and of love.

A red demagogue will remove the crowns and feel their heads; then he will announce to the impatient plebeians: “Throw away your axes; this couple has been dead for half a century.”

The Trapeze

Wise Meng-pen, dearest of my disciples, ever since the day paralysis seized my tongue, you have always been by my side, attending to your mute master's needs, either by interpreting my gestures or by having your eye follow my brush's strokes on the page, as it does now. In so doing, you show that you possess the noblest virtue of all, that which Confucius called the *virtue of Humanity*; and for this I praise you. And I praise God for having granted to men three means of expression: gestures, writing, and speaking. Thanks to your patience, although I have been deprived of conversation, in writing what you are reading I feel I am not without speech inasmuch as I avail myself of the manifestation of an idea, which, albeit somewhat slower, is much less unfaithful than the spoken word.

As I draw these animated contours, guiding at will my brush, which is as supple as the organ of pronunciation, I feel that I am squeezing my poor tongue in my fist and that I vivify it in the warmth of my hand and thereby subject it to my will with greater precision. Thus you see, wise Meng-pen, that this infirmity, which is nothing other than my calm silence and which in no way paralyzes my ear's sensation nor my finger's movements, may be taken more as a good than as an evil; much harm befalls men by way of the [spoken] word, and because I am safe from such harm, I am more perfect in my person than are so many chatterboxes.

Think of wise Weng-Wang, of whom it is written in the *Lung-yu* that he remained in the hermitage for many years without uttering a word. If I can but delude myself that I am following that ancient prince and philosopher, my silence will seem to me the more welcome.

You know, because of the intimacy that binds us, that I have always been of a taciturn nature; you know that of all the manifestations of human intelligence, owing to the sublime knowledge I profess I have always revered above all the graphic expression of thought and have given priority to the line (which as a geometrician I execute on the ivory drawing board) above every other demonstration of truth. If the line is superior to the word, the figurative characters of our glorious Chinese country are the most suited to represent ideas; in our graphic ideograms, a thought is all but depicted, as in a picture or a little mirror, or in a theorem. For a learned Chinese, what is not written is only partially demonstrated, and this, too, you know. And if you knew all the imperfect writings of European pens, slaves of lips, you would all the more admire the art of our brush – so friendly to our thought and eye – where the rigor of the term, fused in the variable appearance of the symbol, as in a burning element that dissolves it in order to recompose it after its own fashion, finds new and ineffable ways mysteriously inspired by feelings.

And today more than ever, I feel the need to give my highest praise to ancient Su-Lin, who discovered this wonderful writing, and to thank the Divinity who grants that I may die in the world's most civilized Empire. For a number of days now, I have wanted to trace these signs to let you know that my calm, admired by you since the first hours of my paralysis, is not solely a serene resignation but a sincere contentment of my soul. You, who love me, be reassured of this. In the time of my perfect health, I never addressed you with so many words in succession, and behold, now that I am mute, I begin to be loquacious.

Do smile, I give you my permission, smile without fear of offending me. From the corner of my eye, I see the honest smile of your eye so intent in examining the calm tracings of my fingers. You may well smile at human contradictions, you will find them in the wisest mortals; but do not fail to note where the two opposing movements intersect, for there you will discover the

synthesis of man and the explanation of all his apparent oddities, and then your look will soon take on a serious cast.

I have become loquacious because I no longer distrust my tongue. If, when I could speak, I was not wont to talk with you of any subject less exact than our science of geometry, please understand that the reason for it is not to be attributed to any disdain I might have had about confiding in you. It is only because I have always felt that the spoken word must, to a greater or lesser degree, distort feeling's intention; and out of respect for feeling itself, I checked the inner impulse that drove me to open my heart. The shame of risking, in talking, a display of emotion beyond what is met in a philosopher also restrained me. Ever since understanding I was a man, I have endeavored to attain that moral strength Confucius calls the *steadfastness of the heart*; and in part, at the price of much anguish, I have succeeded. From the time I read in Mencius that Kao-tse did not allow himself to be shaken by any emotion whatsoever, I have striven to possess such a solemn impassiveness. I know how far I can go in comparing myself with Kao-tse.

I know which of many actions, including strenuous ones, I can confidently carry out and which of others, seemingly simple, that I cannot. Yet, as long as I have life, like a gymnast who with exercise strengthens all his muscles, I shall strive to master my soul's frailties with daily exercise.

One of these weaknesses was the deadly occurrence of the vertigo that seized me on the day of the new moon, when I was expounding to you and others of my colleagues and disciples and to the venerable Kung-sie, the exact measurements of the obelisk of Wei. Do you recall that there was a point in that calculation where I chose to conform my demonstrations to all the trapezoidal forms? You will also recall that I had drawn (with charcoal) on the ivory tablet three sides of a trapezoid and was tracing its base and speaking these words: "the trapezoid is a quadrilateral having only two sides parallel . . ." when I became muddled and fell in a faint. When I came to, I was mute.

The physicians have sought the cause of my illness in my blood, and I believe they are right; and I am also sure that this malady would have come upon me sooner or later with the weight of my years. But I know too that not the cause, but the occasion for it befalling me was the *trapezoid*.

In the half century that I have instructed the younger generations in mathematics, I have never succeeded in describing a trapezoid without my vital spirits becoming confused.

If I raise my eyes from this sheet, I see that Meng-pen observes me with surprise, if not incredulity, and that he alternates his gaze between my writing and my face, fearing that my mind is wandering.

Honest Meng-pen, be at ease. If a secret of my youth were known to you, you would readily discern the source of this strange fixation of mine concerning the trapezoid, the fixation that only now I can begin to conquer precisely because it provoked a violent crisis in me.

Be at ease, my friend. I divine the wish you hide from me, and I find it at one with mine. No one is worthier of trust than you. I have imparted to you all the knowledge I possess. You have attained the ripeness of reason, you know how to observe, discuss, listen, enter into and exit from a temple, a palace, a house, all in accordance with the Book of Rites. You are sacrificing your youth to my old age, your health to my infirmity; it is more than right that you should learn of an adventure, which is apparently closely tied to this infirmity.

How much time do we have till supper?

Good.

Close the door.

Relight the tea-lamp.

Hand me the lacquered box.

Draw up the seat that is in front of the terrace.

Sit down. I will write in a kneeling position; you may rest your head on the back of my chair. In this way, you will more easily see the characters I trace.

Read carefully.

I shall begin.

The story I wish to tell you is a long one, and it would be more convenient for you to read it when you are alone, after I have written it all out. But you cannot know what a comfort it is to me to feel that you are getting it fresh as it leaves my hand, ideogram after ideogram. I feel as if I were talking.

In the year of the great famine, I was a little boy in the province of Tsing. My father had died, and my excellent mother struggled hard to provide for me by cultivating three small fields. But the cruel earth was heartless, and the Prince demanded the full tribute from the farmers. Each day saw the people sink deeper and deeper into pitiless misery. The five kinds of grain were kept from maturing. Water overflowed everywhere and flooded the empire. Grown sons were unable to support their old fathers, and mothers were forced to surrender their babes to hunger. Broken families wandered throughout the four corners of the empire in search of sustenance. All germination seemed extinguished. Seed and corolla remained barren. Nothing came to life; everything was dying. The hearse merchant, who speculates on death, amassed treasures, but a sack full of gold was less precious than a sack of rice. And there came a day when even funerals seemed superfluous ceremonies. The rites sacred to Confucius and Mencius were neglected for many long months. In the city of Tsing, more than a thousand of the elderly and the sick threw themselves down from the walls to keep from dying by starvation. Winter was approaching. In the meantime, I bounded through the fields and climbed up the skeletons of trees that were leafless and without nests. Every morning I ate a *ping* of boiled rice and every evening a piece of millet-cake. But one day, through the partially opened door leading to the granary, I saw my mother bent over a nearly empty sack. In her right hand she held a small measuring scoop, of the kind we call *chao*, which she four times immersed into the sack and thrice extracted full of grain; the fourth time she withdrew only a bit of powder. When the good woman turned around, I saw that she was weeping. I ran off without her having noticed my presence. All that day and the next, my mother seemed to be hiding a terrible pain. On the third day, after having been gone from the house for a few hours, she returned in the company of a man clothed in a European sailor's garb. She called me to her; then showing me to the stranger, she said: "Here is my only child; his name is Yao. I have taught him how to read and write; he is nimble and strong, like a panther, and he also has the appetite of a little beast, but of a mild beast, patient and wise." My poor mother's words were broken by halting interruptions; certain brief anguished silences. Then, turning to me, she said: "Yao, this Koo, this merchant, has a ship full of cookies and honey, a big ship that goes on the sea. You will go with him," she added, "you will become a fine navigator, while I shall eat alone your *ping* of rice and your millet-cakes."

Then, addressing the merchant, she spoke with the tenderest tone of supplication: "But why wouldn't I be permitted to accompany my son? I could mend the ship's sails, care for the sick; I would be useful, patient, and brave."

The *Koo* replied, "I don't want women aboard."

Having resigned herself, my mother went to an armoire (I still see it in my memory just as it was) and took out a leather pouch which she handed over to the merchant with these words:

“Here is the sum agreed upon: fifty ounces of gold. With this money, I wish to purchase a small piece of your heart’s kindness for my little Yao. It took me ten years to save the fifty coins you are now counting.”

Then, from the same armoire, which was nearly empty (and which a few months earlier had been filled with good food and sweets), she took out a book bound in silk – the very book that at this moment lies in the second shelf of my writing desk – and gave it to me, saying: “This is for you, my son; in this volume I have gathered together and sewed with my own hands the *Lun-yu*, the *Ta-hio*, and the *Tsiung-yung*. I have taught you how to understand our ancient characters so that you may one day read this holy book whose profound wisdom I had hoped to explain to you myself verse by verse, but the earth’s calamities have denied me such a joy. For you to continue to live, you must leave me. Every time you read in this volume, try to remember your mother.”

I cried, she cried; we were clasped in a kiss.

Suddenly, the *Koo* seized my hand and tore me from my mother’s arms, shouting: “It’s late!” He dragged me away with him. After we had reached the end of the desolate vegetable garden, we descended into the large valley until we came to the banks of the Yellow River. We had gone a good half-league when we climbed into a *sampan* having six oars. I crouched under the prow, less conscious of myself than if I had been a stone. The rowers worked the oars hard. A heavy, anguished sleep fell upon me. When I awoke, I was aboard an enormous vessel floating on an immense, measureless plain that seemed like a universe of water to me. For the first time, I looked, terrified, at the sea.

My astonishment was so great that I forgot all about my mother until the sun hid itself under the horizon.

Childhood, sage Meng-pen, is a beautiful song, not understood while it vibrates, but becomes clear later in one’s memory.

The solutions to many obscure problems of my childhood revealed themselves to me only when I became an adult.

In the first days, I passed on the vessel of that cruel man who tore me from my mother’s kiss, I did not realize that I was a victim of a *jin-mù*, of a slave-merchant, one of those men the Chinese, with timid irony, call *shepherds of men*. In his hands, I lived confidently, because my mother had entrusted me to him. But a thought preoccupied me: I had not yet tasted or seen the cookies or the honey of which, according to my mother, the ship was supposed to be laden.

One day, while most of the ship’s crew were deep in sleep during the noontide hours, I was tempted to seek out the place where the delectable tidbits promised to me must have been hidden. In my mind, the money my mother had given to the captain for me constituted the right to such an exploration.

Very quickly I went down the steep ladder that ended in the ship’s hold. When I got to the bottom, I found myself in the midst of a thick semi-darkness, and the further I advanced, the deeper the darkness grew. I got on my hands and knees so as not to stumble over the cables that cluttered the floor, and in this position, I crawled about, timidly and cautiously, like a cat undertaking some perilous adventure.

The deck above my head was noiseless, a sign that no one was moving about on the ship’s bridge. I became bolder and carried my exploration forward in a straight line until a wall stopped me. Feeling before me in the darkness, I made out a door. My little finger got stuck in a crack; I extracted it, and in its place I set my eye. Through the small hole, I saw only shadows. And yet, I knew that amid those shadows the ship’s cargo must have been hidden.

I hoped that by dint of looking intently my eye would become accustomed to the darkness and penetrate it. In fact, after a few minutes a dim light enabled my eye to see again. With the hungry curiosity of a greedy boy looking at a world of tidbits, I remained fixed there, contemplating what I did not yet discern. All the silence that is possible at sea reigned in that ship's stowage. The longer I looked through that chink, the more the dim light increased in power. Little by little, it seemed to me that the darkness was condensed all on one side in horizontal strata and that as it became denser and denser it took on bodily shape, but a true body and almost contoured, in fact, the true form and outline of a man.

First, I saw a head that was sooty-black, a head with wooly hair and thick lips, then a torso that breathed heavily, then two trembling knees; I didn't see the arms; they seemed to be tied under his back. That body was stretched out on the floor.

My curiosity for tidbits had given way in my mind to another, and more violent, curiosity – that of fear. Truth often takes on the aspect of an hallucination. It suddenly seemed to me that that body, bound and stretched out, was mirrored ten or twelve times with the same profile and the same position, as if it were reflected in the glass of two black mirrors.

My eyes fled in terror to the opposite side of the hold. There a like number of bodies – but yellow ones – lay stretched out in the opposite direction, with the soles of their feet against the feet of the first group. If not for their heaving torsos, I would have taken them for corpses.

But a sudden furious blow on my back shook me brusquely out of my terror and freed my horrified spirit.

Behind me stood an irate figure holding an illuminated lantern in one hand and a whip in the other. I recognized the *shepherd of men*.

When, as now, I call to mind that cruel moment when I felt the lash dealt me by the *Jin-mu*, I think of it as the decisive moment of my destiny, the first impulse that inflicted upon my spirit that particular trait of thought that is known among men as *character* and which is, as it were, a style of the soul.

From that moment, my life was divided into two periods, I would even say into two moral eras: before the *Jin-mu*'s lash; after the *Jin-mu*'s lash. But here, allow me to have recourse to an image. You know that for the mortal remains of the *Tsing*, the embalmers make use of a drop of balsam extracted from the most virulent poison. As soon as it enters into the heart of the limp, imperial corpse, it transforms it into incorruptible stone. In like fashion, I, a living being, felt I had been transmuted by the lash of the *shepherd of men*.

But as to the minute that immediately followed the stroke, alas, I am at a loss to describe it to you; there is a blank spot in my memory at that point.

After the moment in which I remained numbed in the depths of the ship's hold, on the tragic threshold I have recounted, upon seeing two violent glares before my face – the light of the lantern and the *Jin-mu*'s eyes – my memory goes blank. Then I find myself immobile, calm, undaunted astride the highest mainsail beam, overlooking the sea. How I had bounded up to the main deck and clambered up the main mast, I cannot say. But I know that the little Yao who shortly before had been crouching in the dark was no longer the same Yao who had climbed on high and was poised amid the ship's rigging, with the sun in his eyes and with his brow to the wind. My mind seemed to have risen with my body to those free heights. I felt my heart leaping with quick and proud ardor, as if the knave's lash had activated a spinning top in my breast. The sense of offended dignity is more delicate and purer in a child than in a man, because in the child resentment is more ingenuous and the indignation caused by human arrogance is newer. Since

my earliest childhood, I had been aware of possessing the sense of justice that has accompanied me throughout life.

Justice has always appeared to my mind as something precise, as evident as a wholly physical truth. When, as an adult, I began to study mathematics, a violated right was as repugnant to my conscience as a wrong calculation was to my intellect.

To redress a wrong or correct a computation was all one to me, and I found myself powerfully urged to vengeance by a clear and calm scientific principle. Attack and defense, action and reaction, identical maxims that demonstrated the same truth under different aspects. Doubt, mystery, everything that is vague and indefinite has always been contrary to my character. I have never been able to tolerate for long an unsolved problem, a lie; a vast need for verification roils within me. I have always hated obscurity, I have always feared the unknown, but never the known. This is why, when spying through the peephole into the darkness of the ship's hold and dimly making out the phantasmagoria of martyrdom mentioned by me, I trembled; that was the unknown. And that is why the precise and all too evident whiplash given to me by the *shepherd of men* had restored calm to me, and with the calm also strength.

Tranquilly perched on the mainsail beam, I reflected; and I determined that my descent to the ship's hold had been just and wise, because it allowed me to deduce the certitude that the *jinn-mù* had deceived my mother. I had seen with my own eyes the cargo of slaves; no other merchandise was present, neither below nor on the main deck. I realized that I had fallen into the hands of a fierce enemy, and being but a boy and alone, I felt the need to defend myself, to arm myself with all the might of my mind and body, for in defending myself I felt that I was avenging my mother. Beneath my feet dangling in space, I could see the crew bustling about; the whole crowd seemed hostile to me. On that day I turned fourteen. I recall that I marked the day: "Fourteen!" I said to myself with pride. And taking off my sailor's beret I murmured solemnly, as though performing a sacred rite: "Be thou my *Kuan*, my beret of virility; now I am a man!" And proudly I put my beret back on. In so doing, I anticipated by seven years the traditional imposition of the *Kuan* and thereby consecrated myself a man, on my own.

The moon appeared on the horizon while the light of day had not yet faded. I remained atop the main sail mast, engulfed by sea breezes and deep in thought. Of a sudden, in looking downward, I saw something dark climbing up the mainmast with the speed and nimbleness of a monkey. A moment later, I recognized a boy, bizarre in looks and movements, who was already astride the sail beam near me.

As soon as he had got on the beam, we looked at one another like two human beings of contrasting races who see each other for the first time: astonished, serious, face to face, and speechless.

Moved by a wholly childish instinct of vanity and self-defense, with a glance I took the measure of our respective sizes. The front of his feet, dangling in space, like mine, reached my ankles, and his eyes barely reached my chin. Thus with a sense of satisfaction I inferred that in a standing position I would be a palm and a half taller than my aerial companion. His tiny, slender body shook all over, incessantly, like one of those water vibrations that live in a perpetual oscillation, and the mobility of his face was even faster than that of his limbs. His hair seemed blacker and shinier than this ink with which I write, and abundant and hanging and twisted like the strings that exceed the length of our lyres. His luxuriant locks seemed never to have been cut; they waved gently in the wind like a plant of seaweed undulating in the water. His skin was the color of unripe olives, and beneath the pores, there seemed to shine forth even the fat of that fruit. His livid and fervent little head seemed imbued with an oily balm; my eyes were unable to

stay fixed on that little head, so frenetic was its movement. But between one quick movement and another of his face, I managed to look into his eyes; so black were they that they emitted rays like two electric coals, flashing intermittently and acutely. His whole body seemed a magnet. Seeing him made one think that he was activated by electricity rather than by a soul. Being young at the time, I was unfamiliar with the laws of certain physical phenomena; nonetheless, I sensed that if I had reached out to touch that boy's forehead, a spark would have darted forth. Then, as now, I did not believe in supernatural phenomena; and yet a strange uneasiness troubled me perched there so close to that bizarre creature with so fantastic an aspect. Besides his eyes, two other features shone on the boy's figure: his gleaming teeth and a small gold coin hanging on his naked chest. He was wearing a dark robe of sorts; unstitched and torn beyond repair, it was ludicrously ample so that caught by the wind it flapped all about him, sending a mirth of tattered cloth into the sky.

Suddenly he burst into a loud laugh and with a lively curiosity pointed to my long ponytail, which even then was quite beautiful; from the top of my head, it came out from under my cap and hung far down my back. But at that explosion of laughter, I remained silent, motionless and somewhat offended. Then the fellow began to talk to me in a strange but melodious language that I had never heard before. His voice entered my ears so sweetly that my budding annoyance vanished and gave way to a nascent feeling of friendliness.

I thought that he was doubtlessly inquiring about me affectionately. For some reason, I imagined that he was asking me about my mother. And in this belief I replied with simplicity in my own tongue: "My mother is a poor *Kùu!* (widow)." Upon hearing my words, the boy was seized by a fit of laughter. Scoffingly he screamed, "Ha! *Kùu!* *Kùu!* *Kùu!* Ha! *Kùu!* *Kùu!*" somersaulting on the beam faster than a pinwheel. Then, while shouting and laughing, he darted downward head-first, clasping a rope and sliding in that position all the way to the deck, faster than a hurled stone and lighter than a feather. And thus he disappeared.

I remained on the beam, astonished and pensive. The appearance of that boy there in the heights of the mainmast, between sky and sea, had shaken me. I could not imagine where the madcap had come from, for I had never seen him on the ship before then.

Meanwhile, the ship sailed briskly ahead; the sail below me swelled majestically with air. Night had fallen. A sudden light passed swiftly by me and stopped at the top of the mast: it was the ship's lantern. The sound of a bell announced the crew's supper, but I did not descend.

Dear Meng-pen, your diligent eye has thus far followed the preliminaries of my tale, which I have perhaps traced too slowly. Forgive the involuntary prolixity of an aged man looking back on the earliest years of his life. A thousand details of the past crowd my mind, which gathers them as though I were speaking to you; and I forget I am writing and that you are close by me reading the diffuse words that I here delineate. But for this circumstantial prolixity, there exists (I feel it and fear it confusedly) also a voluntary cause in part.

This cause lies in the loathing I feel in approaching that very catastrophe the narration of which is the aim of this tale. As I pause here and there in writing, by observing and discussing I postpone thinking and writing about the final events toward which any story inexorably moves. And precisely in the exposition of that catastrophe, much more than elsewhere, I shall need to apply all the skill of a minute and scrupulous analysis.

But the expression of noble patience that appears on your face encourages me to return to my subject.

Following my encounter on the beam with the bizarre boy I have described to you, there was not an hour that we were not together. He had been locked up by his master in one of the ship's

cabins as punishment for some fault or other. This is why I had never come across him on deck in the first days of the navigation. The boy expressed, with the inflections of his facial features, with the liveliness of his gestures and the modulation of his voice, everything that at first his barbaric jargon kept me from understanding. He spoke in a mixture of Latin and oriental tongues, and his nationality was more hybrid even than his speech. He belonged to a race of nomads, without a country or name, or, better still, of several countries and several names. On the deck, he entertained the crew made up of sailors from various countries. Some called him, smilingly, *Tartar*, others *Pharaònepèk*. The Americans christened him as a black Indian, *Hind-kapes*, the Dutch referred to him as *Heidene* (idolater), many named him *Gypsy*, others *gitane* or *zingaro*.

To all these appellations, he replied indifferently. But when asked for his true name and provenance, the little gypsy bared his left arm, and with a graceful and solemn gesture, he would put the forefinger of his right hand on a tattoo that decorated the lithesome curve of his small muscles and would then pronounce the word *Ramàr*, dryly and loudly, like two beats on a drum.

Ramàr and I quickly became friends. I understood his gestures, and soon he came to understand my words. I taught him the Chinese language with a very simple system. For example, I would put my hand over my heart and would say the word *sin* (heart); he would repeat the word while laughing. Or I would extend the palm of my hands and say *tsci*; or I would point to the blue above us and say *li* (sky). This instruction seemed to amuse him no end, for he guffawed at every slightly harsh grouping of consonants, as at a highly ridiculous phonic effect. His unrestrained gaiety, which he could not control even in connection with the most serious matters, was sometimes irksome to me, perhaps because even then it went against my nature.

Ramàr's lightheartedness irritated me somewhat, as did the rush of his words, his facial expressions, and his actions. He disconcerted my nascent individuality, and this was undoubtedly the cause of my irritation. There I was, alone, without any assistance, traveling on a ship headed for a land unknown to me. Unbefriended by all, unarmed against all, at that very time I was summoning all my instincts in order to steel myself with a defense. At work within me was an intense moral activity very much like that of a silkworm spinning its strong cocoon, and here was that *zingaro*, carefree, irreverent, and frivolous, upsetting my task. I was unable to resist the fascination of curiosity that he exercised over me.

To stiffen my resolve, I turned often to the writings of Confucius, intuiting more than I literally understood of the profound maxims of *Steadfastness in the Center*. The spirit of that book passed into mine as though it was attracted by a like element. After my readings, I could sense my superiority, and I would look on Ramàr with affectionate contempt. The poor boy was ignorant even of the true meaning of the words *mother* and *father*. One day when I asked him who his father was, Ramàr pointed to a gigantic man with red hair and blue eyes, an American who was walking up and down the deck. I realized that Ramàr confused the name of *father* (*padre*) with that of *master* (*padrone*). For as long as I was on the ship, I could not gather any other facts concerning my little friend's social condition.

When I asked him "can you read? can you write?" or any other such question, he invariably answered me in the oddest tone of conviction: "I can fly."

The weather, which was rather cold at the start of the journey, gradually became milder. It seemed that we had gone from autumn to summer. I thought back on the various phases of the moon that had occurred during our sailing, and I could reckon no more than three complete cycles. According to my calculations, we should have been near the winter solstice, and yet it was getting warmer. This climatic phenomenon surprised and worried me. Everything around me

was mysterious, the ship, the *jin-mù* who guided it, little Ramàr, the very air I breathed, and the destination to which I was heading. My instinct for precision was troubled in the midst of the strange uncertainty in which I found myself, and I rebelled against the sea, against the air, against the men, silently, but with my thoughts in a tumult. Nobody but Ramàr talked to me, and he seemed to abandon himself freely to everything that he found unknown and mysterious. I disdained to inquire of the others regarding all the strange things I did not understand; I wanted to investigate, induce, deduce, discover everything by myself. This was not the best way to get to the bottom of the enigma that troubled me.

Nonetheless, I felt that a mariner's life could only be temporary for me; and although I recalled my mother's words: "You will become a great navigator," I sensed that seafaring was not to be my destiny, for nobody bothered to instruct me in that art. Moreover, the *jin-mù* did not require me to carry out any sort of duty, and this made all the more evident to me the deceit that had tricked my mother. My mother! And then a thousand still crueller uncertainties assailed me, and I thought to myself: "That loving woman sent me away from her embrace because of the famine that raged; she saved me from hunger, she gave up her gold to save me, that little gold she had obtained with such great sacrifice of working and self-deprivation. The danger must have been extreme, the need inescapable. So then, if my mother allowed me to be taken from her, it proves that it was not possible for two to survive together; to flee together was likewise impossible. But what of her?" And in my memory, the granary would appear, dreadful, empty except for the last few *ping* of rice measured out by the weeping woman. A horrible conclusion always arose at the end of these thoughts. Then, to flee from the crew's gaze, I would climb up to my refuge, the mainmast, and would sit no longer on the sail beam, but on the very top of the immense pine, like a hunted bird that finds greater safety the higher it flies.

When my anguish persisted, when my immersion in the blue was not enough to calm me, I would grasp the point of the mast and abandon myself with my whole body swaying in the wind; and I would remain in this condition as long as my strength held out. That violent stretching of my muscles distracted the anxiety of my thought.

Often Ramàr, seeing me from the deck and thinking that I was at play, would join me. Then we would begin a series of quite strange and awesome gymnastic feats, he laughing and I almost crying, a prey to a kind of nervous desperation. What fascinated me in those wild aerial exploits was the imminent danger. The sailors on deck admired us while laughing at us. One day, I completed a particularly daring feat that won me their respect, so to speak.

That day, I was crouching by the compass, observing the magnetic needle's oscillations, when I was startled by a raucous cheering that came from the crew. I approached a group of cabin boys who were looking up at something that had caught their attention. It was one of those yellow mountain-birds that we call *mièn-man*. Somehow it had gone astray over the vast ocean waters, and now, exhausted and immobile, it sat perched on the mast of the ship's prow. The crew proposed a prize to whoever could fell the bird. The *jin-mù*, who was in a good mood that day, permitted the sport. The rifles were readied for what was bound to be an extremely difficult shot because of the *mièn-man*'s small size and the height at which it was perched. The crew took turns at aiming, firing, and missing. At each volley, the bird would fly from the mast on an uncertain wing, wheel about in the air, and then, weary, would land on the nearest support. I ran to get the sling I had brought from home; arming it with a large lead ball, I took the stance of someone carrying out a mental calculation, my eye fixed on my target. The sailors, the *jin-mù*, and Ramàr's master looked at me ironically. Take note, dear Meng-pen, that to strike with a sling a small object that is high up and distant is an arduous task even for the most expert of throwers.

Nonetheless, after two twirls of the sling I let fly the ball, and the *mièn-man* fell dead into the sea. The crew cried out aloud hurrah. I had won the prize – a silver coin.

Ramàr's master placed his powerful hand on my shoulder as a sign of approval; then he walked away quickly with the *jin-mù* at his side.

The following day, at dawn, I saw a whitish line far off where sky and sea met; it was motionless. Little by little, this line grew larger on one side and smaller and smaller on the other. I made out some vague outlines of mountains. It was land; but what land I knew not. Even so, a great joy invaded me. Land represented for me a goal of any kind, and that was enough to relieve my mind. In that destination, I was already constructing my hopes, my plans.

The wind drove us toward the coast with remarkable speed. Before my eyes, there appeared an enchanting land, green and luminous. A small city could be seen on the coast; the sailors pointed toward it while uttering the word *Callào*. Soon we were at the mouth of a river called Rimas. These names sounded strange to me. We disembarked between two ranges of hills and went ahead on foot into the river valley. Toward sunset, there appeared on the river's shore a strange city, reddish like the clouds of the sunset that were aflame on the horizon. The city's houses seemed tinged with blood. It was Lima. The country was called Peru.

An hour later, I was marching through the streets of Lima with little Ramàr, both of us led by the hand of the gigantic Mister William Wood. The *shepherd of men* had disappeared.

We went along a wide avenue bordered by palm trees; then we entered an immense square in the middle of which stood a bronze column surmounted by an imposing statue of a solemn character. I was unable to keep from whispering to Ramàr as I pointed to the column: "It's twenty-two feet high." Mister Wood, who heard me, asked: "How can you tell?" I replied: "Eyes are the two points of a mental compass." Then, turning to look at the statue, I exclaimed: "Glory!" The sculpted figure was holding an enormous trumpet and seemed, with its bulging cheeks, to be blowing a powerful spirit into it. From the trumpet's bell, a perpendicular cascade of water poured out, collecting in a basin at the column's base. Even as we walked on, I kept my gaze fixed on the bronze sculpture, admiring it and entertaining great dreams of glory. The splash of the fountain struck the air like an unending cry of triumph, and I thought to myself: "If that fountain never goes dry, its artificer had a clear notion of the concept of true glory." I felt the need to give to my name the continuing roar of that water. I searched my soul. The new land that I trod had awakened in me the personality that had somewhat receded amid the sea's vague immensity. At contact with *terra firma*, my intellectual and moral self regained vigor, like a leafing branch. Under my arm, I clasped tightly *Mencius* and *Confucius*. There came to my mind a chapter of the *Lun-yu*, where it is written: "One must ponder well the profession one wishes to embrace; one's entire existence will be determined by it. The purpose of the man who makes arrows is to wound men; the purpose of the man who fashions breastplates and shields is to keep men from being wounded." This maxim that I recalled demonstrated to me that the scope of all human works is benevolently or malevolently decreed. I felt the gravity of this aphorism more from a philosophical point of view than from a humanitarian one. To harm men or to keep them from being harmed were precepts understood by me as two oppositional aims, but I did not lend to these two aims any great importance insofar as they concerned mankind, but solely insofar as they represented for me two fundamental and contrasting directions of human faculties.

Interpreted in this way, Confucius's maxim appeared to me in all its limpid majesty, and I readily enrolled myself among the aggressors. Yes, to strike and injure, to hit with an arrow or an idea, the very center of a thing or a problem, an occasion or a target, a star, a circle, or the heart of a *mièn-man*, or the heart of a man – it was all one to me until then, purely a physical fact, or

simply an intellectual fact. *The Center (to tshiung)*: in this word I felt burgeon the vocation of my existence. I repeated to myself these words of the sacred text: “The true center – the golden mean – has not been hit: the learned man goes beyond it, the ignorant man falls short of it. To go beyond the mark is not to hit it.” And to myself, I would add the words, “But I will attain it,” and all my thoughts coursed with fierce determination to this ideal of justice and moderation.

Lima was already wrapped in evening twilight; Ramàr, Mister William, and I, after having left behind us the *plaza mayor* and four or five avenues, found ourselves in a large, flat area of land at the far end of which arose an immense circular edifice. While William Wood directed our steps toward that edifice, I continued the train of my meditation. I did not know why my little hand was joined to the enormous fist of the strange person who was leading me, nor did I know where he was taking me. Neither did I deign to ask him how he had come to replace the *jin-mù* in my vicissitudes. I sensed that my pace was ruled by his, but the bold independence of my aspirations reassured me. My feet were hastening toward an unknown destination, but in my soul, the goal of my thoughts became ever clearer.

The project of my existence was taking a precise and solid shape in my head, and I was already formulating it in a few words: “*I shall be a great geometrician.*” But now, we had come to a halt before the vast entrance of the huge circular edifice. The external walls were covered by a great many multicolored posters. William Wood, who spoke some Chinese, then said to me – just as I was thinking: *I shall be a great geometrician* – “This is my circus, Yao, and you shall be my magician. Let’s go in.”

And here, dear Meng-pen, allow me to interrupt my writing for a moment, for I am thirsty. Do get me a cup of tea; have a cup for yourself too, and suppose that while we are here sipping our tea, seven years of my story have elapsed.

The enclosure in which I lived from when I was thirteen years old until I was twenty-one is (I say “is” because it still exists) a perfect circle, roofless under the light of day. Its diameter is 855 *tsci*; along its circumference rise high walls girded by three zones of gigantic ledges occupying a point of the diameter. From the point where the lowest ledge ends, it is 255 *tsci* to the center, and this clear and flat space is covered by a particular kind of sand, bright red, that comes from the banks of the Rimàc. Every quarter part of the circle I have described was, when I was there, marked by a number that indicated the entrance below; and the four numbers contributed in no small measure to render the majestic circus similar to a geometric figure traced on the plateau of Lima as by a prodigious theorem. Several ropes that stretched tautly from one to the other hemisphere fractioned the area, and from these ropes hung three trapezes and six parallel ropes.

How many times, clinging to one of those trapezes, 215 feet above the ground, did I meditate on the insoluble enigma that every circle encloses, until I was seized by vertigo, not of the physical abyss, but of the scientific abyss, something much deeper.

So greatly did I interpenetrate the circle in which I lived, that I felt I had become one of its mobile points, tossing about within it and delineating by its moves a thousand angles and a thousand mathematical curves. The principal axioms of geometry disclosed themselves to my youthful spirit merely by my travels within the immense enclosure that was the *plaza de toros* of Lima.

William Wood had taken it by contract for ten years, promising the Peruvian public a “bull run” every two weeks and many minor spectacles on the other days of the month. He had been all over Spain, England, Bohemia, Africa, China, busy with gathering bulls, horses, men, women, and monkeys needed by him for his circus; and he succeeded in putting together a huge

caravan of people and animals. When he arrived in Lima, in possession of his whole medley, he started his circus, which took the name of *Wood's Circus*, and divided the events into big shows and little shows. The big shows were given in the daytime, beginning before sunset under the light of the splendid South American sky; they consisted of bull runs, horse races, wild animals leaping, Arabian fantasies, and fireworks as darkness fell. The little shows took place in the evening, under cover, in a temporary pavilion that could be erected and taken down in a few hours, in the middle of the circus. There the public could see and admire pantomime shows, acrobatic and gymnastic performers, clowns at play, and a hundred other entertainers.

O patient Meng-pen, you may already be amazed in guessing what I am about to state to you.

Yes, many and often bizarre are the ways and byways of destiny. I, *Yaosse*, or *Doctor Yao* as European savants call me, I who am now writing and who wear the coral button on my cap and toga, took part in both the little and big shows of William Wood in the Lima circus.

I was accomplished in many feats requiring the greatest precision. At the risk of boring you, I will cite a few of them.

I often appeared before the public with seven bells of sandalwood (of the kind we call *mu-to*), tuned at different pitches according to the laws of music. I would begin my act by sending one of these bells high in the air so that when it reached the summit of its parabola, its clapper would cause it to ring while the bell came down lightly into my other hand. Then, one by one, I would make all of them go around and around, taking care to alternate them so that they created the sound of a pretty melody. The refrain I used most often in my act was our “Kuan-tsin-tsi-Kuan” of the noble *Book of Verse*. But the public did not care much for it, and if I wanted to end my experiment amid enthusiastic applause, I always had to revert to a trite Spanish song: *la jota Aragonesa*.

At times, instead of the *mu-to*, it was five catapult balls that burst from my hands, like a jet from a spring, while, with a heavy lead weight hooked to my sturdy pig-tail, by calmly rocking my head I formed a sweeping horizontal motion, like a halo that intermittently cut between the turning balls cleanly without ever meeting with an obstacle. Even more than the precision of my moves what most amazed the public, made up chiefly of bald heads, was the strength of my hair which so easily whirled a weight so heavy that to lift it with both hands would have been a feat in itself.

Meanwhile my fame grew day by day, and on the posters of *Wood's Circus*, there appeared in red letters, each one foot high, the name of *Yao*, sure to entice the crowd.

Men are quickly convinced of their own glory no matter how it comes to them, and I thought myself happy to be the object of so much curiosity, the focus of everyone's gaze, the cause of so much wonder and so much pleasure.

I took comfort in the maxim of Mencius, which says: “Wei-kueï,” a maxim plagiarized by a Latin writer who wrote: “The public is the noblest of all things.” I was also comforted by recalling what Confucius narrates about the wise men of antiquity – “their joy depends on the public's joy” – and I did not despair of getting my spectators to appreciate some day the refrain “Kuan-tsin-Kuan” from the noble *Book of Verses*.

At that time I was twenty. Ramàr, still thin despite having grown taller, was a satellite of my triumphs. He was about eighteen then. Together we performed many famous feats. Among them was the arrow-shooting feat, which involves, as you know, shooting many arrows along the contour of a person standing against a board and doing it so that the arrows remain fixed in the board without harming the person.

In a certain sense, the archer can be compared to a philosopher; he distances himself from the mark he aims at and concentrates his attention on it before releasing the arrow.

With arms and legs bared, and his body squeezed into a snug garment the color of his brownish skin, Ramàr would await my arrows at a distance of fifteen yards. During the performance, his trembling limbs would stiffen. We communicated by way of our eyes. He always foresaw where my arrow was about to strike, and his bearing showed the same confidence that was displayed in my aim. On the board, he stood against I “traced” with pin-point precision the outline of his elegant figure. I did so with the same affectionate patience employed by an artist painting a portrait of his beloved.

When the entire outline of his body was “traced” and Ramàr was enclosed within arrows from head to toe, he would step blithely out of the board, and we would leave together amidst the thunderous applause of the spectators. I willingly shared the public’s acclamation with Ramàr, even though it was meant more for me than for him. And though my glory reverberated on him, I felt in the closeness of his person a certain touch of grace and beauty that enobled me in my own eyes. I had heard of a “king of the gypsies” who was to be chosen at that time, and I mused upon the idea that Ramàr could have well been that king, for nobody could have seemed his equal in appearing at one and the same time so gypsy-like and so regal.

But the day came when there appeared in our circus troupe (it was the day of the summer solstice, forty-three years ago) someone who little by little stole Ramàr away from my glory while drawing him to hers. She was a young Andalusian dancer of a charming age – sixteen; and she had a beguiling name – Ambra. She was even more charming than her age and more enchanting than her name. As soon as she appeared dancing, she was triumphant. Wise Meng-pen, those who have not seen European women do not know true beauty, and you are among them. Yet you respectfully admire the tiny feet of our women, tenuous triangles on which they barely hold themselves upright. Know then that the Andalusian dancer also had tiny feet, not, however, by way of a nurse’s cruel art, but as a gift from Nature. And they were smooth, a polished ivory mined by love itself, with toes that succeeded one another in a harmonious hierarchy from the sturdy big toe to the tender little toe, finishing in a wing-like curve. And as a lark soars upward on tiny wings, just so Ambra soared on her tiny feet. Whimsically she kept them naked when turning on the bare back of her black colt. A long satin cloth at times gray or sky blue or dark enveloped her shoulders, her hips, her knees, reaching down to within a few inches above her ankles, where, to keep her tight dress from flying off, a knotted sash fastened it. The scintillating satin clung to Ambra’s form like one of those glossy coatings that enclose our sugared almonds. A cleavage of nudity descended from her throat to the upper part of her bosom. Her face seemed a fusion of pale silver, and her hair was like a gleam of tawny gold cast in a mass of braids flailing the air. Her eyes, Meng-pen, I assure you, were of a violet amethyst, truly violet (do not smile at what I write), and sweet and dark. I will never see eyes like those again in this world. Her lips, steadfastly closed, seemed destined to part only to a kiss and thus reveal her pearly teeth.

Perhaps in keeping with her name this stupendous maiden adorned herself only with amber trinkets. Just as shells on a beach open at the sun’s rays, so when Ambra came into the circus, men’s lips would part in admiration.

This, then, was the young woman who robbed me of the sweet brotherly friendship of Ramàr.

One day, I saw my name printed as usual in large block letters on the circus billing, but without Ramàr’s name, which for so many years had appeared just under mine in somewhat

smaller letters; instead I read, a little below mine, three words in bright gold printed on one line like this:

AMBRA AND RAMÀR

Have you ever heard letters speak? For me, those two names not only shined in splendor, they also resounded. My ears perceived phonically what my blinded eyes read. And I repeated aloud: *Ambra and Ramàr!* The word “and” placed between the two names sounded sinister to me and seemed something more than a grammatical conjunction. By a typographical curiosity, that “and” shone in a singular fashion, as though, placed between the five letters of *Ambra* and the five letters of *Ramàr*, it was a luminous center, a focal point of convergence and of rays.

How great an affinity between the two names! Five letters in both, bisyllabic the one and the other, and in each but one vowel, the purest, the most humane, the dominant, which echoed twice in both names. Oh! how sweetly that vowel introduced and cadenced the name of *Ambra!* With equally perfect art the most rumbling of consonants vibrated at the beginning and at the end of the name *Ramàr*. A vague feminine softness emanated from the first, whereas a virile boldness erupted from the second; and yet, the one seemed to be composed by the harmony of the other. It was as if the two names loved one another in their beautiful golden letters. And the name of *Yao*, all alone, seemed almost forsaken in its glory.

Yao and *Ramàr* symbolized several profound antitheses: calculation and intuition, exactitude and audacity, patience and impulse, science and art. In a more profound synthesis *Ambra* and *Ramar* stood more sublimely to symbolize *Beauty and Strength in the harmony of Love*.

And indeed, they truly seemed two symbolic figures when on their dark steeds they entered the arena bound in a seductively sculptural oneness. The steeds, proud of their burdens, advanced with a stately gait, curving their necks and forelegs like bows drawn to the limit. With the reins in his strong grip, Ramàr held back those bows ready to let fly. Suddenly, the reins were let fall, and the steeds bolted forward in a chase around the circular course, their legs seemingly light, extended, elegant in their fury as the poem of *Ambra and Ramàr* began, a poem more chimerical than a dream, filled with beautiful yet terrifying emotions. I watched it from outside the fence, lost in the crowd of footmen and clowns.

That poem began as a flight and finished as a triumph. In the first grouping, the gypsy and the Andalusian inspired so much horror and anxiety as to seem like they had escaped from the dragon’s den. The knots of fright clasped the two riders together body and soul. The gypsy commanded the race in a kneeling position with his left knee on the back of his horse while he pressed his foot on the back of the other horse. The Andalusian clung to the neck of the panting Ramàr. The two colts speeding now with a free rein, alternated their leaps like two waves of a sea storm; their dark-haired manes lashed like raging foam across *Ambra*’s face, which was paler than a ghost. The sculpturesque couple were at one and the same time equestrian and aqueous.

A tragic terror invaded me so powerfully that I imagined I was witnessing not a recurrent pantomime, but a real flight across a vast land of hideous scenes: immeasurable wastelands traversed in a flash by the two fugitives, or chasms crossed over miraculously, or forests rendered fantastical by the moon’s rays, teeming with nightmarish figures and snakes. But gradually *Ambra* would awaken to a happy reality, and soon the fleeing couple’s long embrace of fright would, by the mere transfiguration of their faces, give way to a long embrace of love. And then, even the imaginary background of the scene changed, and I saw airy landscapes dissolving in an immense rainbow. The speeding group stood out in black now in the golden arena, now in the green, now in the rainbow’s rosy glow, like a Chinese shadow floating from one place to another. And the rainbow slowly opened its arc, much like a gigantic fan. This

image of the rainbow very likely had its origins in the circular form of the amphitheater with its variant perspectives, as well as in the magical irradiation of the sunset and the scintillation of the sand kicked up by the charging horses' hooves, the vertiginous rush of the chase, and the undulation of the crowd now widening and now narrowing the space before my eyes, but above all in the equestrian vision itself that in its flight and its very aspect contained something meteorological about it.

When, towards the end, the flight became an apotheosis, Ambra and Ramàr changed places after each round. The positions they adopted in their inebriation are not comparable to an earthly sculpture, and in truth, I had the impression that a new Zodiac was revealing itself to my gaze with a strange and sublime newness of signs. Ambra and Ramàr were invaded by a true inspiration in their limbs. The Andalusian maid frequently threw around her colt's neck a white veil, clinging to its extremity. It seemed then that her light body was suspended from moment to moment, like one of those flying *stag beetles* our ancestors brought into battle to confound the enemy. As an effect of the incessant whirling, the couple's positions were mostly out of perpendicular, and this created an impression of a remarkable impetus. The hooves of Ambra's steed no longer hit the sand; caught by a violent centrifugal force, they bounded along the very parapet of the sand with a storm-like clangor, while the girl's body, wholly converging toward the center, drew an oblique line, inclined toward the horizon, a suggestive hypotenuse.

At every turn when Ambra and Ramàr, clasped in a tight embrace, passed by near me, I felt myself caught in a struggle between two opposing emotions – fascination and terror. I tried to avert my gaze so as not to see their merging bodies, and yet I could not help fixing it all the more adamantly upon them; and in that close proximity, I seemed to feel all eight iron-clad hooves of the galloping steeds pounding in my breast. Then when the race was beyond me and out of my hearing, I breathed more easily. Often I joined in the public's enthusiastic hurrahs; but I will not conceal from you that I faulted the pair because the Andalusian girl's poses, for all their technical virtuosity, now and then caused my face to flush hotly with moral indignation.

I trembled at the idea that the beautiful couple might fall; but at times, just as when we catch a criminal in a trap, I caught myself watching avidly for the moment they should fall.

One day they did fall. The shriek of the dismayed crowd was tragic, as was the hush that followed upon it. I had felt a premonition of the catastrophe and was waiting for it to occur. It was obvious to me that the two of them would lose control of the charging horses; and, indeed, one of the horses, sensing the couple's oblivion, momentarily slackened its furious pace, thereby causing it to separate from its companion. Beneath Ambra and Ramàr, a vortex opened into which they plummeted, entangled in the reins of the frenzied pounding. When the horses were finally stopped, Ramàr tried to get up from the ground but immediately fell back senseless. Ambra was stretched out motionless like a corpse.

The spectacle was halted, and the unconscious riders were brought to the circus's infirmary. Several doctors in the audience rushed to give aid. Many young men, admirers of the beautiful Andalusian, crowded around to ask anxiously for the doctors' verdict.

Inside and outside the infirmary, there was an undertone of voices and a timid shuffling of footsteps. William Wood, the impresario, was pallid as he tried to disperse the large crowd.

Half an hour later, I stood by the two beds along with William Wood and three doctors, among them the doctor on duty.

Neither Ambra nor Ramàr had yet regained consciousness. In Ramàr, the vehement cerebral blow took the form of a delirium. Yet the consequences were much more grave in Ambra, who appeared to be in a cataleptic state. Ramàr was bleeding but not Ambra. A streak of blood flowed

from the gypsy's forehead; it collected a bit on his lips and then flowed down to his chest. The motionless bronze-colored body dripping blood looked like the image of a wounded warrior. In his right hand, the gypsy tightly clasped the golden amulet hanging from his neck. But Ramàr was saved by virtue of the very flow of blood, which relieved the congestion of his brain.

Ambra's body was without bruises or scratches, immaculate but lifeless. In her serene aspect, the beautiful maiden seemed to have preferred to enter the realm of death preserving her beauty intact rather than face life with the disfigurement of a scar.

While the doctors were deliberating by Ambra's bedside, I remained by my friend, leaning over him to tighten his bandages, to dry the blood on his wounded forehead; and as soon as the ice on his burning forehead melted, I hurried to replace it with the solicitous patience for which the people of our race are duly praised.

Whenever he became delirious, I drew back from him, not wishing to risk being surprised by some secret thought contained in his ravings. I would then turn my eyes toward Ambra.

Almost naked, she lay under the hands of the doctors. The catalepsy had resisted a strong application of electric current, and although rubbing her body with hot linen cloths had succeeded in quickening her blood's circulation, it failed to clear the cerebral confusion of her brain. A more effective means was needed at once. I saw a doctor on duty approach Ambra's arm with a small, gleaming blade. The same physical repugnance that comes over us at the sight of a fingernail scratching glass caused me to turn my eyes away.

I returned softly to the right of Ramàr's bedside. On the other side, the doctors were actively at work in the narrow space that separated the two beds; because I was sitting, their backs kept me from seeing the Andalusian girl. Daylight was completely gone, and William Wood was holding a burning lamp over her bed. I rested my eyes on the sleeping Ramàr. No one was attending him any longer. His left arm, which bore a large tattoo, changed colors in keeping with the abatement or the rage of his fever, like the mark on thoroughbred Arabian horses. If I replaced the freezing band frequently on my friend's forehead, his drowsiness became calmer, his febrile shivering ceased, and the scar on his arm, where his name could be read, turned livid. If, on the other hand, I allowed the compress on his head to become warm, the tattoo gradually took on a purplish tint, and his delirium returned. Hence I could at will temper or throw into confusion his exquisitely impressionable body. Urged on by the true tenderness I felt for him, my thoughts were then all fixed on Ramàr.

"Oh good Ramàr," I thought, "it would have been much better had that girl never appeared to you, for you would not be here now, trembling, with a fractured cranium. Yao alone knew how to deflect the perils from your head; his eye watched over you, careful and keen, and dizziness did not come over you when you looked at him. And when together with your friend, you swung through the air, hanging by the circus ropes, you were safer than being in a cradle."

My thoughts were accompanied by a light, uniform plopping sound like a large drop falling second by second into a metallic basin, with the regularity of a water clock.

My mind began to be distracted by external sounds when I heard the following phrases coming from diverse voices:

"It's a hopeless case!"

"I believe that he's conscious now."

"Now we must stop the bleeding."

"I need somebody with a patient and steady hand."

"Mine!" I exclaimed, rising from my seat and approaching Ambra's bed.

"Let's try," said William Wood to the doctors as he pointed at me.

A stool was placed between Ambra's bed and Ramàr's. Then, one of the doctors, after looking carefully at the skin of my palms, took my left hand and placed it so that the metacarpus pressed hard on the open vein of Ambra's arm. After bidding me to sit down, he turned to his colleagues and said:

"Do you see? We often carry the best remedies within ourselves. Human skin checks the flow of blood better than any other much-acclaimed remedy."

Then he put a small pillow under Ambra's arm as a support to keep it raised a bit. He urged me to keep my hand still and not lift it from the wounded vein before midnight, adding that the girl's salvation depended on my patience. If in the morning Ambra could speak, she would be out of danger. I was to keep from falling asleep and from making any sudden movements.

A few minutes later in the room of the two wounded persons, there remained myself, the stand-by doctor, and William Wood. After half an hour, William Wood, upon retiring to his rooms, asked the on-duty doctor to give careful attention to Ambra. After an hour, the doctor too, overcome by boredom, left the room after first replacing the cold compress on Ramàr's forehead. And like William Wood, he also entreated me to attend carefully to the Andalusian girl.

The cathedral bell-tower of Lima struck ten o'clock, when in that room, where two hours earlier two hundred persons were crammed, I was alone between Ambra and Ramàr.

Motionless where I sat, I experienced the weariness of limbs that a nocturnal sentinel feels in the first half hour of his turn on duty. I began to slowly turn my head and eyes all about me. I saw myself surrounded by a green light that seemed watery to me, a light such as one might see at the bottom of the sea, giving a faded aspect to everything and distorting the precise outline of real objects into the turbid nuances of an aquarium.

Before leaving, William Wood had, for the sake of the sleeping pair, placed the single lamp on the room's only table behind a large glass jar filled with a tincture of absinth. The rays of light filtering through the glass jar were what produced the strange light surrounding me. Beside it were several phials of medicines.

The table, several feet away from where I sat, presented to my gaze – deluded by the weird light – a crowded number of objects among which was one that seemed to me a persistent enigma that had to be explained. I saw it as an indistinct apparition, shaggy and violet, that ended in a suggestion of a tricuspid. The sight tormented my thoughts and my pupils; I was unable to discern its nature. The only thing I could imagine it to be was this: *the specter of a flame*, next to which several phials of medicines glistened. I, who had never been capable of supporting without anguish the slightest doubt about anything, was now in a dither, needing to determine the nature of the incomprehensible object that provoked my normally acute eyes. The impossibility of approaching the table goaded my curiosity. My hand was not to be lifted even for a moment from Ambra's wound, but I was continually assailed by the temptation to get to the object. I thought to myself that a mere three feet forward from me could reveal to me the nature of that inexplicable form. The solitude, the silence, the immobility, the boredom to which I was condemned, aggravated all the more my already exacerbated curiosity. I tried to direct my gaze toward other objects.

Against the table's edge was a whip. A clown's wig had been placed on a chair. In a glass case, a battery of surgical instruments appeared carefully arranged. Scattered on the floor lay the costumes of Ambra and Ramàr, glittering with gold and silver. That mixture of hospital and theatrical paraphernalia struck my gaze and, even more, my mind. An odor of foul-smelling drugs and sweet herbs came into my nostrils, while from a heap of ice stacked in a corner a mountain-like coolness invaded my body. The more I fixed my gaze, the more the blue-green

light of absinth seemed to increase its cloudiness. I was breathing a bitter pestilent air that went from my lungs into the circulation of my blood and thence into my brain. So too my thoughts were of a bitter and torbid nature. My contact with the Andalusian's arm caused me to think of the contact between the man and the woman. Ramàr was asleep. My mind suddenly threw itself into a new channel of ideas. The first impression I had in looking at Ambra was one of repugnance. I almost felt that I was beside the corpse of a drowned woman, at the bottom of a lagoon, and I myself submerged. In the palm of my hand, I felt the beautiful girl's arm, colder than the room's temperature. There are ideas that cry out, others that murmur. Somewhere inside me I heard these words murmured: *she is truly dead*.

The sheet that covered her assumed on that marvelous body funerary folds, like the marmoreal drapery wrapped around the effigies of empresses laid out atop mausoleums. Then as my eyes were guided toward her beautiful bosom, the white drapery softened its curves, and the winding-sheet seemed to acquire serenity. The right side of her bosom remained uncovered because of her naked arm entrusted to my patience.

"But if she is dead," I thought to myself, "for what purpose do I remain here?" And yet, I did not for an instant remove my hand from the wound. "If she is dead," my thought continued so, "Yao and Ramàr will be brothers again. If she lives, it is I who will have saved her." Then all my thoughts became concentrated on how to resolve this new doubt. Inch by inch, I rose from my stool, taking care not to detach my hand from the function entrusted to it, and with my right hand, I uncovered the girl's left breast. Then, as slowly as a sphere of a Quadrant, I bent over just enough to place my ear over her heart. The scent of rose-oil lightly entered my nostrils. Her white flesh was cold and silent. There was not the slightest pulsation under her ivory rib-cage; nonetheless I continued to listen even as I bent my knees to the floor, as the low-lying bed allowed me to do. I sharpened my hearing on the girl's soft flesh with the avidity of a spy.

I remained for a long spell thus prostrate, attentive, and motionless when I suddenly heard something like an outburst of vehement convulsive throbbing. I rose hurriedly to my feet, terrified by the idea that Ambra was alive and awake. The throbbing continued to echo in my brain. It wasn't the girl's heart that throbbed, it was my arteries and my temples agitated by a febrile turmoil. Behind me, I heard Ramàr breathing serenely like one asleep. It was then that I was seized by the idea of listening to Ambra's breathing. Kneeling again, I started to bring my face close to hers but was quickly thwarted by an unspeakable fright. I stopped a hand-span away. The cold girl's eyelids were heavily closed, but her parted lips glistened, and all of her extremely pallid face shone brightly. I no longer doubted that she was dead, and this thought gave me the courage to bring my face close to hers. I wished to see for one last time her divine pupils, and with my thumb and index finger, I lifted her delicate eyelids. But all I saw were two white eyes like those of a marble statue. I withdrew my hand, and her eyelids closed again. I was then invaded by a profound pity, and my heart's inflexibility was shaken.

I no longer wished that the beautiful girl were dead; and as children do with beautiful dying insects, I brought my mouth over Ambra's face so as to revive her with my warm breath. My lips fell upon hers, and I felt the cold ivory of her teeth cause me to tremble. A moan coming from Ramàr shook me, and I quickly resumed my sitting on the stool.

Ramàr was still sleeping. From a far-off bell tower, the hour struck twice. For a long time, I remained immersed in a strange train of thoughts. An hour later, under my left hand I felt a sensation of tepidness. Ambra was not dead! I felt her pulse; she was alive! Barely noticeable, her bosom at the start of a breath rose and lowered. The crisis was past. I had saved Ambra, I had prevented all her blood from issuing from her veins, and I felt now that I had infused her with a

part of my life, of my warmth, and I recognized it to be so despite my anger with my own merit. I don't know why, but I felt I had saved her too soon.

The affecting passiveness of the corpse had vanished. Only her face still bore the weight of lethargy, but the stupendous form of the Andalusian took on an ever increasing liveliness of a fatal power that annihilated me. And yet, if the blood I had held in check was not yet stanching, that life was still under my hand, which could weaken it as I wished and then reanimate it. This thought made my heart beat wildly with immense pride, with sharp curiosity, with mad desire. Meanwhile the long period of immobility of my muscles had exhausted the strength of my arm and hand. I felt an overwhelming desire to change my position. If the vein was healed, I could free myself at will. I raised my palm for a moment. A bit of blood quickly streaked along Ambra's arm. Dismayed, I immediately closed my hand over the wound. It was now necessary to cleanse the trace of blood from her arm before the doctors returned. The blood was softly tepid and sweeter than honey. A drop of it had fallen on my hand, and I had sucked it up. I brushed my parched lip all along the streak that stained the enchanting arm of the Andalusian girl, and little by little, my lips were near the living source of that voluptuous blood of a woman, which, upon removing my hand from the wound, I began to suck out in deep draughts, the way one sucks the liquid of a precious fruit. Suddenly, I felt myself seized violently by the throat, and I heard Ramàr's voice shout "Vampire!"

I did not try to defend myself, even though I felt my jugular vein twisting under Ramàr's fingers. Of a sudden, the hand choking me relaxed, and the gypsy collapsed to the floor between the two beds, at my feet. I had already put back the palm of my hand on Ambra's wound. The sudden assault gave back to me the lost passiveness of my body and mind. Just so a disturbed mechanism is often quickly put back in order by a knock. The violent actions of men always produced this effect on me, only to augment my composure. Stretched out on the floor, Ramàr was writhing furiously in a state of delirium. He was in the throes of a high fever since the last ice-pack had melted on his forehead. In his ravings, Ambra's name was invoked with ever-increasing anguish. I was unable to help him. In the time it would have taken me to re-bandage his head with cold compresses and to get him back in bed, Ambra might have died. The reawakened sense of my mission firmly constrained my hand to remain fixed on the beautiful Andalusian's arm, which was still tepidly warm. Remorse for the fault I had committed a short time before sharpened my sense of duty, which was not to move under any circumstances from the position I was in. If the abandoned Ramàr were to die, the fault was not mine. On the corners of my mouth, I still tasted the sweetness of Ambra's blood – of the purest essence. The thought that I had a bit of that blood in my body moved me in a strange way. I also felt a sharp pain in the right part of my neck where the gypsy's fingernails had dug in, and I was glad to carry the sign of Ramàr's anger; this thought lifted a grave but vague weight from my heart. I remember having murmured five or six times as I looked at Ramàr lying on the floor these words in Chinese: "*eulh wei eulh, ngo wei ngo*" (you for yourself, me for myself).

When the first gleam of dawn illuminated the ambulance-room, the morning-duty doctor arrived, disheveled and with eyes heavy with sleep. Seeing Ramàr as I have described him, he went out quickly in search of help. In a few minutes, members of the company entered – a doctor, a clown, and William Wood. After putting Ramàr back in his bed, they all rushed to Ambra's bedside. She was breathing easily. The doctor ordered me to remove my hand slowly from the patient's arm.

The bleeding had stopped. Then the doctor said: "If she talks, she's out of danger."

I had not yet moved from my stool, and I continued to administer smelling salts from time to time to Ambra.

We waited anxiously for a word from her mouth, all of us hanging from her mute lips. Slowly Ambra opened her eyes, and only after a while, did she really seem to awaken. She looked around in amazement. When she saw that I was patiently holding the phial of smelling salts under her nose, she looked at me fixedly and in a soft and languid voice spoke: "Thank you, my good lady."

An outburst of laughter stunned my head, and a rush of blood flowed to my heart. I looked at myself in a mirror that was in front of me, and in my mind, I thanked the Divinity that made me be born in the land of pale faces that never turn red.

It didn't surprise me that her European eyes failed to see the sign of virility in my face. This only added to my sense of shame, for there was not even the shadow of any facial down to indicate my gender, and my Chinese garments and my braid, which on that day I wore twisted on my head, could have been taken, by an eye not familiar with our manner of dress, for a woman's hairdo.

Two weeks after the day of the catastrophe that was to have such bizarre consequences for me, the gypsy and the Andalusian maid were whirling around in the circus ring energetically and gaily amid the cheering audience.

Meanwhile, my colleagues were plotting a prank against me; Ambra's misunderstanding quickly made the rounds in the whole company and gave grounds for even the lowest circus lackey to grin in my face. They all agreed not to reveal the deceit to the Andalusian so as to prolong as much as possible the joke and the laughter. No more did anyone call me *Mister Yao* or *Señor Yao* as they formerly did, but *Miss Yao* or *Señorita Yao*, and more than anyone else, it was Ramàr who enjoyed this joke and watched assiduously for an opportune moment to renew it. Whenever Ambra spoke to me all who were present held their breath in order to guffaw the more after our conversation. But I, however, kept my mind on Chapter VII of Confucius' *Dialogues* where Tseng-sse, the Master's friend, speaks these wise sacred words: "Let yourself be insulted without showing any resentment;" and I abided by that ancient maxim: I did not *show* resentment, but in the back of my mind, I kept track of the insults, one by one, and made an indelible mental note of each one.

My imperturbability spurred my mockers to greater fury, and when their mockery became rage, I felt triumphant. And for a time, I was satisfied with this meager revenge. I disdained to rectify Ambra's mistake. My honor did not permit me to stoop to such a bizarre rectification. My dignity found no other way to react than this: to let others think that I believed the Andalusian to be aware of and a participant in the joke and that I was indifferent about it. My friend, it's a bad lot to live in the midst of a race different from our own. For a while, the bitterness of this lot had been sweetened by Ramàr's friendship. Now he, too, was abandoning me.

Our friendship had undergone a sort of poisoning; we avoided looking into one another's eyes. But I observed him closely. I wanted to discover whether there remained in his memory some reminiscence of the night he called me *vampire*. He had uttered that word in a moment of rage, prey to an attack of delirium and a feverish crisis. If he himself remembered it, he would, I thought, very likely have confused the cause of his uttering it with other moments of his raving. These assumptions calmed me somewhat, albeit in a brief and uncertain peace of mind. A dark shadow stood between me and the gypsy whenever we faced one another: a black shadow, fatal and ineradicable, like one that clouds the sight of a diseased retina. And Ramàr also saw that

shadow. I noticed it whenever we performed together the *game of arrows* that I described to you earlier in these pages.

It was William Wood who decided one day that this act, not performed for several months, was to be revived. We obeyed him. Ambra was a little terrified by this news; she could not conceive of a *woman* skilled in the art of archery. A clown reassured her with such good humor that she laughed over the matter, and her fears were dissipated. The public was thrilled with the possibility of seeing our act again. I returned to the arena by Ramàr's side as in the serene days of our common glory.

Ramàr stood firmly and upright, facing my aim with a boldness that was perhaps greater than he had shown in the past. Nonetheless, I could see, beneath the sheer silk garment that covered him, his beating heart. The black spot was then between us.

Even so, our eyes were necessarily bound to meet. The former intuition of our gazes was gone. A different intuition had replaced it. When the arrows shot were meant to strike along the outline of his side, it was with great difficulty that I restrained the urge to aim at Ramàr's beating heart. The habit of my pulse and eye conquered the perversion of my will, and my arrows hit precisely alongside the contour of his frame. During the whole time of the performance Ramàr and I read sullenly in one another's soul. When the performance was at an end, the gloom vanished only to give way to suspicion. The public applauded, but the gypsy had from me alone the admiration he deserved, for I alone could, in the occasion, be the true judge of his courage.

At that time, I continued to be mocked, and to distract myself from the rancor I felt and so find refuge in any sort of affection available to me, I took to training dogs.

In this new stage of my adventurous life, I became acquainted with five good friends, the most humane, indeed the most noble of any I had come to know until then. I found them in the circus kennels, where they lived miserably, and I brought them to my little room, where I undertook their training.

These five friends of mine were two poodles, a dachshund, a hound, and a splendid one year old bulldog, my favorite among them all. When, in my later years, I dedicated myself to "training" men, I never met among my own kind as much spontaneous affection as I had known and admired in those humble animals. I taught each of those dogs certain marvelous tricks that made people laugh, and in turn, each one of them taught me in various ways the virtues of humanity which men had hidden from me. To each of the dogs, I gave a Chinese name.

To one of the poodles, the friskiest and whitest, I gave the name *Ani-Kaine* – "good luck"; the other poodle's name *Scing-tscie*: "Perfect One." I called the dachshund *Buddha* because when he was resting he really resembled the image of the god because of the chubby serenity of his face. The hound was *Ta-fu*: "mandarin." To the bulldog I gave the name *Jin*: "humanity." And so I lived in the society of my canine friends, loving them and conversing with them in my maternal tongue, and being loved by them in return. *Jin*, perhaps because he was younger than the others and more violent in his instincts, owing to the pride of his pedigree, became extremely fond of me in a very short time. He added worth to affection by chasing rabidly after my co-workers. I trained this noble animal more in his marvelous physical capacity than in the use of memory. *Jin* could leap over a barrier three meters high. My affection for this dog was so profound that I never humiliated his particular character by subjecting him to the clownish tricks forced upon other so-called smart dogs; and *Jin* seemed to recognize and was grateful for my discretion and respect. I myself was aware that between my face and his there was a curious resemblance, seen in the fact that we each had a flat nose and a thin upper lip that exposed two

teeth in the front of our mouth. The prominence of our frontal bone gave both of us a serious and thoughtful expression.

A most singular affinity, of which I was proud, bound me to the young Molossian. *Jin* hated my enemies with a passion greater even than my own, and he was hated by them with an equal ferocity, though they dared not cross him or offend me in his presence since the day when a clown made the ugly joke of throwing a rope around my neck, whereupon the bulldog leaped at his throat. It was all I could do to save the wretched joker.

I have forgotten to mention a sixth dog, evidently because I didn't care very much for him; I found him to be unintelligent and lazy. He was a Pekinese with long hair, obese and languid in his movements, and quite delicate in his limbs – one of those small dogs that are eaten by people in our land, where they are held to be the perfect gourmet's delicacy when well skinned and properly cleansed of their entrails and cooked in four tablespoons of olive oil and two of honey along with pistachios and onions. I didn't do anything with this miniscule dog that came with the others, but I kept him because I knew that Ambra was fond of him, and I was waiting for the chance to offer him to her and so make a good impression on her.

One day William Wood came to my kennel and said: "Yao, I have decided to move you (his use of the informal *te*, that familiar form so patronizingly plebeian as is our "*ju*" jarred my nerves) and the dogs to a much larger room."

On that very day Yao, *Jin*, Buddha, Ani-Kaine, Ta-fu, Scingtschie, and the Pekinese moved into the larger room. This new lodging of ours was a spacious abode next to Ambra's room. (Did I fail to mention that we all dwelled on the circus grounds?) Ambra's door and mine exited into the same passageway, which had no other rooms exiting into it. When I was settled there with my dogs, William Wood, who had followed us, pointed to the right and said: "The beautiful Andalusian has the room next to this one. I know that many Spanish grandees would like to buzz around her. I noticed some notes in the bouquets of flowers presented to her yesterday by the dandies in the loges. It's only natural, and as long as the tempters buzz without stinging, they are welcome to do so, and I applaud them; it helps to augment Ambra's fame. But if even just one of them were to succeed in stinging her, I would suffer an irreparable damage. I know Ambra loves Ramàr, and that suits me just fine; it reassures me somewhat. Nonetheless, I'll be more at ease having you, who are clever and alert, living here with your dogs. Be sure to stay on the lookout. Ambra won't guess the reason why I've moved you so close to her."

"I'll be a good watchman," I replied. Satisfied, Wood left.

Then I called: "*Jin*!" and immediately the bulldog leaped onto my knees. "Bully for us," I said, and *Jin* wagged his tail as excitedly as when he read in my eyes some happy thought.

As soon as Ramàr learned of my new lodging (Wood himself told him of it and confided its purpose in my presence), his face darkened. Then in a troubled voice he said: "It cannot be!" But Wood was quick to reply: "And why can't it be? It wouldn't be possible to find a better watchman than our Chinaman in all of Lima. Ambra will be happy for the proximity of *Miss Yao*. You know that she always laughs when looking into his face. Besides, he's devoted to Ambra, and he saved her life with a miraculous act of patience."

"That's true, that's true," replied the gypsy, laughing as though at a secret and foolish superstition of his, and he extended his hand toward me.

Two uneventful weeks went by. Ambra continued to think I was a woman, and it suited me to let her think it was the case so as not to suddenly dismay her and lose any of her intimacy. I often assisted her when she readied herself for an appearance before the public. I would stay among her servants, who for their part showed no surprise at my presence; and far from being

scandalized, they smiled as though it were a matter of no consequence. I swallowed my shame silently, and with my shame a pungent secret joy.

Often when Ambra finished her bath, I would hasten to her call and find her sitting on the edge of the bath-tub, wrapped in a scarlet tunic of fine wool. In the room, the hot steam of the water would still be evaporating. The midday sun filtered through the yellow silk curtains, illuminating a bar of opaline soap that, having just been taken from the lavabo, slid slowly down the tub's marble steps like something alive. Knowing what office I was beckoned to, I silently looked under the mirror for a silver file and a small pair of scissors, a Pumice stone and a phial of aromatic oil. Then, kneeling before the beautiful Andalusian, I would take into my hands her small naked feet and carefully dry them with the care of an engraver of ivory cleaning his precious knick-knacks. I would then put on a pair of spectacles that I kept exclusively for the labor I was about to undertake, that is to say, so that my eyesight, wonderfully acute for discerning things at a distance but rather poor in seeing things close up, would not fail me. So it was that she would laugh with the repressed laughter of a babe as she put forth her dryer foot on which I would begin my work of chiseling and engraving that proceeded undisturbed by the presence of any profane observer. I still retain in my memory every single toenail of her enchanting feet. In the ovality of each one of them, I perceived a certain vague impression of a face. The prettiest one was the fourth toe of her left foot. The sturdy big toes gleamed like brilliant quartz. Her baby toes had tiny nails, so beautiful and delicate that it was touching to see them, even though they curved a little like two incipient claws. I filed, polished, shaped, and rounded those ovals with a light and devoted touch. Ambra entrusted to me alone that painstaking task, because one day she saw me whiling away the time by carving ivory in the manner of our patient craftsmen. For my part, I was proud of her faith in me. My faithful dog *Jin* was almost always by my side. When I was busy with her toes, she petted the Pekinese I had given her and which she cherished, couched in the warm folds of her beautiful lap. Ambra wore no other garments under her scarlet tunic, and at times, while my hands passed from one to another of the thin instruments I used in beautifying the Andalusian's feet, my eyes wandered a bit higher than her alabastrine ankles in the pink penumbra of her flesh colored by the warm intonations of her tunic's folds.

My heart would beat wildly then, as gaily as an internal applause, and in fact it was precisely that, for I triumphed secretly over those who thought they were ridiculing me.

When I finished my task, I would rise from the floor and stand up on my heels; and I, who could hang upside-down from a trapeze for a long time without fearing vertigo, felt in that moment, both at my temples and in my breast, a rush of blood so violent that it made me reel.

One day when I had just regained a measure of calm following this tumult in my arteries and was about to exit from the room (*Jin* followed me step by step), I met Ramàr who was at the door's threshold, ready to enter. Without knowing why, I avoided looking him in the face. Suddenly *Jin*, barking fiercely, leaped at his chest like a wild beast. My command was enough to save Ramàr, who with a beautiful smile on his lips hurried to calm the dismayed Ambra. I hit the dog, who looked at me with an expression of subdued disapproval, and we left the couple to themselves. As I was leaving, I heard Ramàr murmuring to Ambra the Spanish proverb "As the master does, so does the dog," and this displeased me so much that in my thoughts I faulted my friend for having murmured to his beauty a nasty expression concerning me, which I felt was unwarranted. *Jin* growled at my feet, wagging his head like a mute anxiously trying to speak. Before then, my bulldog had never showed himself to be hostile to the gypsy, and such a sudden anger couldn't be explained without a cause. The dog's remarkable instinct had sensed a sure

sign of ill-will in the way the gypsy looked at me. I promised to myself that I would study Ramàr's eye so as to profit from my poor dog's intuition, for as the philosopher says: "If you listen carefully to a man's words and scrutinize the pupils of his eyes, how could he ever conceal his thoughts from you?" From that day, Ramàr could not enter Ambra's room because of the dog's presence and the barking that attracted people's attention, much to the gypsy's chagrin and William Wood's satisfaction.

Not long afterwards when I was leaving my room later than usual and was heading with *Jin* toward the trapezes for my morning practice, I came across a group of ten or twelve coworkers among whom I noticed Ramàr. They were laughing boisterously, but when from a distance they saw me, they recomposed themselves and seemed to be engaged in a lively conversation in which the word "wager" was often heard. When I was close to them, Ramàr, assuming a festive air, said to me:

"*Señora Yao*, what a lucky chance. Fibbertigibbet here (and he pointed to an English clown) doesn't think much of your dog."

"He has a long leap, but he doesn't jump high," the clown added in a screaming voice.

To this Ramàr added: "Fibbertigibbet wagers that *Jin* wouldn't reach a piece of bacon at a height of six feet."

"I didn't say a piece of bacon actually, I said a piece of bread."

The word "actually," so slyly placed, caused the group to break into laughter.

"Let's do it with a piece of bread! I'll wager a dollar that *Jin* grabs it at a height of six feet if Yao himself offers it to him."

"I've no doubt about it," I said.

"All right! A dollar for a dollar," the clown shrieked, "I accept the terms. Where's the bread?"

"I've got it right here," Ramàr replied, taking a formless piece of soft bread from his pocket. I took the bread and jumped onto a raised wooden plank. Fibbertigibbet rushed off and came back with a yard stick with which he measured the established height from the ground to my hand. The group stood around me with curious faces fixed in a queer smile. I called out: "*Jin*, hop!" and the faithful dog leaped up and snatched the bread neatly. Then he swallowed it happily as a reward for his successful effort.

When I awoke the following morning, I found my poor *Jin* dead, a greenish incrustation coming forth from his nostrils. Then I remembered that I didn't see Fibbertigibbet pay Ramàr for the wager, and I recalled the derisive hoot that burst out from the group when *Jin* swallowed the piece of bread. Damnation! They had poisoned my dog, and Ramàr had placed the poison into my very hands. At this recognition, my anger was so violent that at first it smothered my grief. Then I wept bitterly. Dawn was just beginning; everyone was still asleep. I gathered up my poor *Jin*'s corpse and went into the circus arena. There, under my trapeze, I dug a grave and buried the poor creature. Then I carefully replaced the gilded sand on the grave, with the words of Confucius in mind: "If a man once offends you grievously, do not display your resentment; remember the offense, but do not hasten to revenge." I prostrated myself on the dog's grave, and taking in hand my long braid, I made a knot at its end. Then I said to myself: "Ramàr has offended me *once*." And I returned to my cell.

There I indulged in angrily relishing the bitterness of my thoughts. In this world, I was left without any affection. Without a mother (an incessant presentiment whispered in my heart that I was now an orphan), without friends, and without love; a stranger, ridiculed, I had placed in my poor bulldog all the affection I was capable of feeling. He had shared my labors and my rancor; I

was not a stranger for the poor creature. When that faithful dog looked at me, he would widen the lips of his sagacious snout and reveal his pointed teeth like a person laughing; he didn't look at me with the suspicious eye of Ramàr, he didn't laugh with the scornful laughter of clowns. Poor *Jin*, he was dead! They had killed my faithful dog. While my silent pain was burning within my breast like an enclosed fire, I heard a scratching at the bottom of the door. Upon opening the door, I saw at my feet Ambra's cherished pet Pekinese. Driven by a desire for revenge as well as by an instinct of gluttony that I dissembled to myself, I seized the obese *Niño* by the scruff, and as I picked him up I grasped a knife with which I slit his throat. I then skinned him, and after purging his entrails, I lit a burner and set about cooking the fat little creature in a pot containing honey and onions, provisions I always kept in my cupboard. In about two hours, the dainty dish was ready. With great care, I cut it up and set about eating it. Meanwhile I heard Ambra running up and down outside calling loudly, "*Niño! Niño!*" – the name she had given to the Pekinese. I was gnawing away at *Niño*'s little bones with my strong teeth when the door opened and Ambra, Ramàr, and Flibbertigibbet came in.

Ramàr asked me: "Where is *Niño*?"

Calmly executing the gesture my words required, I replied: "He's here, and if I may offer you a rib..." Ambra fainted. Ramàr succored her while addressing words of fury to me. I made not the least allusion to the poisoning of *Jin*. Ramàr led Ambra to her room.

Flibbertigibbet, who was roaring with laughter, ran to tell everyone in the Circus company about the *Niño* affair, which seemed so strange to him. I realized too late that I had made a mistake. The life of mockery in which I had grown livid for such a long time worsened after this deed. My colleagues then took to calling me dog-eater, an appellation that in China would not have seemed in the least opprobrious but seemed utterly ridiculous among that coarse group.

The matter went beyond the Circus grounds; it was picked up by the gazettes, which sullied my fame.

Whenever I appeared in the Circus on the days of my act, the elegant young ladies would giggle and hide their puppies, pretending to fear that I might devour them alive. Gluttony always led me into untoward ways. It was this evil instinct that had once caused me to be flogged by my *jin-mù* when I went into the ship's hold looking for the sweet bonbons my mother had promised me. And a second time was when, ten years later, I sucked the sweet blood of the Andalusian's voluptuous vein. But you are smiling, wise Meng-pen, with the smile of one who notices an error in the demonstration of a theorem, and your sad eyes do not correspond to the expression of your lips. But pay attention to these words of the philosopher: "Any man who says of himself: 'I can discern the causes of human actions' presumes too much of his particular discipline." Allow me now to continue with my tale.

One evening, following the Circus' spectacles, tired of being the butt of the clowns' jokes and the public's laughter, much irritated I walked calmly to the impresario's room. There I found William Wood occupied in counting the day's proceeds.

"What's up?" he said as soon as he saw me.

I replied respectfully but frankly: "I wish to quit the company, I want to leave the Circus." The roar of laughter that followed so filled his mouth that I could barely make out his broken words: "And why is that, *Miss Yao*?"

"I am leaving because I'm a gymnast and not a buffoon," I exclaimed resolutely.

"Well now, well, well," the American replied, "I see that you need to read a certain document."

He handed me an old sheet of paper, a contract. My eyes looked at the bottom of it where I saw a name not known to me: Tom Thompson. Then, in the middle of a line, I discerned my name, "Yao," and in the same line these two words: "three thousand dollars," and three lines further down: "sold with the clothes he has on and a precious edition of Confucius to William Wood, impresario of the Circus of Lima." I read no more. Leaning against a wall I saw in a flash of memory the horrid stowage hold of the *shepherd of men's* ship. Tom Thompson, the *jin-mù*, had deceived my mother. William Wood smiled. I was a slave!.....