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Antun Gustav Matoš

## Camao

Getting out of the hospital, he composed some musician or other a couplet against the President of the Republic; in a week the whole of Paris was full of it. Taking his fee, he went to the station and asked where the first train went.

“To Switzerland.”

And next morning Alfred Kamenski arrived in Geneva.

His uncle, Petar Tkalac (he couldn't remember his father) had been a priest in Croatia. Having suddenly been made a canon, he achieved a rapid reputation for his Bukovac vintages and the Lucullan lunches to which he treated his political friends, not at all concealing from them his passionate love for his nephew, not even when he became a bishop, and when the malicious reproached him with this love.

Alfred was a very poor pupil, and his private tutors, among themselves, held him an idiot. The bishop was already despairing of being able to get his beloved boy into the theology department, when he heard him singing something in Latin. He peered through the window and in the garden saw the lad under an enormous chestnut, with his uncle's weighty breviary in his hands. It was impossible: the

boy was singing improvisations on the psalms. He sang so innocently, so sincerely, so perfectly, that the bishop imagined he was listening to the young Mozart. He rushed into the garden, and took the brat in his arms to his mother, crying:

"I knew it, Marta, I knew it, that there had to be something good in Lojz's son. Please, send for our organist, today, right away. And you, Alfek, what'd you like to learn, tell your uncle then!"

"I'd like to learn the piano."

As a boy he went, a new Krezma, to Vienna, where he astounded the professors at the conservatory with his talent, and his comrades with his aristocratic munificence. He kept servants, received company twice a week and took pleasure in befuddling the hectic musicians and the occasional jolly actress, ballerina or girl student from the conservatory with wine from his uncle's grapes. At one such revel his uncle met him, coming secretly and in disguise from Pest, where he had been at the Parliament. Alfred calmly introduced him to the gathering as the most celebrated actor in Zagreb, and the good fellow, the ruddy, white-haired prelate was so charmed by this youthful wantonness that he stayed with the merry, young company until dawn, paying for champagne and moaning with exaltation when his nephew played Beethoven on the piano or improvised on some theme of Lisinski. He took him with him to Pest and introduced him to the salons of the aristocracy which the brat took by storm with his playing, and even more with his exterior. He was as handsome as a young Bacchus. His limber young body still had the hermaphrodite shape of an Adonis. Al-

though he was seventeen, the hostess, Baroness L., could not refrain from kissing this disguised girl, in front of the whole society, on his white forehead, with its network of blue veins, his wavy brown hair falling over it, or upon the large, rosy, pampered lips. And he only just tore away, ran to the piano, and his agile fingers scuttled over the keyboard like the legs of a frightened spider.

At the beginning of his last year at the conservatory, after a game of preference that he had deliberately lost, Kamenski mechanically took up a copy of *Horizon*, turned over a small marble table in his desperation and burst into bitter tears, the first and last time in his life. Rushing home, he found the letter in which his mother informed him that her and his benefactor had suddenly died, without anyone, least of all her, having expected it. She begged her son to return to Zagreb, for she had no money to keep him abroad. The little silver plate and the few hundreds that had come to hand were nothing.

It was the end of the month, and Kamenski, instead of money, had several hundreds in debts.

He sold the furniture, two pianos and a harmonium, all the garments apart from what he had on, paid the debts and collapsed into a hospital from which he emerged in three months a shadow of himself. He spent two nights on the pavement, and the third in some low dive, playing to the men and the trollops polkas and waltzes from ten in the evening till four in the morning for two forints, dinner and beer ad lib. During the day he slept and played in his study. That's how he lived for a year. One night the chums he had once treated turned up in the

bawdy house. Luckily, they didn't recognize him at once, and he fled, and fell, and it was the pavement again. On the third day, when he was completely feeble, he was tapped on the back by his one time teacher, the well known F-f. Kamenski attempted to run, but the astounded gentleman kept hold of him. Questions, pleas, reprimands, and Kamenski confessed everything. His friend F. took him under the arm, led him home, and said:

"From now on I shall be your guardian. It would be a sin to let so much talent go to waste. You've become weak and sickly, look after yourself, practise at my house until the autumn, and in the autumn you'll go to the conservatory and graduate."

But Kamenski recovered to such an extent that in the autumn he was conscripted. Afraid that he would have to start all over again when he had finished his soldiering, he departed, leaving his benefactor a note, for his mother in Zagreb, went off to Vienna once again, where an agent got him under contract as a pianist for some London club. The club quickly folded, and Kamenski with no small difficulties got to Norway. In Christiania he took up with the novelist and odd-ball Dybfest, and when the latter killed himself because he had allowed some acquaintance to drown in front of his eyes, Kamenski was so shaken that after a half year's wandering with a women's orchestra he arrived in Berlin. Here he calmed down, becoming a real "Fatzke" or dandy and leader of a gypsy orchestra. He had just got settled down in Warsaw and was preparing for his longed-for first concert, when the police sent him and his friend the anarchist Mayevski packing to Belgium. And then

after indescribable sufferings he arrived in Paris. Without knowing a single word of French, he miraculously survived for a full year without a penny in his pocket and hardly ever touched the piano. And then he began to work again, working day and night in a sixth floor attic in which all the furniture, apart from the piano, was a straw mattress... He lived off tea and a little bread; on Saturdays only there was champagne to be drunk at the Countess Branicka's, where he shone in the shoes of the painter Weisse, the jacket of the cellist Tisserand and the shirt of the sculptor David who had to lie in bed the while. But the Countess Branicka went away, and Kamenski was thrown into the street because of the rent, together with his furniture. Luckily, Weisse set up a studio in some attic in Batignolles, and Kamenski posed for him for two months for some symbolic painting, dreaming, making love to the other models, playing, carousing and starving. However the great yet unknown Symbolist fled to Algiers because of debts, and Kamenski was in the street again, now blown by winter. Once again in hospital, and he arrived in Switzerland for the winter.

In Geneva he found a little room and on the third day came in the cafe on some Austrian banker who had noticed him while he was reading Hanslick's column in *N.S. Presa* and for whom he began to play every evening. The Jew, Baron Diamond, rewarded him in a quite princely fashion. And so Kamenski began to prepare seriously for his first concert.

And although he was clean and well-clothed, well-fed and without cares, although, after so many barren and miserable years he was approaching a

certain goal, he was astonished that this neither satisfied nor soothed him. Ordinarily, like all solitaries and recluses, he would have quickly got to love his own little room, but all his Genevan flats, which he changed twice or more a month, tormented him like living graves. He was driven out of one in the small hours of the morning by the curtains that would start waving and waving while he was composing, curling like an elephant's trunk and winding round his table like a snake. In the day, especially when he had just woken up, he was troubled by dull anxieties and mournful yearnings – he didn't himself know by what. He was often overtaken by an only just surmountable desire to slash himself across the thighs and ribs with a razor, the longing to destroy himself, kill himself, that had afflicted him in Paris too. Now that he had arranged his life and calmed down as if by some divine miracle, life for him became something as it were between the lines, something that, so to speak, more or less did not exist, and if it did, then it wasn't a life worth grieving for; only his poor mother was, and perhaps whatever he might have created. Create, create! According to the poem he heard in the murmurs soaring above the invisible, myriad-headed orchestra to the quiet sky, everything that life, the waking world, had to offer him was wretched, indistinct, craven and pointless. He was a man who dreamed so clearly that he mixed up the events of his dreams with the goings on of his waking, that the life of his dreams often seemed more powerful than real events. The prosaic existence of modern man, which had well-nigh run him down in the street and left him dead of starvation, was at

first of interest to him, then appalling and finally disgusting. He stuck his head into the sand like an ostrich, spent his life with his eyes turned in towards himself. He met and associated with people who like him hated reality, but their hatred was not the same as his feelings. Some of them hated the laws or religion, or science or poetry; others women, proprietors, society. But Kamenski didn't simply hate; it was something different. They were all in love with their own general ideas and ideals about themselves and about humanity, so called. Kamenski neither loved nor hated; he was simply a burden to himself. He didn't kill himself, because death seemed to him to be a bigger disgrace than life even, and humanity, unfeeling and unintelligible, was strange to him, well nigh appalling. He felt a complete exception, an odd man out.

He plunged thirstily into this Europe, thinking that he would come upon something new and hidden in the soul, playing a part in front of the world and aping the ordinary man, but he found nothing, absolutely nothing. At home, after all, it was all different, it was more beautiful, more poetic. And he secretly regretted the hearty and healthy Croatian countryside, though he knew how that too had at times bored him to death. He could love only things that were far away, unobtainable, that he didn't have. As soon as he obtained some wish, it would bore him even before he could fully satisfy his wish. When he didn't have it, he coveted money, and yet a single ducat was enough thoroughly to disturb and torment him. He was an ardent atheist, and then became a Catholic ascetic, greeting the Angelus on his

knees. By day he was limp, his listless face had the sedate expression of the blind or the dead; at night he came alive, his dull eyes flamed, his pale face would change and be sprinkled with a blush like chaff. He couldn't, like that poet, look at women eating. They were indifferent to him, but he yearned for uncommon relationships abounding in love and for those uncommon women he could not find. From fits of enthusiasm and impulses of uncommon energy, he declined into resigned indifference and finicky limpness.

The summer went by, and Kamenski still had not calmed down. Not long since he had received a letter that upset him still more. His mother had informed him, in passing as it were, that his friend Š. had, in some wood not far from Zagreb, killed J., a young lady teacher, whom Kamenski also knew because her parents had a flat in the same house as his mother and himself. Of the girl, only a pale, yellow veil of a face had remained in his memory, with big, moist midnight eyes glaring out of it like a vampire, and the sickly carmine of her lips like the red glow of carnations in a pauper's window. He remembered Š. as being very silent, holding him a poltroon who wouldn't even cut a chicken's throat, and then! Who could, who could have imagined it in a dream even. A lonely forest evening, the timid, stooping Š. in his black spectacles meets the black, vampire eyes and the terrible lips meant for some other. The quiet, aged lover asked, prayed, begged, pulled a revolver from his pocket with trembling hand... she fled, he shot, shortsightedly got caught in the saplings, his black eyeglasses fell, he hurried like a maniac, jerked

her by the crow-black hair and put his last bullet through her virgin white forehead, and she sent her last desperate shriek through his trembling heart. And Š. found his glasses, went home for his rifle, came back, put a match to the brush, impaled himself on hawthorn and brambles, fell over the black, vampire eyes and bloody blotches, and blew out his own brains.

"Such a thing to happen in Zagreb... I couldn't have imagined that, not even in my dreams." And Kamenski worried and fretted, and yet nevertheless secretly longed for such a love and such a death.

One evening he went to the *Metropol* hotel to see his patron; while taking off his coat in the vestibule, through the only half closed door he heard the baron whispering.

"Ah, madame, here comes that pianist of mine you expressed so much interest in, having done me the honour to graciously visit me here this afternoon. He will play at once. This will be just the thing for you. Only please do not let yourself be seen, for this fellow of mine plays conventionally and poorly in front of strangers."

This stung Kamenski to the quick. He went in, and greeting his host out loud, whispered to him from the piano.

"What's this game about? There's someone else here? What's that hiding behind the door?"

"Forgive me. But this is just some eccentric, half mad, aristocratic lady of mine from Vienna. Ssshhh. Play!"

Kamenski sat down at the piano, convulsively stretching his long thin fingers. Throwing down his cigarette he felt a gentle, sweet feminine perfume, from which there arose a pallid veil, with two shadowy, midnight eyes on it, lips like a bloody carnation, and the evening twilight, which was dense about the room, absolutely began to touch his forehead as if it were soft, dishevelled female hair. On the piano he could notice a fine white glove, and behind the curtains over the opposite door he could hear muffled breathing.

"Oh, if this piano were as great as the nave of some ancient cathedral, and if it were on a hill above some extinct village, from which smoke was rising towards me, of the sacrifice of the last inhabitant, the last man but one," said Kamenski as if to himself, and Liszt's passionate *Rhapsody* and Schumann's frenzied *Carnival* rang out. Silence, not a breath. Kamenski fixed his gaze on the glove on the piano and saw the fingers desperately flexing and sinking into the dark. The door curtain shifted. He could see nothing, but he could feel the eyes, two eyes, two warm eyes. And in the despairing basses the quiet melody began to vanish, like the young sailor's view of the shore from the waves, of the dark shore, from which it seemed a voice could be heard from the little village church. And the young eyes clouded over, the awful waves sank, and over the divine water the silver voice from the divine little church died away... Silence again in the room, not a breath, and the evening darkness heaved softly. Kamenski drank down a glass of claret and threw himself back negligently upon the divan.

"One more time, dear Kamenski, just one more time, do you hear, I beg you to come along with me," said Diamond, quite hoarse with emotion.

"I am a bachelor, you can live well here with me, I shall pay as much as you want. You are not made for concerts, not for any kind of practical life. Fashion and the so-called public will kill you. You are not for playing upon the boards."

At that, the lady came out from her hiding place, and sat down alongside Kamenski, without a word. He didn't move. He was overwhelmed and entranced. The banker, lighting the lamp, indicated her with his head, squinted, and put his finger suspiciously to his forehead. He brought the light back to the pianist but the lady smiled and said with a beautiful, warm contralto:

"Stay just like that. I have known you for ages."

"And I have known you."

And really, it seemed to Kamenski that he knew her very well indeed, as if he had seen her often, very often, but where, where?

"Where have we seen each other, Fanny?"

"I can't say just now. Look here, am I really called Fanny?"

"It's the *only* name that fits you..."

Diamond started coughing nervously, and she laughed aloud, from the heart, wrapped Kamenski's long silky hair around her slender fingers and looked inquisitively at this spellbound Bohemian, who stretched carelessly, crossed legs ending in elegant patent leather shoes and stuck his hands into

the pockets of a coat made of black silk velvet.

"Heavens, Fanny, I've known you for ages, and it's only today that I realise how pretty you are. Forgive me, Baron, but she is pretty, so frightfully pretty,"

A lamp burned behind her head, and her hair flamed like a golden aureole. Kamenski observed her, and he was overwhelmed by such a feeling of pleasure that he couldn't keep looking, and closed his eyes. He felt as you do when you hear the murmur of the wind in the pines above your head and think you're sailing on a cloud.

She suddenly rose and left, saying farewell to the banker with her head only.

"And where are you off to, my lady?" shouted the banker, and ran after her to the door. "Where shall I send your money? Where, where do you live?"

There was no answer.

Kamenski somehow managed to compose himself.

"Who is that lady?"

"Believe me, I don't really know. Polish, I suppose you can tell from her accent. The daughter of ruined gentry, they left her a little income that I pay out. I became acquainted with her in Vienna, where she played the violoncello wonderfully. Today I met her by chance on my way by boat to Montreux, where she told me she was married to some sort of financier, Forst, Fürst, Förster, what was it? I can't remember the name just now, though I know the man personally. What she wanted from me, I don't know; the only thing that's clear is that she didn't

come for the money. Hey, my lad, you're lucky with the ladies, it seems to me. It's just a pity that this one is absolutely, upon my word of honour, absolutely mad, and I wonder that her husband allows her to wander around."

"Strange. And where does she live?"

"Devil only knows. But what are you asking? You, my dear sir, are a real diplomat. It seems that I, old bird that I am, don't really know you. Her husband was here one evening when I gave our first soiree if I am not mistaken. You know, that big fellow who was playing cards all..."

"I don't know; there were lots of them, and I went home straight away after the performance. But it's her, her that I know, know her like my very self, but where, and how?"

The Jew looked at him suspiciously and sceptically shrugged his shoulders.

The old broker was a good connoisseur of people, but with this pair he didn't know whether he had a fool to deal with or if he was being hoodwinked by a designing double-dealer.

"You're a first-rate actor," he said, lighting his cigarette and strove to see if there was even the slightest trace of hypocrisy in the Bohemian eye or under the youthful little beard. But Kamenski puffed quite calmly and started to say good-bye. There was a throbbing in his temples. Diamond slipped some money into his right hand.

"Well, then, have you made up your mind? Shall you go to Munich with me tomorrow? If you haven't, it's a pity for you and for me, and if you do make up

your mind to it, write to me. You're such a big baby, you'll be ruined if you stay here left to your own devices. But whenever you need me, just let me know, and I won't forget you.

Thanking the worshipper of Mendelssohn, Kamenski felt that the man was boring, however much he attempted to make himself feel grateful, and however much that made him angry with himself.

He felt a little easier in the street. The wind was whirling the first dry leaves. The lake at night gleamed like a woman's silver skin under a black veil. Kamenski sat down on a bench.

"Thank you for coming at once. Thank you." It was her.

"I knew you'd wait for me, Fanny!"

She sat down beside him.

Not many people around; a few working men with steel-bound shoes. Noiselessly below them floated a foaming patch of pale: a swan.

"How wonderful it would be were that swan to sing!"

"Truly. If I could hear it, I think I would die."

The swan disappeared on the water like a white spectre. The quivering wave of the dreaming lake rose like the breasts and smelled like the sweat of a healthy young girl in her sleep. The clouds imbibed the moonlight and swung among the stars like silver serpents among flowers of pearl.

"Have you heard, Fanny, the stars singing? Have you heard the moon in its sorrowful grieving? That's like a voice that echoes from the heavenly vault.

Hard ears don't hear it, hard fingers can't render it on hard guts and hard wood... Nothing is lost, nothing comes into being, and this is a night that is full of pain that has been and shall be".

He felt her strong, soft hands around his neck.

"I have always known you, always, always longed for you. And I have found you. No one can take you away from me, not even death!" she whispered, and her hot tears dewed his dry, hot lips that had started to tremble convulsively at the ends. He didn't even kiss her, he was so carried away.

So far they had been talking in German and French mixed, and now he started to murmur to her in pure Warsaw:

"So it's you I was born for, whom I'll die for. The Lord created the light because you have eyes, the sun because you have a heart, flowers because you're a violet, music because you speak. Now I can understand the language of this water, this wind and this earth in which I shall lie with you, my marvellous *pani*, my lady. Hera's eyes, Athene's hands, Thetis's eyes, the Cyprian's breasts... is it really all mine? Shall I really breathe in your soul, in which that deep dark night shines so mysteriously?"

The swan slipped past them again like a silvery dream, the wind carried the warm whispering over the lake to the clouds that were climbing the moon and rolling like copper snakes among the pearly flowers on the soft meadow of night.

The thunder clap of a distant storm rumbled over the Jura. They departed.

"Have you, Fanny, have you got a husband?"



“Until today I had. Now you are my man. I shall leave that corsair, and we shall live and play. Don’t ask me who I am, at least not today. Look, I shan’t ask you either. And why should we, when we have known each other for ever, from the very beginning? Let us go home to get my things; don’t be afraid of me, I am not rich. My corsair is in Paris, scouring the bourse and lounging around studios and backstages. How sick I am of all these lies, this Europe of theirs. I’ve been up to my neck in mud waiting for you, my dear Alfred.”

Kamenski’s flesh crawled when she hit on his name.

“But I am really called Alfred.”

“No. You are not Alfred, not tonight at least. I am the lady Venus, and you are my darling knight Tannhäuser. But oh how thin and wan you have become my lovely knight, going on your far off quests. Every tedious journey has left a gloomy furrow upon your noble face, a furrow only the eyes of the Lady Venus can espy. But the eye is still that old Tannhäuserian eye, hazel, proud and green like that of a royal lion. Tell me, tell me something, my lost and found again love!”

They had already left the city and come to an area of mute villages and chilly gardens.

There was a fence hung with the last roses, luxuriant as foam. Kamenski broke off a branch, took off his companion’s hat, scattering the scented roses over her head, decking out her bosom.

“Can you hear, my lovely lady, the stars sounding, the sounds starring? A song of the seraphs, which

your heart accompanies with a divine arpeggio.”

“Tell me, Tannhäuser, of your voyages!”

“I was never in Rome, but in all other parts I have been....the road stretches out like some boundless snake, it has covered the bare earth and pitched me into the ditch. My feet are numb, bones full of the frost of winter and the fire of June, and heart is full of dark and despair. A hundred times I could have expired, but longing drove me on to your mansions...Venus, my lovely lady! And the sun to the east, and a strong god to help. Ten long years I rested, not knowing where I would hide my head on the morrow. And I can already feel the frozen hand of death upon my back, but I take hold of my harp, console myself with you, lovely lady, I cry for you, far off Venus, for your mysterious mansions, for your divine soul, for your delectable soul.”

“Here we are, this is my house.”

They had come down through a thicket into a little dale. A lull, a hush. The chilly park took them in through the heavy iron gate; it was full of old firs, poplars, old box and ivy. An immensely high wall closed the estate off still more from the general world. And two dark towers started up in the moonlight and a hamlet of wind-blown walls with high closed windows. As quiet as the grave. There was just a dog on the hill wailing ominously, and two enormous St Bernards hurled themselves at the newcomers and started to lick the hand of the lady of the house, who led them away to an old house. Kamenski was overcome by a strange, alien feeling, as always when he was alone near ancient, isolated wooden houses. At night through their shaky door

frames the silken rags of rustling crinolines were to be seen, through the holes in the shattered and sodden shutters on the windows peered the dull, wary eyes of a sullen host, there was a dreadful bristling of a greying wig around the crooked tin cocks on the mossy roof. Weepers squealed under great chained columns in the mouldy cellar; stones around the headless Chinese on the roof of the abandoned summer-house hummed a dead song... Kamenski sat on the terrace on the crumbling stone step. The wings of night birds rustled above his head. He gazed in the green moonlight at a cobweb descending onto his bare head like a wisp of grey hair. The whelp on the hill wailed again ominously. At that a lean oldster in a livery popped up behind Kamenski silently carrying a table and armchairs.

“Madame will be here presently.”

He banged down wine and tobacco on the table and, muttering something through his teeth, went into the house, slamming the door. Silence again. There was nothing to be heard but the knocking of his troubled heart and the monotonous strumming of a cicada. Two stars gleamed, falling one after another. Kamenski sighed, heard soft steps and felt soft arms around his neck.

“I hope you are well in my house, Tannhäuser!”

“Since your eyes shine over me and these flowers below me. Someone said: A warm night, and the will is waxen in your soft hand! Lord above, but you are beautiful!”

He filled a glass with wine and drank it off. He gathered up her broad lace sleeve, passionately kissed

the ample arm near the elbow and fell bewitched to her feet.

“You have brought me, as our ancient song says, sun in your bosom, and the brilliant moonlight in your arms. I have shattered my first hellish dream and arrived in this divine dream. Behold me, yours for ever and ever.”

She placed his head in her lap and kissed him on the hair and face.

“My poor afflicted one, my lovely spouse. Tell me the sufferings of your travels, to relieve your soul.”

“In London I was unfaithful to you. Camilla was like the sparrow with whom she grew up under a high roof. She had yellow hair and eyes like two blue insects; I shall never forget these insects. And a damp wind blew, and a thick green winter fog fell. We went to find her child food. Just as the dawn was breaking on the second day, I came home with milk and hurried up to our attic. On the sixth flight of stairs I heard a child’s wailing, as when you score glass with a needle. I broke down the door. The sabbath bells began to drone, and when the little mite in my arms went green, I heard the old bell crack and lose its voice. I fled to Spain with the gymnast Griffith. We went to see the shooting of the already garotted anarchists. They lay bound upon the earth, and a soldier was going from one to the other, shooting them in the head. When he arrived at a certain blond man, my friend carved out a lightning way for himself with iron tipped elbows and tore the gun from the executioner’s hands. When they only

just managed to overcome him and led him away close by me, I saw that he had gone mad. I found out later from the paper that the blond fellow was his brother. When he was being shot, he looked me in the eyes like a trapped bird, the rifle went off, and his eye was extinguished in mine, the ice of his soul sank into mine. Do you know that even when you have taken out animals' brains they can still bite if you pinch them. And I went off to kill, to bite. In Brussels I was friends with Mayevski. He was good as gold, and brave as a lion. We lived together. His seven year old child, a little phiz with golden hair, would always wait for me when I came back from playing and fall asleep around my neck. I gave Mayevski money to make dynamite. One day I was going home from my playing and all at once there was a bang, a boom, clatter, a roar. I fell prone. The dynamite had blown up half the hotel. I picked up this rag from the street."

And Kamenski took a fragment of a child's pinafore from his bosom; it had a hank of long blond hair stuck to it by blood. She clung to him and trembled. Kamenski supped off a glass of Cypriot.

"The spirit winds and there's no life. With a certain *trimadeur*, a tramp, I went to Paris. In Paris I looked in at the Morgue, grievous building, where the unknown and unfortunate are exhibited to see if anyone recognises them. I came upon a pair of dead revellers. One Lazarus had his head swollen and blackened like an Arab, and there was a waxing of blood on his lips and around his corroded teeth. The other was as wretched as Job. His skinny loins poked out of his tattered cloak, and his inflamed

ribs were all but thrusting through the countless holes in the colourless rags of a shirt. I looked at his face, and my knees began to totter appalled, and I came close to tumbling over the wooden rail and breaking the glass of the dreadful exhibition. The unlucky nightwalker was the absolute picture of myself. He was wearing the same rags in which I had arrived in Paris. I stared harder, through the rags, on the skinny exposed chest, I could see a mole, just like the one I have on the same place, and on his long, crooked index finger of the right hand I could see the trace of a wound, look, here, just like the one I have. Near his feet there was a cap – my cap; a handkerchief – my blue handkerchief and a piece of paper for music. I stared with despairing eyes and I could see on that leaf of paper the beginning of my song *A winter's morn* written down in pencil. ... I swooned, and when they brought me round in hospital, I felt better. The old youthful nightingale warbled in my breast, the scent of a flower of eighteen years in my spirit. God's sky gazed at me through the window like the blue eye of an innocent, the rainbow of God's grace arched over the calm of my soul. I became different, I was born again. While dreadful dreams were rending my soul in the hospital that day, my sinful body, that fatal corpse in the Morgue, was swallowed up by a grave without a name, a nameless numbered tatter. I went to Lourdes, and from there I found myself in some castle at the foot of the Pyrenees, where I taught a son of the nobility to play, and played the organ every Sunday in the village church. Yes, that was the first time that I saw you, my lady Venus; you were marble, in the old

ducal park, and I drank the first frosts from your icy lips with my burning kisses in those lonely and insipid autumn mornings..."

And Kamenski began to kiss her dewy eyes.

"I endured all those tribulations just for this blessed moment."

The lightning flared in his eyes and she shrank as if she had been burned by the thunderbolt.

There was just a slight breeze flowing through the leaves and their hair, as if the flowers were debating with the stars.

"My unhappy one!"

"My soul, my dream!"

They ran out of words. A warm, drained fatigue swept over them, like a sick person taken out of doors into the fresh sea breeze. If they were to die, they wouldn't feel it at that moment.

And the breeze rustled through the flowers and the fragrant hair, as if the blossom were quietly flirting with the stars.

The salon they entered from the terrace through the wide glass doors was quite brilliant. The walls were hardly to be seen for opulent tapestries. This was hardly a salon at all, more of a kingly studio, filled with gorgeous Persian rugs, Bedouin rifles and Damascene sabres, Etrurian and Hellenic pottery, enamels and jewels. As to the painters, they were largely English and Dutch: excellent copies of the landscapes of Ruysdael, Turner and East, of Rembrandt's Night Watch, of Reynold's portraits.... Kamenski was most attracted by an original Whistler

portrait. It was of a man, with a large, clean-shaven, longish face, with brush and palette in his nervous, bony hands. The painter had caught the expression on the face marvellously: around the mouth with its short pipe there was a satiated, contemptuous sneer, the eyes were slightly closed, dark grey, not looking in a single place but wide about. Kamenski felt that this being was her husband: the grim, restless eyes were pointed at him from the painting like the muzzles of a loaded double-barrelled pistol. Quite suddenly Kamenski was uncomfortable, almost uneasy. If you walked on roses, you would have bloody feet. It was like reading some marvellous book and, when you got to the most interesting part, finding there was a page missing. By the side of this grim portrait there was one of her smiling in the manner of Rubens. She was semi-nude. Just alongside her white, white knee was written thick and red: Francisca de Krystkiewicz, amor meus aeternus. Johannes Forest pinx. The portrait was not very good in fact, and Kamenski could read on the model's face that she found this sitting naked revolting. And the scene came to life in front of his eyes: his adored darling in that corner, on the ottoman, and the amateur painter looking at her cynically with those double barrelled eyes, daubing the canvas, whistling, approaching the model to adjust her, affronting the marble back with his grimy paws.

She instinctively felt the cause of his silence and started to draw the curtain in front of the portrait, and Kamenski had the blood in his veins chilled by the cry:

"Fanny, Fanny!"

It was as if Forest were calling from the portrait.

"Shut up, idiot, shut up!" laughed the lady, feeding sugar to a parrot standing between the portrait and a marble bust of Ludwig II.

And Kamenski laughed aloud, but when the white parrot with its green crest started to ruffle its feathers and stare at him with its big protuberant eyes as black and hard as if they were of black pitch, he was overcome by a secret spleen and a desire to wring its neck. He had always hated the silly, malicious animals, those dolls and monkeys of the birds with their hypocritical, shrieking voices. Fanny sat to bow the cello, but his gloom was brought on even more by her enthralled and perfect playing. He had a friend, a virtuoso cellist, who was dying from consumption in Lugano, and he couldn't listen to the cello without thinking of him.

"How do you like it? What do you say, can it pass muster? I'm quite embarrassed in front of you."

"Fanny, you play marvellously, marvellously. I would never have imagined that a woman could know this male instrument so well. In fact, you yourself were not even playing; that was being sung by a dead man, a dear departed, my countryman and only friend. I have heard no one but you and him playing these acrobatics of Paganini on the cello."

"Was he as beautiful and good as you?"

"Much more beautiful, much better."

"Are there many such people in your Croatia?"

"There are, only on the whole they perish. Don't ask why!"

"Do you love your Croatia? Oh, I adore Poland. Tell me, tell me."

"Sometimes I felt I didn't love it, but I was wrong. Once I was coming back home in Paris from some socialist meeting. It was a wonderful night, and I was walking along some not very large boulevards. I was tired, and dozed on a bench. Dawn was reddening when I was awoken: tirili, tititi, tiritirili. At first I thought I was at home, under the walnut trees, with my mother, in the lovely Croatian countryside. In my sleep on the boulevard it was perhaps Croatia chirping above my head like a bird...I rubbed my eyes and saw a Lika cap, I saw my brother Croat gently blowing into a double flute. At length he arose, went round the corner, and playing all the time tiriliri ti-ti-ti. And when I could hear him no more, I rushed after my brother, that man from Lika, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen. As I say, Croatia comes to visit me, and it's hard for me when I remember..."

"Oh, you Croats are like Poles; you are a Pole, like I am. Shall we go tomorrow, my darling?"

And again the words were silent in his throat. There was nothing to be heard but the ruffling of the parrot who was glaring at the lovers with his large, protuberant eyes as hard and black as if of black pitch. The cockerels could be heard too, bringing the day in their beaks. And the tick-tocking of the great Baroque clock wove the weary souls with its honeyed weaving...

The stars had descended long before. Long before, a patch of the peony sky had peeped through the long velvet curtains. The shaven old servant

squinted suspiciously through the keyhole into the studio, saw the head of the mysterious fellow drowned in a jet of golden hair, and the slender ray of sun fell by that pale head on the closed mouth and long lashes. The full dishes trembled in his hands, and the malicious old fellow was now sorry, and wanted to knock on the high white door, fall on his knees in front of the lady, and confess everything to her, everything... And her sleeping smiles were so childlike in the ray of sun that gilded the ruddy cheek. The old lackey sighed and took the trembling platters back to the kitchen. And when the lady of the house came herself for supper as evening fell, the servant fell to her feet and started blabbing, but she didn't even look at her husband's repulsive informer, just shouted from the corridor:

"Make sure to be here at eleven with a carriage from the city."

"Yes my lady. But, my lady, please, listen..."

However, the door of the salon banged mercilessly, and the old chap started to tug at his hair.

"And now, let us hurry, my dear Alfred. We will take only what is most essential, and the gold of my late mother. With this and my own small income we can live peacefully and prepare for our concerts. We can go to Cairo, Venice, America, it's quite the same to me. You will help me to get ready for the journey won't you? At eleven we will go to the station and we will leave on the first train. The main thing is to leave here as soon as possible."

Instead of answering Kamenski began to kiss her eyes and hands frantically.

When she started to fold her elegant dresses in her enormous travelling trunk, the parrot all of a sudden began to ruffle its feathers in a frenzy and scream, imitating her husband.

"Fanny, Fanny, *my dear Fanny!* Fanny, ma mignonne, douce minette Fanny..."

"Sshh, Camao!" she said calming the bird, terrified, feeding it with sugar, but the parrot yelled madly, the green crest shaking frenziedly on the doll-like head, and the protuberant eyes, hard and black as if of black pitch, bulged as if they were about to jump out.

"Fanny, mignonne, ma minette, Fannnnn!"

He had already got everything ready for the journey, when the dogs barked and yelped joyfully in the park.

"My husband," she shrieked in alarm. "Come, Alfred, let's quickly throw these things through that door into the box-room... That's it. ...And now take this purse, my jewels, and through the window, take our fiacre and wait for me where you picked me those roses last night. Hurry. He is already upon the steps."

The dog ran up and began to scratch on the door, and this bothered Kamenski so much that he ran at the closed window. He had just made as if to open it when he heard the door opening. He pressed himself up to the long curtain and held his breath. But this terror soon passed, and he stood up, taking a pocket-knife from his pocket and saw her through the slit throwing the dog out into the passage by its collar.

"Ha, have I taken you by surprise then?" whispered the newcomer ostensibly smiling and then suddenly shouting so loud that the flame of the candles blinked:

"Where is this lover? Where is the interloper?"

And a tall broad-shouldered figure in a top hat whirled with his revolver round the room and peered into every corner. Arriving at Kamenski's hiding place, he lifted up only the right hand curtain, and, looking through the window into the park, hid him with it. Kamenski felt an elbow in his chest. Then he went, and Kamenski smiled in spite of his heart.

"Well, and? Have you found anything? Is that the way to come to ladies at night? Sir, you are something more than ridiculous," she said calmly.

Forest lunged, took hold of her brutally by her right hand and threw her down on the carpet like a feather.

Kamenski was about to step forward.

"Vulgarian! It's easy to see your father's an American butcher. Once a peasant, always a peasant, and I am not in the habit, unlike my father..."

"The starveling and gambler!"

"... I am not in the habit of doing peasants the honour of horsewhipping them," said she, coldly and contemptuously.

Forest started to hawk, cough, pushed the revolver in his pocket, pulled deep at a bottle of cognac, slumped on the sofa as pale as a quince and began to consider.

"Do you hear, you would-be Othello, you are a brutal vulgarian, and that is why I shall forgive you

this evening if you beg me for forgiveness. Do you hear me, Fo - Fo - Fo, oh, that name of yours. Fo - Fo - Forest?"

"Quiet... you. Petar telegraphed me last night that you were here with some young fellow, some lover," stammered the American in his atrocious French and threw the telegram into her face. "Tell the truth, I won't do anything to you, but just tell me the truth. I won't hurt a hair of your head. But this uncertainty, this lie; that hurts, hurts, Fanny, it hurts a hundred times more than the ghastly truth. I know that you don't love me, I knew that when I took you, and I don't ask for love from you. You can love someone else, but for him to love you, for you to deceive me, oh, I would kill, slaughter, tear to pieces, Fanny."

She smiled sweetly.

"So... the lackey accuses me. So, Petar is your spy. I saw through that toady ages ago. And you believe such people? That's sad. It is true that there was an artist here with me, some pianist or other, a Czech, whatever, who was sent to me from Geneva by my Viennese banker."

"I think I've seen him at Diamond's, that piece of raw macaroni with his famished loafer's face."

"Very good. So, I found this skin-and-bones last night at Diamond's, whom I had met accidentally on the way and visited on account of my own business. I brought the Czech home to break the monotony for me with his playing. Since he's nowhere to live, he spent the night here on the divan, and since he plays well, he accompanied me on the piano to-

day. Do you and your lackey informer take me to be so dense that I would bring my lovers here and carry them off in public from people you know? From the son it's clear your father was a dealer in oxen. It's all pointless, it stays in the blood, it's hopeless, all your expenses on actresses and carousing with painters..." Forest greedily drank down the last of the cognac, threw down his top hat and coat, and began to cackle and stammer doltishly:

"Fanny, Fanny, my dear Fanny! Fanny, ma mignonne, ma douce minette, Fanny! I love you so much, Fanny, for you have the tongue of a snake and claws of a jaguar. It's an honour to be your husband: one long marvellous fight. I am so big, strong as an elephant, and you're such a gentle and poisonous adder... it's marvellous, isn't it? But let's make a truce for tonight. I beg you, please forgive me, because I am desperately and wildly in love with you."

There was knocking on the door. In came Petar the lackey, as pasty-faced as a condemned man. He caught hold of the scroll of an armchair to keep himself from falling.

"Where are you loafing around, you old black-guard? And what was that you were telegraphing me last night, you dog?"

The old man directed another canny glance at his mistress and began to moan out:

"I got it wrong, my old master, and the madame has already graciously forgiven me this morning since I repented. Once again, forgive me, gracious lady!"

And the old servant had just been dismissed to his cell by the lady's hand, groaning for joy and excite-

ment that everything had ended in such away, when the parrot started to flutter in a frenzy, with silly shaking of its green crest on its silly head, the hard bulging eyes shining like phosphor. The half drunk Forest shouted:

"What's up with you, my white Camao?"

And with that the parrot flew onto the ottoman, picked up some gossamery black scarf and started babbling in German, Polish and French.

"Dear... sweet... Alfred... Tan... Tannhäuser... a new life... my soul..."

As pale as a sheet, she leaped to catch hold of the malign bird, but the parrot flew off spitefully, dropped the black scarf on Forest and started wooing, imitating Kamenski:

"My heart... my soul... mystery of life... ha... let's go... quick, Fanny, dear Fanny..."

She fainted. The American's eyes burned, and he started pulling her by her hair along the Persian rug. Kamenski cried out, leaped from his ambush on the American's broad back, and struck him in the head with the point of his blunt pen-knife. The blood had not yet spurted over the white shirt, and Forest was on Kamenski with what seemed like spiked gloves and pitched him onto the sofa.

"*Goujat, infame!*"

His voice was thick, his mouth afoam, eyes alight with blood, and when he heard the scream of his wife, he threw her over her, snarling:

"I won't kill him alone, but you too, you bitch, bitch, a hundred times lying bitch."



Kneeling on Kamenski's back, he pinned him with his gorilla's arms, and broke first his right and then his left forearm and, breaking down the door, pitched the mutilated Kamenski by his legs onto the stone terrace, laughing wildly and shouting:

"Play to her now Tannhäuser, play to her now!"

His blue lips twitching, through the shattered door, Kamenski could see the frenzied man of fate shooting her, the astonished lackey, the two terrified faithful dogs, and strangling himself with a black cravat, the gift of Baron Diamond, on the copper column underneath the parrot.

And then he saw his own mother, resting on a black bed, among the lilies and candles. Her face and folded hands were as yellow as wax candles, and her hair as silver as a lily. His mother was silent like lily and candle. He wanted to kiss her, but the old lady became somehow terribly small, dreadfully tiny, the hot wax was dripping on her closed left eye, and she didn't flinch, but kept as silent as the yellow candle and the white lily. Kamenski fled and swooned on the stone steps of the church where he had once played the Angelus in duets with the bell-ringer. A man came up to his head from the church saying:

"Arise and come with me to the kingdom of heaven!"

He rose, but four fists took hold of him:

"You are Alfred Kamenski. In the name of the law..."

Kamenski recovered from this apparition. And it was night again. Blood from his head glued his back

to the stone. Pain in his arms and head, pain in the wind and air. And he prayed humbly to the blessed Virgin to beg for grace from the most merciful Lord in the coming hour of his death. Praying; his gaze quenched in the stars, the myriad rosary of the night, in the clouds, the incense of the night, in the moon, the communion wafer of the night that had started to descend to his mouth.

"The heavens speak of the glory of the Lord," he managed to say with his last strength.

And the park was redolent of incense.

And he felt in his body the balm of the soothing heavenly rain. Darkness.

It was only the cawing of the crows and the distasteful odour that aroused the distant neighbours, who together with the police broke down the iron studded door of the deserted old villa. They found five corpses and a parrot malignly shrieking over the fatal carnage:

"Fanny, Fanny, my dear Fanny! Fanny, my little rose-bud, Fanny, my little pussy cat."