

MIHAI EMINESCU

1850 – 1889

Mihai Eminescu epitomizes the romantic revival of Romanian literature. His poetry – as unprecedented as it was unsurpassed in the epoch – endures until today as an unchallenged pinnacle of artistic achievement. Love as main theme is lavishly orchestrated in a resplendent range of registers. It is romantic love that unfolds with ardent intensity against social, historical, philosophical, Utopian and natural backgrounds. ● Luceafărul (“Hyperion”) is generally considered to bear testimony of the poet’s genius. So very much so, that he is commonly known as “the Hyperion of Romanian poetry”, and recognized unanimously as the national poet. ● True to romantic form, Eminescu was keen to live out his poetry. His prose was an obvious step in that direction. He is as much the sorrowful Dionis as he is Hyperion. The following fiction experiments ingeniously with the implications of relativity, and boldly questions causality, at a time when such attitudes were far less commonplace than today. ● Though his story is open-ended, in keeping with the capers of relativity, it does hint at the one absolute value transcending the convulsions of causality: love...

THE SORROWFUL DIONIS

...and likewise, if I close one of my eyes, I see my hand a fraction smaller than with both. Now if I had three eyes, I'd see it larger still, and the more eyes I had, the larger all the things around me would appear. Yet were I to be born with myriads of eyes, compassed by creatures of colossal bulk, those creatures, one and all, though keeping their proportion to myself, would then appear to me no larger and no smaller than today. Let us imagine the world shrunken to a bullet, and all the things thereof scaled down in due proportion – the denizens of such a world, supposing them to be endowed with senses like our own, would perceive everything in absolutely like wise and proportion as we do. Let us imagine it, other things being equal, a thousand times as large – it's all the same. As long as the proportions are unchanged, a world a thousand times as large and one a thousand times as small will be for us unchanged in magnitude. The objects that I see are, in like manner, smaller to one eye, while to both they're larger; how large are they, then, absolutely speaking? We might be living in a microscopic world for all we know – what if the making of our eyes alone has us perceive it in the size we do? For all we know, each man might have a different perception of all things, and – likewise – of all sounds – what if language alone, naming an object in a certain way, though different men perceive it differently, *unites* all men's perception. Language? No. It may well be that every single world rings differently to every single man – only the individual alone, being the same at all times, hears it in one way only.

And, in a space supposedly unbounded, is not a piece thereof, no matter how immense or how minute a mere drop compared to boundlessness? Likewise, in limitless eternity, is not each length of time, no matter how extensive or how short, a mere suspended moment? And here's how it's done. Suppose the world is shrunken to a dew drop, and all time ratios – to a drop of time; the centuries that make the history of that world microscopic would be but moments of our time, and in those mere moments people would work as much and think as much as we do in our ages – to them, their ages would be just as long as ours are to ourselves. Oh, the non-finite nanospace the millions of infusoria searched after by the scholars of that world would fade into, and oh, the time infinitesimal allotted to the fleeting flash of joy – and, all in all, those things would be no different than they are in our days.

... The world, in actual fact, is our soul's dream. For neither time nor space exist as such – they only find their substance in our soul, the way the forest does within the acorn; the infinite itself resides in there, like the reflexion of the starry sky within the dew drop. If only we could grasp the mystery allow-

ing access to these two orders of things which are concealed in us, a mystery once mastered, peradventure, by the Egyptian and Assyrian magi, then – having descended to the chasms of our souls – we might in truth be living in the past, and might inhabit sun – and stellar worlds. That sciences such as necromancy and astrology are lost is to be rued – who knows the mysteries without number they might have yet revealed in this regard! If the whole world's a dream – why couldn't we co-ordinate the range of its phenomena at will? It is not true that such a thing called past exists – consequentiality is all in our mind – causality, though we perceive it sequentially, is essentially immovable and simultaneously at work in all phenomena. Oh, to be living in the times of Mircea the Great or Alexander the Gentle – is it, I wonder, absolutely impossible? A geometrical point will simply vanish if we consider its position against infinity, so will an instant in its infinitesimal divisibility which goes forever on. In these atoms of space, atoms of time, how much infinity! If only I could likewise lose myself within my very soul's infinity, all the way to that particular phase of her emanation known, say, as the age of Alexander the Gentle... and, nonetheless...

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The reader has indeed been justified to shake his or her head in dismay, and ask him or herself: who was the mortal harbouring such notions in his mind? The ideational existence of these reflexions had for its source of emanation a head whose mane, tempestuously unkempt, was stuffed into a furry lambskin cap. It was night, and the rain drizzled upon the unpaved, narrow, muddy streets that criss-cross the welter of dwarfish crumbling houses making up most of Rumania's capital. A hefty pair of boots braved the miry puddles that splashed lavishly the intrepid wayfarer trusting the perfidious tide; not that the boots seemed to care – they would have been a match for the deluge, all the more so, since their ample tops were designed so as to engulf the trousers of the individual contained, as soon as the weather started posing a problem. Our hero's shadow was obliterated by the drizzly precipitation which had caused the appearance of his head to resemble a rain-soaked ram, and one wondered what it was that struggled to withstand the unrelenting rain: was it his drenched attire, or was it metaphysics? The shops and public houses contributed, through their many-paned windows, whose size was only equalled by their dirt, a murky light, further dimmed by the raindrops flooding the glass. At times, some romance-prone gallant would amble into sight, whistling as he walked past; the occasional suburbanite, pot-valiant with the fruit of the vine, would challenge the walls and the wind; the odd woman, her countenance obscured by her hood, would sweep by, shedding her shadows in the misty space, like the forbidding gods of ancient Norse myths... The wailing of a belaboured fiddle wafted through the open door of a public house. Our metaphysician approached it for a closer look, and the light spilling through the door bounced off his face: Dionis' was no uncomely head. His ivory complexion was as mellow as soft-hued marble glowing

in the gloom. His face, though on the wan side, was not hollow. His almond-shaped, pitch-black and intense eyes, swirled in their orbits like voluptuous velvet. A smile – so faint, and yet so innocent – flashed on his face in response to the sight that met his eyes. And what should that sight be? A Gipsy boy, his bullet-head afloat in an expanse of hat whose ample brim was a meet symbol for infinity, shod in a pair of boots as large as all of him, clad in a tunic reaching down unto his heels and obviously not his, savaged a jumble of discordant strings with sparsely stranded bow and bony fingers extracting agonizing stridulations, while a lanky Hungarian, his bare feet tucked into galoshes stuffed with straw, fervidly trod the earth down all around him. Offending though this pageant might have been to the aesthetic standards of our hero, its influence upon him was benign, for – roused from his metaphysic reveries – he realized the rain had drenched him to the bone. He repaired to an adjoining coffee house to dry himself. On taking off his furry lambskin cap, our youth revealed a brow so smooth, so white, flawlessly arched, in perfect keeping with his handsome face. His hair, granted, in dire need of clipping, cascaded down his back in jet-black fronds, its shaggy wilderness in pleasant contrast with his boyish, tender face. He hung his topcoat on a peg to dry and, as he luxuriated in the inebriating fragrance of steaming Turkish coffee, his softly sparkling eyes engaged again in that intense pursuit of reverie becoming boys so well, since seriousness does enhance by contrast the sweetness of a child's face. The light of sleepy lamps ploughed fulvous furrows through the frowsty air. The sooty walls, redolent of the fumes of stale tobacco, resounded with the clash of dominoes and with the hollow tick-tock of a timepiece. Dionis scribbled some mathematical computation upon the polished top of the old table, and oft-times he would smile. His smile though innocent, and sweetly so, was nonetheless tinged with melancholy. Melancholy with people in his age belies the orphan; he was indeed an orphan – a commonplace occurrence in these parts – and his existence was devoid of hope; besides, the very circumstances of his birth had made him prone to constant speculation. We've seen above the kind of thoughts he'd mostly give himself to; with such a mind, no man can make it far – the poor man least of all – and our Dionis was a poor boy.

His own predispositions brought further poverty. His youth – he was perhaps eighteen – just made it worse... What life could he have hoped for?... A copyist destined for furtive learning, on his own... his liberty of choice regarding culture led him to read those things, and only those, that matched the nature of his dreamy soul. Mystical lore, and metaphysical finesse were likely to attract his thoughts like magnets – was it a wonder, then, that dreams were life to him, and life was but a dream? Was it a wonder he had turned to superstition? Times without number, he himself considered how sad, how long, and uneventful, too, the years of his life would drift away – a leaf borne by the current. Deprived of love – for he had no one in the world, a lover of his very solitude, emotionally barred from the pursuit of happiness

in life, he knew only too well that in "this order of reality", as he would call it, he'd be cause of neither smile nor tear – unloved by anyone, unhated, too, he would expire like a fleeting spark, enquired after by no one – no one on earth. His hermit's house, an ill lit, cobwebbed corner down in the record room of some forgotten office, the sluggish and splenetic atmosphere of this here coffee house – that was his life entire. Nobody cared to ask if he, too, had a heart, if he, too, would be glad to wear fine clothes, the way children are asked, if he, too, would desire... to be in love? To be in love – the very notion would arrest his heart. Oh, how he would have loved to be in love! To carry in his arms, to worship the sweet virgin who would have given all her heart to him! Oft-times he'd see that silver shadow in his visions, lily-white face and hair of pure gold – for it's a must for all ideals to be blonde – and almost felt her tiny, warm, soft hands within his own, and fed the kisses of his mouth upon her eyes, until they almost melted in his passion, and his own soul, his being, his whole life were almost melting as he looked upon her... as he, for evermore, looked upon her.

Here and there, gathered around the tables, the regulars played cards; their hair in disarray, cards held in trembling hands, they'd snap their fingers with each card they played, while with their lips they mumbled voiceless words; at times, they'd trumpet their triumph by slurping at the beer and coffee set before them. Across the room, another customer was busy chalking the green cloth of the billiard-table; and yet another one, his top hat tilted to his nape, hands clasped behind his back, a quasi-independent length of cigarette held loosely 'twixt his slack lips, was watching – whether in earnest or in languor, who could tell? – a portrait of Dibici-Zabalkanski hung on the sooty wall. The timepiece struck twelve times in accurate interpretation of old man time's dictates, to show unto a world that wouldn't listen the sign that the twelveth hour of the night had passed. Dionis rose to go home. The rain had stopped, he noticed as he left; through billowing cloud-veils of deepest indigo, the moon displayed a pallid, frigid face... In a deserted garden lushly overgrown with weedy masses of green foliage, a rundown house raised its eyes of shattered glass; the rotten shingles of its moss-covered eaves shimmered like hoar-frost in the cold moon light. A flight of wooden stairs led to its upper rooms. The large door gaping in the balcony upstairs swung on a single hinge and squeaked in the light wind; the stairs were black with age and rotten, too, and the odd one was missing, so that one had to climb them two at a time, and the wooden balcony swayed slightly at each step. He made his way past vestiges of paling, across the wilderness of the garden, and climbed the stairs hurriedly. All doors were gaping open. He entered a high-ceilinged, vast, bare room. Its walls were all stained black with the rain showers seeping from the attic, and a green mass of mould was smothering the plaster; the window sagged with the heavy burden of old walls; the bars had long since snapped: only their rusty stumps protruded from the rotten window-sill. In the corners of the ceiling, supported by long beams of dingy

wood, the spiders exercised the quiet skills of their tranquil pursuit; upon the floor, piled up high in a nook, a jumble of old books slept in their hundreds, Greek quite a few of them, and all replete with Byzantine instruction; yet in another nook – the bed, that is to say several lengths of plank, their ends resting on trestles, topped with a bale of straw and a red duvet. Next to the bed – a table, old and grimy, its splintered top all carved with Latin letters and with Gothic; upon the table – papers, scraps of verse, torn journals, ephemeral brochures distributed for free, well, all in all, a pagan-like disorder. The moon poured its eerie light through the large windows, bleaching the floors with pools of liquid chalk, and its reflection on the gloomy walls traced two large oblong patterns corresponding to the windows and shimmering like silver; the spiderwebs glowed brightly in the moonlight; above the sleeping books, a human figure of angelic beauty emerged from the deep shade: it was the full-sized portrait of a young man, some eighteen years of age – his hair jet-black and long, lips sensuous and pink, face delicate and white as carved in marble, eyes large and blue, under dark eyebrows and long lashes. The young man's deep blue eyes were so bright, so clear in colour, so serene, that they appeared to look upon the sight with almost female innocence and softness. Though sporting man's attire, that strange representation might well have been a woman in disguise, hands oh so light, so dainty, and so white, face delicately pale, aglow, and dewy-soft, eyes deep as deep can be, brow smooth and elfin-like, hair streaming down in almost untamed tresses. Our starry-eyed Dionis came to a stop before the painting, which, in the moonlight, seemed to be alive... His eyes aglow with mindless adoration, his voice suffused with tears, he whispered softly: "Good evening, papà." The shadow seemed to smile upon him from its frame. He drew closer and kissed the painted hands, and then the face, the mouth, the eyes of dark blue flame. Suffused with love for someone who was no more alive, he wished that night would last eternally, the bracing coolness of its air limpid with moonlight, he wished his sweet, unearthly, blissful craze would last forever. It was this face, therefore, he doted on – this was the shape that framed the waste of his whole life – a portrait!... That was his father, yes, when he was in his age. His mother, a pallid, tall, blonde woman with dark eyes, had often talked to him about his father: a youth who wandered, no one knew how, into the lower classes. Surrounded by a veil of mystery, disclosing to no one the secret of his name, he lodged with the old priest whose daughter was Maria. Oh, how they loved each other! He would, day after day, promise to her that his soul's mystery would be at last revealed, that she would be his wife, bound for a golden fate. Until one day, when he received a black-sealed letter... He opened it, he read it, tore it up... With it, his mind was torn... The copy of a will it seemed to be, as far as the torn pieces did reveal. He later died in the insane asylum... pale, speechless to the last, apparently concerned with keeping a great secret.

Dionis was the fruit born of their love.

His widowed mother raised him as she could, by working with her hands – the fine hands of a lady – her waxen face, her darkly gentle eyes responding tenderly to him alone – to him and to the portrait. Since early childhood he would watch in admiration the portrait's lovely eyes, that seemed aglow with a life of their own.

"How handsome papà was!" he would say with a smile, and as she heard him, she would hide her tears.

"You mean his eyes, Dionis, right? His eyes!"

"Yes, Mother."

"Oh, those eyes!... If you had only seen those eyes alive, you would have recognized them in the blue of every morning star, in every sea wave's shades, in every cloud's bright edge. How beautiful he was, how young he had to die! His eyes endure in the darkness of my thoughts still lovely, as two stars in the cloud-obscured vault – only two stars of blue..."

Then she would take him in her arms, caress him, kiss him. Apart his black eyes, which were all his mother's, he was the spitting image of the portrait. She spoiled him rotten – yet she had no choice: she loved him so! He was her only joy – her life devoid of hope, of future, of all fulness. She knew no pain, no joy, save her own child's. Her soul was nothing but a sad, shady reflexion of her own infant's soul. Whatever the child thought in his naive child's mind, his every word, his every single dream, would linger in her mind for days on end – for days on end she'd dwell upon a word he chanced to utter in a careless moment. Worn out by penury, she passed away one day. As she lay on her death bed in a trance, she grasped her child's hand, and then plunged it in her bosom, next to her heart, for warmth – a symbol summing up her life entire.

Henceforth, his countenance, his smile was tinged with that sweet shade of sorrow which made him so attractive to would-be débutantes. Yet he himself would never dare to dream that someone might have loved him – no one had ever love him, save his mother – then how on earth could anyone love him, so hopelessly alone, hopelessly poor... "Does not each man," he thought, "have his own family, his relatives, his friends whom he can love? Why should, then, anybody care for me? The way I've lived, the same way shall I die, unloved and unlamented."

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The moon crept behind a dark cloud whose midriff burst with flashes of red light, the house was left in darkness, and neither the framed portrait in the shade, nor the tall figure of Dionis could be seen. He therefore made some light.

Now let us cast an eye over the squalor, as revealed by the flame of a tallow candle stuffed down the neck of a carafe acting as candlestick. The horror of it all! Summer and winter he would spend in here. In winter, the beams would crack with the bitter cold, timber and masonry alike would creak in protest, while the wind howled through snowbound trees and fences; he

would have liked to fall asleep and dream, but his eyelids were frozen with the cold, and his eyes glazed. To make it worse, his tunic seemed to have shed its weft and was reduced to warp – shredded to frills around the edges, and threadbare at the elbows, it seemed to move the wind to laughter as he passed. People would gasp ironically at his sight... And yet, does anyone suspect that at such times, during the long and icy winter nights, consumed by grinding poverty, he would succumb to sadness? That was his element. A whole world of humorous fancies would flourish in his brain, each more bizarre and more unlikely than the other. He noticed that his thoughts would often yield themselves to rhythmic patterns, to rhyming words, and then he couldn't help but put them all on paper... The empty flagon was particularly prone to trigger off a spate of melancholy thoughts...

*Alas, ample-bellied flagon, fit for nought – an empty shrine,
Where a candle-end's consuming its own tallow, spluttering...
Will such poverty inspire? Will it move the bard to sing?
Money – I've seen none for ages; since last month
I've had no wine.*

*Ah! My kingdom for a smoke, to fill up the wintry sky
With chymeras!... Not a chance, though. In the gale, my window creaks,
Caterwauls come from the attic; turkey's combs have bluish streaks,
As, engrossed in meditation, they morosely amble by.*

*Oo, it's cold... my breath is steaming... Hat pulled down over my jaws,
I don't have another choice but to brave the elements,
While my elbows feel the air through my jacket's gaping rents,
In the hope that, peradventure, on the other side it thaws.*

*How I wish I were a mouth, Lord, I'd have such a cosy life:
I'd keep warm in my own fur, and on my own books I'd dine.
How I'd relish Homer's verses – scrumptious, superb, divine,
In the mansion of my mouse-hole, with an icon for my wife.*

*Up and down the dusty walls, bed-bugs trample in a throng.
Frilly cobwebs deck the ceiling – an enchantment to the eye.
My straw-bed holds no attraction: the bugs sucked my poor skin dry;
Now they march across the ceiling in a file ten cubits long,*

*Promenading, don't you know – such distinction, ah, such class:
That bug over there's a matron, stately, sauntering about;
That's a gallant – smooth and nimble... and he does speak French,
no doubt,
And the one skirting the crowd must be a romantic lass.*

*Oo, I'm cold... Upon ny hand hesitates a jet-black flea.
Let me make a move to catch him.... I shall crack his shiny shell...
Nay, I'll let him go, some women, without doubt, would give him hell.
Yet to me it makes no difference – I should rather let him flee.*

*And the cat purrs in the hearth... Come over, faithful feline...
In the kingdom of the cats, if on earth were such a thing,
I'd make you, upon my honour, his royal highness – the king,
To enjoy life of plenty, for a change, poor friend of mine.*

*He is pensive, purring gently, and curled up into a ball.
Is his cat imagination taken up with sweet romance?
Could it be some white-furred damsel waits from him, ready to dance,
In the barn, or in the attic? Can he hear her sensuous call?*

*Were the earth a feline planet, should I be the poet there?
I'd mew odes in mewling metre, tragically, Garrick-like,
I'd bask all day in the sun, when the odd mouse stirs, I'd strike,
Late at night, upon the rooftop, moonstruck, I'd perform my air.*

*Were I a philosopher there, perceptive in the extreme,
I'd defend lofty ideals in my lectures, to inspire
The golden young generation, the young damsels sparkling fire,
Showing them the world is nothing but a feline's sordid dream.*

*... Or a priest, there, in the temple dedicated to the one
Who has made in his own likeness the cats' nation, high and low,
I should cry out: Cats, oh, cats, lost in your transgression, woe
To your souls, for you shall pay for the evil you have done.*

*There are some amongst you who spurn the tables of the law,
The being above all being and the mind above all mind
That unfolds for evermore the full fate of felinekind!
Atheists, who do not hold hell's spirits, the bats, in awe!*

*Let them be accursed! Come, righteous cats, spit in their faces!
Can't you see within yourselves all the blessings without match,
Heartless heathens – it was he, who gave you your claws to scratch,
And your whiskers to lick clean. Repent of your airs and graces!*

*Ah! My famous candlestick barely gives off any light...
Ancient cat, it's time to turn in, can't you see the hour is late?
Let us each go to his bed, and dream of a better fate.
Oh, if only I could sleep... Sleep, from thought a sweet respite,*

*Come and cover all my being with your muted harmony.
Come, oh, sleep, or come, oh, death... I, for one, don't really care
Whether with the cats and fleas the rest of my life I share,
Or I die... For what's the use – poetry is but poverty.*

Tonight, Dionis felt light-hearted, nonetheless, though he himself knew not why. Nest to the candle-end, stuck in the bottle neck, whose failing eye gave off a reddish light, he opened an old book, leatherbound and moth eaten – a zodiacal codex. He was a superstitious atheist – a not infrequent case. The initial letters of this tome were eerily illuminated in blood-red ink, while the Slavonic signs squatted in pious rows, forbidding in appearance. This school of astrology was Byzantine in origin, and based upon the geocentric system, admitting of the Earth as focal point of the world's achitecture, seeing in man the being for whose sole delight God made the whole creation. The title was also written in Latin: "Architecturae cosmicae sive astronomiae geocentricae compendium" – "Teaching on the world's godly order, according to which the whole creation is revealed to benefit the Earth by God's eternal mercy – translated in Romanian from Greek with an appendix on the influence of stars upon the life of man." The dedication read: "To Him Who in His being is unbounded, Who in the works done by His hands is wondrous, to the almighty God – in praise aeternal." The tables were full with the schemes of an imaginary world system, painted around the edges with the portraits of Plato and Pythagoras, and had Greek sentences for captions. Two Triangles entwined encircled by the sentence: "Director coeli vigilat noctesque diesque, qui sistit fixas horas terrigenae". Constellations drawn in red, geometrical calculations put together according to some fancied mystic system – lastly an alphabetically arranged key to dream symbols – a book that left no thing to be desired by superstitious brains partial to such a diet. The end of the book was a representation of St. George fighting the dragon, a symbol meant to picture – Lord, have mercy – the truth annihilating ignorance. The gold upon the spine, rubbed off in places, was glittering like tinsel here and there. His elbows resting on the table-top, his head propped in his hands, Dionis plodded through the obscure text with extreme interest, until the burning wick began to agonize, and then expired in smoke. He drew his chair next to the window, which he opened, and in the pallid moonlight went on turning the pages one by one, watching strange constellations. Upon one page he came accros a multitude of circles intersecting one another, so many of them, that they appeared to be a skin of russet yarn, or some intricacy of spider threads painted in red. He lifted his eyes and watched dreamily the moon's comforting mien – it sailed, lovely and clear, across the limpid deep sky, through liquid clouds of silver, among enormous stars of molten gold. A thousand other circles seemed to criss-cross above, their presupposed existence apparent through the deep blue... "Who knows," Dionis mused, "this book contains, perchance, the very sign that might trans-

late one to the depth of one's own soul, to worlds that form themselves the way one wills them, to spaces lit by splendid tides of blue".

A white and lovely house stood opposite Dionis' abode. Through open windows on the upper storrey, he heard through the night air the sweet and trilling notes of a piano, and a young girl's high, modulated voice wafting an eerie breeze of scented prayer. He closed his eyes to dream at liberty. He found himself in a wide wasteland of dry sand, as arid as the drought, lit from above by a fantastic moon, as pallid as the face of a young virgin dying... Its the dead of night... The wasteland lies in muteness, the air is dead – his breath alone's alive, his eye alone's alive, so that he sees, upon a silver cloud, high in the sky, an angel white, hands clasped in prayer, kneeling, singing a prayer divine, deep-reaching, stirring: the prayer of a virgin. He opened his eyes halfway and he saw, through the arched and open window, in a resplendent room, a girl so young, laved by the airy flow of a white gown, causing the keys of a high-strung piano to tingle with the touch of her exquisite fingers, and singing to the soft accompanying sounds of a heavenly tune, in a sweet, tender voice. It seemed the genius of that godlike Britton, Shakespeare, had breathed upon the earth another lunar angel, a new Ophelia. He closed his eyes again until, fallen again amidst that wasteland wide, the white palace across took up the shape of the bright silver cloud, and the young girl became the kneeling angel. Than, forcing his eyes shut upon it all in grim determination, he drowned his dream in darkness – there was no more to see, he only heard, receding like a murky memory, the prayer of a virgin. The music had long since come to an end; yet he, entirely held in thrall by his impression, still kept his eyes shut tight. When he came round from his reverie, the upper window of the palace was still open, the room was now in darkness, the window panes were shining bright as silver in the moon's white light. The air was ripe with summer and caressing; the moonbeams seeping in bounced off Dionis' pale face, and filled his tearful soul with untold sorrow. "Yes," he slowly reiterated his fixed idea, "beneath our brow – the world, that ample wasteland, why space alone, why not time, too, the past." He took another look at the maze of red lines – the lines started to move. He plunged his finger in their midst – his soul suffured sheer ecstasy – at first he seemed to hear the whispers of those ancient looking old men, who, in his childhood, all throughout the winter, as he sat on their knees, would tell him stories of fantastic sprites all dressed in gold and light, living their serene life in crystal mansion – as if it all had happened yesterday, the time when he would plait his fingers in their white beards and listened to their voice of whispered wisdom, to the instruction of a distant past, to news of ancient times. He knew without a doubt now... all by a hand unseen, he was drawn into the past. King dressed in gold and sable would flash before his eyes – he listened as they spoke from royal thrones in castles as of old, he saw the elders' council, the eager, Christian people, stirring like sea waves in the royal courts – still, everything was somehow yet unfocused.

And the lines of the astrological sign were stirring frightfully, like fiery serpents. The spiderweb became larger and larger. "Where shall we stop?" he heard a voice asking from the deep centre of the fiery book. "Alexander the Gentle," he managed to gasp, for joy, amazement played upon his heart's strings, and... ever so slowly the red maze grew larger still, and then its colour mellowed till, at last, it changed into a sky tinged rosy with the sunset. He lay flat in a mown meadow with stacks of fragrant hay, the gloaming spread from the blue sky above, so clear and so deep, while hosts of clouds aglow with golden fire advanced upon the vault, birds filled the air with flight, the rivers mirrored in their gleam the rosy sunset, a tolling bell filled up the eve with calls to prayer, and he?... What about him? Such strange attire! A russet cassock, black kamelavkion... the astrological book still in his hand. And how familiar everything appeared! He was himself no longer. He found it all so right, to wake up in this world. He knew for a fact that he had come down to the meadow to read, and that, as he was reading, fell asleep. The gloomy room, the past life of a man, his name Dionis, how strange... he had been dreaming. "Oh, well," he thought, "this book plays pranks on me; its reading made me dream such weird things. What a strange world, and such strange people, too, and, oh, the tongue they spoke – it sounded like our own, and yet was different, alien..." How strange! The monk Dan had dreamt he was a layman named Dionis... as if he'd come to life in other times, among a different people! How very strange! "Oh, Meister Ruben," said he with a smile, "your book is truly wondrous!... if only it did not addle the brain; I do feel now the soul is travelling through the ages, the selfsame soul, it's only death that causes her to forget she was alive before."

"How right you are Meister Ruben," to say that the Egyptians were fully accurate with their metempsychosis. How right you are to say that in our soul both boundless time and boundless space abide, and all we lack is just the magic wand to transmigrate at will to any of its points. I, the monk, am now living under the rule of good Prince Alexander, and by a hand unseen I have been drawn to times concealed within the future of my soul. How many lives are in a single man? I reckon, just as many as all the stars reflected by just a single dew drop under the clear night sky. And if you were to magnify that dew drop, and thus be able to regard its depth, you would then see again the myriads of stars in all the sky, each single one – a whole world in itself, with countries and with people of its own, imprinted with the story of all ages – a universe within a transient drop. This Jew is truly deep..." he summed up Meister Ruben to himself.

He got up from the grass, the old book in his hand. The lofty mountains shimmered in the distance, their tops bedight with forests, their slopes awash with silverly-white springs. Large banks of puffed-up clouds abrew with storm sailed in the deep blue sky; the mountains pushed their high and craggy slopes through them, piercing the misty masses here and there with black, truncated cliffs, while the odd pine would stand erect and weatherbeaten on

some peak, outlined against the sky by the sun going down. As the sun disappeared in the clouds, their colour turned to indigo and red, their edges lined with gold light from behind. They drowned in towering domes and gaping grottos, that rose in tier upon tortuous tier, the heavenly king's light, and only now and then did lakes of purple gush forth through the black breaches in their side. The clouds dispersed at last, in bluish ripples; the sun sank lower still, and briefly shone upon the lonely pine top – a diadem of rays above dark shoulders – then climbed down through the branches and nestled there – a ruby glowing red – then slid behind the thickness of the trunk, shooting roseate shafts at the surrounding rocks, coaxing a glow out of the silver embers of their brows – until it vanished fully 'neath the mountain, the black and lofty mountain displaying in the blue air its rosy-bordered sides. The evening slowly fell, large stars emerged from the celestial fields of blue, and rippled in the soft and limpid air, while nature's harmony flooded the eve with myriads of voices, not two of them alike, yet all of them in tune with the voluptuous drowse exuding from the moon.

Our monk traipsed through the sunset-mellowed world, oblivious to its enchanted state, still deep in thought after his strange adventure. The gleaming steeples of the Jassy churches, the neatly whitewashed houses with weatherbeaten roofs appeared in the distance, beneath the limpid light shed by the rising moon. With quickened steps, he walked into the city. A narrow lane, with ancient, rundown houses, whose upper floors were larger than their groundfloors – supporting only half of their expanse, while wooden poles upheld the other half – raised porches overgrown with dark green moss, running the whole length of each rickety erection, protruding from its front under the sagging roof upon the porches – gaffers spinning yarns; young girls with rosy faces peeped from behind the lattice windows, past shutters flung aside, revealing golden flowers in clay jugs. The narrow streak of moonlight advancing far enough to reach the lane penumbra was but rare, rare was the passer-by that whistled to himself – little by little, all the lanes dozed off, shutters were closed, the candles were blown out, constables of the watch, wrapped in white cloaks, were out on their beat, and our monk passed on, a shadow roughly carved out of the darkness, along the tortuous maze of sombre lanes.

He came to a halt in front of an isolated house standing in the middle of a yard. Light could be seen through the chinks in the closed shutters. The house had a peaked roof – its walls were made of the kind of flint that coats the inside of a well, and were devoid of any vestige of plaster, not unlike those of an abandoned fortress. The shutters were much larger than the narrow windows, and a steep flight of steps approached the house laterally, leading halfway up its front to a high porch, supported by square pillars of masonry. No tree, no outbuilding anywhere around; the broad expanse of the yard, its grass all dry, gleamed yellow in the stillness of the moonlight; only the draw-well's pole swayed lightly in the breeze, with plaintive creaks. He

hurried up the stairs and rapped at the porch door. The sound of footsteps echoed down the porch.

"Who's there?" a voice enquired, booming yet composed.

"It is I, Dan."

The door swung open. Right in front of Dan, a tall man stood erect, long beard streaked with white, a broad expanse of brow, a patch of skull-cap perched atop his head, after the Jewish fashion. He put his hand out to the monk, and led him inside. Old volumes bound in leather, in ancient-looking cases of plain wood, took up most of the room. Stuffed birds and human skulls were resting upon brackets. A bed... A table piled with ancient scrolls and sheets of paper... The atmosphere, heavily scented with the potions sealed in phials, was drowsily suffused with the dim, russet light shed by a sluggish torch.

Meister Ruben was old, and handsome in the style of classical antiquity. His brow was domed and furrowed by reflection, his steel-grey eyes were set deep in his skull, his beard, long and flowing, descended from high cheekbones down to his stooping chest. He had the aura of an ancient sage. He looked composed, yet not remotely placid; his well-shaped mouth alone belied a certain softness tinged with the bitterness of doubt. He was a learned Jew, who had left Spain to wander into Poland. As he continued in his law, he couldn't be a public teacher there, so when the ruler of Moldavia sent for him, he came to teach philosophy and mathematics at the Academy of Socola. The monk Dan studied there, and – what was more – he was a favourite of Meister Ruben's, who shared with him the burden of his doubts and, furthermore, the fruit of secret findings. The wise Jew watched Dan's dreamy face with a certain degree of curiosity.

"Well?"

"Exactly as you've told me, Master," Dan replied, "I am fully convinced now, as I speak, that endless time is nothing but a figment of our immortal soul. I did live in the future. I'm telling you, two vastly different men are now in me – the monk Dan, on the one hand, living during the times of our Prince Alexander, and on the other – someone else, named differently, living five hundred years hence."

"Successively," Ruben replied, "you can slip into the lives of all the ones who led up to your life, and likewise, into all the future lives caused by your present life. That's why men have an urge, impenetrably vague, to magnify and to preserve their nation. They keep being reborn in their own great-grandchildren... And that's the difference between God and man. Man only holds succession – the lives of other people, past and future, while God contains at once all nations bound to come, all former nations, too; man holds a space in time. God is the very time, with all occurrences, but time all in one place, time as a spring, whose waters return unto itself, or as a wheel, comprising all at once the spokes rotating in eternal motion. Our soul, too, does comprise eternity, but only piecemeal. Picture a speck of dust that clings unto

a wheel spinning in place. That speck of dust will pass through all the places the wheel is passing through as it turns on and on, yet only in succession, whereas the wheel itself, at each and every moment is fully present in all spaces it comprises.”

“I am convinced, oh, Master, as far as time’s concerned, but what about infinity of space?”

“As with time, piece by piece, you can go any place you want, although you cannot leave it void behind you. You do know that, by virtue of to the law, there’s no such thing as fully vacant space. Yet, there exists a way to overcome that hindrance... a hindrance posed by our transient flesh. You have already seen that man contains a string of men in infinite succession. Out of this string, let one fill in for you, whilst you are absent from your slot in space. It’s understood, that man could not be there entire, for, by his wholeness, he’d deny your being. In actual fact, though, the eternal man, of whom the whole succession of transient men springs forth, is present by your side, and permanently so – you see him, though you can’t get hold of him – he is your very shadow. And for a while, you can exchange your nature – you can give to the shadow your transient human nature of today, in exchange for his being without end; then, as a shadow sharing in eternity, you shall possess a fragment of God’s own omnipotence; whatever you desire shall come to pass according to your thoughts... of course, as long as you obey the formulae – for they are as aeternal as God’s words, even the words He uttered at the creation of the world. These formulae you’ll find all in the book that I have lent to you.”

“Oh, Meister Ruben, will I ever come to plumb your deep sagacity?”

“My deep sagacity is already within you, but unrevealed as yet. Were we not kindred spirits, do you suppose you would as much as follow the meaning of my words? Do you suppose I should have made you my disciple, had I not known your worthiness and depth? You’re like unto a viol with all tunes locked within it – waiting for an accomplished hand to make them free. I am hand, and I will make you free inside.”

“What if tonight I tried to flee unto a place fashioned in full accordance with my will...?”

“So shall it be... for that place lies within you, in your immortal soul, unbounded in its depth. Upon the seventh page of this here book, are all the formulae you shall need to this end. On *every* seventh page you’ll find instructions on what you need to know to move on further. In such a case, of course, we’ll have to part forever, as in such spaces that fulfil desire, a single day shall last a century, and when you do come back, no Ruben will be there, but someone else, analogous to me, a man you’re sure to find quite easily... although he might no longer recognize you, he might have lost the secrets of his knowledge, and be a man like every other man. There’s nothing else I’ll teach you – there’s no need to: at such time as your shadow, while still a shadow, does commence to speak, he – being then all-knowing

– shall tell you what to do; when you do come to dwell within his nature, you shall yourself be all-knowing; and thus not need me anymore, no matter what. Yet, I presume you have remarked yourself the following occurrence: this book of mine, read in succession, defies all understanding... Nevertheless, if wherever you start, you keep on reading every seventh page, a godly clarity unfolds throughout the pages: This mystery – myself I cannot fathom, nor can – I heard it said – a man fully convinced of God’s existence unravel in his mind the hidden meaning of this most curious count. You might turn to your shadow for an answer – to no avail: he has no notion of its secret whatsoever. They say the devil, prior to his fall, cracked this obscure enigma in his mind, and that’s why he did fall. If you were ever apt to grasp it in your mind, know you that everything around shall fall away – both time and space shall then escape your soul, and you shall wither as the dying branch, likewise deserted by the sap of time. As I myself know not this mystery, for as I said, I shouldn’t dare to touch it, I cannot counsel you in this regard.”

Ruben smoothened his beard with slow fingers. His ancient sage’s face spelled fathomless dejection. Dan clasped his hand and kissed it. They were about to part forever, after all. Ruben pinched off the burnt end of the wick, and in the brightly burning candle’s light, his eyes glistened with tears. They both stood up, and Dan flung himself in his arms, sobbing his heart out like a son aware that nevermore would he behold his father.

But as soon as Dan descended the stairs, book tucked under his arms, the long skirt of his russet cassock hitched up out of the way... the house changed to a cave with pitch-black walls, the waxen candle – to a coal glowing in mid-air, the books – to ample globes of glass, their necks sealed tight with parchment, with tiny devils hanging from their horns inside, quivering and kicking amidst a pellucid bright liquid. Ruben himself became wizened, his beard – shaggy and forked as two goatees, his eyes glowed like embers, his nose turned to a stump-like, shrivelled beak, and, scratching his hirsute horned head, he started contorting his face in a fit of hideous laughter:

“Aha, aha!” he said, “another soul doomed to complete damnation!”

The devils gloated, smirking in their globes, and turning somersaults, while Satan heaved a breath and stretched his cloven hoofs.

“Took us a long time to ensnare this pious monk, but at long last... aha!... my old arch-enemy shall utterly destroy him. I told him, didn’t I, the thought concealed in numbering the pages shall never strike his mind... and yet it shall... it shall... for strike his mind is must... Why did it, then, strike mine? Because’t was bound to strike it!...”

Dan was moving at a quick pace through a part of the town where the nobility lived. Silvery mansions, the timber of their stairs and porches neatly polished, were glowing in the moonlight, drowned in a sea of fruit-trees. The foliage of the orchards spilled past the palings, bordering the lane – walnuts, broad-leafed and planted in a row, quince-tree, and cherry-trees... A yel-

low sheen escaped closed shutters here and there, into the orchards' green obscurity... He walked on hurriedly... it was but seldom that some gallant beau would chance to pass him, busby perched on his head, resting his hand upon the pommel of his sword whose tip protruded from beneath the rear folds of the cloak he was wrapped in... Some other gallants would, in places, scale the palings and force their way across the gardens to some window, that would swing open in the moonlight, revealing the white shadow of some damsel, who would lean her young head out of the window frame, towards the shadow waiting down below. In yet another place, one of the gallants, hanging on tightly to the window bars, was botanizing with the damsel who had pushed her head out through the bars, their lips locked in communion. The silence of the night was rent in places by howling dogs admonishing the moon, by watchmen calling hoarsely in the distance, by groups of gallants plodding on their way back after some late carousal. They would tear leaves off from the bowed down branches, and fling them after the pale beardless monk... Stars were guarding the firmament, the moon sailed like a silver shield among the clouds of concentrated darkness, the air was ripe with gold, the gardens – fragrant, their deep pellucid shade torn by the shafts of white light filtering through the mesh of foliage.

He reached his home at last. He lived in a small chamber in the house of a high-ranking noble. Ever so slowly, he walked down the long porch whose overhanging roof rested upon white pillars... he stole past like a shadow and, once inside his chamber, he drew a deep, long breath. He was bound to embark upon an awesome venture, wasn't he? The darkness of his chamber, heavily scented with the smoke of incense, was singularly pierced by the red glow of a low burning cresset placed on a bracket, among flowers and dried basil, under the silver-surfaced icon of our Saviour. The worse for wear, a cricket was chirping in the stove. He lit a smoke-streaked oil-lamp; it spluttered faintly, shedding light and smoke. The eye of light grew gradually red... he sat down at the table... opened the old book of obscure writing and still obscurer meaning. The silence was so total that he could hear his own thoughts, the fragrance and, indeed, the very growth of a carnation, red and beautiful, growing between the curtains of his window, in a pot. He was staring at his own shadow upon the wall, looming large and outlandish. The flame strained at its wick, as it flared up in an attempt to reach the ceiling, while his shadow... flapping in place, black, wraith-like, long-nosed, hooded, appeared to have involved him in intimate exchange. He appeared to be asking of it questions carefully pondered upon... it appeared to be answering him in stream of unravelling thought... a dialogue, and yet, were he to compass its reality, it was a dialogue of his thoughts and nothing more – he, talking to himself. How very strange! This separation of his individuality became the source of a disturbing thought. He stared intently, sternly at his shadow... Offended by his stare, it came into slow focus on the wall, its shape

as clear as an old, oil-painted portrait. He briefly closed his eyes and opened them again – it had become once more a simple shadow.

“It’s a momentous step, let me consider first,” he said within himself. “Have I, in all my life, ever desired something for myself – for my own self alone?... I never have. Has she ever been absent from my prayers? Has she ever departed from my thoughts? Maria? Never! Whenever I desired to be endowed with some unearthly power, it was for her own sake. Oh! If only I could take her to a desert, with no one else, no one but she and I; to will the stars above, down to the white expanse, like unto hosts of gold and silver blossoms; to plant the desert rank with groves of laurel, criss-crossed by shaded paths, to string it with blue lakes as clear as crystal; to chase her, as she feigns to flee my love, along the secret paths... Oh, no! Where she is not, heaven is barren.”

And who was she, Maria?

She was the daughter of Tudor Mesteacăn, sword-bearer to the prince. An angel blonde was she, a golden teardrop, a slender lily fashioned out of wax, with eyes as brightly blue as they were pious, indeed, as blue and pious as the sky in its unplumbed divine eternity. Many a time, she’d look up from her hymnal into the monk’s deep-set and pallid face; he, too, had seen her often as her face appeared like a flower at the window. On moonlit nights, he’d cast away his cassock to don a gallant’s cloak, and thus kept watch under her glowing windows... until they opened to reveal her precious face, wan with the vigil love is wont to keep, until her eyes began to shine their light deep into his black eyes. A brief exchange of whispered words, a blissful touch of hands, and she would then withdraw into her fragrant chamber, while in her wake the night was filled with dreams of unforgotten sweetness... As ever, he was now thinking of her.

The lamp flared up with a fantastic flap of flame, the ancient letters of the book resolved themselves into coherency, taking the shape of dreams and trains of thought that took possession of his listless mind, his shadow, once again, began to take contour, bearing the samblance of an icon painted in oil, with bald and pallid dome, with bloodless lips, with sparse wisps of grey hair, with piercing eyes locked onto the book’s pages, as it lay open there, in front of Dan. The shadow whispered to him, in sequences of thought, the very answer that he had requested.

“You do know,” thought the shadow, and he could hear its thoughts, “your soul has made, from the beginning of the world and until now, a lengthy journey through a thousand bodies, which all have come to dust. As for your soul, she knows it not herself, for each and every time she was again embodied, she drank out of the vapid waters of the Lethe, the river of oblivion; no one was by her side during that journey past all memory – no one but I, the shadow of all bodies in which she ever lived, no one but I – your shadow; for either funeral or birth, I was forever present by their side; I watched over your cradle, I’ll watch over your grave. Your soul, though now unable to

recall it, was once in Zarathustra, who moved the stars around with the voice of his knowledge and the combining science of his numbers. That book of Zarathustra, comprised of all the secrets of his science is now opened before you. The work of centuries could not unlock its meaning, not fully, anyway, but I alone can do it, for – from my wall – I’d talk with Zarathustra, the way I talk this very day with you.”

Dan could clearly perceive the separation of his being into two parts – one transient, one eternal. He turned seven more pages, and the shadow took the contours of a bas-relief, then yet another seven, and the shadow began to come off slowly from the wall, as if leaving a frame, alighted on the floor, and stood there, all diaphanous and smiling, saying in a respectful, clear voice:

“Good evening!”

The red-flamed lamp was burning between Dan and his now-solid shadow.

“Let us proceed,” the shadow said, resuming the old sequence of its thoughts, thoughts Dan could clearly hear, as if some cogitations of his own. “Appropriating through your magic my own being, and giving yours to me, I will become a man like any other, and utterly oblivious of my past, while you shall be like I am – omniscient, eternal and almighty, by dint of this here book. You leave me in your circumstances, together with the solid shadow of your love and with your friends; you doom me to forget my visionary being, while you embark upon a journey, together with your love, to any world you happen to desire... like, say, the moon. One hundred years there will be to you but one day. Furthermore, you can take the earth along, and not be cumbered by it. You change it to a pearl, and string it round your love’s neck; and do believe me: though smaller than today a thousand thousand times, proportionally still the same, nevertheless, men will believe they are as big as ever. Their time? One hour of your life will be to them a century of time. Your moments will be decades, and in those moments, wars are being waged, kings are enthroned, nations decline and nations rise, in short, the nonsense of today is going to continue much the same, diminished by analogy, of course, yet *absolutely* the same sort of nonsense.”

“Agreed,” Dan said, clasping the shadow’s cold, translucent hand. “Still, I entreat you, keep a record of your life, to find it here as I return to earth, and read it as my own. With the unbiased coldness of your judgement you will be able to describe for me the whole deceptive nature of world-distorted vision, from the deception of the tender flower, naively lying through its garb of splendour that it is happy in its frail anatomy, to the deception wrought by man himself, who covers in grand words, in layers of hypocrisy unbroken, which never ceased throughout the history of mankind, that blackened, evil core which is the true root of life itself and all the facts thereof – his fierce egoism. You shall see for yourself the lies they tell in schools, in church, in government – that we are born into a world of justice, of love, of

righteousness, only to see, upon our death, it was a world of hatred and in justice. Ah, who would ever want to go on living if he or she were told, while still a child, instead of tales and fables, the true and unveiled nature of the things to be entered upon?"

"The call of a philosopher?" The shadow smiled a chagrined sort of smile. "So, be it, then! What you have said decides my future fate. I shall light up my lantern, and go in search of men. The record of my life you'll find on your return, here in the drawer of this table. As for myself, I shall be dead and buried, when you return, for hours of your life will be on earth long years and without number. Turn seven pages further, and get hold of my hand! What do you feel?"

"I feel my arms dissolving into thin air, and yet invaded by unearthly strength; I feel the heavy atoms of my brain come off, leaving my mind as clear as the sunshine."

"I," said the shadow softly, "feel my awareness of eternity is growing dim and vanishing away; I feel my thought weighed down as if by lead... Turn seven pages further, and our mutual metamorphosis shall be completed."

Dan turned the pages, whispered, and the shadow was turned into a man. The man resembled him, and stared at Dan in hazy, anxious stupor, as if he watched a ghost, with trembling lips and with unsteady steps. Dan was a shape of light. He shot his long strong arm into the air.

"Sleep!" he commanded.

The timepiece struck a dull, echoing hour... the shadow turned to man collapsed upon the bed as touched by death. Dan draped his ample cloak upon his shoulders, blew out the lamp, then tiptoed down the porch, and closed the door behind him as he got out. Unhurriedly, he started walking in the moonlight, along the wide streets of the city. The curtained windows and the gates were closed, the whitewashed walls glowed yellow in the moonlight; an isolated watchman would walk by, mustachios tucked inside the collar of his cloak, halberd under his arm; a drowsy silence reigned, the air was warm and balmy, the moon was shining bright, the stars twinkled their eyes, the sky was blue and cloudless, the houses watched the moon from tiled eaves – the picture is complete! His shadow steps made no sound down the street.. Wrapped in his cloak, hat pulled over his eyes, he walked along the streets flooded with light, without the moon casting his shadow on the walls, for his own shadow he had left at home, and he himself appeared to be an unskilled shadow, running the gauntlet of the rows of houses. The house at the far end of the street was painted yellow, its windows shimmering with moonlight, its curtains white as snow. He tapped the window softly with his finger.

"Is that you?" asked a precious voice suffused with sweetness.

"It's I... Do open up the window... There's no one in the streets, no one can see you, and even if they did..."

The window slowly opened, the curtain slid aside, and from beneath its folds, an angel's head came into view, blonde, pallid, lovely. The moon

shone down upon her face, causing her blue eyes to send back an even brighter shimmer in response, so that they seemed to sparkle as if struck by a sunbeam. The tell-tale ripples of her snowy night-gown betrayed the budding nipples of her breasts; her tiny hands, her white and naked arms reached out for him, and he drowned them in kisses. A moment later, he had scaled the window, alighting in her room. He put his arms around her naked neck, then took her face into his hands and kissed her with such fervour, clasped her unto himself with such hot passion, that it appeared he'd drench her life out of the fountain of her eager mouth.

"My love," he whispered softly, smoothing her golden hair, "my love, let us elope together, you and I."

"Where to?"

"Where to? Just anywhere. Wherever we should live, our life shall be so blissful, with none to give us trouble; you'll be all mine, and I – entirely yours. Out of our dreams, we'll fashion palaces, out of our thoughts, deep seas shall issue forth, awash with myriads of mirrors sparkling bright, our days shall drift into aeons of blissful love. Let us away!"

"But what shall Mother say?" she asked, her eyes in tears.

Her prostrate shadow hugged the wall behind. Dan fixed it with his eyes; the shadow started coming off ever so slowly, bobbed up upon a moonbeam, only to drop again onto the bed.

"Who's that?" Maria asked, and huddled with a shiver in his arms.

"It is your shadow," he replied and smiled. "It stays on in your place... see how it sleeps."

"Oh! I can feel such freedom and such ease..." she murmured in a golden tone of voice. "No pain, no more torment within my heart. I thank you, oh, I thank you... And, oh, how beautiful you do appear to me... like someone else... like from another world."

"Come with me now," he whispered in her ear, "come through the hosts of stars, through skies of light, until, far from this gloomy and ill-fated earth, we shall forget it altogether, and our minds shall be entirely taken with each other."

"Then let us go!" she whispered, her arms around his neck, her precious mouth fastened upon his lips.

Her kiss filled him with genius and gave him strength renewed. As they embraced each other, he draped his cloak, his black, resplendent cloak upon her snow-white shoulders; one arm around her waist, he clasped her to his chest, while with the other arm he flapped his cloak, thus taking both of them, ever so slowly, up through the clear air suffused with moonlight, through banks of turbid clouds, through swarms of stars, until they reached the moon. Their journey had been one extended kiss.

He laid his precious burden down upon the fragrant shore of a blue lake, which mirrored in its depth the crown of groves encircling its clear waters, revealing to the eye a world submerged. Again, he took off earth-wards. As

he approached the earth, he came to rest upon the black bank of a cloud, and had one last, long, pensive look down at the earth. He took the book of Zarathustra, leafed through its bulk, and started reading on the Doomsday of the earth; each letter was one year, each single line – a century of truth. It was sore frightful, the amount of murders occurring on that atom, so insignificantly small in the unbounded vastness of the world, that black, pathetic clod, which is called earth. The crumbs of that said clod are called empires, the infusoria hardly discerned to human eyes are called the emperors, and millions of further infusoria are playing in this muddled dream the part of subjects... He stretched his hand towards the earth. It started to contract faster and faster, until it was, surrounding sphere and all, no bigger than a pearl, blue, speckled with gold all over, and with a core all black. Size being only relative, it stands to reason that all the atoms in the core of that pearl, whose outer layer was the very sky, whose speckles were the sun, the moon, the stars, those infinitely small dwarves had all their kings, waged wars, and all their poets could hardly find in all the universe metaphors and similes in sufficient supply to glorify the heroes. Dan peered through a spyglass past the pearl's outer cover and was surprised it didn't burst with the amount of hatred it contained. He picked it up, and coming back with it, he strung the blue pearl in the necklace of his love.

And, oh, how beautiful had now the moon become!

Endowed with a colossal phantasy, he had hung two suns and three moons deep in the blue canopy of the sky, and out of a range of lofty mountains, he had fashioned his palace, with rows of ridges for its colonades, with ancient forests merging with the clouds for the eaves of its roof. Majestic stairways swept down craggy slopes, among fragmented woods sunken into ravines, all the way to a wide and level valley dug by a river grand whose waters seemed to carry its islands like a fleet of ships, all overgrown with groves. The sparkling mirrors of its streaming waves reflected the star icons deep inside, so that whoever gazed into the river appeared to be gazing at the sky.

The amber-gravelled island shores emerging from the waters bore resin-fragrant tree trunks. Their fringe of shady groves were mirrored by the river in its depth. Out of the same one root, a paradise of trees grew out into the dawn, while yet another reached towards the stream bed. Long rows of cherry-trees heavily sifted an embarrassment of blossoms – a roseate snow the breeze was drifting into banks; the air was ringing with the song of flowers, their leaves sagging with bugs of precious stone, whose humming sent voluptuous shivers through the world. Stridulant crickets ticked like clocks strewn in the grass; emerald spiders wove a bridge of diamond web from one isle to the bank; the moons shining their beams through its translucent, sheer, pearly shimmer turned the majestic river's flow to green. Erect and lithe of body, as white as silver gleaming in the night, Maria walked across the bridge plaiting her hair whose gold cascaded past her tiny hands of wax. The silver of her garments revealed a fleeting hint of lissome limbs; her feet of

snow would barely touch the bridge... Or, often times, they'd float downstream, in a boat made of cedar, borne by the yielding waters of the river. He'd rest his head, wreathed in a crown of flowers blue, against her knee, while perched upon her shoulder, a magic bird would pipe.

The wide river ran deep into dark forests, where its waters would but rarely sparkle, when touched by a stray beam of furtive light; the branches of the trees met halfway over the expanse of water, spanning its flow with lofty vaults of compact foliage. Only in places would a sudden flash be seen above the waters. The streaming waters laughed as they were driving their blue masses through the dark, until, without a warning, the river, halted by rocks piled up into high mountains, gathered its flow among the woods like unto the vast mirror of the sea, its water now so clear in the suns, that all the silver treasures on its bottom could easily be counted.

To while their time away, they thought up a fantastic game of cards. The kings, the queens, the knaves upon those cards were all the heroes of their evening stories. The game itself was a long story of complicated plot, as if from *The Arabian Nights*, in which the kings did marry, queens were given in marriage, while knaves would move around entranced with love, a story they themselves could not unravel, until they gave it up, weighed down with sleep.

And what a sleep they slept!

Before they went to sleep, she'd clasp her hands in prayer, and while the stars of white played on celestial strings the cosmic prayer of the universe, her lips would murmur on, in smiling consonance, until her head, wan with the musky exhalations of the night would drop upon the pillows. And who was there to see her thus, but he alone! He, who would cover up her naked arm, as it hang over the bed side, with showers of kisses. He'd fall a sleep upon his knees. They'd both dream the same dream. Skies of mirrors soaring upon spread wings and spanned by rainbows, high-reaching portals, courts of wax-like marble, layers of blue stars against canopies of silver – pervaded all by cool and fragrant air. One gate alone they couldn't enter – ever. Above it, framed in a triangle, was an eye of fire, above the eye – a sentence carved in the crooked letters of dark Arabia. It was the entrance to the dome of God. The sentence was a mystery unsolved, closed even to the angels.

34

Indeed, why cannot man be satisfied with finding happiness! The Arab sign upon the dome of God was constantly a puzzle to Dan's mind; his search through Zarathustra's book availed him nothing – the book was adamantly mute to all his questions. And yet, night after night, he'd travel with Maria into the solar sphere of the skies. And each and every time, he'd take the book of Zarathustra in his dream, and searched if for the answer to his question. The angels flying by, the mortals' prayers carried in their laps, would shoot him glances full of hidden meaning – and yet to no avail. To no avail did one of them lean gently to his ear, and whispered softly: "Why do you

search for what cannot enter your mind?" Or, yet another angel: "Why try to make vile copper ring like gold? Such things can never be." But what he did find strange was that whenever he wished the angels to obey his will, though he said not a word, they would fulfil his thoughts with utmost zeal. He could not explain this preordained harmony between his own thoughts and the life of the angelic hosts.

"Do you not see, Maria, that whatever I think the angels heed me in the twinkling of an eye?"

She laid her hand upon his mouth, then whispered in his ear:

"When rain falls, all the grains grow; when God wills, it is you who think the thoughts of angels."

To no avail. His mind dwelt further on that matter, and his large eyes were fixed upon the gate that stayed forever shut.

"I wish that I could see the face of God," he told an angel that was passing by.

"If you don't have Him in yourself, He's not existing for you, and vainly do you seek Him," the angel answered gravely.

Once, he felt his head full of songs. As in a bee hive, the airs swarmed clearly, sweetly, brightly through his besotted mind, the very stars appeared to heed their harmonies; the angels flying by with smiling faces echoed the song inspiring his mind. In silver garb, snow-browed, blue-eyed, chests soft and smooth as marble, hair streaming richly down their heads and shoulders, the angels beautiful were gliding past him, their blue eyes shining darkly throughout that solar world; one angel, the most wonderful of all he had set eyes on in his solar dream, was playing on his harp a tune he knew so well... note by predicted note... The white air blushed with the voluptuousness of sound. The Arab sign alone continued brightly red, like embers in the night.

"That is the question," Dan said to himself, "the whole enigma that pervades my being. Are they not singing what I merely think?... And does the world not move according to my will?" He clasped Maria to his chest as if to stifle a dark pang of sorrow. The earth's emerald was glowing in her necklace... "*Can it be that, though unbeknown to me, I am myself Go...*" Bang! the sound of a giant bell – the sea's smitten with death, the falling sky – its canopy was rent, its blue enamel cracked, and Dan himself felt struck by thunder, and plunged into the abyss. Rivers of lightning chased him, and tribes of ancient thunders, the turmoil of the abyss shuddering to its core... "Oh, thought ill-fated!" he hallucinated. His hand clenched mindlessly on Zarathustra's book, he tore instinctively at bead of earth strung round Maria's neck. She was falling away from his arms... like a dark-contoured willow stretching its boughs towards him, and as she fell, she called:

"Oh, Dan! What will become of me?"

And another voice boomed in his wake:

"Unhappy mortal, what thought durst you to think? Count yourself fortunate for not having pronounced the world entire!..."

Torn as if a magnet and sucked into the abyss, he fell with lightning speed – a thousand years each moment. Suddenly, the darkness around him became tranquil and deathly black, with no sound and no light. He opened the book, cast the bead into the dark, and started reading. The bead was falling brightly, unfolding as it fell. Larger and large, larger still and brighter, until he saw it in the distance, like a moon... and he descended, book tucked under his arm, through the thick clouds, closer and closer to the earth – he could already discern the radiant rooftops of a city, lights strewn all over, a summer night blonde – aired, gardens of fragrance, and... and he opened his eyes.

He shook the heaviness of sleep off him somehow. The sun was rising as a burning globe of gold upon a deep blue sky; the garden stretched outside the window in front of which Dionis had fallen into slumber, its green still wet and cooled after the rainy night; the freshened up flowers raised to the sun their childish, foppish heads, their eyes brimming with tears as cold as they were vain. In the house across the road, the white curtains were still drawn; all through its orchard, the rows of cherry-trees in blossom and sweet smelling acacias kept watch over the secret paths thereof, spreading into a bluish, melancholy shadow.

Was it a dream, his life-like dream, or was it a reality of the visionary sort of all human reality? The curtain across the road was slightly drawn aside, revealing through its white folds the blonde head of a girl. She was laughing – who knows why.

“Maria!” whispered he, as his heart skipped a beat.

Her blonde and plaited hair fell down her back; a blood-red rose was tucked behind her ear, her tiny mouth was shaped like a ripe cherry, her face was blushing-white like royal apples. When she stopped laughing, she let the curtain fall again.

His heart contracted wildly, for he had understood the meaning and the impossibility of his dream. Now he knew he was in love. “What good is this to me now?” he thought, his soul in tears. “Isn’t the squalor of my life enough – it was, at least, a squalor free from yearning and desire. And now, my first desire, and – it may be – my last, can never be fulfilled!” The finely-traced bitterness around his mouth grew significantly deeper. His soul shuddered with the realization that he would never be able to shake himself free from the burden of this love. Hope he could have none. Was such a feeling he had never had before to be born at the time that love was born?

She reappeared and smiled. This time she pulled the curtains all the way, and stayed there, a carnation in her white hand, watching – it seemed, engrossed in meditation – into the dark-red center of the flower. “How precious!” whispered he, looking at her. “Ah! she had to be good, else why would she be smiling, why, oh, why? And at the window, too... Did she not see him? What if she did see him, what if her smiles were not whitout

intent... a teasing shadow of intent, but nonetheless..." She vanished once again."

"I'll write to her, I'll ask her... ask her to smile no more, to fill my soul no more with vain, painful illusion. This one thing... she will not deny to me. She is so good; I'll ask her to be wicked."

In a painful, unprecedented surge of voluptuousness, he wrote to her:

"Oh, my star,

Lacking in earthly goods, in beauty and in spirit, my heart is ailing as a sparkling drop of sun at night, and I love you. And your eyes, molten morning stars, can look so deep, oh, so blissfully deep into the dark night of my soul, that, as I stay awake, I dream of you, and, if I fall asleep, I am awake before the icon of their light.

Can you, perchance, discern the pangs beneath my words, oh, angel mine?

... How could you, though... Your life so bright was never ever tinged by the remotest shade of pain akin to the torment that blasts my heart... blasts it beyond redemption! Try picturing a man possessed of feeling, real to all intents and purposes, reduced to lasting, incarnate despair. Such men you do not know. They gain no access to the circles you move in. They are the down and out. When a heart lost in squalor, in oppression, in the impossibility to cultivate feelings, for each of these feelings is curbed by the non-existent power of the one having it, when such a heart as that would dare aspire to you, against its very will, struggling to quench those feelings, unable to resist them, what could the owner of that heart still feel? Sadness? That's more than sadness! Despair? That's more than just despair! It is an agony of the soul, a vain struggle, a cruel travail against one's very will. Hopelessness kills, while this feeling torments. My love's name, then, is martyr. In each and every snapped cord, the pains are infinite; for my heart doesn't break at once, but cord by cord. Death's but a moment, hopelessness endures – such agony of feeling is pure hell. Maria! can you picture such torment, and not cry out with pity – nay with awe? A heart of stone would still be moved beyond a certain limit, a soul of venom would be tamed in front a certain pain, and there's no greater pain than mine. Why am I in the world when you were meant to be there? Why did my eyes rest upon you, why did I ever see you? Had I been blind, I should have never known this life of constant pain and emptiness and darkness. Oh, flower mine, you're smiling in the garden of your days, and little do you know a heart is breaking; heavenly star, you're shining in your sky, and little do you know a soul is dying! And in not knowing is your beauty greater still, and greater still is the torment you cause. How beautiful you are, and the more so, the greater my mishap, for my mishap is adding to your beauty. I entertained no hopes, and little did I care; desires I had none in all my life; and little did I care; yet one desire did I have, just one, to compass all my life, and yet beyond fulfilment: you! No matter how unlimited your pity, it cannot stoop so low. Smile not to me! Your

smile would only fill my heart with empty hope. You're not allowed to love me – pray, despise me! For your contempt might, peradventure, kill me, and death is nothing when compared to my ongoing torture. I kiss the traces of your precious footsteps, I kiss the walls your shadow has caressed, despise me! I have no choice but love you. You know not why, nor can I let you know, and yet your face, the shadow you have cast upon my thoughts is the sole happiness I've ever had on earth.

Maria!... this is your name! It has to be your name... you!... I cannot call you by any other name... Farewell! Farewell!"

And although he had written, his soul was still suffused with hope – painful yet sweet, diffuse yet purposeful. He did imagine that she could be his. She! The world entire was contained in this word. He was on the verge of losing his mind at the mere thought that he would take her golden head into his hands, and flood her eyes with kisses, that her sweet slender waist could rest inside the cradle of his arm, that he could hold her white hand, and watch her porcelain fingers for hours on end... What good is life? He felt one hour next to her would be more precious than his life entire. How much intensive, nameless joy mingled with sorrow in one hour of love! And, oh, the words he'd tell her! The names he would invent, each one of them more precious than the other, names past all comprehension, names wonderful and strange – for the odd shadow of a smile upon her lips, a fleeting smile, the fading echo of a joyful thought; how grateful he would be for just one glance; how thankful, if she suffered for a moment her precious dainty fingers to linger in his hand, and he could almost feel himself lifting those fingers to his heart to make them catch its frequent, boundless beats... oh, he would cry, and he would laugh with joy with infantile abandon, and finally succumb to loss of mind, dreaming for ever of that priceless hour.

Whence this upsurge of feeling, whence this delusion irrepressible? He couldn't feel his head, nor could he feel his heart, things whirled around him in a roseate light, all he could see were white curtains, and from behind each curtain, her head would come out, smiling with a timid, childish coquetry. In love with her? That would have been too little. In love he was, aye, yet not merely with her, but with her every thought, with every step she took, with every smile, a thousand times in love. Had he been God, he would have spurned his universe, to search for a new one in her blue eyes; whether he would have found it, none could tell... he would have searched forever. Oh, how he loved her! Had she despised him, he would have loved her very contempt; a mere shadow of her hatred would have sufficed to feed his love his whole life long.

"Ah!" he smiled in a tormented kind of trance, "if I could only kiss her just one time! I should desire for nothing else on earth... If I could only fondle her soft hands, unplait her hair, or kiss her shoulders! Angel of my heart!"

He had dispatched the letter. He stayed on at the window anxiously, as if he were awaiting his death sentence, he had no thought in mind, nor did he know what he could think about, an endless row of icons, vague, breath-tak-

ing, were fleeting through his mind... Ah, he had begged contempt, and yet he hoped for love.

She appeared in the window frame. He went behind the curtain to watch her. His eyes were dry with arduous desire, and sparkled with the madness of intent; she stood there, beautiful, her deep large eyes brimming with tears, and stared in front of her, the letter clasped into her lowered hands, her face spelling confusion, suffused with the desire to shed a flood of tears, like a child fraught with guilt. He appeared at the window, and her tear-filled eyes turned to him... deep, merciful and buoyant... She crumpled the letter, and pressed it to her heart... a sharp, unyielding pang pierced his own heart; his very life appeared to be disrupted, his poor heart snapped in two, a dark haze spread across his eyes... and after that nothing... nothing at all.

The girl dashed from the window in alarm.

.....
“What is that letter in your hand, Maria? And what the flush? What’s going on?” a friendly old man asked her, as he appeared at that very moment at the window lifting with his exquisite hand the girl’s well-chiselled chin.

She did attempt a smile, but it came out all wan, and care-worn, too...

“Come, let me see!”

He pried the crumpled letter loose from her unwilling, yet obeying, listless hands... he had a look at it, and the lines in his face grew even deeper. He read the signature.

“Whom did you get this letter from, where does its writer live?”

The tears streamed down her face and, sobbing her heart out, she sought refuge into her father’s arms.

“Look,” she gasped, “that’s where the poor man lives... in the deserted house across the road... I saw him dropping to the floor like dead... and he might well be dead for all we know... Run, father, it may yet be not too late.”

“What does he look like?” asked the old man, apparently concerned with convoluted thoughts.

“Oh, he is handsome!” she said quickly... then bit her smiling lips.

A bald, bespectacled man came to join them, and the old man conversed with him in rapid, hushed up tones, as he showed him the letter. The bald man nodded his dome.

They rushed down the stairs, and the next moment they had reached the house across the road. As both were fairly aged, their haste belied the vivid interest they must have had in young Dionis. They shoved the door wide open. Dionis had collapsed flat on the floor, his hair in disarray, his eyes squeezed shut. The bald man slowly raised him from the ground, uncovering his chest.

“His heart string nearly snapped,” he whispered softly. “He seems to be extremely sensitive. A rush of joy may be the end of him. We shouldn’t even wake him... I’ll chloroform him, so that from his swoon he drifts into a deep sleep.”

While the doctor (you would have guessed by now that our bald biped was a medical doctor) was talking to himself, nodding his head, raising his eye-brows, having shifted his glasses to his dome, Maria's father watched the portrait on the wall. To cut a long story short, the person treated by our Aesculapius was legally entitled to a legacy. His similarity to the portrait, together with a set of circumstances we are not interested in, pertaining to Dionis' as yet obscure origin, were proof enough of that. Suffice it to say that from that moment on, his material status had drastically changed.

He was lying on a bed. His head propped up with pillows, his chin was almost resting on his chest; the quiet pallor of his marble-like face was in sharp contrast with his ruffled hair. One of his hands was pressed upon his heart, convulsively compressing the pain he felt inside; this other hand was hanging down his bed-side. A black cloak had been draped upon him, revealing through its folds the young man's slender yet proportioned frame. Maria's father leaned above him, and watched him with intent and with delight.

"Well, well!" the doctor thought with cunning insight.

.....
A thick haze, grey and sparkling... and then a sky of blue, eternal darkness, with mellow stars stirred by the breath of night, with rippling clouds, with air of fragrant warmth... and once again, again the town of old with narrow streets, with jumbled houses, with eaves shining their mildew in the moonlight; Dan hurried through the lanes... the moon cast the odd shaft of light into their darkness... he entered his own house fully aware of his extended dreams.

"My mind did after all conceive that most unfortunate idea, which Ruben thought impossible to dawn upon a mortal."

His shadow was asleep upon the bed.

He read in Zarathustra's book... the shadow started sitting up ever so slowly... its eyes still closed... it grew thinner and thinner... fastened itself upon the wall, and took its rightful place – outlandish, long and mocking.

Dan felt unwell and ill at ease, crushed down under the burden of his thoughts. Besides, a flash of lightning had pierced his very heart during his fall. He could still feel the lightning slashing through his heart. He lay upon the bed with his cassock for a cover... A host of eerie creatures he'd never seen before were filing past in front of him. "Ah," he thought to himself, "I shall soon die, these are already shadows come forth from the hereafter." Only his shadow stood erect upon the wall: it somehow seemed to smile and – most bizarre – it had blue eyes. "Confound you," he said to himself, "now my own shadow scoffs."

The door opened to let in Meister Ruben.

"Now, Master, what the deuce – since when have you grown whiskers on your face, and took to wearing that there Jewish gown?"

"For mercy's sake, my good sir, it's been for quite a while now – as far back as I can remember," said Meister Ruben, smoothing down his beard.

"Why, have you ever seen me in any other garb, down by the Ancient Court?"

"Down by Ancient Court... that's Riven... the book-seller, and not you, Meister Ruben."

Ruben cast him a long glance.

"Sir, you are out of sorts," he told him gravely.

"I'm dying, Meister Ruben... Have a look in my desk, that's where my shadow's memoirs have been left, the shadow you can see upon the wall, who kept a diary while I was on the moon."

The Jew watched the sick man for quite a while, and shook his head.

"That shadow of yours is a portrait that looks like you," he said.

"Meister Ruben, you do seem to have lost your marbles since the last time I saw you," the young man said and smiled, "or, could it be, I have become superior to my master... and why not?"

The Jew approached the desk which the sick man had mentioned, opened its drawer and sure enough, he came across a sheaf of yellow, shrivelled papers, tied with a length of blue string... he took them out, had a look at them, then laid them on the table. At this moment, two men entered his chamber, whom Dan had never seen before. One of them, thin and bald, walked up to him and felt his pulse, while the other was talking to Ruben. Ruben showed him the papers... The man went quickly through them... "Without a doubt," he said under his breath.

"How long have you known him?" he added as he turned towards the Jew.

"Quite long. I sell him books. Mostly the oldest, and of the kind no one earth would buy. I used to buy them wholesale – the scattered libraries of old people, whose executors sold them to me for almost nothing – they're barely worth the paper they are written on. It was such books he delved into with utmost frenzy, and he would buy the most obscure of them, the most nonsensical. Now, as it happens, I've also got some of those ancient tomes, and I had come to offer them to him; he would have surely bought them off me, too... had I not found him in the state he's in. And yet another thing – he does no longer call me Master Reiven, but Meister Ruben! God alone knows how everything got twisted in the poor man's brains."

The sick man heard all that, yet couldn't sound the meaning of it all. "They're all out of their minds," he thought, "and Meister Ruben is completely mad... and I don't seem to know him anymore. Aha!" he thought at last... I must have died, and Ruben brought the doctors to sell my body to them. And rightly so... the changes I've been through must have worked miracles with this body of mine. But are these two doctors indeed, I wonder?... They both appear to me to look like Satan... Or are they just *one* man divided into two old-looking creatures with whom the cunning Ruben is poking at me... one half with hair on, and the other bald. The bald one feels my pulse, the one with hair on looks upon my shadow – it's hanging on the wall, caught in a nail. Look! He is taking it off the nail, and hands it on to Ruben.

"Bravo, Meister Ruben," he called, "your devils are experts in prying shadows loose from walls, and the baldy is going to take me next... for, as I see, he's playing doctor at the moment... Bravo! Bravo!"

He was clapping and laughing.

Ruben took his shadow and his papers from the desk and left the house, slamming the door shut behind him.

"You're gone, oh, Jew... you're gone, and you have sold me to the tormentor of souls," he murmured in sorrowful resignation, letting his head drop back upon the pillow.

"He is deliriously feverish," the bald one gravely said.

.....
It is night... A pleasant coolness wafts in through open windows, and Dionis, laid prone upon his bed, is shivering with fever, his lips parched, his brow sweating profusely, his head heavy. He seemed to have awakened from a maze of confused dreams, and he is looking at his surroundings, distrusting the reality he sees. The portrait of his father is missing from the wall, the old books, too, are gone, the house is still the same, yet elegantly furnished with new things, the floors are carpeted, only his bed is still the same. "That's strange," he thought, "one miracle gives way to yet another... I barely know what's happening to me." The moon sheds all its gold into his room; the furniture and carpets gleam with a lack lustre, drowsy kind of sheen under the moon's diaphanous enamel; a timepiece tinkles timidly and slowly on the wall, while through his mind the recent happenings fleet in confused succession, somewhat faded. And all of them appear like unto dreams; his mind now feels refreshed, cold and clear, compared to what his old mind used to be. The semiobscure world of his youth has receded from all around him; he gazes into the future as if into the crystal-clear bottom of a tranquil deep lake. This clarity of mind he is himself unable to explain. He closed his eyes. Suddenly he can feel someone is sitting on his bedside, at his feet. He then feels a soft hand upon his brow. He peers through his eyelashes. He sees an oval-faced boy, pale and somewhat haggard, his golden hair tucked under a wide-brimmed velvet hat all black in colour; he has a velvet jerkin on, girt with a polished circlet, revealing the most slender waist in all the earth. Dionis' half-opened eyes do not betray his wake. He takes a full view of the boy, from his gold-flooded head down to his dainty boots that sparkle radiantly upon the fowered carpet.

"Ah," he thinks as he feels a shudder through his heart, "this is Maria!"

Yes, it was she, the priceless... and talking to herself... for girls do talk quite often to themselves. He felt the air grow sweeter with her whispers.

"I've run away from home under disguise... they kept putting me off... tomorrow, not today... that beastly doctor said it might be dangerous to him... dangerous, fancy that. I am not dangerous!" she almost screamed. "What if he were to wake up... then, oh, then... Sleep on, sleep on!" she whispered, her mouth above his brow...

He felt soft dew drops dripping on his hair... And at that very moment, he put his arms around her neck... frightened, she wanted to withdraw, but his strong arm pinned her down upon his chest... He sat upon in his bed.

"Pray, let me go!" she said, blushing profusely.

But he had clasped her in his arms, and as he was caressing her white brow, he shoved her hat off, sending a flood of blonde hair streaming down her back... then he took both her hands into his own... she could resist no longer... watched them, and kissed her fingers... she could resist no more...

"Maria, do you love me?"

"What if my name were not Maria?" she enquired, inspired by a momentary malice.

"What else could you be called?"

"Maria, yes, Maria," she said in silver tones, "but say no more, you're not allowed to speak... you're not allowed... and, furthermore, you're not allowed to sit up..."

She pushed him back upon his pillow... He wanted to say something, but felt his mouth muffled by eager kisses... He closed his eyes, and felt his heart bursting in his chest... then opened them again, to fill them with the treasure of her image, while she was laughing with a sort of childish glee at the sight of his smile, laughing at her own fear and surprise... laughing at each and every thing, at every thing...

Often, during the long, long winter nights, long after she had finally become the treasure of his marriage, when, of their own free will, they lived exiled in some remote small village, to love each other far from the world's noise, Maria would, without a warning, enter the heated drawing room, lit solely by the embers glowing red in the fireplace, dressed as a boy, like on that night they'd seen each other closely for the first time – with slender limbs, dressed in the black velvet jerkin, wearing the wide-brimmed hat upon her blonde hair, the daintiest feet on earth shod in man's boots. And she would come close to him. Her white transparent hands contrasted with the soft black sleeves, and they would walk arm in arm through the warm semi-darkness of the room; from time to time, their mouths would meet half way, from time to time they would come to a stop before a mirror, their heads leaning against each other, fine-featured face, still shadowed by the bitterness of a tormented youth, which lingered on around his mouth in a trace of amazing naivety, next to her oval, rounded, marble face... the face of a young demon, next to an angel's face, an angel undefiled by doubt.

By way of brief conclusion: who is the true hero of this story: Dan, or Dionis? Many a reader must have been looking for a key to these occurrences in his surrounding reality; they will have inferred the elements making up his inner life from his actual circumstances: Ruben is Riven; the shadow on the wall, that plays such an important part, is the blue-eyed portrait; once the portrait is removed, what you may tend to call a fixed idea also comes to an end; now, among those who follow in footsteps of causality, many will have professed to understand the meaning of these strange occurrences, by having them dismissed as mere dreams of a diseased imagination.

Was it a dream or not, that is the question. Could it be that behind the stage of life abides a stage-director whose existence we are in no position to explain? Are we, perchance, not like a company of mummers who, wishing to suggest an army of great numbers, march on stage, then file behind the back drop to reappear once more? Is not mankind in its advance through history an army such as those mentioned above, marching away in an old company, only to reappear in a new one – an army large enough for the individual in the audience, but limited in number for the stage director? Are not the actors the same ones, although the plays are different? It is true we cannot see behind the backdrop. And could not someone, living, have moments of retrospective clarity, appearing to us like the memories of a man that is no more among the living?

We shall not hesitate to quote a few passages from one of Théophile Gautier's letters, which contribute some colour to this idea of ours: We are not always from the land we have been born in, and, therefore, we are in search of our own true country. Those made after this fashion feel exiled in their cities, strangers in their homes, and tormented by a form of inverted nostalgia... It would be an easy task to define not just the *country*, but *the age as well, in which their true existence ought to have taken place*... I do seem to have lived once in the Orient, and, during carnival, when I don a burnouse by way of disguise, I have the feeling I am back in my own garb. It always comes as a surprise to me that I don't speak Arabic fluently. Well, I suppose I have forgotten it.

*Translated by
Florin BICAN*



Ion Tuculescu, *The Gold of the Masks*