

ENGLISH TITLE:

The Stranger

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I opened the door. There was a thin man, in appearance a beggar, staring at me from under his thick eyebrows. His eyes looked me up and down as if I were an old friend he had not seen for a long time. But that beggar-looking man was neither a friend nor an acquaintance of mine. Suddenly the fear that usually comes with a thick mist made me shiver.

The stranger looked back at the dry, wide plain in front of the house and, to protect his eyes from the light, raised one hand to his forehead, and then took a long look. I thought he was searching for somebody – but as he was so at ease, as if nothing were happening, I couldn't say whether a friend or an enemy.

Then, without saying a word, he put one foot forward, and then the other, and came into my house, so much at ease then, too, as if nothing were happening. He examined every corner of the hall, and then his eyes slowly stopped moving.

He was staring at the drawing on the stained glass window between the hall and the library. The drawing had two main parts to it, made up of pieces of glass of different sizes and colours, in addition to the decorative elements above it and to either side. To one side, there was a geometric centre of a meadow in the picture with two horses on it, one black-headed, the other white-headed. Both horses' necks were up straight and, apart from a few minor details, they seemed to be symmetrical.

At the top it said *Fugite*, and over the image of the meadow at the bottom, and over a wreath of clover, the Latin saying continued: *partes adversæ, ut complexus non sit similis morti* – Those of you who oppose it should flee from each other, lest anything like death do you embrace.

The afternoon was quietening down, the stained glass window filtering the last slight rays of light from the library window in vain, the green breath of the wreath of clover multiplying itself on the hall walls, door and ceiling.

The stranger took something wrapped in leather from under his arm. The deformed clover moved nervously over his body. He opened the leather casing with his dried-up fingertips, the exact opposite of kneading dough to make bread. It was a small book. He dampened a couple of fingers with his tongue, and flicked the pages over quickly. When he reached the page he was looking for, he spread the book open, and pressed down on one side of it to put pressure on its spine. He looked at a purple drawing in the book, and then at the picture on the stained glass window. He repeated that expert examination two or three times.

Biting his lips, he looked from the stained glass window to the book, and from the book to the stained glass window, and made his examination time and again, nodding continually in approval of what he was doing. He had the fire in his eyes of somebody who had long been looking for something, and finally found it. He held his hand out to me. I was familiar with the book, and with that purple drawing too. But I wanted to pretend I was not. I looked at the drawing in the book carefully, then quickly at the stained glass window, and then closed the book.

“What is it you want to tell me? The two horses in your book look like the ones on my stained glass window. Perhaps whoever made this stained glass window drew the horses in the book too. That’s no miracle!” and I gave him the book back. The stranger, however, opened the book once more and stood next to me.

All of his clothes smelt like rags, his body of defecation and rotting. I held my breath. He pointed the difference between the two drawings out with one of his blackened fingernails. The two horses in the book and those on the stained glass window could be seen as identical, except for one detail: the horse on the left in the book had its leg closest to us on the ground; the one of the right,

however, had that leg in the air; the horses on the stained glass window, on the other hand, had both legs closest to us on the ground. At the top and the bottom of both drawings, however, the same Latin expression was written in small letters: *Fugite partes adversæ ut complexus non sit similis morti*.

I compared the two images: the stained glass window was shining in the sun; the book had the grease of many hands on it.

I gave him a quick nod to say what I had to, that I had seen the difference. And I added:

“The picture on the door doesn’t have the symmetry of the drawing in your book. There are differences.”

But the stranger paid no attention to the Latin expression, and nor did I say anything to him about that easily understood message: one horse was black, the other white – it was better for enemies to keep apart. Or, as Aba Yakue like to say: Two people do not fight if one of them does not want to.

Aba Yakue! After the stranger came into the house, everything – the book, the picture, the Latin expression – brought Aba Yakue to mind. I had seen that book at Aba Yakue’s place, or a book very much like it. Remembering what I had seen there I completed the image of the two horses, and fairly well too, whatever the symmetry.

However, when I looked at the stained glass window, it was not pleasure that led me to it: that *fugite* was going to make me forget my past. At first, when some unexpected scream of the night, or the senseless barking of a dog made me nervous, I would take a candle and go towards the door to see what the noise was about, but I could not get used to the disturbing flickering given off by the light of the candle on the picture. Events and faces from the past came back to me like in a nightmare. I was often tempted to break the picture into a thousand pieces. As the years went by and my memories of Aba Yakue faded, I learned to live with that warning by using the same procedure which one-

legged men use to get used to their wooden legs: from missing the lost leg to finding its replacement uncomfortable; from finding it uncomfortable on the thighs, to feeling no itching or tiredness at all; finally, when they ask the one-legged man which his wooden leg is, he touches them –if not with a hand, at least in thought– to see which is the wooden one, and which the natural one, before answering.

While I was reflecting on this, I must have looked at the stranger as if asking for an explanation, and he shrugged. And then he looked big to me as he had not before; almost a giant. Perhaps it was I who was weakening, becoming delicate.

The afternoon light lost all its strength, and the stranger's shadow was cast over the whole stained glass window. He went up to the window and measured the thickness of the wall by stretching his arm outwards. Then he turned, and spoke for the first time. His voice did not sound as he looked, nor was it cracked in the way that his sun-dried face might have suggested.

“It's strong.” He looked from left to right with the same attention and expert's glance as he had a moment before when examining the stained glass window. “Such a solitary place, such strong walls, such full barns, that warning on the stained glass window... Everything is like a fortress, a place to protect yourself from the embrace of death. Something was frightening the stonemason who made this house. Don't you think so?”

I did not answer him. I was lost, unable to separate my thoughts, ideas and worries. Even knowing very little about me, the stranger knew that I did not know him. But I could not be sure of the same.

He raised one hand to his chest as if he was going to have a coughing fit. But he did not cough.

“You could have made it yourself... I'd say it isn't much over twenty years old” he said, with the conviction of an expert.

I was not going to tell him right away and respectfully that I had found the designs and deeds at Aba Yakue's place. I was not going to tell him that a certain J.P. had signed them, and that I had always believed those initials stood for Julius Probo. There was no reason for me to give any further explanations.

"Let's say I built the mansion. What would you care?" I said to slow him down.

I realised my mistake as soon as I had asked the question: the stranger drew a breath with the tranquillity of somebody thinking that things have got easier. He saw an opportunity. Waving his book in the air, he spoke to me arrogantly:

"In the same place as this little book was there were deeds for a large house until somebody made off with them."

He put the book away quickly, miming its theft.

I stood up to him, putting to one side the courtesy with which I had treated him until then.

"How could you prove that? How are you going to make me believe that you haven't made that all up because you want to become the owner of this house? And even if I had stolen the deeds, how do I know you haven't stolen the book?" I said to him roughly.

His eyes lit up. That good mood made me see what I had not really noticed until then: I had seen a robust man, a stranger who had been attacked, as the bags under his eyes on that whiter than white face of his denoted. It is when mistletoe is at its finest that we notice the apple tree's weakness.

He spoke with the same tiredness you could see in his eyes:

"Hold on, hold on, I'll explain all of that. I don't know how yet, but I won't give up."

The stranger paused. He was watching me, seeing what I was going to say. But even if he had seen me look astonished, I had not been astonished by his threat; it was his arrogant, complacent way of speaking that had thrown me off.

Seeing I did not know how to reply, he kept on talking, opening his mouth wide to get his words out, and taking pauses. It reminded me of the pebbles you throw down a well to see how deep it is.

“I like this mansion. I’m going to stay here”, he said with affection.

I find it hard to say what it was about the stranger that took all my energy away; why I did not get stirred up by him; why I did not kick him out of the house; what made me sweat under my armpit in fear. Was it his elegant form of speech? Where had he come from, and what did he want to find out about? Why did his eyes shine in mockery? This ghost of something that I might define as a threat?

I got angry inside. But... What nonsense is this? What threat do you have to be worried about? I had conscientiously erased even the smallest, slightest traces of the misfortunes from twenty years ago; or, at least, so I had believed until then. So I found it easy to guess what had happened: the stranger was familiar with the drawing on the stained glass window, and it was no matter to me how and since when he had; he also knew several of the details about the house’s construction, and he was taking advantage of that as he waved his book in the air with his clumsy fraud, saying he had as much right to the mansion as I had!

No, no, it was not the laughable story about the differences between the drawings that had me in a sweat. Nor was it the stranger’s mysterious personality.

A phrase he had said started rattling around inside my head as if it had hit a spring: The stonemason who had built the house had been afraid of something. The stranger – I don’t know how – had easily guessed the real reason for my lack of energy.

“I won’t give you much trouble. Enough space to stretch my legs, enough food and drink to fill my belly. I’m easy to please”, added the stranger, but I didn’t get annoyed then either. I didn’t start flattering him or complaining. Hunting dogs’ eyes light up when they are close to the hunters, when the hunters stroke their necks when they bring the quails back; by then they have forgotten being beaten to go out and get the game. They do not know, or they forget, that the people punishing and stroking them are the same people. But I hadn’t lain down before him like a dog.

“Let’s see.” My answer was tinged with arrogance.

He looked at me warily, trying to work out if I were covering up some ill intention. While he was trying to size up my reaction, he could not have been expecting anything other than the hardness of ice and the coldness of rock; my attitude seemed to please him.

Had I had wanted to clear things up, in a precise way, I would never have finished, I would never have got it quite right; the mystery of our silence measuring of forces concluded in that short moment, under the tension of his bottomless gaze, I’ll admit I didn’t show him the door. I showed him in respectfully. I welcomed the stranger in wanting to find out what his real intentions were. What he knew; what had brought him there.

We walked slowly from the entrance to the main hall. The stranger went first, looking all around him, examining every detail. When we were half way along the corridor, all of a sudden he turned to the right and took three or four steps beside the wall, rather than in the middle. I was horrified: he had been in my house before! Without being told, by pure instinct, he avoided the opening which had used to lead to the cellar, and which I had blocked off. Who was this, then, that knew every part of the house so well? It could have been Julius Probo, if Julius Probo hadn’t died long before. So what connected the stranger with the house, with me?



Regretting that I was not going to be able to answer those questions by being patient, I pointed out the rung in front of the fire, which was burning well. I pointed at two trunks:

They're done what fate had waiting for them: stuck in the earth, they quenched their thirst with water, spreading their branches in the air. Here, in the fire, they are reaching their end. Don't put off the pleasure of a fire.

Remembering a similar scene from a very different time, I felt revolted to the point of wanting to vomit. In that image from the past, Grazibel was kneeling at my feet, taking my laced boots off and softly asking: Did you see the comet in the sky the day before yesterday? Apparently they foretell misfortune...

The connection between two such opposing situations made me stand up suddenly, roughly. The stranger took that as an insult, and his anger whistled through his teeth:

"All the paths here are dirty and covered with undergrowth", he said as he took his second sock off. "You, too, must have had filth on your feet when you first came here, didn't you?"

Filth on my feet! If the stranger wanted to bring old memories back to life, he could get lost and go back the way he had come! Memory, apparently, is the Devil's most loyal servant in this world, but I had already managed to deceive the servant and the Devil and leave them empty-handed. I was beginning to enjoy the day's numerous ups and downs, palliatives to memory. I had noticed the image on the stained glass window and the hunting scene in the tapestry on the wall for the first time in a long while: they were purely decorative. I had slept without bad dreams for many years, my old worry about changes in the weather; hunting for amusement, the liqueur I made myself for relaxation.

"Fie!" I wanted to make little of the question, making a gesture with my hand to say that. "You're talking to me about this morning's misfortunes... a few insignificant details I barely remember." I tapped my forehead with the back of my hand to excuse myself for not remembering.



The stranger shook his head at me:

“Man, man... Memory is like weeds: it has deep roots, and it’s hard to pull out. It never gives up. It never lightens, not even when we lose our minds.”

I made no answer, realising, to my chagrin, that the stranger was right. I had long expelled from my mind the days when I had become the owner of the mansion, I had lived in comfort thanks to that, as the mere appearance of the stranger had made me realise: it would be easier for me to kick him out of my house than it would be to expel the memory of that from my mind.

He coughed to clear his throat, and asked me for some clothes:

“These old rags are done for. There are more holes in them than cloth”, he excused his request, holding his shirt up with two fingers to show me.

I lifted the lid off my box of ordinary clothes for him to choose. He changed completely, putting the book in the pocket of the trousers I had given him, putting all his old clothes into a pile, which he tucked under his arm. Then, taking a candle from a hole in the wall, he lit it with an ember from the downstairs fire, and commanded we go out to the entrance hall.

“If you would tell me what you want, maybe I could help you”, I said humbly. If I knew what he wanted, I would also be able to see how to act.

But he explained nothing to me and, drawing an arch with the candle in his hand, told me to follow him:

“I’ll tell you out there...”

I regretted having been so respectful, having started off so soft. My head up, I spoke to him:

“I’m not going. Not, at least, unless you tell me what I have to go for...”, I insisted, and then, after a short pause: “It’s daylight. That candle will be invaluable for you to go back the way you’ve come.”

He paid no more attention to my provocation than he would have done to a fly and, after turning his back on me, headed towards the entrance, and said:

“As you like. I’ll soon finish what I have to do. But watch out. When I come back, I don’t want to find the door closed.” He paused at the front door and turned towards me, waving the candle in the air. “If I threw this in the barn, the whole mansion would soon be ablaze.”

“Would you be capable...”

“You know I would.”

He left the room and took the way out of the house. For a moment I debated whether to go to the window or not. I did not want to look curious. May the Devil stick his horns up a single hole of his!

But my dignity lasted no longer than a fly on the tip of the tongue of a toad and, very shortly afterwards I did go to the window. The strong walls flanked a narrow passageway between the two window openings, and I walk along it to leave the house. I saw the stranger roll his clothes up into a ball and tuck them under a haystack in front of the house. He looked left and right, and then towards the house. The mansion had been built facing a huge plain, but there was a sharp rock protecting it from behind.

He examined the surroundings carefully: on seeing my jetty on the banks of the river, his eyes opened wide; when he turned around and looked at the vertical rock, on the other hand, he raised one hand to his forehead to shield his half-closed eyes because the sun was directly behind it, making its last challenge before hiding itself for the night. It occurred to me, as I followed his gaze, that he was looking for somebody rather than examining the countryside. Were some friends of his close by, hidden in the undergrowth beside the river? Was there a lookout on the vantage point on the top of the rock? Was there a group of people on the jetty awaiting the stranger’s orders? A new question added itself to the bundle of curiosity I already had about the stranger: Who had sent him?

He raised a hand to his forehead once more, and, when he looked towards my window, I moved back from the narrow opening a little for him not to see me.

Shortly afterwards, I stuck my head out again. I was astonished when I saw what the stranger was doing. He was setting fire to the haystack!

I shouted at him, my call breaking the calm:

“You wretch! What are you doing?”

He turned around, put his hands on his hips, stood with his legs open, and shouted back at me:

“Who’s going to think, when they see that burned haystack, that the ash is also made up of a beggar’s old clothes?”

Something strange happened to me then: I saw myself, as if in a mirror or on the blade of my sword, down there, wearing my own clothes, and anyone could have mistaken me for the stranger. I didn’t know what to do, how to behave, and I sat down at the table and waited for the stranger to return. I had given up; I had almost no hope of seeing the moon over the chimney once again.

When he came into the entrance, he spent a little time there. He’s looking at the drawing on the stained glass window, I thought, and I wasn’t worried by that. When he came back into the hall, and came up to the fire, I made no protest.

Rather than the sting in itself, a sharper thought than that was worrying and annoying me. Was I sure I was going to achieve anything with that innocent, respectful attitude of mine? That damned stranger had put himself up at my house easily enough. He’ll be the owner soon enough too. Looking at you, nobody would think that the cowardly cur they are seeing now is one and the same as the Black Knight everyone used to be terrified of. A curse upon it!

For a moment we said nothing to each other. He took a small axe from his belt and started sharpening a piece of firewood next to the chimney, paying

scarce attention to me. The stranger looked like the owner of the house; if anyone had seen us they would have thought I was a servant. I could only think of one way to get out of that incredible situation: finding out something about the stranger, and making use of what I knew. If I knew who he was, I could find out what he wanted, what type of danger I was in... Or was it more urgent for me to find out what was happening to me rather than who he was and where he had come from? And what if he was no more than somebody else's servant? Then what and who was he afraid of? I had to decide what to do, decide which question needed to be answered. That was the only way for me to leave that vile situation with any dignity and kick the stranger out of my house. Meanwhile, until I saw some kind of light, the only thing I could do was treat him well. As I was thinking this all through, lunchtime arrived.

I was a loyal servant to the stranger. I served him mashed turnips with bacon on maize bread. He enjoyed the smoked calf ribs and the pig snouts marinated in vinegar.

*Good Health!* were the only words I heard the stranger say in the short pauses I took between serving him one dish and another.

He drank a lot of my strong, fiery liqueur with enthusiasm. He asked me how I had made it. I told him. On days when there had been a heavy snowfall, which meant I could go nowhere, I used to boil turnips and filter the juice into a still. When I thought I had enough liqueur to last me all year, I filled up a couple of barrels in the cellar, dug a snow hole by the front door, and put the two barrels into it. The cold in the snow holes stopped the turnip juice from distilling too quickly, which makes the liqueur bitter.

He took another mouthful of liqueur, and saying *Good Health!* once more accepted my explanations and my drink.

On the other hand, he did not praise the fresh milk I then put on the table:

"I'd say it's been milked from some huge snake, except that I know snakes don't give milk".

“It’s goat’s milk”, I said apologetically. “Unlike fresh milk from cows and sheep, it does have that bitter taste of damp water.”

He made a gesture to command me to be silent. I started to give him explanations, moving my hands as if along a goat’s udders: after you milk the goat, you have to let the milk rest – unlike with milk from cows – for twelve hours or so:

“That is what wolves usually do: they kill a goat, and then hide it in a hole for eight hours. They’re capable of letting two days go by before they start eating it. They tear them apart with their teeth, the entrails too, which means the milk is too bitter for them too.”

But I thought what they did was quite different: wolves do not have the will-power to wait for so long, however bitter the taste; furthermore, the smell would not be enough to put them off, at least not until they had finished a cupful. As the milk went down their throats, they would accept its bitter flavour.

The stranger did drink the whole cupful, but without saying *Good Health!* as he did so. A look of revulsion came onto his face, and he started shaking. He stuck one hand into his mouth and, wanting to throw up, put a couple of fingers down his throat.

Before I could do anything, he started vomiting, directing it towards me, like a male cat, and he locked my neck under his arm like a hangman’s noose around a condemned man’s throat.

“What was in the milk?”

I didn’t say a word, just shook my head.

“What did you put in it?” he said, loosening the pressure on my neck.

“Nothing. I don’t know what’s made you vomit. Maybe it’s gone off...”

In that short moment, his rough way of speaking calmed down, as did the pressure around my neck.

“Maybe. It may be as you say”, as he took his arm from around my neck.

His change of mood astonished me. A moment before the stranger had been convinced that I had put some poison in his milk. He seemed to need to put me in the clear, and my frightened explanation calmed him down. Had it just been a trick? A show he had put on for some hidden reason? Getting sick, starting coughing, but all of that actually being a show rather than illness, in other words. What else would have made him sick?

He went to the window and breathed deeply, quickly and nervously, as if he were suffocating. He spent a long time by the window, until he felt better.

I wanted to show him my respect and get past that moment, so I said I would show him the cellar.

“I have my tools for making liqueur down there.”

After the cellar, I showed him all the rooms and halls, corridors and stairs, barns and granaries in the mansion. He asked many things about each room: the mirror chamber, the arms room, the tapestry chamber... But I told him little. I did not want him to think that I had built the mansion, at least not until I knew what his intentions were.

“I seldom use all the rooms in the mansion”, I said to excuse myself when I left a question of his about the main beam over the arms room unanswered. “I don’t know how such a long main beam holds up the ceiling either. But it does; that much is clear.”

It was not quite true: there were a couple more beams hidden in the ceiling. The exposed main beam and other two hidden beams had the effect on the stranger which had been intended: he was astonished.

“Where did they bring those oak trunks from? There aren’t any oaks around here.”

I became nervous. We were like a cat and a mouse, seeing who would get the piece of ham. The stranger wanted to find out what connected me and the house. But I had a few questions of my own: what did he know about the stolen deeds for the house? He had heard something, but what exactly did he know? Was he sounding things out, wanting to get me to say things? Or did he know more than I believed and thought?

“There are more wild trees, reeds and undergrowth here; none of which can be used for making beams...” I said no more than that, and I only stuck my neck out as it suited me: “Shortly after I became the owner of this house I found out that a single man can keep the walls warm enough for the building to remain intact.”

I thought he was going to follow the route to owning the house which I suggested to him, but he kept on asking for more details: It is lower than the soil, that is clear for all to see, but by how much? The thickness of the stone walls in the whole house should guarantee a certain temperature: is it warm in winter? Cool in summer? You must spend days and weeks here without seeing a soul: how many days on a horse is it to the nearest town?

Saying what I wanted to when I wanted to, and mostly shrugging my shoulders, or uttering a short *Who knows!*, I did not satisfy the stranger’s curiosity, knowing very well as I did, I would lose my way, that would be how that would happen.

On that long tour from room to room, his body was as stiff as I was attentive to answering his questions. His way of walking, after the initial impression of clumsiness which he had given, was physically elegant, as if used to having to deal with many difficulties, but without having been overly tired by them; hardened by sleepless nights with clear skies and travelling in darkened days, but weakened and exhausted by them too. To an extent; to a degree. With regard



to courage, however, I knew that I could not make any firm decision, there being some things which are impossible to compare until the chance to test their scope and characteristics comes up.

We finished inspecting the house, and we returned to the main hall, which I had adapted to suit my needs – my bedroom, sitting-room and kitchen, it was where I spent the most time, and where I ate.

I drew my sword from its scabbard, which was hanging beside the chimney. The stranger looked at me calmly, as if he had been expecting me to do that then.

Bending at the waist, and leaning towards the chimney, I stoked the fire up with the tip of my sword.

It was dark night, and we spent a long time in front of the lively fire; I polished the relief work and damascene on the hilt of my sword, while the stranger stared at the movement of the smoke rising up from two quite large logs.

“You really love that sword of yours”, he said to me when I held its polished blade up towards the ceiling, turning its shiny surface towards the flame for approval.

I could have killed him, the stranger knew that much. He was not as strong as me, nor was he as skilful. My whole body and all the muscles in my whole body had been hardened in fights, hunting and fencing. Why should I worry about that clumsy man? To what end? As well as his clothes, the stranger’s loose-hanging arms, swaying walk and crooked beard reminded me more of somebody who wandered from village to village, house to house and barn to barn begging for a crust of bread than a soldier skilled at using his sword.

I could have easily held my sword up to him and demanded he reply to my challenge:

“Watch out!”

I had no doubt of my superiority. I am wholly familiar with the impact of putting a sword into the left-hand side of an enemy’s chest. After the first violent blow pushes it past the ribs, the sword easily goes right through the body. Someone wounded like that has to say his prayers quickly. It is not even sure that they get to suffer; sometimes their eyes have given me no sign of that. At most, the cut makes them shiver and their eyes go white. And then something like the heat of a summer storm comes over them.

For their eternal rest, as everything is over, you take the sword out from between the enemy’s ribs as easily as you would take it from its scabbard. It comes out softly. With no effort.

But sometimes I have had to face enemies who were thought to be tough. It is a great danger to realise too late that that supposedly tough enemy has been trained by the most skilful masters from a royal city: but the time you have seen that, he has worked out what your most effective strikes are. Moments like that have taught me the importance of being on the look-out for surprise attacks. A feint, a second feint, and if my enemy is skilful and brave enough to avoid my attacks, even if you knock the sword from out of his hand, he may have a fire-poker or a leather-worker’s tool to hand, and, using that, may easily disarm you and use the rusty fire-poker to knock your arm up into the air and leave it force-less up there. And all that has to happen is for your enemy to attack you unexpectedly, and you’ll be disarmed. I have several souvenirs from such moments on my chest.

The stranger’s lanky body gave no impression of being any kind of expert with a sword, but I could not be sure that he was as unskilled as he looked to me.

So I did not know if I could wholly dominate him. I moved to the middle of the room in a couple of steps and paid full attention, ready to ward off an attack. I wanted to know how the stranger would react. How he would stand up, or what sort of skill he would show. But what I was expecting to happen did not. He did

not get up from the bench by the fire. Turning his back to me, he used a sharp stick he had carved out with an axe to break off the burning ends of the logs. He spoke while staring at the fire, his back to me:

“Only at the king’s palace can you learn to wield a sword with such skill... I wonder if I can remember who liked pretending he was going to take a step backwards like that... Where have I seen the hilt of a sword being held like that, just three fingers on the hilt and the other two pointing towards the end of the blade to make the turning of the wrist faster and more flexible?”, and he paused to emphasise what he had said. He was still facing away from me. He shrugged like an eagle shaking its wings before taking flight and asked me: “Who are you?”

The stranger’s words frightened me more than if he had wounded me with a sword. I hated that question and found it more repulsive than death itself, I had heard inhuman-looking ghosts saying those three words to me –Who are you? Who are you? Who are you? – in all my nightmares over the previous twenty years until the filter of my solitude excluded them along with my memories.

But now I had one of those ghosts from my nightmares there, in front of the fire, and asking me that question.

“Watch out!” I shouted, and wondered whether to attack him or not. But, instead of that, I put my sword into its scabbard. Not from lack of courage. Nor from any fear that anyone would deny my skill compared with that of the stranger, or that I could be wounded by surprise.

“And I know you well might sneak up after that!”

“Who are you?” He knew me. I didn’t know him. Not all the sword-mastery in the world could shave off the advantage the stranger had over me.

“You just give me a single reason”, he challenged me, the courtesy he had used until then forgotten, and speaking in a more direct way, “for you to try in vain to escape what fate’s got in store for you.”

“Do you think I am running from what fate’s got in store for me? What are you talking about?”

I did not want to lower myself to the the stranger’s way of speaking. He got up from the bench and pointed at the entrance, signing I should go there with him.

“Come. Come with me.”

I was not sure whether to go. But I obeyed him. He wanted to show me something, or confess something to me. I thought there would soon be some light cast on the darkness I was in. I followed him until we were in front of the stained glass window.

There, by the stained glass window, with his back to the picture on it, he hid it and the Latin saying on it from me. As I moved my head from one side to another, the stranger moved his body at the same time, and I could not tell whether he was playing with me or whether his movements were no more than a figment of my imagination. Obviously, he had to be very much mistaken if he thought I would pay him more attention and be more curious because of the two horses.

“Could you describe the picture? Could you remember the Latin phrase word by word?”

“Well!” I blurted out. I was angry. Being respectful was humiliating me too much; I was beginning to regret not having taken the stranger by the scruff of his neck and kicked him out of the house. “You must be joking!”

He laughed, and stood aside from the stained glass window. Where the two horses had been, there was a skull.

“You are more certain of what you have seen and learned by yourself than you are of the morning sun, aren’t you?” he asked me with a laugh.

Then, seeing that I said nothing, he became completely uninhibited.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” he asked, and ordered me to go to the main hall, pointing to the way there, and chuckling as he did so. I took five or six steps towards the main hall. He was not looking, and I looked round quickly towards the stained glass window. The skull was still there, where the two horses had been before.

The stranger laughed and made me look in front of me so I carried on walking to the main hall.

He threw himself into a chair, his whole body relaxing. I stayed standing up, my arms crossed on my chest and looking towards the entrance without focusing.

“You don’t take fate into account, do you? So I must be the arm of the punishment which fate has in store for you.”

I made use of the only path still open to me: making his arrogance a laughing matter and getting my honour back.

“I had thought you would be so vain. Fate has chosen you to carry out its justice? You poor fool! Those who have least brag the most.”

My attack seemed to astonish him, and he changed his tone. He stood up and started to pace around the hall. He seemed uncomfortable. As he walked around he spoke to me:

“Call it what you will, but I have become the arm of justice for fate or for my own will as far as you are concerned. Now we’ve come this far, and unless fate has something else ready for you, you will not save yourself unless I want you to. So I am your fate: Death is sending me to you on its behalf. What you call bragging is the beauty of arrogance in my eyes.” He had gone from being angry to enjoying the words he was saying. I was amazed by his theatrical elegance, which I had not noticed until then.

I started quite enjoying that you-to-me, me-to-you exchange. Those sharp words were less dangerous than swords. Or so it seemed to me at the time. I mocked him:

“The beauty of arrogance? If fate has condemned me to die tied to a mast, and if you are my executioner, that would mean that you, too, are condemned to provide everything for me to die on that mast. I am the victim, you are the executioner, but we are both subject to fate. Fate needs both of us, if that is what is going to happen.” The stranger said nothing and gave no reaction. He carried on walking up and down, his head down and without making any reply to my words. And that attitude of his made me bolder: “The beauty of arrogance! What nonsense! Some mad emperor would want the whole world to have a single head so he could cut it off with a single stroke of a sword, but fate is the opposite: it prefers to have us one by one so it can have the pleasure of cutting our necks one by one. But you, even though you’ve seen all that, you have not risen up against it to win the bet against fate.”

Nearly night, the weakening afternoon light had started to take the things in the room – the table, chairs, the sideboard, pots and their reflections on the wall – and blur their outline little by little. Shortly all of those objects would lose their individual character, becoming no more than a single dough making up the darkness. Only the things in front of the fire and around it would still hold onto the shapes they had in daylight, although in a flickering, reddened way.

I took the lamp from the hook beside the door and, going to the fire, lit it from an ember. I heard the stranger’s words behind me, and felt his breath on the nape of my neck as he spoke:

“Our elbows are very close to our lips, but, however hard we try, we cannot bring them together. Betting against fate! Betting against fate! No! Who would do something like that?” He had changed the tone and way he spoke to me, leaving the arrogance he had used until then to one side. I do not know if my

words had brought about that change in him, or if he wanted to take some approach I was not familiar with, but his mood had changed completely.

I turned around. There was no more than a single hand's distance between our two faces. I stared into his eyes until he looked away.

I spoke to him laughingly. I softened each word I said, as you do when, after having caught him lying, you tell a child off.

“Come on, come on! You’d be able to kiss your own elbow, even if you had to tear it out of its joint to do so. People would preserve your memory for ever. Grandma, Grandma, tell us the one about the funny beggar! And Grandma would tell her tireless grandchild about the stranger who cheated fate.”

He did not appreciate my joke. He looked away. Seeing that I wasn’t giving up, he took two steps backwards and kicked up at the air.

“You don’t even believe in fate, do you?”

The scratching came from somewhere near the front door. We both looked around at the entrance. Another two scratches followed. They sounded more like scratches than anybody knocking on the door. But I said nothing.

In the same way a surrounded wild boar becomes aggressive, the stranger got out of the chair and went to the window to see who was at the door. He looked from left to right, half of his body sticking out of the window. The sound of a bat passed close by the window. Nothing else. There was no wind. The crackling of the fire was the only sound breaking the silence.

The stranger came back in from the window and turned towards me.

“Are you expecting anyone?” he shouted at me, his voice louder than thunder.

I shrugged. I saw him in a way I had not until then. He was nervous. Obsessive.



Trembling like a saw which has just started cutting. I laughed at his expense, thinking he could only go further along that way by screaming.

He took two steps towards me and grabbed me by the back of my neck. His eyes were wild. He was frothing at the mouth.

“Are you expecting anybody?”

His cheeks were shaking. Did he think somebody was knocking at the door? Even if they were, why be so afraid? There was somebody after him, and that somebody frightened the stranger. I had found something out. They say you get lucky twice, and that had been the first time things had gone my way since he had come into my house.

I wanted to spike him the way bees do the most beautiful flower in the field:

“Won’t that be fate knocking at the door? Open the door for it; I want to see how that agreement you have with it is getting on.”

His eyes widen like those of a wild boar facing an enemy, but he did not hit me. His fear was greater than his hate for me. It had been a while since we had last heard any sound from the door, but we were still both looking at it.

“Tell me who it is”, the stranger begged me, his voice shaking. He had not spoken like that even once since he had arrived. I remembered horse-flies after a storm. When they are soaked, their sting softens, their wings shrink, and their poison is diluted. I had a soaking horse-fly in front of me, lost in the noise, poison-less.

I did not miss the chance for vengeance:

“Is somebody pursuing you? I’m not expecting anybody. Whoever’s knocking at the door wants to settle things with you. If they’ve been sent by the King, you’re a thief or a murderer. But if you’re an anointed friar, you must have committed blasphemy. Whatever it is, your head isn’t going to rest on your

shoulders for long. I'm going to say hello, point at the ashes out there, and say to whoever's at the door: Do you know what else got burned on that haystack?"

He took the book out of his pocket as slowly as a tired ox.

"Take it: you can save your life if you own this." He looked all around the room and added: "You won't even have to leave this house."

That sudden change amazed me because, until then, everything he had said suggested that he was the owner of the house, not me. He must have been incredibly frightened of whoever was walking around out there to humiliate himself like that. I think that over-quick change alerted me to the danger.

I shook my head at him, and made a gesture for him to keep the book.

"No, no, my friend. Let us imagine those sounds were somebody knocking. What if they were looking for that book of yours? Let us say you stole it. If they found it on me, they would take me for the thief, and it would be my head that was not to rest long on my shoulders."

The paleness of the stranger's face made me think I was not wrong. There was somebody after him, and he was scared.

The drawing of the two horses might be the reason for that; that picture seemed to hold a secret message which I had not yet managed to interpret.

"Why doesn't the man at the door keep on knocking?" he asked me, using the last scraps of energy he had left.

"You'll have to ask him..." My imagination was on fire because I knew we were not going to hear any more knocking. I was enjoying myself. I nodded towards the entrance, showing I wanted to open the door. The stranger, though, raised his shoulders up to his neck as he had when he vomited the goat's milk.

"Stay still! Nobody's going to open the door!"

Then, making a ball of some rags, he put on his back under his shirt. He put on an apron, lowered his back, and started imitating a lame hunchback as he walked up and down.

“Hey... What’s all this play-acting for?” I asked in surprise.

He started stammering and foaming at the mouth. I could not understand much of what he was saying, but I did catch the word servant two or three times. He took a broom and started to sweep up the ash in front of the chimney. If anybody came into the house, he wanted me to say that he was my servant!

We spent a long time like that, waiting to hear knocking on the door once more, or the sound of a horse trotting away from the house. The stranger, with the broom in his hand, looked towards the entrance time and again. Then, hearing no sounds coming from the front door, he limped to the window: his crooked body filled it, and he looked from left to right.

It was quite dark, there were no stars, and the sky was misty. But it was not a moonless night; you could make out the white of the moon behind the mist. There was a more pungent smell than that of the smoke from the haystack in the room. It smelt like mint to me, but it was not the time of year for that to come out, it was autumn. The temperature was mild, peaceful after the north wind of some days earlier. That smell of mint was unusual. I remembered the butterflies I had seen beside the river that morning before the stranger had arrived. The smell reminded me of what I had thought that morning: the undergrowth and moss on the riverbanks gave the impression that spring was on the way.

All of a sudden he came up to me without limping, and, with his strength back, took the rags off his back, stood up straight, and spoke mockingly:

“Obviously this house must have a back door.” Having gone from being the servant to becoming the owner once again, I nodded to him, unable to disguise my amusement. I had already started to enjoy what was going to happen to the stranger, and at that moment nothing in the world was going to amuse me

more than going to the front door and seeing how he would react to what he saw there.

“Let’s go!” he ordered me. “We’re going to go out of the back door and go right around the house. Let’s see who’s at the front door.

I stood on a floorboard with dry rot, and its loud creak broke the silence.

“Watch out!” he said, elbowing me in the ribs. I paid no attention to his jab. That arrogant man was soon going to get a dose of his own medicine.

We went out of the small door I used to go to the stables between the house and the rock, and we walked almost right around the house, the stranger coming behind me, the fire from the morning still smoking, our hands held to our mouths in order not to cough. I was carrying the lamp, but the moon came through the mist, and it was a full moon.

I saw two horses in the storeroom for grass and bracken for the animals’ bedding. I looked at the stranger from the corner of my eye. As I looked at him, he nodded to make it clear that they were his horses. A man with two horses for travelling is no ragged pedestrian beggar!

He walked in front of me and, after making a half turn towards the house, we reached the front door. Seeing that there was no sign of anything there, we started to examine the other side of the house: he was serious about it, while I went through the motions.

I saw right away what had been making the noise on the door, but I wanted to prolong the search to see how the stranger acted. We spent a long time looking about outside the house, looking for footprints or signs of something. We found no more than our own prints, and, when he calmed down, the stranger decided to go back into the house:

“We must have imagined those knocks on the door.”

I said nothing. As we were about to go back into the house, I pretended to have a last look around as if I, too, were worried about where the sounds had come from. I pointed with the lamp to the lean-to where I used to pile winter firewood up. I walked towards it paying a lot of attention, and the stranger followed me. You could not really make it out until you got close to it. A mother cat had taken shelter under the pile of wood. She was suffocating in the smoke. There were two or three kittens around her, and they, too, were suffocating.

The stranger said the mother cat's death throws had been the sound we had heard from the door.

"It must have been a good litter", I said. "At least five or six kittens."

"You knew it was the cat scratching, didn't you?"

"Me?" I said with surprise, playing the innocent. "Why would I doubt you when you thought it was somebody knocking at the door?" I paused, and chose my words carefully: "Everyone gets frightened in a different way. Thanks to that mother cat I've found out you and I don't scare in the same way."

"God's teeth! By all the saints, I'll be damned!" he started to swear, and looked up at the roof.

I laughed out loud at his old-fashioned swearing. The way the stranger said them they sounded like a curse on me rather than anything frightening.

When we went back into the house, now me going behind him, I looked at the skull on the stained glass window. It seemed to me that the jaw was moving. It was an unsettling image because I could only admit that the skull was laughing itself silly about one of us two.

Just as he had suddenly fallen prey to fear, now all at once he wanted to get his energy back. Once more in the main hall, he waved the two horses' book up in the air, brought it close to my eyes, and then put it back in his pocket.

“What were we saying, my friend?”

I was bored. I could not throw the stranger out because

I knew very little about him. But would I manage to get him to leave of his own accord?

I took two slivers of wood from the wedges and splinters which were breaking off from the trunks in the basket next to the chimney, one long and the other short, showed them to the stranger and told him to hold them in the palm of his hand: we were going to draw lots with them.

“If the one I take out is longer than yours, you will leave here at dawn.”

He burst into laughter and answered:

“Do you think you can fool me as easily as that?” He went on joking after he had calmed down a little: “You hope in vain, as if you wanted bread without having sown any wheat. Earlier you didn’t dare attack me with your sword. And now this ridiculous draw. You aren’t as cowardly as that. Do you have some hidden reasons for wanting to pretend to be a coward in order not to face up to the situation? Or don’t you want to realise and admit just how frightened you are, and just how much you are at my mercy?”

The scarce light in the room was coming in through the window rather than the fire, which was dying down. The moon would be over the reed bank beside the river.

“Frightened? At your mercy?” I picked his words up with disdain. “Obviously. That’s why I can amble up to the window and shout towards the reed bank: No! No! Here is your prey! You wouldn’t stop me, I’m sure of that because you didn’t show yourself to be free from fear yourself when a dying mother cat scratched on the door.”

The stranger put his hand on his knife, and looked as if he would draw it.

“Keep quiet if you don’t want to lose your tongue.”

So I was heading in the right direction, and I kept on going forward, albeit like a blind man with a stick, and I could not let the opportunity pass:

“Try to look at things from this different point of view. Without a tongue, I could take the lamp and, heading towards the sun, start making signals towards the reed bed on the riverbank.

He took his knife from his belt and waved it through the air, threatening me.

“Watch out, or I’ll slit your throat!” The fact that he had started to speak in a common way once more told me more about his change of mood than his waving the knife in the air. “Or I’ll stab you in the heart, just like I’ll tear the antlers from that deer head.”

He threw his knife into the air, and there were two noises, one after the other: the knife hitting the antlers, banging against their tips, and the knife and the antlers hitting the floor. I had never seen anybody use a knife so skilfully.

I gained nothing from the stranger getting angry. I wanted him to think I was in favour of peace.

“Imagine I promise I won’t sell you out. Imagine you believe me and take my word. Could we possibly reach an agreement?”

“Perhaps...” He took his knife from the floor and clasped it to his belt once more.

I was beginning to get annoyed again; the stranger had began to relax as if nothing had happened.

“Could we? Yes or no?” I asked him impatiently. “A man doesn’t lose the hope of getting out of danger, not even when threatened by your knife. As well as giving you away, I could also take shelter behind the door. Or behind whoever comes knocking on the door.”



After saying those last words, it occurred to me that he was not expecting just a single enemy at the door. He was anticipating a whole group of people would appear. Otherwise, what would he be so afraid of, and why?

Egged on by that thought, I repeated my sentence:

“Or behind whoever comes knocking on the door... You wouldn’t dare to throw your knife, you’d be too afraid of the group of knights outside.

He started coughing. Instead of shivering or throwing up bile, he put one hand on his hip, another on his chest, and with each breath it looked as if his heart was going up to his throat.

I remembered the goat’s milk. At that time I had taken his coughing to be put on, but this repetition made me see I had been wrong: the stranger was in a bad way, poisoned, scarcely breathing, about to surrender his soul to the lady with wings darker than those of a crow. Didn’t people with the plague cough like that too?

There was no stopping his dry coughing, he sneezed and shed tears for a long time; each fit of coughing shook his whole body, just like a sudden, rough gust of wind shakes the branches of vines, and even moves the vines themselves from side to side.

The attack lasted for three or four minutes, he also threw up for a while, but he did not lose his dignity during those three or four minutes. And then the crisis passed as quickly as it had arrived.

“It’s over. A bit of a racket, that’s all. I’m used to it”, he said wanting to erase what had happened, moving his hand up through the air.

It was the first time he had said anything about his life, and the first time he had lowered himself to the level of a man. By admitting that he had coughing fits like that he had just shown a weakness: anyone who builds up a big wall between their life and their surroundings is trying to put up some kind of

defence. He may think he has strengthened himself behind that wall, but it is weakness rather than strength that has built that barrier.

I went to the window and opened both sides of it completely. All the smoke from the burned haystack had blown away, but, just then, perhaps helped by a fresh burst of wind, a new lot of smoke was filling the room, obliterating the scent of mint from the reed bed. The moonlight did nothing to soften the aridity of the plain: everything on it had been dried out; everything was undergrowth and box trees, straw from small dents in the ground, the silver light of moon only emphasised the aridity of the plain; the blue shine only looked like silver saliva of a leper's broken skin...

"Close the window; that bitter smell of smoke isn't going to do me any good."

The way he asked me to do that made me think I had the stranger under my control. To find out what he was up to, I tried something else out:

"Could we reach that agreement? What do you say?" I asked him once again. "This huge house", and I moved my hand around in the air to symbolise the size of it, "has enough space to shelter two men such as you and me without our ever having to get in each other's way... Let's say..."

He did not let me finish.

"But we would get in each other's way, wouldn't we? We aren't made to get along with each other" he laughed out loud, ruling my suggestion out with disdain in his eyes. "Do you think that would be possible? You know only too well that our incompatibility is at least as strong as the orders given by fate. The image on the stained glass window says that too. *Fugite*, a mouse cannot build its home in a cat's ear."

"What would the problem be? What turns us into a cat and a mouse?" I wanted to know.

“Our past would completely condition our future.”

“Are you sure of that?” I asked with a tremor in my voice. The mere mention of the past was enough to make me more nervous than a reed shaken by the wind.

The stranger answered me slowly, as if tired of speaking:

“I am very sure... Otto Pette...”

I cannot say precisely – so many hours have gone by since then – just how much hearing my nickname terrified me. I spent a long time staring at one corner of the window, not even daring to look the stranger in the face. I looked back at my life, tried to remember all the faces of all the enemies and all the friends I had had over so many years. By then most of them must have been dead: Aba Yakue. Julius Probo. The king. Battis Tobera. Briskot the Gypsy...

But more than my many enemies and few friends, it was Grazibel’s face that came to mind time and again: wiping out the desire for vengeance on my enemies’ faces, her sweet look made me enjoy seeing both my friends and my enemies...

The mere memory of the pain of the past brought that pain back to me. I had spent years alone in that huge house, believing that Grazibel’s way of looking at me, like that past and smoke, would wear itself out. I even managed – it took me many years to reach this point – to see the innocent, sweet look on her lips when she smiled in my dreams rather than the look of fear on her face; and sometimes I managed to dream without Grazibel being in my dreams; and sometimes I managed not to wake up screaming in terror in the middle of the night, or not hearing others’ screams.

But all of that came back to me with the two-word name the stranger had called me: Otto Pette. I heard something like lightning with two peals of thunder when the stranger said those words making up my nickname, and based on my real name, Pette. While the two-word name was mine, I had not heard it for a

long time, and I was quite astonished when I heard the stranger say it. The first time they called me Otto, people giggled at that name, because I was Grazibel's uncle too, until all our meeting places, dark corners of markets and taverns, became the subject of rumours and speculation; but they called me Otto, above all, after I mentioned *lignun veritatis* to Julius Probo: "It seems you are enjoying yourself as much as a wolf slaughtering sheep", the king once told me, summing up what people were saying...

So who the devil was the stranger? Where did he know me from? How had he heard about me? The king and Aba Yakue were dead by then; perhaps the first-born or the abbot's helper had sent him. Or the successor of one of the tortured rebels. What was sure was that he had heard about my shelter, and that meant that once again, since he had arrived in my house, the exhaustion of having to flee had possessed me once more.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"It's around twenty years since I saw you for the first time. In the city, in the palace square. You raised your sword."

He paused. He wrinkled his eyebrows as if he were having trouble remembering something from the distant past. He soon started speaking again, but his voice had the echo of coming from very far away:

"There was the sound of trumpets, then people began shouting, waving their fists towards the gallows as you had ordered. When you lowered your sword, three heads were taken off their shoulders, and the bounced of the gallows and down into the crowd."

He was talking about the time before Julius Probo had made the torture table. He was talking about the days before the black plague, when the rebels were put on the boards for knowing what they did, and after saying what they knew; and if it was impossible to get out what they knew, because they kept their lips closed, those were the times I liked my sword to take their heads off

their bodies. I used to enjoy the sound of the heads bouncing off the planks when the executioners kicked them off there as much as I liked people cheering, when the heads span around before falling into the crowd.

“Who are you?”

He picked up some slivers of wood from the table. After having his hands behind his back for a while, he held them out towards me. Only the ends of the slivers of wood could be seen.

“I’ll tell you right away if I get the shorter of the two” he said, taking the route I had suggested earlier.

He greatly enjoyed that theatrical way of moving and speaking, once rejecting drawing lots, then accepting it; once refusing fate, then proclaiming himself to be the arm of vengeance; once asking who I was, then calling me Otto Pette. I had to go along with the game as I was both a spectator and an actor in the play. I had marked the shorter piece of wood with my fingernails, but I wanted to draw the ritual of the game out, just in case, not wanting the stranger to suspect anything.

“And what about if I get the short straw?” I wanted to know.

“You’ll have to tell me about the main events in your past.”

I took a few moments to ponder the stranger’s request.

“Let’s say I do that. What then?”

“Only if you do that will I then tell you who I am. Only then will I tell you about myself. Because I know who I am, I know that one of us must leave this world. And when you know who I am, there is no doubt that you will see we are not birds for the same nest. Quails are the eagle’s prey, not his nest mate.”

Just then the room went very dark. The fire went out completely, and the stranger was no more than a shapeless shadow.

The moon must have gone behind a cloud. I was unable to see the nail marks on the slivers of wood.

“Are you the son of one of the people on the gallows? A relative?” I made a last attempt to gain time before putting myself in the hands of fortune.

“Don’t try doing that: it won’t get you anywhere. Let’s draw lots and see who’s going to tell his story first, and we’ll know about each other before dawn breaks.”

The stranger’s answer seemed like damp wood to me: a lot of smoke, but little flame. Which was why I wanted to ask him for some explanations, not understanding the reasons for the changes. My first question was about the change in the picture on the stained glass:

“Why did you take the trouble, when you came back from burning your clothes, to draw a skull on top of the two horses on the stained glass?” He was silent for a moment as if preparing his answer. Or thinking whether he should give me an answer. Then he started to speak slowly, completing his description of the stained glass with hand movements.

“If you had looked carefully, you would have seen the two horses. They were closer to each other than before, but they were both still there”, and he visualised the two horses approaching each other by moving his hands together.

“What?” I asked him in astonishment. I had seen the skull rather than the two horses very clearly. “Are you trying to pull my leg?”

He laughed and held my arm:

“Come and see it yourself.”

He took me to the entrance, and pointed at the drawing. I could only see the skull there.

“Stop messing around” I said, loosening my arm from his fingers.

“Look carefully”, and he outlined the skull with one finger. The two horses were there; as the stranger’s finger pointed out their outline, I lost sight of the skull, and I could no longer see anything by the drawing of the two horses. “Now you only see the two horses. The skull and the drawing of the two horses cannot be seen at the same time. One or the other.” Then lifted a finger and drew the skull. “And now you can only see the skull.”

I stared at the stained glass. The horses had not lost their lack of harmony, I thought. He had only brought the horses closer together: he had taken out the piece of glass between the two horses, and, bringing the two closer together, put the pieces of glass left over behind the horses.

The two horses hooves, brought together, made up the sides of the skull, and the same was true for the horses’ heads, eyes and noses, which had become the skull’s forehead, eyes and nose.

The stranger had not just stolen the book. Those connections had not occurred to him just then. He had been familiar with the drawing and its components beforehand.

His voice brought me back from my thoughts.

“So, ask me your second question.”

“How do you know I want to ask you a second question?” I asked in surprise.

“Because I know what you’re worried about. Your attitude towards me has changed, and I would like to know why.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Because death makes us equal”, and he started coughing for the third time.



He held one hand to his mouth. Although his coughing fit was shorter than the previous one, he coughed up some blood.

When he got over it, he cleaned the blood from his hand on his trousers. Then he held it to his chest, which he scratched for a while. Was the stranger's illness one which gave sharp pain, like the plague.

Alas! Realising he was on his last legs, gravely infected, I wanted to get the most from the situation. Using my most evil voice and without taking into account whatsoever that he would soon die, I blurted out:

“I could even decide not to tell anybody.”

“As you like. But you're wrong: the people I am expecting to arrive are not coming for me. They're after you. And, when they catch you, they won't show you the mercy I'm showing you.” A challenge. It could not have been otherwise. Why, otherwise, would he have been scared by the mother cat's scratching?

“Even if that were so, what would I have to lose by keeping quiet?” I asked him.

“Well, I wouldn't tell you my story, and, that way, you wouldn't know what to do to protect yourself when soon – and if it isn't today, it'll be tomorrow; if it isn't tomorrow, the day after – they come through that door to get you. We would both die anyway: I'll be killed by nature, and you'll be cut in half by the swords of the people who come through that door, and my journey here will have been in vain.”

That absolutely theatrical way of speaking again! Was it not Aba Yakue who had used to speak like that, looking upwards and his chest puffed out? But Aba Yakue had died by then.

“Why have you come here? You won't make me believe that you wanted to save me from some enemy or another of mine.”

“Everything in good time.”

The moon came out from behind the clouds again, and the stranger cast his large shadow once more.

“So why didn’t you try saying that from the start? Why’ve you taken so long?”

He laughed with pity:

“I wanted to know how you behaved with people nowadays, see how much you’ve changed. I wanted to hear your words for myself. But I hadn’t thought you would be so close.”

“Close?”

He took me by the elbow and led me to the window.

“Look, look out there... The lonely bit of mist under that hill. Can you see it clearly? That has to be a fire.”

I could not see anything.

“Won’t that be a mirage caused by the moonlight?”

He shrugged with regret. He squinted to concentrate on a single point, and, looking towards the hill, said to me:

“It could be. It often seems to us that we see it like that because we want it to be like that; but it could be a mirage. But what if it were some people who had lit a fire, people who are coming here and hungry? If they were mounted, if would have them here in a day’s time.”

“So they’re after you”, I said, wanting to goad him.

“After us, my friend, after us. However, like you, I would prefer to think the fire is a mirage. But, in the worst case, let’s imagine the horses are exhausted. Let’s imagine they have had to stop for a rest, and they are taking a long, eight-hour rest. They won’t be here before tomorrow night. There’s a lot of time before then.”

He showed me the ends of the slivers of wood he was holding, and held his hands out to me.

“Take one!”

“I could tell you a lie”, I said before choosing a straw. His hand was at the height of his waist, so I could not see the end of the shorter piece.

“I know you aren’t going to tell me the truth, you’re going to give me your blind point of view about your life. But we have to say the truth about things we can both check up on: that happened, the king gave that order, that number of rebels were imprisoned... Let not interpretations and each person’s esteem for his own skin get in the way of real events.”

“You know me. You must also know about the events, obviously.” I leant over and scratched my knees so I could look at the slivers of wood. I could not see the marks.

“Well, at least enough to realise whether you are lying or telling the truth”, and he turned towards the fire.

I followed him, took the poker and stoked up the fire, knocking the smaller pieces of firewood down. It came back to life right away.

“I, on the other hand, do not know you. How can I know whether what you are going to tell me is true or not?” I looked at his hand. I saw a mark on the sliver of wood to the left. That was the shorter of the two.

“As soon as you know who I am you will realise I cannot tell lies about the most important events in my life. You will be able to be sure of that. But it is up to you to tell the first story. There!” he said, holding his hand out again for me to choose a straw. “Any other problems?”

I did not think the situation of whoever was going to draw the short straw was fair: after telling his whole story, and when everything about him had been said, the other man would be able to adapt his own story accordingly.

I knew where the short straw was, and I had nothing to worry about. Even so, I told him my objection.

“I don’t object to that”, the stranger said to me. Whoever draws the short straw can tell his story up to where he wants to; and the other man can do the same too. So I don’t think either of us is going to have a particular advantage over the other. Does that seem right?”

I nodded in agreement, and, as I was going to draw my straw, he turned his back to the fire so I couldn’t see his hand.

I blindly chose the one on the right. We compared them, and mine was the shorter of the two. Obviously, he had switched them around when he turned his back on the fire!

I could not complain. To what end? The pot can hardly call the kettle black.

The stranger sat down on the bench by the chimney, his back against the wall, ready to hear my story. He made some recommendations before I began to speak:

“Tell as much as you want to. It could be a good system, if you agree, for you to give some examples of what happened on the most important days. It’s raining on the countryside we can see through the window, and it would keep on raining just the same if we went outside. The passing of time is no obstacle to trying to tell a story, but shortening it to a few hours can be. That’s why I say

we should both choose important days in our lives. The ones we think complete, of course.”

“Complete? How can we know if they are complete? Storms, while they last, have moments of calm and moments of rage, but all of those moment make up a storm.”

“Complete events change our point of view on what has happened until then, and open up to what is going to happen afterwards.”

Having no alternative, I spoke respectfully once more:

“Dawn is still a long way off. Would you like something to eat or drink before I start talking?”

“Not me. But if you want something...”

“No, no. No we’ve come this far, I’d rather start right now. I’ll go on until dawn. Do you agree?”

He nodded, and, his elbows firmly on his knees, he held his hands behind his neck ready to hear my story.

Grazibel’s face, which had long ago misted over for me, renewed my need to remember. I felt wholly pitiful.

I started my tale hesitantly, until the words themselves calmed me down as they came out.