

German Short Stories of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Isolde Kurz (1863-1944)

The Iettatore.
A Forgotten Story

(From *Die Stunde des Unsichtbaren*, 'The Hour of the Invisible,' 1927)

The reader who should happen to know all about the Iettatura ('Evil Eye') need not be alarmed by this title. I have made the sign of the horns¹ over my leaves so that reading them will not harm him nor writing them harm me. We both generally assume, it is true, that we are superior to superstition, but it is better to be on the safe side nevertheless.

What kind of person is a Iettatore? One who has the Evil Eye, the answer will come. But the Evil Eye is known in the North of Europe as well; whoever has it wishes to do evil to his fellow men and is marked by nature as a vessel of evil, so that nannies can spit at his feet from ten paces. Not so the Iettatore, a variety that occurs only in the South. He can be the most perfect man of honour and inspired with the most benevolent convictions; if he has brought this fateful gift into the world with him, then as long as he lives, wherever he goes, without his knowledge or volition, he is a danger to his fellow man. His coming is invariably bound with some misfortune, a loss, if not even a death. He himself can enjoy the best of success for a long time, until the perniciousness retroacts on its originator; he can be lucky in all that he undertakes while, at the same time, he rages among those around him like an epidemic. He suspects nothing of the doom that he brings; he

¹ Made with a clenched fist by backing the thumb under the middle and fourth fingers and extending the index and little fingers.

sympathetically presses Friend A's hand to console him over the lost lawsuit, the prospects of which had still been so favourable before his last visit, then he hears that Friend B has fallen ill, hurries at once to his residence where his family receives him with horror and tries to quickly remove him – to no purpose, three days later he walks, a candle in his hand, in sincere grief behind the coffin of his victim.

He who will become a true *lettatore* usually gives notice of this even in the cradle: he either cost his mother her life with his birth, or the wet-nurse, the moment she put him to her breast, fell into incurable insanity. Later, he has been pernicious to teachers and fellow pupils, has, through his mere presence, ignited fires, caused inundations, and perhaps even put the state in danger. But as the family conceals the evil for as long as possible, he can have caused no end of damage by the time the Mark of Cain is at last visible to all the world. There is no known case of someone afflicted with *lettatura* ever having recovered from his malady; it is innate, hereditary, and incurable. It can pass over a whole generation or enter a collateral line, but like tuberculosis it appears again and again and is said to become more acute as the affected one increases in years. The home of the *lettatura* is Naples, which suggests a Greek origin, and it particularly likes to latch on to the aristocratic families there.

Formerly three great *lettatore*-families stood out among the Neapolitans. They bore the proudest names in the land; I shall keep them to myself, so as not to harm them or us. My source, a very erudite and broad-minded Neapolitan, knew of a fourth, the most dangerous of all, but he would not name them: merely to utter their name was ominous, he said.

After much pleading and urging, he wrote it in my notebook for me, but not without making the well-known protective sign with two splayed fingers of his left hand over it and then sighing from the depths of his soul: “Dio ce la mandi buona!” [God help us!] I have lost the notebook with the name, and that is probably for the best. Under the rule of the Bourbons, it was apparently no rare occurrence for members of such families to be banished the land for no fault of their own, but simply to render the *Iettatura* harmless. Their nearest relatives could, at the same time, hold the highest court appointments and public offices undisturbed, for usually only one person among the kindred was bearer of the diabolical inheritance. I do not however intend to write a treatise on *Iettatura*, but would rather like to tell about a completely forgotten *Iettatore*, whom I personally knew and who today, when I was rummaging around in the old, rediscovered sketches of my Florentine years, suddenly appeared to me in my mind’s eye.

It was in the nineties when I received, one day, an invitation to supper from Mrs. Clara G., the German wife of a Neapolitan noble who had formerly set up house on a grand scale in Florence but now came to the city from his estate in Casentino only seldom. It had the playful postscript:

“As you love the odd types of humanity, so there is a surprise in store for you tonight. I ask however that you provide yourself with a little coral horn just in case, for you will make the acquaintance of the most notorious *Iettatore*, Marchese O., at my home.”

I immediately knew who was meant, although I had never heard the name before. The figure tainted with the bad reputation had been shown to

me in the street as a curiosity of the town: a gaunt old gentleman with a striking physiognomy and somewhat slovenly outward appearance, to which, however, there still clung the traces of an earlier, aristocratic lifestyle. His appearance was not prepossessing, but there was something in his eyes that touched the heart, something timid and proud, like a man who was once condemned to death though innocent and who has avoided human intercourse ever since.

He was never seen in public places of entertainment; on the contrary, he walked to the Parco delle Cascine every day, particularly in the early hours of morning, and then most preferably along secluded bridle-paths to which pedestrians seldom find their way. There he walked slowly up and down, prodding the soft earth with his cane, singing to himself in an undertone and stopping now and then to let out a short laugh that was anything but happy.

The name of the Marchese O. had, as I have said, never yet been spoken to me, even those who were personally acquainted with him avoided uttering it: when the talk was of the unfortunate man, he was simply called, "So-and-so," or "Mr. So-and-so," and one could hear, from the mouths of educated people, statements such as these:

"I had intended to take a sum to the bank today, but on the way I met So-and-so, so I thought it more advisable to turn back." Or: "I must sell my horse, the Marchese, you know, the Neapolitan, praised its paces in Cascine Park the other day, so it's going to break a leg any day soon."

The Marchese O. had not always been a pariah in Florence. Older people remembered knowing him as a young man with a zest for life and as a brilliant member of the noble club; in those days, he rode on the crest of the

wave and was engaged to one of the richest and most beautiful girls in high society. What circumstances were attended with the turning-point of his fortune had long been consigned to oblivion; now he led a solitary life as a bachelor, lived as frugally as a miser, and I was more than a little astonished when I met him one time, one single time, with a beautiful young woman on his arm in the entrance-hall of the pergola, attentively escorting her out and protecting her from any contact like a precious vase. I was told that she was the presiding judge's daughter Lacava, the Marchese's godchild and heiress-presumptive, and when I expressed my surprise at this enlightened family who alone seemed to defy the general prejudice, I was given for reply, with an indeterminable smile, that the *Iettatura* had no power over the House of Lacava.

I was therefore more than a little eager to become acquainted with the man to whom such an incomprehensible fate was attached. Apparently, my fellow countrywoman wanted, with her clear mind and warm heart, to make an attempt to bring the solitary man back among people, and I can only regret that I arrived too late to observe the faces of the other guests when he entered; of course, Mrs. Clara had invited foreigners almost exclusively by way of precaution. I found him already seated, clean-shaven and in an immaculate frock-coat suit, beside the lady of the house. The entire circle seemed to have joined in a kindly conspiracy, for the outcast was surrounded with the most courteous attentions from all sides. Seen from close at hand, he had no repellent features; only, the unusual narrowness of his face, which actually consisted of nothing more than two profiles, and the long aquiline nose, which resembled the back of a knife, could strike one as sinister. But

there was nothing of the classical *lettatore*-type about him, his hair did not incline to reddish-fair, and his eyes did not have a piercing look, only an infinitely melancholic one, as if they would say: Yes, dear children, you come too late with your sympathy, this tree is past bursting into leaf.

The master of the house, his compatriot and coeval, indefatigably sought to cheer him up through reminiscences from the years of their youth, but the amiable and beautiful hostess, who, although younger than her spouse by twenty years, likewise treated him as an old companion, helped even more to rouse the guest from his timid reserve.

At table his constraint really was dispelled, the recluse revealed himself to be an entertaining neighbour, from out of the mask of reserve there broke an effusive Southern temperament and social talents which had only become rusty; they had not died. He recounted witty stories about Court in the Age of the Bourbons and displayed that old-fashioned gallantry which made elderly gentlemen all the more charming the farther away one moved from the days when they were in vogue.

When we took our coffee in the adjoining room, the Marchese went and stood at the piano with the master of the house, and they accompanied each other, alternately singing merry Neapolitan folk-songs which put the guests in a transport of sheer delight. The Marchese still had a clear and powerful voice like a young man, and he sang with such youthful fire and exuberance that we thought we were listening to a *lazzarone*.²

A lady walked up to him at the piano and said:

² Here: A strolling singer in the streets of Naples.

“Why, I really had no idea that you were so musical, Marchese.”

“Now, is there a Neapolitan who is *not* musical?” he asked with a smile, and the lady of the house quickly interposed:

“Oh, you do not know that the Marchese has even written an opera, ‘Tullia d’Aragona,’³ which was accepted by many theatres at Verdi’s intercession.”

“And performed at none,” the old gentleman added.

“Why was that?” asked the lady.

“In the Costanzi, the prima donna was wounded when a spurned lover shot her during the final rehearsal, and here at the Niccolini⁴ fire broke out at the first performance, before the curtain had even been raised. Of course, everyone cried: There you are, it’s the *lettatura*. And then the opera had to pay the penalty for this, being thrown overboard together with its composer. For from then on it was taken as read: Whenever ‘Tullia d’Aragona is on the programme, some misfortune is bound to occur.”

“Outrageous! Ridiculous superstition!” cried those standing nearest by, and a disapproving murmur spread all through the drawing-room, while one or another of the company, perhaps, secretly made the Sign of the Horns.

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Clara with animation, “one would not believe it possible elsewhere. And we also suffered as a result of the foolishness, for my husband had written the libretto. The subject matter is from the Marchese’s own family history, and he entwined it with the figure of the famous poetess and courtesan.”

³ An Italian upper-class courtesan and poetess (c.1501-1556).

⁴ The Costanzi: an opera house in Rome. The Niccolini: a theatre in Florence.

“Could we not hear something from your opera?” I asked the Marchese.

He threw an inquiring look at the lady of the house, who quickly interjected:

“My niece will sing Tullia’s aria, ‘O, senza pace,’ for you, and the Marchese will have the kindness to accompany her. You will give us the pleasure, will you not?”

The Marchese bowed without saying a word. A quiet radiance passed over all of his face, making his unlovely features almost prepossessing.

The niece, a pretty seventeen-year-old German girl who was preparing herself for the stage, had already slipped away into a corner to rummage in the sheet-basket, from which she presently fetched out the aria; this little shift had been prepared by the hospitable household to please the recluse.

Annetta walked to the piano, the Marchese sat down, and the listeners sat in a wide semi-circle. I could not take my eyes off the old gentleman; it was worth observing his face during the music. He did not look at the keys but raised his eyes as though he wished to hurry after the sounds as they soared away, and his fingers found their way by themselves. The girl, who had a good soprano voice, sang the lovesick poetess’s aria expressively and powerfully, and elicited murmurs of admiration from the listeners. The composer did not miss out on his share. “That has a Verdian passion,” I heard someone say beside me, and when the singer finished, an encore was fervently called for. The Marchese had suddenly become ten years younger and sat there as if transported into another world.

“If you are not tired,” he quietly said to the young girl who shared his laurels, “you might sing the ‘Un sol desio’ passage one more time.” The singer assured him with glowing cheeks that she was not tired and began the whole aria from the beginning:

‘O, senza pace,’ – but she did not bring the first line to an end, a shrill cry of terror drowned out her voice. She had come too close to a piano-candle with her hanging sleeve, and her flimsy blue silk frock instantly flared up. The Marchese tried to put out the fire with trembling hands, but two strong young arms beat him to it and extinguished the flames. Yet Annetta seemed to be quite beside herself, she screamed over and over again and had to be carried, having convulsions, into the next room. Ten minutes later, although Mrs. Clara came back and reported that her niece had suffered nothing worse than a fright and only needed a little rest to calm her nerves, the evening was spoiled nonetheless. One gentleman had burns on his hand from extinguishing the fire, and the company broke up in dismay. Only now did we notice that the Marchese was missing, the piano was still open, and the fatal music-sheet lay on the floor undamaged – but the Iettatore had disappeared.

“I just feel sorry for the poor Marchese,” said Mrs. Clara when we were sitting together for half an hour after the company had departed. “I meant well, but this evening will, I fear, simply add fuel to the fire. I am convinced he will now keep away from us as well; for he naturally supposes that the accident, for which only the stupid vogue for hanging sleeves is to blame, will be ascribed to his presence.”

When I asked for the story of the singular man’s life, she referred me to her husband, who had been intimate with him in their youth and had

perpetrated many a droll prank with him before the Marchese, being very young, joined one of the many conspiracies of the late forties and then came to Florence with that tidal wave of Neapolitan fugitives who poured over Tuscany at that time.

“In those days,” she continued, “it was generally believed that he was destined for a brilliant future. Although he lived in the humblest conditions, his estates having been sequestrated, yet all great houses stood open to him, in Florence everyone went crazy about the talented and noble Neapolitan, and many copies of his lesser compositions passed from hand to hand. – When I made his acquaintance, his star was already sinking. I still clearly remember how friends of my husband said even then:

“‘What? You associate with the Marchese O., with the *lettatore*? Turn your back on him when he comes again, spit at his feet, he has the Evil Eye, he will bring discord into your house.’

“And the poor Marchese himself, who still took the matter as a joke at that time, brought me a little coral horn one day – I have it still – which I should carry for protection against him. Of course I did not drop him, and he remained a friend of the family so long as we spent the winter in Florence, but we had a hard fight against prejudice even then, and if only a roast was burnt, the blame was laid upon the poor Marchese in jest or in earnest.”

“Well, there *was* something more than burnt roasts,” her husband interjected. “Do you remember the incident with the new Sèvres porcelain? My wife,” he explained to me, “had ordered a sumptuous Sèvres dinner-service from France, and to celebrate the porcelain she gave a supper at which friend O. had to be present. He radiated amiability, but when the first course

had been taken away, it occurred to him to reach out for one of the small bowls just when the footman was walking in with an armful of plates, and to say: "It is really a quite charming pattern." He had not finished his words when a crash sounded from the door, and the floor was covered with fragments. But at the crash the Marchese innocently turned his head round and said, with a pitying look at the offender who was gathering up the pieces, "These marble floors are too smooth, I have warned Mrs. Clara several times" – without suspecting that half of the company present saw *him* to be the real culprit."

"He was right, the floor was indeed too smooth," replied Mrs. Clara, quite unfazed. "And it is by no means out of the question that our new servant was made nervous by the hints they had given him in the kitchen before he entered."

"And that large chandelier of ours which he caused to crash on the next occasion?" the husband, who was perhaps not, after all, so sure of his broadminded outlook as he liked to make his German wife believe, reminded her.

I asked her how the unlucky devil had managed to accomplish that.

"Oh, very easily," was the answer. "He came, saw, and conquered. No sooner had he advanced to the middle of the room to kiss my wife's hand than something fell from above and broke, and our lovely chandelier lay in a thousand fragments."

"But nobody was injured," Mrs. Clara insisted unperturbedly, "and when the chain was examined, it turned out that the broken link was rusty; it was a miracle that it had held so long. The only strange thing about the whole

incident was people looking for a scapegoat.”

“What can you expect?” the master of the house remarked to me. “It’s easy for foreigners to make light of a prejudice they are not born with. But these repeated mischances did the poor Marchese much harm. Among the refugees, some now suddenly claimed to know that his father had been a *lettatore*, and then misfortunes came one after another. What happened with the opera, you have heard from the man himself. Around that time, he invited a few young people to a boating-party on the Arno one day, to watch the fireworks that were going to be let off on the bridge. The little boat collided with a larger one, capsized, the Marchese swam to safety, the others drowned, among them one of his fiancée’s brothers, whose family was so shattered that they broke off the engagement. From that time on his reputation as a *lettatore* was established, it was as though he were branded with a stigma. Duchess Carafa, whom he visited almost every day, had lost three delightful children, one after the other, to scarlet fever; the Duke was the Marchese’s oldest school-friend and a truly enlightened man, and he wanted to force his wife to continue to receive the pariah, but the Duchess wrote a short letter to him in secret in which she implored him to have consideration for the worries of a mother who wished to keep her last child, and voluntarily stay away from her threshold. The unfortunate man had tears in his eyes when he showed me these lines. Offended and embittered, he withdrew from society, and nobody made any attempt to stop him. It was not that everyone had believed in his pernicious influence, but his long nose was a reminder of so many painful events at which it had been present that people gradually preferred not to see it any more. They let superstition alone

and simply found that they did not exactly need to associate with the Marchese O., who had in any case lost his charming spirits and assumed a suspicious, embittered manner. Whenever he dared to occasionally leave his visiting-card here or there, he simply found nobody at home.

“In the end, there remained for him only the Club, in which he now spent all of his time. But there too, people did not really like to see him anymore, for if he should want to watch a game of cards, it could easily come to pass that the player beside whom he had seated himself would angrily snort at him, ‘Can’t you see that you’re spoiling my game, find yourself another seat.’ Then there were altercations, painful scenes, and even duels, until the unfortunate pariah preferred to avoid his Club also.

“Of the entire society with whom he had previously associated, Countess Valenza had kept her friendship with him the longest; he visited her every now and then on a Thursday, where he found her old circle together, and there he was always received with undiminished warm-heartedness. His star, which was perhaps his unlucky star, ordained it that shortly before the death of this truly noble-minded lady, which broke up the hospitable house, he renewed an acquaintance there which was decisive for the rest of his life. Mrs. Lacava is neither beautiful nor brilliant, but she possesses a clear mind, a thorough education, and is, as a born Englishwoman, free from Italian prejudices. She approached the persona non grata with sympathy; it is said that she had favoured him when she was a girl but had been overlooked by him, he still being much in demand at that time. Her marriage was a mere matter of form even then and left her heart completely unengaged; President Lacava, who had been deceived in her

financial circumstances, certainly treated her with respect, but he went his own way. It was with his full consent that the Marchese occupied the empty seat beside the lonely lady and gradually took over the role of master of the house. He accompanied the young lady to the theatre in the absence of her husband and helped her receive guests; he superintended the education of her little son, and later, when a little daughter came into the world, the Marchese undertook the position of godfather, and the little one received the name Tullia after his *Child of Sorrow*, the unperformed opera. Meanwhile, political revolutions had brought him back into the possession of his fortune; he could now have turned his back on the city which had grown so inhospitable and lived abroad, free from defamation, as a well-to-do man. A new existence beckoned to him; it only depended on him to cast aside his entire past life and the accursed prejudice that clung to him, to start a family in a foreign place and become a person like any other. Mrs. Lacava herself advised him to do this. But his heart was bound: love for his little godchild displaced all his own wishes. He stayed where he was and is said to have made a will in which he designated Tullia Lacava as sole heiress. All of his thoughts and aspirations were restricted to this little flower of maidenhood from her birth on: he instructed her in music, arranged English nurses and French governesses, and to the few friends he still had, my wife and I first and foremost, he became practically unbearable, for he spoke of nothing but the progress the little one was making, her beauty, and her talents. He preserved a grateful, fond friendship with the mother, a pale, ailing woman, but he went down on his knees before the child – the child was everything to him. ‘When Tullia has grown up,’ that was the starting-point of all his dreams for the

future, and he saw the signs of eminent talent in the little one's childlike notions.

“In spring and autumn, he carried the whole family off to his estates near Naples, in summer he accompanied them on journeys or into the mountains, and the winter he spent very tranquilly in Florence, occupied only with the Lacava family like a quiet tutelary spirit. When Tullia made her debut in society, he ordered a dress for her from Paris that cost thousands, and he followed her with his eyes from the steps, rubbing his hands, as she got into the carriage with her father and mother. He went around in worn-out clothes, ate in a cheap café and accumulated interest upon interest, to increase the dowry of his Tullia. On the occasions when the mother's heart disease got worse, he did not leave her bedside and watched by her through the nights so that Tullia's sleep was not disturbed. And when the girl, almost grown-up, wanted to be sent to a select college to enable her the better to comport herself in society, he supported this wish also, however hard it would be for him to stay at his melancholy post without her. ‘When Tullia gets married one day,’ – with these words he consoled himself for the domestic joys he had missed and for everything that Fortune had denied him.”

“And did the diabolic influence really never make itself manifest in the Lacava family?” I asked.

Mr. G. was silent and glanced fleetingly at his wife.

“Let me talk now,” she said emphatically. “All through sixteen years, while the Marchese looked after the President's house, not a tile fell from its roof. Indeed, it was as if the pernicious effect that people had imputed to him

had changed into a sheer blessing there. But fate will knock at every door someday, with or without Iettatura.

“In the spring of Eighty-Seven, of unhappy memory, news of the disastrous battle of Dogali⁵ flew through Italy like a seismic shock. Mrs. Lacava’s eldest son, Alberto, a promising, very handsome youth of twenty-two years, was with his regiment in Massawa. A part of this very regiment had been massacred at Dogali by the Abyssinians. For many days, mothers, father, brothers besieged the Ministry of War for news of their dear ones in Africa. Godfather, as the Marchese was called in the President’s house, happened to be in Rome at that time, and he hurried to the relevant ministry straight away but had to look in a number of times before the casualty list arrived from Africa: among the fallen, Alberto’s name was one of the first.

“The Marchese did not dare to telegram the family, but personally brought the sad news to Florence. And now see the lengths to which human folly and human unkindness will go. For the Battle of Dogali had been fought a long time before, and the fallen were lying in the hot earth of Africa, when the casualty list came to Rome and into the hands of the Marchese. And yet Mr. Lacava could not refrain from saying to his wife in the first paroxysm of despair, ‘What need did that bird of ill omen have to meddle in our concerns? Couldn’t we have sent another? Doesn’t he know that his croaking brings calamity in its wake?’

“The senseless malice that suddenly burst out of these words occasioned the first matrimonial quarrel in the Lacava household, which was

⁵ Fought on 26 January 1887. A small Italian force was eventually overwhelmed and virtually wiped out by a much larger Ethiopian army.

never subsequently patched up and which was also placed to the Marchese's account. A few years passed. Then there rose a new joy from the old sorrow in the House of Lacava, as tends to be the way with the fate of man. A Count Tancredi, Alberto's friend and comrade from the military academy, had come in the very first weeks, under the deep impression of the recent loss, to offer his condolences to the family, and seeing charming Tullia in her mourning-dress, he was captivated. However, they came to an understanding only last winter, when the young officer was transferred here with his squadron. The plan was to wait until Mrs. Lacava's birthday for the formal engagement, then only a short time was to pass between this and the wedding, as is the custom here. Tancredi had also taken the godfather's heart by storm, for he played chess with him and showed himself thoroughly equal to the situation by showing even greater deference to his fiancée's godfather than to his future father-in-law. He had every reason to do so, for the Marchese furnished the young home on a princely scale and gave the couple so magnificent an allowance that he himself was left with only a scanty annual income. As proof of his particular affection, he gave the young officer an English thoroughbred, the racehorse Vandalo, which had already won prizes in Rome and in Naples.

“Around four o'clock on the first Sunday in May, the entire Lacava family made ready to drive to Cascine Park, where Count Tancredi was to race for the Arno Prize on Vandalo. Tullia was sitting in the landau the Marchese had sent, and in her light-green gown, with a mighty bouquet of roses in her hands, she resembled a goddess of spring. She was waiting for her parents, who were still tarrying upstairs, when, to her infinite astonishment, she saw her godfather, dressed with immaculate chic, a flower in his buttonhole,

coming down the street. He had hung a field-glass over his shoulder and wore a tie-pin in the shape of a horseshoe in his tie. Tullia was seized with an inclination to laugh, so unaccustomed was this spectacle to her; but the next moment, her heart froze as if gripped by an icy hand: Surely he would not want to ride with them?!

Sure enough, he came up, gave a greeting, and innocently opened the carriage door. 'But godfather,' cried Tullia in alarm, 'we shall be squashed together, you *know* I've invited a girlfriend.'

"Doesn't matter,' he calmly replied, seating himself beside her and feasting his eyes on her charming appearance. 'When she comes, I shall simply get out and follow you on foot. I am firmly resolved to see Vandalò race today.'

"The arrival of the parents interrupted the conversation, but Tullia trembled all over, she felt, as she later recounted, as if she wanted to throw herself screaming out the carriage. She still sought objections, but a steady look from her mother, who set great store on the godfather being treated with deference, enjoined her to silence.

"Her last hope fastened on her girlfriend, before whose house they were just then driving up. Bianca had faithfully promised, and when Bianca appeared, her godfather would have to give up his seat; he was too chivalrous to make her squeeze in. A painful minute passed, then the footman came back alone: Miss Bianca was indisposed at present and asked to be excused.

"Tullia leaned against the back of the carriage, as white as a sheet, and said not another word. So, it was a decree of fate that her godfather should ride with her today, he, who had never otherwise accompanied her to a public

entertainment. She avoided his admiring looks; she saw for the first time, in the knife-sharp bridge of his nose, the signs of the Evil Eye, which she had been taught to despise as crack-headed superstition. From that moment on, she hated her godfather, I have it from her own lips, and she resolved to make him pay for her fear. Had he not also accompanied poor Alberto to Brindisi and even called his blessings after him from the pier? And is it not known that the blessing of a *Iettatore* must change into its opposite? What could it matter to him whether he rode with them to the racecourse or not? For the old gentleman it was merely a childish pleasure, while for her it meant an hour in Hell.

“Only when Tancredi walked up to the carriage and she took a short stroll at his side over the grass did she light up again, and her anxiety dissipated. There was no more handsome couple in the whole racecourse, and she knew it. Admired and envied and loved above all others – what more could a spoilt young bride-to-be wish for!

“And the godfather above all! He was actually in youthful spirits, the Neapolitan blood broke out once again from under the stern exterior, a rapid fire of good ideas poured out of his mouth, he was in constant motion, explaining the chances of the various horses and even taking part in the betting. – As we had chanced to come to a halt, in the crowd of carriages and horses on that day, bringing our two *landaus* side to side, he directed almost all of his words at my husband and me.

“Of course, he bet on *Vandalo*.

“Anything but that, godfather!’ Tullia cried out, grasping his arm.

“And why not, silly little goose?’ he replied, laughing. ‘Do you suppose

I don't know horses? Vandalò is the best animal on the whole racecourse. Today he will bring back in what he cost.'

"Tullia hung her head and could not think of anything to reply. The gentlemen's race⁶ began. Tullia, standing on tiptoe and pale as a marble statue, stood on the cushioned carriage-seat and followed Vandalò's every movement with her small opera-glasses. He came past in second place, his rider cautiously holding him back; a black horse was a length ahead of him.

"That's the way!" said the godfather. 'You'll see, you'll see, Vandalò has air in his bones like a bird.'

Again they flew past, and this time the black horse was far back, but a dun had the lead.

"Vandalò, stride out, stride out!" cried the godfather, who could not be silent a moment. Constantly hearing his voice got on Tullia's nerves, she trembled all over and her hands became cold and damp. But now Vandalò meant business, his rider leant forward and whipped him, he flew like the wind; for the third time he came rushing past, the winning-post was not thirty metres away.

"Bravo! Bravo, Vandalò!" cried the godfather, and before he had finished speaking, Vandalò crashed down, and horse and rider literally disappeared under the hooves of the dun as it came flying after. It was received with a general cry of horror when it reached the winning-post after running over the fallen rider. Vandalò lay motionless and covered its owner.

"The opera-glasses fell from Tullia's hands, then she reeled after them

⁶ A race in which the horse's owner rides as its jockey.

and was only just caught up in her godfather's arms. He placed her in the arms of her parents, and immediately afterwards his tall, gaunt figure elbowed a way through the crowd. In vain did the rest of us try to calm the girl with the poor comfort that the racecourse being soft and free from obstacles, the fall could not possibly have been such a serious one. Tullia lay like a dying woman and only groaned, 'It's over, I know, it's over.' Her godfather did not return, and the throng around the site of the accident prophesied no good. The carriage was driven slowly, step by step, through the densely packed crowd towards the city.

"The rest of us followed. Before the exit from Cascine Park, we saw a covered object being carried from the grass into the ground floor of a house. The godfather walked beside the stretcher and did not raise his eyes. Tullia wanted to jump out of the carriage, but four arms held her back; and the landau, as soon as it was clear of the crowd, flew towards their home as fast as the horses could trot.

"Tullia had been right in her surmise: her lover did not regain consciousness. The horse had fallen on him and smashed his spine. But how it came about that Vandalo, much-lauded Vandalo, ridden by the best rider in the garrison, had fallen to its death on level ground – this was one of those things for which there is simply no explanation. Had he stumbled or been brought down by the horse behind? Tancredi could speak no longer; the two rivals had been too preoccupied with themselves at the moment of the catastrophe; the crowd had seen only the fall, not its cause. So it must have been a case of *lettatura*, the most pronounced and the direst case imaginable.

"Tullia lay without moving or saying a word for many days; only, when

her godfather entered the room, she turned her face to the wall. The worldly-wise mother at length thought that this excess of misery could harm her daughter's future prospects, all the more so as the engagement had not yet been made public, and she took the girl away with her to England. Tullia acquiesced in everything that had been arranged for her, except that she opposed, with vehemence, her godfather accompanying them. Her mother had to think up one subterfuge after another to conceal from the old friend how bitterly she accused him. On the other hand, she urgently demanded the company of her father, who had never been so intimate with her before, and the President had to take leave twice to visit his mentally disturbed daughter, while the poor godfather was left behind on his own in Florence and walked to the post office day after day to receive news from England. The mother wrote to him regularly and sent fabricated greetings from Tullia, because she could not persuade her to write a line to her godfather. The poor man then told us, with a radiant face, the affectionate words that a pious deception had brought him, and he generally ended with his usual refrain, 'When Tullia gets married one day..' – At the request of Mrs. Lacava, we brought the recluse more and more into our circle for the duration of our stay, to console him for his loneliness, and it was expressly for his sake that the present evening was arranged which has now come to so disastrous an end through the clumsiness of my niece."

That was the last that I saw or heard of the Marchese O. for a long time, for our mutual friends left the city soon afterwards. I did, it is true, come across Tullia Lacava and her parents in a spa at one time. She was still beautiful, but deathly pale, and the forced liveliness with which she received

the attentions of an elderly gentleman of good standing had, for those who knew her history, something heart-rending about it. Later on, I learned that she had married the gentleman of good standing and had received from her godfather the gift of his entire fortune.

Years passed again without my hearing anything more spoken of the Knight of the Doleful Countenance or his godchild; his image had receded into the hindmost nook of my memory. Then one day, in Switzerland, I was reminded of him by meeting Mrs. Clara G.

She immediately drew me to one side and said:

“If you go to Florence, then pray do me the favour of going to see the poor Marchese O. You perhaps will not know that Mrs. Lacava has died, the unfortunate man does not have a single soul left who takes any interest in him.”

“Well – and Tullia?” I asked. “Beautiful Tullia, she is alive and is, as far as I know, married in Florence.”

“Tullia? Oh, that is a sad story. Tullia has shown him the door.”

“What?” I said, “his godchild, his idol, has really and truly shown the old man the door after she has accepted the gift of his entire fortune?”

“Certainly. Tullia’s character has never been a pleasant one, for all the praise of her that circulated. She has not forgiven him for the death of her first fiancé, in her eyes he is and always will be the guilty party. She has got hold of the idea that his presence brought about the disaster. She also held it against him that her parents’ house could not become a social centre because of him. Moreover, she could have made a better marriage after Tancredi’s death without the Lettatore, that is her conviction. What can be done about

it? I believe that she had secretly borne him ill-will for a long time, even before the catastrophe with Vandalò. She calmly accepted the gift and told herself, 'It is the least he can do for me' – but she knew how to keep him away from her house with propriety. As long as the mother was alive, he did not come to realise her intention; they regularly saw each other at her house. But after the death of Mrs. Lacava – the President preceded her by half a year – then the two of them talked things out. It must have been a terrible scene. The Marchese wanted to tell her everything – what her mother had been to him and what rights he had to her, but Tullia did not let him finish: 'By the memory of my mother, be silent, I cannot listen to you' – and thus she drove him from her."

"Does she have children for whom she can be afraid?"

"That would excuse the cruelty, but her marriage is childless. She told him to his face that he would drive her guests away, that she was not of a mind to forgo society as her mother had done. Indeed, she threatened to leave Florence if he insisted on seeing her in her house. One can only suppose that the early disaster turned all her heart to stone."

"And how did the old man take it?"

"He could not help stammering when he told me about the matter. The worst thing is that he himself is now becoming superstitious and beginning to believe in his Evil Eye. As his adored Tullia can do no wrong, so he resigns himself to his fate and quietly covers his head. 'She has suffered so much, poor Tullia,' he said to me, 'she shall suffer no more because of me.' – Now he is seventy years old, and he's ailing. Look him up, give him my best wishes and tell him that he still has friends; it will do him good and be a good

work.”

I had his address written down for me, and as soon as I was in Florence, I prepared to visit him. But when I was ascending the steep Costa San Giorgio, where his dwelling lay, I saw his gaunt figure appear, stooping and in threadbare clothes, twenty paces before me. I called him by name and hastened towards him; but the moment he caught sight of me, he violently waved me away with his hand and hurried off, faster than one would have expected from his shaking knees, in the direction of the Viale.⁷ Near the Porta San Giorgio he disappeared without a trace, as if he had put on a cap of darkness.

The first attempt had therefore failed. He himself now believed in the *lettatura* and did not want to bring calamity upon anyone; only thus could I explain his singular behaviour. There was consequently nothing else for it but to catch him unawares in his residence, if one wanted to bring him best wishes from the outside world and a sign of human sympathy. But it was far away, and not until weeks later did I manage to undertake a second walk.

I pulled the bell at his residence; a slatternly woman opened the door.

“How is the Marchese, he is at home, is he not?” I asked quickly, so as not to let him slip away.

The woman let me enter and said:

“You have come too late – if you wish to visit my poor master, then you must go to San Miniato – he has lain there for eight days.”

“Dead!” I said in dismay, and let myself be led into the heart of the

⁷ The Viale dei Colli (Avenue of the Hills).

empty abode. “He lived here for twenty years, you see, and he died in this bed. You will not believe what a good master he was – at the end he became a little feeble-minded and got the idea in his head that his eyes brought disaster to people. And for this reason he wanted no doctor when his end was approaching but locked his door and did not even admit me. – The door had to be broken down, he lay there with his face turned towards the wall, as was his habit when sleeping. Everything had been tidied up and the last scrap of paper set in order or burnt; on the table there was a telegram to his only sister, the nun, which he himself had drawn up to announce his death to her. The necessary money lay counted out beside it. If your Honour had heard his will being read out! Tears came into the eyes of the law-officers. His grave was to bear no other markings than the number which fell to his lot; he wished that his unlucky name should go to long rest with him in San Miniato, for he was the last of his line. And so he requested the few people who still knew him never to refer to him in their conversations. He also asked good Antonia – by that he meant me – to forget him. And do you know what kind of misfortune he brought upon me? A handsome annuity and all the household furniture! Do you think that one can forget such a master? The rest went to the poor. They came and accompanied him when the coffin was borne over to San Miniato – the poor people are not afraid, there is no *lettatura* for them. Otherwise, not a soul has troubled himself about him. Your Honour is the first person to ask after him.”

I threw another glance at the room and the empty bedstead, from which the mattress had been removed. A sunbeam fell through the half-open window and played on a photograph which portrayed Tullia Lacava in school

uniform. I became absorbed in contemplation of the proud Roman profile, which did not show such a marked bird-like physiognomy at the time the photograph was taken as it exhibited later. Then Antonia said, as she blew the dust from the plush frame:

“This lady did my master great wrong. I wanted to secretly fetch her to his deathbed. He had not ordered me to do this, but I knew it would have made him happy – I was not even admitted. – On the day of the funeral a servant from another house brought a splendid wreath, but he came too late, for the coffin was already out the house. And I think that it was better that way, the wreath would have weighed heavily on him; a man whose life is no bed of roses does not want any flowers on his grave.”