

The Masque of the Red Death

The Red Death had been in the country for many, many years. No disease had ever been so deadly. People called it the Red Death because it left blood, red horrible blood, on the body and face of each person it visited. And no one, if visited, was ever left alive. Once a person was touched by the Red Death, he immediately felt pains, and soon afterwards started to bleed from every part of his body. In thirty minutes he was dead. After that no one, not even his family, went near the blood-covered body.

Everybody was afraid of the Red Death – everybody except the fearless Prince Prospero. *He* refused to be troubled by it. Although half the people of his country had already died from this terrible disease, he continued to enjoy life to the full. One day he decided to invite a thousand of his strong and brave friends to stay with him in one of his castles, far out in the countryside. There the Red Death would not be able to touch them.

It was a huge and extraordinary castle, built to Prince Prospero's own plan. It had strong high walls and great gates of heavy metal. Now when the Prince and his friends arrived at the castle gates they went inside, locked the gates carefully and threw away the keys. In that way no one would be able to enter or escape. They were all there together, far away from the Red Death. Now they could forget the world outside and think only of themselves. They had everything they needed to amuse themselves, because the Prince had forgotten



Outside the castle lay the Red Death.

nothing. He had brought in food and wine, actors, musicians, and dancers. All of this, and life itself, was inside the castle. Outside lay the Red Death.

Towards the end of the fifth or sixth month, while the Red Death was at its most deadly outside, the Prince gave a wonderful masked ball for his friends. It was a wild and wonderful ball, but first let me tell you about the rooms in which he gave the ball. There were seven rooms in all. In most castles, of course, the rooms for great parties or dances join each other end to end. In this way, when the doors at the end of each room are opened, the seven rooms become one huge room, and you can see from the first room right

through to the last one. In Prospero's castle, it was different. Each room turned suddenly round a corner into the next, so if you were standing in one room it was impossible to see into the other rooms.

In the middle of each wall, on the right and left, there was a tall, narrow window opening onto the closed passage which ran along beside all seven rooms. Each window was made of different coloured glass, and the colour of the glass was the same as the colour of the room that it opened onto. The first room, for example, was blue, and so its windows were also a deep blue. The second room was purple, and so the windows, too, were purple. The third was green, with green windows, the fourth orange, the fifth white, and the sixth violet. The seventh room was black. Its walls were black, its thick, heavy carpet was also black. But its windows were red – a deep blood-red.

There were no candles in any of the rooms. The only light came from fires, in hanging metal baskets, which were in the passages outside the rooms. Each fire was opposite a window, and so the light from the fire shone through the coloured glass and filled each room with strange and fantastic shadows. But in the black room the firelight that shone through the blood-red window changed the room into something too horrible to describe. In that strange light, faces became wild and frightening, and few people were brave enough to enter the room at all.

In this room, against the farthest wall, stood a huge black clock. Every hour it chimed loud and deep and clear, filling the castle with its long, gloomy sound. And while the clock chimed, the musicians stopped playing and even the

wildest dancers stood still, in silence and fear, listening to the passing of another hour . . . But when the chiming stopped, people looked at each other and laughed, trying hard to pretend that they had not been frightened. Happiness came into the castle again, until the clock chimed the passing of the next hour, and the same fear returned.

Prince Prospero's ball, although given in these strange rooms, was wild and happy. The Prince had planned everything – the colours, the paintings on the walls, even the cloaks and masks worn by each one of his friends. He had chosen all the clothes with the greatest of care, putting together the beautiful and the ugly, the strange and the fantastic, the surprising and the frightening.

Each man and woman was dressed like a terrible dream. And in and out of the rooms these dreams walked and danced, their clothes changing colour each time they entered a different room. But no one was brave enough now to enter the black room. As the night passed and the fires burned brighter, the colours and shapes in this room became more horrible than ever. The black carpet and walls seemed full of gloom, and the deep chimes of the black clock sounded even more frightening.

But the other six rooms were full of life and pleasure. People were dancing and singing, talking and laughing, and the wild noise of a thousand happy men and women rang through the castle. Then came the hour of midnight, and once again dancers and musicians became still and silent, as the clock slowly rang the twelve long chimes of midnight. And because the twelve chimes took a long time to ring, each person had more time to think, and feel



Each man and woman was dressed like a terrible dream.

uncomfortable. They also had time, before the last chime had sounded, to notice a masked figure who had not been there before. The first person who saw the stranger told the next person, who told another, and in a few minutes a cry of fear and horror rose up from the crowd.

Now you will remember that everyone at the ball was wearing strange cloaks and masks, which belonged more to the world of dreams and wild imagination than to everyday life. So why, you may ask, this horror, and this fear? But

even in the cruellest heart there are some fears too terrible to laugh at. The tall thin figure of the stranger was dressed from head to foot in the white clothes of the dead. And the mask over the face was frighteningly real – it was the face of a dead man. Worse still, the face and the body were covered with red, horrible blood! Here, in the middle of all that dancing and happiness was a living picture of the Red Death! When Prince Prospero saw the masked stranger, his face became white with fear. Then his fear turned to anger and he shouted out, 'Who is that? Who is mad enough to play games with us, and with death, in this way? Take hold of him, and pull off his mask. I want to see the face of the man who, tomorrow, will hang from the castle roof.'

The Prince was in the blue room as he said these words. They rang loudly and clearly through the seven rooms. Many of the Prince's friends started to run towards the masked figure, but they were all too frightened to touch him. With slow and silent steps, the stranger walked slowly towards the Prince, passing very near to him. Then he continued walking, and went from the blue room into the purple one, from the purple into the green, and then into the orange room, the white room and then the violet room. No one tried to stop him.

Then Prince Prospero, mad with anger, hurried through the six rooms, with a sword in his hand. As the masked figure entered the black room, the Prince was close behind him, holding his sword up high. At that moment the stranger turned suddenly to look at the Prince. There was a loud cry – and the sword fell upon the black carpet, followed by the dead body of the fearless Prince Prospero.



He was standing very still, in the shadow of the black clock.

At once a crowd of people ran into the black room and took hold of the masked stranger. He was standing very still, in the shadow of the black clock. Angrily, they pulled away the clothes and the mask, but then they backed away in horror, because inside the clothes and mask they found – nothing.

And now each person in the castle understood that the Red Death was there, among them. It had come like a thief in the night. And one by one they fell down dead. And the black clock stopped ringing with the death of the last person. And the fires also died away. And the only things left in the castle were Darkness and the Red Death.

William Wilson

William Wilson is not my name. But I shall use it in this story because my real name is too well known, too hated in every corner of the world. My evil crimes have made sure of that. And as the day of my death comes nearer, I feel the need to write, to explain to you how my life of crime began.

Most men become evil slowly. They start with little crimes and then move on to bigger ones. But I am different. I moved into real crime with just one big step. Has any man lived a life as evil as mine? But now, the shadow of death fills me with fear; day and night I have the most terrible dreams. Perhaps someone, somewhere, will feel sorry for me. Listen to my story . . .

I was a wild and excitable child. My parents worried about me and often tried to punish me, but they never succeeded in changing me. I refused to obey them and I never followed any orders that they gave me. I wanted to be free so I listened only to myself.

The first school that I can remember was a large and very old house in a small, quiet English village. As I write, I can still feel the coolness of the shadowy gardens near the house. I can smell the sweetness of the flowers and hear the deep sound of the church bells as they rang every hour.

These feelings give me some moments of happiness as I sit here in black misery, waiting for death. In fact, it is here, in this school, that my story really begins . . .

The school building was large and old. The big gardens

were closed in by a high wall, with broken glass at the top, just like a prison. We only went out three times a week. On Saturday afternoons we took a walk in some fields near the school, under the watchful eye of one of our teachers. On Sundays we went out twice, morning and evening, to go to the village church.

I was not bored or unhappy during my life at school. Children can amuse themselves very easily, and in my imagination, I lived an exciting life, full of mystery and interest. But in the real world, the days were always the same – we woke up and went to bed, we walked in the fields and played in the playground . . . The playground was, indeed, a very special place. It was a place where friends were made and lost, a place always full of trouble and excitement.

I was the kind of boy who liked to give orders, not to take them. I always wanted to win every game, every fight, and to be first in everything. All the other boys, even those a bit older than myself, were happy to follow and obey me. All, that is, except one. His name was the same as mine, so I shall call him William Wilson, too. We were not from the same family, but we both had the same name. This was not surprising because my name was not an unusual one.

This William Wilson refused to obey me. He argued with me, both in class and in the playground, and tried to stop the other boys from following me. Actually, I think I was the only boy who realized what he was doing. He did everything very cleverly and silently, and in this way nobody really noticed it. But I – I noticed what he did, and I was frightened by it. I was afraid that Wilson was stronger than I was. I became worried and angry when I saw the other



He argued with me, both in class and in the playground.

boys follow him instead of me. But Wilson was always cool and calm. Nothing ever troubled him. He seemed to want one thing only – to see me frightened and unhappy. But at the same time I sometimes noticed that he showed a friendliness towards me – which was most unwelcome to me.

It is difficult for me to describe my feelings towards Wilson. I didn't hate him, but neither did I like him. I think that, more than anything, I felt afraid of him. At the same time I wanted to know more about him. I wanted to find something that frightened or worried him. But I could find nothing. There was nothing strange in the way he looked or walked. Nothing, that is, except for one thing – his voice. His voice was strange. When he spoke, he could never speak loudly. In fact, he never spoke above a whisper.

Wilson was quick to find the one thing that I really did not like. It was my name. Although I come from an old and famous family, my name is a very everyday one. It could belong to any unimportant workman. I had always hated my name, but now I hated it even more because both of us had the same name. I heard it twice as often. And there was something that worried me even more deeply. We seemed to look alike as well. We were as tall as one another, we were both thin, and even our faces were alike. Because our names were the same, I knew that the older boys thought that we were brothers, but nobody seemed to notice that we looked alike. But Wilson noticed it and he also saw that I was angry about it. Nothing ever escaped him. He always knew my deepest feelings.

After a while he started to dress like me, and even to walk

like me. Luckily, he could not speak like me when I spoke loudly, but when I spoke in a whisper, *his whisper was just like mine*.

All these things troubled me deeply. I could see that Wilson enjoyed making me angry, and he used to laugh at me secretly. Strangely, the other boys never noticed how he made fun of me, and copied me in every way. I was the only one who noticed it.

Very often he used to give me advice, telling me quietly what I should do or what I should say. I hated him even more when he did this. Today, of course, I realize that his advice was always very good and sensible. What a pity that I never followed it!

As time went by, I became more and more angry with him. Why should he, or anyone, give *me* advice? My feelings towards him changed and I actually began to hate him. He noticed this and tried not to come near me so much.

One day, towards the end of my fifth year at school we had a violent argument. While we were arguing, he showed his feelings more openly than usual, and a very strange idea came into my mind. I thought – how can I describe it? – I thought just for a second or two that I had known him before, a long, long time ago, when we were very young children. It was, as I say, a strange and very stupid idea, and I forgot it as quickly as I could.

But that night, when everyone was asleep, I got out of bed. Then I walked through the dark building, with a small lantern in my hands, until I reached Wilson's room. I left the lantern outside and went near to his bed. Yes, he was asleep. I returned to get my lantern and went back to his

bed. I had planned to do something cruel to him while he slept. But as I looked at the sleeping boy, my heart beat faster and I was filled with fear. Was this really what William Wilson looked like? Did he look just the same when he was awake? I knew that he was as tall as I was. I knew, too, that he walked like me and talked like me, and copied me in every way that he could. But was it possible that the person in that bed looked so like me in every way? I began to shake with fear, and my body turned ice-cold. Surely he couldn't look like this! Was I really looking at a boy who was not just a copy of me, but ...

I was more frightened than I had ever been in my life. I went silently out of his room, left the school building and never returned there again.

After several lazy months at home, I was sent to Eton, one of the most famous English boys' schools. There, I soon forgot William Wilson and the strange fears I had felt. If I thought about them at all, I used to laugh at myself.

My life at Eton lasted for three wild and evil years. I learnt to be clever and secret, and was interested only in new ways of amusing myself. I chose the worst kind of students for my friends, and spent all my time in evil enjoyment. One night, when I was in my third year, I invited some students to a party in my rooms. We drank and played cards all through the night. As well as the wine, we had other, perhaps more dangerous, pleasures. As the first morning light started to appear, I suggested a new evil amusement. Then I noticed that somebody was opening my door and I heard a servant's voice, 'There's somebody outside who wants to speak to you, sir. He seems to be in a hurry.'



We drank and played cards all through the night.

I walked, with difficulty, to the hall, as I was feeling very drunk with the wine. It was still too dark to see clearly, but I could just see the shape of a young man. He was as tall as I was, and was wearing the same clothes as myself. I could not see his face.

He came up to me and whispered the words 'William

Wilson!' in my ear. I knew the voice at once. It was impossible to mistake it. Those two words were enough to fill me with fear. Before I could look into his face, he had disappeared.

The meeting only lasted a few seconds, but for some weeks I could not forget it. I thought of it all the time. Who and what was this William Wilson? Where did he come from? What did he want from me? My questions stayed unanswered, but I did discover one thing. I learnt that William Wilson had left my last school on the same day that I myself had run away from it.

Soon I forgot about him again, and not long afterwards I went up to Oxford University. My parents were not sensible people and they always gave me a lot of money. I was able to live a fashionable, expensive life, and to choose as my friends the sons of the richest families of England. There was nothing at all to stop me now. I spent my money wildly, and passed my days and nights in dangerous and exciting pleasures.

At Oxford I spent a lot of my time gambling. I became, in fact, a most clever and successful gambler – no better than a thief. I played cards in order to win money from the other students and become even richer. Of course, I was careful to play only with students who were bad at playing cards. In this way I could be sure of winning every time. My friends were not clever enough to see what I was doing.

In my second year at University I met a new student called Glendinning. He came from an old English family and was one of the richest students in the university. I soon realized that he was very unintelligent and because of this he was, of course, a very suitable person for me to gamble with! I

started to play cards with him often, and for some time I made sure that he always won.

At last I decided that the time was right and I made my plans carefully. I met Glendinning at the rooms of a friend of mine, a Mr Preston (who had no idea of my secret plan). Eight or ten other friends were also invited. In this way Glendinning had no idea that I planned to gamble with him that evening. In fact, at the party, it was he who first suggested playing cards.

We played for many long hours. In the end, by my careful plan, I was playing alone against Glendinning, while the others watched our game. Glendinning had drunk a lot of wine during the evening and his hands were beginning to shake a little – from fear or from the wine, I wasn't sure. He had already lost a large amount of money. Then he did what I had hoped for. He took another long drink of wine and said, 'Let's double the stakes.' Beginners always think they can win back what they have lost in this way.

At first I pretended to refuse. Then he became angry, so, naturally, I had to agree. My plan was working excellently. We continued playing, and in less than an hour my winnings were four times as big. Glendinning's face was now as white as a sheet. Everyone around the table started talking, and to my surprise I heard the words, 'That's the end of Glendinning. He's just lost everything he had!'

I had heard that Glendinning was very rich indeed – rich enough to lose a lot of money and not to worry about it. Now, I understood from the whispers around the table, that this was not true. I had, in fact, won everything he owned, and so destroyed him.

Nobody spoke. Glendinning had covered his face with his hands and everyone clearly felt very sorry for him. Even I began to feel a little worried, and wondered what I should do.

As we stood in silence, the doors suddenly opened and a strong wind filled the room. It blew out all the candles in the room and we were left in darkness. But in the few seconds before the candles went out, we noticed that a man had entered the room. He was about as tall as I was, and his face and body were hidden by a long cloak. As we stood in the darkness, we could *feel* him standing in the room.

Then he began to speak. He spoke in a whisper, and his voice filled me with fear. 'Gentlemen,' he said. 'I am here because I have something important to tell you. I am afraid that you do not really know the man who has just won so much money from Glendinning. Let me tell you how to learn more about him. Please look very carefully inside his left sleeve and at the several little packets inside the large pockets of his jacket.' Immediately after these words he left the room, as silently as he had entered it.

That moment was one of the worst moments of my life. I had no time to do anything. My friends fell on me angrily, lit the candles again, and searched my clothes. They found the single cards hidden carefully inside my left sleeve, and in my pockets they discovered the packets of special cards which helped me to win every game I played. My friends stood around me in a circle and looked at me in silence. Mr Preston then picked up a cloak from the floor, 'Mr Wilson,' he said. 'Here is your cloak. You will, I hope, leave my room, and then leave Oxford immediately.'

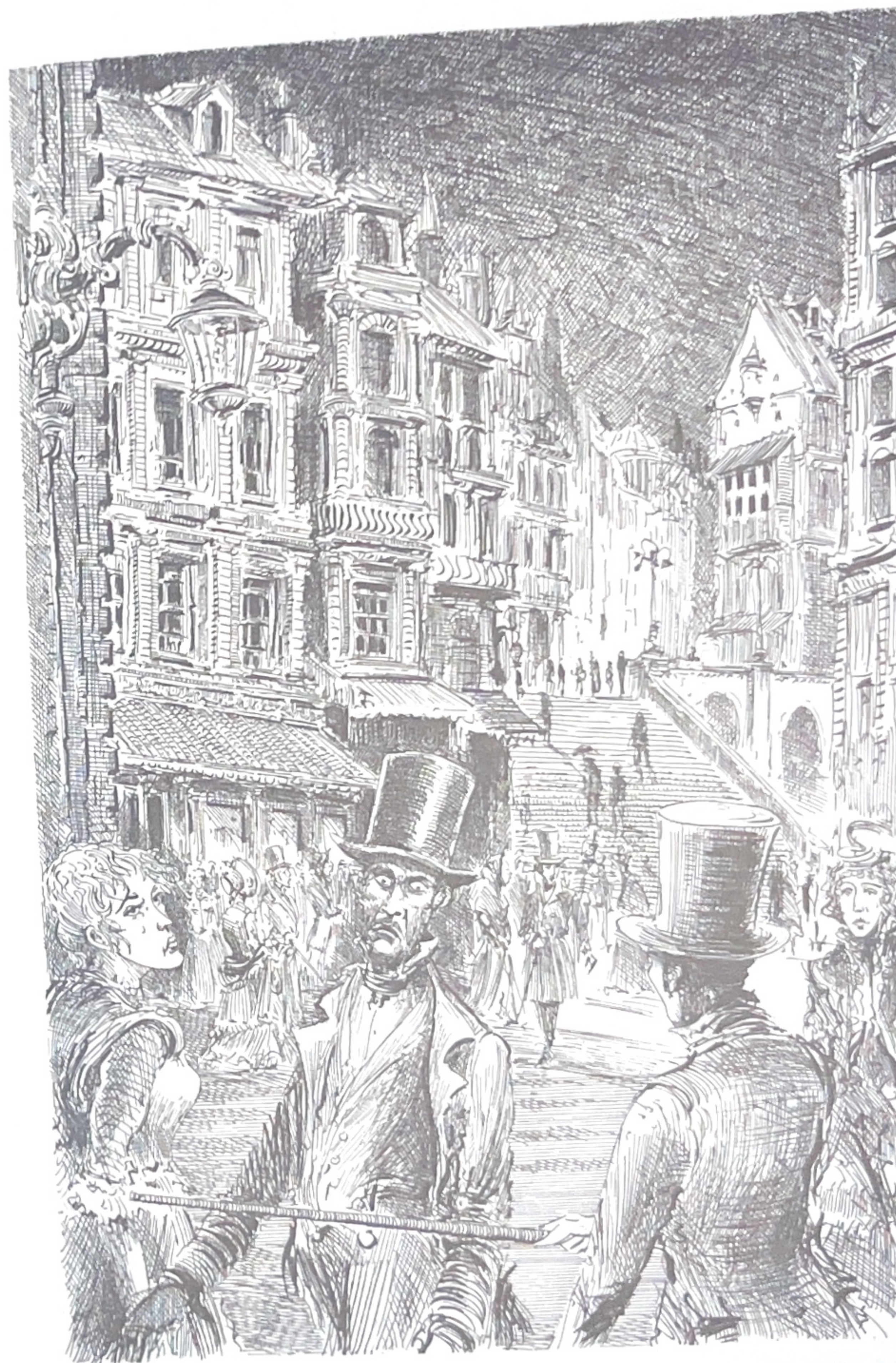


I wanted to hit him, but something stopped me. It was the cloak that Preston was holding in his hands. Although it looked like my cloak, I knew that it wasn't, because my own cloak was already over my left arm. It was a very unusual and expensive cloak, which a shop had made specially for me. How was it possible that there was now another cloak just like it?

I thought back to the moment when the stranger had come into the room. Yes, *he* had been wearing a cloak too . . . Full of fear, I quickly took the cloak from Mr Preston and left the room. The next morning I left Oxford and escaped to Europe. I was now known to be a cheat at cards and every door in England would be closed against me.

But bad luck travelled with me. In fact I soon realized that my troubles at Oxford had been only the beginning . . . Soon after I arrived in Paris, I met William Wilson again. There, too, he destroyed my evil hopes. Everywhere I went, year after year, he appeared like a ghost and came between me and my plans. In Rome he stopped me from getting what I wanted. In Vienna, too – in Berlin, and even in Moscow! Wasn't there anywhere where I could be left alone? I went from city to city, trying to escape from him. But I couldn't feel free. I couldn't be alone. He followed me everywhere.

Again and again I used to ask myself these questions. 'Who is he? Where does he come from? What does he want from me?' But I could find no answer. I thought deeply about all the times when I had seen him. In every city, I realized, Wilson had done the same thing. He had not stopped my plans all the time, but only when they were evil and dangerous, either to others or to myself. I understood all this, but still I was



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very angry. Why couldn't Wilson leave me alone? Why couldn't he let me live in the way I wanted to?

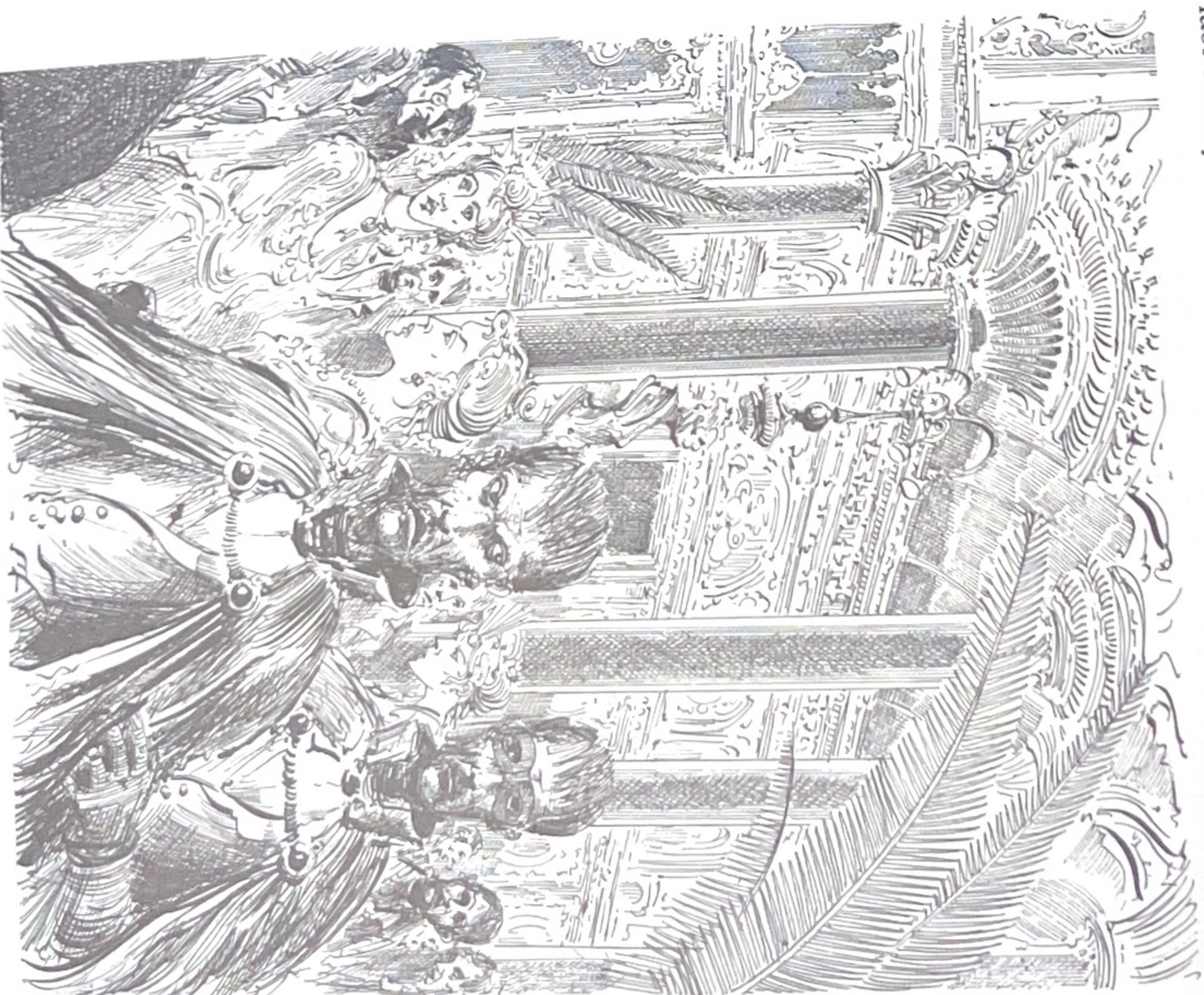
I realized another thing too. Every time Wilson appeared, he had never let me see his face. I had always noticed his clothes. It was difficult not to notice them because they were always the same as mine. But he kept his face hidden from me. Why did he do this? Did he really think that I was so stupid? Did he think I hadn't realized who he was? The man who followed me everywhere and destroyed my plans again and again was the same William Wilson of my schooldays! But let me continue with my story.

Until now I had felt afraid of Wilson and had obeyed him. The mystery of his sudden arrivals, his cleverness, his deep understanding of me – all these things filled me with fear. But recently I had become a very heavy drinker. Wine made me feel brave and strong, able to fight anybody who tried to stop me. At the same time I began to think that Wilson was becoming weaker. Was this really happening or was it just a dream? I cannot tell, but I do know that my own feelings were becoming more and more violent. I began to feel a burning hope – soon I would break free from this terrible enemy and never take his orders again.

One evening, in 18—, I was in Rome and was invited to a big party in the palace of Duke Di Broglio. The Duke was old and boring, but his wife was young and beautiful, and not very sensible. I had evil plans for her. She and I had agreed to meet, during the party, in a quiet room where we could be alone.

As I walked from room to room looking for her in the

crowds, I suddenly felt a hand touch my arm. Then I heard a whisper in my ears. Angrily I turned round and saw a man. He was wearing the same clothes as I was, but his face was covered with a black mask. I caught him by his arm. 'Stop!' I shouted. 'I have had enough trouble from you! This is the last time you'll follow me anywhere! Come with me now



His face was covered with a black mask.

into the next room. If you don't, I shall kill you right now, here where you stand!

I took him into a small room nearby and pushed him violently to the floor. He got to his feet shakily, and stood up against the wall. I then closed the door and ordered him to fight. For a second he did not move. Then he silently took out his sword.

It was a short fight. I was wild and excited and felt stronger than I had ever felt before. After only a few seconds I pushed him against the wall and plunged my sword into his body again and again.

At that moment somebody tried to open the door. I ran to check that the door was locked and then ran back towards my enemy. How can I describe what I saw at that moment? During those few seconds when I had turned to the door, the room had become strangely different. There was now a large mirror at the end of the room. I was sure that it had not been there before. As I stepped up to the mirror, I saw myself, walking forward shakily, my face white and covered with blood.

Or so I thought. But I was wrong. It was my enemy, Wilson, who stood before me in his last moments of life. His mask and cloak lay on the floor. His face was now uncovered. And I saw, in terror, that his face was now uncovered.

Then Wilson spoke, but no longer in a whisper, and I thought I heard my own voice speaking as he said:

'You have won, and I have lost. But from this moment you, too, are dead – dead to the world, to Heaven, and to hope! You lived in me – and, in my death, look in my face, which is your own, and see how you have murdered yourself,'

The Tell-Tale Heart

It is true that I had been – and I am – very nervous, but do you really think that I am mad? I could see and hear *more* clearly – not less, because of the disease. My hearing, more than anything, was excellent. I could hear all things, things in this world and things in heaven. I heard many things in hell, too. So how can I be mad? See how clearly and calmly I can tell my story.

I cannot explain how the idea first came into my head. But once I had thought of the idea, I could not forget it. I had no reason to do it. I was not angry. I loved the old man. He had never hurt me in any way. I didn't want his gold. I think it was his eye! Yes! He had a pale, blue eye, the eye of a vulture. Whenever I looked at it, my blood became cold; and so, very slowly, I decided to kill the old man and escape from the eye for ever.

You are thinking, I know, that I am mad. But madmen are not clever. And see how cleverly I prepared my plan! Every day that week I was so kind to the old man! And every night of that week, at about midnight, I opened his door very, very quietly. First I put my dark lantern through the opening of the door. The lantern was closed, and so no light came out of it, none at all. Then slowly, very slowly, I put my head inside the opening. I took sixty long minutes just to put my head inside. Would a madman have worked so carefully? And when my head was inside the room, I opened the lantern carefully and a thin ray of light fell onto the vulture