

# The Dice

By Thomas De Quincey

For more than 150 years had the family of Schroll been settled at Tanbendorf, and generally respected for knowledge and refinement of manners superior to its station. Its present representative, the bailiff Elias Schroll, had in his youth attached himself to literature, but, later in life, from love of the country, he had returned to his native village, and lived there in great credit and esteem.

During this whole period of 150 years, tradition had recorded only one single Schroll as having borne a doubtful character; he, indeed, as many persons affirmed, had dealt with the devil. Certain it is that there was still preserved in the house a scrutoire fixed in the wall and containing some mysterious manuscripts attributed to him, and the date of the year, 1630, which was carved upon the front, tallied with his era. The key of this scrutoire had been constantly handed down to the eldest son through five generations, with a solemn charge to take care that no other eye or ear should ever become acquainted with its contents. Every precaution had been taken to guard against accidents or oversights: the lock was so constructed that even with the right key it could not be opened without special instructions; and for still greater security the present proprietor had added a padlock of most elaborate workmanship, which presented a sufficient obstacle before the main lock could be approached.

In vain did the curiosity of the whole family direct itself to this scrutoire. Nobody had succeeded in discovering any part of its contents, except Rudolph, the only son of the bailiff; he *had* succeeded: at least his own belief was that the old folio with gilt edges, and bound in black velvet, which he had one day surprised his father anxiously reading, belonged to the mysterious scrutoire; for the door of the scrutoire, though not open, was unlocked, and Elias had hastily closed the book with great agitation, at the same time ordering his son out of the room in no very gentle tone. At the time of this incident Rudolph was about twelve years of age.

Since that time the young man had sustained two great losses in the deaths of his excellent mother and a sister tenderly beloved. His father also had suffered deeply in health and spirits under these afflictions. Every day he grew more fretful and humourless; and Rudolph, upon his final return home from school in his eighteenth year, was shocked to find him greatly altered in mind as well as in person. His flesh had fallen away, and he seemed to be consumed by some internal strife of thought. It was evidently his own opinion that he was standing on the edge of the grave; and employed himself unceasingly in arranging his affairs, and in making his successor acquainted with all such arrangements as regarded his more peculiar interests. One evening, as Rudolph came in suddenly from a neighbour's house, and happened to pass the scrutoire, he found the door wide open, and the inside obviously empty. Looking round, he observed his father standing on the hearth close to a great fire, in the midst of which was consuming the old black book.

Elias entreated his son earnestly to withdraw, but Rudolph could not command himself; and he exclaimed, 'I doubt, I doubt, sir, that this is the book which belongs to the scrutoire.'

His father assented with visible confusion.

'Well, then, allow me to say that I am greatly surprised at your treating in this way an heirloom that for a century and more has always been transmitted to the eldest son.'

‘You are in the right, my son,’ said the father affectionately, taking him by the hand. ‘You are partly in the right; it is not quite defensible, I admit; and I myself have had many scruples about the course I have taken. Yet still I feel myself glad upon the whole that I have destroyed this accursed book. He that wrote it never prospered; all traditions agree in that; why then leave to one’s descendants a miserable legacy of unhallowed mysteries?’

This excuse, however, did not satisfy Rudolph. He maintained that his father had made an aggression upon his rights of inheritance; and he argued the point so well that Elias himself began to see that his son’s complaint was not altogether groundless. The whole of the next day they behaved to each other not unkindly, but yet with some coolness. At night Elias could bear this no longer, and he said, ‘Dear Rudolph, we have lived long together in harmony and love; let us not begin to show an altered countenance to each other during the few days that I have yet to live.’

Rudolph pressed his father’s offered hand with a filial warmth; and the latter went on to say, ‘I purpose now to communicate to you by word of mouth the contents of the book which I have destroyed. I will do this with good faith and without reserve, unless you yourself can be persuaded to forgo your own right to such a communication.’

Elias paused, flattering himself as it seemed that his son *would* forgo his right. But in this he was mistaken; Rudolph was far too eager for the disclosure, and earnestly pressed his father to proceed.

Again Elias hesitated, and threw a glance of profound love and pity upon his son—a glance that conjured him to think better, and to waive his claim; but, this being at length obviously hopeless, he spoke as follows: ‘The book relates chiefly to yourself; it points to you as *to the last of our race*. You turn pale. Surely, Rudolph, it would have been better that you had resolved to trouble yourself no further about it?’

‘No,’ said Rudolph, recovering his self-possession. ‘No; for it still remains a question whether this prophecy be true.’

‘It does so; it does, no doubt.’

‘And is this all that the book says in regard to me?’

‘No, it is *not* all; there is something more. But possibly you will only laugh when you hear it; for at this day nobody believes in such strange stories. However, be *that* as it may, the book goes on to say, plainly and positively, that the Evil One (Heaven protect us!) will make you an offer tending greatly to your worldly advantage.’

Rudolph laughed outright, and replied that, judging by the grave exterior of the book, he had looked to hear of more serious contents.

‘Well, well, my son,’ said the old man, ‘I know not that I myself am disposed to place much confidence in these tales of contracts with the devil. But, true or not, we ought not to laugh at them. Enough for me that under any circumstances I am satisfied you have so much natural piety that you would reject all worldly good fortune that could meet you upon unhallowed paths.’

Here Elias would have broken off, but Rudolph said, ‘One thing more I wish to know: What is to be the nature of the good fortune offered to me? And did the book say whether I should accept it or not?’

‘Upon the nature of the good fortune the writer has not explained himself; all that he says is that, by a discreet use of it, it is in your power to become a very great man. Whether you will accept it—but God preserve thee, my child, from any thought so criminal!—upon this question there is a profound silence. Nay, it seems even as if this trader in black arts had at that very point

been overtaken by death, for he had broken off in the very middle of a word. The Lord have mercy upon his soul!

Little as Rudolph's faith was in the possibility of such a proposal, yet he was uneasy at his father's communication, and visibly disturbed; so that the latter said to him, 'Had it not been better, Rudolph, that you had left the mystery to be buried with me in the grave?'

Rudolph said 'No': but his restless eye and his agitated air too evidently approved the accuracy of his father's solicitude.

The deep impression upon Rudolph's mind from this conversation—the last he was ever to hold with his father—was rendered still deeper by the solemn event which followed. About the middle of that same night he was awakened suddenly by a summons to his father's bedside; his father was dying, and earnestly asking for him.

'My son!' he exclaimed with an expression of the bitterest anguish; stretched out both his arms in supplication towards him; and in the anguish of the effort he expired.

The levity of youthful spirits soon dispersed the gloom which at first hung over Rudolph's mind. Surrounded by jovial companions at the university which he now visited, he found no room left in his bosom for sorrow or care: and his heaviest affliction was the refusal of his guardian at times to comply with his too frequent importunities for money.

After a residence of one year at the university, some youthful irregularities in which Rudolph was concerned subjected him, jointly with three others, to expulsion. Just at that time the Seven Years' War happened to break out: two of the party, named Theiler and Werl, entered the military service together with Rudolph,—the last very much against the will of a young woman to whom he was engaged. Charlotte herself, however, became reconciled to this arrangement when she saw that her objections availed nothing against Rudolph's resolution, and heard her lover describe in the most flattering colours his own return to her arms in the uniform of an officer; for that his distinguished courage must carry him in the very first campaign to the rank of lieutenant was as evident to his own mind as that he could not possibly fall on the field of battle.

The three friends were fortunate enough to be placed in the same company. But, in the first battle, Werl and Theiler were stretched lifeless by Rudolph's side,—Werl by a musket ball through his heart, and Theiler by a cannon shot which took off his head.

Soon after this event, Rudolph himself returned home; but how? Not, as he had fondly anticipated, in the brilliant decorations of a distinguished officer, but as a prisoner in close custody: in a transport of youthful anger he had been guilty, in company with two others, of insubordination and mutiny.

The court-martial sentenced them to death. The judges, however, were so favourably impressed by their good conduct whilst under confinement that they would certainly have recommended them unconditionally to the royal mercy, if it had not been deemed necessary to make an example. However, the sentence was so far mitigated that only one of the three was to be shot. And which was he? That point was reserved in suspense until the day of execution, when it was to be decided by the cast of the dice.

As the fatal day drew near, a tempest of passionate grief assailed the three prisoners. One of them was agitated by the tears of his father; the second by the sad situation of a sickly wife and two children. The third, Rudolph, in case the lot fell upon him, would be summoned to part not only with his life, but also with a young and blooming bride, that lay nearer to his heart than

anything else in the world. 'Ah!' said he on the evening before the day of final decision, 'Ah! if but this once I could secure a lucky throw of the dice!' And scarce was the wish uttered when his comrade Werl, whom he had seen fall by his side in the field of battle, stepped into his cell.

'So, brother Schroll, I suppose you didn't much expect to see me?'

'No, indeed, did I not,' exclaimed Rudolph in consternation; for, in fact, on the next day after the battle he had seen with his own eyes this very Werl committed to the grave.

'Ay, ay, it's strange enough, I allow; but there are not many such surgeons as he is that belongs to our regiment; he had me dug up, and brought me round again, I'll assure you. One would think the man was a conjurer. Indeed, there are many things he can do which I defy any man to explain; and, to say the truth, I'm convinced he can execute impossibilities.'

'Well, so let him, for aught that I care; all this art will scarcely do me any good.'

'Who knows, brother? who knows? The man is in this town at this very time; and for old friendship's sake I've just spoken to him about you; and he has promised me a lucky throw of the dice, that shall deliver you from all danger.'

'Ah!' said the dejected Rudolph, 'but even this would be of little service to me.'

'Why, how so?' asked the other.

'How so? Why, because—even if there were such dice (a matter I very much dispute)—yet I could never allow myself to turn aside, by black arts, any bad luck designed for myself upon the heads of either of my comrades.'

'Now, this, I suppose, is what you call being noble? But excuse me if I think that in such cases one's first duty is to one'sself.'

'Ay, but just consider; one of my comrades has an old father to maintain, the other a sick wife with two children.'

'Schroll, Schroll, if your young bride were to hear you, I fancy she wouldn't think herself much flattered. Does poor Charlotte deserve that you should not bestow a thought on her and her fate? A dear young creature, that places her whole happiness in you, has nearer claims (I think) upon your consideration than an old dotard with one foot in the grave, or a wife and two children that are nothing at all to you. Ah! what a deal of good might you do in the course of a long life with your Charlotte! So then, you really are determined to reject the course which I point out to you? Take care, Schroll! If you disdain my offer, and the lot should chance to fall upon you,—take care lest the thought of a young bride whom you have betrayed, take care, I say, lest this thought should add to the bitterness of death when you come to kneel down on the sand-hill. However, I've given you advice sufficient, and have discharged my conscience. Look to it yourself: and farewell!'

'Stay, brother; a word or two,' said Rudolph, who was powerfully impressed by the last speech, and the picture of domestic happiness held up before him, which he had often dallied with in thought, both when alone and in company with Charlotte. 'Stay a moment. Undoubtedly, I do not deny that I wish for life, if I could receive it a gift from heaven: and that is not impossible. Only I would not willingly have the guilt upon my conscience of being the cause of misery to another. However, if the man you speak of can tell, I should be glad that you would ask him upon which of us three the lot of death will fall. Or—stay; don't ask him,' said Rudolph, sighing deeply.

'I have already asked him,' was the answer.

'Ah! have you so? *And it is after his reply that you come to me with this counsel?*'

The foretaste of death overspread the blooming face of Rudolph with a livid paleness; thick drops of sweat gathered upon his forehead; and the other exclaimed with a sneer—'I'm going;

you take too much time for consideration. May be you will see and recognize me at the place of execution; and, if so, I shall have the dice with me; and it will not be too late even then to give me a sign; but, take notice, I can't promise to attend.'

Rudolph raised his forehead from the palm of his hand, in which he had buried it during the last moments of his perturbation, and would have spoken something in reply; but his counsellor was already gone. He felt glad, and yet at the same time sorry. The more he considered the man and his appearance, so much the less seemed his resemblance to his friend whom he had left buried on the field of battle. This friend had been the very soul of affectionate cordiality—a temper that was altogether wanting to his present counsellor. No! the scornful and insulting tone with which he treated the unhappy prisoner, and the unkind manner with which he had left him, convinced Schroll that he and Werl must be two different persons. Just at this moment a thought struck him, like a blast of lightning, of the black book that had perished in the fire and its ominous contents. A lucky cast of the dice! Ay; *that* then was the shape in which the tempter had presented himself; and heartily glad he felt that he had not availed himself of his suggestions.

But this temper of mind was speedily changed by his young bride, who hurried in soon after, sobbing, and flung her arms about his neck. He told her of the proposal which had been made to him; and she was shocked that he had not immediately accepted it.

With a bleeding heart, Rudolph objected that so charming and lovely a creature could not miss of a happy fate, even if he should be forced to quit her. But she protested vehemently that he or nobody should enjoy her love.

The clergyman, who visited the prisoner immediately after her departure, restored some composure to his mind, which had been altogether banished by the presence -of his bride. 'Blessed are they who die in the Lord!' said the grey-haired divine; and with so much earnestness and devotion, that this single speech had the happiest effect upon the prisoner's mind.

On the morning after this night of agitation, the morning of the fatal day, the three criminals saw each other for the first time since their arrest. Community of fate, and long separation from each other, contributed to draw still closer the bond of friendship that had been first knit on the field of battle. Each of the three testified a lively abhorrence for the wretched necessity of throwing death to some one of his comrades by any cast of the dice which should bring life to himself. Dear as their several friends were to all, yet at this moment the brotherly league which had been tried and proved in the furnace of battle, was triumphant over all opposing considerations. Each would have preferred death himself, rather than escape at the expense of his comrade.

The worthy clergyman, who possessed their entire confidence, found them loudly giving utterance to this heroic determination. Shaking his head, he pointed their attention to those who had claims upon them whilst living, and for whom it was their duty to wish to live as long as possible. 'Place your trust in God!' said he: 'resign yourselves to Him! He it is that will bring about the decision through your hands; and think not of ascribing that power to yourselves, or to his lifeless instruments—the dice. He, without whose permission no sparrow falls to the ground, and who has numbered every hair upon your head—He it is that knows best what is good for you; and He only.'

The prisoners assented by squeezing his hand, embraced each other, and received the sacrament in the best disposition of mind. After this ceremony they breakfasted together, in as resigned, nay, almost in as joyous a mood as if the gloomy and bloody morning which lay before them were ushering in some glad-some festival.

When, however, the procession was marshalled from the outer gate, and their beloved friends were admitted to utter their last farewells, then again the sternness of their courage sank beneath the burden of their melancholy fate. 'Rudolph!' whispered amongst the rest his despairing bride, 'Rudolph! why did you reject the help that was offered to you?' He adjured her not to add to the bitterness of parting; and she in turn adjured him, a little before the word of command was given to march—which robbed her of all consciousness—to make a sign to the stranger who had volunteered his offer of deliverance, provided he should anywhere observe him in the crowd.

The streets and the windows were lined with spectators. Vainly did each of the criminals seek, by accompanying the clergyman in his prayers, to shelter himself from the thought that all return, perhaps, was cut off from him. The large house of his bride's father reminded Schroll of a happiness that was now lost to him for ever, if any faith were to be put in the words of his yesterday's monitor; and a very remarkable faintness came over him. The clergyman, who was acquainted with the circumstances of his case, and therefore guessed the occasion of his sudden agitation, laid hold of his arm, and said, with a powerful voice, that he who trusted in God would assuredly see all his *righteous* hopes accomplished—in this world, if it were God's pleasure, but, if not, in a better.

These were words of comfort: but their effect lasted only for a few moments. Outside the city gate his eyes were met by the sand-hill already thrown up; a spectacle which renewed his earthly hopes and fears. He threw a hurried glance about him: but nowhere could he see his last night's visitor.

Every moment the decision came nearer and nearer. It has begun. One of the three has already shaken the box: the die is cast; he has thrown a six. This throw was now registered amidst the solemn silence of the crowd. The bystanders regarded him with silent congratulations in their eyes; for this man and Rudolph were the two special objects of the general compassion: this man, as the husband and father; Rudolph, as the youngest and handsomest, and because some report had gone abroad of his superior education and attainments.

Rudolph was youngest in a double sense; youngest in years, and youngest in the service: for both reasons he was to throw last. It may be supposed, therefore, how much all present trembled for the poor delinquent, when the second of his comrades likewise flung a six.

Prostrated in spirit, Rudolph stared at the unpropitious die. Then a second time he threw a horrid glance around him, and that so full of despair that from horrid sympathy a violent shuddering ran through the bystanders. 'Here is no deliverer,' thought Rudolph; 'none to see me, or to hear me! And, if there were, it is now too late; for no change of the die is any longer possible.' So saying, he seized the fatal die; convulsively his hand clutches it; and before the throw is made he feels that the die is broken in two.

During the universal thrill of astonishment which succeeded to this strange accident, he looked round again. A sudden shock and a sudden joy fled through his countenance. Not far from him, in the dress of a pedlar, stands Theiler without a wound, the comrade whose head had been carried off on the field of battle by a cannon-ball. Rudolph made an under-sign to him with his eye; for, clear as it now was to his mind with whom he was dealing, yet the dreadful trial of the moment overpowered his better resolutions.

The military commission were in some confusion. No provision having been thought of against so strange an accident, there was no second die at hand. They were just on the point of despatching a messenger to fetch one, when the pedlar presented himself with the offer of supplying the loss. The new die is examined by the auditor, and delivered to the unfortunate Rudolph. He throws; the die is lying on the drum, and again it is a six! The amazement is

universal; nothing is decided; the throws must be repeated. They *are*; and Weber, the husband of the sick wife, the father of the two half-naked children, flings the lowest throw.

Immediately the officer's voice was heard wheeling his men into their position. On the part of Weber there was as little delay. The overwhelming injury to his wife and children, inflicted by his own act, was too mighty to contemplate. He shook hands rapidly with his two comrades; stepped nimbly into his place; kneeled down. The word of command was heard, 'Lower your muskets'; instantly he dropped the fatal handkerchief with the gesture of one who prays for some incalculable blessing; and, in the twinkling of an eye, sixteen bullets had lightened the heart of the poor mutineer from its whole immeasurable freight of anguish.

All the congratulations with which they were welcomed on their return into the city fell powerless on Rudolph's ear. Scarcely could even Charlotte's caresses affect with any pleasure the man who believed himself to have sacrificed his comrade through collusion with a fiend.

The importunities of Charlotte prevailed over all objections which the pride of her aged father suggested against a son-in-law who had been capitally convicted. The marriage was solemnized; but at the wedding-festival, amidst the uproar of merriment, the parties chiefly concerned were not happy or tranquil. In no long time the father-in-law died, and by his death placed the young couple in a state of complete independence; but Charlotte's fortune, and the remainder of what Rudolph had inherited from his father, were speedily swallowed up by an idle and luxurious mode of living. Rudolph now began to ill-use his wife. To escape from his own conscience, he plunged into all sorts of dissolute courses; and very remarkable it was that, from manifesting the most violent abhorrence for everything which could lead his thoughts to his own fortunate cast of the die, he gradually came to entertain so uncontrollable a passion for playing at dice that he spent all his time in the company of those with whom he could turn this passion to account. His house had long since passed out of his own hands; not a soul could be found anywhere to lend him a shilling. The sickly widow of Weber, and her two children, whom he had hitherto supported, lost their home and means of livelihood, and in no long space of time the same fate fell upon himself, his wife, and his child.

Too little used to labour to have any hope of improving his condition in that way, one day he bethought himself that the Medical Institute was in the habit of purchasing from poor people, during their lifetime, the reversion of their bodies. To this establishment he addressed himself; and the ravages in his personal appearance and health, caused by his dissolute life, induced them the more readily to lend an ear to his proposal.

But the money thus obtained, which had been designed for the support of his wife and half-famished child, was squandered at the gaming-table. As the last dollar vanished, Schroll bit one of the dice furiously between his teeth. Just then he heard these words whispered at his ear,—'Gently, brother, gently; all dice do not split in two like that on the sand-hill.' He looked round in agitation, but saw no trace of any one who could have uttered the words.

With dreadful imprecations on himself and those with whom he had played, he flung out of the gaming-house homewards on his road to the wretched garret where his wife and child were awaiting his return and his succour; but here the poor creatures, tormented by hunger and cold, pressed upon him so importunately that he had no way to deliver himself from misery but by flying from the spectacle. But whither could he go thus late at night, when his utter poverty was known in every alehouse? Roaming he knew not whither, he found himself at length in the churchyard. The moon was shining solemnly upon the quiet clouds. Rudolph shuddered at nothing but at himself and his own existence. He strode with bursts of laughter over the dwellings of the departed, and entered a vault which gave him shelter from the icy blasts of wind

which now began to bluster more loudly than before. The moon threw her rays into the vault full upon the golden legend inscribed in the wall,—‘*Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord!*’ Schroll took up a spade that was sticking in the ground, and stieck with it furiously against the gilt letters on the wall, but they seemed indestructible; and he was going to assault them with a mattock, when suddenly a hand touched him on the shoulder, and said to him, ‘Gently, comrade; thy pains are all thrown away.’ Schroll uttered a loud exclamation of terror, for in these words he heard the voice of Weber, and, on turning round, recognized his whole person.

‘What wouldst thou have?’ asked Rudolph. ‘What art thou come for?’

‘To comfort thee,’ replied the figure, which now suddenly assumed the form and voice of the pedlar to whom Schroll was indebted for the fortunate die. ‘Thou hast forgotten me; and thence it is that thou art fallen into misfortune. Look up and acknowledge thy friend in need that comes only to make thee happy again.’

‘If *that* be thy purpose, wherefore is it that thou wearest a shape before which, of all others that have been on earth, I have most reason to shudder?’

‘The reason is because I must not allow to any man my help of my converse on too easy terms. Before ever my die was allowed to turn thy fate, I was compelled to give thee certain intimations from which thou knewest with whom it was that thou wert dealing.’

‘With whom, then, was it that I was dealing?’ cried Schroll, staring with his eyes wide open, and his hair standing erect.

‘Thou knewest, comrade, at that time; thou knowest at this moment,’ said the pedlar, laughing, and tapping him on the shoulder. ‘But what is it that thou desirest?’

Schroll struggled internally; but, overcome by his desolate condition, he said immediately, ‘Dice: I would have dice that shall win whenever I wish.’

‘Very well; but first of all stand out of the blaze of this golden writing on the wall; it is a writing that has nothing to do with thee. Here are dice; never allow them to go out of thy own possession; for *that* might bring thee into great trouble. When thou needest me, light a fire at the last stroke of the midnight hour; throw in my dice, and give a loud laugh. They will crack once or twice, and then split. At that moment catch at them in the flames; but let not the moment slip, or thou art lost. And let not thy courage be daunted by the sights that I cannot but send before me whensoever I appear. Lastly, avoid choosing any holy day for this work: and beware of the priest’s benediction. Here, take the dice.’

Schroll caught at the dice with one hand, whilst with the other he covered his eyes. When he next looked up, he was standing alone.

He now quitted the burying-ground to return as hastily as possible to the gaming-house, where the light of candles was still visible. But it was with the greatest difficulty that he obtained money enough from a ‘friend’ to enable him to make the lowest stake which the rules allowed. He found it a much easier task to persuade the company to use the dice which he had brought with him. They saw in this nothing but a very common superstition, and no possibility of any imposture, as they and he should naturally have benefited alike by the good luck supposed to accompany the dice. But the nature of the charm was that only the possessor of the dice enjoyed their supernatural powers; and hence it was that towards morning Schroll reeled home intoxicated with the money of all present, to the garret where his family was lying half frozen and famished.

Their outward condition was immediately improved. The money which Schroll had won was sufficient not only for their immediate and most pressing wants: it was enough also to pay for a front apartment, and to leave a sum sufficient for a very considerable stake.

With this sum, and in better attire, Rudolph repaired to a gaming-house of more fashionable resort, and came home in the evening laden with gold.

He now opened a gaming establishment himself; and so much did his family improve in external appearance within a very few weeks that the police began to keep a watchful eye over him.

This induced him to quit the city, and to change his residence continually. All the different baths of Germany he resorted to beyond other towns: but, though his dice perseveringly maintained their luck, he yet never accumulated any money. Everything was squandered upon the dissipated life which he and his family pursued.

At length, at the Baths of —, the matter began to take an unfortunate turn. A violent passion for a beautiful young lady whom Rudolph had attached himself to in vain at balls, concerts, and even at church, suddenly bereft him of all sense and direction. One night, when Schroll (who now styled himself Captain von Schrollshausen) was anticipating a master-stroke from his dice, probably for the purpose of winning the lady by the display of overflowing wealth and splendour, suddenly they lost their virtue, and failed him without warning. Hitherto, they had lost only when he willed them to lose: but, on this occasion, they failed at so crucial a moment as to lose him not only all his own money, but a good deal beside that he had borrowed.

Foaming with rage, he came home. He asked furiously after his wife: she was from home. He examined the dice attentively; and it appeared to him that they were not his own. A powerful suspicion seized upon him. Madame von Schrollshausen had her own gaming circle as well as himself. Without betraying its origin, he had occasionally given her a few specimens of the privilege attached to his dice: and she had pressed him earnestly to allow her the use of them for a single evening. It was true he never parted with them even on going to bed: but it was possible that they might have been changed whilst he was sleeping. The more he brooded upon this suspicion, the more it strengthened: from being barely possible, it became probable: from a probability it ripened into a certainty; and this certainly received the fullest confirmation at this moment when she returned home in the gayest temper, and announced to him that she had been this night overwhelmed with good luck; in proof of which, she poured out upon the table a considerable sum in gold coin. ‘And now,’ she added laughingly, ‘I care no longer for your dice; nay, to tell you the truth, I would not exchange my own for them.’

Rudolph, now confirmed in his suspicions, demanded the dice, as his property that had been purloined from him. She laughed and refused. He insisted with more vehemence; she retorted with warmth; both parties were irritated: and, at length in the extremity of his wrath, Rudolph snatched up a knife and stabbed her; the knife pierced her heart; she uttered a single sob, was convulsed for a moment, and expired. ‘Cursed accident!’ he exclaimed, when it clearly appeared, on examination, that the dice which she had in her purse were not those he suspected himself to have lost.

No eye but Rudolph’s had witnessed the murder: the child had slept on undisturbed: but circumstances betrayed it to the knowledge of the landlord; and, in the morning, he was preparing to make it public. By great offers, however, Rudolph succeeded in purchasing the man’s silence: he engaged in substance to make over to the landlord a large sum of money, and to marry his daughter, with whom he had long pursued a clandestine intrigue. Agreeable to this arrangement, it was publicly notified that Madame von Schollshausen had destroyed herself under a sudden attack of hypochondriasis, to which she had been long subject. Some there were undoubtedly who chose to be sceptics on this matter; but nobody had an interest sufficiently deep in the murdered person to prompt him to a legal inquiry.

A fact which at this time gave Rudolph far more disturbance of mind than the murder of his once beloved wife was the full confirmation, upon repeated experience, that his dice had forfeited their power. For he had now been a loser two days running to so great an extent that he was obliged to abscond on a misty night. His child, towards whom his affection increased daily, he was under the necessity of leaving with his host, as a pledge for his return and fulfilment of his promises. He would not have absconded if it had been in his power to summon his dark counsellor forthwith; but on account of the great festival of Pentecost, which fell on the very next day, this summons was necessarily delayed for a short time. By staying, he would have reduced himself to the necessity of inventing various pretexts for delay, in order to keep up his character with his creditors; whereas, when he returned with a sum of money sufficient to meet his debts, all suspicions would be silenced at once.

In the metropolis of an adjacent territory, to which he resorted so often that he kept lodgings there constantly, he passed Whit-sunday with impatience, and resolved on the succeeding night to summon and converse with his counsellor. Impatient, however, as he was of any delay, he did not on that account feel the less anxiety as the hour of midnight approached. Though he was quite alone in his apartments, and had left his servant behind at the baths, yet long before midnight he fancied that he heard footsteps and whisperings round about him. The purpose he was meditating, that he had regarded till now as a matter of indifference, now displayed itself in its whole monstrous shape. Moreover, he remembered that his wicked counsellor had himself thought it necessary to exhort him to courage, which at present he felt greatly shaken. However, he had no choice. As he was enjoined, therefore, with the last stroke of twelve, he set on fire the wood which lay ready split upon the hearth, and threw the dice into the flames, with a loud laughter that echoed frightfully from the empty hail and staircase. Confused and half stifled by the smoke which accompanied the roaring flames, he stood still for a few minutes, when suddenly all the surrounding objects seemed changed, and he found himself transported to his father's house. His father was lying on his deathbed just as he had actually beheld him. He had upon his lips the very same expression of supplication and anguish with which he had at that time striven to address him. Once again he stretched out his arms in love and pity to his son; and once again he seemed to expire in the act.

Schroll was agitated by the picture, which called up and reanimated in his memory, with the power of a mighty tormentor, all his honourable plans and prospect from that innocent period of his life. At this moment the dice cracked for the first time; and Schroll turned his face towards the flames. A second time the smoke stifled the light in order to reveal a second picture. He saw himself on the day before the scene on the sand-hill, sitting in his dungeon. The clergyman was with him. From the expression of his countenance, he appeared to be just saying—'Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.' Rudolph thought of the disposition in which he then was, of the hopes which the clergyman had raised in him, and of the feeling which he then had that he was still worthy to be reunited to his father, or had become worthy by bitter penitence. The next fracture of the die disturbed the scene—but to substitute one that was not at all more consolatory. For now appeared a den 'of thieves, in which the unhappy widow of Weber was cursing her children, who—left without support, without counsel, without protection—had taken to evil courses. In the background stood the bleeding father of these ruined children, one hand stretched out towards Schroll with a menacing gesture, and the other lifted towards heaven with a record of impeachment against him.

At the third splitting of the dice, out of the bosom of the smoke arose the figure of his murdered wife, who seemed to chase him from one corner of the room to another, until at length

she came and took a seat at the fireplace; by the side of which, as Rudolph now observed with horror, his buried father and the unhappy Weber had stretched themselves; and they carried on together a low and noiseless whispering and moaning that agitated him with a mysterious horror.

After long and hideous visions, Rudolph beheld the flames grow weaker and weaker. He approached. The figures that stood round about held up their hands in a threatening attitude. A moment later and the time was gone for ever, and Rudolph, as his false friend had asserted, was a lost man! With the courage of despair he plunged through the midst of the threatening figures, and snatched at the glowing dice—which were no sooner touched than they split asunder with a dreadful sound, before which the apparitions vanished in a body.

The evil counsellor appeared on this occasion in the dress of a gravedigger, and asked, with a snorting sound,—‘What wouldst thou from me?’

‘I would remind you of your promise,’ answered Schroll, stepping back with awe; ‘your dice have lost their power.’

‘Through whose fault?’

Rudolph was silent, and covered his eyes from the withering glances of the fiendish being who was gazing upon him.

‘Thy foolish desires led thee in chase of the beautiful maiden into the church; my words were forgotten; and the benediction, against which I warned thee, disarmed the dice of their power. In future observe my directions better.’

So saying, he vanished; and Schroll found three new dice upon the hearth.

After such scenes sleep was not to be thought of; and Rudolph resolved, if possible, to make trial of his dice this very night. The ball at the hotel over the way, to which he had been invited, and from which the steps of the waltzers were still audible, appeared to present a fair opportunity. Thither he repaired; but not without some anxiety, lest some of the noises in his own lodgings should have reached the houses over the way. He was happy to find this fear unfounded. Everything appeared as if calculated only for *his* senses; for, when he inquired, with assumed carelessness, what great explosion *that* was which occurred about midnight, nobody acknowledged to having heard it. The dice also he was happy to find, answered his expectations. He found a company engaged at play, and, by the break of day, he had met with so much luck that he was immediately able to travel back to the baths, and to redeem his child and his word of honour.

In the baths he now made as many new acquaintances as the losses were important which he had lately sustained. He was reputed one of the wealthiest cavaliers in the place; and many who had designs upon him in consequence of this reputed wealth willingly lost money to him to favour their own scheme so that in a single month he gained sums which would have established him as a man of fortune. Under countenance of this repute, and as a widower, no doubt he might now have made successful advances to the young lady whom he had formerly pursued, for her father had an exclusive regard to property, and would have overlooked morals and respectability of that sort in any candidate for his daughter’s hand; but, with the largest oilers of money, he could not purchase his freedom from the contract made with his landlord’s daughter—a woman of very disreputable character. In fact, six months after the death of his first wife he was married to her.

By the unlimited profusion of money with which his second wife sought to wash out the stains upon her honour, Rudolph’s new-raised property was as speedily squandered. To part from her was one of the wishes which lay nearest his heart. He had, however, never ventured to express it a second time, before his father-in-law, for, on the single occasion when he had hinted at such an

intention, that person had immediately broken out into the most dreadful threats. The murder of his first wife was the chain which bound him to his second. The boy whom his first wife had left him, closely as he resembled her in features and in the bad traits of her character, was his only comfort, if indeed his gloomy and perturbed mind would allow him at any time to taste of comfort.

To preserve this boy from the evil influences of the many bad examples about him, he had already made an agreement with a man of distinguished abilities, who was to have superintended his education in his own family. But all was frustrated. Madame von Schrollshausen, whose love of pomp and display led her eagerly to catch at every pretext for creating a *fête*, had invited a party on the evening before the young boy's intended departure. The time which was not occupied in the eating-room was spent at the gaming-table, and dedicated to the dice, of whose extraordinary powers the owner was at this time availing himself with more zeal than usual, having just invested all his disposable money in the purchase of a landed estate. One of the guests, having lost very considerable sums in an uninterrupted train of ill luck, threw the dice, in his vexation, with such force upon the table that one of them fell down. The attendants searched for it on the floor, and the child also crept about in quest of it. Not finding it, he rose, and in rising stepped upon it, lost his balance, and fell with such violence against the edge of the stove that he died in a few hours of the injury inflicted on the head.

This accident made the most powerful impression upon the father. He recapitulated the whole of his life from the first trial he had made of the dice; from them had arisen all his misfortunes, in what way could he liberate himself from their accursed influence? Revolving this point, and in the deepest distress of mind, Schroll wandered out towards nightfall and strolled through the town. Coming to a solitary bridge in the outskirts, he looked down from the battlements upon the gloomy depths of the waters below, which seemed to regard him with looks of sympathy and strong fascination. 'So be it, then!' he exclaimed, and sprang over the railing; but, instead of finding his grave in the waters, he felt himself below seized powerfully by the grasp of a man, whom, from his scornful laugh, he recognized as his evil counsellor. The man bore him to the shore, and said, 'No, no! my good friend; he that once enters into a league with me, him I shall deliver from death even in his own despite.'

Half crazy with despair, the next morning Schroll crept out of the town with a loaded pistol. Spring was abroad; spring flowers, spring breezes, and nightingales.<sup>1</sup> They were all abroad, but not for *him* or *his* delight. A crowd of itinerant tradesmen passed him, who were on the road to a neighbouring fair. One of them, observing his dejected countenance with pity, attached himself to his side, and asked in a tone of sympathy what was the matter. Two others of the passers-by Schroll heard distinctly saying, 'Faith, I should not like, for my part, to walk alone with such an ill-looking fellow.' He darted a furious glance at the men, separated from his pitying companion with a fervent pressure of his hand, and struck off into a solitary track of the forest. In the first retired spot he fired the pistol; and behold! the man who had spoken to him with so much kindness lies stretched in his blood, and he himself is without a wound. At this moment, while staring half-unconsciously at the face of the murdered man, he feels himself seized from behind. Already he seems to himself in the hands of the public executioner. Turning round, however, he hardly knows whether to feel pleasure or pain on seeing his evil suggester in the dress of a gravedigger. 'My friend,' said the gravedigger, 'if you cannot be content to wait for death until I send it, I must be forced to end with dragging you to *that* from which I began by saving you—a

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<sup>1</sup> It may be necessary to inform some readers, who have never lived far enough to the south to have any personal knowledge of the nightingale, that this bird sings in the day time as well as the night.

public execution. But think not thus, or by any other way, to escape me. After death, thou wilt assuredly be mine again.'

'Who, then,' said the unhappy man, 'who is the murderer of the poor traveller?'

'Who? why, who but yourself? Was it not yourself that fired the pistol?'

'Ay, but at my own head.'

The fiend laughed in a way that made Schroll's flesh creep on his bones. 'Understand this, friend, that he whose fate I hold in my hands cannot anticipate it by his own act. For the present, begone, if you would escape the scaffold. To oblige you once more, I shall throw a veil over this murder.'

Thereupon the gravedigger set about making a grave for the corpse, whilst Schroll wandered away—more for the sake of escaping the hideous presence in which he stood than with any view to his own security from punishment.

Seeing by accident a prisoner under arrest at the guardhouse, Schroll's thoughts reverted to his own confinement. 'How happy,' said he, 'for me and for Charlotte, had I then refused to purchase life on such terms, and had better laid to heart the counsel of my good spiritual adviser!' Upon this a sudden thought struck him,—that he would go and find out the old clergyman, and would unfold to him his wretched history and situation. He told his wife that some private affairs required his attendance for a few days at the town of—. But, say what he would, he could not prevail on her to desist from accompanying him.

On the journey his chief anxiety was lest the clergyman, who was already advanced in years at the memorable scene of the sand-hill, might now be dead. But at the very entrance of the town he saw him walking in the street, and immediately felt himself more composed in mind than he had done for years. The venerable appearance of the old man confirmed him still more in his resolution of making a full disclosure to him of his whole past life: one only transaction, the murder of his first wife, he thought himself justified in concealing; since, with all his penitence for it, the act was now beyond the possibility of reparation.

For a long time the pious clergyman refused all belief to Schroll's narrative; but, being at length convinced that he had a wounded spirit to deal with, and not a disordered intellect, he exerted himself to present all those views of religious consolation which his philanthropic character and his long experience suggested to him as likely to be effectual. Eight days' conversation with the clergyman restored Schroll to the hopes of a less miserable future. But the good man admonished him at parting to put away from himself whatsoever could in any way tend to support his unhallowed connection.

In this direction Schroll was aware that the dice were included: and he resolved firmly that his first measure on returning home should be to bury in an inaccessible place these accursed implements that could not but bring mischief to every possessor. On entering the inn, he was met by his wife, who was in the highest spirits, and laughing profusely. He inquired the cause. 'No,' said she: 'you refused to communicate your motive for coming hither, and the nature of your business for the last week: I, too, shall have my mysteries. As to your leaving me in solitude at an inn, *that* is a sort of courtesy which marriage naturally brings with it; but that you should have travelled hither for no other purpose than that of trifling away your time in the company of an old tedious parson, *that* (you will allow me to say) is a caprice which seems scarcely worth the money it will cost.'

'Who, then, has told you that I have passed my time with an old parson?' said the astonished Schroll.

‘Who told me? Why, just let me know what your business was with the parson, and I’ll let you know in turn who it was that told me. So much I will assure you, however, now—that the cavalier who was my informant is a thousand times handsomer, and a more interesting companion, than an old dotard who is standing at the edge of the grave.’

All the efforts of Madame von Schrollshausen to irritate the curiosity of her husband proved ineffectual to draw from him his secret. The next day, on their return homewards, she repeated her attempts. But he parried them all with firmness. A more severe trial to his firmness was prepared for him in the heavy bills which his wife presented him on his reaching home. Her expenses in cloths and in jewels had been so profuse that no expedient remained to Schroll but that of selling without delay the landed estate he had so lately purchased. A declaration to this effect was very ill received by his wife. ‘Sell the estate?’ said she; ‘what? sell the sole resource I shall have to rely on when you are dead? And for what reason, I should be glad to know; when a very little of the customary luck of your dice will enable you to pay off these trifles? And whether the bills be paid today or tomorrow cannot be of any very great importance.’

Upon this, Schroll declared with firmness that he never meant to play again. ‘Not play again!’ exclaimed his wife; ‘pooh! pooh! you make me blush for you! So, then, I suppose it’s all true, as was said, that scruples of conscience drove you to the old rusty parson; and that he enjoined as a penance that you should abstain from gaming? I was told as much: but I refused to believe it; for in your circumstances the thing seemed too senseless and irrational.’

‘My dear girl,’ said Schroll, ‘consider—’

‘Consider! what’s the use of considering? what is there to consider about?’ interrupted Madame von Schrollshausen; and, recollecting the gay cavalier whom she had met at the inn, she now, for the first time, proposed a separation herself. ‘Very well,’ said her husband, ‘I am content.’ ‘So am I,’ said his father-in-law, who joined them at that moment. ‘But take notice that first of all I must have paid over to me an adequate sum of money for the creditable support of my daughter: else—’

Here he took Schroll aside, and the old threat of revealing the murder so utterly disheartening him that at length in despair he consented to his terms.

Once more, therefore, the dice were to be tried; but only for the purpose of accomplishing the separation: *that* over, Schroll resolved to seek a livelihood in any other way, even if it were as a day-labourer. The stipulated sum was at length all collected within a few hundred dollars; and Schroll was already looking out for some old disused well into which he might throw the dice, and then have it filled up; for even a river seemed to him a hiding-place not sufficiently secure for such instruments of misery.

Remarkable it was on the very night when the last arrears were to be obtained of his father-in-law’s demand—a night when Schroll had anticipated with so much bitter anxiety—that he became unusually gloomy and dejected. He was particularly disturbed by the countenance of a stranger, who for several days running had lost considerable sums. The man called himself Stutz; but he had a most striking resemblance to his old comrade Weber, who had been shot at the sand-hill, and differed indeed in nothing but in the advantage of blooming youth. Scarce had he leisure to recover from the shock which this spectacle occasioned when a second occurred. About midnight another man, whom nobody knew, came up to the gaming-table, and interrupted the play by recounting an event which he represented as having just happened. A certain man, he said, had made a covenant with some person or other that they call the Evil One—or what is it you call him? and by means of this covenant he had obtained a steady run of good luck at play. ‘Well, sir,’ he went on, ‘and would you believe it? the other he began to repent of this covenant;

my gentleman wanted to rat, he wanted to rat, sir. Only, first of all, he resolved privately to make up a certain sum of money. Ah, the poor idiot! he little knew whom he had to deal with: the Evil One, as they choose to call him, was not a man to let himself be swindled in that manner. No, no, my good friend. I saw—I mean, the Evil One saw—what was going on betimes; and he secured the swindler just as he fancied himself on the point of pocketing the last arrears of the sum wanted.'

The company began to laugh so loudly at this pleasant fiction, as they conceived it, that Madame von Schrollshausen was attracted from the adjoining room. The story was repeated to her; and she was the more delighted with it because in the relater she recognized the gay cavalier whom she had met at the inn. Everybody laughed again, excepting two persons—Stutz and Schroll. The first had again lost all the money in his purse; and the second was so confounded by the story that he could not forbear staring with fixed eyes on the stranger, who stood over against him. His consternation increased when he perceived that the stranger's countenance seemed to alter at every moment, and that nothing remained unchanged in it except the cold expression of inhuman scorn with which he perseveringly regarded himself.

At length he could endure this no longer: and he remarked, therefore, upon Stutz again losing a bet, that it was now late; that Mr Stutz was too much in a run of bad luck; and that on these accounts he would defer the further pursuit of their play until another day. And thereupon he put the dice into his pocket.

'Stop!' said the strange cavalier; and the voice froze Schroll with horror; for he knew too well to whom that dreadful tone and those fiery eyes belonged.

'Stop!' said he again; 'produce your dice!' And tremblingly Schroll threw them upon the table.

'Ah! I thought as much,' said the stranger; 'they are loaded dice!' So saying, he called for a hammer, and struck one of them in two. 'See!' said he to Stutz, holding out to him the broken dice, which in fact seemed loaded with lead. 'Stop, vile impostor!' exclaimed the young man, as Schroll was preparing to quit the room in the greatest confusion; and he threw the dice at him, one of which lodged in his right eye. The tumult increased; the police came in; and Stutz was apprehended, as Schroll's wound assumed a very dangerous appearance.

Next day Schroll was in a violent fever. He asked repeatedly for Stutz. But Stutz had been committed to close confinement; it having been found that he had travelled with false passes. He now confessed that he was one of the sons of the mutineer Weber; that his sickly mother had died soon after his father's execution; and that himself and his brother, left without the control of guardians, and without support, had taken to bad course.

On hearing this report, Schroll rapidly worsened; and he unfolded to a young clergyman his whole unfortunate history. About midnight he sent again in great haste for the clergyman. He came. But at sight of him Schroll stretched out his hands in extremity of horror, and waved him away from his presence; but before his signals were complied with the wretched man had expired in convulsions.

From his horror at the sight of the young clergyman, and from the astonishment of the clergyman himself on arriving and hearing that he had already been seen in the sick-room, it was inferred that his figure had been assumed for fiendish purposes. The dice and the strange cavalier disappeared at the same time with their wretched victim, and were seen no more.