

III. The Brothers Kramm

At the same time that Fred Jorgell learned of the tragic death of his client Pablo Hernandez, Baruch emerged from the isolated building in which he lived by means of a door that let out into the street, to which he had the only key. He could thus go in and out as he pleased, without disturbing any of the servants.

Although it was marked on the official maps of the city, the street only consisted, thus far, of fenced-off plots and heaps of gravel. Baruch crossed it, casually jumping over puddles of water and pot-holes. For some while he followed the unfinished boulevard that traversed Jorgell City, illuminated at intervals by powerful arc-lamps. Finally, he stopped in front of a large cottage of severe appearance.

Baruch Jorgell had arrived at the house of Dr. Cornelius Kramm.

Dr. Cornelius was famous throughout America, but his marvelous cures were of a very particular kind. The doctor was the providence of all those persons, of either sex, who were afflicted by extreme ugliness or some physical blemish and who were able to pay his fees for a very expensive treatment. He straightened crooked noses, reduced the size of copious ears, enlarged eyes, tightened mouths, raised foreheads and rectified heights. In brief, by means of surgery, he treated living substance as a veritably plastic material, which he fashioned according to his caprice.

It was his incontestable dexterity that had earned him the bizarre nickname of "the sculptor of human flesh," by which was familiarly known.

Little was known about Dr. Cornelius' past. He had turned up one day, installed himself magnificently, and since then, thanks to clever advertising, successful cures and his very real knowledge, his reputation had grown steadily.

There was, however, a sinister rumor regarding his initial fortune. Ten years before, it was claimed, Cornelius had been associated, as a physician, with a mining company in the Matto Grosso in Brazil, which had employed more than five hundred black laborers. In spite of active and careful surveillance, thefts were quite frequent. One incident of that sort coincided exactly with the arrival of the doctor: a seven-hundred carat diamond disappeared and all the searches made had been fruitless.

A few weeks went by, and the theft was beginning to be forgotten, when an old black man fell ill and had to be transported to the hospital that Cornelius was running. The latter had no difficulty diagnosing acute peritonitis, caused by the presence of a foreign object in the intestine; he was about to carry out an operation when he remembered the vanished diamond. He was not unaware that the black workers often did not hesitate to swallow the stones they stole, in order to hide them more effectively.

Two days later, the patient died of an absorption of a prussic acid capsule prescribed "in error" and the doctor, as he had foreseen, found the seven-hundred carat diamond when he dissected the body. In that same month, the doctor handed in his resignation on health grounds, and left for Europe, where all trace of him was lost.

Franz Kramm's antecedents were also mysterious. He had made a fortune dealing in paintings and other works of art; that was all that could be precisely affirmed on his account. His enemies claimed that he had been part of an international gang of museum-burglars, whose receiver he had remained, but no one had ever been able to furnish proof of this slanderous assertion.

At any rate, those rumors did cause any prejudice against the two brothers; no one who has become rich has failed to be the target of denigration.

At the moment when Baruch rang the doctor's doorbell it was about ten o'clock in the evening; only a few beams of light were filtering through the interstices of the tightly-closed shutters.

The domestic who came to open the door introduced the young man silently into a waiting-room furnished with severe elegance, already occupied by an individual clad in black who advanced courteously toward the visitor. It was an old Italian named Leonello, who had been in the doctor's service for many years.

"How can I be of service to you?" he asked Baruch.

"I want to see the doctor."

"Unfortunately, that's impossible. The doctor is working."

"He's expecting me," said Baruch, insistently. "Here's my card."

"A thousand pardons," said the Italian, obsequiously, after a glance at the card. "I'll tell him, that you're here."

Leonello came back a few moments later. There was a sarcastic expression on his fleshless face.

"My master will be very happy to receive you," he said, "but he cannot abandon the work to which he is devoting himself, so it will be necessary for you to accompany me to the laboratory."

"What is he working on, then?"

The Italian's shrewd features became even more ironic. "The doctor is busy with an embalming. It's a matter of poor Pablo Hernandez, whose cadaver was discovered this morning. The family telegraphed the doctor asking him to take the necessary measures, and you'll have the privilege of witnessing the operation."

"Thank you," Baruch stammered, his face covered with a mortal pallor, "but I don't care to see such a spectacle."

"I can understand that."

"Tell the doctor that I'll wait until he's finished."

"It might take a long time."

"Too bad—I prefer to wait."

Leonello disappeared. Baruch remained alone, fretfully, prey to anger and impatience.

Finally, the doctor appeared.

Dr. Cornelius Kramm was little more than thirty-six years of age, but his enormous and entirely bald head, his large gold-rimmed spectacles and his thin and clean-shaven face made him seem much older. His features were symmetrical and at first sight, he gave the impression of being a man of powerful intelligence, but his thin lips and his unquiet ferret eyes, behind the crystal lenses of his spectacles, gave rise to an indescribable unease. He expressed himself with a glacial slowness and dryness.

The two men did not greet one another formally. Now they were free of witnesses, there was no need for banal gestures of politeness.

"For lack of the great ruby," Baruch said, "I have the bonds I mentioned."

"I know that better than anyone," Cornelius retorted, cynically, "since I've just finished embalming their previous owner."

Baruch did not flinch. "I'd like the money straight away," he said.

"So be it, then. Let's go to my brother's house."

Nothing further was said. Cornelius picked up a small electric lantern and guided his guest through the paths of the garden to an iron door that connected the properties of the two brothers.

Having gone through that door, they found themselves in a vast hall, literally crammed from floor to ceiling with heaped-up paintings and statues of all times and all schools. In an empty space contrived in the middle there was a desk, seats and a large safe sealed into the wall.

Cornelius and Baruch had hardly had time to sit down when Fritz, doubtless already alerted, appeared on the far side of the hall.

The dealer in curiosities was entirely different, in terms of physical appearance, from his brother the doctor. Whereas Cornelius was thin, emaciated and morose, Fritz was corpulent, rubicund, jovial and extremely polite in his manners and gestures. He was what we in France call a *bon viveur*.

His benevolent smile and his clear gray eyes full of frankness rendered him very likeable at first, but if one observed his over-developed jaw, his large ragged ears and his enormous short-fingered and round-thumbed hands attentively, one was much less reassured.

On perceiving Baruch, Fritz went straight toward him, holding out his hand. "Delighted to see you," he said. "Oh, I knew that your visit wouldn't be long delayed; I was almost expecting you."

Baruch breathed more freely; that cordial tone, real or feigned, put him at his ease.

"You've guessed what brought me," he said.

"Of course. You need banknotes."

“As you say...”

“Let’s see the bonds.”

Baruch took a fat morocco-leather wallet out of his overcoat pocket, but he blushed and became anxious when he suddenly noticed the name of Don Pablo Hernandez embossed in golden letters in one of the corners.

“That,” said Cornelius, in his harsh and gruff voice, “is a little souvenir that I don’t advise you to keep, Master Jorgell.”

Fritz Kramm immediately intervened, with conciliating gestures. “All right—one can’t think of everything, of course. But let’s see the bonds.” He took the wallet from Baruch’s hands. “Oils, coppers and rubbers—excellent; the majority are on the rise; the man who bought them was far from being a fool. Except...look, not one is made out to the bearer. No one but me can negotiate those, and not without risk. Let’s count up. There are three hundred thousand dollars’ worth, so I can give you, as agreed, a hundred thousand dollars in banknotes and gold.”

Baruch made a movement of protest, which was quickly suppressed.

“I believe,” Fritz continued, without giving him time to speak, “that my proposition is perfectly equitable: a hundred thousand dollars for me, who accepts the shares and obligations, which will be difficult to negotiate; a hundred thousand dollars for my brother, who has signed the medical report; and a hundred thousand for you, who...”

“I haven’t made any protest,” Baruch interjected, hurriedly.

“I believe that we understand one another perfectly.”

With the scrupulous and placid gestures of an honest tradesman, Fritz went to the safe and took out a wad of banknotes, which he handed to Baruch.

“There,” he said, with a broad smile. “The sum is all ready; count it. I think the number is correct, but anyone can make a mistake.”

“No need,” replied Baruch, stuffing the banknotes into his pocket. “Thank you. It’s not impossible that I’ll have further occasion to take advantage of your kindness.”

“Entirely at your service.”

Baruch took his leave.

Fritz insisted on escorting him to the door to the street, and they separated after having exchanged a firm handshake.

Fritz returned to his brother. When they were alone in the great hall with the paintings, facing the safe, they exchanged a singular smile.

“I believe we have him,” said Cornelius.

“Oh, he’s ours now,” Fritz agreed, “well and truly ours. He’s very headstrong, though; I fear that he might not be a docile instrument.”

“Everyone becomes docile when they fall into our hands,” the doctor affirmed, with a sinister grimace. “I can only see one dark spot in our plants—young Harry Dorgan.”

“We’ll think about that. It requires mature reflection. I think we’ve worked hard enough for one day.” The two brothers left their conversation there and went their separate ways. Cornelius went back to his laboratory. Fritz changed his clothes in order to go out and spend the rest of the evening with a rich coal-merchant who was one of his best clients, to whom he had furnished an entire gallery of paintings.

In the meantime, Baruch had hailed a taxi and had himself taken to the celebrated Black Bean Club.

IV. *The Black Bean Club*

The Black Bean Club was an institution possessed of a very American originality. It consisted of forty active members, all bachelors, and a large number of honorary members, married or not. Every year, on New Year's Eve, after a splendid banquet, lavishly washed down with claret and extra-dry champagne, the *maître d'hotel* ceremoniously deposited on the table a silver-plated urn that contained thirty-nine white beans and one black one.

It was a solemn moment.

With eyes blindfolded, each of the members of the club, beginning with the president, took a bean from the silver-plated urn in turn. Whoever drew the black bean was required to marry within a year and, ceasing to be an active member, became an honorary member by right, but the club took responsibility for the cost of the wedding and the young couple, expenses throughout the honeymoon.

If the bride was poor—which rarely happened in that milieu, almost exclusively frequented by the sons of billionaires—the club's funds furnished a dowry.

This interesting association, which had come from a city not far away to establish itself in Jorgell City, was a great success; its members formed an elite into which it was difficult to be admitted.

Baruch Jorgell was only an honorary member, but as people played cards for high stakes at the Black Bean Club, he frequented it assiduously. Baruch was a gambler. He rarely won, though, for want of calculation and reflection; it was with a kind of feverish nervousness that he threw his gold in handfuls on to the green baize. He was ignorant or scornful of the skill of the old professionals who came to garner hundreds of dollars with an insignificant stake.

When Baruch went into the gaming room the session was very animated. There was a certain Mr. Stickmann there, who had arrived in Jorgell City not long before, who was betting with admirable audacity.

Arnold Stickmann, a young man with a fresh and rosy complexion, almost an adolescent, had made a reputation in the society of the Five Hundred by his elegance; in Chicago, and even in New York, he was a trend-setter. He was the man who had inaugurated cravats in gold cloth decorated with diamond florets; on another occasion he had innovated a suit in pink and violet metallic cloth; he had also launched sharkskin knee-boots in which each button was constituted by a small black diamond.

The portrait of that Yankee Beau Brummell was to be found in all the newspapers in the world, and skillful reporters went to interview his tailor, his boot-maker and his shirt-maker to try to find out what he would be wearing the following day. He had been seen to appear on the same day, alternately, in asbestos flannel pajamas, a green suit and a crocodile-skin waistcoat.

Stickmann was, in his fashion, a poet. He translated all his emotions and all his dreams into a new and original costume, meditated for a long time. In the slightest actions of his life he was scrupulously refined; every morning, his manservant scrubbed the gold coins that were to be placed in his purse, and he only ever had new and perfumed banknotes in his pocket.

Such was the man opposite whom Baruch sat down when he entered the Black Bean Club's gaming room; they exchanged a rapid glance, and instinctively detested one another.

Arnold Stickmann had the bank. Baruch emptied a glass of champagne that a barman handed him and insolently threw a thousand-dollar bill on to the baize.

Stickmann dealt the cards with a sure hand. "Seven," he announced.

Baruch had drawn five.

Stickman collected the thousand-dollar banknote, which was slightly greasy at the edges, with an expression of disgust; in front of him, gold, chips and bills formed an enormous heap, a veritable small mountain.

Impassively, Baruch risked two more thousand-dollar bills.

He lost. His two banknotes went to increase the impeccable Stickmann's pile.

"Again!" said Baruch. And he threw successively on to the baize four, then eight, and the sixteen banknotes. He lost every time.

Very interested, the club's members had all stopped playing; they were following the battle raging between the two young billionaires passionately. Persistent bad luck dogged Baruch, and gold flowed through his fingers like water.

"Shall we have a game of fly?" proposed an old regular, suddenly.

The idea was welcomed with enthusiastic cheers.

"Fly" is an exclusively American game primarily played aboard transatlantic liners to while away the passengers' time.

Twelve of the club members each deposited a banknote on the table; a lump of sugar was placed on each banknote, and the entire audience remained plunged in a religious silence and complete immobility.

Suddenly, a fly that was buzzing around near the electric lights in the ceiling, attracted by the odor of the sugar, flew down. The gamblers and the spectators remained fixed in their statuesque rigidity.

It was an emotional moment. In the great silence, the breath of the gamblers, oppressed by anguish, was audible.

The little creature circled for some time around a tray on which bottles of champagne and whisky were set, and then headed straight for the sugar-lump placed in front of Baruch. The latter could not suppress an imperceptible shudder, which caused the fly to change course. It went to settle on the sugar-lump in front of Arnold Stickmann, who had not flinched.

"A winner!" cried the gamblers, loudly.

With a disdainful smile and a negligent gesture, Stickmann collected the eleven banknotes that were under the sugar-lumps.

The stakes were renewed, but five times in succession, Arnold Stickmann won. One by one, as they had the first time, the gamblers abandoned the game, amazed by that improbable good luck. Again, Baruch and Stickmann remained alone, facing one another. There were ten thousand-dollar banknotes beneath each sugar-lump.

The witnesses of the scene were following its phases with that impassioned, almost unhealthy interest that the Yankees bring to every kind of game or sport. No longer playing, in order to leave the field open to the two adversaries, they laid side-bets in low voices.

"Two thousand on Baruch!"

"Two thousand on Stickmann—he's on a streak."

"The luck's bound to turn. Baruch will win!"

"We'll soon see."

"Three thousand dollars!"

"Done!"

In the meantime, the fly, which all gazes were following anxiously, amused itself by playing the coquette, so to speak; it circled around the vast room, drawing away and then coming nearer, only to fly up toward the ceiling again. For a moment, it even placed itself exactly between the two pale and tremulous gamblers, as if to mock them.

Suddenly, it landed on Baruch's sugar-lump.

Finally, he had won. Avidly, he took possession of his adversary's stake; the latter was smiling with a detached air, like a man to whom winning or losing a wad of banknotes of any thickness was a matter of absolute indifference to him.

Baruch's supporters gained ground; the luck seemed to have turned. The game continued, as stubbornly as before.

At that moment, an argument broke out among the gamblers that nearly ended in revolver shots. Someone, without meaning any harm, had lit a cigar, the smoke of which was capable of influencing the insect at the moment when the destiny of the game was being settled. The unfortunate smoker, scolded by everyone, had to throw away his cigar and make his apologies.

This time, Baruch put twenty bills under a sugar-lump, and won.

Still smiling, Stickmann took fifty banknotes out of a pigskin wallet. Without a second's hesitation, Baruch placed an equal number in front of him.

The game was becoming grandiose, but the fly, sufficiently gorged on sugar, had flown out of the open window. The players and side-betters were furious.

There as a moment of forced calm, but the flies asleep near the moldings in the ceiling did not manifest the slightest intention of disturbing their slumber, and the creature that had so far played such a sterling role seemed to have gone for good.

The conversations resumed their course, cigars were relit, and trays laden with glasses of extra-dry and incendiary cocktails were circulating.

There was already talk of playing something else—organizing bridge or poker tables—when, abruptly, with a joyful buzz, the fly, undoubtedly the same one, came back in triumphantly through the window and began to circle, uncertainly, above the gaming table.

“The quarter of an hour hasn’t passed!” clamored the spectators, with one voice. “The bets stand; the game’s on!”

Instantly, the cigars were extinguished, and in the room, so noisy a few moments before, the most religious silence and the most perfect immobility reigned. Everyone was thinking privately that it had been a long time since such a fine contest had taken place at the Black Bean.

This time, the contest was brief. After a minute, without the slightest hesitation, the fly settled on Baruch’s sugar-lump. He won the fifty thousand dollars.

Stickmann handed them to him with the most gracious smile.

“My compliments, Master Jorgell,” he said. “The evening’s honors go to you. But don’t you think we’ve played enough for one evening? For myself, I find my head’s becoming a little heavy.”

Baruch was astonished; he did not understand that sudden moderation. “I’m ready to continue,” he said.

“No, that’s sufficient for today. You’ll certainly have another opportunity to give me my revenge. I’ll be here for a fortnight, perhaps longer.”

“As you please,” Baruch murmured, nonplussed. “I dare say that one of these gentlemen will be delighted to take your place.

No opponent presented himself, however. With the particular superstition of gamblers they were all convinced that the luck had changed and that Baruch would win for the rest of the evening.

“Besides which, it’s getting late,” said Stickmann. “It would be wise, in my opinion, to go home to bed, after having drunk one last glass to the health of the fortunate winner.”

That motion rallied all votes. The gaming room as deserted for the bar, and a joyous toast was drunk. Then the members of the club retired in small groups.

Bizarrely enough, Stickmann seemed to have suddenly recanted his aversion for Baruch. They conversed amicably for some time, and went into the elevator together.

As they were going down, Stickmann asked Baruch whether he had his automobile, and, on his negative reply, offered to give him a lift and drop him off at his door. Somewhat astonished by that kindness, Baruch accepted.

When they had taken their places in the luxurious electric coupé, the conversation did not take long to take a confidential turn.

“Listen, my dear opponent,” said Stickmann, “I’m going to be entirely frank with you and tell you a secret.”

“I’m listening,” Baruch murmured, wondering what the other was getting at.

“As you know, I went to the party given by your father a few days ago.”

“Indeed. I remember seeing you dancing a Scottish reel with my sister.”

“That’s precisely what it’s about. I’ve never admired anything so much as the grace, charm and liveliness of that delightful young woman. I marveled at her intelligence as much as her beauty.”

“And, naturally,” Baruch put in, with a slightly ironic expression, “you’re in love with her?”

“Madly in love! I intend to ask Mr. Jorgell for her hand in a few days.”

“Good luck,” said Baruch, still mocking. “But I don’t see how I can be useful to you. As you probably know, I don’t have any influence over my father, and very little over my sister.”

“All that I’m asking of you, for your part, is not to be hostile to me.”

“You can certainly count on my most benevolent neutrality, my dear Arnold. But I ought to tell you that Isidora has already refused a considerable number of brilliant suitors.”

“That’s no reason to hold back,” the king of fashion replied, arrogantly. “Isidora will have to settle on someone, some day.”

“Let’s hope that it will be you. But I believe this is my destination. Don’t worry—I’ll keep your secret. A thousand thanks for your generosity, and we’ll meet again at the Black Bean soon!”

The two young men parted, with every appearance of the utmost cordiality.

Stickman thought he had taken a step of very skillful diplomacy. In that, he was greatly mistaken. Baruch, who had previously had nothing against him but an instinctive antipathy, now detested him wholeheartedly. As he went back into the drawing-room on the ground floor of the pavilion in which he lived, he gave free rein to his bilious humor.

“The popinjay! The imbecile!” he exclaimed. “Does he imagine, then, that my sister will be immediately infatuated with him? He’s doubtless counting on winning her heart by means of the excellent cut of his suits and the chic of his cravats. Isidora would have to be very stupid to grant her hand to that pretentious manikin, good for nothing, at best, but standing in a tailor’s window...”

While talking to himself thus, Baruch had taken out of his pocket the banknotes that he had stuffed in pell-mell when he left the gaming room.

He counted them. There were a hundred and sixty—but that significant augmentation of his capital, rather than calming him down, further increased his ill-humor toward Stickmann.

“I understand now, why the clown refused to continue playing and let me take my winnings away. If anyone divines his intentions, I’ll be the laughing-stock of the club members. Perhaps he thinks that I’ll be grateful to him! I know that he detests me, deep down; he’s scarcely addressed two words to me before.”

Baruch was, before anything else, a proud man, and Arnold Stickmann, in thinking that he was being agreeable to him, had found a means of wounding his self-esteem to the quick.

The following evenings, at the Black Bean, the gambling was furious. Baruch was intent on proving to everyone that he was not, as people said, held in a state of dependence by his father, and that he had capital of his own at his disposal. He would have liked, in order to complete that demonstration, to lose a large sum playing against Stickmann, but the latter, faithful to the strategy that he had initially adopted, made every effort to let him win.

He’s trying to humiliate me, thought Baruch, angrily, to prove to me that he possesses a fortune of which he has free disposition, and business affairs that he administers himself, while I, thanks to my father’s avarice, don’t have any of that. He doubtless wants me to understand that, when he becomes Isidora’s husband, I’ll be able to count on his liberality. But he mustn’t know me very well to make such a calculation, and I’m not a man to put up with insults for long!

Meanwhile, the other members of the Black Bean did not have the same reasons as Arnold Stickmann to be careful of Baruch Jorgell; so, as they took advantage of his impetuosity and distraction, the wad of banknotes got thinner every day.

Soon, of the hundred and sixty bills, no more than thirty remained.

The proud Baruch did not want to believe the evidence of his own eyes that he was not rich enough to gable with opponents who almost all had billions at their disposal, and, instead of employing his money in some fruitful speculation, as he had originally planned to do, he played recklessly, without wanting to envisage the consequences of such conduct.

At the same time, Arnold Stickmann paid Fred Jorgell two or three successive visits. Nothing came of their conversations, but the king of fashion manifested a joviality and zest that were previously unknown. As for the costumes he inaugurated every day, they were in pastel shades, and dazzlingly chic.