

Albert Robida: *THE ENGINEER VON SATANAS*

Prologue

That all these things happened was the fault of the venerable Abbé Gottlieb, prior of the Augustine convent at Freiburg im Brisgau in 13 or thereabouts.

He was a saintly man, but he was old—very old—gentle and timid, almost child-like, half deaf and three-quarters blind.

One day, he received a visit from a young rogue of a student who claimed that he had enough of deceptive science and the errors of society, and wanted to become a monk, in order no longer to occupy himself with anything but the salvation of his soul, by means of meditation and prayer.

“Accept me as a novice in your convent, Father,” he groaned, in a cavernous, hypocritically tearful voice. “I have many sins to expiate. It’s only here, in the refuge of the Augustine convent, sanctified by your virtues, sheltered from all temptations, that I can dream of cleansing my soul appropriately—with the aid of your advice and your examples, Father.”

Alas, the venerable abbé did not see, in the physiognomy of the rogue, a certain truly disquieting sarcastic smile, nor his green eyes, nor, on his forehead, two black patches underlining two protuberances that resembled flattened horns.

He did not see anything! He consented to receive the novice Schwartz, and everything was settled. The old world had ended and a new world began.¹

At any rate, as soon as the novice Schwartz was introduced, the existence of the convent seemed singularly troubled. The Augustine monks, so meek and so pious, who provided the edification of the town, as they did in all the Germans’ burgraviats, margraviats, duchies and grand duchies, suddenly became anxious, nervous, susceptible and quick to disputation. The Augustine’s beautiful chapel no longer saw a full attendance every day at all the offices. The idle monks only arrived one at a time, slowly. Often, they even left Father Gottlieb all alone in the chapel, in his abbatial pulpit, and the latter was frequently obliged to ring the bell for matins himself.

The cloister where the monks had once strolled two by two, gravely, talking about edifying matters, resounded with arguments and vociferations, when it was not with laughter and songs.

Only the monk Schwartz consoled the poor prior somewhat; in him alone was piety and austerity still manifest, and all the virtues by which the good Augustines of Freiburg had once been distinguished. In chapel, when the other monks were asleep on their benches, his was the voice that was heard accompanying the quavering of the old abbé: a strange, resounding voice, with rumblings and rollings like an organ, and sudden boomings that made the windows shake.

At the sound of that voice the sleeping monks woke up, to quarrel more bitterly. Schwartz sniggered, the old abbé wept, and the convent became a veritable Hell.

What is more, that rage of disputes spread outside the walls of the convent, in starts and surges, when Schwartz’s voice, singing in the chapel, burst forth with bellowings that made the whole edifice vibrate and caused the steeple to oscillate. Domestic troubles, squabbles between burgers and the lower classes, brawls and scuffles over everything—the entire town and the surrounding areas went crazy, in a perpetual fury of fighting, and the duke, who was ruining himself with armor and arbalests, marched back and forth over his lands, showing his teeth and seeking a quarrel with his neighbors.

At the convent, the monk Schwartz deployed a prodigious activity. He seemed to be everywhere at once, circulating in the corridors and the cloister, always sniggering, with a kind of grating sound that

¹ A monument to the probably-fictitious Berthold Schwarz, or Schwartz, was erected in Freiburg in 1853, thus laying claim to the legendary inventor on behalf of the town.

made the two points of his long red beard stick out; and he sang in the chapel, where his mere appearance caused something akin to a shiver of fear to pass through the old colonnettes, and something like the pulse of a tocsin through the bell-tower.

He received numerous visits, from lords with nobly rebarbative faces, messengers with shady expressions and students of famished appearance, and he spent long hours of the day and night in his cell, occupied with mysterious labors.

Brother Schwartz's cell made the other monks anxious; they ran away from it in terror. Sulfurous vapors and nauseating fumes escaped from it continually, and sometimes even flashes like lightning and long rapid flames—not to mention the muffled growls that had caused the monks to flee from the neighboring cells.

Inside, it was a genuine den of alchemy. There was no crucifix or holy images on the walls, but retorts and flasks of all kinds, furnaces, basins, mortars, bottles, incomprehensible documents nailed to the wall, old books and dog-eared parchments.

And Schwartz worked, pulverized, crushed and kneaded, always stirring, scuttling and sniggering...

The visits multiplied. Did not a day arrive when the Duke himself arrived at the convent, with three or four individuals who had their faces buried up to the nose in their cloaks?

Thicker smoke spread from the monk Schwartz's cell, swirling around the galleries and the cloister.

Schwartz's face became more and more disquieting; his eyes launched fulgurations, his beard danced and writhed as hoarse and creaky sniggers passed through this throat.

Finally, there was massive popular excitement one day in the vicinity of the convent, and an upheaval in the Augustines' abode.

Here comes the Grand Duke again, with a numerous retinue, with mounted lords, leaders of troops and captains decked in shiny armor. They have been summoned by the monk Schwartz for a final experiment.

The monks are convinced the Brother Schwartz has found the means, at the peril of his soul, to manufacture gold, and has offered the secret to the Duke, in exchange for honors, in addition to some solid fief.

The noble lords crowd behind the prince in the corridors of the convent, while the latter is content to stick his head around the door of the laboratory cell in order to cast a suspicious glance around it.

A strange sight, that cell and the things inside! That big barrel, carefully covered, must be full of the product of the monk's industry, and the smaller casks glimpsed to either side in the smoke. The monk has obviously not been lying to them. It is the triumph!

Brother Schwartz sniggers and rubs his hands. Yes, it is the triumph—you shall see, noble lords!

He whispers for a long time into the ear of the Duke, whose eyes grow wide and sparkle with satisfaction. He gives each of the lords a piece of parchment on which he has scrawled his formula, along with a cask full of a specimen, which he engages them to take home immediately and put it in a safe place.

Brother Schwartz is still sniggering and taking long strides around his cell and the corridor; at every step the gangling monk seems to expand and get taller; phosphorescent gleams pass through his eyes. In front of him the proud burgraves and mercenary leaders feel little frissons running through their bones.

The monk asks them to step away. He is going to carry out one last experiment; they will see well enough from the far side of the garden.

Now they are huddled, slightly anxiously, under the abbé's trees, noses in the air, looking toward the gallery to which the cells open.

They do not have to wait long...

Suddenly, there are sinister rumblings, jets of flame, a frightful suffocating odor...and then a mighty explosion resounds, which throws them all to the ground, terrified. A tongue of flame rises up, dancing, into the sky, as high as the steeple of the chapel, which oscillates and leans over, and beneath the flame, whirlwinds of bitter smoke spurt forth...

Half of the convent is lying on the ground, thick walls broken, arches smashed, with a quantity of poor monks crushed and crippled.

Of the monk Schwartz not the slightest trace, not the most wretched morsel, was found. Some people, who had good eyes, claimed to have clearly distinguished him in mid-air, in the fiery tongues of the explosion, capering madly, immeasurably grown and still sniggering, with enormous horns on his forehead and a long tail.

The Duke, the noble lords and the captains, undamaged, merely frightened, ran away swiftly to their homes, in order to put away the casks of the specimen offered by Schwartz in safe places, along with the formula for renewing the provision at will.

A marvelous gift, more precious than potable gold! It is soon perceived in the world that Schwartz's discovery has not fallen into the hands of negligent idlers.

And that is only a beginning, that coarse little powder, simple and easy to use—exactly what was needed, in times of obscurity, for rude and primitive men habituated, most of all, to striking hard in battles. Meek searchers and excellent chemists would subsequently improve it greatly!



The monk Schwartz

Second Prologue
1909: The Solemn Inauguration of the Palace of Peace in The Hague

One Congress succeeds another for the inauguration of the superb and grandiose Palace of Peace erected at the expense on the American billionaire Carnegie² to the glory of modern civilization, triumphant over the somber ideas of the past.

There is a Congress of scientists and pacifist philosophers, the flower of all the Academies, all illustrious, all venerable or in the process of becoming so, and all venerated, the champions of peaceful and fecund progress, which is working for the wellbeing of peoples, transforming the world, and is about to bring about an Edenic era, a renascent Golden Age for all the races of the Earth.

And finally, there is a diplomatic Congress: ministers and statesmen, decorated with all possible orders, perhaps less venerable in appearance, but full of good will, won over to great and noble pacifist ideas, sent by their respective governments to draw up appropriate international conventions codifying the new rights of peoples and imposing obligatory arbitration to regulate peacefully all the questions, all the difficulties and all the differences that might emerge between nations in the future...

What a magnificent prospect is opening before pacified humankind—a marvelous vision! All the old quarrels extinct, mildness and benevolence universal! The triumph of science, man dominant over matter, domesticating the blind forces of nature, subjugating the elements in order to put them in the service of creative, redemptive and regenerative Progress! Wellbeing, fecundity, expansion and happiness everywhere!

That is what they were saying, those benevolent scientists in spectacles, while congratulating one another and offering felicitations to the present generations for living in such a beautiful, gentle and glorious epoch! A fusion of peoples, a universal embrace!

And the diplomats nodded in assent, as they signed protocols and conventions.

Conclusively finished, the ages of brutality and Medieval barbarity! All chains fallen, the old fortresses crumbling, frontiers being effaced, the earth is opening up and offering itself, entire, to human genius. Modern man is carving and slicing across the continents, going to search in the entails of the globe for hidden riches that will give impetus to industries and carrying wellbeing and abundance everywhere. He is exploring the abysses of the seas, capturing and directing natural energies, correcting torrents and straightening cataracts, utilizing the lightning of the heavens for all kinds of tasks—and now he is launching himself into the clouds with his airplanes and his dirigibles, and flying at full tilt through the immensities of the azure, in the immediate vicinity of God!

What joy! How sweet it is to live in such beautiful times, and finally to see the realization of the dreams of all the seekers of the ideal, all the illustrious thinkers of yore!

For six weeks, every evening, the emotional speeches of philosophers and scientists, and the elegant harangues of Statesmen, transmitted by the telegraph and reproduced in all languages by the newspapers of the entire world, have been carrying the good news everywhere.

The Congress, having completed its work, is holding one last session before the great banquet that, naturally, will mark its closure before the separation. The International Convention has just been signed by the diplomats and *chargés d'affaires* of all the powers. On this solemn day, History is inscribing on its tablets the definitive triumph of ideas of enlightenment and progress over the powers of darkness and violence.

² The Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) financed the building of the “Palace of Peace” (which now houses the International Court of Justice) in The Hague. There was no conference there in 1909—it was not officially inaugurated until 1913—so the one described in the story is purely symbolic. The second Hague Peace Conference of 1907 had produced a number of conventions relating to the arbitration of national disputes and rules of war relating to bombardment, the laying of mines, etc., many of which were violated during the war of 1914-18. Chemical and biological warfare were not fully incorporated into the network of conventions until the Geneva Protocol of 1925.

From now on, no more wars, no more conquests, no more peoples trampled, right coming before might—or, rather, might respectfully bowing down before right. Humanity can breathe freely. No more armed conflicts between peoples, between brothers gone astray. Obligatory arbitration! It is agreed by a solemn convention concluded between all the government that all differences—if any can still emerge—will be submitted to obligatory arbitration.

Fortunate twentieth century, destined to profit from the harsh experience of those preceding it!

Everything is settled. It is signed. General congratulations in all languages; the members of the Congress throw themselves into one another's arms and embrace—and in the benches to which a select public has just been admitted, people are weeping with joy.

After the session, the most notable personalities of the Congress, philosophers and scientists, jurists and diplomats, remain to chat in the great Salon of the Presidency. One sees them separating, carrying away the joyful certainty of having opened for the world a marvelous era of fecund and civilizing peace.

Bless you, Torches of Progress, luminaries of Science—you who have prepared the way for the universal embrace!

Everyone is talking at the same time; only one of the Congress members—a tall, thin man, stiff and bald—is saying nothing, contenting himself with twisting his russet beard. A philosopher with long white hair, greatly moved by the splendid perspectives opening on such a rose-tinted future, almost falls into his arms, while wiping away gentle tears.

“Well, dear colleague in pacifist philosophy, it is to Science that humanity will owe this happiness, to the peaceful conquests of Science, to its discoveries, its triumphs over matter! At the closing banquet of the Congress we shall drink to Science, queen of the world, to past discoveries, to those that tomorrow is preparing, and will give to us, to the sublime discoveries that human genius is multiplying every day!”

“Hurrah for Science!” says the colleague. “Look, my good sir, in the matter of discoveries, I have here, in my pocket, a design for a new engine—marvelous, I guarantee! Admirable, this engine, I tell you in confidence, for a submarine! Oh, Monsieur, the submarine—what a magnificent agent of progress! This engine would also suit the airplane, the superb bird that suppresses all frontiers and brings people together. I have one of those too, on this piece of paper—a new model of aircraft, larger—armored, even...this model has all the necessary qualities for great voyages: rapidity, power, and the possibility of carrying a considerable load! A precious machine, sir, if one wanted to bombard a city or a fortress...I'm joking, naturally; my aircraft will never carry anything but married couples on their honeymoon...”

“It's like these little designs for an improved torpedo. Admire the ingenuity of a discovery completely useless henceforth! I'm keeping it as a curiosity... Oh, this...this is something else—a sketch for an asphyxiating shell. Bizarre, isn't it? But interesting, as an idea? It's beautiful, science, even applied to the search for such useless things. I also have a little plan for an improved zeppelin, a marvel that I've concocted to amuse myself...it would be very nice to realize it and very useful for peaceful voyages around the world...for the benefit of people who are afraid of sea-sickness...”

“These little sketches are for research of another kind. This one is a portable gas apparatus for use in campaigns, and this one is for diffusing toxic vapors...original ideas! That reminds me that in my moments of leisure, I've succeeded in isolating the most dangerous microbes at the maximum of virulence...and notice, sir, that it would be sufficient to drop one little bomb—a bombette—furnished with those tiny creatures on a city to cause a serious epidemic. It's very curious...it's certain that our ignorant and barbaric ancestors would never have dreamed of that...”

“And I still have a number of other pretty little inventions, thoroughly studied and carefully put aside, for the love of science...”

The diplomats of the Congress had formed a circle; they were listening, very interested by all the ingenious things of which use would obviously never be made.

“Who is that gentleman, then? Remind me of his name, I beg you,” one of his colleagues asked the slightly alarmed pacifist philosopher.

“You don't know him? It's the great engineer Satanás, a worldwide celebrity, who dearly wants to put all his science and all his genius at the service of our ideas, for the peace and happiness of humankind.”

“Admirable!”

The great engineer Satanus, who was following them with his gaze, was still twisting his beard and smiling at them amicably while giving a few explanations to the interested diplomats.

But we know him, that engineer of genius. He is not the alchemist with the face of a Medieval sorcerer, he is the famous scientist, very modern and so well known, illustrious and celebrated: engineer, inventor, constructor, chemist, physicist, Nobel prize laureate, member of all the Instituts, correspondent of all the Academies of Science in the world...it's curious, however, how much he resembles the monk Schwartz, of Freiburg im Brisgau!