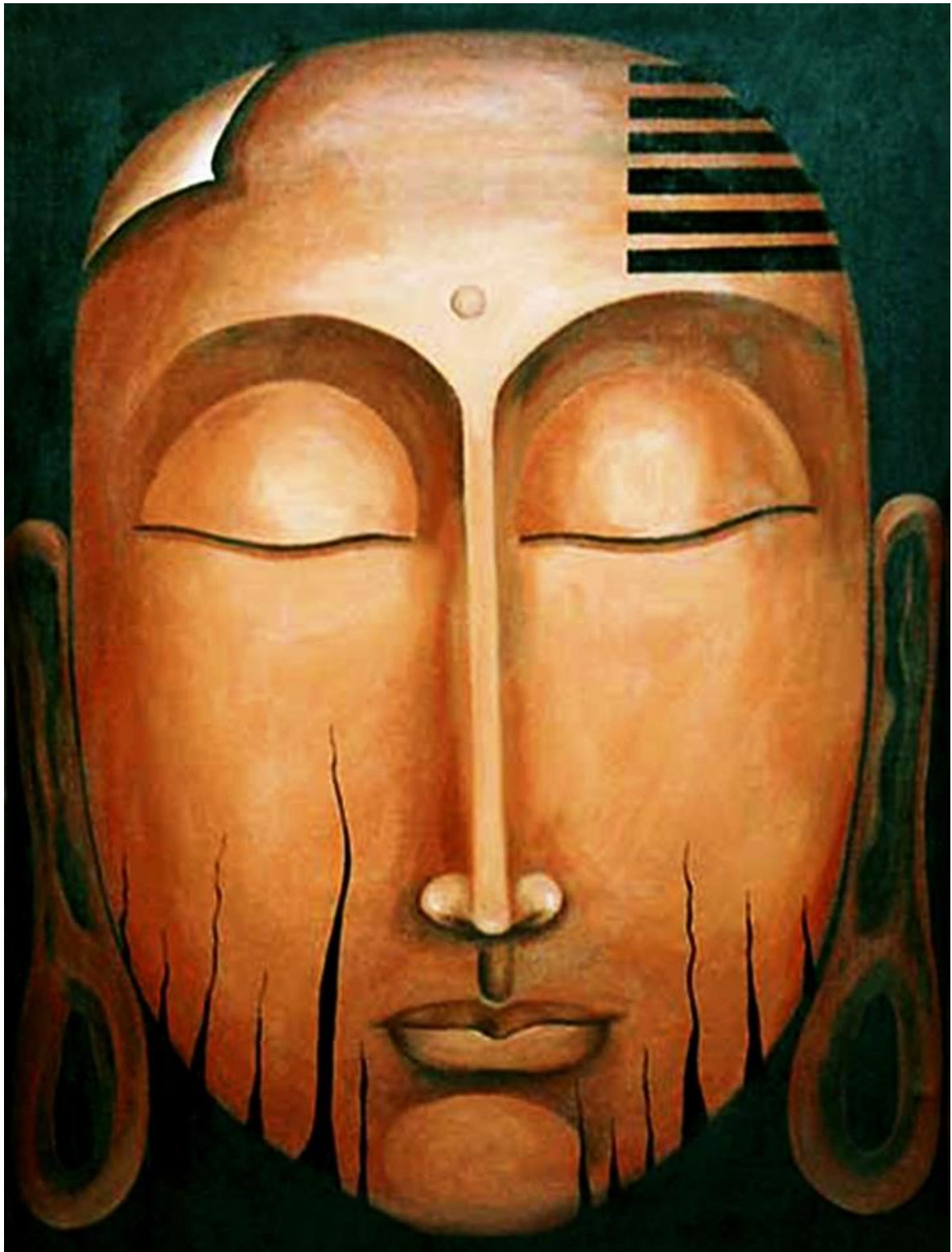


# *The Silent Brother*



By Count E \* \* \* A \* \* \* , F.T.S.<sup>1</sup> First published in: *The Theosophist*, Vol. I, Nos. 7 and 8, April–May 1880, pp. 166-68 & 200-1. Republished in: *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THE SILENT BROTHER) II pp. 366-77. Frontispiece by Fei Alexander.

[The authorship of this remarkable story is uncertain, but it bears a great similarity to other stories written by H.P. Blavatsky in collaboration with the Adept known as Hillarion Smerdis, such as, for instance. “The Ensouled Violin,”<sup>2</sup> or “An Unsolved Mystery.”

The initials E.A. could very easily stand for Endreinek Agardi, a pupil of Master M., and an F.T.S., on the strength of Blavatsky’s own explanation. See in this connection the Compiler’s Notes at the end of the story, “An Unsolved Mystery,” in Volume I of the present Series. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

**T**HE STRANGE STORY I AM ABOUT TO SAY was given to me by one of its principal heroes. Its authenticity cannot be doubted, however sceptical one may feel as to the details of the narrative — and this for three good reasons:

- (a) the circumstances are well known at Palermo, and the incidents still remembered by a few of the oldest inhabitants;
- (b) the shock produced by the dreadful occurrence on the narrator was so violent as to turn his hair — the hair of a young man of 26 — as white as snow in one night, and make him a raving lunatic for the next six months;
- (c) there is an official record of the death-bed confession of the criminal, and it can be found in the family chronicles of the Prince di R \* \* \* V \* \* \* . For myself at least, no doubt remains as to the veracity of the story.

Glaüerbach was a passionate lover of the occult sciences. For a time, his only object was to become a pupil of the famous Cagliostro, then living at Paris, where he attracted universal attention; but the mysterious Count from the first refused to have anything to do with him. Why he declined to accept as pupil a young man of a good family and very intelligent, was a secret which Glaüerbach — the narrator of the tale — could never penetrate. Suffice it to say that all he could prevail upon the “Grand Copt” to do for him, was to teach him in a certain degree how to learn the secret thoughts of the persons he associated with, by making them speak such thoughts audibly without knowing that their lips were uttering any sound. And even this comparatively easy magnetic phase of occult science he could not master practically.

In those days, Cagliostro and his mysterious powers were on all tongues. Paris was in a state of high fever about him. At Court, in society, in the Parliament, in the Academy, they spoke but of Cagliostro. The most extraordinary stories were told of him, and the more they were extraordinary the more willingly people believed them. They said that Cagliostro had shown pictures of future events in his magic mirrors to some of the most illustrious statesmen of France, and that these events had all come

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<sup>1</sup> [Fellow of the Theosophical Society]

<sup>2</sup> [See Philaletheians ed. in the same series.]

to pass. The king and the royal family had been of the number of those who were allowed to peer into the unknown. The “magician” had evoked the shades of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, of Mohammed and Nero. Ghengis Khan and Charles the Fifth had held a *conversazione* with the minister of the police; and an outwardly pious, but secretly sceptical Christian Archbishop having shown a desire to have his doubts cleared, one of the gods was summoned — but did not come, for he had never existed in flesh. Marmontel having expressed the desire to meet Belisarius, he, upon seeing the great warrior emerging from the ground, fell senseless.<sup>1</sup> Young, daring and passionate Glaüerbach, feeling that Cagliostro would never share with him more than a few crumbs of his great learning, turned in another direction, and at last found an unfrocked abbot, who for a consideration took upon himself to teach him all he knew. In a few months (?) he had learned the weird secrets of black and white magic, *i.e.*, the art of cleverly bamboozling fools. He also visited Mesmer and his clairvoyants, whose number had become very large at that period. The ill-fated French society of 1785 felt its doom approaching; it suffered from spleen and greedily seized upon anything that brought it a change in its killing satiety and lethargic monotony. It had become so sceptical that, at last, from believing in nothing, it ended by believing anything. Glaüerbach, under the experienced direction of his abbot, began practicing upon human credulity. But he had not been more than eight months at Paris, when the police paternally advised him to go abroad — for his health. There was no appeal from such advice. However convenient the capital of France for old hands at charlatanry, it is less so for beginners. He left Paris and went, via Marseilles, to Palermo.

In that city the intelligent pupil of the abbot got acquainted with, and contracted a friendship with Marquis Hector, youngest son of the Prince R \* \* \* V \* \* \* , one of the most wealthy and noble families of Sicily. Three years earlier, a great calamity had befallen that house. Hector’s eldest brother, Duke Alfonso, had disappeared without leaving any clue; and the old prince, half-killed with despair, had left the world for the retirement of his magnificent villa in the suburbs of Palermo, where he led the life of a recluse.

The young Marquis was dying with *ennui*. Not knowing what better to do with himself, under the directions of Glaüerbach he began studying magic, or at least, that which passed under that name with the clever German. The professor and pupil became inseparable.

As Hector was the Prince’s second son, he had, during the life of his elder brother, no choice left him, but to join either the army or the church. All the wealth of the family passed into the hands of the Duke Alfonso R \* \* \* V \* \* \* , who was betrothed, moreover, to Bianca Alfieri, a rich orphan, left, at the age of ten, heiress to an immense fortune. This marriage united the wealth of both the houses of R \* \* \* V \* \* \* and Alfieri, and it had all been settled when both Alfonso and Bianca were mere children, without even a thought as to whether they would ever come to like each other. Fate, however, decided it should be so, and the young people formed a mutual and passionate attachment.

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<sup>1</sup> [Reference is here to Jean François Marmontel (1723–99), French writer, historiographer of France and secretary to the Academy. He published in 1767 a romance, *Bélisaire*, which incurred the censure of the Sorbonne and the archbishop of Pads for a chapter on religious toleration. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

As Alfonso was too young to be married, he was sent travelling, and remained absent for over four years. Upon his return, preparations were being made for the celebration of the nuptials, which the old Prince had decided should form one of the future *épopées*<sup>1</sup> of Sicily. They were planned upon the most magnificent scale. The wealthiest and noblest of the land had assembled two months beforehand and were being royally entertained in the family mansion, which occupied a whole square of the old city, as all were more or less related to either the R \* \* \* V \* \* \* or the Alfieri families in the second, fourth, twentieth or sixtieth degree. A host of hungry poets and *improvisatori* had arrived, uninvited, to sing, according to the local custom of those days, the beauty and virtues of the newly-married couple. Livorno sent a ship-load of sonnets, and Rome the Pope's blessing. Crowds of people curious to witness the procession had come to Palermo from afar; and whole regiments of the light-fingered gentry prepared to practice their profession at the first opportunity.

The marriage ceremony had been fixed for a Wednesday. On Tuesday the bridegroom disappeared without leaving the slightest trace. The police of the whole land was set afoot. Uselessly, alas! Alfonso had for several days been going from town to Monte Cavalli — a lovely villa of his — to superintend in person the preparations for the reception of his lovely bride, with whom he was to pass his honey-moon in that charming village. On Tuesday evening he had repaired there alone and on horseback as usual, to return home early on the following morning. About ten in the evening two *contadini*<sup>2</sup> had met and saluted him. That was the last any one saw of the young Duke.

Later, it was ascertained that on that night a pirate vessel had been cruising in the waters of Palermo; that the corsairs had been ashore, and carried away several Sicilian women. In the latter part of the last century, Sicilian ladies were considered as very valuable goods: there was a large demand for the commodity in the markets of Smyrna, Constantinople, and the Barbary Coast; the rich pashas paying for them enormous sums. Besides pretty Sicilian women, the pirates used to smuggle away rich people for the sake of the ransom. The poor men, when caught, shared the fate of the working-cattle, and fed on flogging. Everyone at Palermo firmly believed that young Alfonso had been carried away by the pirates; and it was far from being improbable. The High Admiral of the Sicilian navy immediately dispatched after the pirates four swift vessels, renowned above all others for their speed. The old Prince promised mountains of gold to him who would give him back his son and heir. The little squadron being ready, it spread its sails and disappeared on the horizon. On one of the vessels was Hector R \* \* \* V \* \* \* .

At nightfall, the watchers on the deck had as yet seen nothing. Then the breeze freshened, and about midnight it was blowing a hurricane. One of the vessels returned to port immediately, the two others were driven away before the gale and were never heard of more, and the one, on which was young Hector, returned two days after, dismantled and a wreck, to Trapani.

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<sup>1</sup> [Epic poetry-making, reciting, etc.; French word from Ancient Greek *εποποιία*.]

<sup>2</sup> [Italian farmers]

The night before, the watchers, in one of the beacon towers along the shore, saw a brig far off, which, without mast, sails or flag, was being furiously carried along on the crest of the angry sea. They concluded it must be the pirates' brig. It went down in full sight, and the report spread that every soul on board, to the very last man, had perished.

Notwithstanding all this, emissaries were sent by the old Prince in every direction — to Algiers, Tunis, Morocco, Tripoli, and Constantinople. But they found nothing; and when Glaüerbach arrived at Palermo, three years had passed since the event.

The Prince, though having lost a son, did not relish the idea of losing the wealth of the Alfieris in the bargain. He concluded to marry Bianca to his second son, Hector. But the fair Bianca wept, and would not be consoled. She refused point-blank, and declared she would remain faithful to her Alfonso.

Hector behaved like a true knight. "Why make poor Bianca still more miserable, by worrying her with prayers? Perhaps my brother is yet alive" — he said. "How could I, then, in view of such an uncertainty, deprive Alfonso, in case he should return, of his best treasure, and the one dearer to him than life itself!"

Touched with the exhibition of such noble feelings, Bianca began to relax her indifference for her Alfonso's brother. The old man did not lose all hopes. Besides, Bianca was a woman; and with women in Sicily, as elsewhere, the absent are always in the wrong. She finally promised, if she should ever have a positive assurance of Alfonso's death, to marry his brother, or — no one. Such was the state of affairs when Glaüerbach — he who boasted of the power of raising the shadows of the dead — appeared at the princely and now mournful and deserted country villa of the R \* \* \* V \* \* \* . He had not been there a fortnight before he captivated the affections and admirations of everyone. The mysterious and the occult, and especially dealings with a world unknown, the "silent land," have a charm for everyone in general and for the afflicted especially. The old Prince took courage one day and asked the crafty German to solve their cruel doubts. Was Alfonso dead or alive? That *was* the question. Taking a few minutes to reflect, Glaüerbach answered in this wise: — "Prince, what you ask me to do for you is very important . . . Yes, it is quite true. If your unfortunate son is no more, I may be enabled to call forth his shadow; but will not the shock be too violent for you? Will your son and your pupil — the charming Countess Bianca — consent to it?"

"Anything rather than cruel uncertainty," the old Prince answered. And so the evocation was decided upon, to take place a week from that day. When Bianca heard of it, she fainted. Recalled to her senses by an abundance of restoratives, curiosity got the better of her scruples. She was a daughter of Eve, as women all are. Hector began by setting himself with all his might against what he regarded as a sacrilege. He did not wish to trouble the rest of the dear departed; he at first said, if his beloved brother was really dead, he preferred not to know it. But at last his growing love for Bianca and the desire to satisfy his father prevailed, and he too consented.

The week demanded by Glaüerbach for preparation and purification, seemed a century to the impatience of all three. Had it been a day longer, they must have all gone mad. Meanwhile, the necromancer had not been losing his time. Suspecting that the

demand in this direction would come one day, he had from the first quietly gathered the minutest particulars about the deceased Alfonso, and most carefully studied his life-size portrait which hung in the old Prince's bedroom. This was enough for his purpose. To add to the solemnity, he had enjoined upon the family a strict fast and prayers, day and night, during the whole week. At last the longed-for hour arrived, and the Prince, accompanied by his son and Bianca, entered the necromancer's apartment. Glaüerbach was pale and solemn, but composed. Bianca trembled from head to foot and kept her bottle of aromatic salts in constant use. The Prince and Hector looked like two criminals led to execution. The large room was lighted by only a single lamp, and even this dim light was suddenly extinguished. Amid the thick darkness, the lugubrious voice of the conjuror was heard to pronounce a short cabalistic formula in Latin, and finally, to command the shadow of Alfonso to appear — if it was, indeed, in the land of the shadows.

Suddenly the darkness of the furthest recess in the room became illuminated with a feeble bluish light, which, by slow degrees, brought before the sight of the audience a large magic mirror, which seemed to be covered with a thick mist. In its turn, this mist was gradually dissipated, and finally, the prostrate form of a man appeared to the eyes of those present. It was Alfonso! His body had on the identical dress he wore on the evening of his disappearance; heavy chains clasped his hands, and he lay dead on the sea-shore. Water dripped from his long hair and blood-stained and torn clothes; then a huge wave crept on and, engulfing him, all suddenly disappeared.

A dead silence had reigned during the whole progress of this fearful vision. The persons present trembling violently tried to keep their breath; then all relapsed into darkness, and Bianca, uttering a feeble moan, fell senseless into the arms of her guardian.

The shock had proved too much. The young girl had a brain fever which held her between life and death for weeks. The Prince felt little better; and Hector never left his room for a fortnight. No more doubts — Alfonso was dead, he was drowned. The walls of the palace were hung with black cloth, strewn all over with silver tears. For three days, the bells of many churches at Palermo tolled for the unfortunate victim of the pirates and the sea. The inside of the great cathedral was also draped from floor to dome in black velvet. Two thousand and five-hundred gigantic tapers flickered around the catafalque; and Cardinal Ottoboni, assisted by five bishops, daily performed the service for the dead for six long weeks. Four thousand ducats were distributed in charity to the poor at the portal of the cathedral, and Glaüerbach, clad in a sable mantle like one of the family, represented its absent members, during the funeral obsequies. His eyes were red, and when he covered them with his scented pocket-handkerchief, those near him heard his convulsive sobs. Never had a sacrilegious comedy been better performed.

Soon after, a magnificent monument of pure Carrara marble, sculptured with two allegorical figures, was raised in Alfonso's memory in St. Rosalia's church. On the sarcophagus grandiloquent inscriptions in Greek and Latin were cut by order of the old Prince.

Three months later, the news spread that Bianca was wedded to Hector. Glaüerbach, who had meanwhile gone to travel all over Italy, returned to Monte Cavalli on the eve of the marriage. He exhibited his wonderful necromantic powers elsewhere, and had the “holy” Inquisition upon his heels. He felt full security only in the bosom of the family which adored and looked upon him as a demi-god.

On the following morn, the numerous guests proceeded to the chapel, which was resplendent with gold and silver and decorated as for a royal wedding. How happy looked the bridegroom! How lovely the bride! The old Prince wept for joy, and Glaüerbach had the honour of being Hector’s best man.

In the garden were spread enormous banquet tables at which were entertained the vassals of both the families. The feasts of Gargantua were less rich than such a festival. Fifty fountains spouted wine instead of water; but towards sunset, no one could drink any more, for unfortunately — for some people — human thirst is not infinite. Roasted pheasants and partridges were thrown by the dozens to the neighbouring dogs, which they too left untouched, for even they were gorged to the throat.

Suddenly, among the gay and showy crowd, there appeared a new guest, who attracted general attention. It was a man, thin as a skeleton, very tall, and clad in the dress of the penitent monks or “Silent Brothers,” as they are popularly called. This dress consists of a long, flowing, grey, woollen garment, girded with a rope at the two ends of which hang human bones, and a pointed hood which entirely covers the face, except two holes for the eyes. Among many orders of penitent monks in Italy — the black, grey, red, and white penitents — none inspire such an instinctive terror as these. Besides, no one has the right to address a penitent brother, while his hood is pulled down over his face; the penitent has not only the full right but the obligation to remain unknown to all.

Thus, this mysterious brother, who so unexpectedly appeared at the wedding feast, was addressed by none, though he seemed to follow the newly-married couple, as if he were their shadow. Both Hector and Bianca shuddered every time they turned to look at him.

The sun was setting, and the old Prince, accompanied by his children, was for the last time going the round of the banquet tables in the gardens. Stopping at one of these, he took a goblet of wine and exclaimed: “My friends, let us drink to the health of Hector and his wife Bianca!” But, at this very moment, someone seized his arm and stopped it. It was the grey-frocked “Silent Brother.” Quietly emerging from the crowd, he had approached the table and also taken up a goblet.

“And is there no one, old man, besides Hector and Bianca whose health thou couldst propose?” — he asked in deep, guttural tones — “Where is thy son Alfonso?”

“Knowest thou not he is dead?” — sadly answered the Prince.

“Yes! . . . dead — dead!” echoed the penitent. “But were he only to hear again the voice he heard at the moment of his cruel death, methinks he might respond . . . aye . . . from his very grave . . . Old man, summon here thy son Hector! . . .”

“Good God! What do you . . . what *can* you mean!” be more easily imagined than described. In one moment — exclaimed the Prince, pallid with unnameable terror.

Bianca was ready to faint. Hector, more livid than his father, was hardly standing on his legs, and would have fallen, had not Glaüerbach supported him.

“To the memory of Alfonso!” slowly pronounced the same lugubrious voice. — “Let everyone repeat the words after me! Hector, Duke of R \* \* \* V \* \* \* . . . I invite you to pronounce them! . . .”

Hector made a violent effort and, wiping his trembling lips, tried to open them. But his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth and he failed to utter a sound. Every eye was riveted upon the young man. He was pallid as death and his mouth foamed. At last, after a superhuman struggle with his weakness, he stammered out, “To the memory of Alfonso! . . .”

“*The voice of my mur-de-rer!* . . . ,” ejaculated the penitent in a deep but distinct tone.

With these words, throwing back his hood, he tore open his robe, and before the sight of the horrified guests there appeared the *dead* form of Alfonso, with four deep gaping wounds on his breast, from which trickled four streams of blood!

The cries of terror and the fright of the spectators can be more easily imagined than described. In one moment the garden became empty; the whole crowd the garden became empty; the whole crowd upsetting the tables and flying as if for life . . . But, more strange than all, was the fact that it was Glaüerbach who, notwithstanding his intimate acquaintance with the dead, was the most panic-stricken. Upon seeing a real ghost, the necromancer, who had raised the dead at will, hearing him talk as would a living being, fell senseless upon a bed of flowers, and was picked up, late that night, a stark lunatic, which he remained for months.

It was only half a year later that he learned what had taken place after the terrific arraignment. After uttering it, the penitent disappeared from the eyes of all, and Hector was carried into his room in violent convulsions, where, an hour later, after summoning his confessor to his bedside, he made him write down his deposition, and after signing it, drank, before he could be stopped, the poisonous contents of a hollow seal-ring, and expired almost immediately. The old Prince followed him to the grave a fortnight later, leaving all his fortune to Bianca. But the unfortunate girl, whose early life had been doomed to two such tragedies, sought refuge in a convent, and her immense wealth passed into the hands of the Jesuits. Guided by a dream, she had selected a distant and unfrequented corner in the large garden of Monte Cavalli, as the site for a magnificent chapel, which she had erected as an expiatory monument of the fearful crime which put an end to the ancient family of the Princes of R \* \* \* V \* \* \* . While digging the foundations, the workmen discovered an old dry well, and in it, the skeleton of Alfonso, with four stabs in his half-decayed breast, and the wedding ring of Bianca upon his finger.

Such a scene as the one on the wedding-day, is sufficient to shake the most hardened scepticist. Upon recovering, Glaüerbach left Italy forever, and returned to Vienna, where none of his friends was at first able to recognize the young man of hardly twenty-six in his old decrepit form with his hair as white as snow. He renounced the evocation of spirits and charlatanry forever, but became from that time a firm believer in the survival of the human soul and in its occult powers. He died in 1841, an



honest and reformed man, scarcely opening his mouth upon this weird history. It was but during the last years of his life that a certain person, who won his full confidence through a service he was enabled to render him, learned from him the details of the mock vision and the real tragedy of the family of the R \* \* \* V \* \* \* .<sup>1</sup>



Stroll in Palermo by Franz Ludwig Catel<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> *Blavatsky Collected Writings, (THE SILENT BROTHER) II pp. 366-77*

<sup>2</sup> The original oil on canvas of 1846 has a group of figures consisting of a person in a sedan chair accompanied by riders and progressing along the coastal road in Palermo, with Mount Pellegrino in the background. The persons depicted are Tsarina Alexandra Fiodorovna in the sedan chair, accompanied by Grand Duchess Olga Nikolayevna and her fiancé Crown Prince Charles of Württemberg on horse behind her, and Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich on horse at right.

The work was painted in the year when the Tsarina sojourned in Palermo in order to undergo treatment for her illness. Alexandra Fiodorovna travelled to Palermo in October 1845 together with her husband, Tsar Nicholas I, and her daughter, Grand Duchess Olga Nikolayevna.

Whilst the Tsar left Palermo again in December to travel to Naples and Rome, the Tsarina and Grand Duchess remained in Sicily. Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich joined them on the island in December 1845 and Olga's future husband, Crown Prince Charles of Württemberg, in January 1846. Olga's engagement to Crown Prince Charles of Württemberg, announced on 6 January 1846, may have been the reason for the commissioning of this painting.

Once the completed painting had been sent to St Petersburg it was presented as a gift from the Tsar to Alexandra Fiodorovna who had returned to Russia at the end of March 1846. The painting became part of her private collection and was displayed in the Alexander Palace in Tsarskoe Selo together with other paintings by Catel. It remained there until her death in 1860. From <http://eng.tzar.ru/info/info-events/title/?id=3019>