Fritz’s Story

I wonder if any of you remember the extraordinary business at the palace a few years ago? They tried to hush it up, but some details came out, and a bizarre mystery it was, too. It seems that Prince Otto had taken his young son Florian hunting, together with an old friend of the royal family, Baron Stelgratz. It was the dead of winter—just like now. They’d set off in a sledge for the hunting lodge up in the mountains, well wrapped up against the cold, and they weren’t expected back for a week or so.

‘Well, what should happen but that only two nights later, the sentry on duty at the palace gate saw a commotion down the road, and heard the whinnying of horses—whinnying in panic—making a terrible racket; and it looked, though he couldn’t be sure, as if a sledge was being driven towards the palace by a madman.

‘The sentry raised the alarm, and called for lights, and when the sledge got close enough, they could see that it was the royal sledge, the very one the prince had set off in only two nights before. It was hurtling up the road behind those terrified horses, and it wasn’t going to stop; and the sergeant of the guard gave orders to drag the palace gates open quickly before it crashed.
They got them open just in time. The sledge rushed through, and then drove round and round the courtyard, for the horses were mad with fear and couldn’t stop. The poor beasts were covered with foam and their eyes were rolling, and the sledge would be going round that courtyard still if one of the runners hadn’t caught on a mounting block and turned the whole thing over.

Out fell the driver, and out fell a bundle from the back of the sledge. A servant hastened to pick it up, and found little Prince Florian wrapped in a fur rug, safe and warm and half asleep.

But as for the driver . . .

Well, as soon as the sentries came close, they saw who it was. It was none other than Prince Otto himself, stark dead, as cold as ice, with his eyes wide and staring ahead of him, his left hand gripping the reins so tight they had to be cut loose, and (this was the strangest part) his right hand still moving, lashing the whip up and down, up and down, up and down.

They covered him up so the princess wouldn’t see him, and took little Prince Florian to her to prove he was alive and well, because he was their only child.

But what was to be done with Prince Otto? They
took his body into the palace and sent for the Royal Physician, a worthy old man who'd studied in Heidelberg and Paris and Bologna, and who'd published a treatise on the location of the soul; he'd studied geology, and hydrology, and physiology, but he'd never seen anything like this before. A dead body that wouldn't keep still! Imagine that! Stretched out icy-cold on a marble slab, with its right arm lashing and lashing and lashing with no sign that it was ever going to stop.

'The physician locked the door to keep the servants out, and brought the lamp closer, and bent low to look, and then his eye was caught by something in the clumsy arrangement of the clothes. So, avoiding that lashing right arm, he carefully unfastened the cloak and the fur coat and the under-jacket and the shirt, and laid the prince's chest bare.
‘And there it was: a gash across his breast just over the heart, crudely sewn up with a dozen stitches. The physician got his scissors and snipped them away, and then he nearly fainted with surprise, because when he opened the wound, there was no heart there. Instead, there was a little piece of clockwork: just a few cogs and springs and a balance wheel, attached in subtle ways to the prince’s veins and tick-tick-ticking away merrily, in perfect time with the lashing of his arm.

‘Well, you can imagine how the physician crossed himself and took a sip of brandy to calm his nerves. Who wouldn’t? Then he carefully cut the attachments and lifted out the clockwork, and as he did so, the arm fell still, just like that.’

As he got to that point in his story, Fritz paused for a sip of beer, and to see how his audience was taking it. The silence in the inn was profound. Every single customer was sitting so still they might have been dead themselves, except for their wide eyes and expressions of tense excitement. He had never had such a success!

He turned the page and read on:
Fritz’s Story (continued)

‘Well, the physician sewed up Prince Otto’s wound, and let it be known that the prince had died of apoplexy. The servants who’d carried the body in thought differently; they knew a dead man when they saw one, even if his arm was moving; at any rate, the official version was that Prince Otto had suffered a contusion of the brain, and that his love for his son had kept him alive just long enough to drive him safely home. He was buried with a good deal of ceremony, and everyone was in mourning for six months.

‘As for what had happened to Baron Stelgratz, the other member of the hunting party, no-one could guess. The whole affair was shrouded in mystery.

‘But the Royal Physician had an idea. There was one man who might be able to explain what had happened, and that was the great Dr Kalmenius of Schatzberg, of whom very few people had heard; but those who did know of him said he was the cleverest man in Europe. For making clockwork, he had no equal, not even our good Herr Ringelmann. He could make intricate pieces of calculating apparatus that worked out the positions of all the
stars and the planets, and answer any mathematical question.

‘Dr Kalsenius could have made his fortune if he’d wanted to, but he wasn’t interested in fortune or in fame. He was interested in something far deeper than that. He would spend hours sitting in graveyards, contemplating the mysteries of life and death. Some said he experimented on dead bodies. Others said he was in league with the powers of darkness. No-one knew for certain. But one thing they did know was that he used to walk about at night, pulling behind him a little sledge containing whatever secret matter he was working on at the time.

‘What did he look like, this philosopher of the night? He was very tall and thin, with a prominent nose and jaw. His eyes blazed like coals in caverns of darkness. His hair was long and grey, and he wore a black cloak with a loose hood like that of a monk; he had a harsh grating voice, and his expression was full of savage curiosity.

‘And that was the man who—’

Fritz stopped.

He swallowed, and his eyes moved to the door. Everyone followed his gaze. The parlour had never
There was something uncanny about Dr Kalmenius’s clockwork. He made little figures that sang and spoke and played chess, and shot tiny arrows from tiny bows, and played the harpsichord as well as Mozart. You can see some of his clockwork figures today in the museum at Schatzberg, but they don’t work any more. It’s odd, because all the parts are in place, and in perfect order, and they should work; but they don’t. It’s almost as if they had... died.

been so still. No-one moved, no-one dared to breathe, for the latch was lifting.
The door slowly opened.