IMMORTAL

 Tristen Cole was an art historian and professor at the St. George campus of the University of Toronto -- one of the world's top educational institutions in the Arts & Humanities. Tristen was forty-eight, and had two grown children with his wife, Gina, a Provincial attorney for the Canadian government.

 Cole had been granted a two-week sabbatical to visit specific art museums in England, the Netherlands, and Italy. His purpose was to document precisely which famous paintings had covert inclusions of their creator. (This could only be done with any certainty, of course, if the artist did a self-portrait sometime during his career.) Tristen would focus on artworks featuring large crowds, then look for the face or entire person of the artist himself cleverly included somewhere in the scene. He brought his iPad and a magnifying glass with him, to personally examine up-close and then photograph each painting he would be investigating -- something that could not done with any accuracy simply on-line.

 Tristen would be analyzing almost one-hundred artworks during his European sojourn. He was provided special access to the selected museums both before and after the regular opening and closing hours by their Directors, so as not to be disturbed by the usual milling general public. Cole was also allowed private admittance on the one day per week that the museums were closed to the public.

 Over the course of a dozen days, however, Tristen noticed something very peculiar.

 In five well-known paintings -- all created in different styles and during different eras -- he noticed a man with short brown hair and brown eyes included somewhere in the crowd scenes.

 Incredibly, the person appeared to be exactly the same man.

 And even if other men in the crowd painting had beards or mustaches, this particular man was always clean shaven. Plus, he always appeared to remain the same age -- perhaps in his early 30s. Even dressed in the typical clothing of each time period, the man was unmistakable. This was because of a definitive facial feature -- a darker patch of skin on the bridge of his nose between his eyes, about the size of the fingernail on one's pinkie finger if the portrait was life-sized. This rare identifier could thus be noticed regardless of whether the man was in left, right, or center painted profile. Maybe it was some kind of birthmark? Tristen surmised.

 Mystified, Cole took several close-up photos with his iPad of the man for comparison, to be analyzed by experts once he returned to Toronto.

 The image of the mysterious man was carefully captured by the professor in the following paintings:

 "The Night Watch" by Rembrandt (1642), at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam;

 "School of Athens" by Raphael (1510), at the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City (This was one of the several paintings examined during his tri-country quest to actually include its artist -- in this case, Raphael.);

 "Adoration of the Magi" by Fabriano (1423), at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence;

 "Coronation of Napoleon" by Jacques Louis David (1807), at the Louvre in Paris;

 and, "La Moulin de la Galette" by Renoir (1876), at the Musee d'Orsey, also in Paris.

 Using computer enhancements and other sophisticated graphic tools once back at the St. George campus -- with some volunteer assistance from the Art Department and a few eager graduate students -- Tristen Cole was amazed at the results of his analysis:

 It really was the exact same man in each of the five paintings. If painted in full upright position, he was found to be of average height and build. Matching facial images of the man featured his short brown hair and brown eyes. And the distinctive darker dermal patch on the bridge of his nose was clearly noted.

 Cole's wife, Gina, next came up with a suggestion over their rib roast dinner, when he shared the results of his research.

 "I remember reading once about a mysterious stranger named the Count of St. Germain. He appeared among the European Royal Houses throughout the mid-to-late 1700s. He was fluent in a dozen languages, and was said to be a genius in science, philosophy, mysticism, and the arts. He could expertly play several musical instruments. He also claimed to being immortal through the use of a secret alchemical elixir, and he never appeared to age -- as witnessed by those who claimed to have known him, even with decades of time elapsed between sightings. In his far-flung travels, he used several different aliases to confuse those who tried to ascertain his lineage and/or track his whereabouts. He supposedly showed up, then vanished again, on and off, over the span of earlier and subsequent centuries. Some claim he is still alive somewhere, even today. Maybe your mysterious personage has some tie-in with this remarkable Count?" she wondered.

 During his next period of free time, Tristen jumped onto the internet and read as much as he could about the astonishing Count of St. Germain. The mysterious man obviously had a fine education in his youth and a lasting source of enviable wealth. He had been seen in St. Petersburg, Berlin, Vienna, Milan, Amsterdam, Venice, Livorno, Paris, The Hague, and elsewhere. Even Voltaire remarked, "He is a man who does not die, and who knows everything." Casanova, who meet him while visiting the French King Louis XV, once remarked, "...as a conversationalist, he (The Count) was unequaled." The King sent The Count on diplomatic missions, and gifted him a suite of rooms at Chambord, along with a stipend of 100,000 Francs, to build a laboratory for The Count to conduct scientific experiments. Some -- naturally jealous of his talents and influence -- claimed that St. Germain was no more than a clever charlatan. Some reported that he died in Germany in 1784 at the age of 93, while others claimed to have noticed him or made his acquaintance decades or even centuries later.

 Next, Cole researched a mythical, so-called immortal man dubbed The Wandering Jew. This legend spread throughout Europe in the 13th Century. The man was supposedly a Jew who taunted Christ (some say even struck The Lord on his cheek) on the way to His crucifixion, and was then cursed to walk the Earth, alone and unloved, until the Second Coming. His actual name was given many versions, depending on which country is telling the legend, but he is most commonly known as Ahasver. Many paintings, plays, poems, songs, and books have used the Wandering Jew tale as a theme, even up until today. The man is said to revert to becoming thirty years of age every one-hundred years, and makes his living as a itinerant cobbler or shoemaker.

 Both of these theories certainly intrigued Tristen Cole, but he needed more proof of someone possibly showing any evidence of immortality. Then he got an idea, and shared it with Gina a week later.

 "I am going to ask some of my art history graduate students to volunteer a few hours per week for extra credit and help me comb through vintage and modern photographs of historic crowd scenes featuring famous people -- let's say, from the 1830s until now. I want to focus initially on Europe rather than other continents, because it was in Europe where I first spotted our mystery man in certain paintings. If we can find at least five or six photos with this exact same person in it, we may be further along in solving this challenging and frankly perplexing puzzle," he announced. Gina said that she, too, would like to help her husband in this quest in her free time, whenever possible.

 Using mostly the microfilm readers at the University Library, as well as photography books and the internet, the task was eagerly undertaken by the research crew. After about five weeks of exhaustive effort -- using the latest enlargement and photo enhancement techniques -- some startling results finally emerged. Seven undeniable instances revealed the return of the strange man with the never-aging face and the telltale dark mark on the bridge of his nose.

 The mystery man -- now dubbed "Mr. X" -- was spotted in the following 'crowd scene' photographs, centering upon well-known people of history:

 Russian Czar Nicholas II, leaving the Assumption Cathedral in Moscow after his coronation (1896);

 Vladimir Lenin arriving at Finland Station in Petrograd (St. Petersburg), Russia, to help lead the Bolshevik Revolution (1917);

 Albert Einstein, addressing an assembly about the dangers of rising European Fascism at the Royal Albert Hall in London (1933);

 Adolf Hitler in an SS Nazi motorcade in Bavaria, Germany (1937);

 Winston Churchill inspecting London bomb damage a German Blitz during World War 2 (1940);

 American President John F. Kennedy speaking in support of West Berliners after the Berlin Wall was erected (1963);

 and, during an assassination attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square, Vatican City (1981).

 There were probably many more sightings of Mr. X in crowd photos beyond the last year covered, but Tristen Cole halted the research at this point. "I'm certain the man is still alive somewhere even today," he announced to his wife and his volunteer graduate students. "And I aim to seek him out once and for all, and solve this beguiling mystery."

 The professor then learned that the world's three best-known American multi-billionaires -- Bill Gates of Microsoft, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, and Elon Musk of Tesla -- were to appear together in a rare public presentation at Carnegie Hall in New York City in two weeks to discuss their latest technological breakthroughs. Could such a tempting trio of personages lure Mr. X out of Europe for a time to attend? Tristen wondered. Tickets were being sold for a hefty $1000 U.S. apiece, however. So Cole discussed the possibility with his wife.

 "Ouch...that's taking an expensive risk, dear," Gina replied. "But we have gone too far down this mysterious road to give up now. I think you must go, Tristen." Reassured, her husband went online and made the commitment -- purchasing his general admission lecture ticket, reserving round-trip seats on Air Canada, and booking a room at the Chelsea Hotel.

 Security was extremely tight as a capacity crowd of 2804 packed into the five-story Stern Auditorium for the big event. Cole could only pray that Mr. X was there, somewhere, with him, and that they could meet and talk!

 Before the guest panel appeared, Tristen left his seat and walked up to the front of the ornate, historic room and stood near the stage. He took out his cell phone and pretended to take a photo, but what he was really doing was scanning the crowd for Mr. X.

 At first, his quest seemed futile...so many people...yet, wait! There, off to the far side, on the left, in an aisle seat, was his prey. It was so eerie to finally see the mystery man alive and in person -- smartly dressed in a charcoal-grey pin-striped suit with a white shirt and navy blue tie -- after all those hours analyzing static paintings and photographs. Tristen's actual seat was on the other side of the auditorium's main floor, but immediately after the event, during the concluding applause, Cole would quickly rush out through Carnegie Hall's main exit doors and, ever-so-carefully, watch and wait.

 The presentation by the three tech-magnates was exciting, but it was difficult for Tristen to concentrate solely on the program. After ninety minutes, however, the show ended, and Cole zipped out before the large crowd started to grab their coats and hats and move to leave.

 It was 8:40 p.m. and already cold as November winds coursed down the towering concrete canyons of the Big Apple. After about ten anxious minutes, Tristen Cole at last found his man in a throng moving his way. Taking a deep breath for courage, he boldly approached Mr. X and spoke in a low voice.

 "Excuse, sir. You don't know me, but I'm certain I know you. I have studied you in old paintings and in old photographs, unchanged across the centuries, like some kind of ancient immortal. How can such a thing be possible?" Cole stared into the deep brown eyes he felt he knew so well, and likewise noticed the dark skin patch on the bridge of the man's nose. Mr. X stared back at Tristen for a few moments, then slightly smiled and spoke.

 "Have you eaten yet? No? May I invite you to dinner at the Russian Tea Room? The food is excellent. It is just down the street," the man replied in a courtly manner, with a faintly Eastern European accent. He adjusted his brown plaid wool scarf and tugged his grey fedora down on his head against the whipping winds. "We can talk there."

 After the short walk, the pair entered the warm and welcoming restaurant. Mr. X pulled the maitre'd aside (out of sight and sound from Tristen's notice) and pressed five folded one-hundred dollar bills into the man's hand. He then leaned forward, and spoke low into his ear: "I wish your very best service tonight. I am paying my bill in advance. Under no circumstances are my guest and I to be disturbed after dessert and coffee is served. The rest of this money is a tip for the waiter and yourself. Is that clearly understood?"

 "Yes, very good, sir...please enjoy your meal, and it is our pleasure to thank you in advance," the tuxedoed maitre'd replied, giving Mr. X a deferential bow.

 The two strangers dined well on caviar atop blinis with chopped egg and sour cream, bowls of steaming borscht, rich Boeuf a la Stroganoff, and cherry-cheese blintzes with vanilla ice cream. The wine was a zesty 2019 dry red Georgian. Between courses, the two men made casual but polite small talk about the city and the weather, after Tristen introduced himself as an art history professor in Canada. Once the after-dinner coffee was served, the waiter vanished as directed and the pair began their much more important conversation.

 "Mr. Cole, I must congratulate you on your diligent research. You are the only person who has ever 'discovered' me across these many, many years, so I feel it is only fair to reward your efforts by telling you my story.

 I was born in Krakow, Poland when that city was my country's capitol. I was married to a marvelous woman named Caterina. We had four children, two boys and twin girls. Life was simple but good. I was apprenticed as a silversmith, and thus was my livelihood. I would tell you my original name, but it has changed so many times that it would be pointless, as you will soon understand.

 In 1298, however, a terrible disease swept through Krakow. Thousands died after suffering agonizing fevers, including all four of our children. Soon, my beautiful Caterina took very ill. She seemed to be at death's door and ready for The Last Rites...you might recall that Christianity came to my country in 966. I prayed with all my heart to the Lord Jesus to spare my wife's life. I felt that I could not live without her. But my prayers went unanswered, and Caterina slipped into a coma, her breathing becoming weaker and weaker by the hour. I wept in despair. In my bitterness, I did the unthinkable, out of sheer desperation. I begged Satan, the Prince of Darkness, to save her. I pledged that I would willingly give him my soul in exchange for her life.

 That fateful night, three specters dressed in hooded black shrouds approached our bed just after the midnight church bells. They were minions of The Evil One himself, and although their faces were shadowed, their eyes glowed with a ghostly purple light. One came over and touched my unconscious Caterina's foot. She slightly moaned in some kind of reaction. Then I heard a voice in my head say these words: 'Your wife will live. You will both be happy for another twenty years. But when she finally dies naturally of old age, you will go to sleep the night after her burial. When you awaken, you will be thirty years old again, but you will never father any more children -- not be impotent, only sterile. At that point, too, you will never age, or get sick, or die, for you have given your soul to our Lord and Master, Lucifer. He will protect you from all harm and provide for all your worldly needs in exchange for an important future service you must do for him. This service may be asked of you tomorrow, or it may be required many centuries from now.' Then the three specters vanished like wisps of smoke."

 "What happened then?" a rapt Tristen wanted to know. "Your story is beginning to remind me of the German genius Goethe's famous 1808 play, 'Faust,' only the Devil was named Mephistopheles."

 "Yes, I know it well...Anyway, it was all as they foretold. Caterina recovered, and she and I grew old together and were happy. After I buried her, I went to bed, yet arose with the sun the next morning young again. The only other change was the addition of this dark patch of skin on the bridge of my nose. I think of it as somewhat similar to the mark of Cain -- you probably know the Bible story of his lasting curse for killing his brother, Abel.

 I moved around Europe next, learning the languages and customs of its many lands. Every time I needed money, it would magically appear in a small leather pouch in my pocket when I was asleep -- gold, silver, coins, and later, paper money. I wasn't supremely rich, but I was very well-off. I was endowed with whatever currency was acceptable in each particular country. I never starved and never had to work. I stopped being a silversmith. I lived in inns and, centuries later, in hotels. I never had a normal, fixed home again after leaving Krakow. Nowadays, I pay cash for everything, and have several passports which allow me to travel unimpeded.

 I had hundreds of pleasant female relationships, but always left before my never-aging became apparent. Next, I became fascinated with art and creativity. I befriended many painters across Europe who ultimately became quite famous. Raphael, Rembrandt, David, Renoir, Frabriano, and many others. They enjoyed including me as a remembrance in their paintings of crowd scenes."

 "That was how I first noticed you," Tristen interrupted. He told of the five specific paintings he had examined in the art museums across the continent.

 "Just so...yes. I also knew, for example, the great Leonardo in Florence. I told me that he secretly painted his initials, 'LV,' in microscopic letters in the right eye of his 'Mona Lisa.' And did you know that if you draw a five-line musical bar across the bottom of his painting of the 'Last Supper,' the position of the apostle's hands, and the arrangement of the bread and goblets on the table -- when converted to musical notes -- makes a beautiful but short musical score? That man was amazing, I can truly attest..."

 "Sorry to interrupt again, but can I ask you if you are indeed the Count of St. Germain?"

 "No, I am not...but I did meet him once in Bruges. A remarkable man. I'm not sure if he had stumbled upon the actual secret of immortality, however. Perhaps yes, perhaps no."

 "Well then, I assume it would have also been impossible for you to be the legendary Wandering Jew, seeing as you were born in Poland long after the Crucifixion?"

 "Correct. That is just a story anyway, not a fact."

 "So tell me, why did you change and later follow various leaders rather than artists?" Cole asked. "I have photographs of you in crowds with Lenin, Lindbergh, Churchill, Einstein, Hitler, and others."

 "I was told in my mind by Satan that such was my next duty," Mr. X explained. "The world would be coming to an end, he said, and I would have a vital role to play regarding the Anti-Christ and the final battle between Good and Evil."

 That reply stunned Tristen Cole to his marrow. He shivered briefly. "Then the Bible predictions are true? The Book of Revelations, the numerals 666, and so forth?"

 "Yes, Mr. Cole. And I can never renounce my pledge to Lucifer. My soul is damned. I will be in Hell forever after I do my service for the Prince of Darkness. Even if I try to have my spirit exorcised, or try to convert to the Christian priesthood, or run away and try to hide in a remote monastery somewhere, I am still doomed. I am not a person who even wants my fate anymore. It disgusts me. But I freely chose it back centuries ago to save my wife's life, and that was that."

 Tristen was flooded with pity for this sad, condemned man upon hearing this last admittance. "I'm so sorry," he gently offered.

 Mr. X gave a slight smile. "That is kind of you, Mr. Cole. Thank you."

 "To conclude my story now, I was visited by Satan himself three nights ago. It was the first and probably the last time on this Earth that I will see him until I die and go to eternal damnation after completing his sworn service.

 He was hideous and terrifying...Huge and dark, easily seven feet tall and weighing perhaps four-hundred pounds. He was cloaked in a black, hooded shroud, with red, glowing evil eyes. He smelled like some sort of rotting, putrid animal. His hands, which protruded out of his gown's sleeves, ended in claws, and the part of his skin I glimpsed was scaly like a reptile. My blood ran cold with fear and dread as I fully realized the horrible mistake I had made by trading my precious soul to such a monster.

 He told me that the Anti-Christ had been born in southeastern Europe in 2013, nine years ago -- I assumed in either Romania, Bulgaria, or Ukraine. The Anti-Christ would be very attractive and charismatic, and would become very wealthy upon reaching maturity. He would be in favor of One World Rule and in implanting everyone with a microchip. This technology would be the so-called Mark of the Beast, to ultimately control their minds and complete allegiance. In fact, that was the main reason why I was directed to attend the presentation tonight at Carnegie Hall. You see, Gates, Bezos, and Musk are unwittingly ushering these events onto the world stage with their latest researches and new technologies.

 Anyway, at first, the Anti-Christ would claim to be a Christian, but later, he would publically convert to Islam and move to Damascus, Syria. There, at age thirty, he would suffer a head wound which would ordinarily be fatal. This event is to take place in the year 2033. But the Anti-Christ is destined to recover quickly from this assault, as if by a miracle. That instant of recovery will, in fact, trigger the takeover of his soul by Satan himself. A horrible and agonizing World War between Christians and Moslems will then erupt, and consume every nation for three and one-third years. Only then will the Second Coming of Christ occur -- for the ultimate battle of Good vs. Evil at Armageddon, in the Middle East -- to decide the final fate of the world."

 "Did Satan reveal what service you would need to render for him?" Tristen asked.

 "Yes...I was to be the would-be assassin of the Anti-Christ, and deliver the fatal head wound with a high-powered rifle shot, so that the prophecy of his recovery would be fulfilled."

 The professor gasped. "Do you know the name of this man yet?"

 "Yes. These are his initials." Mr. X traced them with his index finger slowly on the white tablecloth where the pair were seated. Then he sighed. "I can say no more...I must leave you now... Goodbye, Tristen Cole. Prepare yourself for what is to come."

 The immortal man -- who himself would finally die in eleven years -- suddenly reached across the dining table and grabbed Tristen's left wrist. He gave it a crushing squeeze. Cole was startled and bewildered, when he found himself slipping into the dark pit of unconsciousness...

 When Tristen Cole awoke, disoriented, a few minutes later, the alarmed restaurant staff was surrounding him, and asking if he was O.K., or should they summon a doctor?

 Meanwhile, the mystery man once dubbed Mr. X was nowhere to be seen.

 He had somehow vanished into the night...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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