

THE VIOLINIST

THE room was cloudy with a poisonous incense: saffron, opoponax, galbanum, musk, and myrrh, the purity of the last ingredient a curse of blasphemy, the final sneer; as a degenerate might insult a Raphael by putting it in a room devoted to debauchery.

The girl was tall and finely built, huntress-lithe. Her dress, close-fitted, was of a gold-brown silk that matched, but could not rival, the coils that bound her brow—glittering and hissing like snakes.

Her face was Greek in delicacy; but what meant such a mouth in it? The mouth of a satyr or a devil. It was full and strong, curved twice, the edges upwards, an angry purple, the lips flat. Her smile was like the snarl of a wild beast.

She stood, violin in hand, before the wall. Against it was a large tablet of mosaic; many squares and many colours. On the squares were letters in an unknown tongue.

She began to play, her gray eyes fixed upon one square on whose centre stood this character, N. It was in black on white; and the four sides of the square were blue, yellow, red, and black.

She began to play. The air was low, sweet, soft, and slow. It seemed that she was listening, not to her own playing, but for some other sound. Her bow quickened; the air grew

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harsh and wild, irritated; quickened further to a rush like flames devouring a hayrick; softened again to a dirge.

Each time she changed the soul of the song it seemed as if she was exhausted: as if she was trying to sound a particular phrase, and always fell back baffled at the last moment.

Nor did any light infuse her eyes. There was intentness, there was weariness, there was patience, there was alertness. And the room was strangely silent, unsympathetic to her mood. She was the dimmest thing in that gray light. Still she strove. She grew more tense, her mouth tightened, an ugly compression. Her eyes flashed with—was it hate? The soul of the song was now all anguish, all pleading, all despair—ever reaching to some unattainable thing.

She choked, a spasmodic sob. She stopped playing; she bit her lips, and a drop of blood stood on them scarlet against their angry purple, like sunset and storm. She pressed them to the square, and a smear stained the white. She caught at her heart; for some strange pang tore it.

Up went her violin, and the bow crossed it. It might have been the swords of two skilled fencers, both blind with mortal hate. It might have been the bodies of two skilled lovers, blind with immortal love.

She tore life and death asunder on her strings. Up, up soared the phoenix of her song; step by step on music's golden scaling-ladder she stormed the citadel of her Desire. The blood flushed and swelled her face beneath its sweat. Her eyes were injected with blood.

The song rose, culminated—overleapt the barriers, achieved its phrase.

She stopped; but the music went on. A cloud gathered

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upon the great square, menacing and hideous. There was a tearing shriek above the melody.

Before her, his hands upon her hips, stood a boy. Golden haired he was, and red were his young lips, and blue his eyes. But his body was ethereal like a film of dew upon a glass, or rust clinging to an airy garment; and all was stained hideously with black.

“My Remenu!” she said. “After so long!”

He whispered in her ear.

The light behind her flickered and went out.

The spirit laid her violin and bow upon the ground.

The music went on—a panting, hot melody like mad eagles in death struggle with mountain goats, like serpents caught in jungle fires, like scorpions tormented by Arab girls.

And in the dark she sobbed and screamed in unison. She had not expected this: she had dreamt of love more passionate, of lust more fierce-fantastic, than aught mortal.

And this?

This real loss of a real chastity? This degradation not of the body, but of the soul? This white-hot curling flame—ice cold about her heart? This jagged lightning that tore her? This tarantula of slime that crawled up her spine?

She felt the blood running from her breasts, and its foam at her mouth.

Then suddenly the lights flamed up, and she found herself standing—reeling—her head sagging on his arm.

Again he whispered in her ear.

In his left hand was a little ebony box, a dark paste was in it. He rubbed a little on her lips.

And yet a third time he whispered in her ear.

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With an angel's smile—save for its subtlety—he was gone into the tablet.

She turned, blew on the fire, that started up friendly, and threw herself in an armchair. Idly she strummed old-fashioned simple tunes.

The door opened.

A jolly lad came in and shook the snow from his furs.

“Been too bored, little girl?” he said cheerily, confident.

“No, dear!” she said. “I’ve been fiddling a bit.”

“Give me a kiss, Lily!”

He bent down and put his lips to hers; then, as if struck by lightning, sprawled, a corpse.

She looked down lazily through half-shut eyes with that smile of hers that was a snarl.

FRANCIS BENDICK.