



Weird Tales

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REGISTERED IN GREAT BRITAIN

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Mandolin

By WILL CHARLES OURSLER

A brief story about a composer who thought his inspiration had gone for ever

"NO, I can not do it. I break my contract, I know. But music is gone from me; I can no longer compose."

"But you can't do this to me, Rand. We're old friends. I've promised to have at least one piece by you in our next production. You can't let me down."

"I'm sorry, Wolfson. We are old friends, but I can't do the impossible. And it is impossible for me to compose anything now that sounds like music. I'm through."

"Perhaps you'll change your mind."

After Wolfson was gone, Gordon Rand leaned back in his chair, and in silence watched the butler clear the table. A quiet filled the room. Drunken shadows from the candle danced silently on the panelled walls; the corners were lost in leaden gloom.

"Squires!"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going to sleep tonight in the bedroom."

"In the bedroom, sir? You mean the room that was——"

"The room I shared with my wife. I know it hasn't been used since—since last year. But to arrange the place won't take you long. I guess I'm just sentimental, Squires, but you see, it was a year ago tonight that my wife died. Nothing but sentiment, Squires."

"I know. I didn't remind you, sir. One doesn't always wish to be reminded

of such things, if you'll pardon my saying so. Is there anything else?"

"Oh, yes, Squires. You remember my wife's mandolin?"

"Yes, sir. It's in its case, in a corner of the library."

"Now look. First of all, pack my suitcase for my trip tomorrow. Then bring the suitcase and mandolin to the bedroom. I'm taking both with me, and I must be all set to leave. And bring some wood to the bedroom, too; I may make a fire later."

"Very good, sir. Good-night, sir."

ALONE, Mr. Rand rose from the table, walked to the mantel, and switched on a light. The shadowed portrait above him seemed to come to life. Lustrous eyes of a beautiful woman looked gravely down at him; one might almost have thought the soft lips were about to speak.

"It won't be long now, dear—not long." His words broke the stillness. "I'm coming to join you."

He could bear it no longer. One whole year of living without her; one wretched year of hell! The world needed him? Needed a composer whose music was dead, whose notes had become jarring and discordant? He had been a great composer once, perhaps; that time was over. He would never write music again; the world would be better off without him.

Tomorrow, he was going to Roaring Falls, for a rest and a change of scene.

He laughed mirthlessly. At least, it would be a change; one could say no more. In the swirling torrent of the falls he would find swift and sure death; beyond that, he did not care.

"Tomorrow, Alice. Tomorrow."

The bedroom was a book, a diary of past hours; a book which Gordon Rand alone could read. Trivial, forgotten scenes re-enacted themselves before him. How many times he had built a fire for the two of them! He stood before the struggling flame and poked at the smoldering logs. Now he had the blaze crackling arrogantly in the grate; methodically, he put the smoking fire-irons back on their stand, and turned around, half expecting to find her there, her kind eyes upon him. How vain the hope!

He sat long before the fire; dreaming, wishing, wondering. Fate had taken from him the only thing in life that counted; there was no use going on. Music, too, was gone from his soul. It had been there when he had written their piece; her piece. The melody ran through his mind now, tormentingly. He had better go to bed.

He undressed slowly. By the time he finished his toilet, the red embers glowed only dully, sullenly, in the grate. The room was nearly dark. He opened the window wide and went to bed. Ordinarily he would have lain awake for some time; his mind was upset and excited. But it had been a long day, and his body needed rest. He was asleep in a few minutes. Outside, the wind howled wildly through the trees.

MUSIC! He fought his way back to consciousness, and opened his eyes. The room was pitch-black. He had only been dreaming, of course. Dreaming that she played for him! The mandolin had sounded so real. Their piece!

A soft tinkle reached him, as if someone were really playing the instrument. What was that? His senses could not deceive him now; he was awake. Someone must be there; some madman, strumming tunelessly on the mandolin. He could hear the notes clearly now. This was real. Someone was in the room. Quickly he sprang from his bed, and switched on the lights.

The room was empty.

He shut the window, put on his dressing-robe, and went to examine the mandolin. It was safe in its case. Impossible! Yet no one could have put it away and escaped, without a sound.

He put out the light, opened the window and returned to bed. Wide awake now, he listened carefully. There it was, those notes. Music! Music from a mandolin shut in its case! A cold shiver ran through him, a shiver of delight, of wonder. It *was* real, and it could mean one thing only; a sign from her.

"I understand now." His voice was low, barely audible.

SQUIRES woke him in the morning with breakfast.

"Good morning, sir. Mr. Wolfson is waiting to see you. You had better hurry, sir, or you'll miss the train."

"I'm not going to take it, Squires. Bring Mr. Wolfson up here; he won't mind if I'm still in bed. I want to talk to him."

The butler ushered Mr. Wolfson in, and stood at attention at the foot of the bed.

"Sit down, Wolfson."

"Well, how do you feel about it today?"

"I've changed my mind."

"Good! Wonderful! Grand! My Lord, what did it?"

"You're an old friend, Wolfson, and

I'll tell you. I know you won't let it get out.—No, stay here, Squires. You've known me since I was a child. I want you to hear this, too."

He paused.

"I was going to commit suicide today, Wolfson. I was going to kill myself. Fed up with everything. I wanted something of my wife's near me when I died; I was taking her mandolin. But last night, in this room, I had a sign. Someone played that mandolin. I didn't dream it; I heard it with my own ears. Yet no one was here, and the instrument was in its case. I tell you, it was a voice from the beyond. That's what changed my mind, Wolfson."

"Sure, old man." The producer smiled indulgently. "I won't speak of it to anyone. Now, when are you going to start on my work?"

"Today—at once!"

He leapt from bed, threw on his robe, and hurried downstairs. Mr. Wolfson trailed after him.

Squires stayed behind. He opened the windows to air the place, and began to make the bed.

Suddenly he stopped. That tinkle! it was what Mr. Rand must have heard. But this came from the fireplace. In a second he realized; it was the pokers, the tongs, swinging in the wind from the window.

"But I shan't mention it to Mr. Rand," said Squires.

Downstairs, someone was at the piano. The butler heard swelling, rapturous music that filled the morning with its beauty.