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“MELODIE IN E MINOR”

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THERE is a certain section of St. Louis that gives one nausea to go through. There is a perpetual cloud of smoke above the section, a cloud which no one seems to mind, not even the people who walk about below it with soot-streaked faces. Once in a while, on a clear night, the smoke disappears, only to appear in a much denser form the following morning. A heavy rain drives the smoke away for a while, but it is sure to come back when the rain stops. A stench that seems alive creeps from one dim alley to another, gathering strength as it goes. This, too, the people do not mind. Dirty children play in the midst of it; they go home reeking with it. But what difference does it make? Their homes reek with it.

There are more than two hundred houses in this section, and each house is just like all the others. Thus, each house might have belonged to Jack Hammond, except for one little difference: In Hammond's house the noise started exactly at 6 o'clock in the evening, and ended exactly at 6 o'clock in the morning, when both Jack and Amy went to work.

When Amy married Jack Hammond he had “prospects”, but, somehow, he lost them, and Amy never forgave him for it. When they moved to this squalid section, it was to be temporary. But it had become permanent; Amy would not forgive Jack, either for this or for making her go to work shortly after their marriage.

Amy made life miserable for Jack in all ways, but especially at the supper table. She had taken a fancy to a piece by Rachmaninoff that she had once heard in a recital, *Melodie in E Minor*. She bought the piece and learned it note for note, until she was able to play it after a fashion. Every night while Jack ate his supper she played it. At first Jack didn't want to say anything about it, though he hated that kind of music, and Amy knew it. Invariably he began to hum *St. Louis Blues* when Amy started to play, but Amy soon drowned him out. Cursing did Amy no harm, nor did his threats. The situation showed no sign of progressing either for better or for worse.

At 6 o'clock in the evening the program opened, somewhat like this:

“Supper ready?” from Jack, to Amy's young brother, who stayed at home and did the cooking for the two workers.

Amy would throw down her bag and hat, and move toward the door of the parlor. It was called a parlor only because of the piano in it. “I'm not hungry; guess I'll play the piano for a while.”

At this juncture Amy's brother vacated.

“Listen, Amy (this from Jack): if you think you're going to play that thing again, you got another guess coming. And if you play that E Minor thing, I'll——”

“Shut up, Jack. Why'd I ever

marry a fool like you? Got no appreciation of good music, and never will have. Haven't even got a little horse sense."

"Shut up, damn you. I got just as good an education as you, Amy Hammond. Amy! If you play that piano, you'll go to work with a black eye tomorrow."

"Oh! I will, huh? And you'll never see your little Amy any more."

"No such luck, Amy; you know when you got it good, and you'd soon be back. Damn you! what d'you have to play that piece again for? You know I don't like it. I'm going to sell that damned piano!"

"Who's going to buy it?"

"Amy! By God, some day I'm going to break that damn' neck of yours."

"Yeh? What about funeral expenses; where you going to get 'em? And what about your own neck?"

"My neck's all right; you just watch out for yours."

"Aw, sign off, Jack. Be yourself. Go out and get an education."

"Damn you, Amy! Some day——"

"Yeh! Some day you'll break my neck; that's ancient history, Jack."

"Well, damn you, some day I will."

"Oh! yeh! yeh! Of course!"

ONE night Amy's brother Jim set the supper table as usual, and went out for a package of cigarettes. When he came back he found Jack home, surly as always, with an expression on his face that scared Amy's brother.

"Where's Amy, Jack?"

"She ain't home yet, Jim. Ain't seen her on the way, have you?"

"No."

"Where in thunder is she, then? She ought to be home by now."

"Yeh! She ought to."

Jack sat down and began to eat his

supper. From time to time he glanced nervously at the door.

"What in hell's keeping that woman? Sure she isn't home?"

"She didn't come in."

Jack kept on eating. Suddenly the staccato notes of Rachmaninoff's *Melodie in E Minor* came to the ears of the two men in the kitchen. Jack dropped his fork with a curse, and looked at Amy's brother. Cowed, the youth shrank into a corner. But curiously, Jack's glance was not of anger, and Amy's brother picked up courage.

"It's Amy, Jack. She's come in by the winder."

"My God! Do you hear the piano, Jim?"

"Sure. It's Amy."

Jack got up from the table slowly. His hands hung limply by his side; his face twitched spasmodically.

"Don't hurt her, Jack. Don't hurt her, please."

Jack Hammond did not notice the youth in the corner. For a second he stood before the parlor door. Then he turned to Amy's brother.

"Call Amy, Jim."

"Amy! Amy!" The youth stuck his head into the parlor. "She don't answer, Jack. I can't see very well; it's kinda dark in there." He turned and looked at Jack curiously. "Maybe it ain't Amy; huh, Jack?"

With a stifled sound Jack Hammond sank back into a chair. "No! No! My God! It ain't Amy! It can't be Amy! No! It ain't!"

He rose a second time and moved jerkily toward the parlor door. The piece ended abruptly, then began over again.

Something like a sob escaped Jack. "My God! I killed Amy just before—she started playing again—that damned piece! It ain't Amy. I killed her!"

Without a sound he pitched forward and lay in a crumpled heap on the floor.