

All Stories Complete



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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "Diana and the Golden Ring."



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PURE CHANCE BROUGHT TWO PEOPLE TO

Mr. Destiny Follows Through

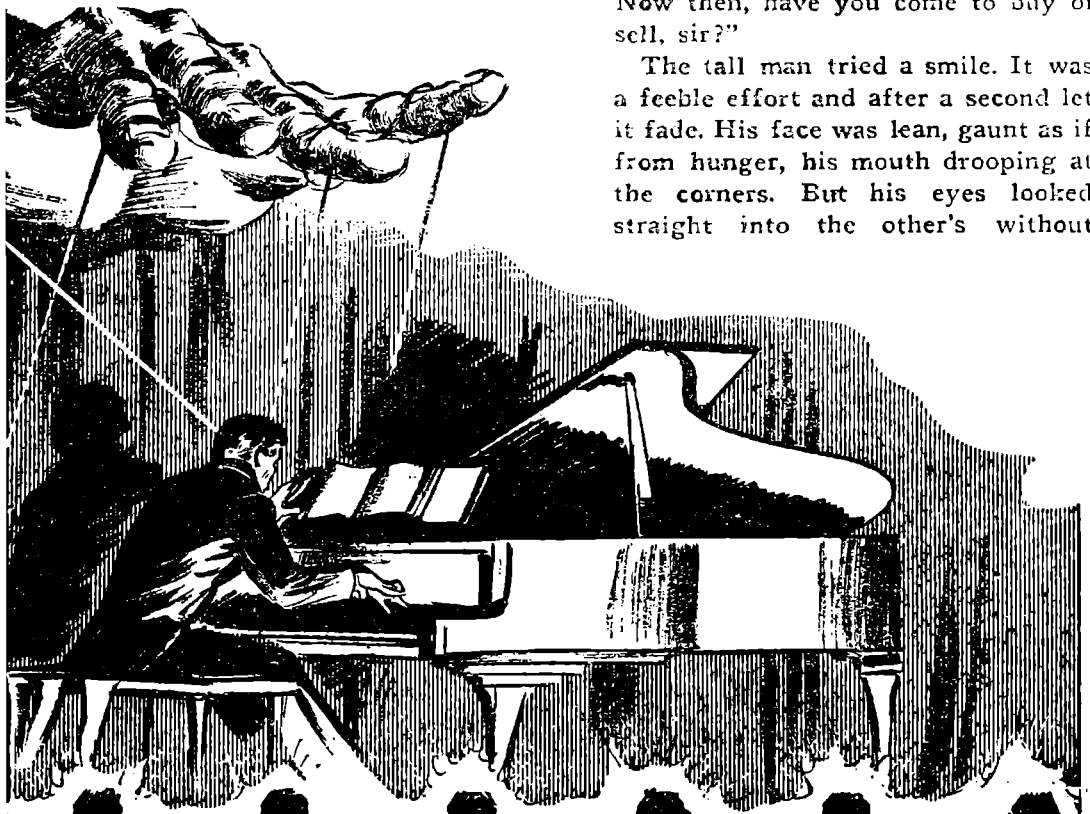
By Gilbert Grant

A TINKLING sound announced the door's opening and immediately after a man stepped from behind the beaded-cloth curtain separating the shop from the living quarters in the rear. He was a small man, narrow shoulders lifted

high, head bent forward like a bird's. The impression of a bird was heightened by the eyes, beady, unblinking, and bright. His hands washed themselves; they rustled drily, as leaves scraping a picket fence.

"Ah! Good evening, sir. H'mm! *Such* weather. Nasty. *Very*nasty," he ran the two words together. "Quite! Now then, have you come to buy or sell, sir?"

The tall man tried a smile. It was a feeble effort and after a second let it fade. His face was lean, gaunt as if from hunger, his mouth drooping at the corners. But his eyes looked straight into the other's without



MR. DESTINY'S SHOP — OR WAS IT FATE?

blinking. And his chin was set and hard.

"Don't be uneasy, friend," the shopkeeper continued. "I buy to sell and sell so that I may buy. A simple business, really."

"Yeah. I suppose. I've got something to sell."

"Out with it, my friend. The darkness hides the worth of things. Bring it here where the light will fall on it. Jewels sparkle and gold shows its lustre only when the blessed light strikes. Now then..."

Color heightened the pale thin features of the tall man. His right hand, concealed in one of the pockets of the formless jacket leaped out with an almost involuntary gesture and revealed in its palm a wrist watch. "It's just a nickle-plate job. P.X. Stuff. Not worth much, I'm sure. But..." The words dribbled off into a fear-formed silence.

The other snatched the watch from the hand offering it. "Let Mr. Destiny be the judge of that," he said sharply. "Ah! A watch. The past, present and future. I love them. I have so *many*. One is the watch of the Chinese Emperor, Lao Kwang Shi. He had it made for his number one concubine and presented it to her the morning of the day he had her beheaded for some trivial thing or other. He was *such* an impetuous person. A scholar, though. Very *learned*. Didn't believe in..." He hesitated, smiled apologetically into the tall man's eyes, "...*fate*! I—I hope *you* do..."

"Nuts!" the tall man spat out.

The tiny yellowed hands went up in a simulated gesture of horror and Mr. Destiny's eyes rolled upward. He shook his head sadly. "One mustn't," he spoke in a thin whisper. He sighed, turned and walked to the counter at the far wall and snapped on a light

just above it. The tall man followed.

"...From a P. X. you say? Carried through the war, eh?"

"Yeah." The word was stencilled in bitterness. "Yeah. All I got left. I had a medal. A pawnbroker offered me fifty cents for it. The guy who owned the restaurant said he'd give me the seventy-five cent special for it. I was so hungry. So..."

"Hunger always sells cheap. But this lovely thing. How many secrets it whispers of. I shall treasure it. And sometimes, when I grow weary, I will put it to my ear and let it tell me of what it saw and heard. Would fifty dollars make the parting less sorrowful?"

"Fifty dollars! But..."

"Good! A deal. Your money, sir, and a little something besides. This—"

The tall man looked at the circular disk that gleamed with a dull golden color in the light. Strange characters were hammered into the surface. Suddenly the disk was obliterated. Five crisply-new ten-dollar bills had been laid over it. As though fearful the other might change his mind, the tall man shoved bills and disk into his pocket.

"...The characters read, 'Fear nothing. Trust in me. I bring fortune.' I remember well the first time I saw those words. It was during the reign of—"

But the tall man was no longer there.

Mr. Destiny stepped forward and closed the door which had been left ajar by the tall man in his haste to leave. An odd smile broke on the lips of the small man. A smile of inner satisfaction...

HE TOOK THE short flight of stairs in a single bound and almost ran down the slight figure of

a girl who had suddenly risen before him. He barely closed his fingers on her arm in time.

"O-oh!" it was a sob of relief. Then another, "Oh. Thank you."

"I'm sorry, miss," he said. "Pretty clumsy of me."

"Yes, yes. But-uh, I've got to... He's closed!" there was horror in her voice.

He turned and saw that the windows of the shop below were now dark.

"He was open just a second ago. Come on," he said. He held on to her hands, and turning, he started down the steps again.

He rattled the knob, shook it savagely, while she pounded futilely at the window. Nothing.

"He can't be asleep," the tall man muttered.

"No," she whispered brokenly. "We've got to get him up!"

But the darkness remained.

He turned at the sudden sound of sobbing. "Hey! Hey! What goes, miss? What's wrong?"

As if an echo, came another voice: "Hey! What goes? What's wrong?" And following the words a blinding light fell on them.

She shrank against him, her frail figure nestling close in terror. He looked up, narrowing his eyes against the circle of light and growled: "Shut that thing off! We'll be up."

The light went off.

"All right, you two. Come up here," the thick voice said. He was a policeman, still in his raincoat although the rain had stopped. He looked stolidly at them, waiting an answer to his questions.

"We saw a light as we came up and by the time we got down the steps it went out. So we knocked and shook the knob trying to get the man's attention," the tall man ex-

plained.

"No use," the policeman said. "I seen it happen time and time again. The old guy never opens up once the lights go out. Try him in the mornin'. Night folks."

It was a polite way of saying, beat it.

The tall man took the hint. Taking her arm under his he started off at a brisk walk. Not until they had put distance between themselves and the policeman did he break the silence.

"All right, miss. Out with it. You're in trouble. Maybe I can help."

Her speech had the soft slurring of the south. "I was there only an hour ago. He said not to rush, that there would be someone to help me. I guess he forgot."

"I see," the other said, not seeing at all. "You wanted to buy something...?"

She held her free hand out. A golden band encircled the third finger. "I was going to sell him this." She continued before he could break in, "My mother's. All I had left to sell..."

He didn't know why he felt a rush of relief on learning the ring was not hers. But suddenly the pressure the sight of the band had brought to his heart, lessened. "Things tough, eh? Kinda down, eh? Like I was a while ago?" He snapped his fingers. "Breaks come this fast sometimes. Now me, I always feel better when I got a steak in me. Steak, potatoes, salad, pie, apple of course, and a nice dish of ice cream to follow. How does that sound?"

"Heavenly..."

"And here we are at Joe's, the poor man's Steak House. Shall we dine?"

Her tremulous smile was answer enough...

HER NAME was Hallie Fromm and his Tom Gaynor. The park

was not far off. The moon was free of clouds and of a sudden summer was in the air. There seemed nothing better to do than stroll in the park after their meal. They had spoken little while eating, neither pretending any interest other than in the food served them.

"Uh, Hallie..."

"Yes, Tom?"

"I don't want to sound nosy. So don't be a goon, Tom Gaynor and just be quiet!"

She laughed and he stopped her. "Do that again," he said.

"Why?"

"I liked it."

She only smiled and presently began to talk: "It was the nicest thing ever done to me, that dinner. It's different with a man. I mean begging. I know that all day I was fighting myself. I guess when a person gets so hungry..."

"Forget it!" he said it fiercely, angrily. "Forget it."

They walked in silence for a moment under the weeping arches of trees. Suddenly she put her hand out. "I-I'm very tired, Tom. Let's sit for a moment."

They found a bench a few feet off and sank into its hard embrace as though the wooden slats were the softest of down pillows. She leaned her head back and he studied her small still features. There was nothing about any single one to make one look twice but altogether they made a pleasing effect. Her eyes were her best features. Oval in shape, brown in color, they were large and well-shaped and oddly intent in look.

Abruptly she turned toward him her eyes wide and looking off into personal distances: "The hills are full of color now. Spring comes early to the mountain country. The women are starting to plan things; I can see

them, gathered at Sister Ellie Rand's house. 'Lympia Tavish keeps demanding preacher Jud Simpkins be there, but no one pays her heed; they all know she's been wearin' her heart on her sleeve for him for the past ten years. Then Ellie'll ask me to sing, of course... Only this time I won't be there, Tom—"

"You sing?"

It was as if she hadn't heard: "Poor Uncle Gordie. He worked so hard. And after Mother died he took me in. It was like being his daughter. 'Hallie,' he used to say. 'Singin' for the Saturday night gatherin's all right. But there's better things for your voice. An' I'll make 'em come true. Yo're going to Chicago an' study, that's what.' He did too. Saved and scrimped and paid my way through singing school. Then he died..."

"That's what you like, singing, hunh? Mountain songs and spirituals. I like them too," he said.

"At school they told me to forget the songs I knew. They said my voice was for other things. Opera, the stage. They said I should sing like this..." Her voice lifted in a sudden high note, held for a moment then dropped suddenly. "...Not like this..." her voice became a husky thing, low, intimate, telling of the love of a mountain girl for her man.

HE LISTENED, enthralled. From the first high note he knew her voice as a big one, yet not operatic, perhaps. Not strong enough, not enough power. But this folk song, and the way she sang it. Ah! That was something else.

"Hallie. Did you ever try to sing for anyone?"

"Oh, yes. Time and time again. One thing or another put me off. But always behind it all the fact was I

just wasn't good enough."

"For opera you're not," he was blunt. "Not even for some operetta music. But folk singing. Hah. I'd like to handle you. Hey! What an idea! The best I've ever had."

She looked at him with a speculative glance. He colored suddenly under the appraising stare. And knew how pitiful the words were. He remembered his clothes, the hunted, starved look of him, and smiled in crook-lipped self-derision. He couldn't handle worms! His head fell forward against his chest. He dug his hands deeply into his trouser pockets. And felt the small fold of bills, the balance of what was left of the fifty dollars.

He *could* help her, though, he realized.

He started to withdraw his hand and saw the stooped figure of a small man pass. The stooped figure was almost at the curve of a bend before Tom remembered it. The man who owned the shop! Then with the remembrance of the man came also the thought of the good-luck piece he had been given. He pulled it out and examined it. He could make out the engraved characters. What did they say? 'Fear nothing. Trust in me. I bring fortune'.

"Hallie..."

"Yes...?"

"Do you believe in yourself?"

"I-I'm not sure anymore."

"Take a look at me. What do you see?"

"I see a good man."

"No, no! I mean..."

She stopped him: "I don't know what you mean. I only know what I see. Tom. I'm not a city girl. Don't misunderstand. It's just that I'm mountain folk, Tennessee mountain girl. We don't have different values. It's just that they're more simple.

You're good or you're not. You're good, Tom. I'd trust you with my life."

He felt a sweep of awe take hold of him at the words. She'd trust him with her life. But what had he done to deserve such trust? Bought her a meal...? He shook his head. Maybe he needed straightening out? Maybe...? Damn right he did!

"Then start trusting," he spoke with harsh abruptness. "I'm going to do things for you, Hallie. Make a somebody of you. First, are you staying any place in particular?"

She told him where; she owed a week's rent. That was why she had gone to sell the ring. The man had promised her enough to pay her rent. Twelve dollars.

"Okay. Here's twenty-four bucks, last week's and a week in advance. I'll take you home and pick you up around noon. H'm. Here's another five .. no, better ten. Breakfast and maybe you might need something. We're going to see people. People who are going to hear you sing, and after, give you a job. How does that sound?"

Her lips were cool, and soft and sweet. It was the answer he didn't expect. But it satisfied more than any other....

SHE LOOKED at him and saw he had shaved. His suit had been pressed. He had even bought a tie and shirt; they wore the unmistakable look of newness.

"Say. I'd never have thought of that, but you're wearing just the dress that'll fit the act," he said. "Had breakfast?"

"Hours ago. There's some change..." She held her hand out to him. There was nine dollars and seventy-five cents in the palm.

"Where'd you eat, in a bird shop?"

Look, Hallie! You should know people can't sing when the insides are empty. Come on. We've..."

"I'm too excited to eat," she said. "Later, maybe. Not now."

He understood. "Sure. I just didn't want you getting sick or something. We're off."

Tom hadn't noticed how close to Mr. Destiny's shop they were. As they strolled along he became aware of the fact they would pass it.

"What a difference, last night and now," he said as they approached the shop. "Y'know, that old man must be a little touched. Fifty dollars for the watch I gave him... Found money."

They were abreast of the shop and as though compelled to, looked down. A narrow face, whose beady eyes were bright and steady, was pressed against the grimed windows. Mr. Destiny. He saw them and waved for them to come down. Tom bit his lip. The old boy had been pretty gabby, he remembered. But Hallie was smiling and already stepping downward. He followed.

"Ah! There you are my dear," the old man was saying as he ushered them into the shop. Daylight made it less glamorous, more dingy-looking, bare and oddly forlorn. "I'm so sorry. I remembered too late... Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," she smiled her sweetest smile. "Maybe it turned out for the best?"

"It always does," Mr. Destiny said. "And you, how different. A new tie. becoming with the shirt you purchased. Yes. You *do* look different, young man. For the better, I can say."

"Thanks to you," Tom said. "I've got to say, though, that I don't see how you can make money. Fifty dollars..."

Mr. Destiny's shoulders heaved slightly. They almost touched his ears. He smiled his apology for not being a better business man. "Money? It has its place, I suppose. But..."

The mention of money brought Tom's mind to the business he and Hallie had in mind. Of course Fabian's did not open until late. But the people Tom wanted to see should be there now. He thought, better get Hallie away from this.

"Hallie," he turned toward her and winked. "It's getting late."

It was Mr. Destiny who answered, however: "Nothing is ever late or early. Time moves in measured pace. Only humans rush. What will be will wait until you come." He sighed, tapped his fingers together, and nodded happily. "Yes. I like that. Time moves in measured pace. *Very good*. Ah. But I must *not* keep you too long. Another moment, that's all—" He turned with a surprising swiftness and fairly ran through the beaded-cloth curtain.

HE RETURNED almost immediately. There was something in his hand. He held it out to Hallie and said: "Something for you, my dear. A long-departed relative of yours made it. They were artisans, those hill people."

It was a miniature spinning wheel. Made of wood and bearing the unmistakable stamp of hand work.

Hallie started to object but Mr. Destiny waved the objections aside. "*Now, now, my dear!* A small return, indeed, for the pleasure of hearing you sing. I have heard it said it will bring... But there is no need to tell *you* this. You are the last of the hill-people. They will never forget you or let you come to harm. Ha-ha! *Oh, dear!* How I go on. And Tom here is fairly *fretting* to be off. Then off

with you both. Quickly! Before I am reminded of other things."

They were at the door when Hallie suddenly turned and darted back and before Mr. Destiny could stir, had planted a quick kiss on his cheek. There was such a sad smile on his lips as he closed the door after them.

"What a queer bird he is," Tom said. "I guess when you get to be his age you start to imagine things. Like knowing your relatives."

She wasn't listening. Her mind was on far-off things. He gave her a quick glance from the corner of his eye and felt his pulses quicken. She was so-so, he was at a loss for a word, and groped for one in his mind. He wondered why, wraith-like, came to it. He looked down at the miniature and noticed how wondrously exact the carving and details were. The artisan had even fashioned a tiny spindle on which a few threads of wool were wound. . . .

"You haven't even asked me where I'm taking you," he said.

She started and the far-away look was replaced by one of bewilderment, as if she had been awakened from a dream.

"Hallie!" he teased her. "You're a sleepwalker."

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said. "But Mr. Destiny's talking brought my Uncle to mind."

He shook his head. "That's the past, Hallie," he said. "I'm taking you to your future."

"It's funny," she said. "But when I'm even near Mr. Destiny I think of the strangest things. They seem to be so real. Especially when he talks of the hill-people, as he calls them. It's as though they were all standing around and listening."

"Maybe that's the reason he gave you the miniature," Tom joked. "Thought perhaps it would conjure

them up."

"Don't laugh!" she was suddenly breathless. "They tell strange tales about them in the hills. Funny ones, too. But only sometimes. They believed in witches and. . ."

"Hallie!" he shook her gently. "Bogey stories. I'm surprised."

She shuddered, recovered and suddenly smiled. "You're right."

"Of course I am. Now. We're going to Ed Fabian's. No bottom for you. The top, from the very beginning."

Ed Fabian's on State Street was a combination steak house and nite club. Fabian paid high for talent. There was a reason for it. The upstairs rooms. Fabian charged high prices. The upstairs rooms again. He wasn't interested in anyone unless they had money. Only people with money could go upstairs. Crap, roulette and poker came high there.

Tom held the door open for her and followed her into the dim coolness of the lobby. They could hear the muted sounds of music from beyond the leather-faced inside doors. There was an elevator to their right. A man in shirt sleeves was talking to the girl who ran it. They looked at the two standing just inside the lobby doors with cool appraising looks.

"Not open, folks," the man said. "Six o'clock. . . ."

"I'd like to see the manager," Tom said.

"Joe? Through those doors and back. I think he's busy with Trilby Hill."

Tom nodded his thanks and took the lead.

THE BANDSTAND was from wall to wall and projected onto the floor for a good twenty feet. A glassed-in bar was to their left just beyond the inside doors. The floor

was quite large and square. The stacked chairs and bare tables had an air of tired expectancy about them. There were eight men and a woman grouped about a grand piano on the stand. The woman was in slacks and sweater. She had small breasts and rather wide flat hips. Her breasts looked like apples wrapped in wool.

The woman was singing when they entered. Suddenly she stopped. "Now what d'ya say, fellas?" she demanded in a raucous voice. "Off-beat. Off-beat! I sound like I'm peddling fish or something. And never mind the wisecracks, Jack. It's tough enough making a living this way."

There was laughter which was stilled as they caught sight of Tom and Hallie. The woman, seeing the others staring, turned and gave the girl a frank look of appraisal. Her lip curled in a grin.

"Help you folks?" she asked.

"Yes. We're looking for someone named Joe," Tom replied.

"Trellis...? He was here a second ago. There he is..."

A chunky man in shirt and slacks stepped from an open door to the left of the bandstand. His swarthy skin was made more so by the blue-black look to his close-shaved face. He was balding and middle-aged. But he moved briskly and his eyes, Tom saw when Trellis stopped before them, were needle-sharp.

"Yeah?" Trellis didn't waste words. "What's on your mind?"

"A job. Singing," Tom said.

"Benny the Bum's using singing waiters, Jack," Trellis said. "You got a wrong steer."

"Not me. The girl."

"Yeah? Sings, huh? Look, Jack. The amateur hour is Moore's caper, not Ed Fabian's. So why don't you try the radio?"

"So why don't you let her sing?"

Tom asked.

Trellis gurgled laughter and shook his head. "I ain't got the time. I'm a busy guy. I got work to do. The madam up there's leaving Sunday. Hollywood's got her number, and they can have it. So we got to find someone to fill the last two weeks. An' you want me to listen to this broad sing? Some other time, huh?"

Tom dug deep into his pockets. Damn! He *had* to get this man to listen to her. His fingers felt the good-luck piece. *Don't fail me now*; he thought desperately. He turned to look at Hallie and saw she was no longer at his side. He turned again quickly and saw Hallie was now on the bandstand. She and Trilby Hill were talking in low tones. The trumpet man was blowing soft riffs, the pianist was practicing runs and the other men were looking bored or interested whatever their feelings ran.

"Joe," Trilby Hill said drily. "Let her sing."

"What for?"

"F'r the kick. Okay?"

"Okay. But it's your kick not mine. I ain't got time to listen."

"Oh, I don't know, Joe," said a man who had suddenly stepped from the dimness of the darkened bar. He came forward the ten steps which separated him from the two men standing before the bandstand. He was tall, though not so tall as Tom: heavier, yet not fat. He was dressed in a double-breasted suit, a fine pin stripe on blue cheviot. His tie matched perfectly, his face was immaculately groomed, his hair worn slick, was dark with greying edges along the sides and back. "Let the chick sing, Joe. Go ahead, miss..."

From the instant attention paid him Tom guessed this was Ed Fabian himself. Fabian pulled a platinum cigarette case from behind the

colored display kerchief in his breast pocket, lit a cigarette and smiled through the small cloud of smoke he blew.

HALLIE WAS whispering to the pianist. He kept shaking his head. She turned away and looked pleadingly toward Tom. "He-he doesn't know any of the songs," she said.

"Sure he does," Fabian said. And suddenly Tom got it. It was a gag. There was laughter deep in the man's voice.

"Never mind," Tom found himself saying. "I know them, Hallie."

He rubbed his hands together in a quick nervous gesture. His upper teeth kept chewing at his lower lip. The keys seemed to stretch endlessly, black and white; eighty-eight, ninety-eight, one hundred and eight . . . He heard her voice as from a distance. She was telling him to play the song she had sung the night before. And his fingers were moving over the keys. Presently they were more sure. He struck a chord, gave her a quick smile and whispered, "I've got the key. Sixteen bars of introduction."

She nodded, turned and faced the two men below. But just as Tom finished the introduction, the trumpet man said: "Hey! Gotta use a mike, sister. You ain't built like Kate Smith, you know."

Her mouth was open. It remained that way as laughter leaped from one to another of those listening. Only Trilby Hill was silent. But not for long.

"What's so funny? Give the kid a break. Go on, honey. Let 'em have it. But don't you need a mike?"

"No!" Tom's voice exploded sharply. "No mike. Not for her."

Once more he went through the introduction. Again she opened her

lips. The gentle lament of the mountain girl in search of her lover filled the air. She sang with eyes closed, swaying to and fro with the music. Suddenly her voice died away on the last note. There was a startled silence. Then Tom broke into another tune, a very old folk song, sung only in the hill country of Tennessee. Once more she sang. As the soft husky voice sang the words, Tom felt a chill strike him. For the shortest second he imagined the strangest thing. That there were men in boots and jeans, lean men, tall men, bearded and wearing slouch hats, suddenly dancing to the tune. Dancing with women in sunbonnets, lean women, gaunt-faced women, women in calico. . . .

Abruptly a shrill whistle of awe cut the silence following the song. It was the trumpet player. "Terrif. But terrif! I gotta learn that number."

It was the accolade, the acknowledgment of her genius. The others crowded about her. Only the piano player held aloof. A worried frown creased his forehead. He moved slowly forward until he was standing beside Tom. "Y'know, Jack, I don't dig you now, but I used to. Uh, hunh! You ain't from right now. No. I dug you some time ago. Give me a chance, Jack. I'll label you."

Tom's eyes burned holes into the sleepy grey ones looking down at him. The piano player backed away in startled fright. Abruptly Tom slid from the stool and crossed over in front of Hallie.

"What do you say, Mr. Fabian? Did she sell you?"

"I'll buy her. What's her name?"

"Hallie Fromm," Tom said. And only he heard the whispered thread of her voice when someone wise-cracked, "From where?" She said,

"...Over the mountain..."

"All right boys," Trellis said, as if sensing something in Fabian's manner. "Fold it up and put it away. Until eight..."

FABIAN motioned for Tom and Hallie to follow him. He led them to his office. There was none of the opulence, the garishness of the nite club in his office. It was cold, business-like. A pair of crackle-brown files stood head high in one corner. The steel door of a large safe projected from a side wall. Tom could see the warning label. It said that only Brinks could open the safe. A wide, flat-topped desk angled two corners. Fabian seated himself behind the desk and waved his hand for the two to sit.

"I'll buy her," he said again.

"Us," Tom said.

"Okay. She's got to have an accompanist. Eight week contract with option. All right with you?"

"Sounds good. How much?"

"Grand a week...both of you. If you hit, four weeks at two grand and four more at three."

"It's a deal."

Fabian smiled. He had nice teeth. The uppers were false but beautifully made. The teeth were nice, Tom decided, but the smile wasn't. Too much teeth, not enough humor. Fabian asked him his name and Tom told him.

"Y'know," Fabian leaned back until the chair creaked under his weight. "You're either very smart or very lucky. Maybe both."

"Why?"

"You're no stranger to booking. You know I don't work anything but fine acts in here. You've been around. Nobody walks into a place like this and gets auditions."

"I know," Tom agreed. "I just

felt...*lucky!*"

"Believe in luck, eh?" Fabian asked.

"Lately. Very much."

"Then let's get straight on something, Gaynor. I run some games upstairs. It's a house rule that anyone can play, including the help. You win or lose on your own, understand?"

"Perfectly. No advances on gambling losses..."

"Or any other kind. No advances, period."

"...Except this. We'll need half our first week's salary."

Fabian started to voice a protest but changed his mind. He opened one of the drawers instead and pulled out a flat steel cash box. He flipped the lid open and extracted a packet of money wrapped in a paper folder. He counted out ten bills and slid them over to Tom. "Five hundred. You've got four days. Trilby goes out Sunday night. But I'll want you here Sunday night too. The girl needs an introduction. I'll leave it to you and Joe. Work out a good act."

Tom nodded, pocketed the money, and said: "We'll knock them dead. Don't worry. Well, Hallie, let's be on our way. Things to do."

IT WAS A moneyed crowd. Trilby Hill was a very popular *chanteuse*. And her farewell appearance at Ed Fabian's drew the largest audience of the season. She sang raucously, risque songs they had heard before and loved. She was earthy and without pretense. Tom and Hallie, seated at a far table, watched her and loved every song, every movement she made. She had been like a rock against which Hallie had leaned, staunch and protecting against the sometimes rough jibes of the orchestra men. And she had

taught Hallie the inestimable value of poise under trying circumstances. There were tears in Hallie's eyes as Trilby finished her last song.

"...Okay, folks! We've been pal-sy for a long time," Trilby raised her hands for attention. "So Trilby goes to greener pastures. And I mean greener, especially where the lettuce grows in bigger bundles. Got it? Ha-ha! A funny. But anyway, she's agoin. And someone else is acomin' to Ed's joint. Matter of fact she's here tonight. A little girl the likes of which you've never heard before. Good...? But wait till you hear. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Hallie Fromm..."

The spotlight bathed Hallie in its brilliant glow, made her look like a small girl in the specially-designed gown Tom had spent two hundred dollars on. Her hair was in pigtails and her face bore only a trace of make-up.

"Okay, honey. Onstage," Trilby said. She extended a hand for Hallie, gave her a quick peck on the cheek and whispered, "Do it like as if there was no one here. Luck, baby!"

The audience was intent on the girl. No one noticed Tom inconspicuous at the piano. He looked about, noticed Fabian standing at the doors at the rear, saw the musicians off-stage and turned again to look at Hallie. And for the first time noticed that her fingers were playing with the miniature spinning wheel she had received from Mr. Destiny. So she had her good-luck piece also. He slid his fingers into his trouser pocket and caressed the coin. Then she was looking toward him and he let his fingers ramble over the keys for a second or two.

They wouldn't let her go. She took six encores. There were tears in her eyes when Trilby Hill ran

on stage.

"Gotta save her voice, folks," Trilby said. "Don't worry. She'll be here for a long time, I can tell you. Now..."

But the crowd begged one more song. Hallie gave in to it. She turned to Tom and whispered, "What'll it be, Tom?"

Without hesitation, he said, "'Over The Mountain'."

He kept his eyes on the spinning wheel in her fingers. It fascinated him. It seemed alive. He would have sworn the spindle was moving. There was a sudden chill in the air, a tingling at his spine, a tightness in his belly. He turned slowly and looked out at the crowd below.

Bearded men, in slouch hats; tall men, lean, gaunt, dressed in homespun and jeans. And seated at their sides, women in calico, angular women, thin-faced, sharp-featured, strong-minded women. They were happy and carefree and their eyes were bright and their lips sang the chorus, soundlessly...

His fingers crashed out the last chord in wild protest. For a startled moment Hallie's eyes met his. Then he was dashing from the stage.

"WHAT THE hell kind of an idea was that?" Ed Fabian growled. "You almost spoiled the show."

Tom was miserable. He had chewed a blister on his lower lip. Hallie watched him from the leather couch with worried eyes. Fabian was pale with anger.

"Look, mister," Fabian continued. "I told you piano players are a dime a dozen. I don't go for that temperament deal, even from my stars. Get it?"

"I said I was sorry!" Tom growled. But his eyes begged forgiveness from her.

Mr. Fabian," Hallie broke in before the other could continue. "I think Tim isn't wholly to blame. He worked very hard rehearsing, and I know that when he should have been sleeping he was writing arrangements for me."

She spoke the truth. But Tom knew that wasn't the reason he had left the stage in such panic-stricken haste. The reason she gave seemed to satisfy Fabian, however. The thunder left his brow and presently he was smiling again. He stepped over to the girl, patted her shoulder and said: "I've got an idea you're going to be here a long time, honey. Well. No show tomorrow. Tuesday the boys from the papers and trade sheets will be on hand. But I don't think we have to worry. Or do we, Gaynor?"

"No-o," Tom said wearily. "From now on no worries."

They started to leave when Fabian halted them. "Going without your pay?"

"You mean...?" Tom was puzzled.

"Sunday night's pay night. You and Hallie get the other half of the grand."

"I'll take it," Tom said.

"You'll take it? What's the matter? Doesn't she get any of it?"

Hallie looked bewildered. "But of course Tom will take it," she said. "Why shouldn't he?"

Fabian's shoulders heaved in the custom-fitted dinner jacket. He pulled out the cash box and slid across the crisp bills. Tom put them in his pocket without looking at them and took Hallie's arm.

"See you Tuesday," he said. And to Hallie, after the door closed on Fabian, "I've got something to do. Be a sweet kid and grab a cab and go to your hotel. Don't mind, do you?"

She blew him a kiss from the elevator door...

THE CHANT of the stickman was the only human sound: "...Acey-deucey; crap! Same man shootin'. Lay your bets..." And then the clicking sound of chips on the board.

Tom bit his lip. The dice had to get hot! He shoved the last of his chips on the 'pass' line, shook the cubes hard and threw them against the rail. Boxcars! Another crap. He grunted sourly, turned and shoved his way through the crowd pressed against the crap table.

Five hundred bucks shot to hell, he thought. *Her money. Not mine. Her's! A good thing she's got the dough that was left after the dress and suit were bought.*

"No luck, Gaynor?" a voice stopped him in his blind walk to the elevator.

It was Fabian.

"How the hell do you know?"

"I can spot a loser a mile away. Especially a bad loser."

"Oh. I thought maybe a guy didn't stand a chance of winning in this house."

Fabian's eyes blazed. The anger died and a drowsy look came into his eyes. His lips curled in sardonic humor. "You got a fast lip, fella. Could be I might have to slow it down."

"Could be. Not you, though."

"Probably not. But don't worry. When the time comes, I'll see to it that you're well taken care of."

"I'll hold my breath till then."

It wasn't until Tom was in the elevator that he remembered Fabian had been talking to the piano player in the band at the time...

* * *

She hadn't noticed it until weeks had gone by. Then she couldn't help

it. He seemed to be losing weight; his clothes hung loosely on his frame, and his face was gaunt, hollow-cheeked, haggard-eyed. More, he seemed suddenly slovenly. Now and then he didn't shave. And once he had appeared on the stage without a tie.

It was the day after the tie incident. Tom had called for Hallie, as usual, for their brunch. He needed a shave and his eyes were red-rimmed, as though from lack of sleep.

"Tom," she began hesitantly. "I've never mixed in your affairs. And maybe I shouldn't now. But, well I can't help it. Is there something wrong?"

It was as though she had touched him with a hot iron. He took a step to the side, looked at her with eyes which showed panic, pain and fear inextricably mixed. "What do you mean? There's nothing wrong! Or maybe you'd like to know what's happening to the dough?"

She stopped dead. Unbidden anger sharpened her voice: "All right then. It wasn't what I meant. But since you've brought it up. Just what have you been doing with the money. Certainly the hundred dollars a week isn't my share."

"So! All that talk about trusting me was just talk, eh? Yeah! You trust me. Far as you can throw me. Well. Don't worry. You'll get it. Every last penny. See...?"

Her eyes were wide in hurt. Her lips quivered and suddenly she was running down the street. He called to her but his voice was a dry whisper in his throat. He moved slowly, head bent, eyes half-closed in hidden pain.

"Young man," a voice panted up at him. "Oh, dear! I thought you were going to drag me across town."

For a second or two Tom didn't

recognize the pinched features, the bright beady eyes, the tiny figure of Mr. Destiny. When he did he tried to shake off the fingers holding so tightly to the cloth of his jacket.

"So overwrought. *Come come*, Tom, my boy. It isn't seemly, this struggling. And so useless. Now then. That's better..."

Tom shook himself. Shook the bitterness out of his eyes and from his lips. He came to a sudden decision. It was as though fate... He gave the little man at his shoulder a sharp glance. Fate... But he had once said he didn't believe in fate. "Yeah," he said softly. "Yeah. I think maybe you and I ought to have a talk."

"Good! I was *hoping* you would say that. I was preparing a cup of tea. Join me...?"

NOT A thing had changed. Not even the wiping of the dust from the cases. Tom fell wearily into the chair Mr. Destiny offered.

"You seem troubled, my boy," the old man said as he busied himself with the pouring. "H'mm! *Very-troubled*. I'm an old man. Seen a great deal. *Greatdeal*. Always helps to talk it over. Out with it!"

"Who are you?" Tom asked. The world seemed to stand still while the little old man with the bright beady eyes stopped pouring.

"Why, I'm Mr. Destiny. The man who buys, so that he may sell. A bad business, really. I make very little money at it, to tell the truth. Aah! Money. So much trouble because of it. Lover's quarrels..."

"That's it!" Tom burst out. "You knew. Yet you weren't there. You knew we quarreled. Like you knew my name. I'd never told you. Like you knew all about Hallie. Like you know about the spinning wheel and

the *Hill-people* who come to Ed Fabian's every night. They used to smile and laugh. Now they sit and just look at me. Why do they look at me? As though they were waiting for something? Why must I play that song, 'Over The Mountain' for Hallie's last encore? Why?"

The old man's smile was a little tired, a little sad, but patient. He had not stopped his pouring of the tea while Tom was in his tirade. Now he finished, shoved over one cup before Tom and seated himself across from the other. He lifted the cup, drained it and put it down. His usually quick voice, deepened, slowed in measured speech: "When the last of the skein is spun from the spindle the garment Fate is weaving will be complete. There was a beginning and she is the end. But there had to be an instrument. Our paths crossed as it was ordained. So you must walk it to the end. *They* will protect her to the very last. And when their work is done they will fade into the mists from which they appear, never to come again. But you, Tom, must work your way alone, unaided, until the light of what is at your side becomes visible. Now, if you will excuse me? I am tired..."

The beaded-cloth curtains rustled as Mr. Destiny parted them and stepped past...

THE APPLAUSE died down, the lights came on and people stepped onto the dance floor as the band took over, after Hallie's last encore. Tom stepped away from the doors and waited for Hallie to come out. He paid no attention to the man who was at her side.

"Hallie, I'm sorry. But something happened..."

"Yes, Tom. I know. It happened long ago. So long ago. And now it's

all over. Please, Tom. Mr. Fabian is waiting for me."

"Sure, Jack," the man at her side suddenly said. "The boss is waiting for her. Uh, hunh! And he don't like waiting..."

It was too late to stop her. She had stepped into the elevator before he could follow.

"...Yeah. I knew I dug you. Took me a while. But I figured I'd seen that hung-up pan of yours before. Thomas Gaynor Hardin. The guy who was barred from the concert stage. For gambling with advances and not keeping playing dates. A petty thief. A real hung-up Joe."

Abruptly many things became clear to Tom. This man was the piano player, the one who had first mentioned he looked familiar. The one who had been at Fabian's side the first night Tom had shot crap. He was dressed in tails...

"You played for Hallie, tonight?" Tom asked softly.

"Yep. And gonna keep playin' for her. Fabian's say-so."

"I see. I suppose you told Fabian about my past?"

"Look, Jack," the other said gently, as though Tom were being stupid. "You had a good gig. But you loused it up. Am I supposed to be a stupe too?"

"You told Fabian. I wondered why he changed his mind about giving me advances. He knew I'd play craps. So he gave me all the advances I wanted. The dice were crooked so he stood to lose nothing. And I fell in. Like a baby fresh from the cradle. Uh, hunh! No wonder the *hill-people* stopped smiling. I was hurting Hallie. I, who love her. Well. Maybe it's not too late..."

He could hear the murmur of voices beyond the panelled door. He rapped and Fabian called for him to

enter. From the man's look of surprise he hadn't expected the caller to be Tom. Hallie, white-faced and tense was seated by the desk.

"Oh. It's you," Fabian said shortly. "Well. Maybe it's to the good. I was just telling Hallie about the advances you took."

"He's telling the truth," Tom said quietly. "I took all that money and gambled it away. It was my vice in the long ago. I thought I'd gotten rid of it. Hah! Then I got that lucky piece from Mr. Destiny. It worked. So I thought I'd really put it to use. Lucky piece! Junk..." He slipped the disk from his pocket and tossed it on the desk. It struck and something fell away from one edge.

Fabian picked it up and peeled off what was a heavy piece of foil. Tom watched him with lifted brows. Abruptly Fabian burst into laughter. "Lucky piece was it? Get this. 'Gibson's Tavern. Good for one buck in trade'. Here. Maybe you'll need it."

But Tom was looking at the girl. The disk fell at his feet. "Hallie. Maybe it's too late. I'm hoping it isn't. I love you. I loved you from the moment when we sat on that park bench. I've done you wrong and to say that I'll make it up would be foolish. You just don't hurt people you love. But this money I've taken from you. I'll return every cent of it. Every cent."

He wasn't sure. But he thought he had read forgiveness in her eyes as he turned from them and walked through the open door...

TOM KNEW what he had in mind to do was going to be the most difficult he had ever attempted. He realized the only way to make enough money to repay Hallie was to return to the concert stage. But he had be-

trayed his agents, the concert impresarios and his public. Their memories were long. Could he do it? He'd damn well try, anyway, he thought, as he walked down the darkened streets.

It wasn't until he was a block from it that he became conscious the street he was on was also that on which Mr. Destiny had his shop. He ran quickly down the stairs. The shop was in darkness, but he expected it to be. He peered through the window, trying to pierce the darkness within. Hopelessly. He thought that if he could shake the door hard enough the bell might tinkle and awake Mr. Destiny.

The door was open.

Tom snapped the light switch on and walked back, through the beaded-cloth curtains. There was nothing beyond. Nothing but the walls. Not a bed or a chair or even the trace of anything in the dust that covered the floor. It was dust which had never been violated... He turned and ran from the room, the shop, as though from fear and horror. Nor did he stop until he sank from exhaustion on a bench in the park.

He sat, head buried in hands, and tried to puzzle it out. Yet he knew it was impossible. Mr. Destiny had been flesh and blood. He had felt his touch on the cloth of his jacket. Those hadn't been phantom fingers which had placed the disk in his hand. Then where was Mr. Destiny? And who was going to answer the one question Tom wanted answered? How was it Tom saw the *hill-people*?

Did the answer lay in Mr. Destiny's words, "... There had to be an instrument"? Did they mean the piano was the instrument, or Tom? He thought back on the last encore Hallie had sung. It had been *Over The Mountain*. And remembered that for

the first time he hadn't seen the *hill-people*.

Then it wasn't the piano.

"...When the last of the skein is spun from the spindle the garment Fate is weaving will be complete..." The words were branded on his brain. The spindle on the miniature spinning wheel never moved until the song, *Over The Mountain* was played. Tom knew then he had to make good. For otherwise the *hill-people* could not protect her. He had to make good so that he could return and play for her.

For he had known for a long time Ed Fabian wanted her.

THE ROAD back for Tom was incredibly hard. It took more than just courage. It took the remembrance of the trust she had placed in him to light his way. And one by one he got over the obstacles and hindrances. One by one he broke down the suspicions until at last he was given the chance to play again.

Though he did not see Hallie he saw someone who saw her every night. The little fat trumpet player who had been the first to acknowledge her genius. Tom saw him often. And learned that all was not well. The trumpet player's name was Billy Sims.

"Haggerty's real crazy. You know, be-bop," Billy said. He ain't a long-hair like you, Tom. Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with long-hair. Matter of fact Hallie did better with you at the eighty-eight..."

"All right, Billy. I'm with you," Tom said. "How's Hallie? How's the show?"

"They still come to hear Hallie. There's something missing, Tom. Hallie's changed."

"How?"

"Oh, hell! We all go upstairs once in a while. You know that. She's taken up craps. I tried to steer her off but Haggerty got red-eyed and said he'd stool to Fabian. I think Ed Fabian's behind it. The talk is that she owes Fabian a left lung. In advances."

Billy left to get back to the place for rehearsal. Their talk took place three days before Tom's debut in the Civic Opera Theater. The next few days passed in a sort of daze. He rehearsed wildly night and day. The afternoon of the concert Tom was a nervous wreck. He knew not alone his career but his and Hallie's future depended on his succeeding. He was alone in the hall he had rented at the music school where he did his practicing.

The music was before him. He had played it until he was letter perfect. Suddenly he was frightened. The thought he might fall had come to him. His fingers ran over the keys and as though through a will other than his they struck chords, notes they hadn't touched for weeks. *Over The Mountain*. He played it as he used to. There was a difference this time. No spine-tingling chills, no gripping of his innards, no fear. It was as if *they* were with him...

HE DIDN'T bother reading the revues. He knew! There had been no doubt for him. He had been a terrific success. Now it would only be a short while before he could give Hallie the money he had used so badly. And more important, tell her she had not made a mistake in her trust, even though it seemed she had. Later, there would come the time for asking her to marry him...

But first he had to tell her.

The band was on the stand which meant Hallie had just left for the

hour and a half break between the second and third shows. Tom remembered the show breaks. He made it a point to skirt the tables close to the glassed-in bar. Billy was sure to see him. The trumpet player caught his eye. Tom jerked his thumb up and Billy nodded.

So she was upstairs.

She was at the crap table. Fabian was at her side. Tom stood behind them and watched her. She did not win even once. She turned at last to say something to Fabian and Tom was shocked at what he saw. She seemed the same until he saw her eyes. They were without expression, staring. Fabian kept shaking his head to what she was saying. Finally she shrugged her shoulders and turned to go. Fabian moved with her. They saw Tom at the same time.

She came to him with a smile of pleasure but Fabian was obviously not pleased at his being there.

"Hallie," Tom said, "I've good news."

"I know. Billy called the theater right after the concert. Oh, I'm so glad."

"Yeah," Fabian broke in. "She's glad, you're glad, everyone's glad but Ed Fabian. Let's go to the office."

"What for? I want to see Hallie alone. There are things we've got to talk over."

"That's why we're going to the office," Fabian said.

It was then Tom noticed the two men standing close to his side. He recognized them. Fabian's muscles. Tom took her arm and they marched to the office. The muscle men walked behind them a few paces.

Tom took a stand at her side. The muscle men stood to either side of the door. Fabian spread himself behind the desk, his feet on the desk

top.

"What's the pitch, Fabian?" Tom asked.

"Pitch? No pitch. The chick owes me dough. Heavy scratch. Twelve grand in advances. I just want to know where I stand. A man's entitled to that I think?"

"You're not a man and you're not entitled to anything. I don't know who talked her into shooting craps but that game you run's rigged. I ought to know."

Fabian made a sucking sound through his false uppers. He seemed to think it funny. Abruptly the smile faded and Fabian's feet came off the desk top. "Okay! I don't like her work anymore. She's fired. I want my money. Now what?"

"So she owes it to you," Tom said. "I'll see to it that you're paid. I was given guarantees for fifty thousand dollars for advance concerts. I'll give you my note on what she owes you."

Fabian told him what he could do with the note.

And Tom took the step forward which separated them and pounded his fist into Fabian's face. Blood spurted from smashed flesh. Tom broke Fabian's nose with the one punch.

He heard Hallie scream from behind. Then lightning struck him. There was searing pain, and after a while the room stopped spinning. There was a sticky wetness on his face and his side hurt with every breath.

"Hold it, boys," a nasal voice was saying. "We got time for that. I want some fun first..."

Hallie's arms were about him, her voice sobbing in his ear. "Darling. They hurt you. Oh, please, darling. Don't let them hit you again."

He got to his feet, held her close and looked through his one good

eye at the man behind the desk. Fabian was holding a blood-stained kerchief to his leaking nose. He spoke through the fine fabric:

"Not for twelve. Twenty-five grand. You took it before, you'll take it again. Twenty-five grand in advances. And bring it here. By noon tomorrow."

"But..."

"Shut up! The chick stays here until then. If you don't show..." there was the sound of gurgling laughter.

"Okay. I'll get it. But if you so much as harm a hair on her head..." he let the threat hang on the air.

"You'll do nothing!" Fabian said flatly. "And you ain't going nowhere just yet. That dough is for what she owes me. And interest. But for socking me and for playing me for a chump, that's another thing! No broad plays Ed Fabian like she did me. We're staying here until the show ends."

"**I** LIKE the way you play the piano, Gaynor," Fabian said. He was sitting at table directly below the stand. His strong arms stood to either side of his chair. "So you're going to play and the chick'll sing until I get tired of it. And I've got an idea it's going to be a long while. Go on!"

She sang and he played, until her voice was a whisper and his fingers numb. And still Fabian listened.

"We can't go on much longer," Tom warned.

"Can't? Help 'em, boys," Fabian replied.

One of them rapped Tom's fingers with a blackjack so hard the knuckles split. The other slapped Hallie with the back of his hand across the mouth. A tiny thread of blood slipped from her compressed lips. Tom leaped from his stool and

started toward the one who struck the girl. The blackjack caught him alongside the skull and again everything faded in darkness.

"I love you, Tom," Hallie was saying. "From the first. I lost my trust but I've found it again."

He looked up at her. She was standing over him. The thread of crimson was still flowing. He got to his feet swayed dizzily and touched her mouth gently.

"Okay! Let's go. You've stalled enough. Or do you both want another treatment?"

He went back to the piano. He struck the opening chords and Hallie stiffened abruptly. Her fingers went to the silver cord about her throat and pulled it out. There was a miniature spinning wheel at the end of it. She held it close to her breast as Tom played and she sang. The song was *Over The Mountain...*

Tom couldn't keep his eyes from the spindle. The tiny skein of thread was moving, the entire wheel was moving. And Tom shouted:

"Now. Come from out of the mists! She needs you. Now!"

* * *

They came, wraith-like as if from the floor. They were grim, unsmiling, men and women alike. The *hill-people*. They moved in measured step, a dance Tom had never seen before. A huge circle. He crashed the chords out, forgetting the pain of broken knuckles. And her voice was clear and strong above the sound of the piano. Below the dance continued. Now they circled closer until they were moving around the three men below. Tom could not see Fabian and his strong men clearly. They seemed enveloped in a mist. The dancers were closer now, hiding them. And Tom ended the song in a wild crash of sound.

And echoing the sound came a single wild scream.

They were gone, all of them. And with them the three they had danced about.

Tom ran to Hallie, lifted her from the floor where she had fallen in a faint at the end of the song. He called endearing words to her, patted her hands, stroked her face. She

opened her eyes.

"What happened, Tom?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Fabian and the others are gone. Let's get out of here."

They were at the door when Tom heard the voice. He would have sworn it was Mr. Destiny's voice:

"...It was all arranged from the beginning. Fate, you know..."

THE END