

# Weird Tales

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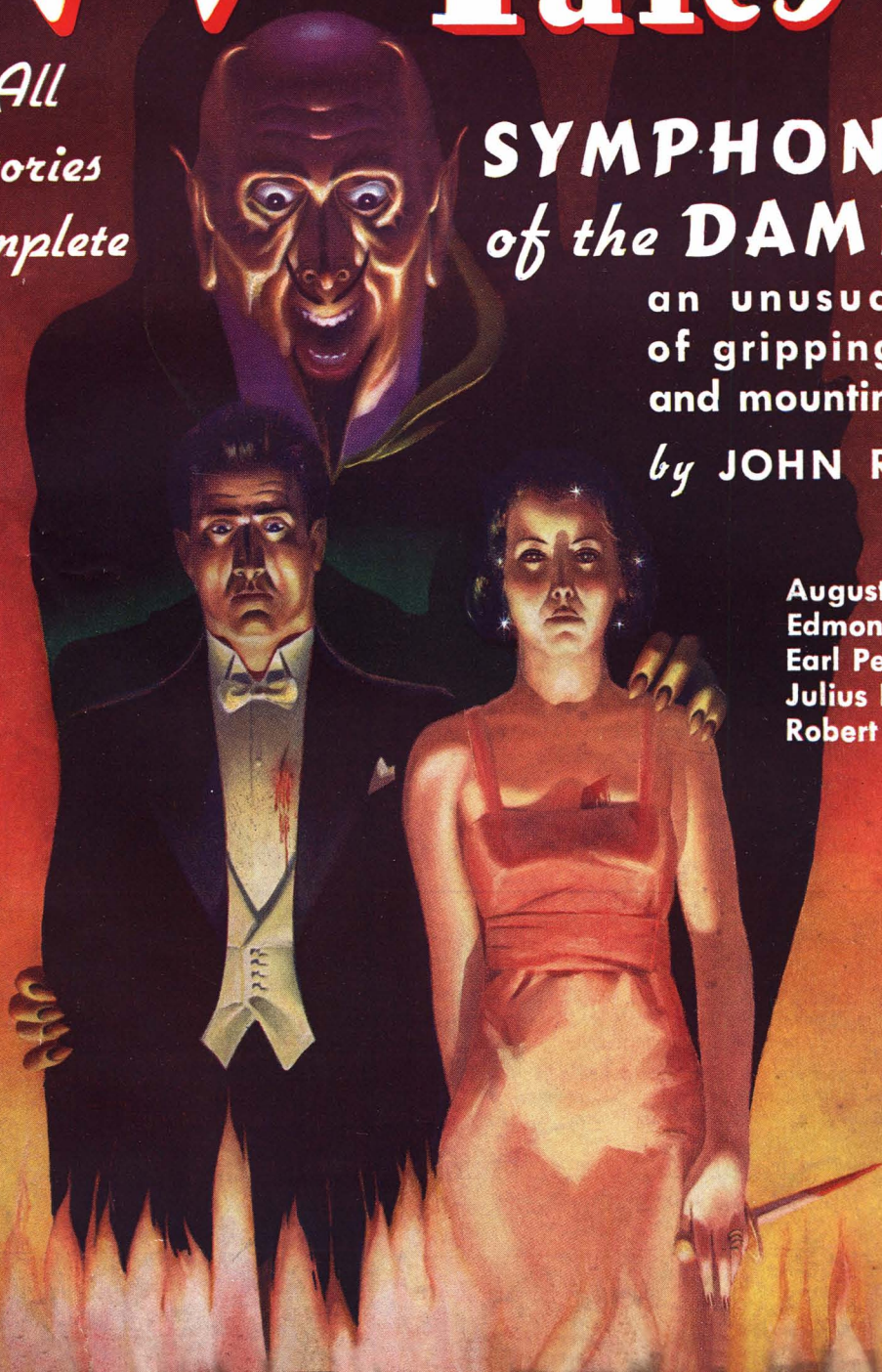
*All  
Stories  
Complete*

## SYMPHONY *of the* DAMNED

an unusual story  
of gripping power  
and mounting horror

by JOHN R. SPEER

August W. Derleth  
Edmond Hamilton  
Earl Peirce, Jr.  
Julius Long  
Robert Bloch



A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

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Volume 29                      CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1937                      Number 4

Cover Design . . . . . Virgil Finlay  
*Illustrating a scene in "Symphony of the Damned"*

Symphony of the Damned . . . . . John R. Speer 386  
*Blasting through a thousand radios, the Black Song crashed into the souls of its listeners—a story of gripping power and mounting horror*

The Witch Walks in Her Garden . . . . . Lea Bodine Drake 412  
*Verse*

Fessenden's Worlds . . . . . Edmond Hamilton 413  
*An amazing weird-scientific story about a man who created a cosmos in miniature*

The Execution of Lucarno . . . . . Julius Long 422  
*A story of stark, staring fear and yawning, abysmal gulfs of horror*

The Shuttered House . . . . . August W. Derleth 432  
*Ghostly and uncanny was the atmosphere of the old house with the French shutters*

The Mannikin . . . . . Robert Bloch 441  
*What was the thing that moved and writhed on Simon Maglore's back?*

The Death Mask . . . . . Earl Peirce, Jr. 453  
*This new tale by the author of "The Last Archer" will fascinate you even while it horrifies*

Fangs of Vengeance . . . . . Nathan Hindin 470  
*A circus story of ravening leopards and a weird black panther that chose its time for vengeance*

So Very Strange! . . . . . Arthur William Bernal 482  
*What happened on that slippery city street? An odd little story*

Black Gold . . . . . Thorp McClusky 484  
*The tale of an atrocity on a slave-ship that came to a shocking discovery*

We Are the Dead . . . . . Henry Kuttner 488  
*A poignant, brief tale of a weird experience in Arlington Cemetery*

Weird Story Reprint:  
  The Dead-Wagon . . . . . Greye La Spina 491  
*A tale of the London Plague, reprinted from WEIRD TALES of ten years ago*

The Eyrie . . . . . 506  
*Our readers express their views about the magazine*

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Symphony of the Damned

By JOHN R. SPEER

*Blasting through a thousand radios, the Black Song carried its message of destruction into the minds and souls of its listeners—an unusual story of gripping power and mounting horror*

## 1. Helgar Gaudet

**A** GREAT invisible audience listened in silent rapture to strange music, sweet and flowing like the soft, rippling notes of a wood-song from some sylvan pool where tranquil lilies float in cool, white splendor. Silver drops of April rain falling upon the warm, brown earth. Golden sunshine inviting the fields to live again. The whole world blooming in the springtime! That was the way Helgar Gaudet's music affected the enchanted millions who heard him play, the night of the fatal broadcast.

Out from the tall, slender tower of the Metropolitan Studio, through the heavy ether of night, his symphony carried a flower-scented melody to your ears.

Who could resist the impelling strains of Helgar Gaudet's music? His music? No! The music of Satan, the evil strains of that dark song of medieval sorcery brought to life again to perform with more potency than ever before. Helgar Gaudet's hell-born orchestra was playing *The Black Song!*

Even now, after all that occurred later in the studio, they doubt that Helgar Gaudet played music made to drive men mad. How could they know, this modern world that smugly believed it had exposed as trickery the Black Arts of the Dead Ages? This scientific world that had produced with machinery even greater magic than Hecate had proclaimed possible over her brewing caul-

drons on the wild, wind-ridden heaths of Scotland!

If you heard him play that night, you will recall how his music conjured up pictures of exquisite beauty in your mind. You closed your eyes and listened. Everything that was good and lovely paraded before you.

But what was this? Somewhere in the glorious tapestry of sound, a strange high note kept recurring. It jarred and grated. Perhaps you thought at first some incompetent player was spoiling heaven's music with his off-key fumbling. But after the first shrill sound had pierced your ears, the whole screaming note had no longer the effect of an accidental discord. With damning significance it belonged to the soul-decaying symphony.

But for a chance in the days to follow that fateful performance those same fiendish notes would have pursued you. Everywhere you went they would have echoed back to you, in the sounds of the street, the running water in your tub, the scratch of your pen upon paper. They would have been there, pursuing you as relentlessly as they did François Currier, the French critic who killed himself; as they still pursue Lorraine DeBreault, the actress, now screaming in a madhouse of Paris, the doctors unable to calm her.

**H**ELGAR had not always known such power with music. In Paris, ten years after the city had ceased its quaking from the fears of German air raids, he



"Tomorrow madness will reign supreme."



had only the hope of great power to come.

It was a warm afternoon late in August, and the long day of rehearsals had transformed the usually gay interior of the Théâtre de Gabrielle into a shadow-haunted workhouse. Even young Rodney Prisnéy, whose American dollars were financing this operatic experiment of Helgar's, was weary of the whole business. Helgar Gaudet was a heartless director in rehearsal. He raged, he threatened and bullied his performers; and when all else failed, he made violent physical attacks upon them.

For a while Rodney had been amused at this sort of theatrical bombast, but now gossip columns were speculating upon just what he would lose through his affiliations with the opera—all of his money, only half of it, or would he escape with just the loss of his heart to Maria Martell?

Although Rodney was paying out money at a faster rate than he liked to think about, he was not concerned with that at all; it was his heart, for he had lost that long ago to Maria. Only a man in love would have sat through those long hours of rehearsal as he did, hearing

again and again the songs he had heard at least a hundred times before.

Rodney watched Maria now as she tried so hard to please the critical ear of Helgar. Her soft, lovely face looked so pale and helpless in the dim light that shone down from the flies of the stage. He had tried two hours ago to persuade her into leaving the rehearsal and getting away from the stuffy theater, but she had refused.

"No, dearest," she had said, "I can't do that. Helgar needs me. His opera must be perfect when it opens; you know that."

And so she stayed and rehearsed; she stayed, and took the slanderous insults that Helgar hurled at her when she failed to please him. What was more, she seemed not to mind what he said to her in rehearsal. Of course Rodney knew that she was no doubt used to all of that, but just the same it was unpleasant to hear her talked to in the manner Helgar used. And Helgar Gaudet was supposed to be in love with Maria also! If that was love, Rodney thought, it certainly wasn't his idea of expressing it. Opera or no opera, he wouldn't keep Maria going at the pace Helgar had set.

He decided to try once more to stop the rehearsal.

"Hey, *maestro*, how about a little rest?" he called down from his seat in the box. "That ballet of yours looks like a bunch of wilted orchids."

Helgar turned and smiled coldly at his patron. "*Monsieur* does not realize that perfection is demanded of a ballet, even though the charming ladies may not appear so beautiful. Their make-up will hide their weary looks but not their clumsiness. Again, Maria, sing your last notes, and please pay less attention to the left stage box!" These latter words Helgar almost hissed. "This is not ordinary music that I have written. It is

something different, and we must rehearse and rehearse, and then rehearse some more! It must be perfect."

Rodney gave up quietly. There was little he could do if Maria insisted on staying. He could stop Helgar Gaudet, probably, but that would not please Maria; so the only thing he could do was wait while they "rehearsed, and rehearsed, and then rehearsed some more."

Indeed Helgar Gaudet had not written ordinary music. In any number of respects it departed from the conventional. Helgar knew that unless his effort pleased Paris (that meant pleasing the critic, François Currier) his career would be over. If François Currier chose to be pleased with the opera, the papers would carry his praise to all of Paris. Helgar would be famous. But if the music did not meet with Monsieur Currier's admiration, all of Paris would be laughing at the reviews the critic would write. Helgar had known the power of François Currier's withering paragraphs on several occasions.

With this knowledge well in mind, he was all the more irritated when a second violin squeaked discordantly.

"You fool, you blind, deaf, dumb, inexcusable fool!" he screamed from his stand in the orchestra pit. "Can't you play? Can't you read music? Have you forgotten even the first principles of it?"

"I'm sorry, *maestro*, but I am so tired," the unhappy violinist offered meekly.

"Tired!" shouted Helgar, running his hands through the heavy, black hair that swirled thickly over his head. "You are tired? We have no time to be tired. Tomorrow night this opera opens. No one will care whether you are tired. Will François Currier say of my opera, 'It was very poor, but that is excusable because a second violinist, Monsieur Enré, was tired?'"

He rapped vigorously with his baton

upon the stand. "Again—we take that passage again!"

THE wretched orchestra seemed to sigh in unison as they resumed their playing. Maria smiled limply from the center of the stage as she began her song. The empty seats in the theater stared back at her sullenly.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Helgar pressed his fingers into his ears. He shook his head with exaggerated pantomime of pain. "Maria, where is your voice, the voice I taught you to use? Or do you remember that any more? While I realize that there are many who would be content with that pretty face of yours, it is not enough. You sing like a fish-wife!"

Rodney left his seat in the box, and hurried through the stage door. He would not hear Maria talked to in such a way any longer. He would take her away from the rehearsal by force, if necessary.

She saw him starting for the stage, and shook her head, her eyes telling him that she did not want him to make a scene. He paused unwillingly in the wings.

"I am sorry, Helgar. Perhaps if I had a drink of water I could do better," she ventured gently.

"Water? Certainly, my dear. You may have gallons of water if it will help your voice. Champagne if necessary. Where is that simpleton, Feroch? Where is the cringing idiot? I sent him for refreshments an hour ago. One could die of thirst before the dumb brute would bring them. Feroch! Where are you? Asleep somewhere, I suppose. I'll crack your skull, you simpering, hunchbacked, contemptible——"

Helgar's further discussion of Feroch, his only servant, was interrupted by the little man's cowering appearance upon the stage. He was carrying a pitcher of water that was rapidly spilling from his trembling grasp.

"I am sorry, *monsieur*, but I thought——"

"Sorry! You are always sorry, you ugly clown. Be careful! The lady only wants a drink, not a bath, you clumsy clod!"

"It's all right." Maria took the pitcher from Feroch's shaking hand, and drank slowly. "Thank you, Feroch. I feel much better now."

He bowed to her, grateful for the smile she gave him, and took the pitcher again.

"Well, go on—get off the stage, and out of the way!" Helgar shouted. "Don't stand there bowing and scraping like a lover saying his first good-bye."

"*Oui, monsieur*, I am sorry, I——"

Feroch hurried into the wings in time to dodge the heavy book that was thrown at him by Helgar. In his hurry and fright, he pushed headlong into Rodney, who caught him before he fell.

"Oh, Monsieur Prisney, I am so sorry! I did not see you. I am so clumsy. Did I hurt you? I am so——" Feroch began another series of apologies, which Rodney laughingly stopped.

"It's all right, Feroch. Calm yourself. Don't bow up and down to me. I'm not a temperamental artist—just an American fool in Paris!"

"No! No! *Monsieur* is not a fool. He is the kindest man I have ever known," Feroch said earnestly.

Rodney smiled, and looked down at the little fellow, pitying him.

BREATHING heavily, her eyes startled into brightness by Helgar's further raging, Maria sang with greater force, but it was not enough; it was not pleasing him, she knew. He was flaying her with unmerciful language.

"I can't stand this any longer. I'm going to stop him." Rodney started from the wings, but Feroch's hand restrained him.

"Please, *monsieur*, it will only make

matters worse for her. She will not want you to do it," said Feroch.

"Perhaps so, but how can I stand by and see him treat Maria this way? I love her, and the sooner I tell that music-mad composer the better!"

"Oh, no, no, *monsieur!*" There was fright and concern in Feroch's voice. "My master is a very strange man. It is as you say—music-mad. He has only two loves. One, the greater, his music—and then Maria. If you tried to take her from him, he would——"

"What, invite me to fight him?" laughed Rodney, throwing back his head and shaking the blond ringlets that topped his handsome face.

"He is more shrewd than that, *monsieur*. He would plan some slow doom for you both. Oh, I have seen him watching you these past few months. He knows that it was something more than his music that prompted your generous writing of checks for this production. He is well aware of your love for her. But just as he considers this music his very own, so he considers Maria. He took her from the cheap restaurants she used to sing in because she was poor and needed money—he took her from them, and trained her voice. It is his voice, he thinks—his own creation within the beautiful case that is Maria. He gave her that voice, it is true, *monsieur*."

"That is all very well, Feroch, but does he have to browbeat the girl simply because she does not always sing to please him? Let him take his voice: I'll take Maria, if she will only have me. I'll take her away from all of this. If she wants to sing, she may do it in America."

"Oh, *monsieur*, I would be so happy if she would go away with you. But she is loyal to Helgar Gaudet. She is not one to forget quickly, even though love may call her. Oh, she is so good and kind, *mon-*

*sieur*. I would be so happy for you both if—if it could only be."

"Then start getting happy, Feroch, for I am going to see that it is."

"I would miss her though, *monsieur*. I would miss you both. You have been the only people who were ever kind to me. When the *maestro* is angered with me and wants to beat me, she persuades him not to, even refuses to sing for him if he does. She is like an angel."

"Yes, like an angel!" Rodney repeated fervently. "But why do you stand it, Feroch, this cruelty from your master?"

A wry little smile crossed Feroch's countenance. His misshapen shoulders shrugged. "*Monsieur*, I am not the most competent of men, nor am I a very handsome sight to have around. I was very fortunate when the *maestro* gave me employment. I have been with him for many years. Few would have me, I know. Really I am fortunate with my lot, bitter as it often is."

Rodney was forced to admit to himself that perhaps Feroch was right. His little body seemed shriveled and drawn up close about his large head, which was covered with coarse, bushy hair. His teeth jutted out repulsively above his upper lip. Only his eyes prevented him from appearing too hideous. They were soft and kind, swimming continually with a mellow hurt like the devoted eyes of a dog appealing to his cruel master not to beat him.

Two, three, four more hours, Helgar's baton waved from the orchestra pit like a whip lashing over the heads of his musicians. At last he was forced to dismiss the company; he too had become weary of trying to bring music that just now seemed to be gone from the score.

"Tomorrow morning at nine sharp everyone be here. You were terrible, I am

sick of you, but what can I do about it? Go, all of you—get out of my sight!"

He passed his hands over his eyes, which were burning from the long hours of strain, and then dropped into a coma. Feroch waited patiently with Helgar's hat and cane. Maria dropped upon a chair near the footlights. Rodney was at her side, holding her hands and cursing mildly to himself. The rest of the company had hurried out, glad to escape from the theater. The auditorium was dark and echoing with sounds that came in from the streets now lighting up for the evening's gayety.

Feroch was the first to notice the old woman as she hobbled down an aisle of the theater. A strange feeling of unexplainable dread came over him. Slowly she walked to the center of the orchestra pit, and glanced over the music. Her eyes lighted with a green brilliance. It was not so much the sight of the old woman that disturbed Feroch—it was the ring she wore upon her finger.

The old woman began humming to herself the score of Helgar's opera. Helgar awakened quickly from his stupor of exhaustion to behold a filthy-looking hag, whose dirtied brown lips parted over yellowish teeth that broke off in jagged scallops. She seemed quite unconscious of the attention she was attracting.

"Who can she be?" asked Maria.

"She's an evil practitioner, whoever she is," Feroch answered in a very low but serious tone.

"What do you mean—evil practitioner?" Rodney asked, half amused at the apparent weight Feroch had given the words.

"A witch, *monsieur*," Feroch whispered. "You may laugh, but I still believe in them. Notice her face, her hands; notice that ring upon her finger. That is no ordinary trinket or mere piece of jewelry."

"Nonsense! Are you trying to tell me that she has unnatural powers, or something?" Rodney laughed.

"Listen to what she is saying." Feroch cupped his hand to his ear.

The old woman was smiling wickedly into Helgar's face as she said, "I fancy your music, *monsieur*. Some of it is quite acceptable. Yes, some of it—quite good, *monsieur*."

Helgar chose to be sarcastic.

"I am sure you flatter me, madam," he bowed elaborately. "But unless you do me the honor of leaving immediately I will see that you dine this evening in the bastille."

Her cackling laughter made him suddenly angry. Helgar started quickly as if to evict her himself.

"Please, *monsieur*, do not be angry with me. I shall leave. I only came to wish you success for your opera. I know that it means so much to you. But your music will not mean as much to those who listen to it. No, they will not see quite all that you have dreamed of, *monsieur*."

Despite his anger, Helgar was amazed by this ill-gowned old woman's apparent knowledge of his composition.

"You intrigue me, madam. Perhaps I have under-rated you? Could you by any chance be a famous opera diva whose opinions upon music I should know?"

SHE laughed again. Her long fingers reached for the music of his overture. Her voice became soft and refined as she spoke of the music. Maria and Rodney leaned closer over the footlights to listen.

"Perhaps *Monsieur* would do well to hear my opinions. I am the only one in Paris who will ever understand what you really tried to do with this music. You have dreamed of the power music may have over man's imagination. With that end in mind you have attempted to write



music that will capture their minds completely. You give them both beauty and ugliness. The very theme of your opera is that beauty is always destroyed by evil. In your overture you picture the beauty of life, beginning with the first bud of spring, and ending with the final cruel death of winter. You inspire a picture of flowers blooming in a field where two lovers find also the blossoming happiness of their own hearts. Then——"

"Yes, yes, go on," Helgar said impatiently.

"Then you bring into your score the onslaught of a destructive force. You have tried first to inspire beauty; then you try to destroy it with this overwhelming force that is evil. But you do not fully understand what that force is. No one will understand it, *monsieur*, because you have failed.

"Your idea is not new, nor is it impossible. Three centuries ago a great song was played. It accomplished what you have dreamed, and then went on to greater heights. Ah! If *Monsieur* knew the music of that song, his opera would not fail as it will tomorrow eve."

"You mean to say that you think my opera will be a failure?" Helgar scowled.

"A miserable failure, *monsieur*. All of Paris will laugh at you. They will call your music crazy. François Currier, the critic, will destroy you in his paper. Tomorrow night, *monsieur*, your opera will die the same as your flowers and lovers die upon the stage."

"Bah!" Helgar, impressed though not willing to accept her prophecy, sought to dismiss it quickly. "You are a gloomy old hag, and I will hear no more of your babbling about songs three centuries old. Pretty soon you will be wanting to sell me a manuscript of your own writing. My music will not fail."

She laughed again. "We shall see! We shall see! Tomorrow I will be here

to witness your grand performance, *monsieur*."

Now Helgar laughed. Maria and Rodney were also forced to laugh at the thought of the evil-smelling old lady sitting in the opera house during a première performance. She would never be allowed to purchase even a seat in the very last balcony, reserved for the less opulent lovers of music.

"Come, come, I've had enough of this." Helgar pushed her rudely. "I have no doubt that the charming madam has already arranged for the royal box, but I have no time to listen. I shall wait until you arrive tomorrow night with all of your jewels and finery."

At this she turned upon him suddenly, her long fingers thrusting out in front of her like tongs upon a fork. On one was a strange ring, dull and dirty-looking, yet distinctive in its design of a twining serpent.

"I have a jewel or two, *monsieur*!" she flashed. "You do not believe what I have told you, but tomorrow night you will have to. Tomorrow night, *monsieur*, your opera will die!"

The hag turned and hobbled up the aisle, laughing in her cracked voice, laughing all the way until the doors of the theater shut out her laughter, leaving only the echo of it in the empty auditorium. That emptiness seemed to hold only the whispering prophecy: "Tomorrow night, *monsieur*, your opera will die!"

## 2. A Weird Visitor

RODNEY PRISNEY realized the truth of the old hag's statement on the next evening, although he credited her with nothing quite so mysterious as the possession of occult power—mere intuition; he himself should have known the opera would fail; there was something too dis-

concerting about the entire theme. The music was wild and unnatural, sometimes sounding like the hissing of wind through a cleft in the mountains, again like the full force of a cyclone sweeping across the prairie. The audience was more distressed than impressed with it.

Between the acts Rodney strolled through the lobby trying to get as much of the audience's viewpoint as possible, although he felt sure that they would all be agreed upon one thing—Maria's beauty and charm.

François Currier, the critic, beamed with happiness, because there was really nothing he liked better than a chance to turn his sharp wit upon a poor production. Only Maria had been spared from his ill-favor. Rodney swelled with unconscious pride as he heard the critic discussing the opera as far as the first two acts.

"Her face is the only approach to music that I have seen in this—this—shall we say cat-calling affair? In twenty years of musical reviewing, I have never heard such perverted sounds, nor have I seen such beauty in a woman upon the stage. The opera is hopeless. There is only one advantage to the man's music."

"And pray what is that?" asked one of the ladies of his party.

"It is sure to boom the aspirin business. My head is already splitting from his sounds."

This comment was passed from one to another. Everyone laughed because François Currier was an accepted wit as well as an authority; it was smart to laugh at what François Currier said. And he enjoyed it. He was warmly anticipating what he would really do in his review the next morning.

But Helgar's opera did not need the killing comments of François Currier to make its death complete. It was truly dying before the audience. Aside from

the fact that the entire theme of the opera was neither appreciated nor understood, there had been a series of casualties back-stage, enough of them to wreck even an outstanding success. A baby spotlight had fallen on the stage during the second act. The curtains caught and dragged down a flat of scenery at the end of the second act's most important scene. Lorraine DeBreault, one of the leading characters, sang hopelessly off key. Victor Vazzeli, the tenor, forgot his lines. Of the entire cast, only Maria gave the slightest hint of talent.

Helgar, wielding his baton, vainly trying to breathe life into the dead performance, realized his defeat. For a moment he hated Maria for her beauty and charm, but he could not blame her because his music was not appreciated. It was more that he saw in her success the freedom that she would gain from him. She would no longer need his help. She would be greater than he was, after tonight. This lovely poise and beauty that he had given her, this voice that he had trained, would never be his. It would go to the young American with his money and his youth.

Oh, if he could only have the power to make his music capture them. Why couldn't music hypnotize them? What notes, what chords would give him this power? How he would like to make that smirking critic bow to him! How he would like to feel that his music held them helpless! What joy it would be to turn and behold that sea of disinterested and politely bored faces suddenly entranced!

Casting occasional furtive glances over his shoulder to the audience, he caught a disheartening glimpse of François Currier looking coldly down upon him. He knew what the man was thinking, and what he would do to him. His mind filled with hatred for the critic, for his

power. In his helplessness before the silent audience that condemned his music, in his desperation of mingled jealousy and hope, he thought also of the hag and her prophecy. Could music such as she spoke of really exist—music that did what he had tried and failed?

**W**HEN it was over, he ran them all from the theater, told them he never wanted to see their faces again. He was through! The flowers that came pouring back-stage for Maria enraged him all the more.

"It is your form they like," he said to her bitterly. "You sing with it. They did not care about my music because they could not understand it. You are what they understand. Every man in the audience held a clandestine affair with you in his mind."

"That's enough out of you!" Rodney stepped forward threateningly.

"Oh, you do not like that?" Helgar laughed harshly. "You are not content with taking her from me; you want more—you want to deny me the privilege of telling her what I think. Very well then, take her. Oh, she will go with you gladly enough."

"Oh, please, Helgar—why must you talk this way?" There was disappointment in her voice. She could not understand the bitterness of his thoughts. If the music had failed, she had not, but wasn't she his own creation?

"Oh, go on. Out of my sight. I am sick of you—sick of everyone. Don't stand there taunting me with your love for each other. Take it and go. Go to America with its high standards of art, Maria. They will appreciate a pretty face and figure. They won't care if you sing like a crow. Nor will you care, so long as you may have your success. You are happy, smug and content with your art. Take it, give it to this young Ameri-

can fool; his dollars far outnumber his brains. Take your success and eat it! Eat it!"

Maria fled from him in tears. The other members of the cast accepted his denunciation of their ability, and humbly folded up their make-up kits; they were almost glad to be leaving. Only the tempestuous Lorraine DeBreault ventured to say something on her behalf. She was to regret this later.

"You blame us?" Her black eyes snapped. "You poor maddened fool! You think that anyone could make your music sound right? You took a frog's song, croaking to its mate, and tried to make it beautiful. You—you impossible composer of discordant sounds! Wait until tomorrow when François Currier reviews your opera. He will say who was to blame for this evening's wretched performance. He will say that no one could make anything of your impossible music."

"Get out of here! Out, I say!" Helgar whitened with rage.

Lorraine DeBreault left with a final contemptuous toss of her head.

**S**LOWLY Helgar walked to his dressing-room. He felt weak and tired; his anger and disappointment had exhausted him—but it was still there, smoldering with dangerous fire that wanted to flare up again, to destroy something, to avenge the hurt to his egotism.

Feroch watched his master quietly but with fright and dread. He knew from Helgar's look what was coming. He knew all too well that somehow his master would reason that he, Feroch, who knew little or nothing of music, had caused the failure of his opera. This was a part of the meanness of his job—as much a part of it as helping his master don his coat, or shine his shoes. When there was no one else to be made the

object of Helgar's rage, there was always Feroch.

"Well, don't stare at me like that, you blithering, thick-skulled dolt! Are you happy that I have failed? Does it give you secret pleasure, you ugly whelp?"

Helgar made as if to strike his cringing servant, when the door of his dressing-room suddenly opened. There was a rustle of silk and a silvery tinkle of jewelry. The room lighted mysteriously. In the doorway appeared a strange woman of breath-taking beauty.

Her lustrous eyes surveyed Helgar quietly. The raven hair that framed the sharp yet distinctly beautiful lines of her face seemed to be sprinkled with the sparkle of many precious stones. Her silken dress was of red flame. It was as if she stood in fire, only her face showing soft and cool above it.

She smiled slowly. "May I come in, *monsieur*?"

Her voice was a deep melody. With assured tread she entered the room. In her hands she clasped several sheets of a very old manuscript.

Feroch trembled and his eyes opened wide in terror as he recognized the serpent ring upon her finger. The ring now seemed alive—the serpent was brilliant with many colors, and it moved as if it were alive, a suddenly aroused reptile preparing to coil and strike. He did not like to believe what he was now thinking.

Helgar's thoughts were speeding back to the prophecy of the hag. Could this be—she spoke, and then he knew it was—yet—

"You do not recognize me, *monsieur*?" she laughed. "I told you that I would be here tonight to see your opera. And I brought my jewels and finery. Now may I talk with you—alone?"

Feroch bowed and hurried from the room, closing the door behind him. Panting heavily, his heart thumping with wild

bewilderment, he leaned against the door.

The rest of what occurred in that dressing room only Feroch could tell, as he heard it from outside. What he heard no one believed, not even Rodney Prisney, who should have listened to him.

### 3. *The Black Song*

"YOU must believe me, *monsieur*," Feroch pled the next day with his friend.

Rodney listened kindly, but with little faith. He was too happy over the thought of sailing with Maria to America.

"I can't promise to believe you, Feroch, but I will listen to your story." Rodney laughed. "It will amuse me until two o'clock. Then Maria and I have an important engagement with a man who sells jewelry. What can you expect me to believe of such a fantastic story anyway, Feroch? I'm too happy because Maria has consented to marry me, but even if I wasn't happy I couldn't believe a story like yours. First you tell me this woman was an old hag, that unspeakably hideous old woman we saw in the theater, and now you tell me she was the most beautiful woman a man could ever see. Impossible, Feroch!"

"Oh, I know it sounds unbelievable, but I saw her with my own eyes. There she was, standing there, just as he was raising his hand to strike me. The way she appeared there—it wasn't real, and neither was anything she said, but I heard it, *monsieur*. I listened at the door.

"She spoke about the failure of his music. He told her he did not wish to talk of it. Then she asked him to play a piece of music for her. I saw it in her hand when she came in, a faded old manuscript with ragged edges and yellowed pages. He finally consented to play it on the piano that was in his dressing-room. I listened. I tell you, *mon-*

*sieur*, I have never heard music so beautiful.

"He played at first slowly, as if he didn't care. But later—as he played—it was like a mad race of sounds. Then the music stopped abruptly in the very middle of a bar.

"He begged her to give him more of it, saying, 'It's glorious, divine—but it is not complete. Pray, give me the rest of it. I must hear it all.'

"Then she said, 'Most men have regretted hearing the end of this song, *monsieur*.'

" 'Bah! They were fools!' he said. 'No man with a human heart could resist it. It is everything I have ever tried for in music. It is beyond me. I would give my soul for that music.'

"She laughed softly, and said, 'Your soul, *monsieur*? Ah, how easily men bandy that word about! They would give their soul for the woman they love, their soul for a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese when they are hungry. How many men really would give their soul if a market should be found for it?'

" 'I would give anything for that song,' Helgar said.

" 'Your soul?' she asked.

" 'Yes, yes, my soul!' he said.

" 'I see you are not a very religious man,' she laughed, and then asked more seriously, 'Do you believe you have a soul?'

" 'Of course I do,' he answered her, 'although I do not spend all of my time in contemplation of it. I live for my music. It is there that I come closest to my soul. My sins may be many upon this earth, but I am still young enough to live with them. When I grow very old, I shall do something about redeeming my soul.'

" 'But if you gave your soul away for a song, *monsieur*, it would not be yours to redeem.'

" 'I do not care,' he cried impatiently. 'I want that song, and I will do anything to have it.'

"Then she answered, *monsieur*, an awful answer. It made me tremble. I have prayed all morning to the Blessed Virgin because I fear for all of us. She told him that she belonged to the Supreme Master of the Evil Force. She was Satan's and the music he had just played belonged to her master.

"Oh, I know what it is, *monsieur*. I have read in old books of this music—it is the *Black Song*. No one can hear the entire song without losing himself for ever. She said so herself. She said that to have this music was to possess a great power over mere mortals. From what I have heard of the song, I know that she is right. It has not been played on this earth for three centuries."

RODNEY by now had become quite interested in Feroch's story, but his interest was more in what he believed was a fine exhibition of a superstitious mind concocting fantastic tales, than in the sincerity of his story.

"Three hundred years is a very long time, Feroch," he said soberly. "Where did you say you heard of this—this what do you call it—the *Black Song*?"

"From my old tutor, *monsieur*. You see I was not always poor. My father was once a prosperous business man. We lived in London, and in Italy, and many places on the Continent. During my childhood I had my own tutor, because of our traveling—and because of my misshapen body it was not pleasant to go to a common school. Old Professor DeFoe, my tutor, had many books on the forgotten arts, and many stories that he used to tell me of things no one talks of today. He believed in them."

"Then that explains it," said Rodney. "You were impressed early in your life



with these stories from a seemingly harmless old professor. No wonder you can tell such a tale to me. It is your imagination running riot with you, Feroch. I have no doubt that you slept while Helgar entertained some lady—who it was, I don't know or care—but please, Feroch, no story of a *Black Song*, or an ugly old witch who turns into a beautiful woman in the evening."

"No, no, I did not sleep, *monsieur*. I was as wide awake as I am now. I heard it all through the door. She spoke of Helgar's ability to play and understand great music. Then she told him of a three-century search for another mortal who would dare play her song. The last possessor had gone to join his soul, she said. She did not talk of herself as an ordinary person. She spoke of centuries, of old courts, and kings, and empires.

"This music was her possession, the gift she bestowed upon those who found favor with her, and proved daring enough. She spoke of a long, wandering search for a mortal man who would again be her lover.

"It was then that he seemed to go mad over her beauty, forgetting his love of Maria entirely. She told him that those who touched her lips at night kissed fire. He swore that to touch such beauty he would risk all the fires of eternal damnation. Then, *monsieur*, he kissed her!

"She said, 'You have taken the first step. The coming dawn prevents you from going further. Think well of what I have told you. Consider your soul, if you will. Tomorrow evening I will return here. Then, if you desire the bargain I will make, you shall have your music.'

"He pleaded with her to stay, but she hurried out of the room. I ran away from the door, and hid behind a costume trunk. I did not want her to know that

I had been listening. She hurried down the corridor of the dressing-rooms; and as soon as I thought it safe, I followed her to see where she went.

"I tell you, *monsieur*, I heard her slam the stage door that leads into the alley. She went past old Papa Pierre, the door-keeper. He was awake, but when I asked him if he had seen a beautiful woman in red silk go out the door, he laughed. Yes, he laughed at me, *monsieur*, and said, 'If you mean that monstrosity who must be a bat come to life in human form, I have seen her, but no beautiful woman has come by me this late hour!'

"There was no other way for her to leave the theater from where Helgar's dressing-room is located. She had to go through that corridor and out the stage exit. I dashed into the alley—and there, chopping along the cobblestones and darting in and out of the crooked lane, was only the form of the old woman in the same ragged dress she had worn that day. It was the hag!"

**F**EROCH finished breathlessly. Surely Rodney would believe some of what he had told him.

"An excellent story, Feroch," applauded Rodney, "but I advise you to tell it for just that—a story."

"Oh, please, *monsieur*, if you doubt me, come there tonight. We'll hide in the theater and watch. You will see that she is not a character of my imagination. I tell you it is unholy. Please come with me. Don't you realize that with the power of that music the *maestro* could take Maria from you? He hates you, and he could make you a victim of its spell. Please say you will come. She will be there at midnight."

"Let her be. I shall be with Maria, and tomorrow we will be sailing for America. Now I've given you too much of my time already. If I listen to any

more, I will be forced to think you have been using hop. So on with your hat, Feroch, and out! Let Helgar Gaudet have his evil lady with her satanic music, and let's hope that her music is not as awful as his own."

He clapped Feroch's small hat upon his head, whirled the little man around until he was dizzy, and then sent him, still objecting helplessly, out the door.

That night Feroch cautiously secreted himself within the theater. The place was deserted; Helgar had arranged to send everyone away; even old Pierre, the door man, had been given five francs and told to go home and stay there until the next morning.

Midnight was approaching, and Helgar paced alone up and down the empty expanse of the dark and deserted stage.

He did not know what manner of strange contract this mysterious woman would present, but he did know that this music meant everything to him; it meant power, a supernatural power. He would have it even at the price of his soul.

There came a silken rustle and a silvery tinkle of jewelry. . . .

#### 4. *An Unholy Wedding*

FROM his vantage-point high in the scenery loft, Feroch watched the weird rites that took place. The mysterious woman of the serpent ring had returned as she had promised. Helgar proclaimed himself ready to risk everything for the possession of the music.

"Then you must join the circle of my master, surrendering to him your soul." She spoke in deep tones of heavy meaning. "Know you now, Helgar Gaudet, that there are only two forces in the world; the force of evil and the force of good. The weak, the timid are within the circle of good, and they eat humble bread for it. When you give up your

soul to my master, you come into power. My master has many gifts of power to offer to those who would serve him. Some are endowed with shrewd minds for collecting gold, some rule the fields of battle. My gift was the ring of immortality, and this song. Down through the centuries I have carried this song to those who wedded me for it."

Walking slowly about him as he stood upon the darkened stage, she drew a circle of fire.

"This is your last chance to retain your soul. If you would weaken, say so now," she warned. "You are standing within the first inner circle. Speak to me if there is fear in your heart, my bridegroom. Soon comes the Master to wed us. My song shall be my dowry to you."

Helgar remained silent.

With a wild cry, she whipped from her bosom a dagger, and plunged it into his breast. Feroch covered his eyes in horror. But when he opened them, he found that Helgar was still alive, and that the dagger was now plunged into the woman's breast. Blood dripped red and hot from its hilt.

From Helgar's breast a thin, blue, vaporish ring of smoke curled slowly upward and vanished into the air. The ring of fire closed in and danced about them. From out of it came a voice that rumbled like distant thunder.

"Dost thou, Helgar Gaudet, take my loyal daughter for thy eternal wife?" asked the booming voice.

From out of the flames came Helgar's answer, "I do!"

"Dost thou, my daughter, Morella, take this man for thy wedded husband, to serve him faithfully as thou hast done me as long as the power of the ring shall last?"

"I do!" answered Morella.

From her hand she withdrew the ser-

pent ring. Placing it upon Helgar's finger, she spoke again.

"This ring is a symbol of the power of my master. For centuries I have worn it. Nothing can harm me when it is upon my finger. But were I to lose the ring, then my power would die, and I would go to join my soul. But with this ring you and I will go on for ever. My blood is within your heart, and yours within mine. The ring is upon your finger. It has joined your life to mine. In this one moment, to prove my love for you I have risked mortality."

Hastily she withdrew the ring from his finger and placed it again upon her own.

Feroch's senses reeled. He felt as if he would faint. Indistinctly he could hear the chant of the third voice completing the unholy wedding. The flames blazed higher, seeming to touch the ceiling, yet having no effect upon it. This was a fire of Satan's own control. He had brought it for the festivities, a fire that did not destroy, but only transferred the soul of Helgar Gaudet to its vault in hell. Ferroch could feel his lungs bleeding from the phosphorus fumes. His hand gripped tighter about the little crucifix he wore.

Feroch closed his eyes, and felt the pain of his lungs that cried out to be relieved; yet he dared not make a sound. When he opened them again, the flames were gone. The air was clear and still. Helgar and Morella stood clinging to each other. The unholy wedding was over!

When Helgar untwined his arms from about her form, she spoke: "And now, my husband, you shall have your music—all of it."

Eagerly, almost greedily, Helgar grasped the moldy pages of the manuscript she extended to him.

"It is mine! *The Black Song!* At last I have it! The music of life and death!" he cried excitedly; then he paused as if he had suddenly felt cheated. "But who

will ever play it for me? No mortal musicians could play this. They would go mad in the attempt."

"No mortal musicians will play it." Morella smiled. "You shall have your own orchestra, an orchestra that knows no discord."

From outside in the alley there came a wild howling like a pack of hungry hounds. Morella laughed gayly as she ran to the stage door and pulled it open. Upon the stage there rushed forty mangy dogs, barking wildly as they clamored about Helgar, who stared at Morella with open amazement.

"Your orchestra, my love! Lead them to their places. They await only their leader." She gestured to the orchestra pit.

Helgar walked slowly down the steps of the stage, the hounds following. He raised his baton and stared about him. The orchestra pit of the theater was now filled with musicians—not dogs, for only their faces resembled their canine selves. All were dressed in immaculate evening clothes; all had the same long jaws over which their noses extended only slightly; all had the sharp, pointed ears of wild hounds. Their hands, covered with coarse hair, held properly each musical instrument. Their eyes followed the end of Helgar's trembling baton. He held it above his head for one breathless moment; then it began to sway with meaning. For the first time in three centuries the music of the *Black Song* swelled upon the air!

**F**EROCH did not linger. Climbing from his seclusion in the loft, he hurried from the theater as quietly and quickly as possible. Behind him he could hear the strange, impelling, irresistible music that was soon to sing its death song into the ears of those who listened.

As dawn approached, the musicians departed, barking and baying to the moon

that was paling in the sky. Helgar's beautiful vision of Morella was fading as he kissed her, his eyes closed with rapturous delight.

Suddenly alarmed in the grim, gray light of morning, Helgar found himself holding the hideous form of the old hag in his arms. Her breath was stinking of decay as she croaked, "It is morning, my lover. You and I will always be cursed with morning, for then I must return to my miserable shell, while you forget the night's beauty. Now you think of that angelic Maria! I see it in your eyes: you love her now, but you shall never have her, for each night my beauty will return to recapture your heart!"

Helgar shrank from the repulsive sight. His heart chilled with wild terror at the grim realization of what his life would be.

Maria's vision of loveliness tormented his mind. He was overwhelmed with an intense hatred for the ugly old woman who stood before him.

Maria! He must have her. She was the only one in the world to help him now. Her sweet lips of purity would cool the blood-red stain of his own burning lips—the lips that had kissed away his soul.

### 5. Maria Goes to Helgar

IT WAS late in the afternoon when Maria went to Helgar. Rodney had not wanted her to go, but she felt she owed a brief explanation to Helgar. She found him alone, brooding sullenly over his piano. All day long he had been trying to see her, and now she had come to him. And soon it would be evening! Soon he would have his power.

He did not rise to greet her. He allowed his fingers to wander over the keyboard—ever so carefully—as if they were searching. . . .

"You are leaving with him, I suppose?" he asked coldly.

"Yes, tonight. We sail for America tonight. Oh, Helgar, can't you see that I love him? I came here to tell you that. You must understand it. It is something I cannot help, something stronger than all else in me. I know that I owe you a great deal, more than I can ever repay, but I cannot love you."

Helgar was playing softly. He did not look at her, but he was smiling—the music was beginning to come!

"Yes?" he said. "Come and look at me, my dear. Come, stand in front of me while I play. Tell me what you said again."

Maria moved in front of him.

"I love Rodney," she said.

His fingers touched a crashing chord. He stood up, a strange light showing in his eyes. Shadows were beginning to fill the room. A heavy purple dusk was descending upon Paris. Soon he would have the full force of his music with him. He could play for her. She would never leave him then.

"Helgar, please! Don't look at me that way. Please! You don't understand."

"Listen, Maria—listen to this, my dear!"

He sat down again and began to play. This time his fingers touched the keys with familiarity. The first chord of the evil song was struck; it resounded in the darkened room like a bell-note from out of the doomed past.

Maria stood transfixed. She heard the call, she heard his words whispering, beckoning to her.

"You cannot leave me, Maria. I need you. Do you hear my music, Maria? It is the music of power and wealth. You cannot leave me now, Maria!"

"Stop it! Don't listen to it, Maria!" Feroch rushed into the room.

"You idiot!" Helgar wheeled about angrily.

"Go, Maria. Go to Rodney, Maria. He

is waiting for you." Feroch rushed her out of the room.

Helgar started for him savagely. He would have killed him, but in the doorway stood the glorious figure of Morella. She smiled, and he forgot all else except the passionate love of his wife, his wife and only love from evening shadows until dawn.

Maria in her fright did not hesitate, once outside of Helgar's studio. She was too anxious to find Rodney, to feel his strong arms about her, and to hear his assurance that he would always be with her.

### 6. *Suicide and Madness*

THE years passed with light and happy tread for Rodney and Maria. In America she at once found success. Helgar Gaudet was almost forgotten by them; only when they occasionally read of his unusual success in the capitals of Europe did he even enter into their conversation.

"The greatest composer and conductor of modern times," said London and German papers. "His First Symphony is unaccountably the most beautiful and thrilling experience a man can have. To hear him play is to believe in a superhuman power behind music."

Everywhere he played it was the same. Helgar, in public, played only certain parts of his *Black Symphony*, the parts that pictured beauty, that captured the imagination of the listener better than any known composer had ever done before. Those who had the misfortune to hear the entire symphony did not talk, at least not in a sane language.

Only Feroch could have explained the mysterious suicides that puzzled Europe for a while, but Feroch's lips were sealed with fright. Helgar and Morella knew that he could not talk. Who would believe his story?

W. T.—2

Who would have believed the story of that fatal night when eight leading figures in the musical circles of Europe met their doom, among them François Currier and Lorraine DeBreault?

It was late in the evening, after Helgar had played a most successful concert, that they gathered in his sumptuous apartment. He had mildly suggested that they were to hear music few mortals ever heard.

"A new composition?" François Currier asked eagerly.

"On the contrary, a very old composition, Monsieur Currier," Helgar answered, smiling into the faces of his guests.

He sat down at his private pipe-organ, a gift from a wealthy admirer. Morella stood silently watching him, a thrilling picture of exotic beauty that all of Paris had whispered and exclaimed over.

Helgar's fingers wandered idly over the keys for a moment; his gaze moved from the sharp face of François Currier, now worshipful of his talent, to the face of Lorraine DeBreault. They who had been loudest in condemning his music were now at his mercy. At this moment he felt that perhaps his sacrifices were small in comparison with this power.

He played! The music flowed like liquid melody through the room. It seeped into the very core of its listeners' souls. It ran the gamut of every human emotion. Golden cities with castles of air rose up within the listener's dream; then they fell before the onslaught of his final score. Death rode a wild ride across the pages of their memory. The world that each built that night as they listened was destroyed; only for brief moments would it return to haunt them with its beauty. Each man and each woman saw the full extent of a dream come true, then saw the end—the end of everything—when Helgar stopped playing.



**T**HEY were silent, awed, as he finished. The chattering, brilliant conversation that had pervaded the earlier part of the reception was gone. All of the beauty of life had been killed for them. A green fog of despair blurred their hopes. They all left like mourners departing from a church in which a funeral had just been held.

François Currier walked unsteadily down the avenue. His eyes were staring straight ahead. He looked into the bright lights of the Paris he had always loved for its tinsel beauty. Now it was ugly and sordid. Nothing he saw that night possessed any charm or beauty for him. He could only remember the glorious scenes he had pictured to himself as he had listened to Helgar's music—the awful feeling of fear that came over him at the thought of the evil vision he had seen later withering all the beauty of these earlier movements.

He tried to hum the more beautiful passages to himself, but nothing came except the sounds he so detested. The taxicabs tooted that sound! The buzzing moths near the flaming lights of the street hummed it. A man with bright, yellow shoes, shoes that squeaked the hideous sounds, limped past him.

Alone in his apartment, he tried to drown them out, but they closed in upon him from every corner. Covering his ears, he confronted himself in a mirror. He had grown ugly—the face he had considered handsome was now hideous to him. He stared into the madness of his own eyes. He screamed with torture as the music filled his brain. He cursed the sounds! Where could he go to escape them?

He threw open the windows of his apartment. A sigh of wind carried them in to him. Twinkling Paris was singing the horrible song. Stop them! He had to stop them!

François Currier leaped from his window, screaming a curse that followed his hurtling body as it bumped against the cornices, swept festoons of flowers from balconies and finally smashed upon the hard pavement eight stories below.

Upon the steps of the Good Shepherd Cathedral a puzzled gendarme discovered a woman, her clothes half torn from her body, her finger-nails sinking deep into the flesh of her breasts. Evident marks showed that by her own hands she had dug deeply into her ears. She was muttering incoherently to herself. The name—Lorraine DeBreault!

**W**ITHIN three days everyone who had been invited to Helgar's reception was either dead or insane. Now came others to his little receptions at night. He took care that those who came were wealthy men and women who could pay well to save themselves from a terrible fate. After they had heard the dread music, he told them of what lay before them. Realizing their fate, they gladly paid him huge sums of money to receive his treatment. To them Helgar offered frequent little concerts composed of the more soothing music he knew. Their lives became strangely parallel with that of a dope addict. Madness and death lay always before them.

Morella enjoyed the torture Feroch suffered, the torture of standing by, unable to cry out against this black magic that was working its way to great heights of destruction. If only someone would believe him, if only he dared to expose the power of the great Helgar Gaudet!

"I think that will be your eventual punishment, Feroch," Morella once laughed; "the ring of mortality shall be placed upon your finger. My Master will give you a long life to watch my powers working. Will you enjoy that, Feroch? Will you enjoy carrying a story no one

believes today; nor will they believe it tomorrow—always, always—a madman's story that is true?"

The ring of mortality! Feroch prayed constantly for the chance to strip it from Morella's finger. If ever Morella was to be defeated, it lay through the destruction of that ring, he knew.

Wealth and success were inevitable for Helgar Gaudet, but these were small compensation for a mind that knew no peace or rest. In the daytime he found himself seized with remorse and fear. This must not go on for ever, he told himself; yet he knew that it would. What a shallow thing this power really was! At night, intoxicated with passion and unearthly desires; by day a lonely man within whose mind there was a continual conflict of emotions.

As his evening's passion cooled with the dawn and Morella's terrible transformation, so warmed over the smoldering coals of it a new fire of desire—for Maria, for the sweet purity of Maria. He felt old and useless in the afternoons. He wanted sometimes to beat away the loathsome features of Morella as she walked through his apartment during the day—a silent, smirking old woman whose eyes stared hungrily at him.

A PICTURE of Maria smiling at him from the cover of an American magazine one morning was too much. He rang for his servant.

"Feroch, you will pack immediately, and reserve a cabin for us on the *Bere-saulta*. It is sailing for New York this afternoon, I believe."

Feroch shuddered. "New York, *mon-sieur?*"

"Yes, New York. I have had many offers of engagements there, and besides"—he picked up the magazine, and ripped Maria's picture from its cover—"I have someone I want to see very much."

"Someone it would be best not to see!"

They both turned to see Morella's eyes blazing deep with hatred in her seamed and ugly face.

Helgar hesitated a moment, then said, "Do as I tell you, Feroch. We sail for America today!"

Feroch's lips moved in silent prayer. He prayed that the ship would sink rather than to have it carry Helgar Gaudet and his music into the happy lives of Rodney and Maria.

### 7. Helgar Takes Maria

THE New York papers were extravagant with their announcement of Helgar's arrival in America. Maria smiled pityingly as she studied the full-page portrait of him in the Sunday rotogravure. He seemed so old and tired-looking in the picture. His hair was streaked with gray, and there were lines of worry and pain about his eyes.

"He's aged considerably, hasn't he? The old villain!" Rodney laughed over his wife's shoulder at the picture before them.

"So very much. I—I almost feel sorry for him," Maria replied. "Only a few years, Rodney, and we have been so happy in those years. Poor Helgar seems to have lived centuries."

"The price of success, my dear. Perhaps now that he is so successful I should present him with a bill for financing that half-baked opera of his."

"Do you regret that opera, Rodney?" She looked at him.

"Not one penny of it, for it was there that I found you, my most adorable sweet," he answered, taking her in his arms.

"I wonder why Helgar came to America, Rodney?"

"To steal you away from me." Rodney,

kissed her tenderly, and they both laughed at the impossibility of such a thought.

The telephone on her dressing-table rang. Maria reached for it with one hand, the other still grasping Rodney's warmly.

"Hello," she said. "This is Maria. Oh!"

Rodney felt her hand clench his tightly. He sensed her inner disturbance.

"Who is it, Maria?" he asked anxiously.

"Helgar!" she answered, holding her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. "He says he must see me!"

Rodney scowled because of the look of fright in her eyes. She spoke again.

"I'm sorry, Helgar. It is very kind of you, but not this evening. No, please—I——"

"What is he saying to you?" Rodney moved closer to the receiver.

"No, really—thank you, Helgar—I can't listen to you. Please!"

She clicked the receiver down, and stared at it for a moment, breathing heavily.

"Darling, what did he say to you?"

"It was all so strange, Rodney. The moment he heard my voice, he started playing some music. It seemed so odd. He said he had come all the way to America just to give me a concert. He insisted that I listen to it."

"He's crazy," laughed Rodney. "What did I tell you? You see—he did come to America just to steal you from me. Strange way to serenade a woman, though—nothing very romantic about a telephone."

"I wonder," Maria said soberly, not at all in the same gay tone Rodney had used. She was thinking of those few wild chords of music that had come to her. Her mind raced back to that day in Helgar's studio. They were the same chords. They were calling to her. She wanted to listen, and now tugging at her was a little half-regret that she had not listened,

and a suspicion that if Rodney had not been there she would have listened.

When a business acquaintance of Rodney's called, awhile later, she excused herself, leaving them to transact their business in the library.

IT WAS quite late when Rodney finished with his friend, and he felt very tired and drowsy. For a few moments he sat before the fire in the library, his head nodding wearily. He told himself that he should really go upstairs to Maria. But the fire felt warm and inviting, and the short walk upstairs seemed like a long distance, too long for a drowsy man. He lingered, his head dropped upon his shoulders. Before he knew it he slipped off into a heavy slumber.

When he awoke, he jumped with a start. Feroch was bending over him, shaking him frantically.

"*Monsieur*, wake up! Wake up. Tell your butler that I know you. I must talk to you, *monsieur*."

"Feroch! What—it's all right, Conroy." Rodney dismissed his butler, and took hold of Feroch's arm. "Now you sit down, and calm yourself. You look like a startled ghost."

"Oh, please, *monsieur*, don't jest with me. I have come to warn you. It is Maria—she has gone to Helgar's, and he is——"

"Don't be silly, Feroch. My wife is upstairs in her room."

"See for yourself. Call her if you will," demanded Feroch.

Although Rodney knew she was in her room, he ran up the stairs, followed by Feroch. He called first—no answer. He opened the door—the room was empty. Hanging on its cord was the receiver of her telephone. Maria was gone!

"You see! He has lured her with his music. There was no way I could warn you, so I had to come here. Right now

she may be at his mercy—his and Morella's!" Feroch cried excitedly.

"See here, man, are you still trying to tell me a story about a——"

"Oh, *monsieur*, this is no time to doubt! You must come with me." Feroch tugged desperately at Rodney's sleeve. "Even now we may be too late. I tell you I have risked everything to come here. And unless you help, your wife will be lost to you for ever. For ever, I tell you!"

"But it is so ridiculous! So—strange that she would go there without telling me. By Jove, come to think of it, she did speak of his playing music over the telephone. Oh, but if I could only see——"

"See! See!" Feroch cried angrily. "Go to Harmony Hall when he plays his concert. Watch the musicians who play for him. You will see that they are not human. They are dogs! Mad dogs who play their night's concert and then disappear. Is the world blind? Why hasn't someone noticed them before? Must I always be cursed with a story no one will believe?"

"Oh, *monsieur, monsieur*, while we have talked, he may have played that music. We have not a moment to lose. You will find him playing it for Maria. You will find her listening, unable to help herself. You will see Morella watching while the music destroys Maria—destroys her mind, makes her a mere pawn in the hands of two who have no souls. Morella will see that Maria is completely destroyed."

Rodney had no other choice than to hurry with Feroch. He took his roadster, and with absolute defiance of all traffic laws, made the distance to Helgar's apartment in short time.

He found Maria just as Feroch had said he would.

"Take her quickly, *monsieur*; don't listen to the music—take her!" Feroch

urged him lest he too become a victim of the powerful melodies.

Rodney picked up Maria in his arms and carried her from the apartment. He heard Helgar's curse, and the hissing threat of Morella's voice, but he could not linger now. He was too much concerned with Maria. How long had she been listening to the awful music?

Maria was staring at him wildly.

"Why did you come for me?" she asked. "What is it, Rodney? Oh, why did you do it? I was listening to Helgar play. I have never heard music like it. Why did you make me leave? Rodney, I'm afraid! The most horrible sounds are beginning to ring in my ears. I heard beautiful music while he was playing, only once did I hear a sound—a sound like what I am hearing now. Rodney, it's all I can hear now—that sound. Take me back to Helgar's. Oh, why did you come? Why? Why? Let me go! These sounds! I can't stand it! I hate you! I hate you! I want to hear the music!" She screamed, and her fingers dug deeply into the pink flesh of her ears.

Rodney felt himself go suddenly rigid with terror. He had been blind. Feroch had not imagined this nightmare of horror. It was all true! Here was its awful proof—his own wife, slowly, surely going mad before his very eyes.

### 8. The Radio Broadcast

DOCTOR SORENSON, an eminent authority on psychotherapeutics, diagnosed Maria's condition as the result of too much imagination placed wrongly upon the value of music. Rodney did not mention many facts of the case; it still seemed to him a fantastic, unexplainable story.

"I recommend that your wife be taken to a place where she may find rest and absolute quiet. She has been working too

hard, no doubt. These artists are often subject to hysteria of this sort. Do you have a cabin anywhere in the mountains?"

"Yes," Rodney answered. "We have a small hunting-lodge in the Adirondacks."

"Splendid. Take her there. I will engage two special nurses, and we shall go there at once. She must not hear any music, not even the sound of a radio. We will keep her completely quiet, and I am sure this will all pass within a very short time."

As Rodney watched Maria struggling to free herself from the strong hands that held her, he realized the impossibility of any such speedy recovery. In the little cabin in the mountains where they had gone many times for pleasant week-ends it was necessary to strap Maria to her bed.

Rodney realized the impossibility of ever convincing a doctor or any other modern-thinking person of the real cause of Maria's derangement. He knew that medical science could be of little help. He was utterly helpless—unless— His only chance was to go to Helgar himself. Helgar Gaudet would have to save her. Rodney would make him save her.

Leaving Maria with the nurses and the doctor, he hurried to his car and sped back to the city.

Pushing his way through the blockade of servants, he found Helgar pacing alone up and down the long expanse of a spacious music room. The room had been done in the style of an old castle. At one end, sunlight streamed through high Gothic windows. Deep red draperies fell at intervals along the gray walls where suits of armor stood like sentries. At the other end of the room was a pipe-organ with its spires of dull brass tubing reaching to the high-vaulted ceiling. Morella had gone to great trouble to recapture the effect of an old castle in this very modern apartment. Even the radio had been concealed in a suit of armor.

The radio was playing softly; Helgar had just finished dialing away a program that offered swing music, and was now bringing in an organ recital. Rodney confronted him, clutching a small automatic pistol in his hand.

"Of course you know why I am here," he said, leveling the gun at Helgar.

"Yes, I know. But put that down, it will not do you any good." Helgar waved the pistol aside as if it never existed.

Rodney flushed with chagrin at the uselessness of modern weapons when dealing with the power of something he could not fully believe or understand. He pocketed the pistol and glared at Helgar.

"Now where have you taken Maria?" Helgar demanded.

"Far enough away to keep you from destroying her mind any more with your infernal music."

"Then Feroch told you everything?" Helgar seemed more worried than angered at this.

"Yes, everything. He told me before we ever left Paris, but I laughed at him. I still find it hard to believe. And if it is so, why have you done it? What do you think it has gained you to drive my wife insane?"

"It was not my intention to drive her insane. That is your fault. You took her from my playing at a very inopportune moment. I do not know how much you may have learned from Feroch, but you must understand that I am the only one who can ever save Maria. I must play for her the more soothing passages of my music. They will restore her sense of beauty again. We do not have a great deal of time. Another few hours, and she may be beyond all help. Where have you taken her?"

"To my lodge in the mountains. It is nearly a seven-hour drive from here. We could take a plane, but the nearest we



could get to the cabin would be a three-hour drive."

"Oh, you fool! If you had only come to me sooner. Now——"

"You mean she will die——"

"Unless I can reach her within the next few hours, her mind will be gone completely. There is no way, unless——" Helgar's fingers toyed with the dials upon the radio; his eyes lighted suddenly. "I say, do you have a radio at this—this hiding-place you have taken her to?"

"Yes, but I have given orders that it is not to be played. The doctor said that she was to listen to no music whatsoever."

"It is simple, then. Retract that order, and I will play for her tonight. I have already accepted an engagement to play over the air. For my program, I will play the music that will help Maria."

"But how? There is no telephone at Lonesome Pine Lodge. The nearest telephone is twenty miles from there."

"Send the message to that place, instructing the people to hurry it to your lodge. That must be done. Hurry, man, there is no time to waste. We cannot lose a minute."

**H**ELGAR looked anxiously out of the window. The afternoon sun was already beginning to cool. Fear and dread shone in his eyes. He was hoping against hope, he knew. Whether Rodney trusted him or not, within his own daytime heart, Helgar Gaudet had a desire to help Maria. But evening was coming on!

"But why, if you are so intent upon helping Maria now, did you play it for her in the first place?" questioned Rodney.

"Because of her—that woman—my wife. Feroch told you of her power. She made me play it because she knows the love I still have for Maria when it is daylight. Oh, it is true that I intended to win Maria with my music, but only so

that I might have her as my own. Can't you see that she means the only clean and decent thing in my life? Don't stand there doubting my intentions. Send that message. For her sake, send it!"

Rodney did not hesitate any longer in sending the message to the little general store near Lonesome Pine Lodge.

While Rodney was sending the message, Feroch strained to free himself from the cords that bound him to a chair in a little room, concealed behind the draperies. Morella had bound and gagged him so that he could not escape the punishment she intended for him.

"Your precious friend has trapped himself," she taunted Feroch. "Would you like to warn him that he has made it possible now for me to kill his lovely Maria? Cry out, Feroch! Tomorrow morning your cries will be those of a madman, for tonight Helgar plays the complete symphony!"

**T**HE sun blazed like a burning ship, then plunged into the purple abyss of the far horizon.

Morella appeared in the music room. Smiling bewitchingly at Rodney, she walked slowly toward him, the hand of the serpent ring extended before her. Helgar bowed his head. Darkness was outside.

"My wife!" Helgar had said, but Rodney did not hear him. From the first the ring had caught his eye; he stood entranced by the sudden, blinding flash of exquisite beauty that came before him.

An hour passed, and still another. Long ago Morella had said to Helgar, "You will play tonight, my husband, as you have never played before. Tonight you will play the real *Black Song!*"

Helgar had bowed with resignation and gone out of the room, leaving her alone with Rodney, who by now had become oblivious to all except the crimson vision

of beauty that stood before him with a green serpent ring, twining and twisting mysteriously alive upon her finger.

A burning desire flamed within him. Slowly her lips wandered across his brow, leaving a trail of fire as they moved down to meet his hungry mouth, her kisses that were the supreme height of tantalizing pleasure. Such maddening ecstasy he had never known. Gone was Maria, her lovely beauty, as if it had never existed for him. Gone were all of his thoughts of concern for the tortured soul that lay upon the bed in Lonesome Pine! All of Rodney's memories were now consumed in the flames of a desire to gratify his passion with the unendurable pleasure of Morella's embrace. It was as she had planned; soon she would mock him for the helpless mortal that he was.

Far away, through the miles of busy traffic, Helgar Gaudet stood before the great bronze doors of the Metropolitan Studio. He hesitated one moment before entering. Tonight he would play this evil music before the largest audience of his career. Millions would be listening, and somewhere in the mountains his symphony would fly with its wings of death straight into the fevered brain of Maria Martell!

### 9. *The End of the Black Song*

A SUDDEN unearthly scream pierced Rodney's ears. He withdrew from Morella's arms, and stared stupidly about him. The scream came again. Reality was returning to him. From behind the curtained wall, he could hear someone pounding, someone calling his name. It was Feroch.

"*Monsieur!* Help! Don't let him play it. Oh, God, stop him!"

Rodney heard sounds of crashing wood. He saw the red curtains on the wall suddenly sway out and fall from

their securings. The curtains had concealed the door through which Feroch was now smashing his way.

When the door finally gave way, Feroch stood before them with his arms and face bleeding from the force he had exerted to free himself from Morella's bonds. A frayed and broken cord dangled from his waist.

Morella poised herself against the wall, her hand raised above her head, the finger with the ring extended outward. "You fool, I will kill you for this!" she said.

Before she could move to him or focus the gleam of the serpent ring upon him, he wrenched a cumbersome battle-ax from the suit of armor that was standing beside him. It was a very ancient suit of armor, a rare antique that Morella had purchased from a collector only a few days before.

A blue flash crossed the room in front of Rodney's eyes—a blue flash with a silvery trail of light. An agonized cry came from Morella's throat. Rodney felt a warm spurt of blood against his cheek. Upon the rug before him fell a human hand, severed at the wrist. The long scarlet nails of the ghastly hand clutched spasmodically at the rug. A serpent writhed in the throes of death upon the finger.

Feroch was laughing wildly and pointing to the wall, where Rodney saw the quivering handle of the ax, its blade deeply imbedded in the plaster.

"I've done it! At last, at last! I've killed her power! The ring is dying! Her life is over!" Feroch jabbered hysterically.

Morella fell upon her knees, her one hand eagerly clutching for the bleeding thing that lay in the center of the room.

Laughing horribly, Feroch pushed her from it.

"You see, she wants her ring, her pretty ring of hell. Her chance for eternal

beauty is gone. At last my prayers have been answered. Now die, you ugly hag, die in the form in which you belong."

Feroch's wild laughter halted suddenly.

Coming from the radio that had been playing softly throughout the evening was the crisp voice of the announcer: "This is the Cosmopolitan Network bringing to you the celebrated European composer, Helgar Gaudet, and his symphony orchestra——"

The *Black Song* with its unmistakable melody came trickling through the panel of the radio, filling the room with its command to listen.

"He's playing it!" Feroch croaked hoarsely. "Oh, stop him! That is the music of death. This is *her* plan, all of it. What did she care for the millions who would hear it? She wanted Maria's death. We must stop him. We must!"

From the floor came Morella's low, triumphant laughter, mingling with the sounds of the music. Raising herself so that her body rested upon the bloody stump of her wrist, she pointed with her other hand to the radio.

"You fools! I die, perhaps, but so does your lovely Maria. They will all die who hear it tonight. This may be the last time that the *Black Song* is heard on earth, but ah—the millions who will hear it! Tomorrow madness will reign supreme. Hear it, you fools? It is coming to the millions. My song is coming to the masses. Play on, my husband, play your *Symphony of the Damned*."

Rodney hastened to the telephone and tried desperately to explain to the girl at the switchboard of the studio.

"You must stop it. Tell them to stop it at once, I say. Listen to me—listen!" He clicked the receiver desperately, but the operator had disconnected him. Her laughter still mocked him.

"The police!" he shouted into the telephone. "Give me the police station."

But before the sergeant at the desk had answered, Rodney realized how impossible it would be to make his statement sound sane. For a moment he stared helplessly at Feroch.

"They believed your story, my friend?" Morella taunted. "Try to tell anyone in this city about the music that destroys! Try to tell them tomorrow when they are all mad and dying in the streets!"

"The studio, Feroch!" Rodney hurried to the door. "We've got to reach the studio before he finishes. It is our only chance."

Followed by Feroch, he hurried out of the room and down the stairs into his roadster. "If we can only reach there before he has finished."

"We have twenty minutes, *monsieur*."

RODNEY shot his car forward into the evening traffic, gaining the center of the lane, and ignoring the damage to his fenders. The speedy little roadster groaned with the full force of its motor.

Skilfully maneuvering in and out among the busy streets they sped. A thousand thoughts and curses tormented Rodney as his foot sent the gas feed to the floor.

From his dashboard radio, they could dimly hear the insinuating strains of the music above the din and roar of his speeding motor. Feroch clicked the radio on and off at brief intervals to avoid becoming hypnotized with the music.

Rodney sickened with fear as he heard the whine of the motorcycle patrol. How could he ever convince them, if they were stopped, that he was speeding to prevent a man from playing music that meant certain madness for everyone?

A car turned suddenly in front of him. He threw his force against the wheel, and they rode upon the curb, narrowly missing a lamp post. The roadster lurched

crazily as they fought again for the center of the street.

All too well Rodney sensed the futility of hoping to reach the studio in time, but desperation led him on. People seemed to be flying in front of him. Night lights were stabbing his eyes. Precious minutes clicked swiftly on. The trailing skirts of death seemed to be riding just ahead of his radiator cap. The motorcycles were gaining on him. Not one extra ounce of power could be coaxed from his motor.

"We're nearly there. You stall them, Feroch. I'll try to force my way into the studio," Rodney shouted.

"I will. There is the tower. Oh, hurry, *monsieur*, hurry!"

Rodney's car groaned to a stop. The smell of burning rubber and the slowing whine of police sirens mingled with the rush of thoughts that were throbbing in his brain.

**H**E JUMPED from the car, knocked over the door-man who attempted to stop him, and pushed his way into the elevator.

"Take me to the broadcasting-room—and hurry!"

He pushed his revolver into the ribs of the startled operator. The car shot quickly upward.

As he reached the broadcasting-room and hurried toward the stage, his heart sounded a death knell of defeat within his body. He saw the deserted stage. He heard the announcer mumbling something—but where was the orchestra, where was the audience?

A small group of ushers rushed at him, and he was hurried out of the room. In the corridor the police awaited him. Feroch was struggling to free himself from the grasp of a tall giant in blue uniform. Everywhere there was confusion.

Frantically in the face of their skeptical expressions Rodney tried to tell them about the music.

"It was the *Black Song!* The song of death! Can't you see? Where did he go? Are you all deaf and blind?" cried Rodney.

"The man's insane," he heard them say. "They're both crazy, no doubt of it."

An officer stepped forward and gripped Rodney tightly by the collar. "Come on, Mister. You're going with me. I've got enough charges against you to give you life. Babbling about that musician won't get you anywhere. If his music was so awful, no one got a chance to hear any too much of it. He dropped dead right in the middle of his broadcast."

"Dead?" Rodney gasped.

"Deader than last week's joke," the manager of the studio growled.

"Then that proves it," Feroch shouted eagerly. "The ring—it was her power of life for both of them. I killed the ring, and Helgar and the music died with it."

"Yes, of course." Rodney jerked loose from the grasp of the policeman. "Where are the musicians who played for him?"

"The musicians?" The manager blinked. "Why—why, they left, I suppose. I didn't notice. Everything was so 'egged' up. He had been playing about eight minutes, when with no warning at all he just drops in a heap on the stage. We had to switch the whole broadcast around."

"Come on, you two." The officer pushed them both into the elevator. "You are either drunk or crazy. I'll let the judge decide which it is."

**R**ODNEY'S attorney bailed them out, and they refused to talk of their reason. Rodney did not care what they charged him with—drunkenness, insaa-

ity, or what—no one would ever believe the story now—and he did not care. It was Maria that he was worried about.

Of course, back at the studio the janitor's story might have proved illuminating, but he never told it. He said nothing of the pack of wild, barking hounds that had come bounding down the back stairs, pushing him over as they rushed on out through the rear entrance and into the alley, disappearing into the night. Although the incident was strange enough, the janitor told himself that one might expect almost anything in a broadcasting-studio, and let it go at that.

Rodney and Feroch stopped at Helgar's apartment. Perhaps they might find something that would make their story a little more believable, but there was nothing. Morella was gone. The hand and the ring were gone. Only a black, foul-smelling spot staining the center of the rug remained.

Feroch examined the ax, which was still imbedded in the wall.

"Look, *monsieur!*" He pulled the ax from the wall. "Do you see the writing inscribed upon that blade?"

Rodney examined it closely.

"Why, it's an ax that was used in the Crusades," he said. "The inscription is engraved with silver——"

"For the service of God against all evil," Feroch translated the inscription reverently. "This antique was her undoing. This very ax was the answer to my prayers. It made it possible for me to sever from her the ring of mortality."

"But is she really gone, Feroch?"

"God grant she is!" Feroch crossed himself. "May this be the end of the *Black Song.*"

"But will it be? Will its music still linger in the minds of those who have heard it?"

"I do not think so, *monsieur*. Some may never recover from its music, but you saw those people tonight. They heard only half of the evil music. It was only beginning to capture them. Helgar's power was destroyed almost from the beginning of his performance. Perhaps Maria only heard enough of his music to sway her from herself. You remember he did not get to finish the song that first night."

"Yes, thanks to you, Feroch. Now we must hurry to Maria. Oh, if I hadn't sent that telegram!"

"God is good, *monseigneur*. He will not let this music remain. The good songs will come to Maria again, perhaps."

"Let us pray for that." Rodney bowed for a moment of silent prayer, then hurried to his car again.

WHEN they arrived at Lonesome Pine Lodge, the nurse met them with excited apologies.

"I'm so sorry, sir. We received your message, but could not get the radio to work. The tubes or something—I know so little about these things. We tried and tried all evening, but no luck."

"Oh, yes—plenty of luck!" Rodney answered, hurrying to Maria's bedside.

She was asleep, her face calm and soft like a baby's, her hair falling about it in a golden frame upon the pillow.

As he kissed her tenderly, her eyes opened, and he saw them clear and bright with the loveliness of her refusing sanity.

"Rodney—the music—it is leaving me. I only hear it faintly now. What was it, Rodney?" she asked like a frightened little girl.

"A song of hell that is no more," he answered softly, bending to kiss her trembling lips.