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# The Black Angel

By C. ED ROWLEY

**T**HE demesne of the Count Sieur de Brabationo lay between the provinces of Allemtis and Thessily and extended up from the River Wëss to the Vestican Hills. The castle stood in the center of the demesne, and to the north, within a dark forest of yew, there was an ancient and moldering abbey.

Now late in the afternoon of a day in midautumn, the Lord Brabationo proceeded on horseback through the forest on the road to the abbey. And as he rode, this much was easily to be marked of him, that the count was exceedingly unhappily disposed. For he sat slouched low in his saddle, with body listless and head bent and eyes fixed down in idle and mournful contemplation of the road below him. And the sable plume in his hat fell unnoticed about his face and swayed to and fro with the movement of the horse, whilst his long, dark cloak hung in listless abandon, drooping like a great black wing, half-way to the ground. Moreover, even the horse seemed to share his master's dolor, for he moved with slow and funereal step, as if he bore on him the sorrows of a thousand obsequies. Thus, in passing melancholy show, the count moved down the abbey road, and as he rode he numbered his woes. He gave himself over to recalling the divers troubles which of late had fallen upon him like so many plagues, so were they all violently come and wholly unforeseen.

There had occurred within the last few months, under the most peculiar

and mysterious circumstances, the death of a well-loved sister; and that sister's son lay even now sick unto death in the pestilent lazaretto at Milan. And even whilst the count had mourned his sister's death and his nephew's plight, a mighty storm had rushed from the mountains, and blasted his fields of grain. Thus, Famine and Death stared at his tenants from the coming winter months. And most sadly of all, the count thought him of the madness of his father, who had lately taken to roaming the country, clad in rags, with white hair shaggy and beard uncombed and, like to Elijah and John the Baptizer of Judea, was ever furiously exhorting repentance and God-fear. And this last was the count's most considerable sorrow, since he, Brabationo, was wont to believe in the power of evil over good; in the mightiness of the Black Angel over the righteousness of God. For the count was a Satanist, one who had long ago pledged his soul to Hell and his body to the sustainment of the kingdom thereof. And it was more to the count's sorrow that his father had, in some manner, discovered this truth and by excessive brooding on the matter had gone stark mad. So thus we have a most unseemly paradox, with the Black Angel being pleased to make at one time a devil and a saint, for where Brabationo had incorporated himself in Satan, by so choosing he had put his father into such a fury of good-doing that men were fain to regard the old man as

visited of God, and cures and miracles were reported of him. And so considered the count as now he rode out of the forest and approached the abbey wherein he worshiped his god.

As he drew near to this gloomy, decaying and extremely aged place, he was met by one Barbaces, a hunchback, whom the count had as guardian of the abbey and who, having discerned his master's coming, had hurried forthwith to give him greeting. For the count, despite his pernicious beliefs, was a kindly lord, and it was said that in all the land there was none like to him in charity and kind-doing.

Now the two moved across the large court and Barbaces walked beside the horse, being meantime in eminent hazard of the great charger's hooves, by reason of his dwarfed, wizened body and spindly, short legs. And as they moved across the rotting and grass-choked cobbles, the count looked down upon Barbaces and questioned him in this wise: "There has been no one here, Barbaces, since the occasion of my last visit?"

"No one," said Barbaces, but he spoke hesitantly and he manifested sundry signs of confusion and doubt, all of which the count was quick to remark.

"My father," said Brabationo gently, "has not been seen of late about the countryside and I have been concerned——"

Then quoth Barbaces, "Thy father did come here and I marked his coming and let him not from my sight till he had gone." This last was said in a breath, for Barbaces knew that the count feared the madness of his father, for such was his affliction that he regarded as blasphemous and hellish all his son's art treasures and all the many ancient books with which the abbey was stored. And so it was that when the old man chose to visit the abbey he must be diligently

watched lest his fury lead him to do irreparable harm.

Then further questioned Brabationo, "You remained constantly with him?"

"Constantly, my Lord; it was at the end when he would leave that once I let him from my sight. And that was to procure him bread, for such it was he demanded. When I shortly returned he had gone. Me-seemeth later I saw him enter the forest."

Brabationo pondered these words. "Nevertheless," said he, "you did wrong to leave him, and if there is harm done within, I shall hold you guilty."

So saying, he dismounted, and dismissing the servant with the horse, he ascended some ruinous stone steps and entered the abbey. He turned aside in the spacious and gloomy vestibule to enter a long, dim, winding corridor by which, at length, he reached a small room in a remote part of the abbey. Here he divested himself of his clothing, donning sandals and a robe of coarse, black material. Then by descending a short flight of steps, he entered a large, long hall which was lighted by torches set in sconces in the wall. Moreover, such was the nature of these torches that as they burned they gave a red, lurid flame and this ghastly light streamed fitfully up the high, dark walls, and moved on the sable drapes, and gleamed wanly in the tall Gothic windows which, on each side of the hall, reached far up, nearly to the shadowy vault overhead. The floor was all of black, gleaming marble, and this reflected the red-burning flames in shimmering, bloody-hued streaks and blurs. At the end of the hall there was a great, black, double door, fantastically carved. To this door the count walked with the slow, solemn step of one who approaches sacred things. He halted before it and removed his sandals. Then he opened the door

just sufficiently for to give him entrance. Once within, he closed it firmly behind him.

IT WAS dark. The darkness might have rolled from out the mouth of Hell, so was it utterly profound and blinding, being *blackness*, warm, sensuous, sweeping the senses with a torrent of strange, elusive perfumes, myrrh, frankincense, olibanum. And as he stood in that palpable dark and fragrance, there pealed out suddenly the faint notes of an ethereal music, and rapidly it swelled and now the darkness shuddered under the power of a mighty anthem; it surged, thundering, rolling, while meantime shrilled high piping notes of wild delight; then as suddenly it subsided; it held for a moment of exquisite tremulousness, then vanished. It was the music of an Eolian harp, suspended high in the darkness. Swept by the wind, it emitted notes, now of titanic power, and now of paradisiacal sweetness.

Brabationo stood for a moment, held by strange, awful emotions. Then, groping in the dark, he moved ahead until his feet encountered a rug, on which he threw himself. He lay quiet. He abandoned himself to an ecstasy of mysterious and unrestrained feelings. And meanwhile he sensed that before him, hidden in darkness, stood the image of his god. This was a statue carved of rarest ebony into the likeness of a man. And the body of this man was more beautiful than any woman's.

After a time the harp sounded again; the golden notes reverberated softly through the darkness, speaking, now low and gentle, so ineffably restful a melody that the worshiper felt an infinite peace upon him. And he spoke after this manner:

"O Thou brother of man, Prince of Worldlings, Thou beloved of men, wherever man does suffer, since by Thee and for Thee men do suffer,

know that I worship Thee. Lend ear to my prayers, I beseech Thee, nor turn ever from me, for there is none like to Thee in kindness and there is none on Earth or in false Heaven I love as I do love Thee."

Then Brabationo ceased to speak and he rested his head on his arm and wept, for reason of a great sadness within him. And the music died in sweet low humming murmurings, and after a time it was still. The darkness pressed heavily about him; the slow hours passed. Thus the night waxed older.

Then when the harp sounded again, it spoke a mystic strain. The notes swept the fragrant darkness in a warm, slow-falling rain of melody through which slowly moved a low measure, slumberous and voluptuous. And there were whisperings and sighings and vague languishing movements; meantime voices told of exquisite longings and of strange, poignant desires. And the worshiper stirred; and he spoke softly in this wise:

"O Thou who knoweth of the only good, which good is the body's delight and the soul's exaltation therein, I pray to Thee for these things. That Thou wilt teach me new hungers, that Thou wilt fill me with strange subtle longings, that Thou wilt give me desires. And when I am anhungered give me not surfeit and when I am in longing suffer me not respite. For the world teaches these things, that there is joy in hungering and longing and having ever great desires, whereas it is as much taught that content hath neither hope nor life, being, withal, cold and wholly desolate. Thus it is I pray Thee to grant me these things."

Thereupon Brabationo became silent, and, soon after, the music ceased. And he lay long without stirring, and when the slow hours passed he heeded not their passing. Meantime the incense died and the darkness grew colder as the night waned.

Then at last he was slowly roused. For some obscure sense had given entrance into his ecstasy of worship to a vague feeling of disquietude. He tried to cast it from him, to bury himself further into his spiritual detachment, but in vain. The feeling persisted; it grew, and now disquietude trembled on the verge of actual fear. Then it was he strained all senses in an endeavor to trace the feeling to its source. He stared ahead trying to pierce the darkness—could it be of *that*? Or the deathly chill? The utter absence of sound? Or was there in the darkness some vague, some nearly undiscoverably faint odor?

At that moment the harp sounded. It struck repeatedly, with slow, deliberate, measured strokes, a low, solemn, muffled note that sounded through the gloom like the tolling of a death knell. And then, around this ill-omened tolling, there lifted distant sounds that drifted and twisted in the vagaries of a strange, strange melody, one withal so fitful, so mournful and utterly wild that it seemed all the legions of the distant dead must there bewail unearthly sorrows in some unholy dirge, in some blasphemous, ghostly fugue that throbbed and beat with the heavy, thudding tolling of a funeral bell. And the dirge grew louder and wilder, the bell tolled faster, and wilder still sounded the chant: it surged, rising, writhing in a grinding, discordant charivari of Death, Death white-robed and triumphant, riding amain before the horrible thunder of iron bells! And into this groaning, shrieking, writhing din the voice of Brabationo entered and itself was now like to the screaming of a soul in Hell.

“Satan! Master! I beseech Thee, heed me! Oh, wherefore is there sorrow in me and fear and utter loneliness when I have Thee for mine own? Thou wouldst not turn from me! If Thou leavest me, Thou wilt

doom me; whom have I save Thee? Master, I pray Thee, speak to me; I beseech Thee, give me a sign. Satan, give me a sign!”

At once all sound stopped. The silence was awful. It was as if the darkness had become Death, hushed, chill, crushing with stillness. And lo, it *was* Death, for now it breathed gently through the darkness on Brabationo and its breath was nauseous and cadaverous, smelling of dead flesh! A frenzy of blind terror seized him; he groped desperately back. Reaching the great doors he flung them open wide.

A lurid red torrent of ghastly light from the outer room rolled far through the darkness. Then Brabationo saw that the great black statue had toppled from its pedestal to the floor. He saw further that it had fallen straight across his father's back. The old man lay flat, crushed, his chin pressed against his arm, his head thrust back. And through his long white hair he regarded his son with a fierce and unrelenting glare.

**I**N THE early morning the dwarf Barbaces met the Count Sieur de Brabationo in one of the vast, shadowy halls of the abbey. And despite the gloom it was easily to be marked that the count was exceedingly ill disposed. For his face was pale and he stared straight before him with wide, unseeing eyes, while he walked with a slow, faltering step, as one who has been stunned. Moreover, he was most singularly attired, being barefoot and hatless, and wearing but a coarse black robe. He drew near to the dwarf and spoke quietly to him; then, turning, he walked slowly away, vanishing in the darkness at the end of the hall. Meanwhile Barbaces hastened to that part of the abbey which had been hitherto denied him, and there, as the count had told him, lay the body of Brabationo's father. It lay under an ebony

statue which was so heavy that the dwarf must summon aid before he could secure the body. And Barbaces was inconsolable and he wept loud and fiercely, since it was by his error that the old man had wandered into the forbidden chambers to meet his death. For manifestly the count's father, who hated as blasphemous and hellish all his son's art treasures, had attempted to destroy the rarely beautiful statue. Instead he had toppled it upon himself and thereby died. And the dwarf wept, and all who were with him did likewise, and, thus lamenting, they bore the body from the abbey. Then, for as much as men regarded the old man as visited of God,

they interred him in a holy place. Even to this day he lies there, and it is said that whatsoever ailment a man may have, he has but to touch the tomb to be straightway cured.

But for the Count Sieur de Brabationo we have no word, for he was never seen again by men; albeit legend has it that he lives, a holy hermit, in the forest about the abbey, and that before the end of all earthly things he will come forth, clad in rags, with hair shaggy and beard uncombed, and like to Elijah and John the Baptizer and like even to the saint, his father, he will roam the country and ever furiously exhort men to repentance and God-fear.