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THE DEVIL'S OPERA

by Arthur S. Garbett

THEY shake their heads over me, the fools, and say, "Is it not a shame that such a man of genius should be a lunatic?" But I tell you, my friend, it is false. I am not insane. It is not true that I killed Ailsa Corliss. Ailsa died at the hands of her husband, Ronald Corliss. I tell you, in spite of all they say, that this jealous, earthbound eld choked the life out of her body as surely as he would have strangled her soul had I not prevented it—or tried to.

For her sake I must speak, though even you do not believe me. The stories told in the papers that I went back to Mallingham to renew my acquaintance with her are false. My old boyhood love for her was dead. I had forgotten her.

Then why did I return to Mallingham? A whim; no more. I had to go to some place where I could work on my opera, some place that was quiet. Why not back to the town where I had run barefoot as a boy, and been jeered at, flouted, despised, because I loved my music better than the silly games and uncouth follies of schoolboys? I wanted to show these fools who had grown up into shopkeepers that I had beaten them even

at their own silly game of money-making.

I give you my word, I had forgotten Ailsa Freyne until I met her one day at one of those teas the women were giving to lionize me after my success in London and Paris. They told me she was no longer Ailsa Freyne, but had married Ronald Corliss, the lawyer and politician, who was a grown man when I was a boy. It needed but a glance to tell me that marriage had ruined her. I could see it in her eyes; for while she had lost little of her grace and her former dusky beauty, the elfin spirit was gone from her eyes and she was pale and—oh, how shall I say it?—the soul of her was dying. I am sensitive to the occult. I could tell. . . . I could tell.

She did not surprize me when she took an early opportunity to speak to me alone.

"I waited that year—the whole year and you never wrote," she said, half jokingly, half in earnest.

I laughed. Surely that will convince you that I had forgotten her, forgotten the foolish boy-and-girl flirtation that the papers have made so much of. I had forgotten our compact, forgotten even that she could

sing—in the old days. I think that was why as a boy I loved her. She sang better for me than for anybody else, and gave me my first realization of the magnetic power that has made me a great opera director—that power not only to make beautiful music myself, but to compel others to yield their will to mine so that music flows from them as from a fountain.

We talked a little, she and I, recalling old days. And then I asked her, flattering her: "Do you sing as divinely as ever?"

She shook her head, sighing.

"Alas, no; not a great deal. My husband does not care for music and I have lost interest. He is not very strong, and it excites him too much."

"It is a pity," I told her, and soon I left her, half promising to go and see her.

I really had no use for her. You must understand, my friend, that when I see a woman possessed of the divine gift of a beautiful voice throwing her gift away to please a stupid husband, I become annoyed. Husbands are common as dirt, and any woman can be a wife; but great singers are rare.

NEVERTHELESS, I went to see her, for old times' sake. She had a big house on what used to be Maple Avenue but has now been rechristened Radnor Heights by some real estate man. Only in America would any such low-rising ground be dubbed "heights". But it is a quiet, well-wooded section near the Country Club, not far from where I was living, and where most of the élite have their residences. The élite of Mallingham, my friend. It is to laugh!

She had a fire lighted, for already it was autumn, and it had rained. How dismal your Middle West can be when it rains!

We talked again of old times, and presently, "Are you happy," I asked, "now that you are married?"

"Why, yes," she said. "Of course; why do you ask?"

I looked at her and, reading her eyes, knew that she lied without knowing it.

"Do you love your husband?" I ventured.

"What a question!" she answered; and there was a touch of defiance in her eyes as she spoke. The absurdity of it! How could she love a man twenty years older than herself?

I continued to look at her and she was compelled to beg for mercy.

"Don't look at me like that," she pleaded. "You are trying to frighten me as you did in the old days. You know, I was fond of you; but at times I was terrified of you."

At that I laughed. How could I help it? It amused me to find that I still retained some of my old power over her. There was a piano in the big room and I went over to it.

"Don't play," she pleaded. "I—I don't think I want to hear you play. You frighten me when you play."

At that I only laughed again, and began to play a tune we used to be fond of—Ethelbert Nevin's *Oh That We Two Were Maying*. You know it? A saccharine, sentimental thing, but not bad.

It was funny the effect it had upon her. I kept my eyes on hers, and noticed that she was trembling all over. She was standing near the fireplace when I began, but she drew insensibly nearer and my eyes held her, though unwillingly. She was fighting my will.

Suddenly, as if in spite of herself, she began to sing. At first her voice was soft and breathy; but gradually it strengthened. She seemed to yield herself more and more to the music. Her voice grew in richness and volume. She did not sing loud, you understand, but—oh, how can I express it?—with beauty! That strange, subtle quality of unlimited power

held in reserve which only true artists obtain.

To say I was thrilled is putting it mildly. For you see, my friend, I realized what had happened. It was as if I had hypnotized her and my will dominated hers. It was exactly as if my spirit had entered her body and was using her voice as an instrument—the rhythm, the phrasing, the nuances of light and shade: they were mine—all mine! I was playing upon her as upon a violin.

I did not dare break the spell. It was too wonderful. I kept my eyes fixed on hers as she stood there, at the other end of the long, polished black piano, and modulated almost insensibly from one tune to another, being careful to select those melodies we had sung together in childhood. It was amazing, fascinating; and it lasted I know not how long.

The end, however, was as unexpected as the beginning. Somehow—I can't pretend to explain how except that I am unusually subjective, and feel instantly the occurrence of any change in the psychic atmosphere—I knew that I was losing my control over her. I was aware of tension, of combat. I felt that some strange, inimical force was at work compelling me to relax my hold upon her even before I heard the click of the latch, saw her eyes waver and wander from mine, and knew that somebody stood upon the threshold of the room.

I DID not look behind me as Ailsa stopped singing, for she swayed as if she were falling and went pale as death. My hands fell with a crash on the keyboard and startled her back to reality as her husband, Ronald Corliss—for he it was—came dashing into the room and caught her as she stood clutching at the piano. She went off into hysterics, laughing and crying all at once in the strangest way, and he led her to a chair.

Corliss paid no more attention to me, until she had quieted down, than if I were so much dirt on the carpet. It was humiliating.

When at last he had calmed her, he turned on me—that is the only expression I can use, for he was veritably snarling at me. He was a huge brute of a man, you remember, with broad shoulders, square face and tousled fair hair.

"What in blazes have you been doing to her?" he demanded.

I shrugged.

"We were having a little music," I told him. "She was absorbed by it and your abrupt entry frightened her."

He glared at me; but I was not afraid. You see, with my quick intuition I had already perceived the heart of the matter. Dominated by his gross, earthbound strength, Ailsa had ceased to sing; indeed she had lost the power. But my coming had broken the spell, and I had resumed my old dominance over her. The soul of an artist, my friend, may be crushed, but it cannot be killed.

This was the first time I had ever seen Corliss close at hand, for in the old days he had moved in what then seemed to me the lofty region of Mallingham's highest social circles, but he evidently remembered me, or perhaps Ailsa had spoken of me.

"Now look here, Kenworthy," he said. "I don't know what you've been doing to Ailsa; but we don't want any of your music here. What's more, I won't have you hanging around this place, either. So get out; and stay out."

Ailsa made a natural movement of protest at this unheard-of rudeness. But he motioned her to keep silent.

"Sit still," he ordered, "while I chase this little beast out of the house."

There was, you see, no pretense between us. To do the brute justice, he was not usually lacking in the cruder

manifestations of politeness current in America; but his resentment against me was—shall I say it?—psychic. It swept him off his feet.

I was irritated, but I kept my temper and left with what grace I could muster. I meant to see no more of Ailsa in that mood, my irritation having caused me to forget the subtle yet powerful bond that had formed between us.

Ah, my friend! You may laugh; but in your grossness you fail to realize the subtle power we musicians possess to respond to magnetic impulses far beyond your ken.

WHEN I left Ailsa Corliss that day, I was angry. I meant to forget her and her cloddish husband; but it was beyond my power, as I soon found in a strange and beautiful way.

I had, as I explained, gone to Mallingham to work on my new opera, but hitherto I had done little. Now, however, I began to write with a sureness of touch, a feverish energy, which convinced me that my faculties had received a tremendous stimulus. The act of creation is for a composer beyond all earthly joys. The music wells up in his soul until he is possessed by it. His pen flies over the paper for hours at a stretch until for very weariness he falls asleep where he sits. At least that was the ecstasy that came to me. And it was Ailsa's voice I heard in my creative dreams. Her voice, as she had sung to me that day under my hypnotic influence, lured me on hour after hour, day after day.

I did not go to see her in all that time. I did not need to; for her spirit was with me, guiding me. It was Ailsa who came to me, not I who went to Ailsa. And for a strange reason, indeed!

One late evening, while I was in a highly nervous condition, having worked all day and kept myself going

on cigarettes and black coffee, I was startled to hear a knock at the door.

My studio, as you know, was an isolated building some distance from the house where I lived with only a deaf old housekeeper to wait on me. It is, in fact, a converted barn, surrounded with trees and bushes to screen it from the road. I had fixed it up so as to ensure myself uninterrupted seclusion and freedom to play the piano at all hours of the day or night. Orders were strict that I was on no account to be interrupted; therefore the knock at the door jarred my nerves.

I went to the door with angry words on my lips, but they remained unuttered, for it was Ailsa who stood before me in the yellow glare of light that streamed from the door.

"Ailsa!" I cried. "What does this mean?"

She did not answer in words; she entered swiftly, looking behind her as though fearful of being seen, and motioned me to close the door. I did so in wonder, and she leaned, panting and trembling, against the wall. Her eyes had dark rims under them and she was pale and exhausted-looking.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered wildly. "I think I am going crazy. My husband is away, at the state capital, and I had to come to you. You are killing me, Francis."

"Killing you?"

I don't remember what she said in answer; but she began to babble in the strangest way, talking wildly, incoherently. I gathered that in some way she had been music-haunted since my visit.

"All day and all night," she complained, "the music whirls and eddies in my brain. And it is you, Francis, you, who are responsible."

I was too startled to speak, and could only gaze at her with startled incredulity, which apparently she

understood, for suddenly she darted to the piano.

"Listen," she cried. "I will show you."

She began to play, somewhat clumsily and inaccurately, for she was no pianist, yet in a way that turned me to stone where I stood. For, my friend, whether you believe me or not, *it was my own music she was playing.*

Incredible as this sounds, it is true. Remember, not a soul had heard this music, for I use the piano but little in actual composition, writing my thoughts straight down on paper as all good composers do, referring to the keyboard only occasionally.

I was struck dumb with astonishment. I scarcely breathed. And presently she stopped, and leaning her elbows on the keyboard, covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

"But this is amazing, incredible!" I cried at last, endeavoring to explain to her, and to calm her.

"But what are we going to do?" she demanded, when I finally convinced her of how matters stood by showing her the manuscript of my opera. "It can't go on like this. My husband hates music, and I can't keep from playing and singing. It infuriates him. I think he knows you have something to do with it and he is jealous."

"I can't help that," I answered, angrily. "The music comes to me. I must write it. What do I care about your husband?"

"But I care for him," she cried. "He is not strong, and music excites him so. And just now there is his political campaign—"

At that, heaven forgive me, I think I swore. For you must know that I was very tired, and what had politics to do with my masterpiece?

She cowered before my anger, and I thrilled to find it was I who dom-

inated her, not she me. But I was merciful. I promised that I would not work so long at a stretch, for when we came to compare notes, we found that she suffered most acutely at the time I was actually engaged in composition, and especially in her husband's presence. When he was absent at the state capital, some eighty miles away, she surrendered more completely to the spell, and even derived from it a certain ecstasy, though it drained her emotionally.

IT ANNOYED me to find that my work was subject to the comings and goings of this oaf, but so it turned out; for it transpired that the days of his absence when she yielded herself freely to my influence were the days on which I myself worked most happily. I promised to adapt myself to these circumstances. There is in musical composition much mere note-writing, filling-in of details and revision, which I could do without any special creative effort. I promised to devote myself to this work for a while so as to give her a rest, and so it was arranged when she finally left me.

Of course I went to see her often after that. How could I help it? But I chose only those days when her husband had gone to the state capital, some eighty miles away. I found that by seeing her, consulting with her, my work progressed better. She had, of course, no suggestions to offer; the creative energy was all mine. But she had the gift of stimulating me to a powerful degree. I was able to work more calmly after visiting her; and it affected her much less unpleasantly to have me there in person than it did for me to subject her to the hypnotic spell which brought her astral body to mine when I worked alone.

You may remember that Richard Wagner, the greatest master of us all, wrote his opera *Tristan und Isolde* under much the same condi-

tions, finding his inspiration in the person of Frau Wesendonck, with whom, in spite of all the gossip, I believe his friendship was purely platonic, as was mine with Ailsa Corliss.

But you know how it was with him; and still more was it the case in this small, midwestern town with its obtuse incomprehension of all things artistic. People began to put a wrong construction upon my frequent visits during Ronald Corliss' absences. Nor was the gossip lessened by the fact that under the new arrangement Ailsa was benefited physically. The old elfin look returned to her eyes. She was gayer, more light-hearted, more alive, her old self. Her soul had been sleeping, my friend, and I had awakened it.

I must confess that as time went on, we became careless. We met frequently and were seen together a lot. Both of us were blind to the gossip, so pure and so beautiful was the union between us.

THE awakening came one day when I received a visit from Ronald Corliss himself. I don't care to speak of that interview even now. He became purple with rage when he spoke of what he called my "damned diabolical musical hypnotism," and threatened violence if I visited his house again. I fear I was equally indignant and violent in speech. We nearly came to blows. He left finally after saying that if I did not leave Ailsa alone he would run me out of town—me, Francis Kenworthy, whose birth and subsequent residence there conferred the only distinction on the town it ever deserved or enjoyed.

That upset me greatly, my friend; but what upset me more was the discovery that so long as Corliss was in town my control over Ailsa was greatly diminished. His stubborn will, now fully aroused, was fighting desperately against mine, and all my

energy that should have gone into creating divine music was expended in fighting him. It was a strange battle, and Ailsa suffered perhaps worst of all, for she was, as it were, the battleground.

Finally I was compelled to communicate with her, and we patched up a sort of arrangement for clandestine meetings distasteful to us both. There is in town a wretched voice-teacher and organist named Borman who was forever fawning upon me, and upon whom I exerted, grotesquely enough, a hypnotic power similar to that I wielded over Ailsa herself. I persuaded her to go to him, ostensibly for voice-lessons, during which this loathsome creature made himself scarce. In this way we resumed our strange intimacy and things progressed well for a time. Ailsa recovered her spirits and I continued happily in my work.

But this wretched Borman talked, and thanks to his gibbering the scandal was greater than ever. I received another visit from Corliss. Of the wretched vulgarity of this visit I speak with loathing. As you know, my friend, he brought a horsewhip with him and actually attempted violence.

I do not look strong, my friend, but like many musicians I have extremely powerful wrists and arms; and I can move with catlike swiftness. Against this heavy, over-fleshed creature I was omnipotent. I wrested the whip from his hand, slashed him with it, flung it away, and gave him a violent body-blow with my fist that sent him panting and heaving into the corner of my studio. I was afraid I had killed him. His face went ashen-gray and he gasped and choked as though he were going to have a fit. He recovered eventually, however, and left, muttering curses.

Of course news of the encounter leaked out, and there was terrible gossip. I was obliged to leave Mall-

ingham under threats of violence which even the police advised me not to ignore. Such, my friend, is the freedom of this land of liberty!

STRANGE to say, my work progressed during this period. I had found a new inspiration, my friend. And will you believe me when I tell you that it was hatred? It was nothing else. My disgust and loathing for this wretched Corliss drove me to composition in a way that was at first gratifying and afterward alarming.

It was alarming because, to my consternation, I found the music was bad. I don't mean technically; I mean spiritually. It was wicked music, distorted, cacophonous, diabolical, the child of hate. I could not believe that this loathsome thing was my own brain-child.

At first I did not realize this. But gradually the truth dawned upon me. This hideous, earthbound creature had dragged me down to his own earth-level. My genius was being trailed in the mud.

Worse than that, I found myself consumed by new physical passions to which I had hitherto been a stranger. I longed, physically, to choke the man's throat with my fingers. And worse still, I found that my feeling toward Ailsa was changing. Hitherto my feeling for her had been purely platonic, apart from the strange musically creative passion that bound us together. Now I felt less and less of that and more and more of a much less desirable longing.

My friend, I cannot begin to tell you the horrors I went through. My desire for her was no longer sublimated into divine music; it was gross, earthly. It haunted my dreams, so that I loathed her even while I longed for her, just as I began to loathe myself.

Always I could feel the strong will of her husband dragging me down to the crude level of his own debased

passions. Always in my dreams he came between us. The thought of him obsessed me, compelled me to write music which was, I verily believe, dictated by the devil himself.

I could not stand the strain. I longed to go back to Mallingham, to see her again, feeling that by a resumption of our old intimacy alone could I regain my true self, purified, sublimated. Otherwise I and my music would perish. Yet I resisted the temptation for her sake.

In the end, it was she who compelled me to go. Just as she came to me that first night, so she wrote a letter of such anguish that I should have been inhuman not to return to her for just the one meeting she demanded.

"The suspense is killing me," she wrote. "I feel myself the battleground between you, and you are wearing me down. Ronald does not understand. He is jealous, fearful, suspicious, and will hardly leave my side, yet at all times I feel you tugging me. You at least have intuition enough to understand my state of mind. Come to me, I beg of you, before you kill me."

What could I say to that? What else could I do but go? And fate conspired to help us. It seemed that the country was again to undergo its quadrennial political orgy known as a presidential election, and Corliss was due to speak at a convention in the state capital the following Wednesday night. I had only to send her a key to my studio, and we could meet late at night without a soul being the wiser. As I have explained, my studio was isolated and screened from the road.

ACCORDINGLY, on the night Corliss was to speak, I went back to Mallingham, half frightened at the desire I felt to see Ailsa once more, and yet confident that once in her pres-

ence the older, purer feeling for her would return.

I arrived, as you know, late at night, passing unobserved from the railroad station and walking the two miles out to my studio, soaked to the skin, for it was raining, and clutching my manuscript under my arm.

She must have been there some time, for she had a fire lit in the stove, and had coffee ready. Also, to my amusement, she had started the clock, as she explained, to cook my eggs by, having forgotten her watch. I laughingly set it right while she put the eggs on. I should not mention this fact but that it has a certain significance, as you will see.

Just as I had supposed, now that I was with her, the ugly, sensual feeling I had had for her vanished, and I felt toward her as I had always felt, and we talked of music—nothing else. And as we talked the old elfin light came back to her eyes, and the drawn look left her cheeks. I told her of what had happened, as clearly as I could.

"I know," she said. "I felt that something of the sort was going on in your mind. Oh, it has been awful—awful! I have been torn between you and Ronald. I tried to make him understand just what our true relations were, but it only made him the more jealous, and—oh, I must not speak like this, for I love him!—indeed I do, Francis. You must believe that—I do love him."

You will not believe me, perhaps, but to hear her say that made me actually happy. I wanted nothing from her but the inspiration for my opera.

"You must play me what you have composed," she went on; "I am dying to hear it—even if it is bad, as you say it is."

For the first time I felt a misgiving.

"It is late," I said, pointing to the clock.

It was, in fact, nearly midnight. She insisted, however, and though I felt that it was dangerous to play that diabolical music to her, I was by now so sure of myself that I felt no risk; yet I hesitated.

"It's devil's music," I warned her. "I'm afraid of it."

"Then I'll exorcise the devil," she said, gaily.

So I went to the piano and began to play. And then—the worst happened. As I played that cacophonous, insidious music, I felt the old evil passions rising within me. I tried to stop, but I couldn't. The music possessed me with its infernal power. I fought against it, tried to lift my hands from the keyboard, but I could not move them.

She must have seen from my eyes what was going on, for an expression of horror came over her face. "Stop! Stop!" she cried; but I was powerless. It was as if diabolical hands were holding mine down to the keyboard, forcing me to go on playing though I revolted with every ounce of will-power.

She rushed toward me, and put her arms about me, trying to draw me away from the keyboard. But her touch inflamed me. I stopped playing, indeed, but I do not dare to think what madness was in me at that moment.

Yet strangely, as soon as the music ceased, the feeling began to pass. Though I struggled with her in my arms, and for all I know, may have kissed her, yet I felt that my strength was returning, and I was regaining control over myself.

IT WAS while we were still struggling that the final catastrophe happened. Ronald Corliss came into the room. No, my friend, it is useless for you to look at me like that. He entered the room as sure as I'm alive, and my arms dropped to my side. I was powerless, frozen stiff. I heard

Ailsa gasp, and knew somehow that she had dropped into the armchair beside the stove, weeping and panting.

Ronald Corliss spoke no word as he entered, and his eyes were fixed upon her alone. I was frozen stiff, paralyzed, yet I was sharply aware of details that seemed inconsequential. I noticed, for instance, that his double-breasted suit of blue serge was dry. I glanced at the clock, which seemed to be ticking unnaturally loud. It was a few minutes after midnight.

There was no train at such an hour. He must have traveled in a closed car at a furious pace; but he could have made it in an hour and a half, and it seemed reasonable to suppose his speech was over by 10:30. It seemed reasonable; but I felt that something was wrong in my reasoning. I can't explain this, but I felt it.

He swerved a little as he came forward, and his hand shot out as he passed the piano. He grabbed my manuscript from the piano, and to my astonishment, still glaring at Ailsa and ignoring me, he flung it into the stove, before he went to her and stood before her, implacable, menacing.

His action restored my senses. I cried out and ran to the stove, intent on saving the manuscript from the flames; but as I passed him, his hand shot out once more, and I was flung to the ground. I must have swooned. I remember nothing more, save that as my senses reeled, I saw his great hands reaching out clawlike toward Ailsa. . . .

WHEN I awoke, it was to find the sunlight creeping into the room, mingling with the still-burning electric light, though the shades were drawn. The three of them were standing over me—the police officer,

the newspaper reporter, and the deaf woman from the house who had noticed the light burning when she woke in the morning.

Ailsa was all crumpled up in the armchair before the cold stove in which were the charred remnants of my opera. I could only guess what had happened to her.

"Did you get him?" I asked, spluttering, for they had thrown water in my face to revive me.

"Get whom?" demanded the police officer.

"Corliss," I answered. "Ronald Corliss, her husband. It was he who killed her."

The two men stared at each other curiously, and I was puzzled to interpret their looks.

"He's plumb crazy," said the police officer.

"Looks that way," answered the reporter.

The deaf woman stared uncomprehending from one to the other.

I tried to rise up, hot with indignation; but the policeman gripped my shoulder. And then the newspaper man shoved the newspaper under my nose and I saw the huge headline.

"CORLISS DEAD!" ran the headline, and beneath in heavy type: "Immediately after finishing his speech to the Republican convention shortly after midnight last night, Ronald Corliss, of this city, succumbed to a heart attack. He appeared to be smitten with a fit of some sort, for he plunged forward and struggled violently with those who ran to his aid before death put an end to the attack. He has been ailing for some time, and domestic worries may—"

I read no more.