

WEIRD TALES



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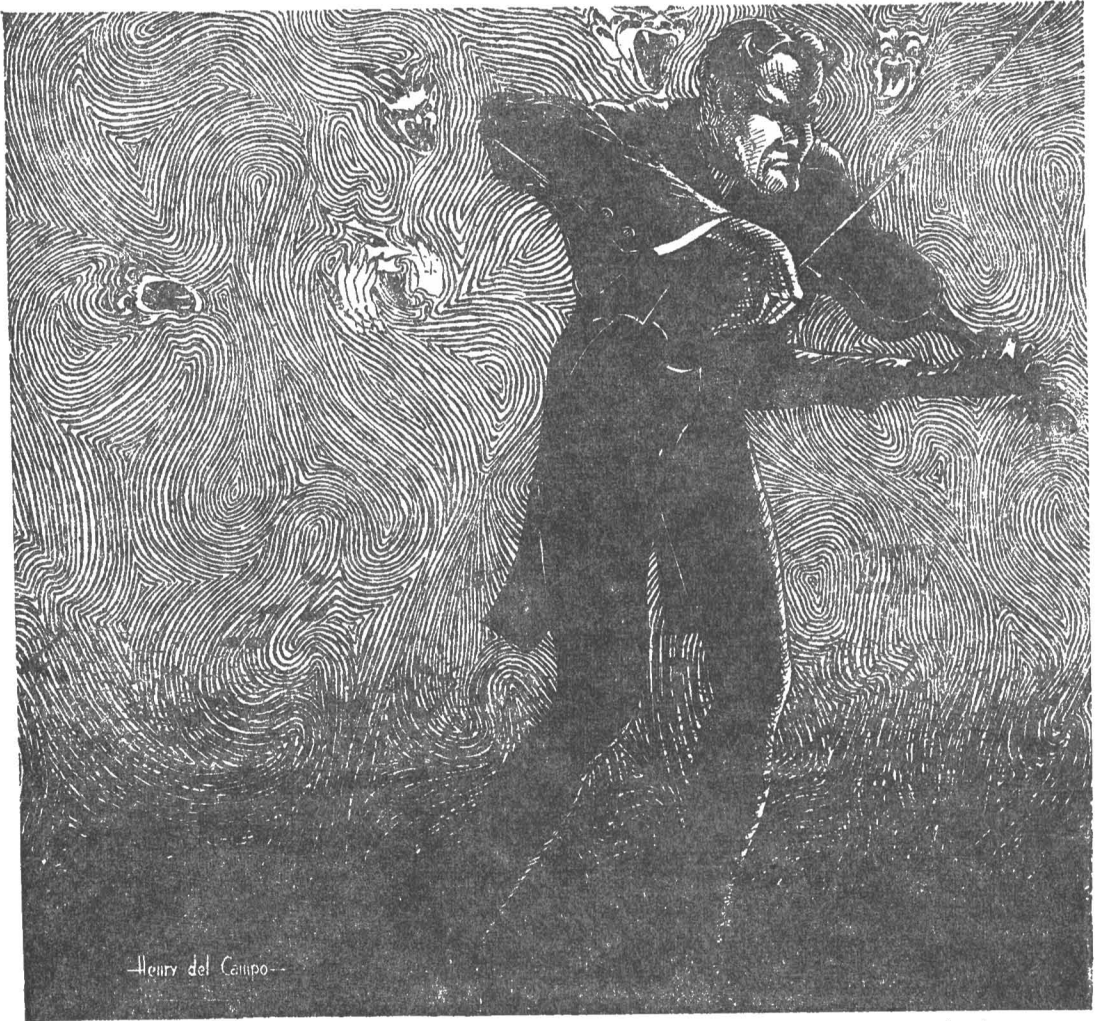
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Henry del Campo

"Swooping to Hell, spiraling to Heaven, the violin sang accompaniment to the dark voices in his brain."

The Fiddler's Fee

By ROBERT BLOCH

Genius for sale—at a price that could not be repaid in all Eternity.

THE door of the inn swung open and the Devil entered. He was as thin as a corpse, and whiter than the shroud a corpse lies in. His eyes were deep and dark as graves. His mouth was redder than the gate of Hell, his hair was blacker than the pits below. He

dressed like a dandy, and he came from a fine coach, but it was assuredly he: Satan, Father of Lies.

The innkeeper cringed. He had no fancy to play host to this emissary from Darkness. The innkeeper trembled under Satan's smile, while his eyes searched

Satan's person for signs of a tail, of cloven hoofs. Then he noticed that Satan carried a violin-case.

It was not Satan, then! The innkeeper breathed a silent prayer of relief. It was only momentary. A minute later he was trembling with augmented fear. If this was not Satan, this man who looked like the Devil and carried a violin-case—then it must be—

"*Signor Paganini!*" whispered mine host.

The stranger inclined his dark head with a slow smile.

"Welcome," quavered the innkeeper, but there was no smile on his face. It was almost as though he preferred confirmation of his first fear rather than this. Satan one could deal with, perhaps—but the child of Satan?

Everyone knew that Paganini was the son of the Devil himself. He looked like the Devil, and many were the diabolical legends concerning his unholy life. He was said to drink, gamble, and love like the Prince of Darkness, and to entertain an equal hatred of all men. Certainly he played like Lucifer—in that case under his arm he carried an instrument of hellish power; a violin whose sublime singing drove all Europe mad.

Yes, even here in this tiny village men knew and feared the strange and terrible legend that had grown up about the destiny of the world's most famed violinist. New and fantastic stories were continually pouring in from Milan, from Florence, from Rome—and half the capitals of the Continent as well. "Paganini murdered his wife and sold her body to Satan." "Paganini has formed a Society against all God-loving men." "Paganini's mistresses are offered in the Black Mass." "Paganini's music is written by the very fiends of Hell." "Paganini is the son of the Devil."

Legends these might be, but the atrocious conduct attributed to the *maestro*, that was fact. His scandalous amours, his disgrace-

ful attitude toward the great and the nobility had been confirmed time and time again. Gossip, slander, malice these things were in part. But one shining truth remained.

No one had ever played the violin like Nicolo Paganini.

Therefore the innkeeper bowed despite his fear. He sent a lad to change horses and serve the driver of the coach, ushered *Signor* to the best room, and awaited his presence in the parlor of the inn with a carefully prepared table.

Another awaited his presence as well—the innkeeper's son, also called Nicolo.

Young Nicolo knew even more about the great man than his father. The lad knew more about the violin than anyone in the village, with the exception of Carlo, the wine merchant's son. Both boys had studied at the local conservatory since early childhood, and there was keen rivalry between them; between their families, each of whom fostered the budding genius of their heirs.

Now Nicolo awaited his glimpse of the great man. What a triumph over Carlo! What a thing to talk about in weeks to come! Perhaps he, Nicolo, might even speak to the illustrious musician—might, if the saints were kind, receive a word in return. But that was almost too much to hope for. Paganini was not interested in boys. Still, Nicolo was determined to see him; he did not fear the legends. So the lad waited, working on the preparations for the meal in the kitchen with his sensitive ears attuned to the sound of footsteps on the stairs above.

They came.

PAGANINI sat in solitary splendor at the great table of the inn. No other customers were present to stare at the great man, and he seemed oddly content to be alone—he who loved applause, adulation, obeisance. His thin, hawk-like face

—singularly Satanic in the lamp-light it was—cast a black blurred shadow on the wall behind. His carefully curled hair rose in two horn-like projections against that shadow, so that the innkeeper noticed it as he entered, and nearly spilled the wine.

Paganini ate and drank sparingly—as fiends do. He said never a word, nor did he exhibit the humanity of smile or scowl. When he had finished, he sat back and seemed to stare into the candle-flame.

It was as though his eyes turned homeward to Hell.

The innkeeper left the room, crossing himself. This silent guest was indeed a son of Satan! In the passage he came upon Nicolo, staring at the pale violinist.

"No, no!—come away," the father whispered. "You must not."

But Nicolo, moving as one entranced, entered the parlor. A voice that was unlike any his father had heard came almost mechanically from his throat.

"Good evening, *Signor Paganini*."

The eyes left the flame, after partaking of their glare. A long, deliberate glance pierced Nicolo's face like a dark lance.

"The whelp knows my name. Well!"

"I have heard much of you, *Signor*. Who in Italy does not know the name of Paganini?"

"And—fear it," said the violinist, gravely.

"I do not fear you," answered the boy, slowly. His eyes did not fall when the *maestro* smiled his wolfish smile.

"Yes?" The voice purred. "Yes; that is right. You do not fear me. I feel that. And—why?"

"Because I love Music."

"Because he loves Music," parroted Paganini, cruelly mimicking the intonations until the statement stood naked in its triteness. Then, slowly, as the stare came again: "But you do love Music, boy. I feel it—strange."

A hand reached out, a pale ghost of a hand with great sinews that hinted at delicate strength, however paradoxical that might seem. The hand gestured Nicolo to a seat. The hand poured wine into a glass. The hand drummed on the table slowly.

"Do you play?"

"Y-yes, *maestro*."

"Play for me, then."

Nicolo raced to his room. The beloved violin rested against his heart as he ran back.

"It is such a poor thing, *maestro*. It does not sing——"

"Play."

Nicolo played. He never remembered what he played that night; he only knew that it came to him, and he played as he never had played before.

And the face of Satan smiled through the music.

Nicolo stopped. Paganini asked his name. He answered. Paganini asked of his teacher, his practice, his plans. Nicolo answered all questions. And then Paganini laughed. The innkeeper, listening in his turn in the passageway, shuddered when he heard that laugh.

It was a laugh that cracked through the earth and came up from Hell. It was the laugh of a sobbing violin played by a fallen angel in the Pit.

"Fools!" shouted the *maestro*.

Then he stared at Nicolo. Something inside the lad begged him to turn away. But as he had before, the boy returned the stare, until the master musician spoke.

"What can I say? Should I advise you to go to a good teacher, buy a better violin? Should I even give you money for that purpose? Yes, but to what end? You have the gift, but you will never use it."

Paganini sneered.

"You may be competent. You may even win small fame, a certain amount of success. But true greatness you cannot

achieve through teacher or instrument or training. You must be inspired—as I was.”

Nicolo stood trembling, he knew not why. There was a horrible conviction in the words he heard. It frightened him, that hint of certain authority, of final knowledge.

“A man must compose his own work, play his own work,” the voice went on. “And no human teacher can give you that gift.”

Suddenly Paganini stood up.

“My pardon. I forgot. I came to this place because I have an—appointment nearby. I cannot keep my—the one I must see—waiting. I shall go now. But thank you for your playing.”

Nicolo’s face fell. He was convinced that in a moment or so more the *maestro* would have revealed something to him which he very much wanted to know. For Nicolo felt as Paganini did about his work. He knew that within him lay great talent; knew that any ordinary training would subdue that talent in channels of mere mechanical perfection. There was a bond between his humble self and the greatness of the master before him. And if only Paganini had spoken! Now it was too late!

The black cloak swirled as the violinist went to the door. Then in a rush of ebony Paganini swept back the garment as he turned.

“Wait.”

He stared, and Nicolo felt his soul lifted and examined and torn and probed by the red-hot pincers of Paganini’s eyes.

“Come with me. We shall keep our appointment together.”

An almost audible gasp issued from the passageway at the end of the room. Nicolo knew it came from his father, listening. But he did not care. As the door swung against darkness, he moved to the musician’s side. They left together.

“I will apprentice you this night to a true Master,” Paganini whispered.

IT WAS a long walk up the mountain-side to the Cave of Fools. The road was lonely in the midnight, but then it was always lonely, for men hereabouts feared the Cave. The Devil was said to dwell in its mists, and the Cave itself was unexplored by those who deemed its depths led down to Tartarus itself.

It was a long and lonely walk, and the way was strange amidst winding paths and twisting passages of rock; yet Paganini never faltered. He had walked this way before.

Now, the bony hand gripped Nicolo’s brown fingers in an icy clasp so filled with cold, inhuman strength that the lad shuddered. But he followed through the steam and mist and fog that hid the clean light of the stars; followed to the mouth of the Cave as though impelled by the magic of Paganini’s voice.

For the *maestro* spoke all that way, and spoke without reticence. Sensing a kindred soul, he revealed.

“They say I am a spawn of the Devil, and that is a lie. All my life they told me so—even my father, cursed fool! In the academies my fellow-students made the sign of the horns at me and the girls fled screaming.

“They screamed at me, who lived for Music and Beauty! But at first I did not care. I lived for my work, and I worked hard. Always I felt within me that spark, glowing to a flame.

“And then when I made my first appearances, I came again into the world of men. My music was acclaimed, but I was hated. ‘Child of the Devil’ they called me, because I was ugly, and my temper bad. I tried again to drown myself in work, but this time it no longer sufficed, because I knew my playing was not good enough. I had genius, but I could not express it.

“After a while one begins to reason.

My work was not enough. The world hated me. 'Child of the Devil?' Why not?

"I knew the way. I studied. I read the old forbidden books I found in the great libraries of Florence. And I came here. There is a legend of Faust, you know.

"There are ways of meeting Powers that grant things to men in return for an exchange."

They entered the Cave now, and when Nicolo's hands trembled at the words the musician's grip tightened.

"Do not fear, lad. It is worth the cost. Thirteen years ago tonight I was just such a lad as you; perhaps a bit older. I came this way alone, and with the same fears. And it was well.

"When I came forth I had within me the gift I craved. Since that time, you know, all the world knows, my story. Fame, wealth, beautiful women—all earthly success is mine to command. But more than that; greater than that, is my Music. I learned to compose, and to play. They say His songs moved the angels and the stars. I have that gift. And you, who know, love, and have born within you, Music—you shall this night partake of the same gift."

NICOLÒ wanted to run, to get out of this deep cavern where the steam swirled in fantastic shapes. He wanted to make the sign of the cross as he heard the bubbling and the booming from the depths ahead. And then a curious picture came to his mind—the vision of Carlo Zuttio, the wine-merchant's son. Carlo went to the conservatory, and he was a fool. But he had a better violin, and private lessons, so that he played more masterfully than Nicolo. And his parents were wealthy, and they boasted to Nicolo's father of their son and his music. The whole town knew that Carlo would go on to the big school in Milan. He, Nicolo, would not go on—he would remain and take over the inn,

and sometime when he was old and fat he might play at country weddings for drinks. Carlo would be rich and famous, and wear silk when he returned to visit. Nicolo would no longer be a rival, then; merely a country innkeeper.

It was this vision, and no love of Music that came to Nicolo in the bowels of the earth. It was this vision that made him smile and follow Paganini as they advanced into the heart of the hot smoke and knelt upon the stones in the darkness.

Then Paganini called a Secret Name and the earth thundered. He made a sign not of the cross, and he prayed in a voice that was black and crawling.

Then the mists grew red and the thundering swelled, and Nicolo was formally introduced to his Teacher.

3

PAGANINI had been crafty. It was a bargain. Three years for him, and no more; where Paganini had gained thirteen. But the other ten years went to the *maestro* as payment for leading the way. It was a fair arrangement; a business arrangement.

That was what shocked Nicolo more than anything else when he returned home. It had all been so business-like. There was behind it a terrible hint of purpose; the Power knew what it was doing—there was no aimlessness, no blind evil. It was all so *arranged*.

Three years.

But there was singing in Nicolo's heart, singing which over-rode the sound of his father's quavering prayers, singing which rose to triumphant heights when he played at the conservatory the next afternoon.

"Paganini taught me," is all that Nicolo would say when the faculty exclaimed. "Paganini taught me," Nicolo told Carlo with a smile.

The singing rose higher as the weeks passed.

Nicolo, who read notes poorly, composed.

Nicolo improvised.

The faculty bought him a new violin, and on the festival day it was Nicolo who appeared as soloist with the orchestra from Venice; though Carlo was second in competition for the post.

Nicolo won the scholarship and went to Milan.

His father prayed but said nothing. Paganini did not write, but word came of his triumphs in France.

In Milan, Nicolo was a sensation at the school. Carlo came too, his parents paying his tuition; and Carlo was successful. He studied hard, worked diligently, played expertly.

But Nicolo's soaring tones were born of inspiration within. He was mastering a technique against which mere practise could not compete.

Through the year it was a constant competition between the two country boys—Nicolo and Carlo. The whole school knew it. Nicolo had the talent. Carlo had the ambition. The battle for perfection was deadly.

Nicolo was aging. His face was already maturing in set lines, and the color had left it set and harsh. It was whispered that his nights were spent in study that left him wasted.

The truth was that Nicolo's nights were spent in fear. He was remembering the tryst in the Cave of Fools, and he was anticipating the days to come. Only two years now—and so much to do!

He had been a fool. But Paganini's personality had overshadowed his own, dominated it. He had been led. He knew that now. Paganini had wanted a dupe, so that he might make such a bargain and extend his own life at the expense of another's. That is why he had taken Nicolo. Nicolo often wondered just what might have happened had Paganini gone alone to his ac-

counting. He wondered, because in two years he must go—and there would be no dupe for him.

Two years! Nicolo would toss on his pillow and shudder at the thought. He could not hope to do what Paganini had done in thirteen. He could not win much but initial acclaim; none of the fame and the riches would be his in so short a time. But one thing he could do—beat his rival, Carlo.

Nicolo hated Carlo now. He hadn't used to hate him. They had been rivals, but friendly enough. Ever since that night in the Cave of Fools Nicolo had hated.

Carlo was keeping up. Nicolo found that his work came to him almost effortlessly. His hands moved without thought along the bow, and his fingering seemed undirected. There was no triumphant thrill for him in his music, no sense of mastery in his easy playing.

Carlo had this, because Carlo had to work and sweat to compete, and when he did so he felt satisfied. Moreover, aided by no supernatural gift, Carlo *was* competing too closely for comfort.

And the school liked Carlo. The teachers knew his work and praised him for it. They did not praise Nicolo because they could not understand his methods. He puzzled them.

The other pupils liked Carlo. He had money, and he was generous. He bought sweets for his friends, laughed with them at their parties. Nicolo had no money for sweets, no fine clothes for parties. The pupils were in awe of him, and they distrusted his face.

Carlo was handsome, too. The girls liked Carlo. Even Elissa, liked him. And that added to the agony of Nicolo's nights.

4

ELISSA'S hair was yellow flame on a pillow. Elissa's eyes were the jewels on the breast of Passion. Elissa's mouth

was a red gateway to delight. Elissa's arms were——

It was no use. Nicolo couldn't think of anything more poetic. All he knew was that Elissa burned within him at all times. Her beauty was like a lash across his naked heart.

Actually, Elissa Robbia was a very pretty blond student, but Nicolo was in love and Youth knows only a goddess.

Elissa walked with Carlo, and she went to parties with him, and they danced at the festival together. Throughout the second year they were together always.

Always Nicolo watched from the corner. Once or twice he spoke to the object of his worship, but she did not seem to notice him, despite his efforts to be ingratiating. She preferred the handsome Carlo.

So Nicolo worked. He outplayed Carlo, though it was not easy now. Despite Nicolo's secret power, Carlo seemed inspired by love. Carlo followed his most difficult trills, mastered every detail of the well-nigh flawless technique which Nicolo mastered.

Still, Nicolo triumphed always in the end. The better teachers were now confounded by the spectacle of their two notable students. Often outsiders witnessed performances. The Opera sent conductors down to listen, and notables from all over the South attended the salons in local aristocratic homes when the star pupils played.

Nothing was said officially, but it was understood that one or the other of the boys would be groomed for concert debut within the year.

Both of them knew it, though they no longer spoke to each other. Both of them worked frantically. The final concert of the season would decide; they suspected that. Both had been asked for a performance of some solo composition.

Nicolo went to work a month in advance. What took place in his dark room will never be known, but he emerged with

what he felt was a true masterpiece. He had worked as never before. He would win, he would shame Carlo before them all; shame him before Elissa.

He could hardly wait for the night.

The stage of the school was lighted and the house was filled with those of a station to allow their jewels to reflect that light. Rumor had passed, and in the audience were musical notables from all Italy. And the Master was there, too—yes, the great Paganini himself! Come to watch Nicolo, his former pupil, they said.

What a triumph! Nicolo shivered with ecstasy, fondling his violin as he waited in the wings for the solos to end. Tonight he would appear before Paganini himself when he took victory over his rival. Nothing could make his happiness more complete!

Where was Carlo, by the way? He had not appeared in the wings as yet.

But—there he was—in the audience!
With Elissa.

What did this mean?

A number ended. The director was announcing his name.

"Unfortunately the soloist who was to compete with Signor Nicolo this evening, Carlo Zuttio . . ."

What was that?

"Resigned from the school . . ."

Yes?

"Marriage to . . ."

Married! To Elissa!

He had done that, knowing he would lose tonight he'd given up music, retired to his father's business, and married Elissa. And now he had arranged for it to be announced, to rob Nicolo of his victory! Bitter despair rose in Nicolo's heart, and black anger.

But when his name was called he stepped forth and played.

He played his number, but it was not the original he had planned. For now he improvised; or rather, hate improvised for

him. Hate tore at the strings, plucked frenetically at a flayed violin.

And waves of horror crept through the house.

Through red mists, the black eyes of Paganini blazed, the smile dropped from Carlo's face, the lips of Elissa grew pale. Nicolo saw *her* eyes grow blank, and poured his music into them. She had never noticed him before, eh? Well, she would not forget him now—not this, and *this*.

Swooping to Hell, spiraling to Heaven, shrieking and whispering of damnation and glory, the violin sang accompaniment to dark voices that yammered in Nicolo's brain.

Nicolo had no arms, no fingers. He was all violin. His body was part of the instrument, his brain a part of the song. Both were being played by *Another*.

He finished.

Silence.

Then the thunder.

And while he bowed and smiled and the sound tore at his ear-drums, his eyes blazed into Elissa's empty face through the standing crowd.

Nicolo had won and lost tonight. But he would win again.

5

THEY came to him after the concert. They offered him money, for private study.

In a year, they said, he would come back and perform in a solo concert at the school.

Nicolo accepted the money gravely. It was supposed that he would use that money to spend his year in Rome, working under the great *maestri* as a private pupil.

But Nicolo had other plans. He knew that Carlo and Elissa would return to the village, and he meant to follow them there. He thanked the directors of the school and prepared to depart.

In the hallway stood a cloaked figure. It was Paganini.

Without a word the pale genius took Nicolo's hand, just as he had that night two years before. Together they walked the dark streets.

"You played well tonight, my son. They said your music was like Paganini's." He smiled. "And well it might be, since we study under the same Master."

Nicolo shuddered.

"Do not fear. In a year's time you shall have had all the fame and glory you desire. The world will bow before your power. That is as you desired, no?"

"No." Nicolo shook his head. "I shall not study and I shall not go to Rome. My desire lies elsewhere." He told Paganini of Carlo and Elissa. The *maestro* listened.

"So you return to the village, eh? Well, if it is that what you seek, I am sure you will be aided in your quest. Do not despair."

Nicolo sighed.

"I am afraid of that aid. This music—this playing—it is not a part of me. It comes from other sources, and I feel no satisfaction in stirring my listeners. Carlo and Elissa were stirred tonight; but it was the music that did it, not myself. Don't you understand?"

A cold whisper bit through the darkness as Paganini spoke.

"Yes, I understand, perfectly; but you do not. Tonight you played through hate, and there was hate in the hall. *But when you go to Elissa, you will play through love.* She will be stirred. For our Master is eminently successful in amours. Let your violin speak and she shall become yours."

"But what of him? What of Carlo?"

"Again, let your violin speak. It has a voice that drives men mad. *Let him hear that voice.*"

A slow laugh crawled out of Paganini's lips.

"I know how it will be. Ah, I know! Years ago I discovered that secret, and well

have I used it. Madden the cuckold and woo the mistress, and rejoice in the gift of the Teacher! I envy you your year, my friend. It will be a great triumph for you."

Nicolo's heart was pounding.

"You really believe I can do it?" he asked.

"Certainly. You were given the power; let it guide you to your purpose." Paganini's voice grew grave. "But it was not of that which I proposed to speak when I awaited you this evening. There is another thing.

"I want to remind you that a year from tonight you have an appointment in the Cave of Fools."

"I am afraid."

"It was a bargain, and you must go."

"What if I do not go?"

"That I cannot speak of. *He* will come for you then, I know it. *He* will revenge himself horribly."

"I wish," and Nicolo's voice was low with hatred, "I wish that I had never met you. You led me to this—tricked me into this infernal bargain! I was a fool, and I should kill you for it."

Paganini stopped and faced the youth. His eyes were ice.

"Perhaps. But think—think of the coming year. You shall win Elissa, and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad——"

His voice was like his violin, playing and replaying the same damnable, wheedling trill until it surged through Nicolo's brain.

"Think not of revenge. Go to the Cave of Fools a year from tonight; but first, win Elissa and drive Carlo mad——"

Still whispering the words, Paganini turned in the darkness and disappeared. And Nicolo walked the streets, muttering to himself:

"I shall win Elissa and drive Carlo mad."

6

NICOLO did not stay at his father's inn when he returned. He had money now, and he procured rooms in town—rooms below the apartment of the newly-wed couple he had followed.

He did not see them for a month. He was in his dark room with the violin. He played in darkness now, for he needed no notes in this composition. He developed only two themes. One was soft and sweet and tender, thrilling was passionate beauty. As Nicolo played, his face would glow in ecstasy and warmth flooded his being.

The second theme slithered out of the darkness. Then it padded. Then it began to run, and leap, and dance. At first it squeaked like a rat, then it howled like a dog, finally it bayed like a black wolf. It was a fiendish howling of terrific power, and when Nicolo played it his hands trembled and he closed his eyes.

For a month Nicolo played the two themes over and over in his tiny room—alone. Not quite alone, for there was a whispering in his brain that prompted each tone, and an unseen hand that guided the bow over the strings. Nicolo played and played, and he grew thin and gaunt. After a month the music was a part of him, and he was ready.

It took him a week to become friendly with his neighbors again. In another week he had learned their habits; knew when Carlo worked at the wine-press and left Elissa alone.

Then, one afternoon, Nicolo visited Elissa. She sat regal in her blond beauty while they talked, and after a while Nicolo suggested that he play something for her. He took out his violin and drew the bow across the strings, eyes on her face.

His eyes never left her face while he played. His eyes feasted on her face as the music feasted on her soul.

The tune came forth, reiterated; in end-

less variations it rose in soaring rhapsody. And Elissa rose in soaring rhapsody and came toward him, her eyes empty save for the soul-filling majesty of the music.

Then Nicolo put down the violin and took her in his arms.

He came the next day, and the next. Always he brought his violin. Always he played and always she surrendered to the music.

For months Nicolo was happy. For many months he played each day, and his nights were peaceful at last. Carlo suspected nothing.

Nicolo began to plan. In a little while he would return to Milan for the solo concert. After that he would be famous—go on tour. He had, under the inspiration of his love, written enough to insure his success at the debut. He would take Elissa with him, and together they would scale the heights.

Then he remembered.

He could not go to Milan, or the concert. That night he had an appointment in the Cave of Fools.

Nicolo didn't want to die. He didn't want to give his soul. That cursed bargain!

But there was no way out.

Every day he saw Elissa he longed for life with greater fervor. Knowing the end was near, he came oftener, took greater and greater chances. He was counting the hours now, the minutes.

Three days before the time appointed he went there in the evening. Carlo would be late at the wine-press, so Nicolo played. Elissa sat there, her face blank as it always was when he played. Sometimes Nicolo would find himself wishing that he had no music to do his wooing—that he himself would inspire such adoration in the woman he loved. But that was too much to hope for; Elissa loved Carlo, and only the music gave her to Nicolo. It sufficed. The spell was strong. Nicolo played tonight as

he had never played before, and as the music rose it drowned out the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Carlo was in the room.

NICOLO stopped playing. Elissa's eyes opened as though she were wakening from profound depths of sleep.

And Carlo faced them both. He was a big man, Carlo, with strong hands that now opened and closed convulsively at his sides. Carlo's heavy body was lunging across the room and the hands moved for Nicolo's throat.

They never reached it.

Nicolo's delicate hands were on the violin. He began to play.

It was not the love-strain that he played this time. It was the other—the song of madness.

At the sound of the rat-like squeaking Carlo stopped. Nicolo watched him as the shrieking mounted. Carlo's eyes grew wide. The shrieking became a moan. Carlo's wide eyes were growing red. The moaning was a rising bark, a yelp of agony. Carlo's hands went to his head. He stepped back, sank to his knees. Then Nicolo played. The violin screamed, the bow moved up and down upon it like a red-hot poker descending on human flesh. Nicolo played until Carlo lay rolling on the floor, baying in rhythm as the foam poured from his lips. Nicolo played until the room pulsed with horrid sound, until the glass shivered with the vibration and the candlelight wavered and the flame danced in agony. Nicolo played, and then he stopped.

Carlo lay there moaning, and he rose to his knees and looked at Nicolo. Then he looked at Elissa.

Nicolo followed his glance.

Elissa—he had forgotten Elissa! He had played the music of madness and forgotten she was in the room.

Elissa lay where she had fallen and her face was white with the unmistakable whiteness of death. Carlo looked at her and began to laugh.

Nicolo sobbed. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Husband and lover laughed and sobbed together.

It was all over. She was dead, and he was mad. And two nights from now Nicolo must go to that rendezvous in the Cave of Fools.

So this was Satan's gift! This awful mockery was what it had brought him.

The dead woman lay on the floor as the madman crawled toward her, cackling.

Nicolo rose to go. His bow accidentally scraped the strings. The mad Carlo rose, laughing, and seized the violin. He broke it across the bridge and hurled it from the window.

Still laughing, he turned, but there was no sane hatred in his eyes.

And then the thought came to Nicolo. "Carlo," he whispered. "Carlo."

The idiot husband laughed.

"Carlo, your wife is dead. But I did not kill her. I swear it. It was the Devil, Carlo. The Devil who dwells in the Cave of Fools. You want to avenge your wife's death, don't you, Carlo? Then seek out the Devil two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. Remember, Carlo—two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. I will stay with you until then and tell you where to go."

The madman laughed.

Softly, Nicolo repeated his suggestion. He whispered it all that night as the deranged Carlo slept. He whispered it the next day as they sat beside the body of the dead woman. At last, when Nicolo rose to leave on the coach for Milan, he felt that Carlo understood and would go. Smiling, the violinist withdrew, leaving the chuckling lunatic and his dead wife in the dark room.

7

IN THE night of travel Nicolo smiled bitterly but often. It had worked out after all! He would trick Satan then; sending Carlo in his stead. Thus he could play the concert and go on to fame. Poor Elissa was dead, of course, but there were other women to hear the song of love. It was good.

It was good to hear the praise in Milan. His old teachers spoke, his friends gathered around him and whispered of the celebrities who would attend the concert tonight.

Nicolo was so busy that day that he forgot a very important item. Indeed, he had just finished a meal in his dressing-room when he remembered.

Carlo had broken his violin!

Confused by tragedy, by lack of sleep and overmuch planning, it had slipped Nicolo's thoughts. His violin—not a precious instrument to him, for Nicolo knew that he could produce his music on any violin. Still, it was necessary.

He rose to summon the director, when the door opened. Carlo entered.

Carlo was mad. His eyes glittered and his teeth were bared, but he walked erect. He was able to control himself sufficiently to pass unnoticed, it seemed.

Nicolo, beholding him, nearly froze on the spot. A wave of fear rose chokingly in his throat.

"Carlo—why are you here? Don't you remember—the Cave of Fools and your appointment?"

Carlo grinned.

"I went last night, Nicolo," he whispered. "I went last night. Tonight I am here to see you play. You will be playing soon, Nicolo."

Nicolo stammered wildly. "But—but what did you find in the Cave? I mean—there was One who waited, and he wanted something from you—?"

Carlo grinned wider.

"Do not trouble yourself. I gave Him what He wanted. It was all arranged last night."

"You mean that?" Nicolo whispered. "*You gave your soul?*"

"I gave my soul. We made a bargain," Carlo chuckled.

"Then why are you here?"

"To bring you this. I broke your violin, and tonight you must play."

Carlo thrust a bundle into Nicolo's hands. At that moment the prompter entered.

"*Maestro!* The concert is starting. You are wanted on stage. Oh, what a crowd is here for your debut! Ah, there has never been such a tribute—you played but once, a year ago, but they remember and have returned. It is wonderful! But hurry, hurry!"

Nicolo left, and the grinning Carlo followed, standing in the wings as the violinist stepped on the stage. In his confusion, Nicolo unwrapped the parcel and tossed the paper to the wings as he took the violin and bow in his hands and faced the applauding audience.

Nicolo's eyes sparkled. This was triumph!

His heart was light within him. Fame was here, and poor Carlo had settled matters with the Master. He had made a bargain, and that did not concern Nicolo. What concerned him was that he was free, and this was the greatest evening of his life, and he would play as he had never played before.

Automatically he gripped the violin and raised it to his chin. It felt heavy; an ordinary instrument. But it would suffice. Poor Carlo was mad; bringing a violin to the man who had killed his wife!

But—*play.*

Yes, play with the Devil's gift, play the Devil's love-song that won Elissa. Let it win the audience tonight. What matter

the violin, or Carlo chuckling in the wings? Play!

NICOLO played. His bow stroked the opening strains of the melody. But a droning arose.

What was wrong?

Nicolo tried to correct his stroke. But his fingers moved automatically. He tried to stop.

But his fingers, his wrist, his arm moved on. He could not stop. The power within him would not swerve. And the droning increased.

This was the song of madness!

Nicolo's fingers flew, his arm flailed. He fought, trying to hold back. But the sounds increased. Rats scurried and chattered and then the hounds of Hell began to bark. Fiends brayed in his brain.

Yes—in *his* brain.

The audience, he dimly realized, was hooting and jeering. They were not being driven mad by the music. *He* was!

Nicolo closed his eyes, clenched his jaw to make the violin slip; and still it played. He wanted to think of something else, anything but the music that now shrieked in his skull. A vision of Paganini's satanic face, of Elissa's dead features, of Carlo's mad red eyes, of the black Cave of Fools where he should be tonight—these things swept on wings of horror through his brain. And then the music broke through and Nicolo fiddled madly.

Eyes jerked open and stared down at the violin—at the coarse wood, the peculiar strings, the ghastly bridge glistening with pearly brilliance.

And then the voice of the music screamed the truth to him. Mad Carlo had gone to the Cave of Fools last night, to make a bargain. He had said that, and Nicolo had believed that it meant he was free. But what had that bargain been?

Carlo had sold his soul for vengeance. What could that vengeance be?

That One had told him to make this violin!

And now Nicolo stared at the violin—the violin he was helplessly playing, but which made a music that drove him mad.

Nicolo stared at the coarse wood. He had seen such wood before. Where? *Why did it remind him of Elissa?*

The wood was stained red; ghastly red. *Why did the red stain remind him of Elissa?*

Music thundered in Nicolo's ears, and still he played and stared.

The glistening bridge of the violin was pearly. *Why did that bridge remind him of Elissa?*

The bridge grinned up at Nicolo, grinned insanely as Elissa had grinned when she was driven mad by music. The violin tones rose to a shattering crescendo, and Nicolo staggered. His blurring eyes glanced at the golden strings of the violin that were singing his doom. In a burst of ghastly fear he seemed to recognize them.

Why did those strings remind him of Elissa?

And then he understood.

The music he was playing was the music that had driven her to madness, to death. In some way this violin now held her soul

He was not playing a violin, he was playing her soul, and its madness was pouring out to drive him mad!

He looked down again as the shrieking music rose in his ears, and he saw.

He did not hold a violin in his arms, but the dead body of a woman—the body of Elissa. He was playing on her body, playing on the gray ghost of her body, drawing the bow across long golden strands that he recognized in a final burst of fear that tore his brain to shreds.

Nicolo played her body like a violin and drew the madness out into his own being, and then he recognized the wood, the stain, the bridge, and the horribly familiar strings.

That was why Elissa's soul was in the violin!

Nicolo suddenly began to laugh, insanely, and the music rose to drown out his laughter as he held the horrible thing playing in his arms. Then with a lurch Nicolo fell, face black with agony.

The curtains dropped, the hysterical manager ran to the dead body of the violinist.

Then the madman that was Carlo crept slyly from the wings and crouched over the body, tittering in a shrill voice. He took the violin from the dead Nicolo's breast and laughed.

His fingers lovingly caressed the wood he had carved from Elissa's coffin, the stain of blood he had drawn from Elissa's body, the pearly teeth on the bridge he had taken from Elissa's throat. And finally, his fingers fell to stroking the long, smooth golden strings on which the music of madness had been played—the long, golden strands of dead Elissa's hair.

