

THE HARMONY OF HORROR.

A PIANIST'S MOST TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE.

By HAVELOCK ETRICK.

Illustrated by R. W. Wallace.

"YOUR carriage awaits you, monsieur." "Thanks. I shall not, however, require it. I am walking."

So saying, I wrapped my warm fur mantle closer about me, and stepped out into the brilliant night. The evening had been one of wild intoxicating success, and I thought that the walk across Paris would help to soothe my nerves, naturally too highly strung; and now, with the cries of an applauding multitude still ringing in my ears, strained to a tension that was unbearable, I must be alone.

The air was keen and frosty, the sky clear, the brilliant stars scintillated and sparkled like diamonds in the hair of some dusky beauty; the gleaming constellations appeared twice as radiant, surpassing in magnificence their usual appearance.

I heard the clock in the Tour de St. Jacques strike the quarter before three as I rapidly

made my way along the deserted street. The elation of my spirits, the wild exultation of my heart, was but intensified by the loneliness; the clear frosty air was as champagne in its power to keep buoyant my throbbing brain. I was wildly, intensely happy, I trod on glorified air.

And yet, had I not cause for happiness?

The ceaseless toil for many years, the drudgery and hardships to which I had been no stranger, had brought at last their reward.

I was famous, and Paris, the world, lay at my feet!

The wheel of fortune had turned, and I, the poor obscure student of Dresden Conservatoire,

the half-starved, always penniless aspirant for musical fame, was the darling of Paris! After having met with unqualified success both at Berlin and Buda Pesth, I had taken Paris by storm, and the musicians, critics,

and high-born dames, composers, all alike, of the gay city, hung over my chair drinking with delight the liquid



"I WAS THROWN VIOLENTLY TO THE GROUND, AND A HEAVY WRAP DEADENED MY CRIES FOR HELP."

notes as they dropped from my long, supple fingers.

Occupied with these pleasing reflections, I turned into the Rue Royal, which was by this time utterly deserted, save for a few prowling cabs on the search for night fares. I passed, and left on the right, the great church of the Madeleine, and struck into the labyrinth of quiet streets that lie between the Boulevard Haussmann and the main avenue of the Malesherbes.

Deep sunk in thought, I scarcely noticed that the footsteps of a man had been gaining rapidly upon me, and it was only upon hearing them almost at my side that I turned round to see who it was that shared my nocturnal peregrinations. As I did so, however, an arm was thrust into my own, and I saw my uninvited comrade, a pleasant voice at the same time exclaiming—

"Ah, Monsieur Raoul Kaiservitch, you walk quickly! I left the Châtelet but a few moments after yourself, and I have had the greatest difficulty to overtake you. I see," he continued, "that you do not recognise me. Well, more people know a celebrity than a celebrity knows. I was present to-night at the supper given in your honour, and am one of the many humble worshippers at the shrine of genius."

"You are very amiable," was my rejoinder. Glancing again at my companion, I saw that he wore a dark moustache and imperial, but otherwise his face was invisible, being enveloped in the heavy fur mantle that the chilliness of the night rendered welcome; a broad slouched hat shaded the upper portion of his face, and I could but dimly perceive the dark flashing eyes that occasionally met my own.

"You are bound for the Rue des Sept Chiens, is not so?" he inquired.

"That is my destination: I trust I am not taking you out of your way," I replied.

"Far from it, our roads lie together: this little street that we are approaching is a short cut for both of us. I fancy that I know Paris better than you," my companion said, laughingly. "I was born and bred on the boulevards."

"True," was my rejoinder, "I have only been here for the best part of a month; but I begin to find my way about with ease, though I generally confine myself to the main streets; I have no bump of locality."

Thus chatting, we turned up the quiet side street mentioned by my companion.

What followed I am almost at a loss to describe; the incidents are fused into one hazy remembrance, and at this length of time are well-nigh lost to my recollection.

I can recall a scuffle of feet, a hurried whispering; then I was thrown violently to the ground, and a heavy wrap deadened my cries for help. I had no doubt but both my friend and myself had fallen into the hands of a band of robbers, and that such money as I possessed was the motive for the attack.

I was lifted from the ground, and placed on the seat of a carriage which would appear to have been in waiting. Helpless, and the victim of a plot evidently prearranged, I could do nothing but await developments. I was held in my seat by four powerful hands, the owners of which, apparently anticipating some resistance on my part, prevented the smallest movement. The drive was a silent one, and seemed to me of interminable length; the jolting and bumping over the rough cobbles told me that the main streets were being avoided, and that our course lay along the quieter and less frequented by-ways of Paris.

At length, with a sudden jolt and the throwing of the horse upon its haunches, the vehicle came to a standstill. Swiftly and in perfect silence I was lifted from my seat, and conveyed into a house, a heavy door closed behind me, and I knew that, whatever the reason of my abduction, I was completely in the power of my captors.

I felt myself hurried along a passage, and pushed into a room, the agreeable warmth of which at once struck me.

The heavy cloak that enveloped my head was removed, a glare of light struck my dazzled eyes; then, recovering myself, I looked around me.

When my eyes had become accustomed to the blaze of light with which the room was flooded, I saw that it was for some definite purpose that I had been brought thither; I was evidently expected.

A group of men, numbering perhaps some two dozen, sat in semicircular fashion around a full concert grand piano. I saw with surprise that upon the book-rest stood one of my own programmes. Was it, I asked myself, the custom in Paris for artists to be violently assaulted and dragged against their will to give compulsory performances in the small hours of the morning?

A second glance at the faces of the men, who sat in stolid silence around the piano,

told me instinctively that it was for no ordinary musical performance that they waited.

The men were none of them of less than middle age, many of them wore grey beards and possessed but scanty locks. Upon the faces of all there was a strange look of determination, in some cases it amounted to fierceness; they were men, I felt sure, whom one might fear, but shrink from useless appeals to their sense of mercy; men who conveyed swiftly to my brain the

sion to my mind, left the end of the room in comparative darkness, and I could but dimly see its outline. It seemed to be fashioned of some dully gleaming metal, and was raised upon two steps of what appeared to be glass. The man was bound hand and foot by leather straps, which rendered the smallest movement an impossibility; upon his head was placed a metal cap to which was attached a wire which ran up to the ceiling of the room. The man was pale and livid, giving no signs of life except



"THE CLOAK THAT ENVELOPED MY HEAD WAS REMOVED, AND I SAW TWO DOZEN MEN ROUND A GRAND PIANO."

from his black beady eyes, which followed my smallest movement with intense anxiety.

The audience had their backs turned to the mysterious chair and its occupant; only the player at the piano would face in their direction.

"Who was the man thus bound?

What was the meaning of the silent audience, the piano, the entrapped musician?

As I stood irresolute, the figure of a man rose from a chair placed close beside the piano, and advanced with outstretched hand towards me. He struck me as being of about fifty years of age, and he wore a full black beard, and was dressed entirely in dark clothes.

"Welcome, Monsieur Kaiservitch! You will excuse the somewhat peremptory manner in which you have been brought into our midst."

"Is it the custom in Paris to waylay musicians, monsieur? I judge from the open piano that my professional services are expected. I cannot deny that I would choose any time rather than the present for giving them."

impression that they carried their lives in their hands!

To what place had I been brought? As my eyes travelled round the silent group, they were arrested by the sight of one man; the fashion of the chair in which he sat, and the manner of his occupation of it, was such as I had never before seen.

The chair was placed at the back of the room some yards away from the piano with its surrounding audience, and was in the shade. The strong lamps, that cast such a glare down upon the fierce resolute faces that conveyed such a disagreeable impres-

"Unfortunately, Monsieur Kaiservitch, we have no option but to require your artistic services at the present time. It is for this reason that you were followed from the Châtelet Theatre and brought hither. I speak in the name of my comrades when I assure you that if you will do as we counsel you, no harm of any description will come to you, and that you will be safely at your residence within the space of one hour from now."

"I thank you," was my reply, "for the assurance. May I ask what is required of me?"

"Simply to play on the piano that you see before you—and which, let me add, you will find no mean instrument—three pieces of music which have been selected from the programme that you performed this evening at the Châtelet Theatre."

The words of the man before me conveyed a command rather than a request; so, putting aside my natural curiosity, not un-mixed with resentment at the peremptory manner in which my professional services were demanded, I bowed to the circle of silent men facing me, and seated myself at the piano.

I was dead tired, and even the pleasure of touching such an exquisite instrument as the piano proved itself to be could not arouse within me the energy to do justice to the music I set myself down to interpret. I was haunted, too, by the sight of the man's face who sat bound hand and foot in the chair, which I could dimly see gleaming with dull metallic lustre in the shadows at the further end of the room.

I fancied that, as I played, the man's face grew more haggard, and blanched to an even more ghastly whiteness. I played my first piece—a valse capricieuse of Liszt's: it was received in solemn silence, the chairman of the assembly—he who had first addressed me—alone giving a sign, by gravely bowing his head, that the music had been heard.

The dead silence of the room began to affect my nerves, already overwrought and unstrung by the strange proceedings of the past hour.

As I began the second piece marked for my performance, I could have sworn that a husky cry for mercy burst from the lips of the captive in the metal chair; his face was working convulsively, and I could see that the fingers of his tightly-strapped hands were twitching. The sight of it, added to the mystery of his being there at

all, and the utter indifference of the other men in the room to his position, broke down what little of nervous force I had still left to me. I dropped my hands from the keyboard, and turned to the chairman of my grim audience.

"I cannot play more!"

He rose from his seat and came to my side. His full face, with its large, prominent eyes, looked strangely excited.

"You *must* play: you *must* perform the pieces marked on that programme."

"I must know before I do so the reason of this unnatural concert. Why is that man there bound into his chair: why does he watch my every movement with such horrible anxiety: why do you sit around me in such unbroken silence? I must and will know the reason of these unnatural proceedings."

For the space of a few seconds the man did not speak; he regarded me with a strange, fixed stare, that seemed to draw from me all power of resistance to his will, whatever it might be. I felt in the presence of a mesmerist, one who could compel me by the exercise of his powers to bend before his force of intellect, his concentration of mind.

"You *shall* know, and that without loss of time, the meaning of your surroundings. That man whom you see bound yonder is doomed to die, and he will meet his death at your hands! Sit down, Monsieur Kaiservitch," for I had started from my seat in horror. "You cannot by any possibility escape from being the medium through which the vengeance of an all-powerful society shall be wreaked upon one who has disobeyed its laws.

"Listen! All that you see in this room are members of a mighty organisation for the suppression of social abuses, a vast community that is spread over the face of the entire civilised world. By our laws certain offences committed by members are to be punished by death; equally by our laws that death is to be inflicted by someone not belonging to the society. So shall our hands be free from blood-guiltiness! Do you understand now?"

I began to grasp his meaning! I was to be the slaughterer, by some means yet unknown to me, of that wretched man bound so fast in the metal chair! Was there no escape? Could I not work upon the feelings of this diabolical crew to spare the intended victim? I looked, my hands trembling, my lips dull and parched, upon

the face of the man who awaited his death-blow. His eyes met mine, but in their glance I read but the misery of hopelessness: he doubtless knew better than myself the character of the men who had doomed him to death.

The chairman resumed his explanation, still holding me fascinated by his dark, gleaming eyes.

"The manner of this man's death will be as follows:—You will play the Chopin Nocturne in B flat that already you have

my informant, who with set smile on his pale face regarded me fixedly.

"But this—this will be sheer murder, nothing less than murder," I cried. "Nothing on earth shall make me touch this piano again!"

He forced me with strong hand down upon the chair once more.

"You will play, Monsieur Raoul Kaiser-vitch. You will play!"

So saying, he took my two hands into his own and steadily looked at me. A sense



performed to the delight of thousands this night; again you shall play it, but this time every note that you strike will bring mortal terror to the man who has broken the laws of his fraternity. This piano is connected with a powerful electric battery: upon a certain chord in that Nocturne being played the communication will be made, and a charge of electric current more than sufficient to kill ten men will enter that man's body, and he will then have paid the penalty of his disobedience!"

I sprang to my feet once more and faced

of utter helplessness overcame me

"YOU MUST PLAY," HE SAID; "YOU MUST PERFORM THE PIECES MARKED ON THAT PROGRAMME."

—my will seemed to disembody itself, to detach itself from my personality, to leave me powerless and weak, a puppet in the hands of the man who stood over me, never removing his eyes from my face.

"Play!"

Obediently I turned to the piano; my fingers involuntarily began the opening phrase of the Nocturne. I played as one in his sleep; no power of resistance came to my aid. I was a mechanical automaton worked by the mesmeric power of a stronger will than my own.

The notes dropped one by one from under my fingers: the first movement of the Nocturne, with its searching, plaintive melody,

was finished, and I passed without pause on to the minor scheme of exquisite beauty. I watched as in a dream the face of the doomed man, knowing that as chord by chord formed themselves under my hands, the knell of death was sounding in his ears. Nearer and nearer drew the fatal harmony that would release the dread force which brought eternity to him; there was no hope, no possible accident that could spin out the threads of life for him.

Mechanically, and with no will of my own, I struck the long-sustained minor chord that forms the modulation wherein the melody returns to its first and earliest cry.

As I did so, I noticed that the faces of my audience turned with one accord

Sept Chien; daylight was breaking, and I was alone, faint, weary, and hungry. Staggering to my feet, I regained in a few moments the house for which I had been bound when these dread things fell upon me.

Success has come to me, and as the years pass, fame has been coupled with my name; but never since that night have I played the B flat minor Nocturne of Chopin. I am haunted ever by the sight of a face, pale and livid, wherein the eyes watch my every movement with horrible intensity; I can hear the long-drawn minor harmony that opened the gate of the land of shadows to a helpless fellow creature who had done me no wrong.

Who were the men who thus entrapped me for their fell purpose?



"AS I PLAYED I WATCHED AS IN A DREAM THE FACE OF THE DOOMED MAN."

towards the chair that stood in the shadow!

I, too, looked!

The eyes of the doomed man were closed, a slight froth appeared on the parted lips, the muscles of the neck and hands stood out tense, but, as I dropped with horror my hands from the ivory keys, resumed their ordinary appearance; the jaw fell; I understood! The long-sustained chord had been that selected to deal the death blow; the man was dead, and I, Raoul Kaiservitch, was his executioner!

I dropped unconscious on to the floor, knowing and hearing nothing further.

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When I recovered myself I was lying in the shade of a doorway in the Rue des

What devil-
is h
Brother-
hood
was it that
used me as
the handle
wherewith to
deal death to one of
their number?

I do not know; from that night to the present time I have seen or heard nothing of my companions of that dread hour in which my hands struck the Harmony of Death.