

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



# The House of Living Music

By EDMOND HAMILTON

*A strange weird-scientific story with a tragic denouement—about a great composer who could re-create all living things in sound*

**I**F I HAD only killed Harriman on that first night! Yes, I know it would have been murder, but the diabolical thing that Harriman did was worse than any murder. He was a great composer—the world will never know just how great. He was also a devil from hell.

But at that time I, a young newspaper music critic, had only admiration for Harriman. He was considered one of the greatest living composers. His Mechanical Symphony, with its mad blend of street noises and riveters, had started a whole new school of music. Then he had

upset the academies again with what he called "mathematical" music. He always seemed striving to achieve some impossible musical ideal that haunted his brain.

That night I met him in the lobby of Carnegie Hall. Inside, the Philharmonic had just launched into the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth, and I was hurrying toward that exultant shout of strings when I bumped into Harriman, going out.

I muttered a hasty excuse, and then I suddenly recognized him and stopped. It was Harriman, all right, his tall, thin figure clad as usual in rusty black, his unruly, thick gray hair falling over his brilliant gray eyes and taut face. He *looked* like a genius, Harriman did.

I exclaimed, "You're not leaving now, surely? Don't you want to hear the finale?"

Harriman said, "Hello, Raymer." Then he made an impatient, disgusted movement with his hand, toward the distant music. "No, I don't want to hear it. It's a confession—Beethoven's confession of his ultimate failure as a composer."

His gray eyes were bitter and scornful now as we stood there, listening to the chorus' great song that blended with the tumultuous instruments in the conclusion of Beethoven's stupendous work.

"Human voices," said Harriman bitterly. "That's what Beethoven came down to in the end—his attempts to create pure, perfect music an admitted failure."

"What do you mean by perfect music?" I demanded.

Unconsciously, in my interest, I had fallen into step with Harriman and we had strolled together out into the warm spring night.

Harriman's thin hand gesticulated as he explained. "I mean music that per-

fectly expresses things in sound. Take a flower, for instance. A painter can reproduce that flower exactly for your eyes by his colors. A scientist can reproduce it exactly for your mind, by his exact classifications and measurements. Why shouldn't a musician be able to reproduce the flower exactly for your ear in sound, in music?"

"It's an odd theory," I commented. "Sounds like a sort of sublimated program music."

"Program music, hell!" snarled Harriman angrily. "You wait until I——"

He shut up suddenly, and I could not get another word out of him that evening. I left him at his apartment building, but I found pretexts to call on him during the next few days, and endeavored to draw him out further about his oddly interesting theory.

It was no use, for Harriman was not often there and when he was, he refused to be pumped. Yet my time wasn't wasted, for in my first visit I'd discovered his daughter. Lina Harriman became a greater attraction for me there than her father's radical musical ideas.

**S**HE was a small girl, with bright yellow hair, a tip-tilted nose and blue eyes dancing with love of fun. I think I fell in love with laughing, gay little Lina from the first. Harriman was too preoccupied to notice, though what so absorbed him I did not know, at first.

Lina told me, a few weeks after I'd first met her. "I can't understand it, Harold," she said perplexedly. "Father is going in for scientific research."

I was amazed. "A first-class composer like Harriman dabbling in science? Why in the world should he?"

She shook her bright head, puzzled. "I can't guess—he will tell me nothing. But you know that he was a brilliant stu-

dent of physics before he took up music, and for the last months he has spent all his time down at the laboratories of Manhattan University, experimenting. He says that it's only a hobby of his."

"Strange hobby for a man whose whole life-interest seemed to be music," I commented. And I resolved to ask Harriman about it the next time I called.

Well, I didn't ask him, for the next time I visited the apartment, Harriman was gone. So was Lina. The apartment was empty and I learned from the building superintendent that the two had moved out only two days before.

He didn't know where they had gone. Neither could I find any forwarding address through the post office. Harriman's music publishers were similarly ignorant—they didn't know the composer had left town until I told them.

I was surprized, and a little hurt, for I had thought that Lina and I were coming to an understanding, and couldn't comprehend why she would leave like that without a word. I thought, though, that she'd soon write from wherever they had gone, but the weeks went by and she didn't.

She and her father had simply disappeared as though the earth had swallowed them. I scoured around New York musical circles a good bit, without ever finding a clue to their whereabouts.

As a final resort I tried Manhattan University, in whose physical laboratories Harriman had been dabbling with research. The professor of physics there, a spectacled, white-haired Teuton, remembered Harriman quite well.

"He was my pupil years ago—I expected him to become a brilliant physicist," he told me. "Then he disappointed me—he turned to music. A fine scientist wasted, just like that." He added, "He came back here a few months ago and

asked to use my laboratories for some private research. Of course I let him."

"You don't know what kind of research?" I asked, a little curiously.

The scientist shook his head. "No, he was quite secretive. It seemed that he was conducting some experiments in acoustics, but I could not gather their nature."

"And you've no idea where he and his daughter could have gone?"

He hadn't. I thanked him and left, disappointed and wondering if Harriman had not become a little queer mentally.

It certainly looked like it, for a composer of his reputation, a man of his devotion to music, to fling himself suddenly into abstruse scientific research for weeks, and then abruptly disappear. I told myself, too, that if Lina had wanted me to know where she was, she would have written me. She hadn't, so I might as well forget her.

But it wasn't so easy for me to forget laughing little Lina. Only now that she was gone did I discover how much I had come to care for her. The withdrawal of her liling, sunny being from my life left it flat and tasteless, and I followed my routine around the concert halls and operas of New York without much enthusiasm, in the following months.

**D**URING all those months I had not one word from Lina or her father, and never heard from anyone in musical circles any news of Harriman's whereabouts. He and Lina might just have dropped out of existence. Then, a full year after their disappearance, I was astounded to receive a telegram from Harriman.

It had been sent from a village in

western Massachusetts, and I read and re-read it.

*"Raymer, I'm not dead as you may have thought. I've been working up here, and I have achieved my ideal of perfect music. If you will come up here, you shall hear it."*

Lina! That was all I thought of when I read Harriman's queer message. I didn't care at that moment what Harriman had been doing in music. I was only overjoyed to discover at last where he and Lina were living.

Early the next morning, I was in my roadster on the highway north. And as I drove through the spring-green Berkshires that afternoon, I could hardly wait to reach Lina. I still couldn't understand why she had not written me, but told myself that doubtless her father had forbidden it, in his desire for seclusion.

The village from which his wire had come was a neat little community of white frame houses, tucked in the big hills west of Greenfield. There I learned without trouble where Harriman was living—a hilltop house a few miles out of the village. It was late afternoon by the time I steered my car around a winding dirt road into sight of the place.

Harriman's house stood brooding black against the red embers of sunset, up on the low, domed hill. It was an old stone Colonial farmhouse, whose grounds looked shabby and ill cared for. I stopped my car in its drive, wondering whether gay, fun-loving Lina had liked this isolated place.

My heart pounded with eager anticipation as I stood in the dusk on the veranda, ringing the bell. But when the door opened, my spirits were a little dashed, for it wasn't Lina who stood inside, but Harriman himself.

He had changed, in this year. His white face was thinner, looking more

taut and strained than it had been, and his gray eyes, always brilliant, were burning now with some continuous inward excitement.

He smiled at me a little oddly and said, "I hoped you'd come, Raymer. I was almost sure you would."

"Where's Lina?" I demanded eagerly. "Does she know I'm coming?"

Harriman made a brusque gesture. "Oh, Lina—she's not here."

"Not here?" I echoed, dismayed.

He shook his head. "No, she couldn't stand the loneliness out here. A month after we came, she left me and went down to live with an aunt of hers in North Carolina." He added, "Come on in, Raymer. Let me have your bag."

I was numb with disappointment as I followed him inside. Only now was I aware how eagerly I had looked forward to seeing Lina again. Harriman, however, appeared not to notice my dejection, as he conducted me into the living-room of the old house.

The room was in an unforgivably slovenly state from complete lack of care, dust lying thick on the floor and old-fashioned black furniture. It was quite evident that Harriman was living here alone.

He was rigid with repressed excitement as he told me now, "Raymer, you'll thank heaven you came here. For you, first of all men, are going to hear the greatest music ever produced on this earth—*my* music."

I said hesitatingly, "Yes, but Lina—I can't understand why she never wrote me from Carolina."

He exclaimed impatiently, "Oh, forget about Lina—haven't you any curiosity at all about my music?"

I tried to summon up an appearance of interest.

"Of course I'm curious, Harriman.

What have you been composing up here, anyway? Another symphony?"

He nodded slowly, his brilliant gray eyes fixed with an odd expression on mine. "You might call it that. You remember, Raymer, that I once told you my dream was to create music that would perfectly express anything, any object, in sound? Well, I've succeeded, and you're going to hear that music. Come along to my laboratory."

"Your laboratory?" I repeated, surprised.

He chuckled. "Yes, Raymer, this music isn't composed with pen and ruled paper. It is created by—but come on, and see for yourself."

I followed him along a dark corridor that led into the rear portion of the rambling old house. He led into a dark room, and when he had snapped on the lights, I saw that it really did look like a scientific laboratory.

There were various electrical generators and machines around the room, which meant nothing to a music critic like myself. There was also a sound-recording machine and a large phonograph, but the central object in the room was a big cubical metal chamber six feet high. This weird apparatus was open in front, and fastened outside one of its sides was a bank of big vacuum tubes connected to a resonator like a flat loud-speaker.

I said, "This is a queer kind of study for a composer."

Harriman laughed triumphantly. "Wait until you hear the music that has been created in this room."

He opened a big steel filing-case. I saw that it was full of black disks, phonograph records of the long-playing kind. They were not ordinary commercial records, though, for the only label on each one was a white sticker with a scrawled word in Harriman's writing.

HARRIMAN took out one of the records and placed it on the turntable of the large phonograph near me. Then he turned to me.

"This is one of the first pieces of music I created here, Raymer. It is a series of flowers, in music."

I said doubtfully, "You mean a descriptive suite something like Hadley's——"

"Hadley be damned!" he muttered. "This isn't a musical description of flowers—it's the flowers themselves, in music! Listen."

He started the phonograph. Out from the turning black disk welled music, strange music such as I had never heard before. Its notes did not seem to have been produced by any musical instrument known to man. They were purer, sweeter, clearer, than any sounds that man-made instruments could create. And they wove a weird, magic pattern of changing sound in the lamplit laboratory, music that brought with it to my ears and brain, inevitable sound-pictures of the blossoming plants of earth. Each separate drifting melodic phrase seemed to conjure up for me a different impression of flowers blooming from the soil.

There were shy, sweet, fluted melodies, fugitive and brief, that brought to my mind the wild, nodding violets and daisies. There were thrilling, full-voiced harmonies of gorgeous roses, cool, low songs of drooping orchids, flaring music of vivid poppy and hibiscus, sighing whisper of white lilies beside forest pools, and gay, climbing, clarinet-like notes that irresistibly suggested the waving cat-tails.

I listened enthralled, almost forgetting my disappointment over Lina's absence. It was like *hearing* all the flowers of earth instead of seeing them. As he played record after record, the cool drifting music brought before my eyes everything

that has root and seed and flower, all the life that climbs upward from the soil into the sunlight.

"Harriman, it's wonderful!" I cried. "It *is* music like no other ever composed before. But I can't understand on what instruments you produced it——"

"You will soon learn that," Harriman answered, his thin face smiling strangely. "There is more that I want you to hear first."

One record after another he brought from the cabinet and played. Enchanted, I listened, hearing music such as surely no one had ever listened to before, music perfectly expressive of the life of earth.

Strong, vibrating harmonies as of hushed reed-instruments that voiced the trees of the forest, the sturdy young elms and gnarled oaks and slender, graceful birches. Deep, solemn chords like the muttering of ancient bassoons, expressing in sound the rocks of earth itself, the eternal quartz and granite. Ringing, crystal bell-notes of shining forest spring and stream.

And the wild, moving life of earth welled out in the room in music, too. Swift, thrilling harmonies of the winged birds that dart in the sky; nervous, quick-tumbling music of the squirrels running in the branches, little orderly rhythms of tiny pattering brasses in complex counterpoint, that voiced the intricate life of hive and ant-hill; long, suave harmonies that brought before the eyes the silver fish poised in his dim, curving world. All the inanimate earth, and also its animate plant and animal life, poured forth in torrents of weird music.

Harriman finally stopped the phonograph, his eyes brilliant with triumph. "Now do you know what perfect music is, Raymer?"

I cried, "How in the world did you do it? How could you create music like

that? It's as though you translated the rocks and birds and flowers themselves into music."

"That," said Harriman, "is just what I do."

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," he replied calmly. "Watch, Raymer."

He went to the big, cube-shaped apparatus, and touched certain switches on its control panel. The electrical mechanisms around the room broke into whirling life. A flood of white radiance cascaded down from the top of the cube's interior, filling the hollow chamber with shining force. The great vacuum on the side began to sputter.

**H**ARRIMAN took a red carnation from a vase of flowers, and tossed the blossom into the force-filled chamber. Then my eyes beheld an uncanny thing. The carnation began to *fade*, to disappear slowly. As though under that terrific flood of white force, its very substance was melting away.

And from the resonator outside the cubical chamber, at the same time, began to issue sounds. Music! Hushed, velvety, slow-climbing tones in languid rhythm, a smooth, slow harmony that perfectly expressed in sound the fading flower inside the cube!

The flower faded further, became almost invisible in its increasing tenuity. The velvety music from the resonator swelled louder. Then, as I watched frozenly, the carnation in the cube vanished altogether and the music ended.

I gasped, "Good Lord, it isn't possible that I've seen——"

Harriman nodded quietly. "Yes, Raymer. You have just seen solid matter transmuted into sound, a flower translated into music. I can do the same with any living or non-living matter."

And, to show me, he took a living rabbit from a cage in the corner, and tossed it also into the force-filled chamber.

I saw the furry little animal freeze motionless inside, as though petrified by the white force. It too began slowly to fade. And again from the resonator came music—different music.

Darting, quick little runs of jovial silvery notes in broken rhythm, a complex harmony that was a perfect sound-picture of the furred, furtive little thing inside the tube. The rabbit faded further, the music swelled quicker and louder. Then the little beast too had vanished, and with a last flutter of silver notes, the music ended.

I said hoarsely, "A flower—an animal—converted into pure sound!"

Harriman nodded again. "Just so was created all the music which you have heard, and which I have recorded as it issued from that apparatus. Everything I put into that cube beneath the changing force, flower or rock or bird or beast, has been transmuted into pure music which I have preserved on these records."

"But how?" I cried, stupefied. "The thing's not possible——"

Harriman's eyes glistened. "Yet I achieved it, Raymer—achieved my life ambition of creating music that does not *describe* a thing, but *is* that thing, turned into sound.

"It's simple enough, in principle. What is music, sound? A vibration in the air, is it not? And what is matter? A vibration in the ether, nothing more. Well, find a way to transfer that vibration from the ether to the air, and you have transmuted matter into sound, into music.

"That process does not offer great difficulties. After all, any ordinary radio can transfer etheric vibrations, the Hertzian waves which flash through the ether, into

sound-vibrations. It is very little harder to convert the different etheric vibrations which are matter into sound-waves. This apparatus of mine does it easily. The more complex the matter, the more complex will be the sound, the music."

Harriman's face was gleaming with rapt devotion as he continued, "By this method, I am going to create the greatest symphony that will ever be heard. An Earth Symphony, containing the pure music of earth itself, its rocks and streams and flowers and birds and beasts. Out of the pure music preserved in these records, I shall assemble that Earth Symphony, the greatest musical work that will ever be heard in this world."

Stunned, I said, "But somehow this whole business seems unholy, uncanny——"

I asked with a sudden thought, "Is that why Lina left here? Because of this weird work of creation of yours?"

Harriman nodded impatiently. "Yes, Lina too thought that it was uncanny and didn't want to stay. I've been living here quite alone, and that's why I wired you to come, Raymer—I wanted someone to know what I have achieved."

The brooding brilliance in his eyes deepened. "But my great work here is nearly completed now. Soon I shall have arranged and assembled the pure music of these records into my Earth Symphony. When the world hears the records of that symphony, it will hear pure, perfect music for the first time."

He broke off, turning to me. "You look pretty dazed, Raymer, and tired too. We'll have some supper, and after a good night's sleep you'll be better able to appreciate what I'm doing."

I made no objection, but I ate little of the sketchy supper which Harriman prepared in the ill-kept kitchen. I was still extremely disappointed by Lina's ab-



sence, yet I could well understand now why she had left. There was something so strange about Harriman's fantastically created music that it repelled me in spite of its perfect beauty.

Later, as I lay in bed in the dark, musty chamber Harriman had assigned me, I found myself shivering a little when I heard faint, drifting music from his library. He was there, I knew, even this late, going over his records, listening to the music into which he had converted life itself.

**T**HROUGH the dark house the weird music whispered to me where I lay in darkness. I heard again those cool, sweet harmonies of forest flowers, those mighty chords of the eternal rocks, the swift, rippling rhythms of winged birds and jovial, broken music of furtive forest beasts. The music stopped, and then it began again. But this time it was not any music that Harriman had played for me in the laboratory, but was new, different music that brought me bolt upright in bed, trembling as I listened.

A gay, dancing melody it was now, clearer and sweeter and more tender than any he had let me hear. It rose and fell like love and laughter themselves translated into silver sound.

Sweeter, stronger, swelled that silver melody, while I listened with a strange feeling clutching my heart. That exquisite, lilting music, it was like the laughing tenderness of a loving heart, like a bright-haired girl dancing in the sunlight, like——

*Like Lina!*

That hideous thought crashed into my brain like a dissonance of horror across the lilting notes.

I leaped wildly out of bed, snatched on my clothes and crept down the corridor toward the laboratory door. I was

trembling like a harp-string as I paused outside that door.

From within, the gay, sweet music welled to a sheer climax of unearthly melody. A last phrase of exquisitely tender notes whispered to me. Then silence.

I crashed madly through the door. Harriman whirled from the big phonograph, his face a stiff white mask of alarm, and came toward me.

I thrust him reeling aside and ran to the phonograph, peered with wild eyes at the black record that lay on it. The label on the disk bore a single written word: "*Lina.*"

"Lina!" I screamed it aloud like a maniac at Harriman as he stumbled to his feet. "You did the thing to her, too—translated her too into music!"

"Yes, I did." Harriman's stiff white face was strange, and in his voice there was a ghastly note of unhuman pride. He had drawn a pistol from his pocket and was covering me with it.

His voice swelled, his eyes blazed. "Yes, I put Lina into the cube and transmuted her also into music—music that will live for ever. I loved her, do you hear? Yet I did not hesitate to do that, for as a mere human being of flesh and blood she would have died within a few score of years. But as music, imprisoned eternally in that record, she is undying in beauty!

"She will live on always as part of my immortal Earth Symphony. And you too will be part of that great symphony, Raymer! That is the reason why I had you come here. For my Earth Symphony, to be really complete, must have in it not only the rocks and streams, the birds and flowers and beasts, it must also have in it human life, human love, man and woman who love each other. The music that was Lina is already recorded and preserved. And you, Raymer, shall now

become music likewise and take your place with her in my symphony."

And Harriman, keeping his pistol aimed at my heart, strode toward the control panel of his diabolical apparatus. The switches clicked, the white forces streamed down into the interior of the tube.

He rasped, "You will step into the cube, Raymer. Otherwise——"

He stopped. For by now the wild grief that had frozen me suddenly dissolved into mad rage as I stared at the black record in which was prisoned the music that had been the girl I loved.

Gone, transmuted into silver melody, lost to me for ever! Lina——

I shrieked, "By heaven, your devil's symphony will never be heard by the world! I'll destroy it—it and you——"

And in my crazy rage I leaped at the filing-case and tore out the neat stacks of black records, sent them crashing to the floor in showers of broken black bits.

Harriman shrieked and shot. I felt the bullets tear into my shoulder but in my mad wrath I did not even experience any pain. And as I tore out the last records and smashed them, Harriman leaped at me.

His eyes blazed awful agony and his hands clutched my throat to choke me. He too had gone mad at sight of the destruction of his work. We wrestled there, two crazily struggling men in the lamplit laboratory.

"Lina!" I kept shouting as I struggled, that strangling horror still utterly possessing my soul.

I tore his hands from my throat, forced him back across the room, toward the devilish cube inside which the white transmuting forces flamed. I thrust him with a wild push inside the cube!

Harriman's thin body froze rigid in there beneath the terrific forces. Pain, awful pain, leaped into his stricken eyes. His petrified body began to waver, to fade. And as he faded, sound, music, swelled out from the resonator at the side of the cube. Music into which Harriman's mind and body were being translated! Thunderous, crashing chords of vaulting and collapsing superhuman aspirations. Mad bellowing as of brasses trumpeting soaring ambitions that had failed. Wild music such as no man had ever heard before, thundering on my ears as Harriman's frozen body faded and faded, until at last his misty form was gone, and with a last, long wail of bitter agony, the music had ended.

I was only dimly conscious. But I reeled forward and with great blows smashed the tubes and apparatus of the cube, then staggered to the phonograph and snatched from it the black record with Lina's name upon it, the only one that had escaped destruction. And with it clutched to my breast, I stumbled blindly and drunkenly out of that house accursed.

**T**HE world never knew what became of Harriman and Lina. When I drove unsteadily into the village in the gray dawn after that hideous night, I told only that I had found them missing from the old house. The signs of destruction in the house led local authorities to believe that intruders bent on robbery had killed Harriman and his daughter and disposed of their bodies. I let them think so, for I knew that if I told the truth they would deem me mad.

I am no longer a music critic, for I can no longer bear to hear music of any sort. But there is one exception. That is the record that I took with me

from Harriman's house, the black disk that imprisons for ever the tender, wonderful melody into which was transmuted the girl I loved.

*That* music I hear each night. I start that record playing, and as the dancing

melody swells out, gay and clear and sweet, Lina is again beside me in the dark room—little Lina, laughing beside me in the lilting, exquisite music that was her being. She will be with me thus while I live.