

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1945

Cover by Pete Kuhlhoff

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# The Music-Box From Hell

By **EMIL PETAJA**

**R**OLPH MACE hunched under the awning of the antique shop, glowering at the March drizzle as he waited for his bus. If it hadn't started to rain he could have walked, and saved seven pennies. Or if his Aunt Audrey would hurry up and die he wouldn't have to make trips downtown for medicine.

After she died he could shut up both the east and west wings of the old Mace Mansion, and live in two little rooms in back. Wouldn't cost one-quarter the money it cost now, with the east wing open, and her burning gas all the time. And a part-time maid.

Rolph's pinched-up face grimaced at the thought of all that money going to waste,

Heading by **A. R. TILBURNE**



*Recorded on metal in this little box is a demonic and cunning song  
to which no man can listen*

when it rightfully belonged to him—as her only heir.

“Could I sell you anything?” a voice at his elbow asked suddenly.

Rolph turned to see a cherub-faced little man wearing a frock coat and white side-whiskers smiling at him jovially. He was, apparently, the owner of the antique shop.

Rolph gave a quick glance at the motley assortment of items in the pleasantly-littered window, and shuddered with actual horror at the thought of parting with hard cash for those *things*.

His Aunt Audrey loved antiques. She loved music, too, and was forever ordering chamber music records on the sly. With her own money, of course—but Rolph had for more than ten years considered it *his* and re-seated every mouthful she ate.

He turned his lean, stooped shoulders away from this shop-owner in high distaste, not deigning to even answer him.

“I have just about anything you might want, inside,” the odd little man went on affably. “*Anything.*”

“I don’t want anything,” snapped Rolph.

“Nothing?” said the little man. “You must be very happy. . . .”

Rolph’s pinched, bird-like features puckered. Yes, there was something he wanted. He wanted Aunt Audrey to die. . . .

“YOU see that ring on the white velvet, just under the candelabra?” the little man with the side-whiskers went on, insinuatingly, paying no heed to Rolph’s obvious snub. “That once belonged to the Borgias. Lucrezia, I believe. Quite adept in the art of poisoning—they tell me. . . .”

Rolph’s lip twitched. He gave a quick look at the ring, scowling.

“Of course, me—” the little man continued, “I’d choose some other method of—er—eliminating besides poison. It can always be traced.”

Rolph’s lip curled contemptuously. He knew that! How well he knew that! Hadn’t he tried to figure a way by which . . .

The little man chuckled, as at a secret joke.

Rolph began to squirm.

“What way would you use?” he asked, licking his thin lips.

“Music.”

“*Music!*”

“Why, yes.”

“But—”

“Sorry. I have to go in now.” The weird little man moved into the dusky doorway. “In case you’re ever in the market for some really remarkable antiques—”

“Wait—” Rolph cried. He didn’t quite know why.

But the little man was gone.

THE suburban bus came and went, but Rolph just stood there under the awning, racked by indecision. Finally, with a little growl, he stepped into the antique shop doorway, where the little man had disappeared, and wormed his way past littered tables to a little dark back room.

There was the little man, all smiles.

“Decided there was something you wanted, after all, eh?”

Rolph nodded uncertainly.

“I want—” He must be subtle about this.

“I want a present for my Aunt.”

The little man chuckled.

“Ah! An Aunt who loves antiques!”

“She also is very fond of—music,” Rolph put in hastily.

“Ah! Antiques. Music. Good!” The little man rubbed his pudgy hands together happily. “This Aunt of yours is—perhaps—*wealthy?*”

Rolph scowled.

“Ah! Mustn’t ask personal questions, must we!” The little man bustled over to a dark corner, and pulled a string connected to a bare light bulb. Unhappy orange light sprayed the crowded little room. “It so happens that I have just the thing you want, unless I am sadly mistaken!”

He tugged a small ornamented box off a shelf, and set it down on the table in front of them. Whipping a silk handkerchief out of his pocket, he began to polish it vigorously.

“What is it?” Rolph asked, eyeing the black oblong box dubiously.

“*Katchoo!*” the little man sneezed, from the dust. “Pardon me. This—” He pointed at it dramatically, “is called *the music-box from Hell!*”

Rolph sniffed. He didn’t relish idle melodramatics. He wanted to buy, or—better still—cajol the old man’s music-

murder secret, and get back to Mace Mansion.

"All right," he said impatiently, when the little man paused. "Why is it called the music-box from Hell?"

The little man pursed his lips gravely.

"That, my son, is a long story."

"Well, I don't want to hear it."

"No?" The little man's face fell. "Well, suffice to say that this music-box was manufactured by the wizard, Syn Borkillish, of Nurenburg, in the early Sixteenth Century. It constitutes the result of a particularly fiendish pact he made with an evil power. He—"

"Get to the point, man!" hissed Rolph. "What can it do?"

The little man's eyes, bright as shoe buttons, seemed to look right into Rolph's miserly mind.

"Recorded on metal in this little box," he said, "is a daemoniac and cunning song to which no man can listen without—"

"Yes?"

"Without being snatched off the face of the earth into the nethermost Hell!"

Rolph's piggish eyes snapped fire.

"And you expect me to believe all that medieval nonsense!"

The little man shrugged.

"Would you like a sample?"

Rolph blinked.

"But—"

The little man laughed gleefully.

"No. Hearing just a few notes or strains can't hurt you. It's the whole song. It forms a hideous pattern which at last seizes hold of its victim's mind and soul, and finally—as the last plangent chords are sounded—by an evil rearrangement of his vibratory pattern, the listener is swept irresistibly into the Black Limbo where the demon who conceived this vile song holds sway. . . ."

**R**OLPH gaped at the strange little box with new respect.

"Shall we have a sample?" the little man invited again.

"No. I'll take your word for it," Rolph replied hastily. "But—I don't see any levers or dials on it. How do you set it running?"

"By simply calling out the demon's name."

"Which is—?"

The little man said it, whereupon the box came to audible life. A windy sigh escaped it, which abruptly grew to the proportions of a banshee's tormented wail. At times the song had a hauntingly sweet character, but under this melodic line were sinister, mocking intimations of carnate sin and evilness.

The non-human voice seemed to beckon—to call Rolph into timeless depths. . . .

First it was merely unnerving, then unbearable.

"Shut it off!" he shrieked.

The little man shouted another outlandish word. The song vanished.

Rolph's pinched face illuminated with avarice. He almost drooled.

He must get hold of that box! It would dispose of Aunt Audrey beautifully, and no one would ever know. *Corpus delicti*, you understand. Then she wouldn't be around any more to waste money on medicine and part-time maids, and order phonograph records on the sly.

But—he mustn't act eager. He would outwit this simple fool—get the music-box for nothing, if humanly possible.

He ran his finger gingerly along its weirdly-cold surface.

"How much are you asking for this piece of junk?" he asked casually.

The little man beamed on him.

"Oh, a mere nothing. Ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand dol— And that's your rock-bottom price?"

"I'm afraid so." The little man sighed. "I wouldn't sell it at all, only I need the money so desperately. You see, my shop is mortgaged to the hilt."

"Umm." Rolph's eyes narrowed craftily. After all, once Aunt Audrey was out of the way he could return the music-box, and tell this stupid little fool he'd changed his mind. Thus he would get the *use* of it without having paid a cent! "I'll take it. Only—I'll have to send you a check tomorrow morning. Will that be satisfactory?"

The little man nodded, rather wistfully.

"Yes. That will be fine."

**A**UDREY MACE was a sweet-faced old lady who found it more expedient to let her half-sister's penurious offspring manage the affairs of her lovely old house on

Windsholm Hill. All she asked of life now was to sit by her little parlor gas-fire and listen to Haydn or Mozart on her old phonograph.

Even that pleasure had been dimmed in latter years, not only by Rolph's persistent growlings about the few record albums she allowed herself to purchase, but by the fact that she was slowly going deaf, and had to resort to the use of a hearing aid.

She had lived an abundant life, and her memories were with her always, like a warm shawl to cover her chilling bones.

As the dying rays of the sun sifted through the dripping elm leaves outside her window, she sat motionless in her favorite wing-back chair, staring sadly at the blue gas-flame.

Her blue-veined fingers toyed with the hearing-aid box in her lap.

Rolph swept bat-like into the cozy old-fashioned room, and immediately switched off the little lamp by her elbow, and turned down the gas.

"You don't need a light yet!" he shouted in annoyance. "And it's not cold out!"

Aunt Audrey appeared not to notice. She smiled wanly. Rolph always acted as if they were paupers. It was true there wasn't as much money as there had been, but there was plenty—more than enough for anything they might need.

"Rolph, I was wondering if—"

"Listen, Aunt Audrey," Rolph burst out, waving a slip of paper. "You've been buying records again! Twenty-one dollars in the last three months! My God, do you think I'm *made* of money!"

Aunt Audrey looked bewildered, but said nothing. She sat quite still while he went through his scathing denunciations of all musicians and all music. His indignation at finding that bill in the mail box on his way home had made him forget for a moment, all about the music-box. . . .

"Rolph," she ventured timidly, when his tirade subsided. "I hate to ask you to do it, but could you run downtown again, and buy—"

"Buy, buy, buy!" he shrieked. "You do nothing but sit here all day thinking up things to buy!"

His aunt's eyes left his furious face and went wearily back to the frugal gas-fire.

"All right, dear. It doesn't really matter. . . ."

ALL in a rush Rolph remembered the music-box. So with an awkward show of affection he bent down and pecked at Aunt Audrey's withered cheek.

"Anyway," he tittered nervously, "I can't go downtown now. I happened to pass an antique shop, and so I went in and bought something for you!"

Now was a good time to do it, Rolph thought, his crafty eyes roving. The maid was gone for the day. No one would be calling. Besides, he wanted to be able to send the thing back to the shop tomorrow morning, so he wouldn't have to pay for it.

He brought the oddly-carved box in and set it down on the table, just in front of his aunt's chair.

"A present? For *me*?"

Aunt Audrey was incredulous and excited as a girl.

"Why, this is so sweet of you, Rolph. . . ."

She sat back in her chair, dabbing at her eyes with a lace handkerchief, overcome with emotion. So Rolph *did* love her after all—to bring her such a beautiful gift!

"It's a music-box," Rolph explained, nervously. And, in a cracked voice, he called out the demon's name.

He looked a last look down at her gray head, and his thin lips parted in a ghoulish leer.

Aunt Audrey sat back in her chair, a blissful smile on her face. A gift from Rolph! Why, surely she had misjudged him all these years!

The fearful song spawned in the gathering gloom. The moaning wind. The banshee's keening. The falsely-sweet melody. . . .

"I've got to get out of here!" Rolph muttered, and fled.

Aunt Audrey leaned forward, listening intently, a sparkle in her blue eyes.

Rolph took a last backward glance, then ran up the swirling stairway. He didn't want to be caught in the web of that unholy song from Hell. . . .

ROLPH spent half an hour upstairs, gloating. Now the whole estate was his. Mace Mansion, and the park surrounding it.

All Aunt Audrey's securities, and her lovely dollars in the bank. . . .

"It must be all over by now," he told himself, triumphantly, and sped downstairs.

It took only one glance in the little parlor to tell him that something had gone wrong.

Blazing rage took possession of Rolph as he saw that his Aunt Audrey still sat there in her chair, placid and smiling. He cursed as he ran to her, and the fury in his eyes made the old lady shiver.

He turned to the music-box, which was still venting its uncanny song, which had now become incredibly soft and sinister, like the hissing of serpents.

"It's a *fake!*" Rolph shrieked, sobbing with disappointment. "The box hasn't any supernatural power! The antique shop owner tricked me!"

Aunt Audrey seemed to be smiling—as if she knew!

"I'll fix it!" cried Rolph, striding to the table and reaching for the box. "I'll break it in a million—"

*What was happening?*

His hands trembled, refusing to touch the box.

It was his ears! Something was wrong with his ears!

"God! What—"

Searing pain severed his brain. In one brief flash knowledge came to him, but by then it was too late.

*It was the music—the demon's song.*

Its unhallowed patterns had woven about his brain and ensnared it. Just in that brief, unwary moment. . . . And now his mind was incapable of thinking coherently. It couldn't remember the word that would stop the music and free him. Nor could his mind direct his leg-muscles to act—to *run*. . . .

Everything blurred in his sight. The ro-coco wallpaper patterns blended into one empurpled smear. The prim little parlor became the vortex of a maelstrom.

Rolph clutched at his throat involuntarily.

The music went wild, chaotic, then reached a monstrous climax. . . .

"HELLO. Is anybody home?"

An odd little figure in a frock coat and white side-whiskers peeked into the silent parlor. His shoe-button eyes saw Aunt Audrey sitting quietly in her chair, watching the blue gas-flame. Then they saw the music-box on the table.

The little man uttered an improbable word. The demoniac music stopped.

"Forgive my unseemly intrusion," the little man said, stepping toward Aunt Audrey's chair. "I've been knocking on your door for hours, it seems. I wouldn't have burst in this way, only it's terribly important. You see, I contracted to sell a young man who lives at this address a music-box, and—"

He paused to stare gravely down at a peculiar green splotch on the faded carpet, then went on.

"I've thought it over carefully, and decided that this particular music-box is not to be sold, ever. In fact, I've decided to burn it. . . ."

"My nephew is—" the old lady began.

"So *you* are the aunt he was buying it for!" The little man shook his head and clucked his tongue indignantly. "I can see how right I was to come here. So you're the lady who dotes on antiques and music! Well, well! I practically bankrupted myself because I couldn't bear to part with my treasures. You and I have mutual manias, so it would seem logical that we—"

Aunt Audrey stopped him with a merry laugh.

"You might just as well stop talking, sir!" she exclaimed. "I can't hear a word you're saying. My nephew, who seems to have gone out, brought me this lovely old music-box. Of course, I couldn't hear it either."

She sighed wistfully. "I just *know* it plays some lovely Mozart melody! You see, sir, the battery in my hearing aid went dead this afternoon—and dear Rolph didn't seem to want to spare the money to buy another!"