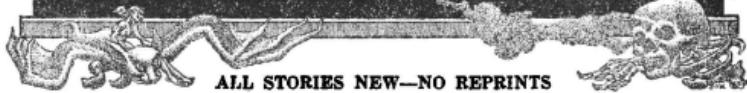


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1941

Cover by Margaret Brundage

NOVELETTES

BEYOND THE THRESHOLD August W. Derleth 6

The Forces of Ancient Evil Are Always Breaking Forth—Becoming Manifest Briefly, Horribly to the World of Men!

BIRTHMARK Seabury Quinn 44

A Strange, Dreadful Drama of Pre-Natal Influence . . .

SHORT STORIES

WHERE ARE YOU, MR. BIGGS? Nelson S. Bond 24

A Spaceways Tragi-Comedy of the Inimitable Mr. Biggs.

THE MAN WHO LIVED Raymond F. O'Kelley 34

He Had the Whole of London to Do With as He Pleased.

UNHALLOWED HOLIDAY O. M. Cabral 59

"Either He's a Myth—or There Really Is Such a Kid; and in That Case . . ."

A SORCERER RUNS FOR SHERIFF Robert Bloch 69

Needles Sharp and Shining—Tiny Daggers for the Death of a Doll . . . How Could These Be Used in a Modern-Day Political Campaign?

THE HALF-HAUNTED Gans T. Field 83

Judge Pursuivant Routs a Murderous, Hunchbacked Hulk of a Phantom!

THE MUSIC FROM INFINITY Thorp McClusky 93

Sparkling Showers of Notes, Furious Triumphal Piano Playing . . . Jazz . . . but What Jazz!

THE LOST GODS Dorothy Quick 106

"Gods Are as Real as Their Worshipers"

VERSE

REINCARNATION Gerald Chan Sieg 82

WITCH DANCE Clark Ashton Smith 104

SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS Irwin J. Weill 42

THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB 122

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.



"You've won! I'm confessing, Alicia—confessing that I killed you with arsenic!"

The Music From Infinity

By THORP McCLUSKY

That furious, triumphal piano playing; was it from somewhere in the Infinite—or from the dying brain of a murderer in the electric chair?

“IT'S twenty-five minutes past eleven right now,” my good friend John Chambers said, “and at twelve o'clock midnight he's scheduled to die. You

know why I got you over here tonight; because you're a screwy piano-player, as screwy as they come, I guess—and God knows if anybody in this world is psychic

or *fey*—that's what they call it, isn't it?—you are. Have a drink, Jerry?"

I nodded, and relaxed in Chambers' softest armchair as he opened a small liquor cabinet that stood in a corner of his comfortable home—a large and beautifully furnished room on the third and top floor of an establishment that may best be described as a cross between a private club and a bachelor gentlemen's rooming house. The sort of place with a reception room on the first floor, telephone service in each room—swank for minor executives at moderate cost. Just the sort of place for a wifeless young man—

Chambers mixed two whiskey-sodas, handed me mine, and sat down tautly on the davenport, across the room from me. He slept, by the way, on that same davenport—though no one would have ever guessed.

"Here's the story, Jerry," he said, sipping at his drink as he talked. "I haven't told you all of it before for fear you'd laugh. I waited, instead, until tonight. Whatever happens tonight—if it does happen or nothing happens at all, I mean; it'll be over in a hurry, and that'll be the end of it. And if you want to kid me afterward, why, that's your privilege—

"Jerry, I want you to let me tell you this without interruptions. It's confused enough at best, and I want to be as sure as I can that I'm not missing anything that may be—significant. So—"

I nodded; I am a good listener, and after a moment he continued:

"I met this fellow Pierce just about a year ago, when he first came to live here. Kind of a round-faced fellow, with a funny little nervous twisted smile, sort of like a cat's—Lord, you've seen his pictures in the papers enough lately so that I don't have to describe him to you. I'll bet he isn't smiling like that right now, though—"

He shivered slightly, glanced fearfully at the banjo clock on the wall, gulped a big

swallow of his drink and went on hastily:

"I struck up a sort of friendship with this Pierce right off. I'm an amiable bird anyway, and I couldn't help getting to know him; there're only about twenty-five fellows living here, and most of us take our breakfasts downstairs every morning, and our dinners at night, too, when we've nothing special on; it's like a sort of club, really.

"Everybody knows everybody else, and everybody else's business, too, so far as that's concerned. So I got to know Pierce right away. Had him up here for a drink, as a matter of fact, the second or third evening after he checked in the place.

"Lord, if anybody'd told me then that he'd done what he'd done I'd have said they were crazy. He seemed the most harmless sort of fellow in the world. The only odd thing that I noticed about him was that he seemed nervous as the devil all the time; jumpy, like — and he always seemed to be sort of listening for something, some noise or sound to materialize that never did. Lots of times I had to repeat whatever I was saying to him two or three times before he'd reply, and even then he'd only answer sort of mechanically, as though he weren't really listening to me at all. Well, it was a damned annoying trait, I can tell you; I put it down to his being terribly absent minded, and I made a private resolution that I'd find out the answer.

"Well, as it happened, I didn't get my first bit of information from Pierce direct; I got it from Mrs. Thomas, our landlady. She'd noticed, I guess, that I'd struck it off with Pierce, and I guess, too, that she'd taken a violent dislike to him. She waylaid me in the hall one day and started in, 'Mr. Chambers, haven't you noticed anything *strange* about our new Mr. Pierce?'

"I told her I hadn't, no.

"She clamped down her jaws and then

snapped, 'The man positively detests music. Hasn't he told you so?'

"I can't say that the subject of music has ever been mentioned between us," I told her.

"Well, she persisted, practically went into a tirade. Yammer, yammer, yammer; I'll reproduce it for you as well as I can. She said, and she was in dead earnest, too, 'Mr. Chambers, that Mr. Pierce, before he would even so much as look at my rooms, told me very emphatically that if there was a piano in the house he wouldn't even consider staying here; said that he hated piano-playing. Of course, as it happens, there isn't a piano on the premises, though I've often considered getting one of those little spinets for the reception room. So I told Mr. Pierce the truth, that there weren't any pianos in the building, and he seemed very pleased, didn't even ask *then* to look at rooms, but paid me a month's lodging in advance and moved in the same day. Mark my words, Mr. Chambers; a man who hates music as much as that isn't normal!"

"I hadn't noticed that Pierce disliked music—though I knew perfectly well that he had peculiarities—and I commented that I'd played the radio in my room lots of times when Pierce was present, and he never seemed upset. Also I mentioned Dowd's banjo playing, down the hall, said that that never seemed to bother Pierce, either.

"WELL, that about terminated the conversation; Mrs. Thomas muttered around a little more and then went off in a huff. I merely had the idea at the time that she'd just taken a violent dislike to her new lodger, and wanted to express that dislike in talking to me; I know now, of course, that she was right. Landladies are uncanny that way.

"Consciously I didn't pay much attention at the time to what Mrs. Thomas had

said, but I guess that subconsciously I kept mulling it over. I remember the thought came to me one day all of a sudden that I really didn't know the first damned thing about Pierce—about where he worked, if he did work, who his people were, where he came from, anything. And I realized another thing, too, that that funny mannerism of his of always seeming to be listening nervously for some sound that he never actually heard was getting more pronounced every time I saw him; by thunder after I'd known the fellow about two weeks I began to wonder if maybe Mrs. Thomas wasn't right after all about him. Watching him—and remember that I had plenty of opportunity to do just that, for we were fairly thick there for awhile—I couldn't help but come to the conclusion that either the man possessed such an acutely sensitive ear that the sound of piano playing was torture to him, or he was just plain nuts.

"And neither of those notions exactly fitted the facts, either—for no man who ever lived played a more miserable banjo than Dowd, yet Dowd's banjo practice didn't bother Pierce at all. Nor did piano playing when it came over the radio. But any sort of piano playing, good or bad, popular or classical, that came to his ears direct from the instrument seemed to affect him like the screech of chalk on a blackboard affects a normal person. I've seen him turn white as a sheet at the faintest sound of piano-playing coming from an open apartment window as we walked past; I've even seen him cross the street to avoid passing the open door of our neighborhood music store. That's the way he was all the time he lived here, normal in every respect except when it came to pianos and piano-playing direct from producer to consumer. Music under those circumstances was pure unadulterated torture to him. The more I watched him the more I veered toward the conclusion that he was really crazy, after all.

"Then, one night, it all came out—or so I thought at the time. It was a Saturday night and something or other had happened at the last minute to spoil my date and it was too late then to get any other girl—so I went down the hall to Pierce's room and asked him if he didn't want to take in a movie. I was pretty sure even before I knocked that he'd be there; he very seldom went out; I know now because of that piano music phobia of his. Well, he said all right and we took in the double feature at the Cameo, down the block, and then we went to a beer place to kill the rest of the evening. Funny about that, too; we passed up two fairly decent places for this dump where there wasn't any orchestra—not a piano, even, only a machine; Pierce wouldn't go inside the first two places, just stood outside for a minute and shook his head and dragged me along until we found the last place.

"We stayed there until the place closed and by that time we were feeling pretty good. As a matter of fact we'd both had enough by then, but it was a Saturday night and I didn't have to work on Sunday, so we came back here and I opened up a quart of Scotch and we really went to town. I guess I liked Pierce more than than I ever did, before or since. The drinks had killed that nervousness of his for the time being; he wasn't listening and cringing all the time anymore; he seemed normal as hell. And after a few more shots I did the unpardonable; I asked him point-blank what was the matter with him, why he had such a terrible fear of the sound of piano music. That's what too many drinks can do to a man's discretion.

"**T**HAT question sobered him up like a bullet between the eyes. He stiffened all over for an instant, all the drunken merriment gone out of his face like magic, then he began to tremble—horribly. The way he reacted was ghastly; I've never seen

anything quite like it. But after a minute or two he got hold of himself to some extent, and he looked up at me, and there was the most pitiable, haunted expression on that man's face imaginable; twisted and haggard and agonized, like the faces in some of those old Doré illustrations. I'm not exaggerating when I say that his face then was the face of a man damned—utterly without hope and still tormented. That's the significant point; he looked as though his torment wasn't over or would ever be over—but was still going on and on, without any end to it in sight or even hoped for. By the Holy, the sight of his face then gave me the creeps; just the thought of it still does, for that matter.

"Then he began to talk. Heaven knows why, except that I'd been friendly to him, and the nerve strain he was under was too great for him to bear any longer alone. Sooner or later, I guess, he would have had to talk to somebody. It just happened that that somebody was me.

"I'll try to tell you, as nearly as possible in his own words, everything he said. Of course he didn't say all this at once; there were pauses and interruptions and we had more drinks and there were times when I thought he was going to break down entirely. It was four o'clock in the morning before he finished.

"'I'll tell you, Chambers,' he said, his voice very soft and low and without a tremor in it as he began—though his face was twitching and his hands shaking, 'I haven't known you very long, but you've been a damn good friend and I'll tell you. You know my name is Harry Pierce. There are lots of Harry Pierces in the world, but I'm *the* Harry Pierce—.'

"Well, that didn't mean a thing to me, and I guess my face showed it, for he went on, 'I'm the Harry Pierce whose wife died last August of a—*a* lingering illness, they called it. Pernicious anemia, the death certificate read. She was a pianist, a profes-

sional—played jazz, but she played it like a concert artist. Her maiden name was Alicia Castle. That's the name she played under—'

"I knew, of course, who Alicia Castle had been—who doesn't?—and I thought immediately that I had the whole story. Loving husband—wife, fine pianist, dies—husband can no longer bear to hear piano music as he had heard it so many times in his home, soft and loud, fragmentary bits, practising, the human side of music that's somehow missing on a record or over the radio. 'Poor devil,' I thought.

"I felt sympathetic, all right. The feeling of intimacy the drinks had built up—and then this confession Pierce had made, that had so dramatically and poignantly explained his peculiar phobia. I tried to be as delicate as possible in my sympathy. I looked down at my hands and murmured, 'She was a wonderful pianist, wasn't she? I remember; she always played *Dancing in the Wind* at the start and finish of her radio programs. And she was your wife—!'

"He didn't seem to be listening. He just sat there across from me, right where you're sitting now, and, like me, he kept looking down at his hands. Only his hands were trembling violently. After a moment he muttered, and his voice was so savage that I almost jumped, '*Dancing in the Wind!* God, how I loathe that piece!'

"I didn't say anything; I was afraid to. And in a minute or two he started up again, and the words just poured out of him.

"'Hell, Chambers!' he babbled, with the most peculiar, pitiful eagerness, 'ghosts don't exist! They just don't exist, and that's all there is to it. Especially ghosts that don't do anything but just play the piano!'

"He reached for the bottle of Scotch, poured himself a good six ounces, tossed it off in one sobbing gulp that didn't even

jar him. He went on talking—raving maybe's the better word.

"It's been like that ever since the night she died. Piano playing. *Her* piano playing. I can't mistake it; I know her touch, her style of playing, the licks she used that nobody else can imitate, like I know my own face. It's *her* playing. Nobody else. It's unmistakable, unmistakable, I tell you! And it's been going on ever since the night she died. Whenever I get near a piano, sooner or later I hear her playing. Not all the time; sometimes she plays only one piece, or just part of a piece, and then stops, as though she's been—called away. *Dancing in the Wind*, she plays a lot. She had a special arrangement of it. And—nobody else can hear her. Nobody else can hear her playing. Only me.

"It can't be. Such a thing can't be. There aren't ghosts. There can't be ghosts. But when I get near a piano, sooner or later I hear her ghost playing. The night she died I heard her first, playing on the big grand downstairs in the living room. I went down—but before I got downstairs the music stopped. The room was empty—nobody there. But Lucas—he was our butler then—was outside, in the foyer. I asked him who'd been playing the piano in the living room, and he said, 'Nobody, Mr. Pierce. I haven't heard a sound from the living room all evening.' So I went upstairs again. Twice more that night I heard it—the sound of her playing—and both times nobody else heard it—nobody but me. I asked; I know. The servants were beginning to look at me as though they thought I was queer; I knew they were beginning to talk among themselves. So I shut up—just watched them, watched the people in the house, the friends and relatives who were dropping in all the time to pay their condolences.

"Three or four times the next day I heard her playing. Each time I was in the living room — and each time other

people were with me, old friends who had known her well and who wanted to look at her and to look at me too and see for themselves how I was bearing up. God, it was barbaric! The casket stood between the north windows, on the opposite side of the room from the piano. Standing with my back to the piano, standing between my friends looking down into her pale wasted face, I could hear her playing there behind me. But nobody else heard. Nobody else heard! I watched their faces, and I know. To them, the piano was silent. Yet I heard it playing, three or four times that day! God! God! God! I know that once I almost fainted when I heard it; Kenny Coates had to grasp my arms and hold me up until I came out of it. He helped me upstairs and gave me brandy and made me lie down for awhile. I was afraid to ask him if he'd heard the music, because I knew he hadn't. I began to wonder if I wasn't going crazy.

"And the next day, and the day of the funeral—it was the same. Music that only I heard—Alicia's music—coming from that damnable piano downstairs. I didn't sleep three total hours from the moment she died until they buried her. I was trying to think, trying to fathom out the thing, to keep from going wholly mad. I knew that it was a sort of short circuit in my own brain that was causing the trouble; I kept telling myself over and over that the sounds didn't really exist, or other persons would have heard them. But I knew too that if I didn't conquer the—the sickness—sooner or later I'd go stark raving mad. Part of my brain was sick already; I had to keep the sickness from becoming any worse.

"I have will power, plenty of it. But I couldn't overcome this thing. I even forced myself to sit in the living room by the piano, hour after hour, waiting to hear the music, waiting to see if the piano keys would also appear to move. I wanted to find out if my sickness extended as far as

hallucination—included my vision as well as my hearing. But whenever I watched the piano, it wouldn't play. It only played when my back was turned—and always when I was in the presence of other people, never when I was alone. It was like a devil in my brain, trying to make me—act ridiculous, strange, mad, in front of my servants and friends.

"THE day of the funeral was the worst. Right in the middle of the prayer the music began—*Dancing in the Wind*, again. It kept up all the way through the prayer, until the prayer was finished and the quartette began to sing; I had to bite my lips to keep from screaming. But I have a strong will—I conquered that time. Yet some day I won't—and I'm afraid that then they'll find out my secret and take me away and lock me up as a madman.

"After she was—buried, I came back to the house and shut myself in my room. All that night I stayed awake, waiting to hear that music. But there was no music then, not a note. It was just as though my sickness had gone with the people who for three days had filled my house. But I knew that perhaps it was just waiting another—opportunity. . . .

"The next afternoon Kenny Coates dropped in. He's my attorney, and one of my best friends; I couldn't refuse to see him. I met him in the library, across the hall from the living room.

"Just as soon as we started talking it began again. As always, it seemed to come from the big grand in the living room, and I could hear it plainly, though the two intervening doors were closed. Cutting right into what Kenny was saying, blotting out his words, blotting out all my senses except my hearing, blotting out everything except itself.

"I don't know how I looked then, or how I acted, but my reaction must have been pretty ghastly, for the next thing I

remember was Kenny handing me a drink with his face as white as a sheet and saying over and over, "Good God, Harry—you look shot to pieces! For a minute there I thought you were going to fold up. I tell you, you've got to snap out of it, or it won't be long before you follow Alicia. Get away, take a cruise, go to Canada, do anything to try and shake off this nervous condition that's got hold of you. Otherwise—"

"I guess I must have been still in a fog for I remember that I asked him, "But the music, Harry! Didn't you hear—the music?"

"He shook his head. "Music? What music?"

"That clinched it. I knew then that I had to get away. So I did. I turned my business over to a friend—I guess he'd been half anticipating that I'd do just that—and went to Canada, to a little place where I've been going every fall for years to hunt.

"I stayed there for three weeks. I was really beginning to feel better; since leaving the city I hadn't once heard that fiendish piano playing. Then, one Saturday night, Pierre Chouinard—he owns the lodge where I was stopping—asked me if I didn't want to go to a barn dance at the village—and some devil in me made me say yes.

"When we entered that hall the first thing I noticed was that there was a piano. An old worn-out upright on a makeshift bandstand. The sight of it gave me a queasy feeling for a minute, but the feeling passed off; there was too much noise and merriment and gaiety going on. The orchestra was a couple of fiddlers, a pianist and a drummer. They weren't bad; they played round and square dances mostly, with every once in awhile a waltz, and everybody danced, old and young alike.

"At ten o'clock the orchestra took its intermission, and we all lined up in a row

for refreshments—ice cream and cake. I was just reaching out my hand for mine—Pierre was standing directly behind me—when the music started.

"It came from that old rattletrap on the bandstand. The piece was *Dancing in the Wind*, and it was Alicia playing. No matter how tinny the music was, no matter how distorted by that God-awful out-of-tune instrument with its loose strings and its dead notes, nothing could disguise that. It was Alicia playing, all right, playing that wreck of a piano to me alone. I looked at the bandstand, and there wasn't anybody there. Not even the orchestra; they had all gone off the stand somewhere to smoke and eat their ice cream. Through that hellish music I heard my dish smash on the floor at my feet, and that's the last thing I remembered, then.

"I woke up in my bunk in Pierre's cabin, with a raging fever. Pierre wasn't in the room, and I lay there for awhile thinking and trembling. Funny thing, but my thoughts were clear as crystal. I could recollect everything that had happened since I'd left my own house back in the city, and it occurred to me all at once that I had never actually been within hearing distance of a piano in all that time—until the night of the barn dance. I had gone from my house to my train, and from that train to another train, and then I had ridden in an automobile, and then in a wagon, and, of course, in Pierre's lodge there was no piano. I tried to figure it out, figure out what craziness was in me that made me seem to hear Alicia playing, sooner or later, whenever I came near a piano. I remembered clearly that that old rattletrap had seemed to sound exactly like itself, with all its mechanical imperfections and poor tuning, not at all like our big grand. Then I began to wonder if my own couldn't conceivably have twisted its own conception of Alicia's playing to conform to the limitations of this tinny old instrument. The

thing seemed not impossible. If my mind could make me imagine that I heard Alicia playing, it could certainly also make me imagine that I heard her playing various pianos, especially after I had had a good chance to hear each of those instruments. And I had been listening to that decrepit old upright all evening. Certainly no supernatural influence was at work. It was all in my own mind. I remembered a story I had read somewhere about a man who had imagined that a monkey was following him about. The story ended, I believe, with the man slitting his own throat. I made up my mind then and there to get back to the city and consult a psychiatrist—a good one!

“ **T**HREE days later I was well enough to travel, so I returned to the city. I didn't go to my own home, but registered at an hotel instead. I was afraid to go back to my own house, full as it was of memories of Alicia — and with that accursed grand piano waiting for me in the down-stairs living room. The only way I could have gone home would have been to first have that piano moved out of the house—and I was afraid to do that. Afraid of what people would think and say. The servants had heard me talking queerly, so had Kenny Coates. A hotel was the only solution.

“ When I registered I asked for a quiet room, isolated from the ballroom and dining room; I told the desk clerk frankly that I couldn't bear the sound of music, especially piano music. The room he gave me was all right; there wasn't a piano within a half-dozen floors of me. But I couldn't stay in that room indefinitely. The first time I came downstairs, as I got off the elevator in the lobby, I heard that devilish piano playing again, coming from the dining room. God! it followed me all the way across the lobby, growing fainter and fainter as I walked away from it; I could

hear it up until the instant that I passed through the revolving doors to the street. Then I couldn't hear it anymore.

“ I went directly to consult a psychiatrist, told him the same story I've told you. He seemed interested as hell, told me that my malady was extremely rare, used a lot of big words and ended up by advising me that my only salvation lay in fighting the thing—

“ Well, I did just that. I did exactly as this man advised. I didn't go home, because of my—memories of Alicia; but for three months I lived in that accursed hotel, went to my office every day and transacted my business as well as I was able, ate my morning and evening meals in that hotel dining room every day—and listened to that ghastly music pounding in my brain every mortal day in the week! Always in the hotel dining room I heard it—not when the orchestra was playing, of course; only when they were silent between pieces. But I heard it other places, too; through an open window as I was hurrying to catch a subway, a fragment of *Dancing in the Wind* hitting me in the face from the swinging doors of a saloon as I walked past, even from the orchestra pit of a theatre—God!—anywhere and anytime! I haven't gone inside a theatre since, that had a piano; I haven't dared. . . .

“ For three months I fought it. But I couldn't beat it; I can't beat it. Two weeks ago I finally gave up the fight. I moved out of the hotel, took the room here. For one reason only, because there isn't a piano in the place. When I'm inside these walls I have peace—of a sort; it's only when I go out that I hear the music—and I'm careful about where I go, what streets and even which side of the street I walk on, so that I'm seldom exposed. Maybe the disease will go away of itself in time; I don't know. I only know that I haven't the strength or the courage to fight it any longer. That way would lead to total in-

sanity quicker than the way I have chosen. . . .

"That's all, Chambers; everything. Now you know—why I am as I am, why I act as I do. I trust that you will keep this—this confession to yourself?"

John Chambers, who for almost half an hour had been talking in a steady, quiet monotone as he gave to me, as nearly as possible in Harry Pierce's own words, the peculiar confession Pierce had made to him in this same room twelve months earlier, paused abruptly in his narrative. Without a word, he rose from the davenport, took my glass and his own, walked over to the liquor cabinet and mixed two more drinks. He handed me mine; I nodded without speaking, and he went back to his place and reseated himself. Then he said, his voice still quiet, still restrained, though I knew his thoughts were racing:

"It was good of you to listen to me so long, Jerry, without interrupting. I'm glad you did, for I wanted you to get the complete picture without missing anything, no matter how insignificant some details may seem. There are details which may have vast significance, contrasted with others which may mean nothing; I thought it best to tell you everything that I remembered.

"Well, the rest of the story is told from my own viewpoint; it's exactly what I saw and heard. Pierce never again mentioned his odd confession to me and I of course also refrained from referring to it. And—it was just two weeks later that he finally broke.

"Funny how that came about. One of those jokes of Fate that are always happening and that none of us can foresee or guard against. It happened on a Friday evening, about eleven-thirty; I know it wasn't any later than that because I have to work on Saturday mornings and I was still sitting up, fully dressed, reading—when I heard this awful scream. It wasn't like anything human, I can tell you; it

wasn't even recognizable as a man's or a woman's voice—it was more like a—like a fiend screaming in hell or a witch burning at the stake, maybe. It was loud; it stabbed into my ears like a knife—left them ringing for seconds afterward. I was out of my room and down the stairs in nothing flat, and everybody else in the house, too!"

"They were down in the front hall—Harry Pierce and two men who, it turned out, were Kenny Coates and Alicia's brother. Frank Castle, his name was. Frank Castle and this Coates were both holding Pierce by the arms to keep him from sagging to the floor; after that single scream Pierce hadn't screamed any more but there was froth on his lips and dribbling down his chin and his face was white as paper and streaming sweat. And his eyes; God!—they were the eyes of a trapped, maddened beast! And he was mumbling over and over, his mouth lax and drooling, his whole body trembling spasmodically, 'Yes, I did it; Alicia! I'll confess, Alicia; hear me, Alicia; I'll confess! I killed you, killed you with arsenic so slowly that nobody knew. I'll tell now, tell the world now that if they exhume your body they'll find enough arsenic in you to kill a dozen people! Hear me, Alicia; hear me! I'm confessing; God, I'm confessing! It's what you've wanted, all along, I know. You've won, Alicia; you've won; you've beaten me! I'm confessing, Alicia; I'm confessing that I killed you with arsenic—!'

"Over and over and over he went on, like a broken record.

"WELL, except for a few loose ends that's all there is to the story to date that you haven't already read in the papers. The confession came as a total surprise to me, of course, but I can see now how completely it explained things; explained Pierce's terrible nervousness, his peculiar insanity—everything. His conscience was hounding him every minute, day and

night. Through all those months his life must have been a perfect hell.

"It turned out that the three of them had met earlier in the evening, dined—at some place where there was no piano!—and come here afterward.

"Well, you know that the brother demanded that Alicia's body be exhumed, which was done—and they found that sure enough she was saturated with arsenic. Pierce pleaded not guilty on grounds of insanity, but the alienists shot his story full of holes. They examined him and they put him in rooms with pianos, and he tried to fake the malady he said he'd been experiencing all along, and they proved that he was just faking. Then he tried to say that he hadn't heard that ghostly piano-playing any more since the minute he'd confessed, and that only made it worse. The prosecution made a monkey out of him. Proved that his business had been perilously close to the rocks, that he had been inordinately jealous of Alicia because of her radio reputation and because she made more money than he did, and that he'd killed Alicia for her insurance. The jury found him guilty in half an hour, and the judge sentenced him to burn. And tonight's the night. That's why you're here.

"Oh, there's one point that I forgot. Remember I said that the reason Pierce broke when he did was one of those jokes of Fate that nobody can foresee or guard against? Well, the joke was this: that same day, while Pierce was out, Mrs. Thomas bought a piano. A little spinet. She'd always wanted one anyway for the reception room; she didn't like Pierce of course and didn't care a damn whether he stayed on or moved out on account of it; so I suppose when she saw it she merely thought, 'The hell with him,' and ordered it sent out. It came that evening, and it was put in the reception room near the door, not ten feet from where Pierce went haywire as he walked into the house.

"But the real reason I've got you up here tonight, Jerry, is this—

"It may all be imagination, but, thinking back after all the commotion and excitement that night had subsided, I can't get out of my mind the notion that, just before Pierce screamed, I heard somebody playing that piano downstairs! Just a fragment of music, just for an instant, and then the scream blotted it out. Music that had a sort of unreal quality to it, as though someone was playing loudly, but at a great distance—like the music that comes across a lake at night, like, Oh, Lord, this is a lame comparison but it's accurate—like music heard when you hold just the needle to a phonograph record, in your fingers. Diminished almost to nothingness, yet strong and powerful. Microscopic, yet full of fury. You understand? And the piece was *Dancing in the Wind*!"

"Jerry, you're here because I believe that I heard that music, that same music that drove Pierce to confess! Maybe it was only an emanation from Pierce's own tortured brain; I don't know. But I am certain that I heard it. There have been times when I thought that I was clairvoyant, Jerry; not tremendously so, like mediums, but just a little bit. And if I'm sensitive at all to such things, I know that you're ten times more so.

"Jerry, I feel that, if it were truly Alicia's spirit driving Harry Pierce to confess through her music, we will hear her play again tonight, for the last time, when he dies. Because she knows that I know the whole story, as no other person on earth knows it. And I feel that if Alicia's spirit exists, and can communicate with us, it will try to get one last message through to me—to let me know—that it lives and that it has triumphed."

I moved uneasily at that, looked down at my glass, which was empty, and shook my head.

"Sorry, John. It doesn't necessarily fol-

now—that if you, or I, or both of us, hear this—ghost music—tonight, we've consequently demonstrated the reality of Alicia's spirit—and, naturally, of a whole spirit world. For telepathy *does* exist; we know that—and I can see no way in which we can eliminate beyond doubt the possibility that whatever music we *may* hear—might not have come to us direct from Pierce's brain at the moment of death. The human brain sends out strange and powerful impulses when it is about to die; visions of loved ones, sometimes startlingly vivid and real, sometimes speaking or otherwise transmitting definite messages. There're thousands of authenticated instances. So—whether the music originates with Alicia—or merely in Pierce's dying brain—that's a question we can never answer—"

John Chambers shivered, and his face went gray.

"Jerry! It's four minutes past twelve—and he's to die at midnight—!"

AND in that instant—God!—from downstairs, through that quiet house, came the sound of furious, triumphal piano playing! It was jazz, but what jazz! Sophisticated, transcendental playing, a strong lifting rhythm glittering with embellishments and flying notes that transformed the saccharine melody into a surging clangor of glamorous sound. Not ten jazz pianists in the world could play like that, I knew—and of those ten only Alicia Castle had ever played that particular special arrangement. It was Alicia Castle, all right—playing as I had heard her play innumerable times at the start and finish of her coast-to-coast network broadcasts!

The piece danced along to its conclusion, a sparkling shower of notes that burst and coruscated like a musical skyrocket, and then the music was gone from my brain. The silence that followed was deafening. For a full minute we sat there, neither speaking.

There was no sound in the house; whatever *we* had heard had been heard by nobody else.

Then John Chambers looked at me, and his face was white.

"Did you hear it?" he whispered.

I nodded. "Loud," I croaked. "Loud as hell. *Dancing in the Wind.*"

He licked his lips like a frightened dog. "I only heard it faintly," he muttered. "Just like the other time. You're—you're more psychic than I—"

We sat there dumbly, as though paralyzed, through long minutes. At last John's lips moved.

"Pierce is dead, Jerry; I know it. He died when we heard that music. And—you're right in what you said; we can never know beyond doubt whether that music came from Alicia, somewhere in the infinite, or from his own poor dying brain. It's a thing we'll never know—"

I nodded. It was a thing we would never know—

Again we sat silent. Then, almost musingly and wholly irrelevantly, I spoke the words that were to lead us to—the unbelievable conclusion.

"Funny thing about that damned music, John," I said. "The B flat above middle C didn't play. It was missing, all the way through the piece."

"B flat above middle C?" he echoed. "That's a black note, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"If it's busted on that piano downstairs, and if I know that it's only been busted a few days—that would prove that Pierce, up in the death house, couldn't have known of it, wouldn't it?"

Again I nodded. I was beginning to understand what he was driving at. He jumped to his feet.

"Come on. Wednesday night we were playing poker down there and Bob Ellis' chair went over backward and broke a black key on the piano. Mrs. Thomas doesn't

even know about it yet. We'll see if it's the one."

We went downstairs softly, for it was late and the house was sleeping. We went into the darkened reception room. Chambers didn't wait to turn on the lights. In the darkness I reached out and depressed the B flat. At first gently, then vigorously, I shook the key up and down.

The note was dead—the hammer shaft broken.

In the dim dark I heard Chambers whisper, "It's the one?"

My voice was taut, unnatural, high-

pitched as I whispered my reply, "It's the one."

His voice was quivering, too, now, as, with a curious triumphant eagerness, he persisted, "Then it *was* Alicia—who was sending music to our ears from this piano tonight?"

I could feel the flesh crawling along my spine as I sought to formulate my answer. It was incredible, yet there was only one answer, could be only one answer. Then, my lips stiff and dry, my heart palpitating like a triphammer, I spoke—that answer.

"Yes, John. It *was*—Alicia—!"