

The Phantom Violinist

By WALTER F. McCANLESS

VERY few of us, I suppose, have not been enthralled by tales from *Arabian Nights*, or thrilled to the goose-flesh state by stories of "ha'n'ts," as told by the old-fashioned southern Mammy.

To me the sole merit of those old mystery or ghost stories lies in the fact that nowhere within them is the reader or hearer made to feel that a hoax has been perpetrated upon him. They are honest-to-goodness ghost stories and are not cluttered up at the close with weakening explanations that the conventional stories of that type have.

At the risk of being regarded unconventional, therefore, I wish to assure you that I have no explanation of the tale I am going to tell. I give it exactly as I got it from the lips of one of the principal actors. It may be that, in this day of psychic research, some explanation has been discovered, but, I repeat, I have none.

Late one night in February, 1920, I was called up by the night editor of the little paper, for which I was acting in the humble capacity of reporter, to investigate a strange occurrence that had taken place at the Auditorium earlier in the evening.

From those whom I interviewed I learned that the entertainment was composed of several numbers by a rising young violinist, touring the state as a member of a prominent Lyceum. Nothing out of the ordinary happened during the first part of his program, the young violinist responding to the usual encores in the customary manner of artists.

But after the following interval, which was prolonged, owing to the shifting of the audience and late arrivals, he came upon the stage in a noticeably constrained manner. His accompanist played the opening bar, paused, looked over his shoulder, and began again. Still the violinist did not move, and the audience suffered all the pains of witnessing a case of stage-fright. Again the opening bar was played, and again the pause.

Then the violinist began, but not the air familiar to the accompanist; for, after a few feeble efforts to follow, he

soon desisted, while seemingly from the soul of the violin there throbbed into the ears of the audience a low haunting melody. Slowly, at first, and in mournful cadence the violin sobbed out a tale of loneliness.

To the audience, frozen in their seats, it ceased to be a thing of wood and strings. It was an immortal soul finding at last a sympathetic ear. More and more rapid became the measure as, from loneliness, the tale progressed to one of privation and suffering—suffering, growing ever more and more acute and mingling with despair. Abruptly, then, from the wail of despair, which sank fitfully lower and lower, the air changed to a soft pizzicati, as from spiritland.

All space seemed filled with airy creatures that flitted and danced, mowed and gibbered, beckoned and menaced till the blood ran cold. Again the air changed. Low and weird, it rose in ever increasing crescendo till, with the dread certainty of the *Dies Irae*, it broke in one awful shriek. As if in echo to the voice of the violin, right in the midst of the audience, an answering shriek rang out. Many in the audience sprang to their feet, but were almost instantly calmed by the raised hand of the violinist, who had come to the front of the stage. Pointing his finger at the trembling culprit, who had not resumed his seat, he said:

"Gentlemen, there stands the murderer of Joel Dalziel. Take him!"

THIS was the strange occurrence regarding which I was charged to secure an interview from the violinist. Consequently, not more than a quarter of an hour after I was called, I was shown into the private sitting-room of the artist.

He did not keep me waiting and soon appeared habited as on the stage except for lounging-robe and bedroom slippers. I rose with an apology for the call at so late an hour, but he raised his hand deprecatingly.

"Naturally I could not sleep, under the circumstances," he said, "and I'd as soon talk. I presume you came regard-

ing the affair at the Auditorium, Mr.—er—" (Here he referred to my card.)

"Wright." We said it together.

"Yes," I continued, "the people will want to know all about it. I presume you know the man made a confession of the crime?"

"No, I came directly to my rooms, since I had been under a great strain, and heard nothing. But, of course, his guilty actions were, in themselves, a confession. It was but another case of 'the cranes of Ibycus'."

"I understand that your wonderful improvisation brought it about. The public would like to have an explanation of that."

The violinist smiled, and, selecting a cigarette for himself, he pushed the pack across the table to me. Settling himself comfortably in his chair, he told me the following tale which I now give to the public for the first time:

"You have asked me to explain how my improvisation, as you call it, brought about a confession of murder. In the first place, I am not sure that I have an explanation to offer—not, at any rate, one to satisfy you or that you would care to give to the public—but it is all I have to offer. In the second place, the explanation, such as it is, will have to be in the form of a story. But before I begin it, I myself have one or two confessions to make. First, my real name is Joel Dalziel. I know what you are thinking; but the murdered man was my uncle after whom I was named. Second, what you were pleased to call my improvisation is not mine but my uncle's, and never in my life have I heard all of it till tonight.

"Strange, you think? Stranger still, if you know that not I, but the Phantom Violinist—played that last number! But to my story:

"As you probably have already surmised, I come from a musical family. Not only my uncle, but my grandfather and great-grandfather, were all violinists of no small fame. In fact, it is known in our family that wherever there was a Dalziel, however remote the kinship, there would be found a violin. I

have known members of my family to prove their right to the name by being able to play the violin.

"My uncle was a maker of violins as well as a composer. Such was his skill in this direction that he acquired a good bit of property before he finally disappeared. I was but a child at the time, and can just remember his habit of taking his violin with him to the forests where, in a sort of outdoor laboratory, he would study and test the acoustic properties of different woods. From the last expedition of this kind he never returned.

"At the age of ten I received an invitation to visit my grandfather at his estate, 'Lion's Lair'—so named on account of two large stone lions that marked the entrance to the house. I knew not, at the time, why the invitation was extended to me alone, but I was got ready, and I hastened to visit the old man.

"Perhaps his increased loneliness, since the disappearance of Uncle Joel, made him wish to have the namesake, who so strongly resembled his son, near. Anyway, after a long journey, tiresome for its monotony of scenery and method of travel, I arrived at 'The House of the Lions,' as it was sometimes called.

"I will not bore you with a description of the magnificent situation of this old house, nor how for miles, before it is reached over undulating hills, its great white columns and broad red roof appear against its mountain background as some classic structure of ancient time. But I will tell you that, casting my glance back and down over the broad sweep of hill and valley and woodland with the shadows of sunset creeping across them, I was impressed with its utter loneliness and comparative isolation.

"Grandfather himself met me—not in his bluff hearty manner of my earlier memories, but in a sort of timid abstracted manner. Young as I was, I noted the change, suspected the cause, and forbore comments that would hurt and questions that would reopen old wounds. I suspected, though I never knew otherwise till later on in my visit, that he had never learned the fate of my uncle. Otherwise, my grandfather bore few outward marks of his grief.

"Not to burden my story with irrelevant details, I was assigned a room that had been Uncle Joel's, and soon the days began to pass in a manner befitting the association of age and childhood—my grandfather reading, day-dreaming, or telling me stories in my quieter moments, and I in exploring the grounds or listening to his stories. No other associates

we had except a man-of-all-work and his wife, who was my grandfather's house-keeper.

"These, however did not count, as they seemed to have been trained to respect Grandfather's grief and to hold themselves aloof. Questions I had in plenty, for in my explorations about the grounds I had discovered in the family burying-plot a grave more newly made than the others and a fairly worn trail that led back further into the mountain.

"But I restrained my curiosity for the reason I have already given and for the reason that Grandfather had the air of one whose confidence would be hard to force."

"TOWARD the close of my visit, however, the even tenor of our way began to change. Grandfather had become more and more restless, walking up and down the long porch or about the grounds, or gazing up into the mountain.

"I, on the other hand, had found other fields to explore and now daily amused myself by rummaging among the odd pieces of old furniture, books, arms of the Revolution, and clothing that I had found in the great old garret. There was one old chest, however, that had thus far resisted my efforts to open. It was a quaint, oddly-carved chest that reminded me of some of the stories Grandfather had told me. Visions of treasures passed before my mental sight, and I at once determined to ask Grandfather for the key or the secret or whatever it was that opened it. I rushed down and found Grandfather pacing restlessly up and down the porch.

"'Grandfather,' I began, 'that old carved chest in the garret—'

"I stopped, transfixed by the look in his eyes and by the grip upon my arm.

"'Joel,' he gasped, out at length in a horrified whisper, 'did you—have you—what have you done?'

"I was badly frightened at his manner.

"'Joel, what have you done?' he repeated, giving me a shake.

"'N-nothing; I only wanted the key.'

"His fierce grip upon my arm relaxed and fell away.

"'You did not find it, then—the spring, I mean?' he asked more calmly, even kindly, as he realized something of my fright.

"'No, sir. Won't you open it for me?' I added, encouraged by his kinder tone.

"'Joel,' He almost shrieked this, and his face went white. 'No—never! I could not! And yet—' He paused,

irresolute, as he struggled for control. 'And yet it may be merely my fancy after all. Yes, that is surely it. How could the dead—' Here his voice fell in incoherent soliloquy and finally ceased altogether, while his head gradually sank in thought.

"'Yes,' he continued, after a moment, as to himself, 'I will—I will. This horror—from the mountain—if I can prove—my fancy—I will. Come!' He turned suddenly to me. 'I will open it for you and let you know something of what I have lived in the past three years. Come!' He turned resolutely toward the garret and I dared not disobey.

"We were soon by the chest, and I can see him yet as, with pale face and trembling hand, he touched the spring. The lid rose slowly as if loath to give up its secret. Forgetting my momentary fright, I hastened forward with the eagerness and ignorance of youth.

"'Listen! Do you not hear it?' he asked.

"'I hear nothing, Grandfather.'

"My eyes were bent upon a small coffin-shaped box in the chest. A groan behind me drew my attention to Grandfather. He, too, was looking at that box, and the terrible appearance of his face I shall never forget as long as I live.

"Pale before, his face was now as the face of a corpse—a greenish pale. The veins were swollen like cords under the skin upon his forehead, perspiration was on his brow, his breath came in gurgling gasps, and his eyes were so distended as to seem bursting from their sockets. If I have ever seen a madman under the throes of a horrible hallucination, I saw one then. With a shriek of terror, I jumped from the chest and dashed toward the head of the stairs.

"'Joel, stop!' came in a ghostly voice from Grandfather.

"In spite of my terror, I paused long enough to glance over my shoulder at Grandfather. He calmed himself with an effort and, shudderingly picking up the box, followed me. I hastened down, feeling that I was followed by something unearthly—a gruesome Thing.

"At the bottom of the steps Grandfather led the way into the library and, placing the box upon the table, he motioned me to a chair.

"'You remember your Uncle Joel, do you not?' he asked.

"I nodded.

"'You have wondered, perhaps, why I, an old man with nothing in common with your youth, should have invited you here to this lonely spot. Perhaps you thought that, with your Uncle Joel gone, I was lonely and wished you to

cheer my old days. Anyway, you came, a fact that I appreciate, and you forebore to ask questions; and I understood your tact in avoiding reminding me of my loss. But the fact is, I had you here not for my loneliness, although I am lonely, and my loss is rarely out of my mind. I had you here to measure myself by you, for I have had fears that I am going mad. This violin is your Uncle Joel's, and that newly-made grave out yonder I believe to be his.'

"Grandfather paused as if uncertain how to proceed further. Had Uncle Joel come home but to die, then? Or had they found his body? I wondered. When on the point of giving way to these questions, I had them answered in the story which my grandfather again resumed.

"'You possibly remember,' he continued, 'that at the time of Joel's disappearance diligent search was made in his accustomed haunts and in the surrounding neighborhood, but without result. We looked for a mangled or wounded body out in the open; we never looked for a prisoner under lock and key. Even if it had occurred to us, who of our neighbors—and they were few—would be guilty of abducting him? He had property, but how could his abductors hope to profit by it with him a prisoner?'

"'But all of this never occurred to us till too late. Months passed by, months in which he suffered all the torture of the damned, and we were beginning to hope that he, if he had merely gone off, would soon return. I nearly go mad when I think that he was almost at our doors—right up on that mountain in a cabin—*starving!*'

"'Here the recital proved too much for my grandfather, and he was obliged to pause. My heart went out to the old man, for he seemed so broken and helpless, and, under the influence of the stress of the emotions of the past few moments, he appeared to age perceptibly. I opened my mouth to protest against a further recital when, after a desperate effort at control, he continued:

"'One day, while restlessly riding about, I passed the cabin and noted the heavy door and the heavy iron bars across the windows. I had heard that the building had been used as a prison during the Revolutionary War. It was an old building, but remarkably well preserved, and seemed capable even then of holding prisoners.

"'Idly I rode up to the window and looked in. I was on the point of turning away, when, in the shadow near the door, I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be old clothes. It occurred to me that they might be the clothes of a Revolutionary prisoner. Curiosity car-

ried me around to the door, which I found to be locked on the outside with padlock and chain. The chain proved to be rust-eaten and so worn that by a little effort with a stick I broke it and entered.

"'You can imagine my horror and loathing when I discovered that the clothes covered a skeleton. Something strangely familiar about the clothes caused me to turn the skeleton over, when, from the coat and the fleshless arms, there rolled—*this violin!* Instantly I thought of Joel. I know not why, but it is a fact. With fingers trembling from half-formed fears, I opened the case. Before me lay my son's violin, and I knew no more.

"'WHEN I finally regained consciousness the sun was setting and my horse was snorting with fright at the open door. I tarried long enough to compose what was left of my poor son's body, intending to return that night and to convey it to our family burying-ground for interment. While engaged in this sad duty, I observed for the first time that the skeleton was not an old one, for parts of the flesh still adhered to the bone in places. But my heart broke when I found a half masticated piece of leather between the poor jaws!'

"'Again Grandfather paused, overcome, and I begged him to desist from so painful a recital. He shook his head.

"'The rest is soon told. I will finish, for you must know all. I returned that night, as intended, and with help performed the last sad rites for my boy. The violin I placed in the corner there by the bookcase, later moving it to where you found it.

"'Late one night, after a dismal day of rain and sleet, I was trying to read when a spell of restlessness assailed me. It was such a night as made one wish to nestle in a cozy chair close up to a roaring fire to read. My mind constantly reverted to Joel and his sad fate. Finally I gave up the attempt and laid the book upon the table, intending to let the sound of the wind and rain lull me into forgetfulness and sleep. The wind had risen considerably and was moaning and whimpering about the caves, and at every sudden gust the rain and sleet would beat like ghostly fingertips upon the window-pane.

"'Realizing that my efforts were useless, I rose and carried the book I had been trying to read back to the case. Idly, my glance fell upon the violin and it suddenly occurred to me that I had not closely examined it since I found it.

I wondered if it were in good repair after months of exposure in a poor cabin in all sorts of weather. With this in mind, I opened the case and took the violin out. The strings were all broken, but the violin had not suffered—a fact due to the coat and protecting arms of my poor boy:

"'I soon had it restrung and was preparing to draw the bow across the strings when I heard a low sweet melody that I recognized as an improvisation of Joel's. It appeared to come from his room. Hardly knowing what I dared to hope, I rushed madly into his room. Had Joel after all these months, come back? His room was as empty as it had been for months. But the melody continued, now in another part of the house. Again I rushed after it, but with like result. Will-o'-the-wisplike, it appeared to be leading me! Leading me where?'

"'I rushed back into the library and placed the violin in the case. I intended to follow that melody, which now seemed to be coming from afar. Out on the porch I ran, heedless now of rain or sleet. Could it, after all, have been the wind? Was it my fancy? But no; down the wind, as if borne by it, came the melody, leading me—*leading me to the mountain!*

"'I followed. Through the storm I followed. Up the mountain, to the cabin, and beyond I followed—followed till the storm broke and the dawn appeared. Exhausted and fainting, I fell; and there, several hours later, the searching party found me muttering and groping in delirium. They carried me home, and for a month or more I lay between life and death.

"'When I recovered, the people around looked at me pityingly. I knew; they believed me mad! Am I? I can still reason. Is not my story coherent? Or do I merely have seasons of madness? I have begun to have fears, for at times I still hear that melody and I always follow. For three years now this has continued until I have worn a trail up the mountain. I never know what I hope to find—Joel or his murderer. I cannot believe that Joel, after all these years, still lives. And yet hope dies hard, they say. If he does live, whose skeleton is that?'

"'And now you know all. I wanted you here to see if you, too, could hear The Phantom Violinist, as I have begun to call him. But my fears seem to grow. The Phantom Violinist played today—and you did not hear!'

"SO ended my grandfather's story, and you may guess that, young as I was, I grasped what his closing words

meant. Grandfather mad! With growing horror, as bit by bit I recalled what I had heretofore only subconsciously noted (his abstracted gaze, his listening attitude), I came to a full realization of the fact. I was relieved, therefore, when a day or two later I was called home.

"Grandfather insisted that I carry the violin with me, and for fear of hurting him I complied. As I turned to look back upon the 'House of the Lions' I then swore that if ever I had the means I should hunt down Uncle Joel's murderer and exact payment to the full for the life he had taken and for the reason he had overthrown. I little dreamed I was so soon to be successful.

"The days went by uneventfully enough for my youth. A month passed, and with it passed my poor grandfather. He had taken the trail up the mountain and, in his weakened state, fell from a high rock. When they found him he was quite dead. I renewed my oath of vengeance, and, taking out the violin for the first time since I had acquired it, I examined the seeming source of Grandfather's tragic fate. I could play a little by ear even then, and an overmastering desire came to me to play Uncle Joel's violin.

"I strung it and tuned it and picked up the bow to play. But I never played it. A low sweet melody began to throb from the heart of the violin. Surprised and charmed, I stood for several minutes before I realized what was happening. When I did, in horror I almost flung

the violin from me into its case. The melody died away in a wail of despair. Was I, too, going mad?

"Looking down in terror upon the instrument as this idea came to me, I beheld sticking through one of the fholes a yellow piece of paper which my hasty action had dislodged. Without touching the violin, I fished out a discolored piece of envelope that had evidently been secreted within it years before. Unfolding it, I discovered that it contained writing that was fairly legible.

"To the owner of this violin' [it ran] 'I, Joel Dalziel, dying of slow starvation, do give and bequeath all my estate, lately converted into stocks and bonds, to the amount of (\$150,000) One Hundred and Fifty Thousand Dollars, on condition that half of said amount be used in a musical education, the other half to be used in finding and prosecuting my incarcerators, who are now my murderers, described below.'

"The envelope was pretty well covered, both inside and out, with a small closely-written hand which was easily proved beyond doubt to be my uncle's. Furthermore, details as to where certain bonds were placed, facts known only to my uncle, proved conclusively enough that the paper was genuine and I had no difficulty in establishing my claim. For the past ten years I have

been carrying out the conditions of my uncle's strange will.

"Strange that after all these years of search in my travels I should succeed in so odd a manner in running to earth the murderer. I had not used that violin for years, and only because my regular violin failed to come with my other things was I compelled to use my uncle's."

"ONE thing more," I said, after the completion of this marvelous tale. "How do you explain the awkward pause just before your last number?"

"Do you know," he laughed, "I clear forgot what I was going to play? Yes, sir. I couldn't recall a note or how to finger it. I could only hear the haunting melody of my uncle's, and my old fear that I was going mad came back. I was conscious of nothing but the haunting melody till that terrible cry from the audience."

"The man, in his confession, stated that the melody was the same that had drawn him repeatedly to the scene of his crime," I ventured.

"Doubtless at the same times my grandfather heard it," he said.

"Then there is your remarkable likeness to your uncle," I added.

The violinist smiled.

"But, while he may have taken me for a ghost," he said, "there is The Phantom Violinist. It is all very strange. Can you explain it?"

I could not, and today I am no nearer its solution.

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