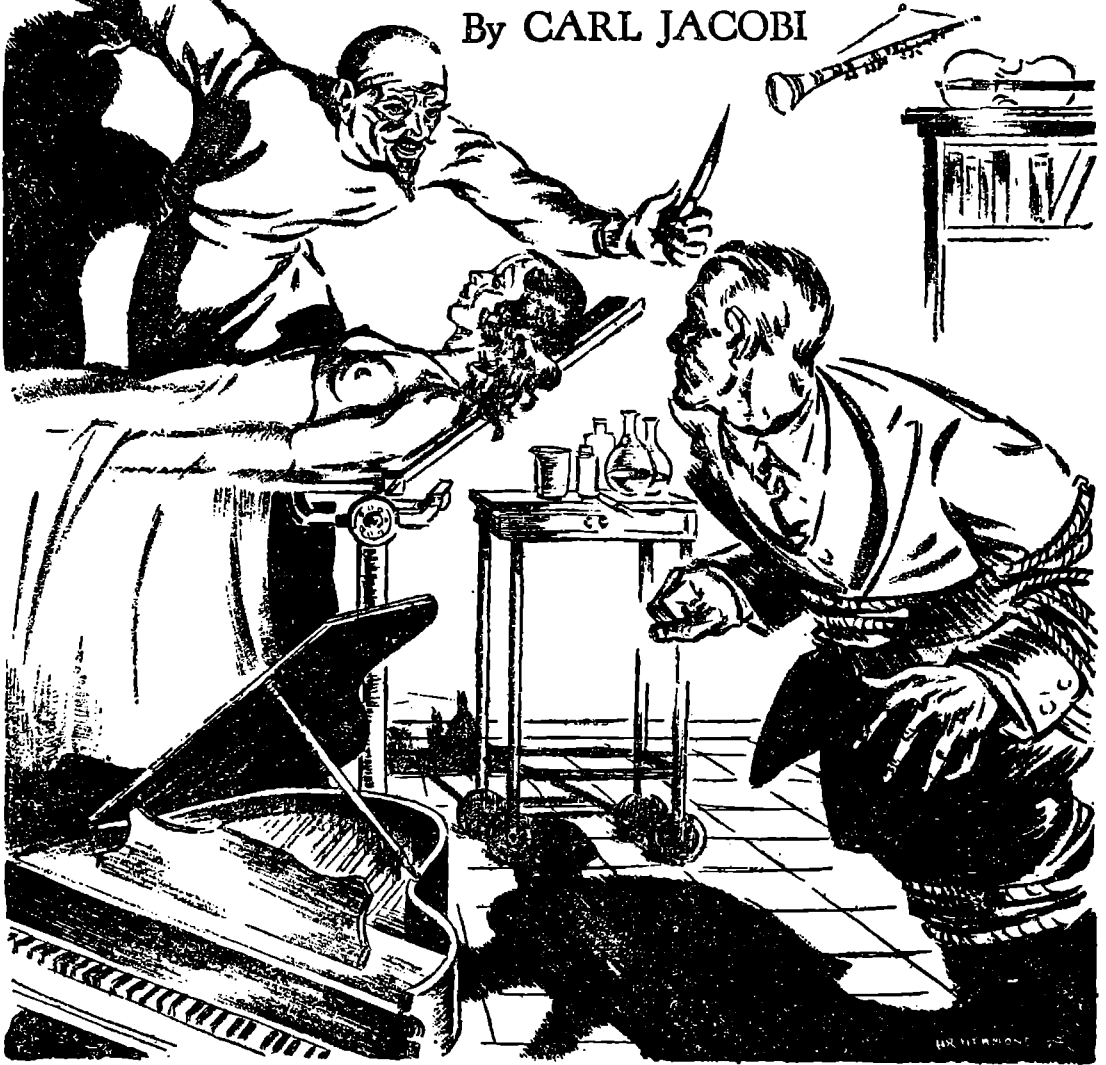


The Satanic Piano

By CARL JACOBI



"Farber!" I cried. "Farber! If you harm that girl——"

'A gripping tale of occult evil and a marvelous musical invention—by the author of "Revelations in Black"'

MIDNIGHT, and I was seated at the old concert grand in my study, running my fingers over the keys to the wild melody of Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*. Outside the fog like some toothless centenarian peered in at the glowing electroliers and drooled mist and greenish drizzle on the window-

panes. Hollow and muffled through the thick air, Big Ben boomed its chimes of the hour.

I was restless. The night was hardly conducive to sleep. The empty weeks in London with Martha, my fiancée, gone for an extended visit up-country, had reached a climax of loneliness in the

preceding solitary hours at the theater. And above all, that puzzling message which had come to my door a few moments past still lay there on the chair, leering up at me with the insistence of a spoken command. It read:

Come at once to 94 Milford Lane. I have something of the utmost importance to show you. It concerns your music.

WILSON FARBER.

For a moment as I stared down upon the black card with the peculiar writing in white ink, I was almost inclined to smile. Farber, eh? Wilson Farber. Yes, I remembered the man, remembered the day I had first come upon him in his dirty little music shop on lower Telling Street. I had gone there in search of some old collection of Russian folk-dances, and he, sitting amid his jumble of tarnished horns and battered violins, had led me into a conversation. And I remembered his book, which had attracted such wide interest and which psychology professors had been forced to admit opened new fields for thought in the subjects of hypnotism and telepathy.

Once again after that I had visited his shop, and while I must confess I was distinctly impressed by the man's queer erudition, still I had been only too glad to remove myself from his presence. There was something disturbing about the way he stared into your eyes, seemed to plumb your very soul. Nor did I like the silent way he glided about dragging his thick ebony cane, or that high-pitched laugh that sounded like the mirthless squeak of a ventriloquist.

Tall and gaunt, with a shock of sable black hair and a ragged unkempt beard the color of slate, he was at once a commanding and repelling figure. There were rumors about the man, rumors that came into existence when his unorthodox book first appeared in the stalls. Was it

the work of a trained or a neurotic brain? And was there any significance in the fact that a *James Wilson Farber* had been released from St. Mary's Institution for the Insane some nine months before?

I say now that had that last line, "it concerns your music," not been included in the missive, I should probably have dismissed the matter entirely from my mind. But the thought stole upon me that perhaps back in the shadows of his shop he had come upon some rare old music composition and was offering it for sale. Farber knew my weakness. He knew that for years I have amused myself by collecting original manuscripts and unknown works of forgotten composers. This hobby has brought me almost as much enjoyment as my own creations for the piano, and I hated to let any valuable work slip through my fingers.

Yet even music compositions were not so important but that they could wait until the morrow. One did not go on midnight excursions merely for the sake of viewing some rhapsodic creation of yesteryear.

I moved to my favorite armchair, picked up a half-read novel and tried to immerse myself in the pages. For a time the movements of the characters attracted my full attention, and the disturbing message of Farber faded slowly out of my thoughts. But when in the course of a quarter-hour or so the narrative before me began to lag, I found my eyes inadvertently returning to the bit of paper there on the chair.

For the third time I crossed over and read its imperative lines, stood there musing, hands thrust deep in the pockets of my lounging-robe. And suddenly the old germ, curiosity, struck me with full force, and I gave in to impulse.

Five minutes later, clad in trench-coat and cap, I was rolling across the wet

streets in an east-bound cab, past Piccadilly Circus, down Haymarket and through a world of white to the Strand. The fog was even thicker here by the Embankment, and it seemed to increase as we sped onward.

MILFORD LANE was almost a half-hour's drive from my apartment. It was close to one o'clock by my watch when I stood before the frowning door of number 94, and by the light of a single street lamp, gazed upon the gigantic jumble of brick and wrought iron that formed the ancient edifice. For a moment I hesitated there, the fog and drizzle pressing close against my face like wet gauze, the rumble of a distant tram reaching my ears hollowly as if from some lower world. Then, urged on by curiosity and determined to see it all now that I had come this far, I stepped forward and rattled the knocker.

The sounds had but died away into silence when the door opened, and I found myself staring once again into the iron countenance of Wilson Farber. Even though I had known fully what to expect, I confess I recoiled slightly before those black penetrating eyes and that face white as lime.

"You sent for me——?" I began.

He nodded. "I'm glad you've come, Bancroft. I think you'll find it well worth your trouble. This way, please."

He conducted me through a dark corridor to a brilliantly lighted room in the rear of the house, thrust forward a chair, and bade me sit down. Slowly unbuttoning my coat, I glanced at my surroundings. Glanced, I say—then stared. Without fear of contradiction, I believe I can safely put down that room to be the strangest chamber in all London.

The four walls had been painted or frescoed a dead white, and over this in

deep black, beginning from the ceiling and continuing down to the very floor, were a series of five lines of the musical scale, adorned with notes—full notes, half notes, and flagged eighths and sixteenths. At two-foot intervals on the wall, with no show of artistic placement, hung a line of musical instruments, the choice of which seemed to have been guided by a bizarre taste rather than a love for harmony. There were several lutes, battered and ornate, an oboe, a mandolin, a Javanese drum, and a number of queer elongated horns. Over in a far corner stood a harpsichord, dating to an early period. Heavy black drapes curtailed the two windows, and in sharp contrast a white porcelain operating-table stood under the glare of a green-shaded lamp in the center of the room.

There was a desk at my side, the top littered with manuscript, chemical vials and tubes, and a disorderly array of books. Some of the volumes, I saw by the titles, were technical studies of music composers and their various works, but the majority dealt with such subjects as hypnotism, experiments of Doctor Mesmer and telepathy.

Farber was leaning forward now, placing before me a glass and a decanter, and motioning that I help myself.

I shook my head. "It's late," I said, "and I live a long way from here. What do you want with me?"

He settled in his chair, hooked his thumbs in the vest of his black suit and studied me closely.

"Bancroft," he said, beginning slowly in a quiet voice, "you're a concert pianist and a composer. Are you not?"

I looked at him carefully before I made my answer. There was power in that face. Every line suggested cruel determination as if once he were moving toward an end, nothing could stop him,

The mouth with its thin bluish lips was fixed in that characteristic half smile, half sneer. The eyes under their heavy brows gleamed like separate entities.

"I suppose you might call me that," I replied. "My public appearances have been a source of livelihood for some years now. But although I've written a lot, only one number of mine ever acquired much notice."

He nodded slowly. "I know," he said. "*Satanic Dance*. It has been acclaimed one of the finest examples of modern music in the last decade. And at present you are working on a sonata which you plan to present at your next concert at Kensington Hall."

I started in my chair. "Will you kindly tell me where you obtained that information?" I inquired coldly. "That sonata was to come as a complete surprise."

With a gesture of his hand he waved my question aside. "That is beside the point," he said. "I am in possession of a number of facts this blundering world will some day be surprized to learn about. When the time comes . . . but never mind. What I want to know now is this: What, exactly, is your method of composing music?"

"Method?" I repeated.

"Yes. For example, how did you go about writing *Satanic Dance*? What was your procedure?"

The question was so prosaic, so matter of fact, that I leaned back in disappointment. To be drawn out of one's apartment at such an hour, led to a distant point of the city, and then amid such surroundings, asked a simple detail about my bread-earning profession—as I have rationally come to look upon it—was indeed disillusioning. The tone of my voice manifested my lack of enthusiasm.

"Basically speaking," I replied, "the

composing of music is no different from the writing of, well . . . say fiction. Half inspiration, half craftsmanship, I suppose. A central theme, a strain of melody courses through my mind. I immediately go to the piano, play as much of it as I can—play it several times, in fact—and then put the proper notes as far as my memory permits, on paper. Is that what you mean?"

The thin lips twisted into a smirk of satisfaction. "Yes," he said. "And what do you find to be your greatest difficulties in this method?"

"That," I replied, "is obvious. In transposing from the mind to the keys of the piano, and then to the printed notes on the page, much of the original inspiration is lost. It can not be otherwise. The realization is never so great as the expectation."

HE REACHED for the decanter, poured himself a glassful, sipped it slowly and moved to the edge of his chair.

"Suppose," he said, a distant expression stealing across his face, "suppose an instrument were to be placed at your disposal—a machine, let us call it—which under certain conditions would seize this musical inspiration that courses through your brain and transform it of its own accord into the actual living sound, a device so delicate that it would record permanently, note for note, the very melody that exists in your thoughts. How valuable do you think it would be?"

I dropped my cap on the floor and stared at him. For a moment as I gazed I seemed to be falling far into the depths of those liquid eyes. The black-bearded, sharp-featured face and its chalky skin, so white it appeared devoid of human blood, fixed itself like an optic scar directly before me, and the walls of the room with their maelstrom of painted

notes drifted far back out of the perspective. Slowly, for no reason I could understand, a great dread rose up within me. A chill crawled its way along my spine, and I jerked away with an effort.

"If such an instrument could be created," I said slowly, "it would bring fame to its musical owner in twenty-four hours. It would make a mere writer of songs a master musician, and it would make a great musician a genius. But it's impossible. I know something of science, and I know that telepathy—if that's what you're driving at—has never been acknowledged. Oh, I'm aware there are so-called mind-reading machines in use in criminal courts, but they are mere lie-detectors and show only the presence or absence of emotion. Still, it's rather interesting to dream about."

He seized my last words in fury. "Dream about!" he cried, banging his fist sharply on the arm of the chair. "That's all this stupid world does do. Fools, when will they realize they can not arrive at perfection through cold science alone? When will they learn they must include the psychic in their formula? You say, as they all have said, that such a machine is impossible. You say it can not be done. I will prove to you that you are wrong. Sit where you are!"

He leaped to his feet, stepped to the door leading to the adjoining room and disappeared. Profound silence swept down upon me as I found myself alone with those fantastic furnishings. For a moment I sat there absently twisting and turning one of the buttons of my coat. What on earth was this Farber person driving at? What was the significance of all the conversation regarding the composition of music? And why had I of all people been summoned here to be a party to it? As my wrist-watch ticked off the passing seconds, a mounting sense of un-

easiness welled up within me, and I found myself staring at the music lines and note decorations until they seemed to swirl wildly and form queer designs on the walls.

At length, impatiently, I stepped across to one of the heavily curtained windows at the far side of the room, thrust the drapes aside and peered out into the pool of drifting fog. But my vision was interrupted. Heavy iron bars were there, defiant as a bastille, preventing access either to or from the street. A wild sudden thought that I might be a prisoner here whipped me about. The sight of the open door, however, partly reassured me, and when Farber put in his appearance a moment later, I chided myself for being a nervous fool.

He was staggering forward, arms strained and bent under the weight of a large object shrouded in a black cloth covering. Reaching the operating-table with a gasp of relief, he set the square-shaped thing fully under the glare of the suspended light, then turned and carefully placed my chair on a parallel some five feet away.

"Bancroft," he said as I sat down, "I want you to listen and obey instructions very closely. Keep perfectly quiet, fasten your eyes on the object on the table and concentrate your mind upon it as much as you possibly can."

So saying, he turned and whipped off the cloth covering. I stared in astonishment. There before me was a midget piano, the shape of a concert grand, three feet in width and about eighteen inches high. Its sides were painted a lurid crimson, and at a glance I saw that from the ivory keys of its little keyboard to the tiny strings revealed by the open sounding-top, it was a piano complete in every detail. The carving on the diminutive legs was

as intricate as that on the huge Lonway in my study, the entire woodwork perfectly formed. A thick hard-rubber base-board served as a mounting for the instrument, and at one extreme end of this was a small box with a glass panel. The panel bore a single black-faced dial, but within I could see a world of wires, coils, queer-shaped bulbs and a thick glass winding tube filled with some black liquid.

Farber busied himself for some moments, adjusting and readjusting the dial. Presently the black liquid in the glass tube began to surge back and forth like a steam pressure gage. Then as I glared full upon it, and as my concentration grew more intense, there came a slight hiss, and the fluid raced through the tube, boiling and bubbling like lava. One of the bulbs began to glow cherry red.

AT LAST Farber looked up. "For ten years," he said, "I have worked on the instrument you see here on the table. Until tonight I have had only ridicule and failure for my reward. But tonight a few hours before you came, chance showed me where I had erred. There was only a slight correction to be made, but it changed the principle of the entire working mechanism.

"Now please don't speak. Keep your attention on the piano, and in a moment I will have it tuned to your thought wave. The brain, you know, is a most complex organism. It must be interpreted with care."

He turned to the dial again and began moving it slowly, a fraction of an inch to the right—to the left. Occasionally he glanced back at me, and I could see a rising gleam of excitement in his black eyes. I confess I found it difficult to continue my concentration, as he had

asked, upon the object before me. Though my common sense told me it was absurd, I was tempted to examine my chair and see if it were wired like some instrument of torture. A horde of wild thoughts and fears began hammering far back at the core of my brain. I could feel my pulse begin to throb at my temple. And yet, had I tried, I could not definitely have pointed a finger at any single cause of my alarm. At length, however, Farber gave an exclamation of satisfaction, moved back to his chair and sat stiffly upon it.

"You will in a moment find yourself in complete operation of one of the most drastic inventions science has ever known," he said. He was speaking quickly and loudly now, running his words together and almost gasping for breath. "Up until now genius has been vested in only a few persons, and those persons have been hailed as leaders in their field. The truth is that there is genius in many of us, but it is unable to find its proper expression outlet. It is born and dies in the brain without ever seeing the light of the world.

"Psychology has known for a long time that the nervous impulses which course through the brain are electro-chemical in nature, but that these impulses while in action set up a wave motion, psychology has steadfastly refused to admit.

"Call it telepathy, if you need a term, but my postulation was that each thought, each idea, and particularly each strain of melody which passes through the brain sets up a distinct field of motion as existent as the field of an electro magnet or radio broadcasting station, and that if an instrument could be made delicate enough, it would seize those waves and transform them into their actual sound.

"You know yourself how clearly a cer-

tain bit of music will pass through and linger in your mind. The very orchestra, instrument or voice seems to live there in your brain. In your case, perhaps, this is accentuated a thousand times because you are a trained musician.

"You say your method of composing is to wait until a central theme or melody strikes you mentally, and then to transpose it laboriously, first to the keys and then to the written page. Very well, Bancroft, listen to me. I want you to think back, remember some one of your music numbers, some piece which you have played and heard many times and which you can recall note for note. Keep your attention upon this piano, and *think of that music!*"

It was with a curious mixture of emotions that I sat there listening to him. The little crimson piano rested on the table before me like some elaborate toy. The black liquid in the glass tube pulsed steadily upward. And Farber's face was contorted now into an expression of delirious absorption. His hands were opening and closing convulsively. The cords of his neck extended taut like wire. All the old rumors I had heard concerning the man came back to me with a rush. Had I been listening to the ramblings of a man mentally unbalanced? Was this thing, this scarlet piano, a harmless product of a man's brain, or was it, as a small voice within me kept insisting, some fiendish device, the outgrowth of a super-normal intellect, in whose experimental maw I was to be sacrificed? Unconsciously I glanced toward the door, but as if in answer to my thoughts, Farber's voice leaped to my ears like the snap of a whip.

"Are you thinking of the music?"

I tried to guide my mind backward into the maze of piano compositions I have committed to memory. Names of

titles, of composers, spun through my head in grand turmoil: waltzes, scherzos, caprices—what was it I had been playing when Farber's message arrived at my door? . . . Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*. The weird melody seemed a fitting one for the occasion. I puzzled my brain as to how the composition began. A moment of cogitating, of seeking a mental impression of the opening chord; and then, simultaneously with that instant when the train of melody entered my mind, an astounding thing happened. The piano, five feet away, trembled violently. The light in the queer-shaped bulb increased from a cherry red to a brilliant flaming orange, and the keyboard—as though controlled by invisible hands—that keyboard leaped into motion and began to play—the very music of which I was thinking!

With a terrific start I turned and stared at Farber. He was sitting tensely on the edge of the chair, watching the instrument of his making with dilated eyes—chin thrust forward, body motionless as some Mefisto cut in wax.

"Good God!" I cried "It's . . . it's reading my mind!"

On played the piano, the little keys pressing downward to form the chords and racing along the octaves with lightning speed—faster and faster as my brain ran over the familiar melody. It was *Danse Macabre*—the *Dance of Death*—Saint-Saëns' masterpiece, and it was filling the room with all the tone and depth of a standard-size instrument.

Suddenly, however, as the utter singularity of it claimed my full attention, the tones of the piano dwindled off, and the keys came to a standstill. From deep within me a confusion of reactions burst forth. I could feel my face burning with a fever flush.

FARBER turned abruptly. "The music is no longer passing through your brain," he said. "The musical thought-waves have ceased, given way, I presume, to your complete surprize. You are wondering at the natural tone coming from an instrument of such small size. This is accomplished by a sound-chamber beneath the strings, made of *zyziphus* wood, an importation from central Baluchistan. A rotating light ray is sent through the sound-chamber which automatically brings the reborn tones to their proper vibration. But see if you can concentrate again. Try another composition, one of your own, if you wish, and keep your eyes on the piano."

In a moment I was intoxicated with the strangeness of it. Sitting there tensely, my palms cold with perspiration, I ran my mind through the opening strains of my own fantasy, *Satanic Dance*, and from that with a rush into the middle of Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C Sharp Minor*, and then, not waiting an instant, into the slow tempo of a Chopin lullaby. The piano did not falter. Even as the chords entered my mind they were born into sound on the keyboard. In full obedience the instrument played a few bars of one selection, then leaped to another.

It was weird, it was stupendous; and as I sat there I found it difficult to repress an actual shudder. Yet the moment I submitted to incredulity, marveled at the miracle, and my thoughts, as a result, slipped away from the remembered music—that moment the piano, finding no stimuli, fell into a sudden silence. I saw that in order to make it continue smoothly, I must call every bit of concentration I could to mind, that I must control my thoughts to an absolute chronological succession of the notes and chords of any certain composition. To do this through an entire piece, keyed to fever

pitch as I was, was almost an impossibility, and the piano consequently raced from the work of one composer to another in a mad, chaotic fashion.

At last, when it seemed I could think no more, I sank back into my chair and stared speechless at Farber. He too appeared strangely affected by the performance and for a moment said nothing. There was a deep flush of victory slowly mounting in his cheeks, and there was a wild stare of suppressed emotions in his eyes.

"You see, Bancroft," he began suddenly, "I was right. The piano proves my theory and opens a new world for research. This is only the beginning. But let me show you another feature of the instrument, the one probably that will be the greatest aid in the art of composing."

He reached for a second knob, which I had not seen before, and turned it with a snap. The piano began again, this time with no effort on my part. Then in an instant I understood. It was repeating all that it had received, playing it all a second time exactly as it had before. It was not hard to recognize the significance of this act. Once born into sound, the musical inspiration was recorded permanently, could be played as many times as one wished, and then set down on paper at leisure.

All my desire to have that machine on the table as my own personal possession burst forth like a bomb within me. With such a device my composing would know no bounds. I would be famous in a matter of months. The world would sing to my music. My sonata, the first movement of which I had so tediously labored upon, would be finished overnight and would be a flawless translation of my every elusive musical fancy.

"Is it for sale?" I asked hoarsely. "Will you part with it? Will you make

me a duplicate? You can name your price—any price!"

The blue lips before me curled again in their half smile, half sneer. He surveyed me in silence, apparently weighing his answer.

"The piano is still incomplete," he said. "There are other features, additional mechanism, I plan to add. But it will take me three weeks or more to get it ready. During that time I am willing to lend you the instrument for work on your new sonata, provided"—his lineaments hardened suddenly into a look of craft and basic cruelty—"provided you will agree to one thing.

"If your composition is pronounced a success, you must declare to the world that it was conceived—from your own brain, of course—but by the sole means of this piano. You can readily see that my invention can be introduced only by a great musician. In my own hands it would be the mere recorder of simple tunes. But do you agree?"

"Yes," I said shortly, a great elation sweeping over me.

"Then I will have the piano expressed to your apartment early tomorrow. It is, of course, much too heavy for you to carry with you."

I nodded and followed him out of the door and through the dark hallway. At the street entrance I paused.

"May I ask," I inquired, "the nature of the mechanism you plan to add? The instrument seems very complete."

His pallid face was a study in black and white there in the corridor's gloom. The dark liquid eyes turned and stared past me into the street of drizzle and fog.

"Now it is only a servant of the will," he said in a low voice. "It can only receive and bring forth what it receives into sound. Perhaps some day it may interpret and"—he hesitated and broke out into a

horrible mirthless falsetto chuckle—"perhaps create and compose itself."

FOR two weeks the piano had been mine, two delirious weeks with the door of my apartment locked to the world. During that time I had worked like a creature bewitched, composing, composing, buried deep in the ecstasy of new creative music. The novelty did not wear off. Meals I limited to repeated cups of strong coffee, and my bed I sought only when absolute weariness threatened to overwhelm me.

During those fourteen days I brought into creation *Valse du Diable*, *Idyls to Martha*, *Mountain Caprice*, and *The March of the Cannoneers*, all of which compositions I knew to be the best I had ever accomplished. It was a tremendous amount of work, yet more than that I wove to a sublime finis the thing I had been laboring on for so many months, my *Sonata in B Flat Minor*.

As Farber had said, the repeat device of the instrument was its chief asset. There was no more toiling through the octaves, bar by bar, line by line. I let my brain run unhampered through as much of the passing fancy as I could, then turned the little second knob on the instrument panel and recorded the notes on paper as the piano repeated the strains a second, a third or a fourth time.

I became intoxicated with the spell of it. I neglected to shave, to comb my hair. I sat there in the chair, hour in and hour out, thinking, searching for a basic theme that was original. The piano's uncanny reaction to the slightest stimulus my brain chose to give it, its weird, apparently effortless operation, affected me like drafts from a bottomless flagon of old wine. Like some instrument of Satan it stood there on my library table, the crimson sides contrasting sharply with the dark

walnut of the room's woodwork, the little white keys leaping erratically, feverishly, from chord to chord.

And yet while it was near me I lived under a distinct feeling of unease. Ridiculous as it may sound, the impression stole upon me that the piano was a living thing, that it was watching through hidden eyes my every move. It was absurd, and I knew it, but the feeling would not pass. The device was merely a delicate piece of intricate man-made mechanism; yet a psychic aura seemed to exist about its shape that reached out when I sought to control the sound and gripped me like some powerful drug.

ON THE fifteenth day Martha returned from her visit up Cheshire way, and I hurried over to her apartment. Martha Fleming was the girl I was engaged to marry, and during her long absence from London I had almost died of lonesomeness. I had met her a year before in the course of some musical contact, a common interest in the piano bringing us together. She was an accomplished pianist herself, and I have always maintained that her rendition of Brahms was far more intelligent than my own. But music had been only a byway of acquaintanceship. It was her dark beauty, her ravishing loveliness, her black eyes, deep pools of hypnotic fire, as well as her laughing personality that had caused me to fall madly in love with her. Our wedding day was set for three weeks hence, but the days until then seemed an eternity.

I found Martha's face darkened with a troubled frown when I arrived. There was a look of anxiety in her eyes, and when I took her in my arms and kissed her, her usual joviality seemed missing. At once I began to relate the strange happenings to which I had been a party. Or-

dinarily an adventure such as I had had at Farber's, especially as it concerned a mutual interest — music — would have roused her to the highest point of excitement. But as I sat across from her now and told the story in detail, her interest was obviously shadowed by something else. Those delicate lips of carmine so often arched in smile were trembling slightly, and there was about her whole manner an attitude that suggested—fear.

"Martha, dear," I said at last, "tell me what's wrong."

She clenched her hands and sat staring out through the open window into the humming traffic of St. Anne's Court.

"It's Kari again," she said slowly.

"Kari?" I glanced at the door of the opposite room, but the maid was not in sight. Kari—queer creature. A year ago Martha in the company of two girl companions had toured and visited the various beauty spots of the West Indies. And it was somewhere in Jamaica while browsing through the back country that she had found Kari, unaffected by present-day modernization and still living a life steeped in the black rites her slave-trade ancestors had brought from Africa.

She was an *obea* woman, a performer of *obi*, that system of darkest sorcery still practised by inland West Indian negroes, which the most rigid British law enforcement has failed to suppress; *obi*, a primitive witchcraft that has been handed down from generation to generation unchanged since its beginning in the tribal villages of the jungle. I had heard of this weird form of black magic before, had read somewhere how the unfortunate victims who had "*obi* put on them" would fall into a morbid state which would finally terminate in a slow unexplainable death, or how, if differently used, the *obea* woman would reveal the events that awaited one in the future.

For some queer reason Martha had been attracted to Kari there in Jamaica. Her heart had gone out to the negro girl when she saw the squalor and superstition under which the poor creature was living, and when she had returned to England, she had contrived to take Kari along as her maid.

I remembered the day Martha had first brought the young dark-faced woman forward and smilingly introduced me to her. "The poor thing's life would have been a sordid thing," Martha had said. "I couldn't bear to leave her there to practise her evil worship. I think she'll make a perfect maid."

But she hadn't made a perfect maid. Although Martha had drilled her in the customs and manners of European etiquette, Kari still clung to her black background. Several times she had given in to her inborn desire for mumbled incantations over a box of grave dirt, dogs' teeth and broken eggshells, and several times she had persisted in foretelling events of the future.

In this respect, I confess my skepticism regarding such matters suffered a severe blow. On three occasions, once in my presence, the negro girl had seemed to throw herself into a trance and slowly chanted a prophecy of what lay ahead. And strangely enough, three times she had been correct almost to every detail.

"What has she told you now?" I asked Martha, assuming an attitude meant to destroy her fears.

For a moment the girl who was to be my wife said nothing. Then running her fingers nervously back and forth over the design on the table, she sketched briefly Kari's latest psychic introspection.

At intervals during the train ride from Cheshire, the negro girl had lapsed into fits of crying and had begged Martha to exercise the utmost caution in everything

she did for the next few days. The immediate future, she declared, was very black, and a terrible misfortune lay in store for both of them.

"You shouldn't let such throw-backs to superstition bother you, Martha," I said soothingly. "They mean nothing at all."

"There was a time when I would have thought the same," she answered slowly, "but you—you don't know Kari. Sometimes I think she isn't human. She's not like us. She seems to see deeper into things than we do. Sometimes I almost believe *obi* to be an actual power, something fundamental and primitive which we can not understand."

I talked to destroy her fears, and in the end, though half-heartedly, she agreed to try and guide her thoughts into brighter channels. Then we left for my apartment, where I was anxious to show her the powers of Farber's strange invention.

While we walked I enumerated the compositions I had written in the past few days and waxed enthusiastic over them separately. The strange instrument I described in detail.

"It seems incredible," said Martha. "If it were anyone but you telling me, I wouldn't believe a word of it."

Finally we reached the door of my study. I thrust it open and strode ahead toward the table. Two feet away I stopped dead in my tracks.

The piano was gone! Only empty space on the walnut table met my eyes. For a moment I stared there, motionless, a great tragic disappointment sweeping over me. Then I saw the slip of paper lying on the floor where the draft had evidently blown it, and picking it up, I read the following:

Bancroft:

I am very sorry, but the changes we have planned to include in the piano are almost ready, and I shall have to take the instrument back sooner than

I expected. I trust that in the short time you have had it, you have found it the means of bringing forth some excellent compositions. If they are favorably received, remember your promise to give the piano its full credit. Possibly when the new additions are fully completed, I may permit you to operate it again.

WILSON FARBER.

With an exclamation of dismay I sank heavily into a chair. The mad adventure was at an end. Those hours which had seemed like an excerpt from the *Arabian Nights* had run to their close. Well, at least I had not wasted the opportunity. Through the instrument's powers I had finished my *Sonata in B Flat Minor*.

AN URGENT request that I go to Chatham Downs to the country manor of my old friend, Major Alden, and play for a group of week-end guests came early next morning. Alden was prominent behind one of the largest music-publishing houses in all Britain. To strain his friendship, if only from a monetary standpoint, would be foolhardy. I telephoned Martha and caught the first train.

Three days later, bored with an interlude of playing before an audience that thought more of cricket than of music, and horribly lonesome, I arrived back in London. But the instant I stepped into the station, stark tragedy fell upon me like the blow of a bludgeon. Even after its full significance had been brought to me by the pages of the *Times* I found myself walking the streets in a half daze, sick with despair, helpless as to what I should do next.

The disappearance of Martha Fleming caused a furor in music circles. A member of the Saturday Musicale and the Etude Society, she had countless friends who were shocked at the thought that anything had happened to her. Scotland Yard raced to the case.

From the landlord of her apartment

building I gathered only the feeblest of information. Martha had left her rooms about eight o'clock in the evening without her hat and coat and apparently bound for the little sweet shop around the corner, where she was accustomed to take some light refreshments before beginning her regular evening practise at the piano. The landlord had been particularly attracted to noticing her exit on this evening, two nights ago, because of the strange subsequent actions of Kari, her West Indian negro maid. Scarcely had the street door closed behind Martha, he said, when the negro girl slipped stealthily down the hall and followed her.

The two of them had failed to return, had disappeared completely.

As my bewilderment slowly settled into cold reasoning I became frantic for Martha's safety. I questioned the other occupants of the building again and again. I searched her apartment from room to room trying to find some clue. But I found nothing. Nor did the police have any better results. Martha and her negro maid had disappeared as completely as if they had fallen into another dimension.

Yet I would not give up the hunt. Mad with grief, doubting my very sanity, I paced along the night streets and byways, oblivious of my surroundings, yet searching the face of every passer-by. Hopelessly I offered a reward for information as to her whereabouts. Hopelessly in the privacy of my study I stumbled back and forth, back and forth, swearing to heaven that if she were harmed I would spend the rest of my life finding the guilty person and making him pay the penalty.

There seemed no reason. If it had been kidnapping, there would have been a ransom note; and if murder—I shuddered—some traces of the crime. There

was nothing, nothing save Kari's black inexplicable prophecy to stand out in an otherwise clueless mystery. And even that, I realized, when viewed in mundane surroundings was not something one could tell to a cockney police officer.

At last one night when all my hope had left me I returned to my study, sick to the soul and utterly discouraged. My music meant nothing to me now. If Martha were to be taken away from me I had no other interest in this world.

Without spirit enough to remove my hat and coat, I sat there slumped in the chair, brooding with my thoughts, staring blankly into the glowing coals of the open grate. Then, as if to add to my unpleasantness, came — Wilson Farber. He entered my apartment without knocking, and almost before I was aware of it, he was pushing me out of the door and into the hallway.

"I tell you I'm not interested in your piano," I said. "I don't care how much you've improved it. I have other things on my mind. Please go away and leave me alone."

There was a silky smile as he shook his head. "I know, Bancroft," he said. "I have heard of the misfortune that has befallen you, and you indeed have my sympathy. But I must have a man who is musically trained, inspect the instrument in its new form. I——"

"Get someone else then," I snapped, my disposition strained to the breaking-point. "You can throw the thing into the Thames for all I care."

The white face gleamed before me like an alabaster gargoyle. The voice, purring, soothing, flowed softly to my ears.

"You are the only man I can trust, Bancroft, the only one I've told my secret. Come. It can do no harm. Perhaps it may freshen your mind and give you new vigor in continuing your search."

For a moment I hesitated in indecision. Farber's invention interested me no more. It was Martha and Martha alone that existed in my thoughts. Yet what the man had said about freshening my mind I realized was true. After all, it would do no good to sit home and brood. For almost a week now I had been under a terrific strain. I might clear my brain and start looking again. There must be some clue. And tomorrow——

ALMOST as in a dream I permitted Farber to lead me into a waiting cab. Then once again I was gliding toward that fantastic room in Milford Lane. As I sat there on the jolting upholstery I felt the inventor's black eyes glaring full upon me, seeming to burn their way into my very brain like the rays of an invisible light shaft. A slow numbing dullness stole over me, and my will responded only as a conquered thing.

I found that wild music chamber with its note decorations, aged instruments and black drapes the same as before. But I looked vainly for the midget piano. The operating-table was empty. Then, following Farber's gaze, I saw the thing.

It was mounted on a small extending shelf high up on the right wall at a point just below the ceiling. And as I looked upon it, there came, magnified a thousand times now, that same feeling that it was watching me.

"I have placed the instrument up there," explained Farber, "because I find it is noticeably more susceptible to the thought waves if at a higher position than the level of the operator's eyes. Now your full attention, please, while I adjust its tuning."

He propped a chair against the wall, stood on it and began to turn the little dial on the instrument panel. Five sec-

onds later as I gazed hard upon it, I saw the little bulb within glow cherry red and the black liquid in the glass tube bubble and mount slowly upward.

"I shall leave you to yourself now," said Farber, stepping down. "I want you to be undisturbed in the room alone."

He strode to the door, pulled it open, then slowly turned and faced me again. "I think, Bancroft," he said softly, "I think you will agree that the improvements I have added are very much worth while." He burst out into a peal of laughter and passed into the next room.

Moments dragged by as I sat there staring up at the painted wall. As before, that same sense of uneasiness, that same electric something that seemed to fill the room whenever I was in the piano's presence stole over me. Mingled with it now was a curious impression that the pulsations of the liquid in the glass tube were following the rhythmic cadence of a human heart.

But suddenly I roused myself, stared full at the piano and tried to guide my thoughts to the opening chords of my *Sonata in B Flat Minor*. The instrument was changed, eh? Well, I would operate it once more, and then I would tell Farber I was through with the thing. I would note the improvements as he had requested and then forget it once and for all.

Abruptly as the first strains of my sonata flashed upon my brain, the piano up on the shelf quivered and broke out into the familiar sounds. I leaned forward in my chair, that queer exhilaration rushing over me. But something was wrong. I sensed it, felt it with every nerve of my body. Something like an impalpable miasma was rising from the scarlet instrument and contaminating the air about me.

IT HAPPENED without warning! It came like a black apocalypse of unutterable blasphemy. For a few bars the midget piano followed my thought waves and played the sonata note for note exactly as I had composed it. Then suddenly it lapsed into silence. There was an instant's hesitation, a quiet that rang through that fantastic room like the roar of an inferno.

And then with a leap downward the keys burst forth into a terrific ear-splitting crash of discord. The piano began again, swung wildly into the middle of my sonata, and I stiffened in horror.

It was my sonata, yes. It was my own composition, the work which I knew to be my masterpiece, and the chords were manipulated by my own brain. But oh, how changed, how different! They were rotten with malignity; they were obscene with basic evil. Like a screech from the grave they crashed into sound, searing their way into my eardrums in grinding cacophony. My sonata, which had once been an idyllic interpretation of a peaceful sea, now shrieked at me a threnody of despair, a dirge of unspeakable horror. Quivering, vibrating like a thing accursed, the piano pounded insane harmony, defiling the composition, corrupting it with music of the damned.

I sat frozen in my chair, hot blood rushing to my cheeks, muscles gripped as in a vise. Sweat broke out on my forehead. And as though its keyboard were being controlled by some fantasm of a lethal world, the piano raced on and on, mounting the runs in rising crescendo.

It was diabolical—that music, befouled, sullied by every repulsive sound from the depths, played in a pitch insufferable to the human organism . . . gargoyle tones that shrieked and fell upon one another in a wild orgy of ghoulish frenzy.

And as I sat there riveted in the chair, the painted notes on the frescoed walls seemed to leap upward and reel before my eyes in bacchanalian accompaniment. The mounted mandolins and lutes cried out in a delirious obbligato of sympathetic vibration. On and on through the second and third movements the piano raced, faster and faster as though drunk with its power.

I clawed at the chair arms, a scream gurgling unsounded to my lips. Trained musician though I am, with years of experience in searching through all the intricate combinations known to the laws of harmony, I was hearing now for the first time a melody from an unknown register, from unexplored octaves in black.

The third movement ended in the climax of the composition. It was here that the sonata pounded into a violent dramatic crescendo of booming, racing chords, descriptive of storm waves lashing the Irish coast. And it was here that the midget piano, mounting like the scream of a siren, suddenly crashed out in terrific demoniac fury, rotted harmony from the bottomest pits of hell.

An instant I stood it—no longer. Then with a wild cry I was out of that chair and lunging for the door. Blindly through the gloom of the outer hall I ran, down the long uncarpeted passage, my steps hammering out behind me in a single reverberation.

I reached the door, ripped it open and leaped down the steps two at a time to the sidewalk. There I halted, trembling, shaking, every nerve cut with a thousand needles of pain. My heart was pounding like a runner's, my ears throbbing to their very core. A moment of dizziness, of swirling confusion, and then as the silence of the deserted street gathered to soothe me I turned and began to walk

slowly toward the Strand. But from behind, from the huge dark house to the rear, a sound swept through the night air to follow me. It was a laugh, a high-pitched falsetto chuckle, filled with mockery.

I SPENT the next day combing London once more in a determined search for Martha. I wandered through Limehouse; I visited filthy grog shops and sailors' hangouts, engaging in conversation all who were willing to talk. And I beseeched Scotland Yard to continue their hunt.

Nightfall found me plodding wearily along Essex Street, despondent after having run down the last vague rumor to a futile end. A cab-driver had reported he had driven two women, who he vaguely thought answered the description, to an address somewhere in this district. But just where, he had forgotten, and the scant information was of little value. All seemed hopeless now. The world which had been such a beautiful place a few short days ago had turned into a pit of despair.

Bitter, caring little where I went, I found myself shuffling along the empty street, immersed in my thoughts. The very thought of another night in the solitude of my apartment was abhorrent, and I promised myself I would not return until I was so exhausted that sleep would come the instant my head reached the pillow. The fog was rolling in from the river again, thick and moist, sluggishly harmonizing with my mood. And the darkness behind it hung close upon the yellow glare of the street lamps like a black curtain.

At first I walked aimlessly, my mind filled with changing scenes and pictures of happy days when Martha and I had been together. A passer-by jostled

against me, and I startled him with a growl of irritation. But gradually as I moved forward there came the impression that my steps were not altogether haphazard. I was walking in the opposite direction from the way that led to my own distant apartment, and I was entering a part of the city I seldom frequented.

Strangely enough, as I stopped to consider it, a distinct urge that I continue, that I even hurry, stole over me. I mused for a moment in the shadow of a darkened shop front, puzzled at the queer sensation. Then giving in to impulse, I paced forward again. Stronger, a hundred times stronger, that attraction drew me along the street and around a corner at the next intersection.

Suddenly I was aware that my surroundings were somehow familiar, that I had been here before. The avenue before me fitted sharply into a remembered corner of my brain. And then a little shock swept through me from head to foot.

I was on Milford Lane, and the black bulk brooding there just ahead I recognized as number 94, the house of Wilson Farber. Stock-still I stood staring at it, shuddering as I recalled the wild nightmare of events which had sent me running down those steps the night before.

There was something strangely magnetic about that dark building, something that drew me toward its portals and at the same time seemed to warn me away. For a moment I gazed meditatively upon it. Then having no wish to renew my dealings with Farber, I turned to go.

Five steps forward, and I stopped, galvanized to attention. A sound had emerged from somewhere in the depths of that house, a sound that penetrated the silence of the street like a muted tocsin. It was a woman's scream.

An instant I hesitated, scarcely able to

believe my ears, waiting for it to be repeated. High-pitched, filled with stark terror, it came again. And distorted though it was, I knew that voice!

With a cry I leaped into action. Up those steps I ran, heart pounding madly, wrenched open the door and plunged into the blackness of the inner corridor. A horde of thoughts and fears were rushing through my brain. The way before me was steeped in silence, sounding only to my footsteps as I tore on.

At the far end of the hall I came upon that door leading to the music room. A pencil of light filtered under the sill, but within was dead quiet. I waited an instant, listening. Then lurching forward I grasped the knob and pushed the door open. The sight that met my eyes flung me backward, staggering as if struck by a blow.

The room was dazzling in its brilliance. Farber was there, Wilson Farber, bending over the lighted operating-table in the center of the room. And upon that operating-table, stretched out as in death, lay the beautiful figure of Martha Fleming!

EXACTLY what happened after that I can not be sure. I remember standing there framed in the doorway, staring at Farber, who was still unaware of my presence. I remember growing suddenly sick as I saw him unfasten her dress at the throat and, bending down, mumble some words of incantation.

Then a bomb burst within me. I lunged forward, leaped upon the man and struck him with every ounce of strength I could call to arm.

It was a tiger that whipped around to face me. Farber's face was contorted into a mask of rage and hate. His black eyes gleamed with menace. His mouth over the slate beard slid into a snarl.

"So you've come, Bancroft?" he said. "Found out at last? Well, I expected you. Even a fool will blunder into the truth, and you had plenty of time. But you are very much in luck. Had you arrived a few moments later you would have missed a very rare operation, a performance worth witnessing, I assure you. If you will kindly take that chair, I will proceed with an experiment that is going to startle the scientific world. If you will——"

I seized him by the arm and jerked him around. "If you have harmed that girl, I'll—I'll kill you!"

Those bluish lips curled before me. "She is in a state of hypnotic trance," he said. "She resisted at first, fought with a man's strength when she realized she was falling under my will. I had to use an injection of morphine. . . . But in a few moments she will be dead. I shall take her soul and——"

Blind fury seized me, and with a crashing blow to his jaw I closed in. I gave no heed to my own protection. My one thought was to crush that face before me. Back and forth across the floor of that fantastic room we struggled, pounding each other mercilessly. There was power and physical strength in those gaunt arms, and in a moment I realized I had more than met my match. Yet all the punishment in the world could not have held me back.

We struck a chair, crashed to the floor and rolled over and over, seeking each other's throat. I buried my fist in his eyes. His knee lashed out into my abdomen. And then all at once I grew faint. One of those iron hands had seized my wrist and was slowly twisting my arm backward to the breaking-point.

With a jerk he raised me from the floor higher and higher, until I lay squirming in his hands two feet over his head.

Then his arms shot forward, and I felt myself catapulted into space. The wall leaped to meet me; my head seemed to split open with a dull roar. A wall of flame and dancing lights broiled in my vision, and I sank into a cloud of oblivion.

I was conscious that but a few minutes had elapsed when I opened my eyes. My temple throbbed and as I struggled to rise I found that my hands and feet had been tightly lashed behind me. Two feet away stood Farber, swaying sardonically on the balls of his feet, leering down with an air of childish satisfaction.

"I have delayed the operation for your sake, Bancroft," he said. "I knew you wouldn't have wanted to miss it."

"In God's name," I cried, "what are you going to do?"

He stared at me silently a moment, then turned and pointed high up on the wall at his right. There, gleaming luridly on the overhanging shelf, was the crimson, midget piano. I stared at it without understanding.

"The piano, Bancroft," he said. "I'm going to make my dream of ten years come true. I am going to do something no man has done before. As it stands the instrument will receive your musical thought-waves and transpose them into the actual sound. But I want it to do more than that. I want to make it compose. . . . Compose, do you hear, Bancroft? Create . . . play music of its own making without anyone's help."

"You're mad!" I cried.

He shrugged. "Madness? It is only a relative state. Perhaps I am mad. But if I am, so were the old alchemists of the Middle Ages. Have you ever studied alchemy, Bancroft? It is a most interesting subject. The learning of those sorcerers is a lost art. They made gold, made it out of lead, and the one neces-

sary essence of their mixture was a curious thing—a most unusual thing. It was the soul of a young maiden."

He roared with maniacal laughter. "I think you are beginning to see, eh? It is quite obvious no cold mechanical thing could create music. Impossible. No, it must be an object of warmth; must have a woman's soul. And more than that, the soul of one who has lived a life of music. Are you following me, Bancroft? The very beautiful Martha Fleming is such a woman.

"The procedure is quite simple. I shall remove her heart and brain and insert them in the piano, and I shall keep the heart alive, pulsing in a vacuum tube."

The black eyes continued to bore me through and through. He removed his coat and began to roll back his sleeves.

"When I lured her here by telling her you were taken suddenly ill in my apartment, I did not expect the negro maid to come along. But Kari—yes, that was her name—Kari was a most interesting person. I found to my surprize that she was an *obea* woman from the West Indies. *Obi*—an admirable system of sorcery, Bancroft. The civilized world would do well to study it. I thus had two totally different yet ideal subjects for my experiment. I tried the native girl first."

With a violent start I stared at him. "You mean——"

"I mean that while Kari was not musically trained, her occult background made her worthy of the experiment. You perhaps noticed last night her heart pulsing in the glass tube in the piano. She——"

"You murdered her!" I screamed.

He laughed. "In the interests of science," he said. "The piano still would not compose, but it was no longer a cold, inanimate thing. The powers of *obi* had

been woven into it. It was that that rose up and colored your sonata last night. It was that . . . but I am wasting time."

He stepped across to the operating-table and adjusted carefully the powerful light suspended over it.

"Farber!" I cried. "Farber! If you harm that girl——"

A sense of utter helplessness swept over me. I looked frantically from one side of the room to the other, strained and pulled at my bonds, groaned in despair. Must I remain here and watch the girl of my heart dissected without my being able to raise a finger?

Motionless she lay there on the operating-table, face white as chalk under the glaring light. Her black hair had fallen to her shoulders, and her lips were twisted in fear.

FARBER left the operating-table now and moved toward the farther wall. My eyes never left him. Directly under the shelf that held the midget piano was a built-in wall cabinet, and opening the door the bearded man drew forth a white enameled tray.

A wave of vertigo rushed over me as I saw its contents. Knives! Surgical instruments, glittering in all their polished silver. With a moan I fell backward; the room seemed to swirl like a rotating wheel before me. For an instant all was madness. The lights, the walls, the ceiling, Farber himself, swept round and round in a great circle of confusion. My brain was buckling under the strain.

As if measured into focus, a single object took form in my vision—the midget piano up on the shelf. There was that damnable creation that had thrown me into this well of terror. There it stood, tuned to my thought-wave as on the night before, an instrument of Satan. The room had blurred out of the perspec-

tive, and I stared at the crimson thing as one looking through a telescope. All my loathing and hatred for it rose up like a storm within me. I glared at it with a desire to destroy, to tear apart its sides and rip the unholy mechanism from its scarlet interior. Had that piano never been created, this tragedy would never have entered my life. A thing of evil, it was, the product of a distorted intellect, steeped with all the ancient rottenness of *obi* and black witchcraft, colored with an innocent woman's blood.

Then suddenly it happened! As I gazed with utter abhorrence upon it, as my concentration increased a thousand-fold, the little bulb within the glass panel flared into orange brilliancy. The ivory keys trembled, shook in their sockets, and an electric shock ripped through me from head to foot. An invisible bond seemed to connect my brain through space with that crimson piano.

And somehow I understood. It was not music that was sweeping from my mind to the inner vitals of that instrument. *It was hate!* Hate—and the piano was reacting to it in a manner which Farber had never dared dream was within its scope. Hate—a thought-wave a thousand times more potent than any musical fancy—born in my brain in a spirit of unutterable loathing—passed on to the piano as a death heritage.

Up there on the shelf the keys were trembling violently like the fingers of a man crazed with fear. Abruptly they came to a standstill, and I found myself glaring at them, eyes still riveted in attraction. Then with a soul-rending thunder of discord those keys surged downward in unison. The piano shook and swayed, and the strings under the open sounding-top screeched forth a chord that was malignant with all the agonies of hell.

Farber, at the wall cabinet directly beneath, stared with an expression of blank astonishment. The tray of knives slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor, and he looked, puzzled, unable to understand.

The chord passed on, and as Farber continued to stare there came now from somewhere within the piano's sides a low, humming sound, a drone as of a distant electric motor.

Louder and louder, growing into a subdued roar, and from a roar into a pounding thunder, it filled the room. The ivory keys began again, quivered in rotation down the octaves. Back and forth in trembling vibration the instrument swayed, rocked crazily on its hard-rubber base.

It was the soul of Kari, writhing in black witchcraft, the spirit of the murdered *obea* woman imprisoned there in the instrument—crying for revenge!

And then—a single titanic repercussion burst forth from the bowels of that piano. It was a sound no human ear could endure, a sound beyond the farthest reaches of man-made harmony. It etched itself deep in my brain, never to be forgotten. To the edge of the shelf the piano toppled, hung there, vibrated, the strings screeching that symphony of horror.

Farber came to life too late. With one mad lunge he sought to throw himself out of the instrument's reach. He screamed and attempted to jump sideways.

It was futile. The piano fell, shot out into space and roared downward. Straight toward that upturned ugly, bearded face it hurtled as if aimed—struck with a sickening thud.

There was a single shriek of agony, a rending of wood and broken bone, and I turned my eyes away, sick to the soul.

IT is Martha, not I, who remembers the happenings of the next few moments. The death of Farber released her instantly from her hypnotic trance. She came to her senses slowly, looked about her as if awakening from some wild dream, and then stumbled from the operating-table. It was she who released me from my bonds and helped me to my feet. Then, weak and trembling, we passed out the door and through the black corridor to the street. I looked back when I reached

the walk, looked back in answer to a grim and fearful fascination.

There was that huge disproportionate building with the three bulging colonnades rising to form a claw of granite before the black façade. There were the dark eye-like windows staring sullenly forward, leering at me like a monstrous sea-bat.

I shuddered, passed my arm around Martha, and led her gently toward the Strand.
