



## THE SPECTRE'S VIOLIN\*

BY ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN

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**K**ARL HAFITZ had spent six years on the method of counterpoint. He had studied Hayden, Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini. He rejoiced in flourishing health and a modest income that permitted him to follow his artistic vocation; in a word, he possessed all that was necessary to compose great and beautiful music, except that little indispensable thing called inspiration.

Each day, full of noble enthusiasm, he bore to his beloved master, Albert Kilian, long scores full of harmony, but each phrase was like that of Peter, or John, or Christopher.

Master Albert, seated in his great armchair, with his feet on the andirons and his elbow resting on the corner of the table, always smoking his long pipe, applied himself to scratching out, one after another, these singular revelations in his pupil. Karl wept with rage, became angry, argued; but the old master quietly opened one of his innumerable music books, and putting his finger on the passage, said:

"Look at this, my lad!" Then Karl bowed his head and despaired of the future.

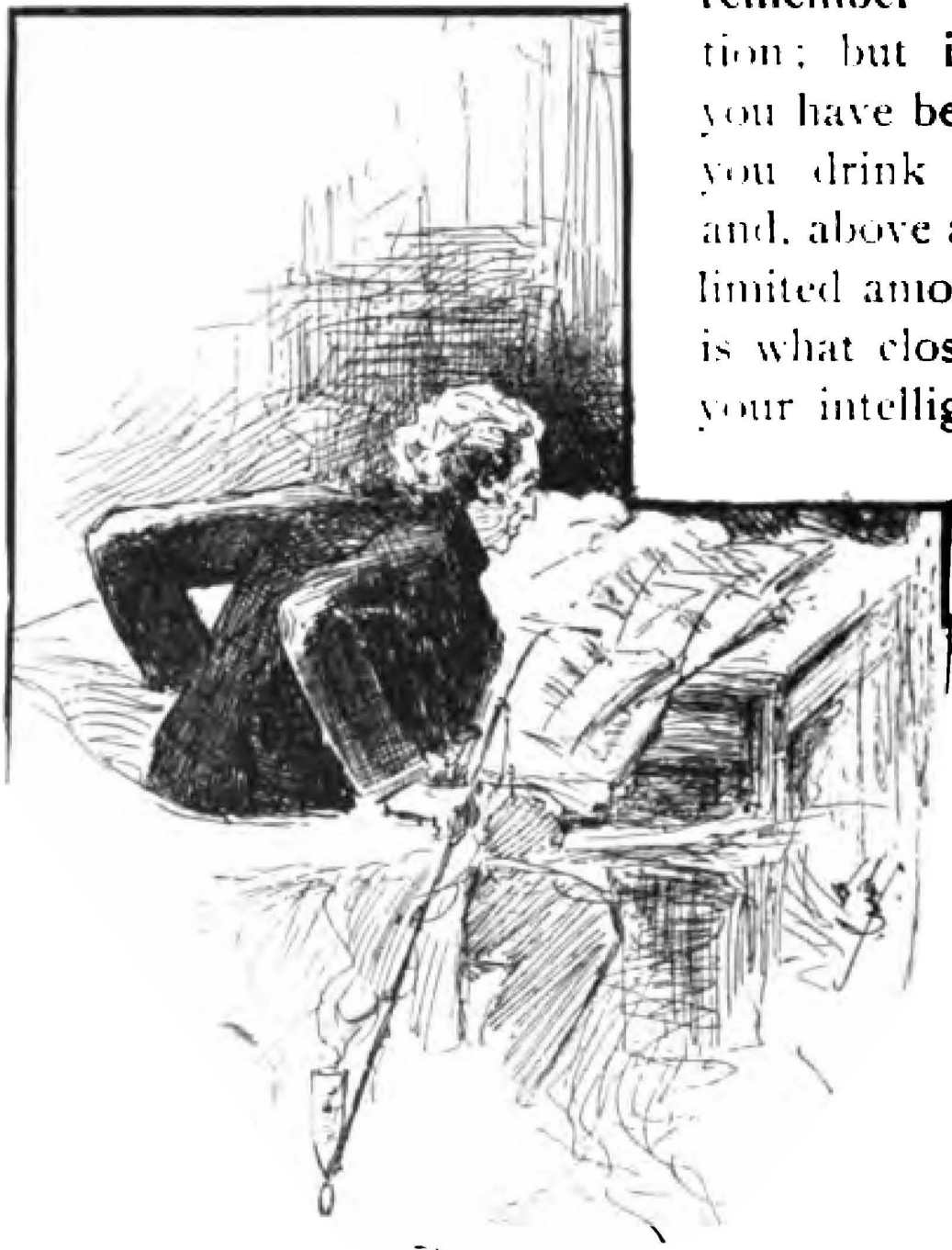
But one fine morning when he had presented under his name, to Master Albert, a fantasie of Baccherini, with variations by Vioth, the good man, until then impassive, became angry.

"Karl!" shouted he, "do you take me for an ass? Do you think I cannot detect your disgraceful thieving? This is truly too much!"

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And seeing the consternation caused by his reproach:

"Listen to me; I am perfectly willing to admit that you have been the dupe of your memory, and that you take what you



remember for pure invention; but it is very evident you have become too gross—you drink too much wine and, above all, you eat an unlimited amount of meat. That is what closes the avenues of your intelligence. You ought to starve yourself."

"To starve myself!"

"Yes; or renounce music. You have no lack of science, but simply of ideas, that's all. If you spend your life covering the strings of your violin with a layer of

fat, how can they vibrate?" These words of Master Albert's were like a ray of light to Hafitz.

"Then I ought to make myself thin?" cried he. "I will not turn back from such a sacrifice. And then if matter oppresses my soul, I will starve myself to death!"

His face at this moment expressed so much heroism that Master Albert was truly touched. He embraced his dear pupil and wished him every success.

Then on the following day Karl Hafitz, with his knapsack on his back and his staff in hand, left the "Three Pigeons" inn and the brew-house of "King Gambrinus" to go on a long journey.

He turned his face toward Switzerland.

Unluckily, at the end of six weeks, although his weight was greatly reduced, the inspiration would not come.

"Is it possible for any one to be more unhappy than I?" he

said to himself. "Neither fasting nor good cheer, neither water nor wine, nor beer, can show my spirit the diapason of the sublime. What have I done that I should merit so sad a fate? Whereas, such a crowd of ignoramuses produce remarkable compositions, I, with all my science, all my work, and all my courage, I attain nothing. Ah, God is not just; no, He is not just!" With reasonings of this sort he followed the road from Bruck to Freiburg. Night approached: he slowly dragged one foot after the other, and felt ready to fall from fatigue.

Just then he saw in the dim moonlight an old ruin, with creeping roof and door unswung, half hidden, back from the road. The chimney was a heap of ruins, and the tall nettles and briars interlaced around the broken windows, as if Nature strove to conceal decay. The dormer window of the gable barely overlooked the heather-covered plain, where whistled a gale strong enough to blow the horns off the cattle. Karl saw, too, through the gloom, a branch of fir waving above the door. "Oh," said he to himself, "this ruin is not attractive; it is really somewhat sinister-looking, but it is not well to judge by the external appearance."

And without further hesitation he rapped with his staff on the door.

"Who's there? What's wanted?" said a rude voice from the inside.

"A shelter and food."

"Oh, well, let's see!"

The door opened suddenly, and Karl found himself confronted by a sturdy-looking man, with a square face, gray eyes, shoulders covered by a great coat out at elbows, and a hacking knife in his hand. Behind this singular person shone the flames from a fireplace, lighting the entrance to a loft, the steps of a wooden stairway and the decrepit walls. Under the flickering light of a flame he saw a young girl, pale and feeble,



dressed in a cheap gown of brown cotton dotted with white. She looked toward the door with a frightened air. Her black eyes had an expression of sadness and undefinable wildness.

Karl saw all this in the twinkling of an eye, and instinctively clutched his staff.

"Well, come in," said the man; "this is no time to keep anyone outside."

Then feeling that it would be ill-timed to appear frightened Karl walked into the middle of the hut and seated himself on a stool before the hearth.

"Give me your staff and sack," said the man.

For an instant Master Albert's pupil shivered to the marrow of his bones; but the sack was unbuckled, the staff stood in the corner, and the host seated tranquilly near the hearth, before he had recovered from his surprise.

This circumstance made him more calm.

"Sir innkeeper," said he smiling, "I will not be sorry to have my supper."

"What do you wish for supper?" said his host gravely.

"A fried omelet, a jug of wine and some cheese."

"Ho, ho, ho! Indeed, sir, you have brought a good appetite; but our provisions are exhausted."

"Exhausted?"

"Yes."

"All?"

"All."

"You have no cheese?"

"No."

"No butter?"

"No."

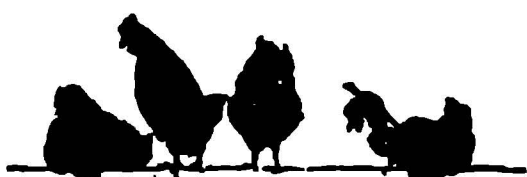
"No bread, no milk?"

"No."

"But, great heavens! what have you, then?"

"Potatoes baked in the ashes."

But just then Karl saw in the shadow, on the steps of the stairway, a whole regiment of fowls—white, black and red,



some asleep with head under wing, others with their necks drawn in between their shoulders. There was one miserably tall, thin, shriveled, haggard fowl that combed and plumed itself with great non-chalance.



"But," said Hafitz, pointing, "you ought to have eggs."

"We carried them this morning to the market of Bruck."

"Oh, but then, cost what it may, put a fowl on the spit!"

No sooner had he pronounced these words than the girl turned pale, flung back her hair and threw herself before the stairway, crying:

"No one shall touch my fowls—no one shall touch my fowls. Oh, do you not know we must permit the creatures of the good God to live?"

The appearance of this unhappy creature was something so terrible that Hafitz hastened to say:

"No, no; no one shall kill the fowls. Let us see the potatoes. I will apply myself solely to the potatoes. I will leave you no more! From this hour my vocation is clearly shown. It is here that I shall remain three months — six months — the length of time necessary to become as thin as a fakir."

He expressed himself with such singular animation that his host called to the pale young girl:

"Genevieve! Genevieve! look at him; this one is like the other."

The north wind on the outside redoubled its fury; the fire on the hearth eddied and whirled and writhed under a thick grayish smoke. The fowls, in the reflection of the firelight, seemed to dance on the small boards of the stairway, whereat the crazy woman began to sing a weird, old air, and the pile of green wood, sobbing in the middle of the fire, accompanied her with plaintive sighs.

Hafitz understood that he had fallen into the den of the Sorcerer Hecker. He hungrily devoured two potatoes, lifted the big, red jug full of water to his lips, and drank deep draughts. Then peace returned to his soul. He saw that the



girl had disappeared and only the man remained in front of the fire, wrapped in deep thought.

"Mine host, lead me to bed."

The innkeeper then lighting a lamp, climbed slowly up the worm-eaten stairway. He lifted with his gray head the heavy



trap-door and conducted Charles through the loft, under the thatch.

"See, there is your bed," said he, putting the lamp on the floor. "Sleep well, and, above all, guard against fire."



Then he went down, and Hafitz, left alone, doubled up on a great straw pallet, and covered

himself with a large sack of feathers.

He reflected for some time, and asked himself if it was prudent to go to sleep, for the face of the old man seemed so evil; then, recalling his clear gray eyes, his bluish mouth encircled with deep wrinkles, his broad, bony forehead, with its yellowish tinge, he all at once remembered that on the Golgenburg three hanged men were found, and that one of them strongly resembled his host. That he, too, had hollow, deep-set eyes, was out at elbows, and that the great toe of his left foot was out of his shoe and chapped by the rain. He remembered that the most miserable looking one, called Melchior, had once been a musician, and that he had been hung for murdering with a jug the innkeeper of the "Golden Sheep," who had reminded him that he must pay his little score.

The music of this poor devil had been at times profoundly touching. It was unusual, fantastic, and this pupil of Master Albert's envied the bohemian; then, suddenly, Karl seemed again to see the figure on the gibbet, its tattered garments blown back and forth by the winds of the night, and the crows circling round and round with great clamor. He felt his hair stand on end, and his fear was greatly increased, when peering through the gloom he saw at the far end of the loft, leaning against the wall, a violin, with two faded palms on top of it. Karl longed to flee, when the rude voice of his host again struck his ear.

"Blow out the light!" he roared. "Go to bed. I told you to guard against fire."

Although these words made Karl shiver with terror, he instantly stretched himself on the straw pallet and blew out the light.

All became silent. In spite of his resolution not to close his eyes, Hafitz slept profoundly. The wind moaned, the night birds called to each other in the darkness, and the mice scampered back and forth over the worm-eaten floor.

Near the hour of daybreak, when Hafitz still slept, he was awakened suddenly by a sharp note of music, full of pain, and so penetrating that a cold sweat covered his face.

He peered forth from his covering, and there under the angle of the roof, he saw the figure of a crouching man. It was Melchior, the man who was hung. His black hair fell down over his fleshless bones, his breast and his neck were bare. He was so thin, that one might have said it was the skeleton of an immense grasshopper. A beautiful moonbeam that came through the dormer window shone sweetly upon him with its bluish light, and disclosed long spider-webs hanging in festoons from the rafters.

Hafitz, silent, eyes wide open, mouth gaping, stared at this strange apparition, as one looks at death hiding behind the curtains of his bed, as the last hour approaches.

All at once the skeleton stretched out his long, fleshless hands and took the violin from its place against the wall. He placed it tenderly against his shoulder, and, after an instant's silence, began to play.

There was in this music funereal tones as the sound of earth falling on the coffin of a loved one—solemn notes like the thunder of waterfalls lengthened by the echoes of the mountains—majestic, like the great winds of autumn in the midst



of the sonorous forest, and sometimes sad notes, sad as hopeless despair.

Then, in the midst of this sobbing, he played a song, light, sweet, silvery, like a flock of gay goldfinches fluttering through the flowery thickets. These graceful trills were twirled with ineffable tremblings of sweetness and joy, only to fly suddenly, frightened by the waltz, soft, low, mad, palpitating—love, joy, despair—all song, all tears—gushed forth pell-mell under his breathing bow.

And Karl, in spite of inexpressible terror, stretched out his arms, and cried:

“Oh, great, great, great artist! Oh, sublime genius! Oh! how I bemoan your sad fate! To be hung! For having



killed a brute of an innkeeper, who knew not a single note of music, to wander through the woods in the moonlight, to have no body and such a beautiful talent—oh, God!”

But as he mourned thus the rough voice of his host interrupted him:

“Hey, up there! Can't you hold your peace until the night's over? Are you ill, or is the house on fire!”

And his heavy steps made the stairway creak, a light shone



through the cracks of the trap-door, which, shoved open by a push of the shoulders, disclosed the innkeeper.

"Oh, mine host, mine host!" cried Hafitz, "what happens here? Just now heavenly music awakened me and carried me to unseen worlds; but it has all vanished like a dream."

The host's face assumed a thoughtful expression.

"Yes, yes," murmured he, like one in a dream, "I was obliged to doubt myself. Melchior still comes to trouble our sleep; he will always return. Now your slumber is lost; it is not worth while for you to try to sleep. Come, get up, comrade; come, smoke a pipe with me."

Karl needed no entreaty. He made haste to go somewhere else; but when he was down below and saw the night was still dark, he sat with his head between his hands, elbows on his knees, for a long, long time, plunged in an abyss of sad meditation.

His host himself came to relight the fire. He had taken his seat on the chair in the ingle nook and smoked in silence.

At last the gray dawn appeared—it peeped through the dull little windows—then the cock crew, and the chickens, one by one, went out.

"How much do I owe you?" asked Charles, buckling his knapsack on his shoulders and taking up his staff.

"You owe us a prayer at the chapel of the Abbey St. Blaise," said his host in a strained voice; "a prayer for my son, the Melchior who was hung—and another for his fiancée—Genevieve, the insane woman."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"Then farewell. I will not forget."

Really, the first thing Karl did upon arriving at Freiburg was to go and pray to God for the poor Bohemian and for her whom he had loved.

Then he entered an innkeeper's house, "The Grape," spread his manuscript music paper on the table and, having made him bring a bottle of "rikevir," wrote at the head of the title page, "The Spectre's Violin," and composed forthwith his first true and original score.