

Strange STORIES

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CONTENTS

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THE CRAWLING CORPSE	Eli Colter	
<i>High on a Rocky Knoll, Hidden from the Eyes of Men, a House of Incredible Evil Rots in the Mire of Souls Forever Damned! [A Complete Novelet of Bizarre Sorcery]</i>		12
A BOTTLE FROM COREZZI	Mark Schorer	
<i>In Roman Dungeons, Conspirators Plot Against the Despised Borgia</i>		30
THE MAN WHO LOOKED BEYOND	Carol Boyd	
<i>None Are So Cursed as Those Who See Too Much!</i>		37
VIGIL	Hampton Wells	
<i>The Fatal Book Held a Soul-Destroying Threat Within its Pages</i>		46
THE SOUL OF THE CELLO	Maria Moravsky	
<i>Haunting Strains of Melody Weave a Strange Web of Song</i>		56
FOR LOVE OF A WITCH	Manly Wade Wellman	
<i>A Lovely Seeress Conjures Up Weird Magic to Further the Conquest of the Wilderness! [A Complete Novelet]</i>		62
A GIFT FOR UNCLE HERMAN	August W. Derleth	
<i>Ellsworth Barnes Keeps a Final Grim Tryst with Fate</i>		80
THE GRIP OF DEATH	Robert Bloch	
<i>Two Hands—and a Throat; Ten Links in a Necklace of Death</i>		85
VOICES IN THE WIND	Robert Emerick	
<i>Other Things Besides Chickens Come Home to Roost</i>		92
PASSING OF ERIC HOLM	Will Garth	
<i>A Book of Black Magic—and a Weird Thing from the Sea!</i>		101
HE WHO SPOKE	Bernard Breslauer	
<i>The Face of the Sphinx Was the Face of Richard Carey</i>		105
DREAD COMMAND	David Bernard	
<i>Fancy Mixed with Grim Fact Makes a Disastrous Brew</i>		107
THE ROOM IN THE ANNEX	Tally Mason	
<i>Voices, Dusty with the Past, Reach Across Time!</i>		116
THE BLACK ARTS (A Department)	Lucifer	120

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The Soul of the Cello

By MARIA MORAVSKY

Author of "The Great Release,"
"Let Me Out," etc.

A TALL, stooping lad of eighteen, with sallow face and burning black eyes—that was my picture in early youth. The sordid poverty of the New York East Side; the burning desire to possess a cello fit for a concert—these were the circumstances which created a crime.

Have you ever wanted anything so passionately that the desire would not let you sleep? Then you will understand me. Longing for that antique violin-cello I saw at a private exhibit of a New York millionaire was like being feverishly in love. I have never



I believe to this day that my cello has a soul

The Haunting Strains of Immortal Melody Envelop a Devotee of Music in a Strange Web of Song!

wanted anything so much in my life.

But I am jumping ahead of myself, as we Russians say. Let me tell you how I first saw my cello.

I was a child prodigy, playing for money since the age of eleven. Hence the diminutive "Misha" which stuck to me even though I am bald now and my youth is but a memory.

My parents encouraged me all they could. They bought me a cheap, new cello which grated on my sensibilities as a musician. Ach, such a silly toy-instrument! I was ambitious. I wanted a cello fit for the immortals.

And then—I met that adorable instrument! I can not talk about it in terms of an inanimate thing, that is why I say "met", as if it were a human being. For I believe to this very day that my cello has a soul.

A New York millionaire, a connoisseur of musical instruments, was giving a free exhibit of his treasures. Was it charity or vanity that prompted him? It might have been both.

I read about it in the paper. I put on my best suit of ready-made clothes, which hung loosely on my thin frame, and spent an agonizing half hour trying to achieve an artistically-tied tie.

I was vain then, in the remote days of my youth. With my black hair slicked carefully back, a clean handkerchief in my pocket, my hands moist with nervous perspiration, I hurried to the exhibition on that early Winter afternoon.

It was on the other side of Manhattan, on the then fashionable Riverside Drive, but I had to go on foot, saving carfare. The occasional concerts in cheap halls of the East Side did not net much.

THE small, brownstone house with an elaborate crest on its front door, seemed inadequately lighted. I wondered whether I was too early. To be sure, the dark had fallen, but days were short. The exhibit was scheduled for five o'clock. I had no watch.

I walked in, and saw that the place was lighted entirely by candles. The owner, I was told later, thought it in keeping with his antiques. The sense of style, you see.

But that dim candlelight gave the lofty hall an eerie aspect. Dark shadows seemed to lurk in the corners. The great electric candelabrum in the ceiling threw up a distorted outline, like the tentacles of some deep sea monster. I felt creepy as I stood before the large, carved, highly-polished table on which the instruments were displayed.

The host explained to the hushed, deferential crowd:

"These six cellos are the best in my collection. I bought them in Italy. The oldest one was made over three hundred years ago."

He gave the name of the Italian town and the cello maker, but I forgot them as soon as I heard them. For he passed the bow over the strings of the great, shining cello, and my heart leaped up. I have never heard such a mellow, deep, soul-penetrating sound!

From that moment on, I was consumed with the violent desire to possess that cello. I found one hundred and one arguments why I should have it. The thing was not made to be buried in a private collection. The owner was not a musician. The cello was meant to be heard by thousands.

I saw enchanted listeners, I imagined their eyes burning with admiration, their cheeks hot with excitement, even as my own.

Instead of listening to the host's lecture on the methods of cello makers, I scanned the room for the possible ways of secret entrance. I already planned to steal the cello.

Nothing could be easier than to hide oneself in one of the dimly lighted corners, while the crowd was leaving the hall. I stood there, crouching behind an armored figure of some medieval knight, until the last visitor had departed and the candles were snuffed out.

Then I heard the host addressing his valet.

"Don't wait up for me, Rodney. I'm going to dine at the club and sleep there. This house is too damp when the wind is blowing from the river. I wish I never inherited the darn old barn." The last words were spoken after the valet had left.

I heard the owner walking down the

creaky stairs. I heard the key scraping in the lock. My sense of hearing, always acute, magnified all the sounds. Finally there was silence, welcome silence.

I left my hiding place cautiously. I almost screamed when my awkward foot caught against the armor and it jangled faintly. It seemed to me that the servant would surely hear me.

But all was quiet when I approached the table with its antique treasures. My hand shot forward. Just then I saw a shaft of moonlight reaching through the narrow Gothic window by the side of the fireplace. It fell on the coveted cello, forming an aura about it.

IN THAT pale, wintry moonlight, it seemed a thing of ethereal beauty. Its highly polished wood shone like satin. Its strings seemed to quiver with suppressed melodies.

As I was about to snatch it from the table, I heard a faint sound. I started, almost paralyzed with fear. Yes, it was the sound of the cello!

Yet I never touched it. Even after all these years I remember clearly that I was a step or two removed from the table when I heard that sound. It was the ancient cello come to life of its own volition, uttering a warning sound to the would-be thief.

But even that horrifying phenomenon did not stop me. I blamed my nerves for it. I dismissed it as futile imagining. With the feeling of exultant guilt in my heart, I grasped the shining instrument and pressed it to my breast as if it were a beloved woman.

We crept down. I say "we" because all the while I had a feeling that another human being was with me, enlivening that mystic cello.

I don't quite remember how I got out of the house, which one of the back doors was incautiously left open. I only remember running along the wintry, wind-swept Drive, with the unwieldy, bulky instrument in my arms, I forgot to steal its case.

Suddenly I saw a policeman and slowed my pace. Instinct rather than reasoning warned me that I might be suspected if I ran like that. As we were passing by the red-faced police-

man, stamping his feet to keep himself warm, I heard a shrill note coming out of my cello. It was for all the world like a scream for help!

I was terrified. Fortunately, the policeman was too occupied with his own comfort to hear the devilish thing screaming. I pressed the strings to my shaking body, to muffle the terrifying sound, and ran blindly into the first narrow street leading across town.

The East Side seemed like a haven. They don't ask you questions when you are carrying a caseless instrument on those streets. People mind their own affairs there, pretending that they don't see guilt. I might have been carrying the cello to a pawn shop. I might have been a street musician. I felt safe on those crowded streets.

When I came home, my parents were out. I found a note telling me that they had gone to a wedding, and asking me to join them. But what did I care for any earthly wedding? I, wedded to my art, with that marvelous, priceless, sweet voiced cello!

I sat in my cubicle of a room and played it with self abandon. Never had I heard such melodies coming from a man-made thing! I imagined angels in heaven praising Jehovah with the instruments like this.

The cello sang with a voice that was almost human. It mourned my starved youth, it rejoiced in my ambitions. It was tender, compassionate, understanding.

It soothed, it inspired. It was a solace and a challenge. It was a hell-cello, a thing with a soul!

I loved it. My feeling of guilt only intensified my passion. I felt like a man having a secret love affair. But I could not imagine any lover more desirable than my cello. It was a pure affection, generous affection, although born of crime. My only regret was that no crowds could hear that cello. For it was too well-known to be displayed. Its description, no doubt, was in the hands of the police the day after it was stolen.

I ceased to read the papers for fear of finding it. I hid the instrument even from my parents. I dared to play it only in the rare hours when they were both away.

My father kept a second-hand book store. I mean he sold second-hand books there—my English is still wobbly, in spite of my many years' residence in the States. It is because my chief means of expression is music.

But I could not express myself all alone. Every artist needs an audience. I could not think of playing on the cheap new cello I had used before I got the Sweet-Voiced One, for that is what I called it to myself, in Russian. My people were the educated kind of Hebrews. They belonged to the Russian intelligentsia.

The Sweet-Voiced One seemed at times reluctant to answer the pleading of my fingers. At times it acted as if possessed of its own will. Instead of enchanting melodies, it would utter harsh, sharp sounds, going against my will.

Much as I tried to blame it on my own faults in playing, it came to me forcibly that the cello had a spirit, a rebellious spirit of its own.

The thought depressed me like a stormy cloud, dampening and darkening my life. I no longer played in the cheap halls of the East Side. I became a parasite in my poor father's home. I spent day after day waiting for an opportune moment to play my cello in secret.

But it was impossible to hide it indefinitely. One day Mother found it hidden among my clothes when she was hanging them out to air, on one of those days of general housecleaning women are so partial to.

"Where did you get that cello?" she asked me severely.

She knew I had no money of my own. Every cent was counted in our household.

"I . . . it was given to me," I stammered.

She saw that I lied. I never could lie to her. She called in Father. We lived next to the store. He made a terrible scene, demanding that I return the stolen treasure. He had read about the theft in the papers.

I could not bring myself to do it. It was not so much the fear of prison, as the intolerable fear of losing that incomparable means of musical expression. I thought that I would rather

die than part with my wonderful cello.

THAT night, exhausted by the persuasions and threats of my parents, I went to sleep without undressing, with the cello clasped in my arms. I was like a child loath to part with its beloved toy. I had wept hysterically. I think Mother thought me slightly crazy, for she dissuaded my father from taking the cello by force.

I woke up with a start at midnight. There was the late moon streaming pale shafts of light through the dusty panes of my cubicle-like room. Mother had washed them only yesterday, during the general housecleaning, yet they seemed to be covered with some sort of misty cobwebs, reflecting pale rainbows.

My hand jerked at the strings of the instrument and I went cold all over. How foolish it was for me to take it to bed with me! What if I had broken the delicate, satinlike wood?

I examined the cello carefully, tenderly, as a mother would a child. No, it was intact. Not a scratch on its polished surface. Suddenly I wanted to convince myself that it was absolutely sound, and, in spite of the lateness of the hour, passed the bow over the strings.

I gasped in horror! Not a sound came out!

I looked the instrument over once more. Not a crack, not a slit. Its surface gleamed darkly, like a polished stone, like an unbroken sheet of calm water. Yet it was mute, mute!

I wanted to scream in anguish. I laid the voiceless cello on the window ledge and dropped my head on my folded forearms, gave way to a silent attack of sobbing.

And then, I heard a faint melody! I did not move. I was paralyzed with wonder, as my cello played by itself. It was a faint music as if coming from an immeasurable distance. It was like the muffled music of the spheres.

I thought about the angels praising Jehovah with the instruments like this. But, no, this was an earthly music. One could hear the babbling of a stream in it. One could almost

distinguish the voices of singing birds. Birds singing of love in May, during the mating season. In some beautiful, unknown country. A country of musical dreams.

Something made me lift my tear-stained face and look out of the window. There, through the cobweb mists, I saw a picture I shall never forget.

It was a panorama of a foreign city, with canals instead of streets, with tall spires of churches and marble fronts of palaces bathed in bright moonlight. My window seemed to be situated in some high tower. I could see the dream city below, as though from a skyscraper or a plane.

Its narrow water streets were alive with slim black boats manned by swarthy men in scarlet-lined cloaks. I could see it clearly in the light of innumerable bright lanterns. They were hung over the hunched bridges and along the narrow sidewalks, swaying over the water, their reflections awakening in it pale rainbows.

Beautiful women reclined in the noiseless-moving boats, singing to the accompaniment of guitars. But all of a sudden I realized that all and every sound of that harmonious holiday emanated from one single cello—my cello—uniting everything in melody.

I turned in the direction of the bed on which I had left the stolen instrument. It was no longer there. It seemed to be poised in midair. After my eyes got used to the dusk in the room, I saw the faint outline of a man in strange clothes holding the cello and playing on it.

"I made it!" he said in a sibilant whisper, which suddenly hushed the music. "You stole it. You will have to return it."

I HEARD those words with my soul rather than with my ears, for the music continued to flow with them, as if they were just a motive, a musical motive and not the harsh words:

I made it.
You stole it.
You must return it.

It was like a song, the cruel meaning softened by the melody. It was like a hypnotizing admonition. I had to heed it,

"Take the last look at my beautiful city. This cello can conjure the spirit of that city. The spirit of Venice."

The instrument was silent now, yet I could remember its music. I could render it myself, I was sure of it. I could have played it even better than the cello maker. I was exultant over it. I was sure that I could move people to great enthusiasm if allowed to play it before the thousands. But no, that could not be. I was a thief. I could never dare to pass my bow over those enchanted strings in public.

I was in despair. Mentally I invented one hundred and one new excuses for possessing that cello unlawfully. In agonizing silence, I was pleading with the ghost of the music, in my thoughts only, that I be allowed to keep the Sweet-Voiced One. I said:

"This cello was meant to be heard by someone who can appreciate it. That rich man is but a collector. He doesn't know the ABCs of music. He would keep it there, in prison as it were, with his valet dusting it and polishing it, like a mummy in its plush-lined coffin. And I can play it. I CAN play it!"

The ghost was unmoved. He pointed to the door.

"Must I return it and deliver myself to the police?" I pleaded again. "I'm an artist. I may become a great artist. I may bring joy to many. Oh, please, can't I keep the cello?"

The ghost was inexorable. He made a step toward the door and motioned me to follow him.

Cursing and pleading in turns, despair in my heart, I followed the apparition out into the frosty night. I forgot to put on my coat, and all the winds of the universe seemed to blow through my threadbare clothes.

The violent wind seemed to sweep me along, so I reached the connoisseur's home with lightning swiftness. I saw the old house ablaze with lights. The old man must have overcome his aversion to electricity, I thought. When I entered, miraculously unnoticed. I saw that it was a stag party, at the end of a supper.

The very same table which had held the six precious cellos on the day of the exhibit, was now loaded with half-

empty dishes. The white cloth covering it was stained with wine, and to my distorted imagination those stains looked like spilled blood. The guests were animated, hilarious. They stared at me with amused surprise.

"How did you get here, young man?" the host asked me, not unkindly. "Your face is familiar somehow."

Only then he noticed the cello in my arms. "Why, it's the stolen cello!" he cried out.

I felt suddenly resentful toward that paunchy old man, with his eyes bloodshot from too much drinking, with his face showing his unwise excesses. Those unsteady hands, to hold my cello, the instrument of the immortals. Never!

Inspired by sudden, rebellious courage, definitely foreign to my native, rather timid, character, I shouted:

"Yes, I stole it, but I'm not going to give it back! This instrument is too good to remain idle in a private collection. It should be heard by multitudes or . . ." I lifted it above my head, about to smash it.

MY DESPAIRING gesture was stopped by an unseen hand. To my surprise, I heard the host's voice, singularly void of anger:

"This boy must be mad. He talks as if he were in love with my cello."

"I'm not mad. I *am* in love with it. I can play it, hear me? I CAN play it, for thousands of happy listeners to hear! I'm entitled to it!"

"Well, why not show me that you can," my host retorted, with a mildly derisive smile.

Upon hearing that ironical invitation, my hands suddenly grew numb with nervousness. I became so self-conscious that I could not even lift my bow. It was the most complete stage fright that had ever possessed me.

I stood, full of unbearable agony, shamed beyond words, utterly impotent. I had a mad desire to run away, to hide my shame in the river.

And then, as I deliberated between suicide and murder, hating the man who challenged me, I felt some unseen fingers touching my hands.

That touch was like a miraculous balm to my soul. All of a sudden the terrible numbness passed. My hands became steady, my mind cleared. And, from an immeasurable distance, I seemed to hear the first notes of the Venice melody.

"I'll play for you the musical story of the 'Soul of Venice'," I said.

I disclaim all the credit for that performance. Even as I heard the enchanting sounds rise under my nimbly-moving bow, I knew all the while that it was the dead cello maker, the master of his craft, who put life into his immortal instrument. It was his spirit, proudly demanding to be heard. It was his pride in his instrument which craved expression under my obedient fingers. I understood it now. He wanted me to bring his cello back, so it could be heard by all the world.

After a long silence, when the last echo of the "Soul of Venice" departed into Eternity, my host spoke:

"You *are* a genius, my boy. I'll see to it that thousands of people hear you and YOUR cello."