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The Stealer of Sight

BY LUCK WILLIAMS.

PART I.

As I passed the partly open door on the third landing I suddenly stopped. From inside the darkened room there stole a melody, soft and ineffably delicious.

I am a music-lover generally, but now my brain was caught in a loop of siren sound, from which I had no desire to free myself. It seemed to eddy and swirl around me like the breath of incense. When its wailing notes were wistful, I, too, felt exquisite yearnings, and when it rose into a rich and vibrant volume, my own heart throbbled to its ecstasy. Suddenly—it seemed as unnatural as the abrupt ceasing of a stream—it stopped.

"Come inside, young man, come inside," said a silky voice from within the room.

Hesitating, I pushed open the door, and stumbled into the darkness. At the other end of the room, casting a little reflection outside its own orbit, was a dully glowing fire, sunk in the blackness like a great misshapen ruby. "You are the young man who has come to live in the top room?" asked the voice.

"Yes, and you are—," I began. "Oh, our mutual landlady, Mrs. Hain, has told you of me," went on the smooth voice. "I'm old Mr. Gettle, the blind man, 'a little queer on top,' as Mrs. Hain always tells her new lodgers, 'but perfectly harmless but for the fact that his mouth was head.'" His laugh, as he ended, possessed all the silkiness of his voice, yet it was an eerie laugh.

"I happened to be passing the door, and I paused to hear your violin," I hastened to say.

"I heard you, young man. And would you care to hear more of my playing?"

"I would," was my reply. Somehow I was feeling far from comfortable. "Then light the gas * * * No, I'll see to it. Light isn't necessary for me, but I know you'd prefer not to sit in the darkness."

I heard him go to the gas bracket,

and never once did he fumble. Soon the room was brilliant in the yellow light.

I looked curiously at the occupant. He was a small, old man, with soft silver hair and beard. His face would have held the usual placid expression of the sightless, but for the fact that his mouth was bent in a hard, repellent curve. His open eyes, dull, motionless, made me think of windows heavily whitened on the inside so that no one can see through them.

He caught up his violin as though again to make it whisper and cry and sing with the cunning God had given his hand, but with sudden decision he replaced it on a chair.

"So the fly, quivering with its gauzy iridescent wings through the sun-lit air of youth, has bravely entered the silken coils of the patient old spider," he said.

"Why—why do you use such queer words?" I stammered.

He laughed, such a laugh as is born of eternal blackness.

"Don't you remember," he said, "that Mrs. Hain told you I was 'not quite the thing'? It's nothing, my young friend. It's only that in the darkness I crave for color, and some words are colors. To me they are the same as butterflies are to you, dazzling splashes of crimson and purple and green floating through the air."

"So you were not always—?" I ventured for something to say.

"No. I could see until I was three. Sometimes even now I can remember a great mass of wonderful brazen blue—the summer sky, I suppose * * * But let me touch your face. I want to tell if—"

I shrank back instinctively, and then, ashamed, let him approach. His cold fingers came lightly over my face, and though their touch was but momentary, there was something queerly tenacious in their passage. For seconds they played over my eyes, almost lovingly.

"But I'm forgetting myself," was his declaration. "I'm not doing the duties of host properly. I'm selfish. You must have a glass of wine with me."

I demurred, but he insisted. With wonderful sureness he went to a corner cupboard, and after a minute or so returned to me bearing a glass of wine. It was port, sickly stuff, and curiously sweet, but I drank it as well as I could.

He took up his violin again, and began to play.

Whether it was one of the works of some master composer, a rare old melody, or just that he extemporized, I do not know. At first the music was wild, tempestuous, making me think of a storm, raging and hurtling across the earth in blind fury to destroy all things in its path.

Slowly the storm died away, and in the sweet rhythmic whispering that followed I seemed to be near a tiny babe, resting on its mother's breast. I could hear their two breaths mingling in a curious harmony, broken only now and again by a sudden catch in the mother's breath as though she suffered some sudden fear for her tiny offspring.

I was becoming drowsy. My eyelids seemed to be swollen and heavy, and I closed my eyes. How sweetly the mother and babe were sleeping.

Once I lifted my reluctant lids and noticed that those of the blind violinist also dropped over his empty shells of eyes. Again I closed mine. The music became softer and softer. My own deep breathing was now drawing in time with those I seemed to hear * * * But I was floating away—away from the gentle rise and fall of those sleepy sounds. I * * *

Slowly my brain returned to consciousness. First I became aware of the peculiarly stiff position I was in. There was a burning pain around my ankles and wrists, and I felt I was choking.

Then my senses became normal. I opened my eyes with a start. Around my arms, wrists, and legs were cords, binding me to the heavy armchair in which I sat. Something soft filled my mouth and pressed on my tongue, while a handkerchief was bound tightly around my jaw.

The next thing I noticed was that the fire was now nothing but a dead mass of flaky gray ash. I lifted my head, and saw that the old man was standing by my side. He seemed to perceive that I had returned to consciousness.

"So the young fly has become enmeshed in the web of the patient old spider," he said softly.

He came forward, and once more his finger tips passed over my face. "Yes, you are ready," I heard him say. "I put in the port only just sufficient to make you sleep a little while. I have barely finished tying you up. Yes, you are ready."

I watched him as he stood with his vacant eyes staring before him.

"Do you know why you are here?" He paused as though it were possible for me to reply.

"Nearly fifty years," he began again, with that wonderful silken quality of tone, "have I been living in the great darkness. Always alone. Always alone. It's not that. It's color I've craved for all my life—living, vivid color. There is only one way in which I can obtain it. That is with music—the music of my violin."

(To be concluded.)

Forces Plant Growth.

Promising results have attended German experiments with forcing the growth of plants by adding carbon dioxide to the air surrounding them.

Donkey Rides!

London.—The child of 11, who wrote the following, is evidently better up in the events of the day than in the works of John Bunyan:

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

The pilgrims are going on donkeys to see Tutankhamen's tomb. They come from a long way.



DOLLED UP.

Mrs. Curleycue—"Tell me, who gave your poodle that lovely marcelle?" Mrs. Dogophile—"He had it when we bought him and we liked it so well we paid the man fifty dollars extra to give him a permanent wave."



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In Town.

Somewhere there's a willow budding, In a hollow by the river, Where the autumn leaves lie sodden, Turning all the pool to brown; There's a thrush who's building early, With his feathers all a-shiver, And the maple sap is rising— But I'm glad that I'm in town.

Somewhere out there in the country There's a brook that's overflowing, And a quaker pussy-willow Sews grey velvet on her gown; Rushes whisper to each other That marsh marigolds are showing, And those saucy crocus fellows— But I'm glad that I'm in town.

Long ago, when we were younger, How those little things enthralled us; King-birds nesting in the hedges, Baby field-mice soft as down; Muskrats in the sun-warmed shallows, Strange how all these voices called us Hark, was that a robin singing? When's the next train out of town? —Isabel Ecclestone Mackay.

Unfamiliar.

The Old One—"Yes, this is sunset painted by my daughter. She studied abroad several years."

The Young Man—"Ah, yes; I understand now. I can't remember having seen a sunset like that in our country."

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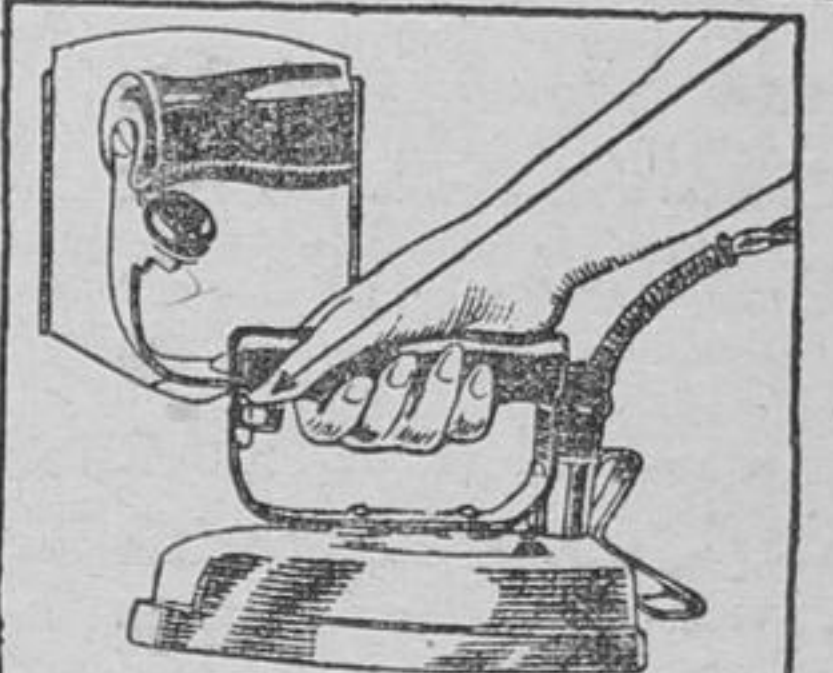
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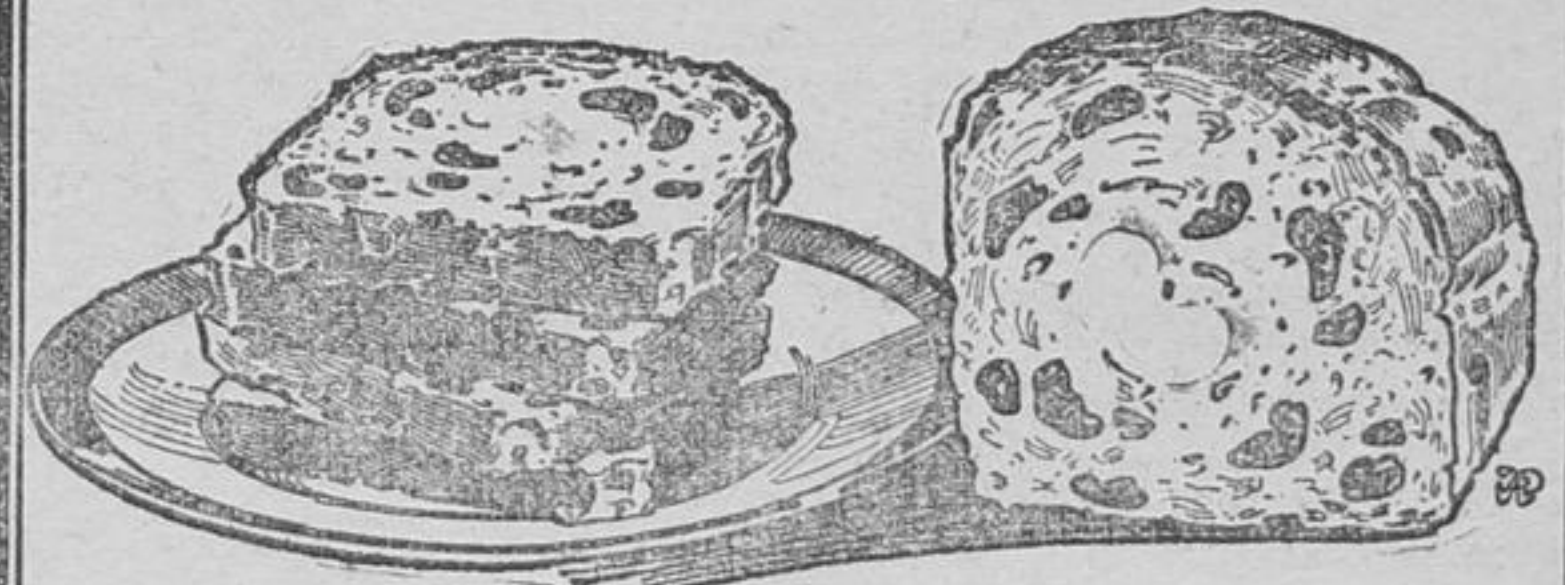
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