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The Curious Case of Norton Hoorne

Ray Cummings

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Back thirty years ago when Argosy All-Story was the best-liked adventure fiction weekly in the land, when a story came in that didn't fit the standard categories of Western, Detective, Adventure, or Sport, the editor would label it "A 'Different' Story" and run that phrase right under the title. It was these "different" stories which were the forerunners of modern fantasy, they were the seeds which grew into Weird Tales and Amazing Stories. One of the finds made then was a new writer named Ray Cummings who began to contribute unusual off-trail stories with increasing regularity. "The Curious Case of Norton Hoorne" bore the label "Different." The reader will find it still justifies that designation.

I do not feel that now, after these many years, it is any breach of professional etiquette for me to relate the case of Norton Hoorne. It was so remarkable, so extraordinary an incident, that it seems wrong to let it lie forever buried in the professional secrecy to which my good friend, the late Dr. Johns, consigned it. And so now, after nearly twenty years, I have decided to give my remembrance of the events just as they occurred.

I attempt no explanation. I am not psychic. Indeed, I know very little of the subject, for it is not one that appeals to me. I have never seen a ghost, nor have I ever talked with any one who had. You who read this may explain it as you will. I shall merely set down for you the plain facts; and if, by so doing, I shall have added anything of value to the existing data on Psychical Research, I shall be amply repaid.

At the time the incidents occurred, I remember, I had just taken my medical degree. My mother had wanted me to become a musician. I was, and in fact always have been, tremendously interested in music. But the career of professional pianist, for it was that branch of the art to which I leaned, seemed to hold little promise for a youth whose talent obviously fell far short of genius, so I decided upon the medical profession instead.

At the time I took my degree I had two friends who meant a great deal to my life. They were Dr. Johns and Norton Hoorne, the latter one of the most famous concert pianists in the country. The friendship of these two men, and the inspiration I derived from them both, was the biggest thing in my life at this period—excepting possibly my interest in my work.

It was in the spring of 1900, I remember, that Dr. Johns and I attended one of Hoorne's concerts in New York. I know we were both proud, as we sat in that

huge, enthusiastic audience, to feel we were the closest friends of such a man.

Norton Hoorne was at this time at the very pinnacle of his fame. He was about thirty-five years of age—a most picturesque figure, tall and straight, with very black wavy hair slightly touched with gray at the temples. His features were strong—almost rugged. Yet his mouth was sensitive as a girl's, and his face, for all its sturdy strength, was the face of a poet. He had never married, but lived alone in his luxurious studio on Riverside Drive with an old housekeeper who was devoted to him.

Hoorne was unquestionably a great artist. But we knew him also as a great man—a man big mentally, physically and spiritually; had he been otherwise the events I am about to relate might have been less inexplicable.

I think it was hardly two or three days after the concert that Dr. Johns called me up one morning shortly after breakfast.

"Something has happened," he explained hurriedly. "Norton's housekeeper has just phoned me. Will you come right up to his studio?"

Then he hung up without waiting for me to reply.

When I arrived I was ushered in at once by the frightened housekeeper. She took me immediately to the studio and I found Dr. Johns already there. He led me across the room without a word and pointed to the grand piano that stood in a corner by the window. On the bench before it sat Norton Hoorne, his body sprawled forward over the keyboard of the instrument.

How curious it is, that in moments of great mental stress little details impress themselves upon one's mind that in other times would pass unnoticed! I can remember the scene in Hoorne's studio that morning as though it had happened yesterday. It was a luxurious room, in perfect order now as always. Large French windows opened onto the Drive, and by the piano stood a many-pillowed divan where frequently I had lain and listened to Hoorne's playing.

Dr. John's had arrived but a short while before, and now in a few words he told me what had happened as far as he knew it. Hoorne was not dead as I had supposed by my first hurried glance, but was in a most extraordinary state of catalepsy. There was absolutely no sign of life except in so far as there was also no positive sign of death. Both pulse and respiration apparently had ceased.

We lifted our friend from his position at the piano and laid him prone upon the divan. Dr. Johns had not wanted to move him, he said, until I arrived. I had a dozen horrified questions to ask, but he would have none of them. I could see by his manner that he knew, or suspected, the cause of Hoorne's condition. And because he wished it so, I questioned no more, but helped him with his further examination.

When we had finished, at his request, I summoned the housekeeper. The poor woman came at once; she was frightened almost out of her wits and was crying softly.

“Did Mr. Hoorne have his dinner here last evening?” Dr. Johns began at once.

“Yes, sir, he did.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You told me you did not notice he was ill?”

“No, sir, he ate very well.”

“What did he do after dinner?”

“Came right up here, sir. I think he spent the first part of the evening reading.”

I looked over the few books scattered on top of the library table. Lying under the electrolier I found an opened volume of Freud’s *Psychoanalysis*, several sheets of music, and two or three operatic scores. I picked up the volume of Freud and showed it to Dr. Johns.

“Very probably,” he said, and continued his questions.

“You retired about half past eight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And very soon afterward you heard Mr. Hoorne begin playing?”

“Very soon after; yes, sir.”

“How long did he play?”

“I don’t know, sir; I fell asleep listening to him.”

Dr. Johns looked at her curiously. “Do you know anything about music?” he asked.

The housekeeper smiled a little through her tears. “I ought to, sir, I’ve been with Mr. Hoorne a long time.”

“I know you have—yes. What sort of music was it he was playing?”

The old lady thought a moment. “I don’t rightly think I can say, sir,” she replied. “I don’t remember he played anything I had ever heard before.”

“If he had played any ordinary piece—anything in his repertoire, or those he sometimes plays for diversion—would you have recognized it?”

“Yes, sir; I think so, sir—though I might not know its name.”

“But you are familiar with most of the standard pieces, aren’t you?” pursued the doctor.

“I know a great many—I do love music,” she added earnestly, and her eyes filled with tears again as she looked at the motionless figure on the divan.

“What about the music, Fred?” I asked impatiently.

Dr. Johns raised his hand deprecatingly. "I was just recalling a conversation I had with Norton last week. I'll tell you later." He turned back to the housekeeper who stood looking at her master with pleading eyes.

"Oh, sir," she burst out. "Isn't there something I can do? Is it right just to let him lie there? He isn't—oh, please tell me he isn't dead."

The doctor gently led her to a chair and sat her down.

"No," he said, "he isn't dead. And there's nothing we can do just now. Don't you worry too much—perhaps he's not in great danger. We were talking about the music," he went on. "What sort of music was it? Did you notice anything peculiar about it?"

"Yes, sir, I did, now that you mention it. It was very curious music, sir."

"How curious?"

"It was sort of weird, sir. I never heard anything like it before. One part of it gave me the creeps. And some of it sounded like discords, sir."

The doctor drew a long breath. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Beacon. I think that will do for now."

The housekeeper rose. "Yes, sir," she said. "And if there's anything I can do—oh, you will let me help, won't you, sir?" she pleaded.

"Yes, Mrs. Beacon, we will let you help," he answered kindly, and closed the door upon her pathetic figure.

"You know, Will," he said, turning back to me, "there's something mighty curious about this—I'm hanged if I understand it."

I was just about to reply when there happened the first of the extraordinary incidents that made this case so remarkable. I had just seated myself on the piano bench, with my back to the instrument. I remember I was leaning backward with my elbows resting on the music-ledge above the keyboard.

At Dr. Johns's remark I must have shifted my position slightly, for one of my elbows slipped off the rack and hit the keys with a thump, sending a crashing, jangling discord reverberating through the room. At the same instant there came a sharp rap from the floor near at hand. With the roots of my hair tingling, I turned toward the divan. Hoorne's right hand had slipped from his side to the floor, a large seal ring he wore striking sharply its polished surface. And as I looked at his face, I caught just the fleeting end of a convulsive jerk of the lips as they steadied again into immobility.

"Good God!" ejaculated Dr. Johns, as we started toward the divan. "Did you see that?"

We were both trembling violently as we examined the body. The convulsion had

passed. Hoorne was in the same state of living death as before.

That was the first intimation I had of the connection of music with the case. What Dr. Johns knew and conjectured he was soon to tell me.

We were sitting beside the table, and Dr. Johns was idly fingering the volume of Freud.

“There’s something mighty curious about this,” he repeated slowly.

“You’ve some idea,” I pursued, “or you wouldn’t have talked to Mrs. Beacon that way.”

“What I had in mind, Will,” he answered, turning the leaves of the book in his hand—“you know how interested Norton was in psychic phenomena?”

“Of course.”

“We were talking about it at the club a week or so ago. He confided something to me then—something he said he had never told anyone. It seems for some time he had been experimenting with a theory that through the power of a new style of music he had evolved, the soul could be transported temporarily out of its body and brought back at will. You know there are people who claim to be able to send their astral body with its soul wandering into other planes while their human body lies inert and helpless?”

“I know.”

“Well, Norton said he had found that he could do just that by using certain kinds of music. I think I offended him a little, for I must have smiled rather skeptically. At any rate he wouldn’t say much more except that he was afraid of the power he had acquired. I told him I thought that it might prove inconvenient when he was playing in public some time, and he replied quite seriously that was just what he feared. He seemed to be sorry that he had told me at all—just a little sheepish at my ridicule—and I couldn’t get him to say any more. He asked me not to tell you about it.”

Dr. Johns hesitated.

“Go on,” I urged.

“That’s all he said. Only—the look in his eyes made me know there was far more to it than that. Something so personal, so intimate, he could not even tell it to me.”

Silence fell between us.

“And you think—” I prompted finally.

“What do *you* think? He was probably reading Freud last night. You heard what Mrs. Beacon said about the music. And now, when you happened to hit the piano —”

Dr. Johns stopped abruptly, his face very white, and for a long time we sat and

stared at each other.

“What are we going to do about it?” I asked, breaking a silence that had become oppressive.

“We’ve got to assume, I think,” Dr. Johns said, “that Norton’s theory as he told it to me has turned to fact. He has forced or lured, or whatever you might term it, his astral body away to another plane. And for some reason it does not want to or cannot get back.”

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, and the intense, earnest expression on my friend’s face, I could not help smiling just a little at hearing such words from the lips of a man so coldly scientific as he.

“Do you believe that?” I asked when he paused.

“What else can I believe?” he answered. “At least it is a theory that fits the facts. Norton may have been experimenting with this thing for some time. God knows how far along he got with it—what he was able to do.”

We tried to discuss the matter calmly; but to us it was so gruesome a subject, so darkly mysterious, so weird, that in spite of our efforts we found ourselves frequently at the point of becoming unnerved. There had been no change whatever in the body on the divan; it remained as before in a state that was the complete simulation of death.

I do not know what feelings caused us both to avoid suggesting the obvious thing to do. I think perhaps it was the almost supernatural aspect of the incident when I had unwittingly sounded a discord from the piano that made us hesitate to repeat it.

It was Dr. Johns who voiced first what was in both our thoughts.

“Whatever else may be in doubt,” he began, “one thing is clear. Music has some definite connection with Norton’s condition. It is to music we must look for a solution.”

“How?” I asked.

“You know a great deal about music,” he replied; “we shall have to experiment.”

I jumped to my feet impulsively and struck a chord on the piano. I do not know what I expected, but my heart was beating furiously as the room vibrated with the music. I turned toward the divan; the body lay motionless as before.

Dr. Johns drew a chair beside the divan and sat down, staring steadily at Hoorne’s face. “Try another,” he said.

I played several chords in both major and minor keys; there was no effect whatever upon the body. With a sudden inspiration I turned around and rested my elbows on the music-ledge. Then I brought one of them sharply down upon the black keys. Simultaneously with the discord came a piercing shriek, followed by a

low, mumbling groan, the most hideous, horrible sound I have ever heard issue from human lips.

When I got to the divan the body was lying on its side, the knees drawn closely up to the chest. I caught a glimpse of the contorted, agonized face. Then, with a convulsive jerk the legs straightened, the face relaxed. It was as though nothing had occurred, save that now the body was lying on its side, with one of its arms still hanging down, and the hand lying limply upon the floor.

Nothing else of importance happened that morning; the body remained motionless, and we were too unnerved to try any further experiments. We pulled down the shades and sat beside the divan, looking into the placid, ghastly white face of our friend, and talking together in low tones. Occasionally Dr. Johns would jump up and begin nervously to pace up and down the room, only to drop back in his chair again after a moment.

About noon the housekeeper timidly knocked on the door and brought us lunch. Dr. Johns agreed with me that until we considered it vitally necessary we should not call in any assistance, for publicity of this character would be extremely harmful to Hoorne's career. We decided therefore to carry the case through ourselves, and cautioned Mrs. Beacon to say nothing to the servants beyond the fact that their master was very ill, with two physicians in attendance.

We both felt better when we had eaten lunch. At Dr. Johns's request Mrs. Beacon and I brought down from one of the upper bedrooms a small cot. We undressed Hoorne and laid him on it, covering him to his neck with its white counterpane. Then dismissing the tearful, almost hysterical housekeeper with another admonition to say nothing concerning her master's condition, we prepared to carry out another experiment.

It was our plan—we had discussed it all very carefully at lunch—to begin with the faintest possible musical sounds, and find by trial those that would effect the body without causing the agony we had witnessed before.

Dr. Johns sat at the bedside and I at the piano began striking chord combinations as softly as I could. It was not until I had evolved what amounted practically to a discord that a sharp exclamation from Dr. Johns made me stop abruptly.

"Remember that," he commanded. "Play that again. Louder—a little louder." I doubled it with my left hand, striking it several times. An exclamation from my companion made me leave the piano and rush to his side.

"Look," he whispered; Hoorne's lips were moving, apparently trying to form words. Dr. Johns bent over him; then he straightened up and shook his head.

For over an hour we worked, trying every possible kind of music I could think

of, but to no purpose; we got no further than this. Only one fact stood out plainly. The reactions the body gave were quite consistent; I could now almost anticipate the effect of my playing.

Then it occurred to me to look at the music we had found lying on the center table with the volume of Freud. The sheet music, that part of it that was in manuscript, I could tell even at first glance was like nothing I had ever seen before. It was not built upon the ordinary eight-note scale with its two whole tone intervals followed by a half tone, with which we are familiar. Perhaps it was based upon the old Chinese scale—I do not know.

One of the sheets was a composition of Debussy. There were some songs—one of them by Rimsky-Korsakow, I remember—and there was the pianoforte score of Moussorgsky's "Boris Godounov." Of this latter several pages were turned down at the corners. I opened at the places indicated and found many of the passages marked with a pencil, with penciled notations altering slightly the tempo and rhythm, and occasionally the harmony.

This music, which I found after a little practice I could play indifferently well, had far more effect upon the body than any I had hitherto been able to evolve. I played, with trembling fingers; Dr. Johns sat at the bedside, watching the effect of my music.

For some time I played, softly, haltingly. The body of Norton Hoorne, I could see it from where I sat playing, jerked convulsively. The face twitched and from the lips issued occasional heart-rending cries that were almost more than we could bear.

Then all at once there came a death-like silence. The body on the bed lay quiet. A sharp exclamation from Dr. Johns made me stop playing; in a moment I was by his side, leaning over the bed. Hoorne's lips were moving. We held our breaths, bending closer. From the lips came the sound of a low, mouthing muttering, and then the words distinctly audible:

"It is all so useless."

I hardly know how to describe the tone in which these words were uttered. It had the quality I might best describe as *hollow*, a cold, measured, *detached* intonation, devoid absolutely of every quality of inflection—a voice forming words but embodying no human personality. I want to make this quite clear, because I think now that this detached quality, this *lack of personality* in the voice, was significant of much that subsequently happened.

Not only was the fact that Hoorne spoke startling in itself, but the weird, unearthly tones of his voice filled me with the utmost horror. I turned and fled back to the piano, in doubt whether to wait, or resume playing.

Then I heard Dr. Johns gently asking:

“What is all so useless?”

There was a long pause, and then in the same ghastly voice as before came the words:

“Nothing matters now!”

I sat down on the piano bench, and turning, caught a glimpse of the passive, livid face on the pillow, and Dr. Johns bending over it.

“What is all so useless?” he repeated. There was no answer, though we waited a long time, with our beating hearts audible it seemed in the heaviness of the silence.

Then Dr. Johns signed me to go on playing, and for perhaps ten minutes I went over and over the themes, elaborating them at times as fancy led me.

“Stop!” called the doctor sharply; I ceased abruptly, my hands poised above the keyboard.

“Play slowly, very softly,” he commanded, and as I obeyed I heard his voice in the gentle tones one uses toward a child, asking, “Can you speak now, Norton?”

A long pause and then came the answer:

“Yes.”

“What can we do to help you?”

There was no answer.

“What can we do to help you, Norton?” repeated Dr. Johns. “Play louder,” he added aside to me.

“It is all so useless,” said the voice, louder and stronger than before. I let my playing die down a little.

“Why is it all so useless? Why is it, Norton?” asked Dr. Johns firmly and yet almost tenderly.

There was a longer pause than usual, and then came the words:

“So useless. So useless, because she is not here—you must not make me live.”

I do not know whether I played wrongly at this point or that it was merely from some other cause, but immediately after uttering these words the body was seized with a convulsion horrible to witness. I heard Dr. Johns’s sharply indrawn breath and his muttered exclamation.

“Stop playing!” he commanded.

I did so, and hurried again to the bedside. The convulsion had ceased; the contorted face was relaxing.

“Why must we not make you live? Why, Norton?” Dr. Johns spoke almost in a whisper.

Standing directly over the bed I could see the muscles of the face as the lips

parted and the words came forth.

"Because she has gone. I cannot reach her now."

And then a shudder seemed to pass over the entire body, and with more power than ever before the voice said:

"The desk. Look in the desk. Use it, for God's sake use it."

The body abruptly relaxed into immobility; we waited and waited, but there came nothing more.

That was the first we knew about the girl. On the desk stood a photograph—we had not noticed it before—in a small silver frame. It was the picture of a girl perhaps twenty-five years of age—a shy, beautiful face, with very large wistful eyes and a mass of golden hair. She was undeniably a girl of refinement and culture. The photograph showed her in what evidently was her own drawing-room. The fittings of the room were distinguishable, and the girl was seated with her back to a large grand piano, leaning an elbow upon the keyboard.

We took the photograph from its frame; there was nothing written upon it. Then we rummaged through the papers on the desk and came across a note written in a woman's small script. It gave an address in the East Sixties just off Fifth Avenue—one of the most fashionable sections of the city. It read simply:

They wish it to be otherwise so—good-by.

ELAINE.

The note bore a date some three months previous to the time at which we read it.

We located the name of the family living in the palatial private residence at this address. It was the name of one of this country's most prominent financiers—you would remember it now if I were to mention it here. And I remembered then having read in the society columns of this daughter, Elaine.

That night Mrs. Beacon brought in our dinner and we ate it by the bedside. When we had finished it was nearly eight o'clock. We ordered Norton Hoorne's car, and, locking the piano, and cautioning the housekeeper to admit no one to the studio in our absence, we drove to the address where lived this girl whose connection with the case appeared so definite, and yet, to us, so unfathomable.

II.

After we had waited perhaps five minutes a young man entered the room, holding in his hand the card Dr. Johns had sent up. He was a few years younger than I—a clean cut, athletic-looking chap—a typical rich man's son of the better sort.

"Won't you sit down, gentlemen?" He waved us back to the chairs from which we had risen, speaking, I thought, in an unnaturally low tone. "I am Mr. Henten—my father is not at home."

"Dr. Manning and myself," Dr. Johns began, when we were seated, glancing at me an instant by way of introduction. "Mr. Henten, we came here this evening to see your father on rather a curious matter. I am sure you will do quite as well."

Our young host inclined his head in agreement and waited.

"I—er—must ask, Mr. Henten, that you will keep all we say strictly confidential?"

The young man nodded gravely.

"Then I will be quite frank with you. I should like to ask first—do you know Norton Hoorne?"

"I have heard of him," said the young man. "I have been to his concerts—he is a very great artist." I thought he spoke a little cautiously, and with a note of coldness in his voice.

"You do not know him personally?"

"I believe—yes, I have met him—some months ago."

Young Mr. Henten seemed to make this admission with reluctance. Then, a little impatiently but without dropping his politely formal manner, he went on—

"But will you tell me what Norton Hoorne—"

"Mr. Henten," Dr. Johns interrupted, "I shall be still more frank with you. We are Norton Hoorne's physicians—and his friends also. Mr. Hoorne is very ill at this moment—very dangerously ill, I might say. This afternoon in his delirium he spoke the name of—er—Miss Henten. There is a photograph of her standing on his desk. From the words he spoke—incoherent—"

The look on the young man's face made Dr. Johns stop abruptly. After an instant he continued, speaking much more firmly than before.

"You will pardon me, Mr. Henten. You must understand we have not the wish—the indelicacy—to pry into Miss Henten's affairs. What we three say here is said in the strictest confidence. We are Mr. Hoorne's physicians. His life is in danger. The

information we seek is for his good only. I trust you will understand that and will do what you can to help us.”

“What information is it you desire?” asked the young man.

Dr. Johns leaned forward earnestly. “Miss Henten and Norton Hoorne were friends?”

“They were, but the friendship was broken off several months ago.”

“Why?”

Young Mr. Henten hesitated. “Elaine was to have married Sir Oliver Baconfield. It was announced recently,” he said finally.

“Was to—?”

“My sister died this morning,” said the young man quietly.

The effect of this announcement on Dr. Johns and me must have surprised our host greatly.

“Oh, I am very sorry, Mr. Henten,” Dr. Johns hastened to say contritely when he had recovered himself somewhat. “I can understand now your reluctance—our coming at such a time—”

The young man bit his lip and looked away; we could see he was struggling to suppress his emotion.

“We will not keep you more than a moment longer,” Dr. Johns added. “There are a few questions—I beg you will not think them irrelevant. They have, I assure you, a direct bearing upon Norton Hoorne’s present welfare. If you will let me hurt you just a moment more, Mr. Henten. It may be—I think it is—a matter of life or death to our patient.”

The young man bowed his head. “What is it you want to know?” he asked in a low voice.

“I will be as brief as possible. Was your sister ever engaged to Norton Hoorne?”

“No—not that I know of.”

“They were very good friends?”

“I think so—yes.”

“Why was the friendship broken off?”

The young man met Dr. Johns’s gaze with a look of almost pleading appeal.

“Why was the friendship broken off?” persisted the doctor. “Did they quarrel?”

“No.” The youth spoke so low we could hardly hear him.

“Were they—were they in love?”

Young Mr. Henten’s increasing agitation became manifest.

“I’m sorry to hurt you, my lad,” Dr. Johns added gently. “But I must know these things. Were they in love?”

“Yes, they were.”

“And it was broken off so that she could become engaged to some one else?”

“My—my mother wished her to marry Lord Baconfield. My father forbade her seeing Norton Hoorne again.”

Dr. Johns sat back in his chair. “What was the cause of your sister’s death, Mr. Henten?” He tried to ask the question quietly, but I knew by my own emotion the anxiety with which he awaited its answer.

Young Mr. Henten raised his head wearily. “She died of pneumonia,” he said. “She caught a severe cold. It was very sudden—though she had not been well for some time.”

Dr. Johns thought a moment and then resumed.

“After her friendship with Norton Hoorne was broken off, was she—did she seem ill?”

“She never seemed quite herself. She—she—Oh, Dr. Johns, if you please, I—” The young man seemed at the point of breaking down.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Johns said kindly. “If you will just bear with me a moment more—then we will go. Your sister was musical?”

“She would have been a very fine pianist. She was a pupil of Norton Hoorne.”

“Afterward—I mean these last few months—did she play frequently?”

“Not as much as before. Only at night sometimes, in the evening, she would go into the music-room alone and play.”

“What sort of music would she play?”

“I don’t know. It *was* peculiar. Improvisations of her own sometimes, I think. We did not like her to play—it was not good for her.”

“Why not?” Dr. Johns’s eyes never left the young man’s face.

“It made her ill. Once or twice she—she fainted. We found her lying there—once on the floor where she had fallen.”

Dr. Johns rose abruptly, and crossing to where the young man sat low down in his chair, laid an arm over his shoulder.

“We will go now, my lad,” he said gently. “I am sorry to have hurt you, but it was necessary. I know you do not understand why I have asked these questions. You need never understand—now. And remember—our visit here to-night and what we have said, you have given your promise—you will tell no one?”

“No, sir, I will not mention it, if you wish me not to.”

“Thank you.” The doctor straightened up. “Your sister was a very fine little woman. You know that—and we know it. Good night, my lad.”

“Good night, sir,” said the young man, rising.

During the drive back to Norton Hoorne's studio, Dr. Johns showed a peculiar reticence in discussing the interview we had just had. The few questions and comments I volunteered he answered so shortly and with such abstraction of manner that I soon gave up and remained silent.

Back at the house on Riverside Drive, we went immediately to Hoorne's studio. We found nothing unusual had occurred during our absence. Norton Hoorne's body still lay motionless on the cot.

After we had dismissed the housekeeper with such assurances of her master's recovery as we could give, and were again alone, Dr. Johns locked both doors of the room, and turning to face me, began abruptly:

"Will, whatever you or I may think about this case, it is obvious that theoretical discussion of it is futile. I am convinced of but one thing—the secret lies with Norton; we must make him tell us."

"Do we dare?" I asked; I dreaded further musical experiments.

"We must—there is no other way. And to do nothing—" Dr. Johns broke off and shuddered.

"Shall I play now?" I asked. My companion nodded and seated himself beside the cot.

I began to play, softly at first, then louder. For what seemed ages there was no response. Again I heard the sound of that weird voice, babbling incoherently, with low moans, and once interrupted by a piercing shriek.

I ceased playing and heard Dr. Johns say:

"You must speak more clearly, Norton. Now—try—what is it you want to tell us?"

In the silence that followed I played slowly a series of soft modulations. Then I waited, and after a time, from the lips of Norton Hoorne came the words:

"In the desk—another drawer—the letter—for you. Use it, for God's sake, use it."

We found it after a long search, in a secret drawer of the desk. It was a large envelope, sealed, and inscribed with both our names. It contained a folded sheet of music manuscript and a letter. The letter, which was in Hoorne's handwriting, we opened first. It contained only two lines:

I fear this thing. I cannot tell to what it will lead. I know I can trust you both, if need arises, to use the enclosed.

That was all.

The music was written in Hoorne's careless, hurried way, with which I was quite familiar. It was a composition of perhaps sixty bars. And at the top, for its title, was the one word:

“RELEASE”

For a moment we stared at this cryptic paper in silence. Then our glances met, and in Dr. Johns's eyes I read the same doubt of its meaning that he must have seen in mine.

“Can you play it?” he asked; his voice almost broke with the intensity of his emotion.

“Yes,” I answered. “Shall I?”

He flung his hands to his head with a gesture of despair.

“Play it,” he said hopelessly.

The scene in Norton Hoorne's studio that night, as I remember it, was fantastic and gruesome in the extreme. The room was in semidarkness. The shades were down, and we had drawn the heavy portières together before the French windows. The corners of the room and its heavily beamed ceiling were shrouded in thick, black shadows. The piano stood quite in shadow, with only a dim glow of amber light from a lamp shining upon its rack and keyboard.

Near by stood the white-lined bed with the ghastly white face of Norton Hoorne upon its snowy pillow. And from a stand at the bedside a beam of light fell full upon the expressionless features.

At first I was trembling so violently I would not dared have made the attempt to play. Forcing myself to calmness, I ran my fingers silently over the keys, staring intently at what I knew instinctively was Hoorne's unplayed composition, finding its extraordinary harmonies, and fixing the rhythm in my mind.

After many minutes of guiding my cold, trembling fingers in their unfamiliar way over the keys, I began to play. In the hush of the room the fantastic music welled out with a throbbing intensity. No longer was I nervous, no longer afraid. The shadows of the studio faded into blackness—a great void of nothingness all about me—as I abandoned myself more and more to the influence of the strange harmonies I was creating. Now my innermost being felt their power, for they awakened emotions my soul had never known before.

The blackness around grew denser. My senses seemed freed of every earthly tie. The room, the piano, everything, was blotted out. Only the music remained, quivering out through the void, crying with the sorrow of the ages, but always tender, inexpressibly tender, and luring—luring me on—and on—

I shall never forget the shock to my senses when the first sharp cry from Dr. Johns brought me to myself. The music died—throbbing away into silence. I found myself sitting at the keyboard, cold and shivering in the hot, close air of the room.

“Look! Look there!” I heard Dr. Johns’s low whisper as though from a great distance.

The corner of the room and the ceiling beyond and above Hoorne’s white, expressionless face was shrouded with a great, black, grotesque shadow. I do not know what made me stare in that direction, but as I stared the shadow began to take form. At first it seemed merely to waver; then it began to contract, slowly at first, then more rapidly.

Then it seemed no longer black but vaguely luminous, like a silver fog gleaming in the dim light of a hidden moon. And then all at once I realized that it was taking shape. I could see plainly the tiny glowing particles that composed it, twisting and crawling upon themselves. But the shape remained, grew more definite, until at last I recognized it for what it was—the figure of a young girl—the girl of the photograph—the girl whose brother we had just left.

I do not know how long it took me to come to this realization of what I was seeing. Probably it was only an instant; it seemed an eternity.

I could hear Dr. Johns’s labored breathing—see dimly the outlines of the cot and Hoorne’s face upon its pillow. But all that remained clear and real was the figure of this girl, quivering there in the air above the bed.

The upper part of her body particularly was vivid; below the breasts it seemed to melt away into the blackness of the room beyond. Her hair hung in two flowing braids over her bare shoulders; her arms were reaching down toward the bed, and on her beautiful face was a look of tenderness and sorrow and unutterable longing.

And then I saw that around her head and shoulders there hung another radiance, dimmer far than the outlines of her form—a radiance that seemed to fade away as I looked at it directly. Yet I knew it was there; and I seemed to feel, too, rather than see, that it was not silver, but the delicate color of a rose—a color extraordinarily beautiful, yet fragile, wistful as the rose petals it resembled.

Then as I sat staring I heard a whisper come up from the bed. The whisper grew louder, and I heard that same toneless voice from the lips of Norton Hoorne, saying:

“I cannot stay here. I must go. Play—play—you must play.”

I think I must have resumed playing; I know I heard music—the same music as before, only softer, sweeter, more tender.

And then, from the body lying inert on the bed, I saw issue another shape—in outline, form, and every detail the body of Norton Hoorne. It glowed, swirled, and

drifted upward. It *was* Norton Hoorne—its face the face of my friend as I had always known him. After an instant his figure hung swaying above the bed. And from it depended a thin silver cord—fine as the finest gossamer, holding it chained to its human shell below.

The music swelled louder. The arms of the girl reached out; her eyes seemed to cry aloud with yearning. The man's figure pulled and strained at its leash, but the silver cord held strong.

The music grew still louder, thundering now in the hush of the room. The body in the bed sat up suddenly, beating with clenched hands its naked breast. And then, slowly it seemed, the silver cord parted.

A look of ineffable happiness suffused the girl's face as the man's figure, growing suddenly brighter, swirled upward and mingled with hers.

The body on the bed fell back upon the pillow and lay motionless. The mingled shapes above drifted away. The music ceased abruptly.

Norton Hoorne was—dead?

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Curious Case of Norton Hoorne* by Ray Cummings]