

“BILLEE, BILLEE--
the BUTTON!”

Leslie Gordon Barnard

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“Billee, Billee—the Button!”

HERE WAS A MUSIC THAT HAD NO CHARMS
TO SOOTHE EVEN THE GENTLE BREAST OF
CIVILIZED MAN

By Leslie Gordon Barnard

IT was young Bertrand who suggested it. He looked us up in our various haunts, disregarding the telephone as unreliable, and traveling himself from place to place at breakneck speed in a taxi.

I was lunching with M. Griggio, whose compositions you may recall as having won a measure of renown beyond the borders of his own land, for he was born in this country, although of mixed French and Italian parentage. M. Griggio was forever discussing the turning of a scenario of mine into a musical play of sorts, and always looking a little worried about the eyes as if in fear this tenuous thread might snap and he be thrown upon his own resources for just so many more lunches.

Well, there was Bertrand standing over us, and gesturing, in quite a foreign way, with a pair of hands incased in particularly “doggy” gloves.

“Don’t move! Don’t rise!” he implored us. “There are few things more indecent than breaking in upon a luncheon tête-à-tête—and, besides, I have no time for the formalities! You see me back from Europe for my usual month at home with my dear uncle. Thirty days’ hard labor—fighting ennui—is the

price of my care-free life at other times. Sometimes I wish he or his money would perish! One way I would get his fortune, and the other way a penniless freedom—but freedom! I have been forty-eight hours under his barren and hospitable roof. I am bored to extinction. I have come to my friends.

“You have”—he glanced at his wrist watch—“six hours to find costumes that will reduce your age to as many years. I am giving a children’s party. You must both come!”

Relinquishing, with a sigh, my plans for a quiet evening, I gave in to him. It was the easiest way with young Bertrand. Some feverish Parisian strain ran in him, too, and phlegmatic Anglo-Saxon blood might as well capitulate peacefully. Not so my friend Griggio. He shrugged his shoulders, and went dramatically into thought.

“Ah!” Bertrand cried. “I forgot, professor, you are at odds with my uncle’s music!”

“Not at all! Not at all!” M. Griggio dissented, with a gentle sadness. “It is merely that his compositions do not suit my particular ear. They are—they are —”

“I know,” Bertrand agreed, gesturing again; “they are, indeed! I find them so myself. Just like my beloved uncle—so unexpected at the wrong place. At the moment when you are getting along nicely, poof!—something gives way and lets you down with a thump, and the music goes on laughing mockingly at you. But I think, professor, you will not be troubled. My uncle is enormously busy with a new composition that is nearing the end—some amazing big affair, so I gather.”

He laughed. “The ghosts—the spirits, you understand—I cannot guarantee. My good uncle insists upon them. I believe he has them in his new operatic composition, so doubtless he often sees them. I have not myself run across them. You will come then?”

We nodded, and he was gone like a vanished spirit himself. I laughed, but M. Griggio did not.

“What does he mean—ghosts?” I inquired, interestedly.

M. Griggio looked up with a start, his mild eyes on me quizzically.

“Have you not heard? The old place is supposed to be haunted.”

He, too, gestured in his odd foreign way.

“M. Bertrand himself would tell you—but then what a joker he is!—that

the devilish trickery of his music comes from outside himself. I myself have seen—”

He relapsed into silence.

“Seen?” I prompted.

“Strange things!” he replied. He brightened. “I shall go as Lord Fauntleroy. My figure lends itself, and with a little ingenuity my studio corduroys may be turned to the purpose. Would you honor me by sharing my taxi?”

I nodded gravely, although I knew the charge would fall on me.

“At a quarter to eight, then, if that suits,” M. Griggio suggested.

II

The Bertrand house sets well up on the slope that rises graciously above our city. It stands in grounds of proportions that made us feel young Bertrand did well to hold to the affections of his uncle. I had often heard the scapegrace say, that as a subdivision, it was worth a king's ransom.

The old gray house seemed to sit sullenly by itself among the upstarts that had grown about it with the spreading of the city. Immersed in his music, Uncle Bertrand let the grass run wild, the orchard fail for want of pruning, the flowers go to seed and intermix with weeds in a scandalous Bohemianism of the earth.

Within, the house was gradually sinking into a magnificent decay. He always was going to have repairs made, but neglecting them, contenting himself with saying:

“When I am gone, Bertie can do with it as he pleases. Let us grow old together!”

As for servants, he abominated them. Train them as he would, they always interrupted at a critical point, and since he had nearly brained an unfortunate domestic who did not hear his warning rumble to “Get out—you!” he had hired a married couple—deaf mutes. They were particularly sensitive to pantomime, and could be depended upon to obey electrical sign-boards he had installed in their quarters and in the kitchen.

We were among the last to arrive, M. Griggio and I. Only with difficulty did I dissuade him, at the last moment, from giving up. His small apartment was littered with signs of struggle.

“*En bas*, Lord Fauntleroy!” he cried at sight of me. “Why should he wear a lace collar? How can one get lace without money? Consider this bureau drape—will it suffice? No—no, I will not go. You think if you pin it there?—ah, that is clever! Bah! I am of all fools the greatest—a Lord Fauntleroy with a mustache! It is meant I should remain at home!”

In the end, I dragged the little man off, holding before him—like a carrot before a donkey—the prospect of refectons worthy of young Bertrand, the products of a proper pâtisserie.

“*Voilà!*” M. Griggio capitulated. “I will come, but it is flying, my friend, against the very nose of Providence!”

“You are thinking, perhaps, of the ghosts,” I chaffed him; and then I revealed that Uncle Bertrand, although too busy to attend the “children’s party,” had promised he might raise a spook or two for them.

“He is quite a joker in his way,” I added.

“*Peste!*” the little man cried, bouncing up and down on the seat of the taxi. “That is just the trouble with his compositions! It is sacrilege, the way he plays with music. And how many critics are fooled by it, crying, ‘Bravo! Bravo!’ where honest work goes begging! Bah!”

He suddenly swung toward me, waving his arms. “Let me out! I will not go to his house!”

“You are afraid of him, then?” I gently insinuated.

He almost fell off the seat.

“Afraid? Pah—I will go! I will slide on his floors, I will mark his walls, I will consume great quantities of his food! To-night I am a child,” he tapped his costume, “without repressions.”

“The house is just ahead,” I reminded him, “and you must not forget that Lord Fauntleroy was an exemplary little fellow.”

“A child with a mustache!” he grumbled, disconsolately.

He sank back into the gloomiest of silences and glowered.

III

That great, musty old place! A sense of desolation forced itself upon me at our entrance.

Young Bertrand met us at the door, a dashing Boy Blue, much given to a raucous blowing of his horn.

“Listen!” he would cry to arrivals. “You will be welcomed by the spooks!”

The house was a great double one, divided by a long corridor leading to a stair-case that went both up and down. And when Bertrand blew on his silvery horn, the notes seemed to hang in the air about us, and then go drifting down the corridor to splinter into a thousand mocking voices that arose and descended, as if the old stair-case were indeed peopled by impish ghosts!

“But your uncle!” I said, horrified. My glance went to a great closed door on the left of the passage, where I knew the composer worked.

Young Bertrand shrugged his shoulders.

“Turn about!” he laughed. “The old boy’s strumming drives me frantic sometimes; mine at least is musical.”

He blew again.

“Anyhow, I think he is growing as deaf as the servants. He went into the studio at four thirty, and gave orders for no one to enter. His new composition is almost ready for the public, and, for the time, he is lost to us all. Come along.”

One could hardly blame the nephew for trying to waken this sleepy old house. The electrical fixtures were of the earliest manufacture, and the great hallway was full of dim shadows. We followed down it halfway, and young Bertrand ushered us through portières to the left, into a really immense room.

Here, under a vague ceiling, and a dim illumination further diminished by Japanese lanterns, the children’s party was about to begin. There were perhaps twenty of us in all, and mutually acquainted.

“Later,” the youth declared, firmly, “you may dance, if we can drag the piano out of my revered uncle’s studio; but for the moment the games of

childhood must engross us!”

My memories of poor M. Griggio, as a melancholy Lord Fauntleroy—with mustache—changed by the exigencies of the game into a doleful Sally Waters; of him as the grease on the axle, revolving at every call but his own, in Family Coach; of his determination that we should play Post Office, for the little man was impulsive in his amours, and greatly smitten by Little Miss Muffet—these things must pass by as irrelevant.

Thus we come to that last great game of the party—what M. Griggio termed: “Billee, Billee—the Button!”

“Any one got a loose button about ’em?” young Bertrand demanded loudly. “Never mind—I’ll fetch—”

Somebody interposed: “Here’s one, right in the doorway! I kicked it coming in.”

It was a brown bone button, and we formed a circle to deal with it according to rule. M. Griggio, being denied Post Office, squeezed in beside me—as nearly opposite Miss Muffet as possible—and with eyes only for her and the two Buster Browns, who had, with twinly divination, ousted him from beside her.

One or two others, tired of the childish games, and anxious to be dancing, wandered restlessly about.

“Billy, Billy Button—who’s got the button?”

We began the feverish circulation from one to another, hands behind our backs to receive and pass on.

“Billy, Billy Button—”

Round we went, shrieking out laughter, the one who was “It” making wild diagonal dashes.

I did not see two of the non-players steal out. They had gone to peep in the key-hole of the studio, with designs on the piano.

I did see them come back to signal to young Bertrand; and I heard distant sounds as of straining, creaking wood. But the game was fast and furious now.

“Billy, Billy Button—who’s got the button?”

Young Bertrand’s face seemed to hang suspended above us, and gradually we grasped the fact that something was amiss.

“That—that button!” he said, with a grave stammer. “Who’s got it now?”

No one spoke.

“I’d like to have it—please!” He paused, then launched his bomb.

“My uncle—” he gulped. “My uncle is lying dead on the floor of his studio! We forced the door. There has been a struggle—a button has evidently been torn from his coat! If some one will give up the button we can make sure.”

I stammered: “A brown bone button?”

“A brown bone button,” Bertrand answered, solemnly. “Somebody—please!”

We looked at one another, a pale, dazed circle. But nobody handed out the missing object. The button had disappeared!

IV

Poor M. Griggio! One would have thought he had, indeed, seen a ghost. He remained—caught in the terrible, fascinating clutch of the thing—after the others had gone.

Young Bertrand, himself as pale as a sheet, urged me to stay with him, refusing other offers of assistance. He permitted M. Griggio to remain, as one would humor a child.

“You know Dr. Terriss well,” Bertrand said to me, appealingly. “Fetch him up directly, there’s a good fellow. I’ve sent for our own man, MacPherson. We’ll leave things just as they are until they come!”

His voice hoarsened. “I’ve been a fool, blabbing about what I’d do with the estate if the old uncle got bumped off—all in a joke—but people will talk. You can’t stop silly gabble!”

He pounced suddenly on M. Griggio, and shook him. “What do you mean—staring at me that way—you little rat?”

“It is he who profits, yes—that is suspected!” the poor little man declared, as if his thoughts came up from some vasty deep, and oblivious, it seemed, to both the insult and the shaking.

Then, as if the word had reached and stabbed his consciousness—

“Rat—*rat!*” His teeth gleamed. “My God, no—but crazy fools, yes—dressed up—Boy Blue, Lord Fauntleroy with mustache; little kid from the family of Katzenjammer. And beyond the door—death!”

He began to giggle hysterically.

“Come, and we’ll telephone,” I said, catching his arm, and bringing him around by the need for action. His hysteria died on his lips, but we stood for a moment, listening tensely.

Echoes of that horrid giggle retreated down the corridor, were caught and thrown back by the impish ghosts of the great stair-case, losing themselves, at last, upstairs and down, in faintly mocking laughter.

In my journalistic days, when he was deputy, I had done Coroner Terriss a

considerable service, and I knew he would be quick to respond, now. He came right up, on the heels of the family physician.

Their evident amusement at our childish costumes quickly gave place to professional gravity at our news. We followed them into the studio.

M. Griggio caught my arm at sight of the still figure on the floor, the head a little matted with crimson in the light of a nearby globe.

The room was, like the others, immense, and even more severe. Four plain walls, scantily hung with pictures; a couch, a few chairs, and, in the center of the great space, the desk where old Bertrand had worked, and, close by, a grand piano.

This instrument supplanted the upright model of his more modest days, which stood—open for use as well—against one wall. It was a memento with which he refused to part.

Entrance or exit to the room could be had in two ways only. There was the large oak door leading to the hallway, and a French window at the opposite end, opening onto a small balcony.

The third wall, forming part of the front of the house, was fitted with several high windows, quite overgrown with vines. The fourth wall was broken only by the couch and the upright piano, two small pictures, and a signal rope for the summoning of the servants.

The two doctors made a careful examination of the body. Dr. Terriss arose at last, and snapped his glasses into their case with a look of relief.

“Heart disease, gentlemen!” he pronounced. “A sudden seizure, not uncommon in men of his age—and, I understand from Dr. MacPherson, something to which he was subject.”

“Correct,” his confrere agreed.

“In falling, he evidently hit his head against the edge of the piano.” Coroner Terriss touched the polished corner. “You will observe a slight trace of the accident here. I think it will be quite sufficient for Dr. MacPherson to give the usual death certificate—that is—” He paused and regarded us. “That is, unless you gentlemen have any reason to wish a more formal investigation?”

Bertrand coughed nervously, and glanced at me. M. Griggio, like a man transfixed, was staring at the body of his contemporary, and I knew instinctively that the focal point of his gaze was that missing button on the coat.

Then his eyes, too, forced themselves away and met mine—as if it were my place to speak.

Just why I made the gesture at that moment, I do not know, but some nervous impulse sent my hands into the ridiculous pockets of my child's costume.

My right hand touched something round and solid.

All I could do in that dazed moment was to shake my head quite stupidly. M. Griggio nodded in sympathy. Bertrand said: "I am quite in agreement!"

We lifted the body to the couch by the wall, and covered it reverently with a sheet that Bertrand fetched. Then the doctors withdrew for a professionally friendly chat.

Above the couch hung the silken bell-pull, or rather signal cord, with which the composer had been wont to summon his domestics. Bertrand pulled it now, and bade the woman who appeared, by means of gestures, to serve refreshment to the doctors. He stood in the doorway so that she could not see the couch.

He presently followed her, attending to the doctors, and finished with them as their host. They made their adieus and left. We heard their final cheerful "Good night" to each other, and the sound of their cars on the gravel driveway.

Bertrand rejoined us. He was shivering a little; a cold blast seemed to have entered with him. The house appeared suddenly of a new immensity; the atmosphere clammy as death itself.

He said moodily: "Well, should we have told them?"

"No! No!" M. Griggio snapped, with a suggestion of his former hysteria.

He controlled himself to declare: "All professional men—doctors, lawyers—in especial I may say musicians—are fools. It is better not. The button has gone. We will forget it!"

My hand went guiltily to my right pocket as he spoke, and now, again by a nervous impulse, I jerked it out.

And a little round object fell to the floor and went rolling across the uncarpeted, polished space, bringing up under the couch with its sheeted figure.

Bertrand sprang forward and picked it up. He stood with the little brown button in his hand, staring palely at us.

"It came from my pocket," I said soberly, steadying myself with an effort,

“but how it got there you know as well as I!”

We continued to stare almost stupidly at one another, we three, caught in the immensities of the great old house, while the far, faint rumble of the city’s life seemed to retreat still further. It was like a receding tide on a foggy day, when the shore is lost in shrouding mist, and only a little mysterious whisper comes from the sea.

V

“You understand,” said young Bertrand, “it was undoubtedly *torn* from him. See!”

He drew down the sheet, and we gathered about.

“The cloth is old,” the youth continued. “Like the piano, he would not discard it! I have no doubt the button, too, was loose, but it tore the cloth before the thread gave!”

M. Griggio broke from us with one of his quick impulses, and ran to the French window.

“Locked!” he cried. “Locked on the inside, as was the door! But, yes, you will observe—whoever pulled the button left your good uncle alive, M. Bertrand! For a man—I ask you—can he lock a door inside, lock a window inside, after he is dead?”

I hazarded: “Then, whoever it was fled with the button through the ball, and dropped it there!”

“No!” Bertrand objected, decisively. “At four thirty my uncle was alive. I saw him enter the studio, I spoke to him, and arranged that he should not be disturbed in there. It was then he made his joke that he might raise a spook for my children’s party, though he would not attend himself. At six thirty the woman came in with tea, but he made no response to her repeated rappings, and she went away. Undoubtedly he was already dead.”

M. Griggio could not suppress a gasp, but Bertrand paid no attention.

“Between those hours—four thirty and six thirty—I myself was in the library opposite, working out the details for to-night’s affair, and reading when I tired of that. I could plainly see the studio door. If any one had come in or out, I should assuredly have noticed.”

“That is true,” I said, inanely.

“I present, therefore, another problem to supplement M. Griggio’s,” the youth announced. “Not only how did the window and door become locked behind the escaping party responsible for the button, but how came the button into the room yonder, and to the group playing the game?”

“And at last into my pocket!” I added.

A thought came to me.

“On one side of me,” I recalled, aloud, “was our friend Griggio, here—on the other—both—I don’t remember!”

M. Griggio turned on me quite furiously.

“*Peste!* You do not mean that I—?”

He appeared so excited and upset, and at the same time so ludicrous in his Lord Fauntleroy garb, that, in spite of the sheeted figure on the couch by the wall, I nearly burst out laughing.

“My dear man,” I pacified him, “let us rather put it down to the spooks—the spirits who haunt—”

“Bosh!” Bertrand exclaimed, but his face was working. “Look here, you fellows, there’s something damned queer about the whole business. I’m not much given that way, but this house—and—and everything—well, it’s getting on my nerves.”

He hesitated, and said almost shyly, “It’s so confounded late, anyhow—you might as well—stay the night. I admit I should prefer it. It’s well enough for you to joke—”

“God forbid!” I said. “With your uncle—”

“My uncle,” he retorted dryly, “would be the first to appreciate that. It’s not that. I mean,” he waved an arm, “I mean—the other thing! There are queer circles in Paris—I’ve mixed in a little—rummy things, you know—occult. I’m not built that way, but it gives you pause sometimes. If you don’t mind—”

We said we would see him through the night. The three of us made a round of the room of death—at times fairly touching elbows.

The high windows, protected sufficiently already by their heavy vines, were found all bolted within; the French window was quite secure.

We shut off the lights at last. A pale flood of moonlight at once crept in, and fell in a pool upon the floor at the bottom of the couch on which the dead man lay.

“He would rather lie so—in his beloved studio!” young Bertrand said in a low voice. “Come along!”

Somewhere in the house a clock boomed out the half hour.

“Half past twelve!” the youth observed, quietly. He closed the heavy oak

door and locked it carefully, retaining the key.

Our footfalls, as we walked along the great corridor, were magnified by echoes into the patterings and shufflings of a countless multitude.

VI

Declining a separate room, M. Griggio shared mine, and the benefit was not all his. The place seemed to be—even with the window wide open—imperfectly aired; the sheets were damp with a quite ghastly perspiration! The unshaded electric bulb cut the gloom, but in a stark and ineffectual way.

Left alone, I should have felt all the phantoms of my boyhood assailing me. M. Griggio's presence, although it was a nervous, chattering thing, was most welcome. His own timidity somehow increased my pitiful stock of courage.

The grotesqueness of our costumes, caught in a queer, nebulous way by the dusty mirrors, did not help. Bertrand brought night apparel for us, and a dressing gown of his uncle's with one of his own.

M. Griggio regarded the dead man's possession with concern, and was quite willing that I should use it. He himself, enswathed in young Bertrand's gown, looked scarcely less ridiculous than before—a Lord Fauntleroy—with a mustache—turned into a little, unshaven monk.

We climbed in between the clammy sheets. Bertrand stood with his hand on the switch until we were under the coverlets, then he shut off the light.

"You won't mind?" he suggested. "This room connects with mine—you won't mind if I leave the door open between? Thanks! Good night."

His figure, bathed in its lower portion by moonlight, remained for a moment, then disappeared.

That was my last impression, for the bed was deep and really comfortable, and, in spite of everything, I slept. When I awoke, with M. Griggio tugging at my arm in a terrified way, it seemed to me that Bertrand was still standing there, and that I must have dropped off only for a moment.

But the moonlight had now crept up, and was falling full upon his head. The expression on his face I shall not soon forget, awake or asleep.

It was one of utmost fear—not the fear that a threat of violence might produce, but that subtle thing—fear of the unseen, the mysterious—that grips and throttles, and sets the hair at the nape of the neck bristling, animal-like.

He came, with swift, silent steps, across the floor to the bed.

“Sorry to disturb you,” he said in mechanical politeness, and then, with a catch in his voice: “There’s something damned queer afoot!”

He gripped my arm. “You’d swear we locked the—the room up completely? No—no one could get in, could they?”

I shook my head. M. Griggio sat up, trembling so that the whole great bed began to be affected into a quiver.

“The woman—Mrs. Moggins,” Bertrand explained, “has just come and wakened me. She wasn’t sleeping well, and once, when she was wakeful, just now— There’s a signal right in their room, you know, so that *if he wanted anything in the night—*”

He paused, and my flesh crept most horribly.

“You understand,” he went on in a low voice, “the signal shows, by a number, where the service is required—the dining room, the library, and so on. Mrs. Moggins saw a light when she awoke. *It was a call from the studio!*”

We threw on our borrowed gowns, M. Griggio refusing at first either to go or to be left, but in the end following—a quaking, unshaven monk.

We descended to the servants’ quarters. There was the light on the signal board, showing at No. 7.

“The studio right enough!” Bertrand confirmed. “Well—we must investigate.”

Ascending the stairs, we tiptoed along the corridor, unlocked the studio door with undisguised trepidation, opened it, and entered. The moonlight now had crept up from the foot of the couch on which the sheeted figure lay. It fell upon the recumbent, white-covered form, it touched the head—

“My God!” young Bertrand cried, snapping on the lights now. “Look! Look! His face! The sheet!”

He did not need to explain. We had completely covered the corpse with the sheet. Now, in the moonlight and the pale electricity, the face of the dead man was exposed, staring up calmly—almost with a smile, we fancied—at the signal rope just above his head!

We went over every inch of that room for possible exits, entrances, explanations. There was nothing to furnish the slightest clew.

We tapped the walls, and examined the floor. With the aid of a flash light, we peered under the couch on which the body lay, moved the other scant furniture—even to the pianos. There was nothing!

What we had expected to find I do not know. Our activities came from a desperate need for action, for investigation—a search for the material explanation of the unseen!

“I say,” Bertrand declared at last, “if this thing should happen again, we’ll be right on hand. We’ll lock the door, leaving the key on the outside, and watch from across the hall. I’ll set Mrs. Moggins watching below for the signal, and let her bang the dinner gong—which we’ll have handy for her—the instant it shows again.”

To this we agreed.

I do not know how you who read this feel about it—whether I have made vivid our feelings to your perceptions and sympathies. I do know that as I write—even now—my scalp begins to prickle with the remembrance of that time of waiting.

The clock struck two, I recall, as we sat shivering in that great, cold, moonlit house, just within the library door. We began, I think, to doze a little in spite of our tenseness, when, suddenly, we were all alert. We had reason to be!

The piano in the studio began to play.

At first it was the halting, one-finger exercise of a beginner; then it began to gather body and meaning. The scattered notes became united in a racing arpeggio, down the scale, up the scale, down again—then stopped abruptly.

“Quick!” Bertrand cried, rallying our dazed senses; and at the same moment a fearful reverberation struck across the silence to dismay us.

With the inability of the deaf, Mrs. Moggins did not realize what a din she was making. The elder Bertrand had brought from his Far Eastern travel a queer, vibrating gong, and the old house seemed now to shiver with the weird, primitive music of it.

Young Bertrand sprang for the studio door, and we followed breathlessly. He flashed on the lights.

“It’s trickery!” I exclaimed, for the thing hit me that way suddenly. “Your uncle is spoofing us! It’s some uncanny joke of his!”

For there he was, lying on the couch, it is true, but with the sheet trailing on the floor, and only partly covering his legs. He was, for all the world, like a mischievous boy feigning sleep, but surprised before he could quite replace the covers!

The youth sharply clutched my shoulder. "I've seen queer things—and he—he said he might raise up a spook for us to-night, but—but—"

He hesitated, then sprang to his uncle's side, touching the body, shaking it, then beckoning us over.

"It's death, of course!" he said. "He's cold—cold. But look—look there!"

Young Bertrand's face was gray-blue itself.

The dead man was gazing up with what seemed to us a calm mockery. Above his head the signal rope was still swaying a little, as if the hand that pulled it had only just withdrawn its grasp!

"A current of air," I ventured, feebly, "might blow that!"

"Where from?" Bertrand demanded, and then, swooping forward to the desk that stood near the grand piano: "The same one, I suppose, that knocked these down!"

He stooped to pick up some papers that, since our last entrance, had fallen to the floor. One he clung to and let the others drop.

"His will!" he said, wonderingly. "He had it out—did he expect then—? I say, there's a blot here—a fresh blot. He was about to make some change."

We stooped over it. It was evident, from even superficial examination, that the blot was quite recent. It stood there opposite a clause that caught our instant attention: "to my contemporary, M. Griggio, my upright piano—"

M. Griggio's eyes grew big. He seized the paper and read it for himself.

"Oh, my poor friend! My poor friend, Bertrand!" he moaned.

Young Bertrand folded up the papers, piled them neatly, and said with a weary gesture: "Let's go to bed! I'm in a maze! Perhaps in the morning we'll be sane."

He drew a hand across his forehead.

"I am not one to believe silly things," he added, "but in the morning—in the morning I shall have my poor uncle's body removed to a mortuary. I shall dismiss the servants. I shall lock up this house, and give instructions for its sale!"

"Yes, yes!" M. Griggio cried, rubbing his hands nervously and blinking. "You are quite right."

Bertrand went swiftly over to the two pianos in turn, shutting them up. He left the room and returned with two rugs—he threw one over each of the

instruments.

I shivered, for the sight of the sheeted musician, and the two instruments thus covered, struck me cold.

“To-morrow,” he repeated gravely, returning to us and preparing to lock up the place again, “I shall vacate, and put up the house and furniture for sale by auction. Your piano, of course, will be sent over to you, M. Griggio!”

“The piano!” the little man exclaimed. “But no—no—no! I cannot! I will not! What if his spirit came there to play? Oh, *mon Dieu! Monsieur*, you do not understand my feeling!”

Bertrand stared at the pitiable, cringing figure, the protruding eyes, the sweating brow; and suddenly he turned on me a curious, reflective look.

“Nevertheless,” he said, crisply, “it is my uncle’s wish, M. Griggio. And the piano will be delivered to your apartment!”

VII

M. Griggio had luncheon with me on the day the piano was removed.

“So small a place, and two pianos!” he groaned. “But what shall I do? From a dead friend—there are the decencies, are there not? And young M. Bertrand is insistent!”

He fanned himself agitatedly with a menu card. I remember it as an exceptionally sultry day; my own spirits were so depressed by the atmosphere that I made no attempt to rally the little man, except by an indolent mention of my scenario that he was to transform into a musical play.

“*Peste!*” M. Griggio cried. “That stupid thing!”

So I knew that even my luncheons were, for the moment, uninteresting to him. I might have snapped the tenuous thread of our noon hour relationship then and there, but for an almost annoying fondness I had for him. He wiped my soup from the ends of his mustache, and glared up at me.

“You should have got him to do it—before his genius was taken from the world! His fripperies and trickeries might have garnished its stupidity! Pah! This cheap napkin tastes of starch!

“To-day, only to-day,” M. Griggio continued, throwing the offending napery aside, “I have learned of it! His new composition—to be posthumously produced—I know how it will be—the critics will proclaim it as superb, bemoan the cutting off of genius, and silly women will read the reviews and weep and buy, and our young friend Bertrand will make a fresh fortune. So much for the dead.”

“Speak well of those who have gone before,” I said, sententiously.

“What of the living?” he demanded, miserably. “A small apartment, and two pianos on which to play compositions unacclaimed by any but a few fine souls in a world of crazy banalities! Bah! I wish I were dead!”

And there, at that moment, was young Bertrand, standing over us, just as he had on another eventful day, save that his gloves were now a modest gray with broad black braiding.

“I have but a moment,” he said. “Such a life, adjusting the estate! No time

even to read my mail.”

He pulled a bundle of unopened envelopes from his pocket in confirmation.

“Hello!” he exclaimed. “Here’s one in the handwriting of Mrs. Moggins—what do they want? I paid them off generously. Well—” He thrust the bundle back into his bulging pocket. “The workmen commence to-day to tear the old place down. It is to be subdivided without delay. Your piano, professor, will arrive some time this afternoon!”

M. Griggio looked as if he just restrained himself in time from committing an atrocity.

“I shall do myself the pleasure,” Bertrand added, regarding M. Griggio sharply, “of calling this evening to see that it has been installed to your liking in your apartment, my friend!”

M. Griggio’s eyes flashed up, but his bow of acquiescence was perfect.

“If M. Bertrand can spare the time,” he said, “from the arduous duties of turning his poor uncle’s estate to account. His death has served you well, M. Bertrand, is it not so?”

The young man shot me a quick glance; his face was pale and moving.

“To-night, then,” was all he said, and hurried off.

M. Griggio put a hand on my arm.

“You will not fail me, my good friend?” he appealed. “You also will come to me—perhaps for a light meal at six, if you do not mind my bachelor cooking? I do not wish to be alone—with that man!”

I saw that he was really agitated, and agreed. Indeed, he must have wanted me badly, for I had never before been invited to share his bounty. The reason for this I discovered on my arrival. I had no previous idea how close to penury the little man was.

“It is no use!” he said, growing voluble over his scant preparations for the meal. “What is it that a few of the great—internationally—acclaim one? It is the public who control the purse strings. If I wrote tricks and fripperies—”

He had an apron tied over his suit; his tie had gone askew; perspiration ran down his thin cheeks. “You do not know what it is, perhaps, to envy—to envy—” His face was tragic; before my questioning glance he controlled himself.

“I am thinking of our young friend, Bertrand,” he said. “So much that he will have—everything; and for me—a small apartment and two pianos!”

He shot a glance at the bulking object shrouded in canvas, against the wall of his little studio. He shivered. The stormy sky outside the window, that gave on a well-like court, was not less sulphurous with the coming of darkness.

Bertrand arrived quite early in the evening. "It's an indecent hour!" he apologized. "But it's going to storm like the mischief before long. Ah—I see it got here all right! You haven't opened it yet."

He went over and touched the canvas shroud.

"If you don't mind," he said, politely, "we'll open it up and see if they misused it at all! It hasn't been touched since—that night!"

Perhaps, if the atmosphere had not lent itself, we should have felt better about it. But we shared, we three, a recurrence of that queer, shivering apprehension that the eventful night of the elder Bertrand's death had left us in.

For young Bertrand's face held a certain fixity of expression, and a pallor only exceeded by poor M. Griggio's, whose fingers worked with a desperate, fumbling haste over the fastenings. My own heart, in the stillness in which the earth seemed caught, and we with it, beat out its uneasiness like an ill-regulated clock.

The canvas shroud fell away, and the old upright piano stood exposed. It looked very innocent, and a bit shabby and somewhat shrinking beside M. Griggio's more modern instrument.

And yet I was sure, from the way Bertrand opened it and flicked imaginary dust from the keys, and how M. Griggio stared at the thing with smoldering suspicion, that they believed the ghostly music of that other night—that hesitating touching of the notes, that furious arpeggio trailing up, trailing down—had come not from the grand piano of the elder Bertrand, but from this unostentatious instrument.

But there was another subtle presence with us. Where the spirit came from, I did not quite know, but there it was—a deadly antagonism between young Bertrand and the little musician. Their eyes sought and held each other, like the rapiers of fencers, feeling the way, testing out strength and weakness.

Standing aside, I saw it all, and watched something like mockery grow in the one, and something like fear grow in the other.

"Perhaps you will try it out, professor?" Bertrand inquired at last.

"But—but no—"

“Just what are you afraid of?”

The rapier was searching for a hidden weakness. M. Griggio appeared to wilt, but he shrugged his shoulders, set a stool before the piano, and touched a key—a little, I thought, like a cat setting a tentative paw on an object of which it is not quite sure.

It was a bass note, and, as if the universe had been waiting for the signal, the storm leaped upon the city. A blinding flash of light filled the court area; there was an explosive crackle, and the lights went out.

M. Griggio sprang away from the piano as if, with that touch, he had, indeed, precipitated the thing.

By the light of successive flashes we found a single candle, cut it in two, and with the aid of saucers provided ourselves with a feeble light. We sat around, for the most part in silence, until the storm had rolled itself away to the east.

“Well,” Bertrand remarked, “that’s that! We can have our music now!”

With what seemed to me a calm impertinence, he took the candles off their saucers, and set one on each side of the piano keys. M. Griggio arose as if hypnotized, and went to the piano again. His white, sensitive fingers hovered over the keys; they descended—and a curious scattering of notes resulted.

We saw him start back, touch a key speculatively, another, another—no sound came! A shiver ran down my spine. I glanced at young Bertrand; his face in the candle gleam was full of mystification touched with fear.

M. Griggio seemed to gather all his courage together. He drew his right hand with a sweeping motion from treble to bass—and the scattered notes became united in a racing arpeggio. Down the scale it swept, and up again!

In a terrible fascination his fingers ran, his solitary little diamond glittering like an evil eye—up—down—and only those notes would play that had made the sweeping arpeggio of the room of death!

It seemed to sweep M. Griggio along, up he went, down again, until my head reeled.

“Stop!” I cried. “For God’s sake, stop!”

He spun round on the stool, clapped his hands to his head, and stared at us. Then he got slowly to his feet.

“You heard—it—too?” he said, almost stupidly. “His trickery again—his trickery—the people fell for it while he lived, and now it follows—follows—”

He faced young Bertrand, pointing. “Don’t look at me that way! I—I pulled that button from his coat, telling him to his face he was a joker with a sacred art. It fell on the floor and lay there, the brown button from his coat. Yes, yes—it was my fault—I killed him! It is true. It was I, M. Griggio, who is true to his art—in poverty. It was I who killed M. Bertrand, the musical trickster!”

VIII

I do not know how long we sat there, young Bertrand and I silent at the confession; little M. Griggio huddled in an emotional heap in an armchair. Now that he had wormed it out of M. Griggio—after a groping suspicion, as he afterward confided—the youth seemed as horrified as I myself was.

But when he spoke, it was to ask a curious question.

“The button, M. Griggio,” he said. “You say you saw it on the floor. You picked it up, then, and brought it away?”

The little man looked up, and, as if he had exhausted his emotion, his face became a mask.

“It was on the floor,” he replied. “There I left it.” He got up and started to pace the room.

“You must understand,” he continued, “it was when you told me, that day, of the new composition that was to be so great, something snapped in me. I thought ‘Here he will be great again—money—everything! I will go and see for myself what he has.’ He handed me the finished composition. I had but to glance—there were the tricks, clever as the devil—jokes on the thing I love! I called him names. I threw his papers on the floor and stamped on them. He tried to interfere; I caught at his coat like a crazy man—the button came off in my hand. Then I—I ran away—I saw him calmly close the French window.”

Young Bertrand cried: “Then you left him—alive!”

M. Griggio stared. “I left him so, but his heart could not stand such things as I had done.”

I think we both cried together: “But you did not kill him!”

“Because of me he died,” M. Griggio declared simply. “Has not his spirit followed me—to taunt me—after death?”

“By gad!” Bertrand exclaimed. “The piano!”

We both ran to it, and he lifted the top.

“Look!” he cried. “One of my poor uncle’s little jokes. The notes are muffled inside, all except those that make the arpeggio. Anybody passing a

hand along the keys would get the same result!”

I said grimly: “At two in the morning, in a locked room, occupied only by a corpse, what hand was it that played the arpeggio? Answer that!”

M. Griggio came suddenly to life.

“Ah, it was different—that arpeggio! Like this, see?” He ran his hand in a skipping fashion down the notes. “Irregular—so! You see?”

Bertrand caught him by the lapel. “That button, professor—you left it on the floor. How, then, did it get into our friend’s pocket?”

M. Griggio looked confused.

“I put it there,” he confessed. “I had it when you came to tell us—of your poor uncle—and I was frightened. I slipped it in the nearest pocket—it was my friend here, who always helps me out of scrapes!”

“But how did it get out of the studio?”

M. Griggio shrugged his shoulders.

“And how,” I broke in, “did the signal go twice, and the sheet move off the face of the dead man?”

We stared at one another, with a little prickling sensation returning to our scalps. Suddenly Bertrand leaned over the keys of the piano.

“What the devil,” he cried, “is this on the keys, stuck in between, and in the corners?” A greenish, powdery stuff, like dried herbs, it was.

“I’m a fool, a blind fool!” he exclaimed.

He snatched an envelope from his pocket and pulled out a letter. “From Mrs. Moggins,” he said. “A request, if I will be so kind—but here, I’ll read the part:

“In closing up the studio we found a favorite kitten of your poor uncle’s—a lively little thing, but half starved. It used to spend most of its time in under the couch, where, the lining being torn, there was a good hiding place. It was a timid thing, except with your uncle, and it used to play about in a great way when he was alone. We took the liberty of taking the poor thing along, thinking he’d like it well looked after.”

“We are three fools!” Bertrand cried. “My uncle wins after all, with his spooks! There’s the button, found by some one in the hall outside, and there’s

a crack under the door—and did you ever notice the fascination of a crack to a kitten with a loose object to play with? And there was the signal rope, tempting in the moonlight, an easy jump for a kitten from the sheeted figure—swaying the second time.”

“Aha!” M. Griggio exclaimed, relievedly.

“But the music?” I interrupted.

He grinned.

“That was the only prepared part,” he said, “and quite typical of my uncle’s jokes. No doubt he intended to come out of the studio—and behind him the ‘ghostly’ piano would be playing. Come here!”

He caught my arm, and led me to the instrument.

“Catnip!” he announced. “Scattered from one end of the keys to the other. An irregular arpeggio for the kitten to race over in its ecstasy.”

THE END

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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of "*Billee, Billee--the Button!*" by Leslie Gordon Barnard]