All is Blackness

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By Margaret Woods •

A Macabre Tale of Dark Music and a Love Distorted into Hate.

THE MUSIC came softly, almost stealthily through the gloom. The shadows were deep and with the last shafts of sunlight formed an ethereal vapor-like haze which surrounded the great piano and its player silhouetted black against the dying sun. The figure swayed as she caressed the keys with slender white fingers that eased the music from the great instrument as though it were a tenuous spirit that filled the room with shapes and thoughts of changing and fantastic moods. She played on, her head thrown back, and her eyes closed. As she drew forth this song so vague in melody and
form, she repeated in a low, dreamy voice the *Kubla Khan*. Softly and like velvet the words came—

"Weave a circle 'round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise."

As the smooth and throaty voice died away, the music stopped, and she sat still, thrilling to the beauty of her dreams.

**SHARPLY** a baby’s cry came through the open door distorting her mystic serenity like rough shears on satin. The woman’s hand dramatically clutched at her throat, and she became rigidly tense. With a slow, almost reluctant flutter her eyes opened revealing black, brooding pools that seemed to enshadow all else in the room by their brilliance. She rose and with taut, jerky steps strode to the door. There she stopped. Her whole being seemed to be transformed, for she relaxed, unclenched her white fists, and her eyes became veiled with an unconcerned coolness.

In a voice several notes higher than that in which she had spoken while in her revery, she called the maid. “Marie, please look after the baby. His crying annoys me. When Mr. Mitchel comes home, we’ll have dinner in the garden.” She turned and swept through the French doors to the terrace, her filmy tea gown flowing like mist around her slim figure.

Derbin Mitchell came home a few minutes later. He was a gay yet rather earnest young man whose greatest difficulty was to keep from being too popular with the expensive country club crowd in the near-by city. His bland and boyish seriousness was the pride of the Rotary and Lions, and he was the mainstay of the local Junior Chamber of Commerce. With long, happy strides his tall trim figure swung through the door and down the hall. After flinging his hat on a chair, he called, “Debora, Oh Debby.” Going to the French doors, he called again.

Her answer came coolly, “Yes, dear.”

“Oh hello. Having dinner out here? That’s swell. Isn’t it a grand day? Makes me feel like walking all over the country
side.” He went to her and kissed her warmly, for he was genuinely glad to be home with her again. “Shall I wash now, or isn’t dinner ready yet?”

TURNING to her book, she answered, “Yes, go now.” As he turned and walked away, her whole attention was on his back. Her eyes again became dark and glowing. Grasping the arms of her chair with her thin hands till the knuckles showed white, she sat rigidly staring at him. That easy self-assurance, that gaiety and charm that had so fascinated her now filled her with a loathing mixed with a wild and hateful desire to avenge her own feeling of inadequacy to live in this environment.

Derbin and the baby seemed to her the great and heavy chains that held her in the midst of this routine of small-town life. She hated the possessive way the little boy clung to her finger as though he had every right to demand all of her, and she hated the way he nestled on her shoulder when the stiff nurse would bring him down to say goodnight and Derbin insisted that she hold him. And Derbin—his gaiety and calmness stifled her. When she would feel a need to go to her music and pour out her own desires and dreams, he’d call in his laughing voice that he’d planned for them to go with his friends. The way he would bite at the corners of his mouth as he kicked at imaginary objects when she always told him that she had a headache and would have to be excused, annoyed her most of all. Why should he act as though she should give up her own greatest pleasure to go out with him and his silly friends? He had no right to expect her to, and what’s more he’d never be able to get her to. There was her source of power that answered her problem of living in this intolerable place. She’d not do what he expected her to. He was blind to her great genius—blind to her power to rebel. He was as blind and helpless as a white mouse in a gas attack when faced with this new power of hers. That was what all of these people were trying to do to her—poison her—stifle her, but they’d soon find themselves the victims for she’d rebel and be free
of them. Free—free. She'd go far away to her dear Colin who alone understood her. Only his genius matched hers, and he could teach her again as he had those past few weeks.

AFTER dinner Derbin and Debora lingered a few moments.  
"Derbin, my dear," she began, "I want to go away. I can't study my music with the baby, and Marie always crowding in . . . I want to be where this eternal routine can't reach me."

"Why dear, I didn't know you felt that way about it. You came home only three weeks ago, and I've hardly seen you at all." And he added hurriedly, "You know we've both been so busy."

She waited a moment and then said, "Derbin, I can't stand it. This having the baby crying, and Marie snooping around is driving me mad. I know she sneaks in—watches me while I play. I tell you I can't and I won't stand it! It's not my fault that I'm caged here!

"There, there, Debby darling, of course. We'll go away together. Wherever you say."

Just then Marie came to the door and called Derbin to the phone. Debora rose, that same haunted, wild look on her face. Of course he'd suggest they take a trip. What did he know of genius, of a spirit that could reach paradise and absorb its beauty. He couldn't share that, yet he'd insist upon coming with her so that she couldn't have it either. What was the use of asking to go away? He'd never want her to be free of him. That was it—he'd seen her discontent and had planned to go with her so she couldn't be with Colin and her music. He was the one that was to blame. No, not he; it was the baby, for it it weren't for him, Derbin wouldn't be so concerned and possessive.

ABOUT one that night Derbin awoke. As his consciousness crept up through his body to his numb brain, it brought a realization that some one was in the room. Since Debora no longer shared his room, he knew it wasn't she; he felt also with some uncanny intuition that it was a stranger. He heard no breathing, no noise, and he could see no moving shadows
as he lay on his side, but there was a pressure, a weight on his feet. As he rose on his elbow a cloud fled from the moon, and the pale, lurid light coming through the window revealed a woman's figure sitting on the edge of his bed. In the yellow-green light her features were like a marble mask—perfect and yet infinitely cold. Her lips were moving though no sound came forth, and her long dark hair fell about her shoulders like a shroud. Her great eyes, the only living things in that beautiful expressionless face, seemed to blaze with the phosphorescent glow of the stalking cat's. They seemed to burn into Derbin's heart as though desirous of consuming and destroying it. Suddenly there was a pain in his breast like that caused when a knife is plunged deep and twisted. He lunged forward with a look of agonized pleading on his bewildered face.

"Debby, darling, what is it!"

Instantly as he spoke that look of deep, far-away complexity and hatred fled from her face, and she was again masked in her usual calm composure.

"Oh—oh it's nothing. I was just nervous and couldn't sleep so I came here to be near you. Don't let me bother you. Good night, my dear." She rose and quickly left the room.

EVEN after she left Derbin felt a restless motion as vague and inaudible as dreams still lingering in the room. He fell back on his pillow. His heavy eyebrows formed a long bushy line across his forehead, and his mouth twitched as he lay there thinking. Had there after all been something abnormal and queer in the way Debora had looked at him? Had it been hatred or fear that had caused her eyes to burn till they seemed to scorch his very thoughts? She had been there—or had she? Was it a dream—oh no, it had been real, for his heart was still pounding, and there was that chilled, stabbing pain in his breast that prevented him from breathing calmly. Surely she had been merely nervous as she had said and wanted to be near him. Maybe it had been that gruesome light that had given her face that fantastic resemblance to cold marble. Yes, but that didn't explain her eyes and that queer feeling when he awoke that there had been a stranger in the
room. What was it? His thoughts went on and on in this seemingly endless fashion until they became more and more disconnected and finally blended into a changing black background for his dreams.

The house again was still, but it was a stillness that seemed born of intention rather than calmness. The moonlight faded and left the rooms in thick blackness as though a great dark cloud filled the house hiding some furtive movement. It was now near morning though there was yet no greying to relieve the inky sky. Suddenly Derbin’s eyes opened. They stared through the darkness that seemed shot with tiny pin points of light. With one quick action, he threw the covers back and sprang to the floor. He heard nothing, but was conscious of an uncanny feeling that the air about him was like a black spell damp and chill as though seeping out from a tomb. As he stood there taut and rigid every nerve seemed alive and electrified by the tension. It came, almost inaudibly at first, but it grew very definitely until it seemed to be a soft throbbing. It became louder until he identified it as a low hollow chuckle. As he raced from his room and down the hall to the nursery it grew and grew until it was shrill yet throaty cry. Derbin threw the door open. Debby stood there near the crib with her back to the door. Her long hair was still about her shoulders but it seemed now like a blue-black serpent as it moved with her swaying body. Her long white fingers, opening and closing like a cat’s paws when sharpening its nails, clutched the side of the baby’s bed. Sensing that someone was watching her, she whirled around. Her eyes were again the great brooding pools but they now held a new look of triumph. Seeing Derbin she laughed louder, stretching her hands out for him to see. They were still opening and contracting.

“I’ve smothered him with my hands. With my own wonderful hands. I always said I would.” They both stood there as though transfixed watching those strong white fingers. Her eyes were opening and narrowing in rhythm with her hands. Her voice fell to a whisper, “I’m free—I’m free!” She sang it
like a chant, her body swaying to the measured beat of her voice. Suddenly she screamed in a piercing mad voice, "Don't you understand—I’m free!" Her laughter again throbbed like the beating of tom-toms and filled the room with a great, pulsing rhythm until it seemed a thing alive.

Silas Speaks

An Interpretation of Robert Frost's
"The Death of the Hired Man"

By George W. Woster

My thoughts are mixed, of course; these last few days
I've lived my life in memory so often,
I see the faces of people I'd forgotten.
There's Harold Wilson; I thought him a fool,
Yet he was wise enough to earn his living
By teaching other fools his brand of folly;
Yet if that crowd of college boys I saw
Bumming and hiking give him much competition,
He'll find it hard to keep his lucky job—
May yet be pitching hay to earn a living.

I'm glad the window's open; I can hear her
Trying to make him feel kindly toward me.
She's been my friend, God bless her! My own Mary
Would be like that today if she had lived.
If she had lived! I'd not be here like this;
On charity, no home to call my own,
Nor would I, dying, still have bitter feelings
Toward my own brother, who delayed the loan
Of money needed for her operation
Until it was too late, and Mary died.