

imagine that you had composed it, and at the same time you had to imagine that the public were hearing it for the first time. "Do you think," he said, "do you really think that any outsider has ever got half as great a thrill from a symphony as the composer himself when he first heard his work played by a full orchestra?"

"No," she answered timidly. "Of course not."

"Then become the composer! Steal his music! Take it away from him and give it to yourself!" He leaned back in his chair and for the first time she saw him smile. He had only just thought of this new complex explanation of his conduct, but to him it seemed a very good one and he smiled. "Well, what do you think, Miss Darlington?"

"I must say it's very very interesting." She was polite and puzzled but she was a long way away from him now.

"Would you like to try?"

"Oh no. Please."

"I wish you would."

"I'm afraid I don't think I should be able to feel the same way as you do about it, Mr Botibol. I don't think I have a strong enough imagination."

She could see from his eyes he was disappointed. "But I'd love to sit in the audience and listen while you do it," she added.

Then he leapt up from his chair. "I've got it!" he cried. "A piano concerto! You play the piano, I conduct. You the greatest pianist, the greatest in the world. First performance of my Piano Concerto No .1. You playing, me conducting. The greatest pianist and the greatest composer together for the first time. A tremendous occasion! The audience will go mad! There'll be queuing all night outside the hall to get in. It'll be broadcast around the world. It'll, it'll..." Mr Botibol stopped. He stood behind the chair with both hands resting on the back of the chair and suddenly he looked embarrassed and a trifle sheepish. "I'm sorry," he said, "I get worked up. You see how it is. Even the thought of another performance gets me worked up." And then plaintively, "Would you, Miss Darlington, would you play a piano concerto with me?"

"It's like children," she said, but she smiled.

"No one will know. No one but us will know anything about it."

"All right," she said at last. "I'll do it. I think I'm daft but just the same I'll do it. It'll be a bit of a lark."

"Good!" Mr Botibol cried. "When? Tonight?"

"Oh well, I don't.."

"Yes," he said eagerly. "Please. Make it tonight. Come back and have dinner here with me and we'll give the concert afterwards." Mr Botibol was excited again now. "We must make a few plans. Which is your favourite piano concerto, Miss Darlington?"

"Oh well, I should say Beethoven's Emperor."

"The Emperor it shall be. You will play it tonight. Come to dinner at seven. Evening dress. You must have evening dress for the concert."

"I've got a dancing dress but I haven't worn it for years."

"You shall wear it tonight." He paused and looked at her in silence for a moment, then quite gently, he said, "You're not worried, Miss Darlington? Perhaps you would rather not do it. I'm afraid, I'm afraid I've let myself get rather carried away. I seem to have pushed you into this. And I know how stupid it must seem to you." That's better, she thought. That's much better. Now I know it's all right. "Oh no," she said. "I'm really looking forward to it. But you frightened me a bit, taking it all so seriously."

When she had gone, he waited for five minutes, then went out into the town to the gramophone shop and bought the records of the Emperor Concerto, conductor, Toscanini--soloist, Horowitz. He returned at once, told his astonished butler that there would be a guest for dinner, then went upstairs and changed into his tails.

She arrived at seven. She was wearing a long sleeveless dress made of some shiny green material and to Mr Botibol she did not look quite so plump or quite so plain as before. He took her straight in to dinner and in spite of the silent disapproving manner in which Mason prowled around the table, the meal went well. She protested gaily when Mr Botibol gave her a second glass of wine, but she didn't refuse it. She chattered away almost without a stop throughout the three courses and Mr Botibol listened and nodded and kept refilling her glass as soon as it was half empty.

Afterwards, when they were seated in the living-room, Mr Botibol said, "Now Miss Darlington, now we begin to fall into our parts." The wine, as usual, had made him happy, and the girl, who was even less used to it than the man, was not feeling so bad either. "You, Miss Darlington, are the great pianist. What is your first name, Miss Darlington?"

"Lucille," she said. "The great pianist Lucille Darlington. I am the composer Botibol. We must talk and act and think as though we are pianist and composer."

"What is your first name, Mr Botibol? What does the A stand for?"

"Angel," he answered.

"Not Angel."

"Yes," he said irritably.

"Angel Botibol," she murmured and she began to giggle. But she checked herself and said, "I think it's a most unusual and distinguished name."

"Are you ready, Miss Darlington?"

"Yes."

Mr Botibol stood up and began pacing nervously up and down the room. He looked at his watch. "It's nearly time to go on," he said. "They tell me

the place is packed. Not an empty seat anywhere. I always get nervous before a concert. Do you get nervous, Miss Darlington?"

"Oh yes, I do, always. Especially playing with you."

"I think they'll like it. I put everything I've got into this concerto, Miss Darlington. It nearly killed me composing it. I was ill for weeks afterwards."

"Poor you," she said.

"It's time now," he said. "The orchestra are all in their places. Come on." He led her out and down the passage, then he made her wait outside the door of the concert-hall while he nipped in, arranged the lighting and switched on the gramophone. He came back and fetched her and as they walked on to the stage, the applause broke out. They both stood and bowed towards the darkened auditorium and the applause was vigorous and it went on for a long time. Then Mr Botibol mounted the dais and Miss Darlington took her seat at the piano. The applause died down. Mr Botibol held up his baton. The next record dropped and the Emperor Concerto began.

It was an astonishing affair. The thin stalk-like Mr Botibol, who had no shoulders, standing on the dais in his evening clothes waving his arms about in approximate time to the music; and the plump Miss Darlington in her shiny green dress seated at the keyboard of the enormous piano thumping the silent keys with both hands for all she was worth. She recognized the passages where the piano was meant to be silent, and on these occasions she folded her hands primly on her lap and stared straight ahead with a dreamy and enraptured expression on her face. Watching her, Mr Botibol thought that she was particularly wonderful in the slow solo passages of the Second Movement. She allowed her hands to drift smoothly and gently up and down the keys and she inclined her head first to one side, then to the other, and once she closed her eyes for a long time while she played. During the exciting last movement, Mr Botibol himself lost his balance and would have fallen off the platform had he not saved himself by clutching the brass rail. But in spite of everything, the concerto moved on majestically to its mighty conclusion. Then the real clapping came. Mr Botibol walked over and took Miss Darlington by the hand and led her to the edge of the platform, and there they stood, the two of them, bowing, and bowing, and bowing again as the clapping and the shouting of 'encore' continued. Four times they left the stage and came back, and then, the fifth time, Mr Botibol whispered, "It's you they want. You take this one alone."

"No," she said. "It's you. Please." But he pushed her forward and she took her call, and came back and said, "Now you. They want you. Can't you hear them shouting for you?" So Mr Botibol walked alone on to the stage, bowed gravely to right, left and centre and came off just as the clapping stopped altogether.

He led her straight back to the living-room. He was breathing fast and th

e sweat was pouring down all over his face. She too was a little breathless, and her cheeks were shining red.

"A tremendous performance, Miss Darlington. Allow me to congratulate you."

"But what a concerto, Mr Botibol! What a superb concerto!"

"You played it perfectly, Miss Darlington. You have a real feeling for my music." He was wiping the sweat from his face with a handkerchief. "And tomorrow we perform my Second Concerto."

"Tomorrow?"

"Of course. Had you forgotten, Miss Darlington? We are booked to appear together for a whole week."

"Oh... oh yes... I'm afraid I had forgotten that."

"But it's all right, isn't it?" he asked anxiously. "After hearing you tonight I could not bear to have anyone else play my music."

"I think it's all right," she said. "Yes, I think that'll be all right." She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. "My heavens, it's late! I must go! I'll never get up in the morning to get to work!"

"To work?" Mr Botibol said. "To work?" Then slowly, reluctantly, he forced himself back to reality. "Ah yes, to work. Of course, you have to get to work."

"I certainly do."

"Where do you work, Miss Darlington?"

"Me? Well," and now she hesitated a moment, looking at Mr Botibol. "As a matter of fact I work at the old Academy."

"I hope it is pleasant work," he said. "What Academy is that?"

"I teach the piano."

Mr Botibol jumped as though someone had stuck him from behind with a hatpin. His mouth opened very wide.

"It's quite all right," she said, smiling. "I've always wanted to be Horowitz. And could I, do you think, could I please be Schnabel tomorrow?"

Vengeance is Mine Inc.

IT was snowing when I woke up.

I could tell that it was snowing because there was a kind of brightness in the room and it was quiet outside with no footstep-noises coming up from the street and no tyre-noises but only the engines of the cars. I looked up and I saw George over by the window in his green dressing-gown, bending over the paraffin-stove, making the coffee.

"Snowing," I said.

"It's cold," George answered. "It's really cold."

I got out of bed and fetched the morning paper from outside the door. It was cold all right and I ran back quickly and jumped into bed and lay still for a while under the bedclothes, holding my hands tight between my legs for

r warmth.

"No letters?" George said.

"No. No letters."

"Doesn't look as if the old man's going to cough up."

"Maybe he thinks four hundred and fifty is enough for one month," I said.

"He's never been to New York. He doesn't know the cost of living here."

"You shouldn't have spent it all in one week."

George stood up and looked at me. "We shouldn't have spent it, you mean ."

"That's right," I said. "We." I began reading the paper.

The coffee was ready now and George brought the pot over and put it on the table between our beds. "A person can't live without money," he said. "The old man ought to know that." He got back into his bed without taking off his green dressing-gown. I went on reading. I finished the racing page and the football page and then I started on Lionel Pantaloon, the great political and society columnist. I always read Pantaloon--same as the other twenty or thirty million other people in the country. He's a habit with me; he's more than a habit; he's part of my morning, like three cups of coffee, or shaving.

"This fellow's got a nerve," I said.

"Who?"

"This Lionel Pantaloon."

"What's he saying now?"

"Same sort of thing he's always saying. Same sort of scandal. Always about the rich. Listen to this: '... seen at the Penguin Club... banker William S. Womberg with beauteous starlet Theresa Williams... three nights running... Mrs Womberg at home with a headache... which is something anyone's wife would have if hubby was out squiring Miss Williams of an evening...'

"That fixes Womberg," George said.

"I think it's a shame," I said. "That sort of thing could cause a divorce. How can this Pantaloon get away with stuff like that?"

"He always does, they're all scared of him. But if I was William S. Womberg," George said, "you know what I'd do? I'd go right out and punch this Lionel Pantaloon right on the nose. Why, that's the only way to handle those guys."

"Mr Womberg couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because he's an old man," I said. "Mr Womberg is a dignified and respectable old man. He's a very prominent banker in the town. He couldn't possibly..."

And then it happened. Suddenly, from nowhere, the idea came. It came to me in the middle of what I was saying to George and I stopped short and I

could feel the idea itself kind of flowing into my brain and I kept very quiet and let it come and it kept on coming and almost before I knew what had happened I had it all, the whole plan, the whole brilliant magnificent plan worked out clearly in my head; and right then I knew it was a beauty.

I turned and I saw George staring at me with a look of wonder on his face. "What's wrong?" he said. "What's the matter?"

I kept quite calm. I reached out and got myself some more coffee before I allowed myself to speak.

"George," I said, and I still kept calm. "I have an idea. Now listen very carefully because I have an idea which will make us both very rich. We are broke, are we not?"

"We are."

"And this William S. Womberg," I said, "would you consider that he is angry with Lionel Pantaloon this morning?"

"Angry!" George shouted. "Angry! Why, he'll be madder than hell!"

"Quite so. And do you think that he would like to see Lionel Pantaloon receive a good hard punch on the nose?"

"Damn right he would!"

"And now tell me, is it not possible that Mr Womberg would be prepared to pay a sum of money to someone who would undertake to perform this nose-punching operation efficiently and discreetly on his behalf?"

George turned and looked at me, and gently, carefully, he put down his coffee-cup on the table. A slowly widening smile began to spread across his face. "I get you," he said. "I get the idea."

"That's just a little part of the idea. If you read Pantaloon's column here you will see that there is another person who has been insulted today." I picked up the paper. "There is a Mrs Ella Gimple, a prominent socialite who has perhaps a million dollars in the bank..

"What does Pantaloon say about her?"

I looked at the paper again. "He hints," I answered, "at how she makes a stack of money out of her own friends by throwing roulette parties and acting as the bank."

"That fixes Gimple," George said. "And Womberg. Gimple and Womberg." He was sitting up straight in bed waiting for me to go on.

"Now," I said, "we have two different people both loathing Lionel Pantaloon's guts this morning, both wanting desperately to go out and punch him on the nose, and neither of them daring to do it. You understand that?"

"Absolutely."

"So much then," I said, "for Lionel Pantaloon. But don't forget that there are others like him. There are dozens of other columnists who spend their time insulting wealthy and important people. There's Harry Weyman, Claude Taylor, Jacob Swinski, Walter Kennedy, and the rest of them."

"That's right," George said. "That's absolutely right."

"I'm telling you, there's nothing that makes the rich so furious as being mocked and insulted in the newspapers."

"Go on," George said. "Go on."

"All right. Now this is the plan." I was getting rather excited myself. I was leaning over the side of the bed, resting one hand on the little table, waving the other about in the air as I spoke. "We will set up immediately an organization and we will call it... what shall we call it we will call it... let me see... we will call it 'Vengeance Is Mine Inc.'... How about that?"

"Peculiar name."

"It's biblical. It's good. I like it. 'Vengeance Is Mine Inc.' It sounds fine. And we will have little cards printed which we will send to all our clients reminding them that they have been insulted and mortified in public and offering to punish the offender in consideration of a sum of money. We will buy all the newspapers and read all the columnists and every day we will send out a dozen or more of our cards to prospective clients."

"It's marvellous!" George shouted. "It's terrific!"

"We shall be rich," I told him. "We shall be exceedingly wealthy in no time at all."

"We must start at once!"

I jumped out of bed, fetched a writing-pad and a pencil and ran back to bed again. "Now," I said, pulling my knees under the blankets and propping the writing-pad against them, "the first thing is to decide what we're going to say on the printed cards which we'll be sending to our clients," and I wrote, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE INC.' as a heading on the top of the sheet of paper. Then, with much care, I composed a finely phrased letter explaining the functions of the organization. It finished up with the following sentence: 'Therefore VENGEANCE IS MINE INC. will undertake, on your behalf and in absolute confidence, to administer suitable punishment to columnist and in this regard we respectfully submit to you a choice of methods (together with prices) for your consideration.'

"What do you mean, 'a choice of methods'?" George said.

"We must give them a choice. We must think up a number of things... a number of different punishments. Number one will be..." and I wrote down, '1. Punch him on the nose, once, hard.' "What shall we charge for that?"

"Five hundred dollars," George said instantly.

I wrote it down. "What's the next one?"

"Black his eye," George said.

I wrote it down, '2. Black his eye... \$500.'

"No!" George said. "I disagree with the price. It definitely requires more skill and timing to black an eye nicely than to punch a nose. It is a skilled job. It should be six hundred."

"OK," I said. "Six hundred. And what's the next one?"

"Both together, of course. The old one two." We were in George's territory now. This was right up his street.

"Both together?"

"Absolutely. Punch his nose and black his eye. Eleven hundred dollars."

"There should be a reduction for taking the two," I said. "We'll make it a thousand."

"It's dirt cheap," George said. "They'll snap it up."

"What's next?"

We were both silent now, concentrating fiercely. Three deep parallel grooves of skin appeared upon George's rather low sloping forehead. He began to scratch his scalp, slowly but very strongly. I looked away and tried to think of all the terrible things which people had done to other people. Finally, I got one, and with George watching the point of my pencil moving over the paper, I wrote: '4. Put a rattlesnake (with venom extracted) on the floor of his car, by the pedals, when he parks it.'

"Jesus Christ!" George whispered. "You want to kill him with fright!"

"Sure," I said.

"And where'd you get a rattlesnake, anyway?"

"Buy it. You can always buy them. How much shall we charge for that one?"

"Fifteen hundred dollars," George said firmly. I wrote it down.

"Now we need one more."

"Here it is," George said. "Kidnap him in a car, take all his clothes away except his underpants and his shoes and socks, then dump him out on Fifth Avenue in the rush hour." He smiled, a broad triumphant smile.

"We can't do that."

"Write it down. And charge two thousand five hundred bucks. You'd do it all right if old Womberg were to offer you that much."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose I would." And I wrote it down. "That's enough now," I added. "That gives them a wide choice."

"And where will we get the cards printed?" George asked.

"George Karnoffsky," I said. "Another George. He's a friend of mine. Runs a small printing shop down on Third Avenue. Does wedding invitations and things like that for all the big stores. He'll do it. I know he will."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

We both leapt out of bed and began to dress. "It's twelve o'clock," I said.

"If we hurry we'll catch him before he goes to lunch."

It was still snowing when we went out into the street and the snow was four or five inches thick on the sidewalk, but we covered the fourteen blocks to Karnoffsky's shop at a tremendous pace and we arrived there just as he was putting his coat on to go out. "Claude!" he shouted. "Hi boy! How you

been keeping," and he pumped my hand. He had a fat friendly face and a terrible nose with great wide-open nose-wings which overlapped his cheeks by at least an inch on either side. I greeted him and told him that we had come to discuss some most urgent business. He took off his coat and led us back into the office, then I began to tell him our plans and what we wanted him to do.

When I'd got about quarter way through my story, he started to roar with laughter and it was impossible for me to continue; so I cut it short and handed him the piece of paper with the stuff on it that we wanted him to print. And now, as he read it, his whole body began to shake with laughter and he kept slapping the desk with his hand and coughing and choking and roaring like someone crazy. We sat watching him. We didn't see anything particular to laugh about.

Finally he quietened down and he took out a handkerchief and made a great business about wiping his eyes. "Never laughed so much," he said weakly. "That's a great joke, that is. It's worth a lunch. Come on out and I'll give you lunch."

"Look," I said severely, "this isn't any joke. There is nothing to laugh at. You are witnessing the birth of a new and powerful organization..."

"Come on," he said and he began to laugh again. "Come on and have lunch."

"When can you get those cards printed?" I said. My voice was stern and businesslike. He paused and stared at us. "You mean... you really mean... you're serious about this thing?"

"Absolutely. You are witnessing the birth..."

"All right," he said, "all right," he stood up. "I think you're crazy and you'll get in trouble. Those boys like messing other people about, but they don't much fancy being messed about themselves."

"When can you get them printed, and without any of your workers reading them?"

"For this," he answered gravely, "I will give up my lunch. I will set the type myself. It is the least I can do." He laughed again and the rims of his huge nostrils twitched with pleasure. "How many do you want?"

"A thousand--to start with, and envelopes."

"Come back at two o'clock," he said and I thanked him very much and as we went out we could hear his laughter rumbling down the passage into the back of the shop.

At exactly two o'clock we were back. George Karnoffsky was in his office and the first thing I saw as we went in was the high stack of printed cards on his desk in front of him. They were large cards, about twice the size of ordinary wedding or cocktail invitation-cards. "There you are," he said. "All ready for you." The fool was still laughing.

He handed us each a card and I examined mine carefully. It was a beautiful thing. He had obviously taken much trouble over it. The card itself was thick and stiff with narrow gold edging all the way around, and the letters of the heading were exceedingly elegant. I cannot reproduce it here in all its splendour, but I can at least show you how it read: VENGEANCE IS MINE INC.

Dear.....

You have probably seen columnist 's slanderous and unprovoked attack upon your character in today's paper. It is an outrageous insinuation, a deliberate distortion of the truth.

Are you yourself prepared to allow this miserable malice-monger to insult you in this manner?

The whole world knows that it is foreign to the nature of the American people to permit themselves to be insulted either in public or in private without rising up in righteous indignation and demanding--nay, exacting--a just measure of retribution.

On the other hand, it is only natural that a citizen of your standing and reputation will not wish personally to become further involved in this sordid petty affair, or indeed to have any direct contact whatsoever with this vile person.

How then are you to obtain satisfaction?

The answer is simple, VENGEANCE IS MINE

INC. Will obtain it for you. We will undertake, on your behalf and in absolute confidence, to administer individual punishment to columnist, and in this regard we respectfully submit to you a choice of methods (together with prices) for your consideration: 1. Punch him on the nose, once, hard \$500 2. Black his eye \$600 3. Punch him on the nose and black his eye \$1000 4. Introduce a rattlesnake (with venom extracted) into his car, on the floor by his pedals, when he parks it \$1500 5. Kidnap him, take all his clothes away except his underpants, his shoes and socks, then dump him out on Fifth Avenue in the rush hour \$2500 This work executed by a professional.

If you desire to avail yourself of any of these offers, kindly reply to VENGEANCE IS MINE INC. at the address indicated upon the enclosed slip of paper. If it is practicable, you will be notified in advance of the place where the action will occur and of the time, so that you may, if you wish, watch the proceedings in person from a safe and anonymous distance.

No payment need be made until after your order has been satisfactorily executed, when an account will be rendered in the usual manner.