

The Secret of Asherwick

For three decades, I toiled in the service of the enigmatic House of Asherwick, a lineage veiled in shadow, their past a tapestry of nightmares woven with secrets that clung to their present like a malignant fog. I was the maid in the grand manor of Sir Jones Asherwick, the last scion and sole heir to the cryptic legacy of his forebears. Sir Jones was an eccentric soul, his demeanor as inscrutable as that of his ancestors. The Asherwicks were infamous for their peculiar habits and unearthly pallor, their skin as white as specters, their expressions frigid, and their dark blue eyes piercing with an almost otherworldly intensity. Their history remained a riddle, yet despite their strangeness, they stood among the elite—immensely wealthy, their influence vast as the night.

I dwelt in the imposing Asherwick manor alongside Sir Jones and his barren wife, who never bore him heirs. The manor, inherited through generations, stood as a monument to their lineage. Forged of towering brick, it loomed in solitude, far from the world, nestled in a desolate countryside three hours from the nearest inhabited town. Encircled by mournful pines and cloaked in an ominous mist, it overlooked a stagnant marsh, while ravens wheeled above its eaves each night. Its silence was that of a sepulcher; its heavy-handled doors seemed crafted for a demon's grasp. The portraits of Asherwicks, with their wary gazes, seemed to stalk my every step. The walls, cracked and murmuring as if haunted by buried souls, housed tomes inscribed in an alien tongue. The windows admitted only slivers of sunlight, and the still marsh outside, mirroring the moon's pale glow by night, grew sinister. These traits alone could instill

dread in any heart. The mere thought of dwelling or laboring in such a place would haunt only a desperate mind—like mine. Yet, the specter of destitution that once hounded me through the streets, coupled with my dire need for coin and the Asherwicks' lavish wages, drove me to its threshold.

Among the truths and enigmas of the Asherwick lineage was their unparalleled mastery of the piano. For generations, they astonished the world with their virtuosity, surpassing any pianist in the city. Despite their cryptic nature and glacial emotions, their music was serene, tranquil, even romantic at times—as if the piano were their sole conduit for feeling. Thus, the piano was hallowed, a cornerstone of their identity, their legacy. Even Sir Jones, now nearing sixty and seemingly apathetic, never wearied of playing. From childhood, like all Asherwicks, he honed his craft, mastering it with uncanny speed. His daily performances and compositions rivaled the greatest musicians of his era, and many celebrated pieces, performed at galas and gatherings, were attributed to him, the last of his line.

The family's bond with the piano was nigh spiritual, akin to a rite of devotion. They revered it, dedicating their lives to its service, as if it were the patriarch of their house. Once, in a rare exchange with Sir Jones about this obsession, he faltered, unable to offer a clear answer, his words stumbling as though guarding an unspeakable truth. Yet his actions spoke louder—treating the piano as their holiest relic, reciting their prayers at its altar. Their wealth, vast as it was, seemed to mirror the countless notes they composed. It was said that on days when the piano fell silent, their emotions grew turbulent, their thoughts scattered, and the manor's air turned stifling. To me, it often seemed the piano was their beating heart. In my first week there, a nightmare gripped me: the piano extended invisible tendrils, binding the

Asherwicks and their manor in a sinister embrace. In another, I saw it yawn open like a grave, dragging the family into its maw.

Much was known of the Asherwicks' musical legacy, but little of the piano itself, housed in the manor's lower chamber and inherited through generations. It was a mere speck in a vast abyss of mystery. No outsider had ever seen or touched it—only those of Asherwick blood. No maid before me had dared approach it or the chamber where Sir Jones and his kin played. This was one of the manor's ironclad decrees: "The piano room—its door is not to be neared, its threshold not to be crossed." Another, stranger still, remained a buried secret until much later: "No Asherwick may forsake the piano or cease playing for forty days, be it in mourning or revelry—the bond must endure."

Tales and legends swirled around the instrument. Some claimed it embodied an ancient Asherwick, a romantic poet who, in a bout of despair, wound its strings about his neck on the fortieth day and hanged himself, his soul now singing its anguish through the keys. Others whispered it was a cursed gift from an old rival, dooming the player and their descendants to eternal performance.

But Sir Jones, in the depths of grief after his wife's death, committed an act no Asherwick had dared: he broke the sacred rule.

Days bled into weeks, and he remained cloistered in his chamber, emerging for no one, speaking to none, doing naught but brooding in silence. Letters piled at his door—condolences, inquiries of concern—but he answered none, opened none, cared for nothing of the world beyond. He spared me not a word, not a glance. All that emanated from him were sighs of anguish and murmurs of disdain, uttered in fleeting moments as he stood at

the piano room's threshold, as though blaming it for his calamity.

Though I knew the Asherwicks were untouched by the maladies that plagued ordinary folk, my worry for him grew unbearable. He had become stranger than his already strange nature allowed. He refused food, canceled engagements, and severed ties with life itself. After forty days, his state culminated in wails and weeping. But the true horror was his silence at the piano. For the first time in generations, an Asherwick ceased to play. For the first time, the sacred rule was defiled. And Sir Jones was the transgressor. That night, his reckoning came. I recall it vividly:

In the dead of a bleak night, after more than a month since Lady Asherwick's passing, as I lay in deep slumber, I was roused by the sound of the piano—faint cries, as if Sir Jones himself wept through the strings. The night was pallid, the moon casting a ghostly sheen on the manor's walls, steeped in heavy silence. Was it my imagination? Or had the night chosen to speak? I dismissed the sounds and sought sleep once more.

Dong... dongggg! I jolted upright, heart pounding. This was no illusion, no trick of my mind. The piano's resonance shook my bones, seeping into my very being. The playing was faint but unnatural, its cadence eerie, its notes discordant. "Could it be Sir Jones? At this hour?" I wondered.

But... no.

This was not his playing. No Asherwick played with such chaotic, broken strokes, like a novice fumbling through a complex piece for the first time. Each note pierced my ears, sparking a throbbing ache. The music was frenzied, devoid of harmony, purpose, or clarity.

A deep tremor seized my limbs. I hesitated: “Should I rouse Sir Jones to investigate?” Snatching my apron, I rushed to the door, descending the stairs with heavy steps, battling drowsiness yet driven by curiosity, my eyelids drooping. But what I beheld below froze my soul. My blood turned to ash in my veins. “If... if he stands here before me, then who is in the room, playing with such monotonous dread?” Terror gripped me, a chill creeping through every fiber of my being. My first thought was that an intruder had breached the manor, seated now at the piano. It was the only rational explanation.

Sir Jones stood motionless, rigid as a statue, not a word escaping his lips. His silence unnerved me more than the situation itself. My stillness did not alarm him as his did me. Did he, like me, suspect a trespasser had infiltrated the manor and dared to play the sacred instrument?

I approached him. He clutched a candle in one trembling hand, his spectacles perched on his nose. His pallid frame seemed drained of every drop of blood, his lips muttering something inaudible, moving in a heavy silence. His eyes, fixed on the piano room, brimmed with terror, as if he had just glimpsed the devil himself. His hands shook unnaturally—unheard of for an Asherwick, whose history bore no trace of fear. I attributed it to the chill air or some inner turmoil. It defied reason.

Cautiously, I took the flickering candle from his quaking hand and peered into his darkened eyes, where fear had swallowed all traces of life. He was afraid—fear I could feel, as if it had slithered into my own body. His heart pounded audibly, its rhythm echoing the piano’s jarring knocks that had startled me awake. His gaze never wavered from the room’s door as he stepped toward it with agonizing slowness. The piano’s sound grew louder, more intense. I heard the notes—calm for a

moment, then erupting into fury, then screams. Screams woven into musical notes, emanating from the piano itself. Each deliberate step Sir Jones took, with me trailing behind, felt like a mile; seconds stretched into eternity.

At last, he reached the door and paused. With a trembling hand, he grasped the handle, casting me a final glance, as if he knew what awaited him and that he alone would face his fate. I watched, my face etched with horror, on the verge of collapse. He opened the door—slowly, deliberately—and what I saw chilled my bones: the piano played itself!

The door slammed shut behind him. I heard him speak in a strange tongue, his voice laden with panic, as if conversing with the piano. Then... a scream. Sir Jones's scream, so piercing it paralyzed me with dread. My legs stiffened, rooted to the spot, unable to move. The candle slipped from my hand, igniting the carpet. Flames licked at my feet, and I fainted, lost to the world.

Hours later—I know not how many—I awoke to a crowd milling about me. In that moment, someone flung open the piano room's door, and a wave of horror swept over us all. Those standing collapsed in terror. The piano's keys and frame, drenched in blood, were Sir Jones's own limbs and fingers. Its strings coiled around his neck, strangling him. With my eyes, pierced by dread and despair, I searched for the rest of his form, as if the piano had opened its jaws and swallowed him whole.