

Cacophony

By LEON WALLACE and ANNA RUTH HAWORTH

WE were leaving a dance, Baker and I, one night not so long ago. There were others there, but they were of no importance—nice people of inane remarks and vacant laughter. Stuttering rhythm of a half mad dance band jangled and spilled out the doorway, reminding us of the penalty inherited from our ancestors for introducing the black folk of Africa and their barbaric syncopes.

We walked down the street aimlessly. There was nothing to do. There was no place to go.

"This place is mad," said Baker. "Those folk who live outside believe a blatant university to be a thing of opportunity, but you might stay here until you withered and blew away, and you would find little to study, or few who desire to study it. Now, what have we to study here? An owlish old night watchman, a blinking street light, and a vacuous looking policeman standing over on yonder corner."

Baker was correct. The night watchman passed on. There remained only the palling night, the blinking street lamp and the policeman with the vacuous stare.

"Why do all policemen look so stupid?" I asked.

"Perhaps all of them do not look stupid," mused Baker. "Perhaps only the stupid ones look that way."

"Yes, but did you ever see a policeman who did not look stupid?" I pursued. "Is it an essential attribute of policemen, or is there a regulation of the Council that all candidates must be stupid?"

"I do not know," sighed Baker. "Let us ask this one."

We approached the man and asked him if he could solve this troublesome problem for us.

"Have a care. Have a care, young gentlemen," said the policeman sourly. "It is not a far walk to the station"—he added darkly.

"But what are you doing away out here? Do you not realize that you will have to walk back?" asked Baker with that maddening grin of his.

"I hadn't thought of that," said the policeman, and he stroked his chin in a perplexed way.

"Well, then, what are you doing?" I asked him.

"Nothing," replied the policeman honestly.

"What are you going to do?" I continued.

"Nothing," replied the policeman with equal honesty.

I turned to Baker and looked at him thoughtfully.

"Perhaps we should have this man arrested for vagrancy, my dear Baker," I suggested.

"No more rational thought ever occurred to you, my dear Samuel," he answered.

"Have a care. Have a care, young gentlemen," barked the policeman. "It would be better if you moved along, moved along."

"Why?" I asked.

"Good night, officer," said Baker hastily, and he led me away.

We continued down the road.

"Do you recognize that ahead of us?" asked Baker suddenly, and he stopped with a jerk.

I looked. A little old man shuffled along ahead of us, a little old man with a few dirty unkempt straggles of hair hanging from the back of his shining old head, a dirty old cutaway coat, dirty old bagging trousers and a shuffling old gait that threatened to crumple at every step.

"Why, that's just old man Weatherton," I said in a relieved way. I had experienced a trembling uneasiness when Baker had spoken.

"I didn't know that he was back here this year," said Baker. "I thought he had been retired, or had died."

"More probably retired," I told him.

"Let's go talk to him," suggested Baker. "There is little else to do, and he was a queer old duck when he used to teach."

We started up again and overtook the old man.

"How do you do, Professor Weatherton," greeted Baker in his genial way, as we drew alongside the old fellow.

He turned those fish eyes of his toward us and blinked rapidly.

"Oh, yes. How do you do. How do you do," he replied suddenly in his squeaking old voice, a dirty old voice.

We walked along silently, the three of us, for a time.

"Perhaps you young men would like to come to my home and watch a little experiment of mine," invited the old man finally.

I looked at Baker questioningly.

"Most certainly we would," replied Baker.

"We walked on until we came to a row of gloomy old homes along Ballentine Road, dark, uninviting, harsh old places that sought to hide behind the vagrant shrubbery that surrounded them and sighed softly under the clouded light of a moon that was dying. The old man led us into the gloomiest one of the row, a massive old structure that crumbled and wept its stone away at the contemplation of its own age.

Across the rotten old porch we went and into a dark hallway that smelled of decaying age and loneliness. We stumbled through this, and came at last to a great doorway, and the wizened little man rolled the thing back on creaking rollers, and bade us enter.

Baker and I stood there in the restless darkness that engulfed and pushed down upon us like a pall to stifle and leave us gasping.

We could hear the old man stirring about—padding over the soft carpet with that maddening shuffle of his. Suddenly he struck a match, and lighted two great candles that stood like gloomy sentinels on either end of a long mahogany table in the center of the room. Long and silently dark tapestries covered the walls of the place and looked down on us solemnly. The whole room was massively long. Width was strangely lost. The long table, long chairs, a long dead hearth, and long flickering shadows that flitted hither and yon, and laughed fiendishly at their own elusiveness.

The old man came to the end of the table and tapped his hands against his head.

"Sit down, my good fellows, and I will show you a strange thing and tell you a fine story."

Back and forth across the room he paced, as we sat ourselves beside the table and leaned toward the flickering lights as if we hungered for them. Back and forth, forth and back, that incessant whispering shuffle.

He stopped suddenly and stroked his head.

"And now, my dear fellows, I shall demonstrate some-

thing to you," he said very low, and his queer eyes shifted about uneasily—"They do not know it, these other professors. But I know it. I do know it."

He shuffled stealthily to an opening in one of the tapestries that hung upon the wall. His long bony hand with its dead flesh reached out and pulled the curtain aside. A small cabinet was revealed, a black, shining Oriental thing that gleamed dully in the fearfully flickering candle light. The hand extended claw like fingers upward, and jerked open the door of the cabinet. Out of its depths came a small metal box. He carried it over to the table to thrust it before our faces.

"This is it," he cackled in that dirty old cracked voice, "and they do not know I have it."

"This is the salve of learning, my friends, and I have mixed it from materials picked up here and there, a mixture of the words and thoughts of all of those who teach, and a very fine mixture, indeed. I have it all ready to make use of it, but they do not know it"—he whispered—"They do not know it."

And he cackled again, a laugh brittle as the dead limbs of ancient forest trees.

"I have brought you here tonight to let you see the first experiment," he murmured absently.

He straightened and frowned, and the fish eyes grew black and piercing.

"Gentlemen, you will be the first to see the result," he rasped impressively.

Arms clasped behind him, he began that damnable easy shuffle again, back and forth, back and forth in the long jumping shadows that hid what the flickering lights sought to reveal. He shuffled to the door and peered out into the blackness, then to the tapestries and looked stealthily behind them, then back to the table to renew that nervous shuffle.

"After much difficulty, I have found the specimen," he said hurriedly and low,—“a gawking country youth, who comes down here with no polish. I lured him here, and deceived him, taught him to answer to my whistle and to obey me. Upon him we shall experiment.”

Back to the door shuffled those nervous feet. The old man paused and whistled shrilly—a doleful whistle that

pierced and soothed, and engulfed us like the waters over a drowning man.

There was a stumbling noise back somewhere in the bowels of the house. Closer it came and closer. A presence was in the doorway, a strange, almost beautiful presence.

A tall, perfectly formed youth stood there, unclothed, looking at us with dull eyes.

The little old man led him to the table.

"This is he," whispered the old one, "and now we shall see."

He opened the metal box and put a finger in it, withdrawing it with some of the strange salve upon it.

The shadows played fitfully around the white body of the youth. The old man gently anointed the body with the salve, until it glistened and gleamed like a bronzed image. A curious change was taking place with the youthful body. It was growing darker. The old man applied the ointment steadily, continually. A soft fuzz appeared on the body. The face was longer, the eyes more crystal, the ears larger and more pointed, the feet smaller.

The old one worked on, never ceasing. The body was covered with coarse gray hair, the nostrils grew larger and twitched nervously, the feet and hands became hard and cloven, the ears ever longer.

Minute after minute, the old man worked away in the fluttering darkness. The ears were very long and flapped idly, the eyes glassy and more expressionless than ever. The creature came down on all fours. The arms were gone. In their place were slender little legs. A bushy tail switched the air.

Before us worked the patient old professor, anointing the body of a diminutive ass. The creature pawed restlessly and kicked. The thing was complete.

The old man straightened proudly, and waved arrogantly at the beast.

"It is done, gentlemen. You have seen it. I have succeeded, proved it."

Baker and I sat powerless in our chairs, staring, gaping at this mad thing done before us. Limp with horror, we looked, and feared.

"And now we shall watch him perform," whispered the dried up one.

He tugged at the bristling mane of the ass. It followed him docilely for a step or more and then stopped, braying irritably.

"You see, it would balk," squeaked the aged one,— "but it knows not why."

He looked at the thing and beamed in his senile delight. With his back to the creature he faced us, making an imperious gesture.

"You see, friends," he exulted, "what I shall be able to do with these yokels. They are mine—mine."

The ass whisked about and kicked his tiny feet high in the heavy air. The little professor jerked his hands to the back of his head, and crumpled to the floor.

Baker and I sat there, held by this new horror in the long, dismal room with its silent restless shadows that shrieked and taunted us. Gone was the shuffling—only the stupid little ass and the limp old devil lying upon the floor with his face upturned to us, his ghastly grin, his cracked lips fluttering, and his fish eyes wide open, staring, staring.

There was a noise at the door. We turned slowly to face it. Our policeman of the evening was standing there with a knowing smirk.

"And what may you be doing here?" he asked pleasantly. I turned to Baker.

"What are we doing here?" I asked him.

"Tell him," urged Baker.

I started to point to the limp body of the old man, and to the recalcitrant ass, but they were gone, as completely as if they had never existed. The shadows flickered uneasily.

I stared at Baker. We shook our heads in an uncomprehending way. The policeman of the evening smiled knowingly.

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"I found them, sir," said our officer, after we had arrived at the headquarters of police, "I found them in the house of that old Professor Weatherton that died last year. They seemed to be in a dazed condition. The charge is drunkenness."