

# *The Mated Violin*

Being An Accounting Of The Exploits of  
**ST. JOHN BLACKDALE**, Free-lance Inspector

By John Benson

with annotations by Andrew Hatcher  
and a **New Postscript by the Author**

Presented for public consumption for the first time  
with typesetting by Kenneth Lowe  
and **NEW, HARROWING LIMNOGRAPHY** by Kari Keller

*The flat above Frau Schafer's public house was the sort of place that smelled perpetually of the byproducts of its revelry. The dark wooden floor might have been walnut once, and the walls might have been whitewashed; we neither hazard to guess, nor to judge! As for myself, a bachelor living above a printing press, it was an opulent enough milieu for the dark gentleman who resided there.*

*One must mount the stairs carefully in the dark, as I learned on my way up. And so it was with smarting shinbone and sans one of my pens that I first knocked on the door of St. John Blackdale, the weathered copper knocker beginning to show verdigris, a sunbeam trickling down from a slight gap in the roof that let in the wind and the rain, and, in that part of Artist's Row, the soot.*

*The voice that answered was — is — characterized by an acerbic highness, almost a whine. "Yes, yes, enter!"*

*Inside is a well-kept place, if not well-appointed. Or so I later discovered! My attention was focused on the suit of black-burnished full plate armor standing in the corner, as stately*

*as it was obsolete. Candlelight flickered from within the suit, all the more visible for the neat bullet-holes in it. One wondered how it could be considered an effective source of illumination.*

*My host sat with right ankle thrown over left knee, a glass in one hand and the other stroking the deep black goatee. I made my introduction in as humble a manner as befits a simple writer, and when I had finished, he gestured to a chair by the fireplace with neither a word nor a glance. When I had quite settled, I looked to him, but found his gaze fixed upon the armor. The face abided well in the shadows, I thought.*

*"I must compliment you on your treatment of the Lac Pluie case this past month," he said after a long moment.*

*I begged his pardon as I informed him the Lac Pluie case had actually been that autumn, longer than a month. He looked to his glass for a moment, sipped a gentlemanly sip, and said:*

*"Was it, indeed?"*

*When silence passed into an awkwardness that made me all too aware of the heat of the fireplace on my rump, he spoke again, but still did not look at me.*

*"The other journalists missed the connection between Count Farnham and the plot of land where they located Elsie Blane's body."*

*I detected there was a question, and so explained that my start in the Noble Profession was as a writer of legal notices, working for a truly humorless group of solicitors who owned the Law Bulletin of Amaranth, though they paid a young man a decent living, or what a young man might believe to be—*

*"Fascinating, listen: There is something I know, an accounting, which for the public's good must be related. And as I've more than once read shocking inaccuracies in the Gazette and the Mirror, it occurred to me I should perhaps try another means of telling my tale, and the Clarion is the last option available to me that can still reach a respectable number of people, even if you are against democratization. That is, if you are in the market for an exclusive, Mr. Benson."*

*Though I let the political comment pass unremarked, I assured him such was my natural state.*

*"Then if you've the time, I will tell you of the death of Sir Robert Halsing, and, I believe, the one who murdered him."*

*I perked up in amazement, and any lingering doubts that I'd been lured there for some vanity project evaporated into the gloom of Blackdale's lair. The public death of the Empire's master violinist just three days prior yet remained on the scandalized lips of the public, even as newsmen struggled to get any further details out of the Watch. I told Blackdale anything more than the feckless speculations of the gossip pages was certainly*

welcome.

*“Then attend me,” he said, and I hastened to prepare to receive the tale.*

*It was only when I'd readied a pen and notebook that he finally turned and met my eyes. It was true, then: There was the faintest hint of a glow in those blue irises, as you might catch from a cat's at the right angle. Let me lay to rest, with this writing, any doubts that St. John Blackdale is indeed half-fey.*

*“It was Friday last. The opera was busy, as usual—”*



—and I was obliged to meet somebody for the show that night, some tiresome romance. I'd changed into stuffy formal attire, which I do not mind saying I hate doing.

*I asked him who could have compelled him to participate in a diversion he clearly found to be unpleasant.*

It doesn't matter, for she never did show up. If you have never been to the opera, Mr. Benson, you will likely not understand the chaos that happens there of a normal night. The grand staircase in the atrium is forever crowded with bounders and escorts of every conceivable shape, size, and disposition. Fights between one strutting cock and another, centered around some woman and lubricated judiciously with spirits, are a common occurrence. The watchmen consigned to that thankless patrol would have my sympathies, were they not just as responsible for their plight as their superiors.

*I could not resist asking him, in a cautiously jocular fashion, whether he had himself had the dubious honor of that same post during his time in the Watch those years prior. He flatly ignored the question and plodded on.*

I hastened through that multitude up to the mezzanine, and the box I was to occupy along with other esteemed guests of Sir Robert himself, or his patrons. He was the “warm-up” act to the proceedings, and I am guilty of having had something less than true enthusiasm when I learned of it. You'll recall that after forty years of uninterrupted mastery, (and a reputation

as a strutting *prima donna* as unmatched as his skill), Sir Robert had been criticized of late for delivering, note-for-note, the same exact recital for the past year or so at each of his engagements. I might have tempered my annoyance had I known I was about to witness the man's death.

Some of the ... color ... of the opera is lost when you reach the next floor, accessible only to those with the proper gilded, numbered ticket. The semi-circular hallway is fortified against the noise from below, and the portraits of the great performers leer down from the outer wall under the gaslight, so much more immaculate than the vulgar posters covering the walls in the atrium. There, near the door to the box, I met Patrolman Turner, the night's unlucky custodian of the moneyed set, it seemed.

"Blackdale!" His bored demeanor fell away when he saw me. "Become an opera-goer?"

"Hardly," I said. "I'm here at another's behest — yes, you can wipe that smile of your face and dummy up besides, Hank. And do I dare to hope you'll tell me my box is otherwise empty tonight?"

Hank Turner is but a lad, but whatever he may eventually be, I believe he will excel at it. He has been a patrolman a scant year and, were I his superior, I'd recommend him for guard-o'-the-watch. What he lacks in brute force he makes up for in cleverness and an easy demeanor. He was, simply put, wasted on a night at the opera, playing nursemaid to the landed.

"I'll not rankle ye with guesses at which pair of eyes you're the 'plus one' for, St. John," Turner said. "Must say, though, that you've fallen in with a fine group tonight. No less an infamous bounder than Count Jack."

"He's still alive, and not in chains?" I said. "I've not been paying attention to the papers. Have they amended the Charter to discontinue peerage through feats of arms yet?"<sup>1</sup>

"If they ever do, it'll be called 'The Jack Act,' no doubt. Tonight he seems humble, though. You'll remember Contessa Narice Fisgon, I'm sure?"

"You'll forgive me if I won't."

"A more proper dame I've not yet seen," Turner said with a roll of his eyes. "I do cop to reading the *Clarion's* social pages, and she was once thought to be Sir Robert's paramour, though now twice a dowager herself."

"Fantastic." I had become bored already with this crowd, but Turner so loves to talk, and I am told I am habitually short with people.

"You'll also recognize Adrian Nokes, the engineer and inventor," Turner said.

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<sup>1</sup> Visitors to Amaranth may be unaware that in time of war, criminals may opt for service on the front lines in lieu of incarceration or other, more irreversible legal remedies. A separate provision, which (apparently) does not discount those convicted of piracy and smuggling narcotics, awards nobility to those with extraordinary merit on the field of battle. — A.H.

“Him, I would, though I've no idea why he would trouble himself with a spectacle such as this.”

“I asked him much the same, though perhaps with a touch more tact than yourself, and he mentioned he and Sir Robert had both stood before King Mathis to receive patronage for their arts, during the same conference.”

“Ah. I shall have to thank Mr. Nokes for his contributions to my own personal effects. Frau Schafer gifted me once with a watch with mated sun-stones in the face, patented technology of his very own design,” and I showed it to him, right here.

*Here Blackdale brought out the timepiece to show me, and it was truly a princely thing. Each hour demarcated on the clock had its own sun-stone, drawing light from some part of Amaranth's far-flung commonwealths and protectorates. No more concrete proof have I ever seen that, as the patriotic often say, the sun never sets on the Empire!*

Yes, Turner found it to be quite engrossing as well, but just as he was about to try to handle it, the door to the box opened and a thin, bald man with prominent nose and cheekbones and rheumy brown eyes peered out.

“Patrolman, why do you trouble this gentleman? I want to meet the famous Inspector Blackdale myself!”

I cringed — take note of this Mr. Benson — for I cannot abide a name-dropper, nor am I any inspector. Turner, relishing my distaste as the young always do the discomfort of a curmudgeon, introduced me to Sir Arthur Wedrose.

“Inspector Blackdale, Sir Arthur Wedrose here was me mum's favorite violinist while she was raising me up, I ought to say!”

“Ah, but it was no occupation for a gentleman!” Wedrose chuckled, perhaps forgetting that a disgraced former watchman isn't either.

Before I could find some way to ignore him, this “gentleman” grabbed my hand and dragged me bodily into the box. I was glad I didn't get to see the undoubtedly wide smirk on young Turner's face as Sir Wedrose went on a grand, reeling tour of the box's other occupants, repeating exactly what Turner had already related to me: There was Count Jack, in an outfit that could conceivably have cost him more than he'd ever made in the 40 years before gaining his title, and with his plumed cavalryman's hat sitting irreverently on a head I knew to be bald. Nokes sat quietly by himself in the far corner, the seat with quite possibly the worst view of the stage. I gathered he disliked the proceedings in an altogether more visceral way, and wondered why he'd come. Contessa Fisgon spilled herself all over me by way of an introduction: She was the sort of aged beauty that somehow hasn't learned how

unattractive desperation appears.

And finally, he turned me toward the last five seats. One for myself and my absent host, and three for Sir Wedrose and his family. He introduced me to his wife Eudora, a much put-upon woman, I could see. I saw Sir Arthur's taste in a companion to be the same as my father's, for Eudora Wedrose is a fey, unmistakably, though she is considerably younger than he. She was beautiful, and clearly in charge of her husband whether he knew it or not. The light from her eyes was green, and her hair glowed sunrise-gold. As is customary at any gathering where darkness is respectful to the proceedings, she wore a head-scarf that somewhat diminished the luster of her long, brilliant hair.

Wedrose flung an arm around his son, called Calvin. The boy was 14 or so, dressed to the nines, a bow-tie about his neck I am quite certain he could only have picked out willingly if he suffered from color-blindness. He'd inherited his mother's eyes, but his father's brown had polluted her green, and so his were a sort of dirty hazel-brown, touched, like mine, with a hint of the witch's fire, as they say. He fiddled with the garment in a nervous manner, as if it were cinched too tightly. I will be the first to admit I am quite disinterested in most children, but in this case I was struck by how equally he was disinterested in me.

"Calvin is here as Sir Robert's special guest tonight!" Eudora said, taking over for her husband in keeping up appearances, as he had already lurched over to resume laughing about some bawdy matter with Count Jack. "Calvin, you were a student of Sir Robert's, yes? We visited his mansion just two nights ago, did we not?"

To this the youth gave a lame nod and averted his eyes. I felt for him, as might anybody with a parent as evidently proud as Lady Wedrose. She launched into a head-spinning recitation of her son's accomplishments and natural talents, from the good notes he'd received at Sir Robert's Academy of Strings to how quickly and completely he'd defeated the applied sciences and botany curricula at Dobson Occidental and the wonderful prospects he already had among the un-pledged.<sup>2</sup>

Each pronouncement of her offspring's skill, whimsy, wit, and prowess was punctuated with a phrase such as "Isn't that so, darling?" or "Didn't you, my dear?", to which said offspring would invariably respond with a monotone "Yes, mum," the entire exchange seeming to me so well-worn as to be liturgical.

"Well, good show," I said at some point, and nodding to the lady and the object of her pride, I found myself the target of Nokes's gaze.

My host absent, I made my way over to him, passing by Sir Wedrose and Count Jack, festooned with the medals of his triumphs at war and holding up his famous deformed right

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<sup>2</sup> The nobility in Amaranth select spouses for their offspring in a manner thus far undisclosed to the public, and which we can be assured isn't simply comparing the pocketbooks of the respective families involved. — A.H.

hand, pointing to it with its more serviceable twin as he said, for my benefit as much as Sir Arthur's, "Would you believe this could tickle the old gut-strings as fast as Sir Rob, back before I got a medal for losing it?" Nokes appeared to regard this last with as dismissive an attitude as I, and it was clear, when I shook his hand, that we had something of an accord.

"I don't mind saying I am somewhat out of place at such a gathering," Nokes said to me with a tone of confidence, and I took his choice to eschew the usual pleasantries as an indication he either knew of me or had heard Wedrose pass me about like a flask in the briefing room of Precinct XIX.<sup>3</sup> I might have been at least slightly put off by the implicit assumption that I knew who he was, but then, he was Adrian Nokes.

"I am here at another's behest, myself," I said. "It must be a good change of pace, at least, to leave the lab behind and go somewhere else of an evening."

Nokes waved this away with what I perceived to be not a small amount of bitterness.

"I am not so engaged at present," he said, and feeling as if I'd offended the man, I displayed the same watch and remarked upon its ingenuity. At this he smiled.

"Good to see the principles so well used! I do remember this patent, in the rush of so many of them crossing my desk. I thought at the time it was one of the purest applications of my mated stones, truly. The sun-stones emit gathered light, to illuminate places, or in this case I suppose, information. And the dark-stones... well. I think it's appropriate that they—" here he seemed to trail off.

"Please, don't leave me in suspense!" I said.

"It's ... silly I suppose. But I always thought of the dark places created by the dark-stones placed in Charco Escondido, in the Topaz Isles, in the Wide Country ... well, I thought of the dusky hideaways they make as romantic."

"Sentiment that serves knowledge," I said. "Another energy transfer?" and we both smiled.

Below, the groundlings had begun filing into the auditorium, cackling and dancing, filling the place with a noise that echoed up the walls, but seemed to disappear into the grand blue curtain that girds the stage. I felt the odd and sudden change in mood, not unlike a shift in the wind while at sea, that occasionally lifts an inherent loner's spirits when he realizes this tedium will perhaps not be so very bad. It was a testament to how completely the excitement of the theater had swept over me that I greeted Count Jack with sincerity when he left Sir Wedrose's company and joined Nokes and myself. The man had removed all his cumbersome medals and ribbons but for the Star of Redemption, that signifier of one whose military service has paid his debts to society. Perhaps it is the only one he truly values.

The distinguished peer makes a point of presenting to new acquaintances the gnarled revenant that is his right hand, without regard to how it may shock the recipient. Yet, it adds

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<sup>3</sup> Blackdale refers to the Amaranth Civil Watch's precinct covering Artist's Row. A lifelong resident might call the area "hardened." — A.H.

to his overall honesty; nothing Count Jack does or says is without calculation, but neither is it ever anything less than sincere. I'm afraid I cannot reconcile his existence in any other way.

“A vagabond like yourself at so momentous an occasion as this!” was his greeting, which like Nokes's, didn't trouble with pleasantries. “And how do you know Sir Robert?”

“I don't,” I said. “I am the guest of another. Though my host seems to be absent.”

Count Jack gave me a wink I did not altogether appreciate.

“Well, Adrian here has undoubtedly filled the lady's absence with his endless talk of mated stones and magical tomfoolery. Thoroughly fascinating though it may be, I find myself cautious around such contrivances.”

“Count Descarat!” Contessa Fisgon had sidled up to us, it seemed, and was addressing Count Jack by his more formal name. “You are impugning this brilliant gentleman! And besides, a mated stone is hardly magic, is that not right, Professor Nokes?”

Nokes gave a curt nod.

“My lady is well-informed,” he said. “The technology is quite new, and, uh, a bit difficult to explain without a blackboard as long as the opera's stage is wide. In truth there is little in all the worlds more predictable than the non-local exchange of energy between two mated stones. 'Stone' is, of course, a misnomer, the implements being a sort of mineral. When subjected to the proper industrial process — my own design, patent pending, of course — they act as a sort of tunnel for energy of all sorts. But! And here is the fascinating thing; the energy doesn't move through any space we can observe, yet emerges from the stone's mate. The theoretical space it moves through is something we have deemed 'The Vertex,' but this is science other, younger researchers are hard at work exploring, I'm glad to say.

“Treat a pair of mated stones to be heat-conductive, and the heat that issues forth from a hot-stone is the very same heat pulled from the area of its corresponding cold-stone, and in the case of Mr. Blackdale's rather sharp timepiece, a sun-stone's light is drawn from a dark-stone's account. For magic, well — One might inquire out in the Westlands.”

“And if one side wishes dark while the other doesn't yet wish for light?” asked young Calvin Wedrose, who had begun listening at some point.

Nokes smiled knowingly and pushed his spectacles up his nose a bit.

“A fair question! Once gathered by the input stone, energy is stored until the holder of the output stone wishes to release it. In the case of Mr. Blackdale's fine pocketwatch, closing the lid imposes what we call a 'stop' on the output, for he has no reason for light when he isn't consulting his watch, does he? The light coming from Charco Escondido or from Jamundí waits at the Vertex, gathering. Unlatching the watch is the catalyst for releasing that stored light. As for the dark-stones, I happen to know they have specifically been put in public places and designed to run from sunrise to sundown, but others, for instance, might be



installed in a photographer's darkroom, that his film remain undamaged by exposure to light at the moment he triggers a similar mechanism, you see?"

Lady Wedrose took her son's hand just then and bade him sit, and it occurred to the rest of us that the audience had grown hushed. I sat in the far seat, leaving the empty one between myself and Sir Wedrose, not realizing this would merely incite him to lean across the gulf and converse in a voice too loud for the circumstances. As the fey-kind covered their hair and the gaslights fell and the curtain rose, Wedrose thundered over the applause to speak to me in confidence.

"I know how he feels, you know! There's nothing like when the curtain comes up. Would that I still had the time!"

Then the light shone on Sir Robert. He struck me as frail in appearance. He looked up to the crowd and bowed as one might before a recital, and there was something so careless about it that I reached for the opera glasses to get a closer look, and in that moment saw what I had suspected: On his face was a look of unmistakable defeat.

And then he tightened one peg with the most minute motion, adopted his stance, and out flowed "The Dirge For Violeta."

"A strange piece to start on, surely," I overheard Contessa Fisgon remark in a stage whisper.

There was something hesitant in the way Sir Robert moved about the stage, but the hands seemed to know their art well. He finished the piece to applause — I did not join in, for I still observed, through the glasses, that something was amiss — and then after but a moment of respite he hastened to bring his violin up again and launched into an even more curious selection. The hall filled with the loopy, drunken-sounding crescendos of "The Fool of Soulard," a shift in tone so abrupt that the audience seemed thrown by it. And those close enough to him had to see what my opera glasses couldn't fail to note; that his face and body appeared strained, almost as if he were confused.

Yet the hands played on. Murmurings spread through my box.

"You think he's all right, Art?" this from Count Jack.

"My own hands would fall off, even in my prime, at two up-tempos in a row like these," Wedrose said.

The lord's wife and child seemed just as distressed at their sire's discussion of the spectacle as they were at the spectacle itself. Lady Wedrose looked away and young Calvin cringed and tugged at the obnoxious tie the way one might worry prayer beads.

"The Fool" came to an end, but Sir Robert stepped on the applause by plunging, without pause or preamble, into "The Rivals," a call-and-answer duet that is possible to play with one violin, but unbearably strenuous. The audience was split at this point, but it seemed the greater part cheered the celebrated master's prowess.

The old man bludgeoned his way through the final portion of the song, which becomes a jagged mess of chords, and then stopped so abruptly that nobody applauded. Nor would they. For Sir Robert's physical attitude immediately broke in that moment, such that he stumbled about the stage, the pain and distress as clear to everyone as the abruptness of the change was shocking. At this Eudora Wedrose gasped and left the box — in his rapt attention to the stage, her husband seemed not to notice. Their son stared at the stage wide-eyed, a hand over his mouth.

As gasps filled the auditorium, Sir Robert looked up to our box, and in that moment the sneer of contempt and betrayal were unmistakable.

And then, as if unable to do anything else, he played. His body snapped into the posture as if an outside force commanded it, and he launched into a composition never before heard in public. We shall, I believe, discover its title soon. It was a transcendently beautiful piece, ranging and complex, influenced by styles from all about the empire. And midway through it, Sir Robert died, though he did not stop playing.

The other papers have not described it in any way that does the horror justice. I hesitate to relate the fullness of it, Mr. Benson, but the truth is the public must know the depth of the crime, must know its abject cruelty if it is to know what monster I hope to deliver to the courts. There came forth from Sir Robert's throat a sound the lips refused to allow to pass. He would not be allowed even a scream, nor a chance to plead for his life. This muted shriek, the sound of a babe's plaintive cry in the night, rose alongside the song the body would not stop playing, the discordance ending so sharply that none could doubt he had died where he stood.

His head lolled back, the eyes rolled up into the head, and blood issued from the nose — that prominent nose — and from the corner of the puckered lips. It took a moment for others in the back of the audience to realize they were watching an animated corpse, but the shouts and cries soon drowned out the composition. Yet, it was if the melody itself could not bear to go unfinished any more than an unattended object cannot bear to go without falling to the earth. As the audience's horror rose in as fevered a crescendo as the song, the dead body came to the flourishing end of its recitation. The corpse, its eyes staring sightlessly in two separate directions, stood for a moment that to me felt as long as an hour. Then, shaking, it took a bow and fell motionless to the stage. Perhaps the only mercy was that at last the hands released the violin, which tumbled off the edge of the stage, breaking strings as it struck the pit.

A single instant of shocked silence followed, and then the auditorium erupted into pandemonium. I found my feet again. Ignoring my box-mates, I bolted through the doors, finding Turner totally unaware of the entire debacle as he comforted Lady Wedrose. Breezing by them without a word, even as he asked me what was the matter, I rushed

downstairs, against the flood of landed gentry and fey-kind spilling out into the atrium away from the tragedy and in amongst the rush of gutter-dwellers who fancied taking a gander at the grim spectacle. It was after shoving my way into the midst of that throng and, at length, to the head of it, that I realized I had that entire time been shouting the familiar cry: “Watch! Watch!”

*I remarked that old habits surely die hard, and Blackdale waved this away.*

And yet this is no excuse! In any case, a crowd can tell a real watchman's shout from a pretender's, and I should take perhaps a modicum of pride in the fact they gave me a wide berth. I gained the stage and scaled the edge of it, crouching beside Sir Robert's corpse before the two patrolmen even managed to enter the room. The fury of his movement before made the perfection of his stillness there, on his back, seem as impossible as the violin that had played on without his ministrations.

“Blackdale, what in blazes is going on?” Turner came up then, the other patrolmen hesitating as they recognized me for the outcast I am.

My wits returned to me as I looked up into the box where I'd witnessed the man's death, and there I could just barely make out, with these eyes of my mother's, the terrified looks of my earlier companions as Turner and an inspector hemmed them into the box and looked down to me, pointing.

My night at the opera had just begun.



*Blackdale paused in the telling to retrieve water from the fireplace and start some tea for me — and to refill his own tumbler with more brown liquid from an unlabeled bottle on the mantle, where the bricks above the fireplace warmed it. Outside, it had begun to snow, and the last falling light of day had slipped into dark. We sat in silence as the tea steeped. My eyes had adjusted to the dimness of the room. I realized that my host, with his night-eyes, does not waste light where it is not needed. He passed me a strong cup of Oriental tea.*

*“Drink,” he said. “For you’ll need your hands free while I speak, won’t you?”*

*When I’d quite finished, the draftiness of Frau Schafer’s building seemed far away, and with a last sip Blackdale reclined and set his drink aside, closing his eyes and steeping his fingers, forehead creased in thought.*

*“I am coming to the heart of it, I believe, Mr. Benson. You must humor me but a little longer, can you?”*



I met Turner and the inspector, who turned out to be Quentin Raines. The man is brutish, to say the least. Once he had me back in the box, he looked us all up and down in the way a detective chief inspector will do. An hour had passed by then, full of shock and speculation, as Raines inspected Sir Robert's corpse.

“Horrible! Horrible!” went Contessa Fisgon's histrionics, as Count Jack shook his head and muttered to Nokes: “What's worse, Adrian, tell me! That he was a fake on a magical crutch, or that he died as such?”

“We've yet to see if it was magic at all,” Nokes said.

Turner was guarding us, along with the two other bulls who had jumped to respond to the crime. He and I did not speak; I was a suspect, after all, and knew it.

When Raines returned and spoke to us, it was in the rehearsed speech of a real watchman.

“It is my duty under the authority of His Majesty to hold all of you pending an investigation into this matter,” Raines said. “If by this time tomorrow we have not charged a person here with a crime, he is free to go forth on his own recognizance. Do you all understand the situation?”

“Outrageous!” Contessa Fisgon said. “In a crowded theater, why are we the only ones suspect?”

“It is for the Civil Watch to decide who is or is not suspect in this incident,” Raines said, and her nascent tirade came to an end. “Several witnesses saw Sir Robert look up into this

box, and it is clear that each person here is the maestro's invited guest. Or perhaps a hanger-on."

Here his gaze fell on me, lingering for the briefest moment, but long enough to convey what I knew he meant the look to convey; I was in the noose the same as the others.

"Here, Inspector, I understand your need for due diligence, but why us?" Sir Wedrose broke in, taking a more respectful tone. "My family is a guest of Sir Robert's, as is everyone else here. And Mr. Blackdale is the guest of another who couldn't make it."

"For various reasons, you are all suspect," Raines said. "You're all to remain here until we sort out precisely what happened and conduct our investigation. There are rooms for visiting troupes, presently unoccupied. You can all abide there, privately, while I continue to search the premises."

And so the bulls lead us, all in a sombre, silent march, to the guest rooms. Each party had his own, the Wedroses abiding together. Turner made sure I was set up in the sparse room, which had a bed and wash-basin, a copy of the *Rosariat*, and a candle to read it by. Outside, this damnable snow, which we are seeing more of this evening, had just begun.

"Sorry, St. John," Turner said. "You know how it is."

"I made no protest for a reason," I replied. "Only take care that Raines doesn't beat his way through this lot, will you? He won't uncover the killer that way."

Turner smiled just a little.

"And how do we know there is a killer, Blackdale?"

I waved him away.

"Dry up! I need to think."

"Come now, put us on with a tale! How am I to learn otherwise?"

"Firstly, Sir Robert was not in control of himself, even before he became that gruesome marionette. That was by the killer's design, as was the audacious new composition which he forced Sir Robert to play through the contrivance of the violin. That was an advertisement, a calling card to show who truly was the master in Sir Robert's last frail year. There's a reason his shows were note-for-note the same."

"You seem convinced it was the design of a killer and not simply the malice of a magical implement, even one that used to serve him," Turner said. "Such things exist, Blackdale, and you yourself have encountered them!"

"It's a fool who leaps immediately to rarities like magic and mysticism when immaculately designed technology will explain the situation just as neatly. Think about it, Turner: Mated stones transfer energy like light and heat, why not *movement*? We learn in school it is merely kinetic energy. Sir Robert could have had another master player, a secret partner, record the movements into a stone that remembered them, and then all he would need to do is keep feeding it kinetic energy, by strapping it to the blade of a windmill, perhaps. Tell Raines to

search the violin, see if he doesn't find a stone inside it, triggered by the peg Sir Robert worried in the moment before he began playing. The killer could've switched stones on Sir Robert, handing him one with the fatal movements stored in a recorded order, waiting in the Vertex to drive Sir Robert's heart to failure when released."

"If so, that surely implicates Adrian Nokes for his expertise, but what possible motive could he have had to do the foul deed? He and Sir Robert were colleagues."

"'Were' being the operative word. In the box, he waved away my compliments on his work, saying he was no longer so engaged. Yet Sir Robert clearly is. Check the royal decrees, and you will undoubtedly find Nokes's funding pulled recently. A brilliant researcher, responsible for perhaps the most important new scientific discovery in the past five years, and King Mathias prefers to patronize an aged violinist? I call that motive enough."

"Very well, then why not tell Raines to slap the cuffs on him?"

"Because whoever was on the other end of the mated stone needed to be a world-class violinist, and Nokes isn't. Consider also Arthur Wedrose and his wife, Eudora. Arthur was once a violinist of some renown, as you yourself recall, Hank, and he protested just a bit too much at the difficulty of Sir Robert's opening set. Meanwhile, he may have plans for his son to take up the banner of master, as might his wife. They are the both of them suspect."

"And the proper Contessa Fisgon? Don't tell me it's as simple as a spurned lover?"

"It is that simple, but she can likely be ruled out for the same reason I rule out Nokes: She hasn't the ability to outplay Sir Robert and no amount of coin could even rent such service without Sir Robert hearing of it."

"And Count Jack?"

"John Descarat is a rogue. I'd not put murder past him. We must remember, after all, that the King pressed him into military service for his crimes, a move which as you can clearly see, backfired. He didn't do it for his own glory, but to step on the toes of his betters; he removed his medals once he was in the box so he might be more comfortable. What better way to strike a blow to the King's pride than to fell one of his most high-profile beneficiaries and to walk away from it a free man? As to the ability to play, Count Jack may be exaggerating the severity of his war-wound. And the fact he left his Star of Redemption on could mark it as the trigger for the mated stone that fed into the violin. I don't make him for it, though. I don't know why. His underhandedness seems more straightforward."

Turner shook his head.

"You've thought it all through, then. But tell me: Why you, Blackdale?"

"I was in the box alongside those other poshes, and Rob looked right at us. I'm in the noose, same as the others."

Turner shook his head.

"Bollocks to that! You've no motive."

“Surely I haven't. But Raines has his job to do.”

After we had abided there a bit longer, Raines came in. The evil of the deed before him and the late hour had taken its toll on his body and his psyche, but he was a watchman all the same. He brought a small, crystalline object no larger than a thimble from his pocket and laid it on the nightstand next to the bed, where I sat.

“You can save your insistence I search the violin, for there is the culprit,” Raines said. “I tested the strings. They were poisoned; a concentrated extract of blue rosemary.”

“A stimulant! His heart beat itself right out of his chest!” Turner said.

“Indeed,” Raines said. “The killer forced Sir Robert to play furiously enough to open cuts on his fingertips, an injury that it seems required a forceful selection of compositions to break the calluses of a master. And which, in this case, exposed his blood to the poison and strained his heart to failure. The Empire's master violinist, murdered on stage, before an audience.”

“Then we've but to pull off the fancy white gloves of these poshes!” Turner snapped his fingers at the insight. “He'd've had to play just as greasy, the killer would, and wreck his own fingertips in the playing!”

“A sharp thought, Hank, but I reckon it won't come to much,” I said. “The killer might well have performed his solo a month ago or more, waiting for the right opportunity to unleash it as his pluckers healed. It's as Nokes said: The energy will keep. Perhaps the poison might lead us somewhere?”

Raines shook his head.

“No good, Blackdale. The damned stuff is common as candle wax, though only dangerous when concentrated. Any greenhouse in the city could produce enough to kill a frail old man.”

We sat in silence for a moment. The poison didn't change anything, but it gave the story of Sir Robert's last moments another macabre twist. At length, Raines turned to me and gestured to the door—

*I begged Blackdale's pardon as I asked whether his host could not have been implicated, despite being absent. Blackdale rolled his eyes, waving a bitter hand.*

We'll say my idea-pot's sprung a leak, eh? It was late, after all, and my host, you must trust me, doesn't enter into this. What I remember is that Raines said to me:

“I've questioned the others to no effect, Blackdale, I'll not question you. You've no motive, and if you somehow did have one, I'd not get it out of you. You and the others are free to go.”

And so I went.



*It became clear, after a long pause, that Blackdale's account of the murder had come to an end. I waited for him to elaborate further, and seeing that he would not, asked if he knew the identity of the culprit.*

*"No," he said. "Three days later and I can't make any of the suspects in the box as the ones with access to the necessary technology and malice to do the deed. I had hoped flapping my red flag to you might help me relive it. But there it is. Perhaps I was never meant to be an inspector."*

*I begged his pardon again, but mentioned that not only technology and malice, but opportunity also would be needed to so skillfully implant such a deadly contrivance on an instrument Sir Robert certainly kept near at hand, and that surely this must be a potential way of isolating the killer. Blackdale started to say something, then paused.*

*In that moment there passed over Blackdale's face a look of epiphany I am quite proud to say I have since come to know well.*

*"Mr. Benson!" and he leaped out of his chair and pumped my hand up and down. "I must thank you for your assistance in the matter. And, if you wish, you will be lucky enough to perhaps see the result of your good deed."*

*Blackdale consulted his fine watch with his free hand. He'd still not released my hand, which now ached noticeably.*

*"The funeral of Sir Robert Halsing begins in a half an hour, and I have it on good authority our suspects will all be in attendance. Have you a moment, Mr. Benson, to join me in congratulating our murderer on such an immaculate crime? It will surely make quite the exclusive."*

*I told him a journalist is prepared for anything. We rose from our seats and descended the stairs, where Frau Schafer waited for us with tele-stones so I could call my editors and Blackdale could make an inquiry at the Precinct XIX station. Blackdale had already rung off by the time I explained the situation to my superiors. With a kiss on the cheek from Frau Schafer for us both, Blackdale and I donned our overcoats and headed into the winter. We hailed a cab, and after a ride in silence where my heart thundered as much for the excitement as for the bracing cold, we found ourselves at Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, surrounded by mourners. The record shall show that none other than King Mathias himself*



*was present.*

*"A memorial tonight," Blackdale said. "And afterward, an arrest. Inspector Raines will be by presently, but we must first unmask our quarry."*

*I pointed out, as we threw our coin at the driver and hastened out into the snow, that a simple accusation couldn't possibly suffice, after days and days of the Civil Watch's efforts failing to uncover hard evidence. He clapped me hard on the shoulder as we mounted the stairs of the cathedral, picking our way through the long line of mourners. Though it was not as grand a throng as it might have been, sad to say, had Sir Robert's death not revealed him for a fraud.*

*"You've an inspector's twisted mind, Mr. Benson! The killer has the offending mated stone in hand; he must. For it's pride at the heart of this, isn't it? Follow my lead, and we'll put him in the noose by his own venomous jealousy."*

*We gained the top of the steps and pushed into the sanctuary. The hall was packed with the proud, moneyed sort who can afford to come from so far on a Sunday night to be seen at the memorial of a man they'd likely never met. Up front were the very richest and gaudiest, but there was, near the back so that the winter wind sent chills up her spine, a lass clothed in rags with eyes full of tears. There wasn't time to ask her how often she had heard Sir Robert's shows from outside the concert halls of Amaranth, huddled out of the wind, as the ones who so happily collected her taxes sat inside in a heated auditorium.*

*Nor was there time to reflect on this, for Blackdale pointed out to me our group of rogues, and it was then that I realized I still did not know the identity of the killer. Count Jack and Contessa Fisgon stood in the throng of mourners nearest the casket, their low voices joining the rolling murmur of the great crowd — and Jack had even had the decency to wear sombre attire and doff his hat. The Wedroses stood in a huddle near them, but not speaking to them — the whole family in black yet unmistakable for Eudora's fey-light. Off some ways — by himself, of course — was Nokes. It was too late to ask Blackdale with whom I should be cautious, for he dragged me bodily to the Wedroses and introduced me to them in a hurried manner, contrasted with each quiet, awkward "A pleasure."*

*"Mr. Benson has been assisting me in mulling over this disturbing crime, but you really must hear him expound upon the Lac Pluie case of this past autumn!" Blackdale said all in a blur. "But ah! There is Prof. Nokes, I haven't yet made my manners. You'll watch my writer, won't you?"*

*He was a ghost in the crowd before I could stutter out the beginning of the tale. Telling it was suddenly much more difficult when I was staring at three pairs of bewildered eyes, two of them searing with the same unnerving, far-off light as Blackdale's. As I came to the*

*critical part in the telling — that being the breakthrough moment when I realized the property transfer records, while destroyed, would have had triplicate copies stored with the Office of the Exchequer, those being forbidden from being defaced under the Preservation Act of 1795, as we all, of course, know — I felt the involuntary need to look over my shoulder and saw Blackdale speaking to Adrian Nokes rapidly and with furious animation as a young patrolman stood near at hand attending the conversation.*

*I was just coming to the climax — an argument with my editor over the proper placement of an independent clause near the end of the story, before it went to print<sup>4</sup> — when Blackdale, the young patrolman, and Nokes approached us in greeting, the latter pallid, avoiding the gazes of all present.*

*Then came the call to be seated. Silence unfurled over the crowd as I imagine must the curtain at the opera house; though, I have still never been. The service began, with no less a luminary than the Cardinal directing the proceedings. I sat between Blackdale and Arthur Wedrose, with Nokes and the patrolman seated to Blackdale's left. We had the privilege of occupying the front row.*

*We heard prayers and quotations from the Rosariat, and every possible lamentation. The entire time, stealing glances at Nokes revealed a man dreading what was to come next. And yet, it was not what I expected — never with Blackdale.*

*When the deacon called out the name of the next speaker, it was Blackdale's. He must have found a moment to add himself to the list of mourners while I was engaged with the Wedroses. He took the podium, standing before Sir Robert's closed casket, and he looked out onto the assemblage as if it were the easiest thing in the world.*

*"Esteemed friends, I shall come right to the point," Blackdale said. "Sir Robert Halsing died a fraud, but he lived a man, and that life was worth not a quantum less than any here, king or pauper. Or, in the case of one, murderer. For he is here this very moment."*

*The crowd had only enough time to register these statements before Blackdale pulled from his pocket a small, brilliant object, no bigger than a thimble.*

*"This was the instrument of Sir Robert's demise! A mated stone that drove him to a twisted suicide. I have it on loan, quite illegally, from the Precinct XIX evidence room."*

*At this the young patrolman in our party covered his eyes. Daft fellow that I am, it was only then that I made him for young Hank Turner, and also for the one who had absconded with the evidence Blackdale now held. It seemed to me his superiors would just as easily make the same connection. Blackdale did not pause:*

*"Yet, the killer's finest work is here recorded, in a way. He believes that because mated stones work in only one direction, he is safe from discovery. Fortunately, I have my own*

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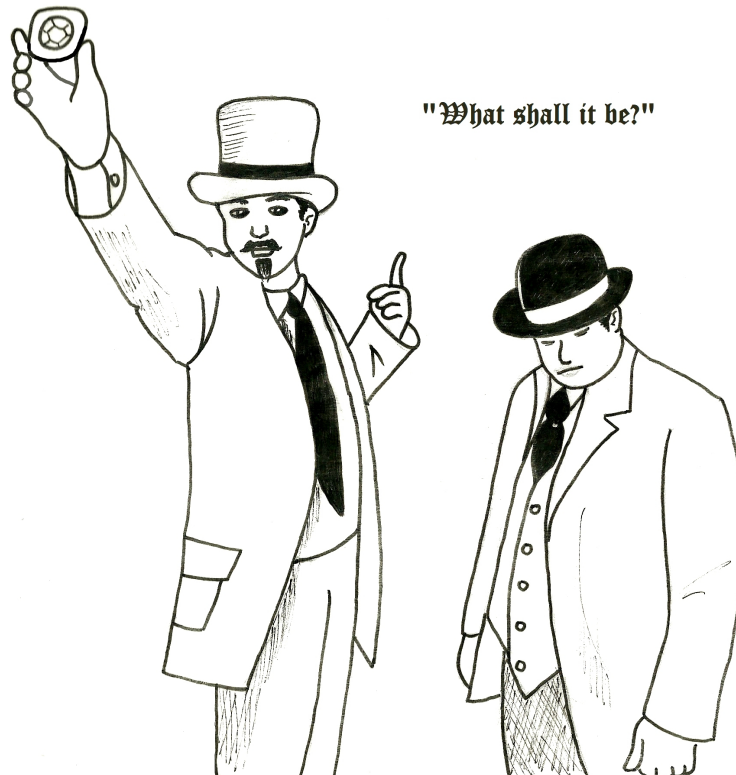
<sup>4</sup> *The Clarion* exercises its editorial right over all submitted content, particularly those pieces sent in by the overtly sesquipedalian. — A.H.

*expert on that matter here. Adrian Nokes, stand, please, and tell them what I plan to do."*

*Nokes did as he was told, pushing his spectacles up on his nose as, standing, he turned to address the hall. This was not the nervousness of a murderer about to be put in irons, but a man in fear of something even more terrifying: Public speaking!*

*"Inspector Blackdale holds in his hand a small device I have created — patent pending — to send a pulse of energy back through the stone he holds that will disperse the stored energy. He has but to trigger the stone to open the pathway and then activate my device, and the corresponding mated stone will be destroyed. Rather, uh, explosively, I should caution."*

*Blackdale removed another small object, cupped in his other hand, which appeared to have the violin's peg attached to it. He turned the peg, then raised the small stone, holding it over this trump card as he eyed the people in the front row.*



**Blackdale pulled from his pocket a small, brilliant object, no bigger than a thimble.**

**"This was the instrument of Sir Robert's demise!" he said.**

*"What shall it be?" he asked.*

*A long moment passed, one in which I could see imperial guards and churchmen wondering if they should pull this madman away and have him committed to an asylum, and*

then Blackdale entered into sudden and violent convulsions, dropping Nokes's device and gripping the mated stone to his chest. Nokes and Count Jack cried out and leaped to the stage to help, Contessa Fisgon fell down in a swoon, and the crowd near the altar erupted into chaos.

"Come and get it, then!" Blackdale kept shouting over and over, even as Nokes and Descarat struggled to get the stone away from him. Finally he dropped it, and I watched it tumble into the bedlam of legs stampeding about. When the thin, pale hand of Calvin Wedrose took hold of it, I clasped him about the wrist, and our eyes met. He had in one hand a tie which could only be the same one Blackdale had related in his tale — and, I realized with a startling clarity, must also be the trigger — a look on his face of such searing avarice and rage I nearly let him go out of revulsion.

Yet I held on, even as he struggled, and then Detective Chief Inspector Raines had his hands on the boy, and then two other police took hold of him, and then all of a sudden I felt Blackdale's arm on my shoulder, and heard his voice saying: "We have him, Mr. Benson, you can let him go. He won't be able to swear on the Rosariat if you break his wrist."

After I did, Raines took hold of the tie, and located on it a small rhinestone set in a button, concealed in an interior fold but accessible to the wearer.

"The trigger, then, easily testable. And witnesses who will attest to the boy having worn it at the very moment of Sir Robert's death. Well done, Blackdale," Raines said. "And you as well, Patrolman Turner," he added a bit too pointedly, though the young bull grinned.

"How dare you!" Arthur Wedrose stepped in at this. "It is one thing to level accusations at us, but a boy?! I see why they stripped you of your rank, Blackdale!"

"Do shut yer arse, Wedrose!" Blackdale said, all patience lost. "This boy just tried to kill me with a premeditated trap, and over a bluff, too. Calvin here is the only one with the knowledge, skill, opportunity, and motive to have done this, but I confess engineering his deathblow when it would implicate so many others was the true genius. I didn't realize he'd done it until Benson mentioned that the killer needed opportunity to make the deadly swap. The Wedrose's visit to Halsing's mansion a mere two nights prior to the show gave young Calvin here the opportunity to swap the mated stone his former master had long ago come to rely on for help this past year with the one containing his death-dance, and to change the peg on the violin so he would activate it in the same manner." Here he turned to me and said, quite in a different tone: "My thanks for pointing it out, John."

Before I could finish muttering something of absolutely no consequence, he rounded again on the youth.

"Forced into servitude to a demanding, perfectionist master, you found yourself the silent partner in a grand farce, didn't you, young man? Sir Robert couldn't give up the limelight, lest he die in the gutter without the King's patronage. So he convinced you to be his hands.

*He had the idea behind the mated stones, but he needed a young mind, one accomplished in, say, Dobson Occidental's applied science disciplines, to make it happen. Somebody nobody would believe if he spoke up, somebody he could exploit with promises of fame and fortune after his time came to an end. As a student, you were perfect. But then he had what he needed from you and left you behind. You came away with a slip of paper and a pat on the back, and he came away with your true, unrevealed prowess, which he played back each night, precisely the same, to the cheers of an audience unaware of your prodigy. In between the tedium of class, you gathered what would be needed for your work: Some blue rosemary extract from Dobson's botanical gardens, and that unfortunate bow tie your mother insisted on buying you. You pondered wearing the new peg down so he wouldn't notice, but you didn't do that, because you wanted him to know his fate in the fleeting moment his decrepit fingers touched it. Applying the poison to the strings was the work of but a moment.*

*"I should have known it earlier, though. I should've remembered that from the stage, even these half-fey eyes of mine could barely make out our box with the light being the way it was. But one can see the witch's fire coming off eyes like ours quite keenly, even through the glare of standing onstage in a darkened auditorium. He was looking into your eyes, Calvin. I suppose it must have seemed necessary to mock him with that final bow you knew he wouldn't live to perform himself."*

*"No," Calvin finally spoke. His eyes were fixed on Blackdale's; dim brown into cold blue. "It was for propriety. One bows after a recital, isn't that right, Mother?"*

*Blackdale smiled in a bizarre manner I do not to this day understand as Eudora Wedrose stood in shocked silence at her only child.*

*"Lord Wedrose, your son is to come with me, by the King's order, immediately," Raines said.*

*"I'll be addressed as if I am present, Inspector!" Calvin barked, and Blackdale was the only one who did not flinch. "I took what was rightfully mine, after being told what I am to give and what I am to take, every moment of every day since before I could talk. At least my method of crushing somebody is quick."*

*"Mr. Benson will want to know the title of your solo," Blackdale said.*

*"I call it 'To Rob A Thief,'" and here the murderer smiled. "Add a comma, if you like. You'll find the sheets in my notes."*

*They lead him away, the mother unable to move or to speak, the father staring at the floor, unable to watch. I confess I had stopped my scribbling, and had to rush to resume it, but by then the funeral was over.*





**They lead him away, the mother unable to move or to speak, the father staring at the floor, unable to watch.**

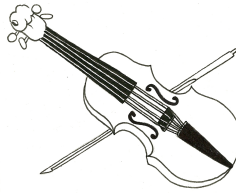
## A POSTSCRIPT

*A week later, the tale published and Calvin committed to incarceration after a swift trial, I called at Frau Schafer's again in the hopes of having another conversation about the matter. I did not find my host there, but discovered I was not the only one with the idea to pay him a visit on a cloudless Sunday bright with the reflection of sun off the snow and the lack of smoke on a factory holiday.*

*She left as I tried to enter; tall, dressed in dark clothes, hooded for the cold and the wind, with bright green eyes looking out from a pale, lineless face. She smiled when she saw me, and it may be the most arresting smile I have ever seen.*

*"Alas, he is not in. We always seem to miss one another."*

*Down the street she went, and I lost sight of her for the glare before long. I later learned Blackdale was out on another adventure I shall at some point relate if I can ever get him to tell me of it. As to the identity and the nature of his relationship with his hostess that night at the opera, I observe that there are secrets even the most dogged of journalists must despair of ever uncovering. The opera's true mystery, to this day, remains unsolved.*



**KENNETH LOWE** *is still searching. He is a freelance writer in Colombia whose articles have appeared in Colombia Reports, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Cook County Record, and Illinois Issues Magazine.*

**KARI KELLER** *is an occasional artist, between long bouts of procrastination and working a "real job." Keller has lent her talents to role-playing game character design, family portraits, book illustrations, and tattoo art. Keller continues to hope that if she buys increasingly expensive art supplies, she will feel obligated to make this more than a hobby. Keller lives in the urban belly button of the Midwest, and is supported by her wonderful fiance Owen and their two neurotic cats.*

This story was laid out in "Jacques Francois," a font designed by Cyreal, with title in "Aquiline Two," designed by Manfred Klein Fonteria.

Both fonts are available at [www.http://www.fontsquirrel.com](http://www.fontsquirrel.com).

**ST. JOHN BLACKDALE**  
*will return in*  
**THE AUTUMN SWORD**