

# Cavalanci's Curse

By Henry A. Hering

1675

Cavalanci Da Salò was one day in his workshop opposite the old Palace of the Podestà in Brescia. On the shelves around were numerous examples of his work, their rich gold varnish, for which he was afterwards so famous, glistening in the sunlight. But Cavalanci sat on a bench disconsolate.

'Diavolo,' he at length exclaimed, letting a half-purpled scroll fall unheeded from his hand, 'is this to be the end of Brescian dreams? Here is music lying dead, enough to charm the ears of half Italy, and yet, forsooth, he who wants viol or violin must needs hasten to Cremona for the imitations of the Amati, Guarneri, or of Antonio Stradivari. Times are indeed changed that I, Gasparo's grandson, must offer my work and find no purchasers, unless it be the mountebanks of the village fairs. Truly, I pay dearly for a father's folly. Instead of roaming Western seas, why stayed he not at home to earn the mantle which fell on Maggini's shoulders, from whom I had to learn all a father should have taught? And his son Carlo, in like manner, is content to merce flimsy silk rather than pursue immortal work. We are ingrates here, while in Cremona loyalty, at any rate, thrives, and son succeeds father to Brescian hurt.'

Then he rose and paced the room savagely, kicking what tools or wood fell in his way.

'But what mends it,' he muttered, 'mouthing of fallen hopes? Present claims are more urgent. Sixteen lire were due to Carlo for rent more than a month ago. His grace expires tomorrow, and well I know no memories of the past will stay his hand. My stock and tools alone are worth a hundred lire; therefore old Tubal would give me ten. Perchance I might haggle the whole sixteen, and then—Corpo di Bacco, that it should come to this!—Gasparo's grandson an outcast, while Guarneri and Stradivari, base copiers, flourish! By all that is unholy, I swear I'd sell my soul to the Evil One himself could I but outdo them in fame.'

There was a blinding flash of lightning, followed by a fearful thunder-peal, and then, sulphurous darkness filled the shop. When light came Cavalanci was conscious of the presence of another. He half-hoped, half-dreaded, to see the Devil on whom he had so impiously called—but it was seemingly only a chance customer. Yet it was afterwards said that he was something more, for Cavalanci paid his rent next day, the fame of his instruments increased forthwith, and he died a rich, though not a happy, man.

1875

'DEAR SIR,'—the letter ran—'We are instructed by Messrs Ware and Foster, executors under the will of the late Mr Josephus Wilson, to intimate to you that the testator bequeathed to you his violin. We are sending it you by special messenger herewith, and will thank you to sign inclosed acknowledgement of receipt.

'Yours respectfully,  
'DANES AND DANES'

I handed the letter to Dawson.

‘Well, I’ve heard of heaping coals of fire on your enemy’s head,’ he remarked, when he had read it, ‘but I never came across such a remarkable instance of the operation as this. Are you going to take it?’

‘Why not? I will accept it as the peace-offering for which it was obviously intended. As a matter of fact, a post-mortem reconciliation was the only one I would have agreed to. Yes, certainly I will take it.’

So I signed the receipt and accepted the bequest.

I undid the parcel and took the violin from its battered case.

‘Why, it’s as yellow as a guinea,’ I exclaimed, in surprise; I had never seen such a light one.

‘Wilson was uncommonly proud of the colour,’ said Dawson, ‘and he was simply infatuated with the instrument. Latterly they couldn’t tear him away from it. He never would play it before anyone, though. That was another of his cranks. He used to shut himself up with it all day long, and play both it and the piano simultaneously.’

I expressed my doubts as to this possibility.

‘At any rate, Wilson did it: I’ve heard him myself, though I never actually saw the operation.’ Saying which, Dawson sat down on the stool and resumed the interrupted nocturne.

Then a remarkable thing happened. He had not played half-a-dozen chords before a long-drawn-out note came from the violin I was still fingering. I nearly dropped it in my amazement.

‘Here, stop that,’ said Dawson, wheeling round.

‘I did not touch a string. It made that noise of itself.’

‘Humbug! Don’t do it again, that’s all,’ he replied, snappishly, resuming his interrupted piece.

Again, as he struck the keyboard, the violin sounded. Without stopping Dawson turned his head, and when he saw me a couple of yards away from the violin, his expression of annoyance changed to one of open-eyed amazement, for he was still playing the piano, and the notes that continued to proceed from the violin were in harmony with his piece.

He stopped suddenly, and with him the violin.

‘Did you hear that?’ he asked, in a scared voice.

I was too much astonished to reply, and we both stared at the instrument for some minutes in absolute silence.

‘It’s a sympathetic fiddle,’ I said, at length, for the mere sake of saying something.

‘It seems a bit that way,’ replied Dawson, drily; ‘but I never heard one so sympathetic as all that.’

He turned round to the piano and commenced afresh, and again the violin joined in. This time Dawson did not stop, and the duet continued in absolute harmony.

I bent over the instrument. The varnish seemed brighter than before. The sun glinted topaz lights upon it, with changing gleams of purple and brown; the strings quivered as though touched by an unseen bow. I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as I watched; it was altogether too uncanny.

The piano stopped: simultaneously the violin. Dawson wheeled round and gazed at it.

‘Well, of all the extraordinary things!’ he ejaculated. ‘What on earth does it mean?’

‘Let’s see if it will follow me,’ I said, irrelevantly, taking his seat. Once I learnt to play on the piano, and I still remember the treble of two tunes—‘Haydn’s Surprise’ and ‘God bless the Prince of Wales’. I played the first, but the violin remained impassive. Maybe the bass I improvised puzzled it: at any rate, it did not join in. Then I tried the second air, and with no better success. Then Dawson played with his right hand only, and it struck in at once.

‘It isn’t particularly respectful to its owner,’ I remarked. ‘It seems to me, Dawson, this fiddle has taken an altogether unnecessary liking for you. Wilson should have left it to you instead.’

‘If you want to part with it I shall be glad to offer it a home,’ said Dawson with what appeared to me indelicate haste.

‘You can take it away now, Dawson,’ I rejoined. ‘I want no unwilling visitor here.’

He seemed singularly pleased with the present, and he left me that evening with the fiddle-case in his hand.

Immediately after this I made a long foreign tour, and it was nearly twelve months before I saw him again. I wrote advising him of my return, and asked him to look me up, but as he neither did so nor wrote, I called upon him.

He lived in rooms in Bloomsbury. The servant told me he was in, but added that she did not think he would see me.

‘Is he ill?’ I asked.

‘No, sir, but he’s playing; and he won’t ever see anyone then.’ This was a new development in his character. Telling the servant it would be all right, I made my way upstairs.

Yes, Dawson was undoubtedly playing, and someone was helping him, for there were piano and violin.

I tapped and then turned the handle, but the door was locked. I knocked loudly and called to Dawson to open it.

There was a moment’s pause—or rather the piano stopped, but the violin went on.

‘Who’s there?’ shouted Dawson, in a peevish voice.

‘Saunders!’

‘Wait a minute,’ was the curt reply; and on the piano galloped as if to overtake its companion. I don’t think it accomplished this, for the violin shrieked as if in anger at the delay, and the piano rushed on blindly and apologetically. Then in a fierce crescendo of disgust the fiddle ceased. The piano put on the brake, slowed down, and stopped.

The door opened and Dawson bade me enter. He was alone. ‘Where’s your friend?’ I asked; and then, catching sight of a yellow violin on the table, I suddenly remembered: I had just been listening to another duet between Dawson and my self-acting legacy.

Dawson made no reply, but sank into a chair and wiped the perspiration from his face with trembling hands. He seemed altogether out of condition.

‘What’s the matter, old man?’ I asked. ‘You don’t seem well.’

Dawson gloomily pointed to the fiddle.

‘That’s what’s the matter,’ he replied, with a ghastly smile. ‘What, my sympathetic fiddle? You don’t mean to say you’ve had too much of it already? I’ll take it back if you don’t like it.’

‘You can’t take it back. It’s a Cavalanci.’

‘Well, it won’t bite, will it?’

‘When a man once gets a Cavalanci and plays to it, it sticks to him like the Old Man of the Sea, and no power on earth can take it away from him,’ said Dawson, sententiously.

‘Humbug!’

‘Look at the wreck I am,’ he replied. ‘There’s no humbug about that, is there? And I’ve only the Cavalanci to thank for it.’

‘You do look bad,’ I admitted. ‘But tell me all about it. What do you mean by a Cavalanci?’

Dawson leaned back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling. ‘Cavalanci,’ said he, slowly, ‘was a competitor of Stradivarius, and he determined to outshine his rival. According to the legend, which I for one now implicitly believe, he sold his soul to the Devil to gain his ends. His

instruments became all the rage, till it was found that their owners invariably went mad, as I am going. Then the demand ceased and bonfires were made of them whenever possible. I have learnt that there are only four extant now, and this cursed thing is one of them.'

'Why not burn that as well, if it annoys you?'

'I dare not. Its owner can only destroy his Cavalanci on his deathbed. Wilson could have done it, but as he owed you a grudge he passed it on to you instead. Would to Heaven you'd been the first to play in its diabolic presence.'

'I'll destroy it, if you won't,' I said. I grabbed at it, and was about to break it across my knee when Dawson sprang forward with a terrible cry.

'No, no, Saunders. You'd kill me if you did it.' He caught the instrument in his hands and huddled it to him as if it were a child.

It was a painful spectacle. I watched him pityingly.

'Saunders,' he said, at length, 'you don't know what a time of it I've had since I got hold of this infernal thing.'

'You seemed pleased enough to get it at the time.'

'And so I was. It seemed scarcely credible, but as I played with the thing in your room, an overwhelming desire for possession came over me. I pretty well asked for it, and if you had refused to give it me, I think I should have taken it by main force. I simply craved for that fiddle.'

'Then if you wanted it so badly, why does its possession worry you?'

'Because, Saunders, it makes my life a perfect misery. Man, I'm its slave. It takes the lead now. When it wishes to play—and it is always wishing it—I have to accompany it wherever I am. Distance makes no difference, and I have to play till it is satisfied. I found that out about a week after I got it. I was at the Venables'. In the middle of dinner I felt a terrible longing stealing over me. I wanted to play. I tried to control myself, but play I must or go mad. Scarcely apologizing I left the table, ran into the drawing-room, and sat down at the piano. I don't know what I played, but the moment my fingers touched the keys I was filled with a feeling of content and delight. I was still playing when the ladies entered. Mrs Venables must have thought me mad, for I did not stop. She sent for her husband, who came and asked me to return to the table. I nodded to him and went on. Suddenly my feelings changed, and I was only aware that I was making a terrible fool of myself. The full force of my social enormity fell upon me, and, livid with confusion, I made some incoherent apology and fled from the house.'

'From that night my reputation for eccentricity was firmly established, and I have added to it from time to time, for I am never safe, and can go nowhere without the danger of a similar occurrence. The following Sunday I went to the Wilmers'. There were plenty of delightful people there, and for a time I forgot my wretched position. Suddenly the same mad impulse came over me. There was a long-haired German at the piano, but it didn't matter. I flicked him off the stool, and, surrounded by a gaping crowd, went through Heaven knows what composition. But I did not care: I was happy. Then when my master was satisfied again the terrible awakening came, and I flung myself out of the room like a madman—they all thought I was. It's just fiendish, Saunders. I rarely can go anywhere without making a fool of myself. It's just maddening to think of the ignominy of it all.'

'But, my dear chap, why don't you lose it? Put it in an express train, with a fictitious address, and wash your hands of it.'

'I've tried it,' said Dawson, wearily. 'Before I knew all I have since learnt from bitter experience, I packed it off by P&O boat, addressed to the Grand Llama of Tibet. I thought he

might be able to deal with it if he ever got it. I suffered agonies from the separation, and it must have been very lively on the journey. For I had to play to it just the same. And then, after all, it came back to me marked "Gone—Left no address", and I don't know what I hadn't to pay for carriage. How they found out the sender, goodness only knows. I have left it in trains, but it never fails to come back, and I have always suffered during its absence. I took it to a pawnshop and destroyed the ticket, but the yearning for it was so fearful I had to get it out by making a false declaration about the ticket before a magistrate. I can't bear to be away from it. When I play its accompaniments a feeling of intense happiness and satisfaction steals over me, but afterwards the sense of the ignominy of it all is terrible. I can do nothing in life but minister to the caprices of a Cavalanci violin—and finally go crazy.'

Just as he ended there was a tap at the door, and the servant appeared with a parcel. It was a disreputable-looking object. The paper was ragged and dirty, the string knotted and loosely tied.

Dawson looked at it doubtfully.

'Are you sure it's for me?' he asked. 'Who brought it?'

'He looked like a circus man, sir,' replied the maid, 'and he was most particular in saying it was for you.'

'A circus man,' muttered Dawson, as he tore off the wrapper. A violin-case was exposed to view. He opened it, and then gave vent to a yell of dismay. I looked at the contents. It was a yellow violin.

'What, another Cavalanci!' I exclaimed.

'It looks like it,' said Dawson, bitterly. 'One's quite enough for any family. I don't know to whom I'm indebted for this particular attention, but I should like to wring his precious neck.' Then he banged the lid to.

'Here, Saunders,' said he, 'you can do me this good turn at any rate. Take this outside—leave it in a 'bus or pitch it into a dustbin; do anything you like with it, only take it away, and it will work its passage to its owner. But do it at once. I may have to play any minute to satisfy my own fiddle, and I don't know what complication would result. Take it, man, this minute.'

To satisfy him I took hold of the thing, put on my hat and opened the door. I nearly fell over the servant, who was about to knock; behind her was a tall, fur-coated man whom I did not remember to have seen before. And, good heavens! in his hand was a violin-case! The place seemed infested with fiddles.

I was brushing past him, but he laid a heavy hand on my shoulder and forced me back into the room. He himself followed, closed the door, and placed himself before it.

'Excuse my roughness, sir,' said he, with a strong nasal twang, 'but air you James Dawson?'

'No,' I replied: 'that's the gentleman,' pointing to Dawson, who was standing with eyes staring out of his head, fixed on the stranger's violin-case.

'Don't stay, Saunders,' he almost shrieked, 'take it away. There's not a moment to be lost.'

But the newcomer effectually barred the way.

Dawson was almost beside himself. He grabbed hold of the poker, but the stranger coolly threw his case on the table and from his breast produced a tiny revolver.

'Two can play at that pertic'ler game, sir,' said he, 'and I reckon the betting's on my side today.'

And there we stood.

'Perhaps you'll kindly explain what you mean by this intrusion?' I said, hotly.

‘No objection at all,’ said the American, for so I judged him to be. ‘I’d have done so at once if James Dawson hadn’t been so demonstrative. You see, Colonel, it’s thish-yer way. That infernal cuss, Cavalanci—’

Again the door opened, and this time a heavily muffled foreigner with spectacles and long hair appeared, and, ye gods! he also had a violin-case.

‘Goot,’ said the latest arrival, ‘I see dat I am joost in de nick off time. Goot evenings, shentlemens all,’ and with this he placed his case and hat on the table and proceeded to divest himself of his wraps.

‘Bravo,’ said the Yankee, ‘I’m glad to see you, Bloomstein. We are now complete—the four extant Cavalanci and the four owners.’

‘I’m not an owner,’ I said, in alarm, for I did not at all like the turn things were taking.

‘You’re the Baboo from Benares, ain’t you?’ asked the American. ‘No, sir, I’m not. I’m a friend of Mr Dawson. I was simply calling upon him, and I think I’ll go now. I don’t wish to intrude on your proceedings.’

‘No, you don’t, sir,’ said he, turning the key in the door and pocketing it. ‘Not till I’m clear on the subject. Whose fiddle’s that?’ pointing to the one I held.

‘It’s just come in a parcel,’ said I.

‘Allow me to look at it, please,’ said the Yankee, still toying with his revolver.

He placed the case on the table, opened it, and drew forth the violin. Underneath it was a letter.

‘Ah, thishyer’s thingumy’s fist,’ said he, ‘and no doubt it will explain. Here, Colonel, you look like an Oriental scholar, so, perhaps, you’ll decipher it.’ And he handed me the letter.

The handwriting was like a copy-book heading, but the composition was peculiar. This is what I read:

‘Honoured Sir—It mortifies me deeply not to intrude at happy conversazione. I have made blue in the Wiski of Scotchland the rupees obligingly forwarded so there is no ability in me to pay for a transit. Today the Gangees receives a solid addition but my fiddle of spanking yellow will reach you timely by a holy gentleman of Shoreditch.—Faithful and truly,

DONNERGEE JUGGERNAUT.’

‘The cur!’ exclaimed the Yankee, when I had finished reading this singular epistle. ‘Why didn’t he destroy his Cavalanci before he committed suicide instead of passing it on here? Someone will have to own it or the whole scheme will fall through. Here, Colonel,’ addressing me, ‘you’re the odd man out. You’ve got to take possession of that Cavalanci.’

‘I beg to decline the honour,’ I replied, firmly.

The Yankee lifted his revolver threateningly.

‘Nein, nein,’ broke in the German, ‘do not shet his blood. Egsblain de matter to de shentlemans und he vill understand.’

‘Right,’ said the Yankee, seating himself astride of a chair, with his back to the door, revolver still in hand. ‘It’s thishyer way, and maybe if I had told you at first I should have had a warmer reception from James Dawson. My name is Masters—Simpson K. Masters, of Tontine, Dak. I am the unfortunate owner of this instrument, and I need hardly tell you what its possession entails.’

A groan broke from the German. ‘Ja, ja; dat is so,’ he said.

‘It was left me about five years ago by a lady who had lost her breach of promise action against me, and when I fully realized that I should probably grow woolly if I could not get rid of it, I determined to devote what leisure the infernal instrument left me to making inquiries about

Cavalanci and his curse—for, as most poisons have their antidote, I reckoned the same arrangement held good for curses. I spent all last year at Brescia, where these things were manufactured. I bought up every vestige of a relic of Cavalanci, took his shop for a spell of 999 years, and was prepared to stay my lease out unless I got what I wanted. I searched every corner and cranny of that-air shop after the manner prescribed by the late E. A. Poe. I spent days in the chimneys, and wasted a power of time in the roof; I took his old tester-bed to bits, and probed every inch of its wood; and worked at the anatomy of the building till the authorities sent word it was likely to fall, but all to no purpose.

‘I had about given up hope when I chanced upon a lineal descendant of Cavalanci—a decayed Italian nobleman in the retail macaroni business. From him I learnt of the existence of a tradition that Cavalanci on his death-bed was annoyed to think of the trouble he had started, and got the Devil to promise that, when a combined band of all his fiddles played a certain air, the Curse should be removed. Why the Old Gentleman agreed to this arrangement my informant couldn’t guess, unless he did it to soothe his friend’s last moments, no doubt feeling pretty certain that the combined band would never play till he’d got a lot of fun out of the Curse.

‘It sounded like a cock-and-bull tale, but the Italian nobleman seemed so certain about it, and was so much hurt when I doubted him, that I sort of began to believe in it myself. As luck had it, I had discovered a roll of manuscript music up the shop chimney, of which I had taken no pertic’ler account, but which now assumed considerable importance. As I had no piano handy in those days, I had been playing to my fiddle on a concertina, and it rather seemed to take to the instrument; so the very next time it wanted me to accompany it, I started to work through that bunch of tunes on the same article. Now, whether it was the concertina it suddenly took a dislike to, or whether the tunes didn’t agree with it, I don’t pretend to say, but it turned sulky and wouldn’t take a hand in noway, that is until I came to one pertic’ler air. It was a weird affair—a sort of mixture of the “Dead March in Saul” and “Hail, Columbia!” It struck in from the first note in a nasty nagging way, and if ever a fiddle played unwillingly that one did. It lagged behind and put in commas and full-stops where they were not wanted, and in every other bar it screeched out a note of exclamation that wasn’t down in my part. But I took it out of that Cavalanci, gentlemen, and made it sit up, for when I’d run through the ditty I started it all over again, and that instrument followed me like a whipped cur. And then another remarkable thing happened. It changed colour—from yellow to orange and then to a dirty brown. I guess I’d touched it up at last; and when I saw this I closed the concert and gave that Italian nobleman an order for macaroni that surprised him.

‘Although it regained its old colour, I was firmly convinced from the behaviour of my violin that the nobleman was right, and that if I could get the whole extant Cavalanci together the Curse could be broken; and the last few months I have spent in tracing Bloomstein, the Baboo, and our friend James Dawson, and in making arrangements for this happy meeting. I thought it better to keep the notion from you, James, until now, for fear of incredulity on your part. And now, Colonel,’ turning to me, ‘you must assume possession of that Baboo’s fiddle. It won’t take ten minutes to break that-air Curse.’

‘But if it doesn’t break?’ I urged.

‘It will break,’ said Simpson K. Masters.

‘Saunders,’ said Dawson, who had worked himself up into a state of great excitement, ‘I implore you to help us destroy this Curse. You owe it to me to do so, for it’s all through you I got into the trouble at all.’

'I'm awfully sorry, Dawson,' I replied, 'but I cannot. I was very strictly brought up, and my family would not like me to mix myself up in anything of this nature. You must respect my scruples.'

'And you must respect this, sir,' said the Yankee, holding his revolver at an extremely unpleasant angle.

There was no help for it. 'All right,' I said, 'I'll do it for my old friend Dawson's sake. Nothing else would have induced me. But I can't play any instrument,' I added, triumphantly.

'Mein Gott!' exclaimed the German.

'Why, I have heard you play "Haydn's Surprise",' said Dawson.

'Only on one finger,' I modestly urged.

'Try it, sir, with your toes if you like,' said the Yankee. 'And I shall be surprised if that fiddle don't respond. A Cavalanci ain't pertic'ler when it wants an owner.'

I sat down at the piano and played what I knew of the air. A shadow of despair came over Dawson's face, and the German put his fingers in his ears, but Simpson K. Masters encouraged me to persevere.

'Keep it up, Colonel,' said he. 'Put the pedal on, it'll help you round the corners.'

Before I had played a dozen notes a sound came from the table.

'Hurrah!' cried Dawson.

'The Baboo's fiddle has bit,' said Simpson K. Masters.

Sure enough the violin had joined in, and I turned cold at the thought that I was now the owner of a Cavalanci violin.

I played all I knew of the air and then stopped. The violin ceased as well.

'It would not let you off so easily in a week or two, Colonel,' said the Yankee, grimly. 'Now, gentlemen, here we are—the four extant Cavalanci and the four owners. All we have to do is to run through Cavalanci's Antidote and our troubles are over.'

With eager impatience Dawson sat down at the piano, the German produced a flageolet, and Masters a flute.

'What am I to play?' said I, in dismay. 'You mustn't leave me out.'

'Haven't you got anything, James?' said the Yankee. 'A drum would do.'

'I've nothing that I know of,' replied Dawson.

'Then we must send out for something.'

'I have it,' said Dawson. 'I bought a triangle some years ago, and ought to have it still.'

'A driangle—goot!' said Mr Bboomstein, and Masters nodded his satisfaction.

After some little delay the triangle was found, and when I had received a few instructions on the manipulation of this simple instrument Dawson sat down, and the quartet—or rather octet—commenced.

I don't think it was a success from a musical point of view, for we were all excited. Even the flute was off-colour. Still, we hung together pretty well, and stuck to the notes as well as we could. I tapped my triangle with considerable effect.

The four Cavalanci joined in from the first note. It was a weird and mournful composition, and the violins kept up the pathos of the thing with remarkable effect. It was like the prolonged wail of a soul in torment, with sudden outbursts of Satanic joviality. Our feelings were strung to the highest pitch, for we were playing for our lives. The sweat rolled off Bloomstein's face, and Dawson's hands trembled like aspen leaves. Simpson K. Masters tried to appear unconcerned—and failed.

The others were intent on the notes, but as I played from ear I was able to observe the fiddles. I could feel my heart thumping as I watched them. Would the 'Antidote' act, or was it all a delusion of the Yankee's? Was I not saddled for life with a fearful monstrosity which would finally undermine my reason?

Ha! it was touching them. Masters was right. They were changing colour! They were a rich yellow when we started, but with every bar their hue deepened through varying shades of orange, brown, walnut, darker, darker still, till at last four coal-black violins lay upon the table. As the final bars came their notes shrieked out as if in terrible protest, and as the last chord was struck sixteen strings snapped with one crack.

'Gentlemen,' said the Yankee, 'I guess Signor Cavalanci's Curse is off.'