

1. Two Worlds (Texarkana, 1884)

AFTER embarrassing himself at the Jefferson Davis fundraiser, Scott Joplin kicked his way down Stateline Avenue. In the dark, black and white were the only colors he could still see clearly. All else was hopelessly mixed up: people from the North and the East, cotton pickers and lumberjacks, Polish shopkeepers and Chinese servants, Mexican cooks and Irish gamblers. From the dense forest just outside of town traipsed in bands of Caddos, the Kadahadacho Indians who sold their leather shoes and decorative tapestries for stone tools and food supplies. Every day something new came up for sale. Building, building—everyone was building something in Texarkana, but that was part of the problem, too.

The city may not have had a history, but the people who lived there did. Now that colored people had real opportunities to reconstruct their houses, their relationships, their lives, one would think they'd be zipping around like fireflies. But a man's past can never be reconstructed because it isn't ever cleanly destroyed. Pieces stay behind. No splash of whitewash ever fully prevented the termites of memory from inching their way through the colored crevices downtown.

Whenever he had a difficult decision to make, Scott set himself up on the small hill with high grass and wildflowers. In the starlight he was especially careful not to disturb the patient, purple flowers. A traveling white schoolteacher once read to his class the story of the heliotrope from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Derided by the world and scorned by her lover the Sun God, a poor nymph keeps her eyes ever fixed to the sun. Streaked with purple, she is covered in leaves and flowers, roots that claw their way around her helplessness, forever binding her to the earth.

"An excess of passion begets an excess of grief," the schoolteacher quoted. "Don't reach so high. You'll be much happier if you lower your sights."

But there was something about the nymph's undying faith that touched him inside. She refused to be stuck here in this world, and that refusal brought hope along with the pain. Scott thought he understood the nymph's eternal conflict. His music wouldn't right the wrong, but it might help ease the loss. Long after the sun abandoned her, Scott sat among the heliotrope and played for her his coronet.

The hill had a further advantage: it overlooked the new train station. He was there one December day, ten years earlier, when the first Texas & Pacific railway pulled in from Dallas, on its way to Fulton, Arkansas. Since then his father had taught him to play the violin, banjo and coronet, but none of them could take him beyond his colorless world. Maybe the trains couldn't either, but the tracks held that promise, going outwards, ever away. His mother believed the coronet was the Devil's instrument. Scott disagreed. Any instrument that brought relief to others was useful. It shouldn't much matter who was dancing at the other end.

Under the wavering light of a half-moon, Scott played with all the sounds of the night: the high-pitched melody of cicada bugs over the running bass line of lumber cars and freight trains, garbage crates and short hauls sounding their syncopated iron rhythms: *boom-chugga boom-boom: boom-chugga boom-boom*. The music of the night trains was the sound of waiting—waiting and waning and wasting away. The greatest secrets in life, Scott knew, lay not in the music or the people who played it, but in the short, silent spaces that sometimes fell unexpectedly off the beat. The Stop Man taught him that without hardly even saying a word.

Actually, until recently, Scott couldn't remember the Stop Man saying anything more to him than, "Pass that pitcher yonder this way, sweetie boy." That's why he was caught off guard when the Stop Man ambled on over to him before the fundraiser, sitting down so close that Scott could not escape the smell of salted fish and old age. Scott had been offered a position to play the piano at church. It was more than playing the hymns during services. The Canaan Baptist Church hosted all kinds of events in the colored community. The position came with a certain prestige. But from what Scott had seen, church music never made it out. He had bigger plans. The world was wide open. Why limit yourself to a colored audience? The Stop Man sighed one of his big sighs and started right in with the story about an alligator. Just like that.

A slave boy named Lil' Jim meets an alligator while heading out to the cotton fields. The alligator looks at Lil' Jim and opens his big mouth with all those sharp teeth and surprises Lil' Jim by saying, "How dee do?" Lil' Jim runs back to his master and tells him of the talking alligator. Scott was already laughing at the Stop Man's relish in speaking the part of the alligator. As the story goes, the master, irritated at having his time wasted, consents to go back with Lil' Jim and clear up this ridiculous misunderstanding. When they run into the alligator, it is Lil' Jim's turn to be angry. No matter how hard he tries, the dumb reptile won't say a word. The master leaves, but not before giving Lil' Jim double time in the fields. Poor Lil' Jim sits down by the alligator and starts to cry. Nuzzling up next to the boy, the alligator opens his big mouth and says, "How dee do?"

"How come you didn't say nothin' when the master was here?" Lil' Jim asks the reptile. And the alligator says, "Why did that master come here in the first place? I say just one word to you, and the first thing you go and do is run and tell the white man!"

People were always taking things too seriously, Scott's father often said. And he was probably right. Music didn't always have to have some holy purpose. Whites in Texarkana wanted something to dance to just like anybody else.

"Sometimes I just like to have fun with my music," Scott told the Stop Man noncommittally. "There is nothing more to it than that."

The Stop Man grabbed the back of Scott's neck and bore straight down into him. "No sweetie, boy. When we play music there is *always* more to it than that."

The rolling bass of the trains marked the passing of time. Scott blew his horn muted and slow, drowning out the insects and thoughts that buzzed his sleepless brain until the opening allegro of the early morning light.

Arriving home, Scott heard a lone violin moaning sweetly from the muddy old kitchen. That meant trouble.

Usually there were all kinds of musicians outside, playing banjos with busted strings, iron pots and wooden spoons, strange instruments with holes to blow through or elastic pieces and pumps that contracted and vibrated and made strange, beautiful and discordant music. Sleepy neighbors

occasionally objected, but by the early morning hours most of them could be appeased with one of the strong smelling pitchers passed up and down the slanted front porch. When Scott's father Jiles came home from the saloon with his older, poorer, mostly genial friends from his North Texas farming days, it didn't much matter who you were. In Texarkana on a Friday night, it seemed like most everybody was a singing cowboy.

Jiles liked the violin best, but he was known to blow through broken whiskey cups if he thought it would lighten a mood. He was never too particular about his music. Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races" or "Ring de Banjo," Irish jigs, Viennese waltzes, it was all the same to Jiles. "The good Lord don't plan for no animal go heavy through this world," Scott's father used to say. "The snake he slides, them birds they glide, them big cats scowl them ca-yotes howl but ain't nobody meant to walk heavy. A man should dance. He can't dance, he should learn. He can't learn to move he should learn to make music so someone else can be dancing."

Typically, Scott joined the spastic circle of musicians spilling out into the dirt road in front of 618 Hazel Street. He played alongside Swindle, the fast talking singer from Plain Dealing, Louisiana who sold "Texarkana Bitters" to the colored folks in town, and with Professor Johnson, a music teacher, barber, real estate investor, and widely respected shaman in both Miller and Bowie Counties. But for Scott, the best times were when he didn't make any music at all. Those were the rare summer nights when the Stop Man stopped in. An ageless, taciturn Southern gentleman, the Stop Man was an old friend of Jiles' and helped him get his start in the railroads. There was some dispute over whether the Stop Man got his name from his railroad work or his style of dancing. It was the dancing that captivated Joplin.

Sometimes you wouldn't even know he was there. The violins might screech and tear and the bleating banjos jump along to stomping feet, stomp-stomping to the floating melodies when Scott would catch the Stop Man rising slowly to his feet, steadying himself with a stick carved from scratched pine, and move step by steady step to the middle of the ragged circle. The old Negro wasn't out for a stroll and he didn't move with ease. When he made it to the center he jerked to the left, then he jerked to the right. He could move so slow with his feet and his shoulders, not quite a step or a start but a dally and sway and he'd move with an effort, as though his very blood pushed lonesome in his veins, all dried and patchy like the grass.

"Yank the line!"

"Honey and wine!"

Tipsy music men shouted over the music as the Stop Man lifted the tempo harder and faster and just when it looked like all was about to break wide open, just when the frantic fiddles took on the very walls of Jericho, the Stop Man, appealing to some mysterious guide, reached upwards with clenched fists and froze. "Puttin' on the stops," he liked to call it. One by one the banjos quit and the fiddles couldn't hardly have played anything at all. And then, before Scott even knew why, just as suddenly as that, the Stop Man started up again. Uneven and guarded. With a jerk. And a push.

On this morning, however, the porch was empty. From inside the broken window there sounded only one tired violin; left alone, in the kitchen.

"What is that you are playing, Papa?"

"Sweet widower you scared me good, you done. Why you sneaking around like that?"

"I heard you playing, that's all."

“That’s all,” Jiles said with a deep sigh. “I’m a just tickling an old tune, and that’s all.”

“What is it?” Scott asked.

“It ain’t nothin’. Nothin’ much that matters, anyhow.”

“I never heard it before,” Scott persisted. “What is it?”

“That there is an old Louis Gottschalk tune. You probably don’t even know about him. He ain’t one of your so-called masters.”

Scott bit down on his lip. He knew his father was still sore at him from last night’s fundraiser.

“I know some of Gottschalk’s music,” he said defensively.

“Well that’s good. I guess because he played the pianini like you. Still couldn’t tell you why. You take all these fine tunes he play on the pianini and you put it to a fiddle and it’s the best kind of music you never hear. That goes for any of your pianini music. Now this one I was playing here, this here tune ain’t near as famous as that ‘Ojos Criollos’ or the old ‘Bamboula’ or any of that Spanish stuff he plays. This tune here ain’t quite so well known.”

“What is the name of it?” Scott asked.

Jiles hissed through the space in his yellowed front teeth.

“It don’t matter what it’s named. Nobody remember names any old how. Names disappear just as fast as people do when there ain’t no one around to remember ’em. But you got to call it something, I guess, and they call this one, ‘The Dying Poet.’ That’s as good a name as any, I guess.”

The music sounded like it came from a darker world, quivering like a newborn baby forced into the light

“Why is that poet so sad?”

Jiles moved his foot from the bar and gingerly stood himself up off the stool. With care, he tucked his violin and broken bow into a worn out sack he also used for hauling spikes.

“Best not to think ’bout such stuff. Maybe he just was sorry he ain’t been named Shoper.”

“Chopin,” Scott corrected him instinctively.

Jiles nodded, slowly massaging the back of his neck.

“That’s right,” he said. “You always remember their names.”

Jiles was still hot over Scott’s playing the previous night. Specifically, what he played. The Joplin family had played a prominent role in the entertainment for the Jefferson Davis fundraiser. Scott and his brother Robert each took one solo before joining Jiles for two more numbers. Robert played the guitar and sang a song he wrote, poking fun at leaders in the white and colored sections of town. The crowd howled with laughter and roared with applause.

Afterwards, Scott took his seat at the piano. He had planned to play a minstrel number, but at the very last moment, the Stop Man’s alligator story came back to him. He pulled out a handkerchief from his suit pocket and smeared off his blackface. Then, as if guided by a higher force, his fingers produced Bach. Scott sang out the twenty-fifth cantata: “My Body is Sick.”

*It is said that poison runs through our veins
But where will we find us a cure?
Who stands with the suffering and the poor?
What doctor will come ease our pains?*

*Take my simple songs, and lift them higher
Listen, Jesus to my simple verse
Listen with your ears of mercy
Then take me up into your choir*

He played it elegantly, pleading with the audience to listen with merciful ears. His piano teacher would have been proud. For the last three years Mr. Weiss had been cautioning Scott against the “pretty chords.”

“Without suffering there can be no music,” his teacher was fond of saying. “Zee unpleasant chords makes us to wait a little longer for good times at zee end. It is good to wait a little. Relief from pain can only come after most hard longing.”

But when he hit the last note, only silence welcomed Scott back to the surrounding world. Then a cough. And another. Then the *boos* rained down from the balcony. It was a disaster, and would have been worse had not Jiles and Robert run onto the stage and started in with their “Johnny Schmoker” number. Scott sang right alongside them, as planned.

*Johnny Schmoker, Johnny Schmoker,
I can play,
I can play, I can play,
I can play my triangle
Tic knock knock, my triangle*

Scott sang and sang, modulating his voice to hold back the tears.

*My boom, boom boom,
My pilly willy wink,
My rub a dub a dub,
My fa la la
My zoom zoom zoom*

Just give them what they want, Scott reminded himself. *If you want to be remembered you got to give them what they want.* The Stop Man didn't understand that. Scott sang even louder then, opening his mouth wide like a tamed alligator, harmless and eager to please.

“But how did he die?” Scott asked his father the morning after.

“Who?”

“Gottschaulk. Do you know how he died?”

Jiles shook his head ruefully. “He was *hoodoo'd*.”

“What?”

“He was *hoodoo'd*,” Jiles repeated. “Thas what Professor Johnson done call it.”

At that moment Florence came into the kitchen to boil milk for breakfast.

“Don't start in with that man,” she snapped. “All that Professor Johnson does is sit around and tell stories.”

Besides running the numbers game on the Arkansas side of the line, Professor Johnson was schooled in the Black Arts. Jiles was deep in debt to the Professor, a point that infuriated Florence. Scott's mother was a God-fearing Baptist. Credit and loans came straight out of the Devil's purse; only slaves obediently accepted them as gifts.

"The Good Lord chooses who lives and who dies. Nobody ever gets hoodoo'd," Florence insisted.

"That's easy for you to say, Flo. You don't owe nothing to the Professor."

"That's right. I don't owe anything to anyone."

"Well, soon enough it ain't going to matter any old way. Hoodoo'd or not, I ain't got long left on this good earth now."

Jiles was being overly dramatic, as usual.

"They didn't pay us anything for last night?" Scott asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Nope. Guess they didn't care for our evening's entertainment."

"Robert and I will square it with the Professor in church today."

"Robert didn't come home last night," his mother said, pouring out milk for the baby. "Do you have any idea where he is this time?"

Well that's just fine, Scott thought to himself. Now that was two problems he had to fix. He was sure he knew where Robert was but his mother would die of worry if he told her. Because his family forever needed him, Scott never had the time to do anything or think about things that really mattered. He wondered if Bach could have possibly written such beautiful music if he were born into Joplin's family.

"Maybe the Stop Man was right," Scott said to his father. "Maybe we ought to quit playing for them."

Florence looked at Jiles with one eyebrow slightly raised.

"But we were playing for the Southland," Jiles said, swinging his arms beneath his narrow chest. "For Masre Jeff!" Pleased with himself, Jiles let out a high-pitched laugh.

Though Jiles only used the slave-speak jokingly, for Florence, the question of Jefferson Davis, like the question of her race, was always more complicated. "Masre Jeff" was from Kentucky, and the roots of all free Kentucky Southerners ran deep. The past night's show had raised money to build a statue of Davis, in honor of his 75th birthday. The Joplin family was asked to perform so that Texarkana could see how the greatness of Jefferson Davis, the first and by no means last President of the Confederacy, rose high above the overblown color issue tearing apart the country. Scott's mother was conflicted. She was colored enough to welcome the end of slavery, and she could share the ecstasies of those early days after the war when colored folk took to the streets changing the words to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic":

*They will hang Jeff Davis to the sour apple tree,
They will hang Jeff Davis to the sour apple tree,
They will hang Jeff Davis to the sour apple tree,
His soul goes marching on!*

The great War Between the States, which brought an end to slavery once and for all, was long overdue. But Florence was one of the lucky colored women to be legally free already before emancipation. To that end, she also shared something in common with her white counterparts. For them the war brought with it a kind of moral sloppiness. It was the end of manners, a certain way of living that appealed even to colored Southerners like Florence. *Why couldn't they have ended slavery without losing their dignity*, Florence wondered? Nothing of

the polite society appealed to the rude Union soldiers everywhere spitting and cursing and acting shamefully to the ladies. The North ruined everything. They were businessmen, little more, and there could be no dignity in that. Cities like New York and Washington looked to swallow everything indiscriminately. Florence didn't want to start over if starting over meant building on empty, spiritually dry land. She detested frivolity in all its forms and held few illusions about the North. The old world was too much changing for Florence. She worried privately about the future of a country ruled by businessmen trained in the Northern way of thinking.

"Don't talk about what you don't understand," she snapped. Occasional dismay at her occasional husband was as much distaste as Florence ever allowed herself to show. "You ought to change your ways and quit dragging your whole family into your affairs."

"That's what I'm trying to say, Flo. A man gets hoodoo'd, there ain't any way to change. At least not in this world, if you catch my drift. You can call it what you want. But that Gottschalk, he was only forty years old, and he up and dies playing for 'em down there in Brazil. And you know what song he was playing when he ups and dies? '*Muerte.*' That's just what it's called. '*Muerte.*' Professor Johnson says it means 'I been hoodoo'd' in Brazilian speak. You can call it what you want but I'll tell you one thing, I ain't ever giving no name to any song of mine."

"What do you still come by here for, anyway?" Florence asked. "Just to bring bad news, on a Sunday of all days!"

"Now you just upset, is all."

"Aren't you upset, Jiles?"

"I try not to think 'bout that stuff."

"A man doesn't take his own life for no reason at all," Florence said definitively.

"Maybe that's true and maybe it isn't. I don't know nothing about it."

"Well what do you know?"

"I know it ain't got nothing to do with us. No way of knowing any old how. Ain't nobody knows where another man's thoughts go."

"On Juneteenth Day? Emancipation Day?"

"Means different things to different people. Not everyone knows what to do with their freedom. Sometimes things just stay with a man without nobody ever seeing what's going on. A man might take his life so that he don't have to be free no more."

"Who died?" Scott asked.

"You still strum the banjo there, Flo?" Jiles asked, ignoring the question.

"I haven't touched it for a long time."

"Why not?"

"Too busy, I guess. I'm raising a family here in case you haven't noticed. I guess I don't have the time to play music anymore. I guess I don't have much of an interest, to tell you the truth."

Jiles took the banjo down from the wall by the door. He strummed a few chords, then handed it to Florence.

"It's out of tune," she deadpanned.

"Sweet widower, Flo, you ain't never played it in tune."

She laughed then, and for just a moment in time, Scott could see them back in Mooresville, Texas; young Jiles, a dashing, carefree and newly freed slave with Florence, a Kentucky gal freely singing and strumming with all the musicians gathered in the marshy field. It would have

been the late 1860s, and they would be singing a song about the endless and open future that lay ahead for everybody.

Scott's reverie was broken by the sound of his father's voice. First, a humming sound. Then he began to sing.

*Weep no more, my lady,
Oh weep no more today!
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home*

Florence shook her head in mock anguish and for the first time in Scott's life, he heard her strum. The chords were hardly recognizable but the notes were clear and confident.

Jiles closed his eyes and his voice, steadier than Scott ever thought possible, filled the one-storey house.

*They hunt no more for the 'possum and the coon,
On meadow, the hill and the shore
They sing no more by the glimmer of the moon,
On the bench by that old cabin door*

In a voice that was broken and sweet, Florence responded.

*The day goes by like a shadow o'er the heart,
With sorrow where all was delight;
The time has come when the people have to part,
Then my old Kentucky home, good night!*

Soft crying was heard from the room next door.

"Now see what you've gone and done, you've woken up the baby with all this foolishness."

Florence put down the banjo and with her back turned to Jiles, hurriedly wiped her eyes and ran to her daughter. Jiles knew his son well enough to know that Scott, standing by the door, was still waiting for an answer. He told him the truth.

"The Stop Man was found hanging from a tree this morning," he said hoarsely, his words nearly buried by his daughter's crying. "Folks saying he took his own life. Best not to think too much on it."

Scott was dumbstruck.

"And I'll tell you somthin' else. When Masre Jeff was captured in Georgia, folks say he was wearing his wife's dress as a disguise. That's what they say in the North any old ways. Ways I see it, best not to think too much on it. When a man is trying to get away from something, there's no knowing what he'll get up to."

Jiles threw his railroad sack over his shoulder, patted his son on the shoulder, and quietly left their home.

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And so they went, on into the afternoon, singing and clapping to herald the New Jerusalem that was close at hand, always on its way, while outside the walls of the Canaan Baptist Church the day drew ever onwards like a slow, solitary train, and the south Texas sun pounded down on the humbled and the hardened, daring any and all to leave off with their singing and put down their music.

After the service, a friend of Florence accosted Scott. She was livid about Scott performing for Jefferson Davis. Sojourner Truth hadn't been underground for half a year, the woman admonished him. She lived 108 years and no one was building a statue for her. Scott listened politely, then just walked out. It seemed like everyone in Texarkana had an opinion on what Scott should do with his life. And yet, what he wanted most of all was to get away from all the people giving him advice. Why couldn't he simply play his music in peace? He never liked being told what to do. It occurred to Scott that tying the rope might have been the only free act the Stop Man ever made in his life.

Scott went to his piano lesson dogged by uneasiness. Colonel Draughon was looking for musicians for his weekly poker games, Saturday night right on through to Sunday evening. Scott didn't want to do it because for one thing it would force him to miss church. It wasn't that he was particularly religious, but he cared too much for his mother to hurt her in any way. Robert was younger. He didn't carry Scott's burdens.

Robert had taken the Colonel's offer, he was sure of it. Why wouldn't he? It was more complicated for Scott. Not only would he miss church, but his piano lesson as well. It would be a double blow for his mother who had bought Scott his first piano, spending nearly all her savings to get it. Nobody in her family had ever played one, but Scott's passion had touched her. She often told her church friends how he sat himself down at the Rodgers' upright piano that first time. Florence cleaned the family's home and brought him along when no one else was available to watch him. From the instant he found the notes to the old plantation songs, Scott's face lit up with a radiance that made his mother swell with pride. Julius Weiss, the Rodgers' music teacher, also heard him play, and immediately agreed to tutor Scott on Sunday afternoons, his only time off. More than Classical music, he taught European "sensibilities" not readily on display in nineteenth century Texas. Those lessons had been taking place for years now, and never once did Mr. Weiss charge the family so much as a nickel.

Robert was likely making good money, but was he in any better position than their father? One was indebted to a small-time crook and the other to a big-money gambler. Everyone was indebted to someone. Scott hated it. But that was just a fact of life. Nobody understood that better than Mr. Weiss, the small-time entertainer plucked from St. Louis.

"Ah, *mein kinder*, you have fine ear. Timing is excellent. But always only notes," Mr. Weiss said, pulling Scott's hand from the piano. "There is no understanding of tragedy. Without this, there is no art. Only notes. Here you play Chopin very nice but you only hear zee joy. Joy for world to come. But you don't yet see a tragedy. It is disappointment in zee world down here that makes us to look somewhere else. I ask you, what is more tragic than to look somewhere else for joy? Chopin understood what you do not—zee melancholy behind joy, tragedy under zee joke."

Scott looked above the piano where wild, naked bodies struggled for mastery—painted people at a seaside, an island perhaps, framed by trees on either end. In the background, sky. A light blue sky filled with big fluffy clouds swirling into each other, colliding, without peace. Foregrounded on the grassy shore, three naked couples violently wrestled each other to the ground. On the left, a man poised to strike a bare woman lying on the ground, covering her head. Two lovers with long yellowish-orange hair wrestled upright in the center, locked in a feverish embrace. Another pitched struggle followed on the right, this one observed by two yelping dogs,

panicked or enraged. Directly above the dogs, on a small ridge, a fourth couple also locked arms in combat: the man hunched over his knees while an animal, or perhaps a naked woman, latched on from behind. All that was quite plain to Scott, no expert on French Impressionism. The world was a violent, nasty place. Music, whether from the fiddle, coronet, or piano, whether played alone, in church, or at the card table, could ease the suffering, if only for a time.

"Have you ever heard of 'The Dying Poet'?" Scott asked his piano teacher.

"It will be me if you don't start to play again."

"I am speaking in earnest. It's by Louis Gottschalk."

"Yes, I know him, of course. This Gottschalk write nice songs. But here, I teach you music!"

Scott stared ahead and fingered a few notes with his right hand. Mr. Weiss had encouraged Scott to take the position at church. Bach, he argued, had started much the same way.

"You are a Hebrew, right?" Scott asked. He knew that at heart Mr. Weiss was a patient man who took serious questions seriously. "What do you believe happens when you die?"

"Ach, mein kinder, we don't ask such questions. It is what happens while you live to matter most. It is where zee true art lies."

"Then what happens when you live?" Scott pressed.

"You die."

Though he wanted more out of life, Scott didn't yet know how to find it. He didn't want to end up like the Texarkana steamboat going up and down the Red River, just up and down, remembered now by no one.

"A friend of my father's died this morning," Scott said. "He was found hanging from a tree next to his house."

"Ach, it is why I leave Deutschland. Always a fight with somebody else. People are afraid to fight zee boredom so they fight with others. It is more easy that way. More clean."

Julius Weiss had long ago lost his faith in mankind. In Germany, under Bismarck, it was always war. War with France, war with Prussia, war with everyone. He explained to Scott why Beethoven scratched out Napoleon's name in the dedication of his third symphony. No war could be made into a thing of lasting beauty. People that turned so easily to violence must first turn away from music.

"My father thinks that maybe he hung himself. He says Juneteenth Day is supposed to be the day of freedom, but that freedom isn't a blessing to everyone. Sometimes it gets them thinking too much."

"Your father said that?" Mr. Weiss sounded almost impressed.

Scott nodded.

"Your father is artist, you know. He understands tragedy. Better than you, mein kinder."

"I don't want to go that way," Scott said. "Who will remember my father's friend in five years? What I want is to do something. Really *do* something."

Mr. Weiss chuckled, callously it seemed to Scott. He put away the sheet music and played Scott the opening scene of Wagner's Tannhäuser for the first time. His bony hands were curved, his posture, as always, flawless. And he played magnificently. Scott was transported to Venus' cave where Eros burned out all his troubled days.

"Listen to here," Mr. Weiss continued, his voice even. "Listen to zee music here as Tannhäuser says to Venus he must go to leave. It is so lovely."

Weiss began to sing gently.

*“Nicht Lust allein liegt mir am Herzen,
Aus Freuden sehn ich mich nach Schmerzen.
Aus deinem Reiche muss ich fliehn –
O Königin, Göttin! Lass mich ziehn!”*

Tannhäuser, torn between two worlds, asks Venus to return him to the world of men. Just as Adam turns down God in the Garden of Eden, Tannhäuser prefers a world of imperfections to the God-like pleasures of Venus. He is given his freedom and sent to the ugly town of Wartburg. There he wins his Elizabeth, not with songs of eternity, but with bawdy, ugly, practical words of the world.

“Ya, when Wagner was young he understood that one must play zee clown. It is zee biggest tragedy of all.”

Scott looked down at his own hands. They were muscular, powerful. Lifting his sights, he returned to the French painting that always fascinated him. Likely, Rodgers picked it up in St. Louis. There was still a sizeable French community there and anything making waves in the salons of Paris was soon copied in the city on the Mississippi and eventually brought down to cities like Texarkana. Underneath the massive gilded frame, just inches above the top of the Rodgers’ piano, it read: “The Battle of Love by Paul Cezanne.”

It dawned on Scott that music, like love, was violent. There could be no healing. The more you let it inside the more terribly it tore at your unformed, naked dreams. Jiles could “just give ‘em what they want,” and his mother could admire the Fisk University Singers from a safe distance, but his parents never played the piano. What did it matter if Beethoven scratched out Napoleon’s name? The cannon fire that volleys within is not so easily silenced.

He looked at his old teacher for the last time.

“Today is my final lesson,” Scott said with a troubled calm.

Mr. Weiss held his gaze and lay his hand heavy on Scott’s shoulder.

“You go to play for zee lout who plays that American poker?”

Scott smiled. He hadn’t told anyone about that. Mr. Weiss always seemed to know more than he realized.

“No,” Scott said mournfully. “I am getting on a train and never coming back.”

Mr. Weiss nodded his head. He had been waiting a long time for his student to say those words. Scott was the most gifted pupil he had ever taught.

“I understand, mein kinder. This world will be hard for you. Music is like God, zee great Schopenhauer has said. It sees only zee heart. I wish you much luck. Without this luck, you will have a no good time of it. Wartburg is always hard on zee artists.”