

The Street of Seven Stars

by

Mary Roberts Rinehart

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Chapter 1

The old stucco house sat back in a garden, or what must once have been a garden, when that part of the Austrian city had been a royal game preserve. Tradition had it that the Empress Maria Theresa had used the building as a hunting-lodge, and undoubtedly there was something royal in the proportions of the salon. With all the candles lighted in the great glass chandelier, and no sidelights, so that the broken paneling was mercifully obscured by gloom, it was easy to believe that the great empress herself had sat in one of the tall old chairs and listened to anecdotes of questionable character; even, if tradition may be believed, related not a few herself.

The chandelier was not lighted on this rainy November night. Outside in the garden the trees creaked and bent before the wind, and the heavy barred gate, left open by the last comer, a piano student named Scatchett and dubbed "Scatch"--the gate slammed to and fro monotonously, giving now and then just enough pause for a hope that it had latched itself, a hope that was always destroyed by the next gust.

One candle burned in the salon. Originally lighted for the purpose of enabling Miss Scatchett to locate the score of a Tschaiakowsky concerto, it had been moved to the small center table, and had served to give light if not festivity to the afternoon coffee and cakes. It still burned, a gnarled and stubby fragment, in its china holder; round it the disorder of the recent refreshment, three empty cups, a half of a small cake, a crumpled napkin or two,--there were never enough to go round,--and on the floor the score of the concerto, clearly abandoned for the things of the flesh.

The room was cold. The long casement windows creaked in time with the slamming of the gate and the candle flickered in response to a draft under the doors. The concerto flapped and slid along the uneven old floor. At the sound a girl in a black dress, who had been huddled near the tile stove, rose impatiently and picked it up. There was no impatience, however, in the way she handled the loose sheets. She put them together carefully, almost tenderly, and placed them on the top of the grand piano, anchoring them against the draft with a china dog from the stand.

The room was very bare--a long mirror between two of the windows, half a dozen chairs, a stand or two, and in a corner the grand piano. There were no rugs--the bare floor stretched bleakly into dim corners and was lost. The crystal pendants of the great chandelier looked like stalactites in a cave. The girl touched the piano keys; they were ice under her fingers.

In a sort of desperation she drew a chair underneath the chandelier, and armed with a handful of matches proceeded to the unheard-of extravagance of lighting it, not here and there, but throughout as high as she could reach, standing perilously on her tiptoes on the chair.

The resulting illumination revealed a number of things: It showed that the girl was young and comely and that she had been crying; it revealed the fact that the coal-pail was empty and the stove almost so; it let the initiated into the secret that the blackish fluid in the cups had been made with coffee extract that had been made of Heaven knows what; and it revealed in the cavernous corner near the door a number of trunks. The girl, having lighted all the candles, stood on the chair and looked at the trunks. She was very young, very tragic, very feminine. A door slammed down the hall and she stopped crying instantly. Diving into one of those receptacles that are a part of the mystery of the sex, she rubbed a chamois skin over her nose and her reddened eyelids.

The situation was a difficult one, but hardly, except to Harmony Wells, a tragedy. Few of us are so constructed that the Suite "Arlesienne" will serve as a luncheon, or a faulty fingering of the Waldweben from "Siegfried" will keep us awake at night. Harmony had lain awake more than once over some crime against her namesake, had paid penances of early rising and two hours of scales before breakfast, working with stiffened fingers in her cold little room where there was no room for a stove, and sitting on the edge of the bed in a faded kimono where once pink butterflies sported in a once blue-silk garden. Then coffee, rolls, and honey, and back again to work, with little Scatchett at the piano in the salon beyond the partition, wearing a sweater and fingerless gloves and holding a hot-water bottle on her knees. Three rooms beyond, down the stone hall, the Big Soprano, doing Madama Butterfly in bad German, helped to make an encircling wall of sound in the center of which one might practice peacefully.

Only the Portier objected. Morning after morning, crawling out at dawn from under his featherbed in the lodge below, he opened his door and listened to Harmony doing penance above; and morning after morning he shook his fist up the stone staircase.

"Gott im Himmel!" he would say to his wife, fumbling with the knot of his mustache bandage, "what a people, these Americans! So much noise and no music!"

"And mad!" grumbled his wife. "All the day coal, coal to heat; and at night the windows open! Karl the milkboy has seen it."

And now the little colony was breaking up. The Big Soprano was going back to her church, grand opera having found no place for her. Scatch was returning to be married, her heart full, indeed, of music, but her head much occupied with the trousseau in her trunks. The Harmar sisters had gone two weeks before, their funds having given out. Indeed, funds were very low with all of them. The "Bitte zum speisen" of the little German maid often called them to nothing more opulent than a stew of beef and carrots.

Not that all had been sordid. The butter had gone for opera tickets, and never was butter better spent. And there had been gala days--a fruitcake from Harmony's mother, a venison steak at Christmas, and once or twice on birthdays real American ice cream at a fabulous price and worth it. Harmony had bought a suit, too, a marvel of tailoring and cheapness, and a willow plume that would have cost treble its price in New York. Oh, yes, gala days, indeed, to offset the butter and the rainy winter and the faltering technic

and the anxiety about money. For that they all had always, the old tragedy of the American music student abroad--the expensive lessons, the delays in getting to the Master himself, the contention against German greed or Austrian whim. And always back in one's mind the home people, to whom one dares not confess that after nine months of waiting, or a year, one has seen the Master once or not at all.

Or--and one of the Harmar girls had carried back this sear in her soul--to go back rejected, as one of the unfit, on whom even the undermasters refuse to waste time. That has been, and often. Harmony stood on her chair and looked at the trunks. The Big Soprano was calling down the hall.

"Scatch," she was shouting briskly, "where is my hairbrush?"

A wail from Scatch from behind a closed door.

"I packed it, Heaven knows where! Do you need it really? Haven't you got a comb?"

"As soon as I get something on I'm coming to shake you. Half the teeth are out of my comb. I don't believe you packed it. Look under the bed."

Silence for a moment, while Scatch obeyed for the next moment.

"Here it is," she called joyously. "And here are Harmony's bedroom slippers. Oh, Harry, I found your slippers!" The girl got down off the chair and went to the door.

"Thanks, dear," she said. "I'm coming in a minute."

She went to the mirror, which had reflected the Empress Maria Theresa, and looked at her eyes. They were still red. Perhaps if she opened the window the air would brighten them.

Armed with the brush, little Scatchett hurried to the Big Soprano's room. She flung the brush on the bed and closed the door. She held her shabby wrapper about her and listened just inside the door. There were no footsteps, only the banging of the gate in the wind. She turned to the Big Soprano, heating a curling iron in the flame of a candle, and held out her hand.

"Look!" she said. "Under my bed! Ten kronen!"

Without a word the Big Soprano put down her curling-iron, and ponderously getting down on her knees, candle in hand, inspected the dusty floor beneath her bed. It revealed nothing but a cigarette, on which she pounced. Still squatting, she lighted the cigarette in the candle flame and sat solemnly puffing it.

"The first for a week," she said. "Pull out the wardrobe, Scatch; there may be another relic of my prosperous days."

But little Scatchett was not interested in Austrian cigarettes with a government monopoly and gilt tips. She was looking at the ten-kronen piece.

"Where is the other?" she asked in a whisper.

"In my powder-box."

Little Scatchett lifted the china lid and dropped the tiny gold-piece.

"Every little bit," she said flippantly, but still in a whisper, "added to what she's got, makes just a little bit more."

"Have you thought of a place to leave it for her? If Rosa finds it, it's good-bye. Heaven knows it was hard enough to get together, without losing it now. I'll have to jump overboard and swim ashore at New York--I haven't even a dollar for tips."

"New York!" said little Scatchett with her eyes glowing. "If Henry meets me I know he will--"

"Tut!" The Big Soprano got up cumbrously and stood looking down. "You and your Henry! Scatchy, child, has it occurred to your maudlin young mind that money isn't the only thing Harmony is going to need? She's going to be alone--and this is a bad town to be alone in. And she is not like us. You have your Henry. I'm a beefy person who has a stomach, and I'm thankful for it. But she is different--she's got the thing that you are as well without, the thing that my lack of is sending me back to fight in a church choir instead of grand opera."

Little Scatchett was rather puzzled.

"Temperament?" she asked. It had always been accepted in the little colony that Harmony was a real musician, a star in their lesser firmament.

The Big Soprano sniffed.

"If you like," she said. "Soul is a better word. Only the rich ought to have souls, Scatchy, dear."

This was over the younger girl's head, and anyhow Harmony was coming down the hall.

"I thought, under her pillow," she whispered. "She'll find it--"

Harmony came in, to find the Big Soprano heating a curler in the flame of a candle.

Chapter 2

Harmony found the little hoard under her pillow that night when, having seen Scatch and the Big Soprano off at the station, she had come back alone to the apartment on the Siebensternstrasse. The trunks were gone now. Only the concerto score still lay on the piano, where little Scatchett, mentally on the dock at New York with Henry's arms about her, had forgotten it. The candles in the great chandelier had died in tears of paraffin that spattered the floor beneath. One or two of the sockets were still smoking, and the sharp odor of burning wickends filled the room.

Harmony had come through the garden quickly. She had had an uneasy sense of being followed, and the garden, with its moaning trees and slamming gate and the great dark house in the background, was a forbidding place at best. She had rung the bell and had stood, her back against the door, eyes and ears strained in the darkness. She had fancied that a figure had stopped outside the gate and stood looking in, but the next moment the gate had swung to and the Portier was fumbling at the lock behind her.

The Portier had put on his trousers over his night garments, and his mustache bandage gave him a sinister expression, rather augmented when he smiled at her. The Portier liked Harmony in spite of the early morning practicing; she looked like a singer at the opera for whom he cherished a hidden attachment. The singer had never seen him, but it was for her he wore the mustache bandage. Perhaps some day--hopefully! One must be ready!

The Portier gave Harmony a tiny candle and Harmony held out his tip, the five Hellers of custom. But the Portier was keen, and Rosa was a niece of his wife and talked more than she should. He refused the tip with a gesture.

"Bitte, Fraulein!" he said through the bandage. "It is for me a pleasure to admit you. And perhaps if the Fraulein is cold, a basin of soup."

The Portier was not pleasant to the eye. His nightshirt was open over his hairy chest and his feet were bare to the stone floor. But to Harmony that lonely night he was beautiful. She tried to speak and could not but she held out her hand in impulsive gratitude, and the Portier in his best manner bent over and kissed it. As she reached the curve of the stone staircase, carrying her tiny candle, the Portier was following her with his eyes. She was very like the girl of the opera.

The clang of the door below and the rattle of the chain were comforting to Harmony's ears. From the safety of the darkened salon she peered out into the garden again, but no skulking figure detached itself from the shadows, and the gate remained, for a marvel, closed.

It was when--having picked up her violin in a very passion of loneliness, only to put it down when she found that the familiar sounds echoed and reechoed sadly through the silent rooms--it was when she was ready for bed that she found the money under her

pillow, and a scrawl from Scatchy, a breathless, apologetic scrawl, little Scatchett having adored her from afar, as the plain adore the beautiful, the mediocre the gifted:--

DEAREST HARRY [here a large blot, Scatchy being addicted to blots]: I am honestly frightened when I think what we are doing. But, oh, my dear, if you could know how pleased we are with ourselves you'd not deny us this pleasure. Harry, you have it--the real thing, you know, whatever it is--and I haven't. None of the rest of us had. And you must stay. To go now, just when lessons would mean everything--well, you must not think of it. We have scads to take us home, more than we need, both of us, or at least--well, I'm lying, and you know it. But we have enough, by being careful, and we want you to have this. It isn't much, but it may help. Ten Kronen of it I found to-night under my bed, and it may be yours anyhow.

"Sadie [Sadie was the Big Soprano] keeps saying awful things about our leaving you here, and she has rather terrified me. You are so beautiful, Harry,--although you never let us tell you so. And Sadie says you have a soul and I haven't, and that souls are deadly things to have. I feel to-night that in urging you to stay I am taking the burden of your soul on me! Do be careful, Harry. If any one you do not know speaks to you call a policeman. And be sure you get into a respectable pension. There are queer ones.

"Sadie and I think that if you can get along on what you get from home--you said your mother would get insurance, didn't you?--and will keep this as a sort of fund to take you home if anything should go wrong--. But perhaps we are needlessly worried. In any case, of course it's a loan, and you can preserve that magnificent independence of yours by sending it back when you get to work to make your fortune. And if you are doubtful at all, just remember that hopeful little mother of yours who sent you over to get what she had never been able to have for herself, and who planned this for you from the time you were a kiddy and she named you Harmony.

"I'm not saying good-bye. I can't.

SCATCH."

That night, while the Portier and his wife slept under their crimson feather beds and the crystals of the chandelier in the salon shook in the draft as if the old Austrian court still danced beneath, Harmony fought her battle. And a battle it was. Scatchy and the Big Soprano had not known everything. There had been no insurance on her father's life; the little mother was penniless. A married sister would care for her, but what then? Harmony had enough remaining of her letter-of credit to take her home, and she had--the hoard under the pillow. To go back and teach the violin; or to stay and finish under the master, be presented, as he had promised her, at a special concert in Vienna, with all the prestige at home that that would mean, and its resulting possibility of fame and fortune--which?

She decided to stay. There might be a concert or so, and she could teach English. The Viennese were crazy about English. Some of the stores advertised "English Spoken." That would be something to fall back on, a clerkship during the day.

Toward dawn she discovered that she was very cold, and she went into the Big Soprano's deserted and disordered room. The tile stove was warm and comfortable, but on the toilet table there lay a disreputable comb with most of the teeth gone. Harmony kissed this unromantic object! Which reveals the fact that, genius or not, she was only a young and rather frightened girl, and that every atom of her ached with loneliness.

She did not sleep at all, but sat curled up on the bed with her feet under her and thought things out. At dawn the Portier, crawling out into the cold from under his feathers, opened the door into the hall and listened. She was playing, not practicing, and the music was the barcarolle from the "Tales" of Hoffmann. Standing in the doorway in his night attire, his chest open to the frigid morning air, his face upraised to the floor above, he hummed the melody in a throaty tenor.

When the music had died away he went in and closed the door sheepishly. His wife stood over the stove, a stick of firewood in her hand. She eyed him.

"So! It is the American Fraulein now!"

"I did but hum a little. She drags out my heart with her music." He fumbled with his mustache bandage, which was knotted behind, keeping one eye on his wife, whose morning pleasure it was to untie it for him.

"She leaves to-day," she announced, ignoring the knot.

"Why? She is alone. Rosa says--"

"She leaves to-day!"

The knot was hopeless now, double-tied and pulled to smooth compactness. The Portier jerked at it.

"No Fraulein stays here alone. It is not respectable. And what saw I last night, after she entered and you stood moon-gazing up the stair after her! A man in the gateway!"

The Portier was angry. He snarled something through the bandage, which had slipped down over his mouth, and picked up a great knife.

"She will stay if she so desire," he muttered furiously, and, raising the knife, he cut the knotted string. His mustache, faintly gray and sweetly up-curved, stood revealed.

"She will stay!" he repeated. "And when you see men at the gate, let me know. She is an angel!"

"And she looks like the angel at the opera, hein?"

This was a crushing blow. The Portier wilted. Such things come from telling one's cousin, who keeps a brushshop, what is in one's heart. Yesterday his wife had needed a brush, and to-day--Himmel, the girl must go!

Harmony knew also that she must go. The apartment was large and expensive; Rosa ate much and wasted more. She must find somewhere a tiny room with board, a humble little room but with a stove. It is folly to practice with stiffened fingers. A room where her playing would not annoy people, that was important.

She paid Rosa off that morning out of money left for that purpose. Rosa wept. She said she would stay with the Fraulein for her keep, because it was not the custom for young ladies to be alone in the city--young girls of the people, of course; but beautiful young ladies, no!

Harmony gave her an extra krone or two out of sheer gratitude, but she could not keep her. And at noon, having packed her trunk, she went down to interview the Portier and his wife, who were agents under the owner for the old house.

The Portier, entirely subdued, was sweeping out the hallway. He looked past the girl, not at her, and observed impassively that the lease was up and it was her privilege to go. In the daylight she was not so like the angel, and after all she could only play the violin. The angel had a voice, such a voice! And besides, there was an eye at the crack of the door.

The bit of cheer of the night before was gone; it was with a heavy heart that Harmony started on her quest for cheaper quarters.

Winter, which had threatened for a month, had come at last. The cobblestones glittered with ice and the small puddles in the gutters were frozen. Across the street a spotted deer, shot in the mountains the day before and hanging from a hook before a wild-game shop, was frozen quite stiff. It was a pretty creature. The girl turned her eyes away. A young man, buying cheese and tinned fish in the shop, watched after her.

"That's an American girl, isn't it?" he asked in American-German.

The shopkeeper was voluble. Also Rosa had bought much from him, and Rosa talked. When the American left the shop he knew everything of Harmony that Rosa knew except her name. Rosa called her "The Beautiful One." Also he was short one krone four beliers in his change, which is readily done when a customer is plainly thinking of a "beautiful one."

Harmony searched all day for the little room with board and a stove and no objection to practicing. There were plenty--but the rates! The willow plume looked prosperous, and she had a way of making the plainest garments appear costly. Landladies looked at the plume and the suit and heard the soft swish of silk beneath, which marks only self-respect in the American woman but is extravagance in Europe, and added to their regular terms until poor Harmony's heart almost stood still. And then at last toward evening she

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