

BONES, BONES, THE MUSICAL FRUIT

By James S. Dorr

"Bones, bones, the musical fruit,

"Hollow 'em good, the better they toot. . . ."

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It was a good living, the Bone-Carver thought, despite the harassment. The children outside his window finished their mocking song and now they were pelting the glass with garbage.

The Bone-Carver kept the windows closed because of this. Even in summer, which it was now.

He thought of opening the door and yelling, shouting at them to go away. But they'd just retreat, as they always did, into the neighbor's yard. Trampling the Bone-Carver's flower beds as they did. And the moment he closed his door and went back to work, they'd be at it again.

Street urchins. Homeless waifs. Dregs of the city, no use to anyone. Cared for by no one. The city really ought to do something.

Once he had actually called the cops. He laughed sardonically.

Yeah, that had really worked.

He always strived to obtain his bones from only the best medical supply houses, but since he specialized in using human remains, the officers who had answered his call took just one look into his workroom, then insisted on seeing his receipts. Every last one of them. As if it were he who had been at fault.

"Officer, really, I have to use human bones," he had protested. "I make instruments for the finest musicians, and they insist on it. Cow bones are too thick-walled, even after you've hollowed them out as much as you can. They deaden the sound. And sheep bones, well, when you bore in the finger-holes, they tend to split -- "

"Well, you just watch it," the senior officer said. "Anytime anyone uses human parts, we keep an eye on 'em."

And now his main supplier had retired. Where would he find new bones?

One had to be resourceful in this business, he thought, as he rubbed a final coat of polish into his latest, a femur-bassoon -- one of a matched pair. Both for the same client, a virtuoso with the Municipal Orchestra. Truth to tell, some of his latest projects had forced him to sources not always strictly sanctioned by law.

Raids on churchyards -- dirty, smelly work. And the thing was, bones for making instruments had to be fresh when you got them. The kids' silly song was right about one thing, bones were like fruit; if they remained in the ground too long, they could turn rotten. They developed soft spots where his drills would break through, no matter how carefully he reamed out their centers, no matter how artfully he matched their natural curves.

He fitted on its double-reed cap and blew experimentally into his latest creation. His latest work of art. He trilled his fingers over the note-holes, essaying, first, a simple scale, then a rising series of quick arpeggios --

Just as, outside, the orphans' song resumed:

"Bones, bones, the musical fruit, . . ."

Damn kids! he thought. He put down the instrument, glaring out the window at them. Diminutive. Malnourished. Stick-thin, some of them. Some of them scarcely out of their infancy.

Somebody really ought to do something -- to hell with the cops.

He picked up his order book. Next on his list was a rush request from the State Fire Association Band for a full set of piccolos.

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