



The Piano

after Daniel Mason

by Christian Lanciai

The characters:

Colonel Killian Fitzgerald

Edgar Drake, piano tuner

Catherine, his wife

The man with the story

Young militaries

Captain Nash-Burnham

Another captain

Lady Remington

Colonel West

Other dinner guests

Khin Myo
Doctor Anthony Carroll
Residents of Mae Lwin
Prince of Mongnai
His emissary
Other local chiefs
A lieutenant

The action is in London to start with,
during the voyage from there to Burma, Mandalay,
and in the eastern frontiers of Burma in 1887.

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The Piano

Act I scene 1. An office in London 1886.

Killian I am very glad that you could come, Mr Drake, so that I could initiate you in the delicate situation.

Drake I actually only need to know one thing, and that is why I have come.

Killian We are very grateful that you accepted the mission, since the general practitioner practically has made himself indispensable to us.

Drake I haven't accepted yet in writing, since I still don't know if I am capable of fulfilling the mission. That's why I need to know the details.

Killian I see. I will do my best to put you in the entire situation. Our illustrious general practitioner has often caused us some distress by his eccentricisms, but at the same time he has proved himself almost invulnerable in his bold expeditions and spying missions. He is today 53 years old and still in his prime. While he was married he worked here in England, but his wife died in childbirth with their first child. After that crisis he abandoned himself to the poor hospital of East End during the cholera epidemic and then signed up as a military doctor. He needed to get away from England.

Drake He never remarried?

Killian No, he never remarried. He became chief deputy of the military hospital in Saharanpur in north India, and there embarked on his famous activities as scout and expedition leader mostly up to Kashmir, which then was dangerous ground both on account of capricious warlords and Russian spies. On one occasion he treated one of the local moguls at the hospital and pleased him by reading poetry to him. His reading of Shelley's "Ozymandias" made such an impression on the warlord, that he after his recovery returned with 300 men that he wished to place at the disposal of

the army surgeon, not of the military officer. He wanted to serve the poet soldier for the rest of his life.

Drake Remarkable.

Killian To say the least. It may give you an idea of the chief deputy's considerable cultural interest. In 1868 he was commissioned as chief deputy at the military hospital of Rangoon, the only one in the country, where he remained for three years. Then he asked to be transferred to Mandalay and the dangerous parts around the Shan mountains, where he resumed his expeditions. He has been there now for fifteen years and made himself indispensable by his excellent relationship with the Shan people, and the only trouble he has caused us there was his enforced request.

Drake A most singular request, on my honour. And you agreed?

Killian He threatened to resign if it was not granted. We had to. Above all we need him there now when the French threaten to cross the Mekong and take over our trade interests.

Drake But there were no problems with the transport?

Killian We took all precautions and no risks.

Drake A grand piano is doomed to soon lose its tuning because of the tropical humidity.

Killian That's where you enter the picture. You happen to be an expert on Erard grand pianos, and he ordered specifically an Erard grand piano. You are like made for the mission, and we are happy to have found you. You will receive a year's salary for three months' service with the tuning of the instrument as your only task.

Drake You still have not answered my question.

Killian What question?

Drake What is wrong with the instrument besides needing tuning? Doctor Carroll implied that it also needs repairs. Is any string missing or other parts? What is broken?

Killian I am afraid I can't answer that. Doctor Carroll has not included any such details.

Drake It would greatly facilitate my work if I had such details.

Killian I am sorry. We hope you will still accept the mission.

Drake Of course. It's a chance of a lifetime. I will simply have to bring along my entire arsenal of repairs.

Killian Thank you, Mr Drake. Welcome to Burma and out into the great world. *(rises and shakes his hand)* We will send all further details home to you.

Drake Thank you, Sir. *(leaves)*

Killian We got him. Now perhaps we will learn at last what doctor Carroll really is doing up there.

Scene 2. At home with the Drakes.

(*Edgar arrives home.*)

Catherine How was work today?

Edgar As usual, trying, infinitely tedious but not hopeless.

Catherine Edgar, there were two representatives from the foreign office here today. Why haven't you told me anything?

Edgar What did they want?

Catherine Leave some materials of Burma.

Edgar I am sorry. I had intended to tell you about it but constantly postponed it. I knew it would be difficult.

Catherine What do you have to do with Burma?

Edgar Just tuning a piano.

Catherine In Burma? Are there pianos in Burma?

Edgar There is one.

Catherine And can it be tuned?

Edgar Catherine, it is not just any piano. It's a real Erard grand piano from Vienna, and you know that's my special instrument.

Catherine No, I didn't know. But what is such an instrument doing in Burma?

Edgar An eccentric deputy military surgeon threatened to resign if he couldn't get it there. He got it, and now it needs tuning. His superiors have searched all London for a real piano tuner, but I am the only expert on Erard grand pianos.

Catherine And that doctor is in his right mind?

Edgar He has made himself politically indispensable by being able to pacify all northern Burma. He is unique in being popular with the local people. The army can't deny him anything.

Catherine North Burma. That gives me associations to fevers and tropical jungle, mortal dysentery and all the dangers of a primeval forest including native homicidal maniacs. What do I do if you don't come back?

Edgar I will be back. They promised me the mission will only take three months.

Catherine Don't count on my still being here if it takes more than a year.

Edgar My love, try to understand me. It's my life's chance. I would never get out of England in any other way. I will faithfully keep in touch with you by letters all the way.

Catherine And if it doesn't work? If the letters cease? What do I do then? They say women beyond India are very beautiful.

Edgar You know I have no interest in sex. I am only interested in faithfulness.

Catherine And I am only interested in you. I will wait, Edgar, but something tells me you are not coming back.

Edgar It is just the tuning of one piano, Catherine. And I get a year's salary for just three months' absence and one piano tuning.

Catherine You don't mind the risks and are blind to them. Crocodiles, illnesses, insects, snakes, unreliable natives and perhaps war – the agents said something about the French peril.

Edgar The French are in Indochina and should stick to their side of the Mekong. That's why doctor Anthony Carroll is where he is keeping them at bay, if he gets his piano tuned.

Catherine How could a piano survive in a tropical rain forest?

Edgar I wonder that as well, but it seems to have managed, since it only needs tuning.

Catherine Go in peace, Edgar, but be back. Or else I will never forgive you.

Edgar Neither will I. (*embraces her*) There is never any danger in piano tuning, Catherine. That is why I became a piano tuner. No job in the world is more important than to bring harmony into a disharmonious world. Here I can make a difference.

Catherine Come back.

Edgar Of course.

Catherine I wish I could believe you.

Scene 3. On board a ship on the sea.

The man (spying across the sea) In all my days since that day I have been searching for him, but I never found him, the listening musician, who could understand my fate. But I will continue searching for him. Perhaps he is on board right now. If I will find him one day it will be the greatest surprise of my life.

(*Drake comes out on deck, relies on the railing, regards the sea, smokes.*)

Sir, I heard you were a tuner of pianos. Is that correct?

Drake (turns around, surprised) Yes.

The man What is a piano tuner doing in Asia? Are there pianos there that need tuning?

Drake (watches the man) I hope so. At least there is one, for I am going to tune it.

The man Going such a long way just to tune a piano, which probably is quite ruined already, and who would bring a piano to Asia but a madman?

Drake Or a musician.

The man Quite right. Not anyone would bring a piano to Asia. Which country?

Drake Burma.

The man The worst. There is nothing there but wars and tropical fevers. And you make the journey willingly?

Drake Naturally I get paid for it.

The man So you do it willingly. I admire you. May I tell you a strange story about music? You would perhaps understand it.

Drake You are known as the man who has a story to tell. Therefore I have observed you and only waited for the story.

The man I was a commercial traveller, and by one of these coasts I once suffered a shipwreck. I was the only survivor, for I never saw anyone of the others alive any more. I was taken care of by some beduins, who tempted me out into the desert. There I slowed them down because of a knee injury, so they had to leave me by a

water hole, but the last thing the beduins told me was: "If you are lucky you will hear her sing." Of course I wondered whoever "she" could be, but there by the water hole a strangely beautiful woman appeared, who tempted me further out into the desert. She seduced me by her sheer beauty, for I had never seen anyone so beautiful. Then the sand storm broke out. It cut me sore like tiny fragments of glass, I could see nothing and thought I was going blind, but then suddenly everything became quiet, and then I heard the song. You probably know about the phenomenon of the Sirens from the wanderings of Ulysses, but this was infinitely more beautiful. It was so stunningly beautiful that I lost consciousness.

When I woke up again I lay by the sea, as if I had dreamt it all and the shipwreck just had happened, but my sandals were torn and my knee injury was still there. It was no dream. The musical phenomenon was a reality that brought me out of time – and brought me back again – after twenty days. Sailors found me, and I could learn that twenty days had passed since the shipwreck.

But the strangest thing of all was that I was deaf. I could hear nothing any more. The song of the female spirit of the desert was the last thing I heard. I am grateful therefore that you all the time have been watching me as I spoke, for you can't have known that I was deaf?

Drake (stunned, throws the cigarette into the sea) No.

The man Could you understand or explain the phenomenon, being a musician?

Drake There must be some explanation.

The man That's just the explanation. There is no explanation. Thanks for listening, and remember, that the ultimate music is inaudible. You only hear it once, and then you hear nothing any more, for you don't want to hear anything more after having heard the most beautiful of all. *(walks calmly off)*

Drake The worst thing is that his story is probably quite true, the sort of story you can never understand, since it is too musical to be grasped by any mortal sense. *(leaves)*

Scene 4. Another boat, on the river.

(A jolly company of young militaries by a gaming table.)

1 Where is he, our jolly fellow?

2 He should be gearing up at the bar as usual.

3 He plays like a devil.

4 Since he happens to be a musician.

All Ha-ha-ha!

1 Is he really? I thought he was some kind of an agent for the government. No musician goes upstream.

2 He is probably a reporter or war correspondent. He is a civilian so he could hardly be anything less.

3 Here he is now. Let's ask him! *(Enter Drake with a drink.)*

Hey, fellow! What are you really doing upstream? No civilian goes upstream voluntarily unless he is a correspondent or preacher.

Drake You sure would like to know, wouldn't you!

2 Is it true you are a musician?

Drake Tuner.

3 Accountant?

4 No, you stupid, he probably tunes his guitar.

Drake No, I am actually a tuner of pianos.

4 Pianos? Are there pianos in Burma?

Drake There is one.

2 And you find it in the far end of the jungle?

Drake Apparently.

3 Where are you really heading?

Drake For a place called Mae Lwin. A certain doctor Anthony Carroll owns the piano and has asked for me.

(Immediate dead silence around the table. The young militaries look at each other.)

Did I say something wrong?

4 *(finally)* Doctor Carroll? Do you know doctor Carroll?

Drake Not yet, but I hope to.

3 Here he has travelled with us for three days and never said a word about his acquaintance with doctor Carroll!

2 Boy, if we had known we would have treated you with some respect!

Drake Is he then that remarkable?

1 Remarkable? He is a living legend! Without him we would have been at constant war with the forest people, the notorious Shan warriors, who never leaves anyone left behind alive.

Drake And how could he make peace with them?

2 Tell your story, John, you who were present when he arrived.

1 As we travelled up the river through the jungle, we were naturally shot at from the forest. We were already at war with the Shan people. The doctor looked around, had it confirmed by the soldiers that there were Shan warriors making trouble, and then he produced a flute. He played a small simple melody on it. Then he paused. When they started shooting again he played it again. And so he carried on until the shooting suddenly ceased. Then someone in the forest picked up the same melody. And then it was heard from every part of the strand, and the doctor played it again. They all played it together. Then there was laughter and shouts from joy from the forest. The victory was won. Since that day not one shot has been fired any more from any Shan warrior against us, and as long as the doctor remains, there probably will not be any.

Drake But what was the tune he was playing?

1 A simple song sung by a suitor to his first love.

2 No one can fire at someone who reminds him of his first love.

3 All native hearts immediately melted to doctor Carroll.

Drake That's what I call musical psychology.

4 Everybody loves him, and not just the Shans. Somehow he warrants our peace and security here. The only possible threat we have to fear now is the French.

Drake I heard about it.

1 So you are here to tune the doctor's instrument?

Drake A grand piano. An Erard grand piano. It's not an ordinary piano but one of the most advanced piano instruments in existence. The doctor knew what he ordered when he desired an Erard grand piano, the instrument of Haydn, Beethoven and Liszt.

2 Now you are talking Chinese. We only know barrack room ballads.

Drake Even Chopin wrote ballads.

3 Of beautiful girls and lovely legs?

Drake Not exactly.

4 The case is clear, he is ordered by doctor Carroll, he is sacred, cheers to doctor Carroll and his piano tuner!

Drake I understand that doctor Carroll is not quite popular in higher circles.

1 It's because he is a man of action and is good at it. No one except he could have made peace with the Shan warriors.

2 Without him we would have been lying in the jungle ditches of mud and fought to death against invisible forest terrorists, who would have kept the initiative all the time.

3 We would all have been dead without him.

Drake So he turned the war into love?

4 You could actually say that.

Drake Have you any idea about the condition of his instrument? Is it broken? Does it sound at all?

1 We have no idea,

3 I didn't know he had any.

2 He must have played on it only for himself.

4 You will make a difference, boy, if you come here to make him happy.

Drake That's the very intention. I am only good at creating harmony.

1 That's the spirit!

4 Cheers!

2 Deal the cards!

3 Now for the serious business and the drinks!

(They get going enthusiastically.)

Act II scene 1. Mandalay, a dinner.

captain What is this new strange piano tuner like?

Nash Like any ordinary human being, a regular greenhorn, neither disturbingly naïve nor very knowledgeable.

captain He arrives at a most inconvenient moment. We ought to send him back.

Nash I intend to try. The less he gets into these swamps, the better for himself.

captain Haven't you warned him yet?

Nash I only warned him against mentioning doctor Carroll at the table.

captain Very wise.

Nash Here he is now. – Welcome, Mr Drake! I hope you like it in Mandalay?

Drake I have managed so far.

lady Is this our mysterious guest from home? It's certainly not every day that we get strange visiting civilians from home! You are *so* very mysterious! I long to hear about your secret mission.

Drake It is no secret. It is very simple. I am just a craftsman.

lady Don't try it! Don't remove the mystery from your fate! You are my man at table. Please!

(The company is seated, long fine frocks, evening dresses and smokings.)

Nash Don't press him, lady Remington. He is not even saved on dry land yet.

lady Anything is better than your interminably boring war and hunting stories and gossips about the natives.

Drake I am afraid, my lady, that I am not a very good entertainer. My life is the simplest possible, mostly humdrum work days of petty work of precision, like that of a watchmaker.

lady How dramatic! How romantic!

Drake Yes, I have a very pretty wife who cares for me.

Captain And then you come here with the world's most exotic temptations all around you in the form of the most beautiful women in the world?

Drake I assure you, captain, that I am quite satisfied with my wife even at some distance.

Nash Very wise of you. Almost everyone from home get bogged down in love affairs here in the swamp world of Burma and never get home again.

lady Still I have heard you have a very pretty maid.

Drake She has helped settling down but only offered her laundry and cooking services. I don't know who sent her to me, but I suspect my employer.

lady Who is your secret employer?

Drake (evades the question) My only mission here is to tune a piano.

lady It couldn't be doctor Carroll's piano, by any chance? He is the only one playing the piano in these parts, and he does it at our most extreme jungle outpost in the east. Isn't that exotic?

colonel West We should have dropped that miserable thing into the river.

Drake Pardon?

West Just for the best of Her Majesty, that infernal instrument should have been tossed straight into the Irrawaddy on arrival or used up as firewood.

Nash (sighs, exchanges a worried look with the captain) Here we go. – Colonel, that matter is long since settled and done with.

West With respect, captain, but I will never be able to forget that I lost five men for the sake of that blasted piano.

Nash The matter can never be enough regretted, Sir, but it was not the fault of the piano, and Mr Drake here is our guest.

West The piano transport put us at risk quite unnecessarily. The whole idea was absurd and should have been refused from the start! Who has ever heard of a piano at the farthest end of the jungle? And then you have to pay for a piano tuner all the way from London for repairs when it cracks up in the humidity!

Nash Doctor Carroll is indispensable to us, Sir, and you know it more than well. He made an ultimatum. A piano or resignation. We had no choice. We have been through all this before, and if you want to continue bothering about it, I pray you to do it on another occasion. This was supposed to have been a dinner of welcome.

West (rising, angry) I am sorry, Sir, but I am a realist. Go home, Mr Drake. That's the only good advice I can give you. There have been fights along the border again, Mae Lwin has been attacked, and it's even possible that the piano has been blown to pieces. We can arrange your return journey within a week and are more than willing to do so.

lady You and your bloody wars! Mr Drake has just arrived! This is the only pleasant thing that has happened here for years! All the rest has only been your childish jungle fights all of the time!

West Lady Remington, I am only frank and straight. I am sorry if I ruined your dinner. (*throws his napkin on the table and leaves in a rage.*)

Drake (breaking the ensuing silence) If the piano really is blown to pieces, as the colonel so dramatically affirms, there is nothing for me to do here. But I would hardly consider a patient dead before having examined him. If doctor Carroll's instrument can be put in order, I am here to do it, and I have come a long way at the cost of the government to do so. I can't consider it right to abandon a mission before it has definitely been proved impossible.

Nash Spoken by a gentleman. You have a true soldier's guts in you, Mr Drake, and there couldn't be a more suitable man for this mission. We apologise for the colonel's bad temper, but we understand him. To lose five men for the sake of transporting a piano is hard cheese indeed.

Drake I presume that the last word rests with doctor Carroll himself.

captain Absolutely. We expect some report from him. If nothing is heard from him, though, I would also recommend you to return.

Nash Your security is after all more important than a piano.

lady They say it is a unique piano. Doctor Carroll was very proud of it. Are you a specialist on exotic pianos?

Drake I am the only expert in England on specifically Erard grand pianos.

Lady Then it would be a pity if you couldn't complete your mission.

Drake Definitely.

A servant (brings in Khin Myo) My lordship, a message.

Drake (rising immediately, as he sees her) A message? For me?

lady (whispering to the others) Mr Drake's exotic maid.

Khin Myo A message from doctor Carroll. (*delivers it*)

Drake (reading it at once) My friends, the piano actually seems to have been damaged in the fights. Doctor Carroll asks me to come if it can be repaired. Fortunately it can be repaired.

Nash Your life is in your own hands, Mr Drake.

captain You go there at your own risk. We can't warrant your security but will of course give you as safe an escort as we can.

lady Tell us all about it when you come back. We will long for that exotic day.

Drake (to the officers) When can I go?

Khin Myo (answers) He has sent a boat waiting for us.

Drake Now at once?

Khin Myo Yes.

captain Good luck, Mr Drake. I hope you return alive.

Drake I hope so too.

Nash We will carefully follow your progress, Mr Drake. Consider yourself under protective surveillance.

Drake Thank you, gentlemen. (*leaves with Khin Myo*)

captain What are his chances?

Nash 50-50. He will probably not get shot, but he will certainly get malaria or something worse.

captain So at least he will come back alive?

Nash Yes, but marked for life.

lady What a drama! Piano intrigues in the jungle!

Nash (dryly) Yes, it couldn't be more exotic.

Scene 2. On the beach. A perfectly paradisiacal environment,
like a landscape by Doré.

Doctor Carroll sitting by a small table. Drake approaches him cautiously.

Carroll (noticing him) Good morning, Mr Drake. I hope you slept well.

Drake Like a log, until the children found my room.

Carroll Oh, you'll get used to it.

Drake I hope so. It was long since I was awoken by children making noise.

Carroll Do you have children yourself?

Drake Unfortunately not, but I have nephews.

Carroll I hope your journey here went well.

Drake Somewhat adventurous, but I arrived.

Carroll Skirmishes. Nothing to bother about. The jungle Shan warriors like to frighten but are easily frightened off by a single shot in the air.

Drake So I noticed.

Carroll Is that the scores you have brought that I ordered? (*indicates Drake's parcel under his arm*)

Drake Yes. You have good taste.

Carroll Did you open it?

Drake Pardon my indiscretion, but I was curious about what music you desired. You only wanted the best. But there are also some materials completely unknown to me.

Carroll It is Shan songs. I try to arrange them for the piano. I transcribe the music and send it home, a composer colleague makes suggestions for changes, I always wondered what someone who could read music would think... a cheroot?

Drake Thank you. (*receives one*) I don't quite recognize the scent.

Carroll A woman in the village prepares them for me. She cooks the tobacco in palm sugar and adds vanilla and cinnamon with other extraordinary ingredients, which risk your memory... but it makes you feel good. Tea, perhaps?

Drake I would love to. (*The doctor gives a sign to a boy who serves tea. The doctor starts smoking.*)

Carroll The tea is without any additional ingredients, for certain. Just ordinary honest English tea without side effects and with exclusively wholesome and constructive effects.

Drake The fortress here is magnificent.

Carroll Thank you. We tried to build it in traditional Shan style, it is more beautiful, and I could avail myself of local people. Parts of it, the two storeys and the bridges, I invented myself. The position demands it. I wanted to stay close to the river and be concealed below the mountain ridge.

Drake The river is much larger than I thought.

Carroll I was also surprised at first. It is one of the greatest rivers of Asia, and like most of the Asian rivers it runs up in Tibet.

Drake What does the name mean?

Carroll I also wondered about that. Salween is pronounced Thaulwin in Burmese and means something like 'The river of the light sound'. You have come to parts where music flows out of nature. If you are musical you will enjoy it as much as I do.

Drake You haven't said anything about your instrument yet.

Carroll We will get to that. I sincerely hope you will be able to repair it.

Drake That is why I am here. But I was almost returned from Mandalay. The new disturbances took the militaries by surprise. They didn't want to take responsibility for my being here.

Carroll *Bullshit.* Politics mean nothing. The only important thing is the music, poetry, the writing, the stories, that never will cease to their quest for eternity. The only sensible thing to do politically is to have nothing to do with it.

Drake Still you are politically involved and has a political mission here.

Carroll Involuntarily. I only succeeded because I am a musician.

Drake Was the war for serious or just an incident?

Carroll An irrelevant incident, like all wars. The more you take them seriously, the worse they grow. Forget them. Forget politics. Live. Music lives. Here it lives

with all nature. You wouldn't believe it, but Handel and Bach go well here. Most of all I hope to hear you play, when you have repaired the piano.

Drake I am no pianist, just a tuner.

Carroll Don't be so modest. Surely you can play something.

Drake Not much.

Carroll There you are. When it comes to music, just a little is more than the entire world. Come. Let me show you around. (*rises and takes care of Drake*)

Scene 3. A room with a grand piano.

The room is dark, and the piano is covered. Doctor Carroll enters with Drake and starts drawing the curtains to let in some light. Then he uncovers the piano.

Carroll Here is your instrument, Mr Drake.

Drake (*approaches, lays his hand on the grand piano, almost devoutly*) Unbelievable! Such an instrument in such a jungle... I really am stunned. It transcends all my wildest expectations. (*draws his breath*) I still can't quite believe it is true. I have known about this now for more than two months, but I am still as surprised as if I arrived directly here out of the jungle and suddenly caught sight of it. I am sorry, I never thought I would be so affected. It is as beautiful, as if it was alive.

Carroll As a piano tuner you must know, that every instrument is alive to the highest degree, since they just like any living organism owe their existence to a constant tension to the point of breaking, at least all string instruments.

Drake The odd thing is that a piano is designated a percussion instrument, just like drums, although it actually is just a kind of extremely advanced harp. But I must admire your taste, doctor. How come that you chose this particular instrument? It is different from other Erard grand pianos by its more classical simplicity without decorations and frills.

Carroll Your question is rather however I came to think of wanting a piano out here at all, considering that it has to suffer grave assaults from nature.

Drake But still you chose more than just a piano. You chose an Erard grand piano.

Carroll Some claim the organ as the queen of all instruments, but for me it is the piano. An organ is somehow unavailable by its assignation to churches and platforms, but a piano always has a major presence and occupies a central position wherever there is one, whether in a home or in a concert hall. A piano vibrates of life, as if the 200 strings tightened to the point of breaking by their extreme tension indicated a music of silence that is felt without being heard. The piano is also the most sensitive of instruments, no instrument is so dependent on fingertip sensitivity as the piano, and it embraces a greater tonal range than any other instrument. It is universal, has a life of its own and a soul, which is individually different from all other piano instruments. That's why I chose the piano as my best friend for life and for my great unhappy love, which I always remained pathetically faithful to, and that's why I wanted the best of all piano instruments, a real Erard grand piano, the

instrument Beethoven chose above all others. This was the only Erard grand piano the war ministry could find. I didn't choose the model, only the instrument. But I am keeping you from your work. I assume you wish to start tuning?

Drake Gradually, but there is no hurry.

Carroll May I stay and watch your work?

Drake Of course. No problem. You mentioned a bullet damage.

Carroll You can see the bullet hole here. (*opens the lid*) Here. Four-stroke A.

Drake Shot in the belly.

Carroll It wasn't intentional. Someone aimed wrong. Can it be fixed?

Drake Of course. It's only two broken strings that need to be replaced, and I have brought such strings with me. It is just ordinary piano wire.

Carroll That gives me pleasure. Then I am relieved.

Drake But it is a dull and monotonous work, unless you do it yourself. But standing by and watching it while having to listen to it is insufferable.

Carroll Then I will attend to my patients in the meantime. Just tell me if there is anything you need.

Drake Thank you, doctor Carroll. You take care of your patient, and I'll take care of mine, and we all will get well.

Carroll If it only was that simple... Take your good time, Mr Drake. (*leaves*)

(*Drake immediately starts working on his patient.*)

Scene 4. Evening.

The doctor at his desk in his study with only one intimate desk lamp.

(*Enter Drake. The doctor looks up.*)

Carroll You have been working all day, my friend.

Drake There is so much to do, and much of it remains. You can't be careful enough with such a precious instrument.

Carroll Is there anything you need?

Drake I have managed to fill the crack in the sounding board, it was fortunately just a few inches, so the repairs should not affect the sound, and the strings are repaired. The main tuning is accomplished, and the final tuning should be accomplished tomorrow. But I am worried about the climate that it should soon bring it out of tune again. On my way back I wouldn't like to receive a message in Mandalay that the piano needs tuning again.

Carroll What can you do?

Drake I could impregnate it. Or else the sounding board will hardly survive another rain season. You have only kept the piano for a year, and it was already mortally ill. But I have seen several other wood instruments in Rangoon and Mandalay, that should suffer from the same problem. Do you know anyone who could know anything about it?

Carroll Certainly, there is a lute player here who used to play to king Thibaw. He has a Shan wife and lives here after the fall of the court. We could ask him.

Drake He should know the best impregnating agent for sensitive instruments. Then the instrument should be playable again by tomorrow evening.

Carroll I am very happy with you, Mr Drake. You are very convincing as an artisan with your meticulous care. How long do you stay?

Drake I should follow up the tuning after two weeks. Is that too long?

Carroll You will stay exactly as long as you wish. I only want you to be aware of the dangers. We take a definite risk by allowing a civilian here, since this is a war restricted area. It's only Mae Lwyn that has kept the position against the surrounding Shan wars. Here you never know what will explode when, where and how. It's with a certain pride that I can boast of controlling the only outpost in the Shan states which hasn't been attacked by Shan rebels, and I am responsible for the most significant progress in the efforts of achieving peace and concluded treaties. This is a diplomatic island in the midst of a stormy sea. As long as I am here you stand directly under my protection and are relatively safe, but I still must make reservations for what might happen. You stay at your own risk but are welcome.

Drake If I have travelled so far just to save a piano, it's worth risking anything just to make sure it is done.

Carroll Thank you, Mr Drake. When you are finished we will at last be able to start devoting ourselves to some serious business, that is music.

Drake I long to hear you play.

Carroll As I long for your music. Make the best of it, Mr Drake, and feel completely free and at home. Just don't go out into the forest alone.

Drake No risk. Such a beautiful place as this you will only be able to enjoy once in a lifetime, and I intend to make the most of it to the last moment.

Carroll You are absolutely right in doing so.

Drake Good night, doctor.

Carroll Good night.

(Drake leaves, and the doctor returns to his journals.)

Act III scene 1. On the beach.

Drake by the river, which is floating by.

Drake The tuning is accomplished, and I have nothing more to do here but to wait for the tuning to hold. The doctor has disappeared since several days, and no one knows where he is. They call him 'Rajah', as if he was the most important man in the country, and perhaps he is. But why is he then so secretive? What does he have to hide? Is he out on secret negotiation missions with Shans, Karenes or French? No one knows anything, or doesn't want to know anything.

Khin Myo (comes up to him) May I disturb?

Drake (turns around surprised) Ma Khin Myo, what a nice surprise! Have a seat, by all means! I was just thinking of you. You disappeared and I have hardly seen you since we arrived.

Khin Myo I left you and the doctor alone. I know you have important work to do.

Drake Yes, my hands have been full. But I missed you. I very much enjoyed our talks in Mandalay.

Khin Myo Nok Lek told me you were finished.

Drake Yes, I was about finished this morning, although there still remains some small things to do. The piano was in a bad condition.

Khin Myo Doctor Carroll told me so. He thinks it was his fault.

Drake He shouldn't. I am fairly satisfied. The piano will sound exceedingly well.

Khin Myo He said you seemed pleased with it. What will you do now?

Drake Now?

Khin Myo Now when it is finished. Will you return to Mandalay?

Drake I have to, but not at once. I would like to wait some time to be sure there is no more problem. And then it would only be fair to hear it played on after my long journey. But the doctor is gone. Where the devil is he? Do you know when he will be coming back?

Khin Myo No one knows. He often gets away on sudden missions. No one knows anything about them.

Drake I couldn't very well leave until he has returned?

Khin Myo He will probably return soon.

Drake Is there anything that bothers you?

Khin Myo Oh no. I just came to think of something. You are different.

Drake Pardon?

Khin Myo We met for many hours in Mandalay and on the journey here. Most other visitors would have told all about themselves after a few minutes. But all I know about you is that you come from England to tune a piano. Pardon me if I get too personal, Mr Drake. Please take no offence.

Drake No bother at all. I don't have the habit of speaking about myself, especially not to a woman.

Khin Myo Woman?

Drake A foreign woman.

Khin Myo Do you have a woman at home in England?

Drake Yes, I am married since eighteen years, but we have no children. I have a rather introvert disposition. It's a personal trait. I am the same back in England.

Khin Myo I am rather talkative myself. Sometimes I feel rather lonely here, since I am not from these parts. Most people here have never left their native village. I speak some Shan, and they speak some Burmese, but my English is better.

Drake You have doctor Carroll.

Khin Myo He is gone now.

Drake Was he the one who sent you to me?

Khin Myo Only to make your journey and life here easier.

Drake I can't complain.

Khin Myo I wish I had told you already in Mandalay. He is a very influential person.

Drake So I have understood. And a widower.

Khin Myo He lives the more intensively especially in music.

Drake And you don't know where he is going.

Khin Myo I have nothing to do with it.

Drake Still you feel alone when he is gone.

Khin Myo That's another matter.

Drake I am sorry. Now I was imprudent.

Khin Myo No. What is your wife called?

Drake Catherine.

Khin Myo A beautiful name. Is she very pretty?

Drake She was very pretty. Now we are both getting middle-aged.

Khin Myo But you love her.

Drake I always loved her, though I always wondered what she could find in me. I tuned a piano of her family's. In Europe we live in an age of accomplishments, culture and conquests. English women want energetic men who join the army or write poetry, who can aim with guns or become doctors. I was never anything in that way. I was pleased enough with bringing harmony in instruments who risked decay and thus bring them back to life, like sick patients, and I could always love my instruments, for they were always cooperative and submissive. A woman could hardly find any more boring job in a man. But Catherine was different. She understood music. "When I hear piano music, I hear your work of love behind it," she used to explain. Not all women have ears for more than just the music.

 But here I just met you and told you a lot of things that I never even told my friends about.

Khin Myo It's perhaps just because you just met me that you told me about them.

Drake Perhaps. But I know very little about you.

Khin Myo My story is brief. I am thirty years old and was lost when the late royal family was ousted, with whom I was related. So I came in touch with the English and educated myself to be a teacher. I met doctor Carroll in Mandalay when I was a guest there. He suggested that I should join him here and start a school. I could make a difference. That's why I came.

Drake How long have you been here?

Khin Myo Four years.

Drake And the village is flourishing under your and the doctor's meticulous care.

Khin Myo I think I have to go now.

Drake Thanks for keeping me company.

Khin Myo Thanks for your confidence. (*leaves hastily*)

Drake A delicate princess. I hope I will meet her again, but she is as evasive as doctor Carroll, like water running out of your hands when you try to bring it to your mouth. (*starts shivering*) But what is this? Anything, but no illness, I hope. (*starts shaking*) In the middle of the tropical heat! What's happening to me? (*rises and leaves shivering and shaking*)

Scene 2. Drake's room.

Khin Myo How is he?

Carroll It will pass. Everything will pass.

Khin Myo Is it malaria?

Carroll Of course it is malaria. The question is how serious it is. The first attack is the most devastating. Then you get used to it.

Khin Myo May I visit him?

Carroll Of course you may. We could enter together. He should wake up now.

(They enter Drake's room together, where he tosses around in a fever. Carroll sits down beside him, takes his hand and pulse.)

The fever is going down.

Drake (wakes up, all sweaty) Where am I?

Carroll You are returning to life, my friend. You have had a difficult period, but it is over now. Can you hear me? Can you recognise me?

Drake (sees Khin Myo) Ma Khin Myo!

Carroll (turns to her) At least he recognizes you. That means he is alive.

Drake Doctor Carroll! What is the matter with me?

Carroll Malaria. Nothing dangerous. It will pass. You will get used to it.

Drake No, I never will, not to such infernal torments.

Carroll They will be back, but it's only the first time they come as a shock. Just take it easy. It's the most common illness here. It's really just an ordinary fever.

Drake Don't tell me it will be back!

Carroll It will come back. I have had malaria myself any number of times. You will have to learn to live with it.

Drake How often will it strike me down again?

Carroll It depends. Sometimes after two days, sometimes after three, sometimes quite regularly. The only thing you can do about it really is to sleep it off. Naturally you will be given quinine sulphate. Go to sleep now, if you can. *(to Khin Myo)* Sit with him. I have to attend to my other patients. *(rises and leaves, pressing the shoulder of Khin, who takes his seat. She presses a sweat towel on Drake's front.)*

Drake (takes her second hand) Don't leave me! I never want to be alone again with that terror!

Khin Myo Be calm. I won't leave you. Sleep.

Drake How could anyone be as beautiful as you are?

Khin Myo No doubt, many. Sleep now.

Drake How could I sleep when I am alive with the world's most beautiful woman beside me?

Khin Myo You are ill and delirious. You have to get well. Then you will see me with more sober eyes.

Drake I never want to see you with sober eyes.

Khin Myo Sleep, my friend, so that you will get well.

Drake I will try. *(closes his eyes and falls asleep. She wets his front.)*

Scene 3. On the beach.

Drake What has happened to me? It's like a black pothole gobbled me down, which I am stuck in and can't get out of, like in a bog of quicksand, and the worst thing is that I don't want to either and least of all have the strength to. I feel done for and can do no more than get down to the river on shaky legs to just sit here and rest.

Carroll (comes forth) You look better today, Mr Drake.

Drake Progress is slow, but I am alive.

Carroll You should be happy. It could have been worse. It feels like death, and the delirium is terrible, an interminable howling nightmare, but you make it worse than it is by getting into a panic. Gradually you learn to handle the attacks with patience and to master them by taking it easy and just rest. That's all you need.

Drake Will I recover my strength?

Carroll Of course. Just try some patience. That's the best medicine. Unfortunately I will have to be off again, and I don't know how long I'll be gone, but it will probably be just a few days more. Khin Myo is here to watch over you. I hope she will do for a nurse.

Drake I could hardly have any better one. Where will you go?

Carroll Only to the Shan prince of Mongnai to get his emissary here to secure the peace.

Drake Is it dangerous?

Carroll Everything is dangerous around here. Risks exist to be taken, and they have to be taken. Here you don't survive if you don't take risks.

Drake Happy journey, doctor.

Carroll Thanks. (*leaves*)

Drake Thus he vanishes again, my strangely mysterious doctor with music for his lifeline, perhaps the most important secret agent of Burma, a doctor and musician and successful diplomat, and I may not know if he returns until he does, but at least he always did so far. – But what do I behold over there? Another fever hallucination? No one walks here with a parasol, but she does, and it's even red. My sight can't be mistaken. It must be herself. (*Khin Myo is seen approaching from a far distance, a sylphlike being with a red parasol*) Still this reality is more dreamy than any dream, for it is simply too lovely to be real, but still it is real. She gets more beautiful every day, and she minds her looks, as if she would make herself more beautiful on purpose. My Khin Myo, are you really coming to me?

Khin Myo (comes up to him, closes her parasol) As you see, doctor Carroll has left again, and you need me. I promised the doctor to care for you, and so I will. You are getting well, but improvement is slow. Just take it easy and relax, and the last fever will vanish. Can you take a walk? You should get other things to think of than your health.

Drake I could try. In your hands I would not fall.

Khin Myo Just let yourself go, and you won't fall even if you would fall.

Drake (rising with her support) They will perhaps get the wrong impression if we walk here alone.

Khin Myo What do you mean?

Drake Are you completely free? You are not bound to doctor Carroll?

Khin Myo I am as free as you are from your wife, with the difference, that I am not married.

Drake Then I dare trust you with my life?

Khin Myo That's the smallest risk you can take in this life.

Drake I am afraid that I am in love with you.

Khin Myo Don't be afraid. Everybody loves me, and no one is afraid of it.

(Suddenly a great bang, and you hear heavy raindrops falling.)!

The rain! At last! It has been too dry for too long! Come! We must get back!

Drake I can't run.

Khin Myo Then we'll get wet, but no bother. *(She offers him her hand, and he accepts it. Their fingers intertwine, and they look into each other's eyes.)*

Drake It's the fault of the rain, no fault of ours.

Khin Myo Come! *(They move out, crouching in the rain, and stick together.)*

Scene 4.

Carroll Come down, Mr Drake!

Drake (from the outside) Are you back again, doctor Carroll?

Carroll So it seems, doesn't it?

Drake The piano is ready.

Carroll Thank goodness! You have perhaps saved the life of both myself and the country.

Drake How come?

Carroll Come down, and I will introduce a guest to you.

(Drake comes forth.)

Drake A guest?

Carroll A most important guest. Come, my friend, and meet our instrumental surgeon, unique in the world, a musical miracle doctor. *(Yawng Shwe comes forth.)* This, my friend, is Yawng Shwe, emissary to the sawbwa of Mongnai. He speaks no English. He only shakes hands. *(Yawng Shwe bows before offering his hand.)*

Drake Much obliged.

Carroll Mongnai lies north, and the Shan prince of Mongnai holds the greatest power on this side of the Salween. Tomorrow the prince will visit Mae Lwin, and he comes here for the first time. Our great hope is that we will succeed in concluding a treaty with him. I am very happy the piano is ready. It will probably come useful earlier than we expected.

Drake How come?

Carroll My friend, I have my sincerest wish to ask of you if you could like to help me with a favour.

Drake What can I do?

Carroll I would like to ask you to play for the prince.

Drake But I am no pianist. You know it.

Carroll You are no concert pianist who could play for the Queen in Albert Hall, but I have heard you playing while you were working, and the audience here would probably appreciate music better than ordinary Englishmen do.

Drake But I am extremely indisposed, so recently returned to life after a shattering illness, totally out of practice...

Carroll There is very much at stake. I have told the prince you have come only for his sake. Music is perhaps the only means for us to accomplish the treaty. Boy, show the emissary his room. (*A boy takes care of the emissary.*) Drake, you don't have to put much effort. You have the whole day tomorrow to collect yourself and choose what you would like to play. It doesn't have to be difficult or pretentious at all. All you need is a likeable piece that inspires feelings of friendship and makes the prince understand the good intentions of our proposition. I have heard you play that very kind of easy pieces.

Drake And how do you think western piano music could be understood by an Indian forest people who are mostly occupied with wars and only heard primitive monotonous instruments?

Carroll That's just why. This will be something new to them, and they are more musical than you think, perhaps even more musical than us Europeans. Did you notice, that they are incapable of ever singing out of tune, as if they all had a natural absolute pitch? We don't have that, who as a rule only can train ourselves to a perfect pitch by string instruments and their practice and who helplessly both play and sing out of tune if we don't concentrate hard. You must help us by inspiring a peace treaty. You have stayed so long now that this couldn't cost you anything.

Drake I almost expected you to prompt me to go back. You yourself expressed the risks of having me here. Why did you keep me? Was it only for this?

Carroll I haven't kept you. You stayed on of your own accord.

Drake But you haven't asked me to go.

Carroll Neither have I asked you to stay.

Drake I fell ill.

Carroll You could have left before falling ill.

Drake You were gone. I didn't want to be impolite and leave before saying goodbye.

Carroll Don't make excuses. You could have left any moment after you got well, but you haven't wished to.

I will tell you something. There is a piano tuner in Rangoon, a priest who also tunes pianos, and I could have asked him to come here to do the tuning. If he had come he would immediately have left the moment he was finished. So did all my other British guests who arrived here. But I wanted an expert on Erard grand pianos and therefore waged on the only expert in England in the field, and you came. I am

the last one who wishes to keep you against your will, but you took music seriously and wasn't satisfied with only doing your job. You stayed on for two weeks just to follow up your work. And then you continued staying on, when you heard the music of the nature here and was captivated by its magic. All this has only increased my respect for you. You can increase it even more, if you play for the prince.

Drake Very well, I will do it.

Carroll Thanks, my friend. So I hope the music will prevail over war and politics. It will in that case be greater than any political or wartime victory. It will be a universal victory, which would prove the power of music as higher than any mundane might.

Drake Now you are getting pretentious.

Carroll Pardon me. I only wish to encourage you. Play whatever you fancy, and I am sure it can't be anything but appreciated and breed those noble feelings that are needed for carrying through a lasting peace treaty.

Drake I will do my best.

Carroll That's the spirit. Good luck, my friend. (*pats his arm*) I will now attend to the emissary, try to tune him right and make preparations for the reception of the prince tomorrow. (*leaves, friendly pressing his shoulder.*)

Drake I have never played in public before, and it will be to the most exotic audience in the world, an oriental forest prince, who never heard western music before. But what shall I play? The only possible option is Bach.

Scene 5. The music room.

The piano is elevated as before but illuminated to enhance its presence. Enter the audience taking their seats, the prince with attendants and the doctor, then Khin Myo and other local servants and villagers, an audience of about a dozen in all.

Then Drake enters very serious, approaches the piano, bows respectfully to the prince and the emissary and their following, sits down by the piano, collects himself and starts playing.

The grand piano is placed askew towards the audience, who therefore can't see the keys or that he is playing at all. He starts with Bach's prelude and fugue in C sharp minor from Das Wohltemperierte Klavier, which of course is heard in a good recording by playback. The audience can see though that the prince and the local audience must be able to see how he plays. The prince whispers discreetly with the emissary and the doctor. All are in pious awe. When the piece is finished, Drake turns to them with a question on his mind. The prince nods in the affirmative.

Carroll (calmly) Carry on.

And Drake continues with the prelude and Fugue in D major. The scene fades, but the music goes on.

Act IV scene 1. On the beach.

Drake Why do I stay on? I don't know myself. The doctor has stayed here for twelve years, but he has been able to survive here as a solitary thanks to the music and his vocation and important work. I have fulfilled my mission and have a loving wife waiting for me. Still I can't leave just yet. Why?

Carroll (approaches) Pardon me for disturbing as usual. You are right in enjoying the lovely morning by the river. And you really deserve a moment's rest more than anyone else. You played exquisitely wonderful yesterday. I never expected to hear Bach in this world, and I could never imagine it would make such a profound impression on everyone.

Drake It was a technical piece.

Carroll It was far more than technical. But why didn't you start from the beginning?

Drake That prelude and fugue in C sharp minor has a special standing with us piano tuners, since it is the first piece in "Das Wohltemperierte" that takes full advantage of the possibilities of tempering, since it is partly chromatic and touches almost all the keys. It's the ideal piece for checking a tuning. That's why I know it so well by heart, since it is so useful. But what did the prince say? Did it have any effect on him?

Carroll It's too early to say. He was stunned. He wants to hear you play again, but there are better occasions, and we wish to save you.

Drake And the treaty? Did he sign it?

Carroll Not yet. You can't enforce such a matter, and you can't go straight to the point with the princes. Such impressions that you made yesterday will take a long time to digest. He must be given time to recover. We have courted him and got him here, and we can't conclude the talks until we have received affirmation from the other princes. But if this prince gives us his support our chances for getting the treaty through will be better. But I came here now to ask of you yet another matter.

Drake I can't play again, doctor.

Carroll No, this is another matter. I would ask you to follow me north to Mongnai, where there will be a meeting between the Shan princes.

Drake In what capacity?

Carroll With just your presence I think you could make a diplomatic difference. You have already made a certain reputation, as the one who made the singing elephant sing in tune. Yesterday she sang in tune for the first time, and only you made her do it.

Drake No, it was Bach.

Carroll By your tuning.

Drake For how long would we stay away?

Carroll Only two days and one night. We would start this afternoon.

Drake I am stuck here, doctor, and you may use me any way you like. I can't leave the place. Do you feel the same? Is that why you stayed on so long?

Carroll I have no wife to mind. I have a vocation here, both my patients, since I am a doctor, and the political situation, since I am the only diplomat. As long as I can control the situation I can't just leave it. Still I tried. I once had three months' leave to go home to England in between. I made the same journey as you, to Rangoon, to Calcutta, by rail to Bombay and then by boat. I came as far as Aden. There I turned back.

I couldn't face the cultural shock that would expect me in London – an almost madly feverish world metropolis with a jungle of criminality and vices compared to this completely natural and free world dominated by perfect innocence. I would only get sick in London. Here at least I can keep my natural diseases at bay. But you have a wife waiting for you. Why then did you stay on?

Once a traveller always a traveller. I had a wife once and a child for one day. My wife died with the child. What then do you have to live for but the perpetual escape from your own trauma, which you will never get rid of but can be tempered if you constantly have something else to concentrate on. I considered myself happy once and then lost everything at once. Perhaps I was too happy, so that fortune let me down and left me thrown up on a desert beach like a wreck invalidated for the rest of his life. I am translating the "Odyssey" to the Shan language, the first novel, which always fascinated me, since I found myself in the destiny of Ulysses. It is said among the Greeks that he in reality never came home except to die.

Drake It reminds me of a story I heard once, right on the Red Sea in the vicinity of Aden.

Carroll "The man with the story"?

Drake (surprised) Do you know him?

Carroll Almost everyone has encountered him on that route. He always tells his story so engagingly and fascinatingly, that each one who listens to it will never be able to forget it. He is like an institution which everyone is familiar with but which no one can fathom.

Drake Could it really be the same story?

Carroll It couldn't be anything else. He is unique. He is deaf but reads anything on the lips of others in any language, but he is actually Greek.

Drake Greek?

Carroll Yes. His story is about Greece and the liberation war, and the story is true. He and his brother were only boys when their families were killed by the Osmands. They worked as spies during that war. An old veteran from the war whom I knew, knew about the brothers and confirmed their story was true. Everyone wants to hear the story, it is considered to bring good luck to anyone who hears it. It breeds courage and bravery and intrepidity.

Drake Are you sure it was about Greece?

Carroll Of course. Are you surprised that I remember it so well after so many years?

Drake Not at all. I also remember it like yesterday.

Carroll Is there anything that doesn't fit?

Drake I understood its meaning as exclusively musical.

Carroll It's because you are a piano tuner. Then the musical details mean more than anything else.

Drake And what did it mean to you?

Carroll Predominantly a lesson to never let go. You seem puzzled.

Drake It *was* a puzzling story, and no one was more puzzled by it than he who told it. He was a good story-teller, who could bring unfathomable meanings into it, although it was just a story.

Carroll He was initiated in the Asian tradition of story-telling, which could make any story appear as much more than just a story, although it is just a story.

Drake Yes, it's probably just one of those tall stories, which appear the more meaningful because it is so meaningless as just a story.

Carroll Those stories will never end. Are you coming with us?

Drake Yes, I will join you. I will just make ready.

Carroll (*pats his arm*) I will fetch you when the time comes. (*leaves*)

Drake One of those stories, unfathomable in its human depth just because it is so meaningless, just showing us show small we are to the inapprehensible, the fathomless destiny of each one, which you never get any hang of until it is too late.

Scene 2. The piano room.

Enter Drake, studies the piano thoughtfully for a moment,
then sits down and starts tuning again.

Khin Myo enters.

Khin Myo Have you started all over again?

Drake Khin Myo! I didn't hear you.

Khin Myo Don't let me disturb you.

Drake The sound board has swollen as a result of the rain. Perhaps I am the only one to hear the difference, but it gives me reasons enough to start tuning it again.

Khin Myo Congratulations to the success at Mongnai.

Drake I understood nothing. It was a rogues' meeting in an alien tongue, and now the doctor is gone again, so I haven't learned anything. What did really happen?

Khin Myo The treaty was concluded between the princes of the Shan states. They have laid down their weapons. The rebellion is over. In a month the treaty will be valid on the condition that the British will grant them limited home rule.

Drake But that is wonderful!

Khin Myo The doctor was very grateful for your contribution, which might have been decisive.

Drake How? I did nothing.

Khin Myo You were there. You proved yourself real to chiefs who doubted your existence. You are a piano tuner. And the prince of Mongnai has heard you playing. That was enough to tune them positive.

Drake But it was a historical occasion, but the village is just as quiet and peaceful as before, as if nothing has happened. No one has shown any difference.

Khin Myo Mundanity means nothing to eternity, and here life is eternal.

Drake I think I know what you mean.

Khin Myo But you must go home now, Edgar. You are not safe here any more.

Drake How come? What could happen?

Khin Myo You already had malaria, but worse things could happen.

Drake Like what?

(Enter the doctor, soiled after a long ride. Khin raises her eyes to him, as he enters behind Drake.)

Khin Myo I tried to persuade him.

Carroll Good, Khin Myo. You have to leave, Drake. The situation is slipping off my hands.

Drake What is the matter? Didn't you conclude a peace treaty?

Carroll That's not it. Other perils are lurking. The risk is that Mae Lwin will be exposed to new attacks. You must have heard about the other one, that occurred when you were in Mandalay.

Drake But who is attacking, if you made peace with all the tribes?

Carroll We don't know who they are, but they are heavily armed. Their weapons are British, which they probably plundered or stole from some depot. We know too little. Therefore anything could happen. Mae Lwin could be attacked already tonight, and then no one will be safe. Therefore I would also ask you to save the piano.

Drake The piano?

Carroll I already made all the preparations. I entrust you with the great mission of honour to save my invaluable piano, since I don't want to expose it to the risk of ending up as firewood. You will follow it down the river. All security measures will be observed to protect it and to make the transportation safe.

Drake And what about yourself?

Carroll I have to stay here to defend the village and the camp.

Drake And Khin Myo?

Carroll She stays with me.

Drake If there will be another war here the place is hardly suitable for a woman. Let me escort her down with the piano, until you can follow yourself.

Carroll I will not come with you. I stay here to either survive with the community here, my only life's work, or will go down with it. The only thing I really can save is a unique music instrument. Has it been damaged again?

Drake The rain only caused the sound board to swell somewhat. Only a piano tuner can hear the difference, but that's why he also can fix it.

Carroll You can save the piano. Do so please. But Khin Myo stays with me.

Drake Is that her own wish?

Carroll Don't question me, Drake. It's no idea. It's always best what happens. She also has her own life's work here, which she will not abandon. We have

something here to defend against the whole world if necessary, which is worth defending. You have found that yourself, who has seen the meaning of staying on here longer than was good for you. Be satisfied with that. You will go as soon as we have got the piano down to the river and fixed it steadily on board.

Drake It will take hours.

Carroll Therefore you have plenty of time to pack your things. I am not just thinking of the safety of the piano but also of yours. Try to realize that.

Drake I submit, doctor. I will be ready in an hour.

Carroll Good. Then you can also watch the piano being loaded. I have to leave again. Happy journey, Drake, and thanks for wishing to stay on. It meant a lot to me, especially all our musical conversations.

Drake The pleasure was all mine, doctor. I would have liked to stay even longer.

Carroll I know. Have a good journey. (*leaves in haste*)

Khin Myo He is not understating. The danger is greater than what he makes it sound like, but he still has some small chance to save the peace.

Drake Could he succeed?

Khin Myo It depends entirely on the attackers. We have reached no contact with them, they refuse to make themselves known, which is why it looks so bad.

Drake French?

Khin Myo It could be even worse. You had better get started immediately.

Drake Come with me, Khin Myo.

Khin Myo I can't.

Drake You don't want to.

Khin Myo The will is of no matter. The doctor needs me. I am the only family he has got, and we have a life's work in common. He has created a unique world here to live in peace from the rest of the world. He is right. It's worth defending against the whole world. The instrument was its pearl in the crown. Save that at least for the future.

Drake (*embraces her suddenly, kisses her tenderly on both her cheeks, doesn't want to let her go, but releases her eventually and leaves without saying anything, since words cannot express his emotion.*)

Khin Myo (*after him*) Farewell, master of the singing elephant. To save you and the sacred elephant is the last thing we can do. You will not understand it now, but in future you will understand it. (*waves his hand after him, brings up her red parasol, opens it and walks out in the opposite direction.*)

Scene 3. A piano workshop, loaded with instrumental gear.
An old piano tuner with his apprentice. They have just finished their day's work.

Old man (with a finger on his lips to the boy, moves to a wooden cupboard and produces a bottle of wine. He fills two glasses, empties one of them at once and refills it.)

The day's work is over, so now we can celebrate another good day's work.
(drinks) Tell me now, my boy, why do you so insist on becoming a piano tuner?

boy I have good hands and like music.

Old man (laughs) Is that all?

boy Isn't that enough?

Old man (raises his glass) Don't you know, that there is a song concealed in every piano?

boy (shakes his head)

Old man You see, the pianist's fingers move quite mechanically, a collection of muscles and sinews that only know a few rules concerning tact and rhythm. He is brainwashed into an automat who plays best without thinking. We have to tune pianos to turn something as trivial as muscles, sinews, keys and strings and wood into a song.

boy And what is the name of the song of this old piano?

Old man Song, just song pure and simple without words. It's called nothing, it's just a song.

boy (laughs)

old man (laughs with him and drinks up his glass) It is our sacred task to make pianos capable of singing. If they can't sing we have failed. It's the real task of the piano tuner – to endow dead concrete instruments with a live singing voice. Then it's the task of the pianists to abuse it, for they all play too hard and treat the instrument as an instrument of percussion instead of the secret harp it is. Therefore we must constantly tune it all over again.

boy Why then do the piano composers write piano music just for being abused?

Old man You are getting the hang of it, my son. The composers write the music that sings by itself inside them. To them the music sings without being heard. Certain composers were also great pianists, and the best of them could also play without abusing the Song, above all Chopin, but Liszt could not. He could only make a lot of sound but couldn't sing. The song is a divine gift, my son, especially that song which is heard without needing ears for it. Beethoven knew that. And Bach was knowledgeable enough to give the most important work of all piano literature the name of a piano tuning. *(toasts his apprentice and drinks)*

Scene 4. Dark night in a jungle with glimmering moonlight.
Drake on a raft with three escorts and the piano well packed.

Drake How do I get to think of such old memories here in the middle of a jungle on a black and silent river? He taught me the secret of the piano, and I have kept it and brought it on. I have been privileged to always be able to keep the Song alive and bring it on further and bring it back to life when it was lost. Could I be any happier? No, I know of no possible higher happiness.

(Suddenly sharp shootings, machine gun fire, and his three companions fall into the river, shot to death.)

What now? Don't shoot! We have a living piano on board!

(blackout)

Act V scene 1. An army headquarters.

soldier We got him alive, Sir.

lieutenant Splendid. Then we have the chance to know some more before we shoot him.

soldier Court martial, Sir?

lieutenant No, he is a civilian. He has never been in the army. He has to stand trial in Rangoon, although he is already done for.

soldier Pardon me, Sir, but he seems totally unaware of what he has been through and is very upset about the three natives that were shot.

lieutenant Bring him in. His only chance is to cooperate. *(The soldier leaves,)*

Poor devil. Could he really be innocent?

(The soldier and another bring in Drake.)

Drake (upset) Lieutenant! What is all this about? In cold blood you have shot down three innocent friends of mine, two of them hardly more than children!

Lieutenant (sternly) Sit down, Mr Drake.

Drake I demand an explanation!

lieutenant (sterner still) I said, sit down, Mr Drake.

Drake You don't understand – there has been a terrible misunderstanding.

lieutenant This is the last time I ask you.

Drake I –

lieutenant Mr Drake! *(moves one step towards him)*

Drake I demand to know!

lieutenant Will you please **sit down!**

Drake I will not sit until you tell me why I am here. You have no right of command over me.

lieutenant Mr Drake! *(strikes him)*

Drake (falls down into the chair, bleeding, puts his hand to his front and notes his bleeding with surprise)

lieutenant (regards him thoroughly and sits down opposite him) Edgar Drake, by order of the military headquarters of Mandalay you are under military arrest. In these papers your crimes are being accounted for. *(He indicates a pile of folders.)* You will be detained here until you are picked by an escort who can bring you to Mandalay and Rangoon to stand trial.

Drake (shakes his head) What kind of a crazy misunderstanding is this?

lieutenant Mr Drake, I have not given you permission to speak.

Drake I need no permission. *(rises. The lieutenant also rises.)* I –

lieutenant (strikes him again. His spectacles fall to the floor. He falls back into the chair, almost falling backwards.)

Mr Drake, this will be so much easier if you cooperate.

Edgar (picks up his glasses from the floor, shocked and trembling) You have just killed my friends in cold blood. You strike me and demand my cooperation? I am in Her Majesty's service.

lieutenant Not any longer, Mr Drake. Traitors are not granted any such privilege.

Drake Traitor? *(can't believe his ears)* What kind of an absurd nightmare is this?

lieutenant Please, Mr Drake, such charades will get you nowhere. If you have been dreaming it's time to wake up now.

Drake This is madness. I know nothing. Traitor? On what grounds?

lieutenant For helping and supporting chief surgeon Anthony Carroll, spy and a traitor himself. Can you deny it?

Drake (astounded again) Anthony Carroll? Doctor Anthony Carroll? He is England's finest soldier in Burma. I don't understand what you are talking about.

(A knock on the door)

lieutenant Enter! *(enter captain Nash-Burnham.)*

Drake (with rising hopes) Captain! *(rises)* What is happening?

Nash (observes Drake, who is unshaved and worn out, has obviously not slept for a long time)

Lieutenant, have you informed Mr Drake of the charges?

lieutenant Only briefly, Sir.

Drake Captain, please tell me what this is all about.

Nash Sit down, Mr Drake.

Drake Captain, I demand to know what is going on!

Nash (bellows hard) Sit down, Mr Drake, damn it!

(Drake sits down, beaten. The lieutenant rises, giving his chair to Nash, who sits down.)

Nash (well calculated and clear) Mr Drake, there are very strong allegations against you and chief surgeon Carroll. I can assure you that it is in your own interest to cooperate. This is as difficult for me as it is for you. *(Drake listens, waiting)* Lieutenant.

lieutenant We will be brief, Mr Drake. Colonel Fitzgerald, the one who first made contact with you from the war ministry and was in charge of Carroll's correspondence, was arrested as a spy when classified documents with Russian notes were found in his possession.

Drake (surprised again) Russian?

lieutenant You must be aware that there has been a cold war going on between us and Russia since decades concerning Central Asia. It has always been improbable that Russia would show any interest for such a remote area as Burma, but in 1878 there was a meeting in Paris between the honorary consul of Burma and such an improbably diplomat as the famous Russian chemist Dimitry Mendelyev.

Drake This seems far-fetched and smells of a clumsy diplomatic mistake. I can't understand how this could concern me or doctor Carroll. You have just killed...

Nash Mr Drake, we don't have to tell you anything. If you don't wish to cooperate we could send you directly on to Rangoon.

Drake (closes his eyes and tries to control himself)

Lieutenant (continues) In 1879 doctor Carroll wrote a letter to Dimitry Mendelyev titled "Of the haemostatic qualities found in the Dendrobium in upper Burma". Suspicions were raised, since the extensive chemical formulas could be a code, like those uncountable sheets of notes that were sent from England to chief surgeon Carroll in Mae Lwyn, exactly such note sheets that you brought to him. On careful investigation, these notes proved unintelligible, which indicated they were not music but some kind of crypted message.

Drake This is constantly getting worse. I have heard that music being performed. It is Shan music. It is no code but an effort at transcription and documentation of Shan music.

lieutenant We were naturally reluctant to bring accusations against one of our most competent and successful commanders in Burma. We needed more evidence. Then the report arrived of your and doctor Carroll's visit to Mongnai and meeting with representatives of the Limbin federation and the bandit prince Twet Nga Lu.

Drake It's correct. I was there. It was about peace negotiations.

lieutenant How much of the Shan language do you understand? What Carroll carried through was an alliance with these rogue barons to defeat British forces and restore Shan self rule.

Drake Nonsense! It was only about peace! He made peace with the entire federation! He persuaded the federation to submit to British supremacy by a peace treaty of limited self rule for the Shans.

Nash Was that what he told you?

Drake Yes, but I was there! I saw it!

lieutenant Again, Mr Drake, how much of the Shan language do you understand? Was there any other language spoken on that occasion than Shan?

Drake (collecting himself) You have got everything all wrong. I have been in Mae Lwyn for almost three months, and the doctor has never shown any sign of disloyalty to the crown. He has only taken initiatives for peace and that with passionate engagement, since he desired to keep off all atrocities from his world at Mae Lwyn at any cost, the paradise he created with his own hands with a clinic and school and everything. He just wanted peace, nothing else, and keep away all politics. He is a scientist who really only loves art and culture above everything else...

lieutenant (jeeringly) Let's talk about art and culture, Mr Drake.

Drake What do you mean?

lieutenant Why did you go to Mae Lwyn at all?

Drake To tune a piano. You know that very well. The army gave me the commission.

lieutenant That piano which now lies floating on a raft on the shore of our camp.

Drake Exactly. I came only for that reason. That was my command. When I got a calling in Mandalay from doctor Carroll I proceeded there, like by an order, although I had been advised to return home. I didn't wish to have made the long voyage in vain without even having given the noble instrument a chance.

lieutenant And how long does it take to tune a piano, Mr Drake?

Drake It depends.

lieutenant How long does it take at most in England?

Drake Two days.

lieutenant You said yourself just now that you had been in Mae Lwyn for three months. Why stay so long when the work you had gone there to perform only had taken two days?

Drake In such a tropical climate you have to follow up the tuning for at least two weeks. I also had to repair it. Then I fell ill in malaria. I had hardly recovered when the doctor asked me to follow him to the meeting at Mongnai. It's also a very beautiful place, which I would only be able to experience once in my life. Everything has an explanation.

Lieutenant You will have to admit that the circumstantial evidence against you will be hard to explain away. The doctor asked his friend colonel Fitzgerald to engage you, so that you could bring suspect notes from London, although he could have engaged a piano tuner from Rangoon. You stay on up there for three months over time in spite of a climate which no European normally can support more than a few days, but you stay on for the whole duration of the illness and take part in suspicious subversive conferences. For three months you are doctor Carroll's number one man, who conspires with bandit chiefs to liberate the Shan country from British presence.

Drake (is silent)

Nash (till finally) Can you answer the accusations and testify against chief surgeon Carroll?

Drake Captain, I am convinced you have drawn wrong conclusions from unfortunate circumstances. Doctor Carroll is a diplomat of peace whose chief interest is to win the hearts of men by music and science. He engaged me only for such matters, and I was the only expert of such a unique thing as an Erard grand piano in England, perhaps in all the world. When the Limbin federation will present its draft to the army you will believe me.

lieutenant Mr Drake, two days after the meeting in Mongnai the Limbin forces attacked us commanded by the sawbwa of Lawksawk in one of the fiercest offensives so far. We managed to drive them back to Lawksawk with difficulty, where we burned the town.

Drake (astounded) Have you destroyed Lawksawk?

lieutenant Mr Drake, we have destroyed everything there and also Mae Lwyn.

Drake (shaken, shocked, shattered) How could you? *(rises)* You have got stuck in your own bureaucratic paranoia, which have induced you to commit monstrous political mistakes, that never will tune Burma in harmony to you. Doctor Carroll has apparently been hoodwinked by deceitful 'friends', but you have walked into the same trap and accuse him instead of regretting his human limitations. In brief, you have acted according to prejudicial instincts without first finding out the truth. You have handled the illness crisis of a patient by slaughtering him.

lieutenant Should we then have turned the other cheek and allowed us to be massacred without defending ourselves? We had no alternative, Mr Drake.

Drake (drops tired and devastated down into the chair all washed up, with his hands to cover his face)

Nash (rising) Consider the matter, Mr Drake. Your testimony is of supreme importance since it is the only one we have. Come, lieutenant. *(They leave. A chain is attached to the door from the outside, and a key is turned.)*

Drake Is this a dream or reality? Was the idyllic paradise and peace oasis of Mae Lwin a dream and this a reality or the other way around? I will never get a satisfying answer to that. I only know that both were absolutely incompatible in the same dimension.

(Captain Nash-Burnham enters quietly again.)

Captain! Was there anything more?

Nash Hush! No one knows I am here. I shouldn't have come back, but I know more about the instrument than you think. I know that you are just a piano tuner.

Drake What do you want?

Nash You must understand that we need your help. Only you can help us find the doctor.

Drake I thought you had destroyed Mae Lwin. Didn't you shoot down the doctor and his mistress like you so coldly shot down my three young companions? The oldest, Nok Lek, was only fifteen.

Nash I didn't want to. When the boat was identified as yours with the piano we had to stop the natives from bringing it to safety. The lieutenant knows nothing else than war.

Drake So I noticed. The direct contrary of doctor Carroll. Therefore he can only think evil of doctor Carroll, excluding all his goodness, which doesn't exist in the lieutenant's world.

Nash You can still get out of it.

Drake If I betray him?

Nash We only wish to learn the truth. Only you can make it in any way available to us.

Drake So he got away?

Nash He disappeared with Khin Myo up in the mountains.

Drake Then you will never catch him.

Nash I am convinced that you are innocent, perhaps as innocent as the doctor, who really could have been conned. Let us believe that. But the lieutenant's chain of evidence by circumstantial evidence will be hard to crack. The risk is that you will be convicted by the doctor's absence. Only he could have you acquitted, if he could exonerate himself, which he can't now.

Drake Yes, he has acquitted himself. He is free from you.

Nash In the same way I wish to acquit you. I only came because of that.

Drake You mean, you intend to leave the door open?

Nash The piano is waiting for you by the river. Don't let ignorants like the lieutenant desecrate it with his ignorance. The clearest sign of a barbaric disposition is the absence of all musicality. The lieutenant can't even understand that birds are singing.

Drake Where should I go?

Nash Just follow the river down to Thailand. Try to rescue the piano. That's all I ask of you and the only thing I can do for you.

Drake Thank you, captain.

Nash I will leave now. Forget that I ever was here. I give you back your destiny. You belong to the piano, not to the politics and wars of the empire.

Drake I will try to find the doctor.

Nash Do so. Perhaps you both could return.

Drake Don't count on it.

Nash No, I don't. Make your escape only in the protection of the night, and you will have a chance to manage. – One last question: you don't think the doctor could have had the ambition to create a state of his own of the Shan states?

Drake Impossible. He was only interested in music, malaria research, flowers and butterflies and his own medical science.

Nash I believe you. Go now. *(rises and leaves)*

Drake Can I save the piano? Either that, or we will both go down together, for a piano tuner cannot continue in his profession if he can't complete a tuning. And only I could tune that piano. *(breaks up)*

(You hear the river booming and the rain rattling in the dark.)

The End.

*(at sea between Greece and Italy, 24.3.2010,
translated in August 2022.)*

The entire drama is naturally built on Daniel Mason's phenomenal first novel "The Piano Tuner", where all the characters are fictional, like also the Mae Lwin community, although everything else is historically true.