

Winter had London's West End firmly in its grip. On that evening in December, a frosty wind blew through the streets. The yellow light of the gas lanterns tried to simulate warmth. But the candelabras were full of icicles. No hackney coaches circulated any more. Every now and then, a hooded figure hurried across the snow-covered cobblestones.

The blind beggar in Savile Row had taken shelter in a corner of a building. Here, too, his threadbare coat provided just little protection from the cold.

Beside him, on the ground, a hat-like thing waited for pennies and shillings. But today, only snowflakes now and then found their way into the old hat.

This will make a bitter Christmas Eve tomorrow, thought the blind beggar, who had been dreaming of a piece of roast goose and a glass of wine. He struggled to elicit sounds from his violin. Because of his clammy fingers and the condition of the instrument, he only produced a miserable squeaking noise. No one hears it, anyway, sighed the blind beggar. He let shoulders and violin droop.

The residents of Savile Row had long since closed their shops and their window shutters. Inside their homes, they sat comfortably by the fire, drank Christmas tea with rum, chatted or daydreamed. The gentlemen perhaps with a shag pipe in their mouths, the ladies with knitting on their laps. The little ones were bobbing on their rocking horses, older children were at the piano or playing checkers. Christmas cards were written, maybe also love letters. Novels were read, as was the fashion at the time. *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, for example, or *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen.

No one thought of the blind fiddler. He had always stood on the pavement and belonged to the street scene like lampposts, brass signs, or iron railings. The few passers-by were in a hurry. Wearing woolen scarves and sheepskin earmuffs, they could hear neither the melodies nor the dissonances of the blind beggar.

Then a strangely gaunt figure appeared in Savile Row. The man wore elegant gaiters, a black fur-trimmed coat with a white silk scarf and a castor hat. The pale face with the hooked nose was wildly framed by strands of black hair. As he passed the blind beggar, he glanced first at the empty hat, then at the violin. He stopped and turned to the beggar, "Please, may I have your instrument?" A foreign accent was unmistakable.

The beggar was startled. It had already happened that someone had snatched the violin from him to run away with it. "Well, come on!" the man beckoned. Hesitantly, the blind beggar handed over the violin and bow.



The stranger checked the musical instrument, scraped away some ice here and tapped on the wood there. He blew snow out of the pegbox. He put the tailpiece and the bridge to the middle, where they belonged. He turned the pegs several times. Then he stretched the bow and ran it over the strings.

"No Stradivarius, indeed!" he grumbled, lifted the violin, tucked it under his chin and began to play. Softly at first. The bow stroked the strings long and gently. The fingers on the fingerboard moved cautiously, somehow tentatively, but never uncertainly. The stranger played with feeling. An adagio like the song of angels! What a virtuoso! He strode to the middle of the street, then up the street and down the street. His violin playing sounded wonderfully through the snow-covered Savile Row. A divine music, indeed.

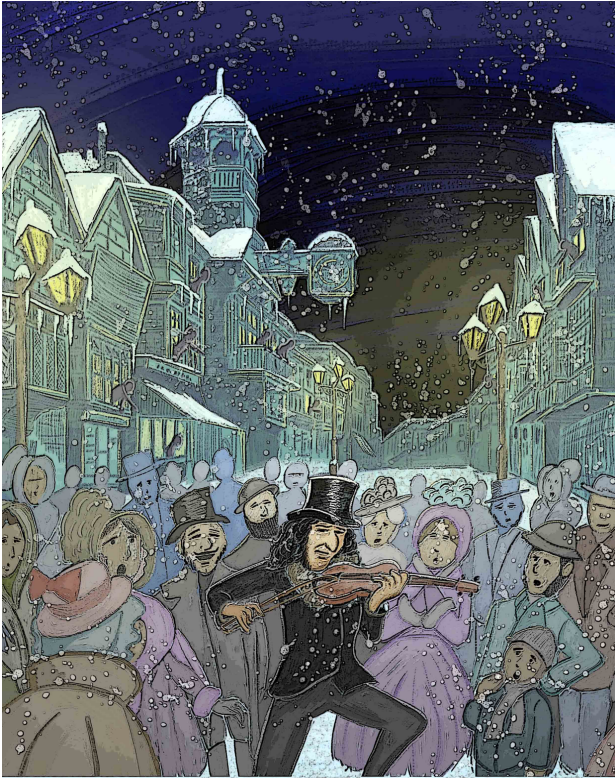
Now becoming louder, allegro. Then again tender-sounding. Sometimes cheerful, often melancholy.

Shutters were opened, astonished ladies and gentlemen leaned out of the window and listened. Under the glow of a lantern, the strange violinist stopped, playing fervently, leaning slightly forward, his left leg bent.

Passers-by from nearby Regent Street approached. A crowd formed around the virtuoso. His fingers raced across the fingerboard at breathtaking speed, the bow bouncing wildly over the strings. In between, the man plucked at the strings. Is that what you do with a violin? people wondered. Probably not, but it sounds outrageously good!

Suddenly, the strange virtuoso stopped. He stood there for a moment as if frozen in the middle of playing the violin, like a monument. Now he tucked the violin and bow under his left arm, bent down to

the forgotten old felt hat, picked it up and, bowing, held it out to his listeners. The men and women cheered, applauded - and reached deep into their pockets. Soon the hat was filled to the brim with shiny silver coins.



Then the man strode up to the beggar, laid the money at his feet, pressed the instrument into his arm and said, “Go home now. Take a bath. On Christmas Eve, have roast goose and a good wine served. This money will also be enough to send for a barber and a tailor. Allow yourself a few days of rest. And then you can return here and play again. But, for God's sake, play with joy, with love and with feelings - above all, with feelings.”

Shyly, the blind beggar asked, “Is it you, Jesus?” The virtuoso smiled bitterly and thought: If the good man knew that in Italy, they call me *il violinista del diavolo*, the devil’s violinist...

Aloud he said, “My name is Paganini.”

The blind beggar thanked deeply and then did as Paganini had told him. He enjoyed the finest Christmas Eve in years. On New Year’s Day, he was back in Savile Row. Well dressed, with neat haircut and freshly shaved. He played the violin. With joy. With love. And with feelings. From Adagio to Vivace. People remained standing. They threw money into the hat.

He was no longer *the Blind Beggar*. The people now called him *the Violinist of Savile Row*.

Generally, we say about anecdotes: *Se non è vero, è ben trovato*. It has been recorded that Niccolò Paganini occasionally took the violin of a beggar boy in Vienna around 1828 to play it for the amusement of passers-by. Almost two hundred years later, Lorenz Derungs wrote the present text, which he created from what he heard or read about Paganini. He embellished the story with own imagination.

What is it? You can find the words in the text “The Blind Beggar”:

0	<i>icicle</i>	A pendent, tapering mass of ice formed by the freezing of dripping water.
1		A naturally rounded stone, larger than a pebble and smaller than a boulder, formerly used in paving.
2		A four-wheeled carriage having six seats and drawn by two horses.
3		Holders of several candles or lamps.
4		A game for two players using a checkerboard and 12 checkers each. The object is to jump over and capture the opponent's pieces.
5		Sidewalk, a paved surface.
6		Coin of little value.
7		Fencilike barrier, balustrade.
8		Coverings for protecting the ears in cold weather.
9		A covering of cloth or leather for the ankle and the lower leg, worn over the shoe or boot.
10		Something erected in memory of a person or an event, as a building, pillar, or statue.