

THE SECRET OF THE STRADIVARIUS.

My friend Luigi is reckoned one of the finest violin players of the day. His won-derful skill has made him famous, and he is well known and honored for his talent in every capital in Europe.

If in these pages I call him another name than the one he has made famous, it is solely on account of a promise he exacted from me, in case I should ever feel tempted to make the following strange experiences, we shared together, public property. I am afraid, nevertheless, that too many will readily identify the man himself with the portrait I am obliged to draw.

Luigi—leaving his professional 'greatness' out of the question—would have been a noticeable man in any company—a man that people would look at and ask not only, "Who is he?" but "What has he done in the world?" knowing that men of his stamp are seldom sent upon this scene to live an ordinary everyday life. In person he was very tall, standing over six feet. His figure was graceful, and might even be called slight, but had breadth of shoulder enough to tell it was the figure of a strong man; a face with a pale but clear complexion; dark deep-set eyes, with a sort of far away expression in them; black hair, worn long, after a manner of gentlemen of his kind; a high but rugged forehead; a well shaped nose; a drooping moustache; a hand whose long and delicate fingers seemed constructed for their particular mission—violin playing. Picture all these, and if you enjoy the acquaintance of the musical world, or even if you have been in the habit of attending concerts where stars of the first magnitude condescend to shine, I fear, in spite of my promise of concealing his name, you will too easily recognize my friend.

Luigi's manner in ordinary life was very quiet, gentlemanly, and reserved. He was, in his dreamy sort of way, highly courteous and polite to strangers. Although, when alone with me or other friends he loved, he had plenty to say for himself—and his broken English was pleasant to listen to—in general company he spoke but little. But let his left hand close round the neck of a fiddle, let his right hand grasp the bow, and one knew directly for what purpose Luigi came into the world. Then the man lived and revelled, as it were, in a life of his own making. The notes his craft drew forth were like bracing air to him; he seemed actually to breathe the music, and his dreamy eyes awoke and shone with fire. He did that rare thing—rare indeed, but lacking which no performer can rise to fame—throw his whole soul into his playing. His manner, his very attitude as he commenced, was a complete study. Drawing himself up to every inch of his height, he placed the violin—nothing it, I may say—under his chin, and then taking a long breath of what appeared to be anticipatory pleasure, swept his magician's wand over the sleeping strings, and waking them with a charmed touch, wove his wonderful spell of music. The moment the horse-hair came in contact with the gut, the listener knew he was in the presence of a master.

Luigi had come to London for the season, having, after much negotiation and persuasion, accepted an engagement at a long series of some of the best, if cheapest and most popular, concerts held in London. It was his first visit to England: he had ever disliked the country, and believed very little in the national love for good music, or in the power of appreciating it when heard. He disliked, also, the trumpeting with which the promoters of the concerts heralded his appearance. Although his fame was great already throughout the Continent, he dreaded the effect of playing to an unsympathetic audience. His fears were, however, groundless. Whether the people liked and understood his music and style of playing or not, they at least appeared to do so; and the newspapers, one and all, unable to do things by halves, went into raptures over him. They compared him with Paganini, Ole Bull, and other bygone masters, and their comparisons were very flattering. Altogether, Luigi was a great success.

I met him on two occasions at the houses of some friends of mine, who are in the habit of spending much time, trouble, and some money on that strange sport, lion-hunting. His concerts were held, I think, on two evenings in every week; so he had time at his disposal, and was somewhat sought after. We were introduced, and I took a liking to

the quiet, gentlemanly celebrity, who, different from many others whose names are in the mouths of men, gave himself no airs, nor vaunted, by words or manner, the aristocracy of talent. I could make shift to converse with him fairly enough in his own soft language, so that upon my meeting him the second time, he expressed his pleasure at again encountering me. A few days afterwards we met by chance in the street, and I was able to extricate him from some little difficulty, into which his imperfect knowledge of English and of English ways had betrayed him. Then our acquaintance ripened, until it became friendship; and even at this day I reckon him amongst the friends I hold the dearest.

I saw a great deal of Luigi during his stay in London. We made pleasant little excursions together to objects of interest he wished to visit. We spent many evenings together—nights I should rather say, for the small hour had sounded when we parted, leaving the room dim with the smoke from my cigars and his own cigarettes. Like many of his countrymen, he smoked simply whenever he got a chance; and when alone with me, I believe the only cessation to his consumption of tobacco was when he took his beloved fiddle in his hand and played for his own pleasure and my delight.

He was a charming companion—indeed what man who had seen such varied life as he had, could be otherwise when drawn out by the confidence that friendship gives and I soon found that under the external calmness of the man lay a nature full of poetry, and not free from excitement. I was also much amused to find a vivid vein of superstition and belief in the supernatural running through his character; and I believe it was only my merriment on making the discovery that hindered him from expatiating upon some ghastly experiences he had gone through himself, instead of darkly hinting at what he could reveal. It was in vain I apologized for my ill-timed mirth, and with a grave face tried to tempt him. He only said:

"You, like the rest of your cold-blooded, money making race, are sceptical, my friend. I will tell you nothing. You would not believe; you would laugh at me—and ridicule is death to me."

Another thing he was very tenacious about—showing his skill when invited out. He invariably declined, seeming quite puzzled by the polite hints some of his entertainers threw out.

"Why can they not come and hear me in public?" he asked me. "Or can it be that they only ask me to their houses for my talents, not for my society?"

I told him I was afraid their motives were rather mixed; so he said quietly—

"Then I shall not go out again. When I do not play in public to earn my living, I play for myself alone."

He kept his resolve as well as he could—declining all of his many invitations, save those to a few houses where he knew he was valued, as he wished to be, for himself.

But when I was alone with him I when I visited him at his rooms; then he was not chary in showing his skill; and, although I blush to say so, at times I had violin playing ad nauseam. A surfeit of sweets—a satiety of music. I often wonder if it has ever been any man's lot to hear such perfect manœuvres as I did in these days when I lay, grown careless of the good the gods would send me, at full length on Luigi's sofa; and the master of the magic bow expounded themes in a manner which would have brought the house down. Till then I little dreamt of what, in skilful hands, the instrument could do. How true genius could bid it laugh, sob, command, entreat—sink into a wall of pathetic pleading, or soar to a song of scorn and triumph; what power to express every emotion of the heart lay in those few inches of cunningly curved wood! Now I could understand why Luigi could play so much for his own enjoyment; and at times it seemed to me that his creation was even more wonderful, his expression more thrilling, when I alone formed his audience, than when a vast assembly was before him, ready, as the last impassioned notes sank into silence, to break into a storm of rapturous applause.

Luigi was a connoisseur in fiddles, and owned several pet instruments by the most renowned makers. Sometimes of an evening he would bring out his whole stock, look

them carefully over, play a little on each, and point out to me the difference in the tone. Then he would wax eloquent on the peculiar charms or gifts the master's hand had bestowed on each, and was indignant that I was so obtuse as not to detect, at once, the exquisite gradations of the graceful curves. After a short time the names of Amati, Ruggeri, Guarnerius, Klotz, Stalner, &c., grew quite familiar to me; and as I went through the streets I would peep into the pawnbrokers' and other windows with fiddlers in them, hoping to pick up a treasure for a few shillings. Two or three I did buy, but my friend laughed so heartily at my purchases I gave up the pursuit.

He told me he had for a long while been looking for a genuine old Stradivarius, but, as yet, he had not succeeded in finding the one he wanted. He had been offered many, purporting to have come originally from the great maker's hands, but probably they were all pretenders, as he was not suited yet.

One evening when I visited Luigi I found him with all his musical treasures arrayed around him. He was putting them in order, he said. I must amuse myself as best I could until he had finished. I turned idly from one case to another, wondering how any experience could determine the build of any particular violin, all of which, to my untutored eyes, appeared alike. Presently I opened one case which was closed, and drew the fiddle it held from its snug, red-lined bed. I did not remember having seen this one before, so took it in my hand to examine it—holding it, after the manner of connoisseurs, edgewise before my eyes to note the curves and shape of it. It was evidently old—my little knowledge told me that; and as, even though protected by the case, dust lay upon it, I could see it had not been used for a long, long time. Moreover, all the strings were broken. Curiously, each one was severed at exactly the same point—just below the bridge—as if some one had passed a sharp knife across, and with one movement cut all four.

Holding the ill-used instrument towards Luigi, I said, "This one seems particularly to want your attention. Is it a valuable one?"

Luigi, who was engrossed by the delicate operation of shifting the sounding-post of one of his pet weapons, some infinitesimal part of an inch to the left or to the right, turned as I spoke, still holding his ends of string in his hand. As soon as he saw the violin I had taken up, he let fall the one he held between his knees, and, to my great surprise, said hastily—

"Put it down—put it down, my friend. I beseech you not to handle that violin."

Rather annoyed at the testy way in which my usually amiable friend spoke, I laid it down, saying, "Is it so precious, then, that you are afraid of my clumsy hands damaging it?"

"Ah, it is not that," answered Luigi. "It is something altogether different. I did not know my man had brought that fiddle in. I never intended it should have left Italy."

"It looks an old one. Who is it by?"

"That is a real old Stradivarius, the acme of mortal skill; the one thing human hands have made in this world perfect—perfect as a flower, perfect as the sea. A Stradivarius is the only thing that cannot be altered—cannot be improved upon."

"Why do you never use it?"

"I cannot tell you—you would not believe me. There is a something about that fiddle I cannot explain. I believe it to be the finest in the world. It may be even that Manfredi played upon it to Beethoven's cello. It may be Kruger led with it: when the mighty applause rang through the Karntnerthor, shaking it from floor to roof-tree, but which he, the grand deaf genius, Beethoven, could not even hear. Who can tell what hands have used it? and yet, alas! I dare not play upon it again."

Rendered very curious by Luigi's enigmatic words and excited manner, I ventured to take the violin in my hands again, and examined it with interest. I looked carefully at the belly and back, noting the beautiful red but translucent varnish, known alone to Stradivarius, with which the latter was coated. I peeped through the f/s, to ascertain if any maker's name appeared inside. If one had ever been there it was completely obliterated by a dark stain, covering the greater portion of the inside of the back. Luigi offered no remonstrance as I took the fiddle for the second time, but sat silent, watching me with apparent interest.

And now a strange thing occurred to me

—let who can explain it. After holding that fiddle a few minutes I felt a wish—an impulse—growing stronger and stronger each moment, till it became almost irresistible, to play upon it. It was not a musician's natural itching to try a fine old violin, as I am no musician, although fond of listening to music, and at times venturing to criticise; neither have I learnt nor attempted to learn the art of performing on any instrument, from the Jew's harp to the organ. And yet, I say, as my fingers were round the neck—as soft as silk it was—of that old violin, not only did I feel a positive yearning to pass the bow across it, but somehow I was filled with the conviction, odd as it was, that all at once I was possessed of the power of bringing rare music forth. So strong, so intense was this feeling, that, heedless of the ridicule I should expose myself to from my companion—heedless, indeed, of my presence—I cuddled the fiddle under my chin, and took up one of the several bows lying on the table. My left fingers fell instinctively into their proper position on the strings, or rather where the strings should have been; and then I remembered the ruined state they were in, and with all my new-born skill, knew that no miraculous inspiration, even if it produced a fiddler, could bring forth music from wood alone. Yet the impulse was on me stronger than ever; and absurd as it may seem, I turned to Luigi with the request on my lips that he would re-string the useless instrument.

Luigi had been watching me attentively; no doubt he had studied every motion, every vagary of mine since I commenced handling the fiddle again. Srelog me turn toward him, he sprang from his seat, and before I could speak, snatched the fiddle from my hands, replacing it at once in its case! then closing the cover, he heaved a deep sigh of relief. I had no time to entreat, remonstrate, or resist; but as he took the fiddle from me, all wish to distinguish myself in a line that was not my own left me, and I almost laughed aloud at the folly and presumption of which I had been mentally guilty. Yet it was strange—very strange.

"Ah," said Luigi, as he placed the fiddle out of sight under the table, "so you have felt it also, my friend?"

"Felt what?"

"The—I don't know what to call it—the power, the sorcery of it."

"I felt—don't laugh at me—had the strings been there, I, who never played a fiddle in my life, could have drawn exquisite music from that one. What does it mean?"

Luigi returned no answer to my inquiry, but said, as if thinking aloud—

"So it was no dream of mine. He, the cool, collected Englishman, he felt it also. He could not resist the impulse. It was no dream—no creation of my fancy; would he see it, I wonder."

"See what?" I asked, curious to know what his wandering sentences meant.

"I cannot tell you. You would not believe me."

"But what do you mean by the sorcery of the fiddle?"

"Did I say sorcery?—Well I know no other word that can describe it. Although I tell you I believe that fiddle is the finest in the world, I have only played upon it twice; and the second time I drew my knife across the strings, that I might never again be tempted to play upon it without due consideration."

"What is its history, then? Where did you get it?" I asked, by this time thinking my friend was suffering from some eccentricity that genius occasionally exhibits.

"It was sent me originally from London. When I found out its secret, I begged my agent in England to ascertain its history. After some trouble, he traced it to a house, where, for many years, it had lain unnoticed in a garret. That house had once been a lodging house; so doubtless the fiddle had belonged to some one who had sojourned there for a time. I could learn no more about it, save what it told me in its music."

I saw Luigi was far away from any wish to jest, so paused before I asked him the meaning of his last sentence. He anticipated me, and said—

"You wonder at my words. Did you notice nothing else strange about it?"

"Only a dark stain inside; as if wine had been spilt into it."

"Ah!" cried Luigi, excitedly, "that is it! that is the secret—the meaning of the power it holds. If it were not for the varnish that fiddle would be stained outside and inside. That stain is from a man's heart's blood, and that fiddle can tell how and why he died."