

An Artist's Freak.

(Continued from our "Home Magazine" department.)

coffee. The old maids were at their whist and their scandal. Suddenly was heard a noise, as of voices in dispute, outside the room, which made the old ladies prick up their ears, but which did not appear to have the slightest effect on Paganini.

"What can all this disturbance be about?" asked one of the whist party.

Louissette here made her appearance and gave an answer.

"Please, ladies," said she, "a porter has brought a large box, and we don't know what to do with it."

"Who is it for?"

"The address is so badly written that none of us can tell."

"Then you had better bring in the box."

Louissette, with the assistance of the porter, proceeded to do so. It was a large wooden box, securely fastened, and on it was written in very large letters, "With great care." Under this direction, but in much smaller letters, were the words, "For M. Nicolo Paganini."

"What made you say that the address was badly written, Louissette?" said a harsh-featured, wizened old lady, a martyr to gout and bad temper. "It is as plain as can be. The box is for our illustrious companion."

Paganini still paid no attention to what was going on. He was intently occupied with his book, and did not heed the old ladies and their tittle-tattle.

He started at the sound of Louissette's voice. She came to his side and spoke to him.

"Monsieur Paganini, here is a box for you."

"A box? What box?"

"The box which the porter has just brought in, and which the ladies have been talking about."

"I heard nothing. Let me see what it is."

He swallowed his coffee, and went towards the porter, who was still standing sentinel over the treasure.

"Where did you bring this from?" said Paganini.

"From the bureau, sir. I know nothing about it, except that it is said to have been forwarded from Orleans or Lyons."

"That is very strange," said Paganini. "I don't know anyone in either town. Who on earth could have sent it?"

"Well, that does not so very much matter, monsieur, does it?" said Louissette, softly. "The box is directed to you, so I suppose it is yours. You will take it in, will you not?"

"Certainly, Louissette, and we will see what it contains."

Paganini paid the porter and dismissed him.

"Shall I take the box up to your rooms, monsieur?" said Louissette, evidently in a very curious frame of mind.

"No, we will open it here," said Paganini, looking directly towards the whist party, who appeared to be intent on their game, and entirely oblivious of Paganini and his box.

The process of opening was easier said than done. After the lid of the box had been wrenched off almost angrily by Paganini, there was much to be done before the contents were visible. Wadding after wadding of hay was followed by roll upon roll of paper. Each separate covering of paper was secured by enormous seals and intricate twines of string.

"Well, what is after all that padding?" said one of the old ladies, who could not conceal her impatience.

"There were still more coverings to be unbound and unsealed before anyone's curiosity could be gratified."

At last the most secure fastening of all was cut, and Paganini held up to the astonished company—a wooden shoe!

"Is that all?" tittered the old ladies, with an injured air. "We need not have stopped our game for that."

"Only an old shoe, after all," sighed Louissette, who ill-concealed her disappointment.

"Only an old shoe, after all," repeated Paganini, with marked emphasis, and without taking his eyes from the quartette at the whist table. "A very good practical joke, no doubt, and one that must have caused its promoters a vast amount of amusement. This present has been sent me as a direct allusion to and a taunt upon my supposed avarice. I can see through it all."

A present of a wooden shoe on Christmas Eve is sent to Paganini, in order to compare him to the little children who are always asking for presents, and are seldom liberal themselves. It does not require much intelligence to see through this feminine jest. But never mind, the concocter of this scheme meant me to believe that this box contained a present of great value. He or she, whoever it may be, shall not be disappointed. I tell you, Louissette, and every one here assembled, that not many days shall pass before this old wooden shoe is worth its weight in gold."

Paganini was strangely excited, and every one in the room looked at him with astonishment. They did not understand what he meant, but they felt, somehow, that he would keep his word.

Three days passed away, and Paganini never appeared in the daytime, or took his accustomed seat in the drawing-room after dinner.

Louissette was asked the reason, and her answer was that Paganini was not as well as usual, and was obliged to keep his room. Even Louissette did not know the real cause of his absence. She had seen him, it is true, hour after hour, at work with knife and chisel and the sharpest instruments, and she had heard that at feats of dexterous carpentry the great violinist was almost without a rival; but she did not know that, by dint of patience and exquisite ingenuity, the old wooden shoe which she had seen taken out of the box on Christmas Eve was being changed into a violin which in tone and finish would not have discredited Amati.

Paganini's labor was rewarded. He gave the old shoe a soul, and the world was to hear the result.

Very soon blue bills, placarded on the walls of the Villa Lutetiana, and liberally distributed all over Paris, announced to the world that a concert would be given in the large salon of the Villa on New Year's Eve, at which Nicolo Paganini would make his first appearance after his serious indisposition. The popular artist promised to play ten pieces, five upon an ordinary violin, and five upon a wooden shoe. The price of admission was fixed as high as twenty francs a head, but it was added that the proceeds would be added to a charitable purpose.

The good news of Paganini's recovery and speedy reappearance spread like wildfire in Paris. For three months past hardly a soul in Paris knew what had become of the illustrious artist. The whole musical world indulged in transports of joy, and it is needless to add that a few hours after the announcement appeared, not a ticket for the concert was to be had for love or money. Paganini had given strict injunctions that only a certain number were to be sold. The largest theatre in Paris could have been filled over and over again, but he had set his heart upon playing in the Villa Lutetiana.

There was an element of what we should call "sensational" about the whole freak of the artist. A concert in an elegant establishment like this villa, given by one of the most distinguished of all artists after a three months' absence—variations first upon a violin, and then upon a shoe—these were the items of gossip discussed over and over again, until the long-looked-for New Year's Eve came at last.

The carriages of all the notabilities in Paris thronged to the gates of the Villa Lutetiana, and amidst

a hush of breathless excitement, Paganini, violin in hand, made his appearance in the room.

There was not a trace of his recent illness left. He looked as young again as when he had isolated himself from the world. With one bright smile at the recognition he received, and with but little preface, he dashed at once into a brilliant fantasia, and, quite lost in the fury of his art, he literally intoxicated his audience with his magic power.

"He cannot improve upon that," they said. "He never played better in his life."

Prepared, however, for any prodigies of skill from one who had previously done what no living man had accomplished on the violin, the dilettanti waited in an agony of excitement for the variations on the "sabot."

After a short interval Paganini reappeared with the treasure in his hand. A silence that was almost terrible, and then from the new instrument poured forth sounds so sweet as to draw tears from the eyes of almost every one in the room. The artist seemed to be carried away by the excitement he was causing, and put his whole soul and grand intelligence into the musical drama he was reciting. There could not be a doubt about its meaning. It was the return of the conscript.

There was the roll of the drums, the excitement of military life, the pang of pain at the soldier leaving his companions, the loneliness of the journey, the approach to home, the meeting of the lovers, the tears of joy and ecstasy of indissoluble happiness.

A burst of wild applause greeted the last brilliant passage of Paganini's almost superhuman effort. Again and again did the villa ring with the excited cheers of the audience. The ladies flung their bouquets at the artist's feet, and the men rushed up to him and seized him by the hand.

Even the four old ladies who had composed a certain whist party, to which allusion has before been made, could not refrain from the general excitement which was around them. "It is simply magnificent," they said; "we should not have judged him so harshly. He must have a good heart."

Up in a corner of the saloon, half hidden by a curtain, stood a simple little girl. She was crying as if her heart would break. It was Louissette.

The drama of the conscript's return had gone straight to her heart.

The concert was a magnificent success, and when it was all over they totalled the receipts.

They amounted to two thousand francs.

And then Paganini called Louissette to his side.

"My little friend," said he, "we have been lucky enough to obtain five hundred francs more than was required to procure a substitute for Henri. Take all the money. What is over will do to defray Henri's expenses on his way home."

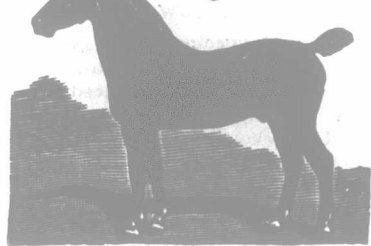
Louissette could not keep back the tears of gratitude which came welling to her eyes. But Paganini took her kindly by the hand and said:

"You have been an affectionate and faithful little handmaid to me, and you, too, must have your reward. I will give you something to start in life with. This old shoe—perhaps you will like to call it a violin now—is yours; I always intended that it should belong to you. You can dispose of it as you think fit, and I cannot help thinking that it will realize sufficient to give you a handsome dowry."

Paganini was quite right. A wealthy Parisian amateur purchased the instrument of her, and the price he paid for it was six thousand francs.

And so Louissette got back her lover from the wars through the instrumentality of Nicolo Paganini. The kind part this famous violinist played in the matter must ever redound to his advantage, however much it may be considered "An Artist's Freak."

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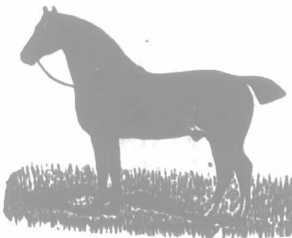
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