

The Secret of the Stradivarius

Hugh Conway

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MY friend Luigi is reckoned one of the finest violin players of the day. His wonderful skill has made him famous, and he is well known and honoured for his talent in every capital in Europe.

If in these pages I call him by 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 the manner of geniuses 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 reposed. 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 respire 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 — threw 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 — nestling 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 the 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

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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 hours 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 could get the 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 ghostly 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! 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 performances as I did in those 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 wail 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 execution 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, Ruggieri, Guarnerius, Klotz, Stainer, grew quite familiar to me; and as I went through the streets I would peep into the pawnbrokers' and other windows with fiddles 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, 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.

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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 someone 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 each 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 Boccherini's 'cello. It may be Kruger led with it when the mighty applause rang through the Kärntnerthor, shaking it from floor to 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 enigmatical 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 criticize; 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 his 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.

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Luigi had been watching me attentively; no doubt he had studied every motion, every vagary of mine since I commenced handling the fiddle again. Seeing me turn towards 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 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 someone 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 you why he died."

"I do not understand you."

"I do not expect you to — or believe me — why should you? What have you, an unimaginative Anglo-Saxon, to do with marvels? How, in the centre of a great, cruel, material city, with the ceaseless sound of traffic outside our windows should you expect anything supernatural? It may be I only dreamt it. Perhaps you would not see it. And yet, one night when I feel strong enough, we will take the fiddle from its case, and I will play it to you — I who have not laid a finger on it for five years until tonight. And then, if its music moves you as it moved me, I dreamt no dream. If not, I will say it was a dream, and I may at last be able to use this masterpiece of Stradivarius."

I begged him to name an early day for the curious performance, but he would make no promise; so we parted for the night.

A month passed by: Luigi's London engagement terminated, and he was now going to win fresh laurels at Berlin. I had seen him two or three times every week, but he had never referred to the conversation which had taken place upon the night I drew the strange violin from its case, nor I had he offered to redeem his promise on that occasion. I had ceased to think about it, or indeed only remembered it as a jest, laughing at the idea of a superstitious man not being able to play on any particular fiddle. Two days before he left England he wrote me asking me to dine with him that night; adding, "I think I may keep my promise of playing upon the Stradivarius."

We dined at a well-known restaurant, and about ten o'clock went to Luigi's rooms to finish the night. The first thing I saw, upon entering, was the fiddle-case lying on the table, — Luigi's favourite bow and several coils of

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strings beside it. We sat down and talked on various topics for about an hour, and then I said —

"I see you have made preparations for the performance. When do you intend to begin?"

Luigi drew a deep breath. "My friend," he said, "you will not blame me if my playing agitates you; and remember, when I once commence I must continue to the end. It is no pleasure to me — it is rather deadly pain. But I am curious, and would satisfy my doubts."

He was so much in earnest that I checked the laugh his solemn manner called up, and merely nodded acquiescence. He then rose, and saying, "We must not be interrupted," called his servant, and after giving him the necessary instructions locked the door, placing the key in his pocket. He then opened the mysterious case, and with tender hands drew forth the violin. His nimble fingers soon detached the severed strings, knotted on the new ones, and in the course of about a quarter of an hour the instrument was ready, and tuned to his satisfaction. I felt, as I watched him, I should like to take the violin in my hands once more, to see if the strange desire I had before experienced would again come over me — but hardly liked to ask him to permit me to do so. And now all was ready — Luigi's critical ear satisfied with the sound of the strings, and he seemed about to strike his favourite attitude. Yet I noticed his pale face was paler than usual, and the hand poising the bow seemed tremulous; and as I looked at him, a sympathetic feeling of fear — a dread of something, I knew not what — crept—over me. It seemed too absurd, however, to be disturbed by an excitable Italian playing a violin in a room with all the appliances of modern every day life around me; so I laughed away the feeling, placed myself in my favourite attitude for listening to the master's performances — at full length on the sofa — and was prepared to give my undivided attention to the music.

And yet, for a while Luigi did not commence, although he saw I had resigned myself to my fate. He had placed the violin under his chin; his left-hand fingers were on the strings, but for some minutes he contented himself with beating a sort of time, or rhythmical measure, with the bow. One would have said he was endeavouring to recall something he had heard once, and only imperfectly remembered.

"What theme are you going to play to me?" I asked.

On hearing my voice he looked at me vacantly, and only upon my repeating the question did he seem aware of my presence. Then with an effort he said, ceasing not to beat time the while —

"Ah, that I do not know. I am no longer my own master; I cannot choose. Let me beg of you not to interrupt me again, my friend."

I said no more, but watched him with anxious eyes. The left-hand fingers slipped, slid, and danced in dumb show up and down the strings, the bow for ever beating time. A sort of shiver passed over him; then, drawing himself up, he swept the bow across the strings, and the fiddle, silent for so many years, found tongue at last.

A weird strain, commanding the listener's attention at once — a strain I knew I had never heard before. So curious the opening bars sounded, that, had I dared, I should have said several well-established rules of harmony were outraged. And yet, in spite of its peculiarity, I knew that he who created that music was a master in the art. It was not Wagner, I was sure, although somewhat of his remarkable power of expression, and of moving the mind without the aid of melody, was present. The first thirty bars, or so, appeared to me to be of the nature of an overture, heralding the performance to follow. In snatches of mystic music the violin spoke of joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure, love and hate, hope and fear; and as my own thoughts responded to the varied emotions, I lay and wondered who could have written the music, affecting me so; and thought how fortunate the unknown composer was to have such an exponent of his ideas as Luigi. Yet, as I looked at the latter, it struck me his style of playing tonight was different from usual. Faultless though the execution was — marvellous as were the strains those facile fingers drew forth — the whole manner of the man seemed to be mechanical, utterly at variance with the fire and dash that ever characterized his performances. The skill was there, but, for once, the soul was wanting. With the exception of his hands and arms, he stood so still he might have been a statue. He played as one in a trance, and his eyes with a fixed look were ever directed towards the end of the apartment. Swifter and swifter his arm flew backwards and forwards — more strange, eccentric, and weird the music became — stronger in its expression, plainer in its eloquence, more thrilling in its intensity, and ever exercising its powerful spell on the hearer. At last, with a sort of impulse, I turned my eyes from the player and looked in the direction he looked. Suddenly the music changed. There was no lack of melody now. A soft, soothing, haunting measure began — a sort of dreamy far-away tune; and as its gentle cadences fell on my ear, hitherto kept in a state of irritating, if not unpleasing, expectation, my thoughts began to wander to old and half-forgotten scenes — distant events came to

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my mind — recollections of vanished faces, once familiar, flocked around me, — all things seemed growing misty and indistinct, and I felt as one sinking into sleep — the sort of sleep that one can almost realize and enjoy.

It was not to be, however. A few harsh notes from the fiddle, sounding like a warning or admonition, recalled me to wakefulness; and as my straying thoughts collected themselves, that lulling song began again.

And yet, if fully awake and conscious, where was I? The scene was entirely changed; and although I knew I was still lying where I had at first placed myself — although I could hear within a few feet of me the unceasing melody of Luigi's violin — I was now looking into a strange apartment, even as one looks into the representation of a room on the stage; and I knew I was dreaming no dream. It could be none; for, as I gazed, I felt a feeling of utter astonishment — and that feeling is always absent from a dream, however marvellous its features may be. Yet, lying there, and in as full possession of my faculties as I am at the moment of writing these words, I saw, opened as it were before me, a strange room, and one I could in no way connect with any chamber I was in the habit of entering. It appeared to be a large, lofty apartment and if I was looking at a vision, neither the room I nor its belongings presented any appearance of unreality. The latter, indeed, gave the idea of wealth and comfort. The furniture was after the fashion of the early part of this century. The chairs were covered with costly old brocade; and a short, square pianoforte — then the highest type of the maker's art — stood open against one wall. And as, with the sound of the violin ever near me, I noted these things and waited for what was to come, I knew — although I did not attempt it — I was utterly powerless to turn my eyes from the phantom scene before me, even to ascertain whether it could be that Luigi saw the things I saw.

Another change in the wonder-working music. A long rippling legato passage, sweeping into a tender, passionate, pleading strain — the eloquent notes speaking of joy and fear mingled. As my heart followed and understood the inspiration of the musician, I whispered to myself, "This is love." As if in answer to my thoughts, the door of the phantom room opened, and two figures entered — a lady and a gentleman. Both wore the dresses of that period to which I have assigned the date of the furniture, and both were young. Like the objects around them, there was nothing in their appearance ghost-like or supernatural. Their limbs looked as firm and round as my own. It was some little time before I could take my eyes from the girl. She was supremely beautiful — tall and fair, with a delicate, refined face; and the robe she wore plainly showed the exquisite proportions of her figure. Her companion was handsome, and his features wore an expression of melancholy pride. I noticed he carried under his left arm a violin, and something told me he was a Frenchman. With great courtesy he led the girl to a seat, and, as if in obedience to a request of hers, commenced playing the instrument. Still the same sweet strain fell on my ears; but a stranger thing than any I had yet noticed was that, as he played, the sound seemed to come from his violin, and Luigi's was dumb. And as he played, the girl looked up at him with admiring eyes. He ceased at last, and Luigi's fiddle immediately resumed the melody, without a moment's break. Then I saw the phantom place the violin and bow in the girl's hands, instructing her how to hold them; and I knew that during the lesson, his voice as well as his eyes made avowal of his passionate love. I saw his fingers linger on hers as he placed them on the strings; I saw the blush deepen upon her cheek, the lashes droop over her downcast eyes, and then I saw him lean over and press his lips to the fair white hand holding the bow; whilst the music near me, sinking almost to silence, and tremulous as if a man's future lay on those vibrating strings, told me he sought his fate at her lips. He threw himself at her feet, and I saw the girl bend over him, and placing her arms around his neck, kiss his forehead, whilst high and loud rose the song of sweet triumph from those impassioned chords, doubtful of her love no longer.

Again the strain changed — a song of love no longer: a few notes of warning, melting into a strain that foretold and spoke of sorrow. Again I saw the door of the apartment open, and, with a hasty step, another man entered. He, too, was young and powerfully built, with an intensely English face. Yet I could trace in his harder features a resemblance, such as a brother might bear, to the girl before me. As he entered, the lovers sprang to their feet; then, covering her face with her hands, the girl sank upon a chair, whilst her companion faced the new-comer with an air as haughty as his own, and words of scorning, of contempt, of shaming, of defiance, were hurled from man to man. True, I heard them not — all the phantasmagoria came before me in dumb show; but the varied tones of the violin told me all that passed between the two men as truly as though their voices smote upon my ear; and, as the wild music culminated in a fierce crescendo of thrilling power, the two men grappled in their rage, and the girl sprang to her feet and ran wildly to the door. For a moment all grew misty, and the phantom actors of my vision were hidden from my sight. When they ***re-*appeared I saw the young Frenchman quitting

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the room, with blood trickling down his pale cheek, and as, with a look of undying hate on his face, he closed the door behind him, the room and all faded from my sight.

But no pause in the music; still those weird notes weaving the mystic spell that chained me. Leaving me no time to reflect on what I had seen, but enforcing my attention to the drama acted before me, the fiery crescendo sank in a dull sullen theme, almost colourless when compared with the foregoing numbers; then, as with dissolving views where one scene grows through another that fades, I began to realize that I looked into another room — one very different from the first. It was evidently, from the slanting roof and small window, an attic, and its contents spoke of poverty. A bedstead with threadbare hangings occupied one corner, and in the centre, at a square table littered with sheets of music, sat the young Frenchman. His brow was contracted, and the wound yet fresh on his cheek. He was writing, and through the medium of the music I knew the purport of his epistle as well as if I had looked over his shoulder. It was a challenge — a challenge, he stated, his late antagonist dare not decline, as the writer was of even more noble family than the man who had insulted him. Having written the letter, he rose and paced the small room, deep in thought. As his steps went backwards and forwards across the limited space, — as his thoughts grew black with hate as he remembered the insult he had suffered, or grew bright with love as he pictured the fair girl who pledged herself to him, — so truthfully did the delicate gradations of the music harmonize with them, that I could feel every emotion stirring his heart, at times almost identifying myself with him — making his joy, his sorrow, mine. After what seemed to be hours, he took up the violin that lay on the table near him, and commenced playing. As before, I say, the sound came from him, whether Luigi's hands produced it or not; and as he played, the music, at first, fierce, stern, and harsh gradually toned down until it became dreamy and lulling — until at last he threw himself on his poor bed, and Luigi's violin resumed the strain — the soft, soothing measure I have before mentioned, telling of placid sleep.

Another change — hard, sharp, staccato passages. I was now looking — it might be from a window — on a wide expanse of smooth green turf. As before, the scene was so real, so material, that I might have stepped out on the sward. There was nothing in the locality I could identify. A wall and some palings, I remember, were on the left hand; a belt of trees on the right. As I looked, I saw figures at some little distance. Two men in their shirt-sleeves were engaged in a deadly duel. They were not so far away but I could distinguish their features plainly; and I knew they were the two men I had seen grapple in the room. As their flashing blades, slender as serpents, twined in and out; as they thrust and parried, advanced and retreated, — the mysterious music entered fully into the fray, accompanying every stroke, till, as the arm of one of the combatants sank to his side, helpless — pierced by his antagonist's blade — it swelled to a strain of exultation. It was the Englishman who was wounded; and as the sword dropped from his grasp, his opponent with difficulty checked the impulse urging him to drive his weapon through his unguarded breast; then, seeing he was quite unable to renew the combat, bowed with cold politeness, sheathed his sword, and turned away, leaving the wounded man to the care of his second. As the Frenchman vanished from my sight among the trees at the right hand, the scene grew blurred and faded — only the spell of the music continued ever.

The dismal measure and the dismal garret once more. As I look at the poverty-stricken room, the music, eloquent as before, in some hidden manner makes me aware that months have passed since I last looked at it. The young Frenchman is present. Indeed, I begin now to understand that no scene can come beneath my eyes unless he be an actor in it. It is his life, his love, the violin in its own marvellous tongue relates. I wait with interest now. I have no time to wonder at or speculate on what I have seen: no time to endeavour to explain the phantom scenes and actors the song of the Stradivarius has brought before me. I feel no fear — curiosity and excitement only. Luigi's presence I have forgotten, so intent am I upon the drama played before me.

The young man, I notice, is handsome as ever, but paler, thinner, and careworn. What is the music saying now in that strange speech I can interpret so readily? Poverty and hopelessness, loss of love, and with that loss the wish to rise to fame.

He is writing; but the paper before him this time is a score — the score of a work he once thought would hand his name down to future times. Well I know, as I watch him, that music will never be given to the world. I know it is night; and to kill his bitter thoughts he is sitting down and working without interest at his uncompleted score. As I watch him, grieving at his grief, weird and dreamy and unearthly sounds Luigi's violin — bar after bar of the music monotonous and sad. Then of a sudden it wakes to fresh life with a sort of expression of keen surprise; and the young man raises his head from the work that interests him no more, and the door of his poor dwelling opens.

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A few bars of that haunting melody, that had caused me to whisper "this is love," merge into a strain of plaintive hopelessness, and the fair girl enters. She is closely veiled, and enveloped in a long dark cloak, and as she raises the veil from her face and looks at him with sad and wistful eyes, the man's heart responds to the impassioned strings and vibrates with love, hopeless though it be. For I know that ere two days are past she will wed another, and the man knows it, and, crushing down his love, curses her in his heart for her faithlessness. He stands helpless in his surprise at seeing her for a moment after her entry, and then, with a grand air of calm politeness, handing her to one of the crazy chairs that furnished his poor room, waits, with a cold face, to learn the object of her visit. Then the woman — or the music — pleads in pathetic strains for the pardon and forgiveness — pleads the pressure put upon her by friends — pleads her utter helplessness in their hands, — yet tells him, even with the wedding-ring waiting to encircle her finger, that he alone, the exiled, poverty-stricken Frenchman, owns the love her heart can give. And as the tears fall from her eyes, the man waves his arm round the squalid room, and showing with that gesture his utter poverty and hopelessness, commends, with a bitter sneer, the course she has taken, or been compelled to take, and asks how he could expect the daughter of a noble English family to share such a home and such a lot as his. I see the girl hesitate, falter, and tremble, and as she rises, the man with a calm air and forced composure opens the door. Weeping bitterly she leaves him; and as he closes the rickety door upon her, a wail of music, more mournful than words can describe, lingers in the air, bringing the tears to my eyes, and the man kneels down and kisses the very boards on which her feet had rested.

With the mirthless smile upon his face he sits down thinking, thinking; and the music, playing ever, gives me his thoughts. As I read them I shudder, knowing how every fresh departure tends ever and only to the same end — what has he to do with life any longer? — he the last descendant of a noble French family, his sovereign an exile, his lands and possessions confiscated or squandered, and now he lies starving, or soon to be starving, in a London attic. Even the fame he once hoped to win as a musician is far off; and if ever to be won, is it worth struggling for? The past, to him, is full of agonizing recollections of relatives and friends whose blood has slaked the guillotine's thirst. The present is misery. The future, now that the dream of love he had dared for a while to dream, is dispelled, hopeless — what, indeed, has he to do with life any longer? If he knows now how to live, at least he knows how to die.

Ever with the same dreary thoughts in his mind, I see him take the bulky score, the result of months, it may be years, of labour, and deliberately tear sheet after sheet to pieces, until the floor is littered with the fragments. And as his action tells me he renounces hope, love, and fame, I know I am fated to see an awful sight, but am powerless to move my eyes from the scene. For yet the melancholy notes sound; and I know until Luigi's hands are still, I am fettered by the spell the music weaves. I am watching the man, or the phantom, with concentrated interest. The last page of the score falls in tatters to the ground, and seated still in the chair he had placed for the girl, he stretches out his hand, seeking for something amongst the papers on the table. Well I know the object he seeks — a small knife, with an elaborately chased silver handle, — a relic, doubtless, of former riches. Tomorrow even that would have been sold to provide the bare necessities of the life he ceases to care for. He opens it, passes his fingers across the keen edge, and removing his coat, turns up his shirt-sleeve to the shoulder, and deliberately severs a large vein or artery in his arm. Oh, that maddening music! — encouraging, tempting, even applauding his crime of self destruction! I see, and sicken at the sight, the first red rush of blood from his white arm; and then, drip, drip, drip, follow the large quick-falling drops. So real, so horrible is the vision, that I can even note the crimson pool forming amid the tattered paper covering the floor. Will the fatal music never end? Minutes are hours as I watch the face grow whiter and whiter as the man sits bleeding to death. Now, whilst I long to faint and lose the dreadful sight, he rises, and with tottering steps walks across the room and takes up the violin. With the life-blood streaming from his left arm, once more, and for the last time, he makes the instrument speak; and again, I say, the music comes from him and not from Luigi. As he plays, even whilst I wait for what must follow, I know that such rare music was never heard on earth as the strain I listen to — fancying the while I can see the eager wings of Death hovering around the player. What can I compare it to? A poet would term it the **death-song of the swan. It is the death-song of a genius — one whom the world never knew: whose own rash act has extinguished the sacred flame. Strong and wild and wonderful rises the music, for a while. Now it sinks lower, lower, and lower. Now it is so soft I can scarcely hear it; it is ebbing to silence, even as the heart's-blood is ebbing to death. The face grows ghastly; the head sinks upon the breast; the eyes flicker like the dying flame of a candle; the violin drops from the reddened hand, and the man falls sideways from his chair to the ground, even as

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Luigi's violin completes the bar his fall had broken off in the middle; and as it sums up the tragedy in one long-sustained passage of hopeless grief, I see the bloodless, white face of the man, now dead, or soon to be dead, lying on the ruddy floor; whilst the left arm, motionless now, rests as it had fallen, across the violin those nerveless fingers had at last been fain to drop.

The music stopped — the spell was ended. So powerfully was I wrought upon by the last vision I had seen, that the moment my limbs resumed their freedom, I rushed forward and fell fainting on the very spot it seemed to me the man had died. When I recovered consciousness, I found Luigi bending over me, and sponging my face with cold water. He was pale and agitated, and seemed scarcely able to stand from physical exhaustion. I rose, and with a shudder looked towards that part of the room where the phantasmagoria had appeared. Nothing was there to move me now. The familiar wallpaper, the pictures I had so often scanned, alone met my eye. As I gazed round, Luigi, in a whisper, asked —

**"You saw it all, then, as I did?"

"I saw it all: could it have been a dream?"

He shook his head. "If so, three times have I dreamed it, and each time alike in every detail. The first time, I said, 'It must be a dream'; the second time, 'It may be fancy.' But what can I say now, when another sees it also?"

I could give him no answer — I could offer no explanation — only, I asked —

"Why did you not cease playing, and spare me that last sight?"

"I could not. It was your impulse to play on that violin, when first you saw it, led me to think its strange power would act on another besides myself, and induced me to go through it all once more. But it will tell its story to no one else."

I turned inquiringly, and seeing on the carpet a mass of small splinters of wood, mixed with tangled strings and pegs, knew what he meant. This, then, was the end of the masterpiece of Stradivarius.

"And you mean to say you had no power to cease when once you began? — were compelled to play through the whole tragedy?"

"I had no power to stop. Some force irresistible compelled me. I was but an instrument; and absurd as it seems, I believe that you, with no knowledge of the art, would have played just as I did."

"But the music?" I asked. "The wonderful music?"

"That to me," replied Luigi, "is the strangest thing of all. Neither you nor I can recall a single bar of it. Even those two or three melodies, which, as we heard them, we thought would haunt us, have vanished."

And it was so. Try how I would, I could fashion no tune at all like them.

"It bears out what I told you," said Luigi, in conclusion. "I was simply an instrument. Indeed it seemed the whole time not I, but another was playing. But here is an end of it."

Then, late as the hour was, we kindled a small fire, and consumed every atom of the violin, which held, in some mysterious, inexplicable way, the story of man's love and death.

We parted at last. Luigi left England as arranged, and has not yet revisited it.

Is there any sequel to my incredible story? None that will throw any light upon it, or enable me — as, indeed, I have little hope — to win the reader's belief. Only, some time afterwards, I saw in the house of a man, — known by name at least to all who are familiar with the titles of the great ones of the land, — the portrait of a lady. It was that of his mother, who had died a few years after her marriage; and if the painter's skill had not erred, it was also the portrait of the phantom-woman I had seen twice that night in the visions the weird music brought before me. Every feature was so stamped upon my memory, I could not be mistaken. And yet I did not trouble to inquire into her private history. Even if I could have learnt it, it could tell me no more than I knew already. The history of her love and its tragic ending — doubtless a sealed page in her life — had been fully displayed to me as I lay in Luigi's room listening to the varying strains of the haunted Stradivarius.