

MY MUSICAL MEMORIES

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My Musical Memories by H. R. Haweis

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H. R. HAWEIS

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BY

H. R. HAWEIS

AUTHOR OF "MUSIC AND MORALS," "AMERICAN HUMORISTS," ETC.

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MY MUSICAL MEMORIES.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY LIFE AND RECOLLECTIONS.

I THINK it was Lord Beaconsfield who said that a man is usually interesting in proportion as his talk runs upon what he is familiar with ; and that as a man usually knows more about himself than about anything else, he seldom fails to be tolerable if his self-centred talk turns out to be unaffected and sincere. To talk about one's self and to be dull is nevertheless possible. In the early pages of this volume I shall have to do the first to a considerable extent ; let me hope to avoid the second.

Music is not the business of my life, but it remains its sweetest recreation ; and there is one opinion which used to be widely held by my friends in the old days, and to which I subscribed for many years. Nature, they often said, intended me for a violinist. In fact, my musical life starts from the violin ; and, "Stradivario duce"—Stradivarius leading the way—I feel inspired, "after long years," to retrace with a certain keen pleasure these labyrinthine passages of Musical Memory.

There is something about the shape of a violin—its curves, its physiognomy, its smiling and genial ζ 's—which seems to invite and welcome inspection and handling.

Tarisio, the Italian carpenter, came under this fascination to good purpose. He began by mending old fiddles; he himself played a little; he grew more enamored of these mysterious, lifeless, yet living companions of his solitude, until he began to "trade in fiddles."

At the beginning of this century, hidden away in old Italian convents and wayside inns, lay the masterpieces of the Amati, Stradivarius, the Guarnerii, and Bergonzi, almost unknown and little valued. But Tarisio's eye was getting cultivated. He was learning to know a fiddle when he saw it.

"Your violin, signor, requires mending?" says the itinerant peddler, as he salutes some monk or padre known to be connected with the sacristy or choir of Pisa, Florence, Milan. "I can mend it."

Out comes the Stradivarius, with a loose bar or a split rib, and sounding abominably.

"Dio mio!" says Tarisio, "and all the blessed saints! but your violin is in a bad way. My respected father is prayed to try one that I have, in perfect and beautiful accord and repair; and permit me to mend this worn-out machine."

And Tarisio, whipping a shining, clean instrument out of his bag, hands it to the monk, who eyes it and is for trying it. He tries it; it goes soft and sweet, though not loud and wheezy, like the battered old Strad. Tarisio clutches his treasure.

The next day back comes the peddler to the cloister, is shown up to the padre, whom he finds scraping away on his loan fiddle.

"But," he exclaims, "you have lent me a beautiful violin, and in perfect order."

"Ah! if the father would accept from me a small favor," says the cunning Tarisio.

“And what is that?”

“To keep the violin that suits him so well, and I will take in exchange the old machine which is worn out, but with my skill I shall still make something of it!”

A glass of good wine, or a lemonade, or black coffee, clinches the bargain. Off goes Tarisio, having parted with a characterless German fiddle—sweet and easy-going and “looking nice,” and worth now about £5—in perfect order, no doubt—and having secured one of those gems of Cremona which now run into £300. Violin-collecting became the passion of Tarisio’s life. The story has been told by Mr. Charles Reade, and all the fiddle-world knows how Tarisio came to Paris with a batch of old instruments, and was taken up by Chanut and Vuillaume, through whose hands passed nearly every one of those *chefs-d’œuvre* recovered by Tarisio in his wanderings, which now are so eagerly contended for by English and American millionaires, whenever they happen to get into the market.

I have heard of a mania for snuff-boxes—it was old Lablache’s hobby. There are your china-maniacs, and your picture-maniacs, and your old-print connoisseurs who only look at the margin, and your old-book hunters who only glance at the title-page and edition, and your coin-collectors, and your gem-collectors, who are always being taken in; but for downright fanaticism and “gone-cooniness,” if I may invent the word, commend me to your violin-maniac. He who once comes under that spell, goes down to the grave with a disordered mind.

I said that I was, perhaps, intended for a violinist by nature. I can understand Tarisio’s passion, though I never followed out that particular branch of it which led him to collect, repair, and sell. I could not buy vio-