

MEMORIES OF A MUSICAL LIFE

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Memories of a Musical Life by H. R. Haweis

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H. R. HAWEIS

**MEMORIES OF A
MUSICAL LIFE**

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

Memories of a Musical Life

— — — — —
Rev. H. R. HAWEIS, M. A.



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CHAPTER I.

REMINISCENCES OF YOUTH.

I THINK it was Lord Beaconsfield who said that a man was usually interesting in proportion as his talk ran upon what he was familiar with ; and that as a man usually knew more about himself than about anything else he seldom failed to be tolerable if his self-centred talk turned 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.

There is something about the shape of a violin — its curves, its physiognomy, its smiling and genial *f*'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 played, himself, a little ; he got 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 masterpiece 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 violino, signor, requires mending," says the itinerant pedler, 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 violino 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 pedler 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 violino, 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 violino 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.

FIDDLE SHOPS.

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 violins, — the prices have risen since the days of the Italian pedler. I could not cheat people out of them; the world was too knowing for that, — and then I was too virtuous. I could not "travel" in violins. It was not my vocation; and one may in these days go far and get little, for it is now about as easy to find a Stradivarius as a Correggio. But long before I had ever touched a violin I was fascinated with its appearance. In driving up to town as a child — when, standing up in the carriage, I could just look out of the window — certain fiddle shops, hung with mighty rows of violoncellos, attracted my attention. I had dreams of these large editions, — these patriarchs of the violin, as they seemed to me. I compared them in my mind with the smaller tenors and violins. I dreamed about their brown, big, dusty bodies and affable, good-natured-looking heads and grinning *f*'s. These violin shops were the great points watched for on each journey up to London from Norwood, where I spent my early days.

Youth is the great season of surprises, as it certainly is of delights. There never were such buttercup-fields and strawberry-ices as in the days of my childhood. Men try to make hay now, but it is poor work; and as for the modern ices they are either frozen amiss or ill-mixed. They are not good enough for me who can remember what they were in the exhibition of 1851. One of my keenest musical impressions is connected with that marvellous show. I shall never see such another. As I stood in the gallery of the great crystal transept, and looked down upon a spectacle such as has been witnessed since, but had never before been seen, a feeling of intoxication—there is no other word for it—came over me.

I remember perfectly well falling into a kind of dream as I leaned over the painted iron balcony and looked down on this splendid vista. The silver-bell-like tones of an Erard—it was the 1,000-guinea piano—pierced through the human hum and noise of splashing waters, but it was a long way off. Suddenly, in the adjoining gallery, the large organ broke out with a blare of trumpets that thrilled and riveted me with an inconceivable emotion. I knew not then what those opening bars were. Evidently something martial, festal, jubilant, and full of triumph. I listened and held my breath to hear Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" for the first time, and not know it! To hear it when half the people present had never heard of Mendelssohn, three years after his death, and when not one in a hundred could have told what was being played,—that was an experience I shall never forget. As successive waves of fresh, inexhaustible inspiration flowed on, vibrating through the building without a check or a pause, the peculiar Mendelssohnian spaces of cantabile melody, alternating as they do in that march with the passionate and almost fierce decision of the chief processional theme, I stood riveted, bathed in the sound as in an element. I felt ready to melt into those harmonious, yet turbulent, waves and float away upon the tides of "Music's golden sea setting towards Eternity." The angel of Tennyson's vision might have stood by me whispering:—

“And thou listenest the lordly music flowing from the illimitable years.”

Some one called me, as I was told afterwards, but I did not