

Le Queux William

The Intriguers



William Le Queux

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CHAPTER I

The scene was Dean Street, Soho, and this story opens on a snowy winter night in the January of 1888. The modern improvements of Shaftesbury Avenue were as yet unmade, and the foreign district of London had still to be opened up.

A cold north wind was blowing on the few pedestrians whom necessity, or some urgent obligation, had compelled to tramp the pavements laden with snow. A few cabs and carriages crawled along the difficult roadway to the Royalty Theatre, deposited their occupants and crawled back again.

Nello Corsini, a slim, handsome young Italian, poorly clad, carrying a violin-case in one hand, wandered down the narrow street, leading with his other a slender girl of about eighteen, his sister, Anita. She was dressed as shabbily as he was.

The snow was lying thickly on the streets and roads, but it had ceased to fall a couple of hours ago. The two itinerant musicians had crept out at once, as soon as the weather showed signs of mending, from their poor lodging.

They had only a few pence left. The bitter weather of the last few days had affected their miserable trade very adversely. It was necessary they should take advantage of to-night, for the purpose of scratching together something for the evening meal.

There were lights in several windows. It was, of course, far from being a wealthy quarter; but there could be none behind those warm-looking lights, safely sheltered from the cold and wind, so wretched as these two poor children of fortune who would have to go supperless to bed if they could not charm a few pence out of the passers-by.

Nello withdrew his violin from its case with his cold fingers. Just as he was about to draw the bow across the strings, a carriage passed down the street on its way to the Royalty Theatre. Inside was a handsome man verging upon thirty-five. Beside him sat a very beautiful girl. Nello glanced at them swiftly as they came by. They were evidently not English, but he could not for the moment guess at their nationality.

They certainly did not belong to any one of the Latin races, that was evident. It was not till later that he discovered their identity. The tall, imperious-looking man was Prince Zouroff, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. The girl, about twenty, was his young sister, the Princess Nada.

The young Princess was as kind and sweet-natured as she was beautiful. She caught sight of the two mendicants, for as such she regarded them, standing there in the snow, and a gleam of compassion came into her lovely eyes. Impetuously, she pulled at the check-string, with the intention of stopping the carriage and giving them money.

Her brother laid his hand on hers roughly.

“What foolish thing were you going to do now, Nada? Your sentimentality is an absolute curse to you. If you had your own way, you would give to every whining beggar in the street.”

She shrank back as if he had struck her a blow. There was no love lost between the two. He despised her for her kind, charitable instincts; she disliked him for his hard, domineering nature, unsoftened by any lovable or generous qualities. She put back the purse which she had drawn hastily from her pocket. Her mouth curled in a mutinous and contemptuous smile, but she returned no answer to the brutal words.

Nello played on in the cold and biting wind. When he had finished, his sister had been the recipient of two small donations from the few passers-by. The girl's heart already felt lighter. They could not expect very much on such an unpropitious night as this.

And then, as the young violinist paused, from the first floor of one of the houses close to them, there floated faintly into the air the strains of a sweet and melancholy air, played with exquisite taste and feeling.

Nello listened eagerly, while his heart contracted with a spasm of pain. The man who had played that beautiful little melancholy romance was as capable a violinist as himself. Alas, how different their lots!

When the sounds had died away, the young man resumed his instrument. He played over twice that beautiful theme which had impressed him so strongly, and then, as if inspired, wove into it a series of brilliant variations.

He felt he was playing as he had only played once or twice before in his life. Soon, a small crowd was gathered on the pavement, in spite of the icy temperature. And when Anita went round shamefacedly with her little bag, she met with a liberal response. Nello need play no more that night, they had enough for their humble needs; they would get home as quickly as possible. He had contracted a heavy cold from which he was still suffering. To-morrow he could stop indoors and she would nurse him, as she had so often done before.

She whispered the good news into her brother's ear, and joyfully he placed the violin back into its case. The small crowd, noting the action, melted away. The friendless young souls linked their arms together, stepped on to the pavement and turned in the direction of their humble lodging.

But they had not taken half a dozen steps when the door of a house was opened very quietly, and an extraordinary figure stepped out and beckoned to them.

"My poor children, it is a wretched night for you to be out." This peculiar-looking old man was speaking in a very kind and gentle voice. They noticed his face was withered and furrowed with the deep lines of age. He wore a bristling white moustache, which gave him rather a military air in spite of his stooping figure. He had on a tiny skull cap to defend himself against the keen night air, but underneath it his snow-white locks were abundant.

He turned to young Corsini, peering at him through his tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses. "You have the gift, my young friend; you played those variations divinely. Our neighbour over the way is a decent performer, he plays in a very good orchestra, but he has not your fire, your brilliancy."

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a shilling, which he pressed upon Anita, who shrank back a little. She had not always been accustomed to this sort of half-charity.

The old man saw her embarrassment and smiled. "Ah, it is as I thought, my child. But there is no cause to blush. If your brother were a famous violinist and I paid half-a-guinea for a stall to hear him, you would not think he had lowered himself by taking my money for the pleasure he gave me. Well, I had my stall up here on the third floor! there is a convenient little hole in the blind through which I could peep and see the whole proceedings."

They both thanked him warmly, and were about to move on, when the strange old man arrested them.

"Stop a second, my poor children. You must be numbed with standing so long in that frosty air. I have a good fire upstairs. Come and warm yourselves for a few moments."

His voice and manner were compelling. Wonderingly they obeyed, although at the moment, they were thinking very intently of their supper. Still, the night was young yet. They could wait a little longer to make their purchases. Plenty of shops would be open. And a few minutes spent at a bright fire would be comfortable.

He opened the door wide as they entered it and closed it behind him. Then he skipped, wonderfully nimbly for a man of his age, in front of them.

“Follow Papa Péron, that is what they call me in these parts, where I have lived for Heaven knows how many years. It is a big climb and I don’t do it as easily as I used. But to children like you, it is a hop and a skip. Follow me.”

They followed him up the old-fashioned staircase into a small room, where a roaring fire was blazing. He drew forth two easy-chairs and motioned to them to seat themselves. He lighted another gas-jet in their honour. He looked intently at their white faces, and what he read there impelled him to a swift course of action.

He dived into a small sideboard. In a moment, as it seemed to the fascinated watchers, he had laid a cloth upon the small and rather rickety table, arranged knives and forks. Then he produced half a fowl, two sorts of sausages, half a ripe Camembert cheese, and a dish of tinned fruit. When all his preparations were complete, he beckoned them imperiously to the table. He spoke in short, sharp accents, with the air of a man who is accustomed to be obeyed.

“At once, please! You are famished with that dreary standing in this arctic street, and it will be some time before you can get food. Please fall in at once.”

The sharp pangs of hunger were already gnawing the vitals of both brother and sister, the tasty viands were inviting enough; but they had observed the poorly furnished room. Monsieur Péron, in his small fastidious way, seemed to have an air of distinction, but his clothes were well-worn. Nobody could be as poor as themselves, but they felt sure this kind-hearted old Frenchman was far from being well-off.

Corsini raised a protesting hand. “Sir, you have been kindness itself already. You have warmed us, and we are very grateful, but we cannot eat you out of house and home.”

They guessed pretty accurately that these viands which he had produced with such abandon, were meant to last some little time. The average Frenchman is a small eater, and a very thrifty person.

Papa Péron beat the table impetuously. “*Mon Dieu*, do you refuse my little whim? I am not rich, I admit. One does not lodge on the third floor if one is a millionaire. That is understood. But I can show hospitality when I choose. To table at once, my children, or I shall be seriously displeased.”

The old gentleman, in spite of his frail appearance, was very masterful; it was impossible to resist him. Obediently they sat down, but their native politeness forbade them to eat very much. They just stayed their appetites, and left enough to satisfy their host for a couple of days at least. In vain he exhorted them to persevere. Brother and sister exchanged a meaning glance, and assured their host that they had already done too well.

When they had finished and were back in the two easy-chairs, basking in the warmth of the glowing fire, the old Frenchman went to a little cupboard affixed to the wall. On his face was a sly smile.

From this receptacle he produced a bottle, dusty with age. He performed some strenuous work with a somewhat refractory corkscrew whose point had become blunt with the years. In a trice, he produced three glasses and placed them on a small table which he drew close to the fire.

“This is fine Chambertin,” he explained to his astonished guests. “A dozen bottles were sent to me by an old friend, since dead, three years ago. In those three years I have drunk six – I am very abstemious, my children. To-night, in your honour, I open the first of the six that remain. We will carouse and make merry. It is a long time since I have felt so inclined to merriment.”

To this sally they could make no retort; they were still in state of bewilderment. To a certain extent they felt themselves in a kind of shabby fairyland. Was this strange old Frenchman as poor as appearances suggested – or a miser with occasional freakish impulses of generosity?

Papa Péron shot at them a shrewd glance. Perhaps he divined their thoughts. Long experience had made him very wise, possibly a little bit cunning.

“You think I am just a trifle mad, eh?” he queried.

With one voice, or rather two voices raised in a swift unison, they disclaimed the insinuation. They only recognised several facts: that he was very kind, very generous, very hospitable.

Papa Péron sipped the excellent Chambertin and fell into a meditative mood.

“I lead a very lonely life, and youth, especially struggling youth, has a great attraction for me. I watched you two poor children to-night through the little peep-hole in my blind. *Mon Dieu!* I guessed the position at once. You had come out in the snow and bitter wind, to try and make a living. You are two honest people, I am sure. *N'est-ce pas?*” They had been speaking in English up to the present moment, but momentary excitement, the stimulus of the Burgundy, had made him indulge in his native tongue.

They assured him that they were.

Papa Péron smiled a little sardonically. “Of course you are. If you were inclined in other directions, you with your talents, your sister with her good looks, would have taken up more paying trades than this. What have you earned to-night?” he concluded sharply.

Anita answered in a faltering voice. “Over three shillings, Monsieur.”

The sardonic smile vanished. A look of infinite compassion spread over the lined face.

“My poor children. Virtue is indeed its own reward.” He turned to Nello, and his eyes flashed fire. “And that charlatan, Bauquel, gets a hundred guineas for a single performance. And he is not in the same street with you.”

“But Bauquel is a genius, surely, Monsieur?” ventured Corsini deferentially. “I have never heard him play, certainly, but his reputation! Surely he did not get that for nothing?”

He spoke very cautiously, for although he had not known Papa Péron for very long, he had recognised that under that kindly and polite demeanour was a very peppery temperament. If he were crossed in argument, the old Frenchman might prove a very cantankerous person.

Péron snapped his fingers. “Bauquel, bah! A man of the Schools, a machine-made executant. He never half understands what he attempts to render.” Again he snapped his contemptuous fingers. “Bauquel, bah! A charlatan? It amazes me that the public runs after him. He has a powerful press, and he employs a big *claque*. *Voilà!* On the business side, I admit he is great; on the artistic side, not worth a moment’s consideration.”

“You understand music, Monsieur, you are a critic?” suggested the young man timidly. Papa Péron was evidently a very explosive person; it would not be polite or grateful to risk his anger.

For a little time the old man did not answer. When he spoke, it was in a dreamy tone.

“Once I was famous as Bauquel is to-day – with this difference: that I was an artist and he is a pretender, with not an ounce of artistry in him.”

“Was your instrument the violin, Monsieur?”

“Alas, no,” was the old man’s answer. “Chance led me to the piano. I think I did well. But I have always regretted that I did not take up the violin. It is the one instrument that can sing. The human voice alone rivals it.”

After a moment’s pause, he added abruptly, “Are you very tired?”

No, Corsini was not in the least tired. The warmth, the meal of which he had eaten sparingly from motives of delicacy, the Burgundy, had warmed his blood. He was no longer the weak, pallid creature who had set out from his lodging to earn a night’s sustenance.

“Why do you ask, Monsieur?”

“If you are not really tired, I would love to hear that exquisite romance again, with one or two brilliant variations. See, in that corner, stands a piano of fairly good tone. I will accompany you, or rather follow you.”

Corsini, his blood aglow with the generous stimulant, the strange circumstances, rose up, took his violin from its case, and drew the bow lovingly across the strings. The Frenchman went across to the piano, opened the lid, and struck a few chords with a touch that revealed the hand of the master.

For the next ten minutes the room resounded with the divinest melody. The deep notes of the piano mingled with the soaring strains of the violin.

Corsini, strangely inspired, played as one possessed. And Papa Péron caught every inflection, every subtle change of key. Never, during the brief performance, was there a single discord. All the time the Frenchman, old in years, had followed every mood of the younger musician.

Papa Péron dropped his slender, artistic hands on the last chord. "My young friend, you are great," he said quietly. "Success to you is only a matter of time. Another glass of Chambertin?"

Nello drained it; he felt strangely elated. "Ah, Monsieur, but your accompaniment was half the battle. When I faltered, you stimulated me. You must have been a magnificent pianist."

Anita broke in in her gentle voice. The daughter of an English mother, she spoke the tongue of her adopted country very fluently.

"You put great heart into us, Monsieur. But when you speak of success, I remember that we have earned just about three shillings to-night."

Péron, the optimist, waved his hand airily. "Look up to the stars, my child, and hope. I have a little influence left yet. Perhaps I can put you on the right track; take you at least out of these miserable streets. Sit down for another ten minutes; make a second supper if you like." He guessed that they had not fully satisfied their hunger.

But this they resolutely declined. He waved them to their chairs.

"Five minutes, then. Tell me a little something of your history. I am sure it has been a tragic one."

And Corsini, departing from his usual mood of reticence, imparted to the old Frenchman the details of his career.

His father, the elder Corsini, had been first violin at the Politeama Theatre in Florence, while comparatively a young man. He had quarrelled violently with the manager and been dismissed. Confident in his ability, he had come over to England to seek his fortune afresh. Here he had met and fallen violently in love with a young English girl, some few years his junior. She was a pianist by profession, in a small way. She attended at dances, played accompaniments at City dinners. Her income was a very meagre one. She was the product of one of the numerous schools that turn out such performers by the dozen.

They married, and Corsini soon discovered that he was not the great man he imagined himself to be. Also, he was of a frail and weakly constitution. Ten years after his marriage he died of rapid consumption. Madame Corsini was left with two children on her hands.

She was a devoted mother. Nello dwelt on this episode of their sad life with tears in his eyes. She worked hard for a miserable pittance; and then she was worn out with the strain. Nello and his sister, Anita, were left orphans. Nello had been taught the rudiments of the violin by his father; all the rest he had picked up himself.

After his mother's death the rest was a nightmare. He had done his best for himself and his sister. That best had landed them in this snow-laden street to-night.

Papa Péron listened quietly to this young violinist's recital, but he made little comment. Here was one of the numerous tragedies that were occurring every day in every populous city.

He rose and shook hands with the two. "You have a lodging to go to, my poor children?" he asked anxiously.

With a deep blush, Corsini assured him that they had a lodging to go to; he did not dare to give him the address. Dean Street was a comparatively aristocratic abode. Papa Péron's humbly furnished room seemed a Paradise. And the piano was good – that must have been saved from the prosperous day – and was his own. No Soho landlady would provide such a piano as that.

Péron shook them warmly by the hand. "You must come and see me to-morrow. I shall be in all the morning. I shall think things over between now and then. I am a poor man myself, but I may be able to help you with introductions. I must get you out of these miserable streets."

They walked home, wondering about Papa Péron. Who could he be? Anita inclined to the belief that he was a miser. Nello had his doubts.

Still very hungry, they bought some sausages on their way home and devoured them before they went to bed. They still had a substantial balance on hand, according to the thrifty Anita.

And the next morning, Nello was round at Dean Street to learn what Papa Péron had thought of in the meanwhile.

CHAPTER II

The old Frenchman had heard Corsini's knock at the door. He stood at the entrance to his shabby sitting-room, the only article of furniture being the piano, his kind old lined face illumined with smiles.

"Courage, my young friend. I did not sleep very well after the excitement of your visit. Inspiration came to me in the middle of the night. You see that letter?" He pointed to a small desk standing against the wall. "Go and see to whom it is addressed."

Nello obeyed him. His eyes sparkled as he read the name on the envelope. "Mr. Gay, the leader of the orchestra at the Parthenon."

Papa Péron nodded his leonine head, bristling with its snow-white locks. "A friend of mine. He is a composer as well as *chef d'orchestre*. I have corrected many of his proof sheets for a firm I work for."

Corsini pricked up his ears at this statement. He and his sister had been curious as to the old man's profession. The mystery was solved. He was no miser, no millionaire, just a music publisher's hack. And once, according to his own statement, he had been a famous pianist, with a renown equal to that of Bauquel.

"I have asked him to give you the first vacancy in his orchestra. He will do it to oblige me, for I have helped him a little – given him some ideas. It is one of the best theatre orchestras in London. The pay, alas! will not be good, but it will take you out of those miserable streets. Go to his private address this morning; I am sure he will see you at once."

"How can I thank you?" began the young man; but Péron stopped him with an imperious wave of his long, thin hand.

"Tut, tut, my child! I want no thanks. I have taken a fancy to you and that dear little sister of yours. Now, listen; I have another scheme on hand."

Rapidly the genial old man unfolded his plans.

"In my room there are two beds. The landlady has a little attic to let, by no means a grand apartment, but it will serve for your sister. You can share my room. Three people can live almost as cheaply as two." There was a knowing smile on the wrinkled face, as the genial Papa enunciated this profound economic truth. "Come and live here. You can practise on the violin while I play your accompaniments."

"But Monsieur, at the moment, we have no money," stammered the embarrassed violinist. "Mr. Gay may not have a vacancy for some little time."

Papa Péron frowned ever so little. He did not easily brook contradiction. "You are making difficulties where none exist. You must lodge somewhere. My landlady only asks five shillings a week for the attic. You share my bedroom and sitting-room. As for the food, you will be my guests till you earn something. Do not say me nay," he ended fiercely. "I am resolved that you shall play no more in those miserable gutters. It is finished. You come here to-night."

There was no resisting this imperious old man with the frail figure and the snow-white abundant hair. Nello promised that he and his sister would move into Dean Street that afternoon. In the meantime, he would take the letter of introduction to Mr. Gay, who had lodgings in Gower Street, no great distance.

Mr. Gay was a fat, rubicund man with a somewhat faded and slatternly wife. He read Péron's note and a genial smile lit up his massive face.

"Good!" he cried heartily. "My old friend vouches for you, and you have come in the very nick of time. One of my men is leaving in a couple of days – got a better berth. You can take his place. But before we settle, you may as well give me a taste of your quality. We go in for rather high-class music at the Parthenon. Play me Gounod's 'Ave Maria,' I always test a man with that."

He called to the slatternly woman who was crouching over the fire. "Ada, please go to the piano and play the accompaniment for this young man."

Mrs. Gay complied with the request. Nello played the beautiful piece with all his soul. Gay listened, attentively. When it was finished, he applauded loudly.

"By Jove, you are great! Péron was right. He has not exaggerated. You have had no chance, eh?"

Nello stammered that he had had no chances. He did not dare confess to this prosperous person, composer as well as conductor of an orchestra, that, lately, he had been playing in the streets for a living to pay for his miserable lodging and scanty food.

They arranged terms with many apologies on the part of Mr. Gay.

"It is an insult to a man of your talent to offer such a miserable pittance. But my hands are tied, and tied very strictly, I can tell you. Turn up at the Parthenon on Friday night; you will soon get something better. You can read music quickly?"

Nello assured him on that point. He could read music as easily as his newspaper. The terms which Mr. Gay offered him were riches compared to the few coppers he had earned in the streets.

That same afternoon he and the joyful Anita presented themselves in Dean Street, with their few belongings. Papa Péron furnished a royal supper and broached another bottle of the very excellent Chambertin.

There was, however, still the question of clothes. Nello had nothing but what he stood up in, and the Parthenon was a very swagger theatre. Péron was equal to the emergency. He took the young man round to a neighbouring costumier's, and secured a dress-suit on the hire-purchase system, at a very small outlay of ready money which he advanced. For, although the good Papa was not rich, he was very thrifty, and usually had a shot in the locker.

It was a very happy *ménage*; the old Frenchman was kindness and geniality itself. He seemed to grow younger in the society of his youthful friends.

And in time the mystery that had seemed to surround him vanished, his means of livelihood became revealed. He was on the staff of a couple of big music publishers. He corrected their proof sheets, he occasionally advised on compositions of budding composers; but needless to say, at this hack work his remuneration was very modest.

But he always appeared cheerful and resigned. He would drop fragmentary hints of a brilliant past, when money flowed like water, when he had mixed with illustrious personages. But he could never be induced to dwell very long on this period, would enter into no convincing details.

"It is gone, it is a feverish dream," he would say with a somewhat theatrical wave of the hand. It was evidently a weakness of his to enshroud himself in an air of romance and mystery. "What does it matter who and what I was? To-day I am Papa Péron, music publisher's hack, earning a few shillings a week at a most uncongenial occupation. But, at my age, I want little."

Nello and his sister were happy too. The salary at the Parthenon was not magnificent, but it was a certainty, and they were frugal young people. No more playing in the sleet-driven streets, no more terrible uncertainty as to the night's lodging and the next day's meal.

For a month they pursued this humble, but not uncomfortable life. And Nello, who had no opportunity of displaying his talent in this big orchestra, where he was one of many, played two or three hours a day to the brilliant accompaniment of the old Frenchman.

And then the clouds began to gather. Papa Péron was taken with a severe attack of bronchitis. Racked in spasms of severe coughing, he was unable to pursue his humble and not too remunerative occupation. He could no longer correct the proof sheets. The doctor's visits, the necessity of extra and expensive nourishment, began to eat up his slender store. The few sovereigns he had hoarded for a rainy day began to melt rapidly.

This did not matter much for a while. The regular salary at the Parthenon sufficed, with Anita's skilful management, for the three; but there was no longer any question of putting by. Anita knew

now that she had been very mistaken in thinking the poor old Papa was a miser. With tears in his poor old eyes, he had been forced to confess that he had come to his last sovereign.

And Anita had cried too. "What does it matter, dear Papa?" she said. She had grown very fond of the kind old man. "You took us in when we were poor and friendless. Nello will work for you now, and I shall be very careful. You will see how well I can manage on a little."

And so good old Papa Péron had his beef-tea, his little drops of brandy, his expensive chicken. Whoever went without, he must not experience want. And the doctor was paid punctually.

But misfortunes never come single. One very frosty night, on coming out of the Parthenon, Nello fell on the slippery pavement and seriously hurt his left hand. He went to the doctor on his way home, and his worst fears were confirmed.

"A longish job, I fear, Signor Corsini. The fingers are very much injured, and so is the arm. You are a musician, are you not?"

"A violinist, sir. If it had been the right arm instead of the left, I might have managed with the bow. But I cannot play a note."

Mr. Gay was informed of the accident, in a letter from Anita. He was genuinely sorry, but the theatre had to be served. He had to procure another violinist at once. For four miserable weeks Nello ate his heart out, and Papa Péron seemed to grow weaker every day.

When life and motion returned to the poor damaged fingers, there were only a few shillings left in the house. Péron had announced that if help did not come soon they must sell the piano, the one bit of property he owned in the world. So, at least, he averred.

Nello could play now. He went round at once to Gay's lodging in Gower Street. Could he be taken on again? The kindly conductor hemmed and hawed; he was obviously very much embarrassed.

"We had to fill up your place, my dear chap, and the new man has proved quite satisfactory. It is, of course, awfully hard on you. But, you see, I can't sack him to put you in his place."

"Of course not," answered Nello quietly. Misery was gnawing at his heart, but he was just. The man who was taken on had possibly been in the same state of wretchedness as himself. He would hardly have cared to turn him out, if Gay had been willing.

"And how is the dear old Papa?" asked Gay, trying to relieve an awkward situation with the inquiry.

"He is very ill; not far from death, I fear," was Nello's answer. And then the truth, which he could no longer conceal, flashed out. "And very soon he will be close to starvation."

Gay looked shocked. He had experienced his ups and downs, but he had never been in such a tight corner as this. He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and produced a sovereign, which he thrust into the other man's hand.

"Terrible, terrible! I am sorry I cannot do more; but I am a poor man, too."

Nello took it, but his face burned, it was such obvious charity.

"I accept it, Monsieur, with gratitude, and I thank you for the kind thought. But can you help me to find work? I want to earn money, not to beg it."

"Sit down a moment while I think." The kind-hearted conductor was very distressed himself at the piteous state of affairs.

"I have it," he exclaimed after a few moments of reflection. "You have heard of Paul Degraux?"

"One of the directors of the Covent Garden Opera?"

"Right," said Gay. "Well, Degraux is a big man now, but twenty-five years ago we were playing in the same orchestra for a few shillings a week. He is there, I am here. We have never quite lost sight of each other, and I think he would always do me a good turn if it was in his power. I will give you a note to him. Take it round to him this morning. You will find him at the theatre."

Ten minutes later, Corsini was on his way to the great man. Gay had written a most glowing and eulogistic introduction.

“The bearer of this note, Signor Nello Corsini, is a most accomplished violinist. I have had him in my orchestra, but he is too good for that. Give him a chance at one of your concerts and he will make good. You know my judgment is generally pretty accurate. Give him a helping hand and you will not regret it.”

CHAPTER III

The name of Gay seemed one to conjure with. Five minutes after the letter had been taken in, Nello was shown in to Monsieur Degraux's private room.

He was a tall, handsome man, this musical director of the opera who, twenty-five years ago, had played in a small orchestra for a few shillings a week. His countenance was florid, he had a very striking personality. Emphatically he was the type of man who gets on, who shoulders his way in the world, pushing aside with his strong, resolute elbows his weaker and more timorous fellow creatures.

He was always urbane, even when he had to say No. At the present moment he had not decided as to whether he would say Yes or No to his old friend's request. He was very much taken with the appearance of the slim, handsome young Italian. His clothes were certainly shabby: Degraux's experienced eyes took in that fact at once; but there was a certain resolution in Nello's bearing, a brightness and animation in his face, that showed he was no ordinary seeker for favours.

"Sit down, sit down," he said genially, "although I cannot give you very long. I am a very busy man; all the day and half the night I have to cut myself into pieces, as it were. And always, I am frightfully worried. To-day I have been more worried than usual."

"I am sorry to hear it, Monsieur," said the Italian, sympathetically. If he wanted to get anything out of Monsieur Degraux, he must fall in with his moods. Privately he thought the director's worries, whatever their magnitude, were as nothing compared to his own.

This plump, prosperous-looking person was not very close to starvation.

"You know, of course, the name of Bauquel?" inquired Degraux abruptly.

"A great genius, Monsieur." In spite of Papa Péron's hostile verdict, the younger musician had a great reverence for the celebrated violinist, who was a popular favourite in every European capital.

The director snapped his fingers, and indulged in an angry exclamation. "Not the genius that he thinks himself, not the genius his friends pretend he is. He is very astute on the business side, has worked his Press well, and always maintains a vigilant *claque*. I and people like myself have helped him very considerably also by taking him at his face valuation. Genius, certainly not; at any rate, not a great genius."

Monsieur Degraux snapped his fingers more contemptuously, and reeled off the names of a few rivals. "Those are geniuses if you like, artists who disclaim his clap-trap methods."

Nello felt uncomfortable and apprehensive. The irate director was evidently so occupied with the subject of the offending Bauquel that Mr. Gay's letter stood in danger of being forgotten. And the great man had especially said that his time was short.

"Monsieur Bauquel has had the misfortune to incur your displeasure, sir?" he hazarded.

"I should think he had," cried Degraux furiously. "He was to appear at my great concert next week; Royalty and the élite of London will be there. Two days ago we had a little tiff, in which I admit I told him some home truths. What happens? This morning I receive a letter, dated from Brighton, in which he throws me over. Pretends he is ill and that his doctor has ordered a complete rest."

"And you do not believe this to be true, Monsieur?"

"True!" thundered Degraux. "An absolute lie. A friend of mine writes me at the same time from the Grand Hotel. He tells me that the so-called invalid is staying there with a rowdy party and looking the picture of health. The scoundrel has done it to put me in a corner. And what is to become of my concert? I cannot put my hand on a violinist of the first rank in the few days left me."

Nello stood up, his face glowing, his limbs trembling with excitement. He pointed to Gay's letter, which lay on the director's desk.

"Monsieur, I beseech you, if it is not too great presumption, to let me take his place. I may not make a sensation, but certainly I shall not be a failure. And you will have so many stars of the first

magnitude, that a smaller one may dare to give a little light. You have read what Mr. Gay says of me. I fancy he is no mean judge of music and musicians.”

Degraux was suddenly brought down from his heights of indignation by this direct appeal. He looked keenly at the young man, but in his eyes there appeared a humorous twinkle, as if he admired his audacity.

“You don’t miss a chance, I see, my young friend. But it is a big risk to run you in the place of Bauquel, and as soon as he gets wind of it, he will send his *claque* to hiss you.”

Monsieur Degraux thought for several seconds, and the young man went hot and cold. His hopes, his fate, hung upon the conductor’s caprice.

Degraux touched a bell on the desk with the air of a man who had made up his mind. An attendant answered the summons.

“Please send in Mr. Lemoin.” He turned to Nello. “This gentleman will accompany you, and you shall show what you can do. Remember, you will appear before one of the most appreciative, but also one of the most critical, audiences in the world.”

Monsieur Lemoin appeared, a fat chubby person. He accompanied very well; not perhaps with the assured artistic instinct of old Papa Péron, who was a part of the piano he played so skilfully.

Degraux listened intently. He had told Nello to play the pieces which, in his own opinion, he could render best. The young man finished with that sad little romance which he had heard in Dean Street on that well-remembered night, and into which he wove some brilliant variations.

The director rose and spoke, for him, rather enthusiastically. “Yes, my young friend, Gay is right. You are a true artist. Play that little romance at the end; you are at your best in that. Play it as you have done here and we need not fear Bauquel’s *claque*. I engage you for that concert. I will also boom you, but not extravagantly – just judiciously – in the short time that is left me. Now about terms?”

He named a fee that seemed to Corsini to represent absolute wealth. If he could only obtain a couple of sovereigns on account, to ease the hard conditions in Dean Street. Degraux did not seem a hard man; it was possible the request would be granted as soon as asked.

But prudence forbade. It would be the reverse of politic to plead absolute poverty on so brief an acquaintance. Till next week, they must draw their belts a little tighter. Well, experience had taught them to do that.

He hurried back to Dean Street with the joyful news. He was to appear before a most fashionable audience in place of the great Bauquel, squandering his money down at Brighton in order to revenge himself upon the too plain-speaking Degraux.

Papa Péron was sitting up in bed, Anita by his side. The poor old man had had one of his good days, the cough was less troublesome. The doctor had whispered as he went out that if the severe weather mended a little, they might pull him through. He smiled happily as his young protégé recounted what had happened.

“I have met Degraux once or twice in the years gone by, and I have been told that prosperity has not spoiled him. But, my dear boy, there is one little difficulty about that concert next week.”

“And that?” asked young Corsini. He was so overjoyed in his new-found fortune, that he could think of nothing else.

The old Frenchman chuckled quietly. “You will want an evening suit, my young friend. One does not appear before Royalty in ordinary clothes, and those not of the newest, does one?”

Nello groaned. The dress-clothes which Papa Péron had purchased for the engagement at the Parthenon had found their way to the pawn-brokers a few days ago, to provide food. What a fool he had been not to make a clean breast of it to Degraux and ask for a few pounds in advance!

“It crossed my mind to ask for a loan, and I was afraid I might offend him,” explained the young man.

“Quite right, my dear son, quite right. Those wealthy men are peculiar. We will not trouble this rich gentleman. There are other ways.”

He pointed his thin hand to a little cupboard standing against the wall. "Go and open the door. Within I have a small private box where I keep my papers. Bring it to me, please."

Nello obeyed, and carried to him a beautiful little antique casket of ebony, inlaid with tortoise-shell and silver, with some cipher letters on the lid. The old man opened it with a key which he wore attached to a ribbon round his neck.

From the small box he carefully produced an antique ring with a tiny miniature portrait, exquisitely painted and set with diamonds. This he pressed reverently to his lips, and then handed it to the young man, saying:

"This is the likeness of my honoured Master, my Emperor Napoleon the Third – given to me with his own hand."

He took out a jewelled star, all tarnished. "This is the Order of the Chevalier of St. Louis, bestowed upon me for my services to – " He could not finish his sentence; the tears were rolling down his thin, wasted cheeks.

Brother and sister exchanged a swift glance across the bed. Evidently, Monsieur Péron had, at one time, been a personage of some importance. Sovereigns did not bestow such gifts upon undistinguished people.

"Take that ring and the Order," commanded the old man in his feeble, husky voice. "Go and pawn them. If you cannot get enough by pawning, sell them outright. And buy a dress-suit with the money to-day."

Both Nello and his sister protested. These two objects and the piano were all that the old man had preserved out of his brilliant past.

Corsini spoke. "Listen, dear Papa! You would not part with these when we had not enough to eat. I can understand what they represent to you. Do not worry about me. I will go to Degraux in a couple of days and explain the situation. Even if he is annoyed, he will have gone too far to recede."

But Péron was persistent. A flash of his old imperiousness came back to him.

"Go and do as I tell you. My days are numbered. My one hope is that I may live to see you successful. Go and dress yourself properly. Let me hear of your success before I die; that is all I wish."

The strain of the interview had been too much for him. Taken with a violent fit of coughing, he sank back exhausted on his pillow. Anita pointed to the door.

"You cannot disobey his wishes. Come back and tell him you have done what he asked you. It may give him a few days more of life."

The young man, fearing the old man's death, rushed round to the nearest pawnbroker in Wardour Street. Upon the ring alone he raised sufficient to hire a dress-suit at a neighbouring costumier's. On his return he was overjoyed to find that the poor Papa had rallied from his exhaustion.

On the night of the concert Nello came into the old man's room to bid him good-night. Péron drew him towards him and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Courage, my son, courage!" Alas! every day the voice was getting feebler. "You play at the end that little romance with your own variations. *Au revoir*. I shall be awake when you return to hear the news. Anita and I will not have a wink of sleep till you come back."

"*Au revoir, bon Papa!*" was Nello's parting greeting.

Papa Péron raised himself in his bed, shook his hand at the air and almost shouted after him: "And if you do not outplay that charlatan, Bauquel, I will never forgive you."

CHAPTER IV

Nello stood facing the big and fashionable audience. A celebrated accompanist was already seated at the piano. There was perfect silence in the vast assembly. In a few seconds the pianist would strike the opening chords, and Nello Corsini, the unknown violinist, must justify the faith that had been placed in him by Paul Degraux.

He felt sick and a little faint. As he looked dimly into that vast sea of expectant faces, he realised the ordeal to which he was exposed. In the little room in Dean Street, with Papa Péron and his worshipping sister for an audience, it was not difficult to feel at ease, to pour out his artistic soul. Even to Gay and Degraux, in the privacy of their apartments, he had given of his best.

But to-night he was before a vast audience, critical and fastidious. Had they not already sampled many executants, many equal to himself, not a few superior?

The salient episodes of his later life floated before him. His meeting with Papa Péron, his introduction to Gay, the placid evenings when he had played at the Parthenon for a small wage, his accident and the miserable days that had supervened, his desperate visit to the powerful Degraux, the marvellous success of that interview. And behind the recollection of all this, the memory of that dreadful time when he had played in the streets for a few wretched coppers to keep himself and his sister from want.

But to-night he was playing for fame and fortune, through the lucky chance of the great Bauquel's absence. If he made good to-night, if he could secure the plaudits of this fashionable crowd, coppers would no longer be his portion, but sovereigns and Bank of England notes.

It was a brilliant assembly. In the Royal box sat the Queen of England, with the Prince and Princess of Wales. Peers and Peeresses were there by the dozen. Every other person was more or less distinguished. This was no audience gathered from the corners of mean streets.

As the pianist struck the opening chords, the mist cleared from the young man's brain. Those upturned faces which met his fascinated gaze were no longer charged with cold hostility, but full of friendliness, of welcome to a new and untried artist. He drew his bow caressingly across the strings, and began.

The last plaintive notes died away – he had chosen to open with an exquisite romance of Greig's. The applause was sincere, but it was not fervent. Degraux, standing anxiously in the wings, had to admit that it was not fervent. And then, suddenly, Bauquel's noisy *claque* burst forth in a storm of hisses. They were paid by the popular favourite to howl down any likely rival.

The young man's face went white as death. Was the chance going to be snatched from him? Would he leave the theatre a failure, to the disgust of the man who had befriended him and put faith in him?

The storm of hisses, hired disapprobation, died slowly down, countered, as it was, with a little decorous and well-mannered applause. The charming romance of Greig, though exquisitely played, had failed to really touch the audience. If the great Bauquel, with his well-established reputation, had rendered it, the house would have been in a furore.

Corsini's next item was a piece by Chopin. Amid the din of the contending hisses and applause, the pianist beckoned to the young man and they exchanged whispers.

"Take my advice; leave the Chopin piece. They are not in the melancholy mood to-night: they want something brilliant, an undernote of pathos with a cascade of fireworks to relieve the sadness. Play that romance of yours, *with* the variations. Cut the theme as short as possible; use it as just an introduction. Get to work on the variations, those will fetch them."

Nello set his teeth firmly; opposition, the suspicion of failure, had goaded him to fresh effort, to a fuller belief in his own powers. He remembered the good old Papa's injunction: "If you do not outplay that charlatan, Bauquel, I will never forgive you."

And he played as one inspired. The violin, a legacy from his father, sang and sobbed and thrilled as it had never done before. When he had finished the applause was hearty and vehement. The hisses of the Bauquel *claque* could no longer be heard. The unknown young violinist had made good and won the plaudits of one of the most critical audiences in Europe.

Degraux met him in the wings and shook him warmly by the hand. "A thousand thanks. I see now I was right in engaging you, in speculating on a chance. Now, come to my room. You told me something yesterday about certain things in Dean Street. Cheques are no good to you. You want ready money."

Nello admitted that it was so. Together they hastened into the director's private room. Degraux went to a small safe, unlocked it and drew forth a roll of notes.

"See here, my young friend, you have saved the position. For the moment, that rascal Bauquel is temporarily eclipsed. Here is your fee, double what I promised."

Nello protested faintly. "But, Monsieur, this is too much. And remember, please, I was very nearly a failure. Bauquel's *claque* was almost too much for me."

Degraux laughed light-heartedly. "Very nearly, but not quite. You say your good old Papa Péron calls him a charlatan. The expression is perhaps a little strong. He is not that, but he is perhaps not the genius he thinks himself, or his friends think him."

"I should be more than delighted to possess his reputation, Monsieur," interrupted the young Italian.

Degraux laid his hand lightly on Nello's shoulder.

"I see, Corsini, you have a head upon your shoulders. Will you permit me to give you a few words of sound advice?"

"A thousand if you are so disposed, Monsieur."

"You have scored a triumph of sorts to-night, but don't let it give you a swollen head."

"It will not, Monsieur, I can assure you," was the answer.

"That is well; preserve the business head as well as the artistic instinct. This profession is full of ups and downs. Look at Bauquel! In spite of his considerable earnings, he is always in debt, always in the hands of money-lenders. He earns easily, he spends more easily. In five years he will be ousted from his position by younger and more talented rivals, and he will be penniless. He will probably come to me to borrow a sovereign."

"And you will let him have it, I am sure, Monsieur," said Nello warmly. "You have a very kind heart."

"Of course I shall let him have it. But, at the same time, I shall take advantage of the opportunity to say, 'here it is, friend Bauquel. But why did you not save in the fat years, instead of spending your money on a miserable *claque*, in order to spoil my show? And you know, moreover, you were absolutely in the wrong.'"

Nello could not refrain from smiling. Paul Degraux was very human. He could not forgive Bauquel for his cavalier treatment.

"I am a frugal Italian, Monsieur. I shall never waste my money."

Paul Degraux swelled out his broad chest. "You will get on, my young friend. Look at me! Twenty or twenty-five years ago I was playing in a small orchestra with Gay at a few shillings a week – I have no doubt Gay has told you of that little episode. I know he is a very garrulous person – a dear good chap, but garrulous. Well, Gay is there and I am here. Why?"

He thundered out the question, expanding still further his broad chest.

Nello temporised. The great director was evidently in a confidential mood. It was as well to fall in with his humour.

"Ah, why, Monsieur? I should like to know. I am sure I should learn a good deal."

Degraux, in his present mood, was pleased to have a listener. The concert was going on splendidly with experienced stars. It no longer required his attention.

“Listen, my young friend! I devoted myself to the business side of art. I saw more money was to be made out of exploiting other people than being exploited by others. Do you understand?”

“I think I do,” said the young Italian, who was fairly shrewd for his years. “In fact, I am sure I do.”

“Good! Gay followed the artistic side.” Degraux snapped his fingers contemptuously. “The result: poor Gay, at his age, conducting a small orchestra at the Parthenon – a good one, I admit; but what is the remuneration? I, Paul Degraux,” again he tapped his broad chest significantly, “am here in a great position. I have followed the business side of art; poor old Gay has followed the artistic side. Bah!”

“You advise me, Monsieur, to cultivate the business side?” queried the young man.

“Of course. I am giving you good advice; sound advice. You have made a little stir here, certain things may follow from it. But still, you have not the reputation of Bauquel, second-rater that he is. Bauquel will be on his knees to me next week, and of course I shall take him back. It may be, when you come to me again, I can only give you a second place in the programme. The way will be hard from the artistic point of view.”

Nello listened with deep attention. Degraux was a man of business to his finger-tips. Certainly he was giving him good advice.

“And what are they, these artists, except the very few who are in the front rank – creatures of an hour, of the public’s caprice? Joachim, Sarasate, those are names to conjure with; they are permanent. But the others come and go. I, one of the directors of the Italian Opera, remain while they disappear. The exploiters are permanent, the exploited are transitory.”

“What do you advise, Monsieur?” asked Nello timidly. This whirlwind of a man half fascinated, half repelled him.

Monsieur Degraux held out his hand with his frank, engaging smile.

“Be exploited as long as it suits your book. Then save money and exploit other people. I cannot stay any longer. I have given you a few hints. You must work them out for yourself.”

A new world was opening to Nello Corsini, the talented young violinist who, only a few weeks ago, had played in the street on the chance of the coppers flung by passers-by. But it was absurd! How could he ever be a Paul Degraux? And yet, Degraux had played twenty-five years ago in a small orchestra for a pittance. What was his income now? Something princely.

He longed to hasten back to Dean Street with that precious sheaf of notes. How the dear old Papa’s eyes would lighten up at the news of his success, when he told him the tale of how Bauquel’s *claque* had been silenced. And the dear little Anita too! Tears of joy would run down her cheeks.

Degraux, or Bauquel, after such a night of triumph, would have taken a cab. But such an idea was alien to Nello’s frugal temperament. It was only a few moments’ walk. He took his violin case in his hand and stepped along bravely.

As he emerged from the theatre a footman in handsome livery laid his hand upon his arm.

“Pardon me, Signor Corsini. The Princess Zouroff wishes to speak to you. Will you follow me, please? I will lead you to her carriage.”

He followed the tall footman. The Princess, a grey-haired woman of tall and commanding presence, leaned through the carriage window.

“Ah, Signor Corsini, I have been enchanted with your playing to-night. I am giving a reception at the Russian Embassy, in Chesham Place, to-morrow evening. I shall be so pleased if you will come and play for us – at your own fee, of course.”

Nello shot a swift glance into the carriage. On the back seat, facing the horses, were the grey-haired woman and a beautiful young girl. On the front seat was a dark, handsome man of about thirty-five.

He recognised them at once, the man and the young girl. They were the two who had driven down the street to the Royalty Theatre on that dark winter night when he had been playing in the streets.

“Enchanted, Madame. I will present myself to you to-morrow evening. Will you forgive me if I render you only very brief thanks at the moment? I have a very dear friend, I fear at the point of death, to whom I must hasten.”

The grey-haired Princess inclined her head graciously. “Pray do not wait a moment. I am sorry such trouble is awaiting you on the night of so great a success.”

Nello raised his hat and was moving away, when the charming girl leaned forward and spoke impetuously.

“One second, Signor; we might be of assistance to you. Will you please give me the name of your friend, and his address?” She had recognised him the moment he appeared on the platform as the wandering musician she had passed on her way to the Royalty Theatre.

She turned eagerly to the Princess, her mother. “We might send our own doctor, Sir Charles Fowler, he is so very clever. Perhaps this gentleman’s friend has not had the best medical advice.”

The Princess assented graciously. She was a very kind-hearted woman, if not quite so enthusiastic in works of charity as her more impulsive daughter.

Nello, with burning cheeks, gave the name of poor old Papa Péron and the number of the small house in Dean Street. His cheeks flamed, because he was wondering if she had recognised him as he had remembered her. It was evident she thought he was poor by that remark about the best medical advice.

He thanked both the ladies in a low tone, and for the second time turned away. The man, Prince Zouroff, who had been fidgeting impatiently during the short interview, leaned out of the window of the carriage, and in a sharp, angry voice commanded the coachman to drive on.

Ho sank back in his seat and darted a glance of contempt, first at his sister, then at his mother.

“Your foolish sentimentality makes me sick, Nada. And I am surprised at you for abetting her in it,” he added for the benefit of the Princess.

The Princess answered him in calm, sarcastic tones. “Would it not be better, Boris, if you left off interfering with every word and act of poor little Nada? If she has too much compassion, you redress the balance by having none.”

Nello hastened with quick strides in the direction of Dean Street. His one fear was that Péron might have already passed away. It would be heart-rending if he were not alive to hear the splendid news.

But the vital flame, although very low, was still burning. The old man had had a long sleep, the sleep of exhaustion. By some strange effort of will, he had allayed the impending dissolution, had awoken about the expected time of Nello’s return, and was sitting up in bed, propped up against the pillows, awaiting the arrival of the young man whom he had grown to regard as a son.

“It is well, I can see,” he said in the low, husky voice that was so soon to be hushed for ever. “It is well. Triumph is written all over your face. You have scored an even greater success than you anticipated, eh?”

Nello sank on his knees beside the bed, at which his sister had devotedly seated herself, to watch the least movement of the dying man. He possessed himself of one of the long, wasted hands – those hands which had once made such eloquent music – and kissed it reverently.

“All thanks to you, my more than father. There was a trying moment. My first piece did not touch them much, and the Bauquel *claque*, as Degraux warned me would be the case, did their best to hiss me down. Then I set my teeth and vowed that I would not be a failure and return home disgraced. I played that little romance, with my variations. I finished in a storm of applause.”

“Ah!” sighed Péron amongst his pillows, a wan smile lighting his livid face. “That is your masterpiece. That would always stir the dullest audience.”

“And listen, dear good Papa. Degraux was so pleased with my success that he has paid me double the fee he promised. No more short commons for any of us. Little Anita here shall keep the purse and maintain us in royal state.” He threw his head back and laughed almost hysterically. “Oh, it must be a dream, a wild, mad dream. I cannot be the same Nello Corsini who, a few weeks ago, used to play in the streets for coppers.”

Then he recovered from his overwrought mood. There was more yet to be told to this kind old man.

“Then, dear Papa, I had an adventure – it was the first-fruits of success. As I came out, a tall footman in livery accosted me; he was to lead me to the carriage of the Princess Zouroff.”

Péron’s voice grew a little stronger. “The mother of the Russian Ambassador, Boris Zouroff. In the long ago I used to know her. Her husband was a brute. She has two children, Boris and a girl much younger than he. I have heard that Boris is a brute like his father. Go on, Nello. Finish your adventure; but I can guess what is coming.”

“The Princess is giving a reception to-morrow evening at the Embassy in Chesham Place. She has asked me to play, at my own price.”

Tears welled up into the old man’s eyes. “You are made, my son, but we must not be too jubilant. Artists are creatures of the hour. To-day Bauquel, to-morrow Nello Corsini. Take advantage of the present, but it will be wise to look out for something more permanent than the caprice of public favour, which dethrones its idols almost as quickly as it has crowned them.”

Nello started. There was in Péron’s mind the same thought that Degraux had expressed a short time ago.

The poor old man rallied himself for a last effort. “In that little cupboard yonder there is a packet containing a few private papers. You will destroy all except a letter addressed to yourself; in it you will find my last instructions. But you will not open that cupboard till I am dead. You both know as well as I do that it is only a question of a few hours. Well, my son, I do not regret; I have lived long enough to know of your success. And you have both been a great comfort to me. My heart was starved till I met you. You have taken the place of the children I never had.”

As he finished, there was a thundering knock at the door. Nello jumped up, remembering. Had not the Princess Nada promised to send their own physician?

“I forgot to tell you, *bon* Papa. I told them I was in a hurry to get back to you because you were so ill. The young Princess, a most beautiful girl, inquired your name and address. I gave them. She wished you to have the best medical advice. She is sending you their doctor, Sir Charles Fowler. I am sure that is he. I will go down and see.”

In good health, Papa Péron, in spite of his kind heart and still kinder actions, had a little spice of malice in him. He was not quite exhausted, as his next words showed.

“I know him well by reputation.” This remarkable old man knew of everybody, so it seemed. “Rather pompous and very suave, a good bedside manner, rather despised by his fellow practitioners. But he has a large and very aristocratic connection: he panders to their whims. But it was very sweet of the young Princess. Evidently she does not take after her father, she inherits the sweetness of her mother. Twenty Sir Charles Fowlers cannot keep me alive. But show him up, out of deference to the Princess. He is as much a charlatan in his profession as Bauquel is in his.”

Nello went downstairs into the shabby sitting-room, where the slatternly maid had just shown in the popular physician.

Sir Charles addressed the young musician in his most bland and courteous accents. He must privately have been very annoyed to be sent at this time of night to such an obscure patient, but he did not betray his annoyance. The Princess Zouroff and her daughter were demi-goddesses to him. Their whims were equivalent to a Royal command.

“Signor Corsini, I presume? The Princess has told me over the ’phone of your great success to-night; I congratulate you. She has sent me to see a friend of yours, who I understand is seriously

ill. Of course it is not very strict professional etiquette that I should intrude myself without a request from his local doctor. But the Princess is a little autocratic, and will be obeyed.” He waved his plump hands deprecatingly, in well-bred apology for the unaccountable vagaries of the aristocracy. “Will you take me to him, please?”

Corsini led him up the shabby, narrow staircase into the small apartment containing the two beds, in one of which the now successful violinist was used to sleep.

Anita was hanging over the bed, with a white face, the tears raining down her cheeks. In those few seconds of the conversation between her brother and the doctor, the poor old man’s soul had taken flight to happier realms.

Sir Charles stepped to the other side, and his trained eye took in the situation at once.

“Alas, my dear sir, too late! He has passed away, absolutely without pain, I assure you. But I could have done nothing for him. He is very old: a clear case of senile decay, aggravated by the malady from which he has been suffering. Your local doctor will give you a certificate.”

He looked intently at the white countenance. Sir Charles might not be a very clever physician, as his less opulent colleagues were always very fond of affirming, but he had special gifts of his own.

“A fine, intellectual head, a distinguished face. I should not be surprised if he had once been a man of some distinction. Do you know anything of his antecedents?”

Nello shook his head. “Next to nothing. Our acquaintance has been too recent for much confidence, but he has been very kind to myself and sister. I gather that he was at one time a very celebrated pianist.”

“His name, the Princess told me over the ’phone, was Péron. With the recollection of all the great artists for, say, fifty years, I cannot recall that name. We have here, my dear sir, a mystery, and probably a tragedy also. I will keep you no longer. A thousand regrets that my visit has been so useless.”

Nello saw the plump, urbane man to the door, and then returned to the little bedroom where poor old Papa Péron, of the kind heart and the caustic tongue, lay in the last sleep of all.

CHAPTER V

His heart heavy with grief at the loss of his kind old friend, who had been to him and his sister a second father, Nello Corsini faced again a fastidious and critical audience in the saloons of the Russian Embassy.

Last night he had played to the élite of the fashionable world, made up of its many elements. Royalty, as represented by the sovereign and her children, the flower of the aristocracy, subordinate members of the financial and commercial world, distinguished persons of every profession.

To-night he was to appear before the smaller world of diplomacy and politics. But he was very confident of himself. If he had not failed on that vast stage, he would not disgrace himself on a smaller one.

The Princess Zouroff was devoted to music, as was her daughter. The somewhat brutal Prince, her son, could not distinguish one note from another – like his father, whose death had been regretted by nobody, excepting his son.

The difference between father and son was very easy to define. The late Prince Zouroff was both brutal and brainless. The present holder of the title was of quite as brutal nature as his father, but he possessed mentality. In short, he inherited the brains of his mother, the gentle, grey-haired lady, whom he despised for her womanly qualities.

Two *prime donne* and a celebrated contralto had already sung. The two *prime donne* had united in a duet which resembled the warbles of two nightingales; the contralto had enchanted the audience with her deep and resonant notes; an accomplished quartette had disbursed exquisite music.

It was time for the turn of the violinist. Nello Corsini, his slim figure habited in the garments which he had hired from a costumier in the neighbourhood of Wardour Street, followed these famous personages.

He was so adaptive that, in this short space, he had learned to accustom himself to his environment. A few weeks ago he had been playing in the streets for coppers. To-night he was playing for higher stakes.

He darted his bright, keen eyes over the illustrious assembly, and his spirits rose, as they always did when something was to be striven for.

In a far corner he saw three men standing together and whispering confidentially. One was the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, wearing the ribbon of the Garter; another was that brilliant genius, too early eclipsed, Lord Randolph Churchill; the third was a slim, tall young man, who had taken on the dangerous post of Secretary for Ireland, still now with us, beloved and revered by all parties, Arthur James Balfour, who later succeeded his great uncle as Prime Minister.

In these far-off days the old melodies were the sweetest. Nello played first the “Ave Maria” of Gounod. He followed on with Chopin. And then, as a finale, he played that exquisite little romance which had floated on a wintry night out of the window of a house in Dean Street, with his own variations.

There was a subdued thrill amongst the audience. There was not the full-throated applause that had greeted him at Covent Garden; but he made allowance for that. The pit and the gallery had had something to say last evening: they were always ready to recognise a new genius. This assembly was too *blasé*, it was no longer capable of great emotion, even in the case of an artist of the first rank. But, in a way, they were subtly appreciative. At least, he had pleased them.

Nello Corsini, with his keen Latin mind, grasped the situation. Princess Zouroff had set the fashion. There were many more fashionable concerts at which he would be invited to play, at remunerative fees. But he also remembered that both Papa Péron and Degraux had pointed out to him the uncertain tenure of public favour.

Unobtrusively, he made his way out, but not before Princess Zouroff had thanked him warmly for the pleasure he had given them, and introduced him to a few notable persons, some of them hostesses as popular as herself, who had spoken gracious words.

And while he was talking to one of these exalted ladies, there had floated to him a vision of youthful beauty, the lovely young Princess Nada, attired in an exquisite dress of white satin, a single diamond star in her dark-brown hair, round her slim neck a row of pearls. These were her only ornaments. She reached out her slender hand.

“Thank you so much, Signor. That exquisite little romance brought the tears to my eyes. We shall meet many times again, I trust, and I shall often ask you, as a special request, to play that to me.”

“Enchanted, Mademoiselle,” answered Corsini, bowing low, and blushing a little. He was rather overwhelmed with these compliments from great ladies. The person to whom he was talking when Nada intervened was a popular Countess, the *châtelaine* of an historic house in Piccadilly. She had spoken of a concert in a few days’ time which she had invited the young violinist to attend.

“A great artist and a very handsome young man also,” murmured the great lady to Nada, as soon as Nello was out of earshot. “He will very soon be the rage. Bauquel will want to commit suicide.”

The Prince, who was talking to the Prime Minister, and always saw everything that was going on, had observed the brief conversation between his sister and the violinist. A scowl settled on his handsome face.

As soon as he was disengaged, he overtook the young Princess as she was on her way to speak to some guests.

“Indulging in a little bout of sentiment again with this young fiddler, Nada?” he inquired in sneering tones. “Telling him how delighted you were with his playing, eh? What need is there to thank these hired artists? They are well paid, generally overpaid, for what they do.”

Usually the Princess endured the insults and coarse remarks of her truculent brother with disdainful indifference. To-night she was a little unstrung. Like her mother, she was a passionate lover of music – what the French describe as *un amateur*. The lovely voices of the two *prime donne*, the exquisite strains of the violin, had raised her to an exalted mood, in which she only wanted to think of things pure and beautiful.

The Prince’s coarse words and sneering accents jarred upon her sensibilities, and aroused in her a spirit of antagonism. She darted at him an angry and contemptuous glance.

“You are more than usually offensive to-night, Boris. I suppose you have been indulging in your favourite habit of drinking too much champagne.”

The shaft went home. It was well known in his family and amongst his friends that the Prince, in spite of the obligations of his high position, was far from abstemious, and had caused some scandal as a consequence of his unfortunate proclivities.

A dull flush spread over his hard, handsome face. “You little spitfire!” he growled savagely. “I wonder when you will be tamed. Never, so long as our mother refrains from keeping a tighter rein over you.”

For answer, the young Princess swept scornfully away from him, in her pearls and shimmering white satin, a dream of loveliness to everybody except her churlish brother.

Nello hastened home to his frugal supper in Dean Street, prepared for him by the capable hands of his little sister. A roll of notes had been handed to him on his departure by a slim young man, the secretary of the Princess. In spite of his natural grief at the death of the poor old Papa, he was jubilant, over his good luck. In two evenings he had made a small fortune. He handed over the precious roll of notes to Anita.

“They are safe in your keeping, my dear one. But you must buy yourself some good clothes. Heaven knows we have starved and gone shabby long enough. But I cannot believe in it yet. It is still a dream.”

Poor Papa Péron was lying upstairs. Nello to-night would sleep in an improvised bed made up on the shabby sofa in the sitting-room. Anita, with her usual spirit of self-sacrifice, had offered him her own attic, while she made shift, but, of course, he would not hear of that.

He had spent the morning in making arrangements for the funeral; they would bury the kind old Papa in two days from now. Happily, there was no lack of money at the moment. A week sooner, and a pauper's grave might have awaited him.

Nello was very excited with his evening, and in consequence, wakeful. He smoked a cigarette, and Anita thought he would suggest retiring to his improvised bed after he had finished. But, to her surprise, he did not seem at all desirous of repose.

“Are you very sleepy, little one?” he asked.

As a matter of fact the girl could hardly keep her eyes open. The long watch by old Péron's bedside had tried her slender vitality sorely. But she was always ready to sacrifice herself to the slightest whim of those she loved.

“Not in the least. What is in your mind, Nello?”

“I thought we might look through the dear old Papa's papers. He said we were to open that cupboard after his death. I wonder if we shall learn who and what he was?”

Nello went to the little cupboard and drew from it the ebony casket. The first thing that met his eye was the glittering order of Saint Louis, attached to a faded ribbon, which had been returned on the night when he had raised sufficient money on the miniature.

There was a very small bundle of papers, carefully tied up, for good old Papa Péron was nothing if not methodical and neat. There was nothing in the papers to reveal his identity. With two exceptions they were absolutely unimportant documents. These, according to Péron's dying injunctions, Nello committed to the fire. It was the dead man's wish.

The first exception was a letter addressed to Anita, dated a few weeks back, no doubt when he had prescience that the end was near. In it he told her that he had left everything in the world he possessed to her: the ring set with diamonds, which had not then been pawned, the order of St. Louis, and the piano. These would give her and her brother a little capital with which to carry on.

It was a very informal sort of will, although he had taken the precaution to have his signature witnessed by his landlady. But there was no next of kin to dispute the document, and Anita was the sole heiress of his poor possessions – poor from the point of view of money value.

Two other letters were tied up together, the one addressed to Nello himself, the other marked “Private” and directed to the Baron Andreas Salmoros, 510 Old Broad Street, E.C.

The note to Nello, dated a few days after the more or less informal will, was short but to the point.

Péron informed his protégé, at the time of writing, that his artistic career still hung in the balance. That even if he achieved a certain success, his career was an uncertain one. It behoved him therefore to set his ambitions in other directions which might yield more permanent results. The letter concluded as follows:

“There yet remains one person in the world who will still take an interest in me. For the remembrance of those days long ago, he may prove of service to you when I am gone. After all is over with me, carry this letter to him yourself. Trust it to no other hands. Of course you have guessed that Péron is an assumed name. If the Baron likes to reveal to you my identity, he will do so. It will matter no longer to me.”

Nello gasped, as he laid down the letter. “But dear old Papa Péron must have been a distinguished man at one time. He speaks of Salmoros as an old, I should say a great, friend of the long ago. Of course you do not know who he is.”

Anita shook her head. She had never heard of the Baron Andreas Salmoros. How should she? Absorbed in her domestic cares, she never read the newspapers.

“But he is one of the greatest financiers in the world,” cried Nello eagerly. “He is only second to the Rothschilds themselves.”

And then it suddenly struck him that Salmoros was a very busy man, that approach to him was difficult. Péron had expressly said that he was to take the letter to him himself. If Péron had only written a private note introducing him, a note that could be posted! But the poor Papa had not thought of that, of course.

Then there recurred to him the altered circumstances which had taken place since that letter was written.

Then he was just Signor Nello Corsini, unknown and poor. To-day all the newspapers, London and provincial, had blazoned forth his name as a brilliant and successful artist. Even the great financier would welcome a great musician.

And even if he did not, the Princess Zoureff, at whose house he had played to-night, the Countess, at whose house he was playing shortly, would secure him a personal introduction. It was a certainty that the Baron’s vast wealth enabled him to mix in their world.

CHAPTER VI

A month had elapsed since the funeral of the good old Papa, and the note addressed to the Baron Salmoros was still in Corsini's keeping. He knew from a postscript in Péron's letter that no date except that of the year had been affixed to it, for obvious reasons.

The young man was considering his position. There was no doubt that the Baron had been asked to find him a post that would give a more assured future, remove him from the difficulties, the uncertainties of an artistic career. He was not yet quite sure in his own mind that he wanted to avail himself of this opportunity, if Salmoros offered it to him.

His month's experience had been very satisfactory. An enterprising gentleman, keenly on the alert for new clients, had introduced himself to him and established himself as his agent, unfolding a rosy future if he trusted himself to his skilled guidance. Nello had agreed. This plausible person, obviously of the Hebraic persuasion, knew the ropes, Nello did not. Besides, he had come with a recommendation from Degraux, who had spoken highly of his abilities in exploiting young artists, who had set their first step on the ladder of fame.

Yes, the month had been very satisfactory, if it had not reaped quite such a golden harvest as Nello and his sister had anticipated. The agent booked him for private concerts as hard as he could, but there was a great variance in the fees. Some were considerable, some very moderate. Mr. Mosenstein – such was the agent's name – made light of the discrepancy. These were the anomalies incidental to the profession.

“The great thing is to get known, my dear boy, to be seen everywhere, in South Kensington as well as Belgravia,” the plausible agent had explained. “If South Kensington pays you less than Belgravia and Mayfair, never mind. Better take a small fee than stop at home, earning nothing.”

All of which went to prove to the shrewd young man that, if he had set his feet upon the first steps of the ladder, he had not, so far, mounted very high up. If the great Bauquel, who had now made it up with Degraux, condescended to play in South Kensington at all, he would demand a higher fee than he obtained in Mayfair, penalising the less fashionable quarter for the honour of his services.

Brother and sister, for Anita was no less shrewd than her brother, and had a fund of common sense, argued the matter out many times, now inclining one way, now another.

The present was distinctly satisfactory: it meant absolute wealth compared with the penury of the old days. The question was, would it last? Was he just, in a secondary sort of way, the fashion of the moment in certain circumscribed circles, to be shortly superseded by somebody who had scored in a night, by some fortunate accident, the same kind of sudden success? In short, should he take that letter to the Baron Salmoros or not? That was the vital question. In his undecided mood, he sought Degraux, who received him with great cordiality, but who had now made it up so effectually with the still powerful Bauquel that he had no opening for another violinist.

“Privately, my friend, I agree with your old Papa Péron that as an artist pure and simple you are the superior of Bauquel. But what can one do? Bauquel has got the name, he has ten years' reputation behind him. At any moment he may be relegated to a back seat, but at present he fills, he draws. He is an asset to an impresario. In a word, he represents gate money. His name on an announcement fills the house. Five years hence, I predict it will be very different.”

Nello pondered these wise and sensible sayings. “Do you think it possible, Monsieur, that I could gain the standing of Bauquel? You have seen and known so much, I can believe in your opinion.”

The great director shrugged his shoulders. “You ask me a little too much, my friend. I cannot see into the future. You have made a very considerable success, you created quite a respectable furore on that night – but – ” he paused significantly.

“But!” repeated Nello quietly. “Please be quite frank with me. I want to hear the truth.”

“I cannot say that you have progressed much since that night. You ask me to speak frankly, and I should say, on the contrary, that you have gone back a bit. No doubt you are doing quite well at these private concerts – that is Mosenstein’s specialty. But, supposing I could ask you to play for me at my next big concert, which I can’t because Bauquel will be there, I doubt if you would repeat the success.”

“In a word, I am far from being in the first, even in the second rank?” queried Nello. His life had been so full of disappointments, that he had become hardened in the process. He did not seem as disturbed as Degraux had expected he would be by this uncomfortable cold *douche* of plain speaking.

“Fairly well on in the second rank. Mark you, I am not speaking of your standing as an artist, but just from the box-office point of view. You see, one can never tell what goes to the making of a first-class success. An inferior person often achieves it, a genius as often as not misses it.”

He did not mention names, but Nello guessed, while he was speaking, Degraux had the great Bauquel in mind, who, he admitted, was the inferior artist.

The young man looked a little downcast, in spite of his stoicism. Degraux clapped him on the shoulder.

“Now, my young friend, cheer up. After all, you are not doing so badly. Live as frugally as you can, put by every penny you can save. If things go well, still save. If they go badly, you will have something put by. You remember our last conversation here, eh? I told you to join, as quickly as possible, the ranks of the exploiters instead of remaining in the vast army of the exploited.”

Nello remembered that conversation well. Degraux’s advice had made a great impression on him at the time.

“That is precisely what I am here for, Monsieur – to ask you to give me a little more of your valuable advice on a very important matter. I am not at all sure about the rewards of the simply artistic career.”

“Tell me what is in your mind,” answered Degraux kindly. It was not the first time in his long and brilliant career that he had been called upon to act as the arbiter of a young man’s destiny.

Nello told him of the note addressed to himself, of the letter directed to the Baron Salmoros, whom Péron apparently claimed as an old and attached friend.

Degraux elevated his eyebrows at the mention of that world-known name.

“Salmoros! One of the greatest of European financiers. He knows the secrets of pretty well every Cabinet,” he remarked, when the young man had finished his narrative. “Your old Papa Péron must, at some time, have been a person of more than ordinary distinction. You have no knowledge of the contents of that sealed letter?”

“None, Monsieur. I can only guess that I have been recommended to the Baron’s protection.”

“Of course,” said Degraux. “It is a pity this very kind old man was not a little bit more communicative before his death, or in his last letter to you.”

“I think he was a little fond of mystery, Monsieur.”

“Evidently,” said Degraux drily. “Possibly, when you knew him – you told me the acquaintance was very brief – he had begun to go a little off his head. Well, let us see how the matter stands. On the one side, satisfaction with your present lot, with all the possibilities opening out to you. On the other hand, the presentation of this letter, with the chance of the Baron’s patronage. If we could only have a peep into that letter we should know better where we were.”

“But that is impossible, Monsieur. We can only guess that the kind old Papa has recommended me in the warmest terms.”

“Yes, we may assume that. Then, I think, my young friend, there is only one obvious course. You take that letter to the Baron. When he has read it, he will either put you off with smooth promises, or propose a certain line of action out of deference to his old friend’s request. If he should put before you any proposition that does not recommend itself to you, you can easily decline and stick to your present career.”

The advice was sound and sensible. By presenting the letter to the eminent financier there was nothing to lose. On the other hand, there might be something to gain.

“Unfortunately, Monsieur, I do not know the Baron personally. I understand he is a very busy man, and access to him a very difficult matter.”

“That is so,” admitted Degraux. “I know him just a little. I dare say you have heard that he is a great lover of music, and we have exchanged a few words now and then. But I fear my acquaintance with him would hardly excuse a formal note of introduction. But stay, you know the Princess Zouroff and Lady Glendover, at whose house you played lately. He is a friend of both. Either of these will give you what you want. If not, come and see me again and I will think of somebody I know fairly well, who will do it as a favour to me.”

“Both these ladies occurred to me,” said Nello. “The Princess is kindness itself; I am sure she would do it at once. But, in case of failure, I will fall back upon you.”

With many thanks for his good advice, Nello took leave of the warm-hearted director. Yes, Degraux was quite right. He would present that letter as soon as possible. He would write to the Princess Zouroff to-morrow.

But fate willed it that the Princess’s good offices were not required. He was playing that night at the house of a certain Mrs. Raby, who lived in Kensington Gore.

Mrs. Raby was a widow of about fifty years of age, of good family and considerable fortune of her own. When a romantic girl of twenty-two she had eloped with a man some twenty years her senior, who happened to be one of the greatest, if not absolutely the greatest, pianists of his day. For a long time her parents and friends held aloof from her. Artists were all very well in their way, but Constance Raby, with her money and good looks – she was an heiress through her godmother – ought to have made a brilliant match.

But Mrs. Raby loved her long-haired musician, the more perhaps for the fact that he was an Englishman, and never repented her choice. And in time, parents and friends condescended to bury the hatchet and came to her house, exchanging frigid courtesies with the artistic husband.

To their drawing-rooms flocked the élite of the musical world – great sopranos, great contraltos, nearly every artist of eminence. And in that charming house in Kensington Gore they gave for nothing what they demanded high fees for elsewhere, for was not the host one of their own world, and had they not adopted his charming wife as one of themselves?

Mr. Raby had died some ten years ago, but his widow still maintained the fame of those musical evenings. And to those who had still their way to make, an appearance in Mrs. Raby’s drawing-rooms conferred a *cachet*.

Mosenstein had secured an invitation for his young client. There was no fee. When Nello had demurred to this, not quite understanding the situation, the astute agent had silenced his objections at once.

“You do not understand, my young friend. England is a very funny place. A lot is done here for love. Mrs. Raby occupies a unique position. Supposing you were unknown, to play at one of her evenings would secure you a twenty-guinea engagement in South Kensington. Patti, Lucca, Nielson have sung there for friendship. Sarasate has played there for friendship. My friend, if you are wise, you will be glad that I have procured you an invitation.”

Nello made no further objection. Mosenstein knew the ropes as well as anybody. If he urged him to go to the house in Kensington Gore and play for nothing he had a wise motive. Mrs. Raby was evidently a power in the musical world.

The drawing-rooms were crowded, mostly with musical people. But there were a few others from another world; and amongst these, Nello presently discovered his patroness, Lady Glendover, who came here out of sheer love of music. The Countess had to pay five hundred or more for what Mrs. Raby got for nothing.

She greeted Nello kindly and invited him to sit beside her.

“Do you know many people here?” she asked, as she made way for him on the sofa.

“So far as I can see, nobody but yourself, Madame.”

“Oh, then, we will take compassion on each other and keep each other company – at least till you have to play. I suppose you are on the programme.”

“I believe so. My agent, Mosenstein, is arranging matters, and he will tell me when I am wanted.”

“Very well; until that moment arrives we can sit still and chat. I don’t know very many people either: just a few artists who have appeared at my house. The Princess Zouroff sometimes comes, but she is not here to-night. Some evenings, of course very late, it is as good as one of Paul Degraux’s concerts, when all the great stars have come on. About one o’clock in the morning they begin to warble and outplay each other. Of course you know Mrs. Raby married the greatest pianist of his day. They perform for her out of camaraderie.”

They talked for a little time, when the Countess suddenly exclaimed: “Ah, there is somebody from my own world, the Baron Salmoros. There is such a crush, he does not see me. Do you know him?”

Nello’s breath came quickly. “No, Madame, but at the moment he is the one man in the world that I particularly want to know.”

Lady Glendover looked at him sharply, but she was too polite to inquire the cause of his sudden agitation.

“I will introduce you to him with pleasure; but it is no use running after him in this crowd, we shall never catch him. I know his methods, he comes here very often, he is a great *amateur*. He will exchange greetings with the many artists he knows, making a tour of the rooms, and then he will see me and come to a halt in front of us.”

Lady Glendover’s prognostication of the Baron’s movements was a correct one. After what seemed to Nello, watching his slow progress round the room, an interminable period, Salmoros stopped before them and bowed over the Countess’s outstretched hand.

“Delighted to see you, dear lady. I have just met Mosenstein, who always arranges the programme. There are not so many stars as usual to-night, but he promises us some very good music.”

While he was speaking the young Italian took stock of the great financier. A massive head, surmounted with a mass of snow-white hair, a patriarchal beard of the same hue, a tall, sturdy figure. Nello guessed his age at seventy, but the brightness of his glance, the upright form, gave little sign of age. He went by the evidence of the snow-white hair and beard.

After a brief conversation the Countess turned to young Corsini.

“This gentleman wishes to make your acquaintance, Baron. Signor Nello Corsini. You will no doubt remember him at the last Covent Garden Concert.”

The Baron held out his hand and his smile was very kindly. “I recollect you well, Signor. You played very beautifully; you took the place of Bauquel, who played our good friend Degraux a rather scurvy trick.”

Nello bowed. He felt very embarrassed. The Countess had discreetly turned her head, so as not to appear to listen to their conversation. The young violinist had, no doubt, something of a private nature to impart.

“I have taken advantage of the Countess’s kindness to make your acquaintance, Baron. The fact is, I have in my possession a letter addressed to you, a few days before his death, by a friend of mine, a Monsieur Péron. Did you know anybody of that name?”

“Péron, Péron!” repeated the Baron, then he shook his snow-white head. “No; that name recalls nobody to me.”

“I have reason to believe it was an assumed one and that he was a great friend of yours some years ago. I am charged to deliver it personally into your hands.”

The bright eyes took on an alert expression. “You have not got it with you, I suppose?”

“No, sir, I would not risk carrying it about with me. Would it be possible for me to see you at your office, or anywhere else, for a few moments?”

The Baron thought a second. “Certainly. Come to Old Broad Street to-morrow morning, say at eleven o’clock. Please be punctual, as my day is pretty well cut up with appointments.”

“At eleven to the minute, sir,” was Corsini’s answer. After a few minutes’ chat with the Countess, in which he tactfully included the young violinist, the Baron pursued his tour of the drawing-rooms, exchanging numerous greetings, for he knew every artist in London.

CHAPTER VII

The next morning Corsini presented himself at the palatial premises in Old Broad Street where the Baron evolved his vast financial schemes. After he had waited in an anteroom for a couple of minutes, a slim young man, who looked like a confidential secretary, appeared from an inner apartment, and led him down a long corridor to Salmoros's private sanctum.

It was a handsome apartment, beautifully furnished. Your feet sank in the thick Turkey carpet; the easy-chairs were models of artistic design and comfort. There were only a few pictures on the walls, but each one was a gem. The Baron was a lover of art in every shape and form, and one of the best-known collectors in Europe. In his business, as well as his leisure hours, he loved to surround himself with beautiful things.

Few, save a few old friends, knew anything of his family or antecedents. The name suggested a Greek origin, although of course most of his enemies would have it that he was a pure Jew. His fine, clear-cut features, however, had no affinity to those of that celebrated race.

He smiled kindly at the young man, and shook hands cordially with him: he had the greatest respect for all persons connected directly with the arts. After a few commonplace remarks, he asked for the letter.

Nello handed it to him, and at the same time showed him the glittering Order of St. Louis.

"This is one of the few things my poor old friend had in his possession when he died in that poor house in Dean Street, Baron. I have no doubt, in my own mind, that he was once a man of position and distinction."

The Baron glanced at the Order, and nodded his head. It was evident common persons did not come into possession of such valuable things. Then he opened the letter, and read.

When he had perused it and laid it down on the desk in front of him, a strangely soft expression had come over his fine, intellectual face.

"My poor old friend Jean!" he murmured in a low voice. "How very strange! I believed him dead long ago. There was a rumour that he had been shot in those terrible days of the Commune. Poor Jean! My once dear friend Jean!"

"I am right in saying that the name of Péron was assumed?" asked Nello timidly.

The Baron bent his keen glance on him. "You know absolutely nothing of his real history?"

"For the purposes of identification, nothing, sir. The only thing that he ever let drop was that long ago he had been a pianist of eminence. That I could well believe, for even at the age at which I knew him, his touch was that of a master."

"Ah, that is all you could gather. Well, my poor old friend was always a little fond of mystery. His real name was Jean Villefort, and he was one of the finest and most successful artists of his generation. You are a musician yourself; you must have heard of him, although, of course, he was long before your time."

Yes, Nello had heard of him as one of the great masters of the past. "Then he must have amassed a great fortune, Baron. How came it that he died so poor and friendless?"

The Baron spoke slowly, in a musing tone, as if following the thread of his recollections. "Yes, he made plenty of money in his time; he had a tremendous vogue on the Continent and was a special favourite of Napoleon the Third; I do not think he ever achieved much success in England or America. I know he was greatly dissatisfied with both his tours in those countries."

The Baron paused, much to Nello's disappointment. He was eager to know all the details of the past life of this strange old man who had passed away under such tragic circumstances. Especially curious was he to learn what had become of all his wealth.

Salmoros looked up and caught the gleam of interrogation in the young man's eyes.

“Naturally you are curious. Well, no doubt my poor old friend made plenty in his time; but he was very lavish, charitable, and open-handed. Still, his fortune could have endured the strain placed upon it by the possession of such amiable qualities. Alas! he was a confirmed gambler; the racecourse and the card-table swallowed up any surplus he ever possessed.”

“I understand,” said Nello. “And when was it, may I ask, Baron, that you lost sight of him?”

“He disappeared from Paris – you may say, from the world – about twenty-five years ago, or thereabouts. I was one of his most intimate friends, although he was about seven years my senior. From that day to this, to the moment that you have brought me this letter, I have never heard a word from him. His sudden disappearance was a nine days’ wonder, but the world rolled on and the great artist, Jean Villefort, was forgotten.

“That sudden disappearance, the abandonment of such a brilliant career in a moment of despair, was, I need hardly say, the outcome of a tragedy. Also needless to add that, as usual in such cases, a woman was at the bottom of it. The few details that filtered out enabled us to piece together certain things.”

“And the certain things?” queried Nello eagerly.

Salmoros spoke in his low, deliberate voice – the voice of the man who, with his vast experience of the world, had known and seen everything, and was surprised at nothing.

“Let me put it to you as shortly as possible. An elderly husband, married to a charming and beautiful young woman some fifteen, perhaps twenty, years his junior. The husband, a member of the old French nobility, a little dull, not gifted with any mentality. The wife, ardent, romantic, a lover of music and all the arts, not a single bond of union between her and her unappreciative husband. You follow me? You are an artist yourself. You will soon see the beginning of the romance that ended in tragedy. In a very inspired mood, you could express it on your violin.”

Nello nodded. His life had been so hard up to the present moment, that he had enjoyed scant leisure to indulge in the softer emotions of life. But, in a vague sort of way, he could appreciate something of the tragedy of Papa Péron’s past.

“Tell me something more, if you please. I am very interested.”

Salmoros continued in his slow, deliberate tones. “The *femme incomprise*, a more or less bovine husband, a man almost as old as her husband, but ardent and impetuous, ten years younger in spirit than his real age. What happens? The woman falls in love with him for his genius. He bewitches her with his beautiful art. With his deft and skilled fingers, and by Heaven he was almost the finest pianist I have ever heard, he drew out from her her very soul.”

“Ah! I can understand he must have been very wonderful,” interjected Nello. “Even at his age, there were times when he thrilled me.”

Salmoros nodded. “You can understand the spell he would cast over a comparatively young woman. Well, let us get to the end of this. My poor old friend Jean sleeps in peace, why wake up those old faint memories?”

“But they are very interesting, Baron,” urged Corsini.

“I know, my young friend. Even I have a melancholy interest in them, because they take me back to the days of comparative youth. Well, to be brief – a romance in a nutshell. A violent altercation between husband and lover, a duel, the husband is wounded, not mortally, carried to his house. The charming young wife, innocent, or perhaps guilty, cause of all this dire misfortune, commits suicide. Jean Villefort, apprised of her tragic end, disappears. He might have thrown himself into the Seine. For days his friends searched for him in the *morgue* to no purpose. And, through you, I have at last unearthed the mystery. Jean Villefort did not avail himself of the coward’s resource.”

“Ah, Baron, dear Monsieur Péron – I prefer to call him by that name – was no coward,” interjected Nello eagerly.

“I quite agree. He left a world which held no further joys or triumphs for him. *Mon Dieu*, what a strange temperament! Why don't these fellows make art and sentiment a part of their life only, and put in some common sense on the other side?”

“You speak from the great financier's point of view, Baron?” suggested Nello shrewdly.

Salmoros smiled his slow, appreciative smile. “I see, young man, you have got a head on your shoulders. Well now, let us come to this letter.”

Nello was only too anxious that he should.

“I am waiting for that, Baron. Of course I can only guess at the contents that he has recommended me to you.”

“That he does in the warmest terms, and for the sake of our old friendship I am prepared to comply with his request. In this letter, which is not dated – he explains that by the fact that he does not know how soon his death will take place – he states that you are hoping to establish yourself as an artist, that he has already secured you a small, but fairly remunerative, engagement at the Parthenon.”

“That is quite true, sir.”

“Then, I take it, this letter was antecedent to your considerable success at the Covent Garden Concert. In that comparatively short space of time, your remuneration has gone up by leaps and bounds?”

Nello assented for the second time. “Perfectly correct, sir.”

“Then how do we stand? Of course, if you were quite a poor man, I would find you a post at once for the sake of my old friendship with Jean Villefort. But, candidly, do you want my assistance? I am not dissatisfied with my lot, Signor Corsini, I can assure you – ”

And Nello murmured, half under his breath: “I should think you were not, Baron, you a financier of European renown.”

A whimsical smile overspread the other man's features. “And yet I will tell you a little secret. Music is a passion with me. I am a financier by profession, but art, art alone absorbs my soul. I have tried, oh how hard! to be an executant on more than one instrument. Signor Corsini, I would pay you a hundred thousand pounds to-morrow, if you could teach me to play that exquisite little romance as you played it last night. I feel every note in my soul, but when my feeble fingers touch the strings, they are powerless.”

Nello looked at him compassionately. There was in his composition the hard Latin fibre; but here was a new experience for him. Here was a man who had achieved eminence in one of the most difficult professions, a man who could write a cheque for one or two millions. And here he was, lamenting his incapacity to succeed in an art for which nature had given him no equipment.

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