SOUVENIRS OF AN EGOIST

EHEU FUGACES! How that air carries me back, that air ground away so unmercifully, *sans* tune, *sans* time on a hopelessly discordant barrel-organ, right underneath my window. It is being bitterly execrated, I know, by the literary gentleman who lives in chambers above me, and by the convivial gentleman who has a dinner party underneath. It has certainly made it impossible for me to continue the passage in my new Fugue in A minor, which was being transferred so flowingly from my own brain on to the score when it interrupted me. But for all that, I have a shrewd suspicion that I shall bear its unmusical torture as long as it lasts, and eventually send away the frowsy foreigner, who no doubt is playing it, happy with a fairly large coin.

Yes: for the sake of old times, for the old emotion's sake—for Ninette's sake, I put up with it, not altogether sorry for the recollections it has aroused.

How vividly it brings it all back! Though I am a rich man now, and so comfortably domiciled; though the fashionable world are so eager to lionise me, and the musical world look upon me almost as a god, and to-morrow hundreds of people will be turned away, for want of space, from the Hall where I am to play, just I alone, my last Fantaisie, it was not so very many years ago that I trudged along, fiddling for half-pence in the streets. Ninette and I—Ninette with her barrel-organ, and I fiddling. Poor little Ninette—that air was one of the four her organ played. I wonder what has become of her? Dead, I should hope, poor child. Now that I am successful and famous, a Baron of the French Empire, it is not altogether unpleasant to think of the old, penniless, vagrant days, by a blazing fire in a thick carpeted room, with the November night shut outside. I am rather an epicure of my emotions, and my work is none the worse for it.

"Little egoist," I remember Lady Greville once said of me, "he has the true artistic susceptibility. All his sensations are so much grist for his art."

But it is of Ninette, not Lady Greville, that I think to-night, Ninette's childish face that the dreary grinding organ brings up before me, not Lady Greville's aquiline nose and delicate artificial complexion.

Although I am such a great man now, I should find it very awkward to be obliged to answer questions as to my parentage and infancy.

Even my nationality I could not state precisely, though I know I am as much Italian as English, perhaps rather more. From Italy I have inherited my genius and enthusiasm for art, from England I think I must have got my common-sense, and the capacity of keeping the money which I make; also a certain natural coldness of disposition, which those who only know me as a public character do not dream of. All my earliest memories are very vague and indistinct. I remember tramping over France and Italy with a man and woman—they were Italian, I believe—who beat me, and a fiddle, which I loved passionately, and which I cannot remember having ever been without. They are very shadowy presences now, and the name of the man I have forgotten. The woman, I think, was called Maddalena. I am ignorant whether they were related to me in any way: I know that I hated them bitterly, and eventually, after a worse beating than usual, ran away from them. I never cared for any one except my fiddle, until I knew Ninette.

I was very hungry and miserable indeed when that rencontre came about. I wonder sometimes what would have happened if Ninette had not come to the rescue, just at that particular juncture. Would some other salvation have appeared, or would—well, well, if one once begins wondering what would have happened if certain accidents in one's life had not befallen one when they did, where will one come to a stop? Anyhow, when I had escaped from my taskmasters, a wretched, puny child of ten, undersized and shivering, clasping a cheap fiddle in my arms, lost in the huge labyrinth of Paris, without a *sou* in my rags to save me from starvation, I *did* meet Ninette, and that, after all, is the main point.

It was at the close of my first day of independence, a wretched November evening, very much like this one. I had wandered about all day, but my efforts had not been rewarded by a single coin. My fiddle was old and warped, and injured by the rain; its whining was even more repugnant to my own sensitive ear, than to that of the casual passer-by. I was in despair. How I hated all the few well-dressed, well-to-do people who were out on the Boulevards, on that inclement night. I wandered up and down hoping against hope, until I was too tired to stand, and then I crawled under the shelter of a covered passage, and flung myself down on the ground, to die, as I hoped, crying bitterly.

The alley was dark and narrow, and I did not see at first that it had another occupant. Presently a hand was put out and touched me on the shoulder.

I started up in terror, though the touch was soft and need not have alarmed me. I found it came from a little girl, for she was really about my own age, though then she seemed to me very big and protecting. But she was tall and strong for her age, and I, as I have said, was weak and undersized.

"Chut! little boy," said Ninette; "what are you crying for?"

And I told her my story, as clearly as I could, through my sobs; and soon a pair of small arms were thrown round my neck, and a smooth little face laid against my wet one caressingly. I felt as if half my troubles were over.

"Don't cry, little boy," said Ninette grandly; "I will take care of you. If you like, you shall live with me. We will make a *ménage* together. What is your profession?"

I showed her my fiddle, and the sight of its condition caused fresh tears to flow.

"Ah!" she said, with a smile of approval, "a violinist—good! I too am an artiste. You ask my instrument? There it is!"

And she pointed to an object on the ground beside her, which I had, at first, taken to be a big box, and dimly hoped might contain eatables. My respect for my new friend suffered a little diminution. Already I felt instinctively that to play the fiddle, even though it is an old, a poor one, is to be something above a mere organ-grinder.

But I did not express this feeling—was not this little girl going to take me home with her? Would not she, doubtless, give me something to eat?

My first impulse was an artistic one; that was of Italy. The concealment of it was due to the English side of me—the practical side.

I crept close to the little girl; she drew me to her protectingly.

"What is thy name, *p'tit?*" she said.

"Anton," I answered, for that was what the woman Maddalena had called me. Her husband, if he was her husband, never gave me any title, except when he was abusing me, and then my names were many and unmentionable. Nowadays I am the Baron Antonio Antonelli, of the Legion of Honour, but that is merely an extension of the old concise Anton, so far as I know, the only name I ever had.

"Anton?" repeated the little girl, "that is a nice name to say. Mine is Ninette."

We sat in silence in our sheltered nook, waiting until the rain should stop, and very soon I began to whimper again.

"I am so hungry, Ninette," I said; "I have eaten nothing to-day."

In the literal sense this was a lie; I had eaten some stale crusts in the early

morning, before I gave my taskmasters the slip, but the hunger was true enough.

Ninette began to reproach herself for not thinking of this before. After much fumbling in her pocket, she produced a bit of *brioche*, an apple, and some cold chestnuts.

"*V'la*, Anton," she said, "pop those in your mouth. When we get home we will have supper together. I have bread and milk at home. And we will buy two hot potatoes from the man on the *quai*."

I ate the unsatisfying morsels ravenously, Ninette watching me with an approving nod the while. When they were finished, the weather was a little better, and Ninette said we might move. She slung the organ over her shoulder—it was a small organ, though heavy for a child; but she was used to it, and trudged along under its weight like a woman. With her free hand she caught hold of me and led me along the wet streets, proudly home. Ninette's home! Poor little Ninette! It was colder and barer than these rooms of mine now; it had no grand piano, and no thick carpets; and in the place of pictures and *bibelots*, its walls were only wreathed in cobwebs. Still it was drier than the streets of Paris, and if it had been a palace it could not have been more welcome to me than it was that night.

The *ménage* of Ninette was a strange one! There was a tumbledown deserted house in the Montparnasse district. It stood apart, in an overgrown weedy garden, and has long ago been pulled down. It was uninhabited; no one but a Parisian *gamine* could have lived in it, and Ninette had long occupied it, unmolested, save by the rats. Through the broken palings in the garden she had no difficulty in passing, and as its back door had fallen to pieces, there was nothing to bar her further entry. In one of the few rooms which had its window intact, right at the top of the house, a mere attic, Ninette had installed herself and her scanty goods, and henceforward this became my home also.

It has struck me since as strange that the child's presence should not have been resented by the owner. But I fancy the house had some story connected with it. It was, I believe, the property of an old and infirm miser, who in his reluctance to part with any of his money in repairs had overreached himself, and let his property become valueless. He could not let it, and he would not pull it down. It remained therefore an eyesore to the neighborhood, until his death put it in the possession of a less avaricious successor. The proprietor never came near the place, and with the neighbours it had a bad repute, and they avoided it as much as possible. It stood as I have said, alone, and in its own garden, and Ninette's occupation of it may have passed unnoticed,

while even if any one of the poor people living around had known of her, it was, after all, nobody's business to interfere.

When I was last in Paris I went to look for the house, but all traces of it had vanished, and over the site, so far as I could fix it, a narrow street of poor houses flourished.

Ninette introduced me to her domain with a proud air of ownership. She had a little store of charcoal, with which she proceeded to light a fire in the grate, and by its fitful light prepared our common supper—bread and radishes, washed down by a pennyworth of milk, of which, I have no doubt, I received the lion's share. As a dessert we munched, with much relish, the steaming potatoes that Ninette had bought from a stall in the street, and had kept warm in the pocket of her apron.

And so, as Ninette said, we made a *ménage* together. How that old organ brings it all back. My fiddle was useless after the hard usage it received that day. Ninette and I went out on our rounds together, but for the present I was a sleeping partner in the firm and all I could do was to grind occasionally when Ninette's arm ached, or pick up the sous that were thrown us. Ninette was, as a rule, fairly successful. Since her mother had died, a year before, leaving her the organ as her sole legacy, she had lived mainly by that instrument; although she often increased her income in the evenings, when organ-grinding was more than ever at a discount, by selling bunches of violets and other flowers as button-holes.

With her organ she had a regular beat, and a distinct *clientèle*. Children playing with their *bonnes* in the gardens of the Tuileries and the Luxembourg were her most productive patrons. Of course we had bad days as well as good, and in winter it was especially bad; but as a rule we managed fairly to make both ends meet. Sometimes we carried home as much as five francs as the result of the day's campaign, but this, of course, was unusual.

Ninette was not precisely a pretty child, but she had a very bright face, and wonderful gray eyes. When she smiled, which was often, her face was very attractive, and a good many people were induced to throw a sou for the smile which they would have assuredly grudged to the music.

Though we were about the same age, the position which it might have been expected we should occupy was reversed. It was Ninette who petted and protected me—I who clung to her.

I was very fond of Ninette, certainly. I should have died in those days if it had not been for her, and sometimes I am surprised at the tenacity of my tenderness for her. As much as I ever cared for anything except my art, I

cared for Ninette. But still she was never the first with me, as I must have been with her. I was often fretful and discontented, sometimes, I fear, ready to reproach her for not taking more pains to alleviate our misery, but all the time of our partnership Ninette never gave me a cross word. There was something maternal about her affection, which withstood all ungratefulness. She was always ready to console me when I was miserable, and throw her arms around me and kiss me when I was cold; and many a time, I am sure, when the day's earnings had been scanty, the little girl must have gone to sleep hungry, that I might not be stinted in my supper.

One of my grievances, and that the sorest of all, was the loss of my beloved fiddle. This, for all her goodwill, Ninette was powerless to allay.

"Dear Anton," she said, "do not mind about it. I earn enough for both with my organ, and some day we shall save enough to buy thee a new fiddle. When we are together, and have got food and charcoal, what does it matter about an old fiddle? Come, eat thy supper, Anton, and I will light the fire. Never mind, dear Anton." And she laid her soft little cheek against mine with a pleading look.

"Don't," I cried, pushing her away, "you can't understand, Ninette; you can only grind an organ—just four tunes, always the same. But I loved my fiddle, loved it! loved it!" I cried passionately. "It could talk to me, Ninette, and tell me beautiful, new things, always beautiful, and always new. Oh, Ninette, I shall die if I cannot play!"

It was always the same cry, and Ninette, if she could not understand, and was secretly a little jealous, was as distressed as I was; but what could she do?

Eventually, I got my violin, and it was Ninette who gave it me. The manner of its acquirement was in this wise.

Ninette would sometimes invest some of her savings in violets, which she divided with me, and made into nosegays for us to sell in the streets at night.

Theatre doors and frequented places on the Boulevards were our favourite spots.

One night we had taken up our station outside the Opéra, when a gentleman stopped on his way in, and asked Ninette for a button-hole. He was in evening dress and in a great hurry.

"How much?" he asked shortly.

"Ten *sous, M'sieu,*" said exorbitant little Ninette, expecting to get two at the most.

The gentleman drew out some coins hastily and selected a bunch from the basket.

"Here is a franc," he said, "I cannot wait for change," and putting a coin into Ninette's hand he turned into the theatre.

Ninette ran towards me with her eyes gleaming; she held up the piece of money exultantly.

"Tiens, Anton!" she cried, and I saw that it was not a franc, as we had thought at first, but a gold Napoleon.

I believe the good little boy and girl in the story-books would have immediately sought out the unfortunate gentleman and bid him rectify his mistake, generally receiving, so the legend runs, a far larger bonus as a reward of their integrity. I have never been a particularly good little boy, however, and I don't think it ever struck either Ninette or myself—perhaps we were not sufficiently speculative—that any other course was open to us than to profit by the mistake. Ninette began to consider how we were to spend it.

"Think of it, Anton, a whole gold *louis*. A *louis,*" said Ninette, counting laboriously, "is twenty francs, a franc is twenty sous, Anton; how many sous are there in a louis? More than an hundred?"

But this piece of arithmetic was beyond me; I shook my head dubiously.

"What shall we buy first, Anton?" said Ninette, with sparkling eyes. "You shall have new things, Anton, a pair of new shoes and an hat; and I—"

But I had other things than clothes in my mind's eye; I interrupted her.

"Ninette, dear little Ninette," I said coaxingly, "remember the fiddle."

Ninette's face fell, but she was a tender little thing, and she showed no hesitation.

"Certainly, Anton," she said, but with less enthusiasm, "we will get it to-morrow—one of the fiddles you showed me in M. Boudinot's shop on the Quai. Do you think the ten-franc one will do, or the light one for fifteen francs?"

"Oh, the light one, dear Ninette," I said; "it is worth more than the extra money. Besides, we shall soon earn it back now. Why if you could earn such a lot as you have with your old organ, when you only have to turn an handle, think what a lot I shall make, fiddling. For you have to be something to play the fiddle, Ninette."

"Yes," said the little girl, wincing; "you are right, dear Anton. Perhaps you will get rich and go away and leave me?"

"No, Ninette," I declared grandly, "I will always take care of you. I have no doubt I shall get rich, because I am going to be a great musician, but I shall not leave you. I will have a big house on the Champs Elysées, and then you shall come and live with me, and be my housekeeper. And in the

evenings, I will play to you and make you open your eyes, Ninette. You will like me to play, you know; we are often dull in the evenings."

"Yes," said Ninette meekly, "we will buy your fiddle to-morrow, dear Anton. Let us go home now."

Poor vanished Ninette! I must often have made the little heart sore with some of the careless things I said. Yet looking back at it now, I know that I never cared for any living person so much as I did for Ninette.

I have very few illusions left now; a childhood, such as mine, does not tend to preserve them, and time and success have not made me less cynical. Still I have never let my scepticism touch that childish presence. Lady Greville once said to me, in the presence of her nephew Felix Leominster, a musician too, like myself, that we three were curiously suited, for that we were, without exception, the three most cynical persons in the universe. Perhaps in a way she was right. Yet for all her cynicism Lady Greville I know has a bundle of old and faded letters, tied up in black ribbon in some hidden drawer, that perhaps she never reads now, but that she cannot forget or destroy. They are in a bold handwriting, that is not, I think, that of the miserable, old debauchee, her husband, from whom she has been separated since the first year of her marriage, and their envelopes bear Indian postmarks.

And Felix, who told me the history of those letters with a smile of pity on his thin, ironical lips—Felix, whose principles are adapted to his conscience and whose conscience is bounded by the law, and in whom I believe as little as he does in me, I found out by accident not so very long ago. It was on the day of All Souls, the melancholy festival of souvenirs, celebrated once a year, under the November fogs, that I strayed into the Montparnasse Cemetery, to seek inspiration for my art. And though he did not see me, I saw Felix, the prince of railers, who believes in nothing and cares for nothing except himself, for music is not with him a passion but an *agrément*. Felix bareheaded, and without his usual smile, putting fresh flowers on the grave of a little Parisian grisette, who had been his mistress and died five years ago. I thought of Balzac's "Messe de l'Athée" and ranked Felix's inconsistency with it, feeling at the same time how natural such a paradox is. And myself, the last of the trio, at the mercy of a street organ, I cannot forget Ninette.

Though it was not until many years had passed that I heard that little criticism, the purchase of my fiddle was destined very shortly to bring my life in contact with its author. Those were the days when a certain restraint grew up between Ninette and myself. Ninette, it must be confessed, was

jealous of the fiddle. Perhaps she knew instinctively that music was with me a single and absorbing passion, from which she was excluded. She was no genius, little Ninette, and her organ was nothing more to her than the means of making a livelihood; she felt not the smallest *tendresse* for it, and could not understand why a dead and inanimate fiddle, made of mere wood and catgut, should be any more to me than that. How could she know that to me it was never a dead thing, that even when it hung hopelessly out of my reach, in the window of M. Boudinot, before ever it had given out wild, impassioned music beneath my hands, it was always a live thing to me, alive and with a human, throbbing heart, vibrating with hope and passion.

So Ninette was jealous of the fiddle, and being proud in her way, she became more and more quiet and reticent, and drew herself aloof from me, although, wrapped up as I was in the double egoism of art and boyhood, I failed to notice this. I have been sorry since that any shadow of misunderstanding should have clouded the closing days of our partnership. It is late to regret now, however. When my fiddle was added to our belongings, we took to going out separately. It was more profitable, and, besides, Ninette, I think, saw that I was growing a little ashamed of her organ. On one of these occasions, as I played before a house in the Faubourg St. Germain, the turning point of my life befell me. The house, outside which I had taken my station was a large, white one, with a balcony on the first floor. This balcony was unoccupied, but the window looking to it was open, and through the lace curtains I could distinguish the sound of voices. I began to play; at first, one of the airs that Maddalena had taught me; but before it was finished, I had glided off, as usual, into an improvisation.

When I was playing like that, I threw all my soul into my fingers, and I had neither ears nor eyes for anything around me. I did not therefore notice until I had finished playing that a lady and a young man had come out into the balcony, and were beckoning to me.

"Bravo!" cried the lady enthusiastically, but she did not throw me the reward I had expected. She turned and said something to her companion, who smiled and disappeared. I waited expectantly, thinking perhaps she had sent him for her purse. Presently the door opened, and the young man issued from it. He came to me and touched me on the shoulder.

"You are to come with me," he said, authoritatively, speaking in French, but with an English accent. I followed him, my heart beating with excitement, through the big door, into a large, handsome hall and up a broad staircase, thinking that in all my life I had never seen such a beautiful house.

He led me into a large and luxurious *salon,* which seemed to my astonished eyes like a wonderful museum. The walls were crowded with pictures, a charming composition by Gustave Moreau was lying on the grand piano, waiting until a nook could be found for it to hang. Renaissance bronzes and the work of eighteenth century silversmiths jostled one another on brackets, and on a table lay a handsome violin-case. The pale blinds were drawn down, and there was a delicious smell of flowers diffused everywhere. A lady was lying on a sofa near the window, a handsome woman of about thirty, whose dress was a miracle of lace and flimsiness.

The young man led me towards her, and she placed two delicate, jewelled hands on my shoulders, looking me steadily in the face.

"Where did you learn to play like that, my boy?" she asked.

"I cannot remember when I could not fiddle, Madame," I answered, and that was true.

"The boy is a born musician, Felix," said Lady Greville. "Look at his hands."

And she held up mine to the young man's notice; he glanced at them carelessly.

"Yes, Miladi," said the young man, "they are real violin hands. What were you playing just now, my lad?"

"I don't know, sir," I said. "I play just what comes into my head."

Lady Greville looked at her nephew with a glance of triumph.

"What did I tell you?" she cried. "The boy is a genius, Felix. I shall have him educated."

"All your geese are swans, Auntie," said the young man in English.

Lady Greville, however, ignored this thrust.

"Will you play for me now, my dear," she said, "as you did before—just what comes into your head?"

I nodded, and was getting my fiddle to my chin, when she stopped me.

"Not that thing," bestowing a glance of contempt at my instrument. "Felix, the Stradivarius."

The young man went to the other side of the room, and returned with the case which I had noticed. He put it in my hand, with the injunction to handle it gently. I had never heard of Cremona violins, nor of my namesake Stradivarius; but at the sight of the dark seasoned wood, reposing on its blue velvet, I could not restrain a cry of admiration.

I have that same instrument in my room now, and I would not trust it in the hands of another for a million.

I lifted the violin tenderly from its case, and ran my bow up the gamut.

I felt almost intoxicated at the mellow sounds it uttered. I could have kissed the dark wood, that looked to me stained through and through with melody.

I began to play. My improvisation was a song of triumph and delight; the music, at first rapid and joyous, became slower and more solemn, as the inspiration seized me, until at last, in spite of myself, it grew into a wild and indescribable dirge, fading away in a long wail of unutterable sadness and regret. When it was over I felt exhausted and unstrung, as though virtue had gone out from me. I had played as I had never played before. The young man had turned away, and was looking out of the window. The lady on the sofa was transfigured. The languor had altogether left her, and the tears were streaming down her face, to the great detriment of the powder and enamel which composed her complexion.

She pulled me towards her, and kissed me.

"It is beautiful, terrible!" she said; "I have never heard such strange music in my life. You must stay with me now and have masters. If you can play like that now, without culture and education, in time, when you have been taught, you will be the greatest violinist that ever lived."

I will say of Lady Greville that, in spite of her frivolity and affectations, she does love music at the bottom of her soul, with the absorbing passion that in my eyes would absolve a person for committing all the sins in the Decalogue. If her heart could be taken out and examined I can fancy it as a shield, divided into equal fields. Perhaps, as her friends declare, one of these might bear the device "Modes et Confections"; but I am sure that you would see on the other, even more deeply graven, the divine word "Music."

She is one of the few persons whose praise of any of my compositions gives me real satisfaction; and almost alone, when everybody is running, in true goose fashion, to hear my piano recitals, she knows and tells me to stick to my true vocation—the violin.

"My dear Baron," she said, "why waste your time playing on an instrument which is not suited to you, when you have Stradivarius waiting at home for the magic touch?"

She was right, though it is the fashion to speak of me now as a second Rubenstein. There are two or three finer pianists than I, even here in England. But I am quite sure, yes, and you are sure, too, oh my Stradivarius, that in the whole world there is nobody who can make such music out of you as I can, no one to whom you tell such stories as you tell to me. Anyone, who knows, could see by merely looking at my hands that they are violin and not piano hands.

"Will you come and live with me, Anton?" said Lady Greville, more calmly. "I am rich, and childless; you shall live just as if you were my child. The best masters in Europe shall teach you. Tell me where to find your parents, Anton, and I will see them to-night."

"I have no parents," I said, "only Ninette. I cannot leave Ninette."

"Shade of Musset, who is Ninette?" asked Felix, turning round from the window.

I told him.

"What is to be done?" cried Lady Greville in perplexity. "I cannot have the girl here as well, and I will not let my Phœnix go."

"Send her to the Sœurs de la Miséricorde," said the young man carelessly; "you have a nomination."

"Have I?" said Lady Greville, with a laugh. "I am sure I did not know it. It is an excellent idea; but do you think he will come without the other? I suppose they were like brother and sister?"

"Look at him now," said Felix, pointing to where I stood caressing the precious wood; "he would sell his soul for that fiddle."

Lady Greville took the hint. "Here, Anton," said she, "I cannot have Ninette here—you understand, once and for all. But I will see that she is sent to a kind home, where she will want nothing and be trained up as a servant. You need not bother about her. You will live with me and be taught, and some day, if you are good and behave, you shall go and see Ninette."

I was irresolute, but I only said doggedly, feeling what would be the end, "I do not want to come, if Ninette may not."

Then Lady Greville played her trump card.

"Look, Anton," she said, "you see that violin. I have no need, I see, to tell you its value. If you will come with me and make no scene, you shall have it for your very own. Ninette will be perfectly happy. Do you agree?"

I looked at my old fiddle, lying on the floor. How yellow and trashy it looked beside the grand old Cremona, bedded in its blue velvet.

"I will do what you like, Madame," I said.

"Human nature is pretty much the same in geniuses and dullards," said Felix. "I congratulate you, Auntie."

And so the bargain was struck, and the new life entered upon that very day. Lady Greville sought out Ninette at once, though I was not allowed to accompany her.

I never saw Ninette again. She made no opposition to Lady Greville's scheme. She let herself be taken to the Orphanage, and she never asked, so they said, to see me again.

"She's a stupid little thing," said Lady Greville to her nephew, on her return, "and as plain as possible; but I suppose she was kind to the boy. They will forget each other now I hope. It is not as if they were related."

"In that case they would already be hating each other. However, I am quite sure your protégé will forget soon enough; and, after all, you have nothing to do with the girl."

I suppose I did not think very much of Ninette then; but what would you have? It was such a change from the old vagrant days, that there is a good deal to excuse me. I was absorbed too in the new and wonderful symmetry which music began to assume, as taught me by the master Lady Greville procured for me. When the news was broken to me, with great gentleness, that my little companion had run away from the sisters with whom she had been placed—run away, and left no traces behind her, I hardly realised how completely she would have passed away from me. I thought of her for a little while with some regret; then I remembered Stradivarius, and I could not be sorry long. So by degrees I ceased to think of her.

I lived on in Lady Greville's house, going with her, wherever she stayed—London, Paris, and Nice—until I was thirteen. Then she sent me away to study music at a small German capital, in the house of one of the few surviving pupils of Weber. We parted as we had lived together, without affection.

Personally Lady Greville did not like me; if anything, she felt an actual repugnance towards me. All the care she lavished on me was for the sake of my talent, not for myself. She took a great deal of trouble in superintending, not only my musical education, but my general culture. She designed little mediæval costumes for me, and was indefatigable in her endeavours to impart to my manners that finish which a gutter education had denied me.

There is a charming portrait of me, by a well-known English artist, that hangs now in her ladyship's drawing-room. A pale boy of twelve, clad in an old-fashioned suit of ruby velvet; a boy with huge, black eyes, and long curls of the same colour, is standing by an oak music-stand, holding before him a Cremona violin, whose rich colouring is relieved admirably by the beautiful old point lace with which the boy's doublet is slashed. It is a charming picture. The famous artist who painted it considers it his best portrait, and Lady Greville is proud of it.

But her pride is of the same quality as that which made her value my presence. I was in her eyes merely the complement of her famous fiddle.

I heard her one day express a certain feeling of relief at my approaching departure.

"You regret having taken him up?" asked her nephew curiously.

"No," she said, "that would be folly. He repays all one's trouble, as soon as he touches his fiddle—but I don't like him."

"He can play like the great Pan," says Felix.

"Yes, and like Pan he is half a beast."

"You may make a musician out of him," answered the young man, examining his pink nails with a certain admiration, "but you will never make him a gentleman."

"Perhaps not," said Lady Greville carelessly. "Still, Felix, he is very refined."

Dame! I think he would own himself mistaken now. Mr. Felix Leominster himself is not a greater social success than the Baron Antonio Antonelli, of the Legion of Honour. I am as sensitive as anyone to the smallest spot on my linen, and Duchesses rave about my charming manners.

For the rest my souvenirs are not very numerous. I lived in Germany until I made my *début,* and I never heard anything more of Ninette.

The history of my life is very much the history of my art: and that you know. I have always been an art-concentrated man—self-concentrated, my friend Felix Leominster tells me frankly—and since I was a boy nothing has ever troubled the serene repose of my egoism.

It is strange considering the way people rant about the "passionate sympathy" of my playing, the "enormous potentiality of suffering" revealed in my music, how singularly free from passion and disturbance my life has been.

I have never let myself be troubled by what is commonly called "love." To be frank with you, I do not much believe in it. Of the two principal elements of which it is composed, vanity and egoism, I have too little of the former, too much of the latter, too much coldness withal in my character to suffer from it. My life has been notoriously irreproachable. I figure in polemical literature as an instance of a man who has lived in contact with the demoralising influence of the stage, and will yet go to Heaven. *A la bonne heure!*

I am coming to the end of my souvenirs and of my cigar at the same time. I must convey a coin somehow to that dreary person outside, who is grinding now half-way down the street.

On consideration, I decide emphatically against opening the window and presenting it that way. If the fog once gets in, it will utterly spoil me for any work this evening. I feel myself in travail also of two charming little *Lieder* that all this thinking about Ninette has suggested. How would "Chansons de Gamine" do for a title? I think it best, on second thoughts, to

ring for Giacomo, my man, and send him out with the half-crown I propose to sacrifice on the altar of sentiment. Doubtless the musician is a country-woman of his, and if he pockets the coin, that is his look out.

Now if I was writing a romance, what a chance I have got. I should tell you how my organ-grinder turned out to be no other than Ninette. Of course she would not be spoilt or changed by the years—just the same Ninette. Then what scope for a pathetic scene of reconciliation and forgiveness—the whole to conclude with a peal of marriage bells, two people living together "happy ever after." But I am not writing a romance, and I am a musician, not a poet.

Sometimes, however, it strikes me that I should like to see Ninette again, and I find myself seeking traces of her in childish faces in the street.

The absurdity of such an expectation strikes me very forcibly afterwards, when I look at my reflection in the glass, and tell myself that I must be careful in the disposition of my parting.

Ninette, too, was my contemporary. Still I cannot conceive of her as a woman. To me she is always a child. Ninette grown up, with a draggled dress and squalling babies, is an incongruous thing that shocks my sense of artistic fitness. My fiddle is my only mistress, and while I can summon its consolation at command, I may not be troubled by the pettiness of a merely human love. But once when I was down with Roman fever, and tossed on a hotel bed, all the long, hot night, while Giacomo drowsed in a corner over "Il Diavolo Rosa," I seemed to miss Ninette.

Remembering that time, I sometimes fancy that when the inevitable hour strikes, and this hand is too weak to raise the soul of melody out of Stradivarius—when, my brief dream of life and music over, I go down into the dark land, where there is no more music, and no Ninette, into the sleep from which there comes no awaking, I should like to see her again, not the woman but the child. I should like to look into the wonderful eyes of the old Ninette, to feel the soft cheek laid against mine, to hold the little brown hands, as in the old *gamin* days.

It is a foolish thought, because I am not forty yet, and with the moderate life I lead I may live to play Stradivarius for another thirty years.

There is always the hope, too, that it, when it comes, may seize me suddenly. To see it coming, that is the horrible part. I should like to be struck by lightning, with you in my arms, Stradivarius, oh, my beloved—to die playing.

The literary gentleman over my head is stamping viciously about his room. What would his language be if he knew how I have rewarded his

tormentress—he whose principles are so strict that he would bear the agony for hours, sooner than give a barrel-organ sixpence to go to another street. He would be capable of giving Giacomo a sovereign to pocket my coin, if he only knew. Yet I owe that unmusical old organ a charming evening, tinged with a faint *soupçon* of melancholy which is necessary to and enhances the highest pleasure. Over the memories it has excited I have smoked a pleasant cigar—peace to its ashes!