

Wednesday - August 30, 1871.

PAGANINI.

"Mankind," says Du Bourgh, in the introduction to his book "On the Violin,"—"mankind may be divided into two classes—those who play the violin, and those who do not." As this humorous definition, of course, includes all those who play it in a way not fit to be heard, it will be understood that the former class is more numerous than would at first be supposed. Be that as it may, the art of playing this wonderful little instrument called "the little violin"—violin being the diminutive of viola—in any degree of mastery is acquired only by very few men among those professors who give the work of their whole lives to it. And now as to the "Magician!"

Let the reader—may I say spectator; as his portrait is about to be presented—let the reader or spectator imagine one of the tallest men he ever saw, and the very thinnest. He is really like a skeleton dressed in an evening suit of black—and he looks the blacker yet, because ever seen who was not born of that color and race. He wears a narrow, loose white neckerchief, but no pins, rings, or jewelry of any kind. His head is very high, very narrow, very bald, but he has a profusion of long, coal-black, snaky ringlets, hanging down just behind his ears, and falling in disorder over his forehead, and over his shoulders. His face is sunken and hollow, but with an expression of something lofty, yet restrained. His arms are long, the hands loose and yellow, and the fingers bony and strong, and of unusual length. His eyes are deep set, and gleaming with a sort of secret or hidden light, as from a flame concealed behind them. His nose is a long aquiline, and his jaws lantern.

The first impression of him is something between that of the devil and Don Quixote. His appearance is to be about fifty-five. We are speaking of his first appearance in London; and before this he had been comparatively unknown in this country, and quite unheard of by the mass of the people. So many are the years of labor and struggle it recognizes, and requires to become duly recognized amidst the crowd and pressure of all sorts of rival talents and other difficulties; so brief is the period with such men whose success comes at last.

Of course Paganini had first earned his reputation on the continent, or he would not have been invited to the Italian opera in London. However, this eventually occurred, and then his foreign reputation being duly paraded and pasted, a very crowded house assembled for the concert on his opening night. There is no orchestra in front. The curtain rises, and the orchestra is seen, ranging upwards at the back of the scene. His figure and face have been portrayed. A symphony plays and pauses. A tall black skeleton protrudes his head and shoulders above the side entrance, and advances, with a healthy gesture as of "a thing forbid." It is the Magician with his violin. He bows very low—almost ironically; then rises, and from that moment takes no more heed of the presence of the audience than if the house were empty. To describe his marvelous performances words are inadequate, and yet one is bound to say something.

I had previously heard all the other celebrities of the time on this instrument, and had supposed that nothing could surpass what their life-long labors produced. It was felt, however, and this feeling and opinion was the common one—that no other living player could be called second to Paganini, the interval being of a kind that put all resembling up or approach to him clean out of the question. The quality of his tone was of the richest and sometimes exuberant, and seemed to overflow, so to speak, not only the bounds of what might be called a bear, but what the hearer could bear. Many were the persons of keen musical sensibility who averred that they often felt his tones in the roots of their hair, and even at the vibrating and tingling throughout their whole being. His powers and skill in expression were of a kind to produce alternately tears, laughing, astonishment, the noblest emotions, and the most intense ecstasies. No wonder that his hearers shed tears when he could make the violin itself appear to weep. His execution, rapid as belief, even with those who were present, it seemed impossible that a single instrument could give the effect sometimes of half a dozen. His double-stopping was as rapid as any other player's single notes, and he could make it rapid cawing of single notes by the power of the fingers only, and while waving the bow in the air. Indeed, his bow was continually seen flourishing in the air like a magic wand as a signal or command to the orchestra behind him.

While his powers of expression varied from deep passion to the most delicate shades of emotion, he had also a descriptive and even imitative faculty which led him now and then into effects that laid him open to accusations of fool play and illegitimate means from instrumentalists who were incapable of such strikingly ingenious feats. For example, one of the pieces, for, unlike the common run of meaningless execution, all his pieces really did mean something, and often conveyed definite pictures to the imagination, was called "The Witches under the Walnut Tree."

You hear—let me say you saw—an old belandee come hobbling along in the twilight of evening. She is evidently toothless and lame. Her faltering, mumbling old song quite suggests this, as she advances toward the foot of the walnut tree. Presently another belandee, with a different tone of voice, advances to a somewhat different measure. The two meet and confer together in a weird dialogue—not merely singing, but talking.

To be continued.

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