

THE FASCINATION OF FIDDLES

The Story Of A Stolen "Strad."

Written for "The Listener" by HENRY J. HAYWARD

ONLY lovers of violins can truly appreciate the spell which royal old violins bring and hold over those who own them. There are few passions that possess a man to equal the fascination he feels for his singing violin. Naturally, there is the grand passion he feels for his woman-mate. But after all, there are many, many lovely women, but oh! so few lovely violins. Then again, your sweetheart-violin has the advantage over your woman-sweetheart that "age does not wither nor custom stale" its passionate attraction.

Perhaps I am ungallant, but fiddle-lovers will sense what I mean. Men, who in all other ways live honourable lives, have been known to steal violins that spelled them.

Here is the true account of a really great artist who kidnapped my "Strad."—I will not pillory his name, for knowing intimately the ruling passion a violin inspires, and for the sake of Art, and the reputation of a master-violinist that took decades to build—I decided that I would not prosecute.

But as a psychological study, the incident of "The Stolen Strad." should be put on record.

I shall write of this artist as "Incognito."

Family Heirloom

This "Strad." violin is an heirloom, and has been in my family just over a century, for my father purchased it in

1839 from Charles Reade the novelist, who was not only a connoisseur of Cremonese violins, but whose work on the "Lost Art of Cremonese Varnish" remains a standard authority.

Now my old dad first owned the "Strad." in 1839 at a cost of £150—a large sum for any violin a century ago—and until he died in 1886 it was his constant and beloved daily companion. On rare occasions, he lent it to other



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In his 'teens he fell for a "flapper"

contemporary artists—Sivori, the favourite Italian pupil of Paganini played upon it, as also did Ole Bull, that strange but gifted and poetic Norwegian virtuoso. And my father himself played on it with Mendelssohn at the Birmingham Musical Festival in the early 'forties.

The "Hayward Strad."—for so it was called—descended to my eldest brother Flavell, upon my father's death, and when my brother died in 1907, it came to me; and although in the golden days of my youth I dreamed of emulating my old dad's career as a solo violinist—and indeed I played in over a hundred English towns on tour—yet I found the profession of an entrepreneur more profitable. So gradually my fiddle playing became fallow, except for occasional quartet parties.

But when I became a citizen of New Zealand, my ownership of the "Strad." was well known, and visiting violinists generally "looked me up"—more to make acquaintance with the "Strad." than to see myself. For example, I lent Kubelik the "Strad." which he played upon during a part of his Australian tour; also John Dunn, the greatest English violinist of our time; and also Heifetz, one of the most masterly exponents of the art of the violin to-day.

"Incognito" Meets the Strad.

Then came another brilliant touring genius, whose name I have said shall be "Incognito." He was a strangely fascinating man, engrossed in his art and a super-

lative artist—a poet of the violin. My "Strad." instantly cast a spell upon him—it was "love at first sight"—and several times during his New Zealand tour, he came to pay court to the violin, which responded to his touch, and welled out in exquisite harmonies. For these master Cremonas leap in magic response to the caressing fingers of the true artist.

Then came the question: Would I sell the "Strad." to him?

At that time, I had a plethora of shekels—and for "Auld Lang Syne" I would not part with my precious fiddle, for it had become "one of the family." But as he had heard of my loan to Kubelik, he asked me to lend it to him for the period of his Australian visit. This was a little too much, but his manager, who had been my schoolmate at the ancient home town of Wulfruna, privately assured me that "Incognito" was a man of unquestionable honour, and had a modest fortune.

I Fall

So I fell, and the "Strad." together with a fine Tourte bow in its ancient mahogany case, was handed to him.

Several months passed. Through the newspapers I noted the royal progress of "Incognito" as he toured the capital cities of Australia. During this period, I received a further inquiry as to sale, asking me to name my own price. Then the press spoke of his return to the United States, and I thought the time had arrived for my "Strad." to be returned. So I wrote to a young lady friend—a newspaper girl, who was coming to New Zealand—and asked her to call for the "Strad." and bring it home, at the same time, sending a note to "Incognito," intimating that she would call.

He was full of courtesies to my friend when she visited his studio, and improvised rapturous harmonies for her on the "Strad."

He even came to see her off by the boat, and the mahogany case was safely placed in her cabin; and when the boat arrived in Auckland, she walked down the gangway with the violin case in her hand.

But what a bombshell awaited me when, an hour later at home, I opened the violin case. In it was a changeling violin! The "Strad." was stolen, and an old copy of Stradivarius lay in its velvet bed.

"Incognito" had substituted an old copy for my precious "Strad."—a copy that had been carefully given the characteristic wearing marks that two centuries of playing had left on the original. Where the fingers of past players had slipped from the finger board in the higher "positions" and worn off



the varnish—where the bow had caught the edge of the "belly" rim by the "purfling"—these marks had been cunningly imitated.

The Police Are Warned

Without handling it, I took the case with the "changeling" to the police station, and arrangements were made to take any fingerprints that might be on the instrument. Cables were dispatched to the Sydney police, and also to friends of mine, to watch the movements of "Incognito."

Replies came that "Incognito" had booked a passage to America under an assumed name, and although he was a rich man, he travelled steerage class. This was proof positive!

The "Strad." was stolen, and was being spirited to the States, where untold difficulties of identification of both the violin and the man would arise.

"Incognito" sailed.

A Fellow Feeling

Then I recollected the passion I had had for a Carlo Bergonzi violin which enraptured me in my golden 'teens—a lovely flapper fiddle dressed in Dragon's blood varnish—that sang like a siren at my caressing bow—and which I might have stolen had it not been given to me—the most royal gift of my adventurous life. (And afterwards, when in poverty, I sold it to Colonel Thorneycroft, of Spion Kop fame).

So this fellow-feeling made me wondrous kind. I decided to make a last appeal to "Incognito," for, as Fate had it, the boat was scheduled to call at Auckland.

The police were ready to arrest and take possession of both his person and belongings on arrival. But as I did not desire to ruin a man of his reputation, I dispatched a wireless to the boat, appealing to his better self, and promised to forgo action if the "Strad." was returned.

A laconic reply came: "I will return the 'Strad.' to you at Auckland."

And he did. When the boat arrived, my precious "Strad." came home, and I called the detectives off.

"Incognito" came to my office to ask forgiveness, but I would not see him. However, I bore him no ill-will. It was not a common theft—any more than Chas. Parnell's overwhelming love for Kitty O'Shea was a common passion. The siren Strad. sang to "Incognito," and he fell—as many of us mere males have fallen to sirens both of flesh and of our art dreams.

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