SECOND LETTER.

August 24th, 1872.

Gio Paolo Maggini is represented at the Kensington Museum by an excellent violin, No. 111, very fine in workmanship and varnish, but as to the model a trifle too much hollowed at the sides, and so a little inferior to some of his violins, and to the violin No. 70, the model of which, like many of the Brescian school, is simple and perfect. (Model as applied to a violin, is a term quite distinct from outline.) In No. 70 both belly and back are modelled with the simplicity of genius, by even gradation, from the centre, which is the highest part, down to all the borders of the instrument. The world has come back to this primitive model after trying a score, and prejudice gives the whole credit to Joseph Guarnerius, of Cremona. As to the date of No. 70, the neatness and, above all, the slimness of the sound-hole, mark, I think, a period slightly posterior to Gasparo da Salo. This slim sound-hole is an advance, not a retrogression. The gaping sound-holes of Gasparo da Salo and Maggini were their one great error. They were not only ugly; they lessened the ring by allowing the vibration to escape from the cavity too quickly. No. 60, assigned to Duiffoprugcar and a fabulous antiquity, was made by some 'prentice hand in the seventeenth century; but No. 70 would adorn any collection, being an old masterpiece of Brescia or Bologna.

The School of Cremona.—Andreas Amatus was more than thirty years old, and an accomplished maker of the older viole, when the violin was invented in Brescia or Bologna. He does not appear to have troubled his head with the new instrument for some years; one proof more that new they were. They would not at first materially influence his established trade; the old and new family ran side by side. Indeed it took the violin tribe two centuries to drive out the viola da gamba. However, in due course, Andreas Amatus set to work on violins. He learned from the Brescian school the only things they could teach a workman so superior—viz., the four corners and the sound-hole. This Brescian sound-hole stuck to him all his days; but what he had learned in his original art remained by him too. The collection contains three specimens

of his handiwork: Violin 202, Mrs. Jay's violin—with the modern head—erroneously assigned to Antonius and Hieronymus; and violoncello No. 183. There are also traces of his hand in the fine tenor 139. In the three instruments just named the purfling is composed in just proportions, so that the white comes out with vigour; it is then inlaid with great neatness. The violoncello is the gem. Its outline is grace itself: the four exquisite curves coincide in one pure and serpentine design. This bass is a violin soufflé; were it shown at a distance it would take the appearance of a most elegant violin; the best basses of Stradiuarius alone will stand this test. (Apply it to the Venetian masterpiece in the same case.) The scroll is perfect in design and chiselled as by a sculptor; the purfling is quite as fine as Stradiuarius; it is violin purfling, yet this seems to add elegance without meanness. It is a masterpiece of Cremona, all but the hideous sound-hole, that alone connects this master with the Brescian school.

His sons Antonius and Hieronymus soon cured themselves of that grotesque sound-hole, and created a great school. They chose better wood and made richer varnish, and did many beautiful things. Nevertheless, they infected Italian fiddle-making with a fatal error. They were the first scoopers. Having improved on Brescia in outline and details, they assumed too hastily that they could improve on her model. So they scooped out the wood about the sound-holes and all round, weakening the connection of the centre with the sides of the belly, and checking the fulness of the vibration. The German school carried this vice much further, but the Amati went too far, and inoculated a hundred fine makers with a wrong idea. It took Stradiuarius himself fifty-six years to get entirely clear of it.

The brothers Amati are represented in this collection, first by several tenors that once were noble things, but have been cut on the old system, which was downright wicked. It is cutting in the statutory sense, viz., cutting and maiming. These ruthless men just sawed a crescent off the top, and another off the bottom, and the result is a thing with the inner bought of a giant and the upper and lower bought of a dwarf. If one of these noble instruments survives in England uncut, I implore the owner to spare it; to play on a £5 tenor, with the Amati set before him to look at while he plays. Luckily the scrolls remain to us; and let me draw attention to the

scroll of 136. Look at the back of this scroll, and see how it is chiselled—the centre line in relief, how sharp, distinct, and fine; this line is obtained by chiselling out the wood on both sides with a single tool, which fiddle-makers call a gauge, and there is nothing but the eye to guide the hand.

There are two excellent violins of this make in the collection—Mrs. Jay's, and the violin of Mr. C. J. Read, No. 75. This latter is the large pattern of those makers, and is more elegant than what is technically called the grand Amati, but not so striking. To appreciate the merit and the defect of this instrument, compare it candidly with the noble Stradiuarius Amatisé that hangs by its side, numbered 82. Take a back view first. In outline they are much alike. In the details of work the Amati is rather superior; the border of the Stradiuarius is more exquisite; but the Amati scroll is better pointed and gauged more cleanly, the purfling better composed for effect, and the way that purfling is let in, especially at the corners, is incomparable. On the front view you find the Amati violin is scooped out here and there, a defect the Stradiuarius has avoided. I prefer the Stradiuarius sound-hole *per se*; but, if you look at the curves of these two violins, you will observe that the Amati sound-holes are in strict harmony with the curves; and the whole thing the product of one original mind that saw its way.

Nicholas Amatus, the son of Hieronymus, owes his distinct reputation to a single form called by connoisseurs the Grand Amati. This is a very large violin, with extravagantly long corners, extremely fine in all the details. I do not think it was much admired at the time. At all events, he made but few, and his copyists, with the exception of Francesco Rugger, rarely selected that form to imitate. But now-a-days these violins are almost worshipped, and, as the collection is incomplete without one, I hope some gentleman will kindly send one in before it closes. There is also wanting an Amati bass, and, if the purchaser of Mr. Gillott's should feel disposed to supply that gap, it would be a very kind act. The Rugger family is numerous; it is represented by one violin (147).

Leaving the makers of the Guarnerius family—five in number—till the last, we come to Antonius Stradiuarius. This unrivalled workman and extraordinary man was born in 1644, and died in December, 1737. There is nothing signed with his name before 1667. He was learning his business

thoroughly. From that date till 1736 he worked incessantly, often varying his style, and always improving, till he came to his climax, represented in this collection by the violins 83 and 87, and the violoncello 188.

He began with rather a small, short-cornered violin, which is an imitation of the small Amati, but very superior. He went on, and imitated the large Amati, but softened down the corners. For thirty years—from 1672 to 1703—he poured forth violins of this pattern; there are several in this collection, and one tenor, 139, with a plain back but a beautiful belly, and in admirable preservation. But, while he was making these Amatisé violins by the hundred, he had nevertheless his fits of originality, and put forth an anomaly every now and then; sometimes it was a very long, narrow violin with elegant drooping corners, and sometimes, in a happier mood, he combined these drooping corners with a far more beautiful model. Of these varieties No. 86 gives just an indication; no more. These lucid intervals never lasted long, he was back to his Amatis next week. Yet they left, I think, the germs that broke out so marvellously in the next century. About the year 1703 it seems to have struck him like a revelation that he was a greater man than his master. He dropped him once and for ever, and for nearly twenty years poured forth with unceasing fertility some admirable works, of which you have three fine examples, under average wear, hard wear, and no wear—90, 92, 91. Please look at the three violins in this order to realize what I have indicated before—that time is no sure measure of events in this business. Nevertheless, in all these exquisite productions there was one thing which he thought capable of improvement—there was a slight residue of the scoop, especially at the lower part of the back. He began to alter that about 1720, and by degrees went to his grand model, in which there is no scoop at all. This, his grandest epoch, is represented by the Duke of Cambridge's violin, Mr. Arkwright's, and M. le Comte's: this last has the additional characteristic of the stiffer sound-hole and the wood left broad in the wing of the sound-hole. One feature more of this his greatest epoch: the purfling, instead of exactly following the corner, is pointed across it in a manner completely original. He made these grand violins and a bass or two till about 1729; after that the grand model is confined to his violins, and the details become inferior in finish. Of this there is an example in No. 84, a noble but

rough violin, in parts of which certain connoisseurs would see, or fancy they saw, the hand of Bergonzi, or of Francesco or Homobuono Stradiuarius. These workmen undoubtedly lived, and survived their father a few years. They seem to have worked up his refuse wood after his death; but their interference with his work while alive has been exaggerated by French connoisseurs. To put a difficult question briefly: their theory fails to observe the style Stradiuarius was coming to even in 1727; it also ignores the age of Stradiuarius during this his last epoch of work, and says that there exists no old man's work by Stradiuarius himself; all this old man's work is done by younger men. However, generalities are useless on a subject so difficult and disputed. The only way is to get the doubtful violins or basses and analyze them, and should the Museum give a permanent corner to Cremonese instruments, this Francesco and Homobuono question will be sifted with examples. The minutiæ of work in Stradiuarius are numerous and admirable, but they would occupy too much space and are too well known to need discourse. His varnish I shall treat along with the others. A few words about the man. He was a tall, thin veteran, always to be seen with a white leathern apron and a nightcap on his head; in winter it was white wool, and in summer white cotton. His indomitable industry had amassed some fortune, and "rich as Stradiuarius" was a byword at Cremona, but probably more current among the fiddle-makers than the bankers and merchants. His price towards the latter part of his career was four louis d'or for a violin; his best customers Italy and Spain. Mr. Forster assures us on unimpeachable authority that he once sent some instruments into England on sale or return, and that they were taken back, the merchant being unable to get £5 for a violoncello. What ho! Hang all the Englishmen of that day who are alive to meet their deserts! However, the true point of the incident is, I think, missed by the narrators. The fact is that then, as now, England wanted old Cremonas, not new ones. That the Amati had a familiar reputation here and probably a ready market can be proved rather prettily out of the mouth of Dean Swift. A violin was left on a chair. A lady swept by. Her mantua caught it and knocked it down and broke it. Then the witty Dean applied a line in Virgil's Eclogue—

"Mantua væ miseræ nimium vicina Cremonæ."

This was certainly said during the lifetime of Stradiuarius, and proves that the Cremona fiddle had a fixed reputation; it also proves that an Irishman could make a better Latin pun than any old Roman has left behind him. Since I have diverged into what some brute calls anec-dotage let me conclude this article with one that is at all events to the point, since it tells the eventful history of an instrument now on show.

THE ROMANCE OF FIDDLE-DEALING.—Nearly fifty years ago a gaunt Italian called Luigi Tarisio arrived in Paris one day with a lot of old Italian instruments by makers whose names were hardly known. The principal dealers, whose minds were narrowed, as is often the case, to three or four makers, would not deal with him. M. Georges Chanot, younger and more intelligent, purchased largely, and encouraged him to return. He came back next year with a better lot; and yearly increasing his funds, he flew at the highest game; and in the course of thirty years imported nearly all the finest specimens of Stradiuarius and Guarnerius France possesses. He was the greatest connoisseur that ever lived or ever can live, because he had the true mind of a connoisseur and vast opportunities. He ransacked Italy before the tickets in the violins of Francesco Stradiuarius, Alexander Gagliano, Lorenzo Guadagnini, Giofredus Cappa, Gobetti, Morgilato Morella, Antonio Mariani, Santo Maggini, and Matteo Benti of Brescia, Michel Angelo Bergonzi, Montagnana, Thomas Balestrieri, Storioni, Vicenzo Rugger, the Testori, Petrus Guarnerius of Venice, and full fifty more, had been tampered with, that every brilliant masterpiece might be assigned to some popular name. To his immortal credit, he fought against this mania, and his motto was "A tout seigneur tout honneur." The man's whole soul was in fiddles. He was a great dealer, but a greater amateur. He had gems by him no money would buy from him. No. 91 was one of them. But for his death you would never have cast eyes on it. He has often talked to me of it; but he would never let me see it, for fear I should tempt him.

Well, one day Georges Chanot, Senior, who is perhaps the best judge of violins left, now Tarisio is gone, made an excursion to Spain, to see if he could find anything there. He found mighty little. But, coming to the shop of a fiddle-maker, one Ortega, he saw the belly of an old bass hung up with other things. Chanot rubbed his eyes, and asked himself, was he dreaming? the belly of a Stradiuarius bass roast-

ing in a shop-window! He went in, and very soon bought it for about forty francs. He then ascertained that the bass belonged to a lady of rank. The belly was full of cracks; so, not to make two bites of a cherry, Ortega had made a nice new one. Chanot carried this precious fragment home and hung it up in his shop, but not in the window, for he is too good a judge not to know the sun will take all the colour out of that maker's varnish. Tarisio came in from Italy, and his eye lighted instantly on the Stradiuarius belly. He pestered Chanot till the latter sold it him for a thousand francs and told him where the rest was. Tarisio no sooner knew this than he flew to Madrid. He learned from Ortega where the lady lived, and called on her to see it. "Sir," says the lady, "it is at your disposition." That does not mean much in Spain. When he offered to buy it, she coquetted with him, said it had been long in her family; money could not replace a thing of that kind, and in short, she put on the screw, *as she thought*, and sold it him for about four thousand francs. What he did with the Ortega belly is not known—perhaps sold it to some person in the tooth-pick trade. He sailed exultant for Paris with the Spanish bass in a case. He never let it out of his sight. The pair were caught by a storm in the Bay of Biscay. The ship rolled; Tarisio clasped his bass tight, and trembled. It was a terrible gale, and for one whole day they were in real danger. Tarisio spoke of it to me with a shudder. I will give you his real words, for they struck me at the time, and I have often thought of them since—

"AH, MY POOR MR. READE, THE BASS OF SPAIN WAS ALL BUT LOST."

Was not this a true connoisseur? a genuine enthusiast? Observe! there was also an ephemeral insect called Luigi Tarisio, who would have gone down with the bass: but that made no impression on his mind. *De minimis non curat Ludovicus.*

He got it safe to Paris. A certain high priest in these mysteries, called Vuillaume, with the help of a sacred vessel, called the glue-pot, soon re-wedded the back and sides to the belly, and the bass being now just what it was when the ruffian Ortega put his finger in the pie, was sold for 20,000 fr. (£800.)

I saw the Spanish bass in Paris twenty-two years ago, and you can see it any day this month you like; for it is the identical violoncello now on show at Kensington, numbered 188. Who would divine its separate adventures, to see it all reposing so calm and uniform in that case—"*Post tot naufragia tutus.*"

THIRD LETTER.

August 27th, 1872.

"THE Spanish bass" is of the grand pattern and exquisitely made: the sound-hole, rather shorter and stiffer than in Stradiuarius's preceding epoch, seems stamped out of the wood with a blow, so swiftly and surely is it cut. The purfling is perfection. Look at the section of it in the upper bought of the back. The scroll extremely elegant. The belly is a beautiful piece of wood. The back is of excellent quality, but mean in the figure. The sides are cut the wrong way of the grain; a rare mistake in this master. The varnish sweet, clear, orange-coloured, and full of fire. Oh, if this varnish could but be laid on the wood of the Sanctus Seraphin bass! The belly is full of cracks, and those cracks have not been mended without several lines of modern varnish clearly visible to the practised eye.

Some years ago there was a Stradiuarius bass in Ireland. I believe it was presented by General Oliver to Signor Piatti. I never saw it; but some people tell me that in wood and varnish it surpasses the Spanish bass. Should these lines meet Signor Piatti's eye, I will only say that, if he would allow it to be placed in the case for a single week, it would be a great boon to the admirers of these rare and noble pieces, and very instructive. By the side of the Spanish bass stands another, inferior to it in model and general work, superior to it in preservation, No. 187. The unhappy parts are the wood of the sides and the scroll. Bad wood kills good varnish. The scroll is superb in workmanship; it is more finely cut at the back part than the scroll of the Spanish bass; but it is cut out of a pear tree, and that abominable wood gets uglier if possible under varnish, and lessens the effect even of first-class work. On the other hand, the back and belly, where the varnish gets fair play, are beautiful. The belly is incom-