

A REPORTER AT LARGE

NO WEEPING TONIGHT, BACCHETTA!

ACCORDING to an Italian travel folder, Cremona, the two-thousand-year-old town on the plains of Lombardy, is "noteworthy chiefly for its gastronomic specialties, such as butter and cheeses, mustards and sausages, marmalade and *torrone*," the last being a kind of candy. For people who play, collect, or simply like violins, however, Cremona has a different appeal, for it happens to have been the home town of the world's greatest violinmakers, among them Nicolò Amati, Guarneri del Gesù, and, most celebrated of all, Antonio Stradivari. The golden era of violinmaking in Cremona had its beginnings in the middle of the sixteenth century, with Andrea Amati; reached its peak around 1700, when several Amatis, Guarneris, and Stradivaris, as well as their pupils Carlo Bergonzi and Francesco Ruggieri, had their workshops there; and ended in 1883, with the death of Enrico Cerutti, the last master in the celebrated Stradivari tradition. During those three hundred years, Cremona gave to the world most of what are still its finest violins, violas, and cellos, and also a number of legends and mysteries, especially about Antonio Stradivari, of whose life practically nothing is known with certainty except the names of his two wives and of his eleven children and the date of his death.

One might expect to find a few vestiges of past glory in such a place, and it was with the hope of this that I arrived in Cremona, a town of sixty thousand or more inhabitants, late one afternoon a few weeks ago. The Piazza del Comune, where my bus stopped, was dramatically lighted by the sun, now well over in the west, and the shadows were already dark between the two Gothic palaces, beneath the four-hundred-foot Torrazzo—famous as Italy's highest bell tower—and around the Romanesque-Lombard façade of the old cathedral. It seemed a perfect setting for the making of superb violins, and as I stepped down onto the magnificent stone-paved square, I suppose I felt not unlike a pilgrim standing before the footprints of Grauman's Chinese Theatre, in Hollywood. Here, on these stones, I reflected, the Messrs. Stradivari, Amati, Guarneri, et al. once promenaded after their working hours, talking of music, art, and beautiful violins. A piercing noise interrupted my meditations. It came from a loudspeaker above

a radio shop and turned out to be the voice of Carmen Miranda singing "The South American Way." A group of elderly loafers wearing capes like the ones I remembered being worn by the chorus in Verdi's "Rigoletto" (the locale of which is Mantua, only about forty miles from Cremona) looked with interest at the labels of two New York hotels on my suitcase, and one decrepit party, evidently the group's most gifted linguist, greeted me in English with "Come again," asked me for half an American cigarette, and recommended a nearby hotel, the Albergo Impero. "Is it very good bathroom," he said.

Whatever the quality of the Albergo Impero's bathroom, I learned upon entering the lobby of the hotel that there would be no hot water in it until Saturday. (It was then Wednesday.) I was told this in French by a black-haired girl with cold eyes who was seated behind the reception desk, and who, aside from requesting my passport and volunteering the information about the water, was disinclined to talk. After she had handed me a room key, I asked her about something that had been on my mind during my bus trip to Cremona: Was there anybody in the town by the name of Stradivarius? The girl gave me a questioning look. "Who?" she asked. "Stradivari," I said, switching to the Italian version of the name. The girl shrugged, as if she'd never heard of it. "Sorry," she said. "I'm from Mantua. I've only lived here three years." This struck me as being rather like arriving at the Book-Cadillac Hotel in Detroit and being told by the desk clerk that he'd never heard of Ford. Just then, an elderly, severe-looking man, whom I took to be the manager, came to the desk, and I asked him about the Stradivaris. He seemed annoyed by my question. "There is that lawyer," he said gruffly. "I think he belongs to the family. The address is in the telephone directory. Give him the book, Camilla." With that, he turned and strolled away. The girl did as she was told, and, opening the book at "A," I found an Amati, and, farther on, ten people by the name of Guarneri, among them a shoemaker, an undertaker, and a marmalade-and-jam salesman, but none of them were listed as making violins. Under "S,"

I came upon what I had been looking for: *Stradivari Mario, avvocato, Via XX Settembre 4*. I asked the girl how to get to Via XX Settembre. She didn't bother to answer but merely pointed toward the front door. I instructed her to have my luggage taken to my room and walked out.

Near the hotel, I came upon a crowd gathered around a number of sidewalk stands on which heaps of cheese were spread—slabs of *stracchino*, clumps of Gervais-like *mascarpone*, aged *bel paese*, marble-textured Gorgonzola, and big wheels of Parmesan. The merchants presiding over the stands wore white aprons and looked prosperous and well fed, which was not surprising, since they were doing a brisk business and were continually sampling their own and one another's wares, breaking off small pieces of cheese and munching slowly to savor the taste. I asked three or four people how to get to Mario Stradivari's house. None of them seemed to have ever heard the name, but they were able to direct me to the Via XX Settembre. It is a large, quiet street behind the cathedral and No. 4 is an old house with a Renaissance façade and grilles on its ground-floor windows. To one side of the entrance was a big plaque proclaiming a *dentista* and, underneath it, a smaller one, which read, "AVVOCATO MARIO STRADIVARI." I walked into the hallway, a drafty place with a musty smell

and several doors, one of which bore the lawyer's name. I knocked on it, and a woman inside shouted something. I opened the door and stepped into a big room, where a pretty, young girl was sitting at a typewriter. It was easy to see that I was in an attorney's office. Against the walls stood shelves filled with leather-bound lawbooks, statutes, and pandects, heaps of subpoenas, writs, and affidavits—all the frightening paraphernalia of jurisprudence. The girl stood

up and asked me what she could do for me, and, after a couple of false starts, we found that we could get along fairly well with a mixture of Italian and French. I told her that I wanted to talk to *Avvocato* Stradivari, and she said that he had gone to Mantua for the day but had promised to be back on the six-o'clock bus. "If you can believe any of his promises," she said, smiling. "You know him?" I replied that I



did not. "Oh, you don't?" she said, and shook her head significantly. I told her about the trouble I'd had tracking her employer down. She didn't seem surprised. "They don't exactly like the *Avvocato* at the hotel and around town," she said, and laughed. "He's a very independent sort of man. He wouldn't win any popularity contest in this town. Look, it's quarter to six. Would you care to wait in the *Avvocato's* private office? Too bad you couldn't hear him today in Mantua—a big counterfeiting case. It must have been quite a spectacle. When the *Avvocato* pleads in court, a lot of people go there just to listen to him."

The girl showed me into the private office, a large and disorderly place that made me think of the back room of an antique shop that hadn't been aired or dusted for years. Many pieces of old furniture were scattered about, no two of them of the same style or period. A grandfather's clock stood silent in one corner, its hands pointing to six o'clock. Chairs and chests and credenzas cluttered the room, and there was a large desk, covered with inkpots, paper cutters, paperweights, books, unopened letters, sheets of music, ashtrays, broken pencils, and an old-fashioned telephone, with a receiver on a hook. Next to the desk was a wooden filing cabinet, reaching all the way up to the ceiling. On the wall behind the desk was a diploma, with two red seals, stating that Mario Stradivari had been graduated as a "*Juris Universi Doctor*" from Padua

University. Next to it hung another document, with one red seal, stating that a bird dog by the name of Kerry, whose photograph was attached, had been awarded the first prize at the Codogno Dog Show of 1947. "Kerry's a wonderful dog," said the girl as I was examining this. "The *Avvocato* is crazy about Kerry. The *Avvocato* is a great huntsman, you know." I nodded, without much enthusiasm. Somehow, I felt let down. I suppose I had unconsciously expected something different—a couple of Strads in a glass case, perhaps, and pictures and framed letters of old Antonio Stradivari on the walls. I asked the girl whether she knew the relationship of her employer to Antonio Stradivari. "Oh, the *Avvocato* must be his great-grandchild, or something," she said vaguely. "I don't know. We've never talked about it. When the *Avvocato* is here, there are always so many things to do."

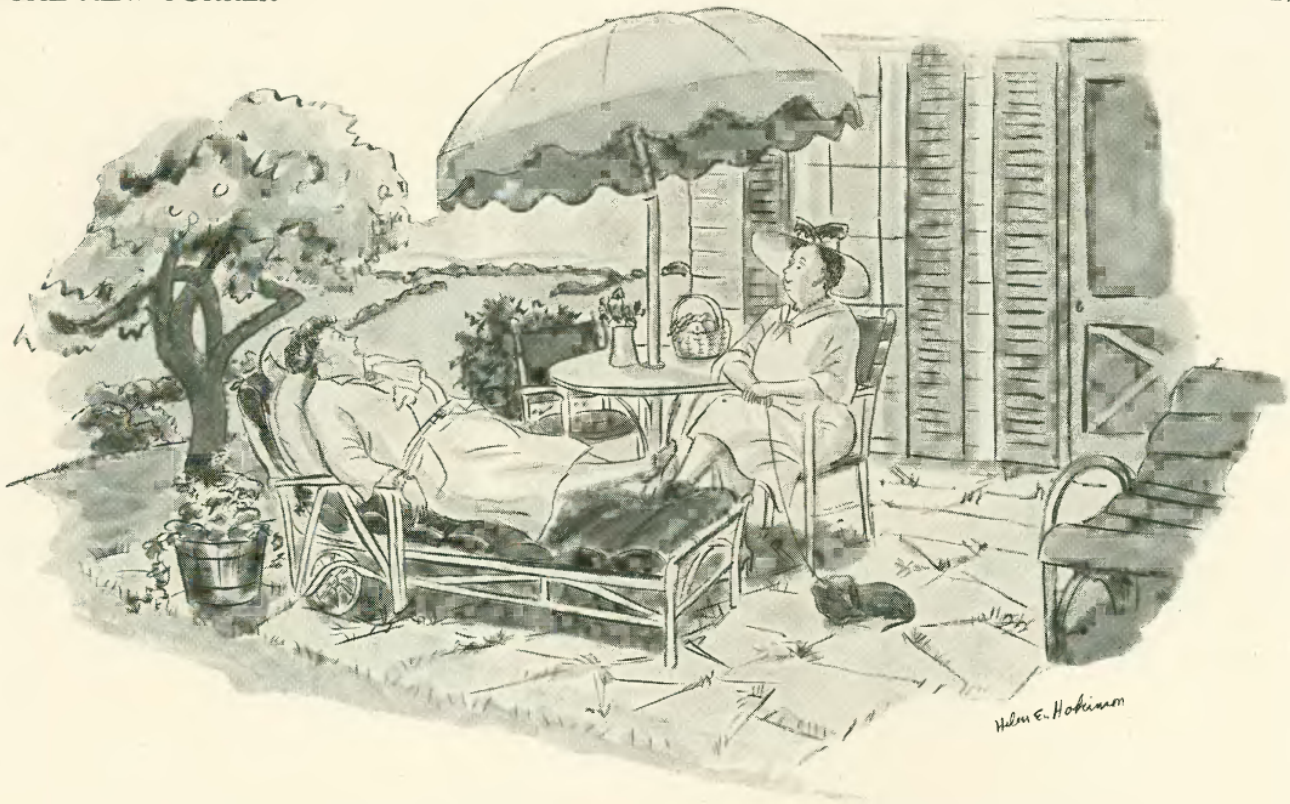
A telephone rang in the outer office, and the girl went to answer it. She came back a few minutes later, wearing a coat. "Almost six," she said. "Time for me to leave." She hesitated, and then added, "Would you mind very much if I asked you to wait for the *Avvocato* out in front of the house? It really won't be long. And, not having met you, he might not like..." I said I wouldn't mind at all, and asked her to describe the *Avvocato*, so I would know him. She laughed again. "You can't miss him," she said. "No one ever does." We went out, and she locked

the door, bade me good night, and was gone.

FOG had begun to settle in the street. From a window across the way came the melody of "*La donna è mobile*," being played over the radio by a brass band. The bell of the cathedral tolled six, and then other bells began to sound, to my left, my right, and, seemingly, everywhere—deep, reverberating bells and sweet, melodic chimes, heavy-toned gongs and a harmonious glockenspiel. I stood there quite a while, alone in the fog-shrouded street, listening to the bells, and then I was startled to see a man move toward me, suddenly and silently, out of the mist. He was big and tall, and it occurred to me that he might have been part of a Michelangelo sculpture. He had a furrowed Renaissance face, with a large, aquiline nose and a high forehead, and he bent slightly forward as he walked, with long, slow strides. He was wearing a baggy suit and a hat with a very broad brim, and was clutching a briefcase whose handle was broken. "*Au revoir, au revoir!*" he shouted at me, surprisingly, in a sonorous bass-baritone, taking off his hat with magnificent grandezza. "Sorry," he went on. "I'm always getting mixed up when I talk French. But *bienvenu, bienvenu!* I met Maddalena in the piazza and she told me about you. The silly girl should have let you wait in the office. Come in and be welcome in the house of Stradivari!"

He led the way along the hall, past the door I had gone in by, and opened a door so inconspicuous that I probably wouldn't have noticed it if I'd been alone. "Careful," he said as he went through it and switched on a light. "This is narrow." I squeezed in after him and discovered that we had entered his private office and that the door formed the back of the tall wooden filing cabinet. "A useful invention, that door," he said, throwing his hat and briefcase on his desk. "Sometimes the carabinieri are after a client who happens to be sitting here in my office. By the time the girl has announced them, my client is out and gone. Also to be recommended when you handle the divorce case of a woman with a jealous husband and a couple of lovers. Sit down, sit down." He slumped into a chair behind the desk. "That damn judge in Mantua! Keeps me there all day long and in the end sends my clients to jail for three years because he thinks they've counterfeited some trifling thousand-lire banknotes. Of course they've





"You'd love my Dr. Brodie. His creed is rest, rest, and more rest."

done it, but what's the difference? A few inflated bills more or less, hardly worth the paper they're counterfeited on. The paper we use today as currency has very little in common with money. Well, what can I do for you, my friend? A criminal affair? Most people know me as a criminal lawyer, I guess. Or have you been having trouble at the *questura*? They've been making it difficult for foreigners to have their visas extended, God knows why."

I explained, with some hesitation, the purely sentimental nature of my visit. Stradivari stared at me in amazement, and then got up and seized my hands with great warmth. "Damn Maddalena! Why didn't she tell me you weren't a client? I don't like to see clients after six at night. That's why the hands of my clock here always point to six—a reminder that that is the end of a day's work. But it isn't often that an admirer of Antonio Stradivari comes to see me. Before the war, yes, a few, but nowadays no one seems to care. People are too busy thinking up new ways of exploding one another into oblivion. Who's got time for violins? It was a break for old Antonio that he lived two hundred and fifty years ago. Today, he would have trouble making his instruments. He would need hard

wood from what is now Yugoslavia, and he wouldn't be able to get the right ingredients for his varnish. And on top of that the government would tax him to death."

Stradivari opened a big drawer, rummaged among various pieces of bric-a-brac, and came up with a small bronze statue of a man sitting on a chair and holding a violin. At its base was the inscription "ANTONIO STRADIVARI." "There he is," said Mario Stradivari, giving the statue a friendly pat on the back. "People say I've inherited the big nose, the high-domed forehead, the curved mouth, and the long fingers. Ridiculous!" He threw the statue onto his desk, where it landed with a crash. "A typical case of delusion," he said, waving his arms about. "That silly statue you've just been admiring was made by Micchieri, a Cremonese sculptor, who modelled the figure after the well-known painting by Hamman, and that, as you probably know, is a work of pure fantasy. No true picture of Antonio Stradivari exists, and no one can possibly know what he looked like. Micchieri didn't even bother to dig up a picture of a Stradivari violin. The violin that he put into the hands of what is supposedly my venerable ancestor has all the earmarks of the Brescia school.

Good thing old Antonio couldn't see it. He would have killed Micchieri. Nothing enraged those Cremonese masters more than to be confused with the second-class fellows from Brescia."

Stradivari picked up the statue, tossed it carelessly back into the drawer, and drew out a colored photograph of the bird dog whose picture I had noticed on the wall. "I wish you could see Kerry," he said. "He's fine on points and he's got the best nose in the whole province. Sometimes he actually understands what you're talking about. Kerry lives at a little place I have at Pizzighettone, thirty kilometres from here. My friends call it the Castle, but it's as run down as an old adventuress. Well, my castle doesn't matter, but I'll be damned if I'll let anything happen to Kerry. You agree with me, don't you? You are familiar with hunting?" When I replied that all I had shot at, at least in peacetime, were some small figures of swans and undressed ladies in a shooting gallery at Ocean Park, California, Stradivari looked pained. "Well, you don't know what you're missing," he said. "My father used to say that hunting was the biggest thrill in life, and Papa was a wise man." Stradivari got up and pointed to the framed oval photograph of a dignified elderly man

who had the amused eyes and the knowing smile of my host. "That's Papa," he said. "Papa's name was Libero, and he was the best lawyer in Cremona. Had his office in this very room. Papa was a great orator. They called him the Siren of the Cremonese Forum, on account of his voice, which sounded like an angry foghorn. Papa was a member of the City Council, and when he made a speech at the Palazzo del Comune, the newspaper reporters didn't bother to go upstairs to hear him. They'd just make sure the windows of the council chamber were open, and then they'd listen to the speech from the café downstairs, taking notes between swallows of wine. Papa played the flute excellently. Sometimes he was asked to play first flute at the opera house when they gave a première. He was always a fierce believer in independence, too. He was a follower of Garibaldi and gave his second daughter, my younger sister, the name of Anita, because that was the name of Garibaldi's wife."

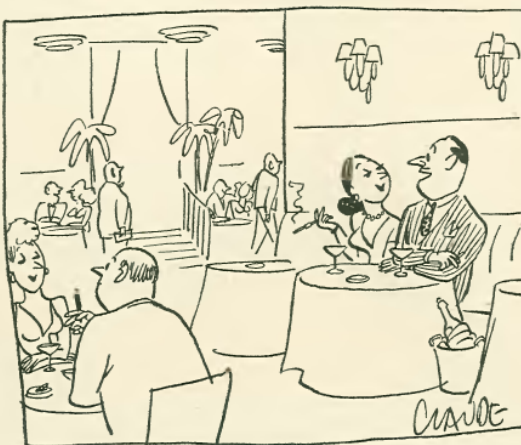
Stradivari turned to another photograph, which showed his father in his younger years, with three dapper gentlemen companions. I judged from the clothes the four were wearing that the picture had been taken around the beginning of the century. It was inscribed, "To my always great friend Libero Stradivari from Giacomo Puccini." "Papa and Puccini were great friends," said Mario Stradivari. "Those two other fellows are Giacosa and Illica, Puccini's librettists. They and Sardou wrote 'Tosca.' You will notice that Illica has turned one side of his face to the camera. That is because he had no ear on the other side. He lost it in a duel. He was a formidable fellow, that Illica—always duelling. I think he fought thirty-two duels in his life, which is something, even for the author of 'Tosca.' He and Giacosa and Puccini would come here for a few days, to drink and play music and sing with Papa, and they and Papa would parade through Cremona all night long, making so much noise that they woke everybody up. One night, they were singing the Christmas Eve song from the second act of 'Bohème.' A policeman came up to them on the Piazza del Comune and told them to be quiet. Papa pointed at Puccini and asked the

policeman what had become of the old music-loving town of Cremona if a man couldn't even sing his own melodies any more. The policeman knew all about opera, of course, like every policeman in Italy, and he got very indignant and said, 'What do you mean, his song? That was from "Bohème." Next thing, you'll tell me that he is Maestro Puccini!' So then Puccini took off his hat, saluted with his cane, and said, 'I am Puccini.' The policeman got so mad at what he considered an impertinent impersonation that he arrested all four of them, and they had to spend the night in jail, where

they kept all the other prisoners awake singing opera." Stradivari sighed. "In those days," he said, "people spent time and ingenuity to have fun. Come, now, let's go to my apartment upstairs and have a glass of wine. A friend is coming to see me later. He can tell you all about Antonio Stradivari. Knows much more about the Old Man than I do."

THE stairway was dark, and Stradivari, after groping in vain for the light switch, put two fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. A few moments later, a light came on and a woman appeared on the landing at the head of the stairs and shouted, "That you, *Avvocato*?" Stradivari shouted back, "*Sì, bellissima!*" The woman yelled, "And who's with you?" and he replied, "A friend, *bellissima!*" We walked up to the landing, where the *bellissima*, a shrivelled little old woman, was standing. Stradivari hugged her fondly and introduced her to me as the concierge. "She's over ninety and she's been in this house for sixty-two years," he said. "Naturally, you can't expect her to run up and down any more, so now she's installed up here and handles the lights and visitors by remote control."

Stradivari's apartment is on the third floor. His housekeeper, a plain-faced peasant woman wearing a white apron, met us in the hallway and bade us good evening. Stradivari told her to bring us some food and drink, *presto*. The woman looked unhappy and said the *Avvocato* had twice assured her that he would not be home for dinner. Stradivari set up a frightful fuss at this, and the housekeeper fled, making the sign of the cross and mumbling that she thought there might be some cheese and wine around. He led me into a large, cheerful living room. The portrait of a woman, painted in the manner of da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," dominated one wall. "My grandmother, Maini Lavinia," Stradivari said, pointing to it. "She must have been a beautiful woman. And here," he continued, turning to a photograph, "is my wife. She *was* beautiful. We Stradivaris always marry beautiful women." Stradivari explained that he is a widower, and lives alone except when his



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son, Renato Antonio, a nineteen-year-old law student, comes home from Milan on vacation.

Stradivari sat down at a large piano by a window. Scattered all over the piano, as well as under, behind, and around it, were the scores of operas and operettas and piles of popular music, together with sheets of note paper, some blank and some covered with pencilled musical symbols. On the wall by the piano was a signed photograph of Verdi. On the other side of the room hung two photographs, both of them, apparently, of Rossini. Stradivari said that only one was actually of Rossini, and asked me to guess which it was. I made a guess, and he laughed and said I was wrong, like everybody else. "Here, let me show you who the other one is," he said. He took a comb out of his pocket, combed his hair forward until it nearly reached his eyes, made a big bow out of his tie, turned up his coat collar, struck the pose of the figure in the picture, and became the perfect image of the composer of "The Barber of Seville." Stradivari obviously enjoyed his little joke. "I've fooled a lot of musicians, including Mascagni, Molinari, and de Sabata, that way," he said. "It's just a way I have of keeping up the tradition of the great name of Antonio Stradivari, which for centuries has been fooling people, people who think they own genuine Stradivaris. No month goes by without somebody writing me to say they've found an old violin in their attic with a label in it reading, 'Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat,' followed by the year. They think they've got a rare treasure and want my expert judgment. I don't know a damn thing about violins, but of course I know that there are only some five hundred Stradivari violins on earth, most of them tested by experts and listed in catalogues, and the chances that anybody's going to find a real Stradivari in his attic are about one in a million now. Good old Antonio! He really started something."

THERE was a knock on the door, and a small, intense-looking man with horn-rimmed glasses and a harassed manner came breathlessly in, lugging a heavy, bulging briefcase. Stradivari greeted him exuberantly and introduced him as his friend Renzo Bacchetta, a professor at the Scuola Internazionale di Liuteria, Cremona's school of violinmaking, and also a prominent journalist and the town's expert on Antonio Stradivari. Bacchetta took a gloomy view of the last distinction.

"Don't think it makes me popular with the people in Cremona," he said. "They don't know the first thing about violins, and care less. All they care about is that the price of cheese should stay up. If Antonio Stradivari had invented a new kind of cheese instead of making the world's best violins, they would have built him a monument. As it is . . ." His voice trailed off sadly. Stradivari shook him by the shoulders. "No weeping tonight, Bacchetta!" he shouted. "My friend has come all the way from America to hear a few juicy family scandals of the Stradivaris."



The little man nodded. "Did you tell him the real scandal?" he asked bitterly. "That no one in this town owns a single violin made by Stradivari, or the Amatis, or the Guarneris—not one great Cremonese instrument? Yes, signor," he said, turning dramatically to me, "Cremona has betrayed its heritage. The cheesemakers, silk manufacturers, and innkeepers shy away from Mario Stradivari. Their conscience bothers them. They say that they can't afford to spend a few million lire to build Antonio Stradivari a monument. They gave his name to a street, as if he'd been a member of the City Council, but they wouldn't buy back one of the Master's violins. If a Cremonese wants to look at a Stradivari violin, he has to travel to Paris, to Amsterdam, to New York." Bacchetta's voice broke and he sank down dejectedly into a chair. Mario Stradivari laughed. "Poor Bacchetta," he said. "He can't get over it. Back in 1937, they had an exhibit of Stradivari violins here to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of Antonio's death. There were some fifty of them and—"

"Forty-one," Bacchetta corrected him. "The first of them made by Antonio when he was still under the influence of his illustrious teacher, Nicolò Amati, and the last made when he was an old, old man and the greatest master of them all."

"Well," said Mario, his eyes twinkling, "I went to see the exposition and started to pick up one of the violins so I could have a good look at it, and a man in striped pants came up staring down his nose at me, and said the public was not permitted to touch the instruments. Would I please leave, he asked, or he would have to call the police."

"That's not funny, *Avvocato*," Bacchetta said severely. "Here you are, the descendant of the great *liutaio*, and

ALLEGRO

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you not only don't own one of his instruments, but you don't even own a paper or letter signed by his hand, or one of his tools, a piece of the wood he worked with, a relic—anything. Maybe that unhappy year of your birth is to blame."

"What's the year of my birth got to do with it?" Stradivari asked.

"You were born in 1883, the same year in which the Cremonese school came to an end, with the death of Enrico Cerutti, the last of the masters," said Bacchetta. A new wave of melancholy swept over him. To forestall another emotional outburst, I asked how long the family of Stradivari had lived in Cremona. "Oh, quite some time," said Mario casually. "I think the first mention is around 1300 or so."

"Wrong again, *Avvocato*," said Bacchetta, frowning. "There is a note in the city archives of Cremona, dated December 7, 1176, about one Lanfranco de Stradilvertis, *'index constitutus a consilibus iustitiae Cremonae.'*"

"One of those damn judges who make life miserable for a lawyer," said Stradivari.

Bacchetta ignored this remark. "The name of the family originally was written in various ways," he said, getting up and pacing back and forth, as if he were on a lecture platform. "They called themselves Stradivertus and Stradaverta, among other versions. There is a mention in the records of one Johannes Stradivertus, who was *sindicus Cremonae* in 1220. Then there was Giuliano, *notarius*, and also Tebaldino, Isacco, Pietro, Balzarino, and Gasparino, all in the fourteenth cent—"

"Oh, stop it, Bacchetta, for heaven's sake!" said Stradivari. "Just tell him about Papa and Grandfather." He moved around the room, kicking aside scores of Wagner, Verdi, and Bizet, until he found a dusty, leather-bound volume that contained a genealogical chart entitled "Discendenza di Antonio Stradivari."

Bacchetta waved it away. "I know these things, *Avvocato*," he said with a note of reproof. "Now, then. The *Avvocato* is the son of Libero, who, in turn, was the son of Cesare Stradivari."

"I remember Grandfather," said Mario. "He was one of the best doctors in town, but he refused to treat the rich burghers and instead practiced among the peasants and workers, who couldn't pay him. He had a lot of money and could afford such whims."

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Stradivari," Bacchetta went on. "This Giacomo was born in 1769 and was a postal clerk. His father was Antonio Stradivari II, of whom little is known. He was the son of Paolo Stradivari, born in 1708, who, in turn, was the youngest son of the great Antonio. Antonio married twice. He had six children by his first wife, Francesca Ferraboschi, and five by his second, Antonia Zambelli."

"A busy life," said Mario, staring at his family tree. "Let's see, where do I stand here?"

"Antonio Stradivari was your great-great-great-great-grandfather," said Bacchetta, without so much as glancing toward the chart. "You, *Avvocato*," he continued impressively, "are therefore the sixth-generation descendant of the immortal Antonio Stradivari."

Mario threw the book on the floor, sat down at the piano, and began to play the triumphal march from "Aïda." Bacchetta sighed. "He doesn't even play the violin," he said to me.

"No one in our family plays the violin," said Mario. "My son, Renato Antonio, plays the piano. My brother, Italo, played the guitar when he was young. He's a gynecologist and director of the Cremona hospital. Plucking the guitar strings wasn't good for his sensitive fingertips, so he had to give it up."

The housekeeper came in with a tray on which she had arranged glasses and plates, several bottles of wine, and some big pieces of Gorgonzola. Stradivari upbraided her mildly for being so long about it. She put the tray down on a table under the picture of her employer posing as Rossini, and left. "Let's have some wine and cheese," said Stradivari. Bacchetta gulped and looked at him wryly. "Cheese again," he said. "Wherever I go, I hear and see cheese. Even in the house of Stradivari."

Mario filled the glasses with an orange-colored liquid from a bottle labelled "Tibi Bene." "Try this," he said. "It's made from my own oranges down at my castle. Very strong. Cheer up, Bacchetta. Things could be much worse. After all, there is a genuine Stradivari in this house." He pointed to himself, and we raised our glasses.

A COUPLE of hours and three bottles later, Stradivari went back to the piano and fished out some sheet music from one of the heaps on the floor. It was the score of an opera called "Le Nozze in Turenna." I was surprised to see that the name of the composer was Mario Stradivari. Bacchetta told me

that Mario is known and appreciated as a composer "all over Italy, except in his home town." He has written two operas (the other is called "La Leggenda del Gatto Stivato") and a number of lesser works, including some popular songs that are frequently heard on the radio in Italy. Both operas have been performed at the opera house in Cremona, which is called Teatro Ponchielli, after Amilcare Ponchielli, the composer of "La Gioconda" and a native of the town. "La Leggenda" was performed in 1935," Mario told me, "and 'Le Nozze in Turenna' had its première two years later—and also its dernière, you might say. The libretto is taken from a story by Balzac. An old man marries a beautiful young woman and is sort of nervous at the thought of his wedding night, so he sends a young man into the grotto with her instead. A typical Balzac story. Let me sing you the love duet in the grotto."

Stradivari played the introduction and began to sing. His voice, though untrained, showed the Italian flair for singing; his pitch and rhythm were perfect. The love duet ended on a beautiful melodic line that reminded me of Puccini, and Stradivari gave it a lot of schmalz and rubato. As he started to play it again, somebody pounded on the other side of the wall. Mario played on, heedless, and the pounding on the wall continued at intervals. Bacchetta said that it was the director of the local museum, who lived next door, a fellow not distinguished by enthusiasm for music, or violins, either. "The museum has three big halls filled with medieval coins," said Bacchetta angrily, "but there's only one small room for the souvenirs of Stradivari and the other violin-makers. Why, the museum people didn't even want to lend me the diaries of Cozio di Salabue, which I have edited."

I made the mistake of asking about Cozio di Salabue. Bacchetta became very excited, opened his briefcase, and produced a fat manuscript, which he shoved into my hands. "Two thousand pages," he said. "It took me nine months, sixteen hours a day, two magnifying glasses, and three secretaries to edit those diaries. Quite a few important people have tried to prevent me from publishing them, since they contain some of the most sensational stuff yet about Antonio Stradivari." He closed one eye, pressed his lips together, and solemnly raised his right hand. "Bacchetta cannot be intimidated or bribed," he said. "The diaries will be published next year,





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and they will create no little furor, I assure you. For one thing, they will prove that Antonio Stradivari was not born in 1644, as some students claim, but in 1648." By way of emphasis, he opened his briefcase again and showed me proofs of a booklet he had just written called "Stradivari Was *Not* Born in 1644," which, he said, was going to give many people sleepless nights.

Count Alessandro Cozio di Salabue, upon whose diaries Bacchetta bases his convictions, was a Piedmontese nobleman who lived in Casale Monferrato at the beginning of the nineteenth century and owned a great collection of Stradivari memorabilia—instruments, letters, designs, tools, and formulas for making varnish. He bought them all from Antonio Stradivari's youngest son, Paolo, a textile merchant who apparently had no interest in the history of violinmaking. Musical libraries have the written pedigree of almost every accredited Strad, giving the names of all its owners and the years of their ownership, and thus the career of each violin can, or so it is generally believed, be traced back to the time when it left the workshop of its maker. Bacchetta thinks otherwise. "Cozio was not only a collector but a shrewd businessman," he told me. "Some of the most valuable Stradivaris are those that bear the dates of the Master's last years—1736 and 1737. Cozio admits in his diaries that he altered the year on the labels of several Stradivaris from 1727 to 1737, and from 1730 to 1736. It's relatively easy to change a 2 to a 3 and an 0 to a 6, and Cozio probably made a nice fortune on his little swindle. He also created a lot of confusion. It will be a sad day for the owners of some presumably late Stradivaris when the diaries are published."

Mario had wandered away from the piano, but now he was plainly tired of listening to Bacchetta, and he returned to it and began to play, and sing, some selections from "Traviata." The thumping on the wall recommenced, and Bacchetta had to raise his voice to be heard above the din. "In his last years, Stradivari would sometimes write his age on the label of a violin he had just made," he said. "One well-known Stradivari is inscribed 'Stradivarius Faciebat Anno 1736 d'Anni 92,' or 'at the age of 92.'" Mario's playing and singing grew louder, and the pounding on the wall became more furious. Bacchetta found himself obliged to shout. "This would set the year of Stradivari's birth as 1644," he announced, coming over to me and grabbing the lapels of my coat. "But suppose that this was one



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of the violins in which Cozio di Salabue changed the date!"

A bell clanged, and in a moment the housekeeper came in to yell something at Stradivari, who was now singing Wagner. He paid no attention to her. She left the room and presently returned with word that the neighbors were going to call the police if the noise didn't stop. Stradivari ordered her to get out, but he stopped playing the piano and suggested that we go around to the opera house, where we could all play and sing. "It's past eleven," said Bacchetta. "The place will be closed." Stradivari said that suited him fine; at least we'd have privacy. He pocketed a bottle of wine and handed Bacchetta and me each one. Bacchetta carefully put his manuscript back in his briefcase, with the air of a man responsible for an atomic secret. As we started down the stairs, Stradivari began to roar the toreador song from "Carmen," the sound of his voice resounding from the walls. "Go ahead, friends, sing!" he paused to shout. "One always sings in the house of Stradivari!"

OUTSIDE, it was still foggy and quiet. The cool air seemed to have a calming effect on Stradivari. He stopped singing, and as we walked, we chatted about the reactions of his countrymen to his famous name. Once in a while, he said, it was of some help to him. Even during the war, he could always get hotel accommodations in Milan and Rome, thanks to a couple of Strad-conscious room clerks, and on one occasion a violin-playing manager of the credit department of the Banca di Roma had been so impressed by the name that he granted Stradivari a loan without any of the usual formalities. The opera house was dark and deserted. We walked around to the stage door, where Stradivari bore down on a push button and began to bellow. Presently, the janitor, a dilapidated patriarch, appeared, wearing a stained jacket over an odd assortment of underwear. He started to curse us and our ancestors, but his face brightened when he recognized Stradivari, and the two of them clapped each other on the shoulder as we filed in. Shuffling ahead and switching on lights, the janitor led us to his office, where we all had a glass of wine out of Stradivari's bottle, and then to the stage.

The curtain was up, and the stage wasset for the fourth act of "Rigoletto," which had been given that night. The peculiar backstage smell of dust, old sweat, and fresh paint permeated the

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place. Stradivari stepped up to the footlights, his eyes sweeping the vast, dark auditorium, and began to sing. He sang almost everybody's arias in "Rigoletto"—the Duke's, Rigoletto's, and Monterone's—and then he said he was thirsty, and the janitor went to fetch glasses. By the time we were on the third bottle, Stradivari, the janitor, Bacchetta, and I were singing the beautiful quartet from the fourth act of the opera, with Bacchetta and me taking the women's parts. After each number, the janitor would switch on the house lights, Bacchetta would let down the curtain, and the four of us would step in front of the footlights, bowing proudly to the phrenetic, if inaudible, applause of an enthusiastic, if invisible, audience. "What a great singing actor the *Avvocato* would have made!" Bacchetta said admiringly. "What force! What a personality! Instead, he is wasting his time saving other people's lives. It's a shame!"

STRADIVARI, Bacchetta, and I left the opera house at two in the morning. "Now is the right time to pay a formal visit to the home of Antonio Stradivari," said Mario, leading the way to the Piazza Roma, a square in the center of town. Even at that hour, it was well lighted. On one side of it was a little park, and on the other, one of those big, neoclassic, palacelike office buildings, with marble façades and impressive entrances, that were built all over Italy during Mussolini's regime to provide work for the followers of Fascism. The whole ground-floor front was taken up by the large glass windows of the town's most elegant café. There was an advertisement of a vermouth firm in one window, and in another, a poster of the Cremona Football Club, with photographs of some young men in sweaters. Stradivari pointed up at a small marble panel just above one of the windows. "Ecco!" he said. I looked and read, "Qui sorgerà la casa dove Antonio Stradivari recando a mirabile perfezione il liuto levava alla sua Cremona nome imperituro di artefice sono."

"That's all there is to remind the people of Cremona that Antonio's house once stood here," said Mario. "The government tore it down in 1928, because they wanted the site for this building. My brother and I tried to keep them from doing it. You can see that we failed."

Bacchetta sighed deeply. "Just imagine," he said. "Here in front of us once stood the workshop of Antonio Stradivari. It was a plain three-story building. I remember it had a tailor shop and a

billiard parlor on the ground floor. It was probably in that building that Antonio made most of his instruments. In his day, the shop must have had a lovely smell of aged wood, varnish, and resin. The house had a flat roof, and Antonio would hang his newly varnished violins up there in the sunshine to dry."

We turned and walked across the park, in which there were the usual benches, gravel paths, and play areas for children. Near the far side, Mario stopped and pointed out, behind a bench, a three-foot-high block of stone, which looked as if it had been left there by mistake. "Bend down," he said to me, and flicked on his cigarette lighter to help me see. Just above the ground, I could read the name "STRADIVARI."

Mario took off his hat. "Signor," he said to me solemnly, though his eyes were smiling, "you happen to be standing in front of all that is left of Antonio Stradivari's grave. Well, Bacchetta," he added, "tell us what happened."

Bacchetta seemed overcome with sorrow. He stood staring at the stone, and when he spoke, his voice was almost a whisper. "It really isn't much of a story," he said. "But it is the saddest page in the history of Cremona. No one knows exactly *what* happened. They say today that the land was needed for a public playground, but the truth is that back in 1869 a wrecker from Milan paid the city fathers of Cremona, a corrupt bunch of politicians, forty-two thousand lire for the privilege of demolishing the Church of San Domenico, which used to stand over there, by the square. He carted the materials away and sold them. Antonio Stradivari's family burial plot was right here, in the church's Chapel of the Rosary. Antonio died on December 18, 1737—that date is certain, anyway—and was buried the following day, and later most of his children were buried near him. In the course of the demolition of the church, the grave was opened and the bones were taken out. What happened to them? Maybe the workers took them to the local cemetery and threw them into a common grave. Or maybe they got tired and just walked to the bank of the Po—for it is only a few minutes away—and threw the bones into the river. In any event, here is the final, cruel irony of fate in dealing with a man of whom we know almost nothing and who has given us so much."

TWO carabinieri, making their rounds of the Piazza Roma, stopped on the opposite side of the park to scrutinize the three of us with sus-



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picion. "I bet you my manuscript of Cozio's diaries that they don't know what this stone here stands for," said Bacchetta, glowering at the policemen. "Few people do. Here is where we would like to build a decent monument to Antonio, but, as I told you, the cheesemakers keep saying they can't afford the money."

Stradivari began to hum a melody. "I've written the lyrics and tune of a song called 'Addio Me Vecia Cremona,'" he said. He started to sing, strumming an imaginary guitar. "It's written in Cremonese dialect," he explained, after singing a few strange-sounding lines. "It goes like this: 'They say the old Stradivari comes at night into the park to look at his monument. But, alas! all he finds is two mongrels who use the block of stone for their needs.'" He laughed, and started to repeat the refrain. Bacchetta joined him, singing loudly and defiantly and staring straight at the carabinieri, who were now watching us from just about where Antonio Stradivari had had his workshop. Mario Stradivari and Bacchetta kept right on singing, their voices powerful and derisive, until the two policemen turned and vanished among the old houses of Cremona.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

"There's nothing so surprising about it," Franck insisted today. "The human palate and the painter's palate are spelled the same way, you know."—*The Post*.

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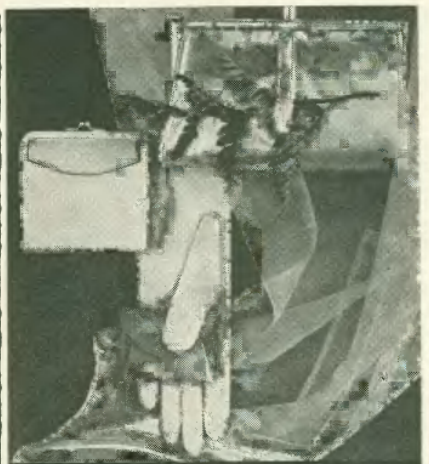
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