

# Arnold Dolmetsch : his life and work [continued]

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## J. C. RATHGEB.

On the 15th of this month, Mr. J. C. Rathgeb of "Wolverton," Church End, Finchley, N. is celebrating his 85th birthday, and we feel sure, when tendering him on this eventful and happy occasion our heartiest congratulations and best wishes, we are voicing the wishes of not only a few old and young friends but those of the whole Swiss Colony.

Mr. J. C. Rathgeb is one of the oldest of our compatriots living in this country, and we take this opportunity to acquaint our readers with a few biographical notes of one who has at all times kept a warm corner in his heart for his native land.

Born in 1846 at Horgen, Ct. Zurich, he left his home in 1864 at the age of 18 to try his luck in foreign lands. London, the great Metropolis of the British Empire, was his ambition and to London he came. In those days a journey to London was not such a simple affair as it is nowadays, but there was no obstacle big enough to discourage a young man who was determined to satisfy his life's ambition.

At that time prejudice against foreigners was far more pronounced than it is to-day, and it was not easy for an outsider to gain a footing on these now so hospitable shores. But here was a young man who made up his mind to succeed, and succeed he did, as our readers will see from the following account.

After having occupied some minor positions, Mr. Rathgeb entered the then well-established firm of Louis Henlé & Co., General Merchants, of Walbrook, E.C., who had business connections all over the world. Here was an opportunity for a young and ambitious man to show what stuff he was made of. Before long his principal became aware of the great capabilities of his young employee, and he entrusted him with important missions to various foreign lands. For many years Mr. Rathgeb travelled extensively in Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia, and some time before the death of his principal, he was made a partner of the firm, in recognition of faithful service.

When in 1914 the world war broke out, which had such disastrous results especially to concerns trading with foreign countries, difficult times lay in front of our friend, but with an iron determination in which his immense wealth of experience stood him in good stead, he mastered difficulties which seemed at one time almost insurmountable and was proudly able to keep the old flag flying, when all around this terrible war was claiming its victims not only on the battle-fields but also in this great City of London. What is the secret of

this undeniable success? Mr. Rathgeb has given it to your reporter, it consists of two insignificant words: *Hard work.*

A faithful companion in his early struggles was his wife, an English lady, who presented him with five children, three daughters and two sons, all of whom are happily still alive, with the exception of one son who gave his life for his adopted country during the Boer war. In the year 1900 he lost his constant and faithful partner, who had faced storm and sunshine with him, but a happy providence filled this sad gap, by the tender care which his unmarried daughter has bestowed on him for the last thirty years.

One would think that a busy life would leave but little time for recreation, and yet Mr. Rathgeb was one of the best-known athletes and gymnasts of Victorian times. Countless cups, medals and diplomas adorn his home at Finchley. To mention only a few, it might interest our readers to learn that as far back as 1865 he won, at a gymnastic Festival at the Crystal Palace, the one and only coined medal of the German Gymnastic Society. Nine years later, on the occasion of a great International Sports rally, again at the Crystal Palace, the first prize, a large silver medal and cup was presented to him by the National Olympian Association for Promotion of Physical Education, together with a diploma declaring him Champion of all England. The then Prince of Wales, later King Edward, who was present expressed a wish to be introduced to this famous sportsman, and the Shah of Persia, then on a visit to this country and an eye-witness of the display, extended an invitation to the champion to accompany him to his capital to take up a position as a gymnastic instructor, an invitation which was however politely declined. Another feat worth mentioning is that in 1866 he accompanied the celebrated rope dancer, Charles Blondin, of Niagara Falls fame, across the rope at an Exhibition which took place at the Agricultural Hall, and which at that time caused a great stir.

Mr. Rathgeb was not only a prominent business man and a great sportsman but also made a name as a collector; his home, which he has occupied for over 50 years, contains not only a collection of valuable pictures but a most exquisite collection of old Dresden, Meissener and Sèvres china, which denotes his excellent taste as a collector.

The Swiss Mercantile Society has counted him as a member ever since its foundation and with the exception of a short interruption he has been a member of the City Swiss Club since 1864. Many of the younger generation will of course remember Mr. Rathgeb as having met him at various social functions at the City Swiss Club or the Swiss Mercantile Society where his kind face, with

had been kept ready for us by the Fates.

Soon, however, we felt the urgent need of a workshop. There was space in the garden but no funds for such a costly enterprise. A sympathetic and generous friend volunteered to furnish the necessary capital; the workshop was built. Skilled artisans, machinery, and fine tools were installed in it and the construction of instruments started in earnest.

The demand for my instruments increased so rapidly that in 1924 I had to enlarge the workshop. Then I thought of the decorations which had embellished my early instruments and which we could now execute among ourselves. My wife designed and painted flowers in tempera with the simplicity, grace, and decorative effect I desired. My daughter Cécile's perfect command of the brush and her feeling for symmetry was shown in the painted and gilded letters of the inscription. Their work is seen in the fine Clavichord presented to Dr. Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate, on his eightieth birthday.

This Clavichord was much admired; photographs and descriptions of it appeared in many papers.

About the year 1924 the Recorders began to attract attention. I used to play simple tunes on an Old English instrument whose sweet tone charmed everybody. One evening, after a concert during the war, whilst waiting for our train in the darkened station at Waterloo, my youngest son, Carl, who was in charge of the bag containing the precious Recorder, put it on the ground. The train came; we got in hurriedly and when half-way to Haslemere, we discovered that the bag was missing!

Inquiries, an offer of £20 reward poster everywhere, Scotland Yard researches, and all our efforts, failed to bring it back. Poor little Carl, who so loved the old Recorder, was heartbroken. We had lost all hope of ever seeing it again when, two years later, by a rare chance it was bought for a few shillings in a London curiosity shop by a friend who gave it back to me.

Old Recorders being so rare, I thought of making new ones. This, however, proved much more difficult than I expected. These instruments, although simple in appearance, are in fact extremely complex. They do not in the least resemble other wind instruments, and seem to defy the laws of acoustics. Moreover, the old treatises, so full of details and so precise concerning the proportions of Oboes, Flutes, and

the little twinkle in his eyes made him a welcome visitor. The writer vividly remembers how at some social functions, in spite of his great age, he entertained the audience with a few comic Swiss songs, and how our hearts went out to that man who has spent the greater part of his life away from his native land, and yet kept an ever green memory and a young and warm beating heart for the land of his fathers. A great and splendid example for some of the younger generation.

And now on his 85th birthday anniversary we are sending him our heartfelt greetings, coupled with the sincerest wishes that the eventide of this active and successful life may be bright and sunny, and assurance that, although illness has lately prevented him from seeing his many friends, in their memory he is living and not forgotten.

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## BULLE AND "LA VERTE GRUYERE" IN THE LIMELIGHT.

Whether it be because of the world-wide fame of its cheese or its idyllic natural beauties unstained by too much artificiality, one finds nowadays this town and district increasing in popular favour. During the summer streams of Swiss and Foreign Motorists go up and down the surrounding roads. The Swiss who prefer the peace and charm of the Gruyère valleys and the homeliness of its comfortable inns to the more fashionable resorts, cannot sufficiently praise the benefits they derive from a holiday in that part of Switzerland.

It is therefore not surprising to hear that Bulle has recently been so much in the limelight. First came the "Commission pour l'unification de la nomenclature douanière" appointed by the League of Nations. Then we have the visit of the Federal Council together with the Swiss Diplomatic Corps, including our esteemed Minister, Monsieur C. R. Paravicini, on the occasion of their annual reunion. A dinner took place at the "Hôtel des Alpes" in Bulle, the municipal philharmonic societies and soloists executing certain parts of Bovet's festival "Grevire" in honour of the distinguished company.

Needless to say that the famous "Ranz des Vaches" was rendered with all the pomp which only a Gruyère Tenor and philharmonic society can produce. A visit to the "Musée gruyérien" and Castle of Gruyères followed.

Last week the President of the Confederation and Madame Musy entertained in Bulle H.M. King Feisal of Iraq who later, in their company, attended a review of the troops taking part in the autumn manoeuvres held in the neighbourhood under the leadership of Colonel Sarasin. King Feisal also visited the well-known "Valsainte."

A.L.D.

other similar instruments, are curiously silent about Recorders. It took me a long time to discover their secrets. Eventually I succeeded in making good playable instruments and sold quite a number. Carl, meanwhile, having learned all I knew on that subject, began to work alone and soon revealed an extraordinary genius for the instrument. He has acquired a marvellous command of the Recorder and makes instruments which surpass, in beauty of tone, purity of intonation, and evenness of scale any other I have ever seen, old or new. It is a happy coincidence that he, who had lost the precious old Recorder, should have become the maker of hundreds of new ones, which now delight people in all parts of the world.

The year 1928 was full of memorable events for us. In April my first Treble Viol was finished. Its tone and appearance gave me full satisfaction; but, as yet, it was unvarnished. For years I had experimented on the momentous question of varnish which has disappointed men for many generations. I had obtained nothing better than the smooth, brilliant surface of modern violins.

This did not satisfy me; I wanted to capture the light, and reflect it from *under* the varnish. This indescribable effect which the old masters knew how to obtain has little to do with the varnish itself; it depends upon the finishing and preparation of the wood before varnishing. My amazing luck brought me the discovery of this lost secret just in time. I soon mastered its application and by the end of April my first Treble Viol was finished. My daughter Cécile, so clever at painting and gilding, soon learned the new art. She has since finished many beautiful instruments, in the construction of which my two sons-in-law, Leslie Ward and George Carley, have taken an important part.

Three Viole da Gamba have lately been finished and are now being varnished, which are finer than those previously made. A purer and more generous outline, stripes of dark wood, interlacings of purfling and a richly carved head considerably enhance their beauty. The carvings are the work of my daughter Nathalie, who specializes in that art.

We also made bows, like those of the angels in the old pictures, real bowed bows, beautifully fluted and pointed, the hair of which gets tighter when more power is required, instead of getting looser as in modern bows in which the curve is reversed.

TO BE CONTINUED.

## Arnold Dolmetsch

## HIS LIFE AND WORK.

CONTINUED.

In 1905, during my second tour in America, I became acquainted with the Directors of Chickering & Sons, the famous piano makers of Boston. These far-seeing and generous people offered me a good salary, a choice corner in their factory, the pick of their eighteen hundred workmen, every facility and freedom to carry out my ideas. Needless to say, I gladly accepted and made some eighty instruments there under ideal conditions. Clavichords, Virginals, Harpsichords, Pianos (my own way), Lutes, and Viols which all bear my name. They also helped me to organize concerts, in fact gave me every assistance to accomplish what I wanted to do.

They gave one of their Harpsichords to Busoni. I taught him to play upon it and he took it to Berlin. After Busoni's death, the Chickering bought that Harpsichord back and I understand that it is the only one of my instruments now in their possession.

In 1911, being home-sick and other circumstances inducing me, I parted most amicably and regretfully from the Chickering and went to Paris. I entered the Gaveau Piano factory, where I made some fine instruments, although I very much missed the freedom and happiness I had enjoyed in Boston.

In 1914 I returned to England and settled in Hampstead. I found that my friends had not forgotten me and that my place had not been filled.

With the assistance of my wife and my eldest children I started work. The war hampered us in many ways, but still we managed tolerably well until the bombs began to fall in alarming numbers round our house. Unable to stand the air raids any longer we flew to Thursley, improvised a workshop in that delightful village and resumed our work. We found ourselves very happy in the country where pure air, good light, and the absence of dirt are so advantageous to fine work.

I used to fear that my affairs might suffer if I did not live in London; but, once out of it, I realized that not only were the gains greater than the losses, but that those who wanted me or my work could find me there, or anywhere. All the family agreeing, we settled down for good and all in beautiful Haslemere, where a pleasant house