

Viottiana

By E. Van Der Straeten

IN art, as in all things which concern the life of man, "Fashion," the most despotic and cruel of tyrants, holds its sway, and thus it happens that the most brilliant stars in the firmament of art appear sometimes obscured for a longer or shorter period as the tide of fashion rises and falls.

Down to the middle of last century "Giambattista Viotti" was a name to conjure with, while to the younger generation it is far less familiar than the names of Vieuxtemps, Wieniawski, and others. Surfeit counts in a great measure for Viotti's apparent neglect, and when the effects of that have passed away violinists will, no doubt, return to his masterpieces with fresh zest, for they will always keep their place among the standard works for the violin.

But even now his duets and concertos are well known to students of that instrument, and they will be interested to learn some incidents concerning the latter part of his life, which hitherto remained more or less a mystery.

Some years ago Mr. Edward Heron-Allen showed the writer a number of manuscripts which throw light on that period, and he very kindly gave his permission for their publication. They consisted of an autobiographical sketch, a number of letters to his friends, and his last will. These documents were all published in *Die Musik* (vol. i., Nos. 18 and 19, Berlin-Schuster & Löffler), together with reproductions of Viotti's portraits by Madame Vigée Le Brun, and by Trossarelli, which were supposed to be lost.

All that was known about the latter part of Viotti's life was that the French Revolution drove him to England, that he became partner in a wine business in London, which failed, and that for some time he was exiled for political reasons and spent the greater part of that time at Schönefeld, a small place on the Dove-Elbe, near Hamburg.

It was at the beginning of 1798 that he was arrested one evening

while sitting peacefully among his friends. Without giving any reasons for his arrest, the officer informed him that he must leave the country without a moment's delay. It transpired afterwards that Jacobites, residing in London, recked their vengeance on him for his escape from France by sending an anonymous letter to the Duke of Portland, in which he was accused of revolutionary intrigues and *lèse majesté*. This caused him to write the before-mentioned sketch, which he handed to Colman Macgregor, British Consul at Teneriffe (then staying at Hamburg), in order that he might undertake his justification. The document was headed: "A Short Description of the Life of J. B. Viotti, from his entrance into the world until the 6th of March, 1798."

He relates all that is known about his early life, and also how the terrors of the revolution caused him to sell all his belongings in France, pay the debts of his ill-fated theatre (Feydeau) and start for London, where he arrived in July, 1792. Exactly twelve months later he was informed of the death of his mother, and set out for Italy, to arrange the affairs of his family. Towards the end of the year he returned to London, where he had made the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. William Chinnery,* whom he extols as people of most excellent qualities, and good, staunch friends. They had introduced him to Mr. Charles Smith, a wine merchant, in whose

business he invested all that he possessed at the time. The reason he gives for doing so, is that he intended to devote his whole life to the company of his friends and the exercise of his art in privacy, and that to this his professional career would not give him full leisure.

Mrs. Chinnery was an excellent pianist, and a very accomplished lady of great personal



PORTRAIT OF VIOTTI

BY MME. VIGÉE LE BRUN

* Wm. Chinnery lived at 44, Mortimer Street. He left that house, which belonged to a Colonel Toon, at the end of 1798. His father, Wm. Chinnery, sen., was still alive, and living at 44, Great Queen Street.



SILHOUETTE PORTRAIT OF A LADY
ON PLASTER

Viottiana

charm, whose house was frequented by the most fashionable and intellectual society. One of the most intimate friends of the family was Adolphus Frederick, first Duke of Cambridge. Their daughter, Caroline, a very beautiful girl, and their little son, Walter, were both pupils of Viotti. Both died young, as well as their eldest son, George, who was a young man of great promise, in whom the first Duke of Cambridge took a great interest, as we shall see anon. A

painting, by Lawrence, of Caroline was sold to France, but two miniatures of her, painted by Trossarelli, who also painted Walter and Mrs. Chinnery, as well as portraits of George, Mr. Chinnery, and Viotti, are in the possession of Mr. Algeron Green, of Surbiton. Mrs. Chinnery, who survived her husband and her children, had bequeathed them to a great-aunt of Mr. Green, together with

Viotti's letters, and the contents of her country house Gillwell, at Sewardstone, near Walthamstow.

Among the letters is one to Master Walter Chinnery, dated from "Schönfeldz" (Schönefeld), "ce 18 juin, 1798." In that letter Viotti writes:

"Do you practise your violin? You must keep up your playing, your brother George likewise, so that your 'Amico' may instruct you. Tell Mamselle (the governess) that I often think of her. Embrace your father and mother for me, and love with all your heart

"Your Amico,
"VIOTTI."

On the 8th of October of that year he wrote to Caroline:

"MY DEAR CAROLINE,—

"I was just busy composing some very pretty little pianoforte sonatas with violin accompaniment for you when a letter of your dear Mama brought me the news that you were sadly neglecting your music. I am all the more shocked at this as Mama adds that it is ill humour that prevents you from making progress.

"As I am convinced that this can last but a few moments,

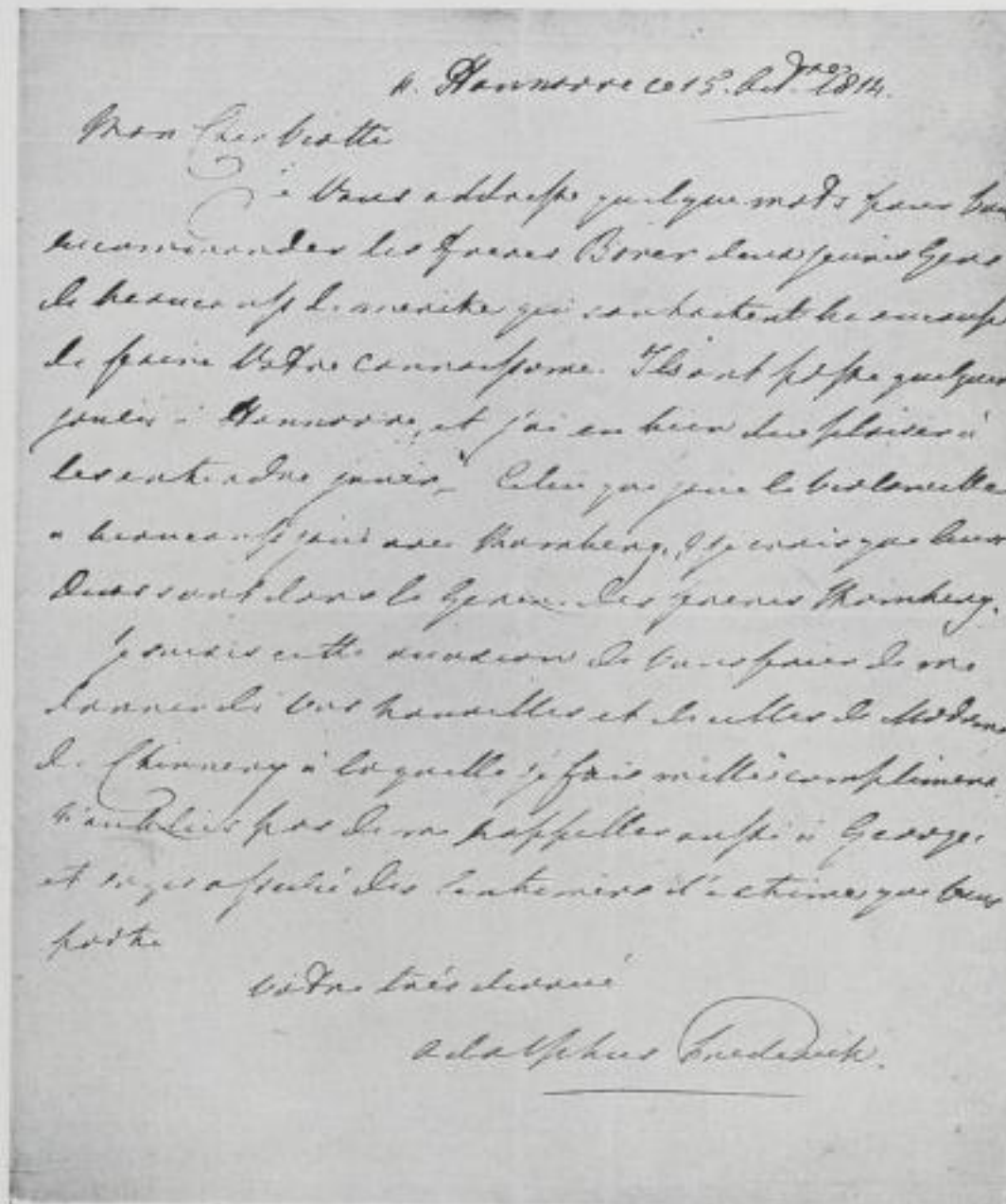
and that you will immediately be as sweet and amiable again as you were before, I shall finish the sonatas, so that you may play them to me *very nicely* on my return, and that I may have the pleasure of playing the accompaniment for you. I shall send them as soon as I hear from your dear good mother that you find pleasure again in music, that beautiful and agreeable art which gives so much enjoyment to the whole world.

"Adieu, my dear Caroline, embrace your little Walter for me, remember me to Mamselle, and speak often of me with your excellent mother and your good

father. I hope that I may soon learn that you deserve the full esteem and friendship of l'Amico.

"J. B. VIOTTI."

The above is a literal translation from the French original, and it shows us better than any description the amiable and loveable character of Viotti. He had been educated at the expense of the Prince De La Cisterna, together with the young prince, and his distinguished appearance, as well as his great accomplishments and a natural grace and sweetness of manner, made him a favourite in Court circles, as



FACSIMILE OF A LETTER WRITTEN TO VIOTTI BY THE DUKE OF CAMBRIDGE



well as among intellectual and polite society.

How much he was devoted to the Chinnerys may be judged also from the fact that he dedicated six duos for two violins, op. 5, to Mr. and Mrs. Chinnery. They were composed at Schönefeld, and the dedication on the beautifully designed title-page runs as follows: "Full of gratitude, I offer this work to friendship. It is the fruit of leisure which my misfortune has afforded. Some of the pieces are dictated by grief and others by hope." His last violin concerto, the famous E minor, was dedicated to his friend, William Chinnery.

The last of the above-mentioned documents, his testament, refers once more to his friends in a most pathetic manner. We quote his own words.

After appointing his friends, Gustav Gasslar, of Paris, and Wm. Chinnery, or, failing him, George Robert, his son, as executors, he goes on to say:

"Not only am I dying without means, but moreover I die with a debt which breaks my heart. It is that debt which my misfortune caused me to enter into towards Madame Chinnery, born Tresilian. That good and excellent creature placed the sum of 80,000 francs at my disposal to assist me in my business. The house failed, and I was forced to relinquish not only my own capital but also the 80,000 francs lent to me with such disinterested magnanimity. That sacred debt is the misfortune of my life, and it will disturb the peace of my ashes, if I should have the misfortune to be unable to discharge it."



SIX PORTRAIT SKETCHES OF VIOTTI FROM LIFE

He asks that in the latter case all his belongings should be sold, and the proceeds handed to Mrs. Chinnery, after paying a debt of eight hundred francs to his brother, André. His Klotz violin he had already made over to her, but his Strad should be sold, as it would be possible to obtain "a nice little sum" of money for it. He requests that, as the proceeds would not cover his debt, nothing should be reserved for his interment; "a little earth will suffice for such a 'miserable' as 'myself.'" He feels sure that Mrs. Chinnery will forgive him if he dies in misery and unable to repay that sacred debt.

"I feel sure even that she will shed bitter tears in thinking of me, and that she will never cease to pray to the Almighty for the repose of my soul. In that conviction, and with tears in my eyes, I say farewell to her for ever. I say the same to you, dear friends, full of gratitude which I shall no longer be able to prove to you when you peruse these pages. Farewell, drop a tear and heave a sigh for the unfortunate who addresses his last prayer to you. Written in Paris this 13th of December, 1822."

His sun was not to set without spreading a friendly glow over the remainder of his days.

Within about a week from the date of the above document he returned to London, and appears to have lived henceforth in the house of the Chinnerys. Mrs. Chinnery and her son, George, occupied 17, Montague Street, Portman Square, until the end of 1823, when they

moved to 5, Upper Berkeley Street, and it was at this address that Viotti expired on the 8th of March, 1824, at seven o'clock in the morning, in the presence of Mrs. Chinnery—according to a family letter of that date.

His last resting-place is still unknown, as, curiously, none of the Roman Catholic churches of that neighbourhood have a record of his death. It appears not impossible that he was buried at Sewardstone, where Mrs. Chinnery's children were interred. There is a crayon picture which shows Mrs. Chinnery at the grave of Caroline. Some members of a branch of this family are well-known sportsmen of the present day.

We have mentioned already that the first Duke of Cambridge was on very friendly terms with the family, and also with Viotti. Mr. Edward Heron-Allen, who received the before-mentioned documents from Mr. Algernon Green, has also some letters from the Duke to Viotti. They contain several interesting references to topics of the time.

The first letter, headed "Cambridge House, Samedi," without date, was written early in 1813, as it refers to the foundation of the Philharmonic Society. Viotti, as one of the founders, had sent a ticket to the Duke. The latter writes:

"MON CHER VIOTTI,—"

"Je m'empresse de vous accuser le reçu de votre billet et de vous prier de me mettre sur la liste des souscripteurs à la Société Philharmonique, c'est avec un plaisir que j'assisterai à ces concerts, et je me flatte que cette société réussira à rétablir le goût pour la musique instrumentale qui malheureusement est tombée en décadence dans ce pays-ci. Je suis bien fâché que vous ayez été derechef incommodé le pauvre Vanoni est dangereusement (malade) et je ne l'ai pas vu depuis, trois semaines, desorte que je n'ai pas touché le violon de tout ce temps. Je vais demain à la campagne, (mais) et à mon retour

* In this, as in the following letters, the spelling of the original has been strictly adhered to.

je serai enchanté de vous revoir et de vous assurer de vive voix de la haute estime avec laquelle je suis,

"Votre très dévoué

"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

"Je vous prie de faire bien des compliments de ma part à Madame Chinnery, et de lui dire que je lui recommande d'aller chez Mr. Bacon, No. 17, Newman Street, voir la statue du Roi d'ont l'exhibition finisse aujourd'hui en huit. Je l'ai vu hier, et j'en suis infiniment content.

Translation.

"MY DEAR VIOTTI,—

"I hasten to acknowledge receipt of your note, and to ask you to put me on the list of subscribers to the Philharmonic Society. I shall attend these concerts with pleasure, and flatter myself that this society will succeed in re-establishing the taste for instrumental music, which unfortunately has gone down in this country. I am very much annoyed to hear that you have been again molested. Poor Vanoni is dangerously (ill), and I have not seen him for three weeks, so that I have not touched the violin all that time. To-morrow I am going to the country, (but) and on my return I shall be delighted to show how highly you are esteemed by

"Your very devoted
"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

"Please give my compliments to Madame Chinnery, and tell her I recommend her to go to Mr. Bacon, 17, Newman Street, to see the statue of the King, the exhibition of which will be closed to-day week. I saw it yesterday, and I am very well satisfied with it."

As the first Philharmonic took place on March 8th, this letter was probably written in February. The Duke, who was a brother of the Queen, was an enthusiastic musical amateur. He was afterwards sent to Hanover as a General, and subsequently became Governor-General of that country. His London residence, "Cambridge House," now 94, Piccadilly, has been converted into a club.

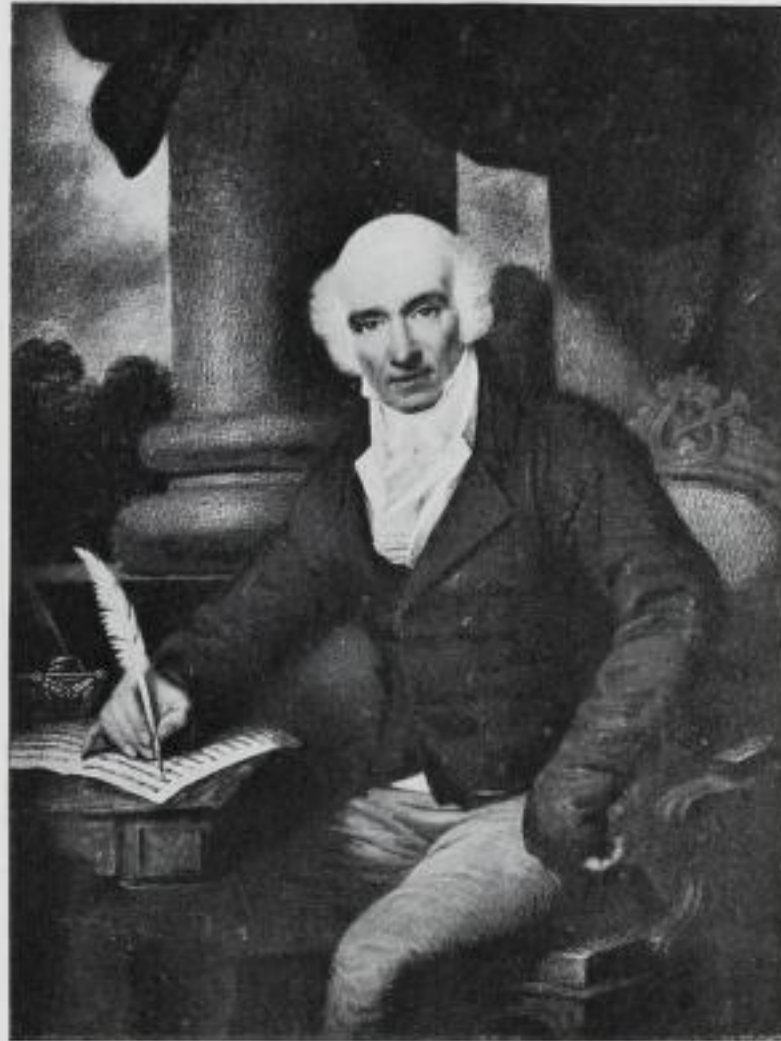
The next letter runs thus:

"CAMBRIDGE HOUSE, DIMANCHE,

"7 h. du soir.

"MON CHER VIOTTI,—

"Je m'empresse de vous accuser le reçu de Votre Billet, et de vous dire que ayant oublié la répétition de ce matin j'ai envoyé chez vous pour vous proposer une petite Musique et pour



PORTRAIT OF VIOTTI

BY TROSSARELLI



CAROLINE CHINNERY

BY TROSSARELLI

avoir le plaisir de vous voir et de vous demander des nouvelles de Madame Chinnery.

"Je ne manquerai pas demain de me rendre au (*premier*) concert pour entendre le premier coup d'archet. Adieu, faites bien des compliments à Madame Chinnery et à George, et soyez assuré de mon estime.

"Votre très dévoué

"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

This note was evidently written on the 7th of March, as the first concert of the Philharmonic Society took place on Monday, March 8th, 1813. Translated, the note runs as follows:

"CAMBRIDGE HOUSE, Sunday, 7 p.m.

"MY DEAR VIOTTI,—

"I hasten to acknowledge receipt of your note, and to tell you that, having forgotten the rehearsal this morning, I sent to you to propose a little music, and to have the pleasure of seeing you, and to ask news of Madame Chinnery.

"I shall not fail to go to the (*first*) concert to-morrow to hear the first stroke of the bow. Adieu, give my compliments to Mme. Chinnery and to George, and let me assure you of my esteem.

"Your devoted

"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

The Duke never forgets to speak of, or send messages to, "George," but the father, William Chinnery, is not mentioned once.

A curious fact is that *Mrs. Chinnery* and *George Chinnery* appear as occupiers of



MRS. CHINNERY

BY TROSSARELLI

17, Montague Street, until the end of 1823, when Mrs. Chinnery moved to 5, Upper Berkeley Street (according to the London directories of the time). The former is undoubtedly the house to which the Duke refers in a letter of July 7th, 1817, when he says that he is pleased to hear that they have found a house which they like. Of William Chinnery we hear nothing more, except that Viotti appointed him his trustee in 1822, and that he was then living at Havre.

Another undated note speaks of the Duke's satisfaction to hear that Viotti has recovered from a recent indisposition, and that he hopes that George will follow his example by recovering in a couple of

days (*un couple de jours*). It then tells us of his regret at not finding Mrs. Chinnery at home when he called, and asks Viotti to postpone his intended visit, as he had to go to Carlton House,* but that he hopes to see him and have some music on his return from the country on Wednesday.

Here is the original text:

"CE DIMANCHE,

"MON CHER VIOTTI,—

"Je m'empresse de vous accuser le reçu de votre bien aimable billet et de vous dire que je suis bien aise d'apprendre que vous êtes tout à fait



WALTER CHINNERY

BY TROSSARELLI

* The residence of the Regent, George, Prince of Wales, afterwards George IV.

remis de votre indisposition. Je doute qu'il me soit impossible de profiter aujourd'hui de votre bien aimable offre de passer chez moi étant obligé après l'Eglise d'aller à Carlton House mais à mon retour de la Campagne Mercredi prochain se sera enchanter de faire de la musique avec vous. Je vous prie de faire bien des compliments de ma part à M^e Chinnery et de lui dire que j'ai été bien fâché de la manquer hier. Faites aussi mes amitiés à George, et dites lui que je me flatte qu'il suivra votre exemple en se remettant dans un couple de jours de son indisposition.

"Adieu, mon cher Viotti, et croyez moi,

"Votre très dévoué

"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

The following is also undated :

"Wednesday, at one o'clock in the morning.

"MY DEAR VIOTTI,—

"This moment I have read your amiable note, and I hasten to tell you before going to bed that I shall be delighted to see you again at ten o'clock for breakfast.

"Please give my compliments to Madame Chinnery and to George, and believe me (*et d'être persuadé!*),

"Yours truly,

"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

"If George has time, tell him to accompany you."

The preceding notes give us a very good idea of the familiar footing that existed between the Duke, Viotti, and the Chinnerys. In fact, the keen interest which the Duke shows in everything that concerns George Chinnery leads one almost to think that he may have been his godfather.

The next note comes from Hanover with a recommendation for the Brothers Bohrer, who, on their concert tour over Northern Europe, visited Hanover on their way to England. Although they came to London in 1814, they did not play at the Philharmonic concerts until May, 1828. Anton Bohrer, the violinist, returned in 1834 to Hanover, where he remained as "Concertmeister" (leader), while Max Bohrer settled at Stuttgart. Romberg said of him, that if he closed his eyes when he heard Max Bohrer playing he imagined he heard himself. The two brothers usually played duets by Romberg, or of their own composition, which was similar in style, but rather weaker.

The interesting little note runs :

"MY DEAR VIOTTI,—

"I send you a few words to recommend the brothers Bohrer, two young people of great merit who are very anxious to make your acquaintance. They have spent a few days at

Hanover, and I had much pleasure in hearing them play. The one who plays the violoncello has played a good deal with Romberg, and I believe their Duos are in the style of the brothers Romberg.

"I take this opportunity to ask you to send me news of yourself, and of Madame de Chinnery, to whom I send my compliments. Don't forget to remember me also to George, and rest assured, etc., etc."

In 1814 Viotti paid a visit to Paris, and his friends encouraged him to devote more time to composition. He apparently took their counsel, as the following letter will show, and it is certain that he wrote some of his finest concertos during the period which preceded his last return to France in 1819.

The commencement of the letter, dated from Hanover, February 6th, 1815, deals with the delivery of two violin bows which Viotti had purchased for the Duke. The latter tells him how much he wished that Viotti might bring them himself, but then he knew how indispensable he was to his friends. He then refers to a passing indisposition of Mrs. Chinnery, and continues as follows :

"You may rest assured that I thoroughly appreciate your sentiments with regard to George, and I wish that it depended on me to prepare another destiny for him. I am sure that your friends in Paris were very pleased to see you again, and I am rejoiced to hear that they have encouraged you to take again to composing. I am looking forward with impatience to receiving the concerto which you will kindly dedicate to me. I have been busy studying the quartets, which are of

great merit. I have played one with Romberg, who was charmed with it. He spent eight days here, and it is impossible to be more amiable than he. I heard him play nearly every day, and I have much regretted his departure. I flatter myself that a few months hence I shall be able to make a journey to England, and in that case I shall rejoice at the pleasure of seeing you again. . . ."

The following letter shows that this intended visit to England was actually made in the summer, 1816. George Chinnery was destined for the diplomatic career, hence the reference to Canning. "L'Amico," as we have seen before, was the nickname of Viotti. The rest of the letter explains itself.

BRIGHTON, Aug. 7th, 1816.

"MY DEAR MRS. CHINNERY,—

"I have many apologies to make to you for not having acknowledged yesterday the receipt of your very kind note, but I really was so hurried that it was not in my power. I therefore seize the first moment I have to myself to return you best thanks



CAROLINE CHINNERY

BY TROSSARELLI

The Connoisseur

for it, and to assure you that though I have been hitherto deprived of the pleasure of waiting upon you, it has not been my fault, but really it has been owing to the constant hurry I have been living in ever since I have been in England. George and l'Amico will have both, I trust, done me justice in this respect, and you may depend on my calling at your house before you leave London. It is very provoking, indeed, that I should have been so long in London without our having met, and it is a thousand pities that the party at Wimbleton should not take place. The cause, however, is fortunately removed, but I fear, for all that, that I must give up the pleasure of meeting you there this year, as my stay in England will be very short, and I really am afraid of fixing a day from the uncertainty that I can keep my engagement. You will easily believe the delight I had to see George, and I sincerely hope that after the knowledge Mr. Canning has, of his character and abilities, he will soon think of doing something for him. I will now not detain you any longer than to request you to remember me most kindly to George and l'Amico, and believe me,

"My dear Mrs. Chinnery,

"Yours most sincerely,

"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

On the 21st of October, 1816, he writes again from Cambray:

"MY DEAR VIOTTI,—

"As I have heard that you are at Brussels, I hasten to send you these lines. . . . You know the deep interest I take in everything that concerns Mrs. Chinnery, and you will surely have no doubt that it would give me the greatest pleasure to be useful to her. At this moment I see no possibility of doing so. All the apartments at the various palaces are occupied, and even were this not the case, the Lord Chamberlain has so many people on his list that I am sure I should meet with a refusal if I asked him. My sister's household is complete; moreover, I must confess that I do not know what (situation) post Mrs. Chinnery could occupy near her. After this explanation you will see, my dear Viotti, that I find it impossible to be useful to her. Adieu! I must finish, for my brother, who will take this letter, is just ready to depart. . . ."

From the above it appears that Mrs. Chinnery sought an appointment as lady-in-waiting, through the influence of the Duke, but was unsuccessful.

The last of the letters is dated: *Monbrillant, ce*

7 Juillet, 1817. With that letter he sends a draft for fifty guineas for a violin which Viotti bought for him, requesting that it might be sent to his "Maitre d'Hotel, Mr. Unlin," with instructions to hand it to the Hanoverian courier, who would be in London at the end of the month, and would take it with him on his return. After expressing his pleasure about the satisfactory news of the state of health of Mrs. and George Chinnery, and that they have found at last a suitable house (17, Montague Street), he tells him that he hopes to come to England, in the following year, and to pay them a visit. Then he continues:

"I had to remain here this year much against my will, but one must do his duty, and for that reason I am obliged to remain in the country. The music fares badly; unfortunately I have so little time at my disposal that I have not played the violin more than eight or ten times during the last three years. I sing sometimes, and I have an Italian, called Bolossi, who accompanies me very well, and who is a good composer.

"Good bye, my dear Viotti, and be assured of the esteem and friendship

"Of your devoted

"ADOLPHUS FREDERICK."

It is evident that the Duke's friendship towards Viotti and the Chinnerys was worth more than his French. There is a homeliness and kindliness of spirit which peers through all his poor French, however, which must win for him a good deal of sympathy. It is evident, also, that he took a great deal of interest in all the people he came in contact with. Amusing is his reference to the "good composer," Bolossi, of whom the world is totally ignorant, and probably none the worse for it. But Italian was as much the fashion in music as French in polite conversation, no matter whether good, bad, or indifferent. And one thing more we learn from these letters—how greatly honoured and beloved Viotti was by the best people of his time.



PORTRAIT OF VIOTTI

BY GEORGE CHINNERY