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INTERVIEW WITH MISS MAUD POWELL
by C. Fred Kenyon

Interviews generally take a long time. I had only fifteen minutes. The time was 4 p.m., and the place Manchester. My train to Derbyshire went at 4.20, so when Miss Powell met me at the foot of the stairs of the Queen's Hotel there was really no time to be polite. Besides, she didn't expect it.

"I know you're in a hurry," she said, "so don't bother to talk about the weather. Come to the corner here – there's everything you want: pen, ink and paper. You don't take notes? What a relief! You don't know the hot feeling that comes over me when a man plumps himself down in the chair, pulls out a notebook and pencil, and asks you when you were born. It's the most dreadful thing in the world that can possibly happen to anyone. But interviewers are privileged beings. They are allowed to say anything, and we, their poor unprotected victims, have to submit with a smile."

"Ah, you'll find me quite an accomplished person as far as interviewing goes," I replied. "The great thing to do is to keep on talking at all costs. Once stop, and you're completely lost. The interviewer and his victims stare at each with lack-lustre eyes, both feeling and looking horribly stupid, until the hard-worked journalist blurts out some absurd remark about the pretty furniture or the South African War. That's what I used to do when I began this kind of work; but I've learned wisdom since then. I talk on and on until I'm interrupted. Any kind of nonsense will do. I never ask questions; I leave that to my victim. I make him the interviewer. He doesn't like it, of course, and it's hardly fair, but then what is one to do? The stereotype interview is the most hopeless thing in the world. In fact, I might say --."

"May I remind you that we've only ten minutes left, and if we are to speak of music perhaps we'd better begin. I'm immensely interested in your methods of interviewing, of course" (here I collapsed completely, for Miss Powell has a fine gift of expressing the highest degree of sarcasm with her eyebrows), "but after all, don't you know, I don't think the *Musical Standard* people care very much about it."

"You're quite right," I answered. "It's my great weakness – the habit of talking of myself. What I should like to hear from you is some account of the struggles which a young artist has to face in attempting to gain a footing. As you know, there are dozens of colleges turning out more or less competent young men and women by the hundred, and each of these youngsters imagines that he or she is going to take the world by storm. He has only to sit down and the letters and telegrams will come of their own accord."

“Yes – I myself should like to say something on that point; it’s a matter I feel very strongly about. The certainty of achieving Fame which most musical students possess is not only pitiable, it is pitiful. When I see a young girl striding along with a violin case in one hand and a roll of music in the other, my heart aches for the sorrow and disappointment she will have to go through. Concert playing is no career for anyone unless he have powers absolutely above the average. And even then it is one of the most disheartening professions a girl can possibly enter. A man like Kubelik can get as many engagements as he wants, but Kubelik is a technical giant, and I am not speaking of giants. I am speaking about the ordinary run of violinists, pianists and vocalists of whom there are scores. An artist has to *seek* engagements; they rarely come to him. He has to obtain letters of introduction to managers, he has to introduce himself sometimes, and if he gets terribly snubbed, well, it’s all in the day’s work, and he has to put up with it. People say ‘there’s always room at the top.’ So there is, but how many people get there? Not one out of every five hundred. A man or woman may become fashionable, but who understands fashion and who is able to fathom its strange eccentricities? I know very well that it is extremely unpopular for a successful artist to talk in this way; he is generally accused of being anxious to avoid future competition by discouraging young aspirants; but, believe me, I speak right from my heart when I give Punch’s advice to those about to marry – ‘Don’t!’ It doesn’t pay; and not only that, it is the most heartrending profession in the world. Take my own case, for instance. I am no longer in the first flush of youth – in fact I’ve been before the public a fair number of years, but *I haven’t saved a cent!* I simply can’t. Artists are supposed to dress well both on and off the concert platform; they are supposed to stay at the best hotels when traveling; and they are supposed to keep up appearances in the thousand and one little ways which I needn’t bother to explain. Added to all this, an artist is really only a child – he doesn’t understand the value of money because he receives it in fairly large sums after half-an-hour’s work, and he spends it as quickly as he gets it. Not one artist out of twenty is a good businessman; it isn’t natural that he should be. The artistic temperament is all against it. The artist’s life is a hand-to-mouth existence; anything between 200 pounds and 20,000 pounds a year may be made from it, but the prizes are few and far between. And of late years another difficulty has sprung up. It is not only extremely hard to obtain engagements, but at certain concerts one is expected to pay for one’s appearance, and (*mirabile dictu!*) there are actually a large number of men and women who are willing to do this. The ambitious sons of wealthy bankers gain an entrance to certain concerts merely by the length of their purse. Of talent they have little, of money they have a great deal – so that is how the trick is done. They put a premium on mediocrity, and concert managers begin to expect really able artists to sacrifice sums of money just for the sake of appearing once or twice at their concerts. I am glad to say I have never paid a cent for any one of my appearances; I would rather starve than encourage a system which is ruining the prospects of so many talented men and women.”

Here Miss Powell would have sighed if she had been that kind of person; but instead of sighing she spoke in a high passionate voice, and it looked as if she would like to emphasize her remarks by vigorous thumps on the table with her fist. She is a woman who feels intensely; you can see it in her face. She has suffered because she has not been afraid of the world. She has fought it and conquered it... . We both looked at the clock simultaneously; there were three minutes left.

“Quick!” I exclaimed. “Let me have something of English music. What do you think of Elgar?”

“Oh – Elgar is the English Richard Strauss – the greatest composer we have, or, at all events, the man who will eventually become the greatest composer. He is the musician in whom I am most interested here in England. He has something much more than talent; ‘genius’ is not too big a word. And Richard Strauss is the greatest musician alive. He has wonderful technique, tremendous depth of thought, and a soul that is neither afraid nor ashamed to feel. At least, that is how he appears to me, don’t you know.”

The interview was over; my time was finished.

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