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MAUD POWELL ON HER ART AND HER VIOLIN
Chat With an American Girl Who Has Won Fame

“Isn’t this a disagreeable, sloppy-underfoot sort of day?” asked Miss Maud Powell, the wholesome and delightful American girl, who has just played so artistically for us on her new violin.

“Do you see my little gas radiator with the basin on top? The former keeps me warm and the latter keeps the air moist and breathable. So forget how they look and just draw up your chair. I know you will soon be comfy.

“But, you see, I have something to think of aside from my own comfort. I have the well-being of that precious new fiddle of mine to take into consideration. Don’t you want to see it?” she asked, her face glowing, as she went over to the table, and approaching the black box in the spirit of a mother bending over the cradle of her first-born, drew forth the fine, old violin which she recently acquired through dint of much saving.

“Steam heat is vile for a fiddle,” she cried, stroking the rich old wood. “I had a great terror in Washington the other night. My pet had been subjected to the villainous influence of steam heat, and when I was introducing it to its first American audience in the Columbia Theater the sound was inadequate. Something was queer, and I had a fit of despair; I was afraid it had been a mistake to decide so hastily. That hasty decision is ‘another story,’ and I will tell it in a moment.

“Well, I was in a cold perspiration of fear for a few moments, but soon the [illegible] old thing began to melt, and then [illegible] settled with itself, and then – [illegible] sighed rapturously, “well, it was simply heavenly – that’s all. So I felt reassured [illegible] had [illegible] in pushing me on to the purchase of it.

She Loves Her Violin

“You love it, don’t you? Is it partly because she sacrificed a few gowns to own it?”

“Perhaps, anyway, I did. All my earnings of many months went for that one fiddle. I was on the lookout for one, and had had my gowns made for my American tour,” she added, laughing. “You know one must wear one’s stunningest in New York, and it isn’t in me to save money. I am extravagant, and money simply slips away from me.

“Well, I had gotten together a wardrobe, and somehow had managed to save quite a bit of money, and had more over here in America; so the time seemed ripe. But, for all that at the last the decision was made so suddenly, I had to make a terrible run for my money, to speak racily.

“One day a friend and I went to Hill’s famous place in Bond street, London. I was taken into the back part of the shop, where are kept rare old fiddles. The place is full of a mystery that is deliciously romantic, and I reveled in dreams and delight galore.

“After trying a great many violins I picked up a Guarnerius and drew the bow across the strings. Directly I had done so I thought thoughts and experienced presentiments. Oh, that fiddle!” Miss Powell cried.

“Well, I arranged to take it to my hotel and as I stepped into the cab remarked ‘that’s the fiddle I’m going to buy.’ ‘All right,’ my friend replied, ‘but don’t decide hastily.’

“I preserved a discreet silence, but wasn’t I full of excitement, though!

“After dinner, upon returning to my room, I took the violin out of the box and again drew the bow across the strings.

“‘That’s mine!’ I cried, and mine it was, very soon.

“That was Friday. The following Tuesday, by dint of much skirmishing, carried on in the meantime – by cablegrams, borrowings and several other sorts of hustle, I found myself the possessor of the coveted \$5000 fiddle but it took a lot of energy to secure it. You see, by paying cash it became a bit more accessible as to price, so it paid to hustle.”

“If it is as fine as it looks one cannot wonder at your ardor.”

A Regular Treasure

“As fine! It is superb. And you see the wood. Isn’t it a rich color? But the tone – oh, the tone of it! And do you know there is something of especial interest in it to one who has toiled hard to play the fiddle well. This identical violin belonged to [Joseph] Mayseder, whose exercises are practiced by every ambitious fiddler. He owned this instrument for years, and do you see that little worn place in the wood? Somehow his little finger must have had a trick of slipping off the board very hard, and the little dent is the result. I wonder why he did that!” Miss Powell added, reflectively. “I don’t do that trick.”

“He didn’t play as well as our Miss Powell does,” was the enthusiastic reply.

“No, it isn’t that, for he played beautifully,” the artist replied, smiling. “But is it not interesting to think that the old master played on this very fiddle for years?”

“Miss Powell, at last they have ceased to speak of you as the greatest woman violinist,

and place you where you belong, as one of the few living really great artists regardless of sex. Did you not resent the reference to sex?"

"At first," she replied, smiling. "Later I began to regard it as something in the nature of a compliment. The thing evens itself out pretty well. When I hear the playing of the greatest men violinists, I miss something – a nervous vitality – a subtle lack, hard to define, but still inevitably present for me. So if, on the other hand, the men miss something in my playing, how can I complain? It is only fair all around.

"But my work was too masculine without having fine distinction at one time. It was getting too hard, too scintillant, too purely virile without possessing the leavening [illegible] of tenderness and sympathy. Do you know who brought me to a [realizing? illegible] sense of this? Mr. Hunecker."

What a "Roast" Did

"He roasted me, and kept on roasting me, in the papers, you know, until I learned to be a better critic of myself. He praised me for much of my work, but blamed me for that lack; called my playing mannish, without the proper proportions of the feminine.

"You see, I had high and mighty ideas, but very honest ones, when I began," Miss Powell said, laughingly. "I wanted to be a great fiddler I was the first American women violinist after Camilla Urso to win really universal notice, and had the especial fight which comes of being a woman.

"It was my dream to find my pedestal, firmly plant my artistic feet upon it, and hold myself erect and aspiring. It was later that I found nothing would satisfy me, unless I could feel I had a message to give, and a mission to fulfill. I wanted to play for some purpose, and to some good effect. The altruistic crept in and colored my ambitions, making them ethically, as well as personally aspiring."

"That's fine! It is good to hear it from one's own countrywoman."

"Well, I'm right glad I am an American," said Miss Powell. Then she laughed and added, "which reminds me of an interview with me by a Western reporter. 'Are you an American?' he asked. 'Indeed I am!' I replied, and added, very carefully, if mischievously, and with much refined apology in the soft tone of voice I assumed, 'I should like to say, "you just bet I am!"' Now, what do you suppose confronted my eyes the next morning? 'You Bet I Am' in great head line letters above an interview with Miss Maud Powell.

"Since that time I've tried to be careful, for that sort of thing looks sensational, you know.

"But," she continued, "when in London some American friends of mine and I use slang shockingly; twice as much as we would think of doing at home – just to shock the Britishers; they are so dreadfully proper. It's great fun, sometimes.

“The social life there impresses me as being very different from ours. Court etiquette demands so much, and being in a country with a king may mean, for the republican, the making of many breaks, especially to a republican from the States. Such funny situations are the result. One has to ‘watch others hard,’ and ‘follow suit’ diligently,” she laughed.

“Did you enjoy playing for the king?”

Playing for Royalty

“Vastly. Before I had finished the first selection, his Majesty began to applaud, and, of course, the court followed suit at once. It was very exciting and delightful.”

Right here Miss Powell’s secretary [probably H. Godfrey Turner, her fiancé] broke into the conversation.

“Yes, and a few nights later there was a pasteboard imitation of it all. Miss Powell was to play for the king’s representatives in Dublin and when the company assembled in the vice regency lodge, Miss Powell and her friends were treated to an act from a ridiculous comedy.

“One and all, men with their gold braid and stars and elegant bearings; women with their fair Irish faces and evening silks and satins, appeared visibly under the burden of too much wine at dinner.”

Miss Powell held up a warning finger, but not before the laugh had become general at the thought of the absurd picture.

“They couldn’t find their places, and got so mixed up,” the secretary couldn’t resist adding, as he laughed in glee at the memory.

Miss Powell laughed, too, but changed the subject as her guest rose to leave.

“See these compositions lying around,” she said. “It throws a performer into a slough of despond to receive them, for one wants to encourage young talent, but cannot play everything that is sent accompanied by a pleading note.”

Then in response to a hint:

“Oh, you want some pictures? Do you like these? Here is one taken with Mary Carmichael, the London song writer, who is one of the sweetest old ladies in the world. Everyone loves her, and whenever a young person approaches her, he or she bursts out with those lines from the little Scotch song about the ‘Four Mary’s.’

“‘Twas Mary Beaton, and Mary Beaton,
And Mary Carmichael, and me.’

“In this picture I am sitting on the arm of the chair. Do you think that looks queer?”

Upon being assured quite to the contrary, Miss Powell added:

“Let your last look be for the fiddle, and pray that the steam heat in Carnegie Hall may not get in its deadly work. Poor Mr. Wood’s face was just streaming with perspiration at the rehearsal today. But the fiddle acted gloriously. It’s a dream! You will love it!” she called as the door closed.

She is very right. It is “dream,” and we all did love it.

From the Archive of The Maud Powell Society for Music and Education