THE GIRL WHO WANTS TO BE GREAT

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I am somewhat loath to encourage the girl who wants to be "great," for she is the girl who is a worshiper of the trappings of art – its glitter and show, the fine concert dress, the reception after the concert with compliments galore, the big check offered by an obsequious manager! The girl who wants to be "great," and works to that end, rarely attains her wishes, although she oftentimes sacrifices her family and the family fortunes in the attempt. To the girl who wants to succeed, or better still, who wants to excel, I have perhaps a helpful message, gleaned from my own experiences in the long and weary march toward the goal of my chosen vocation.

All over this great country in city, town and distant village, are hundreds of American girls of that wonderful mixed heredity of all nations, who possess a gift or a talent that in a way sets them apart from their schoolmates and companions. It gives them a certain distinction, and long before the child is old enough to formulate an opinion of her own in the matter she is hailed as a prodigy; father, mother and a coterie of admiring friends insist upon the future of glorious triumphs – the child is doomed to greatness!

I became a violinist through my mother's passionate love of music. She was of German-Hungarian parentage, but while in this country she was suddenly bereft of both father and mother by the cholera epidemic raging at that time. She was adopted into a straight-laced Puritanical home.

Little Wilhelmina [Bengelstraeter] became Minnie Paul, and was forced to stifle her love of music and her ambitions for a musical career. Her adoptive parents had no sympathy for girls whose thoughts wandered from the domestic hearth and the duties of housecleaning, preserving and mending. When my mother married she determined that her first son should be a violinist. The expected son turned out to be a girl, but my mother was not to be balked by such a trifle. As soon as I was old enough a baby violin was put into my little hands, and it was not long before I realized that my mother had set me apart for something different from the other children whom I knew.

My mother had dreams of a musical career and future greatness for me. I knew only that a difficult task was placed before me, and there was something within me that forced me to conquer any task, however obnoxious. Often as a child I would stamp my little feet in fury and sob and scream in impotent rage, but I would return with tear-stained cheeks and swollen eyes to my scales and exercises; never for an instant did I dream of abandoning any work because it was hard. I not only had the ambition to do it well enough, I wanted to do it better than anyone else. I carried this spirit out, not only in my music, but in all my other studies. My father, William

Bramwell Powell, for many years the head of the public schools in Washington, was one of the most advanced educators of his day, and he had no intention of permitting me to have a one-sided education. He believed in all-around men and women – an equal development of mind, soul and body.

Once he was convinced that I possessed sufficient musical talent to justify my following the career of a violinist he apportioned three, and as I grew older, four hours a day as sufficient for my musical studies. He was right. Unless I am on a concert tour, I never permit any encroachment upon these four hours of practice. I have made a point to adhere religiously to this habit all my life. A regular routine of so many hours a day – a reasonable number – in the morning, especially when one's vitality is unimpaired, is infinitely preferable and accomplishes better results than the spasmodic exaggerated attempt to cram as much work into a day as possible. The girl who thinks, talks and acts the music drudge for sixteen hours out of the twenty-four will acquire neither technique nor musical development. It is the quality not the quantity of work that really counts.

At this point I want to lay stress on a fundamental essential of success. It is the determination to *excel*; a bull-dog instinct to stick grimly, ferociously to one's task and not let go except with one's life. If the girl who wants to be great is easily discouraged, if she "funks," she had better renounce at once all idea of a career. When all is said and done success is as much a question of character as talent.

It must not be forgotten that most of the girls who are dreaming of greatness, or whose parents are dreaming for them, possess "talent" only – talent in more or less quality and quantity. Now, talent allied to intelligence and determination is not to be despised. It is sufficiently rare, but it is not that God-given divine fire we call "genius," a gift accorded only to the elect! Genius is a law unto itself; it surmounts difficulties over which mere talent must plod step by step. It "arrives" and cannot explain its methods. But, unfortunately, genius often lacks the balance-wheel of common-sense. It falls by the wayside, consumed by its own fire. Talent is more sane and, I may add, achieves where genius fails.

The girl with talent, or even genius, has nothing to do with greatness or success until her studies are completed. But day by day she may and, indeed, *must* excel in her task; that is to say, she must do it better than the average – her standard must be head and shoulders above the normal. In the choice of her teacher there must be both common-sense and courage. If she is with a master who crushes her enthusiasm and keeps her in a depressed, discouraged condition – if she feels she has outgrown her teacher, she must have the courage to seek another. She must feel satisfied with and realize her own progress. It will not be long before the girl destined for a career finds that her own town or provincial city no longer offers her sufficient opportunities for development. She turns her eyes toward Paris, Berlin, or most probably New York.

Now, the question arises in my mind, "Why go abroad – why select New York?" The time has passed when a musician requires European prestige. Nowadays an artist is received on his or her own merits. If a girl can give a proper showing to the leader of any of our big symphony orchestras she will be given an opportunity to make her début. But she must be the

equal, not the inferior of the foreign artists; she must not expect favors simply because she is an American and received her musical education in her own country.

At the time I finished my studies abroad and returned to this country it was different. Girl violinists were looked upon with suspicion, and I felt that I had a hard road to travel in my native land. I had sent a letter of introduction to Theodore Thomas, but I waited in vain for a summons to play with the Thomas orchestra. I determined to take matters into my own hands. I walked into the hall one morning where the rehearsal was being held with my violin under my arm. When it was over, and before the musicians had dispersed, I walked up to the great leader. My heart was in my throat, but I managed to say pretty bravely, "Mr. Thomas, I am Maud Powell, and I want you to give me a chance to play for you." His big heart was touched, I suppose, for he nodded his head, reached out his hand for my score and called the musicians together. I knew it was a crucial moment in my life – a girl only eighteen daring to be a violinist and demanding a hearing of the greatest orchestral leader in America! I had brought the score of the Bruch Concerto, and it is not difficult to do once best when one knows every note of a concerto backward. When I had finished, Mr. Thomas engaged me on the spot for his next concert. At the close of that concert – my début in America – Mr. Thomas came to me with his two hands full of greenbacks. He handed them to me, saying, "I want the honor of paying you the first fee you have earned as an artist."

As I said before, I do not see why a girl should go to Europe for the actual routine of study. Indeed, I doubt if New York [would] be as advisable as Boston, or even Baltimore. New York is so noisy that it is apt to deaden the sensitiveness of a musician's ear; for a finished artist the competition and the exhilarating atmosphere are sort of a tonic and spur him on to do his best. It is well at some time in a girl's career to go abroad to measure her stature, as a student who plays a few concertos is apt to overestimate her value. If she goes abroad she will find the woods are full of her kind. In her own home she is apt to measure her standard by those beneath her; in Paris or Berlin or Stuttgart she falls into the ranks. There is more talent to the square inch in Europe than to the piece in this land of business and haste.

But for the actual routine of study, I should suggest Boston or Baltimore. In the latter place for instance, the ideals of the Peabody Institute are of the highest, and the different departments are in the hands of musicians, scholarly and sincere. Life is free from haste and restlessness and the cost of living is trifling. But under no circumstances should I advise a girl to enter the life of a student in a strange city without the care and guidance of a mother or a guardian. I had the inestimable treasure of a mother's care during my student life and during the first ten years of my concert work. A girl should be free from the consciousness of dangers and temptation; she should meet strangers without an undercurrent of suspicion and watchfulness. Young girls are none too wise; they require a person in authority to regulate their meals, their hours of rising and retiring. A certain amount of musical talent, or even that rare thing, genius, does not presuppose an old head on young shoulders.

Long before a girl of the right caliber has completed her studies, she should have received the baptism of her vocation – the words "fame" and "greatness" should have disappeared, to be replaced by truth and art. She must be a worshiper of the thing itself. Her ambition should no

longer be to excel but to deliver the message of the musician. Her own greatness should count for nothing beside the greatness of her art. When she is emancipated from her teachers she must not fear to seek and develop the creative spirit within herself. While she should not shun the world or her fellow beings, she should commune within herself and seek to fathom the depths and heights of her own individuality. I lay great stress on these seasons of solitude. I cannot tell how preciously I hold those long hours quite by myself on the swiftly moving train. I sit alone sometimes for days, unknown and knowing no one. Never does the voice of my art speak so clearly and truly as in those long and silent days of journeying across a vast desert or cutting a path through the mountains.

It never occurs to me to ask myself if I have achieved greatness or fame, but I do realize with a thrill of wonder and delight that after long, long years of praying and fasting in the temple, I am able to deliver the message of my art to hungry and thirsty souls.