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Mathilde Marchesi

Excerpt

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MARCHESI AND MUSIC

CHAPTER I

Madame Marchesi's Youth and Early Studies. — A Noble Woman for a Mother. — Cutting Beans and Making Jam. — Homesick in London. — Her Father Loses his Fortune. — A First Visit to Vienna. — Anecdote of Beethoven. — German and Italian Opera. — She Makes the Acquaintance of Pauline Viardot, the Great Garcia's Daughter.

I WAS the youngest of three sisters, and was born in Frankfort-on-the-Main, where my father, Johann Friedrich Graumann, a wealthy and highly respected merchant, was established. My paternal grandmother came from French Alsace, and we had many relations in France — among others, Baron Haussmann, General Denzel, etc. As I was of a very lively and restless disposition, my dear mother sent me to a day school when I was only five years old, where first, besides being taught how to knit, I learned how to sit still, and it was not until a year later that I had to battle with vowels and consonants and the terrible four rules of primary education. Morning and afternoon I wended my way to the so-called "Musterschule," where all social classes, all

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religions—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish—were represented, the last named being, however, in the minority. The day's work commenced with a hymn, in which I joined with heart and soul.

For many years my right-hand companion was the daughter of the Dutch minister ; a baker's daughter sat on my left, and at one time I even found myself for a short period next to the child of the executioner. This poor girl, whom I pitied with all my heart, was treated with absolute contempt, and was the butt of so many jokes that she was compelled to leave this really excellent school soon after she had entered it.

From earliest childhood I took great delight in my studies ; my craving for knowledge was never satisfied, and as a natural consequence of this I was nearly always the first in class. Still, I must have been popular with my school-fellows, for I have a lively recollection of not only helping many of them with their lessons, but even at times doing their work for them.

Being naturally of a happy disposition, I sang from morning till night, and was not a little proud of being intrusted with the solo parts on all important occasions at the school-house. At home, when there was company, it was always, "Tilda, give us a song," but I could only be prevailed on to sing if the guests pleased me. This may be termed by some "the whims of a budding artiste"; but no—a thousand times no. It was a child's instinctive dislike to appear before people who were not sympathetic to her, and who were neither interested in the songs she sang, nor took

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YOUTH AND EARLY STUDIES

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the same delight in them as she did. These views had no weight with my parents, however, for they invariably scolded me for refusing to sing; yet they were always kind, and too indulgent ever to inflict on me anything in the shape of severe punishment, even when I might have deserved it, and to the present day I feel grateful to them for this indulgence. Often is a child's mind embittered when punished for the smallest fault; or, what is even worse, when thoughtless parents allow their servants to take the home law into their own hands. Fear of punishment sows the seeds of lying; truth, like Ariadne's thread, should guide us through the labyrinth of life. If once it is lost, life is aimless.

My beloved mother was to me the incarnation of everything that is good, noble, and beautiful. She was, in fact, not only an exemplary wife and mother, but was also the beau-ideal of a German woman. One of my most pleasant recollections will always be that of the peaceful, happy life my parents led together. Mother devoted herself entirely to our education, and, having a high opinion of my singing and musical talent, she often permitted me, in preference to my two elder sisters, to accompany my grandmother to the Opera, for she had a box there with Baron Anselm de Rothschild. It is true I often had to stand the whole evening, or occupy a hard, uncomfortable little seat in a dark corner of the box, but that mattered little, as I could still listen to the music while trying to grasp the thoughts of the great composers—a task which, however, was at that time almost beyond me. Moreover, Baron de Rothschild supplied us

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all with choice sweetmeats, and this I duly appreciated.

When Jenny Lind sang at the Opera in Frankfort, or whenever De Bériot, Pauline Garcia (now Madame Viardot), Thalberg, or Liszt gave concerts, I would coax or implore my grandmother, until she allowed me to accompany her to these musical treats, and there I sat in my little corner, nearly crying my eyes out with joy. I was not, however, always so fortunate; for once when Rubini gave a concert, my father, generally so indulgent, would not permit me to go and hear him. I cried and begged, I believe I even went so far as to go down on my knees to him, but he remained obdurate. “The seats are too dear,” was his laconic reply, “and little girls are better employed in learning how to sew and cook. . . .” And so I never heard that great singer.

We had a French governess, and the best masters for literature, music, harmony, languages, dancing, etc.; nevertheless, household studies were not neglected, and I had to learn cooking, ironing, sewing, mending, embroidery, and do a deal, a great deal, of knitting besides. Even during the reading of instructive and classical works this knitting went on uninterruptedly, and woe to poor me if I dropped the stocking in my eagerness to peruse an interesting chapter of some book. But in order to render our work more pleasant to us, our mother used to place some small present in the ball of cotton, so that we generally found a gold cross or some other little surprise as a reward for our industry. I may truly say that my teachers were in general satisfied with me,

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CUTTING BEANS AND MAKING JAM 5

but I must confess that sewing was as distasteful to me as knitting was. We three sisters had an elderly humpbacked spinster as sewing-mistress, who did all in her power to make me take an interest in her domestic art, but all in vain. I had plenty of excuses to escape the hated task, till at last this lady had a happy thought. She began to read me fairy tales and plays during the lesson, and thus the game was won. From that moment I plied my needle with right good will, and all went merrily.

In summer, also, I had an unpleasant time of it when we had to cut beans, or stew fruit for preserving, and on these occasions we were not allowed to leave the house. Many a time did I hide myself with some interesting book in order to get away from the uncongenial work, or so as to give myself a rest. How everything has changed! Are there girls nowadays with well-to-do parents who know anything about cutting beans or making jam? I doubt it. In winter we lived in our own house, built something after the style of a Swiss chalet, with balconies running round it, and called "Zum Rebstock"; while in summer we had a cottage in the suburbs, where we children were in undisturbed enjoyment of a beautiful garden and all its contents. I used then to spend the entire day in the open air, reading up in the trees, or carrying my books, paper, pens, and ink with me, and preparing my lessons on an improvised table of logs of wood piled one on top of the other. I also tumbled innumerable times into a shallow stream which flowed by the end of the garden; or I played with the little lamb that was bought for

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me every spring, or looked after flowers, plucked tempting fruit from tree and bush, and dreamed the beautiful dreams of childhood. In winter, when snow was on the ground, our faithful old servant Johann took me to school in a small sleigh ; and then I invited my little friends home with me, or went to children's parties, or had the loveliest of Christmas trees on Christmas Eve, and received countless presents with that holiday.

One day, going home from school with several of my companions, we suddenly made up our minds to play truant and lengthen our walk by taking a turn in the fine public gardens which surround Frankfort. It was, if I remember rightly, the time of a Polish revolution, and those who took part in it were obliged to fly their native land. Three very distinguished-looking Poles were seated on a bench in the park, and in my vivid imagination I pictured them suffering from hunger ; so I eagerly said to my companions, " Let us give them the remnants of our lunch," and so we did. The gentlemen rose and thanked us, taking, at the same time, some sweetmeats from their pockets, and offering them to us. We departed delighted with ourselves, supposing, in our youthful minds, that we had really been the means of saving from hunger three of our fellow-creatures ; then we swore solemnly together that we would always keep the sweetmeats as a memento of our encounter. On separating, the eldest of the little band asked us to show our sacred relics, but I, sad to relate, had already eaten mine ! From that time my companions treated me with disdain, and often and oft again did

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FRÄULEIN MATHILDE GRAUMANN IN HER GIRLHOOD

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HER TOILET THE ONLY TROUBLE

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I regret that the childish love for goodies had prevailed over my romantic feelings.

Ah, that was a happy time of life! Everybody loved me, and my smallest wish was fulfilled. I had only one trouble—that was my toilet. My dear mother brought us up in puritanical simplicity, doing all that lay in her power to counteract the love of dress. Thus it often happened that when we went to children's balls in our woollen frocks we were laughed at by our playmates—this always upset me very much. I now consider it just as reprehensible to dress young girls badly, or in direct opposition to the prevailing fashion, as it is to foster in them a love of show and finery, for they become an object of ridicule to their companions, and this cannot but have a bad effect on them. I shall never forget when one winter I had to go about with a red cloak, a pink hat, a blue veil, and gray stockings. I had friends by the dozens, who were playmates in summer in the fields, and in winter on the ice. My favorites were the two daughters of Bettina von Arnim, so well known through her correspondence with Goethe. Later on they became the Countesses of Flemming and Oriola.

When barely fifteen I accompanied my parents to balls and parties. In the beginning I was passionately fond of dancing, and was the first in Frankfort to take up the polka and mazurka. Soon, however, these pleasures lost their charm for me, as I gave myself over heart and soul to the study of music, especially of harmony and the piano, although I did not in any way neglect my singing. We had some friends of the name of Flinsch, at whose house I often had

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the opportunity of playing quartets and trios composed by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, or Mendelssohn, also of joining in some part-singing, which did a great deal to further my own musical knowledge. However, none of my numerous singing masters or mistresses ever pleased me as teachers, not even Professor Ronconi. He was brother of the once celebrated singer, Giorgio Ronconi, and at this time was residing at Frankfort. He had undertaken to develop my voice, but I did not come up to his expectations, although he made me sing the most difficult exercises of Bordogni, and gave me for my first song the grand cavatina of "Norma"! I was so bitterly disappointed that I gave up my favorite occupation for a while, and devoted all my energy to the study of languages, especially English and Italian. In my constant desire for occupation, learning alone did not satisfy me. I always had a strong inclination to impart to others what I had myself learned, and so, to gratify this desire, I induced some friends to let me give them lessons in Italian and music. Two of them continued taking these lessons for a long time, but the others thought me too severe and left me.

One of the recollections of my youth is the introduction of railways into Germany. I will not attempt to describe our astonishment when we saw the first train leave Frankfort. In the beginning we solemnly vowed never to trust our valuable lives to the "snorting steam horse," but as our fears gradually subsided we of course soon looked anxiously forward to the pleasure of a train ride.

I was nearly seventeen when my parents allowed