

Antoinette Sterling and Other Celebrities
Chapter 2 – Career In America
By Lady Mary Sinner-Hendrickson
April 6, 2002

The tariff on imported iron was lifted, and the English manufacturers flooded America, which caused the bankruptcy of James Sterling. The family members were forced to provide for themselves. Antoinette took a teaching position, arranged through Mrs. Willard of Troy Female Seminary, and Antoinette immediately left for a Mississippi plantation. Many difficult feelings she struggled with, as she left a home which had provided a safe haven, and was suddenly thrust into a life where she saw, firsthand, the effects, and severe treatment of slaves in the south. The girls on the plantation were from wealthy families, yet, they would kick the slaves in their heads if they found them sleeping. When Antoinette could no longer condone the treatment of the slaves, and hostile feelings against northerners, she tried to collect her salary, which was behind in payment, but did not succeed. After she was refused a passport, she and a fellow teacher on a close-by plantation, left the south on a dark, rainy night. They were helped by blacks, and having escaped many dangers, she was back home, safe and among friends. Two letters are now included, which she wrote in 1862, at the height of the war:

“July 12. – Europe has not yet received me, in spite of all those restless yearnings, which have increases with years, to visit here shores. Alas!, my hopes do not seem much nearer their fruition than in those days, which now seem so long ago, when I was like a butterfly as to my knowledge of life. Now I have been through great joy and great sorrow; found the thorns with the flowers, but plucked the flowers in spite of the piercing thorns; have loosed my boat from its moorings, and rowed over Mason and Dixey’s line to the ‘land of the sunny South’ – the traitorous, black-hearted country of rebels, would-be murderers of our beautiful flag; taught music for nearly two years, and succeeded; lost my salary, and come home, with a heart on fire for our noble North, to find that my youngest brother, great-hearted and brave, only seventeen years old, has gone to the war.” (My personal note: Rochester was the seventeen year old brother who Antoinette speaks of having gone to war.)

“July 19. – I feel like a rudderless ship in a great storm, with a danger of all the hopes being drowned. Those worn heart-hopes quiver with fear of being crushed under the firm tread of – is it Destiny? Sometimes I feel that the good Father, Whose child I am, and Who gave all these hopes and desires, will not allow them to be crushed without fruition, if I will only be true. But, will He give me light to know how to be true, to find the path, and strength to follow it after being found? I would never even flinch from the thorns if only sure of success. It seems to me I could walk on them, and through them, even though I met with naught but thorns at first, if only I felt the glorious sureness of finding the haven at last. Sometimes I am wicked and almost reckless, and have no hope, no courage, but wish I could ravel out a few years and pick up the poor weak stitches, and live a life like everybody else – get married, dress, gossip, read love stories, and so on. But I have a hunger, a yearning to be good and to do good, to be noble in thought and deed, and at such times I feel I have some work to do. If I could only find it and the strength to do it, I should be overjoyed; and, oh! so tossed about by the wind, anchorless, rocking on troubled waters. Why I forget how to remember, from the necessity of trying to think how to accomplish it all without money. It makes me bitter to think of that money. How many souls has it claimed? How often has it galled and crushed out the warmest, youngest life? Thus I am selfish, and not noble in my thoughts. I am wearing away the sound health I have always had. How little we know of hearts, though our persons may be so near! I thank God for my kind, noble-souled friends! Some of them are my ideals in hearts and intellect.

“I must love and be loved, or I starve. If with those who don’t love me and whom I don’t love, I am as restless as the sea, and crystallize, freeze my own heart by reason of all the love being turned back. I wish I were in love, for then I should be better, because he would be noble in soul and intellect, pure and great-gifted with the rare voice, but not the artistic appreciation necessary to success?”

It was at this time, Antoinette seriously began her singing studies. She studied under Maestro Bassini, at the Normal Academy of Music. Bassini, on hearing her voice, was full of excitement, and told young Antoinette she had a very remarkable voice. Under Bassini’s tutelage, Antoinette was given simple voice exercises, and he did not try to “unlearn” what Antoinette had been taught by Anna Sykes, as it would not have proved fruitful. By teaching these simple exercises, it enable her to build her voice, and technique, in such a way that she would never be unsure of her gift, her voice.

Upon completing her studies with Maestro Bassini, Antoinette went to New York, and studied under the Spanish professor, Senor Abella. It was at this time, she began singing professionally. Her first professional engagement was at Dr. Adams’ Presbyterian Church, and her salary was \$1500.00, per year. This congregation represented almost 1/3 of New York’s wealth. Most all of the millionaires attended this church.

Antoinette was very timid the first few times she sang at Dr. Adams’ church, saying “I can’t do it, I can’t do it”, with tears rolling down her cheeks. But, she soon found that `Sterling’ strength, and sang with the greatest of ease. On a trip to New York, in 1896, some 30 years later, people would approach her on the street, or at receptions, and call her `Miss Sterling’, then relate to her how they had never forgotten her singing at the church.

She was advised to go to Europe to further her studies, and she did so when one of the congregation offered to advance her the finances to make the trip. The man who lent her the \$1,000.00, was very wealthy. He thought he would “lend” her the money as a way of “giving” it to her, without hurting her pride. Two years later, she visited him, and returned the “borrowed” amount. He was so surprised that he could hardly speak. When he made out a formal acknowledgment, he did not write “Received of Miss Sterling”, but wrote “Received of True Blue.” He told her he never expected a return of the money, and that he had lent money to others, but she was the first to ever repay him.

Dr. Adams decided to give a concert, in Antoinette’s honor, with the proceeds as gratitude for her assistance at their service. They also gave her a gold watch, inscribed, which she always treasured. Antoinette then left the shores of her homeland, to study in Europe, under the direction of Manuel Garcia, and later, under his pupils, Mathilda Marchesi, and Pauline Viardot, and met with Brahms, and Frederick Hiller, the old Emperor of Germany.

Upon Antoinette’s return to America, she stayed with her old friends, Mr. And Mrs. Huss, and began singing at New York’s best concerts, and other places. One of the performances was with Mme. Rudersdorff in the first performance at Boston of Bach’s “Passion Music.”

Because of Malcolm’s wonderful way of describing his mother, and events in her life, I will now share the words he wrote, pages 24-27, concerning Emily Faithfull, and Horace Greeley. The incident involving Miss Faithfull, was most likely, the only time Antoinette was unprepared to sing a certain song, which would be

appropriate for a certain occasion! There, the funeral of Horace Greeley is shared by Antoinette, and both of these events will be better conveyed, straight from the tome.

Miss Faithful – “During the months which followed, she went through many experiences, grave and gay. Two of these were specially interesting as being connected with names which were very prominent at that time – Emily Faithfull and Horace Greeley.

The former – of whom, by the way, Rutland Barrington, of Savoy opera fame, is a nephew – was one of the earliest advocates of Woman’s Rights. When only twenty-five years old she had founded a printing-office in London, with women compositors – a startling innovation -- and was appointed publisher to Queen Victoria. Three years later she started “The Victoria,; a magazine in which she advanced the claims of women to remunerative employment, and in 1872 she decided to go out to America upon a lecturing tour, with the object of spreading her propaganda over a larger area.

During this visit Miss Faithfull held several meetings at the Steinway Hall, in New York. Miss Sterling went to one out of curiosity, though not in any very serious spirit, for she was so wrapped up in her music as to know practically nothing about the big questions of the day.

The hall was packed with people, who listened intently to all that was said. During the evening the speaker proved conclusively that Woman was Man’s equal, in spite of all his attempts to keep her in slavish subjection. Not only that, but she was in many ways his superior. In fact, by the end of her discourse poor Man had been so utterly crushed by convincing argument, that any unhappy member of the sex who had ventured to attend was forced to bow his head for very shame. When the last words had been spoken and Miss Faithfull sat down, there were cries for a song from “Miss Sterling,” who had been recognized by many on entering the hall. The shouts went on for so long a time that there was nothing for it but to comply with their wishes.

The vocalist rose from her seat, and made her way on to the platform, without having a notion what to sing. She felt utterly confused by the noise and the unexpectedness of the whole thing, and so, without thinking what she was doing, took a deep breath, and started wildly on the first music that happened to come into her head.

Out of all the songs included in her repertoire she stumbled by the merest fluke upon absolutely the most inappropriate, and, to the disgust of Miss Faithfull, began to sing “A Man’s a Man for ‘ that.” A mighty roar of laughter went up. The audience were simply wild with delight, cheering and clapping, and stamping their feet. They realized from her surprised face that in making this choice she had not been actuated by a mischievous desire to perpetrate a joke. Had it not been for her obvious youth and inexperience, nothing would have ever persuaded them that her intention had not been to make a hit at the Woman’s Rights Question.

It was only a few weeks after the foregoing episode that the citizens of New York were overwhelmed with grief by the death of one of America’s greatest men, Horace Greeley. Born of the most humble parentage, he began his journalistic career at an early age, and gradually worked his way up to the foremost rung on the ladder of fame. He used to write essays, poetry, and general articles, while the “Log Cabin,” a Whig campaign paper which he ran, contributed largely to the election of General Harrison as President. At the age of thirty he brought out the “New York Tribune,” and remained editor till the close of his life. During the great slavery war he published in the “Tribune” the impressive “Prayer of Twenty Millions,” and within a month the “Emancipation” Proclamation was issued. He was an unsuccessful candidate for the presidency in 1872, and

died the following November. Upon the day of his funeral the streets of New York were impassable, owing to the crowd which had gathered together to pay honour to his memory.

“I happened to be passing in the vicinity,” wrote my mother, describing the incident, “when a man suddenly rushed up, seized me by the arm, and said, ‘You must come and sing.’ He wedged his way with me through the living wall and into the church, went somewhere for the music, and took me to the organ loft, high up above the gallery. Miss Kellogg had just finished singing, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth.’” Some of the most prominent men of America were to carry the coffin. Just as they had lifted it, and were starting down the aisle, unexpectedly there came a voice from far up in the church (the singer almost invisible), “Beyond the smiling and the weeping.”

The bearers stood still during the music. The song closed. Still they and all around them remained motionless. A pin might have been heard to drop. Then, after a long pause, the voice in the organ loft recommenced, and sang the anthem all through again. As that glorious contralto voice rang forth many people wept, some even fainted, so truly thrilling and tragic was the whole scene.

“In my youthfulness I could not see anything so marvelous in it,” she writes; “but now I believe that it was because these words, ‘Beyond the smiling,’ written by Dr. Bonar and divinely set by Zundel, so exactly fitted Horace Greeley’s life and passing on.”

Not too long after Antoinette’s return from Europe, she began singing at Dr. Henry Ward Beecher’s Plymouth Congregational Church, in Brooklyn. Dr. Beecher was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, authoress of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

Dr. Beecher was far from being a ‘typical’ preacher, as he did not adhere to formal beliefs, and, in Malcolm’s own words “preached the gospel according to his own ideas.” He supported the Temperance Movement, and when the Civil War began, raised, and equipped a Volunteer regiment.

Dr. Beecher once heard Antoinette sing at his church, the song “O Rest In The Lord.” He was so deeply affected by her rendering that he requested her never to sing it again, as it was impossible for him to preach, afterwards. Oh, how I wish I could hear the voice of my great grand aunt, Antoinette. What a loss not to have a recording of the beautiful sounds.

At Dr. Beecher’s church, Antoinette sang from the gallery, and always sat in the same seat. Her favorite flowers were Violets, and every Sunday she could be seen wearing a bunch of them. She felt the gallery was “somewhat” draughty, and mentioned this to Dr. Beecher, to which he said he didn’t think anything could be done about it. The next Sunday, Antoinette found a “sort of throne” erected with a canopy hanging round it, so that she might never be more troubled by draughts. Her seat at once became known as the “Jewel Box,” and was called by this name as long as it remained in the church.” When she eventually returned to England, on Christmas 1872, Dr. Beecher gave orders that her chair should be kept vacant, and told a friend that he “lost a certain inspiration when Miss Sterling was no more seen at the accustomed spot.”

Antoinette departed America, accompanied by her friends, Mr. and Mrs. Huss, and found a “lasting home and a career far greater than she had ever dreamed of.

Stay tuned for a synopsis of chapter 3. Enjoy!